

Dinner with strangers

SUSAN SCHWARTZ
THE GAZETTE

Iwona Majdan goes up to complete strangers every week and invites them to Sunday dinner. Which she proposes to cook. In *their* homes.

Not surprisingly, they are almost always taken aback. Not surprisingly, some refuse, suspicious or reluctant or just not interested.

Those intrigued enough to accept the invitation of the Montreal artist become participants in the Dinner Project, a yearlong undertaking she describes as a living work of art – an exploration of the boundaries between safety and discomfort, between intimacy and distance.

"I'm interested in how people

bond, in how they deal with the strangeness of the situation," said Majdan, a slender 31-year-old brunette with intense electric blue eyes. "People pretend discomfort doesn't exist ... I am actively confronting fears instead of avoiding them; I am going to that place of discomfort."

She acknowledges an element of fear for her physical safety, going into the homes of people she does not know, but that it is entirely secondary to the fear of confronting her own inhibitions, of being perceived as vulnerable.

She asks her host to invite a guest; she brings one as well. And all the food. Because she does not know how well-equipped the kitchen will be, she always brings a frying pan and utensils.

"The food is a nice pretext for us to share," said Majdan, who sure knows her way around a kitchen: Last week's dinner featured Thai coleslaw, green pea soup with scallops, pasta puttanesca and pear pie. The other six dinners she has put together are equally imaginative.

Each of the Sunday encounters, the first of which took place June 27, is chronicled in a comprehensive Web log at thedinnerproject.com; it includes photographs, menus, participants' reactions and entries in Majdan's thoughtful, occasionally plaintive online journal.

The site has been up and running for only two weeks, although an incomplete version has been in place since early July. As of late last week, the site

had received close to 40,000 hits – 3,900 this past Thursday alone. Majdan had sent 500 e-mails to friends, galleries and the media, although before she spoke to *The Gazette* last week she'd done only a single interview, with a Montreal radio station. She suggests the reaction is perhaps a response to the fact that the Dinner Project is "appropriate for our times."

Sabina Sariyska, a 23-year-old actor and director who accompanied Majdan to a Sunday dinner in July, said she was less nervous than she thought she'd be going to a stranger's home – perhaps because the two are close friends and she trusted her friend's judgment, perhaps because it was Majdan, not her, on the line.

Over salad, linguine with veg-

etables and cheesecake, Sariyska recalled, the diners talked about all kinds of things – about art, about feelings, about hang-ups. There were those moments, particularly early on, when everyone, inevitably, felt uncomfortable, when a sudden silence descended. But mostly, it was "very natural, free-flow, close conversation, rather than what strangers usually talk about."

Later, their host wrote: "This was really cool, the food was really yummy and you guys were great fun ... yes, there were moments when I felt uncomfortable/self-conscious, but this was no different from other social situations, that is, having 'conventional' friends over."

Please see DINNER, Page D3

For every invitation accepted, two are rejected, says project creator Majdan

Dinner | A fine art

CONTINUED FROM D1

Or is it? Majdan's guest at another July dinner observed that "the experience was so odd and so magical that it evaporated the minute it was done."

For strangers to gather is not so unusual. It happens all the time, everywhere from blind dates to cocktail parties. But they are conventional gatherings, Majdan observed, not dinner with someone who picked you out of a crowd on the street or in a café or on Mount Royal because you piqued her interest.

So far Majdan is averaging roughly two rejections to each invitation accepted, and much as she tries not to take it personally, she does.

"I have approached five people so far and no Sunday dinner companion," she wrote in her journal on July 9. "After each time, it takes longer to recover ... maybe I don't appear confident, or playful enough. What I am asking for seems to be a lot. To let me into their house. Yes, I am a complete stranger. All these questions arise - about limits, respect. Entering their life, disturbing their privacy."

Majdan is interested also in how her hosts receive her, in how - or whether - they set the table or offer drinks. Alcohol is not included in the meal she provides; she tells that to her hosts. "When you are giving, you don't want to bring everything and do everything yourself."

Writing after a dinner at

which her hosts initially made her feel uncomfortable, she observed how she seems unable to let go of the feeling "that I am disappointed by people, in what they promise, their contradictions ... and I know I do the same, even when I try so hard not to."

This isn't the first time Majdan, a Concordia University visual arts graduate who moved to Montreal from Toronto seven years ago, is showing her vulnerability through her work. She started out studying sculpture, moved into installation work and became increasingly interested in interactions between people.

As part of a Montreal gallery

project, she once taped herself to a chair and blindfolded herself - then asked people to help her into the elevator. "I wanted to know how people would react to my vulnerability," she said.

In a 2002 project set in Toronto called Random Encounter, she distributed her cell phone number in public places, on café tables and windshields, with a note encouraging callers. The ensuing conversations were broadcast live in an art gallery.

In the subsequent Love Project, set in Poland, where Majdan was born and lived until she was 8 before coming to Canada with her family, she issued a casting call all through the country for a

husband. Auditions, as it were, were held in five art galleries. The point was to make public a discussion of something intimate, she said. That and she was "seriously invested emotionally in looking for a husband."

The event got all kinds of media coverage in Poland, and, ultimately, she did meet a suitable candidate, although he came forward too late to be part of the project. The couple recently became engaged.

Major sponsors of the Dinner Project to date are the Canada Council for the Arts, which has given Majdan a grant of \$6,000, printer Jean-Marc Côté, who has made up the business cards and promotional material, and Buonanotte, the trendy St. Laurent Blvd. eatery, which is providing the ingredients for 52 Sundays worth of dinners: The controller who approved the arrangement told her he was convinced by how confident she sounded of the project's success, Majdan said.

Majdan is planning for portions of two dinners each month to be videotaped and used in a documentary to be screened next September at a reunion of the friends and strangers who will have sat around a table with her in the Dinner Project.

The project's Web site is www.thedinnerproject.com. For information about advertising and sponsorships, or for general inquiries, e-mail iwonka@thedinnerproject.com



Artist Iwona Majdan serves up some linguine at a recent dinner.