

Paul Lukas

INCONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

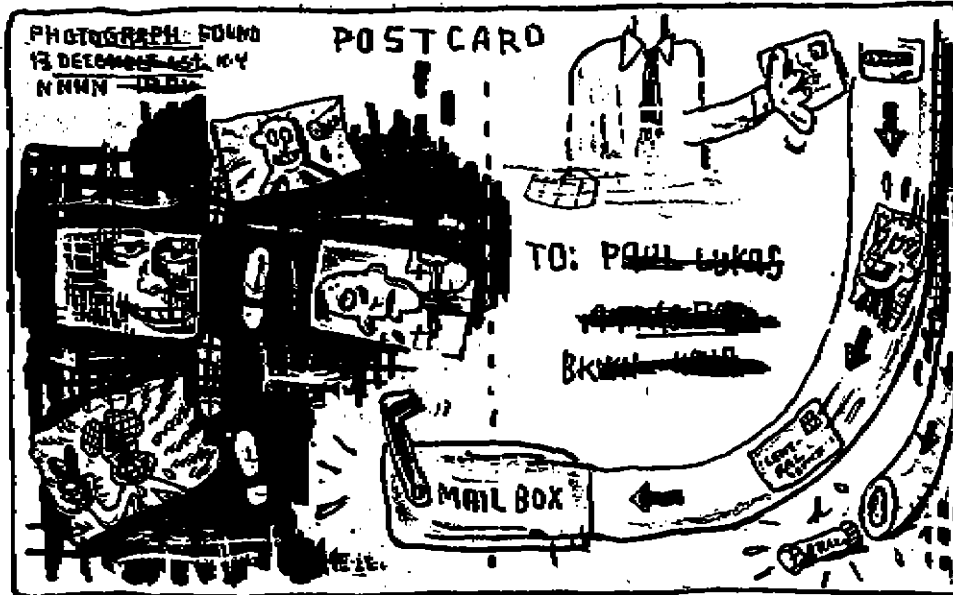
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SIGHTINGS POSTCARD SERIES

Lots of art projects make use of found objects, but few do so as simply and cleverly as *Sightings*, a series of postcards based on snapshots found around New York City and Canada. The images serve up a steady diet of routine mundanity that should strike a familiar chord among those who collect found photos (or can honestly assess their own photo albums): a preppy-ish guy dancing at a party, a smiling man and his granddaughter relaxing on a lounge chair in the backyard, a tacky-looking girl posing near the water at a marina—you get the idea. In keeping with the spirit of found art, no attempt has been made to clean up the images; if part of the original photo was scratched or grainy or underexposed, then the postcard is too.

Things get more interesting when you turn the cards over. The upper-left region of the back of a postcard, of course, is traditionally reserved for a caption describing the image on the front, and the *Sightings* cards rigidly adhere to this protocol while exhibiting an impressive attention to detail. A typical caption in the series reads, "One of six photographs found in trash can, November 1992, 8th Avenue at 20th Street, New York, verso stamped in pink ink, 'APRIL 1992.'" Another: "Photograph found 17 May 1993, 41st Street at Dyer Avenue, New York, verso imprinted, '11 + 00 NNNN 818 + 02'; marked, 'FUJICOLOR paper'; and inscribed in black ink, 'Christmas 1991/(seated) Peter, Elizabeth, Rosie/(foreground) Claire.'"

Sightings is the work of Germaine Koh, a Canadian conceptual artist who started collecting found photos in 1991 and began mass-producing them into postcards in 1993. Her promotional literature, which she uses to pitch the project to galleries, describes the postcards as "operating in the anonymous realm between lost and found, as enigmatic markers of the passage of specific unknown people through time and space...They engage our allegiances to private objects and communal



RETURN TO SPENDER.

spaces, singular fetishes and common types [and] deal with both theoretical and physical consequences of property and representation." Koh concedes that much of this language is a bit "overblown" but finds it necessary to resort to such verbiage in the highly competitive art world. *Sightings* sounds much more appealing when she tells me, "One important thing that I underplay in the project description is that it's just a really cool idea." She's right.

Somewhat kitschier but still amusing is *Jews of the 70s*, a packet of five postcards produced late last year by a Chicago art student named Marc Alan Jacobs. Unlike Koh, Jacobs didn't find his postcard snapshots on the street or in the trash—he found them in his family photo album. I'm not sure how big a market there is for postcard versions of 20-year-old snaps of the Jacobs clan, but those of you who've been waiting for just such a product can now find satisfaction at last. Typical captions: "Mom, in the family room of the old house, at 35 Kennedy Road"; "J.B. in his barmitzvah best, poses with Aunt Jackie & Grandma Elaine"; "The Jacobs and Rubinstein children anxiously light the menorah on the third night of Hanukkah."

Due to Jacobs' 1970s theme, some of his subjects look like fashion victims of the worst sort—there's no shortage of polyester, and the lapel-span on some of the shirts and jack-

ets must've necessitated a wide-angle lens. All of which suggests that Jacobs should probably try to score a licensing deal with the people distributing the *Brady Bunch* movie. (*Sightings* postcards are available for \$1 each, \$2 for three, and \$5 for 10 from Germaine Koh, Box 20032, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 9N5, Canada; for *Jews of the 70s*, contact Marc Alan Jacobs, 47 W. Division, No. 204, Chicago, IL 60610.)

UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE MAIL CHUTE (CUTLER MAILING SYSTEMS)

All this talk of postcards brings to mind the humble mail chute, a simple element that can add a bit of fun to even the dreariest office high-rise. Surely you know the routine: you drop your letter in the slot, watch for an instant as it disappears down the chute, and then listen in vain for a few seconds for audible evidence of its arrival in the box in the building lobby.

The key to the interactive consumer experience here is that the chute is transparent, a design decision for which we should all be grateful. They could've made the whole chute out of steel or aluminum or whatever, and that would've taken all the fun out of the game—you'd drop your letter in the slot and that would be the last you'd see of it, just like when using a normal letterbox, big deal. But

because the chute is transparent, you get those few instants of seeing your letter beginning its gravity-driven trip down into the belly of the building.

For me, those critical moments test and ultimately reinforce the magic of the postal system. Being able to see the envelope beginning its 39-floor descent tends to highlight the letter's mortality. It suddenly looks vulnerable, innocent, a small fish in a huge postal pond. Did it somehow turn sideways and get wedged against the wall around the 17th floor? Did someone try to shove a small package in the chute, leading to a huge pile-up of letters between floors 11 and 12? Despite these and other paranoias, I ultimately have enough faith in the chute to keep going back for more.

Another nice thing about the transparent chute, of course, is that you can watch other letters flying by from higher floors. If my father had worked in a high-rise office building with a mail chute, and if he had brought me to work one morning when I was seven years old so that I could see what he did all day long, I'm sure I would've spent the entire day just staring at the chute, watching to see mail go by. As it happens, my father owned a ground-floor shop in a two-story building, so I never had this experience. Which may explain why I felt compelled to stare at the chute at my first high-rise job when I was 26.

Finally, as if the chutes didn't already have enough of a mystique, there's this little puzzle: mail chutes are invariably identified as the products of "Cutler Mailing Systems, Rochester, N.Y." But when I tried to get Cutler's phone number so that I could pester them with a few questions, the folks at Rochester's directory-assistance line said they'd never heard of them. And neither had the people I spoke with at the Rochester Chamber of Commerce, the Rochester Fair Business Council, or the county clerk's office. Can anybody out there clear this one up?

Every two weeks this column examines a variety of products and services—some unusual, many exceedingly ordinary, but all worthy of close inspection. Readers, manufacturers, publishers, and entrepreneurs are encouraged to send toys, gadgets, promotional literature, publications, and suggestions to Paul Lukas, c/o NY Press, The Puck Bldg., 295 Lafayette St., NYC 10012.

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