

Vertical Sun

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Abstract: Deeply influenced by Antonio Gaudi's work, in particular Park Güell in Barcelona, French-American artist Niki de Saint Phalle (1930–2002) began a twenty-year project which would see her create her own sculpture garden in Tuscany. During the making of what she referred to as her garden of paradise, Niki endured the debilitating symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis amongst other illnesses and personal setbacks. Antonio Gaudi, who also suffered from arthritis, refused to let the pain of his condition stop him from persevering with his visionary work. The connections between Niki de Saint Phalle, Antoni Gaudi, arthritis and the making of their respective public gardens draw upon the performative nature of creativity as a means of coping with obstacles. The gardens themselves perform as places where people can be authentically transported and have their personal responses to what essentially are themed spaces detailing memories, stories, myths and legends.

Keywords: Niki de Saint Phalle, Antonio Gaudí, Rheumatoid Arthritis, Public Gardens

Introduction

When I encountered the work of French-American artist Niki de Saint Phalle (1930 – 2002), I was searching for artists who used Tarot in their art. I was particularly interested in an artist's use of Tarot as a kind of lens or framework, through which one could create meaning and tell stories that tapped into ancient wisdom but did not take itself too seriously.

Not only did I find a woman who was courageous and unflinching in her passionate desire to realise a dream, I found a woman who flew in the face of society's expectations of her role in life. I found a woman who embraced her many illnesses and used her pain to drive what appears to be a limitless imagination. What good fortune to find this woman who had dedicated almost twenty years of her life to making a Tarot garden in Tuscany.

And what an astonishing garden it is. A public sculpture garden stunning in its aspect but like many gardens remaining unfinished, ongoing, still growing. The art of repair and restoration is constant.

During my research into Niki's life and garden I realised I needed to research the way her experience of rheumatoid arthritis shaped her work and her self. The years she spent making her garden were the years that the disease spread and impacted on all aspects of her life. Learning of her deep admiration for Antonio Gaudí's work at Parc Güell in Barcelona and the discovery that he too suffered from arthritis yielded interesting connections for me. What follows is a series of observations detailing my own touristic experience of Niki's garden and Gaudí's park, interspersed with short creative extracts, the latter presented as an imagined dialogue that Niki had with Gaudí.

One

Approaching the surprisingly stark entrance with its fortress-like wall made of sandy-coloured tufa stone with a giant Chinese moon gate at its centre, I sense that once beyond this architectural austerity I might be in another realm. I am right. Past the sign,



past the rubbish bin and through the steely moon gate, I walk the gentle hill toward the glittering monoliths of artistic endeavour surrounded by trees under a shimmering morning sky. Entering this garden is like walking into a kaleidoscope. Such endless colour, wherever I turn. Such a myriad of shapes and mirrors pulling my gaze in all directions. Inside the garden the sound of water coming from the fountain leading to the High Priestess sculpture recedes, yet it is always in the background and even if not quite hearing the water while passing through Niki's visionary mosaic

versions of the Tarot's major arcana, I know it is always there.

Moon gate, rubbish bin and sign

Two

Groups of tourists are buzzing around the place, taking photo after photo. I wait for mine in numerous places, caught up with the desire to memorialise. I want my photographs to have no people. I want my pictures to be a recording of the art in place. I listen to the chit-chat of the tourists who sound mostly French. I love French and happy to practise my school girl version and express "Excusez- moi, Merci, Oui, Oui, D'accord." I'm so many thousand miles from where I live in Australia, and here I am in a garden in Italy made by a French American artist with mostly French tourists and

Italian staff. My polite tourist-self waits and occasionally I find magical moments empty of people. Later I see that many of my photos do have people in them but in the end this doesn't really matter, it just seems an important thing to look at each photo and still experience myself there. I wonder about the people; who is and who is not comfortable in the freeze-framed spontaneity. I observe the human dynamics under the pressure and pleasure of experiencing this touristic garden, but that is not my focus. I want to look at this place as though I have x-ray vision. I am completely entranced by the amount of work done here. Not just the creative installations but the landscaping and concreting must have been daunting at times. I think of Niki's hands and how the rheumatoid arthritis was forcing the bones in them to form shapes and bumps like small individual knots and trees growing underneath her skin. I imagine her there on the worksite, consulting, fretting, laughing, crying, kneading the clay and breaking up mirrors. My photography skills are pretty much limited to point and shoot. Later I am glad I have been so trigger happy, each picture reminding me of walking those steps. The steps of Niki de Saint Phalle's garden, so many of them etched with her statements about life. Messages announcing credos, mysteries, names, personal thoughts, stories, numbers and symbols. It would take weeks to read everything.



Niki's steps, and pathways

Three

A well kept garden is a legacy and a sculpture garden is not unlike a house or a series of houses proclaiming look at this, this is mine, yours, this is ours. Progress. We need to tend it. Breathe it in. This is belonging. It is very feminine.



Beyond the moon gate

Four

The organic shapes of Niki's sculptures invite a tactile response. I can see why people liken the experience of visiting the Tarot garden to visiting Disneyland. It does have a cartoonish theme park look to it with bird creatures, angels, giant snakes, and totems everywhere, such a collision of colours, enormous eyes and lips featuring on almost every sculpture. Patterns, names and images of body parts populate the tiles on the curvy walls. But Niki's garden is not Disneyland, it is based on the archetypal nature of Tarot and speaks of ancient knowledge and being.



Sunlight on Wisdom

Five

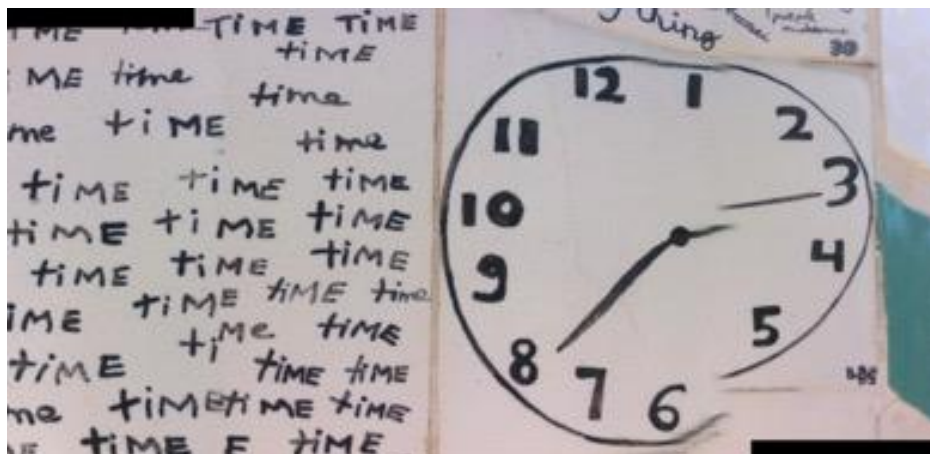
So many bodies clambering, clicking, dropping, running, walking, staring, drinking, smiling-selfies, group shots everywhere. The general ambience of laughter and chatter among the many children and adults taking it in confirm this as a happy place, one that inspires joy, wonder and reflection. I believe this is exactly what Niki wanted from her garden.



The Emperor

Six

When Niki first saw Park Guell she experienced what some might say was revelation, a vision of her future life. She believed she had met both her master and her destiny. Imagine that, experiencing someone else's garden feeling that you had found a kindred spirit in the creator of that garden and knowing that you had to build your own paradise. Of course, imagining and actually following through are two different things. So often many of us just live in the world of wanting and not doing. Attempts are fraught by distraction and we end up with a semblance of what we thought we could do. So a garden grows.



Me Time

Seven

The garden is nestled on a small hill near the Tuscan coast. On that hill you can see the ocean shining in the distance from many standing points, pathways, vistas and windows made by the many human hands that assisted her to bring her dream to a reality. It was a love-in of sorts. And with that came the gamut of human emotion.



Niki's garden

Eight

For her the garden was an obsession, and once started there was nothing and no one who could stop her. Her capacity for suffering was tremendous because along with all the hard work that goes into realising such a project, Niki was experiencing her body failing; the pain of rheumatoid arthritis in her hands and wrists was beginning to tell. For several years she disregarded the pain in her hands, believing she could conquer it with willpower. Why she ignored the symptoms is not for anyone to know, not even her. It later puzzled her. But she was determined to be her own healer relying on the theories of healers. Deep down she knew the pain was inextricably linked to her output as an artist. For her the pain was like a flag that waved, demanding that she divert her attention to another driving force, that of her art.



The 'A', looks like a girl

Nine

During the building of the garden, Niki would shuffle her Tarot pack to decide which sculpture she and her many collaborators would work on next ...

I imagine her saying, “Okay! Here is The Tower today ... Oh well, trouble will come! C’est la vie! Boom!” Apparently during the construction of the pavilion that would become The Tower, which in Tarot terms, simply put, is a card of destruction and renewal and chaos, there were many setbacks experienced by those involved; including accidents, betrayal, sickness and death.



Towering

Ten

Not being able to hold anything in one’s hands has deep ramifications for anyone, let alone a sculptor. But Niki found a renewal with every setback and kept on going. She was in her own words, “bewitched” by the contract she had set herself for making the Tarot Garden. Her self-portrait circa 1958 – well into a life of many ups and downs, great happiness as well as mental disharmony mixed up with early childhood trauma, pain and debilitating bouts of arthritis – shows a picture of a woman made up of pieces. Not only did she experience rheumatoid arthritis but she also suffered from lung

conditions which were exacerbated by the use of her favourite material, polyester. In the picture all the fragments of mosaic and broken shards of pottery reveal her shattered self posing yet she seems so whole with her queen-like demeanour, her large eyes looking slightly to the left. Of particular interest to me are her hands, so ill-formed along with the markings on her face, which are perhaps connected to the strong drugs she finally started taking including cortisone steroids. In later photographs of Niki one can see the emergence of what was referred to as the cortisone moon face. The drug was used liberally and considered the wonder drug of the time. Once on that prescription road of drugs coursing through her with the rapidity of a snake, Niki was able to withstand the side effects and sideswipe her pain. She felt stoned most of the time but that was nothing compared to the excruciating and desperate sensations that wracked her body before the drugs kicked in.



Niki de Saint Phalle, Self Portrait, 1958. Source:
<http://parisoriginals.blogspot.com.au/2014/10/niki-de-saint-phalleart-provocateur.html>

Eleven

In Niki's garden despite the gaudiness (no pun intended) and Disneyisation qualities inherent, there is an overarching sense of a spiritual place, or perhaps even a small village, or even a tiny planet. A brightly coloured gift to the world and testament to the

tenacity of an artistic temperament who dared to show everything about herself through her garden. In some ways the bright colours and her trademark childish handwriting she uses everywhere to convey her stories speak of the part of her that remained a child and perhaps this part of her was the artist. Gifting it to others, past, present future with an endless energy despite her difficulties. An experience of the power of art and nature. Just like Gaudí's Park Guell, it took years to build and was fraught with problems but yielded a place where people could lose themselves. I imagine the artisans who found themselves working there often thought, "this is maybe my fate."



My everything tile

Twelve

Not willing to open her eyes she lies wishing for some invisible healer to enter her room and through all the little mirrors that cover the walls and ceiling, beam an energy that would fight the disease she knows is advancing but chooses to ignore. With eyes squeezed shut and trying to block out the small intense stabbing pain flashing in her right wrist she shifts her shoulders against the mattress and lifts the blanket to her chin. She hears her husband arrive in the kitchen downstairs. She is surprised to hear him since she thought he was staying with his lover who lives hours away. Perhaps they have fought again. He calls up to her and tells her he has adjusted the kitchen taps so she can turn the water on with her feet. Such a clever and thoughtful husband.

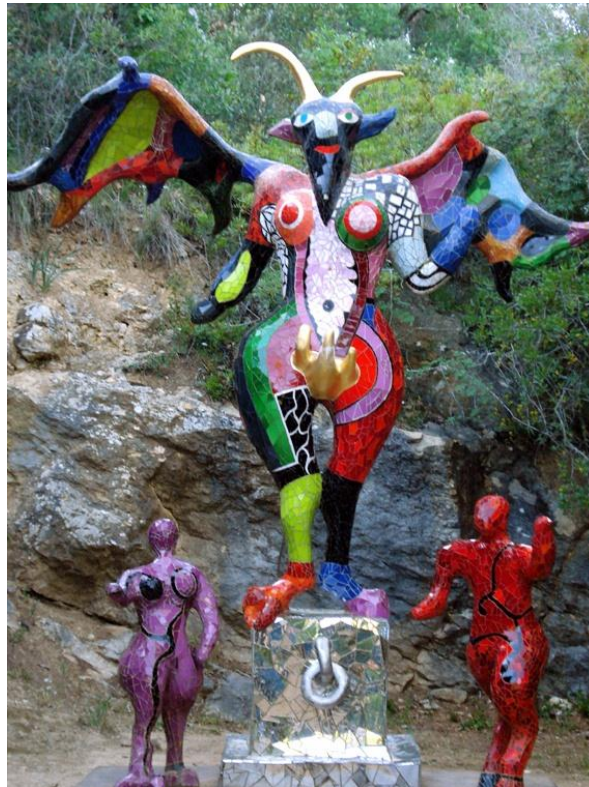


Inside the empress, downstairs in the kitchen

Thirteen

I think of the day you were hit by that tram. I also think of the tram driver who swore at you and barely stopped except to shove you aside then continued driving as though he had just hit a dog that no one cared about. Did the driver go home and tell his family and laugh about his ability to be on time or did he tuck the incident away in the back of his mind? I imagine your confusion about suddenly lying on the ground and feeling the devastating clarity of knowing the extent of your injuries. They say you were often vague but your mind was as vivid as the shape of the serrations your towers make against any coloured sky. You would have known this was the end. I do wonder if you felt humiliation when the one or two people who tried to help you could not get anyone else to assist. When I ponder this, I realise that despite your broken ribs and other internal injuries, what would have troubled you the most is how your work would go on without you. I worry about the same thing with my own work. My hands often feel as though a blue fire is burning in them. Particularly my right one, it seems to have a life of its own in comparison to the other aches. When this happens I sometimes think of what others have said about your eyes. I embrace this blue-sky transparency lit by the sun and I get to work. This week has been hard because we are trying to finish the Devil sculpture and it has been devilish from the start. Nothing has been helped by J storming in and yelling at me to stop being a martyr. Don't get me wrong, he has cried

about my hands too. This open marriage of ours has done nothing for his fiendish temper or his judgement of me. Do you think that had I lived earlier, you and I could have been married and we would have loved each other solely and the only mistresses in our lives would have been our sculptures? I'm such a crazy romantic, I learned about love through the movies. Harpo Marx was my first imaginary love. He was the silent one of the Marx brothers, I think he would have thought your work superb. Perhaps that young woman you once thought you loved could have been me. Instead of God you would have had me to talk to. Together we might have painted a city red, just as simply as I painted the fig leaves red on all the Greek statues at school when I was twelve. They sent me to a psychiatrist and I felt that I was going mad after that. Many say you were mad. We could have been madly in love. When I told J my joke about you and me and mad love, he gave me one of his dark stares and told me I needed to up my doses and get moving on The Devil plans or else. *Merde!*



The Devil, Niki style

Fourteen

This last fortnight has been filled with doctors and pinpricks and x-rays. I officially have rheumatoid arthritis, RA as they call it, and with my lung condition being such a problem for so long, I am it seems, quite complicated. I am too skinny and moody so they have put me on all sorts of pills for my weight, for my pain, for my bones, for my brain. They have a pill for everything. My daily doses look like a handful of lollies. The days pass and the drugs begin to work, I notice changes in myself. I feel a renewal.

Everyone at the garden is laughing more because it seems the drugs make me speedy and with that comes a new energy and a sense of joy because I can now model the clay again without wanting to scream in frustration at my hopeless hands. J arrived yesterday and is not impressed with H being around. J is here to work on The Justice pavilion which stands tall above the garden. Its scaffolds rise up against the night sky capturing the cool stars blinking in the distance. J is looking stern when he tells me he wants to return to live in the garden with me. He does not ask, he simply tells. H left the following day and the hurricane of J stopped swirling and things settled in to the familiar pace of intense work and play. I feel happier not because of J necessarily, although he makes me happier, but because the drugs are allowing me to stay here and tend to so many marvelous details.



The Justice pavilion

Fifteen

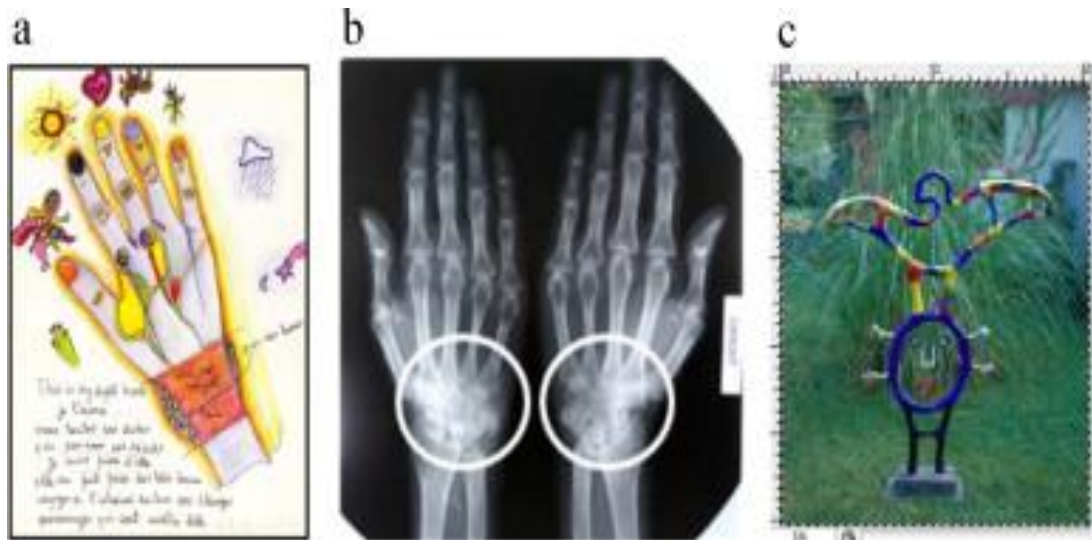
Already dealing with my hands malfunctioning I notice my right knee complaining as I walk down stairs. I have created numerous stairways in my garden and often wondered about the irony of me making paths for what would be my future knee now navigating the steps that my then now knee was making.



Wrapping paper found in a Mexican shop, Barcelona

Sixteen

Think of me making the stairs with back-breaking effort or semi-not-quite-more accurately- think of me making those - back-breaking stairs - with others doing the Herculean effort of shoveling earth and moving it around with me watching and participating as best as I could; ordering, some would say dictating but essentially participating with as much energy as I had. Quite a lot, actually. Think of me later walking down those now made stairs and many others, which I have not made but making, and see me faltering. Twinges of regular sharp and breath-taking pain that implied, this is what's wrong. What are you going to do about it? Ignore? Go to a doctor? Eat better? Drink more water? It wasn't until recently, when I fell hard on my right knee and hit the concrete like we were one that I acknowledged the synchronicity of both J and I having right knee injuries. Needless to say, our relationship is suffering. We actually have to do something practical about it. For me I have to attend to the scab on my knee which clings to clothing like skin does to bone. It looks angry and intense. I am worried. For J, he needs to attend to his desire for other people whose scabs are unknown yet waiting to be peeled. He is worried. Your vow of celibacy was only ever threatened when you fell in love with a young American woman who did not return your affection. Affection unreturned sends the same kind of pain signal to the brain as the one that will tell me my right wrist is in agony.



Source: Alcocer-Varela, J & Hinojosa-Azaola, A 2014, 'Art and rheumatology: The artist and the rheumatologist's perspective', *Rheumatology*, Vol. 53, no. 10, pp. 1725-1731.

Seventeen

So far my hands and my knee are the casualties. J's knee is giving him grief but he goes on as though nothing is wrong with it. The garden is growing and from the bare bone structures of thin steel rods tacked into place the foundations of each piece are being realised. Some days I feel like giving up. As the days grow colder my lungs feel on fire. It as though all of me is inflamed. I am fighting against this crippling bone disease and consider it a fight with death. These last few months have been about making The Death sculpture and death in my world is a glittering, somewhat faceless, voluptuous woman astride a blue shining horse. She is positioned away from the main pavilions. She is tucked away in a special place designed for her, designed for people to come across and inhabit the space and contemplate. It is a daily torment watching my hands becoming so deformed but it is a delicious feeling watching Death be realised with such beauty. I am proud and defiant but the pain is defeating me. If you were here I think you would say to me the same words you said to your assistant on the evening before your final day on this planet – Come early tomorrow, so we can make some more beautiful things.



Death with Blue Horse

Eighteen

When visiting Park Güell recently, it took me quite a while to take one particular shot without tourists in the picture. The photo captures the giant mosaic lizard that Gaudi always patted in the mornings on his way to his studio. I had to wait for ages. Everyone it seems wanted their wife, their friend, their child, themselves to be seen with the lizard. The touristy trinkets taking the form of that lizard fashioned into key rings, t-shirts, placemats, coasters, jewelry and stuffed toys are everywhere to buy in Barcelona but are clearly not enough. The picture is not great but I did manage to capture a pigeon alighting on the lizard's head. And I captured a moment with no tourists. As ridiculous as it sounds, it was as if the pigeon was waiting for me waiting for the tourists to move along. A question I think about is what this garden would be without tourists? I suppose pigeons would be there regardless.



**Ricardo Obispo, Gaudi working in his studio at the Sagrada Familia.
Source: www.barcelonaexperience.com**

Twenty

In your last years you apparently fashioned your own shoes out of horsehair and leather. I would have liked to help you make your shoes so they didn't look so strange, but you would not have wanted any decorations, certainly no adornment for you in your personal life and knowing what I do about my own bones I understand how no other shoe could have accommodated the debilitating pain of arthritis. Others thought you were growing more eccentric and fanatical. They didn't understand that the stern grimacing look on your face was from clenching your teeth to keep the pain at bay.

Twenty-one

It was your shoes and your bandages that contributed to the fact that no one recognised you as their famous Catalan architect on that fateful day you were hit by a tram. What a tragic comedy of errors played out. They thought you were a tramp and as a result you languished in the hospital and died three days later in bed 19. This happens to be the number relating to The Sun in the Tarot, of course, but that would be neither here nor there for you. I imagine you would have scoffed at the Tarot and ranked it as

belonging to the vacuous world of the bohemian types such as Picasso who ridiculed your work and what you believed in. I loved Picasso's work but we, and when I say we, I mean practising artists, had to watch ourselves around him just in case he took an idea and ran away with it. J was highly amused by Picasso. He was so good at anything he did. Even Picasso would have hung his head to learn the news that by the time anyone had realised who you were it was too late. The sun may as well not have shone that day.



The Sun in mosaic

Twenty-two

Inside Niki's bedroom, which is inside The Empress pavilion, there is little need of stars. It surprises me that the bedcover is so plain but perhaps it needed to be in the presence of so much colour and so many mirrors. So many cut and tiny mirrors on every surface broken up with coloured mosaic tiles detailing pictures and symbols. Imagine always looking at yourself in tiny fragments. Then again perhaps when afflicted by rheumatoid arthritis, an important part of coping might be to see oneself in this shattered way, perhaps having that diversity of images of oneself while lying in bed or standing up getting ready for the day offers a positive view as small as it might be. Possibly it gave Niki some hope about not just becoming her illness, perhaps looking at her reflection in different shapes and sizes as she lay in her bed helped her keep everything in perspective. For Niki, life was filled with obstacles but she learned to love obstacles because she drew strength from overcoming them and greeted the next hurdle as a challenge towards her ultimate goal in attaining inner peace. For her this peace was in her Tarot garden – her garden of paradise – born of a dream in Spain where she stood in awe of another's garden and trembled with the knowledge that this was her destiny.



Made bed and mirrors



The Life in mosaic

Note: all photographs taken by Mari-Ann Bragge except where indicated.

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Marianne Bragge completed the Associate Degree in Creative Writing at Southern Cross University in 2015, during which time she obtained a scholarship to go to Barcelona and work on 'Vertical Sun'. She is currently completing her BA at SCU and recently completed a course at Oxford University Creative Writing Summer School as part of her ongoing academic pursuits. When not writing studying, and traveling, Marianne is a freelance theatre director with the Australian Shakespeare Company and moonlights in a variety of arts-related roles with other companies and individuals. Marianne also holds a Diploma in Dramatic Art from the Victorian College of the Arts.