

NANCY SPERO: *I DO NOT*

Michael Green

I: *I do not*

Nancy Spero's *Perhaps She Was Right* (1979, figure 1) bears a small, faded graphite inscription that could easily go unnoticed. Found in the collage's bottom left hand corner are three words: 'love to Carol'. Carol is Carol S. Newman, the artist's sister, to whom Spero gifted the work – the addressee of Spero's 'love to' that at once announces the act of gifting and a familial bond which, in this instance, is sisterly. Another name printed in sharp bulletin type also marks the work: 'H.D.', the nom de plume adopted by Hilda Doolittle, the modernist writer largely known for her early Imagist poetry and well-documented analysis with Sigmund Freud in Vienna during the inter-war years. H.D.'s initials appear twice in Spero's collage; they sign seven stanzas of poetry taken from H.D.'s book-length poem *Helen in Egypt* (1961) that stagger down a long vertical strip of tracing paper in the centre of the work, whilst also hovering below a recurring figure in Spero's work: a small bodiless head, mouth agape, mid-scream, spit or bite.

This article examines Spero's tripartite engagement with H.D. and, in particular, the artist's turn to *Helen in Egypt*, written between 1952 and 1956, yet only published just before H.D.'s death in 1961. Foregrounding three works on paper completed in 1979 – *Perhaps She Was Right*, *H.D. Fragments* and *Notes in Time* – all of which draw quotes from H.D.'s poem, I ask what H.D. bequeaths Spero at a pivotal moment in the career of an artist who, following the completion of *Notes in Time*, would altogether reject the voice and image of man in her artistic practice; a shift away from the tortured screams of Antonin Artaud in her earlier *Artaud Paintings* (1969–1970) and *Codex Artaud* (1969–1972) towards the revisionary poetics of H.D. I argue

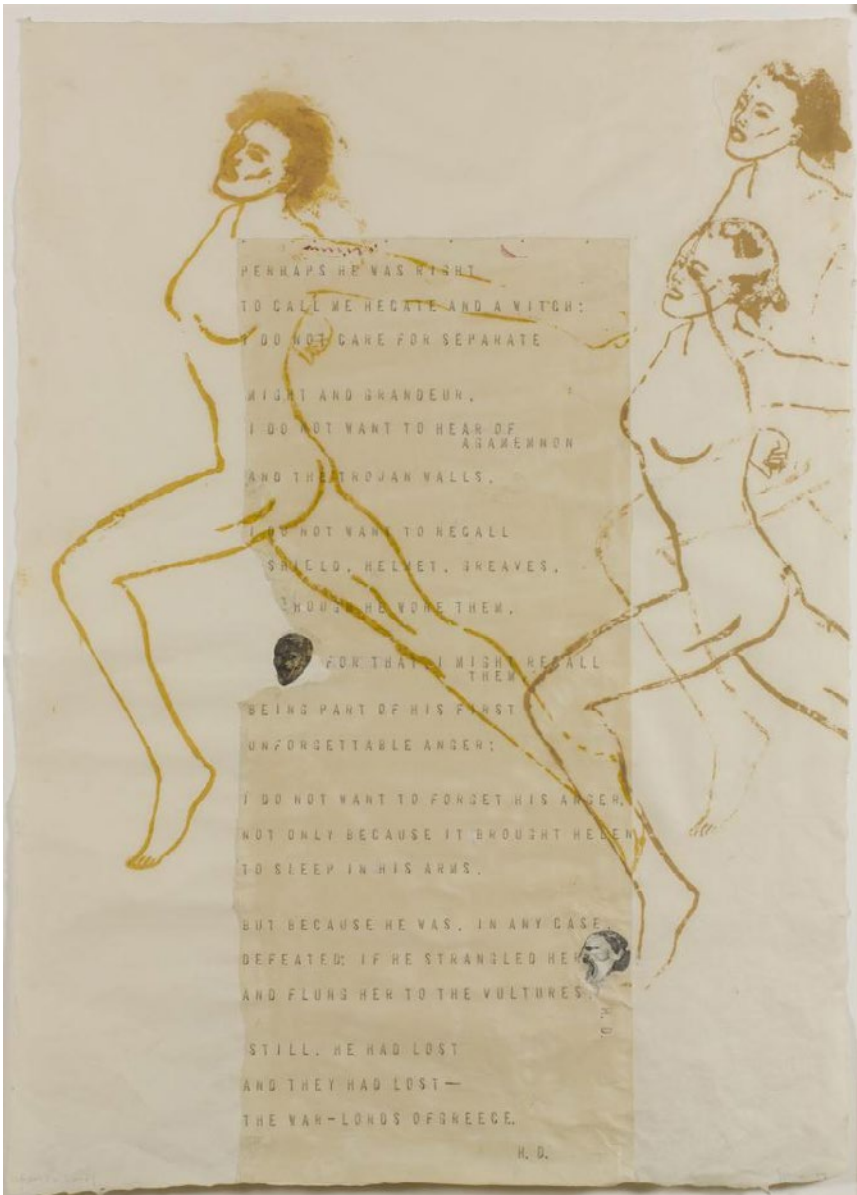


Figure 1 Nancy Spero, *Perhaps She Was Right*, 1979. Mixed media collage with type-set text, 71.12 x 50.8 cm. Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon. Gift of Carol S. Newman. © The Nancy Spero and Leon Golub Foundation for the Arts/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2020. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co. Photo: Portland Art Museum.

that Spero's turn to H.D. marks a moment of thinking *with* the writer, an Irigarayan exchange between two that allows Spero to generate a vocal space where woman becomes a protagonist and narrator of her own history. Theorising Spero's move, I emphasise that Spero *turns* rather than *returns* to H.D., a semantic shift with both temporal and spatial implications which circumvent an Oedipal model of influence to reach for a multidirectional series of relations. Spero's gesture, her *turn* to H.D., begins a mode of expression-*with* another which generates a space of possible encounters and multiplicity, a lateral move away from what Irigaray has theorised as a male libidinal economy founded upon an exchange of the Same. The artist brings H.D. with her and this turn, this horizontal glance announces the stride into the beyond as a collective endeavour.

Repeated at irregular intervals across the seven three-line stanzas, the defiant, resistant phrase 'I DO NOT' becomes a refrain that echoes throughout the paper's creased and torn space. 'I DO NOT CARE FOR SEPARATE // MIGHT AND GRANDEUR' reads one declaration, 'I DO NOT WANT TO HEAR OF AGAMEMNON / AND THE TROJAN WALLS' the following two lines proclaim. 'I DO NOT WANT TO RECALL / SHIELD, HELMET, GREAVES' announces the next. And the work's title, a pun on the first line of the seven stanzas that asks 'PERHAPS HE WAS RIGHT', turns the tables on gender and issues via this distinction – the simple yet effective pronoun swap – a precise recognition of sexual difference. The 'he' dislodged from Spero's title punctuates the 21 lines as we hear of 'HIS FIRST / UNFORGETTABLE ANGER' and how 'HE STRANGLED HER / AND FLUNG HER TO THE VULTURES'. Might and grandeur adopt a pointedly masculine quality as they are conflated in one stanza with the mythological warlord Agamemnon, commander of the Greek fleet that launched the assault on Troy. And yet *his* anger, might and grandeur – bolstered by the tools of war *he* wore (shield, helmet, greaves) – is sardonically undercut in the final stanza: 'STILL, HE HAD LOST / AND THEY HAD LOST – / THE WAR-LORDS OF GREECE'. Indeed, Spero quips, perhaps *she* was right.

'This is why she starts (to) paint, in order to scream "I do not"', Hélène Cixous tells us of Spero, 'One had to scream, not to make oneself heard but to hear oneself. She screams. In painting. She paintscreams...[sic]'.¹ One would be forgiven in thinking that Cixous is referencing *Perhaps She Was*

Right and the defiant 'I DO NOT' emblazoned in Spero's severe bulletin type, the rips and tears in the tracing paper and the two heads, one of which looks to be either devouring or screaming out the poem; the rebellion of 'I', the subject, of 'I DO NOT' who raises her voice in an effort to be heard by oneself and listened to by another. A cry which has all too often fallen on deaf ears. 'I was really angry at the art world', Spero has said, recalling the stifling, masculine atmosphere of 1960s and 1970s New York, 'I was angry because I felt silenced'.² In fact, Cixous's evocative description purposely invokes a work that returns us to the beginning of Spero's artistic career, a painting which has coincidentally been mistaken to contain a reference to H.D.³

Painted by Spero while living in Bloomington, Indiana, *Homage to New York (I Do Not Challenge)* (1958, figure 2) was completed 21 years before the collage of 1979, by which time Spero was living and working in New York. 'I did this painting with a tombstone right in the middle and then on each side are two heads[...]and their tongues are sticking out', Spero recalls, 'And on this phallic-like tombstone[...]are the initials of all the artists who were prevalent then'.⁴ Above the tombstone is the line 'I do not challenge' and below 'homage to New York', both clearly written in black oil paint. Rather than finding H.D.'s initials as we do in *Perhaps She Was Right*, the tombstone bears different initials. Listed down the tombstone we read 'JP' (Jackson Pollock), 'AR' (Ad Reinhardt), 'MK' (Mark Rothko) and so on. For Spero, these were the powerful elite of the New York art world, the 'Agamemnon' of Abstract Expressionism. Brushes replace shields, helmets and swords and the blood-stained Trojan plains become the gestural, splattered surface of the canvas. 'Chicago against New York, it is the Trojan War[...]figurative art doesn't give a damn about abstraction', Cixous continues, yet here Spero as a figurative, Chicago-trained painter does give a damn about New York abstraction, or at least what it excludes.⁵

'*Homage to New York*', Mignon Nixon writes, 'invokes[...]the contempt that burns from exclusion'.⁶ For Nixon, Spero's homage mocks and derides the bravado of the artists inscribed in paint on the phallus-cum-tombstone. Tongues slyly protruding, the two heads flanking the tombstone scold the homage enacted in paint. The 'I do not challenge' of the work's title, perhaps, we might imagine, hissed by the heads with their flicking tongues, performs a scathing parody of the systems of competition and conflict that defined,



Figure 2 Nancy Spero, *Homage to New York (I Do Not Challenge)*, 1958. Oil on canvas, 119.4 x 78.7 cm. Private Collection. © The Nancy Spero and Leon Golub Foundation for the Arts/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2020. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co. Photo: David Reynolds.

in Nixon's words, 'the New York School as an Oedipal affair'.⁷ For this league of artists and the milieu to which they belonged was, Spero's mock-subordination chides, built on a hierarchy of masters and students; masters to be usurped by their disobedient disciples. And Spero's own inscription, her name and signature, flanks the totemic list. 'Nancy' is cut off from 'Spero' as the tombstone cleaves forename from surname, rejecting the artist from the list and spatially registering her exclusion in terms of marginality: 'Nancy' 'Spero' as woman artist and figurative painter from Chicago, the second sex from the second city.

If 1958's 'I do not' of *Homage to New York* is taunted whilst knelt in feigned submission at the grave of Abstract Expressionism's fathers, tongues stuck out in parody, then 1979's 'I do not' of *Perhaps She Was Right* bites and scolds from a different mouth. For while it also rebukes and flaps its tongue at the all too fallible 'WAR-LORDS OF GREECE', it does so through the voice of another. Gesture for gesture, gone are the rough lashings of paint on canvas, the ochre and crimson hues, that mock the New York School's abstractions, for now three women leap across the background of the page exciting the rhythms of the female body. The two painted, clownish heads, one 'Nancy' and one 'Spero', have become two ferocious, terrifying faces. The artist's signature is now a signature proper, scrawled in the collage's bottom right corner, while H.D.'s initials – the poet's signature – mark what once was a tombstone. And the challenge of 'I do not' is delivered via H.D. and her protagonist Helen of Troy, a woman writer and a symbol of destructive beauty who both fought to be heard amongst a crowd of antagonistic male writers and critics.⁸ 'Helen', Susan Stanford Friedman reminds us, 'is an object of worship[...]What seems to be an adoration of woman[...]is rooted in reality in a hatred for the living woman who has the capacity to speak for herself.'⁹ Charged with voices, Spero's collage defies this history of hatred and silencing – H.D.'s vocal rebuke resounds into 1979.

Writing on Spero's return to H.D., Joanna S. Walker has read the relationship between artist and writer as one enacted through 'homage' and 'commemoration', those paeon systems of tribute and influence Spero derided in 1958.¹⁰ 'Spero performed a two-fold commemoration', Walker writes, 'she generates a scene of homage both to Helen and her literary rescuer'.¹¹ However, the terms employed by Walker pull H.D. back into the past, for

while ‘commemoration’ may evoke a summoning by way of remembrance and celebration, it also leaves H.D. temporally bound to an almost deathly status of being *past* or *before*; to commemorate is tantamount to memorialising those now lost to the present. The tombstone of Spero’s *Homage to New York* would therefore seem to remain, transposed into the vertical strip of paper now marked with H.D.’s verses and initials. Walker’s reading of ‘homage’ suggests the kind of deference that, to return to Nixon, Spero in fact curses. It implies a tribute that risks eulogising in its reverence the woman who came before.

Rather, as Adalaide Morris has argued, ‘More than any other writer[...] H.D. gives readers the sense of thinking not *about* her but somehow *with* her’.¹² Morris reads H.D.’s texts as sites of intersection – between writer, reader and culture. This dialogic movement, to quote Friedman in the same journal issue celebrating the centenary of H.D.’s birth, ‘involves a constant exchange with the language of an *other*, with the linguistic traces of another person who had (or has) her own voice, subjectivity, existence’.¹³ As a feminist strategy, Spero’s (re)turn to H.D. marks a moment of thinking *with* the writer, an exchange between two that guides her artistic practice forward into the direction where woman is protagonist. This is not to perform homage but to think and express *with*; not to commemorate, but to see and recognise the work done by another (woman) who ‘had (or *has*)’ a voice and to work *with* that voice [emphasis added].

With her characteristically sharp insight, Spero herself commented some years before *Perhaps She Was Right* that ‘The ultimate liberation of woman is the hardest and most ultimate task of revolution because her biological subordination[...]is so deep-rooted[...]that to break with it is to create a virtually new order of creature co-equal to man’. ‘We demand a new kind of space’, she concludes, ‘a space free from repression to develop the roles of freedom’.¹⁴ Here, Spero’s words echo those of Virginia Woolf spoken in 1928 – her voice cutting through the historically masculine form of the lecture – that called for a change in material working conditions for women or, more precisely, for a room of one’s own.¹⁵ But Spero is also talking of a change to, or creation of, a different symbolic order, ‘a new kind of space’, as Spero called it, where the liberation of woman might be achieved and where her voice can be heard. To quote from H.D.’s earlier sequence of three long poems, *Trilogy*, ‘*We are voyagers, discoverers / of the not-known, //*

the unrecorded; / we have no map'.¹⁶ Both artist and poet set out into that space of the 'not-known, // *the unrecorded*' that is the not-known, unrecorded half of the human story that belongs to woman. Perhaps, Spero's collage of 1979 suggests, expressing-*with* can begin this work.

Interlude: *Love to*

I want to remain nocturnal, and find my night softly luminous, in you.

Luce Irigaray¹⁷

The above epigraph is found in the final pages of Irigaray's study of sexual difference, *This Sex Which is Not One*.¹⁸ Irigaray's ethics of thinking-in-difference, of an irreducible *I* and *You* and an intersubjective dialogue in which neither subject is reduced to the Same, emerges out of Spero's 1979 collage. This is a dynamic of collaboration and a communication between two, an interchange in the present that has the potential to make way for an emergent future. Irigaray helps us move away from the Oedipal model of influence derided by Spero in 1958 towards a non-hierarchical, fluid system of relations of which I will argue Spero's reach to H.D. is part – a 'love to' quietly evoked in *Perhaps She Was Right*. 'Now with the American woman poet, H.D.,' Spero once commented, 'it wasn't an antagonistic position[....]I tried to extract the stuff that I thought would bring her to this moment'.¹⁹

Writing in *I Love to You: Sketch of a Possible Felicity in History*, Irigaray describes this mediation between subjects through the negative space generated by the phrase 'I love to you' (remember 'love to Carol'). 'I love to you' concurrently describes and enacts such a mediation between two, an in-between space of respect for difference. As Irigaray writes: '*I love to you* means I maintain a relation of indirection to you. I do not subjugate or consume you[....]The "two" is the guarantor of two intentionalities: mine and yours'.²⁰ Irigaray's phrase operates spatially, *I* and *You* both divided and united 'to' the other, indicating a difference that can be brought together yet is still crucially maintained *as* difference. Moreover, the phrase's sideward glide vitally extends between relations that are not bound to the matrilineal, recalling Spero's 'love to' her sister. Irigaray's 'I love to you' opens up an intersubjective dynamic in which neither subject is reduced to the Same or

upheld as the One – a dialectic insisting on difference and maintaining the uniqueness of the other via the negative. Crucially, thinking-in-difference has the potential to become exchanging- or expressing-in-difference; the negative is the gap between and the ‘to’ announces a pause (or silence or breath) that allows one’s interlocutor to listen and respond, enabling their own becoming.²¹

Irigaray’s articulation of a space of exchange-in-difference, a dialogue *between* two or mode of expressing-*with*, helps us see the relationship forged by Spero’s bringing H.D. ‘to this moment’ as one also structured between an *I* and *You*, twin poles of an exchange oscillating between past, present and future. In this way, Irigaray’s ‘to’ wafts between Spero and H.D., generating a pause that flows between the two in anticipation of a response from the other. On such a transformational dialogue, Irigaray has written that:

For such work, descriptive and narrative languages[...]are no longer appropriate. They correspond to something or someone who already exists, and is even already in the past, or put into the past by what is said. The task here is different. It is a question of making something exist, in the present and even more in the future. It is a matter of staging an encounter between the one and the other – which has not yet occurred, or for which we lacked the words, gestures, thus the means of welcoming, celebrating, cultivating it in the present and the future.²²

This reciprocal exchange is what Irigaray terms *parler-femme*, a new type of language spoken between women. Irigaray’s formulation, emphasising speaking over writing and thus differentiating her from her contemporaries Cixous and Julia Kristeva, distinguishes between ‘speaking (as) woman in patriarchal culture, in which that voice is not heard or listened to, and speaking (as) woman in a different symbolic order’, as Margaret Whitford writes.²³ Whitford continues: ‘What Irigaray is above all most concerned to work out is[...]how women can assume the “I” of discourse in their own right and not as a derivative male “I”’.²⁴ *Parler-femme*, then, can be read as a type of language generated in an exchange between two subjects, *I* and *You*, *You* and *I*, neither privileged, bequeathing the possibility of a new subject position and revived subjectivity. It is a series of expressions and exchanges, of responses to the speech of another, that finds its roots in the transference

situation maintained in the psychoanalytic session. Irigaray's 'speaking (as) woman' therefore rests upon a foundational belief in the transformative potential of language and calls for subjective and active, not objective and distant, participation. 'Since Freud', Nixon notes, calibrating our attention to the historically gendered dynamics of psychoanalysis, 'feminism[...]has even created situations in which women occupy both sides of the transference relation'.²⁵ It is a feminist strategy of developing such a dialogic relation between women that Spero's turn to H.D. forges.

If Irigaray identifies the task at hand as a something 'different' from communicating in the already codified languages of the past, a task of 'making something exist', then we might say that by 1979 Spero's task was indeed different, that it too became one of 'making something exist, in the present and even more in the future'. Spero's gesture, her turn to H.D., begins this encounter and mode of expression which slips from 1979 and then beyond. For when Spero turned away from painting on canvas in the late 1960s she did so with the understanding that she needed a new medium through which to forge a new dialogue, not only with herself as a woman artist, but with other women. Spero envisioned a new space, one of possible encounters and multiplicity. The artist, Catherine de Zegher describes, 'responded by uncovering silence and inventing a language which would allow communication and exchange'.²⁶ It is to this space where this article now (re)turns, to 1979 and, in particular, to *Notes in Time*, *H.D. Fragments* and *Helen in Egypt*.

II: *no art is beneath your power*

It is good to meet Helen face to face, for men and poets have visualized her so crudely.
H.D.²⁷

H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* is a foundational antecedent to Spero's interest in how to develop an 'I' outside of the subject-object dialectic she identified upholding a patriarchal culture and society – the *symbolic* question explored by Irigaray. For the poem at its core is a quest for such an 'I' spoken from the other side. Within this quest it is the titular Helen, not Achilles, Paris, Menelaus, Agamemnon, or Odysseus, who is the quester and protagonist of the epic. Told from Helen's perspective, the poem recalibrates previous

Trojan War cycles recounted through the ages to restore a voice to the demonised Helen who, H.D. reminds us within the opening pages of the poem, was and still is ‘Helen hated of all Greece’, vilified and cursed ‘through eternity’.²⁸ Homer’s *Iliad*, Stesichorus’s ‘Palinode’ and Euripides’s *Helen* all lie somewhere beneath this new version of Helen’s story. H.D.’s poem is self-consciously attuned to these variations on the myth and at times evokes their numerous accounts so as to expel their patriarchal logic from Helen’s searched-for destiny. For example, H.D. invests the Egypt and eidolons found in Stesichorus and Euripides with new meaning as they no longer serve to maintain Helen’s chastity as wife to Menelaus: the Amen-temple in Egypt is transformed into a sanctuary of ‘space and leisure’ where Helen can begin to decipher her past, present and futures selves through the meta-fictional image of reading the hieroglyphic script on the temple walls, and Helen’s eidolon, or phantom, now lays bare the futility and waste of war fought between men.²⁹

Selecting the Helen myth, one recounted innumerably through the ages, H.D. clearly discloses her intention to voyage out into the masculine landscape and hierarchies of the epic – down through a chorus of voices that ‘hates / the still eyes in the white face, / the lustre / as of olives / where she stands, / and the white hands’, as the poet would write in her 1923 poem ‘Helen’. In this earlier poem, the reviled beauty ‘grows wan and white’ as each insult is flung at her until she is eventually petrified into a symbol of ‘past enchantments / and past ills’, frozen, as Irigaray would argue, into a masculine economy that demands woman’s passivity and silence.³⁰ She is crystallised as a lifeless, mute statue by ‘the speech of a nation through the mouth of one man’, as Ezra Pound once described the epic.³¹ For H.D., writing Helen’s quest entailed a process of both revision and renewal; revising, and in many ways deconstructing, the epic tradition – the epic of the genre’s patriarchs who stand monolithic at its beginnings – while simultaneously renewing the epic with a new found place for a woman at its centre. This woman was not to be the same stereotype H.D. found cast in previous depictions of Helen. She was to be a quester in search of her own identity and destiny, and a reader and translator of her own history who, to quote Friedman’s reading of H.D.’s protagonist, ‘directly confronts the denial of power and speech to women, not only in the conventional epic, but also in patriarchal culture in general’.³²

H.D., then, begins to thaw Helen's effigy that has been passed from writer to writer. Helen's quest in the poem, her search, is for herself, to understand her identity in its past and future incarnations. 'How reconcile Trojan and Greek?', H.D. questions, 'It is Helen's old and Helen's own problem'.³³ It is this problem which structures H.D.'s epic, transforming, as Friedman has argued, the action of the so-called traditional epic into action predicated on reflection, specifically the psychoanalytic process of reflection.³⁴ H.D.'s Helen remembers, recalls, questions, revises, often reaching no conclusion. The poem reads as a series of questions that receive no response or definite answer, least of all to a question which reflects upon the interminable mutations of Helen's narrative: 'how did the story end?'.³⁵ *Helen in Egypt's* purpose is not to provide narrative closure, but to unravel her constantly re-written narrative, to spiral out the already written lines of verse and prose to find space for the silenced and oppressed voice.

Questions proceeding questions, H.D.'s epic undoes any sense of finality, absolute knowledge, or phallogocentric power. The very reflexive nature of the poem itself is one that refuses to respond to a question with an answer and that closes while pointing to a shadowy horizon:

*But what could Paris know of the sea,
its beat and long reverberation,
its booming and delicate echo,*

*its ripple that spells a charm
on the sand, the rock-lichen,
the sea-moss, the sand,*

*and again and again, the sand;
what does Paris know of the hill and hollow
of billows, the sea-road?*³⁶

These lines pulse with the echo of H.D.'s first writings on Helen – a rough prose translation of Euripides's *Helen* dated around 1918 – in which the ebb and flow of waves becomes the reoccurring lap of Helen's story on new shores. 'Helen is there – she is standing on the shore. The white waves creep up and creep back eternally, over and over', H.D. writes.³⁷ Standing



Figure 3 Nancy Spero, *H.D. Fragments*, 1979. Painting, printing and typewriting collage on paper, 27.9 x 304.8 cm. Private Collection. Installation view at *Nancy Spero: Paper Mirror*, MoMA PS1. © The Nancy Spero and Leon Golub Foundation for the Arts/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2020. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co. Photo: Michael Green.



Figure 4 Nancy Spero, *Notes in Time*, 1979. Hand printing, gouache, typewriting, collage on paper, 51 x 6398 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Installation view at *Nancy Spero: Paper Mirror*, MoMA PS1. © The Nancy Spero and Leon Golub Foundation for the Arts/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2020. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co. Photo: Michael Green.

on the shores of 1979, her ear tuned to the echo of the waves as they ripple onto the sands of where she stands, Spero also asks a question aloud, facing H.D. and her poem: how to create a space within which to depict woman, narrator of her own story?

Spero's *H.D. Fragments* (figure 3) and *Notes in Time* (figure 4) both stretch out horizontally, *H.D. Fragments* across 13 small frames and *Notes in Time*, Spero's own monumental epic, across 24 paper panels, each roughly measuring 9 feet long. The horizontal, lateral stretch of both works – a reference to both the papyrus scrolls of ancient Egypt and the architectural frieze – creates the space within which Spero can begin her own feminist recalibration of the epic, one which, like her choice of texts and *Perhaps She Was Right's* defiant 'I do not', answers back. Each frame or panel constructs the two horizontal expanses, detailing in their own textual and pictorial

calibrations episodes from *Helen in Egypt* and, in relation to *Notes in Time*, other specific chapters in the lives of women that have been neglected from the history books.

While *H.D. Fragments* takes H.D. as its sole interlocutor, *Notes in Time* took Spero three years to complete, culling a massive 94 quotes from a wide variety of sources including *Helen in Egypt*, a poem by Mina Loy, speeches by abolitionist Sojourner Truth and feminist literary scholarship by Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert. Spero's 'notes' and 'fragments' are as such – intimate first-hand accounts, personal stories, letters, fleeting moments from *Helen in Egypt* all brought together to form an epic founded upon the previously silenced and suppressed history of the other sex. *Notes in Time's* expansive size and its textual and pictorial density was developed from years of prowling; Spero was an impressive collector of materials, amassing a great number of books that spanned from ancient literature to modernist fiction to encyclopaedias on ancient civilizations, alongside carefully filed newspaper and magazine clippings.³⁸ Books were the artist's hunting ground, where she would sever texts and images from their sources to include in her vast scrolls. It 'was like working on a book, a solitary activity', the artist once commented, 'I was stockpiling images and quotations, handprinting them and collaging them directly on the paper. Then, in the last few months of work, I put everything together'.³⁹ Many of these images formed Spero's chorus, a diverse stock company of women from across time brought together over years of collecting. Performing various poses and movements, the troupe was continually re-cast and re-used by Spero throughout her career, made instantly accessible on zinc plates ready for printing and on cut-out paper for collaging.

Together, this chorus – a lexicon of text and image – details an encyclopaedic account of the violation of women throughout history, be it the violence felt in their personal, lived experiences or their erasure from language and history. One quote from H.D. in Panel XVI of *Notes in Time* reads 'could a woman ever // know what the heroes felt / what spurred them to war and battle', while an excerpt in *H.D. Fragments* asks 'What can a woman know / of man's passion and birthright?'⁴⁰ Grounded in a recognition of difference, these questions betray Spero's investment in the poem as a text which probes, in its epic form and its reflective narrative content, the possibilities of understanding sexuate identity as fundamentally bound to history and

lived experience. Both artworks catalogue this hegemonic violence while simultaneously undermining it; in Spero's own recording of history, women are granted a voice to respond and her chorus move freely throughout the space crafted by the artist, imbued with freedom and vitality. Individual chants and ecstatic movements come together to form a thunderous, rolling wave of resistance.

Unlike the dense hieroglyphic surfaces of papyrus scrolls, the artist's scrolls do not simply unfurl from left to right, but are multidirectional, narrating a history through bodies and text with no beginning, middle or end. And unlike *Helen in Egypt* which picks up after the fall of Troy, *Notes in Time* begins somewhat *in media res*, usurping a clear linear flow, as it was originally intended to be part of Spero's earlier scroll *Torture of Women* (1975). Yet due to the sheer scale of the two scrolls and the breadth of material collected by Spero over years of gathering, *Notes in Time* became a separate artwork, completed four years later.

Already beginning in the middle of things, *Notes in Time* therefore offers a temporal complex that moves both forward and backward at once, between the lives of different women living in different historical moments. In this way, Spero's women too leap both left and right, up and down, across and over the panels, confusing the direction of the horizontal axis established by both works' spatial configurations. Concurrently, the temporal flit between past and present histories and the intimacy found in the voices that form Spero's revised history becomes an embodied experience for the viewer of Spero's art; we move from panel-to-panel, lean in, come close to read what the artist has printed on the page, step back to try and understand how one voice might figure in the larger frame, come closer again, and then perhaps follow the direction of Spero's women to help guide us to the next image or passage of text. This contact between viewer and artwork brings new meaning to when H.D. considers what it might mean to come 'face to face' with Helen, an encounter in which the petrifying layers of white paint applied to the poem's titular quester throughout history are peeled away to reveal Helen the subject.

Thus, to experience *Notes in Time* is to be faced with an active bodily task as it demands communication and an encounter. Spero's scroll insists on being read, seen, followed, in a way co-authored by the wandering, reading, looking viewer whose own quiet 'tread of[...].feet', quoting H.D. from the scroll, fills the many empty spaces left throughout the work – pauses where

the viewer almost becomes one of the leaping, traversing women. As with her chorus of women, Spero positions the viewer as an active subject, one who can also respond and answer back. For Lisa Tickner, this tread of feet is akin to a public procession, foregrounding this encounter as a communal activity, one shared between viewers and between viewer and artwork.⁴¹ Similarly, Jon Bird has noted the importance of what he terms 'peripheral vision' in Spero's art, a glance (as opposed to a gaze) 'that delights in a subversive delay which compromises the whole notion of[...]order and hierarchy'.⁴² We might then think of this as an encounter between subjects, a subject-subject dialectic founded on intimacy and participation and a series of moments in which those steps both forward and backward embody the back-and-forth swaying between Irigaray's *I* and *You*.

The horizontal reach of both works is therefore imbued with a psychic and political importance, one that binds together the intimate and the epic to generate a space within which subjects can coexist. Form as epic and content as intimate, personal and subjective come together as a resistance against a totalising, linear model of history which belies the subjective (and indeed woman as subject). This is to insist on the intimate as bound up with the epic or, more precisely, to recognise woman as a subject with a history and within a history, part of an alternative, intersubjective timeline. As such, *Notes in Time's* multidirectional temporal form applies pressure to the Oedipal model of history and relations derided in *Perhaps She Was Right*, a vertical paradigm pervaded with anxiety and violence. Embracing a lateral model of thinking and experiencing, Spero's works 'explode', to borrow from Robert Storr's analysis of Spero's 'encyclopaedic projects', the narrow subject-object, hierarchal model upheld by a patriarchal society. Spero, Storr writes, creates a 'multiform vision' that 'return[s] to consciousness elements of a common heritage lost to view by both men and women'.⁴³ In this way, Spero's works suggest that we might also look beside, parallel and in front. We could read this as another 'love to' or 'I love to you', a gesture extending within and beyond the frame that aims to forge a space which can transform the very terms upon which being is predicated. And thus this 'common heritage' to which Storr refers is renewed by Spero as she reaches across time to then place her notes *in time* (a move of which Spero's expression-*with* is also crucially part), that is a temporal continuum that ruptures the seams tying the linear to the vertical.



Figure 5 Nancy Spero, *H.D. Fragments*, 1979. Detail. © The Nancy Spero and Leon Golub Foundation for the Arts/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2020. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co. Photo: Michael Green.

This intimacy, this closeness and proximity, which is established between artwork-viewer and Spero-H.D., as well as between the myriad voices deployed in *Notes in Time*, is rendered within Spero's works. Glancing across *H.D. Fragments*, we notice a *pas de deux* performed by two women; hovering in Spero's carefully constructed universe, where voice and gesture co-exist, one figure reaches towards the other and vice versa (figure 5). Their hands meet, yet each remains defined, afforded a unique agency in relation to their partner. Making our way around *Notes in Time*, this *pas de deux* dances into



Figure 6 Nancy Spero, *Notes in Time*, 1979. Detail of Panel XIX. © The Nancy Spero and Leon Golub Foundation for the Arts/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2020. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co. Photo: David Reynolds.

Panel XIX where, again, two women embrace in swift motion as one leaps upwards while the other holds them in support (figure 6). Taken as a way to read Spero's recalibration of the epic and history, as well as her expression-*with* the voices and figures that construct this new space, the *pas de deux* foregrounds the possibilities that open out of the dim haze glowing between Irigaray's twin poles. Following the 'softly luminous' light, Spero brings together a chorus from across time (mythological and historical, real and fictional), including H.D., whose voices chant a new desynchronised ode, one voice lapping over the other, disrupting, as H.D.'s poem does, any sense of a beginning or an end. In this way, the space generated by Spero echoes the very evolution of the work itself, oscillating somewhere in the middle of things, *in media res*, as if to acknowledge that to place woman as protagonist means to look forward as much as it means to look back – to remember to glance to both sides.

Look. Look left, away from the *pas de deux* in Panel XIX and you might find this chorus – 80 ferocious heads, each unique, some with past lives in Spero's body of work and others new to the group. Move in close and tilt your ear towards them. Listen. Perhaps you will hear one of them spit out those three words hissed by H.D. and Helen: *I do not*.

Notes

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- 1 Hélène Cixous, 'Spero's Dissidences', in *Nancy Spero: Dissidences*, (trans.) Laurent Milesi, exh. cat., Barcelona and Madrid, 2008, p. 141.
- 2 Nancy Spero quoted in Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'Nancy Spero Interview', in op. cit., p. 96.
- 3 It has been suggested that the 'I do not challenge' of *Homage to New York* is a reference to a section of *Helen in Egypt* which reads 'No, I will not challenge / the ancient Mystery, / the Oracle...' While Spero was certainly very familiar with this section of the poem as lines immediately following this stanza appear in Panel X of *Notes in Time*, this cannot be the case as *Helen in Egypt* was first published in 1961, some years after the completion of Spero's painting.
- 4 Nancy Spero quoted in 'Jo Anna Isaak in Conversation with Nancy Spero', in Jon Bird (ed.), *Nancy Spero*, London, 1996, p. 9.
- 5 Cixous, op. cit., p. 141.
- 6 Mignon Nixon, 'Spero's Curses', in *October*, vol. 112, 2007, p. 5.
- 7 Ibid., p. 5.
- 8 On H.D.'s belated critical reception see Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Who Buried H.D.? A Poet, Her Critics, and Her Place in "The Literary Tradition"', in *College English*, vol. 36, issue no. 7, 1975, pp. 801–814.
- 9 Susan Stanford Friedman, *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.*, Bloomington, 1981, p. 235.
- 10 Joanna S. Walker, *Nancy Spero: Encounters*, Surry, 2011, pp. 73–74.
- 11 Ibid., pp. 71–72.
- 12 Adalaide Morris, 'Introduction: Writing', in *The Iowa Review*, vol. 16, issue no. 3, 1986, p. 5.
- 13 Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Emergences and Convergences', in *The Iowa Review*, vol. 16, issue no. 3, 1986, p. 52.
- 14 Nancy Spero quoted in op. cit., 2008, p. 115.
- 15 See Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, London, 2019.
- 16 H.D., *Trilogy*, New York, 1998, p. 43.
- 17 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, (trans) Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke, Ithica, 1985, p. 217.
- 18 Ibid., p. 217.
- 19 Nancy Spero, 'Woman as Protagonist. Interview with Jeanne Siegal, 1987', in Roel Arkesteijn (ed.), *Codex Spero: Nancy Spero – Selected Writings and Interviews 1950–2008*, Amsterdam, 2008, p. 97.

- 20 Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You: Sketch of a Possible Felicity in History*, (trans.) Alison Martin, New York and London, 1996, pp. 109–110.
- 21 Donald A. Landes has noted that ‘Speaking-*with* runs the risk[...]of appearing to be a mere communication, while expression-*with* inevitably points us towards exchange and communication[...]a movement away from verticality towards loving-horizontally’. See Donald A. Landes, ‘Expression and Speaking-with in the Work of Luce Irigaray’, in Luce Irigaray and Mary Green (eds), *Luce Irigaray: Teaching*, London, 2008, p. 177.
- 22 Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love*, (trans) Heidi Bostic and Stephen Pluháček, London and New York, 2002, p. viii.
- 23 Spero’s work has often been identified as a form of *l’écriture féminine* (women’s writing), recalibrated by the artist as *peinture féminine* (women’s painting): ‘When I read about *l’écriture féminine*, I got excited about what I was trying to do as a visual artist and[...] I said to John Bird [sic] that I was doing *peinture féminine*’. See Nancy Spero and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Nancy Spero/Hans Ulrich Obrist*, Cologne, 2008, p. 32.
- 24 Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, New York and London, 1991, p. 42.
- 25 Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art*, Cambridge, 2006, p. 41.
- 26 Catherine de Zegher, ‘Torture, Tongue, and Free Reign in Spero’s Explicit Series of Paintings’, in *Nancy Spero*, exh. cat., Birmingham, 1998, p. 5.
- 27 H.D., ‘Helen in Egypt’, in *Notes on Euripides, Pausanias, and Greek Lyric Poets*, unpublished manuscript, various dates, H.D. Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. YCAL MSS 24, II, Box 44, Folder 1119.
- 28 H.D., *Helen in Egypt*, New York, 1974, pp. 2–4.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 30 H.D., ‘Helen’, in Louis L. Martz (ed.), *H.D.: Collected Poems 1912–1944*, New York, 1986, pp. 154–155.
- 31 See Noel Stock, *The Life of Ezra Pound*, New York and London, 1970, p. 76.
- 32 Susan Stanford Friedman, ‘Gender and Genre Anxiety: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H.D. as Epic Poets’, in *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, vol. 5, issue no. 2, 1986, p. 217.
- 33 H.D., op. cit., 1974, p. 157.
- 34 Friedman, op. cit., 1981, pp. 55 and 66.
- 35 H.D., op. cit., 1974, p. 52.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 304.
- 37 H.D., ‘Helen in Egypt’, in op. cit.
- 38 This was an activity Spero shared with her husband, artist Leon Golub, and in their New York studio they would frequently pass articles, books and images on to one another.
- 39 Nancy Spero quoted in Maurice Berger and Jo Anna Isaak (eds), *Notes in Time. Leon Golub and Nancy Spero*, exh. cat., Maryland, 1995, p. 29.
- 40 H.D., op. cit., 1974, p. 293.
- 41 See Lisa Tickner, ‘Nancy Spero: Images of Women and la peinture féminine’, in *Nancy Spero*, exh. cat., London, 1987, p. 15.

- 42 Jon Bird, 'Dancing to a Different Tune', in op. cit., 1996, p. 64.
- 43 Robert Storr, 'When This You See...', in Brigitte Lamberts (ed.), *Nancy Spero: Woman Breathing*, exh. cat., Germany, 1992, p. 18.

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