The Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona, I am told, intends to present an exhibition of Nancy Spero’s work as a kind of book. Contemplating this prospect in London, I pay a visit to the British Museum to study its display of papyri from the Egyptian Book of the Dead. It is a pilgrimage I often make when reflecting on Spero’s art, which, through frequent allusions to literary artefacts, from Egyptian scrolls to medieval manuscripts, dramatizes the vanishing of cultural memory, pointing insistently, through the invocation of past cultures, to art’s “lost resources in myth.” Today, however, my thoughts are concentrated on the word book. The Egyptian Book of the Dead, to which Spero’s art has often referred, does not resemble a book in the modern sense of the term, being neither a bound volume nor a definitive edition of a text, but a compendium of diverse writings, often conjoined with graphic motifs, copied onto papyrus, linen, leather, even onto the walls of tombs. As Barry Kemp, Professor of Egyptology at the University of Cambridge, writes in his helpful primer, *How to Read the Egyptian Book of the Dead*: “‘Book’ is an English translation of a word in ancient Egyptian that in fact refers to an extensive piece of writing of serious philosophical intent.” This, I consider, might be an apt description of Nancy Spero’s art. By this definition, her work is indeed a book. The *Book of the Dead* is, moreover, a book, if of serious philosophical intent, that is composed of incantations, a book to be read aloud, a book of tongues.

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**BOOK OF TONGUES**

Mignon Nixon

An extensive piece of writing of serious philosophical intent

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A book of tongues of serious philosophical intent; yes, this seems a possible rendering of Spero’s art.

With the Codex Artaud (1971–72), Spero adopted the scroll as a medium for her art, pasting sheets of paper end to end, a procedure prompted, as the artist has remarked, by “Egyptian hieroglyphics — their methods of composition on walls and papyrus.” The writing in the Book of the Dead, Kemp observes, “was mostly done on a roll of papyrus, an early equivalent of paper.”

Codex Artaud, a pristine array of typed capital letters, an extract from Artaud’s writings given the appearance of a telegram, is cleft by a stiff tongue, thrust from the gaping mouth of a head in profile that dominates the margin of the page. The margin is shared by the avant-garde and by “woman;” it has been said. 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, and other discarded sheets picked up from the street and brandished “on the fringe,” in the margins, a place to which “woman” is also consigned. Spero actively occupies this “doubly marginal” position of the woman artist, rendering her inter- vention, as Marguerite Duras once described her own work, “doubly intolerable.” She literally sticks my tongue out at the world — a woman silenced, victimized, and brutalized, hysterical, talking ‘in tongues,” the artist has remarked.

She graphic interjections in the margin of the book — a book that is itself a form of marginalia, a scroll composed of the further-fragmented writings of an outcast and madman — have been read in terms of an inscription of the feminine “between the lines” of patriarchal discourse, which is synonymous with the printed page.

The narrow format of this panel, and the concentration of motifs at its edges, make it, in effect, all margin: a meditation on the audacity, the appearance of a telegram, is cleft by a stiff tongue, thrust from the gaping mouth of a head in profile that dominates the margin of the page. The margin is shared by the avant-garde and by “woman;” it has been said. 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, and other discarded sheets picked up from the street and brandished “on the fringe,” in the margins, a place to which “woman” is also consigned. Spero actively occupies this “doubly marginal” position of the woman artist, rendering her intervention, as Marguerite Duras once described her own work, “doubly intolerable.” She literally sticks my tongue out at the world — a woman silenced, victimized, and brutalized, hysterical, talking ‘in tongues,” the artist has remarked.

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I do not challenge
Spero’s book, then, might open with a work called Homage to New York (1958), a painting that shows, as she narrates: “a tombstone,” flanked by “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.” What Spero also wrote, or scrawled, on the painting — graffiti-like — was her name, shifted from the conventional subordinated position of signature to the very heart of the canvas.

There, the name of a ‘woman artist’ — not Spero, or N. Spero, or N.S., but Nancy Spero — is spelled out in block letters, emblazoned on the chests of the twin message bearers with their flat, flapping tongues. And so, this signature performs, while at the same time altering, an ordinary function of the autograph, which is, as Jacques Derrida observed, to imply “the actual or empirical non-presence of the signer.” Here, the author declares her absence not only from the document she has signed — a document, in the form of a painting, 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 sufficient to represent them. In contrast to the painters Homage to New York imprecates, late modernist painters who effectively defied the cultural authority of logos with the mute gestures of abstraction, Spero’s “I” is the subject whose rebellion falls on deaf ears, whose bold signature can only announce the futility of the very gesture it enacts.

The voice of the silenced subject that yet speaks is a persistent theme of Spero’s work. Here, with her mocking disavowal of agency — comically mouthing the subordinate’s refrain, “I do not challenge,” even while symbolically burying a generation of rivals — she finds her tongue in derision. It is a strategy Virginia Woolf urged women to employ: “to remember, learn from, and use derision, of which they had long been objects.” Naming derision one of the exacting “unpaid teachers” of women, who had learned the technique by having it used against them, Woolf advised them to apply its lessons broadly, to deride patriarchal hierarchies and rituals of deference in every sphere, even if to do so risked “ridicule, obscurity, and censure.”

By cultural tradition, “the tongue” is, as Lisa Ticknor has observed, “women’s weapon. Men fear the scold.” And “men bridle scolds.” Spero’s signature device, her autograph mark, is a derisive tongue, sharp as a blade, or thick with fury. This flapping, flicking, flashing, fucking tongue, however, is also, as it turns out, a mother tongue.
From 1959 to 1964 I did what I called the Paris Black Paintings. I called them Black Paintings because I worked at night and I reworked them so much. They became very dark and gray. They look black sometimes when you look at them. I would paint on the surfaces in a linear way, outlining the figures, until I got what I really wanted. Then I would scrub it off with turpentine and that would darken the surface.

I was doing kind of existential statements. It was the idea of a person and the loneliness of one’s state. I did prostitutes, mothers and children; kind of timeless human subjects. If a figure was alone, it was usually a female human figure. When I did couples, I would have them separated. Even though they were couples, they were in an isolated, undefined space. Everything kind of merged into the black. The heads of the figures were just a mass. I was, in a way, the face becoming a mask to the world. I was only thinking in philosophical, existential terms then, rather than in political terms.

Nancy Spero, 1987

Les Anges, Merde, Fuck You

In 1959, Nancy Spero and her husband Leon Golub, both Chicago-based figurative painters, decided to "leap over" New York, its art world still dominated by Abstract Expressionism, and move to Paris for the sake of their "artistic survival."

Spero knew Paris from her student days, having studied at the École des Beaux-Arts and being recognized, as she once archly recalled, 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. With their two (soon to be three) sons, the couple now decamped to Paris, where Spero worked intensively on a series she called the Black Paintings, expansive, sensuous, nocturnal vignettes of recumbent couples — lovers, mothers and children — their bodies entwined, enamoured, entranced.

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, and these nocturnal rituals of painting, devoted to a slow, patient labor of making, nurtured the motif of the sensual dyad. Then, during the second winter in Paris, "suddenly in the midst of doing these Black Paintings, " Spero recalls, she found herself making a "fuck you one." She means this literally. In Les Anges, Merde, Fuck You (1960), those words float in white script on a page scoured with black ink, like profane captions for three little heads with gaping mouths, ghostly furies taking flight across the page.

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Nancy Spero, 1987
Reflecting on the place of writing in Spero’s art, Benjamin Buchloh has underscored the “contorted conditions of articulation” dramatized in her use of graffiti and profanity. Such gestures are always motivated, he observes, by “disgust with the conditions of confinement” that constrain the subject — in this case, a “woman artist” and mother — from speaking freely. For Buchloh, Spero’s painting is “a manifesto of desublimation,” coinciding historically with “Modernism’s climactic project of demythifying painting.”

Spero’s demythifying of painting, however, bears directly upon another cultural trend, toward the remythifying of women, and in particular of the maternal feminine, in the postwar years. For in the aftermath of the Second World War, a cult of maternal domesticity restored women to the home, reviving the “moral motherhood” of the nineteenth century, as the psychoanalyist Juliet Mitchell has observed.

The “psychological significance” accorded women in the post-war period in turn derived from the maternal role. “All the aggression and sexual sensuality in the woman’s personality are suppressed and diverted by this central emotional expression of motherliness,” observed Helene Deutsch in her 1945 study, The Psychology of Women, positing a fundamental contradiction between motherhood and artistic endeavor. 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) that Spero highlights, echoing the poet Adrienne Rich’s description of the “waves of love and hate” in which a mother may find herself “caught up” — is suppressed in such an account.

At the very moment, therefore, when the maternal subject emerged for the first time, in a culture of maternal domesticity, Spero’s work challenged the assumptions underlying this cultural trend.
time as a focus of concentrated psychoanalytic study, that subject was reconfined to the stric-
tures of normative femininity: “Moral mother-
hood,” excluding women from the public sphere, and from artistic agency, reproduced, in Spero’s
rendering of the predicament, the very condi-
tions Buchloh ascribed to the alienated social
subject of the graffiti gesture, who is: “disgusted
with the conditions of confinement and the evi-
dent absence of the linguistic competence to
articulate oneself publicly,” yet also “elated at
finding any means and sites of articulation in an
overall regime of interdiction.”

Spero claims to have found inspiration for the
black drawings in medieval art “I thought I remem-
bered in the Apocalypse of the Girona Beatus,
death of the drowning figures had their tongues sticking
out,” she recalls, suggesting that she drew upon
the Christian tradition’s imagery of the subject
in extremis to “rationalize” a representation of
maternal apocalypse. In another sense, however,
Spero profaned painting and the maternal femi-
nine, corrupted them in tandem, “demythifying”
them, damming them, cursing them both as “regi-
mes of interdiction” that “bridle scolds.”

Exorcisms to keep the war away
In 1964, Spero and Golub returned to the United
States and settled in New York where they were
confronted with the escalating American action
in Vietnam. Acknowledging that “we weren’t in
Paris as expatriates anymore,” Spero abruptly
abandoned what she called the “elegiac mode” of
the Black Paintings and “started working rapidly
on paper,” producing “angry works, often scato-
logical, manifestos against a senseless obscene
war, a war that my sons (too young then) could
have been called up for. Those works were exor-
cised of maternal motherhood in the postwar period, see
Juliet Mitchell: Mad Men and Medusas, op. cit., p. 189;
Benjamin H.D. Buchloh: “Spero’s Other Traditions,”
op. cit., p. 242.

NS to JS: I was reacting to the self-importance of oil paint-
ing, its value as a commodity; I wanted to undermine
this notion. It was important that I discard what I felt
was an “establishment” product and critique not only
the art world by implication, but the politics of war.

I abandoned oil painting in 1966 as both a personal and
political act.

JEANNE SIEGEL: In thinking about your move away
from painting to collage, accompanied by your new
unconventional format, I am tempted to conclude
that it was a response to macho painting – so-called
heroic painting dominated by male artists. Were you
conscious of that at the time?

NS to AMY SCHLEGEL: Abandoning oil painting and
switching to paper was a definitive kind of self-
realization. Even though I had railed against self-
importance, I wanted to expand – I just wanted
more space. The confining spaces of small work
needed to be augmented – a longer gesture. I had
subversive ideas about space in the War series
and the Artaud Paintings.

I wanted to get out
in the world and occupy “my” space; it was to
become an extended layer of space, primarily
horizontal, but also vertical, which could con-
tinue virtually indefinitely in extended linear
formats.


31. On moral motherhood in the postwar period, see
Juliet Mitchell: Mad Men and Medusas, op. cit., p. 189;
Benjamin H.D. Buchloh: “Spero’s Other Traditions,”
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33. Image of the Apocalypse, Girona Beatus, 795

34. Exorcisms to keep the war away

35. Image of the Apocalypse, Girona Beatus, 795


Gouache, ink and collage on paper
62.5 x 100 cm
Spero confesses, “I was worried that the children might be embarrassed with the content of my art, what ‘their mother’ might be doing as an artist.”

What Spero does as an artist, “thinking as a mother,” is to incarnate the phantasmatic dimension of war, to invoke the infantile, sadistic, often sexualized mania that pervades war violence. Spero’s imagery of war is informed, in effect, by a “mother’s” knowledge. For the War series invokes the origins of aggression in the infantile drives, trends to which the maternal, or parental, subject gains fresh access when early fantasies are revived through close contact with the child, as the psychoanalyst Rozsika Parker has observed. In the War series, the oral and anal sadism that, in Melanie Klein’s revision of Freud, inaugurate the so-called paranoid-schizoid mechanisms of defense, are stimulated in the service of a death drive grotesquely agitated by the machinery of war.

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 accurately the body-in-pieces, fragmented and in turmoil, wreaks indiscriminate destruction on the entire world — a world that is, at this stage, synonymous with the parental, typically the maternal, body. The infant, Klein theorized, "as a mother?" “Making these extreme images,” Spero confesses, “I was worried that the children might be embarrassed with the content of my art, what ‘their mother’ might be doing as an artist.” What Spero does as an artist, “thinking as a mother,” is to incarnate the phantasmatic dimension of war, to invoke the infantile, sadistic, often sexualized mania that pervades war violence. Spero’s imagery of war is informed, in effect, by a “mother’s” knowledge. For the War series invokes the origins of aggression in the infantile drives, trends to which the maternal, or parental, subject gains fresh access when early fantasies are revived through close contact with the child, as the psychoanalyst Rozsika Parker has observed. In the War series, the oral and anal sadism that, in Melanie Klein’s revision of Freud, inaugurate the so-called paranoid-schizoid mechanisms of defense, are stimulated in the service of a death drive grotesquely agitated by the machinery of war.

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fantasizes through these bodily drives, exacting vengeance for the pain and frustration visited on it by external objects, in particular the breast, which, in extremis, it imagines as a lethal enemy, a primal persecutor. Turning to a process that, in its apparent immediacy, volatility, and “impatience,” invoked both children’s drawings and her own “few small drawings called Fuck You and Merde,” Spero’s War series recalls Klein’s theory of fantasy as produced through the bodily drives: manically working off aggression by projecting it onto external objects, invoking the most primitive and comprehensive defenses available against a threat that is bound up with the material body, the original object of love.  

“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?”  

The War series poses this very question. Mercilessly conflating sex and violence, Spero’s imagery portrays war, in its recourse to action in preference to speech, as hysterical, anticipating Mitchell’s similar claim. Sex and violence are shown to be as inextricably entangled in war as they are in infantile fantasies, but with actually brutal effects. For these fantasies, Spero suggests, elicited from soldiers who are deprived of speech and exhorted to act, are actively exploited in war. In a soldier, Mitchell observes, hysteria is a reaction to the violence that warfare exacts. Forced to break the social taboo against killing, the agent of war is urged to revive, and to act upon, infantile fantasies of murder and revenge. And, as Spero’s art makes explicit, this hysteria of war is in turn projected, by the wagers of war, onto victims, onto critics, and onto mothers, whose resistance is dismissed as impotent rage.  


40. Witness, for example, George W. Bush’s conduct toward Cindy Sheehan, the mother of a soldier killed in Iraq. Sheehan became the symbol of the anti-war movement after Bush refused to meet with her in 2004. Sheehan was arrested on charges of disruptive conduct for attending the State of the Union address in 2006, where Bush delivered his 11th State of the Union address. Sheehan was one of 20,000 people in a crowd of 50,000 who assembled to hear Bush’s speech. On the regulation of mourning as feminine excess in the ancient Greek city-state, see Nicole Loraux: Mothers in Mourning. Paris: Gallimard, 1998.
“Women,” Spero has commented, “are often put down as screamers or irrational, characterized as one who screams but can’t act.” The culture of war is one in which hysterical effects proliferate as enactment, or acting out, triumphs over representation. In the War series, Spero protested the American war in Vietnam by dramatizing the hysterical violence of warfare — its stimulation of the desire to kill, its fusion of sex and violence, its tail in “psychic death” — but also the displacement of hysteria onto war resistance. By hystericalizing political resistance — cutting out its tongue — while engaging in, and actively promoting, war hysteria, patriarchal authority condemns hysteria (brides scolds), while proving, as the War series makes evident, that war is the culture of hysteria por excellence.

In the War series, tongues are both the weapons of war (its knife and sword, its poison and fire) and its victims, castrated, cut off from speech, impaled by the churning blades of the helicopter. Bodies even become tongues (Victims, 1967), dancing like flames, straining to lash the enemy overhead, or, as Leon Golub once wrote, perversely compelled “to lick the bomb.” What unites the waging of war and the suffering of war, in the War series, is a kind of cursing, a compulsive repetition of profane utterance and obscene imagery. This war’s mother tongue, Spero suggests, is invective. “Anal and ejaculatory metaphors,” Lisa Tickner has noted, “were common speech in Vietnam — ‘I laid my stuff all over it,’ in pilot’s language” — and Spero’s anal-apocalyptic imagery exposed the sexual and sadistic obscenity of modern warfare. Obscenity, in the War series, is the lingua franca of atrocity.

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. Works such as Fuck (1966) and Gunship (1966) borrow from the iconography of children’s war drawings, in which machines such as planes and helicopters commonly appear, but here enhanced by grim supplements — minute skulls and bones falling to the earth, naked corpses, and a compulsive repetition of profane utterance. The curse, however, is more than a profane utterance. It also carries the tinge of omen, bears the resonance of a spell. Like the Book of the Dead, which incorporates its complement of curses, maledictions, and hexes, the War series is, in one sense, a collection of apotropaic images, a compendium of “exorcisms to keep the war away.”

Spero’s art, as Buchloh has observed, acknowledges “history’s (and painting’s) profound entanglement with myth.” This is evident in the motifs it deploys, in its borrowings from mythological iconography, but also in its evocation of myth as a psychical vestige. In the Freudian tradition (and notwithstanding the artist’s own avowed absence of interest in psychoanalysis), Spero reveals the past that haunts the present through myth, finding in the remains of ancient civilizations cultural encryptions of the passions that haunt the modern world. And so, the War series, populated by birds and snakes, fire and phalli, Gargen heads and screaming tongues, couches its politics, its “manifestos against a senseless, obscene war,” in traces of history’s “profound entanglement with myth,” and in urgent admonitions about the perils of repressing the past. Reflecting on Freud’s attachment to myth, Griselda Pollock has pondered why this atheist and scientist, himself a symbol of modernity,
seemed compelled to “live intellectually and affectively in a world populated by such fragmentary image-bearers of its antithesis, namely, mytho-poetical, cultic, and religious thinking.” The “Freudian paradox,” she suggests, is that of a modernity that is “itself defined by the partner it created: the ancient, archaic, or foundational past.” Through a hybrid imagery of the archaic and the modern, and in its apotropaic incorporation of catastrophe, the War series underscores the complex interaction of the psychical and the political, the mythical and the historical. It also decries the obscenity of a war machine that claims to rationalize and administer violence in accordance with modern, scientific principles, while at the same time ruthlessly exploiting what Freud deemed the “primitive” fantasies of its agents, and while compulsively hystericizing its opponents and victims. For in its recourse to the vestiges of myth to portray a modern war, the War series contends, as Freud had argued in his “Thoughts for the Times of War and Death” (1915), that nation states “still obey their passions far more readily than their interests.” The interests of nations, he claimed, “serve them, at most, as rationalizations for their passions; they put forward their interests in order to be able to give reasons for satisfying their passions.” In the War series, the persistence of the passions of violence in the war in Vietnam is evidenced by conjunctures of the mythic and the modern: hydra-head bombs, multi-breasted goddesses fulminating mushroom clouds, mammoth mechanical birds vomiting fire. These are emblems of a modernity in thrall to its own myths of rationality, a modernity in which war itself is understood as the rational administration of violence, a modernity that, as Freud observes, mistakes rationalization for reason.
In a later, monumental work, Torture of Women (1976), Spero returned to the scene of modernity’s violence, reflecting, as had Freud, on the moral failures of the state, and the brutal actions it elicits from its agents. Opening with the words “Explicit Explanation,” drawn from an eighth-century Commentary on the Apocalypse, the work confronts the ultimate degradation of the state and the individual: covert torture. Combining biblical and mythic references with contemporary testimony, excerpted from Amnesty International’s 1975 Report on Torture, the work exposes the most illicit passions of state violence, the secret terrors of the torture chamber. While incorporating actual witness accounts — the evidential status of this text underscored through the use of print media, including letterpress and bulletin type — Torture of Women excludes the visual representation of violence in favor of a mythological iconography of godess and monster. For Spero’s admonition, like Freud’s, is not addressed to the war monger, the state, or the torturer, so much to the citizen. She, like Freud, discloses illusions of modernity, one of which is the high morality of the state: a state that purports to be free of passion and immune to myth. Torture of Women protests the practice of torture but also aims to dispel illusions created by the state to blind its citizens to passion-ate excesses satisfied in the name of reason. “The individual citizen,” observes Freud, “can with horror convince himself in this war of what would occasionally cross his mind in peace-time — that the state has forbidden to the individual the practice of wrongdoing, not because it desires to abolish it, but because it desires to monopolize it.” In Torture of Women, Spero exposes the apparatus of state violence as a precinct of unbridled passion, proclaims modernity’s “profound entanglement with myth.”
Up to now men and the term “man” have been used to symbolize both women and men. I decided, therefore, to represent women,
not just to reverse history but to see what it means to view all this through the depiction of women. I zeroed in on the torture of women because symbolically the abuse of women sexually, and their vulnerability, have been institutionalized. Torture is an instrument of control, institutionalized violence.

Nancy Spero, 1979

Torture of Women, 1976 (panel III)
Artaud I could not have borne to know you alive, your despair, Spero

Hysteria, Juliet Mitchell observes, is "a condition that everyone wishes to repudiate." And so, "the solution to this profound repudiation of the condition is to make sure that someone else has it." That "someone else" is, in broad cultural terms, woman. Spero embraced hysteria, this term of reference for women "put down as screamers," making it the pivotal dynamic of her work for over a decade, a period that coincided with her self-invention as a "woman artist." Yet she assumed the mantle of hysteria from Artaud.

"I thought it was a perfect transition from talking about war to talking about myself," Spero recalls of her first sustained encounter, in the summer of 1969, with Artaud's work. Picking up a copy of the first English translation of his writings, edited by her friend Jack Hirschman, and finding there a reflection of her own "state of mind and my position as an artist at that time," she soon decided to adopt "the sexual language of war hysteria as a common feature. In an exercise of self-dramatization by proxy, the artist began "talking about herself" by appropriating the words of another, a male artist whose screams were accorded "male worth." 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) of this act of homage from Spero. The Codex underscores, but also intercepts, the poet's own heterophobic speech. "I fragmented these quotes," Spero recalls, "with images I had painted — disembodied heads, defiant phallic tongues... victims in strait-jackets." She quotes Artaud faithfully, repeating his words and appending his name not to each individual epigram, in a compositive reiteration of the protocols of homage that registers as an act of mimetic excess. A 'feminine' discourse," Pamela Wye has noted, "entered the art of this century on the tongues of men, not women." Reclaiming the voice of hysteria from Artaud, Spero performs it as a kind of homage. For this, she adopts the logic of hysteria, in which doubling, mimicry, and copying are common features. In an exercise of self-dramatization by proxy, the artist began "talking about herself" by appropriating the words of another, a male artist whose screams were accorded "male worth." 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) of this act of homage. The Codex underscores, but also intercepts, the poet's own heterophobic speech. "I fragmented these quotes," Spero recalls, "with images I had painted — disembodied heads, defiant phallic tongues... victims in strait-jackets." She quotes Artaud faithfully, repeating his words and appending his name not to each individual epigram, in a compositive reiteration of the protocols of homage that registers as an act of mimetic excess. An overdoing of phallocentric discourse can facilitate its undoing, Luce Irigaray has claimed, and...
here Spero overplays a masculine ritual of esteem, the act of homage, turning this into a tribute performance of, and to, hysteria. Yet, Spero speculates, Artaud "would have disapproved, even hated what I was doing, using and disrupting his language for my own purposes."60

Yet, Spero overplays a masculine ritual of esteem, the act of homage, turning this into a tribute performance of, and to, hysteria.59

So she wrote him a letter, resorting once more to the apotropaic principle of warding off a threat by incorporating it. "Artaud I could not have approached it with the so-called mother tongue as with any other, making oneself scarcely translatable."65

Spero quotes extensively from these letters, extracting 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.66 By reproducing Artaud's original words, Spero however contrived, precisely unlike an editor, "not to facilitate the reading of the quotes"67 (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. "Je suis suspendu à vos bouches, " writes Pamela Wye.64 "I am hanging on your every word," or on your lips, the translator might suggest -- except that Artaud substitutes bouches for lèvres, mouths for lips, estranging a familiar figure of speech, an idiom for which no being I, Artaud, maintains the necessity, writes Derrida, "to write against this language, and have it out with the so-called mother tongue as with any other, making oneself scarcely translatable."68

This quotation, or scripting, of Artaud's words in a French that is "scarcely translatable" and in a hand that is only vanishingly legible, both thematizes and occludes the act of reading. Spero's graphic interjections further intensify this effect. At the bottom right corner of the page appears one of those "scraps of other pages on which she has drawn and written," a collage sheet that iterates and redoubles "the idea of the 'page.'"69

From this pain rooted in me like an ant, at the center of my present reality, at the point of my possibility where the two worlds of body and mind are joined, I learn to direct myself by the effect of a false support. Artaud.
The Artaud Paintings 1969-70 are equivalent to the War paintings. 90 paintings in French and English, graffiti-like poetry, screams and paradoxes scratched and torn and collaged out of Artaud’s writings. “This God has disposed of me to the point of absurdity.” “God does not exist, he withdraws, gets the fuck on out and leaves the cops to keep an eye on things.” “... this man whom they’ve cooked, strangled, hanged, grilled, baptized, shot and incarcerated, slandered and guillotined.” The Artaud Paintings are existential moments - frozen. They deal with “… that little black mucus, that waxy fart of hideous pain at the end of the turnstile of blood…”

Nancy Spero, 1974
as so often with Spero, is apotropaic, aiming to preserve the act of writing from being “transformed into artistry,” from attaining “the benigne status of a finished, literary product,” precisely through its ruination. Artaud would salvage literature through its savaging. Spero, similarly, aims to desublimate painting (with writing, often literally profane) while also preserving its mythic past — by desecrating it with “fragments of pictorial representation,” often obscene, “disseminated like shards through the scrolls of the Codex.” For Spero’s recourse to the writings of Artaud, himself a wildly syncretic, and often profane writer, enacts a double corruption of text and image. Executed on paper, these are fragile, sometimes painfully ephemeral works in which a hybrid form of writing, drawing, and collage, consecrated to an “extreme sexual imagery,” is used to “humiliate” painting by demythifying it — even as they “point equally to painting’s lost resources in myth.”

Combining references to the Book of the Dead, medieval manuscripts, papier collé, and concrete poetry, the panels of the Codex Artaud combine typing, gilding, gouache, and collage, evoking the fragile medium of paper on which Artaud himself constantly relied. In one panel, Codex Artaud VI (1971), three gilded, human-headed, phallic-tongued snakes make stately progress toward the body of the self-sucking Nut, this Egyptian goddess, a recurrent motif in Spero’s work, here doubled over to form the pedestal for Artaud’s urgent epistle 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 particular letter, reproduced in bulletin type, impinges on a block of geometric design that, on closer 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 Jon Bird has noted, “is the phonetic equivalent of a shout or scream.” Juxtaposed with Artaud’s petition, this signature-scream concreté, 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.

Spero’s book begins with a signed statement in the form of a false homage. “I do not...”

68. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh: “Spero’s Other Traditions,” op. cit., p. 244.
challenge”, it declares, an announcement issued by an unknown “woman artist” Nancy Spero, by way of derisive Homage to New York. That this proclamation, issued by mute figures, falls on deaf ears, is, of course, its urgent message. In the Codex Artaud, that protest is writ large. The trend of Artaud’s writings is to curse his own silencing — in a voice that, for Spero, a “woman artist,” is accorded at least some “male worth.” By paying homage to Artaud, declaring his madness “the perfect vehicle” for her own speech, Spero dramatizes the perversity of her own historical predicament.70

To close this abbreviated reading of Spero’s book, then, by turning back to the leaf, the chapter, the spell on which it was opened, to Codex Artaud XVII (1972) look down. Exiled to the foot of the page is an even more obscene vignette than the head in profile, its fierce tongue inserted between the lines of a text by Artaud. There, skirting the nether edge is another, smaller head, 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,” one critic suggests.71 Yet, if this head in profile, ritually repeated, its tongue grotesquely extended, does function as Spero’s own graphic signature, her auto-icon, the implication of this coupling is more ambiguous. Spero declared herself to be moved by Artaud’s writings, in particular by his “sexual language,” to “force a collaboration” with him. The couple at the foot of the page, stranded at its lower margin, is the sign of this perverse and desperate association. The concatenated figure of phallic tongue and ecstatic/hysteric body encapsulates the struggle in which Spero and Artaud, madman and “woman artist,” were mutually entangled, at the margins of the book.

Artaud is exceptional for having uttered the most extreme expressions of dislocation and alienation in the twentieth century. He represents himself as the victim par excellence. While violent in gesture and language, he is masochistic and passive. Nevertheless, he plays the part of the female victim.

Women are often put down as screamers or irrational, characterized as one who screams but can't act. The so-called mad woman is removed from any sort of participation in the external world. Women are made powerless by these kinds of allegations.

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.

I identified with Artaud's sense of victimage - using his language to exemplify my loss of tongue - fracturing his already fractured texts, because I felt a victim as regards to both being a woman and an artist. I used Artaud for four years, in the Artaud Paintings (1969-70), and in the Codex Artaud (1971-72), to explore the boundaries of victimage (imaginary and real) although I knew how much Artaud would have hated a woman re-using his language and shifting his implications. I used these fragments of texts in tension with my painted cut-out images to exemplify the artist (myself) rejected in a bourgeois society.

Nancy Spero, panel, The Cooper Union, New York, October 1989