

## BABY DOLL

By [Kay Gabriel](#)

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***Sketchbook, September 1977, by Greer Lankton.*** New York: Primary Information, 2023. 160 pages.

**IN SEPTEMBER 1977**, a precocious Greer Lankton scribbled in a Chicago suburb. Nineteen, talented, asthmatic, embattled, she described her art practice: “I remember telling Joyce once to *excuse* my behavior while I’m working on dolls because the excitement overcomes me. I also have found that I don’t need sleep or food when I work just liquids. I *work very fast.*”

Making dolls was a rare solace to the young Lankton, whose 1977 sketchbook Primary Information has reproduced in a facsimile edition, released this month. One page diagrams her life; a line stretches to a node titled “creation,” under which three more lines lead to “Dancing,” “Dollmaking,” and “cross-sex.” These nodes stand in contrast with the others on the page: “self torture,” “Mother,” and “Speeding up life to get it over with.” It’s an endearing moment of reflection from a young woman at a pivotal moment—pre-notoriety, weighing a sex change. Artmaking and transition appear as related but distinct activities, nonidentical and catalytic of each other, as if pursuing one might hasten the other.

The sketchbook’s publication arrives at a critical juncture: Nearly three decades after Lankton’s untimely death in 1996, her work is enjoying a serious revival. Of course it is. Masturbating by the subway, sporting a crown of thorns, strung out, painted, dying, bloated, as sick and fabulous as life itself: Lankton’s dolls provoke devotion. In 2014, Participant Inc. exhibited her work for the first time in New York since her death. That show—I remember my own instant conversion—imprinted Lankton onto a fresh generation of transsexuals or soon-to-be transsexuals and chasers and other admirers. An exhibition last year at New York’s Company Gallery confirmed the faith, complete with a photograph of a dollified transsexual Jesus (*JESUS/MARY*, 1989) and a sculpture of red pumps impaled with bloodied nails designed to leave stigmata in the feet (*JESUS’S CHA-CHA HEELS*, 1986). Pittsburgh’s Mattress Factory, which hosts a permanent installation of her final work, *It’s All About ME, not you*, 1996, received a grant to digitize its entire collection of Lanktoniana, which it released publicly in 2022. New Yorkers have been spoiled for shows, but now anybody in any place can view photos of the dollmaker and her unruly creations across her truncated thirty-eight years.

If audiences are feeling Lankton fever, what does her teen notebook—its speedy, stimulated handwriting and skeletal illustrated women, its adoring nods to Candy Darling and Maria Tallchief—indicate about her practice? The intrigue and scandal of Lankton’s hard living sometimes clarify and sometimes cloud what her dollmaking was all about. Lankton attributed “bad habits” to her figures, perceptible in their grotesque faces and sickly, attractive shapes. Certainly they get some of that from their mother-manufacturer and her social world, so surely there’s at least a distant biographical relationship between the doll and her dolls. On the

other hand, curators and writers during Lankton's lifetime and since have struggled to write about her art without stigmatizing her trans status, her anorexia, or her drug use, stage-whispered about in a basically moral tone. ("Former East Village artist Greer Lankton makes kitsch mannequin busts of Candy Darling and other transvestites," sneered a reviewer of the 1995 Whitney Biennial—everything kind of sounds like that.) The result is an overly biographical interpretation of her work that tends to both elide her substantial personal struggle for a dignified life and treat her prolific artistic output as sceney, cross-dressed shock, as if she hadn't honed her aesthetic with extreme specificity. Fabric stretched over a wire frame can look like anything. In Lankton's hands, it looks like nothing else. Or rather, as Gary Indiana wrote lovingly in 1984, her dolls look as if "they have all been ripped apart, mucked around with, and pieced back together in the middle past. They have learned to live with an unalterable strangeness." Your shock is your problem. Lankton did everything she did with precision.

"It's impossible to keep a *constant* record of experience," she writes. In a way, the sketchbook's rapid transcription of ideas, feelings, and meals recalls Bernadette Mayer's *Studying Hunger, 1972–74*—a durational, journal-based project of Acconci-generation Conceptualism that proceeds from the premise that volumes of thought under extreme psychic circumstance will produce insight. Social and psychological pressure was key to the production of Lankton's insights, too: "The rich keep the poor in 'their' place by withholding knowledge that is beneficial, by keeping the price of that knowledge above a level that a *poor* or *average person* is allowed to pay." The drive for knowledge courses through Lankton's notations; so does a wide-ranging antagonism. "Limits for growth are set mostly by one's perception," she writes, "very evident in American art that we saw at museums." She felt keenly the limits of others' imaginations and the abrasiveness of her own, largely isolated, curiosity.

After this torrent of reflections, she pivots to thinking about hormone therapy, and her sketches move in a decidedly transsexual direction. An illustration follows of a wire skeleton with blue lips, ears, and eye shadow—something between a self-portrait and a plan for dollmaking—against a lithe figure pictured in the distance from behind with arms raised. And a caption: "I was so surprised to see myself on Video Tape Dancing." Previously, Lankton noted the stares of others and the weight of their expectation. "It's not the drag that sinks the queen it's the acceptance of the guilt and shame one feels one must have . . . put out by parents, peers, media doctors, moralist etc. etc." In the grip of others' perception, Lankton shrinks. Catching a glimpse of herself looking girlish, she expands again.

The young Lankton collected evidence of other transsexuals. "My constant need to save anything to do with sex change," she notes in one column. Susan Stryker's 2019 interview with the NYC Trans Oral History Project suggests a pattern of young people in the '60s and '70s collecting TS documentation: "I paid a lot of attention to the Renee Richards story and it was in newspaper coverage about Renee Richards that is like, 'Most Famous Transsexual Since Christine Jorgensen in the 1950s,'" Stryker says. Richards and Jorgensen show up in Lankton's pantheon; somewhat closer to her style, so do Darling and Canary Conn.

There's another series of possible self-portraits, the subject clothed and nude, seen from behind, next to an anecdote about a friend of a friend telling Lankton she'd "be the perfect transsexual." "All of the sudden my scrapbook makes sense," she says in an apparent epiphany. Then a further series of captioned sketches, mostly bony, striking faces, painted women with their hair combed back. "If you can be a women [*sic*] at 20,"

she asks, “can you at 60.” The faces become both more feminine—framed by longer hair—and more garishly painted, with deep rose blush streaks on their cheekbones and green half-moons above their eyes. “Naturally I’ll be Miss Drama,” she notes. “It’ll be scary Painful Long and disappointing at times,” followed by what appears to be a self-portrait in which a distraught Lankton gazes at her own work. “People will stare but they always have.” And finally: “It’s worth it.”

It’s striking, even tender, to see Lankton validate herself—committing even to a public ugliness. “As a sex-change many people will discriminate but alas does it really matter,” she writes, both maudlin and determined. In a sense, the line she draws early in the book between creation and dollmaking on the one hand and creation and sex change on the other suggests a life-affirming orientation of her work that critics, distracted by “bad habits” and her early death, have largely skirted. If, per Indiana, Lankton’s dolls “have learned to live with an unalterable strangeness,” the emphasis might sit on *learning to live*, which is another way to understand maladjustment. Life has detonated inside of them. They want too much of it, and they deserve every inch. If there’s a parallel here with an ample transsexual social reality, Lankton suggests it when she paraphrases her reigning icon: “As the late Great Candy said ‘I’ve got a right to live.’”