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Sam's Chance and other essays about art

Mary Lum

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

SAM'S CHANCE AND OTHER ESSAYS ABOUT ART
By
Mary M. Lum

Date: May 15, 1981
I, Mary M. Lum, prefer to be contacted each time a request for reproduction is made. I can be reached at the following address.

Mary M. Lum

Date: 6/23/81
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INTRODUCTION

A few months ago a fellow MFA student and I were having a conversation about our theses. My colleague gave me a lengthy description of his, which was to be a long and learned paper of great social significance, involving much research and documentation. At the end of his discourse he said, condescendingly, "...and what's your thesis about? Just about your work or something?"

Well, yes, I admitted. My fledgling thesis was just about my work...or something. When I began the written portion of the thesis project I knew more about what it was not going to be, than what I would actually end up with. It would not be historical in nature, nor would it include a lot of technical information. It would reveal no academic conclusions and it would not be a direct commentary about my paintings.

The following series of essays reflects some important things that I have observed and learned over the past several years.

I believe that deep and important issues should be approached with sufficient good humor to keep us from regarding our mutable opinions as eternal truths. While not ignoring the real tragedy in the world, I feel it important to concentrate on hope...I believe that joy is more fun than sadness and no further from the elusive reality of things. ...it should be possible to be profound without being boring.

---

Many of the essays that were written for this series ended up in the wastebasket. They tried too hard to be humorous and cynical and all-encompassing at the same time. They were too much.

If a connection need be made between this writing and my paintings, it is in the way each piece of work is put together. In a painting I select details from a vast range of sources and isolate them so that they have a life apart from their original environment. In the essays I select a topic which is broad, then elaborate on the slightest portion of it. In both the paintings and the essays we always see things up close; there is never a moment when the camera fades back to take in a whole scene.

If the essays seem to vary in tone from one to the next, this too, is a reflection of what is found in my paintings. As long as a balance is achieved in each piece (painting or essay) and in the body of work as a whole, the shifts in tone are not only justifiable, but necessary.

Since I feel that one's work suffers, ultimately, if over-described, this introduction stops here. I hope that the reader enjoys these essays, which are about my work...or something.
HOW I WORK - AN EXPLANATION OF Sorts

How I work.
Mostly I don't.

My studio has huge windows high above the intersection of Fitzhugh Street and West Main. I spend a significant portion of my day watching people get on and off the bus there, watching the senior citizens with their walkers traverse the block, watching the boss and secretary in a cubicle on the third floor of the bank across the street, watching people go in and come out of Edward's Pub.

Truly remarkable things have happened outside these windows. For example: one day a great length of some gossamer substance got caught by a lamppost below. There was a slight breeze, the result being that two strands floated delicately outside my open window, sometimes close enough to touch, sometimes the ends disappearing far into the distance. The filament wavered above buildings, over flagpoles, and occasionally dipped dangerously close to traffic. From time to time the shorter strand wound its way around the longer and the breeze untangled them. It was fascinating. Remarkable. I guess you had to have been there.
Lots of unremarkable things happen as well, out there. Planes fly over Rush Rhees Library. Dry snow is sucked into the windowsill like sand through an hourglass. Parking cars hit parked cars. The hands on the bank clock move.

My work is rooted in the process of collecting. I do precious little invention. I only rediscover things. I collect images from various and sundry sources. Among them:

- Japanese prints
- Foreign magazines
- Newspaper photographs
- Tacky postcards
- Any picture book before 1960
- Fashion advertising
- Trashy novels
- Travel brochures

Also I find and save scraps of paper, such as:

- Bus tickets
- Grocery slips
- Receipts from anything
- Anything printed
- Used envelopes/stamps
- Old love letters
- Wrapping paper
- Calendar pages
- Take-a-number tabs
- Opera programs

I find these things in:

- Trash barrels
- Restaurants
- Chinatown
- The street
- Friends' apartments
- My mailbox
- My files

Once I found a mink coat in a dumpster. I recognized it as one which belonged to a friend of mine, who happened to be a rather classy hooker (and given to throwing her coats in dumpsters) so I gave it back.

Often I'll be examining something on the sidewalk, colored rubber bands caught in a steel grate, for example, and I'll look up to find that everyone who is waiting for the bus or for the light to change is staring at me.
If you are walking along and come upon a bunch of pigeons pecking at the ground, make an upward sweeping motion with both your arms and they'll fly away. Of course they come right back.

I read a great deal. I read The New York Times and the local papers every day. I read the weekly neighborhood papers. I read a lot of magazines. I read trashy novels and teen-age novels and collections of short stories and essays. I am partial to the shorter forms. In novels we are often forced to know more than we want to know.

I read non-fiction sometimes, but mostly it puts me to sleep.

Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so. After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns, we ourselves flash and yearn, and moreover my mother told me as a boy (repeatingly) 'Ever to confess you're bored means you have no inner resources.' I conclude now I have no inner resources, because I am heavy bored. Peoples bore me, literature bores me, especially great literature, Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes as bad as achilles, who loves people and valiant art, which bores me. And the tranquil hills, & gin, look like a drag and somehow a dog has taken itself & its tail considerably away into mountains or sea or sky, leaving behind: me, wag."

---

I try to translate slices of life, as I understand them, into paintings and collages. I take the things collected from various and sundry sources (see above) and arrange them in a fashion which may or may not be unusual. If I'm using imagery from a Japanese print, I mix it up, take only the smallest details, or some aspect of the composition. The viewer sees that which I have deemed essential to see. Time is short. We only have time to appreciate details. Besides, if one seeks a panoramic view of things, it's like a novel. We come to know too much.

When I'm arranging bits of paper into a collage, I like to entertain the notion that the resulting composition resembles the way the scraps might be found in a trash barrel, or on a messy kitchen table.

On May 20th, 1976, the following items were on my kitchen table:

- 3 books
- 2 magazines
- 2 ashtrays
- 2 decks of cards
- 2 pencils
- 1 pair of scissors
- 1 salt shaker
- A bunch of torn paper
- 1 empty pack of cigarettes
- 2 empty matchbooks
- 1 Ann Arbor Rec. Dept. bulletin
- 1 Chronicle of Higher Education
- 1 candy jar, half full
- 2 dirty spoons
- 1 cup of coffee
- 1 bottle of saccharin

Our memory of something is as important as the aspects it presents to us at any one moment.

How I work.

Mostly I don't.

I spend a lot of time at the studio. The best hours are very early in the morning and all day Sunday.
It is quiet then, traffic below (and within) is light, no jackhammers or shouting schoolboys. I do most of my painting during these times. The reward for working all day Sunday is the Bobby Short Hour at four on the radio, on PBS. It reminds me of California.

I never believed the stories about how the quality of light is so different in California. Then I moved to Los Angeles. The light in California is so different. I am convinced that the clichés, "clear as day", "crystal clear", "clear as glass", and the "coast is clear" originated in California morning light.

Never have I been so sure of what the color orange is as when I saw a thousand square feet of orange desert flowers on a hillside in Hollywood. Even Josef Albers would have had to admit that that patch of land was orange.

The light in California is so intense that one constantly feels like a voyeur. There is no escape. Romance is out of the question. We see too much, even at night. Like novels and panoramic views, California light forces us to see too much.

I like to say that I do my "work" early in the morning and on the weekend. That way, when people catch me staring out the window, reading trash, having a two hour lunch break, or, God forbid, sleeping in the afternoon, I subvert guilt. In fact, I "work" (the physical act of painting) whenever I feel like it. Fortunately, I feel like it often. I manage to do a lot of "work".
There is nothing I would rather do than paint.
That's not quite right. Dorothy Parker once said, "I hate writing, I love having written." There are several thousand reasons not to work on a painting. For example:

there's not enough light
there's too much light
it's noisy in the studio
the floor is uneven

One can be:
in a bad mood
in a good mood
cold
hot
tired
hungry
broke

Or:
out of a certain color
broken palette knife
brushes falling apart
brushes wrong size
no turpentine

Also:
can't hear radio
radio too loud
only radio choices are opera or rock
phone ringing
someone at door
week crammed with social obligations

Or simply:
It's not a good day.

None of these things, of course, matter once work is begun. Maybe there is nothing I'd rather do than paint.

Sometimes I think I would rather write, give up paint-splattered Levis and toxic fumes to live the pristine (if otherwise unhealthy) life of a writer. You know writers. They sit in front of their typewriters in drafty,
poorly-lit garrets, chain-smoking and coughing constantly. They type all day (or night), then tear everything up and go out to drown in the sorrows of gin. Writers don't have to worry about lead poisoning or warped stretcher bars or anything archival.

For a brief moment I thought I'd like to be a photographer. After all, if I'm out to capture slices of life, what easier way is there than to snap away with a Nikon.

One of the principal characteristics of the civilized world has been our passion to describe to one another where we have traveled and what we have seen and dreamed.

Before photography this passion was realized through writing. It is the current rage for Ivy League institutions to bemoan the fact that their freshmen can't write. I say let's put the blame on George Eastman for making it so feasible for anyone to record their experiences on film. We no longer have to write to tell someone about Aunt Tillie's garden or the Grand Canyon, or how the window light fell on the grand piano at four in the afternoon. A picture is worth a thousand words. Is it?

Like novels, panoramas, and California light, photographs tend to tell us too much. A picture is worth a thousand words, but in most cases a hundred words would suffice.

3 John Cheever, "Why We Read," Parade (December 1980), p. 16.
How I work.

Mostly I don't.

I used to work very hard at being a window designer in Beverly Hills. Every Thursday for two years I dressed the mannequin or rearranged the furniture, in an effort to catch the eyes of Beautiful People. The mannequin was a six foot white plastic androgynous (interchangeable chests) Italian. Each week I put him/her into a different slice-of-life situation. One week she was a farm girl in a printed smock. The next week she was reclining, semi-nude, in a French deck chair on the Riviera. The following week she was he, and drunk, head on table, broken wine glasses all around. This was mildly entertaining but after two years I had to stop. The mannequin knew too much about me.

How do I work?


Mostly I don't.

Yet, "No one knows when I'm truly working. Least of all, myself."
A scene in the movie Manhattan takes place in the Museum of Modern Art. Most of the characters manage to babble inoffensively about the artwork. The conflict arises when Diane Keaton, during a pseudo-intellectual speech, pronounces "Van Gogh" (van-go) as "Van Gogh" (van-gück), therefore causing Woody Allen to think her obnoxious and affected.

Perhaps he was right in judging her by virtue of her mispronunciation. It is hard, though, to know how to pronounce words correctly, both in the arts and in general. Spelling is often no clue. In a country where Natchtoches, a city in Louisiana, is pronounced "Nack-i-tish", anything can happen. Every student in a Survey of Western Art course writes "ang" for Ingres at first, and most are too embarrassed to admit that it took weeks to figure out who the mysterious "ang" that the professor kept mentioning was. Steichen is quite a bit easier. We need only decide between "stike-un" and "sty-tshun". In the cases of Tchaikovsky and Tchelitchev, the names are much easier to pronounce than to spell. People who claim to be able to spell these names are the affected ones.
I do not take issue with people who have difficulty with tricky or foreign pronunciation. I do not claim to be William Safire's clone. I can take regional accents into account and even will tolerate several ways of saying "Van Gogh".

I object to people who say "sha-gale" for Chagall and "al-zir-ian" for alizarin. One only has to eavesdrop on conversations in any museum, gallery, or bookstore to hear readily pronounceable words being slaughtered. Some names/words that I've recently overheard:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Name/word</th>
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<td>Maholy-nah-gee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate Millet</td>
<td>Kate Mil-lay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claes Oldenburg</td>
<td>Clays Oldenburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willem DeKooning</td>
<td>William Day-Kooning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Debuffet</td>
<td>Do-buff-it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barishnikov</td>
<td>Mish-ni-kawf</td>
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<td>critique</td>
<td>critic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bauhaus</td>
<td>baw-house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylvia Plath</td>
<td>Sylvia Playth</td>
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My college friends and I used to deliberately mis-pronounce names and words in public to see what kind of reaction we could get. We'd walk into a record store and ask for the new Joan Bay-zee (Baez) album, or for something by Erik Say-tee (Satie). In the museum we'd talk loudly enough to be overheard about the "chair-oh-score-oh" (chiaroscuro) in a painting. At a restaurant we'd ask for some of those "cross-ants" (croissants) and a "cafay-oh-late" (café au lait).

Maybe everyone else plays this game too. Then, I suppose, the joke's on me.
Part II: Jargon

We no longer can look up to such people as Fry, Bell, Wolfflin, Panofsky, Greenberg and Rosenberg, who were responsible for defining the art of their times. Words like "painterly" and "significant form" and "art" were clearly defined in their days. Now we have Hilton Kramer, Robert Hughes, John Ashbery, and Calvin Tomkins; who all write interesting criticism, but do little to help us understand the pluralism of the contemporary art world. Maybe comprehension is an unrealistic goal.

Art students have an especially rough time interpreting criticism of their own work. Since this is all they're usually interested in, something should be done. Faculty and student speech is generally so laden with jargon and cliché that it's hard for a student to know which end is up; where anyone is coming from; if you get my drift.

In order to help students relate to what is said about their work during critiques, I have compiled a short list of common jargon phrases and interpretations of same in Plain Language. So that no one is confused, J = jargon, PL = plain language.

J: The spatial arrangement is unresolved.
PL: The composition stinks.

J: It's technically unsophisticated.
PL: Your craftsmanship is shoddy.

J: An interesting color exploration.
PL: No one in their right mind would put those colors together.
J: It has a certain primitive quality.
PL: The perspective is all wrong.
J: This is quite an individual response to the problem.
PL: You've completely missed the point of the assignment.
J: It's a very intellectual (or private) piece.
PL: What the hell is this thing?
J: This would be more effective as an environmental totality.
PL: Work bigger.
J: The alignment of the piece is not working with the wall space.
PL: The painting is crooked.
J: Would someone else like to share their experience with this work?
PL: I have no idea what to say, someone else talk.

**Part III: A Very Good Question**

During a recent painting critique, the guest critic asked each painter several routine questions. One of these questions was, "How long have you been painting?"

In my opinion, the honor of the day went to Yu-Ru, from Taiwan, who (from naiveté, not contrariness) answered his question with one of her own.

"What do you mean by painting?" she asked.
Painting is a relatively physical activity. Painters are more active in their work than computer programmers and bank tellers, but considerably less active than, say, blacksmiths or third basemen. Painters expend a lot of energy in related activities as well as in the actual practice of painting. For example, on any given day a painter might:

- haul lumber
- build stretchers
- stretch canvas
- mix paint
- carry an unwieldy portfolio or a large canvas in the wind
- rip up drawings or throw brushes in frustration
- climb several flights of stairs to a lonely, unheated garret

Then there is the veritable act of transferring paint from one place to another; from palette to paper, bucket to canvas, brush to wall. Painters who emulate Jackson Pollock are admittedly more physical than the little old ladies who take out their paint boxes every fourth Saturday. Painters who frantically complete several pigment-laden pieces each week burn more calories than the purist who draws a grid here, an X there and then spends a lot of time deciding if the work is finished. However, all painting (excluding some forms of conceptual art) is physical, since it requires motion of some sort, at some time, on the part of the artist.
Since painters, by virtue of their work, are physically active, it stands to reason that they must be in fairly good shape. Right? Perhaps even physically fit.

This reasoning got me into trouble a couple of years ago when I saw a poster advertising an Art Run. The event was being held to benefit a new museum. For running a mere ten kilometers, a little over six miles, the participants would be rewarded with a silk-screen printed t-shirt signed by David Hockney. Understand that this was on the West Coast, where if you don't jog, you don't exist. Specifically, it was in Los Angeles, where if you don't simply love David Hockney, you are a social misfit. I seriously doubt that anyone East could organize Soho artists to run any further than from Canal Plastics to Pearl Paint if the reward were solely a t-shirt. New York artists would probably want at least a signed, limited edition print.

Anyway, I examined the poster with great interest. Painters are physically fit, I reasoned. I am a painter. Therefore, I (by syllogistic logic) am physically fit. Besides, I was in my David Hockney "phase" so there was nothing I wanted more than that t-shirt. I completed an entry form and mailed it the same day. This was auspicious because, in Southern California, if one does two things on any one day, one is already considered very active.
During the week before the race I took it easy. I knew that I wasn't in good enough shape to win the race, so I opted for rest above conditioning. I did take several two-block jaunts from my apartment to the Seven-Eleven, but this had more to do with running out of milk than with merely running. I bought a pair of Nike shoes and several magazines about jogging. It all sounded easy enough. Load up on carbohydrates before the race, hit the "wall", don't run on your toes.

On the morning of the race I arrived at the Pasadena Rose Bowl confidently dressed in a ten-year-old Junior Olympic t-shirt, shorts and my new Nikes. Several hundred runners were stretching on the grass near the registration booth. I picked up my number, pinned it on very professionally, and did some vigorous calisthenics. All the runners seemed to be acquainted, and were saying things like "knock 'em dead" to each other. Most were wearing shirts from recent ten-kilometer races. It was at this point that I realized that this was no novice field; this wasn't a bunch of painters out to run for the sake of Art. I wondered if there were any other painters there at all. I considered being suddenly stricken with pneumonia or shin splints. Could I still have my David Hockney t-shirt if I withdrew because of illness? The carbohydrates that I had loaded up on the night before were making me feel sort of sick. I went to the starting line.
Before the first ten minutes of the run had passed, I thought I was going to drop dead. This was normal, according to the magazines. It takes a mile or so for your breathing to regulate. Knowing this, I kept going and was delighted to find that as I passed the one mile marker, I could breathe again. This won't be so bad, I thought.

After jogging several more miles I came upon a marker which said "two". There must be some mistake, I thought. I had to have come more than two miles. Two miles wasn't even halfway. I slowed to a halt and asked a spectator. Sure enough, I had just passed the two mile marker.

Throughout the third mile, as runners passed me on both sides, I formulated plans for cheating. This was before Rosie Ruiz and the Boston Marathon sham, so I had no precedent. Cheating, in this case, would have involved climbing to the top of the Rose Bowl Stadium, traveling across the bleachers, down to the field, and then finding a ground level way out the other side. This seemed to me even less desirable than trying to run three more miles.

The next three miles do not merit lengthy description. Suffice it to say that I had rarely experienced such misery in my lifetime. I began to hate California, and David Hockney, and the Nike Corporation. Each time I thought the run surely had to be over, I'd come to a
little marker that said otherwise. I kept looking behind me to see if I was last. What does this have to do with Art? I wondered. I'd much rather be climbing stairs to a lonely, unheated garret.

I stood around after the race (surprised that I could still stand), shoes off and Hockney t-shirt in hand. Another runner approached me as I was finishing off a second complimentary Perrier (remember, we're still in California—plain water just wouldn't do). "Nice race, eh?" he said.

"Nice?" I said.

"Yeah," he said. "Nice day, nice course, don't care much for the t-shirt, but altogether a nice run. You do this distance often?"

I thought for a minute.

"Yeah," I said, flexing a blistered toe. "I'm a painter. Have to keep in shape for my work, you know."

"Knock 'em dead," he said.
On Park Avenue there is a shop named Sweet Sharon's Pastries & Comedy. As the story is told, "Sharon," although quite sweet, cannot seem to make a living at stand-up comedy. This is understandable, considering that we are in Rochester—a city in which, in its slogan "It's Got It", the "it" is definitely not a sense of humor.

Sharon can, however, bake a knock-out Gateau Luteitia, so she makes ends meet by selling pastries. She names special creations after famous comedians, and I've heard that, if one buys enough, she occasionally cracks a smile.

Sharon's plight is not uncommon. Most proclaimed artists (writers, painters, actors, etc.) need to have a "real" job if they expect to pay their rent. In New York and Los Angeles practically all reasonably young persons who work at uncreative sorts of jobs are waiting for their "big break" in the arts. The waiters are actors; the store clerks are painters; and most of the taxi drivers carry a "spec" script around with them in case they happen to pick up a desperate producer. If Sharon were really serious about stand-up comedy, she would be in one of these cities, hanging around at Catch a Rising Star or the Improv., selling her pastries to agents and directors.
The dilemma, of course, has always been whether to look for a menial job having to do with one's profession or to take a totally unrelated menial job. Should a writer write advertising copy? Should a painter do paste-up? Should a screenwriter work as a grip? Or should one's job be totally separate from one's artistic calling? Is it better to be a waitress, or a janitor? Will there be more energy left for creativeness after a night of slinging hash rather than a day of typing scripts?

Sharon, the stand-up comic baker, seems to have the right idea, even though she is in the wrong city; the idea being to combine some popular commodity (pastries) with a less lucrative artistic desire (comedy). That way, she makes money and expresses herself concurrently.

I have thought of several combinations of business and art that might work for Sharon should the comedy-pastry shop fail. Each involves a common service and an artistic cause in need of support. For example:

- Sporty Sharon's Bowling Apparel & Handmade Paper
- Starchy Sharon's Fast Food and Fabric Dyeing
- Seismic Sharon's Earthquake Insurance & Graphic Design
- Sibilant Sharon's Speech Therapy & Pastel Portraits
- Svelte Sharon's Diets & Macrame
- Salacious Sharon's Swedish Massage & Book Illustration
- Sacred Sharon's Drive-In Chapel & Stained Glass
- Steamy Sharon's Public Bathhouse & Light Opera
- Solar Sharon's Recreational Vehicles & Screenplays
- Speedy Sharon's Pest Control & Landscape Painting
- Spotless Sharon's Dry Cleaning & Photography
- Sharp Sharon's Acupuncture & Free Verse
AW: I've been invited to the White House about five times. I think the greatest thing would be if they actually invited everybody to the White House every night.

RON: Have an open invitation?

AW: No, they'd just take 500 people a night. Everybody would just love this country because it's so thrilling to go there. It really is. I went to Ford's White House and Rockefeller's Vice President house. Rockefeller took us upstairs to see that great Max Ernst bed. Do you draw?

RON: I used to.

AW: It's easy to be an artist. I'll teach you how. Don't you want to be a famous painter? It's really easy.

RON: I imagine it might be if you know the right people.

(Andy Warhol and Ronald Reagan, Jr., in Interview Magazine, November 1980.)

The day will come, says Andy Warhol, when everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes. This could be cause for alarm. Does he mean that one day, at a pre-determined
time, virtually everyone, from Ann Landers to the midget
who rolls his suitcase down Wilshire Blvd. in L.A., will
stop whatever they are doing, bask in glory and recognition
for a quarter of an hour, then continue on with life as
usual? Or will we all, in the future, take fifteen minute
turns at being famous? This being the case, the morning
papers could print schedules for fame each day. They
might read like this:

**TODAY'S FAMOUS PERSONS**

| 8:30-8:45     | Mimsy W. Borogoves. 4'5" tall. Plays clarinet in the school band. Had a cold in 1978. |

and so on.

Does he mean that one day, those who have managed
to achieve fame will have only fifteen minutes until they
are no longer famous? Assuming that Andy Warhol achieved
fame in the mid-sixties, he has since taken up over 600,000
fifteen minute increments of notoriety. Doesn't he con-
sider this excessive?

Perhaps the point is that fame is hardly the cher-
ished and elusive institution that it once was. Fame
no longer creeps in on little cat's feet. Some people
are born famous, some achieve fame, and some have fame
thrust upon them. Whatever. Fame is running rampant
in American culture today.
This month, one of the easiest ways, it seems, to achieve instantaneous fame is to shoot, or threaten to shoot, President Reagan. However, we rarely hear anything about the person who, ten years ago, tried to assassinate Andy Warhol.

The word "fame" is from the Latin "fama" (report) which is related to the Greek "phemi" (speak). Fame connotes what is said about someone. It need not have to do with excellence, renown, or even accomplishment. It doesn't address itself to what is thought about someone, only what is said.

If the world's population was made up entirely of mutes, would fame cease to exist?

Bernard Malamud has said that "There is too much interest in the teller, not the tale." It seems to be true. The names of certain artists (writers and painters) are now recognized and accorded the same "star" status as movie stars, sports heroes, and rock musicians. Advances by publishing houses and movie corporations to certain authors are not unlikely to be a million dollars. Collectors are so desperate to buy the work of a few contemporary painters that gallery exhibits of their work are sold out before the shows open.

We do not yet have a free agent draft for artists, and no painter has to worry about being put on the twenty-one day disabled list. Galleries are not guilty of encouraging talented art school student "stars" to forsake their
educations and turn professional. The star system has, though, affected the way galleries and collectors regard artists. A recent article in Saturday Review lists the "blue-chip" dozen artists (akin, I suppose, to the players chosen to participate in the All-Star game) whose names can be counted on not to collapse with changing tastes. Reggie Jackson and Dave Winfield bring notoriety to the Yankees; Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg do the same for Castelli. And they don't even have to show up late for spring training.

This is all fine, as far as I'm concerned. Artists might as well have an equal share of the current "star" hysteria. Perhaps, in the future, we can support galleries which feature no work, only placards with artists' names on them.

Paintings themselves can become similar to trading cards for collectors and museums (i.e. "I'll trade you two Lichtensteins for one Rauschenberg").

Painters who have achieved fame can go out into the art school ghettos once a year in search of talented youth. Once such talent is recruited, agents and gallery owners can make sure that the youth executes work in his/her original style forever.

Famous artists can make money on the side by endorsing products on television. Imagine a suave Frank Stella looking into the camera, saying, "I can fit a
twenty-nine foot painting into the back of my Volkswagen Rabbit."

Imagine:

A candy bar named after Claes Oldenburg.
Larry Rivers eating Wheaties.
The Helen Frankenthaler line of sportswear.

Finally, Andy Warhol can be encouraged to open a school (maybe a correspondence course) devoted to teaching the sons of presidents how easy it is to be a famous painter.
I receive very little mail of any consequence. There have been points in my life when this has upset me enormously. For example, during undergraduate school I used to race expectantly home from class only to be disappointed by a box full of local advertising, or ROTC recruitment propaganda, or a newsletter of the Chinese Students Association (to which I did not belong and, since the letters were written in Chinese, could not figure out how to join). In those days, though, there usually was something between my fingers and the bottom of the mail slot.

Nowadays I check my mailbox faithfully, dust the cobwebs out occasionally, sometimes leave cookies and milk for the mailman. There is absolutely no fault with the way I treat my mailbox. And what do I get for my effort? Last week's mail was typical.

Monday-nothing
Tuesday-nothing
Wednesday-phone bill
Thursday-nothing
Friday-nothing
Saturday-nothing

I'm sure the box is bewitched. Maybe the mailman deposits my mail in the slot, only to have it fly out,
on its own accord, when his back is turned. The first thing I did when I moved to this city was to send away for anything (free catalogs, free samples, trial offers, etc.) I could find a form for. I had decided that my mailbox was going to be full, even if it was full of junk. I envisioned myself on every mailing list in the country and anxiously awaited the influx of trash.

Nothing. The garbage bags full of mail did not, and still have not, arrived.

Which brings me to the subject of this essay, and thank God, you're probably saying. You probably were having a hard time making a connection between ART and the state of my mailbox. Well, rest assured that there is no connection.

Except for the fascinating piece of mail I was so delighted to find in my box yesterday.

"Dear Reader," it started. I considered this a good omen, for I am a reader. Had the salutation been "Dear Nuclear Physicist," I might have been less thrilled.

"If you've ever stood before a work of art and wondered what it was all about, you are not alone. Much great art is not instantly accessible. And all great art is more meaningful to the trained eye than to the untutored observer."

Marvelous, I thought. I have been sort of confused, of late, about great works of art. Reading further, I
found that I could explore *The World of Van Gogh* for ten
days FREE, with no obligation to buy. I would learn:

* to recognize Van Gogh's style at a glance!
* to read his paintings for signs of inner turmoil!
* why his friendship with Paul Gauguin almost destroyed him!

After Van Gogh, I could explore the worlds of Leonardo
DaVinci, Rubens, Vermeer, Goya, Whistler, Manet, and count-
less others. Each world was available for only $14.95, plus shipping.

I have to admit, I was a little disappointed.
It's not that I mind learning about Van Gogh, but I was
hoping for explanations of a slightly more contemporary
nature. I want someone to explain the worlds of the art-
ists that I've been reading about recently in the papers.
For example:

Minneapolis artist Steve McKenzie has tossed away
his brushes and put on his roller skates to bring a new
dimension to abstract painting. To create his paintings,
McKenzie arranges small papers filled with brightly colored
paints around the edges of his canvas, then skates through
the paints onto the canvas. He works to the beat of rock
music with an audience cheering. "I'm pretty involved
in trying to compositionally arrange the canvas," he said.
(Democrat and Chronicle. Rochester, New York, Nov. 9,
1980.)
The Sonnabend Gallery, New York, exhibited "Twisted Chains (of Events)" by Barry LeVa. The piece consists of cardboard cylinders, glued together by the dozen, ovals and semi-ovals of homosote, chunks of grey wallboard and wood beams, cut into lengths of about eighteen inches. The cylinders dominate the scene, often combined with the ovals into structures suggesting coffee tables. The remaining elements, also glued into place, are strewn about the floor and the whole thing averages about three feet in height.

Some of Mr. LeVa's previous works include:

1968- a yellow floor scattered with bits of felt (this was on the cover of *Art Forum*)

1969- Mr. LeVa ran up and down the length of a gallery at Ohio State University battering himself bloody on the opposing walls. This brought him notice as a body artist.

Among other plans conceived (but not carried out) by the artist,

A plan to dig pits three feet wide and one hundred feet deep in some busy locale, like an office corridor.


Sixty-two year old Jo Roman, a New York artist, planned and carried out her suicide after learning she had cancer. The business of trying to make death into art was facilitated by her documentary on the Public Broadcasting Service, "Choosing Suicide." (*Susan Jacoby, New York Times*, July 3, 1980.)
At Castelli Graphics, Sandy Skoglund, a photographer, exhibited "The Revenge of the Goldfish". The exhibition consists of just one photograph, plus a full scale reconstruction (with variations) of the subject of the photograph: a turquoise-blue bedroom through which swims a school of giant ceramic goldfish. (Gene Thronton, New York Times, January 18, 1981.)

Elizabeth "Grandma" Layton, 71, had three options after the death of her son in 1977: psychoanalysis, suicide, or a college art class. She took up drawing on poster paper (29¢ a sheet at the local drugstore) with colored pencils and crayons (less than a dollar, same store). She has since won a prestigious prize at Kansas City's Nelson-Atkins Gallery of Art and is gaining steady recognition in mid-America. She calls her pictures obnoxious and won't sell any to her widening circle of admirers. Some art critics say she is a genius. (Democrat and Chronicle, Rochester, New York, March 8, 1981.)

In 1969 Jonathan Borofsky began a written count to infinity, and one day in 1972 the counting led to scribbling, and the scribbling, in turn led him back to painting. A good portion of his recent show at the Paula Cooper Gallery was drawn and painted on the gallery walls.

Black painted silhouettes of larger-than-life running figures spilled across one wall, and became three-dimensional in the form of a twelve-foot-tall, motorized wooden cut-out of a man raising and lowering a hammer. Faces and other
images from the artist's vivid dreams covered the other walls, along with written dream excerpts (some in mirror writing). Large, erratically shaped canvases dangled or hung aslant from the ceiling, and one perched on top of a ten-foot metal pipe. Viewers were invited to play Ping-Pong on a regulation-size table painted black and white, near which stood a four foot stack of paper, the result of Borofsky's decision some years ago to count from zero to infinity. A great diversity of objects and images hung or stood or lay about the room, including several hundred copies of an anonymous handwritten anti-littering statement that the artist had picked up on the boardwalk in Venice, California. Just before the opening, the artist's mother began picking these up, until someone told her that Borofsky wanted them underfoot.

The demand for Borofsky's work has been described by Paula Cooper as "hysterical". (Calvin Tompkins, The New Yorker. Dec. 22, 1980.)

Some entries in this year's Cooper Union Edible Architecture Competition were:

1. "The Chocolate Syndrome" by Gare Fernandez. Forms of chocolate ice cream in the shape of the towers of the Three Mile Island Nuclear Plant. The project was intended to melt down.

2. "The Tomb of the Unknown Doughboy" by Prentice & Chen, Ohlhausen, Architects. A round, classical temple with columns of marbled cupcakes and an architrave of gingerbread with an animal cracker frieze. Inside was a model of the Pillsbury Doughboy.

3. "Toast Modernism" by Mark Ace. Toast and tuna salad made into sets of small, stage-set-like facades. It consisted of "Wonderbread, which turned out to be non-structural, reinforced with Triscuits." The point of the project "was to investigate the ongoing dialectic between the bread and the tuna."

Can someone make these artists and creative works more meaningful to me for $14.95, plus shipping? Can my eye be trained to recognize "The Revenge of the Goldfish" at a glance? Will I ever be able to stand before "Toast Modernism" and not wonder what it is all about?
SAM'S CHANCE

We all know the story of Sam, the poor but honest art student who has to walk to school barefoot in the snow because he can afford neither shoes nor bus fare. His clothing is ragged but clean. After spending his days faithfully attending classes, he works all night cleaning brushes for rich students who pay him fifty cents a week. Though he is chronically hungry he accepts no charity, and often he shares what little food he has with small animals that roam the studio at night. Needless to say, Sam is an orphan.

Late one night, as he is diligently cleaning brushes, Sam hears a faint cry from the other end of the room. Upon investigation, he discovers a history student who has inadvertently wandered into the studio and been overcome by toxic fumes. The student hovers near death. Sam has not even one dime with which to call an ambulance (to search the sick student's pockets would be decidedly dishonest), so he wraps him in his own torn but clean jacket and carries him through a blizzard to the hospital. Barefoot.

After the student recovers, he and his parents are grateful to Sam and try to reward him with money and shoes. But Sam is proud. He refuses, saying he'll just
continue to clean brushes and paint whenever he collects enough palette scrapings to do so.

"Oh, are you a painter?" says the boy's father. "What a coincidence. I own the most successful gallery on 57th Street. Because you saved my son's life and are so virtuous, I'm going to give you a one-man show."

The show, of course, is an overwhelming success. Soon Sam finds himself rolling in dough. Instead of letting wealth corrupt his integrity, he remains humble and becomes a pillar of society. He buys shoes for anyone who cannot afford them, but continues to walk barefoot himself, lest he forget his leaner days.

* * *

The cost of going to art school, like everything else in our society, continues to rise. Tuition for one semester is now what ten years ago would have covered tuition, room, board, supplies, and treats for an entire year. Since we obviously have to pay our tuition, and it is self-defeating to skimp on art supplies, the only way in which we can logically cut back is to reduce our living expenses. Altering (downward) the quality of life is a sad task. Isn't everyone, after all, addicted to brie sandwiches and long distance phone calls?

I have no suggestions for reducing the phone bill other than to tie one's dialing finger to the kitchen table. I did, however, (in my undergraduate years)
Devise a plan to spend no money whatsoever on food. By watching the campus papers and bulletin boards faithfully, I managed to have adequate, if not gourmet, meals for weeks on end.

Here are some of the places/events I discovered, where the food was good and the price was right.

**DORMITORIES:** Walk casually into the back door of the cafeteria. If anyone stops you, look desperate and say you forgot your books and point frantically to a table in the corner. After discreetly working your way into the food line, fill your tray with extra sandwiches and fruit, to be eaten later. This works until all the checkers in all the dorms recognize your face. After that, it's best to wear disguises.

**GRADUATE TEAS:** Usually held in late afternoon and announced in the campus newspaper, graduate teas are notorious for the quality, not the quantity, of food served. Mingle with the scholars while you surreptitiously scarf down four or five miniature watercress and cream cheese quiches. If asked, say you are in the International Relations department and your work is highly confidential. Put several handfuls of bite-size butter cookies in each pocket. You can go to graduate teas forever as long as you don't talk too much.

**PRESIDENT'S WELCOME:** This happens only once a year but should not be missed. After you've shaken hands
with your friendly University president, and acknowledged that he is a regular guy, head for the catered buffet. Snacks range from chow mein noodles to carrot sticks and there's usually a pretty strong punch.

**SORORITY/FRATERNITY RUSH:** Rush is good for weeks of fine dining. It is divided into several stages; as long as one can remain socially acceptable, one can go from house to house and enjoy good food everywhere. This may involve small fabrications concerning your background and status. It never hurts to drop hints about Daddy's Lear jet. Do this during the first stage of rush, the open house. It will be very crowded, and the eats will be fast-food quality. Show you have class by sniffing at this food and saying, "I never eat sweets unless Mummy brings chocolates from Paris." Your best bet is to empty as many of the cigarette dishes as you can into your bookbag. If you don't smoke, you can hawk them on the street corner later and buy a decent meal with the profits. Next comes the Formal Dinner stage. If you haven't been blackballed, you are now invited to dine with your prospective brothers/sisters. Watch your table manners if you want to be invited back. Entice the members to talk a lot so they won't notice how many times you've taken seconds. If you behave properly you'll be invited back to Final Desserts. This event, in actuality, is another dinner. Don't spill soup on the social chairperson and show a propensity for reciting the Greek
alphabet backwards. After dessert you will be asked to join the house. Attend Final Desserts at as many houses as you can, then refuse all bids. Otherwise you will not be able to go through the same fine dining experience next year.

OPENINGS: Visit your college museum or gallery. There will undoubtedly be several openings each year. At these events the emphasis is usually on drinks, not eats. There is no harm in occasionally drinking your dinner.

SUPERMARKETS: If you have a car, frequent the suburban supermarkets. These stores are laden with free samples in every department. By circling a store two or three times, you can eat the equivalent of a well-balanced meal. Adventurous taste is required; be prepared for tofu pizza and Spam Surprise. It might even be worth taking the bus.

VENDING MACHINES: Anytime you pass a vending machine of any sort, take a minute to pull all the knobs and the change release button. You'll be surprised at how often you are rewarded with a Milky Way or someone else's quarter.

BLOOD BANKS: For simply giving a nice nurse approximately a pint of your blood, you are entitled to as much orange juice and as many donuts as it takes for you to "recover". Act quite weak until you've had your fill. Not recommended as a daily source of food.
PAINTING STUDIOS: Be poor but honest. Wear torn but clean clothing. Wash brushes at night. Go barefoot. Discover a history student near death and save his life. Refuse money and shoes from student's grateful parents, but let them treat you to a good meal.
DILEMMA

The problem with writing, is reading. The more one reads, the fewer one's options become. Writing differs from painting in this way. Going to a museum or looking at reproductions in a magazine do not generally interrupt one's progress on a painting. Paintings are rarely abandoned because the painter feels (through looking) less than original in the handling of a certain theme.

Writing is (literally) another story. One has an idea, starts to write. Then one reads, say, The New York Times Magazine. The feature article happens to be about precisely the same subject that one is struggling to portray. The New York Times writer has said everything, and so clearly. Dilemma. Should one continue to write, quoting extensively from the newly-discovered source? "It's easier to quote than to think," says John Leonard. But why should one write something that has so recently been written?

I started out to write a piece about our memory of past times. Then I read "The World of the Past" by Paul Theroux. I thought I'd shed some light on the art "Star" system. Carter Ratcliff said it all in "The Art Establishment, Rising Stars vs. the Machine." So I began a piece dealing with the passing of "modern" art.
As I reread Hilton Kramer's "Beyond the Avant Garde" I realized that I had nothing to add to it. As I began gathering my notes for an essay about mediocrity, Barbara Tuchman's article "The Decline of Quality" entered my mind, and stayed.

Perhaps this is why I am a painter, first, and a writer, second. While I may rest in awe of Cezanne, his paintings do not inhibit my expression of similar subjects.

I refer my readers to the aforementioned articles, if they wish to know something about said subjects. I do not advise looking at Cezanne, if my viewers want to know what I have to say about apples.
APPENDIX: PAINTINGS
THE POEM OF THE PILLOW
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


