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...not only know each other,



Hirst quenching: the Young British Artists not only know each other, but how to party as well.

As the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition opens, **TIFFANY DANEFF** takes a look at London's alternative, pickled art world

well oiled

Paris had the Fifties, the Eighties were Cologne's and everyone's talking about Berlin being the next stop, but right now, London is the centre of the art world. Not since the mid-Eighties have the vibes been so good or the private views so exciting. And though it is artists in their twenties and thirties who have given this welcome fix of importance to the London art scene, the other, more established and traditional galleries, are enjoying the fall-out. From the gilt-framed soirées of old money, to the down-at-heel cool of an industrial art space in Brixton, from champagne to lager, the party is on.

'A good private view is one that is absolutely swimming in alcohol.' That's how the late curator Joshua Compston saw the art world he inhabited. He was renowned for his one-off happenings. For one private view he served up fried scorpions and grubs which he had smuggled back from a trip to China. Last year, for Gavin Turk and Tracey Emin – part of the cutting-edge Young British Artists crowd – Compston borrowed a derelict Edwardian tram shed in Hoxton Square. You walked in to a bar ringed with candles. Everyone got paralytic.

Today's serious bingeing is largely thanks to the sponsorship of drinks companies like Becks which has just celebrated ten years of lubricating arts bashes. Gilbey Vintners, who produce J&B Rare Whisky and Bombay Sapphire Gin, also got in on the act, ensuring their product reaches its niche audience by providing drinks for cultish gatherings. On one such occasion, a private view organised by Max Wigram of Independent Art Space (who's into mixed-media installation), things got famously out of hand. This led to a fight in the Groucho during which Mark Wallinger (he of last year's Turner Prize shortlist) threw a punch at someone. It may have been embarrassing at the time, but it'll always be remembered.

Infamous with every London gallery are a few freeloaders, collectively known as the Bulgarians. No one knows who they are or where they come from, but they can smell a private view from a hundred miles. 'Although they look like tramps, they even manage to get into the Tate and the Hayward,' says Richard Ingleby, a director at the up-market Fine Art Society. 'One lady turned up when we had invited only a few close friends for wine and crisps. She tipped a bowl of cheese straws into her handbag which she proceeded to eat as she looked at the work. She left with them still sticking out of her bag.'

It is the leading-edge artists, most of whom know Damien Hirst and are now collectively known as Young British Artists, who are creating a buzz. They go to the same private views, they all know each other and they build the atmosphere which tends to continue late into the night at an after-show party or more often the pub. Jay Jopling might dump a couple of crates of beer by the loos at the White Cube, but he rarely bothers

serving real drinks as everyone tends to gather outside on the street, popping in and out of the pub across the road for refills. Same goes for Anthony d'Offay who can afford to serve drinks if he wants to but, say regulars, only does so if the artist is alive and important enough. But then again, given the foulness of the wine dished out at most private views, who cares?

If you want a decent drink these days, check your invitation (assuming you've got one) for the booze sponsor. The alternative is to make friends with Charles Saatchi, who serves champagne, or to get cosy with some aristocrats. They're likely to get invitations to Lefevre's where the food and drink are legendary. But then the gallery holds only one or two parties a year. The mailing list has on it the richest, most high-profile people in theatre, politics and commerce. People who can afford to do more than window-shop for Impressionist paintings.

As someone once said – and they're not far wrong – contemporary art is 100 per cent about networking, which seems to have supplanted selling as the real business that gets done at a private view. A room where an interested buyer would be invited to examine a work of art in seclusion no longer exists. These days nothing is private, given that the world and its family turn up with a load of uninvited guests in tow. And unless you spend your time craning your neck or nudging people out of the way, there's little chance of seeing the work. The fashion now is to do business over select dinners, before or after the private view. And the really smart galleries don't even deign to cheapen the minimalist decor with vulgar red spots.

'The private view,' says Matthew Flowers of Flowers East, 'is really for the artist and their friends. We invite buyers and potential clients to a preview dinner the night before.'

'People in the know always turn up the day before,' agrees Rebecca Hossack, 'though if we see someone looking intently at a work we will approach them.' The art of being a good salesman, she says, lies in conviction. 'We only sell work we all love, otherwise it's very difficult to sound sincere.' And sincerity is all when you're trying to sell someone a pickled animal.

THE CREAM OF THE CROP

WHERE TO GO FOR FOOD

- Lefevre for melt-in-your-mouth tit-bits.
- Anthony d'Offay's preview dinner for lobster and caviar.
- Rebecca Hossack for witchity grubs.

WHERE TO GO FOR DRINK

- Saatchi's for champagne.
- Lefevre for champagne and cocktails.
- Marlborough for good wine.
- Royal College of Art for Absolut Vodka.
- Independent Art Space for Becks.

WHERE TO NETWORK

- Saatchi's.
- White Cube.
- Serpentine Gallery.
- The Tate.

WHERE TO GO RUBBER-NECKING

- Bernard Jacobson to see Bowie.
- White Cube – Damien Hirst et al.
- Rebecca Hossack – Joan Collins, the Duchess of Hamilton and bigwigs from down under.
- Serpentine Gallery – Princess Di.
- October Gallery – foreign dignitaries and ambassadors.