

A TWO-VOLUME REISSUE OF TOP STORIES (1978-1991) RECALLS A NICHE PUBLICATION THAT WAS STRIKINGLY OF — AND AHEAD OF — ITS TIME

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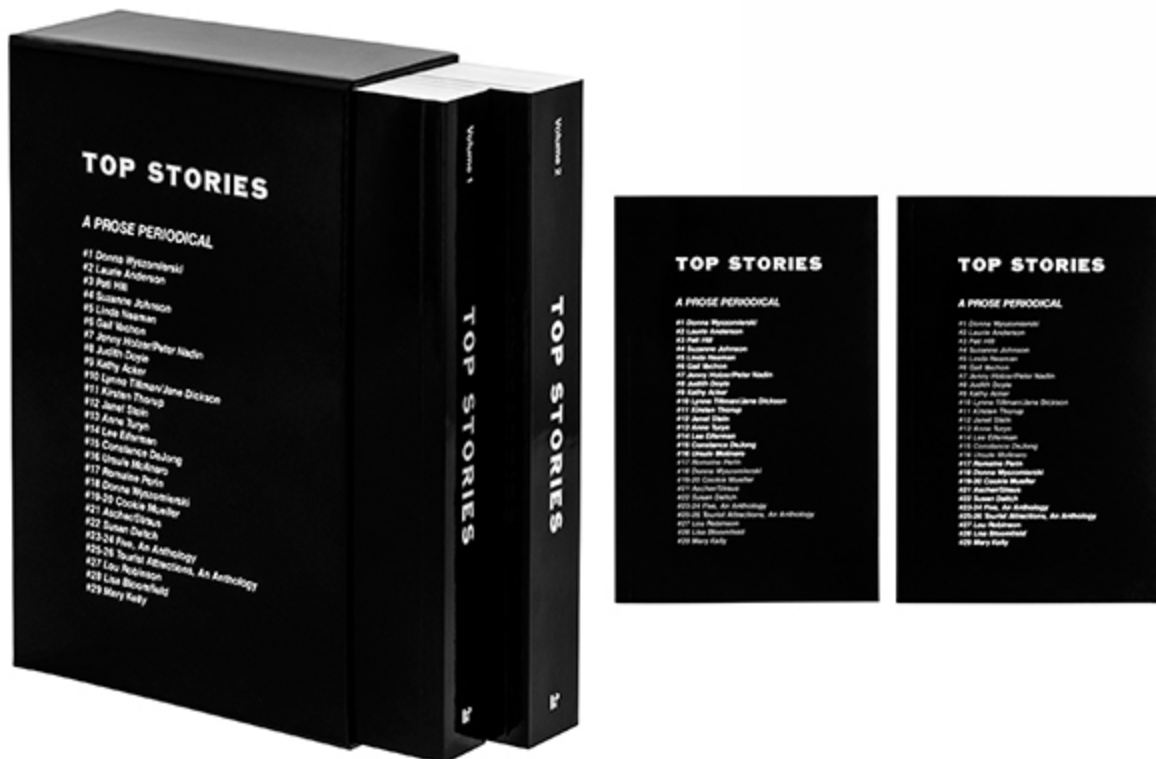


ANNE TURYN'S "TOP STORIES": LANGUAGE IS PLASTIC

by Sarah Fensom

What can a little book do?

That's the question that framed Anne Turyn's approach to *Top Stories*, the prose periodical she produced from 1978 through 1991. In 2020, Turyn told [Know Wave](#), a London-based community platform and production house that put together an oral history of the publication, "I was really approaching *Top Stories* like, what can a little book do? What can words and pictures do? I like fiction that isn't regular, you know what I mean?"

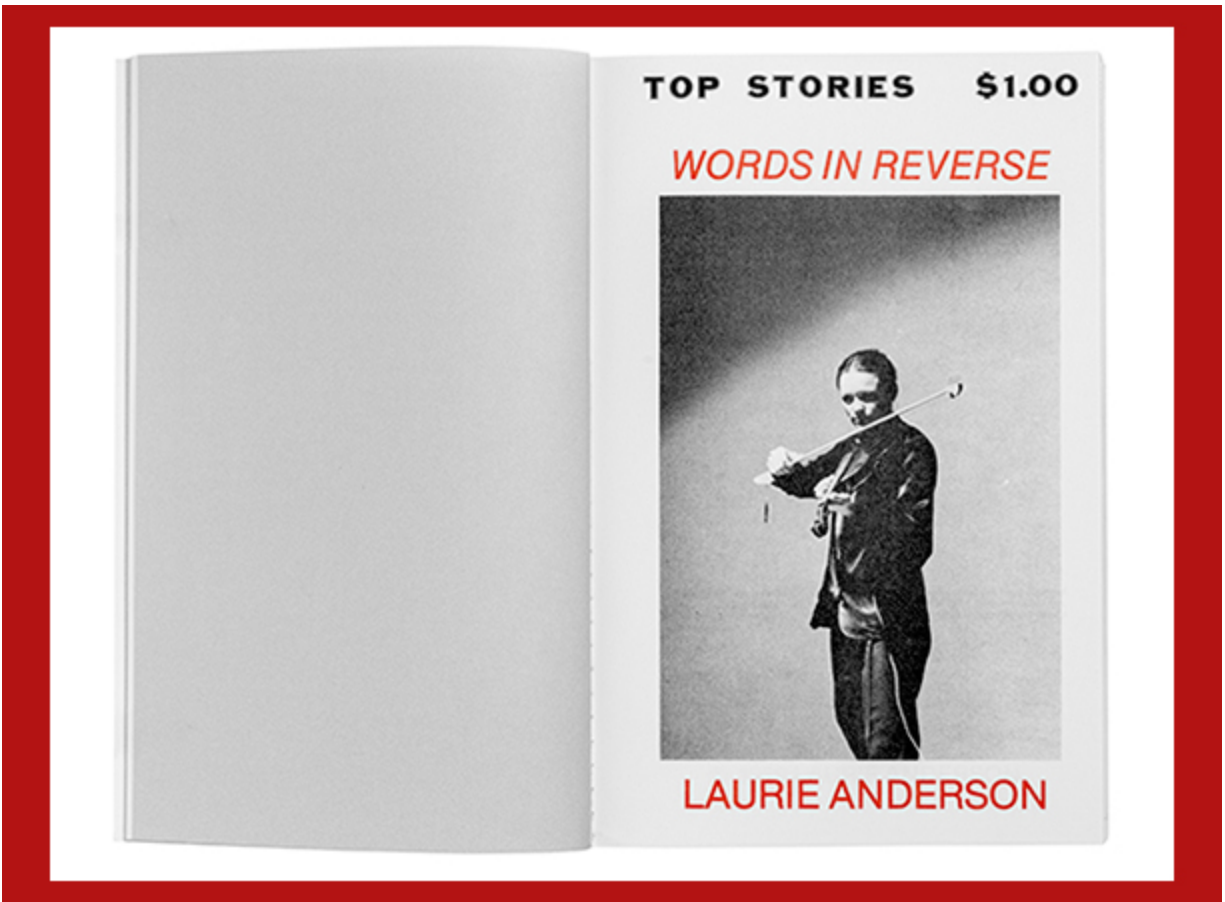


The complete run of the periodical *Top Stories*, which was created and edited by Anne Turyn, and published from 1978 through 1991, has been reissued by Primary Information, a publishing company based in Brooklyn, New York.

Through *Top Stories*, Turyn, a New York-based photographer whose work can be found in the collections, in New York, of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Museum of Modern Art, provided a catalyst for and captured for posterity a significant historical period's experimental fiction produced by women writers.

In retrospect, the artists and writers who contributed to the periodical's run of 29 issues represent a veritable who's who of the avant-garde of the late 1970s and the 1980s, including, among others, Laurie Anderson, Lynne Tillman, Cookie Mueller, Mary Kelly, Constance DeJong, Jenny Holzer (in collaboration with Peter Nadin, a rare male contributor), and Kathy Acker. The work they offered *Top Stories* established bridges between visual art and fiction.

Earlier this year, Primary Information, a Brooklyn-based nonprofit that publishes artists' books and writings, released the entire run of *Top Stories* in a two-volume set. This anthology comes on the heels of renewed recognition for Turyn's memorable publishing project, which has included Know Wave's online oral history; an exhibition of original issues of *Top Stories* that was presented last year at Kunstverein, a nonprofit arts organization in Amsterdam; and a number of recent publications by former *Top Stories* contributors.



The multimedia performance artist and musician Laurie Anderson's writings appeared in the second issue of *Top Stories*. Photo of page spread courtesy of Primary Information

Turyn established *Top Stories* in Buffalo, New York in 1978, after graduating from Antioch College, in Ohio, with an undergraduate degree in fine art. She had moved to Buffalo to live with her boyfriend, the artist Tony Conrad, but forged her own path there, too. There, she became involved with Hallwalls, a small, nonprofit gallery, and enrolled in graduate school at the University of Buffalo after discovering that Walter Abish (1931-2022), an Austrian-born, American author of experimental fiction, would be teaching in its writing program. Initially, *Top Stories* was produced in conjunction with Hallwalls, for Turyn had received a small grant through the gallery, but, over time, its thematic scope broadened. The publication came to focus on new expressions in literature and language by artists, writers, and art-world-related figures.

Taking the form of chapbooks, each issue of *Top Stories* was portable, economical to produce, and adaptable in various ways. This format was one of the periodical's only regular features; contributors could submit anything to the publication as long as their offerings worked well as chapbooks, and the *Top Stories* logo and an issue's contents listing could appear on each booklet's front and back covers, respectively. This openness in the publication's design scheme allowed for drawings, collages, comics, and experimental approaches to photography to grace its pages and commingle, without constraints, with prose texts of different lengths, representing a variety of literary styles.

Top Stories was not the only underground, niche publication to appear in the United States in the late 1970s and the 1980s. Others included *Just Another Asshole*, which was produced in New York by the photographer Barbara Ess; *FILE Magazine*, which was created by the Canadian artists' collective General Idea; and *REAL LIFE*, a magazine produced by the writer Susan Morgan, along with the artist and curator Thomas Lawson. All of these periodicals toyed with the notion of what an art-oriented, artist-produced publication could be.

However, because *Top Stories* primarily featured single-artist issues (save for two anthologies), its run may be seen more as a series of individual artists' books that were devoted to various aspects of language rather than as a literary journal or as an art magazine assembled by artists.

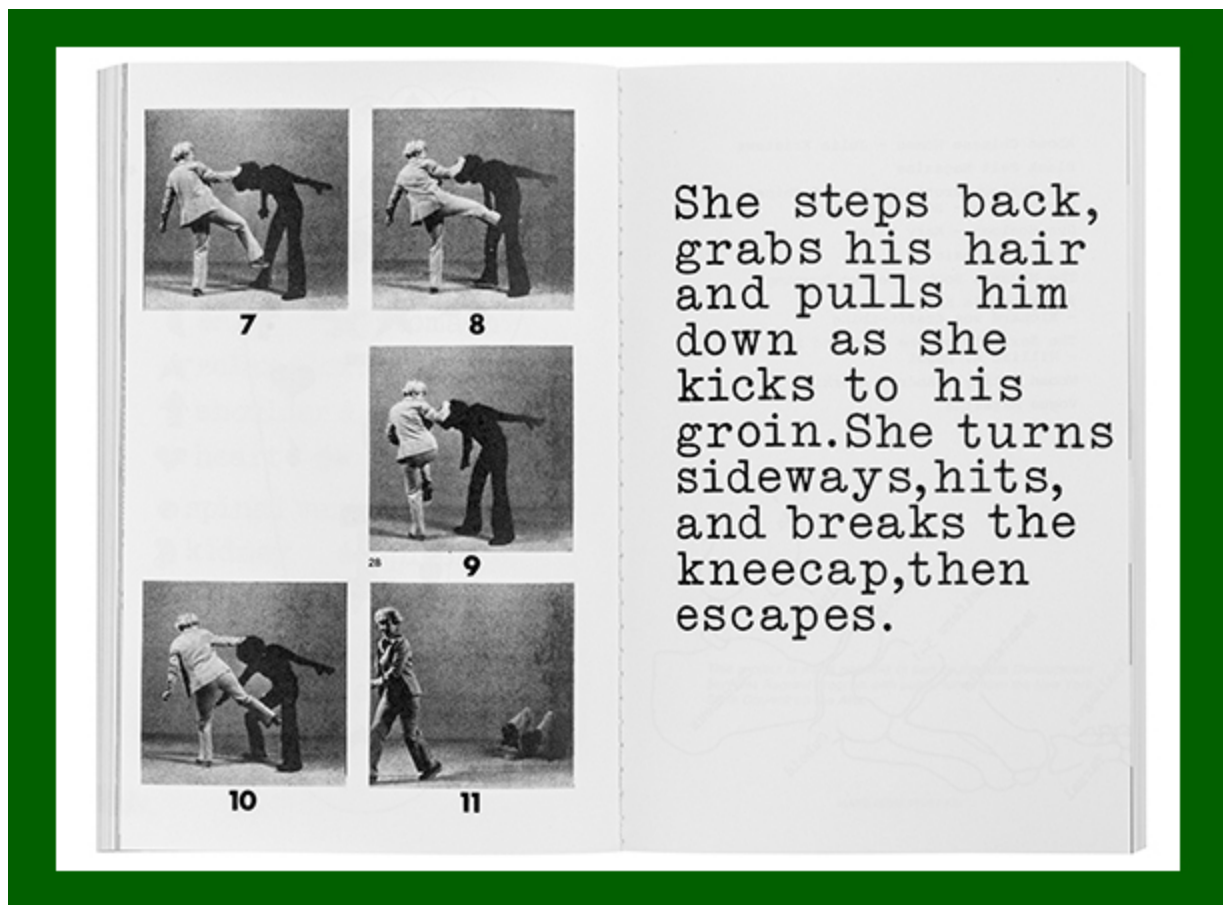
10:37pm approx- imately: filled in afterwards at home at 11:28pm	on E.'s couch	pretending to be smoking through my ears, to divert Timmy's eyes from his mother's dis- shevelled appearance.	at a loss; embarrassed for E.	When I bent down to kiss him goodnight at E.'s door, he spat in my face. Why are you spitting at John? E. asked. Because I do it; he replied...What does a 4-year-old see? & hear?
10:50pm approx. filled in at home at 11:28pm	on road	walking home from E.'s place	very sorry for E.	-----
11:28pm	at home	filling in previous cigarettes	still perplexed	-----
11:42pm	"	<p>Just finished reassuring E. —who called: in tears, I thought— that Timmy saw nothing. That it had probably been the ringing of her phone which she had let ring itself out that had awakened him. & that he couldn't have seen very much if anything since her phone had started ringing at the very highpoint of... My highpoint: E. said: not hers. Just then. Or she would probably have answered. Incidentally, that had been her mother, on the phone. Her mother had called back 2 minutes after I left, complaining that there had been no answer. Where had E. been? What had E. been doing? Was Timmy all right...etc. etc....she'd been worried sick... One's mother & child certainly didn't encourage one's sex life: E. said. I asked if she'd been crying, but she said: No, that was her allergy acting up. Despite the three pills she had taken. Her mother, incidentally, was an incurable smoker. She had even paid \$100,—to a hypnotist, to make her stop. But after a week she'd been back on. So that's why E.'s allergic. To her mother. I didn't say that, though. I merely recommended that her mother start filling in lists...</p>		

In *Top Stories* issue 16, Ursule Molinaro created a detailed listing of all of the cigarettes a woman smoked over the course of several days. Photo of book page courtesy of Primary Information

One of *Top Stories*' earliest issues, "Words In Reverse," featuring material from the composer and multimedia artist Laurie Anderson, served as a literary component of her performance-art work. It included an excerpt of text from Anderson's "Like a Stream" (1976), a piece for string ensemble, voice, and tape-bow instruments, and "Americans on the Move" (1979), a series of works for voice, electronics, film, and instruments. (For her performances, Anderson had developed a "tape-bow violin" that used recorded magnetic tape—on its bow instead of horsehair and a magnetic tape-reading head in the instrument's bridge; it produced a peculiar or haunting sound, depending on the nature of the audio fragment recorded on the slice of tape and how quickly or slowly the artist swiped her bow across the tape head.)

Presented in print and removed from live performance, Anderson's words preserved their lyrical, observational quality. In them, she described dreams, the movies, airplane rides, and her perceptions of "America" in short passages that held together loosely. "In my dream," she wrote in one short item, "I am your customer."

In the sixteenth issue of *Top Stories*, the novelist, translator, and artist Ursule Molinaro created a detailed chart of all of the cigarettes a woman smoked over the course of several days. One of the most diaristic works ever to appear in *Top Stories*, Molinaro's "Analects of Self-Contempt while trying to stop smoking" logs the time of day, location, activity, and emotional state of its protagonist each time she lights up a cigarette. In her chart, a column titled "Thoughts & Comments (if any)" reveals the intricacies of her protagonist's daily life. Molinaro's chart, which she called a "Consciousness-raising Sheet," boasts a strong geometric design that becomes, in effect, its own illustration.



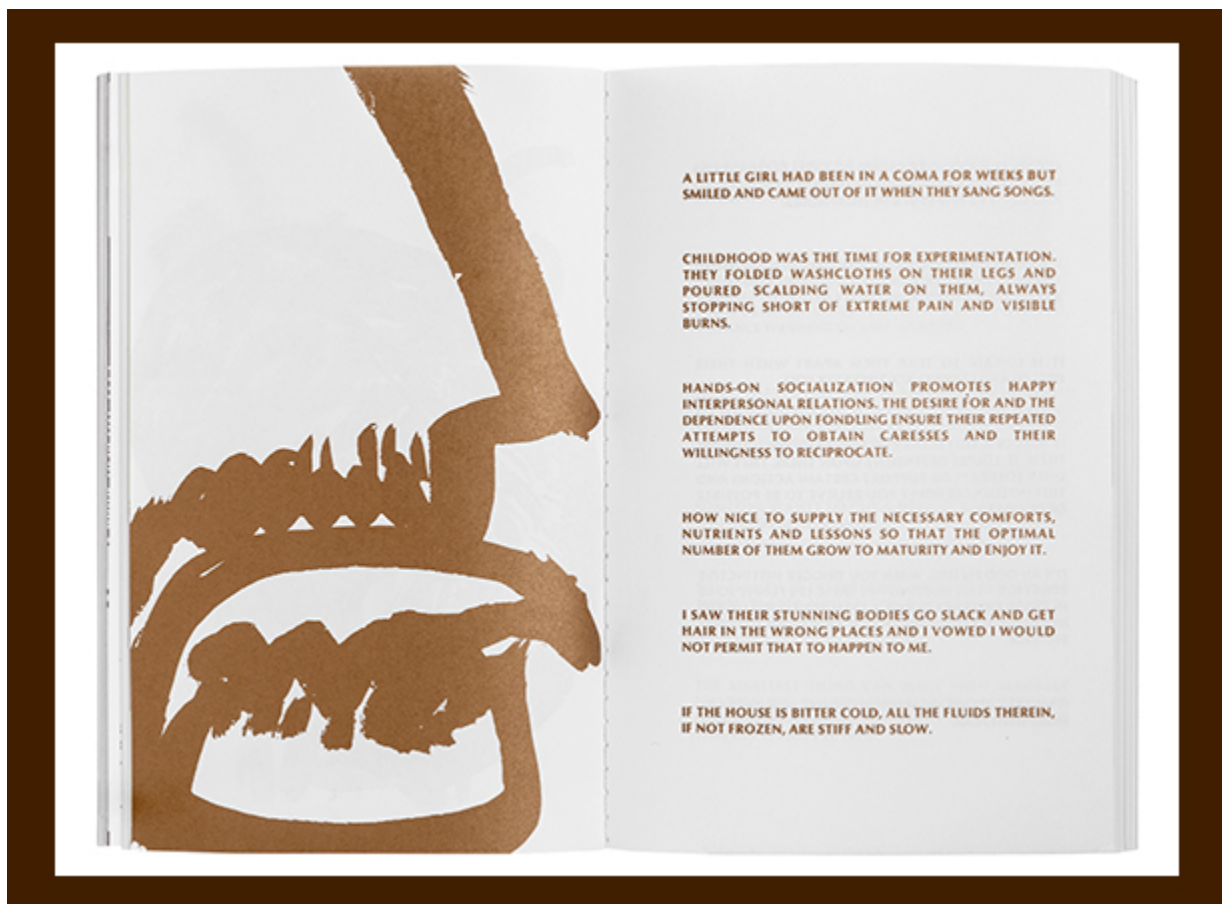
Linda Neaman's "Foot Facts," in the fifth issue of *Top Stories*, was all about the character, health, and use — including for self-defense — of the feet. Photo of page spread courtesy of Primary Information

The artist Linda Neaman's "Foot Facts," which made up the periodical's fifth issue, functioned as an archive, literary work, and collage unfolding over several pages. This one-issue-long, text-and-image work includes excerpts from magazine and newspaper articles

discussing foot health, drawings and reproduced images of high heels and feet (both healthy and otherwise), original passages of typewritten and handwritten prose, and charts related to Eastern and Western medicine.

Neaman's "Foot Facts" culminates with instructional photos of a woman defending herself against an attacker. Her weapon, not surprisingly, is her own foot, which she uses to kick her molester in the groin.

In "Eating Friends," the publication's seventh edition, short passages of Jenny Holzer's terse, biting prose are accompanied by brushy, abstract drawings by Peter Nadin. Both Holzer's words, which describe states of emotional and corporeal distress, and Nadin's loose depictions of human bodies, are rendered in copper-colored ink. The overall visual effect of Nadin's drawings and Holzer's words is one in which their respective contributions come together as one fully integrated work, not one in which one component serves to illustrate the other.

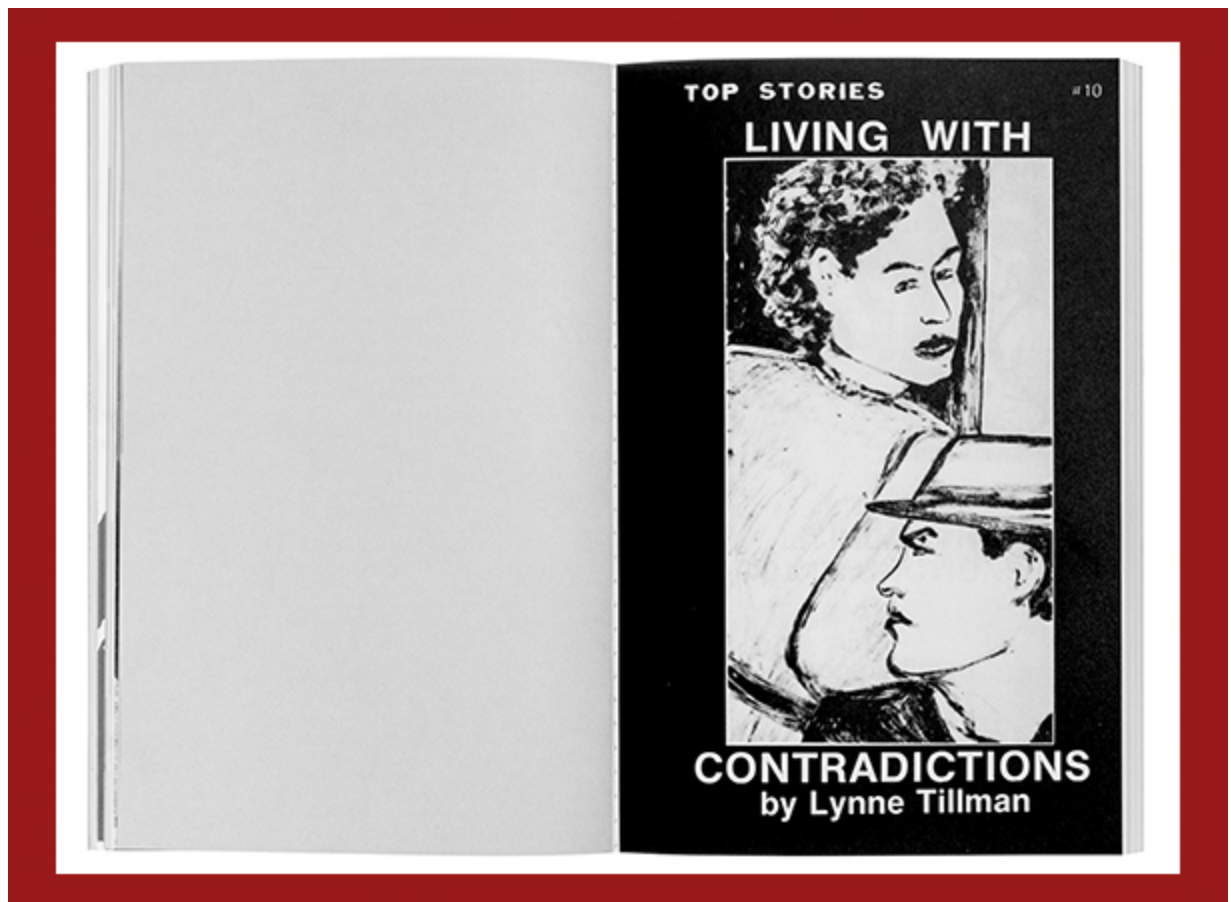


Jenny Holzer's "Eating Friends," in the seventh issue of *Top Stories*, described states of emotional and corporeal distress; her text was accompanied by abstract images by Peter Nadin. Photo of page spread courtesy of Primary Information

Top Stories' tenth edition, "Living with Contradictions," features drawings by Jane Dickson and writing by Lynne Tillman. In the late 1970s, Dickson, a Chicago-born, New York-based painter, began living with her future husband, the filmmaker John Ahearn (best

known for the influential, 1983 hip-hop film *Wild Style*) and making art about their cohabitation. In the period from 1979 to 1980, she created the monotypes that ultimately turned up in *Top Stories* in 1982. Those prints depict Dickson and Ahearn as an anonymous, generic heterosexual couple in various states of physical intimacy and domestic interaction.

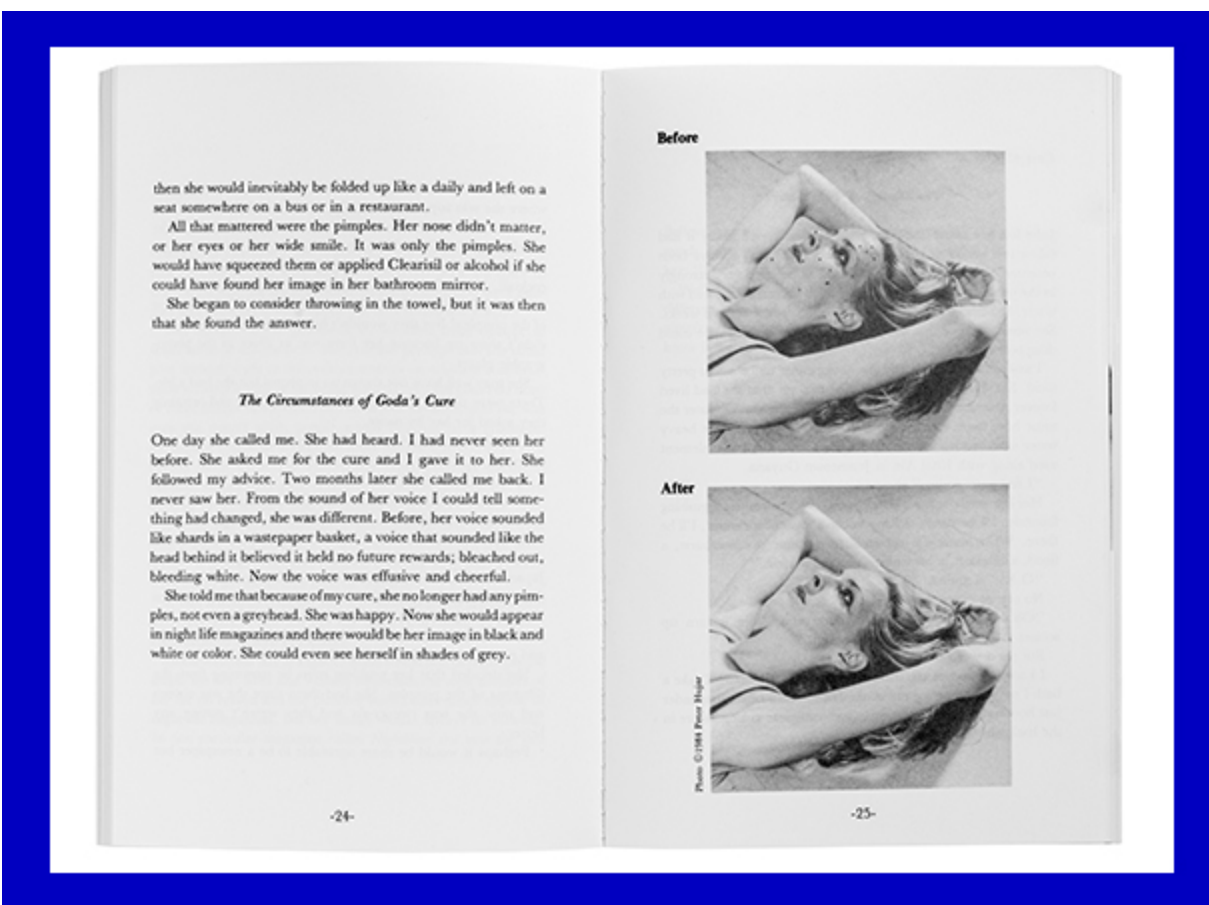
Dickson asked Tillman, a New York-based novelist, short-story writer, and critic, to produce a story in response to her series of images. The fragmentary prose Tillman composed sketches out a complicated relationship between two partners. Broken into short passages that complement Dickson's drawings, Tillman's narrative seems to unfold rhythmically, like a slideshow.



Top Stories' tenth issue featured "Living with Contradictions," a text by Lynne Tillman, with drawings by Jane Dickson, that examined the life of a man and a woman who were living together as a couple. Photo of page spread courtesy of Primary Information

Cookie Mueller's "How to Get Rid of Pimples," which was published as *Top Stories*' issues 19 and 20, is a series of character studies accompanied by photographs by Nan Goldin, Peter Hujar, and David Armstrong. Mueller, who died in 1989, was known as a denizen of downtown Manhattan's underground scene and as an actress who had appeared in a number of John Waters' films. Her role as a writer was firmly established in part by the appearance of "How to Get Rid of Pimples" in 1984.

In 1990, Semiotext(e)/Active Agents, a division of MIT Press run by the writer and filmmaker Chris Kraus, published *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black*, a posthumous collection of Mueller's writings. Kraus, who was not personally involved in the production of *Top Stories* but who followed the periodical when it was being published, told Know Wave's oral-history interviewers how influential Turyn's periodical was with regard to her development of Semiotext(e). Kraus recalled, "I didn't know it at the time but I was copying Anne Turyn's work completely." Earlier this year, Semiotext(e) rereleased *Walking Through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black*.



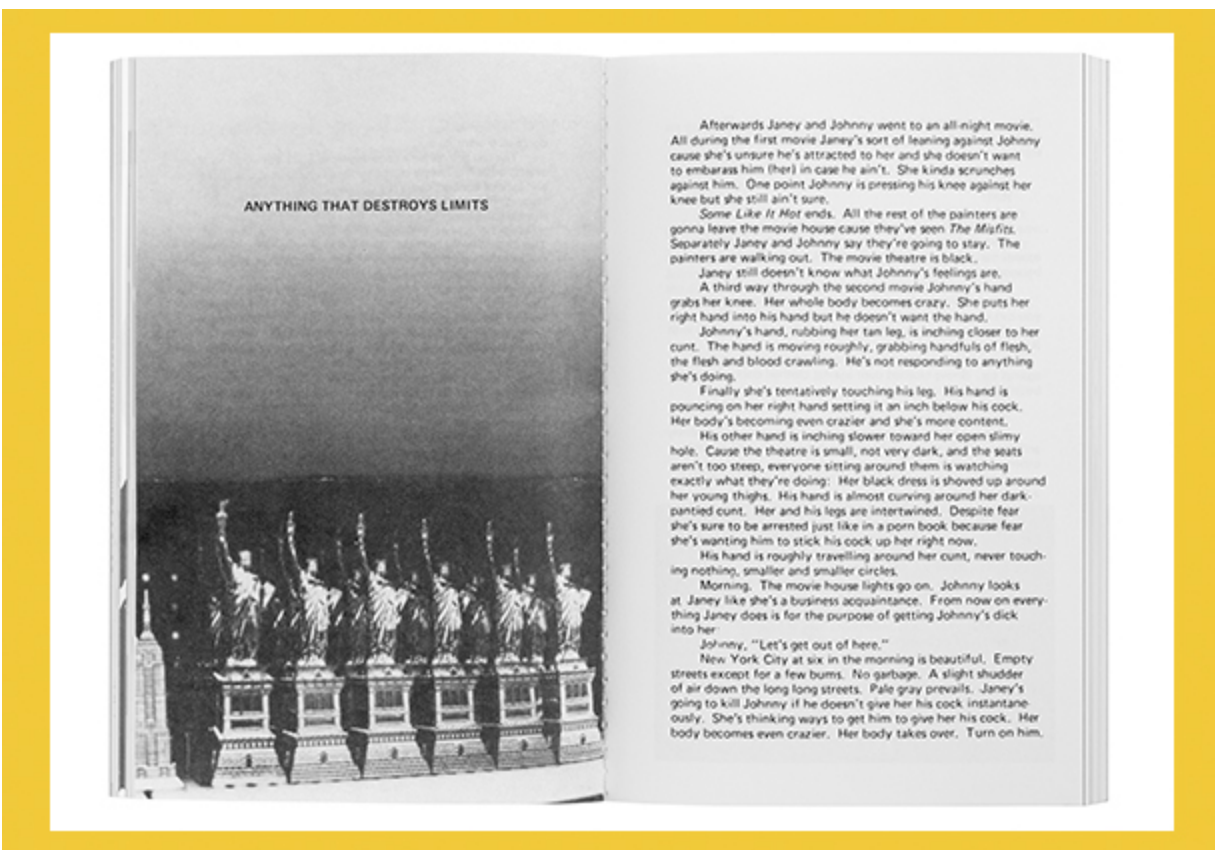
Cookie Mueller's "How to Get Rid of Pimples," a series of character studies accompanied by photographs shot by Nan Goldin, Peter Hujar, and David Armstrong, was published as *Top Stories*' issues 19 and 20. Seen here: photos by Hujar. Photo of page spread courtesy of Primary Information

Constance DeJong's "I.T.I.L.O.E." appeared as *Top Stories*' fifteenth issue. As an artist and writer, DeJong has worked with a variety of media and in numerous fields, including performance, audio installation, electronic objects, and video; she is considered a progenitor of so-called media art as well. In recent years, her long-overlooked debut novel *Modern Love* (1977) has come back into print via Primary Information and Ugly Duckling Presse, bringing her writing renewed attention and praise. DeJong initially wrote *Modern Love* in

installments, mailing its component parts to 500 people at a time. Both the novel and “I.T. I.L.O.E.” are characterized by a slippery first-person narrator who assumes the personas of different people.

Similarly, the postmodernist writer and performance artist Kathy Acker (1948-1997) employed a shape-shifting narrator, writing in the first person in potent and sneaky ways. Acker’s short story “New York City in 1979” was published as the ninth issue of *Top Stories* in 1981. Turyn herself took the accompanying photographs that appeared with Acker’s text — hazy New York street shots radiating a sense of heat and ennui. “New York City in 1979” was reissued in book form by Penguin Classics in the United Kingdom in 2018. Chris Kraus mythologized Acker in her book *After Kathy Acker: A Literary Biography*, which was published the previous year by Semiotext(e)/Active Agents.

During the early days of *Top Stories*, Turyn had been moved by an interview with Acker she had read in *Only Paper Today*, an art publication from Toronto produced by the Canadian artist and poet Ian Carr-Harris, in which the writer had discussed shifting the point of view and experimenting with the figure of the narrator in her work.



The writer Kathy Acker’s story “New York City in 1979” was published as the ninth issue of *Top Stories* in 1981. Photo of page spread courtesy of Primary Information

In Know Wave’s oral history of *Top Stories*, Turyn recalls that Acker’s interview had made her think of the work of such writers as William Faulkner and Ken Kesey, which she had read, but that it also had triggered her memory of *Harriet the Spy* (1964). That book for

children, which was written and illustrated by Louise Fitzhough, also played with different narrative perspectives. Turyn tells Know Wave, “That’s something I never got over — this idea that the language and form of the novel is [sic] plastic.”

The outlet it provided for its contributors’ experiments with the plasticity of language and literary form is a large part of *Top Stories*’ enduring legacy. The various women artists and writers whose works appeared in its chapbook-format issues over many years did not necessarily share a particular, collective style. What they did share, though, was a belief that the boundaries between medium, style, and form were — and should be — flexible and porous.