

Alum Profile: Diane di Prima '51

by Avra Kouffman '84

David Short



In late April, writer Diane di Prima '51 spoke with me at her San Francisco home. I'd asked for an interview since I felt her insights would be helpful to the younger generations of creative Hunterites. In her memoir *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, Diane writes that, as a teenager, she chose to be "dedicated to art and the life of art." What makes her such a potent role model is that she has stayed steadfast in the service of her art for more than half a century.

During our talk, Diane addressed some hurdles that can deter young artists, like a shortage of confidence, confusion over how to handle recognition or the lack of it, the need to make a living, and the fear that artists are doomed to a life of suffering. She also observed that literary theory which is "Marxist in bent" can influence students to feel it's "horribly selfish of them" to want to be artists: "I've had young women, basically kids, teenagers in college, beautiful people, full of energy, doing music, doing performance, writing" who "think they're being selfish and terrible and evil and they're neglecting the masses and they're just behaving like privileged whatever, which is bullshit." Diane laments, "We're cutting off the lifeblood of the next generation with things like that."

By contrast, in *Recollections*, Diane recalls her own teenage feeling that being an artist was "a vocation, like being a hermit or a samurai. A calling. The holiest life that was offered in our world: artist."

Her passion and purpose were accompanied by an exuberant confidence in her right to live, and be taken seriously, as a poet. As a young woman, she corresponded with Ezra Pound and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. She then became one of the principal Beat poets in a cadre that included Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Jack Kerouac. Diane attributes her confidence as a female in a notoriously male-oriented poetry scene, in part, to being raised in a family where her mother's father put six daughters through college, and where women routinely worked outside the home.

"And then I had the luck to go to Hunter," Diane recalls enthusiastically, "when it was still an all-women's school. I had those wonderful women teachers—I write about some of them a little in *Recollections*... Having a place that was all women and all these really, really smart women—Ruth Lilienthal went off later and became a Zen person in Japan and our history teacher, Mrs. Robbins, sent us off to the Institute of Pacific Relations, to find out about Mao, in the '40s. So we were getting this really sharp, polished female mind at work. One of our English teachers was an actress, a Shakespearian actress. We performed staged readings of all the plays we were studying. A different world. So there was confidence being exuded there."

Even so, how did she find the courage to contact Pound, who was already regarded as one of the century's premier poets? "First of all," she replies, "we're all just human beings on a planet. I'll give you another answer, too. In Pound's *Pisan Cantos*, the late Cantos, there are some lines... where he's talking about breaking

down egos. The famous part is 'Pull down thy vanity, I say pull down.' Then he says this: 'But to have done instead of not doing/ this is not vanity' and 'To have gathered from the air a live tradition/or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame/This is not vanity./Here error is all in the not done,/all in the diffidence that faltered...' So, it's like, right from his own work, it's true that any elder artist is just another artist and most of the time, they've been inadvertently isolated because people buy into celebrity, but they're just people with interesting and knowledgeable access to the creative stuff, the creative spirit."

This unceremonious view of fame seems to have helped Diane stay focused on her work, rather than on the media attention it could attract. She says of her early experience with the New York Poets Theatre, "When we got one review from the *Times*, I started to realize that this was going to get unwieldy if we continued—nobody understood what we were doing and it was taking energy and attention away from the work as we tried to explain ourselves or got upset about a bad review—all that." In response, she explains, "I tried to be...not totally, but a little bit invisible," and didn't publish with a big New York press before the late 1990s. By publishing her work via small presses, she was able to avoid ceding creative control to corporate publishers. "I wasn't sure whether I was strong enough to resist those kinds of pushes and shoves and pressures," she says, "and I didn't really want anything that I could see that I could get out of New York notice, so therefore, I just avoided it all." Even now, Diane says of large publishers, "I want to finish my book and then I'll let them know about it—maybe they'll like it, and if they don't, screw 'em! I can publish it with a small press out here, I can publish it myself, I can go online and publish it." She encourages her students to adopt a similar do-it-yourself ethic.

Diane's practical approach to getting your work out extends to how to finance it: "A lot of young people think they should be somehow making their money, building their whole life around their art. You do...in terms of what's important—priorities...but in my day, everybody expected to have to have a job and do their art, and it was considered smart to try and get some skill so that you're not just earning minimum wage." She says, "What I urge people to do still is to go get one of those community college certificates in something that you like. It could be landscape gardening, welding, it doesn't matter, you know? And have that skill...just have it there as a fallback. Go for it with your own work but don't feel like, 'Oh my God, I'm not making it; therefore, I'm going to have to give this up,' which is where people go, they have that either/or: either my work is going to support me and I'm going to get well-known by the time I'm 30, 40, whatever, or I have to give this up. No! I mean, first of all, if you think you can give it up, you probably shouldn't be doing it in the first place. Your art owns you; you don't own it."

What about the cultural mythos around the archetype of the tortured, brutally intense artist? When asked about the price of living and feeling things so intensely, Diane says, "I never believed that you had to suffer in order to write, but I always believed you had to stay totally true to what your vision was and that nobody was going to pay you to do that, so you just had to do it on your own. That hasn't changed—that's still basic. I think it's a horrible hype—and an evil thing on the part of the society as a whole—to sell young people the idea you have to suffer to be an artist. One of the most horrible parts of that hype is how they like to glamorize women artists who killed themselves, and everyone is like, 'well, that's the price she paid.' That's all

b.s., total bullshit, because you don't need that to write or to make art. But it sometimes happens that you're put in a very difficult position by society. It's not a law of nature that if you're an artist, you're in a difficult position. It's the law of this stupid culture and capitalism and other things. So I find it very sad, not that they pay attention to people like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, that's fine, but that they don't pay attention to women artists that are strong and that thrive and get their work done, of which there are millions. It's really pathetic!"

When asked about balancing the personal and political, Diane says she doesn't find balance a problem in this respect. As a lifelong anarchist, she has "never been somebody who believed in programmatic work on social change." She adds, "It's not that I disapprove of people who do it, it's just not my way. But early on, I made a decision that if there was something I believed in and someone asked me for something like a benefit reading...I'm right there with it. But I don't go looking for causes to beat the drum about. I've got enough in my own backyard." She adds, "But I try to keep my eyes and my heart open and do go with what comes my way, and I speak directly to it."

Diane di Prima '51 is the author of more than 30 books and the recipient of an honorary Doctor of Literature degree from St. Lawrence University. Last year, she received the Fred Cody Award for Lifetime Achievement and Community Service.

Avra Kouffman '84 is a performance poet and the author of "Lush: Poems for Stage and Page."

NEW BOARD MEMBERS

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Eloise NURSE-Paterson '83 earned a B.A. in Political Science from Trinity College and then attended Temple University School of Law and received her J.D. in 1990. While in law school, Eloise studied International Law and participated in travel abroad programs in Italy and Israel. She studied at Tel Aviv University School of Law and participated in one of the first international programs with American, Egyptian, Israeli, and Palestinian students. After law school, Eloise worked as a prosecutor with the Queens County District Attorney's Office and then worked as a criminal defense attorney, specializing in juvenile delinquency and child abuse/neglect cases. Additionally, she spent four years in the arena of family law and not-for-profit housing. She has also worked on several presidential campaigns and ran two successful city council campaigns, with her expertise lying in canvassing operations. She is currently involved with several organizations including NAACP, National MochaMoms organization, and St. Martin's Episcopal Church, where she was recently appointed to the Vestry. Eloise is married and is the mother of two young children, Carter and Basil. Eloise's interest in serving on the Alumnae/i Association's Board of Directors is due to the importance of Hunter in her life—it was where she made life-long friendships and made special memories. She plans to express her appreciation by giving her time and attention to the Alumnae/i Association and the school. Hunter was instrumental in her growth and she appreciates every lesson she learned as a student, athlete, and a young adult.