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**NICOLAS CALAS** (*Nicolaos Calamaris*, Lausanne, 1907 – New York, 1988)

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Nicolas Calas was a member of the Breton circle from 1934, and one of the main points of contact between the Paris and Athens groups, along with Andreas Embirikos. Calas moved to Paris permanently in 1938, fleeing from the Metaxas dictatorship in Greece where he had already established a reputation as a left-wing poet and literary critic. Calas was born into a wealthy family of grand historical lineage (his grandmother was lady-in-waiting to the first Queen of Greece and daughter of Marco Botzari, hero of the Greek War of Independence and romantic icon amongst European Philhellenes), which provided him both with a privileged upbringing and the *point d'appui* for a life-long critique of privilege and establishment values. Fluent in French, English and Greek since early childhood, Calas studied law and political science at the University of Athens, but never fulfilled his mother's dream of becoming a diplomat; as he put it in an interview with Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, 'she was relieved from this anxiety at a very early stage of my life, where no one in Greece that belonged to the world of diplomacy would have ever dreamt of going anywhere near me' (Calas, 1977-78: n.p.). Instead, he published poetry, literary and political criticism under different aliases, including 'Nikitas Randos' and 'M.Spiros' (after Robespierre); following the surrealist imperative of reinventing one's ancestry, in the mid-1930s he adopted the name 'Calas' in reference to the *cause célèbre* of Jean Calas, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Protestant merchant tortured and executed in spectacular fashion on the false accusation of killing his son for converting to Catholicism.

In Paris, Calas contributed to the full range of surrealist activities, from playful experiments to not so playful expulsions, including the *jeux du dessin communiqué* [games of communicated drawing] (fig. 1), as well as Georges Hugnet's 'trial' on the charge of fraternising with the 'Stalinist' Paul Eluard, recalled by Hugnet in his memoir: 'The grand room that would serve as the stage for this revolutionary monkey-trial filled up slowly. Breton entered pompously, flanked by his wife Jacqueline and Madame Rivera, dressed in Mexican costume. Apart from Breton, Jacqueline and Frida Kahlo, the accusers included Péret, Malet, Pastoureau and 'the insipid' Calas (Hugnet, 1972: 405; my translation). As a theorist in his own right, Calas first appears in print in *Minotaure* (No. 11, Third Series, Fifth Year, Spring 1938), with a piece on 'L'amour de la révolution à nos jours' ['The Love of Revolution in Our Time'], an extract from a book of Freudo-Marxist-inflected reflections on surrealism entitled *Foyers d'incendie* [Hearths of Arson], published by Denoël that same year. Calas's study gathered together fragments of literary, philosophical and scientific wisdom, delivered in an erudite, polemical and typically eclectic style, which reflects both the idiom and concerns of its milieu but also the growing ambition and confidence of its author. In his blurb, Breton endorsed Calas's book emphatically: 'a manifesto of unprecedented necessity and breadth', where 'all the questions which have been posed to us in the last twenty years find their inspired, decisive, exultant answer' (Breton 1992: 1221; my translation). In his 'Paris Letter' for *Partisan Review*, 'Sean Niall' (alias of the Trotskyist poet and critic Sherry Mangan) also wrote appreciatively of Calas's book as an important new contribution to the surrealist scene, and an extract from *Foyers*, 'On Revolutionary Sadism', was translated into English and published in *Partisan Review* in 1940. A further accolade came from Leon Trotsky himself, to whom Calas had sent a copy of *Foyers* via

Breton. In a letter to Calas dated 12 April 1939, Trotsky noted his approval rather pointedly: ‘I have established that you root out mysticism, which is doubly consoling: because our age is reactionary and because I have always worried that surrealism was somewhat inclined towards the mystical’ (Liakos, 1998: 258; my translation from the French). Trotskyism was an important bond with Breton at the time: following the formation of the *Fédération internationale des artistes révolutionnaires indépendants*, Calas joined the Paris F.I.A.R.I. group and contributed to the two issues of *Clé*, the group’s monthly bulletin (Lewis, 1990: 154). It was a conviction that Calas never abandoned.

Calas’s Paris golden age was cut short by the Nazi onslaught. Following the same route as other surrealists and various undesirables, he arrived in New York via Spain and Portugal in 1940, and proceeded to spread the word to the local vanguard straight away. Despite the ambivalence or at times outright suspicion with which the ‘boatload of madmen’ (Tashjian, 1995) or *émigrés de luxe* were received by the American public and left-leaning intellectuals (Kolocotroni, 2009), the English-speaking Calas played a pivotal role in promoting surrealism in the 1940s. His close association with Charles Henri Ford and *View* magazine resulted in numerous headlining essays, reviews and occasionally poetry (21 publications in total between September 1940 and April 1946), including a ‘Surrealist Number’ (*View* 7-8, October-November 1941) edited by Calas and featuring an interview with Breton, and Calas’s essay ‘The Light of Words’. He was feted by the Ford circle and treated as an authoritative spokesperson for surrealism’s true brand, a counterpart to Dalí, whose celebrity antics became an easy target for denunciation (Calas led the charge with ‘Anti-Surrealist Dali: I Say His Flies Are Ersatz’ [*View* 6, June 1941]). More than second in command or interpreter to the monolingual Breton, Calas sought to expand

surrealism's reach in the New York scene and established connections with artists and avant-garde galleries. He was proposed as one of the original editors of *VVV* (along with David Hare, Breton, Ernst and Duchamp), a role he rejected considering the 'deluxe' initiative a political wrong turn, contributing only a 'Review of Reviews' for its first issue in June 1942. Though openly critical of Breton's leadership during the latter's brief stay in New York, he still collaborated with the core group and in 1944 he co-wrote with Breton a short piece to accompany the *Wine Glass Chess Set and Board*, their joint entry for *The Imagery of Chess* exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery (fig. 2). 'Profanation: A Chess Game' consists of 14 short statements in sets of two, by way of move and countermove: 'The chess player's narcissism will not tolerate the diabolical interference of the dice [NC]. An essential weakness of the Game of Chess: it does not lend itself to divination (absence of echecomancy [chess divination]) [AB]' (Calas, 1985: 243). Typically, perhaps, for the fortunes of surrealism's 'minor' figures, the piece has since been solely credited to Breton (List, 2005: 74).

Yet Calas cut a memorable figure in those early New York years: he was photographed by the critic and cultural impresario, Carl Van Vechten in 1940 (fig. 3), struck John Bernard Myers, managing editor of *View*, as the perfect example of 'what a Surrealist look[ed] like' (Myers, 1981: 86), and frequented the social gatherings of surrealist emigrés hosted by Peggy Guggenheim and Max Ernst, including the house-warming party where, as Guggenheim later recalled, 'there was a terrible fight between enormous Nicolas Calas and little Charles Henri Ford, and in the middle of it Jimmy [Ernst] rushed to take down the Kandinskys from the walls before they were splattered with blood' (Guggenheim, 1980: 260). Polemical, brash and grandiloquent in equal measure, Calas's surrealist activity in that period includes 'Towards a Third Surrealist Manifesto', one of a suite of pieces written for James Laughlin's *New*

*Directions in Prose & Poetry 1940*, in which he attempted to recalibrate surrealism's radical agenda through typically aphoristic statements: 'I affirm, without the slightest hesitation, that poetry *begins* with the transformation of the Parthenon into an arsenal and *ends* with the blood of Marat spilt by Charlotte Corday' (Calas, 1973: 32), as well as the publication in 1942 of *Confound the Wise*, a companion volume to *Foyers d'incendie*, with a decalcomania cover by Brion Gysin, the British artist whom Calas had introduced to the Paris surrealist circle in the late 1930s. A formidable, though for some contemporary reviewers also rambling, account of the transfiguration of hybridic images of inspiration and heretical energy, *Confound the Wise* spans analyses of pre-modern space and time, proposes an original reading of the Portuguese Baroque style and sensibility and pronounces New York a modern Babylon, 'more fantastic than beautiful' (Calas, 1942: 264), ripe for transformation by the 'diabolical' poets' 'evil eye' into a 'grandiose vision' (Calas, 1942: 267).

Calas's preoccupation with the transformative, magical power of images, for which surrealism was the most unfettered conduit, generated programmatic statements on the need for a new '*saper vedere*' (Calas [1947], 1985: 205-9), a new 'iconolatry': 'Like poetry, good painting is used for hermetic purposes, a prerequisite for the miracle that turns the picture into a salutary image. ...To experiments and masterpieces one must oppose *icons*' (Calas [1947], 1985: 8-9). Magic, primitivism and shocking continuities between arcane tropes and radical energies Calas traced in the writings of the Greek tragedians and early Christian fathers (Paul, Gregory, Augustine) were some of the coordinates for Calas's signature style, driven by surrealist eclecticism but also the prodigious erudition of the intellectual prodigal or self-declared 'diagnostician, polemicist, poet'. In the early 1940s in New York, this style had clearly gained traction: with Greece in the news as the only European

country resisting Fascist aggression with acts of collective heroism (as the early victories against Italian invading forces were presented in the press), Calas's militant voice was inflected by a sense of genuine urgency and a vanguardism fuelled by the real danger facing the world. In an act of intellectual solidarity, William Carlos Williams, who had picked Calas's *Foyers* for a 'Super-Nobel prize' in the 1939 issue of *Books Abroad*, translated Calas's French poetry and collaborated with Calas and Kurt Seligmann in the production of *Wrested from Mirrors*, an illustrated folio of his translation of Calas's poem 'Arraché des miroirs', published by the Nierendorf Gallery in 1941. Seligmann's etching of a monstrous mutant figure (fig. 4) served as a striking emblem for the poem, which conveyed a sense of personal and political apocalypse in a surrealist idiom. A surrealist staple in its own right, the mirror motif features regularly in Calas's writing and in various extrapolations, from the conceit of the 'Monstrous Narcissus' (*View 3:1*, April 1943) to its deployment as an interpretative device for solving the riddle of art's ambiguous relation to truth in Calas's selection and essay for *Mirrors of the Mind*, a portfolio of prints and objects by Vincenzo Agnetti, Arakawa, Joseph Beuys, Marcel Broodthaers, Richard Hamilton, Roy Lichtenstein, Bruce Nauman, Meret Oppenheim, Robert Rauschenberg, Man Ray and James Rosenquist, published in 1975 by Marian Goodman's Multiples Inc. (Calas, 1985: 117-34).

Although by the late 70s Calas was mostly known as a pioneering advocate of Pop Art, his critical approach and cultural interventions remained surrealist in their tone and outlook. The 1968 collection of essays *Art in the Age of Risk* opens with a section on surrealism's 'continuance' (Calas, 1968: 3-40) and in the same year he exercised his surrealist-witness prerogative in attacking publicly MOMA and the curator William Rubin for their presumption in identifying surrealism with a

homogeneous style in the 'Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage' exhibition. In 'Surrealist Heritage?' and 'Surrealism Hits Back' (*Arts Magazine* 42: 5, 42: 7), Calas defended surrealism against the threat of a new conformism and depoliticized institutionalization. Invoking (and inviting) Herbert Marcuse and Stokely Carmichael, radicals of the day, as more appropriate inheritors of the surrealist spirit, he claimed an alternative lineage for surrealism's fundamentally political energies.

Calas went on to teach, remember and promote surrealism in various capacities: as Professor of Fine Arts at Fairleigh Dickinson University (1963-75), as a columnist for *Village Voice* (1964-66), as regular contributor to *Arts Magazine* and *Artforum* (throughout the 60s and 70s), as visiting professor at the School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado (1976-77), invited by Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman, as a poet and curator of exhibitions in the US, Italy and Greece. Amongst the many unrealised projects conceived in a long career marked by intellectual militancy and visions of art's untimely and irreverent mission, his unfinished study of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* as a heretical, hermetic and punning panorama remains a testament to Calas's determination to look at the world through surrealist eyes.

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