

Kristin Landowski

PICTURING DIS-EASE: ADVERTISING
BREAST CANCER IN PINK-RIBBON
CULTURE AND THE NARRATIVE WORKS
OF JO SPENCE

1. BreastCancer.org, "U.S. Breast Cancer Statistics," http://www.breastcancer.org/symptoms/understand_bc/statistics

One in eight women will develop breast cancer in her lifetime.¹ This is the current statistic. In the 1970s it was one in nine, enough to fuel the beginning of a national health campaign to increase awareness of the disease and raise funds for research of a cure. Starting in 1985, the month of October has been dedicated to breast cancer awareness.

Since then, thousands of corporations, supporting hundreds of nonprofits, have launched initiatives and fundraisers dedicated to the cause. To cite just one example, in 2007, Dyson and Target joined forces for a breast cancer fundraiser. Specifically, for every Dyson DC07 vacuum cleaner sold at a Target store, 10 percent of the purchase price was promised to be donated to the Breast Cancer Research Foundation. But well-meaning customers were not made aware of the exact terms of their support, and the companies involved were not so altruistic as they hoped customers would believe, as I will soon show.

In this paper I will explore how breast cancer is blatantly appropriated by corporations and even nonprofits, to the extent that a term has been introduced into the breast cancer lexicon—"pinkwashing"—to describe products sold by companies that leverage the pink ribbon symbol and the sympathies it calls up, and/or use their support of breast cancer charities as a marketing technique to increase their profits. Shockingly, many of these companies, at the same time that they wave the pink ribbon, manufacture products containing ingredients linked to the disease. And perhaps not so shockingly, many of them, in the very same ads in which they show their support of breast cancer, reinforce constructed, conventional, antifeminist standards of female beauty that are directly detrimental to the mental states of those afflicted.

In opposition to all of this, I will examine how Jo Spence, an artist who lived with breast cancer from 1982 to 1992, just before the advent of the pink ribbon, rejected such patriarchal visions of female beauty in her staged self-portraits, which foreground suffering, grimness, and mortality. Spence's work is anything but beautiful, but it is powerful, and it offers a powerful alternative to the enforced positivity of pink ribbon culture and its perpetuation of stereotypes regarding how the female body should look. Whereas the pink ribbon subverts the patient's personal narrative, Spence's work championed it—and perhaps offers us one possible path away from the pink ribbon's cultural stranglehold.

Sightlines 2017

To return to the Dyson and Target ad, it is ostensibly about breast cancer awareness and fundraising for the cure,² but I would argue, and probably without much opposition, that it is baldly designed to appeal to conventional ideals of how the female body should look and act. It specifically recalls bygone 1950s–60s gender roles as manifested in TV shows like *Leave It to Beaver*, featuring super-housewife June Cleaver. The underlying heteronormative idea is that the woman’s place is in the home, and that that home is clean and well kept for her husband, who we imagine coming home from work to sit in his chair of power and authority. The ad is geared toward a privileged white demographic, in which the fit white housewife—who is well-groomed from the waist down, at least, and is wearing high heels (not the best shoes for cleaning, but certainly pretty ones)—can afford a state-of-the-art machine to keep her home perfectly manicured.

The pink ribbon is supposed to be a symbol of awareness, community, positivity, and hope. And in this Dyson and Target ad, it appears in an unusual place—on the white Maltese dog (also meticulously groomed). Today the ribbon can be applied to anything, as this ad makes clear. Also implied here is that bodies presented in the context of breast cancer awareness must be seemingly healthy; Dyson and Target are surely not presenting a diseased body, or if they do, it is one whose breasts are safely out of sight, out of mind. This woman is perky and presentable.

The ad declares that the two corporations will donate up to one million dollars to the cause. But this amount, while impressive, is capped. Corporations contributing to breast cancer research and awareness do not notify the public when they have reached their goal. After the cap is met, they will resume their full usual profit margin.

Breast Cancer Action, located in San Francisco, coined the term “pinkwashing” to refer to manifestations of the pink ribbon such as this.³ Within the breast cancer community, pinkwashing refers in part to controlling the perceived experience of breast cancer and obscuring the realities of the disease—for instance, suppressing images of those actually afflicted with it. Pinkwashing also occurs when corporations use the pink ribbon in a way that contributes to the rather antifeminist idea that a woman must be carefully packaged and made up, beautiful by

2. Although even in this, it is vague: Where exactly is the money going? PR campaigns for awareness? Clinical research? Both?

3. This term is shared in the LGBTIQ community in a different context regarding political and public relations strategies. Specifically, in the United States and other countries, support of LGBTIQ pride parades (for instance) diverts attention from human rights abuses

continuing elsewhere in the culture. See Eng-Beng Lim, *Brown Boys and Rice Queens: Spelbinding Performances in the Asias* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 14, 26, 122–125.

conventional standards, in order to be accepted by those around her. In 2012, for example, Avon utilized the pink ribbon to advertise their breast cancer research organization Breast Cancer Crusade. Avon proved strategic in playing on the emotions of the ill, naming their shades of lipstick Courage, Hope, Faith, Passion, and Honesty. This particular deployment of the pink ribbon pulls on the emotions of the diseased woman, her friends, and her family members: If they buy the lipstick shade Hope, they will have hope. A 2011 issue of *Environmental Justice* cited Avon's "Kiss Goodbye to Breast Cancer" campaign as one of the company's most "poignant instances of pinkwashing," because despite the fact that the lipsticks were raising funds for breast cancer research, these very lipsticks contained hormone-disrupting ingredients linked to breast cancer.⁴

Once you are looking for the pink ribbon, it is ubiquitous, but I question who it is actually benefiting. One beneficiary is surely the corporate sponsors who freely use it on their products, advertising their support of nonprofit organizations, which themselves wield much power in the breast cancer community. They are the ones with the power in marketing—not the people with cancer. Returning to the plush, cozy, authoritative chair in the Dyson/Target ad that declares "The Power of Pink," it's not too much of a stretch to connect this grand chair to the chairs in the corporate boardroom, and from there to the more abstract idea of the patriarchal power of administration. These are the powers that actually control and limit women, whether by knowingly selling them harmful chemicals for consumption, withholding the option to receive birth control, or wielding a Foucauldian power of knowledge of the disease and authority in diagnosis. Nonprofits like Susan G. Komen have done a lot for breast cancer research,⁵ but I question the transparency of their motives, as they have been shown on numerous occasions—as for instance with their acceptance of money from Baker Hughes, known for fracking—to care more about their bottom line than their ethics.

In 1982, the artist Jo Spence was diagnosed with breast cancer. In ten short years it would kill her. Spence is not so well known today, but she was pioneering in the representation of breast cancer. Her staged self-portraits predate pink ribbon culture, which began in earnest in 1992, the year she died, and they offer an alternative

4. "Avon Claims to Fight Breast Cancer, But Are Its Products Safer? Ecouterre," <http://www.ecouterre.com/avon-claims-to-fight-breast-cancer-but-are-its-products-full-of-carcinogens/avon-breast-cancer-walk-2/>.

5. Although given the statistics stated at the outset of this article, more women, not fewer, are diagnosed with breast cancer now than in the 1970s, and it is unclear whether we are closer to a cure than we were then.

Sightlines 2017



Figure 1: Dyson and Target Ad, 2007.



Figure 2: Avon, Breast Cancer Crusade, 2012.

to the constructed positivity of pink ribbon ad campaigns. Her work was prescient in its exploration of illness and the challenge it poses to the oppressive stereotypes that insist that women must constantly be beautiful—stereotypes that pink ribbon culture relentlessly supports. However, despite the fact that the work offers a strong critique of today’s expectations surrounding breast cancer—expectations that the Susan G. Komen Foundation (the most powerful organization) has encouraged—it would be wrong to interpret the artist’s intentions in that way. Ironically, Spence was responding through her work to a very similar impetus that led to the *creation* of the Susan G. Komen Foundation. The same year as Spence’s diagnosis, 1982, a dying Susan asked her younger sister Nancy to promise that breast cancer would be much more widely talked about, and not kept in silence, “so women know and don’t die.”⁶ This was a time when the silence surrounding breast cancer was immense. Spence independently and bravely made an analogous decision to change her artistic trajectory—to veer through photography into new, “dangerous territory of seeing myself as Other, as Monstrous, as potentially powerful through a display of my vulnerability and my wounds.”⁷ Regarding the scarcity of images about breast cancer at the time she was working, she recounted in an interview with Ros Coward: “There are no images for what I want to say. I can’t go to anything which already exists and either deconstruct and then reconstruct it, neither can I create images out of my imagination, because they don’t exist in the culture.”⁸

Spence was indeed charting new territory with her exploration and representation of breast cancer through self-portraits. Her focus on the patient’s personal narrative is, to me, the work’s most compelling aspect because it foregrounds suffering. It dares to be ugly, to refuse narratives of female beauty that would impose upon the ill a conventional vision of female beauty as somehow a rescue and cure for female suffering. In the paragraphs remaining here, I will examine Spence’s 1990 series *Narratives of Dis-ease*. Through this photographic documentation, Spence made the invisible—her internal feelings regarding her cancer experience—visible.

Illnesses become narratives very quickly. In her book published in 1978, *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag—who had been diagnosed with breast cancer in 1975 and wrote this book about her experience—discussed how the metaphors associated with disease

6. Nancy G. Brinker, *Promise Me: How a Sister's Love Launched the Global Movement to End Breast Cancer* (New York: Crown Archetype, 2010), 147.

7. Jo Spence, *Cultural Shaping: The Art of Transgression* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 198.

8. Jorge Ribalta et al., *Jo Spence: Beyond the Perfect Image: Photography, Subjectivity, Antagonism* (Barcelona: Museu D'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2005), 73.

Sightlines 2017

stigmatize the disease and the ill person. Her book laid important groundwork for further conversations about disease and its interpretations, one of which came in 1997, when the feminist theorist Jackie Stacey—herself diagnosed with cancer in 1991—wrote *Teratologies: A Cultural Study of Cancer*, which continued the discussion regarding how disease is perceived and experienced—indeed, how it is a cultural phenomenon.

These explorations of breast cancer from Sontag, Stacey, and Spence all emerged out of the personal, and then expanded to involve educating others: other women living with the disease, their friends, their loved ones. Their work continues to remind us not only that we cannot remain silent, but—more importantly than ever today, amid pink ribbon culture’s relentless erasure of personal narratives—that sharing real stories is empowering. An important point that all three of them made is that the words associated with disease can be powerful for good or bad. Sontag discusses in her book, and Stacey expands upon in hers, labels such as “hero,” “monster,” “victim,” and “villain.” These, and the word “teratology” (deployed by Stacey in her book’s title) are useful frames for thinking through how Spence visualizes herself in photographs such as *Exiled*. According to the Oxford Dictionary, “teratology” is the scientific study of congenital abnormalities and abnormal functions. The prefix *terato* means relating to monsters or abnormal forms, and its origin is Greek, *terat*, meaning monster. The suffix *ology* is medical jargon that means a branch of knowledge. In one recollection of her experience with cancer, Stacey examines two pictures: one in which she looks well but actually had cancer, and another of her after treatments, when she appeared ill but had been deemed cured by her doctors.

A seemingly healthy body can house a disease, and a diseased, mutilated body can be healthy; Stacey points out the strangeness in this, and in the idea that society thus fears the healthy body becoming grotesque, a monster. There is something perverse in the idea that a “healthy” body, post-cancer, could be one that pink ribbon culture cannot sell because it looks close to death. Spence’s work aligned quite closely with these modes of thinking; several photographs show her effectively equating herself to a monster. And whereas pink ribbon culture exerts a kind of tyranny of cheerfulness, Spence was addressing the tyranny of being the

9. Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1980), 64.

10. Jesse Green, “The Year of the Ribbon,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 3, 1992, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/05/03/style/the-year-of-the-ribbon.html>. Also see <https://www.worldsday.org/the-red-ribbon>.

Kristin Landowski

object or victim. She created *Narratives of Dis-ease* in collaboration with the psychotherapist Dr. Tim Sheard. The title's play on words manifests her dis-ease with the disease of breast cancer, and the loss of control that occurs during a diagnosis and thereafter. Through the pictures she reclaims the voice of power, illustrating just one of the multiple narratives to be considered.

In *Narratives of Dis-ease (Exiled)*, Spence stands nearly nude before the camera. Focus is centralized on her torso, which is exposed by her opening a green gown. Her face is partially covered with a white mask, with black paint chipping off, reminiscent of the mask of the Phantom of the Opera. Spence is clearly aligning herself in a lineage of monsters, of outsiders in society, as was the Phantom. She does not allow us to see her eyes, but we can infer from her gesture of opening her gown, exposing her body like a flasher to an unsuspecting crowd, that she is allowing a trauma to become visible. In case there is any room for doubt in the matter, Spence has written the word "MONSTER" in an arch above her breasts, in all-capital letters, with black marker. She is announcing unambiguously how society will perceive her now that cancer, and the surgery to remove it, has disfigured her body.

In *Narratives of Dis-ease (Expunged)*, Spence again shows us the area that was removed from vision in the Dyson/Target ad, making visible the trauma of breast cancer. In her 1980 book *The Cancer Journals*, Audre Lorde relates how women have been programmed to view their bodies only in terms of how they look and feel to others, rather than how they feel to themselves. Everywhere, she says, we are surrounded by media images portraying women as essentially decorative machines of consumer function.⁹ With her title *Expunged*, meaning to erase or remove completely something that is unwanted or unpleasant—which we easily understand to mean the cancer removed—and her display of a "booby" prize, Spence challenges this idea of being whole again, of being named a "survivor." Spence again stands nude, and this time we only see half of her pale, aging torso. Her head is removed from the frame and we cannot see the expression on her face. Her body has been tanned by the sun; the tan echoes the marks that radiation can cause on the breast during treatment. Toward the center of the image, we encounter her misshapen breast. The nipple is pulled, creating a diagonal line leading to the darkness where the



Figure 3: Jo Spence and Dr. Tim Sheard, *Narratives of Disease (Exiled)*, 1990, Courtesy Richard Salfoun Gallery, London.



Figure 4: Jo Spence and Dr. Tim Sheard, *Narratives of Disease (Espunged)*, 1990, Courtesy Richard Salfoun Gallery, London.

Kristin Landowski

incision hides. The breasts in the “booby prize” are asymmetrical and cartoony. At first glance, they could be read as eyes, but the comparison to the deformed breast and the words make us realize that this is a prize for the diseased. The colors of the ribbon call to mind the red AIDS awareness ribbon, and the pink one for breast cancer awareness, but *Expunged* was created in 1990, well before the advent of all that, and thus we need to look elsewhere for the artist’s intended meaning.¹⁰ This is a ribbon readily found in adult novelty stores, awarding the prize for the best breasts, yet the artist is using it for the exact opposite purpose—to celebrate (however ironically) the individual removed from society, the one that others might wish to be a phantom. She is bodily here, insistently present.

Although it predates the explosion of pink ribbon culture, I argue that Jo Spence’s work offers a valuable example of a path forward out of the various tyrannies and constraints of that culture. Whereas the pink ribbon campaigns of companies such as Avon injuriously insist that women must always be happy in the face of their own mortality, Spence asserts otherwise. Whereas Dyson and Target insist that a woman must be tidy and perky, relentlessly dedicated to maintaining patriarchal power structures, Spence asserts otherwise. I have seen firsthand through my own mother’s experience with breast cancer how the pink ribbon’s tyranny of cheerfulness can be hurtful and condescending, even infantilizing to the person living with cancer. And the easy labels of pink ribbon culture—hero, victim, survivor, and so on—leave us with what Jackie Stacey and others criticize as an overly simplistic narrative that leaves behind more personal stories. While pink ribbon culture cultivates a vocabulary of positivity, it denies the alternative—the anger and traumas of the disease. Jo Spence asserts another way.