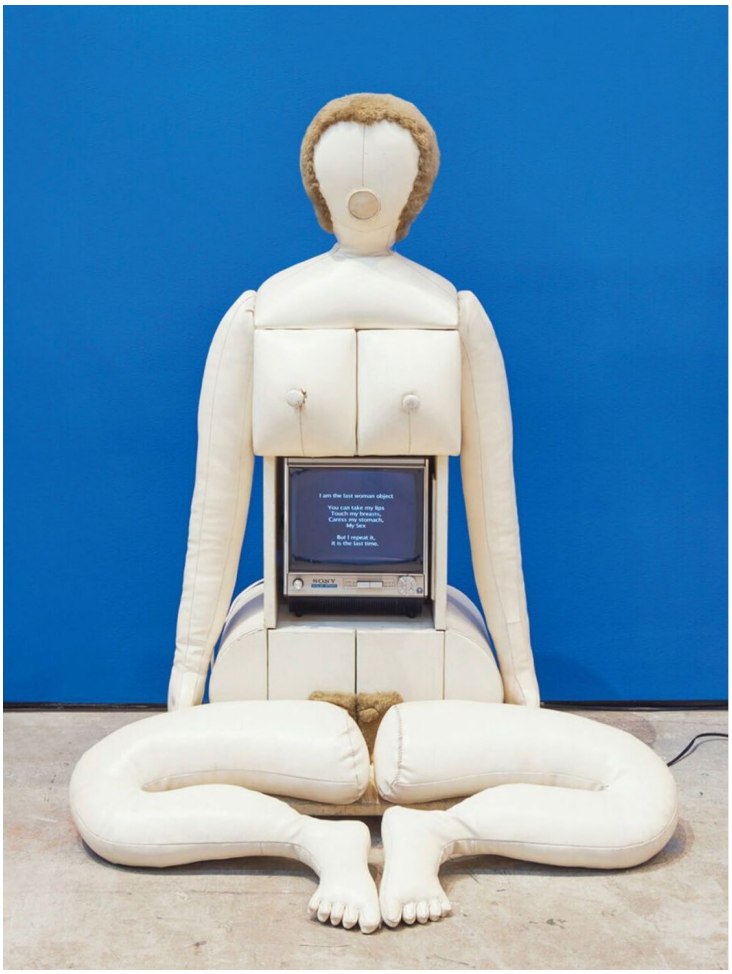
ON NICOLA L.

Jo Applin, *London Review of Books,* 26 December 2024



Nicola L. 'Little TV Woman: I Am the Last Woman Object', 1969

Nicola L. is best known for the soft vinyl sculptures of feet and other body parts she made in the 1960s and 1970s. These giant cushions were paired with other 'functional objects' including plastic lamps shaped as eyeballs and lips, curvaceous wooden chests of drawers and head-shaped bookcases. In I *Am the Last Woman Object* (until 29 December), soft sculptures dot the gallery space. Many of the works on display have a nascent feminist edge. *Woman Cut in Pieces* (1968) is a startling group of pastel-pink severed body parts shoved inside a transparent Perspex suitcase. In *Little TV Woman* (1969) a series of stuffed plastic cushions hinge together into a single collapsible body, complete with furry pubic hair and sex-doll mouth. The sculpture is propped awkwardly against the wall and set back on its haunches, knees splayed apart on the floor. The breasts double up as drawers and white buttons stand in for nipples. A working television set has been inserted into the abdomen, periodically broadcasting a series of messages that begin 'I am the last woman object.' Any viewer who seeks to 'touch my breasts' or 'caress my stomach' will do so, it announces, for 'the last time'.

Born to French parents in Morocco in 1932, Nicole Leuthe spent her childhood in North Africa. She changed her name to the more masculine form ‘Nicola’ on her application to the École des Beaux-Arts in 1954. (The L. came later.) After training as a painter, she became involved with the Nouveaux réalistes, whose gritty torn posters and assembled junk stood in stark contrast to the slick surfaces of their American Pop art counterparts.

In his 1967 essay ‘The Poetics of Softness’, Max Kozloff challenged the unspoken assumption that if sculpture was to be taken seriously, it had better be solid. Kozloff was revising his earlier criticism of Claes Oldenburg’s oversized soft sculptures of everyday objects: hamburgers, ice creams, toilets and trousers. Kozloff came to recognise that soft sculpture was an uncanny analogue for human flesh. Nicola L.’s functional objects ratchet up the intensity: her soft sculptures are laced with menace. A tugged-open drawer for a vagina, a grasped nipple for a handle: this is the female body served up hard and unflinchingly.

Photographs show Nicola L.’s *Femmes Commodes* (1969-2008) cluttering the rooms in her apartment. Voluptuous pieces of wooden furniture are shaped into female bodies, a series of built-in drawers where breasts, belly and vagina should be. The critic Pierre Restany referred to Nicola L.’s sculptures as ‘object lessons’. The body, we’re meant to understand, is a receptacle into which things can be stuffed, and from which things can be taken away. These sculptures resemble giant bobbin dolls, as if posing before the camera. In one photograph, the naked artist peers out from behind one of her giant vinyl feet.

Nicola L. made her first vinyl ‘skin’ in 1964. Conjoined capes, punctuated by a series of holes and hoods, the skins were designed to be worn by multiple bodies in a performance of solidarity and collectivity. Restany called these works ‘pénétrables’. They were performed around the world, from Cuba and China to Franco’s Spain. *Red Coat* (1969) was made from a sheet of red plastic with eleven hoods. It was first ‘activated’ by the Brazilian musician Gilberto Gil at the Isle of Wight festival in 1970. Gil joined a troupe of game, naked participants to clamber inside the sheet and parade in an awkward huddle. It was an especially warm day and ‘the heat inside the coat becomes unbearable,’ Nicola L. later reported. At the end of the performance mauve gloves were handed out, printed with the words ‘same skin for everybody’ – a phrase the crowd picked up and began to chant.

It is a phrase we encounter repeatedly at the show, in one instance applied in tangerine letters to a white, wearable banner. Eleven face masks droop from the surface, stitched into the fabric of ‘Same Skin for Everyone’ (1975). Participants were meant to press their heads into the masks and march in careful lockstep to keep the sheeting taut and the banner fully splayed. Other banners read ‘We Want to Breathe’ and ‘The World Goes Pop’ (which lent its title to Tate Modern’s exhibition of global Pop art in 2015). An oversized mouse-grey acrylic furskin lies on the floor like a discarded onesie. Above it, another skin hangs from the ceiling in a sheet of fine, billowing fabric. *Fur Room*, a rectangular tent-like enclosure whose walls, ceiling and floor are made from sheets of deep purple acrylic fur,

is a fitting centrepiece to the show. (The original 1969 version was included in Camden Arts Centre's 1974 exhibition *Soft Sculpture*.) Up to fifteen people are invited to stuff their extremities into the dangling arm and head holes. Those who enter (shoes off) are warned that the activated limbs might reach out to poke, stroke or otherwise interfere with them. As people get into the swing of things, the room becomes a writhing mass of purple furries. That's the idea, anyway. It's all a bit silly, a bit pervy, a touch unhygienic. The earnest muddle of liberatory politics and raucous group participation seems utterly of its time. It's hard to recapture the utopianism of the original work, not least because most visitors to the current exhibition are too self-conscious to participate.

Nicola L. first visited New York in 1966. In the late 1970s, she moved there permanently and began making films. *Doors Ajar* (2013), her final film, was set in her rooms at the Chelsea Hotel, where she lived for thirty years. In the 1980s she made documentaries about the Yippie leader Abbie Hoffmann, and the punk group Bad Brains, although these feel like a sideshow to the earlier soft sculpture. In 1977 she made a film, *Les Têtes sont encore dans l'Île*, about a drug deal that goes wrong. Around the same time, she began a correspondence with the imprisoned Basque separatist Eva Forest, whose prison memoir she wanted to use for a film (the funding fell through before it could be made). Money was often short. In 1986 she made the first of many sculptures of heads in profile, a motif which, alongside the spiralling form of a snail, she would draw on over and over again. In the early 2000s she photographed dozens of people wearing the same yellow coat in a return to her earlier slogan, 'same skin for everybody'

By her own account, Nicola L. was not an activist, and the label 'feminist' was not one with which she especially identified. In the early 1990s she began her *Femmes Fatales* series, banners dedicated to various women, from Eva Hesse to Joan of Arc. This celebratory pantheon, with icon-like portraits of each woman accompanied by quotations printed on crumpled sheets, is probably her most explicitly feminist work, but it is also her least provocative. It's in the earlier work, when things were weirder, less didactic and more uncertain, that her dysfunctional forms offered their most uncomfortable object lessons.

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