

FEAST

RADICAL
HOSPITALITY IN
CONTEMPORARY
ART

Stephanie Smith

SMART MUSEUM OF ART
The University of Chicago

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Bonnie Ora Sherk

IN THE EARLY 1970s, Bonnie Ora Sherk created a series of performances in public places: sitting still beside a freeway during its construction, working as a short-order cook in a donut shop, eating lunch in a cage at the San Francisco Zoo. The latter work, *Public Lunch* (1971), was Sherk's contribution to an exhibition of performance art curated for the Richmond Art Center by artist Tom Marioni (who is also included in *Feast*). For this performance, a primly dressed Sherk calmly ate an elegant meal while a tiger devoured raw meat in the next cage. As shown in the documentary photographs and video included in *Feast*, Sherk also paced, made notes, and rested—but kept the act of eating at the center of the piece. This solo meal worked on multiple levels to blur boundaries between human and animal behavior, public and private space, everyday life and spectacle. The piece was pivotal for Sherk. She considers it to be a key precedent for later projects focused on interrelationships, analogies, and communications between diverse species, and on the interconnections between biological, cultural, and technological systems. *Public Lunch* led directly to her study of interspecies communications while living and performing with diverse species of animals, and later to her landmark work, *The Farm* (1974–80, also known as *Crossroads Community [the farm]*). In the latter project, she and collaborators transformed a few acres adjacent to, and under, a San Francisco freeway interchange into a small working community farm/garden, environmental education center, and alternative art space that she describes as “a work of life-scale environmental performance sculpture.” Such eco-art-education transformation projects continue to be her primary focus through her ongoing project *A Living Library* (A.L.L., for short).

Around the same time as *Public Lunch*, Sherk was exploring an idea she called “cultural costumes:” styles of dress with strong gender, class, and occupational associations that might shape others' perceptions of the wearer, and also might alter the wearer's sense of self. For *Public Lunch* she dressed as “a Woman”—in black dress and heels. This choice was a key part of the performance. *Public Lunch* occurred during a time of intense debate about whether women's roles could or should be limited, and took place in San Francisco—one of the epicenters of 1960s counterculture, and a city where dress was highly coded in expressing ideology. Sherk's choice to combine a typically female ensemble with an often elegant, unflappable persona both amplified and nuanced the contrast between human and animal meals.

For two other site-specific, meal-based performances, Sherk donned attire associated with particular kinds of blue-collar labor. As *The Waitress* (1973), she wore a bouffant hairdo and black and white nylon dress (and even chose to stay in character when called to jury duty in order to further explore reactions to that working class persona and explore the nature of performance art in the courtroom). In the nearly yearlong performance of *The Short Order Cook* (1973–74, shown in *Feast* through documentary photographs), Sherk wore jeans, a t-shirt, an apron and a chef's hat to perform as *The Short Order Cook* while working the graveyard shift at Andy's Donuts in San Francisco's Castro district. Some customers were aware of this performance as a kind of theater, while others obliviously enjoyed a midnight meal. The piece exemplifies the period's commitment to blurring—here nearly erasing—the customary boundaries between art and life.



Interview

SMART: Describe your path as an artist and sources of inspiration for your work, either in or beyond the context of art.

BONNIE ORA SHERK: My work has been evolving for more than four decades in performance, installation, public practice, and place-based landscape architecture and planning. In my current work, physical transformations are integrated with communications technologies, hands-on, interdisciplinary and intergenerational curricula, and community programs.

My early work focused on expressing ideas and feelings through performance in a site, either found or created. I thought of myself as an environmental performance sculptor, integrating systemically the expression, performance, or activity within the place. I experimented with many forms of performance: some were open-ended, free flowing, and spontaneous; others were more tightly woven, planned or scripted; some had elements of each.

I was very particular about the place in which the performance would occur. Sometimes I used found environments, such as in the *Sitting Still Series* and *Public Lunch*. Often I created them, such as *Living in the Forest: Demonstrations of Aktin Logic, Balance, Compromise, Devotion, Etc.* (1973).

I understood early on that everything happens in a place, and if the performance and environment are systemically interconnected, then whole experiences are the result. I was very conscious of the physicality of the environment, the look and feel of the place, even if it was an internal environment or state of being.

In my early work, I was exploring the nature of performance and what constituted an audience in its various permutations. I was also looking at ways to transform “dead space.” Additionally, I became increasingly involved in understanding and learning about natural systems, including ecology, animal behavior and communication, and interspecies communications. I was led to these areas of exploration as a result of my experiences during *Portable Parks 1–111* (1970) in three urban street environments, and a performance

in the lion house of the San Francisco Zoo called *Public Lunch* (1971).

Sitting Still 1 (1970), in which I inserted myself as a seated human figure into a found environment of garbage and water adjacent to a freeway construction site, was actually a watershed piece for me. I thought I was merely showing how a seated human figure can transform the environment facing an “audience” of people in slow-moving cars. But I was actually facing my future: the future site of *The Farm* and the *Islais Creek Watershed*. I learned much later that I was also sitting in water from the Islais Creek that had collected due to the 101 Freeway Interchange being built. For me, this is an extremely profound piece that addresses the deep power and spiritual dimensions of both art and water. My early practice eventually led me to develop an urban farm and art center, beginning in 1974, which incorporated about seven acres of disparate land fragments, including a freeway interchange, into a bucolic new city park, farm, and environmental art and education center replete with farm animals living in *The Raw Egg Animal Theater (TREAT)*. (I was facing this area in *Sitting Still 1*, as described above.) Called *Crossroads Community (The Farm)*, literally in the crossroads of four economically distressed communities, *The Farm* was also one of the first alternative art spaces in the country, and pioneered urban agriculture and watershed management. I also saw *The Farm* as a performance, and similarly regard my current work with communities.

SMART: How has this shaped your ongoing work with your *A Living Library* project?

BOS: Performance in my work has evolved into community programs for hands-on, interdisciplinary learning, which is integrated systemically into an environment, or place, that I also create. I think of all of these works as *Life Frames*. The *Life Frame* literally frames life, so we can see it and experience it more profoundly. As a vehicle and framing device, this idea has consistently evolved with my work. In 1992 I founded *Life Frames, Inc.*,



Public Lunch, 1971, at the San Francisco Zoo

a nonprofit that is now focused on sponsoring *A Living Library & Think Parks*, in diverse communities. *A Living Library*, which is still evolving in exceedingly creative ways, integrates biological, cultural, and technological systems within diverse communities—locally and globally. *A Living Library* (or *A.L.L.*), provides a methodology and strategy for making ecological change in schools and communities, and educating people of all ages about interconnected relationships, systems, and phenomena.

Each *Branch Living Library & Think Park* is place-based and unique, integrating local resources—human, ecological, economic, historic, technological, aesthetic—seen through the lens of time—past, present, future. A goal of mine, and *Life Frames, Inc.*, is to develop *Branch Living Library & Think Parks* in varied locales, and link them digitally, so that we can learn of cultures and ecologies—near and far—and better understand our commonalities and diversities. Currently there are multiple *Branch Living Library & Think Parks* underway in San Francisco and New York City.

SMART: Tell us about *Public Lunch*—its impetus, intention, and production—and how it fits into your broader practice.

BOS: *Public Lunch*, in which I ate a meal in the lion house at the San Francisco Zoo, adjacent to tigers and lions being fed raw meat, was the culmination of the *Sitting Still Series* mentioned above. *Sitting Still* initially began as an exploration of the nature of performance, and demonstrated how a seated human figure could transform the environment by simply being there.

Public Lunch was a seminal piece for me. During the course of the performance, I paced, ate my human meal, climbed up the ladder to the platform above, wrote what I was thinking and feeling (on Waldorf Astoria stationery), lay down, and rested. As I was lying down, gazing through the beautiful skylight above, viewing the clouds and birds flying overhead, the tiger in the adjacent cage, got up on his haunches and peered over at me. I thought, “This tiger is perceiving me; he is looking at me. What is he seeing? What is he thinking? What is he feeling?”



ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: *Public Lunch*, 1971, at the San Francisco Zoo



Sherk performs
The Waitress, 1974

This was a profound experience to think about the potential of another creature's intelligence, perception, feeling states, and communications. In the cage with me at the zoo, there was another cage that contained a white rat. I brought that cage and animal within as a way to demonstrate a cage, within a cage, within a cage. Who is in the cage?

As a result of the tiger's actions, I decided to bring the white rat back to my studio. I created a pristine, elegant environment for her. Between two pillars in the space, I built a "rat run," with sod at the bottom and wire mesh on the sides. But I left it open at the top, so the rat could leave if she chose to. She decided to stay, and I named her "Guru Rat." She was the first animal I lived with, and gradually I introduced other species into the environment and studied their behavior and interactions with each other.

At the time, the field of ethology (the study of animal behavior) was new; there was very little literature to read and study. But I learned tremendously by doing and creating experiences. The animals were performers, as was I. But we were also beings in our own right.

This work led me to understand ecology, which at the time was not as much a part of the zeitgeist as it is today. This work eventually led to the creation of *The Farm* and *The Raw Egg Animal Theatre*. I was determined to create a situation where people could learn about and appreciate the natural intelligences of other species. I saw this as a

direct analogy to, and metaphor for, issues of racism, sexism, and child abuse.

SMART: The documentary photographs of the performance show a large audience watching you. Did the audience know they were experiencing art?

BOS: Most people came to the zoo at the regular public feeding time of the lions and tigers at 2 pm on a Saturday in February to see the animals being fed. I was one of the animals being fed on that day, and for those spectators it was a surprise. There were also a few people there who came because they knew that there was to be a performance piece that I was presenting, although they did not know what the piece was going to be.

SMART: What made you decide to write about your "private" experience of such a "public" lunch as part of the performance? Do you remember the kinds of things you wrote down?

BOS: Writing is a human activity and I was performing human activities for my performance in *Public Lunch*. I was writing about what I was thinking and feeling about the experience about being there, and what was happening.

I purposely wrote on Waldorf Astoria stationery, as the irony was irresistible, and also because the piece was conceived by my experience at the Waldorf. I stayed there as a

guest of Condé Nast, after being named a Woman of the Year by *Mademoiselle* magazine, and was in New York City for their awards ceremony. In the morning, I ordered room service breakfast—a simple poached egg, coffee, and toast. I was struck by the elaborate, formally set table wheeled into my room with so many covered dishes. Extremely elegant but excessive. Soon thereafter, I took a walk in Central Park and went to the zoo, visiting the lion house. The rest is history.

SMART: How would you describe the role of the meal or hospitality in your practice? Do questions about hospitality figure into your process or thinking?

BOS: I have always been interested in communicating ideas or feelings to others, and in creating beautiful places. In some ways, creating art is really a public gift. That, I think, is close to the essence of hospitality, which is being generous, and sharing with others. It also helps if you really love what you do, as that makes the sharing more relaxed, loving, and more "hospitable." I have also used food a lot in my work, as a simple, common element, with multiple symbolic meanings. Food as a material is something accessible to all of us. 🍷



Sherk performs
Short Order Cook,
1973–74, San Francisco