My Body Is Your Vehicle

A Conversation with Janine Antoni

BY JOSHUA REIMAN

Is it possible to touch something with sight, to feel something deeply in a total state of awareness? For Janine Antoni, creative process takes on a psychological disposition. She creates objects with an intense admiration of life, in which her body is your vehicle, a fulcrum of perception, in which senses are enabled through corporeal textures. Phenomenologically speaking, Antoni would like you to feel her body and to understand where your body is in relation to gestures frozen into forms of loving care. To speak with Antoni about her work and the root of sculptural presence is to be present and aware in one’s own body and mind. She does not see the body as a mere vehicle for the mind; instead, she hopes the body feels before the mind takes over. Listening to her, I felt more in tune with the dance of what it really means to appreciate sculpture.

Joshua Reiman: *What are your current obsessions?*

Janine Antoni: My current obsession is improvisational dance, and it has transformed my way of creating sculpture. I am interested in what comes to me in the moment. Committing to being open to that has allowed things to flow out of me in a way that I could not achieve in the studio alone. Dance pushes me into a whole new territory.

My obsession has always been the body, and I have always had some physical activity that inspires my sculpture. For instance, I learned to walk on a tightrope and became obsessed with balance. I did it every day, waiting to learn something that I could bring back to my sculpture. Then before I knew it, the tightrope itself became part of the work.

JR: *When you are dancing, what are you finding out about the body, and how does that relate to an object that you have made?*

JA: I’ve been exploring forms of somatic movement for seven years now. This has been fun and enlightening, and I surprise myself again and again. As I move, I receive visions of potential artworks. It is very curious, as though my ideas are lodged in my body, and through movement, they come out.

JR: *That sounds like a spiritual meditation, although instead of trying to block out life, you are accepting it.*

JA: Yes, I watch, I wait, and then I see how things resolve themselves. When I move, I have revelations: I don’t know if this will sound like a revelation to you, but my ankle is actually connected to my cheek. When we walk around the world, we are not really aware of this. We are usually in our heads, and our bodies are just vehicles to move our thinking minds. I was not walking around the world in an embodied way. So, dance has been a way to integrate my body with my experience of the world. This was something I had been trying to do with the work since the beginning, where the edges of my body are more permeable and the distinction between my inside and my outside world merge. I want to make sculptures that describe that kind of embodiment.

Like the sculpture of the hand holding the sacrum. It allows the outside of the body to come in contact with the inside of the body. Your sacrum is the root of your spine. It’s the thickest bone in your body, and it’s the last bone to disintegrate. Some cultures believe that when you resurrect, you resurrect up through the sacrum, which is a beautiful idea. The coccyx, at the base of the sacrum, is the place where our tail once was. In this sculpture, the hand cups the sacrum, holding on to our severed past. Locating this meeting on the stool connects the body to its environment. When you see a stool, you’re already sitting on it in your mind.

JR: *That makes me think of phenomenology related to the viewer’s body within a space that you have created. I am curious to know your perspective on that.*

JA: Well, in that regard, I have high hopes. It’s one thing for me to describe the feeling I want you to have, but it is another thing for you to have the feeling. If you feel my sculpture in your body and therefore experience your body differently, then I’ve accomplished a lot.

JR: *Within that, what was the most meaningful reaction you have ever heard about one of your works, and which piece was it?*
JA: Believe it or not, people have actually bit into the chocolate self-portrait bust in Lick and Lather. When I made that work, I wanted to have an experience with my own image, and the viewer was to witness that relationship.

I make the work as an antidote to my loneliness; it allows me to feel connected to the viewer. I have great fantasies about the viewer. The objects act as surrogates for my own body and my desire to be in contact. I am trying to elicit desire within the viewer, so if someone succumbs to that desire and bites the chocolate image of me, how can I be upset?

Then there is Hearth, which is inspired by the birthing process. The painful part of giving birth is that the sacrum and coccyx have to move back for the head of the baby to come through. Three vessels articulate this process in a Muybridge kind of way. To make the work, I dragged the sacrum along the clay bowl, while it was still wet and on the wheel, shaping the vessel. The final forms are further articulated by the lift of the sacrum. Viewing this work, mothers like to tell me their birth stories.

JR: Have you had many direct conversations with viewers?

JA: This is something I pay a lot of attention to. Communication is a driving force for me—I am constantly watching people and in conversation. I've had some of my most important information relayed to me through the guards in museums. They spend the most amount of time with the work, and they see how people respond to it.

Right now, I have a work up at the Brooklyn Museum called Yours truly, which experiments with an unusual way of communicating. I originally showed it at London's Hayward Gallery in "Move: Choreographing You," and it was a beautiful idea of how sculpture choreographs the way you move around it. Instinctively, I have always been thinking about this relationship. Especially when you put several works together, how do viewers move through those works? How does your movement uncover the meaning of the object while you walk around it? I just fell in love with this idea.

So, I suggested to Stephanie Rosenthal, the curator, that I would like to write a love letter to the viewer, as if the object could see them walking around it. The letter was printed on the floor plan in the gallery guide. It appeared to be handwritten hastily and ripped as if torn from the gallery guide. It was slipped into people's coat pockets by the coat check to be discovered after they left the museum. On first read, it feels like it was written by a secret admirer. But on closer inspection, you notice the language is a bit strange, revealing that it was written from the perspective of an artwork seen at the museum.

Preparing for this work, I spent a lot of time in the Greek and Roman galleries at the Met, watching bodies look at bodies. It is totally fascinating to observe how people see and perceive. What are the physical things that we do when we are looking at an artwork?
The first thing I noticed is that we don’t really look directly. Most people go straight to the wall tag. And, these days, people see first through their iPhones, photographing before they’ve looked at the work directly.

J: So, did you hear back from the unsuspecting viewers?

A: Yes, and there has been a huge variety of responses. Some people are tickled, some people are confused, and some people are upset. I witnessed the whole gamut of emotion. The piece fools its viewer for a little while. Sometimes art makes us uncomfortable, just like love.

J: How many of these did you make and distribute?

A: Thousands. It’s not my usual form of making, which has surprised people. But it gets down to the root of where my art comes from. I want to express my desire for the viewer.

J: To hold something so intimate in your hands is a personal experience.

A: Yes, and to find it in your stuff.

J: That crosses some very interesting lines in an art experience.

A: Well, what happens when we walk away from a sculpture? If my ideas come from inside my body,
then how can my sculpture enter your body? Why would it enter your body, and what are the repercussions of this experience? In Yours truly, you receive my letter after you’ve seen everyone else’s artwork. It references whichever work you formed a memorable relationship with that day. This is why I did not write it from the perspective of a specific work.

JR: What do you hope that your current materials offer the viewer? JA: I came to resin because of my interest in milagros. They are religious folk charms from Spain, Portugal, Brazil, and Mexico. They can be made out of wax, resin, metal, and even carved wood. When you have an ailment, for instance a bad foot, you go to the store and buy a replica of a foot. Then, you bring it to the church and hang it from the ceiling as a prayer for healing.

The choreographer, Stephen Petronio, who was working on a dance called Like Lazarus Did, asked me to create visuals for the performance. This was the start of what has become a nearly three-year collaboration. I was riveted during rehearsals. I noticed that certain movements jumped into my body. The next day, I would replay these movements over and over again. I asked myself, why? What is it about these movements that makes my unconscious want to bring them back?

I asked the dancers to send me images of the gestures that psychologically resonated for them. They sent me iPhone pictures, and I reproduced them with my own body. During the performance, I hung my body parts from the ceiling of the Joyce Theater.
and suspended my live body in a helicopter stretcher beneath them. In contrast to the exuberant dance, I remained still, contemplating these gestures while the dance unfolded beneath me. I identified with the stillness of the audience. I spent 35 hours meditating on this constellation of body parts. During this time, these works came to me.

JR: You mentioned earlier that the outside of the body meets the inside of the body, and I understand how plastics are used with the body in medical circumstances, such as splinting, but I am wondering how they relate to your new work when it comes to materiality.

JA: Casting both the body and its environment in the same material allowed me to talk about their merging. I have made impossible scenarios—the inside of the body is meeting the outside of the body, and the body itself is literally grafted to its environment. The irony here is that to describe an embodied experience, an experience I can only know through a felt sense, I’ve had to use a synthetic material. I’m removing it from life to bring it back to life.

These objects have been sanded for days and days. They take on light. There is a luminosity in the material. What intrigues me about traditional milagros is how they generalize the body. All the details have been lost. I found this sculpturally appealing. Inspired by this generalization, I decided to sand down the details of my sculptures. This creates a blurring, almost like worn sea glass. Both the body and the object it’s grafted to share the same surface quality.

In one work, I located the sacrum on the stool exactly where your bone would meet the architecture of the furniture. How has the stool been shaped to receive the body? How does the body shape itself by sitting? These types of furniture mold our skeletal structure and muscles. It’s a very symbiotic relationship.

JR: But what about the mind/body relationship?

JA: I am saying these words to you right now: Where are you feeling these words in your body? You register them in your body first, and then your brain takes over. It either listens to your body or not. At times, your brain drowns out what your body knows. If you reside primarily in your head, you exploit your body for the sake of where your ideas are taking you. If we exploit our own bodies, then it stands to reason, we have no problem exploiting other bodies and exploiting our environment. The more we cut off, the more we cut off.

JR: So, you are really interested in the present moment, in being aware?

JA: Yes, being present and aware is being embodied.

JR: I get a sense that you really love what you do. You love these materials; you have an affinity to touch and the tangible aspects of the body in space. In a sense, you are also loving your viewers because you are trying to connect.
with them. How does the word “love” and thinking about objects make you feel?

JA: It's funny, we don't really talk about love in the art world. There's work that's about being in love, and loving, and then there's making as a loving act. But, what does it mean to make with love?

JR: There's also the gesture. I am thinking about Rodin, and about the gesture that is captured within the material, within a moment.

JA: Rodin knew how to capture emotion in a gesture. I think it is because his figures are in motion; they are alive. With craft, we feel that love is captured in the attention given to the material and its surface. Contemporary art often posits its love in another location. Where does love exhibit itself in the marrying of form and content? Which brings us to the idea of intention and art as an offering. What fascinates me about the milagros is that when people cannot afford to buy one, they will make it themselves. To make as a prayer is a particular kind of love. My show at Luhring Augustine was called “From the Vow Made.” For me, there is a relationship between love and my desire for intimacy. I try to put myself on the surface of an object so I can touch the viewer. I want viewers to feel near me there.

JR: Like they are touching with sight?

JA: Yes, but I am also exposing something intimate about myself in the object, so that's a way of being touched, of being moved.

JR: But what about the idea of love and transformation?

JA: I am glad you said “transformation.” Because I was thinking, how does making change me? There's a mutual relationship between me and the object: the object is changed by me, and I am changed by the object. If this relationship occurs, then maybe I could hope to have some effect on you as the viewer. But if I am not changed, then how can the viewer ever be changed?

When making, there is always a question about when to stop. It's complicated, to know when to let go. I have come to wait for this transformation as a signal that the object is ready to go into the world. It's so intangible to know what makes an object really powerful. How do we figure that out? There may be times that things flow out, or there may be times that things need to be bled out. It can take a long time, and a lot of pain. But I think that in general, artists have a rhythm to their creative process, and the unconscious will continue to reveal itself at a certain rate. It is good to let go.

Improvisational dance has taught me how to let go. When I'm dancing, the content of all my prior works resurfaces. There's a freedom to knowing that everything you have ever done has accumulated within. I think sculpturally, whether it takes on a three-dimensional form or not. For better or worse, this is the way I think about the world.

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