

Dorothy Iannone at M HKA: art's original bad girl

In the late 1960s, the biggest German curators tripped over the many penises and vaginas in her work, today the M HKA in Antwerp shows a survey of the late American Dorothy Iannone's explicit art. 'She was silenced for years.'

SOFIE VAN HYFTE 13 October 2023



The exhibition of American Dorothy Iannone in Antwerp has had a sad but beautiful run-up. Iannone died at the end of last year and was just able to help out with the broad outlines of *Love is forever, right?* in the M HKA. "Everything you see here was largely her choice," says Piet Van Hecke of the M HKA. "And that was her big wish anyway. Only it's particularly unfortunate that she will never be able to see the end result herself."

Iannone is one such artist who, despite her 89 years, died prematurely. Even before the term was invented, her work embraced autofiction, a combination of autobiographical elements and fiction. Just as we convey a filtered image of ourselves to the outside world through social media today, she did the same with the partly made-up stories from her life, and was central to her work.

"In her early works, she even literally applied these filters," Van Hecke says. "For example, she edited polaroids of everyday scenes with felt-tip pens. She adapted her reality to the version that was right for her. She was also very generous to her audience, who gained a wide insight into the life behind the artist through her very

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narrative style. Just as much an aspect that linked her work to the present. Today we know the background of most artists and authors, who are much more mediatised than they used to be.”

That Iannone’s work at times reads like a novel is not surprising. She studied literature in Boston before marrying the artist James Upham and settling in New York in her early years. This focus on the literary has therefore had a lasting influence on her work. For instance, we get caught up in her artful storytelling in *An Icelandic Saga* (1989), it’s about a boat trip she takes with Upham to Iceland, where upon arrival she has an encounter that changes her life.



In Iceland, she crosses paths with the Swiss artist Dieter Roth. The two instantly fell madly in love. As a result, she divorced Upham and followed Roth to Europe, where they lived between France and Germany. Not only did he become her muse, Roth also introduced her to the Fluxus artists, such as Robert Filliou and Ben Vautier, who had a great influence on her work.

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“By getting to know them, her work evolved towards Fluxus art, although she has always continued to deny it,” Van Hecke states. “The Fluxus artist wanted to bring art and everyday life closer together. Art had to become more democratic, not just for the elite. Anything could be art, and her autofiction fitted the definition perfectly. Although she always stayed true to figuration, which was difficult at the time. Everything had to be abstract and conceptual. Her work was too explicit.”

Iannone integrated erotic elements into her paintings early on. Every character, even if wearing clothes, was invariably given sex parts. That was simply part of her drawing style. She once told herself: “From the very first figures in my work, the genitals were present. For me, that was completely natural. I didn’t really think about it and certainly didn’t wonder if others might take offence.”

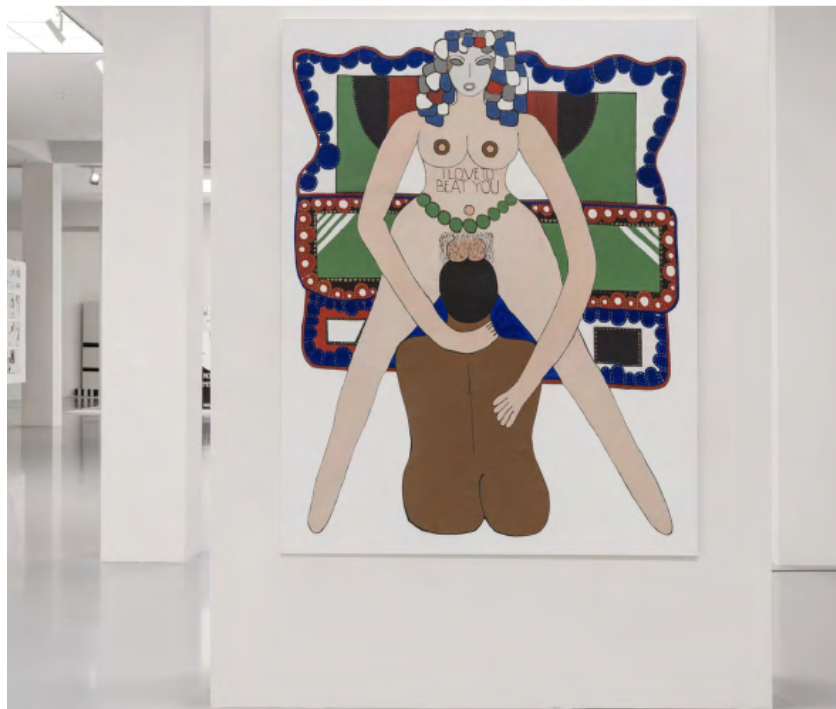
She had to deal with a lot of censorship during her career, though ironically that was exactly what she wanted to address with her work. Iannone strove for freedom, focusing on themes such as tantrism and Tibetan Buddhism. And although some feminists found her work problematic at the time, she also stood up for women’s rights.

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Iannone was often ignored or ridiculed in her career. Sometimes this went far. *People*, a series of painted wooden figurines, was confiscated by the police in 1967 at an exhibition in Stuttgart. The latter even invited a panel of professors and art critics to determine whether or not the work was pornographic. Nobody saw porn in it - otherwise her images would have been stored in underground vaults for a hundred years.

The incident did not stop Iannone from turning *The Story of Bern* into an artist's book two years later. It tells with words and images the story of the 1969 *Freunde - Friends - d'Fründe* exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern, where the great Swiss curator Harald Szeemann was director at the time.

Iannone had been invited by Dieter Roth to exhibit her work *(Ta)Rot Pack*, a set of twenty-seven Tarot cards that documents Dieter's protest against the censorship of her work. Picture by picture, you can follow how the board of directors and Harald Szeemann tried to censor her, until all of her the works - to the displeasure of the other artists - were removed from the exhibition by Dieter which lead to Szeemann resignation.



“A lot of prominent names in the art world cut their teeth on her work,” Van Hecke says. “And that lasted until well into the 1990s, until the position of the female artist became stronger and her work was viewed in a better light. Iannone was silenced for years. This is another reason why we wanted to let her speak for herself one last time, from the planning to the visitors’ guide. The spirit of the recently departed artist thus haunts the entire expo.”

Love is forever, right? runs until 21 January at M HKA, in Antwerp.