

# In the Grotto: Gathering in the Fractured Self

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*ART WILL SAVE US. This was announced to me as if a voice had spoken it aloud, but there was no one else around. Should I have been surprised to learn this was the room named Spirituality?*



“In this world of so much pain if a sculpture of mine can give a moment of joy, a moment of life, I feel rewarded.” —Niki de Saint Phalle

ON NOVEMBER 9, 2016, I WAS unmoored from home, traveling in Germany. It was the day after the presidential election in the U.S., and I was in Hanover with my husband, David, who was there to teach his class in geophysics to a group of scientists from the German Geological Survey. We had tracked the voting results on our cell phones throughout the night, had slept little not wanting to believe that Donald Trump was winning.

“It’s a frigging disaster,” I said to David as he dressed for work.

“I know,” he said as he packed up his laptop, sympathetic but already focused on the day ahead.

Left alone in the room I was fractured by fear and fatigue, steeped in dread at the thought of Trump as President with a republican congress. Did that prime me for transformation by a work of art? Yes. I was looking for rescue that day and I found it.

Down in the hotel dining room, the waitress—middle-aged with short red hair—brought me coffee. I recognized her from other mornings and knew she spoke some English. As she poured I said, “I am very sad about the results of the election.”

Her response was instant. “He iss sheet!” she said, spitting out the words as a pistol would spit bullets. Then her cheeks puffed out and she mimed vomiting onto my table. I felt better immediately. A kindred spirit.

The weather that day was cold, below freezing, but it was bright and blue and sunny. I layered on sweater and coat, scarf, hat, and gloves, and left the hotel in search of slaps of fresh air and a dose of greenery. I caught the Number 4 tram to [Herrenhausen Gardens](#).

Begun in 1666, the Gardens are vast—120 acres—and they are formal—French baroque. Evenly spaced trees march beside straight walkways. Hedges are clipped into rigid symmetries of lines, circles, and squares. The day I was there they were frosted with caps of old snow, their hard edges softened. I found a bench facing the sun. Brushed off the snow. Sat down. Stared into the glare. Closed my eyes. Felt the sun seep into me. I unbuttoned my coat, took off my hat and gloves. As my body stilled my quivering spirits steadied.

I stood up and began to stroll as a patient would seek a cure. For a soothing half hour I walked paths spread with coarse sand and speckled with the fallen brown and yellow leaves of autumn. The Gardens were quiet and calm; I saw no other visitors.

On a sign with a map I noticed a nearby building labeled [Grotte von Niki de Saint Phalle](#). Grottoes, I read, were a traditional part of Baroque gardens, interiors designed as spaces to cool off in summer and to enchant with decorations of rocks and crystals and shells.

Curious, I left the cold loveliness of the

gardens and entered the grotto. Instantly I was in a space where colors burst bright as fireworks, where rays of light rocketed off red and gold mirror mosaics that spread across the rounded ceiling and down the walls. Light and color were fractured and multiplied—mirrors reflecting mirrors reflecting light reflecting color. I swirled and soared and spun around that room even though I was standing still. Waves of shiny smooth pebbles, black and brown and white, were set into the glass mosaics. The rocks offered respite, a place to hold my eyes steady and recover from the near vertigo that had captured me.

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**N**iki de Saint Phalle was saved by her art and Niki de Saint Phalle was killed by her art. Born in France in 1930, she was raised mostly in Manhattan. She married at eighteen and had a child. She was beautiful and worked as a fashion model, appearing on the covers of *Life* and *Vogue* magazines. At twenty-three she had “a pseudo-suicidal nervous breakdown,” as her then-husband Harry Matthews described it. He checked her into a mental clinic in Nice, France. There, despite drastic treatments of electroshock therapy, she





rediscovered painting and was set on her path to life as artist.

Saint Phalle is often labeled an outsider artist, yet she has a vast body of work and is a major figure in contemporary art, one of the few women in the Pop Art movement. On a trip to Spain in the 1950s, her inspiration was sparked by glass mosaics in Antonio Gaudí's Park Guëll in Barcelona. In the 1960s she began working in three dimensions using polyester resin painted in bright colors to create huge and fabulous female figures. These became the *Nanas* series, her signature works found today around the world.

The three rooms of the Herrenhausen grotto as transformed by Niki de Saint Phalle are her last finished work, completed by colleagues in 2003, the year after her death at only seventy-two. Decades of working unprotected from resins rendered her organs to the diseases that killed her. This was the price she paid for her art.

I was still soaring in the room of Spirituality when I glanced left and saw an open archway into a room that glittered and chattered with silver mirrors. I entered Day and Life. Within a gurgling fountain danced the *Nana of Herrenhausen*. She had lime green skin and a bodacious shape. Her left arm, raised in greeting, was like a spring leaf full of holes. She wore a royal blue swimsuit, and her large breasts were painted with Pop Art designs: a heart and a flower in red, blue, and yellow. Clinging to the silvery walls were other sculptures in polyester resin: a big black spider with one leg broken off, a disembodied pair of cherry red lips, three disconnected and bulging eyes, a woman's fuchsia face with blue hair, and a flower sprouting from the top of

her head. I delighted in the impossible task of taking it all in.

I turned toward another archway that spoke in sparkles of dark blue: azure, ultramarine, violet, aubergine. I entered the third room, Night and Cosmos. At the center was a dancing sculpture of the elephant god Ganesha: blue head, trunk with bands of bright red, green, yellow, and orange. Nearby, a polyester woman with orange hair in a banana yellow dress stretched her red arm toward puffy gold stars that dotted the blue mosaicked ceiling. Set in one wall was a window with a metal grate that broke the outside light into shattered patterns on the slate gray floor.

After this conversation with color and glass and light, with beauty, I felt remolded into wholeness, my fractured self gathered in. I left the Grotto, exited through the garden gates, and went in search of a place for lunch.

I now see that day in Hanover as one of my last bits of escape before the tsunami of Trumpism—the evil promotion of racism, misogyny, Islamophobia, and war-mongering, the corruption of our environment and democracy—began pounding the America I had taken for granted. Will art save us? No, but it can offer respites that provide strength for the fight against the hateful waves. That was my lesson from the Herrenhausen Grotto on November 9, 2016, when, immersed in Niki de Saint Phalle's rays of light bouncing off fragments of glass and cheered by her joyful dancing Nana and Ganesha, I forgot the pain and felt my energy refreshed, rekindled. I tasted her art as tonic, needed but unknown until that day when I needed it the most. ❖