

ESSAYS TIDBITS

The Next Great Moment in History Is Ours: Dorothy Iannone

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by Kasia Redzisz

Voluptuous buttocks and full breasts, thick black contours surrounding glorified female silhouettes, ornamental plants depicted in primary colors, two golden mandalas. Executed in her signature style, which oscillates between hippie psychedelia and Byzantine mosaics, Dorothy Iannone's cover for her book *A Cook Book* (1969) features her full repertoire of iconic motifs. Plus some pots and pans. The following pages contain more than two hundred recipes handwritten against delightfully colorful backgrounds intermingled with short annotations on life, love, feminism, and moussaka à la Grecque. There is no hierarchy between text and image, food and food for thought. Politics go hand in hand with humor, hunger with sexual appetite. A recipe for one-minute mayonnaise is accompanied by the casual-sounding statement: "Well, it is possible that God is a woman. Sorry."



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

A Cookbook, 1969

Courtesy: Air de Paris, Paris. Photo: Hans-Georg Gaul

Sorry? I don't think so. Full of irony and humorous provocation, Iannone's art is anything but apologetic. After a period of experimenting with abstraction in works such as *Your Treasures* (1962) or *Sunny Days and Candy* (1962), her practice took a radical turn and gave way to figuration. Human bodies—male and female, liberated, naked, trembling in ecstasy—populated her dense compositions. Erect penises, wiggly bottoms, ripe boobs, and swollen vaginas became Iannone's iconography of choice to playfully depict love, passion, sex, sex, sex, and more sex. Her women, once described by painter Amy Sillman as "sirens performing burlesque acts of female pleasure,"¹ are seductive, strong, and above all conscious of their desires, as articulated in explicit texts. "I Begin to Feel Free," "Look at Me," "Suck My Breasts," "Let Me Squeeze Your Fat Cunt"—titles of paintings calligraphed in capital letters decorate bodies and litter the spaces between them. In the immersive, orgiastic chaos of Iannone's work there is no shame and no taboos. Just a lot of joy.

If a woman enjoys cooking and likes men (*Centuries of Gazing at Your Fragility Have Augmented My Love for Your Sex*) does it make her a poor feminist? Maybe. Still, a number of artists at the height of the sexual revolution began, like Iannone, to employ explicit iconography to convey a radical political agenda. Betty Tompkins for instance took an uncompromising stance in the battle for female agency over the production of sexual imagery by basing her work on pornographic images that she re-created with meticulous precision. Joan Semmel painted large-scale depictions of couples and individuals in sexual positions, but shifted the perspective so that the woman (herself) became the observer, challenging the traditional expectation that pornography is created for a predominantly male audience. In similar vein Iannone advocated for the unlimited autonomy of female libido and the physical and intellectual emancipation of women through the experience of free love. Frequently accused by fellow feminists of cultivating patriarchal models and banned from exhibitions due to the pornographic nature of their works, these artists nonetheless constituted important voices in debates concerning the representation of female sexuality and women-authored eroticism.

Iannone has embraced masculinity in a way that many feminists didn't, but consistently on her own terms. Throughout her passionate, seven-year-long relationship with artist Dieter Roth, she made her lover a frequent subject of her work, a gesture that subverted the traditional dynamics between male artist and passive female muse or model. Her seemingly frivolous treatment softens the hard power of the male gaze. In his seminal book *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger famously described looking as political act defining power structures in society: "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves."² Iannone took over the initiative: she *acted*. As did Sylvia Sleigh when she painted beautiful male odalisques and reclining male nudes, or Maria Lassnig with her "body-awareness" self-portraits, denying the right to represent herself to anyone other than herself.

When shortly after they met, Roth asked Iannone the sacramental question of how many there had been before him, she responded with a meticulously illustrated account of her past erotic adventures. In the artist's book *List IV: A Much More Detailed Than Requested Reconstruction* (1968), everything was out there in the open. Full exposure. No regrets. Iannone owned her narrative and maintained control of her image. All of that while preparing meals in the "cozy kitchen" featured on one of the pages of *A Cook Book*. No wonder Roth used to call her a lioness, a telling nickname that decades after they split gave title to the first U.S. survey of Iannone's work at the New Museum, New York, in 2009. It took her more than four decades of art making—dozens of paintings, countless drawings and cutouts, and at least one (now iconic) video sculpture—to get there. *I Was Thinking of You III* (1975) is a life-size box decorated with erotic scenes, and includes a monitor screening a close-up video of the artist's face while masturbating. It caught critical attention when it was featured in Whitney Biennial in 2006—thirty-odd years after it was made. Long overlooked and also frequently suppressed, Iannone's works always emanated optimism, which now seems prophetic. One of her pieces reads: "FOLLOW ME. IT IS NOT TOO LATE TO REMEMBER WHO I AM." I don't know if Iannone is a good cook, but as an artist she is finally getting the recognition she deserves. It is not too late (but not quite early, either).

[1] Amy Sillman, "Best of 2009," *Artforum International*, December 2009, 195.

[2] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), 47.

Dorothy Iannone (b. 1933, Boston) is a Berlin-based artist whose work is concerned with the spiritual dimension of Eros, focusing on eroticism and the human sexual experience as a means to explore and celebrate notions of ecstatic unity. In recent years Iannone has had a retrospective at the Berlinische Galerie, Berlin, curated by Annelie Lütgens, as well as solo museum exhibitions at Migros Museum, Zurich, curated by Heike Munder; the Centre Culturel Suisse, Paris; the Camden Arts Centre, London; and the New Museum, New York, curated by Jarrett Gregory. In 2019 Iannone will have a solo exhibition at Centre Pompidou, Paris, and her work will feature in the museum exhibition *And Berlin Will Always Need You*, curated by Julienne Lorz and Natasha Ginwala at Berlin's Martin Gropius Bau. *Lady Liberty Meets Her Match*, Iannone's fourth solo exhibition is currently on view at Peres Projects, Berlin.

Kasia Redzisz is Senior Curator at Tate Liverpool, where she works on exhibitions and commissions by such artists as Maria Lassnig, Edward Krasiński, Judy Chicago and Sol Calero, among others. She recently curated *Women Looking at Men Looking at Women*, an inaugural exhibition at Muzeum Susch, Switzerland.

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