

Desia•Ava /Dessislava Madanska/ is a multidisciplinary artist working with diverse artistic mediums-sculpture, installations, digital art. In her work she uses scientific tools to translate natural environments/specimens into artistic contexts. Sensory experiences are created through an experimental material and immaterial palette.

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How to gather 100 oyster shells?

A practice in process

1. Make a list with all Fish restaurants serving oysters in Stockholm.
2. Buy gelatine powder, food pigments, chromatic paint.
3. Start contacting the restaurants.

Few phone calls later, I am on my way to get the oyster shells from a restaurant at Östermalm. I am instructed to come by before the official opening hours. Waiting in the cold in front of a closed door which finally opens and they hand me a bag of shells.

I go back to the studio and count twenty-five oyster shells. I put on gloves and start gently cleaning them. They smell like the sea. A strong and salty smell. The interior of the shells, once cleaned, reveals beautiful iridescent shades covering the white matter surface. The inside of the shell is soft, delicate. The outside is its exact opposite. They are beautiful in their own ways. I am thinking of where they came from. Born, grown up and gathered by fisherman. Served, eaten, discarded. Who are the people who gathered them, served them, consumed them?

Twenty-five oysters are still not enough. They look even less once positioned in the big space they are supposed to be exhibited.

Scene 2: The Fish market

Located in a remote industrial area it looks pretty grand and stocked on Google maps. The reality does not meet the expectations when I arrive there-a small space with several shelves

of fruits, and vegetables, and finally, a small section of fresh fish. The smell of the fruits is mixed with the smell of the fish and the collective smell is so strong that it is almost palpable. Right there I see a box with about ten oysters in it. I try to talk to the owner and ask about some spare shells. He speaks no English. One of the customers however does. At first he tries to translate for me, then simply tells me that this is NOT the place for me and that I should go to another place in the center instead where they have several fish shops in the same building. I take the endless buss ride back and go to the other place.

Scene 3: The second Fish market

A big food market with all sorts of food shops, restaurants, delis. Two floors of flavours, colours and smells. I wonder if the people working there have become so accustomed to the sensory overload that their senses probably don't notice the smells anymore. It takes me five minutes to scan the place for what I am looking for-two fish shops and a fish restaurant. I approach them with my art project request for empty shells and they all promise to keep some oyster shells for me and tell me to come back again on Thursday. I do. And nothing. Two of the places say no customer ordered any oysters in the last days. The last

place says they had many oyster shells but that they forgot about my request and threw them away just about 30 mins ago. Not even slightly discouraged, I write my name and phone number on a post-it note together with “Oysters for art”. I hand it to the man behind the counter, ask for his name and phone number and say that I will text to remind him about the oyster shells. The Saturday before Easter he texts me back “You can come”. I go there and a bag of oyster shells is already waiting for me behind the counter. My friend Tim seems stressed and busy-the place is packed with customers enjoying their free Easter weekend. He’s carrying a big tray back to the counter and he spots me. This time I don’t even have to talk and explain myself, without me saying a word, Tim hands me the bag of oyster shells and rushes back to his tasks. After that I visit his colleague from the Fish restaurant next door. Again, they know what I came for and I receive my bag of shells without much explanation.

I am working on Easter. It was not my intention but my process depended on the oysters. So I patiently waited, like a fisherman would have. I like working on days when barely anyone else does. There is a strange sense of peace, as if time had stopped and I’ve been given some extra hours.

I finish my installation that weekend. This text however is not about that artwork. It’s about the people I meet while trying to create it, the peculiar set of unpredicted encounters, conversations and events that finally lead to the execution. I didn’t gather a 100 oysters. I gathered a total of 84.

The day after I receive a text from a restaurant owner I had previously asked for shells. He tells me that my oysters are ready but is it too late? It never is. The 100 was just the beginning. Coming next: “How to gather a 1000 oysters?”

By eating the oysters people unknown to me have provided me with my “building” material. Unaware participants of a collective artwork.

Artwork title: Oysters WIP

Materials:

84 empty oyster shells; gelatine; food pigment in ultramarine;

Size:

Number of oysters adjustable based to the exhibition space. The installation never repeats itself-the arrangement of the oysters is always different as well as the placement of the blue jelly.

*all materials used for the filling are natural and edible but subject to decay.

