

## ***Tu es moi: Sacred and Profane in the work of Niki de Saint Phalle***

‘The image is perhaps our sole remaining link with the sacred: with the *horror* provoked by death and sacrifice, with the *serenity* resulting from the pact of identification between the sacrificed and those who sacrifice, and with the *joy of representation* indissociable from sacrifice, its only possible passage...

Julia Kristeva, *Visions Capitales*, 1998<sup>1</sup>

*I never shot at God... I shot at the church. I glorify the Cathedral.*

Niki de Saint Phalle, 1981

So much European art, particularly performance, should be reinscribed within a dialectic of the sacred and profane. Niki de Saint Phalle’s work is situated in a tradition which begins with the roots of the Catholic religion in Europe and extends to the *oeuvre* of our contemporaries such as Orlan. These themes, and force of her challenge to the patriarchal institution of the Church as well as society as a whole will be the focus of my exploration here. For once the women artists who so often shared her context and concerns in France will accompany her story.

1961, an *annus mirabilis* for Niki de Saint Phalle, saw the invention of her shooting paintings (*Tirs*) and cathedral pictures. As the only female member of Pierre Restany’s *Nouveau Réalistes*, working with the two most brilliant international curators of the day, Pontus Hulten from Sweden and Willem Sandberg from Amsterdam, she was involved in the art and movement show, ‘Bewogen Bewegung’, at the Stedelijk Museum in March which toured to Stockholm and then Humlebaek in Denmark. In June, she was joined in Paris by her American neo-dada friends, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and pianist David Tudor for the *Tir de l’Ambassade américaine*: a shooting to accompany the performance of John Cage’s *Variations II* on American diplomatic territory. (This daring event preceded the American-style happenings which arrived in Paris with artist Jean-Jacques Lebel’s First Festival of Free Expression at the American Center in 1964, including Carolee Schneeman’s *Meat Joy* ...). In July, 1961, Restany’s show ‘Le Nouveau Réalisme à Paris et à New York’ at the Galerie Rive Droite, confronted destructive, Parisian neo-dada with its American counterparts: the work of Stankiewicz, Chamberlain, Rauschenberg and Johns. Other women artists were also present: Lee Bontecou and the Paris-trained Greek-American Chryssa. An August trip for Niki with Jean Tinguely to Figueras in Spain followed: they created the huge exploding *Toro de fuego*, a fire bull, in honour of Salvador Dali, with Marcel Duchamp as master of ceremonies. Niki then showed at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in the highly influential ‘Art of Assemblage’ exhibition which opened in October (it toured to Dallas and San Francisco). *Tu es moi, paysage de la mort*, entered the curator’s wife Irma Seitz’s personal collection – a superb compliment.<sup>2</sup> Niki was poised, then, at this exhilarating moment at the apex of an international avant-garde, on the cusp of neo-dada and performance, at a moment of fête and celebration.<sup>3</sup>

*Tu es moi* was made in Paris at the moment of transition from landscape assemblages to the first target portraits in the rue Alfred-Durand-Claye. A black sky with a dying red sun is poised over a white horizon, peopled not with the *personnages* of Jean Dubuffet’s encrusted

landscapes (which precede these formally) but with pistol, hammer, scissors, razor blade, rope, a two-pronged fork, a rod and a dagger. A crime of passion? Or the instruments of passion evoked by the echo of those black-skied crucifixion landscapes where the sun is eclipsed at the darkest moment of Christ's agony? Each object, lightly-inclined to the left, invites the spectator to pick it up with the right hand and strike of fire. Niki's subsequent turns are anthropomorphic: the move from sun to circular target-head, from folded plaster landscape to crinkly shirt is evident : *Tu es moi* anticipates *Hors d'oeuvre*, the first target portrait, and *The Portrait of my Lover*.<sup>4</sup>

The sun floats, disembodied – decapitated. The counterpoint to *Tu es moi*, possibly the first of the Death Landscape series, is *Collage de la mort*, [cat x]. A black sun is poised in a livid red sky: a doll's severed hand and a hatpin join the instruments of aggression. A stream of paint trickles like dried blood from the black sun into the landscape: it becomes the back of a hand-held looking glass through which we cannot see, even darkly. The everydayness of the objects, already trapped, half-engulfed in a plaster burial, evoke the tradition of the *vanitas*. *Le soleil noir de la mélancolie* – the black sun of melancholy – is evoked as an act of mourning. For Niki, as for any young girl learning Gérard de Nerval's symbolist poem which introduces this black sun, an act of transference takes place: we imagine the mysterious Prince of Aquitaine in his abandoned tower, *Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie*, not as the poem's narrator, but as a romantic love-object. *Tu es moi*, you are me. We introject, as his melancholy becomes our longing and loss a forward-looking yearning. *Tu et moi* – you and me – an impossible dream?

But the Death Landscapes (their titles *Paysages de la mort* coming from *Natures mortes*, still lives, 'dead natures') are highly aggressive. *Tu es moi* is also *Tuez-moi*: Kill me! Is this an imperative coming from the work itself, an exhortation to take up the pistol, the hammer, and smash the representational object to pieces? (In one of the films, Niki's repeated shots end with the crumpling of the complete armature of the *Tir* and its contents: like a dead body it slumps, bleeding, into the snow – an abject pile of mess and coloured liquids). Alternatively, rebarbatively, is this exhortation 'Kill me!' coming from Niki herself?

In *Le Martyr nécessaire (Saint Sebastien)* the dart board replaces the head, suspended just above the empty shirt; a decapitation precedes the assault on the target-substitute. The work is an appeal to the female spectator, perverting the homoerotic, though saintly subject of Renaissance art. Niki's art is an act of profanation. And what pleasure to reverse the Saint Sebastian trope, to aim one's own darts at this blank emblem of the male! The *précoce* precursor, subtitled *Portrait of my Lover*, with its Jackson Pollock shirt of spurts and drips, obliquely signals the impact of the great touring show, 'The New American Painting' that arrived in Paris in January 1959.<sup>5</sup> Pierre Restany's text, 'Tir a volonté' ('Free shoot') presenting Niki's work for the Galerie 'J' in 1961, was typed over a fairground paper target spattered with holes (one recalls the ultimate Dada gesture of shooting at random into a crowd). He declared: 'In the extraordinary perspective of the acceleration of history, man has forgotten the sense of his own dimension. He has given up action, grasp [*le rapt*], choice ... There's both the cowboy and Young Werther in this pistol history...the gesture of the assassin or the cuckolded husband becomes an invitation to a voyage...'. This is a man-on-man shoot out: husband versus lover, Restany says, the scenario of the deceived and jealous *mari trompé*. The protagonist, for Restany, is the man of action, choice, *le rapt*, with its suggestion of rape, of seizure. Far from empathising with Niki's desires, he does not even perceive female agency!

The Baudelairean voyage Restany describes is into 'a world of strange marvels where blood cedes its places to the richest of colours, where explosion creates new form, where the wound is poetry...'<sup>6</sup> In *Shooting Picture – séance Galerie J*, 1961, created at this very moment, rainbow stripes trickle down from the surface: a parody of the exhaustion of the existentialist gestures of an international European *informel* (one recalls the similar results of Jean Tinguely's *Painting Machines* of 1959)<sup>7</sup>. The equivalence between shooting a victim and shooting a painting – paint as blood – evokes the whole Western tradition in which the canvas becomes the equivalent of the female body: nude, love object, goddess, Venus – or alternatively the raped Europa, the raped Lucretia, the raped Sabines.... Niki shoots the whole Western tradition in art. 'Possess and destroy': *Posséder et détruire*; such was the title of an exhibition summarizing this tradition at the Musée du Louvre in Paris ...<sup>8</sup> A brilliant parody, then: but is she shooting at male artists: or at a body not male but female?

*Tu es moi* - 'You are me': victim as perpetrator, perpetrator as victim ... *Tu et moi* - 'You and me' or *Tuez-moi* - 'Kill me'? How should we respond to nanas such as *Pink Birth* where woman has moved from the rectilinear or altarpiece-shaped confines of the tableau to become all body, to acquire human, female form? *Tu es moi*. Was I this horrible, birth-giving animal splayed on its back, covered with blood, defined by my reproductive function, Niki asks? (*Pink Birth* was conceived and made at a time when she was secretly recovering from an abortion). The red-haired nana's body pullulates with menageries of plastic mammals crawling towards a huge spider and an empty breast overrun with vegetation; she sports man-made machines, trains, planes – a doll hangs from her vagina... Next to this terrifying image in the Paris-Stockholm catalogue of 1980 we read in Niki's deliberately childish hand: '*Giving Birth: the virile woman. She bears the child like a male sex organ. My births turn woman into a goddess. They become at once father and mother.*' Underneath a male curatorial note ripostes in print: '*To give birth standing up, in a field, like Descartes's mother! What method! Niki's virile woman leaves us dumbfounded, without an answer. Is there an answer?*'<sup>9</sup>

Niki of course conceived this birth-giving Nana not standing up (to give birth to the philosopher René Descartes, the father of French rationalism...) but on a flat plane, like Jasper Johns' ready-made, patchwork quilt *Bed*, 1955, trickling with coloured paints, shown in Paris in 1959, or like her fellow Nouveau Réaliste, Yves Klein's *Anthropometries* and *Shroud anthropometries*, where positive and negative images made with 'female paintbrushes' involved real nude models. The intensely physical, sticky processes of printing with the body on canvas or loose cloth to make imprints were then - 'dematerialised', via the alchemical and sacred colours of blue and gold, and by erection to the vertical, where they assumed disembodied forms, angelic flights.

Other dialogues are more disturbing however. Niki's Nanas are direct descendants of Jean Fautrier's *Hostage* paintings, commemorating rapes and shootings, which celebrate the wound in Bataillean mode, and with Jean Dubuffet's ugly and menacing parodies of the nude tradition such as *Olympia* and other works in his 'Corps de Dames' (Ladies bodies) series of 1950; here the link between Dubuffet and the writer, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, who exemplifies the abject in Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* is direct.<sup>10</sup> The transformation of the nude into a cannibalistic feast – in the tradition of the vegetable allegories of Arcimboldo – took place when the naked Meret Oppenheim was prostrated on a table and covered with fruit and food for the opening of the International Exhibition of Surrealism devoted to Eros in Paris in 1959: an embodiment of Eros as woman to be devoured. She signalled both the continuing fascination with woman as fetish – an invitation to oral and sadistic aggression – and her own

absorption within that fetishistic desire.<sup>11</sup> Surrealist women of the 1950s and 1960s, from the mature sorceress Leonor Fini, to Mimi Parent or Bona, the poetess Joyce Mansour, or the writers Annie Le Brun and Dominique Aury, were all subject to the spell of the Marquis de Sade – and the mental horizons of the ageing pontiff André Breton – even as surrealism reached a point of expiry and transformation: the transition was marked by the encounter with psychedelia in the colourful drawings and body-paintings of Myriam-Bat Josef or the pop art of Axell in Brussels – Niki's contemporaries.<sup>12</sup>

Niki's work, poised between painting, assemblage and sculpture is more excessive, more terrifying. With its neo-dada aggression it is liberated, from any surrealist affinities. The apotropaic dimension of the nude is at stake here. *Tu es moi*, You are me, Niki declares – just as Gustave Flaubert identified with his most famous, sexually profligate creation, Emma Bovary, *Madame Bovary c'est moi*. On the one hand says Niki, addressing male artists, you create beautiful – or horrible – nudes because you are afraid of woman and her power, including her power of procreation. The idealised 'beautiful' image, terrifies in its perfection, its unattainability; the 'dirty' nude of a Dubuffet corresponds to the infantile wish to destroy, to defile, to scratch, to score, to cut up the body, the 'bad breast': see his 'Ladies' bodies', *Piece of Butchery*, or *Tree of Fluids* where the image liquifies, spreading dangerously to the four corners of the canvas, threatening to engulf its creator in pre-natal memories...

Contemporary French culture exalted the glamourpuss: from Roger Vadim's creation of Brigitte Bardot as the ultimate, God-created woman in his film *Et Dieu... créa la femme* 1956, to Martial Raysse's *Nouveau-Réaliste* beach queens. Niki's birthing mothers may be virile in the classic Freudian sense – the child a penis substitute – but, in contrast, they are horrible, open wounds, corpses, redundant as they crawl with new life. *Laedere* - to wound - is arguably the origin of *laid* (ugly) in French.<sup>13</sup> Compared with Niki's slim and fashionable body, whether beauty plate for *Vogue* or queen bee at the *Nouveau Réalistes* private views, the Nanas are the monstrous, ugly, misshapen 'other self', sticky with the 'viscous' feminine, execrated by the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and even his feminist partner, Simone de Beauvoir, author of *The Second Sex*.<sup>14</sup> The other self: the 'bad mother', a fearful effigy for Niki herself, who left her own two children and her husband to work with Jean Tinguely. Does Niki shoot the effigy of the mother she once was, all 'earth mothers' or the 'bad mother' she fears?<sup>15</sup> Her 1960s 'destructions of the mother' precede Louise Bourgeois's *Destruction of the Father* installation of 1974. Niki has been left in a situation of lack – lacking any of the careful attention, the psychoanalytic readings, that Bourgeois has elicited in America.<sup>16</sup>

The impact of the ugliness which inverts and vilifies the cult of female beauty and the trope of a sacred and virginal motherhood so central to the Western artistic tradition (explored later in the 1970s by Marina Warner and Julia Kristeva), also expressed a political anger.<sup>17</sup> The models on the covers of *Vogue* or *Paris-Match* were being confronted by the scandal of the rape and torture of women by French soldiers during the Algerian War.<sup>18</sup> Here Niki's art becomes an important voice of protest. She transforms the female body, which – as in medieval love poetry – represents the body of France, into a militarised landscape, whether 'occupied' by American troops (refuelling for Vietnam) or shot and blown up in Paris or in Algeria mimicking both OAS bombs and police brutality. The almost sexual ecstasy that she describes while shooting: the 'sublime' moment followed by fatigue, disappointment, exhaustion has arguably a counterpoint in the excitement, horror and disbelief of the militarised teenage conscripts, her counterparts in a 'France torn apart' by this unnamed war ... (*La France déchirée* was indeed the title of a torn-poster show of 1961 by her Nouveau

Réaliste contemporaries<sup>19</sup>) The shooting-painting *Tirs* can become `tears' of shame, of pain or of mourning. The title of her 1962 altarpiece contains another pun: *Organisation Armée Secrete* (the secret right wing army) or *Oeuvre d'art sacré* (Sacred work of art). The altarpiece is a sacrilege with its guns and its massacred innocents - gilded with an ecclesiastical pomp. Neither the French church nor the Vatican denounced the Algerian slaughter, just as they had sent missionaries off with the first colonisers, and still maintained an ideology of France's *mission civilisatrice* and its rewards. The altarpieces, evoke the Church itself as an ultimate patriarchal institution, one whose power over the most sacred rites of passage, baptism, marriage, death, evoked moral principles constantly abused. That very year, 1962, the writer Pierre Guyotat was expelled from the army following two years in Algeria for moral turpitude: his novel *Tombeau pour cinq cent mille soldats* (Tomb for 500,000 soldiers) with its intense sexual scenes between combattants and their victims was banned from military barracks.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Tuez moi /tu es moi: Kennedy Khrushchev***

What happens when the Nana becomes a man? Or to reverse the proposal: what is implied when the monstrous Siamese twin Nana, *Kennedy-Khrushchev*, becomes a woman? Created in 1962 in the Impasse Ronsin in Paris – where Brancusi once sculpted his smooth and beautiful birds – this most angry of Niki's shooting pieces asks the most disturbing questions.<sup>21</sup> Completed with a shoot-out it anticipates the tense moment of the opening of the New York–Moscow telephone hotline in June 1963 and Kennedy's November assassination: the first global television tragedy. Just as the Nana's body could become the equivalent of a country to explore, here again is the metaphor of the body politic, now signifying Cold War apocalypse. However the two world leaders are humiliated not only via their stripping, but through their castration, through their feminisation. *Tu es moi*: you have become me. The sexual humiliation of political victims – a practice Niki would have deplored, taking place at that very moment in the French-Algerian war - is acted out here as revenge: the blackened pubis becomes a place of shame and ashes. While a sister piece, *Red Witch*, 1963, may take upon itself all the fairy-tale empowerment of the monstrous feminine, of the vampire killer, with Kennedy-Khrushchev the sexual politics at stake here of feminising the enemy – a practice reenacted today between victors and victims – is ambivalent in the extreme: women's anger expressed through self-reflexive humiliation.

### **Crucifixions and Cathedrals**

Niki's *Crucifixion* c. 1965, made in the Chelsea Hotel in New York, is a suspended Nana – clothed, not naked, with its huge, square body, tiny head in curlers, and hardly any arms. An *arcimboldesque* jungle top of vegetation, soldiers, dolls and animals, like a flowery blouse is tucked into a huge pink spotted suspender belt; thick thighs turned outwards taper into black laces stockings and tiny stilettos. A female Christ: profanation, blasphemy, or a resurrected reversion to the goddess-mother? *Crucifixion* anticipates by a year Niki's *Hon* (She) the massive, collaborative woman-cathedral created inside Stockholm's Moderna Museet in 1966. The associations of fertility shrines, ancient priestesses and the origins of the cathedral arch and brothel in the Latin word *fornix* come together here – but so does the link between women and evil. On the painted garter of the *Hon* maquette Niki wrote the motto of the order `Honi soi qui mal y pense': Evil to him who evil thinks.<sup>22</sup> This work, celebratory, democratic, fun, feminist – a worldwide press sensation undertaken in the spirit of the Summer of Love, anticipated a climate in Scandinavia in which over 250,000 people went to see the First and

Second International Exhibitions of Erotic Art in Sweden and Denmark in 1968 and 1969, in public, tax-supported museums.<sup>23</sup> Its success led to Niki's commission with Jean Tinguely for the Paradise garden on the roof of the barbican-like French Pavilion at the Montreal 'Expo' 67', where 'Nana-kebabs' (*Nanas-en-brochette*) spun around joyously in the air; a treat for the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo and then for the lovers and the Harlem kids in Central Park, New York. Together with the 'marvellously-tattooed' *Nana-Maison*- shown in Paris' these became Niki's contribution to May '68.<sup>24</sup> By November, with her show at the Galerie Alexandre Iolas, Paris, she was recognised as 'the most important female artist of the era'<sup>25</sup>

And the American context was exploding: with the 1972 'Festival of Women in the Arts' at Cornell, the NOW conference on female sexuality, the Erotic Art Gallery.. The discussion over overtly 'feminist' creations, the sexualised flowers of Georgia O'Keefe, or Judy Chicago's classic *Dinner Party*, 1973-9 became displaced by works that were both more violent and more gender-sophisticated. Who remembers that Louise Bourgeois' semi-abstract *Trani Episode* piece was exhibited with Marge Helenchild's *Vulva Hammock*, Shelly Lowell's *Slice of Life* (an Oldenberg pie with meringue peak nipples)? Bourgeois' *Cumulus no 1*, white and superb in the Pompidou museum collection, must be reimagined in its 1973 New York context of 'Metaphorical Cunts and Measured Cocks'.<sup>26</sup>

The small cathedral pieces evolved from assemblages, almost as children instinctively draw a house – hommages of course to the eccentric postman, the Facteur Cheval, wonderful Palace in the **DROME** and to the art-nouveau |Spanish cathedral –builder Antonio Gaudi. (Did Niki ever visit the Maison de Picassiette, the ceramic-fantastic house and garden in the foothills of Chartres cathedral?) As sun descends and becomes transformed into the target disc of Saint Sebastian, so it also becomes metamorphosed into the rose window at the centre of many of Niki's cathedral *tableaux*: man is at the very centre again of the patriarchal edifice against which Niki shoots: For the tenth birthday celebrations of the Nouveaux Réalistes in 1970, Niki's altarpiece shoot-outs took place with the ghostly and magnificent night-time facade of Milan cathedral as a backdrop – an element essential to the meaning of the pieces – and indeed to Jean Tinguely's huge exploding phallus centrepiece. The phallus ejaculates in sound, smoke and fury, then implodes; the cathedral remains.<sup>27</sup> The action magnified Niki's first posing sessions in her white shooting outfit on the *parvis* of Notre-Dame in Paris, taking the place of the *jongleurs* of old

#### **DADDY thomashirschhorn@aol.com**

Niki de Saint Phalle's film *Daddy*, with its incest theme and scenes of women masturbating or being masturbated, was shown in New York in 1972<sup>28</sup> **and in London**

Le 13 septembre 1440, Jean de Malestroit, l'évêque de Nantes cite Gilles de Rais à comparaître après avoir recueilli des témoignages et des rumeurs sur les exactions de celui-ci. Il est accusé d'avoir violé, torturé et assassiné 140 enfants, notamment dans le cadre de rites sataniques, durant les huit années précédentes. Les chefs d'accusation sont les plus graves de l'époque : « sodomie, sorcellerie et assassinat ».

# Georges Bataille, Le procès de Gilles de Rais, Pauvert, 338 p., 1965 (Réédition : 1977, ISBN 2-720201-77-4)

# Michel Bataille, Gilles de Rais, 312 p., Club des Amis du Livre, Paris, 1966, (Rééditions : Éditions Pygmalion, 1976, puis 1997, ISBN 2-857040-30-X)

The cathedral and his patriarchal is

**JKVis Cap ed FV[parti pris[ RMN, 27 av-27 July 98, p 27**Les ceremonies sacrificielles plus recentes attestees par l'anthropologie laissent penser que les rituels craniens se sont accompagne de fetes: depenses sensorielles, violence permise, transe, danse, rythme, cri, incantation – jusqu'a perdre la tête, perdre conscience, abolir la capacité de representation elle-même. La fête met en jeu la capacité de representation que celebre le rite cranienne, mais elle la met aussi en peril. Osmose narcissique, repli uterin ou tombal, retour animal, le spirituel s'y resorbe dans le sensible: la fête est la doublure jouissive du sacrifice, une immersion incestueuse... Alors que Freud souscrit a l'aveu resigne de Frazer `Nous ignorons l'origine de la peur de l'inceste et nous ne savons même pas dans quelle direction nous devons la chercher [ S F Totme aet tabou,p 145] -. , C LSrepond que l'inceste est interdit pour que les groupes humaines puissent echanger les femmes et créer les liens, constituer la société

Pour représenter, je dois denouer les liens vie/mort, Eros Thanatos qui trament mes passions, je dois démêler, déserotiser. Comment? Je comence par desirer non pas un objet exterieur (Pere, mere autre corps) mais d'abord mon propre corps ou mon Moi dit `narcissique, puis un signe, des signes. Je ne jouis pas d'un homme, d'une femme, d'un objet partiel, ni même de Moi, mais des signes que je suis capable d'emettre et qui `pensent' ma depression: mots, couleurs, sons gestes. Que devient la pulsion de mort dans ce noble parcours?

While Aury, in her picaresque, neo-Sadian novel *Histoire d'O* buried her identity and paradoxically her sex with the pseudonym `Pauline Réage' (linked instantly to her companion, Jean Paulhan), complicitly adopting Sadean stereotypes,**BERNARD NOEL**

...

DELEUZE `Le Froid et le Cruel; *Presentaiton de Sacher-Masoch*, iEditions de Minuit, P, 1967

`To recognise beauty is to defer endlessly the question of its origin.<sup>129</sup> But its origin is at once its opposite: the beautiful woman has always her evil double, the woman-castrator; female beauty is but the counterpart of the `monstrous-feminine,' the witch, the vampire, the killer. Yet from Niki's birth-giving Nanas to contemporary film heroines, there is ultimately a placing of woman as abject. The abjection linked with the decay symbolised my new life crawling all over the body of what appears to be a corps – the abjection symbolised by her position as shot victim, as bleeding wound, as blood, `the fantastic semantic crossroads' (Kristeva) to which Niki constantly returns, bent on corroboration and revenge.<sup>30</sup> **PROB see below..... CUT?**

**In RAPE bit.**

[Note?was most strikingly portrayed by Magritte's *Le viol*, *The Rape* of 1934, where the **headless?** body `looks back' with its breast at the male viewer – (who is raped?) the invitation to rape turns into the phallic woman, her look reinstated. Magritte's apotropaic desire

for self-protection paradoxically creates Surrealism's most powerful image of the Medusa or Gorgonic gaze.<sup>31</sup> (a trope preserved into a self-consciously Lacanian, 1970s France in the work of Michel Parré for example) .

Gynecide: the metaphorical chopping up of images woman: 'Femme sans teste tout en est bon' ('a headless woman is all for the good' runs the French proverb that surely Max Ernst knew...)<sup>32</sup>  
 'An effective Muse is a Muse that is killed, not once, but over and over again, her power is to be both powerful and dead, present and absent, a severed and yet unsevered head.'<sup>33</sup>

### *Imitatio christi*

The establishment assumptions against which she fought all her life were never more evident than in 1972, when after an exhibiting career of over a decade she figured as one of only two women in the great retrospective held in Paris's Grand Palais, *Douze ans d'art contemporain*, popularly known as the 'Expo Pompidou' or '72 for 72' starring seventy men – a proportional representation that seemed entirely appropriate to the young exhibition organisers who still rule France's art establishment today.

*Niki de Saint Phalle Aventure Suisse Espace Jean-Tinguely-niki de Saint Phalle Fribourg, Musée de la Ville de Fribourg, Bern, 1993*

NdsP

W Rico Weber 'J'étais leur princesse et ça m'amusait de les entendre parler leur langue (le schwyzerdu[umlaut]tsch), cela me permettait de rêver.

1968 J buys Neyruz en Suisse. 1968 installs Micheline Gygax in his house in Fribourg  
 p12 un combat artistique joyeux entre Jean et moi'

### **BARTHES ARTEMISIA LUBLIN\*\*\*\*\***

#### **Capital Punishment: Gilles de Rais DATE 1440 1964**

In X, the X baron Gilles de Rais was arraigned by the ecclesiastical court for the sexual abuse and murder of young children. The Surrealist dissident, Georges Bataille, author of the *The Story of the Eye* (1928) and *the Tears of Eros* (1957) relaunched awareness???? Of Gilles de Rais with the help of Sadena specialist, author, artist and latinist, Pierre Klossowski in BBB

In an era where in France, the sexual explosion of the 1960s was countered by repressive measures and astonishing anti-pornographic 'show trials', Niki's white plaster death's-head rendering of Gilles de Rais had a particular resonance. At once resurrected and decapitated by Niki, he becomes a *revenant*, a presence which returns again and again to haunt her waking dreams. The head of Gilles de Rais seems to subsume within it? The masks of Kennedy, Khrushchev, Lincoln X and Santa Claus – so many fathers – who preside over world destruction in the great Los Angeles shoot-out *King Kong DATE*, It is at once a desecrated altarpiece to patriarchal ancestors and current world leaders, and a scene – so uncannily prophetic – of Armageddon: thin-nosed planes crash into skyscrapers: explosions blackening storeys of masonry.

**Fay Wray?** *King Kong* is of course a love story – a reworking of Beauty and the Beast. Niki's dinosaurs rampaging here evoke – beyond their fairy-tale horror – their own archaic past in a human collective unconscious. The sound and fury signalled in this work of breathtaking excess and the neat row of its serial killers, arranged on the principle of the fairground (rather than the serial sequences of conceptual art) countered, to my mind, by Gilles de Rais' silent presence: the great ancestor; Daddy.

In 1973? Louise Bourgeois

Before revealing her deepest secret to the world, Niki de Saint Phalle attempted some kind of dramatic self-exorcism working with Peter Whitehead, to make the film *Daddy*. The film, which wreaks revenge on the perpetrator of her own abuse as a child, humiliates – sexually again, and kills the father. Feautring? [Fearlessly?] Transvestism, masturbation, Niki/ Agnes' of three ages 123, are played out in the traditional surroundings of a Sadean chateau.

This example of 1970s gothic (in the era of Barbarella and

### ***The Grotto***

*Niki de Saint Phalle. The Grotto.* Hatje Cantz, 2003 Herrenhausen Gardens, Hanover

**Dubuffet** evolved from a *matiere*-based painting of materials, including tar, straw, pebbles linked to X disturbing sexuality and bajection (the connection with the anti-semitic writer Celine on his works, quite explicit, considerably predates Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, to the mental landscapes

Whitened speulchres of his Pascalian exercises in a contemporary *vanitas* that extended from the smallest biro scribbles of polystyrene models to the pharonically ambitious *Cloerie Falbala*.

Niki's De Saint Phalle's monumental drive is exactly contemporary: they shared the same XXX Robert Haligon, Following her baby *Hon*, exhibited in Paris in **May '68**,

### **Daddy**

#### **2/72**

In 1972, Niki was included in the major retrospective of the 1960s and the fall-out from 1968, *Douze ans d'art contemporain* held in the Grand Palais, Paris at the behest of French President Georges Pompidou. Left wing feeling ran so high that many refused to participate in a 'State' exhibition, notorious for the violent confrontation between police and artists at the opening. Nicknamed '72 pour 72' (72 for 72), the ratio described the presentation of almost seventy male artists - and two females. Niki's commemorative Milan altarpiece - the shoot-out in the Galleria Vittoria Emmanuel which accompanied Tinguely's exploding phallus, was on show here, together with an upside down Nana and the white, gothic, Miss Haversham-like *Bride*, which almost immediately entered the State collections. Sheila Hicks's large textile environments, displayed prominently and near the entrance were also feminist

statements, both in their technique and in their titles.<sup>34</sup> But while Hicks chose a text by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss to accompany her work, Niki added her own voice at its most violent to appreciations by leading critics such as Pierre Restany and others: 'Me? A savage? She has finally found an answer, that a woman in a man's civilisation is like a black in a white civilisation. She has the right of refusal, the right to revolt. The bloody battle-flag has been raised.'<sup>35</sup>

Niki's sense of injustice rings with the contemporary resonance of the Black Rights movement in America: her great *Black Venus* had entered the Whitney Museum collection in New York in 1968, a celebratory, contemporary response to a theme with a long and vexed history.<sup>36</sup>

The Mouvement de la Libération des Femmes - the French Women's Lib movement - who demonstrated outside the show was in its infancy. This proportional representation - two women, seventy men—corresponds almost exactly with the statistics Linda Nochlin gives, reflecting thirty years later upon the context of publication of her pioneering article of 1971, 'Why have there been no great women artists?'.<sup>37</sup>

#### BARTHES ARTEMISIA LUBLIN\*\*\*\*\* 1979

In 1979, the Galerie Yvon Lambert staged an important exhibition in a climate where feminism was finally making shortlived inroads to French art and society.<sup>38</sup> It was a homage to Artemisia Gentileschi. Niki's great precursor - a female artist raped. Artemisia's *Judith and Holofernes* of 1567 in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, seemed to the eyes of the late 1970s to transcend the classic, Biblical subject matter with a personal energy of revenge. The show brought together conceptualism (Daniel Buren, Joseph Kosuth), Arte Povera (Jannis Kounellis), sensual painting (Cy Twombly) and staged photography (Duane Michels): work which seemed far from that of Niki de Saint Phalle. In the preface, the philosopher Roland Barthes contrasted the structural simplicity of the core narrative with the variety of retellings of the apocryphal story, and praised Artemisia's *coup de génie*: the 'two women' variously struggling to behead the massive, not necessarily passive male. It was artist Lea Lublin however, who crossed insights on space and perspective with a new psychoanalytic language, bringing us back to Niki's similar beheadings, her open wounds, her birth in death and death in birth: her *Tuez-moi - Tu es moi* - an almost uncanny parallel. In Artemisia's very beheading of her assailant, Lublin sees a ghastly birth: the birth of the father: 'Death scene, the staging of the body by the reversal of these fragments also shows up the scene of defilement, the rape scene, the castration scene, the birth scene, the birth.... In Artemisia's picture, if the reversal of the centre of the painting moves and changes the image due to the course it takes from the murder to the birth it is because the two women in the picture, Artemisia and her double hide a third who appears as the beheaded, bearded man. Within the limits of the picture's subject, is the butchered, bearded man the assailant of the biblical tale, the invader, the seduced and beheaded occupier, the father or professor of perspective, the disciple of the father-painter, the master of the laws of perspective, the rapist, the robber? Within the limits of the picture's subject is it the painter-woman who shows herself defiled, raped, sexed, bloody? Or her Other and her drives full of weighty prohibitions, of repressions, religious, symbolic, sexual? The desires and the ensuing unconscious processes unleashed, punishment, castration complex, guilt, putting to death, transgress the space of prohibitions,

by denuding a body in order to show the course of desire and the limits of a symbolic space which cover it, which violate it, which erase it. Desires and prohibitions, prohibitions of incest, murder, guilt, throw us into the species's phylogenetic memory, its law, its taboos, and its traces which persist or which reappear there where they warn us of the appearance of their symptom.<sup>39</sup>

It was two whole years later, 1982, and an entire decade after Saint-Phalle's *Daddy*, that Louise Bourgeois - the first female artist to have a retrospective of at the Museum of Modern Art New York - launched her late career and the big bang of contemporary scholarship with her *Artforum* article 'Child Abuse'.<sup>40</sup> That moment might now seem to be reframed - or at least interestingly enriched - by looking at art and criticism in Europe.

Niki's book *AIDS: You Can't Catch It Holding Hands*, published in 1986, to while she was sorking on her Tarot Gardem was subsequently translated into five languages. Despite the desire to 'come out' on behalf of young victims, which was also at the heart of *Mon Secret*, 1994,, this book still rests a secret, framed as a letter to her daughter Laura, in her loopy childish handwriting: the story of her rape at eleven, which she

Marcel Duchamp, Niki de Saint Phalle, Louise Bourgeois, all worked with their twinned French and American identities, the clash of sensibilities and languages.<sup>41</sup> Niki de Saint Phalle conceived of herself as an American artist.<sup>42</sup> Was she - is she - far too French for a thrid generation feminist art history of 2008? (There is not a trace of Niki in the influential publication *Women Artists at the Millenium*, 2006). Are her love stories, her hate stories, and her relationship with Jean Tinguely in particular - too strong to rate in its often too separatist stakes?<sup>43</sup> Like Bourgeois, her vivid, sometimes painful personal memoirs add a supplement to the psychoanalytic interpretations we can bring to her powerful, aggressive works.

Is Niki's personal story supplementary? Where do we place biography in the writing of art history. **Enigma or the confessional mode? Cool critical distance or hot memories? Less is more or more is more?**

With *Traces, An autobiography. Remembering 1930-1949* (1999) and with *Harry and me, the family years, 1950-1960*, published posthumously in 2006, Niki's was able to create her own family monuments, to redeem the Bad Mother, to celebrate the wife, the good lover, the imaginative, violent child, the artist determined to make paintings, assemblages, sculptures, grottos, gardens, homes, and, with the *Hon*, to make a cathedral out of herself.<sup>44</sup> The sacred and the profane, the masculine and the feminine, love and hatred *Tu es moi, Tu et moi, Tuez-moi* - or the joy of representation - our sole remaing link with the sacred - as Kristeva says are all here. In speaking, too, of 'serenity resulting from the pact of identification between the sacrificed and those who sacrifice' Kristeva allows a conceptual space, the space of this pact, for the the innocent, the celebratory and festive dimensions of Niki's immense *oeuvre* produced with the convictions of an epoch whose mantras of love, peace, liberation, colour are so apparently far from our own. Our preoccupations are darker, more cynical; we exist in the shadow of the black sun.

Bad enough, brave enough, good enough: Niki de Saint Phalle takers her place with the GWAs (Great Women Artists) of the twentieth century.

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Kristeva, preface, *Visions Capitales*, Musée du Louvre, Paris, 1998, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> The catalogue entry p. 122 reads `de Saint Phalle, *Tu es moi*. 1960. Steel gear, toy pistol, rope, and other objects, on painted plywood, 31 and a half x 23 and five eighths". Private collection, New York. See William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, the `family resemblances' evident in the catalogue which affiliate Niki's work with surrealist objects, with Kurt Schwitter's Merzbau, with Simon Rodia's Watt's Towers, and contemporaries beyond the *Nouveaux Réalistes*, from Parisian Yolande Fièvre to Enrico Baj in Italy have implications beyond the scope of this essay

<sup>3</sup> `Niki' is in no way belittling; to repeat `De Saint Phalle' (one would normally use the surname) is otherwise problematic.

<sup>4</sup> It was surely the poet John Ashbery's review of *Hors d'oeuvre*, shown (no 350) at the Salon Comparaison in the *New York Herald Tribune*, 8 Feb, which generated Niki's reputation there.

<sup>5</sup> *The New American Painting as show in Eight European countries, 1958-9*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1959. Paris was the last venue of the sensational tour.

<sup>6</sup> All quotations from Pierre Restany `Tir a volonté' Galerie J, 1961; see Elienne Lawson, *Pierre Restany, Janine de Goldschmidt and the Galerie J, 1961-66: the art of making Nouveau Réalisme*, MA, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 2002. **FRENCH**

<sup>7</sup> At the time of the first Paris **Biennale des Jeunes** of 1959, Tinguely's cranky `drawing machines' created a sensation on the esplanade of the Eiffel Tower.

<sup>8</sup> *Posséder et détruire, les stratégies sexuelles dans l'art d'occident*, Paris, Musée du Louvre, 2000, told a story where the classical tradition gave way to Artaud, the Viennese Actionists and Yves Klein.... Curated by Régis Michel, this erotic pageant was by no means challenged or deconstructed...

<sup>9</sup> *L'accouchement c'est la femme virile. Elle porte l'enfant comme un sexe masculin. Mes naissances font de la femme une déesse. Elles deviennent a la fois père et mère.*

<sup>10</sup> `Dames' were not ladies, but prostitutes, so-called with the chivalry of those who accepted the inevitability of the situation (600,000 `dames' were working in Paris in 1948, two years after the official closure of the brothels: an increase of 200,000 since the war (*Combat*, 12 September 1947).

11. See Marjorie Garber: *Vested Interests. Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, New York, 1992, p 126-7 on female fetishism and fetish envy.

<sup>12</sup> The Sadean vogue was enhanced, of course by the writings of Georges Bataille and Pierre Klossowski. For a discussion of Fini, see Jennifer Thatcher, *Menace a Trois MORE*. For Myriam Bat-Josef and Axell, see my texts in their Editions Somogy monographs (**DATES**) in English via **MORE** [www.courtauld.ac.uk](http://www.courtauld.ac.uk)

13. Murielle Gagnebin: *Fascination de la laideur. L'en deça psychanalytique du laid*, Lausanne, Editions Champ Vallon, 1994, p 259 (1st edition 1978).

14. Sartre's characterisation of the viscous as the sweet and feminine 'revenge of the en-soi' in *Being and Nothingness* was challenged by Suzanne Lilar in *A propos de Sartre et l'amour*, Paris, Grasset, 1967, p 77; he was called a 'traditional sexist' by Margery Collins and Christine Pierce in 'Holes and Slime. See also Dorothy Mac Call: 'Existentialisme ou Feminisme' in 'Sartre', special number of *Obliques*, 1979, pp. 311-320.

<sup>15</sup> NIKI AND MOTHERS include 1930-49

<sup>16</sup> The psychoanalyst, D.W. Winnicott explored the concept of the 'good-enough' mother; his 1951 article 'Transitional objects and transitional phenomena' appeared in *La Psychanalyse*, 5, 1959 (review of the French Society of Psychoanalysis founded by Jacques Lacan and Daniel Lagache). Winnicott became known to a wide French audience with special number of the review *L'Arc*, no 69, 1977. See also Mignon Nixon, 'Bad enough mother', *October*, Vol. 71, feminist issues (Winter, 1995), pp. 70-92, where 'Bourgeois subverts the name-of-the-father logic of Lacanian theory through a destruction-of-the-father, part-object logic based in the Kleinian model.'

<sup>17</sup> I refer to Julia Kristeva's 'Giotto's Joy' and 'Motherhood according to Giovanni Bellini' – inspired by the example of Marina Warner's *Alone of all her Sex, the Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, (Lonon, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1976) Julia Kristeva: 'Stabat mater', *The Kristeva Reader* Taril Moi ed., Basil Blackwell, 1986.

'Giotto's Joy', 'Motherhood according to Giovanni Bellini', *Desire in Language, a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, Léon S. Roudiez ed., New York, Columbia, 1980

18. See Simone de Beauvoir: 'Faut-il bruler Sade?', in *Privilèges*, Paris, Gallimard, 1955, p 9 - 89; *Brigitte Bardot ou le syndrome Lolita*, Paris, 1959 (*Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita syndrome*, London, Andre Deutsch/Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1960; with Gisèle Halimi and others, *Djamila Boupacha*, Paris, Gallimard, 1962.

<sup>19</sup> See Laurence Bertrand-Dorléac 'La France déchirée' Hains et Villeglé' in *La France en Guerre d'Algérie*, Paris, Musée d'Histoire contemporaine (BDIC), 1992, pp. 202–03.

<sup>20</sup> Michel Leiris insisted on showing Guyotat's *Tombeau pour ceet mille soldates* (Paris, Gallimard,, 1967) to Picasso. Guyotat's sequel, *Eden, Eden, Eden* was banned by the French government from 1971-1981

<sup>21</sup> Date KK

22. Compare 'bad' as in the exhibition *Bad Girls: the Middle English representative of Old English 'baeddel' means 'homo utriusque, hermaphrodita'...* and the derivative 'baedling' 'effeminate fellow, womanish man'; but bad can be positive, Dionysiac, anti-conservative, ironic, humorous: see Laura Cottingham: 'What's So Bad About 'Em?' *Bad Girls*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1993, (for etymology see p. 59, note 2).

23. See reprint of the two exhibition catalogues as *The Complete Book of Erotic Art*, compiled by Drs Phyllis and Eberhard Kronhausen, New York, Bell Publishing Company, 1987.

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<sup>24</sup> See Grace Glueck, 'Tinguely's Machines Menace Niki's Nanas in the Park' *New York Times*, 2 May, 1968; 'La "Nana-Masion" merveilleusement tatouée', *Beaux-Arts*, Paris, 4 May 1968.

<sup>25</sup> '...le plus important artiste féminin de l'époque', François Pluchart, 'Merveilleuse Niki de Saint Phalle', *Combat*, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1968. As for note 23, press dossier, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Geroges Pompidou, Paris

26. Maryse Holder: 'Another Cuntree: At Last, a Mainstream Female Art Movement' (*off our backs*, September 1973), in Arlene Raven, Cassandra Langer, Joanna Frueh eds, *Feminist Art Criticism. An Anthology*, New York, 1991, pp 1-20.

<sup>27</sup> Jill Carruthers note here

T28. *Daddy* was shown in London, Hammer Cinema, November 1972, and the revised version in April 1973, at the 11th New York Film Festival.

29. Francette Pacteau: *The Symptom of Beauty*, London, Reaction Books, 1994, pp 15 and 21.

30. Julia Kristeva as quoted in Barbara Creed: *The Monstrous Feminine. Film Feminism, Psycholanalysis*, London, Routledge, 1993, p 16.

31. To decapitate = to castrate according to Freud. From the woman's point of view, 'The tusked Gorgon is *the eye which eats*.' See Camille Paglia: *Sexual Personae*, New Jersey, 1990, p 50.

32. 'Femme sans teste tout en est bon': see the engraving circa 1660 in Laure Beaumont-Maillet: *La Guerre des Sexes*, op. cit. p 8. Generically this must have been a source for Ernst's 'Femme cent/sans tête' - (Hundred-headless woman).

33. Barbara Johnson: *A World of Difference. Disfiguring poetic language*, Baltimore, 1987, p 114, quoted in Chave, op. cit., p 291.

<sup>34</sup>Hicks exhibited *Je savais que si je venais un jour, j'y passerai mes nuits*, 1972, wool and bibin-work on linen, 4.70 x 9m; *L'épouse préférée occupe ses nuits*, 1972, an 'enveloppement' of wool, 520 x 260 x 20, artist's collection, in *Douze ans d'art contemporain*, op. cit., pp. 229-31; see also XXX *Sheila Hicks*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, DATE

<sup>35</sup> 'Moi? Une sauvage? Elle a trouvé enfin une réponse, qu'une femme dans la civilisation des hommes c'est comme un negre dans la civisilsation des blancs. Ella droit au refus, a la revolte. L'etendard sanglant est leve.' Niki de Saint Phalle, Galerie Alexandres Iolas. 1965, in *Douze ans de l'art contemporain*, 1972, p. 302.

<sup>36</sup> See T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (1999), Durham, duk University Press, 1999.

<sup>37</sup> In *Art News* 68, (March 1969-February 1970, two articles on women painters out of 81 major articles; in *Art News* 69 (March 1970-February 1971, ten out of eighty-four (but nine, including Nochlin's own in the special January women's issue), and in *Artforum* five out of seventy-four artists on women, in 1970-1971. See Linda Nochlin, 'Why have there been no Great Women Artists? Thirty Years After', in Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher eds., *Women Artists at the Millennium.*, Massachusetts and London, MIT press, October Books, 2006, pp. 21-32.

<sup>38</sup> Following the abortion debate in the early 1970s, the establishment of the MLF (Mouvement de la Liberation des femmes) and the psychoanalytically inclined 'Psych et Po' (psychoanalysis and politics), the periodical *Les Sorcieres*, ran from 1976-1982, *La Spirale* was launched in 1972, *Feminie-Dialogue*, was held at Unesco in 1977 and following Lucy Lippard's visit of March, 1977, *Combative Acts, Profile and Voices*, curated by Lippard was held at the A.I.R. Gallery New York including French feminist artists (but no Niki). See Jennifer Thatcher: *Menace a Trois: the Art of Leonar Fini, Niki de Saint Phalle and Annette Messager in the context of 1970s French feminism*, MA, Courtauld Institute, 1998

### **NB QUINBY LEBOVIV+CI**

*Feminie-Dialogue*, 1977 Unesco *Femme/Art* from Oct 77 after cancellation of expo to be curated by Françoise Eliet, l'ARC (cf manifest *Enfemenement /rupture* Lucy Lippard visit March 77

*Combative Acts, Profile and Voices*, cur LL, A.I.R. Gallery NY w Françoise Jannicot, Bernadette Bour, Milvia Maglione and Hessie

<sup>39</sup> Lea Lublin, 'Space perspective and forbidden desires of Artemisia G.' in *Artemisia*, Mot pour Mot/Word for Word, 2, Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris, 1979, pp. 51, 53 (translation Diane Chrestien).

<sup>40</sup> Louise Bourgeois, 'Child Abuse', *Artforum*. December, 1982, vol. 20 no. 4, pp 40-47, and cover.

<sup>41</sup> *Hommage to Bryony F*

<sup>42</sup> 'I always find it strange that though my personality, my accent, my attitudes are so American and I was raised in New York, no one thinks of me as an American artist which is what I really am' in Barbara Rose, 'Earthly Delights' *US Vogue*, December 1987, p. 365.

<sup>43</sup> *Hommage* to the catalogue *Niki de Saint Phalle & Jean Tinguely, L'art et l'amour*, 13 April to 24 June 2007, Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno (CAAM) curated by Alvaro Rodrigues Fominaya, with the collaboration of the Sprengel Museum, Hanover and the Musée Jean Tinguely, Basel, and a text by Bloum Cadenas (with English translations)

<sup>44</sup> Niki de Saint Phalle, *Traces. An autobiography. Remembering 1930-1949*, Lausanne, Acatos publications, 1999; *Harry and me, the family years, 1950-1960*, Bern, Benteli Verlag 2006.