

## Jo Spence

29 July – 16 October 2016

“I’m trying to show through my work that there are many alternative ways of using photography to the high street conventions which most people ape.” (Jo Spence, 1986)

This exhibition is dedicated to the work of the British photographer, educator and writer, Jo Spence (1934-92). Typically working in collaboration with individuals or groups, using the camera as a tool to empower herself and others, Spence explored how photography can represent, frame and construct reality. She worked tirelessly to address issues such as class, family, sexuality, illness and death and made a hugely influential contribution to photographic practice and debates around the politics of representation.

This display presents selected material from a range of projects that Spence worked on from the early 1970s until the year she died. Loosely divided into three sections, the exhibition includes: archival photographs from children’s educational workshops that Spence began with her long-term collaborator, Terry Dennett, in 1973; a rare display of exhibition panels produced in 1981 by The Polysnappers, a group that included Spence and fellow Polytechnic of Central London students Mary Ann Kennedy, Jane Munro and Charlotte Pembrey; and a room of self-portraits dating from 1978-92, highlighting work made in collaboration with various different people including Rosy Martin, with whom Spence developed the Photo Therapy technique.

### Self-portraits, 1978-92

For the first section of the exhibition, self-portraiture has been used as a theme to gather together photographs that represent some of the projects that Spence collaborated on with individuals such as Terry Dennett, Rosy Martin, David Roberts, Tim Sheard and Valerie Walkerdine. Examples include images from Photo Therapy – a technique influenced by co-counselling and developed with Rosy Martin to acknowledge repressed memories and feelings through “serious playing.” Images from *Narratives of Dis-ease, A Picture of Health* and *The Final Project* highlight the important contribution that Spence has made to the picturing of illness.

“How do you represent cancer? All there are, are images of misery around it. It isn’t that my work is hopeful but that it’s about the fight to get up in the morning and get on with your life.” (Jo Spence, 1986)

On being diagnosed with breast cancer in 1982, Spence documented her treatment by the medical system and produced powerful and emotive images about the experience of living with the disease. She died of leukaemia in June 1992. Spence continued to collaborate with Terry Dennett in the weeks leading up to her death, latterly using a rubber skeleton toy as a substitute for her own body.



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### **Children's Educational Work, 1973-75**

"I finally felt that the work I was doing contradicted my political beliefs. I wanted to belong to a more egalitarian society, and felt that the emphasis should be on children's rights." (Jo Spence, 1986)

In 1967, Spence set up her own commercial photography studio in Hampstead, London. She specialised in portraits and wedding photographs but became disillusioned with the kind of work that she was paid to produce. In 1970 she helped to set up the Children's Rights Workshop and a few years later she closed her commercial studio to devote more time to political and educational workshops. In 1973, with an Arts Council grant, Spence helped to put together *Children Photographed*, the first exhibition she was ever involved with. In 1974, Spence met her long-term collaborator, Terry Dennett, and together they founded Photography Workshop, an independent educational research, publishing and resource project.

In this part of the exhibition we are displaying material from work undertaken by Spence and Dennett between 1973-75 such as: *Children Photographed*, *Adventure Playgrounds: Photographing housing communities and children's playgrounds* and *Children's Educational Work: pin-hole cameras* which featured the memorable Welliflex camera. During the same period, Photography Workshop produced other bodies of work such as, *Gypsies and Travellers*, *Working Lives*, *Invisible Labour* and *Women Musicians*.

### **The Polysnappers, Family, Fantasy and Photography, 1981**

"By combining dolls with found imagery, we tried to make visible the connection between religion, marriage, myth, advertising and industry." (Jo Spence, 1986)

In 1979, as a mature student, Spence began a degree course in Film and Photographic Arts at the Polytechnic of Central London (now the University of Westminster). Here she met fellow students Mary Ann Kennedy, Jane Munro and Charlotte Pembrey. Together they formed The Polysnappers and produced the exhibition, *Family, Fantasy and Photography* for their degree show. In her autobiography *Putting Myself in the Picture*, published in 1986, Spence wrote: "...we shared a political framework and we pooled our knowledge, skills, obsessively-collected image banks and allocations of student materials. It was an ideal situation; for the four of us to spend a major part of eight months on one project would be out of the question under any other conditions.

We wanted to look at the family as a socially and ideologically produced unit within systems of representation, rather than as a biased or distorted reflection of the real.

We used dolls in order to avoid the problems of exploiting as 'camera fodder' those whom we photographed and to enable us to get round the taboo on picturing certain areas of family life."

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Further information on Jo Spence can be found at: [www.jospence.org](http://www.jospence.org)

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