

HOW TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE
BETWEEN THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
AND A HAIR BALL

A Pocket Guide For the Bewildered Modern Person

(from *Spy*, 1988)

An infectious conformity is complicating our lives these days. Copycat designer clothes, look-alike athletic uniforms, formula romances, the post-Warhol doubt that a soup can *really is just a soup can* – today, as never before, there are an amazing number of Things That Seem The Same. Symptom – or sickness? Who knows? But now that most of the men on the Upper East Side look like Robert Chambers and most of the women on the Upper East Side look like the woman who does the funding drives on Channel 13 (who looks like the woman on the Bloomingdale ads), more than a few New Yorkers are getting frightened. And confused.

This ice cream I'm eating here as I stroll up Columbus Avenue with my investment banker friends: is it Ben & Jerry's or is it Steve's? Are those Top-Siders or Timberlands? This pile I'm standing in front of with my date: is it Neo-Geo art or debris? Should I wipe it off my shoe? Or buy it? That woman there: is she Martha Graham or Louise Nevelson or Diana Vreeland? Or Gloria Vanderbilt on a very bad day? Why are both the men and the women in this ad wearing what looks like men's underwear? *Are* those men? And is this SoHo or Madison Avenue? Is this the Hamptons or the Cape? Is this a dance club or a railway tunnel?

Where am I?

To help clear up some of the confusion – and as part of *Spy's* ongoing outreach program to all citizens of the tri-state area – we have devised the following portable, easy-to-use primer.

Small Dogs / Small Children

Similarities

Smell
 Noise
 Unexpected, messy bowel movements
 Like to roll on floors and sleep on top of blankets
 Disgusting food habits
 Make unintelligible sounds at all hours of the day and night
 Should be aired every day
 Tend to be fawned over by bothersome women in the park

Differences

Dogs: more hair
 Small children: less hair

New York Post / The Village Voice

Similarities

Tabloid
 Politically hysterical
 Owned or formerly owned by Rupert Murdoch
 Like to run large, vulgar photographs on the cover
 Lots of exposés

Differences

The Post: a daily; prefers celebrity exposés; does not like Robert Wilson
The Voice: a weekly; prefers exposés about policemen; likes Robert Wilson

Las Vegas / Broadway

Similarities

Sleazy surroundings
 Expensive
 Many patrons wearing clothes made of synthetic fibers
 Straight plays uncommon
 Jackie Mason performances not unusual

Differences

Las Vegas: located in Nevada
 Broadway: located in New York

Wall Street / Rikers Island

Similarities

Many drugs available
 Convicted felons
 Many business deals of a shady nature
 Open day and night
 Sexual deprivation and/or lack of exercise, leading to...
 Bad Skin
 Lots of tension, leading to...
 Very bad manners

Differences

Wall Street: power ties; increasing numbers of women
 Rikers Island: no power ties; few women

Painting by Julian Schnabel / Your Grandmother's Basement

Similarities

Old, broken crockery
 Flaking paint
 Bits of fur and antlers

Differences

Schnabel: mentioned in *New York*; priced at \$60,000; owned by rich folks
 Basement: not mentioned in *New York*; worthless; owned by Grandma

A Shot of Jack Daniel's at the Oak Bar (59th & Fifth) /
A Shot of Jack Daniel's at Rudy's (45th & Ninth)

Similarities

About one ounce

Differences

Oak Bar: costs \$5.75; long walk to toilet; the person you're sitting next to is just visiting town to close a deal; lousy conversation

Rudy's: costs \$2.00; the toilets are very close by; the person you're sitting next to has been there since 1943; dialogue straight out of *The Iceman Cometh*

Metropolitan Opera / New York City Opera

Similarities

Lincoln Center location

Vulgar décor

Very large people shouting

Differences

The Met: *Parsifal*, *Wozzeck*; tickets are \$75 a pop; many slightly overweight, asexual men who've been buying subscriptions for *years*; Luciano Pavarotti sings there

NYC Opera: *South Pacific*, *Kismet*; tickets are \$32 a pop; lots of tourists; Tony Roberts sings there

Lexington Avenue IRT / New Calvary Cemetery, Queens

Similarities

Underground

Dark

Overcrowded

Costs to get in

Death all around you

Differences

IRT: moves, sometimes

New Calvary Cemetery: does not move at all

Ed Koch / An Old Tire

Similarities

No hair
 Roundness, rubberiness
 Avoid the topic of sexuality around election time
 Physically unappealing

Differences

Ed Koch: lives at Gracie Mansion on the East River; Democrat; Jewish; irritating, nasal voice
 Old Tire: floats in the East River; unaffiliated; Baptist; no voice

MoMA / A Hair Ball

Similarities

No similarities

Differences

MoMA: made of steel, concrete and art
 Hair ball: made of hair; has not, as of this writing, sold its air rights

Life / That Novel You've Been Working On

Similarities

Seems to have something to do with you as an ontological being

Differences

Life: leads to no satisfying conclusion; has mysterious and possibly divine origins
 Your novel: you think it will be satisfying once you figure out how to fix that one section that's been giving you so much trouble; is transcribed pretty much from your journal.