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# What Is Now Known Was Once Only Imagined

## AN (AUTO)BIOGRAPHY OF NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE

by Nicole Rudick

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\$45 | HB | 8 x 10 | 268 pages, full color throughout | biography + contemporary art + feminism | ISBN 978-1-938221-31-6

Known best for her exuberant, often large-scale sculptural works that celebrate the abundance and complexity of female desire, imagination, and creativity, Niki de Saint Phalle viewed making art as a ritual and a performance—a process connecting life to art. This unconventional, illuminated biography, told in the first person in Saint Phalle’s voice and her own hand, dilates large and small moments in Saint Phalle’s remarkable life as an artist who pointedly challenged taboos and societal expectations as she “trespassed” (as she has said) into a male-dominated world that she attempted to redefine on her own terms.

In a kind of collaboration with the artist, Nicole Rudick has assembled a gorgeous and detailed mosaic of Saint Phalle’s visual and textual works from a trove of paintings, drawings, sketches, and writings, many rare or previously unpublished. These confessions, declarations, meditations, and musings were intended to be read, open and accessible. Nevertheless, they trace—in Rudick’s selection and arrangement—the most intimate contours of Saint Phalle’s life. In some works, Saint Phalle articulates herself with startling candor and self-examination; in others, she carefully and slowly unwinds her secrets as she herself wrestles with them. Saint Phalle’s invocation—her “bringing to life,” as she calls it—“is an apt summation,” writes Rudick, “of the overlap of Saint Phalle’s life and art: both a bringing into existence and a bringing to bear. These are visions from the frontiers of consciousness.”

Rudick opens *What Is Now Known Was Once Only Imagined* with Saint Phalle’s memory of seeing Akira Kurosawa’s film *Rashomon*, which famously tells one story through multiple, contradictory points of view. Rudick—and Saint Phalle—understands that there is always more than one story, and her experimental approach—in giving space to absences and silences as well as repetitions and permutations—suggests that this book is one possible telling, but one in which Saint Phalle’s agency is paramount. It is an erudite, insightful, and generous construction of Saint Phalle’s life that, despite the recognizability of her work, has remained mostly obscured, until now.

Born in France, **Niki de Saint Phalle** (1930–2002) was raised in New York and began making art at age twenty-three. Self-taught and prolific, she pursued a revelatory vision informed both by the monumental works of Antonin Gaudí and the Facteur Cheval and by aspects of her own life. In addition to her Tirs (“shooting paintings”) and Nanas and her celebrated large-scale projects—including the *Stravinsky Fountain* at the Centre Pompidou, *Golem* in Jerusalem, and the *Tarot Garden* in Tuscany—Saint Phalle produced a major body of writing and works on paper that delve into her own biography: childhood and her break with her traditional family, marriage to Harry Mathews, motherhood, a long collaborative relationship with Jean Tinguely, creative support from the curator Pontus Hultén, numerous health crises, and her late, productive years in Southern California. Saint Phalle has most recently been the subject of retrospectives at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, in 2015, and at MoMA/P.S.1, in 2021. An exhibition of her work from the 1960s opens in September at The Menil Collection.

**Nicole Rudick** is a critic and an editor. Her writing on art, literature, and comics has been published in the *New York Review of Books*, the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, *Artforum*, and elsewhere. She was managing editor of *The Paris Review* for nearly a decade. She is the editor of a new edition of Gary Panter’s legendary comic *Jimbo: Adventures in Paradise* (New York Review Comics, 2021).

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