

people are talking about

trend

people are talking about

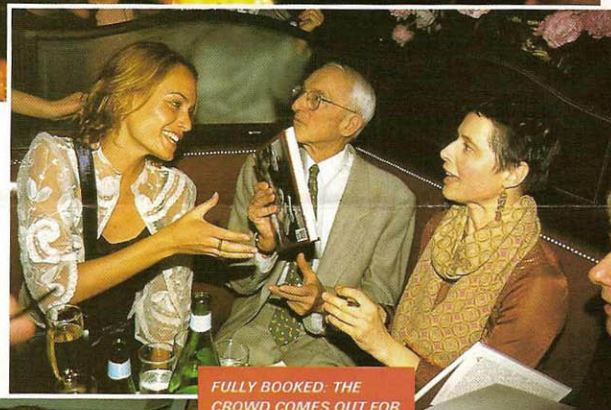
trend

the art of the party

And where do all the bright young things go these days? Betsy Berne finds that the publishing party has replaced the gallery opening as the fete du jour.

was standing at a book party one night when a wave of eighties-New York-art-world déjà vu came over me. Back then, there was a steady onslaught of art openings that insiders and outsiders attended, regardless of who happened to be the guest of honor. Now there is a steady onslaught of hype-driven literary events, and, again, it's dubious whether half the crowd knows the guest of honor or if they're even linked to publishing. The neophytes and hangers-on who used to crowd openings have defected to the literary scene, and the same atmosphere prevails: glazed eyes, craning necks, and a slew of "all these gorgeous, adorable young people," in a literary warrior's words.

What is behind all these book parties and book readings, book breakfasts, book dinners, book teas? Big money—or at least the aura of big money, which has deserted the art world and has infiltrated publishing via Hollywood. "Film scouts take agents out to lunch more often than agents take editors out to lunch," says an aspiring young thing/literary agent. Or as *Variety* put it, Hollywood's "casu-



FULLY BOOKED: THE CROWD COMES OUT FOR "THE LAST PARTY" TOP: TOASTING ISABELLA ROSSELLINI'S "SOME OF ME" AT BALTHAZAR. ABOVE: INGRID CASARES, KELLY KLEIN, AND MADONNA. LEFT: CELEBRATE KLEIN'S "UNDERWORLD" AT MIAMI'S DELANO HOTEL



al flirtation" with the publishing industry has "become a full-blown affair."

A lot of writers would disagree. "Ambitious young writers see these million-dollar deals and think it's going to be them, but the chances are like a basketball star coming out of Harlem," says Fernanda Eberstadt. Pearson Marx is slightly more upbeat. "It used to be like spotting a unicorn, but now there's just enough weird, gaudy, garish big sales or movie deals to get everyone's blood up." The literary warrior is more bleak: "Publishers are just trying anything they think is going to work because books are selling so poorly."

Whatever the reason, even corporate sponsorship, a former benevolent presence in the art world, has jumped ship to publishing. There are readings, "literary salons" at Benetton, and liquor companies such as Macallan are now sponsoring literary fetes. "Liquor and readings go back to *Beowulf*, when the

warriors drank mead while listening to the bard," explains poet Sam Truitt, a publicist for *Granta*, the literary journal that has imbibed in several liquor-company-sponsored events. Rose Kernochan, producer at *Word*, an on-line magazine, has her own theories. "Since books are becoming obsolete, they are acquiring that curious cachet we confer on archaic objects—like typewriter typeface," she says. "Books are being used as a marketing tool, as a kind of cool accessory that people don't actually use." Even high-fashion accessories. Giulia Melucci, a determinedly cheerful publicist at Scribner, reports that one of her authors, Amy Hempel, was invited to read at the MaxMara boutique in San Francisco.

The aspiring young literary agent says there are "tiers of cool" when it comes to the various book-reading series. "I go to KGB and Limbo [the lit version of the eighties East Village art scene]; it's sort of a 'See and be seen' thing. No one goes to Barnes & Noble readings—and I never go to 92nd Street Y readings. Old people go, and I wouldn't know anybody there."

Old people go to KGB and Limbo, too. Says the literary warrior, "The audiences actually listen—they know the good lines and the bad ones and the jokes." Rick Moody, an *old* writer of 36, says, "I'd read at KGB every week because the people who go genuinely love books, and I'd avoid ever going to the chains again. They rarely turn off the sound system, and kids are next door clapping in time." The art world has joined in with its own downtown reading series at The Drawing Center, "curated" (it is the art world, after all) by novelist Linda Yablonsky.

As for book parties, gone are the days of genteel affairs financed by publishers—except for a few token superstar extravaganzas. "Venues certainly have changed," admits one bewildered editor. "And there never used to be people letting you in the door like at Pravda and Kunsthal—well, maybe during the McInerney reign." The aspiring young agent is kind enough to bring me up-to-date. It seems there are old-fashioned private parties thrown by agents and friends ("Those are the best—I don't always get invited"), big bashes held at bars or clubs ("Last night there was this party for Rob Weisbach's imprint [Ellen DeGeneres's and Jerry Seinfeld's publisher] at this huge downtown club, Chaos, and all these foreign publishers, film scouts, and TV people were there"), the liquor-company-sponsored parties ("Those parties suck"), Knopf's star-studded parties ("I never get invited"), and, of course, the great constant and equalizer, George Plimpton's *Paris Review* parties.

The multiple-book-party syndrome has also surfaced. Writers Eberstadt, Gini Alhadeff, Patricia Bosworth, and Mary Gaitskill were all honored with multiple celebrations for their latest efforts. The art world has gotten in on the party action, too. Eighties art star David Salle has hosted soirees for Frederic Tuten and George Trow. Chelsea galleries

Morris-Healy and Matthew Marks have been party hot spots for writers Michael Cunningham, Brad Gooch, and A. M. Homes, among others. There's been the odd celebrity-sighting, too. Melucci spotted Lauren Hutton at a Random House breakfast "in dark sunglasses, as though she didn't want to be noticed, but she talked throughout the whole thing."

Not everyone is an enthusiastic reveler. "I don't like going to book parties anymore," says Moody. "I didn't have a party for *Purple America* purposely. I've only been to two book parties in the past 24 months, and I get invited to a lot of them. I think it is a really tired and lackluster scene." Tom Beller, a weary 32, resuscitator of the historical drunken brawl with the galas for his literary magazine *Open City*; is already tuckered out: "I may be entering geezerhood because I'm going through [party] detox—I've had my glorious day as a partygoer."

"Are there a lot of book parties now?" asks Bret Easton Ellis. "I guess I don't get invited anymore." "Where are these young people going?" wonders A. M. Homes, whose last book party was described as a "rock-star party" by the literary warrior (Homes says she wouldn't know; she was hiding in the corner the whole night). "Book parties are quieter than ever. And I have no sense that film people are around." Others beg to differ. "I was at this party for Alex Garland's book, *The Beach*, a book so hip the *Trainspotting* guys bought the rights," says Kernochan. "And I saw this guy out in the hall with his cell phone. He walks in, snaps his phone shut, and says, 'I just sold the film rights to my book.'"

Has the scene really changed significantly? Or is it just an ordinary sign of generational upheaval, the changing of the guard? The patriarch of book parties, George Plimpton, gives the idea some thought. "I think there are many more parties than there used to be, and they are slightly different." He pauses to think again. "There are an awful lot of young people." Notice any film scouts? "I wouldn't know a film scout if you pointed one out. The funny thing is you

see the person who's written the book and then you see a whole raft of people you have never seen before. The other odd thing is they give them in these bars, which costs money. Who pays?"

patata ▶ 266

PARTY LINES: TOM BROKAW, KATHARINE GRAHAM, AND LESLEY STAHL, RIGHT, CELEBRATE GRAHAM'S MEMOIR "PERSONAL HISTORY"; HELENA CHRISTENSEN AND NAOMI CAMPBELL KICK OFF KATE MOSS'S "KATE." BELOW: JON STEWART, RIGHT, FETES A PUBLISHER'S NEW IMPRINT AT CHAOS, BOTTOM RIGHT.

