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Nancy Spero (1926–2009)

Nancy Spero, one of the most influential artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, died Sunday, October 18, 2009, in New York City. For over fifty years, Spero made the female experience central to her art's formal and thematic development. Her radical career encompassed many significant visual and cultural movements from Conceptual Art to Post-Modernism to Feminism.

After studying at the Art Institute of Chicago and l'École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Spero lived in Italy briefly and then in Paris, where she remained until moving to New York in 1964. In Europe, Spero produced her first significant works, the Black Paintings—somber, figurative works allusive of existential oppositions and emotional turmoil. These works were made at a time when Pop Art and Minimalism were the focuses in the art world, marking Spero's first consistent oppositions to the prevailing conventions in art making. Nancy Spero's return to the U.S. in 1964 coincided with the height of the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. In this charged political climate, her passionate engagement with these issues engendered the groundbreaking aesthetic style and the political and feminist themes for which she is now known. The War Series was Spero's first significant body of work on paper, a support she would favor for the majority of her working career. Described by Spero as "broadsides," The War Series depicted women and children as victims of war and suffering, a theme that would occupy Spero for the next forty years. Though exhibited rarely in their time, The War Series works were more recently exhibited to great acclaim, including in Documenta X in 1997 and in *Nancy Spero: The War Series* at Galerie Lelong in 2003.

Following *The War Series*, Spero produced two bodies of work: the Artaud Paintings and the Codex Artaud series, based on the French poet Antonin Artaud, whom Spero described as the “most extreme writer of the 20th Century.” In reading Artaud, Spero coined the term “victimage,” making a parallel between Artaud’s language and her feeling of the “loss of tongue” as a female artist in a male-dominated art world. One of Spero’s great inventions was the fracturing of text and image in the Codex Artaud works, which some critics have described as the first works of Post-Modernism. Following the Artaud series, Spero began work on her pioneering and critically lauded scroll series: *Hours of the Night*, 1974 (collection Whitney Museum of American Art), *Notes in Time on Women*, 1979 (collection Museum of Modern Art, New York) and *Torture of Women*, 1976 (collection National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa).

Earlier this year, the Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Austria awarded Spero the Herbert Boeckl Prize and presented her exhibition *Nancy Spero: Woman as Protagonist*. In 2008, the Museu d’art Contemporani Barcelona organized a full-scale retrospective, *Nancy Spero: Dissidances*, which traveled to the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, and the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Seville. The Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris will present a retrospective exhibition of her work in 2010. During her long career, monographic museum exhibitions of Spero’s work have been held at de Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam; Frac Haute-Normandie, Sotteville-lès-Rouen, France; Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Santiago de Compostela, Spain; Baltic Mill Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, England; Kunsthalle zu Kiel, Germany; Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York; Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, England; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Malmö Konsthall, Sweden; The Power Plant, Toronto; and The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; among many others.

Nancy Spero was married to the artist Leon Golub (1922–2004) for over fifty years. In 1996, together they received the Hiroshima Art Prize—awarded to contemporary artists for their achievements in promoting world peace—and exhibited at the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art. A joint retrospective of their works, *War and Memory: Nancy Spero and Leon Golub*,” was presented by the American Center, Paris in 1994 and traveled to the List Visual Arts Center at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge; and Vancouver Art Gallery, British Columbia. Spero is survived by her three sons—Stephen Golub of Swarthmore, Pennsylvania; Philip Golub of Paris; and Paul Golub of Paris—six grandchildren; and sister, Carol Neuman of Portland, Oregon.

above: photo by Abe Frajndlich, 2003