

Janine Antoni

American, born 1964

*The key word for me is empathy. It's something I think about a lot because I want to put the viewer into a particular relationship with the objects. That's different from how we have traditionally learned to approach a conceptual work of art. Traditionally, we stay objective and go through a process of decoding information to make meaning. I'm much more interested in the viewer empathizing with my process. I do these extreme acts because I feel that viewers can relate to them through their bodies.*¹

Janine Antoni is an artist best known for work that blurs the distinction between performance art and sculpture, drawing, and photography. Coming of age as an artist in the 1990s, her work can be placed within a broader shift in art of that time toward issues of intimacy and corporeal experience. Antoni uniquely replaces the traditional tools of the artist—chisels, pencils, and brushes—with those of her own body. She molds lard and chocolate with tongue and teeth, inks her hair with dye, and paints directly on the floor.

To make *Butterfly Kisses*, 1996–99 [Work 2], the artist applied many coats of black mascara to her eye lashes and then flutters them against clean sheets of white paper—each eye stroking its own page 1,124 times. The drawing is a result of intensely ritualistic labor, the artist pushing herself to her physical limits by winking and blinking against these pages 60 times a day over the course of a month. Though we may think of butterfly kisses as child's play—as a flirtatious, undemanding expression of affection—the ragged strokes of ink showered to excess here have a frantic quality suggestive of an ardor and intense longing for connection to the world outside one's own body, which belies the gentleness of the gesture. If this work speaks to Antoni's desire to connect with the world outside the body, it also simultaneously speaks to the limits of this connection.

Mortar and Pestle, 1999 [Work 3], is a close-up photograph of the artist's tongue licking her husband's eyeball. It is a playfully overboard take on the notion of "eye contact"—the brief moment of locking eyes with another to signal attraction, to develop confidence between two people, or to probe another to assess their feelings or mood. Of her motivation for the piece, Antoni says simply, "I want[ed] to know the taste of his vision." Her comment and the work it inspired speak to a desire, however impossible to realize, of incorporating another's experience into one's own. A sense of strangeness also pervades the piece, suggesting the alienation and discomfort of intimacy and

an inability often to understand the full logic of such closeness. As in *Butterfly Kisses*, Antoni deliberately courts blindness in *Mortar and Pestle*. Though she offers us objects to take in with our eyes, Antoni's work suggests the privileged position of touch over vision as a means for relating and creating intimate knowledge.

In her 2001 piece *Umbilical* [Work 4] using a sterling silver cast of her family silverware, Antoni sculpts her mouth around a spoon handled by her mother. The spoon serves the function of an umbilical cord connecting mother and child. As the umbilical cord feeds and nurtures the fetus, the spoon is the means by which the mother feeds the child. The spoon, a cast of a family heirloom, suggests also that the feeding of a child includes much more than physical sustenance, including one's family inheritance, emotional and financial, being "born with a silver spoon in one's mouth." This drive to get beyond the limits of one's body and to merge symbolically with the world is at the center of Antoni's practice. Her work enacts the powerfully human drive for connection on which love is founded.

JC



Work 2
Janine Antoni
Butterfly Kisses, 1996-99
Cover Girl Thick Lash mascara on paper
diptych: 22 1/8 x 15 in. each panel