
Jo Spence:
Work (Part I & II)

Introduction

Jo Spence (1934–92) emerged as a key figure in the mid 1970s from the British photographic left, crucial in debates on photography and the critique of representation. Her work engaged with a range of photographic genres, from documentary to photo therapy, and responded to the prioritisation from the late 1970s onwards of lens-based media in art-critical discourse.

Rough edged, recycled, personal — in essence *positively* amateur, Spence's work stands in direct opposition to numerous artistic givens. She proposed process over object, collaboration and collectivity over heroic authorship and, above all, generosity (to self and other) over the pursuit of any singular creative ambition. While adroit with its arguments, she swerved the academic theorisation of photography, preferring an experimental and biographical exploration of ideas. This resulted in a richly didactic yet highly idiosyncratic output, one that is playful, silly even at times, while also being capable of delivering images of excoriating intensity.

Spence held the firm belief that photography has an empowering capacity when applied to complex issues of class, power, gender, health and the body. From this perspective she rallied against all forms of hegemony, dominance and control. Her critical concerns, be they with the idea of naturalism in the documentary image or protocols within the National Health Service, became the primary productive principal for her output, drawing her into action — variably as an artist, writer, activist, community leader, adult educator and patient.

While a prevailing wind of cultural pessimism might propose Spence's work as specifically periodic, to those who know it, and to those who — through this exhibition — will come to know it, it is clear that she has much to offer contemporary audiences. Her work is best described as energetic, one that is constantly agitating, asking awkward questions, and pushing against things. It is no wonder that Spence was never quite at ease with the title 'artist'. Instead she had a preference — one linked both to the behavioural condition of the photographer, but also to the nature of her critical enterprise, that of 'cultural sniper'...

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Jo Spence: Work (Part II)

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On the twentieth anniversary of her death, *Jo Spence Work (Part I and Part II)* offers an important opportunity to experience a significant presentation of the photographer's practice first hand. In doing so, we hope the exhibition allows for a recognition of the relevance of her work and working methods, both of which remain as sharply radical and transformative today as they were over two decades ago.

The exhibition is chronologically split across the two sites: SPACE's presentation will focus on Spence's work from the late 1960s to the early 1980s and will explore the explicitly social and political dimensions of her early solo and collaborative work. Studio Voltaire will present later works from the early 1980s up to the artist's death in 1992. The latter works broadly deal with issues of health, therapy, self-empowerment and mortality. This publication has been produced as an introductory guide to the works on display at SPACE and Studio Voltaire. We urge any reader interested in Spence's practice to do some further reading — we have included a recommended reading list in this publication as a starting point.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Stanley Thomas Johnson Foundation and The Andy Warhol Foundation for Visual Arts for their generous financial support and Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) for loaning three key bodies of work that has enabled the largest presentation of Spence's work in the United Kingdom to date. Thanks also to Simon Jones for this creative input and expertise with the exhibition design. We are particularly grateful to Richard Saltoun who represents the Jo Spence Estate for his valuable support and input. Finally, our warmest thanks go to Terry Dennett, curator of the Jo Spence Memorial Archive, for his tireless involvement and generosity in the development of this project.

JO SPENCE: *WORK (PART I)*

1 JUNE – 15 JULY 2012, SPACE

1967–74

High Street Photographer

After leaving school at thirteen Jo Spence was put through private secretarial college by her parents who wanted 'something better' for her having both worked in factories all their lives. Following a stint at the Fellowship for Freedom in Medicine, Spence took a position as a shorthand typist/book-keeper/secretary for a small commercial photographers in Finchley called Photo Coverage. Exposed to photography for the first time, Spence soon took a keen interest; enrolling in a training course at Kodak led to the purchase of her first camera. Upon leaving Photo Coverage Spence took a number of photographic support roles, including working as assistant, secretary and printer for well-known Canadian advertising photographer Walter Curtin.

In 1967, borrowing £300 from her parents for rent, fixtures and fittings, Spence went into business on her own running a small photographic portrait studio in Hampstead. Weddings, family groups and baby photos were her mainstay, with passport pictures providing some extra cash. More interesting work included producing portfolios for actors or legal photography for solicitors.

Spence's early encounter with the highly structured and formal world of commercial photography opened her eyes to the way all images are encoded with values and performances:



Jo Spence, circa 1970, *Untitled*

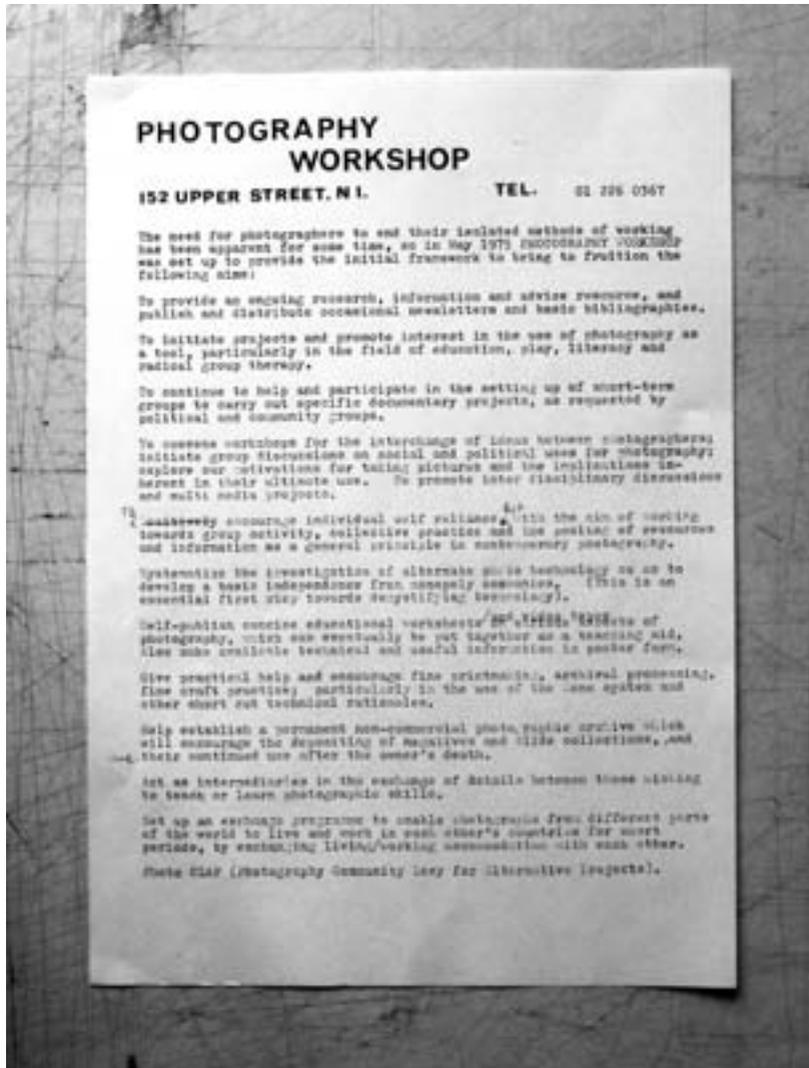
My specialty was the production of portfolios for professional use, and in the evolution of this work I learned the art of visual stereotyping. Sometimes actors would try out new 'selves' for the camera, and I would try to interpret their needs in the light of what they presented to me, what they said, and the parts they were trying to get.

This practice of asking, listening, looking, and interpreting fed into my photography for the general public. I began to ask who and what the pictures were for, and then in collaboration we would produce such different views as seemed feasible, or as the sitters gave themselves permission to show me. It was only years later when I was in therapy and trying to 'speak' to various parts of myself that I began to make connections with this earlier practice and seek for a way of portraying psychic images of myself.¹

1973–75

Documentary Work and the Children's Rights Workshop

After a number of years working professionally, Spence began to question 'cultural ideals' of photography. By the early 1970s Spence was exchanging her purely commercial relationship with photography for an interest in the political and documentary possibilities of the medium. This led to her involvement with the Children's Rights Workshop. Spence's early documentary work took a particular interest in how children are represented within the family environment and attempted to break through the usually scripted depictions of children within archetypal domestic photography. During this period, Spence met Terry Dennett who would become a lifelong collaborator. Working together, they photographed travelling communities living under the Westway in Notting Hill. Owing much to a social documentary tradition, the photographs explore issues around the representation of marginalised and underrepresented communities.



Photography Workshop Aims

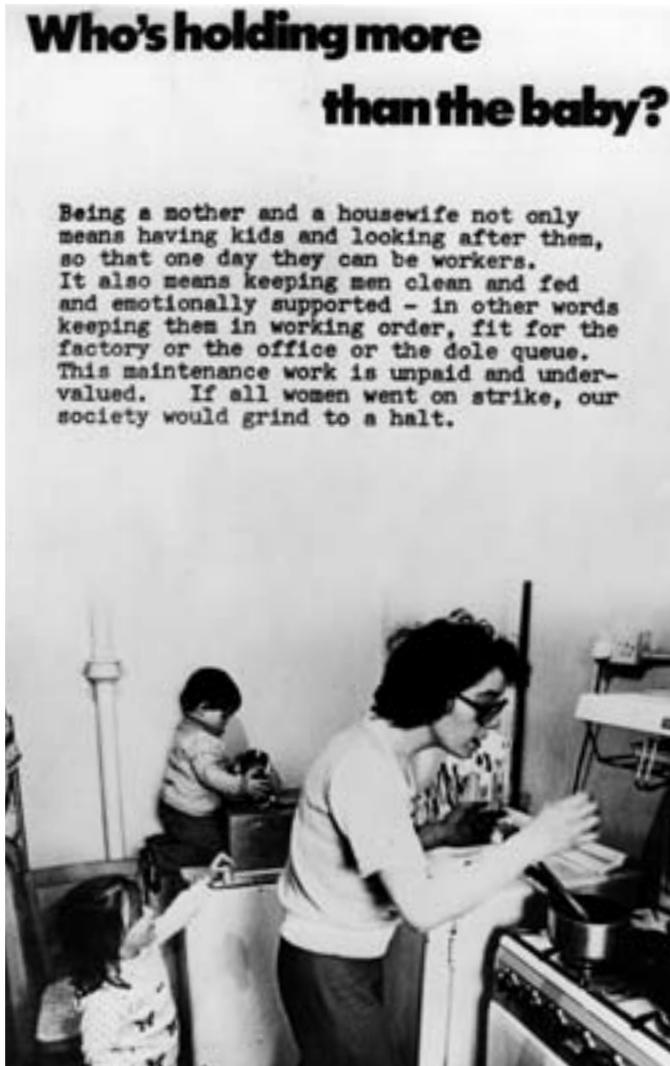
We started to visit illegal sites in various parts of London where gypsies and travellers were encamped, and to take photographs. You could say that it was the classic introduction to documentary for me. I was both privileged and upset to be allowed to look at a world where people had to work so hard to survive, whilst labouring under such terrible disadvantages. The transient sites in particular had no plumbing or refuse removal and life appeared to be very hard. I feel in retrospect that I was looking at them sometimes as the exotic 'other', and at times as 'victims of society'...

...We always took contact sheets back to the site and provided people we had photographed with images of themselves. Here I encountered an antagonism to images which were not idealized or obvious snapshots. To attempt to interest people in a sociological approach to their lives seemed impossible. It never occurred to me to teach people to take photographs of their own lives.²

1974-onwards Photography Workshop

Established in 1974 by Dennett and Spence, the Photography Workshop was set up as an independent research, publishing and education project. The Workshop started to produce projects in the mode of 1930s documentary photography. Influenced by John Heartfield and the Arbeiterfoto groups of pre-war Germany, Dennett and Spence moved away from straight documentary in an attempt to destabilise their work through the use of photo-montage and the incorporation of text and graphics.

Photography Workshop engaged with a number of activities that aimed to establish a collection of 'progressive alternative materials' relating to the production, dissemination and use of photography. These activities would often feed into each other, for example, research into historical photo technology



Hackney Flashers, 1978, *Who's Still Holding the Baby?*

allowed for an indexed collection of substitutes and alternatives to commercial production. Through educational workshops, these cheaper alternative methods of production used to empower amateurs to be more self-reliant and not be constrained by the use of expensive materials and equipment. Additionally, they mounted educational exhibitions which toured a number of art centres and community projects, as well as being used in teaching sessions.

1974–early 1980s

The Hackney Flashers Collective

The Hackney Flashers Collective emerged from Photography Workshop and included a changing affiliation of women working within education and the media. The group defined themselves as both feminists and socialists.

The original group formed in late 1974 and in 1975 produced an exhibition — Women and Work — was produced as part of Hackney Trade Council's 75th anniversary celebrations. Since then Women and Work has been exhibited all over Britain in colleges, libraries and community centres, and at conferences in this country and in France. Slides have also been used for discussion at a range of events within the Women's Movement, Trade Unions and Community Organisations.

The collective's original aim was to document women in Hackney, at work inside and outside the home, with the intention of making visible the invisible, thereby validating women's experience and demonstrating women's unrecognised contribution to the economy.

The limitations of documentary photography became apparent with the completion of the Women and Work exhibition. The photographers assumed a 'window on the world' through the camera and failed to question the notion of reality rooted in appearances. The photographs were positive and promoted self-recognition but could not expose the complex social and



Jo Spence, 1979, *Beyond The Family Album*

*economic realities within which women's subordination is maintained. We began to juxtapose our naturalistic photographs with media images to point to the contradictions between women's experience and how it is represented in the media. We wanted to raise the question of class, so much obscured in the representation of women's experience as universal.*³

1979

Beyond The Family Album

The principal question of Spence's *Beyond The Family Album* project concerned what was being screened out from family photography. In contrast to the carefully orchestrated images of union, celebration and occasion — the smiles and the laughs of a birthday or the joy of a seasonal holiday together — other images, those perhaps with the capacity to diminish the idea of familial stability and certitude, seemed — in the main — to be missing. Where were the tears, the screaming fights, the *untruths* and illnesses? Why are these moments being consistently omitted while others were being actively pursued and included?

Beyond The Family Album tackled prevailing tendencies in the way value is attributed to certain images and not others, while also inserting a disruptive agency into the representational condition of family life. The project was a turning point for Spence, marking a move away from the observation of others and towards a sort of therapeutic self-analysis/critique; a relocation of profound significance for her practice in general and one that would remain of central importance for the rest of her life.

As a photographer I had spent most of my working life trying to visually represent other people. As a studio assistant, carrying out my professional practice, I 'interpreted' instructions from clients or employers; as a local newspaper photographer, I did as I was told and took pictures which the editor would approve of; as a portrait photographer,

I gave people a view of themselves that they wanted to see. When I reached forty, working as a freelance documentary photographer and becoming more politicalised, I began to have serious doubts as to my right to continue with my work — to act on behalf of those I photographed, who had no control of what I did with the images, or who could not decide what words would we put with their image. As a result of these doubts, I eventually gave up being a photographer.

Additionally, I was questioning the naturalism of the photographic image (with its apparent ability to provide a ‘window on the wall’ by giving the effect of reality by apparently replicating what had been in front of the camera) as the best way to use photography politically.

Later, as a feminist, when I become more aware of my own socialization as a ‘woman’ (and of the process of ‘bourgeoisification’ which I had undergoing — which had taken me completely away from the working-class roots and struggles of my own family) I began to think about how I had been represented by others. This was a starting point to a project on ‘my history,’ in which I began to tentatively examine the existing photographs of me, and ended by my taking control over how I wanted to be photographed. Thus I changed my role from being behind the camera to being in front of it, but became at the same time as an active rather than passive subject. Not only did I take more control over what I presented of myself to the camera, but I also decided what techniques I wanted used on me.⁴

1980

Fairy Tales and Photography

The question of how to represent the unrepresentable, posed initially through her work on family albums, found an extension in a project based around the Cinderella story.

I began to grasp a wider problem for me as a photographer and social historian: how could I represent power structures in which we are formed as children, and which then pin us in place? [...] From 1980 to 1982, whilst a student at the Polytechnic of Central London, I made an extensive study of the evolution of the Cinderella Story, looking particularly at the pictures which had hardly changed at all in over a hundred years, consisting of roughly twelve or less different tableaux. I came to the conclusion that the many possible meanings of the story were limited to very few possibilities by the specificity of these pictures. In most stories the pictures repeat what the words tell us, so I began to be interested in pictures which by saying something different from the text opened up a space for new meanings to emerge. I wanted to contradict or demythologize the story...⁵

1980–82

Remodelling Photo History

The critical importance of *Remodelling Photo History* to the subsequent direction of her practice cannot be underestimated. The project, again co-produced with Terry Dennett, emphasised staging and construction over the problematic assumption of naturalism in the documentary image. The term ‘remodelling’ placed emphasis on the necessity to the ideological and organisation restructuring of the

4 *Jo Spence. Beyond the Perfect Image. Photography, Subjectivity, Antagonism, MACBA Exhibition catalogue, (Barcelona: MACBA, 2005), p172*

5 *Spence, Putting Myself in the Picture: A Political, Personal and Photographic Autobiography, p98*



Jo Spence / Terry Dennett, 1982,
Remodelling Photo History: Realisation

photographic image. Necessarily theatrical (the idea of photo-theatre being a key concept for Spence), *Remodelling Photo History* drew from the drama-therapy of Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal, whose 'spect-actor' techniques were absorbed and repurposed in the project for personally and politically therapeutic ends.

For those of us who are photographic workers it is obvious that a vast amount of work still needs to be done on the so-called history of photography, and on the practices, institutions and apparatuses of photography itself, and the function they have had in constructing and encouraging particular ways of viewing and telling about the world. The photo work which follows is an exploration of our attempts to work through some of this problem by 'making strange' the everyday, normalized, institutional practices and codes of 'the trade', re-ordered, re-modelled, re-invented, so that their commonsense, unquestioned notions become disrupted. We are not trying to show familiar objects in unfamiliar ways, but rather to denaturalize the genres of photography which already consist of fully coded visual signs. Much of our thinking on this had been influenced by reading and seeing the work of Brecht, and by the writings of Augusto Boal...

...Above all, we wanted to get away from the dry didacticism which pervades so much worthy work on photographic theory and to provide instead a kind of 'revolt' from within the ranks. In a funny sort of way this is a return to our class roots, where adversity and oppression are dealt with not only through comradesly struggles or learned exposition, but lived out through individual or group rituals like sarcasm or irony (which is commonly termed 'taking the piss'). We aimed to produce something which was perhaps not quite in such 'good taste' as it usually expected; something which tried to break down some of the sacred cows of photography and bourgeois aesthetics while daring to mention police photography and fashion photography in the very same breath, to indicate that perhaps they share some common formal features.⁶



Hackney Flashers, 1980, *Working Lives*

1980–82

The Polysnappers

In 1980, Spence enrolled as a mature student on the Polytechnic of Central London photography course. Her studies (in what was at the time a theory heavy department) synthesised her political position and past involvement within collective and collaborative endeavours with a grounding in communication theory, psychoanalysis, feminism and semiology. Whilst on the course, Spence co-founded The Polysnappers alongside fellow students Mary Ann Kennedy, Jane Munro and Charlotte Pembrey.

Our London home was always full of groups

— *older women's groups, younger women's groups, photo literacy groups, mask-making groups.* Spence's decision to take a higher education degree under the conceptual artist and writer Victor Burgin was no exception. Enthusiastic and happy to be a student at a college with a reputation for a progressive curriculum, she soon became critical of the structures and the difference between the critical theory she was taught and the not-so-critical practice of the institution itself. Predictably, she formed another group by starting to work with three fellow students. The Polysnappers' final degree exhibition was made available to Photography Workshop after the group left college, who toured it for some time before passing it on to the Camera Work Gallery who then lost it some years later when their building closed. Summing up the work in their introduction to the degree show, they said:

Working in a group has given us the opportunity to make a shift away from individual work and assessment (so rampant within photography) and to share our skills in a non-hierarchical way. It has also allowed us to negotiate apparently insurmountable problems of 'what to do' with theory, and to combat intellectual terrorism through joint discussion. Solidarity and an open exchange of ideas has been a crucial process within the group throughout the eight months that we have worked together...⁷

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From: *Polysnappers, degree show introduction text, 1982* (published in Jo Spence. *Beyond the Perfect Image. Photography, Subjectivity, Antagonism*, MACBA Exhibition catalogue), p22



Jo Spence / Terry Dennett, 1982–86, *The Picture of Health?*

JO SPENCE: *WORK (PART II)*

12 JUNE – 11 AUGUST 2012
STUDIO VOLTAIRE

1982–86

The Picture of Health?

Last Christmas, having recently completed three years' study as a mature student, having earned a first-class degree with honours, now utterly exhausted and wondering what the hell it had all been about, I had to go into hospital. Suddenly.

Dutifully, so as not to waste time, I took with me several books on theories of representation, a thin volume on health and a historical novel. One morning, whilst reading, I was confronted by the awesome reality of a young white-coated doctor, with student retinue, standing by my bedside. As he referred to his notes, without introduction, he bent over me and began to ink a cross onto the area of flesh above my left breast.

As he did so a whole chaotic series of images flashed through my head. Rather like drowning. I heard this doctor, whom I had never met before, this potential daylight mugger, tell me that my left breast would have to be removed. Equally I heard myself answer, 'No'. Incredulously; rebelliously; suddenly; angrily; attackingly; pathetically; alone; in total ignorance. I, who had spent three years (and more) immersed in a study of ideology and visual representation, now suddenly needed another type of knowledge; what has come to be called 'really useful social knowledge'. Not only knowledge of how to rebel against this invader, but also of what to do beyond merely reacting negatively. I realized with horror



Jo Spence / Terry Dennett, 1982–86, *The Picture of Health?*

that my body was not made of photographic paper, nor was it an image, or an idea, or a psychic structure... it was made of blood, bones and tissue. Some of them now appeared to be cancerous. And I didn't even know where my liver was located.

This peculiar disjuncture in my knowledge of the physical world caused such total crisis in my thinking and activity that it is only now, some six months later, that I am beginning to realize what has happened to me. So began a research project on the politics of cancer, with a fervent desire to understand how I could begin to have a different approach to health in which there would be less consumerism, more medical accountability, more social responsibility, more self responsibility.⁸

Spence's lumpectomy and adoption of alternative health regime is documented in *The Picture of Health?* which charts her journey through illness and her treatment within the apparatus of the NHS. Spence articulates her feelings of being infantilised at the hands of the doctors and interrogates the 'medical gaze'.

1982

Cancer Shock, Photonovel

I returned to the hospital to the definitive confirmation that my tumour was cancerous. The Duty Nurse was very supportive and I felt genuinely upset that part of her job was first to give me the bad news, then to have to tell me that the hospital could not offer any immediate 'in-house' counselling because of 'the cuts.' An appointment could be made, she said but there was a waiting list. In the meantime my doctor could prescribe some medication. I said no, I would make my own private arrangements, and left feeling utterly alone. In the shadows of my fears came also a rebellion, against the rubbish I discovered that I was being fed about my treatment options and the need to have my whole breast off thus ended my first lesson as a cancer patient.⁹

⁸ Spence, *Putting Myself in the Picture: A Political, Personal and Photographic Autobiography*, p150–52

⁹ Spence, *From Cancer Shock, Photonovel*, laminated panel text, 1982



Jo Spence /David Roberts, 1988, *Evacuee*

In response to her cancer diagnosis, Spence produced a diaristic series of photographic montages that brought together documentation and ephemera in an attempt to navigate the complex feelings of anger and fear, and to deal with issues of control, patients rights and alternative therapies.

1984–onwards

Photo therapy

Drawing on techniques learned from co-counselling, psychodrama and a reframing technique borrowed from neuro-linguistic programming therapy, Spence and collaborator Rosy Martin began developing their own form of photo therapy. In a challenge to the orthodox idea of fixity within portraiture, Photo therapy presented new forms of representation which allowed for multiple, fragmented selves. Martin and Spence created a personal therapy tool, producing work that allowed the subject to control their image and represent their own difficult and often previously unexpressed feelings and ideas. Working collaboratively and taking it in turns, the person in front of the camera was both subject and author of the image. In a number of different sessions, Spence worked through a number of personal histories and traumas such as going into hospital and her feelings of being infantilised; her relationship with her mother and feelings of abandonment while she was evacuated during the war and her emotional roots to patterns of eating. This series further extended Spence's interrogation and decoding of sexuality, family and class.

*Two elements make up photo therapy — photography and therapy — and each word has come to have a number of meanings for me, both as a former professional photographer and a cancer person. I arrived at these formulations mostly through actual practice, so my ideas may not be the same as those of an academic or professional therapist. Any theory I have now acquired came to me slowly from a variety of sources...*¹⁰



Jo Spence / David Roberts, 1990, *Cultural Sniper*

Spence continued working with photo therapy with a number of other collaborators/ therapists, these included Ya'acov Kahn, David Roberts and Dr Tim Sheard.

Libido Uprising (1989) is a series of photo therapy works produced with Rosy Martin and Spence's partner David Roberts:

Most of my work remains totally private, but occasionally I feel safe enough to share it with others. Thus the work moves from being part of an ongoing process (the taking of pictures), through into a series of interior dialogues and transformations after my viewing the pictures, into finally becoming potential raw material for public work. In Libido Uprising (which is part of my ongoing work on the mother and daughter relationship) I have endeavoured to enact interior metaphors for my conflict between the domestic and the erotic, between my image of my non-sexual mother and that part of myself which is still coming into being...¹¹

Narratives of Dis-ease: Ritualised Procedures (1988–89) is a series of works produced with psychotherapist, Dr Tim Sheard:

In these photographs is the beginning of a 'subject language'. One which allows me to start the painful process of expressing my own feelings and perceptions, of challenging the 'ugliness' of being seen as Other. In so doing I cease to be a victim, becoming again an active participant in life. I am not suggesting that making these pictures has solved all my problems, nor do I want to create a new mythology, dwelling only in the active role, I still oscillate going between subject and object/victim, but I am no longer 'stuck' and have begun to live with my own totality. In displaying this work (as I displayed my body previously for each of the medical, the familial, the media and the male gazes) I am aware that these images can shock. Breaking out is not painless for anybody. In cracking the mirror for myself I cannot help but

11 Jo Spence, From: *Exploring the Unknown Self: Self Portraits of Contemporary Women*, Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography exhibition catalogue, 1991, (published in Jo Spence, *Beyond the Perfect Image. Photography, Subjectivity, Antagonism*, MACBA Exhibition catalogue), p358



Jo Spence / Terry Dennett, 1991
The Crisis Project: Scenes of the Crime

challenge your view too. By giving expression here to eight years of my life I stand in contradiction to those who have the power to repress or deny the experience of others. In doing so they make our experience appear ordinary, robbing it of any importance or potency. If I don't find a language to express my subjectivity I am in constant danger of forgetting what I already know...¹²

Cultural Sniper (1990), produced by Spence and David Roberts:

A crisis of identity culminating in my trying to tell myself a story of who I thought I was. I finally came up with an image which had evaded me, one which was structurally absent from my previous photographic discourse, the image of myself as a Cultural Sniper, capable of appearing anywhere, in any guise.¹³

1991–92

The Crisis Project: Scenes of the Crime

The Crisis Project was a collaborative project that Spence had been making with Terry Dennett up until her death.

The study of crisis as a subject in its own right has occupied us practically and personally for many years now. Our initial starting point was the important question of economics, and the problems of how to represent it. At an everyday level the work was also the result of having to confront a life-threatening illness and encountering the many taboos which surround the cancer patient. These twin poles then brought about a double 'crisis of representation' which we as photographers have continually tried to address. Thus, our 'Crisis Project' does not simply stem from theory, nor is it an attempt at 'correct positionism': rather, we have tried to amalgamate our lived experiences in crisis management with diverse theories of the visual...

¹² *Ibid.* p374

¹³ Jo Spence, From: Jo Stanley (Ed.), *Jo Spence: Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression*, (London: Routledge, 1995), p162

...In planning and undertaking 'The Crisis Project' we have proceeded as if we had been given a 'historical commission' for a future government to produce visual material for a criminal trial against those who have presided over with despoliation and pollution of today's society. Technically of course this is a fantasy but in fact the archives we are building up using this 'historical imagination' approach will, if they survive, be truly transported forward to the future and the project will then almost certainly become a reality. 'Scenes of a Crime' uses two genres: legal record photography (documentation of the scenes of a crime) and staged photography.¹⁴

1991–92

The Final Project

I thought cancer was lonely, but it was nothing to having leukaemia. Leukaemia is a killer disease. There is no cure for it. If you deviate one iota from the path of chemotherapy, everybody, literally everybody, thinks you're stark raving mad. This time my witness, my advocate's eye, is a hundred times keener than it was before, and I'm using my camera as a notebook. I keep a diary. I'm watching, and I know there is no easy answer. How do you make leukaemia visible? Well, how do you? It's an impossibility. It's what I went through before — a crisis of representation. I actually haven't got very much to say at the moment. I'm dealing with an illness that is almost impossible to represent. I have not the faintest idea how to represent leukaemia except for how I feel...¹⁵

The Final Project was first conceived while we were on holiday in Tunisia early in 1991. Jo had just returned from a three-month tour with her work to Australia, Canada, and the United States feeling tired, looking pale, and suspecting she might have more health problems. Somehow the conversation drifted toward the question of aging and death as the ultimate human condition. We had previously theorized that you start to

die the day after you are born. Jo felt we should begin to tackle the question of aging and mortality. Her diagnosis of leukemia led us to formulate a final project based upon the notion of mortality and possible death. Initially, Jo thought of it as a 'final' project because it was going to be her last work in photography. It would include documentation of her treatments as well as photo theatre and photo therapy sessions on mortality and approaches to death in different cultures. During her second illness, photo therapy proved emotionally difficult, so a more allegorical approach evolved. The Final Project was our last collaborative project, and it also included David Roberts, who technically assisted her.¹⁶

1992

Untitled by Terry Dennett

Jo Spence on a 'good day' shortly before her death, photographing visitors to her room at the Marie Curie Hospice, Hampstead.¹⁷

1992

Hospice Diaries

One of Jo Spence's major personal projects was the documentation of her everyday life, the good and the bad. For this purpose she developed ideas gained through her studies of three genres — the family album, life writing and scrapbooking

14 *Ibid.* p218–2115 Jo Spence interviewed by Jan Zita Grover, *The Artist and Illness. Cultural Burnout / Holistic Health!*, 1991 (published in Jo Spence. *Beyond the Perfect Image. Photography, Subjectivity, Antagonism*, MACBA Exhibition catalogue, p413–14)16 Terry Dennett, from *Remembering Jo Spence: a conversation with Terry Dennett*, Tina Takemoto, (*Afterimage*: March/April 2009), p1317 Jo Stanley (Ed.), *Jo Spence: Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression*, p227

to create what she called a workbook, a cheap A3 news cutting books filled with photographs and commentary. She put these books together on an almost weekly basis from the 1980s when she got cancer till a few days before her death in the Marie Curie hospice in 1992.

About 40 of these have survived to give us a unique insight into her life. Like many of her projects the workbooks were made for a dual purpose — First as an intimate personal record to remind her of her travels through daily life and secondly for sharing with others as part of her aim to always put the personal into the public domain. — A method developed by the feminist movement under the slogan ‘The Personal is Political’. Thus the Workbook is both a personal and private work and a public anthropological document designed to survive the death of the author. Many people have fought and struggled against cancer and other adversities like Jo, some documented their lives, others not, so we know nothing about most of them because they didn’t consciously set out to share their struggle with others and thus we cannot benefit from the lessons they learnt in their struggles — they and their lives are lost to history — it’s as if they never lived.¹⁸

1991–92

Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis uses another older technique called ‘flip printing.’ The image is printed both ways (right-side up and upside down, reversed) and joined together. This can be pre-visualised by placing a mirror at right angles across an image so that both the image and its reflection slowly merge. Metamorphosis is also a one-of-a-kind series produced after Jo’s death in accordance with our previous discussions about pre and post-death collaboration. The idea came from the philosopher Jeremy Bentham who stipulated that his body

would be mummified so that he could continue to attend his college council meetings even after he died. Bentham called his mummy an ‘Auto-Icon,’ a term Jo adopted for the dolls she used as self-substitutes. Metamorphosis was our attempt to push the boundaries of collaboration a bit further. We thought, if we could collaborate in life, why not collaborate in death?’¹⁹

Some questions & answers

In conversation with audiences in various parts of the country whilst *The Review of Work* was touring, the following questions came up.

Do you see yourself as an artist?

When I was a mature student at the Polytechnic of Central London on an arts degree course, we had a lot of lectures about the history of art, as a result of which I decided I was a photographer and not an artist. If sometimes it help me gets a small grant by calling myself an artist, then of course I will. I finally called myself an educational photographer, whatever people think that means, as a way out of the problem. Then there is the other word 'feminist' that gets tacked on; i.e. feminism as a style of photography, and one could spend the next hundred years trying to explain that it isn't a style but to do with a body of ideas. Although I am a feminist and a socialist I am not a feminist or socialist photographer because I don't think you can talk about photography in those terms.

In 1975 when some of the galleries were getting interested in so-called 'radical work' or interventions made by women who were politicking around certain issues, some of the work like the Hackney Flasher Collective and my own work on personal photographs was elevated onto the walls of the Hayward Gallery. Then it started to be attacked for what it was never supposed to be in the first place. All the bourgeois critics really got their rocks off. So I have a lot of problems around the word artist. All the same, I can't deny a deep inner need now to be acknowledged and taken seriously.

So why did you decide to show your Review in art galleries?

I wanted women's work and collective work to be seen in a gallery situation. Lurking behind that was also the fact that I was quite ill

and felt it would be nice to see all my work on display together in my lifetime. It sounds a bit desperate but it isn't. My work is usually all scattered about. Some of it has gone into mixed shows. Some of the Poly snappers work has been seen at the ICA in London when they did a show on advertising, and some of Terry Dennett's and my work went into various touring shows. But it has never been seen in its own right, it's often taken off the shelf like a cultural commodity to fill a gap. The Cockpit Gallery circulates many of the exhibitions I've been involved with around schools, community centres and conferences — all campaigning circuits and educational sites. Reviewers persistently ignore group work, especially from the women's movement and from students. Unless it is circulated round galleries, group work is not taken seriously. I'd also like to join the ranks of those trying to redefine the gallery space; some of this work might shock people who visit galleries because it is involved with things like divorce, cancer, sexuality and domestic life.

It has been said that your work is about transforming practice and working collectively. Yet the Review seems to contradict that.

Usually photographers are talked about in terms of their development, but most photographers I know have a range of practices that coexist at one time. At college I worked in a group in order to have solidarity as we felt so isolated as women. But I also worked through the same period with Terry Dennett in Photography Workshop and I also went on working on my own.

Authorship is a complicated concept. Some of the work I put together is not strictly my own as lots of other people contributed to it, like Terry, who has done a lot of photography at my request which has now become invisible. Anyone I have worked with could take the part of the work they have contributed to and put it with 'their' work. On the other hand, I can't deny that I come from being a solitary photographer. Even when Photography Workshop was set up I went on being 'me' within it. I believe you have to take account of the fact that you are influenced by the dominant and antagonistic culture you move in, or by the theoretical work you are involved in. The fact that I was born working class and lived through World War II moving from family to family, school to

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school, determines my underlying attitudes to everything, including photography. It is important for the viewer to know that my work is race and class specific and that I am a woman of a certain age.

I'd also like to point out that collective work poses special problems. It is the quickest way I know to become invisible and not appear with histories of your own subject. No one really knows who all the women were in the Hackney Flashers Collective as it never got written down until now, and we didn't sign the work we sent out on the road as students. No record remains that such work took place or that groups are continually forming and splitting, which is my experience.

How difficult was it to photograph a divorce?

Every taboo is operating while a divorce is in progress. Just as there are taboos around domestic life (witness the paucity of the family album) so when the family splits up the agenda increases, especially when children are deliberately kept in ignorance. I took several hundred pictures of my brother's divorce and then had a crisis about how I could use them. I couldn't use them for anything he didn't want me to talk about and I couldn't say things that the children didn't know. It acted as a metaphor for the way in which events are represented in the media, where certain aspects of power struggles are absent through censorship, or just unrepresented in pictures. I was careful to include things like the labour exchange, the house being gutted, the children moving out... it is not just a record of the battlefield of human emotions.

You use your own very personal photos to explore general things that happen to women. Why do you use yourself in that public way?

Although I was born into the working class, I gradually moved to occupy a different position away from my parents, geographically, emotionally and ideologically. Mostly through the men I knew who were, without exception, middle class. Through the music I liked, the reproductions of paintings and the kind of furnishing I bought, the films and plays I saw, I made the traditional journey of being socially

mobile through culture. When I got involved in the women's movement, a group of us photographed some women in factories. Although we achieved our object, I felt very uncomfortable about celebrating this. I think this was because the women workers were very much like my mother and I felt accountable to them. I became so self-critical that I decided I couldn't put my own words with it, couldn't speak for those other women, however much they collaborated, and I almost gave up photography. It seemed to me there was nowhere else to go. But then I began to read stuff published by Centreprise, people's autobiographies. Whole areas of debate on people's history were opening up, and to me it seemed that I could investigate my own family photographs. I could investigate them to try and see what they told me. In the process of looking I came to the conclusion that they told me very little - which is what *Beyond The Family Album* is all about. They were either decisive movements in my life or else, through their genres and styles, part of an aesthetic history of photography. The more I worked on them, the more I concluded that if that was my history, it was a complete mythology. Theory entered here and showed the way forward. Without realizing it I had become involved in questions like 'Can you photograph the real?'; 'Is there a real?'; 'What are you doing with a camera?' In *Remodelling Photo History*, Terry and I explored the theory of women as object of the male gaze, using myself as the model. I have always hoped that some of my ideas of using the camera might be interesting to others; I have always wanted to encourage others to use the camera for its unfixing, rather than its fixing abilities.

Another reason is that I grew up in consciousness-raising groups in the women's movement where experience was shared.

Your cancer photography, like so much of your superficially bleak subject matter, is actually very positive. Is this intentional?

The work is about the process of struggle when ill and acts as a metaphor for all struggle. I think we should try to represent the struggle for *becoming* well and not just throw up a new breed of victims and heroines. The work should be about the fact that most adult women, for most of the time, are in the control of doctors for one

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reason or another, and many never experience good health once they start to have children. Our photographic work should show women trying to have more control over their bodies, as part of women's struggles generally to have more control. I want to pass on what I have learnt to my nieces, so that if they are unfortunate enough to be chronically ill they will not see it as 'only natural' but be able to ask questions and perhaps change the course of their lives with new knowledge, about, for instance, how to confront doctors, which is something almost impossible for most of us to because ideologically speaking they are seen as authority figures and surrogate daddies.

How much of your self-exposure and autobiographical approach is to encourage women to explore their identities and histories through photography? Is this part of your politics of photography?

I'm claiming that the camera can be reappropriated. Most people have a camera in the family, yet the way most women are encouraged to use it in the dominant photographic press is utterly banal. At most they are encouraged to photograph their children — but only in an idealized way. When you talk to women's groups about amateur photography, you find it is difficult for them to give themselves permission to even listen to the fact that they don't have to limit themselves to naturalistic photography of the family, that they can actually stage things for the camera or attempt a dialogue with themselves or take different sorts of photographs. It is even more difficult for women to engage with the fact that what is normally invisible could be taken up, and that the domestic use of the camera could open out this sphere of invisibility. As soon as that gets through there is general excitement — something like photographing 'a day in the life of ' instead of merely the high spots. Part of the work I did as a high street photographer was to make invisible the work that women do. I did it all the time without knowing that was what I was doing. I was too busy producing madonna and child images. Now if a friend asks me to photograph her with her child, I make a point of photographing the clutter, the so-called trivia of childcare. It is not so much naturalistic clutter I look for as symbolic clutter, where certain things are brought together deliberately for the image.

The next question is how to use the picture — the redefinition of use for amateur photographers. The idea that you might want to talk with your daughter when she is fourteen about your life together when she was small is very far from most people's consciousness. You can suggest that people take photographs of different subject matter like funerals or illness, but in the end you need a context for the use of such pictures.

Photography can also be used to encourage women to take a more political view of their family history. Nina Kellgren and I have devised a set of questions around areas of what you actually know and remember as opposed to what you can allow yourself to speak about. For instance, lots of people in a family know about domestic or sexual violence but no one talks about it. Our strategy was to get women to tell us what they knew and what they wouldn't talk about before we asked them to talk about their family photos of holidays, weddings and special occasions. We wanted to show them that they actually knew a phenomenal amount about themselves and their families which they had never written down or told anybody. We feel that women already keep the family archives and that it would not be a big step towards keeping them more thoroughly or differently, with a wider political and social context.

This text consists of extracts taken from a chapter which originally appeared in *Jo Spence, Putting Myself in the Picture: A Political, Personal and Photographic Autobiography*, (London: Camden Press, 1986).

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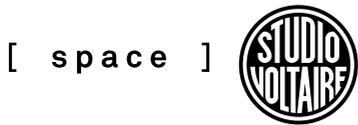
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Jo Spence / Terry Dennett, 1991-92, *The Final Project*

Jo Spence: *Work (Part I & II)*