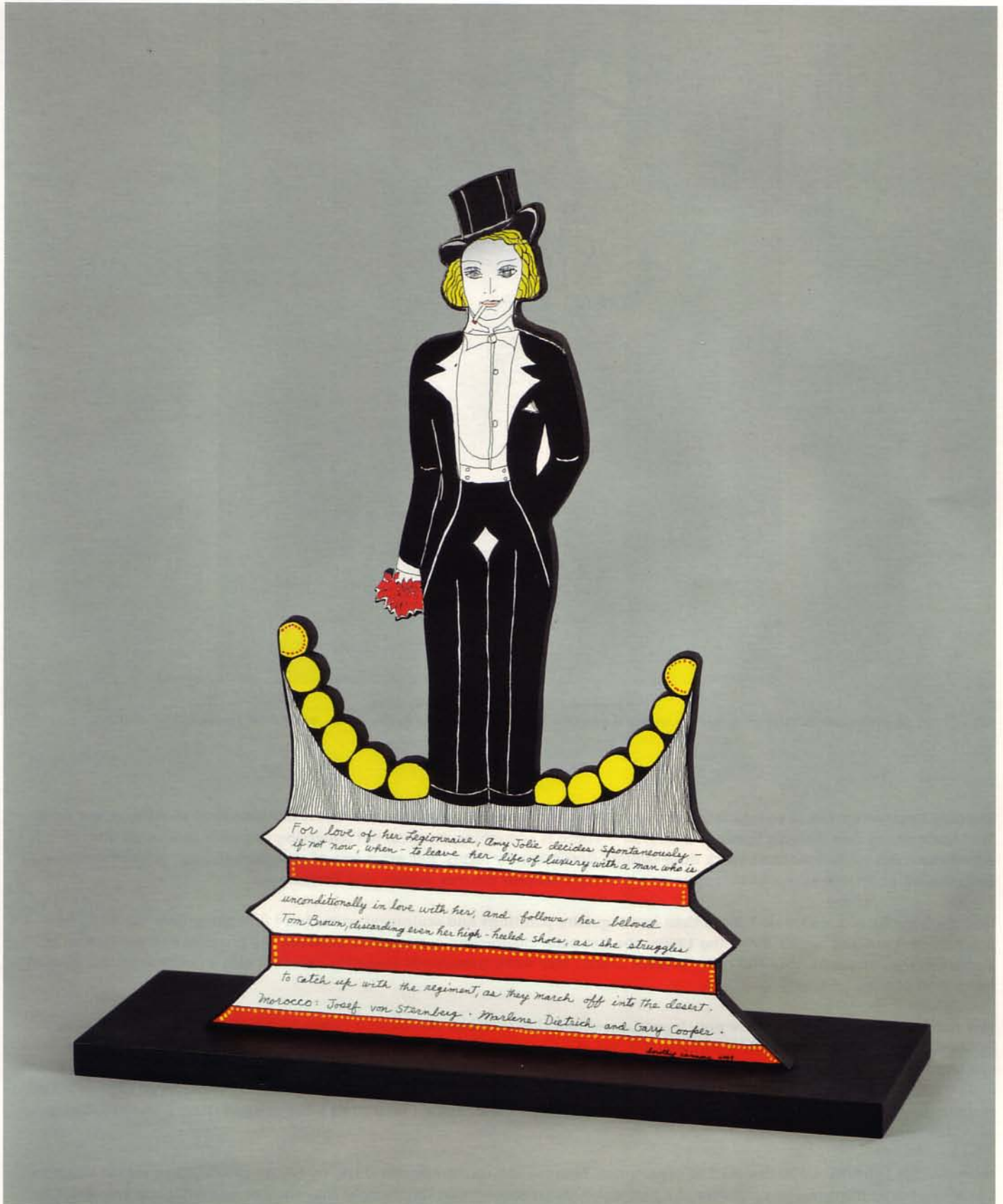


I'M STILL GAME: DOROTHY IANNONE

DOROTHY IANNONE IN CONVERSATION WITH TRINIE DALTON — ART BY DOROTHY IANNONE



Morocco - Marlene Dietrich figure, 2009.

Gouache on paper on wood. © photo DR. Courtesy Air de Paris, Paris, and Peres Project, Los Angeles.



Morocco - Gary Cooper Figure, 2009.

Gouache and acrylic on paper on wood. © photo DR. Courtesy Air de Paris, Paris, and Peres Project, Los Angeles.

Dorothy Iannone's work is so intimate that I sometimes catch myself believing I can know her simply by looking at her work. Yet I understand that memoir is dubious territory. There is something mystical in connecting one's life to a larger human experience. But while Iannone's work does contain documentary facets, her art is one of storytelling. She seeks truth through embellishment, in joyous works that express a woman's deepest desires, hopes, and realizations.

Iannone's books remain lesser known than her exquisite paintings and sculptural work, but I find her artists' books to be among her strongest works. Since the 1960s, she has been chronicling connections between the physical and psychological states through an erotic bliss she calls "ecstatic unity." Her work transcends sexuality, crossing into a political realm, making her a kind of heroine to young artists.

Her battles against censorship are now legendary. When U.S. Customs confiscated Henry Miller books from her, Iannone famously fought back, eventually leading to the end of a ban on Miller's books. After her own work was deemed pornographic, she withdrew from a group exhibition at Kunsthalle Bern, an episode chronicled in her book, *The Story of Bern (or) Showing Colors* (1970). Even her more personal works, with their overt expression of female sexuality, were considered controversial: in 1968, Iannone made an artist's book dedicated to her lover Dieter Roth, illustrating what she had done with each man previous to him.

Interviewing Dorothy was a fascinating experience, because she communicates solely by handwritten letters via fax machine. I was amazed at the generous answers she painstakingly wrote out, and the thought that she put into what you are about to read. It reminded me, once again, of the importance of writing slowly, with visual awareness.

magic & color

trinie You have talked about “ecstatic unity” in your work, seeking to express a union of gender, feeling, and pleasure all in one image. You’ve also mentioned the “journey” in making a work, the experience of creating. I am wondering how you think of time in your practice—your storytelling reveals the past while your images often reflect a present moment. Do you think time is sexy?

dorothy I think I was always making my way toward “this sweetness outside of time,” as I wrote in 1989 in a song for Pastor Erik Bock, my beloved of those days. And that striving has only intensified over the years. By “ecstatic unity” I meant becoming one with the other, a state that I thought could be achieved through erotic love. Much later, I glimpsed that this sense of completion was already within myself, waiting to be realized. I started this journey rather more modestly, although expressing what was for me the highest ideal in that time of my development—and writing only of “complete intimacy.” Later, that ideal evolved and I spoke of “ultimate union” and then of “ecstatic unity.” When I read more recently that in Tibetan Buddhism, another word for enlightenment is “ecstatic unity,” I was still as I let the pleasure of that knowledge silently and without thoughts spread through me. Just this moment, writing for you, I thought to check my feelings about this in my practice—as you are asking—and I see that, as I write, a pleasure goes through me, perhaps not so much—or not only?—because of what I am remembering, but mostly because of what the act of recreating here that moment, in a way which satisfies my literary standards, provides. So, maybe for me, both are true. In a relative realm, time is “sexy” and in the realm of aspiration, the yearning for the absolute, “this sweetness outside of time” is all.

trinie Do you consider your images as talismans that set or establish a moment, or are they purely reflected states of being?

dorothy The images do reflect a state of being, but they are talismans only insofar as any realized work of art does have a kind of magical power. At the same time, they also try to represent a moment, which in itself tries to represent an idea about our being.

trinie In terms of sacred symbolism, I’ve been studying how in certain kinds of sacred art (Aboriginal paintings from Australia or Mandalas from Tibet) the most secret and magical information is embedded deep inside the paintings. Even fake versions are made to exhibit, at times, so the magic is not given away or dissipated. Do you see your work as magical?

dorothy I don’t work with the idea of hiding anything at all (to be scrupulously veracious, hiding almost nothing at all!), but rather expressing myself as directly and honestly as possible and, I hope, inspiring. I can’t say I am even consciously thinking of its effect on the viewer when I make a work (although now, inspired with the spirit of Tibetan Buddhism, I do wish that my work may be of benefit to others). Anyway, what I am expressing is not secret. The Tibetans also speak of “self-secret”—we each understand something at our own level of development.

trinie Are you interested in the alchemical notion of the Hermaphrodite, fusion of man and woman? I think of this in paintings where sexual organs are combining and/or fusing together. It feels less about two people in union than seeking to express another dimension of sexuality, getting out of binaries.

dorothy These paintings were meant more to represent two beings coming together spiritually through erotic love—realizing a sense of completion, rather than that their bodies were literally taking on the sexual attributes of the other. It’s a metaphorical way of suggesting their absolute union. It’s difficult for me to represent the fusion of two beings who become one yet also remain themselves. That is what I mean by complete unity, my highest aspiration.

trinie Your use of color has changed recently. Can you talk about bright primaries versus black?

dorothy It’s true my colors are now what I might call heavenly, whereas before they were more evocative of the jungle. It’s another season! In my song “Long Ago in Antibes,” which I wrote in 1972, there occurs the line which was addressed to Dieter Roth: *Now I’m for the jungle and you’re for the sky. I don’t want the jungle, it’s there I must die...* It seems that now I have passed through the necessary fire, to some extent at least.

So, colors do reflect my feelings and, as always, they function as part of the structure. Until the distribution of the color is right, the composition is not right. I love both black and bright primaries. To make the work I want to make, I need them both. For instance, the black outline around everything is indispensable. Sometimes black brings out the brilliance of other colors, often it pulls everything together. On the other hand, in *I Begin to Feel Free*, half the painting is black, and a little yellow and red bring out its brilliance.

trinie Why are so many women still shy about expressing desire and sexual thoughts? How did you come to be brave enough to make work about this?

dorothy I made what I felt like making without evaluating its acceptability. If I believe in what I’m saying, I have to put myself on the line. But it never occurred to me that the work might be subjected to censorship. Given my public resistance to the censorship of Henry Miller’s books, self-censorship wasn’t in the cards. I had a strong desire, which had accompanied me for a long time, to assert that erotic love was not only natural but also good. And in that process, I was able to transform personal details into a new form. Until I was about eighteen years old or so, I attended the Catholic Church Sunday Mass regularly. If one wanted to receive Holy Communion, then one had to go to Confession on Saturday so that one’s soul would be in a state of grace. On this particular Sunday, which I want to talk about, I had not been to Confession, where the only mortal sin I would have had to confess was the habitual one of having made love with my boyfriend. When the bell sounded for Communion, without knowing even one moment before that I was going to do this, I arose and walked to the altar with the other communicants and received Communion. To take Communion without going to Confession is considered to be a mortal sin. No one knew, but I knew, my soul had asserted that it was in a state of grace, and that erotic love is natural and that it is good. And that was the last time I ever went to church as a practitioner.

text & image

trinie I read that your academic background is actually in literature. Do you tend to think textually and then translate into image?

dorothy I first wrote the entire text of *The Berlin Beauties* as a series of title pages, and only immediately after decided to combine them with images. For the series of large paintings of erotic scenes from 1969-1972, I intended at first to visually represent the erotic attitudes or impulses in a close relationship, and I made a silkscreen print of ten small scenes expressing this idea and including as part of the painting a line or two of dialogue. Afterward, I made ten large paintings with an altered version of each scene. But sometimes, I just begin to work impelled by a feeling, without any idea of what my people will be doing, and only while the image is unfolding does a text come into my mind. *This Can't Be Wrong Because I Feel So Wonderful*, which I made as an original "toy" for the mini-Wrong Gallery, is one example. Looking back at my early abstract work, 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; the work was neither envisioned textually nor imagistically before it appeared. And even when an image comes first, it is preceded by consciousness of a certain feeling about which I would like to make a work.

trinie Do you compose image-based compositions then generate text around the image? Do you write text first elsewhere and then translate it to accommodate your pictorial plane? It is so finely spaced!

dorothy In *An Icelandic Saga*, I wrote the text specifically as a prelude to using it as part of a series of drawings. Although the text came first, the integration of text and image happened simultaneously as I composed my picture. The text was part of the building material. When there is only a line of text though, I place it where it will look best in the composition. Of course, the eraser is my best friend.

trinie What do you find text is better for, versus what images can express?

dorothy Since I first read this question, I struggle over it every day. It's so difficult to answer! No matter which way I turn it in my mind, I get into such deep waters that I despair of being able to find a short answer that will satisfy me. I could say, at least, that first I have the conscious wish to do this or that. Let's say then I do it. Afterward, I really don't ask myself why I chose a text or image or both combined (or including film or music), what did I accomplish with one that I couldn't have accomplished with the other. Maybe I don't ask because that way of using time doesn't take me further on my own path (though God knows I waste enough time in other ways!). This doesn't mean I wouldn't enjoy hearing about other artists' answers to this question. Although I am reluctant to send you this "answer," at least this way you don't go away empty-handed.

trinie I've tended to find erotic art in general sexier than novels depicting sexual exchange. What do you think? Is the connection/union between people more appealing visually and why?

dorothy Perhaps a visual depiction is more powerful because it can be apprehended all at once and without words. But I'm not sure. In a way, a lot of my pictures are sexy, though some, like the tableaux type, seem to me to be even quite cool.

trinie In text, I feel there is an intimacy that can develop between author and reader, whereas a picture is more voyeuristically inviting maybe? Do you agree, and is that why you offer text and image in your work?

dorothy When text and image are integrated, the experiences of both viewing and making is, of course, different from when text or image are presented alone. I think a long text is read less carefully when it's seen as part of a picture, maybe because often the viewer is used to looking at pictures relatively quickly. But in another way, the text gains because it has a "home," it's now an object and somehow has a more prominent place in the world.

This morning when I woke up I remembered the linoleum carpet that covered the floor of my playroom when I was a very little girl. It was divided into large square areas and on each square a nursery rhyme was printed with big illustrations in bright, gay colors. Simple Simon, Jack and Jill, and Jack Spratt are the only three I remember still. From the moment I could read, text and image were together. And it felt good sitting on the floor of my playroom, surrounded by a world of color, text and image.

trinie As you've made books over the years, did you make them because you sought a sort of intimacy between artist/author and viewer/reader?

dorothy Not that I was aware of. I don't think it's possible for me to feel an intimacy with someone I know nothing about. But making the books, it was good to feel that this or that story was going out into the world. And, maybe, the world would even embrace it. When I meet people now who encountered my work—paintings or books—when they were young and tell me exactly what it has meant to them over the years, I'm quite surprised, but very moved and very happy. It's extremely important to me that, despite the censorship, my life's work didn't just go out into the wind. When one is relatively accepted and one knows that one has an audience, perhaps one's feelings about making work changes. We'll see.

trinie I love all of your artists' books, in part because I find them simultaneously sexy and humorous in a touching sense. For example, in *Lists IV*, the chronicles of so many escapades are both sexier and funnier printed on that thick plastic! *Follow Me*, on the other hand, is accordion folded with a 7" record inside. Can you speak about material choices and form in your books?

dorothy Sometimes for the material choices, there were practical considerations or the inspiration of a friend, or the printer had developed a new technique. *Follow Me*, the leporello, was published by the DAAD. They gave me a free hand and I indulged myself,



The Queen of the Amazons and Achilles, 2007.
Gouache on cardboard. Courtesy Air de Paris, Paris.



The Piano, 2009.
Gouache on paper on wood. © photo DR. Courtesy Air de Paris, Paris, and Peres Project, Los Angeles.



The Next Great Moment In History Is Ours, 1970.
Silkscreen, framed with wood and plexiglas. Courtesy Air de Paris, Paris.

Drei Monats Kalender



November

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
11 12 13 14 15 16 17
18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25
26 27 28 29 30

December

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
11 12 13 14 15 16 17
18 19 20 21 22 23 24
25 26 27 28 29 30 31

January 83-84

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18
19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26
27 28 29 30 31

Welcome To My Art, 1983.

Framed gouache and ink on board mounted on wood. Courtesy Air de Paris, Paris and Peres Project, Los Angeles.

maybe, with the record, but it was part of my direction, reaching as many senses as possible with one work. In a way, the design was a forerunner of my later book *Dieter and Dorothy —Their Correspondence in Words and Works 1967–1998*, where I used again my idea of combining texts with images of our works which were somehow connected to the texts. It's really a very personal form because only the person who has made it or lived it can know what to choose. I tried to make almost every page into a kind of picture of itself, and I hope in that way it helped make our correspondence into an artwork. So, that was a form that developed from the closest connection imaginable to the content.

Once, in 1966 in New York, Maurice Girodias, the publisher of The Olympia Press and a friend of ours, asked me to make a book unlike any other which had ever been made. At that time, I had never heard of artists' books, but what I made for him was an artists' book. There, text and image were joined but the images of the lovers were cutouts and individually bound as pages themselves. So what you saw was a cutout image with printed text behind it, which was partially obscured by the outline of each figure, and you would have to turn the figure-page in order to be able to read the text properly. At that time, I was making my *People* —a series of cutout figures on heavy paper glued to wood. So I moved one of my art forms into another genre. I had already been using text almost from the beginning in my Abstract Expressionist paintings.

trinie In *Follow Me*, Robert Filliou wrote, "Iannone investigates the worlds of love and loving styles." Do you find books to be an especially loving form? (I do!)

dorothy Yes, I suppose they are, although I never thought of them particularly in that way. But for me and, I think, for many other people, even without consciously knowing it, the whole artistic endeavor is motivated by a kind of love.

trinie Can you speak a bit about making art that encourages people to open themselves, to embrace the physical and its connections to the metaphysical? What are the burdens and/or rewards that come with this?

dorothy The many works I have made in my life are gradually becoming known to viewers. When I painted and wrote and sang and filmed my message, one might call it, it filled all of my mind. And nothing gave me more pleasure than expressing it (almost!). The burdens are the obvious ones. I have written about my experiences in *Censorship and the Irrepressible Drive Toward Love and Divinity*. Since the early 80s when that book was first published, the landscape looks very different, of course, and for me it has been possible to stand a little bit in the sunlight since the eyes of Maurizio Cattelan, Massimiliano Gioni, and Ali Subotnick were turned upon me during their days in Berlin as curators of the 2006 Biennial. But as Johanna Burton points out in her Artforum review of my New York exhibitions, censorship is insidious and still with us. If, in any way, I have helped people to come closer to themselves, that would mean a lot to me.

trinie Do you ever write "straight" story, pure text? Will you publish a book someday sans imagery?

dorothy I did write *Courting Ajaxander* in 1983 as pure text. It was eventually published in a cassette with books by Emmett Williams and William Copley, on the occasion of our exhibition at Haus am Lutzow Platz in Berlin. Before then, I had copied that entire short story onto a piano I was making for Francesco Conz in Verona, who had also commissioned pianos from Joseph Beuys, Ben Vautier, and other Fluxus artists. *Courting Ajaxander*, by the way, contains the only extended explicitly erotic passages I have ever written. Although completely direct, their effect, I have been told, is not in the least obscene. *The Whip*, from 1980, is another story I wrote purely as text. It was published by Rainer Verlag in Berlin. (But this doesn't mean I don't sometimes think I might like to make a series of drawings using *Courting Ajaxander* or *The Whip* texts.)

I have another rather long text, whose full title is *The Apologia of a Protestant Priest—Wherein is Contained A New Interpretation of the Myth of Amor and Pysche* which has been waiting thirty years for me to have time to find a way of sending it out into the world. In addition, I have many other short pieces I am fond of which have never been published. I don't think I will ever write a long, long story but perhaps when I collect all my writings into one volume (a dream of mine, a joy-in-waiting) that will be my long work. Although, in a way, I consider all of my work one.

culminating in unity with the beloved. I doubt that I will ever again search for it in this life. But now that you are definitely gone, now that your form will never again be seen by anyone, I realize that, next to the moment when I saw the nature of Truth, the moment I saw you was the best. (Or perhaps, as you always liked to say, the opposite could also be true.)

trinie Last thoughts?

dorothy I thought I would like to close with a few quotations which I love from other writers.

Henry Miller's epigraph to his book *Tropic of Cancer* is a line from Ralph Waldo Emerson:

These novels will give way, by and by, to diaries or autobiographies —captivating books, if only a man knew how to choose among what he calls his experiences, that which is really his experience, and how to record truth truly.

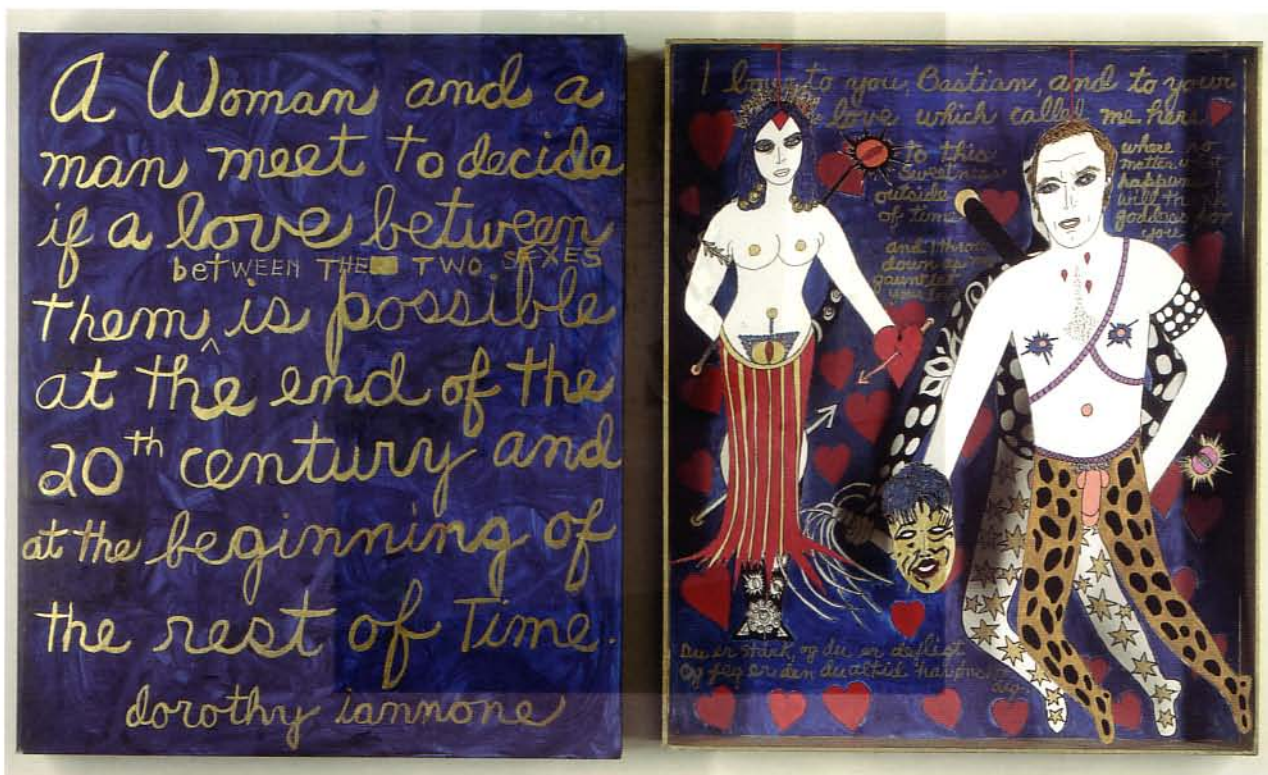
In his foreword to *Women in Love*, D.H. Lawrence wrote:

Let us hesitate no longer to announce that the sensual passions and mysteries are equally sacred with the spiritual mysteries and passions. Who can deny it any more? The only thing unbearable is the degradation, the prostitution of the living mysteries in us.

And, finally, as the epigraph to our correspondence book, I used a line from Emerson which Dieter loved:

Veracity is that which we want in poets, that they shall say how it was with them and not what might be said.

PARIS, LA



The Opera Box, 1980.
Gouache and acrylic on hand made cardboard box and cardboard cut outs.
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