

FINANCIAL TIMES

How to spend it

SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

THE BONUS ISSUE

GROSS ENCOUNTERS

Swat teams, rifle-toting horsemen, Amazonian abductors... It's all in the name of fun at a Sandra Gross party, reports

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Illustration by
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This is a story about Sandra Gross, a woman who likes to party. Or, more accurately, likes to stage parties for people who like to party – the sort of parties that most of us imagine we'd like to be invited to; wild parties in extraordinary locations at which bizarre things happen and which people talk about not just the following day, but for weeks, months, even years after the event.

A few words of warning, however. First, enlisting Gross's services is not merely a matter of picking up the telephone and saying you want to hold a whale of a bash for 500 of your closest friends – she chooses you, not vice versa. Second, although you might consider yourself to be something of a party animal, Gross's shindigs might lead you to redefine your concept of "wild". Third, there's the expense to consider. As they used to say about a Rolls-Royce: "If you have to ask, you probably can't afford it."

With all of this in mind, it might come as a surprise to learn that it is the apparently innocuous world of wristwatches that led me to experience my first party organised by Gross's Dubai-based company The Key. Breitling, maker of aviation chronometers and other high-end timepieces, has the rare distinction of having hosted not just one, but several of The Key's parties – and it is probably fair to say that the Breitling party held each year at the Baselworld watch show is now considered something of a highlight of the fortnight's proceedings.

Invitations are, of course, as rare as gold dust and the theme and location of each event is strictly confidential. The only things guests know beforehand are the date and time when they need to arrive at a pre-ordained pick-up point in order to be transported into what always proves to be a world far removed from chronographs and minute repeaters.

The first one I attended was a mammoth production with themes that combined the

movies *Fight Club* and *Eyes Wide Shut*, complete with wrestlers being thrown over the ropes into the crowd. Just for good measure, there was a Bacchanalian feast in the middle before the evening climaxed with men and women being taken off to windowless ante-rooms by masked, PVC-clad characters of their opposite sex, tied to comfortable chairs, caressed with feathers and provocatively refreshed with vodka shots administered from syringes. That's what happened to us chaps, anyway. My last recollection is seeing an internationally renowned jewellery store owner dressed in a toga and being flirted with by a transsexual in a swan costume.

This year's event involved being picked up from Basel's modern Messeplatz exhibition square in 1950s buses covered in sand and driven by men in Arab garb. They whisked us to what appeared to be the edge of a gravel extraction plant where we were greeted by wild-looking galloping horsemen armed with carbine rifles: the entire area had been turned into an extraordinarily realistic interpretation of a Bedouin encampment.

Other parties include one located more than a kilometre inside an unfinished road tunnel – Gross had transformed it into a sci-fi world where drinks were served from oxygen packs by "aliens" and trapeze artists performed in a dome more than 50ft above our heads. Innocent guests were abducted by an Amazon tribe, carried off into the bowels of the earth and left to witness a century-old "artificial insemination" ritual combined with a four-hour science-fiction/rock spectacular. I told you they were different.

Gross, a statuesque brunette, began organising parties back in the 1980s when there was a sudden boom in the corporate events business in her native Germany. Her big break came in the mid-1990s when she was asked by BMW to stage a party for a group of European kings. "BMW wanted to build more brand enthusiasm and deepen its relationship with this elite circle – people who not only possess everything but who have seen and experienced just about everything, too," explains Gross.

"Despite this, we still managed to convince them to assemble at an exclusive location – the whereabouts of which I can't reveal

– and all I can say is that they left inspired and enthusiastic. They were forbidden from bringing their wives and we implied that they would be able to escape their obligations and have some much sought-after freedom."

Gross claims to spend more than two years devising concepts for some events. Much of this time is taken up by sourcing a jaw-dropping venue and obtaining permission to use it. "As far as I am concerned, the location is the key to success. I have scouts in all of the cities where I regularly stage events and they are permanently feeding me suggestions. I initially visit new cities on my own, and then return with a team of technicians and creative people. I also chat to taxi drivers, go to the best and worst clubs, ask the people... The important thing is to remain completely open, although some of the conversion works and preparations require enormous amounts of effort. Closing down a road tunnel for a fortnight and transforming it into an amazing party location is not so easy – it took two years of negotiations with the Swiss highway authorities to be allowed to do it."

One aspect of Gross's parties that has always struck me as especially extraordinary, however, is the model looks of all of the staff who wait, dance, serve and usher. Where, exactly, does she find such perfect creatures? "The fact is many of the people who work for me have 'real' professions and work at the parties during their holiday time because they have such fun. There are doctors, lawyers, high-earning city people – all sorts. But I also have to work with doctors and lawyers in other ways because, for example, if I devise a theme where the guests are going to be attacked by a Swat team, I can't do it without knowing all the potential psychological, health and legal risks."

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that although some potential clients have the money and the urge to throw the mother of all parties, when it actually comes down to the nitty-gritty, they opt out. Gross nods: "That has happened in some cases. The client needs to be as creative in his or her field as I am in mine in order to understand what is going on. The encounter unleashes enormous energy." ♦

The Key, www.thekey.cc; info@thekey.cc.



GENERAZIONE SUDAFRICA

Il Sudafrica. Raccontato da 20 artisti locali, senza stereotipi inevitabilmente riconducibili - per gli occidentali - al pre, durante e post apartheid. «È davvero possibile non cadere nella trappola dei cliché sulle razze, il colonialismo, le lotte di classe, la povertà e l'Aids in un Paese dove ancora la violenza è all'ordine del giorno?», si chiede anche Kendell Geers, nel suo contributo. Una risposta viene da "Za - Giovane Arte del Sudafrica", collettiva ideata da Lorenzo Fusi e ospitata al palazzo delle Papesse di Siena, che mette in mostra le opere di 20 under 35 selezionate da cinque connazionali già affermati: Marlene Dumas, Kendell Geers, Bernie Searle, Minnette Vári e Sue Williamson. Opere che non convergono in un unico tema che rispecchiano le molte facce di parte di un continente e di una nuova generazione dibattuti tra un passato fin troppo facile lettura e l'aspirazione al suo superamento, tra la diaspora degli artisti che da tempo hanno abbandonato le guerre civili e quel provin-



smo critico che è tipico di un Paese che ha la coscienza sporca di sangue. Ma che, senza la promozione dell'arte, rischia di non promuovere nemmeno la propria libertà. Dal 2 febbraio al 4 maggio, catalogo Silvana Editoriale, www.papesse.org.



Vivere è un'arte

Per "People Magazine" è la donna più famosa in Cina. Yue Sai Kan, sino-americana, è un personaggio paragonabile a Oprah Winfrey. Autrice di cinque bestseller sul buon vivere, ex imprenditrice di cosmetici, ha aperto a Shanghai un megastore di 5 mila metri dedicati all'home living. Lo spazio si trova al Golden Bridge Plaza al 15 di West Beijing Road e propone il meglio di Occidente e Oriente: vini francesi, lino italiano, lacche e sete. Dopo l'infanzia a Hong Kong è emigrata a New York, dove nei Settanta conduceva un programma in inglese e mandarino su Manhattan Cable. Nel 1975 è diventata producer televisiva. Ha lavorato anche per la tv pubblica cinese intervistando Gore Vidal, Hillary Clinton e Jacques Chirac. Ora si dedica al design: "L'art de vivre in Cina ha un potenziale enorme". Come non crederle? E. A.

L'avatar pinguino

Che sia un affare d'oro non ci sono dubbi. Sono più di 10 milioni i bambini, tra i sei e i 12 anni iscritti a Club Penguin, sito di social network che la Disney ha acquistato lo scorso anno per 350 milioni di dollari da tre ragazzi canadesi (capeggiati dall'intraprendente Lane Merrifield): un My Space per piccoli, un mondo virtuale dentro cui i bambini si muovono attraverso i loro pinguini avatar. Che girano di chat room in chat room (le conversazioni sono monitorate per evitare contatti pericolosi) e che, quando sono stanchi, si vanno a riposare nel loro igloo. I piccoli pinguini hanno mille diversivi. Possono arredare il loro igloo personalizzandolo con mobili di ogni tipo, fare surf o lavorare in pizzeria, ma anche cimentarsi in attività più impegnate e scrivere per il giornale locale. Attenzione però: per diventare soci di Club Penguin non bisogna sborsare neanche un centesimo, ma per fare shopping e lavorare è necessario convincere i genitori a pagare un piccolo abbonamento (poco più di cinque dollari al mese). Finora ci sono già riusciti più di 700 mila utenti.

PARTY STYLE STANLEY KUBRICK

Whenever you go to an “Eyes Wide Shut” party mingled with “Fight Club” elements you should be prepared to extraordinary amusement: You may find yourself at a bacchanal feast surrounded by a group of women wearing black paint and caressing you with a fan of feathers. Or you may take a ride with beduines to a camp in the desert. These are some examples for the phantasmagoric parties arranged by the world's most creative event manageress Sandra Gross, a German lady from Munich.

The preparation period for such a “party spectacle” may in fact last longer than those for a film shooting and take between 5 months and 2 years. “Everything depends on how fast we can get the necessary authorisations and on the quality of the location”, was what Sandra Gross explained to the Financial Times.

For the party organized on behalf of Breitling, a clock and chronometer producer, she even managed to obtain the permission of the Swiss Motorway Authorities to close a tunnel outside the city of Basel. Inside the tunnel she created a science fiction-like scenography: cocktails were served by alien creatures and above the guest's heads trapeze artists and thightrope walkers twirled around the tunnel.

To make it brief: being invited to a party arranged by Miss Gross is a privilege few get to experience. Access to Sandra Gross' homepage is given only if the visitor is in possession of a password. Try yourself by going to www.thekey.cc and you will find yourself with nothing happening.



COPIA PER L'ESTERO

Saviano incontra Donnie Brasco

MAFIA & POLITICA