

Ara Rose Parker
Photo-Communicué, Toronto
Summer 1981
Clues to Myself

Clues to Myself, Barbara Rosenthal; Visual Studies Workshop Press, 31 Prince Street, Rochester, N.Y. 14607. Distributed by Printed Matter, 7 Lispenard Street, New York. New York 10013, 47 pp. 1981.

"All my work is but a reflection, one of the innumerable reflections of what I accomplish, write and think. All my painting is but a small fragment of my total cosmogony." Salvador Dali.

So begins Barbara Rosenthal's book, "Clues To Myself," a collection of photographic and journalistic reflections about her feelings, experiences, relationships and dreams. The book is punctuated with quotes by individuals such as Dali, R.D. Laing and Henry Miller which ring out with the assurance of authority amidst Rosenthal's own philosophies of understanding, narrative sketches, words and catchy turns of phrase. The lexis and images are not so much illustrations of one another, nor descriptions of each one's intent, but more specifically evidence of the artist's questioning of structures, and contexts for self-understanding. Barbara Rosenthal in her "Introduction" states that it is her hope that with this collection of fragments from her world, the viewer, in reading the book, finds her/his insights compatible with Rosenthal's based on her assertion that "the purpose of art is to extend into us and evoke personal insight and emotion, and that although I am telling you what I see and think, you are looking at my work not so much to understand my life as to understand your own."

There is a simplicity about this artist's book which both frustrates and seduces. Frustration because of the nature of Rosenthal's conclusions which are inherent in the way her questions are constructed; questions which represent important issues about reality and perception. The presentation of her lexis and images carries with it the authority of own experience, elements juxtaposed in such a way that any questions asked are precluded by assumptions about the ambiguous nature of answers. In this way, much of what is read is frustrated by the obvious. The seductive character of the issues behind these questions, pointing towards the "annihilating" edge between realities and fantasies, narrative structures and documents of witness, allows for an accessibility and familiarity, a mutual recognition between reader and artist around the need to make public the private.

At times, *Clues to Myself* reminds one of the role of the class reader, albeit a sophisticated textbook for searching artists, carrying with it the dynamics of a lesson to be learned. One's anxiety in reading through the rhetoric of these images and text is in anticipation of comprehension questions that might well appear at the end, as in those class readers of childhood education. The page facing a photograph of a lone tree in a field reads as follows: "Here is a tree." "But it is only black and white." "Then it must be a dream of a tree." "Maybe, but maybe not." "What else could it be if it's not a dream?" "A photograph." The actual photograph of the tree is left on its own, made part of the context of the sentiments of this writing

by their juxtaposition, but alluding to little else. In contrast, John Berger, in *About Looking* has an interesting chapter about the Field which is wonderfully open-ended in its suggestive imagery, in its effort to design similar constructs for perception. This dialogue about the black and white tree is set up as a sort of parable for thorough consumption; the clever interchange of definitions seduces the intellect but does not lend insight into the issue of the photographic reality.

Journal entries are frequently scrutinized by their authors for tones of contrivance, fearing the possibility that the personal can be nothing more than just personal, and thereby not valid for others. Therein lies the artist's dilemma. Rosenthal, however, fails to transcend the personal in her self-consciousness by not answering to the potentially suggestive nature of her thoughts, leaving them simply as conclusions unto themselves. The stories, narratives, words and images in this book are tied together in no overall particular order. They are supposedly justified in their arrangement because they represent in totality the artist's conceptual constructs; she alone can be the author of these presentations and owner of these associations between image and text. They may perform this role of "clues" to herself but are left as statements for the consideration of the reader. Rosenthal may be correct in her assertion that we share in a collective of concepts; however, this function of compatibility between artists and audience holds true only insofar as images and text are denied their specificity, their personality in isolation from (their) her contextual interpretations. Her own philosophy about the structures of these elements, words and photographs, and their ordering in terms of priorities as to emotional and intellectual appeal, are her own, and must be appreciated as such. One question that might be asked of Barbara Rosenthal is as to why it is so important to her, as she stated in the "Introduction", that the reader find her/himself in compatibility with the artist in the interpretation of imagemaking. The exchange between artists and public is as important and dynamic when there is controversy and not compatibility.

It is essential to add that the vulnerability of this presentation is welcomed as further evidence of the fragility of conclusions of this nature. It reaffirms the contention that the desire to discover contexts and structures for information and experiences is an important endeavor. The risks which are taken by those who afford themselves the opinion to extend their perspectives necessitates the evidence — photographic, literary and otherwise, to attest to this pursuit. Barbara Rosenthal writes on her last page, what reads as a conclusion to her collection of insights, "I wished to remain invisible. I didn't want to seem pretentious," which is then followed by a photograph of a person diving into a pool taken from the back. The photographic "plunge" forward negates the fear of exposure in the preceding text and one is left to hope that this image rings out in its intent more forcefully than the fearful constraints of self-consciousness.

--Ara Rose Parker