

Jo SPENCE

b 1934 – d 1992

For British artist Jo Spence, photography was capable of not only effecting issues of class, power and gender, but even, poignantly, of health; and from this perspective she fought against all forms of domination.

Her Phototherapy works, photographs that assumed an important aspect of her battle with breast cancer through the '80s, are perhaps her most famous. These images staged for the camera the personal trauma she was living through, offering a way to reframe memory and reclaim her body from the machinery of modern medicine. Spence considered her work to be 'cultural sniping', revealing the broader reach of what at first seems unsettlingly private. Her photographs flew in the face of all the givens in art, utilizing the aesthetic of the amateur snapshot, focusing on process rather than product and placing her own unconventional physique centre-stage. Their raw autobiographical reckoning and refusal to conceal weakness paved the way for works over a decade later by Jenny Saville, Gillian Wearing and Tracy Emin.

Recent solo exhibitions include *Work (Part I, II & III)*, Studio Voltaire & SPACE, London, UK (2012), *White Columns*, New York, USA (2013), *DOCUMENTA 12* (2007), *Jo Spence — Beyond the Perfect Image*, MACBA, Barcelona, Spain and touring to *Camera Austria*, Graz, Austria (2005–06).

Biography

Jo (b 1934) left school at 13 and went into private secretarial college for 2 years and then started working as an 'office girl' for the Fellowship for Freedom in Medicine (group of doctors who were anti-NHS). She then started working for a commercial photography studio in North London (Finchley Rd), who sent her on a Kodak training course.

Jo became seriously interested in photography as a result, bought her own professional camera and started working freelance doing portraits, weddings etc. She shortly worked for two advertising photographers who taught her the finer aspects of 'setting up a shot'.

In 1967 she took over a friend's photography studio in Hampstead specialising in weddings, portraits, actor's head-shots, family photos.

1973 she started working in the documentary mode of photography (some of her work from the period was re-produced in *Spare Rib* magazine). She met Terry Dennett at this time, also a photographer, and they did a series documenting gypsies and travellers in East London.

In 1974 she and Terry founded the Photography Workshop - an independent research, publishing and resource project that also produced exhibitions similar to the documentary mode of the Farm Security Administration of the 1930s. Out of the Photography Workshop emerged a collective of female documentary photographers - the Hackney Flashers.

Hackney Flashers produced two major works: *Women and Work* (intent: to document women in Hackney at work inside and outside the home) & *Who's Holding the Baby?* (intent: expose ideology of motherhood and bring up alternative possibilities such as collective childcare).

Jo had her first gallery show in 1979 at the Hayward Gallery as part of *Three Perspectives on Photography* exhibition. She exhibited a work called 'Beyond the Family Album' - an investigation into her own family and class background. This work triggered further works about the "unrepresentable". Freud, psychoanalysis and alternative therapy became of interest.

Jo went back to school as a mature student at the age of 46, graduating in 1982 with honours from the Polytechnic of Central London where she studied photography.

Jo started a series (with Terry) entitled 'Remodelling Photo History' in 1981-82: "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". (Spence & Dennett)

1982 - Jo started using family photos in therapy, analysing why she kept certain photos, how they represented certain images from the past. This same year she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Jo states in her autobiography 'Putting Myself in the Picture' that: "Like so many women before me I submitted myself to the medical machine, going along with the treatment so far as to have a lumpectomy performed. The feelings generated in the circumstances surrounding this were so totally negative that I felt, come what may, that I had to get off the medical orthodoxy's production line."

In an article in *City Limits* (1983) Jo states: "The recollection that, at 28, I had an ovarian tumour removed because of the side effects of my asthma, and that, now, I could lose first one and then another breast, terrified me beyond all reason, beyond anything that had ever happened to me before."
"I have had to face the fact that I am totally vulnerable, able to die, to feel terror, to be terrorized ... but able to fight back with the help of others".

Jo opted for a system of medicine called TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine). She started questioning the way disease and health are represented to us: "...the breast could be seen as a metaphor for our struggles. The fact that we have to worry about its size and shape as young women, its ability to give food when we become mothers, and its total dispensability when we are past child-bearing age, should be explored through visual representation as well as within

healthcare".

Jo used photography as a way of dealing with her cancer: "Through photo therapy, I was able to explore how I felt about my powerlessness as a patient, my relationship to doctors and nurses, my infantilisation whilst being managed and 'processed' within a state institution, and my memories of my parents".

This body of work toured under the title 'The Picture of Health?' from 1985 on.

1984 onwards - further bodies of work included *Photo Therapy*, *Libido Uprising*, *Triple Somersaults* series

Diagnosed with Leukemia in 1990/1, Jo lost the battle and died in 1992.

She stated in an 1991 article in the *Artpaper* that:

"To leap suddenly into something as taboo as breast cancer was like facing a void. [...] As an artist, I had used my own body to make statements about the history of the nude. But that was totally different - the body I had put up on the wall then was not diseased and scarred. Those nudes had been about ideological things. Cancer was about my own history."

"How do you make leukaemia visible? Well, how do you? It's an impossibility. [...] I didn't have the faintest idea when I first had cancer how to represent to myself what was happening. Finally I found a language for it. Now that I have leukaemia, the language that worked with breast cancer doesn't seem applicable. This time around, I'm looking at it ecologically and globally and I have a totally different attitude to my body, my illness."



* Unless otherwise stated, all direct quotations are taken from Jo Spence. *Putting Myself in the Picture*. London, Camden Press, 1986.