

Since the late 1960s, Dorothy Iannone has displayed a radical commitment to self-expression, portraying herself and her relationships in unabashedly sexual terms



Flora and Fauna, 1973, Colour silkscreen on paper, 60 × 73 cm. Courtesy: Peres Projects, Berlin; photograph: Hans Georg Gaul

'There is only one thing which interests me vitally now', wrote Henry Miller in the first chapter of his 1934 novel *Tropic of Cancer*, 'and that is the recording of all that which is omitted in books.¹ Much of what Miller was intent on recording was of an explicitly sexual nature, resulting in a ban on all of his works in his native US. When Boston-born artist Dorothy Iannone returned from a visit to Paris in 1961 with a copy of *Tropic of Cancer* in her suitcase, it was confiscated by US Customs officials. Together with the American Civil Liberties Union, she filed a lawsuit to sue the government for its return. At the trial various intellectual luminaries testified to the literary importance of Miller's work, resulting in the lifting of the 30-year-long ban on this and the writer's other works.



Lions For Dieter Rot The Present Lion Master, 1971, Etching on paper, 86 × 95 cm. Courtesy: Air de Paris; photograph: Jochen Littkemann

Miller's frankness regarding sex can be seen in the boldly declarative work of the now Berlin-based artist. Since the late 1960s, Iannone's works have displayed a radical commitment to self-expression, portraying herself and her relationships in unabashedly sexual terms. 'Why can't we stand up for Eros?' she asks in her book *Censorship and the Irrepressible Drive Toward Love and Divinity* (1982), in which the *Tropic of Cancer* episode is described – the first of her many run-ins with the authorities over censorship. 'Wouldn't we feel better if we could stand up for this life-long part of ourselves?'² Iannone's book will be republished this year to accompany an exhibition of the artist's work at the Migros Museum, Zurich, which focuses specifically on the issue of censorship. A retrospective of Iannone's paintings, objects, books and films, from 1959 until now, was held recently at the Berlinische Galerie, accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue. In October a further publication bringing together her various writings and interviews will be published by Los Angeles' Siglio Press.

Why this groundswell of interest in Iannone's work now, given that its subject matter and methodology have remained more or less constant since the late '60s? Is it that throughout her works, Iannone has remained vitally present, both as an explicitly portrayed body and a clear and sonorous voice? The uncensored and life-embracing self-portraits are refreshing and rare, despite, or perhaps rather because of, today's saturation of countless modes of online self-presentation, not to mention the Internet's ocean of pornography ('that unrelentingly mechanistic substitute for real feelings', as Iannone calls it).

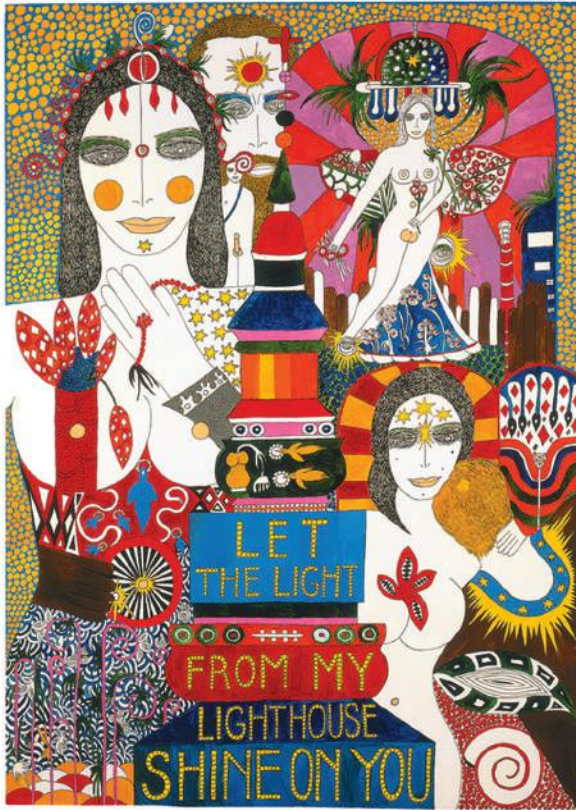
Iannone's background was a literary one, completing her graduate studies in English and American literature at Brandeis University, Massachusetts, in 1958. The following year she married the affluent painter and mathematician James Upham and began to make abstract paintings and collages. By the mid 1960s, these had developed into brightly-coloured, all-over patternings with sharp black outlines. In paintings such as *Sunday Morning* (1965), several scenes spread horizontally across the canvas show small, naked figures in interior settings, interspersed amongst decorative repeating patterns and handwritten excerpts from literary works she admired, such as Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra* (c.1607) or Wallace Stevens's poetry. The subsequent years saw her develop two of the main features that came to characterize her later work: an exuberant folkloristic ornamentation and a naïve figuration which emphasized genitalia – plump pudendas, penises and testicles – visible even on clothed figures. 'Looking back at my early abstract work', said Iannone in an interview in 2010, 'I see that without any intention whatsoever, the lovers gradually appeared and became more and more distinct and that from the very beginning their genitals were not only present but extremely prominent too. This was surely an unconscious unfolding of what was in my heart.'³



Sunday Morning, 1965, Oil on canvas, 1.9 × 2.4 m. Courtesy: Dorothy Iannone; photograph: Jochen Littkemann

It was in the summer of 1967, while travelling with her husband to Iceland, that a life-changing moment occurred for Iannone: her now notorious meeting with Dieter Roth. A month later, she left her husband in New York to return to Reykjavik to be with Roth. She has remained in Europe since, living in Düsseldorf, southern France and finally Berlin, where she first came in 1976 on a DAAD scholarship. That Iannone is rarely mentioned without acknowledging her relationship with Roth is, in this case, not merely the male artist overshadowing his female companion. It is rather that their relationship itself became the primary subject matter for Iannone, not only during the seven years that they spent together but for many of the years that followed. Declaring Roth her muse, in a reversal of usual gender roles, Iannone pursued a personal quest for emancipation that was equal parts feminist, intellectual and sexual.

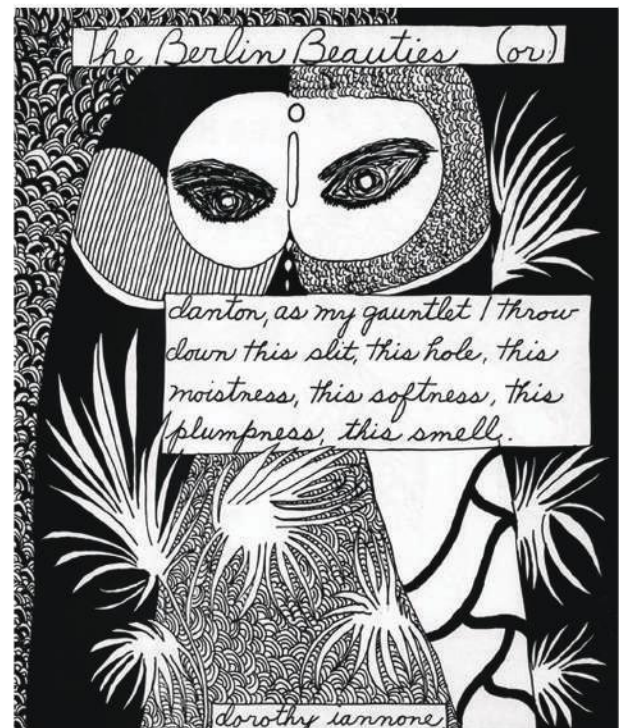
The works Iannone made during her first years together with Roth were celebrations of monogamous passion but also recorded the accompanying doubts, fights and sadness. *Each of the Dialogues I–X*, (1967–69) consists of a series of brightly coloured drawings in feltpen on cardboard panels, detailing episodes from their life together in which sex played a central, cohesive role. In a series of eight large canvases from 1970 to 1971, her imagery explodes in scale: the bodies are almost life-size and a variety of sex acts take centre stage. Crucial here are the brief capitalized texts that seem to subtitle each panel. 'Look at Me' declares one, as a voluptuous figure displays her body from front and back, her pronounced labia as round as her exposed ass. 'Suck my breasts, I am your most beautiful mother' declares another as an obedient male sucks a fat pink nipple. The voice of the artist, with its commanding tone and uncensored script, transforms these paintings from fanciful erotica to compelling statements of female assertiveness and emancipation.



Let The Light From My Lighthouse Shine On You, 1981, Acrylic and gouache on synthetic board mounted on Pavatex, 1.4 × 1 m. courtesy: Air de Paris, Paris; photograph: Jochen Littkemamm

While Iannone was developing this revelatory style in Reykjavik and Dusseldorf (where she and Roth moved in 1968), a wave of female artists in the United States were tackling the body and sexuality from a purposefully female perspective, exhibiting in all-women shows organized by artists or feminist curators such as Linda Nochlin and Lucy Lippard. Several took on the still taboo subjects of sexual intercourse or the male nude: in New York, artists like Joan Semmel, Betty Tompkins and Hannah Wilke.⁴ In Britain, Margaret Harrison, Sylvia Sleigh and Cosi Fanni Tutti were addressing similar concerns. Iannone never aligned herself explicitly with a feminist cause, however, seeing her work more neutrally in terms of 'Human Liberation' (the title of a work from 1972, on which is inscribed: 'One arm for women / One arm for men / who although they need it less / need it too'). The intimately autobiographical nature of her work kept it apart from the more politically orientated, analytical or performative approaches of Wilke or Tutti, or the large-scale photorealistic works of Semmel or Sleigh. The explicit idolization of her lover sat uncomfortably with many of the emancipatory tenets of the feminist movement, though in Iannone's eyes, it too had a feminist component, as she later wrote: 'the exclusion of Eros from life is more easily accomplished if the woman also is denied her importance in humanity.' The autodidactic, folkloristic, storytelling manner of presentation, meanwhile, meant that it hovered on the edges of artistic discourse, in a limbo between art and literature that made it difficult to place. Though she was closely linked to many of the (male) artists involved in Fluxus, she did not see her own work as related to Fluxus concerns, and on being invited to participate in a Fluxus exhibition in 1979, described the tokenistic gesture in lightly ironic terms in a text inscribed on the piece she exhibited: *A Fluxus Essay And An Audacious Announcement* (1979).

Despite her distance from the main activities of second-wave feminism in the field of art, she was nevertheless subject to the same censorship that affected many of her peers when it came to depicting the male nude and sexual activity. One of her earliest artist books, *The Story of Bern* (1970), narrates the events that lead to the censorship of her work in The Friends Show at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1969, curated by then director Harald Szeemann, in a compelling series of black and white drawings. Concerned about the public reaction, Szeemann, together with some of the participating artists, agreed that the genitals in her works should be covered over with brown tape. Iannone withdrew her works in protest – as did Roth – and subsequently turned the episode into a new work, *The Story of Bern*. Ironically, a couple of years later this artist's book itself was confiscated by English customs authorities while being shipped to an English bookshop, and was burned before she could intervene.



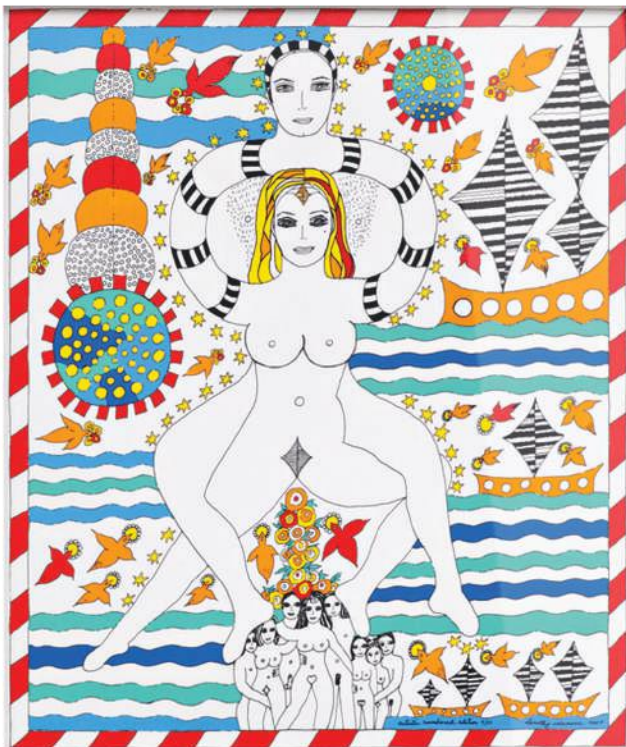
The Berlin Beauties or You Have No Idea How Beautiful You Are, Berlin, 1978, Page from artist's book, 24 × 21 cm. Courtesy: Air de Paris

From the early '70s onwards, the book form became a favoured medium for Iannone, given its ability to yoke text and image and accommodate the narrative dimension of her work. *The Story of Bern* was followed by *Danger in Düsseldorf (Or) I am Not What I Seem* (1973), *Speaking to Each Other, With Mary Harding* (1977) and *Berlin Beauties* (1978) which, though also focusing on sex as a means towards 'ecstatic unity', replaces the specific identity of the lover with a fictional 'Danton'. Further series of drawings and prints followed, such as the wonderfully compelling *An Icelandic Saga* (1978/83/86) in which Iannone tells the fairytale-like story of her meeting with Roth and leaving her husband. These small-scale, text-dense works, many of which are reproduced in full in Siglio Press's forthcoming publication *Dorothy Iannone: You Who Read Me With Passion Now Must Forever Be My Friends*, are perhaps the most convincing of Iannone's oeuvre, effortlessly intertwining drawing and writing, image and voice in their graphic depictions. This diaristic form seems to suggest parallels with the more recent work of American artist Frances Stark, also an artist and writer, who often adopts a similarly disarming confessional tone. In Stark's recent video works such as *My Best Thing* (2011), or *Osservate, leggete con me* (Observed, Read With Me, 2012), subtitles transcribe her dialogues with virtual lovers met in Internet chat rooms, where sexual activity is frankly handled, but becomes just one amongst many different topics in a conversation that moves between politics, work, philosophy and everyday life. Stark too describes the aim of art as one of personal growth, quoting Robert Musil when she says "Art" for me is only a means of reaching a higher level of the "self".⁵ Like Iannone, Stark's work revolves around herself and her personal experiences; the peripheral elements that surround the making of art are harnessed as its subject matter in order to, like Henry Miller, 'record the things that are usually omitted'. Coincidentally, Miller was also an early influence for Stark. For *Untitled (Sexus)* (1992), she presented an edition of Miller's 1949 novel *Sexus* alongside her own handwritten, carbon-copied version. Thus Stark's work was unknowingly indebted to Iannone's fight against censorship – *Sexus* was banned a year after its publication until the 1961 lawsuit filed by Iannone resulted in this being lifted. When it was republished in 1968, a New York Times review described how 'Miller uses licentious sex scenes to set the stage for his philosophical discussions of self, love, marriage and happiness'⁶ – a description that could apply to either Stark's or Iannone's work.

In 1984, Iannone became involved in the study and practice of Tibetan Buddhism, and gradually her focus moved towards the discovery of ecstatic unity through spiritual enlightenment rather than sexual union. During the '80s and '90s, her works began to show the influence of Tantric art, incorporating mantras or images of herself meditating or as a many-armed goddess, while their texts focused more generally on self-discovery. In these paintings, the heart and mind are depicted as one, in a union of corporeal and mental transcendence. Despite this shift, it is nevertheless difficult to orient yourself chronologically within Iannone's work. Its repetitive style and subject matter suggest not so much development as a deepening of intention. It pictures a journey of a personal nature that is not determined by linear time, but is in fact more similar to the looping, repetitive, circular patterning that she employs visually. The same elements, figures, ornaments and phrases recur and their meaning accrues in what grows to become a solid, convincing, and deeply personal corpus; the result of a life lived with eyes wide open, constantly searching out and making use of what Miller called 'those elements in the air which give direction and motivation to our lives.'⁷

Dorothy Iannone at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich, is on view from 30 August till 9 November.

—by Kirsty Bell



Dieter and Dorothy, 2007, Silkscreen print on paper, 65 × 55 cm. Courtesy: Peres Projects, Berlin; photograph: Hans Georg Gaul