

In the Studio with MoMA

By Jan Garden Castro
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One freezing January winter night at the Museum of Modern Art, as JLO wowed fans at the premier of her film *Parker*, an art event on the second floor signaled the start of the new series *ARTISTS EXPERIMENT*. “Capital Exchange: A Dinner Event” was a 3+ -hour, sold-out, three-course art party which proved that good art can be political, that it is never too late to admit this, and that contemporary museums are finding new ways to broaden their missions, to respect the diverse heritages of their staff and constituents, and to stage interventions that are credible art experiences. This month’s blog will examine the first course in MoMA’s experiment to use the whole museum as a curated studio/performance space.

Credit goes to Pablo Helguera, Director of Adult and Academic Programs, for this initiative. Mr. Helguera, the dapper, tuxedoed master of ceremonies, told me, “The subject of Capital Exchange is the locality of culture – we make our own places in the world by transforming them. Starting last summer, we invited four artists to make MoMA programs more dynamic. This is the inaugural event in a series of programs.”



Drawing from her research in the MoMA Library and Archives, Xaviera Simmons shared a selection of her initial findings by presenting each guest with a special set of placemats, inspired by artworks that confront major political movements of the 20th and 21st centuries, from MoMA’s inception to the present. Each corresponds to a course throughout the evening, and provides the evening’s protest-inspired soundtrack. Photograph by Paula Court. Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art.

The evening's edible arts were each introduced by performances that called for audience participation. Artists Xaviera Simmons and her performance-based score executed by singer Teresa Mora stood out. Xaviera Simmons created collectable, limited edition placemats for "Capital Exchange" and titled the set and her subsequent project for MoMA "Archive as Impetus." Her project for ARTISTS EXPERIMENT centers around MoMA's political holdings and artists' interventions within the museum. First, the attendees held the set of 3 art placemats above their heads, as instructed. I resisted Xaviera's instructions to break the seal for the set (wrapped in brown paper), for the seal is a sticker reproduction of a 1984 Guerrilla Girls poster reminding art collectors:

"your collection, like most, does not contain enough art by women. We know that you feel terrible about this and will rectify the situation immediately. All our love, Guerrilla Girls."

Each placemat, based on an image from the MoMA archives and collections, shows a politically-radical event whose evidence in photographic, screen print, and news clipping form has been either collected by MoMA or exhibited in its galleries, starting with a 1930 Communist protest march in Washington with giant placards such as "Unity of White and Negro Workers." The entrée mat was a screenprint reproduction of an original screen print from Andy Warhol's *Birmingham Race Riot* from the portfolio *Ten Paintings By Ten Artists*. Simmons retrieved this from MoMA's print collections. A black felt dessert mat was a newspaper clipping of a "nude-in" by Yayoi Kusama, 1969, showing the artist and nude bathers wading, unannounced in MoMA's sculpture garden.



MoMA's Capital Exchange: A Dinner Event Place setting. Photograph by Paula Court. Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art.

These images directly address gender, race and class inequality protests found in American history. Xaviera's focus on dissidents who have broadened the definitions of "art" was liberating in the sense that it was inclusive and something to literally take home (transparent bags provided), so that each art collector could start being more inclusive as well. It was innovative as well that each mat also used a different type of material and print medium, thereby creating collectable art using quotidian resources. Xaviera commissioned singer Teresa Mora to close the festivities with soaring *a capella* renditions of Gil Scott Heron's "Who'll Pay Reparations for My Soul" and Nina Simone's "Four Women," which

brought the audience to its feet. These performances engaged and included all present.

As the wait staff served about 100 guests wine, MoMA chef Lynn Bound stayed in the background as Guest Chefs Diego Becerra and Raúl Cardenas Osuná discussed the three-course menu. Evidently, *Caesar* salad was invented by an Italian in Tijuana, Mexico, so the chefs decided to serve *Cesar* Salad with Mexican accents — crispy fresh anchovies in a soft corn tortilla topped with avocado, shredded lettuce and carrots, and Serrano chili mayonnaise. The second course was a green curry seafood Newburg with a South Asian twist. The dessert was baked Alaska with a Caribbean twist: rum-soaked banana bread, coconut, and rum raisin gelato inside a gently-torched, piped Italian meringue layer. Artist

Caroline Woolard contributed a rhizome-loaded turmeric capsule and led a toast to Hungarian industrial ceramic designer Eva Zeisel, the first female industrial designer to have a solo exhibition at MoMA (in 1946). Poet Kenneth Goldsmith rounded out the happy, refined menu of international tastes by expounding on the history of Alice B. Toklas's cook book and its "fudge" recipe modeled after Byron Gyson's hashish fudge creation (served separately like taffy in a white wrapper).

Imaginative decisions went into the menu and its preparation; in fact, the MoMA kitchen itself became a pop-up studio, and the many chefs incorporated wit and laughter into the menu. Another grace note was not only perfect service by the kitchen and wait staff but also that the entire kitchen crew came out and took a big bow at the end. No one was left out. Some art performances attempt –but few achieve — this inclusion: every part of the space and event was transparent and participatory and every person present felt like a star.

More live performances and interventions in the galleries are planned for MoMA between February and June. Visit momataalks.tumblr.com/artistsexperiment for details. MoMA's education programs go in many directions and include hands-on art-making for Alzheimer's patients.