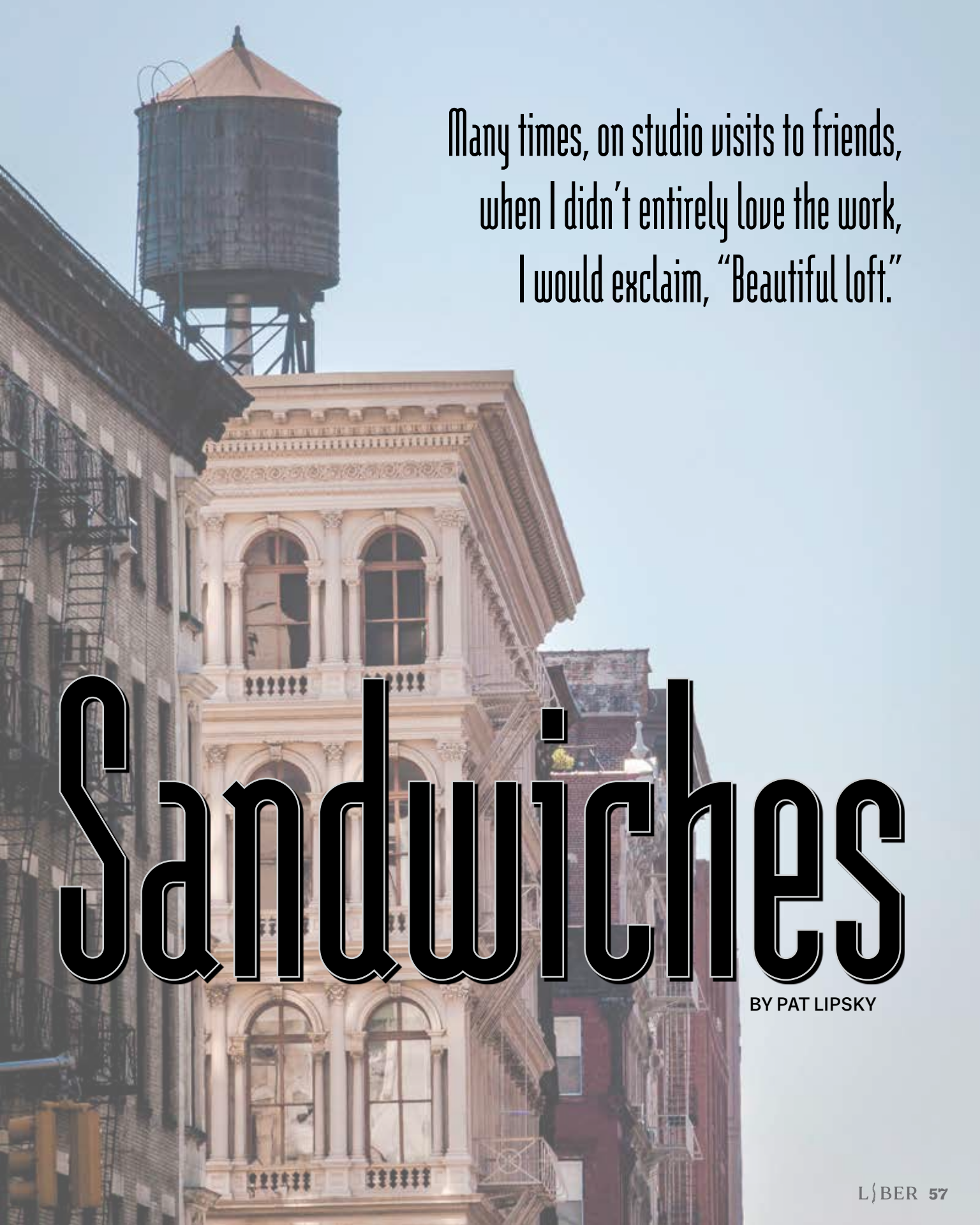

Many times, on studio visits to friends, when I didn't entirely love the work, I would exclaim, "Beautiful loft."

Sandwiches

BY PAT LIPSKY

Pat Lipsky mixing paint, 1971. Courtesy of Pat Lipsky.

After, when we had left the neighborhood forever and life had become quiet and difficult, I thought about the parties. Every day in SoHo was the same: you worked, drank, stayed up late. Weekends didn't matter. So parties came on Tuesday or Thursday, after openings. The whole pregame ritual of it—pulling on jeans and a sweater, doing your makeup over the bathroom sink, with particular attention to mascara. Some makeup consultants had told me to always brush green or brown eyeshadow onto my large eyelids, and I did that. Then I'd draw a dark pencil line under my cheekbones, rubbing it into my face to make my cheekbones appear high.

Usually the party was somewhere in our neighborhood. Or in the neighborhood that had no name—now called Tribeca. The streets were Duane, Franklin, Reade, Mercer, Broome, and Desbrosses. Factory-sounding names that suggested iron-colored streets. And the hallways and stairs of these loft buildings were all the same. Painted gray—middle gray if you were buying the color—or sometimes a creepy, defeated industrial green. That green of institutions that had folded long ago. Without much light on the stairs. One dusty bulb in a dangling socket.

Entrances to these loft buildings were like the entrances of Paris apartment buildings—you were buzzed in. Usually, in SoHo then, this buzzer was broken and hung from its brass fitting like a loose tooth from an injured face. In Paris you'd punch in a code—which the Parisians were able to remember or had written down in their excellent little leather notebooks. In SoHo, you'd simply yell to your upstairs friend, who'd throw down, with a metal splash, their starfish of keys.

Once inside, you'd start climbing those wide, cold, lonely stairs, digging your hands into gloves or coat pockets. Winding the scarf tighter around your neck and cold hair. In winter these staircases seemed endless, your heels pounding the steps, visible breath warming your face. Even socks felt cold on these SoHo staircases. Then you knocked when you guessed you had reached the right door.

If you'd counted the floors correctly, there would be the big clunky noise of the police lock unbolting. Every loft space had one—the only serious protection available against burglary. At that time police weren't interested in SoHo. The tall double doors made of heavy metal swung out onto the hall. This made every loft feel like a fortified bohemian castle with a heavy, impenetrable gate. Inside it would be dark. With some candles burning on the hors d'oeuvres table—revealing plates of shiny olives—or set in saucers and flickering around the room. Definitely loud music—very often the Rolling Stones, always Dylan, occasionally Janis Joplin. The men in these lofts were men who worked with their hands and knew how to set stereos for maximum effect. Speakers hung from the ceiling in complicated arrangements, sometimes perched like a surrealist statement on the top step of ladders. The wood floors, even in the dark, were glossy from layers of polyurethane. Which everyone applied to their floorboards as the old masters had brushed varnish onto their court portraits.

There was an art to living. Where to put bed and bathroom, where to install shower and refrigerator in these spaces we'd all inherited from the factories. And many times, on studio visits to friends, when I didn't entirely love the work, I would exclaim, "Beautiful loft," as if the true artwork had been the ingenious ways they had found to fix their lofts.

Ceilings were always high. Which we filled with smoke and music. A studio table waited to the right of the door, tablecloth pinned down at each corner by liquor bottles. Like the painting by Manet of the Folies-Bergère bar, but minus the woman.

At these parties, you might or might not talk. Same vibe as Max's. Talking wasn't that big. Dancing was big. Sex. All the time, from the corner of an eye, you were monitoring the party, trying to reach a decision about who in the loft your next lover might be.

There would be kids there too. Never many. Very few of us had risked the competing investment of children. Mine were usually home at our loft, presumably under blankets in their vast bedroom, whose ceiling was a maze of right-angled sprinkler pipes. Part of my own real estate genius had been to convert our space's back half into another living space, which I then rented to a young couple. This arrangement was supposed to include in situ babysitting. They were, in their bland and academic way, a nice graduate student couple. I learned much later that the blandness had terrified my children, who had never known people in SoHo to be so normal and mild in manner, and suspected them of innumerable dangerous hungers and secrets.

The same crew from the club. It was as if we couldn't get enough of each other. Frosty Myers, Larry Poons, Larry Zox, and Peter Reginato, who proved every time you saw him that you could be handsome in a shifty way; the unctuous sculptor Michael Steiner with his clingy girlfriend, Elissa. You knew the party was nearly over—that guests were patting and investigating the bed on which everybody had dumped their coats in a mound—when she would wander around the loft asking, "Has anyone seen Michael?"

Dan Christensen, with his solid, friendly looks. Some nights also his girlfriend, Cynthia Something. The last thing these men seemed to be after was the company of their current women. In general, whoever you arrived with was quickly dropped. An attentive date was a liability. At the end you'd check to see if your date had stayed. Often they hadn't. Or you might see them across the loft, an arm around someone else. If not, you'd head home alone, and reconnect sometime the next day.

Strange things happened at parties.

One night—this was in my own giant space with my own children free roamers in the smoke and music—Larry Poons became convinced police had tailed him upstairs. He believed they had melded in with the guests and were even then making their stealthy way forward to arrest him. Someone had put the needle on Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone." This was a song, whatever the mood, that always made me wary. How fast things could go rotten. It was a taunt. "To be on your

Mercer Street looking south toward Canal Street, SoHo, New York City, ca. 1973.

own," Dylan warned, "with no direction home—a complete unknown." I wonder if I was the only one secretly afraid this could happen to me. Larry had dropped to my floor, with his thick, wild hair and his legs stretched out in front of him.

"They're here," Larry kept insisting. "And will arrest me without joy, warrant, or pity. They will be swift and they will prove merciless." But Larry was subject to whims and pressures none of us could fathom. So we all began checking rooms for him. Bathroom, studio, even the boys' room. All proved definitely police-free. Somebody got out my big flashlight, one of those with powerful beams and a virtual briefcase of batteries, and swung it around the space, across surprised faces and spread, dancing fingers. To show that all was safe, no badges were in attendance.

"Yes but," Larry said, "they could be plainclothesmen."

André Emmerich, my dealer, was also Helen Frankenthaler's, one of the most powerful art figures in the city. It made us all proud and relieved to spot him at a party. Later I went into my bedroom, and there André was: reading glasses on, sitting at my desk with a prim library expression and flipping through a book of Hieronymus Bosch reproductions.

"Aren't you going"—I thought of how to put this—"to enjoy the party?"

His eyebrows lifted. "Oh . . ." he said. "I am very comfortable right here, Pat." But then he smiled, closed the book, raised himself from my desk on his thick knuckles, and walked into the noise. When I looked around a quarter hour later, he was nowhere to be found.

Pat Lipsky, 1974, Wooster Street loft. Courtesy of Pat Lipsky.

There were always people from the neighborhood. People you didn't know or didn't want to. This was okay. They were friends with somebody. Or had heard the music and wandered in and could tell you of a distant, and perhaps even better, party. Only in the early morning, when it was time to leave, did the lights come on. Then, blinking, you could see the whole tired room, its ceiling pipes and radiators and floors—like an aging beauty, these spaces relied on the modesty of darkness. At this 4:55 a.m. hour, some people would have already left for the bars—Kenn and John's on Broome Street or the Spring Street Bar over on the corner of West Broadway. We all had tabs there too. Not much paper money got exchanged in SoHo.

The stairs were always easier on the way down. You bounced down, all sweaty and warm from alcohol and dancing. We'd take off together for the bars. All of us now out on the winter street, which also seemed warmer when you were drunk and in a crowd. We were artists. This was our city, our streets, our neighborhood, our profession. There'd be cigarettes lighting up with their sparks and hisses followed by long exhales. The squeak, if it had snowed, of snow under everybody's boots. You'd flash on other parts of your life in a moment like this and know it had all been okay, if it gave you access to these lovely moments, surrounded by friends and colleagues, in a part of the city owned equally by all of you.

At the bar, friends ordered burgers. I had read something about cat food being used in burgers and ordered something else. More joking; more talking about nothing. Then I'd go home. Stairs, musical keys, police lock. In a few hours, it would be seven, and I could wake Jon and David, get their sandwiches ready for school. Baloney and cheese, peanut butter and jelly. I'd be bleary-eyed, sitting at the Parsons table trying to make conversation, checking to see if they had their bus passes. Then I'd kiss them goodbye. As they walked down the brick stairs, they'd say stuff like, "You know what Mom said?" "No, really, Mom said that?" And then they'd bump into each other as they made their way down the outside stairs.