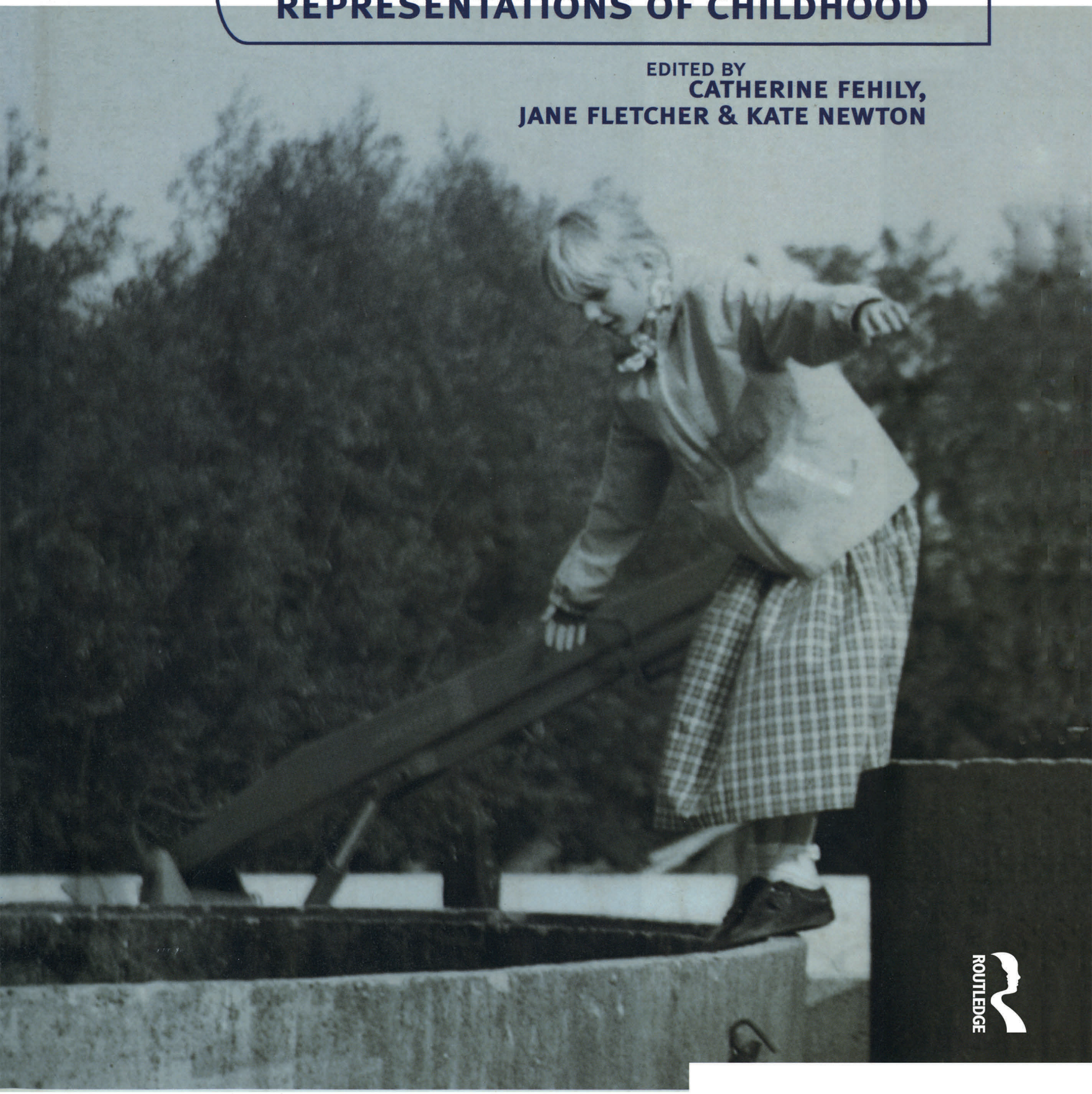
# I SPY
## REPRESENTATIONS OF CHILDHOOD

EDITED BY
CATHERINE FEHILY,
JANE FLETCHER & KATE NEWTON



ROUTLEDGE

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## IRIS – THE WOMEN'S PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT

IRIS AT STAFFORDSHIRE UNIVERSITY EXISTS IN ORDER TO RECOGNIZE THE VALUABLE CONTRIBUTION MADE BY WOMEN PRACTITIONERS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF PHOTOGRAPHIC THEORY AND PRACTICE, THROUGH RESEARCH INTO AND PROMOTION OF THE WORK OF CONTEMPORARY WOMEN PHOTOGRAPHERS AND WRITERS ON PHOTOGRAPHY

# FOREWORD

IRIS' aims and objectives are:

- to promote the work of women in photography through exhibitions, events and publications
- to document women's photography and writing on photography
- to provide a networking resource
- to foster an awareness of women's practice

IRIS was set up in 1994 to coincide with the Signals Festival of Women Photographers, which organized nearly 400 exhibitions across the British Isles. The impetus behind Signals was the series of exhibitions in 1989 marking the 150th anniversary of the 'invention' of photography, which failed to acknowledge the true extent of women's practice historically. *The Art of Photography* at the Royal Academy of the Arts featured ninety-two photographers in its retrospective celebration of the medium, only four of whom were women. The Victoria and Albert Museum's complementary show entitled *Photography Now* displayed the work of twenty-seven photographers; six were women. For those who were familiar with the key players in photography's history there were glaring omissions: Margaret Bourke-White, Imogen Cunningham, Lee Miller, Annie Liebowitz, Jo Spence. For those who weren't, photography was presented as a male preserve.

Since its conception IRIS' has continued successfully to promote work by contemporary women photographers and writers on photography through a series of exhibitions and events, a national conference in 1995, community workshops, a unique slide-resource, situated at Staffordshire University, and a website, *Ariadne*: http://www.staffs.ac.uk/ariadne.

The exhibitions *Touched by Light* (1994), *Resourceful Women* (1994), *City Limits* (1996), *In Spite of Appearances* (1997) and *Child's Play* (1998) have presented to the public a diversity of practice and themes within a framework of photographic discourse and gender analysis. *Child's Play*, the most recent exhibition, which opened at the Midlands Art Centre, Birmingham in February 1998, comprised six bodies of work and negotiated a narrative of childhood experience, identity and (self-) representation. While not ostensibly a 'women's show', the historical and cultural alignment of women with children, and the traditional modes of corresponding representation, inevitably informed any reading of the exhibition. It is from *Child's Play* that *I Spy* derives.

As a result of IRIS' endeavours, work by women practitioners and theorists has been disseminated widely throughout the country, and in other European countries. In addition to IRIS' own activities, historians and academics have utilised the IRIS resource for their own research. The series of interdisciplinary volumes entitled *Nexus: Theory and Practice in Contemporary Women's Practice* and edited by Dr Marsha Meskimmon, draws its imagery solely from the IRIS slide-resource.

IRIS' position as an arts organization that supports women's practice exclusively leaves it open to accusations that such an organization is anachronistic in an equal society. When we have achieved a culture in which issues of sexual difference and social equality have been fully resolved, maybe it will be. Women have been making and taking photographs since the early days of photography: Lady Clementina Hawarden and later Julia Margaret Cameron, to cite the familiar. Women have been writing about photography for over a century and a half, too.

However, social conditions have worked historically to diminish women's 'serious' involvement in the medium and historiography has often acted to deny their presence in canonical texts.

IRIS believes that not only must history be continually re-evaluated but also that the present must be documented accurately to preserve for future generations the significant and valuable contribution that women make today as photographers and critics. IRIS facilitates, promotes and documents women's practice in the knowledge that the kinds of histories written depend upon the cultural value ascribed to any one practice or practitioner and upon the availability of material handed down to future generations.

DIFFICULT SUBJECTS:
PHOTOGRAPHING CHILDREN IN
THE EIGHTIES AND NINETIES

# INTRODUCTION
## VAL WILLIAMS

*I Spy* looks at two differing poles in the contemporary photography of children. It looks at how children photograph themselves and how they are portrayed by contemporary women photographers. To attempt to look at the photography of children in the late 1990s is in itself a difficult and potentially dangerous exercise. The most incisive photographs of children produced over the last two decades draw much of their power from their questioning of the rites and rituals of childhood, their exposure of vulnerabilities and pain. Necessarily, these are also the bodies of work which have provoked the most controversy and debate. When Sally Mann's series *Immediate Family* was published in 1992, media and public attention was intense. Much was said and written about Sally Mann's 'right' to photograph her children's most private moments, despite the fact that these moments were restaged by Mann and her children as collaborative drama. While (mostly male) photojournalists continued to photograph the private moments of distressed children in the famine and war zones of the developing world, making such photographs available to the world's press, Sally Mann's pictures continued to be seen by many from the mainstream media as being manipulative and unethical. But the publication of Mann's pictures was a turning-point. Many of those who supported her right to make these photographs were women, who saw in her portraits a vision which was both tender and acute, and a sensibility which expressed so exactly the pained and fearing love of mother for child.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, our feelings about children and the family, complicated at the best of times, became infinitely more confused when the British public was forced to confront the ramifications of the Cleveland child sex abuse case, in which a considerable number of parents from the north of England were accused of violating their children, who, in turn, were removed from their care. The case went far beyond the original accusations, and became a mirror for the extreme polarity of opinion and belief in Eighties Britain.

The Cleveland cases focused interest on Britain's children in an unprecedented way; while the Thatcher government promoted nuclear family values, the institution of the family was increasingly questioned. Long-held beliefs about children and their fathers and mothers were frequently challenged and new debates about gender, power, sex and desire within the family emerged. It was no coincidence that those at the centre of these debates were men and women (and particularly women) then in their mid-thirties, born in to a post-war British society in which poverty was rampant, housing scarce, feminism virtually non-existent, sexuality rarely spoken of and authority unchallengable. Fifties' childhoods were frequently dark and full of secrets. While major post-war child cruelty cases had indeed hit the headlines, the many injustices of children's lives were never exposed. Exhibitions such as the Fifties' *Family of Man* portrayed children as heroic survivors, beacons for the future, united in spite of race, creed or economic position. Western photographers increasingly travelled the world to photograph children in need with the result that, throughout the Sixties and Seventies, the photojournalistic view of children was dominated by the phantasmagoria of third world famine and the plight of the refugee. In the UK, the advent of the post-war welfare state and the increase in prosperity had not only created a universal improvement in children's health but had also contributed to the emergence of a notion of family and parenthood unfamiliar before the Second World War, in which attention was focused on child development and child welfare. Although

this ideology percolated only slowly through British society, it was one which would increase in momentum. Joined with the emerging identification of the child and adolescent as consumer, increasingly targeted by the advertising industry, the notion of the child as a separate phenomenon soon became a reality.

For the rapidly growing feminist movement of the Seventies, photography became a vital tool. It is interesting to examine the ways in which feminist photographers of the Seventies were more concerned with portraying women and their children as survivors than victims, and had, more often than not, also found their own personal alternatives to the nuclear family. Sometimes, a photographer like Jo Spence would return to those unforgiving childhoods of the Fifties to examine the pain and the conflict, but in the main, feminist photographers used their work to campaign and support other women and their children. The message that strength, community and political action and increased state resources could solve the ongoing difficulties faced by women and children was one which was transmitted forcibly through the women's movement and through the photography which emanated from it.

From the USA in the Eighties, two bodies of work emerged which began the shift towards the examinations of children's lives in a way which was, as yet, unfamiliar. Sally Mann's *At Twelve* (1988) and Judith Joy Ross's *Eurana Park* (1985), both of which portrayed pre-adolescent children, showed the intense vulnerability and physicality of these children. Mann and Ross opened up the way to a new generation of women photographers who wished to explore both the pathos and the joy of pre-adolescence. Their photographs suggested unease and complexity, informed not by a political agenda but rather by emotion and intuition. Over a decade later, countless women photographers have documented children and young teenagers, notably Rineke Dijkstra, Clare Strand, Sarah Jones, Trine Sondergaard and Caitlin Verney. Dijkstra and Strand have photographed desolate yet hopeful teenage girls, Sarah Jones has made tableaux of teenage life, suggesting boredom among plenty, apathy in affluence. Trine Sondergaard has studied Copenhagen's teenage prostitutes, while Caitlin Verney's portraits of children awake and sleeping comment on the bizarre relationship between children and the camera.

In 1994, photographer Trish Brennan worked with a group of children on the Holly Street Estate in Hackney, East London. The children were invited to make photographs of their homes, their families and their local environment. Trish Brennan also made a video in which the children spoke about their lives on the estate. Holly Street, which had once been a model set of dwellings, had declined over the years and had become emblematic of the failure of high-rise social housing in Britain. Though much of the media reporting had been somewhat at odds with the realities – the flats were well built and many of the residents were contented with their homes – the blocks were scheduled for demolition and, in partnership with the existing residents, new homes were planned. Brennan's video explored the lives of some of Holly Street's young people, and gave us a unique access into the private world of the inner-city child. They talked about the places where they played,the people they knew and their sadness at having to leave their homes and community. Just like any other children, they had their routines and their groups, their relationships with parents, siblings and friends. What emerged from Trish Brennan's film was that Holly Street kids were just the same as any other kids: thoughtful, dreaming and energetic, with their own worries and preoccupations. The photographs which the children took were intimate, to do with localities, peer groups and families. Photography can only give us a very partial view of other people's lives, but these photographs have an authenticity which is rare enough. Producing something much more than snapshots, the project not only enabled the children to document their lives, but allowed us an insight into something deeply private.

American artist Wendy Ewald has worked extensively with children over the last decade. Her remarkable book *Portraits* and *Dreams* (1985) showed the photographs made by a group of children, living in a remote community in the USA. Ewald worked with the children throughout and made it possible for them to use the camera in a way which would bring the imagined and the real together. In the work which she made with a group of children in the Netherlands in 1997, titled *If I were orange*, she worked with three groups of children, one from a rural community, one from the inner-city and one the children of itinerant barge owners. The photographs and the oral testimonies which accompany them show acutely both the differences and the similarities