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Being ‘The Other’ – Analysis of Three Artistic Cases: Nancy Spero, Cy Twombly and Dimitrije Bašičević Mangelos

Abstract: An analysis of the work of Nancy Spero is difficult due to the fact that her work is not part of prestigious museum collections and also the indifferent attitude of critics toward her art. The theoretician Benjamin H. D. Buchloh thinks that the reason for this is the fact that Spero is a woman. The question arises as to how this biological fact reflects on her position as an artist, and Buchloh gives an answer that critics could not ‘read’ her work, that there were obstacles in understanding, which made critics avoid her work. He finally defined her position on the art scene as marginal. In order to analyze Spero’s work without again positioning her outside of established practices, Buchloh has made a comparative analysis of her work and Cy Twombly’s. As a gay man, Twombly was ‘the other’ in the mainstream art world. On the platform of Buchloh’s analysis I would like to introduce a third artist, Dimitrije Bašičević Mangelos, whose position could also be defined as ‘other’, coming from a small country (Yugoslavia, Croatia) which is interesting to world art centers only as something ‘other’ than the dominant nations of Western Europe and North America.

To be the ‘other’ does not necessarily imply the critique of the dominant. The critique of the New York School developed by Spero is a critique of the style which pretended to be the dominant one. The common feature for these three artists is the conclusion that alternative models must be based on the different relation of painting towards language..

Key words: other, feminism, high modernism, conceptual art, text in visual art, reception

“I’m literally sticking my tongue out at the world – woman silenced, victimized and brutalized, hysterical, talking ‘in tongues.” (Nancy Spero)¹

¹ Nancy Spero, “Creation and pro-creation”, in: Lucy Bradnock, “Lost in translation? Nancy Spero/Antonin Artaud/Jacques Derrida”, *Papers of Surrealism*, Spring 2005, No. 3, 8.

Introduction

It took decades for Nancy Spero to become a widely accepted artist. Analyzing her position on the post-war art scene, Benjamin Buchloh wrote an essay titled “Spero’s Other Traditions”, pointing to the fact that she was treated as ‘the Other’ and her art was considered marginal when compared to art exhibited in museums and analyzed by critics. “The (failed) reception of Nancy Spero’s work within the context of mainstream critical debates and institutional evaluations of artistic production of the sixties and seventies, in both Europe and the United States, points to a larger complex of social, psychological, and aesthetic investments that have remained powerfully latent and have thereby governed aesthetic judgment all the more. Obviously the first obstacle one needs to mention is the fact that Spero is a woman artist and has been a practicing and often radically outspoken feminist for the past thirty years.”² Discussing the obstacles in reading and accepting an artist by mainstream art institutions is the only way to make those obstacles less debilitating.

The more latent the obstacles, the more powerful they can become. What places one artist in the position of the ‘Other’ when compared to acknowledged and accepted ones is the question I would like to discuss in this essay. Why is Spero considered the ‘other’, and consequently marginal, when compared to Pollock, for example?

In order not to treat her as ‘marginal’, Buchloh suggested a comparative analysis which would focus on the work of both Spero and Cy Twombly. The main idea of this type of analysis lies in comparing the marginalized artist with one coming from a different background, based on similarities in their art, whereas the mechanism of marginalization can be omitted. Every time Spero is the subject of a discrete analysis she is recognized as different and the ‘other’. The same argument was my starting point regarding the work of Dimitrije Bašičević Mangelos, who I compared with Marcel Broodthaers.³ This proved to be an efficient method for the interpretation of an artist who was viewed as ‘the Other’ by critics and Western European and North American art institutions. Because of this, as well as due to a number of reasons listed in this study, I have decided to include Mangelos in this analysis.

Searching for alternatives

Nancy Spero (1926–2009) was born in Ohio and grew up in Chicago, where she graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1949. She continued to study painting in Paris at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts and at the Atelier of Andre Lhote. Spero was married to a painter, Leon Golub, and they both decided to live and work far from New York, which was considered the place to be for a young artist. When Spero moved to Italy, the influence of this decision on her career was significant. Being geographically distant from the New York art scene where Abstract Expressionism became a dominant art form, Spero was free to practice art more liberally and search for other sources of ideas, such as the style of Etruscan frescoes as well as the modernist representation of the human form. In 1959, Spero

² Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Spero’s Other Traditions (1996)”, in: *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry. Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, Cambridge Massachusetts, An October Book, The MIT Press, 2003, 429.

³ That analysis was a part of my PhD thesis, titled: *Theory of textual practices in the visual arts – Functions of words and images*, Belgrade, University of Arts, 2012.

moved to Paris where she had major solo exhibitions at Galerie Breteau in 1962, 1964, and 1968 and was introduced to the ideas of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan. The main motifs in her art of that time were mythical themes such as mothers and children, lovers, and hybrid human-animal forms (the series *Black Paintings*). Finally, being already a mature artist with her own style and artistic perspective, Spero moved with her family to New York in 1964 where she stayed until she died. Inspired by images of the Vietnam War, a strong anti-war attitude became her main theme at that time, and she expressed it in her *War Series*, which is considered to be among the strongest artistic condemnations of war in painting.

Spero's quest for something different in painting started very early in her career when she decided to paint figurative representations. Instead of American painters from the New York School as her role models, she chose Jean Dubuffet. This fact motivated Buchloh to introduce Cy Twombly to the analysis, an artist whose work was also influenced by Dubuffet.

Twombly (1928–2011) was born in Virginia and studied art at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and at Washington and Lee University in Lexington. He also studied at the Art Students League of New York, where he met Robert Rauschenberg, and under whose influence he attended Black Mountain College in 1951 and 1952 (he studied with Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell and Ben Shahn, and met John Cage). In addition to Black Mountain College, Twombly's early painting was under the influence of his job as a cryptographer in the U.S. Army as well as his visit to North Africa, Spain, Italy and France in 1952. Similar to Spero, Twombly decided to move to Italy in 1957, where he got married and started a family.

Dimitrije Bašičević Mangelos was born in Šid (Serbia) in 1921. He studied the history of art and philosophy in Vienna and in Zagreb, where he graduated in 1949. He held a post in the Yugoslav Academy of Arts and Sciences as an assistant and a curator of the Modern Gallery and Art Archives until 1960. Mangelos received his Ph.D. in 1957 and, in the period from 1959 till 1966, he was a member of the artistic group named after one of his poems, *Gorgona*. As a critic he did much to promote abstract art. From 1971 he was the head of the Centre for Film, Photography and Television. Bašičević's artistic activity began in high school: he wrote poetry and short literary essays, some of which he published after the Second World War under a pseudonym. During the war his first visual art works were created: *paysages de la mort* and *paysages de la guerre*. In the 1950s he created a series of works⁴ that are a central part of his art. He started using the pseudonym Mangelos for this personal experiment, which he called *noart*.⁵

Similarities in Spero's and Twombly's early artistic development are the basis of Buchloh's comparative analysis of their work, which I am using here as a theoretical platform for the analysis of the position defined as 'being the Other'.⁶ The main biographical information which pushed them to the margins was that Spero was a woman and a feminist, Twombly was gay, and Mangelos – as someone living in Eastern Europe – was creating at the edges of the European art scene.

Buchloh has defined the following premises as a starting point of his theory: Spero was setting her own traditions (Buchloch named them "Spero's Other Traditions"); the context of her work was the dominance of abstract expressionism; behind the modernist myth about art was the Freudian theory of the unconscious as the source of art and of sublimation as the main mechanism of creating art; both of those lead to an expectation that only a straight male could

⁴ The series are: *tabula rasa*, *alphabet*, *paysages*, *nostories*, *graphs*, *negation de la peinture*, *pythagoras*.

⁵ His artistic practice remained unpublicized until 1977, when he decided to show a number of his artworks in the first *Gorgona* exhibition (Zagreb 1977).

⁶ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, op. cit., 431.

be a true artist. One can conclude that the audience and critics could not come to terms with a woman or gay artist. I would add that they could also not come to terms with progressive art practices outside their 'borders,' in the case of Mangelos.

After defining the context of their work, Buchloh pointed to the basic elements of Spero's and Twombly's artistic practices and to how they started their quest for alternatives. Both of them started their careers in dialogue with Abstract Expressionism. But instead of complying with it they decided to create completely different art, or "to take positions as aesthetic and geographic outsiders".⁷ That different style was figurative representation in terms of visuality, and irrationality, even naivety, in terms of inspiration (from which one could understand their interest in Dubuffet's art). What makes their work specifically important in the history of artistic practices of the second half of the twentieth century is the different employment of language in their work and the displacement of the pictorial. Since the practice of inserting text fragments within the field of a painting is considered to be among the most important developments in art of the twentieth century, Spero's and Twombly's decision to pursue this approach made them important on a much broader scope. According to Buchloh, this trajectory emerged first in the work of Jasper Johns in the early 1950s and would lead towards the creation of Conceptual Art as a movement defined as 'the rigorously textual and linguistic artistic production.' It is important to add some other sources of Spero's decision to employ language and text fragments in her paintings, including her encounters with the work of Lacan and Derrida while she lived in Paris.⁸

Spero's and Twombly's attitude towards the use of language in the visual arts, as well as becoming the 'Other' because of the way they used language in their art, opens up the possibility to include Dimitrije Bašičević Mangelos in this analysis. The same theoretical platform can be used in reading the work of this (proto)conceptual artist. All three of these artists look back (into history), searching for words (texts, letters) that help them decipher the meanings of art. In that process they found writers like Mallarmé or painters like Cézanne or Poussin important in understanding significant changes in art – changes, not progress, because both Spero and Mangelos came to the conclusion that there is no progress in art.

Deconstruction of myths

To be the 'Other' does not necessarily imply the critique of the dominant. Or, it may well imply it, in such a way that it is not a defining feature. The critique of the New York School, developed by Spero, is a critique of a style that pretended to be dominant.⁹ What Buchloh pointed out is that Spero based her critique of the New York School artists on an analysis of the mechanisms of its reception. While searching for answers to the question as to how critics defended the 'dominant' style, Spero really dealt with the more general issues of the art world.

What are the "maneuvers" (that's how Buchloh identified them) which the critics, under the guidance of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, have carried out in order to establish and defend the dominance of American Modernism?

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ Useful information about this can be found in the article by Lucy Bradnock, op. cit.

⁹ Spero's explanation of the tongue in her *Codex Artaud* painting: "[...] the tongue is both about being thirsty and longing to get back to New York as much as about mocking the male-dominated artists of the first and second Abstract Expressionist school." <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2008/07/art/nancy-spero-in-conversation-with-phong-bui>, ac. 06. 06. 2015 at 08.50 AM.

1. eliminating the avant-garde's inexplicable involvement with literary practices;¹⁰
2. banning all forms of figurative representation from the field of painting, and
3. barring all traces of cultural and historical memory from the pictorial pursuit.¹¹

Those maneuvers became the starting point for Spero, who used them further on in an attempt to develop her own artistic expression. Pointing to the work of artists from the origins of Modernism, like Courbet, Manet, Degas and the Cubists, and to their affiliation with Champfleury, Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Apollinaire (respectively), who had ideas to establish the correlation between poetic language and visual production, was essential in Spero's¹² quest to reestablish this connection. According to Buchloh, the process of destabilizing the proclaimed genealogy of Abstract Expressionism (from Cubism through Surrealism to Abstract Expressionism) was strengthened by the publishing of Robert Motherwell's collection *The Dada Painters and Poets*.¹³ Motherwell's editorial emphasized poetic and literary complements of avant-garde painting and, in a way, pointed to the incorrectness of Modernism's (i.e. Greenberg's definition of Modernism) 'hegemonic concepts of medium specificity and opticality'.¹⁴ Motherwell influenced Cy Twombly when they met at Black Mountain College: "Thus, for the first time in the New York School context, the function of poetical and philosophical texts – or, more specifically, the status of linguistic signifiers within painterly representation as a linguistic signifier – would be systematically explored by Cy Twombly and Jasper Johns, from the early to mid-1950s onward."¹⁵

Spero and Twombly, and Mangelos, came to the conclusion that alternative models must be based on a different relation of painting towards language,¹⁶ and its realization in the final artistic expression implied the introduction of text in the field of the painting. How are painting and language related, and why did those three artists decide to pursue language in the field of painting while deconstructing the dominant myths of Modernism? Painting's "approach to the condition of 'language' was obvious inasmuch as it functioned like a regularized structure and system following its own laws and conventions."¹⁷ Contrary to that, dominant strategies of modernism insisted on the auto-reflexive logic of painting and the deconstitution into its constitutive features, which implied that painting is presumably incommensurable with language. This process was initially strengthened by the forces of enlightenment and technology. What happened with painting was that it became less and less affiliated with myth and gradually lost its connection with the unconscious. This moment was quite important for the 'Others' on the art scene because it proved that Freud's main thesis about art, as a product of sublimation, and of the unconscious, as the last domain of the natural and pre-linguistic, was finally rejected, and it became obvious that this model was obsolete. At the same time, Lacan defined his theory of the unconscious in analogy to the structuring principles of language. His message was that "the unconscious is structured as language"¹⁸ and needs to be approached as such. "In the context of painting – more precisely in Surrealist automatism and its aftermath – the

¹⁰ Because literature was incompatible with modernism's medium-specific art.

¹¹ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, op. cit., 433.

¹² It would appear to be similar to the ideas of Twombly and Mangelos.

¹³ Published by George Wittenborn in 1951.

¹⁴ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, op. cit., 434.

¹⁵ Ibid, 434.

¹⁶ A relation that would be based on the somatic dimension of language.

¹⁷ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, op. cit., 434.

¹⁸ Jacques Lacan, *XI seminar: Četiri temeljna pojma psihoanalize*, Zagreb, Naprijed, 1986, 26.

traditional Freudian models of the libidinal seemed to have found their most compelling evidence in the specifically male-encoded methods of Abstract Expressionism. Inasmuch as the myth of the pictorial gesture as the self-evident correlative of the 'natural' and of the 'unconscious' as a pre-linguistic 'presence', was embodied in gestural performance, it was primarily on the level of pictorial execution that, at the beginning of the 1950s, this new process of an increasing secularization and demythification of painting occurred."¹⁹ This path of demystification of painting is usually followed through the transition of painting from Pollock via Jasper Johns to Frank Stella and Robert Rauschenberg – from the virility of gestural painting procedures towards the deconstruction of this mythical position of painting and consequently the breakage of its connection with virility. The question arises as to why Spero and Twombly were omitted in the description of this transitional voyage of painting. According to Buchloh, it was because they were doing it in a substantially different way. What Spero and Twombly did was reinvest the painting with myth and cultural and historical memory, which was opposite to the way the logic of Modernist painting of that time was evolving. Twombly's appeal to the memories of classical antiquity serves as a reminder of the painting's lost resources in myth. The same was achieved by Marcel Broodthaers' evocation of poets of modernity like Baudelaire and Mallarmé. Those evocations of Baudelaire and Mallarmé are often present in the work of Mangelos as well.²⁰

Going far back in history, Spero discovered the world of ancient calligraphy and Egyptian art. In one of her most prominent works, *Codex Artaud*, Spero used the quote: "one knows that the first men utilized a language of signs."²¹ Mangelos also questioned the (pre)historical relation between language and image. Inscribing the words: *At the beginning there was no word*, he negated the well-known quote from the Bible (*In the beginning was the word*). Negation as a method is not the only tool used here. Those words are also a reminder that there is no supremacy of painting over language. Prehistoric men made paintings. Language came after that as a tool for the interpretation of those images, according to Mangelos. Or, as Spero put it, those paintings were really the language of signs. Either way, it is important to go back in history. This research will undermine the dominant position of painting and destroy the position of medium-specific painting separated from any links with language, words, letters, and literature.

"[...] the double problem of figuration and signification. Although abstraction (misnamed, as we know) has been under way a long time in the history of painting (since, some say, late Cézanne), each new artist ceaselessly struggles with it: in art, the problems of language are never really settled: language always circles back on itself. Hence it is never naive (despite the intimidations of culture, and above all, of specialist culture) to ask, in front of the canvas, what it represents."²² If language is an inevitable instrument for understanding painting, and if language itself is something we have to learn, since it is based on an arbitrary relation between the word and what it stands for, then there is a large space waiting to be explored inside the field of primary meanings. And, finally, the way children are taught to read and write is the way society's ideology is put into power. For Spero and Twombly, it is the ideology of patriarchal society. For Mangelos it is the society whose ideology brought the world to War.

¹⁹ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, op. cit., 435.

²⁰ Ivana Bašičević Antić, "Comparative Analysis of Two Artists' Practices – Broodthaers and Mangelos", *AM: Journal of Art and Media Studies*, Belgrade, April 2014, No. 5, 79–88.

²¹ Christopher Lyon, "The Figure as Hieroglyph: Nancy Spero's 'First Language'", <http://www.artcritical.com/2010/10/25/lyon-on-spero/>, ac. 15. 04. 2015 at 10.00 AM

²² Roland Barthes, "Cy Twombly: Works on Paper", in: *The Responsibility of Forms*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985, 183.

Deconstructing those mechanisms of meaning is a way to deconstruct the positions of power; in this case specifically, the position of a male, heterosexual individual – a painter. That is how the myth of Pollock was constructed, which Spero finds necessary to deconstruct. Mangelos deconstructed the myth of another prominent artist – Picasso.²³ “Frustrated with texts about Picasso, using quotations from the writings of Gertrude Stein and Roger Garaudy, and collages of Picasso reproductions, Mangelos concluded that legend-generating information, which later served as a foundation for theoretical works and history, were obsolete as they shaped mythology instead of a reliable analysis of an artist and his work.”²⁴ This points to the same conclusion, which Buchloh suggested for Spero’s work – it would be more productive for the art world in general to conduct an analysis of an artist and of his/her work (Buchloh described exactly this activity as the starting point for Spero) than to create a myth about them.

While deconstructing myths that were well-defended and familiar even to people outside the art world, Spero/Twombly/Mangelos created art which was based on completely different premises, and more importantly, not designed to become a new myth. “It seems to have been left precisely to Spero as a woman and a feminist artist and to Twombly as a gay artist to develop a counter-critique from the perspectives of a generation of radically different models of sexual identity.”²⁵ Their work “would set out from a radically different conception of painting as the site of the articulation and inscription of the unconscious.”²⁶ The dominant trend in art of the late sixties and early seventies was the demystification of painting. A group of such practices was named Conceptual art. Conceptual art was concerned only with rational, possibly ‘progressive’ elements in art. Ideas, the main content of this art, were written with a typewriting machine. Contrary to that, in their early works, Spero, Twombly and Mangelos wrote words, sentences and letters manually. Their handwriting was an important carrier of the meaning they wanted to express. It “emphasized the libidinal compulsion of the pictorial mark-making process, which is as intensely compulsive as it is confined and incompetent.”²⁷

Language and painting

“Is painting a language? Yet, till now, no answer: we have not been able to establish either painting’s lexicon or its general grammar – to put the picture’s signifiers on one side and its signifieds on the other, and to systematize their rules of substitution and combination.” (Roland Barthes)²⁸

In the analysis of Spero’s and Twombly’s use of language as a tool for sabotaging the Modernist attitude towards the evolution of painting, Buchloh makes an important statement: “The duality of painting as writing and of writing as painting is central to the inversion of the Modernist trajectory at that moment.”²⁹ That this inversion was an important goal for

²³ The first Mangelos solo exhibition, *Picasso Phenomenon*, Novi Sad, Tribina Mladih, 1972.

²⁴ Branka Stipančić, “Mangelos from 1 to 9 1/2 – Noart”, in: Branka Stipančić (ed.), *Mangelos nos. 1–9 1/2*, Porto, Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, 2003, 27.

²⁵ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, op. cit., 435.

²⁶ Ibid, 436.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Roland Barthes, “Is Painting a Language”, in: *The Responsibility of Forms*, op. cit., 149.

²⁹ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, op. cit., 438.

Mangelos can be concluded from his words: “On the one hand, I am struggling against pictures and, on the other, transforming letters into pictures.”³⁰ Struggling against pictures by means of writing (letters) is the core of all three artistic oeuvres. The employment of literary elements in the field of painting was a way of fighting against Modernist definitions of the pictorial or, later on, the overly-analytic approach in the practices of Conceptual art. Using words similar to those quoted above, Buchloh describes the nature of Spero’s employment of language: “Thus for Spero in the *Codex Artaud* the ‘scene of writing’ is a dialectical project of both defacing painting in the name of literature and poetry and challenging, if not erasing, the ‘writings’ of Conceptual artists in the name of painting.”³¹ The position of painting in Modernism has been resituated in the work of Spero, Twombly and Mangelos within a much wider context of language – speech and literature. Even the monochrome, which was among the favorite discoveries of Modernism and part of its reductivist logic, became something else in the work of these three artists. The monochrome surface in Spero’s work is an “aggressive assault on that very reductivist logic and pictorial visuality altogether in favor of the definition of the painting as a “page”, as a receptacle of writing.”³² The same could be said about Mangelos’ monochromes. Being a part of his strategy of starting from the beginning, learning words and letters on school plates and notebooks, Mangelos’ monochrome spaces are places where a new content should be inscribed. They are painted in such a way that one can see what was beneath them, and there was always something beneath. They are places of a potential abundance of contents and not a void. “The collapse of content, like a floor under bombardment, was expressed through the monochrome, which in Mangelos’s oeuvre are pictures of content, literally obliterated, rather than representations of fields of colour or texture.”³³

Being omitted as the ‘Other’

At the time when Spero started this activity it was difficult for the audience (and critics) to understand her work. This new and different art called for a different recipient. The ‘new’ recipient would have to be aware of the position of a woman artist who is using Artaud (her male model), as a voice of ‘the Other’ instead of her own. Although he was an outcast from society due to his illness, Artaud was a male and his voice would be listened to more than that of a female artist. That is Spero’s message. Freud set the minds of most of the members of the art world in one direction. This direction implied that the nature of all artistic practice is sublimation, which further on implied the potency of the male sublimated as the main energy of art. Precisely this is the thesis Spero wanted to counter, and she did it with her work *Codex Artaud*. According to Buchloh, this work could be defined as a ‘manifesto of countersublimation and counterenlightenment’.

Writing words inside the painting sends more than one message. One of them is that the artist can be somebody ‘different’. Writing about Cy Twombly just after he died (2011), Jerry Saltz has noted that “[...] he (Twombly) moved painting beyond the heroic domains of Abstract Expressionism. Where his predecessors worked in brawny swaths of paint, Twombly focused on the delicate, scratching and scribbling, fusing looping calligraphic line, odd marks,

³⁰ Mladen Stilinović, “Interview with Dimitrije Bašičević Mangelos”, in: Branka Stipančić (ed.), op. cit., 184.

³¹ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, op. cit., 439.

³² Ibidem.

³³ Laura Hoptman, “Notime like present: Mangelos’s noart then and now”, in: Branka Stipančić (ed.), op. cit., 35.

raw smudges, blackboard-like scrawls and gorgeous visceral color with intimations of myth, narrative and a Whitman-esque feel for effusion and the erotic.³⁴ This delicate writing meant that Twombly went on a different path, a path similar to Spero's "other traditions". The elements of childish writing are often used as an instrument to insult his art. What became apparent many years after he started making those paintings is that they appeal to the innocent, unspoiled part of our senses. "So much for the pictorial fact (via di porre). But there are other events in Twombly's work, written events, Names. These, too, are facts: they stand there on the stage, without settings or props: Virgil, Orpheus. But their nominalist glory (nothing but the Name) is also impure: the writing of it is a little childish, irregular, clumsy; nothing to do with the typography of conceptual art; the hand that writes them gives these names all the blunders of someone learning to write; and perhaps in this, once again, the Name's truth is more apparent: doesn't the schoolboy learn the essence of *table* by copying its name in his laborious handwriting?"³⁵

This interpretation could be applied to Mangelos' words/paintings.³⁶ The notion of learning is strongly evoked in his work by the introduction of school tables in his art. The tables on which children used to learn to write function as a (re-done) ready-made object. He has been repeating this thesis in the series of works with lines for learning writing inscribed onto different surfaces. One of his early works from the series of 'paysages', *Non pas* (1958), is a good example of the similarities of his and Twombly's art. The words *non pas, no, pa, n pa, no, non, ... pas* are written by hand, with lightness, as if they are put there without planning, with a kind of easiness. Barthes found that easiness in Twombly's work too, noting "[...] the essence of writing is neither a form nor a usage but only a gesture, the gesture which produces it by permitting it to linger [...]"³⁷ This can be seen in Spero's early work *Les Anges, Merde, Fuck You* (1960). Words in French, a foreign language to Spero, words hanging in a limbo, divorced from syntax,³⁸ are doing the same thing as Mangelos' or Twombly's words: resisting this order that is the only one we know of, the one we live in – the symbolic order of words and meanings. The body is inserted into the linguistic order, the meaning dislocated and 'the self' destructed.

"I have deliberately attempted to distance my art from the Western emphasis on the subjective portrayal of individuality by using a hand-printing and collage technique utilizing zinc plates as an artist's tool instead of a brush or palette knife. Figures derived from various cultures co-exist in simultaneous time [...] The figures themselves could become hieroglyphs-extensions of a text denoting rites of passage, birth to old age, motion and gesture [...] Woman as activator or protagonist dancing in procession, elegiac or celebrator a continuous presence, (*sic*) (elegiac or celebrator, a continuous presence?), engaged directly or glimpsed peripherally; the eye, as a moving camera, scans the re-imaging of women."³⁹

An interesting fact about the work of these artists is the use of collage. When he was working on the Picasso myth Mangelos used collage and made *Getruda Stein used to say...* The use of different styles in one artwork, in this case the author's handwriting, a cutout from the

³⁴ Jerry Saltz, "Cy Twombly: Thinking between his legs", <http://www.artnet.com/magazine/features/saltz/cy-twombly-obituary-7-6-11.asp>, ac. 10. 02. 2015 at 11.10 AM.

³⁵ Roland Barthes, "The Wisdom of Art", in: *The Responsibility of Forms*, op. cit., 180.

³⁶ There is a series of works Mangelos named *Nouns-Facts*.

³⁷ Roland Barthes, "The Wisdom of Art", op. cit., 158.

³⁸ Lucy Bradnock, op. cit., 5.

³⁹ Courtesy Nancy Spero, from an unpublished 1989 statement by the artist titled "The Continuous Presence", <http://www.artnet.com/awc/nancy-spero.html>, ac. 04. 03. 2015 at 05.20 PM.

encyclopedia and a reproduction of Stein's portrait done by Picasso, speaks about the nature of art itself. There is no dominant style; there is no primacy of one piece of information when compared to another. Everything is possible in a quest for truth: what is art, who created myths in art, why are some artists 'big' and others marginal? Collage is an instrument used by avant-garde artists in order to tear the unity of painting apart, to destabilize its traditional position, and in that way to change its susceptibility to being used by others. "What distinguishes them (early cubist collages, author's remark) from the techniques of composition developed since the Renaissance is the insertion of reality fragments into the painting, i.e., the insertion of material that has been left unchanged by the artist. But this means the destruction of the unity of the painting as a whole, all of whose parts have been fashioned by the subjectivity of its creator."⁴⁰

Conclusion

"I thought this work had everything going against it... It was small; it was made by a woman and it used text; and it was a paper-on-paper collage. But it was, in its very make-up, subversive... What I perceived as vulnerability was really her tenacity [...]" (Kiki Smith)⁴¹

Kiki Smith's words point exactly at what caused the (failed) reception of Nancy Spero's work within the context of mainstream critical debates and institutional evaluations of artistic production of the sixties and seventies. It was small in dimensions at the time when huge canvases were dominant; it was done by a woman at the time when museums showed mostly men; and it used text at a time when the space for the image was reserved for painting only. As Spero, Twombly and Mangelos turned to the practice of inserting text into the field of painting, Barthes wrote about the relation between painting and text, making a theoretical approach to this subject.⁴² "This is why the semiologist is entitled to treat in the same way writing and pictures: what he retains from them is the fact that they are both signs, that they both reach the threshold of myth endowed with the same signifying function, that they constitute, one just as much as the other, a language-object."⁴³

Spero's use of language points to its somatic dimension. Language in her work is an extension of the image. The hieroglyph becomes a figure signifying the position of woman, her suffering, starting from giving birth (Spero often painted wombs) to acting in ritual or moving according to music. At the same time it signified her escape to other worlds. In order to escape from the patriarchal society she goes back to the pre-historical, or outside the circle of 'normal' – really, she goes to the state of the pre-verbal. Mangelos painted *Runas* (old German) and *Glagolitic* (old Slovenian) letters, which do not have a meaning for most spectators. Instead, they became shapes, geometrical forms. The author was aware of this transformation, and he has even enforced the pictorial dimension of those letters, although his starting point was to negate painting and enter the world of language, i.e. writing. Letters taken out of the world

⁴⁰ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984, 12.

⁴¹ <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/nancy-spero-tribute/>, ac. 02. 03. 2015 at 04.10 PM.

⁴² Barthes' *Mythologies* was first published in 1957.

⁴³ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, New York, The Noonday Press, 1991, 114.

of familiar meanings have become an instrument of deconstructing the world of constructed meanings and relations. Twombly was interested in the graffiti, but the nature of this interest is primarily related to his (gay) sexual identity. “The graffiti inscription was no longer imbued with a celebration of (male) mastery and the sublime achievement of competence and skill, but rather emphasized the libidinal compulsion of the pictorial mark-making process, which is as intensely compulsive as it is confined and incompetent.”⁴⁴

Spero, Twombly and Mangelos were creating art in the early sixties, at a time when the things they were doing were unfamiliar and different. They prefigured the postmodern semiotics of picture-making,⁴⁵ and this vanguard position in understanding and implementing new theoretical platforms left them out of the dominant traditions of the day. They survived to become contemporaries of younger artists and, in this case, what is called “the artists’ artists”. They were seldom mentioned in art historical literature until the younger generation, who saw them as a source of ‘the new’ and ‘good’ in art, became present on the international art scene. All three of them, Spero, Twombly and Mangelos, are best described with the words which the curator Kirk Varnadoe used in describing Twombly’s work on the occasion of his 1994 retrospective: “influential among artists, discomfiting to many critics and truculently difficult not just for a broad public, but for sophisticated initiates of postwar art as well.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, op. cit., 436.

⁴⁵ Christopher Lyon, op. cit.

⁴⁶ Kennedy, Randy, “Cy Twombly, Idiosyncratic Painter, Dies at 83” *New York Times*, <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/07/05/cy-twombly-idiosyncratic-painter-dies-at-83/?hp&r=1>, ac. 04. 06. 2015 at 08.20 AM.