Voice Recognition

JULIE AULT ON NANCY SPERO (1926–2009)

Nancy Spero in her studio, New York, 1999. Photo: Abe Frajndlich.

IN 1966, NANCY SPERO concluded that the language of painting was "too conventional, too establishment," and she decided that from then on she would work exclusively on paper—flimsy, vulnerable, insignificant paper meant to be pinned to a wall. Having recently returned to the United States after a number of years in Europe, Spero was deeply disturbed by the atrocities the US military was committing in Vietnam, and over the course of the next four years, she created her first significant works on paper, the scores of gouache-and-ink pictures that make up her "War Series." As she later described them to curator Barbara Flynn, these works express "the obscenity of war" via imagery of "angry screaming heads in clouds of bombs [that] spew and vomit poison onto the victims below. Phallic tongues emerge from human heads at the tips of the penile extensions of the bomb or helicopter blades. Making these extreme images, I worried that [my] children might be embarrassed with the content of my art . . ."

For Spero, who died in October at the age of eighty-three, choices of material, form, method, and subject matter were always political. Born in Cleveland in 1926, Spero graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1949. Before settling with their three sons in New York in 1964, she and her husband, the painter Leon Golub (1922–2004), lived in Italy and then in Paris, where she created her first mature works, the "Black Paintings," 1959–64: figurative compositions that seem to brood over existential questions of selfhood and otherness, several depicting sexual partners who appear remote and estranged from each other. She received little recognition for these powerful paintings.

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Throughout the 1950s and '60s Spero experienced intense isolation, discontent, and anger because of the invisibility accorded a female artist making figurative, aggressive work. Moreover, the lion's share of child-rearing duties fell to her, leaving little time for artmaking. But Spero was resolute: "I never stopped working and always late at night, proving if only to myself that I was an artist," she wrote years later. Her fury over being persona non grata in the art world mounted. Spero regarded her Vietnam works as broadsides—manifestos to be given away freely. But no one wanted them. She had no audience to speak of beyond Golub; no opportunity to exhibit her work except at "a few anti-war shows and benefits." No one looked at, engaged with, or discussed her work. The "War Series" was not exhibited in the US until years later.

Feeling like an outsider, in 1969 Spero began an intense four-year engagement with that brilliant outcast Antonin Artaud. "He lashed out at everything, that is just what appealed to me," she said in an interview with Flynn. On discovering Artaud's writing, she immediately began to incorporate it into her practice, transcribing his texts into notebooks so that his words would pass bodily through her. The first fully realized works that emerged from these explorations were the "Artaud Paintings," 1969–70, which juxtapose text fragments redolent of the writer's "desperation, humor, misogyny, and violent language" with painted images of androgynous figures, disembodied heads, and, as in the "War Series," phallic tongues. In one painting, a figure in profile floats limply, tethered to a cord with an unseen end, the words ME, ANTONIN ARTAUD, BORN SEPTEMBER 4, 1896 OUT OF A UTERUS I HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH scrawled above. Spero later reflected that her identification with Artaud had to do with her awareness of being silenced: "The anger in the 'Artaud Paintings' came from feeling that I didn't have a voice, an arena in which to conduct a dialogue; that I didn't have an identity," she told Flynn. "That's exactly why I choose to use Artaud's writing, because he screams and yells and rants and raves about his tongue being cut off, castrated." Joining herself to Artaud, Spero activated his words to articulate her own experience—women's experience—of negation. She found that she "could take a stance in forcing a 'collaboration' " with the notoriously misogynistic writer, and she experienced an intense psychological connection with him in spite of sensing what she would describe (to curator Catherine de Zegher) as "his disapproval." This

Nancy Spero, *Codex Artaud XVII*, 1972, typewriting and painted collage on paper, 45 x 18".

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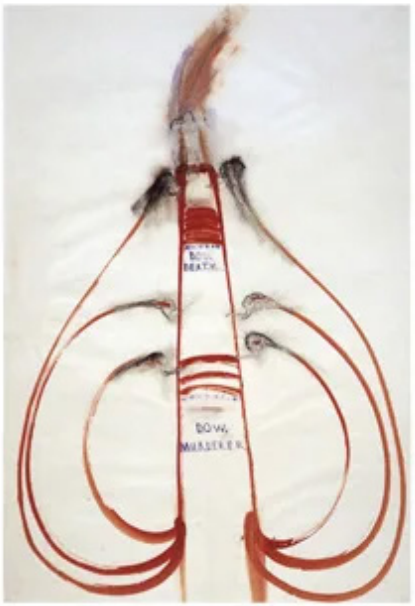
Alluding to Egyptian hieroglyphics, papyrus scrolls, tomb paintings, and books, *Codex Artaud* was the formal and methodological model for Spero's future work. From that point on, she intensified her use of collage techniques and rhythmic image/text juxtapositions to create decentralized compositions up to two hundred feet long. These monumental works require formidable effort; viewers must move across the work as well as toward and away from it to visually accommodate the play of scales. For an artist who had no audience, the decision to create such spatially and physically demanding pieces was a bold one. (In later years, Spero, who suffered from rheumatoid arthritis that debilitated her hands, would endure considerable physical pain in the creation of these works.)

Beyond the studio, she was fighting alienation in other ways. In search of community and collective political agency, Spero joined the Art Workers' Coalition's campaign for museum reform in 1969, and then signed up for a subgroup, Women Artists in Revolution, that fought for women's rights in the art world. Soon she was active in the Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee, which for months picketed the Whitney Museum of American Art, protesting the extreme gender disparity in its exhibitions and collections, and which started the Women's Art Registry to disseminate information about art made by women. As she worked on the *Codex*, a paradigm shift was under way. In 1972 six women, including Spero, founded the first independent women's art venue in the country, A.I.R. Gallery. A.I.R. transformed Spero's social landscape: In addition to having a place to exhibit her work consistently, she become an active participant in the discourse of art, and she found the dialogue and constituency she so desperately needed. Spero exhibited *Codex Artaud* at A.I.R. in 1973—her first New York gallery show—and mounted five solo exhibitions there over the following decade.

Spero's decision, made in 1974, that women would be the subjects of all her future works was a natural outgrowth of her feminist activities. "I decided to view women and men by representing women," she said, "not just to reverse history, but to see what it means to view the world through the depiction of women." Drawing on an Amnesty International report, she created *Torture of Women*, 1974–76, a 125-foot-long piece composed of collaged elements including painted cutout female figures, severed heads, mythological monsters, goddesses, and excerpts from the ancient Sumerian myth of Tiamat's brutal dismemberment by Marduk; all this shares space with eyewitness accounts of state-sanctioned torture, written on a bulletin typewriter or printed via letterpress. These stories of women being battered, burned, cut, electrocuted, raped, split open, and murdered are wrenching to read, their sheer geographic and historical reach shocking.

Around this time, a chance remark by the proprietor of a print shop inspired Spero to begin transferring her painted figures to zinc plates, which permitted her to reproduce, repeat, and recycle images freely and infinitely; previously, she had always painted her figures by hand. In the ensuing years, she frequently spoke of "cannibalizing" her work, a methodological by-product of the printing technique she adopted. "I was like a director of a stock company and these characters would appear, disappear, and reappear," she told Benjamin H. D. Buchloh in 2008. "They would come in and take their roles with other characters, and then some would subsume other roles." In a discussion with critic Alessandra Mammi, she elaborated:

> The repetition inherent in the printing process echoes the irrepressible presence of women in history I seek to capture by combining and recombining images of women from very different historical periods and cultural contexts. Yet my intervention is not neutral history, is not fixed, it's mutable, open to interpretation, it keeps on living by accumulating new meanings.



Above, left: **Nancy Spero, *D.O.W. M.U.R.D.E.R.E.R.*, 1968,** gouache and ink on paper, 35 ¼ x 23 ¼". From the "War Series," 1966–70.
Right: **Nancy Spero, *Goddess Nut* (detail), 1989,** hand-printing and collage on paper, seven panels, overall 9' 2" x 11' 8".

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Mechanical reproduction, in other words, gave birth to Spero's dynamic collaboration with history. From this point on, she increasingly de-emphasized text in her work in favor of imagery; she raided diverse cultures, historical periods, and disciplines—mythology, folklore, art history, literature, and media—for representations of women as tragic and triumphant, degraded and powerful, victimized and liberated. *Notes in Time on Women*, 1979, for example, which she researched and assembled over three years, is a compendium of references to woman as protagonist—including the Greek goddess Artemis, who heals women's pain—juxtaposed with a quote translated from Nahuatl: "Certainly childbirth is our mortality, we who are women, for it is our battle."

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Shortly thereafter, Spero began using cast rubber to print directly on walls, creating site-specific installations for a variety of museums and art institutions. As her methods evolved, so did her subject matter: Far from lingering in a state of victimage, much of her work of the '80s and '90s expresses exuberance and sexual audacity (*Sheela and the Dildo Dancer*, 1987, features the famous sheela-na-gig—the folk goddess figure, incongruously carved onto the facades of medieval churches throughout the British Isles, who cheerfully displays her oversize vulva) and the delight of movement and liberation (the figures that populate *Goddess Nut*, 1989, walk, crawl, dance, run, and jump across its vertical panels). "The new work has this buoyant look which worries me sometimes," the artist confided to Nicole Jolicoeur and Nell Tenhaaf in 1985. Although Spero continued to challenge sadism toward women and the brutality of war her whole life, explicit depictions of violence grew rare in her later work, which progressively portrayed women as empowered creators of their own narratives.

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JULIE AULT IS AN ARTIST, CURATOR, AND EDITOR IN NEW YORK. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

PASSAGES

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By Julie Ault

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