CENSORSHIP AND THE IRREPRESSIBLE DRIVE

TOWARD LOVE AND DIVINITY

DOROTHY FANNONE

1973
Dorothy Iannone

Words by Trinie Dalton

I know what you want to know
I am a monster
I know it
I am wild because I am atavistic
Doesn't everyone want to remember
What it was like at the top of the
Mountain at the beginning of time
Then when we were fresh and new
And not dragging along the memories
Of advertising in our groins?

Follow Me, 1978

Never underestimate the power of fan mail. We may feel shy to approach our heroes, and even if we brace it, our heroes may not care. But anyone who has been on the receiving end of a gift that admits and celebrates sheer admiration knows that these communications are sparkling, fabulous diamonds. When we make art and send it out into the world, whether we're making it to satisfy a compulsion or to please an audience, we hope people will react. It's not that complicated: for starters, if you'd like to get mail, give some. Not advocating stalking or creeping here, but caring enough to write appreciation just feels nice, and it's better to spend an afternoon writing to someone than gazing out on Google Images, scrolling through links amassing thumbs-up and angry emojis (often, confusingly, at the same time), or tapping ant-sized digital hearts with your thumb. People ask how I meet people, how I came into certain projects, and truly there is no magical answer other than that I take creative correspondences and conversations seriously, and strongly believe in attribution. Both activities are meditations. I send mail because I know getting mail is like getting a haircut; I get a new look and new feel daily when I open envelopes and try new messages on. Another person's air, from another place, is released when I unseal that package. How weird! People tell me they haven't sent letters in years, have no time, etc. I reply: if you don't have time to write a postcard and stick a stamp on it,
or write letters to the people who make you love living, that's really far out. I know what busy is. And it doesn't take very long to write a postcard.

Art reviews are a form of postcard I'm especially fond of writing: the artist is likely to read what you wrote, paper and pictures between you both, eyes on the work instead of the boring "sorry-I-haven't-written-in-so- longs" or "wish-you-were-here" that hog vacation missives. There's a physicality to reviews—even if they're digital—perhaps because they're discussing material. Art reviews are postcards that require no small talk and get right down to business about stuff we love. And that business is what I wanted to get to when I discovered Dorothy Iannone's work, like many other Americans, in the mid-2000s. Great positioning in the 2006 Whitney Biennial led to two 2009 exhibitions—Lioness at the New Museum, and a simultaneous solo at Anton Kern Gallery (all in New York). These exhibitions were lightbulb moments for me for three reasons: one—they displayed Iannone's excellence across mediums, including her making of artist's books; two—there was an artist who shuffled narrative inextricably between pictorial and language-based images, and three—it was infinitely cool that, then 75 years old, Iannone could still shock viewers with her work. Her painted video box, I Was Thinking of You, featuring a video of her face while having an orgasm, was the talk of the Biennial and again at the New Museum for its playfully candid content. Spreads of An Icelandic Sog, an artist's book Iannone made chronicling her romantic love-at-first-sight experience with the Swiss artist Dieter Roth and subsequent move to Iceland with him, made me laugh out loud—Dorothy's storytelling is romantic, sincere, and funny. At Anton Kern, I couldn't get enough of her autobiographical images celebrating ecstatic unity that depict, for example, a woman dancing on a piano (Play It Again, 2007); enjoying sex over fancy wicker furnishings (a recurring scene); and fusing with her lover in androgynous delight (Irresistible Strangers, 1982).

Various sexual partners, all archetypal, are fondly and respectfully represented. Ornamented and classical, yet very modern—timeless—sacred and profane rolled together. Nudity figures into many pieces, with beautifully inventive representations of sexual organs decorating portraits that look like their humans are truly living, compositionally alternating with texts made of bold, uppercase block lettering or Dorothy's immaculate cursive handwriting. The best memoir I ever read: memoir that doesn't cling desperately to fact, but rather grows like a plant, shape-shifts and proliferates. I knew at once that her shifts between text and image must be mnemonic, helping her to recall adventures that celebrate love. I reviewed her 2009 shows for Modern Painters magazine, heard she liked the piece, then made a fan-mail care package that the gallery was kind enough to pass along for me. We've been pen pals since.

Iannone is the true queen of mail. Being affiliated with friends from Fluxus (an international movement consisting of artists, composers, designers, and poets that formed in the 1960s and 70s), she's no stranger to mail art and the "happening" aspect of artful correspondence. She keeps me deep in epistolary enthusiasm. Like this friendly gem:

Darling Trine,

You sent me such a fabulous and beautiful letter.
When I finished reading and viewing, I kissed it.
One of these days, you'll have one from me.

Love, Dorothy
Above: Dialogue IX, c. 1968
9 drawings, felt pen and collage on paper
37 x 34 cm, © Photo Fabrice Gousset
Collection privée, Paris
Courtesy Air de Paris, Paris

Previous page: Censorship, 1998
Drawing - gouache on paper, 31 x 22 cm (12.2 x 8.7 in), 2384354, DR101
Courtesy Peres Projects, Berlin
It was infinitely cool that, then 75 years old, Iannone could still shock viewers with her work.

Ten exclamation points upon receiving mail like that!!!!!!! In fact, it’s helpful to consider everything she makes—paintings, prints, sculptures, sound installations, collages, artist’s books—through the lens of correspondence, a strict daily practice of conversation via highly sophisticated, alchemical levels of image and text diary. We first communicated solely via handwritten fax; that communication required a bit of labor, but was 1,000% worth it. When I interviewed her for a piece that ran in PARIS LA magazine, I was living in rural New Mexico, in the mountains outside Santa Fe, and my email was spotty. So I’d write out questions and drive them to the post office to mail to a friend to fax. The friend received Dorothy’s cursive responses faxed back, then printed out the faxes and Fedexed them to me. The Fedex seems absurdly perfect, in retrospect, a little fast jabbed into the slow, just like Dorothy’s work. Her faxed letters: no typos, minimal cross-outs—committing to content and composition once it’s inked. I’ve learned since then that this is a process that Dorothy believes in; she seems to have a strict no-regrets policy. This is not to say she is not a fervent self-editor; she pores over every word and line to make sure it’s energized before it goes out into the world. She actually seems to have a photographic memory not only for what she said, but for what everyone else said, too. (You cannot pull the wool over this woman’s eyes.) She seems to trust that evoked stories present themselves in certain lights for a reason, uncovering details that invoke sensorial richness and sublimity, akin to what Werner Herzog calls achieving “ecstatic truth” in cinema: when poetic imagination depicts events more vividly than clinical facts. Events are what they are, malleable experiences. Lessons in each retelling. In this, themes in her work have evolved and, like her Dieter Roth love story, some Iannone plots have been spun quite a few times, with new images, new sculptural approaches, new texts, new plot twists, and even substituted characters, all theatrically animated. Persona plays, as ancient as narrative itself. Iannone’s subject matter kindles the inner workings of love: how it develops, how to cultivate it, where to draw boundaries, where it flails, where unexpected moments flourish. What happened, and what could have happened, how each participant experienced events differently (see A Cookbook for a wonderful multilayered narrative about the triadic experience of cooking while an internal monologue and external dialogue unfold). In each retelling, myriad subjective experiences are showcased, and the plasticity of narrative, thanks to time, which can extirpate or polish the meaning of events as they recede into the past, sometimes leaves a casing, like a mollusk’s shell, that leads to the invention of mythology. Iannone’s work is more mythology than documentary. Cyclopean epic. Ultimately, she makes creation stories.

In 2013, I went to Berlin to visit Dorothy during the making of her book, You Who Read Me with Passion Now Must Forever Be My Friends (Siglio Press), since I was writing the monograph essay (“Culminations”) and I also wanted to help Dorothy decide what to include in the book, which was to feature her most text-heavy works, especially artist’s books that hadn’t been shown widely due to previously limited-edition runs. We ate tiny, gold-leaved, scrumptious teacakes daily, and she gave me ample sage life advice, particularly about celebrating the freedom inherent to childlessness, and how to cultivate freedom and flexibility generally in order to survive as an artist. Takeaways: health, wisdom,
and adventure all derive from locating an internal sense of happiness that freedom manifests; that happiness is what attracts love and opportunity that springs forth from magnetism. So without spiritual freedom—which does not necessarily imply autonomy, freedom aplenty in coupling and in company of others—one cannot find functional the kind of nurturing, mutual love that leads to evolution and spiritual growth. We talked about Buddhist practice quite a bit. After this Berlin trip, I came home spiritually rejuvenated, though panicked a bit when I realized we didn’t talk much about “art”—until it hit me that we had talked about her art the entire time, as it deals in these subjects almost exclusively, and now I had deeper insight into her priorities in art and life: generosity and honesty.

In 2014, Dorothy started emailing. Of course, her emails have the same thoughtfully composed formality as her paper letters; somehow she makes email as exquisite a document as a fax or pen on paper. I print these emails out and archive them, because I still think of Dorothy as a print person. I read and reread, and bits pop out each time, new inspirations. Like this snippet:

I interrupted this letter to check out Maria [sic] Callas Assoluta, a documentary which was on in the other room, because her voice was so glorious, and became unable to pull myself away.

Back to the idea of shock value: I don’t think this is what Dorothy is going for. The Guardian called her “art’s original bad girl” but, really: imagine being banned and excluded from exhibition for decades because of sexism and conservatism, and then when you do exhibit everyone gloms onto the vagina in the picture, as if it’s some taboo thing to paint a vagina that looks like a piano or a lion or a heart or an asteroid or a penis. Yes, a penis. It’s like, grow up. It’s a damn vagina that looks like a penis. So what? It’s imaginary, it’s fantasy, people have sex, people imagine things while having sex, as well as long afterwards, dreaming of how the sex was, or should have been—deal with it. Too many people focus on the sexual content in her work, and how radical it is. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I love this aspect. It’s hugely courageous and engaging. But overemphasis on this element simply points to unhealthy levels of repression in our society, that we can’t see sexualized images made by women without marveling at the fact that a woman made images about erotic desire really makes me sad. There is so much more to Dorothy’s artwork: it tracks intense aesthetic studies of sacred art, histories of international ornamentation and patterning, sociopolitical critique of contemporary art communities and movements, perceptive insights into gendering and gender roles, graphic design expertise, satirical cartooning, interests in theater and cinema, passion for color, and more. When I have spoken with her about whether she considers herself a feminist, or a sexual liberator, she has said no, that she never thought of it that way. She just says what she wants to say. She has spent time in her art and life studying the positive and circulatory energies that Eros brings into a scene. That society couldn’t get with that until recently is not her fault—and it doesn’t make her a “bad girl.” She’s incorruptible, never complacent; her work is highly scrupulous in its accuracy, and virtuous in its righteous dedication to visceral expression. She’s an archivist who investigates how carnal desire intertwines with intellect and soul. None of that is shocking; it’s simply impressive.

People tend to become fervent Dorothy Iannone fans. She is a cultural incubator of sorts. Many young artists, like myself, consider her a heroine. I’m so glad she has wide new audiences now, and continues to gain fans. I would say, in introducing her work again, that as seductive as the images and haptic elements are, it’s as important to deeply read Iannone. Her work is one long continuous story, and her artworks gain electric charge when her narratives spark them. Welcome to the warm, enveloping art of Dorothy Iannone.

Dorothy shows no signs of slowing down in her eighties. After her traveling retrospective last year (Berlinische Galerie in Berlin to The Migros Museum of Contemporary Art in Zurich), she won the prestigious B.Z.: Kulturpreis, and in recent letters reported that she has been “doing a great deal of work with an alternative music publisher, Tochnit Aleph, in Berlin. We have so far published two vinyls (Dear Dieter) in special albums and a CD and text (A Fluxus Essay). We are almost finished with a two-CD set (1001 Songs for Erik Bock). These recordings were decades ago on audio cassettes.”

She also sent this joyful news that I don’t think she’d mind my sharing: “A great thing which happened was that after my last exhibition at Air de Paris, Museum Pompidou bought the huge black and white triptych with monitor, and painting and text, Follow Me. You know the song I wrote which I am singing: Follow me, it’s not too late to remember who I am, you will not be vanquished, although you are a man, follow me… My feminine manifesto.” Now her work will certainly live forever, in our hearts as well as in the company of abiding museum treasures, where they belong.
Trinie Dalton is the author/curator of six books and teaches at the Vermont College of Fine Arts. She also has written for artforum.com and produced monographs about Mark Grotjahn (Anton Kern Gallery), Chris Martin (Skira), Sam Falls (JRP Ringier), Cristina Toro (LaCa Projects), Jessica Jackson Hutchins (Columbus College of Art and Design Beeler Gallery), Ryan Schneider (Southern Oregon University), and Tannaz Farsi (Linfield College Gallery). She has recently planned exhibitions at Fourteen30 Contemporary gallery in Portland, Oregon; The Pit in Los Angeles; and the University of Redlands Art Gallery in Redlands, California. The Portland exhibition is inspired by and dedicated to Dorothy.
Right: Hello and Goodbye to Copenhagen, 1982
Painting: acrylic, gouache, and marker on board
180.5 x 121.5 cm (70.9 x 48.2 in), D19488
Courtesy Peres Projects, Berlin

Previous Spread: Flora and Fauna, 1973
Painting: color silkscreen on paper
59.5 x 71.5 cm (23.4 x 28.2 in)
Edition 8 APs of 10, D10687.AP1
Courtesy Peres Projects, Berlin
Right: Mother And Child, 1980
Gouache on Bristol board, 78 x 63 cm
© All rights reserved
Courtesy Air de Paris, Paris

Below: Play It Again, 2007
Color silkscreen on paper
55 x 65 cm (21.65 x 25.59 in)
Edition #APS of 183 + 10 AP, D/10684.APS.
Courtesy Peres Projects, Berlin
ONE DAY
WHILE MY MOTHER
WAS NURSING ME,
THE VIRGIN MARY
APPEARED BEFORE HER
IN A VISION.

THE VIRGIN MARY SMILED AND NODDED HER HEAD.
Ultimately, she makes creation stories.
48 drawings, ink on Bristol board
40 x 30 cm each. © All rights reserved
Courtesy Air de Paris, Paris

Below: Doesn’t Everyone Make Mistakes in September, 1976
White silkscreen print on black museum board, 19 x 28 cm (7.48 x 11.02 in)
Edition #5, 0114061.5
Courtesy Penes Projects, Berlin