

Niki de Saint Phalle

Jill Johnston Marella Caracciolo Chia Giulio Pietromarchi

AND THE TAROT GARDEN

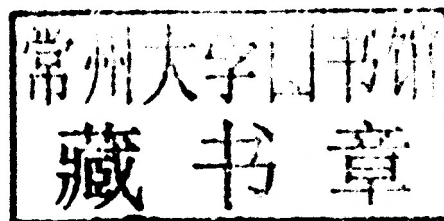
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Niki de Saint Phalle

AND THE TAROT GARDEN

texts by Jill Johnston and Marella Caracciolo Chia

photographs by Giulio Pietromarchi



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Front cover illustration: The Tarot Garden with the figures of *The High Priestess* and *The Magician* in the foreground
Frontispiece: Niki de Saint Phalle in front of *The Tree of Life* in the Tarot Garden

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Landscape surrounding the Tarot Garden,
near the town of Capalbio in Tuscany, Italy.





Panoramic view of the Tarot Garden, showing *The Empress*, *The Emperor*,
The Magician, *The High Priestess*, *The Wheel of Fortune*, *Justice*, *The Tree of Life*,
The Sun and *The Hierophant*.





Front cover illustration: The Tarot Garden with the figures of *The High Priestess* and *The Magician* in the foreground
Frontispiece: Niki de Saint Phalle in front of *The Tree of Life* in the Tarot Garden

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Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely, 1985.

Marella Caracciolo Chia
Castello Romitorio, Montalcino
Siena

28 April 2000

Dear Niki

You asked me some time ago to write down a brief memoir of that vivid period when you came to Garavicchio, our family country home, and started work on the Tarot Garden. "I would like to know what it was like for you, a young girl, to experience this adventure." Those were your words, more or less, a few months ago. I was delighted at the idea of going back in a structured way to those wonderful years of my life, that strangely exposed time in between childhood and maturity, which were permeated by the freedom of knowing you and spending time at the garden. I was 12, when I first met you. You were 47.

As I go back to that time starting in 1977, the year you first came into our lives, many images and feelings flood through my mind. I remember one time in Garavicchio, a small, white maquette on the table (the very first seedling of the Tarot Garden) and you explaining to my father, Nicola, and my uncle Carlo why they should give you a piece of land on which to build your dream project. You were so passionate in your elaborate explanations. Your hands, drawing large invisible shapes over the tiny maquette, and your words, made the vision come to life within our minds. I think you charmed them also with your beauty, for the men in my family have always had a sensitive eye for beautiful women. By the end of the afternoon the land was yours. A long-forgotten piece of rocky soil in the deep mesh of unattended woods.

I remember your femininity and beauty. Your collection of dresses. Pink fuchsias, electric blues, polka dots, animal prints, reds, oranges, tartans. Everything you wore became an extension of you. You were like an alchemist, transforming objects and spaces that you came across. Sometimes you would give me a dress

of yours to wear. It made me feel beautiful and strong just wearing it! And the hats, of course. A hat for every hour of the day, with feathers, artichokes, roses and other bits and pieces of things you liked. Thinking about you and the times spent at the Tarot Garden has brought back other seemingly unrelated memories. Memories of my life in Rome, where I went to school. Those were the infamous "lead years" (*gli anni di piombo*), tainted by endless political tensions, terrorism, the death of Aldo Moro at the hands of the Red Brigades. Policemen armed to their teeth, machine guns strapped across their chests, were a common sight at nearly every corner. Violent demonstrations were a bleak weekly ceremony. Instead of reading Plato and Socrates in school, I remember being taught how to make a Molotov cocktail, a simple fire bomb made with petrol and a glass bottle, by our philosophy teacher. And smoking joints in the courtyards during class breaks. It was a time of great social upheaval, too. The battles for and against abortion, the referendum for divorce. Environmental issues coming to the surface. Though it was an exciting time of change, I remember my deep feelings of rootlessness. The Tarot Garden became a sort of refuge for me, and you a helpful guide. All these things have been the foundation of what I regard as the very special friendship that grew in those years between you and me.

I have many good memories of time spent with you, in Garavicchio, as the Garden was taking shape. Winter afternoons walking around or having lunch with members of the crew in the belly of *The Sphinx*, where you lived and worked for many years. Evenings by the fire. You offered so many answers. Do you remember the times I would ask you to read the tarot cards for me? Sitting in the dappled shade by the table just outside *The Sphinx*, trembling with fear and excitement, I would ask the classic "teen age" questions... Will I find love? Will I be happy? Will I find my guiding spirit? What shall I become? For every question you had an answer filled with wisdom and hope. Even the worst cards of all, the dreaded *Tower* or the ominous *Moon*, were made tolerable by your words. *Death* himself, on his ghostly horse, was never a clear-cut negative. "It marks a new beginning... life is perpetual motion, you cannot stop the flow, just learn to float," would be your words. You always saw the bright side of every situation. Even in the most complicated moments of your adventure with the Tarot Garden, in the midst of health problems or bureaucratic complications, you always knew how to keep your head above water. There was no fear allowed in your vision, only a sense of

challenge and a good sense of humour. "If the worst comes to the worst you will have learned something important!", you would say. And of course you were right.

I have enjoyed these days spent basking in the sweet memories of my adolescence. I have enjoyed visiting with my mind the old places and the friends I have met through you, Antoine, Ricardo, Jeffrey, Venera, Philippe... How much happiness you brought with you. How much space. I will always be thankful for that. You came into our lives like a Hindu deity, a feast for the eyes and the mind. You touched our lives. Especially mine.

Love always,
Marellina