

Jo Spence: Beyond the Perfect Image

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Jo Spence and Terry Dennett Remodelling Photo History (1)

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 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 has been influenced by reading and seeing the work of Brecht, and by the writings of Augusto Boal.

This piece of work is a very tiny statement which should be seen in the tradition of "worker photography" – our workplace being photography as a production process in which we are daily involved. As two working photographers, we have tried any number of ways of making and using photographs so that they do not merely parrot the dominant modes of visual representations of the left, centre, or right of cultural practices and politics but call such practices into question so that it begins to be easier to understand that the camera is not a window on the world, nor are meanings of pictures fixed, but that visual signs (in this case photographs) are in themselves sites of struggle. In trying to make a piece of work "about" photography, we are making a break with our former work, but as life-long photographers we feel it might be useful to look at the ways in which various institutions and apparatuses have used and validated photography, and to try, within that perspective, to make a visual/verbal statement on work and sexuality.

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 (what is commonly termed "taking the piss"). We aimed to produce something which was perhaps not quite in such "good taste" as is 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.

What we finally hit upon was a form of photo-theatre. Here we could use non-naturalistic modes of representation which allowed us to create a kind of hybrid "spectacle" whilst drawing upon and disrupting well-known genres of photography which have been concerned with the representation of aspects of the female body. Obviously this collaboration between two photographers, using themselves both as photographer and as photographic object, stems from our joint interests in photography and politics. So whilst attempting to engage with some of the current theories of visual representation, we are at the same time attempting to offer a critique of standard histories of photography, which still mostly exclude details of institutional, state, class or economic determinants, being grounded rather in "great inventions", "great names", "great companies" and "great themes". The work particularly allowed us to draw upon our separate experiences as a scientific photographer and photo historian (Terry) and as an ex-commercial and ex-portrait photographer now working on the visual/socio-economic history of the family (Jo).

We decided not to rely on what we could find to photograph (in the classic documentary sense), nor on montaging visual elements at the post-shooting stage, nor on "subversive" texts. We wanted to provide a twin performance – the staging and acting out of a tableau for the camera, done by us as social actor/s, and then a two dimensional signifying performance on film and paper. Within this framework we had extended discussions in order to pre-visualize and script everything but still leave room for an element of spontaneity at the shooting stage. We did this work sporadically across several months, taking long weekends to drive around looking for props and locations, and to do the actual shooting. Working mostly with large format cameras on tripods, we could economically re-shoot anything we were not entirely satisfied with. Drawing upon our long disused but internalized professional experience, we chose how to depict a range of styles and genres, both contemporary and historical. By adding a sparse text (what amounted to a re-categorization process) we hoped the spectator could make new inferences.

Crucial to this project was the fact that we wanted to re-examine and re-work the model/photographer relationship, which is generally so one-sided. At the same time as we drew upon our own knowledge of the codes and signifying practices of portraiture, record, still life, documentary, fashion and "nude" photography, we also traversed what we knew of photo practices from within fine art, anthropology, news, advertising, science, law, medicine, welfare and charity institutions. We did not attempt the futile task of trying to invent another language, but tried rather to indicate how photographs which are usually given a currency and circulated within different (and apparently contradictory) spheres can, when brought together in this disruptive way, enable the viewer to make new and political connections.

Although "Remodelling Photo History" attempts to map out relationships between the apparatuses which use and straddle photography and the institutions which validate or teach photographic practices, we also wanted to indicate how this linked up with the placing of women within the family by showing that there is consistency between some of the ways in which oppressed women and other subordinated groups are represented. Though the project offers a starting point from within photography, it allows us to move beyond the eternal textual analysis to ask questions about what is not being shown or said; what cannot be said (what is visually unsayable); and what is being displaced or rendered structurally absent. In asking what is absent we enter the realm of the analytical, be it through psychoanalysis or historical materialism. The former engages with the construction of our gendered subjectivity, unconscious desires and pleasures, positioned as we are within familial relationships and within texts in specific discourses: the latter engages with the possibility of conscious scientific and socially useful historical knowledge and the possibility of political change. Both realms address memory – that which is considered unthinkable / unspeakable / unknowable, socially censored from consciousness, and that which in terms of class / power relations is rendered invisible, not named / discussed / shown and often actively suppressed.

Apart from hoping to give some critical pleasure to an audience, part of our project has been to find a pleasurable new way of working together. Previous collaborations between us have revolved around notions of photography for social and political action, and we wanted to do something which would allow us to explore our personal as well as our working lives and political relationships. Finally we wanted to pose questions beyond the scope of these images. Since we'd been working within a Brechtian tradition of distanciation, trying to transform feeling into thinking and questioning through a form of "educational entertainment", we turned to Brecht's own writing. His questioning poem, coming from outside the photographic discourse, seemed relevant to the overall problems of history – both of the individual gendered subject, and to our positioning within a hierarchical class society.

(Incidentally, what we can't or don't ask of most photographs is questions of their history ...)

Note

(1) Excerpts from an article first published in *Screen*, vol. 23, 1 / 1982, which were originally published in this version in: Jo Spence, *Putting Myself in the Picture*, Camden Press: London 1986, pp. 118 – 133.

Bertold Brecht

Questions From A Worker Who Reads

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?
In the books you will find the names of kings.
Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?
And Babylon, many times demolished
Who raised it up so many times? In what houses
Of gold-glittering Lima did the builders live?
Where, the evening that the Wall of China was finished
Did the masons go? Great Rome
Is full of triumphal arches. Who erected them? Over whom
Did the Caesars triumph? Had Byzantium, much praised in song
Only palaces for its inhabitants? Even in fabled Atlantis
The night the ocean engulfed it
The drowning still bawled for their slaves...

Every page a victory.
Who cooked the feast for the victors?
Every ten years a great man.
Who paid the bill?

So many reports.
So many questions.