

## **Niki de Saint Phalle Biography**

Taken from: [\*Niki De Saint Phalle: Kunst-und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland\*](#) by Pontus Hulten, GmbH Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1992.

### **1930**

Catherine Marie-Agnes Fal de Saint Phalle is born at Neuilly-sur-Seine at 0640 on the morning of 29 October. Her birth sign is Scorpio (with Scorpio in the ascendant). She is the second of five children born to Jeanne Jacqueline and Andre Marie-Fal de Saint Phalle. Her father is one of seven brothers with a share in the family's banking house. He had become manager of its New York branch in 1927 but when the stock-exchange collapsed in 1930 he lost both the business and his entire fortune. Marie-Agnes and her brother John are sent to their paternal grandparents in France and spend the next three years in Nievre.

### **1933**

Marie-Agnes and John return to their parents in Greenwich, Connecticut. Every year they spend their summer holidays at the Chateau of Filerval, which had been built by Le Notre and which now belongs to their American grandfather.

### **1937**

The family moves into an apartment on East 88th Street, New York. Marie-Agnes, now known as Niki de Saint Phalle, attends the Convent School of the Sacred Heart in East 91st Street.

### **1941**

Niki de Saint Phalle is expelled from the Convent School. She moves to Princeton, New Jersey, to live with her grandparents, who have left France during the Second World War. She attends the local public school.

### **1942**

Niki de Saint Phalle returns to her parents' home and attends Brearley School, New York. She reads Edgar Allan Poe, Shakespeare and Greek tragedy. She takes part in school performances and writes her first poems and plays.

### **1944**

In the opinion of her headmistress, Niki de Saint Phalle's behavior is such that she should either have psychiatric treatment or leave school. Her parents send her to a Convent School at Suffren, New York State.

### **1947**

Niki de Saint Phalle graduates from Oldfield School, Maryland

### **1948/49**

She works as a model. Photographs of her appear in *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* and on the cover of *Life* magazine. In June Niki de Saint Phalle, 18, elopes with Harry Mathews, 19 a US marine.

### **1950**

Niki de Saint Phalle and Harry Mathews settle in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He studies music at Harvard University, she begins to paint. She produces her first oils and gouaches.

### **1951**

Their daughter, Laura, is born in Boston

### **1952**

Niki de Saint Phalle, Harry and Laura leave Boston and move into an apartment in the Rue Jean Dolent in Paris. Harry Mathews studies music in the hope of becoming a conductor. Niki de Saint Phalle studies drama. They both take charge of their daughter's education. The family spends the summer months in the South of France, Spain and Italy.

### **1953**

Niki de Saint Phalle suffers a severe nervous breakdown and is treated as an in-patient in Nice. Since painting helps her to overcome this crisis in her life, she decides to give up acting and become an artist. At the same time Harry abandons his music studies and writes his first novel.

### **1954**

In March Niki de Saint Phalle and Harry Mathews buy their first car in Nice. They drive back to Paris, where they share a house with Anthony Bonner, and American jazz musician and composer. Niki de Saint Phalle is introduced to the American painter, Hugh Weiss, who remains her mentor for five years and who encourages her to retain her autodidactic style. In September Niki de Saint Phalle, Harry and Laura Mathews move to Dey on the island of Mallorca.

### **1955**

Their son Philip is born in March. Niki de Saint Phalle visits Madrid and Barcelona, where she discovers Gaudí. The experience changes her life and lays the seeds for her later decision to design her own sculpture park. In August the family returns to Paris and moves into a small apartment in the Rue Alfred Durand-Claye. During 1955 Niki de Saint Phalle meets Jean Tinguely and his wife, Eva Aeppli. She often visits the Louvre and gets to know the work of Paul Klee, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and Henri Rousseau. She also visits Joseph Ferdinand Cheval's fantastic castle *Le Palais idéal* in Hauterives.

### **1956-58**

The Mathews family lives in Lans-en-Vercors in the French Alps. Niki de Saint Phalle Mathews produces a series of oil paintings which she exhibits for the first time in St. Gallen in 1956. Through her husband she meets many contemporary writers, including John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch.

### **1959**

Niki de Saint Phalle Mathews visits the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and is introduced to work by the American artists Jasper Johns, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock and Robert Rauschenberg.

### **1960**

Niki de Saint Phalle and Harry Mathews are divorced; he moves to the Rue de Varenne with their children, while Niki de Saint Phalle remains in the Rue Alfred Durand-Claye. She continues her artistic experiments, producing assemblages in plaster and 'target' pictures. At the end of 1960 she and Jean Tinguely move into the Impasse Ronsin, where they share the same studio. Jean Tinguely introduces her to Pontus Hulten, the director of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. He helps her to take part in important exhibitions which are being held at this time and buys a number of her works for the Moderna Museet.

## 1961

During February a group exhibition is held at the Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris under the title *Comparison: Peinture sculpture*. Niki de Saint Phalle exhibits her first work - a 'target' montage titled *Portrait of My Love*. On 12 February she organizes the first of more than twelve 'shootings' which are held in 1961 and 1962. These events involve sculptures and assemblages incorporating containers of paint which, concealed beneath the plaster, spatter their contents over the image when shot with a pistol. The resultant pictures are known as 'shooting paintings'. Among spectators at the first such event are members of the Nouveaux Realistes. Pierre Restany invites Niki de Saint Phalle to join the group, which already includes Arman, Cesar, Christo, Gerard Deschamps, Francois Dufrene, Raymond Hains, Yves Klein, Martial Raysse, Mimmo Rotella, Daniel Spoerri, Jean Tinguely and Jacques de la Villegle. In March she takes part in an exhibition, *Bewogen Beweging*, organised by Pontus Hulten at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Her works are later shown in the Moderna Museet in Stockholm and the Louisiana Museum in the Danish town of Humlebaek. In June she holds her first one-woman exhibition at Jeannine Restany's Galerie J. Leo Castelli, Robert Rauschenberg and all the Nouveaux Realistes attend the launch. Rauschenberg buys a 'shooting painting'. On 20 June Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely take part in a concert in the American Embassy in Paris. While David Tudor plays music by John Cage on the piano, other works of art are created on stage.

Pierre Restany organizes a Festival of Nouveaux Realistes at the Galerie Muratore in Nice. For the official opening Niki de Saint Phalle arranges a 'shooting' at the Abbaye Roseland at which the Nouveaux Realistes take part. Marcel Duchamp introduces Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely to Salvador Dal'. During a trip to Spain in August both artists are invited to take part in celebrations in honour of Dal'. They create a lifesize bull made of plaster and paper which explodes in the Arena at Figueras during a firework display. In October Niki de Saint Phalle takes part in *The Art of Assemblage* exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. The exhibition subsequently travels to the Dallas Museum for Contemporary Art and the San Francisco Museum of Art.

Between June and September more than fifty international magazines and journals carry reports on Niki de Saint Phalle's work.

## 1962

In February Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely travel to California and visit Simon Rodilla's Watts Tower near Los Angeles. In March Jean Tinguely exhibits at the Everett Ellin Gallery in Los Angeles. With the help of Niki de Saint Phalle he organizes a 'happening', *Study for and End of the World Number 2* in the Nevada Desert. Niki de Saint Phalle stages her first two 'shootings' in the United States: the first is held at Virginia Dwan's beach house at Malibu, the second assisted by Ed Kienholz, in the hills overlooking Malibu. Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely travel to Mexico. In May, Niki de Saint Phalle, Jean Tinguely and several other artists take part in Kenneth Koch's play, *The Construction of Boston*. On stage at the Maidman Playhouse, New York, is her 'shooting sculpture', *Venus de Milo*. Following her return to Europe she exhibits ten works at a one-woman exhibition at Paris's Galerie Rive Droite. Among the visitors is Alexander Iolas, who invites Niki de Saint Phalle to exhibit in New York the following October. He supports her financially for many years and organises numerous exhibitions for her, even though few of the exhibits are sold. It is Iolas who introduces her to the Surrealist painters, Victor Brauner, Max

Ernst and Rene Magritte. Yves Klein dies suddenly in June. In August Niki de Saint Phalle takes part in DYLABY (Dynamic Labyrinth), a large-scale installation at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, in which Robert Rauschenberg, Martial Raysse, Jean Tinguely and Per Olof Ultvedt are also involved.

In October Niki de Saint Phalle opens her first one-woman exhibition in New York at the Alexander Iolas Gallery. In addition to ten other works, she exhibits her *Homage to Le Facteur Cheval*, a shooting gallery in which members of the public are invited to fire at the complex structure.

### **1963**

In May Virginia Dwan organizes a shooting event in Los Angeles at which Niki de Saint Phalle shoots at her monumental sculpture, *King Kong*. From now on Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely live at a former auberge, the 'Auberge au cheval blanc' at Soisy-sur-Ecole near Essonne. She confronts the various roles of women in society, producing a series of sculptures depicting women in childbirth, devouring mothers, witches and whores.

### **1964**

At her first one-woman exhibition at London's Hanover Gallery she exhibits brides, woollen heads and dragons. In October Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely begin working at New York's Chelsea Hotel, which at that time was a well-known meeting-place for artists.

### **1965**

Niki de Saint Phalle spends the summer at The Hamptons, Long Island, where she creates her first Nanas from wool, cotton thread, papier mache and wire netting. The following September she shows her Nanas at a one-woman exhibition at Alexander Iolas's Paris gallery. At Iolas's suggestion, Niki de Saint Phalle begins making silk-screen prints.

### **1966**

In collaboration with Martial Rayasse and Jean Tinguely, Niki de Saint Phalle designs the scenery and costumes for Roland Petit's ballet, *Eloge de la folie*, performed in March at the Theatre des Champs-Elysees in Paris. In June, Niki de Saint Phalle, Jean Tinguely and Per Olof Ultvedt are invited by Pontus Hulten to install a sculpture in the large entrance hall of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. They decide to create a monumental reclining Nana, 28 metres long, 9 meters wide and 6 meters high. It is called Hon (the Swedish pronoun, 'she').

While working in Stockholm, Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely meet the young Swiss artist, Rico Weber. He works on Hon with them and remains their assistant and colleague for ten years.

In October, Niki de Saint Phalle designs the sets and costumes for Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* in a production by Rainer von Diez at the Staatstheater in Kassel.

### **1967**

Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely work on *Le paradis fantastique*, a commission from the French government for the French Pavilion at Expo '67 in Montreal. The commission consists of nine painted sculptures by Niki de Saint Phalle and six black kinetic machines by Jean Tinguely. They are subsequently shown at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo and, for a year, in Central Park, New York. They are now

on permanent exhibition in Stockholm, close to the Moderna Museet. In August, Niki de Saint Phalle's first retrospective is held at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, under the title *Les Nanas au pouvoir*. For this exhibition she creates her first *Nana Dream House* and her first *Nana Fountain* and plans her first Nana town. The new exhibits are made of polyester, a material in which she has only recently started to work.

### **1968**

In June, Niki de Saint Phalle's first play, *ICH (All About ME)*, is performed at the Staatstheater in Kassel. Her co-author is the director, Rainer von Diez. She herself designs the sets and costumes. In October, Niki de Saint Phalle exhibits her eighteen-part wall relief, *Last Night I Had a Dream*, at the Galerie Alexandre Iolas in Paris. Niki de Saint Phalle designs inflatable Nanas, which are marketed in New York. Towards the end of the year she suffers serious breathing difficulties, caused by inhaling polyester fumes and dust.

### **1969**

Following her return from a visit to India, Niki de Saint Phalle begins work on her first architectural project, three houses in the South of France for Rainer von Diez. The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York acquires the sculpture, *Black Venus*, and exhibits it at its April exhibition, *Contemporary American Sculpture, Selection 2*. Niki de Saint Phalle begins work on *La tete (Le Cyclope)*, a collaborative project in Fontainebleau forest, initiated by Jean Tinguely and involving a large number of artists.

### **1970**

A festival is held in Milan to mark the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Nouveaux Realistes. At the opening Ceremony, Niki de Saint Phalle shoots at an altar assemblage. A series of seventeen serigraphs is published in Paris under the title *Nana Power*. Niki de Saint Phalle visits Egypt for the first time in the company of Jean Tinguely.

### **1971**

On 13 July, Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely are married in Soisy. They visit Morocco. Their granddaughter Bloum is born on the island of Bali: she is the daughter of Laura and Laurent Condominas. Niki de Saint Phalle designs her first jewelry. At the end of the year she begins work on *Golem*, an architectural project for children in Jerusalem's Rabinovitch Park.

### **1972**

From now on Niki de Saint Phalle works with the polyester manufacturer Haligon in order to produce large-scale sculptures and editions. In July she rents the Chateau de Mons near Grasse in the South of France. She begins shooting the first version of *Daddy*, produced in association with Peter Whitehead and shown at London's Hammer Cinema the following November. Niki de Saint Phalle visits Greece.

### **1973**

In January, Niki de Saint Phalle works on a revised version of *Daddy* in Soisy and New York, again with Mia Martin, Clarice Rivers and Rainer von Diez. The world premiere of the televised version is shown in April as part of the 11th New York Film Festival at the Lincoln Center. Niki de Saint Phalle designs a swimming pool for Georges Plouvier in Saint-Tropez. In the Belgian town of Knokke-le-Zoute she builds *The Dragon*, a fully equipped playhouse for the children of Fabienne and Roger

Nellens.

### **1974**

Niki de Saint Phalle installs three gigantic Nanas in the city of Hanover. The Galerie Alexandre Iolas in Paris mounts an exhibition of her architectural projects. She suffers an abscess on her lung, caused by years of working with polyester. After a period in hospital she travels to Saint Moritz to convalesce and it is here that she meets Marella Caracciolo, an old friend from New York. Niki de Saint Phalle tells her of her dream of designing a sculpture park and Marella Caracciolo's brothers offer her land in Tuscany on which to realise her dream.

### **1975**

Niki de Saint Phalle writes the screenplay for the film, *Un reve plus long que la nuit*. Many of her artist friends are involved in shooting the film. She designs several pieces of furniture for the sets.

### **1976**

Niki de Saint Phalle spends the entire year in the Swiss mountains, planning her sculpture park.

### **1977**

Together with Constantin Mulgrave, Niki de Saint Phalle designs the sets for the film, *The Travelling Companion*, which is based on a fairy story by Hans Christian Andersen. She visits Mexico and New Mexico. Ricardo Menon becomes her assistant, continuing to work with her for the next ten years.

### **1978**

Niki de Saint Phalle begins laying out her *Giardino dei Tarocchi* on the estates of Carlo and Nicola Caracciolo at Garavicchio in Tuscany. Her designs, which are based on tarot cards, are later used as models for monumental sculptures.

### **1979**

Niki de Saint Phalle spends most of her time in Tuscany, laying the foundations for her Tarot Garden. She invents new sculptures, which she calls Skinnies. In March she holds her first exhibition in Japan at Tokyo's Watari Gallery. Gimpel & Weitzenhoffer of New York hold an exhibition of the models and photographs for her architectural projects. The exhibition, entitled, *Monumental Projects*, tours the United States.

### **1980**

In April, Niki de Saint Phalle begins work on the first sculptures for her Tarot Garden, *The Magician* and *The High Priestess*. In Ulm her sculpture, *Le poete et sa muse*, is unveiled on the university campus. The installation coincides with an exhibition of her graphic work, which lasts from May until July. From July to September the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris devotes a retrospective exhibition to her. Yoko Masuda organizes the first exhibition at Space Niki de Saint Phalle in Tokyo.

The first edition of furniture by Niki de Saint Phalle is put into production.

### **1981**

Niki de Saint Phalle rents a cottage in the vicinity of her Tarot Garden. She hires assistants from the surrounding farms to help her with her project. Jean Tinguely and his All Star Swiss Team of Sepp Imhof and Rico Weber take on the task of

welding the tarot sculptures. In the spring she paints the exterior of a new twin-engine airplane, the *Piper aerostar 602 P*, for the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation in Amsterdam.

### **1982**

An American firm invites Niki de Saint Phalle to create a new perfume. She uses the proceeds to finance her Tarot Garden. Jean Tinguely receives a commission from the City of Paris to design a fountain for the Centre Georges Pompidou and asks Niki de Saint Phalle to assist him, since he wants to combine his machines with brightly colored sculptures. The galleries of Gimpel & Weitzenhoffer in New York and Gimpel Fils in London show Niki de Saint Phalle's *Skinnies*. Work on the Tarot Garden progresses. The Dutch artist Doc Winsen takes over Jean Tinguely's role and works on the steel construction of the sculptures. By the end of the year they are in position to begin applying cement.

Niki de Saint Phalle suffers her first attack of rheumatoid arthritis. The attacks continue for a period of years.

### **1983**

The Stuart Foundation commissions a sculpture, *Sun God*, for the campus of the University of California at San Diego. Niki de Saint Phalle moves into *The Empress* in the grounds of her Tarot Garden. The building is designed in the shape of a sphinx. She decides to use ceramics in addition to mirrors and glass for the sculptures. Ricardo Menon discovers Venera Finochiaro, who produces all their ceramics from now on.

### **1984**

Niki de Saint Phalle works full-time on her Tarot Garden.

### **1985**

The buildings *The Magician*, *The Tower*, *The Empress* and *The High Priestess* are completed. Jean Tinguely constructs a machine for *The Tower of Babel*.

### **1986**

Niki de Saint Phalle spends most of the year at Garavicchio, where more sculptures are installed in her Tarot Garden. Together with Professor Silvio Barandun she writes and illustrates a book, *AIDS: You Can't Catch It Holding Hands*, which is later published and translated into five different languages. Ricardo Menon returns to Paris to attend drama school. He introduces Niki de Saint Phalle to Marcelo Zitelli, who becomes her assistant. She works on a series of polyester vases in the shape of animals.

### **1987**

In March, the Kunsthaller der Hypo-Kulturstiftung in Munich holds a major exhibition of Niki de Saint Phalle's work, *Niki de Saint Phalle - Bilder - Figuren - Phantastische Gärten*. Her first retrospective in America is held at the Nassau County Museum of Fine Arts in Roslyn, Long Island, under the title, *Fantastic Visions: Works by Niki de Saint Phalle*

### **1988**

Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely receive a commission from President Mitterrand to design a fountain for Chateau-Chinon, where he had been mayor for many years. Mitterrand himself unveils the fountain, in front of the town hall, in March. Helen

Schneider commissions a fountain for the Schneider Children's Hospital on Long Island. Niki de Saint Phalle designs a snake tree 5.50 meters in height.

### **1989**

Niki de Saint Phalle has a twin exhibition in the JGM. Galerie and the Galerie de France under the title *Oeuvres des années 80*. She works in bronze for the first time and designs a series of Egyptian gods, which are intended to be cast. Ricardo Menon dies of Aids. Together with her son, Philip Mathews, she produces a cartoon film, which is based on her book, *AIDS: You Can't Catch It Holding Hands*

### **1990**

In June, Niki de Saint Phalle exhibits work from the 1960s at both the Galerie de France and the JGM Galerie in Paris. The exhibition is titled *Tirs...et autres revolts 1961-64*. In November she presents her film about Aids at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. To coincide with the presentation, the museum mounts an exhibition of drawings for the film and for the revised version of the book. *Le sida: Tu ne l'attraperas pas* is published by the Agence française de lutte contre le sida and distributed to school children throughout the whole of France.

### **1991**

Niki de Saint Phalle works on an enlarged model in the scale 1:4 of her *Temple Ideal*, an interdenominational church first planned in 1972. The building will be 16 metres high and will be built in Nîmes. Jean Tinguely dies in August. Niki de Saint Phalle produces her first kinetic sculpture and calls it *Meta-Tinguely*.