The artist Niki de Saint Phalle intended the Tarot Garden, a fourteen-acre sculpture park built atop Etruscan ruins, to serve as

LETTER FROM ITALY

BEAUTIFUL MONSTERS

Art and obsession in Tuscany.

BY ARIEL LEVY

both "a sort of joyland" and a demonstration that "a woman can work on a monumental scale."

PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER GRANSER

In the Italian village of Capalbio, in the late nineteen-seventies, two peculiar things happened: the mail started arriving late, and people began whispering about the "monsters" rising up in the hills nearby. At first, the monsters looked like massive, misshapen iron cages emerging from the Tuscan countryside. Then they went white. Plaster was spread over the metal, and the monsters became looming, creamy ghosts. Finally, they started turning colors: blue, orange, shocking pink.

Although no one suspected it, there was a connection between these two occurrences. The postman, Ugo Celletti, had been helping to create the monsters—tremendous sculptures growing on the grounds of a local estate. He'd discovered a passion for mosaic work, and as he applied slivers of mirrored glass to the monsters he sometimes forgot about his postal route. Like many other people in the area, Celletti had his life altered by the mother of the monsters, who came to Italy to build a sculpture garden that she had envisioned in a dream, decades earlier, when she was locked in an asylum: the artist Niki de Saint Phalle.

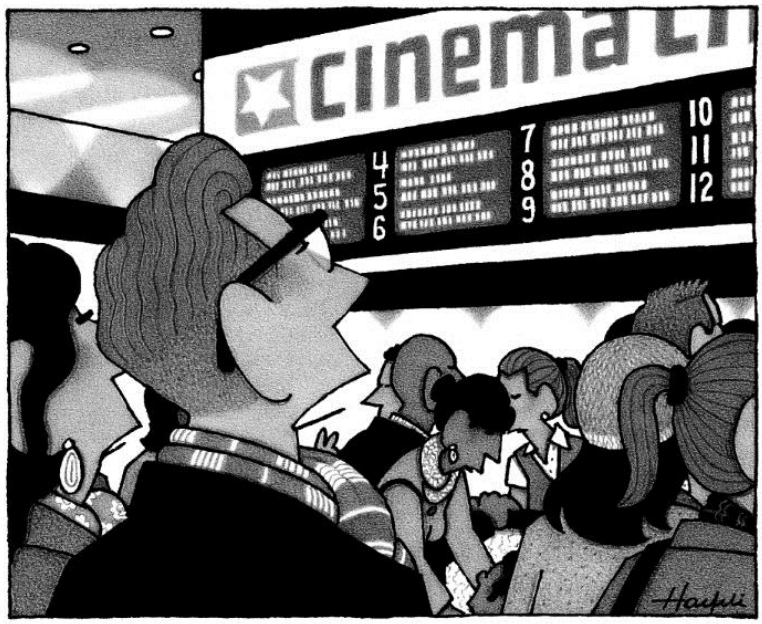
What Saint Phalle, who died in 2002, left behind in Tuscany is dazzling or deranged, transcendent or tawdry, depending on whom you ask. Amid peaceful olive groves and ochre fields grazed by horses and sheep sits a house-size sculpture of a sphinx, with mirrored blue hair and a bright-red crown, a flower blooming on one of her breasts and a lavender heart on the nipple of the other. The interior is covered in shards of mirror, as if a colossal disco ball had been turned inside out. (During the two decades that Saint Phalle worked on the garden, her bedroom was inside one breast, her kitchen in the other.) A sprawling, fantastical castle, with a rainbow mosaic tower, sits near a blue head some fifty feet high, sprouting a second, mirrored head crowned by a huge hand. Downhill, the Devil stands amid some shrubs, a rainbow-winged hermaphrodite with a sweet face, womanly hips, and three gold penises. It is as if a psychedelic bomb had exploded in the most picturesque part of Tuscany.

When Saint Phalle entered the asylum, in the early nineteen-fifties, she was a twenty-two-year-old wife, mother, erstwhile fashion model, and lapsed French aristocrat. Art, she believed, returned her to sanity, and she wanted to make a monumental sculpture garden that would, in turn, heal others. It would be in the fanciful style of Antoni Gaudí's Park Güell, in Barcelona, but each structure would represent a mystical figure from the tarot deck. She would create an alternate reality—"a sort of joyland," she once said, "where you could have a new kind of life that would just be free."

In the decades after her recovery, Saint Phalle became a star. In the sixties, she caused a sensation with her "shooting paintings." She would fire a rifle at assemblages of knives, scissors, eggbeaters, and baby-doll arms—the detritus of domesticity—which she had embedded in plaster, along with bags of paint and the occasional tomato. When the bullets hit, the art started "bleeding." Jane Fonda attended a shooting in Malibu; Robert Rauschenberg bought one of the paintings.

In certain respects, Saint Phalle's career was as much like Fonda's as it was like Rauschenberg's, built at the juncture of art, personal charisma, and political gesture. Her signature creation was the Nanas—big, bright female dancers with small heads and huge hips and breasts. In the later decades of her life, she devoted herself to public works, installing pieces in California, Germany, and Israel. Outside the Centre Georges Pompidou, in Paris, her work is on permanent display in the giddy "Stravinsky Fountain": a group of her sculptures—red lips, rainbow-colored birds, mermaids—facing off with the Swiss artist Jean Tinguely's kinetic iron machines, all spewing water at one other.

But she considered the Tarot Garden, in Tuscany, to be her life's work. "I'm following a course that was chosen for me, following a pressing need to show that a woman can work on a monumental scale," she wrote, in one of the scores of letters preserved in her archive, in San Diego. Before there was a women's movement, before she was on the cover of *Life* or had love affairs with royalty, before she poured a glass of beer on Saul Steinberg's head when they were out with Giacometti, even before she did the "very worst thing a woman can do" and abandoned her children to pursue an artist's life, Niki de Saint Phalle was captivated by liberation. "Men's roles seem to give them



"What kind of moviemaking do we want to reinforce?"

IN WONDER

I cursed someone or something
Tossing and turning all night—
Or so I was told, though I had no memory
Who it could be, so I stared
At the world out there in wonder.
The frost on the bushes lay pretty
Like tinsel over a Christmas tree
When a limo as black as a hearse
Crept into view, stopping at each
Mailbox as if in search of a name,
And not finding it sped away,
Its tires squealing like a piglet
Lifted into the air by a butcher.

—Charles Simic

a great deal more freedom," she wrote to a friend, "and I WAS RESOLVED THAT FREEDOM WOULD BE MINE."

CATHERINE MARIE-AGNÈS Fal de Saint Phalle—Niki—was born on October 29, 1930. It was a year after the stock-market crash known as Black Tuesday initiated the French wing of the Great Depression, and a few months before her father's finance company closed. The Saint Phalles were well connected in Paris—they were the thirteenth-oldest family in France—but Niki's parents thought they would fare better in the United States. They took their eldest child, John, with them; Niki, then a few months old, was sent to her grandparents' château, in Nièvre. It was the first of many abandonments.

When Niki was three, she was brought to live with the rest of the family, which settled on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Her father, André, had established himself as a banker, and the Saint Phalles lived well, if not as grandly as their ancestors. "Father arranged to finance what became the most famous restaurant of its time in New York: Le Pavilion," she wrote, in one of three illustrated memoirs. "I still remember how good the food was." Her mother, Jacqueline Harper, had been born in America and brought up in France, in a château with gardens by Le Nôtre, who also designed the grounds of Versailles. In New York, Jacqueline took her children to the Metropolitan Museum on Sundays, and to the ice-skating rink at Rockefeller Center in the winter. They summered in rented houses on Long Island or in Connecticut.

Despite her cosseted childhood, Niki was "scared of everything." When she and her brother played in the attics of the summer houses, Hitler figured prominently in their games; John pencilled on a mustache, and they painted swastikas on the walls. "There was terrible trouble when we left a Nazi attic in the house Mother had rented," she wrote. "The owners discovered what we had been doing there, and thought that mother had a Nazi spy ring. I can't remember the punishment, but it must have been awful." Their mother had a vicious, unpredictable temper, and often beat Niki's younger sister, Elizabeth, "with the prickly side of a hairbrush." Saint Phalle recalled that her little brother, Richard, "still can't eat fish because Mother sometimes would spend hours forcing him to finish everything on the plate. Our sister Elizabeth told me she was once served her vomit back by Nana the governess, who was following Mother's orders." Both Elizabeth and Richard de Saint Phalle committed suicide in adulthood.

Niki was always in trouble at school. She was expelled from Brearley, for putting red paint on the fig leaves of the school's Greek statues, and then from a convent school in Suffern. She finally graduated from Oldfields, a boarding school outside Baltimore, where "there were horses and fences, and rolling hills." It was there, she wrote, that "I started noticing that I had quite a bit of success with men. I enjoyed the power of turning them on."

She was spotted by an agent at a dance in Manhattan when she was seventeen, and within a few years she had appeared on the covers of *Life* and French *Vogue*. Her look was at once aristocratic and mystical: she had delicate features and huge, haunted pale-blue eyes. "She was one of the most beautiful women in the world—in fact she went on being one for a long, long time," the writer Harry Mathews, who met Saint Phalle when he was twelve and she was eleven, told me. "We were fringe members of the pre-débutante league, and I used to see Niki at dances," he continued. "She had a terrible crush on me, but I was interested in seventeen-year-old girls—women I could conceivably get somewhere with."

Several years later, Mathews remembers, he was on a train leaving from New York, sitting in the dining car with two of his "half-girlfriends," eating trout at a table set with white linen: "This young woman walked past, and she turned around and looked at me." It was Niki, who had become "an absolute goddess," he said. "She smiled at me and said, 'Hello, Harry.' That was it for me."

They were married when she was eighteen. "Her parents were O.K.," Mathews said. "They found out that my grandfather had a vast amount of money. My family was horrified, which I thought was rather funny—that a not highly distinguished New York couple should disapprove of titled members of the French aristocracy." But the Saint Phalles were Catholic, which did not sit well with Mathews's patrician Protestant family. They all but cut him off financially, and the newlyweds got in the habit of shoplifting books and luxurious foods that they could no longer afford.

They stopped stealing when their daughter, Laura, was born, in 1951. By then, Mathews had enrolled at Harvard, after a brief stint in the Navy. His young wife did not take to housekeeping. "I took our dirty clothes and hid them under our bed, where they slowly accumulated," she wrote. When Mathews

complained that he had nothing to wear, she explained that she couldn't do laundry: "It's just *too* boring." She was besotted with the baby but ill-prepared for motherhood. "It simply didn't occur to us that there was anything wrong with leaving our daughter peacefully sleeping in her crib while we went out for a few hours," she wrote. Mathews told me that they used to leave pieces of salami along the edge of the crib, so that when Laura awoke she would have a snack to keep her busy.

The effects of their naïveté ranged from laughable to life-threatening. One night, they returned home and found Laura gone and a terrible smell of gas; neighbors had noticed the fumes and rushed in to rescue the baby. Several years later, they had a second child, a son named Philip. He was born prematurely and kept in an over-oxygenated incubator, which left him with impaired vision. His parents didn't realize there was a problem. "They always used to leave me alone with my sister," he told me. When he was two and a half, they left the children at a farm while they went out of town, and Philip was run over by the wheel of an oxcart. "I was two, three weeks in a coma," he said. He suffered mysterious convulsions for years.

"My parents, they were hopeless," their daughter, Laura Gabriela-Duke, told me. "But I got a lot of things in my childhood that you don't usually get." When Mathews inherited money, he used it to take his young family on a steamer to Paris. They lived for the next decade as itinerant bohemians in Europe, bouncing among picturesque places and prominent groups of creative friends. At their first stop, in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, they befriended the poets John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch, and Mathews started a literary magazine with them. Saint Phalle recalled "celebrities sitting at cafés . . . Sartre sipping his coffee or Juliette Gréco looking very sexy."

They followed some musician friends of theirs to a small town outside Nice, where things turned darker. "It was as if we had been possessed by the demons of the Mediterranean," Mathews said. "It's sort of overpoweringly erotic. The blue sea, the weather—everything seems to be encouraging sex." Mathews began an affair with the French wife of an English lord. Saint Phalle retaliated by having an affair with the lord, who was twice her age and shell-shocked from the Second World War. He talked constantly of suicide, which she found inspirational: she started fantasizing about drifting out to sea on a rubber float with a "large safety pin in hand." She also began hoarding razors, knives, and scissors under her mattress.

One night, Mathews's mistress came to their home, and Saint Phalle attacked her. Then she swallowed a bottle of sleeping pills, but, she recalled, she was so manic that they had no effect. Soon afterward, Mathews discovered Saint Phalle's arsenal of sharp objects, and took her to a mental clinic in Nice. "There were bars on the window," she wrote. "I pointed to them asking Harry, 'What's that for?' And he responded solemnly, 'To catch butterflies.' Somehow this remark reassured me."

Saint Phalle underwent ten rounds of electroshock therapy at the clinic, and doctors said that her treatment could take five years. When she was allowed to walk in the garden, she collected twigs and leaves, and started producing collages. Freed of domestic duties, she became consumed with making art, and she began to feel better. Saint Phalle was released after just six weeks. She feared for her sanity the rest of her life, but she saw the experience as redemptive: "My mental breakdown was good in the long run, because I left the clinic a painter."

A few months ago, I visited Mathews in the elegant apartment in Paris where he lives with his second wife, the French writer Marie Chaix, amid a collection of Saint Phalle's art. In the living room, there was a sculpture of a face that bursts into a tree with candy-striped limbs. Across the room was a small black-and-white rendering of an erection.

Mathews, a tall, bald, handsome man of eighty-six, was suffering from a herniated disk. He was wearing a bathrobe and drinking white Burgundy at the kitchen table, whose top was a cobalt-blue Saint Phalle mosaic with two dancing Nanas. Chaix had roasted a chicken for dinner, and she set it down in front of Mathews to carve, but he found he was in too much pain. "My back," he said, sadly. His wife patted his shoulder and said, "It's because you are talking about Niki."

After Saint Phalle left the asylum, she was never again content to live as a wife and mother. The family moved to Majorca, to a house with no plumbing, where they drew their drinking water from a rain cistern. Mathews worked on a novel, and they entertained an accomplished set of friends, including Robert Graves, who nicknamed Saint Phalle the White Goddess. (Mathews had his own sobriquet for Graves: "an ass hound of the highest order.")

Even in these surroundings, Saint Phalle felt stifled. She wanted to devote herself completely to her work, and she resented the assumption that the children were more her duty than their father's. During a vacation off the coast of Brittany, the artist Joan Mitchell called her "one of those writer's wives that paint," and Saint Phalle felt "as though an arrow pierced a sensitive part of my soul." She made a decision: "If I didn't want to be a second-class citizen, I would have to go out into the world and fight to impose myself as an artist."

The family moved back to Paris, and Saint Phalle took a studio in Montparnasse, at L'Impasse Ronsin, a cluster of "wooden shacks with tarpaper roofs," where, she wrote, "everyone stole their coal from the hospital next door." It was a vibrant artistic community—Brancusi had a studio there, and Saint Phalle visited him regularly, until she tired of drinking "bad Italian champagne in the middle of the day." At L'Impasse Ronsin, she also met Jean Tinguely, an intense-looking young man who was always dressed in blue work coveralls, dirty from welding sculptures. "I immediately fell in love with your work," she wrote to him years later; his pieces were like machines that he had imbued with their own ungovernable agendas. She was also taken by his physicality: "You

walked like a panther." Tinguely was married, but he had a steady stream of girlfriends, and his wife had a teen-age lover who lived with them—an arrangement that impressed Saint Phalle as enticingly creative.

Mathews, too, was captivated by Tinguely. "He was this dashing person—a kind of model of what an avant-garde artist should be," Mathews recalled. "He was essentially rebellious, against any kind of school." The two became friends and often went to car races together. "Niki told me, when we were both still in our seemingly lion-hearted promiscuous period, 'If there's anybody you don't want me to have an affair with, let me know.'" Mathews smiled ruefully. He asked her not to sleep with Tinguely, because, he said, "if she got involved with him, I knew she would make sure it wasn't just a passing affair."

Saint Phalle and Mathews separated in the summer of 1960, while the family was on a trip to the United States. "I didn't want to worry about him," she wrote, "the children . . . or any other responsibilities." Within months, she had taken up with Tinguely. There was never any discussion with Laura and Philip, who were then nine and five years old. "When I came back to Paris," Gabriela-Duke told me, "my mother wasn't there anymore."

Saint Phalle was known for paintings made by firing a rifle at a prepared canvas.

HANS NAMUTH, "NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE" (1962)/ © HANS NAMUTH ESTATE/ COURTESY CENTER FOR CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY, ARIZONA

By the time Saint Phalle picked up a gun to shoot her paintings, in 1961, she wanted to blow up her identity as wife, mother, and daughter—all the dutiful aspects of womanhood. In her work, she took on a different role, the femme fatale. "The more successful—and threatening—she becomes, the sexier she acts," the art historian Catherine Dossin wrote about her.

Saint Phalle wore a tight white jumpsuit when she shot, and she invited friends like Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns to participate. "Performance art did not yet exist, but this was a performance," she wrote. "Here I was, an attractive girl (if I had been ugly, they would have said I had a complex and not paid any attention), screaming against men in my interviews and shooting." Her extravagant nihilism fit the sensibility of the times. John Ashbery, who was then writing about art for the *Herald-Tribune*, and attended the shootings, recalled that "thumbing your nose at the art establishment was just gathering steam." Pierre Restany, the founder of the New Realists, a group of artists that included Yves Klein, Tinguely, and Christo, came to one of Saint Phalle's events. Afterward, he asked her to join the group.

France was in a moment of brutal flux, as the Algerian war raged and terrorists set off bombs throughout Paris. Around the time that Saint Phalle made her first shooting painting, French police killed dozens of protesters demonstrating on behalf of the Algerian National Liberation Front, shooting some on the spot and drowning others in the Seine. Corpses washed up on the riverbanks for weeks afterward. During this period, the newscaster David Brinkley did a segment on Saint Phalle, in which she appears young and gorgeous and hysterical. "Nothing can be as beautiful to me as when the shooting takes place and all the bags burst," she exclaims. "I mean, it isn't as beautiful as war, it isn't as beautiful as seeing someone killed or the atom bomb, but it's the most that I can do!" Brinkley, at his desk, soberly told American viewers, "The artists say they are only mirroring the time they live in."

Tinguely had recently shocked the art world with a piece at the Museum of Modern Art called "Homage to New York," a giant "suicide machine" that he had engineered to slowly self-destruct, ultimately bursting into flames. His shared project with Saint Phalle was to explode everything: monogamy, monotony, art, propriety. A French documentary about Tinguely and Saint Phalle called them "the Bonnie and

Clyde of Art." "She told me she fell in love with Jean when he put out his cigarette in a fancy dish of butter, to kind of tell her to fuck off," Saint Phalle's granddaughter Bloum Cardenas said. Saint Phalle was often photographed for magazines with Tinguely, standing amid the rubble of L'Impasse Ronsin—a vivid repudiation of her privileged upbringing. "They were dirt-poor," Gabriela-Duke told me. "No hot water, toilet outside. I mean, it really did look like a slum."

While Saint Phalle worked, the children stayed with their father in the Seventh Arrondissement; they lived with an au pair in a downstairs apartment, and he lived upstairs. Gabriela-Duke found the neighborhood stultifying after her gypsy childhood. "It was lots of embassies and nuns," she said. One day, Saint Phalle and Tinguely came to visit, and Gabriela-Duke, then thirteen, made lamb chops for dinner. Trying to adopt their bohemian manners, she served the food casually. "Maybe they were not at a table or something," she recalled. As she stood in the kitchen, "I see this lamb chop pass by me and fall in the sink." Tinguely had flung it at her in protest: he was the son of a factory worker, and vigilant against any perceived signs of aristocratic condescension. "It became a big explosion," Gabriela-Duke said. "Niki gets on her high horse, and then he walks out. And at this point I was happy: she's screaming out the window, and he's in the street insulting her, and at last there was a little *action* in this uptight, snotty neighborhood."

Usually, though, Gabriela-Duke hated their fighting. "They were extremely violent," she said. "For them to do what they did, they needed that energy; they knew how to, you could say, arouse each other. You could see it sexually, but also energetically—violent."

Tinguely and Saint Phalle worked constantly, and often collaboratively. They brought an installation of their sculptures, called "Le Paradis Fantastique," to Central Park; the mayor, John Lindsay, said, "They lift me right off the ground." In Jerusalem, in a mixed neighborhood of Jews and Palestinians, they collaborated on a piece called "The Golem," a black-and-white monster with three protruding red tongues—slides for children to play on. There was also "Le Cyclop," a project of Tinguely's, which they worked on for more than two decades: a three-hundred-and-fifty-ton mirrored head in a forest near Fontainebleau, with a toboggan for a tongue and a brain made of cars. "The only thing they used a crane for was a train wagon that's twenty-two metres up in the air," Cardenas, who visited them often, said. "Everything else they made like Egyptians: with rope and their muscles."

There is footage of the two from 1962, on a trip to Las Vegas, where they drove to junk yards, scavenging for discarded toys and furniture to use in a piece called "Study for an End of the World, No. 2": a series of sculptures that Tinguely built and exploded in the Nevada desert. Saint Phalle looks glamorous in a fur-collared coat, sitting in a pickup truck as Tinguely displays a mangled baby doll picked from a junk heap. "Niki, look," he says. "The end of the world!"

Saint Phalle offers a mysterious smile and shouts, "Boom!"

To saint phalle, the Tarot Garden was to be an Eden of art and magic. To the local gentry, the garden was an act of vandalism. But there was little they could do besides carp about the "madwoman and her monsters," because Saint Phalle was under the protection of Italian nobility.

She was brought to Tuscany, in 1977, by Marella Agnelli, a friend from her modelling days. Agnelli had since married the president of Fiat and sailed the Mediterranean on their yacht with John and Jacqueline Kennedy and Truman Capote. When Saint Phalle told her about the idea for the garden, one afternoon in St. Moritz, she suggested that she knew the right place for it: an estate that her brothers owned, on top of an Etruscan ruin by the sea.

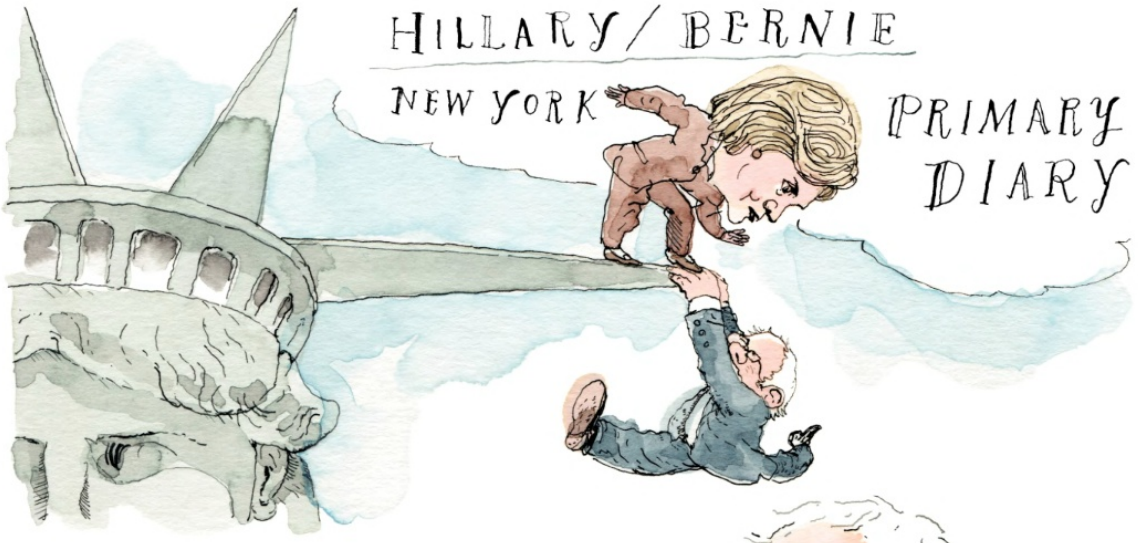
Agnelli belonged to the Caracciolo family, one of the oldest Neapolitan dynasties. One brother, Nicola, was an esteemed environmentalist; the other, Carlo, had co-founded the newspaper *La Repubblica*. They were staid intellectuals, and Saint Phalle seemed to them like a bright exotic bird descending on the sedate countryside. She arrived "all dressed up in a colorful robe, topped by one of her magnificent wide-brimmed hats, with a handmade clay maquette of the Tarot Garden," Agnelli recalled in a memoir, "The Last Swan." "It looked tiny and totally harmless." By the end of their meeting, the Caracciolo brothers had given her a sizable piece of their property. "She conquered all the men in my family," Nicola's daughter, Marella Caracciolo Chia, recalls. "They just kept on saying yes."

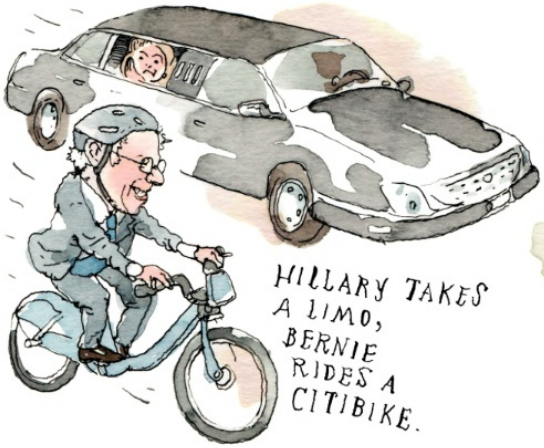
On a fourteen-acre site, Saint Phalle planned to represent the twenty-two figures of the Tarot's major arcana. Tinguely and a team of assistants came to weld the iron armatures. Saint Phalle recalled the making of the Sphinx, where she was to live, as nearly miraculous: "It appeared almost overnight like a huge mushroom rising after a good rain, the iron frame a much larger duplicate of my model. Jean had taken no measurements—he built with his eye only." She hired locals with little experience to help her cover the structures with plaster and, eventually, mosaic. Marco Iacotonio was a nineteen-year-old mason with a reputation in town as a troublemaker when he met Saint Phalle. She asked if he had any experience with ceramics, and he said he did: he was good at making marijuana pipes out of clay.

At first, Iacotonio was struck by Saint Phalle's beauty. "She really knew how to move in front of a man," he told me. But to the people who worked with her, he said, Saint Phalle invariably became a "second mother." It was a role she took on deliberately. In footage taken during the making of the garden, she serves lunch to workers in undershirts, who sit at her dining table inside the Sphinx, under a chandelier made of a cow's skull. She wrote to Harry Mathews, who remained a lifelong friend, "This familiar gesture to all these handsome, very young Italian machos—who before were really just country boys, farmers . . . helped me to assume a psychological power. It was easy for them to take orders from La Mama, they do their whole life, as long as I respected the very thin façade of their maleness."

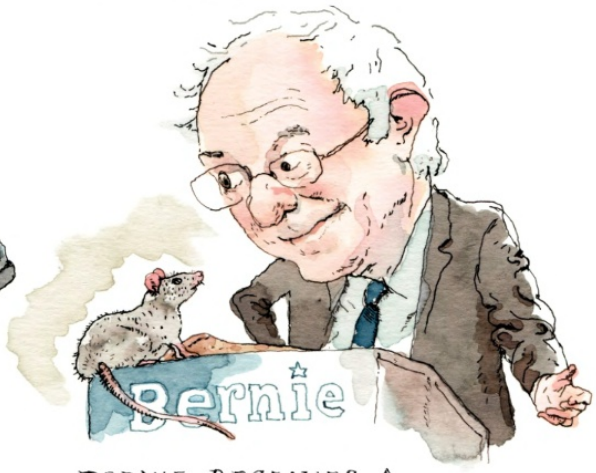
Venera Finocchiaro, a ceramicist who taught in Rome, came to instruct the local women, who helped produce the elaborate tilework that now covers the sculptures in every imaginable

HILLARY / BERNIE NEW YORK PRIMARY DIARY



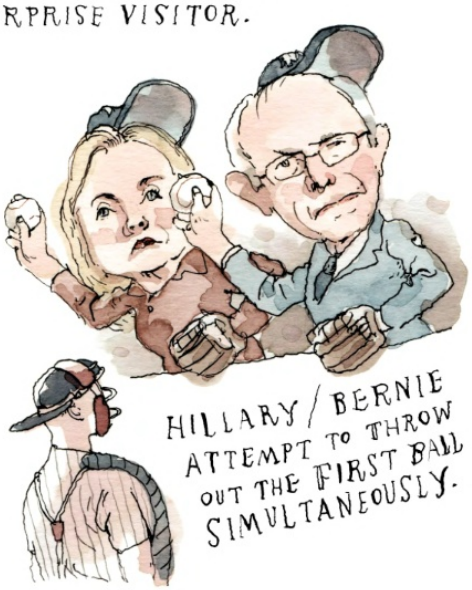


HILLARY TAKES A LIMO, BERNIE RIDES A CITIBIKE.



BERNIE RECEIVES A SURPRISE VISITOR.

HILLARY RINGS THE BELL AT THE NEW YORK STOCK EXCHANGE (INCOGNITO).



HILLARY / BERNIE ATTEMPT TO THROW OUT THE FIRST BALL SIMULTANEOUSLY.

style: crackled glazes, Murano glass, millefiori details, red protrusions like devil's horns or chili peppers. A segment of the Sphinx is decorated with the lacy designs of the women's marriage quilts, which they brought to the garden's workshop and pressed against unbaked clay tiles to leave their imprints. As the team grew to dozens, Saint Phalle took lessons in Italian so that she could communicate. "These women who were from very simple backgrounds—suddenly just by working for her and being part of this project—started walking differently, wearing different clothes," Caracciolo Chia said. "This girl who came in with her family, because she needed a job, and everybody expected she was going to get married soon—I remember seeing her start to wear jeans and makeup and cut her hair really short. You could see this flowering."

Saint Phalle invited friends from abroad to her encampment on the Caracciolo estate, where they worked alongside the villagers, altering the complexion of local life. There were artists from Argentina, Scotland, Holland, France; there were hippies and homosexuals. "Many things change, because now you live not in Capalbio but in the world," Iacotonio said. "You have your mind set out into the *world*."

"Whether or not people think it's art doesn't matter to me," Saint Phalle said.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER GRANSER FOR THE NEW YORKER

If American radical feminism of the time was about rewriting the rules of society, Saint Phalle had a different notion: she felt that the rules simply did not apply to her. And while she had little interest in the domestic aspects of womanhood—the drudgery that was afflicting American women with Betty Friedan's "problem with no name"—she exalted her own vision of the feminine mystique. Even as she spurned child care, she was obsessed with the primal power of the mother and with the erotic power that made mothers out of women in the first place.

The Nanas play many roles throughout the garden; one serves as the figure of Justice, and others recline in fountains, spouting water from their mouths and Technicolor nipples. But they are all ultimately buoyant, funny fertility goddesses. Saint Phalle had been inspired to make the first one in 1964, after the painter Larry Rivers showed her a drawing of his pregnant wife, Clarice. Saint Phalle's first large-scale piece was a huge, hollow Nana called the "Hon"—"she," in Swedish—who lay with legs spread at a museum in Stockholm, where visitors lined up to enter through her door-size vagina. (Inside, they found a twelve-seat cinema in an arm, a milk bar inside a breast, and a brain built by Tinguely, with moving mechanical parts. "A Stockholm psychiatrist wrote in the newspaper that the Hon would change people's dreams for years to come," Saint Phalle boasted in a letter to Clarice Rivers.) As her career developed, Saint Phalle made ever-larger Nanas. Three of the biggest, on the bank of the Leine River, in Hanover, Germany, inspired a debate over the propriety of public art. "I think that I made them so large so that men would look very small next to them," Saint Phalle told an interviewer.

In the late sixties, she scandalized the art world by producing inflatable Nanas to sell as pool toys. "Whether or not people think it's art—or whether or not it *is* art—doesn't matter to me," she exclaims in footage that her friend François de Menil took of her, surrounded by hot-pink Nanas with green hearts on their nipples. She was selling

the floating Nanas, she explained, "to become a millionaire," which was necessary in order to fund her monumental projects.

This, too, she framed as a feminist initiative (though she eschewed the term itself, and refused to appear in exhibitions of exclusively women artists). "To be my own benefactor had many advantages," she wrote in a letter to Marella Agnelli. "I didn't have to cater to patrons. I could work at my pace, in my way, which wasn't always logical." She admitted, though, to being envious of Gaudí, who had a duke to support his work.

The Tarot Garden cost more than five million dollars—about eleven million in today's money. Saint Phalle often had only enough for another month of operating costs, but she never told the workers. To raise funds, she created a perfume, sold in a cobalt-blue bottle with intertwined snakes for a stopper. Andy Warhol attended the launch party, and the perfume ended up providing a third of the funding for the garden. But she also turned to the men in her life. Tinguely would show up at the garden with "suitcases full of cash," Philip Mathews recalled, and his father, Harry, sent money to pay a shrubbery bill. For a while, Saint Phalle had an English boyfriend half her age. "We all thought he was her boy toy," Caracciolo Chia said, "but he owned half of Charlotte Street." He was the Fifth Marquess of Normanby, and, as Saint Phalle's friend Contessa Giuppi Pietromiarchi told me, "He saved her financially."

Pietromiarchi is a well-known garden designer who lives in a grand villa down the road from the Tarot Garden. On a wet winter day, I went to lunch at the villa, which is decorated with souvenirs from Count Pietromiarchi's time as Italy's Ambassador to Egypt and Morocco. "We spent every Christmas here at this table with Niki," the Contessa, who is seventy-six, and wore proper country plaids and a rhinoceros brooch that Saint Phalle made for her, said. A white-gloved servant distributed prosciutto and melon. Then she whispered, "Niki told me that when you look at a man you have to look at him exactly the way you want to go to bed with him."

We were joined at lunch by Giulio Pietromiarchi, the Contessa's son, and his wife, Sophie. He was a sixteen-year-old aspiring photographer when he met Saint Phalle, and her garden was his first subject. "She wanted to have a court photographer," he said. "She didn't pay me, but she bought me some good equipment."

"You see? What a good way to encourage him," Marella Caracciolo Chia, who was seated across the table, said. "The way she encouraged all of us to follow our passions!"

Pietromiarchi shook his head. "But then she took all the equipment back!" he said, and laughed. "She asked me to stop, and she gave it all to her son-in-law, who needed a job. But I couldn't stop. I loved looking at it growing and growing. I was jumping over the fence to take pictures on Sundays, when nobody was there." He did that for more than a decade, whenever he was home. By the time the garden was ready to open, in 1998, Saint Phalle had had a falling out with her son-in-law, and she was distraught that there was no real record of the progress. Pietromiarchi went to see her, and showed her slides for hours. "She was in tears," he said with satisfaction. "She bought all my archives."

Pietromiarchi is now a professional photographer; Sophie, who sometimes helped in the garden when she started dating him, is an illustrator. "He bloomed in his art because of Niki," she said. "When you were with her, there was a completely thrilling atmosphere—a need to create."

Walk downhill along the path that leads away from the Sphinx, and you are confronted by a voluptuous golden skeleton—Death—riding a blue horse over a mirrored green sea, from which disembodied arms stretch up to cling to the world of the living. Saint Phalle's longtime assistant Ricardo Menon died of AIDS while they were working on the garden, and she placed a photograph of him inside a round chapel on the edge of the garden—a snug, dark womb. Perhaps the eeriest figure is the Oracle, a hollow-eyed, golden-faced creature, who stands alone and ominous in a clearing, covered with snakes, one almost swallowing her head.

There are snakes everywhere in the park, and in Saint Phalle's other work—emblems of a childhood episode that she described as "the summer of snakes." A week after she was released from the mental hospital, she received a letter from her father that began, "I'm sure you remember when you were eleven and I tried to make you my mistress." She wrote in her book "Mon Secret" about the experience, when "my father, this banker, this aristocrat put his sex in my mouth." Her father's assault, she wrote, "had broken my faith in humankind."

The shooting paintings were her first revenge: Saint Phalle gloried in associating the family name with violent rebellion. "I had a big rage in myself," she told an audience at the University of California San Diego in 1996, when she was sixty-six. "I would have probably been in prison, or still in a psychiatric hospital, if it hadn't been that art helped me to get out all of my very deeply aggressive feeling toward my parents, toward society."

But, after Saint Phalle left her children, she never stopped believing that she had done "something unpardonable." If making art was her salvation, it was also a form of self-flagellation. She developed severe lung problems, after years of inhaling fumes from the polystyrene that she used to sculpt Nanas. Her time in the unheated shacks at L'Impasse Ronsin—and, later, in the cold belly of the Sphinx—exacerbated a case of rheumatoid arthritis, which grew so bad that at times she couldn't walk. Laura Gabriela-Duke believes that some of her mother's agony was an expression of wrenching remorse: "The suffering was momentous, tremendous." Often, when they had plans to see each other, Saint Phalle became particularly ill. "I would be very happy I would see my mother," Gabriela-Duke said. "Then she would get sick, because she felt so guilty—so then it felt like I made my mother sick."

Saint Phalle became weaker as the Tarot Garden progressed. "I lose twenty pounds. I become the transparent shadow of myself," she wrote. "My hands start becoming deformed. I couldn't sculpt anymore. Jean cries when he looks at my hands." But she did not consider abandoning the garden. It was the apotheosis of her work, and the culmination of her decades-long collaboration with Tinguely. His contributions are everywhere: in feats of engineering like

a tall silver tower whose top, sawed almost off, hangs perilously over the treetops; in the creaking, kinetic metalwork that punctuates Saint Phalle's hallucinatory landscape. As Marco Iacotonio put it, "The garden was their child."

Saint Phalle and Tinguely were collaborators before they were lovers, and it was that aspect of their relationship that proved most enduring. She relied on him to execute her vision from her very first sculpture: he welded a tree to adorn her children's bedroom while she was still living with Mathews.

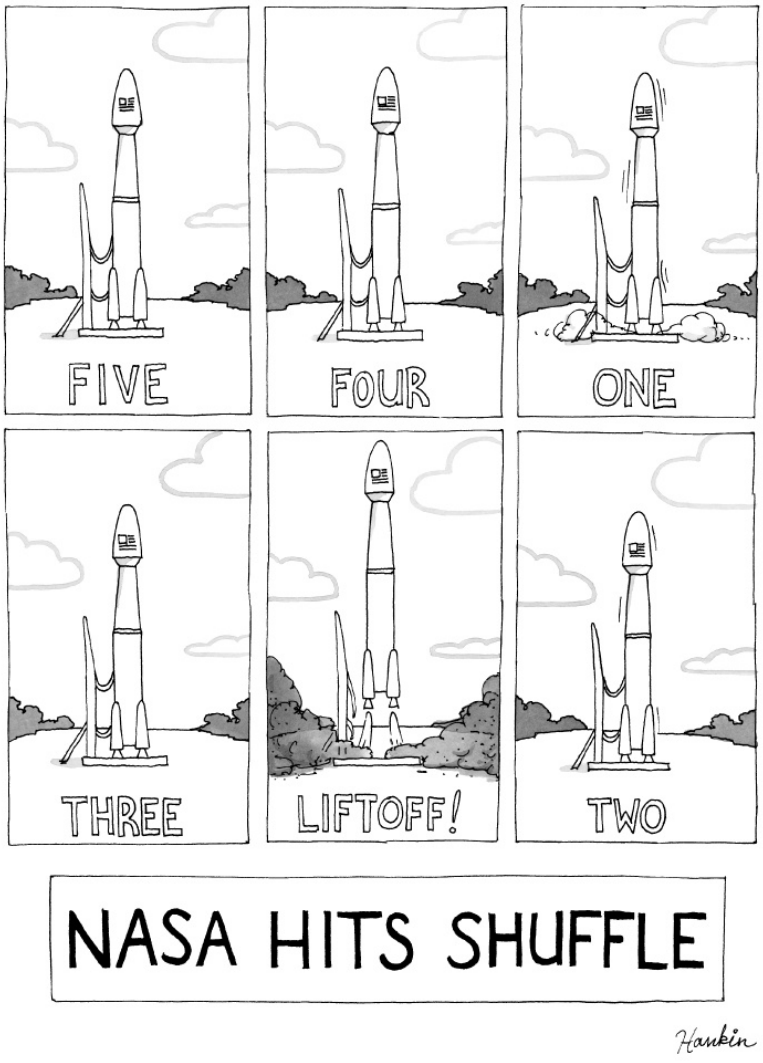
Once Tinguely and Saint Phalle became successful, they bought a ramshackle house in Soisy-sur-École, outside Paris: a former brothel, frequented by truck drivers, with a dozen bedrooms for customers upstairs. Tinguely was in his element there, with space to deconstruct racecars and to invent new machines. The courtyard was a cross between a playground for giant Nanas and a scrap yard. "You could not have met two people who were more well-suited as collaborative spirits," François de Menil, who often visited Soisy, said. Tinguely brought Saint Phalle breakfast in bed every morning. When he travelled without her, he sent elaborate love letters that unfolded into paper sculptures.

"I think at the beginning it was a really passionate, completely monogamous relationship," Cardenas told me. "And then it wasn't. It's the sixties. Jean was a flirt. Niki, too—and they're both beautiful. And then it became a competition." At one of Saint Phalle's biggest shows, at the Hanover Gallery, in London, she drew a huge crowd. "It was such a success," Cardenas recalled. "Jean said that he would never come to one of her openings again without a bimbo on his arm."

Several years into the relationship, Tinguely took up with a woman named Micheline Gygax, in Switzerland. Soon, he began living with her half the time. Saint Phalle had her own lovers, male and female. She and Tinguely occasionally hosted orgies at Soisy, and left photographs of them around the house as mementos. (Once, Philip remembered, Saint Phalle suggested that he could turn a profit by selling pictures of high-profile guests to a newspaper.) Even Tinguely's affair with Gygax was subsumed to the creative process. The two women eventually became friends, and Saint Phalle asked Gygax to translate a children's book that she wanted to illustrate. One would call to warn the other when Tinguely left town: get ready, he's coming your way.

In 1971, after ten years of intense artistic collaboration and intermittent cohabitation, Tinguely and Saint Phalle got married. Gabriela-Duke saw it as "formalizing an unbreakable bond" for the sake of their art: "For both of them, their No. 1 priority was their creative legacy." Who better to decide what became of your work than the person you had worked with most? Philip Mathews thinks that the motive was purely pecuniary. Saint Phalle became a Swiss citizen when they married, and could thus avoid paying taxes to the French government.

Whatever the reason, the wedding seemed to make their relationship even less like a traditional marriage. "The day that they got married, she was expecting to go out and have a wonderful evening," Clarice Rivers said. "Instead, they went right back to Soisy. He got back in his blue overalls and went off to work. She was really upset about that." Soon afterward, Gygax became pregnant and Tinguely moved to Switzerland full time. His relationship with Saint Phalle "never really ended," Iacotonio told me. But they never lived together again.



In a letter that Saint Phalle wrote to Tinguely decades later, she spoke of their early encounters, when they were both married to other people. "You liked my paintings, which you took seriously, and also my badly drawn projects on little bits of paper," she wrote. They had discussed Gaudí and Ferdinand Cheval—a French postman who worked for decades to build an uninhabitable castle, covered in mythical statues. But mostly, Saint Phalle remembered, they talked about "the beauty of man alone in his folly."

In the Tarot Garden, there are signs that Saint Phalle was not always happy in solitude. On my first visit, I was struck by a sculpture of the Tree of Life, with snakes for branches, and the story of a love affair told on tiles set along the trunk. "Where shall we make love?" one of the first tiles asks, in Saint Phalle's loopy cursive. "In a bathtub?" The illustration shows a naked Nana with a heart for a vagina, held in the arms of a figure with a pink erection. "Under the stars? In the jungle with lions and crocodiles?" The crocodile looks like a smiling cartoon sperm with feet and eyes.

The tiles near the beginning of the story capture the abject devotion of early love. "What do you like the most about me?" one asks. "My lips? My breasts? My funny nose?" On another, Saint Phalle writes, "I would like to give you everything," and an inventory of precious things follows: a heart, a thousand-dollar bill, a clock, a plate of food, and the words "my mouth my money my imagination my breast my time my terrific cooking my everything." But after tiles depicting rain and stars and "our house," which looks like a bright, curvy castle, comes a sad ending. "What shall I do now that you've left me? Will I cry a million tears? Will I die? Will I take to drink? Take a trip? Will I consult the stars and a crystal ball on how to win you back? Will we stay friends?" As I stood there looking at Saint Phalle's childlike drawings, I was surprised to find myself bawling.

Tinguely died in Switzerland, in 1991. Saint Phalle died in California, on May 21, 2002—though in Europe it was already May 22nd, Tinguely's birthday. Harry Mathews and their children were with her at the hospital when she died. "She had our little family reunited," Gabriela-Duke has written, in a "circle of forgiveness."

"You can hear this?"

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It didn't last. Philip Mathews and his wife, who live in a town house in the West Village that Saint Phalle bought for them, do not speak to his father, his sister, or his niece, Bloum Cardenas. They feel that the Niki Charitable Art Foundation, established to promote her legacy, is doing a bad job. Further, they accuse Saint Phalle and the rest of the family of failing to fully embrace their two sons. At the root of this bad feeling, perhaps, is Philip Mathews's sense that he was always competing with "a court of nobodies," as he put it, for his mother's attention.

Gabriela-Duke, who lives in a rental apartment in Oakland, seems reconciled with her mother's choices. "There was no other way," she told me. "It was a question of survival: she couldn't put me in the picture." She thought for a moment and then smiled a little. "Really—and it's something I wish my brother would get—we were loved. The thing is, with love, it's one thing to love and then it's another to know how to love, and maybe we take a lifetime to learn."

Making the Tarot Garden cost Saint Phalle a great deal: her health, decades of her life, millions of dollars. But, in the process, she managed to mother an entire community. "I used to have these panic attacks, and nobody really knew what to do with them," Marella Caracciolo Chia, who was thirteen years old when Saint Phalle arrived, said. "Her garden was the place where I wouldn't have them, so I would go there very often and sit at her table inside the Sphinx and doodle. I found in Niki a place where I could really be myself."

Ugo Celletti, the postman who loved mosaic work, helped maintain the garden for many years. Now two of his nephews work there as caretakers, along with Marco Iacotonio, who lives on the grounds with his wife and children, in a house that Saint Phalle had built for him. Seventy-five thousand people visit every year, most of them families with children, who scramble over the statues, dazzled by their size and their wildness. They feel, perhaps, the way that Saint Phalle wanted to feel in the garden. "I lost all notion of time and the limitations of normal life were abolished," she wrote. "I felt comforted and transported. Here everything was possible." ♦