

Issue 6

The Rebel

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Art & Writing by

Olly Beck

Neal Brown

Terry Dennett

Gretta Sarfaty Marchant

Mark McGowan

Stephanie Moran

Sally O'Reilly

Harry Pye

Adrian R. Shaw

Jo Spence

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Remembering Jo Spence

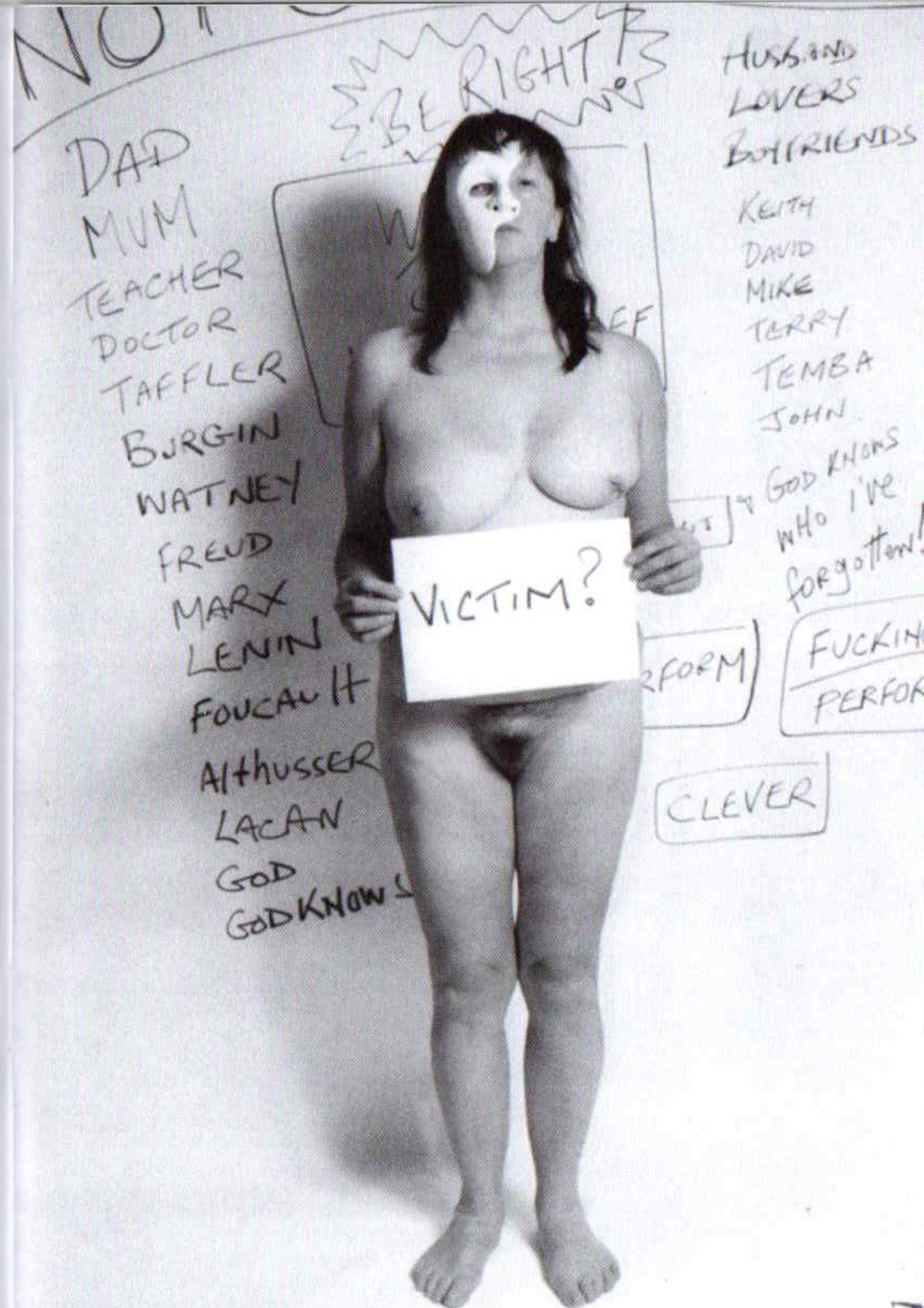
Jo Spence was a British socialist and feminist who was born in London in 1932. She got a secretarial job in a commercial photographer's and eventually became a high street photographer. She went to art school when she was in her forties. Her work as an artist included a series of self portraits that documented her experience of cancer. Jo found out she had cancer in 1982. The way she found out was that a doctor examined her, drew a cross on her breast and said: 'That's the one that has to be removed.' Spence was advised to take drugs and have radiation treatment but she decided instead to use both alternative and Chinese medicine. She invented her own ways of surviving cancer and made up a camera therapy program and used photography to rediscover herself. Jo Spence explained: "I have rejected a medical profession whose basic metaphors of disease are those of WAR: to cut, burn and chemically destroy the 'problem': to get rid of the 'trouble' (in my case a malignant tumor); to knife it out whilst not encouraging me to ask why it is there." Jo was interested in the politics of photography. In 1976 she wrote: "Every day photographers produce countless images, most of which will never be seen by a mass audience. However, those that are seen, in newspapers, magazines and on high street hoardings, play an important part in our lives. With their messages - both explicit and hidden - they help to shape our concepts of what is real and what is normal. They give us information about the sort of sex roles we are expected to play in society, contribute to our image of ourselves, to our expectations and our fantasies."

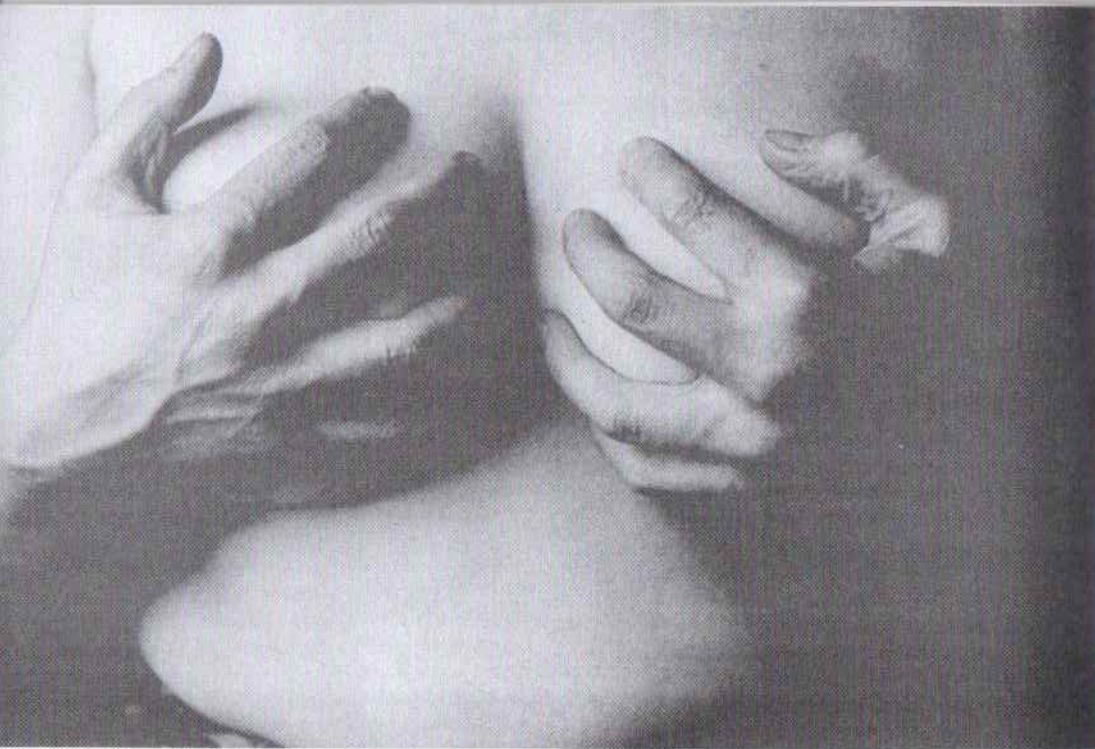
I believe Jo has been an inspiration to many and so I'm delighted to feature her in *The Rebel*.

Last month Terry Dennett, curator of the Jo Spence Memorial Archive, came to Sartorial and told us a bit more about Jo's life and work.

Harry Pye: How did you and Jo first meet?

Terry Dennett: "Around 1972 I was teaching photography at South Island Children's Workshop in Brixton. It was an after school club and one year I agreed to do a bit of research and to go and look at all the other children's workshops in London. One of the places I visited was the Children's rights Workshop involved with non sexist books for children. Jo was a co-founder and part time worker. We got talking and a month later we moved in together. We just clicked. Jo had led an interesting life as a photographer which you can read about in her book, "Putting Myself in The Picture". So we were well suited. The first thing we did was set up our Photography Workshop Ltd and start researching social radicalism in photography and the arts, an area that was missing from the literature at the time. In the workshop we also set up a program to interview older labour activists and research forgotten labour and social history. As the project grew we talked about other projects we might do and then the Woman's movement came along. Which Jo became involved in. Women of all different backgrounds united together not on the basis of social position but because of their feminism. One contingent which Jo supported was the Socialist Feminists. The movement spread locally by setting up Women's centres in cheap empty shops - a few were in squats. The movement became powerful enough to take action to oppose the governments plan to shut down the Elizabeth Garret Anderson Women's Hospital in the Euston Road - Feminist doctors and nurses and woman's movement activists joined together and squatted the hospital and forced the government to keep it open- I've never seen anything like it in my life. The movement





also introduced the word, "Ms". Think how powerful a movement it was then - they could actually change the language!" - a message for those today who say we can't change anything.

HP: Jo has been cited as an influence by many people. Do you see many links between what Jo did with her life and artists around now such as Tracey Emin, Cindy Sherman, Sam Taylor Wood are doing?

TD: "Not really. Jo and her generation set the scene under different social conditions than today's artists find themselves and our generation didn't want to be "artists" we were documentary activists. Very few of today's artists are activists in our terms. The title artist was in fact thrust upon us personally when our work Re-modelling Photo History was shown in Art Galleries. Jo then realized that if we were classified as Artists a whole new area was available for us to use - additionally with the prestige of an artist she could do things a non artist could never do. This became important when she came to produce her work on Cancer. That said Jo has certainly influenced all the people you mention and many more. In every country I travel too I find Jo Spence fans - even recently at the university of Lapland. Jo is one of a number of people of her time who have become influential because their work always spoke about real life - about real problems like serious illness. Their projects were forced upon them by circumstances and they responded with cultural activity - in Jo's case with photography. Another person in the USA who applied photography to cancer is Hannah Wilke. A lot of students write essays contrasting Jo with Hannah Wilke. And Hannah is certainly as close as it gets to Jo's kind of work but they never met or influenced one another and in fact both died in the same year 1992. Jo did have a student called Sophie O'Neal who looked like she would be one of the new generation to keep Jo's flame alight. But Sophie died suddenly aged 24 of a diabetic coma ---

HP: Can you tell us about how Jo managed to get her work out there and seen by new and different audiences?

TD: "Jo had her own 'Cancer Road-show' and in the 1980's, before the economic cuts, when there were lots of college galleries. She was able to

exhibit work a lot. We had travelling cases made for the shows (which were A2 size laminated display sheets) These went to different colleges all over the UK when the first show ended, the college would then post it on to another college gallery or conference centre. Jo did this with her work for years without ever losing anything. She also became involved in a Television The Arena program on her work was seen by 9 million people - afterwards many women wrote to her saying they felt inspired to use photography on their personal lives

HP: Did she ever get invited to talk or exhibit in hospitals?

TD: "Often junior doctors and many feminist nurses would want to invite her to speak. Many had already read her book but they weren't the ones in power. The Royal Homeopathic Hospital was the only place who'd let her actually come and talk. The Royal Marsden Cancer Hospital did let her hold a talk but they insisted it be held outside. Hospital premises. In the archive I have an amusing old rejection letter from this hospital stating: "We don't want radical feminists talking to our nurses ". But now of course I often get invited to medical centres to talk about Jo. And my current paper on Jo's work is published in a prestigious medical journal

HP: There are some photos of Jo in her hospital bed. It's interesting they were okay with her taking photos in the ward?

TD: I actually had to smuggle the camera in for Jo to use - even in 1982 photography in hospitals was forbidden. This set us thinking - Everyone talks about free speech but no one talks about Free sight in personal matters but there were some feminist nurses at one hospital who illegally agreed to take Jo's camera into the hospital and take photos for her. So she had various photos of herself that we wouldn't normally see. At that time Jo also found out that NHS medical records in Britain belong to the government. Even though they are our records of our body we can't see them as they are state secrets. Rebecca Swan, A cancer patient from New Zealand managed to get copies of all her medical documents, she had to buy them, but she got them. She used her X rays and notes in her exhibition called, "The Big C."

HP: Jo seemed to have a lot of interests. Can you talk about the way she'd incorporate references to about say Dennis Nilsen the serial killer, joke shops masks and Day of The Dead Mexican ritual?

TD: "Well, Jo would use a lot of images from popular culture – such as the image of a masked Dennis Nilsen to indicate she was a cultural sniper. This is the cover image on her book *Cultural Sniping* Jo also bought a lot of props from charity shops and from one particular joke shop in Upper Street Islington which is till there. The man who runs it is tickled pink that his things got used in her Photographs. Just before Jo died we went to the Museum of Mankind. I don't think the museum is there now. We visited during the important Mexican Day of the Dead exhibition This show was very influential for the work she did on her approaching death *The Final Project* It also introduced her to the concept of The Woman's Altar a form of family installation that Mexican women traditionally made We actually have this in our culture to a degree as well If you go to your own grandmother's house the chances are she'll have some sort of sideboard family photo display or a collection of family memorabilia that's an altar too. Under the influence of the Museum of mankind exhibition Jo made her own death altar which I still dust down every now and then. After her death a very good book came out "Beautiful Necessity" it's all about women's altars and it's well worth searching for."

HP: Jo carried on making work right up to the end of her life. Could you talk a bit about her final years?

TD: "In 1989 her Breast cancer was fairly stabilized. She had a very heavy programme but like anything else you can get used to it. Then someone said, why don't you take your work to Australia, Canada and the US and so she did. For three months she travelled about but it meant that she had to give up all the treatments, she got stressed out, she had to live on airline food. We were no longer living together but we would still holiday together. I remember we went to Tunisia together and she was very ill then and it turned out she had leukaemia. David her last husband recounted to me later that In 1989 Jo had been given a microwave oven that never worked as it should. She kept it on her kitchen table where she used to write. She got a rash on her arm which I think was caused by the microwave

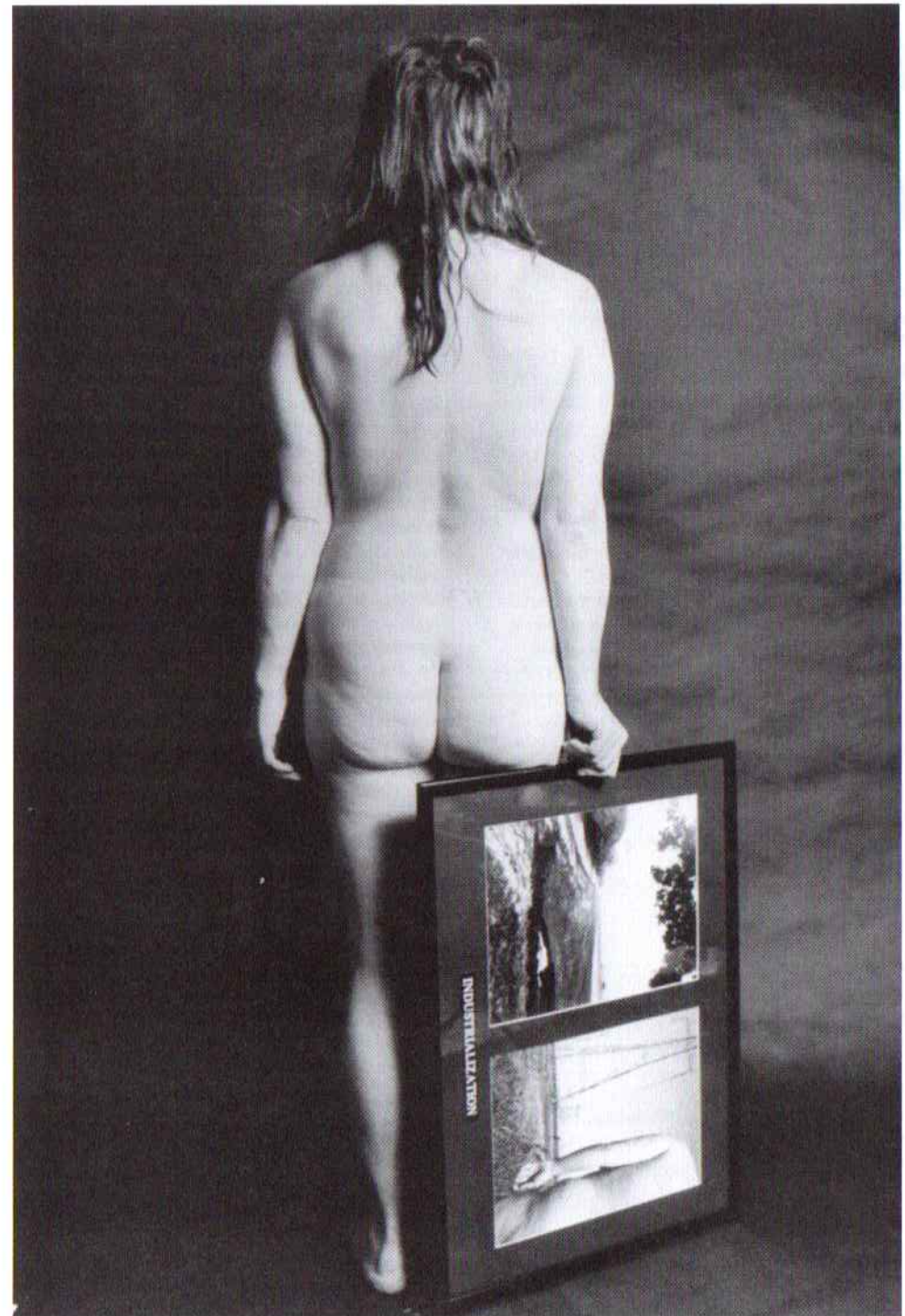
leaking. This may also be why she got leukaemia and not a recurrence of breast cancer - she had been slowly irradiating herself -we will never know. You've probably read about *The Final Project* - *Decay Project* - whilst watching things rot Jo realized that rather than the end of her body it was the beginning of a new cycle a return to nature. Returning to the earth is very much feminist thinking. One of the images inspired by this idea is on the back of her book *Cultural Sniping* I also have a short text about this in the book The last work she did on her approaching death which she called photo fantasy is in many ways her most innovative and creative, I suppose when you're dying all you've got is time to think and time to look. There's no other distraction In her case this resulted in some very perceptive work which I am now preparing for exhibition When she first got breast cancer I suggested she photograph herself every week holding up a card with a date on it so she had a record of her progress. Like a medical photographer. Jo also kept illness diaries and put together around 20 scrapbooks. Every week she'd sit down and put things in her scrap books. She was very well organized; probably because she used to be a secretary. She wanted to be the subject of her own history.

A lot of these ideas were later to influence the founders of the important *Photo Voice* project started in the US after her death particularly one founder Caroline Wang who gives this very good outline of Jo ideas. Jo Spence wrote of the necessity of becoming the subject of our own history rather than the object of some body else's And her essay ends with a warning to use our cameras, tape recorders, diaries, poems and videos – to witness our own histories to learn to share and to learn to nurture ourselves. Don't wait for somebody else to do it for you they may define you in ways that are not in own self or group interest"



Terry Dennett continues to maintain *The Jo Spence Archive* and update Jo Spence's original cancer project database. He is happy to talk about her work and the positive and negative aspects of her approach to her health as an independent cancer patient.

t: 020 7354 1176
e: dennett@gmx.net



BAD GIRL REBEL GIRL

'Woman's pearl was the centre of this electrical storm, a hushed storm, whirling, wrapped in cotton but incandescent, streaks of lightning, the flesh becoming a lightning conductor, iridescent with light, striking gongs of pleasure; one, two, three.' **Anais Nin**

Pre-Strip

The mid 1970's was an acute time of rebellion and change and particularly in America. The 1968 International spiralling out from the Paris riots which echoed as far as Japan and Mexico had apparently failed. For a while it seemed things had descended into a self indulgent drug induced dystopia. All that 1960's hope had gone down the pan. But in that first wave of new freedom some people hadn't forgotten what that meant for culture. A new breed of rebels determined to do things their own way was emerging. They operated on a smaller scale and their rebellion was more local than international, more domestic than global.

This sense of locality had at its heart a knowing sense of self-hood. If we can't change the world with a hijacked Marxism that no longer understands itself, or an ever rampant Capitalism which doesn't even want to understand itself then better to just firm up a sense of ourselves and what we are so that one day we can reclaim it. Forget these ideologies and manifestos that are forever imploding what about my every day life? For if things are going to reach up and make a difference, then they'll reach up through some simple home truths.

On the Strip

It is still shocking to think that an essential text book for art students 'The Story of Art' by E.H. Gombrich fails to mention one female artist. Two thousand years of world history and beyond, and there are no women to be found. How is it that Gombrich can have overlooked the Post-Renaissance Baroque artist Artemisia Gentileschi or the Russian Cubo-Futurist Natalia Goncharova and where is the great Frida Kahlo? What is fundamental to the mid 1970's is the spirit of unadulterated rebellion and a sudden switch about who could call the cards. There was a lingering realisation that anyone from a bum to a black person to a lady of the night had something valuable to say. It's strange to think that fine art of all the mediums was slow on this when there were so many female writers in place and being respected. But art it seems wanted no woman to see herself using and upsetting the very foundations of a tradition of phallogocentric representation. We call this reaction 'Feminism' and it's heyday as an art form was the mid 1970's.

Feminism as a term is in a sense a misnomer. It stratifies and politicises an essential human right. But like the notion of anti-class it had to happen. A movement had to respond. Woman's degradation (that is still ongoing) is deep-rooted firstly in religiously led and then capitalist led illusions of social hierarchy and consumption. Feminist artists began to turn this on its head. It is as if they constructed a huge mirror on which they could reflect and deflect society's attitudes to female identity. Often deliberately choosing non-traditional art forms like photography, film, performance and conceptual processes, the feminist movement sought to operate outside what someone like the misogynist Gombrich revered as art.



The Gretta Strip

In the three sets of photography by Gretta presented in this show: 'Auto Photos', 'Transformations', and 'A Woman's Diary', we witness part of her contribution to this fiery and influential movement, all made during the 1970's period. Like her contemporaries and in particular Marina Abramovic and Gina Pane, Gretta uses the female body itself as a site of exploration, transformation and deconstruction.

The series 'Auto Photos' bares resemblances to Cindy Sherman's seminal 'Complete Untitled Film Stills' (1977-1980) although Gretta's work actually predates Sherman's by a few years. Like Sherman, Gretta explores the idea of multiple feminine personalities. Presented in a contact sheet style we see a series of 'self-portraits' in which Gretta presents herself as different types of women. From the bespectacled sexy librarian type through to the cutesy pigtailed girly in 'Auto Photos I', to an older and less desirable and crisis ridden woman in 'Auto Photos IV'. The fact that they are the same person but barely recognisable as the same person draws attention to the fact that media manipulation of how women are represented is often a betrayal or flattening of the full scope of womanhood in all its many shades of visual truth and emotion. Women are constantly under pressure to stereotype themselves to a particular societal expectation and conceal any part of themselves that doesn't live up to that media compression.

Distortion is a visually and sonically beautiful thing especially when it feeds-back. But mutation is also horror poised at the cliff edge of the dark abyss. Gretta's series 'Transformations' lie on this threshold of the absurd and the horrific. Indeed they are reminiscent of a horror film tradition in which women are on the end of crazed male violence and we as spectators are pulled by the camera into the abyss of the screaming woman's mouth. But the normal arrangement of male film director and his shrieking vulnerable screen-siren is upset by a female director and her own version of a 'film strip'.

Gretta also allows a subtle humour into her suggested film stills that acts as a resistance to the usual stereotyping. In 'Transformations XVIII' a mutation occurs to two women. The first sprouts an egg head and second a ludicrously large pair of ears. Both the women are laughing at their own alien like transformations. Knowingly

laughing at those who are manipulating you is sometimes as powerful a form of assertion as anger is.

Sex and Strip

Whereas both the 'Auto Photos' and 'Transformations' series use female portraiture to mirror societies attitudes to women, the 'A Woman's Diary' set, focus squarely on the naked body. Again repetition with gradual variation in a filmic sequencing is used to suggest the passing of time and brief narrative. We seem to be witnessing the quiet and tender moments of a woman exploring the eroticism of her own body.

The proliferation of pornography and the framing of female bodies as sexual objects without any recourse to a woman's identity has become rife in the modern era. But in the spirit of that most erotic and liberating of female writers Anais Nin, 'A Woman's Diary' subverts the remote and cold pathos of pornography reinvesting it with a desire more poetic and a sense of subjectivity that includes the female sense of sexual self as much as it does a male one.

What is notable about this work is its very use of pornographic style framing. In all these pictures the woman's face is not used. Her identity is eclipsed by her body. But whereas in pornography this sort of framing of sexual parts is designed to bring on an intense sexual gratification, Gretta's portraits achieve something beyond that, transcending the idea of the female body as mere sexual conduit.

A lot has changed since that burning decade that was the 1970's. The Feminist movement paved the way for a whole swathe of art forms that explored and deconstructed identity and cultural reifications including Feminism itself. I doubt that Gretta would want to label herself a Feminist artist then as much as now (but her contribution to its development is undeniable). I think she would prefer to call herself a Rebel Girl...

Bad Girl... Rebel Girl...

Olly Beck
London, April 2009

