

REVIEWS

Junk jazz

How to Read Music in One Evening
by Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel
Clatworthy Colorvues (available from
Light Impressions Corp., P.O. Box
3012, Rochester, N.Y. 14614/
unpaginated/\$5 (sb))

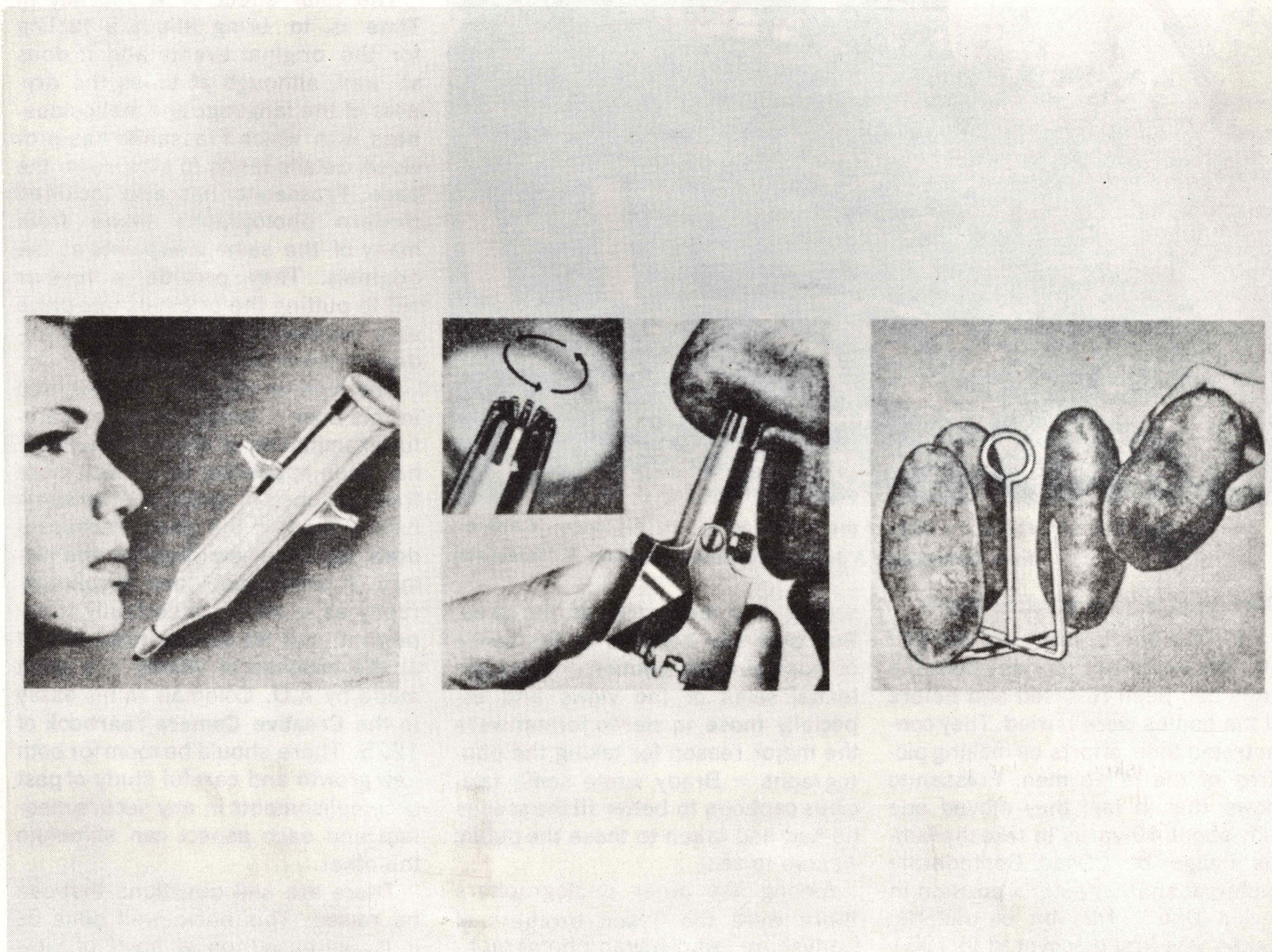
We have noticed, lately, a proliferation of self-published books. Most of these have only proven the justice of the term, "vanity press." This work, though, comes from outside the main production/distribution channels as an example of what freedom from the conventions of book publishing can mean.

How to Read Music in One Evening is a re-presentation of pictures originally used in advertising the kind of novelty household items often seen in catalogues addressed "occupant," or in the back of some women's magazines. All your favorite products are included, from the musical toilet paper dispenser to knitted nose warmers. In fact many of these products are so ridiculous that one might be deceived by the obvious humor of their mere inclusion into putting it down with a smile (or a laugh) and the thought that here was a "cute" book. The real substance of the book, however, can be perceived only after one has gone beneath this superficial layer.

The pictures are presented in sequences of up to four per page. None of these seem to lend themselves to any allegorical reading, but are, instead, built around similarities of form. At times this formal correspondence works to create new, and quite potent, imagery. For instance, the juxtaposition of a pointed black-head remover and a nose-hair clipper, both poised for use, with a set of spikes on which potatoes are being impaled creates what may be the only picture ever made which one can *feel*, physically, in one's adenoids. Other images work in a similarly painful fashion (recalling the old game of watching people's reactions when asked to imagine sliding down the banister that suddenly turns into a razor blade), are visual puns, or, presumably and least effectively, simply "looked right" to the authors.

No book (nor any reviewer) is perfect. This does not seem to be a totally "resolved" piece of work. Some of the sequencing seems arbitrary; some of the humor, blatant. Yet, if one compares it to some other recent self-published books, one can see a vitality in **How to Read Music** which is often lacking elsewhere. This is not a slick product of considered work done over an extended period of time (and/or of a tremendous ego), but a by-product of some current investigations.

The "Meaningful Sequencing" and fat white borders can, in fact, be seen as sarcastic mimicry of the customary layout of photographic books, and the trite subject matter and poor reproduction quality as cold water in the faces of those who made photographic books according to custom. The ultimate irony is that while most traditional photo books ostensibly present reproductions of works of art, **How to Read Music** is an original in its book form, in the sense that the contents did not exist as art until transformed by the context of the



A page from **How to Read Music in One Evening** by Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel.

book. (While one may question the validity of **reproducing** certain work, such a question is not applicable to the original, which is the affair only of the artist).

One aspect of the book which takes a great deal of time in intruding upon one's consciousness is the fact that every page includes at least one representation of a human being (or part of a human being). It's quite strange, but one does not see the people in these pictures (or, more accurately, one does not see the people as people).

This seems to be the effect of a number of influences. The first, of course, is that the advertisers who originally made the images had no interest in the person depicted — they wanted to show their product. Therefore, the product is centrally displayed, with a part of the human anatomy shown as an adjunct to it. This part is described only in terms of the advertised item: the hand which turns the switch, the crotch wrapped in bedwetter's panties. Poses are mechanical, and retouchers take great liberties in distinguishing the product from its surroundings. In some instances, stiff poses are made the more lifeless by the counterpoint of hand-drawing which animates the objects with rays, waves, and vibrations. Mandel and Sultan point up this depersonalization (and add to it) by emphasizing formal relationships between objects in the sequencing, thus diverting our attention from other elements in the pictures.

The moire pattern which occurs when a halftone is re-photographed through another halftone screen also contributes to this effect. Along with the over-all flatness of tone (which is the result of badly reproducing horrible reproductions), this pattern creates a sort of film, or gauze, through which everything is viewed. People become less discernible, yet the objects can be easily recognized.

This is Mike Mandel's third publication. His first, **Myself: Timed Ex-**

posures (which was done in 1971 and eventually went out of print — in itself a remarkable feat for any self-published book), and his **Seven Never Before Published Portraits of Edward Weston**, recently released, have all the wit evident in this latest book. With the co-authorship of Sultan, however, extra dimensions become apparent.

This is not to suggest that the previous Mandel books are only "jokes." In fact, **Music**, partly because it seems more of an enigma at first glance and thus forces a closer look, provides a key to some of the more subtle/obscure aspects of these. **Portraits**, especially, is seen as a rather sophisticated statement about the medium. But the final realization is that all of these books are about people. The humanism of the earlier work is pointed up by the complete stripping of dignity from the subjects in **Music**. The first book showed Mandel as a part of each of the very human situations he photographed, but lack only the recognition as people somehow deserving of special note.

Sultan and Mandel have been showing a whole series of joint projects lately, and Mandel is working on a highly original set of "baseball cards." Look out, major leagues.

— Charles Desmarais

A visual trace

Gettysburg: A Journey In Time

by William A. Frassanito

Charles Scribner's Sons/248 pp./\$12.95 (hb)

Gettysburg: A Journey in Time is a record of painstaking historical research on the photographs taken immediately after and within a three-year span of the battle at Gettysburg, the most important single battle and the turning point of the American Civil War. The extant Gettysburg photographs have all been seen and published many times before and the

details of the fighting also have been recorded and well-established. But it is Frassanito's feeling that the linkages that have been made before between the photographs and the written information about them (in the form of captions) are often inaccurate and should be reassessed.

Frassanito also states that the photographs have previously been regarded merely as supplements to written accounts or as independent, single "art" images. They have not been considered as evidence of events that happened in time — events that, by using the photographs, might be recreated in time to allow us to understand them better.

Since beginning his research in 1962, Frassanito has gone over every known image of Gettysburg, all the written data about the battle, and has apparently walked every single foot of the 25 square mile battlefield. He began his work at the age of 15 and continued while a student at Gettysburg College and in the master's program in American cultural history at Cooperstown. It was interrupted only while he was in the Army.

For the project Frassanito has pinpointed the view locations in all of the photographs still surviving, in many cases correcting long standing errors. Then by comparing reports of troop movements during the fighting and in the aftermath operations, including the paths of the photographers, the first of whom arrived two days after the battle had ended, he has used his new data to construct a complete recreation of the original photographic documentation in relationship to the events that occurred.

The sequence of each photographer's route and of each image is placed on maps of the battlefield. The photographers who were there had arrived in varying lengths of time after the fighting had stopped and selected their views accordingly.

The first group, consisting of Alexander Gardner, Timothy H. O'Sullivan and James F. Gibson, all work-

(Continued on following page)