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March – April 2012



BARBARA T. SMITH

Sonia Campagnola

THE BOX - LOS ANGELES

Two years ago, the newly opened The Box organized an ambitious show of installations from the late '60s and early '70s by Barbara T. Smith. Although today Smith's work is considered seminal within Californian, feminist and performance art studies, her name remains largely unknown to younger audiences internationally.

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BARBARA T. SMITH, *Celebration of the Holy Squash*, 1971. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view at The Box, 2010. Courtesy The Box, Los Angeles. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen.

In this new exhibition Smith surveys her performances from 1968 to 1975, displaying a mixture of performance relics, drawings, notes, photographs and films. What's captivating is that all these bits of documentation merge into what looks like a single overarching work of which the individual performances are chapters, highlighting key recurring elements in her lexicon: food as a metaphor for health and desire; clothing, make-up or nudity as modes of exploration of the human body in different social contexts; sexuality as a means of female empowerment. One of Smith's best known works fully documented in the show is *Feed Me*. Like other noted works from the early '70s, it's an example of a woman artist questioning her social status and drive toward empowerment by disarming herself and passing the reins of control to a predominantly male audience. In Marina Abramovic's famous *Rhythm 0* of 1974,

viewers chose among a range of blunt instruments to use on the artist's body. A year earlier, Smith met viewers in an art gallery bathroom. Naked, she was surrounded with all sorts of objects (food, drugs, books, perfumes, etc.) referring to the idea of nourishment in all its possible forms: sexual, intellectual, psychological.

The visitors, abandoned to their own power of choosing and individual responsibility, entered the room one by one and freely interpreted the artist's request to be fed.

The mingling of food and sexuality is compounded by religious symbolism in *Celebration of the Holy Squash* (1971) — a thrilling work that brings a playful Californian sensibility to the quest for holistic spirituality. Smith concocted a new cult devoted to the fetish of a huge squash. Elevated to the status of holy relic, the squash has been at the center of a number of rituals/happenings; like the egg in Christian symbolism (just think of Piero della Francesca's *Brera Altarpiece*), the squash becomes a trope of fertility, birth and femininity. Rediscovering these pioneering pieces, the exhibition offers a critical perspective on a way of conceiving art that, typical of those years, puts community and adventure before sales. It's no coincidence that the show is hosted by a gallery that was initiated by Paul McCarthy, who, together with artists such as Susanne Lacy, Allan Kaprow and Chris Burden, was Smith's friend and colleague in the early years of their careers.

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