

CEREMONY FOR THE IMPLICATED: ALA DEGHAN AT KEY CLUB

ALA DEGHAN AND ROBIN WINTERS BRING
HAPPENINGS BACK TO SOHO WITH A SERIES OF
RITUALISTIC DINNERS.

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Ala Dehghan's "Tina, Carol, and Gordon at Key Club: A Dinner Series and a Locked-Room Mystery," is a complex work that engages with an array of aspects regarding the social in art. Key Club, an artist-run gallery in SoHo, also functions as Robin Winters's New York City home and studio. Trusting the zeitgeist, Winters, who himself is no stranger to participatory and DIY attitudes, gave Dehghan a key to his space and invited her to do a solo show purely from noticing her deft and arresting work on Instagram, knowing nothing personal about her outside of the internet or the exciting Lower East Side gallery she runs, 17 Essex. Forgoing the usual monthlong exhibition framework, Dehghan had something much different in mind; something designed with an acute sensitivity for creating an atmospheric environment, but wide open for chance encounters, conversations, feelings, questions, smells, tastes, and much to my liking, memories.

I first saw the invitational post on Dehghan's Instagram: a candid black-and-white photo by Richard Landry showing Tina Girouard, Carol Goodden and Gordon Matta-Clark casually hanging out in front of FOOD, their artist-run restaurant and intervention that operated from 1971 to 1974 in a drastically different urban setting than what we now call SoHo. Not only has FOOD added to the creative mythology of early SoHo, but it was also a place where people could eat cheaply, discuss ideas and build a community. The press release for

Dehghan's event, written by Pujan Karambeigi, adds an ominous layer to the whole affair, asking, "What to do with a dead body?" before going on to address the breakdown and confession of the purported perpetrator, who doubles as the victim. Noticing that this Hitchcockian event was playing on the popular mystery dinner theater trope, I immediately RSVP'd as I saw that there was a 20-person limit for each night of the weeklong gathering.

I was eagerly waiting outside with familiar and new faces on Mercer Street when, at around 8 o'clock, Winters greeted us and welcomed us up to his gallery and home. After taking an elevator, walking through a long corridor and then taking another small elevator one more floor up, I had finally arrived to Dehghan's beautiful mystery dinner. Ultraviolet light flooded the space—perfect for forensic investigation, laying bare any trace of evidence to come. Inside the main room, completely covered with Mylar and psychedelically reflecting the attendees, was another smaller room constructed out of translucent plastic sheeting decorated with some loose automatic drawings of chimeric creatures. Inside this tent-like room was a long dinner table with the large radiating blue neon-lit outline of a body lying on it, with only parts of its limbs and half a face made out of off-white modeling clay left intact. This body was neither gendered nor racialized, a sort of non-identified humanoid that could be anyone or thing really. Around and inside the body were knives, practical but ancient foods like cheese, apples, cashews, bread, hummus, pomegranate and more dead bodies: chickens. One by one, we took our plates and red wine (which Ala asked us to bring on our own accord), gathered in the tight claustrophobic tent and, rather difficultly, fed ourselves, being careful not to spill anything or brush into each other. Above, I noticed the neon outline of the body had created yet another double – its hovering reflection on the clear Plexiglas roof window of the tent, evoking a ghostly out-of-body departure. Scattered outside and on top of the window were wilting roses. Conversations started, cliques formed little circles, plates, glasses and utensils piled up, chicken-greased fingerprints adorned the plastic, and wine spills decorated the table like blood.

Had we come to a ritualized sacrifice? Or an instance of Dehghan degenderizing the Japanese practice of *nyotaimori*; the practice, rooted in the celebration of a victorious battle, of eating sushi off a naked woman's body, as problematic as that may be? Maybe it's both, and more. Most funerals, in many cultures, are

followed by food. As a body loses its spirit, we eat another one. As a body is offered to the unknown, something else takes its place. But this isn't just any funeral. It seems to have been a murder, and we're all the suspects. Death and feasting, ceremonial mourning, excess and guilt, reciprocal altruism even; these are the sacred dialectics of the other and self-cannibalism. Is the body an artist? Is the body *the* artist? Or is the body a location, with a story always changing, for better, worse or neither? Dehghan does not answer these questions, but instead implicates us all; seemingly without judgment, and while giving us a meal to die for.