

Glentzer, Molly, "Artist Brings Complex Issues to the Table", Chronicle, March 28, 2014.



Artist brings complex issues to the table

By Molly Glentzer | March 28, 2014

In an era when many artists are testing social practices, an arts writer can land in some surprising situations.

Recently, I consumed seven courses of unusual edibles, including fried sardine skeletons, jellyfish granita and blue-green algae. I was among 50 intrepid participants in New York artist Marina Zurkow's *Outside the Work: A Tasting of Hydrocarbons and Geologic Time* dinner.

Hosted by Rice's Center for Energy and Environmental Research in the Human Sciences, which focuses on "cultures of energy," the dinner unfolded across a long table in Rice's Brochstein Pavilion. The first part of the title translates as the French hors d'oeuvres. The second part - well, that was more mysterious.



"I'm not blaming anybody but looking at the role of petroleum usage in anthropogenic changes," Zurkow said. Known internationally as a creator of video animations that address environmental issues, Zurkow teaches graduate students in the interactive telecommunications program at Tisch School of the Arts.

"I'm the area head for weird classes around the environment like 'fabrication with fungus,'" she explained.

Lately, she has orchestrated food events to offer a more intimate approach to complex issues that have no solutions. "What if you have an encounter in your body around your taste buds?," she said.

Rice professors Joseph Campana (a poet and scholar of Renaissance literature) and Timothy Morton (a scholar of Romantic literature whose books include *Ecology Without Nature*) invited Zurkow to the campus after seeing her 2012 installation *Necrocracy* at DiverseWorks. Campana also attended an early version of the dinner last year at Boston University.

"She's thoughtful and unpretentious, and she really wants everyone at the table, literally," Campana said. He likes the idea of serving a meal because it's basic and ritualistic. "We thought the meal might be this portal into things hard to imagine and impossible to experience," he said.

Chefs from New York's inventive Lucullan Foods collaborated with Zurkow to create the menu. Months ago, they endured some god-awful tastings that included crickets, Zurkow said. Ultimately, bugs didn't make the cut: too off-topic, although they're a carbon-neutral antidote.

Bottom line, she wanted the meal to taste incredible. A Gulf Coast theme provided plenty of material including the jellyfish, which along with Japanese knotweed is one of Zurkow's obsessions. Both are highly successful and contain magical health properties, she said, and they're readily available. "It's a trope in foodie culture: Eat your enemies, the invasive species, to get rid of them."

Guests passed by a wall of Styrofoam packing materials as they entered the room. One of Zurkow's animations looped on four video screens, depicting a drill bit crunching through layers of earth. With each course, we also did some drilling, peeling off layers of reusable place mats that doubled as a geology lesson and Zurkow's script.

In the beginning, there was water - Newfoundland-sourced glacial water in PET bottles - polyethylene terephthalate, a petroleum-derived plastic. We were warned they would not be refilled.

As Zurkow proposed a toast to microorganisms, we squeezed droppers of blue-green algae into shot glasses of local water, watched it bloom and drank. We wondered if real food would arrive.

Thankfully, a beautiful red algae and frisee salad appeared, the first of three small plates in the *Salt of the Seas* course. We shaved salt-cured mullet roe onto the salads like Parmesan. The sardine skeleton chips - whole fish stripped of their flesh and deep fried - turned out to be crunchy delicacies; and the flesh of the salt-baked Gulf striped mullet tasted surprisingly sweet and moist. Getting to the mullet required some cracking and digging through a thick crust of salt, and as we hacked away, Zurkow got us all singing the chorus of the Rolling Stones' *Salt of the Earth*.

The salt hit continued for the *Airless Spaces* course, but it offered welcome substance in a big slice of Old Mother Sourdough Texas Toast topped with umeboshi butter; plus a tastier drink in bottles of St. Arnold's Icon beer. "We are now halfway to oil," the program promised.

Next came a de-constructed gumbo that included *Aspic Domes of Marine Life*. We were starting to feel full, and everything was salty, a reminder of the oceans' changing state. Relief came with a "brief pause" - the granita of Texas grapefruit and cannonball jellyfish, which was topped by a succulent oyster on the half shell.

"This midmeal amuse may cleanse your palate of preconceptions," Zurkow said. "We hang, in an interlude, on a gradient, in uneven time. An inter-species, temporal collusion between oysters and jellyfish and humans: cleaners versus consumers, cultivars versus competitors, delicacies versus detritus."

Servers piled the dirty dishes on Styrofoam sculptures that ran like a spine down the table. After three hours, we'd made a glorious mess. We were almost giddy by the *Digging for Black Gold* course, a dessert that combined a *Composed Strata of Hard Sugar Caliche, Dark Chocolate Clay, Gingered Sorghum Sands, Black Licorice Coal Tar* and *Crude Texas Liquid Gold* (a reward of straight tequila).

To finish, Zurkow noted a phenomenon called *The Rise of Slime*. Human-driven environmental changes - including sinking oxygen levels in the oceans - have enabled "anti-charismatic characters" like jellyfish to proliferate as other species have declined. "Some of these changes can be traced to the petroleum industry and big agriculture, which is also based on petrochemicals," the artist said a few days later.

She wanted feedback. "Did you feel time in any different way?," she wondered. "Did we hit any oil-nerve? Was it all too fun? Did it leave a film? Was it a social sculpture?"

Perhaps the most important outcome of a project like Zurkow's, whatever you call it, is the questions it raises. I'm still thinking about the salmon fan color wheel Zurkow passed around the table, a device commercial salmon farmers use to choose the artificial color of fish I've eaten weekly for years.

Zurkow said she's still trying to find the right balance of seduction, information and conversation for future dinners. "What is the relationship between this complicated, displaced material - petroleum - against the site-specific things that matter to people? That tension is the backbone of the meal," she said. Next time, she might hire a geology lecturer to do the talking, she added. She'd also like to scale the event so more people could participate; maybe even create a pop-up stand to sell jellyfish granita.

The recent oil spill in the Houston Ship Channel had her mind going, too. "It's upsetting, and the dinner participants have now had contact with creatures that live in that environment," she said.

Campana thought the dinner was a good model for activities that could happen when Rice's new interdisciplinary Moody Center for the Arts opens in a few years. "There's a lot in the pipeline, pardon the pun," he said. "We're looking to offer a range of arts and media experiences that are tuned into themes about energy and ecology."

Next up is the "Cultures of Energy Spring Symposium" April 24-26, which is open to the public. It may be brainy, but you won't have to eat slime.