

Reading Lessons - Susan Lipper's *trip*

by John Slyce

"The illiterate of the future will be ignorant of the use of camera and pen alike."

- László Maholy-Nagy, 1923

Susan Lipper's photographic series *trip* is a display of signifying artifacts. Highly vernacular in tone, if not in its cadence or operative structure, *trip* is a collaborative textual amalgam of words and images that circulates in the form of both an installation and a book.

The collaborators – Lipper works here with the writer Frederick Barthelme – come from very different worlds and have their own genealogies and hubristic formations. The New York-based Lipper was trained as a photographer at Yale and is a product of a particular institutional moment with its own place in a documentary tradition. Barthelme, who directs the writing program at the University of Southern Mississippi and is the author of eleven books of fiction, has a parallel existence as a known, if somewhat obscure, conceptual artist of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since that same time, he has also remained a member of the avant-rock group *The Red Crayola*. What each of these artists bring to the making of *trip* accounts for about all that is fixed and certain in this fluid project full of multivalent and potential meaning. Those meanings I discuss here are of my own invention. The *trip* you take will likewise be your own, although in this it will not be a wholly undirected venture.

As predominantly an itinerant artist who works solely with photographic images, Lipper's commitment is more to the literacy and meaning of photography than to the depiction of place. Yet place, and particularly travel, has shaped a great deal of her appreciation of a photographic language with its means and efficacy, possibilities and limitations to communicate both within and across visual and verbal cultures.

I first met with Susan Lipper in London in the summer of 1997. She was then already deeply involved in putting together the series and sequence of images that would become *trip*. Lipper began working in a serial fashion in the early 1980s while at Yale. Similarly, her work has since mined real fictions scattered across the duplicitous ground of a staged documentary. Consequently, her work has been open to literal readings that place it all too firmly and unproblematically within a documentary tradition. When we met that first time, we spoke of such frustrations – of communities of readers and the breaks on cross-cultural communication. Lipper's earlier project – *Grapevine*, presented in 1994 as a fictional equivalent of documentary events – provided her with an object lesson in how photographic meaning – and equally reality – are manipulated through inclusion, omission, editing and staging. One of the most pronounced, and yet surprisingly opaque features of *Grapevine* was that it was a doubled-sided fiction. The series of pictures of which it was comprised presented a mirrored image of a character constructed through the making of those pictures. In this earlier project, sadly too few readers engaged with the posited question: who was this Other behind the camera? With *trip*, such questions of authorial subjectivity and intent are inescapable. The play of found and staged objects and images Lipper scripts in *trip* presents a photography that straddles documentary traditions and conceptual practices. Her sequence of images then constitute not only a critique of recent photographic history, but also the construction of identities and meaning for both viewers and makers.

In *trip*, the outsider status and fictional role of the photographer is exaggerated so as to foreground the constructed qualities of what stands on either side of the camera. Susan Lipper's images here function, much like Barthelme's written texts, as directly reported speech. Above all, they are presented as a sequence, rather than autonomous images. To *trip* belong some fifty

images, with all but four joined by a written text. To offer a representative sample, as we have done here, is to do some necessary and irrevocable violence to the sequential whole. This is significant given that an important aspect of Lipper's project is to examine just how photographic series are disseminated and circulate in the world.

The impact of Lipper's full sequence of images is cumulative, but far from conclusive. A series, and indeed a sequence, infers some consequence. Yet, while the details and facts that are presented in text and image are individually cohesive, each informational package is far too complex, slippery, and at times nonsensical to be fully coherent. *trip* is a textual project that comments on the weakening authority of texts, understood equally as both words and pictures. The project challenges a reader to invent meanings and construct a chain of significance that gathers together fragments of image and text into a patchwork fabric whole. In doing so, *trip* addresses the politics of reading as much if not more than those of representation. At issue here is not only an archaeology of American culture and a deconstruction of the myth of the Open Road, with its false glamour and horizontal freedoms, but more importantly the political consequences of illiteracy - both at the level of the photograph and that of society.

For all the increase in stature and position of cultural products, images, and art in the late 1990s, a literalism far too often maintains a grip on the production of their meaning. Our access to, and ability to generate allegorical readings withers and is supplanted by the consumable literacy of a global market that speaks a lingua franca of Capital. Photography is inextricably implicated in the spectacular forces of commodification as it aids in the atrophy of memory and hobbling of historical subjects. Images can hardly be expected to resist that which they play such a great part in defining. While acknowledging this state of affairs, Lipper's *trip* proposes a collaborative model that re-deploys the expectations and conditions of photographic spectatorship by foregrounding the embedded contradictions out of which meaning is written and made - particularly those tensions that emanate from the interstices between word and image.

The language of Lipper's images and Barthelme's text in *trip* is resoundingly vernacular. Lipper's images are self-referring as they mine the archive and visions of American documentary photos. If one looks for them, one can easily find Walker Evans, and Robert Frank, Lewis Baltz and Lee Friedlander. Perhaps even the shadow of John Szarkowski lingers behind the bark of a leafless tree. Barthelme too refers back to the texts of his novels, at times nearly plagiarizing his originals as he borrows from previous colour and tone. This is in part what makes these visual and verbal texts vernacular: they are a shared and common currency that is part of these artists' formation. That you, as a reader, can recognise these vernacular features is not important. What is, is that they are still ready at hand for use. Text and image are here meant to be equivalent and immersed in the everyday rather than the epic.

The flow of images that comprises Lipper's sequence is cyclical and, like an index of a voyage, it possesses a beginning, middle, and end. Barthelme's written text is not there to supplement Lipper's scripted images - this is not a standard play of picture and caption. Still, a photo-narrative structured through a sequence of serial images is a model of storytelling. And in the telling of this story, both Lipper and Barthelme present a deceptively direct display of language and view that unravels the predictability of a linear reading of setting and scene. Lipper's enactment of the outsider, the interloper and exotic other is persistently interrupted and undercut by the local nature of Barthelme's words. His is the voice of a witness on the inside, perhaps somewhat other than himself, but an indigenous participant who is an observer nonetheless.

This tension between texts visual and verbal unleashes a stream of spatial and temporal complexities in *trip*. The place of the action is nowhere, and yet everywhere - specific, and yet generalized to the degree that it could be happening almost anywhere within the global reach of standardizing market forces. The time of *trip* is also conflated, as photographs deliver up the past in a relentless overthrow of the here and now. The fantasy of this spectacular escape is cut through by the contemporary nature of Barthelme's voice - his text is so much of the here and now as to be almost new. This feature of Barthelme's writing drags Lipper's images forcibly into

the present. This is anyway where they originate and exist. As readers, we show a tendency to reify images as objects and tokens of a past from which we have always already left behind. The people and figures that readers write into the subjectless spaces of Lipper and Barthelme's texts could more aptly belong to a dystopic future rather than a sobering past.

As Susan Lipper says, "words and pictures, text and images, are mutually corrosive." In *trip* their union sets up an antithesis which only a supple and literate reader can synthesize in a text of their own devising. To do so, one must be prepared to not only read, but write against the grain of expectations and conventions; to plumb what is left of a common language; and struggle to achieve a critical literacy other than that tendered by the vernacular nothing of a global market. This is where Susan Lipper's *trip* begins.

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