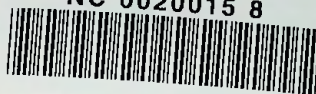


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**CONTENTS**

**PAGE**

Introduction	1
Chapter One - "A Primary Space"	3
Chapter Two - "Codex Artaud"	10
Chapter Three - "The Female Spectacle"	20
Chapter Four - "The Goddess"	25
Conclusion	31
List of Illustrations	33
Bibliography	39
Acknowledgements	42

## INTRODUCTION

Spero uses the female body in her work to ask questions concerning women, such as - what is the social and sexual position of women in a society which speaks a language invented and maintained by a male, patriarchal order? A language in which the male experience equals the "norm" and the female experience equals the "other". The difficulty for Spero and for other feminist artists and theoreticians is that of speaking from a position of 'other' which it is trying to transcend. How does one elaborate on the position of women without relegating them to a blanket mass of people with only one voice, one desire? I will discuss this notion throughout the thesis.

It takes courage and dedication to take the risks involved in exploring the location occupied by women, to try to make that space open-ended and non-fixed. The obvious danger arises of pigeon - holing women into a space where they can be laid aside in memory and dismissed, forgotten about or neglected. I hope to argue that Spero deals with this issue by being eclectic with the imagery she uses. There is no one fixed image, she picks already produced images from Egyptian, Celtic, Sumarian, Greco-Roman and medieval mythologies and cultures. Her work is multivocal. I have also chosen to be eclectic with the images I talk about, picking usually one image from various works.

In Chapter One I will discuss various notions ranging from the symbolism and possible interpretations of Spero's use of space, to the concept of a female viewer. Spero will also be discussed in an Art Historical context. I will talk about the perceived idea that male equals genius and female equals lesser intelligence. Finally, I will give examples of the political activities that the New York

Feminists were involved in which heralded a change in the perception of women in Art History.

In Chapter Two, titled "Codex Artaud", I will examine this work in relation to the position of women in language and what constitutes part of our knowledge of what woman is. As regards the use of Artaud's texts, I pose the question of whether she is justified in using male words to expand on the female position in both art and society. This work provided Spero with a working prototype for later work. Her technique will be referred to in this section.

Chapter Three, titled 'The Female Spectacle' deals with the idea of woman making a spectacle of herself, specifically in "Let the Priests Tremble". I will talk about the effect this has on the male viewer, with reference to the castration complex. I examine also the positive power of the carnivalesque spirit and laughter as highlighted in Spero's work.

Chapter Four titled, "The Goddess" deals with one specific image, Artemis the Hunteress, which appears in "Notes on Women in Time". I hope to examine the criteria for attaining and maintaining Goddess status. Artemis has the power of sudden death and destruction but also has the power to heal. It is this ambiguity of female qualities in the images Spero picks which halts the possibility of a tryanical message about female desire and identity. I hope to also examine some of the elements pertaining to the notion of woman being aligned with nature.

## CHAPTER ONE

### A PRIMARY SPACE

In 1965 Spero deserted the formal oil painting on canvas tradition and worked on paper, unframed and unmounted. With this new working formula she tried to provide a new space, a "room of one's own", in which it could be possible for her to explore feminist concerns away from the almost holy, yet imprisoning canvas space. She created a location where she felt free to move around unhindered by tradition. I see what she has created not as a secondary space, but as a primary one, peopled by not the "second sex", but by women undefined by a patriarchal culture, by self-defining women, subjects not objects. The inhabitants move about freely in their world, they can exercise their abilities, they have a right to determine their own life. Hopefully, they have the right to be free from physical abuse, to control their own sexuality and reproduction. Both historically and contemporarily in Western Cultures, some of these rights have been unattainable for women.

"In many cultures past and present, some men have been restricted in some of these rights; in all Western cultures most women have been restricted in all of these rights" (M. French 1985) (1)

Therefore, power-in-the-world is unattainable for women. In a patriarchal world, this type of power is not just the highest, but the only value.

"In order to create, it is necessary to want to reveal the world to others; consequently, one must be able to see the world, and in order to do so one must attain a certain distance from it. When totally

immersed in a situation, you cannot describe it" (Simone de Beauvoir 1979). (2)

Spero's work provides an uncluttered location for looking around, it is possible as De Beauvoir says "to see the world". When totally immersed in patriarchy, it is hard to see with clarity, it is difficult to imagine, to visualise, to fantasise away from the clutter of oppression. Spero renders an idealised location where the process of looking helps to facilitate a reassessment of women's position in the world. She "demolishes in order to rebuild differently", (3) a demolition of the old order to create a new, different one. Threatening style and structure she disrupts outworn ideologies.

In 1974 Spero decided that 'women' would be the subject of all her works. She is proposing the female gaze as opposed to the male gaze.

"What I am trying to say then, in a lyrical and positive way, is that these women are empowered and they are sexual. These women are protagonists and they are subjects. I am doing this in my language and it is not primarily for the male gaze" (4).

The women that leap, jump, run, stick out their tongues and show their genitals in the work, do so as subjects, not as naked women to be drooled over. In the late 60's and 70's the notion of the female viewer was quite a radical one. Work which used naked women as images previously, by men was for primarily, the male viewer. This type of art, which automatically turned women into objects, was geared towards a specifically male gaze, and was produced for male enjoyment. Spero was trying to rupture the power relationship of subject (male) conquering object (female).

Her aims tied in with the feminist movement, as part of a total reappraisal of women. The possibility of looking at her work with a voyeuristic gaze does not exist. The female viewer relates differently to the images than the male viewer -

"For the woman viewer, the woman in the image is always you" (5) (Joanna Issac)

### Spero in an Art Historical Context

"Art occurs in a social situation, is an integral element of social structure, and is mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions, be they academies, systems of patronage, mythologies of the divine creator and artists as he-man and social outcast" (Linda Nochlin 1971) (6).

In other words, art does not occur in an ivory tower, or totally isolated situation, but happens in a society, a culture, whose education, politics and ethics determine who can and cannot be artists - so far, women had not been allowed partake at the same level as men in this activity. By virtue of being a woman one was almost automatically excluded from participating fully in the art process.

Spero was one of the artists in the late 60's and early 70's whose work was influenced by feminist theory and therefore offered a more complex critique of both art and culture, and examined the role of women in society.

The myth of "greatness" as the male prerogative was at last being challenged, and yet it was difficult to establish a position for women artists, beyond that of comparison with male artists, while trying to site a different discourse for a female art. At the very notion of a

different analysis of art, terms of negativity were almost automatically levelled.

Women artists such as Spero, Judy Chicago and Mary Kelly, were concerned with issues pertaining to nature, evaluation, and the status of female artistic production. In the past, art produced by women was relegated to a special category, it holds a marginal position in terms of mainstream cultural activity. The old categories of male - mainstream and female - marginal or not as good as were difficult to override. Having a different position (without being ghettoized) while trying to get rid of the allotted inferior status associated with women's art, raised the question of whether it is more effective to challenge a system from within or without.

From the beginning of the feminist movement there were different opinions as to which was the best approach to take. New York artists tended to look for economic parity and equal representation at exhibitions. They tackled the biases of the artistic institutions. In some cases this worked, for example, in the Whitney Museum (1970), the level of women's work being exhibited increased to twenty per cent from five per cent. West coast women artists were more concerned with exploring issues of aesthetics and female consciousness. An example of this is Judy Chicago's "Womanhouse" exhibition which took over an entire house and expressed a particular definition of women's lives as shaped by their new feminist consciousness.

"Man has only ever spoken of things that interest him, that is to say of things that help or hinder him in his pursuit of virility. Man has always decided what can and cannot be talked about. Man has outlined in the ink of his own sex, the exact limits of all thought. And the



Numerous Journals, magazines, monographs and books were also published. The "Feminist Art Journal" was launched in 1972 in New York. In 1975, "Women Artists newsletter" was published. "Chrysalis; a magazine of Women's Culture" appeared in 1977.

All this energetic reappraisal served to give women a sense of strength and encouragement, and I believe women artists today are in debt to that generation of feminists who did the ground work and raised the issues concerning a multiplicity of perceptions of the position of women in society and art. The task was gargantuan and is still ongoing which proves the need for a continuance of feminist informed art. Nancy Spero was working on a feminist based art in the early 70's and is still working in the same vein today, because in my opinion the issues she deals with are still also ongoing.

FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER ONE

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4. Catalogue, N. Spero, Pg. 14
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## CHAPTER TWO

### "CODEX ARTAUD" (1972)

"I used Artaud as a means to externalise my voice as an artist, and maybe at that time I had to have that masculine voice, the most extreme example of alienation" (Spero) (1)

Spero used Artaud's texts as being outside logocentrism. Artaud's words are seen as subversive, the voice of the outsider, the madman, which could clarify the position Spero felt she was in as a woman artist. The redeeming of her own voice was something she felt she could do through the fractured words of Artaud. It was almost like a different language. She wanted to assert her own subjectivity through images and her own voice through words. There is a great sense of anger in these words.

Spero says:

"the quotations I have used are mostly about a disavowal of existence or of the material world - of living in a world of shadows and darkness" (2). The work is littered with 'nightmare images' (3) which enter into a dialogue with the words.

In this piece Spero used hand made paper stuck together end-to-end to provide a scroll like format. The viewer could look at images in isolation or in relation to each other, or follow the images in a sequential fashion. This method also helped to resist commodification, it could be seen as a reactionary gesture to the mainstream artworld. The pieces were unusual in a technical sense as they were unframed and unmounted. This gave them an unfinished

sense, they were like the starting point of a discourse, a non-enclosed and therefore open-ended statement or question. There is no starting point or no finishing point in the actual work. One piece does not dominate the other but exists in harmonious co-habitation. Each section of paper joins together with the other in a non-competitive fashion. This technique can be seen to link in with feminist discourse, which is not involved in gaining power over others but is rather in itself an empowering process.

The image of the phallic tongue appears throughout this work. The long tongue protrudes in a defiant gesture, as if to say "I have a tongue and I can do many things with it, I will not keep it encased in my mouth forever".

"In French 'tongue' is 'langue', tongue and language - I was sticking out my tongue and trying to find a voice after feeling silenced for so many years" (N. Spero) (3)

Spero, felt silenced, excluded from partaking fully, like so many women in society. This work ties in with the first stage of feminist theory which asserted the need for a specifically female voice.

In sticking out her tongue Spero was not specifically making an articulate sound but a defiant gesture. The articulate or inarticulate sounds to accompany this gesture come from the texts of Artaud, alienated and outside conventional language - and yet if tongue could equal language as it does in French, perhaps no words are necessary in order to articulate a language. The tongue alone could be a language in itself. The image could also be interpreted as an uncovering of the place of women in language, a making visible of the power woman's tongue, providing the idea of a female voice in language.

Saussure divides language into two parts 1) la langue and 2) la parole. La langue is the language, a system of signs which are essentially words. La Parole can be interpreted as speech, which is an individual act, a message. Yet, one cannot exist without the other, there is no language without speech, no speech without language. Language is a complex system of signs.

In Spero's image the woman wants something for herself - she wants access into the language system - La Langue (the tongue) and La Parole (Speech). Spero makes visible woman's interiority, she was illustrating the beginning of a new position of femininity, by rejecting the notion of the passive, voiceless woman.

Language does not have to be a discipline. It is a robust and fluid system of signs that is constantly changing. A word can acquire a new meaning, depending on what comes before or after it (syntagmatic plane). A word outside discourse, on an associative plane can acquire relations of a different kind.

In recognition of the fact that language can be a non-fixed, fluid organic structure, Spero wants a place in it with a wish to change it.

"When the organ in her mouth belongs to her, we will know that all tongues, all words are flesh" (5) (Joanna French, 1988).

Words like "great", "master" and "genius" carry a lot of weight but have become meaningless through overuse. Life has been taken out of words by logocentrism. But woman's desire cannot be expressed by the same language as male desire. Male desire and male logic has dominated language in the West since the Greeks. Therefore, the point in finding a female voice, is to express something in language that

has not previously been expressed. It is not necessary to set up a counter system to the language that is already there, but to pursue the invention of "another thinking as yet not thinkable" (Irigaray) According to Irigaray there has been a cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language.

Language does not have to be a discipline, like philosophy for example. The very fact of calling it a discipline automatically implies obedience of certain rules, procedures and operations. It represents to quote Michelle Le Doeuff

"a closure, a delimitation which denies the (actually or potentially) indefinite modes of thought (even if this character is only potential); it is a barage restraining the number of possible (acceptable) statements" (6)

What is the position of women in language? According to Levi-Stauss, men exchange women, therefore women have become the equivalent of a sign that is being communicated. He refers to the theory of what is the distinguishing feature of human kinship structures - he suggests that it is not the biological family of the mother, father, child, but the distinguishing law, is that which regulates marriage relationships (and it's pivotal expression is the prohibition on incest). Because incest is not acceptable one family member (i.e. the father), gives up another family member (the daughter), to another family, thus -

"the rules of marriage within 'primitive' societies function as a means of exchange and as an unconsciously acknowledged system of communication (7) (F. Mitchell)

Therefore, as previously stated, woman become the equivalent of a sign that is being communicated.

According to Saussure the linguistic sign (in this case woman as a sign of exchange) is a double entity which entails 1) a concept (the signified) and 2) a sound image (the signifier).

So the sign, the word woman, entails a concept and a sound-image. What is primarily the concept of woman? What constitutes part of our knowledge of what woman is? What is the sound-image of woman? (The sound-image refers to the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression it makes on the senses - i.e. what we think when we hear the word woman).

Spero uses the words of Artaud as a way of radicalising phallogocentric language, disrupting the male order and therefore providing a point of entry for a 'feminine' voice in a misshapen system of communication. Though being male, or using words written by a man does not automatically mean that the feelings behind the words come from the usual base of male thought - Kristeva believes that Artaud, Joyce and Mallarme are among radical authors of a feminine tradition, men can (though they are the exception rather than the rule) express something akin to female desire, through writing, for example Joyce's Molly Bloom. Artaud's writing can be seen in this light (i.e. the feminine tradition). I believe that Spero is therefore justified in using his texts as a springboard to leap over or swim through patriarchal language. Artaud disrupted the universal phallogocentric tradition and Spero uses her images to further push that rupturing to the point of splitting, therefore giving women a starting point for the

expression of 'the self'. Spero's work offers the option of attaining both 'la langue' and 'la parole'. She invites us to see the tongue, see the possibility of woman's strength in language.

What is moving about Spero's work, is the risks she takes in using Artaud's words and the directness of the imagery which can be read on many levels. It could be seen as a negative move to use male words while trying to posit a 'feminine' mode of speech, but my opinion is that one does not have to throw away something that is already established in order to establish something new, it is possible to remould the old to produce something new and fresh. What is needed, now that there is a basic language that we understand, is to fill in the missing, lost, 'feminine' voice and to reclaim a place for women in language. Women need no longer operate as a 'sign' but as a subject who can control oneself, and empower oneself through a sorting out of the reality in which one operates. Given that the average sociable human being speaks approximately thirty thousand words a day, the task is vital. Each word is a complex sequence of sounds and pauses, containing far more information than we are usually aware of. The near miracle of our capacity to generate these messages is perhaps rivalled only by the enormous job the average human being does in understanding them. It is woman's task to write themselves into this language, not to be written out of it - to challenge our perceptions of language, therefore challenging the politics of it and disrupting the perceived location of the female in this system.

Kristeva writes, "As regards the themes to be found in texts by women, they invite us to see, touch and smell a body made by organs whether they are exhibited to our satisfaction or horror (8).



Part of this could be said of Spero's work - she exhibits the organs, the mouth, the genitals, but we are stopped from touching them because she is not portraying palpable flesh, she is not pandering to the male prerogative to touch - we can look but we cannot touch, unless we have the consent of the woman. The world that these women inhabit is not a world in which women are in exile from power (i.e. male power) but one in which women empower themselves.

Spero is tackling language through subjective experience in order to re-examine its models and to demonstrate the system's non-validity in the face of certain experiences, in this case the experience of being a woman.

Such work, in the words of Kristeva, "is concerned both with what it can and cannot demonstrate, with sense and non-sense, with what is and what is not given by the thesis, with truth and whatever it resists. It analyses and so establishes the existence of them all, thereby broadening our view of what we take to be intelligence or society" (9).

'Codex Artaud' deconstructs and constructs at the same time, in the same breath. It deconstructs the given language and constructs a position for the 'feminine' in that language. It is after all made up of *la langue* and *la parole*. Spero re-examines female identity and location through the laws by which it lives, using both image and text to do this.

This work has a double edge to it, in that it also comments on Spero's position in the art world -

"I was so far out in the art world - on the edge, if not actually over it - that by using the language of Artaud I could expel my hostility and resistance" (10).

Therefore the work functions in two ways - it voices the despair of woman in society and language and in the art world. 'Codex Artaud' also provided for Spero a model, as regards technique, for further works. It created a dialogue between text, image, space and technique that gave rise to a specific working method which Spero expanded in later pieces. This multiplicity of text and image gives the work an intensity through the images clashing with the text in some cases, or in others giving of an aura of harmonious cohesion. Through fracturing the language and spacing the images far apart from each other Spero created what she termed a "sound-space" (11). I have discussed in an earlier chapter possible interpretations of what that "sound-space" could mean.

Spero spent four years working on the texts of Artaud. One theme that Artaud articulated was the concept of the 'Theatre of cruelty' which Spero elaborates through her use of the carnivalesque spectacle.

"Once aware of this language in space, language of sounds, cries, lights, onomatopoeia, the theatre must organise into veritable hieroglyphs with the help of characters and objects, and make use of their symbolism and interconnection to all organs on all levels" (12) ('The first Manifesto'; Artaud)

Spero uses language in space, and hieroglyphs to establish the carnivalesque element, which is an essential part of in the 'Theatre of Cruelty' Artaud envisaged.

Spero's use of the image of the 'disorderly' woman dislocates woman from her perceived place in society. "The disorderly woman is a multivalent image that works to widen behavioural options for women within and outside marriage and it also sanctions riotous and political disobedience. Play with an unruly woman is partly a chance for temporary release from traditional and stable hierarchy; but it is also part of the conflict over efforts to change the basic distribution of power within society" (Mary Russo 1988) (13).

By positing the carnivalesque woman as an image Spero invites the viewer to see woman as uninhibited by previous notions of femininity, and also as a means of changing the power structure in a patriarchal society. For me, the figure of the female transgressor as a public 'spectacle', is still powerfully resonant and Spero explores the possibilities of redeploying this representation as a demystifying model. The laughter of the carnival associated with the notion of 'spectacle' and unrestrained speech is positive. The positiveness comes from the joy and heterogeneity of the carnival, and the carnivalesque style and spirit, which Spero's work provides. The female body as grotesque can be used affirmatively to destabilize the idealizations of female beauty. The Sheela-na-Gaig smiles as she exposes her genitals - why?

"I see us as viewed by ourselves and others, in our bodies and in our work, in ways that are continually shifting the terms of viewing, so that looking at us, there will be a new question - why are these old hags laughing?" (Mary Russo 1988) (14).

The answer to this question I feel is that women can be in touch with their own social and sexual desire and identity and empowered with it. They can smile because it feels good.

FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER TWO

1. Nancy Spero: Catalogue, Part 11 'Codex Artaud' - the Phallic tongue", Pg. 24
2. Ibid
3. Ibid
4. Ibid
5. Towards a Feminist Art Theory, J. Freuh, L. Langan, A. Raven, Pg. 160
6. French Feminist Thought, Ed. Toril Moi, Essay 'Philosophy and Psychoanalysis' Michele Le Doeuff, Pg. 194
7. Psychoanalysis & Feminism, J. Mitchell, Pg. 370,
8. French Feminist Thought, Ed. Toril Moi, Essay: "Talking about Polylogue", J. Kristeva, Pg. 112
9. Ibid, Pg 113
10. Nancy Spero: Catalogue, Nancy Spero, Pg. 25
11. Ibid
12. Nancy Spero: Catalogue, Pg. 26, Artaud
13. Feminist Studies/Critical Studies Ed by Teresa de Lauretis. Essay title: "Female Grotesques: Carnival and theory "Mary Russo. Pg. 215. Published McMillan Press, London. Published 1988
14. Ibid: Pg. 227

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE FEMALE SPECTACLE

"Making a spectacle of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger. The danger was of an exposure. It was a kind of inadvertancy and loss of boundaries. It was wrong, any woman could make a spectacle of herself if she was not careful" (Mary Russo, 1986) (1).

Spero makes a 'spectacle' of women not in the negative sense but in a positive way - she is showing us women jumping and running naked, they are shameless. This is the element of 'spectacle' she portrays, seeing and being seen, without the shame or guilt. She eschews the usual connotations of portraying the naked body as something to be desired and overpowered. The female naked body she portrays is doing something rather than waiting to be done to. The woman's own erotic drives are as important as the erotic drives she excites. I am thinking particularly of the work "Let the priests tremble". The women in this somersault, leap and crouch, conquering their world, expressing their desires, showing their sexts. The tilting and falling text reads "let the priests tremble, we're going to show them our sexts!" and "too bad for them if they fall apart on discovering that women aren't men, or that mother doesn't have one". What she is obviously referring to here is the castration complex, and particularly its effect on the male's (priests) first sight of the female genitals.

According to Freudian psychoanalysis, a male child first notices 'difference' when he sees a woman's genitals (usually his mother's). He perceives it as a lack of a penis, and proof that castration can exist. He thinks that women have been castrated.

"Castration can be seen as the high point of psychological fear of loss and hence of danger" (J. Mitchell 1974) (2)

When the child is at this intense period of sexual development, the difference between male and female is acknowledged in terms of 'possessing a penis' or being 'castrated'. Therefore, the penis can be seen as a metaphor for power, and the female genitalia are seen as the antithesis of it.

Chasseguet - Smirger (1964) propose that both boys and girls possess a 'terrifying maternal image' in the unconscious, resulting from projections of impotence. Dinnerstein (1977) argues that the experience of the omnipotent mother in early development leads to a rejection of women by children of both sexes, thus perpetuating male dominance (3).

But Spero is mainly concerned with the concept of castration for the male in this work. Freud wrote that probably no male human being is spared the terrifying shock of threatened castration at the sight of his mother's genitals. Hence, all societies have a conception of the monstrous - feminine, of what it is about women that is "shocking, terrifying, horrific and abject". (4)

"There is a motif occurring in certain primitive mythologies as well as in modern Surrealist painting and neurotic dreams, which is known in folklore as 'the toothed vagina' - the vagina that castrates. A counter-part, the other way, is the so-called 'phallic mother', a motif perfectly illustrated in the long fingers and nose of the witch" (J. Campbell) (5)

This ties in with Kristeva's notion of woman - a woman is always "an eternal dissident in relation to social and political consensus, in exile from power, and therefore always singular, fragmentary, demonic, a witch" (6)

In Spero's 'Let the Priests Tremble', the priests are trembling because they understand women to be castrated, and hence it could happen to them, also, they perceive female genitals to be 'toothed vaginas' and therefore highly dangerous, containing horrific castrating possibilities for themselves. These women are making a shocking 'spectacle' of themselves, which blurs the boundaries of acceptable feminine behaviour and is therefore perceived as a threat on many different levels.

For me, this work is one of Spero's most carnivalesque and ironic, and compares to her other work 'The Chorus Line', in which the motif of the Sheela-Na-Gcig appears. The Sheela-na-Gcig is the Goddess of fertility and destruction. She is exposing her genitals and her mien is that of a smiling, if grotesque woman. She is typical of Spero's type of image of woman, in that she carries ambiguous connotations, being, as previously stated, the goddess of fertility and destruction, both equally powerful. Being eclectic in her imagery sources, Spero links up with Kristeva's notion of woman.

"I am in favour of a concept of femininity which would take as many forms as there are women" (7).

Thus in essence Spero does not produce a "group-effect", she does not want to be united with all women, but shows the different and often ambiguous qualities in a variety of women. She therefore does not set herself or 'woman' up as the keeper of true knowledge, or truth, but

broadens the discourse by showing us a variety of types and qualities about a varied group of women.

"I search for myself among those elements which have been assimilated. But I ought to reconstitute myself on the basis of disassimilation, and be reborn from traces of culture, works already produced by the other. I should search for the things they contain and do not contain, and examine what has and has not given rise to them, what are and are not their conditions" (Luce Irigaray 1984) (8).

By using images of women already present in our culture, Spero searches for 'the self', the subjective experience in an attempt to be "reborn from traces of culture". Traditionally woman represents, for man, a sense of place, Spero provides the option of woman becoming a sense of place for herself - in fact woman becoming herself.



FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER THREE

1. Feminist Studies/Critical Studies, Ed. T. De Lauretis, Essay, 'Female Grotesques: Carnival & Theory', M. Russo, Pg. 215
2. Psychoanalysis & Feminism: J. Mitchell 1974, Penguin
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5. Ibid
6. French Feminist Thought, Ed. T. Moi, Essay 'Talking About Polylogue', Kristeva, Pg. 112
7. Ibid, Pg 112
8. Ibid: Essay by Luce Irigaray

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE GODDESS

In Spero's work 'Notes on Women in Time' Artemis appears, showing her strength by flexing her muscle and clothed in classical Greek style. The bottom half of her body is encased in type - "She and her sister were considered virgins because they never submitted to a monogamous marriage. Rather, as befits mother goddesses they had enjoyed many consorts. Their failure to marry however, was misinterpreted as virginity by succeeding generations of men who accepted loss of virginity only with conventional marriage. Either way, as mother goddess or virgin, Artemis retains control over herself - her lack of permanent connection to a male figure in a monogamous relationship is the keystone to her independence".

The implication of this message is that women can maintain their independence by not marrying, and can therefore have control over themselves and their bodies. By marriage or linking with a male they automatically lose control of themselves, or at least part of themselves. Presumably Artemis would have been demoted from her Goddess status if she was not a virgin when she married. The only way to maintain therefore, the status of Goddess was to be a virgin or be married - the choice of being sexually active outside marriage was never even considered.

On a symbolic level - this message could be interpreted as a warning against succumbing to the patriarchal word on world - once a part of this system, maintaining an individual identity for women is difficult, if not impossible, it could be seen as a plea for separatism.

Artemis, Apollo's sister, is a hunteress and like him goes armed with bow and arrows. She has the power to send sudden death and plagues among mortals, and also the power to heal them. In Spero's image of Artemis, she has no bow and arrows but shows her strength by, as stated earlier, flexing her powerful muscles. When Artemis was a child her father Zeus asked asked her what presents she would like, her answer was -

"Pray give me eternal virginity; as many names as my brother Apollo, a bow and arrow like him; the office of bringing light; a hunting tunic reaching to my knees; sixty ocean nymphs, as my maids of honour; twenty river nymphs to take care of my buskins and feed my hounds, all the mountains in the world; and lastly, any city you care to choose for me, but one will be enough, because I intend to live on mountains most of the time. Unfortunately, since my mother Leto bore me without pains, the fates have made me patroness of childbirth". (1)

Her reply was extensive to say the least - virginity, bow and arrows, nymphs, all the mountains - her use of the word unfortunate when referring to her being the 'patroness of childbirth' implies resentment at having this gift. She would have preferred to have lived in the mountains and hunted than have anything to do with the emotional and physical implications of childbirth, and by asking for eternal virginity she did not want, either, to have children of her own. She did not want biology to control her destiny. 'Culture' rather than 'nature' was her preference.

Spero was giving us an example of a woman who rejected the traditional role of women in a patriarchal world and it is in my opinion important for women to have access to such role models. I am not saying that child birth or child rearing is negative but that it is not the only

path through which women can achieve fulfilment and self-definition. Spero could be accused of giving a 'masculine' woman as someone to worship, but there is no need to assume that a non-maternal orientated woman is 'masculine'. One important issue that feminist theoreticians and artists have highlighted is that 'masculinity' and 'femininity' is learned and cultural rather than being inherently biological, and therefore natural. To imply something is natural means that it cannot possibly be changed and this therefore limits the expansion of the individual, and the possibilities of broadening our concepts of male and female. If it is recognised that a quality is biologically rooted it will be utterly, totally universal. It is utterly universal that we eat, excrete, require sleep, warmth and shelter. It is utterly universal that we have emotions. But the source of our emotional expressions differ, as do the expressions themselves. Therefore it could be learned by women to want to have children and to feel unfulfilled if this does not happen - but where is it learned from? It is learned from a patriarchal culture ruled by men who have vested interests in relegating women to this sphere only, so that they can get on with maintaining culture and strive for what they see as 'real' power in the world, unhampered and not in competition with women.

"Clearly, no discrimination is as important to men as that of sex. This reinforces the argument that female inferiority is essential to male definition" (2) (Marilyn French, 1985)

If, women can be hemmed in, in the role of nature, men who see themselves as being culture, can therefore imply that nature is inferior, therefore women are inferior. This forestalls any progression in the notion of equality for women and hinders the

concept of women achieving full status in society. Women do not want to be like men, but they do want to be treated justly and not as an inferior people hampered by a narrow definition of what 'woman' is.

"Just as the savage must wrestle with nature to satisfy his wants to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilised man" (Marx) (3)

Therefore if woman is seen as nature, man has to subdue her in order to gratify himself and procreate - it is as if she is a wild beast who has to be moulded into submission in order to become a domestic animal. It compares to the Hegelian idea of life as a struggle and nature as an enemy who needs to be tamed and dominated.

Men see themselves as superior (to other men, to women, to other races or ethnic groups) because they lack what the other has. Men are men because they don't cry, don't feel, don't need (culturally and socially learned). And in general what is missing in them is whatever they perceive woman to be.

So if the definition of what woman is, is broadened, man, too has to shift the basis of his perceptions of himself. This is obviously a healthy situation for both sexes, a broadening of the horizons of identity, a blurring of the boundaries that can act as prison bars.

In 'Notes on Women in Time' Spero uses images of numerous women throughout History, and indeed all her work is littered with various representations of women. I believe that it is a valid working method to use examples of women from various times in history, and to use positive, negative and varied images to give a complete picture of

woman. History is not necessarily linear, it is not untroubled by progress and reaction, and the present does not emerge intact out of an exclusively rigid past. To quote Ailette Farge

"If we are to reconstruct the history of women's cultural, social and political identities, we must resist the temptation to freeze that history into two equally distorted images: that of a past which is over, or that of a present penalised by tradition. History is the site of contradictions, of developments and reactions, of overlaps in which coherence and incoherence have their rightful part: it cannot be the place of eternity". (4)

Spero's work could be seen as an attempt to balance the past with the present, through highlighting women throughout history in order to get a more total view of what woman is, what woman wants and what shapes her identity. By using images that are second-hand, (i.e. images that are not originally devised by her) she emphasises the politics behind the image and further disrupts their past meaning by re-interpreting them along with text and by their repeated use. In my opinion her use of these images is valid in that it highlights our understanding of their past interpretation while at the same time positing a new and fuller interpretation.

FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER FOUR

1. New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology, translated by Richard Aldington, Crown Publishers Inc., New York, 1st Published 1959, Pg. 121
2. Beyond Power: On Women, Men and Morals, Marilyn French, Published, Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1st Published 1983, Pg. 211
3. Ibid: Quote from "Capital III, Marx, Pg. 320
4. French Feminist Thought, Essay: "History", Arlette Farge, Basil Blackwell Ltd., Oxford 1987, Pg. 145

## CONCLUSION

When I first came to study Spero's work, I felt uncertain about one thing, this was her use of Artaud's text in redefining and illuminating the psycho-sexual position of women in our present culture. But, after reconsidering her reasons, and realising her extensive thoroughness in dealing with this potential problem, I decided that she was justified in using his words at that specific time. He shared a sense of alienation and despair at his situation that I feel could be compared to women's knowledge and intuition of their situation. He was incarcerated in mental institutions for most of his life and his writing has the sharp edge of his sense of victimization, while also conveying a sense of hope, and laughter.

Kristeva believes that some men's writing can belong to the "feminine tradition" for example Joyce, Mallarme and also Artaud. At first I felt uncomfortable with this notion because it seemed like a ploy on behalf of men, to colonize women's activity and sensibility once again. After consideration however, I feel that to dictate or legislate against the possibility of men being able to communicate through a 'feminine' sensibility, would in the long run be detrimental, and would act as a closing off of something that could perhaps be positive for both sexes. After all, I feel the ideal is that roles and perceptions of both sexes should be blurred, boundaries broken down, promoting a more rounded notion of persons, their ability and roles.

Artaud provided a text of immense subversive power which promoted the notion of deconstruction and reconstitution of conventional knowledge. Spero's work, and indeed feminist discourse also shares the same aims, so it could be seen as a natural choice for Spero to choose Artaud's



texts. Both are interested in the clarification of the space of alternative possibilities. Spero's use of his text could also be seen as a transcendence of the opposition between 'male' and 'female' spheres, by reformulating the relationship between them.

Both also question power, both personal power and power-in-the world. Artaud also complements Spero's work in that he was searching for a new means of expression through language searching for his own 'lost' voice in language.

I do not think that Spero's images are subsumed by Artaud's words, but on the contrary, they stand, immutable on their own terms, speaking with their own voice, enjoying their own physicality, realizing their own sexuality, and all the while smiling.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. "Codex Artaud XVII" 1972  
Detail
2. "Notes in Time on Women" 1979  
Detail Panel 17
3. "Chorus Line" 1985  
Detail 'Sheela and Wilma'
4. "Notes in Time on Women" 1979  
Detail Panel 6
5. "Let the Priests Tremble" 1984  
Detail



(1) "Codex Artaud XVII", 1972  
Detail



(2) "Notes in Time on Women", 1979  
Detail Panel 17.



(3) "Chorus Line" 1985  
Detail 'Sheela and Wilma'



The Artemis of classical Greece probably evolved from the concept of a priestess who never married, and who, like her sister Athena, was considered virgin because they never submitted to a monogamous marriage. Rather, as befits mother goddesses, they had enjoyed many consorts. Their failure to marry, however, was misinterpreted as virginity by succeeding generations of men who connected loss of virginity only with conventional marriage. Still, as mother goddess or virgin, Artemis retains control over herself, her lack of permanent connection to a male figure in a monogamous relationship is the keystone to her independence.

(4) "Notes in Time on Women" 1979  
Detail Panel 6



(5) "Let the Priests Tremble" 1984  
Detail

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