

Susan Lipper: *Collisions of Experience*

By Val Williams

In 1988, Susan Lipper began to document the community of Grapevine Hollow in West Virginia, USA. This small settlement, significantly distanced by geography and culture from Manhattan, where Lipper has lived for all of her adult life, has now become an iconic series within contemporary photographic practice.

Susan Lipper has been making photographs in Grapevine for over two decades, becoming a familiar member of a community which rarely mixes with the outside world. The Grapevine series says much about photography and its multiplicities. Susan Lipper has used the medium both to narrate the everyday life of an 'ordinary' and out-of-the-way place, and has rendered it extraordinary, constructing a diaristic narrative which is complicated, subtle and revealing. More than almost any photographer of her generation, Susan Lipper has used photography as a teller of stories, through intricate exercises in collaborative documentary.

The duration of this extended photo series raises many interesting questions about the ways we look at images. In 1994, when work from Grapevine was shown in the group exhibition *Who's Looking at the Family?* at the Barbican Art Gallery, Lipper's photographs were, inevitably, regarded as documentary—a photographer's mapping of a specific location and community. Grapevine was seen, almost universally, as a social commentary on a way of life—analysis of a community, who would, inevitably, be seen as 'other'—poor, different, chaotic, dysfunctional. Lipper saw her work very differently. For her, photography was an expression of the self, a way of manifesting the imagination through the mapping of elsewhere. The series was embedded in both a photographic magical realism and a Carveresque sense of the absurdity of dysfunction.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, thinking about photography was not fully equipped to deal with the kind of critical distance and narrative thrust which was at the heart of Lipper's work. That these small-scale black-and-white photographs looked like documentary reportage placed them in a particular and somewhat restrictive canon. Interest in large-scale colour photographic works by contemporary photographers and the perception that this methodology could better convey photographic fictions, obscured the importance of the kind of photography beginning to be produced by photographers like Lipper and her South African contemporary Roger Ballen.

In her 1993 introduction to *Grapevine* (Cornerhouse, 1994), Susan Lipper noted that 'These pictures are not an effort to document, in any real sense, Grapevine Hollow, West Virginia, but rather the collision of my experiences, the tangible world and the nature of photography'.

Only relatively recently has contemporary 'documentary' photography begun to be seen as a complicated combination of real life, autobiography and collaborative practice. In Susan Lipper's *Grapevine* series, there is an understanding, shared between viewer, photographer and subject, that things are not entirely what they seem to be. Lipper describes the process of photographing Grapevine as a 'relationship', and refers to the series as 'my journal'. The photographs themselves are imbued with the photographer's wonderment and curiosity. Like Alice in the eccentric environs of the crazily distorted landscape of Wonderland, Lipper watches and listens and feels the mischief of it all.

For an insight into the series Grapevine, includes in her 1994 publication are highly significant. Owing something to both Samuel Beckett and Studs Terkel, these interviews are a haunting vernacular poetry, which Susan Lipper orchestrates.

Susan Lipper in conversation with Gene and Mother, two residents of Grapevine Hollow:

Susan 'Is she the only woman that ever shot at you, Gene?'

Gene 'Yeah. Yeah. I'm not lying. She crazy buddy. A woman. You said, 'A woman'. Now that man shot me right out here where Blossie lives at now.'

Mother 'Shot Raymond Rowe too, over a card game.'

Gene 'It wasn't nothing Ann. He just got sure of his money.'

Mother 'Well it was you'un that was playing and they shot Raymond in the shoulder... when they got to Gene his eye was running out on us.'¹

Lipper's use of oral history, the way she fashions questions, and the replies she elicits, form an alternative narrative to her photographs. They provide a dramatic dialogue full of detail, giving voice to those who appear in the photographs, and giving Lipper the opportunity to experiment with language and its expression through conversation.

From the intimacy of Grapevine, with its myriad of interconnecting relationships, trip published in 2000 with text by Frederick Barthelme was, seemingly, its antithesis. In her exploration of America's deep south, she adopts the methodology of transience, becoming, or so it might seem, the quintessential documentary photographer. Trip could be seen as a rite of passage, the paying of dues to the American documentary tradition, the brief visits to unfamiliar places, a series founded on the notion of transience, bounded by the occasions of arrival and departure, a tribute to American photographic picaresque. But trip was far more than this and, because of its complexity, earns a place as one of contemporary photography's most central and subversive texts. Trip is a compendium of photographic references, history reworked through photographs themselves. At the centre of trip is a very precise cultural and political thinking.

At a time when many photographers (Gregory Crewdson and Philip Lorca di Corcia immediately come to mind) were constructing narrative through documentary fictions Lipper (aided by Barthelme) used documentary to subvert itself.

Without the intersection of trip Susan Lipper may not have been able to produce her latest series of landscape photographs from West Virginia. The act of making trip seemed to release her from the boundaries of documentary. Returning to Grapevine, she has gained a new freedom of expression, the ability to express her solitariness which no longer needs to be reflected through the prism of other people's lives. The photographic and cultural references which were at the centre of trip and also significant in the making of Grapevine have now been replaced by something altogether more enigmatic. Grapevine is, for Susan Lipper, a monumental autobiographic and biographic project and these untitled landscapes are perhaps its enduring overview. In her notes

Lipper reflects on 'subjective documentation— a place visited photographically for 20 years. Possibly like Atget's public parks.'² Lipper revisits the countryside around Grapevine Hollow as an intimate, an honorary member of a community in which she will always be an outsider. She encounters a luxuriant landscape, untouched, save for the odd human intervention—a look-out platform built into a tall tree, a ladder, a track, the ghostly outline of a single-storey house. She is interested in beauty, but is too skeptical, too experienced, to be beguiled by it. If she feels as if she is in paradise, she is as conscious as ever of the probability of loss. She refers to: 'Nature viewed as lush and enveloping—almost biblical, a found Eden. How

ever also lawless, scary and threatening.’³

Readers of Lipper’s photographs over the last two decades are only too aware that her work is never quite what it appears to be, that it asks questions, demands an intensity of response and is underpinned by complex agendas, political, cultural and personal. Through these landscapes, Lipper invites us, yet again, to interrogate the meanings of photographic images and to investigate the intentions of the photographers who make them.

In *New Landscapes*, Susan Lipper has signalled that her journal will continue, but also that it will develop and change. This is not Grapevine ‘re-visited’, nor even Grapevine ‘re-seen’, but rather Grapevine relocated within the imagination, Lipper’s, and our own. While the Grapevine first photographed in the late 1980s was a place of action, event, and relationship, sometimes transgressive, always beguiling, this new vision of place is eerily quiet. Along the margins and into the woods, it positions itself as the prelude to a fairy story, misleadingly peaceful and ominously adventurous; a narrative of intrigue and complication which goes far beyond the surface of the photographic image.

Susan Lipper is a photographer living in New York. *Grapevine 1988-1992* was recently on show at the Motus Fort Gallery, Tokyo.

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Notes

1 Extract from *Conversation in Grapevine*, Cornerhouse, 1994.

2 Susan Lipper, *Notes to the Author*, 2009.

3 *Ibid*