WHAT IS ECSTATIC
UNITY?

DOROTHY IANNONE Fought Censorship AND CONSERVATISM TO PRESENT HER EXPLICIT VISIONS OF THE HUMAN SEXUAL UNION, AND HER DESIRE TO “UNNERVE WITH SIMPLICITY”

TEXT — Maric-Sophie Müller

Perhaps the fact that it can never properly be defined is what makes Dorothy Iannone’s art so explosive. Born in Boston in 1946, she was the long-time lover of Dieter Roth and belonged to the Fluxus community without ever being a Fluxus artist herself. Her art is rude without being innocent, corporeal and intimate without being pornographic, intelligent but non-academic. It is precise, observed with detail and at the same time impulsive, and it operates across different media. From 1966, Iannone combined video and sound recordings with painting and sculpture for her “Singling Bones”. Another multimedia work was “Aaa, Aaa” (1972), with a song lamenting the loss of her lover Dieter Roth. Meanwhile, a particular strength of her work is its literary component: the text. In her own words, “I want to do things that are not just about making art but about making a statement”. 

Equally alluring and playful is her sense of gender roles in her often explicitly explicit representations of man and woman. In most cases, the woman is in the center. She is proud, strong, fulfilling, sexual and ideally heterosexual. These are erotic heroine:
notable examples are her 1970s interpretations of mythological or historical women figures, such as Cleopatra or the Amazons from Persepolis.

In later years, influenced by her relationship with Buddhism, Lannone assimilated the idea of the "cosmic unity" of husband and wife. But before the gender of her figures can be seen to be blurred at the moment of sexual union: the woman's swollen labia are like male testes, the nipples transform into penises ("I began to feel free", 1970). Ten years later she had taken the conjunction of men and women so far that she, in a certain extent, shared the same body ("Let the Light From My Lighthouse Shines On You", 1981).

These looking closely at Lannone's work soon notice that her primary driver is affection, rather than the obscene. The uninhibited and the erotic meet prudery and discipline, the black outlines are drawn consistently and accurately, the charged pubic hair carefully arranged and executed, jewellery and hair shaped decoratively. Among the works that have emerged in recent years, the colors have become brighter, the hair more blonde, the lines more delicate and transparent-like.

For Lannone it's never about using obvious sexuality as a provocation, but rather as a way of entering into an arena of true artistic self-expression and unconditional immediacy, with all that this implies. Even before the police brought her to the limits of censorship, she was fighting an other fight in the name of artistic freedom: in 1981 she was arrested with her husband in the United States when she tried to bring in copies of Henry Miller's "Tropic of Cancer" (1934), which was at the time classified as pornography. Prior to her incarceration, she had requested the import of an art novel with the declaration, "for my own pleasure". In doing so, she laid the foundation for a high-profile court case that the former literature student won and thereby ensured that the censorship on Miller's work was lifted.

Lannone has consistently pushed her work to the limits, and there have been consequences to her honesty: in 1989, the...

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IN CONTEXT

MEMORIES WHEN WE STAY IN EGYPT

LOVE THE STRANGE, 1972

Artwork by Helene Schmitz, 1972

As the sprawling and intricate work of art unfolds, the viewer is drawn into a narrative that intertwines personal and political themes. The characters depicted, both fantastical and human, carry symbols that resonate with the dualities of the human condition. On the left, figures are seen in a state of transformation, hinting at the fluidity of identity and the power of imagination. The vibrant colors and intricate patterns mirror the complexity of human experiences, while the stark contrasts challenge the viewer to confront the darker aspects of the psyche. The artwork is a testament to the artist's ability to convey a narrative that is both universal and deeply personal, inviting the viewer to reflect on their own experiences and the world around them.