

ARTNEWS

‘The Enemies Will Be Dismantled’: Artists Reflect on the Legacy of Nancy Spero’s Letter to Lucy Lippard

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On the first Monday of each month, through June, in a partnership with the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art, ARTnews will be sharing a short film directed by Wes Miller from a series that the AAA produced about its collections.

In 1971, artist Nancy Spero, a prominent figure in the feminist art movement of the 1960s and 1970s, penned a one-sentence letter to writer, curator, and activist Lucy Lippard. The missive, which is held in the AAA’s collection, reads, “Dear Lucy, The enemies of women’s liberation in the arts will be crushed. Love, Nancy.” Spero, who is best known for her works on paper, explored female sexuality, history and mythology, and war throughout her career.

Coinciding with a retrospective of Spero’s work at MoMA PS1 in New York, on view through June 23, this film features readings of her letter by artists Lesley Dill, Abigail DeVille, Barbara Zucker, and Kalup Linzy. Andres Serrano chose to conclude his recitation with a revision: “Love, Andres.” The video also shows a group artists outside New York’s A.I.R. Gallery, which Spero cofounded in 1972 as a permanent exhibition space for work by women in the arts, as well as a view of her installation *Maypole: Take No Prisoners*, which was first shown at the Venice Biennale in 2007.

Other contemporary artists in the film respond directly to Spero’s text with their own messages. Xaviera Simmons says, “The enemies will be dismantled.” Martha Rosler declares, “The enemies of women’s liberation in the arts will be upended by envy,” and Chitra Ganesh proclaims, “The enemies have no idea how hard we’re going to fight.”

Dill gets the last word of the film, adding a few expletives and a hearty laugh as she explains what kind of fate the enemies of women’s liberation in the arts will inevitably face.

Here's more from the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art on its work, and the film project:

The Archives of American Art is a living collection, evolving with the changing world of art and artists and continually growing with new acquisitions each year. What is new is always exciting, but scholars, artists, and others continue to revisit material that is decades or even centuries old, bringing new interpretations, new framing, and new ideas to letters, diaries, oral histories, and the wide range of other materials that the Archives preserves.

In 2017, the Archives began a collaboration with filmmaker Wes Miller to produce a series of short films on important documents in its collections. The oral history, letters, and poem at the core of each film provide a glimpse of the range of historical evidence the Archives of American Art safeguards and brings into vivid detail artists' inspirations, motivations, and the art communities in which they lived. These personal accounts preserve moments in time in a way no textbook ever can, adding richness and depth to our understanding of the American art world.