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On Dorothy Iannone

The willingness to continually revise one's own location in order to place oneself in the path of beauty is the basic impulse underlying education. One submits oneself to other minds (teachers) in order to increase the chance that one will be looking in the right direction when a comet makes a sweep through a certain patch of sky. The arts and sciences, like Plato's dialogues, have at their center the drive to confer greater clarity on what already has clear discernability, as well as to confer initial clarity on what originally has none.

— Elaine Scarry, from *On Beauty and Being Just*

DOROTHY IS MY EDUCATION—I place myself in her path and experience beauty each time, am changed by that beauty. I've been attempting to write an essay of reasonable length about Dorothy's artwork for eight months, since I went to Berlin to studio visit and interview her about art for an upcoming book project; that we spent hearty portions of that journey instead talking about Buddhism, drinking Darjeeling tea, and eating delicate miniature gold-leafed cakes that Dorothy taxied across town to obtain each morning as gifts, has left me reeling on the Dorothy path ever since, one that is at once astute, focused, and intense, yet paradoxically giddy with digression concerned with love and how people are altered by it. What's arrived instead of an art critical essay, then, has so far been a prose poem about how I consider Dorothy my spiritual grandmother, and a set of clunky collages I stitched together and sent her with some tea to replenish her depleted supply.

The interminability of what I've come to call my "Dorothy essay" has yielded funny conversational slippages in my household—my new partner, who I met right after I returned from visiting Dorothy as if she had magically willed love into my life, asked me recently what my daily plans were with the phrasing, "Are you working on Dorothy today?" Yes I am, I've come to realize, every day is Dorothy day, even if that means reading essays about Zen, spelling words out of almonds on my desk to photograph nutty vocabulary, or negotiating fair deals as a woman author and academic incrementally learning advocacy for herself in the professional realm. I could substitute "working on Dorothy" to "Dorothying," for to think of

her provokes industry in my own practice; her prolific dedication to artmaking kickstarts me on potentially lazy days. To bring Dorothy's pioneering spirit into mind is to invite Romanticism, Work Ethic, Adventure, Determination, Eros, Mystery, Indomitability, and Merriment into one's life.

Dorothy's artwork is art to live in, that confers, as Scarry says, "greater clarity on what already has clear discernability," and that confers "initial clarity on what originally has none." That's akin to my working definition of sacred art, but I don't wish to impose that loaded term onto Dorothy's sportive, intrepid, diverse, and theatrical art practice. I marvel at its combination of reverence and irreverence. I admire its calibration of narrative eloquence and pictorial lucidity. I respect the insertion of the body into the work, how performance and characterization activates the graphic. While I don't recall where I first discovered Dorothy's art, I recall vividly, and more importantly, the sense that I'd found a teacher in the work. Beyond its appeal to my radical feminist side, I appreciated immediately the candid, lyrical stories of unerring, heroic bravado cut with earnest irresolution and trepidation within which the characters in her art deliberate, then act, then chart results of their actions.

Life in love or on the edges of love, Dorothy's autobiography is transformed into something much more vigorous, assiduous, and beguiling than typical documentary that is yoked to notions of veracity. In my scribbled notes from our visit, I have two diagrammed interview snippets that paraphrase Dorothy's statements and my reactions about memoir as a genre: 1/ "Autobiography = categorization is too confusing, gave it up long ago"; and 2/ "Autobiography is all the work = in simultaneous time: all present/all past." Dorothy's artwork as Bildungsroman often refers to specific occasions and events, of course, but the memories transfixed into material record become one body, just as one physical body (hers, mine) moves through the world in present time, incorporating remembrance (past) and hope (future). This unification and compression of time's experience (timelessness) is a chief source of beauty in Dorothy's art, and one of its main sources of education for me. This beauty offers me a modeling, a kind of moral musculature that informs my aesthetic tastes, yes, but extends far beyond that into ways I construct my own records of experience, ways of thinking about and looking at the world as a series of challenges—failures and triumphs implicit—that cohere into a massively miraculous and jubilant vision.