

Greer Lankton's Sketchbook, September 1977

B bombmagazine.org/articles/2023/12/15/greer-lankton-sketchbook

Sketchbook, September 1977 reproduces the intimacy and raw candor of artist Greer Lankton's sketchbook from a month as a student at the Art Institute of Chicago, when she was nineteen. Some of these early sketches evoke the uncanny, life-size, handsewn dolls Lankton would later become known for in the East Village art scene of the 1980s, where she collaborated with Nan Goldin, Peter Hujar, and David Wojnarowicz, among many others. In this sketchbook, though, her central preoccupation is not working on art so much as figuring out a way to live.

A one-to-one facsimile printed on elegant, off-white drawing paper with a cover that evokes the store-bought, craft paper original, *Sketchbook, September 1977* begins with handwritten journal entries in black pen, recounting Lankton's daily routines, meals, and medications. Lists, diagrams, and full-color sketches emerge within a few pages, as Lankton details her struggles with allergies, food sensitivities, asthma, anxiety, and the gender binary, which she astutely describes as "propaganda from early childhood America reinforced in gay culture."

There's a palpable excitement when, about a quarter of the way into the book, Lankton declares, "I have finally made a step in the right direction to rid myself of the neurosis I developed in high school (inferiority/superiority) because of the excessive teasing of kids who didn't know and alas I didn't fully either." On the facing page she ponders her options for gender transition, consult for hormone treatment. Below, there is a black-ink depiction of a skeleton with blue lips, ears, and eyes, and a caption scribbled beside: "I was so surprised to see myself on videotape dancing." Underneath, there's a smaller figure in a green shirt and blue pants, with arms raised and legs vibrating energy created with squiggly black lines. Lankton's dancing body comes alive as her skeleton looks the other way.

"All of the sudden my scrapbook makes sense," Lankton writes. At this point in the book the drawings shift to colorful fashion illustrations and the artist's pained expressions are rendered in vibrant reds and greens. In one particularly striking self-portrait, Lankton has drawn her face off-kilter with a giant lopsided smile. Later, she adds: "I will still be doing what I'm doing only happily + constructively."

It's notable that *Sketchbook, September 1977* barely mentions Lankton's later career or concurrent life struggles, except in the back cover copy and in a brief afterword by her childhood friend, Joyce Randall Senechal. Like many of her queer contemporaries in New York City during the early years of the AIDS crisis, Lankton died much too young; in her case, from a drug overdose at thirty-eight. But in this sketchbook, we can stay with her at age nineteen, in a key moment of self-actualization.

On one page, Lankton states, “I will not die,” above a simple sketch of a genderless, unadorned face in profile. On the facing page, she proclaims “I will Become” over a similar face transformed by makeup that shades the eyes and lips, gestural lines for hair, and a carefully rendered earring. Here Lankton faces herself: “I’m alright. There’s nothing to prove,” she declares. “This has hit so hard I can’t stop crying. Finally I too can be human.”

Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore is the author, most recently, of *Touching the Art*, out now from Soft Skull Press.