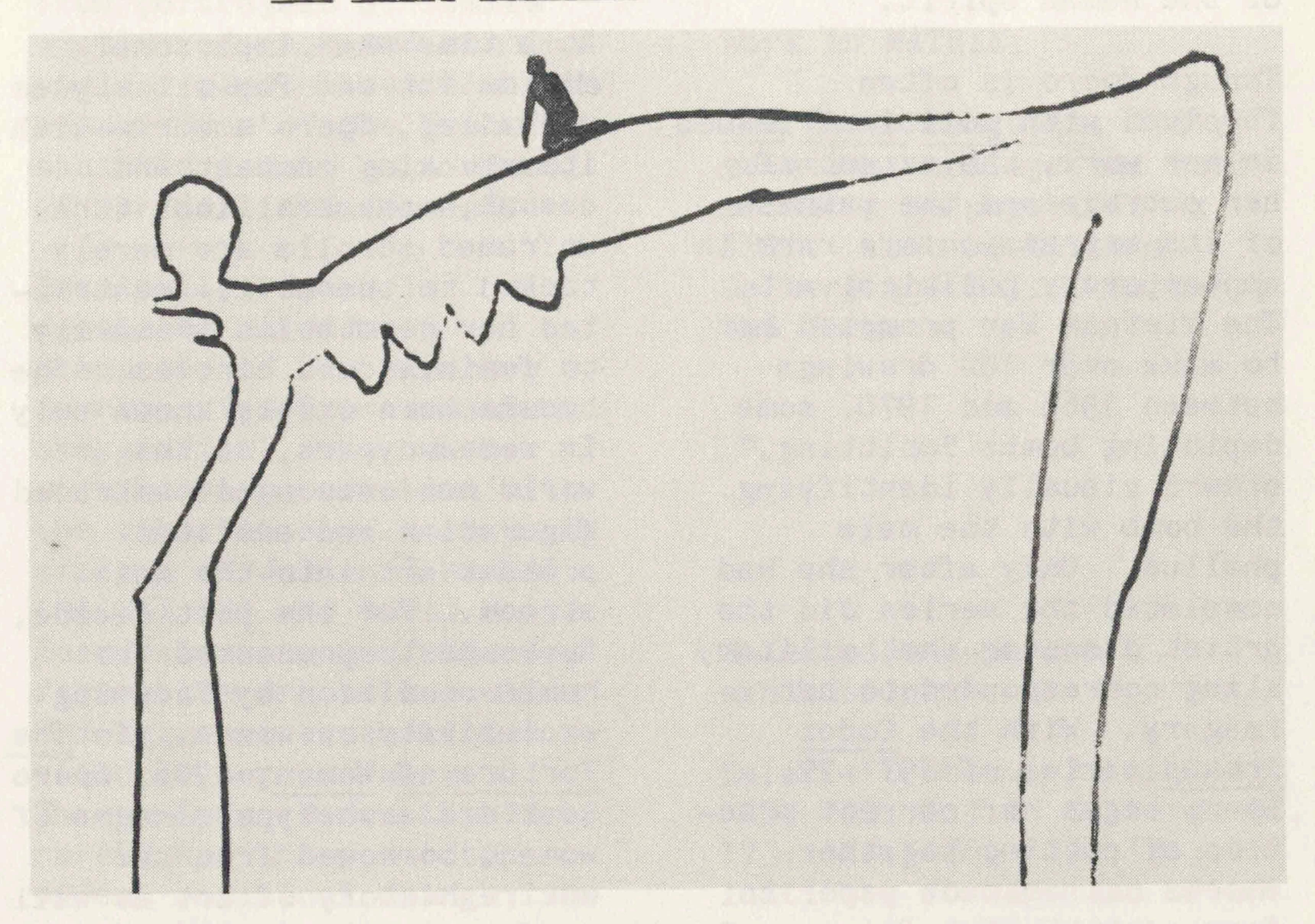
Detail from The First Language, 1981



The First Language by Nancy Spero is a language of female images. Text has appeared alongside images in Spero's work for more than ten years, but in The First Language her figurative notation system communicates eloquently without the addition of written words. The theme of The First Language is the triumph of the female sex over violence and repression, as a metaphor for the resilience of the human spirit.

Though Spero is often involved with political issues in her work, the extent of her outrage and the rawness of its expression are rare in contemporary political art. The Vietnam War prompted her to make over 100 drawings between 1966 and 1970, some depicting bombs "shitting," others visually identifying the bomb with the male phallus. Only after she had completed the series did the artist discover that military slang corresponded to her imagery. With the Codex Artaud series of 1971-72, Spero began her current practice of putting together sheets of handmade paper to form a continuous frieze. Spero was initially attracted to working on paper as opposed to painting with oil on canvas, because it was not only more immediate but also represented a private act of defiance against traditional methods and materials. Formal precedents for Spero's extended horizontal format can be found in Greek friezes and Egyptian wall paintings, which are also sources for some of her imagery. In the Artaud works, ideographic drawings of male and female figures are interspersed among typed passages by the 20th century French poet, Antonin Artaud. As Spero explained in a recent

interview, "Artaud was a pariah in his society. Personality wise, in his writing, his ideas and thought. And in a sense I felt that way myself, as a woman artist in the art community...that I was far afield of what was mainstream or what was acceptable...I identified with this extreme language of Artaud in trying to identify myself as an artist in my society."

At a time when impersonal Minimalist and Pop art styles prevailed, Spero's work--with its shocking content and casual, ephemeral look (the unframed scrolls are merely tacked to the wall) -- restricted her reputation primarily to feminist art circles. She became more widely known only in recent years, as the art world has once again embraced figuration and admitted protest art into the mainstream. For the past decade, Spero has represented the human condition by focusing exclusively on women. In The Torture of Women, 1976, Spero scatters archetypal images of women, borrowed from the entire history of art as well as from popular culture, among ancient mythical and actual modern accounts of barbaric cruelty perpetrated on women.

In her 1981 epic work, The First Language (22 inches high and 190 feet long), Spero repeats many of the images from The Torture of Women. A line drawing of the chaste and athletic Greek goddess Artemis, is placed next to a modern roller skater; a volumetric representation in painted collage of the prehistoric fertility figurine, the Venus of Willendorf, is juxtaposed with repeated hand-stamped adaptations of the Egyptian

sky goddess and protectoress, Nut. Through unexpected juxtapositions, disjunctions in scale and variations in style, Spero is able to sustain a visual excitement throughout the entire length of the scroll. Although there is a definite, rhythmic progression from right to left, Spero does not create a strict "cinematic" narrative. Instead, the drawing progresses in a general way from portrayals of female victims of rape and war in earlier panels toward a final celebration of the graceful, athletic female as a symbol of survival and freedom.

Ironically, Spero is sometimes cited as a precursor of contemporary American Neo-Expressionism and grafitti art, but her work has no connection with the intentions of such young artists as Julian Schnabel (MATRIX 52) and David Salle. Spero views much of the new figurative art as masculine and aggressive, qualities alien to her own work. Though Spero knows that art rarely has the power to effect political change, she nonetheless is committed to a form of art in which she communicates her social concerns to those who will stop and look.

Spero was born in 1926 in Ohio. She met and married Leon Golub (MATRIX 59) while attending the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, from which she graduated in 1949. She and her family (Spero and Golub raised three sons) spent several years in Paris before moving to New York in 1964.

Constance Lewallen Associate Curator Work in MATRIX:

The First Language, 1981, painting, collage and hand-printing on paper, 22" x 190'. Lent by Willard Gallery and A.I.R. Gallery, New York.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Galerie Breteau, Paris, '62, '65, '68; A.I.R. Gallery, NY, '73, '74, '76, '79, '81; Institute for Art and Urban Resources, P.S. 1, Art Couples III, Nancy Spero/Leon Golub, '83; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, MATRIX 74 (brochure), '83; Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, '83; Gallery 345, NY, '83; Art Galaxy, NY, '83; Willard Gallery, NY, '83.

Selected group exhibitions:

American Cultural Center, Paris, Huit Americains de Paris, '64; Judson Memorial Church, NY, Flat Show, '70; Haague Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, Holland, Feministische Kunst Internationaal, '79, catalogue, travelled throughout Holland; The Art Institute of Chicago, Centiennial Exhibition, '79; Institute for Contemporary Art, London, Issue---Social Strategies by Women Artists, catalogue, '80; Ronald Feldman Gallery, NY, The Atomic Salon, '82; Fine Arts Center, SUNY at Stony Brook, NY, The War Show, '83, catalogue; The New Museum, NY, Art and Ideology, '83, catalogue.

Artforum, April '80.

Schjeldahl, Peter.

"Opposites Attract," Village
Voice, April 15-21, '81.

Interview with Nancy
Spero, Profile, Video Data
Bank, School/Art Institute of
Chicago, vol. 3, no. 1, Jan.
183

Lippard, Lucy B. "Art,"

Village Voice, April 19, '83.

Heit, Janet. "Nancy

Spero," Arts Magazine, Nov.
'83.

Kuspit, Donald. "From Existence to Essence: Nancy Spero," Art in America, Jan. 184.

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogues under exhibitions):

Alloway, Lawrence.
"Art," The Nation, April 2,
'73.

Robins, Corinne. "Nancy Spero: 'Political' Artist of Poetry and Nightmare,"

Feminist Art Journal (NY),

Spring '75.

Perreault, John. "Women Ain't Losers," Soho Weekly
News (NY), Sept. 23, '76.

Alloway, Lawrence.
"Nancy Spero," Artforum, May
'76.

De Pasquale, Carol.
"Dialogues with Nancy Spero,
Womanart (NY), Winter/Spring
177.

Robins, Corinne. "Words and Images Through Time: The Art of Nancy Spero," Arts Magazine, December '79.

Kuspit, Donald.

"Spero's Apocalypse,"

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