REVIEW

Putting Myself in the Picture: A Political, Personal and Photographic Autobiography

Jo Spence

Camden Press London, 1987
ISBN 0948491 14 0 £8.95 Pbk

Can there be anything new under the sun? Let students of philosophy debate this question. Meanwhile, go out and buy a copy of *Putting Myself in the Picture* and decide for yourself.

My answer is a resounding 'yes'. This is new, fresh, original, mind-boggling stuff.

Compiled from a travelling exhibition of Jo Spence's work, the book is a chronologically organized account of her evolution as a photographer. But it is more than that. It traces her development as a politically and psychologically conscious feminist as it weaves together the three major strands mentioned in the subtitle: *A Political, Personal and Photographic Autobiography*. The organization is straightforward. There are many short chapters in rough chronological order. Each chapter has some autobiographical text which helps explain the photographs presented in that section, photographs which usually depict a particular project or style. The text is clear, well-written, disarmingly honest and sparks with opinions, ideas and strong emotion. On the photo pages there are plenty of pictures accompanied by succinct, often incisive remarks.

The book begins with a short description of Spence's entrance into the world of photography: as a shorthand typist. Throughout her eleven years of secretarial/administrative

Feminist Review No 29, May 1988

work in various photographic studios and other situations, she picked up many aspects of the photographic process. In each situation she learned different skills, ranging from technical information about cameras, lighting and lenses to the professional demeanour required to handle clients. During that same period she spent her leisure time doing photography as well as by joining a camera club.

Spence's life changed in 1967 when she became a 'high-street photographer', doing portraits, weddings, bar mitzvahs, baby pictures and occasional portfolios for models and actors. The text helps us understand how Spence came to see portraiture as the production of visual myths. She notes that sometimes thirty pictures might be taken so that the 'best one' could be selected (p. 32); that is, the photograph that showed the person or family as it wished to be represented; that is, the photograph which best complied with the conventions of the representation of the idealized version. Of her infant portraiture, Spence says, 'These are not real but imaginary children, conjured out of the skills of the photographer in collusion with the parents' (p. 31). Similarly, in wedding photography, Spence had to 'paper over the cracks of dissent' (p. 45) she saw and, instead, produced pictures of 'happy families' on 'happy occasions'.

The next period in Spence's photographic history may be characterized by her embracing and ultimate rejection of the documentary style. Thinking that she could render visible aspects of the invisible world of power merely by pointing her camera at certain subject matter, Spence soon became frustrated by the limitations of the genre. A pivotal point occurred when she 'abandoned the documentary mode in favour of montage and non-naturalistic methods' (p. 62) because, in my view, documentary photography cannot transcend its

own evidentiary semiotic to become a political emblem unless it is reconstructed within another system of meanings, such as political discourse. The social world is constructed by invisible forces and Spence discovered that 'the invisible world doesn't so easily yield up the reality of power relationships and institutions' (p. 71). In short, the assumption that documentary photography could be a 'window on the world' was found wanting and this insight propelled Spence to create, discover, invent, co-create other forms that would successfully conflate political awareness and personal meaning into a coherent and impactful visual image. During the time that she worked in the Photography Workshop and with the Hackney Flashers, a community-based women's photography group, Spence began to experiment with textual accompaniment to visual images. This ranged from statistical information on women's employment to commentaries on advertisements. The use of text with image potentiates the force of each system of communication and their fusion then can become a vehicle for the transmission of concepts. Thus, new types of messages could be produced and concepts such as paradox, irony or disapproval could be communicated to the viewer. As in posters, political cartoons and other similar media, the concept would precede the image, and not be relegated to the status of post-production interpretation. Concepts would no longer be detritus hanging by an umbilical cord to the image; rather, the conceptual and political intention gives birth to the image.

The next major turning point occurred when Spence put herself in the picture. Questioning her 'right to act on behalf of those I photographed' (p. 82), in addition to her rejection of the use of 'naturalism as the best way to use photography politically' (p. 82), Spence 'changed from being behind the camera to being in front of

it and became at the same time an active rather than passive subject' (p. 82). The balance of the book shows different subject matter in different situations but they are all united by the common fact that Spence is in the picture working with her own image. The images must be seen as a totality, not as individual images, in order to achieve the full impact of her political intention.

Spence describes her return to school as a mature student as yet another period of deep questioning. 'At the beginning it was continual assault on preconceived ideas about what constitutes a photograph, who it is for, what it means, who valued it, who made it, who historicized it . . . Are they critical enough of the existing social order which daily reproduces itself and in doing so naturalizes the very process of reproduction? There was no simply "taking pictures"' (p. 135).

Two thrilling aspects of Spence's later work involve, first, what she has coined 'photo-therapy' and, second, her work on health and illness which includes photographic examination of her own breast cancer. Regarding photo-therapy, Spence had been thinking through the meanings of the family album for a very long time, since her early photographs of children. Her considerations found expression – actually she found her *métier* – by creating a new method of picture-making. Photo-therapy is a process in which the photographer works with a person to create in the present a scene or character or event from the person's past or present. Preferably, the photographer and the photographee have some therapeutic experience and counselling training because they work together on an emotional level to produce a photo-therapeutic process which has not only visual representation as its goal but emotional release and understanding as well. The right clothing may be necessary, props may be employed, finding the right location

may be important. Most important, however, is the emotional safety created by the trust between photographer and photographee. Rosy Martin and Jo Spence have been doing photo-therapy together for quite some time and they write:

Traditionally, the portrait is typified by the notion that people can be represented by showing aspects of their 'character'. We understand the portrait differently. Instead of fixity, to us it represents a range of possibilities which can be brought into play at will, examined, questioned, accepted, transformed, discarded. Drawing on techniques learned from co-counselling, psycho-drama and the reframing technique borrowed from neuro-linguistic programming, we began to work together to give ourselves and each other permission to display 'new' visual selves to the camera. In the course of this work, we have amply demonstrated to ourselves that there is no single self but many fragmented selves, each vying for conscious expression, many never acknowledged. (p. 172)

The photographs are striking, purposeful, controversial and may challenge one's notions of etiquette and propriety. None the less, they are provocative and stimulate a new set of questions and discourses about photography, as well as psychological theory of the self.

Spence's work raises fundamental questions for psychology in general and psychoanalysis specifically by rendering problematic the concept of the 'person'. Spence rejects an essentialist vision of the self and sees the human being as a work in process, an entity which continually invents and then integrates parts of a continually discoverable self. This is a very intriguing concept of the person and it can be counterposed against a more traditional view of the unitary self which consists of a bundle of traits, dispositions, temperaments, attitudes, etc., that are consistent across time, place, situations and other persons. Spence takes on the psychoanalytic presupposition that there can be a 'true' self lurking underneath a 'false' self or perhaps many

false selves. For Spence there are many narratives, all true, all legitimate parts, all wanting the light of visibility to be bounced on them, so that they may quietly lose their sharpness in the integrative process.

Spence's work on health and illness has both a demystifying and educational effect on both women and men. She shows her breast to the camera in various forms: as labelled 'Property of Jo Spence', as injured after the lumpectomy, and as measured and evaluated in a mammogram machine. During the last few years, Spence has been active as a public spokesperson, bringing attention to the domination of therapeutics by the medical establishment, the appalling lack of knowledge about treatments for breast cancer and the lack of legitimacy for alternatives which treat the health of the whole body rather than the illness of the breast. This work is empowering and, like most of the work in this fine book, courageous and important.

Spence's work, especially on breast cancer, stands in sharp contrast to the recent photo-text book by Dorothea Lynch and Eugene Edwards who use the documentary method in their *Exploding into Life*. Their documentary style evidences the medical treatment of breast cancer and implies 'this is the way you would be treated if you had breast cancer', generalizing from one case. In contrast, Spence takes on the putatively homogenous reality of medical hegemony and deconstructs it, thus allowing the reader to know that, if she had breast cancer, she would do it 'her way', even if some of that 'way' is institutionally and medically determined. Spence creates the semantic, semiotic, ideological and psychological space for individuals to find their own power and laughter despite the overwhelming determinations of external forces.

Finally, because the photographs often transverse beyond acceptable imagery, one has to pose the question: how much of the self does one

have to expose in order to make a political statement? The sociologist C. Wright Mills urged politically conscious social scientists to examine how 'private troubles become public issues'. Jo Spence's work makes the private visible and, in materializing it into a sharable form, helps turn it into public and political issues.

Let me briefly mention a few personal reactions I had to this book. First, I have interviewed hundreds of photographers in connection with my own studies in the sociology of art. Each photographer, of course, has certain questions and issues about which she or he feels passionate but never have I encountered a photographer in whom so many thousands of questions are concentrated. Spence's passion, energy and continual self-questioning bounce off the page. Her consciousness is characterized by a burning search which continually transforms her and her work. Secondly, as a sociologist of art who has studied photographers and photography since 1971, and, as a member of a photography collective, I have rarely seen such a successful integration of text and image to produce a political message.

Is there something new under the sun? Yes. My eyes, mind and heart see differently. For this, I thank and congratulate Jo Spence.

Barbara Rosenblum

Note

Barbara Rosenblum, the author of *Photographers at Work* and numerous articles on the sociology of art and culture, last year curated a show in San Francisco on homeless people. She died at home from breast cancer on 14 February 1988. A Fellowship she established will assist feminist scholars to study the impact of cancer on the lives of women. Feminists from Britain will be able to apply. Please send contributions to: Barbara Rosenblum Fellowship, c/o Beth Hess, 2 Hampshire Drive, Mendham, NJ 07945, USA.