



Spring 2016

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Riley, Lucy Kay, "Niki de Saint Phalle: The Female Figure and Her Ambiguous Place in Art History" (2016). *Student Publications*. 498.
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Abstract

Niki de Saint Phalle had a fearless approach in her representation of women and her invitation of audience interaction. Born in 1930, she lived through the years of very male dominated areas of art: Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Neo-Dada. Niki de Saint Phalle provided a unique treatment of the female figure through drawing, painting, writing, found object sculpture, large public sculpture, and installation. One of the pieces I will primarily focus on embodies her fascination with audience interaction and the portrayal of the female figure: her controversial and temporary installation of 1966, 'SHE – a cathedral.' In comparison to other prominent artists of the time, I will investigate how Saint Phalle's consideration of popular themes, such as the female figure, fit into the time period, and how her work was publicly received. Furthermore, I will answer how her version of what makes a woman beautiful or useful or significant fit in with the artwork of artists during this time with different backgrounds. I will also address how her wide variety and identity as female artist, as well as her inter-nationality, contributed to her somewhat ambiguous place in art history.

Keywords

Niki de Saint Phalle, Feminism, Nana, Contemporary art, she - a cathedral

Disciplines

Art and Design | Fine Arts | History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology | United States History | Women's Studies

Comments

Written for ARTH-400: Seminar in Art History and presented at the Central Pennsylvania Art History Symposium at Bloomsbury University.

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Niki de Saint Phalle: The Female Figure and Her Ambiguous
Place in Art History

Lucy Riley
5 April 2016

It's 1966 in Stockholm, Sweden and you're invited to enter in between the legs of the giant, reclining, pregnant Nana entitled *She - a cathedral* (Figure 1) by French-born artist Niki de Saint Phalle. What is a Nana? Firstly, she is a woman, but unlike what you may have seen before. Her curvy, colorful, larger-than-life body is portrayed as both beautiful and powerful. You follow the crowd inside of her as organ music by Bach plays, not knowing what to expect.¹ You step into her womanhood, through her vagina and into her compartmentalized body. Although you are penetrating her, you do not dominate her, *She* engulfs you. Her open legs do not signify submission. You hear the whispers of lovers' secrets from another room. You stop at the milk bar for a drink. The movie theater continually plays a Greta Garbo film.² There is a gallery of fake paintings lining the wall. Continuing through her labyrinth interior, you bump into other visitors, not knowing what or who you will encounter next.

Niki de Saint Phalle, the creator of the Nana figure, had a fearless approach in her representation of women and her invitation of audience interaction. From 1930 to her death in 2002, she lived through the years of male-dominated art movements such as Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Neo-Dada. Saint Phalle provided a unique treatment of the female figure through drawing, painting, writing, found object sculpture, large public sculpture, and installation. She created a series of female figures called Nanans in the 1960s that depicted her idea of feminine beauty; the proud, voluptuous figures were full of joyful movement and bright colors. These energetic works grace the public spaces of various countries from Japan to Italy to the United States. They are portrayed in active poses, breaking free from the passive role that has traditionally characterized the female figure. Her largest Nana figure, the controversial and

¹ Jo Ortel, *Re-creation, self-creation: A feminist analysis of Niki de Saint Phalle*, (Stanford University, 1992), 270.

² Benoit Antille, "'HON – en katedral': Behind Pontus Hulten's Theatre of Inclusiveness," *Afterall: A Journal Of Art, Context, & Enquiry*, (2013): 76.

temporary installation of 1966, *She - a cathedral* (Figure 2) is especially significant in how essential the audience interaction is to the piece.³ Saint Phalle's consideration of the female figure will be compared to other prominent artists of the time and will be analyzed as to how they fit into the time period, and how her work was publicly received. Furthermore, the question of how Saint Phalle's version of what makes a woman beautiful, useful or significant will be examined. Saint Phalle's identity as a female artist, as well as her inter-nationality, contributed to her somewhat ambiguous place in art history. Her artwork as a whole has been categorized in many different movements such as Neo-Dada, Pop Art, Folk Art, Outsider Art, Nouveau Realism or overall avant-garde. This paper will attempt to find a cohesiveness within the place of Saint Phalle as an artist, focusing specifically on her Nana figures, in order to highlight the possible reasons for her lack of recognition within feminist art history.

Personal Background

Saint Phalle grew up in a wealthy, French-American family. She was born in France, but spent a good portion of her childhood in the United States. She married at age 18 to an American man and soon after had two children. They moved to France in 1951 and she worked as a fashion model, (Figure 3) but otherwise served as a wife and mother.⁴ During a trip to Barcelona in the early 1950s, Saint Phalle was exposed to the work of Antonio Gaudi. She was very much inspired by his use of mosaics and of his Park Guel. The use of mosaics and a space that includes active audience participation like that of a park or garden will be seen in Saint Phalle's work

³ This installation is also commonly referred to by its Swedish name, as it was exhibited in Sweden: Hon – en katedral.

⁴ Henning Zeidler, "Le Dialogue De Niki De Saint Phalle Tout Au Long De Sa Vie Entre Art Et Maladies : Traumatisme Psychologique Lié à L'abus Sexuel, Déficit Sélectif Transitoire En IgA, Exposition Professionnelle Aux Matériaux Plastiques Toxiques, Pathologie Pulmonaire Chronique, Polyarthrite Rhumatoïde." *Revue Du Rhumatisme* 80, no. 3 (2013): 231.

later on. She started creating art during her stay at a psychiatric hospital not long after her visit to Barcelona. Saint Phalle found therapy through her drawing, and not long afterwards she left her family to pursue a career as an artist. In leaving her role as a wife and mother, she was rebelling against the societal pressures of the time and was well aware of it. She is quoted in 1989 in reference to her past,

Remember, I was a person in rage against the patriarchal society, against what roles I was told to assume. I was brought up for the marriage market...I was a very pretty girl, I was supposed to marry a specific kind of person, very rich, etc., -- all kind of things that were supposedly normal for me to do, expected of me. And I rebelled against all of this.⁵

The next stage of her life after this act of rebellion was consumed by Saint Phalle's burgeoning artistic career and the beginnings of her collaborations with Swiss Kinetic sculptor Jean Tinguely. Unlike Saint Phalle, Tinguely was not a self-taught artist. His most famous work, *Homage to New York* received great acclaim when shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1960 in a one-day exhibition.⁶ The two met in 1955 and were to be romantic and artistic partners until Tinguely's death in 1991.⁷ Saint Phalle and Tinguely worked together on many projects starting as early as 1956 and were both initially part of the Nouveau Realism art movement in Paris.⁸

Through Saint Phalle's doodles and drawings, writings and films, and especially in her *Tirs* series, we see her anger toward various injustices in the world, and at her own personal

⁵ Jo Ortel, *Re-creation, self-creation: A feminist analysis of the early art and life of Niki de Saint Phalle*, Stanford University, 1992. 168

⁶ Marilyn Stokstad, David Catford, and Stephen Addiss. *Art History* (Upper Saddle River, N.J, Prentice-Hall, Harry N. Abrams, 2nd ed, 2002): 1140.

Jean Tinguely is known for his association with the New Realists and as a Kinetic sculptor. *Homage to New York* was made out of a variety of materials including "yards of metal tubing, several dozen bicycle and baby-carriage wheels, a washing-machine drum, an upright piano, a radio, several electric fans" and was to self-destruct after being activated.

⁷ Pontus K. G. Hulten, *Jean Tinguely "Méta"* (New York Graphic Society Ltd.: Boston, 1975) Camille Morineau, *Niki de Saint Phalle* (Paris: Grand Palais, 2014)

⁸ Michael Bishop, "Shooting for Transcendence: Niki de Saint Phalle." *Contemporary French art I*. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008)

experience with injustice stemming from her turbulent childhood. Her father had sexually abused Saint Phalle when she was young.⁹ There is an irony in how cheerful her work is overall, despite this trauma. It suggests a want to return to childhood, to rewrite this time in her past as something happy, bright, imaginative and playful, the way childhood should be. Her career, however, did not start out aligned with this theme of playfulness that will remain more or less consistent throughout her career as an artist.

Beginning of Saint Phalle's Art Career

The evolution of Saint Phalle's work parallels a woman's struggle in a man's world: her early works reflected the masculine Abstract Expressionist movement¹⁰ that was popular in the United States at the time, before she began to develop a more personal and individualistic style.¹¹ Saint Phalle's first exhibition was of her *Tirs* paintings in 1961 at the Galerie J. in Paris.¹² The exhibition incorporated performance (videos of her actually shooting at her canvases) and the pieces themselves, which in their emotion, and non-representational forms was reminiscent of the Abstract Expressionist movement. Saint Phalle was known in the United States during this time, even though her first exhibition was in Paris. American artists Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns were involved in the shooting of her *Tirs* series. As described in *The Artist's Body*, Saint Phalle "attached her bags of liquid pigment on to their surfaces, which burst when she or

⁹ Zeidler, "Le Dialogue De Niki De Saint Phalle Tout Au Long De Sa Vie Entre Art Et Maladies : Traumatisme Psychologique Lié à L'abus Sexuel, Déficit Sélectif Transitoire En IgA, Exposition Professionnelle Aux Matériaux Plastiques Toxiques, Pathologie Pulmonaire Chronique, Polyarthrite Rhumatoïde." 232.

¹⁰ Preceding Saint Phalle's career, Jackson Pollock set the example of the macho male abstract expressionist. His wife, Lee Krasner, was also an artist, but has been largely left out due to her gender and her role as Pollock's wife.

¹¹ This is similar to well-known feminist artist Judy Chicago. She, too, started her career by trying to fit in with the masculine mainstream before following her own bodily, feminist style.

¹² Amelia Jones, ed. Tracey Warr, *The Artist's Body*, (London: Phaidon, 2000), 57.

others...fired a .22 caliber rifle at the work.”¹³ This in turn created an exploding effect of color that splashed onto the canvas. Saint Phalle and others indirectly caused the resulting piece of work through this shooting.¹⁴

It was also during this time that she was the only female member of the Nouveaux Réalistes¹⁵, a group started in 1960.¹⁶ Her theatrical *Tirs* performances were responsible for her inclusion into this group of male artists.¹⁷ New Realism was hard to define, but as stated by Berghaus, New Realism is “the Continental-European equivalent to Pop Art.”¹⁸ Members of the Nouveau Réalisme included Yves Klein, Daniel Spoerri, Martial Raysse, Raymond Hains, Jacques de la Villeglé, Francois Dufrêne, and later Christo, Gerard Deschamps and Saint Phalle. These artists varied greatly, and their cohesiveness as a group has been questioned.¹⁹

After she became better known in the art world, her artwork changed dramatically and she never returned to her Abstract Expressionist tendency that initially gained her recognition within the New Realism group that was the start of her career. Perhaps it was strategic, her sexy, tight, white jumpsuit outfits she posed in while holding a rifle (Figure 4), bringing to mind virility and a phallic symbol, in order to gain attention from those who ran the art world: men.

¹³ Amelia Jones, ed. Tracey Warr, *The Artist's Body*, (London: Phaidon, 2000),

¹⁴ Gloria Emerson, “Jean Shrimpton Beware! ‘Nanas’ of Paris Are After You,” (New York Times, October 25, 1965)

As described in a New York Times article by Gloria Emerson in 1965, Saint Phalle “would place objects – such as tomatoes, eggs, or spaghetti – under a piece of wood plaster and then “shoot away” at the plaster to “see what oozed out.” Later she filled spray guns with liquids and then shot at them.” This was another method Saint Phalle used during this stage in her artistic career.

¹⁵ English translation: New Realists

¹⁶ Hulten, *Jean Tinugely “Meta,”* 197.

¹⁷ Collette Chattopadhyay. "A Space of Her Own: Niki de Saint Phalle." *Sculpture* 23, no. 9 (November 10, 2004): *Art Source*, 44.

¹⁸ Günter Berghaus. “Happenings in Europe in the '60s: Trends, Events, and Leading Figures,” (The MIT Press, 1993): 157–68.

¹⁹ *Idib.* 160.

Then, with new connections and a status in the art community, she would be freer to make artwork that expressed her identity as a woman and as a person instead of the ideal, fetishized image previously seen. Or, it is possible that she really was just passionate in her anger and wanted to express that through shooting in order to then be ready to move on to something else. She could have been just been simply not afraid to step into the man's realm of art, not to catch their attention or because she was hesitant to go down her own path, but because she was similarly artistically inclined at that point in time. Whatever the trigger for this early anomaly in her art career, she was immediately set apart from other female artists of the time in this portrayal of conformist sexiness and the violence of shooting guns.

Creation of Nanas

A few years later, the shift away from *Tirs* commenced. The female figure began to dominate, and she started creating her Nana figures during the mid-1960s. The term "Nana" comes from the "French slang for 'girls.'"²⁰ At their origin, Nanas are larger than life-size, have accentuated curvy bodies and small, often hairless and faceless heads. There are no straight lines on their bodies. All the lines are undulating, as Saint Phalle prefers. Nanas spread Saint Phalle's message of what is a beautiful woman; she is "uninhibited" and active: cartwheeling, dancing, arms spread up to the sky, legs kicking out.²¹ Her arms and legs are thick and are often in a pose of action. (Figure 5) The large, yet graceful Nanas can stand on their toes in perfect balance, if Saint Phalle chooses to pose them in that way. They appear effortless, full of joy, and their bright colors make us smile. Saint Phalle emphasizes the positivity of her Nanas; "They were very

²⁰ Gloria Emerson, "Jean Shrimpton Beware! 'Nanas' of Paris Are After You," (New York Times, October 25, 1965)

"...the word also means dames or broads."

²¹ As described by Emerson in 1965.

joyous creatures...Totally without pain. They were dancing, they were dancing to the world of music...They were dancing to joy.”²² Her first exhibition of the Nanas was in Paris in 1965. According to art historian Dr. Nicola Gordon Bowe, these Nanas were made of “chicken-wire, fabric, glue and a textured collage of materials.”²³ This softer, sown material was a common medium of women artist at the time and was considered to be a part of Folk Art.²⁴ Nanas often wear what is described by Bowe as “boldly patterned frocks or bathing costumes”²⁵, which emphasize their curves and almost seem as if they are part of their skin and not clothing at all. These patterns include hearts and flowers, often over the breasts, stripes, which circle the breasts and other parts of the body to emphasize roundness. (See figures 1, 8, 11, 12, &13) Over time, the Nanas turned into public sculpture, and more solid, resistant material was used to ensure permanency.

These “big, frolicking figures”²⁶ became widespread and recognizable as the signature of Saint Phalle. Bowe discusses their popularity in the late 1960s and how “they were seen by some as archetypes of the new liberated woman”.²⁷ Her Nanas populate several countries in private and public collections, as well as in public sculpture. One could suggest that these woman figures have universal appeal, as they are accepted in a variety of cultures throughout the world, such as in Asian countries like Japan and South Korea, and also in the Middle East, Europe and the United States.²⁸ They are accessible and understood in these different contexts.

²² Bishop, “Shooting for Transcendence: Niki de Saint Phalle,” 25.

²³ Nicola Gordon Bowe, *The Bird in the Work of Niki De Saint Phalle*, (Eton Enterprises Ltd, 1988), 31.

²⁴ Sid Sachs and Kalliopi Minioudaki, *Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists 1958-1968*, (The University of the Arts, Abbeville Press, New York, NY).

²⁵ Bowe, *The Bird in the Work of Niki De Saint Phalle*, 31.

²⁶ Emerson, “Jean Shrimpton Beware! ‘Nanas’ of Paris Are After You,”

²⁷ Bowe, *The Bird in the Work of Niki De Saint Phalle*, 33.

²⁸ “Niki de Saint Phalle Charitable Art Foundation,” (2007-2016), nikidesaintphalle.org

Saint Phalle referred to her Nanas as “Earth Mothers”: they celebrate women’s fertility in their body shape and youthful energy. *She - a cathedral*, arguably Saint Phalle’s most infamous Nana, was pregnant. Although the Nana figures are fairly simple in form, their purpose is misunderstood and not always well received. Art historian Michael Bishop mistakenly found a likeness between the fecund Nanas and grandmothers. He goes on to add, “*nana* is the English used by very young children for their grandmother.”²⁹ While this is a true statement, it has no correlation with Saint Phalle’s use of the word “Nana” nor would that grandmotherly association with the word translate to French. One source of the Nana’s power, joy and beauty comes from her fertility; this is why Saint Phalle chose to represent her as pregnant in the *She - a cathedral* installation.

By introducing this new idea of what can be beautiful, Saint Phalle is liberating women. According to Morineau, the curator for the recent exhibition on the artist at the Grand Palais in Paris, “elles sont pour l’artiste le symbole de l’émancipation féminine”.³⁰ Nanas, in all of their gigantic joy and liberty in movement, often seen in public arenas, are a symbol of female emancipation for the artist. Their size and athleticism are admirable and leave us in awe of the freedom they possess. We might even be struck by their colorful, dancing bodies before realizing that they are women. Without hair or a face for makeup, two elements that unnaturally distinguish women from men, what do we notice first? These Nanas were recognized immediately as going against the mainstream depiction of women at the time: They were described as ““anti-Jean Shrimpton” because they represented women who were involved with

²⁹ Bishop, “Shooting for Transcendence: Niki de Saint Phalle,” 25.

³⁰ Camille Morineau, *Niki de Saint Phalle*

“Nanas are for the artist a symbol of female emancipation” – translated by author.

life”. The English fashion model Shrimpton that is referenced is described as having a “blank look and a passive prettiness”.³¹ Nothing about Nanas is passive.

Saint Phalle is quoted in a New York Times article in the 1980s referencing her Nanas; “some men find them aggressive...I think they're warm and friendly.”³² This quote gives us insight into Saint Phalle’s awareness of the male gaze that is inevitable on her Nanas, but she is not deterred by her own opinion of them. It also shows how despite twenty years of creating these figures, Saint Phalle is still facing criticism of her Nanas. She states early on in her creation of the Nanas, “I don’t think a man could have made them (Nanas)...Some people – especially little old ladies – are furious” and “shocked” by them.³³ This gives further insight into the reception of her Nanas at the beginning. They were made for a more progressive society, one that men and older women did not fully understand.

In relation to the larger than life size of her public sculpture Nanas: it has always been the man who is taller, stronger, more powerful and dominant. Bishop quotes Saint Phalle in reference to the size of her Nana sculptures; “I made a few very big so that men would look small next to them.”³⁴ She specifically notes how men would feel in reaction to her sculptures, further emphasizing her awareness of feminism and the differences of roles between men and women. The grandeur of the Nanas challenges the stereotypes of woman as small, petite and quiet. She is large, but still full of lightness and grace in her leaping movements. There is significance in her placement outside as public sculpture. She is not coy nor shy nor confined to the interior.

³¹ Emerson, “Jean Shrimpton Beware! ‘Nanas’ of Paris Are After You,”

³² Angela Taylor, “An Artist with a Sense of Fashion,” (New York Times, September 5, 1982)

³³ Emerson. “Jean Shrimpton Beware! ‘Nanas’ of Paris Are After You,”

³⁴ Bishop, “Shooting for Transcendence: Niki de Saint Phalle,” 25.

Not all of Saint Phalle's public sculptures are of Nanas, many of them include depictions of animals, most commonly snakes and birds, or of male figures as well. There is, however, a consistency to her sculpture that reminds us of her Nanas. They have the same playful, inviting quality. She seems to want the viewers to touch and interact with them. The treatment of the material makes us forget their hardness and we believe in their round, softness. They are often made of shiny mosaics. Although her work is so diverse, she is more or less consistent in her portrayal of the Nana figure, and in the bright, playful colors she uses. This welcoming, interactive aspect of her pieces has a candid quality that may remind us of childhood. She does not attempt to represent her subjects photo-realistically, and she has a tendency towards bright, vibrant colors, and flowing, undulating lines. This tendency toward the use of many different colors that we do not usually see put together in everyday life is reminiscent of children's toys or drawings, as is the overall simplicity of her form. In her handwriting and drawing doodles, one is reminded of a child's diary. (Figure 6)

Nanas became mass-produced in other contexts than sculpture. They were minimized and sold by Saint Phalle's sister in New York starting in 1968 as plastic inflatables and were given to children. (Figure 7) They were seen in media, for example, from the well-known French female movie director and writer, Agnes Varda. In *Lion's Love*, an intentionally bizarre, hippie, "flower-power" film from 1969, the Nana is seen in multiple scenes as something respected and sacred, although she is in the form of a pool inflatable.³⁵ (Figure 8) Varda discusses the work of Saint Phalle in an interview posted on the Grand Palais website. She states that Saint Phalle

³⁵Vincent Canby, "Film Fete: Viva, Ragni and Rado in 'Lion's Love': Movie by Agnes Varda Is Set in Hollywood Ophuls's 'La Ronde' Also at Lincoln Center," (New York Times, September 22, 1969) <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9803E1DB1F3AEE34BC4A51DFBF668382679ED>
[E](#)

“found a way to express women’s liberation which went counter to fashion which wanted women to be slim, discreet,” referencing the celebration of curves and the loud colors and movements of the Nana figures.³⁶ Despite the form of the Nana expanding towards less permanent and less ‘high art’ forms and contexts, such as in inflatable pool toys, the significance of seeing the female portrayed in this particular way remains. The figure of the woman is no longer seen as beautiful because she is slim and in perfect proportion.

She - a cathedral

Saint Phalle established herself within the male-dominated art world with a new look on the common theme of the female body early on in her career with *She - a cathedral*. Ortel states, “the Hon was a celebration of woman as body and as regenerative life force.”³⁷ Located in the main hall of the Moderna Museet, *She - a cathedral* was Saint Phalle’s largest Nana.³⁸ At six meters high, ten meters wide and 23.5 meters long, she was able to hold up to 150 people at once.³⁹ She was a specific work of architecture-sculpture made with out of steel tubes covered in “wire mesh and glue-dipped linens.”⁴⁰ Bove describes her colorful exterior as “painted in candy-colored bands with black and white spaghetti patterns.”⁴¹ (see figure 1) Upon the vaginal entrance, there is an inscription on one thigh that reads “Honi Soit Qui Mal Y Pense”, or in

³⁶“Niki by Agnès,” (Grand Palais, 2014) <http://www.grandpalais.fr/en/article/niki-agnes>

³⁷ Ortel, *Re-creation, self-creation: A feminist analysis of the early art and life of Niki de Saint Phalle*,

³⁸ Bove, *The Bird in the Work of Niki De Saint Phalle*, 31.

The Moderna Museet is located in Stockholm, Sweden.

³⁹ Antille, “‘HON – en katedral’: Behind Pontus Hulten’s Theatre of Inclusiveness,” 75.

⁴⁰ Ortel, *Re-creation, self-creation: A feminist analysis of the early art and life of Niki de Saint Phalle*, 268.

⁴¹ Bove, *The Bird in the Work of Niki De Saint Phalle*, 31.

English “Evil be he who thinks Evil.”⁴² According to Bowe, the round, open entrance of *She - a cathedral* and this somewhat conspicuous inscription could be a reference to the sixteenth century sculpture *Hell Mouth* that has the inscription “Ognu Pensiero Vola”, or in English “All Reason/Thought Departs” located at the Orsini garden in Italy.⁴³ Despite the somewhat ominous source of inspiration from *Hell Mouth*, Saint Phalle’s entrance remains approachable and friendly, but with a sense of mystery that entices the viewer to enter.

In regards to the depiction of female genitalia as open and visible, filmmaker Agnes Varda says that such images in Saint Phalle’s figures “went against the image of women being raped, of them hiding in shame.”⁴⁴ Throughout art history, we are not regularly exposed to the genitals of the woman. Her legs are often crossed, or the hand is covering her pubic area. When it is shown, there is a sense of shame that is not included in Saint Phalle’s depiction.⁴⁵ Michael Bischof concisely describes the *She - a cathedral* as “astonishingly beyond such trauma” (here he is referencing Saint Phalle’s own past with sexual abuse and the healing process through the creation of this giant Nana)

to the point of extending a joyous invitation to a huge public not only to admire the raw but real beauty of woman, all women, but to revel in the improbable

⁴² Idib.

⁴³ Margaretta J. Darnall and Mark S. Weil, An Introduction, “Il Sacro Bosco di Bomarzo”, *Journal of Garden History*, Vol. 4, No.1, January-March 1984, p. 4 et seq.

as cited in *The Bird in the Work of Niki de Saint Phalle* by Nicola Gordon Bowe.

The Orsini garden is located at Bomarzo, which is just north of Rome. *Hell Mouth* also served as an influence for Saint Phalle years later in her Tarot Garden in Tuscany.

⁴⁴ <http://www.grandpalais.fr/en/article/niki-agnes>

⁴⁵ Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, et al. *Art Since 1900*, (Thames & Hudson, 2011), 542.

For example, in Marcel Duchamp’s *Etant Donnés* of the 1940s, through the opening of a peephole in a door, viewers become voyeurs as they peek at the spread legs of an anonymous woman, her genitals the focus of the painting. They have a feeling of “caught in the act” linked with shame

exhilaration of entering, through the vulva of this fantastical architecture-sculpture...⁴⁶

She - a cathedral was met with enjoyment from most of her visitors, as her insides were full of leisurely entertainment and satire.⁴⁷ The “cacophony” of sounds of the bottle-crushing machine from the milk bar, the music of Bach and Radio Stockholm, played from a radio-sculpture constructed by Tinguely, “added to the festive, carnivalesque mood” of the Nana.⁴⁸ Her insides were mapped out as a sort of labyrinth, that promoted playfulness and unintended interaction among the visitors as they participated in the various activities available to them.⁴⁹ Bowe describes the interior as a “microcosm of surprises.”⁵⁰ The unexpected features within the Nana’s body were meant to be mischievous in a light-hearted manner. Hidden microphones listened in on conversations of those who sat in the love seat and replayed them in the next room.⁵¹ There was also a planetarium in her breast, a movie theater in one of her arms and an aquarium.⁵² The viewing deck located on top of the womb gave people a chance to peek out from inside the Nana and view the museum and its line of visitors from a different perspective.⁵³ As described by Ortel, “Guests could also buy lottery tickets from an automaton in Hon and try to win a sketch made by one of the collaborators.”⁵⁴ There was also a functioning pay phone that

⁴⁶ Bishop, “Shooting for Transcendence: Niki de Saint Phalle,” 21.

⁴⁷ Antille, “‘HON – en katedral’: Behind Pontus Hulten’s Theatre of Inclusiveness,” 77. The *She - a cathedral* installation was not received well by all, unsurprisingly by conservative Swiss-journalists, but it was deeply criticized by a feminist British woman, Monica Furlong.

⁴⁸ Ortel, *Re-creation, self-creation: A feminist analysis of the early art and life of Niki de Saint Phalle*, 270-271.

⁴⁹ Antille, “‘HON – en katedral’: Behind Pontus Hulten’s Theatre of Inclusiveness,” 75.

⁵⁰ Bowe, *The Bird in the Work of Niki De Saint Phalle*, 31.

⁵¹ Idib., 33.

⁵² Idib. 31.

⁵³ Antille, “‘HON – en katedral’: Behind Pontus Hulten’s Theatre of Inclusiveness,” 76.

⁵⁴ Ortel, *Re-creation, self-creation: A feminist analysis of the early art and life of Niki de Saint Phalle*, 269.

Tinguely had installed. As emphasized by Ortel, within *She - a cathedral*, there was “something to offer everyone, of every age.”⁵⁵

The symbol of the cathedral as a woman’s body is used quite literally in *She - a cathedral*. Her navel is located in the center, like the nave of a Romanesque or Gothic cathedral, and it is through this nave that visitors are able to climb up onto the top of her pregnant belly. Their eyes are opened to a new viewpoint from high above, not unlike the significance of the high altar. Entering through the Nana’s “vaginal portal” is a type of reverse birth; reentering the pure, sacred space we had exited previously is reminiscent of a baptism.⁵⁶ Through the body of this Nana, “it was the viewer who was re-born” in a female setting.⁵⁷ It is not a typical house of worship, but a parody and it is not a patriarchy; there is no man leading a sermon.

Although the original idea of the Nana comes from Saint Phalle, *She - a cathedral* was created with a lot of support from Swiss artists Jean Tinguely and Per Olaf Ultvedt. The architecture aspect, as well as additions on the interior were aided greatly from the two male artists.⁵⁸ The milk bar, for example, located in one of her breasts was accentuated by Tinguely’s “bottle-crushing machine,” a feature that comes from his personal artwork, which was mainly centered on movement and machinery.⁵⁹ However, it is because she is born from Saint Phalle’s unique feminist perspective that her image is so powerful. As Ortel states, “with the Nanans, she created a sculptural form that unequivocally located women’s power in their physical being.”⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Idib., 269-270.

⁵⁶ Idib., 270.

⁵⁷ Idib., 280.

⁵⁸ Bowe, *The Bird in the Work of Niki De Saint Phalle*, 33.

⁵⁹ Idib.

⁶⁰ Ortel, *Re-creation, self-creation: A feminist analysis of the early art and life of Niki de Saint Phalle*, 279.

The installation was essentially about women, her body and her power. The association with men in the construction of her does not take away from this significance.

A mere three months later, the joyous Nana that you had entered along with 100,000 other delighted visitors, is destroyed.⁶¹ All that is left is your memory of the experience and some photographs and preliminary plans describing what could be found inside the womb and body of this larger than life, curvy, playful representation of the female.

Lack of Recognition

In Jo Ortel's dissertation of 1992 on Saint Phalle's early work, he mentions "the Nanas have never been considered seriously within an historical framework of discussed as a response to development in the art world, or indeed, to the popular culture of the 1960s." Ortel goes on to describe Saint Phalle and her Nanas as on the outside of the major art movements.⁶² Saint Phalle's diversity in her artwork and setting touches many periods and movements, however, she is often omitted from the dialogue in many of them. There is not an abundant amount of information available on this artist, and also there was a lack of interest within the feminist art community due to various reasons that will be explored further in this paper. Even in the description by the curator of Saint Phalle's solo exhibition recently at the Grand Palais there is an acknowledgement of the deficiency of serious interest taken by historians in her artwork: "With themes ranging from joyful to profound to intellectual, the paradoxal nature of her work has yet

⁶¹ Ortel, *Re-creation, self-creation: A feminist analysis of the early art and life of Niki de Saint Phalle*, 266.

Bowe, *The Bird in the Work of Niki De Saint Phalle*, 33.

⁶²Ortel. *Re-creation, self-creation : a feminist analysis of the early art and life of Niki de Saint Phalle*

to be fully explored.”⁶³ This statement is an admission of the absence of initiative taken into an analysis and ultimately completes understanding of Saint Phalle’s artwork as a whole. This artist is clearly significant enough to have iconic public sculptures all over the world and to have a large, solo exhibition on at the prestigious and historical Grand Palais. The question is why has her artwork not been fully explored yet as it should have been? One response this paper will articulate is how Saint Phalle’s work is malleable into different art movements.

Although they worked together closely on many of his projects, as well as hers, Tinguely’s name is mentioned more often than Saint Phalle’s. This goes back to the phenomenon of women artists being overshadowed by their male artist spouses and/or collaborators.⁶⁴ While association with male artists may initially aide in opportunity, it may result in the female artist being overlooked. Saint Phalle had many male collaborators, especially in the 1960s, including “John Cage, Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg, Merce Cunningham, Spoerri, Larry Rivers and more than anyone, Jean Tinguely, the Swiss master of ingenious mechanical fantasies.”⁶⁵ One of the most famous collaborations Tinguely and Saint Phalle completed is the Fountain Stravinsky next to the Centre Pompidou in Paris, France.⁶⁶ (Figure 9) This collaboration is one that was evidently more evenly divided between the two, as Saint Phalle designed half the sculptures, and Tinguely did the other half.

Despite Saint Phalle’s presence in multiple countries around the world in museums, private collections, and public sculpture, and her connection to numerous famous artists, she is

⁶³ "Niki De Saint Phalle." RMN. <http://www.grandpalais.fr/en/event/niki-de-saint-phalle>.

⁶⁴ Beth Pearsall, “Negative Space: Women of Art History,” (*AAUW*, Vol. 110, No. 1. 2016), 18.

For example, Lee Krasner and her husband Jackson Pollock, or Mary Cassatt and her association with Edouard Manet. Both relationships led to history’s overlook of these women’s artists.

⁶⁵ Bowe. “The Bird in the Work of Niki de Saint Phalle” 31

⁶⁶ Morineau, *Niki de Saint Phalle*

often left out of the art historical conversation. Her public sculptures can be found all over the populated world, excluding South America, Australia and Africa. She has ten public sculptures in the United States, thirty-one in Europe and the Middle East, and five in Asia, many of them portray her Nana figure.⁶⁷

Often when Saint Phalle is mentioned in survey art history books, it is in brief reference to New Realism.⁶⁸ For example, in *Art Since 1900*, Saint Phalle is mentioned in list form with other artists of the New Realism movement, but not as the central focus and none of her specific works are mentioned. Tinguely, however, is mentioned more often than Saint Phalle and his specific works are mentioned, although the two were such strong collaborators.⁶⁹ Tinguely is also mentioned in the following survey books while Saint Phalle is not: *After Modern Art: 1945-2000*,⁷⁰ *American Art of the 20th Century*,⁷¹ *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*,⁷² *The Illustrated History of Art*,⁷³ *Art History*.⁷⁴ However, both artists are mentioned, along with one of their specific works, in *The Oxford History of Western Art*.⁷⁵

Comparison with *Venus of Willendorf*

⁶⁷ “Niki de Saint Phalle Charitable Art Foundation,” (2007-2016), nikidesaintphalle.org

⁶⁸ Survey books are significant as they are often used to teach art history courses in high school or college, and are used as an overview or reference for specific art movements, and also serve as a starting off point in the research process.

⁶⁹ Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, et al. *Art Since 1900*,

⁷⁰ David Hopkins, *After Modern Art: 1945-2000*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

⁷¹ Sam Hunter, *American art of the 20th century*, (New York : H.N. Abrams, c1972)

⁷² Donald Preziosi, *The Art of Art History : A Critical Anthology*. Vol. 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2009)

⁷³ David Piper, *The Illustrated History of Art*, (New York: Crescent Books, 1991)

⁷⁴ Marilyn Stokstad, David Cateforis, and Stephen Addiss. *Art History* (Upper Saddle River, N.J, Prentice-Hall, Harry N. Abrams, 2nd ed, 2002)

⁷⁵ Martin Kemp, *The Oxford History of Western Art*, (Oxford University Press, 2000)
Saint Phalle’s *She - a cathedralis* shown and so is Tinguely’s *Homage to New York*.

Many sources have compared Saint Phalle's Nanas to the well-known *Woman of Willendorf*, or also referred to as *Venus of Willendorf*. (Figure 10) One can see this link clearly, as both figures have no facial features and full, curvaceous, womanly bodies. However, it is a connection that is made too easily and too often, that limits the conversation of the Nanas themselves. The *Venus of Willendorf* is one of the oldest artifacts from human history, dating back to 20,000 BCE.⁷⁶ Historians have little to no information as to the identity of the artist and what the purpose of the sculpture was. This comparison is a weak one, as it is only based on common body shape.

Saint Phalle's Nanas are unique and comparing them to other depictions of female figures proves to be difficult. One aspect of the Nanas that is incredibly important is their active movement. The *Venus of Willendorf* is stationary, with her legs and arms stiff and still. Nanas arms and legs are often seen outstretched and constantly in motion. *Venus of Willendorf* is also without color or personality. The color of the Nanas is what adds to her playful personality. The *Venus of Willendorf* also has detailing on her head that can be perceived as hair, another feature missing from the miniature Nana heads. In fact, the small, round pattern that is reminiscent of hair obscures most of her head that would include facial features. *Venus of Willendorf* has also been strongly associated with fertility, solely because of her large breasts and curvy body. Saint Phalle's *She - a cathedral* is also associated with fertility, but it is not an interpretation based solely on her full figure and breasts; she is obviously pregnant, and the audience is invited into her womb. In addition, Nanas are not often nude, unlike the completely nude *Venus of Willendorf*. If a Nana is shown as nude or partly nude, they are depicted without nipples or navels.

⁷⁶ Tee A Corinne. "Subjects of the Visual Arts: Nude Females." (*GLBTQ Arts* 1, 2015)

Feminism & Exclusion from feminist art history discourse

Saint Phalle was active during the “political and ideological critique of patriarchy and patriarchal institutions, beginning in the 1960s in Europe and America.”⁷⁷ She envisioned a utopia that was run by Nana Power, where a matriarchal society existed, and she is quoted expressing these dreams. Despite at some points denying aligning herself as a feminist, Saint Phalle is undoubtedly by definition a feminist through her beliefs of equality expressed in her artwork and in interviews. For example this excerpt from 1965 expressly states how feminist she was, while at the same time denying it, “Miss Saint Phalle, who is not an active feminist, likes to think of her “nanas” as strong, joyful and independent creatures, neither intimidated nor repressed by their lives or by men”⁷⁸

Speaking generally, discrimination of women throughout human history has led to an extreme underrepresentation.⁷⁹ They have for centuries been limited to the interior sphere, treated as minors and consequently silenced. As stated by Beth Pearsall in her recent article “Negative Space: Women of Art History”, “Throughout history, society’s traditional gender roles made it difficult for women, no matter how talented, to achieve the artistic success and acclaim that their male counterparts enjoyed.”⁸⁰ Women have been rejected from having a voice in how they are to be represented, as they did not have the same rights as men, such as the right to vote or to equal education. This struggle was the target of the first wave of feminism, which preceded the time of Saint Phalle. Once the right to vote was accomplished in 1919 in the United

⁷⁷ Idib.

⁷⁸ Emerson, “Jean Shrimpton Beware! ‘Nanas’ of Paris Are After You,”

⁷⁹ There are indigenous cultures that have different gender roles that are much more equal, but I am speaking in relation to the majority of the human population, specifically Western population.

⁸⁰ Beth Pearsall, “Negative Space: Women of Art History,” (*AAUW*, Vol. 110, No. 1. 2016), 18.

States and finally in 1946 in France and, the second wave of feminism emerged, focusing on women's choice in regards to their body and sexuality.⁸¹

The Nana figures were “popular beyond the feminist circles,” despite being inherently feminist themselves.⁸² Saint Phalle's clearly articulated feminist point of view expressed in interviews and in her work led to the accessibility of her Nana figures in different realms. She was not limited to one particular audience, group or following because of this. Her artwork as a whole spanning her lifetime touches multiple art periods and movements and categories, as many artists do who have a career that lasts longer than a decade, but the figure of her Nanas specifically is diverse in its reception as well. Being welcomed and categorized so diversely could have contributed to Saint Phalle's underwhelming or excluded presence in the feminist art history discourse.

Saint Phalle has been left out of the American feminist art movement, despite her strong presence in the United States. The differences in French feminist culture and American is important to note, and how Saint Phalle's strong connection with these two cultures results in a type of feminist aesthetic in her art is unlike what is found in either community. In general, in the United States, women grassroots groups, who famously burned their brassieres, supported the feminist movement. In France, it was a different type of struggle, fought in different ways through the theories of writers such as Helene Cixous and Simone de Beauvoir. The right to vote for women in France was not accomplished until decades after American women, but it is from the theory of texts like *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir that Americans draw from

⁸¹ When Niki de Saint Phalle first started creating her Nana figures, abortion in France and in many other countries in the world was illegal and access to birth control seriously limited. It was not until the mid 1970s that abortion and birth control became free and legal in France.

⁸² “Sprengel Museum Hannover: Niki de Saint Phalle's Donation,” http://-museum.com/painting_and_sculpture/niki_de_saint_phalle/index.htm

significantly. One can recognize American artist names during the height of the second wave of feminism like Judy Chicago, Cindy Sherman, Joan Mitchell, and Barbara Krueger. When left with the limited space at the end of an art historical survey textbook, they often choose to include Chicago or one of the other American names mentioned above as the token contemporary feminist artist. For example, in *The Visual Arts: A History*, under “Art as Identity” feminist artists such as Chicago, Sherman, Krueger, Jenny Holzer, and Miriam Schapiro are mentioned and their specific works discussed, but Saint Phalle is not included.⁸³

There is a general division within the women’s art movement. As it encompasses so much, and women are an extremely diverse group of people with different races, ages and life experiences, there is of course going to be divisions within the goals of the women’s art movement. As time moves forward from the rise of the inclusion of women within the art world, different issues are addressed and criticized. Most feminist artists that are included within the conversation of art history have a specific critique(s) that they address. They most often deal with contemporary issues facing women at the time, and have an overall serious tone.

Saint Phalle did not have a specific critique; her Nana figures projected a general message of positivity and celebration of women, women’s bodies, and their fertility. Other feminist artists, such as Cindy Sherman and Mary Kelly were very specific in their artwork, which had an evident specific feminist agenda. Sherman concentrated on the depiction of women in film in her film stills. A series that has carried on for decades, evolving as times goes on, not unlike Saint Phalle’s Nana figures. Mary Kelly’s work focused specifically on the mother, in a pseudo-scientific method.

⁸³ Hugh Honour and John Fleming, *The Visual Arts: A History*, (Harry Abrams, Inc., Publishers, New York, 1999), 874-878.

Women's art of the 1970s was overwhelmingly bodily and the most famous works of the time were quite evident in their message. Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* from 1979, for example, is often mentioned when discussing feminist art, although it was heavily critiqued just as much as it was celebrated as a feminist artist achievement.⁸⁴ The *Dinner Party* installation incorporated vivid "vulvic iconography."⁸⁵ The "ceramic vulvas" at each the place setting were individualized for each of the 39 female guests from history. There were an additional 999 women named as "imaginary" invitees who were all "mainly artists and writers from the past."⁸⁶ This installation was created in an attempt to reorient women within history, but in serving mostly women artists and writers, it remains exclusionary to the ordinary women, who have also contributed to history, but in even less acknowledgeable ways.⁸⁷ This is significantly different from the Nana figure, in her non-specific associations, which any woman can identify with.

Similar to Saint Phalle's *She - a cathedral* is Chicago's *Womanhouse*, also a collaborative project. Both were interior spaces with multiple rooms where the audience could enter and be immersed in an especially female setting. *She - a cathedral* is much more literal in its exterior of a woman's body, but with much less of an overtly feminist agenda within its interior. *Womanhouse* consisted of many collaborators, although Chicago is whom we primarily associate the installation with. *She - a cathedral* consisted of just Saint Phalle, Jean Tinguely and Per Olaf Ultvedt. *Womanhouse* also had a tendency to exclude men from the experience, which *She* absolutely did not. *Womanhouse* had no male collaborators and the initial opening of the installation was reserved for women only. Perhaps *She - a cathedral* should have had a special

⁸⁴ David Hopkins, *After Modern Art: 1945-2000*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 183.

⁸⁵ Hopkins, *After Modern Art: 1945-2000*, 184.

⁸⁶ *Idib.*, 183.

⁸⁷ Like as mothers, daughters, suffragettes, students...etc. There are roles women play in history that are important outside of the fine arts and literature.

opening for women as well, as it is also a celebration of woman, but it may be just as important not to follow in the footsteps of man in excluding the other sex. It is just as important, if not more, for men to experience *She - a cathedral* in order to be exposed to a non-submissive, multi-dimensional depiction of woman. Most importantly, the tone of these two comparable pieces is very different. “Womanhouse pulsed with an underlying current of anger and biting sarcasm” and *She - a cathedral* did not; Saint Phalle’s installation was full of humor and playfulness, an important distinction.⁸⁸

Saint Phalle was skilled in using the mass media to her advantage, one of the first artists to do so.⁸⁹ In her image and interviews on television or in newspapers or journals, she was very conscious of how she was going to be perceived and how she could use her classic good looks and/or clothing and/or personality to highlight her artistic goals and to gain popularity.⁹⁰ Saint Phalle’s projected identity, whether authentic or not, was essential to her career and the feminist message she tried to send. This provocative image she projected of herself created a distance between her and other feminist artist of the time. Unlike Judy Chicago, for example, she had initially allowed this sexually enticing image of herself to be publicized. Yet another feminist artist, Cindy Sherman, who was also conventionally beautiful, used her own image within her film stills. However, she was critiquing this image of the place of woman in film through the use of her own image conforming to the ideal beauty of the time.

⁸⁸ Ortel, *Re-creation, self-creation: A feminist analysis of the early art and life of Niki de Saint Phalle*, 287.

⁸⁹ “Niki de Saint Phalle” *Arken Museum of Modern Art*, <http://uk.arken.dk/exhibition/coming-up-niki-de-saint-phalle/>
Similar to Andy Warhol.

⁹⁰ The artist as celebrity was something fairly new, the greatest example being Picasso starting in the early 20th century. It can be seen as a test to see if the knowledge of the identity and personality of the artist contributed to the reception of their artwork and the understanding of it.

The “Other” in Saint Phalle’s work

During the second wave of feminism, the civil rights movement for African-Americans was well under way. The fight for civil rights during the 1950s and 60s mirrored in some ways the struggles of the first wave of feminism, although it mostly benefitted white women. The law separation African-Americans from the rest of society in many contexts, and they were denied equal education and voting rights. Similarly to white women, who, before the first wave of feminism, were denied the right to vote, expected to stay in the domestic sphere and were not offered an equal education. It is more than fair to state that feminism that benefits black women was (and continues to be, presently) very different from the first two waves of feminism that were successful in promoting the wants and needs of white women.

Emerson quotes Saint Phalle in 1965, “Miss de Saint Phalle said that she has been doing figures of women – ‘Who are, after all, a bit on the outside of our society, like Negroes.’”⁹¹ Saint Phalle has a dual identification with the “Other”. She is, as a woman, part of the “Other”, but she ends up delving into areas that are even further into the realm of the “Other” through her fascination of black women and their bodies. The exclusion of women in art history as a whole defaults them into the “Other” category, along with black women. This is an example of intersectionality of the oppressed. However, the two groups are traditionally represented differently and have separate, distinct struggles. Saint Phalle may not have completely understood this distinction as she is quoted, “We have Black Power, so why not Nana Power?”⁹²

As a white woman from an ostensibly privileged upbringing, Saint Phalle had the specific kind of female experience that the second wave of feminism fought for and benefitted from. A

⁹¹ Emerson, “Jean Shrimpton Beware! ‘Nanas’ of Paris Are After You,”

⁹² Camille Morineau, *Niki de Saint Phalle*

Original quote, “Nous avons bien le Black Power, alors pourquoi pas le Nana Power?”

Translated by author.

self-taught artist, Saint Phalle draws from her personal experiences and struggles, while also including black women within her work. The figure of the Nana as a whole does not conform to the different boxes women are categorized in. The skin color of the Nanas vary from white to black to yellow to pink to red to multicolored in an effort to be inclusive of all women. Black Nanas, white Nanas and pink Nanas are all seen with the same joyful, gymnastic movements and body type. Although the Black Nanas are seen dancing in the same manner as the other colored figures, the presence of dancing black figures can lead to racist assumptions. For example, in her book on Saint Phalle, author Carla Shultz Hoffman states that the “Negro dancers dance like savages, have something defiant or brazen about them.”⁹³ Saint Phalle sees her Black Nanas as goddesses with the same body type and movement that is no more “defiant or brazen” than the other colored Nanas. In no other context have Nanas been described as “savages.”

However, her inclusion of black women in her work can be highlighted as distinct from her other women figures. In some of her Nanas that have black skin, their titles are not as creative as others, and simply read “Black Nana” or “Black Venus.” (Figures 11 & 12). Also, as seen not in her sculpture but in her drawings, is evidence of distinguishing black women in her admiration of curvy female bodies. (Figure 13). In her drawing titled *Black is Different* from 1994, she writes, “I saw a fat woman on the beach today and she reminded me of a great paegan goddess” around the drawing of a black Nana. The right side of the drawing continues in her rambling, expressive writing,

Dear Diary, Black is different. I have made many black figures in my work. Black venus, black Madonna, black men, black nanas. It has always been an important color for me. Today, walking on the beach I watched a small black child 5 or 6 years old playing with his father. He was so cute it was a revelation. Black is also me now with my grandson.

⁹³ Translated from German by Sean Hough.
Carla Schultz-Hoffman, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, (Prestel-Verlag, 1980) 32.

She continues on described her grandson's race before repeating again at the end, "Black is also me now." One could say that this kind of observation borders on fetishizing black people; however, it is not expressed in any kind of malicious way, but rather as a source of inspiration. One can see her desire to be connected with the "Other" of black people, so much so that she reinterprets what it means to be black into something she can associate herself with.

Her most recent work that was completed in her lifetime, *Queen's Magical Circle Garden*, is an excellent example of her inspiration by the "Other". This colorful, shiny sculpture garden is named after a mythical black woman warrior and is located in Escondido, California.⁹⁴ A "site-specific" work (like that of *She – a cathedral*) *Queen Califia's Magic Circle Garden* is a celebration of the fictional namesake of California, Queen Califia.⁹⁵ Its maze like structure is reminiscent of *She - a cathedral*. The fortitude of Queen Califia is celebrated in Saint Phalle's representation of her. It is important and refreshing to see inclusion of a strong woman of color, however, she is "imaginatively" reinterpreted from the "highly evolved personal mythology of the artist," which is a white woman.⁹⁶

The totem poles integrated throughout *Queen Califia* are another example of Saint Phalle's fixation on the "Other." Not from European or American tradition, totem poles are culturally significant to Native Americans in different ways, one of them being in respect to the memory of deceased loved ones.⁹⁷ There are multiple animal figures, such as supernatural sea serpents that are a metaphor of "war and strength" for Native peoples. Saint Phalle uses her own

⁹⁴Her inclusion and focus on figures from mythology is another aspect of Saint Phalle's artwork that sets her apart from other women artists who choose to focus on specific, real-life, contemporary issues facing women.

⁹⁵Collette Chattopadhyay. "A Space of Her Own: Niki de Saint Phalle," (November 10, 2004), 43.

⁹⁶ Chattopadhyay. "A Space of Her Own: Niki de Saint Phalle,"

⁹⁷ Idib.

interpretation of this fictional, metaphoric animal in her creation.⁹⁸ She does this with the totem poles as well by integrating contemporary forms and allusions.⁹⁹

Saint Phalle's inter-nationality

One of the largest permanent concentrations of Saint Phalle's work is at the Sprengel Museum Hannover located in Germany thanks to a generous donation of more than 400 works for their permanent collection by the artist. The museum website has a category specifically linked to Saint Phalle and they consider her to be "one of the most significant female artists of the 20th century".¹⁰⁰ Her other large concentration of work is located in Japan at the Niki Museum in Nasu.¹⁰¹ Most of Saint Phalle's work is scattered, especially her public sculpture, and not including her solo exhibitions, which are few and far between.

Regarding Saint Phalle's nationality, there remains a discrepancy among journalists and art historians. It is clear through many reliable sources that she was born in France, and spent a good portion of her childhood in the United States. Her mother was French-American and her father was French and from an aristocratic family, hence the "de" in her last name, which suggests she is a descendant of French aristocracy. Also, one sees in video interviews that she is completely bilingual with little to no foreign accent in either French or American English.

She is sometimes referred to as French-American, other times just French or just American. This inconsistency is found in blogs, but also in reliable sources such as newspaper articles and dissertations. She is referred to as not just American in some sources, but as

⁹⁸ Chattopadhyay. "A Space of Her Own: Niki de Saint Phalle," 45.

⁹⁹ *Idib.*, 46.

¹⁰⁰ "Sprengel Museum Hannover: Niki de Saint Phalle's Donation," http://sprengel-museum.com/painting_and_sculpture/niki_de_saint_phalle/index.htm

¹⁰¹ Bishop, "Shooting for Transcendence: Niki de Saint Phalle," 24.

“American born,” which is inaccurate.¹⁰² Her second husband, artist Jean Tinguely, was from Switzerland, and Saint Phalle in her association with him has also been referred to as a Swiss artist. What adds to this confusion is that she did exhibit a lot of her work in Switzerland, like her infamous *She - a cathedral* in collaboration with Swiss artists Tinguely and Per Olaf Ultvedt. She also has many works, privately owned or publically shown in the United States and France. It is hard to argue where her presence in all of the countries she has touched with her art is the most important. This inter-nationality can help explain the difficulties some have with categorizing her, which has led to her somewhat scattered presence in the art history conversation.

In a New York Times article published in August of 1966, fairly early in Saint Phalle’s career, yet after she had already been given a solo exhibition and presented her *She - a cathedral* in Stockholm, the journalist mistakenly referred to her as an American artist living in France when describing her influence over designer Yves Saint Laurent. The article was not about Saint Phalle specifically, but on Yves Saint Laurent’s current collection that was described as “pop art dresses”.¹⁰³ Saint Phalle’s Nana sculptures were briefly mentioned, but the focus of her inclusion in the article was how her personal style and her fashion design she co-created of the Roland Petit ballet inspired Yves Saint Laurent. The other artist mentioned was Andy Warhol. Gloria Emerson, the author of this article, had already written an article specifically about Saint Phalle and her work the year before. The fact that this journalist was familiar with the artist and still had a factual error concerning Saint Phalle’s nationality further confirms that her inter-nationality

¹⁰² Lars Patrik Andersson, *Hon-en Kathedral: Mechanical Bride Stripped Bare in Stockholm*, (University of British Columbia, 1993)

¹⁰³Gloria Emerson. “A Nude Dress That Isn’t: Saint Laurent in a New, Mad Mood,” (New York Times, August 5, 1966)
<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archivefree/pdf?res=9F00E7DB163CE43BBC4D53DFBE66838D679EDE>

tended to confuse audiences and critics. Perhaps Emerson's mistake was not due to confusion, but to willfully claim Saint Phalle as an American artist. She mentions two other modern artists at the time; Mondrian and Roy Lichtenstein that Saint Laurent was inspired by, but she only provides brief background information on Saint Phalle. This suggests that Saint Phalle was lesser known in America at the time than the other artists.¹⁰⁴

Categorization of Saint Phalle

As stated by Bishop, "...it is essential to remember that she remains a self-taught artist, developing freely, spontaneously her modes of (self-)discovery and, at particular times of crisis, self-therapy."¹⁰⁵ This statement reminds us of how her artistic process is outside of the influences and restraints of formal training, and largely influenced by her own life experiences, making it further difficult to categorize her.

Mentioned in the same contexts as Pop artists often, Saint Phalle is considered by some art historians and journalists as a Pop artist. She is included in a book on women Pop artists titled *Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists 1958-1968*, and a photo of her *She - a cathedral* even graces the back cover.¹⁰⁶ Despite the similarities drawn from Pop art to Saint Phalle, its connection with mass culture and consumerism distances itself from her association. Pop art

¹⁰⁴ Emerson. "A Nude Dress That Isn't: Saint Laurent in a New, Mad Mood," Emerson makes an interesting comment alluding to the French and specifically Saint Laurent as being less up to date on the discovery of Pop art than Americans. Emerson also states that Saint Phalle "has had the best influence of all on Saint Laurent", further emphasizing her importance in this same context as the vastly more famous Warhol. The personal style of Saint Phalle that Saint Laurent admired was her "'black tie' trouser suit in velvet and in wool". This differs greatly from the dress, and illuminated Saint Phalle's feminism in her personal style, not just in her artwork, as trousers are traditionally a man's clothing.

¹⁰⁵ Bishop, "Shooting for Transcendence: Niki de Saint Phalle," 26.

¹⁰⁶ Sid Sachs and Kalliopi Minioudaki, *Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists 1958-1968*, (The University of the Arts, Abbeville Press, New York, NY).

often took from contemporary consumer images and repeated them. Outside of her original Nana figures, Saint Phalle uses motifs from mythology and creates her own individualized spaces to create them in. She does not often draw from mass culture, except the inclusion of a Greta Garbo film that was playing on repeat inside of her *She - a cathedral* installation of 1966.¹⁰⁷ Ultimately, Saint Phalle is not a Pop artist. Bishop states “the idea of her work being some rather gratuitously “Pop” construction is quite alien to her.”¹⁰⁸ This is common mistake of categorization is just one example of how Saint Phalle and her work were misunderstood.

When grouped in collaboration with other artists on a project, we see her as part of their greater movement. For example, she is often seen as a New Realist, a described by Jenni Sorkin as concerning “itself with representing a visual language derived from urban life, advertising, and popular culture.” This definition of New Realism gives us insight into how Saint Phalle not fit in exactly with its goals. Also, as emphasized by Sorkin, “this “new reality” was remarkably single-sexed: cultural producers were male.”¹⁰⁹ This group can also be described as under the umbrella term Neo-Dada, which was inspired by the short-lived Dada movement from 1916 – 1922. Books written on the bold and brief Dada period were published and spread as far as the United States in the early 1950s, which sparked a revival in the ideas against the traditional “rules about what art should be, both conceptually and visually.”¹¹⁰ Saint Phalle’s treatment of women definitely “protest(s) against the traditionalism in art.”¹¹¹ However, the New Realism as

¹⁰⁷ Antille, “‘HON – en katedral’: Behind Pontus Hulten’s Theatre of Inclusiveness,” 76.

¹⁰⁸ Bishop, “Shooting for Transcendence: Niki de Saint Phalle,” 33.

¹⁰⁹Jenni Sorkin, “Niki De Saint-phalle's Standing Nana with Serpent,” *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin*, (Yale University, Yale University Art Gallery, 2009), 101.

¹¹⁰ Susan Hapgood, “Neo-dada: Redefining Art, 1958-1962,” *Performing Arts Journal* (1995), 63.

¹¹¹ *Idib.*, 70.

a whole was a group that she did not remain with for long and did not have many commonalities' with the other members.

Throughout many sources, Saint Phalle is described as avant-garde. This is a more broad term than what she has been classified as otherwise and therefore is a more accurate categorization of her. She is described in her posthumous New York Times article in 2002 as "at once avant-garde and populist."¹¹² Based on time and context, and whether one is referring to Saint Phalle's work as a whole or more specifically, her classification and how she is put into differs. In retrospect, we can see her as avant-garde.

Conclusion

There is a resurgence of interest in the artist recently, over ten years after her death. Saint Phalle's work is currently in museums in twenty-three different countries including Australia, Brazil, Finland, Israel, Korea, Slovakia, and Taiwan.¹¹³ At the Grand Palais in Paris at the end of 2014 there was a large show of the life and work of Saint Phalle that included every medium she worked in, over several rooms, and offered an impressive amount of information on the artist. Having a solo show at the Grand Palais is considered a very prestigious honor. Saint Phalle also had a show in collaboration with the Grand Palais at the Guggenheim Bilbao in 2015. She is also exhibited in Copenhagen presently at the Arken Museum of Modern Art in Denmark from March to July. One of the curators of the exhibit accurately describes Saint Phalle: "She has an agenda,

The Dada movement's "use of chance as a compositional method" can also be connected to Saint Phalle's love of audience participation in her work. She cannot control exactly how they will feel or interact with her sculpture or architecture.

¹¹² Ken Johnson, "Niki de Saint Phalle, Sculptor, Is Dead at 71," (New York Times, May 23, 2002), <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/23/arts/niki-de-saint-phalle-sculptor-is-dead-at-71.html>

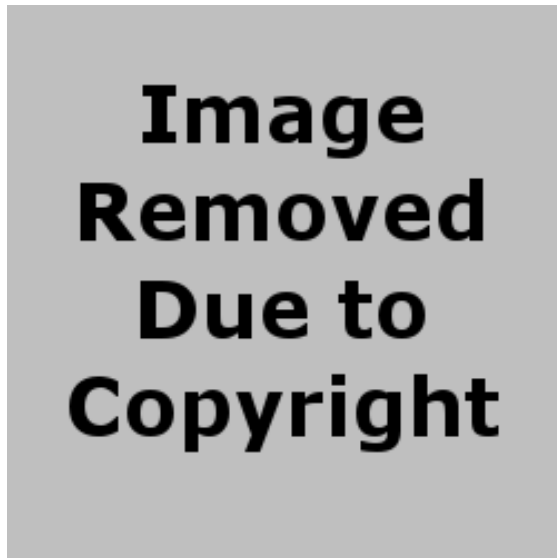
¹¹³"Niki de Saint Phalle Charitable Art Foundation," (2007-2016), nikidesaintphalle.org

she is ambitious, and she will for anything in the world seek recognition as a female artist in a world of male domination.”¹¹⁴

Saint Phalle’s sculptural work as a whole invited the audience to actively participate in a seemingly playful atmosphere, and in this participation the viewer is able to reconsider the female figure. Saint Phalle’s work did not necessarily deal with contemporary issues facing women at the time, but served as a celebration of women’s bodies, fertility and freedom. This paper essentially has shown us what Saint Phalle is not; she is not a man, yet she is not like other women artists of her time, and she is not easily categorized within the canon of art history. However, it can absolutely be said that Saint Phalle has been enormously successful, despite her omission from the majority of art historical texts. Nanas are beautiful and happy and free without being objectified. Saint Phalle has reinterpreted the immensely common motif of the woman in a way that was inclusive, accessible and absolutely feminist.

¹¹⁴ “Niki de Saint Phalle” *Arken Museum of Modern Art*, <http://uk.arken.dk/exhibition/coming-up-niki-de-saint-phalle/>

Figure 1.



She - a cathedral, Niki de Saint Phalle, 1966.

Sid Sachs and Kalliopi Minioudaki, *Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists 1958-1968*, (The University of the Arts, Abbeville Press, New York, NY).

Figure 2

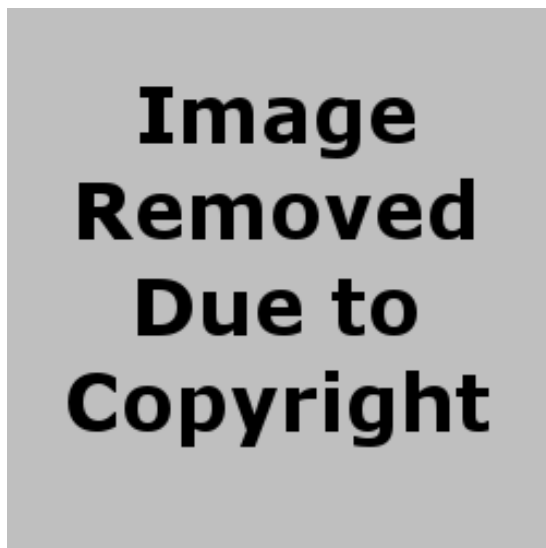


Image from the Museum Tinguely website.

http://www.tinguely.ch/en/museum_sammlung/jean_tinguely.html

Figure 3

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Niki de Saint Phalle's Vogue cover.

"Niki de Saint Phalle Charitable Art Foundation," (2007-2016), nikidesaintphalle.org

Figure 4

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Photo of Saint Phalle shooting.

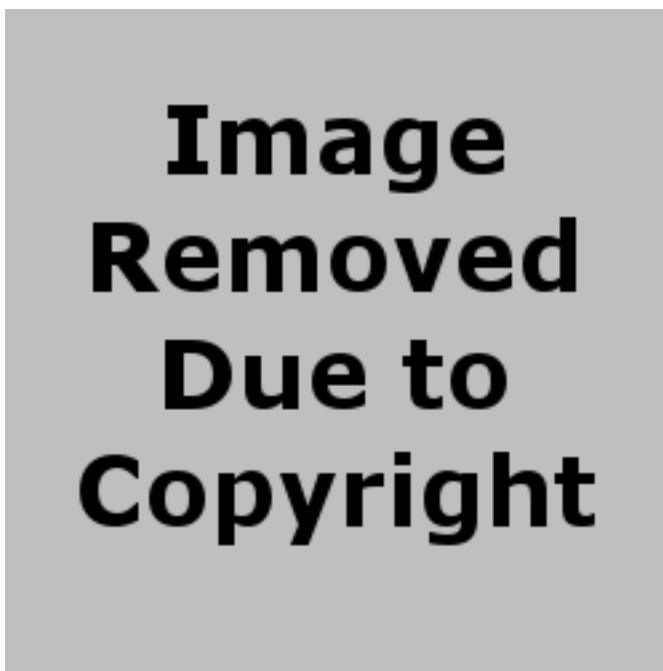
Amelia Jones, ed. Tracey Warr, *The Artist's Body*, (London: Phaidon, 2000), 57.

Figure 5



Photo of Saint Phalle among her Nanas.
“Niki de Saint Phalle Charitable Art Foundation,” (2007-2016), nikidesaintphalle.org

Figure 6



Part of one of Saint Phalle’s drawings.
Carla Schultz-Hoffman, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, (Prestel-Verlag, 1980)

Figure 7

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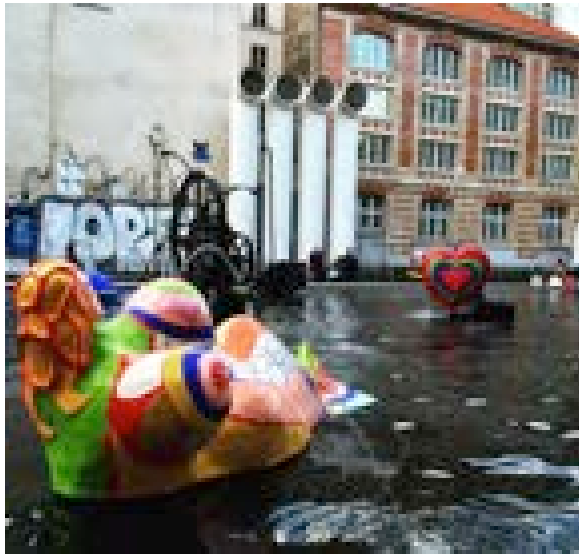
Photo of children and their Nanas.
Camille Morineau, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, (Paris: Grand Palais, 2014)

Figure 8

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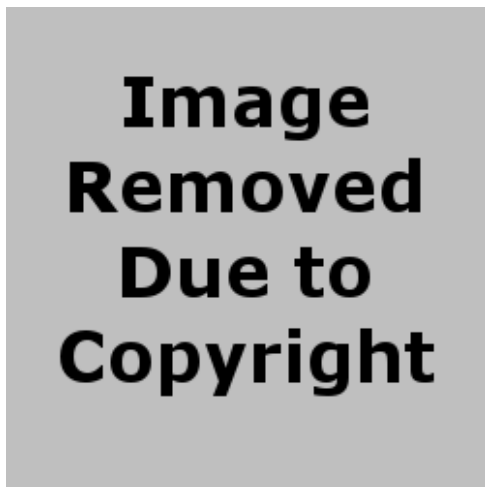
Film still from Agnes Varda's 'Lion's Love.'
'Niki by Agnès,' (Grand Palais, 2014) <http://www.grandpalais.fr/en/article/niki-agnes>

Figure 9



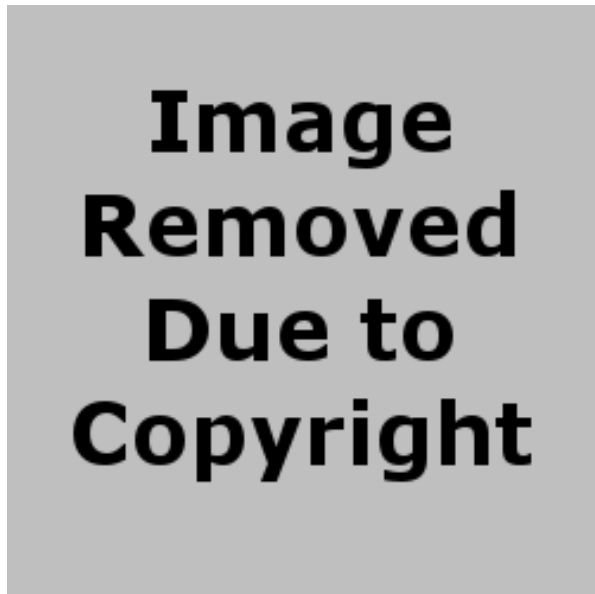
Stravinsky Fountain, Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely, Paris, France.
Photo taken by author.

Figure 10



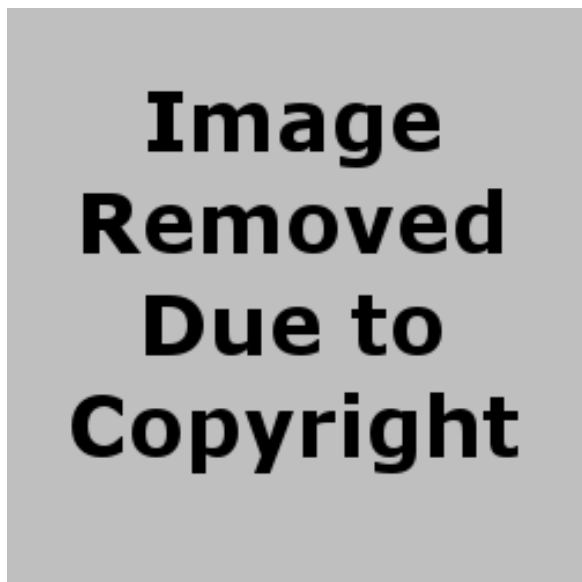
Venus of Willendorf
Tee A Corinne. "Subjects of the Visual Arts: Nude Females." (*GLBTQ Arts* 1, 2015)

Figure 11



Black Venus, Niki de Saint Phalle, 1965.
Camille Morineau, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, (Paris: Grand Palais, 2014).

Figure 12



Nana noire upside down, 1965-1966.
Camille Morineau, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, (Paris: Grand Palais, 2014).

Figure 13

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Black is Different, Niki de Saint Phalle, 1994.

Camille Morineau, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, (Paris: Grand Palais, 2014).

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