

Serpentine Gallery

Teachers' Resources

Nancy Spero
3 March- 2 May 2011



Nancy Spero in her Studio, 71st Street, New York 1973
Photograph: Susan Weiley

Exhibition initiated and produced by the Centre Pompidou, Paris,
and adapted by the Serpentine Gallery

**Centre
Pompidou**

Supported by

DE BEERS
JEWELLERY

and

The Council of the
Serpentine Gallery

and

by word of mouth

With kind assistance from the Nancy Spero Exhibition Circle

Galerie Lelong

And those who wish to remain anonymous

Media partner

THE
INDEPENDENT

Contents

- **Background Information**
- **Nancy Spero – artist and exhibition**
- **Themes, ideas and questions to explore:** These include useful cross-curricular links, classroom discussions and activities.
 - 1. Mythology and Symbolism**
 - 2. Text and Image**
 - 3. Materials and Movement**
 - 4. Alternative Histories**
 - 5. Body and Expression**
- **Further reading and related links**
- **Planning a visit to the Serpentine Gallery**

Background Information

These notes are designed to support your visit to the Serpentine Gallery, including planning prior to your visit and suggestions for follow up discussion and activities. They are aimed at all key stages, enabling you to develop them to suit your needs and inspire discussion and practical work.

The Serpentine Gallery presents a major UK survey of the work of celebrated American artist, feminist and activist Nancy Spero (1926 – 2009). The exhibition showcases a selection of works in various media from a prolific career that spans more than fifty years.

Nancy Spero

A feminist pioneer and politically active throughout her life, Nancy Spero created work that is radical, making strong statements against war, violence, male dominance and abuse of power. She lived much of her life in New York City with her husband and collaborator Leon Golub creating some of her most powerful works, against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. She was a founding member of the women's cooperative gallery, A.I.R (Artists in Residence), in Soho, New York.

Rejecting the dominant post-war movements of formalist Abstraction and Pop Art in the 1950's, Spero developed a more ephemeral and immediate way of working that used painting, collage, printmaking and installation. This practice, which Spero once termed '*peinture feminine*', could, as she saw it, address (and redress) both the struggles of women in patriarchal society and the horrors perennially wrought by American military might.

Spero created a vibrant visual language constructed from the histories and mythologies of past and present cultures that included goddess-protagonists drawn from Greek, Egyptian, Indian and pagan mythologies. In early work, texts as well as images were enlisted from a wide range of sources to express alienation, disempowerment and physical pain.

Nancy Spero's work can be found in numerous museum collections worldwide, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Tate Gallery, London; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona; and Musée National d'art Moderne Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

Themes, Ideas and Questions to Explore

1. Mythology and Symbolism



Azur, detail 2002

Collage with paint and hand printing on paper
39 panels, 64.5 x 8567.4 cm overall

Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne /
Centre de Création Industrielle, Paris

Loan of Harriet and Ulrich Meyer
through the Centre Pompidou Foundation, 2007

Discussions and activities

- Look at how Spero uses female characters from mythology. Think about the roles that they would have played in history, then compare this to the roles they might have if they lived in the present day.
- Look at the relationships between mythological characters and symbols in Spero's works. Do you think these works show celebration or frustration?
- How has Spero chosen to represent the male and female genders. What do these symbols say about their physicality, gender roles and their possible status?
- How has Spero used mythological characters to articulate stories?
- How has Spero explored modern interpretations of myths? What are these characters telling you about themselves, nature, history and society?
- Spero embraced ancient pictorial form using hieroglyphics, historic imagery and symbols, often combing both the human and animal form to create narratives. Why do you feel this juxtaposition between animal and man is so important; Think about the connotations of the species and how they relate to each other?
- Look at how Spero incorporated iconic mythological characters alongside modern imagery. What sort of dialogue is suggested between the old and the new representations of these characters? How have these motifs changed throughout her work?
- Create your own mythological character to represent you. Think about specific qualities you might have and explore how you could represent these feelings and characteristics through symbolic imagery.

2. Text and Image



Nancy Spero
Marduk, 1986
Ink, handprinting, and collage on paper
60.90 x 914.40 cm
Courtesy of Collection G. & R. Mayer

Discussions and activities

- How does Spero's use of text in her works change the way you look at the artworks?
- Spero's works were significantly influenced by French playwright, poet, artist and theorist Antonin Artaud. Spero first used direct quotations in her series *Artaud Paintings* (1969-70), and this series of works was a critical change for Spero as she moves from the figurative to an inclusion of text within the pictorial space. What do you think was the relationship between text and image in Spero's works? If you were to remove one, would your interpretation be same or different, and why?
- Compare the *Artaud Paintings* alongside the *Codex Artaud* scrolls (1970 - 71) and focus on how she has combined both text and image in these compositions. Do their very different ways of incorporating text into the works change the way you interpret the images and the overall pieces?
- Is the use of blank space in Spero's work important?
- Spero doesn't always use language in a linear format, often cutting and pasting fragmented sections from Artaud's works and then incorporating them into her own works. Think about this fragmentation of words, by isolating words from full sentences, do the connotations change and do they still make sense?
- Spero dissembled and reassembled Antonin Artaud's writings, rearranging them in her own way to create her own language and meaning. Why do you think she chose to do this, instead of expressing things in her own words?
- Create your own font that portrays particular emotions that you would like to express. Arrange your font onto a piece of paper, think about how the letters are put together to make words and sentences. Consider the use of colour, scale and whether your font is in capitals or lower case or a mixture of the two.
- Look through magazines and newspaper articles and think about the way words relate to images. Try mixing pictures, headlines, quotations and text from two or more articles; cut them up, and glue them onto another larger sheet of paper. Think of what is happening to the original meanings in the articles as you are taking them apart and putting them back together in your own way.
- Paint over the text of a newspaper then ask your class to see if they can understand the stories from the pictures left, do they read the images differently without the text?

3. Alternative Histories



Nancy Spero
Search and Destroy 1967 – 1974
Cut-and-pasted painted paper and hand printing on paper
43.2 x 417.8 cm
Courtesy of the Estate of Nancy Spero and Galerie Lelong

Discussions and activities

- Think of some historical events that Spero's works remind you of. Why do you think of these particular events?
- Compare the differences between the representations of the male and female form, gender roles and stereotypes in historical and cultural contexts. How do you think Spero addressed these issues through her works?
- Look at historical examples of propaganda. Think about these ideas in the context of a current affair, by comparing the coverage of a story from at least three different newspapers. Do the political and corporate associations influence the way they choose to represent a story?
- Choose a key historical moment, split the class into groups, giving them different angles of the story to look at. Ask them to create a poster to represent their side of the story using image, text and collage. Then later to present their posters to the rest of the class asking them to guess the messages and if they can work out which characters they were.
- Look at a range of historical events and people and start a discussion to see if your group can think of present day versions of them. How does the context affect their success or how we view them?
- Look up representations of historical political revolutions. Focus on how the figures are portrayed. Compare them to the figures within Spero's artworks.
- Nancy Spero rebelled against existing power structures that excluded certain groups of people from being represented. For example, she protested against the male-dominated field of art history, as well as the voiceless-ness of the unseen war victims. What power structures do you think exclude certain groups of people from being represented in various places around the world, including your own neighbourhood?
- Which colours and motifs are associated with the concept of revolution? Discuss how these images came to represent certain political attitudes.

4. Materials and Movement



Nancy Spero
Artaud Painting: Then There Will Be... 1969
Gouache, encre, peinture et collage sur papier 63.5 x 53.3 cm
Courtesy of Estate of Nancy Spero and Galerie Lelong

Discussions and activities

- The aesthetics of Spero's works changed throughout her career. Look at how the emphasis on materials and colour differ in her earlier works with those of her later works. Do the differences change the way you feel and react to the works?
- What materials did Spero use for her *Artaud Painting* and *Codex Artaud* series? How do these differ from the paintings that you would typically find in older works of art? Why do you think she used these materials?
- Look at the strokes of paint in Spero's paintings from her earlier periods, such as her *Black Paintings* and her *War Series*, and compare them to her strokes in her later paintings from the late 1970s through to the 2000s. Describe the emotions and movements conveyed in the strokes, and discuss why her style may have changed.
- Look at Spero's works during the 70's and 80's. How do the figures convey movement?
- Either respond to a piece of music or watch a dance performance (example choreographers: Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown, and Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker). Express the rhythm and the feel of the movements on paper by drawing, painting, and collage. This works well in groups on large pieces of paper.
- Spero chose to leave the canvas and create works straight onto the walls. What do you think she was trying to say by doing this?
- Look at examples of street art and public art to inspire ideas, work in groups and think about location, scale, materials, audience and logistics. Then present your proposal to the rest of the class. Ask the class to play different characters and see how they may respond.

5. Body and Expression



Nancy Spero

Maypole Take No Prisoners II, 2008

Steel, silk, wood, nylon monofilament, handprint on aluminium

Dimensions variable

Installation view at Anthony Reynolds Gallery

Photograph: Dave Morgan

Courtesy of Estate of Nancy Spero and Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London

Discussions and activities

- Describe the portrayal of the human form in Spero's works. During the second half of the twentieth century, bodies were a battleground for politics. Which political movements do you think she may have referred to and why do you think Spero used the human form to express her feelings about these political events?
- In the mid 1970s, Spero removed the male figure from her work and decided only to use the female form. She often represented women from various cultures throughout history. What do you think is the importance of the female form in her work?
- The way the human body has been portrayed has changed throughout history. For Spero's works such as *The First Language* (1981) and *Azur* (2003), she uses styles from different art historical sources, such as pre-historic cave paintings, Egyptian wall paintings and Greek vases. Compare and contrast these styles. Why do you think Spero referenced these particular styles ?
- Imagine the movements of your body as a participant in a Maypole dance. What do you think is the relationship between these movements and the expressions on the faces attached to the ends of the strings in *Maypole: Take No Prisoners* (2007)?
- Take inspiration from this artwork to create a mind map with images of you and people you are connected to. Look at existing maps, such as the London Underground map or a family tree, you could choose to make your map in 3D or as an installation or a performance (consider movement and sound.)
- Look over the latest news stories and pick one that you feel strongly about. Express this event silently by using your whole body or just your hands. Work in small groups and then present your ideas to the class, can they guess the story?
- Watch short film clips without the sound, write down what you think is happening. Then re-watch it with the volume up to see if you were correct.
- Spero used her non-dominant left hand to write Artaud's fractured quotations in her *Artaud Paintings* as she felt this would help express her feelings of anger and frustration. Think about restriction of mobility and try drawing with your eyes closed, or attach a pen to a long stick or a pair of goggles, then discuss how it felt.
- Nancy Spero developed arthritis later in her career. Assistants would cut her images out so that she could arrange and assemble them onto paper. Create a work that involves the co-dependency of two or more people.

Cross-Curricular Links

Journalism – English Literature – Poetry – Philosophy – Political studies – History – Geography – Dance – Theatre – Music – Anthropology – Printmaking – Archaeology – Psychology – Mythology – Political Science – Sociology – Anthology – Gender Studies – Art and design – Design Technology – Creative and Media Diploma – Drama – Photography – Media Studies – English Literature

Keywords

Feminism – Narratives – Hysteria – Grotesque – Choreography – Surrealism – Rhythm – Music – Existentialism – War – Liberation – Anti-establishment – Victims – Anger – Mythology – Memory – Time – Space – Mass Media – Appropriation – Poetry – Performance – Photography – Paper – Collage – Reality – Symbolism – Cultural Politics – Language – Representation – Text – Print – Characters – Gender – Isolation – Motifs – Movement – Fertility – Transformation – Colour – Sanity – Frustration – Juxtaposition – Deconstruction – Reassembly – Rebellion – Unconventional – Radical – Mixed Media – Application – Repetition – Status – Iconography

Further Reading

D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths by Ingri d'Aulaire, Edgar Parind d'Aulaire
The Hieroglyphs Handbook: Teach Yourself Ancient Egyptian by Philip Ardagh
Nancy Spero: The Work by Christopher Lyon
Nancy Spero: Torture of Women, edited by Lisa Pearson
Nancy Spero by Cristiana Perrella and Achille Bonito Oliva
Hans Ulrich Obrist & Nancy Spero: The Conversation Series, Vol.11, edited by Hans Ulrich Obrist
Nancy Spero & Leon Golub: Notes In Time, edited by Maurice Berger
Codex Spero: Selected Writings and Interviews 1950-2008 by Nancy Spero
Nancy Spero: The War Series 1966-1970 by Nancy Spero
Nancy Spero: A Continuous Present by Ingebord Kähler, Dirk Luckow, Susanne Altmann and Deborah Frizell

Related Links

<http://www.serpentinegallery.org/>
<http://www.artinfo.com/galleryguide/20297/6832/5648/galerie-lelong-new-york/artist/nancy-spero/biography/>
<http://www.anthonyreynolds.com/biogs/spero.htm>
<http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/09spring/joanna-walker.shtm>
http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal3/acrobat_files/bradnock.pdf
[http://www.centrepompidou.fr/Pompidou/Communication.nsf/docs/ID90A148F0683A9E6AC12577A8003368F6/\\$File/20102809_dp_spero_eng.pdf](http://www.centrepompidou.fr/Pompidou/Communication.nsf/docs/ID90A148F0683A9E6AC12577A8003368F6/$File/20102809_dp_spero_eng.pdf)
<http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/spero/>
http://www.artnews.com/issues/article.asp?art_id=2693

Saturday Talks

Every Saturday at 3pm at the Serpentine Gallery

Katy Deepwell, Writer and Editor, 5 March
Claire Pajaczkowska, Art Historian, 12 March
Mike Cooter, Artist, 19 March
Sophie O'Brien, Exhibition Curator, Serpentine Gallery, 26 March
Tamar Garb, Writer and Curator, 2 April
Coline Milliard, Art Critic, 9 April
Rachel Taylor, Curator, 16 April
Marcus Coates, Artist, 23 April
Joanna S. Walker, Art Historian, 30 April

Artists who have explored similar themes or have collaborated with Nancy Spero

Lee Lozano, Faith Ringgold, Jean Dubuffett, Ana Mendieta, Rachel bas-Cohain, Leon Golub, Dotty Attie, Mary Beth Edelson, Martha Rosler, Kiki Smith, Carolee Schneemann, Judith Bernstein, Blythe Bohnen, Baude Boltz, Agnes Denes, Daria Dorosh, Loretta Dunkelman, Mary Grigoriadis, Harmony Hammond, Laurace James, Nancy Kitchell, Louise Kramer, Anne Healy, Rosemarie Mayer, Patsy Norvell, Howardena Pindell, Susan Williams, Barbara Zucker

Planning a Visit to the Serpentine Gallery

Contact Details

Joceline Howe
Education Curator
Serpentine Gallery
Kensington Gardens
London W2 3XA
Tel 020 7298 1516
Email jocelineh@serpentinegallery.org
Tel 020 7402 6075
Fax 0207402 4103 www.serpentinegallery.org

Transport

The nearest tube stations are South Kensington (1.25 km walk), Knightsbridge (1.25 km walk) or Lancaster Gate (1 km walk) Bus routes 9, 10, 52, 452, 94 and 148 stop near the Gallery

Group Visit Guidelines

To make your visit as enjoyable as possible, please read the following:

Before your Visit

- Adult supervision of students under 16 is required at all times, including in the shop. An adult student ratio of 1:5 for under 5's, 1:10 for 5 - 11 year olds, 1:15 for 11 - 16 year olds and 1:20 for 16 - 18 year olds is required.
- We recommend a preliminary planning visit, as for some exhibitions there may be works that you consider unsuitable for your group.

During your Visit

- The artworks in the Nancy Spero exhibition are extremely fragile. Please take extra care to follow the Gallery Guidelines at all times:
 - No running
 - No touching
 - No leaning against walls or plinths
 - No shouting
 - No photography
- Teachers/group leaders and accompanying adults are responsible for their group's behaviour whilst at the Serpentine Gallery.

- Many contemporary artworks are fragile and damage easily. Please make sure that your group understands that this is why they are not allowed to touch the art.
- Lecturing: If your group is larger than 30 please split them into smaller groups in the exhibition space and do not lecture in rooms where talks are already in progress.
- Drawing: If you would like to do some drawing please check with the gallery what materials you will be able to use in the exhibition

Education and Family Events

Education is at the core of the Serpentine Gallery's activities. Through practical, artist led workshops and discussion, talks, events and projects the Education Programme offers a diverse range of innovative ways to engage with modern and contemporary art and architecture for all ages.

Please refer to the Serpentine Gallery Bulletin or www.serpentinegallery.org for information on events and activities taking place as part of the Education Programme during the *Nancy Spero* exhibition.

The *Nancy Spero* Teachers' Notes are also available to download free at www.serpentinegallery.org along with Teachers' Notes for the previous exhibitions:

Marcus Coates, 3 March- 2 May 2011
 Philippe Parreno, 25 November 2010- 13 February 2011
 Klara Lidén, 7 October 2010 -7November 2010
 Anish Kapoor, 28 September 2010 – 13 March 2011
 Jean Nouvel Serpentine Gallery Pavilion 2010, 10 July – 17 October
 Wolfgang Tillmans 26 June – 19 September
 Nairy Baghramian and Phyllida Barlow, 8 May- 13 June
 Richard Hamilton: Modern Moral Matters, 3 March 2010 – 25 April 2010
 Design Real, 26 November 2009 – 7 February 2010
 Gustav Metzger: Decades 1959 – 2009, 29 September – 8 November 2009
 Jeff Koons: Popeye Series, 2 July – 13 September 2009
 Luke Fowler, 7 May – 14 June 2009
 Rebecca Warren, 10 March – 19 April 2009
 Indian Highway, 10 December 2008 – 22 February 2009
 Gerhard Richter, 23 September – 23 November 2008
 Richard Prince, 26 June – 7 September 2008
 Maria Lassnig, 25 April – 8 June 2008
 Derek Jarman, 23 February – 13 April 2008
 Anthony McCall, 30 November 2007 – 3 February 2008
 Matthew Barney, 20 September – 11 November 2007
 Hreinn Fridfinnsson, 17 July – 2 September 2007
 Paul Chan, 15 May – 1 July 2007
 Allora & Calzadilla, 17 – 29 April 2007
 Karen Kilimnik, 20 February 9 April 2007
 In the darkest hour there may be light, works from Damien Hirst's murderme collection, 25 November 2006 – 28 January 2007
 Runa Islam, 25 October – 5 November 2006
 China Power Station: Part 1, 8 October – 5 November 2006
 Uncertain States of America, 9 September – 15 October 2006
 Thomas Demand, 6 June – 20 August 2006
 Ellsworth Kelly, 18 March – 21 May 2006
 Elmgreen & Dragset, 26 January – 26 February 2006
 Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, 19 October 2005 – 8 January 2006
 Oliver Payne & Nick Relph, 6 September – 2 October 2005

Rirkrit Tiravanija, 5 July – 21 August 2005
Andreas Slominski, 26 April – 12 June 2005
Tomoko Takahashi, 22 February – 10 April 2005
Monika Sosnowska, 5 December 2004 – 16 January 2005
Glenn Brown, 14 September – 7 November 2004
Gabriel Orozco, 1 July - 30 August 2004
Cy Twombly, 17 April – 13 June 2004 State of Play, 3 February – 28 March 2004
Hiroshi Sugimoto, 18 November 2003 – 18 January 2004
John Currin, 9 September – 2 November 2003
Cindy Sherman, 3 June – 25 August 2003
Takahashi Murakami, 12 November 2002 – 26 January 2003
Kutlug Ataman, 11 February – 9 March 2003