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THE BLOG

Abby Hertz's Cannibal Lust Heats Up the Dada Centennial

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Warning: Images below may be NSFW for some readers.



Feast at *LUST*, performance art and dinner by Abby Hertz at The House of Yes, February 14, 2016. Photograph by Joe Fionda.

A century after the Cabaret Voltaire opened its doors in February 1916, a group performance descendant from Dada and Surrealist sensibilities premiered on Valentine's Day Night in a Bushwick nightclub, House of Yes. Entitled *LUST*, and produced by the young New York artist-entertainer, designer and entrepreneur, Abby Hertz, the production boldly stands out from most other club performance art not only for its complexity and scale, but as well for its rare equation of nudity plus cuisine plus art plus erotics plus intersectional politics plus entertainment, totaling up to a new depth of surrealist mediation of the Uncanny. Hertz asked eleven nude and semi-

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nude male and female models to lie face up on banquet tables, then covered and surrounded them with an exquisite array of fine foods and libations for an audience that sat riveted and titillated on plush oriental carpets and pillows.



Feast at *LUST*, performance art and dinner by Abby Hertz at The House of Yes, February 14, 2016. Photograph by Adrian Buckmaster.

For the meat eaters the beautiful bodies to be eye-cannibalized were surrounded with either beef roasts with red wine, served on top of beds of rosemary, sage and other fragrant spices, or pork roasts with poached apples and pears. There were also fish sushi rolls, oysters, cheeses with meats, and human dessert platters with hot fudge, whipped cream, and fruit along with single serving shot glasses of panna cotta. For vegans there were vegetable sushi rolls, filo pastries with feta and spinach, roasted artichoke hearts, vegan quiche, vegetable skewers, roasted rosemary

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potatoes, roasted vegetables, fresh fruit, with most of the food gluten-free. There was also ample champagne at each table, often served by roaming yet utterly graceful and alluring attendants who not only poured our libations (a full-service bar was on hand), but massaged the attendees throughout. For an audience as diverse as an United Nations Assembly, there were also entirely unconventional musical and theatrical acts that included numerous fire acts, intricate bondage, and trapeze artists, all by entertainment associates that Hertz has known and worked with in the many clubs throughout the New York City scene. Considering the artistry, talent and taste of the extravaganza, all was available to the House of Yes clientele for a reasonable price of \$125 to \$200 a head.



Feast at *LUST*, performance art and dinner by Abby Hertz at The House of Yes, February 14, 2016. Photograph by Adrian Buckmaster.

The mix of art, haute-cuisine, elegance and individualistic yet exotic fashion and costuming of the audience was meant as much more than an edgy-yet-gentle Valentine's Day celebration of aesthetics and eroticism in all its civilized flavors. It evoked a rare sense of the Parisian origins of Dada and Surrealism, particularly that which had been eminently associated with the artist Meret Oppenheim's Parisian 'cannibal feast' that is the prototype for Hertz's *LUST* performance. In fact, Hertz's banquet is so far the most extravagant and most heavily-produced of the so-called cannibal feasts produced in honor of the original feast by Meret Oppenheim on the opening day of the 1959 *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* (EROS) in Paris. One art news source of the day gushed, in full seriousness unimaginable to us today, that the exhibit was "a compelling and horrifying tableau" that "featured a live woman."

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For press photographs, the woman was replaced by a mannequin, no doubt because a nude woman served as a meal, however parodically, was taboo by even French standards. We do know she was "garnished with fish, fruit and nuts" and that "Oppenheim set the table with cutlery, inviting the spectator to a cannibal feast". Apparently Oppenheim staged her original cannibal feast as a private event that she billed a 'fertility feast' in Bern earlier that year "and invited three couples to feast on fruits, nuts and shellfish, presented on the body of a naked female model". We are told that when André Breton, her life-long supporter, heard of the Bern feast, he begged her to restage it for the Surrealist exposition of eroticism and voyeurism. Breton even somewhat redirected the performance, retitling it *Cannibal Feast* to "emphasize the violence of the act". It was reported by the press that, "spectators were shocked and horrified, and Oppenheim commented that the EROS version strayed far from her original intention, stating that, "Instead of a simple spring festival, it was yet another woman taken for male pleasure."



Abby Hertz and House of Yes co-owner Ilan Telmont preparing a human feast at *LUST*, performance art and dinner by Abby Hertz at The House of Yes, February 14, 2016. Photograph by Adrian Buckmaster.

But Oppenheim's feast was not Hertz's introduction to the Surrealist cannibal feast. For that Hertz is indebted to the much more elaborate *The Banquet*, by Hunter Reynolds and Chrysanne Stathacos, the first known re-enactment of the Oppenheim feast in New York that she had been introduced to with a video of the performance (posted below) screened in one of her graduate courses at The School of Visual Arts. Performed on May 1, 1992 at New York's Threadwaxing

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Space, it was the mythpoetic performance of *The Banquet* with the vanguard music of composer Ben Neill's mutant trumpet, that instantly became a legendary multimedia event for its feminist and queer reversal of the gender of the feast with an attractive young nude man on an inordinately long banquet table overflowing with a small mountain of fresh, wholly edible, food art by Rosina Lardieri and Scott Spector.



Feast at *LUST*, performance art and dinner by Abby Hertz at The House of Yes, February 14, 2016. Photograph by Adrian Buckmaster.

The Banquet purposefully bridged the entropy and nihilism of Breton with the feminist and queer poetics and politics of restorative healing and growth in the Age of AIDS. Staged coincidentally on the night of the Rodney King Riots following the announced verdicts of the jury that spawned them, protestors streamed down Broadway, while a floor above them the performance began at

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dusk. Unlike either Oppenheim's or Hertz's feasts, *The Banquet* was significantly mythopoetic in citing ancient sacred sources for the ritual re-enactments. Stathacos, who is of Greek descent and has a home in Athens, is ever reminded of the powerful and uncompromising women of myths and rituals. She sought to make *The Banquet* evocative of the Delphic Oracles who prognosticated fate and the Greek Maenads who in the intoxication of their bacchanals danced and hunted so maniacally that they wouldn't recognize the animal they were tearing apart limb from limb was a man who had unknowingly wandered into the woods. Hence the young and handsome nude man on the table at *The Banquet* was the mythopoetic women's feast, as much as he was the re-embodiment of the Mithraic, Dionysian, Orphic, Osirian feasts, all of which inform even the Christian Eucharist, in honoring the sacrificial body of gods made human earthly and spiritual sustenance. Surrounded and provocatively covered by a spectacular array of food the man on the banquet table was central to a performance of maenads, dressed in printed hair dresses resembling the animal skins of Paleolithic cave dwellers, symbolically gorging on the young man as they ate triumphantly from the feast while reading from texts written by men about the impossibility of women becoming artists. Modeled by Stathacos after the willful women of pre-Christian Greece whose matriarchal beliefs and rites were driven underground with the ascent of the patriarchal gods, *The Banquet's* Maenads ironically consisted of successful artists and art professionals, including the artist Kathy Burkhart; the artist-critic Susan Silas; the critic Patricia McCoy; the current Director of the Brooklyn Museum, Anne Pasternack; and the current Director of the Institute of Contemporary Art Miami, Ellen Salpeter. (All can be spotted prominently in *The Banquet* video below).



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The second leg of *The Banquet* included the symbolic rotation of the AIDS-activist/artist, Hunter Reynolds, in his female persona of 'Patina', dressed in a radiant white ball gown printed collaboratively with black and crimson strands of Stathacos' hair and spots of Reynold's own HIV-infected blood. Patina performed a "music box dance" of celestial revolution on a rotating dais like a slow-moving doll of pathos. At first appearing immobile, gradually Patina could be discerned raising and lowering her arms in supplication to The Universe, its gods and goddesses, for the health of all HIV persons. It was completely by chance that *The Banquet* marked the first time that Patina acted as empath for the world's collective woes. Having that afternoon witnessed the neighborhood of Los Angeles s/he had lived in for ten years go up in flames on TV as s/he dressed for the performance, Patina breathed in the rage and despair of the riots. Yet, prepared for a ceremony intent on healing, s/he became galvanized by a tension that Reynolds claims was unlike any s/he had felt before.



Feast at *LUST*, performance art and dinner by Abby Hertz at The House of Yes, February 14, 2016. Photograph by Adrian Buckmaster.

Hertz saw this video in 2006, and for ten years it impressed upon her a desire to re-stage the event even more spectacularly, if without its mythopoetic politics. That's not to say that *LUST* is apolitical. The attendants she procures to cater to her audience present themselves as ambi-sexual in their apparent tastes, willing to massage men and women equally regardless of orientations all around. There was also a racial and ethnic mix among the audience that conveyed a true

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universality, or *intersectionality*, as the collective liberation from essentialist identifications and authoritarian prejudice of the past is being called today.

Video of *The Banquet*, a performance art event and dinner by Hunter Reynolds and Chrysanne Stathacos at The Threadwaxing Space, Manhattan, May 1, 1992. Video by Carter Kustera and David Leslie, featuring Ben Neill, Anne Pasternak, Ellen Salpeter, Kathe Burkhart, Susan Silas, Hunter Reynolds and Chrysanne Stathacos.

Hertz's reclamation of Surrealism in *LUST* comes without a mythopoetic impetus. She is more intent on making accommodations for a truly sustaining feast, the kind that can be reenacted pragmatically on demand for audiences that may be, quite frankly, hedonistic without guilt. In doing so she reminds us that Surrealism is now a popular art history, not the scandalous revolution it set out to be in the 1920s and 1930s. Despite the successes of such 1980s and 1990s artists as Louise Bourgeois, Robert Gober, Kiki Smith, Andres Serrano, Jim Shaw, John Miller, and in *The Banquet* of Reynolds and Stathacos, by revitalizing many of the old tropes of Surrealism, if not its fetishes, made the artistic movement emblematic of the breakdown of historical repressions. Civilization for a good portion of the human populace living amid modernity at the end of the 20th Century was no longer subjected to such steep sexual repression and thereby no longer felt a need to fetishize genitalia discretely with objects harboring the libidinal charge of genital, oral or anal sexuality. By capitalizing on the new political purposes to which they could be put, such artists made the fetish banal and antiquated.

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The cannibal feast with live nude male model for the appetite of maenads (wild emancipated women) at *The Banquet*, a performance art event and dinner by Hunter Reynolds and Chrysanne Stathacos at The Threadwaxing Space, Manhattan, May 1, 1992. Photograph by Maxine Henryson.

Enter Abby Hertz, an ambitious avatar of the new utilitarian generation who seeks to refurbish the aesthetic and psychological refuse of bygone eras to re-embody them as symbols of the new era of conscious erotics in which, as in ancient cultures, the human nature of desire is celebrated. The choice of reverie as vehicle of new cultural codes expunged of guilt and superstition makes a club rather than a gallery not only logical, but emphatically the more desirable venue to host a surrealism that has over a century been reduced to entertainment, yet no less still possesses considerable aesthetics worthy of being revitalized in new contexts. All of which makes significant Hertz's abjuration of Surrealism's nihilist tendencies.

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The Prevent performed the night before the cannibal feast of *The Banquet*, a performance art event and dinner for patrons by Hunter Reynolds and Chrysanne Stathacos, Manhattan, 1992. Photograph by Michael Wakefield.

For Hertz's revitalization of the old Surrealist trope of the cannibal feast as fetish is by no means a naive attempt to evoke scandal, which may well be near impossible today in modern societies. In seeking to make Surrealism elegant and distinctive, even benefic, in an age that has been called post-HIV and post-feminist, however prematurely, Hertz has taken to Surrealism in a way most artists have been avoiding despite that it is the only fresh recourse left to the movement after a century. She is seeing to Surrealism's aesthetic refinement while disregarding all the old avant-gardisms that haven't been, nor cannot ever again be, avant-garde. The very striving for an avant-garde 100 years after Dada and Surrealism is pointless from an aesthetic standpoint in modern civilization. (From a political one, there still seems much to be gained by pushing the limits of acceptability, as the Republican candidates in the current season of Presidential primary races make surrealism in the ubiquitous sense seem quaint.)

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Meret Oppenheim's *Spring Feast*, the mannequin version. The original live performance with a nude model exhibited on the opening day of the 1959 Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme (EROS) in Paris seems to not have been photographed, perhaps because a nude woman posed as a cannibal feast was considered too scandalous for recording. An earlier *Spring Feast* performance in Bern that also featured a live nude woman on a banquet table was photographed and is seen below. Among the Surrealist group seen here are Oppenheim (leopard skin coat) and André Breton, sitting at the head of the table. Photograph by William Klein.

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The one published photograph of Meret Oppenheim's *Spring Feast* that includes a live woman offered among the banquet is this one taken in Bern, 1959, and staged for a small group of friends. As Oppenheim relays, she invited a woman she did not know to pose nude for her guests. Her face was painted gold and her body covered with lobsters, fish, breads, vegetables and fruits that were eaten by all who attended.

Leaving behind the vulgarities of surrealism (the Uncanny in everyday life) and the fantasmagoria of painted and sculptural Surrealism (the artistic and revolutionary movement of the 1930s on), Hertz's stratagem is to rightly redefine what once was regarded vulgar, even criminal, about desire as natural and cultural. The anti-immigration policies of politicians is vulgar. Eating food off a beautiful nude body is enchanting. Discriminating against queer marriage is obscene. Exhibiting new acrobatic bondage scenes is gentle. Jokes about Caitlyn Jenner's dick are crass. Being unable to guess the biological gender of the new acquaintance across the dinner table is enthralling. By designing compellingly-provocative banquet settings at which we encounter not only nude models but attendees who are likely to be as different from us as similar, Hertz is literally turning the tables on the history of morality that has sought to homogenize what is by nature heterogenous. More simply put, Hertz is making old virtues appear as the fonts of hypocrisy they now appear, at the same time that old scandals are made out to be today's norms. Not that she isn't benefitting from the activism of millions before her; indeed it is the activism of those millions that confers a new dignity and beauty upon what a few decades ago intellectuals could only defend with a new aesthetics of 'Camp'.

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Feast at *LUST*, performance art and dinner by Abby Hertz at The House of Yes, February 14, 2016. Photograph by Adrian Buckmaster.

Make no mistake. Nothing about Hertz's dinner performances like *LUST* is camp or scandalous. Thirty years ago it would be camp. Sixty years ago it would be criminal. Hertz advertises that the average socialite can finally put away the threadbare tropes of camp as eagerly as the intellectual can now disregard Susan Sontag's essay on the subject. We no longer need camp to justify proclivities that are perfectly natural but were culturally denigrated. We are so many ready to be beautiful in ways that societies around the world have not openly considered for two millennia. The time is right to vitalize a new aesthetics that embraces globally-erotic tastes.

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Feast at *LUST*, performance art and dinner by Abby Hertz at The House of Yes, February 14, 2016. Photograph by Adrian Buckmaster.

What Hertz emphatically retains from Surrealism is its heightened appreciation of the Uncanny. This is what makes sitting down at a feast with a nude body on the table so compelling. It is truly a neglected conjunction of beauty even today to have a gorgeous body on a table with a scrumptious meal so long as consent is the *modus operandi*. And why should it be otherwise? This is the question Hertz summons to mind weeks after sitting down with her nude models to eat. Hertz is ferreting the uncanny beauty out of discrete, if unlikely-conjoined events in the same way that Brassai, Man Ray and Lee Miller sought out and photographed the peculiarly isolated incongruences in the world around us and thereby aesthetically heightened the depiction of previously unremarkable yet upon discovery became uncanny occurrences. The lesson learned from their photography of the Uncanny that evades the more programmatic agendas of Surrealist paintings, is that a neglect of elegance in simplicity that is ubiquitous, when discovered and properly contextualized, leaves us in states of epiphany. In this respect, Hertz liberates the Uncanny from our expectation of its injurious inflictions on the psyche. This again is an expectation of the first Surrealist generation, who saw themselves having a steeply-uphill battle against establishment religion and morality. It was only natural that that generation would promote a form of cultural entropy, an eroding of old and outmoded if not obscene and criminal orders, as was required among so much of the potent upheaval of Modernism.

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Feast at *LUST*, performance art and dinner by Abby Hertz at The House of Yes, February 14, 2016. Photograph by Adrian Buckmaster.

I personally learned a lesson at *LUST*. In 1987, when I staged an exhibition of photography by a new generation of surrealist photographers, I called the exhibition, *Poetic Injury*, with the emphasis being the lacerations that surrealism in its acknowledgment of universal entropy incurs upon societies with rigid loyalties to tradition and unreflective moral codes. In doing so I kept to the call of the original Surrealist generation in assembling artists that all somehow embodied in their work the injuries of social change. "The personal form of entropy", I wrote, "is injury: it is smaller in scale, but often more severe in its compacted abrasion, and certainly more visible and swift in its damage." In many ways the entropy/injury model that I was then holding to served as a description of the Surrealist agenda -- certainly more aptly than 'revolution', which is too abrupt when assessing Surrealism's long term, but delayed cultural effects.

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Feast at *LUST*, performance art and dinner by Abby Hertz at The House of Yes, February 14, 2016. Photograph by Adrian Buckmaster.

Indicative perhaps of her generation and the collective mood of the culture she lives in, Hertz shows not the slightest concern for the effects of entropy or the injuries of change. And yet her banquet is no less uncanny than the original Surrealist and Dada performances. That is because the Uncanny can also be something the original Surrealists and Dadaist neglected, just as did the artists of Existentialism later on. The Uncanny that Hertz nurtures is the natural growth, healing and appreciation of the accidental simultaneity of previously un contemplated associations. But the generations caught between the fascisms, annihilations, wars and genocides of the 20th Century could not focus on these positive dynamics. And perhaps we again will reach such cataclysmic states (as they are in the Middle East), after which we will return to the aesthetics of entropy and injury. But for many in the developed world, the aesthetics of sustainable growth inform art. As it informed mythopoetics, the making of new myths, throughout history.

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Feast at *LUST*, performance art and dinner by Abby Hertz at The House of Yes, February 14, 2016. Photograph by Adrian Buckmaster.

Hertz's choice of a nightclub rather than a gallery is only notable because it coincides to the month of the centenary of the Cabaret Voltaire. In the winter of 1916, the German artist and poet, Hugo Ball, now a refugee of the Great War in neutral Switzerland, approached one Mr. Ephraim, the owner of the "Meierei" restaurant in the Hollandische Meierei district of Zurich. Ball inquired as to the availability of the bar's back room as a nightclub. Ball's club was not to host the kind of dionysian revelry the bar owner might have expected. It was to become a cabaret that would foster an intellectual theatrical, musical, and poetic protest against not just the war, but against the masterpieces of art that failed to tame the savagery cannibalizing Europe's empires at war. Ball and his partner, the artist Emmy Hemmings, were on February 5 to become impresarios of a new art of theater, music, theatrical and literary pronouncements that were only as entertaining as the will for disempowerment of the empires allowed. The clientele included the many disaffected artists and intellectuals, along with the many curious refugees who were like-minded in their disaffection with monarchies, empires, and parliaments. In effect it was to become the famed Cabaret Voltaire, and the performances, sets and other material and conceptual events were to become Dada, and for some a decade-and-a-half later, would become Surrealism.

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Feast at *LUST*, performance art and dinner by Abby Hertz at The House of Yes, February 14, 2016. Photograph by Adrian Buckmaster.

If the Cabaret Voltaire seems singular to us today, it is because so many of us feel art has not arrived until it is gentrified by the commercial art gallery and historicized by the museum. In fact, Cabaret Voltaire was really not as singular as we may think for its remoteness from such institutions. It hardly seems necessary to recount the precedents in the 1880s, the French nightclubs and cafés in Montmartre that spawned a new bohemian art movement that would eventually eclipse the art schools, salons and museums as progenitors of avant-garde Modernist art, literature, music and performance. Le Chat Noir and Moulin Rouge were the most renown cabarets to epitomize the raucous and irreverent entertainment of Montmartre and informed the art of Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh, Émile Bernard, Louis Anquetin, Renoir and Picasso. Cabaret Voltaire might never have been conceived were it not for the cafe society that had spawned the bohemian avant-garde in the late 19th-century, in many ways even as significant as the invention of Dada in that it is the source for at least the arts and letters of Modernist activity. Nightclubs and their daytime equivalent, cafes and cafe society, quickly spread across the urban centers of Europe, and a decade or two later across the Atlantic to the cultural capitals of North and South America.

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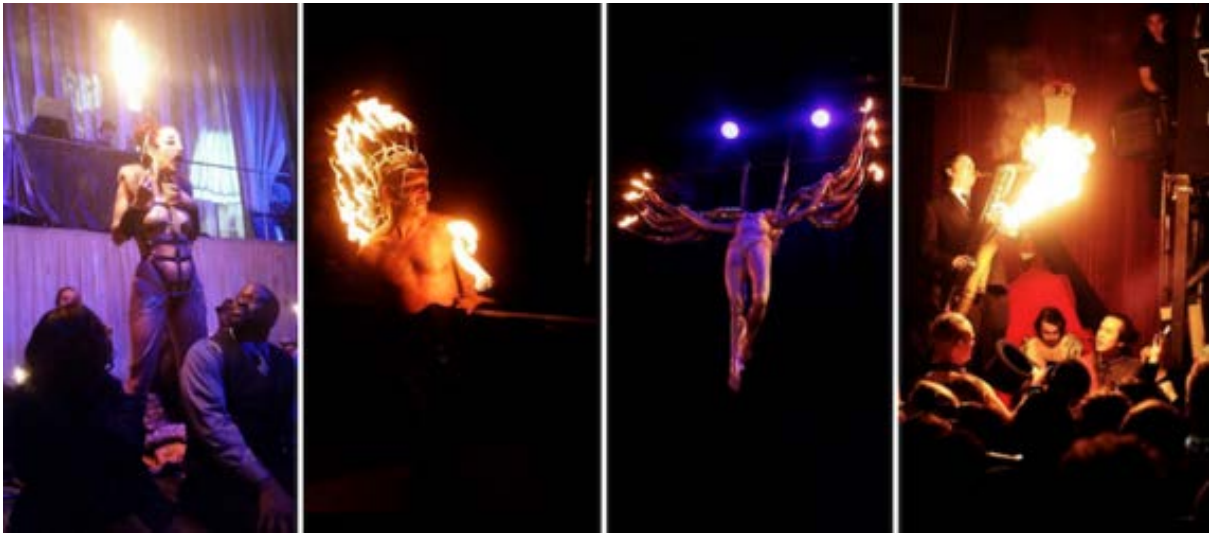
Feast at *LUST*, performance art and dinner by Abby Hertz at The House of Yes, February 14, 2016. Photograph by Adrian Buckmaster.

Since then, nightclubs would become the sites of many avant-garde productions of visual, theatrical and musical experimentation. No one club would ever become as central to the world of avant-garde art, dance, music, poetry and visual art as had the Cabaret Voltaire, but many would spawn movements and launch careers in much the same way that, in the Paris of the 1890s, the cafés of Montmartre helped mold the fin-de-siècle aesthetic. In New York, nightclubs in the 1970s, 80s and 90s provided a throbbing counterpoint to the galleries introducing cutting-edge art. CBGBs and Max's Kansas City, then in the 1980s and 90s, dozens of new nightclubs and bars such as Area, Club 57, Danceteria, Limelight, Mudd Club, Palladium, Paradise Garage, the Pyramid and the Tunnel insinuated themselves as auxiliaries to the art world by presenting new music, art, film, video, fashion, and performance that impacted profoundly and radically on artists and audiences.

In fact the nightclub is the preferred venue for Abby Hertz, who studied art history and women's studies and has professionally produced events for Simon Cowell, Rihanna, Katy Perry, Florence Welch, and Mark Zuckerberg. Asked about whether she would stage feasts such as *LUST* in galleries, Hertz responded with near incredulity. "I truly believe, that NYC's most interesting art is being created in nightlife and outside of the white cube", she told me. "The artists that end up in nightlife are often from a working class background and have found it easier to support themselves financially in nightlife rather than struggling for connections in the high-art world. Or they have rejected the white-cube and found more freedom of expression in nightclubs."

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As if to remind the audience that we were at a nightclub, not a gallery or museum, Hertz booked an assortment of acts ranging from conventional musicians and acrobats to fire shows and bondage at The House of Yes, February 14, 2016. Photograph by Adrian Buckmaster.

"Those of us that did not have the financial freedom to work unpaid internships or have parents with connections in the art world have found more opportunity in cabaret theaters and nightlife, although many of us do end up with gallery representation because of our work in nightlife. Narcissister is a great example of starting in nightlife and theater and gaining recognition in the art world through her performance art in nightlife. I would say that, in general, many nightlife performance artists do not feel they need to be 'legitimized' or sanctioned by the high-art world because we have our own art world that exists outside of Chelsea. I would much rather have my artistic epicenter be Bushwick than Chelsea, personally. It's so much more creatively fulfilling and exciting for me. Bushwick has become NYC's true creative center in the past few years and House of Yes has served as a springboard for many artists' projects over the years. Venues like them are amazing at supporting new ideas and taking chances on younger artists."

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The author, Abby Hertz (center) and guests of honor Hunter Reynolds and Chrysanne Stathacos, at *LUST*, performance art and dinner by Abby Hertz at The House of Yes, February 14, 2016. Photograph by Adrian Buckmaster.