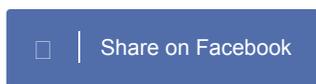




## Can paper be a body?

*Janine Antoni dances a living retrospective exhibition of her photographs and sculptures*

By **Christine Gwillim** - February 26, 2019



Punctuality pays off at Janine Antoni's "Paper Dance."

Audience members who arrive early to the [Contemporary Austin's Jones Center](#)

catch Antoni carefully unwrapping and staging several items from large wooden crates. Some lucky folks, myself included, are even asked to stand up so a work can be removed from the crate on which they sit. Moving blankets in sky and dusty royal blue are passed out to cushion the makeshift seating. It feels undone yet intimate, a theme that comes back again and again in both the performance and the installation.

Artworks are perched against crates, or carefully placed on the edges of others. An audience member's errant leg, or careless hair flip could send the delicate objects crashing to the floor. To date, no one has broken an art object, but several weeks remain before [the exhibition closes on March 17](#).

This arrangement seems precarious, dangerous, and in conflict with traditional art handling procedures, but as the performance unfolds it becomes clear that Antoni chose the arrangement to set up an expectation of trust and care with the audience. She expects us to be mindful of our bodies in space, to look carefully, and to also take care of her as she exposes her work and herself to us over the course of the following 60 minutes.



*Janine Antoni in collaboration with Anna Halprin, Paper Dance, 2019 (2013). Performance view, The Contemporary Aus-tin – Jones Center on Congress Avenue, Austin, Texas, January 24, 2019. Artwork © Janine Antoni. Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York. Image courtesy The Contemporary*

*Austin. Photograph © Giulio Sciorio.*

Antoni's expectation is partnered with generosity. Over the course of the project she has unpacked artworks from every stage in her career, from her famous chocolate and soap busts "[Lick and Lather](#)" (1993), to "Hearth" (2014) delicate vessels she shaped with her sacrum.

And the performance starts innocently. After unpacking her artworks, Antoni walks to the eastmost wall of the gallery and plucks a roll of brown craft paper that leans against it. She plops the paper down in the center of the performance space and begins casually unfurling it with her toes. She engages intently with the audience, holding a gaze with a curious, confused man as she wriggles out of her underwear underneath a cloak of paper, or mimicking the movements of a shy woman sitting next to a portrait of her family members.

"Paper Dance" is a work Antoni created under the tutelage of choreographer [Anna Halprin](#), and it is performed at the Contemporary in three thematic iterations; "Motherhood," "Identity" and "Absence." The improvisational framework is the same, but each theme influences the mood of the work. "Motherhood" was confident, careful and full. "Identity" jerky, insecure at moments and in process. And "Absence," the last phase, promises to offer yet another way to enliven a simple roll of brown paper.

Antoni and Halprin began collaborating after Antoni attended a workshop with Halprin in 2013. Antoni found herself so star struck by Halprin that she didn't even introduce herself at the workshop but reached out months later when she couldn't shake the urge to connect. The two began a years long collaboration and mentorship that continues with this exhibition. Halprin is credited as a collaborator of "Paper Dance," and Antoni's dance is a spinoff of a choreography of the same name that was embedded in Halprin's seminal "[Parades and Changes](#)" (1964). A clip of the original "Paper Dance" plays on a loop projected against various surfaces throughout the exhibition.



*Installation view (Identity), Janine Antoni and Anna Halprin: Paper Dance, The Contemporary Austin – Jones Center on Congress Avenue, Austin, Texas, 2019. Artwork © Janine Antoni. Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York. Image courtesy The Contemporary Austin. Photograph by Colin Doyle.*

After one of her recent performances, Antoni spoke fondly of Halprin, freely sharing her awe and love for the choreographer, and her gratitude for Halprin’s generous way of working. Antoni also mentioned Halprin’s late husband, architect Lawrence Halprin. To Antoni, the two are a unit, their work inextricably tied to one another’s and their contributions to Antoni’s career equally important.

Anna Halprin’s imprint is obvious, the citational dance, the feminist, motherly attitude towards her work, and the sharing of it. Lawrence Halprin’s influence is also clear, from the elaborate set reconfigurations with each phase of “Paper Dance” to the performance space configuration in which the audience is forced to watch one another as much as they watch Antoni.

Antoni first performed “Paper Dance” in 2013 on Halprin’s dance deck that her husband built for her at their Bay Area home. Halprin handed Antoni a roll of paper and suggested that she might want to take her clothes off.

“She knew I’d know what to do with it,” Antoni recalls, adding that she regards Halprin’s invitation as “a great gift.”

With that, Antoni inherited “Paper Dance.” She found Halprin’s dance practice as “sensory at its core” much like her own art-making practice which involves

unusual materials like food, or singular processes such as shaping pottery vessels with her pubic bones, and exploring objects with phenomenological curiosity.

“It makes a little too much sense that we would find each other and that it would be so powerful for me,” Antoni says of the collaboration. “‘Paper Dance’ is the least of what I’ve gotten from her.”

Now 98, Halprin won’t travel to Austin for the exhibition, but her presence is undeniable, both in the exhibition, and in Antoni’s way of working.

So is Antoni’s other longtime collaborator, choreographer Stephen Petronio. In Austin in 2013, Antoni and Petronio presented “incubator” an exploration between the relationship between sculpture and dance at The Contemporary with Testsite. The shock factor of their most famous collaboration “[Honey Baby](#)” (2013) — a video of a male dancer moving through a honey coated sculptural space — coupled with Antoni’s well-know oeuvre have brought capacity audiences to the Contemporary’s current presentation.



*Installation view (Motherhood), Janine Antoni and Anna Halprin: Paper Dance, The Contemporary Austin – Jones Center on Congress Avenue, Austin, Texas, 2019. Artwork © Janine Antoni. Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York. Image courtesy The Contemporary Austin. Photograph by Colin Doyle.*

And yet with this iteration of “Paper Dance,” Antoni worried that repeat visitors to each phase of the performance would expect a vastly different work.

As one of those gluttonous audience members, I understand Antoni's concern, the structure of the work remains constant, but Antoni's relationship to her artworks shifts noticeably in each phase. Different artworks are opened in each performance- building a relational path that grows more complex with each passing day. After the performances, the crates and art works are meticulously rearranged during gallery hours for visitors to interpret.



*Installation view (Identity), Janine Antoni and Anna Halprin: Paper Dance, The Contemporary Austin – Jones Center on Congress Avenue, Austin, Texas, 2019. Artwork © Janine Antoni. Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York. Image courtesy The Contemporary Austin. Photograph by Colin Doyle.*

When I met Antoni to interview her for this article, her sculptures were clustered in groups with a sitting space built out of wood art shipping crates for each. She slowly took me from one vignette to another, gesturing for me to sit with her in each one. She explained a complex relational structure in which artworks from different phases of her life speak to one another in new ways. For Antoni, this “Paper Dance” project is a living retrospective of sorts and she arranged her sculpture spirally rather than thematically or chronologically as would be done in a traditional retrospective.

The result is a delightfully intricate conversation between the artworks, with discoveries that pop up, dots get connected, and new perspectives on works that seem unrelated. Antoni isn't interested in mounting a retrospective if the artist and viewers cannot experience the work in new ways. And while a straightforward retrospective of her impressive practice would likely satisfy

most audiences, her process allows Antoni to reflect and to create opportunities for growth in her upcoming projects.

Not a trained dancer, Antoni finds the performance process rigorous, though I would argue her longstanding dance meditation practice lends her body a physical memory resembling that of a dancer.

“Ideas are lodged in the body and if I get into the body, the ideas will come out,” she says.



*Janine Antoni in collaboration with Anna Halprin, Paper Dance, 2019 (2013). Performance view, The Contemporary Austin – Jones Center on Congress Avenue, Austin, Texas, January 24, 2019. Artwork © Janine Antoni. Courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York. Image courtesy The Contemporary Austin. Photograph © Giulio Sciorio.*

After the project at the Contemporary closes, Antoni plans to return to an object-based practice to reflect on the performance and work out the ideas that arise.

It’s been a taxing effort for everyone — for Antoni who performs on thinly covered concrete floors, for the installation crew who rearrange objects on a near daily basis, and for the museum’s staff, who had to rent and install theatrical lights to accommodate a performance.

The collective exhaustion makes sense. Antoni’s work demands close attention — her objects are made with perishable materials, her portraits

carefully manipulated so that their manipulation is easily missed with a cursory glance. Seeing “Paper Dance” live brings to life the shared resonances in her body of work.

Antoni starts the dance as she does other artistic projects, asking “What is the material telling me it wants me to do with it, what are its’ possibilities, and what will I do to bring that object into the world?”

The paper is shaped into makeshift art objects — a bed with the covers tucked tightly around her chest, a breast, molded out of “Wean” (1989/90) stuffed in a bra, then discarded. The arrangements reveal resonances between bodies of work that can only unfold because of Antoni’s extensive and versatile practice.

“One of the tragedies for me is that we can’t really ever feel another body,” she says.

Her work reaches towards other bodies, asking how close can we get to another body, and also what is a body? Can paper be a body? Can chocolate? Or clay?

Antoni has saved every roll of paper used in “Paper Dance,” including the first one from 2013 on the Halperin’s performance deck. The discarded paper is heaped in a corner of the Contemporary’s second floor gallery, tangled up with dust particles, dried sweat, dirt from audience members shoes.

It’s a pile of detritus that bears memories and holds knowledge that can only be appreciated in context.

*“Janine Antoni and Anna Halprin: Paper Dance” continues through March 17 at the Contemporary Austin’s Jones Center. [thecontemporaryaustin.org](http://thecontemporaryaustin.org)*



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