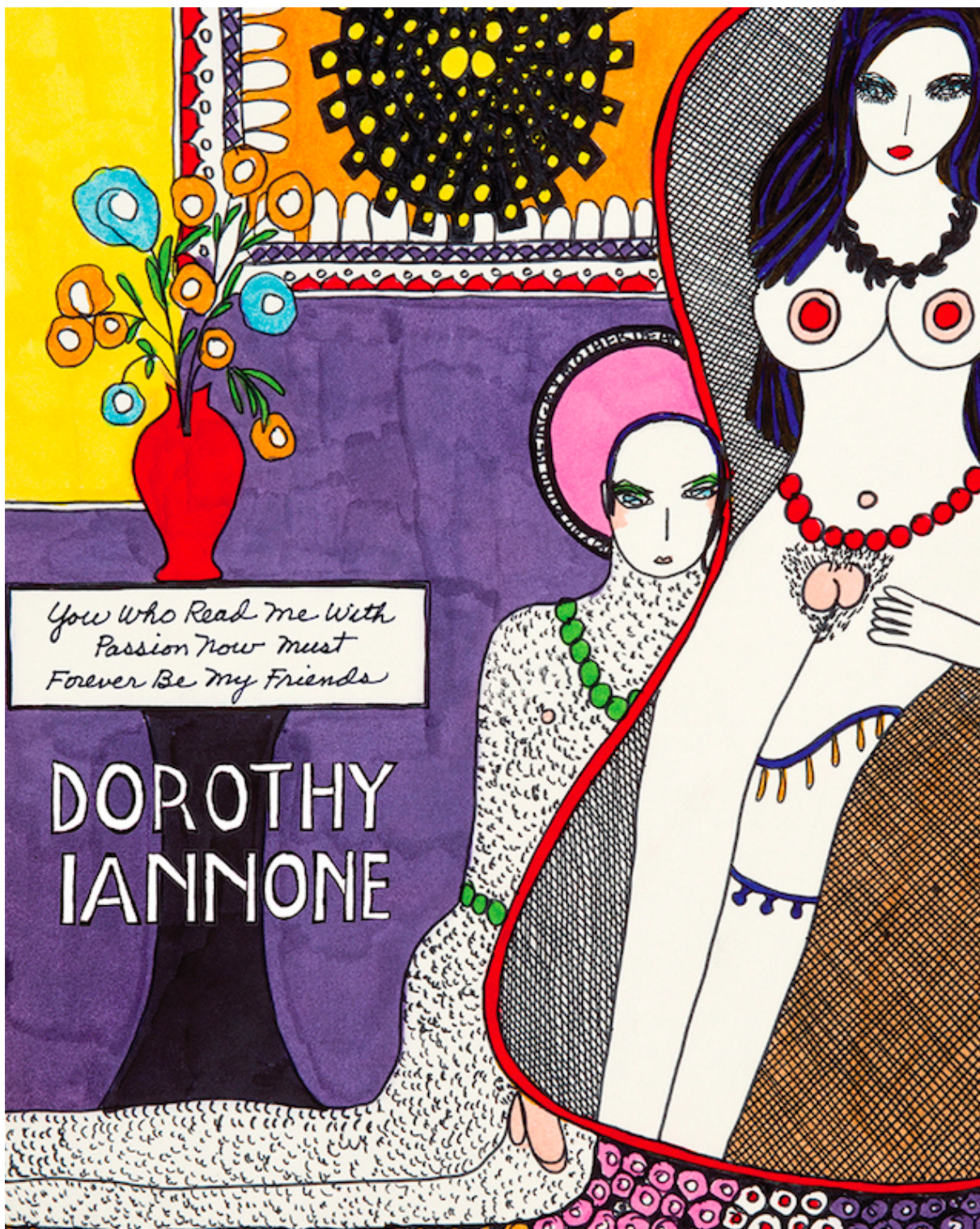


HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Making Muses: Dorothy Iannone's Erotic Art Was Inspired by Dieter Roth

by [Nicole Rudick](#) on December 14, 2014



Cover of "You Who Read Me With Passion Now Must Forever Be My Friends" (2014), published by [Siglio Press](#)

It's fitting that *An Icelandic Saga* opens [Siglio Press](#)'s new collection of Dorothy Iannone's image-and-text artworks. Writing the *Saga* retrospectively — in 1978, 1983, and 1986 — Iannone describes her trip to Reykjavík in 1967 as the "journey which seems to have made all other journeys possible." It was there she met the artist Dieter Roth, with whom she swiftly fell in love and for whom she left her husband and a comfortable life in the United States. But it also marks the start of another kind of journey: Iannone's maturation as an artist and her lifelong quest to achieve ecstatic unity, or "becoming one with another" by way of erotic love.

The idea has parallels in ancient cultures, Indian and Eastern religions, and certain sects of Christianity — an early conceptual influence for Iannone was Saint Theresa, whose immortalization in marble, by Bernini, she saw in her twenties — and though Iannone also borrowed visually from these antecedents (from fertility goddesses and Tantric figurative art, for instance), her method of exploration is very much her own, a journey of both flesh and spirit, life and art, one inextricable from the other.

And in fact, a half dozen pages into her *Icelandic Saga*, she momentarily breaks from the tale to express her gratitude for art. "Art is the world I have created which never lets me down," she writes, "a world to which I can return again and again and smile and be immortal." (Was she thinking of Bernini's sculpture at that moment?) Iannone is often smiling in her work, especially toward the end of the *Saga*, when she sees her new life with Dieter unfolding before her. She is also smiling in "I Was Thinking of You" (1975), which is a very different work. On the front of a large wood box covered with dense, vibrantly colored plant motifs and ornamental designs, Iannone painted a life-size man with a huge erection manually stimulating a woman's clitoris and touching her breast. In place of the woman's head is a small video monitor, on which Iannone's closely cropped face appears in a loop, as she climaxes again and again.

These two works, which appeared together at the New Museum in 2010 (she was then seventy-five, and it was her first, and to date only, US museum solo show), represent two interconnected aspects of Iannone's art: on the one hand, her memoiristic, narrative approach to art making in which her life is both subject and object of her art; on the other, her active, unfettered eroticism. There's lots of explicit sex in her work, but it's never intended as provocation or as an object for voyeurism (though it can be arousing). When, in "Lists (IV)" (1968), she recounts all of her lovers before Dieter, the chronicle is given rather dispassionately. Except for the subject matter, the work resembles a child's primer.

Born in Boston, August 1933
studied English literature at
Boston University, graduated
Phi Beta Kappa. Advanced work
at Brandeis University

Dorothy Iannone
bei Valerie Felix Handachin
Bäumleingasse 16, Basel
Vernissage
13. November
17-20 Uhr
Ausstellung November 13, 1970

Began painting in 1958
Travelled widely + lived
for seasons in remote
places - now spends half the
year in Düsseldorf

LISTS (I)

Supplies for an 8-day sail to Iceland

- Smithfield Ham
- Prosciutto
- Brie
- Bel Paese
- Kottbullar
- Oliveira for martinis - 2
- Cheep Pate'
- Foie de Strasbourg
- Tips
- Dates
- Mixed nuts
- Walnuts in shell
- Dolma - 2
- Brommer wafers
- Mushrooms in oil
- Vienna Sausages
- Mustard
- Lemons + limes
- pickled watermelon rind
- 12 cases of Schweppes
- 1 case of Red Wine
- Cat's tongue
- Makka Sticks
- petit fours
- English fancy cream toffee
- Baclava
- Wild Strawberry jam
- minta oitani
- Panforte
- mango
- Cranshaw melon
- 4/2 of cherries
- pears
- Bananas
- purple nappine
- golden sword plastic
- TOOTHpicks
- Can opener
- rust cracker

LISTS (II)

A few days in Reykjavik

	Tokens	State	D.I.'s response	D.R.'s response
Sat. 6/24/67	d.i. gets food poisoning d.n. makes harsh sexual proposal	drunk	intensely attracted	large head in her lap while kneeling
Sun. 6/25/67	d.n. assists in attention of visit d.i. offers dancer and songs	drunk	racing blood	asks if she can love more than one person at a time
Mon. 6/26/67	d.n. catches trout for d.i. to kill d.i. exhibits obedience and kills fish	sober	in love	big pull with all levels engaged
Tues. 6/27/67	d.i. offers knife to d.n. d.n. accepts knife	drunk	madly in love	performs marriage with one reservation
Wed. 6/28/67	d.n. inscribes two copies of Die Blau-Blut d.i. wears Die Blau-Blut in her lapel as she flies home	sober + drunk	no turning back	removes reservation does not expect her return promises to wash up

LISTS (III)

Fly Away List

- June 29, 1967
- WIRE - Sorrales no show - unbittered Dorothy
 - BILLS - dress shop
Tailor
laundry
art supplies
hairdresser
8th St. Bookshop
 - BUY TICKET - air freight - how much
 - ALBERTO - Emmette's things to Marilyn
Send Sarah her stuff
 - BUY - record player, Saga books, suspenders,
Scotch, Cigarettes, contraceptive pills,
mascara, toothpaste, suitcases
 - CALL - Leon, Maurice, ARTHUR
 - PICK-UP Sable
 - ARRIVE - July 1st 7:30 A.M.
Left Berlin Flight 420 #160
 - PACK - clothes
people
paintings - drawings
art supplies
letters
Some Kitchen things
Cook books, recipes
few books
some records
Towels
Iron? - NO
fig saw? - NO
Spices
Calendar pad

LISTS (IV)

A Requested Reconstruction

Names	age	Sexing	Other
Owen	15		*
Charlie	16	*	
Kimber	17	*	*
Biker	18	*	*
Ann Clair	19	*	*
St. Russell	19	*	*
St. Watson	19	*	*
Sgt. Major	19	*	*
Khami	19	*	*
Chompagne	20	*	*
Wild Berge	21	*	*
Alan	21	*	*
Bramberg	21	*	*
Buchbaum	21	*	*
Sorrales	22	*	*
U.P.	22	*	*
Galanter	22	*	*
Psychiatrist	22	*	*
P.H.	22	*	*
Columbian	22	*	*
Economics	23	*	*
Italian	23	*	*
R.M.	23	*	*
Anthropology I	21	*	*
Papish	21	*	*
Russian	21	*	*
rust	21	*	*

LISTS (V)

Biography

a mother offers letter in response to that of her daughter's, wherein is explained how why + when she leaves her husband + flies to new lover

July 1, 1967 my dear daughter Dorothy, I have received your letter this morning July 1st. Please write to me soon + have the letter registered so I can sign for it. We have new postmen for the summer + I am afraid it will be delayed to someone else's house. Take care. Love, Mother. P.S. Everyone is having trouble with letters being lost.

EXCERPTS FROM LETTERS ON THE SAME THEME

Dear Dorothy, this phallic symbol will be truly yours only after you give me all the details, with dying to know! We're happy for you! RT. that girl for me! MARIANNE

Dear Dorothy, just a short note to let you know I received your letter with its startling news. It's hard to say anything. I'm disturbed and distressed about it, but I naturally wish that it will turn out well for you... A gauge of my friendship and fondness for you is the shock I feel about your shock... It took great courage on your part. Shakespeare is dangerous, Antony + Cleopatra should be read only when one is nineteen or over fifty... I wish you happiness as I always have + things will be better in a bushy future. Write whenever you can + want to and let me know whenever you can. So that you will not be lost to Cambridge. As always, Albert July 5, 1967

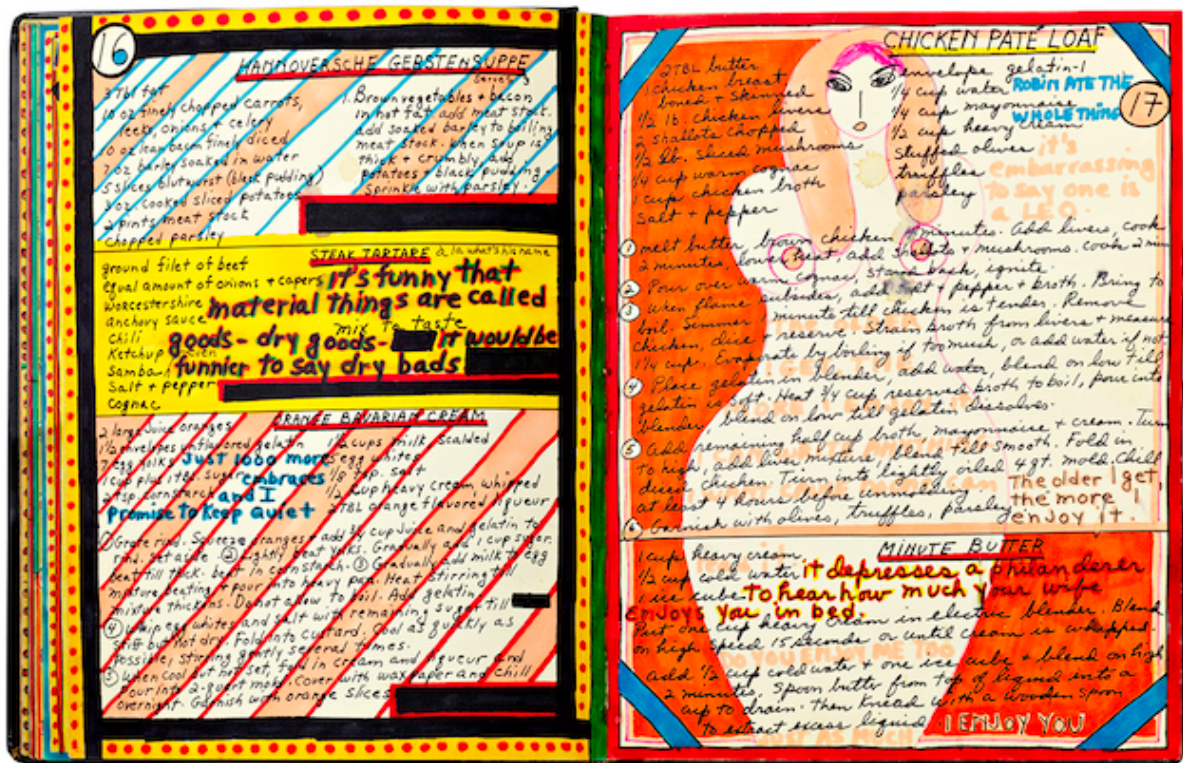
July 6, 1967 my dear daughter Dorothy, received your letter this morning and was very glad you arrived safe + happy. May God bless you Dorothy and if you are happy, so am I.

Dorothy Iannone, "Lists" (1970) in "You Who Read Me With Passion Now Must Forever Be My Friends," Siglio press (courtesy of the artist and Air de Paris, Paris. Photo by Hans-Georg Gaul)

In an interview with Trinie Dalton republished in the book, Iannone recalls a carpet that covered the floor of her playroom as a child: "It was divided into large square areas and in each square a nursery rhyme was printed with big illustrations in bright, gay colors." "Lists (IV)" is a grownup equivalent: Neat, handwritten columns designating each man's name, Iannone's age at the time of the encounter, and a checklist accounting for whether their activities constituted "fucking" or "other." An illustration corresponds to each interaction: these are drawn, as is much of Iannone's art, as flat, two-dimensional spaces packed with ornament and interior detail; Iannone and her suitors engage in their pursuits in increasingly stylized, though rather crudely drawn poses. The vignettes are not theatrical, but representational, employing the language of iconographies, as hieroglyphics do.

In such pairings, writing is a form of drawing. Another of these, "Lists" (1970), is a conglomerate of five lists juxtaposed with one another on a single page. Text becomes an object; no longer is there an image and a piece of writing on a page, but a multiplicity of images. The spaces between lines and words, the rows of sentences and grouping of paragraphs, and the looping squiggles of Iannone's cursive handwriting provide graphic interest. When they are read, the lists offer a picture of what a period in Iannone's life looked like; they are words on a page, but cumulatively they form a portrait of their maker.

Another, and very different, example of this impulse is Iannone's *Cookbook* (1969), a 69-page book that is excerpted here in 26 pages. Iannone used felt pens to write densely packed text and to decorate the pages, which are flush with color and framed by patterned designs. Interspersed among the lists of ingredients and instructions are bits of introspection: sentences or fragments that are written in the fat script of a colored marker or in the thinner line of a black pen and then traced over or highlighted with a colored one.



Excerpt from Dorothy Iannone's "A Cookbook" (1969) in "You Who Read Me With Passion Now Must Forever Be My Friends," Siglio Press (courtesy of the artist and Air de Paris, Paris. Photo by Hans-Georg Gaul) (click to enlarge)

The scene is set on the book's first page, where Iannone combines her alternating annoyance and admiration for Dieter with her pleasure in cooking for him, noting that she wouldn't have made the book if not for the joy of feeding him. It's food prep as an outlet for both eroticism and self-reflection. On the facing page, amid a recipe for gazpacho, she writes, "Can you find the recipes?" Iannone's question gives pride of place to her ruminations, as if to say that among the reflections are recipes. Formally, it's less clear which came first. Did the notes of introspection occur to her after she had cooked the meals, or are the recipes simply a method for expressing her thoughts? In fact, the two are inextricable, and Iannone's self-reflexive fragments flavor the recipes. "At least one can turn pain to color" accompanies the recipe for gazpacho. Directly below it is one for lentil soup: "Dorothy's spirit is like this: green and yellow." A recipe for blanquette de veau instructs one to cook the meat until tender. "The colors on this page are tender too," she writes. As are her feelings for her friend Emmett: "What I like about Emmett is that he has never hurt me."

The *Cookbook* includes dollops of humor — "What happens to my sensual animal theory when I am working ten hours a day. You've heard of a work horse?" — and wordplay, too: In a recipe for baked red snapper with grapefruit, Iannone opines that "the women's liberation movement proved their worth when they pointed out to the ladies that the vaginal deodorant was an insult." At the top of the page, almost lost in a red border, she quietly queries, "Do you like my red snapper?" The thoughts and conversations in the *Cookbook* make Iannone an essential ingredient; she becomes inseparable from the making of the food, as when a recipe for chicken pâté loaf is written over a self-portrait — her svelte form giving inadvertent excitement to lines of instruction.

If writing is a form of drawing, then the converse is also true: drawings, like text, are meant to be read, a reason Iannone's work reminds me so much of comic books. (I wrote on this aspect of her work for [Comics Comics in 2010](#).) "Dialogues I" (1967) tells the story of her seduction of Dieter one night as they're turning off the lights to go to bed. The single-page work is divided into six panels that use minimal dialogue, so that the images primarily tell the story. She uses the same device in "Dialogues V" (1967) and, more abstractly, in "Dialogues IX" (1968).

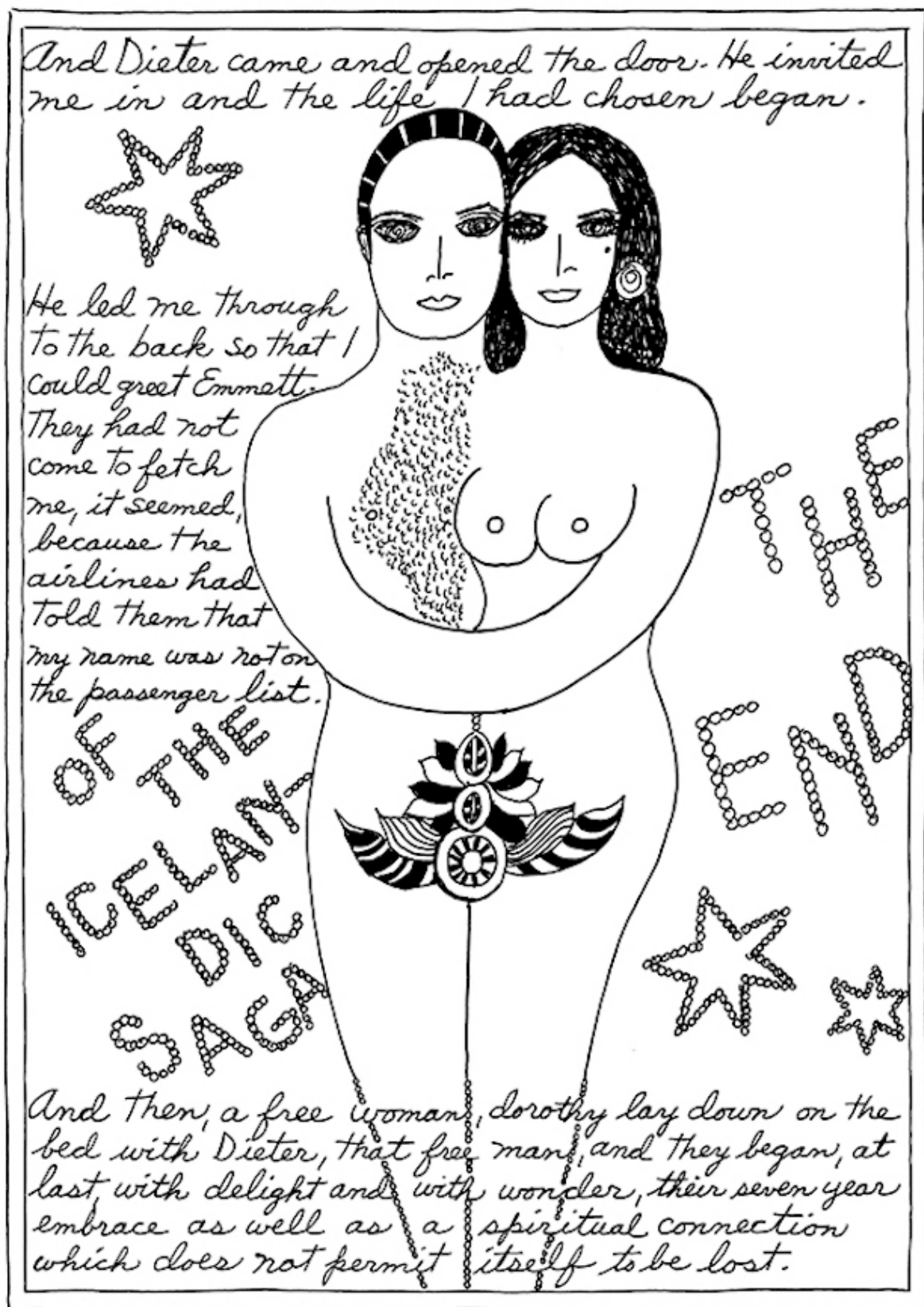


Excerpt from Dorothy Iannone's "Dialogues IX" (c. 1968) in "You Who Read Me With Passion Now Must Forever Be My Friends," Siglio Press (courtesy of Sylvie and Stéphane Corréard, Paris. Photo by Fabrice Gousset)

The interwoven, interacting relationship of text and image — taking turns being read and being looked at — starts to reflect Iannone's conception of herself, as it relates to her "unity" with Dieter. The *Dialogues* describe episodes from Iannone's life that seemed significant to her; they tell stories by way of anecdotes involving erotic love, while at the same time highlighting, as Dalton says, "the ambiguities, enigmas, and incongruities inherent to love." Iannone describes the *Dialogues* as "a way of being with the beloved, even when we were apart" — a mode by which "two beings ... become one yet also remain themselves." Because of this desire for complete unity, Iannone's identity in the *Dialogues* is slippery. She draws herself in different ornate guises that are vaguely Assyrian, Greek, and Egyptian. "Dialogue IX" (c. 1968) opens with a female centaur and the words "I am not D." In the next panel, a man asks, "Who are you then?" By the end, following a series of panels in which the female and male characters work through having caused one another hurt, the female character concedes, "I'll be D. again." Curiously, the initial D. could stand for Dorothy or Dieter, and though details of the narrative imply the former, the ambiguity seems intentional (in other works, she refers to herself and Dieter as "D & D"). Or, as Iannone writes in a text titled "Speaking to Each Other," (1977), an ode to her friend Mary Harding, "Mary Harding who could just as well be Dorothy Harding or Hilda Harding or Dieter Harding."

Frequently, though particularly in the *Saga*, Iannone switches between first and third person; sometimes she is the subject while other times she stands with us as the narrator. The shift in voice is evidence that she is always something more than a single being, that she is always, as she says, “avoiding tyranny” — of self, of identity. This reversal occurs visually, too: in the *Dialogues* and “Lists (IV)” and in her longer stories — such as the odd, entrancing *Danger in Düsseldorf (Or) I Am Not What I Seem* (1973) — Iannone alternately faces the reader and turns her back so that she, like us, is observing the action on the page. In her fictional tales, the female characters largely resemble the way Iannone draws herself — Anna in *Danger in Düsseldorf* and Trixie in *Trixie, the Connoisseur* (1978) — so that they are her and not her. “Is not the opposite of all I say also true,” she proclaims in a drawing called “Flora and Fauna” (1973).

When Iannone and Dieter are together sexually for the first time — what she calls, in third person, the beginning of “their seven year embrace” — she shows them standing side-by-side, facing the reader, with their arms encircling one another, and they appear physically conjoined. They are two beings who overlap — both more and less than a duality. Existing as distinct but unified entities enables, she says, “a kind of total immersion” in the other person.



Excerpt from Dorothy Iannone's "An Icelandic Saga, Part Three" (1986) in "You Who Read Me With Passion Now Must Forever Be My Friends", Siglio Press (courtesy of the artist and Air de Paris, Paris)

Of George Meredith's titular character in *Diana of the Crossways*, Vivian Gornick wrote that Diana believed passionate feeling to be "the undoing of a woman's independence." Iannone believed otherwise; Eros is essential to the unity of flesh and spirit, body and soul. "The exclusion of Eros from life," Iannone opines, "is more easily accomplished if the woman also is

denied her importance in humanity." Moreover, Dalton argues, "that a woman can freely adopt and activate personae as she desires to do so is one of [Iannone's] most evocative, complex and excitingly progressive themes." Iannone is in awe of Dieter, and of their love, but is never subservient to him. She demands an equal devotion in order to achieve an ideal union, and Dieter is depicted as pleasuring Iannone just as often as she pleases him. Interestingly, too, Dieter serves as her muse through most of the work here. It's a wonderful reversal of the traditional artist/muse genders.

Their relationship, however, lasted only seven years. In the work that populates the latter part of this book, Iannone's notion of ecstatic unity falters. She realizes in the years after her break with Dieter that "enduring" unity won't come through erotic love; rather, it's found within the self, and Iannone learns to be her own muse, the self-sustaining woman who is whole on her own, with no need to augment her sense of unity with another person. As Gornick might have it, "The need to own her soul is more imperative than the need to love."

[**You Who Read Me With Passion Now Must Forever Be My Friends**](#) (2014) is published by Siglio Press.