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“Soup & Tart: Los Angeles” serves up Fluxus redux

By Travis Diehl

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David Horvitz performing in “Soup & Tart: Los Angeles” at the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, Los Angeles. All photos: Roadwork/Active Cultures.

FIFTY ARTISTS. Three microphones. Two minutes each.

With a program as unwieldy as a 2023 reprise of Jean Dupuy’s 1974 epic “Soup & Tart,” it’s really about what you remember, what sticks out. Earlier this month at MOCA Geffen, the poet Elaine Kahn showed up with her baby in arms. When it was her turn, she asked the audience for a diaper. A little commotion, people murmured and squirmed on their cushions, then a diaper was passed up front. Kahn squatted down and

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Dupuy's event, held at the Kitchen's loft in TriBeCa (on a floor with an actual kitchen), was a cartwheeling, caterwauling, often poignant evening of thirty-odd performances by the likes of (pre-fame) Hannah Wilke and Richard Serra—plus what the *New York Times* called “an inexpensive dinner consisting of soup, bread, wine and apple tarts.” Serra played a prerecorded story about his father telling him to dig a hole and fill it back in. Wilke stripped down to a bedsheet and posed like Jesus Christ. One act involved dancers who'd just imbibed between zero and ten shots of tequila, while another required the audience to keep a recovering alcoholic from drinking. Dupuy [caught it all on video](#), then abridged it to under an hour.

In a way, it's fruitless to equate last week's “Soup & Tart” to its namesake. Different eras, different coasts, wholly different casts. Yet the event, curated by Sarah Cooper and produced by Active Cultures (like it says on your yogurt), certainly begged the comparison. Did they think the audience would just roll with it, that the comparison would hold up—that an idea as *sui generis* '74 as “Soup & Tart” could, let alone *should*, be reprised at all?



Emily Mast and Gregory Barnett.



In the cavernous main gallery at MOCA Geffen, famously an old warehouse for police cars, a line of I-beams formed a natural barrier between two zones—call them the stage and the food court. On one side, performers rotated through their bits, taking turns at one of three microphones positioned among a crowd seated on thin cushions with their paper flatware and plastic cups. On the other side, six long lines for soups and tarts intersected with a seventh for drinks—a canned IPA cost \$14, a cup of wine \$20. (All proceeds to the artists and chefs!) It felt like a festival: paltry portions, overpriced drinks, water hard to find, bad acoustics, and no one quite sure where the performances were happening or if they'd started. Only half the room seemed to care.

passing messages (and a packet of COVID masks) across the room to her friend Gabie Strong. Both, she said, are hard of hearing. But the crowd wouldn't shut up. They wanted their soup and their selfies, and the bit lingered awkwardly as the messages made their inefficient way.

Two of my favorite performances seemed to parody the buttoned-up bacchanal atmosphere: Ei Arakawa shuffling through the throng, handing out cups of saltwater from a tray while a big screen showed a picture of a waterfall; Emily Mast and Gregory Barnett, one on the other's shoulders, yelling "Free Wine!," cracking two bottles, and sloppily topping guests' up. These were gestures—gestures toward a simmering lack. A lack of what? Generosity—to the performers mostly, all but the most operatic of whom struggled to be heard over the murmuring crowd until around two hours in, when the soup and tarts ran out and most people had left—I'm guessing to go eat dinner.





Six chefs. Three soups. Three tarts.

Today you wouldn't host an event like "Soup & Tart" without employing a squad of videographers, and of course you can trust the performers, their friends, and everyone else in the audience to add to the reservoir of documentation. Maybe I'm old fashioned. The emphasis on high-fidelity posterity and digital networking felt unsympathetic to the concept of a simple artists' meal.

Of course, there was nothing simple about the meal. This being '23, the food was pretty as a hashtagged picture and served as a multisensory calling card for the six participating chefs and restaurants. A vegan hibiscus borscht by Gerardo Gonzalez, cradling a scoop of cashew cream and dusted with dill flowers, was both fresh and filling. The single roti crouton on Rashida Holmes's corn chowder was appreciated. As for the tarts—a savory offering from Sera Pisani played on *pintxos*, stacking a patch of whipped feta with candied orange, green olive, and white anchovy. And I remain grateful for the visual and buccal contrast of the salted pecans and pepper blossoms climbing the chocolate *cremeaux* by Hannah Ziskin. My only (philistine) complaint here, really, is the portions.

Cooper writes in the [program notes](#) that she discovered Dupuy's "Soup & Tart" several years ago,

of unrealized ideals—is where *Soup & Tart* belongs, alongside Gertrude Stein’s salon and the original Woodstock. (Or for that matter *Station to Station*, which I [covered for these pages](#)—a much mightier Doug Aitken production similarly patterned on a countercultural fest from the acid years that could only exist in 2013 as an ad for Levi’s.)



Nina Sarnelle.

Is it art? Entertainment? Branding? *Dinner?* The answer is an LA “Yes.” I, too, believe in the synergistic magic of dinner parties. That dream lives on in “Soup & Tart” ’23. The MOCA event billed itself as a showcase of LA’s intersectional art and food scenes, a chance to let loose and experiment and see what happens—and it was. But *S&T* ’23 was also a sort of trade fair, artists and chefs serving bite-size samples of their wares, and this aspect felt begrudged, secret, almost shameful. Meanwhile, Dupuy’s event was unabashedly tied to an [exhibition of his work](#) at the Kitchen. Fluxus undiluted has a certain puckishness—channeled by many of last week’s acts, but impossible at the level of MOCA and Active Cultures. The night ended with Nina Sarnelle leading a ceremonial

Dupuy's event as a whole, an accelerationist model of bohemia, was willing to self-destruct.

“Soup & Tart: Los Angeles” took place at MOCA Geffen on June 8.

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