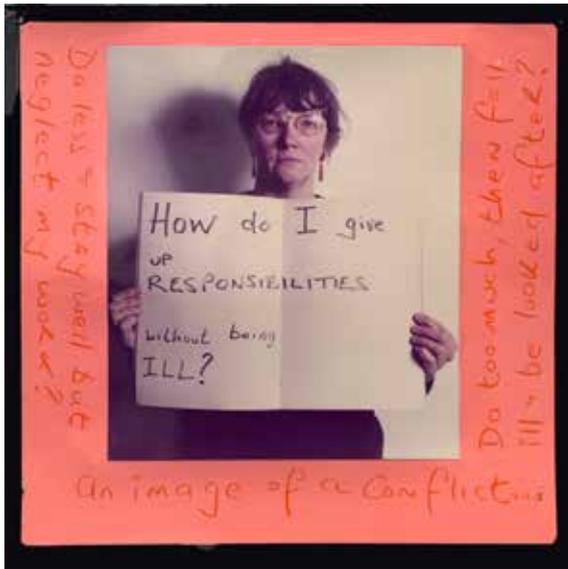


JO SPENCE: FAIRY TALES TO PHOTO THERAPY

Exploring over three decades of photographic practice *From Fairy Tales to Photo Therapy* presents the work of Jo Spence (1934-1992), drawn from The Hyman Collection, one of the most comprehensive collections of her work in the world.

Spence's highly collaborative work included projects with community groups, feminist collectives, children's workshops, and adult education. Until her untimely death from leukaemia in 1992, Spence, and her collaborators, developed new ways of thinking about photography, using it to create radical and empowering images.



Paving the way for women photographers today, Spence shone a light on working class women, who were too often culturally invisible. Using photography as a way to explore her own identity and family history, she reworked traditional relationships between sitter and subject. With new techniques, such as 'photo theatre' and 'photo therapy', she gave women permission to create their own self-imagery.

In her dissertation *Fairy Tales and Photography...or, another look at*

Cinderella (on display in gallery four) she also questions the representation of women within media and advertising. By peeling back the 'gloss' of her own family photographs she creates an alternative narrative, revealing what lies hidden behind the photograph.

Spence used her photographic work to raise numerous difficult questions, challenging conventions in a bid to promote real and collective change. Tellingly, she preferred the term 'cultural worker' to artist. Examples of such provocations include the series *Remodelling Photo History* which plays with traditional images of gender as portrayed throughout the history of photography.

She also held strong beliefs in the power of the collective and collaboration. This notion shines especially bright in her 'photo therapy' practice, pioneered with photographer, writer, and artist Rosy Martin. Together they used photography as a tool with which to understand past trauma and begin a process of healing.

At the heart of Spence's practice lay a strong desire to dig deep, asking the questions that so many of us think about but are afraid to voice out loud. Her vulnerability became her strength, as she used this rawness to explore a host of issues – from feminism to class, to health and wellbeing – all of which still resonate with audiences today.

Curated by Keiko Higashi, Dr Frances Hatherley, and Arnolfini, supported by The Hyman Collection, in collaboration with the Bristol Photo Festival.

REMODELLING PHOTO HISTORY

In 1973, Spence met social historian and photographer Terry Dennett at the Children's Rights Workshop in Brixton. It was the start of a friendship and collaboration that was to last over 20 years.

Together they founded the Half Moon Photography Workshop (1975) and *Camerawork* magazine (1976), working with a collective of photographers also interested in left-wing politics and documentary techniques. Despite the serious aim of seeking to challenge society's overwhelming power structures, their work was often filled with playful humour and irony. The series *Remodelling Photo History* (also known as *The History Lesson*) was published in *Screen journal* in 1982. It consisted of 13 sequential images (seen within this gallery) and an accompanying text.

It was heavily influenced by *Theatre of the Oppressed*, a book by Brazilian theatre maker, theorist, and political activist Augusto Boal, in which he argued that the community must be actively involved in the creation of its narratives.

In this series Spence and Dennett 'poke fun' at conventional techniques often used in documentary photography. They staged their own re-workings of traditional images from both a working-class and feminist perspective.

The notion of switching roles later became a recurring theme in Spence's work as she turned the camera upon herself. By exposing herself in this way she learned to produce powerful and direct images, free from idealisation, enabling her to reveal and re-write her own story.

PHOTO THERAPY

'I am continually asked "what is photo therapy"? It means, quite literally, using photography to heal ourselves.'

In 1982, Spence was diagnosed with breast cancer. Her resulting experiences in hospital left her feeling dehumanised, sparking a new line of enquiry in her work.

Shocked by the insensitivity of the doctors who treated her, she experienced immense feelings of powerlessness and fear. Fighting against fears of being treated like an obedient child, she snuck a camera into hospital. Photographing herself, she was able to articulate the changes to her body, regaining a sense of control.

During this process came the realisation that she knew very little about the health and wellbeing of her own family. It led to a decision to: 'visually document my own struggle for health, and to try to see how that allied itself to struggles that others are making.'

In 1983, Spence met Rosy Martin, her 'sister co-counsellor', and together they began to explore photography as a way of understanding and overcoming past trauma. Inspired by methods used in psychodrama and co-counselling, Spence and Martin developed a new practice; 'photo therapy'.

This new practice shifted power from the photographer to the subject. Each in turn would act out significant moments from their life. It allowed them to push beyond the stereotypical

images seen throughout the pages of countless smiling family albums. Personal histories were brought into focus from grief and self-image, to sexuality and class conflict.

This collaborative process led to Spence creating an enormous body of work, delving into her own family history (including her relationship with her mother). She interrogated the conflicting pressures and expectations placed on women to be both 'sexy' and the perfect housewife. She was also able to explore feelings of shame about her education and cultural knowledge, stemming from her working-class background.

Perhaps most importantly, it allowed her to discuss the impact of her cancer diagnosis and the overwhelming sense of powerlessness felt when faced with illness and eventually death.

FAIRY TALES AND PHOTOGRAPHY... OR, ANOTHER LOOK AT CINDERELLA

On the 29th of July 1981 millions of people were glued to TV screens to watch the 'fairy tale' wedding of Prince Charles to Lady Diana Spencer.

The media frenzy and public fascination surrounding the Royal wedding provided the inspiration for Spence's thesis, titled *Fairy Tales and Photography... or, another look at Cinderella*.

Spence was studying for a degree in Theory and Practice of Photography at the Polytechnic of Central London as a mature student. The wedding became the focus of her photographic investigation, which explored the idea of fairy tales as parables (moral stories) of class and gender structures.

The work focused on the popular tale of *Cinderella* and is shown here in both its original form and as large-scale reproductions, bringing the various 'characters' to life.

Drawing on her own life experience, Spence retells the story through a socialist, feminist framework. By doing so she reveals the roles played by both capitalism and gender in oppressing women.

Spence sourced evidence from adverts, newspaper articles, posters, children's books, and films. Together they create an alternative story, uncovering the pressures and expectations placed on women to live up to ideals of feminine beauty and to fulfil the roles of wife and mother.

The hours of research proved pivotal in shaping the future direction of her practice, crystallizing concepts such as 'photo pantomime' and 'photo theatre' seen in *Remodelling Photo History* in gallery two and 'photo therapy' in gallery three.

The work became a sprawling 240 pages, including a feast of images (from high and low culture), which became familiar totems within her work. It also created a springboard from which Spence was able to address and develop a multitude of personal and political concerns which form the body of her work across the remaining years.

You can buy a copy of Fairy Tales and Photography... or, another look at Cinderella, and Class Slippers: Jo Spence on Fantasy, Photography and Fairytales in the Arnolfini Bookshop.

FIND OUT MORE

You can listen to audio descriptions of the work and each text panel by scanning the QR code to the right.



Audio
Descriptions

Pick up a free copy or download our Jo Spence drawing resources (suitable for all ages), which have been produced by BA Drawing and Print students at UWE, Bristol at www.arnolfini.org.uk

ABOUT ARNOLFINI

Arnolfini is Bristol's International Centre for Contemporary Arts located on the harbourside in the heart of the city. Woven into the fabric of Bristol since 1961, Arnolfini is a pioneer of interdisciplinary contemporary arts, presenting an ambitious, eclectic programme of visual art, performance, dance, film and music, carefully curated to appeal to a broad audience.

Housed in a prominent Grade II listed, accessible building on Bristol's harbourside, Arnolfini is an inspiring public space for contemporary arts and learning, greeting over half a million visitors each year and offering an innovative, inclusive and engaging experience for all. An internationally-renowned institution, throughout its history Arnolfini's programme has welcomed artists from a wide variety of cultures and backgrounds, supporting and developing their work, investigating their influences and aspirations.

Arnolfini has long-standing relationships with a variety of partners and celebrates the heritage and wide-reaching impact of the organisation through sharing a 60 year archive of exhibition slides, publications and artist book collection. In 2019, Arnolfini relaunched its major exhibition programme with *Still I Rise: Feminism, Gender and Resistance Act 3* and continues to build on the multicultural, diverse and inclusive ethos that has prevailed since its inception. Arnolfini remains at the heart of the Bristol community, always mindful of founding director Jeremy Rees' principle to 'Enjoy Yourself', inviting everyone to join in.

Arnolfini is an independent organisation, proud to be a part of the University of the West of England, Bristol, supported by Arts Council England and the Ashley Clinton Barker-Mills Trust, and run with the invaluable guidance of its Board of Trustees.

ARNOLFINI WOULD LIKE TO THANK

Arnolfini would like to thank Frances Hatherley, the Art Fund and The Hyman Foundation.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

We'd love to hear your thoughts about *Jo Spence: Fairy Tales to Photo Therapy*, you can join the conversation on twitter, instagram and facebook using the hashtags #arnolfiniarts and #fairytalesandphototherapy



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