

Seating Plan Roulette

On dining with the art world – with a seating plan by Amy Sillman

BY DAN FOX

In the art industry, dining is both a private and public-facing business tool. For professionals, it commonly takes the form of the post-opening gallery dinner. First the liturgy: 'Are you coming to the dinner?' 'I have to go to another dinner.' 'I have dinners every night this month.' Information for ranking a person's social capital, for dodging social embarrassment, for performing ennui. Excuses betray motives. 'I'd rather stay home but I'm working with the artist on the Guam Quinquennial,' you hear a curator say. Their ubiquity at these dinners suggests otherwise: relentless ambition, no friends outside art and an income so low they'll otherwise starve.

In big cities, gallery dinner venues rotate between the timeless classic restaurant, the newly fashionable and the once-cool-turned-uncool-turned-adorably-nostalgic. (Post-prandial events, genuflections to The Gods of Authenticity, are traditionally held at a dive bar in mortal danger of gentrification.) Dinners serve multiple purposes, none concerning food. For some, it's institutional diplomacy in action. For the artist's friends, a collegiate catch-up. For the hosts, a routine calendar fixture; for their employees, additional hours of unpaid work.

The average art dinner guest wonders: why am I here? Representing your organization. Making career connections. Peacocking status to your peer group. Your presence might even be serving interests unknown to you. As canapés circulate and wine flows, you'll start to believe you're there 'for the community', despite your true community being across town doing a pub quiz. The theatre of food hides the fact that it's work for everyone, albeit highly rarefied. Food is leverage. If they let you near the grilled asparagus wontons, it's likely they want something from you in return.

Take the artist. They're the deer-in-the-headlights obliged to make nice with collectors at top table. Or they're the Art Bros behaving like spoilt toddlers, playing Fantasy League Art Career under the calculating watch of their business representatives. The liveliest dinners are held by galleries skilled at creating a dynamic mix of unusual people from a variety of fields, including the hard-working, back-stage staff who help make their shows happen. The dreariest court clients and technocrats. Often, Seating Plan Roulette decrees you spend the meal next to an artist who understands the word 'conversation' to mean a one-way interview about their career. (My former colleague, Jennifer Higgie, dubbed this garden-variety narcissist 'The No-Bounce-Back'; I call these encounters 'Resumé Recitals'.) Dinner companions can be surprising. I remember the art adviser who told me that extreme wealth was a sign of virtue, and then recounted how she'd met her partner at the circus. She was in the audience; he was a clown. It was love at first sight.

The stains of class show up best in low-lit restaurants. If you were raised to believe it's impolite to leave food on your plate or to get up before the meal has ended, then you'll clock those who blithely interrupt conversation to sit at another table, who take food for granted, who won't make an effort with those beneath whatever social rank they flatter themselves to belong to. Well-educated and socially illiterate people from London or New York who, following the opening of an important show in a small regional city, remonstrate with a local bar for not having the ingredients to make negronis. People who cannot grasp why, as once happened at a *frieze* dinner, local kids would throw stones at them through the restaurant windows.

For the privileged, art meets food according to a broader lifestyle imperative that urges us to be connoisseurs of the good things in life: good design, good vacations, good sushi. An aspiration fed by disposable incomes. But for most, art and food means cardboard sandwiches in a museum basement or a sunny coffee shop selling vegan brownies next to the kunsthalle's bookstore. The cafe is integral to the museum-going public's experience – along with the show, the gift shop and the guided tour. Here, elderly people sit, students gossip, parents distract restive children. Spaces for those whose lives do not afford hours of devotional art-viewing. In regional towns, a museum cafe may be the only venue that serves healthy food, feels safe or where culture can be accessed if other resources – say, the library – have been shuttered. It can provide proximity to art without the pressure to engage with a programme that might, for some, be intimidating.

I've been lucky to be wined and dined in the art world. But give me vegan brownies in a sunny cafe over the event I once attended – a benefit for a non-profit organization – where I watched a prominent collector licking a full-scale chocolate replica of Jeff Koons's *Rabbit* (1986) whilst an expensive-looking couple rolled around on a pyramid of peanuts, and honey was slow-drizzled onto a table piled with 2,000 pounds of ribs. That's a paradox of the art world: it's about class even when it's got none ●

Amy Sillman,
Table Three, 2009.
Courtesy: the artist
and Gladstone
Gallery, New York
and Brussels

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MISS DAGMAR PARDEE
OUT-OF-SORTS SOUND ARTIST WHO USED TO BE QUITE THE GAMIN, BUT PERI-MENOPAUSE RUINED HER SLEEP PATTERNS. SILENTLY CASTS ASPERSIONS ON ALL THE OTHER WOMEN IN THE ROOM, BUT THEN FEELS FEMINIST GUTS RANGS, LEADING TO A SHAME SPIRAL THAT MAKES HER DIFFICULT TO TALK TO. HER AT A DINNER.

MISS WANDA DIBBELSCHAFT
THE QUEEN OF POSTMODERN MEAN, W/ CRUEL MOUTH, A TRUST FUND, A BIG GOLD GUCCI BELT, AND ~~NOT A HAIR OUT OF PLACE~~. HAS AN CURATORIAL DEGREE FROM SOTHEY'S. AND LOVES TO BANDY ABOUT THE FACT THAT SHE WORKED WITH PEOPLE WHO WORKED WITH HORKHEIMER. IS ANGLING TO BECOME EDITOR OF "MOTÉ" MAGAZINE.

MR. PANCRETIUS FLORSCHHEIM
WU
WITTY, WELL-EDUCATED ARCHITECT, WHO SPLITS HIS TIME BETWEEN A VERY NICE ALL-CASHMERE WARDROBE. WHO ONLY WEARS CASHMERE
GUY AT TABLE 4.
he collects Beijing and Cambridge.

MR. JEAN-PHILIPPE OBU-STEVENSON
UBIQUITOUS GET-TO-KNOW-ME QUEEN + BON VIVANT WHO MAKES A LIVING "CURATING" BUT WHOSE REAL OCCUPATION IS SHAMELESS SELF-PROMOTION. LOOKS LIKE PEE WEE HERMAN IN HIS LITTLE WHITE SUIT.

MS. FLOSSIE VAN KLOOS
A HENNA-HAIRED DUTCH CHANTEUSE, A MESOMORPH TRYING TO DIET DOWN TO AN ECTOMORPH, BUT WHO CURRENTLY LOOKS LIKE A SAUSAGE STUFFED INTO A MARGIELA CASING.

MR. CHESTER "BINGO" HORDINATE
NOVELIST WHO IS ABOUT TO CRACK UNDER THE STRAIN OF HIS INTENSE RAGE, WHICH ONLY EMERGES WHEN HE DRINKS TOO MUCH - LIKE, EVERY NIGHT AT 8 PM. AS THE FILMS FAILED TO MATERIALIZE OF HIS MANY OPTIONED BOOKS, THE ANGER HAS GROWN MORE COLOSSAL, LEADING RECENTLY TO ALTERNATING BOOTS OF AFTERNOONS WATCHING SEMINAR RAGE MANAGEMENT AND VARIOUS SELF-DESTRUCTIVE EXCURSIONS IN QUEENS, NY.

MR. ADALBERT BEETLEBROX
LACANIAN FROM LUXEMBOURG, WHOSE WHISPERY SOFT VOICE SERVES TO CONTROL EVERYONE BECAUSE YOU HAVE TO LEAN IN TO HEAR HIM; AT WHICH POINT YOU ENCOUNTER HIS SETTLED INTENSE DAN DRUFF, & WIDE-WALE CORDOURY.

MS. REGINA VAUXHALL
SPEECHLESS AFTER THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF HER HUSBAND'S MAGAZINE FOLDING - AND SHE WASN'T MUCH OF A CONVERSATIONALIST IN THE BEST OF TIMES...

MR. PHOENIX BENE DRILLO
WASN'T INVITED BUT SHOEHORNED HIMSELF IN, AS IS HIS WONT. AT JOURNALIST WHO FANCIES HIMSELF A THINKER. PAPER-THIN POP-SCIENCE IDEAS IN HIS AIRPORT-BOOKSTORE-BOOKS ARE A LAUGHING STOCK.

MISS AUDRINE ZUMWINKEL
CHERUBIC BUT DEMANDING EMERGING SCULPTOR WHILE OPERA DIRECTOR WHO IS ALWAYS ALL UP IN YOUR GRILL. SAYS HER REAL ROLE MODEL IS PATTI SMITH, BUT SEEMS MORE LIKE IT WOULD BE ETHEL MERMANN SPEAKING IN A DULL ROAR.

MISS LINDA P. PRÜNG
HER FATHER RAN A COMEDY CLUB IN THE BORSCHT BELT BUT SHE TOOK THIS INEXPLICABLE NAME TO PERHAPS TO LEND GRAVITAS TO HER PERFORMANCE ART CAREER. HER WORK IS ALL ABOUT ENDURANCE AND SUFFERING, BUT HER DAD WAS FRIENDS WITH SHECKY GREEN.

MR. HERVING ROTONDI
DOCUMENTARY FILM PRODUCER FROM SOUTH AMERICA WHOSE GOOD POLITICS COME WRAPPED IN NOT-A-SMALL-AMOUNT OF MISOGYNY, AND WHOSE DOCUMENTARY ON THE HISTORY OF THE SQUATTER MOVEMENT IN ITALY WILL EARN HIM A PULITZER PRIZE, BUT HARSH CRITIQUE IN THE FEMINIST LEFT FOR BEING-SEXIST. IS DOING CORPORATE BRANDING DURING THE CRISIS - JUST DESIGNED NEW TRUMP LOGOS.

TABLE THREE
FRIEZE DINNER: Max FRIEZE Dinner Gallery

REMEMELESS BASICALLY, HE IS JUST TOOK A JOB BY AN MFA PROGRAM.
RUNNING WINSOME BUT DAKOTA FANNING

TINY PUTATIVELY

Scholar of dust and particulates
Rageful and depression; shows itself
Q's for Christy:
- 1. what event?
- 2. name of Gregorius - marzahn - stadt

social functions.
Ethel merman comes to mind as she tells you about her self in a dull roar.

outer political correctness masks an aggressive ego and not a small amt of misogyny.

IS ANGLING TO become editor of Frieze. Her nickname is Bootsy

something like Amperant Arwood the Marx Bro stuffy old biddy who has been rendered

AS 09

"A paradox of the art world is that it's about class even when it's got none."