

# SWEETNESS IS SEDUCTIVE

AN INTERVIEW WITH DOROTHY IANNONE

**Oliver Koerner von Gustorf:** *When did you first recognize video as an art form and potential medium for your work?*

**Dorothy Iannone:** It was when the desire to record my face in a particular situation and to incorporate that moving image into a painting arose—probably in 1974, because I spent the early part of the following year making my first video. I had been invited to participate in the “Daily Bul Exhibition,” which was organized by Pol Bury. He had invited me in the past to contribute to Daily Bul publications. This show, however, was to be a major event, opening at the Fondation Maeght in St. Paul de Vence and traveling to the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. It was for that occasion that I made the *I Was Thinking Of You* video box, which featured my first video.

Michel Haberland, a friend in Paris who had an advertising agency, showed me how to thread the video recorder. Apart from Nam June Paik, I wasn’t aware of other artists working with video at that time. I don’t think that information would have been relevant to my purposes, anyway.

*When you started working on “I Was Thinking Of You,” what came first, the video or the box?*

First I made the video, which was never meant to stand alone, but was always intended to be part of a multifaceted work. This was a natural continuation of *The Singing Box* series from 1972, in which I had incorporated into my painting and writing audio cassettes of myself singing that I had recorded in the late sixties. All my life I’d loved to sing for friends, and now I had made that pleasure a part of my art.

*What was the subject of your first video?*

When I was living in France in 1975, I made an audio cassette singing some lines from a famous German song: “*Wenn keiner treu Dir bliebe, ich bleib Dir ewig grün, Du meine alte Liebe, Berlin bleibt doch Berlin.*” [*When no one stays by you, I’ll remain forever true, my old love, you, Berlin will always stay Berlin.*] Maybe the song was on my mind because I had just received the news

that I had been awarded a DAAD artist’s grant for the following year. I was home alone that evening and, after painting for some hours, I decided that, since I still had a lot of energy, I would make an audio cassette. I didn’t have any particular plan when I started to sing, but, somehow, as I went along, I began caressing myself. It was interesting how my voice changed according to my feelings. But despite what I was feeling, the discipline was to keep singing those same four lines. The voice itself expressed the stages of sexual arousal. Shortly before orgasm, I was almost completely breathless and could hardly continue repeating the lines between gasps, and then suddenly, as the orgasm began, my voice became really strong and loud, soaring into the air for some moments before subsiding as I, very softly, managed to finish the last few lines.

So, this first video film was, in a way, a development of the audio cassette to visually show the stages of sexual arousal leading to orgasm and to capture the moment when the soul—let’s call it that—passes fleetingly over the face. And it was nice for me to see it myself, too.

ALL MY LIFE I’D LOVED TO SING FOR FRIENDS, AND NOW I HAD MADE THAT PLEASURE A PART OF MY ART.

*Why do you think one can see a person’s soul while they’re having an orgasm?*

Because for one brief moment we leave the way we usually are, and our faces, in that instant, radiate an enormous peace and beauty and we become our truest selves. In 1978, in *The Berlin Beauties*, I expressed this figuratively when I wrote: “I have filmed your reflection in my face, my darling Danton. You have overwhelmed me and your splendor was unbearable.”

*If showing the orgasm was so important to you, one could ask why you didn’t purely use video to show it. Why the decision to combine painting with video?*



Depicting the orgasm was not the only thing that was important to me. The video was one part of a complex the theme of which is the erotic relationship with the beloved. To complete the video image, it's necessary to give the woman's face a body, and to paint the man with whom she's making love, and to place them in their landscape. The text enriches the story, saying something I would not have been able to say with either the video or the painting alone.

The other video boxes each have a somewhat different impetus behind their creation. *Aua Aua*, for instance, was made because I wanted to transform the film into an object that exists in space as well as time and therefore, somehow, is always visible. The *Follow Me* box was made to convey the meaning of the song on many levels simultaneously. And I think the impetus behind *The Heroic Performance of Pastor Erik Bock...* was simply the pleasure of making a gift to the lover. But in the end, it was also a gift from the lover to the artist.

*Why was it so important for you to be on your own while making "I Was Thinking Of You?" You could have had a camera focused on your face while you were having sex.*

Because then I wouldn't have been making art, I would have been making love. To a certain extent, some kind of engagement with the camera was necessary. For instance, I had to be sure I remained within the limited frame I had determined. And you can't do that and also concentrate completely on your lover.

**"I WAS THINKING OF YOU" SHOWS THE STAGES OF SEXUAL AROUSAL LEADING TO ORGASM AND CAPTURES THE MOMENT WHEN THE SOUL PASSES FLEETLY OVER THE FACE**

*The basic setup and your use of the completely new medium of video were quite simple. Your work contains no cuts or camera movements. The camera remains in a frontal position, focused on the face.*

Since there is no one behind the camera, of course, camera movements are out of the question. But they are also unnecessary, because what I want to communicate is a direct experience and for that, the full face is precisely what you have to see. All I want to know about the camera is how to make the kind of image I need. A friend set the camera up on a tripod, focused it where I intended my head to be, and then, of course, left. After that, I only had to know how to turn it on and off. There were some cuts later in the studio, though, parts in which I slid out of the camera range, for instance.

*Did the text on the "I Was Thinking Of You" box exist before you worked on the box, or was it written especially for the piece?*

It all happened together, somehow.

*How is the writing connected to the video? The text begins: "You walk into my quarters, 2,000 years ago, which are outside the city gates."*

**THE "FOLLOW ME" BOX WAS MADE TO CONVEY THE MEANING OF THE SONG ON MANY LEVELS SIMULTANEOUSLY**

The text, which is addressed to the man, imagines his visit to her quarters outside the city gates, in the space where we can go beyond the forces of our culture, where we are not afraid to surrender ourselves to the other. And in the moment of orgasm, when the soul passes fleetingly over the face, she is showing through the video her readiness to give everything. In the text, she wants to persuade him to surrender himself in order that they may achieve complete intimacy or, as I came to call it later, ecstatic unity.

*Let's talk about "Follow Me," which was your next video box.*

Yes, but not exactly my next video. I moved from France to Berlin in 1976, and one of my first new friends was Mary Harding. We made this little video the night before the opening of an exhibition of my boxes and prints at Studio Galerie Mike Steiner in 1977 in Berlin. Oswald Wiener and Michel Würthle, who had a gallery just around the corner from Mike Steiner, were opening the same evening with an exhibition of my books and paintings. I needed the video for Steiner, since I had promised I would make one.

The video is called *Whisper*, because I had laryngitis and had to whisper to avoid losing my voice entirely. Mary assumed a position on the bed and I sat on the edge, and we simply talked to each other.

**TO A CERTAIN EXTENT, SOME KIND OF ENGAGEMENT WITH THE CAMERA WAS NECESSARY**

In a way, the video became a forerunner to our book *Speaking To Each Other* from 1977, which was accompanied by audio cassettes and transcripts of our talks (made separately this time) to each other.

The theme of *You Walk Into My Quarters* was further developed in the *Follow Me* song, which refers to the matriarchal period, a sort of golden age.





The narrator, who is meant to represent all women, addresses her song to all men.

*There is a big difference between "I Was Thinking Of You" and the triptych "Follow Me." This time, the woman in the middle painting of the box is standing alone.*

That's true. She's positioned next to the monitor where my face appears. She's a gigantic figure, and I suppose she represents the White Goddess. The figures on the panels to either side of her represent contemporary man and woman. She isn't really alone, though. She's standing among her people.

*What was the idea behind this video?*

I wrote this text in 1976 and somehow it became a song. The ideas in the text had existed in another form in my mind for many years. The film was made to transmit these ideas and sentiments on different levels, and the painting on the box communicated them through still different means. But I'm reconstructing for you now, of course. At the time, I didn't put all this into words. I more or less saw what I had to do in a single "image" in my mind.

I don't want to steal your thunder by anticipating the question, but you once said you intended to ask me about the element of seduction in my film. I would like to put it differently: I wanted to show my sweetness. It comes out seductive, maybe. That's true—this sweet woman is also a sexual being—but sweetness is seductive. I find sweetness irresistible. There's no harm in sweetness. It is, in itself, loving and unafraid of its vulnerability.

## THE "FOLLOW ME" SONG REFERS TO THE MATRIARCHAL PERIOD, A SORT OF GOLDEN AGE

*Yes, if you're a tough cookie you can't really be sweet. As far as I remember, you videotaped different versions of the song for the "Follow Me" box.*

That's right. I made the video on two consecutive evenings. On the first night, I sat on one of the chairs I had made, but I didn't think it was the right image. It was kind of OK, so I didn't cut it out. Then I zoomed in to frame only my face and I was much more satisfied with the result. I always knew I was going to make several versions. I even did one that is a bit humorous in which I have my glasses on. Sometimes I felt my singing was better than at other times. I was striving to sing the song as well as I could, and for that I always had to do it one more time, because I was never satisfied enough. After some hours I got tired, and that's why I returned to it the next night. You can tell the song is sometimes more spirited than at other times.

*But you finally decided to show several songs and not to pick the one ultimate version.*

Yes. It was good to have variations, because in the exhibition context the video would be playing continuously. And there's something in all of them that I like.

*"I Was Thinking Of You" was in color. Why did you do "Follow Me" exclusively in black and white?*

## I FIND SWEETNESS IRRESISTIBLE. THERE'S NO HARM IN SWEETNESS. IT IS, IN ITSELF, LOVING AND UNAFRAID OF ITS VULNERABILITY

I don't know, really. Perhaps because in *Follow Me* there is a great deal of open space, and so color, which often forms a part of the structure of my paintings, would not have played a major role here. But I do like black and white.

*Why did you use the form of a triptych for "Follow Me?" We were talking about the White Goddess, but this form recalls Christianity. Is this some kind of anti-altarpiece?*

It's another kind of altarpiece. When I thought of this work, it just presented itself to me in the form of a triptych. I didn't ask myself why.

*Much of your work refers to the role of the female in society. "Follow Me" refers to matriarchy as a counter-concept to patriarchy. Basically, this is a very political idea. In your song you say that the air is polluted, that language has been degraded and people are suffering. Sexual liberation and emancipation were big issues in society in the late sixties and seventies. In terms of the "Follow Me" box, you had been developing these ideas for a long time, nearly ten years before you started making the actual work and before Women's Lib began being discussed in mainstream culture.*

## THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT DID MAKE ME AWARE OF SOME ASPECTS OF WOMEN'S CONDITION THAT I HADN'T THOUGHT ABOUT BEFORE

In fact, you should say "Women's Liberation." I think it was Germaine Greer who pointed out that one would never say, for instance, "Palestinian Lib." To say it that way is to demean it. I think I became aware of the Women's Liberation movement in America around 1969, when I had already been living it and making art for several years that reflected

my own independent attitude. However, the feminist movement did make me aware of some aspects of women's condition that I hadn't thought about before.

*Your work always seems to address the polarity between male and female. While the relationship between men and women has always played an important role for you, could you imagine alternative models such as woman/woman, man/man appearing in your art? I've never seen these other models on your boxes or other works. You show a wealth of sexual and emotional variety in the relationship between man and woman, but it always remains this traditional constellation.*

I make art about my own feelings and experiences, and the relationship between a man and a woman is one of my major themes. That's true. Yet I don't think that the feelings in the erotic love relationship that I am expressing are so very different for gay men or lesbian women. I am often moved by well-told stories of same-sex relationships. But I can only sing and write and paint with my whole heart about the things I know.