



Niki de Saint Phalle



Acknowledging the diversity of her artistic output

Niki de Saint Phalle is known above all as the creator of the *nanas*. After she made a large donation of 400 works to the Sprengel Museum in Hanover in November 2000, she thanked director Ulrich Krempel for making his selection representative of her work as a whole and in particular for taking her then almost unknown early works into account.

Ulrich Krempel:

“As represented in her donation to the Sprengel Museum in Hanover, Niki de Saint Phalle’s work spans a period of five decades. We are still scarcely capable of taking it in as a whole, given the great richness and wealth of her output. Too many groups of works, too many individual projects still remain to

Niki de Saint Phalle,
La Fête – Donation Niki de Saint Phalle, 2000.
Color print, 84 × 59.3 cm, Collection
Sprengel Museum, Hanover

“ I’ll never forget the day I realized they were famous. I must have been 13 or 14 when Keith Haring came to visit. He kept taking Polaroids of them and acted like a complete groupie – and I was his groupie! When I was growing up, I’d tried and tried to show off by talking about these



Niki de Saint Phalle in Hanover,
November 2000

be discovered and followed up. But it is now clear how extensive, diverse and apparently contradictory this oeuvre is, and how unconditionally Niki de Saint Phalle as an artist clung to her dream of the necessity of art.”

.....
Niki wrote:
.....

“Dear Uli, it matters to me very much that you put the emphasis

of your selection for the Sprengel Museum on my early work ... at last to be SEEN as an artist who not only did nanas but also had other facets and different periods in her work. As human beings, we all try to become a whole and to integrate the various parts of our personalities. And now, thanks to you, your collection and presentation, I finally feel I’m a whole artist and recognized as such by the art

world. It has taken almost 40 years for it to happen.”

crazy people, but no-one ever knew what or who I was talking about. And suddenly there was this artist I’d admired for some years, and he acted with Jean and Niki the way I acted with him.”

— Bloum Cardenas, about her grandmother, Niki de Saint Phalle, and Jean Tinguely.



Art and the public

Niki de Saint Phalle was a young woman of 31 when she became a public figure on the art scene. She literally “shot her way to fame,” to quote a pithy remark in one exhibition catalogue. Shooting her own pictures so as to make new works of art not only smoothed her way to the top of the art scene. Such actions also aroused the interest of the media worldwide, who were attracted by the novelty and flamboyance of such performances.

■ Shooting Star

Contemporary photos in newspapers and periodicals often showed Niki de Saint Phalle with her weapon trained either at one of her pictures or challengingly at the viewer. Art historian Ulrich Krempel remembers how, in Germany, these messages from Paris represented “a promise of a wholly different life in and around art. ... There was as yet no sign of the new models proclaiming from Paris that art also had to do with life, in a society in which war, torture and violence were on the agenda. The arrival of Niki de Saint Phalle introduced an artistic concept to public life making it clear that being an artist didn’t end with producing works of art. ... The young woman who redirected the aggressions of society back at the pictures and the representatives of society in the pictures was one who spoke of morality and of the responsibility of the artist, of a public moral role for the artist that we had not seen articulated for some time.”

Through her public appearances Niki de Saint Phalle also became symbolic of a new attitude among female artists. She didn’t want to subordinate herself to the male-dominated art world. With her decidedly feminine appearance, she represented the woman who could look after herself, the modern Amazon, as she sometimes featured in the popular media of the time – for example, as the Barbarella figure played by Jane Fonda in the film of the same name, or as the cult secret service agent Emma Peel played by Diana Rigg in the British TV series *The Avengers*. Long before feminism in art, the public image of Niki de Saint Phalle represented a challenge to traditional gender roles. It also represented new forms of experience and expression that would be continued

left
Niki de Saint Phalle,
Notre-Dame de-Paris,
1962. Photomontage



Niki loading her rifle at a shooting session in the Impasse Ronsin, 26 June 1961

overtly and in far more complex fashion in the 1970s by women performance artists such as Marina Abramović, Valie Export, Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke.

With her shooting paintings, Saint Phalle soon found herself welcome among the Nouveaux Réalistes. She also became acquainted with the leading artists of the time such as Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and Frank Stella. In the Parisian artist colony in the Impasse Ronsin, she got to know Larry Rivers, who is now considered one of the founding figures of Pop Art. She met gallery owner Leo Castelli and American artist Edward Kienholz. Marcel Duchamp introduced Niki and her partner Jean Tinguely to Salvador Dalí, who invited her to contribute to a bullfight in his native town of Figueras in Catalonia. Niki and Jean constructed a bull that exploded into a thousand pieces at the end of the presentation. Niki's many contacts with people in the art and culture business – musicians, theatre and museum personalities, gallery owners and sponsors – undoubtedly contributed to her early and enduring success.

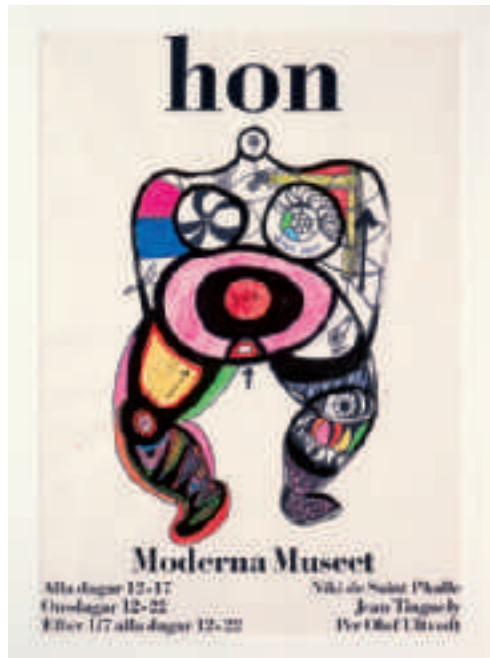
New York had its first encounter with Niki de Saint Phalle in an exhibition of assemblage art at the Museum of Modern Art in 1961, which prompted a flood of press comment about her work in newspapers and periodicals (over 50 articles). In the 1960s came gallery exhibitions in Paris, Los Angeles and London. A long, close collaboration began with the Alexandre Iolas Gallery in New York, one of the most important commercial galleries for modern art, whose artists included Max Ernst and other Surrealists. Alexandre Iolas supported her financially, furthered her reputation and acted as an artistic mentor. It was also through him that she got to know leading Surrealists such as René Magritte.

■ Creator of the *nanas*

Another important art event took place in 1966, with the exhibition of the monumental *Hon* sculpture at Moderna Museet in Stockholm. It attracted more than 100,000 visitors, who entered the huge architectural sculpture through a large opening between the legs to explore the various displays inside (see the chapter on *Art*). Once again, Niki de Saint Phalle was in the media limelight. Being a hit in Sweden proved critical for her subsequent career by attracting many commissions, for example from the French government for a piece for the French pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal, which – like *Hon* – she would do jointly with Jean Tinguely and the Swedish artist Per Olov Ultvedt. The *nanas* became a favourite motif, as monumental

Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely, *Homenaje a Dalí* (Homage to Dalí), Figueras, 12 August 1961





public sculptures, walk-in buildings and stage-sets. In Roland Petit's ballet *Éloge de la Folie*, the dancers involved *nanas* in the choreography, and *nanas* appeared on posters at the Paris Théâtre de France advertising works by the celebrated choreographers Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor.

In fact, the *nanas* became synonymous with the artist's work – “Niki – nana, no one needed to say more. I found that very depressing,” said Niki de Saint Phalle, looking back during an interview. Her shooting paintings passed into oblivion, like many other facets of her work that were largely ignored. Though Alexandre Iolas had been happy to purchase her early works from 1962, he was unable to sell them. Even when they were shown in various other galleries and museum exhibitions at the initiative of curator Pontus Hulten, they aroused little interest.

Not long after the shooting pictures, the *nanas* provided a counter image of self-determined, self-assured femininity. *Les Nanas au Pouvoir* (Nana Power) was what Niki de Saint Phalle called the first public show of her sculptures, at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1967, anticipating the ideas of the emerging women's movement. “They're having a giggle,” wrote Pierre Descargue in the catalogue of the exhibition. “The best thing is always to enjoy



left
Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely,
poster design for the exhibition *Hon*, 1966.
Gouache and felt pen on paper, printed,
100.2 × 70 cm, Museum Tinguely, Basel

middle
Dancer with *nana* figure in the ballet
Éloge de la Folie, 1966

right
First exhibition of *nanas* in the Iolas Gallery
in Paris, 1965

yourself at others' expense. And, gentlemen, this one is on us. They trample on our bodies, our army and our morals, they attack our philosophy, and do the splits on our *patrie* – the traitors!”

■ International recognition

The acclaim was greatest in Germany, where gallery owners and art institutions in Düsseldorf and Hanover, Munich and Baden-Baden exhibited her works. In 1968, her first play, *Ich*, was performed at the Staatstheater in Kassel in a production by Rainer von Diez, for which she also did the stage sets, costumes and posters.

In 1980, the Centre Georges Pompidou put on the first retrospective of her work, which subsequently toured various European cities. The first presentation of her entire work in America took place in 1987 at the Nassau County Museum of Fine Arts in Roslyn on Long Island. In the 1990s, there followed other retrospectives at major European and American art institutions. The Association Française d'Action Artistique, which focuses on promoting French culture abroad, also organized a touring exhibition to major museums in Central and South America, including the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Caracas in Venezuela, the Pinacoteca do Estado



above

Performance photo from the play *Ich* by Niki de Saint Phalle and Rainer von Diez

right

Niki de Saint Phalle and Rainer von Diez, *Ich*, 1968. Screenprint, 84 × 61 cm, Staatstheater, Kassel

in São Paulo in Brazil, and the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires in Argentina. Major international exhibitions continued after her death in 2002, such as the presentation of *Dreams of Midsummer: Works of Niki de Saint Phalle*, which toured museums in China, Taiwan and Korea in 2006, and the exhibition at Tate Liverpool in 2008.

In 1994, Niki de Saint Phalle was awarded the Swiss art prize *Caran d'Ache Beaux-Art*. In 2000 she received the *Praemium Imperiale*, the Nobel Prize for art. In the encomium, it says: “Niki’s work encourages us to ignore all conventional divisions in the arts, between painting, sculpture and architecture, high-brow and low-brow, permanent and ephemeral, even conventionally proper and improper. It is, instead, fun.”

**Staatstheater
Kassel**



**Niki de Saint Phalle
Rainer von Diez**



Niki de Saint Phalle, *Bénédicte*, 1965. Fabric sculpture, 100 × 120 × 75 cm, private collection



Niki de Saint
Phalle, *Black Venus*,
1965/66. Polyester,
height 280 cm,
Collection Whitney
Museum of American
Art, New York