

Marianne Nikolic: The Last Surrealist Two Introductory Texts by Alain Segura¹

“I demand the deep, true concealment of Surrealism,” André Breton wrote in 1930.² Some 20 years later, when Marianne [Nikolic] joined the Surrealist Group, she understood the order very well. She wouldn’t sign any of her canvasses, but she would inscribe the following at the bottom of one of the most beautiful leaflets from May 68: “A Yugoslavian comrade who knows a lot.”

“Why would I go to Tibet, if the Himalayas aren’t here?” When you crossed the door into her studio, you indeed began the climb. Marianne would have had her place on Father Sogol’s sailboat on its way toward Mount Analogue.³ Her words were for her friends. Her outbursts and fury, as well. She dispensed no teachings, but she listened to the painters, to the writers, to the sculptors, exalting their patience, their attention. Most often, everything ended in a big burst of laughter. Leaving her studio, I thought I could feel the gust of wind that had swept my doubts away. To say that she meant a great deal to me would be a bit of clumsiness in which I could, nevertheless, engage because it is the truth.

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Marianne Nikolic was born in Budapest on 10 July 1919. A recovered official document allows us to trace her family’s origins. Budapest back then was a very cosmopolitan city. Her father was a diplomat; his [second] wife had a German maiden name. Of her mother, who very quickly disappeared, she kept the image of a vivacious woman, who loved bathrooms and had a fiery temperament, which Marianne attributed to Gypsy origins. She loved to claim this and to say that she resembled her.

In her youth, Marianne traveled alone with her father. She kept radiant memories of those times, which were no doubt embellished by nostalgia. When she was 16 years old, a new wife appeared and soon after another child. This was the end of their life together [father and daughter], voyages by train and big hotels. Marianne then thought about leaving home, which she did without looking back, her pockets empty.

She studied the piano and lived in Belgrade with a musician friend whom she followed to Rome in 1941. Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany had invaded the Balkans. Returning to Belgrade, towards the end of 1943, Marianne hastened to join the Partisans’ fight against them.

¹ Alain Segura, *Une saison avec Marianne: La dernière surréaliste*, 96 pages, with nine illustrations, published by Plein Chant (Bassac, 2022). Texts and photographs taken from the publisher’s website: <http://www.pleinchant.fr/titres/Fontsecrete/Segura.html>. Translated from the French by NOT BORED! on 11 June 2022.

² Cf. the Second Surrealist Manifesto (1929).

³ Cf. René Daumal’s *Mount Analogue: A Novel of Symbolically Authentic Non-Euclidean Adventures in Mountain Climbing* (1952).

After the war, she joined a puppet theater group, in which she met a poet who would become her husband, Radovan Ivsic.⁴ Among many literary works, they translated Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* [from French into Croatian]. They came to Paris together at the beginning of the 1950s. Contacts made with the artistic avant-gardes in Yugoslavia led them to participate in the activities of the Surrealist group, which Marianne would continue to do until the death of André Breton.

I met Marianne in the fall of 67 thanks to anarchist friends. She'd been living apart from Radovan for several months. She lived alone in their apartment on the rue Galande.

I was very young then and cautiously stayed on the sidelines. Draped in a long black raincoat, her words were as sharp as a razor. It also wasn't good to meet her gaze directly. Those same anarchist friends, who were close to the situationists, introduced her to Guy Debord. At the time, Guy was often surrounded by sycophants. Not the case with Marianne, who posed unsettling questions: "What is this group that includes no women?" She struck hard, even at the entrenchments in which revolutionary, clear consciences (too often workerist) took shelter. "We had never been subjected to such a critique," said an amazed Guy, who immediately came up with a nickname for her: *the Last Surrealist*.

It was in the fall of 1968 that I started to go to rue Galande. We were a few friends who shared reading sessions with her, often daily, in the evening, until just before the departure of the last train.

Marianne made occasional trips to Yugoslavia on the behalf of an import-export company that specialized in fashion.

She started painting, when she lived on the rue Charlot, in order to justify the status of artist that she'd declared to the owner of modest studio that was in poor condition but on which her heart was set.

When she arrived in Paris, she was also a typist at an office on the Champs-Élysées, where, under the amused but benevolent eyes of the secretaries, she typed with one finger.

At the beginning of the 1970s, she found work as a part-time proofreader, even though, to complete the work that she'd scrupulously been doing at home, she had to work late into the night.

She died at the Saint-Antoine Hospital on 14 August 1995.

Since then, I often see myself, in my mind's eye, taking the starry path that led to her studio.

⁴ A Croatian poet, translator and dramatist (1921-2009). After his separation from Marianne, he married Annie Le Brun, another member of the Surrealist group. In a letter to Dario Markovic dated 13 March 1993, Guy Debord refers to Radovan Ivsic as "my friend": <http://www.notbored.org/debord-13March1993.html>.



The overlaid caption says, “84 - Curious Dead-End, 38 rue Charlot, Old Paris B.C. (deposit)”



Marianne Nikolic and Alice Becker-Ho, aka Alice Debord.