

Nancy Spero

Dissidances

29 enero - 22 marzo 09

This exhibition has been organized and produced by Museu d'art Contemporani de Barcelona and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía de Madrid in collaboration with Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Consejería de Cultura, Junta de Andalucía.

An extensive catalogue of the exhibition has been published featuring essays by Benjamin Buchloh, Hélène Cixous, Mignon Nixon and a selection of Nancy Spero writings.

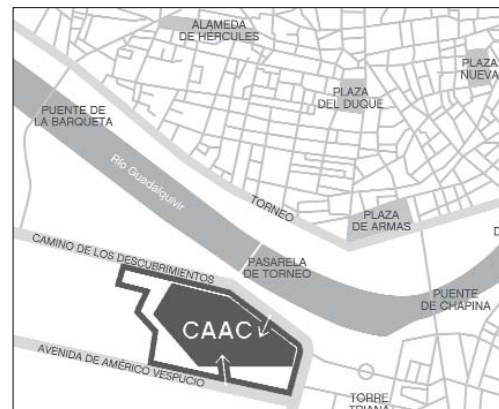
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Access
Avda. Américo Vespucio nº 2
Camino de los Descubrimientos s/n

Transport
C1 y C2 buses



Timetable 1 October - 31 March
Tuesday to Friday: 10 - 20 h.
Saturday: 11 - 20 h.
Sunday: 10 - 15 h.
Closed on Monday
Holidays: Please consult CAAC.

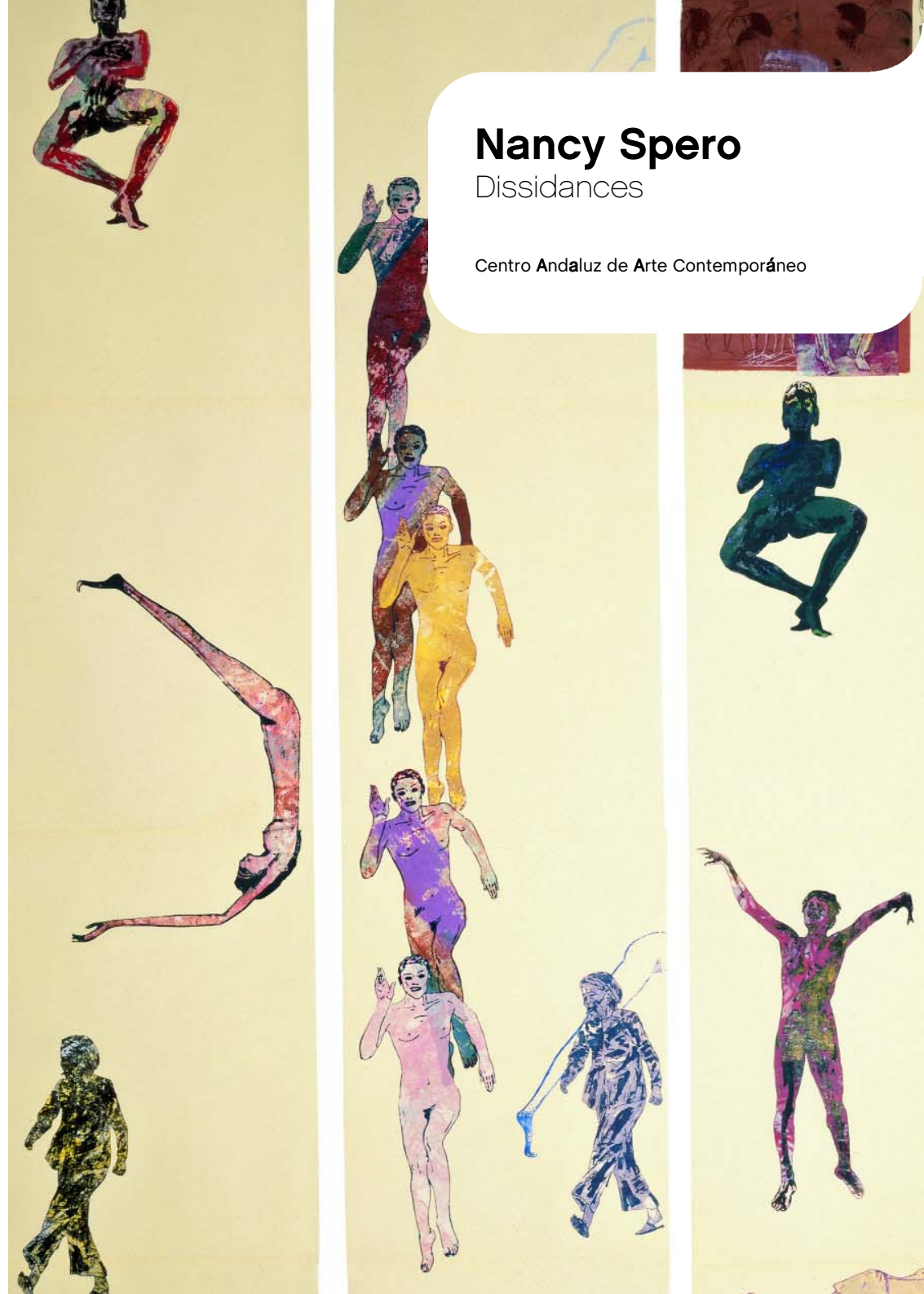
Library
Monday to Thursday: 10 - 14 h. and 17 - 19 h.
Friday: 10 - 14 h.

Tickets sale until 30 minutes before closing.



Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

cover: Nancy Spero, Goddess Nut, 1989 (detail).



Nancy Spero Dissidances

Nancy Spero (Cleveland, Ohio, 1926) is one of the pioneers of feminist art and was a key figure on the dissident New York scene of the 1960s and 70s, along with artists like Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Martha Rosler, Faith Ringold and Adrian Piper, among others.

Nancy Spero. Dissidances is the first major retrospective of this artist's work to be mounted in both Europe and the United States. The title of the exhibition, taken from the text by Hélène Cixous for the catalogue, suggests a potential reading which subsumes two basic aspects of the artist's work: its critical, non-conformist nature in terms of the politico-artistic situation she has lived through during her career and the importance of movement and of the body as vehicles for articulating her discourse. Organized chronologically, the exhibition presents her work as a unitary project in which past and present become blurred, as in the ancient fables and narratives that have been an inspiration to her.

In 1959 Nancy Spero and her husband, Leon Golub, both of them figurative painters established in Chicago, moved with their children to Paris, where they lived from 1959 to 1964, fleeing the preponderance of abstraction on the North-American art scene. In that city Spero made contact with literary, more than artistic, intellectual circles and got deeply involved in readings that would be fundamental, later on, for her work, as in the case of the writings of Artaud. During these early years the artist created a series of works grouped together under the title of *Black Paintings* (1959-1960). These are figurative pictures of a lyrical expressionism, focusing on themes like night, maternity and lovers, through which characters wander against dark backgrounds laboriously created via the accumulation of layers of paint. The feeling of isolation and impasse that these works transmit correspond to the artist's personal and professional situation at the time.

Spero and Golub returned to New York in 1964, at a moment when opposition to the

war in Vietnam and the Civil Rights movement had begun to play a huge role in her country. Her political commitment helped her to escape from her isolation and endowed her with a voice of her own, which would henceforth become the basic research motif in her work. Spero jettisoned painting on canvas, a medium she considered to be male, and settled for the use of paper, whose fragility endowed her painting with a new temporality, procedural quality and expressiveness, as occurs with the *series War* (1966-1970). In them, Spero gives free rein to her anger and disgust vis-à-vis the war, through manifestos in which she introduces explicit gender imagery and many-layered metaphors about the obscenity and violence of power. Her works are suffused with tongues and phallic bombs, helicopters and defecating mushroom clouds and phrases from military slang. This is an obsessive set of pictures that creates a sort of hieroglyph or visual writing.

In 1969 Spero distanced herself from the politico-military debate of the time in order to create a group of works based on texts by the French poet Antonin Artaud, the *Artaud Paintings* (1969-1970). In them she compulsively cites the poet in order to express and exorcise the ire and alienation she was feeling as an artist. These works evolved towards the vast *Codex Artaud* (1971-1972), consisting of 34 scrolls made up of sheets of paper glued end-to-end. Open-ended in format, this multifarious piece, which recalls ancient writings, marks the mature phase of her work and became a turning point in the art of the 1970s.

Spero's participation in the feminist movement - she collaborated with WAR (Women Artists in Revolution)- led the artist to deal with issues like women's torture and pain, whilst conveying their strength and freedom. This is the way of *Marduk* (1986) in which she combines images and texts with references to the sumerian myth *Marduk and Tiamat* that tell us about the origins of human civilization. The



Nancy Spero, *Maypole: take no prisoners*, 2007

torture of Tiamat denounce hate and cruelty against women since this early times. Nowadays "Tiamat" continue being affected by the same attacks in prisons all around the world, said Spero in 1983.

In the eighties Spero abandoned the written word in favor of the female body as a vehicle for expressive language. She adopts a deliberately optimistic tone in order to underline the power of the imagination and of hope, in opposition to tyranny and domination. In *Godness Nut* (1989) several female figures proceeding from various historical moments alternate in an extended space, combining presence and emptiness on the blank page. Nut, goddess of egyptian heaven, inspire this work as a symbol of hope and protection against adversity.

By the end of the 1980s Spero extended her lexicon to include architecture. In this way she did away with any obstacle between the work and the space it was shown in, obliging viewers to participate much more actively by altering their way of looking and their position. In 1998 Spero produced an installation called *Let the Priests Tremble...* in the Ikon Gallery in London, the central part of which we reproduce in the exhibition. In it, strong, athletic women dance to the sound of

a passage from an essay by Hélène Cixous from her book *The Laugh of the Medusa*.

The 1980s and 90s were years in which she created numerous exhibitions and achieved critical recognition. From then on, Spero's work became more exuberant and affirmative, and expressed a kind of "utopia" involving the possibility of change. Even so, she didn't turn her back on themes and procedures that had interested her since the beginning of her career, like pain, destruction or violence. The exhibition reflects this duality in the work *Ballad of Marie Sanders*, an installation in which she reworks the text with a 1934 Bertolt Brecht poem about a Gentile woman tortured for having had sexual relations with a Jew, as a way of recording the suffering concealed beneath oppressive regimes.

Finally, in *Maypole: Take No Prisoners* (2007), an installation produced for the Venice Biennale, Spero has gone back to a recurrent theme in her work and, alas, in the politics of her country: war. The piece is a maypole with 200 treated and painted aluminum heads that, in the words of the artist, she has cannibalized from her war paintings of the 1960s. With this piece we close the temporal circle of her trajectory; we go back to the beginning and encroach on the chronological boundaries of the retrospective.