Nancy Spero and Leon Golub: An Interview
by Connie Samaras

Artists Nancy Spero and Leon Golub met shortly after World War II, while they were students at the Art Institute of Chicago. They subsequently married. In addition to several years spent in the Midwest, they have lived and worked in Italy and France. In the mid-60’s they settled in New York City where they now reside.

They visited Detroit this past October to open a show of their work at the Center for Creative Studies and to jury a show for Detroit Focus Gallery. The following interview was conducted before an audience at the Center for Creative Studies on October 5, 1983. This abridgment has been approved by the artists.

Samaras to Nancy Spero: You were part of Women Artists in Revolution (WAR), the first women’s artist group in New York, and were one of the founding members of the Artists in Residence (AIR) gallery in New York, in 1971. Could you talk about your experiences with both those groups.

Spero: A little after some of the other radical women’s groups started in New York City, some of the women artists in a group called the Art Workers Coalition (AWC) — a group of artists that had gotten together in the late 60’s to analyze what was going on in the art world — decided that the male revolutionaries kind of jived with the rest of society, and that the women had better discuss their particular problems as women artists — which we realized were palpable, really tangible, once we started figuring out what was going on at galleries, museums, and schools. So WAR was formed, and we did a few actions. I remember going to the Museum of Modern Art. There were eight of us (and one woman had a child or two along with her). We demanded 50 percent parity with males exhibiting at MOMA. Hightower, who was director then, invited us to sit down. We wouldn’t sit down. We just stood there, handed him our petition, and marched out of the place.

Another women’s group, called the Ad Hoc Women Artists Committee, later formed out of the AWC. Lucy Lippard was a very important impetus for that. The first action this group took was to picket the Whitney. This action was based on the realization that the representation of women in the 1970 biennial was only four percent. A few years previously, there had been 14 to 15 percent representation, but that wasn’t adequate and seemed to be diminishing. So we picketed the museum. One group left Tampons and black and white raw eggs — to represent Black and White women artists — around the museum to let women’s presence be known. Our actions were effective; we have gotten about 20 to 25 percent representation over
the last decade. In this last show, women did much better; it was about 36 percent.

Samaras: Do you think things have changed significantly for women artists?

Spero: They haven’t changed. There has been a lot of attention recently paid to feminist thought in the art community in New York City, but I’m not sure how profound an influence it is. It comes and goes; it’s fashionable or unfashionable. Until the last few years, it’s been almost a forbidden subject.

Samaras: The period you talk about was a very active and lively one. I find it discouraging that despite the awareness of discrimination, the energy to organize isn’t there, as it was before.

Spero: Before, there weren’t many opportunities; there were just a few token women, and we were all in the same boat. What has happened is that certain women have been placed in galleries, lip service has been paid, and the percentages are higher. A certain amount of co-optation has taken place. There’s also a lot of anger and rivalry within these groups, so the energy’s been dispersed, and there isn’t the cohesion that the movement started with.

Influences from the women’s art movement continue to be felt, however. The magazine *Heroes*, which deals with art and politics, continues to publish. The ideas of the French women philosophers are coming onto the scene. Although AIR is no longer considered a new and exciting phenomenon, it continues, and its existence is another kind of push to keep this dialogue about feminism going. But as a separatist and activist community of women, the movement is more dispersed and individualized now.

Still, when you get a group of women together, and there’s a discussion, resentment always surfaces.

Samaras: In the early 70’s, the concept of a female aesthetic arose. It came out of the perception that since women are often confined to the private sphere, our art often refers to this sphere. It was also an attempt to point out that because the domestic sphere is devalued, women’s art work has also been devalued. At that time, feminists were concerned simply with pointing to differences between men’s and women’s work in an attempt to transcend and to break down the cultural construction of gender. Now in current mainstream feminist thought, particularly among the neo-feminist philosophers you mentioned, these differences are being glorified, rather than simply being regarded as the manifestations of a culturally imposed gender system. Do you think that the celebration of these differences runs the danger of ghettoizing women artists and thus ultimately disempowering us?

Spero: It’s a big problem. I think gender does matter. Look at the phenomenon of the figure that’s come in, this New Expressionism. These male gestures are a terrifically macho kind of expression. You can’t really name any women who are making art in quite this way. There are a few token women who are included in all the exhibits that go to Europe, but it’s really a male phenomenon.

If women’s language, women’s expression is different, which I think it possibly can be — that hasn’t been thoroughly investigated yet — it could very well ghettoize woman and keep her in her place. It’s a difficult problem when you join the “other” or the “other” accepts you, just how the two can mesh or stay separate.

Samaras (speaking to Leon Golub): Since you’re being heralded as part of the Neo-Expressionist movement, how do you relate to what Nancy is saying?

Golub: I see it as more her problem than mine. I’m doing what I’m doing, and I have my own justification for it, for good or for evil. My work is among the most macho of these manifestations. So when she attacks this whole movement, she’s got to deal with me at some level. She’ll make an exception for me. (Laughs.)

Spero: I am going to make an exception for you.

I’ll tell you: I sometimes look at his work and I wonder what kind of a person made it. (Both laugh.) No, really, sometimes I stand and look at these paintings, and I wonder what I would think of them if I didn’t know him. But because they do have a basis in humanity and sympathy, and because they’re ambiguous enough that they’re not just macho gestures, they are saying something about our society and power in our society. And I know full well where the power is in our society.

Samaras: I’m interested in the movement in your work from the androgynous voice in the Codex Artaud series to the specifically female voice in your later work. As the voice becomes more directly related to your life experience, the text becomes more readable; it shifts from French to English. Why did you begin to incorporate verbal language into your work, and how does it interact with the images?

Spero: I’ve used language on and off throughout my work, but never so intensively as in the last decade. The tongue image appears very early, in 1960, in the little angry paintings that I did when I was doing the black paintings. They’re “fuck you” paintings. They’re angry images, and the tongue is sticking out, phallic and defiant. And obscene! At that time, I used the rationale of the Medieval — the tongues of the victims, and drowning figures, as in the tenth century Apocalypse of Saint-Sever. In the War Series I used the tongue again. It was obscene, and it was with bombs, which are obscene. The only way I could show obscenity was through sexual exaggeration. Then in the Artaud paintings, I used the motif again. Artaud spoke very movingly of his tongue and how he was silenced. He couldn’t cry out. He was silenced as an artist by society. I used Artaud’s texts to explain my situation as an artist in society.

Recently, in the French feminist philosophers, I have been reading about the silence of women: how women talk, but do not speak. That means they have no power; their voices are not heard. I continued using language, but much more clearly, in *Notes in Time* and in *Torture of Women*. It’s as if I wanted this silence — which I felt innately imposed upon women’s viewpoints, women’s speech — to come out in my work and to give it a certain kind of verification, since I really didn’t experience any kind of public verification of my work. It’s terrible not to have a tongue, not to have dialogue with the art world. I was getting a little attention, but not enough that I felt I had my tongue. Lately, I haven’t felt that same necessity. I’ve just been using the images.

Samaras: Since you’re both so politicized, I wonder how you’ve dealt, in your own relationship, with the public reality that a man’s work is more highly valued than a woman’s work.

Golub: Right now she’s getting a lot of attention. She has no complaints, but she has had reason for complaint in the past. Over the years, I’ve had a lot of attention. Often people would come over to see my work and totally ignore hers. This went on for many years. She took a lot of crap over the years, and she took it with great patience. She also didn’t have any choice, I mean, how are you going to break out from under? You do what you can under those circumstances. Of course, there was a period during which there was a big dip in my fortunes. With that dip — it started in the late 60’s and lasted through the late 70’s — I largely disappeared from people’s acknowledgment in the art scene. She got a fair amount of recognition at that point.

Spero (breaking in): Through feminism.

Golub: Yes. Now we both have decent reputations in New York; now people come to see both of us.

Spero: Even if they come to see one now, they acknowledge the other, which did not happen in the past. It was like there was nobody else there.
Samaras: What effect did the periods of isolation from the art world, from critical acclaim, have upon your work?

Golub: It's hard for artists who don't have a lot of success to appreciate this, but artists who get a lot of attention often pay a ferocious price for it. Some artists can hardly appear in public because they get so much attention. I would guess if you wanted to contact Rauschenberg, you'd find it impossible. He needs layers of cocooning to order to have any time at all. But when you're cocooned, you're kept away from reality, too. That happened to Picasso.

Another thing that happens is that if you get used to a lack of success, you're used to it. That's really hard to take is having some success for five or ten years, and then — Bang! — it's taken away from you. That's harder. Artists who have no success, or little success, have two choices: they get out while they can, or hunker down, develop a siege mentality. A siege mentality, though, can have negative effects on you, but a siege mentality can also be very effective because you learn resistance. And I think that the work of both of us in different ways has gained from those periods when we've had trouble in the art world. Had my work in the 60's attracted a great deal of success, including financial success, I might be doing that same kind of work today.

If your work is not getting a lot of recognition, you start getting doubts. Even the strongest people get terrible doubts about what they're doing. That can tear you apart.

Spero: If one can maintain an interior dialogue, isolation brings with it the advantage of working out certain artistic problems. If the obscurity, however, is too profound, that's quite detrimental. During periods of my career, it's been almost devastating, really.

Samaras: I'm interested in the aspect of sexuality in both your work. You've mentioned that you draw some of your imagery from sadomasochistic magazines. What are you saying exactly about the relationship of sexuality to fascism? For example, sadomasochists have been writing a great deal recently in publications that deal with sexual politics. They argue that people who practice SM sexually are acutely sensitive to power imbalances — that the relationships are not fascist, because a sadist has to be extremely sensitive to the masochist's tolerance of pain in order to make it a good sexual encounter for them both. In other words, there's a great compassion there.

Golub: There are all kinds of sadomasochistic relationships. Some may show compassion; some may be just pleasure, sexual play, between male and male, female and female, or male and female. Some relationships play out brutal scenarios of domination. The masochist is also playing out the domination scenario at various levels. They meet at one level or another, but it is not always in balance.

My take on it is that I use photos for information. The information is specific. It's a stronger fix on reality than any preliminary drawings that I might improvise. Facial expressions and acknowledgments, body gesture, and details of uniforms are part of the density of information that I draw upon. I can't get photos from the Argentine government. They're not going to release them to me.

Sadomasochism on a personal level has to do with the sexual pleasure, or problems, of the individuals involved. But what about when it's used as government policy? When we, the United States — or the Soviet Union, if you wish — give money to police forces which then use that money to buy and develop instruments of torture, we know they're doing it. At that point, it's not as important that an individual torturer is getting his kicks. It's the fact that what's being done is policy to control and terrorize people. They're not dominated in a playful sense. They are dominated in a political situation in the exercise of power and control.

Samaras: In your most recent work, you depict mercenary "types" at leisure. In some of these paintings, they have their arms around male-to-female transvestites. Why transvestites in the new work?

Golub: Because it's fun to do. It's too nice just to do a guy with an arm around a girl. I want to make it ambiguous. Even the so-called normal relationships are ambiguous, anyway. I like to go to the edge to see where it can slip into something else because it's at the edges of things that you see how society really operates. Society operates in a public way, okay? We have a system of checks and balances. If something goes wrong, maybe the newspapers will comment on it, and somebody will get involved, and so on. But when we really want to pull off a stunt, we move to the edges where law and order, so-called, breaks down, where you pay money to somebody to pull off a stunt, where you try to hide it after it's occurred. That's not far different from some of the sexual games people play as they go toward the edges, as people experiment with their roles, and as they play games with each other.

Samaras: May Stevens once stated that viewers must already be politicized when they come to her art in order to understand her political meaning. Do either of you think that images have the power to cause people to act?

Golub: You don't have to be politicized to understand the art of either of us. One of the biggest compliments I ever got was from some guy who probably never looked at art in his life. He came up to deliver a package or something and looked at my work and said, "Hey! That hits me right in the eyeball!" That's a tremendous compliment.

People know immediately what you're talking about. We all know about control in our immediate circumstances. There's a top dog in all situations in the world.

Samaras: In the mainstream feminist movement, there's been a big anti-pornography crusade. That's not to say that all feminists agree with this position; it's just that it has gotten a lot of media attention. The saying among the anti-porn feminists is that porn is the theory, and rape is the practice. They believe that images do cause people to act and that if we remove certain pornographic images from our society, then violence against women will diminish.

Spero: A lot of gray area, isn't there? When I see some of the really far-out porn, the aggressive and destructive kind . . .

Golub (breaking in): The kind I use.

Spero (laughing): That's right! That's right! I do feel a revulsion. This porn probably can influence some sick minds. On the other hand, because of some of the images I've created over the years, I am terribly afraid of censorship. And just where do you stop? Some pornography is detrimental to society, and it shouldn't be acceptable.

I think that censorship becomes a matter of discretion that can hardly be decided by the courts. I am afraid of a rigorous censorship because this kind of thing supports the Far Right in a crusade for "cleaning up" our minds.

Golub: Recently there was a report in the paper about a doctor who had committed — oh, I don't know — dozens of rapes. He didn't get that from pornography. He would have done it if there were no books around. There were rapes when there were no photographs of them. What do you think went on in the 18th century, the 17th century, in Medieval times? Impulses to rape come from very deep sources within the psyche. They're usually acts of revenge or anger.

Spero (to Leon Golub): I really think the media can give strong suggestions to some very sick minds. Look at all the violence in films and TV. TV is almost a sanction in our society for veering toward violence. I can't quite look at it with the equanimity that you do, although I'm afraid of censorship, myself.

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