

Forgetting your regular life.

An immersion into the Silent Dinner.

Annette Innis. After the Sydney Silent Dinner 2016.

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I was extremely excited but also nervous about the Silent Dinner Party. I didn't tell anyone I knew that I was going because I didn't want anyone I knew to come. No one in the room would have any pre-existing relationship with me, or expectation of me. I was going to be completely anonymous. As a natural extrovert, I'm confident with conversation skills and can fill any awkward silence seamlessly. I love meeting new people, I have lots to talk about, and have sharp skills when it comes to flattery, and listening to others. I wondered whether I would still feel valuable once stripped of my *on-paper* identity, and was treating the experience as a personal challenge.

I wanted to look fabulous, yet weird and very approachable. I knew the crowd would be full of open minded eccentrics who would appreciate an artistically put together outfit so I wore a bright green formal dress, sparkly high-heeled glitter boots and a big fake flower in my hair with matching bright red lipstick.

As I walked up the grand staircase and into the 'quiet' area, the eerie silence was new to me so it felt like I was making a grand entrance. All eyes were on me but no one was talking. I felt like the whole party paused in a stunned silence upon my arrival. Maybe this is how famous people feel when entering a room, I thought. I was greeted by smiles and was very curious about the others who were embarking on the same bizarre experience as I was.

It was a pleasure making other people feel welcome and special too as they entered the room, greeting each other as friends and carefully clinking our champagne glasses in a silent 'cheers'. Honi gave me a welcoming hug, and in that moment I felt like she was a familiar old friend who was glad I had made it! I sat down in an empty part of the room, and watched as the seats around me filled with a mixed bunch of people of different ages, ethnicities and personal styles. I never usually would be at a dinner party with such a diverse bunch. I didn't even know whether everyone spoke English or not. I warmly greeted the small gang who were to become my Silent Dinner immediate family for the evening.

I felt comforted by the social rituals I could fall back on like waving hello, pointing out the grandeur of the room we were in, giving the thumbs up to people's outfits, and an occasional Mexican wave. Soon I observed that the way to gain value in this group was to be a bit silly. The more I exaggerated my expressions, displayed funny behaviour, and generally acted strange, the more I was liked. We displayed over-the-top annoyance when the waiter with the wine was taking so long to reach us, tapping our imaginary watches in agitation, and pretending to be absolutely starving and impatient about the food arriving. We took turns proving that we didn't take ourselves too seriously, with every silent joke being instantly followed by reassuring friendly grins to show that it was all in good fun.

People wearing vegan-wristbands were served a weird, rubbery looking bread as a starter, and when the lady opposite me looked disgusted, we collectively started piling up a of all the pieces of the

dodgy looking bread we could reach onto her plate, encouraging her to eat them. I wondered whether the bread was unappealing on purpose, providing a common enemy for us to unite against. In a similar fashion, the edible flowers from people's entrees were all added to my hairstyle to match the flower in my hair.

I was amazed at how creative we all became with the limited stimulus we had. When conversation was stripped away, our imaginations came to life. Napkins were used as blindfolds, hats, flags, then all tied in knots to create a giant banner, stretching over the entire length of the room.

One man in our group refused his meal with a silent tantrum, so I opened my handbag and generously offered him the collection of fake plastic fruit that I had brought. The fruit was then passed underneath tables, juggled in the air, a fake banana was strategically placed right on the round curve of a bald man's head. Eventually it was being thrown great distances across the hall and caught triumphantly, with some guests being transformed into celebrated cricket legends along with silent eruptions of applause from the crowd.

At one point, whilst balancing a pretend candle on my head, I noticed a guy at another table doing the same thing. We locked eyes, understood that this was now a competition, and tried to outdo each other by seeing who could move around the most without the candle falling. Eventually, with both of us standing on our respective tables laughing and dancing, he stumbled and lost balance. I triumphantly thanked the crowd and took a sip of my wine with my rude finger subtly pointing his way, the plastic candle still on my head.

We left our tables and formed a silent dance floor, looking up to see a DJ spinning imaginary records. We could tell what genre of music he was playing by his exaggerated acting. Everyone froze still while waiting for him to pick the next record, then danced their hearts out. I felt so free that I spun around in circles, my ball gown skirt creating a green blur around me. The crowd started to clear and suddenly I was face-to-face with the candle-balancing guy. He (pretending to be devastated) reenacted my rude finger moment whilst pretending to cry, so I got on my knees and begged forgiveness. We slow danced together and all was resolved.

Returning to our seats there was a special sense of camaraderie at my table, and I could tell this was the case all over. At one point a man rose majestically on top of a distant table. His neighbours had transformed him into a living sculpture of the Statue of Liberty with napkins and cutlery balancing on top of him from different angles, clearly a team effort. We went between tuning into our own group intensely, and joining in on the collective entertainment with the wider party. After using up both of my wine tokens, I was sent a paper-aeroplane wine ticket from one of my new friends who had noticed I'd run out. Such generosity! The rest of the evening was far more casual; we played a lot of musical chairs to connect with the people in further-away seats. There was so much love and laughter in the room that I didn't want it to end. Towards the end, a few of us motioned that we were going to grab a drink at the pub across the road together afterwards, I was determined not to miss the big reveal!

Previously, I had wondered whether I was going to have to try to introduce myself through a charade game of facts and nonverbal introductions, but none of that happened. Instead, I forgot all about my regular life outside of this experience and was completely immersed in the moment, laughing so much at everything that was going on. I felt absolutely refreshed and learned that everyone has a fun side to them. What an incredible experience, I absolutely cannot wait to do it all again.