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**Niki de SAINT PHALLE (1930 - 2002)**  
*Tyrannosaurus Rex (Study for King Kong)*

Spring 1963

Assemblage of objects, plastic toys and various elements in wood and papier-mâché glued, plastered and painted on wood panel

198 x 122 x 25 cm

FGA-BA-SAINT-0002

**Provenance**

Artist's studio

Niki Charitable Art Foundation

Galerie Georges-Philippe & Nathalie Vallois, Paris, 2017

**Exhibitions**

*Niki de Saint Phalle*, Los Angeles, Dwan Gallery, 05 – 31.01.1964

*Niki de Saint Phalle*, Arles, Salles romanes du Cloître Saint-Trophime, 09.07 – 30.09.1975

*Niki de Saint Phalle. Rétrospective 1954-1980*, Paris, Musée national d'Art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, 02.07 – 01.09.1980

*Niki de Saint Phalle. Tirs... et autres révoltes 1961-1964*, Paris, Galerie de France, 20.06 – 28.07.1990

*Virginia Dwan et les nouveaux réalistes. Los Angeles, les années 60. Arman, Klein, Raysse, Niki de Saint-Phalle, Tinguely*, Paris, Galerie Montaigne, 23.10 – 29.12.1990



*Niki de Saint Phalle*, Bonn, Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 19.06 – 01.11.1992 ; Glasgow, McLellan Galleries, 22.01 – 04.04.1993 ; Paris, Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 24.06 – 12.09.1993

*Niki de Saint Phalle, En joue ! Assemblages & Tirs (1958-1964)*, Paris, Galerie Georges-Philippe et Nathalie Vallois, 08.11 – 21.12.2013 ; Hanovre, Stiftung Ahlers Pro Arte, 01.02 – 21.04.2014

*Niki de Saint Phalle*, Tokyo, The National Art Center, 18.09 – 14.12.2015

*Niki de Saint Phalle*, Ishøj, Arken Museum of Modern Art, 13.02 – 12.06.2016

*Niki de Saint Phalle*, Helsinki, Kunsthalle, 20.08 – 20.11.2016

*Le Retour des ténèbres*, Genève, Musée Rath, 02.12.2016 – 19.03.2017

*Art Basel 2017*, Bâle, Galerie Georges-Philippe & Nathalie Vallois, 15 – 18.06.2017

*Is the War Over? Art in a Divided World (1945-1968)*, Madrid, Museo Nacional Reina Sofía, 19.02.2015 – 04.02.2020

*Niki de Saint Phalle*, Høvikodden, Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 16.09.2022 – 12.02.2023

*Action, Geste, Peinture : Femmes dans l'abstraction, une histoire mondiale (1940-1970)*, Arles, Fondation Vincent Van Gogh, 03.06.2023 – 22.10.2023

*Do it, Socle du Monde 2024*, Herning, HEART - Herning Museum of Contemporary Art, 24.05.2024 – 24.11.2024

*Niki de Saint Phalle*, Aix-en-Provence, Hôtel de Caumont, 30.04.2025 – 05.10.2025

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MOECKLI, Justine ; TILBURG, Merel van (dir.), *Le retour des ténèbres. L'imaginaire gothique depuis Frankenstein*, exhibition catalogue [Genève, Musée Rath, 02.12.2016 – 19.03.2017], Genève : Musée d'art et d'histoire, 2016, listed in annex, col. repr. p. 334

MORINEAU, Camille (dir.), *Niki de Saint Phalle, 1930-2002*, exhibition catalogue [Paris, Grand Palais, Galeries Nationales, 17.09.2014 – 02.02.2015 ; Bilbao, Musée Guggenheim, 27.02 – 07.06.2015], Bilbao : FMGB Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa et La Fábrica, 2015, listed p. 367, col. repr. p. 135, cat. 43

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*Niki de Saint Phalle*, exhibition catalogue [Stockholm, Moderna Museet, 12.09 – 25.10.1981], Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1981, listed p. 92 (titled « *Tyrannous Saurus Rex* » and dated 1962-63), b/w repr. p. 24

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*Niki de Saint Phalle, Monographie - Monograph*, Lausanne : Éditions Acatos, 2001, b/w repr. p. 286

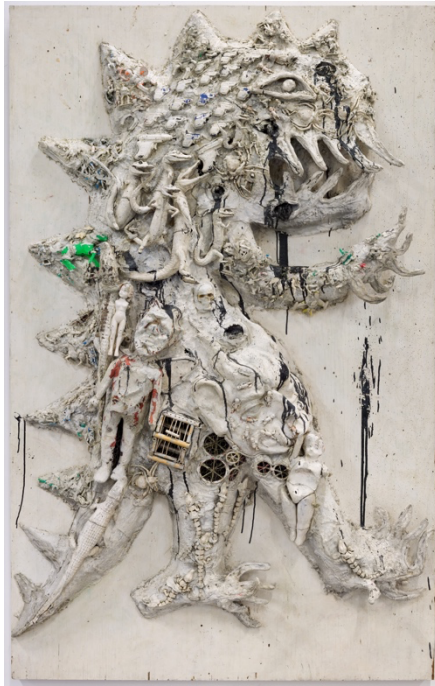
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## ***Tyrannosaurus Rex (Study for King Kong)*** **By Niki de Saint Phalle**



Niki de Saint Phalle, *Tyrannosaurus Rex (Study for King Kong)*, spring 1963. © Photo credit : Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer : André Morin © 2024, ProLitteris, Zurich

Created in 1963, the work *Tyrannosaurus Rex (Study for King Kong)* represents a crucial period in the development of the artistic practice of Niki de Saint Phalle (1930–2002). A major figure and one of the most influential artists of the second half of the 20th century, Niki de Saint Phalle produced highly individual work that was as intimate as it was spectacular right from the outset. The works of this militant committed artist, whose life and production were inextricably linked, tell stories with powerful messages, reflecting her social and political convictions as much as her private life.

Having quickly joined the *Nouveaux Réalistes* group, in 1961 Niki de Saint Phalle attracted attention to herself by publicly shooting at paintings with firearms, in violent performances in the very heart of Paris in which she killed the painting. Her *Tyrannosaurus Rex (Study for King Kong)* is an opportunity to (re)discover the early creative years of the artist, who is now as well known for her monumental works as for her *Nanas*, which are exhibited worldwide.

### **From Niki Mathews to Niki de Saint Phalle**

Catherine Marie-Agnès Fal de Saint Phalle, who always went by the nickname Niki, was born in Neuilly-sur-Seine on 29 October 1930. She grew up in a bourgeois Franco-American family in New York and France, where she spent much of her childhood<sup>1</sup>. Niki was just eighteen, when she married the aspiring writer Harry Mathews (1930–2017), with whom she left for Europe, thus escaping an oppressive family environment and the social conformism of the early 1950s.

Settled in Paris in 1951, the couple and their first child found themselves in the midst of the intellectual, political and cultural upheaval that was sweeping France<sup>2</sup>. Niki Mathews wrote, studied theatre and modelled for fashion magazines before her career ended in 1953 when she was hospitalised for serious depression<sup>3</sup>. Having drawn for several years, though without

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<sup>1</sup> *Niki de Saint Phalle, Monographie - Monograph, Peintures, Tirs, Assemblages, Reliefs, 1949-2000*, Lausanne: Éditions Acatos, 2001, p. 80.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.



training, she found it natural to turn to painting as a form of therapy<sup>4</sup>. Art made it possible for her to express the trauma she had suffered during her childhood – being raped by her father when she was aged eleven – which she revealed for the first time in 1994 in her book, *Mon Secret*<sup>5</sup>. For her, art then became primarily a means of catharsis and liberation that nourished her practice.

Deeply involved in creating her first figurative paintings, Niki Mathews was already exploring subjects close to her heart, such as women, love and family relationships, animals and monsters, that would appear regularly throughout her work over the next fifty years (fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Niki de Saint Phalle, *Untitled*, [Set of 11 models: Embracing Couple, Animal with quills, Sunflower-character, Female conductor, Violin, Dragon, Female figure with small hanging figures, Bird-chair with lovers, Leda and the swan, Horse], circa 1970, painted resin, 82,7 x 92,5 x 10,1 cm. © Photo credit : Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer : André Morin © 2024, ProLitteris, Zurich

In 1960, after she and her husband had separated, Niki Mathews decided to dedicate herself to art, for which she abandoned her role as a mother and took her maiden name as her artist's name as a symbol of her emancipation and independence. That same year, Niki de Saint Phalle moved in with Jean Tinguely (1925–1991), who would be the partner of her life<sup>6</sup>. Tinguely encouraged her in her self-taught practice and urged her to create – unaffected by outside influences – an artistic universe for her own use: «Technique is nothing. The dream is everything»<sup>7</sup>.

Niki de Saint Phalle developed a very personal iconography and invented a magical, fantastic and unique world that she represented using a

characteristic naïve and colourful style. Her production is a reflection of her own history, in which biographical elements, memories and past traumas are mingled with her political convictions.

« In my work I am condemned to reveal every emotion, thought, recollection, and experience. Transformed – they become other form, other colour, other texture. It is all my life. Everything is used; great joys, desires, tragedies, and pains. Everything is subjective. All my life. Nothing is secret. I have nowhere to hide. Luckily people cannot

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> MORINEAU, Camille, “‘Rosebud’ ou écran ? L’inceste et l’œuvre de Niki de Saint Phalle”, *Sociétés & Représentations*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2016), online at <https://doi.org/10.3917/sr.042.0087>, (consulted in May 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Linked sentimentally and professionally, their intellectual complicity triggered a fruitful partnership that would last more than thirty years, until Tinguely's death in 1991.

<sup>7</sup> *Niki de Saint Phalle, Monographie - Monograph*, op. cit., p. 347.

always see what they look at. It is their past, their unconscious dreams that they see. Sometimes, a glimpse of paradise or hell, or some elusive vision from some other time.»<sup>8</sup>

## A rebellious artist



Fig. 2 Niki de Saint Phalle, *The Lady Sings the Blues*, april-may 1965, fabric, wool, embroidery, paper, plaster strips, acrylic, rubber animals, animal glue and polyester resin on wire mesh, 234 x 160 x 66 cm. © Photo credit : Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer : André Morin © 2024, ProLitteris, Zurich / Niki Charitable Art Foundation

A militant artist from the very start, Niki de Saint Phalle asserted her committed attitude and the social and political battles she waged in her work with her depictions of the complex power relations existing in society. Angry at the status of women in the patriarchal society around her, she was outraged by the mental and physical violence inflicted on women, which she denounced by her reappropriation of the female body (fig. 2). She called for new roles for women<sup>9</sup>, and battled to break down the established conventions and open up new perspectives<sup>10</sup>. A public figure who received considerable media coverage, Niki de Saint Phalle flouted convention, deliberately ignoring traditional images and the prejudices held towards her.

In addition to her fight for women's rights, her work reflects the chaos of the 20th century, such as the fight against racism in the United States, the ravages of AIDS during the 1980s, and the Gulf War<sup>11</sup>.

She championed her convictions by inventing her own artistic language imbued with strong messages and a raw aesthetic, and addressing sensitive issues that underlay the affairs of the moment. Her hard-hitting work challenged contemporary attitudes with its radical nature, provoking the public to react and stimulating thought.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Beginning in 1963, her thinking prompted the creation of numerous representations of women, such as the devouring mother, the bride, the woman giving birth, the witch, and the prostitute.

<sup>10</sup> Although Niki de Saint Phalle never called herself a feminist officially, her ideas and demands matched those upheld by the women's liberation movement.

<sup>11</sup> BRAIBANT, Sylvie, "Niki de Saint Phalle, artiste et guerrière du féminisme", online at <https://information.tv5monde.com/terriennes/niki-de-saint-phalle-artiste-et-guerriere-du-feminisme-2969>, (consulted in May 2024).



« I was an angry young woman, but then there are many angry young men and women who don't become artists. I became an artist because I had no choice, so I didn't need to make a decision. It was my fate. At other times in history, I would have been locked up for good in an asylum [...]. I embraced art as my deliverance and a necessity. »<sup>12</sup>

### Making the painting “bleed”

Niki de Saint Phalle began her artistic trajectory in the 1950s with drawing and painting, but her technique soon developed to take in assemblages, with objects inserted into painted scenes. She would include found objects, which she transformed and painted, in the composition. The accumulation of objects in her early figurative paintings became increasingly present, transforming her works between 1958 and 1959 into imposing reliefs, object-paintings.

In 1959, de Saint Phalle discovered the new American painting exhibited at the first Paris Biennial at the Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris. She was fascinated by the works of Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), Willem De Kooning (1904–1997), Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) and Jasper Johns (b. 1930),<sup>13</sup> and she temporarily abandoned figurative painting to experiment with new forms of expression<sup>14</sup>.

In early 1961, Niki de Saint Phalle produced the first works in her famous series of *Tirs* (*Shooting Paintings*)<sup>15</sup>. Conceived as spectacular happenings, she organised shooting sessions at exhibition openings or public events in the centre of Paris. Armed with a small rifle, her performance was the execution of painting by riddling prepared surfaces with bullets.

Her *Tirs* were composed of wooden panels covered with plaster, on which small bags of colour were attached<sup>16</sup>. When the artist shot the bags, the colour spurted out, then trickled down the pristine plaster surface. Members of the public, who were invited to participate, assisted by activating the paintings, which were considered finished once they had been shot at.

The first shooting paintings were abstract, their subject being no more than the violent creation of a painting. The colour, as though it were the victim's blood, was exposed by the artist's aggressive and emancipatory gesture, which was both destructive and creative. The

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<sup>12</sup> *Niki de Saint Phalle, Monographie - Monograph, op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>13</sup> She described this aesthetic shock in a letter to Tinguely in spring 1990: «I was completely overwhelmed. All of a sudden, my paintings seemed so small in comparison. I was about to experience my first great artistic crisis. I resolved it in the same way I always would later on: by metamorphosis». In *Niki de Saint Phalle*, exh. cat. [Manderen, Château de Malbrouk, 01.04 – 29.08.2010], Metz: Éditions Serpenoise, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> *Niki de Saint Phalle, Catalogue raisonné, 1949-2000*, volume I. *Peintures, Tirs, Assemblages, Reliefs, 1949-2000*, Lausanne: Éditions Acatos, 2001, p. 89.

<sup>15</sup> The wordplay between the pronunciation of the French word “*tirs*” and of the English word “tears” (her mother was American) immediately suggests the double meaning underlying the serie.

<sup>16</sup> *Niki de Saint Phalle. En joue ! Assemblage & Tirs, 1958-1964*, exh. cat. [Paris, Galerie Georges-Philippe & Nathalie Vallois, 08.11 – 21.12.2013; Hannover, Fondation Ahlers Pro Arte, 01.02 – 21.04.2014], Paris: Galerie Georges-Philippe & Nathalie Vallois ; Hannover and Stiftung Ahlers Pro Arte, 2013, p. 10.

carrying out of the death sentence, orchestrated by Niki de Saint Phalle in the role of executioner, broke with all convention. Like a cathartic ritual, the artist expressed her anger<sup>17</sup>:

« Was I shooting myself in the ritual of dying by my own hand and being reborn? I was shooting at myself, at society with its injustices. I was shooting at my own violence and the violence of the times. By shooting at my own violence, I no longer had to carry it inside me like a burden. »<sup>18</sup>

More than a dozen sessions of *Tirs* were held in public in 1961–62. The violence and provocative nature of these performances struck the public forcefully and attracted media attention, with most of them documented, photographed or filmed for television.

### **A woman among the *Nouveaux Réalistes***

It was to the first shooting session, held behind the artist's studio on 21 February 1961, that the art critic Pierre Restany (1930–2003) was invited by Tinguely to witness the event. Impressed by the “metamorphic” effect of the rite, Restany was fascinated by “the absolutist aspect of the gesture, which is similar to the irreparable and definitive extremism of the New Realists’ gesture of appropriation”<sup>19</sup>.

Immediately convinced, Restany invited Niki de Saint Phalle to join the group he had formed a year earlier, and from July 1961 she took part in all its collective activities. She was the only woman in the group, which had been officially founded on 27 October 1960 by Arman (1928–2005), François Dufrêne (1930–1982), Raymond Hains (1926–2005), Yves Klein (1928–1962), Martial Raysse (1936), Jacques de la Villeglé (1926–2022), Daniel Spoerri (1930), Jean Tinguely and Pierre Restany<sup>20</sup>.

Niki de Saint Phalle's approach echoed the spirit of the *Nouveaux Réalistes*, whose common bond was a radical and reckless stance<sup>21</sup> without being unified by style. Each member of the group, in his or her individual way, brought new perceptions of reality, reflecting an irrepressible need to reinvent everything. They formulated new perspectives on creation without reference to artistic tradition. Preparing the ground for future generations, these artists made use of new materials for their creations and adopted unprecedented techniques that they introduced into the art world.

<sup>17</sup> Yoko S. Masuda, an art collector and director of the Niki Museum in Nasu (Japan), speaks of “productive anger” to define this period of vigorous and intense emotional exorcism that had begun in the 1960s. In *Niki de Saint Phalle, Monographie - Monograph, op. cit.*, p. 348.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>19</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>20</sup> César (1921–1998), Mimmo Rotella (1918–2006) and Gérard Deschamps (1937) would also join the group in 1961, the same year as Niki de Saint Phalle.

<sup>21</sup> FRANCLIN, Catherine, *Les Nouveaux Réalistes*, Paris: Éditions du Regard, 1997, p. 7.



Arman, who was a founding member of the group and a friend of Tinguely, with whom he was then sharing a studio in Impasse Ronsin, produced work that shared common characteristics with Niki de Saint Phalle's.

In 1961, he developed his series of *Colères (Ange)* (fig. 3) which were also created during public performances<sup>22</sup>. Having destroyed an object by hammering, sawing or trampling on it, he then painstakingly fixed the remains flat on a wooden panel<sup>23</sup>. The similarity of this series with de Saint Phalle's is the transformation of an object into a work of art through its destruction. And the fragments, which become frozen in time, leave the creative gesture visible. The composition created is the outcome of chance, of a planned accident<sup>24</sup>.



Fig. 3 Arman, *Untitled (colère de radio)*, 1962, broken radio on black-painted wooden panel, 73,4 x 96,3 x 29,6 cm. © Photo credit : Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer : André Morin © 2024, ProLitteris, Zurich

Although there were many common points between the work of Niki de Saint Phalle and the other *Nouveaux Réalistes*, in particular Arman, de Saint Phalle stood out from the crowd through the singularity of her work, making her mark on an art scene dominated entirely by men.

<sup>22</sup> Niki de Saint Phalle, *Catalogue raisonné, 1949-2000*, op. cit., p. 72.

<sup>23</sup> FRANCBLIN, Catherine, op. cit., p. 95.

<sup>24</sup> During an interview held on the occasion of his exhibition *Arman, Accumulations Renault*, held at the Zurich Kunsthhaus in 1970, Arman referred to the role of chance in his work as a whole: « I have a very simple theory, I've always claimed that objects compose themselves. My composition consisted in allowing them to compose themselves... Ultimately, there's nothing more controllable than chance. When chance depends on laws, quantities for example, it is no longer chance. Chance is my raw material, my starting point. » In *Arman, Accumulations Renault*, exh. cat. [Zurich, Kunsthhaus, 12.09 – 18.10.1970], Zurich: Kunsthhaus, 1970, p. 13.

## The Saint Phalle monster

Invented in 1961, the sense of the first *Tirs* gradually altered with the introduction of objects into the composition. Although the technique remained the same, the subject matter was fundamentally different. The shooting paintings naturally evolved into more figurative forms, thereby enabling de Saint Phalle to rediscover the narrative that was so important to her.



Fig. 4 Niki de Saint Phalle, *Tyrannosaurus Rex (Study for King Kong)* (detail of the monster's eye), spring 1963. © Photo credit : Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer : André Morin © 2024, ProLitteris, Zurich

In spring 1963 she conceives her *Tyrannosaurus Rex (Study for King Kong)*, a large relief with the silhouette of a threatening dinosaur, its mouth gaping wide<sup>25</sup>. The creature is made of a wire mesh to which six bags of paint and a number of assorted objects are attached. Almost completely covered in plaster, the colour of some of the objects is apparent in what is otherwise a monochrome work<sup>26</sup>. Splattered black paint becomes the imprint of the artist's shots and punctuate the monster's body, representing the completion of the work: the killing of the monster (fig. 4).

Each of the objects inserted in the work is associated with violence<sup>27</sup> – plastic guns, soldiers, crocodiles, spiders, skulls and dinosaurs, and other elements made from papier-mâché and wood, make up the beast's body. A face, probably the devil's, blends with the monster's leg, while naked dolls suffocate in this terrifying battlefield (fig. 5). All these elements, clear symbols of coercion and terror<sup>28</sup>, incarnate the male power at which de Saint Phalle is shooting at point-blank range.

<sup>25</sup> This work was originally made as a study for the creation of a major work six metres long, titled *King Kong*, which was fired on at a shooting session in Los Angeles in May 1963. In *Niki de Saint Phalle, Monographie - Monograph*, op. cit., p. 520.

<sup>26</sup> In a rush to express her ideas and emotions, de Saint Phalle worked quickly, without seeking render her forms perfectly. Almost indifferent to the finished result, her work has often been compared to that of Art Brut artists, who, in working for themselves, attach no importance to the views of others. In *Niki de Saint Phalle. En joue ! Assemblage & Tirs, 1958-1964*, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> *Niki de Saint Phalle, Monographie - Monograph*, op. cit., p. 50.

<sup>28</sup> Idem.

With her choice of toys, most of which are made for young boys because they are associated with war, the artist is attacking the trivialisation of armed conflict through the encouragement of children to consider themselves soldiers from an early age<sup>29</sup>. Carefully chosen and arranged, the objects create a narrative that each viewer is free to interpret through the many possible associations existing between the different elements.

Terrifying monsters, often taking the form of a dinosaur, dragon or giant reptile, were a recurrent motif in Niki de Saint Phalle's bestiary in the early 1960s<sup>30</sup>. As a representation of both evil and the male figure<sup>31</sup>, the monster embodies menace<sup>32</sup>, which is always present in her fantastic but ambivalent world, simultaneously marvellous and terrifying.



Fig. 5 Niki de Saint Phalle, *Tyrannosaurus Rex (Study for King Kong)* (detail of the monster's leg), spring 1963. © Photo credit : Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer : André Morin © 2024, ProLitteris, Zurich

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Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, June 2024

<sup>29</sup> MORINEAU, Camille (ed.), *Niki de Saint Phalle, 1930-2002*, exh. cat. [Paris, Grand Palais, Galeries Nationales, 17.09.2014 – 02.02.2015; Bilbao, Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa, 27.02 – 07.06.2015], Bilbao: FMGB, Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa and La Fábrica, 2015, p. 99-100.

<sup>30</sup> Although scary monsters haunted her dreams since childhood, they gradually disappeared from her iconography in the years to come, to be replaced by a colourful and amusing monster. In BRAIBANT, Sylvie, *op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> « Where are the men in my work? When men are loving, they are animals. When they are mean, they become monsters », in *Niki de Saint Phalle*, Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1980, p. 80.

<sup>32</sup> This menace takes different forms depending on the subject of the work, variously symbolising patriarchy, social conformism, religion, racial discrimination, armed conflict and corrupt politicians.





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