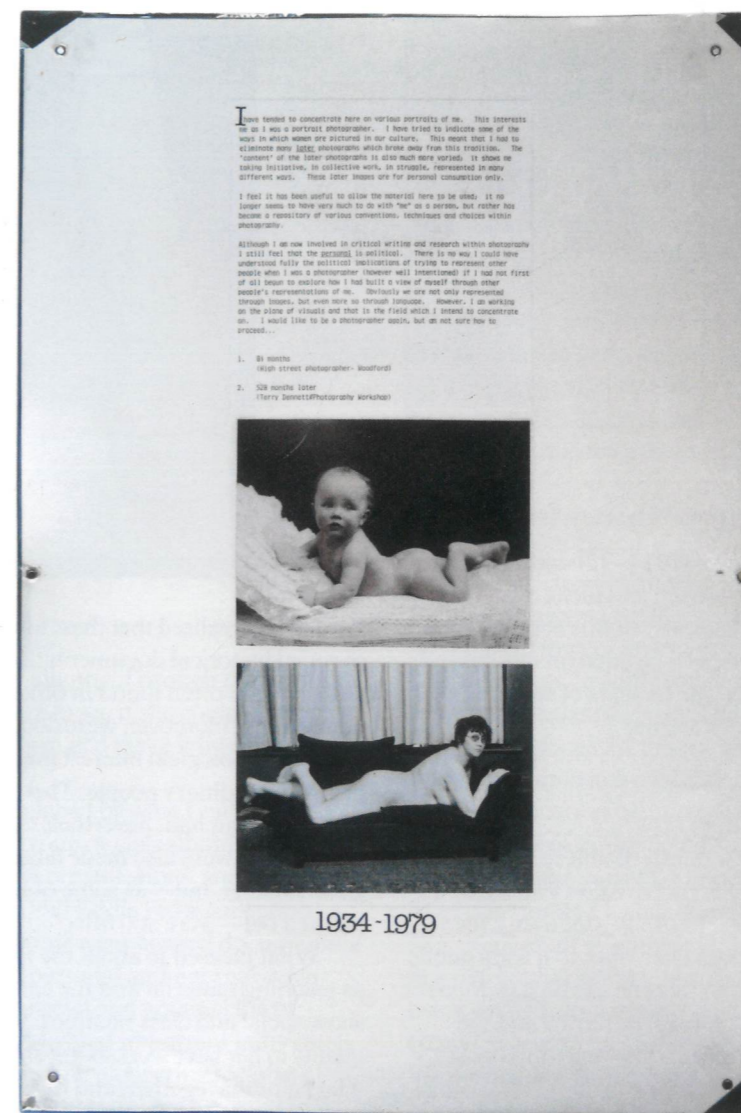


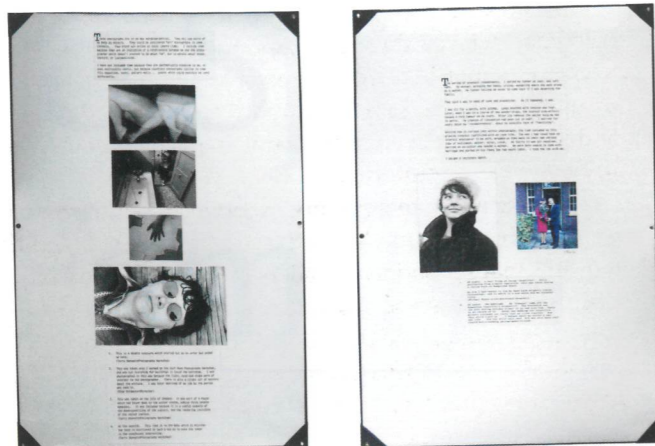
Jo Spence's Family Album

Terry Dennett



All images from Jo Spence, *Beyond the Family Album*, 1979. Courtesy of the author

Jo Spence made a significant contribution to discussions around the politics of family photography through photographs, writing and workshops. Here, her partner and collaborator, Terry Dennett, reflects on the origins of Spence's interest in the family as a subject, and places her work in the wider context of British culture during the 1970s and 1980s. Focusing on 'Beyond the Family Album' and a series of reconstructed photographs, he provides original insights into the thinking that informed Spence's practice.



In a somewhat busy life, Jo Spence (1934–92) wasn't able to publish very much about her approach and ideas related to her early family album investigations.¹ In this article I would like to share some of the knowledge I gleaned on this subject from conversations we had over our 18 years of working together and from material in her archive.

Beyond the Family Album

The initial public showing of her family album work was in the touring group show *Three Perspectives on Photography* (The Hayward Gallery, London, 1979). Jo's section, called 'Beyond the Family Album', brought her work to a wide public audience at around the same time that the feminist movement was becoming interested in the role of the family and the mother as family historian. The mantra 'the personal is political' also came into prominence at that time.

As a result of the exhibition, Jo became recognised as one of the pioneers of work in the field, and received many requests to give talks and workshops to students associated with social history. Unfortunately, this work also corresponded with a time when the book trade and ephemera dealers were starting to break up old second-hand albums and sell the photographs separately, destroying the original albums as a historical resource. This was a serious blow for many of her students and for us today.

Jo's initial interest in the family album was rooted in her social history work within the feminist movement, rather than in any specific photographic project. Like many others, she saw family albums as special kinds of documents. They arose within a particular historic period within capitalism and had not existed widely before. She once said, prophetically, they would not exist in this form in the future. The family album is now being slowly supplanted by the development of social media and the decline of traditional film.

The Album as Teaching Material

Early on, Jo realised that these albums were also a unique form of social historical documentation. They contained images and texts not often found in other material in the public domain and, moreover, were documents of special sociological and anthropological interest made spontaneously 'from below' by ordinary people. These people were not otherwise historians, but had, nevertheless, constructed histories. The albums were also made largely outside the control of governments, but—as some of her feminist friends quickly pointed out—were still affected by the prevailing ideology.

What pleased Jo about the family album was its value as teaching material and the ease with which it could easily show social and class relations. Jo often made use of this quality in her later workshops: showing upper-class and middle-class albums together, and then getting students to make their own albums in which they took different class positions. She put together boxes of different photos for this purpose, sorted into various social categories, and even included a box of cats and dogs.

During much of its existence, the average family album was a private internal document addressed to family and friends. Albums were created as a means of passing on a record of life and times to future generations. They provided a private history. Indeed, the majority of the albums we see today were created to hold pictures made by the relatively new invention of photography when it started to be used by ordinary people. When Kodak introduced the cheap box camera and mass processing, it played an important part in the popularisation of photographic family albums.

From the 1970s onwards, Jo set about collecting these old albums from jumble sales and ephemera dealers, finally deciding to concentrate on finding albums that covered the two world wars: the period when her own family had made



their (now mostly lost) family albums. Through this material she began to explore the genera to see if she could restructure the historic personal album form and make it into a more radical socio-history album.

This had already been developed by what I called 'the social album': these are the type of group or club albums preferred by many 19th-century socialist organisations, some examples of which Jo found in the Ruth and Eddie Frow collection in Manchester. The group albums went beyond documenting the usual range of individual, personal and internal celebratory events to showcase the social and political life of a club or group. They also highlighted important individuals associated with the group, including pioneering socialists whose photographs would not otherwise have existed in the wider media.

Based on this research, Jo wanted her new type album to include under-represented aspects of family life such as illness and divorce, together with the external social and political events that impacted upon the family and were rarely recorded by the average album maker.

Restructuring the Family Album for Use in Therapy

When Jo began to deal with illness, she found the album an important tool for use in therapy work, and eventually made a series of album-style illness diaries. Like many wartime children, Jo was sent away from her family as part of the government's evacuee programme.^{2,3} After I met her, she said that this traumatic event was really the source and motivation for much of her later and now well-known explorations of family. It seems that, in her youthful perception of the

evacuation process, she blamed her parents for deserting her and sending her away, thus ending her happy childhood. This was a common experience among some of the evacuees I have interviewed, and a trauma never really resolved for many due to the lack of any post-war therapy programmes available to evacuee children.

As a young adult, this evacuee experience continued to estrange her from her mother and father, and it was not until their deaths that she suddenly understood that the decision to send her away was not really their own. After their deaths she felt deeply ashamed at the way she had treated them, and resolved to make at least some amends by paying belated homage to them, albeit only at a distance. She made therapeutic reconstructions to re-explore the sort of relationship she should have had with them in life.

The Constructed Photograph as a Point of Focus

A Buddhist friend, with whom Jo discussed her desire to recreate a missing family history, said that in the Buddhist faith the creation of an image was seen as a point of focus for meditation. Jo could make a few key iconic photographs to serve a similar purpose. The photographs were intended to provide a focus for therapeutic explorations, before interweaving these image-meditations with autobiographical texts.

The process of creating these iconic images made her realise that, before she could attempt to reconstruct her family experience, she must first understand how she herself had been constructed by her wartime and post-war experiences as a child, as an evacuee and, finally, as a woman living in a patriarchal society. Her first attempts to explore the past using single iconic images linked together in a narrative structure had to be abandoned when she realised that her life had mostly been experienced through a series of key events—a series of 'shocks' and transitions—and not through any kind of continuous narrative. Her life had been episodic: from the happy childhood to the traumatic evacuee experience, and then her teenage rebellion and shameful drift away from her mother and father.

As this work progressed, she realised that the material she needed for the evacuee part of the project, such as her small suitcase and gas mask and the name label pinned to her coat, had been disposed of when the family house was sold. She again set about visiting charity shops to find examples of these things and additional items like wartime ration books. This collection formed the basis for an initial series of staged tableau and still life constructions now lost, but fortunately later resurrected as part of her photo therapy work. These include the now well-known restaging of herself as an evacuee, as her mother as a war worker, and the less well-known image re-imaging her mother's thoughts on the aberrant daughter.

