

JANINE ANTONI

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# Ally

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JANINE ANTONI  
INGESTING THE WISDOM BODY  
Carol Becker

Artists often are chasing after something that sometimes is also chasing after them. At those moments when “the creation stands between the observer and the artist’s creativity,” it might be best, as D. W. Winnicott suggests, to focus on “the creative impulse itself.”<sup>1</sup> In September 2015, when Janine Antoni arrived at the conference “Afterlives: The Persistence of Performance” to present her work, she announced that she would be reading a short selection from “one of her favorite children’s books,” *The Velveteen Rabbit: Or How Toys Become Real*.<sup>2</sup> Because it is one of my favorites as well, I took special note. It is a story about deep affection, separation, abandonment, redemption and transformation. It is also a story about the time of life when children animate the world around them with ferocity, as they fixate on certain objects that teach them to love and care for something outside themselves.

Antoni positioned herself centrally among the assembled group of artists, writers, and thinkers. She lifted up the book, moving it in a semicircular motion from left to right, so all could see the images, with the familiar gesture of inclusion employed when reading to a group of children. She read from the chapter “The Skin Horse Tells His Story.” It begins with a dialogue between a Velveteen Rabbit, a recent addition to the nursery, and a worn stuffed horse whose hair has been “loved off” and whose tail has been pulled out to “string beads.” The rabbit, curious about his ontological condition, asks the most senior member of the nursery a question that he has been pondering for some time:

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit ...

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful.

“When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”<sup>3</sup>

Antoni’s performative reading brilliantly set the stage for a journey through her early work, much of which has focused on the making of objects — on their transformation from the physical to the metaphysical — and on the impossible primordial human longing to return to an earlier state of consciousness and dependence.

Such concerns and their manifestations in form bring to mind D. W. Winnicott’s seminal text *Playing and Reality*. Winnicott observes that children often adopt a “transitional object” — a creative solution to the originary anxiety of dependence and separation.<sup>4</sup> In the earliest stages of development, children often create their own transitional object. It is not usually an articulated “toy” as representational as a velveteen rabbit, for example, but rather a unique condition that infants find around them and imagine into being — comforting textures such as a fuzzy bit of flannel blanket kneaded into a ball, a cord of rubber binding along the edge of a pillow, a frayed spot on the crib’s sheet. The found object is something that appeals to the child sensorially and that he or she experiences as an extension of the self, even before the child is aware of the self. As the object gains familiarity, it acquires the magical property of assuaging anxiety. Thus the child is able to sleep and play without worry, having found a creative solution to a challenging, developmental need to experience safety when apart from the mother (or the primary caregiver) and even when completely alone.

As a result, the object garners the child’s total devotion. To misplace, lose, or in any way alter it before the child is ready to permit such a transition — even by washing it and changing its texture or scent — can set off the child’s sense of loss and an hysterical response. He or she invests deeply in this relationship with the object and, in so doing, makes it into something “real.” The child’s invention represents an act of independence through creativity at a time of almost complete dependence.

The adoption of stuffed animals, dolls, and toys comes later, as the child begins to negotiate between the objectively real and the imagined. At that time, a child may have many such loved or serially loved objects. Later in development, children mostly abandon these self-constructed intimacies for the expansiveness of the world. Yet, in practice, many people — and many artists (at least in their art making) — never do completely decathect from imaginary, animistic relationships to things. They move in and out of these multiple systems of reality and learn to play in the new symbolic or dream universes they create. In his research, Winnicott observed play and anxiety as polarities of the human experience. If one is anxious it is difficult to play; if one is playing, one is usually not anxious. But if one is able to play through the anxiety, then perhaps one has found a way to live beyond these dualities. Art making, often involving the animism of childhood, allows a relief from anxiety through focused abandon. One can be lost in work, as one can be lost in play.

Freud assumed, because the evolution of the individual mirrors that of the species and vice versa, that beliefs the species once held remain lodged in the unconscious long after the species has supposedly “evolved” beyond them. In Freud’s analysis, the ability to access this unconscious world of imagery and symbols is never completely erased. Adults, able to cultivate dreams and the imaginary, often tap into this deep reservoir. Artists in particular play confidently in these interstitial spaces. They hope to entice the viewer to enter into such locations with them, to re-see these images, engage them, and perhaps also to move beyond them, or at least gain a greater understanding of how they might motivate, shape, actualize, or inhibit our actions — individually and collectively. An adult’s capacity to play depends in part on his or her ability to suspend the conscious self long enough to engage these images and dreams of the individual and the “collective unconscious” which in Jung’s understanding

is the repository of those archetypal images, species memories, and associations that haunt myths, fairy tales and our collective dreams.<sup>5</sup> The capacity to vitalize inanimate objects is essential to creating metaphor, symbols, and art. Such imagery can represent the immaterial, and the immaterial can manifest in the material. The wine and the wafer can, for believers, “become” the body and blood of Christ, not just a stand-in for the idea, but rather, the thing itself — an agreed-upon “transubstantiation” of the ephemeral.

Artists such as Janine Antoni consciously choose to evoke this spiritual and psychological dimension that, in some, manifests before the ability to differentiate the real from the imagined. The work of such artists can compel us with its beauty or performativity. It can also strike a deep cord, tapping into a moment in the individual and collective psyche that catapults viewers far back into an early childhood memory of complete dependence that some would rather avoid. With wit and determination, Antoni approaches these collective obsessions that focus on objects and their transubstantiation through projection and animism, attempting to deep-dive into the unconscious and reemerge from the process, back into the world. Rarely have artists revealed their internal process so deliberately or allowed us to be so close to their actual intention. Because the work is both overtly about this subject matter and also carefully, dramatically, and at times humorously executed, we are disarmed and seduced into safely journeying with her into this primal, precarious, and intimate terrain.

## In the Beginning

An interviewer asked Antoni: “Does your art help you cope with your separation anxiety?”

“My art is all about separation anxiety. I’m obviously working on that issue,” Antoni responded.<sup>6</sup>

In her early photographic staging of *Momme* (1995), Antoni mischievously plays with the post-Freudian assumption prevalent in Western and other archetypal systems of thought that there is a collective desire to return to the womb — “the original home,” “the uterine paradise,” and “the nocturnal bliss of sleep in the unconscious.”<sup>7</sup> In Antoni’s image the artist’s own mother gazes dreamily out a living room window while Antoni hides under her skirt. She rests her head on her mother’s lap, creating a bulge so that her mother appears pregnant. One of her long legs sticks out from the garment joining those of her mother resting on the floor. Her mother, complicit in this provocative prank, appears resolved and calm, as in some Renaissance paintings depicting the biblical Annunciation. But Mary’s gaze in such paintings can also, at times, convey shock, fear, or incredulity; most often it is filled with patient resignation and humility. The Child is expected. Mary will be the mother. God himself is the Father. All is as it should be. This atmosphere of resolve appears again in Antoni’s depiction.

Never one to deliberately mystify her sources, Antoni discussed this provocative image in a 2001 interview with the Aldrich Foundation.<sup>8</sup> She referenced the famous Leonardo da Vinci drawing, *Madonna and Child with St. Anne*. In the foreground of one of Da Vinci’s many versions of this image, the Christ Child plays with a small lamb (in another version of the drawing, Da Vinci places John the Baptist as a child in place of the lamb). Mary sits on the



Janine Antoni, *Momme*, 1995. © Janine Antoni. Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

lap of her mother, St. Anne, and watches the child. Both women admire the cherubic toddler, who looks up at Mary as she gazes at him. St. Anne looks lovingly towards her daughter and also across to the child. Mary is depicted as large and fleshy, Anne as much more slight (and almost as young as Mary). St. Anne, the most renowned mother in Christian iconography, nevertheless seems comfortable holding the weight of her daughter.

Here too we are reminded that, “the woman’s motherliness resides not only in the womb, but also in the seated woman’s broad expanse of thigh, her lap on which the newborn child sits enthroned.”<sup>9</sup> Da Vinci’s image triangulates the gaze of the figures as if to say: “I, the mother of the Mother, see you, Mary, my daughter. I, the Mother of Christ, see you, my child, the Son of God. You are known to me and to my mother. You are safe. My loving gaze and hers each hold you in consciousness and make you ‘real.’”

Da Vinci appears to understand fully that the mother's gaze has deep psychological importance to the well-being of the child and the species. Without it, and without the connectivity it represents, the possibility for the child's comfort, play, and creativity is rendered impossible or is certainly diminished. A child deprived of this affirmation will forever seek that which was withheld, the simple reassurance of entering life with the full sense of one's own being affirmed and intact. A child who has received the completely enveloping look, as has the Christ Child in Da Vinci's depiction, can play in front of his mother and her mother, confident of his security and potential independence in the world. This transmission of ontological certainty to the child must occur early on, through the focus of the biological mother or of the person or persons occupying this essential role.

Of this particular attentiveness, psychoanalyst Josh Cohen writes:

In rocking, stroking, touching and talking to her, a mother gradually and imperceptibly confers the security of a shape on the dizzying obscurity of her baby's world. The more this physical and emotional attentiveness is lacking, the more unintegration is liable to shade into *disintegration*, into a traumatic sense of the absence of any support for her very being, felt as a fall into a bottomless void.<sup>10</sup>

When Winnicott writes of the "good enough mother," he is referring to just this sense that, if successful, the "mother," or the person in the role of mother, allows the baby to feel that his or her actions are controlled completely by desire (i.e., that there is no separation between the mother's breast and the child). The first primal and essential illusion is that the breast is not outside the self but is, in fact, of the self. The "good enough mother" is one who negotiates this terrain well, but she must also be able to anticipate the rupture of this sense of oneness and the resultant "disillusionment," the acceptance of reality, when the breast is taken away during the weaning process.

Winnicott assumes that the "task" of "reality acceptance" is an ongoing process that humans negotiate throughout their entire lives, while they attempt to relate inner and outer reality.<sup>11</sup> There are several locations that can serve as "intermediate" spaces helping people to cope with this integration. Art can be one of these areas where illusion, disillusion, and reality converge, potentially creating a safe space within which to re-experience, or even to willingly get lost in, the imaginary restaging of this personal but collective original trauma. In *Momme*, Antoni seems to be announcing: "I am trying to go back inside. I really am, but look how long my legs have grown, how impossible and absurd is my attempt." Because she assumes we share this desire, if only at an unconscious level, the artist can confidently speak to that collective longing for "the mystical union in which there is no loneliness."<sup>12</sup>

In 2001 Antoni created an exhibition called *The Girl Made of Butter*. The eponymous title is taken from a folk tale about a girl made of butter who can only remain alive if her mother is constantly vigilant in dousing her daughter's butter skin with cold water to protect it from the "heat" of the male gaze. When her mother leaves the room (or withdraws her love and attentiveness) to prepare food for the suitors, the girl is left alone to deflect their desire. Unable to do so and not confident enough to hold onto the solidity, shape, and boundaries of her own form, she slowly melts.<sup>13</sup> Antoni's exhibition focused on the transition from complete dependence on the breast to the substitution of cow's milk and latex nipples, marking the moment when the child must begin to become autonomous, to develop (or not)



Janine Antoni, *Cradle*, 1999. © Janine Antoni. Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.



Janine Antoni, *Umbilical*, 2000. © Janine Antoni. Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

the ability to survive on the food of the world alone. Reflecting on this moment of transition, Antoni created an “empty loop spoon” as part of the piece entitled *Cradle*. This utensil, she explains, “is designed for the baby to begin feeding itself,” marking another significant moment of “separation.”<sup>14</sup>

In this and other early works, Antoni explicitly immersed herself in the needs, desires and expectations of the child’s body or the body of the adult attempting to reconcile the vulnerability of the child within. Grounded in sculptural representations of this quite literal loneliness of spirit, the artist often appeared to be seeking a mystical union in what poet William Blake might call the “mundane shell” of matter — the earthly, physical, cognitive plane that often separates itself, and therefore us, from the poetic, symbolic, or spiritual dimension. By extending her physical body beyond its assumed adult boundaries, Antoni seems to want to return herself and her audience to the deep psychic spaces of an idealized or remembered connectivity out of which emptiness, need, longing, and memory inevitably arise.

In *Momme* and other early embodied works, Antoni focused on the body’s relationship to itself and to society in extreme, poignant, and, again, often humorous ways, extending the sculptural to the performative as she famously: mops the floor in big, bold swirls with her hair soaked in black dye metaphorically named after the Clairol hair dye that served as paint (*Loving Care*); gnaws at enormous blocks of chocolate and lard, leaving her teeth marks on these massive blocks (*Gnaw*); is lowered into a bathtub of lard, displacing and then extracting her weight into a large cube (*Eureka*); licks representational chocolate busts of her head and neck until the facial features disappear; bathes with soap sculptures of herself which she molds as they dissolve (*Lick and Lather*); touches the eyeball of her husband with her tongue (*Mortar and Pestle*). All of this was achieved while playing with classical references again, as in the piece *Coddle*, a photographic work, displayed in an oval Victorian frame, in which the artist, with her long dark hair loose around her face, strikes a traditional Madonna and Child pose, adoringly and irreverently cradling her own leg in her lap as if it were the Baby Jesus.

There is often a sense of dematerialization — a diminishing of the physical object with her mouth or her body, as with the chocolate, soap and lard pieces — and the churning out of metaphor, as laborious physical acts assume a more ephemeral meaning. In *Gnaw*, the removed chocolate was cast into heart-shaped packaging for chocolate candy; the lard was mixed with beeswax to make lipstick. Yet no matter how gravity-bound the resultant objects or gestures may appear, the process of interacting with them demands an act of transformation, not just on the material plane but on the spiritual plane as well. One is forced, for example, to ask what do these giant, edible, minimalist cubes represent? Are they blocks in consciousness that need to be worn away? What does it mean to ingest parts of one’s own image or to “coddle” one’s own leg? Is the child finding fulfillment in her own body? Are the actions motivated by a healthy narcissism gone awry? Or is the work a play on all of this? If there is an unconscious rebus, pun, or allusion to note here, it takes a moment to announce itself. And sometimes we simply need to be told: Why would you lick your husband’s eyeball? “To know the taste of his vision.”<sup>15</sup>



Janine Antoni, *Loving Care*, 1993. Photo: Prudence Cumming Associates at Anthony d’Offay Gallery, London, 1993. © Janine Antoni. Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.



Janine Antoni, *Lick and Lather* (installation view), 1993. Photo: Lee Stalworth, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., 1999. © Janine Antoni. Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.



Janine Antoni, *Gnaw* (detail), 1992. © Janine Antoni. Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.



Janine Antoni, *Coddle*, 1998. © Janine Antoni. Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.



Janine Antoni making *Eureka*, 1993. Photo: Scott Cohen. © Janine Antoni. Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.



Janine Antoni, *Mortar and Pestle*, 1999. © Janine Antoni. Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

While awaiting the recognition of meaning in these works, the viewer is successfully disoriented, and/or physically engaged enough to react, and, perhaps, to give oneself over to whatever might arise. The element of surprise in art making that jostles us out of the day-to-day experience, often touches on these hidden moments of revelation or dream remembrances, revealing how we stitch the world together for ourselves, one encounter and memory at a time. Winnicott refers to this quotation from Milner, who studied the relationship between play and “symbol-formation”:

Moments when the original poet in each of us created the outside world for us, by finding the familiar in the unfamiliar, are perhaps forgotten by most people; or else they are guarded in some secret place of memory because they were too much like visitations of the gods to be mixed with everyday thinking.<sup>16</sup>

For her 2015 Luhring Augustine show *From the Vow Made*, Janine Antoni returned to non-cognitive body memory. *Honey Baby* — a collaboration between Antoni and Stephen Petronio, with videographer Kirsten Johnson, and composer Tom Laurie — recreated yet another representation of the prenatal period. A naked, male dancer (Nick Sciscione) floated weightlessly in viscous liquid (50 pounds of honey), which was a stand-in for amniotic fluid, as Antoni readily admits. Sciscione, a perfectly-formed adult dancer (surely not an undifferentiated fetus), dreamily and uncannily churned around in an interior space which resembled a turbine, a tunnel entrance, a passageway, or a somewhat rigid womb. He did not appear to feel trapped, distressed, or eager to exit the space or to enter the world. Rather, he seemed to be relishing his condition, content to defy gravity in the globular fluid, enveloped in the swooshing sound of a reverberating heartbeat. Within this cylindrical space, he also appeared caught in a dreamlike state, as if in the repetitive cycle of birth and rebirth — Samsara — the rack of illusion that harnesses and seduces most humans, as Buddhists believe, so that they are mesmerized and unable to escape.

This large video projection at first appeared in contrast with the rest of the exhibition in form and content. It seemed perhaps more overtly connected to the themes of the early work and to the artist’s absorption with returning to a place of origin. But in fact this strange womb-like image also mirrored the collective impact of the other sculptures in the exhibition that allude to the evolution and disintegration of the body and the ways in which singular limbs are constructed to make a whole, both in reality and in the imaginary. Luminous, uniform body parts, cast in polyurethane resin and sanded to resemble sea glass, create equally unexpected juxtapositions while allowing light to shine through: a bony skeleton leg crosses another thick with flesh and muscle; a head sits atop a rib cage, listening; a coccyx fits in the palm of a hand. All parts are lusciously white and not visibly specific to any particular body, although those representative of flesh and bones were cast from Antoni’s body. Rather, they are meant to reference the *milagros* found in Catholic churches (called *tamata* in Greek Orthodox churches) — amulets that are often hung from the ceilings of such churches or on statues of saints as meditations or as grateful offerings when prayers have been answered. These amulets call attention to a specific ailment or condition and function as miniature body parts in need of healing. They remind us that spirit can work through physical objects to fix that which is broken. Antoni playfully reimagines these objects, relocating their identities in relation to each other, so that the inside of the body meets its outside, and is literally “grafted” to its environment.<sup>17</sup>



Janine Antoni and Stephen Petronio, *Honey Baby* (video still), 2013. © Janine Antoni and Stephen Petronio. Courtesy of the artists and Luhring Augustine, New York.



Janine Antoni, *to channel*, 2015. © Janine Antoni. Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.



In *From the Vow Made*, the body turns in and around itself, perhaps attempting to know itself as it never truly can. A cast female pelvis shows the moment of “crowning,” the dramatic and decisive event when a baby’s head reaches the top of the mother’s pelvis and is “crowned” by her pelvic bones. The mother welcomes the child into the world as a sovereign, sporting a crown. He or she then will be “enthroned” when seated on her lap to be fed. Here the body seems stripped down to its most basic forms, so that we might be led to ask: “How does the body actually evolve? How does it come to be organized with such functionality? How can we be so agile when the structures that hold us in place appear so fragile, albeit gracefully designed? Without this upright structure, we would crawl on the ground like amphibians. And yet as much as this reference to the body reminds us of life, it also signals death, when the flesh that has wrapped the bones in place disintegrates and the structural relationships holding us together come undone. From the skeleton we are formed and to the skeleton we will return. These are the revered bones, the relics, the sacred locations where meaning is forged as spirit and matter converge.

Antoni has always sought to connect deeply with the “invisible social body, the audience” so that together they might experience all parts of the self — physical, psychic, and spiritual — simultaneously.<sup>18</sup> This evolving process of embodying has become even more urgent and unique now that the species appears to want to exit the body, to live virtually, to project its image out into the world for recognition continuously, while aspiring to rid itself of the messiness of physical decay and death. As this desire to escape the bounds of the physical body has become a ubiquitous cultural phenomenon, Antoni appears to have made an even greater commitment to the knowledge that resides in a body, waiting to be read.

Her extraordinary and relatively recent relationship (2012) with artist, dancer, choreographer and visionary Anna Halprin has aided Antoni in this process. In their collaboration, Halprin can be understood as the embodiment of a powerful artist-mother for the powerful artist-child, a mentor who can free the creative self and the performing self from the weight of the karmic past and from the child’s individual familial memory. The relationship of teacher-student and artist-artist can best be understood through the Buddhist term “transmission,” a psychic and spiritual exchange across space, time, and age that can occur when the wisdom body (the highest state of consciousness) of a seeker meets the wisdom body of a true teacher and is able to absorb the teacher’s knowledge into his or her own consciousness. As Robert Thurman has written, “Such a being, whatever his or her form, is the focal node of a field in which other beings find maximal opportunities for their own evolutionary advancement.”<sup>19</sup> The mentor, willing to share his or her knowledge, is the key element that makes the teachings “practicable” for the seeker. He or she can appear in multiple forms and “in whatever way tames whomsoever.”<sup>20</sup>

Winnicott might say that such figures create a “holding environment,” a safe, timeless place, such as that of the mother holding the child in physical space, or the psychoanalyst holding the psyche of the analysand in mental space, so that the unconscious self (which comprehends the world in symbols and dreams) and the wisdom self (which is perfectly intuitive and has lived hidden in deep consciousness for some time) can encounter a true teacher.<sup>21</sup> In the meeting between Halprin and Antoni, Halprin offered Antoni the gift of transmitting her own, uniquely evolved artistic practice; the dances, movements, choreographic events,

strategies, and methodologies developed over decades while collaborating with many other trained dancers and novice groups in private and public spheres. In retrospect, it seems inevitable that they would encounter each other; the wonder is that it took so long.

In 2008, Antoni, a quintessential and strong performer, began to dance more seriously, and soon dance was occupying a greater portion of her creative life. She put Marley dance flooring in her studio in 2009 and invited choreographers to create new work in her own art-making space. Dance became a way to venture beyond the object. “As I move I receive visions of potential artworks,” says Antoni. “It is very curious, as though my ideas are lodged in my body, and, through movement, they come out.”<sup>22</sup> Antoni attended a workshop with Halprin at Esalen in 2011. But too shy to say who she was or what she needed, she waited. A year later, Antoni wrote to Halprin to tell her how much the workshop had meant to her creative life. Halprin quickly responded that she was familiar with Antoni’s work and wondered why Antoni hadn’t introduced herself during the workshop session. Halprin asked her to visit the next time she was in San Francisco. Antoni soon left for California.

## The Journey

The advanced levels of the Buddha’s teachings emphasize the union of two interrelated features that intertwine with every experience of mind. These are penetrating insight ... and skillful means.<sup>23</sup>

Buddhist philosophy offers important insight into the complexity of how knowledge is passed along, how lineage is created, how one apprentices one’s consciousness to that of another, and how one moves from psychic dependence to independence through the proximity of another person. This process of transmission is particularly significant when talking about artists whose influence on each other can be multilayered and profound, offering permission to venture into previously inaccessible form and content. As a seeker moves independently through the world, he or she relies on intuitive perception to make the best choices in every situation and to do so with the skills acquired through the teacher’s rigorous training. Both attributes are surely invaluable to an artist. But such knowledge is not passively acquired. Buddhist teachings often state that it is not enough to sit by the “fire” of the teacher’s wisdom to feel the warmth; the student must also be *set on fire and become the fire itself*. In order to receive wisdom, to burn away the misconceptions of the past — the illusions that hold back consciousness — to transmit tradition and encourage a wiser consciousness to emerge, the flame must leap from one to another. Heat is essential to the process of transmitting knowledge, just as it is to the “brooding” that a hen might offer a chick.

Anna Halprin, a ninety-seven-year-old artist — vital, physically attuned, lucid, engaged, experimental — is profoundly rooted in place. As an artist-teacher, she has found a force larger than herself within which to gain solace, rejuvenate balance, be healed, inspire, and be inspired. That force is nature, the original and originary home, the source of all organic things. Halprin healed herself of an illness through movement and through her relationship to the natural world. She also found sustenance in nature during the radical transformations taking place in California in the 1960s. From her immersion in nature through dance, Halprin has learned its inherent rituals and extracted a great strength and authority. She is not only powerful enough to function as a creative, spiritual mother to a unique artist such

as Janine Antoni, but she is also confident enough in her own development to encourage Antoni to perform the completion of the self. The artist, no longer fixated on the image of the biological or psychological mother or held back by her own dependence, reticence, or fear, is now able to leap into her vast potentiality. Halprin notes, “As life experience deepens, personal art expression expands, and as art expression expands, life experience deepens.”<sup>24</sup>

Halprin is a legend whose personal history and that of California are inextricably interwoven. Having moved with her husband — the revered landscape architect and environmentalist Lawrence Halprin — from the East Coast to the West Coast in the 1950s, she emerged as a great innovator, essential to the evolution of modern dance. In the 1960s and 1970s, she was swept up in the exuberance of California and the revolutionary currents of thought and action there, mostly generated by protest against the Vietnam War. Organized, massive acts of resistance became a global force essential to ending that war. It was impossible not to feel the changes occurring or be influenced by the radical rethinking of all forms that was emerging in the United States in academia, in government, and in the arts. Because California was inventing itself and its future anew, it became pivotal to this struggle. At the same time, California was also a locus of activity for civil rights, Black Power, and the Chicano, Native American, gay rights, women’s, and ecology movements. Old forms and constructs were challenged daily as exemplified by the women’s movement’s core proposition that “the personal is political.” Artists, architects, academics, and activists caught in this energy wanted to throw off historical constraints and invent new relationships between the self and the world and between art and its audience. The New York art scene, with its traditional categories of art making, dance, and success, could appear limited and restrictive in comparison to the scene in California, which was wide open in comparison.

Halprin found that the most meaningful art came through a process of “discovery.”<sup>25</sup> Attuned to “the ritualistic beginnings of art as a sharpened expression of life,” Halprin opened up a new sense of the potential importance of movement, for herself and for generations to come.<sup>26</sup> She collaborated with, taught, and influenced many young dancers, who, over time, changed the shape of postmodern dance: Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Simone Forti, Meredith Monk, Robert Morris and many others. These artists came to study with her and to dance on the famous dance deck, which Lawrence Halprin brilliantly had designed for his wife. Halprin’s desire to bring artists into the public sphere, to have them take a leading role in addressing and healing the traumas of society, to move away from the notion of spectators to that of witnesses and participants, is very close to what we now call “social practice.” Such a philosophy came out of a deep belief that art — and movement in particular — could liberate people to express and therefore to dissolve those blocks holding them back and thus, in aggregate, preventing society from moving forward. Over the years her practice collided and coincided with the inspirational work of such dynamic figures as Fritz Perls, the new landscape architects (for whom Lawrence Halprin was a central figure), and artists such as John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Alan Kaprow, whose radical approaches to creation and performance are still in practice today. Artists of the future, Halprin imagined, might no longer be solitary heroic figures but rather “guides” who worked to “evoke the art within us all.”<sup>27</sup>

Into this enormous endeavor decades under way entered Antoni, who had become immersed in 5Rhythms (founded by the late Gabrielle Roth) and in somatic therapy and Continuum Dance Meditation (founded by Emilie Conrad). Antoni was determined to find a new way to create through authentic movement, something more akin to Joseph Beuys’s notion of “social sculpture,” a concept that art could subvert society and explode the repressive structures that held the individual in a state of suffocation. But for art to achieve such a utopian efficacy, Beuys believed it had to occur performatively and in public. When Antoni and Halprin met, the flames leapt from one wisdom body to the other. Halprin quickly made the conditions for learning available. She put Antoni on the dance deck — the site of so many historic creative encounters — and told her to try Halprin’s “Paper Dance” segment from the legendary *Parades and Changes* performance, which, from 1965 to 1967 had rocked the North American and European dance and art worlds with its exuberant energy, freedom of form, and matter-of-fact nudity.

Emptiness like space is the ultimate nature of all phenomena,  
which allows everything to occur.<sup>28</sup>

Halprin placed a roll of brown paper in front of Antoni and suggested that she might want to take off her clothes (as others had in the past). Antoni said that when she started to move and saw the paper forming a pile, it “reminded me of a baby, so I immediately picked it up.” She began to wrestle, dive, fuse with, and imitate the paper — inventing new forms as she lunged ahead. Always the sculptor, Antoni morphed one shape into another, fearlessly — first rolling in it until it formed a layered carapace, both noisy and awkward, then slithering out from under it like a snake shedding its skin. As she shredded, ripped, tore, flayed and animated the paper, shapes emerged: a big coat with a wrap-around hood, a bouffant cotillion dress, the *Winged Nike* herself, a meditation pillow upon which she immediately sat, earrings that she hung around her ears, and enormous flowers that she gathered in front of her like a bouquet. When she pushed the paper down her bra and underpants, a bloated chrysalis emerged. Stuffing it in her nose, ears, mouth, and belly button, the paper closed off all orifices, silencing the senses that connect us to the physical world (and distract us from the inner world). Finally, she rocked an armful as if it were a baby, caring for her creation, birthing herself. And so the initiation went: Halprin witnessing the process, Antoni inventing new shapes intuitively, without artifice, allowing the paper to direct her, grounding the performing body, creating art moment by moment, no longer thinking the form into being, rather enacting the making spontaneously, allowing the improvisation to orchestrate her movement, freeing herself to act.

Emerging two hours later, having felt only the “wind and the floor” as Halprin had advised, Antoni obviously had performed something so monumental in Halprin’s eyes that Halprin immediately called the Berkeley Art Museum (which had opened with *Parades and Changes* in 1970 and had reopened with a restaging of the piece in 2012). Halprin insisted that she and Antoni come right over so that Antoni could perform it all once again for curator Dana Beard and others. Antoni had taken up the process of the piece so organically that the results startled them both.



Janine Antoni, *Touch* (video still), 2002. © Janine Antoni. Courtesy of the artist and Lühring Augustine, New York.



Janine Antoni (left) and Anna Halprin (right) rehearsing *Rope Dance*, 2015. Photo: © Hugo Glendinning, 2015. Courtesy of the artists.

Because of this unique relationship, Antoni's creative life has transformed. At least for now, she is no longer just a solo artist developing her craft from one iteration to the next. She has been "collaborating" both with Anna Halprin and also with dancer and choreographer Stephen Petronio. The influence of Halprin on Antoni's work is omnipresent. In spring 2015, the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) was about to inaugurate Rosanne Somerson as its new president and asked Antoni if she would "share greetings" at the inauguration alongside other well-known RISD alumni. The college wanted these artists to help welcome a leader chosen to heal the institution after a tumultuous period in its history. Antoni is a graduate of the college, and it is there that she met fellow artist, Paul Ramirez Jonas, whom she later married and with whom she has a daughter, Indra. Their creative partnership has provided ballast for Antoni's life and productivity. Historically connected to the institution on many levels, Antoni was an obvious choice of artist to ask for an original and meaningful acknowledgment of this important transition.

For this event, Antoni invented a simple, yet resonant, gesture. Each person present would clasp the hand of the person next to him or her to create a connection between everyone there, from the back of the tented auditorium to the front. This chain would reach all the way to the stage where Antoni and the president stood, sending collective energy and affirmation to the hand of the new leader. With 1,000 people in attendance, the piece, which was obvious enough in concept, was nonetheless complex to execute. Antoni made a "score," not unlike those that Anna and Lawrence Halprin had developed for similarly interactive, collective performances — diagrams that at first might appear abstract but which are actually efficient mappings of the movements and sequences involved in each piece, allowing it to be reproduced. By working in this public way, Antoni moved her practice out of the studio and the gallery, off the legendary dance deck, and into the collective, bringing this large group together, touching her audience directly, helping them to touch each other as witnesses in the moment, practices that from the beginning have been essential to Antoni and to Halprin as well. Whereas in the past, the concept of reaching out to the viewer was embedded in the content of Antoni's sculptural and performative work and its potential to reverberate within the interior lives of her audience, now these aspirations have become more immediate, direct, communal, inclusive, and physical.

## The Gaze Returned

The body has deep wisdom within it — memories, ancient knowledge, and personal and collective experiences beyond anything we can imagine with our collective minds.<sup>29</sup>

On one of the visits that Antoni and Petronio made to Halprin's home and studio, Halprin offered these two extraordinary performers a "rope dance" as a way of bringing them and their unique training and practices together in collaboration. They were each to walk blindfolded toward the other, staying on the rope as much as possible. Their assigned goal was to reach each other at an unspecified point. In 2003, Antoni, who has a tightrope in her studio, made a video in which she balanced on a rope that appeared stretched across the horizon of the Caribbean, creating the illusion that she was walking on water. Petronio, a renowned choreographer with a reputation as a virtuosic dancer, did not yet have this particular expertise when they first came together, but of course, movement, the body,

precision, and grace are tools he had honed over decades. The two did finally encounter each other, awkwardly at first and almost by chance, enacting another metaphor for the initial clumsiness and complexity of collaboration.

Halprin created a movement exercise, a “score” that mirrored the meeting of these two artists. The quality of their encounter would be recognized by touch, a connection not of the mind, but of the body and spirit. *Rope Dance* posed metaphysical and physical challenges appropriate to the nuances of their collaboration: Could they come together? Could they reach each other? How would their skills balance each other’s? How long might that take? How complex would the process become? How engaging? Finding each other in a third, unknown space literalized the concept of collaboration. Blindfolded, unable to turn to the outside world for affirmation or direction, they were forced to “look inside” or fail badly.

One might think of this exercise as a koan in motion, literalizing a question or a problem designed by a master to create doubt or to unsettle the student’s perception of reality and to measure the quality of his or her progress on the path to “perfect omniscience.”<sup>30</sup> The koan is chosen with the particular person or persons directly in mind. The “answer” to the question posed is never a conscious, reasoned response. It must be spontaneous and come directly from the intuitive or wisdom body of the seeker, without calculation. The answer can be a gesture, an action, or a non-action. And if it occurs in language, it simply might be one word — and shouted out into a vacuum at that. Only when a student’s response meets the unspecified and unarticulated criteria of the master can a student move on to the next question and to the next level of spiritual development.

In *Ally*, a video projection as large as the gallery wall itself documents Halprin’s face as she sits almost silently watching *Rope Dance* performed by Antoni and Petronio before her. As audience to her solitary response, all we see are Halprin’s expressions in reaction to the performers’ movements, yet we are riveted. Her approving gaze is completely focused on what is happening before her. Her expressive witnessing becomes the entire subject of the film. As Halprin sits on the sidelines watching, we hear only the wind in the trees and her occasional gasp when, we assume, the performers have taken an unusual or unexpected turn. The camera is focused solely on her beautiful face, recording every nuanced response. She is rapt, with her attention completely present and on the performance, an ideal observer, her face the perfect mirror reflecting their collaborative endeavor. What is most astounding is how enthralled she appears to be.

Those attending the opening of *Ally* and subsequent performances were also invited to take part in a rope dance exercise. Petronio called out the instructions as the audience, now participants, became entangled in the formations they and others were creating in response to Petronio’s directions. As they dipped and dived around each other, taking up the slack of the rope, or letting it languish, the exercise turned the experience of observation into one of action that then became social sculpture. Participants began to understand the freedom of play the rope allowed and to imagine, in their own bodies, what Antoni and Petronio might have been experiencing and what Halprin might have been responding to in the expressions captured by the camera.



Janine Antoni in collaboration with Anna Halprin, *Paper Dance* (detail of installation including *Mom and Dad*, 1994), 2016. Photo: Carlos Avendaño, 2016. © Janine Antoni. Courtesy of the artists and FWM.

Psychically and spiritually Antoni and Halprin are fulfilling their own destinies. Halprin, like *Prajnaparamita* in Buddhist thought, provides the space of the Great Mother, “a guide and consort who activates profound awareness.”<sup>31</sup> She has created an open, inviting site of “unlimited potential” that “permits everything to occur.” Among the many female aspects that comprise this idea of the Great Mother, who has many male aspects as well, is that of the “spontaneously dancing Dakini, an inspiring and unpredictably playful flow of changes,” evocative of the movement of energy in space.<sup>32</sup> On the opening day of *Ally*, there appeared to be two overt sources of inspiration, breathing life into Antoni and her performance of “Paper Dance.” The first was her own sculpture: many of Antoni’s works, produced throughout her lifetime, had been shipped to the gallery, but the work was hidden from the audience, who used the closed crates as benches during the performance. But for each performance (there were twenty-two), Antoni selected one work to uncrate, reveal, and feature. After the performance, that sculpture would remain on view until she performed again, when Antoni would return that piece to its crate and select another. The choice and significance of which piece or pieces were chosen, especially for the opening event, was not lost on the audience. Antoni uncrate the early and iconic photographic triptych *Mom and Dad*, in which her mother and father, appearing in formal photographic portrait mode, morph into each other through the use of makeup, wigs, and costumes. This photographic maneuver, in which her parents were co-conspirators, showed Antoni trying to break down all distinctions between these mythic figures, perhaps to find her own identity in the fusion of the two, which her actual being represents.

The second presence in the space was a small film projection of the “Paper Dance” segment of *Parades and Changes* that Halprin and others performed in Stockholm in 1965. In the background, recordings of Petula Clark singing “Downtown” alternated with Beach Boy Brian Wilson singing “Warmth of the Sun,” quietly filling the space like a memory. The avant-garde composer Morton Subotnik had arranged the sound score for that original performance. His intent was that the radio would be turned on at a specific moment during the piece, and whatever song was playing would become the soundtrack for that day, or so it would appear. Hearing the music of that performance at this historical moment inevitably took some of the audience right back to California in the 1960s. These two additions to Antoni’s performance resonated as the most essential and originary “sources” of this particular moment: the triptych of Antoni’s biological parents, whom she had successfully morphed into each other through the illusion of art, and the original version of the “Paper Dance” segment she was about to recreate and transform. But this was not a fashionable art world reenactment of an historic, archival event performed fifty-one years ago; rather it was a re-embodiment of the essence and meaning of that event to the performer(s) who took part in it. It was also Antoni’s homage to Halprin as the guide and teacher who had helped her reach this moment so that she could freely, exuberantly, and brilliantly enact this “Paper Dance” without reservation or guile, thus adding her imprint to the historical meaning and resonance of this piece and to the legend of Halprin, whose influence and spirit filled the room.

Halprin has seen the child, and the child has observed herself being seen. The artist-mother has transmitted knowledge to the artist-daughter who has basked in the reflection of the gaze, ingested the wisdom offered, and taken what she has learned out into the world as practice. Extraordinarily, these two artists have affixed their wisdom bodies to each other across categorization, generation, space, and time.

For Antoni, always engaged in reimagining herself and her practice, this profound connection to *Prajnaparamita* and the concept of “going across to the other side,” which it represents, marks yet another monumental and transformative plateau in the pursuit of the “real.”<sup>33</sup> As the Skin Horse explains to the Velveteen Rabbit:

“Real isn’t how you are made ... It’s a thing that happens to you ...”  
 “Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”  
 “It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become.  
 It takes a long time.”<sup>34</sup>

## Notes

1. D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock, 1971), 69.
2. Adrian Heathfield and André Lepecki, in collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art, Columbia University School of the Arts, and the French Institute Alliance Française, “Afterlives: The Persistence of Performance” (Crossing the Line Festival, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, September 25–27, 2015).
3. Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit: Or How Toys Become Real* (New York: Doubleday, 1922), 5–6.
4. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 6.
5. C. G. Jung, *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series XV (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 80.
6. Julie L. Belcove, “Artist Janine Antoni Takes on Childbirth and the Female Body in Two New Shows,” *New York Magazine*, February 27, 2015, <http://nymag.com/thecut/2015/02/veteran-feminist-artist-takes-on-childbirth.html>.
7. Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 68.
8. Janine Antoni, *The Girl Made of Butter* (Ridgefield, CT: Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001), 3. Published in conjunction with the 1999 Larry Aldrich Foundation Award Exhibition, January 21–May 20, 2001.
9. Neumann, *The Great Mother*, 98.
10. Josh Cohen, *The Private Life: Why We Remain in the Dark* (London: Granta, 2013), 118.
11. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 2.
12. Neumann, *The Great Mother*, 67.
13. Antoni, *The Girl Made of Butter*, 3.
14. Janine Antoni, interview by Megan Luke, 1999, publication insert, *The Girl Made of Butter* (Ridgefield, CT: Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001).
15. Janine Antoni et al, *Janine Antoni* (Kusnacht, Switzerland: Ink Tree Editions; Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2000), 98.
16. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 39.
17. Joshua Reiman, “My Body is Your Vehicle: A Conversation with Janine Antoni,” *Sculpture* 34, no. 4 (2015), 28.
18. Janice Ross, introduction to *Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance* by Anna Halprin, ed. Rachel Kaplan (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1995), 72.
19. Robert A. E. Thurman, *Essential Tibetan Buddhism* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995), 22.
20. Ibid.
21. The term “holding environment” is fundamental to most of D. W. Winnicott’s work. It appears in “The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 41 (1960): 585–595.
22. Reiman, “My Body is Your Vehicle,” 24.
23. Karolina Pospisilova, “The Female Wisdom: The Female Aspect in Buddhism,” *Estetyka i Krytyka* 3, no. 22 (2011): 187, [http://estetykaikrytyka.pl/art/22/eik\\_22\\_14.pdf](http://estetykaikrytyka.pl/art/22/eik_22_14.pdf).
24. Janice Ross, *Anna Halprin: Experience as Dance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 318.
25. Anna Halprin, *Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1995), 74.
26. Ibid., 101.
27. Ibid., 131.
28. Pospisilova, “The Female Wisdom,” 187.
29. Halprin, *Moving Toward Life*, 207.
30. Thurman, *Essential Tibetan Buddhism*, 9.
31. *Prajnaparamita* is often depicted as an embodiment of the Buddha’s teaching. She is a feminine principle, which conjoins the practitioner with reality. “*Prajna* means wisdom, ... it is said to be transcendent (*paramita*), which is the second part of her name. *Paramita* literally means, ‘gone across to the other side’ ... it is often translated as ‘gone to the other shore’” (Pospisilova, “The Female Wisdom,” 186 and 191).
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 186.
34. Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, 6.