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Polite Society
the return of the
New York salon

Tino Sehgal
actions speak
louder than words



New York Salons

words AGNIESZKA GRATZA

photography GUS POWELL



salonista, A RESTITUTION LAWYER BY DAY, revolution soup,
TWO MEN CAME TO MY ASSISTANCE, protean
phenomenon, longevity is rare, COMMUNAL HOUSE IN
BROOKLYN, notoriously hard to penetrate, grandeur and
romance, NEXT TO NO BUDGET, yet another ad hoc
arrangement with the young and idealistic



Patrick Meagher on the rooftop of **Silvershed**, built in the 1970s to house water tanks for the building

New York's salons first came to my attention last 22 October, during the heady days of Occupy Wall Street. I had to make a sign for 'revolution soup' – to be served later that day at the Occupied kitchen. In the designated arts and culture enclave of Occupied's Zuccotti Park camp, two men came to my assistance. One of them extended an invitation to a series of informal gatherings he periodically hosted and, using a coloured pencil, wrote the following in my planner: **'Multispecies Salon / Eben Kirksey** [Edible Companions]'. A month or so later I found myself inveigled into playing the fiendishly complicated 'game of global futures' (an exercise in imaginative storytelling) at said salon. It was then held at the CUNY Graduate Center in a seminar room doubling as a library, made less institutional by the artworks

cum curiosities displayed on the walls and shelves. Kirksey turned out to be a cultural anthropologist collaborating with artists on various projects, and 'multispecies' a burgeoning field of ethnography. The salon later went underground and followed him, artworks in tow, to a communal house in Brooklyn, before resurfacing at the interdisciplinary gallery and reading room Proteus Gowanus.

Roving salons such as the one hosted by Kirksey are by no means unusual, at least in New York, where square footage comes at a premium and longevity is rare. Salons of the sort Louise Bourgeois presided over every Sunday for 30 years in her Chelsea townhouse, open to all artists foolhardy enough to request an invitation, passed away with her. And yet, judging by the number of independent art and performance venues that have adopted the name in recent years – roughly

since the start of the economic downturn – the phenomenon appears to be enjoying something of a revival. In their present-day incarnation, salons are by necessity a protean phenomenon, and salon holders must avail themselves of such spaces as they can access, whether their own, those of their friends or those offered to them by benevolent patrons or institutions.

Salon spaces range from the humble to the spectacular in a city that trades in the latter. For sheer grandeur and romance, few could rival the **Chrysler Series**, an ambitious programme of experimental music, performance and readings at least in part suggested by the venue, co-organised by curator **Summer Guthery** and artist **Robert Snowden**, on next to no budget. That the select group of artists, musicians, writers and interested bodies who attended these 'occasional evenings' (timed to coincide with the



*Salon host **Eben Kirksey** outside Proteus Gowanus, Brooklyn*



*A **Multispecies Salon** gathering and discussion held in the reception room of Proteus Gowanus*

sunset) managed to secure the use of a corner office on the 31st floor of one of Manhattan's best-loved skyscrapers – one that's notoriously hard to penetrate, which can only have added to the salon's cachet – amounted to nothing short of a curatorial coup. The office was loaned free of charge by a boutique investment firm that has since moved to another handsome building, with its own genius loci, downtown on Canal Street, giving rise to the follow-up **Canal Series**.

The term 'salon', which comes from the French, originally referred to a large reception room. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it gradually came to designate a meeting of dazzling people (generally from literary or artistic circles) in the salon of an inspiring (generally female) host. But in its current New York incarnation, it's more interesting to think of it as a series of events than as a space, bringing

like-minded people together, from time to time, in an intimate and convivial setting better suited to the exchange of ideas than, say, a bar. Among the avowed sources of inspiration behind the Chrysler/Canal Series – its 'historical loins', as the manifesto for the series has it – is Franciszka and Stefan Themerson's Gaberbocchus Common Room. Set up in the basement office of the printing press the couple ran from their London home, the Gaberbocchus Common Room brought together a brilliant coterie of artists and scientists during the late 1950s. Each salonista (or host) comes at the notion of the salon with his or her own set of references and associations.

The idea of starting her own salon first came to **Pati Hertling**, who is a restitution lawyer by day, while she was conducting historical research into the salon culture at the time of Dada on behalf of Jewish families trying to trace

artworks lost during the Holocaust. In 2005 she hosted the queer salon **Evas Arche und der Feminist** with Petr Kisur in Berlin, before it relocated, with Hertling, to New York, first to Gavin Brown's Passerby, a bar next to his gallery (back when it was based in the Meatpacking District), and then to an apartment on Leroy Street, above the gallery. In a nod to the host-guest dynamic on which salon culture is predicated, homemade bread and soup would be served at Hertling's monthly salon events, which would usually take as their focus the works of an artist and a performer. But as word of these events spread, some of the intimacy of the original gatherings was lost, and with it the possibility of having conversations about the works offered up for discussion. That's what Hertling would like to recapture in her new salon series, the **Bulletin Board**, recently inaugurated ►





Chrysler/Canal Series curator **Summer Guthery** near her Greenpoint, Brooklyn, home



*Translator, poet, teacher, artist and **Centotto** salon host **Paul D'Agostino***



at a location on the Bowery, in yet another ad hoc arrangement, this time with the young and idealistic Jack Chiles gallery.

A youthful idealism underpins many salonlike initiatives. **Silvershed** in Chelsea was set up with the express aim of generating ‘discussions about contemporary art values, ethics and aesthetics’. What motivated **Patrick Meagher** to lease a rooftop flat with sweeping views of midtown Manhattan and turn it into an independent, artist-run project space was the perceived need for a ‘thirdspace’ (with reference to Edward Soja’s theories), one that was neither a commercial gallery nor a nonprofit artist space beholden to its board of trustees. At the time, in 2008, “market, auction, money was all everyone was talking about”, says Meagher. “We wanted to start our own conversation and create our own values.” The space then contained a fully

furnished living room, whose Hunter green walls made it feel like a billiard hall or a drawing room. Books and snacks would be left lying around to create an atmosphere conducive to discussion.

At odds with the spare, neutral aesthetic and unrelenting uniformity of commercial gallery spaces of the kind you find in Chelsea, salons have plenty of character (reflected by equally imaginative names) and admit clutter. Are salons, then, nothing but apartment galleries with a fancy name? A New York – and that much more urbane, snazzy and smart – take on home galleries and apartment shows more widespread still in Chicago, San Francisco or Illinois, where living space is not so hard to come by? The word connotes a certain preciousness, reaching back to its distant origins as a sort of informal seventeenth-century French academy in which women in particular thrived.

Insofar as they cater to a self-selecting crowd and flaunt their intellectual aspirations, salons lay themselves open to accusations of pretentiousness and/or elitism that those who host them try to assume with grace or else deflate with humour. Summer Guthery is thus adamant that ideas need to be protected, and in her salon series she tackles such accusations head-on. A man of many talents, **Paul D’Agostino**, who has turned his living room in Bushwick (a neighbourhood that boasts a higher concentration of salons than anywhere else in New York) into the congenial, stimulating and consequently well-attended **Centotto** salon, often gives haircuts to friends and acquaintances in the same room. “It’s that kind of salon as well,” he told me when I last visited the place. I am tempted to book an appointment. •