

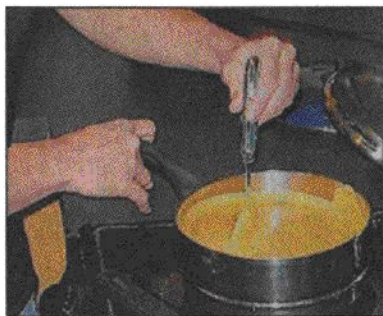
You don't know me, but I'd like to cook you dinner

That stranger offering to prepare a risotto at your house is an artist bent on a 'public art intervention,' writes **LU**

Liz Auchinvole wrestled with the offer: Was it a random act of kindness or an invasion of privacy?

She and her husband were new to Toronto and someone was proposing to cook them an elaborate dinner for free.

Yet that someone was a total stranger who approached Auchinvole in an open-air market as her husband was getting coffee.



"I thought it was a little bit risqué, but I also loved the mystery," says Auchinvole, a 31-year-old violinist.

"She seemed genuine, but what really got me was that she thought we would be fun to hang out with."

Auchinvole sprung the idea on her husband, a 30-year-old math professor named Elliot Lawes. "At first, he had reservations. He tried to think of all the ways we could

get ripped off. But once he realized we couldn't, he agreed."

Despite their initial apprehension, the couple's openness to the proposal is hardly the response Iwona Majdan typically elicits. But that is exactly why the 31-year-old Montreal artist is embarking on *The Dinner Project*: a commitment to spend every Sunday for one year schlepping fine foods, pots and pans to the homes of strangers in

Montreal, Toronto and New York and cooking elaborate dinners for them.

She and her hosts each bring one guest, which adds even more variables to the mix. "There are so many boundaries between people, especially in an urban context," Majdan says.

"*The Dinner Project* was born out of a curiosity to cross these barriers; the desire to get closer to

people, to enter their private lives, to get inside their homes."

Those who agree to take part in the project seem to share her craving for community.

"It goes against our whole TV and takeout culture," Auchinvole says. "It celebrates older values and helps us appreciate one another."

See DINNER on page R4

DINNER from page R1

Once a painter and sculptor, Majdan's desire to connect with people and involve them in her work has gradually steered her from the confines of a gallery toward "public art interventions," which combine performance art and social critique.

Majdan's website (thedinnerproject.com), which tells the story of these evenings with photos, journal entries and social comment, and has garnered more than 150,000 hits worldwide, creates a public dialogue that parallels her private dinner parties.

"Emotions are such a taboo in our society, especially certain kinds of emotions, like vulnerability and sadness," Majdan says. "These are things people aren't encouraged to express, but this is exactly what I try to challenge in my work."

In one of Majdan's earlier intervention performances, she sat in the window of a Prague street-level gallery smearing cake all over her body, drawing points and stares

from passersby. Seeing her treated like a zoo animal prompted one man to punch through the gallery window to "rescue" her, leaving glass shards everywhere.

In another project, Majdan scribbled her phone number and ambiguous messages, such as "I'd like to talk to you" and "You seem interesting" on hundreds of paper scraps that she scattered around Toronto. Two police officers called to interrogate her. "I felt like a criminal for initiating contact with strangers," she recalls.

'I've had a few people treat me like I was a caterer or something.'

Then during a six-month stint in her native Poland, she created *The Love Project*, in which she held countrywide casting calls in search of a husband. She interviewed a string of men before television cameras set up in galleries. (The

project caught the notice of one man, who declined to be part of the project, but whose interest was piqued by the woman behind it. He's now Majdan's fiancé.)

"People were so uncomfortable with the idea of a woman demanding what she wanted in a man," she recalls. "I got lots of hate e-mail."

Whether these interactions constitute works of art is up for debate, but public art interventions are gradually gaining popularity and credibility in the art world, says Claude Schryer of the Canada Council for the Arts, which awarded Majdan a \$6,000 grant for *The Dinner Project*. (The grant funds many of Majdan's expenses, but Buonanotte, an upscale trattoria in Montreal, is supplying all of her dinner ingredients.)

"Artists are in the streets, they're in public spaces because they want to connect with their audiences. It's a sign of the times," Schryer says.

The council supports about 40 projects of all kinds each year, but only a handful are akin to Majdan's.

"Iwona's project shows quality of engagement. She is exploring the questions, Why are people so alone? Why do we have these social conventions? And these are legitimate questions," Schryer says.

Though food is but a pretext for Majdan's probe of social norms, dinner — as a phenomenon — is a crucial aspect of the endeavour. Rituals and conventions surround every step of her process — from invitation to preparation to commensality — and each presents a set of challenges for her to surmount.

"The most difficult aspect of this project is approaching strangers and asking them to play host," she says. She avoids busy streets, subway stations or too-arty neighbourhoods, where people tend to rush around with blinkers on, opting for more relaxed locales, such as parks and cafés.

But even in these hospitable venues, people are leery of a dainty artist with a charming Polish accent and soft blue eyes offering to prepare a feast of swordfish, asparagus butter risotto and chocolate cheesecake. Majdan generally receives two rejections for every yes, but she has also had a streak of 30 straight rejections.

Still, she has come through with a steady string of hosts, who have included students, professionals, married couples, gay men, single parents and bohemians from their 20s to their 70s. And each week she



JOHN MORSTAD/GLOBE AND MAIL

Iwona Majdan says that during one of her earlier 'interventions,' she was made to feel 'like a criminal for initiating contact with strangers.'

finds herself whipping up delicacies, such as wild mushroom linguine and white bean purée with mint in another foreign abode, be it a dumpy apartment, luxurious loft, suburban home or a revamped convent.

While she says she's never had any disturbing encounters, persistent anxiety lurks over whether her latest host will bail before Sunday arrives, despite the fact that she has

them sign a contract. Then when Sunday finally rolls around without a hitch, she must perform a sort of social calisthenics.

Shy by nature, Majdan is attuned to the fact that she must keep her own insecurities in check if she is to put her hosts at ease in this precarious scenario.

"She is very active," recalls Sylvain Gharbi, a 29-year-old waiter and freelance journalist from Mon-

tréal who took part in one of the dinners. "She was cooking dinner and directing the conversation, and doing it all so skillfully."

Though she makes it look easy, juggling the roles of friend, gourmet and her "official" role as artist can be daunting.

"I was once making this shrimp-coconut-milk soup and got so carried away with the conversation that I almost ruined it by adding too much water," she recalls. (She quickly shifted into damage control, adding orange juice and salt to rescue the soup, for which her host later requested the recipe.)

The juxtaposition of contrived project and spontaneous evening breeds an array of contradictions.

Guests are often on guard and there are sometimes long awkward silences, Majdan says. Then, if only to reciprocate, people get into their lives deeply. "I sometimes feel it's crazy that this person is sharing these intimate details with me — a complete stranger. They're telling me things they may not have told their closest friends."

Auchinvole recalls the experience as at once very personal and impersonal. "In one way, it was a very natural evening. I didn't feel like we were strangers. As a person, she was genuine, sophisticated and really warm. She even got to know our baby a little.

"But then I thought, she's doing this every week — am I just one of many randomly picked strangers?"

Beyond relying on her own deftness to balance this complex dynamic, Majdan expects her hosts to transcend their comfortable habits and contribute to the atmosphere.

"I've had a few people treat me like I was a caterer or something," Majdan says, recalling a particularly insulting host, who scrutinized her basket of ingredients and munched on potato chips the whole time she was cooking.

"I am not here to create the setting alone. I expect people to contribute, whether it's wine, or conversation, anything. I don't just want to be giving — I want to create a dynamic of sharing," she says.

And it is precisely in this dynamic that the magic unfolds in Majdan's work: when strangers pass through the inevitable distance that separates them to commune around one of our most basic and personal practices.

"That's the key moment," says Gharbi. "When you start to cook with her. That's when you get involved in *The Dinner Project*."