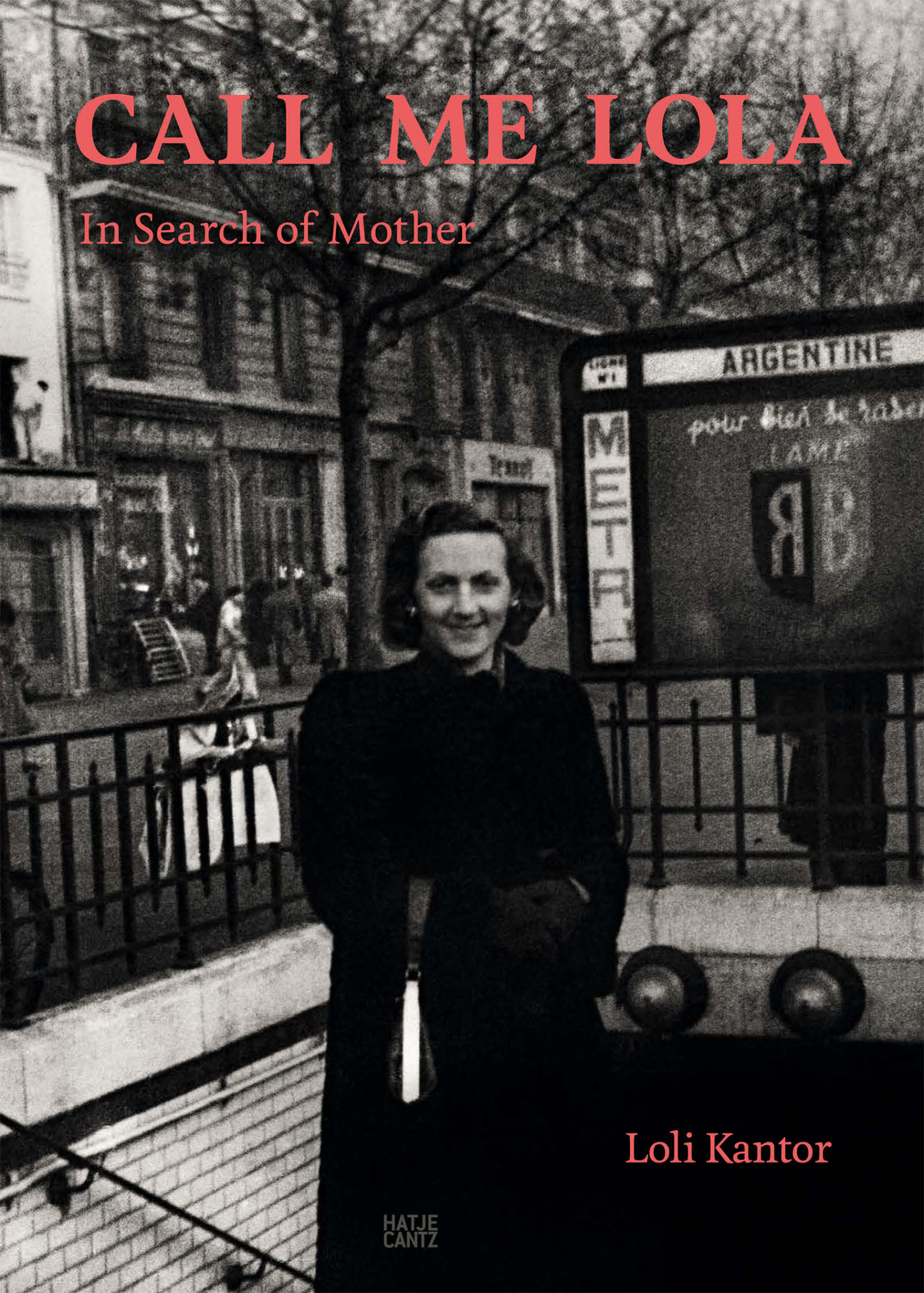
CALL ME LOLA

In Search of Mother



Loli Kantor

HATJE CANTZ

CALL ME LOLA

Loli Kantor

CALL ME LOLA

In Search of Mother

With an essay by Nissan N. Perez
and a conversation between
Loli Kantor and Danna Heller

HATJE
CANTZ

For Scott

Contents

14

Becoming Lola
Essay by Nissan N. Perez

24–184

Plates

185

Paris 12:05. Same Name, Different Story
A conversation between Loli Kantor and Danna Heller

226

Biographies

229

Acknowledgments

232

Colophon

fig. 1 L for Lola pin, 2023

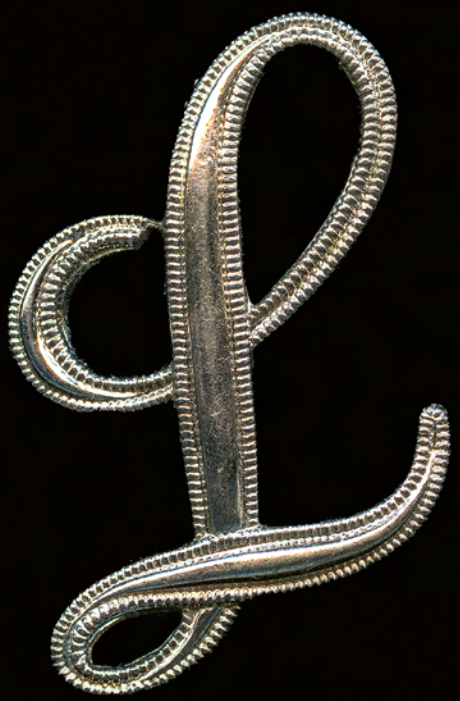


fig. 2 Loli Kantor in her studio, Fort Worth, Texas, US, 2012

fig. 3 Archive, 2022 (p. 10)

fig. 4 Memorabilia, 2022 (p. 26)

Becoming Lola

Loli Kantor's Journey in Search of Mother

Nissan N. Perez

The true picture of the past whizzes by.
Only as a picture, which flashes its
final farewell in the moment that it
can finally be recognized, is the past to be grasped.[1]

Walter Benjamin

In general, family ties are strengthened through photographs because "old" images have the capacity to capture the faces of parents, ancestors, and past events and preserve, among other things, precious moments of an individual's life: they tell a story. These representations are inevitably emotional and reinforce a sense of belonging and the continuity of lineage. Such a collection's narrative and visual chronicle form a legacy that generates bonds across generations and furthers a sense of identity. This is what artist Loli Kantor has been actively investigating in a long-term artistic project in search of memories, or rather, of inventing new ones. The boundary between real and acquired memories is often blurred. Yet the cognitive elements in memories are responsible for shaping personal identity. In Loli's case, family photographs are a treasure, but at the same time they are evidence of loss and the absence of intimacy. They become a source of mourning, pain, and trauma. This condition echoes Derrida's reflection on photography as a "pensive memory and ruin of what has previously passed, mourning and melancholy, the specter of a moment."[2]

Camera images "know" what we, the viewers, do not know or often fail to see. By their very nature, photographs are witnesses of history and encapsulate memories. As coded visual messages, they contain information that, once deciphered, leads to a partially

1 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Gesammelten Schriften* I:2, trans. Dennis Redmond (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974).

2 Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires d'aveugle, l'autoportrait et autres ruines* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1990), p. 72.

fractured knowledge of the past. The coded messages they deliver induce new insights and stimulate a decrypting of what Walter Benjamin called "dialectical images." In this context, historian Pierre Nora, who argues that memory and history are opposites, speaks of a constellation of three terms that reverberate and complement each other: heritage, memory, and identity.

Memory, strictly speaking a phenomenon linked to the psychology and physiology of an individual person, now encompasses a broad spectrum of meanings related to the different forms of presence, real or imaginary, of the past in the present; it could almost be said to have replaced "history," which by definition refers to a social and collective phenomenon.[3]

Numerous philosophers, especially in the early twentieth century, have discussed the powers and failures of photography. Siegfried Krakauer and Walter Benjamin stressed the inevitable link between photography and history. Krakauer's theory established an apparent affinity between photography, memory, history, and the inner memory held by the image. "While photography grasps what is given as a spatial (or temporal) continuum, memory images preserve the given in so far as it means something."[4] On the other hand, in "Excavation and Memory," Walter Benjamin wrote:

He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the "matter itself" is no more than the strata which yield their long-sought secrets only to the most meticulous investigation. That is to say, they yield those images that, severed from all earlier associations, reside as treasures in the sober rooms of our later

3 Pierre Nora, "Foreword" in Helmut Anheier and Yudhishthir Raj Isar, *Heritage, Memory & Identity* (London: Sage Publications, 2011), p. ix.

4 Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," in *The Past's Threshold: Essays on Photography* (Zurich, Berlin: Diaphanes, 2014), p. 31.

insights—like torsos in a collector's gallery. It is undoubtedly useful to plan excavations methodically... genuine memory must therefore yield an image of the person who remembers.[5]

For over a decade, in her ongoing investigative project titled *Call Me Lola*, Lola Kantor—who often goes by her nickname Loli—has delved into her family archive, which is nothing more than an assembly of souvenir objects, family photographs, documents, and artifacts left by her father. For her, these are a repository of elapsed memories—not necessarily hers—that preserve concrete evidence and information, and thus enable her to investigate her family history and her place within it. Therefore, memory is essentially at the source of Kantor's artistic endeavor. For her, however, most of the objects and photographs do not and cannot induce recollection, as the facts and incidents they document were not lived or experienced by her. Some of the faces are of people she never met. Consequently, the process of foraging through and sorting the family archive has one goal: to create a corpus of nonexistent memories that would help Kantor define herself within a chaotic family history. It is important to note that, for the artist, the photographs from the family archive she exploits hold an importance limited to her personal history; by extension, however, they might also deal with the broader social and cultural roles of camera records and, to some extent, resonate with the work of Christian Boltanski based on anonymous photographic portraits drawn from historical archives. Moreover, these are not objects of nostalgia since such a sentiment is related to past experiences and lived moments nonexistent in the artist's life; rather, the present blends with a fictional past. Nostalgia has a wide-ranging artistic dimension, a private preoccupation, and often a source of longing that may generate creative forces.

Kantor bears the name of her mother, Lola, who died two hours after giving birth to her. Her life was defined by a succession of tragic

5 Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2 (1931–1934), "Ibizan Sequence," 1932, ed. Marcus Paul Bullock, Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 576.

events: the death of her father, Zwi Kantor, when she was fourteen years old and, later, the loss of her only blood brother Ami. This was a second loss as Ami and Loli were separated earlier in their lives due to unpredictable circumstances. She has no grandparents, her parents' families having perished during the Holocaust. Born to parents who escaped the Holocaust, Kantor herself is a typical second-generation survivor with all the implications of such a status; it is the underlying theme that informs her art. In fact, she does not hesitate to claim that, having lost her family during her lifetime, she experienced a second Holocaust. Marianne Hirsch, whose important work is in the study of memory of the Holocaust, introduced the concept of "postmemory" and linked this term to memories of the Holocaust trauma. "Postmemory is not identical to memory: whatever one experiences as postmemory is something one did not experience directly."[6] In Kantor's case, as a second-generation Holocaust survivor, it fully applies as she identifies with her parents and their history. Fortunately, her parents were not in the camps during the war, and her mother managed to survive through the use of false identities. Trauma, the fractures in her life, feelings of bereavement, and a sense of loss are the governing elements guiding Kantor's research. However, when it comes to the artist's mother, one cannot strictly qualify this as a loss, because that term implies the disappearance of a known person and involves memories of their existence.

For Kantor, her mother Lola remains no more than an image, the effigy of a woman facing her through old family photographs, and a person she never had the fortune to meet. She never saw her, touched her, or heard her voice. Kantor's sole contact with her is second-hand and visual, mediated by pictures and oral history. So, for her, the task of reconstructing the family history and her place in it is a self-assigned mission of pasting together elements through photographs aimed at filling in the many blanks in her life. This search becomes a Sisyphean undertaking of "remembering" a mother who did not

6 Dorian Stuber, "Review of Marianne Hirsch, The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature* 10, no. 2 (2013).

have a place in her life and events she never experienced. However, as Freud stipulated, Kantor cannot revive through photographs and documents repressed memories of her mother, as she has none. Memories, after all, are essentially related to the past as they were experienced.

"Photography is a mode of bereavement,"[7] wrote Eduardo Cadava. Through photographs, documents, and objects belonging to her mother, Kantor takes possession of her mother and attempts to make her part of her life. Similarly, when Roland Barthes discovered a photograph of his recently deceased mother (whom, unlike Kantor, he knew), he set out to explore the character of the medium through the angle of phenomenology and its relation to memory and did not hesitate to write that "photography has something to do with resurrection."[8] Yet, as Proust wrote earlier, it remains a search for "the faces of the dead that the passionate efforts of our memory seek yet do not find."[9] Concerning remembrance through photographs, Susan Sontag made the somewhat cruel statement: "Memory is, achingly, the only relation we can have with the dead."[10]

As part of her passionate journey of exploration, Kantor intersperses the sequence of reproductions of family objects and photographs with images she created while accomplishing the project, as elements that eventually complement the narrative and place herself in the recreated family history. As she clearly says, these are not mimetic resemblances and are not necessarily "technically perfect" images. However, often purposefully blurred or out of focus, they are intended to convey a particular mood or state of mind. It seems their purpose is to depict vagueness and an impression of fading memories while still evoking their visual power. The personal photographs she created have no explicit narrative and no excessive drama. These silent scenes are devoid of tears and yet suffused with emotion. They relate to places and situations in her family's past and

7 Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light – Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 11.

8 Roland Barthes, *La Chambre Claire* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma Gallimard Seuil, 1980), p. 129.

9 Marcel Proust, *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 553.

10 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. 90.

are not necessarily linked to first-hand personal experiences, primarily retaining an implied associative sentimental connection to the old images in the family archive she preserves so religiously. Once combined and aligned in a sequence, however, the fusion of old and new creates a unique fluid visual grid and an altered reality—one in which she imposes herself as part of the larger narrative through her vision and interpretation of signs and situations. In her case, the photographs become what Susan Sontag called "objects of memory." In the same vein, Sontag also wrote: "The problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs. This remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding and remembering."[11]

As an artist, it seems that Kantor has embarked on a Proustian adventure. Like Proust, she set sail *In Search of Lost Time* or in quest of *Remembrance of Things Past*. However, while Proust's remembrances were based on past experiences and involved a process of recollection, Kantor has been creating/inventing a historical narrative that would fill in the gaps in her personal history. Her search is based on the evidence provided by old photographs. However, these photographs reflect petrified events, images, and moments that immediately became artifacts of the past once the camera recorded them. Proust wrote about the visual power of memory "introducing the past into the present without changing it, just as it was when it was the factual present, memory precisely abolishes the large dimension of Time according to which life is realized."[12]

Photography can be seen as a system that captures memories and suspends moments in time, allowing us to remember people, places, and events that we might otherwise forget. They have a unique ability to transport us back in time, evoking powerful emotions and memories and preserving them in one's history. They are often bound to nostalgia. The family photographs reproduced by Kantor are often

11 Ibid., p. 70.

12 Proust, *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, p. 1681.

faded and, in the case of color prints, the tones have shifted with time. This adds to the nostalgic quality of the series and evokes the fading of memories. The question is, what are memories? As Umberto Eco affirmed: "Physically speaking, memory is a record (an imprint, a print), an ordered macro arrangement, the order of which is preserved: a frozen order, so to speak. Memory helps us reestablish causal links, reconstruct facts."[13] However, this principle does not apply to Kantor since the moments and experiences in the photographs are not hers. Kierkegaard stated: "We can understand life only backward and live it forward." Acting like a meticulous historian, Kantor recreates a document-based visual past that remains imaginary as it was not experienced in person. It attempts to reverse time to fill a gap in her life and discover her personal history. The family photographs Kantor uses are a tool not to revive faded memories but to create new and nonexistent ones. Through her invented memories, she attempts to reverse the course of time. These memories depend on the fixed moments in the photographs and the immobility of the images and objects she reproduced for her project.

Marc Augé argued that "[a]dhering to the image could lead to illusion in the Freudian sense of the term, but nevertheless, a total illusion, which means an effect of truth which does not correspond to any reality."[14] By discovering and untangling family secrets that were kept from her for a long time, her mother's elusive image is reshaped or reconstructed through the artist's imagination, interpretations, and fantasies. In the end, Loli does not know who her mother is, as Lola Kantor lived (or rather, survived) in Europe during the war under a false identity and the pretense that she was a Roman Catholic.

The many photographs Kantor possesses of her mother cannot evoke any memories as there are none, and, as Proust wrote, "the visual power of memory" is ever absent. Thus, Loli's project is an incessant attempt to seek and identify with her mother, creating an illusory

13 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 49.

14 Frédéric Lambert, ed., *L'expérience des images: Umberto Eco, Marc Augé, Georges Didi-Huberman* (Bry-sur-Marne: INA, 2011), p. 62.