

NIKI DE SAINT  
PHALLE

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# NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE

THE STORY OF HER LIFE

Edited by Balthazar Pagani



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# NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE: THE ART OF SELF-ASSERTION

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by Monica Foggia

Catherine Marie-Agnès Fal de Saint Phalle, known as Niki (b. 1930, Neuilly-sur-Seine; d. 2002, San Diego), was a painter, sculptor, and director. She was born in France to Jeanne Jacqueline Marguerite Harper, an American heiress, and André-Marie Fal de Saint Phalle, a French banker of aristocratic origins. There she spent the first three years of her life, entrusted to the care of her grandparents following the financial collapse of her father's company, and joined the rest of her nuclear family in New York in 1933. Thanks to her dual Franco-American nationality, she was naturally multilingual and possessed a cosmopolitan approach to life.

In 1948, her artistic leanings first began to manifest. She began experimenting with literature and theater and expressed a desire to become an actress. After her marriage to the writer and musician Harry Mathews and the birth of their two children, Laura and Philip, she began painting.



Following a severe nervous breakdown and hospitalization in a psychiatric clinic, the long-repressed memory of the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her father in the summer of 1942 re-emerged, and in 1994 she found the courage to tell her story in the book/letter *Mon Secret (My Secret)*. During her hospitalization, she discovered that painting can be an effective form of therapy and decided to dedicate herself entirely to art.

In the 1960s, she consolidated her fame thanks to the performance of the *Tirs*, or *Shooting Pictures*. With the intention of giving a new and different life to the work of art, Niki and the audience shot guns at plaster reliefs into which she had embedded bags of liquid paint and everyday objects. Through the seemingly violent act of shooting a gun and destroying the artwork, Niki de Saint Phalle liberated herself from the burdensome ghosts of her own past. The artwork and the artist die, only to be reborn; they explode and tear into a multitude of shreds, only to re-assemble themselves into something—and someone—completely new and profoundly ephemeral and, therefore, purely human.

Some time later, strongly attracted by the idea of a new world founded on a matriarchal society, she began to work with the female figure and its generative power. Thus the famous *Nanas* were born: direct heiresses of the Goddess, the Great Mother, they concentrate in themselves the principle of birth-life-rebirth. They are free and healthy bearers of joy.

Meanwhile, she became close to the Nouveau Réalisme movement and met Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jean Tinguely, with whom she fell in love and married after her divorce from Harry Mathews. Between Tinguely, the creator of complex mechanisms capable of operating gigantic structures, and Saint Phalle, there immediately developed an especially fruitful artistic partnership that would last until the death of the Swiss artist in 1991.

In 1966, she created the installation *Hon (She)*, a gigantic, voluptuous *Nana* constructed inside the Moderna Museet of Stockholm. This monumental sculpture laying on her back measured twenty-eight meters (82 ft.) long, six meters high (20 ft.), and nine meters (30 ft.) wide, and could receive within her visitors of all ages, who then emerged from her vagina as if they were being birthed. Created from the artist's inspiration, this Goddess housed within her a small world—a milk bar, a planetarium, a love-seat sofa, a twelve-seat cinema, a gallery of fake paintings, a sandwich vending machine, a payphone, and a postcard display, all of which were allegories of the deep meaning of the piece: the female as the origin of everything. For *Hon's* construction, Saint Phalle counted on the collaboration of not only Jean Tinguely but also other artists such as Per Olof Ultvedt and Rico Weber.

In the years immediately following, Saint Phalle vehemently criticized public housing projects as sources of ugliness that prevented the less well-off social classes from accessing the enjoyment of beauty and happiness. She dreamed of building a *Nana Town*, a fairy-tale place where she would be able to develop a new, matriarchal conception of life.

From 1980 to 1996, with the support of Tinguely, Weber, Sepp Imhof, and a staff of collaborators, she created her Tarot Garden in Italy, near Grosseto, between the towns of Garavicchio and Capalbio. In the quiet of the Tuscan countryside, Saint Phalle finally managed to give substance to a dream she had been pursuing for years: a garden of joy and imagination where nature dialogues with art and art harmonizes with nature. The Tarot Garden consists of twenty-two monumental sculptures inspired by the Major Arcana of the Tarot deck. The figures are covered with mosaics of mirror, Murano glass, and Italian ceramic tiles. In the Tarot Garden, as in *Hon*, the artist continued to reflect on the idea of the power of the feminine. Among the various

monumental sculptures, one that stands out is *The Empress*, in which the artist lived for eight years. The interior consists of a space without right angles, rounded and curved, almost like a womb; the bedroom and the kitchen are situated within the breasts of a veritable Great Mother. Saint Phalle detested right angles; she was terrified of them. On the other hand, she loved roundness and undulation; and this is the key feature of the Tarot Garden: curves and movement, in an eternal flow. The sinuousness of the pool and the sculptures is emphasized even more by the ceramics and the mirrors, which refract and diffuse the light of the sun.

With her health deteriorating from chronic lung disease caused by exposure to glass fibers and other toxic materials, she moved to California, where she continued to work on private art pieces and public commissions, including the sculpture *Coming Together*, completed in 2001 and located in the plaza near the entrance to the San Diego Convention Center. With this, the last of her monumental works, she tried to respond to the aggressive tendencies of the Western world and express hope for the “clash of civilizations,” creating an icon capable of uniting the female and male genders and encouraging dialogue between peoples.

Niki de Saint Phalle was a multifaceted artist and a conscious woman whose nightmares of the past and dreams of a happy world invariably merged in her own personal and artistic experience. She was adept at balancing on the edge of the various facets of her personality, passing through and interpreting the contradictions of the second half of the twentieth century, making her, beyond doubt, one of the greatest artists of the last century.





This publication wishes to pay homage to her through the telling of both her private and her artistic life, between painting and sculpture, Nouveau Réalisme and archetypal and mythological symbols, performative art and public art, and between feminism, glamour, anti-racism, and social issues. The stylistic and narrative choices made for the realization of this biographical graphic novel were dictated by its focus on the unique features of her aesthetic vision and interpretation of the world; it narrates some of the most significant moments of her lived experience and the genesis of a part of her artistic production.