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Reviews

# Nicolas Calas: The Trotskyist Time Forgot

- Reviews section -

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**Nicolas Calas (1907-88) may be the most visionary poet, art critic, museum curator, cultural historian, and lifelong Trotskyist of whom you have never heard. Writing decades before Fredric Jameson’s classic *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981) declared, “Always historicize!,” [1] Calas embodied this precept in every dimension of his multifaceted career.**

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He was a revolutionary cultural worker living in the United States since 1940 who blended Marxism and psychoanalysis along with the ideas of Wilhelm Reich, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Ludwig Wittgenstein “all in the years before Herbert Marcuse and the Frankfurt School succeeded in renovating the boundaries of historical materialist discourse.

He was also part of “an international homosexual set” consisting of poet and collage artist Charles Henri Ford (1908-2002), Russian-born painter Pavel Tchelitchew (1898-1957), novelist and film critic Parker Tyler (1904-74), and the fabled Trotskyist/Beatnik Brion Gysin (1916-86). [3]

Principally, the inscrutable, perhaps even shape-shifting Calas was vital in the transnational passage to the United States of the ideas of Surrealism, the 20th century avant-garde cultural movement seeking to release the creative potential of the unconscious mind.

A migrant intellectual and perpetual stranger, Calas was the rebel scion of a wealthy industrialist Greek family whose life and creative development chart an idiosyncratic path through the cultural history of Marxism in the mid-20th century. Reconstructing that route, as I will attempt to do in this essay, permits us to squint backwards through time’s mists to expand our comprehension of the actuality of the revolutionary Marxist experience in the United States.

## The Quest For Calas

Calas’s many-hued career can be traced across six decades of the 20th century. In the 1930s, Calas emerged from debates over Marxist aesthetics in Greece to become a celebrated associate of French writer André Breton (1896-1966) in Paris. In the 1940s, he was among those who edited the avant-garde magazine *View* (1940-47) in New York City. In the 1950s, he underwent a decade of activist decline and disenchantment as he carried out research and revisited his native country.

In the 1960s and 1970s, his career was revitalized as he morphed into one of the foremost critics of modern art, and defenders of Pop Art, in the United States, with writing showcased regularly in the *Village Voice*, *Artforum* and *Art International*.

Finally, in the 1980s, while disappearing from view in his adopted North American homeland, he attained canonical

status as a principal poet in Greece. In October 2016 the Athens School of Fine Arts at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens lionized him at an international symposium, "Regarding Nicolas Calas." [4]

I was a friend and correspondent of Calas from 1976 until 1983, when he fell ill and communication became difficult. Calas, often called "Nico," was a tall and lanky man, still striking in his early seventies in a craggy way. His animated speech quickened and rose in pitch as he told witty anecdotes, usually chuckling in advance of his listeners.

Periodically Calas came to Ann Arbor, Michigan, from New York City. Sometimes he lectured on behalf of the Department of the History of Art at the University of Michigan, although his main purpose was to visit Surrealist painter Gerome Kamrowski (1914-2004), an associate of Jackson Pollack and Robert Motherwell in the formative moment of Abstract Expressionism. [5]

On one occasion I was able to tape an interview with Calas, and after he died of heart failure I would intermittently visit Kamrowski on my own, and also in the company of the Brazilian-born Marxist/Surrealist Michael Löwy. Yet much about Calas' life, especially his early and late activities in Greece and his writings in the Greek language, remained mysterious to me in the late 20th century.

Then, at the start of the new millennium, Lena Hoff, an archivist at the Danish Institute/Nordic Library in Athens, began collecting and publishing Calas's Trotskyist political correspondence in the Greek original, preliminary to issuing an "intellectual biography" that appeared four years ago. [6]

For factual accuracy, lucidity, and sympathy, Hoff was the chronicler that Calas would have wished for, and her book coincided with scholarly essays by others addressing Calas's relation to "Greekness;" [7] his influence on the Objectivist poet William Carlos Williams (who translated several of Calas's poems into English); [8] and his role on View magazine. [9]

## A Polemical Spirit

A man of restless energy and uncommon intelligence, Calas's birth name was Nikos Kalamaris although he would publish essays as "Manolis Spieros" from 1929 to 1934 and poetry as "Nikitos Randos" from 1930 to 1936. An only child, born in Lausanne, Switzerland but raised in Athens, he was educated at home by his aristocratic family, who placed an emphasis on languages inasmuch as they hoped that he would become a diplomat.

Drawn to radicalism in response to the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-22, he was permanently alienated from his elite relatives due to his father's callous treatment of refugees. A year later he matriculated at the University of Athens to study law and was straightaway captivated by Communism.

By 1929 he was similarly engrossed in psychoanalysis, and before the mid-1930s he had published several collections of poems and was recognized as the Greek translator of the work of Edgar Lee Masters, T.S. Eliot and Louis Aragon. In 1936 he returned to using his family name when he privately published his first Surrealist poem.

In a series of highly polemical literary essays, Calas progressively mapped out a Marxist view compatible with the ideas of Leon Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* (1924), a work well known to Greek radical intellectuals. Calas began by criticizing poets immersed in narcissism and introversion, insisting that the conditions of the 1930s demanded that literature communicate a will to fight.

At the same time, he maintained that art should never be judged by politics; art and politics followed two dissimilar roads, even as they should not be unconcerned with each other: "Two unending parallels, no conflict whatsoever. They walk together in harmony." [10] As Hoff puts it, "the critic must work according to a principle of freedom within a framework of social responsibility." [11] This evolution required a reversal of an early 1930s hostility by Calas to literary Modernism, the self-conscious break with tradition frequently associated with the writing of James Joyce, Cubist paintings of Pablo Picasso, and atonal music of Arnold Schoenberg.

At first Calas mistakenly judged Modernism as promoting escapism and "art for art's sake." Yet through his interrogation of the notions of "proletarian art" (a term he did not categorically reject) and "socialist realism" (art promoting socialist ideals), both emanating from the Soviet Union, he progressively began to favor experimental arts.

His standpoint, nonetheless, was both Marxist and Freudian – "Freudo-Marxist" was his preferred term, linking him to both Reich and Marcuse – as well as respectful of the traditional cultural canon. In this blend, he resembled many figures of the Frankfurt School, the neo-Marxism emerging in the 1920s from Institute for Social Research of the Goethe University of Frankfurt, as well as the U.S. writers who gravitated toward the journal *Partisan Review* around 1937.

## A Surrealist Who Happened to be Greek

Calas's own poetry evolved in tandem with his critical essays, and he more or less came to see both as part of the same project. Unluckily, in his efforts to fuse socialist ideas with avant-garde aesthetics, Calas managed to antagonize almost all rival poets and literary movements in Greece.

Whereas many of the so-called "Generation of the Thirties" were engaged in a quest for an idealized "Greekness," Calas produced lines suggesting an unromanticized perspective on city life, dehumanized by capitalism:

The squares of every city  
Turn people and machines around like tops  
In Athens, Omonia Square turns around  
and in my mouth when I pronounce her name  
the letters spin around and spring to life  
and the street signs turn violently  
the squares of every large city  
turn people around madly  
they turn back out of fear  
they turn back with hope or even without hope [12]

In this vein, Calas would go on to write many other poems addressed to the alienation of urban space in a commodified world. But even when he turned to surveying a landscape, as in a poem about the island of Santorini, he drew without warning upon the Surrealist trope of a transgressive and frightening perception of beauty:

With a scream in the night the lighthouse frightens the tall cliffs and makes them play gigantic games  
spreading their revels from the sky to the polyphonic caves  
for hours enormous cries sound out from desperate shadows far away  
only heroic words can tame this material into rhythms  
but the pleasures that Santorini offers a person  
quickly changes passions, break every Cyclopean gust

upon the porcelain of the mountains whitening her black beauty  
From there the island gazes theatrically at the volcano that created her  
and watches its work with the perfection of enchanting supremacy [13]

In sum, Calas found himself alone, isolated not only from the socialist realism of the Communists but also from the popular ideology of Greekness among many contemporaries.

Nevertheless, his fusion of political radicalism with literary experimentation placed him close to the work of at least one major revolutionary writer: Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930), the Russian Communist exponent of Futurism, a Modernist trend emphasizing technology and urban life. Hoff points out a stylistic similarity to Mayakovsky's 1919 "Left March" in Calas's "Demonstration":

that which we feel is  
that we have fetters  
that must go  
because they hurt  
because they are too tight, squeezing  
like the fingers  
clenched together  
to form a fist  
[...] And sweeter still than the sweetest flesh  
is the smell of our demands  
fired with the battle cries  
at the masses  
from the mouths of speakers  
the cannons watching the Cyclops  
inhale their echo  
before the rocks tumble down [14]

Nevertheless, even though Calas' literary direction evoked by this early work led logically toward Surrealism, his contemporaries among Greek Surrealists shared few of his political concerns. Instead, Calas felt more comfortable among the French Surrealists, led by Breton, who had just declared: "'Transform the world,' Marx said; 'change life' Rimbaud said. These two watchwords are one for us." [15]

Calas's sympathy with Breton led to his composing verse like his 1937 "When the Eyes Last No Longer," featuring a desolate landscape suggestive of a Salvador Dali painting:

Night has sealed the lips, everywhere night has fallen, without love sorrow plays  
The dream and the sea have no beginning and the distance is not suspended,  
the horizon never ceases to deceive us  
As the violins play, clocks and skeletons invite singers of funeral laments to take down  
the clouds  
Crowds open up and appear with faces that are warm and smooth  
Their voices faint, doctors and hangmen and magi have eliminated the harmony  
of their chords  
They were locked up, all those memories bringing moonbeams, green drops and melodies  
of the sand and wind [16]

Inasmuch as such writing could be identified with a brand of French Surrealism that sought to break down all

restrictive social and ethnic barriers, and adhered to a Trotskyist-inflected internationalist politics, Hoff elects to describe Calas as “not so much a Greek Surrealist but a Surrealist who happened to be Greek.” [\[17\]](#)

In 1938 Calas translated Eliot’s 1921 essay “The Lesson of Baudelaire” into Greek, while also finding himself drawn to the work of Benjamin Péret (1899-1959), an inspiration that would endure. Péret had been a leading figure in French Surrealist poetry since the 1920s, when he was chief editor of *La Révolution surréaliste*, and was concurrently a Trotskyist from the time he learned of the Left Opposition (the faction in the Bolshevik Party formed in the wake of Lenin’s illness and death) to the end of his life.

Among other activities, Péret lived in Rio de Janeiro at the advent of the Great Depression where he co-founded the Brazilian Trotskyist movement with his brother-in-law Mário Pedrosa (1900-81), another lifelong militant and eventually the country’s leading art critic. [\[18\]](#) When the Spanish Civil War commenced, Péret signed up as an anti-fascist fighter.

Just prior to moving to France, in the fall of 1938, Calas translated three essays by Péret for publication under a freshly adopted pseudonym, “Nicolas Calas.” In December, from his new Parisian home, he published his first Surrealist book, *Foyers d’incendie* (Hearths of Arson) under the name Calas as well, and he would use that appellation ever after.

The book immediately won praise from André Breton, the paramount Surrealist of the era: “All the questions put to us over the last twenty years find in this book their inspired, conclusive and stimulating answer.” [\[19\]](#)

## Mangan and Pablo

Moreover, at this time Calas became acquainted with two Marxist expatriates working for the Fourth International (the organization founded by followers of Leon Trotsky in Paris in 1938) who would profoundly alter his political life.

One was the North American Sherry Mangan (born John Joseph Sherry Mangan, 1904-1961), a classically trained Harvard graduate who had a minor reputation for editing the vanguard literary publications *Laurus: The Celestial Visitor* (1927-28) and *Pagany: A Native Quarterly* (1930-33).

Mangan had also published volumes of poetry and fiction, and designed and printed books, before joining the Socialist Party under the influence of an older friend and mentor, the poet John Brooks Wheelwright (1897-1940). The two writers were magnetically attracted to the Trotskyist wing (called the Appeal Caucus, after its newspaper) and on New Year’s Day 1938 became founding members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). [\[20\]](#)

Some months later Mangan, like Calas, relocated to Paris, employed as a journalist for the magazines owned by Henry Luce, *Time* and *Life*. Accomplished in French, Spanish, Latin, and ancient Greek, Mangan also knew German and Italian, which were eminently useful in his new position in Paris as the technical secretary of the Administrative Secretariat of the Fourth International.

The other bond was with the Greek Michel Pablo (born in Alexandria, Egypt, as Michalis N. Raptis, 1911-1996), who had recently escaped his imprisonment on a Greek island by the Metaxis military dictatorship. [\[21\]](#)

A graduate in engineering from the National Technical University of Athens, Pablo came to Paris to enroll in classes

at the Sorbonne where he pursued urban planning. His Marxism went back to 1928 when he affiliated with dissident Greek communists known as “Archeio-Marxists,” and in 1934 he participated in a split that led to the formation of the Trotskyist “Organization of the Communist Internationalists of Greece.”

In Paris, Pablo, along with Georges Vitsoris (1899-1954), an actor who would become a noted anti-fascist Resistance fighter (he was an expert in explosives, honored after the war by the French government), represented the Greek Trotskyist movement at the founding conference of the Fourth International. [22] It was Vitsoris who introduced Mangan to Pablo, who then introduced Pablo to Calas.

Similar to Calas, Mangan and Pablo had a fondness for numerous pseudonyms. The former was also known as Terence Phelan, Patrick O’Daniel, Patrice, Owen Pilar, and Sian Naill. The latter was sometimes called Gabriel, Speros, Archer, and Jean-Paul Martin, among many other aliases.

Mangan’s political impact was immediate; he and Calas were among primary organizers of the Paris chapter of the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art (FIARI), inspired by the Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art (1938) signed by André Breton and Mexican muralist Diego Rivera (and no doubt co-authored by Leon Trotsky, then in Mexico).

Although this organization of revolutionary artists collapsed with the advent of World War II, there were additional chapters in London, New York and Mexico, and the French chapter published two issues of the journal *Clé*, edited by the writer Maurice Nadeau (1911-2013). In fact, Mangan was working on the journal when he first met Calas.

Mangan would then include a review of Calas’s *Foyers d’incendie* in his “Paris Letter” column in the U.S. Marxist cultural journal *Partisan Review* (under the name Niall), [23] and used his position with *Time* to obtain a visa for Calas to depart for the United States, via Lisbon, in late 1939. While Calas by and large shared Pablo’s political views, the two did not inaugurate systematic communication and contact until after the 1967 coup in Greece that established what came to be called “The Regime of the Colonels” or “The Junta.”

*Foyers d’incendie*, which has never been fully translated into English, involves a reworking of Freud’s idea of the pleasure principle (behavior directed toward immediate satisfaction of instinctual drives and reduction of pain) to include a desire to change the future.

Moreover, rather than following Freud in accepting civilization as necessary repression, Calas was adamant in posing a revolutionary alternative: “Since desire cannot simply do as it pleases, it is forced to adopt an attitude toward reality, and to this end it must either try to submit to as many of the demands of its environment as possible, or try to transform as far as possible everything in its environment which seems contrary to its desires.” [24] Contra Freud, Calas was devoted to liberating rather than curing humanity.

## Critic and Curator

Reaching New York in 1940, Calas made the acquaintance of the *Partisan Review* editors — two were Trotskyist party members and the rest fellow travelers — who published a section of *Foyers d’incendie* to coincide with his arrival; [25] William Carlos Williams, who would write about Calas in unpublished material and who was pulled by Calas toward Surrealism; Surrealists in exile as well as domestic ones; and members of the SWP.

To his dismay, Calas found that the *Partisan Review* editors were actually moving away from the Fourth International

as the war began, and that Felix Morrow (1906-1988), a central figure in the SWP at that time, discouraged him from becoming a party member, apparently because Morrow had a low opinion of the political understanding of Europeans in exile. [26]

As an alternative, Calas remained close to the French-born Jean van Heijenoort (1912-86), another multi-linguist with a score of pseudonyms. Van Heijenoort had been Trotsky's personal secretary for seven years, and now served as secretary to the International Secretariat of the Fourth International, which had been moved to New York for the duration of World War II.

Otherwise, Calas immersed himself wholly in literary and artistic activities, especially in his collaboration with View, the extraordinary magazine published by Ford and Parker (who were ephemerally drawn toward Trotskyism) that used an international group of contributors to introduce Surrealism to the American public.

In the 1940s Calas wrote little poetry, instead proselytizing for Surrealism and producing articles in association with museum exhibitions that would lead to his own role as a curator. Among his most significant essays was "Towards a Third Surrealist Manifesto" that was published in a 1940 volume called New Directions in Prose and Poetry. [27] James Laughlin, owner of New Directions publishing house and a close friend of Mangan, was the editor.

The message of this document was that Surrealist principles needed to be more aggressively political and polemical because Surrealism was doomed to failure "if revolution â€" in the Marxist sense â€" never comes [in]to being." [28] As a result of this endeavor, Calas persuaded Breton (then in New York as well) to write his own "Third Surrealist Manifesto," although Breton's was never issued publically.

Calas's museum collaboration began when he wrote texts for the Chilean Surrealist Roberto Matta's show at Julian Levy's Gallery in 1940. During the war years Calas found employment with the Greek and French sections of the Office of War Information, which used various media to connect the battlefield with civilian populations. There he met the anthropologist couple Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, with whom he would collaborate on research in the postwar era. [29]

In 1943 he married the émigré Russian psychoanalyst Elena Dimitrieva von Hoershelman, originally introduced to him by Mangan.

Even though many of Calas's projects in the war years failed to materialize, including a plan for him and Mangan to edit their own magazine, one modest success occurred in December 1944. At that time Calas participated in an exhibition called "The Imagery of Chess" that he organized along with the French-American painter and sculptor Marcel Duchamp, the German painter Max Ernst, and United States art dealer Julian Levy.

For the exhibition Breton and Calas co-presented their mirror and wine chess set and board, accompanied by co-authored aphorisms, "Profanation: A Chess Game." Newsweek magazine carried an article about this collaboration. [30]

## Cold War Demoralization, 1960s Inspiration

In the postwar years many of Calas's fellow refugees began returning to Europe, while Calas decided to become a United States citizen in 1945. Spending much of his time at Columbia University collaborating with Mead on the Project of Studies in Contemporary Culture, he nonetheless kept his hand in as a curator by organizing a group

exhibition of Surrealists.

Yet his political optimism was waning, especially when Van Heijenoort repudiated Marxism in 1947 and was expelled from the SWP, publishing his critique under the pseudonym “Jean Vannier” in the pages of the similarly demoralized *Partisan Review*. [31]

In a 1994 interview the Marxist art historian and Columbia professor Meyer Schapiro (1904-96), a one-time ally of the Trotskyists, records a debate in the late 1940s in Manhattan organized by Breton on the subject of dialectical materialism. The two men lived near each other and frequently discussed in French the relative merits of the method.

According to Schapiro, Breton chose van Heijenoort and Calas to defend dialectical materialism, while Schapiro arranged for Columbia philosopher of science Ernest Nagel and British logical positivist A. J. Ayer (then working for the British government on assignment in the United States) to raise objections. Breton was to moderate.

When the event occurred, participants were stunned that van Heijenoort [a prominent theorist of mathematical logic & ed.] opted out of any defense; he simply replied to all questions with variants of, “I’m sorry but I never really thought about that aspect.” An unnerved Calas was left entirely on his own, performing poorly in the recollection of Schapiro. [32]

The next decade was even more challenging. Throughout the 1950s Calas’s productivity was diminished, and he often found difficulty in publishing what he wrote. He even lost the three-year grant he had obtained from the Bollingen Foundation to prepare a study of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, an enigmatically symbolic triptych oil painting from the 15th century by the Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch. [33] Due to family illness, he was obligated to make a series of trips back to Greece.

With the advent of the 1960s, Calas once again came to life as a politically committed critic and poet. His splashing re-entrance was through his enthusiasm for “Pop Art,” a movement of the late 1950s in England and the United States that challenged the traditions of fine art by including imagery from popular and mass culture.

Exponents such as Larry Rivers, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns often drew on advertising, comic books and mundane cultural objects to convey an irony accentuating the banal aspects of United States culture. Since Pop Art used a style that was hard-edged and representational, it has been interpreted as a reaction against Abstract Expressionism, the post-World War II anti-figurative aesthetic that emphasizes spontaneous brush strokes or the dripping and splattering of paint.

In a strange twist, Calas’s championing of Pop Art put him at odds with the two major advocates of Abstract Expression, both of whom were also associated with Trotskyism, *Partisan Review*, and the anti-Stalinist Left. These were Clement Greenberg (1909-1994), whose two brothers were members of Max Shachtman’s Workers Party, and Harold Rosenberg (1906-1978), who started out closer to the Communist movement but by the late 1930s was linked to the *Partisan Review* & to which he then introduced Greenberg. [34]

The former, Greenberg, saw Abstract Expression as a continuation of the Modernist experimental tradition, tightly focused on formal and technical aspects (shape, color, line) and requiring a critical assessment devoid of context. [35] The latter, Rosenberg, argued that Abstract Expressionism was a departure from Modernism with a unique emphasis on the act of creating on the canvas; the recording of an action by the hand or brush that was the expression of personal struggle.

Calas's distinctive argument was that "Pop Art is the complementary opposite of Surrealism," [36] albeit homologous in a common descent from Dada "the art movement flourishing after World War I that protested the logic and reason of capitalist society through expressions of nonsense and irrationality."

When asked if Pop Art might be judged a postwar form of Surrealism, Calas replied: "Surrealism is deeply involved in moral issues, while Pop Art is not. Surrealism is passionate and romantic, while Pop Art is cool and pragmatic. Surrealism developed in the intellectual climate of dialectical interpretations of both society and the psyche. Pop Art grew in an age of logical positivism and empiricism. Surrealism relies on symbolism. Pop Art on literalness." [37]

## “Activism for Art”

With this quirky perspective, an infectious enthusiasm, and his air of authority, Calas began to be regularly featured in prominent art journals such as Artforum, Arts International, ARTnews and Arts Magazine. The painter and critic Gregory Battcock observed, "As art critic for the Village Voice, Calas has become one of the most widely read of modern-art critics, advocating a new and broad type of activism for art and a renewed vitality for criticism itself." [38]

In his writing about Harold Rosenberg early in the 1960s, Calas claimed that the focus on the artist's performance turned art into entertainment. Rosenberg was not for "art for art's sake," but he seemed to advocate "art for the artist's sake." [39] With his sympathies wholly, although not uncritically, on the side of the new generation of radical activists, Calas insisted that Rosenberg's interpretation of "Action Painting" was unrelated to political action in either the 1930s or 1960s.

Nonetheless, in a later appraisal, "Anxiety and Harold Rosenberg," he acknowledged that the critic "to his credit, shifted the emphasis from the narrow perspective of formal analysis to the dramatic one of existence, paving the way to a reappraisal of painters as poets rather than craftsmen." [40]

The rivalry with Greenberg was deeper and longer lasting. It began with a battle in 1941 between the Partisan Review, where Greenberg held forth against Surrealism, and View, where Calas disparaged Greenberg's ideas as well as his talent as a painter. In a famous incident, the tensions erupted into fisticuffs. According to Alice Marquis's 2006 biography, *Art Czar: The Rise and Fall of Clement Greenberg*:

"[Greenberg] was holding forth during Peggy Guggenheim's party when Max Ernst irritably dumped a butt-laden ashtray on his head. The critic leaped up to throttle Ernst, who was "overcome with laughter.' Then the youthful Surrealist Nicolas Calas "took a roundhouse swing at Greenberg and, to everyone's surprise, connected'....To an interviewer, much later, he [Greenberg] explained that "the three fights I got into...have all been with Surrealists, or ex-would-be Surrealists, who make a practice of courting violence by abuse." [41]

Early on, Calas saw Greenberg not only as an enemy of Surrealism but also as disparaging the possibility of an alliance between revolutionary artists and revolutionary politics. In a 1967 attack on Greenberg, "Description is Not Enough," Calas drolly conjectures that Greenberg's 1937 occupation as a Federal government clerk could be the explanation for his strategy as an art critic: "Clement Greenberg's talent for descriptive criticism might well be an outcome of his service at Customs [Service] where it is essential to check the correctness of the invoice." [42]

Calas never abandoned a revolutionary Surrealism; instead, he was constantly on the alert to update it so that he can be rightly judged "a perpetual champion of the new." [43] Not only was Surrealism to be the most promising means of making fresh images of our desire, but it was also a source of revolutionary hope:

“Surrealist works are intended to disturb, not appease; the Surrealist goal is unrest, not peace....It is through images that repressed desires combat ideology. In the language of art, the projection of images becomes an expression of hope. Hope, manifestly involves more than the satisfaction of immediate desires.” [\[44\]](#)

In such pronouncements, Calas demonstrated a great deal of radical self-trust, although he usually pulled back from falling into absolute certainty.

## Poetic and Political Revival

After nearly 15 years, Calas was also writing poetry again, appearing in a leftwing Greek publication in 1963 edited by Nanos Valaoritus, another exile writer who had returned to Greece. This precipitated a major comeback in his native land, including the republishing of his older poems and the winning of the Greek State Poetry Prize in 1977.

Even if his poetry received almost no attention in the United States, he was able to attain a position in 1963 teaching art history as Professor of Fine Arts at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey, and he continued to curate exhibitions in New York. By the middle of the decade he was also co-authoring exhibition catalogues with Elena Calas, his wife.

Politically Calas was enthusiastic about the student rebellion, anti-racist and antiwar movements, occasionally appearing in Left journals such as *Radical America* and *New Politics*. However, he took a special interest in opposing the coup in Greece by joining with Pablo and collaborating on the anti-coup newspaper *Antistassi* published in London. Calas submitted writing to the publication and organized a small resistance group in New York, although it fell into crisis when the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Afterwards, he and Pablo remained in correspondence and several meetings between the two old comrades were held abroad. At the same time he was sharply critical of Pablo's break with the Fourth International in 1963, frequently urging young people to read the work of Ernest Mandel. [\[45\]](#)

In the late 1970s Calas wrote an intriguing political poem, “Four O’Clock,” that went unpublished. The concluding lines suggest his rejection of the mystical elements of the United States counterculture for the revolutionary Marxism to which he had been devoted since the 1930s.

In this passage, the Himalayas may stand for the Naropa University (a Tibetan Buddhist College in Boulder, Colorado, where Calas was an invited guest of Allen Ginsberg); “worldly upheavals” for social revolution; “the fusion of terror and beauty” for surrealism; “Mount Athos” for the legacy of religious riches; “Aurora” for the Roman Goddess of Dawn; and “Four O’Clock” for the Fourth International:

Not for me the Himalayas and the sanctuaries of émigré Ilyamas  
I’m attuned to the school of worldly upheavals and to the fusion of terror and  
Beauty. But I’m haunted by the shadow of Mount Athos.  
Triangular, I still see it dialing midnight at sunset  
On the road to Aurora I perceived that the twenty fifth hour of the day is  
Disrupting the summer solstice.  
Pressing my hand against my heart I noticed that it had missed a beat.  
At that precise moment a young woman with Mongolian chromosomes  
Asks me “how far are we from four o’clock?” [\[46\]](#)

One gets the sense that Calas retains a loyalty to Surrealism and Revolution in the present even as he appreciates the cultural heritage of past religion, while still living in anticipation of authentic social transformation.

Calas's collection of essays *Art in the Age of Risk* appeared in 1968, and one co-authored with Elena, *Icons and Images of the Sixties*, in 1971. New poems in Greek continued to come, concurrently with more and more portfolios and exhibitions in the United States with titles such as "Games without Rules" and "Mirrors of the Mind."

Hoff cites the assessment of art historian Joseph Dreiss, a participant in the Athens symposium on Calas, "that he was one of the most esteemed art critics in his heyday," rating just beneath Greenberg and Rosenberg in importance. [47] The well-regarded art critic Donald Kuspit, in the preface to Calas's last essay collection, *Transfigurations* (1985), judged that he was "the most brilliant critic of Surrealism...as Surrealist in spirit as the very best Surrealist Art."

It was called "A Tribute to Nicolas Calas 1907-1988: Critic, Poet, Polemicist," and held on 15 December 1989 at the Great Hall, Cooper Union, in Manhattan.]] [48]

Nevertheless, even though a tribute to Calas, held at Cooper Union in Manhattan the year after his death, [49] augured a secure place in United States cultural history, he instead faded away as if an extinct comet "all but unheard of.

## A Trotskyist Orlando

What are we to make of Calas's creative and critical ideas? His is a story with many moving parts. His enormously productive career is full of intellectual provocations of all sorts, but how many would withstand rigorous scrutiny?

Some of his work is as confusing as it is compelling, although by and large one finds originality and erudition "not impenetrable theoretical discourse. Calas's many diverse pursuits lend a cubist quality to his oeuvre that no tidy or all-encompassing narrative can explain, a matter further complicated by the absence of translations of almost all his poetry and a good deal of unpublished work still in archives.

Much of his prose writing consists of critical thinking on the borderlines that engages anthropology, myths, memory, psychoanalysis, philosophy and more. Many of these dense, eccentric essays and commentary display his profound and generous gifts, including a talent for aphoristic writing, bold speculation, and a flair for wit and metaphor: "Faith is worse than bad faith;" "Wanted: Less clarity and more intensity;" "Poetry is to painting what socialism is to labor;" "I do not write to be read but to be re-read." [50]

A polemicist to the end, he is often memorable for approaching his quarry directly, with frank combativeness, as in his characterization of Greenberg as "the worst influence on art since Savonarola [the fifteenth century Italian priest who burned books and destroyed what he considered to be immoral art]." [51] His poetry may seem to be the biggest challenge, since much of it stems from a deep reservoir of personal experience for which no memoir or scholarly work has provided clarification. Then again, the matter of the emotional fountainhead of his work probably encompasses even more, for Calas refused to separate his poetic art from his critical interpretations, claiming that criticism is likewise a kind of art.

This view, that both poetry and essays in some respects express a cryptic inner world, is consistent with the contemporary perspective that every piece of a person's writing is autobiographical in the sense that it manifests the

concerns, personality and anxiety of the writer. [52]

What we know in regard to Calas is that there are indications of some sort of passionately fraught backstory in his life, even as the precise emotional catacombs have yet to be probed. One aspect clearly involves his relations with his parents, accentuated by one of his Freudian aphorisms: “The artist can create only one thing: his parents.” [53] And then there are haunting lines from his poems such as, “I cannot live unless another past is found for me.” [54]

A further area of puzzlement is Calas’s sexuality, for which we have only a few significant documents. In a letter of December 1938 to Yorgos Theotokas, a novelist of the “Generation of the Thirties,” Calas wrote: “Psychologically I feel like that hero of Virginia Woolf, Orlando, where sometimes the female element is dominant and sometimes the masculine. As I said earlier on, at the moment I have only long and passionate affairs with women. But my ideas regarding love, or rather my position towards it has changed greatly....This is not the first time that I go through a total change....” [55]

It was around that same time that Calas published *Foyers d’incendie*, which is not, as one might hope from a 21st-century perspective, a manifesto of gender fluidity and pan-sexuality; rather, it is explicitly pro-heterosexual and treats homosexuality mainly in relation to fascism. At one point, Calas explains: “...just as the life of the personality cannot be contrary to animal life, so the desire for the personality “love” cannot be contrary to the interests of instinctual life. Love cannot therefore, be contrary to the desire of male for female, and happiness must thus be a broadened form of love which unites two beings of opposite sexes.” [56]

His views on relationships are summarized by Hoff: “Although being more feminist than [André] Breton, Calas also formulated ideas on love and marriage that had a great deal in common with the surrealists’ romantic views on a passionate and lasting monogamous relationship.”

This is confirmed by what Calas wrote: “When in love, you must say “Love! Neither divorce nor adultery will make man happy, only love....We counter the bourgeois family and the power of the husband and father with the family of the first Soviet code....” (Hoff, 139-40)

His reference is to the 1918 “Code on Marriage, the Family, and Guardianship” in which the legal rights of the individual are established at the expense of the existing tsarist/patriarchal system of family and marriage. For example, there would be easily available “no-grounds” divorces; the abolition of “illegitimacy” of birth as a legal concept (all children were entitled to parental support); a married couple could take either surname; and individual property would be preserved in the event of divorce.

It is certainly possible that over the decades, Calas resolved his capacity to undergo such a “total change” as comfortably as did Woolf’s Orlando, who found composure and confidence after coming to the realization that one is made up of many selves. Yet for those who believe in a close connection between individual psychology and creative and critical work, available information at this time does not seem to provide any conclusive picture of his thinking.

We do know that following the 1938 correspondence with Theotokas, suggesting he had experienced a period of heterosexuality (reinforced by *Foyers*), Calas apparently reversed direction. He famously threw himself into a highly-charged liaison with Brion Gysin, a Canadian-born writer and painter associated with Surrealism and then the Beat Generation; and probably most celebrated for having introduced William Burroughs to the “cut-up technique” of composition used in *Naked Lunch* (1959) and Gysin’s recipe for marijuana fudge that appeared in a cook-book by Gertrude Stein’s companion, Alice B. Toklas.

The erotic relationship of the two men is reported graphically in a 2005 biography of Gysin, *Nothing is True* “

Everything is Permitted. [57] Gysin, whose childhood nickname was “Trotsky,” came to Paris to join the Surrealists, although by the mid-1930s he had a run-in with the imperious Breton who proceeded to expel him.

After traveling together throughout Europe, Calas and Gysin went separately to New York. There Gysin joined the SWP and spent some 18 months organizing in a shipyard in Bayonne, New Jersey, where he worked as a wartime welder and ran an election campaign on behalf of a Black woman in the union.

Shortly after, Calas again seemed to change his course toward heterosexuality by announcing his marriage to Elena Dimitrieva von Hoershelman. Yet the managing editor of View, John Bernard Myers, reports in his diary that at the time he met Calas in a gay bar he was hearing gossip that Calas was getting married only to please Breton, who was notoriously homophobic. [58]

Although the marriage, marked by intimate literary collaboration, lasted until death, Calas’s deep involvement with Pop Art brought him into close contact with an artistic movement now regarded as having a strong and rich sensibility connected with gay male culture. [59]

## Paradox, Wonder and Doubt

Perhaps shifts and uncertainties about sexual identity, scarcely uncommon, are a part of the explanation why interpretations of Calas’s poetry have noted that his mostly urban writings tend to adopt figures of strangers and strange figures. His own self is dramatized as a stranger who wanders from country to country.

Of course, this shadowy self-image is consistent with much of his cultural criticism as well, which depicts artists in urban environments that are a kind of transnational space within a national territory. It is customary to find a tangled knot of creativity, sexuality, and yearning for political liberation in a writer. Still, to all his guises Calas brings a unique Marxist perspective, assessing everything with a sense of history.

Mostly Calas did not set out to rank art; rather, he aimed to explain elements of difference and defiance, to situate creative work in culture and explain the mechanisms of its production. His greatest strength as a critic may be found in essays where he reframes the contributions of numerous vanguard artists, attempting to map out intersections “ Jim Dine, Roy Lichtenstein, Allan D’Arcangelo, Alex Katz, Al Held and many more.

His greatest weakness is the baffling absence of women and people of color in his work, a limited and inaccurate perspective promoted by many Surrealist spokespersons and scholars that has recently been corrected by such volumes as *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* (1998), edited by Penelope Rosemont, and *Black, Brown, & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora* (2010), edited by Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley.

Calas preferred to point to differences instead of correspondences, to disruption instead of connection; he sought not to make art familiar but strange and other. His lifelong commitment to Surrealism did not consist of fidelity to old models but to redefinitions; not revivals of the past, but reformulations, such as his effort to update our appreciation of it by juxtapositions with Pop Art.

It was, in fact, the effort to republish his older work rather than his latest that caused his falling out with the Chicago Surrealist Group of Franklin Rosemont. [60] He was happiest in spotlighting new artists and their work, and especially the proliferation of styles that began in the 1960s. Over time Calas revised the terms and focus but never the core of

his revolutionary commitment.

This stance provides an attractive model for radicals in general, who must be aware of our own history yet change with the times and find new challenges. Otherwise, one ends up simply as a historical phenomenon to be placed and studied in libraries. It is partly through our own retrieval and critical appraisal of predecessors like Calas that we can take an active part in creating a diversely crowded social history of the radical past and accept responsibility for continuously reshaping and making our own history.

Even in the one small area of the visual arts in the United States, there is a growing list of figures akin to Calas “drawn to Trotskyism in its first decades” who have yet to be adequately explored and understood. In addition to the aforementioned critics, Greenberg, Rosenberg, and Schapiro, one can cite the sculptors Laura Slobe and Duncan Ferguson, and the painters Aristodimos Kaldis, Lee Krassner, Jesse Cohen, Dorothy Eisner, Jeanne Smith Morgan, and Robert Motherwell (through his professor, Schapiro). [61]

The proud eclecticism of Nicolas Calas is a good place to begin. This figure of conviction merits full attention from every angle; one should not be deterred by any hidebound, self-appointed guardians of the Marxist tradition who believe the treatment of sexuality to be frivolous or distracting.

In his art and criticism Calas had the delightful capacity to create wonder with great flair and feeling. On the page as well as in person, he had a terrifically charismatic presence, a repertoire of oscillating qualities. Although Calas has been tacitly exiled from the history of orthodox Trotskyism in the United States, not least because of the sectarian, perennial pastime of Pablo-bashing, those who turn to the cultural journals of earlier decades, and reference books about Surrealism and United States art in the 1960s, will quickly see that he discreetly lives on today.

This Trotskyist whom time forgot endures as a kind of wraithlike apparition, flitting and hovering over the history of Marxist culture as a Surrealist spirit of contradiction, revelation, and protest.

### [Against the Current](#)

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[1] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 9.

[2] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 9.

[3] The phrase comes from Weldon Kees, as reported in James Reidel's *Vanishing Act: The Life and Art of Weldon Kees* (Lincoln, Ne.: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), 2003), 79. Kees (1914-55) was a poet, painter, critic, and novelist who supported Communism in the 1930s, and was later involved with *Partisan Review*, Abstract Expressionism, and the San Francisco Renaissance. At age 46 he disappeared in what is generally assumed to be a suicide by drowning.

[4] The full program is online at: <https://arthist.net/archive/13932>

[5] Calas helped bring Kamrowski to national attention by including him in the 1947 “Bloodflames” exhibition of eight surrealist painters at the Hugo Gallery in New York

[6] Lena Hoff, *Nicolas Calas and the Challenge of Surrealism* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2014).

[7] See “Nicolas Calas (1907-1988), Surrealism, Hellenic Poetry,” online at: <http://hellenicpoetry.com/uncategorized/nicolas-calas/>, and the earlier

study by Panayiotis Bosnakis, "Nicolas Calas's Poetry and the Critique of Greekness," *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 24, no. 2 (1998): 25-40.

[8] Christopher MacGowan, "'Sparkles of Understanding': Williams and Nicolas Calas," *William Carlos Williams Review*, 22, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 81-98.

[9] Vassiliki Kolocotroni, "Minotaur in Manhattan: Nicolas Calas and the Fortunes of Surrealism," 4 (2009): 84-102; Steve Heller, "All Eyes on View," *Imprint Magazine* (2 January 2013) on-line at: <http://www.printmag.com/imprint/all-eyes-on-view/>; Anne Reynes-Delobel and Céline Mansanti, "Americanizing Surrealism: Cultural Challenges in the Magnetic Fields," *Miranda: Multidisciplinay Journal*, 14 (2017), online at: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/9759>; and Stamatina Dimakopoulou, "From a 'Garden of Disorder' to a 'Nest of Flames': Charles Henri Ford's Surrealist Inflections," *ibid.*, online at: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/9822>

[10] Translated by Hoff, 31.

[11] Hoff, 31

[12] Quoted in Hoff, 73. The date of composition is not provided.

[13] Hoff, 80.

[14] Hoff, 89-90.

[15] Cited by Hoff, 97.

[16] Hoff, 112.

[17] Hoff, 113.

[18] Under the name "Lebrun," Pedrosa was a member of the International Executive Committee of the Fourth International and lived in New York City during the late 1930s and World War II. After 1940 he became a supporter of Max Shachtman's Workers Party and contributed to its publications. Three years ago, a major collection of his writings were translated for the volume *Mário Pedrosa: Primary Documents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015) in a collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art

[19] Cited in Hoff, 26. Breton's review was published in the second and final issue of *Clé*.

[20] For the complete story, see my dual biography *The Revolutionary Imagination: The Poetry and Politics of John Wheelwright and Sherry Mangan* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983).

[21] Since Raptis is best-known outside of Greece as Pablo, I will refer to him by the latter name. The controversial Pablo has been frequently demonized by more sectarian Trotskyists for his advocacy of entryist tactics and orientation toward Third World revolutions.

[22] Vitsoris, like Pablo, had roots in the Archeio-Marxists and escaped the dictatorship to go to France. There he pursued acting and belonged to a political and theatrical circle including Jean-Louis Barrault, Roger Blin, the actress Simone Signoret, and the poet Jacques Prévert. Blin was also a Trotskyist cadre with whom Mangan worked closely; as an actor and director he was intimately associated with the expatriate Irish avant-garde novelist and playwright Samuel Beckett after the war. In 1957 Beckett wrote *Endgame* for Blin and dedicated the play to him.

[23] *Partisan Review* 3 (Spring 1939): 100-105.

[24] Translated by Hoff, 134.

[25] "On Revolutionary Sadism," *Partisan Review* 1 (January-February 1940): 41-49.

- [26] Nor was Calas all that impressed by Morrow. In an undated letter to me from the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, Calas wrote: "I remember my relations with Felix Morrow with some bitterness. He was a chauvinist trotskyite [sic] and secretly thought that Europe would have been spared WWII if he and his friends here were directing the fourth international in Europe."
- [27] James Laughlin, ed., *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* (New York: New Directions, 1940), 408-421.
- [28] Cited in Hoff, 175.
- [29] See Mead, Margaret, and Nicolas Calas, eds. *Primitive Heritage: An Anthropological Anthology*. (New York: Random House, 1953).
- [30] More information can be found online at: [http://www.edochess.ca/batgirl/Imagery\\_of\\_Chess\\_no3.html](http://www.edochess.ca/batgirl/Imagery_of_Chess_no3.html)
- [31] "A Century's Balance Sheet," *Partisan Review* 15, no. 3 (March 1948): 288-96.
- [32] James Thompson and Susan Raines, "A Vermont Visit with Meyer Schapiro (August 1991)," *Oxford Art Journal* 17, no. 1 (1994), 11. There are several inaccurate statements about van Heijenoort's biography in this memoir.
- [33] A website on Bosch exists with a page about Calas's interpretation: [http://www.alchemywebsite.com/bosch/Interpretation\\_Calas.html](http://www.alchemywebsite.com/bosch/Interpretation_Calas.html)
- [34] Greenberg remained good friends with Sherry Mangan up until the Cold War.
- [35] Neil Davidson, a Scottish Marxist who won the Isaac Deutscher Memorial Prize, is in the process of publishing a long study that promises to include the most brilliant reconsideration of Greenberg to date. Part One appears in the December 2017 issue of *Red Wedge*, online at: <http://www.redwedgemagazine.com/online-issue/realism-modernism-lukcs>
- [36] Nicolas Calas, *Art in the Age of Risk and Other Essays* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), 43.
- [37] *Ibid.* 69.
- [38] Gregory Battcock, "Introduction," *ibid.*, vii.
- [39] This observation is by Hoff, 229.
- [40] Calas, "Anxiety and Harold Rosenberg," *Art in the Age of Risk*, 126.
- [41] Alice Marquis's, *Art Czar: The Rise and Fall of Clement Greenberg* (Boston; MFA Publications, 2006), 86. Having interviewed both men, I would say that Greenberg was very compact while Calas was gangling, but Calas may have been as much as a foot taller, giving him a wide swing.
- [42] Calas, "Description is Not Enough," *Art in the Age of Risk*, 133.
- [43] Battcock, "Introduction," *ibid.*, vii.
- [44] Calas, "Surrealist Perspective," *Art in the Age of Risk*, 144-145.
- [45] On the other hand, Calas wrote me from New York on November 15, 1979, that he was "outraged" by remarks that Mandel had made on Euro-Communism. One got the sense that Calas had a volatile personality and might be difficult to work with.
- [46] Hoff, 309.

[47] Hoff, 226-227.

[48] Hoff, 228.

[49] It was called "A Tribute to Nicolas Calas 1907-1988: Critic, Poet, Polemicist," and held on 15 December 1989 at the Great Hall, Cooper Union, in Manhattan.

[50] Calas, "Between Silence," Art in the Age of Anxiety, 23-238.

[51] Ibid., 238

[52] This view is obviously not shared by schools such as the New Critics, adherents of Roland Barthes' 1967 argument about "The Death of the Author," many Deconstructionists, and so on.

[53] Ibid., 235

[54] Hoff, 109.

[55] Hoff, 110. Orlando: A Novel was published by Woolf in 1927, about the adventures of a poet who changes sex from man to woman and lives for centuries. The inspiration was Vita Sackville-West, Woolf's close friend and lover.

[56] Hoff, 137.

[57] See John Geiger, Nothing is True " Everything is Permitted: The Life of Brion Gysin (New York: Disinformation Books, 2005), 60.

[58] The diary is quoted in Hoff, 171

[59] Actually, the connection was suggested in the late 1960s by Vivian Gornick's "Pop Goes Homosexual": "It is the homosexual temperament which is guiding the progress of Pop Art." See Village Voice, 7 April 1966, 1. The most promising work at present seems to be that of Jonathan Katz, as in his "The Silent Camp: Queer Resistance and the Rise of Pop Art," available at <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/KatzPages/KatzCamp.html> Oxford Art Journal 41, 1 (2018); 59-83.

[60] See Hoff, 253.

[61] Laura Slobe among other "Cannonite Bohemians" is profiled by Alan Wald in an essay posted at <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/159/p3651/>" ed.