

## **Jo Spence: Beyond the Perfect Image**

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#### **Jo Spence. Autobiographical Photography: Self, Class and Family**

##### **The influence of the women's movement**

Jo Spence's poignant autobiographical explorations of self, class and family can be considered part of the feminist milieu that arose in the 1970s. She very much identified with its consciousness-raising activities and ideological slogans like "Her story, not History", but did not believe in separatism. Her concerns within this broad movement always centred on an interest in the family, both women and men, in a personal history and unique archival documents like albums and photos. She urged her students as a first project to gather together all the family archives and photograph them, and then find ways of passing on this knowledge to future family yet unborn, so they too could know their roots and pay respect to their ancestors.

This work inspired a whole generation of young woman students to begin observing and recording their own daily experiences, and value their role as historian when they raised a family. In this respect Spence was closer to the relatively small group of socialist feminists and labour historians associated with the people's history movements than to the mainstream of the Women's Movement, but it is against a background of feminism and its general cultural concerns that Jo Spence started to formulate her work.

##### **Starting out in the 1970s: Photography Workshop Ltd**

My working contact with Jo Spence began when we combined our separate work programmes to found Photography Workshop Ltd, to provide a forum for discussing socially relevant photography and research the photographic and cultural radicalism of the past, which both Spence and I had independently started to do before we met.

Our first aim was to build up an archive of important cultural and photographic texts that were not easily available elsewhere. A call for donations from various people and our own research soon enabled us to gather together a lot of important material, and our collection soon became known and used by students and college lectures. Our second task was to initiate group projects on matters of social interest.

As part of our practical activities we started a community teaching programme that eventually operated out of an old hospital ambulance converted into a mobile darkroom. A regular route was started, visiting community centres, adventure playgrounds, squatted artists' studios and free schools that existed at that time. Some sessions were also held at temporary gypsy encampments such as those under the Westway flyover in London.

No one wanted to fund this work, so we kept our 9-to-5 day jobs and ran the workshop on a part-time basis – evenings and weekends. By frugal living we were able to self-grant the project up to £ 5.000 a year.

A text by Vaclav Havel, writer, poet, and later President of the Czech Republic, provided us with the credo for the workshop, and his eloquent statement is still of great relevance today. He said: "The intellectual should constantly disturb, should bear witness to the misery of the world, should be provocative by being independent, should rebel against all hidden and open pressure and manipulations, should be the chief doubter of systems, of power and its incantations, should be a witness to their mendacity". Read photographer for intellectual. Our research into various archives and contact with knowledgeable political activists provided us with further information about cultural and photographic activities, and a wealth of literature describing many then-forgotten cultural organisations. We also discovered the work of two contemporary practitioners, the German artist Joseph Beuys and the radical Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal, who became major influences and prompted us to look at modern radical art.

We bought Boal's book *Theatre of the Oppressed*, and it became a key text. John Willet, an expert on 1930s' art and culture whom we contacted to discuss our research, advised us to focus on the various movements that developed out of Berlin Dada and try to reintroduce some of their little-known ideas into our practice.

To increase our income and to further her own education on media and film, Jo Spence got a job as a secretary at the British Film Institute (BFI), and ended up in the education department. The facilities at the BFI gave us access to the work of three classic Russian film-makers whose ideas on the aesthetics of film we had long wanted to study: Sergei Eisenstein (collision editing), Pudovkin (linkage editing), and Vertov (factography).

In the mid 1970s Photography Workshop combined its programme with the Half Moon Gallery to form the Half Moon Photography Workshop (HMPW), the second viable contemporary photographic gallery in England – the first being the Photographers' Gallery, which is now in London's West End. The new organisation started its own ground-breaking magazine, *Camerawork*, and we were among its first editors. At this point Jo Spence became one of the paid HMPW workers, but eventually differences on theories of class and gender began to emerge within the organisation, and the former Half Moon Gallery directors unilaterally dissolved the partnership with Photography Workshop by sacking Jo Spence. An industrial tribunal for unfair dismissal resulted in an award of part of the joint HMPW funds to her, and Photography Workshop set out once again as an independent body, publishing the critical annual *Photography/Politics: One and going on* to set up a variety of community-based projects which included homemade camera workshops, photo literacy, and work with disabled and visually impaired students. The Photography Workshop closed in 1992.

### **Women's social documentary: The Hackney Flashers**

The Hackney Flashers Women's Photography Collective came into being after we called a meeting asking for people interested in doing documentary photography to help us with a request from a local trade-union body. We had been approached by a union representative in Hackney, London E8, a traditionally working-class area that was the centre of the low-wage clothing industry, for help and advice on an exhibition they planned to celebrate the work of the union over the past fifty years. We agreed to do the historical research with them, and suggested it might also be useful to include a set of contemporary photographs of work and life in Hackney to contrast with the historical images. The inaugural meeting we set up consisted mostly of women, so it was decided that the two men who came should withdraw, and it became an all-women group.

This group, which ran independently of our workshop, carried out important documentation of women's labour for a number of years. It became the longest-running female photography group ever to be set up in Britain.

The strange name they chose for themselves related to the Hackney district of London where the project was situated. "Flashers" referred to the fact that as documentary photographers they intended to expose bad conditions, a pun that also referred to the flashlight photography used by early documentary photographers.

Photographs taken for the union exhibition in local factories, offices, schools and hospitals later became part of an independent show, "Women, Work and Wages". The collective then went on to document nursery and childcare provision, which resulted in the exhibition "Who's Still Holding the Baby?"

The first Hackney Flashers' documentation for the union took place just before the area was regenerated to provide accommodation for middle-class people. Today many of the sweatshop factories have been turned into expensive loft-style apartments, and the working-class inhabitants have drifted away. The photographs are now all that is left to remind us of this vanished society.

### **Group practice: The Poly Snappers**

Jo Spence couldn't be anywhere for long without forming a group of some kind. Our London home was always full of groups – older women's groups, younger women's groups, photo literacy groups, mask-making groups. Her decision to take a higher education degree under Victor Burgin at the well-regarded Polytechnic of Central London (PCL) 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 place itself. Predictably, she formed another group by starting to work with three fellow students. The Poly Snappers' final degree exhibition was made available to Photography Workshop Ltd after the group left college, and we toured it for some time before passing it on to the Camera Work Gallery, who 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."

These eight months also corresponded with the start of our "Remodelling Photo History" and "Photo Theatre" work, so a great deal of interchange of ideas took place, with Jo taking the Poly Snappers our props to use and the Poly Snappers sharing their experience and ideas for working with dolls as narrative actors in photographic tableaux.

### **"Photo Theatre" and "Remodelling Photo History"**

In 1980 we decided it was time to bring together all the theoretical work we had done on photography, theatre and film, and merge the elements to create a practice that would be more filmic and theatrical photo theatre.

We called our first project Remodelling Photo History, the term remodelling being used to describe what would now be called "re-engineering" – ideological and organisational restructuring. The work was about genre, and the history within particular images. Our original rather grandiose conception had been to make photos using different historical processes, from Daguerreotypes to Polaroids, juxtaposing and critically mixing different period styles to further heighten the effect. Only a lack of funding prevented the realisation of this interesting idea.

As preliminary preparation for our new photo theatre approach we experimentally restaged a number of John Heartfield's works, of which only one example now remains. We learnt a lot from this restaging process – as art students no doubt do when copying the old masters.

The switch of emphasis from our previous classic documentary methods to the new plan for staged and constructed imagery led us to look for the work of other people making staged work. We soon discovered photographer Fredrick Holland Day, who in 1896 photographed himself as the crucified Jesus Christ. His realistic-looking pictures were completely scripted, with carefully selected props and locations, and he even went so far as to starve himself to give his Christ figure an emaciated appearance. The photographs demonstrated the basic model for a constructed, performance-orientated photography.

A meeting later in London with Canadian photographers Carol Conde and Carl Beveridge introduced us to the studio-based tableau photography they were then doing for the trade union movement, which inspired us further. They did not give their style of work a name, but at a later date we were to term it "Photo Theatre", and this name now seems to have become established. The English photographer Ray Lee also independently called his magnificent billboard-sized work Photo Theatre.

We decided to photograph some of our photo theatre outside the studio like Holland Day, and now scripted and directed our pictures like scenes from a play. Each location was carefully researched and all shots were worked out as a visual before we clicked the shutter. This pre-planning was an important change from our old documentary method of shooting first and asking questions afterwards. Three "Remodelling Photo History" images – Industrialisation, Colonisation and Victimisation – were constructed, using Pentadic analysis.

We had planned to start another project, to be called Life as Theatre, when Jo Spence left college, but a few months later she was diagnosed with breast cancer, putting an end to further work on this phase of our photography.

### **The Nottingham Cancer Project and beyond – Photography as therapy**

Spence's cancer diagnosis was a shock, and the possibility of losing a breast was a situation that none of her previous theoretical work on self-image and body politics had really prepared her for. Temporarily disoriented, she sank into depression, but soon realised that this was yet another life event she must document.

Spence realised that this illness presented her with an entirely new set of challenges, not only in regard to the direction her health programme should take – conventional or alternative – but also how photography was to be incorporated, if at all, into her busy cancer survival plan.

When we did find the courage to discuss the photographic possibilities calmly, it was decided we should work in both an autobiographical diary-like fashion and a therapeutic mode, based on her earlier "Faces" group self-image project that had been inspired by the ideas of the film and media teacher Keith Kennedy. With Remodelling Photo History and the successful use of Burke's Pentad still in our minds, we decided to read his book again for further ideas. We came across a part we had missed – what he called his three major pairs: Action-Passion, Mind-Body, Being-Nothing. This principle of dialectical groupings provided Spence with a possible way to choreograph her hopes and fears photographically, and also suggested a method for post-session image-editing. Spence also realised that these Burkean categories could be used in different combinations, reversed (Passion-Action, Body-Mind),<sup>1</sup> or connected into a sequence. It is unfortunate that this work started at a time when all our available funds were needed for medical fees, and buying film was a very low priority. This early work, therefore, was only practised in front of a mirror and not recorded photographically.

### **From camera therapy to phototherapy**

The success of these experiments and the stabilisation of her cancer encouraged Spence to leave our Nottingham house and return to London to meet other women with cancer who had been corresponding with her. At the same time she started attending a co-counselling session where she met a younger colleague, Rosy Martin. They agreed to set up a collaboration to explore Spence's cancer "Camera Therapy" method, and had the idea of combining it with co-counselling principles, adding a collaborative element that had been missing from the solo Nottingham explorations, making it more applicable to a broader range of subjects. They called this combination "Phototherapy", unaware that this name was already in use in North America. This collaborative method differed from the earlier solo Camera Therapy, where the sitter was both photographer and subject – a self-portrait environment.

In collaborative phototherapy both participants take it in turns to be sitter and photographer. These two systems differ again from the original Faces Group project, which gave Jo Spence her initial ideas for therapeutic photographic practice. In Faces Group work, six or more women took part (this seems to be the only example in Jo Spence's entire archive where groups are used in therapeutic staging).

Over the next eight years Spence set up collaborations with various people across a range of subjects. A couple of participants brought props with them, which gave her the idea of asking people to bring personally significant objects to work with. Graffiti and body art, first tried a few times in the Camera Therapy cancer work, slowly begin to play a more prominent role in the work, until in some photographs the text starts to advance over the body and finally spills onto the background. Body-writing and background graffiti merge to become a second "textual voice" that negates the hierarchy between image and text, giving a highly visual abstract effect.

From time to time Spence also begins to photograph in sequences and make series pieces, but following her anarchic nature she then often breaks them up again and re-uses individual pictures in other work. Unfortunately she did not always keep a record of these ad hoc reinventions.

### **Remodelling Medical History**

This medical history work was seen as a continuation of our earlier Remodelling Photo History project, but this time we decided to make a more autobiographical, diary-like project, a mixture of documentary photographs and medical ephemera with actual examples of the herbs and other alternative medicines Jo used. Although we intended photography to play a big part in this work, the main thrust was eventually centred on research into cancer and its management in a holistic way. This was the first priority, so we could independently construct a viable self-managed alternative treatment programme.

In "Remodelling Medical History" Jo, as the principal social actor, tries to come to grips with the daily reality of having cancer in a society which at that time was dominated by only three basic "quick fix" approaches to breast cancer – invasive surgery, radiation and cytotoxic chemotherapy. Take it or leave it.

This work is a bitter, realistic denunciation of the class-divided politics of health at that time, as perceived by many women who wanted choice in the way their illnesses were treated, and felt naturopathic methods like the Gerson

treatment should be available in public hospitals. Grass-roots agitation for such treatment resulted in the setting up of the pioneering Bristol Cancer Centre by Dr. Forbes and his colleagues – a clinic which Jo attended and which is still in existence today.

Agitations such as this one by Spence and other colleagues directed at nurses and junior doctors eventually led after Spence's death to the establishment of complementary centres in some hospitals.

Spence's story ends tragically and prematurely. Her breast cancer had been successfully stabilised and she started lecturing and seeing students again, but was warned that it was not advisable to overdo things ever again. After a few months of lecturing she was asked to tour with her work internationally, to Australia, Canada and the USA. She knew that this would mean suspending her health treatments and strict diet, but decided to take the risk to please her many fans in these countries. On her return three months later she complained of feeling tired, and was diagnosed with leukaemia.

### **The Final Project**

The leukaemia diagnosis came as a bitter blow, but Spence was initially confident that she could overcome this setback by using all the skills she had acquired when dealing with breast cancer. She immediately restarted her health treatments, but it soon became clear that leukaemia was more physically debilitating than breast cancer, and might soon stop her engaging directly in photography on an extended basis.

The original plan was to shoot phototherapy re-enactments, documentary photos of her health and survival treatments, and still-life tableaux on mortality. She started a series of leukaemia portraits rehearsed in a mirror, as she had done before in her breast cancer work, but soon realised that her gaunt appearance was at total variance with the mental image she still had of herself – of a person active in struggle. This mind picture could not be captured with normal photography. Attempts to photograph herself therapeutically in a graveyard using her regular photo-therapy methods ended in exhaustion and emotional upset, prompting her to look for more indirect and allegorical methods to explore her situation.

Remembering her earlier research on "Magical Realism", she decided to abandon direct photography in favour of a fantasy approach that better expressed the sense of unreality she felt about the possibility of death and non-being. She noted the dialectical link between fantasy and realism, and considered the possibilities of intermixing them to make a hybrid magical realism, which she called "PhotoFantasy".

Spence continued to use film right up to the end of her life, but this last work strangely anticipated the sort of montage effects that are now routinely possible with digital imaging. Her technique was crude compared with today's computer creations – she simply sandwiched two or more slides together, which I then duplicated. However, without realising it, Spence was attempting to go beyond film in her search for a more allegorical statement on mortality. There is a parallel here with one of the artists who influenced her approach, the French film-maker and magician Georges Méliès, the creator of filmic animation techniques in the 1890s which stretched the technology of the day to its limits.

As the project planning progressed, it occurred to Spence that she should perhaps also set up a "pre-death" fantasy funeral, since she would not be able to take part consciously in her real one. British religious rituals seemed too industrialised to make a meaningful holistic tribute to the dead, so why not adopt another, more exotic, religion?

A chance purchase of a book on ancient Egypt made her decide that she wanted an Egyptian "pretend" funeral, with its elaborate philosophy and theatrical rituals – especially as she realised that tombs decorated with scenes from the life of the dead person were really the family albums of the day.

Two ideas were eventually selected from the main body of the Egyptian mythology – first, the concept of a travel guide to the death process, implied by the ancient *Book of the Dead*, which was a set of rules for the deceased to negotiate passage through the underworld. Jo Spence planned to make her own urban version, including a subway journey at the start. Second, the preservation of the body after death was important for the survival of the deceased in the afterlife in Egyptian mythology, so a proxy – usually a small statue – was the equivalent of an insurance policy today. In her case, perhaps this could be a photograph.

From Spence's point of view the mythology got better – if all representations were lost, then writing or speaking the deceased's name would still ensure survival; to remember and honour was to reactivate. When none wrote or spoke their name, the dead would cease to be.

These concepts deeply impressed both of us, and we looked forward to working through the pictorial possibilities. But before we could take things further Spence's condition deteriorated; recurring pain in her liver and dangerous secondary tumours developed, necessitating her removal to a hospice. Jo Spence married her last partner, David Roberts, and died on 24 June 1992 at the Marie Curie Hospice, Hampstead, only a few streets away from her original portrait studio. Our project remained unfinished and she never had time to set up the Egyptian fantasy funeral, but 400 people did turn up to her real funeral, although it had initially been announced as just a small family affair.

### **The Significance of Jo Spence's work today**

The value of Jo Spence's work needs to be assessed at a number of levels in relation to her many roles in life. The overall consensus of many who knew her was the sheer range and theoretical accessibility of the work, coupled with the high quality she achieved with even the simplest equipment.

As an educator, her advocacy of an autodidactic approach to learning set her apart from some of her more academic colleagues, but the realisation that their students often preferred to attend Spence's off-campus lectures rather than their own prompted a few to invite her in officially to give course lectures and student tutorials. Many became good friends and firm defenders of her work.

Her teaching style was as direct and simple as her equipment. Always humorous and down to earth, she quickly convinced even absolute novices in photography that they could do work like her if they overcame socially induced fears – Jo used to say to her new women students, "Is it difficult to buy a cheap pocket compact, photograph ourselves and then take the exposed film to the local high-street processor? No, of course not – so let's go together and do it now." She was an expert at using the power of group dynamics to foster individual independence.

As a photographer Spence was a skilled trade-trained professional. As a young woman she was assistant to the advertising photographer Walter Curtin, and a little later a printer for a veteran Fleet Street photographer, then a busy freelance, before finally opening her own very successful portrait studio in London's fashionable Hampstead area. Doubts about the social usefulness of this work prompted her to abandon professional practice and concentrate on exploring the uses of photography as a democratic folk art, with everyday life as prime source material. Another dimension was added to her work when she started re-investigating her life history through family photographs. Eventually, as her work developed, other levels appeared, until Spence the teacher and Spence the photographer quickly turned into Spence the TV performer – she did three major network shows – or Spence the writer – she wrote several books – or Spence the artist – she had major shows in national and international galleries. And if that was not enough, she could also turn up at health conferences as Spence the cancer survivor.

It is in this last role as a radical cancer patient that the general public in Britain remembers her best. Nine million people watched the TV show on her health, and many women wrote to thank her afterwards, telling her they now felt part of a community and not alone, as they had imagined they were.

The final significance of her work will probably lie not so much in what she managed to finish in her twenty-year working life, which was considerable, but in the rich legacy of ideas and creative pathways she left future generations to explore after her death.

### **Notes**

(1) Kenneth Burke. *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.