



# Turning Inside Out

Janine Antoni's new perspective  
on sculpture and dance

*By Wendy Vogel*

*Portrait by Kristine Larsen*

**I**ntense physical rituals take center stage in Janine Antoni's practice. To create past works, she has performed such acts as licking her partner's eyeball (*Mortar and Pestle*, a photograph from 1999), urinating through a copper gargoyle statuette off the Chrysler Building (*Conduit*, 2009, a sculpture and photograph), and dumping herself in a bathtub full of lard (*Eureka*, 1993, a sculptural installation). The results of these actions occupy a space between performance and relic. Her recent work, however, focuses less on indexing external bodily processes than on learning about and depicting the

body from the inside out. Inspired by giving birth and somatic movement, Antoni's new corpus in sculpture and dance extends her interests in spirituality, desire, and embodiment.

Born in the Bahamas in 1964, Antoni became known at a young age for daring conceptual work that blended sculpture and performance. *Gnaw*, 1992, was one of the most buzzed-about works from the controversial 1993 Whitney Biennial, which showcased that era's young artists' engagement with identity politics. To make the work, Antoni cast two 600-pound cubes, one of chocolate and one of lard, which she bit into repeatedly, spitting out the material. She formed the gnawed chocolate into heart-shaped containers for candies and the lard into pigmented lipsticks, displaying them near the chewed cubes. Loaded as it is with signifiers related to the feminine body, cravings, and disordered eating, the piece puts the viewer in an empathetic position as a witness, better able to understand the artist's method and her female position. Antoni would go on to use these materials again in her 1993 sculpture *Lick and Lather*, a group of busts cast from her own body in chocolate and lard soap that she eroded by licking or washing.

Antoni contextualizes her subversive appropriation of neutral Minimalist vocabulary in her search for a visceral language as part of a generational engagement with questions of identity and corporeality. (In an early interview, she referred to the act of biting as an expression of her marginalization, characterizing it as an "intimate" and "destructive" gesture toward an art history that defined her as an artist but excluded her as a woman.) "When I came to New York, Kiki Smith and Robert Gober were bringing us back to the body," Antoni explains of her early sculptural influences, adding that a rather unassuming work by Gober—*Plywood*, 1987, chipboard laminated with a layer of fir, what she describes as a "handmade ready-made"—had an indelible impact on her artistic development. "When I first saw that piece of plywood, my whole world was shaken." Joseph Beuys, the shamanic German sculptor who frequently used the materials of fat, felt, and honey, was also an influence, particularly his concept of aura. "Beuys said that the bed is an energy catcher: Sex and sickness and birth, all of this sank into the mattress for him. How does something accrue power in this way?" Throughout her career, Antoni has sought a connection with her viewers beyond a passive visual experience, creating work that bears the traces of its making while leaving room for speculation about its backstory.

This engagement with embodiment is equally intertwined with Antoni's understanding of feminist

art history. As a graduate student at the Rhode Island School of Design in the 1980s, she began to learn about body art through one of her instructors, artist and writer Mira Schor. Antoni's early work recuperated the themes and ideas of artists such as Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, and Ana Mendieta, who were scorned in some circles as essentialists in the theory-driven art climate of the era. *Loving Care*—a performance from 1993 in which Antoni used her hair to mop the gallery floor, repeatedly dunking her head into a bucket of Clairol's Loving Care® brand hair dye—shows the influence of feminist artists like Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who tackled the notion of women's work. In 1996 Antoni performed the piece at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, where Ukeles had engaged in tasks such as washing the steps of the museum in 1973 for her "Maintenance Art Performance Series." Ukeles's project sought to validate "maintenance" work, typically regarded as female or lower-class labor, alongside the "creative" work that is often attributed to male makers. Though the Ukeles series has recently been hailed for its radicalism, it was little known at the time of Antoni's performance. That Antoni chose to reference Ukeles's action in her choice of performing *Loving Care* at the Wadsworth made the rendition even more powerful.

Although Antoni gained notoriety quickly and had a firm grasp on her art-historical predecessors, her early pieces were not always viewed with critical acclaim. In academic circles, her work was sometimes derided along with that of other artists who undertook the subject of embodiment and identity. In a 1994 *October* journal roundtable about the reception of 1960s art, art historian Benjamin Buchloh attacked Antoni's "spectacularization of feminist theory," while the artist and writer Silvia Kolbowski claimed that Antoni's work incorrectly assumed that Minimalism was "bereft of emotion." Subsequently, art historians viewed the strategies of absence, embodiment, and the performative critique of art history in Antoni's work as both powerful aesthetic gestures and representative of an important dialogue about subject formation.

But her exploration of embodiment has not stopped at the surface. Antoni has recently shifted her focus to another set of practices vital to the ecology of contemporary art that have long been marginalized: dance and movement therapy. For the past seven years, she has been exploring somatic movement, which involves proprioception, or movement that focuses on the felt, internal body. Antoni explains that she has always pursued parallel movement practices, such as tightrope walking, that have become "a kind of research" for her work: For *Touch*, a video from 2002, the artist strung a slack wire along the horizon line of a beach in the Bahamas and appeared to walk on water; during the 2003 opening of the installation *To Draw a Line*,

*Hearth*, 2014. Set of three pit-fired ceramic vessels, 4¾ x 6½ in., 4¾ x 8 in., and 5 x 8 in.

OPPOSITE: Janine Antoni in her Brooklyn studio with a work in progress for her upcoming Luhring Augustine show.





she walked along a rope composed of handwoven and machine-woven hemp and then fell into a pile of raw hemp fiber.

The somatic movement she now practices, however, is defined in contradistinction to performative action for an audience.

"The movement is generated from an inner psychological space," Antoni says. Because her artworks often reference past experiences and inner drives, Antoni describes her experience of discovering somatic movement as "a huge revelation."

The artist studies three forms of somatic movement—authentic movement (a method where one moves with closed eyes and a witness explains what one sees), continuum (a practice based around the idea of moving fluid through the body), and 5Rhythms (a form of ecstatic dancing). Anna Halprin, Emilie Conrad, and Gabrielle Roth developed the respective techniques. Antoni says that the three women, who straddled the disciplines of art, dance, healing, and spiritual practice, all spent time at the Esalen Institute, the retreat in Big Sur, California, where they worked with Gestalt therapist Fritz Perls.

Antoni has become most closely aligned with the work of Halprin, now 94 years old, who has practiced as a dancer and

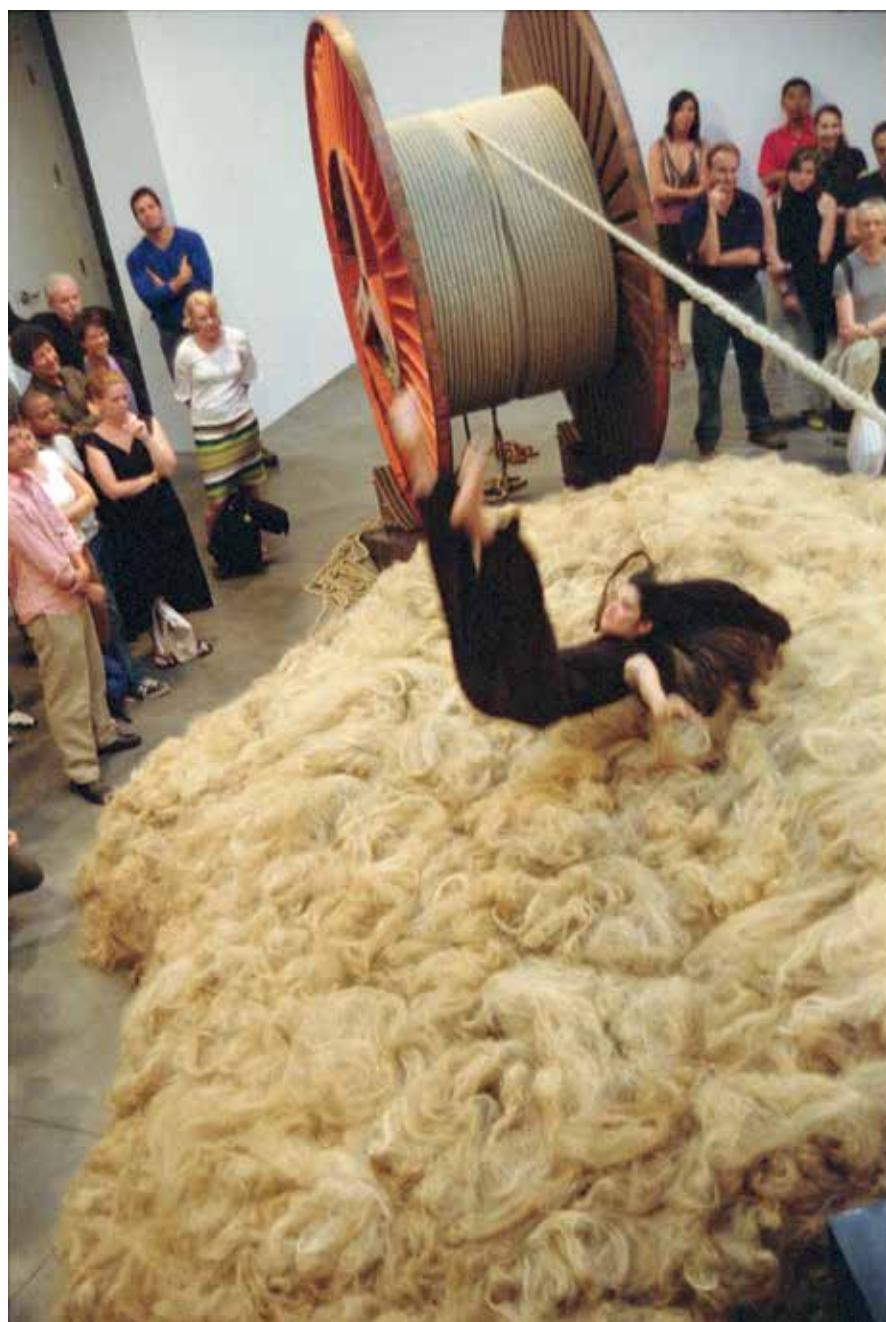
healer in the Bay Area since the 1950s. In the contemporary art world, Halprin is best known as the teacher of avant-garde dancers such as Yvonne Rainer and Simone Forti. Halprin's postmodern protégés eschewed the spectacular and virtuosic aspects of dance, incorporating pedestrian and task-based movement into their compositions. Yet Antoni has gravitated toward the aspects of her work that can less easily be assimilated into the dominant discourses of contemporary art and performance. "My journey toward embodiment follows Halprin's practice, and my objects strive to make viewers feel themselves in their bodies," Antoni says. In an ever more homogeneous art world, where objects seem to function virtually, as images and as backdrops to selfies shared on social media, this notion of surrendering one's body to the work seems once again like pioneering territory. "In both the ecstatic-dancing and the somatic-movement modalities, I realized that my ideas are lodged in my body, and I just need to move to have them come out," Antoni explains. She says that this practice of focusing on the body and decentering from language has made her the most prolific she has been in two decades. The resulting work encompasses both sculptural installation and dance.

This past winter, Antoni's studio in the Gowanus neighborhood of Brooklyn was filled with work for two upcoming gallery exhibitions: "Turn," which opened February 27 at Anthony Meier Fine Art in San Francisco, and a show at Luhring Augustine's space in New York's Chelsea district that runs from March 21 to April 25. The former consists of work based on the notion of crowning in childbirth, when the baby turns and its head engages with the mother's loosened pelvis before it exits the birth canal. Antoni has wanted to make a piece on the subject since she gave birth 10 years ago to her daughter—her child with her husband, the social practice artist Paul Ramirez Jonas. "Because I'm a sculptor, I think of crowning as a sculptural moment of compromise," Antoni notes. "Two forms, the baby's head and the mother's hips, negotiate one another for a successful birth."

The two-part Meier show will feature a series of pit-fired vessels and "crown molding." The process of making the vessels began when Antoni ordered the hip bones of a childbearing woman from a medical-supply company. "The vessel was thrown on the wheel, and while the clay was still wet, the hip bone was dragged along the wet vessel," the artist says, adding that the extruded shape was made from the inner edge of the bones, which are then affixed to the objects as handles. Another group of three vases, entitled *Hearth*, articulates a sequence of movement, "almost like Eadweard Muybridge," where "the coccyx and the sacrum have to move out to let the baby's head come through—that hurt like hell!" A second room features molding that Antoni made to complement the existing structure of Meier's space, a restored 19th-century San Francisco mansion. "Traditionally, the way you made molding was by pulling a tool that articulated the profile of the molding across the plaster. So I thought, Could I do that with a hip bone?" She worked with traditional Italian plaster modelers to create the molding using the bone as a tool. The method creates a wavering, clearly handmade product, with hip bones embedded in the plaster. Antoni's wonky hip-height molding, called chair molding in industry parlance, contrasts with the gallery's sophisticated existing molding.

At Luhring Augustine, Antoni will expand and re-situate a series of resin casts she made of various body parts fused together that she created for a show at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh in 2013. She calls the surrealistic assemblages "impossible meetings" between different organs and bones. One sculpture, for instance, depicts the behavior of crossing one's legs by featuring a cast of Antoni's leg fused with a skeleton from hip to foot. The artist says that she has long wanted to make a piece about the traditionally female gesture of modesty, and

Performance documentation of *To Draw a Line*, 2003. 4,000 pounds of raw hemp fiber, 120 feet of handmade hemp rope spliced into 1,200 feet of machine-made hemp rope, two recycled steel reels, 140 lead ingots with a total weight of 13,300 pounds, two steel ramps with a 20% incline, four steel and rubber laminated shocks, 35 x 20 x 10 ft.



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this work expresses the subtle violence of the act. “I can’t uncross them, which is a comment on how my body has absorbed these female gestures.” She adds that she considers “the bone leg my inevitable future and the meaty leg as the present. I am crossing the future with the present.” She stresses, though, that it was not her intention to represent death. Another work plays on the act of listening to the heart of a loved one. The sculpture consists of a cast rib cage with a head on top of it, whose ear pokes through the ribs, entering the chest cavity. Antoni considers the gesture one of desperate desire to hear a lover’s heartbeat. On closer inspection, one can see that the cast head is from Antoni’s *Lick and Lather* mold. A third piece unites a hand and a sacrum that appear to rest comfortably within each other as a gesture of affection. She describes it another meeting between our ancestral past and our present, noting that the sacrum attaches to the coccyx—the vestige of our primordial tail. The series also experiments with sculptural pedestals: The hand-and-sacrum object rests upon a cast stool in which one joint assumes the form of a tree branch, and the rib-cage-and-head sculpture is fused to a cast pillow, evoking a bedroom.

These dry bones, Antoni says, will contrast with the viscous materiality of *Honey Baby*, 2013, a video that Antoni made with the choreographer Stephen Petronio. In the video, Nick Sciscione performs a dance—naked in a mysterious tunnel filled with honey—that Petronio developed, based on a sonogram of a fetus in utero. In addition to the birth canal, another sculptural reference that comes to mind is Nancy Holt’s 1976 earthwork *Sun Tunnels*, four large cement cylinders that are positioned to perfectly frame the rising and setting sun of their Utah site’s summer and winter solstices. Antoni’s tunnel frames an off-camera golden light that evokes both a heavenly source and a doctor’s flashlight aimed inside a woman when giving birth. Throughout the video, the camera moves ever closer to Sciscione, playing with scale and grandeur.

The work is not Antoni’s first collaboration with the choreographer, who has become another central character in her engagement with dance. Antoni and Petronio’s first large-scale collaboration, *Like Lazarus Did*, debuted at the Joyce Theater in New York in 2013. As a counterpoint to the choreographer’s dynamic gestures, Antoni lay suspended and meditating in a harness installation above the stage, “offering Petronio stillness.” Around her body, she suspended casts of the company dancers’ body parts holding poses from the piece; they function as partial freeze-frames of the choreography. The idea for her contribution, she explains, came from her interest in *milagros*—sculptural replicas depicting sick body parts, either made by the suffering or purchased, that are strung up from the ceiling of churches by Catholic worshipers throughout Latin America and parts of Spain. The wearing down of the *milagros*, “how the detail goes away and how it starts to become a thing unto itself,” has also influenced Antoni’s recent sculptural work in resin, sanded down to a soft “sea glass-like” finish.

Antoni’s work with movement and dance will be the basis of an experimental show with Petroni and Halprin at Philadelphia’s Fabric Workshop and Museum in 2016, supported by the Pew Grant program. “It began as this idea of a retrospective of my work in dance, working with choreographers,” Antoni says, “and it has evolved into a three-way collaboration.”

Rather than giving over her visual ideas or sculptural language to the dance makers, Antoni will create new pieces

with them. She will also strengthen an intergenerational connection, as Petronio once danced for Trisha Brown and Steve Paxton, who are former students of Halprin. Antoni says that she plans to perform one of Halprin’s older dances; that Halprin will develop a new dance for Antoni and Petronio; and that she and Petronio will collaborate on a new work. Antoni was thrilled at Halprin’s suggestion to “place a classic choreography on her,” the dance term for inviting someone to perform a piece. Because she is not a trained dancer, the artist’s kinetic vocabulary naturally draws from the gestures and movements of her older work. In this way, the project circled back around to the idea of a retrospective in movement.

To give a sense of the work she will produce for the Fabric Museum show, Antoni plays a few minutes of raw video on her laptop from a recent improvisation session with Halprin. Nude, the artist stands on Halprin’s wooden dance floor in a California forest, a sheet of brown butcher paper in front of her. Antoni scoops the paper up and bends it into a cocoonlike form, then, with a dramatic flourish, she uncovers herself. Fluidly she wraps herself in the paper again, weaving it between her long limbs, stopping only for a few seconds to strike an extended pose before reworking the surface. In the video’s short duration, she creates more than a dozen unique forms. With eyes closed, she seems in a trance, transmitting something from her inner consciousness. The choreography is from Halprin’s 1965 dance



called *Parades and Changes*, which she suggested to Antoni because she thought it might suit her sculptural sensibilities. “The paper is so provocative. It is very suggestive,” Antoni says. “I went on for two hours the first day. I was waiting for her to stop me.” The short clip shows the artist euphoric, responding to the paper itself and not any outside directive, fully in her own world. It’s an apt illustration of Antoni’s new somatic process and the personal turn that her embodiment work has taken, her interests in spirituality and healing transforming her performance practice from an outward gesture to an almost mystical process of plumbing her inner depths. Recalling the end of her day at Halprin’s, Antoni says, “It had gotten dark and I hadn’t noticed; I was still at it.” MP

*Umbilical*, 2000. Sterling-silver cast of family silverware and negative impression of artist’s mouth and mother’s hand, 8 x 3 x 3 in.