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EAT THE STREET, MAMMALIAN DIVING REFLEX

By Amy Fung

The premise is simple and the premise is social: go to a designated restaurant and dine with grade school children who have been empowered to critique. Illuminating questionnaires are provided as social ice breakers between strangers, and conversations are sparked between people who would never have a reason otherwise to interact.

The result: I can honestly say I've never had a dinner outing that ended with a tickle fight in the middle of the restaurant ... and I can only praise Mammalian Diving Reflex for re-arranging contexts to let this happen for one of the most memorable meals I have ever shared.

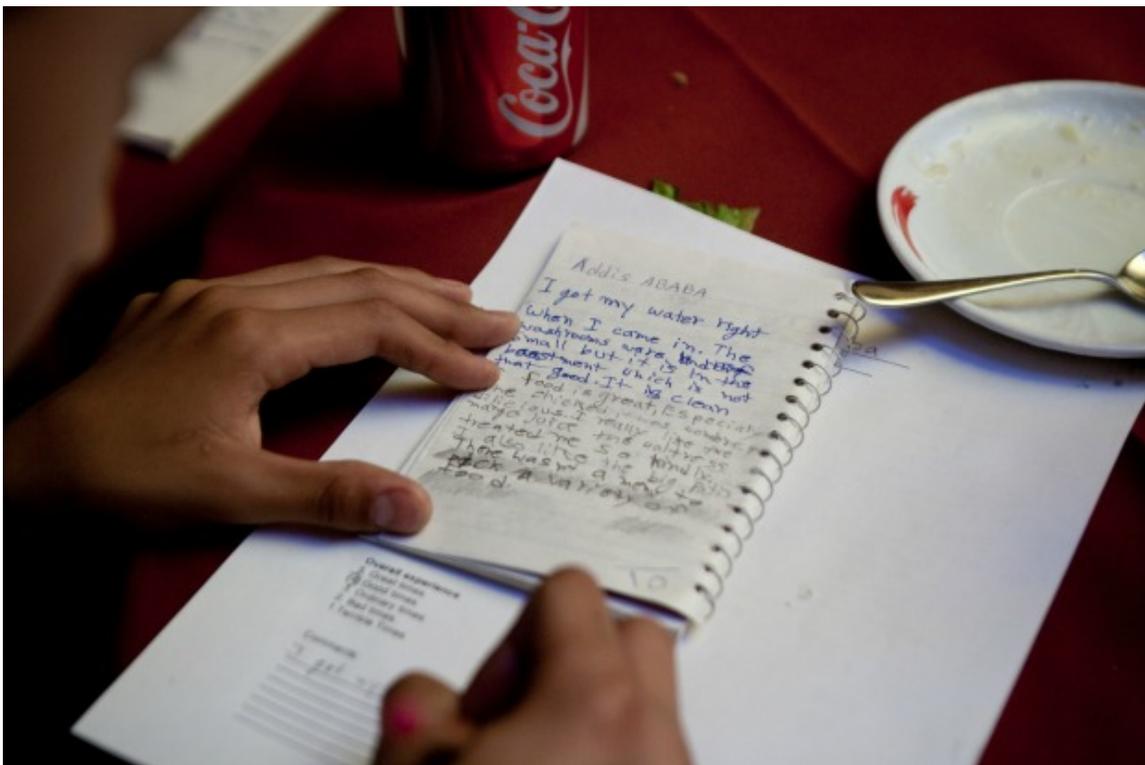


Image from Mammalian Diving Reflex from [Vancouver Sun's "Stranger Danger with a meal" article](#)

I first heard of **Mammalian Diving Reflex** when I visited **ANTI-Fest** in Kuopio, Finland, even though they are a sprawling Toronto-based performance and research collective. For ANTI's 10th anniversary in 2011, MDR put on **The Children's Choice Awards**, an event that culminates the entire scope of the festival's programming through the tastes and perspectives of children who are chauffeured around the town of Kuopio to experience the array of the festival's (other) socially engaged events. Encouraged to share their honest and uncensored opinions on the festival's line-up through a finale of an awards ceremony, the shared experience becomes most transformative for those who have been toting the baggage of culturally instilled connotations (ie. adults who have lost their sense of fun). Backed by what the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child has called "a new social contract" wherein children are invited to be present as children, the projects, or "social acupuncture" by MDR are basically live experimentations on social behavior — and they are brilliant.

For Push Festival's 2012 **Eat the Street** series, children in grades 5 and 6 from Bridgeview Elementary in Surrey have been appearing in restaurants throughout Gastown, taking notes of their dining experiences from the decor of the washrooms to new foods tried. Seated at my table was a 12 year old by the name of Anthony, who in his own words, "had a fetish for fries." A pretty good game of "I Spy" took place as well as digressions on Jesus, the preference for eating cute animals, and weird innuendos were traded between courses.

The underlying principle of the event was in the trust and communication between the children and the working members of MDR, who instilled agency into the children's hands and let them set the tone in a social situation where their opinions and wants are often ignored. Facilitated by Darren O'Donnell, Artistic and Research Director, *Eat the Street* was one of the best socially engaged practices I have ever encountered and participated in. The event worked for the sheer simplicity and transparency of the project's ability to inspire genuine connections and generosity between loosely connected strangers.

I must admit that I have been feeling more social disengagement than not with the minefield that is "socially engaged art." I spent six months last year working in the UK for a socially engaged arts organization that functioned on the premise: "the town is the venue." I walked away feeling that socially engaged art operates more from the funds available to produce events that cuts to community centres, local health clinics, and other basic amenities have all but eliminated from the lives of citizens. Art kept taking the form of events, but events are not always art. Events are the easiest way to get people together for connections and participation, but the preciousness of art can get in the way of what could be just a fun event. Again, not mutually exclusive, but it does appear to be **a slippery slope** for the art world that keeps confusing things like sensationalism and populism with social reflection.

*Check **Push Festival** for more dinner options and information about the free awards ceremony on Saturday, February 4*