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Taryn Simon, Leon Golub and Nancy Spero  
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### **Power and Masculinity through the Eyes of Three Artists**

“The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone” is the most influential book I read in the past couple of years. The author, Olivia Laing, explores the feeling of urban loneliness through the lives of three artists. As an expat of Britain, she arrives in New York fresh out of a relationship—scared and alone. To understand the complexities of her emotions, she looks to the lives of three well known visual artists who worked in NYC years before her time in the city.

I was recently in New York City at the Met Breuer excited to see an exhibit by Anselm Kiefer, a favorite painter of mine. However, what left an impression on me upon leaving was another artist by the name of Leon Golub. His works were figurative, loose and painterly containing movement in each stroke. His works were dark, in color and theme, depicting men fighting and racial conflicts. Throughout the exhibit, I saw various manifestations of issues surrounding gender, race, and class. A section of the exhibit was entitled “Power and Masculinity” and read the following:

With only a few exceptions, Golub painted men, usually men at war with themselves and one another. Some of these figures are victims of violence, others the perpetrators. Ultimately his depictions of men—known and anonymous, modern and ancient—amount to a kind of history of power and its abuses across time. “If I had to give a description of my work,” the artist once said, “I would say it’s a definition of how power is demonstrated through the body and in human actions, and in our time, how power and stress and political and industrial powers are shown.” Working from the belief that power corrupted both physically and psychologically, Golub strove through his career to visualize its corrosive force. He did so in part through his signature method of applying paint to canvas and then scraping it away with tools such as meat cleavers.

This visual representation of what we had been learning in class about the history of power brought everything together for me. I am an experiential and visual learner, one who uses art and exhibitions as a means of learning. I was drawn to one collaged painting done by Golub and Nancy Spero— one of my all time favorite feminist artists. However, I had failed to realize that the two artists were married. Nancy Spero is one of the most well-known feminist artists of her time. So my question became, how did this hyper-masculine artist marry a feminist artist and how did they collaborate to create art together? What was their relationship and how did they work to analyze and expose the gender framework? To supplement these questions I looked to Taryn Simon, a contemporary artist that I worked for last summer. Her primary method of working is through photography, but her ideas often translate into books, performances, sculptures, and text. However, each piece of work breaks down and manifests systems of power. Taryn’s biography reads, “Guided by an interest in systems of categorization and classification, her practice involves extensive research into the power and structure of secrecy and the precarious nature of survival (Simon).” Although a vague description, her work constantly brings light to systems of inequality that our world has in place. Each artist I analyze will serve as a case study as their work not only reflects their personal lives, but their cultural ones. Much like Olivia Laing, I would like to use this paper to discuss theories of power through the work and lives of Simon, Golub, and Spero in order to analyze three different perspectives on power as it relates to gender.

Power is generally defined as the ability to influence the behavior of others or a course of events. In the same vein, masculinity is defined as the possession of traits traditionally associated with men namely courage, independence, assertiveness, and violence. In contrast, femininity is differentiated as the opposite of masculinity by an enculturated polarization. Our culture has

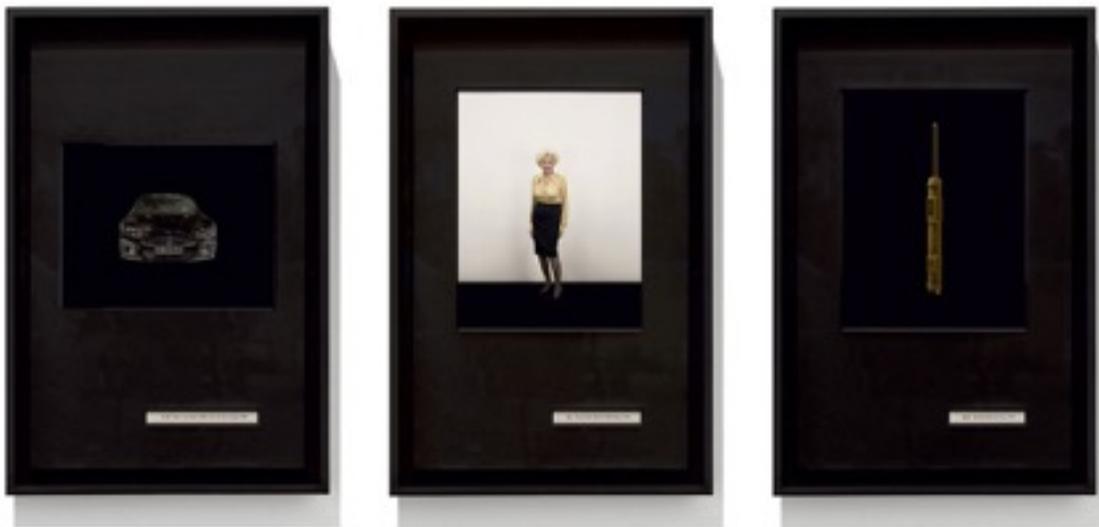
prescriptive and proscriptive rules for what it means to be one or the other, and anything between is uncomfortable, a grey area not to discuss. An article entitled, “Dislocating Masculinity: Gender, power, and anthropology,” serves as a key reference for my analysis. The authors lament over the restrictions of our binary gender language. They write, “masculinity and maleness are defined oppositional as what is not feminine or female... the idea of masculinity is reified and universalized. Masculinity appears as an essence or commodity that can be measured, possessed or lost (Cornwall 12).” They refer to the hyper masculine, macho man, who is the quintessential marker of prowess and toughness, scoring women and fighting battle. Violence and a dominating power are deeply rooted in masculinity. If a man refuses to fight, he is cowardly. But on the other hand, if he cries, it seems justified, because he is macho. Macho men can use seduction or violence as a means of domination. There are male behaviors that can be considered feminine or masculine, but the same for females is less acceptable. As the article puts it: “The male is only male at certain times, the female is female all her life (Cornwall 19).” Hegemonic masculinity is the framework for our androcentric society. Therefore, the power and social relationships that they inhabit due to this advantage allows men to maintain these positions (Cornwall 19). The last point within the article that I would highlight is the idea that sexuality as the “dominant discourse of power in the west,” and until we think of another way to define power. All of the artists I have discussed realize this power of masculinity, all explore it through sexuality and violence (either direct or symbolic). The three artists believe themselves to be political investigators making their art relevant to gendered analyses. I will explore art as a semiotic reflection of gendered issues.

Taryn Simon is an interdisciplinary contemporary artist whose work questions political and social systems across the globe. She uncovers hidden or controversial truths that exist within our society. While working at the studio this past summer, I learned that the top artists are men.

When art consultants offer ideas to their clients about the top artists, they first name the top male artists: Koons, Hirst, Basquiat, Pollock, the list goes on. Most exhibitions centered around one artist are by men; galleries often represent more men than women. This makes it increasingly difficult for female artists' work to be presented at international art fairs such as Art Basel or Frieze. There has been headway in recent years, and I believe artists like Taryn, Yayoi Kusama, Marina Abramovic, and others are progressing women's presence in the art world. But, that doesn't mean it isn't an everyday struggle to be even be represented, and once a woman gets there, compensation is nowhere near equal.

As stated, Taryn Simon's works look at systems of power, but one work in particular examines power dynamics as it directly relates to gender. *Birds of the West Indies* is a piece where she indexes every **single weapon, vehicle, and woman** in the James Bond films. The James Bond series began as a novel called "You Asked for It." The author named the main character after James Bond, an ornithologist who indexed all of the birds in West Indies in the 1930s; hence, Taryn's decision to index all of the "objects" within the films in the same manner as James Bond himself. I would like to draw particular attention to her decision to deem women as objects. The three objects she chose to highlight speak to the cultural idea that the Western man is powerful, alluring, and indestructible— all key elements of traditional masculinity. Within the James Bond movies, women present either help Bond or allure and sabotage him. This idea reminds me of Nagel's discussion of colonialism in early America. Nagel writes that one man: "met his death after Powhatan village women enticed him up from the barge into their howses' and delivered him to his executioners" (Nagel 70). This idea of woman as a victim as well as a seductress is a timeless characteristic of females that Taryn displays in a popular cultural context.

Women are essential to the plot of each James Bond film, an expectation in the pattern of each narrative. The biggest feat for Taryn with this project was to approach each woman and ask to photograph them for the index. Some women were not keen on being depicted as an object in a directory. However, I think this hyperbole of objectification proves to be extremely effective as it visually represents the position that women have in the gender framework. A description of the work by the Eastman Museum reads, “The artist trains her eye away from the agents of seduction — glamour, luxury, power, violence, sex — to look only at the margins. She forces the viewer’s gaze off center, counter to the intentions of the franchise, by focusing on the forgotten, insignificant, and overlooked (Taryn Simon: *Birds of the West Indies*).” The James Bond films represent those key, overt themes highlighted by the Eastman Museum, but what Simon does, is expose the forgotten or objectified pieces of the film. Simon’s perspective emphasizes the gender framework and hegemonic masculinity which is often overlooked and unseen on a daily basis within things of popular cultural value such as James Bond.



Above you can see a piece of the *Birds of West Indies* exhibition highlighting an automobile, a woman, and a weapon.

Taryn believes that democracy needs more transparency. In another piece by Taryn, within the series entitled “An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar,” she photographs some of America’s hidden injustices, angered by inequality and disadvantage she aims to expose issues for public examination. One piece of the series in particular highlights the power of masculinity over every area of female life including their anatomical structure. “Hymenoplasty” is a photograph within the series and shows a woman of Palestine descent who is getting reconstructive surgery on her ruptured hymen. Taryn writes, “In order to adhere to cultural and familial expectations regarding her virginity and marriage, she underwent hymenoplasty. Without it she feared she would be rejected by her future husband and bring shame upon her family (Simon).” This procedure is one of many that women do in relation to vaginal rejuvenation in order to maintain their “virginity” for men. If this woman hadn't undergone the surgery, she would have failed cultural expectations, her husband, and her family. In this work, Taryn highlights her own anger towards the androcentric society that commands women to preserve their purity for male pleasure. This existence of this surgery is a symbolic form of violence towards women; they may be unconscious that they are victims of a male dominated culture, believing that the hymenoplasty is necessary for a respectable life.



Hymenoplasty  
Cosmetic Surgery, P.A.  
Fort Lauderdale, Florida

*An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar, 2017*

I believe that Taryn Simon would be in agreement with Ridgeway's **Framed by Gender**. Ridgeway claims that systematic inequality is expressed and reinforced by social interaction. In her words, gender is a framework deeply ingrained in our society and therefore, structures every other aspect of our lives. I view Taryn's work as extremely anthropological in the way that she structures and organizes our world through indexes and systems. In her two works, *The Birds of the West Indies* and *Hymenoplasty*, she directly speaks to the female position within that male dominated framework.

Leon Golub and Nancy Spero are working during a time period 50 years previous to Taryn Simon, yet the same ideas of masculinity and power are just as pervasive. Art reflects the issues of the time, but in my opinion, effective art is timeless because it speaks to issues that persist throughout time. Power is a societal issue that will always be relevant. Not surprisingly, Leon Golub's art career took off before his wife, Nancy Spero. She was busy making art while raising their children, not to mention the difficulty that women artists had in the mid 20th century. After Nancy and Leon married, they moved to Europe in hopes that their work focusing on power and sex would be more widely received. Leon sums up both of their work in an interview, "Nancy hooked into the issues that women face. Not just women artists, but women subjected to the pressures of subordination in the modern world. And I hooked into all phases of how men act out aggression and violence, power moves (Posner 123)." Both of their work is abstracted from reality, pieces of societal issues manifested visually within the world of contemporary art. Both of their work plays off of each other in terms of collaboration. They constantly fed off of each others ideas and in many ways began to inhabit the space of polarization. One interviewer said, "Nancy, your feminism must bounce off the fact that Leon is very powerful (Posner 125)." Nancy's work is a "subversion of Golub's power (Posner 125)."

They are in an artistic discourse with each other that represents the issues they have with one another in regards to gender and power. These challenges are not unique to them, but rather, a reflection of larger societal issues which they bring back to society through exhibiting their art in the public sphere.

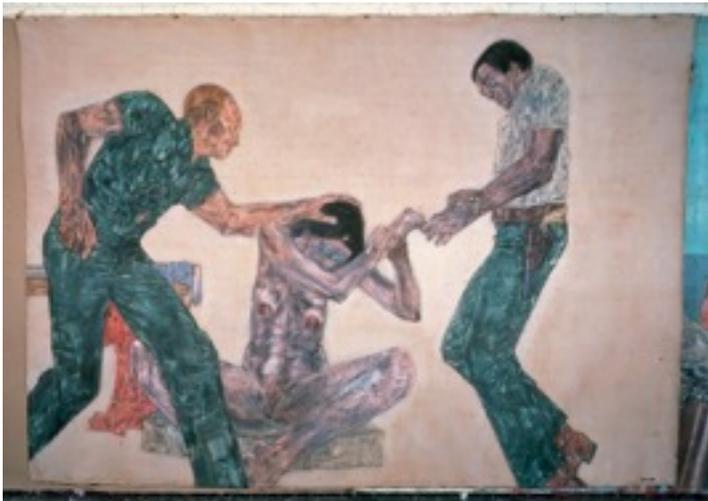
It's interesting to me in the way the two artists look together. She is displaying a dominance in the relationship by being in front of him. They both appear to be androgynous in their appearance and dress— short hair, no make up, muted tones, and similar expressions. Both of their work evokes powerful, blunt, and raw

imagery. Though they may dress the same, their artistic expression of femininity and masculinity are different. In thinking back to Taryn Simon's style, the subject matter and concept behind her work pointed to ideas of power and masculinity. However, in both Spero and Golub's work, their subject matter and concept are tied to very overt social



issues, but the theme is continued on in the formal elements of the works. Painting for both artists is the direct result of physical action, and in this way, they embody issues of violence. Golub's work is characterized by bold, muddied, dark colors. He paints scenes of destruction due to inequalities in power— with guns, fist fights, and sexual violence. He even uses a meat cleaver to apply paint some canvases. On the other hand, Spero's work uses paler colors, fragile compositions with lots of negative space, and feminine imagery. Although, especially in her early work, there are more violent, passionate, dark pieces that evoke similar themes to Golub's work.

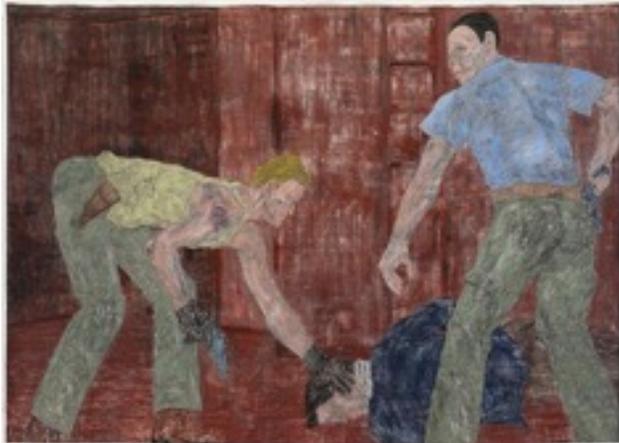
Below are a few examples of their work, Golub on the left and Spero on the right.



Interrogation III, 1981



Codex Artaud, 1971



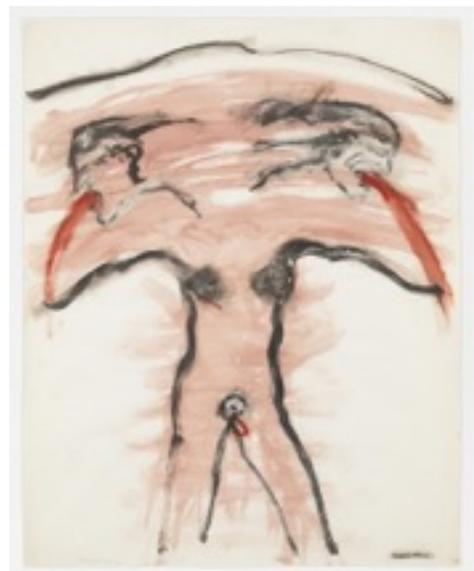
White Squad X, 1986



Masha Bruskina / Gestapo Victim, 1994



Interrogation II, 1981



Female Bomb, 1966

One can see how similar their works are in terms of violence and power, but their ideas are displayed differently in terms of medium, subject matter, and color. Each artist's work changes throughout time, but the images above highlight the major contrasts in their appearances.

Nancy's work is lighter, more fragile, but still angry and fiery. Within her lack of dark color and utilization of white negative space, you get a sense of isolation, fear, and silence. These themes are due to her position as a woman in the mid 19th century, and her inability to be noticed and included in the art scene of New York during her early career. Golub's work is bold, big in size, and with very overt messages of violence and aggression. If I bring this discussion back to "The Dislocating Masculinity" article or even Ridgeway's **Framed by Gender**, there is a consistent theme that men speak out because of their dominating nature. On the other hand, women are often passive and agreeable, their femininity silenced by masculinity. In the work above, you can see frustration and anger in Spero's work, but it's downplayed in color and size of the physical piece of work and the line sizes within the work. Her art is more abstract, more difficult to understand in comparison to Golub's obvious depictions of destruction and superiority. She often uses text in her pieces that references her frustrations and feminist ideals— sometimes even in different languages, continuing on with her trend in being "silenced" by her frustrations with her sex. She said, "I worked harder than ever- proving to myself, if no else— that I was an artist, not just the wife of an artist and the mother of two small sons (Posner 123)." She was constantly working to prove herself more than her traditional position as a housewife and mother, and it made it more difficult that her husband's career was expanding rapidly in comparison.

Spero and Golub's work underscores gender inequality not only within their work but between each other. I will now compare a piece by Spero and Golub, respectively, in detail, and discuss how elements of the work relate to the expression of power through masculinity. I'll first

discuss one of Spero's pieces, and then analyze some of her major themes within her work. Spero repeatedly used symbolic imagery: ambiguous forms with heads, multi-headed snakes, and bodies with phallic tongues (Walker). *Female Bomb*, 1966 (pictured on page 9), uses only three colors, and is very minimalistic and light in color. It is painted using translucent color, perhaps mirroring her feelings as a transparent woman in the art world. The subject matter is a two-headed woman with blood flowing from her mouths as well as her breasts and vagina (*Female Bomb*). The blood coming from the heads can also be seen as the tongues that she often used; the tongues are symbolic of her inability to be heard as a woman. She even states, "I was literally sticking my tongue out at the world—a woman silenced, victimized, and brutalized (*Female Bomb*)." Spero describes the tongues as phallogentric which is ironic given her distaste for this tendency for women to be controlled by the male anatomy. She says in an interview, "what irritates me is that women artists are often expected to respond to the idea of the universal—the phallus, the symbol of power and authority— why do women artists always have to respond to male power." In this quote, you can see the anger that she has with her own work as a response to male power. The tongue also represents the deliverer of derision for Spero—a key to her feminist practices (Nixon 6). In accordance with the beliefs of Virginia Woolf, she believes women are often subjects of derision or mockery, and in order to emphasize and fight against inequality, one must exaggerate and ridicule the pre-existing structures we have in our gendered world (Nixon 6). Sometimes, she shares that she even painted with her spit. As time went on, her anger became more evident— louder. She began to incorporate text reading phrases like "fuck you." In her most raw pieces, she wanted to reveal "the infantile, sadistic, often sexualized mania that pervades even the most calculated and controlled forms of aggression" (Nixon 16). In a piece of hers, the "War Series," there are similarities drawn between sexual violence and war violence, a key

element of Nagel's **Gender, Sex, and Race**. Juliet Mitchell comments in "Spero's Curses," that "sex and death have come together as a fused drive; it is rather that something violent has been sexualized." Since Spero was working during the Vietnam war, and the world had just gotten through WW2, there were remnants of aggression and hysteria. The want to kill and seek revenge was responded to by sexual violence, of which women were often the victims. This is reminiscent of the themes with Simon's *Birds of West Indies*. On top of Spero's frustration with her husband's dominance, there was many societal issues due to war during the time of her work that multiplied the pre-existing power struggle between men and women. This hysteria within men is what Spero clung to throughout all of her work. She dramatized the effect of this hysteria on women's lesser place in society. She believed that women are put down "as screamers or irrational, characterized as one who screams but can't act (Nixon 20)." This is hysteria, and this is what she wanted to give voice to by mirroring this inferior position in her work with the simple forms, tongues, anger, and blood. But, the forms were quiet, they could not speak off the paper.

If Nancy's Spero's work is a frustrated, emotional *response* to power and masculinity, then Leon Golub's work is the manifestation of the *issue itself*. Rather he represents the struggles of masculinity and Nancy's art is controlled and affected by masculinity. Golub creates massive paintings in comparison to Nancy. Interrogation III (pictured above), 1981, is part of a series on the American military occupation in Central America (Glueck). The Interrogation III is the only piece in the series with a woman depicted, and represents male oppression as well as terrorism; Golub, like Spero, linked sexual violence and war. The woman in the painting is nude, handcuffed, and clearly an object of torture. The two men are standing above her, she is physically lower, but also the centered in the painting to emphasize this hierarchy. All of the

figures' bodies are dirtied with muddied brushes of paint, the colors are marked with strokes of black which I believe mirror the disruption of violence in the color of humanity. Much of Golub's work recognized and sometimes glorifies the macho man mentality— fighting and sexual violence.

However, upon further research I found commentary from a female art historian, Jo Anna Isaak, who has studied both Spero, Golub and feminist art as a whole. She presents a view of Golub's paintings that states that is very similar to Spero's use of derision or mockery in her works. By mocking the issues of femininity, we become more attuned to them. In the 1980s feminist movement, many female artists were looking at femininity as a disguise at the same time Golub was looking at masculinity as a masquerade. She says, "When a group of his portraits of powerful men are brought together as they are in this exhibition, what the viewer senses, is not so much an accumulation of power, or what power looks like— but rather what is revealed in the lack (Isaak 36)." According to Isaak, this idea of lack is essential to the feminist ideology. As viewers, we notice what is missing. He painted a series of powerful politicians with ugly faces deflated and emptied of color, strength, and emotion (Isaak 36). Golub removes the stereotypical elements of masculinity in order to draw attention to them in the same way that Spero uses hyperbole or mockery to make her point. Golub's focus on the masquerade of masculinity is symbolized by his rejection of expressing skin as warmth and flesh, a shield from the rest of the world, but rather blends the skin of his subjects into the environment of the painting (Isaak 37). In this way, there is a loss of self, a loss of power. Isaak believes Golub to be as much a part of the feminist movement as Spero, pointing out the social constructions of gender and power. He emphasizes how easily power can be flattened and devalued when painted on a canvas. In showing the viewer these deconstructions of power through art, I believe he is saying that power,

like art, is in the eyes of the beholder. When there is a “lack” of masculinity and dominance in some of his works, we become confused at its lack of conformity to the gender framework. In conclusion, Golub explores male power and the lack thereof to compliment Spero’s work feminist explorations of the lack of female power. The goal of both artists regardless of their methods in exploring masculinity and femininity is to inspire their viewers to be more self-aware of their own power and the power dynamics of the gendered culture that they navigate every single day.

In an interview, Leon Golub shares the way that the contemporary art world shapes the way we view the world, but only if you are tuned in, and the art world can be a very abstracted, and therefore, elitist space. He says, “People do not desire visualizations on their walls which have too great an urgency unless the impact is somehow diffused or ambiguously conveyed (Posner 23).” Basically, people often prefer art that is beautiful, easy to look at, to offer an escape from a difficult day. However, Taryn Simon, Nancy Spero, and Leon Golub present an honest, raw depiction of real issues that our social world faces. All three artists highlight the struggles of female and male roles in the power dynamics of our androcentric framework. Nancy and Taryn not only depict the plight of females in response to male power, but their lives’ work is another testament to the struggle of female artists in comparison to their male counterparts. Leon presents his struggle with masculinity and the violence that surrounds it. Exploring the lives and works of these individuals helped me to better understand the repercussions of the gender framework on every area of human life including art.

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