

SALLY STEIN

Book Review: *Proximities: Art, Education, Activism*

Proximities: Art, Education, Activism by Linda Brooks. TC Photo, 2020. 260 pp./\$45.00 (sb).

For those mature artists still struggling (in all senses) and wondering if they will disappear with little notice, let alone any fanfare, Linda Brooks's *Proximities: Art, Education, Activism* offers a DIY alternative: forget the white knight, the blue-chip gallery, the well-funded promotions. Instead, gather what resources you can muster (with the help of friends and a game new publisher) to take stock of where you came from; what you aimed to accomplish; how you and your work changed; and what artworks, writings, and human encounters inspired you along the way and just might inspire others. What results in this case is a cross between an album of artworks and graphic mementos, and a memoir with autobiographical text segments punctuated by bibliographies of formative books from each decade—all providing strong scaffolding for the visual assemblage.¹

A half century ago, when I was in my early twenties, I had a roommate in the low-rent Washington Heights area of Manhattan. She spoke then and occasionally still does of a “Kitchen Table” book that would compile diverse artifacts of our consciousness-raising as young women, anti-war activists, and quasi-countercultural types living in the still ungentrified parts of the largest metropolis in the United States. I want to bring Brooks's publication to her attention as a variant on her never-realized “Kitchen Table” album even though this one dodges much discourse on sex and is not New York City-centric. Brooks was born in Brooklyn to immigrant Jews who then moved to a lower-middle-class suburb of Long Island; for college and graduate studies she moved to Buffalo, New York, and after that to Minneapolis, Minnesota. For confirmed New Yorkers like my former roommate, even Minneapolis, never mind Buffalo, might seem like the backward boon-docks. To such Big Apple chauvinism, Brooks notes that University of Buffalo (UB) offered solid undergraduate studies to in-state students, and its art department offered a fine master's program for people like her who couldn't afford terminal degrees from private art schools. She also points out that her art teachers at UB were all white men;

1. An early reader of a draft of this review asked whether this is a photo book or an illustrated memoir. Neither/both is my initial response, and to my mind the hybrid character makes this publication more memorable for not fitting easily into conventional genres. On further reflection about terminology I recall the German “bildungsroman” standing for a novel of education that in this instance gives unusual emphasis to the “bild” or image in the meaning of education or “bildung.”

however, the same was true for me back in the 1970s when I left New York for Rhode Island School of Design's private MFA program. At both types of advanced art programs, it was sink or swim for the women students, even more so for the exceptional student of color. In Buffalo, Brooks was part of the experimental gang that started and ran the now celebrated independent art space Hallwalls, with some of the women instantiating cultural feminism with exhibits of emerging women artists. In that first flush as an artist, Brooks sometimes garnered top notice and even the rare monetary prize. In this memoir as album, Brooks recalls proudly that at least some part of Buffalo fostered avant-garde practices and hosted shows, talks, and concerts by leading pioneers in a variety of contemporary media—from new music to film—which introduced her to thinking of art as idea and process over commodity. It was then and there, around Hallwalls and the local abandoned factories reclaimed by young artists as raw workspaces, that she got together with another young artist, Joe Panone, with whom she later moved to Minneapolis, married, and had two children.

The post-grad move to Minneapolis seems to have reoriented Brooks. I confess I am not greatly moved by the early work with which she starts the book, except for one weave of color negatives refigured as a ceiling-to-floor wall tapestry. The early collaging of globes and landscapes recalls for me the recurrent spheres in pictorialist photography, usually as accessory to dreamy fin-de-siècle females. Brooks's next major project was *it was the sound of the ocean* (1980–81). Made when she was in Minneapolis and lamenting the cognitive decline of her beloved grandmother back East, it also strains for the poetic, both in its gauzy language and evasive self-posings with her face either framed out or, in one case, veiled with a handkerchief. Here, however, she is adding language to her work, at a time when her intermittent reading lists show she is also starting to study contemporary artists who were making writing a coequal part of their art (Martha Rosler is credited as a notable influence, as is Carrie Mae Weems). Soon, however, she adopts snapshot-style indexical forthrightness as her new direction in forging both diverse portraits and descriptive texts.

This no-nonsense shift seems to follow her taking a one-year replacement art faculty position at the University of Minnesota at a time when the university had been forced to settle its first major challenge to longstanding sexual and racial discrimination in the composition of its faculty. The chemistry department had hired only one woman in over a century. In 1973, Shyamala Rajender, working as an assistant professor but only on a year-to-year teaching contract, initiated a challenge to such discriminatory practices on the basis of sex and national origin. The settlement that resulted put the entire university on legal notice that it had a problematic pattern of exclusion prohibited by the new Equal Employment federal standard. The resulting consent decree in 1980 opened the door for filings by hundreds of other women who claimed discrimination in their non-tenure track appointments or in their lack of advancement on the tenure track at the University of Minnesota; it also set new standards for reform nationwide. Brooks was among the new plaintiffs as she had applied for a faculty position but only got a one-year replacement position while the only male applicant won the tenure-track position even though he had applied after the deadline. Perhaps because of the new pressure on the university

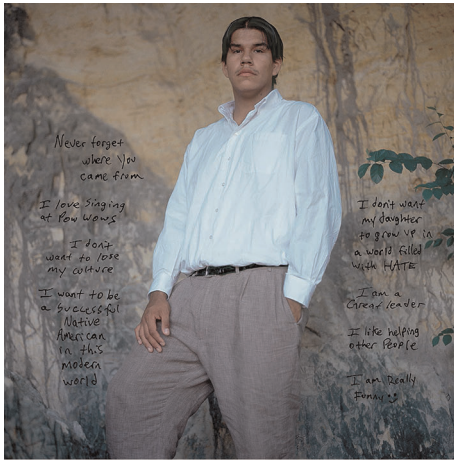
and her interest in serving the curricular needs of both the Studio Arts Department and the Women's Studies Program, Brooks continued teaching there for a decade. Through this connection with the Women's Studies Program, she set about learning in earnest feminist theory and practice, combining it with her knowledge of art and representation, while also mounting a legal challenge, largely on her own, by practicing the rudiments of discovery to economize on billable hours with a lawyer. In taking advantage of the class action options, the growing number of plaintiffs began to operate as a discriminated class, and at least some of the rare women who already enjoyed tenure offered support and expertise. Brooks took advantage of this outreach to hone the best ways to argue her case. I have never encountered so concise and lucid a statistical explanation for proving discrimination as she gleaned and summarizes: "If women with MFAs comprised fifty percent of the eligible candidate pool over the last several decades yet only 19% of the staffed positions are held by women, then discrimination is the only statistical explanation for the underrepresentation of women holding teaching positions. . . ." (44). This measure could be considered by any wanting to challenge extant hiring practices that slight, say, queer or trans people or people with disabilities as well as women and people of color.

Brooks did not win her case and secure a permanent job; neither did Rajender, the original plaintiff.² Weighing the cost to go to trial, Brooks settled in 1982, as had Rajender in the previous decade. However, Brooks's settlement involved not only more years teaching at the University of Minnesota but the stipulation that a woman must get top consideration for the next open position in the Studio Arts Department. In 2020, she proudly noted her former department's reformed composition: "full-time tenured or tenure-track Studio Arts staff consist of nine women and eight men, including three men of color" (45). With no women of color, it's not the mountaintop but certainly closer.

Brooks won in other ways. She gained experience in organizing herself and with others. The next section of her memoir shifts to her participation in the fledgling Women's Caucus of the Society for Photographic Education (SPE). In reading her account, I, who was briefly part of this caucus, encountered a snapshot I barely recall making back in the 1980s that somehow also made its way into her records and the book. I also learned more about the ways women photographers and photo teachers continued to struggle and substantiate their feminist contribution to counter the longstanding currents of sexism in the field of photography. Her experience with hands-on discrimination cases also led her to lobby for and oversee the national survey of race and gender breakdown in photography teaching positions that SPE published in 1988.

The legal case Brooks prepared largely on her own taught her to hone her writing and presentation of self as a serious contender. Even at its most layered, her subsequent visual

2. Elsewhere I learned that while Rajender's financial settlement was large, most went to legal costs and she felt so traumatized by being branded a troublemaker in the sciences that by the time of the settlement she had switched fields and become a lawyer. It's regrettable that Brooks's publication, full of diverse clippings and photographs, includes neither Rajender's ongoing story nor any portrait of her, a number of which are easily found online. In 2020, the groundbreaking scientist-turned-lawyer published her own memoir, *Up Against the Ivory Tower*.



Thomas 18 2006/2007
36 x 36

168



Emily 17 2005
36 x 36

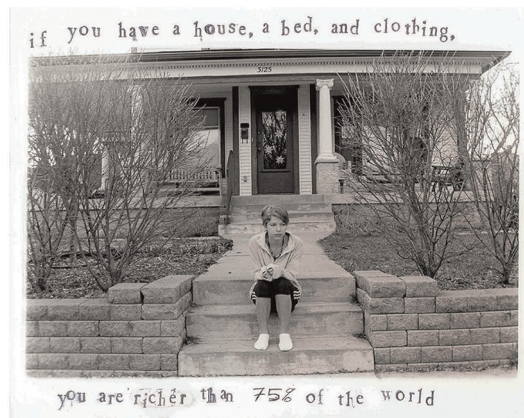
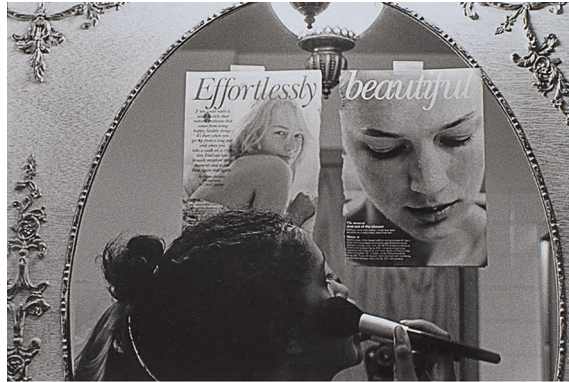
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art evinces an economy of purpose, as do the accompanying captions as well as the writing in this well-crafted memoir. The grounding in academic feminism informs the subsequent direction of her teaching, first a decade at the University of Minnesota, then two years at Minneapolis College of Art and Design, followed by more than a quarter century at St. Paul Academy and Summit School before retiring in 2016. That independent school proved congenial, permitting her to add more feminist perspective to the curriculum, which prompted students to find their own voices and visions. One powerful series she made collaboratively with some students and other teens is her portraits of them that they then inscribed with their handwritten commentaries about themselves and their hopes. Of course, that orthographic element recalls the social portraiture of Jim Goldberg. Brooks tacitly acknowledges his influence by citing him in the memoir's decade-by-decade bibliographies.

Like a prospector, Brooks was mining the fields of photography and contemporary social critiques for all the tools that seem worth trying in various contexts. Moreover, she drew on her much earlier experience in Buffalo creating exhibits in independent art spaces to encourage students to both experience what's going on in local museums and galleries and be unafraid to show their work in public. Brooks arranged to have a subsequent series her students produced of their own annotated self-portraits exhibited simultaneously with a 2004 travelling show installed in Minneapolis of the work of Lauren Greenfield on the worst aspects of *Girl Culture* in a hyper-consumerist world. These students thus mounted a real-time counter to Greenfield's depictions of wannabe Barbies.

This profusely illustrated chronicle had me riveted despite considerable prejudice on my part. For years I harbored a visceral dislike of anything resembling a scrapbook, as I found that genre seemed to yoke women as guardians of family values and memories. Certainly that aversion was reinforced when Hobby Lobby, the largest privately owned chain of craft shops in the US, led the legal charge against women's rights to reproductive

crossing borders between the home and wide world, and considering ways that contradictions play out in both spheres. One piece collages snapshots of Brooks's youthful father after he left the Navy following World War II, posing with her mother; but the typically sweet courtship and marriage pictures are offset by the overlay of a mushroom cloud over the Pacific that mocks the horseshoe configuration of "Honorable Discharge." Not stopping there, Brooks inserts on the bottom right a photograph of the scarred back of a Japanese survivor of the US nuclear attack, positioned under another small news picture of the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials. So dense is this assemblage that the discordant elements only surface gradually with their abrupt effects. In this retrospective assemblage, it suddenly seems a miracle that the marriage, indeed any postwar scenario of wedded bliss, flourished in the shadow of these global horrors. Yet it did, and with a daughter in the next generation paying homage to enduring relationships while mindful of all the misery that happiness must contend with or ignore. But then, as an annotated self-portrait by one of her students declares, "if you have a house, a bed and clothing you are richer than 75% of the world" (118). No wonder this teen depicts herself hunched on



ABOVE
Photograph by
Ashley Malecha (SPA '04)

BELOW
Photograph by
Kala Findlay (SPA '14)

the steps of her modest home instead of seated proudly—it's a load for any of us who can claim a fair amount of comfort to ponder what to do constructively with such privilege.

This book is a potent testament to the second-wave feminist slogan "the personal is political." This claim is not, as some have lambasted, a substitute for traditional power struggles but, rather, an argument that personal life is hardly insulated from hierarchical dynamics. There are plenty of contradictions embedded here. Brooks gave birth to first a son and then a daughter. In keeping with late twentieth-century progressive notions of childrearing, she tried to raise them the same. She delights in photographing the end of a playdate that leaves wrestling figures and Barbie dolls piled together like the proverbial communion of lions and lambs. Although constitutionally preferring signs of constructive harmony, Brooks allows for some discord, noting that her own mother let only the granddaughter play with costume jewelry and rebuffed any signs of interest by her grandson. She also adds one annotation to a photo that her father, long an avid amateur photographer, had an annoying habit of sensing her photographic interest and then getting out his own camera to try to beat her at the recording game. She stages a fine self-portrait with her mother—both of them wearing enviable creations hand-knitted by the latter—but while her mother looks utterly proud yet relaxed as she leans into the camera while retaining her cigarette at arm's length, daughter Linda is literally holding back, preferring, it seems, to contain rather than express stress. Her only comment is the terse caption, "Mom at 55, me nearing 30, 1981." This book attests to her radical aspirations, but with minimal drama and the rifts they might cause. Weaving and incorporating are techniques she treasured learning from her crafty maternal forebears instead of a radical renunciation of the old in a search for something wholly new.

With her eclectic mix of styles as well as sizes of images, Brooks's selection leaves me recalling a surprising number of them. Initially my favorite was taken in a shopping mall exhibition space, with the artist sitting in front of her framed works that she has draped in black mourning cloth because the major commercial occupant of the mall just withdrew its funding of Planned Parenthood. It's a fine example that sometimes you don't make a priority of your art when there are other issues that need immediate attention through a different kind of performance of resistance. Now I am favoring a double-page treatment of her father's death. Although many pages of the volume are jam-packed, here restraint rules the presentation. This was a man with little education, hospitalized for a few years after 1945 for wartime injuries; while never "making it" as he switched and juggled multiple low-level jobs, he figures as a model of both hard work and, like Brooks's mother, upbeat self-presentation, no matter his limited means. Although he does not seem to have ever worked as a travelling salesman, I am reminded of Arthur Miller's famous play with Willy Loman's wife (coincidentally also named Linda) insisting that no matter her husband's failures, "attention must be paid." Brooks's two-page diptych—depicting what is characterized as the aftermath of a rent-a-rabbi funeral for a man who traded in his observant Jewish roots for more secular pleasures in his modest Florida retirement—left me momentarily catching my breath. Finding oneself at a loss for words might be the most apt summation of an ordinary life's barely visible marks on the world. That vacant quality prompts its own moment of reflection.

VIP 2008
12x18

246

FUNERAL NEEDS 2008
12x18

247

Once I appreciated that this hybrid compilation can be skimmed yet truly rewards a deep dive, questions began mounting. I am left wondering what happened to those idealistic teens whose images and statements Brooks featured. At some point I grow conscious that the husband who figured strongly in the first half of the book recedes from her frame. I infer the marriage ended, and this already marks a change from previous generations when most marriages continued for life. Brooks never declares that change in her family situation, and yet in this reprise of the personal as political, I want to know how this shift erupted or was gradually negotiated; given her preference for steadiness, I'm assuming the low-drama latter.

I'm still unsure of the *Proximities* title. Most immediately it refers to the three elements in her subtitle—art, education, activism—that she imbricates in her narrative. Yet the many names cited in this rich volume suggest another kind of rubbing-shoulders proximity with numerous networks including a few Big Name artists. But like *20 Feet from Stardom*, the revelatory film directed by Morgan Neville about backup singers who until that 2013 documentary were unknown and unsung, Brooks makes clear that it “takes a village” to make any artist, whether exalted or barely known. Brooks has the smarts to acknowledge that for herself, with the gratitude all of us need to take humble pride in our own small place in a vast world that defies the myth of a simple global village. This is her testament to her place and contribution in that complex world we inhabit, learning from others, exploring and organizing numerous modes of critical expression that others carry forward with their own acts and creations. ■

SALLY STEIN is professor emerita at UC Irvine, who after retiring from teaching continues to research and write about the history of photography while still based in Los Angeles. More details on her work can be found at www.sallystein.com.