

Detail of Artemis from Notes in Time, 1979

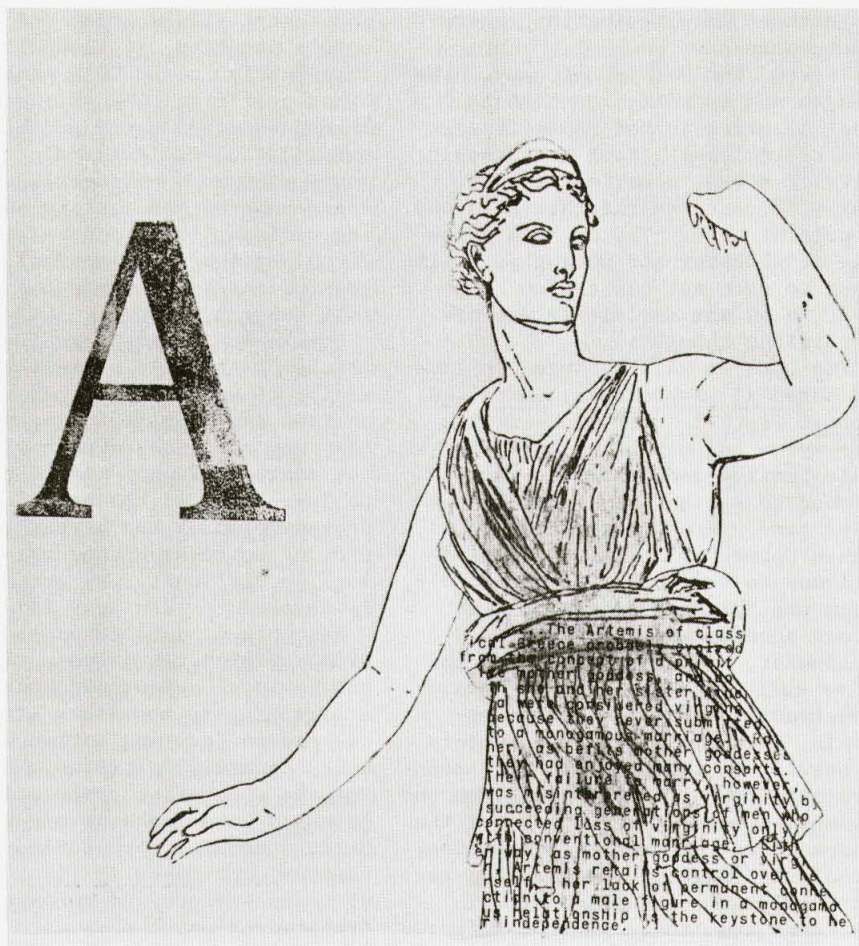


Photo: Diana Church

MATRIX is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal Agency.

Nancy Spero's art over the past thirty years has focused on themes of injustice and violence, voicing angry protest against the obscenities of war and political oppression. Since 1975 she has chosen to devote herself exclusively to making art that explores the related question of woman's place in history. Spero's highly personal style and unique scroll-collage technique have resisted easy categorization in terms of art-world trends, and although she has been an important influence upon younger artists, she has been considered until very recently something of an "underground" figure, producing an art too disquieting for general consumption.

Indeed, her art is not easy. The images and imprinted quotations that interact in her paper friezes are relentlessly frank and graphic; hers is a raw, sometimes almost naive, directness that attracts and repels at once. The work is capable of shocking and moving at a time when so much art has ceased to do so--it is an art certain to provoke unsettling thoughts.

The work in MATRIX, Notes in Time on Women II: Appraisals, Dance and Active Histories (1979) confronts the myths and metaphors born of male fantasy and fear that have served to define and defile "woman" over time. From Abigail Adams to "that Cosmo Girl", from Argentine prisons to New York medical schools, from the "wisdom" of the ancient Roman senate to our own Barry Goldwater, from the rites of primitive cultures to the sophisticated constructs of European intellectuals, Spero insistently documents a pervasive history of abusive misogynistic power. Her typewritten and stamped-out texts are torn from the respectable contexts of literature, scholarly inquiry, journalistic reportage, and reassembled here in battered and ironic juxtapositions that are alternately enraging, moving, chilling and--eventually--enspiriting.

The way that the words are arranged and imprinted--sometimes awkwardly disjointed, sometimes bleeding, sometimes overlapping in their urgency--lends force and rhythm to

the work, as do the sparse silences of white paper that offer respite when the reading becomes unbearable. Although the horizontal bands might suggest a linear reading, the dramatic shifts of scale move us up to the work and then back, just as the texts move backward and forward in time. The experience is simultaneously intimate and public, both personal and profoundly political. We find ourselves caught up in the dance of the lively figures that call to each other across the room.

At the same time that the interplay of word and image recalls such art-historical precedents as medieval manuscript illumination and oriental scroll painting, it also alludes more immediately to the wall poster or urban graffiti. The elegance of the French handmade paper and burnished metallic painted surfaces of some figures contrasts eloquently with the coarseness of the tearing and gluing process. Such contrasting tensions prefigure the ambivalent contradictions inherent in the difficult subject matter.

Donald Kuspit has seen Spero's art as "a struggle against the insanity of world-historical events" wherein she "avoids insanity the only way one can--by acknowledging the reality of what one is tempted to deny." It is the unflinching presentation of the harsh realities of oppression that makes her work so difficult. We are repeatedly tempted to turn away and deny.

But when we dare to share the artist's vision, it becomes clear that this painful acknowledgement is only a beginning--a necessary state in the passage to free and active being. Like the artist's friend who begins to take wing after confronting the pain and loneliness of divorce, or Helen's hanging rope turned into a rainbow, the Notes in Time speak of transcendence and empowering transformation.

Countering the potentially numbing testimony of the collected citations, Spero peppers her scrolls with active figures that gesture and cavort among the words, challenging and mocking their meanings while creating a defiant poetry all their own. Indomitable and irrever-

ent, these often-tiny figures refuse to be dwarfed by the overwhelming forces they confront. Graceful and awkward, beautiful and deformed, they embody the stages of women's existence, and pay tribute to the heroism of endurance.

Spero celebrates, too, through the recounting of "active histories", the strength of women who have resisted, independent women, like Dr. Mamphela Ramphele or Ines Romeu, women who have refused to be silenced, women who have dared to begin to define themselves beyond all odds. Visually the work begins and ends with a phalanx of strong, questing female figures who count --with H.D.--the rhythm of their own dancing feet, and who take strength from Artemis, "who heal-eth woman's pain" and who derives her power from her lack of permanent connection to a male figure.

The philosopher Mary Daly has written, "Within a culture possessed by the myth of feminine evil, the naming, describing and theorizing about good and evil has constituted a maze/haze of deception. The journey of women becoming is breaking through this maze--springing into free space, which is an a-mazing process." (Gyn/Ecology, 1978)

Like the work of the feminist scholars whom she quotes, Spero's art constitutes an important step in this a-mazing journey of becoming.

Nancy Spero was born in 1926 in Cleveland, Ohio. She graduated from the Chicago Art Institute in 1949 and lived in Paris before moving to New York City in the mid 1960s. She has been active in the feminist art movement since its beginnings in the late '60s, and is a founding member of A.I.R. the women's cooperative gallery in New York City. Her husband, Leon Golub, is a painter who is also concerned with themes of political violence and corruption.

Judith Rohrer  
Guest Curator  
Wesleyan University  
Middletown, Connecticut

Work in MATRIX:

Notes in Time on Women: Appraisals, Dance and Active Histories, 1979, gouache, collage and printing on handmade French paper, 1' 8" x 210'. Lent by the artist.

This is the second work in a three-part cycle. The first is titled, Torture of Women (1974) and the third is The First Language (1981).

PLEASE NOTE: Nancy Spero and Guest Curator Judith Rohrer will conduct an informal dialogue in the MATRIX gallery on Sunday afternoon, May 1, 1983 at 2 pm. The public is cordially invited.

Selected one-person exhibitions:  
Galerie Breteau, Paris, '62, '65,  
'68; University of California at  
San Diego, '71; A.I.R. Gallery,  
NYC, '73, '74, '79, '81, '83;  
Douglass College Library, Rutgers  
University, New Brunswick, NJ  
'74; The Woman's Building, Los  
Angeles, '78; Hampshire College  
Art Gallery, Amherst, MA, '79  
Real Art Ways, Hartford, '79;  
Picker Art Gallery, Colgate Uni-  
versity, Hamilton, NY, '79;  
Livingston Gallery, Rutgers Uni-  
versity, '80; The Sarah Institute,  
NYC, '81; Ben Shahn Gallery,  
William Patterson College, Pat-  
terson, NJ, '81; Herter Gallery,  
University of Massachusetts,  
Amherst, MA, '81; Colburn Gallery,  
University of Vermont, Burlington,  
'82; Galerie France Morin, Montreal,  
'82; University Art Museum, Uni-  
versity of New Mexico, Albuquer-  
que, '83; 345 Gallery/A Gallery  
for Social Change, Inc., NYC,  
'83; Art Galaxy, NYC, '83.

Selected group exhibitions:  
Judson Memorial Church, NYC, Flag  
Show, '70; NY Cultural Center,  
NYC, Women Choose Women, '73;  
Philadelphia Museum of Art, In  
Her Own Image, '74; The Woman's  
Building, LA, What is Feminist  
Art? '77; Cayman Gallery, NYC,  
Solidarity with Chilean Democracy:  
A Memorial to Orlando Letelier, '77;  
Artemisia Gallery, Chicago, Strong  
Work, '77; Wright State University,  
OH, Art of Conscience: The Art of  
the Last Decade, '80; Institute  
for Contemporary Art, London,  
Issue--Social Strategies by Women  
Artists, '80; The Alternative  
Museum, NYC, Ikon/Logos--The Word  
as Image, '81; Henry Street Set-  
tlement, NYC, Beyond Aesthetics:  
Art of Necessity, '82; Midland  
Group, Nottingham England, Sense  
and Sensibility in Feminist Art  
Practice '82; The Revolutionary  
Power of Women's Laughter, '83.  
SUNY Stony Brook Art Gallery,  
The War Show, '83.

Selected bibliography about Spero:  
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Alloway, Lawrence. "Nancy Spero,"  
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with Nancy Spero," Womanart,  
(Winter/Spring '77), p. 12+.  
Guthrie, Derek. "Art Politics and  
Ethics: An Interview with N. Spero  
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Lippard, Lucy. "Caring: Five Po-  
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tional, vol. 193, no. 987, (May-  
June '77), p. 197+.  
Robins, Corinne. "Words and  
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Nancy Spero," Arts Magazine,  
vo. 54, no. 4, (December '79),  
p. 103+.  
Kuspit, Donald. "Spero's Apo-  
calypse," Artforum, vol. 18, no.  
8, (April '80) p. 34+.