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Photographer, educator, and writer on photography Jo Spence (London, UK, 1934–1992) worked on deconstructing and critiquing the family album, visually and textually, from the mid-1970s until the end of her life. In many ways, her whole oeuvre could be seen as one big, multi-layered, "alternative" family album made not only for herself, but to share with others her insights into the potential of photography as a tool for personal and political change. She reworked existing family photographs and images from the media, and also made new ones, to visualize experiences that family albums don't usually show – work and strife, domestic drudgery and illness, unhappiness and powerlessness, but also joyfully unruly bodies that do not conform to dominant standards of beauty. Inspired by the consciousness-raising practices of the feminist movement and by egalitarian co-counselling techniques, she developed "photo therapy" across several projects in collaboration with Rosy Martin and others, to demonstrate the importance of understanding the power of images over us. This article analyses some of her work under the rubric of the "album" to highlight the continuing relevance of its lessons.

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Jo Spence: Radicalizing the Family Album

Jo Spence, socialist feminist, educational photographer, and self-defined "cultural sniper" – a term she coined because "there are no categories for artists who invoke notions of class,"[1] is perhaps best known today for her 1980s work on the politics of cancer treatment, for example *The Picture of Health?* (1982–1986) with Rosy Martin and Maggie Murray,[2] for developing photo therapy in collaboration with Rosy Martin,[3] or for her unflinching record of facing death from leukemia in *The Final Project*.[4] Equally groundbreaking, however, is her earlier work *Beyond the Family Album* (1979), consisting of juxtapositions of photographs, magazine cuttings, photocopies, and text across twenty-four laminated panels measuring ca. 76 x 50.8 centimeters (20 x 30 inches) (fig. 1). Its production was commissioned by the Arts Council of Great Britain (henceforth Arts Council), a public body for the promotion of the fine arts, for the exhibition *Three Perspectives on Photography: Recent British Photography* at the Hayward Gallery in London. After the Hayward, the piece was exhibited in community spaces and educational venues in London in the early 1980s, but seems to have disappeared from mainstream attention in the UK until 2012, when it was included in a large London retrospective dedicated to her work.[5] More recently, *Beyond the Family Album* has been included in the group show *Women in Revolt! Art and*



Fig. 1. Terry Dennett, 'Jo Spence hanging *Beyond the Family Album* at the Hayward', 1979. Gelatine silver print. Jo Spence Memorial Library Archive, London [JSMLA]. Courtesy Terry Dennett.

Activism in the UK, 1970–1990, still touring at the time of writing in 2025.[6]

Beyond the Family Album in Three Perspectives on Photography

The exhibition at the Hayward was a key moment in the history of photography in Britain,[7] as the medium was beginning to gain traction in art galleries, museums, and at auction.[8] The Arts Council (1946–1994) had only recently begun funding photography systematically; it appointed its first and only photography officer in 1969,[9] and set up an advisory Photography Committee in 1973.[10] Curated by three people, each in charge of a section, *Three Perspectives* sought to show a wide spectrum of photographic practices. Paul Hill and Angela Kelly, both practitioners and writers on photography, were members of the Arts Council's Photography Committee, while John Tagg, a "left-wing art historian and theorist,"[11] was researching the history of photography with the help of Arts Council grants.[12] The exhibition "provided an opportunity to revisit the debates about the medium and its social functions that had occurred throughout the 1970s,"[13] and therefore included a diversity of perspectives (fig. 2). Curated by Paul Hill, section One, "Photographic Truth, Metaphor and Individual Expression," was based on aesthetic categories informed by modernist conceptions of photography as an art form in its own right – self-reflective, using its realism to create not social or

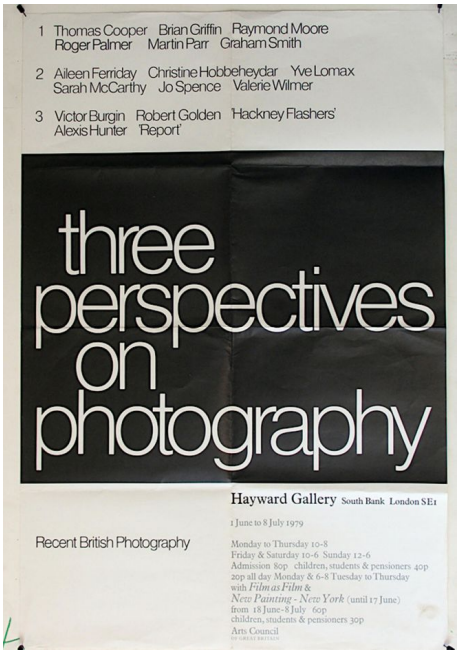


Fig. 2. Terry Dennett, Poster of *Three Perspectives on Photography: Recent British Photography* at the Hayward Gallery, London, 1979, undated. JPEG in Terry Dennett's Digital Archive, JSMLA. Courtesy Terry Dennett.

historical records, but metaphors that would convey the photographer's will for self-expression to the viewer's sensibility. Sections Two and Three – "Feminism and Photography" curated by Angela Kelly and "A Socialist Perspective on Photographic Practice" curated by John Tagg – focused on the politics of the image, with works critiquing its social construction of meaning from feminist and socialist perspectives that were also informed by conceptual art and a burgeoning interest in social histories of art and culture, and what came to be known as photography theory.[14]



Fig. 3. Photographer unknown, Jo Spence and Terry Dennett at a Photography Workshop stall, circa 1976. Chromogenic print. JSMLA. Courtesy Terry Dennett.

Cutting across sections Two and Three were different ways of using the medium in terms of aims and circulation, materiality, and production values. Some of the work, such as the text-over-image series in section Three *From US 77* by Victor Burgin, a conceptual artist and at times a member of the Photography Committee,[15] was made with the art gallery in mind, albeit from a critical position on class and gender; and even the prints by politically committed documentary photographers such as Valerie Wilmer, whose *Mississippi Portraits* of working-class black women were included in section Two, looked equally good on the gallery wall as on the pages of magazines. In other words, Burgin's work would be – and has been – equally at home in an exhibition of conceptual art, while Wilmer's, printed up nicely, would have done well in the section curated by Paul Hill. In the works in section Three by the Hackney Flashers, a collective of women that included Jo Spence, and in Spence's own work in section Two, we would instead have seen a radically different materiality of display, erased by the conventions of reproductions and the print quality of the catalog.[16]



Fig. 4. Edward Lucie-Smith, 'A Flash from the Past', review of photography shows including 'Three Perspectives on Photography', *Evening Standard*, 7 June 1979. Cuttings in JSMLA. Courtesy Terry Dennett.

Instead of carefully framed prints, these are inexpensive panels, cheaply laminated in plastic to make them durable and wipe-clean – a technique still used for the menus of fast-food restaurants. Sturdy yet light, they are easily transported to the community centers, schools, libraries, and political events they were designed for, quickly pinned up on the wall through the eyelets provided. These are photographic calls to action, individual and social, as opposed to objects for the art market. Rather than the tradition of the art gallery, their address of the wall as a place of display is related to the left-wing agit-prop activism of the 1960s and 1970s, and to the use of photographs by working-class organizations since the 1930s to create class-specific representations to counter dominant bourgeois culture. The first Hackney Flashers project around which members coalesced, *Women and Work* (1975), was a commission by the Hackney Trades Council for its 75th anniversary celebration,[17] and Jo Spence's lifelong collaborator Terry Dennett, a socialist photographer who worked with her on some of the pictures in *Beyond the Family Album*, had been researching and collating the archives of the inter-war Worker Photography Movement.[18]

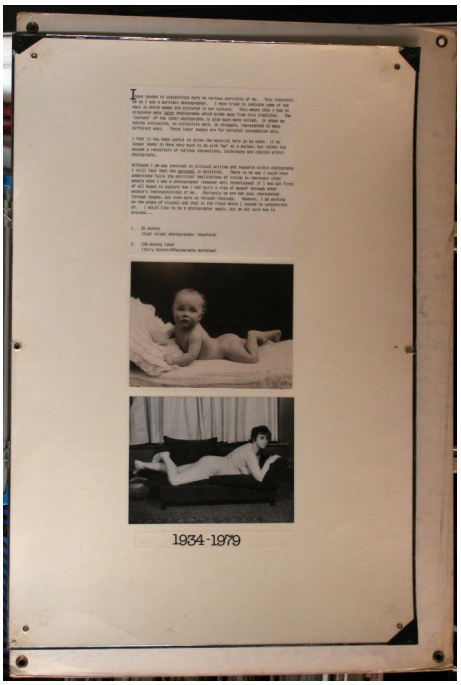


Fig. 5. Terry Dennett, record photograph of Jo Spence, *Beyond the Family Album*, 1979, undated. Panel captioned '1934-1979', with two images captioned: '1. 8 ½ months (High street photographer / Woodford) 2. 528 months later (Terry Dennett / Photography Workshop)'. Courtesy Terry Dennett.

Even the mode of authorship is different: a collective in the case of the Flashers, and collaborations with a variety of individuals and groups in the case of Spence, who was part of Photography Workshop, a radical community resource for photography she and Dennett set up in 1975 (fig. 3),[19] which belonged to a "nationwide network of [...] 'alternative' bookshops, of underground magazines [...] and community activists,"[20] engaged in forms of political image-making as "Radical political artists" who wanted "first: to change art; second, to use that new art to change society; and third, to challenge and transform their relations of production and art world institutions."[21] Photography Workshop's main concern was not "is photography art?" – the question that had preoccupied writers on photography since its development and was still being debated in the 1970s – but rather "who is it for?"[22] The art gallery was a space to be challenged, and that could also be used strategically, to help the group get funded and gain the status that would amplify their voice and impact.

But if the Hackney Flashers' panels were built around documentary photographs – a genre present in all of the three sections of the Hayward show – *Beyond the Family Album* embraced what at the time was the most disregarded and patronized photographic tradition, that of the family album as a device to collect, display, and give meaning to snapshots of and by oneself, friends, and loved ones, school and wedding photographs by professional photographers (or skilled

amateurs), and the occasional studio portrait, all taken with the seemingly natural visual ambition to capture a moment and make people look good. As a former high-street studio and wedding photographer, Spence was very familiar with the demands of the genre, and had become increasingly aware of how much these "private images" were actually shaped by "public conventions" defining a good portrait, conventions interiorized as commonsense and natural even if actually socially specific: "good-looking" people smiling for the photographer and happy families coming together in moments of leisure and special occasions; cheeky boys and sweet little girls; portraits in which men show their success as providers and women display their achievements in domesticity, looking after the family while not "letting themselves go"; and no work, strife, unhappiness, or fights to be seen.

Writers on photography have since begun to take albums seriously, as a social practice that allowed women to develop a specifically feminine language that could be critical of femininity itself,[23] or as a site of memory to construct personal and national identities,[24] and they have been the subject of focused exhibitions.[25] But at the time, most such writers took them for granted as convenient containers or, at best, saw them as "a valuable source of personal and historical information [...] representing photography at its most innocent and least contrived form."[26] Women artists had started to reference them in their work – Annette Messager, for example, made and exhibited several, including a "fake

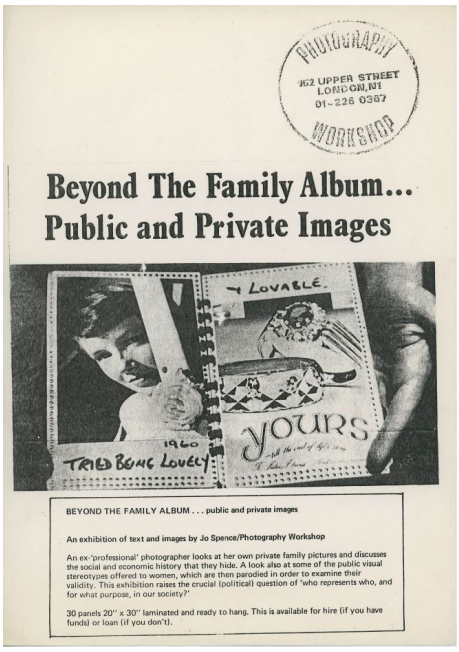


Fig. 6. Leaflet for the exhibition of *Beyond the Family Album* at Cockpit Gallery, using an image from the *Passport* project (1975), undated. JSMLA. Courtesy Terry Dennett.

wedding" album and a "baby book" made from photographs cut out from magazines.[27] In the photographic press, albums were rarely discussed even though they were a staple image in adverts for cameras and film on their pages, while histories of photography accounted for this widespread practice as a byproduct of photographic technologies such as albumen prints or Kodak's easy-to-use cameras and processing service, rather than as a social practice. Dealers, archivists, and curators routinely split them into single pages to sell, file, or exhibit as photographs by or of famous people and events, discarding the rest.[28]

It is not surprising, therefore, that mainstream press reviews of Spence's contribution to *Three Perspectives* were not positive. A few critics appreciated that the exhibition was not proposing a coherent definition of the photographs worthy of display in an art gallery, but many considered it a waste of public money. Several reviews reproduced a section of the opening panels of *Beyond the Family Album*, titled "1934-1979," in which a photograph of Spence as an "8 and ½ months" baby naked on a bed is juxtaposed with one of her in the same pose taken "528 months later" (figs. 4–5). It is a great image, simultaneously funny and poignant, wonderfully addressing without objectification the anxieties women have about ageing and their bodies. The writers and editors using it must have realized how eye-catching it is. Yet the work itself was written about with a mixture of bafflement about the commonplace photographs not even taken by Spence, chauvinistic comments about the display of a middle-aged female body, and condescending remarks about her self-exposure. The plastic panels were dismissed as more appropriate for the noticeboard of a church hall, parochial rather than political,[29] and even when described as "compulsively readable," *Beyond the Family Album* was insulted as a "well larded narrative," more fat than substance, in an indirect, disparaging reference to Spence's

body.[30] Photography had only recently started to enter the art gallery, and critics found it easier to accept its presence if the prints on display were more traditionally pictorial or part of a conceptual art practice. The first venue dedicated to the medium in the UK, the Photographers' Gallery, had been open only since 1971, and the photographic press was just beginning to pay attention to photographic aesthetics beyond "pictorial" versus "straight." These, however, were sites for photography aficionados, unlike the Hayward Gallery, a prestigious fine arts venue.

Much more, I think, could be asked about the exhibition – why there were no women in section One, or much racial diversity anywhere in the show, and why more of its men than women went on to enjoy long and distinguished careers. Spence herself was comparatively neglected after her death, both as a photographer and a writer, if well remembered in the photographic community. Her reputation has grown consistently only since her estate became represented for the first time by an art dealer, Richard Saltoun, and the revival of interest in feminist visual activism introduced new audiences to her work. In this article, I focus on Spence's subversion of the form of the familial or personal collection in *Beyond the Family Album* also in reference to the earlier, smaller *Passport Project*, a cheaply produced "identity scrapbook" in which she rehearsed some of the same themes in a more concise textual form (figs. 6–7),[31] and more briefly to her later photo therapy work with Rosy Martin.

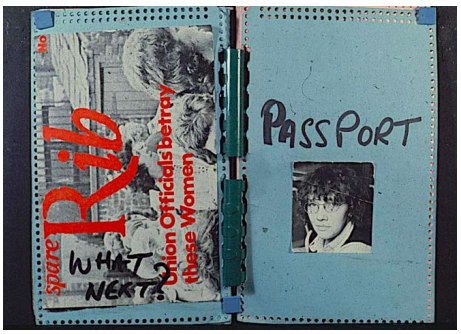


Fig. 7. Terry Dennett, record photograph of Jo Spence, *Passport* project, 1975, undated. Front cover and one double page spread, used on the poster in figure 6 to advertise *Beyond the Family Album* at Cockpit. Courtesy Terry Dennett.

Spence had been working on the theme since 1974, when, together with Nina Kellgren, they interviewed women about their photographic collections, to demonstrate their importance as

family historians and archivists for a book and television program on family albums as sites where ideologies of gender and the family were perpetuated, but could also be subverted.[32] As well as feminism's questioning of distinctions between public and private images, Spence's understanding of the album as a site to construct and question identity was informed by the "history from below" movement's attention to working-class and other people under-, mis-, or unrepresented in mainstream histories, using oral histories, diaries, and albums to research them,[33] and by her participatory experience in Keith Kennedy's Group Camera project. This involved Kennedy working with students, artists, and patients in psychiatric settings, encouraging them to make scrapbooks that could be used to show each other who they were.[34] The turn to working with and on herself was also motivated by her previous documentary practice, through which she came to the conclusion that, rather than photographing underprivileged and subaltern groups, it was better to give them a voice by teaching them the means to represent themselves through literacy and photography lessons. *Beyond the Family Album* used work she had done on and for herself, but it was exhibited to demonstrate a practice that could be taken up by everyone. Spence looks at her own classed and gendered position, constructing an alternative family album that juxtaposes portraits from her mother's collection and her own with cut-outs from magazines, children's books, and photography journals. Understanding the role of the media in the oppression of women and their interiorization of patriarchal definitions of femininity was central to second-wave feminism. This visual activism is visible everywhere in the pages of feminist publications of the time, including the magazine *Spare Rib*, with which Spence was involved. She was also aware, for example, of the work of Judith Williamson on advertising, influenced by feminism and the work of Roland Barthes and other semioticians who were developing analytical and critical

tools to examine mass media and popular culture.[35] The visual juxtapositions in *Beyond the Family Album* that connect private and public photographs of women are accompanied by textual annotations that reveal unhappy moments of personal and national life, and Spence's growth as a socialist feminist who wants to be attentive to rather than dismissive of women's desires to be beautiful, marry, and have children, fed by fairytale structures permeating culture beyond children's books.[36] To look critically at the role of ordinary photographs in everyday lives she investigates the workings of the medium to construct and perpetuate class and gender ideologies. These understandings unlock the genre's potential as a tool of resistance, and reveal how photography could be used to imagine and then make real alternative ways of being a woman – as a worker, a sexual being, a photographer, and a political activist.

Unlike albums where the captions are often minimal, the text in *Beyond the Family Album* takes up more space than the images in many of the panels. It's as if Spence is sharing with us not only the pages of her radicalized family album, but also its oral "soundtrack" – the storytelling, reminiscing, or puzzling that accompanies looking at albums as a social activity[37] – except that here the narrative is avowedly self-aware of the classed and gendered pressures on both people and photographs to conform to stereotypes, and of the sense of shame that comes when failing to do so, even intentionally. It is formed in a dialogue with women's life-writing and consciousness-raising practices in

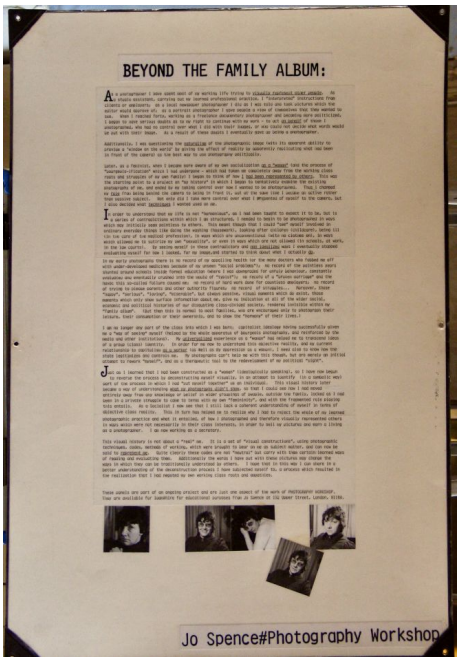


Fig. 8. Terry Dennett, record photograph of Jo Spence, *Beyond the Family Album*, 1979, panel captioned 'Beyond the Family Album', undated. Courtesy Terry Dennett.

the feminist movement,[38] and points to the experiences that family albums disavow: work as drudgery rather than achievement; illness rather than physical exuberance; conflict, unhappiness, and loneliness rather than harmonious togetherness in families and couples; sexuality rather than romance, and frustrations with both; political activism; and lifestyles in which social reproduction is not organized around the traditional family.

While a comparable density of text was also present in Victor Burgin's works at the Hayward, Spence, unlike him, uses this to take control of curatorial interpretation. For example, the opening panel, "Beyond the Family Album: Jo Spence # Photography Workshop" (fig. 8) is an initial explanation of the significance of the rest, written in an informal first-person narrative that makes it very approachable, practically as well as conceptually: "These panels are [...] just one aspect of the work of Photography Workshop. They are available for loan and hire for educational purposes from Jo Spence at 152 Upper Street, London N1 1RA." Writing about photography and her own work in an accessible language and tone was central to Spence's practice as a political and educational photographer, to make it available to everyone rather than specialist audiences. It is one of its strengths, but it might also have been detrimental to her reputation. It's as if the articulacy of her many articles and books excused her male colleagues from writing about her work or including it in their edited collections. Spence contributed to disseminating the writings of Burgin and Sekula in her work as an editor of *Camerawork* and *Photography Politics: One*, but, to my knowledge, they never reciprocated the gesture.[39] She is also absent from *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970–1985*, an anthology of key writings on the topic by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, perhaps because she was not art-school educated and therefore part of the feminist art networks

charted by them.[40] The clarity and simplicity of Spence's writing, and her strong working-class voice and position, seem to have been considered not intellectual enough for the theoretically dense, postmodernist art writing emerging at the time.[41] Spence continued to feel marginalized as a working-class woman and bitter about "feminists in academia" until the end of her life.[42] My analysis, part of a project on Spence as a writer, is intended as an invitation to pay attention to the text in her work and to reread the books and articles she authored.

The panels in *Beyond the Family Album*

Beyond the Family Album is organized in a roughly chronological sequence, preceded and interrupted by panels where pages from illustrated and photography magazines and photocopies of other printed matters take center stage. In the Hayward installation, it is indicative that, before moving onto the chattier biographical materials, we are invited to look at two panels stacked upon each other (figs. 9–10):[43] "The Family" and "Public images: 'Hers'," juxtaposing adverts and idealized tableaux of mother and child from women's magazines with adverts for tranquillizers given to women, equally stereotyped but now as suffering from "anxiety," "depression," or conditions that are not "crystal clear" but can still be seen as requiring psychiatric drugs.[44] In case the point is uncertain, the photocopy of a cover of *Mother* magazine at



Figs. 9–10. Terry Dennett, record photograph of Jo Spence, *Beyond the Family Album*, 1979, undated. Panel captioned 'The Family'. Courtesy Terry Dennett.

bottom left spells it out: "drug discipline." This means that, rather than with birth, marriage, or relatives, this "album" begins with a sampler of visual culture as the environment – especially oppressive for women – into which we are born, informing identity as much as family in defining it. Idealized or tranquilized,

> There are no universal "women", women though oppressed as a group, are also differently exploited according to their [...] class position [...] We are continually offered images with which we are expected to identify; we ourselves select from the limited range offered just who and what we identify with [...] constantly surveying ourselves. [...] This is a political question, not a theoretical question. How we think we "see" ourselves affects how we think and behave.[45]

These opening critical insights are meant to affect how we see and read the rest of the piece. As the next panels spell out (fig. 5), we need to understand that the photographs we are about to look at do not amount to a self-portrait, they do not "have anything very much to do with 'me' as a person, but [as] a repository of various conventions, techniques and choices within photography." Armed with this awareness, we can approach the rest.

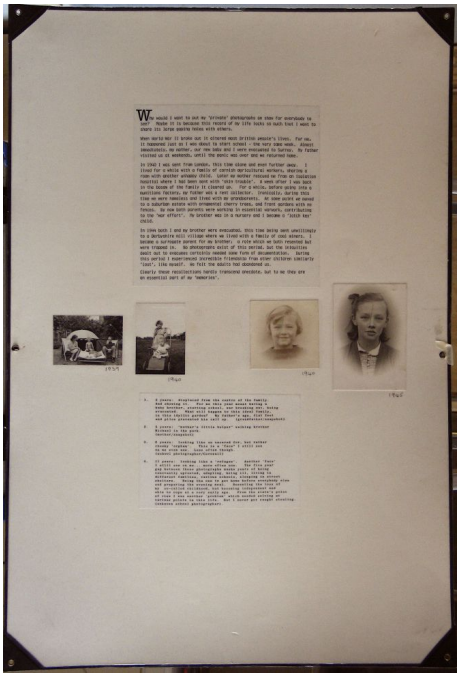
Panels "1934" to "1939," and "1939" to "1945" chronicle happy early years, broken by the birth of her brother at the onset of World War II, the experience of being evacuated from her family to people who neglected her, and the trauma of ending up in hospital. As she writes, these were

> years of being constantly uprooted, adapting, being ill, living with different families, various schools, sleeping in street shelters. Being the one to get home before everybody else and preparing the evening meal. Resenting the loss of my so-called childhood.

These are traumas not discernible in the photographs, even those she labels "Six years: looking like an uncared for but rather

cheeky orphan," or "Eleven years: looking like a refugee" (fig. 11).

As for many other working-class families in Britain, the war was followed by the economic and social disappointments of peacetime. Despite being the clever one in the family, Spence did not get good enough grades at school to pursue higher education, and so she trained as a typist – work in an office was a step up from the factory, which her parents never left after being pushed back into it by the war, losing the tenuous foothold in the middle class conferred by her father's prewar job in retail, earning enough to allow her mother to stay at home to focus on the unwaged work of social reproduction. Her frustration about how little money and freedom she was allowed by her family grew bitter – "social mobility halted in flight [we] took on the trappings of the deadly lower middle-class" (fig. 12). Getting a job as a secretary in a photography studio only exacerbated Spence's anxieties about her looks by teaching her "to know every fault on my face, every flaw in my body." Rather than a source of validation or pleasure, becoming sexually active without adequate sex education was "a nightmare" in which "Loving and 'giving in' had little to do with the diagrams of reproductive organs offered to me at school." Later, she embarked on "a sophisticated relationship by which I mean I got fucked regularly," but without feeling loved (fig. 13). This material is very different to the polite humanism of the many documentary photographers who were attempting to record working-class life at the time, or the cool conceptualism of



Figs. 11–15 Terry Dennett, record photograph of Jo Spence, *Beyond the Family Album*, 1979, undated. Panel with photographs 1939–1945. Courtesy Terry Dennett.

Burgin's work in the same exhibition. Photography does, however, emerge as a tool of transformation, as these were also years of transition from being a secretary in a studio to becoming an amateur photographer and joining a local club, even if the initial result was learning how to strike a good pose for the camera.

The 1960s heralded more anxiety and illness, including damage to her fertility from the drugs she was given for asthma, but also "The period of greatest independence" (fig. 14) as Spence moved up from office work to assisting photographers. This enabled her to leave home and explore her sexuality away from parental control. She was married in 1964 and divorced in 1966, then "eloped" to Ireland with a lover who "shipped [her] back to London" when she was diagnosed with bronchitis and "psychiatric problems" (fig. 15). The fairy tale of love she had pursued since her teens did not survive the ever after, but she kept the surname of the lover, music radio broadcaster Neil Spence, which she had changed by deed poll[46] to hide the fact they were not married. Possibly homeless, and "drugged with [...] Librium" – a strong tranquilizer – she agreed to take over a friend's portrait studio, not an easy thing to do at a time when women could not open a bank account or get a loan without a male sponsor. In her narrative, the studio is associated with giving up trying to conform to society's expectations of desirable femininity, even if the guilt and shame of failing to do so remained. She embraced a bohemian lifestyle – living by herself in the studio, taking up with younger lovers, wearing black polo-necks – funded by the success of her commercial photography, as she recorded emphatically in *Passport* (fig. 16).



Fig. 16. Terry Dennett, record photographs of Jo Spence, *Passport*, 1975, undated. Last two double page spreads. Courtesy Terry Dennett.

This, however, did not satisfy her for long, as she started to question the so-called "good portraits" she was making for clients. At this point in the narrative, *Beyond the Family Album* becomes more focused on a critical analysis of the role of photographs in constructing identities, perpetuating dominant ideologies by making them appear natural and desirable rather than contingent and questionable. She gave up the studio in the early 1970s, and decided to go back to secretarial work while looking for alternative ways of being a photographer, working for the feminist press and on educational and community projects. This closely biographical sequence ends with two panels of snapshots from a period that is "too close to write about biographically," included "for no better reason than they remind me of happy times and people I love."

The panels then move back to public images, asking: "The Photographic Press: what's in it for women?" – contrasting the exploitation of female models on the covers of magazines for photographers, always assumed to be male, with contact strips of Spence "playing out" femme fatale roles for the camera, taken by Terry Dennett, and then further messing around with her "Public Images" in a series of systematic explorations of "1) How I'd like to look. 2) How others see me 3) What happens when you completely change one part of your face? [...] 6) Dressing up" and so on, taken during sessions of "visual [...] bantering with stereotype[s]" with "the Faces Group," women who had come together in 1976 after a call by Spence for "women who did not like their faces" (fig. 17).Working with them, the critique of the "good portrait" became more political. Revealing a sitter's true inner self is impossible because it does not exist. Identity is always in the process of being constructed, fed by the ideologies

and possibilities we encounter. The self-image demanding portrayal is not a mirror but a mirage, formed by the images we see in our everyday lives.

In the next panel we see her photographic and political networks expand and gain central roles in her life. Portraits of Spence taken by Terry Dennett and by Michael Anne Mullen, "a feminist friend" and a member of Hackney Flashers, are topped by a quote from US photographer and theorist Allan Sekula – endearingly misspelt as "Sekulla" – "How do we invent our lives out of a limited range of possibilities, and how are our lives invented for us by those in power?" from his essay in the Photography Workshop "Annual," *Photography Politics: One* (fig. 18).[47] The portrait of Spence just below this quote had previously featured on the cover of *Spare Rib*, which dedicated several pages to a version of *Beyond the Family Album* in an article titled "Facing Up to Myself."[48] In this widely read feminist weekly, Spence's photographs and texts were circulated as a tool of consciousness raising, the practice of women getting together to analyze the processes through which patriarchal definitions of femininity are interiorized, so that their power can be neutralized. In the panel after, we see traces of Photography Workshop joining with Half Moon to publish *Camerawork*, a pivotal magazine in the development of a politicized critical theory of the medium: a photograph "taken when I worked at the Half Moon Photography Workshop [...] I was later deprived of my job by the



Figs. 17–21 Terry Dennett, record photograph of Jo Spence, *Beyond the Family Album*, 1979, undated. Panels captioned: 'Public Images'; 'Sekulla' quote; panel with three photographs 'taken for very different reasons'; panel with 'Certificate of Pay and Tax Deducted'; panel with receipts, explanation of the expenses, and thanks to collaborators. Courtesy Terry Dennett.

person who took it." Spence's exploration of portraits concludes:

> In our culture the face is supposedly the repository of our character or our personality. It is used to represent us, and photographed constantly [...]. Quite clearly, how it [the face] is photographed and by whom is a matter of some concern. Quite clearly also, it cannot possibly represent us even though we are taught that it can. We must learn to see beyond ourselves and the stereotypes offered to understand the invisible class and power relationships into which we are structured (fig. 19).

At the Hayward, the series concluded with a life-size, full-length portrait of Spence constructed over four panels – a joyful representation of a woman photographer, claiming her right to take up space on the gallery wall – flanked by two panels showing us the material conditions of production of the work we have just been looking at. In one, we see Spence's hands at her paid job, typing her own tax form, showing the income she could depend on while making the work, important information rarely included in art-historical discourse (fig. 20); on the other, the receipts showing where and how much money – modest figures – she spent to make the work itself (fig. 21). This is where the grant she received from the Arts Council went, money that came from the taxes she and other workers paid to the government. The panels could be read as a visual rendition of the Keynesian economics that underpinned the founding of the Arts Council back in the 1940s,[49] the circuit through which government money invested in cultural activities would return to the public purse via taxation – Spence was working at the British Film Institute, another organization supported by Arts Council grants. This redistribution of resources, however, is not enough. As she writes back on panel 19, "The world will not be changed merely by a better understanding of how ideologies work. But as our concept of ourselves changes we can begin to be more actively involved in struggling against the dominant forms of social

control" – forms that are not only legal or economic but also embedded in our desires, how we are "passively invited to consume and be consumed." These are key points in reading the overall meaning of the piece: "These panels are some of my raw materials for work on ideology" – she is showing us what she did, so we too can radicalize our family albums. All of Spence's work is a lesson, with herself as the case study, on how to use accessible technologies to enable personal and political consciousness and change. The artwork and the gallery exhibition are but one element of what she did; equally important were the workshops on "family album work" she ran with teachers, students, and social workers.[50] If, as Parker and Pollock wrote in *Framing Feminism*, "Whereas the majority of political movements have employed art and artists for propaganda purposes, feminism has worked to transform art – and artists themselves,"[51] Spence's work was part of a wider, more ambitious project of changing not just photography and photographers, but the visual literacy of the public at large.

Conclusion



Fig. 22. Terry Dennett, record photograph of Jo Spence, *The Picture of Health?*, 1982, undated. Panel constructing a 'family album' of illness. Courtesy Terry Dennett.

Spence's engagement with the family album changed in response to two events. One was a diagnosis of breast cancer in 1982, followed by her refusal to consent to the complete removal of her breast, as was routine at the time. Having researched the survival rates and quality of life for women undergoing the so-called "slash and burn" approach of complete removal followed by intense radio- and chemotherapy, she embraced naturopathic therapies as an alternative. She used photography to record the process, from hospitalization to self-care through alternative medicine, and then to fight the powerlessness she felt facing cancer and dealing with the health system. The resulting photographs came together in *A Picture of Health?* (fig. 22), where, among other things, she constructs an album of her own ill-health, emphasizing its nature as a social rather than personal problem, related to exposure to pollutants, over-medication, and bad diet. The experience of cancer is politicized not only by her refusal of the standard treatment – very unusual at the time – but also by sharing her experience and knowledge with others who might be going through the same thing, to remind us that in any type of crisis – including the economic one that was then unfolding in the UK – "there are other solutions which differ from the most obvious ones," setting up a parallel between medical and economic orthodoxies, as Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government was taking a "slash and burn" approach to

dismantling the welfare state through austerity and privatization.[52]

The other event was her experience of co-counselling, "a non-hierarchical, inexpensive way of training to discharge past hurts and griefs as well as being a two-way non-evaluative talking and listening contract between people."[53]



Fig. 23. Terry Dennett, record photograph of Jo Spence, *Passport*, 1975, undated. Double page spread, using the same school photograph from 1945 in *Beyond the Family Album*, see figure 11. Fig. 24. Terry Dennett, record photograph of Jo Spence with Rosy Martin, *Who Constructed this Child?*, undated. Panel with photo-therapy sequence working on the school photograph from 1945, circa 1985. Courtesy Terry Dennett.

She met Rosy Martin at an evening class run by the Inner London Education Authority, which subsidized life-long education. Spence had started to integrate photographs into her journey toward better mental as well as physical health, and to deal with how the cancer and its treatment were not only in themselves traumatic but reopened old psychic wounds. The practice became part of her co-counselling relationship with Martin and formalized as photo therapy. In some of these sessions, she reworked photographs she had already used, so it is possible to trace the same school photograph worked on at different stages: in *Passport* and *Beyond the Family Album* as a form of consciousness raising (fig. 23), as discussed in co-counselling, and then acted upon in the photographic studio (fig. 24), using re-enactments and transformations for the camera as a way to relive and relinquish feelings in the present that came from the past – buried but not dead.

Spence was intent on using photography as part of a political project to gain knowledge of what was happening to her and why, because "self-knowledge [...] is the greatest and the gentlest power," as she writes in one of the scrapbooks she used to reflect upon photographs taken during photo therapy

sessions. In exhibitions, writings, workshops, and publications, Spence insisted that the most important aspect of her work was sharing this power with others, showing them they could get it too. She used color snapshots as the cheapest and easiest printing technology of her time, and the family album – rather than semiotics or psychoanalysis – as the most shared and widely understood language of photography, aware that they were both perceived in the mainstream as vernacular and amateur, therefore not intellectual or professional, but also all the more powerful when subverted. Throughout her career, she remained committed to a practice that prioritized accessibility over her own access to the recognition that photographers were beginning to gain in the art world.

I want to finish with a quote by Spence, selected by students while we were curating an exhibition of her work at Birkbeck, University of London: "We urgently need to know how we came to (mis) recognize ourselves as being present in the representations offered to us."[54] This need, they argued, is now more urgent than ever, as digital technologies have blurred the boundaries between private and public images, and multiplied and made more intimate the invitations that people receive daily to (mis) recognize themselves as being present in the representations offered to them, as social media and the internet circulate straight to our hands via the private space of the digital phone, an uncontrollable and unfiltered flow of images that challenges anyone's ability for critical reading. We need to listen to Spence, who argued that visual literacy should be taught to all, children included. This article is an encouragement toward doing so.

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1 Jo Spence, "'Could Do Better'... Towards a Personal and Political Theatre of the Self?" (1990), in Jo Spence, *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 156–163: 163; see also Frances Hatherley, *Class Slippers: Jo Spence on Fantasy, Photography and Fairytales* (Bristol and London: RRB Photobooks and Hyman Collection, 2020).

2 First exhibited at the Cockpit Gallery in London, a version of it can be seen on the Cockpit Archives website, https://cockpitarchives.co.uk/the-picture-of-health-jo-spence-with-rosy-martin-maggie-murray-1985/. The piece also appeared as two articles, parts one and three in a series about cancer in the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* , February 1986, 163, and April 1986, 20–25; see also Jo Spence, "The Picture of Health? 1982 onwards," in Jo Spence, *Putting Myself in the Picture: A Political, Personal and Photographic Autobiography* (London: Camden Press, 1986), 150–171; see also Marsha Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Scarlet Press, 1996) and Jo Anna Isaak, "In Praise of Primary Narcissism: The Last Laughs of Jo Spence and Hannah Wilke," in *Interfaces: Women / Autobiography / Image / Performance*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, [2009] 2012), 49–68.

3 One of the best accounts of photo therapy appeared in Jo Spence and Rosy Martin, "Photo-therapy: Psychic Realism as a Healing Art?' in *Ten.8* no. 30 (Autumn 1988): 2–17; see also Rosy Martin and Jo Spence, "Photo Therapy: New Portraits for Old: 1984 onwards," in Spence, *Putting Myself in the Picture*, 172–193.

4 Jo Spence, *The Final Project*, ed. Louisa Lee with texts by Terry Dennett, Clarissa Jacob, Amy Tobin, Philomena Epps, and Jo Spence (London: Karsten Shubert, 2013); *Jo Spence: The Final Project*, Richard Saltoun Gallery, February 12 – March 25, 2016, curated by David Campany, see https://davidcampany.com/jo-spence-the-final-project/. Some of the images from the series are also available at https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2016/feb/16/photographer-jo-spence-the-final-project.

5 *Jo Spence: Work Part I* and *Part II*, at SPACE and Studio Voltaire, London, June–August 2012. The piece had been exhibited at *Jo Spence: Beyond the Family Album and Other Projects*, Belfast Exposed, March 4 – April 15, 2005, before traveling to the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) to feature in the large retrospective *Jo Spence: Beyond the Perfect Image*, curated by Jorge Ribalta, October 2005 – January 2006. There had been a previous UK retrospective in 1995, *Jo Spence: Matters of Concern – Collaborative Images 1982-1992*, Royal Festival Hall, London and Impressions Gallery, York, which may have included *Beyond the Family Album*, but I have been unable to verify this. The work was also exhibited in London in 2018 at *Misbehaving Bodies: Jo Spence and Oreet Ashery*, Wellcome Collection. The panels are now owned by MACBA.

6 *Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970-1990*, curated by Linsey Young, Tate Britain, London, November 8 – April 7, 2024; National Galleries of Scotland: Modern, Edinburgh, May 25, 2024 – January 26, 2025; The Whitworth, University of Manchester, March 7 – August 24, 2025.

7 For a fuller discussion of the exhibition, see Na'ama Klorman-Eraqi, "Photography and *Three Perspectives on Photography: Recent British Photography*," in *The Visual Is Political: Feminist Photography and Countercultural Activity in 1970s Britain* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 110–119.

8 See Alexandra Moschovi, *A Gust of Photo-Philia: Photography in the Art Museum* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020); Juliet Hacking, *Photography and the Art Market* (London: Lund Humphries, 2018).

9 Barry Lane was Photography Officer at the Arts Council, 1969–1993.

10 Andrew Dewdney, "Forget Photography: The Arts Council and the Disappearance of Independent Photography in Neoliberal Britain," paper given at the Paul Mellon Centre for British Art, Yale University, *Concerning Photography: The Photographers' Gallery and Photographic Networks in Britain, c. 1971 to the Present*, November 25 – December 2, 2021; David Bate, "Thirty Years: British Photography Since 1979," *Portfolio* no 41 (2005): 4.

11 John A. Walker, *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 163.

12 This led to John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988).

13 Walker, *Left Shift*, 242.

14 Paul Hill, Angela Kelly, and John Tagg, *Three Perspectives on Photography: Recent British Photography*, exh. cat. (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979). On photography theory, see for example the now classic collection *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin (London: Macmillan, 1982); many of its chapters had been published previously in journals on film, photography, or the arts.

15 Arts Council of Great Britain, Thirtieth annual report and accounts year ended 31 March 1975.

16 This point is based on having seen these works in subsequent exhibitions.

17 Camille Richert, "The Hackney Flashers: A Democratic Exhibition Practice, 1974-80," in *Parents Must Unite + Fight. Hackney Flashers: Agitprop, Work and Socialist Feminism in England* (Dijon, France: Tombolo Presses 2024), 67–99: 68. On *Women and Work* see also Siona Wilson, "Revolting Photographs: Proletarian Amateurism in Jo Spence and Terry Dennett's Photography Workshop," in *Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 139–199.

18 Terry Dennett, "England: The (Worker's) Film and Photo League," in the section "Left Photography Between the Wars: The International Worker Photography Movement" he edited for *Photography Politics: One*, eds. Terry Dennett, Jo Spence, David Evans, and Sylvia Ghol (London: Photography Workshop, 1979), 100–117. This was an important publication, ahead of the books by Tagg or Burgin, on the social history and theory of photography.

19 Terry Dennett and Jo Spence, "Ten Years of Photography Workshop," in *Photographic Practices: Towards a Different Image*, eds. Stevie Bezencenet and Philip Corrigan (London: Comedia, 1986), 13–28. On Dennett's activities as part of Photography Workshop, see Johanna Klingler, "Film and Photography League," "The Worker Photographer," and "Working Together," in *Camera Forward*, *MayDay Room Pamphlets* : 01 (London: MayDay Rooms, 2021), 41–100.

20 Jon Savage, "Seventies: London Subversive," in *Goodbye to London: Radical Art and Politics in the 70s*, ed. Astrid Proll (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 20.

21 See Walker, *Left Shift*, 3; on Photography Workshop and Hackney Flashers, see also Noni Stacey, *Photography of Protest and Community: The Radical Collectives of the 1970s* (London: Lund Humphries, 2020).

22 Half Moon Photography Workshop, "Statement of Aims," *Camerawork* 1 (February 1976), back cover. These are based on the aims Dennett and Spence outlined for a *Photography Workshop Newsletter* they were planning to publish before joining Half Moon and founding *Camerawork*; Terry Dennet and Jo Spence, "Photography as a Tool – Photography Workshop Newsletter No. 1," to be distributed in "October/November 1975," hand-annotated typed manuscript in JSMLA, Photography Workshop – *Camerawork* box.

23 See for example Anne Higonnet, "Secluded Vision: Images of Feminine Experience in Nineteenth-Century Europe," *Radical History Review* no. 38 (1987): 16–36; Lindsay Smith, *The Politics of Focus: Women, Children and Nineteenth-Century Photography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); and Patrizia Di Bello, *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England: Ladies, Mothers and Flirts* (London: Routledge [Ashgate], 2007).

24 Marianne Hirsh, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); and *The Familial Gaze*, ed. Marianne Hirsh (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 1999). See also Pat Holland, "'Sweet it is to Scan…' Personal Photographs and Popular Photography," in *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Liz Wells (London: Routledge, [1997] 2021).

25 As well as the exhibition at the Museum of Warsaw mentioned in the acknowledgments, see also for example *Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage*, at the Chicago Arts Institute, October 2019 – January 2020, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, February–May 2020. The exhibition was curated by Liz Siegel, and the catalog of the same title features contributions by her, Martha Weiss, and Patrizia Di Bello (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2009).

26 Richard Greenhill, Margaret Murray, and Jo Spence, *Photography*, Macdonald Guidelines Series (London: Macdonald Educational 1977), 8. At this point, Spence was still describing herself as "a portrait and documentary photographer particularly interested in the development of photography as a critical tool in education," *Photography*, inside front cover.

27 *Annette Messager, Comédie tragédie 1971–1989*, eds. Serge Lemoin and Christne Poullaine (Grenoble: Musée de Grenoble, 1989).

28 Patrizia Di Bello, "The Family Album, the Feminine and the Personal," in *Women's Albums and Photography*, historicizes and theorizes the disregard for the family album in both modernist and postmodernist writings on photography, 7–27.

29 Edward Lucie-Smith, "A Flash from the Past," review of photography exhibitions including *Three Perspectives on Photography*, *Evening Standard*, June 7, 1979, cutting in the Jo Spence Memorial Library Archive, Birkbeck, London (JSMLA), n.p.

30 William Fever, "Hayward Triangle," review of *Three Perspectives on Photography*, in *The Observer*, Sunday June 17, 1979, cutting in JSMLA, n.p. See also Griselda Pollock, "Three Perspectives on Photography: A Review," *Screen Education* no. 31 (1979): 49–54.

31 Greenhill, Murray, and Spence, "Projects," in *Photography*, 82; see also Jo Spence, "Some Background to *Beyond the Family Album*" in JSMLA, Family Album Work box: "trying to tell my life story in 'passport' fashion – juxtaposing of images from family album with media images, to produce a 'Third Effect' (often ironic)."

32 Joan Solomon, "Preface," *What Can a Woman Do with a Camera? Photography for Women* (London: Scarlet Press, 1995), 9–14.

33 On the History Workshop and the role of Marxist historian Raphael Samuels in inspiring the "history from below" movement, see https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/museums-archives-heritage/the-history-of-history-workshop/; and *Raphael Samuel (1934–1996): History in the Making*, a virtual special issue of *History Workshop Journal*, edited by Felix Driver and available online at https://academic.oup.com/hwj/pages/raphaelsamuel.

34 Spence, *Putting Myself in the Picture*, 107; unless noted, all biographical information in this article is from this publication. See also Keith Kennedy, *Eulogy for Terry Dennett*, JSMLA; and Wellcome Collection, Keith Kennedy, https://wellcomecollection.org/works/evhf339g.

35 See Judith Williamson in *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (London: Marion Boyers, 1978); Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957), trans. Annette Lavers (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972).

36 See Jo Spence, *Fairytales and Photography, or, Another Look at Cinderella*, BA thesis, 1982, facsimile (Bristol and London: RRB Photobooks and The Hyman Collection, 2020).

37 Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2001).

38 See for example *Spare Rib* no. 2 (Winter 1987), which had on its first page an advert for *Women Live*, "The only nationally available magazine by women, writing about their lives," next to the list of contents which included "Jo Spence, 'Photography – evolving new forms of diary writing'." Inside the magazine, this article by Spence was actually titled "Putting Yourself in the Picture," 12–16.

39 Spence commissioned Burgin's article "Art, Commonsense and Photography," in *Camerawork* no. 3 (July 1976): 1–2. He did not include her in his collection *Thinking Photography* (1982). She also included essays by Sekula in *Photography Politics: One* and *Photography Politics: Two* (London: Comedia, 1986).

40 Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970–1985* (London and New York: Pandora, 1987).

41 Wilson makes a similar argument in "Revolting Photographs," contrasting the production values of Hackney Flashers' *Women and Work* (1975) with *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry 1973-75*, by Margaret Harrison, Kay Hunt, and Mary Kelly. Unlike the former, this is included in Parker's and Pollock's *Framing Feminism*.

42 Jo Spence, "Jo Condition Letter Not for Publication 1992," manuscript of a letter to Terry Dennett, in "X Marks the Spot," *Not Our Class #3*, Lambeth Women's Project, 2012, published to coincide with *Jo Spence: Work Part I* and *Part II*.

43 Based on a photograph on their website, *Beyond the Family Album* at the MACBA exhibition consisted of 25 panels, with an extra panel labelled "Beyond the Family Album: Private Images" not at the Hayward. 23 panels from this are reproduced in *Jo Spence: Beyond the Perfect Image*, ed. Jorge Ribalta, exh. cat. (Barcelona, MACBA, 2005). The Cockpit leaflet gives the number of panels as 30. I have found photographs of 28 panels in Dennett's digital archive. The extra three panels, titled "Public Images: His," "Office workers are 14% of the workforce: 'Theirs'," and "Private Public Images: 'Theirs'," address the construction of male identities in the media and give more emphasis to the issue of class, and perhaps because of this they had been omitted from the Hayward show as Spence was in the "Feminism and Photography" section. All of Spence's works tend to be mutable and in flux, as panels are adapted to the space and situation and sometimes lost in transit back from venues, or individual photographs juxtaposed in different combinations, labelled differently, reused, and repurposed across different works; see Charlene Heath and Patrizia Di Bello, "The Work Which Is Not One," in *Contemporary Photography as Collaboration*, eds. Mathilde Bertrand and Karine Chambefort-Kay (London, New York, and Shanghai: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 179–195.

44 The panels have been exhibited in slightly different formations in the exhibitions I have been able to identify. In this article, I am following the sequence visible in fig. 1, as exhibited at the Hayward, and largely replicated in *Jo Spence: Beyond the Perfect Image*.

45 From the panel "Beyond the Family Album: Private Images," not exhibited at the Hayward but exhibited at MACBA; see *Jo Spence: Beyond the Perfect Image*, 176–177.

46 According to his Wikipedia entry: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neil_Spence.

47 Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)," *Photography Politics: One*, 171–185: 172.

48 Jo Spence, "Facing Up to Myself," *Spare Rib* no. 68 (March 1978).

49 Its first incarnation, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), was chaired by Maynard Keynes, see https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/our-organisation/our-history; see also David Beech, *Art and Value: Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2015).

50 Spence published articles on her family album work until the 1990s; see for example Jo Spence, "Reworking the Family Album," in *Media Education* no. 12 (1990): 20–27; Jo Spence, "Disrupting the Silence: The Daughter's Story," *Oral History* (Spring 1990), special issue on "Popular Memory": 54–60.

51 Parker and Pollock, *Framing Feminism*, xiii

52 Jo Spence, "The Picture of Health? Visual Autobiography – An Act of Bravery?" opening panel of Jo Spence with Rosy Martin, Maggie Murray, and Terry Dennett, *The Picture of Health?*, 1982-86, Cockpit Archive, available at cockpitarchive.com.

53 Rosy Martin and Jo Spence, "New Portraits for Old: The Use of the Camera in Therapy," *Feminist Review* no. 19 (Spring 1985): 66–92: 66.

54 Jo Spence, "Beyond the Family Album," in *Open Eye* no. 7 (January 1980) (newsletter of the Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool); the exhibition was *Cultural Sniping: Collaborations in the Show Spence Memorial Library Archive*, Peltz Gallery, London, March–April 2018, curated by Patrizia Di Bello, Frances Hatherley, and the students on my MA module "Art and Photography since the 1970s."

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