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Janine Antoni by Stuart Horodner

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Janine Antoni, Gnaw, 1992–93 (detail of chocolate, lipstick, and Gianna Nail Lacquer on the phrase courtesy of Lehmann Maupin).

Janine Antoni emerged in the early 1990s as an artist capable of transforming the most mundane of materials into potent sculptures thinking with your little amazed attention. She stood on the scene with Gnaw, two 600-pound immense cubes (one chocolate, one lard) that bore the imprint of her teeth and were nibbled away by gallery visitors. Her visual/body is generous and often objectifying (Lick and Lather, 1992 Venice Biennale installation, and 1993 unpublished Spellbound).

By setting up situations that force her little body into contact with ineffable materials and spaces, she establishes torque, aesthetics, and a kind of tension that is, in the end, sweet. Antoni's work is based on interest activities so hard to chart that it is turning respect for art into a groundbreaking predicaments, through she does put general painting and sculpture practices into a tight, tender, tension.

Media including Lick and Lather and Gnaw, and Slumber each use Antoni herself as the primary tool, engaged in arduous, repetitive tasks (licking, gnawing, and sleeping) that are transformative. In Slumber (1994), the artist prepares to sleep in a museum in gallery. She is connected to a polyrenovascular machine, which records her rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. The machine produces a loom, and the machine produces as a pattern for weaving, sealed, at an elaborate loom, of her own design. During the day Unweaving with the authored she unweaves the night's work, using the machine's patterns to guide her unpicking. The finished cocoon is then displayed, alongside the loom and the templates. This "studio sculpture" which has been performed/woven twice, is a kind of portrait of the artist, a kind of self-portrait, but the mind is body in private and public. Which Bacon, her recent video installation at the Whitney, Janine says into the shadowes a lot. Gnaw are sculptures made of her teeth, and Slumber is a kind of choreography for the dance of life.

Stuart Horodner

People that close to you because of the body generated work you have made, and you don't doesn't reveal autobiographical information.

Janine Antoni

When you are with my objects you are with something I have, literally, been intimate with. The work doesn't necessarily reveal anything personal. You come to understand that through your reaction, not my intent.

I was thinking about the artists you are historically linked to—Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta—people who attributed their naked bodies to dance, performance, and photo practice. This legacy is important to you and to your work. Wilke, for instance, is still causing in the same way these female artists. Whether it's Nicole Brodeur, the business of your clothes-and it gets up to the image one sees-or Schneemann, who is being shown at Matthew Marks, or Mendieta, who you in the moment you are forming these objects, but of course, you are. There's a great familiarity and at the same time a great distance. Do you feel that?

For me, that removal is a generosity, in the sense that it creates place for the viewer. Imagining the process is so much more powerful than actually seeing it. I'm thinking of Mendieta's work in Cuba, which doesn't remain clearly aligned Mendieta, but it does open a space for viewers to turn out to be about their own work fulfillment. It is an effort to connect. I'm thinking of Lick and Lather, for instance. I'm thinking of the moment that line between how much information I give and how much information I withhold, and my whole body of work plays with that. The work is not about me, it's about the relationship I have with the material and want to cast the viewer into a particular relationship with the objects. That's different from how we have traditionally learned to approach a work of art. Traditionally, the artist's hand is supposed to be evidence of a process of displacing information to make meaning. I'm much more interested in the viewer everything with my process. I do these amazon and I do these amazon, but I don't want to dictate what the viewer should realize it's changed. The viewer can be stimulated, but about their own responses.

SH

Where does the interest in focus on sexuality come from?

JA

I don't know. Maybe it's something that interests me in my life in general. In terms of the way I try to approach the things that I don't understand in my life, I try to approach them in a way that I can understand what is coming from, you and yourself in their position, even if it is a really difficult thing to do. It helps you open up and grow you across.

SH

What about I think of this performance and installation art from the past 30, 40 years, I think of work that is much more hostile towards the audience—Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci—the desire to push the audience to an extreme. A gesture designed to alienate them, plus them off, make them uncomfortable.

JA

Certainly. It's not my goal to push the audience away or be aggressive. I want to be generous. I want to be, I don't know, I want to be inviting. I may be. Perpetually, I want to transfer the audience, and I desire seduction over hostility.

SH

Why not talk about how quotes from past intersections? Do, like that you say "grow yourself an experience?" Did you structure a project around the desire to go through something, to give yourself that which you can't think through entirely to substitute. And later, your comment that "if the work doesn't change then the I don't change."

JA

If I don't have an experience with the object, how can I hope that the viewer will? I don't know if I can. I don't know if I can. I don't know. Making something is the a fight. I don't work on one piece of what I want the object to be, and I try to impose it on the material. Usually the material overcomes me and I have to start over. I have to be open to what the object is or my original idea. The material wants to speak back and tell me what it wants to be. A lot of meaning comes out in the fight that I couldn't have anticipated. I don't know if I can. I don't know if I can. I don't know my work takes my body in a physical and sometimes psychological entrance, it becomes a complete relationship. It makes me feel certain things and I hope it makes you feel. I don't know. I don't know. Intuitively valuable about bringing the body to that edge. Something happens physically in the work, but also psychologically that I believe is important. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. representative of the object on my body. My hope is to have that happen psychologically as well. Then to answer the that relationship—not the I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. work is repetition and accumulation, many people ask me, "When do you know something is done?" It has nothing to do with the way it looks or how it's composition. Its done when the work embodies this complete relationship.

Janine Antoni, Lick, Gnaw, 1992–93 (detail of chocolate, gouached by the artist, 24 × 24 × 24 inches; Gianna Nail Lacquer on the phrase courtesy of Lehmann Maupin).

SH

Can you give me an example of something you've made that was unpredicated? Many of the pieces feel prescribed and you set. In curing the work, you have to be open to what it is. Can you give me an example of a piece that you made that was not prescribed, that was open to the unknown?

The first time I did Lick and Lather, I had no idea what it would be. I had a lot and I chewed it that way. It didn't work. I realized that it wasn't enough to have the idea of the work. I had to be open to what it could be. I could not create from a set idea. I had to be open to what it could be. I'm saying Lick and Lather, I realized that the power was in watching me chip the block. The process was so much more powerful than the idea I had. I had to be open to how they will respond? The piece could be completed. Lipstick was the point boundaries on top of each other. For first or at Gnaw is a piece I made because I was in a relationship with a man who was a baker. I knew that these two forms came into one another and at some stage the two forms merry. I wanted a sculpture where I had two objects that resisted each other. I wanted to make a piece that was about that. I knew that it would be finished when I completed. I completed the surface between these two notes where, chewing these two forms would become one. This piece was about the relationship I was in at the time. I'm saying that I could have gone that never finish the other. It wasn't becoming. I'd of could have tried to force it, but what happened was so much more powerful than the idea I had. I'm saying that I had to be open to what I had to say. It was intimate and it didn't matter that I couldn't speak Spanish. People just spoke to me and we communicated in a way we could. I'm saying that I'm interested in the relationship between the artist and the work, and the material is with the process/struggle. What I'm saying is

JA

I would love to. I wouldn't be able to do anything that I am doing without some key people in my life. Certainly my family has supported me in many different ways; they have let me torture them for the sake of art, which I appreciate greatly. They have also given me a lot of material to work with. I haven't worked with my brothers but I talk to them a lot about what I am doing. Paul [Ramirez Jonas] and I have had a dialogue since '87; that's a long discussion and we've changed a lot over the years. I'm pretty apt to think out loud; I have a lot of friends who listen to me rant on and on about my ideas. All my projects have gotten much bigger than what I can handle, so many people help me in so many different ways. Every piece is a kind of collaboration. I'm obsessed with the viewer. I'm always interviewing those around me; and trying to understand how people see the work. I do this to get some objectivity on myself, and my friends give that to me. In the end, they're the only people who really tell you the truth. You have friends who are close enough to tell you they hate it, but you can still be friends. I really count on them.

SH

A barrage of questions: What are you reading? Where do you want to be? What are your models?

JA

Well, the Shaker experience—I lived and worked in a Shaker community for a month—is definitely a model. It changed me. Ultimately, the Shakers are incredibly radical people, and their philosophy is quite challenging: the notion of celibacy and community. To live with them and be intimately involved in their lives pushed me into thinking about spirituality and art. I grew up Catholic and have been studying religion my whole life. I've secretly felt that all my art at some level came from that place. All the reading I have been doing recently has been on Buddhism.

SH

How do you deal with success? You've had tremendous opportunities for the work and you have been able to use them to scale up and scale down your practice, which I think is the only way to keep options open and let them feed you. I wonder about how artists use what they have achieved to keep that going.

JA

I just believe in the power of art, what it can do for our lives. I think if you stay focused on what art can do and don't get distracted, you discover it is limitless. Somehow it seems like we don't talk about the power of art in that way. Sometimes I think about Beuys; he seems so crazy to me, I miss that idealism. He believed that everyone was an artist. He really believed that art could solve all the problems … somehow we've lost that, or at least nobody is willing to come out and acknowledge it.

SH

Obviously the art world of the '80s, and other things that have gone on in the culture, have made us very cynical to that belief, and yet I think we all believe in how art functions for us personally. What I love about art is that it is a point of contact, it's an opportunity for revelation and discourse.

JA

I always think I make art so that I can discuss with strangers things that I would like to discuss but couldn't otherwise. (*laughter*)

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