

APOLLO

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The passion projects of Dorothy Iannone

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Dorothy Iannone was not much of a joiner. She was friends with key members of the Fluxus movement, but laughed at the idea of being counted as a Fluxus artist. Tibetan Buddhism, Indian temple art and the Tarot were all important references, and she painted herself as a towering matriarchal deity, but was not, to my knowledge, part of the Goddess movement. Her work occupies a sticky intersection between spirituality and sexuality that does not fit neatly into feminist art. She was certainly interested in women's power, but also made a beautiful artist's book of the recipes she cooked as an act of devotion towards her 'beloved'. She was an intense romantic, who considered great lovers capable of ecstatic unity akin to enlightenment. Today, Iannone might be praised for 'taking up space' as a feminist gesture. She instead described herself in terms of passion – for eating, drinking, smoking, sleeping, sex and love.

Until her death in December 2022, Iannone worked with curators at the Museum of Modern Art Antwerp (MHKA) on the exhibition 'Dorothy Iannone: Love Is Forever, Isn't It?' (until 21 January). From the mid 1960s onwards, she put sexuality to the fore in the most literal way. The vulvas of her painted female figures protrude like vast hairy peaches, more tumescent and assertive by far than the hose-like penises she gives her men. Even when a character is clothed, their genitalia are visible on the outside of their garments, suggesting a latent awareness of potential sex accompanying us through life.

People (1966–67), a series of small wooden cut-outs, features a varied cast ranging from the fantastical – exotic dancers, demigods, supine nudes both male and female – to the mundane. Most have genitals on display,

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many of them improbably positioned – little more than floating glyphs suggesting sexual possibility. *People* was the first of many works by Iannone to attract the censors' attention. On the first day of exhibition at Hansjörg Mayer's gallery in Stuttgart in 1967, police confiscated all the figures and submitted them to a panel of art historians and critics who were tasked with judging whether the work was pornographic. They concluded that it belonged to an ancient tradition of erotic art and the work was returned and placed on display for the final day of the exhibition.



The year after Iannone started work on *People*, she had an encounter that transformed her life and art – an auspicious event later detailed in her multi-panel work *An Icelandic Saga* (1989). In June 1967 Iannone joined her husband, the painter James Upham, and Fluxus co-founder Emmett Williams on an eight-day voyage from New York to Iceland to visit the Swiss artist Dieter Roth (also known as Diter Rot), with whom Williams was working on a book. Already in preparing for the voyage, Iannone presents herself as a character of immoderate appetites – the long list of comestibles she packs for cocktail hour on board include pickled watermelon rind, Vienna sausage, panforte and a case of red wine. Arriving in Reykjavik, she saw Roth standing on the quayside carrying a large fresh fish and falls in love immediately. They flirted more or less clumsily for the duration of her stay. Back in New York, Iannone packs everything she owns and books a flight back to Reykjavik. She and Roth started an intense relationship that lasts until 1974.

It is considered poor form in some feminist circles to draw attention to the relationship between a less-known woman artist and a better-known male artist. It is true that when I have written about Roth's work in the past, I have not mentioned his relationship with Iannone. Perhaps I should have. Perhaps I was distracted by his depraved relationship with cheese. Nevertheless, to discuss Iannone's work without mentioning Roth would be to ignore what she considered a central event in her life, and one that is inescapable in her autobiographical and often self-mythologising art.

Knowing that Iannone started the *People* series before meeting Roth, I am tempted to imagine her manifesting the relationship. The cut-outs establish a mystical, sexually charged realm. Iannone is already lining herself up to transform into the sex goddess she portrays herself as during her relationship with Roth. As with any muse, it is interesting to ponder the extent to which she projects a persona on to Roth. In *Your Names Are Love Father God* (1970–71) Roth stands like a high priest, naked but for a jewelled neck-piece, touching Iannone's breasts and genitals as she lies before him as though on an altar. In a set of cards dedicated to their relationship, the playfully named *(Ta) Rot* (1968–69), she portrays Roth engaged in activities including teaching and cooking, as

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well as masturbating ('This card stunts growth'), fucking her from behind over the kitchen table, and lying before her to perform oral sex ('This card brings reverence').

Iannone's work can be discomfoting – at times it is deliberately so. In her painted video boxes and audio recordings, she uses the transformative impact that masturbation has on her face and voice. She glares, grimaces and rolls her eyes wildly at the camera. Her sexuality is both a performance and authentically felt. I can't help wondering whether what made the art world really uncomfortable about Iannone's work was not the prominent genitalia or depictions of sex per se, but the radical gesture of centring a known male artist as an object of desire and, with his complicity, suggesting her dominion over him.

'Dorothy Iannone: Love Is Forever, Isn't It?' is at the Museum of Modern Art Antwerp (MHKA) until 21 January.

