

# Niki de Saint Phalle Playing with the Feminine in the Male Factory:

## *HON – en katedral*

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*HON – en katedral* (*SHE – a cathedral*, June 4–September 4, 1966) at Moderna Museet in Stockholm, was structured as a giant, reclining woman filling the entire space of the museum's largest room, more or less to its edges (fig. 1). She was painted white with patterns of clear colors over parts of her body. Entering *HON – en katedral* (hereafter simply *Hon*) through its vagina, the audience found themselves walking and climbing in something that has been referred to as a kind of amusement park. The image of the invasive, female body placed directly into the heart of the museum institution served to disturb power relations within artistic networks and cultural life at a time when both the representation of women and gender positions in the arts were being challenged.

*Hon* has become an icon within recent curatorial history, and has been referred to as a milestone of museum practice of the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> The emerging field of curatorial history has, to an extent, identified itself with the history of great individual “curatorial” achievements, and to biography and interview as method. Within that logic, *Hon* has increasingly become a work connected to the career of Pontus Hultén, the director of Moderna Museet at the time, more than anything else. The tendency has occasionally led as far as to the conclusion that *Hon* is a work that Hultén not only “curated,” but also artistically originated.<sup>2</sup> This is not something that began in the 1990s; instead there is a direct relation between the storyline of *Hon* that was written by Hultén and the museum in 1966–1967, and the position of *Hon* in the field of curatorial history. This essay aims to point out this relation, present alternative readings and, more specifically, make a critique of the *temporality* that has been constructed around *Hon* through the close reading of archival



Fig. 1. HON. Photo: Hans Hammarskiöld. © Hans Hammarskiöld Heritage.

documents. *Hon* as being a space and *existing in a space*, that is, a site for gendered power situations to be performed in an era of intense transnational activities within the arts, is the suggestion of this essay, which aims at opening up new perspectives on *Hon*, its authorship, and on the exhibition history of the 1960s. Adopting a perspective on art history that combines close archive reading and spatial theory, the local with the global, is used to get beyond narratives.<sup>3</sup> Such an approach also serves to better understand differences between subject positions and to discover frictions. I will revisit *Hon*'s production within the male factory and study how Niki de Saint Phalle and her male colleagues related to the piece. One of them was Claes Oldenburg, who watched the presentation and destruction of *Hon* from his temporary studio in a room right above the space where the sculpture was placed. I will finally discuss how today's feminist reclaiming of *Hon* occasionally fails to relate it sufficiently to the cultural context where it was created, and partly troubled an upcoming generation of women artists.

The authorship of *Hon* is formally assigned to Niki de Saint Phalle, Jean Tinguely, and Per Olof Ultvedt.<sup>4</sup> The artists' cooperations of the 1960s were, as we know, not always the happy shared work between equals, as it is so often referred to in art history. While approaching *Hon* and its context from a spatial perspective, this essay suggests alternative readings to the linear narratives that are repeated about the piece. Foremost, *Hon* was not about being a labyrinth for the viewer's body—with the one and grand exception, of course, of the significant entrance point. Instead, it was "a cathedral, factory – whale, Noah's Ark, Mama," as the cover of the catalogue suggests, invading the museum space (fig. 2).<sup>5</sup> Its impact was about the corporeality of the sculpture, and of *Hon*'s relation to the actual room, dominating it, almost touching and breaking its roof.

*Hon* is an exception among most of the exhibitions of its time in that, from the start, it was exposed to meticulous documentation. The entire production of *Hon* was carefully registered by photographers like Hans Hammarskiöld (1925–2012) and Lütfi Özkök (1923–2017). A few of the photographs were published in the thin exhibition catalogue, designed as a daily newspaper, and still more of them a year later, together with a storyline of *Hon*, in an extensive publication called *Hon – en historia* (1967, hereafter *Hon – a history*) (fig. 3).<sup>6</sup> This publication and the narrative created in it has been formative for how the exhibition has been placed in art histories. Its publication "post production" is often mistakenly referred to as the exhibition catalogue as such. The documentation gathered in it, for example, reviews, letters, and notes, has been repeatedly referred to in firsthand, instead of as part of a narrative construction performed in it, something which, to an extent, has been fatal for later interpretations.<sup>7</sup> However, on the other side, as a result of the excessive documentation the researcher is also left with some remains, leftovers, documents, unpublished photographs on contact sheets, and so on, that offer other perspectives. Those will be activated in this essay.<sup>8</sup>

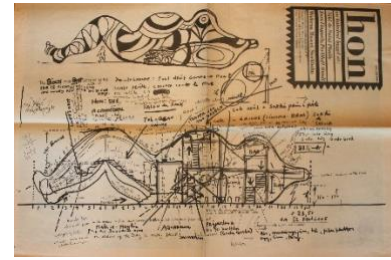


Fig. 2. Front page of the HON catalogue. Photo: Annika Öhrner.



Fig. 3. *Hon-en historia*, published one year after the presentation of HON in the museum. Photo: Annika Öhrner.

I.

Let us first outline a possible walk through the museum hall that Hon inhabited, in order to situate our eyes and body in the exhibition. While the viewer's walkthrough in an exhibition like *Dylaby* (1962) in the Stedelijk Museum was clearly structured and the different artists' works were laid out in a row of defined spaces, *Hon* was anything but that. When entering the largest space at the museum, the viewer met with an oversized representation of a woman with two giant legs and a pregnant belly rising to the roof, and with a bar selling drinks at the top, where other visitors could be seen looking down at the people lining up in front of the large opening, the vagina. She was pale, white, and dressed in painted, brightly colored underwear and stockings. Viewers were shown the way into the innards of *Hon*, where they encountered a dark space with stairs and ladders leading in different directions. After the entrance, the viewers met a turning wheel, initially meant to steer different parts of the structural skeleton that connected to different body parts, but was never made to work. They also met Per Olof Ultvedt's *Man i fåtölj* (*Man in a chair*, 1966), a mobile piece of a man leaning back in a chair and getting a massage while watching a television showing a boat that crosses the screen, all in raw, wooden material.

In *Hon's* right leg was a slide covered with a carpet of imitation parquet, an aesthetic that recalls the slides of amusement parks at the time. In the left leg the viewer could climb to the higher level through a ladder, where different services were offered, including an automat for food and a bottle crusher, giving the impression of a combination of a recycling machine that disposed of bottles from the bar above. Then there was a public telephone booth, and it was also possible to view a film, a clip from the silent movie *Luffar-Petter* (directed by Erik A. Petschler, 1922), in which Swedish beauties bathe in the countryside. In *Hon* there was no "tunnel of love," like those seen in amusement parks, but there was a "lover's bench" designed for couples to sit and rest. They might have been unaware of the fact that their "love talk" was transferred through a hidden microphone and transmitted into the bar. In the belly of *Hon* was a pond with goldfish that served as an association to an animal park and fertility.

*Hon* was flirting with high culture, the museum institution, and the art world. From the love bench, the couple was able, through a small rearview mirror, to see a "Piennal," as it was mockingly called (as opposed to a "Biennale"), containing an exhibition of postcards of paintings from the museum's collection, including Yves Klein's *Square*, Kandinsky's *Departure*, Léger's *The Stair*, Francis Bacon's double portrait of Lucian Freud and Frank Auerbach, and the Swedish artist Uno Wallman's *Farmer's Wedding*. In addition to that, along the wall of the slide were some fake artworks, painted in the style of famous artists and all containing the word "fake": a Jackson Pollock, a Jean Fautrier, a Klee.

These were anonymously created by Ulf Linde, art critic and close collaborator with the museum, who also created copies of the work of Marcel Duchamp in other contexts.<sup>9</sup>

Yet another trait of *Hon*, outside of the amusement park and the mocking of the museum, was the machine aesthetics of squeaking sculptures and other sounds. On the exterior, music by Bach filled the space, along with the sound of the lovers' whispering. The technique was raw, with looping films and large fans with everything clearly visible. The sound of crushed bottles was heard throughout the body—at least if we can believe the film of *Hon*, produced on-site, where this sound is emphasized.<sup>10</sup> In the left hip were Tinguely's moving sculptures, including *Radio Stockholm*, which constantly broadcasted birds tweeting. The experience in *Hon* appeared as an aural one.

However, an accurate description of *Hon*, and in what state she was actually in while receiving her audience, is difficult to make. In catalogue texts, press cuts, and historical reconstructions made in the publication *Hon – a history* (1967), many details are addressed as hard facts, even if they were actually never realized and remained only as ideas. A mobile sculpture by Tinguely, a kind of planetarium made of white ping-pong balls and referred to as the *voie lactée*—the Milky Way—a natural phenomenon typical for Sweden, reoccurs as an important aspect in later interpretations of the work. It is also included in the description Hultén himself makes of *Hon* in his 1996 interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist.<sup>11</sup> That it was never realized, however, Hultén had stated earlier in the catalogue of the exhibition of Jean Tinguely at the Centre George Pompidou in 1988.<sup>12</sup> This is just one example of the many aspects of *Hon* that appear to exist in a thin gray zone of fact and fiction, moderated through the narratives that were established at the moment of its production and continuing into today's critical writing. The image of *Hon* is an unstable construction, ready to serve as the projection screen for a multitude of ideas, but also quite clearly used in the service of the history of curatorial masterpieces. In order to know what *Hon* was, it is crucial not to remain in this production of facts, but to search deeper into the archive. Before doing that, I will investigate some traits in the constructed history of *Hon*.

## II.

It is at a peculiar place that the origin of *Hon* is placed in *Hon – a history*, in 1967. Her prehistory is drawn with the words, "The idea of a 'She'-type exhibition was conceived one evening in September 1955..." referring to the planning of the first exhibition in Sweden with Jean Tinguely in the editorial office of the student magazine *Blandaren*, situated in the apartment of Hans Nordenström in Stockholm. More collaborative projects were undertaken in different constellations, including the unrealized exhibition *Total Art* (*Total Konst*) for Liljevalchs Konsthall in Stockholm,

Tinguely's *Meta Matic 17* in the "youth biennial" in Paris in 1959, *Movement in Art* at Moderna Museet in 1961, and *Dylaby* at Stedelijk in 1962—all projects with Hultén as the common denominator.<sup>13</sup> Thus the genealogy of *Hon*, as it is laid out in the 1967 publication, equals the early career of an up-and-coming star in the international museum world.

This narrative is, moreover, deeply dependent on and linked to the idea of *Hon* as a *temporary* work. In the preface of *Hon – a history*, it is stated that *Hon* was conceived as the reversal of the classical notion and juxtaposition of life and art: "as Life is short, Art is long." As a negation to this, the four contractors (Hultén, Saint Phalle, Tinguely, and Ultvedt) meant to hold

*an exhibition, not of objects brought to the museum for display, but of something created in the museum as workshop, to be shown there and then have an end brought to its temporary existence. That was how "She" was realized, displayed and destroyed.*<sup>14</sup>

This is also how the history of the creation of *Hon* from the moment the group met up with Hultén in Stockholm is told. Tinguely and Saint Phalle presented an idea of an "opera" with twelve stations, each consisting of a tableau upon arrival, where one dealt with the subject of "the women take power." The group met and drew plans together, but the agony increased, so it goes, as no suitable concept or form was found. When finally the idea of making a "giant *Nana*" came up, the authorship of this is constructed in two steps, from being a *joint* idea (as indicated on page four of the exhibition catalogue of 1966) to being a stroke of genius by Hultén in the publication *Hon – a history* already in the next year. There, Ultvedt also baptizes the work as "Hon." It was, it says, decided it should be "similar in type to Niki de Saint Phalle's earlier work." This sentence carefully estranges the idea of a giant *Nana* into something coming neither from Saint Phalle, the creator of the *Nanas*, nor from the collective work, but from the mind of Hultén.<sup>15</sup> Regardless of how genuine the proposal from Hultén could have been—and it has been repeated by Hultén and also by Saint Phalle herself in several contexts; the words could absolutely have fallen that way—it also in effect served to legitimize *Hon*, in both its provocative feminine bodily expression and its female authorship, at a time when these did not have a secured position in popular culture and art. I will, however, question this idea of *Hon's* conception below.

The succeeding images of the construction of the piece in *Hon – a history* represent equally gendered spaces. As Caroline A. Jones showed in her analysis of the work and strategies of Frank Stella, Andy Warhol, and Robert Rauschenberg, the conversion of the artist in his studio into a worker was an important shift within the American neo-avant-garde, and was formed by a thoroughly male connotation of artistic work.<sup>16</sup> In *Hon's* exhibition catalogue, as well as in *Hon – a history*, the visual representation through mainly black-and-white documentary photographs and some drawings puts traditional physical labor at the fore. The reader can follow how the sculpture was put

together, not by classical artistic techniques, but by ordinary construction material, such as timber, scaffolding, electrical cables, etc. Each stage of the construction was carefully described. After the scaffolding, the shape of *Hon* was formed with chicken wire, tissue, and adhesive over the course of two or three days. As the giant body was finished, Ultvedt painted the whole interior in black over the course of ten days, after which a new period of construction began, the white period. To mark this, the team bought new white clothes. The unpublished photographs show that a large group of people—assistants, family members, carpenters, and many other professionals—were included in the building of *Hon*. In the storyline of the post-production publication, the agency of the construction is placed with the three artists and Hultén, along with just a few assistants, themselves acting and dressing as workers, painters, and carpenters. This was underlined also through the dress of the artists, and Saint Phalle and her contractors are presented in blue-collar or white-collar working garments (fig. 4). Saint Phalle presents herself in these photos dressed as a worker, thus playing with gender while acting as “one of the guys” in the male factory. This appearance functioned as an effective contrast to the expansive female body that slowly emerged from their work.

According to the foreword in *Hon – a history*, “Her destruction was not undertaken because it was the only way to let her out, but simply because it was part of her destiny.” The concept of *Hon* as a temporary work is now deeply embedded in art history but is very far from reflecting the real situation. Despite the pronounced ambition to create a collective, improvised exhibition and temporary situation, *Hon* did not escape postmortem fetishization. Her violent fragmentation was carefully documented by filmmakers and photographers, and remains an important part of the *Hon* narrative. In these images nothing of the productive ambiguity of the violence performed in Saint Phalle’s *Shooting Picture* is to be found. Male workers are seen breaking *Hon*’s giant body into parts, with museum director Hultén himself in the leading role, using a blowtorch to remove her head from her body (fig. 5, 6, 7). The destruction of *Hon* adds an important symbolic dimension to the history of its life that is offered in *Hon – a history*.

The destruction also served practical purposes in rendering parts of *Hon* into solid art objects. Initially, parts of *Hon*—such as *Mannen i fåtölj* and *Radio Stockholm*—were carefully taken out before the destruction and preserved as singular artworks (fig. 8, 9, 10).<sup>17</sup> Some body parts survived the massacre, as did the head, which is kept at Moderna Museet following a donation in 1998 from Hultén. The same goes for the model for *Hon* that had been present in the exhibition space during the show and is now part of the Moderna Museet collection.<sup>18</sup> The head was also preserved. These remnants may not be entirely sufficient to verify the objectification of *Hon*. However, parts of the skin of *Hon* were also cut into small pieces and pasted onto 10 × 14 cm boards, numbered in an edition of 150, signed by Saint Phalle, Tinguely, and Ultvedt, and sold separately, mounted



Fig. 4. Niki de Saint Phalle painting HON, May 17, 1966. Photo: Hans Hammarskiöld/Moderna Museet. © Hans Hammarskiöld Heritage.



Fig. 5. Working team at Moderna Museet, demolition of HON, September 5-8, 1966. Photo: Hans Hammarskiöld/Moderna Museet. © Hans Hammarskiöld Heritage.



Fig. 6. Destruction of HON. Photo: Hans Hammarskiöld/Moderna Museet. © Hans Hammarskiöld Heritage.

into a series of issues of *Hon – a history*. One part of the thigh was cut out and given to a member of the museum staff by the three artists.<sup>19</sup> Thus the destruction of *Hon* was not her final destination, but instead a transformation into several lasting art objects, today embraced by the museum institution or circulating in the art market.

### III.

Another significant document of *Hon*'s moment of production is a photograph published in *Hon – a history* that also exists in other versions in the archive of Moderna Museet. It represents Niki de Saint Phalle lying on the floor, with Tinguely and Ultvedt standing on each side (fig. 11).<sup>20</sup> She is modeling for *Hon*, miming *Hon*'s future constitution with the help of her own body. These images are strong, and represent a complete opposite role for Saint Phalle than the ones where she acted as working artist. These images represent the complex position she, as a woman, had as being author, actor, and object within the project itself, as well as in the cultural space where *Hon* was produced.

Saint Phalle credited Hultén for the suggestion of letting one of her *Nanas* become a giant in Moderna Museet in 1966, but she was confident about being the author of this sculptural form. In 1992 she would, for example, emphasize the mythical dimensions of *Hon*, and she opposed pornographic readings:

*There was nothing pornographic about HON, even though she was entered through her sex... At the time I painted HON like an Easter egg with light, clear colors, which I always used. She was a big fertility Goddess, despite her immense size... The happy, giant creature embodied for many visitors, and also for myself, the dream of the return to the great mother. Entire families with little children came to the museum to see her.*<sup>21</sup>

How was this form perceived among her male colleagues? Other contexts have investigated the gendered space in the era of pop.<sup>22</sup> In the highly transnational field of the pop era, the position of Saint Phalle as a female artist was unique; being fluent in English and French, she served as a node between European and American artists and culture, as Patrik Andersson has pointed out.<sup>23</sup> In a period when women to a large degree were shut out from the art market and museum institutions, she became the rare exception, positioned right at the center of matters in a time of the reinvention of the museum.

The exhibition and collection practice of Moderna Museet was no exception to the rule of this gendered space. In the 1960s and '70s, and even into the 1980s, female agency was rare within the walls of the museum. Hultén worked closely with a few female artists, such as Niki de Saint Phalle and Siri Derkert, but his curatorial practice and network was firmly based on defined male contexts. He



Fig. 7. Pontus Hultén during destruction of HON. Photo: Hans Hammarskiöld. © Hans Hammarskiöld Heritage.



Fig. 8. Objects picked out from HON before her destruction. Photo: Hans Hammarskiöld/Moderna Museet. © Hans Hammarskiöld Heritage.



Fig. 9. Objects from HON, carried out from her. Photo: Hans Hammarskiöld/Moderna Museet. © Hans Hammarskiöld Heritage.

would later state a lack of engagement in feminism and equality in the arts, in an interview for the art journal *Material* in 1994.<sup>24</sup> That the position Saint Phalle occupied with *Hon* was not secure, but created tensions, is possible to read from the documents, if we go beyond the established histories of mutual and equal cooperation.

When viewed in the context of European-American pop art, the *Hon* project in Stockholm signified the end of several of years of cooperation between Robert Rauschenberg and some of his European colleagues. Rauschenberg, Ultvedt, Saint Phalle, and Tinguely, as well as Daniel Spoerri and Martial Raysse, had been invited by Willem Sandberg to create a "dynamic labyrinth"—*Dylaby*—at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1962. As has been shown by Andersson, tensions developed between Rauschenberg and the European artists; Rauschenberg would later claim that the others were only interested in collaborative work, not collective work.<sup>25</sup> In this context, *Hon* served as one station within the interactions in the neo-avant-garde and its American and European allies. Andersson quotes from letters to Per Olof Ultvedt: "Tinguely: What would be the use in a large Pop hot dog? Don't you feel the four of us would be enough since the castle would become a unity? Why have an enormous hamburger next to it? Saint Phalle: Rauschenberg may also be unnecessary."<sup>26</sup> She was in the middle of these frictions, that were not, as we shall see, the only ones that would occur in connection to *Hon*.

Contrary to what was stated in 1967 in *Hon – a history*, *Hon* was not invented in 1955 in Stockholm by a couple of artists around Hultén, nor in Stockholm some weeks before the opening by Hultén; not her body-ness, nor the determining constituent of the work. *Hon* was created by Saint Phalle and preceded by, and the logical consequence of a series of *Nanas* that she had worked with already since a couple of years—sculptures of women of varying size and expression. The year before *Hon*, she had exhibited them for the first time at the Iolas Gallery in Paris, and Pierre Descargues, in his introduction to the catalogue, was the first to associate the *Nanas* with prehistoric figurines of Venuses and the Great Mother.<sup>27</sup> Amelia Jones has followed Saint Phalle's female figures developing from the *Accouchements* of the early 1960s into sculptures of female figures involved in or submitted to violent and aggressive acts in the mid-1960s, and then in the late '60s into more joyful, deliberated, and rotund *Nanas*.<sup>28</sup> One example of the violent versions was *King Kong* (1962), which was in fact presented in the same space as *Hon* during its exhibition period. The giant *Hon* in Stockholm was actually recreated the same autumn in Staatstheater Kassel, in Saint Phalle's scenography for *Lysistrata*, directed by Rainer von Diez. There she was stretching out her body on the stage, letting the actors enter and exit the scene through her vagina.<sup>29</sup> *Nanas* returned to Skeppsholmen in 1971, when Tinguely and Saint Phalle donated their group of sixteen outdoor sculptures, *Le Paradis Fantastique* (1966), to Moderna Museet. In form, *Hon* in Stockholm is a sculpture without doubt authored by Saint Phalle.



Fig. 10. Per-Olof Ultvedt, piece within *Hon*. Photo: Hans Hammarskiöld/Moderna Museet. © Hans Hammarskiöld Heritage.



Fig. 11. Niki de Saint Phalle acting as HON, with Jean Tinguely and Per Olof Ultvedt. Photo: Lütfi Özkök. © Lütfi Özkök.



According to Kalliopi Minioudaki, *Hon* justifiably turned Saint Phalle's ephemeral *Nanas* into an enduring legacy for feminist art to come, a "cathedral" to Woman/Mother.<sup>30</sup> I also concur with Amelia Jones that the authorship of the work is Saint Phalle's, while stating that, *Hon* as a "giant installation orchestrated by Saint Phalle with the help of Tinguely and Ultvedt" is a feminine form that is nominally a gargantuan "object," but one "who consumes the spectator (vaginally no less!) rather than being 'consumed' by the masculine 'gaze' of patriarchal culture."<sup>31</sup> And while Saint Phalle could refer to Hultén as someone who came up with the idea of reusing the *Nana* concept for *Hon*, she did consider it has her own work. *Hon* represents extremely powerful significations that served to threaten the rule of order in the cultural space of its time. This did not stop Swedish female writers and artists at the time in reacting against her appearance, a point to which we will return.

#### IV.

The Swedish-American pop artist Claes Oldenburg had initially been invited by Pontus Hultén to participate in the work of a full-scale collaborative project, as had the French artist Martial Raysse.<sup>32</sup> Raysse later realized that he was unable to participate due to an invitation to represent France in the Venice Biennale that year, while Oldenburg left the project after a while because Hultén scheduled him for a one-man exhibition in the period directly after *Hon*. Oldenburg was an important figure for Moderna Museet due to his Swedish background and his role as a bridge to the Manhattan art scene.<sup>33</sup> A retrospective of sculptures and drawings by Oldenburg was planned to open on September 17, 1966, including soft sculptures and with the *Bedroom Ensemble* (1963) as its key work.<sup>34</sup> The pieces in the show were all related to the home, to the vernacular and everyday life, a space with female connotations. With the decision to put on this exhibition, Oldenburg was no longer a part of the initial collaboration.

In a caption of an illustration of *Hon* in the 1992 catalogue of the Niki de Saint Phalle exhibition in Hamburger Kunsthalle, a catalogue that was deeply informed by the artist herself, it is explained why the installation of *Hon* was restricted in time. The giant woman had to be destroyed as a result of the upcoming Claes Oldenburg exhibition.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the destruction of the giant female body is addressed by Saint Phalle as a direct result of the intervention of a full-size representation of her male colleague's work. Seeing *Hon* and Oldenburg's retrospective from a spatial perspective and through photographic documents in the archives, the interrelation between the two exhibitions appears complex in relation to both physical and gendered space. The competitive spatial relation of the two exhibitions was not just symbolic; it was actual and physical, as Oldenburg's exhibition was prepared in a smaller room/studio just over *Hon's* feet. From a point at the end of the room, Oldenburg



Fig. 12. Claes Oldenburg's temporary studio space at Moderna Museet and HON. Photo: Hans Hammarskiöld/Moderna Museet. © Hans Hammarskiöld Heritage.

had a position from which he could monitor her—and her destruction.

And he did. Oldenburg reoccurs in a series of previously unpublished photos in contact prints, where he walks around the construction of *Hon*, deeply engaged in its presence and emergence. He also meditates over her from his rather exclusive viewpoint. In a humoristic but extremely ambivalent text that was printed in *Hon – a history*, he stated:

I.

*I, a passionate anti-American, I think it's good to accept and to look closely at the Cunt, an entrance, an exit. In the smallish magazines in Sweden, focus falls upon the Cunt. In the U.S.A. there is always something in the way, the Cunt is obstructed. From my studio in the M.M. I looked straight up Hon's Cunt. Every day, very clearly, I saw the citizens come in and go out. That seemed to me to move forwards a little. More Body-Art always helps.*

II.

*Art that really means something is always laughed at. So Gulliver, so Alice. People pay for the funny thing, as they do to buy the rubber balls to knock the girls into the water at Gröna Lund. The King is disgusted, but perhaps he doesn't care one way or the other – King is a hard part to play these days. Clowns through the Ages. Hon probably paved the way for me.*

III.

*I wish that those who were and enjoyed Hon whole could have watched her being taken apart. Three months: Birth/Life/Death. One sixteenth of Europe (to exaggerate) and all of Stockholm getting their heads. What a fast, full life! More action than Christina.*

IV.

*I didn't like her bathing suit.* <sup>36</sup>

It is no doubt that what it was about for Oldenburg, from his bird's-eye perspective on *Hon*, was not a collaborative work of participative art, but playing with seeing a *Cunt* from a traditional male position (fig. 13, 14). In his statement above he is also playing with Swedish and American stereotypes of the time; the Swedish being liberal toward sexual expression, the Americans more moralistic. But, all the same, his interpretation lies very far from the one that Saint Phalle expressed above, of a fertility goddess. The text also discloses Oldenburg's perception of *Hon*'s relation to his own work, as a competing project but also as help to it; *Hon* would *pave the way* for what was about to come. Moderna Museet's exhibition program at the time was still understood as controversial, both by some art critics and by



Fig. 13. Claes Oldenburg and HON. Photo: Hans Hammarskiöld/Moderna Museet. © Hans Hammarskiöld Heritage.



Fig. 14. Claes Oldenburg's temporary studio space at Moderna Museet and HON. Photo: Hans Hammarskiöld/Moderna Museet. © Hans Hammarskiöld Heritage.

representatives of the authorities. Hultén was very aware of this, and his PR program was carefully laid out accordingly. Oldenburg realized that if *Hon* would scandalize the Swedish audience, it would also prepare it, and his own work could turn out to be better off. Interestingly, another cooperation was established according to the photographs from the preparation of Oldenburg's show. He and his wife, Pat, lived in an intense relationship of attraction and artistic work, and built the new pieces for the show together. Among the collectives of the 1960s, those between couples were very common. In a 2002 article, Pat Oldenburg shared her memories of their cooperation, which reached its peak during this time in Stockholm.<sup>37</sup>

Another, completely different relation that emerges from the archival material is the one between Per Olof Ultvedt and Niki de Saint Phalle, another example of how the giant *Nana* was felt as a provocation by Saint Phalle's male colleagues. In a 2012 film about *Hon* by Barbro Schulz Lundestam, Ultvedt confesses (in an interview from 1997), that he was provoked by the design of *Hon*:

*I was disturbed by the fact that one was forced to enter her through the vagina. I reacted against that, we were once born from there – why should we return?"<sup>38</sup>*

Ultvedt explains that *Man i fåtölj*, his own work within the giant sculpture, depicting a self-contained man sitting in a chair watching a television set, sculptured in wood with mobile parts and being massaged by moving arms, was his answer to this reaction. He continues, "This disturbed Niki immensely." It is obvious that the strongly gendered expression of *Hon* also left its mark on the relation between Saint Phalle and the male artists around her.

## V.

In the exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* that was shown at MoMA PS1 in New York in 2008, *Hon* was represented by *Photo repeinte de Hon* (1979) and given an honorable position at the entrance—a poster in offset print featured a black-and-white installation photo of *Hon*, where the giant woman has been colored by Niki de Saint Phalle—as well as by the aforementioned film made in connection to its production in 1966. This article is not the place to fully explore the relationship between *Hon*, the *Nanas*, and the second and third waves of feminist action, but I find it important to contextualize the work in relation to the emerging feminism of the time and the location of the work itself. Without knowing this context, one risks inscribing the work into feminist history with less friction than is actually required.

It is not hard to find reactions of skepticism against *Hon* from Swedish women active in the cultural field of the mid-sixties. The work inspired the young poet Barbro Backberger, soon to be one of the leading subjects in the Swedish feminist

movement, to write a poem, "HON," for the literary magazine *Ord och Bild*.<sup>39</sup> Her poem was written as a dialogue between two voices, one admiring voice that capitulates in front of the gigantic goddess, the other addressing the passivity of the sculpture and the traditional representation of the female body. The text frames the ambivalent nature of *Hon* from the departure of a female position. Soon thereafter, in 1968, Backberger would be a co-founder of Grupp 8, the most important feminist formation that would also become a prominent factor in Swedish political life.

Although an exhibition of the political ideas of Grupp 8, titled *Kvinnan (The woman, 1972)*, was made at *Filialen*, an off-site space of Moderna Museet that was active from 1971 to 1973, just a few female artists and hardly any feminist projects were included in the modernist program of the museum until the 1990s.

In the exhibition by Grupp 8, images from *Hon – a history* reoccurred on a panel, side by side with stereotyped images of women from art history and the fashion industry. When looking back at *Hon* in 2003, the feminist painter Monika Sjö, who created the iconic *God Giving Birth (1968)*, said that it was supported by male artists who "enjoyed sitting and drinking beer in it," and she meant that Niki de Saint Phalle did not produce any identifications of women.<sup>40</sup> There was an emerging frustration among Swedish women about the position of women in society and the arts in 1966. Moderna Museet was not ready to embrace the strong creative power of young female artists, who from the early 1970s would be expressed in a number of self-organized group exhibitions of feminist art in mainly municipal museums and art halls throughout the country.<sup>41</sup> The Swedish female artists' criticism of *Hon* has been argued to be a lack of generosity toward a colleague, but it was also part of a resistance against the art field as such, in which female agency was marginalized.<sup>42</sup>

The image of *Hon*, as transmitted through Hans Hammarskiöld's photograph on the cover of *Hon – a history*, remains almost a part of a common subconscious. *Hon* is connected to the history of Moderna Museet on a level that is challenged only by Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram*. The project, together with *Rörelse i konsten (Movement in art, 1961)*, was an important step for the establishment of Moderna Museet internationally. *Hon* has been described as signifying Hultén's approach as museum director in its capacity of being interactive and improvising. The French and European axis that the museum opened up in connection with *Hon* and other exhibitions would emerge a few years later in Hultén's appointment as director for the Musée Nationale d'Art Moderne in Centre Pompidou in 1973.

Hultén was supportive of Niki de Saint Phalle's art throughout his life, and a close friend. The cooperation and exchange between Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely was

evidently close and strong, and has been developed elsewhere.<sup>43</sup> The story of the cooperative and collective work between the four persons that is drawn in the storyline in *Hon – a history* and has been adopted by recent curatorial history writing, however, has not only served to neglect the actual authorship but also to obscure the gendered working conditions of the cultural space of its production. It is obvious that the powerful image that *Hon* represents is a result of Saint Phalle's imagination, which was intensely productive during these years. Her strong position within the group, and as one of very few women in the international neo-avant-garde movement, is unique and reflected in the work itself, its complex reception from male colleagues, and the resistance of some young female artists at the time.

I have suggested some readings of aspects of *Hon* that are related to the exhibition history of the 1960s and to the bigger picture of transnational art history. These include creativity and the reinvention of the museum exhibition, as well as ruptures, tensions, and competitions related to ruptures. Some these readings have pointed to what is to be gained by taking different positions on the subject and how multiple small narratives allow the universal one to be challenged.

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1. Typical examples of this are Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating* (Zürich and Dijon: JRP-Ringier & Les presses du reel, 2014), 41, and Andreas Gedin, *Pontus Hultén, Hon & Moderna* (Stockholm: Bokförlaget Langensköld, 2016). Anna Tellgren has pointed out how Hultén's early exhibition work started to gain new interest from the mid-1990s in tandem with the notion of *curating* becoming the focus of art criticism and being retrospectively applied to or discussed in connection to this work. Anna Tellgren, "Pontus Hultén and Moderna Museet: Research and learning based on an art collection, an archive and a library," in *Pontus Hultén and Moderna Museet: The*

- Formative Years*, ed. Anna Tellgren (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2017), 15. Two recent Scandinavian dissertations on early 1960s exhibition history demonstrate how problematic pitfalls of curator's monography can be avoided; Natalie O'Donnell, *Space as curatorial construct* (Oslo: School of Architecture and Design, 2016), and Kim West, *The exhibitionary complex: exhibition, apparatus, and media from Kulturhuset to the Centre Pompidou, 1963–1977* (Huddinge: Södertörn University, 2017).
2. Gedin, *Pontus Hultén, Hon & Moderna*, 11.
  3. The horizontal art history is a notion by Piotr Piotrowski. See Piotr Piotrowski, "On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History," *Umeni/Art*, no. 5 (2008): 378–83; "Towards a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde," in Sascha Bru and Peter Nicholls, *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 49–58; and "Why Were There No Great Pop Art Curatorial Projects in Eastern Europe in the 1960s?" in *Art in Transfer in The Era of Pop*, ed. Annika Öhrner (Huddinge: Södertörn University, 2017), 21–37.
  4. Amelia Jones, "Wild Maid, Wild Soul, A Wild Wild Weed: Les Féminités Féroces de Niki de Saint Phalle vers 1960–1966," in *Niki de Saint Phalle 1930–2002*, exh. cat., ed. Camille Morineau (Paris: Grand Palais, 2014), 162.
  5. *Hon en katedral byggd av: Niki de Saint Phalle, Jean Tinguely, Per Olof Ultvedt*, Moderna Museets utställningskatalog no. 54, exh. cat. (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1966).
  6. Barbro Sylwan and K. G. Hultén, eds., *Hon – en historia* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet 1967).
  7. In Benoît Antille, "HON – en katedral': Behind Pontus Hultén's Theatre of Inclusiveness," in *Afterall*, no. 32 (Spring 2013) this problem unfortunately occurs as well, although the author gives an interesting account of *Hon* in connection with new approaches to the audience within museums.
  8. I would like to thank the Stedelijk Museum and Moderna Museet for inviting me to the symposium *Lose yourself! On Labyrinthine Exhibitions as Curatorial Model*, at Stedelijk Museum in February 2017, which give me a great occasion to further develop this paper that had been in progress for some time.
  9. On this work see Paul B. Franklin, *Étant donné Marcel Duchamp no. 11* (Paris: Association pour l'étude de Marcel Duchamp, 2016).
  10. Magnus Wibom, *Niki de Saint Phalle Jean Tinguely Per Olof Ultvedt bygger HON* (1966), film.
  11. Obrist, 41.
  12. *Jean Tinguely*, (Paris: Éditions du Centre George Pompidou, 1988), 166.
  13. Sylwan and Hultén, 1967.
  14. *Ibid.*, 2.
  15. *Ibid.*, 40.
  16. Caroline A. Jones, *Machine in the studio: constructing the postwar American artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
  17. Per Olof Ultvedt, *Mannen i stolen* (1966), in Stockholms Stadsauktioner, Auktion 20121113, no. 167; Jean Tinguely, "Radio Stockholm," in *Tinguely*, ed. Pontus Hultén, Centre George Pompidou (Paris: Musée national d'art moderne, 1988), 151.
  18. Model for HON (1966), Moderna Museet Collection. The head of *HON – en katedral* is preserved at the museum and has been shown as a prop in exhibitions. It is not classified as an autonomous art work but as a part of the archive. See the exhibition *Niki de Saint Phalle, The girl, the monster & the Goddess*, Moderna Museet Malmö, May 12–September 9, 2012, and Moderna Museet Stockholm, April 20–December 1, 2013, curated by Joa Ljungberg.
  19. The piece measures 147 x 92 x 10 cm. Private collection.
  20. Sylwan and Hultén, 41.
  21. Letter from Niki de Saint Phalle to Clarice, Pontus Hultén, ed., *Niki de Saint Phalle* (Bonn: Kunst und Ausstellungshalle der

- Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 1992), 167–169. Niki de Saint Phalle: “Es gab nichts Pornographisches an HON, auch wenn sie durch ihr Geschlechtsteil betreten wurde. ... Damals bemalte ich HON wie ein Osterei in leuchtenden, klaren Farben, die ich schon immer benutzt und geliebt habe. Sie war eine große Fruchtbarkeitsgöttin, trotz ihrer immensen Ausmaße, verschlang und wieder gebar. Es war ein unglaubliches Erlebnis, sie zu schaffen. Die fröhliche riesige Kreatur verkörperte für viele Besucher und auch für mich selbst den Traum von der Rückkehr zur Urmutter. Ganze Familien mit Kleinkindern strömten herbei, um sie zu sehen.”
22. See, for example, Sid Sachs and Kalliopi Minioudaki, eds., *Seductive Subversion, Women Pop Artists 1958–1968* (London and New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2010).
  23. Patrik Andersson, “Le jeu de massacre de Niki de Saint Phalle: Participation, happening and théâtre,” in *Niki de Saint Phalle 1930–2002*, exh. cat., ed. Camille Morineau (Paris: Grand Palais, 2014), 56–61.
  24. Erik van der Heeg, Eva-Lotta Holm, and Håkan Nilsson, “Intervju med intendenten (del 4): Pontus Hultén, Kunsthalle Bonn och IHEAP, Paris, Dominans av stjärncurators skadar konstlivet på sikt,” *Material* 5, no. 21 (1994): 9.
  25. Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1980), 225; Billy Klüver and Robert Rauschenberg, “Rörelse i konsten- en kombinerad minnesbild,” *Moderna Museet 1958–1983* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1983).
  26. Letters to Per Olof Ultvedt, undated, Ultvedt’s archive, quoted from Patrik Andersson, “Euro-Pop: The Mechanical Bride Stripped Bare in Stockholm, Even” (diss., UMI Dissertation Services, 2001), 132.
  27. Kalliopi Minoudaki, *Reviewed Reveries: Niki de Saint Phalle Outdoor Wonders*, (Chicago: City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, 2007), 23, note 53.
  28. Jones, “Wild Maid, Wild Soul, A Wild Wild Weed,” 156–163. See also Linn Areskoug, *Hon-en katedral. En läsning av ett konstverk ur två feministiska aspekter* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, Konstvetenskapliga institutionen, 2002).
  29. The premiere was October 2, 1966. This version of *Hon* was 10 m long and 3.6 m high. Pontus Hultén, ed., *Niki de Saint Phalle* (Bonn: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschlands, 1992), 73.
  30. Kalliopi Minoudaki, “Unmasking and reimag(in)ing the feminine: The m/others of Niki de Saint Phalle,” in *Niki de Saint Phalle 1930–2002*, exh. cat., ed. Camille Morineau (Paris: Grand Palais, 2014), 164–173.
  31. Jones, “Wild Maid, Wild Soul, A Wild Wild Weed,” 163.
  32. Niki de Saint Phalle, undated letter to Clarice, quoted from Pontus Hultén, ed., *Niki de Saint Phalle*, exh. cat. (Bonn: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschlands & Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1993), 167.
  33. Claes Oldenburg was born in Stockholm 1929 of Swedish parents and moved to Chicago when his father was appointed Consul General of Sweden in 1936.
  34. *Claes Oldenburg: skulpturer och teckningar*, Moderna Museet September 17–October 30, 1966. For an account of the production of the exhibition, see Annika Gunnarsson, “Sam Francis and Claes Oldenburg: Two Americans,” in *Pontus Hultén and Moderna Museet: The Formative Years*, ed. Anna Tellgren (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2017), 128–139.
  35. “Die Installation von Hon ist befristet, das Werk muß Wegen einer Claes Oldenburg Ausstellung abgebaut werden,” in *Niki de Saint Phalle*, exh. cat., ed. Pontus Hultén (Bonn: Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschlands & Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1993), 70.
  36. Sylwan and Hultén, 167. “Christina” refers to the grand exhibition on the era of Queen Christina, which was shown at the National Museum at the same time as *HON – en katedral* was presented at Moderna Museet.
  37. Pat Mucha, “Sewing in the Sixties: recounting how some classic examples of Claes Oldenburg’s Pop Sculpture came

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- into existence, with cameo appearances by Dick Bellamy, Dennis Hopper and Charlie the cat – Memoir –Excerpt,” in *Art in America*, November 2002.
38. My translation. Barbro Schulz Lundestam, *Hon* (2012), film.
  39. Barbro Backberger, “HON,” *Ord & Bild*, no. 4 (1996), 324–325.
  40. Monica Sjöo, *Kvinnligt konstnärligt skapande är mänskligt skapande; några kommentarer till Monica von Stedingk, Kvinnomuseum som idé*, (Skellefteå: Museum Anna Nordlander, 2003), 10; quoted from Gedin, 198.
  41. See Annika Öhrner, “Making Space for feminism. All-Women Art Exhibitions in Sweden in the 1970s”, in *All-Women Art Spaces*, Agata Jakubowska & Kate Deepwell (ed.), Liverpool University Press, 2017, 47-70.
  42. Gedin, 199–200.
  43. See Cardenas, Bloum, *Niki & Jean: l’art et l’amour*, exh. cat. (Munich: Sprengel Museum, Museum Jean Tinguely, 2005).