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## WHO THREW THE FIRST PUNCH?: SHANA LUTKER STAGES A SURREALIST FIGHT IN LOS ANGELES

BY Catherine G. Wagley (<http://www.artnews.com/author/cwagley/>) POSTED 09/23/16 11:32 AM

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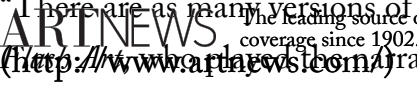
Performance view of Shana Lutker's *The Sleeping Poet and the Jongleuse* (2016).

RUBEN DIAZ

**L**ate on the evening of July 2, 1925, police cordoned off the Closerie des Lilas, a Paris café, after an intellectual altercation. At a dinner in honor of Symbolist poet Saint-Pol-Roux, young Surrealists had verbally attacked older literati before the dispute turned physical. Max Ernst might have started it, but it's not clear who, if anyone, threw the first punch.

The Closerie des Lilas, with an awning, dim lighting, and red faux-leather seats, used to be a gathering place for Paris artists and writers (there's a photo of Gertrude Stein looking unusually motherly, sitting beside Jack Hemingway, Ernest's toddler). When Los Angeles artist Shana Lutker decided to restage a version of the events of that July 2 evening in L.A. in a performance titled *The Sleeping Poet and the Jongleuse*—which is part of LAXART's "Occasional" event series—she did so in a banquet room at Taix, a 90-year-old French restaurant in the Echo Park neighborhood that also has dim lighting, booths, and historical baggage. At least four waiters there have been on the job for more than 50 years. The décor hasn't changed much since the 1960s.

One hundred guests, the same number as attended the 1925 dinner, came to Lutker's two performances on September 14 and 15. Tables were round and a few mirrors in the shape of letters hung near the romantically framed Impressionist knock-offs that are always at Taix. It felt like a wedding reception.

  
“There are as many versions of this banquet as there were witnesses,” said Eli Diner, a writer and editor at ARTnews (<http://www.artnews.com/>). Diner, spent the evening lounging and leaning on a wooden bench that Lutker had built and installed on a raised platform, quoting from poet Philippe Soupault's memoir. He and his fellow performers would recount versions throughout the evening.

Lutker began showing work about Surrealist altercations some six years ago, and since then, her projects and exhibitions have consistently mined the history of Surrealist-initiated fistfights. She traveled to Paris repeatedly, dug through archives, and made sculptures that served as poetically minimal set pieces—more Guy de Cointet than Dalí (although melted plates make appearances). Each “chapter” of the project focuses on a different fight; each involves sculpture and performance. The performance she staged last year, at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., revisited a lecture Surrealists aggressively interrupted in May 1925.

At Taix, composer Jay Israelson, who regularly writes for films and artists, played the piano, his music interrupting Diner's narration at regular intervals. Diner explained early on how he got his part: He'd met Lutker at a party; she invited him to take the role, “saying that I resembled André Breton enough, that I had a nice voice, and that she sensed that I could bring just the right blend of gravitas and ironic distance,” he said. “I agreed.” This is exactly how he came to have the role, Lutker confirmed via email a few days after the performance. Her casting usually happens that organically. She also cast her friend, Nour Mobarak, and a friend of a friend recommended Alex and Dmitrious Bistrevsky, brothers and circus performers in L.A. They, in turn, recommended Melissa Kaplan, who could juggle knives.



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Performance view of Shana Lukers' *The Sleeping Poet and the Jongleuse* (2016).

RUBEN DIAZ

"I will be here to connect the dots," Diner said, just before the four other cast members placed thick, maroon papers under every plate in the room. "But some dots will remain unconnected." The papers had only the word "Paul" on them, mysterious unless you already knew that the Surrealists had arrived early at the Closerie des Lilas on July 2, 1925, to put pamphlets on plates. Their pamphlets were an open letter to Catholic poet Paul Claudel, who had recently referred to the young Surrealists as pederasts. "The Surrealists were incensed by Paul Claudel's slander, especially Breton, who was a known homophobe," explained Diner. Added dark-haired Nour Mobarak, dressed in black, and moving around the audience, "Our activity is only pederastic as it introduces confusion in the minds of those who do not take part in it."

Soon, the Bistrevsky brothers, the six-foot-seven and imposing Dmitrious and the smaller, hat-wearing Alex, were flipping around a narrow wood stage, doing handstands on each others' backs and juggling. Diner and Mobarak began to tell the story of Madame Rachilde as Taix waiters, somewhat crankily, tried to pour wine. At one point, Dmitrious unknowingly stood in one waiter's way for a moment. Another waiter snapped, "It's red or white. Those are the options," when my tablemate asked him which was better.

Madame Rachilde, a 65-year-old novelist who had written a book called *The Juggler* (1900), was a main player in the fight that broke out in 1925, which Mobarak described as the Bistrevsky brothers lifted her stiff body above their shoulders. At the original banquet, Rachilde had said something derogatory about Germans, which Breton assumed was an insult to Max Ernst (German, and married to a French woman). Breton might have thrown a napkin in Rachilde's face. Ernst might have hit Rachilde in the back. Diner explained all this as the salad course came and went. The brothers continued with their acrobatics, shouting "Down with France!", just as the Surrealists had.

The evening continued this way, different narratives of the brawl accompanying different acrobatic routines. A soup course followed salad, and then came fish—at the 1925 banquet, the crowd ate hake with white sauce. Right before Melissa Kaplan began to juggle knives, Mobarak recited a short monologue: "These young people, who wielded insults and slaps wanted to register their protests and their passions in real life, and not just on a sheet of paper. The written commitment is sealed in physical engagement."

In Lutker's performance, however, all physical engagement remained more or less symbolic, accenting the language. No one ever actually threw a punch.

Near the night's end, before the pineapple ice cream arrived, Lutker climbed onstage, supplanting Diner (http://www.artnews.com) how Saint-Poul-Roux, the guest of honor at the ill-fated original banquet, had suffered a home invasion in 1940. His daughter was raped, his home looted and all his manuscripts ruined. He "died of grief a few months later," Lutker said. Then his house was further destroyed during World War II air raids. "The resulting dramatic ruins, overlooking the sea, remain a popular tourist destination in Brittany," Lutker continued. The traces of violence made for an attractive scene, and a good story. Violence played a similar role in her performance, fueling a narrative, as it does, perhaps, when stories about de Kooning and Pollock's bar brawls get repeated, with the descriptions of animosity illustrating the charged self-importance of the artists involved and giving aesthetic ideas physically high stakes.

**Correction 09/26/2016, 1:55 p.m.:** *An earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of one of the performers. She is Nour Mobarak, not Mabarak. The post has been updated to reflect this.*

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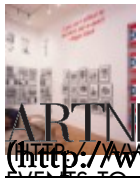
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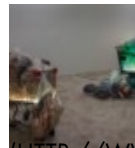
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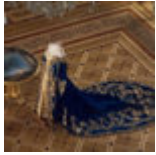


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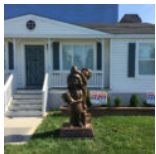
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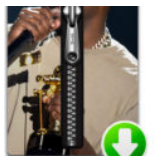
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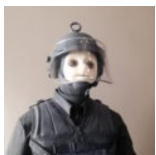


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