Janine Antoni / MATRIX 129
January 7 - April 28, 1996

Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, Spain, 1995.
Photo: Jordi Calafell.

MATRIX is supported by funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency, the LEF Foundation, and the Women’s Committee of the Wadsworth Atheneum.
Janine Antoni is a young sculptor who, over the past several years, has made an impressive series of humorous, eroticized, intelligent, and often startling works. Weaving various strands of art history together with her own personal (and ultimately private) explorations, Antoni’s boldly seductive work explores how contemporary definitions of art-making and aesthetics are elaborately entwined with our cultural constructs of sexuality and gender identification. By calling attention to these conventions, as they have been established by art history and by social definitions of women and beauty, Antoni throws many assumptions into question.

Antoni uses her own psyche and body as a point of departure. Most often, her work is the result of carefully structured, fetishistic encounters between malleable physical materials and the artist. Engaging in intense and arduous private rituals, she uses highly evocative parts of her own body — for instance, her teeth, her mouth, her tongue, her hair, her eyelashes — as the essential tools with which she sculpts, paints, or draws.

Antoni enjoys taking playful liberties with a variety of imposing, influential, and male-dominated modernist legacies, paying particular attention to abstract expressionist and minimalist art. Says Antoni, defining an important aspect of the tensions and ambiguities that characterize her work: “I feel attached to my artistic heritage and I want to destroy it. It defines me as an artist and excludes me as a woman, all at the same time.”¹

Yet, she is quick to acknowledge her considerable debt to certain accomplished, pioneering feminist artists of the defiantly self-expressive 1970s (e.g. Hannah Wilke, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta, Mira Schor, Eleanor Antin) along with many of the better-known women artists of the more ironic 1980s (e.g. Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer). Thanks to ground claimed by these predecessors, Antoni inherits the privilege to transgress existing boundaries with outrageous strategies rather than outrage.

Often her work is theatrical, sometimes even sensational. She deliberately takes herself to the edge, but
never over the edge. Far from being out of control, Antoni’s work requires the artist to be focused and rigorously self-disciplined. Consequently, the physical exertion of her processes and her charismatic presence are implicitly commanding in all that she presents.

Not incidentally, Antoni is intrigued with the fantastical Magic Realist fiction of Gabriel Garcia Marquez (One Hundred Years of Solitude) and other related Latin American and Caribbean authors. Each of


Antoni’s pieces begins with a spontaneous, almost subconscious, image of an unusual or outlandish situation that she makes a conscious decision to experience. As preposterous and challenging as it might be, she then figures out how to structure the realization of this image. Her art is exceptional for the extreme measures she is willing take in order to “have the work exist in the world.”

This MATRIX exhibition features the first U.S.
public performance of Antoni's now legendary Loving Care (1992-96) on Sunday, January 7, 1996 at 2 p.m. She has performed this piece, since 1992, for audiences at museums and galleries in London, Seoul, Amsterdam, Barcelona, Edinburgh, and Dublin.

Loving Care is a strenuous, exhausting performance in which Antoni slowly and methodically "mops" or "paints" the entire gallery floor with her dye-soaked hair. The artist describes this work with the simple statement: I dipped my hair in hair dye and mopped the floor with it. This bizarre, ritual-like process begins with Antoni emptying dozens of bottles of Loving Care® "Natural Black" into a large, plastic pail. Then, using her own long, dark hair as a mop or paintbrush, she conscientiously and slowly covers the gallery floor with hair dye, dragging the pail along with her foot or hand. The strong aroma of a beauty parlor fills the room. Trained in dance, Antoni creates a sweeping, oddly rhythmic, and trance-like performance. After the artist has exited the space, the highly-charged evidence of her efforts remains.

The Hartford performance will be videotaped and simultaneously relayed live to a monitor outside the gallery for those attending the event. Viewers, who are invited to begin the performance in the room with Antoni, will be progressively "mopped out" of the gallery by the artist as she claims the space for herself. Throughout the course of the exhibition, the "relics" of this event — the pail, the empty cosmetic packaging, and, most importantly, the broad strokes of black pigment that cover the floor — will be visible from the two entrances to the MATRIX space. A videotape of Antoni's Hartford performance, shown on a monitor placed intentionally on the floor, also accompanies the display of the "painted" floor during the run of the exhibition.

Loving Care was initially conceived in 1992 for a group exhibition, The Auto-Erotic Object, at Hunter College in New York City. On this first occasion, Antoni prepared the space in private. When finished, she exhibited the consequences of her labor. Although she herself was absent from the finished work, for those privy to the peculiar intensity of her eccentric actions, the gallery installation was undeniably imbued with her presence. This is true in virtually all of her work.

As the reputation of Loving Care has grown and
since the artist has now performed the piece in a public setting a half of a dozen times, both the meaning of the piece and the experience of presenting it have changed for Antoni. In early performances Antoni was anxious and vulnerable, fearful of humiliation in the company of strangers, and unsure if she would be met by boredom or anger. In 1996, however, Antoni enters the MATRIX space preceded by her growing reputation, her improving physical dexterity in accomplishing the


task, and her awareness of the compelling power of the piece. Nevertheless, many of the absurd aspects of **Loving Care** remain intact.

**Loving Care** calls forth a variety of references to the history of twentieth-century abstract painting. Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) made a number of all-over “drip” paintings in the late 1940s by energetically moving (some say, trance-like) around large canvases lying flat on the floor. Pollock’s contemporary, Franz

In ironic contrast, Antoni’s *Loving Care* features an attractive and clothed young woman in charge of all artistic decisions and in full control of her own body. Says the artist: “I am absolutely conscious of the fact that every gesture I make has some roots in patriarchal art history. I want the work to let the viewer know that I am conscious of that history.” In the process, Antoni makes herself both “the model and master.” Tilting conventional power relationships, Antoni dares to declare, “I am taking pleasure in my own body....There is an element of pleasure in the work which is auto-erotic by nature.”

Antoni chose to perform *Loving Care* here at the Atheneum, in part, because this museum was the site of an important and related 1973 performance by the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles. On a quiet weekend morning, Ukeles presented *Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance*, in which she performed such tasks as scrubbing the front steps of the museum and mopping Avery Court on her hands and knees, as part of her *Maintenance Art Performance Series* (1973-74). This event, virtually unrecorded in the institutional history of the Wadsworth Atheneum, is now considered to be a landmark event in the history of women’s performance art and is frequently cited in anthologies and exhibitions of the art of the 1970s.

Ukeles’ actions called into question the hierarchical distinctions between art activities and non-art activities. In 1968, after the birth of her first child, Ukeles faced a range of conflicts as an artist. Using her own life as a model, she was one of the first visual artists to theorize a reconciliation between the two oppositional paradigms of housewife and artist. In 1969, Ukeles’ widely-influential “Manifesto for Maintenance Art” recognized the enormous creative potential in a previously devalued category of social activity. This is one of the first documents of the women’s movement to
articulate a notion of female subjectivity as one that is inherently political. In this spirit, Antoni transforms the ordinary — eating, cleaning, bathing, washing, sleeping — into art-making processes. While Ukeles’ example continues to have great resonance in terms of Loving Care, Antoni’s appropriation of “women’s work” in this context has quite different consequences in terms of art-making. Says Antoni, “I use everyday activity to imitate basic fine art rituals such as chiseling (with my teeth), painting (with my hair and eyelashes), modeling and molding (with my own body).” It is interesting to note that Antoni’s “mopping,” in fact, stains, rather than cleans, the floor.

Accompanying this exhibition of Loving Care is a drawing by Antoni titled Butterfly Kisses (1993). Here, the artist, wearing frequent applications of CoverGirl Thicklash® mascara, makes 1254 winks with her left eyelashes on one sheet of paper and 1254 winks with her right eyelashes on another. The specificity of this extraordinary number of winks is a strategy the artist consciously borrows from the literature of Magic Realism. In this instance, however, the excess is not fictional.

Butterfly Kisses took over a month to complete, since “20 winks at a time — 60 winks a day” of each eye was the artist’s physical limit. In our culture, not only are “butterfly kisses” a playful gesture that young children traditionally enjoy, but also batting one’s eyelashes is the ultimate symbol of flirtation. Once again Antoni takes simple and familiar gestures, already loaded with specific associations, and brings them to a new and obsessive level.

For another significant piece, Gnaw (1992), Antoni cast two 600 pound cubes, one of chocolate and one of lard, and placed each on a marble base. Prior to exhibition, these large castings were “desecrated” or “marked” by hours of Antoni’s indefatigable bitings into its smooth surfaces and clean corners. Gnaw also included a product line of “Antoni” luxury lipsticks and candy containers, crafted from the chewed, spit-out bits of chocolate and lard and convincingly arranged in a Bloomingdale’s-style display. Gnaw not only references the tyranny of media-imposed standards of beauty, but also metaphorically

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When I was a little girl, I used to visit my grandmother, Maina, then in her nineties. I remember sitting on her brown shag carpet, listening to endless stories about the old days in Venezuela and Trinidad. I would often ask her about my grandfather, Barto, who had died before I was born. Because my grandmother loved an audience, I knew this prompting meant that I would hear her tell two of my favorite stories.

She told me of the time that my grandfather had grown a finely groomed moustache, of which he was very proud. My grandmother, however, thought it looked ridiculous. She begged him to get rid of it, but he paid no attention. One night while he was sleeping, my grandmother shaved off half of the moustache. The next morning my grandfather was horrified when he saw his reflection in the mirror.

The second story has a similar theme. Barto told my grandmother that he loved her for her long, beautiful hair. He warned her, however, that if she ever cut her braids, he would no longer love her. This enraged my grandmother. After he had left the house that day, she grabbed her two braids — which reached down to her hips — and snipped them off at the ears. She then tucked them in a crucifix form above their bed.

Janine Antoni, December 1995
and literally attacks the anti-expressionist dogma of the minimalist cube.

Lick and Lather (1993-94) is a group of fourteen neoclassical-inspired busts cast from Antoni’s own face and neck, seven in soap and seven in chocolate, which the artist presents on individual columnar pedestals. Prior to their exhibition, Antoni deformed, erased, or otherwise altered each of the self-portraits. She spent hours industriously licking the chocolate away and lovingly caressing each soap bust during long baths.

Often her work is suffused with great tenderness, evidenced by, for instance, the calm and stately pace of Loving Care. She recently made a limited edition of a pair of elegant 14-karat gold brooches, entitled Tender Buttons (1994), from a casting of her nipples.

Loving Care is a complex and ultimately mysterious piece. The power of the presentation is located in the tensions Antoni embraces. Long hair is ambiguity-regarded across many cultures – sometimes scorned as unsanitary, sometimes appreciated as sensual, sometimes forbidden as provocative. The image of the artist’s subjugated posture is disturbing, as is her seemingly compulsive perversion of “women’s work.” Her visibly excessive, albeit subversive, use of a well-known beauty product contradicts its conventionally covert use. At the same time, Antoni asserts her right to make expansive use of a rich artistic heritage that has, until recently, been closely guarded. With quiet passion, determination, and wisdom, she transforms unlikely elements into a shared experience that moves many viewers to respond on a level that is simultaneously visceral and intellectual.

Janine Antoni was born in 1964 and raised in Freeport, Grand Bahama Island, The Bahamas. She received a B.A. from Sarah Lawrence College in 1986 and an M.F.A. from Rhode Island School of Design in 1989. She lives and works in New York City.

Andrea Miller-Keller
Emily Hall Tremaine Curator
of Contemporary Art
1. Janine Antoni, as quoted in Laura Cottingham, “Janine Antoni: Biting Sums up my Relationship to Art History,” p. 104.
5. Janine Antoni, in conversation with AMK, December 26, 1996, NYC.
6. “Avant-garde art...is infected by strains of maintenance ideas, maintenance activities, and maintenance materials...I am an artist. I am a woman. I am a wife. I am a mother. (Random order:) I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also, (up to now separately) I ‘do’ Art. Now I will simply do these maintenance everyday things, and...exhibit them as Art.” Mierle Laderman Ukeles, as quoted in Patricia C. Philips, “Maintenance Activity: Creating a Climate for Change.” But is it Art: The Spirit of Art Activism, Nina Felshin, ed. Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995, p. 171.

MATRIX has scheduled a survey of Ukeles’ work in 1998 and hopes at that time to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the artist’s performance with a new work by the artist at the Wadsworth Atheneum.


PLEASE NOTE:
Janine Antoni will present an informal MATRIX Lecture in the Hartford Courant Room on Sunday, April 14, 1996 at 2 p.m. A reception in honor of the artist will follow.

James Rondeau, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art, will give a gallery talk on Antoni’s exhibition on April 16, 1996 at noon. Andrea Miller-Keller, Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art, will give a gallery talk on April 23, 1996 at noon.

All events are free with museum admission.
Janine Antoni, **Butterfly Kisses** (detail), 1993, CoverGirl Thicklash® mascara on paper (1254 winks per eye). Photo: Keitaro Yoshioka.

**Works in MATRIX:**


**Butterfly Kisses**, 1993, CoverGirl Thicklash® mascara on paper (1254 winks per eye), framed diptych, each 30” x 20 1/2”. Collection of Susan and Michael Hort, Scarsdale, New York.

**Selected One-Person Exhibitions:**

Selected Group Exhibitions:

Sarah Doyle Gallery, Providence, RI Collaborative Installation with Beth Haggart '88; The Drawing Center, NYC Selection 47 '89; Franklin Furnace, NYC Burning in Hell '91; FAE Musée d’Art Contemporain, Pully/Lausanne, Switzerland Post Human '92 (Traveled also to Castello di Rivoli, Torino, Italy '92, Deste Foundation for Contemporary Art, Athens, Greece '93, Deichtorhallen, Hamburg, Germany '93, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem '93); The New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC The Big Nothing '92, Bad Girls '94; John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin Hair '92; Hunter College Fine Arts Gallery, NYC The Auto-Erotic Object '92; Anthony D’Offay Gallery, London, England Strange Developments '92; XLV Biennale di Venezia, Italy Aperto '93; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC 1993 Biennial Exhibition; Sandra Gering Gallery, NYC add HOT WATER '93; Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, CT Fall From Fashion '93; The Centre Gallery, Miami-Dade Community College, Wolfson Campus, Miami, FL The Art of Seduction '94; Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art Outside the Frame: Performance and the Object '94 (Traveled also to Snug Harbor Cultural Center, NYC '95); Kunsthaus, Zurich, Switzerland A Streetcar Named Desire '94; De Appel, Amsterdam, The Netherlands The Spine '94; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA The Portrait in Recent Art: Face Off '94 (Traveled also to Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, NE '95; Weatherspoon Art Gallery, Greensboro, NC '95), PerForms: Charles Ray, Jana Sterbak, Janine Antoni '95; Grossman Gallery, School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA Self/Made Self/Conscious, Bruce Nauman and Janine Antoni '94; Centro Cultural Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain Cocido y Crudo '95; Africus Johannesburg Biennale, South Africa Volatile Colonies '95; Otis College of Art and Design Gallery, Los Angeles, CA narcissistic disturbance '94; Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, MA Object Lessons: Feminine Dialogues with the Surreal '95; Paula Cooper Gallery, NYC Cornered '95; Exit Art/The First World, NYC It’s How You Play the Game '95; The Hole at Postmasters Gallery, NYC Ready or Not Here I Come '95; Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, Spain Els Límits del Museu '95.
Selected Bibliography about Janine Antoni:


Deitch, Jeffrey. Post Human (exhibition catalogue), FAE Musee d’Art Contemporain (Pully/Lausanne, Switzerland), 1992, n.p.


Iannicci, Anthony. “Janine Antoni,” Kunst-Bulletin (Switzerland) no. 6 (June ’94), p. 16+.


Renton, Andrew. “Janine Antoni,” Flash Art vol.27 no.177 (Summer ’94), p. 119.


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