

DOROTHY



Herald Tribune photo by Ira Rosenberg

Mrs. Dorothy Upham at Federal Court yesterday.

'Tropic of Cancer' Is Up In Court: Art or Filth?

Henry Miller's "Tropic of Cancer" is a "work of art" and does not mean obscene even though it contains "a number of four-letter words and speaks with candor about sexual relations," a Federal judge who enjoys reading Proust was told yesterday.

A customs agent seized that book as well as two others from Mrs. Dorothy Upham, a painter, of 35 W. 11th St., when she debarked at Idlewild Airport from a flight from Paris last October. The other two also are by Miller: "Tropic of Capricorn" and "Plexus." But these two were not in contention yesterday before Judge Thomas F. Murphy in United States District Court, Foley Square.

Ephriam London, counsel for Mrs. Upham, also told the court that "Miller is considered a great artist and a great writer" and that "in this day and age one can deal with the subject of sexual relations with candor because it is regarded as a matter of seriousness and importance."

Wants Book Back

Among other things, Mr. London challenged the constitutionality of the statute under which "Tropic of Cancer" was taken from Mrs. Upham, who wants it back. She alleges its seizure interferes with freedom of communication, as guaranteed by the Constitution. The government says flatly: it is obscene.

Assistant United States Attorney Robert J. Ward made

two main points in opposition. The nub of one was that the lawyer was in the wrong pew—that he should have brought the action in United States District Court, Brooklyn, which encompasses Idlewild, where the book was lifted.

Mr. Ward's second point: "Tropic of Cancer" had been declared obscene by a United States District Court in the northern district of California in 1951 and this decision was upheld by the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, which takes in California. Judge Murphy reserved decision.

Would Destroy Books

The same week last April that Mrs. Upham filed her action at Foley Square for the return of "Tropic of Cancer," the government instituted a proceeding in United States District Court, Brooklyn, for permission to keep "Tropic of Cancer" as well as "Tropic of Capricorn" and "Plexus." By "keep," the government means "to destroy." That suit is yet to be heard.

"Tropic of Cancer," according to Mr. Ward, was written in 1932 and first published in Paris in 1934 by the Obelisk Press. Grove Press here said recently it hopes to put out an American edition shortly. Grove also won the right to put out an unexpurgated edition of D. H. Lawrence's "Lady Chatterley's Lover." Mr. Miller, a native New Yorker, is now sixty and lives at Big Sur, Calif.

IANNONE

When Dorothy Iannone returned from an extended journey through Europe to the USA in 1960, she was stopped by Customs. Some novels by Henry Miller, who was then seen as a pornographic satyr of the literary world, were found in her luggage and confiscated. The artist sued the US government and, after a long period of legal jousting, finally won her case. As a result she not only got her books back, but also managed to have Miller's works struck from the index, made freely available, and even legally printed in the United States—which had previously been forbidden. This early experience with censorship and limits of sexual tolerance in a conservatively constituted community holds in a nutshell the art project of Dorothy Iannone which was to unfold in the coming decades.

In her paintings, objects, texts, and sociopolitical interventions she was primarily concerned with sex and eroticism to the point of a repertoire of pornographic forms and gestures—latent and manifest conflicts with authority, censors, and critics were implicit in this choice of motifs from the very beginning. But Iannone was less concerned with shock art, with “épater le bourgeois,” than with striving for the numinous and the ecstatic union of bodies; with transcending any banal here and now in the sexually charged sacred space of a “great love,” derived from models in literature and cultural history, and realized especially in Iannone's life in her seven-year life partnership with Dieter Roth;¹ with striving for “oneness,” where the individual split by social processes of segmentation could again find harmony with itself and with the cosmos—a philosophy of art in keeping with the Pop and hippie era, which wanted to realize true life in the false one in imagined or hallucinated parallel universes: drugs, free love, spiritual experience, and a withdrawal into rural communes. “We chased our pleasures here, Dug our treasures there,” sang the Doors, and demanded in the chorus: “Break on through to the other side.”

Dorothy Iannone, born in Boston in 1933, staged her art project as a lifelong quest in the sense of the occidental *bildungsroman* or *erziehungsroman*. In retrospect one might grant the multiple developments of her work the character of a creation myth reflected through the prism of an individual life story: from the inorganic to the all-too-human in its diverse ecstatic emanations. Originally trained as a literary scholar, at the age of 26 Iannone married the wealthy James Upham and, now liberated from the necessity to earn her own living, concentrated her creative energies exclusively on the visual arts. She worked at first in the style of the then topical Abstract Expressionism though even then with sprinklings of collage in Japanese paper, but soon she was following her own trajectory, combining the elements of Pop Art with very subjective visual influences and design techniques. Inspired by journeys to India, Cambodia, and Japan, where she became familiar with Tantric painting and Japanese woodcut art, Dorothy Iannone began to make pictures from pieces of golden, lilac, red and black paper with rough edges and somewhat later abstract oil paintings on fiberboards. Such techniques could be combined into constantly new pictorial languages and visual grammars.

Typical of Dorothy Iannone's works, especially the Pop-related works of the sixties, is a strategic profusion filling the visual space: an all-over made up of ornamental elements in distinct two-dimensionality, from which powerful human figures increasingly emerged in the course of years—bodies marked as

beings with sexual connotations by an emphasis on the primary sexual characteristics. Tantric goddesses and gods of an exalted eroticism, whose streaming energy aims at a realm of ecstasy that is not of this world. In Iannone's work one finds substrates of many visual dialects—Indian temple painting, Japanese calligraphy, Egyptian reliefs, religious votive images, and the color cataclysms of psychedelic poster art, which are then regressed in her image-plus-text narrations such as *List IV* (1968, see pp. 236 f.) or *The Story of Bern (or) Showing Colors*² (1970, see pp. 244 ff.) to a rudimentary, woodcut-like comics language. Here the artist is not concerned with mimetic copies of established visual styles but with Pop appropriations from the representation forms of the Other;³ with a subjective charge of empirical fact with the intention of pushing forward to an existential core on the far side of any verbal language or imagery through the fantastic shaping of a private mythology; with peeling off the surfaces of various socio-cultural milieus that are set in relation with her erotic-spiritual vision; and with tattooing these “shreds” onto individual realities of life and art.

What Dorothy Iannone produces is a form of “surface art.” She denies herself perspective, the hollow worlds, and the design techniques that generate an idea of spatial depth by means of optical illusions and emphasizes the superficiality, the smoothness, the visual polish which enables one to surf associatively across the multiplicity of “superficial” motifs and suggests horizontal patterns of combination in the sense of a grid or network structure—rather than vertically penetrating the depth structure of the image, venturing forth to the center of a presumptive numen. In this there may also be some rejection of the demiurgic creator-pathos of Abstract Expressionism, whose predominantly male protagonists paraded as heirs to the occidental cult of genius and its ideas of the sublime and the “shimmer of distant smiling shores” (Stefan George)⁴. Dorothy Iannone's little grotesques on the other hand try to stage the drama of existence with the medium of “lower” forms of art, such as Art Brut, naive painting, and comics. In this respect one may detect a camp attitude spread widely in the Pop scene, but what is conveyed here rather is the realization that a certain strain of “High Modernism,” for all its attitudinal rebellion, continues an elite culture obsessed with distinctions and therefore traditional class distinctions as well. By way of contrast, in the media of the inauthentic, artificial, serial, and inept, in the mysteries of superficiality, there are dialectically transmitted traces of a genuine desire that manifests itself without squinting at minor distinctions. In a way, it is the authenticity of the inauthentic—and

1 Although Barbara Vinken asserts provocatively that “in Iannone's oeuvre Dieter Roth is a random and replaceable figure of the ideal lover, serially incarnated in various thoroughly typified men.” Barbara Vinken: “The Overwhelming Splendor of Eros,” in: Sabine Folie, Gerald Matt (ed.), *Seek the Extremes*, exhibition catalogue, Kunsthalle Wien, Verlag für moderne Kunst Nürnberg, Nürnberg 2006, p. 24.

2 Where the drama of a self-censorship, traumatic for Dorothy Iannone, is narrated: when she was invited by Dieter Roth to a group exhibition in the Kunsthalle Bern, artist colleagues covered the genitalia of the painted figures to avoid conflict with the authorities. In response, both Roth and Iannone withdrew their works from the exhibition.

3 Similar to the way the humming sound of the sitar was used by hippie bands of the time as acoustic global coloring without bothering with the music theory and religious history behind the ragas.

4 Stefan George (born in Bingen am Rhein in 1868, died near Locarno in 1933) was a significant German poet of Symbolism and late Neo-Romanticism.



Dorothy Iannone, *Wiggle Your Ass for Me*, 1970



In her middle phase, which shows the artist loosely associated with Pop and Fluxus, Dorothy Iannone stakes eccentricity, the state of being beside oneself instigated by sexuality,⁵ against the domestication of the libidinous in the controlled society; irrationalism against the Cartesian cogito; the indescribably feminine, as it is symbolically exaggerated in works like *The White Goddess* (1971, see p. 196), against writing as a

in this Dorothy Iannone appropriated one of the most persistent articles of faith in Pop. But she did so from an attitude of emphasis rather than with a pose of passively pleasing that was favored by people like Warhol.

It is in this sense that the “cut-outs” (see pp. 228 f.) which the artist produced from the mid-sixties on are to be categorized as part of her project of conceptual continuity. She “liberated” the people, who turned up in her visual labyrinths in ever greater number, from the prison of the limited picture surface by cutting them out and gluing them onto wood. A conquest of space while simultaneously retaining the flatness, a transference of “flatware” into three dimensions, their origins in the plain surface being explicitly referenced in the frontally displayed figures’ “shallows.”

The “cut-outs,” often arranged in groups, were configured into a “democratic theater of the world” (Oliver Koerner von Gustorf), where celebrities like Charlie Chaplin, Ginger Rogers, Bob Dylan, and the Beatles or iconic representations from the history of art like the Venus of Botticelli have roles to play—a bit like in the famous Sgt. Pepper cover of Peter Blake and Jann Haworth. In these representations the sexual organs are again clearly marked. As, indeed, from a certain point in time, a tumultuously orgiastic all-over seems to take over the director’s job in the image cosmos of Dorothy Iannone. After the epiphany of the meeting with Dieter Roth, which was suitably mythologized in *Icelandic Saga* (1978, 1983, 1986), the personnel was reduced. For a long time the polarity of “Dieter” and “Dorothy” sufficed to drive the religious-sexual spiritual exercises to an extreme, as, for example, in the series *Dialogues X* (1968, see pp. 222 f.), but also to frame the banality of the everyday in art. To the extent that the erotic representations became more explicit, the language also grew coarser, as evidenced by such picture titles as *Wiggle Your Ass for Me* (1970, see p. 226) and *Let Me Squeeze Your Fat Cunt* (1970–1971).

factor of order and a verbal command system of male origins. Soon, too, in new media such as singing boxes, joke boxes, or the installation *I was Thinking of You* (1975), which combines a sarcophagus-like, colorfully painted construction with a video portrait of the artist in a state of orgasmic delight. One cannot but think of Bernini’s marble of Saint Teresa of Ávila and recognize in the closeness of eroticism and spirituality the will to transcend the here and now marked by experiences of failure. “Irreducible excess of the visual” (Stefan Germer), sexual liberation as the healing force of the universe. Or, as the art historian Ulrike Abel has said: “...the final goal of masculine-feminine: all-embracing love.”⁶

THOMAS MIESSGANG

5 Although her work was close to certain aspects of Women’s Lib, there was an invincible critical distance due to her insistence on the “sacred phallus” as a necessary dialectic opposition for achieving an erotic-mystical transcendence. Picture titles directed toward women as *The Next Great Moment in History is Ours* (1970, see pp. 230 f.) do not alter this fact.

6 Ulrike Abel: “I Show You My Poetry And My Passion And I Unnerve You With The Simplicity Of My Language ...’ Sexual And Erotic Motifs In Dorothy Iannone’s Early Works And Their Censorship,” in: Elo Hüskes (ed.), *Dorothy Iannone: Love is forever, isn’t it?*, exhibition catalogue, Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, Berlin 1997, p. 71.