

MIGNON NIXON

*No, I will not challenge  
the ancient Mystery, the Oracle*

—H. D., *Helen in Egypt*, Book 5 (1961)

*Homage to New York* (1958), the work of a thirty-two-year-old, Chicago-trained figurative painter, parodies the mute bravado of the New York School. “I did this painting,” Nancy Spero observes, “with a tombstone right in the middle, and then on each side are two heads with dunce caps and rabbit-like ears, and their tongues are sticking out. And on this phallic-like tombstone . . . are the initials of the artists who were prevalent then. . . . On top I wrote, ‘I do not challenge,’ and then ‘Homage to New York’ below.”<sup>1</sup>

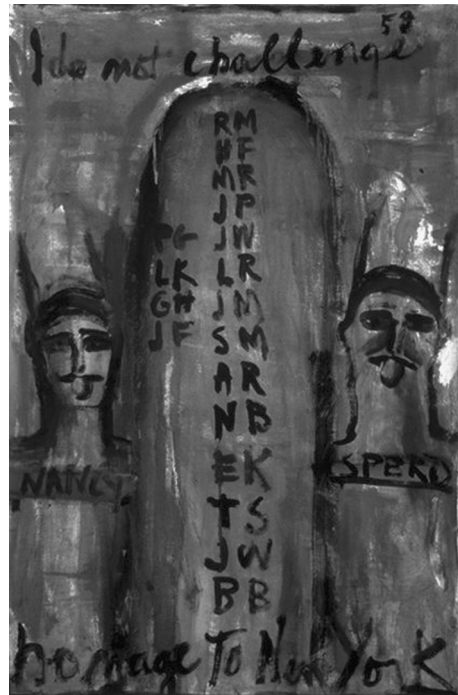
Produced, coincidentally, around the same time Marcel Duchamp cast a deadpan self-portrait inscribed *With My Tongue in My Cheek* (1959)—a work often interpreted as a cunning critique of Abstract Expressionism’s heroic posturing—Spero’s parody conversely is expressionistic in tone, mimicking in its liquid, gestural application of paint the self-conscious performance of alienated, dumb virility that had become a defining characteristic of late-modernist painting. Duchamp’s tongue-in-cheek caricature renders the artist inarticulate, autistically self-silenced, gagged by his own tongue. In a gesture of defiance that parodies the urgency of self-expression in a mode of painting whose funeral *Homage* would celebrate, Spero’s

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1. Nancy Spero, “Jo Anna Isaak in Conversation with Nancy Spero,” in Jon Bird, Jo Anna Isaak, Sylvère Lotringer, *Nancy Spero* (London: Phaidon, 1996), p. 9. It has been suggested that Spero plays on the phrase “I do not challenge” from H. D.’s lyric narrative *Helen in Egypt*, anticipating her later strategy of quoting from literary texts in the *Codex Artaud* (1969–72) and *H. D. Fragments* (1979). As *Helen in Egypt* was published in 1961, however, it seems that Spero’s use of the phrase instead functions retrospectively as an allusion to this poem, in which Helen narrates her own tragic history. “No, I will not challenge/the ancient Mystery, the Oracle,” she declares. Helen does, however, address all those “brothers” who “fought, forgetting women” and “died imprecating her”—who sacrificed their lives to a fantasy. H. D., *Helen in Egypt* (1961; New York: New Directions, 1974).

twin figures, tongues dangling listlessly from their mouths, dramatize instead the author's own exclusion from speech, underscoring the futility of the very gesture that is being enacted. In contrast to the painters *Homage* imprecates, who effectively defied the cultural authority of logos with the mute gestures of abstraction—and in contrast to Duchamp, whose punning tongue is loose enough to lampoon even when tied—Spero's "I" is that of the subject whose rebellion falls on deaf ears. This is the voice of the silenced subject that yet speaks.

For the painting is vocal.<sup>2</sup> It defiles symbolic space with initials and caricatural figuration, mimicking a routine gesture of social alienation. It marks the absence of its author, a woman artist (not Spero, or N. Spero, or N. S., but Nancy Spero), from such rosters as the "phallic-like tombstone" displays. Misplacing the signature—shifted from the corner of the canvas to be emblazoned on the chests of the twin message bearers with their flat, flapping tongues—the painting performs, but also alters, an ordinary function of first-person voice and of signature, which "by definition," Jacques Derrida observes, "implies the actual or empirical nonpresence of the signer."<sup>3</sup> Here, the author declares her absence not only from the document she has signed—a document



Nancy Spero. *Homage to New York (I Do Not Challenge)*. 1958. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York. All photographs by David Reynolds.

2. The voice and its silencing assume the greatest significance in Spero's art. As Mladen Dolar has observed, following Lacan's analysis of the voice as an *objet petit a*, the voice is split between reverberation and signification, and so ensures that the system of language cannot be "isolated as a sphere on its own ('the symbolic')." Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), p. 145. Nor is the voice restricted, Dolar reminds us, to "linguistic voices," or phonemes, but also encompasses "all the non-voices, from coughing and hiccups to babbling, screaming and laughing, and singing." These vocal nonvoices might seem to exist "outside the linguistic structure," but Dolar claims otherwise: not only that "the voice untamed by structure is not external to linguistics" but that it is "particularly apt to embody the structure as such." For voices untamed by structure, the nonvoice and the voice-as-object, are "aiming at meaning." The scream and the song, at opposite ends of the spectrum of vocal articulation, embody a "zero-point" in Dolar's scheme: "the structure at its minimal," "meaning as such, beyond the discernible meaning" (p. 32). In Spero's work, the tongue and the scream are vocal in protesting their own exclusion as linguistic voices.

3. Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 328.

created for the express purpose of announcing the existence of the author who inscribes it with her signature—but also from a select class of artists so well known that their initials alone are adequate to represent them. These include a number of female painters.<sup>4</sup> The circle of artists to which *Homage* refers is defined, it seems, not by the exclusion of women *per se*, but by the abstraction of difference.<sup>5</sup>

Travestying homosocial rituals of tribute, Spero mocks the dynamics of infatuation and rivalry, aspiration and antagonism, that defined the New York School, like many another avant-garde movement, as an Oedipal affair. The act of homage, capable of concealing aggression behind the mask of excessive esteem, historically constitutes an indispensable rhetorical device for the artist as a young man. For the artist as a young woman, in 1958, homage, played straight, could only reinforce a subordinate role. Played derisively, however, homage could have subversive effects: it could, as Freud observed of jokes, promote the defiance of deference.<sup>6</sup> Implicit in the classic Oedipal scenario, in which the artist-disciple aspires to unseat the master and occupy his place, is the hostility that shadows masculine rituals of tribute. The disciple sublimates competition with the master, or rivalry with brother artists, through rituals of homage, often by incorporating signature devices. Quelling appropriation through quotation, turning artistic theft into respectful borrowing, the act of homage nevertheless serves notice on its object, marking the object of esteem as a target of emulation and desire, but also of envy and aggression. For to pay homage, whether abjectly or aggressively—even ambivalently—is to assert one's place in discourse. It is to speak, even if by mouthing another's words; to signify, even if by copying.

*Homage to New York* invokes instead the contempt that burns from exclusion. If the act of homage lends itself to parody—if its fidelity of emulation is susceptible to the betrayal of mockery—Spero's *Homage* is a parody of homage itself. With her mocking disavowal of agency—comically mouthing the subordinate's refrain, "I do not challenge," even while symbolically burying a generation of artist rivals—

4. Amei Wallach identifies the "initials of artists all-too-often cited in *ARTnews* (including Lee Krasner, Grace Hartigan, and Helen Frankenthaler, as well as Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko)" in "Hysterical Men, Castrated Women: Nancy's Spero's Exquisite Corpse," in *Nancy Spero: Selected Works from Codex Artaud 1971–72*, exh. cat. (Dartmouth, Mass.: University Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, 2001), p. 9.

5. On late modernism and sexual difference, see Anne Middleton Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

6. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–1964), vol. 8. A generation earlier, in riposte not to the New York School but to their European idols, the Surrealists in exile, Louise Bourgeois dramatized the potential of mock deference in avant-garde sexual politics, posing with Joan Miró for a dinner-party tableau on the theme of homage. Cloaked in the very mantle of the Surrealist movement, the banner of the 1947 Surrealist exhibition, Miró sits barefoot upon an armchair throne, his feet resting on books about his "master," Picasso. Flanked by the kneeling Bourgeois, her hands raised in tribute, Miró plays the part of the infantile idol to Bourgeois's own subversive supplicant. "I do not challenge" might make a fitting caption for this doubly disingenuous scene. For a discussion of this photograph, see my *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), chap. 1.

Spero finds her tongue in derision. It is a strategy with a firm feminist pedigree, recalling Virginia Woolf's advice to women, "to remember, learn from, and use derision, of which they had long been objects."<sup>7</sup> Naming derision one of the estimable "unpaid teachers" of women, Woolf counsels us to apply its lessons to patriarchal hierarchies and rituals of deference in every sphere, even if, when voiced by a woman, derision invites "ridicule, obscurity, and censure."<sup>8</sup> In keeping with Woolf's injunction to deride, and putting on stark display the very emotions the act of homage disavows, *Homage to New York* is a curse. And homage itself, Spero suggests, is also a kind of curse. To pay homage, she implies, is to curse one's own inferior position. It is to curse cultural rituals of mastery and rivalry in the very act of conforming to them. It is to curse the hierarchy in which one seeks a foothold (through self-abasement) and to curse one's own obedience to that order. It is a cursed business, more so for women, who have no claim on the disciple's share. No wonder, then, that Woolf recommends derision as preferable, "for psychological reasons," to obsequy.<sup>9</sup> Cursing the curse of homage, Spero made *Homage to New York* the token of her adherence to the discipline of derision, and so began a career in ridicule, obscurity, and censure.

*she whom you cursed  
was but the phantom and the shadow thrown  
of a reflection;*

—H. D., *Helen in Egypt*, Book 1

In 1959, the year after *Homage*, Spero and her husband, the painter Leon Golub, decided to "jump over New York" for the sake of their "artistic survival" and moved to Paris with their two young sons.<sup>10</sup> Like Golub, Spero considered herself, as a figurative painter, alienated from the New York scene.<sup>11</sup> The two had

7. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (1938), in *A Room of One's Own/Three Guineas*, ed. Michèle Barrett (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 204.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

9. *Ibid.* See also Rosalyn Deutsche, "Louise Lawler's Rude Museum," in *Twice Untitled and Other Pictures (looking back)*, ed. Helen Molesworth, exh. cat. (Columbus, Ohio and Cambridge, Mass.: Wexner Center for the Arts and MIT Press, 2006): "Woolf's classic essay of ethico-political thought counts derision among the great 'un-paid' teachers of women, educating them about the behavior and motives of human beings, about, that is, psychology, a field that Woolf, unlike many leftist critics today, did not separate from that of the political," p. 123.

10. Spero, in Irene Sosa, *Woman as Protagonist: The Art of Nancy Spero*, documentary video, 1993; Spero, quoted in Elaine A. King, *Nancy Spero: The Black Paris Paintings 1959–1966*, exh. cat. (Pittsburgh: Hewlett Gallery, Carnegie-Mellon University, 1985), p. 10.

11. "New York was the center of the art world and Abstract Expressionism was so powerful then. In Chicago we were always aware of New York. There was a theater group at the time called Second City; if you were in Chicago, you knew you were in the Second City. Also, I was very resistant to New York because I was a figurative artist." "Jo Anna Isaak in Conversation with Nancy Spero," p. 9.



Spero. Lovers VIII. 1964. Private Collection.

met as students at the Art Institute of Chicago in the mid 1940s, and in 1951, when Spero was twenty-five, they married. “And that’s when all the troubles began,” Spero once drily remarked.<sup>12</sup> She knew Paris from her student days, having studied at the École des Beaux-Arts and been recognized, she archly recalls, as “a brilliant student of André L’Hote,” who “put together a Salon des Indépendants at the Grand Palais, and he put me in it.” “And then I got married and I had a child. . . . He [Golub] was going out and being collected, and I was busy with the children, killing myself painting.”<sup>13</sup>

“The art world in Paris,” Spero claims, “opened for me as it hadn’t in Chicago. Perhaps because I wasn’t characterized as ‘wife’ or ‘mother.’”<sup>14</sup> In Paris, where the couple’s third son was born in 1961, Spero worked intensively on a series she called the *Black Paintings*, opaque, oneiric, sensuous vignettes of recumbent couples—lovers, mothers and children—bodies entwined, enamored,

12. Spero, in Sosa, *Woman as Protagonist: The Art of Nancy Spero*.

13. Spero, as quoted in Wallach, “Hysterical Men, Castrated Women,” p. 7.

14. Nancy Spero, “Creation and Pro-creation,” from “Forum: On Motherhood, Art and Apple Pie,” *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* 12 (1992), pp. 38–40. Reprinted in Bird et al., *Nancy Spero*, p. 118. “I was able to show my work in different galleries, and people were receptive to what I was doing. I had my first one-woman exhibition at the Galerie Breteau in 1962 and continued to exhibit there until 1968.” Quoted in King, *The Black Paris Paintings 1959–1966*, p. 10.

entranced. Yet, the artist remarks, “These figures were meant to be about isolation. The figures are related and yet they are not.” Spero painted late into the night while her young sons slept. Enveloped in darkness, the scenes revealed, as the artist observed, “things that happen in the night.”<sup>15</sup> Each slowly worked canvas began with a bright palette that steadily, inexorably darkened over until only ghostly figures remained.<sup>16</sup> The *Black Paintings* portray the disappearance of the visible world in deepening shadow, plunging figures into nocturnal blindness, that faltering state in which sight reluctantly cedes to a fumbling touch. To portray, in painting, a blindness, is to evoke the losses exacted by time, but also the contingency of connection. Figures face toward each other across the darkness, but gazes fail to meet. The intimacy of touch conceals, but also confirms, a distance, reaching into those shadowy depths to which the other, however close at hand, is palpably lost.

These scenes of sexual and familial intimacy, recording incidents that take place in the night, also recall nocturnal journeys into infantile states, in which contours of self and other, body and object, space and time, are blurred. The estrangement of the couple, or of parent and child, and even of the self from itself, under the influence of darkness, sleep, and dreams, is both amplified and remedied by the *Black Paintings*, in which few figures are left alone. Here, night is a medium in which existential alienation and sensual intimacy converge. In mood, the *Black Paintings*, if skeptical of intimacy, encompass every shade of emotional proximity, from the watchful silence of a guardian of sleep, to the tender companionability of a couple, to the longing attraction of lovers, to the gray fatigue, stoically endured, of a sleepless mother. Despair, melancholia, and rage, however, remained elusive, at least until the second winter in Paris when, “suddenly in the midst of doing these *Black Paintings*,” Spero recalls, “I did a few works on paper and they were violent . . . and angry. I was frustrated with my position.”<sup>17</sup>

“There’s something *very* angry,” ventured Jon Bird in an interview with the artist, “about these images of mothers and children and lovers and suddenly in the middle here’s this ‘fuck you’ image with a tongue out.”<sup>18</sup> In a drawing entitled *Les Anges, Merde, Fuck You* (1960), those words float in white script on a page scoured with black ink. Sweeping across the sheet like ghostly furies, trailing the phrase “les anges” [the angels], are three disembodied skulls whose mask-like pallor, vacant, dark eye sockets, and gaping mouths are animated only by a bright blood-red tongue issuing from the rictus of the middle figure. “What I did to rationalize this,” Spero recalls, “I harked back to medieval art. . . . I thought I

15. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 11.

16. On Spero’s technique in the *Black Paintings*, see “Jo Anna Isaak in Conversation with Nancy Spero,” p. 10, and King, *The Black Paris Paintings 1959–1966*, p. 11.

17. Nancy Spero, interview with Jon Bird, October 25 and 26, 1986.

18. Jon Bird, interview with Nancy Spero, October 25 and 26, 1986.

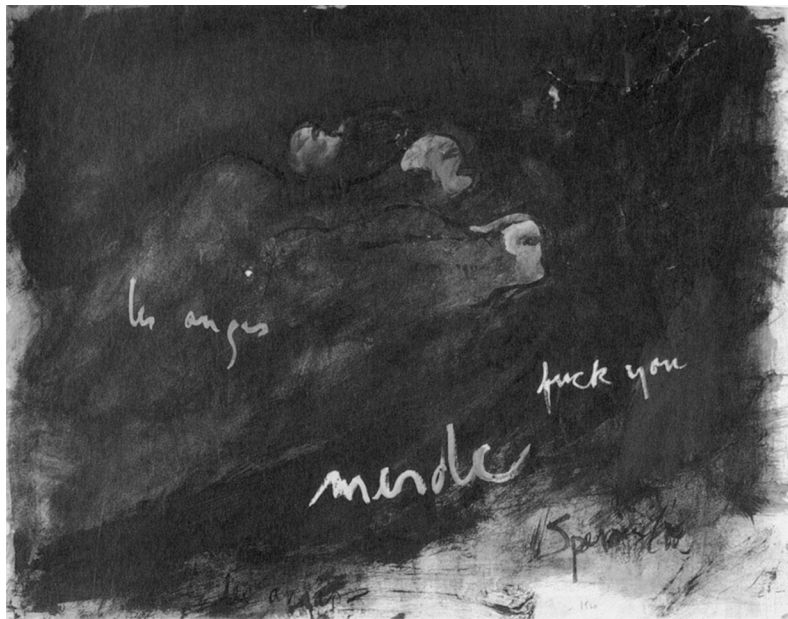
remembered in the *Apocalypse of Gerona*, the drowning figures had their tongues sticking out.”<sup>19</sup>

Three little heads, three pairs of blank unseeing eye holes, three voracious mouths, and one protruding bloody tongue—a nocturnal scene veiled in shadows. Even in an artistic milieu immersed in existentialist philosophy and the raw violence of *art brut*, this spectre of maternal aggression prompted Spero to offer up “a rationale.” She found it not in *art brut* but in the Christian tradition that outsider art itself so often invokes for its imagery of the subject *in extremis*. For the cultural repression of maternal ambivalence is so complete that maternal anger takes on, in this rare representation, the annihilating force of a maternal apocalypse.<sup>20</sup>

Reflecting on the place of writing in Spero's art, Benjamin Buchloh has underscored “the contorted conditions of articulation” dramatized in her use of words. *Les Anges, Merde, Fuck You* exemplifies what Buchloh has described as Spero's

19. Spero, interview with Jon Bird, October 25 and 26, 1986.

20. In her classic reflection on the subjectivity of the artist as mother, Adrienne Rich recalls that “for years I believed I should never have been anyone's mother, that because I felt my own needs acutely and often expressed them violently, I was Kali, Medea, the sow that devours her farrow, the unwomanly woman in flight from motherhood, a Nietzschean monster.” Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), chap. 1, “Anger and Tenderness,” p. 32.



Spero. *Les Anges, Merde, Fuck You*. 1960. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.

“deep involvement with the structure and morphology of the graffito as much as with its poetical/textual equivalent of written *profanity*”—further intensified, as so often in Spero’s work, by its lingual/vocal equivalent, what Mladen Dolar calls the nonvoice.<sup>21</sup> Resorting to graffiti and to profanity—two forms of symbolic violence, two types of broken language—to evoke the subjects of maternal anxiety and aggression, Spero aligns the mother with the mythical outsiders of avant-garde history, figures of transgressive identification such as the primitive, the hysteric, and the criminal. Adding to this cast of social misfits the woman artist as mother, she disavows the conventional role the mother is assigned by the avant-garde as the very symbol of paternal law—a figure portrayed perhaps most histrionically by the Surrealists, who, in an open letter of 1927, decried, with their own burst of profanity, “those bitches who become, in every country, the *good* mothers, *good* sisters, *good* wives, those plagues, those parasites of every sentiment and every love.”<sup>22</sup>

“*Mothers don’t write, they are written,*” Susan Suleiman has remarked.<sup>23</sup> Spero’s curses—penned in a cursive, “feminine” script—write the mother by cursing the curses called down on mothers and the social restrictions that constrain mothers from speaking freely. Spero’s writing is characterized, as Buchloh has observed, by

the continuous oscillation between retentive disgust and elated discharge between which all graffiti gestures—authentic or consciously adopted—hover: disgusted with the conditions of confinement and the evident absence of the linguistic competence to articulate oneself publicly, a condition that condemns the speaker precisely to the clandestine forms of speech, and *elated* at finding any means and sites of articulation at all in an overall regime of interdiction.<sup>24</sup>

This is an apt description of the dynamics of *Les Anges, Merde, Fuck You*, a work in which “disgust with the conditions of confinement” is overpowering. Here, “the evident absence of the linguistic competence to articulate oneself publicly” is an effect, precisely, of “being characterized as ‘wife’ or ‘mother.’” The splitting off of the maternal role from public discourse produces “a condition”—motherhood—“that condemns the speaker” to “clandestine forms of speech,” an interdiction that is never more aggressively enforced than when that utterance is an expression of maternal ambivalence.

21. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Spero’s Other Traditions,” in *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth-Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine*, ed. M. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), p. 242; Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (see footnote 2).

22. “Hands Off Love!” (1927), an open letter against the wife of Charlie Chaplin, signed by thirty-two male Surrealists, quoted in Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 165.

23. Susan Rubin Suleiman, “Writing and Motherhood,” in *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, ed. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, Madelon Sprengnether (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 356.

24. Buchloh, “Spero’s Other Traditions,” p. 242 (emphasis in original).



“A manifesto of countersublimation,” Buchloh declares Spero’s work, one that coincides historically with “modernism’s climactic project of demythifying painting.”<sup>25</sup> Spero’s painting, however, bears directly upon another cultural trend, the re-mythifying of women, and the maternal feminine in particular, in postwar culture. After World War II, in reaction to the expansion of women’s social roles in the war effort, a cult of maternal domesticity restored women to the home, reviving the “moral motherhood” of the nineteenth century, as the British psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell has noted.<sup>26</sup> This postwar return to order was accompanied by concessions of authority in designated “women’s spheres,” and by a fresh recognition of what Mitchell refers to as “women’s psychological significance,” born of the advances of feminism earlier in the century. The “psychological significance” of women, however, was seen to reside pre-eminently in the maternal role, as is amply demonstrated by a period classic, Helene Deutsch’s 1945 study, *The Psychology of Women*. The “chief characteristic” of motherhood, observed Deutsch—psychoanalyst, writer, and working mother that she was—“is tenderness.” “All the aggression and sexual sensuality in the woman’s personality are suppressed and diverted by this central emotional expression of motherliness.”<sup>27</sup> At the very moment, therefore, when maternal subjectivity emerged for the first time as a focus of psychoanalytic study, it was reconfinned to the condition of normative femininity.<sup>28</sup> The psychic struggle to contend with the trends of anxiety and aggression—the waves of tenderness (*les anges*), flashes of aggression (*merde*), and tide of disgust (*fuck you*) Spero highlights, echoing the poet Adrienne Rich’s allusion to “waves of love and hate” in which a mother may find herself “caught up”—was suppressed.<sup>29</sup>

25. Ibid.

26. Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria and the Effect of Sibling Relationships on the Human Condition* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), p. 189.

27. Helene Deutsch, *The Psychology of Women* (1945), as quoted in Suleiman, “Writing and Motherhood,” p. 353. Rozsika Parker has observed that “Deutsch was well aware of the role of aggression in mothering.” Her aim was to align that aggression with the protective role of the mother and to counter the caricature of the mother as dominated by penis envy, or masculine aggression turned against the child. For Parker, “the tragic irony for Deutsch’s standing as a theorist” is that in proposing that “maternal aggression is prompted not by overprotectiveness in response to destructive penis envy, but by protectiveness,” she was “inevitably drawn into producing a maternal norm.” Rozsika Parker, *Mother Love/Mother Hate: The Power of Maternal Ambivalence* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), pp. 150, 151.

28. Melanie Klein had placed the mother-child relationship at the center of the psychoanalytic theory of object relations, but it was the subjectivity of the child, not the mother, that she privileged. A central theme of *The Psychology of Women* is a perceived conflict between feminine narcissism and motherly altruism. In what Suleiman refers to as Deutsch’s menopausal theory of artistic creation, the putative incompatibility of selfless maternity and selfish creativity is most readily resolved by deferring serious creative work until the work of mothering is done. (Suleiman, “Writing and Motherhood,” p. 358). This, of course, is an advance on the patriarchal construction of woman as defined exclusively by the maternal role. Still, even apart from the severe limitation that suspending creative work for a period of years would impose, the implication of Deutsch’s theory is that a woman in the maternal role lacks, precisely, “the linguistic competence to articulate oneself publicly.”

29. “To be caught up in waves of love and hate, jealousy, even of the child’s childhood; hope for its maturity; longing to be free of responsibility, tied by every fiber of one’s being.” Rich, *Of Woman Born*, journal entry, May 1965, p. 22.

Summoning love and death, and tracking the tender, wishful, fearful, mournful, sexual, resentful, occasionally violent fantasies of a mother “killing herself” painting while her children sleep, the works on paper entitled *Fuck You* or *Merde* throw light into dark corners of maternal subjectivity. The “drowning figures” with their tongues sticking out might be taken for children swept away on waves of maternal rage, or as, themselves, maternal furies, avenging injury—or as apotropaic angels, guardians of the night. What is plain is that “all the aggression and sexual sensuality in the woman’s personality” here is not “suppressed and diverted” by “motherliness,” but brought to bear on a maternal subjectivity inextricably bound up with the dangers of regression, suggesting that the artist as mother might have privileged access to malevolent as well as solicitous states of feeling. The psychic resources of expression, Spero suggests, expand and deepen with the maternal role. The maternal subject as artist might be supremely well equipped to access the regressive trend that modern art has pursued in myths of the primitive, the outsider, the cultural other. For the further implication of Spero’s gesture is that the artist/mother might be psychically capable—even within “an overall regime of interdiction” that denies the very existence of the maternal subject as a speaking subject—of representing, and exploiting, the vicissitudes of maternal ambivalence. Her protestation—*les anges, merde, fuck you*—is that “far from being in contradiction with creativity . . . motherhood can . . . favor a certain feminine creation.” It “makes passion circulate,” in Julia Kristeva’s evocative phrase.<sup>30</sup>

As Spero narrates it, the pattern of her work as an artist shadowed the routines of her work as a mother. She painted at night while her children slept. Her intimate theme was the recumbent couple. The nocturnal rituals of painting, devoted to a slow, patient labor of making, nurtured the motif of the sensual dyad, but were, the artist recalls, interrupted by occasional bursts of rage when, “suddenly in the midst of doing these *Black Paintings*,” she found herself making a “fuck you one.”

*so they fought, forgetting women,  
hero to hero, sworn brother and lover,  
and cursing Helen through eternity.*

—H. D., *Helen in Egypt*, Book 1

In 1964, Spero and Golub returned to the United States and settled in New York. Confronted with the escalating American involvement in Vietnam, both artists assumed an obligation to respond. Acknowledging that “we weren’t in Paris

30. Julia Kristeva, “Un nouveau type d’intellectuel: Le dissident,” *Tel Quel* 74 (Winter 1977), p. 6, as cited in Suleiman, “Writing and Motherhood,” p. 366.

as expatriates anymore,” Spero abruptly abandoned the “elegiac mode” of the *Black Paintings*.<sup>31</sup> “I started working rapidly on paper,” she recalls, “angry works, often scatological, manifestos against a senseless obscene war, a war that my sons (too young then) could have been called up for. Those works were exorcisms to keep the war away.”<sup>32</sup> Spero now permanently rejected the medium of painting on canvas and worked exclusively on paper, wetting and scouring the fragile, wrinkled sheets with gouache and ink, generating a cartoon-like imagery of ferocious, apocalyptic violence.<sup>33</sup> “I started off painting the bomb and total destruction. I was so impatient I would spit and rub. I even rubbed holes into the paper,” she recalls.<sup>34</sup> Abrading, soaking, and scarring the page, she grabbed Dada’s paper tail, “demythifying” painting to deplore war.

“My anger really flowed with the *War Series* . . . thinking as a mother,” Spero recalls. “Everything burst out.”<sup>35</sup> Taking an active part in resistance to the Vietnam War, Spero exhibited her work in antiwar shows and benefits. Yet the imagery she devised hardly complies with conventional expectations of what a woman artist, thinking as a mother, might produce. “In the *War Series*,” she narrates, “angry screaming heads in clouds of bombs 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.”<sup>36</sup> Spero explicitly connects both the imagery and the emotional stimulus of those few small paintings on paper entitled *Fuck You* or *Merde* to the *War Series*, suggesting that the anger she felt at being “characterized as ‘wife’ or ‘mother,’” and ignored by the art world, was incorporated in her public denunciation of a war whose obscenities she protested in part “as a mother.”<sup>37</sup>

With the *War Series*, Spero enacts, in effect, an apotropaic inversion of the maternal apocalypse of the *Les Anges*, *Merde*, *Fuck You*. Here maternal rage is unleashed on an external threat and is invoked as a protection, an “exorcism to keep the war away.” It began with “black angels—nightmare figures swooping down with screaming heads,” the artist recalls, and metamorphosed into a graphic phantasmagoria of technological warfare. In *Les Anges—La Bombe* (1966), the

31. Quoted in Wallach, “Hysterical Men, Castrated Women,” p. 11. Spero refers to the “elegiac mode” of the *Black Paintings* in an unpublished statement of 1982.

32. Spero, “Creation and Pro-creation,” pp. 118–19.

33. “I was working exclusively on paper; part of my resistance as an artist in the *War Series* was a decision not to work any more on canvas. I shifted completely to work on paper.” Margit Rowell and Sylvère Lotringer, “A Conversation with Nancy Spero,” in *Antonin Artaud: Works on Paper*, ed. Margit Rowell, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art 1996), p. 157.

34. Quoted in Wallach, “Hysterical Men, Castrated Women,” pp. 11–12.

35. Artist’s statement, unpublished, no date.

36. Spero, “Creation and Pro-creation,” p. 119.

37. “Jo Anna Isaak in Conversation with Nancy Spero,” p. 10: Spero observes “the *Fuck You* series of works on paper, which were very angry . . . are a precursor of the *War Series*; they are screaming and their tongues are sticking out.” To this, Isaak replies: “Just like Caliban, the first thing you do when you start to speak is to curse.”



Spero. Les Anges—La Bombe. 1966. Collection Rhode Island School of Design.

sheet is washed blood-red.<sup>38</sup> “I used bloody color,” Spero recalls, “and literally a lot of spit with the gouache paint.”<sup>39</sup> Here the rusty tone bleeds into the body of a scythe-shaped bomb, a hydra-headed explosive cloud propelling bodies, tongues screaming bloody murder, onto the ground. A blue mushroom cloud fills the page in *Sperm Bomb* (1966), its contour traced by the comet-like tails of shrieking heads whose gaping mouths spew out the furious phrases—“Merde,” “Fuck you”—in a rain of profanity, while needle-stiff bodies litter the ground below. The medium of gouache diluted with spit and applied to ultra-thin sheets confers on some drawings an eerie, incongruous delicacy, as in *The Male Bomb* (1966), with its erect penis, grotesquely extended, ejaculating murderously, multiplied in an army of dagger-sharp tongues hurtling to the ground from the watery nimbus of a pale mushroom cloud. “The angrier Spero got,” one writer has observed, “the more . . . vaporous grew her imagery.”<sup>40</sup>

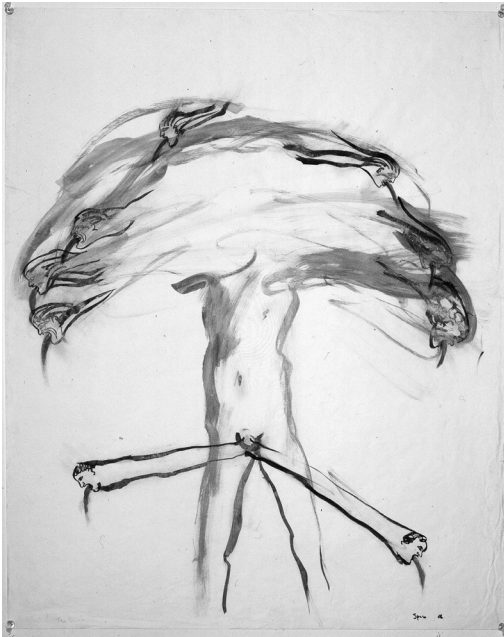
38. Spero, quoted in King, *The Black Paris Paintings*, p. 13.

39. Spero, quoted in Robert Enright, “On the Other Side of the Mirror: A Conversation with Nancy Spero,” *Border Crossings* 19, no. 4 (2000), p. 30.

40. King, *The Black Paris Paintings*, p. 18.



*Spero. Top: Sperm Bomb. 1966. Private Collection.  
Bottom: The Male Bomb. 1966. Collection Crown Gallery, Brussels.*

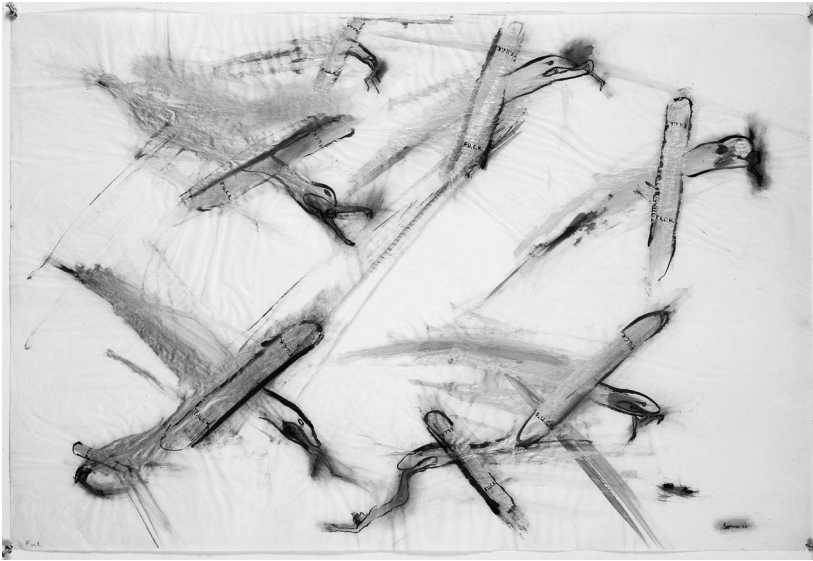


*Spero. Male Bomb. 1966.  
Collection Hiroshima City  
Museum of Contemporary Art.*

“Making these extreme images,” Spero recalls, “I worried that the children might be embarrassed with the content of my art, what ‘their mother’ might be doing as an artist.”<sup>41</sup> What Spero does as an artist, “thinking as a mother,” is to incarnate the phantasmic dimension of war, to invoke the infantile, sadistic, often sexualized mania that pervades even the most calculated and controlled forms of aggression.<sup>42</sup> At the extremes of aggressive fantasy, as the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein observed, the body in the grip of the drives experiences itself as an annihilating force. Its urine burns, its feces cut, its mouth devours. The body, or more precisely the body-in-pieces, fragmented and in turmoil, wreaks indiscriminate destruction on the entire world—a world that is, for the infant, synonymous with the maternal body. The infant, Klein theorized, fantasizes through these bodily drives, wreaking vengeance for the pain and frustration visited on it, manically working off aggression by projecting it onto external objects, in particular the breast, which, *in extremis*, the infant imagines as a lethal enemy, a primal persecutor. And forever after, Klein maintained, in states of intense anxiety, we helplessly invoke the most primitive and comprehensive defenses available to us against a

41. Spero, “Creation and Pro-Creation,” p. 119.

42. “Anal and ejaculatory metaphors were common speech in Vietnam—‘I laid my stuff all over it,’ in pilot’s language—and Spero’s apocalyptic imagery exposed the sexual and sadistic obscenity of modern warfare.” Lisa Tickner, “Nancy Spero: Images of Women and *la peinture féminine*,” in *Nancy Spero*, exh. cat. (London: ICA, 1987), p. 6.



Spero. Fuck. 1966. Private Collection.

threat that is, in some shadowy precinct of the imagination, bound up with the original objects of love.<sup>43</sup>

Spero's imagery of war—with its bombs shitting, helicopters shredding, planes shattering, victims shrieking—invokes the origins of aggression in the infantile drives. The oral and anal sadism that, in Klein's account, inaugurate the paranoid-schizoid mechanisms of defense are revived in the service of a death drive grotesquely agitated by the machinery of war. Abandoning the elegiac mode of the *Black Paintings* and the sustained intensity of oil painting as a medium, Spero turned to a process that, in its apparent immediacy, volatility, "impatience," and obsessional repetition of graphic motifs recalls children's drawings.<sup>44</sup> Works such as *Fuck* and *Gunship* reproduce a recognizable iconography of children's war drawings in which machines such as airplanes and helicopters commonly appear, but here enhanced by grim supplements—minute skulls and bones falling to the earth, naked corpses, a compulsive repetition of profane utterance. Cannibalistic

43. "From the beginning the destructive impulse is turned against the object and is first expressed in phantasied oral-sadistic attacks on the mother's breast, which soon develop into onslaughts on her body by all sadistic means." Melanie Klein, "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms" (1946), in *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. Juliet Mitchell (New York: Free Press, 1986), p. 177. Klein also observes: "The fear of the destructive impulse seems to attach itself at once to an object—or rather it is experienced as the fear of an uncontrollable overpowering object" (p. 179).

44. On children's drawings and bombing, see Melanie Klein, *Narrative of a Child Analysis* [1961] (London: Vintage, 1998).



Spero. Bomb Shitting. 1966.  
Collection Bard College.

fantasies of devouring and incorporating the object of aggression, so vividly described by Klein as the work of the infantile imagination, are compounded by an extreme sexual imagery. Not only do the sheets detail a relentless shattering of bodies, but that annihilating aggression is the effect of frenzied sexual violence.

“How do we,” asks Juliet Mitchell, “account for the rampant sexuality of war”—for the fact that “sexual violence seems to ‘automatically’ accompany war violence”? “How has it been possible,” she demands, “to ignore the intimate relationship of rampant sexuality and war violence?”<sup>45</sup> The *War Series* poses this very question. Cartoon erections detonate male bombs in ecstatic displays of sexual sadism. A sperm bomb ejaculates a toxic cloud. Female bombs rain blood. Bombs shit infant heads. Conflating sex and violence, Spero’s imagery renders the two inseparable, indistinguishable, coextensive. For a defining theme of the *War Series* is war sexuality. And “war sexuality,” Mitchell has noted, is “hysterical sexuality.” In hysteria, she writes, “it is not just that sex and death have come together as a fused drive; it is rather that something violent has been sexualized.”<sup>46</sup>

Male hysteria, in the twentieth century, is pre-eminently an effect of war and is associated most closely with the so-called shell-shock sufferers of the First World War, war hysterics whose most striking symptoms were disturbances of speech. These soldiers, Mitchell observes, exhibited symptoms that in women would have

45. Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas*, p. 129.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 135.





Spero. Gunship. 1966. Private Collection.

been classified as hysteria—disorders such as paralysis and mutism that, stilling the body and the tongue, rendered the sufferer excessively, pathologically passive.<sup>47</sup> For the soldier, Mitchell observes, hysteria is a reaction to the violence that warfare exacts. Forced to break the social taboo against killing, the soldier is urged to revive, and to act upon, infantile fantasies of murder and revenge. To put it another way, warfare exploits the fantasies of its agents, unleashing a violence that is both exhilarating and terrifying for the subject.<sup>48</sup> For some, this aggression rebounds on the aggressor who, traumatized by the effects of his own violence, or unconsciously dreading revenge from those he has threatened, injured, or killed, turns against himself, cuts out his own tongue.<sup>49</sup> Playing out the hysterical logic of war, in which agents are stimulated to act out their fantasies of destruction but not to speak of them, the male war hysteric dramatizes the trauma of killing by annihilating himself, silencing himself—turning himself, in effect, into a woman.

Hysteria, Mitchell observes, is “a condition that everyone wishes to repudiate.” And so, she remarks, “the solution to this profound repudiation of the condition

47. A soldier may find that the reality of war is passive rather than aggressive. As the military psychiatrist W. H. R. Rivers reflects, in Pat Barker’s novel *Regeneration* (1991), contemplating the suffering of soldiers in the trenches: “The war that had promised so much in the way of ‘manly’ activity had actually delivered ‘feminine’ passivity, and on a scale that their mothers and sisters had scarcely known. No wonder they broke down.” Pat Barker, *Regeneration* (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 107–8.

48. Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas*, p. 29. “The sufferer of the illness [hysteria] in the condition of war has not only been a victim of aggression but has also been an aggressor. . . . By considering the victim of the illness only as a victim of war, we are missing the point. What the soldier . . . may also be suffering from is the knowledge that he has broken a taboo and that in doing so he has released his wish to do so—his wish, his ‘wanting’ to murder. . . . In addition to the shock and fear of death, the person who becomes hysterical following a war is also unconsciously dreading vengeance of possession by the person he has killed or threatened.”

49. *Ibid.*

is to make sure that someone else has it.”<sup>50</sup> After the First World War, the diagnosis of male hysteria waned, replaced by “war neurosis”—a term untainted by association with women, madness, and sexual incapacity. “Hysteria,” Mitchell summarizes, was “made woman,” and in time was resolved, or disappeared, into theory of femininity itself.<sup>51</sup> The disappearance of hysteria into femininity is a historical trend that converges with the appearance, in Surrealism, of the female hysteric as muse and of feminine hysteria as a mode of artistic thought. The repudiation of hysteria, “made woman” to promote a restoration of virile masculinity in the aftermath of war, is shadowed by this avant-garde embrace of hysteria “made woman” to signal a resistance to that same order. Spero’s recourse to hysteria in the *War Series* summons both these trends, while also anticipating the roles hysteria would play in her own work, and in the discourse of feminism, in the years to come.

Hysteria was the pivotal dynamic of Spero’s work for over a decade, a period that coincided with her self-invention as a “woman artist,” and that culminated with the *Codex Artaud*, an extended reflection on hysterical subjectivity. She first adopted the posture of the hysteric to dramatize the alienation of women from public speech: with the graffiti paintings of the early sixties, underscoring “the contorted conditions of articulation” that constrained a female subject from asserting “the linguistic competence” to speak, she initiated an extensive body of work in which hysterical speech exemplifies the desperation of the subject whose urgent cries go unheard. “Women,” Spero has commented, “are often put down as screamers or irrational, characterized as one who screams but can’t act.”<sup>52</sup> Speaking in the voice of the hysteric, a technique instigated by her cursive curses, Spero protested the silence and invisibility imposed on the woman artist.

Then, in the *War Series*, Spero spoke out publicly against the war in Vietnam, dramatizing the hysterical violence of warfare—its stimulation of the desire to kill, its fusion of sex and violence, its toll in “psychic death”—but also the hysteria that is projected onto political resistance as the protests of victims and critics alike are “put down” as “irrational,” dismissed as impotent rage. War, Spero suggests, is hysterical in its very recourse to action in preference to speech. The culture of war is one in which hysterical effects proliferate as enactment, or acting out, triumphs over representation. And this hysteria of war is in turn projected onto victims, onto soldiers whose fantasies are exploited by warfare—who are deprived of speech and exhorted to act—and onto all those who protest or resist the violence of war—onto civilian victims, onto critics, onto artists, and onto mothers.<sup>53</sup> War, Spero suggests, is the culture of hysteria *par excellence*.

50. Ibid., p. 186.

51. Ibid., p. 161.

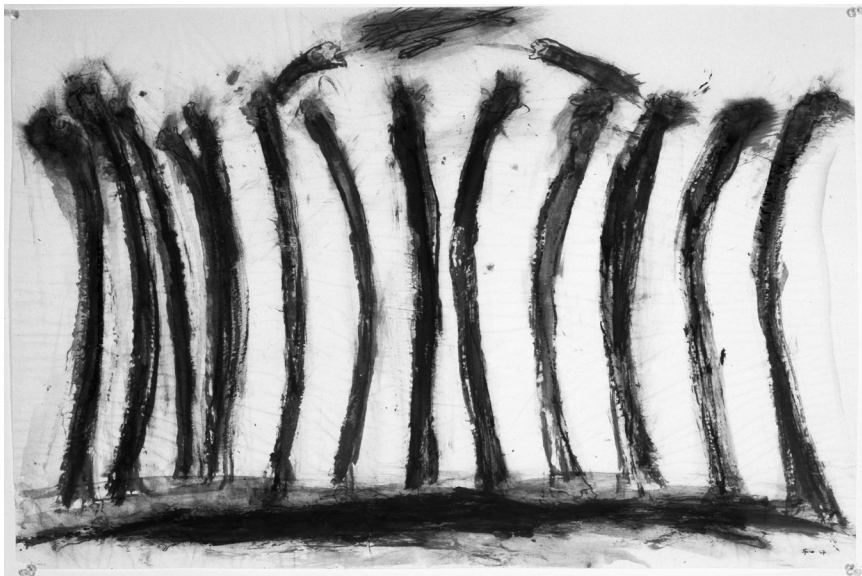
52. Nancy Spero, “Issues and Symbolism,” *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* 8 (November 1990), p. 8.

53. George W. Bush’s dismissive response to Cindy Sheehan’s protests against the Iraq War provides a recent example of this projection of hysteria onto victims and critics. Nicole Loraux recalls that in tragedy, a mother’s “mourning leads to cursing.” In the ancient Greek city-state, mourning was regulated as a feminine excess, representing a potential threat to civic order. Nicole Loraux, *Mothers in Mourning*, trans. Corinne Pache (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 5–29.



The ranks of bloody, sword-sharp “phallic tongues” bristling in so many furious “screaming mouths” in the *War Series* are also castrated, cut off from speech. Indignant, convulsive cries spring from serpentine bodies, fantastically intercepting the churning blades of the helicopter (*Victims and Helicopters*, 1966)—with the result that victims cut out their own tongues. Bodies become tongues (*Victims*, 1967), dancing like flames, lashing the enemy overhead, straining, as Leon Golub once wrote, to “lick the Bomb.”<sup>54</sup>

54. Leon Golub, “Bombs and Helicopters: The Art of Nancy Spero,” *Caterpillar 1* (1967); reprinted in Dominique Nahas, Jo Anna Isaak, Robert Storr, Leon Golub, and Ronald A. Kuchta, *Nancy Spero: Works Since 1950*, exh. cat. (Syracuse, N.Y.: Everson Museum of Art, 1987), p. 39.



Spero. Top: *Victims and Helicopters*. 1966. Bottom: *Victims*. 1967. Both in private collections.

*Her concern is with the past, with the anathema or curse.*

—H. D., *Helen in Egypt*, Book 1

“I thought it was a perfect transition from talking about war to talking about myself,” Spero recalls of her encounter with the writings of the French poet, playwright, and actor Antonin Artaud. It was on a family vacation in the summer of 1969 that she picked up a copy of the first English translation of Artaud’s writings, edited by her friend Jack Hirschman.<sup>55</sup> “I thought it was a perfect vehicle for my state of mind and my position as an artist at that time. I would use the sexual language of Artaud.”<sup>56</sup>

Spero’s paradoxical move to begin talking about herself by appropriating the words of another—a male French poet whom she herself describes as a misogynist—is as contrary to the expectations of a woman artist finding her voice as her earlier claim that it was thinking as a mother that produced the graphic violence of the *War Series*.<sup>57</sup> Thinking as a mother, she investigated the psychic trends of terror and aggression, sexual violence and hysterical rage. Talking about herself, she appropriated the words and assumed the voice of a male author whose writings are replete with anxious, agonized references to women and to mothers, an author whose existential declaration—“Me, Antonin Artaud, born September 4, 1896, out of a uterus I had nothing to do with,” Spero records in one *Artaud Painting*.

“Feminine’ discourse,” Pamela Wye has noted, “entered the art of this century on the tongues of men, not women.”<sup>58</sup> Reclaiming the voice of hysteria from Artaud, Spero restores this tendency (“made woman,” as Mitchell remarks, in post-war culture) to a “woman artist.” Assuming the mantle from Artaud, Spero in turn performs, to the point of (hysterical) excess, an homage to hysteria.<sup>59</sup> She underscores the “contorted conditions of articulation” that constrain the subject whose wanting to speak is the very substance of speech. The rhetoric of Artaud offers “the perfect vehicle” for a discourse that, in mouthing another’s words—in echoing the voice of another protesting his own silencing—exemplifies the anxiety of exclusion, the fear of not being heard that, in hysteria, shades into a fear of not being. The suffering of the hysteric, Mitchell observes, arises from a fear of annihilation, from a trauma that is experienced, at the extreme, as a psychic death—

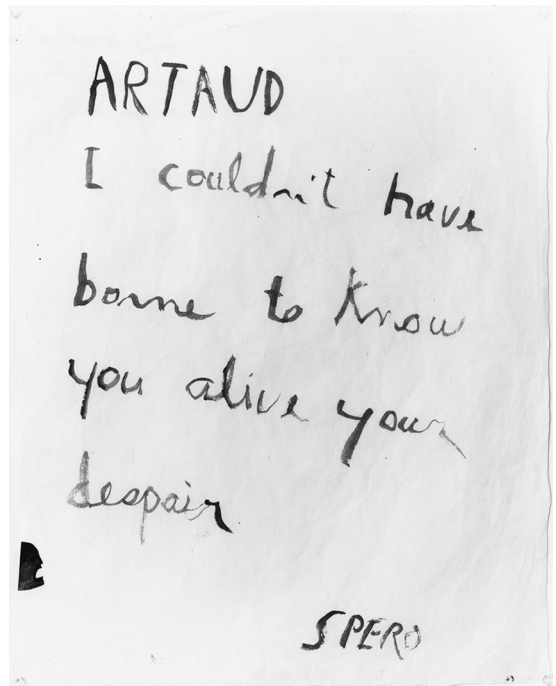
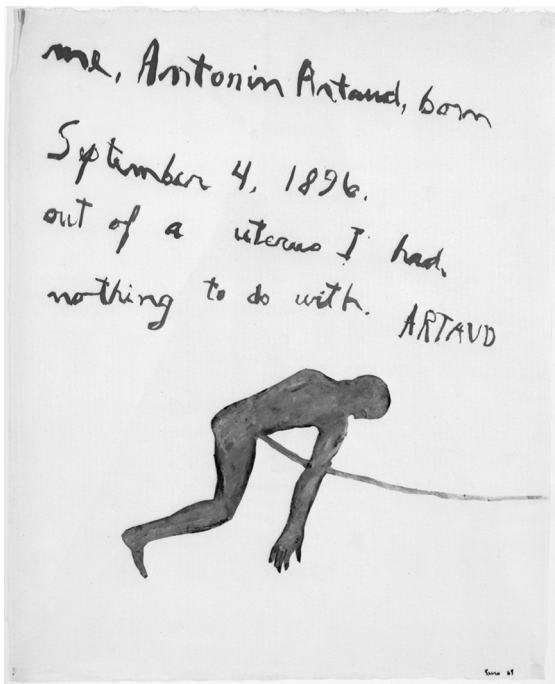
55. Spero, interview with Jon Bird, October 25 and 26, 1986, referring to *Antonin Artaud Anthology*, ed. Jack Hirschman (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1965).

56. Spero, interview with Jon Bird, October 25 and 26, 1986.

57. “I think that the anger in the *War Series* and the *Artaud Paintings* came from feeling that I didn’t have a voice . . . that I didn’t have an identity.” Spero, in “Jo Anna Isaak in Conversation with Nancy Spero,” p. 10.)

58. Pamela Wye, “Nancy Spero: Speaking in Tongues,” *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* 4 (November 1988), p. 38.

59. “A man can scream like a woman and become a cultural hero, whereas a woman who screams is ignored. By taking over Artaud’s voice in a way, I broke down a male/female barrier.” Spero, quoted in Amy Ingrid Schlegel, “Codex Spero: Feminist Art and Activist Practices in New York Since the Late 1960s” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1997), p. 197.



Spero. Left: Artaud Painting—Me, Antonin Artaud, Born . . . . 1969. Private Collection. Right: Artaud Painting—Letter from Spero. 1969. Collection Vancouver Art Gallery.

“the absolute inexistence from which I sometimes suffer,” as Artaud himself described the emotion.<sup>60</sup> In the Artaud works, Spero adopts the rhetoric of hysterical dramatization to portray the predicament of the (woman) artist, cut off from speech, yet compelled to speak. It is an exercise of self-dramatization by proxy. By exploiting the logic of hysteria—in which doubling, mimicry, and copying are at once symptoms of “inexistence” and defenses against it—Spero adopts the voice of the male hysteric, whose screams “are given male worth.”<sup>61</sup>

“I used Artaud, you see, as a voice for my frustration and anger,” Spero recalls.<sup>62</sup> Yet, she confesses, “I took great liberties.” Artaud “would have disapproved, even hated what I was doing, using and disrupting his language for my

60. “The hysteric’s dramatizations,” Juliet Mitchell observes, “are protests against the vanishing of its own body/mind; the drowning man’s struggling cry, ‘Look I am here!’” Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas*, p. 226.

61. Spero, “Issues and Symbolism,” p. 8. “Artaud hated women, and perhaps he is not recognized as playing the role of a woman because his symbolic worth is given male guise. His screams are granted male worth, the male rebel.”

62. Spero, in Sosa, *Woman as Protagonist: The Art of Nancy Spero*.

purposes. That's why I wrote/painted this letter to him."<sup>63</sup> "Artaud I could not borne to know you alive, your despair, Spero," she wrote, left-handed, in a thick red script on a large sheet, adopting, on this unique occasion, the first-person voice that was his own almost exclusive mode of address. Otherwise, in the body of work that comprises the sixty *Artaud Paintings*, executed in gouache and collage on uniformly sized sheets of paper, like the leaves of a manuscript, and in the thirty-six scrolls of the vast *Codex Artaud*, written in bulletin type, Spero's own name is absent. The name Artaud, conversely, is registered more than a hundred times, appended to each and every one of scores of quotations and repeated almost ad infinitum in passages of dense, stuttering, insistent typographic signature in the *Codex*.<sup>64</sup>

At first, Spero copied the passages in English translation. Soon, however, she reverted to French, now reproducing Artaud's words verbatim, the more faithfully to echo his voice but also the more actively to articulate a difference. By using Artaud's original words, Spero contrived "not to facilitate the reading of the quotes" (by an English-speaking audience), but to erode their legibility in the very act of inscribing them, to silence Artaud in the very act of quoting him.<sup>65</sup> Adhering even more rigorously than before to the principle of exact quotation, she eschewed legibility at the level of language while still preserving, even enhancing, its appearance at the level of the written character.<sup>66</sup> While the *Artaud Paintings* are scripted, using the left hand both to estrange the autograph mark, and to embody what Derrida describes as Artaud's proclivity to write against meaning, the quotations in the *Codex* are writ large in type, a decision partly motivated by a practical economy of scale.<sup>67</sup> Wishing to quote Artaud at greater length, Spero began pasting sheets of paper together end to end, producing scrolls two feet in height (or width, if vertical) and up to twenty-five feet in length, initially conceived to be shown pinned directly to the wall. And from these epigrams—interrupted and punctuated, amplified and displaced by collage motifs—she constructed, as the critic Corinne Robins observed, "giant blackmail notes to the world."<sup>68</sup>

63. Rowell and Lotringer, "A Conversation with Nancy Spero," p. 137.

64. On the repetition of Artaud's name as a device of "critical mimicry," see Schlegel, "Codex Spero": "Why would Spero include the proper name 'Artaud' nearly two hundred times in the Codex, after each and every quotation, except to perform the kind of deliberately improper, excessive 'over-reading' characteristic of the position of 'the feminine'?" (p. 197). Lucy Bradnock has suggested that the repetition of Artaud's name "acts as both incantation and attribution." Lucy Bradnock, "Lost in Translation? Nancy Spero/Antonin Artaud/Jacques Derrida," *Papers of Surrealism* 3 (Spring 2005), p. 8.

65. Jon Bird, "Nancy Spero—Inscribing Woman—Between the Lines," in *Nancy Spero*, p. 25.

66. As Schlegel observes, "Spero's paradoxical treatment of 'text' as simultaneously legible and incomprehensible, as both readable and unreadable, and as immaterial idea and material object is the crux of the *Codex* and its central Artaudian characteristic." Schlegel, "Codex Spero," p. 160.

67. Jacques Derrida, "To Unsense the Subjectile," in Jacques Derrida and Paule Thévenin, *The Secret Art of Antonin Artaud*, trans. Mary Ann Caws (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), p. 85.

68. Corinne Robins, "Nancy Spero: 'Political' Artist of Poetry and the Nightmare," *Feminist Art Journal* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1975), p. 21.

Artaud's own career—a career that would yield, by the time of his premature death from cancer in 1948, over twenty volumes of writings—is itself defined by an epistolary drive, resulting, as Susan Sontag observed, in “hundreds of letters, his most accomplished ‘dramatic’ form—all of which amount to a broken, self-mutilated corpus.”<sup>69</sup> Spero quotes extensively from these letters, extracting from the litany of anguished appeals to correspondents both real and imaginary a searing set of fragments. “You yourself will choose the extracts; you will arrange the letters,” Artaud once instructed his editor, Jacques Rivière, issuing a directive that Spero would adopt as the compositional principle of the Artaud works.<sup>70</sup> One *Codex* panel reproduces this letter, written by the unknown twenty-seven-year-old poet to the editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, following an extended correspondence that begins, inauspiciously, with a rejection notice. In return, Artaud wheedles, chides, importunes, and accuses the editor of having, although with “just cause . . . forgotten me”—then, climactically, in the famous letter of January 29, 1924, declares, “I submit to your judgment.”<sup>71</sup> Like Spero's own motto, “I do not challenge,” Artaud's submission is dangerously disingenuous, and Rivière makes no immediate reply. At last, he counters the wrenching emotional plea for “judgment” with a proposal.<sup>72</sup> “Why not,” he asks, “publish the . . . letters you have written to me? . . . The whole might form a little novel in letters.”<sup>73</sup> While ecstatic at the prospect of this publication (he had, he assures Rivière, some time ago thought of it himself), Artaud reacts with characteristic vehemence to the editor's suggestion that the letters be presented in a fictional form, with “invented names.” “Why lie,” he demands, “why try to place on the literary level a thing which is the very cry of life?” “*I do not care whether or not the letters are signed with my name,*” he insists (exhibiting what Mitchell describes as the hysteric's characteristic tendency to dramatize his own suffering at the cost of greatly increasing it). Still, under whatever name, “it is absolutely necessary that the reader feels that he has in his hands the elements of a true story.”<sup>74</sup>

69. Susan Sontag, “Approaching Artaud,” in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), p. 17. “Artaud's contempt for literature” has, Sontag contends, “less to do with a diffuse nihilism about culture than with a specific experience of suffering.” “The verbal humiliation of literature” is, in effect, an apotropaic technique by which Artaud acts to preserve the act of writing from being “transformed into artistry,” from attaining “the benign status of a finished, literary product” (p. 20). In Spero's Artaud works, a hybrid form of writing, drawing, and collage, consecrated to an “extreme sexual imagery,” is used to “humiliate” painting. Or, as Buchloh suggests, Spero demythifies painting—even as the *Artaud Paintings* “point equally to painting's lost resources in myth” (pp. 242, 243). Like Artaud, who attacks literature in order to preserve writing, Spero destroys painting in order to salvage it.

70. Antonin Artaud to Jacques Rivière, May 25, 1924, in Hirschman, *Antonin Artaud Anthology*, p. 20.

71. Artaud to Rivière, January 29, 1924, in Hirschman, *Antonin Artaud Anthology*, pp. 10–12.

72. Robins, “Nancy Spero: ‘Political’ Artist of Poetry and the Nightmare,” p. 20. “The letter is a masterly piece of literary blackmail with its tortured writer in turn playing the part of the torturer.”

73. Rivière to Artaud, May 24, 1924, in Hirschman, *Antonin Artaud Anthology*, p. 19.

74. Artaud to Rivière, May 25, 1924, in Hirschman, *Antonin Artaud Anthology*, p. 19 (emphasis added).

Throughout the Artaud works, Spero faithfully repeats his words, signing his name not only to every *Artaud Painting* and panel of the *Codex*, but to each individual epigram. This compulsive reiteration of the protocols of homage, zealously performing the conventions of citation and tribute that characterize the Oedipal culture of discipleship, perversely honors Artaud through the execution of a literary ritual abjured by its object, a devoted hysteric and, as Sylvère Lotringer observes, a vampire plagiarist.<sup>75</sup> Rather than plagiarize the plagiarist, Spero quotes Artaud excessively, enacting, but also disavowing, through compulsive attribution, the habit of copying, or mimicry, that is among hysteria's defining tendencies. Plagiarism, notes Mitchell, "is a kind of hysterical enactment: one has taken over the other who, in a sense, thus becomes non-existent or dead."<sup>76</sup> If plagiarism testifies to hysteria's main complaint, "an absence of boundaries," Spero's citational excess, conversely, announces a preoccupation with borders and, in particular, with margins.

A horizontal scroll around ten feet long, *Codex Artaud VI* (1971) is suggestive, in its format and in certain details of iconography and facture, of the Egyptian Book of the Dead, a medieval illuminated manuscript, a *papier collé*, and a concrete poem. Typing, gilding, gouache, and collage, applied to a scroll formed by pasting sheets of paper end to end, all evoke the fragile medium of paper on which Artaud himself constantly relied. Three gilded, human-headed, phallic-tongued snakes make stately progress toward the body of the self-sucking Nut, the Egyptian goddess doubled over to form the pedestal for Artaud's urgent letter from Rodez, from where, incarcerated in a psychiatric hospital, he issued innumerable appeals, declaring himself a dead letter, unceremoniously passed from hand to hand. This letter, written in the bulletin typeface of a telegram, impinges on a block of geometric design that, upon inspection, turns out to be a vast signature, revealing, in its intricate typographic pattern, "the repetition of the poet's name in a visual form" that, as Bird has noted, "is the phonetic equivalent of a shout or scream."<sup>77</sup> Juxtaposed with Artaud's urgent petition, this signature-scream *concrète*, displaced and enlarged from its customary abased position on the page to dominate and overshadow the scene from above, enacts both the annihilation and the excessive restitution of identity that the *Codex* as a whole performs.

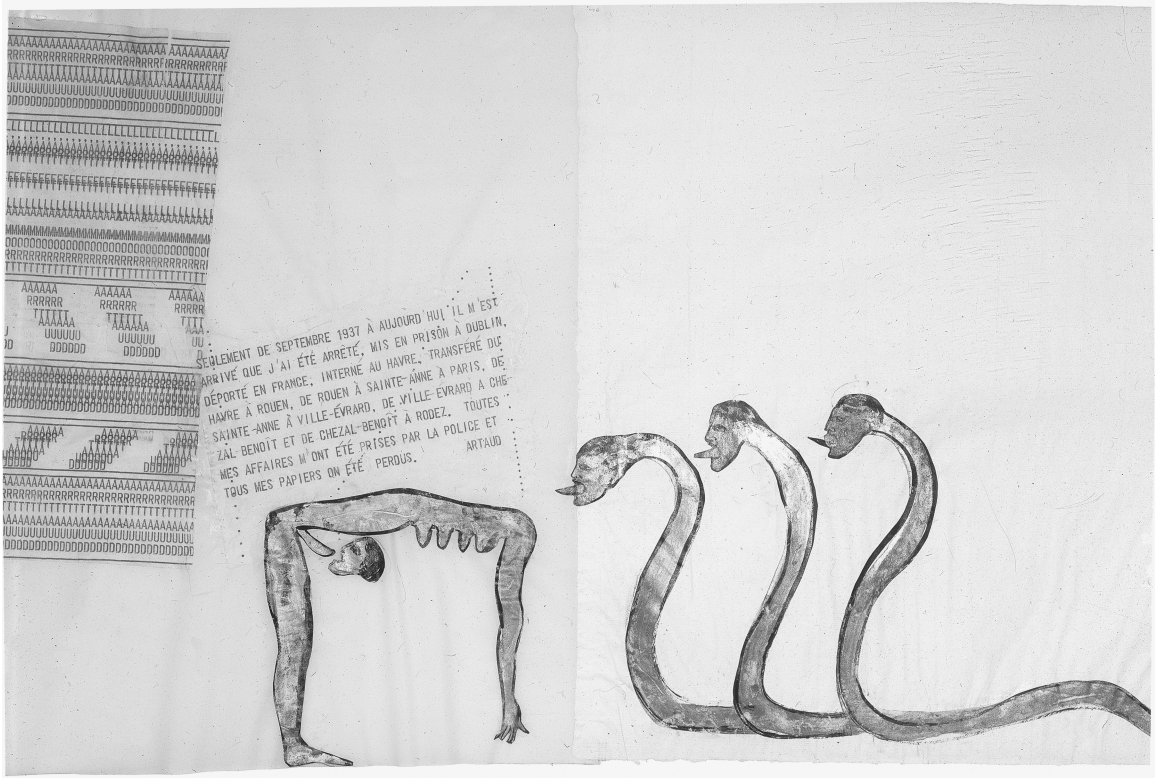
The motifs that Spero interjects in the margins and between the lines of Artaud's words perform a graphic interruption (its recurrent form the scream), underscoring, but also intercepting, the poet's own hysterical speech. "I fragmented these quotes," Spero has recalled, "with images I had painted—disembodied heads,

75. Artaud, Sylvère Lotringer has observed, was "the model and protégé of all plagiarism." Convinced that he had many doubles, he "vampirized them to mitigate the hemorrhage of his own identity." Sylvère Lotringer, "Artaud à New York: L'anxiété de l'influence," *ViceVersa* 42 (Montreal) (June–Aug. 1993), p. 49. As cited in Schlegel, "Codex Spero," p. 193.

76. Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas*, p. 60.

77. Jon Bird, "Present Imperfect: Word and Image in Nancy Spero's 'Scrolls' of the 1970s," in *OtherWorlds: The Art of Nancy Spero and Kiki Smith*, ed. Jon Bird (London: Reaktion Books, 2003), p. 118.





Spero. Codex Artaud VI. 1971. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.

defiant phallic tongues . . . victims in strait-jackets. . . . I was literally sticking my tongue out at the world—a woman silenced, victimized, and brutalized, hysterical, talking ‘in tongues.’”<sup>78</sup> “L’OBSCÈNE PESANTEUR PHALLIQUE D’UNE LANGUE QUI PRIE” [THE OBSCENE PHALLIC WEIGHT OF A BESEECHING TONGUE] announces *Codex Artaud XVII* (1972). This crude tongue, plunging into a pristine array of letters—interrupting the phrase *langue qui prie* with a tongue that screams—performs an act of oral interpretation. “Often,” Spero observes, “there is a juxtaposition of his writing and my head that more or less coalesced,” as if the act of reading had become an awkward physical intimacy between the reader and the text.<sup>79</sup> The subject of the *Codex Artaud* is a close reader, a cunning linguist, a connoisseur of obscenities, inserted between the lines of a tale told by a tongue thick with fury. Critics have interpreted Spero’s interjections in text in terms of an inscription of the feminine “between the lines” of patriarchal discourse, which dominates the printed page. Artaud voiced a more brutal condemnation of the written word. “All writing is pigshit,” declared the poet in a line Spero quotes in one *Artaud Painting*. By intervening “between the lines” of a text by Artaud, Spero colludes in his violence, displays a mimetic sympathy with his tongue-lashing protests against writing, but also, as Lisa Tickner has observed, stages a strategy of mimetic excess, or overdoing.<sup>80</sup> An overdoing of phallogocentric discourse can contribute to its undoing, suggests Luce Irigaray. Spero, however, finds in Artaud a figure whose rhetorical overdoing also contributes to his own physical and emotional undoing, who becomes the victim of retributive excesses (“I died at Rodez under electroshock” is the agonized cry of one *Artaud Painting*) as well as of his own hysteria. The *Codex Artaud* is a work of fitful ambiguity, in which hysterical excess is both flaunted and feared.

Exiled to the foot of the page is an even more obscene vignette, a head in profile, bright tongue thrusting at the crotch of a naked female figure. “A small woman is penetrated, as though impaled, by the reddish tongue of a huge male head,” suggests one critic.<sup>81</sup> Yet if the head with thrusting tongue does function as Spero’s graphic signature, her auto-icon, or as the sign of Spero/Artaud, then this act of oral aggression is more ambiguous.<sup>82</sup> The concatenated figure of the phallic

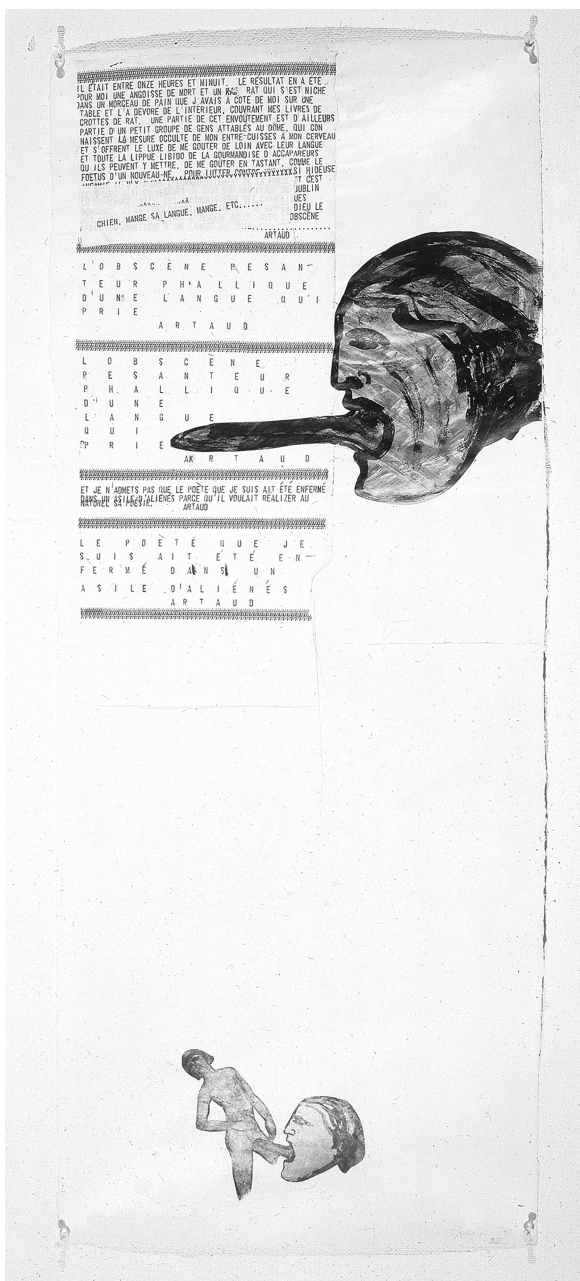
78. Spero, “Creation and Pro-creation,” p. 119.

79. Quoted in Jeanne Siegel, “Nancy Spero: Woman as Protagonist,” *Arts Magazine* 62 (September 1987), p. 12.

80. Both Tickner and Bird describe Spero’s work in terms of an inscription of the feminine between the lines of masculine writing or its mimetic repetition. Tickner writes: “A woman has to copy male language to be understood, and the ‘feminine’ can be read only in spaces left between the lines of her own mimicry. But Irigaray doubles the mimicry back on itself, miming the miming, to the point where it becomes a strategy. Her aim is ‘to undo the effects of phallogocentric discourse simply by overdoing them.’” Tickner, “Nancy Spero,” quoting Toril Moi on Irigaray, p. 16.

81. Robins, “Nancy Spero: ‘Political’ Artist of Poetry and the Nightmare,” p. 38.

82. As Jon Bird has noted, “Artaud offered Spero a provisional position from which to perform her own identity, visually encoded in the image of the head with protruding tongue.” Bird, “Present Imperfect,” p. 135.



Spero. Codex Artaud XVII. 1972. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York.

tongue and the ecstatic/hysteric body encapsulate the predicament in which Artaud and Spero are mutually entangled.

The margin is shared by the avant-garde and by “woman,” Suleiman has remarked.<sup>83</sup> In avant-garde discourse, culture is spatialized as a printed page. Through the manifesto and the collage, the avant-garde announces itself as a print culture, its pages in turn thickly laden with others—scraps of newspaper, posters, handbills and other discarded sheets picked up, at least metaphorically, from the street and brandished “‘on the fringe,’ in the margins.”<sup>84</sup> But in contrast to avant-garde movements, which adopted their marginal position “the better to launch attacks at the center,” Suleiman notes, “woman” was edged out by force.<sup>85</sup> The figure sticking its tongue out from the margin—from one margin, to which “woman” is consigned, into another, marked by the writings of the feminized and hysterical Artaud—signifies the “doubly marginal” status accorded the avant-garde woman artist. The narrow format of *Codex Artaud XVII*, and the concentration of its motifs at the edges, make it, in effect, all margin: a meditation on the audacity, and the precariousness, of speech for those who, as Hélène Cixous declared in a feminist manifesto that was soon to appear, had bitten their tongues too often.<sup>86</sup>

On what note, then, to conclude concerning Spero’s association with the figure of Artaud—this mad muse, this suicidal alterego, this Virgil of hysteria? Now might be the moment to borrow another leaf from psychoanalysis, and to suggest that Spero found in Artaud a figure of transference. In psychoanalytic terms, transference is a process by which a stranger becomes an object of obscure fascination, reviving unconscious longings and fears. One is moved, as Spero declared herself to be by the writings of Artaud, to “force a collaboration” between such a figure and oneself.<sup>87</sup> In its unreconstructed form, transference is a verbatim repetition of the past. Through a process of translation, or reinscription, transference however yields repetition with a difference. Thought of in this way—as an encounter with the past, the other, and the stranger in oneself—transference might begin to describe the process by which Spero came to find in the figure of Artaud “a perfect vehicle” for talking about herself as a “woman artist.”

83. Susan Rubin Suleiman, “A Double Margin: Women Writers and the Avant-Garde in France,” in *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 14.

84. *Ibid.*

85. *Ibid.*

86. Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 4 (1976), p. 886. Portraying speech as an oral drive, even an oral-sadistic one, Cixous called on women to find their voices as writers by plying their tongues. Those who have bitten their tongues too often “are either dead from it,” she declared, “or more familiar with their tongues and their mouths than anyone else” (p. 886); woman should attack the “discourse of man” by “biting that tongue with her very own teeth” (p. 887).

87. Spero, unpublished statement, 1982.