



Salonnières ensemble: from left, Vicky Wang, Galerie Jochen Hempel; Jan-Philipp Sexauer, lawyer; Dr. Dr. Thomas Rusche, SØR Collection; Stephanie von Dallwitz, artist; Philipp Grözinger, artist; Uwe-Karsten Günther, Galerie Laden für Nichts, with daughter Olga; Marianne Esser, patron; Christian Achenbach, artist

LE SALON

Make friends, drink wine, talk about art: why the resurgent salon circuit is the best reason to stay in.

Text: Jeni Fulton. Portrait: Belaid Le Mharchi

EARLY EVENING IN West Berlin, and the sharp-dressed art collector Dr. Dr. Thomas Rusche is standing in the kitchen of his Charlottenburg apartment preparing for the arrival of his salon guests. Busy opening bottles of sekt, he presses glasses into the hands of new arrivals. Small groups of people begin to congregate in the apartment; they're here to see the entrepreneur's personal SØR Rusche collection, and to engage in informal conversation with fellow artists, curators, and critics.

"These gatherings started organically," Rusche says. "Many people wanted to see the collection I have in my Berlin apartment, and I then decided to invite them all at a set time. I wanted to give them the opportunity to discuss the collection, and their reactions to it, as part of a larger group." The painter Jonas Burgert is a regular guest, as are collectors Thomas Olbricht and Jan-Philipp Sexauer, along with gallerists such as Gerd "Judy" Lybke and Christian Ehrentraut. The antique furniture and oriental rugs impart an atmosphere redolent of the Belle Époque, but the contemporary German art on display – Alicja Kwade's pile of gold bricks, Daniel Richter's devil painting – situate the group firmly in the present.

Rusche has been hosting salons since 2008, modelled on the lines of Gertrude Stein's Paris gatherings of the early Twentieth Century.

Gertrude and her brother Leo Stein were early Impressionist collectors, and guests would turn up to see the Steins' collection of Cézanne on Saturday evenings. The salon was attended by Picasso, Matisse and the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, among others; the focus lay on conversation, food and the Stein's art.

Rusche's collection, meanwhile, pairs Dutch Old Masters with contemporary German painters and one or two YBAs, and amply fills his spacious flat. The study features Ruprecht von Kaufmann's disturbing surrealist paintings and Katharina Otto's sleeping Thanatos, while in the dining room a Martin Eder girl lustily lifts her dress and a disconsolate boy by Neo Rauch perches on the bookcases.

"I think it's important that people come together to exchange views on contemporary issues," Rusche reflects. "There are few structured opportunities to discuss significant issues. Good art for me is not just decorative, but inspires people to talk about the subjects contained within it."

The salon, then: gatherings like these – friendly but gladiatorial, exclusive yet broad-minded – command a particular appeal today. In the post-social media era, intimacy, talk and contact have a value that can't be matched by the tweet. In the spirit of the artistic gatherings popularised in Eighteenth-Century Paris, the new hunger

for debate has spawned a number of private salons from New York to London to Berlin. Hosted by art collectors, curators or gallerists, guests mingle in private settings to talk art and ideas. Here, art is resuscitated from the blur of half-remembered images and impressions formed during the latest round of vernissages, and can be enjoyed in surroundings more conducive to meaningful interaction. Guests actively seek conversation that goes beyond the usual thumbs up/thumbs down exchanges characteristic of the gallery circuit. Salons present a forum for the exchange of ideas with like-minded individuals, with hosts eager to open up their personal art collections to a wider platform of debate.

"We are constantly invited to large public events, where we are expected to behave in a certain way. The groups are always very large, and this discourages close debate," notes Anna-Jill Lüpertz, gallerist and co-hostess of a quarterly salon in Berlin's Moabit, which she founded with her brother Justus Werner. Werner is the son of the renowned art dealer Michael Werner, and the siblings have close family ties to the art world. Their salons take place on a quarterly basis, and for each salon, they select artists whose works are shown in Werner's 200sqm apartment. These have included Olaf Hajek, Nina Hoffmann, Kerstin Schröder and Bettina Ebel. "I wanted to provide a situation where art could be experienced in a private context, and hopefully thus encourage a more intimate level of debate. For a long time, people met in restaurants, or bars, or during exhibitions – they were unwilling to open their homes. I sensed that there was a desire to return to the private, to a more personal level of discussion," Lüpertz says. Seasoned "salonnière" Rachel Rits-Volloch agrees: "Salons work because of the intimacy, and the setting. You can achieve a different sort of communication."

Cassandra Bird and Rits-Volloch started a salon as an extension of their Momentum space, a multi-disciplinary forum in Kreuzberg dedicated to international time-based art. "Openings have become networking events, so the content of the art retreats into the background. When we host these salons, people are very happy to finally talk about the show they saw last week," Rits-Volloch says.

The consensus of the salon hosts is that the right selection of guests is key to the event's success. Salons tend to be invitation-only, and guests are carefully selected and change regularly. "You don't want to be having the same discussion over and over again," Lüpertz says. One of the main challenges for the contemporary salonnière is to invite a creative, interesting mix of guests, to ensure a varied debate. The brother and sister duo hand-pick around 100 guests, ranging from Charlottenburg and Dahlem architects, businesspeople and lawyers, to academics, the literati and Justus Werner's younger art world and club kid friends. "I wanted to mix things up a bit, keep it lively, bringing together certain groups, while including all ages and social classes," she says. The guest list varies each time, and is geared around the art being presented. "There are people whom I would like to get to know better in the context of the salon; I do have a wish-list," she confesses. "It's important that novel aspects and perspectives are introduced, and this of course comes through the constellations of people we invite. We want to provoke, and stimulate, so it's important that we invite people who hold opposing views and come from diverse professional backgrounds."

FOR ALL ITS resurgent appeal, the salon is hardly new. An invention of Seventeenth-Century France, salons were usually maintained by aristocratic women who hosted informal, private debates among politicians, intellectuals and artists. The first took place at the Hôtel de Rambouillet, and its hostess, Catherine de Vivonne, Marquise de Rambouillet (1588 – 1665), wanted to provide a space for open discussion away from the strictures of courtly life. The salon is said to have been a critical factor in the advancement of the Enlightenment, and played a key part in cultural life in Europe and the United States until after the First World War. Notable salonnières included the philosopher Madame de Staël, and Johanna Schopenhauer, who held twice-weekly gatherings in her Weimar house for the German Romantic novelists and poets Wolfgang Goethe, the Schlegel brothers and Ludwig Tieck.

Following Horace's definition of the aims of poetry, "either to please or to educate", contemporary art salons emphasise structured conversation among their guests, and provide that structure either through introductory talks or a moderated discussion among the participants. To set the stage for the evening, Thomas Rusche gives guests a guided tour of his collection, while Lüpertz invites an art historian to talk about the works on show. Bird and Rits-Volloch ask artists or curators to moderate a discussion, which either focuses on an aspect of their programming for Momentum, or tackles the wider background of a contemporary event. "The quality of the debate is very important to us," they say. Topics discussed at their salon included "What is Time-based art?" and a discussion of the art presented at the upcoming biennale in Kiev. Participants include curators from the Hamburger Bahnhof, the Neue Nationalgalerie and the Museum of Islamic Art, all with a vested interest in the subject. "Our intention isn't to make this high-brow academic to the point of not being accessible, but nevertheless trying to engender a level of discussion with enough depth to it, so everyone can benefit," Rits-Volloch says.

Rits-Volloch and Bird's programming changes regularly. The last salon was based around a full meal cooked by an artist and a curator having a conversation. Performance and video artist Steve Schepens presented a cooking performance which was originally conceived for a Michelin-starred restaurant, while conducting a discussion on the forthcoming Kiev Biennale with artistic director David Elliott. The title of the piece was "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." The menu featured "Blue Mussels (Homage à Marcel)" and "Cheese, Wine and Discussion". Guests included artists from the Biennale, such as the Kazakh video artist Almagul Menlibayeva, the gallerist Asia Zak, and Jennifer Allen of Frieze magazine.

Food is also a feature at the Lüpertz/Werner gatherings, encouraging informality between strangers: a large cheese sits atop the kitchen table, waiting to have slices gouged out of it, and guests are free to help themselves to traditional Berlin potato soup. Wine circulates freely. People who wouldn't normally encounter one another are brought into contact, and are expected to talk about the art, breaking through social and professional boundaries.

That, of course, is the other side of the salon: despite their formal structure, they can be raucous occasions that last until the small hours. "Some of ours go on until 3am... with such a cross-section of knowledge and professionals, people are fighting and arguing, and don't want to leave," Cassandra Bird smiles. Rusche's salons are similar: guests perch on the Chesterfield sofas and armchairs, nibbling on cheese and being sketched by the artist Andreas Golder, until it gets too late and everyone decamps to a nearby restaurant. Rusche draws his inspiration from the cultural life of Berlin – its openness, inventiveness and creative freedom, and the salon provides a platform to reflect on all this. "Berlin is a melting pot which attracts a very diverse group of people from all over the world. It's a very dynamic, open city where people meet easily and freely, unconstrained by social hierarchies or groups," he says. "I really enjoy the exchange of thoughts and arguments, bringing people into a space where they can unfold their potential and advance their ideas. Habermas calls it the noncoercive force of the better argument."

In Berlin at least, the popularity of salons suggests that these days, the argument for staying in is strong, whether it's noncoercive or otherwise.

It also begs another question: does all this mean that theory is fashionable again?