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About the author(s)

is a researcher, writer and curator. From 2013 to 2016 she worked as a Ph.D. Research Curator at Arts Catalyst, London, as part of an Arts Humanities Research Council-funded doctorate titled 'Curating Art and Science: New Methods and Sites of Production and Display', offered in partnership with Royal Holloway, University of London. Das was awarded her doctorate in July 2018 for curatorial work and her thesis 'Bearing Witness: On Pain in Performance Art'.

Jo Spence, Oreet Ashery and life-limiting illness

by Jareh Das • 06.08.2019

Life-limiting illness intersects with contemporary art in *Misbehaving Bodies*, an exhibition at the Wellcome Collection, London, that pairs work by the photographer and photo therapy advocate Jo Spence (1934–92), with that of Oreet Ashery (b.1966), who uses bio-political fiction in large-scale performative works that address gender and collectivity. Curated by Bárbara Rodríguez Muñoz and George Vasey, *Misbehaving Bodies* presents works from throughout Spence's career, including her three well-known photomontage series that documented the last ten years of her life: *The Picture of Health?* (1982–86; [FIG.1](#) and [FIG.2](#)), *Photo therapy* (1984–86) and *The Final Project* (1991–92). In making these, Spence worked – as she did throughout her career – with collaborators, including Terry Dennett, Maggie Murray and Rosy Martin. In presenting two very different responses to illness through art, *Misbehaving Bodies* responds to what the sociologist Arthur Frank describes as a critical need 'to amplify and connect the voices [. . .] telling tales about illness, so that all of us could feel less alone', reframing illness as bringing with it the possibility for a 'more intimate connection with others'.¹

Spence's works are in dialogue with Ashery's film series *Revisiting Genesis* (2016), a twelve-episode, made-for-the-web project commissioned by the Stanley Picker Gallery in Kingston upon Thames. It documents real and fictive conversations by individuals living with life-limiting conditions. Episodes are grouped thematically and viewed on standalone monitors, some of which are housed in flesh-coloured textile enclosures, introducing comfort and intimacy to displays that double as convening spaces [FIG.3](#). Giant teddy bears allude to the infantilisation often experienced by patients and also address the accessibility of art spaces, as individuals with less mobility can sit or lie on them to watch the films. The exhibition does not separate the two artists' work into distinct spaces, a decision, according to Vasey, that 'creates a porous flow between Spence's photographs and ephemera from the 1970s with Ashery's films to create an experience that is more community centre than austere white cube, thus mirroring the practices of both artists, which centre on collectivity, while questioning institutional approaches to care and social loss (the erosion of welfarism for instance)'.²

Revisiting Genesis [FIG.4](#), which was developed in consultation with medical professionals and emerging 'online death' experts, follows

the narratives of *Genesis*, a fictional, dying female artist (whose biography is illustrated with Ashery's personal photographs from the 1980s and 1990s, some of which document her arrival to the United Kingdom at age nineteen to study at Charles Keene College, Leicester); individuals with life-limiting illnesses (the actors Annie Brett and Joel Sines and the artists Julia Warr and Martin O'Brien); and two nurses named Jackie **FIG.5**, played by the actress Akiya Henry and the practising GP Vanda Playford, in a plot exploring what it means to create digital afterlives and legacies via posthumous biographical slideshows. One of the narratives follows a character called Bambi, played by O'Brien, who lives with cystic fibrosis and brings this illness into his own art. In episode 8, *Bambi, Death Online*, the protagonist and his friend Nilus discuss with nurse Jackie options for an emotional will that allows for video messages to be sent to Bambi's loved ones twenty-five years after his death. Using humour, Bambi's story explores the notion of a digital afterlife in the context of a capitalist colonisation of death and dying, a critique of real-world practices such as turning ashes into tattoos and jewellery or creating tombstones that activate playlists via retina-recognition technologies.

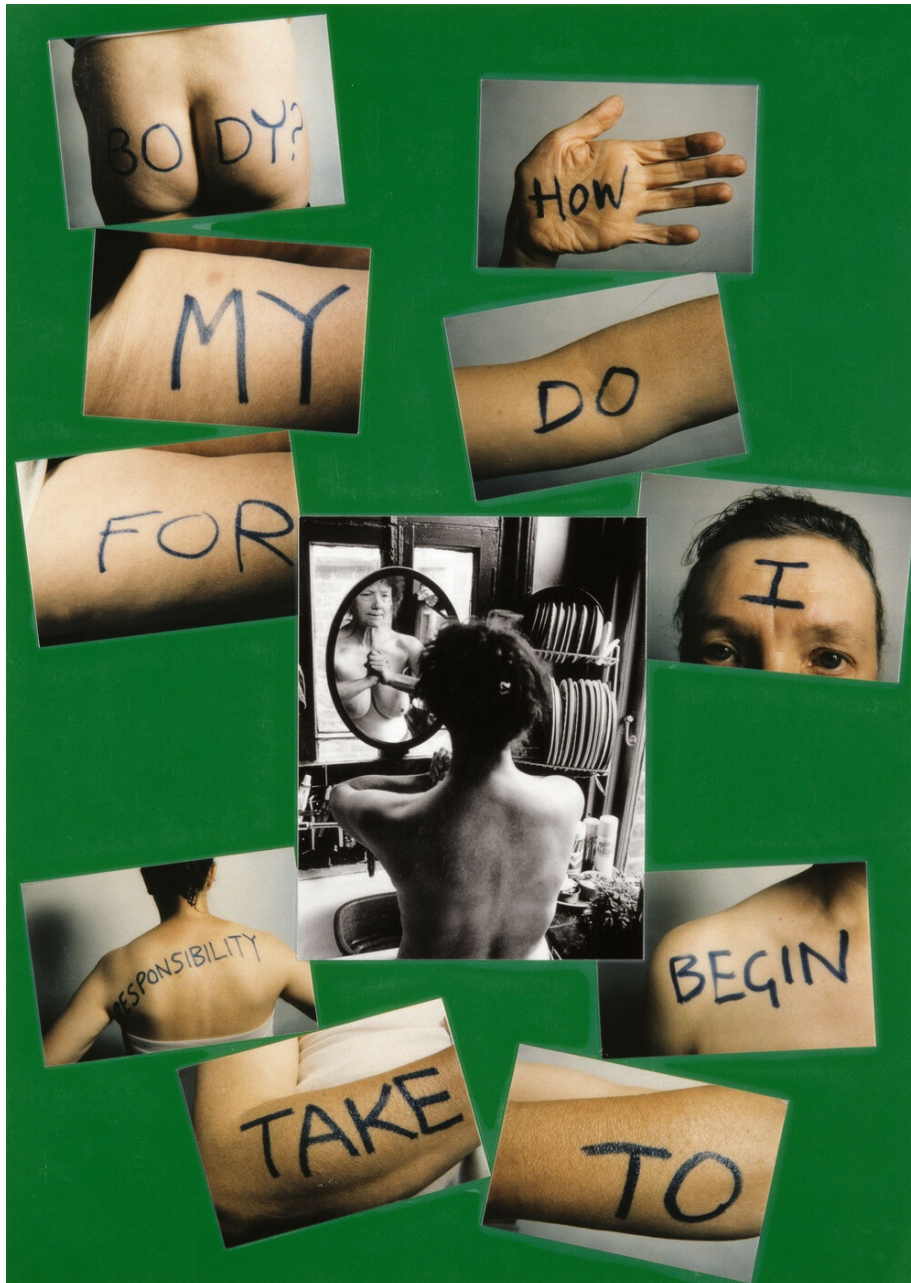


Fig. 1 *The Picture of Health*, by Jo Spence in collaboration with Rosy Martin, Maggie Murray and Terry Dennet. 1982. (© The Jo Spence Memorial Archive, Ryerson University; courtesy MACBA Collection).

Similarly, Spence's texts and photographs documenting her body's transformation following her cancer diagnosis in 1990 use humour to call for a revision of both individual and societal response to the ill body. In her influential book *Illness as Metaphors* (1978), Susan Sontag sets up a binary between wellness and being sick:



Fig. 2 The Picture of Health, Jo Spence in collaboration with Rosy Martin, Maggie Murray and Terry Denet. 1982. (© The Jo Spence Memorial Archive, Ryerson University; courtesy MACBA Collection).

Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.³



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Misbehaving Bodies*: Jo Spence and Oreet Ashery at the Wellcome Collection, London, 2019. (Courtesy Wellcome Collection, London).

Sontag's observations draw attention to the victim-blaming evident in the language used to describe diseases and illnesses, positing that rather than being considered a cause for embarrassment or shame, illness should be addressed for what it is, so as to alleviate suffering from patients and not inhibit them from getting proper treatment. Spence's works directly interrupt this binary, using humour as a critical tool to address the everyday realities of living with illness. *Cancer Shock Photonovel* is a series of six laminated collages combining photographs, newspaper cut-outs and handwritten notes that document Spence's diagnosis of and treatment from cancer. She described wanting to create a record of her mutilated body 'in sharp and stark medical style' as a way of communicating the violence that was inflicted on that body in an attempt to expel illness and heal. In the first panel (*Remodelling medical history, cancer shock - cancer shock*), Spence poses for the camera as Dennett documents her reaction to a diagnosis of breast cancer and to the subsequent stages of treatment that followed. Another panel (*Remodelling medical history, cancer shock - entering a new world*), shows the artist contemplating a future lived with parts of her breast removed and considering the use of a prosthesis as a 'medical solution' to living with this loss of body part **FIG. 6**. Spence states in the text captions accompanying photographs of this body of work: 'the photographs have done their job. I face the fact that I no longer have a "voluptuous" breasts. I must live with my scars'. Documenting her body through its transformations served as a form of personal

therapy for Spence, as well as a work of art in its own right. This is in line with Spence's previous work with Rosy Martin on photo therapy, a practice developed by the pair in order to 'challenge the orthodox idea of fixity within portraiture that presented new forms of representation which allowed for multiple, fragmented selves, thus allowing the subject to control their image and represent their own difficult and often previously unexpressed feelings and ideas'.⁴



Fig. 4 *Revisiting Genesis*, by Oreet Ashery. Video still. (Courtesy the artist).

In other parts of *Cancer Shock (Remodelling medical history, cancer shock - raw juice therapy and Remodelling medical history, cancer shock - learning new skills*, Spence highlights orthodox versus alternative treatments for cancer such as raw juice therapy and hydrotherapy FIG.7, presenting her own medical research as a challenge to what she viewed as the suppression of alternative treatments by the established cancer industry. She also includes an excerpt by Alex Jack, an advocate of the macrobiotic diet for its cancer-healing abilities, which likens cancer treatment to contemporary warfare (the Vietnam War is a reference) advocating a three-fold and linear approach to search-and-destroy, bombardment and chemical warfare.⁵

Misbehaving Bodies questions what causes bodies to become, not out of will or desire, disobedient. Despite Ashery's architectural interventions, the space failed to fully shake its clinical or institutional, didactic overtones, yet the work itself offers promising new avenues for understanding and representing illness. Both artists explore how women seek to have more control of their bodies: Genesis's strategic withdrawal and disappearance from society in Ashery's films, and Spence's use of photo therapy as a response to her cancer diagnosis and the process of 'becoming well'. And yet, both go beyond the personal to situate how the ill body infects concepts of cleanliness and orderliness, at the same time as it reveals that the very orderliness of the world, which might be seen as a form of disease in itself. The anti-capitalist and

feminist approach put forward by both Spence and Ashery show how our understanding and treatment of illness is entwined with class, gender and healthcare. Humour and an anti-establishment stance are tactics used by both artists to address this, as Martin O'Brien reminds us in a transcription of the round table conversation in the exhibition guide between himself, Oreet Ashery and academic Patrizia Di Bello: 'For artists who are sick, humour is used to resist sympathy. If someone is laughing at you, then people are not feeling sorry for you.'



Fig. 5 *Revisiting Genesis*, by Oreet Ashery. Video still. (Courtesy the artist).

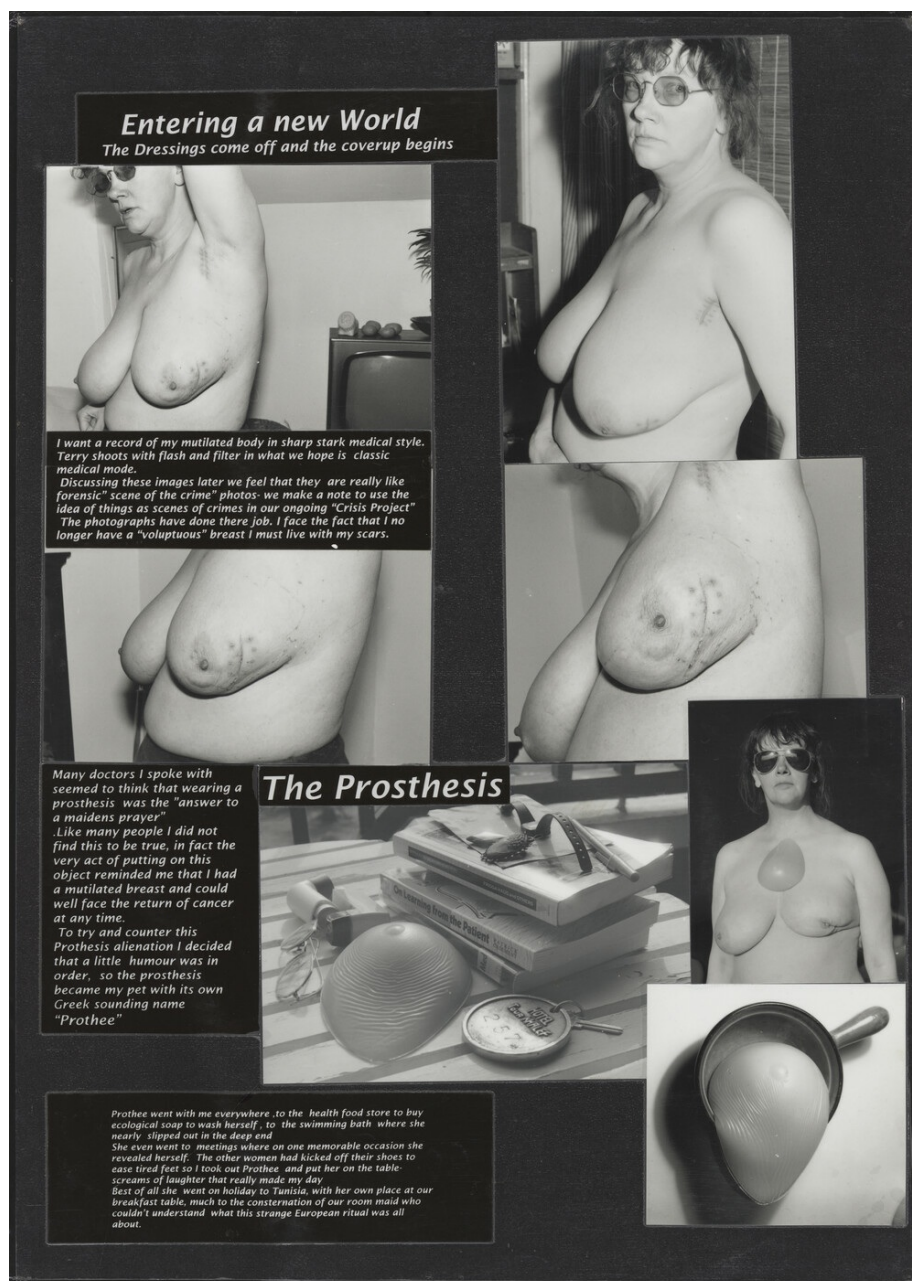


Fig. 6 *Cancer Shock Photonovel*, by Jo Spence. 1982. (© Jo Spence Memorial Archive, Ryerson Image Centre; courtesy Estate of Jo Spence and Richard Saltoun Gallery, London).



Fig. 7 *Cancer Shock Photonovel*, by Jo Spence. 1982. (© Jo Spence Memorial Archive, Ryerson Image Centre; courtesy Estate of Jo Spence and Richard Saltoun Gallery, London).

Exhibition details

Misbehaving Bodies: Jo Spence and Oreet Ashery

Wellcome Collection, London

30th May 2019–26th January 2020

Footnotes

- 1** A.W. Frank: 'When bodies need voices', *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics*, rev. ed. Chicago 2013, pp.xi and xv.
- 2** Email correspondence with George Vasey, 24th July 2019.
- 3** S. Sontag: *Illness as Metaphor*, New York 1978, p.3.
- 4** Exhibition guide for *Jo Spence: Work (Part I & II)*, London (SPACE and Studio Voltaire) 2012, p.24, available at <https://www.studiovoltaire.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Jo-Spence-Exhibition-Guide-web.pdf>, accessed 6th August 2019.
- 5** A. Jack: 'The war on cancer: another Vietnam?', *Cancer Control Journal* 5, no.3/4, p.117.

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