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The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir on Modern French Visual Art

By Rebecca Trevalyan¹

Abstract

Arguably the woman that first inspired and shaped the Women's Liberation Movement in Western Europe, Simone de Beauvoir had an emboldening influence on women engaged in a variety of vocations. Visual art is an area of influence that has been less examined in academia. This project considers the heritage of Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* in the work of five French women artists; in particular the depiction of femininity as artifice, the tensions between painted appearance and corporeal reality, and the bravery required to take action, to persistently defy the gaze of a male-coded society.

Keywords: Beauvoir, visual art, identity



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Introduction

In keeping with Hegel's idea of a "struggle to the death" between two consciousnesses, Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949) characterises the relationship between the two halves of humanity as a painful conflict, a bloody battle, one in which men have hitherto been irrefutably victorious. They have conquered the territory of human existence, they have now achieved sovereign rule. And what is more, the casebook seems to have been closed: women do not fight back; they have long been resigned to their destiny as second-class citizens (or at least this was the case for Beauvoir's contemporaries). Beauvoir is outraged: 'Pourquoi les femmes ne contestent-elles pas la souveraineté mâle?' (1949i, 17).² But fortunately for generations of women doomed to a dreary domestic quotidian, to mediocre marriages, to second-rate educations, one woman was prepared to contest this sovereignty. In her groundbreaking oeuvre *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Beauvoir not only declares war against male dominion of Western civilization, she also provides women with the weapons necessary to recommence the fight. In this essay I would like to characterise the trajectory of woman's visual art as one of the battles launched as part of Beauvoir's war, one that she implicitly opens in her discussion of women in art and literature in the section *Vers la libération*: 'Tant qu'elle à encore à lutter pour devenir un être humain, elle ne saurait être une créatrice' (1949ii, 640).³

As a defiant middle finger up to the long-standing bastions of Western society, such as Catholicism, State, law and family, *Le Deuxième Sexe* provoked scandalised reactions across Europe, and especially in France, whose institutions had been subjected to a thorough cross-examination and had fared rather badly. As critic Claire Duchon points out, the ideas of *Le Deuxième Sexe* were considered 'too new and too threatening' even for the grassroots women's rights groups of the 1950s, thus it 'remained without immediate influence on existing feminist organisations' (in Rodgers 1998, 61). Yet amid the uproar, thousands of isolated women were avidly reading by lamplight. Alice Schwarzer, a friend of Beauvoir and later an active feminist, summarises the nature of its immediate impact: 'In the darkness of the Fifties and Sixties, before the new women's movement dawned, *The Second Sex* was like a secret code that we emerging women used to send messages to one another' (1984, 13).

Although perhaps not immediate, a profound legacy of Beauvoirian concerns can nevertheless be traced in vast swathes of French life and culture. Visual art and its capacity to pre-empt or capture *l'esprit du temps*, to seize upon revolutionary ideas, makes for a fascinating study of this legacy. If *Le Deuxième Sexe* was 'too new and too threatening', this was probably to do with its nature as a lengthy cerebral breakdown of what had previously been considered rather trivial. Making extensive use of existentialism and the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, it was perhaps best adapted to an academic audience. Visual art is a much more accessible medium, available to a huge populace and easy to reproduce in mass media. Furthermore, the power of the visual to shock is immense; colours, forms, textures and movement have a more incisive, immediate impact than the written word. Art and performance can convey a multiplicity of ideas in just seconds and can create a dynamic relationship between the viewer and the viewed, which is especially interesting in light of the existentialist ethic of intersubjective freedom (Beauvoir 1949ii, 604).

Prior to *Le Deuxième Sexe* there had been no coherent movement for the emancipation of woman in the art world. Works of isolated individuals did anticipate some of Beauvoir's ideas:

² 'Why do women not contest male sovereignty?' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 7).

³ 'As long as she still has to fight to become a human being, she cannot be a creator' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 767).

Man Ray's *Cadeau* (1921) and *Le Violon d'Ingres* (1925), along with Meret Oppenheim's *Object (Le Déjeuner en fourrure)* (1936), were somewhat violent protests against the objectification of woman and her domestic confinement. Yet there was no collective quest for identity; women artists were often denied training and exhibiting possibilities, or else dismissed by critics as "feminine." Beauvoir addresses this, esteeming that her female contemporaries were taking their first tentative steps in the male-dominated world of creativity: 'La femme est encore flattée d'être admise dans le monde de la pensée, de l'art, qui est un monde masculin... elle n'ose pas déranger, explorer, exploser' (1949ii, 632).⁴ Beauvoir laments the situation of women that prevents them from becoming a true genius such as Van Gogh (1949, 639). How far have women since dared to disturb the status quo and shatter conventions through art? How have theorisations of sex and gender been set in motion by woman artists? And was this a result of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, either directly or indirectly?

Thus far few critics have answered these questions, or indeed examined Beauvoir's influence on modern French art. Renowned Beauvoir critics Elizabeth Fallaize and Toril Moi are much more concerned with her literary heritage, and even Emily R. Grosholz' *The Legacy of Simone de Beauvoir* (2004) omits a study of the philosopher's impact on the arts. Amelia Jones touches on the subject briefly in her enlightening essay *Genital Panic: The Threat of Feminist Bodies and Parafeminism* (2009, 290), but focuses rather on the feminist movement as a whole, and limits her in-depth analysis to one artist, Valie Export.

I hope to shed light on this matter, using the seminal oeuvre *Le Deuxième Sexe* as a framework to examine the legacy that Beauvoir's unique blend of existentialism and feminism has had on French women artists and their artworks. Niki de Saint Phalle was one of the earliest women artists to (literally) take up arms; she exploded onto the art scene with her work *Les Tirs* in 1961 and was a forerunner for other radical performance artists such as ORLAN. This last made her first performance in 1964 and has worked tirelessly for the cause of the free woman ever since. Louise Bourgeois had been drawing and sculpting since 1947 but only really engaged in the exhibitivistic artistic sphere in the early 1970s, when interest in her work took off, triggering a more explicit incursion into feminism and sexuality. Annette Messager began her oeuvre in the early 1970s, appropriating myths of femininity in order to undermine them, similar to contemporary artist Valérie Belin, who uses media of mannequins and photography to explore narcissism and the life-art boundary. These women seized the opportunity to experiment with different genres in order to deepen their imprint on the course of art history; video recordings, hanging displays and plastic surgery were amongst the innovative art forms used.

Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* and its influence on the works of these artists will be explored in three topics central to both philosophy and art. Firstly the question of women's alterity and search for identity will be tackled, looking at tensions between reality and artifice and assumed social roles. The second section will deal with woman's body, and the tension between the carnal reality and the being objectified by the powerful male gaze. The final chapter will address art, gender and performance and artwork as an existential act. In all of these areas, I will ascertain the breadth, endurance and nature of the legacy left by Beauvoir, by examining how far women's art echoes her ideas, the extent to which it goes beyond them, and whether these ideas still resonate with women artists today.

⁴ 'Women are still flattered to be accepted into the world of thinking and art, a masculine world [...] she does not dare to irritate, explore, explode' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 761).

Femininity: L'Être ou l'Apparaître

Existentialism, concerned as it is with the individual and the development of an authentic identity and freedom, provides an ideal lens for an analysis of woman's identity. One of the movement's greatest proponents, Jean-Paul Sartre, lays out its principal foundations in *L'Être et le néant*. 'L'existence précède l'essence' (1946, 26),⁵ he asserts, implying there is no ontological fixity to identity; one *is* not *just* a waiter or a servant. With that very knowledge, one can begin to transcend one's situation, a possibility open to the servant as much as to his master. Beauvoir borrows this philosophical framework and applies it to women. She says women *should* go beyond their situation, in accordance with the ultimate human project of transcendence towards an ever-expanding future: 'Il n'y a d'autre justification de l'existence présente que son expansion vers un avenir indéfiniment ouvert' (1949i, 31).⁶ But this is where she departs from Sartrean existentialism. Such is the weight of women's situation, she says, maintained as they are in a state of oppression by men, regarded as they are as absolutely Other, utterly resigned to what *appears to be* a pre-ordained destiny, what *appears to be* a natural process, they are incapable of transcending it.

'On ne naît pas femme: on le devient,'⁷ goes her oft-peddled aphorism (1949ii, 13), famously separating sex and gender into two distinctly separate entities. According to Beauvoir "femininity" is not derived from any innate qualities of women as existents, but is rather a result of a situation fostered by society. Like the waiter and servant, woman in her generality is a series of social roles, developed to best serve all aspects of a man-made society. The beauty and youth of the young narcissistic girl make her the perfect site for the practice of male erotic desire. The married woman's "natural" role in the home ties man to the earth, guaranteeing him a place of warmth, security and sustenance. The mother's function is to ensure the perpetuation of the male lineage, to provide heirs for his land and property. Fortunately for men, women's 'natural' roles seem to have evolved as a direct response to their most basic needs and desires. But, demands Beauvoir, are we going to delude ourselves into thinking these roles really are that natural? Several French women artists have made this division between sex and gender a pivotal aspect of their work; problematising woman's body and often eclipsing it entirely, leaving behind a very obviously artificial construct to highlight the unnaturalness of gender, of femininity.

⁵ 'Existence precedes essence'.

⁶ 'There is no justification for present existence than its expansion towards a indefinitely open future' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 17).

⁷ 'One is not born, but rather becomes, woman' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 293).



One such artist is Niki de Saint Phalle, whose representations of brides, *La Mariée* or *Eva Maria* (1963) and *Crucifixion* (1963), are particularly resonant with Beauvoirian concerns. The delicate femininity of the materials used – lace, floral wallpaper, dolls – contrasts starkly with the deformed monstrosity of the brides. They are far from a realistic depiction of woman's form, on the contrary, there is an intentional abstraction here. Saint Phalle emphasises the brides' reproductive features: their bellies and chests are swollen, the mass of black wiring between the bloated legs of *Crucifixion* comically draws attention to the pubic area. By contrast, the brides' heads are absurdly small, their faces blank and featureless, the organs of communication almost invisible, and the colour of the faces homogenous with the calamity of clothing. Individuality, if that ever existed in the

imagined history of these brides, has died. To reuse Saint Phalle's somewhat violent title, the individual woman has been crucified on the cross of male-dominated humanity, nothing remains of her but a social form, a meaningless shrine to femininity. The artist affirms this: 'The bride is a sort of costume [...] clearly totally bankrupt of individuality.' (Centre Georges Pompidou 2009, 51) Beauvoir deploras the institution of marriage and the inevitable generality and loss of personality that accompanies it: 'il s'agit de transcender vers l'intérêt collectif [...] non d'assurer leur bonheur individuel' (1949ii, 234).⁸ The faded whiteness of *La Mariée* also indicates this dearth of personality; life and colour have gradually seeped out of her, there is an absence of all 'élan spontané'⁹ that Beauvoir says is essential for the continuation of a healthy, balanced sexual relationship; one doomed to failure by the 'droits et devoirs'¹⁰ of marriage (1949ii, 254).

⁸ '[It] is a matter of transcending towards the collective interest and not of individual happiness' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 461).

⁹ 'Spontaneous impulse' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 478).

¹⁰ 'Rights and duties' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 478).



The seeming inescapability of marriage and social roles is conveyed by the absolute immutability of Saint Phalle's creations. The bride in *Crucifixion* has had her arms brutally amputated, her torso has been laden with mundane household objects; *La Mariée* is trapped in an extravagant dress: they are denied meaningful action. Beauvoir says inaction and domestic confinement condemn woman to passive immanence: 'La femme est vouée au maintien de l'espèce et à l'entretien du foyer, c'est-à-dire à l'immanence' (1949ii, 226).¹¹ Saint Phalle's brides are similarly doomed to immobility and immanence, because of the constraints of their bodies and attire, and also on a more literal level, because, as lifeless sculptures, they will not be moving anywhere fast. That sculpture has been chosen as the medium is significant: the viewer identifies with the bride in that he or she occupies the same spatial dimensions, thus heightening the empathy with an *être-en-soi* whose desires to act will forever be frustrated.

A real body is also notably occluded from the identity-searching works of Annette Messager, where the viewer is presented with collections of objects surrounding an existence. Beauvoir enlightens us here: 'Parce qu'elle ne *fait* rien, elle se recherche avidement dans ce qu'elle a' (1949ii, 263).¹² In one installation, entitled *Les Piques* (1992-93), black steel spikes impale a diverse range of domestic objects. Soft toys dangle limply in a skewered mass of limbs, objects veiled in opaque stockings form unidentifiable hanging protrusions, an assortment of drawings, maps and photographs are similarly impaled, overlapping each other and partially obscured by other offerings. Similar to Saint Phalle's brides, *Les Piques* is a commotion of *things* that indicate generality over individuality, compounded by the hosiery-covered objects. We assume the bizarre shapes beneath the stockings are just as foreign to the absent owner as they are to us; thus on a figurative level, parts of this woman's identity are *other* even to herself. Messager revels in the use of veils and netting for this reason: 'I have always worked with things that are covered, half hidden, half revealed' (JCA). The latent eroticism in *Les Piques* is



¹¹ 'Woman is destined to maintain the species and care for the home, which is to say, to immanence' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 455).

¹² 'Because she *does* nothing, she avidly seeks herself in what she *has*' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 484).

inextricably linked to violence: the phallic metal spikes literally penetrate the soft objects; a male force *invades* the domestic sphere. We witness a violent conflation of male and female, of sharp and soft, of barbed wire and toys. Messenger's inspiration was indeed grounded in violence: 'Clearly I was thinking of the pikes from the French Revolution' (Centre Georges Pompidou 2009, 70). However the composition also contains *potential* for women to be violent: during the French Revolution there were many examples of militant feminism; seven thousand armed women participated in the March to Versailles in 1789. The artwork is ambivalent then; perhaps women are the active agents in the stabbing of the toys, perhaps this is a violent protest against their situation. Violence can be liberating; indeed, to follow Beauvoir, it is essential in the transcendence of the individual beyond her situation.

Yet despite the underlying violence in her work, Messenger does not explicitly explode the myth of the feminine by presenting an original identity for women. On the contrary, she began her artistic career by playfully exploiting conventional female identities: in assuming them herself she subtly subjected them to ridicule. Before any misogynistic critic could label her, she labelled herself: she is variably 'Annette Messenger collectionneuse', 'Annette Messenger artiste',¹³ 'shameful Annette Messenger' or 'shameless Annette Messenger' (JCA). Critic Sophie Duplaix neatly summarises this categorisation in her book title *Annette Messenger – Conteuse, truqueuse, ensorceleuse* (2007).¹⁴ These lists of categories mirror those repeated by Beauvoir in the chapter *Mythes*, where she examines the endless stereotypes of woman perpetuated by multiple strands of European culture, from the Holy Bible to Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, from the Cinderella myth to Breton's *Nadja*: 'La mere, la fiancée fidèle [...] victimes, coquettes, angéliques, démoniaques' (1949i, 312).¹⁵ Messenger thus fights against the commonly held stereotypes of women and women's art by appropriating them. Traditionally domestic materials such as fabrics, dolls and stuffed toys dominate her work, as do typically "feminine" art forms like knitting and hanging arrangements. In *Ma collection de proverbes* (1974),¹⁶ she employs the quintessentially feminine technique of embroidery to depict a series of woman-related proverbs. Embroidered on white cotton squares in a diagonal, capitalised, child-like scrawl, the presentation is one of innocence, which sits at odds with the powerful sweeping generalisations of the proverbs:

'La femme a des jupes longues et l'esprit court,'¹⁷

'On peut compter sur la fidélité de son chien, et sur sa femme, jamais.'¹⁸

Most devastating for the viewer is not this contrast between style and significance but rather the realisation that these proverbs are the product of their own society. Read as an ensemble, the proverbs seem more than a little ridiculous and incoherent. This reflects exactly Beauvoir's point on the sheer senselessness of the myth of femininity: 'Il existe une pluralité de mythes incompatibles [...] les hommes demeurent rêveurs devant les étranges incohérences de l'idée de Féminité' (1949, 396).¹⁹ Messenger makes no value judgments; by honing in on one particular

¹³ 'Annette Messenger the collector', 'Annette Messenger the artist'

¹⁴ *Annette Messenger – Storyteller, Cheat, Sorceress*

¹⁵ 'The mother, the faithful fiancée [...] victims, coquettes, the angelic, the devilish' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 215).

¹⁶ *My Collection of Proverbs*

¹⁷ 'Woman has long skirts and a short mind'

¹⁸ 'You can count on your dog being faithful, but on your wife, never.'

¹⁹ 'This is a multiplicity of incompatible myths, and men are perplexed before the strange inconsistencies of the idea of Femininity' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 276).

element of culture, uniting it as a collection and presenting it in an all-too-conventional way, she mischievously undermines it.

Message herself said she sought to ‘displace rather than change, rather than submit’ (Conkelton and Eliel 1995, 18). And she does succeed in evading submission to a masculine order, to a typically male way of creating art, whilst also making subversive social comment. As far as a Beauvoirian legacy can be traced, both she and Saint Phalle effectively undermine social roles and society’s desire to categorise the Other, they dramatise Beauvoir’s notion that gender is far from natural, all with a splash of irony characteristic of Beauvoir’s writing style in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (see for example her crucifixion of misogynist writer Claude Mauriac (1949i, 36)).

In some ways these artists develop Beauvoir’s ideas further, adding significance through different forms such as sculpture, photography and collection. Furthermore they leave an ethical space between the viewed and the viewer, where the latter is left to squirm with his misguided preconceptions rather than face direct accusations, giving their work a haunting, compelling power. Yet evaluating how far they have won the battle launched by Beauvoir for the free woman creator, the philosopher would probably suggest that they fall a little short. No artist succeeds here in going *beyond* the given, in recreating the world anew, they rather seek to undo what has been done: ‘Jane Austen, les soeurs Brontë, George Eliot ont dû dépenser négativement tant d’énergie pour se libérer des contraintes extérieures qu’elles arrivent un peu essoufflées à ce stade d’où les écrivains masculins prennent le départ’ (1949ii, 634).²⁰ However these women have made a recognisable contribution to this battle: at least they *are* using creative energy to liberate themselves, in the existentialist sense of creativity as an active transcendental force. The atmosphere of violent conflict in their works proves they have indeed taken up arms against woman’s situation; even if their artworks do not arrive at a coherent, transcendent sense of self, they aim to subvert the accepted status quo and, in the case of Message’s later works, there is a subtle implication that woman’s identity is not as immutable and inescapable as it may initially appear; the violence done to woman *could* be reappropriated, those revolutionary pikes *could* be picked up and wielded in angry protest against her imposed identity and unopposed alterity.

The Body – Extreme Extreme Tension

Having studied artworks in which the body is eclipsed, our focus will now turn inwards to the site of woman’s body itself. ‘Le corps n’est pas une *chose*, il est une situation,’²¹ says Beauvoir (1949i, 73), aligning herself with existentialists like Sartre and Heidegger. She accepts that certain aspects of woman’s anatomy predispose her to immanence, characterising the stages of woman’s biological development as a series of crises. Language of conflict is used to describe these stages, for example, during menstruation she is prey to a foreign life (67), during pregnancy the species *invades* woman’s body (68), and the menopause is a ‘crise difficile’ (68).²² The clash between the individual and the species is made manifest: ‘Le conflit entre ses intérêts propres et celui des forces génératrices qui l’inhabitent s’exaspère’ (62).²³ Here, Beauvoir’s

²⁰ ‘Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters and George Eliot had to spend so much negative energy freeing themselves from external constraints that they arrived out of breath at the point where the major masculine writers were starting out’ (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 763).

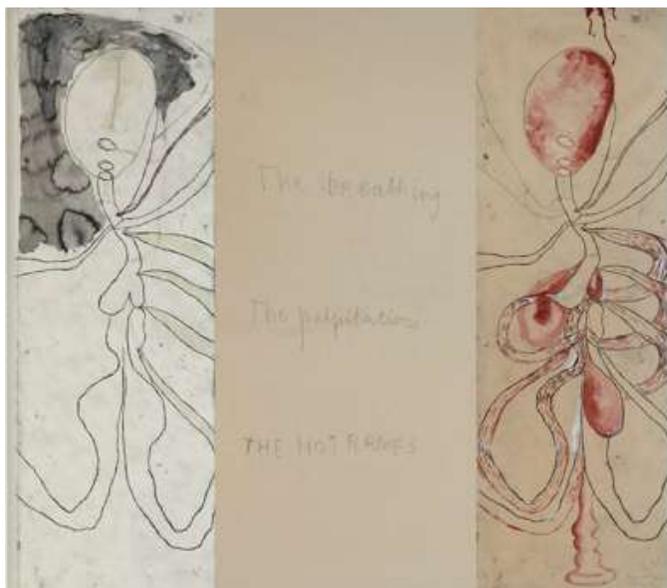
²¹ ‘The body is not a thing, it is a situation’ (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 46).

²² ‘Difficult crisis’ (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 43).

²³ ‘The conflict between her own interests and those of the generating forces that inhabit her exasperate her’ (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 39).

syntax itself flags up the lack of choice women have in being accorded the reproductive function; a transitive verb replaces a personal pronoun; the ‘forces génératrices’ are not her own, they actively inhabit her. In woman’s situation, the species often prevails over the individual, reproduction over production, and by extension, woman is condemned to sit rather than stand, to endure pain and weakness rather than enjoy health and strength, thus can easily fall into the trap of passive immanence rather than active transcendence.

Louise Bourgeois’ oeuvre *Extreme Tension* (2007) resonates particularly clearly with Beauvoir’s discussion of woman’s anatomy. A set of eleven panels depicts a textual breakdown of the human body followed by a woman-identified experience of it, beginning with a list of isolated body parts and ending with a short yet haunting description of the resulting pain and tension. The child-like text, written in capitals using graphite pencil, is illustrated by an assortment of prints highlighted with watercolour, portraying fragmented, distorted body parts, sometimes complementing the text (Panel 6), and sometimes dislocating it (Panel 8). This blurring of the mind and body (or language and body) represents a confusion of the social and the biological, which is interesting from a Beauvoirian perspective, concerned as she is with the mythologisation of what is natural. The text ‘THE ARMS/FOREARMS/HANDS/FINGERS’



(Panel 6) is complemented by two blood-red hands with ten thin red trails extending vertically upwards from the fingers. The trails evoke a sense of pain and frustration, as if the hands had bled on the page and are now clinging desperately onto life. Critic Charlotte Szmargd sheds light on this: ‘L’ensemble décrit un processus d’angoisse menant à la mort’ (Szmargd, 1).²⁴ The woman-identified nature of the series becomes clear with the text ‘The breathing/The palpitations/THE HOT FLASHES’ (Panel 9), flanked as it is by two deformed women figures. The violence done to woman’s body by the ‘fonctions génératrices’ becomes clear: the relatively static greyscale figure

transforms into a dynamic, blood-coloured being. The style and outline of the two figures are almost identical, forcing the viewer to focus on the metamorphosed areas. The previously recognisable contours of breasts, hips and ovaries are distorted in the red figure; there are suddenly extra protrusions, bulging curved shapes encircle the being, evocative of gigantesque veins. Filled with tiny red dashes, the image conveys a sense of wild movement, perhaps evoking an invasion of the body by sperm from the male, perhaps showing that woman’s body is subjected to a frenzied flow of blood; either way, the woman herself is under siege. Most significant is the red pool emerging between the legs of the woman: this is a depiction of menstruation. The red monochromaticity extends to the head, suggesting that the palpitations and hot flashes are not just limited to the core of the physical body, but are also inextricably linked to the psyche. This echoes Beauvoir, who says mental anxiety is inevitable with the onset of

²⁴ ‘The entire work describes a process of anguish that leads to death’

menstruation, partly because of hormonal change, but also as a result of physical and emotional trauma arising out of the myriad myths surrounding the natural process (1949i, 66-7). The figures' disturbing faces, eyeless and unseeing with mouths open in a silent scream, illustrate 'le conflit espèce-individu' (1949i, 68),²⁵ like Saint Phalle's brides they have ceded their subjectivity to the species. Panel 8, 'THE PAINS/and/CRAMPS,' is more ambiguous; sperm-like shapes all "swim" in one direction, creating a sense of movement with their curving tails, the middle third is a mass of densely packed vertical black lines: is this an allusion to sperm or to pubic hair? Either way, the alert viewer concludes that the 'pains and cramps' arise from maternity. The various life stages represented in the panels, the recurrent notions of blood and movement, mean the work as a whole symbolises a grapple against mortality, particularly significant in light of the fact that Bourgeois was ninety-five when creating it.

Extreme Tension may not be directly inspired by *Le Deuxième Sexe*, especially as it was created nearly 50 years later, but it certainly proves that the anguish experienced by women in relation to their bodies was still as alive in 2007 as it was for Beauvoir in 1949. The final, haunting panel of the collection, 'The smell of the hunted animal,' encapsulates Beauvoir's ideas about woman's corporeal situation. Beauvoir wants to throw off the veils of mystery surrounding women's physiology and to present us with the facts: she even carries out a detailed study of the females of the animal kingdom. That woman is an animal that smells, bleeds and develops is important to the philosopher: woman must grasp her carnal condition in order to re-conquer her dignity as a free, transcendent subject (1949i, 190). However her physiology does not make this easy for her, she must fight against enemies that seek to make her their prey, whether this be the 'forces génératrices,' the species, or man himself. *Extreme Tension* dramatises this effectively: the two-dimensionality of drawings and prints, the simplicity of the text and diagram format, lends the piece the quality of a child's biology book; these are the facts of life. Yet the distorted, nightmare-like women, the violence of the recurring claw-marks and the brutality of the final words reveal a latent anger, a personal protest against the impersonal force of nature, and also a call for empathy with women, whose bodily situation induces real physical and psychological suffering, and worse, whose bodies are *hunted* by others.

²⁵ 'The species-individual conflict' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 43).



Beauvoir dedicates much of *Le Deuxième Sexe* to a study of women's narcissism, a phenomenon so prevalent in women due to the power of the male gaze: 'Dans le narcissisme le regard d'autrui est impliqué' (1949ii, 403).²⁶ Society encourages her to alienate herself in her own image, she must *become* prey, *become* an erotic object, to be accepted by the first sex, and by extension, by the second sex as well: 'La société même demande à la femme de se faire objet érotique' (1949ii, 393).²⁷ Artist Valérie Belin's work *Mannequins* (2001) plays on this idea. This is a series of portrait headshots of women mannequins, whose features – modelled on those of real women – are strikingly realistic. Belin heightens this realism by photographing her subjects in soft lighting, carefully selecting the angle of her shot and working only in black and white. From afar the viewer could mistake the subjects for real women; they align with Western male ideas of youth and beauty, with their symmetrical perfection, defined jaw lines, lustrous hair and full-bodied lips. Upon closer inspection

however, the unsettling reality strikes: the 'subjects' are ironically lifeless objects. The mannequins' gaze is a little too glassy, the skin a little too painted. The viewer's attempt to distinguish between living subject and inanimate object flags up the fallacy of women's narcissism in their ambition to transform themselves into an *être-en-soi*; because regardless of how hard they try, they *are* an existent: 'C'est cette confusion avec un objet irréel [...] parfait [...] comme un portrait ou un buste qui la flatte' (Beauvoir 1949ii, 398).²⁸ Upon viewing the mannequins, perhaps the woman viewer understands the sheer impossibility of society's desire for her to be object when she is aware of herself as a carnal being. Beauvoir's chapter on development of gender as a child is enlightening here: young girls are encouraged to alienate themselves in dolls, yet in Belin's work, women and dolls are almost indistinguishable; the mannequins are 'belle comme une image' (1949ii, 28)²⁹ precisely because they *are* images, thus the viewer must acknowledge the absolute artifice and unfeasibility of the process. The layering of different artistic media serves as a sort of *mise en abîme*; this is art within art, a sculpture is painted and then photographed, heightening our sense that the woman-object is ridiculous: 'You wonder if it's a photograph of an object, a photograph of a painting, or a painting of a photograph' (Benedictus 2008). The absolute immutability of the *être-en-soi* is reinforced twice: once by the frozen temporality of the photograph, once by the frozen spatiality of the sculptured form. Perhaps the male viewer's sexual desires are thwarted once again, as he realises he cannot

²⁶ 'Even in narcissism the gaze of the other is involved' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 593)

²⁷ 'Society even requires woman to make herself an erotic object' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 586).

²⁸ 'It is this confusion with an unreal object [...] perfect [...] like a portrait or bust, that flatters her' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 589).

²⁹ 'Pretty as a picture' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 304).

objectify an object. Like the works of Bourgeois, Belin's *Mannequins* force an acknowledgement that woman must be an embodied subject in order to interact with other existents.

Bourgeois and Belin's oeuvres dramatise Beauvoir's thought on the ambivalence woman experiences in relation to her body. On the one hand, the body is a burden, 'un fardeau : rongé par l'espèce, saignant chaque mois' (1949ii, 511),³⁰ a source of shame because of the mythologisation of natural processes. But on the other, her body is 'son double merveilleux', a 'vivante statue' (511),³¹ inversely because of the naturalisation of the myth of feminine beauty. Both artists fight to dismantle the myths surrounding woman's body, critiquing the way social associations with the body are considered natural, negating the repulsion and mystery surrounding female genitalia, frustrating the male tendency to objectify the body and raising an eyebrow at woman's narcissism born out of this objectification. They distort body parts, presenting the viewer with something at once familiar and unfamiliar, male and female, life and art, thereby liberating woman's body from the shackles of an expectant gaze.

Art in Action, Art in Arms

Le Deuxième Sexe is a call to arms for women in our male-coded world; existence is characterised as a constant battle to affirm one's sovereignty over the Other, and sex is described in terms of the conqueror and the conquered: 'Le vocabulaire érotique des mâles s'inspire du vocabulaire militaire' (1949ii, 151).³² Laying out her existentialist ethic in *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, Beauvoir stresses that violence is imperative in breaking out of the prison of oppression: 'L'opprimé ne peut réaliser sa liberté d'homme que dans la révolte, puisque le propre de la situation contre laquelle il se révolte est précisément de lui en interdire tout développement positif' (1947, 123).³³ As with existence itself, women in creative spheres had to prove they were physically prepared to fight in order to gain ground. It is therefore fitting that women artists in France began to implicate their own bodies in performance art, often in a subversive, violent fashion that left polite bourgeois society reeling. The desire of the artists to perform is particularly existentialist: theatre is the prime art form, say existentialist thinkers, because of its power to reveal the truth of the human condition. Sartre said theatre should present situations where human freedom is threatened through universal 'conflicts of rights'; characters and performance duration should be reduced in order to focus on the violence of these conflicts (1973, 31). In the 1960s and 1970s, several French women artists enacted women's situation and the threat to their freedom, creating situations of violent conflict between their own bodies and other media, and between themselves and the spectator, often with a splash of black humour and a defiant stare at the recording cameras. Following Beauvoir's ethic for existence, the women artists achieve positive development by actively revolting against a situation that strives to prevent just that.

³⁰ 'Weakened by the species, bleeding every month' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 672).

³¹ 'Her marvellous double', a 'living statue' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 672).

³² 'Males' erotic vocabulary is inspired by military vocabulary' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 397).

³³ 'The oppressed figure can only achieve their human freedom through revolt, since the particularity of the situation against which they revolt is precisely to prevent them from any positive development.'

One such artist is ORLAN, her name already bursting out of convention with its loud capitals and refusal of gender categorisation. Her body is integral to her work: in 1977 she



astounded the French public with a performance called *Le Baiser de l'Artiste*, where she stood outside the Grand Palais art gallery wearing a mounted black and white photograph of her naked torso in front of her torso itself, in a dramatic refusal of immanence. Passers-by would drop five francs into a slot labelled 'Introduire 5F,'³⁴ which would land in a transparent drawer positioned in front of her genitals; the 'tiroir-pubis,'³⁵ then they would receive in exchange a kiss on the mouth from the artist, ending abruptly a few seconds later when a screaming siren announced time-up. ORLAN thus satirises the economic function of the woman's body; *Le Baiser* exaggerates the idea that sex is a service and that woman is an object to be bought on the market, strongly echoing Beauvoir: 'L'acte amoureux est [...] un service qu'elle rend à l'homme ; il prend son plaisir et il doit en échange une compensation' (1949ii, 227-8).³⁶ Yet ORLAN's offer is not made in the sanitised protection of marriage or in the hushed darkness of the brothel; it is exposed to the public gaze, thereby subverting the society that would rather not accept the prevalent juxtaposition of a supposedly romantic act and cold, hard currency. The performance transforms the typically one-way system

of the male gaze: the male viewer struggles to objectify the woman's body because the active woman subject is staring boldly back at him, daring him to objectify her. Man is suddenly forced to recognise the subjectivity of the artist and of woman's body: she returns his gaze, she acts, she moves, she challenges. If he accepts her offer, he must also accept an *intersubjectivity* between himself and the artist, he must recognise her own right to freedom. The performance forces the enactment of the existentialist ethic itself: 'L'existentialisme est la morale d'une liberté intersubjective' (Noël 1997, 69).³⁷ Furthermore, the male viewer finds that he himself is the victim of a powerful gaze, that of the public around him, he is suddenly on the *other* side of the prison bars. The eroticism of the situation is defused, partly because of man's fear of societal judgment, partly because the artist defiantly renounces soft femininity in favour of a machine-like structure, where a drawer of coins replaces her sex organs. By emphasising the artificiality of the situation, ORLAN fights against society's tendency to naturalise woman's position as *other*. That she uses performance to demonstrate this is particularly significant in light of existentialist thought, which states that all attempts at realism in the theatre are futile, and that

³⁴ 'Introduce 5 francs.'

³⁵ 'Pubic drawer.'

³⁶ 'The love act [...] is a service she renders to the man; he takes his pleasure and he owes compensation in return' (Borde and Malovany-Cheallier 2009, 456).

³⁷ 'Existentialism is an ethics of intersubjective freedom.'

the actor is more rooted in the unreal than other artists: ‘Son matériau, c’est sa personne, son but: être irréellement un autre’ (Sartre 1971, 664).³⁸

Using herself as her material, but confusing the boundaries between self and other, artist and artwork, life and art, ORLAN pioneered a new art form in the early 1990s: plastic surgery. Her method is both existentialist and feminist: making radical use of her individual freedom she shapes herself, for herself; she engaged the help of a feminist woman doctor, Dr. Marjorie Kramer, to perform the procedures, but chooses the nature and form of the surgery herself. The choice of wording in this description is significant: ‘Active pendant l’intervention, elle ne "subit" pas mais orchestre l’opération : elle lit des textes, dialogue avec le public via les transmissions vidéo par satellite’³⁹. Her most famous work and operation, *Omniprésence* (1993), involved the insertion of facial implants, the most striking of which were cheekbone-lifting devices on each side of her forehead, creating a large protrusion above each eyebrow. In so doing ORLAN defies conventional ideas of female youth and beauty, paradoxically using a form traditionally used to attain these very things; she casts off narcissism by irreversibly distorting her facial features. She wanted to destroy the myth that women are victims, saying pain is a thing of the past: ‘La douleur, c’est quelque chose d’anachronique [...] On peut accoucher sans douleur’ (Jeffries and Soldal 2009). She sets up her own face as a site of violent conflict, and braves what is surely painful (one operation had to be completed in two stages such was her agony), in the name of art and woman’s transcendence towards autonomous freedom. She uses her body as a weapon to help women shatter the binary identities and traditional ideals of patriarchal society, furthermore, she presents women with an alternative: she creates, invents, pioneers, often using violence, and always using herself as an active subject, to create a multiplicity of identities and an open future of ever expanding possibilities. Beauvoir describes existence as ambiguous, saying ‘le sens [n’est] jamais fixé, il doit sans cesse se conquérir’ (1949, 160).⁴⁰ ORLAN enacts this ethic, constantly defying meaning, constantly winning her liberty anew.

The enactment of this ethic for existence as prescribed by Beauvoir is also seen in the performance art of Niki de Saint Phalle. Her iconic works, *Les Tirs* (1961), were examples of a painting technique pioneered by the artist herself. She first prepared wooden boards covered with aerosols of coloured paint, hidden under a layer of white paint. She would mount the boards in a line on the wall, take a rifle, and shoot rapid rounds of bullets at them, making the paint spurt and flow over the boards like blood. The noisy and brutal performances were documented with video and photography, and the colourful boards were later exhibited, such that the act itself transcended its temporal confines – its violent action continues in the bullet holes and the flowing streaks of paint. The juxtaposition of the “feminine” youth and beauty of Saint Phalle, with the rifle, the bullets, the spewing paint, the destruction and the look of angry resolve across her delicate features is somewhat startling; this is the ultimate marriage of art, violence, transcendent energy and Beauvoirian freedom. In destroying something old, Saint Phalle creates something new; a vivid kaleidoscope of colour and



³⁸ Their material is their very selves, their aim is to be an unreal other.’

³⁹ <http://telemaguetime.free.fr/Orlan.htm>

⁴⁰ Meaning is never fixed, it must ceaselessly be won anew.

movement is left behind; blank orderly canvases become shrines to unfettered energy and charisma. Armed with the typically male weapon of a gun and a male readiness to violence, Saint Phalle explodes preconceptions of the demure, passive woman of the 1960s, metaphorically creating a new and colourful identity out of the smoking ashes of the remaining materials. The artist spoke on the importance of violence in self-affirmation: 'Il existe dans le cœur humain un désir de tout détruire. Détruire c'est affirmer qu'on existe envers et contre tout' (Saint Phalle 1994, 67).⁴¹ This idea of destroying something in order to recreate it afresh recurs in Louise Bourgeois' 'Je fais, je défais, je refais' (1999-2000), and is the crux of the Beauvoirian existentialist ethic. Critic Ruth Evans neatly summarises: 'For Beauvoir, ethical autonomy is predicated on action. It is an identity that must keep performing itself' (Evans 1998, 13).

We have seen empty shells of identity; subversion of the given by appropriation of the given, we have seen confused bodies; defying objectification through distortion, now with Niki de Saint Phalle and ORLAN, we see a combination of the above, coupled with powerful originality, relentless aggression and absolute freedom. Their very approach to the creation of art seethes with a Beauvoirian existentialist feminism, the artists are undeniably the active agent in their creations, indeed, to some extent they *are* their creations; ORLAN's irreversible and repeated operations demonstrate that identity is never a fixed essence, but must be constantly won again. True to Sartrean ideas on the purpose of theatre, the artists do not strive towards realism but towards truth and freedom. Using the revelatory power of performance, the artists expose the truth of woman's situation, and using the staying power of art, they ensure that their *re-creations* endure; they effect lasting change through their individual freedom. As Beauvoir posits in her penultimate chapter of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, this freedom is primordial in the development of genius and in the advancement of humanity: 'L'art, la littérature, la philosophie sont des tentatives pour fonder à neuf le monde sur une liberté humaine : celle du créateur ; il faut d'abord se poser comme une liberté' (1949ii, 637).⁴²

Conclusion

Postmodernist critic Ruth Evans speaks on the 'uncanny effect of belatedness' (1998, 1) of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, pointing out that its status as the cult book of 1966 was only recognised in 1996.⁴³ Will Self, writing in the Observer Life magazine, defined a cult book as a 'text that influences mainstream culture only after its slow diffusion through the traditionally thin ranks of the avant-garde' (in Evans 1998, 1). And indeed, there was a momentary pause even between the publication of *Le Deuxième Sexe* and the emergence of bold women artists actively and publicly striving for women's equality; twelve years separated the book's appearance and Niki de Saint Phalle's first firing shots in 1961. But slowly diffuse to mainstream culture that momentous work undeniably did, a diffusion begun in creative arts in the 1960s; trails blazed by the likes of ORLAN and Saint Phalle, and continued in the 1970s by politically engaged feminist movements. Artist Annette Messager says of French feminism: 'France is a Latin country where machismo is important, but it's also the country of Simone de Beauvoir [...] French feminism

⁴¹ 'There exists in the human heart a desire to destroy everything. Destroying is affirming that we exist in the face of, and in spite of, everything.'

⁴² 'Art, literature and philosophy are attempts to found the world anew on a human freedom: that of the creator; to foster such an aim, one must first unequivocally posit oneself as a freedom' (Borde and Malovany-Chevallier 2009, 764).

⁴³ Award given in a British promotion organized by The Observer and Waterstone's in 1996.

tries to integrate the past into the present' (in McKenna, 1995). And many of Beauvoir's precepts are still as relevant today as they were in 1949; the oppressed housewives of the 1950s might well be long gone, motherhood is increasingly a free choice, yet women are still far from achieving parity in the workplace (only 26.9% of French parliamentary deputy roles granted to women in 2012⁴⁴), and the cult of the image is more pronounced than ever, accentuated by the rise of photograph-based social media and pervasive "sex sells" advertising campaigns. As Beauvoir presciently predicted, once the myths of her age had been exploded, there would undoubtedly be new ones to replace them (1949, 407).

Beauvoir's legacy on modern French visual art is not necessarily a flowing chronological trajectory of change, but is rather a heritage of ideas, a model of creativity interpreted variously by women artists over the past half-century. The keystones of this legacy are Beauvoir's historic differentiation between sex and gender (dramatised by the lifeless social roles of Saint Phalle's brides), the impossibility and the futility of the conflicting myths of femininity (exemplified by Messager's contradictory identities and collections), woman's ambivalent relationship with a body that is at once a carnal life force and an object of desire (vivified by Bourgeois' infantile yet nightmarish panels and Belin's eerily lifelike *Mannequins*), and finally, an ethic for existence, a revolt for personal freedom (played out by ORLAN's *Le Baiser de l'Artiste* and "omnipresent" plastic surgery, and Saint Phalle's rounds of live bullets). The very public nature of the performance art proved that these women refused to pass under the radar. Like the philosopher herself, they were examples of true creative genius in the existentialist sense of the term: they posited themselves as freedom in order to create the world anew. Most importantly, in all the artwork examined there is a strong undercurrent of violent conflict, whether this be to subtly subvert the given or incandescently explode it. Although these pioneering women have made monumental progress in the battle for women's art, they must by no means lay down their weapons. For, like the battle of the sexes and the battle for individual freedom, the battle for women creators must be constantly fought, constantly re-conquered: it is ultimately a 'bataille sans victoire' (1947, 160).⁴⁵

⁴⁴ <http://www.countingwomenin.org>

⁴⁵ 'A battle without victory.'

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Cover image: ORLAN, *Le Baiser de l'Artiste*, 1977.

Source: <http://www.centrepompidou.fr/>

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Source: <http://alexiamedici.com/2011/01/12/niki-de-saint-phalle-at-the-centre-georges-pompidou-paris/>

Figure 2: Niki de Saint Phalle, *Crucifixion*, 1963.

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Figure 3: Annette Messenger, *Les Piques*, 1992-1993.

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Figure 4: Louise Bourgeois, *Extreme Tension* (Panel 9), 1997.

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Figure 5: Valérie Belin, *Sans Titre No.7, Mannequins*, 2003.

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Figure 6: ORLAN, *Le Baiser de l'Artiste*, 1977.

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Figure 7: Niki de Saint Phalle, *Les Tirs*, 1961.

Source: <http://elles.centrepompidou.fr/blog/?p=609>

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