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SHE – A CATHEDRAL



Niki de Saint Phalle during the construction of
She - A Cathedral, Moderna Museet, 1966

She – A Cathedral.
Esoteric Themes and Mediation

Ylva Hillström

The exhibition *She – A Cathedral* (1966) has been interpreted in many different ways over the years. It has been analysed from a gender perspective, as a response to 1960s arts policy objectives, as an example of ground-breaking exhibition practices, as a satire on society and museum institutions, and as a facet of mediaeval carnival culture.¹ In this essay, the focus is on an aspect of the exhibition that has remained relatively unexplored until now, namely its roots in myth and religion. Special attention is given to references to esoteric currents, both in the exhibition itself and in the material relating to its creation. Finally, the capacity of the audience to embrace the many layers of the exhibition is discussed.

She – A Cathedral opened on 4 June, 1966, and was the result of intense collaboration between Jean Tinguely, Niki de Saint Phalle and Per-Olof Ultvedt. *She* was a gigantic sculpture – 23.5 metres long, 6 metres high and 10 metres wide – of a reclining pregnant woman. The entrance between her legs led to a labyrinthine interior. A mini-cinema inside *She* showed a scene from the silent movie *Luffar-Petter* (Peter the Tramp) from 1921, starring Greta Garbo. A bar with a vending machine was installed in one of her breasts. There were plans for a planetarium with illuminated ping-pong balls representing the Milky Way, but it is uncertain whether it was ever actually built.² In one of the thighs was a miniature exhibition of paintings that looked as though they had been made by artists such as Paul Klee, Jean Dubuffet or Jean Fautrier but were in fact “fakes” by art critic and musician Ulf Linde.³ The interior also had room for a slide for kids, stairs, a lovers’ seat, a bottle-crushing machine, a phone booth, live fish in a small pond, a tombola, and several sculptures by Tinguely and Ultvedt, including Tinguely’s large grinder built on site. Music by Johann Sebastian Bach and radio broadcasts were played over the loudspeakers. At the apex of the round belly was a hole that visitors could stick their heads through to get a view of the exhibition hall. When the exhibition closed on 4 September, 1966, *She* was taken apart and the pieces were thrown away. It was important that nothing should

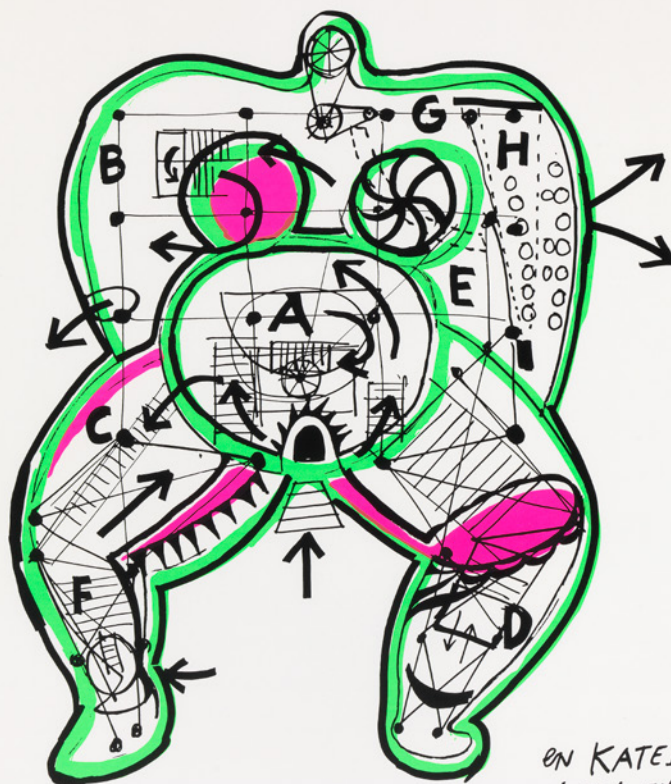
remain, and in the catalogue it was established that “demolition was inscribed in her fate”.⁴

The entire exhibition process was carefully documented. Photographers such as Hans Hammarskiöld and Lütfti Özkök were employed to photograph the work in progress. Their pictures were used in the catalogue and in the book *Hon – en historia* (She – A History) (1967), a publication that could be described as an archive exhibition in book form. Other photographs and reproductions were collected for *Hon – en historia*, including pictures of cathedrals and objects from art history, texts about Antoni Gaudí’s and Facteur Cheval’s remarkable buildings, excerpts from Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* from 1899, in a text by Elias Cornell the cathedral is compared to a woman, and *La France Illustrée*. The book also includes a form of diary account of the exhibition’s genesis, and a great many reviews from the Swedish and international press. Some texts occur in several translations, others only in the language in which they were originally published. Many of these articles are preserved in the substantial material relating to the production of *Hon – en historia* in the Moderna Museet archive.⁵ In some cases, the photographs originally illustrating these reviews have been excluded in the book and replaced with other images. There are no comments on how the material in the book was selected, so it is up to the reader to determine the significance of the texts and pictures.

Esoteric currents

The title of the exhibition, *She – A Cathedral*, suggests links to the field of religion. Religion had a strong presence in the lives of Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely. Niki de Saint Phalle attended a convent school. Her artistic practice is brimming with goddesses, cathedrals, dragons, angels and black madonnas, along with other symbols from religious and, more specifically, esoteric traditions. Her masterpiece, *Giardino dei Tarocchi* (1974–98), is a sculpture park based on the Tarot. The idea for the park came to her on a visit to Antoni Gaudí’s *Park Güell* in Barcelona.⁶ The numerous letters from Niki de Saint Phalle to Pontus Hultén preserved in the Moderna Museet archives, are full of words such as *magical*, *divine* and *energies*. In one of them, her spiritual convictions are particularly pronounced: “I hope you believe, like me, that life is not just an enormous accident. I hope you believe that there are mysterious

hon



Jean Tinguely

Niki de Saint Phalle

EN KATEDRAL
byggd av

Moderna Museet

Alla dagar 12-17

Onsdagar 12-22

Efter 1/7 alla dagar 12-22

Niki de Saint Phalle

Jean Tinguely

Per Olof Ultvedt

Poster for the exhibition *She - A Cathedral*,
1966, signed by the three artists Niki de Saint Phalle,
Jean Tinguely and Per Olof Ultvedt



Per Olof Ultvedt during the construction
of *She – A Cathedral*, Moderna Museet, 1966

laws governing us, that we do not understand because we don't have access to them yet."⁷

Jean Tinguely, similarly, created artworks with religious or mythical connotations: labyrinths, cyclops and altar-like compositions. Some of the religious references stemmed from childhood memories: "Brought up a Catholic by nuns, he was under the thrall of the mystery and magic of the Mass."⁸ In many of his works, he expressly refers to spiritually oriented artists such as Piet Mondrian and Kazimir Malevich. He was also close friends with Yves Klein, and an acquaintance of Jean Cocteau and Marcel Duchamp, all artists with profound knowledge in what has come to be known as Western esotericism.

The collective term *esotericism* includes Neo-Platonism, Hermeticism, astrology, magic, alchemy and the Kabbalah. All these different fields share a view of the world as enchanted. Esotericism can also be understood as that which constitutes the innermost core of every religion. The esoteric, inner side of religion is reserved for a spiritually enlightened minority, whereas the exoteric, outer side, is adapted to the level of consciousness of the general masses.⁹ Mysticism and occultism strongly influenced many of the most famous modernist artists.¹⁰ In the catalogue for the groundbreaking exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* (1986) it is emphasised that the development of abstract art was in fact inextricably linked to the spiritual ideas that flourished in Europe in the late-19th and early-20th centuries.¹¹ For example, the Bauhaus school, this flagship of modernism, was highly influenced by esoteric movements. Based on the concept of mediaeval guilds of builders and masons, its students were called apprentices. They were initiated into the secrets of crafts by masters, just like when the great cathedrals were built, or in the freemason lodges. Several of the artists who are now inscribed in the modernist canon, including Kazimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, Paul Klee, Hilma af Klint, Wassily Kandinsky, Joseph Beuys and Yves Klein, belonged to esoteric circles such as the Rosicrucian Order, the Freemasons, the Theosophical Society and the Anthroposophical Society. The spiritual fountainheads of art and Western esotericism have long been relatively uncharted territory. One reason may be that the emerging fascism and Nazism of the 1930s and 1940s appropriated part of the esoteric ideas for their own purposes.¹² Over the past 25 years, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in research in this field.¹³ There are also more exhibitions focusing on the spiritual in art.

Esoteric references in *She – A Cathedral*

When Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely met in 1956, they introduced one another to esoterically influenced artistic practices:

Ping pong. We were always playing – Ideas back and forth. When Jean and I started living together in 1960 he introduced me to Marcel Duchamp – Daniel Spoerri – Rauschenberg, Yves Klein and I introduced him to the world of the Facteur Cheval, Gaudi and the Watts Towers.¹⁴

She – A Cathedral includes several references to Marcel Duchamp. His works are teeming with symbols and words culled from the tradition of alchemy. Asked in an interview if his art should be regarded from an alchemical perspective, he replied:

It is an Alchemical understanding. But don't stop there! [*Laughing.*]
If we do, some will think I'm trying to turn lead into gold back in the kitchen. Alchemy is a kind of philosophy, a kind of thinking that leads to a way of understanding. We also may call this perspective "Tantric" (as Brâncuși would say), or (as you like to say) "Perennial."¹⁵

As Duchamp's art became increasingly written about in the French press in the 1940s and early 1950s – and he himself made more frequent visits to his native France, granting more interviews and even creating exhibitions – he became an influential figure in Parisian intellectual circles.

The planned planetarium of ping-pong balls could be seen as a nod to the Milky Way (*la voie lactée*) in Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915–1923). Tinguely's vending machine is most certainly a Duchampian readymade, and the giant grinder that Tinguely created for the *She* interior can be interpreted as a reference to Duchamp's chocolate grinder. Not only does Duchamp's oeuvre contain countless esoteric references, but the links between Duchamp and *She – A Cathedral* can also be described as esoteric, in the sense of obscure or inaccessible to the general public. Without explicit explanations, this dimension of the exhibition was probably only perceived by a select circle of initiates. If contemporary critics are to be trusted, most people rather experienced *She – A Cathedral* like a visit to an amusement park.¹⁶



Above: The three artists in the exhibition *She – A Cathedral*, Moderna Museet, 1966. Below: Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely during the installation of *She – A Cathedral*, 1966

More savvy visitors, however, could obtain guidance from Ulf Linde's review in *Dagens Nyheter*. It is reprinted in English, German and French at the beginning of the textual section of *Hon – en historia*, as if it were the official programme for the entire exhibition. Linde compares *She* with T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), a work that abounds in esoteric metaphors, and also highlights the significance of myths in the exhibition: "Yet this plastic richness never becomes an end in itself; everything is 'controlled' by the myth, by the original idea."¹⁷

She's roots in myth, religion and cult are revealed by many of the uncommented images and quotes reproduced in *Hon – en historia*, such as a photograph of Venus from Willendorf and a passage from a publication on the cathedral in Chartres. The Chartres text is about a sculpture of a mother goddess that was worshipped by the locals in Chartres and that was reportedly replaced with a Christian madonna.¹⁸ Many critics mention the similarities between *She* and a goddess, including Ulf Linde, whose review in *Dagens Nyheter* refers to both Venus from Willendorf and "The Primordial Great Mother".¹⁹

Mother goddesses occur in myths all over the world. In all times, mankind has resorted to myths to see life in a wider context. The historian of religion Karen Armstrong writes that there are moments when we all, in one way or another, must embark on a voyage to a place we have never seen, to do something we have never done, and that myths can offer guidance in those moments.²⁰ Many myths follow a pattern – a hero or god must endure various ordeals and then returns to life with new-found wisdom.

The encounter with the mother goddess is usually described as the hero's last adventure and the highest form of enlightenment. In Syria, the mother goddess was shown as the consort of the supreme god El, or as Anat, El's daughter. She was called Inanna in Sumer in Mesopotamia, Isis in Egypt and became known in Greece as Hera, Demeter and Aphrodite. In Neolithic mythology, women were clearly seen as the stronger sex, in line with the feminist aspects of Niki de Saint Phalle's art. The Mesopotamian mother goddess Ereshkigal is queen over life and death and is often depicted in the act of giving birth. *She* was also in labour, with an incessant stream of visitors coming out of her vagina (and entering). The visitors of the exhibition participated in a form of drama and, like the mythical heroes, walked through the labyrinth and were born again. Another

parallel is found in the Neolithic tunnels, which are believed to have been used ritually to evoke the feeling of entering the womb of Mother Earth and making a mystical passage back to the origins of life.²¹ Niki de Saint Phalle claimed that visitors were not the same when they came out from *She* as when they entered.²² In other words, she considered the visit to the exhibition to be a transformative experience, similar to other initiation rites. The transformation of visitors was also pointed out by a critic in the British leftist publication *The New Statesman* in 1966.²³

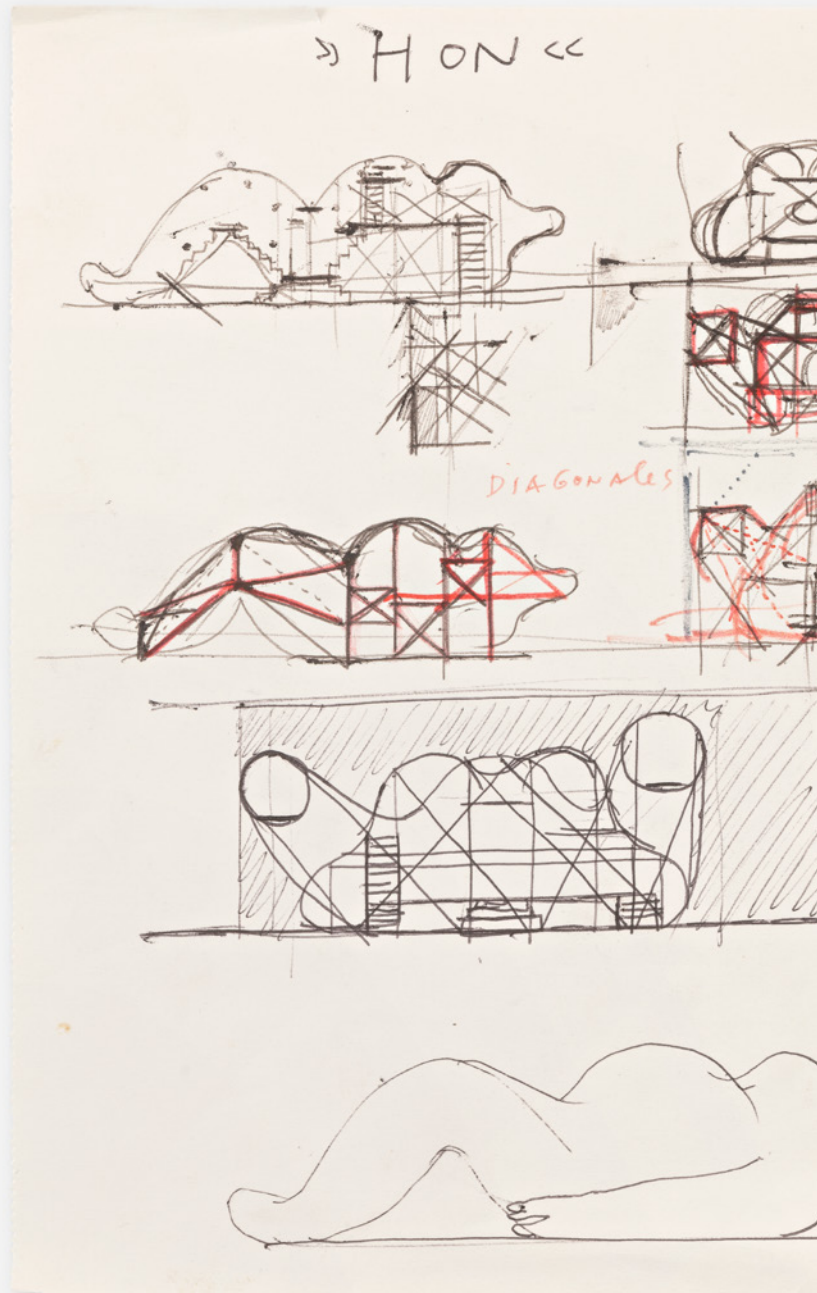
Over the years, commentators have insisted that *She* should be interpreted as a sexually liberated woman or a prostitute.²⁴ A prostitute woman who allows countless visitors to penetrate her obviously invites that reading. Moreover, the motto *Honi soit qui mal y pense* (Shame on whoever thinks ill thereof) which was written on *She's* thigh is linked to prostitution.²⁵ Even if Niki de Saint Phalle herself admitted that *She* could be seen as a prostitute, she later commented that this had never been her intention:

Wicked tongues said she was the biggest whore in the world [with] 100,000 visitors in three months. But for me she was never that. She was the incarnation of the ancient religion. Of the mother god[d]ess.²⁶

It is also worth noting that *Honi soit qui mal y pense* is the motto of the Most Noble Order of the Garter. This is one of Britain's most prestigious orders, founded in 1348 by King Edward III. Its origins are debatable. One version claims that the Order of the Garter is linked to the legend of the Holy Grail, an exceedingly vital part of esoteric mysticism.²⁷

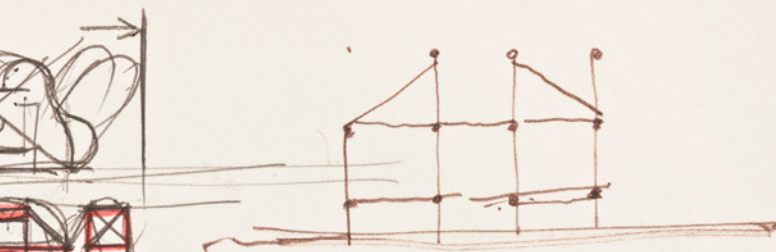
The exhibition's most tangible religious reference is, of course, found in its title: *She – A Cathedral*.²⁸ According to the fabled alchemist Fulcanelli, Gothic cathedrals were built by mediaeval Freemasons to ensure that the Hermetic doctrines were passed on to a select group of initiates. The edifices were and are still today teeming with esoteric symbols and references, functioning as colossal books in stone. In *The Mysteries of the Cathedrals*, Fulcanelli writes:

The cathedral is a work of *art goth* (Gothic art) or of *argot*, i.e. cant or slang. Moreover, dictionaries define argot as “a language peculiar to all individuals who wish to communicate their thoughts without being understood by outsiders.”²⁹



Jean Tinguely, *SHE* (1966),
sketch for the sculpture *She – A Cathedral*

Stockholm



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Timberly

Thus, the secrets are there for all to see in the cathedrals, but few can decode them.

Niki de Saint Phalle painted cathedrals early in her career. Although *Le Château du monstre et de la mariée* from around 1955 may depict a castle according to the title, the building strongly resembles a cathedral, with its rose window where a woman is giving birth. Thus, there were links between the cathedral and the woman giving birth early on in Niki de Saint Phalle's oeuvre. A later example is the plaster relief *La Cathédrale rouge* from 1962. Several texts and images in *Hon – en historia* refer to cathedrals, including Clas Brunius' exhibition review: "It certainly is a cathedral we enter. We sense the arched domes of the belly and breasts above us in the warm, dim light, like in a church from the time of the Crusades."³⁰ Adjoining the text is a picture of the crypt of the Crusader church in Acre, Israel. Another text that is quoted is *Det obeskrivliga huset* (The Indescribable House) by Elias Cornell, in which a cathedral is compared to a woman.³¹

Gothic cathedrals were often referred to as "palaces of the divine queen" or "our lady" (notre dame), since nearly all of them were dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Churches were frequently built on former sites for goddess worship. The Virgin Mary was also called *Ecclesia*, Church, alluding not only to the parish but to the church building itself. Even in ancient Egypt temples and their surrounding pillars were designated a female or male gender.³²

The assumption that the creators of *She* were familiar with the fact that cathedrals are of the feminine gender is corroborated by Jean Tinguely's work *La Vittoria*, which was presented on 28 November, 1970. *La Vittoria* was a self-destructing 11-metre-tall machine in the form of a golden phallus with testicles bedecked with plastic fruits, which was inaugurated outside the cathedral in Milan. As it was unveiled, smoke and fireworks issued from the tip of the phallus, while loudspeakers blared out a drunken rendering of *O sole mio*. A more explicit enactment of the cathedral as a woman is hard to find. The planning of the work was partly secret, since Tinguely was reluctant to inform the authorities of the nature of his work. Before being unveiled, it was hidden behind great purple textiles adorned with the letters NR, as in Nouveau Réalisme. Pontus Hultén himself has mentioned the associations with the acronym INRI from the cross of Christ.³³

The labyrinth as a structure and a symbol has a long history in religion, and the publication *Hon – en historia* includes several

references to labyrinths. The working title of the exhibition was in fact “The Labyrinth” up to 1 April 1966. Earlier still, it had been called “The Emperor’s New Clothing”.³⁴ *She* was seen as a kind of sequel to the dynamic labyrinth *Dylaby* at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam a few years previously.³⁵ Labyrinths have often been used to symbolise the spiritual voyage of heroes in myths.³⁶ An untranslated French essay from *The Situationist* that was reprinted in *Hon – en historia* relates how labyrinths have been found in the oldest Christian churches. They were appropriated as Christian symbols, while retaining their mystical quality as a model of the universe.³⁷ A text in Swedish printed alongside the French essay, gives a similar but not identical account:

The road from a “dynamic labyrinth” to “*She – A Cathedral*” may seem long to a rational eye. In fact, it seems to follow a track that man has trod since time immemorial. The labyrinth is manifested in some form – danced, drawn, narrated or built – in all cultures, primitive or archaic, highly-evolved or modern. The labyrinth visualises notions of death and resurrection, of the transience and perpetual return of everything, of development and change. It is a model of the world and the human condition. There are labyrinths in the early Christian churches, but also in later cathedrals, including the cathedral in Chartres.³⁸

As has now been shown, both the exhibition *She – A Cathedral* and the publication *Hon – en historia*, contain ample religious or spiritual references. The labyrinth, which can symbolise the meandering spiritual journey that each and everyone needs to embark upon in life, can be seen as an analogy to the exhibition itself. Only the visitor who was prepared to search for the hidden connections would reach the core of the exhibition and know its true meaning.

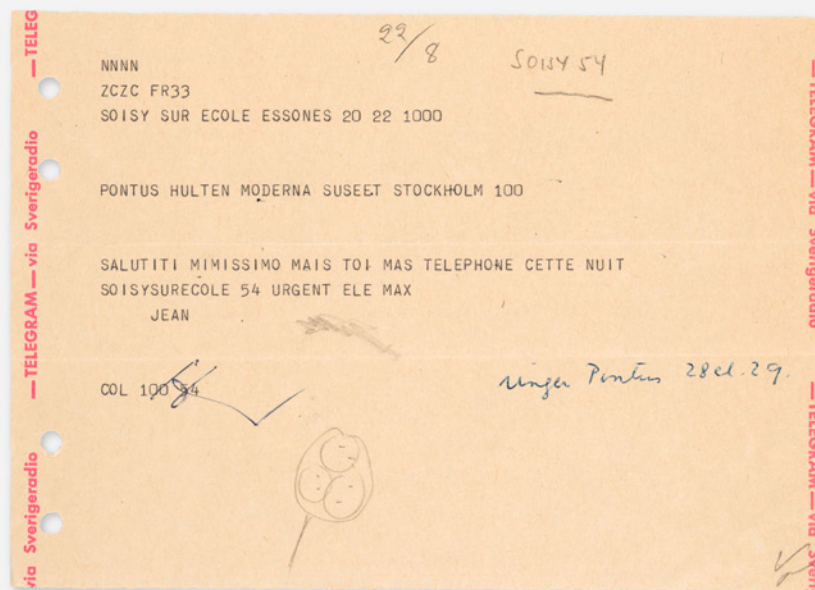
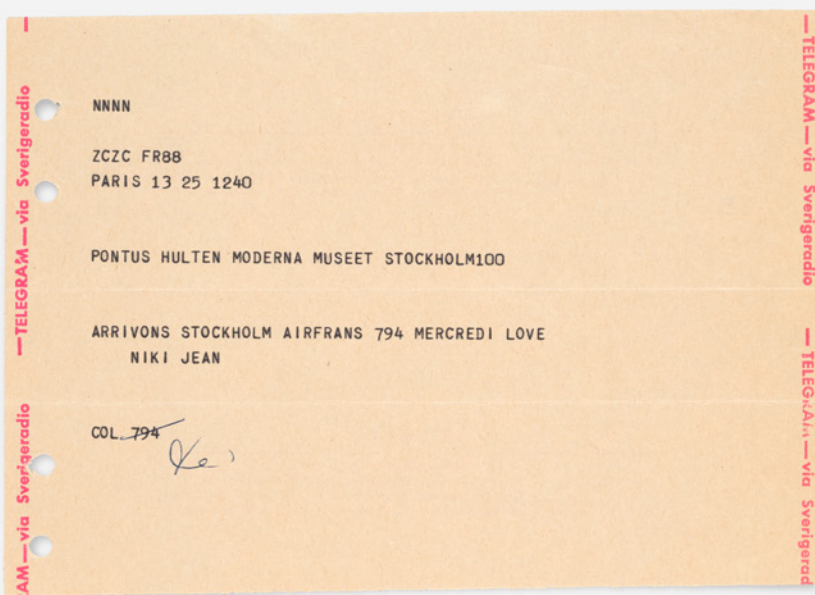
Success and well-kept secret

She – A Cathedral was seen by some 80,000 visitors in the three months the exhibition was open.³⁹ The Swedish and international press covered the event profusely. Even 55 years after it was shown, it is the subject of analysis and discussion. The exhibition that preceded *She* at Moderna Museet was *Inner and Outer Space*, a comprehensive presentation of Kazimir Malevich, Naum Gabo and Yves Klein, together with 35 works by 35 other artists. According to

Pontus Hultén, *Inner and Outer Space* “inclined strongly towards mysticism of the transcendental kind.”⁴⁰ *She*, at first glance, was the polar opposite of Yves Klein’s spiritual exploration of colour and Malevich’s terse suprematism; *She* was immediate and inviting, playful and engaging. But, as Patrik Andersson has demonstrated, the more inaccessible *Inner and Outer Space* prepared the ground for *She – A Cathedral*.⁴¹ The latter consolidated the outer with the inner, the popular with the esoteric, in an unprecedented way.⁴² For Pontus Hultén, irrational and rational were not mutually exclusive concepts:

Why has Niki de Saint Phalle’s work been considered marginal by some? For several reasons, most of them without interest: anti-feminism, indifference, prejudice, lack of curiosity. There are, nevertheless, more profound reasons: science and rationalism have dominated our century. In spite of the marvelous clairvoyance of Dada; in spite of the inroads of the Surrealists in areas usually inaccessible to the conscious mind; in spite of Cubism and in spite of our fundamental individualism, the exaltation of the joy of life of which Matisse was the master is no longer fashionable.⁴³

A cornerstone of social democratic cultural policy in the 1960s was that art should be accessible to the broader public and contribute to eradicating class divides.⁴⁴ In 1966, the same year as the exhibition at Moderna Museet, Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel published *The Love of Art. European Art Museums and Their Public*, a sociological study of museum audiences. It included suggestions for making museums more appealing to the lower and middle classes. Several of the ideas expressed in *The Love of Art* were realised in *She – A Cathedral*.⁴⁵ Striving for a new and broader audience from different social strata was a current tendency in the mid-1960s, and this resonated with Pontus Hultén. Johan Huizinga’s oft-quoted book *Homo Ludens* (1938) focused on play as the principle that underpins creativity. Play and the visitors’ participation were central to several of the projects that the artists behind *She* were involved with in the 1950s and 1960s.⁴⁶ In the process of creating *She*, the curators and artists envisioned “a form of theatre, where the audience would be provoked into participating in the performance”.⁴⁷ *She* could be described as a drama without a stage, where visitors took the place of actors. This is clear, not least, if we consider that conversations between people in the lovers’ seat were recorded with hidden



Above: Telegram from Niki de Saint Phalle and Jean Tinguely to Pontus Hultén, 1966. Below: Telegram from Jean Tinguely to Pontus Hultén, 1966



Visitors at the exhibition *She – A Cathedral*,
Moderna Museet, 1966

microphones and broadcast through loudspeakers in the bar.⁴⁸ It is not clear whether anyone ever mentioned that this arrangement could be problematic in the sense that it invaded the visitors' personal integrity. Whatever the case, it is hard to banish the feeling that visitors to the exhibition were used as pawns in a game, involuntary walk-ons in a drama directed by the curator and artists.

Pontus Hultén was well-aware of the importance of offering visitors some type of educational activity. In 1956, two years before Moderna Museet opened, he stated:

... a work of art is not an isolated object, but has numerous connections: in film, in literature, yes, even in politics or purely socially. Gone are the days when a museum could hang paintings on its walls and expect people to immediately show an interest. People want to know more in order to understand better and get more out of their art experience: that is the line we must pursue at a modern museum.⁴⁹

Under Hultén, Moderna Museet earned a reputation for being both open and accessible. Visitors were offered art exhibitions, readings, guided tours, film screenings, lectures and discussions, along with events especially for kids and youngsters.⁵⁰

In *She*, as in *Dylaby* at the Stedelijk Museum a few years earlier, visitors could move around inside the art and interact with it by, for instance, getting something in the bar, poking their heads out through the navel of *She*, or smashing bottles in Tinguely's sculpture. Hostesses were recruited to make visitors feel comfortable and ensure that the place did not get too crowded:

It is decided that the relationships between "She" and the public, whose character one dares not predict, shall be in the hands of special "She" hostesses. Hostess uniforms will be purchased, and also traffic lights regulating the potential crowds.⁵¹

In a text that appears to be a transcribed conversation or recording in which Pontus Hultén tries to establish a timeline for the *She* process based on photographs, he talks about the *She* hostesses:

... and then we got these hostess uniforms, nobody knew how things would develop, how people would react, we were concerned that there might be crowding, and that the hostesses would have to ensure that there weren't

too many people in there, and that was when the green and red lights were added, there were a lot of fears that there would be so many people in there that it would be hazardous, the whole system with loudspeakers, [illegible, probably for example] The She hostesses were devised through speculation, mainly mine perhaps, about what could happen.⁵²

Thus, the hostesses were there primarily to maintain order, not to inform, at least not according to this statement.

She invited concrete interaction between art and visitors, regardless of their particular background. But physical access says nothing about how accessible the ideas underlying the exhibition were to visitors. The catalogue provided opportunities for them to acquaint themselves with the actual production of the exhibition and biographical data about the artists. There were also information sheets where they could read the following:

SHE – a cathedral is also something much more important than a big woman figure. SHE functions as a very irrational summing-up, a conclusion, a labyrinth of many sentiments and milieus. SHE could be seen as a representation of our life, in anthropomorphic form. A synthesis of facts, dreams, actions. Many visitors experience SHE very directly, in a [sic!] unsophisticated way, as an enormous happening, engaging and amusing.⁵³

The Museum was obviously adamant to point out that there was a deeper meaning to the exhibition but did not state what it was. At least not in this information sheet. A journalist reporting on the exhibition for the men's magazine *Mayfair* in December 1966 seems to have belonged to the above-mentioned unsophisticated group, as he notes: "The symbolism of 'She' was hidden. So expertly that I must confess I never found it."⁵⁴

Those who were interested in the symbolism but lacked the prior knowledge required to decode it could find possible interpretations in press reviews of the exhibition, which, as we have seen, offered associations to both fertility goddesses, mediaeval cathedrals and a critique of consumerism.⁵⁵ Interestingly, all of the reviews, images and essays reproduced in the book *Hon – en historia* are uncommented by the editors. Readers are left to decide for themselves how relevant they were, an approach which can appear either generous or arrogant. The disparity between the critics' interpretations and



Contact sheet from the demolition of
She – A Cathedral at Moderna Museet, 1966

how visitors experienced the exhibition, between the initiated and the uninformed, is highlighted in a feature in *Expressen*:

– But this is not art, although it is fun and very entertaining. And it's great that this is offered by museums, which are usually so boring.

...

Expressen said:

– Nevertheless, "SHE" is "an intriguing and profoundly poetic work" (DN). If you look carefully in there, you will find "the gesture of procreation", not to mention "pre-Christian fertility cult". There is also a "room for the desire of the lonely to be desired" (all from DN).

– Really, said Young Sweden, Is it really that boring?

– Wasn't it supposed to be fun?

– Yes, said Expressen, who knows the vibrant director of Moderna Museet, Yes, that was probably also the idea.⁵⁶

While *Expressen* poked fun at *Dagens Nyheter's* (DN) pretentious reading of the exhibition, the ignorance of the general public seems to have been subject to some laughs at the museum. Archive material relating to the production of *Hon – en historia* includes a transcribed conversation between a cab driver and a museum staff member (possibly Hultén himself). The driver complains about not being able to understand modern art, which doesn't resemble anything in real life. He is represented as being unsophisticated:

M [Me]: What is art?

C [Cab driver]: Well, Picasso, that's not art either, an eye here, a nose there, and an ear somewhere, I could paint that.

M: Have you tried? So, what is art?

C: Well, that Van Gogh, and whatever their names are, all those old, real artists, that's art, when they made people the way they look, and trees and landscapes the way they look ...⁵⁷

This passage was not included in the final publication, but the fact that it was even considered reveals an attitude that does not sit particularly well with Hultén's ambition that Moderna Museet should be a museum for everyone.

The very definition of esotericism – that all religions have an official side and a hidden side that is reserved for a select few – could also be applied to *She – A Cathedral*. The exhibitors managed the feat of

appealing to both the broader public and a small circle of initiates. By publishing the learned analyses in *Hon – en historia* together with pictures of visitors blissfully enjoying the spectacle, and without further comment on the disparate approaches, they succeeded in maintaining the integrity of the exhibition even to posterity. The references to esoteric tradition, to myth and religion, are hidden in plain sight, in both the exhibition and the subsequent publication.

1. For feminist readings, see, for instance: Gudrun Ekeflo, "Varför är HON en katedral", *Hon – en historia*, eds. Barbro Sylwan, K. G. Hultén, John Melin and Anders Österlin, Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1967, p. 155; Naja Rasmussen, "Niki de Saint Phalle – Feminist and Femme Fatale", and Camilla Jalving, "The Giant Woman in Stockholm", *Niki de Saint Phalle* (exh. cat.), Ishøj: Arken Museum of Modern Art, 2015, pp. 51–84; Susan Jenkins, "Niki de Saint Phalle", *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (exh. cat.), ed. Lisa Gabrielle Mark, Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007, and Annika Öhrner, "Niki de Saint Phalle Playing with the Feminine in the Male Factory: Hon – en katedral", *Stedelijk Studies*, issue no. 7, 2018, <https://stedelijkstudies.com/journal/niki-de-saint-phalle-playing-with-the-feminine-in-the-male-factory-hon-en-katedral/> (23 August, 2022). Andreas Gedin highlights the mediaeval carnival tradition in relation to *SHE*, in Andreas Gedin, *Pontus Hultén, Hon & Moderna*, Stockholm: Bokförlaget Langenskiöld, 2016, pp. 215–217. Benoît Antille discusses the exhibition in light of cultural policy at the time, in Benoît Antille, "'HON – en katedral'. Behind Pontus Hultén's Theatre of Inclusiveness", *Afterall*, no. 32, spring 2013, pp. 72–81. For a broader discussion on the performative aspects of *She – A Cathedral*, see, for instance Patrik Andersson, *Euro-Pop. The Mechanical Bride Stripped Bare in Stockholm, Even* (diss.), Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2001, pp. 175–197.
2. Annika Öhrner, *Stedelijk Studies*, issue no. 7, 2018. However, both Ulf Linde's and Richard Boston's reviews of the exhibition refer to the planetarium in one of the breasts of the sculpture. Ulf Linde, "En väldig skapelse", *Dagens Nyheter*, 4 June, 1966, reprinted in *Hon – en historia*, 1967, p. 138. Richard Boston, "Hon", *The New Statesman*, 22 July, 1966. MMA MA F1a:32.
3. Each "forgery" bore the word "fake", and all the signatures were misspelled, see *Hon – en historia*, 1967, p. 103. Two of these works are now in the Moderna Museet collection: a "fake" Paul Klee (MOM/2005/465) and a "fake" Jean Fautrier (MOM/2015/102).
4. *Hon – en historia*, 1967, p. 2. It should be added that not all parts of *Hon* were, in fact, destroyed. The head was preserved and presented in numerous exhibitions, including the recent *Remembering She – A Cathedral* in the Pontus Hultén Study Gallery at Moderna Museet on 3 June, 2018 – 10 March, 2019. Furthermore, some colourful pieces from the exterior of the sculpture were sold together with the exhibition catalogue in the museum bookshop, in a limited edition of 150 copies. This was confirmed in conversation with Susanna Rydén Danckwardt, a long-term employee at the museum, 13 January, 2022.
5. See Press clippings. MMA MA F1a:32.
6. Naja Rasmussen, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, 2015, pp. 24–25.
7. Letter of condolence from Niki de Saint Phalle to Pontus Hultén and Anna-Lena Wibom, 2 October, 1998. MMA PHA 5.1.36.
8. Niki de Saint Phalle, manuscript "JEAN", p. 4. MMA PHA 5.1.41.
9. For further studies of the history of Western esotericism, see, for instance, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy. Rejected*

Knowledge in Western Culture, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013; Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

10. See, for instance, Maurice Tuchman, “Hidden meanings in abstract art”, ed. Maurice Tuchman, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, New York: Abbeville Press, pp. 17–62; Roger Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*, Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, inc., 2011; Peter Cornell, *Den hemliga källan. Om initiationsmönster i konst, litteratur och politik*, Hedemora: Gidlunds bokförlag, 1988. The historian of ideas Kjell Lekeby highlights the alchemist Fulcanelli’s alleged apprentice Eugène Canseliet as essential to the interest in alchemy that blossomed in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in France. Canseliet was also an acquaintance of André Breton. See Kjell Lekeby, “Fulcanelli i Sverige” in Fulcanelli, *Katedralernas mysterium* (1929), Malmö: Vertigo förlag, 2013, p. 12.

11. Maurice Tuchman, *The Spiritual in Art*, 1986, p. 17.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

13. See, for instance, Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 13. The legacy of Édouard Schuré (1841–1929), French writer and esoteric, Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), Romanian religious historian at the Sorbonne after the Second World War, and in Chicago from 1956, and the French historian of religion Antoine Faivre (1934–2021) is maintained by many scholars today, including Wouter J. Hanegraaff, professor of the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at Amsterdam University. Courses in the history of Western esotericism are offered all over Europe, including at the Universities of Uppsala, Gothenburg and Stockholm.

14. Niki de Saint Phalle, manuscript “Collaboration”, p. 4. MMA PHA 5.1.41.

15. John F. Moffitt, *Alchemist of the Avant-Garde: The Case of Marcel Duchamp*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003, p. 9.

16. See, for instance, “The Ultimate She”, *Time*, 17 June, 1966 (writer unknown, reprinted in *Hon – en historia*, 1967, p. 154), and Folke Edwards, “Lustiga huset”, *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, 15 June, 1966.

17. Ulf Linde, “A Giant Among Women”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 4 June, 1966, reprinted in *Hon – en historia*, 1967, p. 140.

18. *Hon – en historia*, 1967, p. 142. The Madonna sculpture referred to in the essay could be the famous Black Madonna in Chartres. The nascence of black madonnas is debated, but one theory claims that a group of black madonnas were, in fact, originally pre-Christian goddesses, such as Isis. To appease the masses when the new religion was introduced, these goddesses were remodelled into madonnas that were acceptable to both heathens and Christians. It is worth noting that black madonnas and references to black madonnas are also found in several other works by Niki de Saint Phalle.

19. Ulf Linde, *Dagens Nyheter*, 4 June, 1966.
20. Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*, Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005, p. 37.
21. Armstrong refers to a note in Mircea Eliade's book *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, published in French in 1957. It is worth noting that Pontus Hultén's library includes another title by Eliade, namely *Méphistophélès et l'androgyne*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1962.
22. *Niki de Saint Phalle et le projet Hon*, an archival short film with an interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNfQt2FsUD4> (23 August, 2022).
23. "No one who has entered her will ever be quite the same again." Richard Boston, "Hon", *The New Statesman*, 22 July, 1966. This sentence is reprinted in bold type in *Hon – en historia*, p. 169, with no explanation as to why.
24. For examples, see Staffan Roos, "Hon – ett ätbart fnask", *Helsingborgs Dagblad*, 17 July, 1966; Arthur Secunda and Jan Thunholm, "Everyman's Girl", reprinted in *Hon – en historia*, 1967, pp. 150–151; Andreas Gedin, *Pontus Hultén, Hon & Moderna*, 2016, pp. 196–197, and Benoît Antille, "'HON – en katedral'. Behind Pontus Hultén's Theatre of Inclusiveness", *Afterall*, no. 32, spring 2013, pp. 72–81.
25. Andreas Gedin, *Pontus Hultén, Hon & Moderna*, 2016, p. 197.
26. The quote is from Niki de Saint Phalle, manuscript "The HON", p. 13. MMA PHA 5.1.41. See also the documentary film *Niki de Saint Phalle & Jean Tinguely – Les Bonnie & Clyde de l'Art* by Louise Faure and Anne Julien, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3y-I-KpxiG8> (23 August, 2022).
27. Albert B. Friedman and Richard H. Osberg, *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 90, no. 357, 1977, p. 314 (pp. 301–315). Incidentally, Niki de Saint Phalle was asked in the 1950s if she could play Guinevere in Robert Bresson's film *Lancelot du Lac* (a drama about the legend of the Holy Grail and the Knights of the Round Table), but the part went to Niki's daughter more than 20 years later. See Tony Pipolo, *Robert Bresson. A Passion for Film*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, note 2, p. 391.
28. Replacing the word "cathedral" with "history" in the title of the publication documenting the exhibition seems only fitting in this perspective. In a letter to Barbro Sylwan, Hultén writes: "That thing about She – A Cathedral A History [arrow pointing at 'Cathedral', and the word 'crossed out'] seems to have got lost. Was it dropped? How about having it on the spine of the book ???? It should be crossed out in red. red. in that case with 'a history' also in red." Letter from Pontus Hultén to Barbro Sylwan, Amsterdam, 5 May, 1967. MMA MA F1a:32.
29. Fulcanelli, *Katerdralernas mysterium*, 1929/2013, p. 44. In argot, words are used that sound the same but shift the meaning, for instance *art scénique* (stage art) and *arsenic*, or *même* (even) and *m'aime* (loves me), a device Marcel Duchamp used profusely in his work titles. The Moderna Museet collection includes an undated drawing (MOM/2005/271) with the words "Tu est moi" by Niki de Saint Phalle. *Tu est moi* is an ungrammatical phrase in French that means "you is me" but is pronounced the same as

tu et moi (you and me) and *tuez moi* (kill me). A collage by Niki de Saint Phalle in the collection of Princeton University Art Museum has the same title. The phrase “You are Me” recurs in various varieties in esoteric contexts to establish that we are all one and the same, parts of a oneness.

30. Clas Brunius, “Moderna museets senaste: Jättekvinna på rygg”, *Expressen*, 3 June, 1966, reprinted in *Hon – en historia*, 1967, p. 144.

31. Elias Cornell, “Det obeskrivliga huset”, *Studiekamraten*, no. 4, 1966, reprinted in *Hon – en historia*, 1967, p. 142.

32. Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects*, New York: Harper Collins, 1988, pp. 87–88. Andreas Gedin, on the other hand, claims that the cathedral is a patriarchal structure, and that *She* is a parody of that masculine building. He writes: “The patriarchal, religious architectural monument is replaced by a reclining, spreadeagled giant woman. The cathedral towers, which rise to the heavens above the city's rooftops and form its unique skyline are represented in this supine cathedral by an open vagina, the exalted is the base.” Andreas Gedin, *Pontus Hultén, Hon & Moderna*, 2016, p. 279.

33. Pontus Hultén, *Tinguely* (exh. cat.), Paris: Éditions du Centre Georges Pompidou, 1988, p. 196.

34. Letter from K. G. Hultén to the engineer Harry Mattsson, 1 April, 1966, and letter from Pontus Hultén to the director Yngve Smedberg, Strand Hotell, Stockholm, 15 March, 1966. MMA MA F1a:32,

35. *Dylaby* was shown at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam from 30 August to 30 September, 1962.

36. *Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images*, eds. Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, Cologne: Taschen, 2010, p. 714.

37. “Le labyrinthe dont on trouve le dessin dans les mosaïques des pavés des églises chrétiennes les plus anciennes, devient symbole chrétien, paradigme religieux, tout en conservant son caractère mythique, c'est-à-dire son sens de ‘modèle’ du monde.” From “Le labyrinthe de la Cathédrale de Chartres”, *The Situationist*, no. 4, 1963, reprinted in *Hon – en historia*, 1967, p. 156.

38. *Hon – en historia*, 1967, p. 156.

39. *Statens konstsamlingars tillväxt och förvaltning 1966*, Meddelanden från Nationalmuseum, no. 91, 1967, p. 25.

40. Pontus Hultén, “Avslutande inledning”, *Den inre och den yttre rymden. En utställning rörande en universell konst*, eds. Karin Bergqvist Lindegren and Pontus Hultén, Moderna Museet exhibition catalogue no. 51, Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1965, unpaginated.

41. Patrik Andersson writes: “Considering the mythical, even spiritual, side of this move toward an unknown fourth dimension, we can say that Moderna Museet found itself born again. It was now ready to reconcile inner individual spaces with outer social space by constructing the spectacular *Hon – en katedral*, a cathedral built with Duchampian irony and wit.” Patrik Andersson, “The Inner and the Outer Space. Rethinking movement in art”, *Pontus Hultén and Moderna Museet. The Formative Years*, eds.

Anna Tellgren and Anna Lundström, Stockholm: Moderna Museet and London: Koenig Books, 2017, p. 58.

42. Andreas Gedin writes: “*She – A Cathedral* successfully summed up Hultén’s approach to art, cultural policy and democracy. It included the amalgamation of avant-garde and transparency that Hultén felt was crucial. Not only was *She* a meta-museum, but also a utopian ideal museum: the project was advanced to the initiated, it challenged conventions but was still interactive and easy to grasp for the interested without too much prior knowledge, including kids.” Andreas Gedin, *Pontus Hultén, Hon & Moderna*, 2016, p. 140.

43. Pontus Hultén, “Working with Fury and with Pleasure”, *Niki de Saint Phalle*, Stuttgart: Hatje, 1992, p. 17.

44. See, for instance, David Rynell Åhlén, *Samtida konst på bästa sändningstid* (diss.), Mediehistoriskt arkiv no. 31, Lund: Lund University, 2016, and Benoît Antille, *Afterall*, 2013. Antille writes that one of the Museum’s ambitions with the exhibition was to attract the working class, which only constituted three per cent of visitors in 1966.

45. One proposal was that the art presented in the exhibitions should relate to everyday life, that music should be played in the museum halls, and that hosts should be available to help visitors feel comfortable in the museum. See Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel with Dominique Schnapper, *The Love of Art. European Art Museums and Their Public*, transl. by Caroline Beatty and Nick Merriman, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991. Also Benoît Antille, *Afterall*, 2013, p. 75.

46. In the catalogue for the Tinguely exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in 2017, the practice of Tinguely is described: “And what about his groundbreaking exhibition practices, with which he transformed the ‘elitist’ museum into an interactive, public-friendly space, lending new dimensions to our conception of what art is, both aesthetically and socially?” It is reasonable to assume that neither Hultén nor Tinguely could claim sole responsibility for this transformation, but that they each contributed to the new approach to museums. See Margriet Schavemaker, Barbara Til, Beat Wismer, “Jean Tinguely: An Introduction”, *Jean Tinguely* (exh. cat.), eds. Margriet Schavemaker, Barbara Til and Beat Wismer, Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2016, p. 9.

47. *Hon – en katedral*, 1967, p. 4.

48. Recording the voices of visitors with microphones and broadcasting them elsewhere in the exhibition had already been done at the exhibition *This Is Tomorrow* at Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1956. See Mark Wigley, “‘The Museum Is the Massage’. Between the Discursive and the Immersive”, *Stedelijk Studies*, issue no. 4, 2016, <http://www.stedelijkstudies.com/journal/discursive-versus-immersive-museum-massage/> (23 August, 2022).

49. Pontus Hultén in “Liten intervju”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 1956, quoted in Andreas Gedin, *Pontus Hultén, Hon & Moderna*, 2016, p. 125.

50. For further discussion on this, see Ylva Hillström, “Parallel Stories. Educational activities in Moderna Museet’s early years”, *Pontus Hultén and Moderna Museet. The Formative Years*, Stockholm, 2017, pp. 149–172.

51. *Hon – en historia*, p. 104 and confirmed in conversation with Mette Prawitz, who was employed by the museum at the time, 13 January, 2022.
52. Pontus Hultén, "Pontus om Hon". MMA MA F1a:3.
53. Exhibition text dated August 1966. MMA MA F1a:32. There would also have been texts in Swedish in the exhibition, but no copy of these is preserved in the archive. "Texts to guide visitors inside 'She' are stencilled." Note in *Hon – en historia*, 1967, p. 98.
54. Sam Heppner, "Sweden – Land of a Million Girls", *Mayfair*, December, 1966, p. 42.
55. Selected reviews are reprinted in *Hon – en historia*, 1967.
56. Lars Widding, "HON – 'sköte-synd' på Moderna?", *Expressen*, 8 June, 1966.
57. Unsigned text dated 30 March, 1967. MMA MA F1a:32.

Images:

Abbreviations

MMA The Moderna Museet archives

MA The Moderna Museet public archive (Myndighetsarkivet)

PHA The Pontus Hultén archive

- p. 1: Magnus Wibom. MMA MA Ö7a:1
pp. 2–3: Hans Hammarskiöld. MMA
pp. 4–5: Hans Hammarskiöld. MMA
pp. 6–7: Nils-Göran Hökby. MMA
pp. 8–9: Erik Cornelius. MMA MA Ö7a:2
pp. 10–11: Ad Petersen. MMA PHA 4.2.58
pp. 12–13: Hickey & Robertson. MMA PHA 4.2.58
pp. 14–15: Erik Cornelius. MMA MA Ö7a:5
p. 16: Benno Movin-Hermes. The Moderna Museet Collection, FM 1974 020 081. Repro photo: Albin Dahlström/Moderna Museet
pp. 22, 26–27: Åsa Lundén/Moderna Museet
pp. 30–31: Erik Cornelius. MMA MA Ö7a:2
p. 34: Albin Dahlström/Moderna Museet. MMA MA B5:2
p. 37: Nils-Göran Hökby. MMA (above). Nils-Göran Hökby. MMA MA Ö7a:2 (below)
p. 38: Tobias Fischer/Moderna Museet. The Moderna Museet Collection, FM 1968 004 001, FM 1968 004 002
p. 41: Nils-Göran Hökby. MMA
p. 43: Erik Cornelius. MMA
p. 44: Okänd fotograf. MMA
p. 46: Erik Cornelius. MMA MA Ö7a:4
p. 49: Erik Cornelius. MMA MA Ö7a:5
p. 62: Hans Hammarskiöld. MMA
p. 65: Albin Dahlström/Moderna Museet. The Moderna Museet Collection, MOM/2005/935
p. 66: Magnus Wibom. MMA MA Ö7a:1
p. 69: Hans Hammarskiöld. MMA (above). Magnus Wibom. MMA MA Ö7a:1 (below)
pp. 72–73: Albin Dahlström/Moderna Museet. The Moderna Museet Collection, MOM/2005/716
p. 77: Albin Dahlström/Moderna Museet. F1a:32
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p. 95: Albin Dahlström/Moderna Museet. MMA PHA 4.2.56
pp. 98–99: James Mathews/The Museum of Modern Art. MMA PHA 4.2.58
p. 102: Albin Dahlström/Moderna Museet. MMA PHA 4.2.55
p. 105: Ad Petersen. MMA PHA 4.2.58 (above). James Mathews/The Museum of Modern Art. MMA PHA 4.2.58 (below)
p. 108: James Mathews/The Museum of Modern Art. MMA PHA 4.2.58
pp. 120, 123, 126, 129, 130, 133, 134, 137: Albin Dahlström/Moderna Museet. Pontus Hultén's Collection of Books, Moderna Museet
p. 148: Unknown photographer. MMA PHA 4.2.40
p. 151: Albin Dahlström/Moderna Museet. MMA PHA 4.3.3
p. 154: Albin Dahlström/Moderna Museet. MMA PHA 4.3.1
p. 159: Albin Dahlström/Moderna Museet. MMA PHA 4.3.1
pp. 168, 173, 176–177, 179: Albin Dahlström/Moderna Museet

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