

Once you see how photobooks use sequence to combine space and time through memory, then the possibilities of reading become really expansive.

## Sequencing Part 2

TATE SHAW

# Strategic Linkage: Binding and Sequence in Photobooks

The way images and texts bind together to form narratives is critical to a photographic sequence. I'm using the word *binding* in the conceptual sense, how images mentally link to one another or to a text. Photo sequence combines images in a specific order to create a context for meaning to be inferred between the images. There is a wide range of different sequence modes as well as variations on prototypical sequence styles. A mode I'll single out here binds subject matter in photographs to create metaphors. I'll use the book, *A* (J&L Books, 2011) by Gregory Halpern as a prime example, with added support from Jason Fulford's *Raising Frogs for \$\$\$* (The Ice Plant, 2006) and *The Mushroom Collector* (The Soon Institute, 2010). Along with the Halpern, Fulford edited *A*, and his own methods illustrate the far end of the spectrum of subject matter image-binding in a photographic sequence.

To illustrate binding, consider an opening page of *A* where on the left you have a birch tree, knotted and twisted in on itself; on the right, a portrait of a redheaded man with light blue eyes. Binding compels the reader to give the two images a single overriding identity and recognize them as a whole. A narrative leap is required to see the two pictures as one entity. To form a closure, we think through why they go together, though this thought process may not be entirely conscious. To me, the knotty tree is the redheaded man's state of mind, a metaphor for how he views the world. Metaphor expresses a complex idea by making a comparison, one thing to another, to more clearly represent the unrepresentable. Binding the subject matter in these two distinct images becomes a way the photographer can make what is interior exterior.

Image binding is a fiction the author creates by having one photograph following another in sequence. The strength of fiction is that it is unreal, and yet it exists in the world to reveal something about it. Part of reading fiction is forgetting that you're doing it. You have to unconsciously see through the ink on the page to experience a barely budding awareness outside of what is actually there. A big reason to reread photobooks is the reward of experiencing that sensation all over again, and to realize new and changed connections between the images. Once you see how photobooks use sequence to combine space and time through memory, then the possibilities of reading becomes really expansive.

For instance, *A* reads as a postindustrial commentary on the small American Rust Belt city—places like Halpern's hometown of Buffalo, New York. It starts on the cover with a photo of hands holding an x-ray signifying injury. With the memory of the x-ray in your mind, you then engage with overlaid and inverted maps, suggesting an excursion through multiple injured, damaged cities. The book's next photograph is a scrappy little cat meowing a warning, followed by a broken gate and overgrown threshold; then a glinting shard of glass on a bed of rocky dirt. The cat is a guardian before the gate of an urban garden in ruins. This mode of sequence is a visual and lyrical language. A lot where a house was demolished, followed by a house with a hole in the side, then another patched house, then a bush we could hide within, fort-like. This is about our basic need for shelter. These photos represent the housing crisis, the great recession, the blight in the urban core of our small cities.

We see a home lost to a fire; a man seated on stairs nearby, naked and alone; a silhouetted couple under a tree at twilight; then an African-American couple cuddling for the camera—Adam and Eve. The next opening references the Garden of Eden on the left, the tree of knowledge on the right; next is the fallen angel Satan in the form of a snake. A later section alludes to Milton's *Paradise Lost* or a Homeric tale of Odysseus. A black-gloved hand holds a string of pearls, payment to cross the river Styx into the underworld; a black bottle of dead flowers in a dying forest; a flock of crows in a tree; the figure of death garbed in a hoodie. Death binds us to a view looking down at city houses, then a grave and bones from a similar point of view. And so, by binding together the subject matter of different images, Halpern and Fulford employ great rhetorical skill as they update classic tales of the fall of humans to expose our hubris and expulsion from that former paradise that was the working-class American city.

Fulford has taken this mode of binding to its logical end, combining images for their own sake in *Raising Frogs for \$\$\$*. The cover claims to be a bizarre handbook, and then virtually nothing inside connects to the title. With this idiosyncratic framework, Fulford defies expectation and opens pathways for an original discovery. Fulford relies on non sequiturs, which translates "it does not follow," and yet images do follow, in sequence, and we make relationships, absurd as they may be. This type of image play is all but impossible to explain verbally, and besides, you don't want to justify it any more than you want to explain a joke.

Fulford's most recent book, *The Mushroom Collector*, adds multiple dimensions by including a series of found photos of mushrooms as well as text. The mushroom pictures pace the book and provide distraction, as well as a strange sense of awe. The texts are micro-fictions that grow little narratives in the mind the way mushrooms themselves are thought to pop up almost overnight. The mushrooms are a metaphor for thoughts and concepts, as related to making photographs; they filter what one sees of the world. The only text without an image in the book reads, "Where do the mushrooms end and I begin?" And this is as good an analogy as any for image binding and sequence in photobooks. A book is a real thing we can touch, feel, and enact by turning pages. Our own thoughts get infused with new ideas as we page through the book, binding images and texts to one another and to our own mental images and sensations. Our thinking is not separate from the thing being thought. Image binding in photographic sequences makes a whole that includes the thinking part, too.

**TATE SHAW** is director of the Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, New York ([www.vsw.org](http://www.vsw.org)), a nonprofit organization supporting photography, books, and film/video with an accredited MFA program in visual studies. Shaw routinely organizes exhibitions and lectures on books, including the Photo-Bookworks Symposium at VSW, June 28–30, 2012. He is copublisher of Preacher's Biscuit Books and his own work is held in many private and public collections of artist's books internationally.

Gregory Halpern

*A*

J&L Books

New York, 2011

9 1/2 × 11 3/4 in. (24.1 × 29.8 cm)

96 pages

56 four-color images

Hardcover with tip-on

[www.jandlbooks.org](http://www.jandlbooks.org)

