



RANBY QUANTILL, GLOBE AND MAIL

Germaine Koh and Phil Klygo in their Toronto apartment/exhibition space: "Weewerk was definitely conceived, at least in part, from the tradition of the salon. But we like to personalize the event, let everyone know who we are and what we're doing," says Koh.

Arty house party

The new salon is an intimate blend of informal exhibits, live performance and mixed socializing

BY R.M. VAUGHAN, TORONTO

Use the word "salon" to describe an art event, and your potential audience is immediately transported to the tangled, mind-numbing pages of a Henry James novel, where the men wear spats, smoke cheroots and discreetly damn the government while the ladies collect on the opposite side of the room to gossip, exchange forbidden French novels and smooth their petticoats a world of tea, finger cakes and polite boredom.

The more hopeful listener might think himself in for an evening of rousing philosophical discussion, the kind sponsored by Madame de Pompadour near the dying days of the French monarchy, or perhaps a night of sharp barbs and emasculation, the specialty of Gertrude Stein in her Paris years. One might even hope for a Warholian afternoon of soft music, light drag, and very hard drugs.

But those days are long gone, and, until very recently, so was the social impulse that guided the salon tradition — the desire to gather together disparate artists and thinkers, serve them snacks and booze and sit back to watch the fur fly. We don't socialize in such organized ways any more, because communication technology makes us instantly accessible to each other at all times. Besides, artists have enough chances to see each other at the regular rounds of openings and receptions.

Speaking from personal experience, I know that attending an average of 25 art openings a month disinclines one to walk into a living room full of equally oversocialized artists and talk about contemporary art. That is, unless there's a floor show.

Since the mid-nineties, various artists have attempted, in fits and starts, to revive the salon tradition by repositioning it as a multimedia drop-in, not a formal sym-

posium. Five years ago in Toronto, artists Jaxon McDade and Jinhan Ko opened up their tiny Niagara Street home for a monthly series of slide projections, performances and dancing. Dubbed the Money House, the series attracted hundreds of artists who were glad to try out new works without the pressure of mounting a formal show. Around the same time, legendary actress Clare Coulter began performing monologues in living rooms and kitchens, and poet/painter Bill Bissett cleared out his apartment every other Sunday for art shows and poetry readings.

When Ko and McDade split up, the Money House group transformed, with the addition of artist Jennifer Papararo, into the Instant Coffee collective, an ongoing project that occasionally sponsors informal in-house exhibits and runs a wildly successful Internet list service and arts magazine. But the genie was out of the bottle, and artists in the city quickly realized that showing works in private homes can be a lot less trouble than begging (and paying) dealers for space or negotiating the byzantine, committee-driven world of publicly funded galleries. For instance, artist James Carl exhibits

works from his balcony in Toronto's Kensington Market, and designer/artist Barr Gilmore has turned the street level stairwell of his Queen West home into a tall, narrow glass vitrine that showcases everything from video to performance (by very thin artists).

Toronto artist Germaine Koh is picking up where Money House left off by opening her tiny apartment for a twice-a-month series of screenings, performances, exhibits

'None of this is new. It's just the sort of thing young artists do naturally.'

and live music. Fittingly dubbed weewerk, given the small operating space, the series attracts a mixed crowd of people who would have little or no chance of encountering each other in their regular circles. Young musicians squat on the floor beside high-powered gallery directors, trying to figure out who brought their dad to the show. Fragile artists lurk by the bar, waiting to see if any of the fur-

niture designers laugh at their latest earnest video. Theatre artists try to pick up rave kids, and everyone wonders who, exactly, is that rich-looking guy in the corner, the one with the confused model on his arm.

Given the size of Koh's apartment, people have no choice but to socialize. At a recent screening, I sat on a ledge and inadvertently kept kicking a young dancer in the head. She could only smile, as she was involuntarily elbowing a 50-year-old photographer's stomach. Koh does her best to make her living room a neutral space — the furniture is shoved into the back of the apartment and the art is taken off the walls — but one is always aware that one is inside somebody's home; an awareness that breeds a refreshing decorum and consideration. But is this a salon proper, or the artsy equivalent of a vacation slides party? Koh wants it both ways.

"Weewerk was definitely conceived, at least in part, from the tradition of the salon. But we like to personalize the event, let everyone know who we are and what we're doing, so it's not totally a focused discussion event."

On the night I attended, Koh

walked around her apartment introducing herself to total strangers who'd just walked in off the cold street, pointing out the bar and a generous row of coat hooks. I half expected to be offered a pair of slippers.

In the coming months, Koh is teaming up with the Luft Gallery's monthly curators and artists forum called Art in the Dark, and then with uber-art rag *Artforum* magazine. Clearly, Koh is trying to mix passive viewing events, such as screening and performances, with activities that require more attentive participation.

"As far as salons as specifically focused discussion events go, we've hosted one small group so far, and it worked. Next, I'm having a forum about collaborating at the same time as I'm showing collaborative art in a Valentine's Day Reunion show."

To succeed, Koh admits, the new salon movement has to mix spectacle with conversation, dance with debate.

Not to be outdone, Montreal's trendy Plateau is about to experience a salon revival in the form of 7eSPACE, an artists' outlet run from a two-bedroom apartment shared by artists G. Hall and Carl Ruttan. Since last fall, Hall and Ruttan have been bombarding artist list serves and publications, begging artists to fill their apartment with projects.

Their message is blunt, "We seek to upset the rather stagnant cultural atmosphere of Montreal by staging performance and performative events, exhibitions and other such flim-flam in a social setting not known to have previously existed in this city."

In Winnipeg, Plug In Gallery director Paul Butler hosts collage parties in his home — inviting artists to make collaborative works on the spot using scissors, paper and glue. Similar parties have popped up in Vancouver and Toronto. And in Saint John, veteran folk musician Debbie Adshade hosts and participates in a rotating series of folk mini-concerts held in living rooms and kitchens.

But not everyone's smitten with the homey approach. David Liss, director of the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, a large, publicly funded gallery in suburban Toronto, wonders whether the salon revival is an attempt to make art more accessible and friendly, or merely part of an endless cycle in the arts.

"None of this is new," he reminds me. "It's just the sort of thing young artists do naturally. I did it in the eighties. Making your home your art space usually comes from necessity and pragmatism, not ideology. For me, it's not all that seductive to get a peek into someone's home. I don't really care; I'm not a voyeur. But I understand the connections to the whole do-it-yourself movement."

Liss admits to going to "art house parties" for fun, and, jokingly, to a bit of jealousy.

"The great benefit of these events is their small size. I mean, if you have 25 people at your art house party, the place looks packed. If I had 25 people at one of the MOCCA's openings, I'd be the laughing-stock of the town."

On the night I attended, Koh *Special to The Globe and Mail*