

The Photography Reader is a comprehensive collection of twentieth-century writings on photography – its production, its uses and effects. Encompassing essays by photographers including Edward Weston and László Moholy-Nagy, and key thinkers from Walter Benjamin to Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, the Reader traces the development of ideas about photography, exploring issues such as identity, consumption, the gaze, and digital technology. Each themed section features an editor's introduction setting ideas and debates in their historical and theoretical context.

Sections include:

- Reflections on Photography
- Photographic Seeing
- Codes and Rhetoric
- Photography and the Postmodern
- Photo-digital
- Documentary and Photojournalism
- The Photographic Gaze
- Image and Identity
- Institutions and Contexts

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Photography

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Rosy Martin and Jo Spence

PHOTO-THERAPY

Psychic realism as a healing art?

The victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim; he, or she, has become a threat.'

James Baldwin

SINCE THE 1950S THERE HAS BEEN a massive development in private sector counselling and therapy in this country. This is a response to the overwhelming unmet needs of people, and is often in opposition to the official agencies of medicine, psychiatry and social welfare work which, however benevolent they may appear, still aim to confine and control. Institutionally, and particularly if we are women, (especially working class and/or Black women) we are encouraged to accept situations which we should resist. Women's working and domestic situations are often awful, but the resultant depression or anger is often so well contained, that eventually many of us become silenced or ill. Rather, we need forms of assertiveness training to assess our needs better and to try to get them met, individually and collectively. Our work is an intervention into the field of (and redefinition of) 'health education', since it engages with the institutionalised mind and body split of western culture.

[. . .]

An imag(in)ed identity?

It has been argued by such differing theoreticians as Winnicott and Foucault that there are various 'gazes' which help to control, objectify, define and mirror identities to us. Sometimes these gazes are loving or benevolent, but often they are more intrusive and surveilling. Out of the myriad fragments thus mirrored to us, first unconsciously as babies, then as we are growing into language and culture, aspects of our identities are constructed. Through the internalisation and synthesis

of these powerful gazes we learn to see and differentiate ourselves from others, in terms of our class, gender, race and sexuality, thence into other sub-groups. We learn the complexity of the shifting hierarchies within which we are positioned.

The mother represents the primary gaze, which is then transformed into the gaze of mother/father, within their conflicting power relationship. Yet the 'family' is itself positioned within the various discourses of society, which each set up their own gaze of definition, power and control. (For example when the powerful-to-the-child mother takes the child to the doctors she introduces the child to, and mediates between, the child and the discourses of medicine, in which situation she herself is relatively powerless.)

We discovered that we can re-enact these discursive gazes, which are not separate but overlap and reinforce each other. In particular we have reconstructed the gazes of mother and father (family); aspects of the communications industry; and various institutional discourses – for example medicine, fashion, education, law. Revisiting each of these has made it clear that they could be described as 'mirrors' in which we as individual children or adults saw, experienced, internalized (often in a self oppressive way) what those who were/are doing the mirroring or surveilling were offering, constructing or defining from within their belief systems.

Our work has centred on family relationships, memory and history, so of particular interest has been the writings of the Austrian psychoanalyst Alice Miller.¹ Crucially, she has argued that within the family it is often the unmet narcissistic needs of parents, interlinked with the wider discourses of a given culture, that are basic to how a child is mirrored and 'sees' herself. We have found this of particular interest because in our photo-therapy work we have been criticised for being 'narcissistic' (always used as a pejorative term). Given that most of our work relates to the multifaceted concept of 'resistance', and that we are trying to unearth, make safe, and analyse the working through of such resistances, we would argue that, what we have unmasked through the re-enactment and mapping out of these gazes is a validation of our anger and discontent at our inability to come to terms with these fragmented selves constructed out of the needs, views, attributions of others and our powerlessness in relation to them.

What photo-therapy engages with is primarily the 'needy child' within us all which still needs to be seen and heard. The therapist has to become the advocate of this 'child' and to encourage her to recreate and witness her own history, to feel safe enough to protest, and then learn to become her own inner nurturer. Such work is not about 'parent blaming' but enables us to move beyond that dead end. Instead we re-invent and assert ourselves by becoming the subject rather than the object of our own histories.

[. . .]

A cultural context?

The images in circulation in a particular culture act to mould and set limits upon how each of us will 'see ourselves' and 'others'. Although we are never totally fixed by these images, they do shape our sense of reality. They are a major constituent of the dominant culture as well as being used continually to construct official histories.

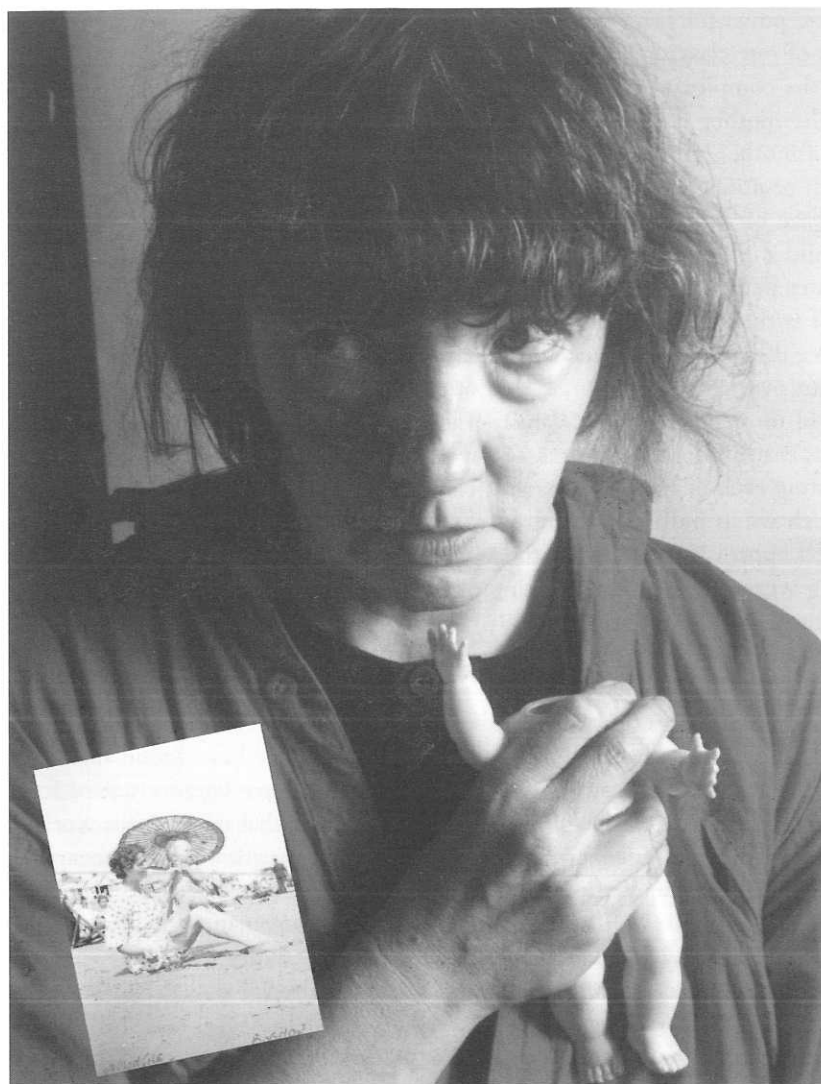


Figure 37.1 Circa 1940. Working on absences in the family album I take as a starting point my feelings of abandonment when as an evacuee I was sent away from my family. Later I find a snapshot in a box of old pictures which shows my mother with the much loved new baby of the same period.

Sitter/director: Jo Spence. Photographer/therapist: Rosy Martin.

Courtesy of the Jo Spence Memorial Archive.

For some people, who are positioned by and identify with such all-pervasive imagery unproblematically, photo-therapy would seem to be a superfluous activity. If however, you are not acquiescent with the positions assigned to you, if you are constructed or labelled as one of the various 'Others' *vis à vis* your sexuality, disability, age, gender, race and class in this society, and in receipt of the negative projections of those with power, then you might wish to engage in work on identity to redefine yourself. You then become the active subject of your own dissonant

history. Photography seems to be an ideal tool since in contradistinction to the rest of the communications industry – most of us already have personal practices with our own cameras in the form of snapshotting and the *family album*. All we need to do is to re-define and re-invent such practices.

Our earliest photographs in family 'archives' have invariably been taken by adults who are themselves caught up within a set of aesthetic expectations, culled (whether they know it or not) from the discourses of popular photography. As examples, we cite the world-wide advertising of Kodak with its universalizing regime of images. Then there are the popular and amateur photographic magazines which fetishise technology, offering a voyeuristic gaze of the personally owned camera as a way of experiencing pseudo control in the world. Within the uneven power dynamics of the family, adults also have a vested interest in what is represented and what is not. It is hardly surprising therefore that the stories about ourselves which we can common-sensically construct from family albums probably say more about the histories of amateur and popular photography and their conventions than they do about the history of any given family or its individual members.

We can now understand, with hindsight, that the privately owned (though industrially produced) images of the family (pleasurable as they undoubtedly are) should not be seen as sources of information. Better perhaps that they be viewed as visual indices of the unconscious desires of parents (and those with institutional power, for example schooling) to provide evidence of their own 'good parenting'. 'It was in your own interests' said over a bland school photograph, or 'We did the best we could' and 'Look what a happy family we were', are phrases we recollect from looking at the album with our parents.

Family snaps hardly give any indication of the contradictions, power struggles or desires inherent at all levels of family life, or in the intersection of that life with the structures which make up a patriarchal society with sexual, racial and class divisions. On the other hand, taken as a genre, they give us infinite pleasure. Family albums if taken outside the family and viewed collectively can also contain valuable resource materials for social historians who are compiling dissenting histories of oppressed or minority groups. When the various histories of childhood come to be rewritten perhaps family albums will prove to be useful tools there.

Reinventing the family album?

We can conceive of three overlapping spheres of activity with which individuals and families can engage in order to become more aware of the contradictory workings of their own subjectivity and of their histories. These can best be described as follows:

1. By using existing family album photographs as a basis for telling stories, and beginning to unmask memories with a sympathetic listener or in a workshop or collective situation. The agenda for this is always set by the context, the degree of trust and the underlying goal of the process. Whilst the oral historian may be attempting to retrieve, record and give back a dissenting history to the speaker/s and their subject positions *vis à vis* class, race, gender or a range of institutions, the therapist is more concerned with the psychic interpretations of individuals.

2. Taking things further by creating a *new family album* through snapshotting and documenting that which is absent or customarily ignored. If we train ourselves to 'see' differently, visual markers of various rites of passage which are socially tabooed within the family album can be made. For example, divorce, illness and death; undervalued everyday events such as signing on for the dole, child care, schooling, housework, visiting the doctor. (The experience of those who have tried to take snapshots within institutional contexts immediately foregrounds the problem of the institutional gaze, as permission is often hard to obtain, or limited access only is offered. This in itself offers a useful learning process in relation to forms of external censorship and self censorship).

Events which could not be photographed at the time can be remembered through the photography of objects or places which 'stand in' for the person/s or objects involved. In this way it is possible to break down ideas of universalized experience and to provide a spectrum of markers of race, class and gender through the photography of work, conflict and 'less-than-ideal' aspects of self and family. These areas of life are often photographed by 'professionals' who make a living out of the misery of others, while they help to label and position people as 'victims'. By recording such events ourselves, particularly by those people who are powerless and marginalised by the dominant stories in circulation (e.g. in contradiction to the 'happy family') a new form of social autobiographical documentation can be put together.

3. By the creation and use of images of 'the theatre of the self as practised within photo-therapy. This practice can be especially useful for exploring the contradictory visual markers of sexuality, of power relationships, and expressing *our own* desires.

Photo therapy – 'Theatre of the Self'

Fundamental to our approach is that of ideally being non-judgmental, active, viewers and listeners. As Patrick Casement has noted, 'The therapist's presence therefore has to remain a transitional or potential presence (like that of a mother who is non-intrusively present with her playing child). The therapist can then be evoked by the patient as a presence, or can be used by the patient as representing an absence. This is the world of potential space which is part real and part illusory . . . The patient needs to be allowed opportunities for optimal experience without interference from the therapist . . . The therapist has to discover how to be psychologically intimate with a patient and yet separate, separate and yet still intimate.'²

Section 28 of the Local Government Act of 1988 in Britain states that: A Local Authority shall not:

- a) Promote homosexuality or produce material for the promotion of homosexuality.
- b) Promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship by the publication of such material or otherwise.
- c) Give financial or other assistance to any person for either of the purposes referred to in paragraphs (a) or (b). Nothing of the above shall be taken to prohibit the doing of anything for the purpose of treating or preventing disease.

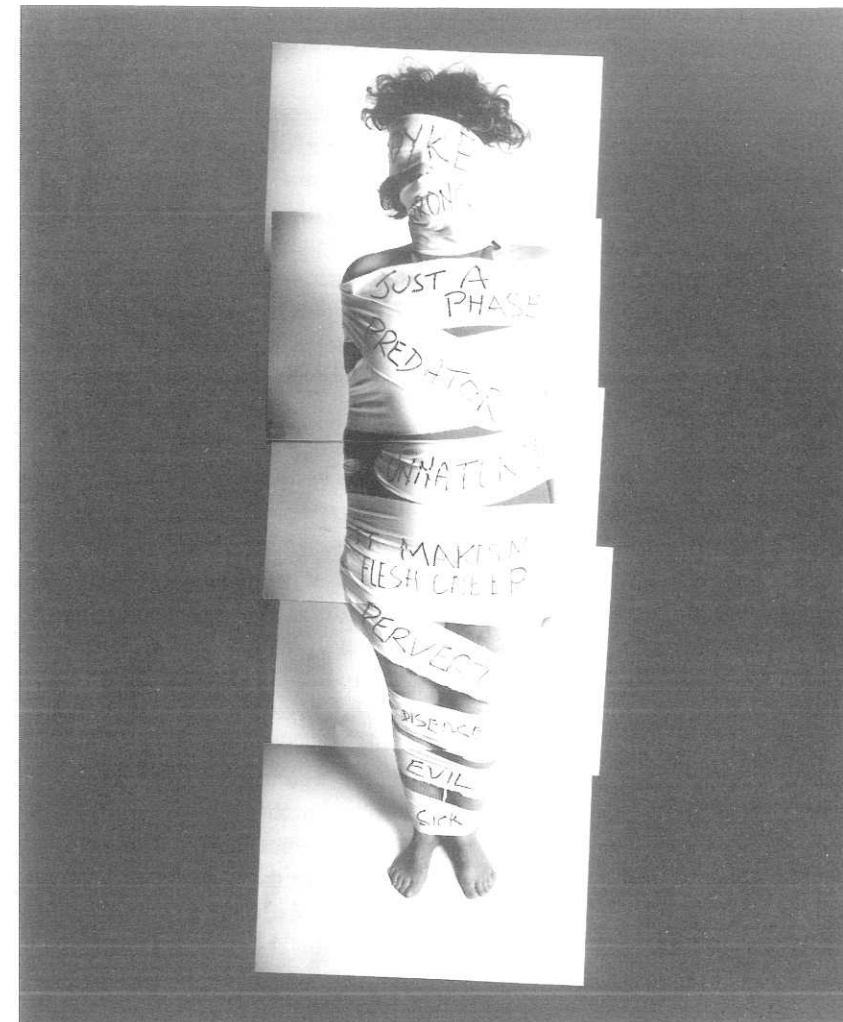


Figure 37.2 *Unwind the Lies that Bind*. Internalised oppressions. Circa 1988.

How does it feel to have the negative projections of others stuck upon me? To internalise their oppressive stereotypes? To be bound, contained and silenced by their hatred and their fear? What do they hate so forcibly? What do they fear so passionately? Why do they choose to scapegoat lesbians and gays? Easy targets?

There are a series of pejorative myths as to what a lesbian could and should be: myths arising from fear, ridicule and contempt, and perpetrated as a means of social control of all women.

Our susceptibility to absorbing oppressive ideas and theories has one major root cause, which is institutionalised in society, but not always recognised as such – the oppression of children and young people and the resultant sense of powerlessness instilled at an early age. Alice Miller has uncovered the 'poison' in universally accepted adult behaviour. Children are silenced. But the more suppressed the expression of any outrage, the more split off the hurt becomes. Hatred for the perpetrator is not allowed, so it is repressed, stored and internalised until it has some outlet in a socially sanctioned form such as racism, classism, misogyny and homophobia.

Sitter/director: Rosy Martin. Photographer/therapist: Jo Spence.

Photo: Courtesy of Rosy Martin.

Our own practice has always been client-centred and client-directed, and unlike most other therapies, has been done mostly on a reciprocal basis, exchanging the power positions of therapist and client. We have also drawn on a range of therapies; for example in psychodrama the sitter/client can act out with others past scenarios or patterns; in gestalt the sitter/client can role play or take up different positions within a family scenario or any other power dynamic, try them out, be heard and seen; in Neuro Linguistic Programming the sitter/client can 'reframe' past experience and examine the present limiting factors arising from it; and as in psychosynthesis, the sitter/client can work on various sub-personalities, personal or archetypal symbols, or visualizations. What photo-therapy enables is visual markers of such work, and is a form of self documentation unlike anything possible via snapshotting or naturalistic documentary modes of photography.

[. . .]

Why are photographs of value in therapy?

Apart from the inter-active process of photo-therapy itself, we have found that the photographs which result from sessions greatly enrich the ongoing therapeutic dynamic for the following reasons.

a) Whilst we know, intellectually, that photographs are not 'real', do not 'tell the truth', but are specific choices, constructions, frozen moments, edited out of time – yet we invest them with meaning. Still, most people believe that photographs have the power to signify 'truth'. It is this contradiction and tension that is so productive in the therapeutic process. As we view the images and witness their mutability it becomes apparent that 'truth' is a construct, and that identity is fragmented across many 'truths'. An understanding of this frees up the individual from the constant search for the fixity of an 'ideal self' and allows an enjoyment of self as process and becoming.

b) They act as a record, a mapping out, of the process gone through in a session, and the making visible of psychic reality. They act as a tangible marker of something which could otherwise go back into the unconscious and remain dormant for a long time.

c) They offer us the possibility to objectify and see a separate part of oneself which can then be integrated back into the overall subjectivity, or core self, as and when we are ready for it, as in psychosynthesis. Although photography objectifies, because photo-therapy is process-based, photographs can act as 'transitional objects' (as theorised by Winnicott) towards another reality. In this sense they can be seen as stepping stones.

d) Photographs can potentially provide unfiltered contact with the unconscious, transcending talking and making possible the direct use of images and symbols. For example, as Assagioli has said of psychosynthesis, symbols are seen as 'accumulators', in the electrical sense, as containers and preservers of a dynamic psychological charge.³ This 'charge' or psychological energy can be transformed by the use of the symbol, channelled by it, or integrated by it. Symbols are especially powerful for transforming the unconscious which does not operate with the language of logic but with images.

e) They can prompt a cathartic release in that they are able to work directly on gut feelings without the interception of the intellect.

f) Transcending the single image, it is possible to order and re-order the photographs into a variety of mini-narratives, which in themselves can be moved around, providing an infinity of matrixes or montages. There is never a fixed story being told, no narrative closure. Transformation of fixed or screen memories thus become possible through such forms of visual montaging. By adding actual objects, or aspects of other media to photographs, we can make collages. These are effective methods of taking things to pieces and putting them together again differently.

g) Photo-therapy can make visible different 'parts' or 'sub personalities' of our subjectivity, as well as enabling us to explore different positions within a dynamic. Thus we can play cyclically with positions of authority and victimization, power and powerlessness and so on.

h) They can be used as a tool within other therapeutic practices – for example, as a starting point for further sessions.

i) Photographs can help us to 'unfreeze', acknowledge what has previously been resisted and repressed, then let go and move on from the material being worked through.

j) As well as enabling a coming to terms with 'negativity', photographs can be markers of triumph, a celebration of integration, and the successful exploration of an issue or pattern.

[. . .]

Psychotherapy takes place in the overlap of two 'areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist. Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together. The corollary of this is that where playing is not possible then the work done by the therapist is directed towards bringing the patient from a state of not being able to play into a state of being able to play. Playing implies trust, and belongs to the potential space between (what was at first) baby and mother figure . . . It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.⁴

Notes

- 1 See in particular *Thou Shalt Not be Aware – Society's Betrayal of the Child*, Alice Miller, 1985, Pluto Press, and *The Drama of Being a Child*, Alice Miller, 1981, Virago (see also *Prisoners of Childhood, For Your Own Good*).
- 2 *On Learning from the Patient* by Patrick Casement, Tavistock Publications, 1985.
- 3 From D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, Tavistock Publications, 1971.
- 4 *Psychosynthesis* by R. Assagioli, Turnstone Books, London, 1975. See also: *Putting Myself in the Picture*, by Jo Spence, Camden Press, 1986.