Student Name: Millie Jones (2403702)

Programme of Study: Photography in the Arts

Lecturer: Paul Duerinckx

Module: Research in Practice (ADAD5004/C)

Figures List:

Figure 1: Ewald, W. (1976-1981). *Self-portrait reaching for the Red Star sky –Denise Dixon.*

Figure 2: Ewald, W. (1976-1981). *Phillip and Jamie are creatures from outer space in their space-ship. –Denise Dixon.*

Figure 3: Ewald, W. (1976-1981). *I am Dolly Parton. –Denise Dixon.*

Figure 4: Morrisey, T. (2005-2007). *Sylvia Westbrook, August 2nd, 2005*.

Figure 5: Morrisey, T. (2005-2007). *Lou Soucell, July 14th, 2006*

Figure 6: Morrisey, T. (2005-2007). *Katy McDonnell, October 5th, 2007*

Figure 7: Spence, J. (1978-1979). *Beyond the Family Album*.

Figure 8: Spence, J. (1978-1979). *Beyond the Family Album*.

Photography is often associated with being a representation of the truth, functioning as a visual record of lived experience. This assumption is often related to the representations of childhood and family, where photographs are understood as authentic documents of personal history. However, contemporary photographic practice increasingly challenges this perception, revealing childhood not as a fixed or truthful state, but as something constructed through memory, performance and retrospective interpretation and reconstruction. As Marianne Hirsch suggests "family pictures are often less memories than myths of memory" (Hirsch, 1997, p. 8), emphasising how photographic images shape idealised versions of the past rather than recording lived experience. This essay explores contemporary photographic representations of childhood through three main themes of nostalgia, family representation through performance and photographic reconstruction. By using these themes as conceptual starting points, the essay examines how photographers and theorists interrogate the traditional assumption that childhood can be authentically documented through the photographic image. The first section of this essay addresses nostalgia and the ways in which childhood is idolised and athesticised through the photographic lens of children. The second investigates family representation, analysing how photographers challenge conventional depictions of the 'stable' family unit and reveals how familial roles can be constructed by being performative within image-making in non-conventional ways. The final section discusses the ways in which childhood images can be photographically reconstructed to establish new versions of memories within the present. Through analysing and engaging with the works of artists including Wendy Ewald, Trish Morrissey and Jo Spence, alongside relevant theoretical perspectives, this essay develops towards a consideration of how contemporary photography constructs rather than simply documents the concept of childhood. Ultimately, this exploration leads to the question of how photographic practices disrupt the notion of childhood as an authentic, stable and universal experience.

Nostalgia plays a significant role in shaping visual representations of childhood, often constructing it as a period of innocence and simplicity. Within photography, childhood is often idealised through sentimental imagery that frames younger children as symbols of universal innocence rather than as complex individuals. As Svetlana Boym argues, nostalgia is "*a romance with one's own fantasy*," (Boym, 2001) suggesting that nostalgic images do not reflect the past yet instead reconstruct it through emotional longing and retrospective desire. In relation to childhood in photography, this is particularly significant as representations of youth are often filtered through adult memory and cultural expectation, producing idealised depictions that reinforce childhood as a mythic and emotionally coherent state. By disrupting the traditional structure of adult photographic authorship, the work of Wendy Ewald challenges the representation of childhood but still demonstrates how nostalgia continues to shape the cultural 'norm' of the concept of childhood in photography.

The body of work *Portraits and Dreams* is particularly significant within this context, as Ewald's collaborative projects with children shift the power dynamics of image-making. By allowing children to produce their own photographs, Ewald challenges the traditional adult gaze that typically defines childhood imagery. Childhood within the context of this ongoing body of work challenges adult authority in image-making as the shift in authorship means that the representation of childhood becomes self-represented rather than something that is observed. Despite Ewald's attempt to dissociate adult authorship, the imagery produced by children often continues to evoke a universal and nostalgic feeling for adult viewers. Many of the photographs created by Ewald's participants depict imaginative play, friendship and everyday moments in domestic spaces, concepts that can easily be interpreted through culturally familiar ideas of youthful innocence and freedom. Although these images are produced from the perspectives of children themselves, their visual language may still evoke nostalgic associations within the viewer, who interprets them through personal memory and broader cultural narratives of childhood. This suggests that nostalgia is not depicted entirely in the production of the image, but also in the response from the viewer. The viewer's own experiences and cultural background may impose nostalgic meaning onto photographs regardless of the photographer's intention.

Figure 1

Figure 2

This reveals the complexity of Ewald's work. While her collaborative projects disrupt the authority of the adult photographer, it does not entirely escape the nostalgic theme through which childhood is commonly interpreted. As Susan Sontag argues, photographs do not merely reflect reality but shape and mediate it, meaning that the interpretation of an image is inseparable from the cultural assumptions brought to it by the viewer (Sontag, 1977). From this perspective, even self-authored representations of childhood remain inseparable to nostalgic reinterpretation, particularly when viewed by adults who are able to project their own memories and fantasies onto the image. Furthermore, the apparent universality of the emotions evoked by Ewald's work contributes to this nostalgic effect. Her participants' photographs often depict experiences of play, imagination, friendship and domesticity that can be found across different cultures and generations, producing a sense of shared recognition in the viewer. Yet this universality itself is problematic, as it risks flattening the specificity of individual childhood experiences into a broader sentimental narrative. The child's subjective perspective may therefore be associated into familiar idealisations of childhood, despite Ewald's efforts to feature individuality.

Figure 3

Overall, Ewald's work demonstrates that nostalgia is not imposed through adult authorship but is structurally embedded within the cultural language which childhood is viewed and understood. By allowing children to represent themselves, Ewald challenges conventional idealisations of childhood while simultaneously revealing the persistence of nostalgic interpretation in photographic observation. Her practice therefore complicates the relationship between photography and childhood, suggesting that even when children control their own representation, the image remains inseparable to idealisation through the desires and memories of its audience through the feeling of nostalgia.

If nostalgic ideals shape the cultural association of childhood, family photography often functions as one of the primary visual methods through which these ideals are performed and reinforced. Conventional family portraits frequently present the family unit as stable and naturally coherent, framing domestic relationships as authentic and self-evident through photographic representation. However, such images rely heavily on established visual conventions and socially recognisable roles, suggesting that family identity may be less a natural reality but instead a performed construction. The work of Trish Morrissey, particularly in her

photographic series *Front* (2005–2007), explores the performative nature of family representation by revealing that family roles can be staged and culturally constructed rather than being naturally fixed.

In the series *Front*, Morrissey approached families on beaches across the UK and Melbourne and asked the mother figure to step behind the camera and then dressed in the mother's clothing and adopting her posture. Morrissey inserted herself into the pre-existing family structures, creating photographs in which she appears seamlessly integrated into each domestic arrangement. At first glance, the images resemble conventional family portraits, however the knowledge of Morrissey's substitution challenges their apparent authenticity. By occupying the maternal role within each composition, Morrissey demonstrates how family photographs rely upon recognisable visual performances of identity that can be replicated and inhabited by others.

Figure 4

Figure 5

This substitution exposes the constructed nature of familial representation, suggesting that roles such as 'mother' or 'wife' function as socially recognisable positions rather than fixed expressions of personal identity. The ease in which Morrissey can assume these roles within the image reveals how family photography depends upon visual codes like body language, placement, gesture, clothing and relational proximity to communicate kinship and domestic order. Rather than transparently documenting authentic relationships, the family photograph emerges as a matter of performance in which individuals perform socially expected roles for the camera. In this manner, *Front* reveals family representation to be controlled by visual conventions that construct familial coherence rather than simply recording it.

Morrissey's work can be understood through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which argues that identity is not innate or essential but constituted through repeated social acts and behaviours (Butler, 1990). Although Butler's theory is rooted in gender performance, it is equally useful in understanding the performed nature of family identity within *Front*. Morrissey's adoption of the maternal role demonstrates that familial identity is not merely biologically determined, but visually and socially produced through repeated acts of representation. The family portrait therefore becomes a performative image through which domestic roles are reinforced and made culturally recognisable. Importantly, Morrissey's intervention also complicates representations of childhood within family photography. If the child is typically understood in relation to the family structure positioned as son, daughter or sibling then the instability of the parental role within *Front* suggests that childhood itself is similarly relational and constructed. The child's place within the image is dependent upon the performative structure of the family unit, meaning that representations of childhood are inseparable from the visual and ideological frameworks through which family is constructed. By disrupting the maternal figure, Morrissey destabilises not only the representation of parenthood but the broader domestic narrative through which childhood is visually understood.

Figure 6

Furthermore, *Front* highlights the extent of which family photography functions ideologically, presenting the family as unified, stable and emotionally coherent even when such representations are heavily staged. The apparent normality of Morrissey's substitution suggests that the family

portrait does not require authentic relational bonds to operate successfully as an image, rather it requires only the performance of recognisable familial indications. This exposes the family photograph as a visual construction that reinforces cultural ideals of domestic order and belonging, rather than objectively reflecting lived family dynamics. Ultimately, Morrissey's *Front* reveals family representation to be a performative act shaped by visual conventions and social expectations. By inserting herself into familial structures and assuming maternal roles, she exposes the instability and contractedness of domestic identity within photographic representation. In doing this, Morrissey challenges the family photograph's claim to authenticity, demonstrating that representations of childhood and family are not neutral documents of lived experience but staged performances through which social ideals are visually maintained.

While family photography can sometimes present itself as a record of lived experience, contemporary photographic practice increasingly exposes the medium's capacity for reconstruction and fabrication. Rather than functioning solely as documentary evidence, photography can be used to construct, stage and reimagine past experiences, revealing the instability of the photographic image as a record of truth. The work of Jo Spence engages with this idea, using photography as a tool for reconstructing autobiographical narratives rather than simply preserving them. Through the project *Beyond the Family Album* (1979), Spence challenges the assumption that photography transparently documents childhood and family life, instead demonstrating how the medium can actively rebuild and reinterpret the past through staged visual reconstruction.

Spence's practice involved the re-performance of childhood experiences through carefully staged self-portraiture and retrieval of her own archival imagery. Yet rather than relying solely on archival photographs as evidence of her past, she physically re-enacted scenes, reconstructing childhood moments within the photographic frame. In doing so, Spence foregrounded the artificiality of photographic representation, making visible to the extent to which the past can be visually rebuilt rather than a record of experience of just then. These reconstructed images reject photography's traditional documentary function, positioning the medium instead as an active site of fabrication and reinterpretation. Childhood, within Spence's work, is not something passively

retrieved from the archive but something visually remade through the contemporary photographic act.

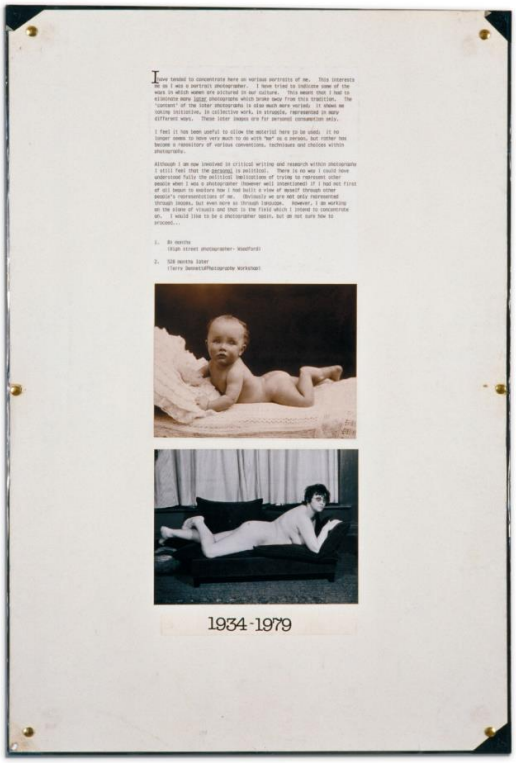

Figure 7

This strategy disrupts the conventional authority of the family photograph as an authentic record of domestic history. As Roland Barthes argues, the photograph is often understood as evidence of “that-has-been” (Barthes, 1981, p. 77), carrying a contextual relationship to reality through its connection to a specific moment in time. However, Spence’s reconstructed photographs challenge this notion by demonstrating that photography can also produce new versions of the past rather than just preserve original moments. Her staged recreations expose the extent to which photographic images may fabricate meaning and narrative through visual construction, complicating assumptions of photographic truth. Furthermore, Spence’s reconstructions reveal how the act of photographing can transform personal history into something newly authored. By revisiting childhood through performance and reconstruction, she reclaims ownership over autobiographical narrative, using photography not simply to remember but to actively reshape the meaning of experience. This process destabilises the boundary between documentation and

invention, suggesting that the photograph is not only capable of recording history but also of rewriting it. Therefore, reconstruction becomes a critical photographic strategy through which the past is not recovered intact but re-authored through present intervention.

Figure 8

Spence's work also challenges the aesthetic conventions of family photography by refusing the refined sentimentality typically associated with childhood imagery. Her reconstructed photographs are deliberately self-conscious and performative which artificiality resists the illusion of photographic transparency, forcing the viewer to confront the image as a constructed object rather than a direct reflection of reality. By making reconstruction explicit, Spence highlights the extent to which all photographs, even apparently candid or documentary images are shaped by framing, performance and selective representation. Spence's photographic practice demonstrates that reconstruction is not simply an additional aspect of photography but central to its representational power. Through staged re-enactment and autobiographical performance, she reveals that photography can reconstruct childhood as readily as it can document it, challenging the medium's traditional claim to portray the truth. Her work positions the photograph not as

evidence of a fixed past, but as an active site in which personal history is continually remade and renegotiated. In doing so, Spence destabilises the notion of childhood as an objectively recoverable experience, instead presenting it as something visually reconstructed through photographic practice itself.

To conclude, through the practices of Wendy Ewald, Trish Morrissey and Jo Spence, the concept of childhood emerges not as a stable or objectively knowable experience, but as a construct continually shaped through photographic representation. Ewald's collaborative projects demonstrate how even self-authored depictions of childhood remain connected to nostalgic idealisation, revealing the extent to which childhood is emotionally constructed through cultural desire and retrospective fantasy. Morrissey's performative interventions within family portraiture further destabilise notions of authenticity by exposing familial roles and domestic identity as socially staged and visually coded performances. Finally, Spence's reconstructed autobiographical photographs challenge the documentary authority of the medium itself, demonstrating photography's capacity not to preserve the past but to actively remake and reinterpret it through acts of visual reconstruction. Collectively, these practices reveal that photography does not function as a transparent record of childhood, but as an active participant in shaping how childhood is imagined, performed and remembered. Rather than documenting a fixed reality, photographic representations of childhood produce meaning through emotional projection, social performance and visual fantasy. Thus, contemporary photographic practice destabilises the notion of childhood as an authentic and stable experience, instead positioning it as a visually constructed experience continually negotiated through image-making. Therefore, this exploration leads to the question of how nostalgia, performance and photographic reconstruction exposes the concept of childhood as a culturally constructed and non-universal experience rather than a stable reality.

Reference List:

Barthes, R. (1981) *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by R. Howard. New York: Hill and Wang.

Boym, S. (2001) *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Hirsch, M. (1997) *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (n.d.) *Beyond the Family Album, 1978–1979, Jo Spence*. Available at: https://www.macba.cat/en/obra/r2825-beyond-the-family-album/ (Accessed: 24th April 2026).

Morrissey, T. (2005-2007) *Front – Trish Morrissey*. Available at: https://trishmorrissey.com/photo_work_post/front/ (Accessed: 21st April 2026).

Sontag, S. (1977) *On Photography*. London: Allen Lane.

Wendy Ewald (n.d.) *Portraits and Dreams*. Available at: https://wendyewald.com/portfolio/portraits-and-dreams/ (Accessed: 21st April 2026).