Transatlantica
Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

2 | 2016
Ordinary Chronicles of the End of the World

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Melanie Meunier

Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/8425
DOI: 10.4000/transatlantica.8425
ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher
Association française d'Etudes Américaines (AFEA)

Electronic reference
Melanie Meunier, "Lucy R. Lippard, *Undermining : A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West*", *Transatlantica* [Online], 2 | 2016, Online since 14 September 2017, connection on 01 February 2023. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/8425 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.8425

This text was automatically generated on 1 February 2023.

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Lippard, Lucy R., *Undermining : A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West*, New York, The New Press, 2014, ISBN 978-1-59558-619-3, 200 pages, $ 21.95, € 21,08

1 In an interview in 2012, Lucy R. Lippard recounts that she had always been interested in the word and the image, but that her efforts always fell somewhere in between and "you knew you could never get it" (Interview 2012). In *Undermining*, Lippard combines the two methods of expression, placing an essentially environmentalist narrative between colorful visual supports (photographs, paintings, collages) covering the top third of each page, and the artists' explanatory captions at the bottom. The result offers an experience that appeals to both visual and intellectual levels of comprehension. In a sense, it is the reverse process of curating : rather than writing a text about an artist's body of work, she has solicited many artists to provide visuals that enhance her text. Photography dominates her choices, because, like many contemporary artists, she considers it the best medium to convey "a way of seeing that flattens and blurs" (*Undermining*, 17) the West's wide-open spaces. The text, taken alone, could figure on the bookshelf of an environmentalist scholar. The visuals and their captions, taken alone, could constitute an artistic presentation of the contemporary West. Together, the visuals and the text present something that is hard to classify, a work that weaves stories of historical events into the present-day context of multinationals, fracking and climate change.

2 Her text could be read as an environmental "rant" (Interview 2014), as she called it, covering a variety of subjects : degradation of the land, of the cultural patrimony and of natural resources. Lippard recounts how a local gravel contractor swept away her pre-conceived ideas about small local mining companies, explaining to her that she should direct her attention to the multinationals, which come in, buy up the small businesses, and expand operations with no regard for the local quality of life. Furthermore, she and consumers all over the country are complicit in the destruction insofar as that they use gravel for their driveways, cement to build houses, etc. Her exchange with this man was one of the inspirations for writing *Undermining*.

3 Perhaps one of the most powerful aspects of this work is that it is very personal. Lippard starts from her own hometown and her own experience. As she affirms in an interview with Lauren O'Neill-Butler, "I'm a great believer in the idea you take responsibility for the place you are, and work on that" (Interview 2012). *Undermining* opens with a description of the Galisteo Basin in northern New Mexico, where she has lived for the past 25 years in a town of 250 people – quite a contrast to New York City, her previous abode for over 30 years. To illustrate the dissimilarity, photos of the apartment building in New York and her present house in New Mexico figure above the text, adding a distinctly personal tone to the work as a whole.

4 Lippard mentions her participation in local committees to influence land use decisions, doing watershed restoration and fending off oil and gas development (Interview 2012). She cites her opposition to the expansion of a quiet, two-lane road into a multi-lane throughway :

> My own little house by the highway lies next to a two-lane rural artery that runs straight through the heart of our village, where once a wide, undefined dirt plaza in front of the church centered a community surrounded by fields and orchards... But now we see more than thirty gravel trucks per day, as well as gas and oil tankers weighing some 40 tons, tearing through from Moriarty, 28 miles south, passing over a concrete bridge built by the WPA in 1936, with a 15-ton capacity. The extraction process itself is problematic enough, but these behemoths barreling through tiny adobe villages spew dust and stones, shake historic adobe buildings to their foundations, crack these chunks of cultural history and rend the illusion of quiet village life. (19)

5 Above the text is an aerial photo of the hills and dirt roads surrounding a gravel pit with a tiny hamlet nearby, and the next page features a photo of a twelve-wheel transport truck. While images sometimes are more powerful than words, in this case, Lippard's description conveys much more of the lived experience than these photos can. This example of the gap between the text and the images reinforces the perception that photography and art are thought-provoking, but far from adequate to influence policy : hands-on involvement in the decision-making process through committees, demonstrations, talks, letter writing, and lobbying is capital. Lippard sums up her approach : "I argue now for the nearby, a microview of land and art, grassroots connections rather than macropronouncements" (88).

6 Lippard also constantly links local problems to national and global issues. Throughout the book, a major leitmotif connecting the many examples is the subversive power of the capitalist system, which puts profit first and undermines the landscape and the local quality of life, desecrates native sacred and Spanish historical sites, pollutes scarce aquifers and fuels climate change. Lippard frequently returns to the complex issues of Native American rights in New Mexico, observing that mining or other

development interests commonly trump the respect for Natives' burial sites, water rights and land rights guaranteed by treaties that were signed and then disregarded. "Western mountains may be sacred to Native people, but they are also grist to industry's many mills" (52). One illustration is the 1872 General Mining Act, which, despite its obsolescence, continues to "bleed the nation" (69). Originally established to encourage settlement of the West, the law "actually requires taxpayers to underwrite the pillaging of some of the finest lands in America" (Lippard quotes William Least Heat-Moon, 68). Leases to private companies of public land for the extraction of gravel, precious metals, uranium, oil and gas are cited as examples of congressional and administrative failures to protect national resources and Native American heritage. On the subject of fracking, Lippard speculates on whether a multinational has tunneled under her house in the quest for shale gas, tunnels that may one day cause the house to collapse. The policies adopted in the four corners region, where the states of New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, and Arizona meet, are "emblematic of the short-term thinking that also characterizes the official US response to climate change" (70). The presence there of the two most polluting power plants in New Mexico and Lake Powell, created by the flooding of beautiful canyons and thousands of archaeological sites, are two of several examples given to illustrate her statement. Thus, national interests – and multinationals' profits – proceed with little regard for the negative impact extraction has on the local communities. Lippard uses the metaphor of subterranean activity to look below the surface of contemporary practices to see how the present system is undermining the integrity of the land to the detriment of the local culture. Given the sheer number of cases of land abuse in *Undermining*, Lippard appears to be more activist than art lover in this work.

7 Lippard's attention has shifted from the esthetic to the practical, from landscapes and land art to land use in the Southwest. Indeed, one of the central questions Lippard raises is the relevancy of art to the complicated issues cited above. Lippard remarks, "Sometimes, the tools I bring from a lifetime in and on the edge of the arts are pretty useless when confronting land use and abuse" (3). She criticizes land art as too often being "a pseudo rural art made from metropolitan headquarters, a kind of colonization in itself... Cultural geography and the politics of land use have replaced land art in my windshield over the years I've been living in the West" (88).

8 Given the emphasis on the politics of land use rather than art, student of art Maya Harakawa found *Undermining* to be disconcerting and wondered how it fit into the realm of art criticism. Coming from a civilizationist/environmental perspective, what struck me was how Lippard is able to succinctly summarize these situations without falling into pessimism. Since the beginning of the environmental movement in the United States, concerned scientists and laypersons have made dire predictions about the future of the earth, nature and humanity. Environmentalists have been criticized for painting apocalyptic scenarios in which action must be radical and immediate to avert disaster. One example is the population scare of the 1970's, epitomized by Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968), in which he prophesied human decimation through starvation in the 1970's and 1980's. Today, some believe that climate change will eradicate humans from the earth if we do not act immediately. Al Gore, former Vice President, gained a wide audience in 2006 with his documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. In an interview in 2013, he stated (in less drastic terms than the language of the 1970s) : "The truth is that we're at a critical juncture in the history of our species and if we don't act soon, we could inhabit a world we don't recognize anymore." James

Hansen, reputed NASA scientist and foremost authority on climate science, has repeatedly sounded the alarm. The title of his book, *Storms of My Grandchildren : The Truth about the Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity* (2009), attests to his belief in the urgency of the situation, and is worded to jolt readers out of their complacency.

9 Lucy Lippard takes a different track : she is obviously very concerned about global issues such as climate change and the quest for new sources of energy, like fracking. Concentrating on her immediate surroundings and the larger region of the Southwest, she has crafted a book that addresses these challenges in a way that does not accuse, goad, or try to frighten the average person through doomsday prophecies. Instead, she gives matter-of-fact accounts of examples of land abuse and calls on the art community to become activist, too, and perhaps get the message across in a more palatable way. Lippard affirms, "Writing about conceptual, feminist and political art, I've concluded that the ultimate escape attempt would be to free ourselves from the limitations of preconceived notions of art, and in doing so, help to save the planet" (9). *Undermining* is a call for action, especially to artists, to use their creativity in order to raise awareness and play a role in devising "alternative futures."

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AUTHORS

MELANIE MEUNIER

Institut d'Etudes Politiques, Strasbourg, EA2325 SEARCH