

Spirit Now! London

The Changing Face of Private Members' Clubs

by CASSIUS MATTHIAS

The idea of the members' club isn't new. It's been an essential aspect of urban culture since the dawn of the Enlightenment.

From the female-dominant salons of early eighteenth-century France to T.H. Huxley's X Club of mid-nineteenth century England and the heyday of mid- to late-twentieth century watering holes defined by Mark Birley's Annabel's, Anthony Mackintosh's The Groucho Club, and Nick Jones's Soho House, it's in the nature of like-minded people to gravitate and come together. Usually what's need is a catalyst.

London hosts around sixty private members' clubs all of which are fixtures made of bricks and mortar. Richard Caring's new incarnation of Annabel's on Berkeley Square is arguably the epitome of that model. But what about the clubs with-out walls—where the concept of what a club can be is more fluid, creative, and non-regimented?

One such club is Spirit Now! London. I met with its founder, Marie-Laure de Clermont-Tonnerre, at her home to find out about why she chose London as her base and how she came to create one of the most dynamic—and exclusive—clubs in London. Her unique take on the members' club is born of an awareness of twenty-first century cultural forces on the one hand, and on the other, a healthy nostalgia for the salons of the past.

Marie-Laure is accustomed to moving and adapting to different countries. Born in Monte Carlo, she studied in Paris then lived in Geneva for eleven years before Paris again and now she's settled in London. "I had a father who always pushed me to give the best since he thought that talent is only 10% and perseverance and effort 90% of success." Although she was literary by nature and was accepted into Hypokhâgne, Marie-Laure's father encouraged her to study law, which she did from the age of 16. Then, at 21, she went to Sciences Po Paris. "It's a very general education where people go before becoming poli-



Marie-Laure de Clermont-Tonnerre. Photo: Julio Piatti

ticians in France," she says. "It teaches you *how* to think more than *what* to think; how to apprehend the geopolitical issues that we are going through."

Marie-Laure's working life began at film-maker Fabienne Servan-Schreiber's production company Cinétuvé. "She's very seductive, interesting, and powerful, but always very respectful of the people who work for her," Marie-Laure recalls. "I learned a lot being by her side." Marie-Laure's job was to choose ideas for the company's dramas, scout young writing talent, and work on their scripts. Eventually, however, she had to quit France and move to Geneva when her Swiss-French husband was posted there for work. "It was a good choice," she laughs, "because I'm still married after twenty years!"

In Switzerland Marie-Laure began working for a small event called Festival Tout Ecran, which in 2017 became the Geneva International Film Festival. But she missed working with writers and nurturing their talents. "It's very nice to

find people before they're stars," she says, "because after they don't need you. I love when you can help someone who has talent." Working with the Festival gave Marie-Laure the opportunity to fill this creative void. "Because the Festival was small I could do a lot for them," she says. "The programming was broad and experimental in the way they thought about films made for cinema in some countries and how they could be licensed for TV in others, and vice versa."

After two years, having developed the festival's film market and becoming its communications director, Marie-Laure was elected to the board of Geneva's Musée d'art et d'histoire. "They wanted new blood," she says, "someone who could help them make the museum more alive." This election heralded her move into the visual arts. Also, more significantly, it started her relationship with international art institutions and foundations that are now intricately interconnected with her members' club, Spirit Now! London.

Fifteen years before the birth of Spirit Now! London, Marie-Laure arranged for some friends to see the Musée d'art et d'histoire's collection of work by eighteenth-century pastel pioneer Jean-Etienne Liotard. "They brought out the Liotards from the basement and put them in the light," she remembers. "It was marvellous because it was only for us!" This idea of sharing beautiful culture privately with friends became central to the concept of Spirit Now!

Today, a mother of two, Marie-Laure organises over twenty events a year. She is fired by her imagination. "I like to do things with passion," she admits. "If not, I don't want to do them." This determination has also enabled her to build the Foundation Clermont-Tonnerre, established in 2007.

"It was my husband's idea, and he asked me to help him," she explains, "and its mission is to give access to education to young students

and underprivileged children. “Every year,” Marie-Laure explains, “we give scholarships to an engineering school in Switzerland, L’Ecole polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne.” The involvement doesn’t end there. “We follow the student,” she continues, “and if they return to their country with a good job, it is their turn to help and pay for a new student. It’s a link. We also ask our friends if they can take them on as interns.”

Since 2008 the Fondation Clermont-Tonnerre has also given a scholarship to the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris after Agnès B gathered a small group of patrons around her to support young students attending the school.

Because Marie-Laure’s husband is passionate about science and astrophysics, their Foundation has recently given a scholarship for a student to be on the team of Professor Idan Segev, a neuroscientist who is part of the Brain Circle, on whose London committee Marie-Laure sits. There’s also a Brain Circle centre in Jerusalem. “It is a centre of excellence,” she says, “that only takes the best students in the world to work with professors of neuroscience who are attempting to model the human brain onto a computer.”

The access to education that Fondation Clermont-Tonnerre provides also extends to the Astroparticle and Cosmology (APC) laboratory in Paris. “They’re working on the new cosmic messengers, the gravitational waves, that help them to read the Universe in a different way,” Marie-Laure says. “The Fondation Clermont-Tonnerre will give to support a thesis in the Physics of the Universe.”

After five years working in Paris as a journalist—and writing three books on natural health and personalised medicine—Marie-Laure returned to the arts when she was elected to the Board of the Friends of the Palais de Tokyo and the Tokyo Art Club. “I really liked the director of the Palais de Tokyo, Jean de Loisy,” she says, “and I wanted to follow his choices and his vision.”

Before long Marie-Laure was part of the life of this “very avant-garde” art centre. One of the first events she organised was on the subject of perfume. “Scent is like art because it moves you from inside,” she says. “It immediately gets into your emotions—like art.” She also arranged for Touria El Glaoui, director of the Contemporary African Art Fair in London, to give a presentation with British-based collector Robert Devereux at the Tokyo Art Club—the space in the Palais de Tokyo dedicated to major patrons.

When Spirit Now! London began five years ago, Jean de Loisy agreed to be its first guest speaker. He gave a talk, “What is a great artist today?” at the Institut Français in South Kensington. Since then, Marie-Laure has maintained a close relationship between Spirit Now! and Palais du Tokyo.

Why Spirit Now! now? “Sometimes you have to take the plunge, you don’t have time to think too much, like a start-up,” Marie-Laure says. “When I arrived in London there was another person who was on the board of the Friends of the Palais du Tokyo. She’d already settled in London for six months and so I said, ‘Let’s do Spirit Now!’”

Marie-Laure finds inspiration in the moment. “There’s nothing more important,” she says, “than to have these deep and interesting thoughts that are shared through a book or through film or through some personality like Ralph Rugoff [artistic director of the 58th Venice Biennale] or Jean de Loisy. I began Spirit Now! because it was a way for me to discover London in its best way, through its best people.”

The name of her club reflects this idea. “It’s not in 10 years’ time. I had to do it now,” she says. “I knew I was ready for it.” London’s cultural scene proved to be a fertile ground for her ideas. She and her husband thought it was a more dynamic place than Paris. “I think that when you have an idea and want to do something in London,” she says, “you have all the energy around to make it happen.”

The set up of the club was originally very informal. “I was just doing events,” Marie-Laure says. But the people coming to her events started

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asking questions. “Is it a club?” They asked. “Can we participate? Can we be linked to this?” And so things evolved. “The third person to speak was a marvellous artist, Jean-Michel Othoniel, who was doing the new fountain in the garden of the Château de Versailles. Spirit Now! began like that, little by little.”

Spirit Now! has become well established on the London cultural scene. Because the talks are never recorded each event is uniquely special. “I always wanted to find the best speakers. In the beginning I had to activate my network,” Marie-Laure says. She remains highly selective about who’s invited to speak. “I never pay a speaker since it’s not a commercial club, it’s a community of passionate patrons, actors in the cultural world. We have a precious moment together—unique and stimulating.”

Spirit Now! isn’t confined to the visual arts either. “I try and open it up also to literature, physics, science. The people in my club are big collectors—we have different nationalities from all over the world. When you’re a collector, you cannot be narrow-minded. You’re also influenced by music, dance, opera, philosophy. Everything’s linked.”

Marie-Laure ensures her members are fully engaged in the events. “My group is a strong one now and we’re also helping and are active in the world. For instance, for the exhibition in Paris of Tomás Saraceno at the Palais du Tokyo, I asked my members if they wanted to commission the work

before the show; so some of them bought pieces that helped the exhibition exist in the first place.”

Spirit Now! London members will support French artist Hicham Berrada’s exhibition at the Hayward Gallery’s Project Room in July. Marie-Laure met Berrada ten years ago when he was at the École des Beaux Arts. She now feels proud to help him and describes it as a win-win situation that ties in with her ongoing desire to help young, emerging artists and institutions that rely on the generosity of philanthropists. “That’s the way I want my club to be,” she says.

All the members are somehow linked to Marie-Laure. “They are friends, or friends of friends,” she says, and has known some for decades. Many of her friends are also patrons or board members of some of the world’s most prestigious institutions—such as Singapore’s National Gallery, and in London the Serpentine Gallery and the Royal Academy.

Maintaining quality is vital. “I don’t invite or search for new members now,” Marie-Laure says. “My members’ friends ask if they can come, and then I decide. Usually, if it’s a friend of a member, they have the profile to be part of our community. I have to say,” she adds, “some of the women in my club were the biggest people in finance or on the boards of large international companies. Interesting women—that’s what I wanted.”

Another body that’s proven enormously important to Marie-Laure is the Fondation Cartier and its exclusive circle, Vivre en Couleurs. “Vivre en Couleurs,” she explains, “is a group of Fondation Ambassadors that Alain-Dominique Perrin, the founder, chose from among his friends and relationships; you cannot be an artist and you cannot be an art dealer to become a member.”

The mission of the Vivre en Couleurs is to make the Fondation Cartier shine. Marie-Laure feels a particular connection to this mission. “I love the choices of [General Director] Hervé Chandès and Alain-Dominique Perrin,” she says, “and it makes me very happy to bring Spirit Now! and the Fondation Cartier together when I can.”

Marie-Laure sees her club growing from 70 to around 100 members as she wants the group to remain small. “It was never meant to be a money-making venture,” she tells me. “Pretty much everyone is involved because they want to be a part of it. The speakers know why they come and with whom they will talk. It’s also very important to maintain a link between France and England,” she adds. “So I try to invite big institutions in France—BNF, Fondation Cartier, Palais de Tokyo, Musée Picasso—to come and talk in front of a very international crowd like Spirit Now!”

What is Spirit Now! unique? “There’re many clubs in London,” Marie-Laure says, “but I think the quality of my members and my events make the difference. We’re an active group supporting institutions and artists we love, we also have a special relationship with our speakers. I’m nostalgic for the French Salon Littéraire of Madame de Sévigné,” she adds. “The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries give me inspiration for my club.”