Ursula

REMAIN FOREVER TRUE

A final interview with Dorothy Iannone, Berlin, April 4, 2022

By Gesine Borcherdt

It was one of those cold, windy days when you'd rather be anywhere than gray Berlin. Deep in the west of the city, almost at the end of the Kurfürstendamm, the rain had turned the lawn on Olivaer Platz into a muddy brown patch where a few people were listlessly walking their dogs.

Shivering outside the entrance of an inconspicuous building off the square, I scanned the list of names at the door, mostly offices and law firms. When I finally spotted the right one, I pressed the doorbell and started freeing the tulips in my arms from their protective wrapping. I'd picked a shade that I thought might suit Dorothy Iannone and her home: orange, the color of enlightenment in Buddhism. After all, Iannone—whose joyously copulating figures, explicit text, and religious symbology has been frightening the art world for more than half a century—was a devoted Buddhist. And after decades dedicated to depicting earthly love, especially for her longtime partner, the artist Dieter Roth, she had found ecstatic unity with herself, along with an abiding love for this city, where she had lived since 1976.

The door buzzed and I crossed the lobby. A suited man joined me in the elevator and, spotting my flowers, asked: "You visiting our neighbor?" When I nodded, he smiled: "She's very charming!" Iannone, who was eighty-nine, met me in her doorway, dressed in black from head to toe, including her Reebok Classics and elegant turban. Only her horn-rimmed glasses displayed a fleck of color, a burgundy rim matching her lipstick, and little embroidered golden

hands waved in welcome from the front of her woolen sweater. Her apartment and studio seemed like a carefully composed refuge, reminiscent of a temple, the walls and shelving white, the curtains and sofa cushions in oranges and deep reds. Her own work filled the walls between shelves bearing hundreds of bookmarked books, records and video cassettes. She worked at a large desk equipped with a laptop and a magnifying glass. Above the corner of a sofa hung an artfully knotted kilim that matched the cushions. “I bought them about forty years ago in a small shop in Camden Town, London,” she told me, her voice high and hoarse. “The guys who owned it had been living in Afghanistan during the time of a drought, which forced the nomads to sell their treasures. By the time I arrived at the shop, the Rolling Stones had already bought the larger part, but they missed several masterpieces, so I was very fortunate!”

Dorothy Iannone, *The Statue of Liberty*, 2018. Acrylic on wall, dimensions variable. As shown, 140 x 104 in. (355 x 265 cm). Ed. of 3 plus 1 A.P. Courtesy Peres Projects, Berlin, Milan, Seoul

I noticed that our tour followed a deliberate staging, ending with her bedroom and the meditation room that opened off of it, its walls filled with Tibetan Buddhist paintings, both of the spaces inextricably linked with her work, which sought to be nothing less than a celebration of love. “Would you like some tea now?” she asked. As she steered us to the kitchen, it struck me again how few people I knew in the art world were familiar with the work of Iannone, who had lived and worked here for so many years, building such a profoundly individual body of painting, drawing, collage, photography and sculpture, a collective work that she describes as “an ecstatic unity.”

Born in Boston in 1933, Iannone was two when her father died. Her mother, Sarah Pucci, raised her alone. Her ancestors came from Italy, as one might guess not only from her name but from the objects lovingly showcased in display cabinets in Iannone’s apartment, little handmade devotional art pieces her mother began making after Iannone married and moved away—glittering hearts and balls decorated with sequins and pearls.

In 1958, Iannone had just finished an English literature degree when, on a summer break in Cape Cod, she met James Phineas Upham, an Abstract Expressionist painter. Iannone had been awarded a scholarship to pursue doctoral studies at Stanford, but she left it behind, married that same year and moved to Greenwich Village with Upham. As she later recounted in her *Notes for an Autobiography (Part VII)*, it didn’t take her long to understand

that though she was "filled with a sense of the vast promise of the world around me … marriage was in no way a substitute for one's own work … And somehow I knew that having a child, which was the natural next step prescribed by society, would not have answered the need I felt to become myself." So one afternoon she began to paint, gently and humbly at first, fumbling with her fingers. "Something clicked and there was never any question about going on," she said. She was twenty-six. Her first paintings were strikingly twodimensional and ornamental, influenced by extensive travels with her husband to North Africa, India, Cambodia, Thailand and Japan. Early on, however, a key figurative element began to emerge from her abstraction—genitals attached to small naked men and women.

This radical turn in Iannone's work took place in 1967, shortly before she and her husband embarked on a transformative boat trip to Iceland. She began making a series of works called People, decorated wooden figures whose genitals were clearly exposed. From then on, all her work turned toward the figurative, cheerily mixing illustrative and ethnologically staged compositions in order to tell her own story.

In *Notes for an Autobiography (Part II)*, she recounted laying eyes on Roth for the first time: "On Saturday, the 24th of June, the Brúarfoss arrives in Reykjavík. And Dieter Rot [sic], that great, great beauty, is on the pier waiting for us, with a very fresh fish, wrapped in newspaper, under his arm. Dieter, so fresh himself, so immersed in responsibility, so immersed in the urgency of his art, Dieter, nonetheless, a lover of beauties, is there waiting for us. And when I saw Dieter I knew I would change my life." What Iannone describes here is not only a powerful erotic spark but the foundations of an oeuvre that, over the next seven years, would revolve around Roth, one of the great loves of her life, who was living in Iceland at the time with his family. With the confidence of a male artist, she described Roth as her muse and, setting aside any sense of shame or fear of sexist or prudish rebuke, she revealed their sexual acts in densely drawn pictures. Titillating phrases such as *I Love To Beat You* or *Suck My Breasts, I Am Your Beautiful Mother* (both 1970/71) served as titles and boldly adorned the surfaces of the paintings themselves—work so freespirited and enthusiastic, so intimate, indecent, humorous and full of iconographic references that there seemed to be no artistic movement to put them in. Even the rambunctious, irreverent work then coming out of Chicago's Hairy Who scene and the city's Imagist movement seemed wellbehaved alongside Iannone's exultant saturnalia.

In short order, Iannone divorced her husband. She then dove headfirst into Roth's Fluxuscentered world, which included artists like Emmett Williams, George Brecht and Daniel Spoerri. She accompanied Roth to Basel,

London and Düsseldorf and began showing her work, beginning with an exhibition at Galerie Hansjörg Mayer in Stuttgart—where a work from People was promptly confiscated by the police. It would mark the start of an exhibition history profoundly affected by censorship. Iannone never made work purely for the sake of provocation, but neither did she moderate herself or back down from a fight. Just how central the issue of censorship was for her had already become clear in 1961, when she carried Henry Miller's novel *Tropic of Cancer* with her on a trip back to New York from France and it was confiscated at Idlewild airport because the book had been declared obscene under United States law. She filed suit against the Collector of Customs, arguing in part, with the help of the New York Civil Liberties Union, that she wanted to read the book "for her private pleasure." She won the suit, joining cases that ultimately reached the Supreme Court, which overturned the ban on the book in 1964.

In 1969, Iannone was to show work at the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland. Its director at the time, Harald Szeemann, had just presented his landmark exhibition "Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form," and its decidedly unartisticlooking objects had raised hackles. Next, he decided to invite four artists, including Dieter Roth, to exhibit works alongside their artist friends—and Roth of course chose Iannone. But even before the opening, Szeemann and some other "friends" decided to preemptively cover the genitals on her pictures with tape. Roth withdrew his work in protest, and Iannone removed hers, too. Instead, she drew an art gravestone, inscribed with: "Here goes Dorothy Iannone / who has only one complaint: She thought her friends were artists / but it turns out they ain't." She eventually told *The Story of Bern* in a kind of graphic novel, cheekily portraying the participants with their genitals hanging out in every picture.

In 1968, Roth accepted a graphic design professorship at the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf, and the city became Iannone's new home for seven years. Roth soon began traveling frequently for work and to visit his three children, who remained in Iceland. Iannone grew lonely, but instead of complaining, she processed her feelings through lyrical letters and paintings. Working at night, her companions, she said, were music, cigarettes and plentiful vodka. She was among the few female artists working in Düsseldorf at the time, and she was prolific. She created drawings, collages and largeformat paintings, built colorfully decorated chairs festooned with feathers, designed card games, artist's books and *Singing Boxes*, elaborately decorated containers with cassette tapes and integrated players inside, featuring songs she recorded with the thenstillemerging electronic band Kraftwerk. Hardly anyone understood that her love for Roth, to whom her work was dedicated, was a synecdoche for a more universal kind of love and that she saw her personal narratives as philosophically complex, feministpacifist statements.

Roth was just establishing himself on the art market, which was gaining momentum through the founding of the

big art fairs in Cologne and Basel. While he began to secure solo shows at important museums, Iannone's difficulttocategorize work struggled to find an audience. It wasn't only the graphic nature of her sexual fantasies that baffled people but also her "naïve" folkart style, which tacked hard against the prevailing pareddown, conceptual direction of the time. She did not receive an institutional retrospective until 1980, at the Neue Galerie Aachen, though many of her fellow artists revered her as a pioneer. "Dorothy Iannone's work has a unique place in modern art," George Brecht once wrote, "in an area practically untouched by other artists."

It had grown dark. Iannone got up to turn on a light and pull out a book she'd created listing all the lovers she'd had before Roth. He wanted to know about them, as lovers do, Iannone explained. One only has to think back to Tracey Emin's *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* (1995) to understand how far ahead of her time Iannone was with such work. She pressed a record into my hands, its pink cover bearing a drawing of a naked woman under a shower of stars and the inscription "EWIG GRÜN"—words from the song "Solang' noch unter'n Linden," made famous by Marlene Dietrich, about her love for Berlin. "When I was living in France in 1975, I made an audio cassette, singing lines from the song, 'Wenn keine treu Dir bleibe, ich bleib Dir ewig grün. Du meine alte Liebe, Berlin bleibt doch Berlin.' ['Even when no one stands by you, I'll remain forever true. My old love, you, Berlin, will always stay Berlin.'] I didn't have any particular plan when I started to sing, but somehow as I went along, I started caressing myself and my voice changed according to my feelings. Yet, despite what I was feeling, the discipline was to keep singing those four lines. The voice itself expressed the stages of sexual arousal. Shortly before orgasm, I was almost completely breathless and could hardly continue repeating the lines between gasps, and then suddenly, as the orgasm began, my voice became really strong and loud, soaring into the air for some moments before subsiding, as I very softly, managed to utter the concluding lines." Iannone told me all this as casually as if she were talking about a stroll along a river, and then she told me to take the record as a gift.

In 1974, she and Roth split. They remained friends, but she left Düsseldorf and moved to the South of France. Her money soon ran out, and she applied for a fellowship in Berlin. The artist Konrad Klapheck wrote her letter of recommendation: "Her work combines elements of folkloric ornamentation with an unfettered eroticism. Far from any obscenity, Ms. Iannone's paintings are filled with a paradisiacal zest for life that can only be enjoyed by an artist who wants to share her inner wealth with others."

She moved to West Berlin at the age of fortythree, in 1976. Though the walled city still had only a small art scene, it did have plenty of discos and drugs. The only good restaurant (and the first with white tablecloths) was Exil, where outcasts and artists felt equally at home. Roth was a regular, having decorated the back room with wallpaper patterned with beer glasses. The restaurant had been founded by Oswald Wiener; his wife Ingrid;

and Michel Würthle, all from Viennese Actionist circles. Iannone showed work in the restaurant's exhibition space and around the corner at Mike Steiner's StudioGalerie, one of the first spaces in Berlin to exhibit video art—including Iannone's *I Was Thinking Of You* (1975): a painted wooden box as tall as a person, equipped with an embedded monitor displaying her face in increasing expressions of elation—it's clear she's masturbating.

Nothing sold, but after the fellowship expired, Iannone stayed in Berlin, applying for city funding three times before she received her first grant, in 1980. It was a time when maledominated, wildly expressive painting was being rediscovered (had it ever been forgotten?) and the art world continued not to know what to do with Iannone. But as always, and perhaps even more so as she grew older, she was patient. She became a Buddhist in 1984. The influence of tantric painting, which she had known from travels to Asia, soon found its way into paintings such as *My Caravan* (1990). There, embedded amidst stars and hearts, sits a naked woman in the lotus position, on either side of her face the lines: "GOING ON WITH THE JOURNEY TOWARDS ULTIMATE UNION BUT NOW, BELOVED, NO LONGER SEEKING YOU OUTSIDE OF MYSELF WHERE ECSTATIC UNITY WITH YOU USED TO TAKE PLACE, SPORADICALLY, UNDEPENDABLY AND WAS, FOR ONE REASON OR ANOTHER, ENOUGH TIMES IMPOSSIBLE TO MAINTAIN, SO THAT FORCED FINALLY TO REALIZE THAT WAY WOULD NOT RESULT IN COMPLETION, I BEGAN TO LOOK FOR YOU IN MY OWN HEART." Tibetan Buddhism, in which the sexual act symbolizes the dissolution of opposites, allowed Iannone to move beyond earthly love to a more spiritual kind.

We were standing in her meditation room. I asked to what extent Buddhism determined her daily life. "While sitting, you learn to calm the mind through mindfulness and awareness," she said. "When thoughts arise, if you don't follow them, they will dissolve, and after a while another thought will arise, and with practice the space between thoughts will increase. It is one thing to do that while sitting, but more difficult when you rise from the pillow and try to integrate that knowledge into your everyday life, where distractions are plentiful."

It wasn't until 2012 that the Berlinische Galerie finally organized a muchdeserved German museum retrospective of Iannone's work. Before that, she had received considerable international attention at the 2006 Berlin Biennale, curated by Maurizio Cattelan, Massimiliano Gioni and Ali Subotnik. And in 2009, the New Museum in New York organized a solo show. But Iannone never had gallery representation in the United States and is scantly represented in public collections there. Things were slightly better in Europe, where she had a big solo show in 2022 at the Louisiana Museum in Denmark. But she was not included in the most recent Venice Biennale, which focused on longoverlooked or deliberately ignored women who worked fearlessly and steadfastly, often in isolation, as Iannone had.

Perhaps things would have been different had she left Berlin to work and show in London, New York or Paris, but it's hard to say. Why was she among the few American artists of her generation who stayed? "Although I loved Paris, somehow it was Germany which caught me," she said. "For one reason or another— love, work, exhibitions—I stayed on, year after year, until it was too late to ever want to leave. Berlin had become my home. And I am happy here." It was late and our visit drew to a close. I thanked her and said goodbye, and with her album under my arm, I stepped out into the cold, spotting lights where it had been dark before. I couldn't know that I would be the last writer to visit her as I did, spending time with her to write about her. Eight months later, on December 26, 2022, the day after Christmas, Dorothy died—or perhaps she was simply reincarnated into an even more pleasant vessel.