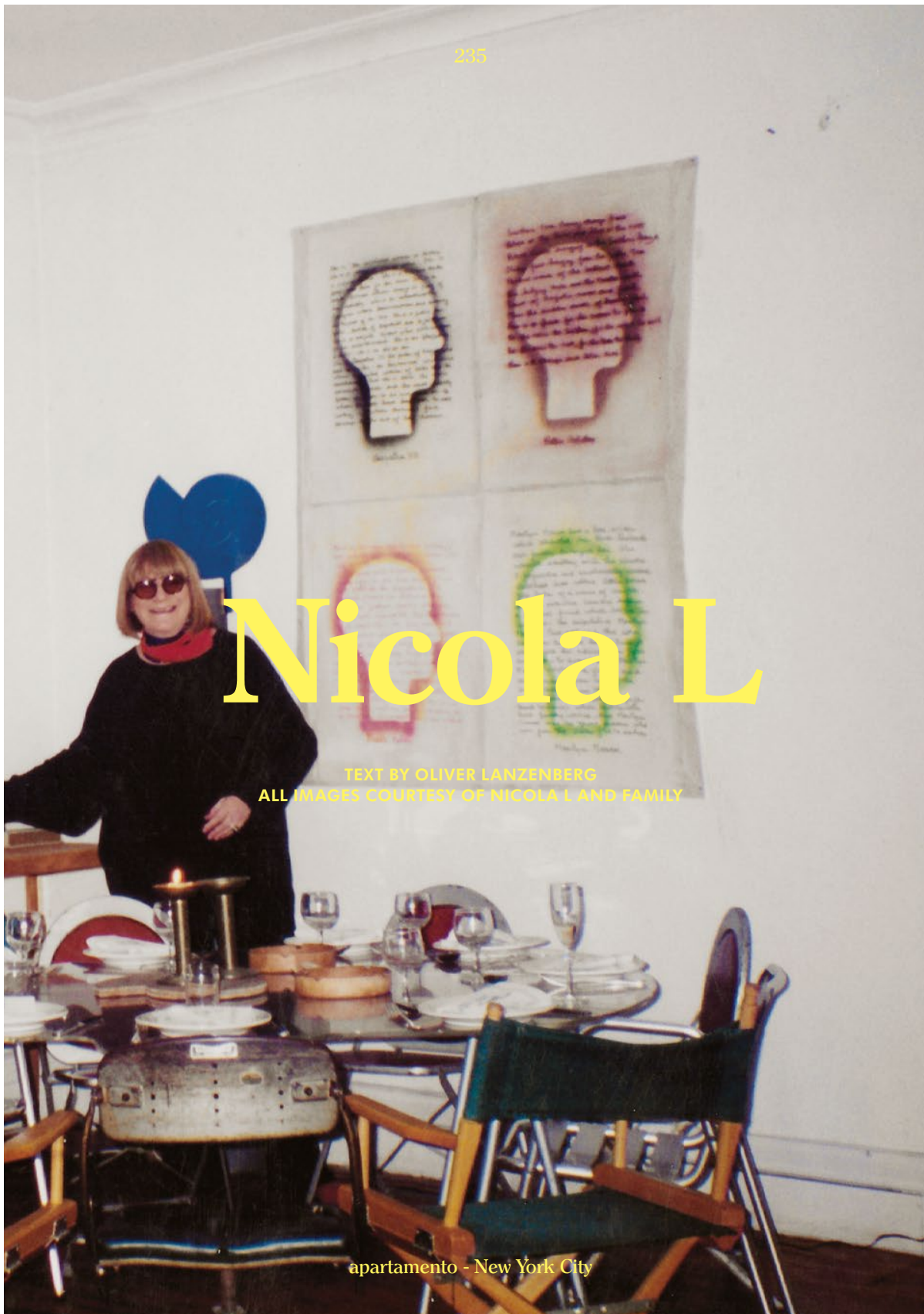




Living with



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Nicola L

TEXT BY OLIVER LANZENBERG
ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF NICOLA L AND FAMILY

apartamento - New York City

There was one faux pas growing up as Nicola L's grandsons, and it was instilled into us early and with fervour: we could absolutely not refer to her as grandmother. Or grandma, or grand-mère, or anything that would suggest she could possibly be old enough to have offspring with offspring of their own. Nicola takes pride in the contradicting birth years scattered among her legal documents. Simply *Nicola* would do.

Nicola was born to French parents in Mazagan, Morocco, in a year between the mid to late '30s that shall never be known with certainty if she has any say in it. Her family moved to the French countryside after the Second World War,



Nicola with friends Carolee Schneemann and Rita Barros at the Chelsea Hotel, New York City, 2003.

and Nicola eventually made her way to Paris to attend the *École des Beaux-Arts* after high school. It was around this time that her name was changed from Nicole to Nicola, when applying for a school grant, in an effort to pass for male on paper. It worked, and the name stuck.

In the early '60s, Nicola began to spend a considerable amount of time in the quaint island town of Ibiza, Spain. Here, she befriended the artist Alberto Greco, whose mentorship helped guide her away from the strictly two-dimensional oeuvres she had

been creating up to that point. Nicola first conceived of her *Pénétrables* in Ibiza. These were human-like figures framed within a rectangular canvas but with limbs protruding and eyes cut out from the face. A *Pénétrable* can be hung on a wall but can be just as easily pulled off and worn as a pseudo-costume. This concept later evolved into *Red Coat Same Skin for Everyone*: an actual coat large enough to fit 11 people that was first introduced and performed on stage at the Isle of Wight Festival in 1969, and later travelled the world. As quoted by Alan Jones in his 2005 portrait of Nicola, 'At Ibiza, she became an artist'.

From this point on, between her time spent in Ibiza, Paris, New York City, and Montauk, Nicola's work continued to morph between wearable, performative, and cinematic work, then back to collage and painting. Perhaps most famously though, Nicola delved into functional art in 1967 when she exhibited *Giant Foot*, a large, vinyl, foot-shaped couch exactly as long as Nicola was tall. *Eye Lamp* and *Lips Lamp* soon followed when Nicola developed a fascination with plastics. Nicola was beginning to establish herself as a sculptor, but it was important for her works to live a life outside the constraints of 'Art'. *Giant Foot* is especially comfortable to lie on, and Nicola's lamps can illuminate a space just as well as any light fixture with the flick of a switch. 'I refused to create sculptures that were not going to be used for something. I did not want to make décor'.

Growing up in Los Angeles, my brother and I knew Nicola in spurts. We would sometimes visit New York without our parents, and she would



Nicola with two of her *Eye Lamps*, 1995.

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Nicola at the Chelsea Hotel, New York City, 2002. Previous spread: Christmas at the Chelsea Hotel, New York City, 1995.



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Above: Nicola's son David Lanzenberg sat on her piece *The Hand Sofa*, Paris, 1972. Photograph by Brigitte Muus.
Below: Nicola's son Christophe Lanzenberg sat on her piece *Giant Foot*, Paris, 1968.
Opposite page: Nicola at her Meatpacking District studio loft, with pieces *Red Coat* and *Aquarium Head Bar*, 1996.

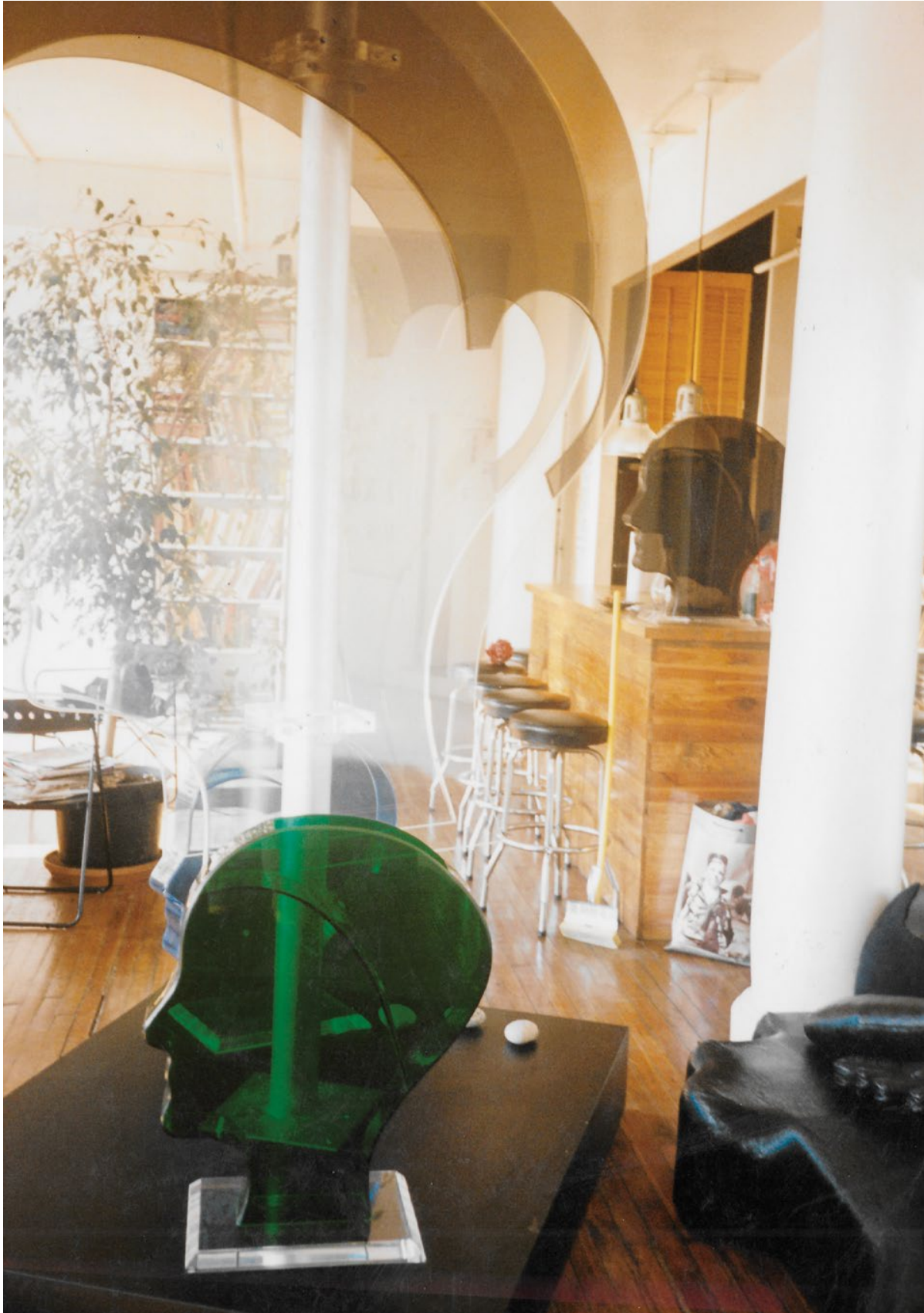
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Eye Lamp, circa 1980. Opposite page: Nicold's loft on Broadway, New York City, circa 1980.

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Nicola's Chelsea Hotel apartment, New York City, mid '90s to early '00s.

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come to Los Angeles for holidays from time to time. Still, we were close despite our limited time together. But Nicola was a curious figure from a child's perspective. A larger-than-life personality, proudly independent, and unapologetically comfortable with throwing a full-on party when her 10- and 12-year-old grandkids were visiting from out of town—Nicola doesn't embody what most children think of as an 'adult', and certainly not a 'grandparent'. I've lived in New York City for nearly a decade now, so I've had the pleasure of getting to know Nicola as more than just my wacky artist grandmother who would fax us cheques as Christmas gifts. She will now proudly introduce me as her grandson to anyone who will listen, but over the years I've also become her chauffeur, tech support, art handler, friend, and so many other things. I've spent countless hours in her ninth-storey apartment in the Chelsea Hotel, sitting on her big, green, head-shaped couch, sipping Côtes-du-Rhône, and fondly listening to the same stories over again. A close friend of hers once warned me to pay attention to as much of what she had to say as I possibly could. I wouldn't always have the luxury of having such a person within arm's reach. I've tried taking this to heart. Nicola likes her apartment filled almost exclusively with her own art, and because of the nature of Nicola's work, this pertains to the furniture as well. As a result, the Chelsea feels almost as if it is a live-in gallery space, but one without security personnel pestering you for getting too close to the art. Spend any time in Nicola's Chelsea apartment and you'll in fact be rewarded with quite the opposite experience. An experience in which the artist herself is pleased if you nestle comfortably on the aforementioned green-head couch or maybe even eat a meal atop the glass dining table in the shape of her signature snail figure. Nicola has no qualms if a guest asks to closely inspect the mechanics of any particular lamp of hers or wants to have a go at opening and closing the body part-shaped drawers inside the *Femme Commode's*



Nicola with Larry Vickers in her piece *Red Coat*, New York City, circa 1980.



Josh, New York City, circa 1980.

figure. One of Nicola's favourite stories these days involves my young cousin Milo's absolute joy upon discovering the *Femme Commode's* retractable vagina drawer.

Besides being stunning to look at, many of Nicola's works have practical functions in her living space, and are thus used accordingly. Nicola herself is not precious with these pieces, and so encountering them in a proper gallery setting can be comical. Of course I understand the importance of protecting her work from the sometimes dirty or clumsy masses that inhabit this world, but because my hands-on treatment of the work is so emphatically aligned with my experience of it, having to keep a safe distance from pieces on view can be slightly frustrating. I want to

swing open the cabinets and flick on the lamps. I want to slide my arms and legs into a *Pénétrable* as I often did as a child.

This is particularly true for works I am encountering for the first time in person. One such piece recently featured as part of an exhibit at the Sculpture-

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Nicola's grandson Oliver in her piece *Pénétrable*, late '90s.



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Above and opposite page: Christmas at the Chelsea Hotel, New York City, 1995.
Below: Nicola's grandsons Axel and Oliver Lanzenberg in *Snail Bird Cage*, New York City, 1996.

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Above: Nadia Fakhoury in *Snail Bird Cage*, Meatpacking District studio loft, New York City, 1996.
Below: Unknown (left) and Kirsteen (right) at Nicola's Meatpacking District studio loft, New York City, 1996.
Opposite page: Grace Jones with Nicola's *Lips Lamp*, New York City, 1991.

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Above: Josh at the Chelsea Hotel, New York City, 2001.
Below and opposite page: Nicola's Montuak home, 1990.

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Nicola in *Renetrale* at the Chelsea Hotel, New York City, 1991. Photograph by Rita Barros.

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Nicola's brother, Jean-Claude Leuthe, in her Meatpacking District studio loft, New York City, 1995.

Center was 1969's *Little TV Woman: 'I am the Last Woman Object'*. As the name would imply, *Little TV Woman* is in the shape of an anonymous female figure, but where the stomach would normally be positioned instead sits a television set. Once upon a time, *Little TV Woman* lived in my father's Parisian childhood bedroom and was loved far more for its function than its form and feminist implications. Nicola has loved reminding us for as long as I can remember of my father's teenage habit of stuffing dirty dishes in *Little TV Woman's* drawers (disguised as breasts) after consuming whatever snack he got his hands on after *lycée*. When I finally encountered *Little TV Woman* in person in September of last year, my mind began racing at the idea of flipping the channels of the television set as my father once had and investigating those famous dirty-dish drawers. Maybe I'd even find stale, flaky remnants of a '70s-era croissant wedged deep in a corner. I held back.

My most distinct memories of those childhood trips to New York are the days we would spend in Nicola's studio in the Meatpacking District.

We'd usually spend our time cutting and gluing together collages or climbing all over whatever body part-shaped furniture she had lying around. A few months ago, when diving deep into her storage while assembling pieces for the SculptureCenter show, we came across several boxes containing decades of photographs taken around the world. Most were snapped by Nicola with her 35mm still camera. One that jumped out was a photo of my brother and me trapped inside a large, snail-shaped birdcage at Nicola's studio. We are staring at Nicola behind the camera and completely oblivious to the fact that what we are horsing around in is considered a work of art—one that was more than likely put on view later in time and thus meticulously cared for. Of course Nicola not only did not care about any of this, she suggested we get in it in the first place.

The photographs displayed beside this text were found in those same boxes. They span from the late '60s through to the early '00s.

The photos are meant to exemplify Nicola's candid relationship with her own art as it pertains to her life and the lives of her closest friends and family members. There is no knowing Nicola without knowing her work, and because of this, her art embodies an important character of its own in these intimate photographs of her life and ours.



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