

Art in America

Janine Antoni

By Douglas Dreishpoon 10/23/09



Janine Antoni making *Tear*, 2009, in her studio. Courtesy the artist.; *Touch*, 2002, video installation, 132 by 178 inches, approx. 9 1/2 minute loop. All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York.;

Some conversations never get beyond an introduction. Others endure, gaining momentum and interest as time goes on. I began a conversation with Janine Antoni in 2003, when she came to speak at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in

Buffalo. Over the past six years we have continued to converse about many matters, from specific projects to existential themes to more general topics.

*Born in Freeport, Bahamas, in 1964, Antoni moved to Florida in 1977 to attend boarding school, and graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1989. Since then she has mounted major exhibitions throughout the U.S. and Europe and won prestigious awards (most notably a MacArthur Fellowship in 1998). Some of her earliest works—*Gnaw* (1992), *Loving Care* and *Slumber* (both 1993), for example—transformed daily rituals of eating, sleeping and washing into extreme acts: in *Gnaw*, chewing on two 600-pound cubes, one made of chocolate and the other of lard, until she was exhausted; in *Loving Care*, mopping a gallery floor with her hair saturated in dye; and in *Slumber*, sleeping on a bed in public, at night registering her brain waves on an electroencephalograph and, during the day, duplicating the patterns by weaving them into an expansive blanket. For *To Draw a Line* (2003), she tightrope-walked her way 8 feet off the ground along a 100-foot-long rope (which she made by hand) coiled around two giant steel reels and stretched taut; she eventually fell into a billowy heap of hemp. The one-time performance, which took place at Luhring Augustine, her New York gallery, required almost 16 months of intense preparation.*

Antoni sometimes takes years to conceive and execute her installations, thriving on interdisciplinary research, and constantly developing new processes and methodologies. Striving to make her work accessible, she is nonetheless careful not to compromise its metaphorical complexity, balancing intimacy and universality, destruction and transformation.

I met with Antoni at her Brooklyn studio on Apr. 28, 2009, as she was preparing for her exhibition “Up Against” at Luhring Augustine. In that and subsequent conversations, we talked about ritual and performance, motherhood, the notion of the witness, how to prime the creative process and what it means to think with the body.

DOUGLAS DREISHPOON Let's start with a flashback. I imagine you growing up on the pristine beaches of Freeport surrounded by sand and sky. And with this image comes another you mentioned in an earlier conversation but didn't elaborate on, of you building sandcastles. Obviously, the Bahamas wasn't a place with a lot of fine art. But there was, not to sound biblical, this primal material. As a metaphor for the performative art you eventually made, your childhood sandcastles seem significant.

JANINE ANTONI There are three things that come to mind when I think about my sandcastle-making days. First there is my love for process. The ephemeral just comes with the territory. Second is the miniature, which I was obsessed with as a little girl. And I like the idea that one thing can stand for another: a shell, for example, can be a door. I see my daughter playing the same imaginative games. Finally, you mention a primal material, which makes me think of Robert Smithson. I imagine that my relationship to materials is why I relate to him so much. I had a very sensuous, physical, visceral childhood. This influence is certainly reflected in my creative process, in some of the ideas and materials I gravitate to.

DD We tend to internalize earlier experiences as memories that may resurface years later in some other form.

JA *Touch* [a video produced in the Bahamas in 2002] is one of the few pieces that directly addresses my relationship to both the landscape and my childhood home. The video was filmed on the seashore in front of that home on the island of Grand Bahama. In it, I walk back and forth across a wire that is parallel to but slightly above the horizon. As I walk, the wire dips to touch the horizon. I balance there for a brief moment. This ocean's horizon was what I looked out at through most of my childhood, and the image is deeply imprinted in my memory. I can still hear my mother saying, "Janine, you must go out and see the world, because this place that we come from is behind God's back." The horizon seemed to be the edge between our forgotten island and the world out there. I always thought of the horizon as a line that could not be pinpointed or in any way fixed; as you move toward it, it constantly recedes. I was drawn back to this impossible place. I wanted to walk along this line, which was essentially the line of my vision, the edge of my imagination.

DD It reminds me of Courbet's painting *The Edge of the Sea at Palavas* [1854], in which the artist contemplates the ocean as he salutes it from the shoreline. The painting captures a sublime moment. A mere speck at the ocean's edge, the human being seems dwarfed and insignificant, but also elevated and somehow enlightened.

JA In *Touch*, rather than being dwarfed, I am a giant. I enter the frame like an apparition, walking along the horizon. I'm presently working on a piece that creates a similar scale shift, and which also happens to be triggered by a childhood memory. As a child in the Bahamas, I heard pirate stories that were more reality than fantasy. The islands were subject to bootlegging, blockade running, illegal immigration and drug trafficking. My brother told me stories about Anne Bonnet, an Irish-American woman who masqueraded as a male pirate in the Caribbean during the 18th century. One of the ways Bonnet deflected suspicion about her double identity was by using a ceramic apparatus that enabled her to urinate standing up.

As a young girl, I was fascinated with the idea of Anne Bonnet's device. Recently, I encountered commercially made objects designed exactly for this purpose that brought back this memory. I couldn't resist the complex implications of such an object. Like Anne Bonnet, I, too, wanted to live out the fantasy triggered by the use of this object. My fantasy, like most, took me to an unlikely place. Such is the unexpected journey of the unconscious.

So here's the leap: What if the apparatus for peeing while standing up was a gargoyle? And what if I actually cast this apparatus as a sculpture and used it to pee off of a landmark building in New York City? Gargoyles fascinate me, not only as hellish creatures but because they signify the mythical, shadow side of our psyche. There's no consensus on the source of their grotesque configuration. They are functional, though, designed to disguise a funneling system that reroutes rainwater away from a building. I chose to sculpt a griffin gargoyle, which is a hybrid—a

mythical composite of different animals. It occurred to me that to use my invented apparatus was to make myself into a hybrid, because as a woman my anatomy doesn't enable me to pee standing up.

Janine Antoni

DD The material you used in the sculpture was significant.

JA Yes, the sculpture was cast in copper, calling to mind copper plumbing pipes as well as copper architectural details. The metal oxidized and changed color when it came into contact with my urine, so the object's patina is a natural result of this action. By using the gargoyle in relationship to my body, I equate myself with the architecture. For, just as I have memories of being entertained by stories of the high seas, I also remember the Franciscan nuns in school telling me, "Your body is a temple." I took the convergence of these memories literally.

DD So you gained access to the Chrysler Building, where you had yourself photographed on the 61st floor peeing through the copper gargoyle.

JA It was definitely a wild and exhausting session that took endless hours and a lot of patience on the part of everyone involved. The Chrysler Building acts as a pedestal for my exuberant gesture. It made me think of Yves Klein's photograph *Leap Into the Void* [1960].

Maybe my attempt to confront the existential void is tempered by comic relief. Humor is useful because it exposes self-consciousness without pretension. It allows us to get closer to things that make us feel uncomfortable, such as our demons, our bodily fluids and our desire for power.

DD We debated the pros and cons of humor in art at our panel at the 2007 College Art Association conference, where we were joined by Jeanne Silverthorne, Jane Hammond, Fred Tomaselli and Charles Long. Jane's remark, that "it's important for a woman to appear serious, so as to be taken seriously," and Jeanne's equally astute observation, that "humor is inherently political, anarchistic, and irreverent," still feel right, as does your comment at the time that "humor has never been a goal, but something you side-step into."

JA I agree with Jane. I was concerned at the beginning of my career, particularly given the extreme nature of my early works, about being taken seriously. I was consciously challenging art historical canons and engaging in cultural critique. It was my '80s art school education coming through. But at the center of all of that seriousness, I would be licking a representation of myself in chocolate or something equally absurd. There was something consistent in the work, a kind of intentional misunderstanding. Contrary to most people's perception of *Gnaw*, my interaction with huge cubes of chocolate and lard was a playful gesture.

DD Which brings up the corporeal dimension of the work. You have said that when you moved from the Bahamas to Florida to attend school, you noticed that your body language was not the body language of someone raised in the United States. Has that translated at all into your work?

JA Coming from the Caribbean Islands, I was painfully aware that, by American standards, I always get too close to other people. I really can't make a point without touching someone. It's a form of emphasis that transcends words. In the work it's more extreme. I long for connection and see my objects as occupying the space between the viewer and myself. To be intimate with the object is to touch the viewer. It's always a profound experience for me to sit down in the subway and feel the warmth of the person who sat there before me. Some people might be repelled, but for me, it's really comforting that, on some basic level, we all produce warmth. I make art because it centers me in my body, and by doing so I hope to offer that experience to someone else. This direct physical experience is one of the rare things that art can offer in a culture of mediation.

It's through the body that I reach my unconscious—through dance, meditation and yoga. The body holds memory differently than the mind. For me, creativity is about unlocking memories within the body. It's also about thinking with the body.

I wonder sometimes whether our bodies are our own. If our bodies are made up of ancestral DNA, then memory could be vast, especially if our bodies recapitulate the genetic fabric of, say, our great-grandmothers. So when we speak about the unconscious, we should consider the collective unconscious and the memories we share when looking at an artwork, which could be the site of confluence between the artist and the viewer.

DD Given that most of your performances happen in real time, control is relative and surprises inevitable.

JA Sometimes I have to get out of the way. It's beyond letting go of control. It's about waiting and following one's intuition. The creative process is a mystery, something that seems to happen on the periphery of thought. When conceiving a work, I don't try to home in on it too quickly. In fact, I do the opposite. I try to stay as open as possible for as long as I can. This state is full of potential, but it's a terrifying place, too, because all I really want is for my ideas to solidify. I have so much doubt and fear, and yet the more I can just watch the unfolding with a light touch, the more the piece seems to make itself. At a certain unexpected point, something comes to the forefront.

The work I'm making at the moment—a photographic series called "Inhabit"—is an example of the circuitous route my creative process often takes. It came to me first as a very simple image. I imagined that a spider had created its web between my legs. As I started to research the process of actualizing this image, things became complicated. Would a spider actually cooperate? How would I remain still in order to facilitate its weaving? After speaking with several entomologists, and learning about the extreme sensitivity of spiders to motion, I looked into getting a harness that would immobilize me. That led me to the world of harnesses, where I found a particular design that enabled me to be attached to a structure from many points on my torso. I realized that my body could be suspended in a way similar to a spider in its web. But I would need to build a cage around my legs in order to keep the spider in that particular area of my body. And it also became apparent that the spider would be too sensitive to build directly on my body due to body heat.

It's worth mentioning that, from the beginning, I equated the spider and its web with my daughter, and myself, the mother, with the support structure. Suddenly I thought of turning the spider's cage into a doll's house, as a way of incorporating the spider into the photograph. I now have an image that is a web within a web, a house within a house.

DD After years of exploring your relationship to your original nuclear family, particularly to your mother, you now seem to be focusing on your own maternal role. You now have a daughter, who's five.

JA In my mind it is no leap to imagine the womb as primordial architecture. I'm structured so that I have room for another to dwell inside me: a quintessentially female experience. I was also thinking about the dollhouse, with its open wings, in relation to the design of religious altarpieces, which can mirror church architecture. And one of the sources for "Inhabit" is the Madonna della Misericordia, or the Virgin of Mercy. In paintings, she is depicted as enveloping her followers in her mantle, creating a space that resembles the apse of a church.

I intentionally create an ambiguous image that reflects the complex reality of motherhood, and I embrace the necessity of shape-shifting in order to fulfill this role. The elastic scale-shifting in the photograph acknowledges the mother's required flexibility. She's a ubiquitous presence, and yet her role requires a degree of withdrawal. A mother has to clear space for the development of the child's imagination. This is a conscious desire, a willful decision: to be a point of stillness whose function is to nurture. In *Inhabit* I

depict myself as half-hermit crab, because I'm carrying my house on my body, and half-spider, because I'm still at the center of the converging ropes. At the same time I want to be unclear about whether my body is suspended or ascending, entrapped or the structure of support. In the end, the substitution of the house for the skirt allows the mother to wear the family drama.

DD Images that incorporate a house and a spider clearly evoke earlier works by Louise Bourgeois.

JA I'd be the first to admit that Bourgeois is a very strong influence on my work. When asked about the spider in her own work, Bourgeois said, "She is my mother." Well, Louise is my art mother.

DD Another recent work references the family.

JA Yes. Another piece that is linked directly to my experience with my daughter is *One Another*, a photograph that captures her attempting to feed me through my belly button. She's acting like an umbilical cord, returning me to my fetal memory. The photograph isn't staged. I fell in love with her uncanny instinct and tender gesture of reciprocity. It's like an image from a dream.

DD You spoke earlier about the unconscious. It looms large in your work.

JA There's something I call the escape hatch. Every project needs one. It's the one part of an installation that doesn't add up. And that escape hatch leads to the unconscious. To liberate the unconscious might be to let go of the ego, or the notion of authorship. I always come back to the word "conduit," because I feel like an open channel when I'm making art. I often imagine my body as a funnel through which the world is poured. And yet I always anticipate the audience at the other end of that funnel, because without them, half of the picture is missing. I need someone to fantasize about!

DD Your notion of sculpture has constructive affinities with work by Hannah Wilke, Lygia Clark, Carolee Schneemann and Joseph Beuys, and shares with Beuys and Ana Mendieta a ritualistic bent.

JA My work occupies the territory between object, performance and relic. For each piece, I ask myself what the piece needs, how much I should tell and how much I should leave to the viewer's imagination. With earlier projects, I spoke through the work in a very direct way, and I thought that was a generous gesture. Now, I'm more interested in leaving a space for the viewer's imagination.

DD Performance can have an afterlife in sculpture, with the challenge being, as you once put it, "How can an object tell you its history on its surface?"

JA In *Tear*, which I initially proposed for the 2007 Venice Biennale and subsequently showed in New Orleans at the Prospect.1 Biennial [2008], I tried to tell the history of a wrecking ball through its surface. I did this by casting the wrecking ball in lead, a soft metal, and then using it to demolish a building. Unlike an industrial wrecking ball, the lead ball was vulnerable; each strike left it permanently scarred. The sound of the ball crashing against the building was synchronized with the blinking of my eyelid. The installation of *Tear* at Luhring Augustine includes, just as it did in New Orleans, the video projection of my eye and the actual lead ball used in the demolition, but excludes what has been seen and hit. I intentionally create a gap at the center of the work. The viewer is left to consider whether the closing of the eye is an instinctive reaction against danger, or the willful avoidance of something one doesn't want to see.

DD After the performance, whose narrative is it?

JA When I performed *To Draw a Line* at Luhring Augustine in 2003, I chose my audience, knowing that they would become the storytellers, the ones who would perpetuate the narrative, and that over time the narrative would inevitably change. So I enlisted good storytellers. I think in the end I'm a storyteller with many stories to tell: the story of the material and its cultural meaning; the story of how the object is made

and its life in the world; and the story of my body in relation to the object—often a stand-in for the viewer's body. With each of the artists you mention, I experienced their performances through anecdotal stories as much as through images. Of great interest to me is how stories and myths change over time, according to our needs.

Janine Antoni's exhibition "Up Against" is on view at Luhring Augustine in New York through Oct. 24. She is also included in "British Subjects: Identity and Self-Fashioning, 1966-2008," at the Neuberger Museum, SUNY Purchase, through Dec. 13.

Douglas Dreishpoon is chief curator at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo.