

Greer Lankton's sketchbook diagrams the construction of a self

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Primary Information's latest release immortalizes a year in the trailblazing artist's life—an addendum to her legacy that leaps off the page

A girl's diary is a sacred place. It's where she goes when the mind begins to escape itself; it's a container for the iterative production of a self, as much a record as it is the physical manifestation of a process. Past versions are overwritten in the immediacy of a page's turn. A diary is a girl's favorite hiding spot, even if it is the most obvious one.

Greer Lankton didn't explicitly keep a diary during her first year at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, but her sketchbook served many purposes: "One communicates with whatever is at one's disposal," she jotted. Whether or not she intended for her words to be immortalized, published in facsimile with the consent of her estate, she concedes to our readerly intrusion. The sketchbook's reproduction mobilizes Lankton's inner life as both an unseen address and an address to the unseen, garnishing her memory with a portrait of the artist on her own terms.

I'm a girl on the train, parsing through another girl's penmanship. If it weren't for the publisher's colophon, and a conspicuous ISBN number, I would have been convinced I burgled the Museum of Modern Art's manuscript archives. This latest addition to Primary Information's catalog presents Lankton's hand-drawn pages to scale, documenting the artist's path to creative conviction as it converged with her trans becoming.

Lankton's words, reproduced here in full fidelity, etch epiphanies as decisive as they are inevitable. She traces the contours of her embodiment with sentiments as intimately real as this talisman allows. In the lucidity of her early-onset self-actualization, Lankton's writing pulses with a prescience utterly intent on finding eternity in this physical plane. The book is a zenith of archival impulse. It maintains the charge of the artist's power, as true to life as its contents; I notice teardrops wrinkle a page's surface, only to realize they're mine.

The sketchbook is as figurative as it is schematic. In Lankton's often frantic diagrams, careful strokes associate errant thoughts with vague concepts, ultimately crafting a poesis more sensory than logical. After some decipherment, her "allergy to artwork" grazes the line between "destruction" and "denial of reality." They're pseudo-pathologies fit for a girl on the edge of herself. Lankton's gestures are rotund and certain—deeply physical articulations that

mirror the figure studies scattered throughout the sketchbook. In this sentimental simulacrum of divulgence, Lankton's project of self-making can never be fully extricated from her artistic practice.

Hilton Als considered Lankton to be "a maker of females in her own emotional image," her sewn dolls "the manifestation of some dream of femaleness." If she were depicting such dreams with her art, this sketchbook would be a document of that slumber. The artist's entries, however, were lucid and waking, as visions of womanhood quickly bled into her real life.

Some of Lankton's dolls stand as oblique attempts at self-representation, carrying an air of animism both masochistic and consecrated. Many of them took on the likenesses of legends and contemporaries like Candy Darling and Divine, if not characters of the artist's own invention. These figures-in-reproduction reveal grotesque truths only perceptible by the collective gaze of the exhibitionary eye; stars tarnished by the spectacle of their own morose beauty.

Lankton's legacy as an artist faces similar circumstances. Her oeuvre has often been consumed alongside the most visceral details of her personal life: drugs, surgery, a life abridged by the chronic pain of becoming. It's an image of the *tragic* artist, only palatable for its ogle-worthy coherence. Lankton's husband, Paul Monroe, stewards a large portion of her work in Los Angeles, though the majority of the estate is preserved at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh, per the wishes of the Lankton family. Monroe's collection maintains many counter-narratives to the story of the artist's life, casting his late wife's legacy as the darling child of a split household. Since her passing in 1996, an ongoing tension has developed around the portrayal of her public memory. Through her sketchbook, however, Lankton finally tells the story for herself.

The mock pulp-board cover sits tented in my lap. I'm the worst kind of girl, smelly with the delinquent satisfaction of a voyeuristic older sister, or a vengeful best friend. The sketchbook is less rife with dirt, and more soaked in a psychosexual soil. In its pages, Lankton diagrams the construction of a self that finally feels tangible. She relays instructions for the body: "One must realize appearance is very important at 1st then as one gradually grows into a woman one becomes comfortable." She characterizes this early period of her transition as "a fear of leaving behind"—doubts, guilt, zits. It's the puerile wisdom of a freshly-cracked egg.

Lankton communicates so much simple wisdom at the onset of her medical transition: "As a sex-change many people will discriminate but alas does it really matter." These lessons, of course, are much simpler in theory than in practice. Lankton was asking many of the questions that arise for girls of a certain age. "What are the dangers?" Questions arose for me: *What is a doll to do with her own instruction manual? What does it mean to witness your own means of production?*

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Lankton’s words are both a preamble to and an echo of a tradition of subcultural, trans-related printed matter that circulated from the late-’70s into the early-aughts. The *TV/TS Tapestry Newsletter* published literature on self-presentation, fashion, and the trans experience as early as 1979. A Canadian DIY zine titled *gendertrash from hell* crafted seasonal editions from 1993 to 1995, featuring writing by and for trans people; Lankton’s testimonies share the tone of the 24 “GENDER MYTHS” published in its Fall ’93 issue. While the artist’s sketchbook cannot represent a universal gender experience, it does provide a structure of feeling that resonates with many—a new entry in the tradition of personal literature as a utility to the trans community.

The person seated next to me on the train lets their phone fall asleep as they read over my shoulder. I feel their glance, and understand myself as an accomplice to the lurid curiosity the trans experience compels. I’m struck with a feeling of secondhand mortification, as if the secrets of a dear friend were being revealed—like my *own* secrets were there for all to see. In the wrong hands, this sketchbook appeals to the very gaze that annihilates our humanity. A familiar twinge of terror ripples through me when I imagine being reproduced at this scale—a plaster mold of my body, made in my sleep. I’m also being clocked, or clocking myself.

Much of Lankton’s writing is concerned with a particular gaze. “Limits for growth are set mostly by one’s perception... very evident in art we saw at museums.” She was thinking about how her image would be consumed in tandem with her work, aware of the ways in which trans people are commodified under common terms. It feels as though she’s warning me, too: “Caution: Exploitation of the Self.”

The sketchbook is a self-portrait, or rather a meta-portrait of a self seen through particular and hypothetical gazes upon Lankton’s life. A trans interiority reveals itself as an addendum to her artistic legacy. Her breakthrough is witnessed in real time—or a time realer than her memory would otherwise allow. Though it feels as though a young Greer Lankton is urging me to hide *my* archives, the truth contained in this sketchbook points to these records of living as a vital resource for an inconceivable future. If any likeness were to survive me, it may as well be one of my own making.

Green Lankton: Sketchbook, September 1977 *is available for purchase [here](#).*
