

JO SPENCE: Beyond the Perfect Image

Opening: March 31, 2006

Duration: April 1 – June 25, 2006

Jo Spence

Questioning Documentary Practice? The Sign as a Site of Struggle (1)

As discussions and questions about documentary practice are such a minefield it is unlikely I'll avoid stepping on many before I've mapped out my thoughts, but I'll try. I'm glad that the organizers have asked a woman to speak, who is middle-aged, comes from an economically poor background, is "working-class identified" but now ostensibly middle class, and has herself experienced dis-ablement through illness. However, I can only represent my own views here and cannot begin to pretend to speak for others outside the identity categories I inhabit. Nor will I hide the fact that part of my identity has been formed from within a specific set of cultural debates and clashes in relation to visual representation, which embrace feminism, Marxism and psychoanalysis. However, I do not occupy a "correct position", nor do I wish to be dogmatic, but am interested that it should be possible to have a dialogue in which we all learn from each other. I have not come here to be preached to, nor do I intend to preach.

In common with many people here I am interested in photography and its relationship to power and powerlessness. In that respect I speak with forked tongue as, like many others, I consider myself to have a foot in both camps. As a practising photographer and writer in the field of education, of course I have some power, even though I am often taking a critical stance and feel very vulnerable, ignored and powerless for doing so. But I also speak as somebody who for many years has earned very little and who is ill, and in these other aspects of my life I have less power. Although it is seldom acknowledged, many of us present here occupy and negotiate a terrain which is constantly shifting in relation to our identities, and none more so than within photography where we often use different photographic strategies to meet different needs and wear different hats on different occasions. Additionally (let us whisper), hardly any of us support ourselves entirely from our labour as photographers, or many of us are on short-term grants and put up with disgusting terms of employment.

It is the complexity of this fragmented notion of identity which I feel could most usefully be addressed throughout this entire conference, most especially in relation to documentary photography. Documentary photography in its most critical form is usually a method of petitioning those in power, or is used in order to change "public opinion", that notice be taken of something which needs to be attended to, which is being ignored. It assumes, in the way in which it addresses an audience, that there are universal people "out there" who have uncomplicated, rational minds, who can perhaps be persuaded or shamed into action by the petitioning claims of such photography. Leaving aside political and economic factors, such appeals to the intellect take little account of the matter of how our minds work out of consciousness, which may not be in any way congruent with the so-called rational mind.

Because of these complexities of social and cultural identity, and because of the vast agenda of social and political problems with which photographers have chosen to concern themselves (which is always linked to questions of audience), we need a complexity and spectrum of practices to be discussed and validated here. This validation, which should take good account of the simplest attempts to engage with photographic practices, is preferable to a hierarchy dominated by intellectuals who talk in jargon and who are accountable to no one. The political agendas of the academic avant-garde are often totally different from, and longer term than, the short-term demands of campaigners to have immediate material needs met. Photographers will all be concerned with their own individual hierarchy of needs, of the needs of the group they represent, and we should respect this. I don't suppose I'll be thanked for saying this

either, but I would also hope there will not be the continual and unhelpful bandying about of blanket terms like race, disablement, gender, sexuality or class that I have experienced at so many other cultural events, where people have been shouted down and prevented from speaking by guilt-tripping insults about hierarchies of oppression. We must not beg the question of cultural and economic oppression, but consider that everybody here has something to contribute to debates. Everybody should be encouraged to speak: if people do not speak then we should find out why this is so.

For more years than I care to remember I have been involved in photography, and have witnessed major changes in its thinking and practices. What I feel we have now in the 1980s is a fantastically broad and exciting map of reflexive theories and histories of photography which are still being unravelled. This offers us many starting points and ways forward but is quite bewildering to newcomers. We need to find common aesthetic and political ground so that we can federate ourselves for education and solidarity. We should treat such a notion of federation not as the major centre of our lives, but as a resource from which we can go, intellectually refreshed, back into the various streams of commerce, education and politics. But maybe that is too much to expect at the moment! Much of the theory of photography now on offer appears to be impenetrable, and offers no reason why it is there or why it is validated continually in the journals of higher education without much reference to grass-roots photographic work. Theory just seems to exist, and the idea that theory is good for you has become a truism. However, we cannot live without theory, and it is important for all of us to continue to try to engage with the analysis and theorisation of photography, and to ask for answers to the question of why and how radical or progressive theory can be liberating, both for us as individuals and in terms of group identities.

Moving on: commercial photography (which also has a highly theoretical base which never makes itself visible) is still dominated by incredibly narrow definitions of photography which are straddled by news and advertising and a multitude of state uses of photography, many of which employ the window-on-the-world documentary mode of representation. Often these are a thinly disguised form of surveillance, a way of offering phony evidence of surface phenomena, or of defining individual or group cultural identities which appear to be grounded in the "real world" but are in fact total fiction offered up for consumption. We must never forget that all this is the background to any kind of radical professionalism in which we are engaged. Such images as we produce which we feel challenge the dominant ideology, even if they initially attempt to show something which has never been seen before, will soon be sucked up by the industrial machine of the mass media. We must expect this and have strategies for dealing with ways in which work is appropriated.

Equally fictitious are the fantasies (apparently more pleasurable, often engaging with our unconscious desires and traumas) offered to us by advertising. Some of us are also offered images of the fragmented female body, which are often called pornography. These images appear to present men with a kind of pseudo-control over women in which they can daydream of being dominant whilst in fact they continue to occupy a kind of childlike notion of omnipotence. This is often in contradiction to the economic and political impotence of many men. These interconnected spheres of image-making create regimes of desire in which we are always flattered into assuming positions which are difficult to escape in imagination – even if our daily lives totally differ.

As well as setting out tasty visual dishes of victimisation and heroics, from surviving plane crashes and runaway horses to winning the pools or being voted slimmer of the year, the dominant media continue to underpin the self-exaltation of the power and owning capacity of dominant groups which create glamorous and idealised images of themselves. There are no countervailing institutions or agencies of photography with the power to challenge any of this: our work is fragmented across a range of sites. The very real professional power of the middle classes, as managers and mediators, how it is attained and kept, continues to remain totally invisible. For those of us who are middle class, this, I feel, should be a priority as an area of work. Instead of going off into the interior, as cultural social workers, perhaps turning the photographic gaze upon one's own individual and group identity may be useful.

Overlaid with these image repertoires are the types of pictures which we choose to make and select of our own lives, which we keep in family albums or personal photo collections. This is termed "amateur photography" by those who define photographic markets. The agenda of images given a currency here is even more limited, and yet most of us continue to collude in the fantasy that – pleasurable as they may be to each of us – the complexity of our lives can easily be encapsulated in these tiny prints. Where then, within the private sphere, do we keep a counter-history, which will remind us that what is being said "out there" is *not all there is to be said*? When do we begin to reinvent a documentary practice within the family where the most insidious of power struggles go on, between men and women and between adults and children?

It is only by having a theory of what it is possible to speak about or to represent visually that we can begin to understand what is absent from all these agendas. It is my contention that as photographers, long before we try to look for techniques to represent others (via documentary photography or whatever), we need to begin to think seriously about the question of how to represent ourselves, to ourselves, even if we do it as a technical or theoretical exercise. It is only if this is taken seriously as a political question that we can begin to home in upon the real problems of representation of documentation – which are primarily those of institutional, family and self-censorship. We are so full of shame and desire and fear and trauma, underneath it all, that we can hardly say anything about ourselves. Yet as photographers we seem to have plenty to say about others. If we can begin to understand the roots of self-censorship (learnt within the domination of the child by the family, schooling, peer groups, doctors, the various forms of media and the state), we will be able to trace all the ways in which we watch ourselves and continually block off what we "really want to say". All the things we cannot bear to face about ourselves, what is called in psychotherapy the "shadow side", are then parcelled up and projected back on to other individuals and groups, which become the embodiment of all that we fear and hate in ourselves. I say this as someone who has undergone various forms of psychotherapy, as the result of a near nervous breakdown. If social and cultural identities are constructed and not biological or God-given, if they are not fixed but changeable, then we are not dealing with notions of bias, in which these representations are distortions of the real, but rather we need to find new and more reflexive ways of conceptualising and mapping out not only the product, but also the process of who we are and how we got that way – as individuals or group members. In the unblocking processes of psychotherapy, I experienced a need to represent myself to myself in a range of ways from the symbolic, to the fantastic, to the mimetic, from the validatory, to the critical, to the contradictory. All of these ways became ways of telling myself different, and more honest, stories so that I could understand better how I came to be formed psychically, how my subjectivity came into being, and how I had negotiated in the world to survive. Photography – in particular phototherapy – helped me here, and I now have an amazing visual map of my psychic and social history. These images are all fictions or fantasies but are the visual embodiment of the structures and relationships which held my life together.

The problems of the dominant practices of documentary photography still remain: though such practices may be useful for showing what appears to be happening in the world, they are still incapable of showing how institutional structures work. Nor can they indicate how we feel or negotiate within them. Documentary photography is also fairly useless when it comes to questions of social self-documentation as individuals, when most of what we might wish to document (such as sexual harassment, racial discrimination, power struggles within the family) is a cause for shame or embarrassment, when we fear that we might be judged by revealing the very concerns we are engaged in understanding and perhaps challenging. Never is this more apparent than when trying to deal with questions of sexual identity, where the camera is taboo or forbidden. Documentary photography in any straightforward sense would be ridiculous here, and so we need to restage scenarios for the camera as a way out of the impotence that comes from this impasse. This image-production work should be seen as a private activity.

I feel it is totally relevant to bring up these problems here, for it is important to understand that whenever there is a photographer and a photographed, wherever there is a story to be told, unless the photography, or an exchange of knowledge, is reciprocal then there will always be an imbalance of power. What I mean by this is that if a documentary practice involves only the exposure or revelation of one party, then it is an unfair transaction. I am not suggesting that all photography be done on a reciprocal basis, but that we mark out this territory as problematic. Augusto Boal states in his book *Theatre of the Oppressed* that within a poetics of the oppressed "one must keep in mind the main objective to change people from 'spectators', passive beings in the theatrical tradition, into subjects, actors, transformers of the dramatic action." (2)

Equally, a photographer "takes" pictures of someone which are then used for a purpose outside the control of the subject (matter) photographed (who is not consulted on their use, or asked to put a personal story or text with them). This means that questions of cultural identity will always be imposed from outside, and we will be forced to collude in such a tying-down process because of poverty. Where people are represented, the question of identity is paramount. To be specific, and to give an example of what I mean, when I was ill in hospital and taking photographs of the ward rounds of the consultant, it was possible to show the interaction between different classes, races and genders of people at their workplace, and between doctor and patient, but it was impossible to show how I was situated within that as a powerless patient, how I knew so little about my body that I had internalised my subjugation to the medical profession, or how the medical profession came to have the power of life and death which is rarely questioned. And please feel free to read this as a metaphor for all other types of powerlessness which we experience at the hands of people onto whom we project benevolence. When I came out of hospital I needed to do research and to turn to theory to understand the essence of the political power of the medical profession. I then needed to seek for other ways of representing that reality which, eventually, involved the staging of personal tableaux for the camera. In this way I was able to produce photographs which helped me to ask questions, rather than to appear to give answers. Speaking less specifically now, not only do we need to use photography to try to make visible what is not being talked about by those in power (dealt with so skilfully by John Heartfield and Peter Kennard, for example) (3), but the other side of the coin is that only by using photography to ask new questions can we then begin to understand the systematic denial of the reality and fantasies of groups and individuals who have plenty to say, who have been silenced, or who are still fighting to speak ...

When individuals or groups decide to document, reclaim or reinvent their own histories and identities they are termed self-indulgent or narcissistic. But let us not forget that Narcissus had a great deal of awareness that the self he saw in the mirror was tantamount to an "unreal self", and was merely a self-image fabricated out of the views, needs and attributions of others. Through self- and political knowledge, it is possible to move beyond the idea of the "perfect image" or "the perfect lifestyle". Ideological liberation lies in the examination, analysis, transformation, destruction and, finally, separation of the ever-evolving core of self, from that other self, which has previously been condensed into one set of images.

In a recent interview on television, Dennis Potter, who is one of our most exciting and political "image makers" as a playwright, said that as a cultural worker:

"You should attend to that which you can attend to [...] work where you find yourself. Make it a detective story about how you find out about yourself – you have a superfluity of clues and very few solutions. Maybe the very act of gathering the clues and the account of remembering not merely events but how those events have lodged in you, and how those events have affected the way you see things which begins to assemble a system of values, will become valuable. Only when it has all been assembled can you (metaphorically speaking) get up out of your bed [...] use

different conventions and make them co-exist so that the past and the present are not in strict sequence (even though they were, in a calendar sense, they are not in your head in that sequence, and neither are they in the terms of the ways in which we discover things about ourselves). In thought an event from the past can follow yesterday instead of precede it [...] out of the morass of evidence and clues and searchings and strivings which is a metaphor for the way we live, we can start to put up the structure called self and we can then walk out of that structure saying, 'At least I know and you know better than before what it is we are.' [...] In *The Singing Detective* the illness is the catalyst which has the starting point of extreme crisis, no belief, and a cry, and a hate [...] out of which were assembled the fantasies out of which eventually came facts, out of which came knowledge [...]."

Notes

(1) This was a keynote paper given at the first National Conference of Photography, organised by the Arts Council of Great Britain, in Salford on April 3, 1987.

(2) Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Pluto Press: London 1974.

(3) See, for example, on John Heartfield: David Evans (ed.), *AIZ: John Heartfield 1930 – 1938*, Kent Fine Art: New York 1992, and on Peter Kennard: *Target London*, GLC: London 1985.

© Jo Spence Memorial Archive, London