

*Dissertation project: "The final large-scale works of Niki de Saint Phalle as phenomena of contemporary cultural and religious history."*

*Abstract*

This dissertation project attempts an interdisciplinary approach to the work of Niki de Saint Phalle: Garden- and landscape architecture are regarded as expressions of the specific cultural, social and political situation of a society and of its "zeitgeist". Consequently, it should be possible to draw conclusions about a society by analyzing a garden in its forms and contexts. Thus, this thesis takes an important step towards opening European Art History to the cultural and religious realities of modern western societies and will help to understand contemporary works of art in an adequate manner.

All of the three projects of the internationally operating artist Niki de Saint Phalle analyzed in this thesis are located in public spaces of multi-cultural societies; their themes refer to topics which originate from their cultural environment and history.

The sculpture-garden Noah's Ark in the Biblical Zoo of Jerusalem (1994–2001) deals with a theme which is a foundation of the three great monotheistic world religions that coexist in the city of Jerusalem. The grotto in Hanover (2001–2003) is inspired by seventeenth-century-grotto-architecture and deals with topics that derive from western esotericism. The sculpture-garden of Queen Califa's Magical Circle in Escondido (1999–2003) in California treats the discovery of the mythical 'Island California' and uses Native American motifs. The gardens in Israel and California have not been objects of scholarly research so far, while the grotto in Hanover has yet to be analyzed satisfyingly.

The early work of Niki de Saint Phalle has already been thoroughly investigated and placed adequately in the artistic and cultural context of its time. However, most researchers neglect the later work of Niki de Saint Phalle. It is a common assertion that she 'merely created a spiritual universe of her own' – detached from external influences. In contrast, it will be argued that Niki's later work is a serious expression of the spirit of her time. The late twenty century in western countries is characterized by an enormous diversity of cultural, social, political and religious choices. However, Art History neglects in most cases the importance of contemporary religious or cultural movements for the work of artists. Religious aspects are only considered if they are Christian or deal with Christian iconography. The influences of other religious and spiritual traditions on contemporary art are explored insufficiently.

The proposed thesis chooses an interdisciplinary approach which doesn't exist in German Art History yet. It consists of two main parts: Indispensable foundation will be first of all the monographic compilation of the various motifs and the classification against the backdrop of the history of garden architecture, based upon the methods of art history. The second part uses methods of Religious Studies: It will be analyzed how the themes and motifs were used and depicted in their original contexts and how they are adapted to and synchronized with other motifs and themes in the new contexts of the gardens and their environment. To clarify the intended function of the projects it will be necessary to examine if there existed a public interest in the construction of the gardens (for example: Noah's Ark was commissioned by the Jerusalem Foundation, the grotto by the city of Hanover and Queen Califa's Magical Circle was supported by the city of Escondido). In a last step it will be examined if the themes' use or the intended function is representative for the time they were built in.