FIGURING FEMALE CORPOREALITY:

THE BODY IN THE EARLY WORK OF NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE

A THESIS

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout her career, Niki de Saint Phalle's diverse body of work examined the subject of women and the adversities that women of the 20th century faced. Best known for her Nanas, larger-than-life sculptures of voluptuous and brightly colored female figures, Saint Phalle's early work dating from the first half of the 1960s has received less attention from critics and art historians. This project will consider three distinct bodies of work from this period: the Tirs (French for "shots"), tactile assemblages that the artist began shooting with a .22 caliber rifle in 1961, the Births and Brides, a series of figurative relief sculptures that Saint Phalle produced between 1962-1965, and *Hon-en katedral* (Swedish for "She – a cathedral") of 1966, the artist's first monumental sculpture, which took the form of a reclining female figure filled with interior installations. The first chapter will examine the *Tirs* with a focus on two key works: *My Shoes or Memory of a Shoot* and *Grand Tir – Séance Galerie J* (Grand Shoot – Gallery J Session) of 1961. The second chapter will analyze the *Births* and *Brides,* looking specifically to *La Mariée* (Eva Maria) of 1963 and *Accouchement Blanc ou Ghea* (White Birth or Gaea) of 1964. The third chapter will address *Hon*, analyzing the exterior structure of the sculpture, as well as the installation pieces it contained.

I will be using these three bodies of work to explore the development of two of Saint Phalle's key subjects, the condition of women and the representation of the female body, across her sculptural work dating from 1961 to 1966. Predating the

formation of the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (MLF) and the more unified feminist movement that followed the May 1968 protests in France, Saint Phalle's early work represents a notable example of proto-feminist expression. When Saint Phalle developed her body of work in the early 1960s, feminist concerns had only just begun to find a place in postwar art practice, leaving her with a limited discourse to build upon. As a result, Saint Phalle's treatment of women's issues in the first half of the 1960s depended largely on the current socio-political climate and the limited feminist dialogue that was available at the time.

This project will explore the evolution of form and content in Saint Phalle's early sculpture through these distinct lenses, contemplating and re-contextualizing her proto-feminist exploration of the female body. I will situate her work within the postwar political, intellectual and artistic climate in Paris, where she was primarily living and working during this period. Each chapter will demonstrate a critical shift in her sculptural practice, and analyze it in relation to a particular cultural context. Formally, this project will illustrate a progression from an abstract, symbolic representation of the body, to a more directly figurative – and eventually, monumental – body sculpture.

The first chapter will argue for a connection between the Tirs and the extreme violence associated with the French-Algerian War. The second chapter will illustrate a link between Saint Phalle's Births and Brides and the feminist rhetoric of Simone de Beauvoir. In the final chapter, *Hon* will be explored in relation to historical conceptions of sexuality and space. By applying these different lenses to Saint Phalle's early sculpture, I hope to re-contextualize her radical approach to

women's issues, analyze the evolution of the female body in her work throughout the 1960s and provide clarity regarding an early feminist perspective that has often been misunderstood.

Despite being shown at major institutions, including a 2014-2015 retrospective at Grand Palais and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, there is a shortage of critical literature addressing the work of Niki de Saint Phalle. In the limited scholarship that is available, historians have come to understand the artist's complex oeuvre through a primarily biographical methodological approach. This is a logical lens to take up in regards to Saint Phalle, as the artist consistently stressed her life story, both in interviews and in her own writing. As curator of her recent retrospective, Camille Morineau explains, "When Saint Phalle takes up her pen, often as the sole author of her catalogues or writing and rewriting her biography several times, signing commentaries on her works in the third person and sometimes obscuring the reading of her works, she is merely palliating the absence of intelligent and informed criticism of her oeuvre."[1]

This approach remains particularly dominant in relation to Saint Phalle's feminist perspective, as her biography directly reflected many of the key struggles that women of the 20th century faced. Due to an aristocratic Catholic upbringing that urged her towards marriage and motherhood, Catherine Dossin describes Saint Phalle's life story as a "text book example" of the plight of women in the 1960s and

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[1] Camille Morineau, "An Oeuvre That Surpasses the Limits" in *Niki de Saint Phalle 1930-2002*, ed. Philip Sutton (Bilbao: FMGB Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa and La Fábrica, 2015), 30.

1970s.[2] Doubtlessly, her personal experience would have played a large role in informing her feminist stance. However, as Dossin's statement indicates, those experiences were reflective of larger systematic issues that affected many women, not just Saint Phalle.

I do not intend to deny the importance of Saint Phalle's biographical details in the larger project of analyzing her oeuvre and its feminist concerns. However, this particular study will consider her work through an under-utilized lens, one which contemporary scholars like Camille Morineau, Catherine Dossin and Amelia Jones have only recently started to apply to Niki de Saint Phalle. The biographical approach neglects the tense socio-historical climate in which Saint Phalle produced this body of work, and personalizes struggles and concerns that applied to women throughout western society. By situating this particular body of work within its cultural context, linking it to both contemporaneous events and the existing feminist discourse in France, I hope to push this approach further and expand upon the lens through which we understand Saint Phalle's larger oeuvre.

As Catherine Dossin has argued, despite Saint Phalle's distinct multiculturalism (moving back and forth between France and the United States throughout her life), her feminist stance is much more clearly understood in the context of French politics and social conventions, as this is where she lived and

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[2] Catherine Dossin. "Niki de Saint Phalle and the Masquerade of Hyperfemininity," *Women's Art Journal* 31.2 (2010): 29, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41331082.

produced much of the work from this period.[3] This understanding also helps to reduce the risk of generalizing different feminist movements across the western world. Ultimately I hope to situate this body of work clearly in its socio-historical context, encouraging a methodological approach that has yet to receive adequate attention from art historians.

[3] Dossin. "Niki de Saint Phalle," 34-36.

THE TIRS

Niki de Saint Phalle created her first Tirs or Shooting Paintings in February of 1961 outside of the studio she shared with Jean Tinguely at the Impasse Ronsin in Paris.[1] The resulting works combine elements of painting and sculpture, incorporating found objects that are unified in high relief by an erratic spattering of color. Thoroughly punctured and dripping with paint, these assemblages appear wounded and violated, the victims of a violent act. Within an oeuvre deprived of serious scholarship, the Tirs have received more attention from art historians, finding inclusion in major catalogues that deal with performance and the body.[2] Despite the more secure position of these works in recent scholarship on postwar art, they have largely been understood through a singular methodological lens, much like Saint Phalle's larger body of work.

Amelia Jones insists resolutely on a biographical understanding of Saint Phalle as a feminist gesture, and describes the Tirs as, "a cathartic self-narrated connection between the violence of the art and the violence of one's past."[3] Jill

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[1] Jill Carrick, "Phallic Victories? Niki de Saint Phalle's *Tirs*", *Art History* 26, no. 5 (2003): 705, doi:10.1111/j.0141-6790.2003.02605006_4.x. Accounts differ regarding the exact date, however February 12 and 26 are often cited.

[2] See Amelia Jones and Tracey Warr, *The Artist's Body*; Michael Darling and Graham Bader, *Target Practice Painting Under Attack: 1949-78*.

Carrick also directly links Saint Phalle's shootings to her personal experiences of violence and trauma, namely the sexual abuse that her father inflicted upon her during her youth.[4] There is no doubt that this biographical and feminist reading of the Tirs has a significant place in the scholarship on Saint Phalle. The artist herself pointed to its necessity in a letter to Pontus Hulten, describing the victim of her shootings, "WHO was the painting? Daddy? All Men? Small Men? Tall Men? … Or was the painting ME? … I was shooting at MYSELF, society with its injustice ... I was shooting at my own violence and the violence of the times."[5] While Saint Phalle clearly weaves her biography into the Tirs, her statement also indicates another possible interpretation or methodological approach, by directing attention to the socio-political context of violence.

This body of work was produced during a moment of considerable controversy and political unrest in postwar France, as the Algerian War for Independence came to a head. The year Saint Phalle began producing the Tirs paralleled several significant developments in the conflict, including the formation of the paramilitary terrorist group *Organisation de l'Armée Secrète* and the highly publicized legal case regarding the rape and torture of an Algerian woman named Djamila Boupacha by members of the French military. This context of controversy

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[3] Amelia Jones, "Wild Maid, Wild Soul, A Wild Wild Weed: Niki de Saint Phalle's Fierce Femininities, ca. 1960-66" in *Niki de Saint Phalle 1930-2002*, ed. Philip Sutton (Bilbao: FMGB Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa and La Fábrica, 2015), 161.

[4] Carrick, "Phallic Victories", 724.

[5] Carrick, "Phallic Victories," 724.

and historical trauma was "an inescapable background to every thought and every gesture of every citizen in 1961, with the constitution of the *Organisation Armée Secrète pour l'Algérie Française* in February."[6] This was the very month of Saint Phalle's first shooting session at the Impasse Ronsin in Paris.

This chapter will explore the formal and conceptual ties between Saint Phalle's Tirs and the contemporaneous socio-political implications of the Algerian War, using *My Shoes or Memory of a Shoot* (Fig. 1) and *Grand Tir – Séance Galerie J* (Grand Shoot – Gallery J Session) (Fig. 2) of 1961 as the primary visual material. Although Saint Phalle would continue to perform her *Tirs* on an international level throughout the early 1960s, this chapter will focus on the early performances held in Paris at the Impasse Ronsin and Galerie J, in order to root the development of this practice within a specific societal framework.

Re-contextualizing this body of work in a particular historical moment will allow for additional interpretations of its significance and open up a more expansive dialogue on the work of Saint Phalle in general. While maintaining a feminist lens in interpreting the shootings, this chapter will do so by way of the social and historical rather than biographical context, exploring the ways in which Saint Phalle's feminist content was pertinent on a larger scale. Ultimately this chapter will argue that in a period of extreme violence against bodies (and in certain instances, specifically female bodies), the Tirs functioned as a representation of the violated, mutilated body and as a disruption of traditional body boundaries. In this manner, the Tirs

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[6] Sarah Wilson, "Tirs, Tears, Ricochets" in *Niki de Saint Phalle 1930-2002*, ed. Philip Sutton (Bilbao: FMGB Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa and La Fábrica, 2015), 97.

will function as the first phase in an overarching exploration of how Saint Phalle's representation of the (female) body evolved between 1961-1966.

Between 1958-1961, Saint Phalle developed a formal vocabulary that grew increasingly violent and chaotic, incorporating found materials such as axes, knives, nails, aerosol spray cans, plastic guns, dolls and children's toys. It was in February 1961 that she developed the idea behind her Tirs:

> There was some plaster at the Impasse Ronsin. We found an old board then bought some paint at the store. We hammered nails into the wood to give the plaster something to hold onto, then I went wild and not only put in paint but anything else that was lying around, including spaghetti and eggs. When 5 or 6 reliefs had been finished, Jean thought it was time to find a gun…It was a .22 long rifle with real bullets which would pierce the plaster, hit the paint in little plastic bags embedded inside the relief, causing the paint to trickle down through the hole made by the bullet, and color the outside surface.[7]

She prepared for the first shooting session alongside her partner Jean Tinguely, and the pair invited additional friends to witness and document the event. Among them was Pierre Restany, founder of the Nouveau Réalistes who, "then and there decided, while watching the red, blue, green, rice, spaghetti, and eggs, to include me among the New Realists."[8] This invitation marked a turning point in Saint Phalle's career, helping to establish her as a major figure in the male-dominated art world; Saint Phalle was and would remain the group's sole female member.

Later that year, Saint Phalle would have her first solo exhibition, *Feu à Volonté (Fire at Will),* at Restany's Galerie J in Paris. Everyday from 5-7pm viewers

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[7] Camille Morineau and Niki Charitable Art Foundation, *Niki de Saint Phalle: 1930-2002*, ed. Phillip Sutton (Bilbao: FMGB Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa and La Fábrica, 2015), 320.

[8] Morineau, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, 320.

were invited to fire at the works using a .22 caliber rifle that the artist provided, creating an element of participation that heightened the performative nature of the works.[9] In 1964, Saint Phalle's final year of working in this manner (though she would revisit the Tirs on several occasions), she wrote out specific instructions explaining her process in a letter to Karl Gerstner. The instructions read,

> 1. Lean the picture against a wall. 2. Put a strong board behind it (if required, in order to protect the wall. 3. Take a .22 long rifle and load with short ammunition. 4. Shoot the color pouches which are embedded in the plaster until they have "bled" (or until you like the picture). 5. Attention! Leave the picture in the same position until well dried. Then still be careful, as remains of color not yet dry might run over the picture.[10]

There is a simultaneous specificity and flexibility to her instructions, which points to the fact that these works were largely process-based and driven by viewer participation. The execution of the Tirs was typically documented extensively through videos and photographs, which further indicates the importance of their performative qualities. In a manner that was typical of postwar European and American art, the process and performance of the *Tirs* was arguably as significant as the resulting object, and thus the body is present in every mark that comprises the work.[11]

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[9] Morineau, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, 323.

[10] Nicole Woods, "Pop Gun Art: Niki de Saint Phalle and the Operatic Multiple" in Art Expanded, 1958-1978, ed. Eric Crosby with Liz Glass, *Living Collection Catelogue 2* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2015), http://walkerart.org/collections/publications/art-expanded/pop-gun.

[11] Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones, *The Artist's Body* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 12.

Saint Phalle discussed this quality in a 1965 interview with Vogue, stating, "I use my body in the same way I use a base of wire netting to make a sculpture."[12] The bodily presence of the shooting act is reflected in the physicality of the resulting objects. By exploring this theme in relation to the socio-historical context of the Algerian War, this chapter will explore the body as, "the site where the public domain meets the private, where the social is negotiated, produced and made sense of."[13] The 1960s marked a period of increased interest in the relationship between art and society, as more and more artists began to produce in a way that responded, directly or indirectly, to their social and historical environment. Specifically, the level of destruction witnessed throughout World War II, which lingered in the collective memory as conflicts like the Algerian War waged on, brought mortality and the struggles of bodily existence to the forefront.[14]

The National Liberation Front, or FLN, initiated the struggle for Algerian Independence, on November 1, 1954 with a string of bombings and armed attacks on military and civilian targets in Algeria. After 8 years of violent warfare, notable for the use of torture and guerilla tactics on both sides, a ceasefire was established with the Evian Accords of March 18, 1962. Not long thereafter, the French paramilitary group Organisation de l'Armée Secrète, or OAS, unleashed the war's most violent campaign of attacks in a final effort to counter Algerian

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[12] Carrick, "Phallic Victories", 716.

[13] Warr and Jones, *The Artist's Body*, 20-21.

[14] Warr and Jones, *The Artist's Body*, 23.

independence by forcing the FLN to break the ceasefire. As the de Gaulle government, already weakened by OAS assassinations, grew nearer to reaching a diplomatic settlement regarding independence, the terrorist acts of the OAS became increasingly brutal. The Algerian War, which dominated French political life in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was the backdrop against which Niki de Saint Phalle's increasingly violent imagery developed. She began her *Tirs séances* in Paris about a year before the ceasefire was put in place.

Despite attempts at state censorship, the French public remained informed through resistant news publications like *Le Monde* and *France Observateur*, as well as pivotal books on the subject of torture, such as Henri Alleg's *La Question* and Pierre-Henri Simon's *Contre La Torture*.[15] Left-wing intellectuals like Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, whose work Saint Phalle was familiar with by this time, addressed the French-Algerian conflict and protested the persistent use of torture in their discourse.[16] Saint Phalle's peers also engaged in the conversation, most notably Nouveau Réalistes Raymond Hains and Jacques Villeglé, who produced *décollages* of torn political posters that documented the tumultuous state of French society during the Algerian War. Their exhibition, *La France Déchirée* (France in Shreds), was shown at Galerie J in June of 1961, just before Saint Phalle's first

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[15] Jo McCormack, *Collective Memory: France and the Algerian War (1954-1962)*, After the Empire (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 135.

[16] Niki de Saint Phalle, Traces: An Autobiography Remembering 1930-1949 (Lausanne, Switzerland: Acatos, 1999).

shooting exhibition, *Tir à Volonté* (Shoot at Will), which went up later that same month.[17]

It was in the midst of this turbulent conflict and the highly engaged dialogue that it spurred amongst artists, writers and intellectuals, that Niki de Saint Phalle began producing the Tirs. As Sarah Wilson aptly observes about this particular moment of national trauma,

> The sexual debasement of political victims was taking place at that very moment in the French-Algerian conflict. From at least 1958, with Henri Alleg's *La Question,* the issue of torture became a commonplace – the very stuff of the Nouveau Réalistes *affiches déchirées.* This was the shame of France in Algeria, the espousal of Nazi tactics, the setting up – precisely – of executioner-victim dynamics where the sacred was defiled and made banal, where pain and confession become blurred, where shooting and death were for real…[18]

With the Tirs, Saint Phalle brings the shooting act, unmistakably an act of warfare, into the gallery space, forcing Parisian viewers to confront the violence of the times directly. By ritualizing, and even normalizing the destructive act, Saint Phalle comments on the violence of the times in a manner reminiscent of Simone de Beauvoir. In the words of Beauvoir,

> In this sinister month of December 1961, like many of my fellow men, I suppose, I suffer from a kind of tetanus of the imagination…One gets used to it. But in 1957, the burns in the face, on the sexual organs, the nails torn out, the impalements, the shrieks, the convulsions, outraged me.[19]

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[17] Tom McDonough, "Raymond Hains's "France in Shreds" and the Politics of Décollage", *Representations* 90, no. 1, (2005), 75.

[18] Wilson, "Tirs",

[19] Rita Maran, *Torture, the Role of Ideology in the French-Algerian War* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 143.

Considered in this context, the Tirs function like commentary on the degree to which violence had become commonplace to French viewers by 1961.

In her analysis of the Tirs, Wilson, much like Amelia Jones and Jill Carrick, observes the apparent formal and conceptual ties between these works and their socio-historical framework.[20] All of these scholars, however, pursue this link only to the extent that the context of violence and sexual debasement in the Algerian War would have triggered recollections of personal trauma for Saint Phalle (specifically in regards to her experience of sexual abuse). These biographical concerns are undoubtedly significant, but the Tirs have yet to be considered through a different methodological lens. While this tendency is not uncommon in the study of artists who have been socially marginalized due to gender, race or sexuality, it does not account for the full complexity behind these works.[21]

The corporeality and chaotic bodily presence of the Tirs could instead be understood in connection to the widespread violence against bodies that was occurring contemporaneously within the French-Algerian conflict. The issue of torture had become widely discussed in France from at least 1958, and beginning in 1960 the rape and torture of FLN militant Djamila Boupacha was making headlines. The extent to which rape and the sexual debasement of victims was utilized as a tactic of torture by the French military gained significant recognition at this time. As

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[20] See Amelia Jones, "Wild Maid, Wild Soul, A Wild Wild Weed: Niki de Saint Phalle's Fierce Femininities, ca. 1960-66"; Jill Carrick, "Phallic Victories? Niki de Saint Phalle's *Tirs*".

[21] Jones, "Wild Maid", 156.

Boupacha's lawyer Gisèle Halimi recalled, "I can't imagine a woman who's been arrested and interrogated who hasn't been raped. I haven't seen a single one."[22] A formal analysis of Saint Phalle's Tirs, when situated in this historical moment of bodily violence and violation, will demonstrate the clear ties this work has to its socio-political context. The final section of this chapter will make evident that in this period, the Tirs functioned as a representation of the violated, abused and distorted body.

Saint Phalle's Tirs evoke the presence and absence of a body simultaneously, creating a push-pull that results in an emotionally charged object. To create her assemblages Saint Phalle used found objects such as shoes, toys, fabric, brooms, chairs, and other everyday household items that function as traces – the body is brought to mind without actually being represented in the work. The absence of an actual body brings the ephemerality of human existence into sharp focus. In *My Shoes or Memory of a Shoot*, Saint Phalle attached a pair of women's high heels to the canvas, which was spattered with paint during the shooting of the work in 1961. While several colors are visible in this assemblage, red is the most dominant, and the dripping of paint plainly alludes to the dripping of blood.

Saint Phalle herself understood the Tirs in this manner, explaining, "I imagined the paint starting to bleed. Wounded, in the same way people can be wounded. As far as I was concerned the painting became a person with feelings and

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[22] Wilson, "Tirs", 98.

sensations."[23] Saint Phalle was explicit in her effort to establish associations between her assemblages and the body, equating the paint with blood and the ruptured surface with wounded flesh. The pair of women's shoes points to the absence of an actual body, further alluding to the role of the assemblage as a sort of "surrogate body" or a stand in for bodily presence.[24] The shoes are positioned in between a metal meat grinder in the bottom right corner and a paddle in the top left. Paired with the smattering of red paint, these elements inevitably suggest violence against women.

Although the found objects evoke the absence of a body, the holes and shredded surfaces of the Tirs, oozing with paint and revealing layers of chicken wire and torn plastic underneath, create a distinct impression of bodily boundaries. In *Grand Tir – Séance Galerie J* (Grand Shoot – Gallery J Session) of 1961, the highly built up, relief surface of the plaster is penetrated from one side of the canvas to the other. The numerous holes appear as a repeated series of wounds out of which the paint drips downward, resulting in what Jo Applin describes as, "a site of bodily damage and porous leakage, the aftermath of a violent attack."[25] The built up layers of various objects and materials become revealed and spilled over as the white plaster bursts open with a shot of the gun. This imagery brings to mind a disruption

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[23] Carrick, "Phallic Victories", 724.

[24] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" in *Art and Objecthood : Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 156.

[25] Jo Applin, "Alberto Burri and Niki de Saint Phalle: Relief Sculpture and Violence in the 1960s", *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 27 (2008), 80.

of bodily boundaries, a violent synthesis of interior and exterior. Maurice Rheims commented to Saint Phalle that the Tirs, "give the impression of being flayed, of having their intestines, nerves, and serous membranes exposed like anatomical drawings."[26] This imagery, combined with the repeated holes and streaming paint inevitably evokes violation, penetration and rape.

In June of 1960, Simone de Beauvoir published an article in *Le Monde* entitled "For Djamila Boupacha", which laid out in graphic detail Boupacha's experience of rape and torture at the hands of the French army. The first line of the article reads, "an Algerian girl of twenty-three, an FLN liaison agent was illegally imprisoned, subjected to torture, raped with a bottle by military officers: it's banal."[27] Beauvoir highlights at once the horrific nature of this individual story and the larger context of violence within which it exists, pointing to the banality that the subject of torture had assumed in France by 1960. Women had a central role in the Algerian struggle for independence, and as such they were increasingly targeted by the French military. Women who had been arrested were systematically raped, tortured and subjected to sexual humiliation as tactic of war and a means of eliciting national shame.[28] Boupacha's case became emblematic of this larger institution of sexual debasement and violence against women that had become so pervasive in the Algerian conflict.

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[26] Carrick, "Phallic Victories", 721.

[27] Judith Surkis, "Ethics and Violence: Simone de Beauvoir, Djamila Boupacha, and the Algerian War", *French Politics, Culture & Society* 28, no. 2 (2010), 45.

[28] Surkis, "Ethics and Violence", 41.

Saint Phalle provides French viewers with a visual manifestation of the brutal realities of torture and rape that had become public knowledge through written news sources like *Le Monde* and *Les Temps Moderne*, which frequently published written accounts of soldiers condemning the actions of the French army.[29] In 1962 Beauvoir and Gisèle Halimi published *Djamila Boupacha*, a book that traces Boupacha's story from her arrest in 1960 throughout her legal case. As the available written sources addressing torture and brutality in Algeria expanded, the degree to which this conflict weighed upon the collective conscience followed suit. Upon situating the Tirs within this historic context of extreme violence and bodily violation, the visual relationship between their ravaged surfaces and the damaged or disrupted body readily appears.

In addition to this visual relationship between the violence in Algeria and the ravaged surfaces of the Tirs, it is also important to consider the conceptual elements of performance and participation involved in the shooting act. By re-contextualizing the violent action in the gallery setting, Saint Phalle alludes to the horrors of war and gives the viewer a chance to participate – to experience the shooting act for themselves. She sets up a victim-executioner dynamic where the viewer-participant becomes the active subject of violence and destruction, forcing them out of indifference or complacency and creating a situation where their role in society could be critically contemplated.

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[29] Surkis, "Ethics and Violence", 40.

In a 1958 article for *Le Monde* written in response to Henri Alleg's *La Question,* Sartre also critically examines these roles, stating, "In France today fear permeates all sections of society. The victim and executioner merge into the same figure: a figure in our own likeness. In fact, in the final extremity, the only way to avoid one role is to accept the other."[30] Saint Phalle's shooting sessions create a scenario that echoes this sentiment, urging viewers out of passivity by inserting violence into their daily lives. Much like that of Sartre, Beauvoir's article for *Le Monde* calls attention to the position of the French citizen within this conflict, pointing out the disturbing degree to which torture had become accepted or commonplace. In her own words, "the most scandalous part of scandal is the getting used to it."[31] In the same manner of contemporary scholars, Saint Phalle points out this habituation of violence by bringing it directly into the everyday life of French viewers, and into the forefront of their experience.

The repetition of the shooting act also reflects the recurrence and naturalization of torture in French society that took place throughout the Algerian War. Photographic documentation shows Saint Phalle and her participants kneeling, lying on the ground and propped up on ladders in their efforts to strike the bags of paint embedded in her assemblages (Fig. 3 and 4). This often took many tries, resulting in an image of repeated blows as in *Grand Tir – Séance Galerie J* (Grand Shoot – Gallery J Session). The many holes that characterize this object point

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[30] Henri Alleg, *The Question,* American Ed. (New York: G Braziller, 1958), xxix.

[31] Surkis, "Ethics and Violence", 38.

directly to the notion of repetition, or to a thorough assault. This impression of repeated violence visually manifests the repetition of scandal discussed by Beauvoir. Viewers would become acclimated to the violence or danger associated with the action of shooting as it was repeated, or as they got "used to it."[32]

The implications of shooting off a gun in the heart of Paris during the Algerian War did not go unnoticed. Saint Phalle herself commented on the connection in a later interview saying,

> "Today it seems quite incredible that one was able to shoot freely in the middle of Paris. A retired cop that lived nearby came and watched the shoot-outs as soon as he heard the shooting begin – this was in the middle of the Algerian War! The smoke [of the gun] gave the impression of war. The painting was the victim"[33]

Saint Phalle explicitly aligned the shooting performances with the acts of war, and the paint-splattered assemblages with a victimized body. At a time when the impact of the Algerian War was weighing heavily on France and national shame had reached an all time high, it is all too probable that spectators would have interpreted the Paris shootings in the same manner.

Throughout the early 1960s, Niki de Saint Phalle expanded her practice of the Tirs to an international scale, making a socio-historical understanding of them increasingly difficult. However, it is important to situate these works in the specific moment in time and space in which they were developed, as the process behind them remained fairly consistent. Upon re-contextualizing the Tirs within the socio-

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[32] Surkis, "Ethics and Violence", 38.

[33] Woods, "Pop Gun Art"

political context of the Algerian War for Independence, their corporeality and bodily presence becomes increasingly apparent. In a historic moment of trauma, violation and violence against bodies, Saint Phalle's assemblages function as representations of the abused or assaulted body. The Algerian War ended in 1962, and by 1964 Saint Phalle had largely moved away from the Tirs. As her practice continued to evolve throughout the 1960s, her representation of the body followed. The following chapter will observe a shift in medium, artistic intention and portrayal of the body as Saint Phalle moves into her *Births* and *Brides* series in 1963.

IMAGES

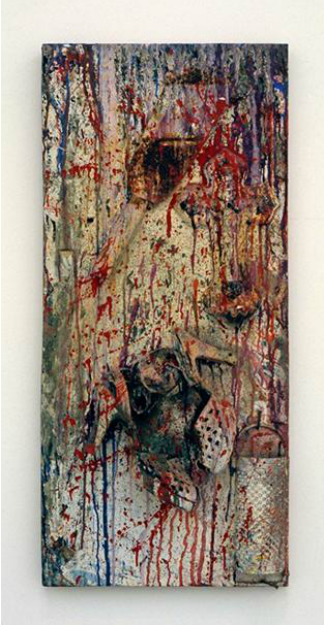

Figure 1. Niki de Saint Phalle, *My Shoes or Memory of a Shoot*, 1961.

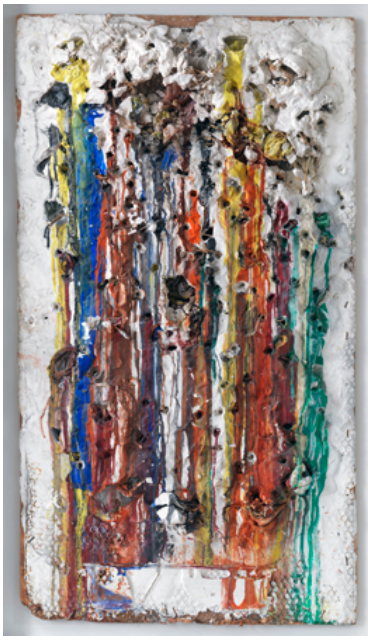

Figure 2. Niki de Saint Phalle, *Grand Tir – Séance Galerie J*, 1961.

Figure 3. Shooting session at the Impasse Ronsin, 1961.

Figure 4. Shooting session at Galerie J, 1961.

THE BIRTHS AND BRIDES

Throughout 1963 Saint Phalle shifted away from the Tirs, and a new series began to emerge in her oeuvre. The figurative relief sculptures that followed are commonly referred to by scholars as the Births and Brides.[1] Through these tactile assemblages, Saint Phalle explored the various roles that were imposed on women in post-war consumerist society, contemplating the problematic dichotomy between woman as mother/bride and witch/whore. Saint Phalle employs the medium of assemblage, a hallmark of the male-dominated art world of the early 1960s, for this explicitly feminist agenda. These works preserve the relief format of the Tirs, incorporating found objects such as toy guns, planes, animals, dolls and fake flowers. These objects were attached to a wire mesh and papier-mâché base, which was then covered in a homogenizing layer of white or pale pink paint. Despite their dense materiality, these works were more explicitly figurative, taking the form of women wearing wedding dresses or giving birth. They took on the subject of the female body and its associated roles with a distinctly feminine and feminist perspective.

This chapter will analyze this strategy of representing the female body, situating the Births and Brides within the larger feminist discourse of the period. In a historical moment when French feminist scholars like Simone de Beauvoir were

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[1] Amelia Jones, "Wild Maid, Wild Soul, A Wild Wild Weed: Niki de Saint Phalle's Fierce Femininities, c. 1960-1966" in *Niki de Saint Phalle 1930-2002*, ed. Phillip Sutton (Bilbao: FMGB Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa and La Fábrica, 2015), 161.

foregrounding the body as a central locus of their campaign, the physicality of Saint Phalle's sculptural assemblages would have carried a particular resonance. This chapter will contextualize the Births and Brides within de Beauvoir's constructivist understanding of the body as a culturally constructed artifact, and within the larger feminist emphasis on reproductive rights in France.[2] Despite the clear dialogue between Saint Phalle's Births and Brides and the social and artistic developments of the 1960s, this series has received little attention from art historians. Typically these pieces are discussed as a brief section in the larger catalogues of her work, but virtually no long form writing has been dedicated to their analysis.[3]

Contrary to what the scholarship would seem to indicate, this series marks two essential turning points in Saint Phalle's career, as she moves forward from the shooting sessions that earned her international recognition. With these assemblages, Saint Phalle shifts to a more decidedly figurative manner of representation, firmly establishing the body as her central subject matter. The figurative would continue to dominate Saint Phalle's oeuvre, and – as the next chapter will demonstrate – get blown up to monumental proportions. Additionally, this series points not only to a direct embrace of the body, but specifically the female body and the condition of women as her conceptual framework. The Births and Brides series thus mark a crucial transition for Saint Phalle, bringing the issues that

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[2] Sarah Fishwick, *The Body in the Work of Simone de Beauvoir* (New York: P. Lang, 2002), 16.

[3] See Camille Morineau and Niki Charitable Art Foundation, *Niki de Saint Phalle: 1930-2002*, ed. Phillip Sutton (Bilbao: FMGB Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa and La Fábrica, 2015).

had been established with the Tirs to fruition, and laying the groundwork for her later monumental endeavors.

This development has direct parallels in the socio-political climate of this period, following the end of the Algerian War and a subsequent shift in the national dialogue. The 1960s were marked by an increased interest in contraception and family planning, as well as a feminist campaign for reproductive rights that would continue into the 1970s and 1980s.[4] The female body became a central focus of the debate on citizenship rights, as leading theorists like Simone de Beauvoir attempted to foreground women's bodily experiences as a source of shared identity. Simultaneously, postwar consumer culture contributed to the objectification and alienation of women's bodies, pigeonholing them in the restrictive roles of wife and mother.[5] In her seminal feminist text *Le Deuxième Sexe* (The Second Sex), which Saint Phalle described as, "a very interesting feminist study, which particularly impressed me," Beauvoir dedicates a chapter to "The Married Woman" and "The Mother" respectively.[6]

Saint Phalle's visual interrogation of women's imposed roles has been tied to Beauvoir's literary critiques, but this connection begs for deeper analysis.[7]

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[4] Sandra Reineke, *Beauvoir and Her Sisters: The Politics of Women's Bodies in France* (Ubrana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 14-15.

[5] Reineke, *Beauvoir and Her Sisters*, 19-20.

[6] Niki de Saint Phalle, *Harry and Me: The Family Years 1950 - 1960* (Wabern: Benteli Verlag, 2006), 30.

Similarly, although Saint Phalle's foregrounding of the female body draws many parallels with the work of Beauvoir, this relationship has yet to be explored. The next section will analyze Saint Phalle's sculptural reflection on feminine roles as it relates to Beauvoir's theorizations, as well as postwar consumerism in France more broadly. To do so it will focus on the Brides, using *La Mariée* (Eva Maria) of 1963 as the primary source for visual analysis (Fig. 5). The following section will explore Saint Phalle's emphasis on the female body by contextualizing it within the work of Beauvoir and the larger feminist campaign for bodily autonomy in France. This section will focus on the Births, using *Accouchement Blanc ou Ghea* (White Birth or Gaea) of 1964 as the champion work (Fig. 6).

Saint Phalle's Brides are, "heavy and weighted; they are fragmented, fractured, and perform the body entering into imprisonment."[8] Typically life-sized or larger-than-life, they stand alone as independent sculptures on the same plane as the viewer. They are covered from head to toe in a thick layer of white paint, as though the bridal attire has consumed the figure entirely. Their heads appear unusually small relative to their hefty bodies, and their faces are expressionless and un-individualized. In *La Mariée*, the bride holds a bustling bouquet in one arm and clutches it to her chest, where the viewer's eye is immediately drawn. This bouquet inundates the bride, merging with the flowers and dolls that make up her monstrous

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[7] Kalliopi Minioudaki, "Unmasking and Reimag(in)ing the Feminine: The M/Others of Niki de Saint Phalle" in *Niki de Saint Phalle 1930-2002*, ed. Phillip Sutton (Bilbao: FMGB Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa and La Fábrica, 2015), 166.

[8] Anne M. Fox, "Peeking Under the Veil: Niki de Saint Phalle's Bride and/as Feminist Disability Aesthetics", *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 15, no. 2 (2016): 28.

form in a manner that evokes corrosion and decay. Her head tilts somberly to one side and her arms press up against her body. She appears to be attempting to hold all of these disparate parts together.

The matted lace folds of her wedding dress dominate the majority of the sculpture, looking hardened and frozen into place. Her face and hair maintain a similar fixed quality, as though the bride has been petrified in this moment in time. The figure looks grotesque and disproportionate, looming over the viewer like a ghost. There is, "a fragmentary quality…that suggests the inherent fragility of the body; it simultaneously expresses a sense of being pulled apart and divided."[9] The body of the bride seems at once heavy and fragile, fixed and fragmented, hovering over viewers like an ominous warning. *La Mariée* gives the impression that she surrendered all the joy and liveliness that she once possessed when she put on her wedding dress, now nothing but a shell of her former self.

This dismal representation of marriage points to a larger social commentary about the roles imposed on women in postwar France, and in the western world more broadly. Saint Phalle suspends this figure in the exact moment that she enters into matrimony, fixed eternally in her wedding dress, as she would be in marriage. The bride conveys an immense sense of immobility, as though literally frozen in this state, condemned to fulfill her wifely duties. Saint Phalle visually equates the institution of marriage to this sort of entrapment, unraveling this traditional role and the assumption that it will bring happiness to every woman.[10] In *La Mariée,* the

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[9] Fox, "Peeking Under the Veil", 40.

bride appears devoid of emotion and individuality – she does not represent an individual woman but rather a type or a societal role. Having been reduced to this state of being, the figure exudes alienation and loss of self, implying that this is an inevitable consequence of marriage.

One finds distinct echoes of this theorization in Simone de Beauvoir's chapter of *Le Deuxième Sexe* entitled "The Married Woman." Beauvoir describes the institution of marriage as being rooted in the sacrifice of self. In this arrangement, the interests of the individual must be foregone for the sake of the collective wellbeing.[11] According to Beauvoir, this institution was not created for the sake of love or individual happiness, but for the continuation and maintenance of a civilized society. In a patriarchal regime this type of sacrifice inevitably has different consequences for women than it does for men. As Beauvoir explains it,

> He is economically the head of the community, and he thus embodies it in society's eyes. She takes his name; she joins his religion, integrates into his class, his world; she belongs to his family, she becomes his other "half." She follows him where his work calls him: where he works essentially determines where they live; she breaks with her past more or less brutally, she is annexed to her husband's universe; she gives him her person.[12]

The loss of self that Beauvoir describes comes to life in Saint Phalle's sculptural assemblages: her brides are alienated, un-individualized and immobile. They exist not as portraits of individual brides, but as a larger contemplation on the sacrifice of

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[10] Fox, "Peeking Under the Veil", 28.

[11] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1957), 448-449.

[12] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 442.

self that accompanies marriage.

In her analysis of *Le Deuxième Sexe* Sandra Reineke describes Beauvoir as a, "feminist critic of French postwar consumer culture who forcefully wove together analysis of women's experiences with economic and social alienation and their objectification as wives and mothers."[13] Saint Phalle's sculptures function in a similar manner, uniting her disruption of traditional feminine roles with a commentary on consumerism through the use of found objects, effectively highlighting the relationship between the two. By employing the medium of assemblage in her exploration of marriage, Saint Phalle also situates this institution within the larger framework of postwar consumerist society. Incorporating mass-produced found objects such as toys, dolls and fabric into a work positions the artist ambiguously between production and consumption, a decision that was particularly pointed in the case of female artists.[14] As Anna Dezeuze argues, consumption was conventionally understood as a feminine activity, and thus the medium of assemblage and the notion of "artist-as-consumer" lent itself well to projects with feminist aims.[15]

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[13] Reineke, *Beauvoir and Her Sisters*, 19.

[14] Anna Dezeuze, "Assemblage, Bricolage, and the Practice of Everyday Life", *Art Journal* 67, no. 1 (2008), 36.

[15] In this article Dezeuze refers specifically to "The Art of Assmeblage," a 1961 exhibition organized by Peter Selz, which included Saint Phalle's early work. Dezeuze, "Assemblage", 36.

In the case of Saint Phalle's *La Mariée*, the lace fabric and children's toys point explicitly to the role of the figure they simultaneously constitute and deluge. Saint Phalle's bride is,

> Awash in fragmentation and the detritus of consumption; these small toys, brought by the container load from overseas, reference the consumer goods a woman is expected to purchase for her household after her body is made spectacle-for-public-consumption on the day of her wedding. The toys threaten to overwhelm the bride, not just covering her, but swarming her; they redirect our focus to the forces of materialism that depend on the subjugation and exploitation of bodies for their perpetuation.[16]

Saint Phalle thus follows the precedent established by Beauvoir, not only criticizing prescribed social roles and institutions, but also the larger structural frameworks that create them. Both women strive to highlight the connections between gendered experience and consumer culture in order to advocate for a greater degree of female agency.[17]

Saint Phalle's work also illustrates another principle of French feminist discourse that Beauvoir helped to establish: a focus on the body as a subversive entity and on female bodily experience as a locus of political power. While this facet of Saint Phalle's practice is apparent in the Brides, it is exemplified even more clearly by her *Accouchements*, or Births. These works maintain the assemblage medium of the brides, consisting primarily of wire mesh, found objects and plaster. Rather than freely standing figures, the births took the form of heavily accumulated relief sculptures that hung from the gallery wall. Camille Morineau discusses these

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[16] Fox, "Peeking Under the Veil", 35.

[17] Reineke, *Beauvoir and Her Sisters*, 26.

works in conjunction with the Tirs as "combine-paintings," however their monochromatic, figurative nature seems to resist this categorization.[18] Rather than acting as paintings, the births project outward from the wall, confronting the viewer at eye-level with their aberrant physicality.

Incorporating an even denser assortment of found objects, these works take the abject or grotesque body suggested by the brides to a new extreme.[19] In *Accouchement Blanc ou Ghea*, Saint Phalle combines horrific elements like plastic spiders, clowns and masks with baby dolls and children's toys, provoking both nostalgic and gruesome associations. Plastic birds peak out from the figure's tangled hair, and draw attention to the birdcage that creates a gaping hole in the middle of her chest. The birds may refer back to the object's secondary title *Ghea*, invoking the personification of mother earth in Greek mythology. The name seems almost ironic when applied to Saint Phalle's Birth sculpture, which appears to suggest inundation rather than natural growth. The figure's cropped legs spread apart and a larger baby doll emerges from in between them. Her anamorphic arm, almost indistinguishable from the rest of her body, extends downward and her hand reaches detachedly towards the baby. The figure's features are somewhat more naturalistic than those of *La Mariée*, but her expression remains vacant and un-individualized.

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[18] Saint Phalle did also shoot at some of the later figurative relief sculptures, creating a degree of overlap between the two categories. Camille Morineau, "A Pioneer of Monumental Sculpture," in *Niki de Saint Phalle: Outside-In*, ed. Styze Steenstra (Heerlen: SCHUNCK*, 2011), 87.

[19] Fox, "Peeking Under the Veil", 34.

The other *accouchements* share this monstrous, even flayed appearance. Saint Phalle's bricolage tendencies create a, "polymaterial skin [that] turns the insides of their delivering bodies out, while holes and hollow body parts amplify their corpse look, highlighting their feminine wounding."[20] Rather than the supposed joys of maternity, these assemblages evoke trauma and physical suffering. By exploring the subject of motherhood through the moment or act of giving birth, Saint Phalle emphasizes female corporeality and points to a shared bodily experience. Kalliopi Minioudaki reads these works as recalling, "cries of centuries of women's childbirth and abortion pain."[21] This foregrounding of the female body as a source of shared identity or experience has direct precedents in the feminist rhetoric established by Simone de Beauvoir.

The special role of the body and issues of corporeality in Beauvoir's philosophy has been of particular interest to scholars in recent decades.[22] According to Beauvoir, woman's position as man's "other" is created and defined by her experience of bodily being. She describes the female body as,

> An alienated opaque thing; it is the prey of a stubborn and foreign life that makes and unmakes a crib in her every month; every month a child is prepared to be born and is aborted in the flow of the crimson tide; woman *is* her body as man *is* his, but her body is something other than her.[23]

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[20] Minioudaki, "Unmasking and Reimag(in)ing the Feminine", 166.

[21] Minioudaki, "Unmasking and Reimag(in)ing the Feminine", 166.

[22] Fishwick, *The Body in the Work of Simone de Beauvoir*, 11.

[23] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 41.

Based on this theoretical understanding, Beauvoir advocated strongly for women's bodily autonomy and reproductive rights in France. These issues would become a central concern of other feminist scholars, as well as the *Mouvement de libération des femmes*.[24]

Reineke argues that Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* set the tone for women's political activism, and, "made it possible, not just for women but for French society as a whole, to engage in discourses about sexuality and reproduction."[25] Beauvoir not only opened up the dialogue on female agency in France, but also helped to establish its central focus: the potential of the female body.[26] Saint Phalle's *Accouchements* take on an entirely new significance when situated within this cultural context. Not only do they reflect a larger societal shift in regards to female corporeality and reproductive rights, Saint Phalle's Birth sculptures function like a visualization of the feminist ideology Beauvoir established with *Le Deuxième Sexe*.

In her introduction, Beauvoir describes the physicality of motherhood with unforgiving candor: "Childbirth itself is painful; it is dangerous. This crisis shows clearly that the body does not always meet the needs of both the species and the individual…the conflict between the species and the individual can have dramatic consequences in childbirth, making the woman's body distressingly fragile."[27] The

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[24] Reineke, *Beauvoir and Her Sisters*, 14.

[25] Reineke, *Beauvoir and Her Sisters*, xiv.

[26] Reineke, *Beauvoir and Her Sisters*, xiv.

[27] Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, 42.

Accouchements bring the pain and conflict described by Beauvoir into the realm of public perception. They appear broken, fragmented, and nearly ripped apart by the process of childbirth. Saint Phalle and Beauvoir emphasize a different side of motherhood: the physical pain, the anxiety, and the emotional trauma. Both of their works aim to reveal the previously unspoken, darker aspects of maternity and female bodily experience. They create a space for women to experience anguish, ambivalence and uncertainty regarding their roles as mothers.

Rather than a reflection on maternal duties or affection, Beauvoir's chapter entitled "The Mother" opens with a powerful discussion on contraception and the experience and legality of abortion. She writes that,

> Even consenting to and wanting abortion, woman feels her femininity sacrificed: she will from now on definitively see in her sex a malediction, a kind of infirmity, a danger…Yet when man asks woman to sacrifice her bodily possibilities for the success of his male destiny, he is denouncing the hypocrisy of the male moral code at the same time. Men universally forbid abortion; but they accept it individually as a convenient solution; they can contradict themselves with dizzying cynicism; but woman feels the contradiction in her wounded flesh.[28]

Analyzing Saint Phalle's *Accouchements* alongside this text brings new meaning to their wounded, violated appearance. Both women were working before the legalization of abortion in France in 1975, when clandestine abortion occurred as frequently as childbirth.[29] Beauvoir's text argued that access to birth control and abortion was crucial to women's ability to exercise control over their bodies,

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[28] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 532.

[29] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 524.

pregnancies, and the outcome of their lives.[30] Saint Phalle's haunting representations of childbirth function in a similar manner, evoking embodied experience and the importance of bodily autonomy.

When analyzed concurrently, the Births and Brides represent a visual unraveling of socially prescribed definitions of femininity. Following the precedent established by Beauvoir, Saint Phalle utilizes the female body as a subversive entity, breaking down conventional understandings of the roles associated with womanhood and creating a space for genuine shared experience. She takes on Beauvoir's constructivist vision of the body as, "an artifact that is shaped and contoured by culturally specific practices."[31] The roles of wife and mother are thus not inherent in female bodily being, but constructed and regulated by social discourses and power structures. Both Beauvoir and Saint Phalle signal an understanding of bodily being as, "a phenomenon that is inflected by sociocultural factors."[32] This interpretation would be of central importance to scholarly conversations about gender and sexuality throughout the latter half of the 20th century.

The Births and Brides series marks a visual and conceptual turning point for Saint Phalle that would come to define her oeuvre, as she began to focus more explicitly on women's issues and the female body as her key subject matter. By

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[30] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 533.

[31] Fishwick, *The Body in the Work of Simone de Beauvoir*, 16.

[32] Fishwick, *The Body in the Work of Simone de Beauvoir*, 35.

situating this transition within the larger conversation on feminine roles, female corporeality, and bodily autonomy that Simone de Beauvoir established in the postwar period, historians can analyze Saint Phalle's work with a greater degree of nuance and complexity. Ultimately her sculptural assemblages may be better understood as players within a politically active cultural dialogue, rather than as deeply personal or biographical reflections. In the following chapter, this same interpretation will be applied to her most ambitious figurative work of the 1960s: *Hon en-katedral.*

IMAGES

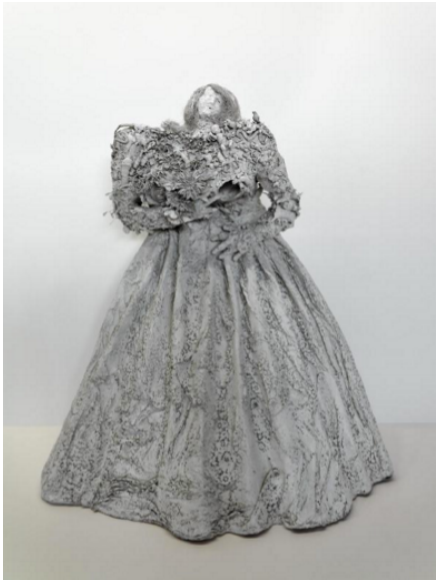

Figure 5. Niki de Saint Phalle, *La Mariée* (Eva Maria), 1963.

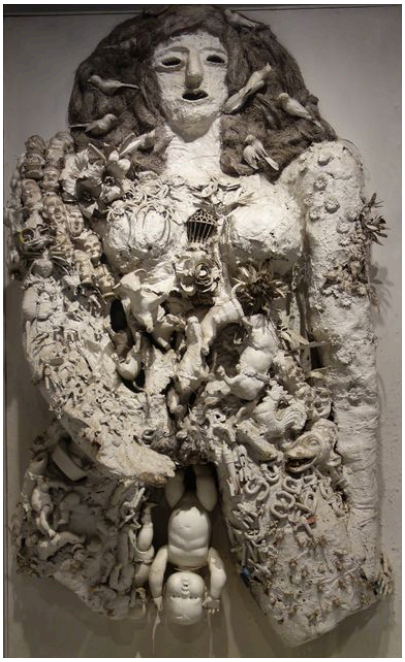

Figure 6. Niki de Saint Phalle, *Accouchement Blanc ou Ghea* (White Birth or Gaea), 1964.

HON-EN KATEDRAL

This chapter will explore Niki de Saint Phalle's representation of the female body as it is brought to life in *Hon-en katedral* of 1966. A collaborative project that fell under the creative leadership of Saint Phalle, *Hon* (Swedish for "She") was an exhibition-installation initiated by Pontus Hultén at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm in collaboration with artists Jean Tinguely and Per-Olof Ultvedt (Fig. 7).[1] The group produced a temporary monumental sculpture in the form of a reclining female nude, creating a body that viewers could enter through the vagina and move freely throughout. The base was constructed using a wooden frame wrapped with wire mesh, which the artists then covered in plaster cloth and painted in vibrant blocks of color. Filling the entire space of the entryway, *Hon* was 23.5 meters long, 6 meters high and 10 meters wide, and could house up to 150 people at a time. This chapter will investigate what it means for a woman artist to represent the female body on an architectural scale.

To begin, I will analyze the manner in which Saint Phalle accentuates maternity and the reproductive function of this body. I will then contextualize this choice, considering the role of gender, sexuality and the body in an architectural

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[1] Anne Tilroe defines the term as, "a sturdier variant of the American pet name *honey*," indicating that it may have carried slightly different implications than the English "she." Anne Tilroe. "Niki de Saint Phalle, a female warrior," in *Niki de Saint Phalle: Outside-In*, ed. Styze Steenstra (Heerlen: SCHUNCK*, 2011), 44.

environment. Subsequently, I will examine how Saint Phalle problematizes conventional understandings of boundaries and the traditional dichotomies of subject/object, public/private and interior/exterior. Ultimately, this chapter will argue that within an oeuvre that deals so persistently with the representation of the female body, *Hon* addresses the link between body and space, identifying the body as a metaphor for the architectural environment. In doing so, this work marks a disruption of social, spatial and bodily boundaries on a monumental scale.

Despite the immense public and media success that it garnered, *Hon* has received relatively little attention from scholars. Much like the Births and Brides series, *Hon* finds mention in major catalogues on Saint Phalle, but nothing extensive has been written on this work.[2] Although it occupies an ambiguous position in the critical literature on Saint Phalle, *Hon* represents a critical juncture in her sculptural oeuvre as she progressed to the architectural scale, where she would continue to work for the rest of her life. Calling to mind Louise Bourgeois's *Femme Maison* series of the 1940s, Camille Morineau describes *Hon* as a "body-house," a merging of the female body and architectural space.[3] Rather than being consumed by the gaze of the viewer, this female body-sculpture consumes and absorbs other bodies. Morineau further asserts that working on this scale was a political gesture for Saint

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[2] See Camille Morineau and Niki Charitable Art Foundation, *Niki de Saint Phalle: 1930-2002*, ed. Phillip Sutton (Bilbao: FMGB Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa and La Fábrica, 2015).

[3] Camille Morineau, "Down With Salon Art! The Pioneering, Political, Feminist and Magical Public Work of Niki de Saint Phalle," in *Niki de Saint Phalle 1930-2002*, ed. by Phillip Sutton (Bilboa: FMGB Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa and La Fábrica, 2015), 255.

Phalle, as a means of taking possession of the public space, a sphere that was traditionally reserved for men.[4] This paper will use Morineau's arguments as a point of jumping off, as it considers the implications of the body-sculpture in greater complexity.

Saint Phalle was invited to the Moderna Museet in the spring of 1966 at the request of Pontus Hultén, the museum director and one of the more forward-thinking figures of the 1960s art world. Hultén's curatorial practice emphasized collaboration, participation and active spectatorship, all of which were embodied in the execution of *Hon*. He envisioned the museum institution as an elastic and interdisciplinary space – a workshop where artists and curators could work collectively.[5] For this exhibition, the three artists would arrive at the museum without a particular project in mind, and would be given forty days to realize an installation in the entryway. The concept grew out of an unrealized attempt to recreate *Dylaby: dynamisch labyrinth* of 1962, an exhibition at the Stedeljik Museum in Amsterdam, composed of nine participatory environment-installations created by Saint Phalle, Tinguely, Ultvedt, Martial Raysse, Daniel Spoerri and Robert Rauschenberg.[6]

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[4] Morineau, "Down With Salon Art!," 255.

[5] Benoît Antille, "'HON–en katedral': Behind Pontus Hultén's Theater of Inclusiveness," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 32, no. 1 (2013): 78.

[6] For this exhibition, Saint Phalle created a shooting gallery in which viewers were invited to fire at a large sculptural installation that she constructed out of found objects and plaster.

This marked a period of heightened creativity and collaboration among this consortium of artist, made up primarily by members of the Nouveaux Réalistes, who were concerned with transforming the audience from one of passive observance to active participation.[7] The collective that was brought together to produce *Hon* was interested in blending the developments that were shaping the art world of the 1960s. They pulled elements from Happenings, theater, installations and activist art, in order to redefine the more historically grounded tradition of monumental public sculpture, and bring it into the museum setting.[8] Pontus Hultén wrote in the exhibition catalogue for *Hon-en katedral* that they had envisioned, "a form of theater that would provoke the audience into taking part in the performance."[9] This theater took the form of an immersive spatial enclosure that evaded straightforward categorization.

The result was both an architectural installation and a participatory environment in the form of a reclining pregnant woman. Saint Phalle described it as, "a sort of modern cathedral for the people."[10] Tinguely produced a sound piece to greet viewers as they approached the structure, combining organ pieces by Bach

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[7] Tinguely was one of the original members of the Nouveaux Réalistes, and Saint Phalle was invited to join the group in 1961. Ultvedt had a working relationship with the group, but was not a formal member.

[8] Camille Morineau, "A Pioneer of Monumental Sculpture," in *Niki de Saint Phalle: Outside-In*, ed. Styze Steenstra (Heerlen: SCHUNCK*, 2011), 90-91.

[9] Antille, "'HON–en katedral,'" 74.

[10] Morineau, "A Pioneer of Monumental Sculpture," 90.

with the sounds of creaking machinery and breaking glass[11]. Visitors lined up between the sculpture's spread legs, and when a light flashed green, ascended a small set of stairs that lead them through the vaginal entryway and into the body. Once inside, viewers wandered through a, "labyrinthine space on four levels, with spaces partly enclosed and partly open: a maze of interconnected platforms offering spots to watch and listen, to be looked at and heard, creating playful interactions among viewers."[12]

The interior environment consisted of a series of rooms and galleries that held different attractions, playing on notions of sensory pleasure, entertainment and post-war consumerism.[13] Viewers first entered the right arm, which housed a twelve-seat theater playing an erotically charged sequence from a Greta Garbo film on repeat. As visitors proceeded into the right breast they found a planetarium filled with glowing ping pong balls that were arranged to display the Milky Way.[14] This playful reference to the reproductive functions of the female body continued as viewers progressed into the left breast, which was the sight of a fully functioning milk bar. Upon entering *Hon*, viewers continued to be confronted with the

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[11] Antille, "'HON–en katedral,'" 75.

[12] Antille, "'HON–en katedral,'" 75.

[13] Antille, "'HON–en katedral,'" 75-76.

[14] Sources differ somewhat regarding the exact location and progression of the different environments. This description follows that of Cornelia Butler. Cornelia H. Butler et al., *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 293.

unabashed sexuality that was established with the vaginal entryway, but under the guise of a socially acceptable leisure activity.

As they continued, viewers encountered a series of rooms that referenced popular entertainment and consumer culture. Ultvedt created a mobile wooden sculpture of a man being massaged and watching a shipwreck on television, that resided in the heart of the structure (fig. 8). Proceeding upstairs, spectators entered another bar area where they could drink Coca-Cola or order food from a brightly lit, circular vending machine. From this room visitors could go up to a viewing deck situated on top of *Hon's* pregnant belly, and look out over the colossal body at the museum's bustling entryway. Tinguely and Ultvedt constructed a red velvet loveseat to fill the space of the left leg, where viewers could sit and watch as other people passed by. The audience was unaware that a microphone hidden in the seat would record couples' private conversations and project them into Hon's head, as though they were her own thoughts. In the right leg a large slide lead people through a gallery of counterfeit paintings, many of which mocked the popular styles of the contemporary art world (fig. 9).

The exterior of the structure was painted in the visual language of Saint Phalle's well-known *Nanas*, which she began producing the previous year. Saint Phalle often attributes this development to a collage she and Larry Rivers created of his wife Clarice in 1964, during the late months of her pregnancy (fig. 10). Saint Phalle has cited this portrait as an important prefiguration of the *Nanas*, and the origin of their flourishing surface patterns and undulating forms.[15] Saint Phalle's

sculptural aesthetic emphasizes voluptuousness and exaggerates the female body through a combination of curvilinear patterns and a vivid color palette. Vibrant blocks of color alternate with whimsical patterns in a seemingly spontaneous manner on *Hon*'s exterior. The resulting surface is biomorphic and dream-like, evocative of a rolling surrealist landscape.

Hon was laid out on her back with her arms by her side and her knees bent, so that her legs sprawled out before her. The silhouette of her body is rounded and stylized, accentuating the curvature of the female body to the point of hyperbole. A photo taken in the early stages of planning shows Saint Phalle on her back demonstrating this pose for her male cohort, highlighting the importance of the specifically female body, which was undoubtedly the influence of Saint Phalle's own practice (fig. 11). In the typical manner of the *Nanas*, this sculptural installation has rotund hips, thighs, and breasts, but a relatively small and un-individualized head. Although it was inconsequential in size, *Hon's* head was the final environment viewers would encounter, and inside it they watched a moving brain and listened to the hushed words of a couple in another part of the sculpture.[16]

It is clear that Saint Phalle and her team wanted to place an emphasis on female sexuality and reproduction: they placed the entrance in the figure's vagina, exaggerated her curves, put milk-themed environments in her breasts and built a terrace atop her pregnant belly. Inverting the historical tradition of the tactfully

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[15] Morineau, "Down With Salon Art!," 256.

[16] While the rest of *Hon* was destroyed at the end of the exhibition, the head was kept and remains in the Moderna Museet's permanent collection.

sexualized reclining nude figure, Saint Phalle not only highlights maternity and the reproductive function of this body, but she does so on a monumental scale. In this manner, *Hon* is explicitly sexual in her own right, but not sexualized as an object of the male gaze. This notion of sexual autonomy results in part from the emphasis on female reproduction, but also from the fact that, "architecture is not simply a platform that accommodates the viewing subject. It is a viewing mechanism that produces the subject. It precedes and frames its occupant."[17] The way that spectators are guided through *Hon* repositions the female nude, rejecting a passive, objectified depiction of woman in favor of a celebration of feminine fecundity. The subject of the female nude thus functions in a completely different manner when elevated to this scale.

In requiring viewers to move around and inside of the female body, Saint Phalle also urges them view it through a different perspective. According to Claire Bishop, "One of the key ideas underlying institutional critique is that there is more than one way to represent the world. Installation art, by using an entire space that must be circumnavigated to be seen, came to provide a direct analogy for the desirability of multiple perspectives on a single situation."[18] Saint Phalle uses the format of installation art, and the opportunity afforded to her by this project, to push forth a feminine and feminist perspective on the female body, which had not

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[17] Beatriz Colomina. "The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism" in *Sexuality and Space*, Princeton Papers on Architecture ; 1, ed. by Beatriz Colomina (New York, N.Y.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 83.

[18] Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 35.

yet gained traction in the European and American art world of the mid 1960s. By denying viewers a singular point from which they could view *Hon* in her entirety, she subsequently denies them a position of mastery or ownership over this body. Saint Phalle paradoxically invites viewers to experience the totality of the female body (from inside and out), while simultaneously pointing to the impossibility of such a complete understanding.

It is also important to note that this installation was designed to fill the entire space of the entry hall, refusing viewers the opportunity to step back and get a complete overview of it.[19] Their perception of *Hon* was always partial, making it all the more impossible to fully posses or take her in. Rather than being visually consumed by viewers, this female figure consumed and absorbed them in a spatial and sensory experience.[20] The sheer size of the figure thus resists the traditional relationship of subject and object, and rejects the conventional associations that identify both woman and artwork as objects. This is the nature of the architectural environment: "Whereas a work of art, a painting, presents itself to critical attention as an object, the house is received as an environment, as a stage."[21] By representing the female body on an architectural scale, Saint Phalle is able to depict and celebrate fertility and female sexuality while simultaneously subverting objectification.

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[19] Nicola Foster, "Niki de Saint Phalle's *Hon*: An Ethics through the Visual?," in *Art, History and the Senses*, ed. by Patrizia di Bello and Gabriel Koureas (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub., 2010), 134.

[20] Morineau, "Down With Salon Art!," 255.

[21] Colomina, "The Split Wall," 85.

The association with architectural discourse also brought into question the historical stigma against female sexuality, and the cultural efforts that have been put towards controlling it spatially. The western understanding of architectural space has been inherently gendered, with the female body being contained within and the male body moving freely outside. As Mark Wigley explains,

> The house is involved in the production of the gender division it appears to merely secure. In these terms, the role of architecture is explicitly the control of sexuality, or, more precisely, women's sexuality, the chastity of the girl, the fidelity of the wife…the house then assumes the role of the man's self-control. The virtuous women becomes woman-plus-house, or, rather, woman-as-housed, such that her virtue cannot be separated from the physical space"[22]

Through the creation of Hon, Saint Phalle makes the historical sexualization of space explicit. Interior environments like the milkyway and the milk bar are clearly coded as feminine, and consequently feel private. Meanwhile the spaces that pull from public life and consumer culture, such as the art gallery and the mannequin watching tv, come across as masculine. Consumer imagery, public space and masculinity function as the inverse of the domestic, the private and the traditionally feminine. By bringing the two together in a single environment, Saint Phalle confuses and conflates these opposing forces.

By depicting the female body as a site of reproduction and sensory pleasure, Saint Phalle also deconstructs the traditional perceptions of female sexuality as a dangerous force that needs to be contained and controlled. Fittingly, a band was painted around the outside of the right leg that read, "honi soit qui mal y pense," or

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[22] Mark Wigley, "Untitled: The Housing of Gender" in *Sexuality and Space*, Princeton Papers on Architecture ; 1, ed. by Beatriz Colomina (New York, N.Y.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 336-337.

"shamed be the person that thinks evil of it," subtly calling out those who stigmatize the female body or female sexuality.[23] In this work the female body is still a site of sensory pleasure for viewers, but in a manner that celebrates fecundity and the inner workings of the body, rather than participating in its objectification.

Instead of "woman-plus-house," a set of spatial boundaries designed to place restrictions on women, she creates a "woman-house," a socially and politically charged space of feminine power. The concept of a "woman-house," or an anthropomorphic body-sculpture, would continue to inform Saint Phalle's public sculpture throughout her career, finding its place at the heart of her oeuvre.[24] An early rendition of this format appears in a drawing from 1967, just a year after the completion of *Hon* (fig. 12). Entitled *Plan for Nana* Town, this playful felt tip drawing presents a whimsical plan for a town made up entirely of body-sculptures. In this image the female body encompasses everything – it becomes a school, a library, a church, a restaurant, an airport and an apartment building. Saint Phalle labels vaginas as doors, breasts as windows and bulging bellies as homes. She reimagines architectural space using the terms of the body, and specifically the female body.

The result is "an architectural 'body', rounded, open, hollow and colorful, which was also a new way of occupying and living in public space."[25] In this

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[23] Butler, *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, 293.

[24] In addition to a number of commissioned public sculptures, Saint Phalle also created her a monumental sculpture garden of twenty-two figures, which she worked on from 1979 until her death in 2002.

manner, Saint Phalle brings together the private body and the public space – throwing this dichotomous relationship into question entirely. She takes the body parts that are typically understood as the most private, and turns them into windows and doorways – access points for the public. She brings the nude body into the public space of the museum, giving viewers the opportunity to experience it directly and without boundaries – to touch it, go inside of it, stand on top of it and interact with its inner workings. The interior installations combine references to consumerism and popular culture (the public sphere) with the private internal functions of the body. The act of producing breast milk is manifested in the presence of a milk bar, an inherently social space. The beating of the heart is recreated by the reverberations of a television set, a window from the private to the public realm. Perhaps rather than a "woman-house," which signals only domesticity and private life, *Hon* would be better understood as representing a new type of space altogether.

By merging body and building, Saint Phalle also merges private and public. She blurs the dichotomy between two highly gendered spaces: "outside, the realm of exchange, money, and masks; inside, the realm of the inalienable, the nonexchangeable, and the unspeakable."[26] Saint Phalle brings sexuality (and particularly female sexuality), a historically privatized and stigmatized subject, into the public realm in playful and accessible manner. She rejects the privatization of

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[25] Morineau, "A Pioneer of Monumental Sculpture," 89.

[26] Colomina, "The Split Wall," 94.

sexuality and provides what Whitney Chadwick describes as, "a potent demythologizer of male romantic notions of the female body as a 'dark continent' and unknowable reality."[27] With the creation of *Hon*, Saint Phalle also addresses another closely related, historically gendered dichotomy – that of interior vs. exterior.

Saint Phalle unites the bodily interior with the spatial interior, and therefore conflates bodily boundaries with architectonic boundaries. The interrelated distinctions between public/private, interior/exterior, and visible/invisible are established by the presence of boundaries at their intersections.[28] Mark Wigley links the existence of such boundaries with the issues of control and surveillance in classical thought, particularly regarding women and sexuality:

> Women lack the internal self-control credited to men as the very mark of their masculinity. This self-control is no more than the maintenance of secure boundaries. These internal boundaries, or rather boundaries that define the interior of a person, the identity of the self, cannot be maintained by a woman because her fluid sexuality endlessly overflows and disrupts them. And more than this, she endlessly disrupts the boundaries of others, that is, men, disturbing their identity, if not calling it into question. In these terms, self-control for a woman, which is to say the production of her identity as a woman, can only be obedience to external law. Unable to control herself, she must be controlled by being bounded.[29]

Wigley identifies the social institution of marriage and the spatial restrictions of the home as a means of "bounding," or containing women.[30] In this classical

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[27] Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society* 4th ed. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007), 337-338.

[28] Wigley, "Untitled: The Housing of Gender," 337-338.

[29] Wigley, "Untitled: The Housing of Gender,"335-336.

understanding, spatial or architectural boundaries are made necessary by the ineffectiveness of a woman's own bodily boundaries at reigning in her rampant sexuality.

Rather than a mechanism for controlling sexuality, Saint Phalle employs architecture as a means of publically displaying it. She combines architectural boundaries and bodily boundaries into a single system, and then invites viewers to penetrate it, moving freely inside and out. By emphasizing maternity and the necessary reproductive functions of the body, she points to the absurdity of historical depictions of female sexuality as a dangerous and excessive force. By filling the dark, mysterious, bodily interior with familiar imagery from 1960s consumer culture, she confuses the conventional distinctions between public and private, or visible and invisible.

Saint Phalle highlights the artificiality of these socially constructed boundaries, rethinking them in a way that prefigures an artistic inclination of the late 1970s in which, "the public was not viewed as discontinuous with the private, but intrinsically constitutive of it."[31] These opposing forces are thus intricately intertwined and dependent on one another, as *Hon* righteously demonstrates. Ultimately, Saint Phalle's monumental body sculpture finds its power in breaking down boundaries. By bringing together the opposing elements in historically dichotomous relationships, this work urges viewers to question their understanding

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[30] Wigley, "Untitled: The Housing of Gender," 336.

[31] Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History*, 110.

of them.

Saint Phalle represents the female body in a manner that calls its historical casting and representation into question: fleshy and pregnant, joyful and vibrant, enhanced and exaggerated to massive proportions. She inverts the body by allowing viewers to enter and explore it spatially, so that, "the body constructed by the rules of polite conduct is turned inside out – by emphasizing food, digestion, excretion and procreation – and upside down – by stressing the lower stratum (sex and excretion) over the upper stratum (the head and all that implies)."[32] She deconstructs socially established boundaries and distinctions, so that the lines between subject and object, interior and exterior, and public and private become deeply obscured. Ultimately *Hon* acts as a disruption, dismantling traditional conceptions of sexuality, space, the female body, and importantly, how these themes are intertwined.

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[32] Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones, *The Artist's Body*, Themes and Movements (London: Phaidon, 2000), 27.

IMAGES

Figure 7. Installation view, exterior. *Hon-en katedral*, 1966, Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

Figure 8. Installation view, interior. *Hon-en katedral*, 1966, Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

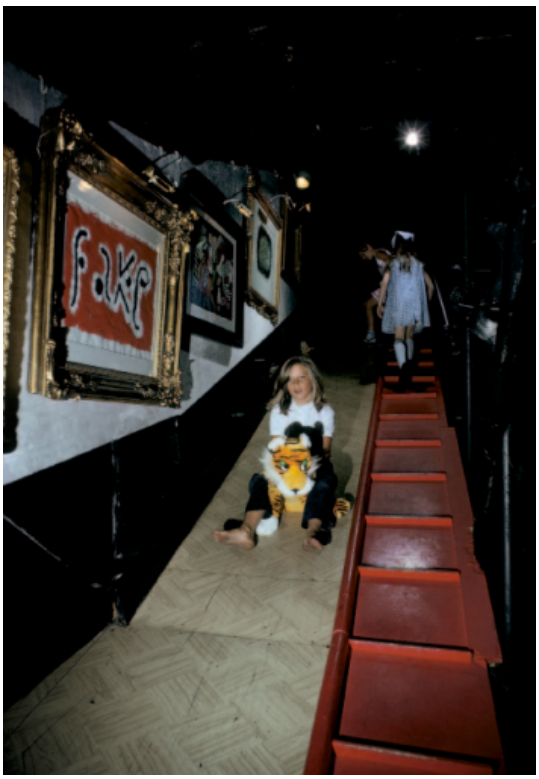

Figure 9. Installation view, interior. *Hon-en katedral*, 1966, Moderna Museet, Stockholm

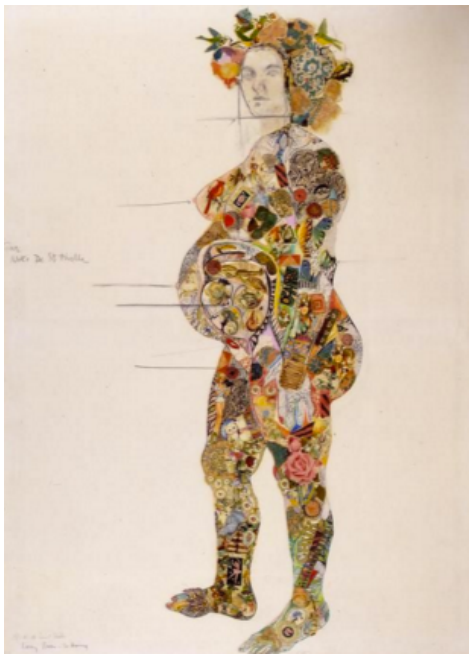

Figure 10. Niki de Saint Phalle and Larry Rivers, *Portrait of Clarice Rivers*, 1964.

Figure 11. Niki posing for *Hon*, 1966.

Figure 12. Niki de Saint Phalle, *Plan for Nana Town*, 1967.

CONCLUSION

Camille Morineau claims that as, "one of the few female sculptors of the twentieth century, Niki de Saint Phalle was also the woman who desanctified the genre at every level, reinventing it from the inside out and across the full spectrum of scale."[1] Saint Phalle's artistic trajectory of 1961-1966, from the Tirs to the Births and Brides, and ultimately to *Hon-en katedral*, exemplifies this characterization. Better known for her Nanas and the monumental public works that followed, Saint Phalle's sculpture of the first half of the 1960s tends to get pushed to the margins. By analyzing her production from this period and identifying a clear evolution in form and content, I hope to have demonstrated its formative position within her larger oeuvre. In a western art world dominated by masculine voices, working as the sole female member of the Nouveaux Réalistes, Saint Phalle's early work provided an indispensable example of proto-feminist expression.

Saint Phalle's growing interest in the female body and the condition of women can clearly be observed across these three bodies of work. With the Tirs, Saint Phalle explored gendered bodily violence through a fragmentary, abstract representation of the body. The Births and Brides take on a more directly figurative manner of representation, situating the body as an entity shaped by sociocultural

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[1] Camille Morineau, "A Pioneer of Monumental Sculpture," in *Niki de Saint Phalle: Outside-In*, ed. Styze Steenstra (Heerlen: SCHUNCK*, 2011), 87.

factors. With *Hon*, the female body gets blown up to monumental proportions, disrupting established social, spatial, and bodily boundaries. By situating this material within its historical and cultural context, this project has endeavored to expand upon the lens through which historians understand Niki de Saint Phalle.

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BIOGRAPHY

Mara Hussey is a Master's candidate at Tulane University, where she received her BA in Art History in 2016. Her research focuses on the art of Europe and the Americas after World War II, with an emphasis on French art and visual culture of the 1960s. Her interests include transatlantic dialogues, exhibition spaces and practices, issues of gender and sexuality, performance, and the body. Her research explores the intersections of politics and visual culture, paying particular attention to the work of female sculptors, and performance and installation artists of the 20th century.