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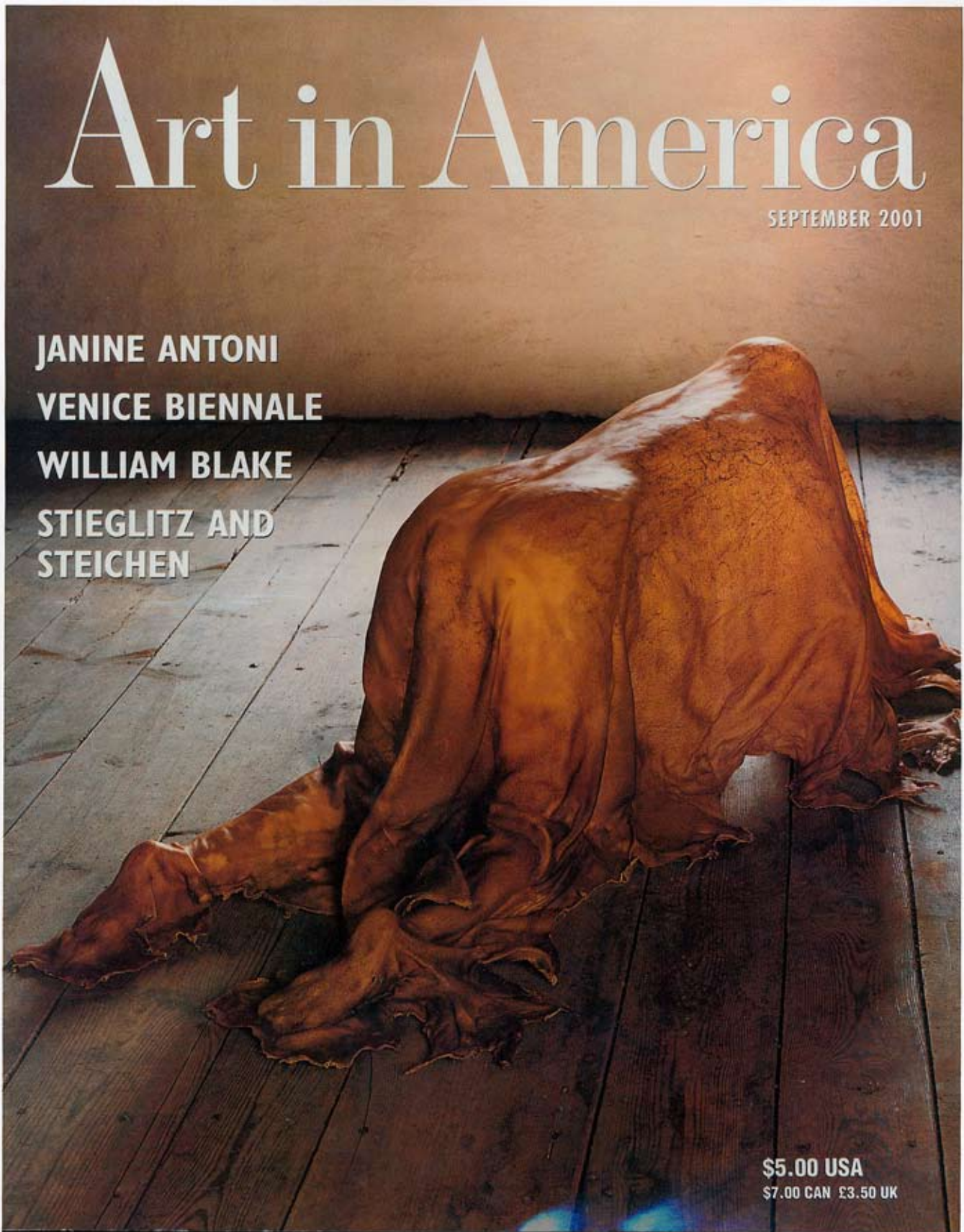
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# Art in America

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**JANINE ANTONI**  
**VENICE BIENNALE**  
**WILLIAM BLAKE**  
**STIEGLITZ AND**  
**STEICHEN**



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# Janine Antoni: Mother's Milk

*Working in a variety of unexpected materials—cowhide, cast silver, a bulldozer bucket and more—sculptor Janine Antoni has lately been exploring both the nature of nurture and the social functions it serves. Her recent show at the Aldrich Museum provided several cases in point.*

BY NANCY PRINCENTHAL

Anyone who has kept a domestic pet to a reasonably regular diet has had the occasion to contemplate one of life's little mysteries: day by day, the unremarkable bags of, say, dried cat food are reconstituted in the form of a living, thriving animal. Janine Antoni's immensely satisfying spring exhibition at the Aldrich Museum in Connecticut was, in part, about the cognate miracle whereby mother's milk (perhaps a little richer in metaphor than cat food) is transubstantiated into a growing baby girl, thence an adult woman. Called "The Girl Made of Butter," after a folktale traditional to the Bahamas (where Antoni was born), the exhibition also explored the iconography of purity: the tale, reprinted in an artist's book that accompanied the show, concerns a vulnerable butter girl who melts when her mother leaves her alone with two boys. As the book's large-print recitation of a 16th-century Catholic litany makes clear, the Virgin Mary, as the Western world's preeminent symbol of incorruptible chastity and dedicated maternity, was also a crucial referent.

To state the matter more broadly, Antoni's recent work concerns the formation of character, both by ontogeny and psychology, and the definition of a given art object through (physical) process and (historical) precedent. Following her established practice, Antoni proceeded elliptically, around eccentric foci. The basic motif in "The Girl Made of Butter" is bovine: two substantial new sculptures, *Bridle* and *Saddle*, are made of cowhide, and a single new photograph is set in a dairy barn.<sup>1</sup> But even in those works that rely on other materials and metaphors, nurturing—of personality, of sensibility—and the questioning of that process together provide the dominant theme.

*Bridle* was in two ways a showstopper, a big, eye-catching work that was stretched right across a main gallery from floor to ceiling. A simple piece, but also a bit of a brainteaser, it involved removing just enough skin from the spread-eagled hide of a brown-and-white spotted Ayrshire cow, in cleanly cut-out sections, to make a leather backpack. The resulting satchel was stitched to the center of the hide, the cow's tail dangling from it jauntily, straps positioned at shoulder height on the other side; Antoni says she aimed to make the backpack resemble, in shape, skin marking and function (as a kind of a vessel), the cow itself.<sup>2</sup> Mentally reconstructing the process of assembly is the viewer's first order of business, and it requires considering a sequence Antoni finds greatly absorbing: in the constructed world, she notes, raw materials (trees, animals) are often flattened into two-dimensional goods (plywood, tanned hides) before being returned to three dimensions.

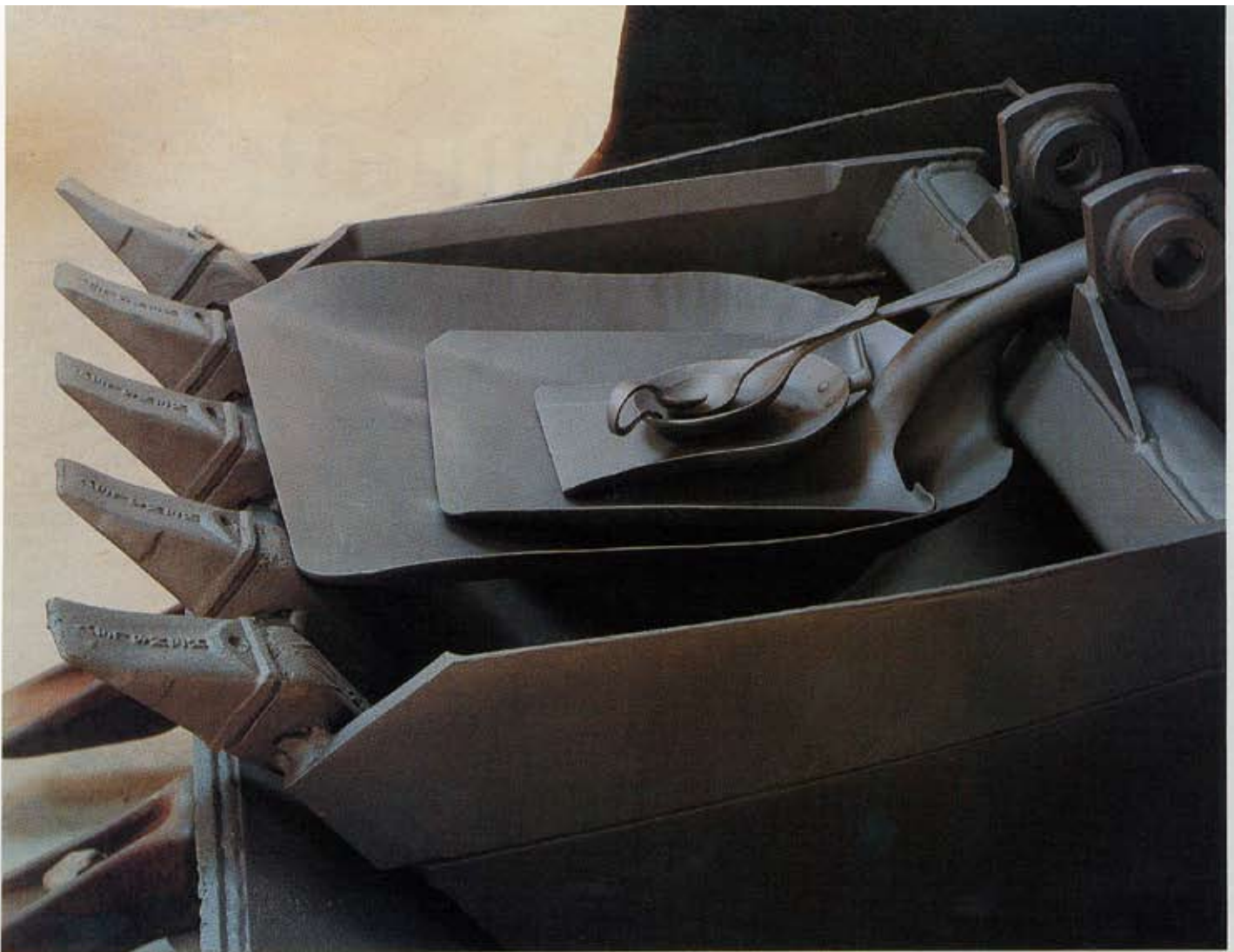
Next, for the viewer and by her own account (Antoni plots the work's reception in unusually careful steps), comes a cascade of associations. From our

initial idea of the animal as barnyard stock and beast of burden, these thoughts lead us to consider the flayed animal (which could be any of us) in relation to the creative individual (i.e., the artist), who is engaged in an act that can be seen variously as one of expressive thrift, patent solipsism or shameless exploitation. Antoni is no Sue Coe; while Antoni's artist's book does list several dozen industrial, medical, food and cleaning items that contain cattle by-products, *Bridle* is by no stretch an essay in animal rights and human malfeasance. But the work's very title suggests tension, the inevitable opposition ("bridle" as a verb) aroused by the subjection of basic animal energy to human social purpose. Too elegant to make us really feel the rude bite of metal in our teeth, *Bridle* nonetheless induces, at the least, a long moment of discomfort, which arrives right along with the pleasure of working out the puzzle it poses.

Sharing the room with *Bridle* was another big sculpture and two wall works. *Cradle* (Antoni favors titles that name actions as well as objects), a version of which was seen in her most recent exhibition in New York, at Luhring Augustine Gallery, is made from the gaping bucket of a bulldozer. Half of the bucket remains intact (it was cut vertically); the other half was melted down and recast as a series of scooping implements that steadily decrease in size from one to the next: a smaller bucket without the original's menacing teeth; three graduated shovels; a serving spoon; a tablespoon; and a loop-handled, baby-sized spoon. Regression in scale is a fundamental analytical tool in physical science (cell to molecule, to atom, to particle, etc.); regression in time is similarly basic to every kind of cultural study and personal history. It is characteristic of Antoni's work to blur these categories, so that forms dissolve physically, and often with considerable effort on the artist's part, to reveal sources both emotional and organic. Also typical of Antoni's work is *Cradle's* avoidance of mess, despite its focus on themes—birth, for example—that cry out for viscera and spilt blood.

This distinctive delicacy is apparent in two other new works, particularly in the almost finicky—and comically so—*Umbilical*. Shown alone on a pedestal in a little chapel-like room, it is a casting in silver of the inside of the artist's mouth (like a dental mold) and of her mother's hand, the two connected by a cast replica of a silver spoon in the family pattern (there is a monogram). The lineage here goes considerably further than biological descent to include (at least) Bruce Nauman's *From Hand to Mouth* (a 1967 wax sculpture of the named body section) and, before that, Duchamp's 1959 cast-plaster self-portrait fragment, *With My Tongue in Cheek*.<sup>3</sup> (This sequence of works is connected, umbilically in a sense, by their reliance on figures of speech. Like linguistic fossils, these indissoluble lumps of vernacular survive intact in the flow of daily speech, just as certain inherited and inculcated personality traits betray themselves, vestigially, in adult character, including sensibility.) Perhaps Antoni's most explicit essay on the varieties of genealogy, *Umbilical* intertwines personal history and art history, psychology and biology.

Opposite, Janine Antoni: *Bridle*, 2000, full Ayrshire cowhide, hardware, rope, 117 by 97 by 14 inches. Photo Larry Lamay. All photos this article courtesy Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Conn., and Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York.



Above, close-up of *Cradle*, 1999, showing recast steel elements.  
 Below, *Cradle*, approx. 59 by 58 by 60 1/2 inches. Both photos Larry Lamay.

Inseparable in it, too, are reverence—the monogram, the precious metal, the reliclike nature of the object, the quasi-ecclesiastical setting—and humor. Both the reverence and the humor are discreet in the extreme, the discretion itself perhaps a mocking invocation of a first principle of moneyed culture, by which valuables are quietly passed down the generations.

*Saddle*, the third new sculpture, is the most broadly drawn in psychological terms, though, paradoxically, humility is the most harrowing of its emotional aspects. Like *Bridle*, to which it is a kind of ghost companion, *Saddle* is made of a single animal skin, here a tanned cowhide that has been draped over the figure of a woman on her hands and knees (it was formed around a cast of the artist). But that woman is absent; only the translucent animal skin remains, trailing on the floor, clearly revealing the shape of her back and head, outstretched fingers and upturned soles, her body positioned to be ridden, saddled with care.

As with *Bridle*, one subject here is socialization, particularly of women, but, again, that's only part of it. Privacy and exposure, protection and abuse, internal experience and its external register, animation and mortality are among the oppositions addressed. "In *Saddle*, to be veiled with the cow's skin is to be shrouded in death," Antoni explains in an exhibition brochure. "On the one hand, this sculpture equates my skin with the cow's, but on the other hand, it is reminiscent of the womb and being surrounded by the body of the mother. To be on all fours and hide under the skin of an animal is to acknowledge the animal in me just as I do my own death. Ultimately, you are faced with a kind of absence."

Hung in the same room with *Saddle* was *Momme* (1995), another time-release work that seems, at first blush, simply a tasteful photo portrait. The subject is a middle-aged woman—Antoni's mother—shown in profile, seated on a red silk sofa and gazing serenely out a window. She is barefoot



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and wearing a modest white dress, which bulges suspiciously at her waist. Noticing the bulge takes a long moment, as does catching the extra bare foot on the floor: there is someone under the dress who looks very much like a full-grown woman. After the fiendishly elegant buildup, *Momme's* punch line is laughably simple, even crude: a perfect Freudian joke. This photograph's dreaminess, too, is right for humor as described by Freud, who was at great pains to distinguish dreams from jokes, so convinced was he of the near identity of the psychic processes they involved (condensation, displacement, indirect representation). And *Momme* is about, of course, a thoroughly Freudian subject: the eternally unresolved need for the mother, and the fear that such yearning induces. (In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud discusses the "comic of situation"—which includes, for instance, "exaggeration" and "unmasking"—as "mostly based on embarrassments, in which we rediscover the child's helplessness.")<sup>4</sup>

Unlike fetishism, say, or scopophilia, the unappeasable, primitive drives that figure in Antoni's work don't readily lend themselves to sophisticated, daring imagery, the stuff of art. Hence they are just the kind of challenge she likes best. She responds to that challenge in *Momme*, as in *Umbilical* and *Saddle*, by means of a pictorial language that is distinctively balanced between abasement and icy dignity. Her mother's aplomb is, moreover, a choice of (feminine) self-definition to which Antoni is attracted. "There's always the temptation to hide behind her idea of femininity," the artist says, "because it still works."<sup>5</sup>

The other photograph in this exhibition, *2038*, is from the new, cow-themed



*Saddle*, 2000, bull rawhide, 27½ by 32½ by 78½ inches; at the Wanås Foundation, Knislinge, Sweden. Photo Anders Norrsell.

*Umbilical*, 2000, silver cast of the inside of the artist's mouth and the palm of her mother's hand with a piece of monogrammed family silverware, 3 by 8 by 3 inches.





Above, *Momme*, 1995, C-print, 36 by 29 inches.

Opposite, 2038 (detail), 2000, Cibachrome, 20 inches square.

body of work. It is a self-portrait, in which Antoni is shown in a big old-fashioned bathtub, which is set up in a dairy barn. A cow, identified by a tag in its ear as #2038, nuzzles the water near her right breast (the tub actually serves, when unoccupied, as a water trough). There is the suggestion that Antoni is nursing the cow, and she gazes down thoughtfully at the animal's head, her expression calm, even beatific. "The tag in the cow's ear both names it 2038 and reveals its identity as a biological machine," Antoni says. "I wanted the tenderness of the image to exist in contrast to this reality."<sup>6</sup> Both these components have parallels, needless to say, in human mothering. No less marked, in this image of a saintly looking woman suckling (implicitly) a being larger than (human) life, is the invocation of the Madonna, whose bodily functions, Antoni notes, were restricted (no sex, no appetites) to nursing. As with *Momme*, the humility and grace of 2038 are indistinguishable from its religious and familial apostasy.

The final work in the show (but the first to have been exhibited) was *Wean*, which dates from 1990. Antoni created it just after graduate school. It consists of a series of plaster impressions made directly into the gallery wall, starting with a breast, and including a woman's nipple, three nipples from baby bottles (or pacifiers) and, lastly, the inside of a mouth. *Wean* brings "The Girl Made of Butter" full circle, its inclusion emphasizing also the importance to each individual work of circular processes, as embodied in the suckled baby that grows up and nurses a child. "In the drawing titled *Saint Anne and the Virgin*, Leonardo da Vinci has captured the poignant moment of a mother relating to her daughter as a mother. . . . Mary is both mother and child," Antoni observes. Similarly, she says, "each scoop in *Cradle* also has two roles, that of scooping and being scooped. Finally, the empty loop spoon," designed for a baby to learn to feed itself, "exposes the tension between the need for separation and the need to be held."<sup>7</sup>

## To evoke primitive drives, Antoni uses a pictorial language distinctively balanced between abasement and icy dignity.

The quantity of recent art (or literature, for that matter) devoted to mothers without rancor or grief is not large. One of the few other recent artists to have depicted her mother with anything like tenderness (and it was deeply qualified by pain) was Hannah Wilke, whose full-size sculptural self-portrait in chocolate (*Venus Pareve*, 1982) also prefigured Antoni's use of that medium.<sup>8</sup> In Antoni's *Gnaw* (1992) and *Lick and Lather* (1993), which partly involved, respectively, chewing and licking substantial quantities of chocolate (a large lump, reconstituted as a candy box, in the former; self-portrait busts, in the latter), she regarded herself with a balance of pride and mortification that is reminiscent of Wilke. But there is an added element of ravenous self-consumption in Antoni's work, a kind of ruthless submission to the tasks she has set herself. This is especially true of *Slumber* (first realized in 1993), in which polysomnograph printouts of readings taken from the artist's sleeping brain (they chart rapid eye movements, which signal dreaming) are used as guides in weaving a blanket that is produced on-site. Each morning during the installation (which has been presented six times to date), Antoni rips off a strip of her nightgown and threads it into the steadily growing blanket in a pattern resembling a short segment of the printout.

The rhythm of energy that Antoni registers even when asleep, at once feverish and underwater slow, has become a distinctive tempo. It runs through the video projection *Swoon* (1997), with its heavy-breathing ballet dancers, and through the grueling daily ordeal of pushing one rock against another that produced *and* (1996-99). Partly rooted in ritual and sacrament, and perhaps influenced by her 1997 residency at a Shaker community in Sabbathday Lake, Maine, this particular pacing is reflected in all Antoni's professional decisions. She works slowly and releases objects sparingly (even the photographs only a few at a time), and they reward prolonged engagement.<sup>9</sup> Hysterical profusion is undeniably a pronounced tendency in current art, and, perhaps partly in response, scarcity is another. Robert Gober, Ron Mueck and Jennifer Pastor are others who, like Antoni, take their time at every step. Antoni herself cites Charles Ray as an artist whose work, also produced with careful deliberation, similarly induces a drawn-out process of perceptual recognition. But Antoni's is an idiosyncratic temporality, calm and measured, thickened by her (and eventually the viewer's) concentration. Reflection plays a major role in this work, and, most surprisingly in the context of contemporary art, so does the time it takes for gratitude. □

Unless otherwise noted, quotes by the artist are from a conversation with the author, June 6, 2001.

1. This series of work came out of Antoni's 2000 residency at the Wanås Foundation, Knislinge, Sweden, a rural estate that includes a fully functioning dairy farm.
2. In a related sculpture titled *Naked*, also made at Wanås, a pair of gloves and one of shoes were similarly cut and shaped from a tanned cowhide, this one laid on the floor.
3. Others of Duchamp's cast body-part fragments and accessories seem relevant to Antoni, including especially his 1947 *Please Touch*, a female nipple shown in relief on the cover of an exhibition catalogue. Antoni's *Tender Buttons* (a 1994 pair of gold nipples) directly descends from *Please Touch* and also makes a reference to the School of Paris by appropriating Gertrude Stein's title.
4. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, New York, Norton, 1963, p. 226.
5. Quoted in *Janine Antoni*, Kúsnacht, Ink Tree, 2000, p. 84.
6. Exhibition brochure, with an interview by the Aldrich Museum's public relations coordinator, Megan Luke (unpaginated).
7. Exhibition brochure.
8. This connection was observed by Ewa Lajer-Burcharth in "Antoni's Difference," in *Janine Antoni* (op cit.), p. 63.
9. The beautifully designed (with Antoni's close involvement), thoughtful and exhaustive recent monograph in which Lajer-Burcharth's essay appears includes six essays focusing on at most a handful of works each, but they overlap anyway.

The 1999 Larry Aldrich Foundation Award Exhibition, "The Girl Made of Butter," appeared at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Conn. [Jan. 21-May 20].

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