

ART FOR DINNER

Iwona Majdan's Gastronomic Search for Closeness

Words: Jesse Ashlock, Photo: Leigh Davis

Meeting people *isn't* easy. For many of us, it's one of the great challenges of modern life. And it's a challenge that provides both creative inspiration and conceptual structure for the work of 31-year-old Montreal artist Iwona Majdan, whose recent interventionist projects have taken her further and further away from the gallery and into the public sphere, while looking long and hard at the difficulties we have connecting to others and with being our true selves around those we've just met.

"I think art is about provocation, and art is about engaging the general public, not this closed art public," Majdan declares. In 2002, that impulse produced *Random Encounter*, in which she left notes in public spaces around Toronto encouraging those who found them to call her up and chat. Next, during a six-month stay in her native Poland, she orchestrated the *Love Project*, a casting call for a husband that involved conducting on-camera interviews with potential suitors in a gallery. Reflecting on the project afterwards, Majdan found herself wanting to push the intimacy issues it had raised even further. "I wanted to go more directly into people's lives," she says. "I wanted to enter people's homes, as a curiosity, to see how people lived. How would they react to me?"

So back in Montreal, she conceived the *Dinner Project*. For one year, Majdan has committed to entering the homes of different strangers every Sunday night to cook dinner. Both Majdan and her host invite a guest to join them. More than anything she's previously undertaken, the *Dinner Project* requires both Majdan and her interactants to confront feelings of vulnerability in ways that can sometimes result in ephemeral magic – and also awkward discomfort. About the only advance certainty she has is that the food will be delicious. Majdan is confident in her culinary skills and has the luxury of working with raw ingredients provided by a local Italian restaurant, so she experiments with new dishes ranging from scallops to swordfish (her four-course menus, listed online at www.thedinnerproject.com, will make your mouth water).

People are a less predictable quantity, though, and before Majdan can even sit down at a table with them, she has to convince them to take part. About two-thirds of the strangers she asks to "host" turn her down; one week in September she logged more than 30 rejections. And when people do accept, she often undergoes paroxysms of anxiety in anticipation of the event, not knowing what to expect. "Over time, you kind of strip your coping mechanisms so that you do become more raw," Majdan explains. "That's kind of the point, to go to those difficult places."

But the vulnerable positions Majdan places herself in can bring great emotional rewards. Though her confidence is undermined by the almost-daily rejections and though she has encountered spectacularly difficult hosts, more often than not the strangers she cooks for are appreciative and generous. One greeted her with a bouquet of flowers. "Some people have been pillows in which you can land," she says. "[They] have been compassionate and understanding. So it's good. I don't have to do the work all by myself."

After each dinner, Majdan posts thoughts about the evening on the Web site (along with photos), and requests that the host and guests do the same. Most oblige. In this way, a living record of the project's history has begun to flourish online, with many *Dinner Project* devotees checking in each week for the latest chapter in Majdan's culinary adventures. Majdan's online diary further fleshes out this narrative, framing the *Dinner Project* as a peculiar picaresque with Majdan as its protagonist, impacted by each and every shared experience, however fleeting. "So far I have met so many people who, for one reason or another, have stayed in my head," Majdan wrote in a November 27 posting. "I remember their gestures, or things they have said to me. In a way, they have become part of my history, an important part of my experiences."

What she's describing in that thought is the very genesis of community. Indeed, the *Dinner Project* has spawned its own community, which exists beyond Majdan's activities. Deluged with requests to participate, Majdan started *Dinner Project Phase 2*, a matchmaking service that pairs would-be cooks with willing hosts; these dinner attendees also share their experiences online, creating tangential tales branching from the main trunk of Majdan's story. The site has also become a repository for recipe swaps and other assorted chatter.

Because the *Dinner Project's* artistry lies in private interactions, the question of how to document or memorialize it is a thorny one. In addition to the Web site, Majdan plans a short documentary when the project is completed, and hopes to secure funding to publish a catalogue of photos and stories. A reunion dinner is also scheduled for September. But the *Dinner Project's* true legacy lies in intimate moments shared by individuals, based on a shared willingness between those individuals to take a chance on a human experience society wouldn't otherwise let them have. Majdan's talent lies in her ability to create those chances. "I'm not the guinea pig, but I put myself at risk, I put myself out there," she observes. "As an artist, I feel like that's my role."