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Art -- July 1996

Living-Room Galleries

*As the New York art world rebounds,
 dealers are responding to an increasing
 need for community--and to high rents--by
 reviving the artistic salon*

by [Carol Kino](#)

THE New York gallery world experienced a mini-watershed last fall, when the Grace Borgenicht Gallery shut its doors after nearly half a century. Borgenicht appeared on the scene in 1951, showing American avant-gardists such as Ilya Bolotowsky, Milton Avery, and Jimmy Ernst. By the time she retired, at eighty, they had become established figures, and her gallery had come to typify the sort of soberly run, familial blue-chip shop to which many serious artists aspire. Borgenicht's final show was a display of complex, jewel-toned still lifes by the painter Janet Fish. At its opening the dealer presided one last time a white-haired, dignified, formidable presence seated sternly behind the counter, as if guarding the vegetables and dip. A huge crowd milled about the gallery, and more than one person said morosely, "This is the end of an era."

The recent art-market collapse hit New York hard, causing a wave of closures and bankruptcies, and the gallery world that has since emerged has dismayed many by teetering between two extremes: a few glossy mega-dealers who have the muscle to move the market their way, and a rash of smaller, scruffier galleries that often struggle to stay afloat. Yet even through the darkest days new dealers and spaces have continued to appear. When Borgenicht opened, probably only a handful of the city's dealers promoted that era's contemporary art, let alone the American variety. Today, according to Steve Anzovin, who edits *Art in America's* annual guide to galleries, a New York dealer of contemporary art must vie for attention with 365 others-- about 15 percent more than in 1990, the pre-recession peak.

Despite the renewed activity, what characterizes the present moment is a sense of frustration with the gallery itself. In Borgenicht's early days the contemporary lookspare, white-walled, and bare-floored, more like an artist's loft than a bourgeois living room--was freshly minted. Betty Parsons, the legendary dealer who championed Robert Rauschenberg and [Jackson Pollock](#), had opened New York's first such gallery in 1946. Thirty years later the critic Brian O'Doherty, in a famous series of essays titled *Inside the White Cube*, decoded the aesthetic and market assumptions that underlie the presumed neutrality of such a space. Today many of New York's chicest shows, most of which are conceptual, seem intent on hammering home the idea that we are all

participating in a big cliché. The artist fills the exhibition space with furniture from the back room, where deals are traditionally made, thus putting the business end of things on display. Or it is somehow made clear that the gallery itself has become a framing device and we are the installation. It has actually become a cliché to invoke the cliché--a nice display of Postmodernist tail-chasing. Perhaps that's why, as the art world moves more surely into the mood and aesthetic that will come to define the nineties, the motif that keeps cropping up dates from a time before Borgenicht's--the era of the salon.

IN the annals of art the word "salon" has a slippery range of meanings and associations. One thinks first of the French Salon, the juried expositions put on by the Académie every year or so from 1667 on, which later became one of the first ways for the public to see new art. In the late nineteenth century the Paris Salons arose as an alternative to this official display. These huge gatherings, often with thousands of works and tens of thousands of viewers, became important venues for [Impressionism](#), the avant-garde that eventually forced the academy out of favor. Although the original Salon still resonates in the imagination the way Emile Zola famously described it--an "absolute cacophony"--"salon" has become another way of saying "group show."

Whereas the public salon has often helped to advance the avant-garde, the private salon seems to spring up in someone's home whenever it needs nurturing. The salon of Gertrude and Leo Stein in turn-of-the-century Paris, where the "modern" community gathered to hash over [Picasso](#) and [Matisse](#), is the prime example. In New York, as European modernism was filtering into this country at the time of the First World War, most creative movements got their start in someone's living room. At Mabel Dodge's "Evenings" artists exchanged ideas with many of the city's flashiest political and intellectual figures. The collectors Walter and Louise Arensberg provided late-night hospitality for Francis Picabia and [Marcel Duchamp](#), the reigning deities of New York Dada.

For "absolute cacophony" today, visit an art fair, where hundreds of dealers gather under one roof to hawk their wares to collectors and one another. This kind of clubby, convivial event is becoming such an important part of the international art market that the trade magazine *Art & Auction* recently termed art fairs a "mania." One reason is simple economics--the need to get maximum bang for each buck spent in overhead. Another is that for an art market whose rapid growth has required increasing professionalization, it's fun to get back to those old horse-trading roots.

A recent variation is the art fair in a hotel, which manages to be both public and private. Dealers, usually young and cutting-edge, take over a few floors and install their wares in individual rooms. The Gramercy International, the granddaddy of the bunch, was held in New York for the third time last May. As usual, it proved a barometer of the trendiest art trends, and also a voyage in miniature through salons of New York past. Last year the highlight was a room decked out in tribute to Florine Stettheimer, whose campy, idiosyncratic portraits, many based on her own family's Jazz Age salon, recently enjoyed a vogue. This time it was a performance by Brigid Berlin, a former denizen of Andy Warhol's Factory. One could also visit rooms hosted by the dealers Holly Solomon and Gracie Mansion. Solomon, whose most notable artist is probably Nam June Paik, the creator of video art, began by holding a salon in her home in 1969. Mansion helped to jump-start the East Village funk scene in 1982 by holding a photography show in the toilet of her flat.

Like art fairs, today's private salons are prompted in part by financial exigency. Many dealers who closed galleries over the past few years have been showing work in their homes. Renée Riccardo, for instance, shut down her SoHo gallery, Arena, in 1993 and reopened it in her Brooklyn apartment. "The people who actually survive," she told me once when I stopped by, "are the ones who are doing their business creatively." Arena is in a quiet street of turn-of-the-century brownstones. The interior walls are ivory instead of white, the ceiling is decked with Victorian trim, and the dining room holds some handsome Eames and Breuer chairs. Art must compete for attention with radiators, a bed, the toilet, and a dog basket--not to mention the basket's frequently yapping occupant.

Not long ago the parlor held a sculpture of a miniature log cabin--a comment of some sort on masculine identity from Jason Middlebrook, a recent art-school graduate. Another time Rachel Harrison had fitted out the room like a bomb shelter, complete with randomly placed cans of peas. (She spent ages telling me what it all meant.)

Even if much of the gallery's art aims for spunky irreverence, its weekly openings are earnest. Billed as salons, they are held on Sunday afternoons; apple juice, wine, and cookies are served. Visitors are said to spend hours there, until Riccardo kicks them out. "People are responding to it," she says, "because they're looking for some comfort and sharing."

Another obvious pleasure offered by a salon-style space is the sense of being in on a privileged and bohemian experience. I've found this, paradoxically, at galleries that are less domestic for example, the enormous NoHo loft where the veteran dealer Barbara Braathen mounts an occasional show. Braathen closed her storefront gallery in 1989 and, like many, chose to go "underground," selling privately. One has to know about her small openings to find them; the traditional gallery opening is pretty much accessible to anyone who spots it from the street. "In our age," Braathen told me recently, "the gallery-as-a-store concept is kind of running out of energy, because it costs so much to run and because people don't have time to go to stores. What we see now is more of bringing the art back into the home and having parties."

Though Braathen doesn't call her openings salons, her shows often summon up an alluringly taboo aesthetic. Last fall a one-week show featured small oil paintings by Sally Randall that appropriated details from David and Ingres, who were staples of the vanquished French Académie. Another show displayed work by fifty artists and was hung "salon-style": in places it ranged the entire length and breadth of the wall, after the fashion of the nineteenth century. The show was focused on the theme of beauty, a loaded subject that has lately enjoyed a resurgence. Both events were celebrated with long, late, crowded openings. At one, two men became so inebriated that they toppled to the floor.

OUTSIDE the art world bohemianism, or at least a semblance of it, has probably never looked so mainstream. It's popular these days to assume that the arts are becoming marginalized. But over the past few years, since The Gap first put the performance poet Max Blagg in a TV ad, the coffeehouse-bookstore has gone mass-market, and gallery and museum sites seem to go up almost daily on the Internet.

In New York several upmarket hotels have recently opened book and

music salons, and a big draw on the society circuit is the frequent evening art openings at Stubbs Books & Prints, an interior-decorating concern. At the last Gramercy fair, I was invited to two "art parties," one of them run by a fellow who said he was "temporarily" in advertising; and my soap-opera-actor neighbor tells me that many of his friends are starting theater and comedy salons. Recently even fashion designers have elected to present their new collections in salonlike settings. In such a climate staging an art event seems an entirely natural career move for a young entrepreneur.

Three years ago Gina Fiore, then twenty-five, moved into a minuscule Greenwich Village studio in which the painter Jackson Pollock had briefly lived. It struck her as a perfect place to show art; she later expanded her plans to include a wine-tasting and cooking-class business. The Gina Fiore Salon has been held five or six times over the past year, presenting art displays and poetry readings. Every time I visit, the work--usually small abstract works on paper--seems from afar to be serious and strong. But it is hard to get a good look, because the place is always jammed with people. Fiore told me once that she is sometimes surprised by the turnout. "People feel intimidated going into Gagosian and Pace-Wildenstein," she said, citing the city's two most prominent mega-dealers. (She was once an intern at Pace.) "It's a different way of seeing work, and people find that really refreshing."

A similar explanation seems to lie behind the growing interest in Jill Brienza's salons, held at the Hotel Roger Smith. Though the hotel, in midtown Manhattan, is well off the beaten gallery track, one of the owners, James Knowles, who took it over in 1989, has worked to establish it as an artists' hangout since. Brienza began working there two and a half years ago, when she was twenty, after a brief stint as the curator of nightclub art shows. Today she supplements a regular gallery program with occasional readings, art and music events, and a series of frequent and free dinners that she calls "advertising in a very exclusive, nice way." (A recent evening celebrated "Bright," a show of fresh, exciting abstract work by young unknowns.)

The events are held in a penthouse apartment furnished much as it was in the 1940s, when the hotel's founder lived there, with family portraits, potted plants, and a Steinway grand. Admission is by invitation, and even if one does see the occasional art star or celebrity in the crowd, the atmosphere remains familial. Most nights Brienza's parents come in from Brooklyn; sometimes someone plays the piano; and the hostess makes constant introductions. (It probably doesn't hurt that Brienza looks like a junior Morticia Addams and is always wearing some vampy dress made by her mother, a former fashion designer.) The attitude of exclusivity combined with inclusiveness seems a particularly twentysomething stance.

Back in conventional gallery territory, the salon is making inroads even on the white cube itself. Over the past year I've noticed more galleries experimenting with such elements as poetry readings, music-filled openings, decorative interiors, and extended evening hours, the better to attract new clients and enthusiasts. One SoHo space, the three-year-old Tricia Collins * Grand Salon, is organized entirely around the salon ethos. It is owned by Tricia Collins, who, as part of the team Collins & Milazzo, was one of the more respected curator-critics to emerge from the 1980s East Village conceptual-art scene. The pair held weekly artists' soirées, organized shows that pinpointed coming trends, and wrote artspeak-filled manifestos to explicate them. Many of the unknowns they championed early, such as Jeff Koons and Ross Bleckner, became art stars.

"It's not that I don't appreciate rhetoric and theory," Collins told me recently. "I just think it's time for a more straightforward or poetic approach." Grand Salon is her bid to encourage "a more public form of the kind of conversations that took place in my living room," and thereby to "reintroduce meaning." It works in a way that seems to be half commercial space, half conceptual project. In the middle of the main room a couch and two armchairs are grouped around a coffee table. "To me, the furniture functions literally and symbolically in order to promote dialogue," Collins said when I came in. *Oh, sure*, I thought. But then I realized what an unusual experience it is to sit talking with a dealer in the middle of a gallery, in full view of anyone who happens to pass by--artist, collector, or potential competitor--or even to plunk down on the couch for a while and look at the art by oneself.

From time to time Collins hosts an evening art film, talk, or reading, and she says that these occasions are what Grand Salon is all about. I find, though, that I've come to rely on the gallery not for its evenings but for regular viewings of terrific painting--a medium that is often rumored to be going the way of print journalism. Last fall I saw some wonderfully unpretentious fruit and flower portraits, laden with sequins and glitter, by the artist Tabboo!, who moonlights as a drag performer. Later Stefano Peroli and Charles Clough presented a relatively austere double bill of brilliantly hued abstractions. Another offering was unabashedly spiritual--joyful oil paintings of saints and supplicants, collaged with shells, jewelry, and broken bits of mirror, by Mary L. Proctor, a North Florida junkyard dealer who began making art last year, when the Lord advised her to. "There has to be space for contemplation," Collins told me one afternoon as we sat on her couch. Oddly enough, that seems a sentiment with which Grace Borgenicht, sitting coolly behind her gallery counter, might very well have agreed.

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