

the art of giving a party

useful ideas and formulas by
Claudio Goulart

THE ART OF GIVING A PARTY
Useful ideas and formulas

to my guests

**they gave me their
presence**

**first edition
Amsterdam
MM**

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Introduction

This book contains descriptions of some of the parties I gave myself or helped to organize during the last twenty years. I want to place my experience of those parties outside the private sphere in which most of them took place and share it with the reader. It will give me great satisfaction if the reader will use those ideas and practical suggestions when organizing his or her own parties.

The main criteria for this selection was that the parties could be easily reproduced, adaptable to various occasions or used as a reference for other ideas. A few examples are more specific or require more effort and resources. The descriptions are meant to give a general impression and the order in which the essential elements were organized. I also included illustrations, lists of basic materials and sometimes suggestions for catering.

By definition a party has to be an exceptional event. It is an opportunity to experience people in less conventional manner than in other social situations we come across in our daily lives. It allows us to leave aside formalities and to be more spontaneous when communicating with other people. A party asks for excess, for pleasures like dancing or tasting delicious food and drinks. And among other things it creates or reaffirms bonds between people.

It is said that what makes a party is the right combination of people. It is my view that if there is such a thing, as the right combination of people, even this can not ensure the success of a party. People will behave differently according to circumstances. When conditions are right they will find each other. A good host will pay attention to basic elements of a party in order to create those conditions: a comfortable arrangement of the space, delicious food and drinks nicely displayed, some special ornaments, pre-selected music, special lighting... Those are simple things that can be done with little effort. One way or another it is important to have a clear statement that something exceptional is happening.

I enjoy going to parties but I will give one myself only a few times a year. Most of my parties are organized within a short time. I like improvisation. The main reason I give a party is to be with people I like, but also I have a lot of pleasure with the preparations - probably as much as with the party itself. I like to create situations which may stimulate the guests and then see what happens. Often I choose a theme related to something I want to express. And so most of my parties are like mirrors or snap shots of what is going on in my life at that moment.

Finally, with this book I want to exemplify that with simple ideas and solutions it is possible to create something personal, something special and to have fun. I hope this book will be inspirational for the reader to carry out his or her own ideas for parties.

NOITES CARIOCAS *

Gigi Vasconcelos garden party

On a trip to Rio de Janeiro I stayed for a while at the house of my friends Gigi and Gilberto. Their apartment had a beautiful tropical garden with a round swimming pool. Gigi decided to give a party and I helped with the setting. The focal point was a round table floating in the swimming pool. The table was set with a white lace table cloth, a candle stick, a glass of red wine, a fork, a knife, and a white plate with pumpkin sweets in the shape of hearts.

Like a raft sailing calm waters, the table moved across the swimming pool in the evening breeze, at times unreachable in the center, at other times reaching the edges, when a guest taking advantage of the moment unloaded its delicious cargo. The raft soon became the object of curious maneuvers: someone almost loosing equilibrium when trying to grab a sweet heart yet just a bit too far, another one trying to cut a piece of a heart causing the floating structure almost to sink or someone else remaining with an empty glass in his hands as the raft moved on. It was at such moments that the metaphor became most evident.

Materials: All materials were found in the house. The table was an average bamboo garden table made into a raft by having attached to its feet pieces of Styrofoam (leftovers of some house appliance packaging).

The pumpkin hearts are easy to find in Brazil and were bought at a local bakery. Any other kind of heart-shaped delicacy will do as long as it is soft and easy to eat with the hands.

Noites Cariocas (Rio Nights) is the theme of a well known Brazilian popular song. Carioca - native or inhabitant of Rio de Janeiro, belonging to or relative to Rio de Janeiro or its inhabitants.



A MAD TEA PARTY

Flavio Pons birthday party

Flavio occasionally enjoys going to parties but would never give one himself, not even on his birthday. However, long ago, after some pressure from my side he agreed to have a tea party for his birthday. The idea came from Alice's Mad Tea Party and I proposed we use materials and objects he collects in large quantity for his work to make the strangest tea sets for the party. The house we lived in was small, long, but not wide. To accommodate the guests comfortably the solution was to have a very l o n g table starting at the front room and ending at the kitchen door at the back, covered with a very l o n g white table cloth. The tea sets were quite absurd, made with a mixture of objects sometimes suggesting characters, at other times witty or awkward situations. For instance a tea set on top of an old typewriter with the cup and the plate *moving* when it was typed on, or a designer set with food colors inside the several cups to color the tea as it was poured,

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or the tea set for the tragic soldier who had to d up because at that place the table was going through a door and there was no space for a chair and with his metal cup on top of an open book veiled by the image of a brick wall. And so on until at one end of the table tea cups surrounded a plate with hashish and instead of chairs there were cushions on the floor. To confuse the notion of space and time the front door was locked and the guests had to go up to the attic, between piles of things, into a room and finally through the hole in the floor and d

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into the tea room. The first view from above the hole was an "aerial view" of the l o n g table and when downstairs to reach the other side of the table the guest had to go all the way a

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u the house.

Hanging on wall was a large drawing of a clock without hands. I was wearing a classic vest over a white shirt, a black fur tail on the back of my trousers, and to comment on the illusion I had on a thin, gold pair of spectacles without lenses.



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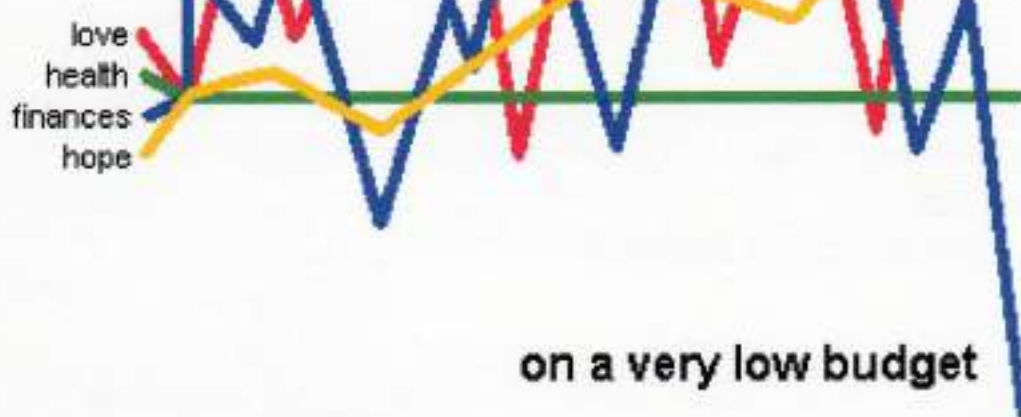
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A cocktail party



I had just moved into my new studio with a birthday approaching - two good reasons to invite my friends over to celebrate. But at that time I was living on very little money and could not afford a party as I think it ought to be: with abundance of food and drinks. So I decided to give a cocktail party. The studio was practically empty and to create some atmosphere I put oversized graphs on the walls, made of colored adhesive tapes. The graphs illustrated how my "newly opened office" was doing (see illustration above).

For alcoholic drinks I served only Martini cocktails. Martinis are not really a popular drink in The Netherlands. However, there was an unexpected variety from which to choose - dry on the rocks, sweet with a cherry, mixed, shaken, upside-down, you name it - and that in itself was quite appealing.

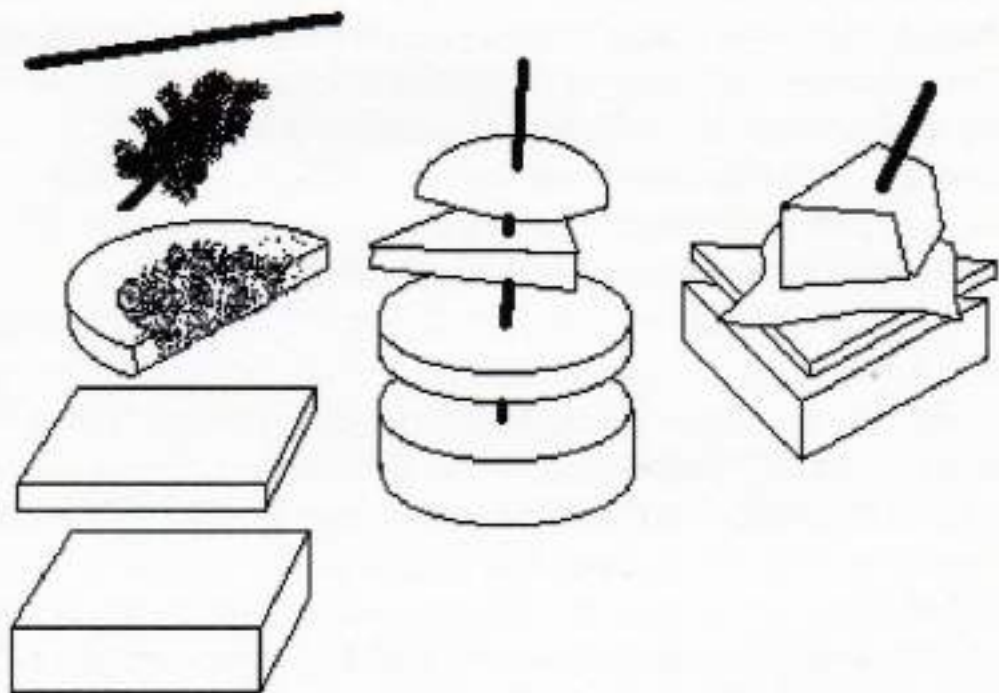
The touch of refinement was in the food: a wide variety of canapés, each so delicately small that it did not exceed one and a half centimeter across. Each canapé was made of three or four ingredients, for instance toast, spread, a thin vegetable slice, topped by a piece of a parsley leaf.

Once in a while I walked around with a tray of canapés and I was quite amused by the sight of someone choosing from the different kinds and then trying to lift it from the tray.

Drinks - Martini dry, red, orange juice, oranges, lemons, olives, cherries, lots of ice - for basics. A good cocktail recipe book will help. For non alcoholics only mineral water.

Materials: adhesive tapes in different colors if you like a simple and not expensive solution like "the office look". If you want to try something else for decoration just keep in mind that such an economical cocktail party requires, for the sake of contrast, the suggestion of formality or sophistication.

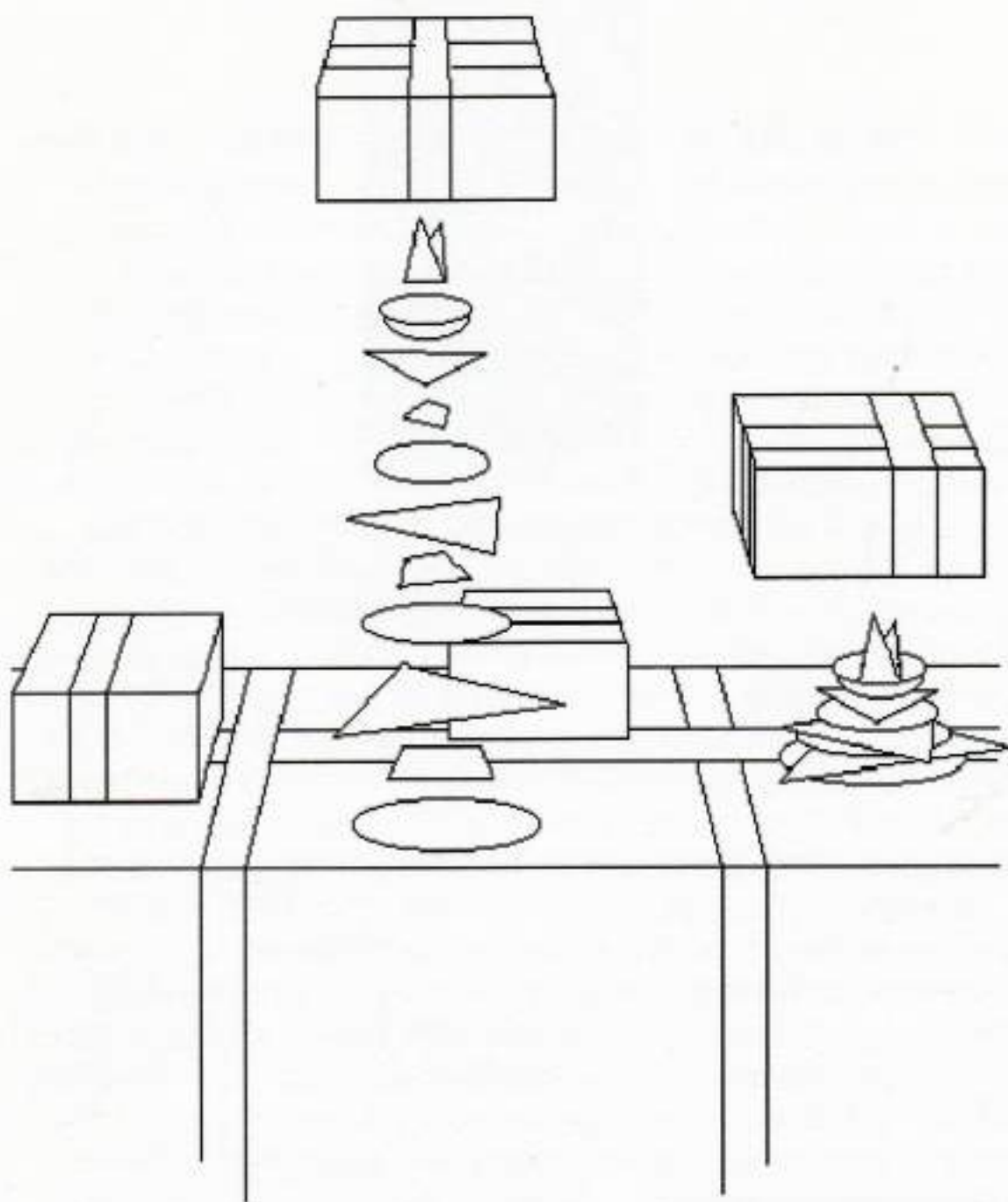
Canapés : toasted thin bread slices, very thin vegetable slices (cucumbers, red beets, etc), smoked salmon, ham, butter, spreads, mayonnaise, cherry tomato, onion, fresh garlic, fresh basil, parsley, etc - for basics. Cut the bread into different shapes, never wider than **1,5 cm**. Try different combinations taking notice that someone will experience the taste in one bite, so in that case appearance is more important.





a
CHRISTMAS
present

A Christmas dinner has become such a conventional party that it is not difficult to host one with a degree of success. Just follow the usual format and since on that evening there is not much else to do, the guests will be glad to have somewhere to go. Having said that I also think it is possible to do something a bit more original. I find some of the traditional elements of Christmas celebrations visually appealing and having significance. Take for instance the use of **light** and **shiny ornaments** with the idea of illuminating the darkest time of the year or to give presents just to please people you like. Once I gave a Christmas eve dinner literally in the form of a present. The **dinner table** was wrapped with semi-transparent paper, **illuminated from inside** and tied with a large ribbon. On this large "**present**" there were other presents, actually wrapped boxes with no bottoms. When the guests sat at the table and lifted up the boxes they found a set of plates. And at the end of each course, when a plate was taken away, there was a 'conversation piece' to be found: a printed image, a flat object or a written thought. Nearby, Christmas **ornaments** hung by threads from the ceiling appeared to float in front of a large black paper silhouette in the form of a Christmas tree.



Materials for the table: wide semi-transparent paper, wrapping papers, ribbons, cardboard boxes (same as number of guests), lamp, candles, Christmas ornaments, and flat 'conversation pieces'. Place the lamp under the table. Wrap the table with semi-transparent paper and add decorations. Cover the 'conversation pieces' with wrapping paper and hide them between the dishes. That will give a more exquisite appearance to each set. Cover the sets with the bottomless boxes.

*

New Year's Eve at from and places we

I rather like New Year's many people stop at the for something good. I however, the planning of night - people move never know when or show up. A dinner party



places we came are going to.

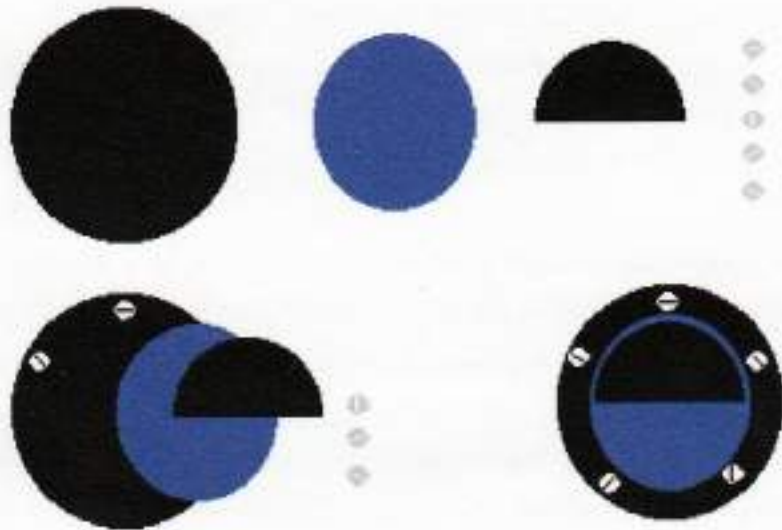
Eve because so same time to wish find difficult, a party on that around so you how many will is a good option

because it will commit the guests. With the idea that the change of year takes place somewhere every hour, I made my studio into the "ball room" of a cruise ship sailing to far away places during that night. A few props implied the ship: on the walls there were round windows made of paper (portholes) with a view of the horizon at sea, a small stage with a white sail as backdrop for slide projections, a long dinner table, the dance floor marked with a circle painted white. I asked some of the guests to prepare exotic dishes from where they came from or to were we were "going to" that night. The result was an extensive dinner for twelve persons. After midnight other guests arrived for the ball. At first I played only music to dance together. I gave each person a ball book to sign and then later I redistributed. Not all guests knew each other and to encourage contact I ask them to invite for a dance the person who's name was in there the ball book. I had a few slides from different



places projected on the sail. Each image announced a new set of music (jazz, Caribbean, Egyptian, Brazilian, disco, etc). On the stage some guests gave short performances. I did not request specific dress code, but it is a good idea to do so. Some guests, on their own initiative, dressed up in costume: a few sailors, a prostitute, an Egyptian enchanting a serpent, an elegant lady on a cruise, myself as a captain.

Menu: international, exotic. If you ask guests to bring special dishes make sure to coordinate the menu, otherwise it may turn out difficult to digest. **Materials:** a white bed sheet and a cord for the sail, slide projector, a few slides from holiday trips, music selected in sections according to the slides, *ball books, black, white and blue papers. Cut a black paper circle, a smaller blue circle, an even smaller black half-circle, five very small white circles, then paste them up in layers and you have a paper porthole. Make as many as you need and place them at the same height on the walls of the party room and you have a ship.



A PARTY TO REMEMBER

all the birthday parties I forgot.

At one of my birthday parties I told my guests about all the other birthdays I could remember. I wanted to rescue forgotten memories and to share those memories with my guests so that they would get to know a bit more about me.

The preparations took a couple of days. I made a list of the birthdays I remembered and went through my photographs, letters, cards, souvenir boxes, selecting a few items to show to my guests. We are always reconstructing our memories based on present experience and feelings and the same event can be told in many ways. So I did not find it important to tell things in detail. Some of my birthdays I simply could not remember and the memories of some others seemed to blend together. Finally I organized the items I had selected in chronological order inside a small archive.

Besides a table with food and drinks there were no other decorations. I even removed pictures from the walls to avoid any visual distraction. I wanted a bare room to be filled with what I was about to tell. The party was already going on for a while when I asked the guests to sit down facing a small table where I placed the archive. I told them the memories of my birthdays and showed the pictures and objects.

The first memory actually was from an old photograph on my family album probably taken at my third birthday. I did not have the photograph with me at that time so I had to describe it: the guests, the cake, the table decorations and myself - a small boy at the center facing the camera and wearing a green velvet suit (it is a black and white photograph but I clearly remembered the color of the suit). I tried to re-enact the expression on the boy's face who seemed not to be fully aware of the scene around him.

I went on into my recollections and as I came about more recent birthdays some of the guests joined in with their own memories of those parties.



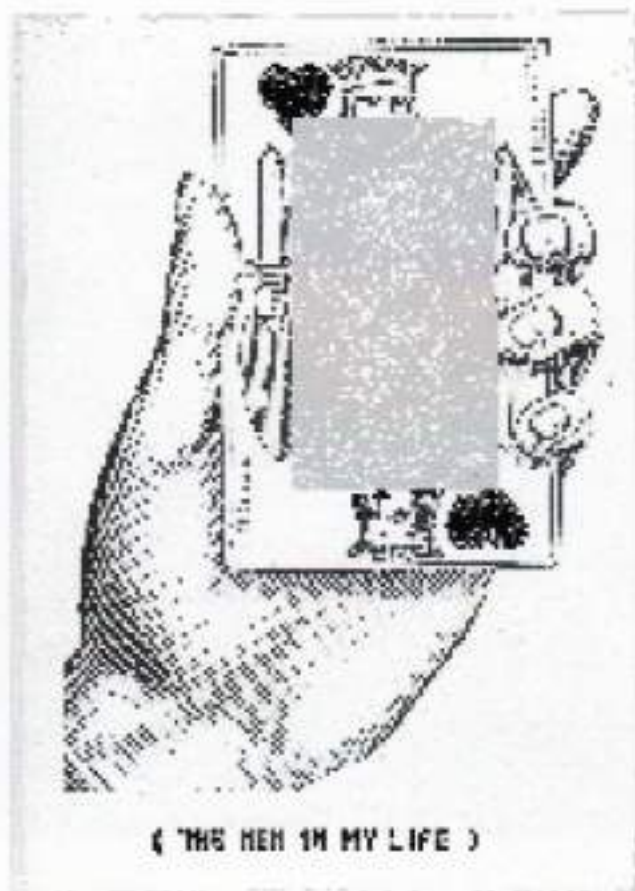
Materials: photographs and objects related to your birthdays or birthday parties and



the indispensable birthday cake.

The idea of having two parties for my birthday - one for men only in the evening and the other for only women the next afternoon - came from memories of my early teens. For a couple of years I was the youngest of a group of teenagers from my neighborhood. Because of that I was quite intimate not only with the boys but also with the girls of the group who saw me more as a friend than as an object of desire. Now, many years later, it is still my experience that even in the more emancipated circles, men or women behave differently when among themselves than when mixed together. The reasons for that are not relevant here, but I like the kind of complicity and

THE MEN IN MY LIFE



intimacy that may develop in such "segregated" social gatherings.

Setting the mood: It is very important to send separate invitations to each group. Otherwise some guests may decide to crash the other party - if that happens send them away! The basic idea is to create "gender oriented environments" with which the guests can identify, even if only for fun.

I chose to explore the most obvious cliches. To start with, the invitations had different designs, were strictly personal and had plastic mirrors on the cover.

THE WOMEN IN MY LIFE



For **the Men in My Life** I served only beer in bottles in more than twenty different varieties, sandwiches and all sorts of nuts. On a round table there were a roulette wheel to gamble with and a box of small cigars. On the walls there were series of photocopy blow-ups of male movie stars and a TV screen in closed circuit with a video camera showing live portraits of the guests. I was wearing a racing car overall.



Some of the male guests, from left to right:
Raul, Tod, (myself), Sebastian, Theo, David, Johan,
Danniel, David, Flavio, Lennart, and Bart.

For **the Women in My Life** I served different sorts of tea, sweets and cakes. The tea set was a mixture of the best pieces from my fifties porcelain collection. The weather forecast announced rain and I planned the party indoors, with the same male pictures on the walls and live video portraits of the women. But that afternoon the sun was shining and the party was moved to the garden. I was wearing 'gaucho' traditional clothes.



Some of the female guests, from left to right:
Annie, Alma, Judith, Christina, Martha, Els, Hanny,
Monique, Maria, Rose, Michal, Françoise, and Nina.

Christmas with Nativity scene.

Many of us celebrate Christmas but do not think much about its traditional elements. Take for instance the Nativity scene which is so central to the event but became just another decorative element. Most people I know do not even include a Nativity scene in their Christmas decorations. My view is that if we choose to repeat the same rituals again and again we might as well reflect upon those rituals in order better to enjoy that which we have chosen.

At a Christmas Eve dinner at the house of Maya Gordon I asked the guests to perform a Nativity scene for a group photograph. Due to the absence of a baby among the guests I composed the scene more as a suggestion than a literal representation, and so for props, I used only the presents I brought.

The evening after I went to a Christmas dinner at the house of David Stein, who always displays exuberant Christmas decorations but no Nativity as a matter of principle. One of my presents was a print of a Nativity scene which I used as an example when I asked the guests to perform it. This time I let each one choose a role and improvise props.

Materials: a Polaroid camera is preferable so that people can see immediately what they did, pieces of fabrics and some objects. If you wish to go all the way rent a set of costumes. For the first Nativity performance I actually brought presents to be used specifically as props, such as a needle work pattern of the Madonna and Child.

* * *



a **SURPRISE** party present from friends.

On my birthday, even when I do not feel like organizing a party, I prepare food and drinks because some friends always come over. On the morning of one of those birthdays I was trying to phone when I notice some action in the courtyard. I went to the window and saw my friends



Maya, Marc (who I was just calling) and Flavio attempting to hide a bunch of 43 heart-shaped red balloons behind a wall. They wanted to tie the balloons with very long ribbons to a metal bar and let them float in front of my window, on the first floor, but they were having problems with the wind. That scene made me so happy!



Since I caught them by surprise they changed the original plan and brought the balloons (and a birthday cake) into my house. When inside the house they released the balloons.



That evening we had a party in a forest of hearts.

Ingredients: treasure your friends.

A Dinner

WITH MYSELF AS THE WAITER.

WHEN I GIVE A PARTY I LIKE TO BE WITH EACH OF MY GUESTS AT LEAST FOR A LITTLE WHILE. ON THE OTHER HAND I AM THE KIND OF HOST WHO LIKES MOVING AROUND CHECKING IF EVERYTHING IS ALL RIGHT. ESPECIALLY AT DINNER PARTIES I DO NOT FIND EASY IT TO COMBINE BOTH THINGS.

ALSO I WANT MY GUESTS TO ENJOY EACH OTHER. BUT IF THERE ARE MORE THAN 7 OR 8 GUESTS, SOME OF THEM WILL NOT HAVE MUCH CHANCE TO TALK TO EACH OTHER ACROSS THE TABLE. WITH ALL THAT IN MIND I USED THE CHAIRS AND TABLES I HAVE IN MY HOUSE TO TURN THE LIVING ROOM INTO A RESTAURANT FOR 12 GUESTS. I MARKED THE SEATS AT THE TABLES IN ORDER TO AVOID THE TENDENCY PEOPLE HAVE TO SIT WITH THOSE WHO THEY KNOW MORE CLOSELY. I DRESSED AS A WAITER, HAD A SMALL TABLE ON WHEELS TO FACILITATE SERVING THE DINNER AND MOST IMPORTANT, HAD A SMALL BENCH TO SIT WHEREVER I PLEASED. MOST TABLES WERE SMALL AND CLOSE ENOUGH TOGETHER TO ALLOW GUESTS TO TALK FROM SEPARATE TABLES (DID YOU SEE THE FILM?). AFTER THE STARTERS IT WAS TIME FOR THE HIGHLIGHT. BEFORE SERVING THE MAIN COURSE I ASKED EVERYONE TO STAND AND MOVE THE TABLES TO GIVEN POSITIONS. ALL AT ONCE, QUITE UNEXPECTEDLY, THERE IT WAS; ONE LONG DINNER TABLE. I TOOK CARE THAT TABLES WHICH STOOD FURTHER APART WERE PLACED SIDE BY SIDE SO THAT EVERYONE HAD NEW NEIGHBORS. WITH THE DESSERTS I PLANNED TO RESHUFFLE A FEW TABLES, BUT BY THEN PEOPLE GOT THE IDEA AND CHANGED PLACES BY THEMSELVES.

MATERIALS: HAND WRITTEN INVITATIONS, CHAIRS AND ALL SORTS OF TABLES (TV TABLE, COMPUTER TABLE, KITCHEN TABLE, ETC.) PREFERABLY OF SMALL SIZE AND THE MORE DIFFERENT THE BETTER. THE PLACE SETTINGS CAN BE AS VARIED.

INSTEAD OF A TABLE CLOTH I USED PAPER MATS I MADE MYSELF - THE KIND USED IN POPULAR RESTAURANTS. IN THIS WAY ONE COULD SEE THE ECCENTRIC COLLECTION OF TABLES. THE RESTAURANT ACCESSORIES ARE INDISPENSABLE: A MENU, PAPER NAPKINS, SALT AND PEPPER, CANDLES AND SMALL VASES WITH FLOWERS.

MENU: OF YOUR CHOICE, WITH AT LEAST THREE COURSES TO ALLOW THE CHANGE OF TABLES.

fig. 1

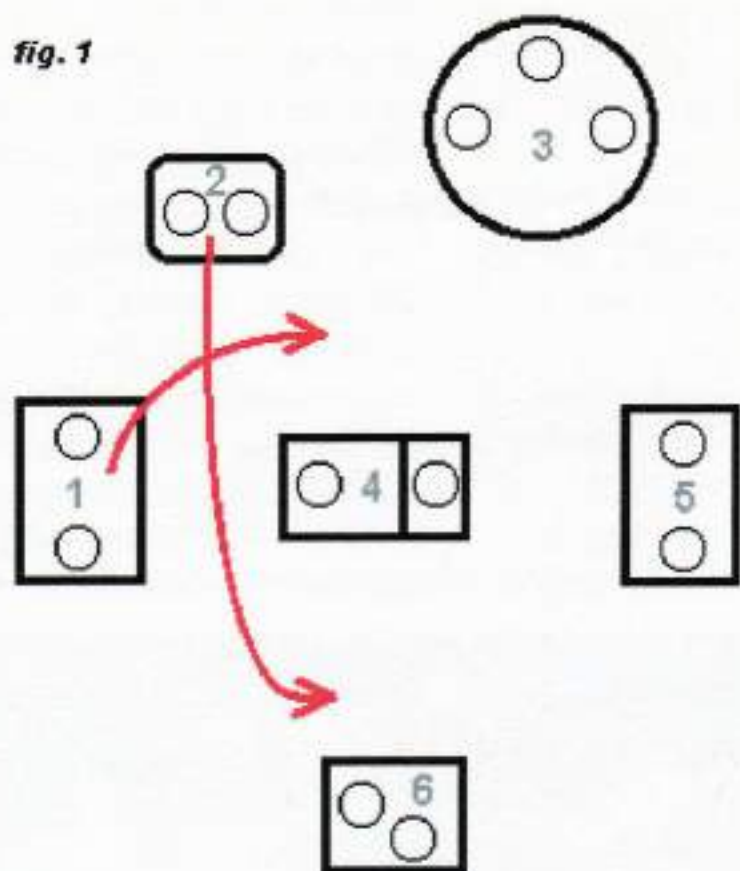


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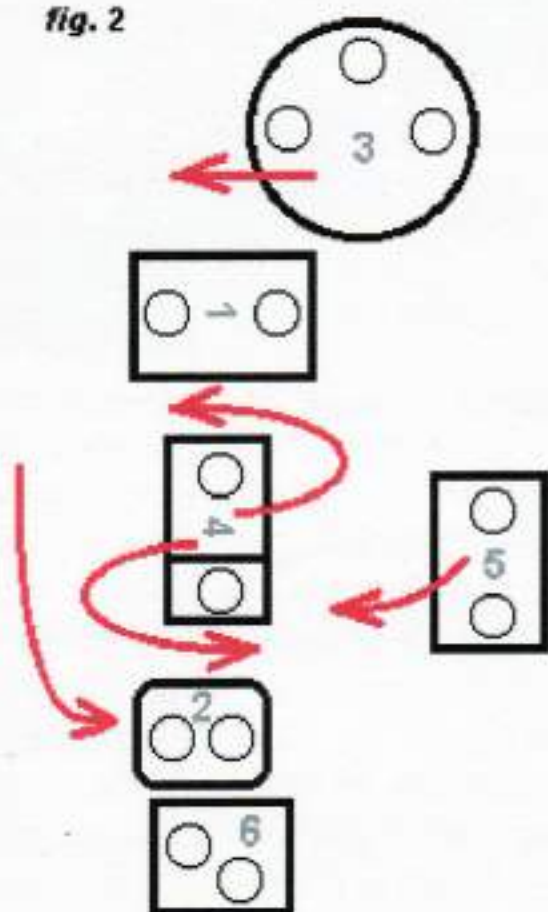
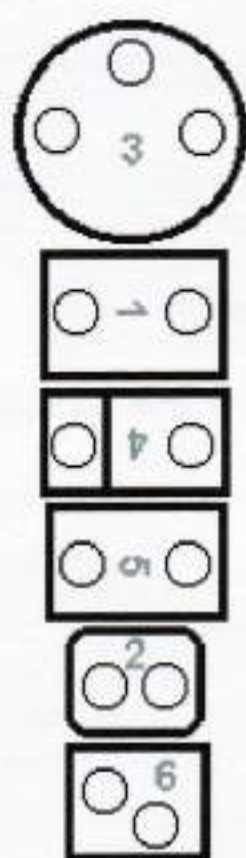


fig. 3



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Peter celebrated his **50th birthday** with a party for some 120 guests and I helped with the organization. The party took place at a small 17th century synagogue at the Uilenburgerstraat, now used for social events. Its main room is beautiful and somehow intimate.

That gave us the idea for a provincial afternoon birthday **party with the traditional cup of coffee and cake** and everybody seated in a circle - so typical of The Netherlands. The idea was carried out, but not so literally. **Following the text Peter wrote for the invitation... becoming 50, how to enjoy life...**



most of the decorations related to time as a general theme: round clocks, round cakes decorated with clock designs, flower-like arrangements made of photocopies of old pocket watches, several round tables covered with satin in strong colors, a large box wrapped as a present for storage of the presents (envelops with donations for the Aids Fund) and a large portrait of Peter made of photo copy blow-ups of other portraits of himself since childhood until recently.





For a party of that size you need a certain order in which all the elements will come together - from the way the space is organized to allow the guests to move freely, to a sense of performance in which there is a flow of things to happen planned or unexpected. **The guests** were asked to **arrive** at a certain time, sometime after the congratulations, the cup of **coffee and** the various **cakes**, there was **suddenly the sound of bells coming from several clocks** placed around the room. **The champagne** was served and **Peter proposed a toast**. Some friends brought a surprise birthday cake in the form of two oversized slices with a candle on top and everybody sung. The party went on with **canapés and drinks**. Two musicians played piano and violin, at first light classic, then as the party unfolded jazzy, gypsy, etc. and chanson with a harmonica. Some of the guests surprised us with **performances**. Catering: coffee, lemon pie, cranberry crumble pie, walnut pie, strawberry-pear caramel pie, cherry almond pie and chocolate hazelnut cake; and later, champagne, white and red wine, soft drinks, oud jenever, canapés (lox canapé with dill, blinis with caviar, mini quiche Lorraine, tuna filled pastry shells, Turkish lamb meat balls, Indonesian meatballs, Brazilian shrimp dumplings.



NEDERLAND LUILEKKERLAND

*Un petit tour dans la cuisine
contemporaine hollandaise*

Fool's Paradise snack bar



A snack bar contains the essence of contemporary Dutch cuisine. It has a bit of everything from everywhere, from chocolate bars to tropical delicacies, not to mention the traditional French fries. It also tells a lot about the way we generally like our food to be: inexpensive, simple and uniform in taste, easy to prepare, able to be eaten fast and with an exotic touch - a reminiscence of glorious colonial past and a result of recent cosmopolitan taste acquired during holidays. The snack-bar popularity also attests to other new aspects of life in The Netherlands, such as longer working hours or attendance of opera performances which always start too early.

For various reasons I rarely eat fast-food and a visit to a snack bar is for me a special event. And so for my latest birthday party I decided to make a snack bar. I improvised a counter with a pile of suitcases and a plate of glass on top. It was located in front of the kitchen door so that I could easily process the orders. On the counter there was a small oven to warm up the snacks, samples of the drinks available (cans only) stacked on a turning plate with other snack bar essentials displayed around it - cans of olives and nuts, candies, cigarettes, paper napkins, etc. The list of snacks one could order and also popular expressions related to eating and drinking were written with chalk on small black boards hanging on the wall behind. Final touches were a display with a nineteen fifties collection of badges from food brands and music coming from a small radio.

Menu: Coffee, many brands of soft drinks and beer (cans only). Most of the food was home made: new herring with chopped onions, huzaren salad sandwich, cheese and sausage in small blocks, fried meat balls, fried chicken legs, cod fish dumpling, fried bananas, fried cassava, loempias pancake filled with chopped liver or with salmon spread, pita filled with eggplant spread, dried prunes filled with coconut, chocolate or raspberry ice cream cones and a birthday cake (if I remember it all). Notice that, as in a snack bar, the food you serve must be able to be eaten with your hands.

THE BALL

Contrary to the other parties I included in this book, The Ball was a public one. It was part of a large exhibition * in which artists presented works in reaction to historical buildings in Amsterdam. The Ball took place on the stage of the Stadsschouwburg (the municipal theater) and as the title suggests it was a dance party. My idea was to use the nineteenth century theater as a backdrop, combining its machinery with video and computer technology, all in order to give a visual impression of developments of western theater from ancient Greece until now.

The auditorium was illuminated but closed to the public and it held a large video screen in the form of a painter easel. A circle of monitors hanging above the stage marked the dance floor.



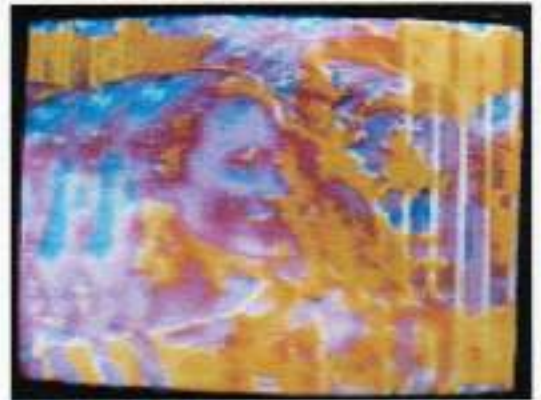
The public, surrounded by that video scenery, were actually the performers of this piece. A camera man filmed the "actors" as they danced and simultaneously their moving portraits appeared on the video screens as "masks" - that effect achieved by means of computer graphics.

Other images on the screens also related to the world of theater. For instance, loops made of photocopies pasted on turning cylinders seemed like endless façades of known theater buildings, endless landscapes (a reference of the earlier moving backdrops), or a chorus line of "clones" of

a known actor. The music played by the disc-jockey Eddy de Clercq had, most of the time, thematic sections interacting with the video scenery. For example, the moment when all the lights of the theater were switched off for a minute causing some commotion. Finally, multiplied on the screens a hand holding a match gradually lit the candles of chandelier at the sound of Madama Butterfly aria "Un bel di, vedremo" - at first sung by Callas and fading into Malcom Maclaren's disco version. At other times short actions appeared on the screens: a close-up of a blindfolded face unfolding a colored ribbon (a mask) always revealing another color behind (another mask behind). Eventually a word or a sentence flashed on the screens. One of these sentences I found on an engraving of the former Stadsschouburg which burned down:

**DE WERELDT IS EEN SPEELTONEEL,
ELCK SPEELT ZYN ROL EN KRYGT ZYN DEEL.**

("The world is a stage, each plays his role and gets his part".)



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into the tea room. The first view from the hole up was an
"aerial view" of the l o n g table and when downstairs to
reach the other
side of the table the guest had to go all the way a

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u the house.

On a wall hung a large drawing of a clock without pointers.
Over a white shirt I was wearing a classic vest, a black fur tail
on the back of my trousers and to comment on the illusion
I had on a gold thin pair of spectacles without lenses.