

updated for the post-Y2K generation. As a temporary unit, or a “twin brain,” they are both part of the world and outside it at the same time. The title activity of the video—time-eating—points toward the sheer profusion of information readily available at our proverbial fingertips in the Internet era, but also to the complexity of processing it or making it all work together as a coherent worldview and to the inherent absurdity of attempting to make it cohere. Much like Dodge’s mordantly funny drawings, abject assemblage sculptures, and expansive writings, his videos exist in a fluid space between the seeming fixity of language and the inevitably messy abstraction of its material counterparts.

# Dry Goods and Sundries: On the Filmic Still Life

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*Emanuel Farber was born in 1917 in Douglas, Arizona, near the Mexican border, where his father ran a dry-goods store.*

—William Grimes, *New York Times*<sup>1</sup>

*He was born Emanuel Farber on Feb. 20, 1917, in Douglas, Ariz., a copper-mining town near the Mexico border where his Russian Jewish immigrant parents ran a dry goods store.*

—Elaine Woo, *Los Angeles Times*<sup>2</sup>

*A congenital maverick, Farber was born in an Arizona copper town one mile from the Mexican border. His parents owned a dry-goods store.*

—J. Hoberman, *Village Voice*<sup>3</sup>

In obituaries and post-mortem assessments of the film critic and artist Manny Farber, details of his early life come in and out of focus. His hometown's location, for instance, often floats next to Mexico in the vague proximity of "nearness," only to be sharply pinpointed by some with an exact measurement of distance from the border—one mile, or even more granularly, five blocks.<sup>4</sup> His parents are often generically named merely as "parents," while in other accounts they are given a more specific ethnic formation: Russian Jewish immigrant. Yet within this descriptive fluctuation, in which some authors zoom in close while others expand the frame, one phrase remains constant: "dry goods

store." The repetition of the antiquated phrase (variably hyphenated) makes it seem as if the obituaries themselves were written in 1917, contemporary to the birth of Farber, rather than in 2008 (the year of his death), when the exact contents of such a store are hazy and bewilderingly out of reach. Jean-Pierre Gorin, for his part, sets the biographical pattern into place with his voiceover, which intones the facts of Farber's early life in his movie *Routine Pleasures* (1986). He calls Douglas, Arizona, a "border town" and refers to Farber's parents as "a couple of dry goods store owners." Noting that the name has "largely disappeared from everyday usage," Wikipedia schematically aggregates dry goods by way of the negative, as objects that would not be found in a hardware store or a grocery. Dry goods, as opposed, one presumes, to wet goods, are not perishable, and they carry with them the hardy feeling of stuff that might be packed up and put into a wagon for a long journey, things that will endure into the future with minimal care or attention. In fact, to look up "dry goods" in the dictionary is to be drawn down a chain of meaning back into the past, as it is defined in relation to equally dusty terms of yesteryear, including "notions" and "white goods." The dry goods store conjures a world of textiles and patterns for clothes making, a world of sundries—various small items too unimportant to single out individually but that might be arranged en masse for display and visual delectation. A world, we might say, of the still life.

As the camera pans slowly over a painting by Farber called *Birthplace: Douglas, Ariz.* (1979), Gorin fills out some of the histories of the town and store, mentioning racism against African Americans, copper wars, arson, damaged goods. In this way, the film animates the painting, puts it into motion by wandering over the surface teeming with railroad tracks, buildings, cowboys, scrawled notes. It becomes, paradoxically, a moving still life in which we glimpse Farber's own class mobility—from son of immigrant shop owners to celebrated critic. Along with its meditation on Farber and his art, *Routine Pleasures* also documents a group of train enthusiasts, all white, all male, none of whom appears to occupy what might be called a particularly high station of privilege or cultural capital. These targets of Gorin's observation intersect and veer apart; my essay follows his lead.



Pieter Claesz (c.1597–1660), *Still Life*, 1623  
Image: Wikimedia Commons

Within the hierarchy of genres, the still life historically has been positioned at the very bottom rung, beneath history scenes, portraits, landscapes, and animal paintings. Domestic, modest in scale, and tainted by gendered associations of femininity, it hovers dangerously close to falling out of the category of art altogether. Still lifes have been understood within art history as depictions of class distinction, with every included element signifying value, acquisition, and status—this expensive cut of meat, these coveted fruits, this fine tablecloth. The still life is thus a gesture of aspiration, straining against the simultaneous and countervailing pressures that might drag it down into the realm of the low.



Jennifer Bornstein, *Collector's Favorites*, 1994, video  
 Courtesy of Gavin Brown's Enterprise

In Jennifer Bornstein's video *Collectors' Favorites* (1994), the artist appears on a cable-access video program dedicated to collectors discussing their stashes. Rather than vintage cordial glasses or porcelain dolls, Bornstein has assembled an eccentric array of non-material artifacts such as words (i.e. descriptions of coffee flavors) and disposable merchandise, including Ziploc bags and every size of cup and pastry bag from Starbucks and Cinnabon. Lined up neatly on shelves and clustered together on display boards, Bornstein's dry goods (many of them vessels slightly stained inside with the trace of the liquids they are meant to hold) are carefully explicated over the course of this video still life, and elevated by virtue of the dignifying rubric of the "collection." The host of the

show, Sally Shishmanian, proves herself to be an acute theorist of connoisseurship and categorization, noting that when things are grouped together for comparison, they take on greater significance than when viewed separately. "When you see them all together," she states, "you realize how different the designs are." Bornstein comments that, while such apparently ephemeral items as paper cups or sugar packets (she calls them "ephemorabilia") might appear banal or even invisible to a contemporary audience, in twenty years these items will "really look unique." I am writing in 2016, 22 years after Bornstein made *Collectors' Favorites*, and the current Starbucks logo no longer matches the one on her cups. The familiar green icon was changed in 2011, with the removal of text that read STARBUCKS COFFEE encircling the mermaid; presumably the words were viewed as redundant given the brand's hegemonic market saturation and the logo's maximal visual recognition. The eBay search I conducted yesterday for "Starbucks 1994" produced 512 listings.



Patty Hearst and Donald DeFreeze robbing a San Francisco bank on April 15, 1974. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Art history is obsessed with parsing structures of economic differentiation as they ramify into cultural production—it is a discipline conditioned by and predicated upon taste. I did not realize the extent to which a degree in art history has long been considered a finishing school for the wealthy when I decided, as someone distinctly not from that kind of background, to pursue my PhD in it. I chose to go to graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley, soon after I discovered that Patty Hearst was studying art history there when the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) kidnapped her from her apartment. Hearst had been a figure of great scorn and fascination for me as a teenager; the surveillance camera images of her with a gun and beret seemed to illustrate an impossible nexus

of amorphous class betrayal and poseur radical chic. Gun and beret: accouterments—dry goods—to be claimed and then discarded. Trucks unloaded cabbages on the streets of West Oakland as part of Randolph A. Hearst's two-million-dollar food disbursement program (part of an SLA ransom demand that went mostly unfulfilled): another still life. In retrospect, it seems likely that my desire to become an art historian pivoted on an unconscious wish to invert Hearst's trajectory—when she took up a gun and donned a beret she attempted (but failed) to step down and distance herself from her own heiress privilege, while I looked to art history as a vehicle to move up and out of my economically fragile childhood circumstances. (Bornstein went to Berkeley, too, as an undergraduate, and so did Farber, for one year.)

Judy Fiskin's video still life *50 Ways to Set the Table* (2003) also lingers over subtle distinctions in the presentation of things. In it, Fiskin documents the judging of a tablescaping competition at the 2001 Los Angeles County Fair, a phenomenon I did not know existed until I saw her video. Judges discuss the "proper guidelines" for formal dinner place settings and explain their objective standards of historical authenticity. (If a table has a *Titanic* theme, for instance, it better have silverware that can be dated to the era of the ship). The video reveals a range of participants—men and women of a variety of ages and races—all linked by their passion for decorative table settings. Who these people are beyond these very gross demographic groupings I cannot say, for as is true of most subcultures, its codes are hermetic and difficult to read for those on the outside. Fiskin's careful framing shows hands adjusting plates, using tape measures to calibrate spacing. One scorecard emphasizes, tautologically, "correctness is perfect!" The tables speak to timely trends—a whole category is devoted to *The Lion King*—as well as nods to distant eras, including one table set for a Kennedy family Valentine's Day meal in 1961. They are scrutinized for every last detail: beads that do not drape properly, a tablecloth so white that it makes salt look jarringly off-colored, unironed linens.

Still lifes are frequently laden with symbolism, functioning as memento mori. They can be deceptively placid scenes where death gets smuggled in covertly—with rotting food amidst the plenty or the disruption of an indecorous fly. Or death may be present more overtly, with the presence of a skull. In Steve Roden's video *everything she left behind that fit in my hands* (2012), a hand opens and shuts, revealing figurines, bits of coral, shells, a safety pin—all objects previously owned (the viewer is told, and must take on faith) by Martha Graham, who died some twenty years previously. Roden is said to have acquired a box of Graham's possessions on eBay, the online marketplace of minutiae. Is this display of sundries an oblique portrait of the dancer, or is it a comment on her ultimate unknowability? The little things are in the main unremarkable. One exception, and a signature moment in the film, is when the hand extracts a handwritten note from the crevice of a seashell and unfolds it for the viewer to read: "deaths and entrances." Charged with the imprint of their former ownership, these transitional objects pivot between the generic and the profound. Similarly, in Fiskin's *50 Ways to Set the Table*, we hear of a woman who vied for a prize in the table-setting competition from the grave—her family pulled out the plates and glasses from her closet after she passed away, in order to resurrect her vision of hospitality and rightness.



*Routine Pleasures*, DVD, Directed by Jean-Pierre Gorin.  
1986; New York, NY: The Criterion Collection, 2012

Gorin ventriloquizes Farber in *Routine Pleasures*: “Just because you’re an ex-Marxist, don’t feel obliged to start a film with the opening of a toolbox.” A few minutes later, the film shows a man, Chester, opening a toolbox, in a scene “thrown in... for Farber’s sake,” Gorin intones in the voiceover. Chester examines its contents, but they are too small for us as viewers of the film to see.

As Bornstein explains in *Collectors’ Favorites*, she grows her collection in part by scavenging cast-offs out of the garbage. Within the confines of her limited budget, she is interested both in middle-brow mall stores and more upscale venues, including “gourmet” coffee purveyors. Among her curated sets of throwaway paper goods are napkins and ice-cream cups of graduated sizes from Baskin-Robbins. Her first job was at Baskin-Robbins, she tells Shishmanian, so these things have special meaning for her. This disclosure about food service employment is one of the moments in the video that I find genuinely touching, along with Shishmanian’s game acceptance of Bornstein’s non-material collection of phrases, her legitimation of Bornstein’s literal rubbish, and her characterization of her oddball, junior-high science-fair poster boards, with their glued-on breath mints from different countries, as “very elegant presentations.” Each party is reaching across a generational divide here. In *Collectors’ Favorites*, the nascent class difference between budding video artist—Bornstein was getting her MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles, at the time—and cable-access host is also both marked and tentatively bridged. Now, Bornstein shows her art internationally, while Shishmanian’s cable-access show, and indeed the entire phenomenon of cable access, is long gone. This video chronicles the brief moment when their trajectories converge, and it foreshadows

their diverging futures. Shishmanian seizes on the potential populism of Bornstein's project, commenting that the richly descriptive names used for chain-store coffee were once reserved for high-priced fancy perfumes but are now available to everyone. Yet Bornstein's list of Las Vegas apartment developments and street names—"Paradise Road," for example—also anxiously invokes class distortions, a comic, or painful, mismatch between label and thing. One synonym for "possessions" is "belongings," a word that resonates with community-formation and collective identification.

Social class in the United States is very often confounding. It stratifies in ways both fine-grained and sweeping. As I see it, Fiskin's video thematizes multiple levels of class interaction, and my analysis that follows is by no means a comprehensive map. First, the judges are positioned in relation to the competitors; a judge deems that a competitor's use of plastic shrimp, for instance, has "cheapened the look." As is always the case in the United States, woven throughout observations about class differences are statements of racial distinction, including comments from the judges (when adjudicating a *Lion King*-themed table) about "colorful" Africans wearing turbans and textiles dyed with "beet juice." Second are the differences among the competitors: what one presents as formal, another might characterize as casual. Third is Fiskin's relation to the people in competition and within the larger apparatus of the county fair, which is not

usually a place where artists like Fiskin, whose first show was at the prestigious Castelli Gallery in New York, display their art. The judges themselves have a difference of opinion—of "personal taste" as one explains, which could signal a slight difference in class formation—and solicit the cameraperson for a tie-breaking opinion about which table should be awarded "best in show." (The cameraperson demurs.) They end up recruiting a security guard for her opinion, precisely because she is not of their milieu. "Let's pull a guard!" a judge eagerly declares. "Let's pull someone totally out of the loop." This is perhaps the most revelatory cross-class interaction in the video; and the guard, with no official credentials, casts the deciding vote. Lastly, we as viewers stand in relation not only to the competition, with its centerpieces and champagne flutes, but also to the video; we judge Fiskin's work, too, according to our tastes.

One of the potential fault lines of the works of Gorin, Bornstein, and Fiskin is condescension. Are they distancing themselves from their subjects, performing a patronizing voyeurism into worlds where they do not fully belong? What I'm trying to propose, though I am still hesitant about it, is actually the opposite. All of these works tell us something about leveling as they make space for conversations that happen across class lines. I'm suggesting, then, that the filmic still life, at least for Gorin, Bornstein, and Fiskin, is a site of cross-class exchange and intersection, an encounter or meeting place, however temporary, over shared objects. These still lifes are reminders that we inhabit the same spheres of material exchange and that we often come together on the same plane of production. If a trace of condescension can be found in these works, it is tempered by a sense of affinity and mutual respect, for to make a film or video is also to be obsessed by placement, by detail, and by composition, held in the thrall of meticulousness.

Farber, too, might be included in this group; though he did not make moving images, his paintings are shot through with cinematic references and moments. Certainly, by 1979, when he painted his *Birthplace*, he occupied a different social position—as a well-traveled professor, artist, critic, and intellectual—from the small-town folks he depicted in *Birthplace*. Clement Greenberg, the modernist art critic, also came from a Jewish immigrant, dry-goods-store-owning family, a reminder that the aesthetic classification of objects is not so far from the sorting of stuff onto shelves to promote them as saleable. Like the still life, the dry goods store is a crossroads, a site of intersection where the bank owner's wife might mingle with the laundress over rolls of fabric. Maybe these women exchange opinions about the film playing across the street (popular cinema is another place of cross-class proximity), as one selects silk, the other muslin.



Wendy Masako Yoshimura, *Fig With Leaf on Italian Plate*, watercolor. Courtesy of the artist.

Patty Hearst was arrested on September 18, 1975 with another SLA member, Wendy Masako Yoshimura. Yoshimura, who was born in the Japanese-American internment camp Manzanar, now resides in Oakland where she paints—what else?—still lifes.

1 William Grimes, "Manny Farber, Iconoclastic Film Critic and Artist, Dies at 91," *New York Times*, August 19, 2008.

2 Elaine Woo, "Manny Farber, 91; Iconoclastic Film Critic and Artist," *Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 2008.

3 J. Hoberman, "Manny Farber 1917–2008," *Village Voice*, August 19, 2008.

4 See Robert Polito, "Introduction: Other Roads, Other Tracks," *Farber on Film: The Complete Writings of Manny Farber* (New York: Library of America, 2009): xxiii.

*Routine Pleasures*

# Down to Its Rightful Size

## Edward Sterrett