

NICOLA: THE PROFILE OF A MOMENT

Alan Jones, New York, October 2005

*Until you have become as a brother to everyone,
real brotherhood will not come to pass.*

Fyodor Dostoyevsky,
The Brothers Karamazov

What took place that day on the beach at Ibiza?

Call it an hallucination, or better yet, a sudden revelation, a vision. Lying back on the warm sand beneath a blazing sun, the young painter, fresh out of art school in Paris, felt herself overcome with the sensation that her body and those of the two companions beside her all possessed a single skin, one and the same. "It was like a spiritual experience."

Sometimes it is the sense of displacement into unfamiliar surroundings which provides the impetus for pivotal breakthroughs' Van Gogh descending from a train at Arles into the sunlight, De Chirico in the stillness of a town square in Florence... or Marcel Duchamp on a stroll through Manhattan stopping in front of the window of a hardware store. An anthology of such epiphanies is easily compiled, but since they cannot be summoned at will without long practice, less easily acquired.

From 1961 to the end of the next decade, Ibiza became the laboratory of the spirit in which Nicola was to enact the process of transformation from student of painting to contemporary creator in the truest sense of the word. It was here that she intensified her exploration of the identity of body and mind, flesh and spirit, the interrelations that determine individuals' place in social structures and their rapport with the basic elements of the natural world. At Ibiza, she became an artist.

Nicola's childhood was spent in North Africa, the land which had profoundly inspired artists from Delacroix to Matisse, if only through visits which, for their tastes, were far too brief. She grew up there, in Morocco where her father served as a french government official while also engaging in the training horses as his avocation. Each morning she would watch as two hundred horses were guided by naked riders going down to the sea to bathe. In the springtime the King would bring his harem and his entourage to camp nearby. The magic of this landscape and the rhythms of its daily life inspired her at an early age to begin to draw and paint.

"I was always making drawings. But my father never liked the idea of his daughter becoming an artist. He wanted me to be an architect..."

The end of the Second World War meant a return to Europe, from light into

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darkness, an expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The family settled first in Germany, then home to France. “It was a jolt to be speaking Arabic and living in an enchanted world one day and suddenly finding oneself in Germany the next. I had never seen snow before. Just after the war, Germany was like a Fassbinder movie: lines of people waiting to buy food. And waiting to see films too.”

But there were consolations, such as the large-scale works by that great exponent of the voluptuous body, Peter Paul Rubens, at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich. As a child, Nicola showed a certain disdain for academic convention. “I was rebel in everything. I was not an easy child. But always drawing. My parents led a *mondaine* life, with an interest in books rather than art. One day the cook watched me making a drawing and said, “Some day you will be an artist.”

In France at last, Nicola became intimately acquainted with the countryside around Charlesville, a town full of associations with Arthur Rimbaud, whose *Illuminations* can be read as a meditation on landscape through awakened adolescent eyes. A cousin her own age confided that he was secretly an ardent communist, and soon new political passions worried her staunchly Catholic mother.

“At sixteen, I was very involved with the landscape, very caught up in Rimbaud, drawing landscapes in the Ardennes... Finally I decided that I was going to Paris So I told my father yes, I will be an architect, and I entered my name in the architecture department of the Ecole des Beaux Arts. I never attended a single class. Instead I took sculpture, painting, life drawing at the Academie Julian. Her first morning in the life drawing class was an eventful one.

“At that age I had little close-up experience with naked bodies and that day it was the male model who later became a very famous Egyptian novelist and who lived at Hotel La Louisiane. They gave me a pair of calipers to measure the dimensions of his body. But I am so nervous that I touch him and he has to quickly cover himself because he got an erection. Everybody laughed and I ran out of the atelier and into the Rue du Dragon.”

Having begun at the Academie Julian in 1958 and remaining for one year, when her father learned the true nature of his daughter’s class schedule, he expressed his anger by refusing further financial support. By then the artist had won a scholarship and completed her diploma at the Ecole des Beaux Arts “Jean Souverbie, a friend of Picasso taught me a great deal about the human figure. Only today I realize the influence he had on me”

“I had always been such a bad pupil, and now all of a sudden I arrive in Paris and start winning prizes. This provided enough money for me to buy my own Vespa. It was the first time in my life I found that I was good at something.”

The year Nicola enrolled at the Academie Julian, Charles de Gaulle returned to power, Mao took the Great Leap Forward, Fidel Castro fought in the hills of Cuba. And Jasper Johns had his first show at the newly opened Leo Castelli Gallery, in

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New York. Claude Levi Straus published *Structural Anthropology*.

Paris in these years witnessed the waning of Existentialism, or perhaps what could be termed its evolution into a new aesthetic outlook, a formative period of new directions not only in art but also of transformative upheaval throughout society.

During the Sixties, in eight short years, the elegance of Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* gave way to the grunge of Dennis Hopper in *Easy Rider*. At the same time abstraction succumbed to figuration, as the citadel of the École de Paris was overrun by Nouveau Realisme, Pop Art, Minimalism, and an explosion of other experimentalist tendencies from Happenings to Conceptualism that arose one after another throughout Europe and the world.

If sense of place has been of essential importance to Nicola throughout the evolving of her art, so too has been the inspiration of certain key encounters.

I studied like crazy and spent my life dancing in the clubs at the same time. I don't think I ever slept." Finding a vast high-ceiling studio of her own, the artist threw herself into painting large abstract canvasses. "At the same time I went on drawing the human body. I also made a collage of a huge body constructed from the thousands of parking tickets I was getting. After the artist Raymond Hains visited my studio with my friend Yoran Casac and saw the collage, they took me at a bar in Montparnasse called the Rosebud where we met Pierre Restany"

Nouveau Realisme, Galerie with Jeanine G Restany, Galerie Iris Clert with the fabulous Iris...Anoutchka at Edouard Loeb Gallery, where the great wooden totems of Louise Nevelson were on display, Yves Klein on the terrace of La Coupole... the inimitable Raymond Hains, Daniel Spoerri, Martial Raysse, Cesar, the young Gerard Deschamps... Behind this moment in time stands Pierre Restany, observing it and combining it with all his immense energy, curiosity and enthusiasm, his visionary intelligence, and unique gift for gathering fresh yet disparate ideas into a bundle of highly articulate language: a forceful and imaginative conceptualizer," as Henry Geldzahler, Metropolitan Museum of Art curator and adviser of Andy Warhol, characterized him.

To sit in the company of the artists around Restany was a heady experience. "I was fascinated by their intelligence and humor. But because I was so young, they frightened me at the same time." She also met with younger artists like Martha Minujin, Marc Brusse, Ero, Daniel Pommereuille...

Displacement and *villeggiatura*, a deliberately conducted nomadism, have long stimulated artists' creative process. With the hothouse atmosphere of Montparnasse behind her, Nicola's next transformative meeting took place when

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she came discovered the seaside resort town of Ibiza.

It was 1961. In England a rock group called the Beatles got underway, while in France MerleauPonty published his book *La Structure du Comportement*. The Berlin Wall was built and the stillpoint of the Cold War, the Cuban missile crisis, loomed on the horizon. As De Gaulle paved the way to ending the Algerian conflict, America had nine hundred soldiers in Vietnam.

Even in a climate as solar as that of Ibiza, it was difficult to ignore that the world was groping its way in darkness. At an outdoor cafe during the summer of 1964, Nicola encountered the Argentine artist Alberto Greco.

Like Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni, Alberto Greco can be called a proto-conceptualist, and once at Ibiza the intensity of his full-speed-ahead Socratic dialogue with the shy young artist immediately stimulated her to entertain new thoughts about how art could be conceived, eventually causing her to call into question her entire approach toward art up to that date, as he coaxed new vistas from within herself. It was to lead her to destroy her early work, the same rash act which Jasper Johns had also committed not long before, and strike out on a fresh course. With persistent yet sympathetic humoring, Greco pushed her for the first time to speak about her own work, something her shyness had formerly hampered: *Why did you paint this, why did you paint that? Why, why, why.* "If you have a good friend like that you never need a psychiatrist."

The curtain had gone up on a new chapter in her artistic evolution.

"The encounters you have at that age can create a revolution. Alberto was a phenomenon. I'd never met anyone like him, so intelligent, so funny, always asking me, '*How can you possibly paint?*' People were constantly begging him for work to buy. He'd sign the license plate of a car for them instead. He was a life-actor, his life was his art. Once he promised a very chic gallery in Faubourg St Honore to show a living sculpture. He arrived at the opening with a glass cage containing mice and a piece of cheese. Once, when he had no money, he took a job as an ambulatory sandwich vendor. He gave all the sandwiches away before noon. He was a poet who lived his poems. It was extraordinary to be around him."

The outcome of the experiences in Ibiza marked the beginning of a whole new dynamic in her creative life, one that was to lead away from painting, yet at the same time quite literally destined to anchor the figure, only under a unique new guise, in its living, breathing form: *the pénétrables*.

I wanted to oblige people to participate."

It all began in a moment that day at the beach with Alberto Greco.

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The year was 1964. The hope embodied in President Kennedy had come and gone, and now the film *Dr. Strangelove* played to packed houses. Now the rhythm of cultural change accelerated with great speed, beyond good and evil: war, unprecedented prosperity, innovation in technology and communication, and about all a new oppositional youth culture throughout the world. The great population-wave born after World War II was about to sweep across an unsuspecting Occident with a radical agenda: to replace the old repressive order with a global utopian brotherhood of peace, love, and understanding. High on this generation's agenda was insistence on an uninhibited outlook toward the human body.

It is in this energy field of technology, war and eros that the combined forces of Nouveau Realisme and Pop Art were to reach their apotheosis.

Pénétrable was the term Pierre Restany was to apply to the loosely hanging canvas rectangles that Nicola now fashioned, "paintings" into which parts of the spectator's body may or may not introduce themselves, in order that head, arms, legs, etc., could intrude and protrude into and from the "picture plane" of the work itself, as if in an improbable encounter of Arctic explorers and officials of the Spanish inquisition, encouraging the viewer to get inside the work in a very real way, to try on its form like a new skin and thus breach another dimension. To enter the work of art itself.

The artist was grieving in the wake of the premature death of her friend and mentor Alberto Greco. And the inspiration he had left her in her grief and anger manifested itself in ways that were to have repercussions on her work for many years to come.

"It was the gift Alberto Greco left me."

One shared epidermis, an invitation to a voyage, a single extended social skin: the adventure of the body as communication device had begun. So too had the declaration of a state of siege against the societal status quo. "The *pénétrables* were clearly a political declaration as well. A reaction to the world I had grown up in."

Pierre Restany referred to the primal impact of these works as a "penetration of the interior, return to the womb, penis and vulva, finger and glove: we go back to the very source of life..."

The very evocation of corporality found in the *pénétrables* still inspires a nervously humorous response, an immediately diffident reaction to the aspect of invited playfulness inherent in them. Yet at least one Italian also detected an elegiac element. "Perhaps there is a tragic aspect also," the artist herself has observed. Both "benign" and "malevolent" wrote Gretchen Faust in 1992: "bringing up the issue of how familial and social relationships are often defined or

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imposed by our physical body.” If Nicola had read Arthur Rimbaud, she had also been perusing the works of Franz Kafka.

New York City, 1966: a new phase in Nicola’s life was about to open. Having seen the artist’s large plastic cylinder at the Paris Biennial, Ellen Stuart invited her to her place at La Mama Theater, in the heart of the burgeoning underground scene in Manhattan.

Her arrival in New York coincided with the pinnacle of the youth movement, the Summer of Love. Opposition to the Vietnam War was reaching the boiling point. By 1966, hundreds of thousands of flower children had run away from bourgeois constrictions to create an extended community without greed, anxiety and loneliness. LSD guru Timothy Leary was there in person to advise this children’s crusade to turn on, tune in, drop out. Hendrix, Hesse and Hinduism would lead these pathfinders toward a new age of innocence.

The universalization of bohemia was under way.

“I had a great experience at La Mama. New York has never excited me more: the Jefferson Airplane, Janis Joplin, the atmosphere of protest and the marches. The artists Emmett Williams and Robert Filliou were in town and we went everywhere together. Carolee Schneemann was making happeningparties in her place downtown with artists like Claes Oldenburg and Robert Rauschenberg, while Jacques Kaplan was receiving uptown.~. I thought that all America was like this.”

The America which Nicola discovered in 1966 was under siege, with race riots in one city after another. US troops in Vietnam now stood at 400,000.

It was in New York City that the artist also took up a new material, that quintessential covering of the surface of the Sixties: vinyl. It was also during her first New York sojourn that Nicola began to fabricate, in 1967, her first functional pieces.

That same year Mao’s youth brigades, the Red Guard, were in full swing throughout China. The apotheosis of pop music, the Woodstock Festival, had taken place under a downpour of rain, so when the Isle of Wight rock festival was announced and Nicola was invited by the Brazilian musicians Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil to go with them to the festival, she decided to fashion an enormous cloak large enough for several people at the same time to be linked like a volunteer chain-gang or bizarre survival squad. Critics likened it to Rodin’s *Burghers of Calais*. “I’ve always been involved with music. People get lost at every concert, so I said I would make one great coat for all of us.” It never rained at the Isle of Wight Festival, but the red communal garment appeared on the stage before a delirious crowd of 500,000 rock fans: the same number as the American troops fighting at that moment in Vietnam.

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When Charlotte Moorman, the doyenne of Fluxus, invited her to perform in the twelfth annual *Avant-Garde Festival*, in New York, at Floyd Bennet Airfield in Brooklyn, the headline in the *Village Voice* ran: *John Lennon hung his autographed shirt on the windbag pole, Yoko Ono planted flowers on the runway, and Nicola opened her suitcase.*

Claude Levi Straus, with his theories that the rapport between religion and art among primitive peoples was of fundamental importance even today, would have felt right at home.

Just as Guillaume Apollinaire with strangely prophetic clairvoyance had predicted that Marcel Duchamp's mission was to "reconcile art and the people," by the mid-Sixties, a massive reconciliation of art and the people was underway in the form of Pop culture all across the board. It was nothing short of a cultural revolution. The subversive agenda of artists such as Andy Warhol was nothing less than to hold a mirror to the society around him and say: *face it, this is who we are.* The reflected image was soup cans, not Claude Monet's water lilies.

Pop artists, in odd synchrony with Bauhaus before them, sought nothing less than to bring fine art, cinema, music, fashion and industrial design all back down to earth onto one plane: this time that of the reality of day-to-day consumerist life in the boom economy of post-war industrialized society. Long before Pop Art, this had been one of Pierre Restany's central intuitions since the early Fifties. A manifesto, an ultimatum that the actual state of things simply be recognized as the legitimate cultural expression of the age. The argument, in the long run difficult to refute, met with resistance at the time.

One great irony of the post-war debate was this: if it began with figuration being the hallmark of Soviet dogma, it ended with the triumph of capitalist neo-realism. Abstraction fell victim to the supremacy of both camps. During this epoch of unprecedented creative upheaval, Nicola's sculptural objects, at all times referring to the human body and now widely exhibiting in museums and galleries throughout Europe, were also undergoing an increasingly rapid popular transformation of their own.

"I refused to create sculptures that were not going to be used for something. I did not want to make décor."

Body Art, Land Art, Anti-Form, Arte Povera: the year 1968 should be logged week by week into the history-book of art. In this season of uncertainty Nicola resettled in Paris. A season in heaven or in hell, depending on the beholder's point of view. The events of May paralyzed France, the Viet Cong launched their successful Tet offensive, Martin Luther King was assassinated, and at the Democrat Party convention in Chicago satirical provocateurs called the Yippies, led by Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman, confronted the forces of order. Stanley Kubrick's film *Space Odyssey* drew record crowds. Marcel Duchamp died.

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It was now that Brussels became another important locus for Nicola's activities. There her first oneperson exhibition took place at the Galerie Veranneman, with catalogue text by Pierre Restany.

At the newly opened Paris gallery of the young Daniel Templon in 1969, Nicola exhibited a large vinyl foot. A large foot whose actual length corresponded to her exact height, bringing to mind thoughts of the anthropometrics of Corbusier, past master of organic functionality. "In New York I had already made a hand and a foot. I was making exaggerations of the human body. It was a kind of obsession with hands and feet, and giant scale."

With their simple, Hans Arp-like forms, their upbeat primary colors and disregard for angst, the works that followed were to embody the quintessential objectives of Sixties aesthetics. Like the space-age regalia which the great British Pop artist Allen Jones created for the film *A Clockwork Orange*, or the Agit-Pop of American Robert Indiana, they compelled the viewer into one primal *gestalt*, a single, nakedly proffered option. And, as she continued to probe deeper to explore the boundaries between sculpture and utilitarian object, between exhibition and theater, it was always with the intention of challenging the assumption of the preciousness of art —objects on pedestals or in a gold frame— as being above the experience of daily life.

The objects of Nicola on the other hand communicate an immediate sense of clarity and frankness, "all that which art has violently opened up since Picabia and Duchamp," as Alain Jouffroy aptly wrote in an essay on Nicola's work.

The year 1969 was an eventful one for the artist, since it was at this time that another momentous encounter occurred when, at Anvers, she met the now-mythic Belgium artist Marcel Broodthaers, who had translated his own startling poetic sense of juxtaposition into a mischievous version of *symboliste* aestheticism strained through the filter of Belgium Surrealism. The two became friends, and soon Broodthaers brought her to the plastic fabricator he used for the creation of his own objects. It was here that Nicola realized her first pieces in plastic: gray die-punch panels with fur samples tipped on, and the words *Same skin for everyone*. This same plastics craftsman was to fabricate that same year two of her iconic works: *The eye lamp* and the *Mouth*, in the form of a functional standing lamp, one of the first prototypes of which she exchanged in an artists' trade with the Paris-based Greek sculptor Takis.

Just as the Egyptian surgeon-goddess Isis gathers and re-assembles the severed limbs of her brother Osiris, over and over again a sort of anatomy lesson occurs; in the work of Nicola, a sort of inventorytaking of the body, displayed in its simplest of units: heads, limbs, extremities, summarily sybaritic, with a salubrious hint of sex-education for good measure, these works keep more on the side of Aristotle than of Plato. Similar fragmented stocktaking of the body appears again in the work of her contemporaries, from Johns and Dine to Beuys and Kounellis.

Perhaps eroticism is an empty house for other people, a clinically alchemical

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hygiene of corporality. No work of Nicola's is more evocative of the erotic dimension of shelter than her *Fur Lined Room* in the form of a ~room for fifteen people." In a very real sense, this work turned the *pénétrables* inside out and back again, expanded into an extreme domicile.

One all-time iconic work of this epoch made its appearance in 1969. It is the *Femme commode*, which stands on the very real battlefield of ideologies of the time as a madly frivolous sentinel. It would seem as if this wooden woman, with her breasts, belly and sex as moveable drawers, had been wheeled up on purpose to the walls of the fortress instead of the fabled Wooden Horse of long ago: furniture as psychological warfare.

Circa 1970, the first disembodied heads appear, ever Egyptian in their unvarying profile. Like marble busts of great men and women of the Hellenistic world, they seem to invite hope, remembrance, and perhaps even veneration: a procession of anonymous Romans. One thing is certain, they give pause for thought, acting as invitations to contemplate the cerebral process itself. The aspect of monumentality of the heads has reminded some observers of the bronze portrait of Baudelaire sculpted by Raymond Duchamp-Villon. In this same period the Brancusiesque *Lovers' Armoire* likewise embodies an Egyptian spirit: in the darkest of times, Nicola's vision has remained steadfastly optimistic and buoyant. Famine sweeps Biafra leaving millions dead, Malcolm X is dead, scores of Black Panthers are killed by police bullets, Salvador Allende wins Chilean elections. In Tokyo, Yukio Mishima commits ritual suicide.

In the midst of this turmoil, Harold Szeemann, who along with Pontus Hulten stands out as one of the great heroic curators of the time, decides that 1975 is the perfect moment to stage an important contemporary art event. The exhibition is called "Je/Nous." It took place that spring at the Musee d'Ixelles in Brussels.

This exhibition could be called a great summing-up of the most challenging creative instigators of the decade, a roll-call that summoned Carl Andre and Artschwager... Ben, Beuys, Boltansky, Buren, Byers... Christo, de Maria, Filliou Haacke, Immendorf, On Kawara... Le Gac and Lewitt... Blinky Palermo, Panamarenko, Penck and Polke, Arnulf Rainer, Tinguely, Tuttle and Toroni... Among them was Nicola, who also took part the following night in the uproarious soiree *Sous un Chapiteau de Cirque Dresse dans Bruxelles* -a circus event staged by several of the artist protagonists, evoking the *Bal de Comte d'Orgel* circus-cult of the Twenties avant-garde while at the same time updating it as an arena of provocation, which Seventies artists did everything to seek out wherever and whenever they could.

Sixty years before this reunion Marcel Duchamp had participated in the New York Armory Show, the most important assembly of modern artists America had ever seen up to that time. And after the scandal-success of *Nude Descending a Staircase*, Duchamp had walked away from gallery offers, if not from fame,

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toward horizons known to him alone. Now, after the Musée d'Ixelles, in which the curator of the hour had included her work at the center of the very cream of avant garde protagonists, this was exactly what Nicola also did. She took a walk.

Just as her early painting had given way abruptly to her *pénétrables*, so too Nicola now made another startling career departure without so much as a backward look. Once again it was to plunge with eyes wide open. Thus were the next several years given over fulltime to the adventure of filmmaking.

It was a natural progression that had brought Nicola behind the cinematic camera. Her first major film was released in 1975, yet from the outset cinema had been of great importance. Upon her arrival in Paris as a student, she and a band of friends organized ambitious expeditions of extended cinema viewing. ~We would spend the entire day watching as many as four or five films back to back, to the point where we all had headaches." And as a very small child she had gone against her mother's interdiction, to see her first movie. "I went and saw *King Kong*. I left the cinema frightened to death, but also terrorized with pleasure."

By 1975, the Vietnam War had ended at last, but the world had few reasons to be cheerful. The Cold War remained in place, civil war broke out in Lebanon, and Pol Pot was taking the Killing Fields from theory to practice before the blind eyes of the world. That year Richard Hell invented punk rock in New York.

For well beyond the decade that followed, Nicola devoted herself almost exclusively to film. This by no means signified a walk-out on the practice of art however. Far from it: while it did mean turning her back on the art object, if temporarily, her about-face at the same time stands as a very clear extension of ambitions long demonstrated in the outreaching social engagement of her objects and in the group nature of her performance pieces. "Making a movie is an adventure in working with people. I think it began with my coat project", which she documented in one of her earliest films.

A question of sensibility.

When her long odyssey in cinema had come full-circle, Pierre Restany was to assess the trajectory by stating that he saw no continuity-gap whatsoever, but rather a cohesive historical progression in the experimental mode: if early in Nicola's work the image gave way to object and action, when the time came that she made the deliberate choice of embracing motion pictures, object and action merged and led back to the starting point, the image once again.

The body of work done during Surrealism's heyday on celluloid instead of on canvas today stands as the first central example of artists turning to cinema as a contemporary means of expression, tripod as alternative to easel: Leger, Clair, Dali, Bunuel, Richter, Cornell.

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Nearer in time, Andy Warhol had followed in the footsteps of late American Surrealist filmmakers like Charles Henri Ford toward European models like Jean-Luc Godard, while even nearer to Nicola's post-Pop milieu, Marcel Broodthaers himself and the Italian painter Gianfranco Baruchello had both mingled film and object, turning with ease from the drawing board to the cutting room in order to extend the boundaries of contemporary expression.

Making a film could be like throwing a party, albeit a long one. One of the first ambitious cinematic projects which Nicola undertook rallied together a cast made up of no less great an English actor than Terry Thomas, as well as Lola Goas and Pierral, who had appeared in several films of Jean Cocteau. Another important project was her 1979 documentary film on the life and times of Eva Forest, jailed for her activities on behalf of the Basque cause under the regime of Generalissimo Franco, who had died four years before in 1975.

The rock film on the group Bad Brains was shot in 1980 at the mythic Bowery club CBGB's, the Machu Picchu of punk rock. Another adventurous encounter-on-film was one which she managed with great difficulty to achieve on Abbie Hoffman, the fabled mock-fugitive from the Yippie barricades of Chicago 1968.

Yet even today the cinematic option is always there, an open game: as proven by the video *The Banquet of the Beheaded*, performance at La Mama, New York in 1999, which provided one stopover for the *Blue Cape* project involving both *pénétrables* and cinema, an around-the-world caravan which continued from Cuba on to La Nostra in Venice as the Blue Cape of Cinema to the MAMCO in Geneva! to Los Angeles, Beijing, and beyond.

“And then the objects came back, on their own, to save me.”

So Nicola described in 2005 the reconciliation of art object and film montage which marked another milestone in her creative trajectory. Again she turned the tables and instinctually reversed polarity, as if it were the works themselves who called her back. Pierre Restany, for one, was not in the least surprised, having grasped the continuity between object, performance and film from the outset. With characteristic acuity he hailed this return to the object as a natural response to circumstances of the Eighties which he recognized as highly similar to those out of which Nouveau Réalisme itself had arisen.

The cerebral icon of the head —in Plexiglas, metal, wood— returned with a vengeance, from the transistor era into that of the computer, its significance unaltered, of which the 1992 *Earth, Forest, Fire, Ocean* is emblematic. The divans, one in the blue color of Yves Klein, came back, and a svelte white Formica table with folding Constructivist base assumed the cephalic form as well, while blind hieratic profiles are watched over now by a new suite of lamps in the form of eyes.

Like the earlier large figure fashioned from traffic tickets, collage with multi-lingual use of phrases from newspapers today takes on the support surface of

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hotel bed sheets from far-flung cities around the world.

Most surprisingly of all, painting re-entered the picture for the first time in decades, and did so in the form of a series of monumental heads on canvas, many featuring collage and use of language, as in the masterful *Winter*, and again in *Madame Bovary*, with is accompanied by a divan re-echoing the depicted contours of the head of Flaubert's heroine.

In 1991, with an evocative performance at the gallery of Lara Vincy in Paris, there appeared a great garment of remembered inspirations: the *Red Coat* came back as an *Ephemeral Monument for Ten Artists and Eternity*, which reunites as if "beneath a single skin" Pino Pasali, Piero Manzoni, Yves Klein, Gina Pane, Marcel Broodthaers, Meret Openheim, Robert Filliou, Alberto Greco, Joseph Beuys, Copi.

This was followed a few years later by a set of unexpected stand-ins for the Muses entitled *Nine Femmes Fatales*, who journeyed from the La Mama Theater in New York to the Musee de Nice.

Then in the mid-Nineties, with breathtaking elegance there appeared the series of large standing sculpture, the *snails*, harkening back to a suite of drawings from 1969. They seem to evoke the caged labyrinth of the mind, a poet's chambered nautilus, the cyclical spiral of a Mayan calendar, *Smithson's Spiral Jetty* or yet again Nauman's neon coil reading: *the true artist reveals mystic truths*.

Like that hallucinatory stampede of household furnishings which Guy de Maupassant once described in a story, Nicola's creations prove that art works possess a life of their own, what Maurice Rheims memorably referred to as *La vie étrange des objets*, while the sun measures the same hour of the afternoon on a beach at Ibiza.

But the last word must go to Pierre Restany, in conversation with Nicola in New York, 1986: ~What I can see now with the distance of time, under the pressure and the spur of these recurring memories, is that this sensibility is still alive in you, the substance, the flesh, of your own present imagination, with no break of continuity, no rupture, no gap between the years of the Sixties and the present. This is quite important. You lived, let us say, you're real creative training during those years, and you have kept the idea that everything can be art... A kind of living archive of feelings, facts, of the profile of the moment."

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