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JANINE ANTONI

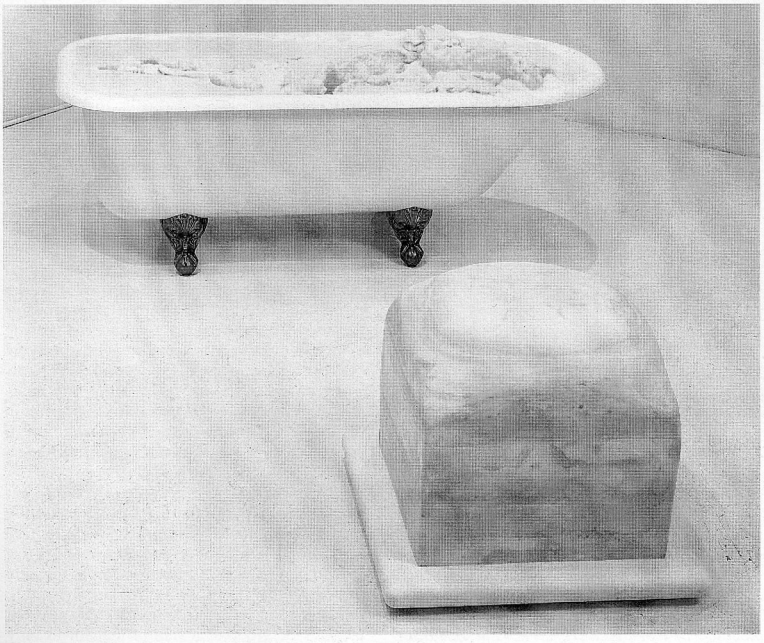
BITING SUMS UP MY RELATIONSHIP TO ART HISTORY

LAURA COTTINGHAM

Laura Cottingham: *Your work is so much indebted to feminist art of the 70s: the autobiography, your use of your own body as both process and subject/object, your reliance on the specificity of female experience as content, the performative work that accompanies your process…*
Janine Antoni: The 80s artists, Kruger, Levine, Holzer, Sherman, are historically important and really influenced me. They made it possible for me to do the work I'm doing now. But the irony of 80s is not something I'm interested in my strategy has more to do with the feminist artists of the 70s — the humor, the process, the emphasis on performance, the intensely visceral quality of their work. It was necessary for the 80s feminists to exist for me to "return" as the 70s. The 80s feminists used a language that was already respected, and they put their content in it, whereas the 70s feminists were much more extreme, and they paid for it by being dismissed.

LC: *Are there any specific artists of the 70s feminist art movement whom you've been influenced by?*
JA: I love the chewing gum pieces of Hannah Wilke of course — and she also cast her body in chocolate. And the whole "female beauty" thing is something Wilke was concerned with. Ana Mendieta: her body is at the center of her work as is mine. Louise Bourgeois. Eva Hesse.

LC: *Your* Gnaw *(1992) pieces, of chocolate and lard, which are your most well-known works to date, both originate as "minimalist cubes" before you begin a "hidden" process — your chewing. Why the reference to minimalism?*
JA: I feel minimalism has influenced and defined me as an artist. I was interested in the bite because it's both intimate and destructive; it sort of sums up my relationship to art history. I feel attached to my artistic heritage and I want to destroy it: it defines me as an artist and it excludes me as a woman, all at the same time. I feel like people often interpret my work as heavy, but I also think it's humorous. Certainly my work is indebted to Sherrie Levine and the idea of appropriation, specifically to a feminist appropriation of male art — but chewing the minimalist cube is also funny and even absurd.



EUREKA, 1993.
BATH TUB, LARD, SOAP. SOAP: 22 X 26 X 26"; TUB: 30 X 70 X 25". COURTESY SANDRA GERING, NEW YORK.

LC: *Why are so many young American artists drawn toward refashioning, disrupting, and in other ways utilizing and deploying the last movement of late high modernism: minimalist forms?*
JA: Minimalism introduced fabrication — that process remained prevalent during the 80s. My cubes are poured, chewed, spit out, melted down, and recast by me. But I've been reading Donald Judd and I'm astonished how, in defining themselves, the minimalists disregarded and tried to destroy all other art practices and standpoints. We're at a time when all kinds of artistic languages are possible, and minimalism is one of the languages available to us and we're using it. I've also used expressionism — in my performance in London last year, *Loving Care*, 1992 — and even 19th century classicism, in *Lick and Lather*, my work for the 1993 Aperto in Venice.

LC: *Your most recent work uses soap; you've also worked with lard, chocolate, and hair dye. Could you talk about your choice of materials and your process?*
JA: I'm interested in everyday body rituals and converting the most basic sort of activities — eating, bathing, mopping — into sculptural processes. Even in

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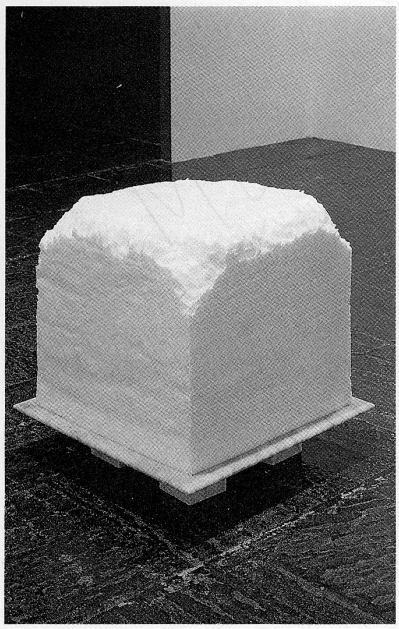
doing this, I imitate basic fine art rituals such as chiseling (with my teeth), painting (with my hair and eyelashes), modeling and molding (with my own body). In terms of material, I use materials which are appropriate to the activity. Those materials, soap, lard, chocolate, and hair dye, all come in intimate contact with the body and redefine or locate the body within our culture. These materials also have a specific relationship to women in our society. The gender of the viewer informs their reading of my work.

LC: *Why do you use your own body as the foundation for your process?*
JA: I work differently from a lot of conceptual artists who begin their process with an idea: I begin with the idea of an experience I want to give myself. The meaning reveals itself to me through the experience, through the process. I didn't begin *Gnaw* as a piece on eating disorders. I started with the idea that I wanted to chew on a 600 pound cube of chocolate. I took the first bite and then, whether I swallowed it or spit it out decided the meaning. When I spit it out, I knew I wanted to make the spit-out part into something else. Then it occurred to me that this was related to bulimia. So I started researching bulimia and found out that chocolate contains phenylethylamine, a chemical produced by the body in love — so from the gnawed chocolate I produced hearts.



LARD GNAW, 1992. 600 POUNDS OF LARD, BEFORE BITING. COLLECTION CHARLES SAATCHI. PHOTO JENNY L. THOMPSON.

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Laura Cottingham is a critic based in New York.

Janine Antoni was born 1964 in Freeport, Bahamas. She lives and works in New York.

Selected solo exhibition: 1992: Sandra Gering, New York.

Selected group exhibitions: 1989: "Selection 47," The Drawing Center, New York; 1991: "Janine Antoni and Devon Dikeou," Offermann Gallery, Cologne; "Warp and Woof: Comfort and Dissent," Artists Space, New York; "Burning in Hell," Franklin Furnace, New York; 1992: "Post Human," FAE Musée d'Art Contemporain, Lausanne, Switzerland, (traveled) ; "Hair," John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin; "Strange Developments," Anthony d'Offay, London; "Second Skin," Hallwalls, Buffalo, New York; 1993: Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum, New York; Aperto '93, Venice.