

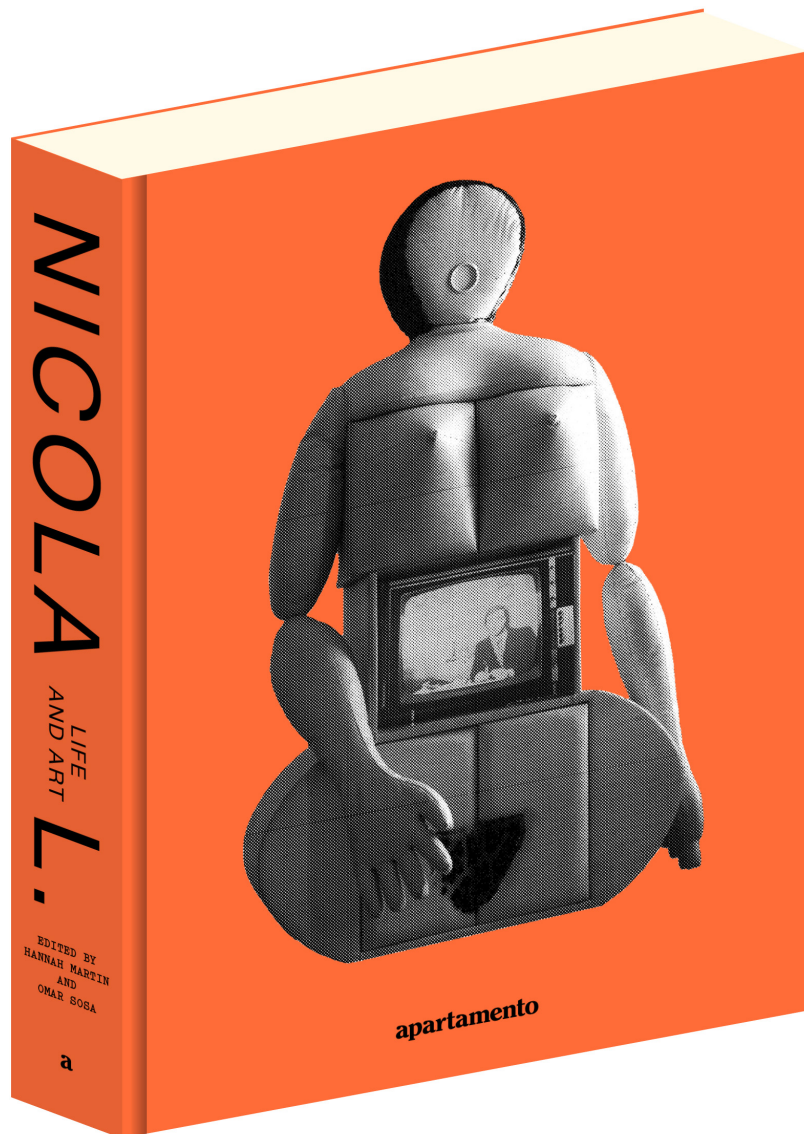
Book Review: *Nicola L.: Life and Art*

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Nicola L. sitting on her *Canapé Homme* with *La Femme Coffee Table* and *Eye Lamp* in Brussels in the 1970s. Photo © Nicola L. Collection and Archive.



Cover of *Nicola L.: Life and Art* Apartamento Publishing

Nicola L.: Life and Art

Edited by Hannah Martin and Omar Sosa

Published by [Apartamento Publishing](#)

The feel of the soft puffy vinyl hardcover of this truly fine coffee table book *Nicola L.: Life and Art*—edited by Hannah Martin and Omar Sosa for [Apartamento Publishing](#) with the support of [Alison Jacques](#)—is the first indication that between these orange covers, stamped

with a Ben-Day dots reproduction of Nicola L.'s *TV Woman* (1969) multi-media sculpture, rests a sweet invitation to explore an exemplar of the light-hearted radically naïve aesthetic that was the swinging 60s.

And it is that—but much more. On offer is a comprehensive display of the art career of Nicola L. (aka Nicola Lanzenberg), whose wide-ranging work in painting, sculpture, film and design challenged ideas about Pop Art, identity, gender, and the body long before such questions were *de rigueur*.

Twenty years my senior—having been born Nicola Leuthe in Morocco in 1932 to French parents—Nicola was a friend till the day she died in 2018. [Pierre Restany](#), theory creator (with Yves Klein) for the [Nouveau réalisme movement](#) of which Nicola had some slight association, had introduced us in 1995 over coffee at Le Café Beaubourg; the brasserie in which Restany held court in Paris. Even though Nicola lived in New York at the Chelsea Hotel she would throw friendly crowded dinner parties during the six months I was in New York a year, so we were ever in touch.

Nicola had spent her formative years in Paris, attending the École d' Beaux Arts, only to burn most of her paintings in 1965. She then moved towards sculptural forms that evoked [Marisol Escobar's](#) blocky carved-wood figures, but double as lay about furniture, skin-like wall-mounted canvases that could be worn as costumes (rectangles of stretched canvas into which viewers could insert their arms, legs or heads—becoming literally at one with what Restany called the Pénétrables), and related costume-coats designed for many people to wear at once in public. Such as in her [La Cape du Blues](#) (The Cape of Blues) performance held at Place Saint-Sulpice as part of Les artistes cassent la baraque in 2007. In 1967, Nicola had designed a Pénétrable called *Cylinder for 3* for a performance at the Paris Biennale of the British psychedelic rock band [Soft Machine](#), which led to her first invitation to New York by [Ellen Stewart](#), founder of [La MaMa Experimental Theater Club](#). For Nicola's group street interventions, such as her *Red Coat: Same Skin For Everybody* (1969)—first performed at the Isle of Wight festival in 1970—had made her faintly famous as a counter-cultural performance artist. Her 2002 performance of *BlueCapeCuba* in the Plaza Vieja in

Havana Cuba enhanced that notoriety (even as her work underplays her own presence) as participants carried flat masks emblazoned with hot button words like *Computer*, *LSD* and *Che Guevara*. Related performances were later staged on the Great Wall of China in 2005 and at the Venice Biennale in 2016.



SunAndMoon Sun Giant Pénétrable (circa 1996) Ink, cotton, wood, 330.2 x 137.2 cm. *Moon Giant Pénétrable* (circa 1996. Ink, vinyl, wood, 322.6 x 129.5 cm. Courtesy Alison Jacques, London and Nicola L. Collection and Archive © Nicola L. Collection and Archive. Photography by Makenzie Goodman.



Grass (1973) © Nicola L. Collection and Archive. Christophe wearing a *Pénétrable* in Ibiza.



BlueCapeCuba (2002) © Nicola L. Collection and Archive. Inaugural *Blue Cape* performance in the Plaza Vieja in Havana, Cuba.



La Cape du Blues (The Cape of Blues) 2007 performance at Place Saint-Sulpice in Paris, photo by the author.



Brown Foot Sofa (1969) Vinyl, 65 x 146 x 66 cm. Courtesy Alison Jacques, London and Nicola L. Collection and Archive
© Nicola L. Collection and Archive. Photography by Michael Brzezinski.

As an object maker, her soft, pliable forms like *The Giant Foot* (1967), *Woman Cut In Pieces* (1968), and *Brown Foot Sofa* (1969) are excellent—even as they may recall Claes Oldenburg’s early Pop sculptures—because, unlike his untouchable fine art, some were meant to be sat upon. The political point she was making here was crucial, for as Roberta Smith [so well stated](#), “Nicola L specialized in conflating women’s bodies and domestic objects, as if parodying the social stereotype of the female caregiver—so ubiquitous as to be part of the furniture.”

But in 1975, Nicola as Nicola Lanzenberg began to also concentrate on directing [film projects](#) such as *Les Têtes sont Encore Dans L’île* (The Heads Are Still in the Island) (1977), *Eva Forest* (1980) and *The Movement* (1982). She also captured on film the punk band [Bad Brains](#) at CBGB and in 1981 made a gripping documentary about activist [Abbie Hoffman](#). The artist’s final film was *Doors Ajar at the Chelsea Hotel* (2011), where she had lived for nearly three decades. But she also continued her flat and object artwork to the end so to follow

her progression in *Nicola L.: Life and Art* is to follow the entire life she lived. It is a fantastic comprehensive *catalogue raisonné* of her artworks as well as a fanzine that publishes her never-seen-before memoirs in which she narrates her life with anecdotes involving Sartre, Dalí, Yves Klein, Niki de Saint Phalle, Caetano Veloso, Andy Warhol, Bad Brains, and Carolee Schneemann. Her writing is complemented by the personal stories of those who knew her and the commentary of those who have connected with her work: Christophe and David Lanzenberg (her sons), Gary Indiana (writer and longtime friend), Marta Minujín (artist and longtime friend), Pierre Restany (late critic and mentor), H.R. (Bad Brains front man and film subject), Alexandra Cunningham Cameron, Flavia Frigeri, Ruba Katrib, and Myriam Ben Salah (curators), among many others. As such, the book transmits a sense of humor that mixed progressive left politics within an art community that was both intimate and global in scope.

What the book offers us these days is a meditation on the use of the Dada-Surrealist cannon within the 60s political-countercultural tradition—and this cultural sweet spot allows Nicola's work to still achieve relevance and enchantment. Her enjoyable and precious book makes it clear just how extraordinary her work was—partly intentionally and partly situationally—within the context of post-war media-technological culture: expanded radio, television broadcast, cybernetics, offset color printing, the reach into outer space, multitrack recording, casual sex, transcendental meditation, and mind-expanding recreational drugs. Her technological-meets-countercultural post-Surrealist style has an externality and an interiority to it that was quite unique. For me, Nicola represents a very free thinking artist who carved out for her art a space within the phantasmagoric energy of the countercultural tradition. *Nicola L.: Life and Art* will secure that space for her in her absence.



"The exhibition is very nice, a bit of a jumble, too many pieces with less rigour than at Emile Varanmenan". Nicola wrote of her exhibition at Galerie Daniel Tompion in Paris in 1969, where the opening was packed with artists and friends.

after a week and surrendered to the captain. I see him go, he's Italian, young, nice, and shouts, the liar, that he came to go to fight in Vietnam with the American army. If only he'd knocked on my door instead of going to the captain, I would've hidden him and maybe I would have forgotten my seasickness. We arrive in New York at the beginning of March 1966.

On the dock in Brooklyn I see Irs Wohl waiting and making signs. He is one of the first to walk across the bridge of the freighter, into my cabin, and he makes me forget the three weeks of seasickness. I understand then that it was an illusion to think that I would leave him the next day.

Gait and I land at the Chelsea Hotel, where I will stay for a few days. We find Robert Filliou, Emmett Williams, and Maria Minujin, who stay there, Bernar Venet too. There is a place where we meet in the evening, Max's Kansas City, where Andy Warhol sits at his table with his band of friends, including Nico, whom I know from Ibiza.

New York is in full revolution-political, cultural, sexual. Stokely Carmichael has just popularized the phrase 'BLACK POWER'. Intellectuals and personalities from all over the world are protesting against the American engagement in Vietnam. Also against the war are the young people who arrive from California



Nicola with Marc Jassinski (left) and Fred Lanzenberg (right) at Galerie Varanmenan, 1968.



From left to right: Robert Malingreau, Fred Nicola, and Jean-Pierre Van Tieghem in Brussels, mid '70s.



The red woman sofa on display at Galerie Varanmenan, 1968. It would later take residence in Nicola's Brussels apartment.

and march shouting, 'LB', how many kids did you kill today?' We walk with them. The hippies on acid make love in the snow at Central Park. The police are on horseback, hunting. Carolee Schneemann organises large parties in her Chelsea loft, where Claes Oldenburg, completely drunk, rolls around on the ground. An image of Carolee nude, superb, on Rauchenberg's shoulders. And the revelation for me of pop art, pieces by Oldenburg, which I prefer to the others, but Wesselmann's nudes touch me a lot. At that moment it's above all the films of Warhol that we remember, and music everywhere. Not just The Beatles, Rolling Stones, Dylan, like in Europe, but Jefferson Airplane, Janis Joplin, and many other groups with bizarre names, like The Lovin' Spoonful, The Mamas & The Papas, etc.