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 instantly subjected to the tangled, mind-numbing pages of a Henry James novel, where the intelligent, vaguely WASPish and disinterested define the governing body while the ladies collate on the opposite end of the room to gossip, exchange forbidden French novels and smooth their petitious looks into a world of tea, finger sandwiches and polite conversation.

The more hopeful listener might think himself in for an evening of thought-provoking philosophical discussion, the kind sponsored by Madame de Pompadour near the dying days of the French monarchy, or perhaps a night of sharp wits and conversation, the specialty of Germaine Stahl in her Paris years. One might even hope for a Warholian afternoon of soft music, light drugs 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, writers, critics, curators and collectors, serve them snacks and booze and sit back to watch the farce.

Don't socialize in public, organized any space, 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.

Walking from personal experience, I know that attending an average of 25 art openings a month, I discover one to walk into a living room full of equally interesting artists and talk about contemporary art. That is, unless there's a 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 symposium. Five years ago in Toronto, artists Donn McDade and Genoa 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 this time, legendary actress Claire Coulehan began performing monologues in living rooms and kitchens, and poet painter Bill Brown showed off his apartment every other hundredth art show and poetry reading.

When Ko and McDade split up, the Money House group transformed, with the addition of artist Jennifer Paparazzo, into the Instant Coffee collector, an ongoing project that occasionally sponsors informal in-house exhibitions and public artists' events and uses 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 paying dealers for space or paying gallery directors.

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