

**FEMINIST
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IN ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS
AND THEORIES OF ART**

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For the past few years, I have been working on a book about feminist artistic responses to the American war in Vietnam. My interest in this subject was stimulated by the current American wars and can be expressed through the following question: What do art and art writing informed by feminism offer to a situation of war, and to war resistance?¹

In 2003, two weeks after the invasion of Iraq, the French theorist Bruno Latour gave a lecture at Stanford University. The lecture opened brilliantly. “Wars. So many wars. Wars outside and wars inside. Cultural wars, science wars, and wars against terrorism. Wars against poverty and wars against the poor. Wars against ignorance and wars out of ignorance. My question is simple: Should be at war, too, we, the scholars, the intellectuals?”² Latour then posed another question, which gave the lecture its title: “What has become of the critical spirit? Has it run out of steam?”

These are compelling questions for anyone concerned with the problem of individual responsibility for war and the role of the humanities in a time of war. After raising these issues, however, Latour abruptly pivoted to what he called his “worry”: “Quite simply,” he noted, “my worry is that [the humanities] might not be aiming at the right target.” “To remain in the metaphorical atmosphere of the time,” Latour continued, “military experts constantly revise their strategic doctrines, their contingency plans, the size, direction, and technology of their projectiles, their smart bombs, their missiles; I wonder why we, we alone would be saved from those sorts of revisions. It does not seem to me that we have been as quick, in academia, to prepare ourselves for new threats, new dangers, new targets.”

Latour’s lecture, entitled “Why has critique run out of steam?”, is, at least in part, an exercise in devil’s advocacy, but it touches on a real problem, which is how critique can adapt to what he calls a “metaphorical atmosphere” of crisis. Over a decade later, this is a familiar problem in feminism. For some time now, feminist critique has been treated in some quarters of the intellectual Left as an indulgence that antiwar politics cannot afford. As Rosalyn Deutsche has written, “At a time . . . that cries out for psychoanalytic and feminist analyses, psychoanalytic feminism is treated as politically expendable.”³

Latour borrows a military analogy, fighting the last war, to diagnose the malaise in which the humanities is plunged. For in military doctrine insists that war, unlike history, does not repeat itself. “Would it not be rather terrible,” he wonders, “if we were still training young kids—yes, young recruits, young cadets—for wars that are no longer possible . . . leaving them ill-equipped in the face of threats we had not anticipated, for which we are so thoroughly unprepared?” Pondering this image, my thoughts turn to my students. It is difficult to imagine them as cadets. But could Latour be right? Is critique outmoded? Is feminist critique at a dead end?

When Latour extolled the superior competence of military experts who constantly revise “the size, direction, and technology of their projectiles,” the American wars were in their infancy. Since then, it has become de rigeur for the humanities to court legitimacy in a culture of techno-militarism, even as the credibility of that culture as inexorably declined. Close to home, militarist thinking is detectable even in some revisionist histories of postmodernism, which reduce those debates to abstract culture wars, and in a broad revival of fantasies of mastery that feminist, psychoanalytic, and poststructuralist work had once discredited. The prospect of a humanist academy on the military model—a drone academy—seems rather different now. Seizing on Latour’s invocation of a military truism, namely, that fighting the last war is a prescription for failure, I struggle to reconcile this with what the humanities also aspires to do, which is in part to consider the past, to reflect on how the past and the present act upon each other. Often, historical experience can be a message in a bottle delivered to the uncertain future. So, why not examine the last war? Why not look at the last few, come to that? Why not reflect upon what feminist thinking has brought to war and war protest in the past?

¹ This text draws upon material from my forthcoming book *Sperm Bomb: Art, Feminism, and the American War in Vietnam*, and from three published essays: “Louise Lawler: No Drones,” *October* 147 (Winter 2014); “Book of Tongues,” in *Nancy Spero: Dissidences* (Barcelona and Madrid: Museu d’art Contemporani de Barcelona and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2008); and “Spero’s Curses,” *October* 122 (Fall 2007).

² Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* no. 2 (Winter 2004), p. 225. First presented as the Stanford presidential lecture, Stanford Humanities Center, April 7, 2003. All subsequent references to this text are to page 225 except where noted.

³ Rosalyn Deutsche, “Questionnaire: In what ways have artists, academics, and cultural institutions responded to the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq?” *October* 123 (Winter 2008), p. 39.



I begin with Virginia Woolf. In *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf suggests that war is not an event that suddenly comes along. It is already here. “The desire to dominate and enslave” animates cultural rituals from education to dining to dress, she suggests, and the prevention of war, like war itself, therefore begins at home, with ourselves.⁴

Militarism is something different. Militarism distinguishes “war inside,” as Gertrude Stein called our birth right of destructiveness, from war outside, the violence of the state.⁵ Predicated on a strict separation between the subject and the state, militarism cultivates our sense of estrangement from war, discouraging questions like the one Gertrude Stein recollected from childhood: “What is it inside—in-me that makes me already know all about war?”⁶ For Stein, war is always already part of oneself, inside oneself. The mystery of war is that it lays its claim from the inside out.

Both Woolf and Stein were, of course, survivors of war. In her *Thoughts for Peace in an Air Raid*, published in 1942, Woolf wrote:

“The Germans were over this house last night and the night before that. Here they are again. It is a queer experience, lying in the dark and listening to the zoom of a hornet, which may at any point sting you to death. It is a sound that interrupts cool and consecutive thinking about peace. Yet it is a sound—far more than prayers and anthems—that should compel one to think about peace.”⁷

Thinking in darkness, thinking in bed, thinking with the unconscious—Woolf defends the supposedly “futile activity of idea-making” as a counterpoint to the drone of war.⁸ Woolf resists the rhetoric of war rather than, as in Latour’s case, embracing it. Sharpening her pen on the spectacle of militaristic display, the vanity on parade in military, parliamentary, and academic pageants alike, in *Three Guineas* Woolf connects the dots between masculine and class privilege and militarism.

Then there is the question of speed. Latour admonishes us in the humanities to get on with things “as fast as possible.”⁹ Woolf’s *Three Guineas*, by contrast, is a study in hesitation and delay, a counterpoint to the urgency and speed of technological militarism. “Three years is a long time to leave a letter unanswered,” she drolly observes in the opening line, “and your letter has been lying without an answer even longer than that.”¹⁰ Setting aside the abundant appeals that pile up on her desk, waiting for more dust to gather before lifting her pen, the author ruminates for years before replying at length to a question styled, in the familiar way, to flatter prospective patrons of a new society: “How in your opinion are we to prevent war?” Woolf’s reply runs to some fifty pages in small type. “It is true that many answers have suggested themselves,” she confides, “but none that would not need explanation, and explanation takes time.”¹¹

A twenty-first century Woolf, one imagines, would not donate now or circulate an online petition to her address book with an urgent personal message to stall next week’s war. It is difficult to imagine her tweeting advice to the prime minister: to bomb or not to bomb. Offered the opportunity to sign a petition, attend a political meeting, and donate to a fund, she resists all three. Belated as it is, Woolf’s thick, chiding letter to the founder of the new society does not conclude by enclosing a check. Instead, she promises to donate to the rebuilding fund of a women’s college. The prevention of war, she reasons, rests on a new model of education, which is experimental and adventurous, with a curriculum devoted not to “the arts of dominating other people” (which “require too many overhead expenses”) but

⁴ “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid,” (1942), in *Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 3. First published in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*.

⁵ Gertrude Stein, *Wars I Have Seen* (1945; London: Brilliance Books, 1984). On Stein’s memoir and artistic responses to war, see Mignon Nixon, “War Inside/War Outside: Feminist Critiques and the Politics of Psychoanalysis,” *Texte zur Kunst* 17, no 68 (December 2007).

⁶ Stein, *Wars I Have Seen*, p. 9.

⁷ Virginia Woolf, “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid,” (1942), p. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Latour, “Has Critique Run Out of Steam,” p. 226.

¹⁰ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own/Three Guineas*, ed. Michele Barrett (London: Penguin, 1993), p. p. 117.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.



to “the arts of human intercourse,” with a faculty drawn from “the good livers as well as from the good thinkers.”¹² She envisions, that is, a project like the one that we are privileged to participate in here today, this seminar.

Woolf wrote *Three Guineas* during the Spanish Civil War, and she writes bluntly about the suffering of civilians, describing dead bodies and ruined buildings as they appeared in photographs of that war. Later, she herself became a civilian target of aerial warfare. In our time of war, the civilian experience of war is more remote. The current US wars were in their earliest stages when Latour extolled the superior competence of military experts constantly revising “their strategic doctrines, their contingency plans, the size, direction, and technology of their projectiles, their smart bombs, their missiles.” It all looks rather different now, the blind spot of Latour’s rhetoric being, of course, the psychological and ethical implications of identifying with the perpetrator.

For the US as for France, the last war, the one the generals were so eager to forget, was Vietnam. There are ironies to spare in all of this. The American war in Vietnam was a re-run of the French colonial war in Vietnam. The old general who proved the fallacy of this metaphor, banishing both armies, General Giap, died in 2013. In an editorial in the *New York Times*, the Vietnam war historian Nick Turse observed that the American government and military continued to resist acknowledging civilian suffering, most recently in drone strikes on suspected terrorists “that have killed unknown numbers of innocent people.”¹³ Our current wars may be winding down, but drone strikes that menace civilians persist. So let us focus on the bombing of civilians and consider what feminism, and art informed by feminism, might contribute to our understanding of this persistent pattern. To do this, I would like to consider the work of Nancy Spero, in particular her *War Series* (1966-1970).

In 1964, Nancy Spero and her husband, the painter Leon Golub, returned to the United States from an extended sojourn in Paris with their three young sons and settled in New York. Confronted with the escalating military involvement in Vietnam, both artists assumed an obligation to respond. Spero abruptly abandoned painting. “I started working rapidly on paper,” she recalled, “producing angry works, often scatological, manifestoes against a senseless obscene war.”¹⁴ Wetting and scouring the fragile, often wrinkled sheets of paper with gouache and ink, she generated an imagery of ferocious, apocalyptic violence—and astonishing delicacy. Produced over an intensive period from 1966 to 1970, the *War Series* culminated only in 2007, when Spero’s installation *Maypole: Take No Prisoners*, was shown at the American pavilion of the Venice Biennale at the height of the American occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. Spero died in 2009, aged 83.

Back the United States in 1964, Spero “starting to think about how to address the war” and decided to concentrate on the bomb so as to “show the collusion of sex and power.”¹⁵ One motif she devised is that of the *Sperm Bomb*. In one of these, a blue mushroom cloud fills the page. Gaping mouths spew out curses in a rain of profanity over stick-like bodies littering the ground. Those curses—*merde*, fuck you—are written in two tongues. One, *merde*, invokes the language of the former colonial power in Vietnam, but also Spero’s own intimacy with the French tongue, her double responsibility, one might say, for the war being waged in Vietnam by Americans following the withdrawal of the French.

Spero’s curses summon the colonial history of Vietnam, with its Francophone legacy, as a palimpsest of the American war. The violence of this war, Spero suggests, is hysterical. Spero’s French curses summon hysteria in many guises: the female hysterics Charcot treated at the Salpêtrière in Paris; the hysteria of Antonin Artaud—Spero’s proxy in other works; and the hysteria of soldiers, first diagnosed in the First World War. Male hysteria, in the twentieth century, is pre-eminently an effect of war and is associated most closely with the shell-

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹³ Nick Turse, “For America, Life Was Cheap in Vietnam,” *New York Times*, October 9, 2013.

¹⁴ Spero quoted in Amei Wallach, “Hysterical Men, Castrated Women: Nancy Spero’s Exquisite Corpse,” in *Nancy Spero: Selected Works from the Codex Artaud 1971-72* (Bartmouth, Mass.: University Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts, 2001), p. 11. The statement about working on paper appears in Nancy Spero, “Creation and Procreation,” from “Forum: On Motherhood, Art, and Apple Pie,” *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* 12 (1992). Reprinted in Jon Bird, Joanna Isaak, Sylvère Lotringer, Nancy Spero (London: Phaidon, 1996), pp. 118-119.

¹⁵ Katy Kline and Helaine Posner, “A Conversation with Leon Golub and Nancy Spero,” in *Leon Golub and Nancy Spero: War and Memory*, ed. Kline and Posner (Paris and Cambridge: The American Center, Paris and MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1994), p. 39.



shock sufferers of the First World War, war hysterics whose most striking symptom was mutism, a tongue tied by war. For the soldier, Juliet Mitchell observes, hysteria is a reaction to the violence that warfare exacts. Forced to break the social taboo on killing, the soldier is urged to revive, and to act upon, primal fantasies of murder and blood lust.¹⁶ For some, this aggression rebounds on the aggressor, who, in effect, cuts out his own tongue. Playing out the hysterical logic of war, in which soldiers are stimulated to act out their fantasies of destruction but not to speak of them, the male war hysteric dramatizes the trauma of killing by silencing himself—turning himself, Mitchell argues, into a woman.

Throughout the *War Series*, Spero dramatizes the hysterical violence of warfare—its stimulation of the desire to kill, its fusion of sex and violence—but also the hysteria that is projected onto political resistance as the protests of victims and critics alike are dismissed as impotent rage. War, Spero suggests, is hysterical in its very recourse to action in preference to speech. The culture of war is one in which hysterical effects proliferate as enactment, or acting out, triumphs over representation. And this hysteria of war is in turn projected onto victims, onto soldiers whose fantasies are exploited by warfare—who are deprived of speech and exhorted to act—and onto all those who protest or resist the violence of war—onto victims, onto critics, onto artists, and onto mothers. War, Spero suggests, is the culture of hysteria par excellence.

The bombs in Spero's *War Series* are mostly headless. In one, in place of a head (to reason), a dark cloud bristles with maenad-like heads in profile, screaming madly, tongues thrust out like the poisoned tips of projectiles. This *Bomb* is out of its head, drunk on war, mad with rage, deprived of all reason. It is the repressed of what the war in Vietnam was supposed to be. For the war in Vietnam was sold to the public as the calculated application of advanced technology for a defensive purpose, a contention contradicted by the reality of its increasingly sadistic and blanket cruelties. Denying the passions of war, Spero suggests, is a defense against the unconscious trends of war. Art, she insists, has an essential role to play in summoning the cultural past to remind us that war is bound up with madness—not this war alone, but war itself. The hyper-rationality of contemporary militarist discourse, with its lexicon of drones and pinpoint attacks and its fetishizing of technology, is a cover, Spero's work suggests, for something else.

"My anger really flowed with the *War Series* . . . thinking as a mother," Spero recalled. "Everything burst out."¹⁷ The *War Series* protests the war in Vietnam, but also the political exclusion of voices raised against it, in particular those of women. Spero would later remark that she exploited the anger she felt at being marginalized as a "woman artist" and mother to articulate a feminist critique of the war. The imagery Spero devised for this critique, however, hardly conforms to conventional expectations about what an artist, thinking as a mother, might produce. What Spero does as an artist, thinking as a mother, is to incarnate the phantasmatic dimension of war, to invoke the infantile mania that pervades even the most calculated and controlled forms of aggression.

The *War Series* condenses a dizzying catalogue of past and future destruction: the fire bomb, the atomic bomb, the napalm bomb, the cluster bomb, and the helicopter gunship, but also the chemical bomb, the suicide bomb, and the drone. Bombs are less the technological advances of warfare, Spero suggests, than its repetition. In our own time of war, aerial destruction and the sexualized violence of rape and torture overlap and converge in puzzling ways. Until we grasp that even aerial and remote-controlled warfare is bound up with sadistic, often sexualized fantasy, Spero suggests in the *War Series*, we will not begin to confront the reality of war.

To resist militarization today, Spero's *War Series* suggests, we need to identify and 'own' the unconscious trends of destructiveness that give rise to war. Spero, among others of her generation of artists, brought matters of subjectivity and violence squarely into the purview of war, and of war resistance. Her *War Series*, with its graphic phantasmagoria of human bombs, dramatizes the sexual destructiveness of aerial war. In these works, Spero poses a question that Juliet Mitchell would later formulate for psychoanalytic feminist theory as this question: "How do we account for the rampant sexuality of war"—for the fact that "sexual violence seems 'automatically' to accompany

¹⁶ Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria and the Effect of Sibling Relationships on the Human Condition* (London: Allen Lane, 2000).

¹⁷ Artist's statement, unpublished, no date. Archives of Professor Jon Bird, London.



war violence?"¹⁸ This is a question Spero's work enables us to ask, not only about the acts of identifiable individual agents—acts of war rape, for example—but also about cluster bombs, suicide bombs, and drones.

¹⁸ Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas*, p. 129.