

Darren O'Donnell ***Eat, Meet and other tactics to chew my way to Sesame Street***

'... being in the network implies sharing a new idea or compatible ideas for society. Initially, small and isolated groups hold these ideas, but as those groups begin to talk to each other, quite suddenly, the entire society can shift paradigms. I see this as an alternate explanation of how revolutions occur, as opposed to the 'great man' idea still beloved in many history books. I also find it offers a strategic idea – perhaps the path to social change is to initiate dialogue and seek connections between groups that are superficially disparate in their ideas.'

– Todd Parsons, Mathematician and Dinner Guest

Growing up in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I watched *Sesame Street* like it was real life, and it anchored itself in my imagination as an ideal for neighbourhood engagement: you know everybody on the block (even the green-furred asshole who lives in the garbage can), you learn together, you hang out together and you even *work* together – the show's enthusiastic championing of the various jobs and vocations that contribute to civic health lent all workers credibility. This image of the city as a productive, supportive and creative place has never been so clearly and thoroughly imagined and illustrated. Even now – perhaps especially now – *Sesame Street* remains an inspiration for many of my social and professional activities.

As an ideal, however, *Sesame Street* is bound to be elusive, and my search for the mythic neighbourhood hasn't been easy. My first impression of Toronto was that I had found a place with similar promise; the mixed-use neighbourhoods and civic culture felt much more vibrant than the Edmonton suburbs where I grew up, and its cultural diversity offered the possibility of mind-expanding encounters. But Toronto is not *Sesame Street* – there are no talking frogs at Trinity-Bellwoods Park and the birds are small. It didn't take long before I found myself in social circles defined strictly by vocation, with mind-sets too often in agreement, and engulfed by an escalating sense of alienation, boredom, loneliness and an intense antipathy towards dinner parties, where I could expect to meet only like-minded people – a dull sameness that made me feel very alone. Parties are hard work for me. My favourite manoeuvre is to slide out the back door without saying good-bye, head out into a beautiful night and climb on my bike to coast away alone, ecstatic to have answered to no one – and this at parties where I'm having fun. I rolled through years,

experiencing feelings of intense isolation oscillating with varying degrees of community; Sesame Street remained a boulevard upon whose sidewalks I had yet to skip.

In spring 2002, my life stalled with a bout of fatigue and an injured back, sending me into an intense and protracted agony comprised of an annoying stew of pain and exhaustion. My condition was so challenging that my chiropractor brought out the big guns and revealed that she's a shaman, studying with the Institute for Contemporary Shamanic Studies, and offered to bring her peers in on my situation. I was desperate, ready to try anything, even a healing circle with a bunch of naked strangers.

Not knowing how the Incorporeal Entities who participated in my ceremony feel about confidentiality, I'll play it safe and keep the details quiet, except to say that it was wacky and not at all sexy, involved giving me a spirit name, which, if you ask me nicely, I'll whisper in your ear, and, ultimately, boiled down to three resolutions, one of which was to have dinner parties. This particular resolution was intended to open my heart and make me love everyone; my physical problems, it turns out, were a result of the litres of vitriol I was always choking back in response to my utter disappointment at still not having found my Sesame Street.

I undertook the Incorporeal Entities' assignment nervously, worried that no one would want to hang around with me; to keep it safe, I invited plenty of people who didn't know me all that well. My dinner parties, then, included a fail-safe: if they happened to blow as a relaxed social time, I was off the hook, because I was simply meeting new people and enlarging my social circles. This meant that the dinners – particularly during the first few moments – were kind of tense. I would roll through these moments by keeping myself busy: I really enjoyed washing dishes with my back to the party.

Still, not content to produce the kind of party I was loath to attend, I needed to introduce some device, a way to lay the foundations of Sesame Street. Turning to participatory food-making to lubricate the social gears, I forced everyone to make their own wafflusa,¹ a dish of my own invention, a hybrid of the waffle and the pupusa. I provided a bunch of ingredients and left the construction of the dinner up to the guests. This not only drew some of the attention away from me and my cooking, it also provided a way for my guests to occupy themselves if they were feeling as overwhelmed as I was by the social pressure.

1 Wafflusa

A bunch of corn masa
Some oil. This is very
important; don't forget
the oil or you'll end up
with crackers.

An array of things to
stick inside: beans,
cheese, meat, olives,
sun-dried tomatoes.

And some shit to put on
top, such as salsa,
guacamole, etc.

Make the dough by mixing
the corn masa with water
and oil. You can put an
egg or two in the dough to
make it fluffier, but it's still
good without. Invite your
guests to add their choice
of stuff to the dough and
then stick them in the
waffle iron.

2 www.sagewisdom.org

As I began to ease into my role as host, developing culinary skills to accommodate about twenty people at a time, I shifted gears, raising the stakes and asking more from my guests, starting off with a dinner entitled Salads and Salvia. *Salvia divinorum* is a legally available form of sage used by indigenous shamans in Oaxaca, Mexico.² Smoking salvia produces a very strange but short-lived experience (six minutes or so) and offers the possibility of states of being well beyond the familiar touchstones of space, time, corporeality and the individual. It had, for me, already created an experience that felt a lot like being trapped at an eternal dinner party, where the improper thoughts I was always suppressing were manifest in the very architecture of the unreality that engulfed me for what felt like a few hundred thousand years. If that sounds slightly idiotic and confusing, it was. But it was a horror I felt compelled to offer my dinner guests. It's a disaster for the ego and, thus, perfect for developing friendships, building connections with new people and filling my bile-soaked arteries with love.

It was the hottest night of the summer, and my fifth-floor apartment was unbearable. We sat around, drenched in sweat, and enjoyed the array of salads,³ and then, one at a time, gave the herb a try. One guest suffered uncontrollable laughter; another experienced reality being apportioned into pie-like slices of space-time. One visited a tiny city hovering somewhere above us, peopled by small Doozer-like beings, and the last person insisted in a hallucinatory panic that no one else in the room should smoke the evil shit – we regretted to inform her that we all already had.

Like other survivable and contained disasters, the trauma induced by salvia creates a moment where habitual social habits just won't cut it – a room full of people who don't know each other all that well are not going to sit around chatting awkwardly about the weather while one by one they're blowing their minds apart. The conversations that follow are marked by open admissions of confusion, fear and awe, generating an alien intimacy between strangers. It could be argued that inhaling hallucinogens, regardless of legal status, is not very Sesame Street, but that would leave you ill-equipped to discuss the source of those mysterious lyrics in 'Mahna Mahna' or the debatable existence of Snuffleupagus: that bird must have been smoking *something*.

Sesame Street as hallucination for the livable city is perhaps at its best when it explores the people whose labour animates and facilitates healthy civic functioning. This, in my

3 Sini Sambol Potato Salad

A bunch of potatoes
- Some spring onions
Some mayonnaise or olive oil and lemon juice.

And some Sini Sambol, a Sri Lankan condiment that features an array of spices including chillies, cloves, cardamom, cinnamon, tamarind and dried Maldive fish – a very tasty item, similar to Japanese katsuobushi. You can pick it up at a couple of stores on Bloor between Dufferin & Lansdowne.

Cook the potatoes, mix in everything else, cool and serve. Or don't cool, just eat it.

credit: Darren O'Donnell

preschool, pre-class-conscious mind, seemed a self-evident no-brainer: of course the garbage worker was a noble figure, as was Mr. Hooper the grocer and everybody else who fuelled the day-to-day. Forged in the optimism of the late 1960s, *Sesame Street* was permeated with the notion that work should be life, life should be work, and all of it should be art. I began to focus my dinners, naming the series *Eat, Meet*, each night featuring two people talking casually about their work. Here, I began looking for vocations beyond the insular clique of mostly artists that I usually hung out with. We met Lenine Bourke and learned about her work with young people in Australia. We encountered Cara Eastcott and her film work, and I coerced Jordan Tannahill to research German theatre company Rimini Protokoll for us – he has since gone on to create a bunch of work inspired by his research. And we heard from architect Rohan Walters, whose very odd home, perched on stilts over an impossible tract of land, can be spotted from the window of my apartment at College and Lansdowne.⁴

At one *Eat, Meet*, mathematician Todd Parsons demonstrated how a bifurcation – or sudden change of state⁵ – occurs in a social network. Through names drawn from a hat, we connected up people (nodes) with lengths of string (edges). At first, small networks between the participants occurred: Richard DiSanto was connected to Jon Sasaki, Elaine Gaito was connected to Ernie Bolton, Misha Glouberman was connected to Sameer Farooq who was connected to Natalie De Vito. Morgan Yew was connected to Anh-thi Tang, Emmanuelle Dauplay was connected to Michelle Jacques, I was connected to Souvankham Thammavongsa who was connected to Heather Haynes who was connected to Danielle Allen who was connected to Margaux Williamson. Suddenly, when the number of edges was near to the number of nodes, the entire group was connected. Todd explained that the more complex the network – the more nodes, the more connections per node – the more abrupt the change from a group that wasn't particularly well-connected to one where everybody is part of the network.

Around this time I got an email from Gregory Nixon from Toronto's Live with Culture office – he had always been invited to the dinner parties but had yet to attend. He suggested moving the dinners into neighbourhood restaurants, shifting the focus to a more public forum. The increased exposure demanded an increased rigour when programming the guest speakers – if the City was getting involved, the utopian lessons



4 Rohan says his use of conventionally useless plots of land to build unusual but highly functioning structures 'represents the ability to craft necessary, artistic, economically appropriate solutions in a positive and unexpected way'. www.spacesbyrohan.com/

5 For example, water remains unchanged as it becomes warmer, each degree from 1 to 99 not making any noticeable difference but with the addition of an single degree of heat at 100, a bifurcation occurs and it suddenly transforms into steam, or to ice when one degree is subtracted from one to take it to zero.

of Sesame Street had to be deployed with more integrity and intensity, so I proposed we showcase speakers who had jobs that fortify the civic sphere but are not considered artistic, and ask them to discuss the beautiful and creative aspects of their work.

The Beautiful Hungry City was held under the auspices of my performance company, Mammalian Diving Reflex, with artistic producer Natalie De Vito joining me in producing them. Firefighter Stacey Hannah spoke about the colours and choreography of the flames of different materials as they burn; paramedic Shiraz Vally outlined his experiments with adopting different characters from Coen Brothers films in order to deal with young drunks, finding that Lebowski is too weak, Chigurh too strong, but the pregnant cop in *Fargo*, Marge Olmstead-Gunderson, provides the perfect balance, combining a folksy likeability with a passive determination that young drunks find impossible to resist. Tagalog court interpreter and Elvis impersonator Steve Comilang sang 'Love Me Tender,' and the owner of the Common café, Ed Lau, explained the rationale behind the name of his establishment: common tables induce a communal experience.

Of course, the problem with utopias is that they are dislodged and separated from historical development; a trench must be dug around the utopian to distinguish it from the non-utopian, the world of history as opposed to the post-historical utopian.⁶ Not that one would expect dinner parties – or, for that matter, children's television – to engage with history in any meaningful way. For the most part, dinner parties are properly apolitical affairs, but if Todd Parsons' hopes have any weight, we could expect that all these dinners would eventually yield some confluence of socializing that would have some political import, however minimal.

In summer of 2008, I received an email from Dan Young asking if I would throw a dinner party for Kanishka Goonewardena's friend Manoranjan, a Sri Lankan journalist who had a project he was looking for some support on. Dinner, we decided, would be at eight and Dan would bring all the materials necessary to make pasta from scratch. Dan came late, well after the guests had started to show up, and he conscripted us all into a two-hour session of pasta preparation, the forced labour creating a lively, if famished, conviviality.⁷

Dinner done, Kanishka introduced Manoranjan with a long, impressive bio that positioned the journalist of Tamil

⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005).

origins in the middle of the Sri Lankan conflict, hated by both the Sinhalese government and the freedom-fighting Tamil Tigers, and now a refugee in Canada. Manoranjan insisted that the only thing most Sri Lankans want is peace. He itemized a long list of artifacts he possessed: hundreds of raw digital images, hours of video and piles of facts he wanted to share with the world. He had rented the lobby of Roy Thomson Hall for August 23 to present this material. It was the highest profile venue he could think of in which to grab the mainstream and spotlight the problem. I did the math: thirty-five days. Mano concluded, 'I need your help. Can anybody help me put together this show? Please help me.'

It was an incredible request, and the guests were alarmed, the desperateness of Manoranjan's situation triggering a realistic, if not particularly optimistic, response. There was a struggle of wills as people tried to escape the corner Manoranjan had trapped us in, offering weak suggestions and trying to avoid the material considerations by discussing politics. Some guests were annoyed with me for letting things drift for so long and so far from the task at hand, so I quietly slunk over to my computer and turned on some music, trying to signal that it was time to party. The vibe didn't take. The evening dissipated, leaving Manoranjan, Kanishka, Dan and me alone to chat about Sri Lanka into the night.

The next day, determined to prove that a project coordinator could be found, I, with the help of Natalie De Vito, drafted a job description, posted it to the Instant Coffee listserv⁸ and did my best to convince myself that I'd done all I could.

A month later, I attended the event and, strolling through the crowds that filled the lobby of Roy Thomson Hall, I spotted Dan, who beamed at me, gesturing towards Andrew Reyes, who had taken the gig. I looked around the show: printed photos, information and stats on big vinyl sheets were hung around the space, and monitors showing videos that Manoranjan had produced dotted the lobby, attracting clusters of people. Manoranjan moved through the crowd, looking sharp in his suit and in relaxed control. Months later, in the spring of 2009, the Tamil community took to the streets, and I couldn't help but fantasize that Manoranjan's show had been part of the buildup that galvanized the community.

So, finally, the dinners offered the possibility – actualized or not – of attaching themselves (at least in my febrile imagination) to the actual streets of Toronto. The Tamil protests – particularly their occupation of the Gardiner Expressway,

7. Dan's pasta

adapted from *Made in Italy*, by Giorgio Locatelli, (Fourth Estate, Ltd. London, 2006)

2 tbsp capers
4 tbsp black olives
5 anchovy fillets (rinsed)
2 tomatos
2 tbsp tomato paste
Bunch of basil
5 tbsp olive oil
Salt and pepper

The fresh pasta

1 c soft white flour
1 egg
1 pinch of salt
(make as much as you think)

Put all the ingredients but basil and spaghetti together. Once the pasta is cooked drain and reserve some pasta water for the sauce. Toss well, add the basil then some more olive oil. Serve immediately

[I've asked DOD for better instructions]

8 www.instantcoffee.org

9 Mamey Issac and Darren O'Donnell, 'The Gardiner Garden of the Multitude: Visions of Provision,' *GreenTOpia: Towards a Sustainable Toronto* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2007).

10 Darren O'Donnell, 'Toronto the Teenager: why we need a Children's Council,' *uTOpia: Towards a New Toronto* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2005).

11 Carl Wilson, 'The party line: Toronto's turn towards a participatory aesthetics,' *The State of the Arts: Living with Culture in Toronto* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2006).

a site filled with spectacular potential⁹ – offered a great example of how to secure the attention of the rest of the city, a terrific reminder that infrastructural attributes can be used for multiple functions.

To whatever extent I can tell myself that Mano's dinner had anything to do with anything, there still remained one central aspect of Sesame Street that was glaringly absent from the dinners: children. No matter how developed, nuanced and complex one's social networks are, if they lack children, they not only don't register on the utopian Sesameter but they hardly qualify as properly civic.¹⁰ But I'm a single middle-aged male, so these connections are rare and can occur only in strictly regulated circumstances. Since 2005, Mammalian Diving Reflex has worked intensively with the students of Parkdale Public School on more than a dozen projects that showcased the kids and invited them in on all the fun that Toronto's art community was up to.¹¹ They cut hair, DJed dance parties at *Nuit Blanche*, were featured onstage at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, played music with bands from Blocks Recordings Club at the Gladstone Hotel and designed menus for Coca Tapas Bar. But with all of this activity, there remained a fissure between my kid friends and my adult friends; the dinner parties were completely homogeneous. And this lack of young people thwarted the Sesame Streetification of my life.

Eat the Street was an event that made the students at Parkdale Public School into a jury of preteen food critics as they sampled the fare at a dozen Queen West restaurants. We worked with about forty students from the school, including a few we had already extensively collaborated with and a bunch of new ones, focusing on students who were new to the country and working on their English-language skills. In groups of ten, the kids checked out the restaurants in their neighbourhood over the course of six weeks. It was a healthy cross-section of establishments ranging from family-run spots like Shangrila, Mother India and Addis Ababa to places more geared towards nightlife like Cadillac Lounge, Mitzi's Sister and the Beaver, from restaurants focused on the experience of dining, like Oddfellows, Czechoski and the Drake, to the Skyline, Parkdale's classic diner.

Positioning kids as food critics worked well within popular culture's turn towards an interest in children's subjectivities, as evidenced in recent documentary films focusing on kids (*Spellbound*, *Mad Hot Ballroom*), television shows (*Kid*

Nation, Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?), academic fields (Children's Geographies) and the success of programs such as Dave Eggers' 826 Valencia project.

But for Mammalian Diving Reflex, this was merely the sideshow to our main goal, which was to bring the Parkdale kids together with adults in the community to build a social network that spanned these segregated communities. The public was invited to be an 'audience,' to join the jury, eat with them, get to know them, listen to their pronouncements and get in on the fun. This was our stated, public objective but it remained a distant second to our desire to create an atypical social time for everyone – a goal we couldn't really publicize. Simply inviting the public to eat with and meet the kids of Parkdale without draping the event with at least a whiff of artistic intent would have generated confusion and anxiety, which, as it stood, we still encountered to some degree.¹²

The dinners went off without a hitch; the forty kids on the jury managed to meet about 300 adults who live in and around Parkdale, thus generating a whole new bunch of edges in the network, and bringing us a little closer to Sesame Street.

Currently, my energy levels are high, my back is much, much better and my spirit name – which I do promise to whisper in your ear – serves as a reminder that an individual's social circles are potentially a community's social circles, worth cultivating and guarding. To revisit Todd Parsons on the issue: 'as ... groups begin to talk to each other, quite suddenly, the entire society can shift paradigms.' Obviously this paradigmatic shift is nowhere in sight, but that would be one of the main characteristics of a bifurcation of this nature: it's always nowhere in sight until the moment that it's everywhere in sight, not unlike the Snuffleupagus, condemned to remain a complete enigma, his very large existence regarded as a figment of Big Bird's imagination by all but us kids, watching, waiting and longing for a neighbourhood where we can all be together, united by a conviviality fostered by the simple fact that we happen to share this place – nothing more.

12 'O'Donnell-land' by Chandler Levack ran in the April 8, 2009, issue of *Eye Weekly* and was a sensational survey of my career, complete with some heavy factual errors. Among other things, it strung a flimsy but titillating thread between an isolated psychotic episode I experienced for a few days in 1993 and my current work with children. Psychosis and kids is not a mix that tends to relax people.