Inside the Art Production Fund’s Beatnik-Inspired Up Beat Benefit

By Maria Ward | March 13, 2018

In New York, a trip through history is as quick as a cab uptown to the Seagram Building—the 38-story Ludwig Mies van der Rohe modernist marvel on Park Avenue where the Art Production Fund staged its Up Beat Benefit on Monday night. Inspired by the Beatnik movement, guests were transported to another time period—not least of all thanks to the jazz quartet in turtlenecks, sunglasses, and berets, who signaled the start of dinner at the former Four Seasons restaurant next door.

Over cocktails, the scene was tailored not to the Beat Generation, but rather, to the two contemporary art world honorees of the hour: Jeff Koons and Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn. In one corner, for instance, a balloon artist crafted miniature dogs in a nod to Koons’s large-scale installations; across the room sat an impossibly decadent feast of fresh fruit, vegetables, and pastries fashioned after Koons’s Celebration series, which made for excellent Instagram fodder. Revelers delighted in capturing every visual, while others, celebratory glass of Dom Pérignon bubbly in hand, took turns at the temporary tattoo booth where “Beatniks” in striped tees pressed on impermanent ink by artist Nina Chanel Abney.

All of the available designs proved a perfect complement to the “off-beat” dress code, which brought out an array of wonderfully wacky interpretations of black-tie. “This is an incredibly creative group of people, and we intentionally give an ambiguous theme so that they are inspired to think outside of the box and go in a direction they may not have otherwise,” said Art Production Fund executive director Casey Fremont, who, for her part, was resplendent in a sequined Gucci dress in neon pink. “We don’t want to make it too much like a costume party, but we want them to experience Beatnik culture set in an upbeat 2018 way.”
Fitting, then, that the location itself should be steeped in culture. When it went up in 1958, the Seagram Building became the gold standard for modern architecture. One year later, it was home to the then just-opened Four Seasons restaurant. Designed by the American architect Philip Johnson, the Four Seasons swiftly garnered a loyal celebrity clientele that, on any day of the week, could include Brooke Astor and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. This was also where President Kennedy would host his 45th birthday dinner in 1962—just before Marilyn Monroe serenaded him with “Happy Birthday, Mr. President” at Madison Square Garden a few blocks south. Fast forward to 2014, its landmark status in place, and the address became the center of a highly publicized debacle over what would become the eventual removal of a sprawling 19-foot-by-20-foot Pablo Picasso stage curtain—one of the most sizable Picasso pieces in the United States—that had hung on the wall since the restaurant opened.

The sense of history could still be felt when guests made their way through the corridor where the work was once displayed, to take their seats for dinner in the adjacent Pool Room. Many took a moment to marvel at the floor-to-ceiling windows draped in their usual metal beaded curtains—the perfect backdrop for an elegant three-course meal accompanied by a surprise rendition of “Moon River,” performed by a pair of cellists that included Rohatyn’s son, Alexander. The dinner speeches, too, were high on nostalgia, as many shared tales of the New York art scene during a similarly now-departed era. The icing on top (aside from the some $700,000 raised) was the Koons-inspired slices of cake served for dessert.