

The Last Estate

BY GREGORY BATTCOCK

"VIAGGIO IN ITALIA"

London was, as usual, lovely. George let me stay in his "sitting room." His roommates (Roland, Neil and Jim) were, as usual, remarkably patient and Roland even drove me to the drugstore. Timidly, I asked for two boxes of poppers. "Why don't you take two dozen? We sell them like hot-cakes," urged the pharmacist.

Surely it will please the reader that my lecture at the Institute of Contemporary Art was a success. I advocated my latest theory—about how, in America in the mid nineteen-sixties occurred a major event in the annals of visual perception. London loved it and I even got two fan letters—from ladies in the countryside who claimed Battcock for a maiden name! They had seen my lecture advertised and were overcome to learn there still lived an authentic Battcock—and a male Battcock at that. Never mind girls. I am the only remaining Battcock and the last.

That finishes off the Battcocks. Once and for all. Let's return to my enthralling narrative. On my final night in London George and I went to the Salisbury Pub in Soho, to meet Colin Naylor, editor of *Art and Artists* magazine.

George bought the drinks. Colin drank like a camel driver prior to embarkation on safari out of Bou-Saada. My eye wandered and came up with this here charming English hustler leaning on the slot machine. Before long he joined our little threesome and George got to buy him drinks too.

My hustler, who claimed to be "half-American" (and half Cretin if you ask me), enthralled George and Colin with his contradictory tales. Since I knew I would end up with him (and if not would have decided I didn't want to), I lost interest in the conversation. What mattered now was gesture. At 11, closing time in England's green and lovely land, I invited everybody to dinner.

That rainy, autumnal eve in Soho, Manzi's seafood restaurant got our business. My hustler started with the lobster bisque—a creamy, fragrant brew that warmed the spirit as well as the stomach. George started with the Whiting—tiny fried fish that were taken from the Thames estuary only a few hours before. Everybody nibbled the little delicacies so we ordered a second helping for George. I had the smoked eel and it was spicy, hearty, rich and good. Colin had a shrimp cocktail or something.

And yes, dear reader, you guessed! The restaurant produced a 1964 Moët & Chandon Imperial Brut that had been lurking in the wine list and that went nicely with the checkered tablecloth, our charming Italian waiters, my hustler, George's idiotic manderings and Colin's polite effusions, not to mention the giant North Sea soles, still flapping their tails, that's how fresh they were, that we all devoured next. Ah, that firm, tender white flesh of our lovely soles! We pleaded for yet more Moët. Our enchanting waiters rushed to bring on fresh raspberry tarts and pitchers of thick English cream . . .

Well, you can guess what happened next. Colin went off into the night, God knows where. I dragged my lovely hustler back to George's drab living room. And at 6 in the morning I gratefully climbed out of the terribly cramped, uncomfortable cot, tip-toed downstairs with my little suitcase, caught the bus to Heathrow and within minutes was sipping iced Veuve Cliquot (with canned pineapple in it) while waiting for take-off in an Air India

Boeing—for Rome.

First class on Air India reminds me, in some ways, of steerage class on the overnight ferry between Brindisi and Corfu, though I doubt even they would stick cherries and pineapple in the Champagne. The stewardess passed around a "flight kit" containing a map of the world and a free ball point pen. Later I caught her in the pantry busily transferring slices of cold ham and "turkey roll" from individual plastic trays to metal platters—that gesture apparently is the difference between first class and tourist passage.

Getting anyplace by plane is a brutal and torturous ordeal. New York subways, channel ferries and Mexican busses are more gracious, personal and charming transportation systems. The only thing that might be more uncomfortable and annoying than the airplane is the sedan chair. (And I put the sedan chair at par with the automobile—which is unspeakable.) My friend Tony who lives in Hato Rey told me that once he did somebody in an airplane toilet during a jet flight someplace. That's the only nice story I ever heard about an airplane trip. Like everybody else, Tony is a compulsive sex maniac. If a situation is bad he makes it good, and that's that.

But what about Rome? Who needs to be told, yet again, that the Eternal City is still there and just as changing and up-to-date as ever? And what good is yet another eulogy to the Piazza Navonna, the Via Frattina, the famous "tartufo" at Tre Scalini, and the seasonal game and quail—grilled "a la diavolo" at local trattoria—that have captured the imagination of all autumn pilgrims to the holy city? The world's pleasures are few. They include, firstly, the winter "carciofi Romano"; secondly, a buttered and creamy fettucini littered with slices of white truffle; and, thirdly, charming 19-year-old Andrea who approached me in the Pincio garden and who suavely sneaked by the nasty, squinty concierge at my hotel every afternoon at six. Andrea—whose only clothes were his soldier uniform—stuck out like a sore thumb because he was 1. tall; 2. Venetian; 3. a direct descendant of the chap that modeled for Polyclitus' sculpture of the *Doryphoros*.

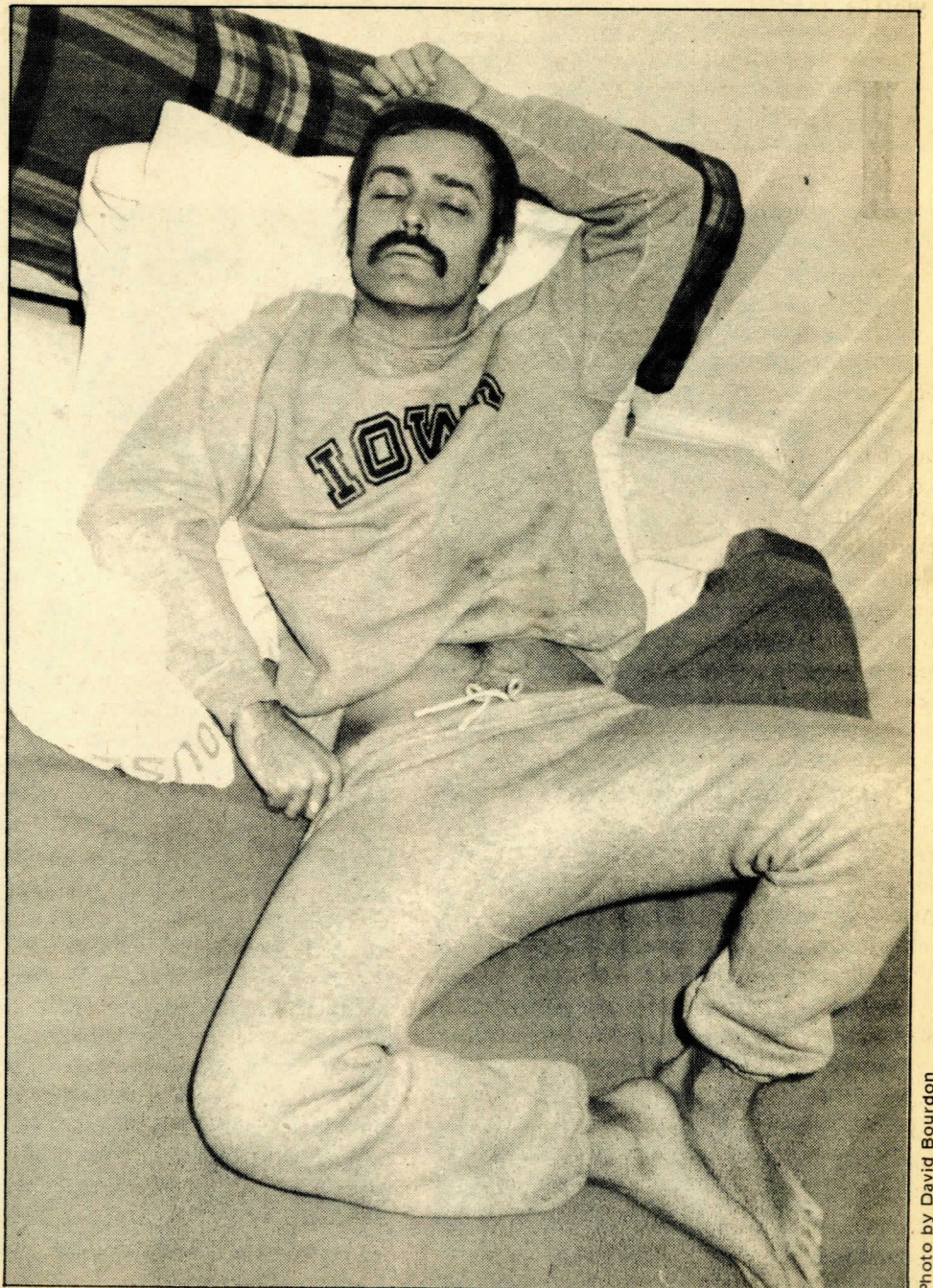
I looked up my old friend Warren Tobin who lives on the Pza. Santa Maria in Trastevere. He took me to dinner at a charming restaurant on the Piazza and said that the elderly chap who washes dishes at the restaurant used to be the parking attendant in the days when they used to allow cars in the Piazza. Once he told Warren that the fish they served were flown in frozen from Greece. Warren also informed me that Italian white wine will give you rheumatism. And offered to enroll Andrea in a language school so he could learn English and be in a better position to get a job when he leaves the military. "Otherwise he will end up in a Venetian suburb with a fat wife and kids," warned Warren. "Ah, the intentions of the lord are a mystery, aren't they?"

At the Galleria Borghese I watched myself on the closed circuit television they have hidden all over, and paid respects to the famous Caravaggios. Caravaggio was the Warhol of his time. His hustlers are angels, representations of Bacchus and pictures of John the Baptist. "Italians are totally visual," said Warren. "They talk not to be heard but to be seen." In Italy conversation is visual.

Well, Swissair got me back here, but not without three litres of olive oil, a bottle of Campari, a new suit, new shoes and another ball point pen—that had been stuffed in my Christmas stocking flight kit from Swissair.



"Sick Bacchus" by Caravaggio, Galleria Borghese, Rome



Gregory takes a well-deserved rest