

“500 Words: Janine Antoni”
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LUHRING
AUGUSTINE

531 West 24th Street
New York NY 10011
tel 212 206 9100 fax 212 206 9055
www.luhringaugustine.com

ARTFORUM

500 WORDS

Janine Antoni

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Janine Antoni and Anna Halprin, *Paper Dance*, 2016. Performance view, The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, April 20, 2016. Janine Antoni. Photo: Carlos Avendaño.

Janine Antoni's exhibition "Ally," which is on view at the Fabric Workshop and Museum through July 31, 2016, is a "retrospective," redefined. This exhibition, occupying four floors of the museum, manifests as a series of performances, installation environments, videos, and sculptures. Conceived and performed by Antoni, this presentation is also a deeply collaborative enterprise, having been developed with the choreographer Stephen Petronio and movement artist Anna Halprin. A book about "Ally" will follow, edited by British performance scholar and writer Adrian Heathfield. Here, the artist talks about upending the notion of a single-person retrospective through her collaborations with Halprin and Petronio.

I'VE BEEN WORKING ON THIS RETROSPECTIVE FOR SIX YEARS, trying to address the idea why, from my perspective, I should have one. I've been avoiding a retrospective for quite a few years because I'm not interested in looking back—I want to move forward. But this show at the Fabric Workshop allows me to do both, and it makes the work remain alive for me. When someone gives you the opportunity to historicize yourself, that, in and of itself, is an act of creativity. You think you've made work, but really, the work made you.

I've always cherished my previous collaborations with choreographer Stephen Petronio—we've a great deal of history together. But when I saw *Breath Made Visible* (2009), a film by Ruedi Gerber on Anna Halprin's life and work—she is a pioneer of postmodern dance—I was blown away, and I wanted to know who this woman was. Anna and I had a very deep connection when we met. As we were thinking about the retrospective, I asked her to look at a body of my work, wondering if she'd be willing to make a dance out of it. But she wanted me to be the dancer! And of course, anyone could be a dancer to her! She knew immediately what she wanted me to do: "You have to work with paper. And maybe you'd like to take off your clothes." She wanted me to improvise a movement performance using rolls of brown paper like the ones originally employed in her seminal 1965 work *Parades and Changes*. Then she called all her friends and invited them onto her famous outdoor deck to show them what we were doing. She wanted me to experience an audience, because I'm not a seasoned performer. But she was intrigued by the fact that I move innocently, not self-consciously. I don't move like a dancer. There's nudity in this piece, and that's a challenge for me. When she performed *Parades and Changes* in New York in 1967, she was arrested for doing it in the nude. But this piece was made to humble and honor the body. It's an interesting negotiation because of an unclothed body's relationship to sex. How do I take people past the sexualization of my body to another space? I don't necessarily want to remove any of the sexuality—it needs to be acknowledged—but it should evolve into other sorts of meanings.

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p.2

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Once a week for fourteen weeks at the Fabric Workshop, I will perform my own paper dance surrounded by thirty-six crates that contain my works—they'll be laid out as audience seating. Each time I start the performance, I will open a crate and bring the work out to sit with the viewers, so that my works can witness the dance too. Twenty-two rolls of paper will be leaning against the wall, and each time I perform I'll take a roll and transform it through the dance. The paper's endlessly malleable, always producing images—it directs me. When I perform, one of my pieces will be out at the same time. I will treat each instance of this like a small show by creating a narrative line throughout all the performances, accentuating various aspects of my pieces and how they relate to the dance. But I do have to say, there's something incredibly significant for me while my works are in their crates. They're still alive for me without being seen, and it's comforting to be surrounded by my history. But they have an uncomfortable presence too—a burdensome weight. I can feel them in the room, like people standing there. The work can still support me when crated and “invisible.” The paper is alive and the past work is still alive—absence and presence coalesce, exist at the same time. During the time between every performance, there will be a film fragment from a fifty-one-year-old recording of Anna's *Parades and Changes* playing among the crates, to make the show feel “in process,” in flux, unfinished. It's the first time I'll truly be working with the notion of duration, and how meaning evolves over time. Creative work isn't linear—it's more of a spiral.

For *Rope Dance*, 2014, Stephen and I won't do a lot of dancing. We do enough for people to absorb, and then we immediately invite people in, handing them the titular prop as a tool to connect and draw lines in space. Anna was very interested in Stephen's ability to direct, so she asked him to guide. She likes the way he has a kind of command that makes participation comfortable. This is the brilliance of Anna's intuition: being able to look at you and make the most of your perspective. Stephen and I were struck by the quality of Anna's attention while we were dancing, and we wanted to capture that. When the performance is not taking place, a video of Anna looking at us performing will be shown. An audience member will be able to see the whole dance expressed on Anna's face.

Stephen will do a solo performance of Anna's *The Courtesan and the Crone*, 1999, where she was seducing the audience with sexual gestures, slowly revealing her body. Stephen's been dealing with gender issues in his dance since the early 1980s, and for him to do that performance as a man adds a whole different twist. It'll allow us to really bring theatre into the gallery space.

This retrospective of my artmaking, told through dance with Anna, Stephen, and myself, has evolved into an interpenetrating partnership that allows us—allows us—despite the onus of the past, to continue reinventing and making new work.

— As told to *Ida Panicelli*