

## It's art. It's dinner. Most of all, it's fun

By Glenn Garvin

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PAC / Handout

New York City photographer Jeff Stark, whose Underbelly Project is on exhibit as part of Art Basel, specializes in taking pictures of "illegal dinners" -- dinners served at sites not ordinarily accessible to regular citizens. Thursday night's dinner guest was the Herald's Glenn Garvin. The dinner was served at the Miami Marine Stadium.

"Do you think he's watching us?" I whispered as we crept through the moonlight. At midnight, the Rickenbacker Causeway was even more eerily empty than we had hoped — except for the man in a white pickup truck parked on the south side, blocking the shadowed service road we hoped to slip down unobserved.

"I don't know what else he could be doing," replied Jeff Stark, the leader of our mission, his

nervous voice belying his nonchalant gait. "When we get across the causeway, we'll sit down at that bus stop and wait to see what he does. We'll just pretend we're waiting for a bus."

"Don't you think anybody might wonder why we're carrying wooden table chairs to a bus stop?" wondered Sue Mullin, the Herald's calendar editor. "And what do we do if the bus really stops? Do we take the chairs and get on? Do we pretend we didn't know Key Biscayne buses have seats?"

Stark just shrugged grimly. A veteran of many covert missions like this one, he was prepared to pay a high price for failure, even looking hopelessly stupid to a bus driver.



Stark is an underground New York artist whose work zig-zags through the largely unmapped frontier between portraiture, documentary and urban prankery. He's staged two-hour plays on subway lines, organized food-throwing shopping-cart races from Brooklyn through Chinatown to the Lower East Side (it's called the Idiotarod, and that's not a typo), and of course the city's notorious Condiment Wars, which started with volleys of mustard and ketchup before escalating to bagels, cabbage and even Nuremberg-outlawed watermelons.

And in the wee hours of Friday morning, he was planning to sneak into the abandoned ruins of the Miami Marine Stadium on Virginia Key, where he would cook a gourmet meal to serve to Mullin and me. The whole thing would be recorded with time-lapse photography to create a video portrait for exhibition in an Art Basel Miami Beach-Week pop-up gallery.

Our dinner was the latest of a series of what the 39-year-old Stark calls "secret meals," served and photographed in not-exactly-legal locations, including a derelict grain silo on New York's East River and an abandoned section of a power plant in Barcelona, Spain.

"The Barcelona dinner was the only time I've ever been caught red-handed," recalled Stark. "A security guard saw us and told us to get out. 'Why?' we asked him. We had this elaborate legal rationale ready to go. But he just said, 'Because I said so, and I'm calling the police.' He did, too. The cops went right by us, just outside the plant. But they didn't pay any attention to us because we were all dressed up, looking fancy.

"I got that advice from a friend of mine who's a bridge-climber in San Francisco. If he sees a bridge, he climbs it, no matter what the signs say. He told me, 'Any time you're doing something where you might get in serious trouble, take a guy in a monkey suit.' By which he meant either a tuxedo or an actual fur suit with a King Kong head on it. Either one works for the purposes of distraction, which is the point."



The first secret meals were large-scale dinner parties, with dozens of guests. But Stark downsized after being invited to join the Underbelly Project, a group of artists who painted the walls of an abandoned subway station 60 feet beneath the streets of New York. "I was going to bring in 40 people or so for dinner, but the station was located right under a police station, so everybody was afraid there would be too much noise and we'd get caught," Stark said. "So I settled for two."

Certainly 40 of us would have looked stunningly obvious trooping across the Rickenbacker at midnight, especially since we had to carry the dinner-table chairs in on our backs. (The small table itself had been hidden inside the Marine Stadium after a dinner the previous night.) Instead, there were just four: Stark, Mullin and I, plus the founder of the Underbelly Project, an artist who goes only by the initials PAC. "I'd rather you didn't use my name, since everything about painting that subway station was at least mildly illegal," he said. We reached the bus kiosk and sat down.

When the driver of the white pickup got out of his vehicle, we were almost certain we were going to get kicked out or even warned that police were on their way — but it turned out the man was picking up sound equipment and other supplies from some public event earlier in the evening. We walked stealthily toward the Marine Stadium a quarter mile away, warily eyeing some tents left over from the earlier event. Had a guard stayed inside? Nope. A few minutes later we were entering the gloomy wreckage of the stadium, closed since a pounding by Hurricane Andrew in 1992.

"A friend of mine who lives in Miami suggested this place," Stark said. "When I looked at pictures on the Internet, I realized it was perfect for us. Not only is the thing covered in graffiti, each chair back in the grandstand has been individually tagged. That tells you the taggers have plenty of time to work. There aren't a lot of cops or guards coming in here."



The graffiti faded away in the dim moonlight. A dozen boats bobbed peacefully at anchor in the lagoon in front of the bandstand.

“They’re either empty or everybody’s asleep,” said Stark reassuringly. “And even if they’re not, I know boat people, and they don’t like to get involved with the police.” Bad luck for them: They were missing a spectacular light show to the west, where the neon of the downtown Miami skyline reflected off the clouds in soft, shifting pinks and oranges.

Stark changed into a tuxedo — remember, you’ve got to have that monkey suit — to cook our dinner on a small camp stove he brought along in his backpack. If he ever gives up the underground performance artist gig, he could have a great career as a chef: olive tapenade appetizers followed by a salad of Romaine lettuce, goat cheese and roasted pecans. (Regrettably, I can’t tell you the name, which is profoundly unprintable. The salad was invented by an old roommate of Stark’s who fed it only to men upon whom she had sexual designs, which were invariably successful. “When she gave me the recipe, she warned me, ‘This salad must be used only for good,’” recalled Stark.)

Then came brined Key shrimp scampi and polenta with a Turkish saffron tomato sauce, followed by a dessert of blackberries and dark chocolate. “I’ll have my cappuccino now,” I joked, only to be astonished when Stark whipped out cups of espresso-bean coffee. An hour and a half later, we packed up and headed for home, fat, happy and undetected.

I’ve covered four wars and more riots and hurricanes than I can count. I’ve been arrested by apartheid cops in South Africa and communist security agents in Cuba and Nicaragua. But I’ve never had an assignment quite as exhilarating as my secret dinner. It was sort of like sneaking out of the house in search of adventure at age 12: pure madcap fun boosted by a mainline shot of adrenaline powered by the fear of nameless but dread consequences.

“I spend a lot of time explaining to one set of friends that serious art can be fun, and to another set that fun can be serious art,” Stark said. “I’ve certainly done some things that are completely brainless. The Idiotarod, totally brainless. But something we’re supposed to do as artists is to show people things we think are beautiful. I think these spaces are spectacular, and I want people to be able to see them. And I think that interpersonal relationships are really beautiful. I think there’s art in the intimacy of a dinner with a person you choose. I think that’s beautiful, and I think people should see it.”

The video portraits of the secret dinners Stark served in the Marine Stadium are on display throughout the rest of Art Basel, in a pop-up gallery in a converted warehouse at First Avenue and 25th Street Northwest. And he’ll be back next year — I told him about Stiltsville.

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