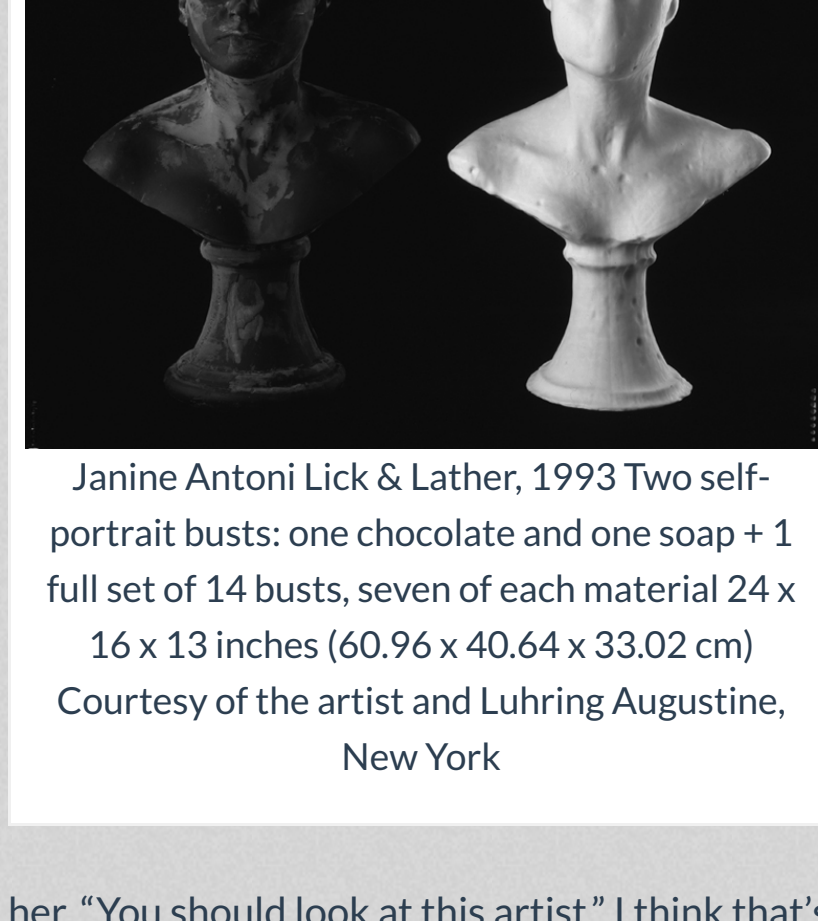


Reality Check Interview with Janine Antoni



Janine Antoni Lick & Lather, 1993 Two self-portrait busts: one chocolate and one soap • 1 full set of 14 busts, seven of each material 24 x 16 x 13 inches (60.96 x 40.64 x 33.02 cm) Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

I met Janine Antoni years ago when I took a group of students to her for a studio visit. Janine generously shared with me the organizational and creative details of her practice, from how she kept her work archive, worked with her studio assistants, to the ambitious project she was currently working on in the studio. I was impressed with the grace by which Janine managed the administrative details of a thriving career and continued to challenge herself as an artist.

Below is an interview with Janine on April 29, 2008.

JACKIE: Janine, years ago when your studio was down in lower Manhattan, I brought my AIM class to visit with you and that visit remains one of my highlights. The combination of your art practice and your organizational systems was thoughtful and inspiring. It had a wonderful mix of the practical and the creative. Let's start with the early days of your career, who was your first dealer?

JANINE: Sandra Gering.

JACKIE: How did she find you?

JANINE: My friend Brian Goldberg, who was at Brown when I was at RISD, told her about my work. He and his parents were friends of Sandra's. He had said to it happened. My first show was in Sandra's Manhattan home. She exhibited

her, "You should look at this artist." I think that's how I knew her. She exhibited my thesis piece, which was a collaboration with Beth Haggart, between her couches. And another work hung next to her bed. So, that was the beginning of showing with her.

JACKIE: That was right out of grad school?

JANINE: Yes. My first show was at the Drawing Center. I'd also shown work with a few non-profits, but Sandra Gering was my first commercial experience.

JACKIE: And then she opened a gallery?

JANINE: Yes, I was one of her first shows in her new gallery.

JACKIE: So, when you left school and came to New York, how did you get yourself started? Did you visit the non-profits?

JANINE: Well, I found out that the Drawing Center would see anybody in those days. You could bring your drawings in and put them on the floor and they would look at them. So, I knew that I had a guaranteed studio visit of sorts. At the time, I did not make drawings. It was not a part of my process. I took the first date the Drawing Center offered. It was six months away. I drew for the next six months, preparing for that visit, and then to my surprise, I got a show. After the show, they gave me a job. So, that was also my first job in New York. I did a year of practical training, because I am a foreigner, so it was perfect. From there, Olivia Georgia gave me a show at Snug Harbor (on Staten Island). Thereafter, I exhibited at Artist Space. So, in those days, that's how you did it. You began with the non-profits and then the commercial galleries found you there.

JACKIE: Is that how you would recommend artists do it these days?

JANINE: I don't think that's the way it's done these days. At least, in the case of the emerging artists that I am most in touch with, some are showing in galleries before they leave the school. You can probably still do it through the non-profits and they certainly fill a role. It was great for me to begin my career at the non-profits because I didn't have to deal with the commercial world. I could concentrate on learning to install my work and watch how it was being received before having to deal with the commercial side of things.

JACKIE: What is the best piece of advice that you got early on in your career?

JANINE: The best piece of advice is something that my husband, Paul, said.

JACKIE: You two met at RISD?

JANINE: Yeah.

My main support came from my peers. We all moved to New York together, which I think was unique to our generation. I came here with Paul Ramirez Jonas, Spencer Finch, Beth Haggart, Ricky Albenda, and Andrea Zittel. It was quite an amazing group. And I was already reading, living, got each other jobs and shows, and helped each other to make and install our work. So, I came with a shared made community. We had already developed a pretty rigorous dialogue in school. It was also important to meet other artists, because we had all been taught by the same teachers. All of us had a similar approach, even though our work was very different. Meeting other artists really broadened my education and made me realize there were all these other ways of making and thinking about art.

JACKIE: And you are still connected that original group of artists?

JANINE: We are still connected. Though certainly not as close.

JACKIE: Well, Andrea is on the West Coast.

JANINE: Right. But I still see Andrea when she is in town. We seem to be following each other around- showing and lecturing in the same places. Maybe that isn't such a big surprise.

But, the advice that Paul gave me was: "You build your audience one viewer at a time." And that is something that still rings in my mind.

JACKIE: So, you were talking about audience all the way back?

JANINE: I think I'm a little bit of a weirdo in that way, I'm really thinking about the viewer all the time, even though my work is so much about me.

JACKIE: But I am really intrigued with that, because I do find that when I lecture and ask artists, "Who is your audience? Who is your viewer?" they look at me blankly like they have never ever considered that concept. And yet, how can you know where to put your work or what opportunities to pursue if you don't?

JANINE: Well, yes, you definitely need to know who your viewer is. That's one issue. The other issue is to know who you want your viewer to be. And then, the thing that I always encourage in teaching is to fantasize about that viewer. For me, the creative process is about the perpetual shift from being in my own body as the maker to then trying to step into the body of the viewer. I think about how they walk, what they think first, and what they think second. But then, if you have a notion of the audience that you would like to reach, that affects all of your decisions. From where to show, to what you make, and so on. There is another way of looking at it. You put something out in the world, certain kinds of people respond to it, and you then have to understand why. For example, in the case of my work, why do women respond differently to it than men? This is crucial to the way I think about what I make. Why does a particular culture have a strong response to my work? Why do I get more shows in Spain than in Germany? And then, there is the issue of venue. There is a gallery audience, there is a museum audience, and there is a public audience. I recently showed in Luang Prabang, Laos where there are no galleries or museums in the city, so they have a limited exposure to contemporary art. In this case, you obviously have to give a context for the work or else it doesn't make any sense at all to the viewer.

JACKIE: Isn't it up to the curator to make the context for the work? I mean, how does the artist?

JANINE: Well, that's a good question. That's another way I think you define yourself as an artist. I would say that we make that context together. It's about a kind of collaboration. The first thing I ask when a curator asks me to be in a show is, "Why? What about your work makes sense for the theme of your show?" I tell them whether I agree with that and then we work together to really talk about their idea versus my idea. They are not always the same and sometimes, that's okay.

JACKIE: Because it reveals something new to you?

JANINE: At times, the differences between our ideas reveal something new to me. In the best-case scenario, it provides a new avenue into my work. The curator might have a broader idea, because they are putting a lot of work together. I want to be aware of my role within that broader notion. I'm happy to play my role within that. I provide certain things. In the gallery, there is a group of artists and hopefully each one has a unique voice, but together it is one perspective. It's good to be aware of what you have to offer.

JACKIE: I like that.

JANINE: Again, it's about the audience, because you only learn what you have to offer by how people respond to your work. Sometimes, you come to realize that you don't want to offer what is being perceived, and then you have to rethink the whole project. It is a dialogue between you and this viewer and if you're not paying attention to who that viewer is, then the dialogue doesn't exist. For me, the dialogue's really the exciting part. Are you communicating and how?

JACKIE: I find that some artists will say, "I don't want to think about another viewer." They worry that it will somehow dilute what they are making.

JANINE: When I first began to show, I loved the idea of site specificity as a concept, but I was not fully formed. Snug Harbor was a perfect example. I got there and I came so involved with the site that I lost my core. And so, I look at that and wonder whether it was mine. Now, I feel like I can go, and find myself in a site. But that's about knowing yourself as an artist, and that takes years to do.

There is certainly a conversation that you are having with yourself in the work. That's important and I don't think you want to lose that, but an artist is afraid that thinking about the viewer will dilute the work, then why show at all? You would just make work in your studio and have a great time with yourself. There would be no need to put it into the world.

JACKIE: Did you get any business skills or professional skills at RISD?

JANINE: No.

JACKIE: So, how did you learn to work with other professionals? How did you learn about the collaborative nature of being with a curator or how to learn with your galleries?

JANINE: I learned by making a lot of mistakes, I guess. I mean, I really had a lot of advice and people that I could call up and say, "What do I do now?" Older women artists, like Kiki Smith were really generous with their advice. I had my mother, who is a very good businesswoman. She taught me to be self-sufficient and to be aware. I think as artists, we hate that stuff. We just want to close an eye to it. She taught me that to know what's going on is to be in power. That was a really good lesson. I have really taken that advice to the extreme. I mean, my gallery does a lot for me, but certainly at the beginning, I took the time to figure out what that whole art world was about in all of its details. I represented myself for three years. During that time, I had to do everything and I learned a great deal. Because I had done the gallery's job, I knew exactly what I wanted when it came time to choose a gallery.

JACKIE: Was this between galleries?

JANINE: This was between Sandra Gering and Luhring Augustine.

JACKIE: So, you were self-managed.

JANINE: Yeah. And then, I just kept that system going. In fact, the gallery and I work in a parallel way. Everything that they have, I have.

JACKIE: What's the advantage to that?

JANINE: I think the advantages are that you become part of all the decisions that dictate your career. Certainly, they know more than I know when it comes to what collections I should be in. When they say, "We think we should offer your work to this collector," I ask "Why?" I want to know, "What work do they have? Have they ever put anything up to auction?" etc.

JACKIE: The goal is to make the effort to create any professional association as a partnership. You're partners here, so it's not handing over your career. It's partnering. It's two or more people collaborating on the decisions.

JANINE: I think we go in both directions. I use what they do for me as an opportunity to learn about how the commercial world works, but they are privy to my thinking from the beginnings of a project. So, I don't just hand them an object at the end. I make sure that they have followed my creative process from the beginning. By the time they get the object, they understand it on all levels.

JACKIE: And you choose to work with a gallery that wants that kind of relationship.

JANINE: Yes, we find each other. I feel like they have something to offer me. I assume that all the professionals that I work with, whether it is the curator or the collector, are interested in how I make my decisions, and want to know what the creative process is like for me. To me, the creative process is what gives an object its value. So, I assume that we all love that part.

JACKIE: It sounds like you allow them to have a degree of intimacy and that carries over to how they can talk about the work with the collector or the curator.

JANINE: But also an intimacy that gets them excited about the work when they put it in their gallery. I'm not only talking about my dealers. I'm talking about the people who work in the gallery. I'm talking about the people who guard the work. My assistants and the docents. I'm talking about everyone that comes into contact with the work. As many as I can let in, I do. At the core, my work is very intimate. This is what I seek in all that I do.

JACKIE: I remember something you said when I brought the AIM artists to your studio that I have quoted ever since: "Your galleries interests are not exactly your own."

JANINE: Yeah. It's more complicated than that. I'd like to think that at some level, whether I'm working with a curator or gallery, we put the art first. But you know, their job is different than my job. They have something that is motivating them and I have something that is motivating me. One has to be realistic. I have to protect the work and make sure that it's seen in the right way. That protection goes beyond the way it's made, to the way it's shown and talked about. Curators and galleries have skills that I don't have, and I want them to do their job. And I try to give them whatever tools help them represent me in the best possible way. Once that relationship is established, there needs to be trust on both sides.

JACKIE: A gallerist will have commercial interests at heart. They have staff. They have those exorbitant rents to pay. They want to think long term for you, but they have to think long term for themselves. There can be slightly divergent issues. You would be amazed by how little artists understand that. I don't know what they think they are getting in a gallerist, Mom, Dad, or some unconditional love, but that is not there and it's inappropriate.

JANINE: It's interesting, because I think each artist has different needs. Like I said, each artist fulfills a different role for their gallery. It's even more refined than that. Each gallery has a vision and a way that things should operate. It's really about finding two visions that somewhat align. I really feel like my gallery understands what makes me tick and what I think is important. And I know that I am different from other artists that they represent.

JACKIE: But you have gone through the trouble of educating them in a gracious and generous way.

JANINE: Yeah. We worked with each other for a year or two before we made a commitment. That way we both could explore whether it was a good fit.

JACKIE: So, have your artistic or career goals changed over the years?

JANINE: I don't know if my goals changed as much as I've learned so much over the years. Maybe my experiences have influenced my expectations. I received a lot of advice, because when I started, I didn't know anything and everybody comes out of the woodwork to tell you what to do. It's very interesting.

JACKIE: So, you have to sort through that.

JANINE: You have to sort through the advice and ask, what is their motivation? At first, I had this sense that I should always take the best opportunities. Then, I had to figure out what the best opportunities for my career were. I realized that I was very lucky to have that choice and to not have to take whatever was offered to me, but it was very confusing at the beginning. At that point, it seemed obvious to choose the biggest museum, the best gallery. Now, I really look for the situations that will nurture my creative process, the interesting thinkers, the contexts that broaden my work. Because now, I am at a point in my career where I have been defined in a certain way. So, I love to show with younger artists for instance. At the beginning, my work was categorized under, "the body" or "identity", so now I love when I get a chance to show the work in a different way. So, I think that's the main thing that has changed.

I've been trying to bring back the joy that made me an artist in the first place. I never forget Kiki telling me, "Before you know it, you are running a small business." And yeah, joy isn't something that I have thought about so much. I am much better at the struggle. So, I'm trying to bring back some of that wonder and the pleasure of making, because there is so much that takes over.

JACKIE: How do you get support for this small business that is the Janine Antoni studio?

JANINE: Financial support?

JACKIE: Financially, I'm assuming you have a pretty steady income. You've won major awards and have been even declared a genius by the MacArthur Foundation. How did that feel?

JANINE: Well I'm not even sure I quite knew what a MacArthur was. Then, I certainly didn't understand how much money that was. I basically knew how much money the work that sold the most for was. At that time, I was flabbergasted by the whole thing. I think it's such an incredible gift, because the MacArthur treats you as if you have a job. I don't know if the foundation still does it this way, but they paid me over a space of five years and provided health insurance, which is huge. So, it gave me a lot of freedom. That's when I organized the studio the way it is now. I created an archiving system, etc. I took some of the money aside to organize my life.

JACKIE: So, you could afford to hire the help that you needed.

JANINE: I was able to hire someone to really organize it in a serious way. That was great. I am always refining it, but the archiving system that I put in place then is pretty much the one I use now.

JACKIE: Well, it's an amazing system. How did you lay out the organization?

JANINE: After a while, you realize that you are doing the same thing over and over again and that's a waste of time. Also, I like to hire assistants that are really good artists, so they don't tend to work with me for a long time. I want to surround myself with interesting people who are doing things with their life and not just taking care of me. So, I needed to create a system that anyone could just step into, walk into, and take part in. That creates a certain mindset. It was a matter of making a file for every piece and I've ever done, splitting it up into installation instructions, provenance, various written text about the work, conservation and anything and everything else pertaining to each work. This way I could just go to the file and access everything I need.

JACKIE: I agree that one develops a system out of a need. You want to free up time so that you are not writing the same thing. You are just editing an old one.

JANINE: Yes, and it's an interesting problem with my work, because every work is dramatically different from the last other. Every situation is brand new and, therefore, the way it goes out into the world is also different. I always feel like I am starting from scratch. So, it's always one carry the information from one experience to another? We just started a new system, called, "The Studio Rules." It's totally idiosyncratic, but, in general, every time we make a mistake, we write it down and try to make a rule out of it, so we don't make the same mistakes over again. Of course, we are always going to make mistakes. It's a hilarious list. It hasn't been that long; it's been about a year or so.

JACKIE: I love it. You turn it into a game.

JANINE: Yeah. It's [The Studio Rules] on the wall. And we just go and write one down when we realize something.

JACKIE: Like whenever you mislabeled something or lose something? You want to talk a little bit more about your systems?

JANINE: Okay, so I talked about the file: archiving, provenance, etc. I keep all of that information of a white gallery, which is of course getting more complex, because things are now being resold. I keep that and the gallery gets a copy of what I have. And then, I have something called installation binders, which is for the more complicated pieces. We put it for the studio and one to the binder with the work. My calendar is crucial. Now that I have a child and a husband that is an artist, we put it online. He and the babysitter can see what I am doing; there is a lot of coordinating. I have an accountant. For years and years, I did my own accounting. At one point after receiving the MacArthur, I hired an accountant to come and organize the studio. My husband, Paul, advised me not to have my assistant do it. He thought we should get somebody from the outside to come in and organize and then we would follow her system. She was amazing. She put everything in order, but it was so embarrassing, because it was like going through your dirty laundry or something. We unearthed flawed accounting system after accounting system. It was just unbelievable. I thought, "Okay, this is just not my talent." And that's okay, I have other talents. Why should I be struggling? So, I hired an accountant. It's the best investment that I have ever made in myself. Stress wise, it has relieved so much. That has been great. My accounting is super complicated, because I split the cost of making stuff with my gallery, so every receipt has to be accounted for. It is great to have somebody else do that.

Rosemarie, my assistant, says she likes the order of the day.

JACKIE: Is that like a "To do" list?

JANINE: It's a list that applies to every day that includes the basic things that you have to do when you come in from picking up the mail, email, and so on. Prioritizing has become the most important skill. What are the things that need to be dealt with? I think the big challenge for all artists is not to let the administrative tasks take over. You could do them all day, feel very accomplished, and not make any art. So, there is another list that is dedicated to just the studio works. I see whether I can I move any of the works forward before the administrative stuff takes over.

JACKIE: The work comes first.

JANINE: As much as I can.

JACKIE: Since your daughter was born, have you had to change your studio hours?

JANINE: Having my daughter changed my hours tremendously. I have to focus. A lot of things that I used to spend hours doing, I can't do anymore and I shouldn't do them even if I didn't have a kid. So, having a child has made things a little clearer to me in terms of what is important. I used to work 24 hours a day and my marriage could handle it, but I don't want to do that to my daughter. I want to get home to her, as soon as I can.

I also keep all of my own artwork. None is at the gallery. Anything that is editioned is right here, so, I'm controlling it coming and going. It's coming without being broken and—

JACKIE: Well, I know you do really amazing packing.

JANINE: Well, yes, some of the pieces really require it, so the packing is part of the making of the piece.

JACKIE: So, all you have in the studio are the editioned pieces?

JANINE: These are all artist's proofs or exhibition copies. Because of the fragility of my work, it's better to not even ask the collectors to lend them out. Of course, I don't have an exhibition proof of everything, but everything that I am duplicate is there.

JACKIE: So, you are your own best archivist.

JANINE: Yes.

JACKIE: That's important. It's a responsibility.

JANINE: It's just that I love these things and I want to take care of them. Nobody loves them more than I do.

JACKIE: It's true.

JANINE: Back to the intimacy thing, Rosemarie [my assistant] also wanted to say that I'm very involved with my assistants, because she says that this is unique. They contribute greatly to my work not only in the making of it, but also in the thinking. I can't really separate the two. I'm also very involved in their work, what they are doing, and their lives. So, it's an intimate relationship.

JACKIE: And what about your studio space?

JANINE: This studio space is incredibly flexible. These curtains can turn this space into sort of a white gallery. If I need to show my gallery or somebody work, I can draw this white curtain and make this space a white gallery where I can hang work. If I need to Columbia students are here, I can set up tables to make it another kind of space. This fabric is made for whatever situation needs to happen. Like right now, I am preparing for a show. Because my work is fabricated and made in different places, I'm using this wall to hang a map of the show: the ideas, images, calendar, and dates. I can look at the date and what has to happen so that everything is done on time. I can work backwards. I can just sit here and see the whole show and think about it.

JACKIE: Were you challenged with the change to digital stuff?

JANINE: Terribly. But I have some great people helping with that. We are the crossover generation into the digital age. I'm waiting for my daughter to grow up and be able to help me.

JACKIE: She'll find it completely natural. My children have helped me solve many of my digital issues.

JANINE: Teaching has been really important. Though I might be in touch with my generation, unless I am looking at shows or assistants. I will not know what's interesting to young artists and what they are thinking about. I learn so much from my students and teaching. Teaching is also a way for me to stay flexible and open-minded and a way for me to have to articulate my ideas and make them understandable.

JACKIE: Because you are doing it for a different generation.

JANINE: Right. And anyone outside of your head. I have always liked to do things that are not the work but that inspire the work, and I have only realized this recently. Like right now, I am dancing a lot. I am always learning something new. I think there is something to that. You activate a dormant part of your brain.

JACKIE: Well my son who is a neuroscientist would say that you are changing up the neural pathways.

JANINE: Right. There is that, but there is this activity that is parallel to the work. Maybe, eventually, it will be in the work. It's really hard for me to track, but I know it is crucial. It's a freer space where I can be creative and not be beholden to my career, my trajectory, and art history.

JACKIE: Audience.

JANINE: Right. I can be a little more raw. That rawness somehow just kind of floats there and later has some kind of effect on what I am doing.

JACKIE: Does it bring in wonder?

JANINE: Yes it brings wonder, chance, and surprise. It is a place to play without restraint.

JACKIE: In meditation, we call it beginner's mind, which is a beautiful concept.

JANINE: Right. Meditation was one of those things and Buddhism. And I think that they have affected my work. Although, I don't know if people would readily see the influence unless they really know the philosophy. And now, I am taking that meditation into movement. It has taken a long time for me to put those two things together in a conscious way.

I don't remember saying it, but Rosemarie said I advised her: "Only make a piece that contributes to art history." I can't believe I said such an intimidating thing. But I think that you should raise the bar high yourself: What are some of your other guiding thoughts?

JANINE: Follow your love.

Know what you are good at.

Get help with what you are not good at.

Make decisions that allow you to make work for the rest of your life.

Create an art family.

Be generous.

Help each other.

Fantasize about the viewer.

Know yourself.

Challenge yourself.

Don't be too narrow at the beginning.

For instance, I could still be making chocolate sculptures, and that would be a disaster. You are defined by the thing that gets you noticed, and there is an incredible pull to repeat yourself. I think that the wider you are based at the beginning, the more possibility you have for the rest of your life. Saying all of that, I think of On Kawara. You could make a fabulous contribution finding the nuances of a very narrow space. Wide view is my territory. Finding the same thing in very diverse forms.

JACKIE: But again, it's following your own advice. Knowing yourself. And for you that wouldn't have been enough. It wouldn't have been satisfying.

JANINE: And then I wrote down a few other things:

Don't get too good at making something.

Work at the edge of your capability.

Take a position.

Make rules and them break them, slowly.

Question every gesture in the making.

Surprise yourself.

Pay attention.

Stay open.

JACKIE: That lists aboutius.

JANINE: For me, it's all the artwork. The artwork isn't just the material to make an object—everything you do is the artwork. Even the way you speak about it.

JACKIE: Working for two very different artists as an assistant out of school gave you some insight into how different processes might operate.

JANINE: And that's the thing. People tell you it has to be done a certain way. We never talked about the bad advice.