



Niki de Saint Phalle
**REVERSING THE
PATRI(HIER)ARCHY**

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Note: the French translation for *to reverse* (changing order or opposite poles) is *renverser*. But *renverser* also means to overthrow (power) : *renverser le pouvoir*.

*“I will cross those boundaries to reach men's world, which looked
adventurous,
mysterious, and thrilling to me.”¹*

From the very beginning, Niki de Saint Phalle rejected the kind of woman she was expected to become. She did not assume that she had to be a perfect and submitted spouse like her mother. This quote shows that she believed she needed to get to men's world in order to be able to take her own path. Deciding for one's own life would be a privileged reserved to men. But what does she mean by saying that there is a men's world ? Would that be a world that is different and separate from that of women ? Or does it mean that men's world is the world at all, belonging to men, and thus putting women in a submitted position ? In both cases, she suggests that boundaries are keeping women from being as free and powerful as men. There would be men's roles that would be forbidden to women because of some boundaries. Boundaries differentiate one thing from another, but they also draw limits and prevent some elements from being associated with the thing it defines. The distribution of the possible it creates is not necessarily questioned, because it often comes

1. Niki de Saint Phalle ; my trans. : *“Je franchirai ces limites pour atteindre le monde des hommes qui me semblait aventureux, mystérieux et excitant.”*

from deeply engraved beliefs and traditions, be they religious or secular. The difference between men and women is not only physical : it determines socially accepted roles and it associates certain kinds of qualities with each of the sexes. There are invisible lines separating the two sexes and introducing a hierarchy, fostered by the binary opposition between man and woman.

Though invisible, these boundaries create noticeable effects in society. Social behaviors, repartition of the roles, sharing of the public spaces, are directly impacted by the existence of a differentiation between the two sexes. They are not only considered as different, but also as unequal, one of them being superior to the other. Language is partly accountable for such a hierarchy. Jacques Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*², says that “*there is no extratext*”³, which means that we cannot understand something out of language. Language determines the way we think and conceive the world. As soon as language supports patriarchy by reaffirming its value against those that are associated with femininity, language reinforces the **hierarchy** between a masculine universe and a feminine universe; or, if we were to consider it differently, language reaffirms that the world belongs to a dominant category—the **patriarchy**. In both cases, language makes the patri(hier)archy look natural; by using language, we are led to acknowledge it.

Derrida's methodology that is deconstruction seeks to question the concepts and perceptions conveyed by language. Its purpose is to find underlying structures that determine our thought and to free language from those categories that limit possibilities. Some of them are binary oppositions: a balance of power between two words, two concepts, two sides. Deconstruction works by undermining the hierarchy between the two words, and

2. Derrida, Jacques, *De la Grammatologie*, Editions de Minuit, 1967. Print.

3. *ibid.* : “*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte.*”

then trying to overcome the binary opposition. Born in 1930, Franco-American artist Niki de Saint Phalle devoted most of her work to feminist issues, exploring ways to destroy the patriarchy. She does not use words—though she does speak about her works of art—but visual arts. Can visual arts be used to perform deconstruction? Binary oppositions are not only inscribed in language. Words and the connotations we associate with them tend to reinforce hierarchies, but hierarchies also produce visible effects and are supported by visual representations. Art can support hierarchies and reinforce them. But it can also make us wonder about commonly accepted norms that visual art itself uses. Often surprising and provocative, Niki de Saint Phalle's art challenges our perception, and the representation of women in our culture. In so doing, it seeks to get rid of underlying significances and connotations that artificially define—and limit—possibilities. The purpose of this paper is to analyze how Niki de Saint Phalle's work tackles the patri-hierarchy so as to give women a new scope, and an own identity.

Transcending words: appropriation, emancipation

The structure of language and the boundaries of binary oppositions

Deconstruction questions the binary opposition that language uses. These oppositions are not a side-effect of language: they are necessarily for language to exist. Ferdinand de Saussure, in his courses of general linguistics, says that “*in language, there are only differences*”⁴. Words have no positive content, we understand them as being different from other words. The word “tree” stands for what we conceive as a tree, because it is not

4. De Saussure, Ferdinand, *Courses in General Linguistics*, Open Court Publishing, 1983. Print.

the words “fish”, “cat”, “house”, and so on. As a matter of fact, binary oppositions emerge from that differential system. Poststructuralism, posterior to Saussure's concepts, and Jacques Derrida in particular, sees a problem in those binary oppositions: one of the two words of the binary opposition is always privileged over the other. In Western thought, day has a more positive connotation than night has; the mind is privileged over the body. Man is the dominant pole of the opposition man/woman. Interestingly enough, dominant terms of different binary oppositions are often associated with each other, and the same goes for unprivileged terms. The day is masculine, whereas the night is feminine in Western culture. Reason is a man quality; the irrational connotation of the corporal incarnation is left to women. Binary oppositions are not limited to two words differentiating one from the other, but they embrace various other words. By a chain of associations, language permits and reinforces the position of dominance or inferiority of each side of the opposition.

According to Derrida, language imposes its categories on us. The chains of oppositions create a universe of discourse, that is to say, a particular definition of reality by language whose terms and categories are not questioned⁵. By using language, we assume those categories of meaning to some extent. Without being necessarily conscious about it, we are in a way accomplices of the male-dominant linguistic system. Derridian deconstruction seeks ways to free us from those pre-conceived perceptions by deconstructing binary oppositions. Deconstruction involves two stages: first, it is necessary to undermine the hierarchy between two words by valuating the unprivileged term. This should destroy the hierarchy, thus creating an equality between the two words in term of how we perceive them. The second stage consists in transcending the binary opposition: the

5. Penelope, Julia, *Speaking Freely: Unlearning the Lies of the Fathers' Tongues*, Teachers College Pr, 1990. Print.

former significations given to each term by the opposition should be left aside, so that the binary opposition is not necessary anymore. New visions independent from the opposition are then found to go with each word.

Deconstructing the patriarchy by taking control of language

Hélène Cixous, in *The Laugh of the Medusa*⁶, urges women to write for themselves, by themselves, in order to free themselves from the patriarchal discourse. By writing **herself**—*s'écrire soi, écrire soi-même*—woman would create her own discourse.

“If woman has always functioned “within” the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this “within”, to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it [...].”⁷

The two steps of Derridian deconstruction are seen in this quote: first, woman needs to *dislocate* the hierarchy, to *turn it around*. Unprivileged terms—feminine—would gain value and not be considered as unprivileged anymore. Then, a feminine discourse should not be determined by the existence of a masculine discourse, but it should be a discourse by itself, that woman can *make hers*. It would destroy the dependence on the binary opposition. However, it would also mean that masculine and feminine discourse are still different. No unity would have been found to transcend the difference between the two.

As we shall see, Niki de Saint Phalle does not seek a harmony between the two sexes.

Though she says she wants to reach men's world, her work does not claim that men's world

6. Cixous, Hélène, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, University of Chicago Press, 1976.

7. *ibid.*

should open itself to women in order to turn itself into a world for men *and* women. Niki de Saint Phalle sees women's fight as a crusade, at the end of which women have to overthrow the patriarchy [renverser la patriarchie]. The patriarchy is supported by language as well as by visual arts in the long run. That is the reason why she tried to introduce a revolutionary change in the art of the 60's, 70's, and the decades that would follow.

Deconstructing the patriarchy by taking control of the visual space

Promoting women in her work, Franco-American artist Niki de Saint Phalle tries to reverse the traditional hierarchy between men and women. Values of the patriarchy can be supported by art, which can reaffirm stereotypes and associate certain characteristics with certain subjects. The artistic set of norms and visual codes can be compared with chains of associations that link one word with a multitude of others in language. It evolves through time, changing its meanings and connotations, just like meanings in language are not stable and absolute. Yet alternative forms of expression such as visual arts can perform deconstruction as well, acting both on the visual aspect and on its consequences of language, for they carry a certain vision of things. Visual art itself can challenge the codes it is supposed to respect. Some writers play on language to question the linguistic system, its norms and its hierarchy; similarly, some artists try to challenge artistic codes.

By challenging its own codes, art can defy our perception. Niki de Saint Phalle shows a will of emancipation from the norms. Her colorful *Nanas* are far from the classical ideal of beauty. When creating a sculpture on a very common theme in art history—*the three Graces*—Niki de Saint Phalle breaks free from traditional representations. A classical painting of the

three Graces would be that of Hans Baldung⁸, an artist of the 16th century. The way women are represented in this painting corresponds to the patriarchal vision of women. The three Graces have a passive gaze as if they were objects of men's desire and not capable of being and acting on their own. Jewels and delicate clothes, and objects associated with leisure –the book and the violin—give us the image of coquettes. These women exist in the purpose of seducing men and taking care of children. They are not expected to achieve something great by themselves, as free and autonomous individuals.

More than 400 years later, Niki de Saint Phalle's *Graces*⁹ are far from the classical ideal of beauty. Their feminine curves are generously accentuated to highlight the corporal dimension, the importance of the body, which is not prudishly hidden. Dancing, or jumping, they are not in a passive attitude, but they are acting, almost aggressively. Their movement suggests a capacity of action, a freedom that is experienced, and a true, defying autonomy. These three women exist for themselves : there is no object to give them a role, all they have is their colorful body. The movement is frozen by the sculptor, but it looks ephemeral, as if these women were floating in the air and would start moving for real at any moment. With this work and many others, Niki de Saint Phalle challenges the codes of visual arts in the 60's¹⁰ by giving her own representation of women. Instead of fighting against certain characteristics that would be considered as faults, because they are associated with femininity, Niki de Saint Phalle glorifies them. She does make them qualities. She creates huge, powerful, impressive *Nanas* ready to give another meaning to femininity.

8. See Appendix A.

9. See Appendix B.

10. We may consider that Niki de Saint Phalle started to create art for feminist issues in the 60's and that she never stopped until her death in 2002.

Reversing the meanings

Qualities in question

Derrida's first step of deconstruction is to value the unprivileged term of the binary opposition. In Niki de Saint Phalle's works, women play with their femininity, they are proud of it, they show it in movement and colors. That dynamism is shown in a positive way, whereas the expression of the body was traditionally repressed in classical art. Women have been associated with the irrational, uncontrollable dimension of the body for centuries. They **embodied** passion, love, and sometimes madness—hysteria is a feminine disease. Men, on the contrary, were on the rational side. They had control over their bodies, so they could be taken seriously in a society that privileged the mind and reason. Consequently, they would be the ones capable of doing philosophy, of studying science, of trading and manufacturing objects, whereas women would be let to second-class activities, either associated with leisure—dance, music—or with mothering and domestic chores.

As for many dominant values, the superiority of the mind can be questioned. It is based on commonly accepted beliefs and shared philosophical theories of the Enlightenment. For many critical theory thinkers, the crisis of the 20th century is due to a mistaken rationalism, that is an overrationalization of the world. These theorists doubt the capacity of reason to bring progress. Reason can keep on developing science, but it may not do it the right way. For Edmund Husserl, science has objectified the mind¹¹, treating it the same way it would treat molecules. This objectification is accountable for the violence that emerged in Europe in the 20th century because violence was one of the reactions to the

11. Husserl, Edmund, *Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man*.

madness of the frenzy of science, which denied human nature to achieve a so-called progress and to produce knowledge. Overrationalization fed a political crisis that gave birth to nationalisms. The importance of the mind is denied by reducing it to a mere object of study, for example in psychoanalysis. But it does not mean that the mind—here understood as what allows human beings to think, feel and believe—gives more space to the body. It rather means that reason is overtaking our thinking by giving it unquestioned logical structures of thought, and lets aside emotions and critical thinking. The roots of the crisis are thus to be found in the very structure of our thought.

This has two consequences that pertain to our study of Niki de Saint Phalle's work. First, patterns of thought that reason gives us to interpret the world should not be taken for granted, for they convey biased perceptions of reality often in favor of their producers—here, the thinkers, the philosophers, those whose mind is valued: men. Second, there is no reason to believe that the mind should be superior to the body, for this belief is due to those patterns of thought. Consequently, we cannot say that showing the body, glorifying it, is a limited way of reversing meaning because it stays in a patriarchal discourse that associates women with the body. It is in fact the *very* way of reversing the hierarchy, because it gives value to something that does not have much of it, not because it does not have it *by nature*, but because the patriarchal discourse does not grant it to it.

An alternative to the crisis of rationalism?

The *Nanas* have a small head, with no face. Their body is all what matters. Instead of giving them characteristics of reason to show that women are as capable as men to think, Niki de Saint Phalle insists on the corporal aspect, purposely ignoring the importance of the

mind that is traditionally given by our society. She represents the body as having a central importance. It is not secondary, subordinated to the mind anymore. Similarly, because they are associated with the body, and because they *are* bodies, women are not subordinated to the other side of the opposition—men. Niki de Saint Phalle's *Nanas* are figures of emancipation.

Giving more value to the body and to feminine qualities may also be seen as a response to overrationalization. The Stravinsky Fountain¹², co-created by Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely, draws an interesting contrast between masculinity and femininity, a contrast that is not the usual one. The figures sculpted by Jean Tinguely are moving, iron-made machines. The sharpness of their design makes them look aggressive, and even lethal. They evoke the violence of war, but also the violence of mechanism and of the pursuit of efficiency that Max Weber denounces when he talks about the crisis of rationalization. Although it may not have been the intention of Jean Tinguely, his work can be seen as a metaphor of Max Weber's "*iron cage*". The strength of the iron materials, the rational aspect of the machines give to his work a masculine tone. But masculinity, in this case, would be seen as something negative. On the contrary, Niki de Saint Phalle's creations are colorful, full of life, almost childish and primitive. They contrast with the dead, violent world of Jean Tinguely, and confront it:

*"Facing my works of sculpture, there would be Tinguely's aggressive, frightening machines that represent men's world. And women's world, we as women, we are colonized by these machines. It is our problem because we live in a world in which we have not invented any of those things."*¹³

12. See Appendix C.

13. Niki de Saint Phalle, my trans. : "*Et en face de mes sculptures, il y aurait les machines agressives, menaçantes, de Tinguely qui représentent le monde des hommes. Et le monde des femmes, nous, nous sommes*

Niki de Saint Phalle points out that women suffer the consequences of men's actions and the mechanic, scientific violence they are not responsible for. There is the idea that they are *colonized*, that the machines and their power of destruction are exterior, and that they have nothing to do with the fact that things have gone wrong. Men are shown as responsible for the crisis of rationalism. The feminine side of the Stravinsky Fountain would suggest a solution to the crisis by a return to the simplest forms of art and life. In Niki de Saint Phalle's world, there is no machines anymore, but there are living animals, and symbols of love and corporeality: one of the figures is a heart, another is a feminine mouth. The feminine representations of Niki de Saint Phalle in the Stravinsky Fountain are bringing life and joy, whereas the masculine ones convey death and terror. Here the masculinity is not valued anymore; the femininity has the positive qualities.

Reversing the meanings attributed to each sex, Jean Tinguely and Niki de Saint Phalle nonetheless fail to perform the second step of the Derridian destruction. The Stravinsky Fountain does not overcome the binary opposition, but reinforces it, though the balance of powers has changed. The crude opposition between the two world does not show any possible sign of conciliation. Men are not seen as being able to help women to gain more independence and to help them in their quest for freedom and equality. They are only seen as a threat, responsible for all the suffering in the world. But can women escape the dominant system by their own? That is what Niki de Saint Phalle claims in most of her works: women do not need men to act, to fight, to become individuals. Yet history has shown that men can help women to get more rights. Another consequence of this violent confrontation between men's world and women's world, is that it opens no possibility for a third world that

presque colonisées par ces machines. C'est notre problème parce que nous vivons dans un monde dans lequel nous n'avons inventé aucune de ces choses."

would reunite the two sexes and transcend the binary opposition. The Stravinsky Fountain denounces masculine qualities and questions the positive connotations that we associate with them. But it also leads us in a deadlock that would reduce feminism to a crusade against all men, instead of a fight for equality.

From words to facts: questioning definitions and roles

Roles and distribution of the possibles

When she plays on the meanings we associate with women, Niki de Saint Phalle does not only seek to change our perception of women to give them a more positive connotation. She also wants to trigger concrete effects in our society. Once the qualities are questioned, the role are as well. Boundaries are not only in terms of how we associate one word with another, but they also concern the social distribution of the possibles. Some feminist theories claim that sexual difference is physical, but gender is a structure of values permitted by role playing. We are acting in socially accepted ways that support our role as a man or a woman¹⁴. Judith Butler notices:

“We think about it as a fact, whereas it is actually something that has been produced and is reproduced all the time.”¹⁵

Physical sexual difference is natural, but the social roles attributed to either women or men are taken for granted (a *fact*) while they are *produced* and *reproduced* by the way we act. We are then accomplice of a whole system partly determined by language—because language determines what words are associated with others. Woman is traditionally associated with tenderness, fragility, mothering: she is thus expected to stay at home and take care of the

14. Butler, Judith : <http://bigthink.com/experts/judithbutler>

15. *ibid.*

children. The existence of an underlying definition of man and woman limits the possibilities of each because it encloses it.

Defining women?

Niki de Saint Phalle's quote that we began this paper with shows a will of emancipation from a limited field of possibilities that women would be imprisoned in. Niki de Saint Phalle uses the metaphor of the prison to characterize women's status:

“My mother [...] I saw her imprisoned in a role that had been imposed on her. A role that had been passed from generation to generation by virtue of a tradition we would never question.”¹⁶

A prison is not natural, it is built and kept by guards. The prison, in the quote, is the never questioned *tradition*, whose guards would be those who benefits the dominant system. Niki de Saint Phalle refused to assume the role society wanted her to play. Instead, she became an engaged artist. Until the end of the 20th century, women were allowed to do art, but they were not taken seriously for what pertains to socio-political issues. Women would have art as a leisure, whereas men could make strong artistic statements. Niki de Saint Phalle crossed these lines to become one of the first world-famous engaged female artist, not only fighting against the patriarchy, but also against war, racism, or AIDS. The diversity of her works makes it difficult to categorize them. And even within a particular theme, she refuses to make a generalization, a categorization. Niki de Saint Phalle's *Nanas* are of various forms, colors, and have many different attitudes. There is no unique feminine figure, static and eternal, such as classical art used to represent. Niki de Saint Phalle purposely broke the codes she was

16. Niki de Saint Phalle, my trans. : *“Ma mère [...] je la voyais comme prisonnière d'un rôle imposé. Un rôle qui se transmettait de génération en génération selon une longue tradition jamais remise en question.”*

supposed to respect as a women. She blurred the lines and created out of pre-conceived definitions. If women want to open their field of possibilities, they have to break free from definitions, from pre-established roles imposed on them. Hélène Cixous, when promoting the concept of *l'écriture féminine*, explains that it cannot have a definition:

*“It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination.”*¹⁷

Trying to define *l'écriture féminine* would mean to stay in the very problematic methodology that it seeks to undermine—it should move to *areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination*. It is not inscribed in time, just like meaning in language is always deferred. It has no static definition that would *enclose* it: it is free to evolve. Cixous' writing itself doesn't keep a single tone or style. It changes, and refuses to be categorized or characterized. If *l'écriture féminine* is woman writing *herself* [*s'écrivant elle-même*], then there would be one unique *écriture féminine* for each woman: all women are unique. Indeed, Cixous rejects a definition for *l'écriture féminine*, but she also rejects a definition for women as a homogeneous group:

*“[...] you can't talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes—any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling together.”*¹⁸

Each woman is singular, each woman's writing is different. Women are individuals, that is to

17. Cixous, Hélène, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, University of Chicago Press, 1976.

18. *ibid.*

say, active subjects who would be able to choose who they want to become. They would not have to abide by the stereotypes of the patriarchal society. However, can they really break free from all definitions? Are men not encircled in limiting definitions as well? Definitions do limit our possibilities, but they also make communication possible, by putting words, knowledge, concepts over blurry facts and events. They help us to understand the world that surrounds us and to organize it intellectually and physically (by the repartition of roles, labor force, etc.). Definitions give roles to people: if a woman is defined as the kind of being that gives birth, the one who is tender, attentive, but also ready to devote herself to the well-being of the family, then she would be the mother *par excellence*—the one whose role is to take care of children. Strictly speaking, fathers can take care of their children too, they are *capable* of doing so. Yet society tends to give to women the *role* and the *responsibility* of looking after their children.

The power of life and the death of the bride

Niki de Saint Phalle worked a lot on the theme of mothering. Niki's *Nanas* do not just birth children in order to raise them. The very act of giving birth becomes an event in which woman is the main actor. She is *active*. Whereas women are usually seen as the passive side (in the active/passive binary opposition), the ability to give birth is a biological characteristic of women that makes them act, do something by their own. By insisting of the fact that women *create* life, Niki de Saint Phalle seems to forget that women do not actually create it on their own: men are obviously needed for a life to be created. However, pregnancy and the very act of *giving birth* is feminine *par excellence*. For Niki de Saint Phalle, it is not their definition as mothers that encloses women. On the contrary, mothering, pregnancy, make

women strong and powerful.

The series of works *Les mariées* (the brides) gives us some hints about what Niki de Saint Phalle considers is the prison imposed on women by society. Indeed, she represents the brides as if they were already dead, that is to say, as if their marriage had killed all possibility of a fulfilling life—or all possibility at all. *La Mariée*¹⁹ (1963) is one of them. Massive, she does not have the grace that would be expected from a young bride. She already has the silhouette of a matron, even though her veil indicates that she just got married. Her whiteness shows that society thinks that marriage has given her an honorable status. But it also stands for her subordinate position: it is as if she had fallen under the influence of a man and had lost all forms of joy, creativity and power. Yet in death she carries life: a multitude of little figurines are running down her shoulders. They look like they directly come from her body, that they are born from it. It is not the role of the mother that kills the life in her, but the role of spouse, that is imposed by social norms and that encloses her possibilities, except that of giving birth and raising children. Interestingly enough, the *mariées* are some of Niki de Saint Phalle's earliest works²⁰. They show that Niki de Saint Phalle first saw that women were kept in a social prison before deciding to free them and to give them their full potential by creating her *Nanas*. The *Nanas* are thus a second step that permits women to emancipate, to live their own life, and to exist **by themselves** (in all their body and by their body, but also independently from men's universe) and not through roles.

19. See Appendix D.

20. Made in 1963 and 1964, the *mariées* are her first works of sculpture.

A voice for women? A feminine call for change

The fear of speech and women's silence

To exist by themselves and not through a role, women need to be able to choose their own life. They need to challenge the norms of society that are imposed on them, they need to denounce an unequal balance of power that is inconspicuous. But they cannot do so if they cannot speak. For centuries, women were not given a voice, they were not considered as political actors. They could not act for several reasons. First, the domination system may have been so well engraved in society that they look at it as if it was natural, and so, unworthy and pointless to contest. Second, even if they realized that something was artificial and that the hierarchy was not necessary, but contingent, they did not necessarily have access to public spaces where they could have protested for more recognition and liberties. Third, if they did have access to public spaces and if they were able to speak up for their cause, they were not taken seriously in most cases.

Hélène Cixous points out the fear of speech that it creates for women:

“Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away—that's how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak—even just open her mouth—in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine.”²¹

Women are often considered as being unable of producing public speech. This belief actually

21. Cixous, Hélène, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, University of Chicago Press, 1976.

has the effect it pretends to point out: it puts pressure on women and makes them fearful of speaking publicly—*the torment of getting up to speak*. Hélène Cixous also speaks about the reception of the discourse by *deaf male ear*, which means that even if women succeed in speaking cleverly, they will not be taken seriously. If they try to speak up against the patriarchy, they would use a language that is not that of the patriarchy, which holds the language of reference—reference because it is the dominant one. Consequently, men only *speak in the masculine* and only *hear in the masculine*, a kind of discourse that women cannot find a place in.

Hélène Cixous makes this an argument for *l'écriture féminine*: women would appropriate a discourse by writing themselves and not be dependent on the masculine discourse. However, two kinds of difficulties emerge: first, women have to extract themselves from the masculine discourse, which cannot be done easily, because many conceptions and significances have been taught to them from a very young age. Although some aspects of the masculine influence can be easily notice, others underlie language in a very subtle way. Second, women are not sure that their own kind of discourse would have an effect on men's one. Women can indeed create their own universe, free themselves from the linguistic system the patriarchy imposes on them, yet the effects of the patriarchal discourse, which has not been destroyed, keep on affecting their lives. That is why women should find a way to be seen and heard. In order to be heard, they should attack the prejudice that says that women cannot speak in front of a public, that they have nothing to say, nothing interesting to communicate. Women thus need to show that they do exist, that their opinion is worthwhile and that they are capable of being as powerful as men. That is what Niki de Saint Phalle intends to do with her art.

A shouting shooting: giving a voice to the voiceless, giving a gun to the unarmed

Niki de Saint Phalle's art seeks to give women more visibility, to let them enter the political discourse. Art is like speech, reserved to men when it comes to socio-political issues and serious matters. Niki de Saint Phalle transgressed those conventions, paving the way for many engaged female artists after her. With Niki de Saint Phalle, it is not only her work which is defying the patriarchal patterns of thought. It is the act of doing art in itself: because she is a woman, because she explores “shocking” themes (painters did not represent childbirth before she did) and because her act in itself is provocative. In the series of *Les Tirs*²² (the Shootings), Niki de Saint Phalle aims a shotgun at her paintings to “*make them bleed*” and proceeds in making it explode with bullets. Patches of painting would leak on the canvas, coloring it. In this series of works of art, Niki de Saint Phalle performed a masculine action—shooting. Yet *her* shootings did not kill anybody, it only killed symbolically. She may want to show that women are capable of being powerful, but that they are not willing to use the power to create violence and death. However, some of her work show a true violence. *La mort du patriarche*²³ (death of the patriarch) is one of *les Tirs* and aggressively affirms a will to destroy the patriarchy. The masculine figure is associated with war and mechanical violence: it has a plane on its body, and many soldiers fighting on its shoulder. It does not bring life like the dead bride does, but it carries death. Shooting at this figure, Niki de Saint Phalle kills it in a symbolic way. She shoots at men with men's weapons.

Not only does she use their weapons against men by appropriating guns, Niki de Saint Phalle also makes the public participate in her work. For some shootings, people passing by

22. She started doing them in 1961.

23. See *Appendix E*.

were invited to shoot at the painting and thus to be part of the creation as well. The consequences are twofold. First, Niki de Saint Phalle allowed other women to take on men's weapon as well: she arms the unarmed, in two meanings: literally, by giving them a gun whereas women were not expected to shoot even as a leisure, and figuratively, because women could be part of the creation, they could make their action count for the feminist issue; they could shout when shooting. Second, and because men also had the opportunity to shoot at Niki de Saint Phalle's paintings, this participative creation links the public to the works of art. The public does not *watch* it, it *creates* it. It feels more concerned about it, and the issues Niki de Saint Phalle wants to promote are then efficiently represented. The public becomes *active* just like Niki de Saint Phalle would like women to be *active*, to take the initiative.

We may wonder what value those paintings have independently from the act of creation. Does museification impact the relevance of *les Tirs*? That question may not be so concerning if we take into account that Niki de Saint Phalle valued the socio-political effects of her art more than its aesthetic aspect. In the case of *Les Tirs*, the moment of creation was the political moment, the crucial instant, the very purpose of the series. We may also point out that many of Niki de Saint Phalle's works are not for museums. She did a lot of monumental works of sculpture that would find their place in public spaces. Unlike the shootings, they do not have an ephemeral dimension, but they do imply a certain proximity with the public, physically speaking. Niki de Saint Phalle stated that her art was not made for an elite, but for everybody. It is interesting to see that she had always thought about the diffusion of her art and the participation of the public to it. They can participate directly to it, as we saw with *Les Tirs*, but they also participate when seeing the works of art. Niki de Saint

Phalle created a garden near Florence, called *Les Jardins des Tarrots*, where children can play. Niki de Saint Phalle's works that deal with political issue are first made to be seen by the public. Their aim is to spread ideas, to make mentalities change by defying the commonly accepted beliefs and norms.

Colonizing public spaces, colonizing men's world

The public dimension of her work is to take into account when analyzing Niki de Saint Phalle's art. Many of her giant *Nanas* are made to cross the line between museums and everyday life. If at first they could have surprised people and provoked violent reaction, they eventually became part of the public spaces. As an example, the series of statues that was designed for a city square in Hanover (Germany) first triggered violent oppositions to Niki de Saint Phalle's *Nanas* by inhabitants. The scandal was followed by a public debate, and years after, when the city of Hanover decided to remove the statues, the inhabitants of Hanover actually opposed the idea. They wanted the statues to stay in the city square, because they said that they were now part of the urban landscape. Niki de Saint Phalle's *Nanas* had become part of their identity. The Hanover case is an interesting example of the acceptance of something new, revolting, that progressively becomes natural and widely accepted. In the 60's, Niki de Saint Phalle's *Nanas* were brand new visions of women; they triggered tough critics. But nowadays many people are familiar with the *Nanas*. That was the very objective of Niki de Saint Phalle: to make people accept the presence of her women in public spaces, and the presence of women at all.

Back in time public spaces were reserved to men: in Ancient Greece, women were expected to stay at home and not to participate into social, commercial, political events.

Statues representing women and colonizing public spaces challenge these norms. Niki de Saint Phalle's *Nanas* are even more striking that they are much bigger than any human being²⁴. Their size colonizes the space almost aggressively, imposing their presence. They made women visible in public spaces, they led people to acknowledge they were part of the public space, and consequently, of the public discourse and the public life. They indeed turned public spaces into spaces where women were legitimate, accepted, and could finally speak for themselves. Breaking women's prison in private spaces meant opening fields of possibility for them: the possibility to access a world that was reserved to men, to become a part of that world (would that still be men's world after that?) and thus being able to speak up and to make their voice count. Men could not ignore women anymore: we may speak of *colonization* because the *Nanas* suddenly started to invade public spaces and imposed their presence with all their might and immovability.

Niki de Saint Phalle wished to go further with the *colonization*. She did not only want women to be simply allowed to enter men's world. She wanted them to take power. She wanted them not to be submitted anymore, because recognition can still be seen as a favor that is done by the dominant group to the inferior group. Indeed, the inferior group can become visible and start to exist in the dominant group's space, but it still depends on the "good will" of the dominant group. It is no accident that Niki de Saint Phalle's *Nanas* are so big:

"My works of sculpture represent the world of an amplified woman, women's megalomania, woman in today's world, woman in power."²⁵

24. Many of them were 2-meters (6,5 ft) to 5-meters (16 ft) high. Her biggest work of sculpture, *Hön* (woman in Swedish) is a monumental "cathedral" (her word) with a length of 90 ft, and in which people could enter. It was part of an exhibition in Stockholm in 1966, and has been destroyed right after it.

25. Niki de Saint Phalle, my trans.: "*Mes sculptures représentent le monde de la femme amplifié, la folie des grandeurs des femmes, la femme dans le monde d'aujourd'hui, la femme au pouvoir.*"

Here the world isn't men's anymore. It is *today's* world, in which Niki de Saint Phalle wants women to be in power. *Nanas'* femininity is emphasized, **amplified**, its characteristics are not deconstructed but reaffirmed so as to give them more power and strength. The *Nanas* are not aimed at deconstructing the patriarchy, but at destroying it.

Reversing the patriarchy: overthrowing power?

Niki de Saint Phalle doesn't necessarily seek to go beyond the opposition between man and woman. The second step of deconstruction does not appear in her works, because she does not seek to overcome the difference between man and woman. On the contrary, she emphasizes it with her artistic approach, but instead of simply reversing the balance of power [renverser le rapport de force], she wants to overthrow the patriarchy [renverser la patriarchie] and give power to women:

*"I think that the time has come for a new, matriarchal society"*²⁶.

From a critical perspective, it means that she does not achieve a deconstruction, because she stays in the binary opposition. Her critic of the patriarchy bears some limits in the radicalism of her thought. Her first goal was to permit women to be as free as men and to have as many possibilities. But then she shifted toward a more offensive discourse, in which she stated that women should take the power. Such a conception means that equality is not sought: there would always be a dominant group and a dominated one.

Hélène Cixous proposes another vision of women's empowerment:

"[Woman] foresees that her liberation will do more than modify power relations or toss the ball over to the other camp; she will bring about a mutation in human

26. Niki de Saint Phalle, my trans.: *"Je pense que le temps est venu d'une nouvelle société matriarchale."*

relations, in thought, in all praxis: hers in not simply a class struggle, which she carries forward into a much vaster movement."²⁷

There would not be a shift of power, but a renewal in politics and human relations. Why? Because putting the patriarchy aside means that patterns of thought and language are renewed (*a mutation in thought*). The liberation of women would be permitted by new patterns of thought that are not inscribed in the patriarchy, that do not bears boundaries limiting women's possibilities. But unlike Niki de Saint Phalle, Hélène Cixous thinks that the destruction of the patriarchy does not necessary mean the advent of a matriarchy. She says that women's fight for more recognition, liberties and rights should not be seen as a mere class struggle in which one of the side would take power in the place of the former dominant side. She talks about a *much vaster movement* that could be the second step of the Derridian deconstruction: a new conception of human beings that would not be based on the binary opposition between men and women. Such a society would not suffer from inequalities between the two sexes based on a dominant system determining patterns of thought, be they in favor of men, or women. If the existence of a hierarchy is the real problem, a matriarchy would not be a real solution.

Art through time: influence of Niki de Saint Phalle's works now and then

Today's overall context is different from that of the 60's and 70's. Without entering into a detailed analysis, we can say that women have more rights in Western countries nowadays than they had back in time. Their field of possibilities has been broadened, and we could try to explain that fact by a change in the perception of women and femininity. Like

27. Cixous, Hélène, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, University of Chicago Press, 1976.

what was already said in this paper, meanings and significances change through time. The meaning of any form of communication—visual arts, language—is always deferred. It is because language needs its context to be interpreted, the cultural context to be understood accurately. In language, “*there are cinders*”²⁸ according to Derrida. Cinders are all what surrounds language, what permits us to understand a word or a sentence, but cinders are not present at the moment. They are all the words unsaid but whose existence is necessary so as to determine the meaning of a particular word. Cinders are also the cultural, historical, social context. In visual arts, there are cinders as well. All the works of art we have seen determine the way we look at a particular work of art. The cultural context, as well as the historical one, also shape our interpretation.

Consequently, Niki de Saint Phalle's work is not seen with the same eye today. One of the differences in terms of how her art is perceived is about its originality. In the 60's, many of her works were considered as shocking. Today, many other engaged artists have daringly challenged the codes of art, and we have seen a lot of these creations: we are familiar with contemporary art. The works of art that we have seen and that influence—without being literally present—the way we analyze art form a kind of artistic culture and knowledge that is different from that we would have had in the 60's. Cinders interact differently: the meaning of Niki de Saint Phalle's art is thus not the same today. Her art changes, when paradoxically it stays the same visually speaking. Niki de Saint Phalle's works are not as striking as they were 50 years ago. Another difference is in the way we assume the relevance of feminist issues. Many feminist voices have been heard since Niki de Saint Phalle, many theories have been made, many protests and public events have happened. Consequently, perceptions of

28. Derrida, Jacques, *Cinders*, University of Nebraska Press, 1991. Print.

women have changed. They have found their way in the public discourse. Because we see women differently, we see the feminine figures of the artist differently. Some qualities that were strictly masculine in the 60's, such as reason, have begun to cross lines and to be shared by both sexes. Some facts have been acknowledged, such as the legitimacy of Black people's rights. When I first saw Niki de Saint Phalle's black *Nanas*²⁹, I did not have much of a reaction. They looked **normal** (natural) to me. But then I thought about this: for Western people in the 60's, the representation of black people in art in the same attitudes and social statuses as white people did not feel **normal** (natural) at all. It seems that some of Niki de Saint Phalle's works may have lost a part of their impressive effect, because there are changing cinders, that make works of art evolve through time.

Yet Niki de Saint Phalle's art keeps on making us think about the position of women in society, for hierarchies still exist—this paper would not take position on whether the patriarchy does exist. It still questions oppositions, not only in terms of genders.

29. See “Black Rosy” in *Appendix F*.

As a conclusion;

Crossing boundaries from one struggle to another

Women are not the sole victims of binary oppositions. Other unprivileged groups exist: the poor(/the rich), the Black(/White), and so on. Many kinds of oppositions have affected—and keep on affecting—the life of those we call *minorities*. But can women be considered as a *minority* when they represent half of the population? *Minorities* should here be understood as groups of people that hierarchies of all kinds make *minor*, that is to say, *inferior*. All along history, women have been told to wait for their turn to be recognized as equal to the dominant group. As an example, French Revolution was the fight for equality between the nobles and the rest of the population. Women took part in that fight, died for the cause, but in the end, they stayed imprisoned in the patri-hierarchy no matter whether they were nobles or not.

The idea that a fight for reversing/overthrowing power should be limited to one *minority* at a time can be questioned critically. What prevents black women from fighting for more recognition as black people *and* as women? By creating her *Nanas*, Niki de Saint Phalle wants to create a “*Nana power*”: “*If there is a Black Power, why wouldn't there be a Nana power?*”³⁰. Yet she does not separate the two issues. Her work called *Black Rosy*³¹ (1965) is a tribute to Rosa Parks, heroine of the fight for Blacks' civil rights. The massive shape of the statue shows her strength and her determination, while she also has feminine attributes—a handbag, a skirt with hearts, pink stockings. The black woman of *the three Graces* is free, daring and joyful. Niki de Saint Phalle's black *Nanas* celebrate black women for they are black *and* women.

30. Niki de Saint Phalle, my trans. : “*Nous avons bien le Black Power, alors pourquoi pas le Nana Power ?*”.

31. See Appendix F.

Let us go back to the first work of Niki de Saint Phalle shown in this paper, that is *the Three Graces*. One of them is white, and the other is black. But surprisingly, the third does not have any “true” color: it is composed of pieces of mirror. May that be seen as an attempt to make the synthesis of the white and the black and to go beyond the binary opposition, uniting all women in equality and freedom?

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APPENDIX A



Hans Baldung, The Three Graces (1540)

APPENDIX B



Niki de Saint Phalle, *Les Trois Grâces*

APPENDIX C



Jean Tinguely and Niki de Saint Phalle, *The Stravinsky Fountain* (1983)

APPENDIX D



Niki de Saint Phalle, *La Mariée* (1963)

APPENDIX E



Niki de Saint Phalle, *La mort du patriarche* (1972)

APPENDIX F



Niki de Saint Phalle, *Black Rosy* (1965)