

NANCY SPERO: 'POLITICAL' ARTIST OF POETRY AND THE NIGHTMARE

CORINNE ROBINS

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland secretes the kind of violence, the kind of shattered imagery of all the great books we preserve for children's classics—the fairy tale books where animal and human parts interchange to make bizarre new combinations, where size and time are not constants, space telescopes and life shuts up before our eyes. It is the world of the nightmare tamed and transmuted by words. The undercoverings of religion offer us the same tortures in the guise of mythology and ritual. The ghosts walk, the beasts dance, we are told. It is a vision we prefer not to see with our eyes—a fragile vision that for the most part words alone carry throughout the history of art.

In this spirit, Nancy Spero committed her *Codex Artaud* series to paper—French tracing paper, rice paper—collaged to form unwinding scrolls, scrolls of Artaud's fragmented words drawn taut among fantastic images, scrolls of visual meaning whose words need not be read or understood. The French words are the undermessage which the images use for their own purposes. The images? Say, rather, the hand of the artist. Spero is an artist working outside the traditions of contemporary Western art, working independent of movements. She sees her work as political art—'political' in a very special sense: in the same way that she feels the works of Antonin Artaud, Charles Baudelaire and Rimbaud are all political arts. Not individual governments or nations are brought into question, but the ways men have of organizing themselves as a society and the range of human feelings we permit ourselves. An art of extremes which goes outside conventions, goes outside the safety limits is by definition a fragmented art. Can one then speak of its organizing principles? Yes, in Nancy Spero's art one can. Just as one can in Antonin Artaud's letter of January 29, 1924 to Jacques Riviere, editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Francaise*—a letter which is at once an unconscionable demand and a



Nancy Spero. Photo: Joyce Ravid.

"I've seen a good many little girls in my time, but never one with such a neck as that! No, no! You're a serpent and there's no use in denying it. I suppose you'll be telling me next that you never tasted an egg."

"I have tasted eggs, certainly," said Alice who was a very truthful child; "But little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know."

"I don't believe it," said the Pigeon; "but if they do, why, then they're a kind of serpent, that's all I can say."

Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll

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work of a conscious anguish, a work of art. The text of the letter is the base of *Codex Artaud XX*, one of her more formally designed works: a collage free of the empty, almost floating space characteristic of most of the codices with their scattering of piecemeal quotes which seem, almost by chance, to have been torn from the poet's writings.

Codex XX, a narrow, 87½ inch long scroll fastened to the wall. From the top, a long narrow magenta triangle curves down towards the center of the paper where it meets a pasted square of gouache of an earth-colored circle topped by a small, five-legged headless torso, walking dog-fashion above the rim of the form. The irregular painting and spotty texture of the gouache give it the feeling of ground, of brown and yellow colored dirt with pale reds washed in. But then the under-texture of the magenta triangle itself is a series of typed black lines. Spero's inside space or under-levels, typed and painted in, provide each work with a just barely visible hidden dimension. Pasted on below the gouache and ending off *Codex XX* is the text of Artaud's letter, tacked on like a final document. In her show at A.I.R. last March, Spero pinned on to the wall translations of the Artaud quotes made by her son Philip Golub. Thus, one could read the letter itself, an exquisite description of Artaud's "internal absences of mind"—of the something that is destroying his thinking, standing between him and his poems and only allowing fragments of images to be born. Nevertheless, Artaud demands of the editor Riviere that "he must judge his work from the point of view of the Absolute," accept it or condemn the poet to nothingness. Riviere must rethink Artaud's poems with his heart because Artaud's life is in the balance. Among other things, the letter is a masterly piece of literary blackmail with its tortured writer in turn playing the part of torturer. It is on every level a political act, with Artaud setting the stakes. In Spero's collage, only its date, salutation and final sentence—"I submit to your judgment"—are legible. She deliberately types the content line melding into line so that the state-



Codex Artaud XX (detail), gouache and typewriter collage on paper, 1972.

ment is the visible evidence of writing rather than words to be read. The look of a document is what is important in visual art, the space and pressure of the words, the shapes of the letters that occupy it. The visual tensions of the lines of print are the final balance of the triangular, round and square forms she has collaged together. She has used Artaud's temperament and position in a way similar to that Artaud himself made use of Riviere's as editor of *Nouvelle Revue Francaise*. Spero is summoning up the poet's agony for her own purposes.

Nancy Spero's tools are scissors, metallic paints, paste and a typewriter with special, telegraph-size type. Her vocabulary of images includes borrowings from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, medieval illuminations of the Apocalypse, Greek and Renaissance statuary—all

visual quotes which she transforms with her brush. The scrolls unwind as muraled documents of an inward journeying. There are 34 works in the *Codex Artaud* series. For the A.I.R. show, the artist chose eleven "in a purely arbitrary fashion—maybe, because they were the most colorful." Two, XX and XXI are relatively filled-in vertical placards whose classical organization of shape-quashape setting off their romantic gouaches manage to mix the familiar with the strange in a 'poetical manner'; thus, assimilating the last gasps of 19th century romanticism and the 'beauties of the classical' juxtaposed against pyramids and triangles of type. In them, the images rather than the space are subversive. Two of Spero's other vertical codices are composed of letters climbing and falling through space—lines of type pasted in different directions on huge,

overly long sheets—are like giant blackmail notes to the art world. The ‘notes’ of course are lines of poetry, their consequence changed by Spero’s branching angles which manage to transform words into literal spatial lines.

The horizontal *Codex VI*, stretching eleven feet across the wall, brings together the mocking images, the falling letters and the ‘fractured look’ of forms in floating space—all the characteristic elements of a Spero collage. It is full of pauses, of ‘notes’ sounded in blankness. Moving from left to right, *Codex VI* begins with a chopped off magenta triangle floating from the top corner of the first panel. The paper ends, joins another, continues and then comes a gilded figure growing from an arching column like a trunk. Outside the trunk’s curve, a kneeling monk with his tongue out and, up and behind him, irregular columns of typed dots and words, fragments from Artaud. The lines “Between my thighs, I feel the church stopping me, groaning . . . The light, soft and perfect, where one suffers no more of the soul still infested with evil” confirm for us that we have entered a nether world. Bands of type, bars, dollar signs and staffs, worked like the frieze on an old temple, lead off the final panel and lean toward large type announcing Artaud’s own cataloging of his arrest,

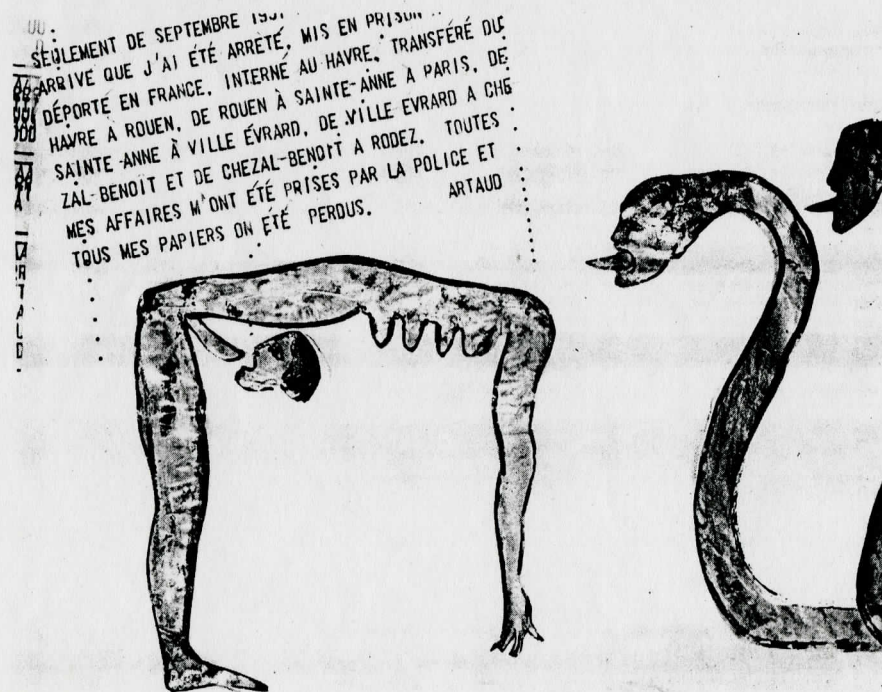
imprisonment and incarcerations in various asylums in France. Finally, Spero’s own images of the arching headless body with erect penis and four pendulous breasts confronting three serpents with the heads of men and protruding tongues which are also penises take over. The panel ends with letters falling into separate words that must be read veritically, horizontally and then vertically again as they climb to the top of the paper. The given translation of the Artaud line runs, “I have to complain of a grave thing against society and the ‘actual’ world”—a line which Spero shapes into French poetry concrete.

The above is a simple listing of the principle elements in *Codex VI*. In order to see the work, one has to move, change position, come up close and then back away again to realize the images in their overall space. Spero has suggested her work requires a kind of moving along as if in reading a manuscript, “and that the rhythm of the whole relates to fractured time and fractured experience.” “The twentieth century is a time when everything cracks and changes,” Gerturde Stein wrote, seeing in this breakdown a kind of splendor. For Nancy Spero, the splendor has turned into a nightmare of mutants among the husks and artifacts of a dying civilization. At the gallery one afternoon, a visitor asked

her if she identified with Artaud. “No, for one thing, I’m a woman,” the artist explained. The perverse and mocking sexuality of Spero’s images testify to that fact. She is making art from a female viewpoint, an unacceptable female viewpoint. Not woman as keeper of the hearth and connecting link between the generations of men, but woman, the unpredictable, out on a heath and regulated by the dark side of the moon.

Spero admits she sees similarities between herself and Artaud, which can account for his attraction for her. There is her sense of powerlessness as a woman and Artaud’s sense of powerless due to his body, his Catholicism. “He is very fractured, stops in the middle of a thought and then goes on with a scream or an imprecation,” she explains. Artaud’s gaps, his sense of looking into the void within himself match the seemingly disjunctive blanks in Spero’s collages. There is the terrible sanity with which he views the world’s madness and affirms his own. He cannot accept or domesticate sexuality and so celebrates all unacceptable perversions as being stronger and containing more truth than those that his tainted society pretends to respect. The beauties of cruelty, the insights of madness—this is the side of the poet that Spero has deliberately chosen, as she says she chose “these wild, marvellous quotes because they point to a certain pattern.” Finally, Spero is attracted to the extremity of Artaud’s reaction to the position of the artist vis-a-vis society. Now as then, we agreed, the artist must depend on bourgeois society for recognition and remuneration. In America and Western Europe still, at any rate, the artist’s real audience consists of those who have the leisure and the money to subsidize the arts.

Spero, as she says, has been outside mainstream art and its movements for so long that she does not feel severed and unrecognized for her work from bourgeois society. This severing and working in isolation has now become a point of pride. “Until very recently, my work was immediately categorized as too far-out,” she says, “and I made my art for my pleasure, my defiance and my



Codex Artaud VI (detail), gouache and typewriter collage on paper, 1971.

own aesthetic." Chicago-born, Nancy Spero was trained in the figure and her art has subsequently always been figurative. After her marriage to the painter Leon Golub, "we deliberately went to Paris in 1956 to by-pass New York City—then the mecca of abstract artists—and be in the more individualistic environment that Europe at that time still was." There the artist had her first one-woman show at the Galerie Breteau in November 1962. The paintings of this period were very dark and linear, consisting of sensual but vague figures of couples or lovers, which dimly emerged from the canvas. In 1964, Spero and Golub settled in New York City where she did her last oil painting. (Galerie Breteau in Paris, however, continued to show her work through 1968.) She had begun to dislike the "importance of oil painting" and found herself opposed to its "notion of progress and its fine art look." As a complete departure, she started doing spontaneous works on paper. It was around this same time that the Vietnam War entered her consciousness. "Although the Algerian struggle had been going on while we were in Paris, as expatriates we paid it little attention," Spero explains. The consciousness of her own country's behavior in Vietnam and the social climate of the time in New York City all helped politicize her. She began making spontaneous anti-war paintings on paper, using bombs and helicopter forms to symbolize the war. The bombs soon grew overtly sexual in character; large penises with heads from which tongues protruded spewing fire and poison. The violent and idiosyncratic nature of this work upset the gallery people Spero showed it to during the sixties, "At the time, drawings on paper were completely unacceptable." One dealer demanded how dare Spero show him such work, and several told her they couldn't regard it as art "because it wasn't packaged properly." Thus, the violent character of the work succeeded in provoking correspondingly violent reactions. "My work seemed to become more underground, more unacceptable each year," Spero says.

Part of the problem at the time,

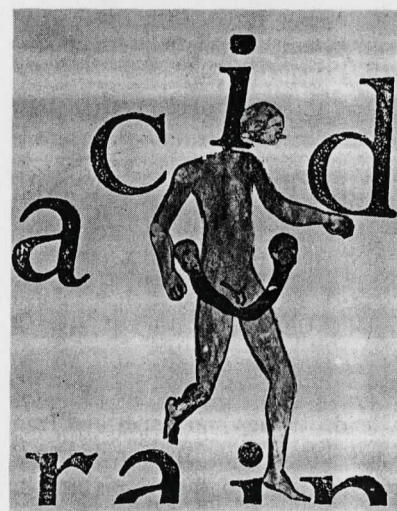
aside from the problems inherent in such work, she now realizes, was the problem of being a woman and of having this "Very boring biography" limited to marriage, painting and children. "If a man does this very individualistic kind of work, with the right life style it makes more sense to people, seems more acceptable," Spero suggests. Undoubtedly, the pornographic element in her work—the detached heads 'going down' on penises, protruding penis tongues, the nude figures examining themselves—when done by the hand of a woman with a deceptively gentle manner seems more shocking. Spero's figures for the most part are either male or androgynous. Woman, except in the art's total viewpoint, is missing from the work.

Spero's sense of isolation, however, has been recently broken fittingly enough by the women's movement which put her in a more public position. She joined the first women's artist group W.A.R. (Women Artists in Revolution) in 1969, picketed the Whitney as part of an Ad Hoc group of women in 1970 and was one of the founding members of the A.I.R. gallery in 1971. "Men can confront society and if they are up to it fight it on perhaps equal terms. Before the women's movement, I really felt powerless," Spero explains, admitting that this feeling is an important element in her work. In Spero's art as in Artaud's, the feeling of powerlessness is transformed into primitive, almost inhuman rage. The small scattered figures—small enough to be covered, hidden by her hand—are merciless renditions of the extremes of sensuality and self-mutilation. Artaud's cruelty, his exquisite terror baths, though mostly directed at himself, is nevertheless, as Spero points out, extreme cruelty. While she was working on the anti-war series in 1969, her son Philip began making some translations of Artaud and Spero immediately recognized that the poet was the take-off point she had been looking for. She made her first series on small sheets of paper using bits of English translation. Then, in 1970, she felt the need to enlarge and began working on long scrolls, two feet wide and ranging from 8 to 15 feet long,

TORTURE IN CHILE

MADE IN
U S A

FASCIST PIG
KNIFE CUT



The Hours of the Night (details) Licit Exp Series, printing on paper, 1974.

that she showed in 1973 at A.I.R.

The gallery was a kind of culmination of her involvement with the women's movement. Because the movement has been non-esthetically oriented and deals specifically with the problems of the woman artist in society, it has become an umbrella for intensely individualistic outsiders like Nancy Spero, who in turn have discovered it offers them an arena in which to participate in the art world. "It's a fact that before this women have been isolated," Spero explains, "I have always kept working, but I didn't externalize my work. The movement has given women artists tremendous momentum."

Cont on p 48

Witten on all artists, until the day that you discover that he, too, is OUT.

5. SPEND over half of your working hours draped around the coffee machine making chit-chat with the Chairman of the Department or one of his cronies. Smile when you walk through the corridors of the building, modelling yourself on an American Airlines hostess.
6. Attend all of the department parties and let them know that you love them and are having a wonderful time.
7. POUT when you don't get your way and act cranky when they act cranky so they know that you are one of them.
8. Go only to the Whitney Museum on NY field trips or the SOHO galleries. Say derisive things about art before 1945.
9. Sneer at any "outsiders" who have not been purged from the department, and if one of them is assaulted by a faculty wife, laugh. If you are feeling really gamey and want to be assured of a place in the sun, go ahead and bash the "outsider" in the face—it's ok—and the University will provide you with a lawyer.
10. If any of the above nine steps fail, you can only become buddy-buddy and share Miss Clairol recipes with the chairman's girlfriend. Should this last tactic fail why, honey—just hop into bed with some handsome, well-established male in the department. If you don't fancy sex, why try sitting up all night reading *ARTFORUM* together.

This is a guaranteed method for instant success at URI and is wholeheartedly recommended by drop-outs from the difficult and unrewarding world of the adult.

Shelly Killen

P.S. Keep that size 8 figure—they don't like plump ladies. Work out on the tennis court, for that's when they get their rocks off and it's a good place for a little politicking on the side.
No one over a size 10 will ever make it to full professor

in Rhode Island's cosy playpen.

If you have to be over size 12, get pregnant, since mothers are reassuring figures to these boys and both mamma and little sister are better roles than a lady with a life of her own.

I was delighted to see the good article on Gertrude Kasebier in the Winter 1974-75 issue of the "Feminist Art Journal." I only must take issue with the title, as Kasebier was definitely not "The First Professional Woman Photographer." The history of photography is still too young to say with assurance who was the first professional woman photographer, but I can offer Frances Benjamin Johnston, the American photographer of great distinction and prolific production as preceding Kasebier. Mrs. Johnston was widely published as early as 1890 and continued far into this century. Lincoln Kirstein refers to her "as a fascinating figure in American feminism in the decades from 1882-1952" in *The Hampton Album* (MOMA-1966). The catalogue of the exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum 'From Today Painting Is Dead' *The Beginnings of Photography*, there is an entry of a booklet of 1843 of *Photographs of British Algae* by Anna Atkins!

I must add a demurrer about the distinction in the title of Kasebier as a "professional" photographer. I know this is an often cited distinction, but I protest that we do not impose it upon other artists. A person is a *painter*, or a *sculptor*, or a *dancer*, *poet*, or whatever. I mention it here because just as distinguished a woman photographer as either Kasebier or Johnston, and earlier than either, was the English Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879) who is still frequently referred to as an "amateur", although she was a photographic artist extremely active and well known, who copyrighted her prints professionally. I would suggest that photographers are photographers, just as painters are painters, poets are poets, when they themselves decide it.

Sincerely,

Nina Howell Starr M.F.A.
New York City

Cont from p 22

But the women's movement, like Artaud, the Vietnam War and today, "*Licit Exp.*" (or licit explanation—the overall theme of her recent show) are only catalysts for Nancy Spero's art, event-subjects provoking her intensely personal response. In the 1974 show, Spero is offering more than an alternate history of art or the visionary future of a poet's madness. Her *Licit Exp.* fixes on the damages of sanity, the end results of "normal" society: "Normal Love," "Smoke Lick," "Acid Rain" and "Torture in Chile."

"Torture in Chile," a thirteen foot horizontal scroll of snakes and men with protruding tongues and open-mouthed tongueless skulls, all set out like a game plan on an eerie backgammon board, sums up the designs of death and cruelty perpetrated by men on men and women. Spero's panels "Hours of the Night" depict the hours for normal love for her androgynous figures on whom acid rain falls and we must witness it all. The earlier domain of Spero's art lay in the perverse and eternal unconscious. Today, life seems to have caught up. The unconscious is loose. Spero's fragile paper walls live both as art and as reports from its front-line from which we are all forced to carry on our daily lives.

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