

JO SPENCE: Beyond the Perfect Image

Opening: March 31, 2006

Duration: April 1 – June 25, 2006

JO SPENCE

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

born 1934 in London, died 1992 in London

1948 – 50 Secretarial College

1951 – 62 Secretary and assistant in commercial studio "PhotoCoverage"

1962 – 63 Part time printer /assistant to Barnet Saidman, London Fleet Street Photographer

1962 – 64 Assistant, secretary and printer to Canadian advertising photographer, Walter Curtin

1965 Farm secretary – also employed to make photographic inventory of lands, properties and leisure pursuits of the employer

1967 – 74 Own studio in Hampstead as a "High Street" photographer – portraits, weddings, babies, family groups – specialised in actors' and models' portfolios.

Political conviction and the need to do more socially committed work compelled her to abandon her profitable studio work for documentary photography, an area in which she became well respected. With the founding of "Photography Workshop Ltd" with Terry Dennett the emphasis shifted to teaching and publishing and an interest developed in using the photographic gallery as a site of social intervention. Jo Spence became a prolific lecturer and writer and was also a founding member of a number of groups including the "Half Moon Photography Workshop" and its magazine *Camerawork* and the Women's documentary group "The Hackney Flashers Women's Photography Collective".

In 1979 she enrolled in the photography course of the Polytechnic of Central London studying with Victor Burgin. She obtained her degree in 1982 only to find she had breast cancer. The focus of her life changed yet again as she began to investigate the uses of photography as a therapeutic method. She shared this work with Rosy Martin and together they explored what they called "Photo Therapy", an approach that has found wide acceptance within the Women's Health and Disability movement. As she recovered her health she continued to develop her exhibitions – and took up lecturing again.

In 1991 she was invited to tour with her work throughout the USA, Canada and Australia. Returning after an exhausting three months tour she was told she had leukaemia. Attempts to combat this new problem turned her thoughts towards death and mortality as a subject for her photography. In attempting this new work she found her previous method of using herself as a photo therapeutic model to be inadequate, since her increasingly emaciated body did not correspond to the mental image of herself as a fighter. Abandoning direct photography she turned instead to various methods of montage based upon the material she already had in her archive. These indirect and allegorical references to herself were termed "Photo Fantasy", a method which she considered as a further development of direct Photo Therapy.

She was working on ideas for an exhibition based upon Photo Fantasy images to be called "The Final Project" when her condition suddenly deteriorated and she was taken to the Hospice where she died. Since her death Jo Spence's work continues to be shown and published through the "Jo Spence Memorial Archive" set up in London in 1992.

PROJECTS

CHILDREN PHOTOGRAPHED (1973 – 75)

With the help of an Arts Council grant she put together an exhibition exploring how photography constructs views of children (Jo Spence's first exhibition). Also established "Children's Rights Workshop".

GYPSIES AND TRAVELLERS

Photographed gypsy life in and around London with Terry Dennett. Later asked by Gypsy Education Council to take photographs for a gypsy literacy project. During this time she rejected the "truth" of the documentary mode of photography. This crisis eventually led to the rejection of her career as a professional photographer.

WORKING LIVES

Contributed photo portraits to a book of oral histories of local residents in Hackney, East London. Went to a second volume which allowed more time with the subjects to translate their lives into pictures.

1974 – 79 Collaborated with Terry Dennett on methods of teaching photography to children and teaching photography on adventure playgrounds.

PHOTOGRAPHY WORKSHOP

Helped establish in 1974 as an independent educational research, publishing and resource project. Produced touring exhibitions on Labour history and the cultural struggles of the left in 30's Britain. Photography Workshop helped to set up the photography collective "The Hackney Flashers Women's Photography Collective" and combined with the "Half Moon Gallery" to found the "Halfmoon Photography Workshop" and the magazine *Camerawork*.

PHOTOGRAPHY / POLITICS: ONE

First collection of critical and theoretical essays on photography, co-edited and published by Photography Workshop, edited by Jo Spence, Terry Dennett, David Evans and Sylvia Gohl in 1979. This highly acclaimed book is widely used in photographic courses in higher education and a standard work on political photography.

BEYOND THE FAMILY ALBUM (1978 – 79)

About the absences and silences in photos from family archives (what we don't record or photograph and why) and directed at the way we record family history in photo albums. Why don't we photograph deaths, breakdowns, disease?

REMODELLING PHOTO HISTORY (1982)

Collaboration with photographer Terry Dennett, investigating the way photography works to construct particular ways of viewing. Questioning dominant modes of visual representation so that it becomes easier to see that the camera is not a window on the world.

FAMILY, FANTASY, PHOTOGRAPHY (1982)

Produced by four women photography students including Jo Spence.

THE PICTURE OF HEALTH? (1982 – 90)

In response to her own position as a cancer patient and in collaboration with others, Jo Spence explored representation and politics of cancer and the inhuman and infantilising treatment of cancer patients. Images and notions of illness / health.

PHOTO THERAPY (1984 – 89)

Jo Spence and Rosy Martin invent "Photo Therapy" – photography plus therapy. Particularly interested in the political and therapeutic power of story telling using existing family albums and creating staged studio works.

LIBIDO UPRISING: Mother / Daughter Work (1987 – 90)

A Dialogue between Lovers. In collaboration with David Roberts.

TIP OF THE ICEBERG (1989)

Television production conceived by Jo Spence on cultural and ideological meaning of women's breasts. Broadcast by BBC in England and SBS in Australia.

NARRATIVES OF DIS-EASE (1990)

Ritualised Procedures. In collaboration with Tim Sheard.

BOOKS

Richard Greenhill, Maggie Murrayjo Spence, GUIDELINES PHOTOGRAPHY, MacDonald, 1978.

Nina Kellgren, Jo Spence, REINVENTING THE FAMILY ALBUM. HANDBOOK OF PHOTOGRAPHY FOR WOMEN, Camden Press: London 1978.

Terry Dennett, David Evans, Sylvia Gohl, Jo Spence, PHOTOGRAPHY / POLITICS: ONE, Photography Workshop: London 1979.

Patricia Holland, Jo Spence, Simon Watney, PHOTOGRAPHY / POLITICS: TWO, Comedia / Photography Workshop: London 1986.

Frances Borzello (ed.), JO SPENCE: PUTTING MYSELF IN THE PICTURE. A Political, Personal and Photographic Autobiography, Camden Press Art Series: London 1986.

Jo Spence, FAMILY SNAPS: The Meanings of Domestic Photograph, Virago: London 1991.

Jo Spence, CULTURAL SNIPING: THE ART OF TRANSGRESSION, Routledge: London and New York 1995.

Jo Spence and J. Solomon, WHAT CAN A WOMAN DO WITH A CAMERA?, London: Scarlet Press 1995.

Jo Spence, AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PHOTOGRAPHY, Shinsuish: Tokyo 2004.

ESSAYS / ARTICLES

Jo Spence, "The Politics of Photography", in *Camerawork* 1 / 1974, republished in *The British Journal of Photography*, August 1976.

Terry Dennett, Jo Spence, "Photography, Ideology and Education", *Screen Education* 21 / 1977.

Terry Dennett, Jo Spence, "The Unpolitical Photograph?", *Camerawork* 7 / 1978.

Jo Spence, Annie Brackx, Laura Margolis, "Facing Up To Myself", *Spare Rib* 68 / March 1978.

Kit Jackdaw Kit, Terry Dennett, Jo Spence, "Photography in and out of Schools", Half Moon Photography Workshop / Photography Workshop, 1978.

Jo Spence, "What Did you Do in the War Mummy?", PHOTOGRAPHY / POLLTICS: ONE, Photography Workshop: London 1979.

Jo Spence, "Beyond the Family Album", *Ten:8 4* / Spring 1980.

Jo Spence, "What do people do all day. Class and gender in images of women", *Screen Education*, 1980, reprinted in Kath Davies, Julianne Dickey (ed.), IN WHOSE IMAGE? WRITINGS ON MEDIA SEXISM, The Women's Press: London 1986.

Jo Spence, "Fairy Tales and Photography: Another Look at Cinderella", unpublished thesis, 1981.

Jo Spence, "The Sign as a Site of Class Struggle – Reflection on Works by John Heartfield", *Block V*, 1981, reprinted in PHOTOGRAPHY / POLITICS: TWO, Comedia / Photography Workshop: London 1986.

Terry Dennett, Jo Spence, "Remodelling Photo History – A Collaboration Between Two Photographers", *Screen 1* / 1982.

Jo Spence, "An Omnibus Dossier", with an introduction and an afterword by Simon Watney, *Screen 1* / 1983.

"Public Images and Private Functions", Ed Barber talking to Jo Spence, *Ten:8* 13 / Winter 1983-4.

Jo Spence, "Confronting Cancer", *City Limits* 22 / July 1983.

Jo Spence, "What is a Political Photograph?", *Camerawork*, 1984.

Rosy Martin, Jo Spence, "New Portraits for Old", *Feminist Review* 19 / 1985.

"Body Talk", a dialogue between Ros Coward and Jo Spence, PHOTOGRAPHY / POLITICS: TWO, Comedia / Photography Workshop: London 1986.

Jo Spence, "The Picture of Health? Parts 1 and 2", *Spare Rib*, February and April 1986.

Jo Spence, "Body Beautiful, Body in Crisis?", *Open Mind*, June 1986.

S. Bezencenet, P. Corrigan (ed.), Terry Dennett, Jo Spence, "Ten Years in Photography Workshop", PHOTOGRAPHIC PRACTISES – TOWARDS A DIFFERENT IMAGE, Comedia: London 1986.

Jo Spence, "The Documentary Forum", *Creative Camera*, February 1986.

Kath Davies, Julianne Dickey, Teresa Stratford (ed.), Rosy Martin und Jo Spence, "Photo Therapy – Transforming the Portrait", OUT OF FOCUS. Writings on Women and the Media, Women's Press: London 1987.

Jo Spence, "Putting Myself in the Picture", *Women Live*, Winter 1987.

Jo Spence, "Questioning Documentary Practice. The Sign as a Site of Struggle", paper given at First National Conference of Photography, April 1987.

Jo Spence and Rosy Martin, "Photo Therapy – Psychic Realism as a Healing Art?", *Ten:8* 30 / 1987, pp. 2 – 17.

Mark Kidel and Susan Rowe Leite (ed.), Jo Spence, "No, I can't do that, my consultant wouldn't like it ...", THE MEANING OF ILLNESS, Routledge: New York, 1988.

Jo Spence, "Remodelling Photo-History / Fotografiegeschichte umgestalten", *Camera Austria* 25 / 1988, pp. 50 – 53.

Jo Spence and David Robbins, "Things My Father Never Taught Me ... / Was mir mein Vater nie beigebracht hat ...", *Camera Austria* 25/1988, p. 54.

Jo Spence, "Family Album Works: Examining the Daughter's Gaze", *Portfolio*, 1989.

Jo Spence, "Disrupting the Silence: The Daughter's Story", SOCIETY OF ART HISTORIANS, Cambridge Press: London, 1989.

Jo Spence, "Reworking the Family Album", *Media Education*, Spring, 1990.

Jo Spence, "Theatre of the Self", Royal Photography Society: London 1990.

Rosy Martin, "Putting Us All in the Picture. The Work of Jo Spence / Wir als Subjekt unserer Bilder. Die Arbeit von Jo Spence", in: *Camera Austria* 43-44/1993, pp. 42 – 55.