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PEEKING UNDER THE VEIL: NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE'S *THE BRIDE AND/AS FEMINIST DISABILITY AESTHETICS*

One of the most exciting concepts in disability studies today is the broad notion of disability gain: how, it asks, can we understand disability as a generative force, one that catalyzes creativity and imagination? Disability gain manifests across many different areas of disability studies such as, feminist disability studies. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Kim Q. Hall have argued for feminist disability studies' invigorating effects on knowledge: Garland-Thomson contends that "[i]ntegrating disability into feminist theory is generative, broadening our collective inquiries, questioning our assumptions, and contributing to feminism's intersectionality."¹ Hall similarly emphasizes that feminist disability studies "enables a reimagining of disability and gender in ways that contribute further insight into the injustice against both."² This is possible, Hall posits, because "[w]ithin feminist disability studies, exploring conceptual and lived connections between gender and disability helps to make visible the historical and ongoing interrelationship between all forms of oppression."³ Feminist disability studies thus looks critically at how definitions of disability and gender have intersected in ways that have been insidious, but also uses that interrogation to query—and generate new ideas about—what we think of as "natural" forms of gender, embodiment, and sexuality.

The history of representation is certainly one of perpetuating many of these old and oppressive archetypes about gender and disability. But visual art has also offered a rich source of inspiration for disability studies critics working to retheorize the importance of disability. Garland-Thomson's *Staring: How We Look* reveals how contemporary artwork can promote "visual activism" by inserting disabled subjects into the traditional visual rhetorics of art (such as classical portraiture), while Tobin Siebers' *Disability Aesthetics* argues that disability—and its embrace of the fragmentary, the contingent, and the chaotic—undergirds modern art. Feminist disability studies and the interpretation of representations of disability in visual art have the potential to function powerfully together to enlarge our understanding: of the work of both disabled and nondisabled artists,

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1. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory," in *Feminist Disability Studies*, ed. Kim Q. Hall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 16.
 2. Kim Q. Hall, "Reimagining Disability and Gender through Feminist Disability Studies: An Introduction," in *Feminist Disability Studies*, ed. Kim Q. Hall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 3.
 3. Ibid., 4.

but also of the social contexts in which they operate. This intersection of theoretical perspective and genre can move disability studies past identifying tropes, whether promising or problematic, and instead invite discussion, through representation, about gender and disability as sources of personal and social innovation.

How could a feminist disability studies approach be applied to artists who might not previously have been read this way? How might it offer a chance to rethink the work of artists whose notion of feminist critique already had a complex genesis in and engagement with bodies—both their own, and those they created in representation? Take, for example, the French-American artist Niki de Saint Phalle (1930-2002); she created work throughout her career that advanced pointed feminist critiques about and through the body. From the time of what is arguably her most well-known museum installation, the spectacular, larger-than-life *Hon (She)* (1966), Saint Phalle invited her viewers to engage with maternal and lushly enfleshed female forms. The Stockholm viewers of *Hon* entered the giant, brightly-decorated, recumbent female figure through its vulva, where they could then explore what was inside: a small gallery, a theater, and even a love seat.

Similar in look, gender play, and sheer whimsicality, among Saint Phalle's best known works are the figurative descendants of *Hon*: her "Nanas," witty and Rubenesque female forms that defy gravity as they cavort, cartwheel, and dance in celebration of woman as a reclaimed goddess figure. Playing with and through what Catherine Dossin calls the "masquerade of hyperfemininity" over the course of her career in her work and flirtatious public persona, Saint Phalle did not disregard the feminine altogether.⁴ And so, she sought to infuse vibrancy into her large, rotund, and brightly colored Nanas:

[they portrayed] fecund womanly bodies in the face of contemporary waif-thin fashion imagery. Invoking and reinterpreting such works as the Paleolithic Venus of Willendorf as well as de Kooning's "Women" paintings, Saint Phalle's "Nanas" dared to celebrate, rather than belittle, the generative labors of pregnancy, motherhood, and human propagation.⁵

As a result, the Nanas transgressed the boundaries of a passively defined, contained, and rarified femininity in art and life, even as they verged on a kind of essentialism, grounding maternity and nurturing in the female form.

By contrast, Saint Phalle made a series of assemblages of bride figures in the early 1960s, which depicted roles accorded to women in society: brides, whores,

4. Catherine Dossin, "Niki de Saint Phalle and the Masquerade of Hyperfemininity," *Woman's Art Journal* 31, no. 2 (2010): 29.

6. Colette Chattopadhyay, "Niki de Saint Phalle: A Space of Her Own," *Sculpture* 23, no. 9 (2004): 45.

mothers and witches. The reliefs challenged stereotypical images of women and broached subject matter still taboo at that period. Built from bases of wire and papier-maché, these assemblages incorporated objects such as cheap plastic dolls, toy guns, flowers, and animals to anarchic effects.⁶ These figures shape a counterpoint to the Nanas; where the Nanas are lushly enfleshed, light, and joyful, the brides are heavy and weighted; they are fragmented, fractured, and perform the body entering into imprisonment as it enters into matrimony.

Saint Phalle's engagement with her gender identity was similarly contradictory. From the earliest days of her privileged New York childhood, she appeared to fully embrace traditional femininity: she was a fashion model whose image appeared on the cover of *Life*, *Vogue* and in other fashion magazines. She married writer Harry Matthews at the age of eighteen and subsequently had two children with him. But she also walked away from her marriage, became a highly successful artist who was the only female member of the *Nouveaux Réalistes*, and entered into a romantic and professional partnership with Jean Tinguely, who ultimately became her second husband. Saint Phalle gleefully reappropriated the phallus in her *Tirs* (or *Shooting Pieces*), in which she literally fired at works from a gun, bursting containers of paint over the canvases and sculptures to which they were attached. She figuratively murdered patriarchy, imagining herself shooting the oppression wielded by the art world as well as the male members of her family—including a father who by his own admission sexually abused her. Among the objects she chose to shoot at was a plaster cast of the *Venus de Milo*, rejecting classical ideals in art, as well as the notions of idealized bodily beauty which they upheld.

The *Venus de Milo* is, of course, an image of fragmentation that is never claimed as such, and a fitting image as we turn to the task of applying feminist disability studies to visual art. It is that not always easily reconciled intersection of identities—female and disabled—that I want to focus on *through* just such a perspective. While the full range of Saint Phalle's work cries out for a multilayered interpretation from a disability studies perspective, in this essay, I examine one of her assemblages entitled *The Bride*.

7. Barbara Jones, "Ain't Gonna Let Her In: Niki de Saint Phalle and Her Absence from Feminist Art History," *Women's Art Magazine*, Sep.-Oct. 1995, 15.



Fig. 1. Niki de Saint Phalle, *The Bride*, 1965-1992.

Saint Phalle's sculpture is not the simple story of a victim disabled by her gender, trapped in tulle; it also hints at liberation, and a sharp-eyed social critique *with* disability in mind. I offer a reading that suggests how Saint Phalle's *The Bride* might act as a template and an argument for what feminist disability studies can do by way of bringing a fuller understanding of a visual artist's work into being. Saint Phalle engaged with the female body and/through fragmentation across the length of her career, during which she herself experienced multiple psychological and physical impairments. Nevertheless, her work does not fall easily on either side of the disability divide; there are problematic uses of the nonnormate body in her work, but there are likewise what we might well argue is the presence of a nascent disability aesthetic. Considering the two possibilities in tandem gives us a model of how one artist created a bridge between using disability to symbolize female oppression and to invigorate her work. A feminist disability studies approach echoes, but also helps more fully inform the interpretations of Saint Phalle made by feminist art historians. It ultimately

affirms the importance of using what we might also call a feminist disability aesthetics to frame our fuller understanding of the complexity of the embodiments that create and are represented in modern and contemporary art.

Saint Phalle first constructed her life-size bride images during the 1960s, coming at a point in her body of work between her shooting paintings and her later sculpture such as the Nanas, *Tarot Garden*, and her late-in-life "skinnies" (slender, stylized, see through sculptures of human stick figures, which while also joyful and colorful, are that much more striking for their extreme contrast to the Nanas). Although she continued working on diverse versions of them for decades, I will refer to the specific version of *The Bride* that I had a chance to study up close. In some ways, the bride assemblages seem to be among the easiest Saint Phalle sculptures to understand from a feminist perspective; what could be more obvious as a critique of gender than a sculpture of an oversized, weighted-down bride, seeming to falter and fail under the burden of all that her raiment symbolizes? Saint Phalle's journey with the symbolic weight of femininity seems even more compactly expressed if we compare *The Bride* to her later Nanas; literally turning all those earlier gender expectations on their heads, stripped of layers of expectation, the Nanas playfully cavort, size and shape becoming expressions of joy rather than grotesquerie symbolizing fear, oppression, or self-sacrifice.

These figures, like much of Saint Phalle's work, however, dance across a political landmine. While there has been a move among critics to reclaim Saint Phalle as an important precursor to the feminist art movement, critics delineate multiple reasons why defining her as a feminist artist has been a somewhat vexed enterprise. Saint Phalle's combined alignment with the New Realists as a commercially successful artist and her seeming essentialism in designing the body of the Nana led to her dismissal by some:

...[Saint Phalle] is well-known and commercially successful in mainland Europe, in America and in Japan. Commercial success and popular acclaim are often mainstream and the feminist viewed with suspicion by the press, suggesting that an artist has often "sold out." Compounding this, her later work is playful and highly decorative. Decoration has become a pejorative term within feminist writing. Playfulness in art work tends to be associated with superficiality and is seen to reinforce a perception that it is anti-thetical to a postmodern minimalist aesthetic and embraces a non-critical view of femininity.⁷

Indeed, Saint Phalle *can* read as confusing or essentialist: why would a woman whose own experiences seem to echo her age, a proper young woman shedding the strictures of femininity in the spirit of the time, still create female figures that hearken back to goddess culture? Why would a woman who walked away from her two children seem to reinscribe a celebration of the maternal as the inevitable end of woman? Was Saint Phalle simply swinging the pendulum in the opposite

7. Ibid.

direction by embracing a kind of essentialism, replacing the "good wife" with the weighty expectations of the "good goddess"? Critic Barbara Jones sidesteps the question, insisting that the "essentialist/non-essentialist debate...is reductive and dismissive and denies achievements outside of that particular debate" and that "[a] generous and inclusive feminist art history needs to embrace women artists of all ideological persuasions."⁸ Dossin is somewhat more specific in engaging the complexities of that debate, offering more detailed reasons for why Saint Phalle's relation with the projects of feminist art and criticism were strained: she cites Saint Phalle's commercial success, her association with the *Nouveaux Réalistes*, a disconnect from the art establishment of any one country, Saint Phalle's public repudiation of feminism, and a "public persona [that] was antithetical to many feminists, as she appeared in press images as a sexy woman, wearing tight boots, wrapped in boas, and flirting with interviewers while claiming that manipulating men excited her."⁹

Dossin, however, ultimately emphasizes the overweening political ambiguity in Saint Phalle's art:

Yet the main problem was certainly the seeming incoherence of her feminist stance and the ideological content of her work, which seemed also rather unfocused. On the one hand, her art appeared to deconstruct traditional images of womanhood by examining roles society ascribes women (bride, mother, daughter, witch, whore, etc.)... Yet her Nanas...with their large breasts, wide hips, full bodies, and small heads—appear like modern equivalents to the prehistoric Mother Goddess, suggesting that Saint-Phalle's work participates in the Great Goddess discourse.^{10 11}

But critics Jill Carrick and Dossin, who have both offered compelling feminist interpretations of Saint Phalle, contend that for Saint Phalle in her persona as in her art, such ambiguity and tension was a purposeful strategy. Taking the *Tirs* as her focus, Carrick posits that they demonstrate "not only the difficulties and ambivalences of a woman artist based in France in the 1960s, but also her semi-spontaneous, semi-strategic solutions in the face of socially imposed models of femininity and masculinity."¹² She avers that cannily, "Saint-Phalle asserted her

8. Ibid.

9. Dossin, "Niki de Saint Phalle," 34.

10. Ibid., 34-5.

11. Those feminist artists of the 1970s who embraced the Great Goddess archetype saw "this image as a symbol of the life and death powers and the waxing and waning cycles of women, the earth, and the moon. Drawing on traditions of goddess worship in the ancient Mediterranean, pre-Christian Europe, Native America, MesoAmerica, Asia, Africa, and other places...[they] used the imagery of the Goddess and goddess worshipping religions as an affirmation of female power, the female body, the female will, and women's bonds and heritage" Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 324.

12. Jill Carrick, "Phallic Victories? Niki de Saint-Phalle's *Tirs*," *Art History* 26, no. 5 (2003): 725.

own active (if always mediated) agency as a woman artist. Seductive, she remained, but this seduction was folded into more subversive scenarios of gender performativity.¹³ Dossin concurs with this assessment, pointing out that it is particularly important we see such ambiguity within Saint Phalle's cultural context:

The question for French feminists—and for French feminism, for that matter—was not whether there was a female essence but, rather, what should be the new definition of “woman.” In this process of redefinition, the female body would play an important role, because it is the source of women’s specific experience. Likewise, myths such as the Great Goddess and the primitive matriarchy could shape future womanhood. In France, the essentialism/nonessentialism argument was irrelevant.¹⁴

Dwelling in ambiguity was a way for Saint Phalle to at once expose hyperfemininity as a troubling masquerade without denying the reality of many women’s lives.

Those of us who do disability studies work might follow a similar direction as these evolving interpretations of Saint Phalle. Disability representations can manifest ambiguously, no matter how we might like to subject them to a critical binarism of our own. We might be tempted initially to extend a critique of Saint Phalle and disability—in her life and her work—further into directions of our own, questioning a seeming essentialism we, too discern. For example, we might observe that in her work the nonnormate body is used to either metaphorize oppression or romanticize difference, with no seeming link to the lived experience of disability anywhere in between. Likewise, the breakdown Saint Phalle had early in her career (about which I shall say more in a moment) is often marked in highly conventional ways; in defending Saint Phalle as feminist, Dossin has pointed out that we need to understand Saint Phalle's experience as “a development from the deconstruction of traditional womanhood to the construction of a new woman, as a reflection of Saint-Phalle's personal journey *from breakdown to breakthrough*,” marking disability as the starting point at which feminist overcoming began.¹⁵ This perspective, in the guise of praising Saint Phalle for both using and overcoming her mental illness, grounds such a reading in what we might think of as the “in spite of” school of thought: where disability is an individuated rather than a social experience, and as such, must be transcended through personal will power rather than the reconfiguration of cultural locations of disability. Disability studies scholars have taken to task the ways in which “madness” has been defined within feminism as either an outcome of or potential rebellion against society’s oppressive presence. For example, Garland-Thomson observes that “Western thought has long conflated femaleness and disability, understanding both as defective departures from a valued standard...More recently, feminist theorists have argued that female

13. Ibid., 720.

14. Dossin, “Niki de Saint Phalle,” 36.

15. Ibid., emphasis mine.

embodiment is a disabling condition in sexist culture."¹⁶ Such thinking, argues Garland-Thomson, misses an important opportunity to understand how "a disability analysis presses our critique further by challenging the premise that unusual embodiment is inherently inferior."¹⁷ That disability, as in the case of Saint Phalle's institutionalization, might be cast romantically as the starting point of a rebellion places her firmly within a tradition of other female artists who have ostensibly gone mad as a way of escaping societal strictures.¹⁸ Yet this remains a critical trope that is still inherently ableist:

the madness-as-feminist-rebellion metaphor might at first seem like a positive strategy for combatting the stigma traditionally associated with mental illness. However, this metaphor indirectly diminishes the lived experience of many people who are disabled by mental illness, just as the metaphoric use of terms like *lame*, *blind*, and *deaf* can misrepresent, in ways that have ultimately harmful political effects, the experiences of living with those physical conditions.¹⁹

Instead, as critic Elizabeth J. Donaldson argues, we need a more expansive, feminist disability studies view of mental illness.

The Bride pointedly denounces the misogyny of compulsory femininity, and there are areas where the figurative disablement of the sculpture works to reinforce that in ways that at once deploy disability but make its actual lived experience invisible. In a way, these elements constitute a kind of visual version of David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's narrative prosthesis—the grotesque, excessive features of the sculpture are that which bring this bride's narrative into figurative being, but which do not actually themselves stand for the embodied, lived experience of disability. The materials of *The Bride* suggest that the facade of femininity women are expected to project results in immobility, becoming simultaneously prison and radiant beauty; even they are stiff and unyielding, the silver folds of the bride's dress, actually cast in bronze, look delicate and filigreed. Indeed, Niki de Saint Phalle expressed admiration for adornment; describing her own observations of her mother in the memoir *Traces*, she herself seems caught up in the tension over whether looks were prison or power:

I liked Mother's looks; I liked the power it gave her. I liked her 1930's thick transparent glass dressing table covered with creams and powders and lipsticks. I loved her auburn curls and flawless white skin. I like the way she elegantly spit into her mascara to make it thicker. She looked like the actress Merle Oberon. Even her name, Jacqueline, was quite sexy.

16. Garland-Thomson, "Integrating Disability," 18.

17. Ibid., 19.

18. Andrea Nicki, "The Abused Mind: Feminist Theory, Psychiatric Disability, and Trauma," *Hypatia* 16, no. 4 (2001): 84.

19. Elizabeth J. Donaldson, "Revisiting the Corpus of the Madwoman: Further Notes toward a Feminist Disability Studies Theory of Mental Illness," in *Feminist Disability Studies*, ed. Kim Q. Hall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011): 94.

I did not reject Mother. I retained things from her that have given me a lot of pleasure--my love of clothes, fashion, hats, dressing up and mirrors. These things I took from her and they helped me stay in touch with my femininity.²⁰

Saint Phalle likewise characterized her mother as susceptible to the kind of figurative paralysis suggested by *The Bride*: "I saw this beautiful creature, Mother, whom I was a bit in love with (when I didn't feel like killing her) as a prisoner of an imposed role. A role handed down generation after generation by a long tradition which no one ever questioned."²¹ Disability becomes deathly, as *The Bride's* too-restrictive femininity is ultimately cast as a kind of death-in-life, that which ultimately imperils the body. This is suggested by details such as the bouquet the statue holds; in the bride's hands it evokes a casketed figure holding flowers in a position of repose. Yet ironically, the very stems of the bouquet suggest the marriage that has stabbed her in the heart, as their trajectory also rests over the bride's breast; the bouquet is at once funerary and assaultive.

As a sculpture, *The Bride* looms over its viewer, both wider and taller than an adult spectator. The size of the bride echoes images Saint Phalle would later create of other monstrous "devouring mothers," fat and gigantic female figures who at once metaphorize and embody the kind of maternal monstrosity seen in literary figures ranging from Medea to Amanda Wingfield. In her writing, Saint Phalle mulled over the oppressive qualities of that particular role, reflecting on how her own inability to mother was a legacy from *her* mother:

How could I be a mother? I was too young and scared. And I didn't know how, probably because Mother hadn't been hugged enough, hadn't been loved enough. So how could she express her love to me?....When I made the "Devouring Mother" sculptures, Mother asked me, "Is that me my dear?" And I said, "Oh No, Mother, NOT AT ALL."...I lied. Then I started thinking, we are all devouring mothers. Mother devoured me, and in turn I thought I knew best for my children."²²

A key question Saint Phalle engages in *The Bride* through the excessive body is: how do women get consumed by what Nancy Cott has called the "reproduction of mothering"?

There is much in *The Bride* that uses the grotesque body to express not only threat, but fear: the fear that the self will be consumed not just by marriage but also by the inevitable children that will result. These are figures that given their size, have consumed, but given their proportions, are also *being* consumed. For example, the head of the bride is much smaller than the body, using an implicit reference to intellectual disability to suggest that through motherhood the mind

20. Niki de Saint Phalle, *Traces: An Autobiography* (Lausanne: Acatos Publishing, 1999): 108.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 127.

and intellect are diminished. That small head is equated with simplicity: reminiscent of a child or baby's head, it simultaneously references the infantilizing nature of the hyperfeminine role, as well as how a woman's identity is replaced by that of her children. We see this kind of image in a very early painting of St. Phalle's, *Is the Mother Wishing for the Big Wide World?*, where the artist does something similar; in it, a faceless, shapeless form nurses a faceless, shapeless baby, and the head of the mother and the head of the child are reduced to essentially the same size. Later Nanas would display a similar tension, where the goddess figure's fecundity is celebrated, even as the head of the figure is small—another sly poke, perhaps, at how hypermaternal impulses diminish women? In *The Bride*, the shape of the head is echoed by the breasts, especially the right breast, which is larger and also seems to match, if not outsize, the head. It seems engorged, as though this bride, hardly having left the altar, already must nurse an infant. The arm on the same side is covered with plastic doll parts, including one coming out of the elbow of the right arm. This replication of babies literally joined to the bride's self creates an image of the conjoined twin (even, perhaps, a "parasitic twin") taken to a ridiculous extreme, multiplied over and over and over again.

Interestingly enough, however, if we read through a feminist disability studies perspective, it is with this overlay of plastic toys and the meanings they suggest that we can discern more ambiguity in Saint Phalle's images of disablement. What emerges in the sculpture is a tension between its use of disability-as-metaphor and how it also facilitates a viewer's keen awareness of the forces that surround and constitute that body. This bride is literally awash in fragmentation and the detritus of consumption; these small toys, brought by the container load from overseas, reference the consumer goods a woman is expected to purchase for her household after her body is made spectacle-for-public-consumption on the day of her wedding. The toys threaten to overwhelm the bride, not just covering her, but swarming her; they redirect our focus to the forces of materialism that depend on the subjugation and exploitation of bodies for their perpetuation. We are compelled to ask, who produced these toys? The invisible bodies engaged in the repetitive task of stamping out these figures are evoked, a subtle reference to the standardization of labor which defines disabled peoples' bodies as extraneous or useless. Domestic labor is itself equated with invisible and menial labor, showing the intersection of disability and female identity.

This intersection of disability and maternity takes on an additional resonance; many of the toys are toy soldiers, referencing the consumption of the bodies of these mothers' sons and daughters in war, even as small toy guns and airplanes both evoke and mock war, as well as the patriarchal culture that feeds it. The toys also reify gender stereotypes, inviting the boys who play with them to imagine themselves as the soldiers, heroes, and conquerors who will leave women like the bride behind. Saint Phalle at once shows us these figures yet renders disablement invisible, thus avoiding the use of disability as anti-war metaphor. Instead, the implicit question of what happens to the bodies of soldiers who are wounded or impaired is what confronts the viewer, rather than a body s/he can sentimentalize or voyeuristically romanticize. We as viewers

are left to contemplate the disposability and ironic sameness of bodies sacrificed to hypermasculinity, militarism, and jingoism.²³

If there is room for empathy-through-disability in this sculpture, it is likewise possible to argue that a key part of Saint Phalle's work is to cast disability as generative force, a presence of the extraordinary body that pervades Saint Phalle's work beyond *The Bride*. Disability was a part of Saint Phalle's embodiment in many ways throughout her life. She had a nervous breakdown, hyperthyroidism, rheumatoid arthritis, and the later lung problems which she attributed to a lifetime breathing in the fiberglass fibers that constituted her sculptures; indeed, she moved to the American southwest later in her life in an effort to live in a climate in which she could breathe more easily. Critics have dealt with Saint Phalle's various disabilities in fairly conventional and ableist terms. She, and others, have described her 1953 breakdown and period of institutionalization as the cumulative result of oppression: by a restrictive childhood during which she was a victim of incest, as well as by the strictures of marriage and motherhood, ones, as we have seen, she fiercely retorted against in her art. Her art, then, has been described as a means to a cure, as therapy and recuperative device. Dossin, for example, makes the distinction between Saint Phalle's time drawing in an institution as therapy and the art she later made once she had been cured:

[In 1953], as her anguish became unbearable, she broke down and was hospitalized. During her institutionalization, she received a letter from her father apologizing for what he had done to her. As repressed emotions surfaced, she sank deeper into depression, finding solace only in her writing and drawing. In pages she covered with images, she also wrote about the feelings and memories that overwhelmed her, pulling together the scattered pieces of her *broken life* to slowly regain control of her story. Following her hospitalization, making art *became more than therapy; it came to define her life, giving her the means to continue and start anew.*²⁴

In a telling testament to the pervasiveness of cultural tropes of disability that emphasize cure, Henning Zeidler, in a 2013 essay based on a review of Saint Phalle's medical records, comes to a fairly similar conclusion:

23. Saint Phalle's work becomes a compelling antecedent, then, to more contemporary efforts to write disability into the history of war in ways that do not simply reinscribe the fear of disability as a means to discourage war, the more typical way soldiers' impaired bodies are figured in the popular imagination. For example, The Joe Bonham Project, a collective of illustrators and artists, has gone into military hospitals and rehabilitation centers to document the recovery of soldiers wounded in the Iraq war. Rather than settling for easy narratives of tragedy or overcoming, the Project's work instead explores what living in this new materiality means for soldiers who have returned injured from war. (See Ann M. Fox, "Review of The Joe Bonham Project: Remembering Wartime Injuries, Documenting New Creativity," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2012), <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3366/3192>).

24. Dossin, "Niki de Saint Phalle," 29-30.

Niki realized that painting helps her to *overcome this crisis* and decided to become an artist. After her recovery, she is encouraged by other artists to continue painting in her unique self-taught style. The mental collapse was not only the start of a life as an artist but the psychological trauma is also a key to the creative coping and symbolic processing in her art.²⁵

Dossin and Ziedler, though clearly admiring Saint Phalle, define her art as the thing that helped her overcome disability, and once having done so, interpret her as curiously disconnected from it.

Ziedler's troubling article also raises significant questions about how the study of an artist's disability is carried out, and to what ends; it suggests there is a fine line between a feminist disability studies approach and a more traditionally medicalized one. After making a study of Saint Phalle's medical records (with the permission of her daughter and granddaughter), the author catalogues Saint Phalle's various disabilities, and briefly compares what she emphasized in her autobiographical writings to what the medical record indicate; Ziedler also theorizes that Saint Phalle's later respiratory health problems may not have been due solely to her inhalation of toxic materials, but also due to an immunoglobulin deficiency. Saint Phalle's medical biography becomes an interesting case study for Ziedler, who concludes:

The medical history of Niki represents a unique case of transient selective IgA deficiency associated with RA [rheumatoid arthritis]. The occupational exposure with art materials may have contributed in part or temporarily to her respiratory health problems. Comparison of biographical memories and medical facts illustrate that causal interpretation of the artist and the medical reality do not always coincide. Furthermore, Niki set with enormous artistic productivity an outstanding example of creative coping with RA and other lifelong health problems. She had a strong sense of self-efficacy and a desire to take control of their [sic] disease to continue her art work. For those interested in art, new insight will be opened into her life and work increasing the appreciation for her contribution to modern art.²⁶

Through this medicalization of a female artist's biography, Ziedler forces Saint Phalle, even in death, into the role of ideal female patient: silent and ill-informed in comparison to the doctor. Saint Phalle, familiarly addressed as "Niki" by Ziedler, is undermined as an authority about her own health, with Ziedler rather paternalistically noting that "causal interpretation of the artist and the medical

25. Henning Ziedler. "Niki de Saint Phalle's Lifelong Dialogue Between Art and Diseases: Psychological Trauma of Sexual Abuse, Transient IgA Deficiency, Occupational Exposure to Toxic Plastic Material, Chronic Lung Disease, Rheumatoid Arthritis," *Joint Bone Spine* 80 (2013): 333, emphasis mine.

26. Ibid., 336.

reality do not always coincide.”²⁷ Yet at the same time, Ziedler holds her up as a model of overcoming, since her productivity and output happen *in spite of* her impairments. It is this fact of transcendence, rather than disability embodiment, which should drive an increased appreciation for Saint Phalle’s art, in Ziedler’s estimation. The presence of disability is deployed by Ziedler to at once feminize Saint Phalle as a patient (she is wrong and must be corrected, publicly) and masculinize her as an artist (she transcended her impairments through sheer force of will to produce), simultaneously preserving fairly patriarchal binaries of gender, medicine, and critical interpretation. Paradoxically, for all (or perhaps because of) the essay’s excessive focus on diagnosis, the opportunity to try and reimagine how disability meaningfully informs Saint Phalle’s work is never taken up.

By contrast, Saint Phalle posits her own physicality in a more complex manner. For example, she recounts an experience that was as daunting for the symptoms of her mental illness as the medical treatments she received. During her institutionalization, she was given insulin treatments and ten electroshock treatments, which although she did not remember, she called “barbarous.” Mathews wrote of the extreme anxiety they caused her: “Niki was very aware of the partial loss of memory they produced and it caused her tremendous anxiety, because there were things that had been completely wiped out and she thought she might never get them back, or that there might be even worse results.”²⁸ She illustrated the experience in her memoir, with a drawing of her lying dazed, on a bed, surrounded by oversized rats underneath a barred window, surrounded by the text:

The sun is shining today through the bars. Is it a sign? Harry will visit me this afternoon. In only a few more hours. Will he bring Laura? Will the rats tear me apart? Are the rats inside of me? Or will they make a feast of me? Today they gave me another electroshock. Will it help?²⁹

Such text is striking in its attempt to give a sense of Saint Phalle’s internal chaos, not simply the external forces to which she was subject. If we redirect the idea that she overcame her disability through art, instead thinking about how the art was a particular medium to expressing alternate psychological embodiments, we find intriguing ways to read Saint Phalle. She was unflinching in considering that time in retrospect, speaking of her mental breakdown as that which *specifically allowed* her to create. She did her first collages and then paintings while being treated, and was clear about the link between her institutionalization and her later life: “The result of my mental breakdown was good in the long run, because I left the clinic a painter.”³⁰ She and others described this time as a motivating force:

27. Ibid.

28. Niki de Saint Phalle, *Harry and Me 1950-1960: The Family Years* (Bentali Publishers, 2006): 38.

29. Ibid., 39.

30. Ibid., 40.

[Early on in her career as a painter] I did not feel a big rush or overwhelming urge to show my paintings. I knew I was accumulating experience and there was plenty of time. I felt that I had to first learn how to make some poetical order out of the ever-menacing chaos that was never far away. This chaos was a fear of darkness, of returning to the night of insanity and loosing [sic] my mind again, although I have never been hospitalized since.³¹

In a 2008 interview, St. Phalle's ex husband was asked if he thought "escape from chaos" is present in Saint Phalle's art. He described that as a "pathetic" way to look at her art.

Like Saint Phalle, he saw her disability more realistically: not in simple terms of overcoming, but in terms of creation emerging out of lived experience: "We were extraordinarily happy together for much of our ten years, but when she was ill with her nervous breakdown, and later thyroid trouble, life was a nightmare. Our last year was extremely painful. She was always highly sensitive and full of determined insight, but if this sometimes made her difficult, it was almost always to a productive end."³² Mathews also described the difficulty of caring for Niki when she and her son were simultaneously ill, Saint Phalle in this instance with hyperthyroidism:

It was tough – there were two invalids in the house. During all that period of illness I had to take over everything. I thus developed a habit of trying to run her life for her – something that, when she was healthy again, she didn't need or like. The subsequent hostility towards men, and me, began expressing itself at this point, and it manifested itself in her work – the black landscapes, the collages with all the sharp ceramic fragments and metal tools.³³

What emerges from Mathews' telling seems as much the chafing of a disabled person against oppressive caregiving as a feminist resistance to paternalism.

If we take our cues from reconsidering Saint Phalle in this way, how can we look to *The Bride* as embodying a disability experience, especially the mental disability she experienced? To begin with, the work resists a sharp distinction between disabled/nondisabled; as I noted earlier, in the small head of *The Bride* and the weight of her looming figure, we can see the echoes of aspects that would later be repeated in her Nanas, but to much different effect. Saint Phalle would make frequent use of assemblage over the course of her career, evidencing a "fascination with breakage and fragmentation, from the faceted figures and scenes of her first paintings and the shattered plaster surfaces of her early reliefs

31. Ibid., 50.

32. Harry Mathews, "Living with Niki," *Tate Etc.*, Spring 2008, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/living-niki>.

33. Ibid.

to the glass and ceramic shards that make up the mosaiclike surfaces on her later sculptures.”³⁴ There is likewise a fragmentary quality to *The Bride* that suggests the inherent fragility of the body; it simultaneously expresses a sense of being pulled apart and divided. Yet even though these pieces can fly apart, they also come together to shape an identity, or a singular beauty. Tobin Siebers, in seeking to argue that disability undergirds modern art, points out that “[d]isability aesthetics embraces beauty that seems by traditional standards to be broken, and yet it is not less beautiful, but more so, as a result.”³⁵ Does the fog of the veil that hides the head (which was on the version I saw displayed) suggest Saint Phalle’s own experience with mental illness, even as it also has a protective quality, suggesting the existence of an interior self behind the assemblage?

The looming weight of the body of *The Bride* suggests Saint Phalle’s sense of her own identity as deviating from a normate, a powerful expression of difference and identity. And indeed, while that weight can be read as the weight of hyperfemininity, it can also be read as claiming presence. Indeed, Saint Phalle would go on to play with weight’s presence and absence throughout much of her work. For example, if we look at her Nanas, their lushness reclaims size as presence and beauty. Yet they also have the same small head as the bride sculpture, creating a significant tension: is this a shifting of the hierarchy between body and mind? Is Saint Phalle slyly reminding us of the association between fat and physical/intellectual limitation, and literally turning that on its head? Later works would also use present absence to express her own disabled embodiment, such as Saint Phalle’s “skinnies.” Rendered so to let breath and air pass through, they suggest a late in life Saint Phalle who herself is made more mindful of and wants to express her embodiment: in this case, her breathing problems, after she damaged her lungs working with the fiberglass out of which she built so much of her work. This is a richer interpretation than simply romanticizing disability in Saint Phalle, as one critic does when writing that Saint Phalle “literally gave her life for her art: fumes from polyester and other corrosive materials with which she worked severely damaged her lungs, and she succumbed to these issues in 2002.”³⁶

As I mentioned at the outset of this essay, one of Saint Phalle’s early *Tirs* was a shot-at, paint-spattered plaster cast of the *Venus de Milo*, an implicit rejection of her own formerly idealized self. This shooting happened within the context of *The Construction of Boston*, a 1962 performance in which “Tinguely, dressed as a bride, built a cinderblock wall across the stage, while in the background, [Robert] Rauschenberg activated a rumbling weather machine and Saint-Phalle fired at a plaster cast of the *Venus de Milo*.³⁷ Saint Phalle’s performance interacting with the *Venus de Milo*, in retrospect, becomes the perfect embodiment of what

34. Phyllis Braff, “Nanas, Guns and Gardens,” *Art in America*, December 1992: 102, 104.

35. Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 3.

36. Barbara Schrieber, “Niki de Saint Phalle at the Bechtler,” *Charlotte Viewpoint Magazine*, 23 March 2011, <http://www.charlotteviewpoint.org/article/2339/Niki-de-Saint-Phalle-Bchtler>.

37. Dossin, “Niki de Saint Phalle,” 33.

feminist disability studies has to offer the consideration of art. As Lennard Davis reminds us, we do not typically mark the armless *Venus de Milo* as a disabled figure, although she most certainly is:

The art historian does not *see* the absence and so fills in the absence with a presence. This compensation leads us to understand that in the discourse of the nude, one is dealing not simply with art history but with the reception of disability, the way that the “normal” observer compensates or defends against the presence of difference. This is a “way of seeing” not often discussed in art criticism.³⁸

Siebers points out that René Magritte’s *Les Menottes de cuivre* (1931), a version of the *Venus* whose arm stumps have been painted a brilliant red, works to reinstate disability into a viewer’s thinking about the sculpture, and “exemplifies a discovery articulated repeatedly in modern art: the discovery of disability as a unique resource, recouped from the past and re-created in the present, for aesthetic creation and appreciation.”³⁹ Saint Phalle’s *Venus*, too, “eschews the uniformity of perfect bodies to embrace the variety of disability.”⁴⁰ In the act of shooting, she reminds us of the violence that might have caused that figurative amputation. Yet Saint Phalle’s paint-spattered *Venus de Milo*, chaotic and joyful, is not a figure waiting for us to wish her arms back into place, but a new kind of embodiment, ready to be encountered and engaged on her own terms.⁴¹ In embracing the tension in Niki de Saint Phalle’s work through the lens of feminist disability aesthetics, then, we can appreciate the dance with disability over the course of her career as a more complex and fruitful one than we might have initially imagined.

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38. Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 133.

39. Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 5.

40. Ibid.

41. We might even go so far as to argue she anticipates work such as that of Mary Duffy, a performer born without arms whose solo performance critiques stigma and the medicalization of disability, even as her nude presentation of it evokes the *Venus de Milo*; or Marc Quinn’s later famous and controversial image of disabled womanhood *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, a statue that itself visually recalls both the Nanas and the *Venus de Milo*.