

**NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE: a Psychological Approach  
to Her Artwork and the Symbolic Significance of the  
Tarot Garden**

**By Paul Brutsche**

Niki de Saint Phalle died in 2002 in San Diego. She was already a famous artist during her lifetime, and since her death she continues to be a presence in the media and in her big and colorful sculptures. She has left behind her, important work, which seems easy of access and yet at the same time is enigmatic and unusual in its style and therefore difficult to understand. This paper tries to contribute to an understanding of her work through symbolical interpretation along Jungian lines. This psychological approach is not meant to give a reductive explanation of Niki de Saint Phalle's personality, but on the contrary, to open an additional perspective and to honor her creative effort by discovering a symbolical depth beyond and in addition to the aesthetic and artistic value of her work.

I will first introduce Niki de Saint Phalle with a biographical overview of her life. Then we will take a look at several aspects of her creative work: first, her critical examination of the conventions and the spirit of the patriarchy, and secondly, a later phase in which she created her well known "Nana Figures," in which she found her own corresponding feminine self. The second half of the paper will focus on the Tarot Garden she created in Tuscany and on a closer examination of a few of the Tarot sculptures themselves.

## **Biography**

Niki de Saint Phalle was born Catherine Marie-Agnès Fal de Saint Phalle in 1930 in France, the second of five children. She was born into a very wealthy, noble family. Her father was a banker; her mother came from a rich American family, which normally spent summers in the family's castle in France. However, her father lost all his money in the stock market crash of

1929. Therefore Niki did not live with her parents during her first three years, but with her paternal grandparents in France. Thus she was from early on confronted with different life styles - American and French. This family background would later make it difficult for her to feel really well rooted either in Europe or in the United States. On the other hand, it helped her to be in natural contact with the avant-garde on both sides of the Atlantic.

When she was seven years old, the family Saint Phalle moved to New York. Marie-Agnès, now called Niki, started school at the Convent of Sacred Heart. Throughout her youth she continually questioned authority and was sent to a succession of schools. She was dismissed from one of them, Brearly, for painting the fig leaves red on the school's statuary. At age eleven she became the victim of sexual abuse by her father. Only many years later, as an adult and already well-known artist, was she able to deal with this. For many years she worked as a fashion model for "Vogue", "Elle", "Life" and other magazines. She was a very attractive woman with an exceptional appearance who inherited from her mother feminine charm and perfect manners, but also battled all her life long against her mother's conventional rigidity and traditional ideas concerning women.

At eighteen, she eloped with her lover and moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts. She began to paint, experimenting with different media and styles while her husband studied music. A first child was born. Then the young family moved to Paris, where Niki studied theatre and acting. In 1953 she was hospitalized in Nice with a nervous breakdown, and painted while recuperating from this crisis. She re-evaluated the direction of her life and began to seriously consider communicating through her art. This was the first of a long series of such crises. The family moved to Spain, where a second child was born. In Barcelona, she discovered the work of Antonio Gaudi. She was

deeply affected by this experience, which opened many possibilities of the use of diverse material and object-trouvés as structural elements in sculpture and architecture. In particular, Gaudi's "Parc Guell" was a special revelation that made her determined to one day create her own garden combining art and nature. She was to realize this project later with her main work, the Tarot-Garden in Capalbio, Tuscany.

At age 30 she made a difficult decision: she separated from her husband and left him with the two children in order to set up a studio and to concentrate solely on her work. She began to work with Jean Tinguely, the famous Swiss artist, whom she had known five years earlier. Later she married him and he became her most important companion and promoter of her work.

## Artistic Work



**Figure 1** *Niki de Saint Phalle*

I begin the journey through Niki de Saint Phalle's work with a photograph of the artist herself. This is not from the early years just described, but from 16 years later when she was 46 years old. The photo was taken during a healing stay in Graubünden (Switzerland) where she recuperated from severe and lingering damage to her lungs, due to her work with polyester, her favorite material. At that time one did not know about its highly toxic nature.

Before us we see an image of a very

attractive, young looking, fragile yet determined woman. The look in her beautiful eyes is hard to interpret, and it is as secretive as any Mona Lisa's. She has only barely survived the damage to her lungs, yet here she shows composure in the way she holds her teacup. Her headdress offers a comical counterpoint. It speaks of the colorful fantasy life of a strange bird --or possibly of the wing of the phoenix that raises itself out of the ashes. Such contradictory aspects express well the polarities which exist within her being - the ones we meet in her work and in her person. This is how she truly experienced herself at the beginning of her art career and then found her own way to free herself from the narrowness of family and societal pressures.

This second image of the artist shows her at the side of Jean Tinguely in her garden in Sosy. Niki de Saint Phalle's relationship to Jean Tinguely is a seldom encountered example of a successful and highly fruitful collaboration between two artistic



**Figure 2** *Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely*

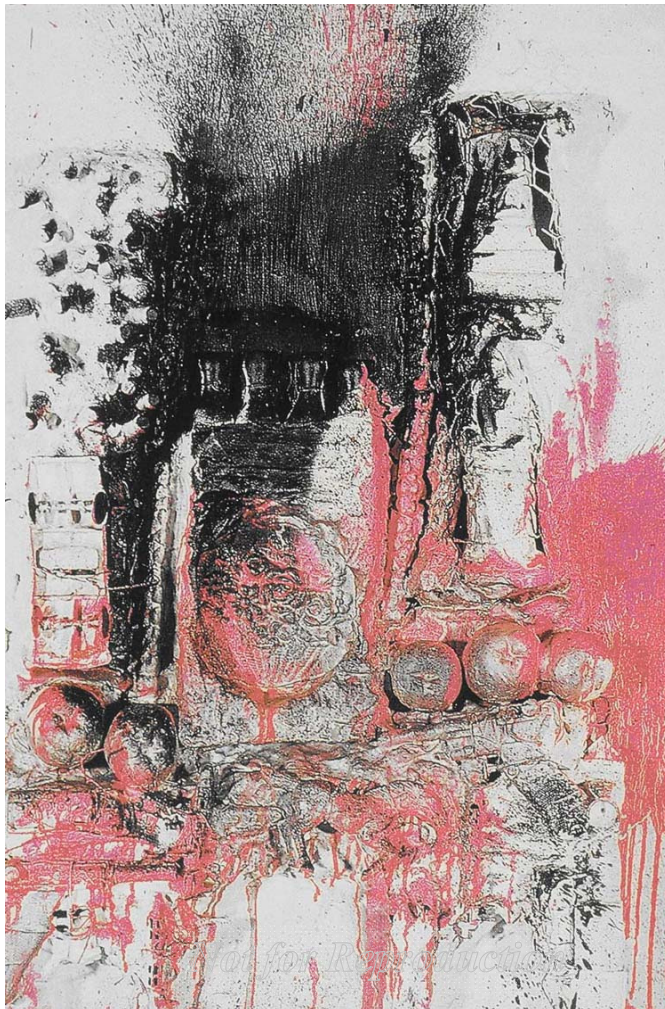
personalities, who were allied at first as friends and later as a couple in a dynamic and difficult relationship. Something of this special relationship becomes visible in this

photograph. They sit together at a table, a place of shared living and lively exchange. On either side stands a sculpture of the other partner: on the right, a feminine, round, female figure of Niki's and on the left a wiry, bird figure of Jean's. Each of these small sculptures is typical of these artists' style of working. It seems that not only is the respect for and interest in the other's work expressed, but also something of the soul meaning that each had for the other. Jean Tinguely seems to be representing the spirit in his bird sculpture as well as in the relationship, while Niki's black and colorfully dressed Nana

figure represents primal materiality and corporeality.

And now to her actual art works.

We begin with the so-called "shot picture", a "Tir" that was created in 1962. One does not immediately see the vehemence it took to create this work. The balanced composition, the weak and nearly fragile pink and the subtle drawing that reminds one of printmaking technique, give the impression of a carefully developed still life. Only the black upper section makes us think of an explosion or of an eruption. But this piece came into being by actually being shot at. Niki



**Figure 3** *Tir*, 1962

developed this method in the 1960's, and it made her famous in one go. Her process

was that she embedded bags of liquid color under the plaster surface of the work and then shot at it. The colors thus sprayed onto the picture surface and in that way created the final image. Understandably, these “happenings” created quite a stir.

For Niki de Saint Phalle this work was not about stimulating public attention through a highly shocking action. It was an authentic expression of inner anger and aggression. Later, she says about this phase of her work: “In 1960 I was a very angry young woman. Angry at men and their power. I felt that they had robbed me of my own free space in which I could develop myself. I wanted to conquer their world, to earn my own money. Angry with my parents who I felt had raised me for the marriage market. I wanted to show them that I was somebody, that I existed and that my voice and my scream of protest as a woman were important. I was ready to kill.” (Catalogue of Exhibition in 1999 in Ulm, Germany, quote from German original, p.17).

This commentary makes it clear that in these “shot-pictures,” she freed herself so that she could stand as a creative woman. It was a revolutionary, existential action, about autonomy and about the right to have ones own expression and creativity as a woman. It was about a freeing destruction of the images of collective roles which had been forced upon her. These “shot-pictures” also make visible how necessary aggression and destruction is in relationship to creativity. Without this gesture, which says “no,” this artist would not have found the path to her very own, primal task. This willingness to say “no” and to resist numbing habits and the power of norms is the base of any artistic, creative existence.

‘Autel du chat mort’, *Altar of the dead cat*, 1962. This is another example of her “Tirs.” An unsettling, macabre altar, with various stuffed animals, statues and other objects, among them various spray paint cans which once shot, have freed up the red, blue and black colors from within them.

Clearly in this altar image, the shooting was not only concretely directed at the spray cans, but also symbolically at the



**Figure 4** *Autel du chat mort, 1962*

church, religion and Christianity. The work gives us the impression of cynical revenge upon religious tradition. Yet we must differentiate here: although the image of the altar and its blasphemous redefinition shows a large amount of aggression against religious feeling, we could also ask ourselves--is this only a shooting of religion? Or are we seeing here an image of what had been sacrificed in having a Christian educational background, meaning nature, the animalistic, the sensuous, the demonic? Upon this altar we see the images of aspects which had no place in the spiritual world of her parents; aspects, which in the name of respectability and conformity had been repressed.



But this altar is naturally more than simply a personal reckoning with her family background. The structure of three speaks of the spirit, in whose name nature and instincts have been controlled and sacrificed. Here there are three crosses, three parts to the triptych, three parts to the pointed triangular form, which is the topmost edge of the altar. In this multiple aspect of threeness and of the number three itself, we see highlighted the symbolism of the masculine, of spirit and of goal-oriented movement. Feminine figures, animals and flowers are subsumed into and subordinate to this geometric, linear, masculine way of thinking and being in the world.

The title of this work is ‘Autel du chat mort’, Altar of the dead cat. Feminine instinct is sacrificed. The sacrifice of feminine qualities is a personal experience of this artist, but it



**Figure 5** *Le mort du patriarche*

is also a collective phenomenon appearing in environmental destruction, technological control of nature and an ideology of “everything is possible.”

‘La mort du patriarche’, *The death of the patriarch*. This is a further example of her Tir creations. The confrontation with the patriarchal value system is particularly visible here. The artist constructed a dumb, scarecrow-like, bogeyman—primitive and brutal—to represent a masculine show of power. The shoulders are wide and full and raised up as a mark of authority. The head, the location of understanding is unthinkable

small and under-developed. One cannot expect much from it. Instead we find an overly large and dominating phallus, represented by a model airplane that flies upwards. This seems to signify the blind, upward, striving drive that is only interested in the pure experience of being virile and wanting progression. At the same time that this airplane-phallus is imposing and large, it is fake and cheap. It is made of fragile plastic. It shows how little authentic, creative energy belongs to this particular representation of the masculine.

In the area of the heart, we find a cast-iron pump wheel used for regulating water flow. In this place of feeling, connectedness, the relational, it seems that there is something purely technical in the perspective of the patriarchal spirit. This technical aspect makes us think of manipulation and mechanical control that are devoid of any differentiated feeling. Various kinds of military weapons complete this outfit. We recognize an air defense canon, a tank, a sharpshooter rifle and various other guns. Added to this are two racing cars and on the left arm two geometry instruments used for drawing exact angles and straight lines. In these objects we further recognize aspects of typical male consciousness; such as man's tendency toward aggression, goal orientedness, one-sided progression and the purely linear. Here, male hubris is caricatured and then shot at like a figure in a shooting gallery. As we know, she had personal reasons to put down the paternal masculine. In her youth she experienced her father's sexual abuse. Only much later could she speak and write about this. (See her autobiography *Traces*, 1999). But in this cynical, mocking image of patriarchal vanity, she is doing more than just getting even with her personal father. This work speaks of the patriarchal spirit, of a world defined by the masculine and dominated by its expectations and values. These are displayed here and made available to be shot at.

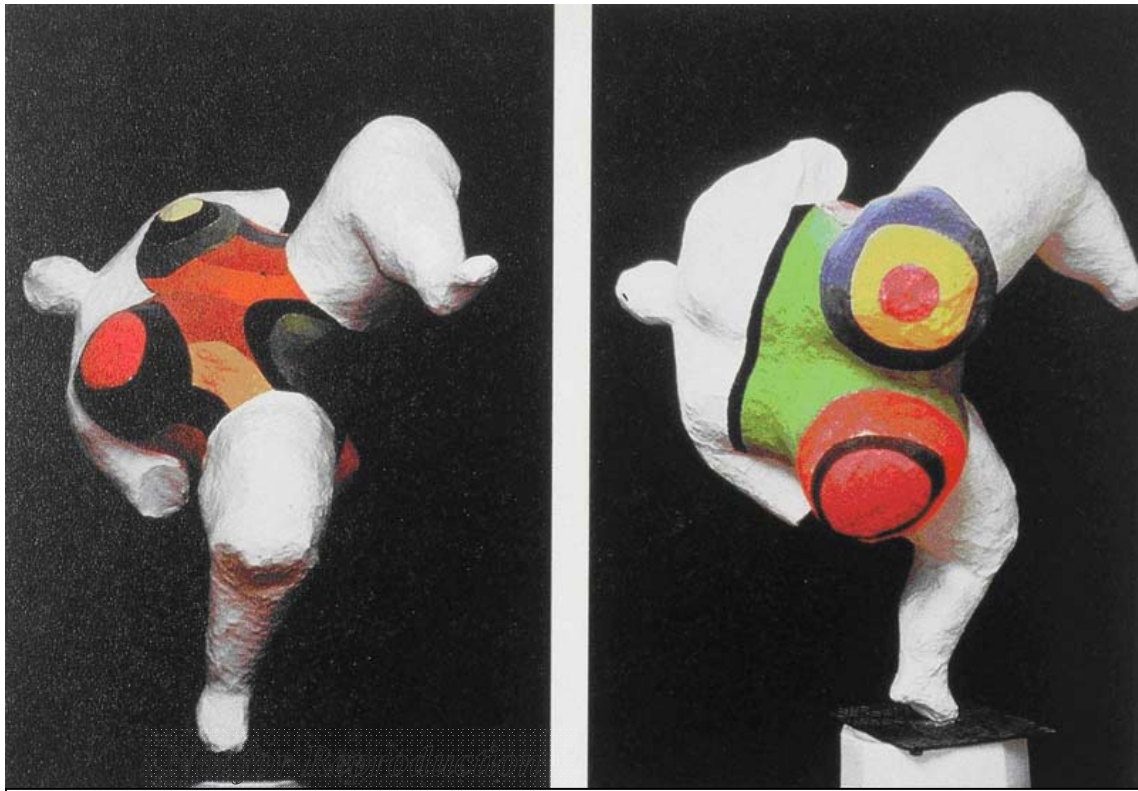


**Figure 6** *Nana qui court*

“Nana qui court”, *Running Nana*. In the 60s, the artist’s style and choice of themes changed in a very decisive way. No longer does she shoot at images, nor do we any longer find melancholic, sad women in wedding veils. We begin to see many more cheerful, female figures. She calls them “Nanas.” This word is taken from the French and is a somewhat casual expression for a saucy woman. The artist became famous with these Nanas. They exist in every thinkable form, in papier-mâché, as is the case here in this image, or

in large format made out of polyester.

The basic inventory of the Nana motifs is easily recognizable here with this ‘Nana qui court’. Each time we find a being with marked feminine body forms, large breasts, broad pelvis and thick legs. One leg is often held high, as if the figure were jumping, skipping or dancing. Elementary, contrasting and bold colors are used. Drawn elements and color are applied as a surface decoration. Let us look more closely at the figure. The symbol of matriarchal, primal femininity has now clearly replaced the visual language of patriarchal forms. The body is covered in plant motifs. It awakens



**Figure 7** *Dancing Nana Anna*

associations to mother nature and to the Great Mother. It suggests the feminine as motherly nurturing, as the seat of life and as vital basic energy. This element also shows itself in the colors. The palette is reduced to few colors - black and white resonates like a primal contrast of beginning and end, day and night, life and death. In addition to this we perceive a blood red and an alluring, vibrant green.

This Nana incorporates, in the truest sense of the word, feminine existence and being and is certainly very different from the contemporary ideal of beauty. The usual expectations of feminine elegance, as celebrated in fashion magazines, with the well-known tendency toward an anorexic ideal of beauty, clearly has little validity here. The work speaks much more about a primeval form of the feminine, and cultivates a relationship to fertility figurines and archaic mother goddesses.

This sculpture from 1966 is called “Dancing Nana Anna.” She is reproduced here with a front and a back view. Nana Anna is wearing a kind of bathing costume

composed of intense colors. The full curves of the breasts and bum are accented and presented with shameless delight, instead of being hidden, restrained or bound. The bathing costume is not meant to clothe or tame the feminine forms of the body. The opposite is true; it supports their Dionysian voluptuousness. This dancing Nana could well fit into the train of wild Maenads who accompany the God Dionysus. She is as if in an ecstatic trance. The head has lost its position as the directing authority and has been replaced by a primal, vital energy.

“Nana acrobate” (1970),  
 “Nana boule” (1970), “Nana”  
 (1970).

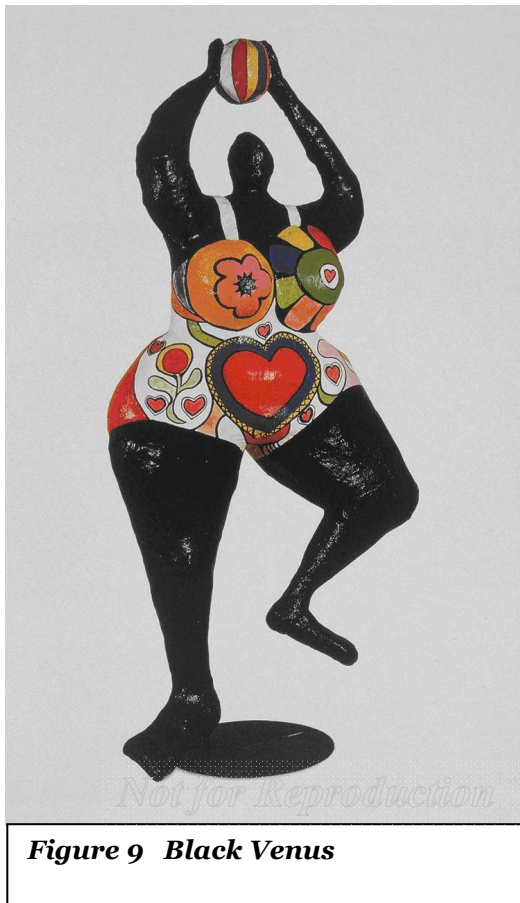
Nana acrobate: This acrobatic Nana stands on her head and hands. Those who walk on their hands do not have the usual view of the world. The artist is fascinated with such a vantage point that contrasts with the normal understanding of things. The transcending of normative views and the nearness to the unusual, of course, belongs to the basic impetus of every artist and not only to Niki or to contemporary



**Figure 8** *Nana acrobate, Nana boule and Nana*

again we find these in the history of art, from Hieronymus Bosch's creations and Velazquez' dwarfs, to Goya's insane, all the way to the harlequins of Watteau, Toulouse-Lautrec, Rouault, Derain and Picasso. Art is, to a certain degree, always involved with the unconventional, non-normative and unusual, as is the life of the artist who often lives a reality different from the accepted and known norms. In this acrobat Nana there may be something of the revolutionary gesture and playful joy in turning things on their heads, which, according to Goethe's Faust, belongs to the essence of the creative: 'Gestaltung, Umgestaltung, des ewigen Geistes ewige Unterhaltung' (*Formation, transformation, this is the eternal spirit's eternal game*) (1808, 193. Quote from German original).

"Nana boule", *Nana in the form of a ball*. This Nana is without extremities. We



**Figure 9 Black Venus**

see the torso emphasized in its voluminous compactness and in its vessel-like character.

"Nana" : The black color emphasizes the numinous aspect of this figure. The artist's fascination with black is expressed in a silk-screen print in which she depicts a black woman in a bathing suit and adds to it a written commentary: "I saw a fat woman on the beach today and she reminded me of a great pagan goddess. 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....Black is also me now." ("Black is

different', 1994).

'Black Venus', 1965/7, New York. Here is the Black Venus, which was mentioned in the above quote. In reality this figure is very large, nearly 3 meters high. The formidable dimensions of the pelvis and the thighs as well as of the breasts and the upright, reaching pose, lend this figure something of the super-human. Also the design of the bathing suit with the unusual motifs makes it clear that this is not only about a swimming black individual, but it is about the feminine, divine essence as such, about an archetypal reality. Venus is the goddess of love and beauty, and as such she is identifiable here through the different heart motives that cover her clothing. This Venus is playing with a ball and her lifted leg lends her something playful and dance-like. The playful gesture reminds one of the dancing Shiva of India as also the black color reminds us of the East Indian Shakti. This portrays divine playing and dancing. What this could mean?

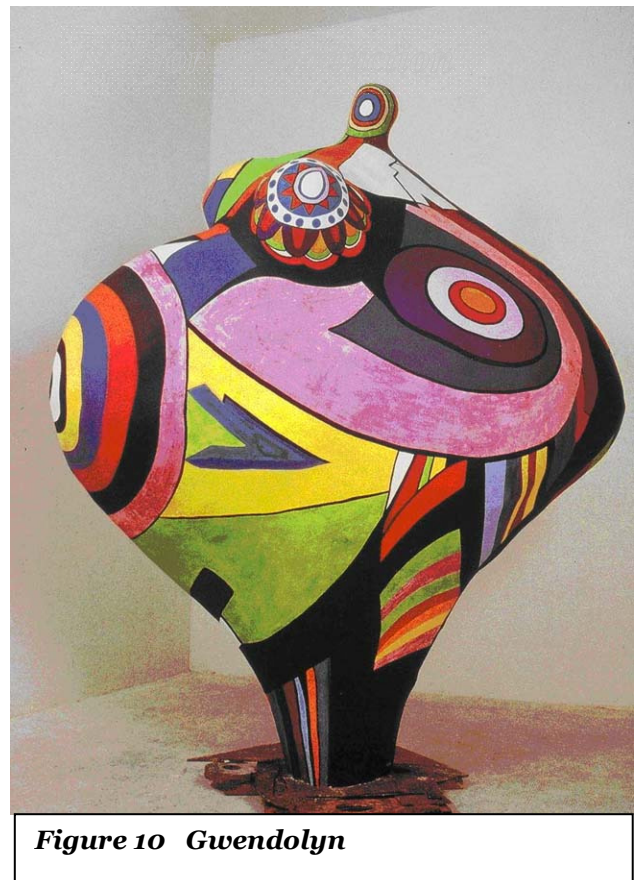
It could signify that what we are seeing is about action which transcends human action and which unfolds independently of humankind. In the concrete, psychic experience of this artist it could refer to the inaccessible wonder of creative inspiration—something which has a numinous character and is hugely powerful and at the same time not explainable or controllable. This divine, autonomous, playful drive brings forth beautiful objects and the primordial energy and joy for creating imagistic reality with color, forms and volumes.

If we briefly compare this "Venus" with the earlier seen "patriarch," obvious differences become clear. Instead of a large airplane-phallus we find here a large heart. We can therefore say that the eros principle of love and desire takes the place of the technological principle of power and progress. In place of a hard and angular persona

we find a playing goddess before us. We do not become caught in a rationalistic order but are moved toward a higher reaching experience. The artist herself, in her work and life, had to develop and shift from the patriarchal pole to the feminine pole. Her first stand was a battle with power and powerlessness, self-definition and rage. As we have seen, this psychic situation found an appropriate expression in her aggressive “Tir”-images. With the discovery of the Nanas she ascertains femininity in its various aspects and in herself and her work frees up cheerful, playful energy.

In the making of ‘Gwendolyn’ (1966) an unquestionable high point is reached in the tendency, which we have seen in other Nana figures, to accentuate feminine body forms. The body is made almost entirely out of round forms and at first glance is not even any longer recognizable as body. The female body becomes vessel, the great round, the containing. It has now fully merged with the primal symbolization of the Great Mother, to use Erich Neumann’s words.

The artist came to create such a primal, archaic, mother figure at the time of the pregnancy of a woman friend. That was the exterior stimulus. But the fascination with the motif of pregnancy and motherhood went beyond this coincidence and accompanied her later, especially during the time of her working on the Tarot garden. There, over several years, living in a larger than life,

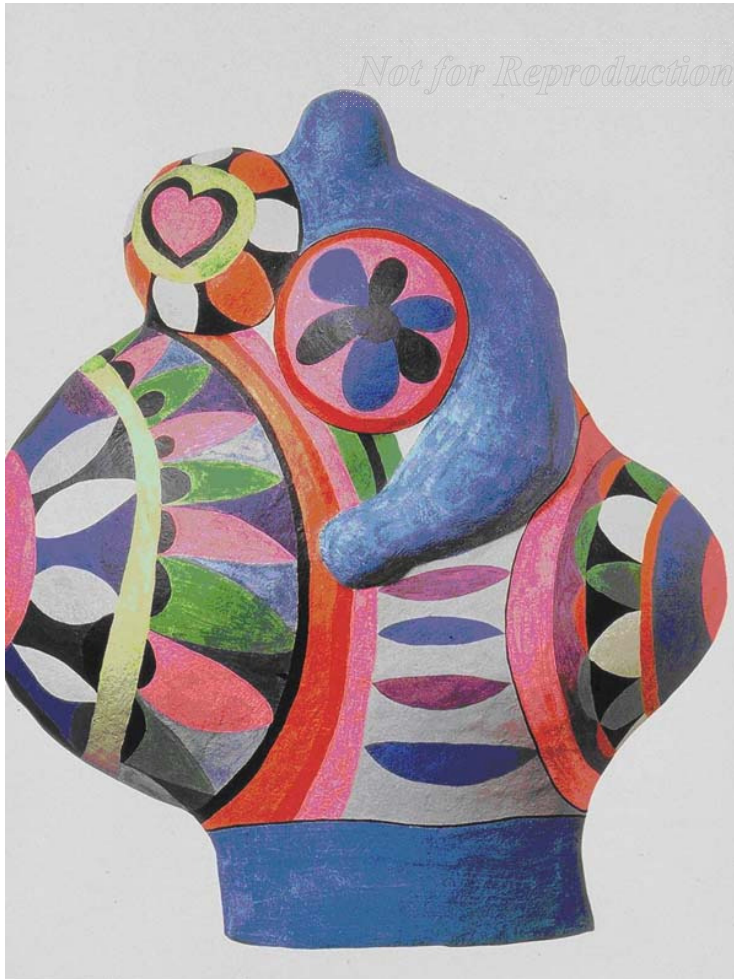


**Figure 10** *Gwendolyn*



Sphinx-like mother-sculpture, as we will see later, she found her psychic nourishment. Here again we see that the symbolic significance of the mother has super-personal and cosmic dimensions. There are close associations that make us think of Great Mother Nature, or of an image of pregnant life as such. Or we could think about the maternal, nurturing collective unconscious out of whose fullness of imagination all riches of

creativity flow.



**Figure 11** *Nana enciente*

“Nana enceinte,” *Pregnant Nana* (1967). This Nana again takes up the theme of pregnancy. A decorative flower design in soft water color tones defines the surface. The light blue body color lends this Nana, even with its voluminous body forms, a heavenly lightness and spiritual quality. We see how the artist explored many different qualities of the feminine. In her Nana figures. There again seems to be something transpersonal in these monumental representations: an

image of the primordial mother or goddess.

In retrospect Niki de Saint Phalle said the following about her Nanans: ‘My first exhibition with the Nanans I called Nana Power. For me they were the symbol of a

happy, free woman. Today, nearly 20 years later, I see them differently. I see them as forerunners of a new matriarchal epoch, of which I believe that it is the only solution.’ (Exhib. cat. Ulmer Museum *Niki de Saint Phalle*, p. 35, quote from German original)

There are many variations to the theme of Nana, which can be illustrated by the next three images.



**Figure 12** *Green Nana with black handbag*

“Green Nana with black handbag” (1969) has a comical detail: the coquettish handbag, which stands in no relation to the angular massiveness of the body. We see a lovely, monochrome basic figure in strong, opaque, spinach green, with the typical black line design that has ganglia-like swellings and egg and sperm-like linear forms. The legs area is also covered in a typical line drawing, which spreads over the surface in an unruly, net-like pattern. There is a strange tension here between the archetypal feminine on one hand and a banal representation of a corpulent woman on her way to her favorite

tearoom on the other. There is also a contrast between the down to earth and well-behaved Mama-aura of this figure and the seductive, saucy aspects: the mini skirt length of the dress, the patent leather shoes and purse and with the swung-out left foot. This double tension makes this figure seem at the same time strangely close and yet far, familiar and foreign, comical and uncanny. Is this an image of the great mother nature,

which as the “green” lets things grow and become, and which holds all life in its secretive, meandering-type relations? Or is this an overdone caricature of Aunt ‘what’s-her-name’? Is this a mythological, symbolic statement, or a comical portrait of feminine particularity?

This very famous figure called ‘La Waldaff’ (1965) also leaves us guessing as to whether we are meeting a goddess or a somewhat hysterical and dressed-up farmer’s daughter who has the stance of a male decathlon athlete. The strange and removed stare of this woman speaks more to the former possibility. Also, the blouse with its design reminds one of a green land, seen from above. The meadow of flowers on the yellow skirt and the brown and green stockings activate associations to the earth. These aspects remind one of a Demeter figure. The broad shoulders and mighty breasts seem super-human and powerful and point to divine omnipotence.



**Figure 13** *La Waldaff*

Against this, the red high-heeled shoes create a nearly grotesque counter- point. They humanize the figure and emphasize her ephemeral, daily significance. This contrast between the sublime archetypal and the trivial biographical, which is the distinguishing feature of these clothed Nanas, seems to be the essence of the artist’s image, of womanhood. Within the individual woman, behind or through her, one can see the more expansive, archetypal, primal feminine. Such an aspect of the “strong woman,” which fascinates the artist and accompanies the whole body of her work,

stands in contrast to her own rather slight physique and fragile health. It flies in the face of the distinguished milieu of her original family and stands in opposition to the



**Figure 14** *Tea Party or the tea at Angelina's*

world of the patriarchs and masculine certainty.

'Tea Party or the tea at Angelina's' (1971). The comical side is completely in the foreground here.

These tea-drinking, women friends who seem to be breaking out at all their seams, no longer allow us to think of noble goddesses but rather of mundane, gossiping women or devouring mothers. Jean Tinguely's reaction to this sculpture

was devastating; it triggered a huge outburst of rage. It seems that the aspect of the devouring mother seen in this sculpture, one who is completely subsumed by matter and who threatens to pull one into the formless world of primordial orality, touched him a bit too closely.

This work, with the ugly red woman that only has one arm, yet two aggressive breasts, and in whose face stupidity is written, shows that in her examination of the feminine, the artist did not simply deal with the one-sided and positive aspects.

“Hon - a cathedral” (1966). In 1966 Niki Saint Phalle as well as Jean Tinguely and Per Olof Ultvedt, a Swedish artist, were invited to install a sculpture to be displayed for three months in the Moderna Musset in Stockholm. The three artists agreed to construct a gigantic Nana. “Hon” was a huge sculptural work into which one could walk, and had a colorful skin and a number of attractions on her inside. Up to 150 people could remain inside her at one time. Visitors entered this lying, pregnant figure through the vagina, which Tinguely called the “source of life,” possibly alluding to a similar image in a work of the French painter Courbet. The exhibition was a huge success in Sweden and triggered an international echo.



**Figure 15** *Hon – a cathedral*

“Hon” or “She” was the name given to this sculpture. It reminds one of Rider Haggard’s “She,” to which Jung made reference at various times in his work (CW 7, p. 298; 10, p. 88). “She” is the epitome of the feminine in its various tonalities. She reminds us not only of the Hagia Sophia but also of the Venus of Willendorf; she

embodies the act of giving birth. She is the ancient, Great Mother with open, spread knees - like the dried out earth waiting for rain.

### The Symbolism of the Tarot Garden



**Figure 16** Tarot Garden, general view

Niki de Saint Phalle began the development of her Tarot Garden in Tuscany in 1979. This would take up 17 years of her life and became her major creative endeavor. From the point of view of this imposing oeuvre, everything she had created before this seems to have led up to it, and everything

which followed it, seems only an after shock.

The idea of creating a sculpture garden had come to her much earlier, in 1955, when she discovered Antonio Gaudi's Parc Guell in Spain. It was immediately clear to her that sometime in the future she herself would have to realize something similar. She was also familiar with the tradition of Baroque gardens and with the fantastic construction of the 'Palais idéal du Facteur Cheval' in Hautes Rives, France. But her garden became much more than simply a personal variation on a concept she had come across elsewhere. It became for her an absolute, on-going concern and a deep, inner, captivating theme for life.

She says the following: 'I owe thanks to the Tarot for offering me a better understanding of the spiritual world and problems of life - as well as the insight that every difficulty must be solved... to ultimately reach an inner unity and the garden of paradise'. (Catalogue of Exhibition in 1999, Ulm, Germany, quote from German original, p.96).

What is the Tarot? It is an ancient, venerable set of cards, with picture representations of archetypal, elementary situations upon them. These describe existential, human experiences and psychic states. The historical roots of the Tarot are not clear. One speaks of their conception having been in Egypt. It is said that Moses received these cards from the high priests of Egypt and then brought them to Israel.

This is an explanation of the large concurrence which exists between the Tarot and the Kabala, the Jewish secret doctrine. Niki de Saint Phalle was convinced that the cards have a considerable meaning. She saw the Tarot Garden as a site which crosses boundaries into the religious and where everyone is potentially able to have a direct experience of the archetypal content of the Tarot.

"Magician". We are welcomed into the Tarot garden by this first figure. It is a high priestess that is covered in blue ceramic tiles. This is number Two of the Great Arcana of the



**Figure 17 Magician**

Tarot and resting on top of it, is number One - the head of the 'Magician' covered in mirrors. The large size of this figure creates a strong reaction in the viewer as does the unexpected blue in the middle of this green park, and the primordial, mask-like quality, the totem-like nature of this sculpture. One feels as if one is in the presence of a powerful, numinous nature-entity, which has a mysterious charisma.

The image sequence of the Tarot begins with the Magician. Here, we see the magician as a head. It is the symbolic vessel of the spirit and the divine imagination. Out of the void or out of the emptiness of the divine imagination, something is brought forth into a state of being. Emerging from the head, we see a hand that acts, that creates out of itself by thrusting steeply upwards. This is a gesture of absolute free and creative



**Figure 18** *Magician and High Priestess*

action The eyes are empty, or, better, they appear to be filled with the heavens. These are heavenly eyes, all-embracing, and all-knowing. The eyes can be seen as forming an 8, lying, on its side, and so suggesting the symbol of infinity, the eternal.

The "Magician" and "High Priestess" are placed in direct relationship to one another. They form a double head. This is the artist's own idea and does not correspond to the original order of the Tarot. She places the two foundational principles of the cards on one axis, and therefore into an inner connection.

That which creates a whole is the above and the



below, heaven and earth, Yang and Yin and in the sense of the I Ching, the creative and the receptive. The artist says about these figures: “For me the Magician is the card of God, the creator of the universe. It is He that created the marvelous joke of our paradoxical world. He is the *card of active intelligence*. Pure light, pure energy, mischief and *creation*” (italics by the author)’ (The Tarot Garden, Niki de Saint Phalle, p.8). And about the high priestess she says: “The High Priestess of intuitive feminine power is one of the keys to wisdom. She represents the *unconscious with all its potential*. Those who wish to explain events by reason or logic alone remain on the surface of things without the depth of instinctual vision and imagination.” (italics by the author) (p. 9)

At the beginning of the Tarot Garden, this “masculine world-creating intelligence” and “feminine power of intuition” are seen together, on the same axis, and appear as a unity. This is a personal statement of the artist. It may be possible to interpret it in this way:

-Masculine and feminine principles are different but arise out of the same source and have the same primal meaning. They are both of central importance.

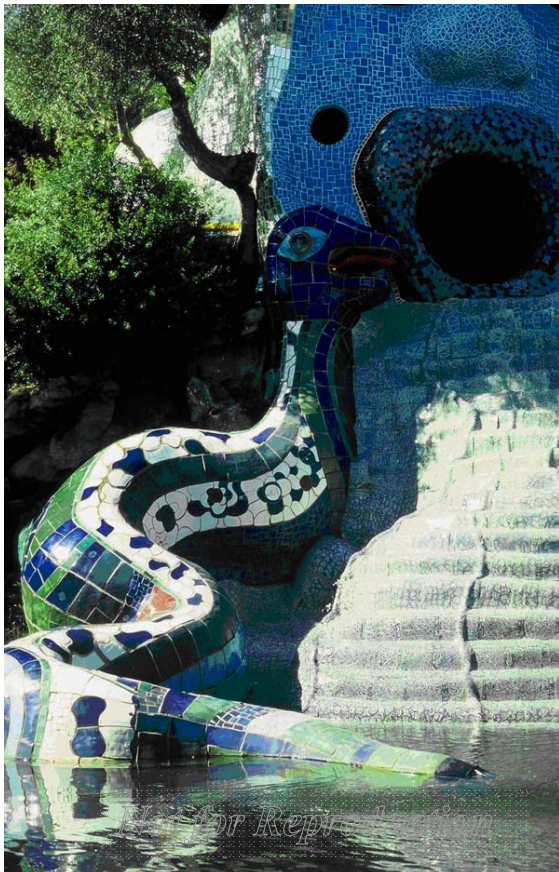
Neither has priority over the other.

-The “masculine” effectiveness (of the upper Magician) is not independent of the “feminine” effectiveness (of the lower High Priestess), but he sits on top of this foundation and finds in her his ground.

“Masculine” and “feminine” effectiveness is not exactly correct as a characterization. Maybe the creative, foundational polarity needs to be described in a different way: for instance as *Yang* and *Yin power* or as the creative and the receptive of

the I Ching. We can also think about other opposites, for instance the two different creation myths in the Bible. In the first one there is the desire to describe “differentiating” and “parting” as the gesture of creation, and in the second creation myth the naming of all things (by Adam and Eve) is emphasized as the creative act. In presenting these differing versions of the creation myth, which appear in Genesis, we find an essential, instinctive wisdom expressing that all creativity entails an elementary polarity.

In all such oppositional formulations, we find mirrored a basic experience of human consciousness. The creative has a bipolar origin and comes into being due to this foundational opposition. This opposition can be made more understandable



**Figure 19** *Serpent rising out of the water*

through physiological data, or psychological situations, or through mythological and theological statements, but in the end it always comes down to one and same thing.

A few more thoughts about the High Priestess: Out of her mouth, as if out of a well, flows water which streams down and over the step-like, chin construction, and is then collected in a round pool. The High Priestess is thus associated with life-giving water. This is symbolic of the water of the unconscious. All art is close to the inspirations and out-pouring of the unconscious. This is the primal material of artistic creativity.

The serpent rising out of the water can be symbolically interpreted as an image of an irrational event, an image of primary movement that seems to lead to a higher plane, therefore toward consciousness or visible form.



**Figure 20** *Empress (Sphinx)*

“Empress” (Sphinx). The Tarot card The Empress, which is number three of the Great Arcana, is interpreted in the artist’s own words as “the Great Goddess.” According to her commentary she is “the Queen of the sky, mother, whore, emotion, sacred magic and civilization” (p. 50).

Some of the qualities of the Empress are already recognizable from this image. She is represented as a black Goddess, similar to the black Venus we encountered earlier. Black defines her as a dark, secret noumenon, powerfully potent. Her face, which is hard to read, and the prone, animal posture with its forward stretched paws, awakens in us the image of a Sphinx. This is the name that was also given to the work.

Two mighty breasts emphasize the mother aspect of this goddess. She is nature and love, which nurtures.



**Figure 21** *Empress skin*

A scaly skin made out of beautiful ceramic tiles covers the whole Empress sculpture. These are made of subtle earth tones, of reflecting mirrors in which the green of the surroundings is mirrored, and of blue glass in which the stars of heaven appear. All this is a reminder of the Great Mother Nature, the earth, the heavens and the cosmos, all of which encompass all life. Like a net or the scale-covered body of a fish, she connects everything with everything else in this all-embracing way.



**Figure 22** *Empress interior*

Niki de Saint Phalle lived inside this “Great Mother” for a number of years. The inner space is totally covered in mirrors, which have a fantastic effect. She entered into this holding cavern, this primal form of the great feminine and healed herself, to some extent, from the failings of her personal mother who was not able to give her holding or loving protection.

“The Emperor,” Tarot card number 4. The sculpture of The Emperor is situated directly opposite to the Empress and is one of the most complex sculptures of the whole garden. This is an overview of it, but you must disregard the straight tower that stands in the background, as it belongs to another card sculpture.

The artist describes the symbol of this card as follows: “The Emperor is the card of masculine power, for good or for bad. The Emperor is a symbol of organization and aggression. He has brought us science and medicine but also weapons and war. He represents the patriarch or male protector. He also desires to control and conquer” (p.44). The ideas of ‘protecting’ and ‘conquering’ become immediately visible here. The whole sculpture is built as a circular structure that embraces an inner courtyard, a kind of plaza. A space is



**Figure 23** *The Emperor*

enclosed and defensively closed off from the outside. This gesture to set boundaries, corresponds to the masculine spirit. We see a marked difference from the sense of space of the feminine sculptures we saw earlier. There we found a definite, vessel-like character which could hold the viewer in a body-related way. The masculine here does not contain but gives boundaries and surrounds.

That which conquers is clearly visible in the intensely colored red rocket that is steeply pointing upward. It symbolizes progress, a conquering of the world, a drive to power and a monumental quality. It reminds us of the image of ‘La mort de patriarch’, which we saw earlier, with the phallic toy airplane that stands erect. Here also we find that the work symbolizes the spirit of the patriarchy. Yet this time the artist no longer

seems to wish it dead. Rather, she has accepted it as a reality, as an expansive and goal-directed energy, as a drive toward something higher, an impulse toward progress which



**Figure 24** *Entrance Way*

transcends inertia and boundaries.

‘(Entrance Way)’ The entrance way into the Emperor’s fort is dressed in black and white pieces of ceramic. This black and white contrast reminds us of an ‘either/or’ opposition. The analogy to the pattern of a chessboard suggests a conflict, fight or a moral weighing between good and evil.

Also in the arcade which surrounds the courtyard, we find the same black and white accentuation. The alternating exclamation and question marks, which we can see on the right column, carry with them a fundamental opposition and express

on one side affirmation and on the other, questioning. There is a tension between uncertainty and definiteness, and between sureness and doubt. Also the mirrored surface, which we are looking at, creates a significant insecurity: what is real here? What is simply fancy or projection? We are dealing with a certain de-realization of reality.



**Figure 25** *Colonnade*

22 columns  
fence in the whole  
courtyard of the  
Emperor figure.  
This is as many as  
there are Tarot  
cards. Here again  
we see the  
mirrored column  
we saw earlier.

Each of the columns has its very own character.

The tower rises steeply and defensively at the edge of the surrounding fortification. Here the upward striving, vertical of the Emperor is emphasized. Before we saw that the prone, horizontal position of the Empress was underlined. These two sculptures exist as complex and opposed symbolic forms. On one side we experience a motherly, matriarchal-influenced view of reality and on the other, a fatherly, patriarchal one. The upward striving movement characterizes a tendency toward spiritual overview and transcendence, but also toward a will to power and to self-assertion. This belongs symbolically to all towers, be they church towers, castle towers, minarets or the



**Figure 26** *Pagoda Tower*



tower of Babel. They always signify transcendence, which points towards a beyond, or makes an inner claim for superiority. Crowning the tower, we find a golden, tiara-like



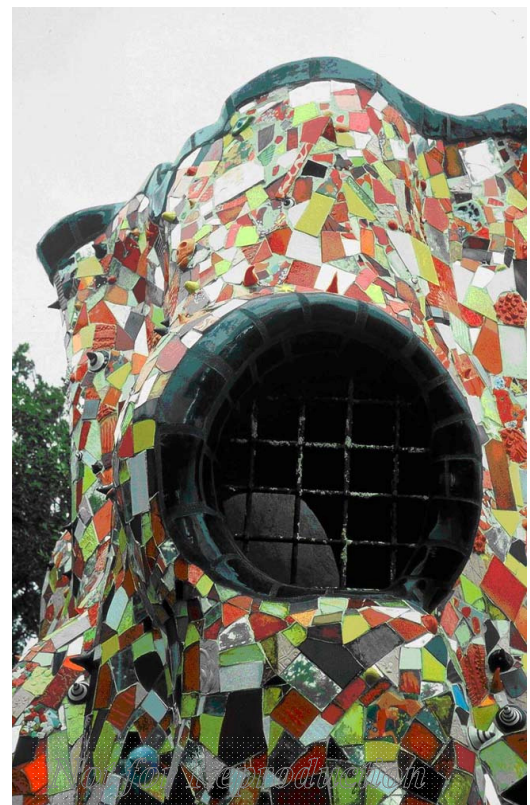
**Figure 27** Side view of the tower.

form as a sign of authority, both worldly and spiritual.

The bright, ceramic fragments, which are dominated by red tones, are

combined to form a lively, puzzle-like pattern. We no longer have the harmonious round forms of the sculpture of the Empress, but fragmented and recombined elements.

This window is quite rough, with rusty bars. The thought of a prison or tower dungeon comes to mind. At the same time, this image also represents that which falls into the shadow of the shining facade of the tower--that is, the repressed opposite, which does not correspond to the official notion of things. The tendency toward domination, which is symbolized by this Emperor's Tower, goes hand in



**Figure 28** Detail, tower window

hand with an attitude of confining and excluding.



**Figure 29 High Priest, V**

‘High Priest, V’ The Tarot card of the High Priest or Pope, in sculptural form, describes a mighty head. It is only defined by its outer contours. It has no material core or density but describes a spiritual, inner space. It has the strong sacred aura of a shrine or place of worship.

(Mouth, Nose, Eyes of the “High Priest” sculpture) The mouth, nose and eyes particularly stand out in this work. These can be seen as related to various functions that belong to the High Priest. The mouth as the organ of speech points to the function of

teacher and prophet, the green nose points to the workings of the shaman, and in

particular the third eye points to mystical experience and to the guru. The whole sculpture portrays, in imagistic language, a deep mystical knowing, which has spiritual origins.



**Figure 30 The Choice, The Lovers**

This is a very unconventional interpretation of the Tarot card VI, (The Choice). Normally, in this card a man is pictured between two women: one, who is more



**Figure 31** *The Choice, The Lovers*

spiritual, and one, more sensuous and earth-bound. Here, out of this original theme, the artist developed a representation of Adam and Eve. She used the theme of Adam and Eve to represent typical qualities of the masculine and the feminine. Eve is a strongly corporal, sensuality-loving Nana. Round forms dominate here. An attitude of nurturing love and primal, motherly support of life characterizes this Ur-feminine.

On the other side of Eve is Adam, recognizable through geometrical and angular shapes. He incorporates the principle of order and boundaries. Here, the two share a meal:

communion is taking place between Adam and Eve and at the same time between the opposite poles they represent.

But at the same time, this harmony is threatened. Necessary to the constellation of Adam and Eve is the snake - evil and guilt, which is what causes the two to become alienated from one another. It is interesting that the



**Figure 32** *The Choice, The Lovers. Back view.*

artist falls back onto the motif of Adam and Eve to illustrate this card. She transposes the theme of “Choice” into the context of the primal parents and thus makes reference to the mythological, primordial relationship between man and woman. In this way she addresses the basic human situation of the love and tension which exists between the masculine and the feminine.



**Figure 33 Hermit**

This mysterious hermit, in whom the spirit of nature dwells, is embedded in the green of the park, which reflects in its mirrored dress and so completely merges with it. No arms or legs are present and nothing points to any doing or moving-toward. Only his being, his observing presence, which looks out from deep eye sockets, is felt. In this hermit, we meet the personification of nature. No longer is the masculine spirit of expansionism or of the power drive present. Rather we see a spirit which has a deep and mystical connectedness with the secrets of nature.

The artist places this feminine figure of the Oracle across from the Hermit. This is an invention of Niki de Saint Phalle’s that in no way exists in the Tarot deck. Her whole life long, she was deeply taken with the theme of the differences as well as the compatibilities of the feminine and the masculine. Her efforts are especially focused

upon the neglected aspects of the feminine experience. This is why she feels it necessary to place here a feminine variation of the masculine Hermit. Feminine knowing, which rises out of the depth of the unconscious, shows itself archetypally in the figures of the oracle Pythia, the wise woman, the female prophets and the Sibyls.

As we approach the figure of the Oracle we see three golden snakes which wind themselves around this figure which is clothed in blue. The number three reminds us of the three Fates. The snakes stand for an irrational spirit which is opposite from and against consciousness. Gold has the symbolic significance of the especially valuable and of the sublime. Thus in the figure of the Oracle we find imaged the subtle capacity for instinctive knowing. As an artist, Niki de Saint Phalle let herself be completely guided and determined by this non-rational spirit.



**Figure 34** *The Oracle*

As there is not enough space to discuss all 22 cards of the Tarot Garden I would like to end with the last card, 'The World'.

Once again we meet a very unconventional interpretation of the Tarot card. Above a metal construction by Jean Tinguely, rises a dancing Nana in blue, who stands on a revolving, golden egg, which has a colorful snake wound around it. It is one of the works which Tinguely and Niki created together. Both have worked using their own

favorite materials-- with rusty steel and with colorful glass. Even with their differences, the styles of working fit together very well.



**Figure 35** *The World*

The world depicted in this sculptural card moves between two poles, one being Jean Tinguely's steel structure and the other being Niki de Saint Phalle's Nana. It does not have the usual, perfect form of the world sphere, but one of a golden egg. Therefore we are not looking at a representation of the outer reality of the earth, in its

physical or political aspect. This world in the shape of an egg is much more about a reality 'sui generis', meaning created out of its own nature or generated out of itself. The symbol of an egg makes us think of 'becoming'. Also, the colorful snake, which winds itself around the egg three times, symbolizes development, transformation and becoming.

Niki de Saint Phalle describes this work in her written commentary as, "the card of splendor of interior life," and she continues: "Within this card lies the mystery of the world." (p. 24) She puts the accent upon an inner life on which the world is mysteriously founded.

Upon this sphere of creative imagination, and in great splendor, dances and balances a Nana. There is no sense of domination here, and for instance, she is not a Virgin Mary, the Queen of Heaven who steps on the head of the snake, nor Shiva who dances upon and subordinates evil. This feminine being does not make the earth something subservient to her and is not fighting evil; rather she is allowing the snake to support her. This work is dealing with feminine consciousness, which is in the service of the creative and harmonizes playfully with it.

The artist's whole oeuvre has been informed by this inner, guiding image of an autonomous, creative feminine. In this way she gave expression to one image of woman, which stood in diametrical opposition to the conventional influences of her childhood home and to the values of the collective arena. In this piece she created something which reaches far beyond what it may have meant for her personally, and speaks of an archetypal image of primal womanhood. With this she was able to raise her oeuvre, to quote Jung, "from the unique and fleeting, into the realm of the eternal and shining, and from personal fate to the fate of humankind." (CW 15, p. 94) Jung continues: "In this is entailed the social significance of art; it works on the education of the spirit of the age (*Zeitgeist*) as it brings up images and forms which are most lacking to the spirit of the time." (p. 95)

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