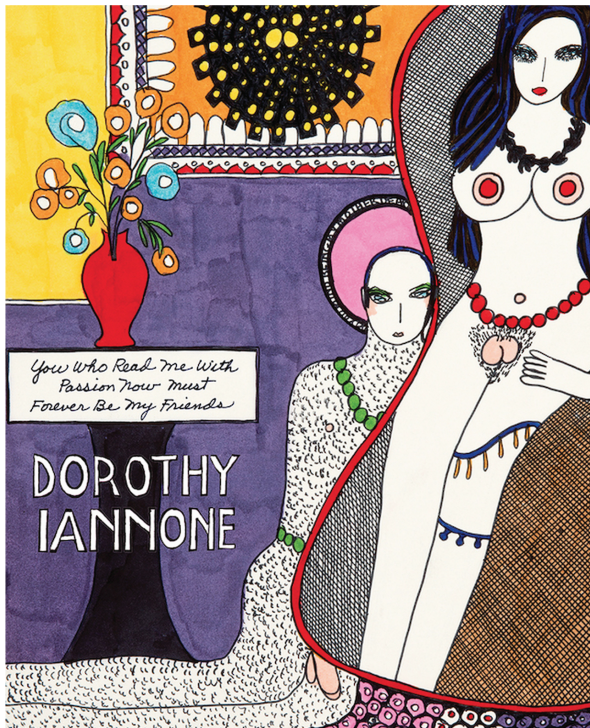


BOOKS • WEEKEND

Making Muses: Dorothy Iannone's Erotic Art Was Inspired by Dieter Roth

by Nicole Rudick on December 14, 2014



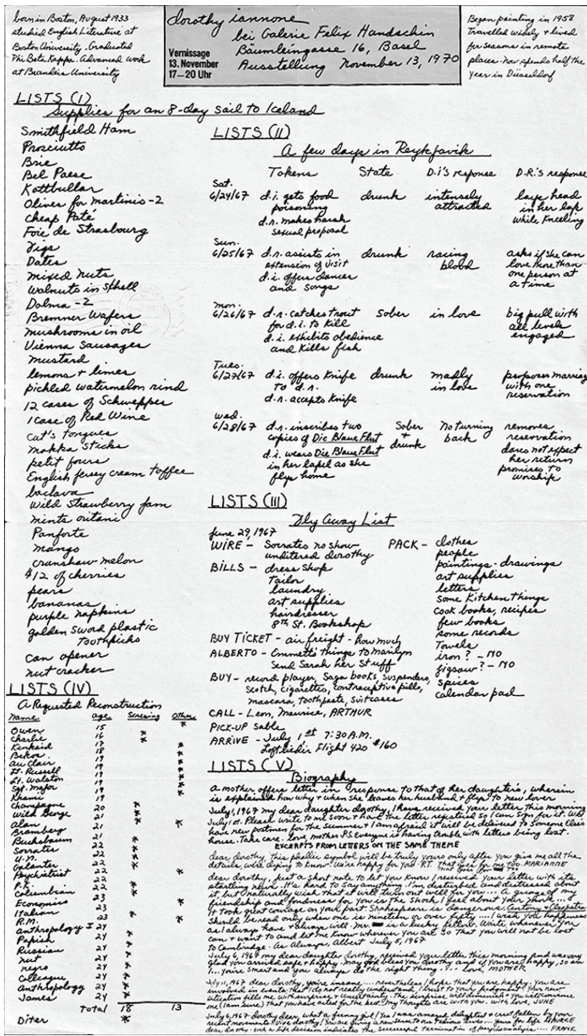
Cover of "You Who Read Me With Passion Now Must Forever Be My Friends" (2014), published by Sigilo Press

It's fitting that *An Icelandic Saga* opens Sigilo Press's new collection of Dorothy Iannone's image-and-text artworks. Writing the *Saga* retrospectively — in 1978, 1983, and 1986 — Iannone describes her trip to Reykjavik in 1967 as the "journey which seems to have made all other journeys possible." It was there she met the artist Dieter Roth, with whom she swiftly fell in love and for whom she left her husband and a comfortable life in the United States. But it also marks the start of another kind of journey: Iannone's maturation as an artist and her lifelong quest to achieve ecstatic unity, or "becoming one with another" by way of erotic love.

The idea has parallels in ancient cultures, Indian and Eastern religions, and certain sects of Christianity — an early conceptual influence for Iannone was Saint Theresa, whose immortalization in marble, by Bernini, she saw in her twenties — and though Iannone also borrowed visually from these antecedents (from fertility goddesses and Tantric figurative art, for instance), her method of exploration is very much her own, a journey of both flesh and spirit, life and art, one inextricable from the other.

And in fact, a half dozen pages into her *Icelandic Saga*, she momentarily breaks from the tale to express her gratitude for art. "Art is the world I have created which never lets me down," she writes, "a world to which I can return again and again and smile and be immortal." (Was she thinking of Bernini's sculpture at that moment?) Iannone is often smiling in her work, especially toward the end of the *Saga*, when she sees her new life with Dieter unfolding before her. She is also smiling in "I Was Thinking of You" (1975), which is a very different work. On the front of a large wood box covered with dense, vibrantly colored plant motifs and ornamental designs, Iannone painted a life-size man with a huge erection manually stimulating a woman's clitoris and touching her breast. In place of the woman's head is a small video monitor, on which Iannone's closely cropped face appears in a loop, as she climaxes again and again.

These two works, which appeared together at the New Museum in 2010 (she was then seventy-five, and it was her first, and to date only, US museum solo show), represent two interconnected aspects of Iannone's art: on the one hand, her memoiristic, narrative approach to art making in which her life is both subject and object of her art; on the other, her active, unfettered eroticism. There's lots of explicit sex in her work, but it's never intended as provocation or as an object for voyeurism (though it can be arousing). When, in "Lists (IV)" (1968), she recounts all of her lovers before Dieter, the chronicle is given rather dispassionately. Except for the subject matter, the work resembles a child's primer.

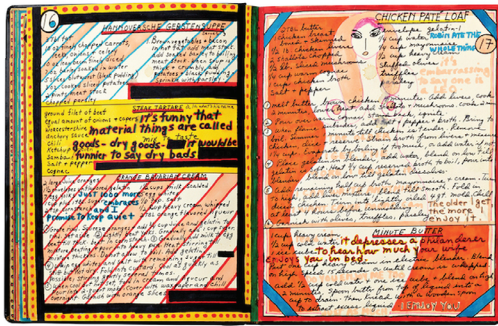


Dorothy Iannone, "Lists" (1970) in "You Who Read Me With Passion Now Must Forever Be My Friends," Sigilo press (courtesy of the artist and Aki de Paris, Paris. Photo by Hans-Georg Gaul)

In an interview with Trinie Dalton republished in the book, Iannone recalls a carpet that covered the floor of her playroom as a child: "It was divided into large square areas and in each square a nursery rhyme was printed with big illustrations in bright, gay colors." "Lists (IV)" is a grownup equivalent: Neat, handwritten columns designating each man's name, Iannone's age at the time of the encounter, and a checklist accounting for whether their activities constituted "fucking" or "other." An illustration corresponds to each interaction: these are drawn, as is much of Iannone's art, as flat, two-dimensional spaces packed with ornament and interior detail; Iannone and her suitors engage in their pursuits in increasingly stylized, though rather crudely drawn poses. The vignettes are not theatrical, but representational, employing the language of iconographies, as hieroglyphics do.

In such pairings, writing is a form of drawing. Another of these, "Lists" (1970), is a conglomerate of five lists juxtaposed with one another on a single page. Text becomes an object; no longer is there an image and a piece of writing on a page, but a multiplicity of images. The spaces between lines and words, the rows of sentences and grouping of paragraphs, and the looping squiggles of Iannone's cursive handwriting provide graphic interest. When they are read, the lists offer a picture of what a period in Iannone's life looked like; they are words on a page, but cumulatively they form a portrait of their maker.

Another, and very different, example of this impulse is Iannone's *Cookbook* (1969), a 69-page book that is excerpted here in 26 pages. Iannone used felt pens to write densely packed text and to decorate the pages, which are flush with color and framed by patterned designs. Interspersed among the lists of ingredients and instructions are bits of introspection: sentences or fragments that are written in the fat script of a colored marker or in the thinner line of a black pen and then traced over or highlighted with a colored one.



Excerpt from Dorothy Lannone's "A Cookbook" (1969) in "You Who Read Me With Passion Now Must Forever Be My Friends," Siglo Press (courtesy of the artist and Air de Paris, Paris. Photo by Hans-Georg Gauß) (click to enlarge)

The scene is set on the book's first page, where Lannone combines her alternating annoyance and admiration for Dieter with her pleasure in cooking for him, noting that she wouldn't have made the book if not for the joy of feeding him. It's food prep as an outlet for both eroticism and self-reflection. On the facing page, amid a recipe for gazpacho, she writes, "Can you find the recipes?" Lannone's question gives pride of place to her ruminations, as if to say that among the reflections are recipes. Formally, it's less clear which came first. Did the notes of introspection occur to her after she had cooked the meals, or are the recipes simply a method for expressing her thoughts? In fact, the two are inextricable, and Lannone's self-reflexive fragments flavor the recipes. "At least one can turn pain to color" accompanies the recipe for gazpacho. Directly below it is one for lentil soup: "dorothy's spirit is like this: green and yellow." A recipe for blanquette de veau instructs one to cook the meat until tender. "The colors on this page are tender too," she writes. As are her feelings for her friend Emmett: "What I like about Emmett is that he has never hurt me."

The Cookbook includes dollops of humor — "What happens to my sensual animal theory when I am working ten hours a day. You've heard of a work horse?" — and wordplay, too: In a recipe for baked red snapper with grapefruit, Lannone opines that "the women's liberation movement proved their worth when they pointed out to the ladies that the vaginal deodorant was an insult." At the top of the page, almost lost in a red border, she quietly queries, "Do you like my red snapper?" The thoughts and conversations in the Cookbook make Lannone an essential ingredient; she becomes inseparable from the making of the food, as when a recipe for chicken pâté loaf is written over a self-portrait — her svelte form giving inadvertent excitement to lines of instruction.

If writing is a form of drawing, then the converse is also true: drawings, like text, are meant to be read, a reason Lannone's work reminds me so much of comic books. (I wrote on this aspect of her work for *Comics Comics* in 2010.) "Dialogues I" (1967) tells the story of her seduction of Dieter one night as they're turning off the lights to go to bed. The single-page work is divided into six panels that use minimal dialogue, so that the images primarily tell the story. She uses the same device in "Dialogues V" (1967) and, more abstractly, in "Dialogues IX" (1968).

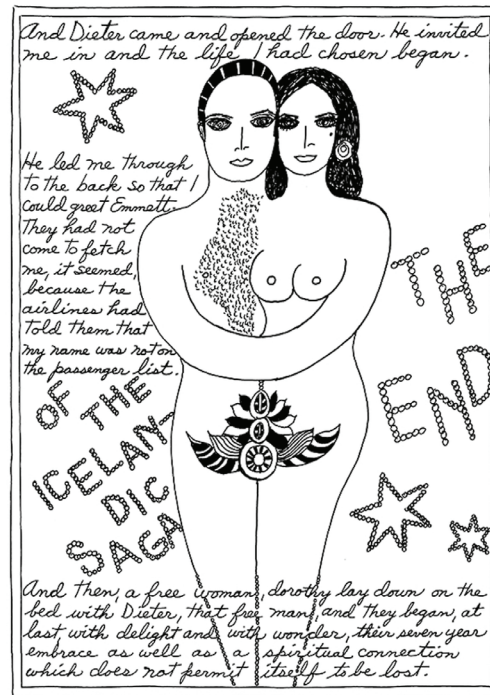


Excerpt from Dorothy Lannone's "Dialogues IX" (c. 1968) in "You Who Read Me With Passion Now Must Forever Be My Friends," Siglo Press (courtesy of Sylvie and Stéphane Corréard, Paris. Photo by Fabrice Gousseff)

The interwoven, interacting relationship of text and image — taking turns being read and being looked at — starts to reflect Lannone's conception of herself, as it relates to her "unity" with Dieter. The *Dialogues* describe episodes from Lannone's life that seemed significant to her; they tell stories by way of anecdotes involving erotic love, while at the same time highlighting, as Dalton says, "the ambiguities, enigmas, and incongruities inherent to love." Lannone describes the *Dialogues* as "a way of being with the beloved, even when we were apart" — a mode by which "two beings... become one yet also remain themselves." Because of this desire for complete unity, Lannone's identity in the *Dialogues* is slippery. She draws herself in different ornate guises that are vaguely Assyrian, Greek, and Egyptian. "Dialogue IX" (c. 1968) opens with a female centaur and the words "I am not D." In the next panel, a man asks, "Who are you then?" By the end, following a series of panels in which the female and male characters work through having caused one another hurt, the female character concedes, "I'll be D. again." Curiously, the initial D. could stand for Dorothy or Dieter, and though details of the narrative imply the former, the ambiguity seems intentional (in other works, she refers to herself and Dieter as "D & D"). Or, as Lannone writes in a text titled "Speaking to Each Other," (1977), an ode to her friend Mary Harding, "Mary Harding who could just as well be Dorothy Harding or Hilda Harding or Dieter Harding."

Frequently, though particularly in the *Saga*, Lannone switches between first and third person; sometimes she is the subject while other times she stands with us as the narrator. The shift in voice is evidence that she is always something more than a single being, that she is always, as she says, "avoiding tyranny" — of self, of identity. This reversal occurs visually, too: in the *Dialogues* and "Lists (IV)" and in her longer stories — such as the odd, entrancing *Danger in Düsseldorf (Or) I Am Not What I Seem* (1973) — Lannone alternately faces the reader and turns her back so that she, like us, is observing the action on the page. In her fictional tales, the female characters largely resemble the way Lannone draws herself — Anna in *Danger in Düsseldorf* and Trixie in *Trixie, the Connoisseur* (1978) — so that they are her and not her. "Is not the opposite of all I say also true," she proclaims in a drawing called "Flora and Fauna" (1973).

When Lannone and Dieter are together sexually for the first time — what she calls, in third person, the beginning of "their seven year embrace" — she shows them standing side-by-side, facing the reader, with their arms encircling one another, and they appear physically conjoined. They are two beings who overlap — both more and less than a duality. Existing as distinct but unified entities enables, she says, "a kind of total immersion" in the other person.



Excerpt from Dorothy Lannone's "An Icelandic Saga, Part Three" (1986) in "You Who Read Me With Passion Now Must Forever Be My Friends," Siglo Press (courtesy of the artist and Air de Paris, Paris)

Of George Meredith's titular character in *Diana of the Crossways*, Diana believed passionate feeling to be "the undoing of a woman Lannone believed otherwise; Eros is essential to the unity of flesh "The exclusion of Eros from life," Lannone opines, "is more easily a woman also is denied her importance in humanity." Moreover, Dal woman can freely adopt and activate personae as she desires to do most evocative, complex and excitingly progressive themes." In and of their love, but is never subservient to him. She demands or to achieve an ideal union, and Dieter is depicted as pleasuring Ian pleases him. Interestingly, too, Dieter serves as her muse through It's a wonderful reversal of the traditional artist/muse genders.

Their relationship, however, lasted only seven years. In the work part of this book, Lannone's notion of ecstatic unity falters. She re her break with Dieter that "enduring" unity won't come through er found within the self, and Lannone learns to be her own muse, the