

Edyta
Janiak

'INHABIT' OF JANINE ANTONI AS A METAPHOR OF FEMALE CREATION

Janine Antoni is a contemporary artist creating on the border of such arts as performance, photography and sculpture. However, there are not many works on her creative output, especially in the Polish scholarly literature. And if there are any studies, then rather in the context of her performances' resemblance to creations of other famous artists – e.g. Marina Abramovič¹, or in the context of topics dealt with by Antoni's works². On the English-language websites dedicated to contemporary art one may find descriptions of the most recognized works of the artist, as well as interviews with her, however, it seems that there is still not sufficient thought devoted to her works.

And Antoni's artworks are amazingly interesting and diverse. What is important for Antoni, it is the process and transition between the creation and ready-made product. Her works bring up the issue of feminism, consumerism and materialism. The artist often uses her body – as a whole, the substance of the work – but it focuses also on a specific detail: her lips, hair, breasts or eyelashes, using them as tools. Additionally, she often undertakes a dialogue with the tradition of the history of art and re-performs recognized actions and images, revaluating and contemporizing them.

That happened, for example, in the case of her *body art* work – *Loving Care* (1993), when the artist immersed her long hair in black paint and, moving on her knees, painted the gallery floor with them, at the same time chasing the audience away with that movement and separating herself from them. The black and white photos taken at that time bring to mind the photos of Hans Namuth, on which he captured Jackson Pollock creating his works. The very use of female hair as a painting brush was a reference to the performance of Yves Klein who used models as human brushes. However, there is one important difference as Antoni was both the tool and the creator of the whole event. The subject and the object at the same time. The body – and at the same time the artist using the body. It is impossible not to notice the feminist gesture accompanying this re-performance. In the introduction to one of on-line interviews with the artist there is an interesting observation: in *Loving Care* there is also a peculiar duality felt in the majority of Antoni's works: being at risk and posing challenges at the same time⁵. As I assume – to herself, the audience, institutional art, the system. Maybe to patriarchy?

Another performance of the artist that is worth recalling is *Gnaw* (1992), when Antoni chewed two blocks of chocolate and lard, both weighing 600 kg, spitting out tiny cubes of those substances. Then these raw materials were used as products sold in a provisional shop, created by the artist in the art gallery. The chewed chocolate was melted to small heart-shaped chocolates and lard was mixed with beeswax and dyes to form one hundred fifty lipsticks. With one action Antoni touched on the issue of consumerism, history of art and the ubiquitous cult of beauty, at the same time using her jaw as the creation tool (exposing herself to severe pain, which was a reference to *body art* practices often invasive for performers). She called the products created as a result of the performance 'a mouth-made ready-made', which was an obvious reference to *ready-mades* of Marcel Duchamp, thus, a reference to the tradition and cannon of contemporary art.

One of more interesting works in Antoni's portfolio that I would like to mention is 2038. It is a photo capturing the naked artist in a bathtub full of water on a farm of bred cows. The photo includes a moment when one of the animals drinks from the bathtub, at the same time stroking the woman slightly with its head and licking her breast. The face of the artist is on the one hand blissful: possibly because of the unexpected caress, on the other hand, one may see a moment of mental bond and the feeling of trans-species harmony. In that almost mystical scene one of the commentators sees even a reference to the myth of the goddess Hathor who changed into a cow in order to be able to become a mother and a wife of the sun⁴. However, I think that it is not about the mythical key here, but rather a feminist gesture of discovering similarity between a woman (since always related with the area of nature⁵) and a cow from industrial breeding. Antoni, similarly as the other figure in the photo, has an earring, they are both females, both culturally associated with fertility and may feed their young with milk. These similarities also encompass commoditization, as *Both nature in a form of a cow, and a woman in the world dominated by male culture, based on the idea of technological progress, are incapacitated through limitation to certain functions*⁶. To point this fact out and additionally as if to reverse that process Antoni calls her work 2038, so with a number of her animal fellow, thus, restating her individuality and visibility.

After this short sketch describing some works (in my opinion characteristic and representative for all works by Janine Antoni), I would like to focus on the subject of this article, namely *Inhabit* from 2009. This is what the artist herself told about the project in one of the comments to the exhibition where her photo was presented:

'Inhabit' first appeared in my imagination as a very simple image. I imagined that a spider created a web between my legs. When I started to go deeper into the process of realizing this imagination, things started to

get complicated. Will the spider cooperate with me? How will I be able to stay still so that it can weave its web? Having had discussions with many entomologists, from whom I learnt about these insects' amazingly high sensitivity to movement, I started to seek a harness that could keep me still. That introduced me to the world of harnesses where I found a model that allowed mounting me to a structure with lines coming from different points of the jacket covering my breast. I realized that my body may be hung like a spider in the web. However, I would have to build a cage around my legs to keep the spider in that part of my body. It became clear that the spider – due to the warmth of my body – will not be able to weave the web directly on me. It is worth mentioning that from the very start I saw my daughter as the spider, with myself as a mother, a support for it. Then suddenly I thought about replacing the web and the spider with a doll's house and putting the spider in the photo this way. Thanks to that I got a photo which shows the web inside the web and a house inside a house.⁷

In the said description of the creative process one may see several exceptionally important moments. First image in the author's imagination was the spider weaving its web between her legs – an image that is incredibly suggestive and marked by culture. In mythologies of the whole world there appears a motive of a spider-woman, for example Aztec foremother who weaves the universe, or better known in our culture – Arachne who is changed to a spider by Athena after she loses a contest for the most beautiful tapestry⁸. Spiders were associated with femininity for a reason – weaving and spinning for many centuries have been the domain and main task of women, was also related with the household sphere, where women belonged⁹. In *Inhabit* Antoni, through being hung in the harness, becomes the

Jeanine Antoni, *Inhabit*, 2009

source: <http://www.janineantoni.net/#/inhabit/>



spider-woman at the same time, but she can also be interpreted as a woman caught in the web, as suggested by her inertia. One can see the duality here, mentioned above in the context of her creation: of being threatened and challenging.

A spider let into the doll house in fact started its work – in the tiny kitchen it managed to weave its web from the fruit bowl to the window. Caught by the artist in the web-harness, in the trap of the doll house, it metaphorically closed her in its web and harness which immobilized the artist, so that the spider may continue weaving. Thus, we can see here a multiplication of images – two webs, two spiders and finally two houses. The artist has a doll house between her legs, which is a reflection of her real house, and a children's room is the stage for *Inhabit*. It is worth noticing Antoni's words that from the very beginning she saw her daughter in the spider, and she saw herself as the web-support for her. In one of the interviews she added that she feels as if she was living in interspace, *somewhere between being suspended and ascending and either entrapped or inside the structure of support, which to me is motherhood*¹⁰.

In her earlier works (for example in *Wean* of 1990), Antoni touched on the topic of motherhood and relations between a mother and a daughter, however, then it was about her-as-a-daughter and getting even – separating from her own mother, which is in fact a very strong feminist lead, many times described by female researchers. The mother-daughter relation is seen as one of the most important in the life of a woman. A daughter is as if an extension of her mother and her femininity, which may be a source of both strength and sense of community for both of them, but also lead to painful and difficult relations caused by the daughter's natural need to separate from the mother and become an autonomous individual¹¹.

The artist's daughter was five when she worked on *Inhabit*, no wonder that Antoni associated her with the theme of the doll house,

and herself as the one supporting the growth of the child, as the structure holding that process. In one of interviews done after the exhibition where the photo was presented, the performer was asked how she combines the role of an artist, a teacher in an art school and a mother¹². Antoni confessed that she does not separate those functions, but her realm is integration, and striving to become the best mother develops her generally as a human being, but also as an artist. Balance and flexibility, and following intuition, required from being a mother, influenced her workshop. Additionally, observing her daughter and her curiosity towards objects whose primary meaning she did not know yet, allowed the artist to take a fresh look at items around us and their re-discovering.

Inhabit presents itself, therefore, as a multilayer work of art, in terms of its interpretation. As a description of the experience of motherhood or place of a woman in today's world (imprisonment in the structures of patriarchy and social roles, being tangled in social-cultural gender). It is worth adding that for Antoni the issue of her works' interpretation is open, the artist is fully aware that *gender* and experiences of her spectators influence the reception of her works.

Therefore, I decided to analyse and interpret *Inhabit* as a metaphor for female creation based on arachnology by Nancy K. Miller.

Primarily arachnology regarded literary texts written by women. It was created in the stream of gynocriticism in the second wave of feminism. It was supposed to be both a method of creation, and a reading strategy against the odds. Against the applicable rules of a universalist (male) way of perceiving literary works. A method of regaining the female voice and female stories in culture. Restating a visibility of a woman-author and an attempt to create new aesthetic categories describing that phenomenon. In my opinion, arachnology may be perceived not only as literary criticism, but also as a way of cultivating philosophy of culture from a female perspective, as a type

of a tool for anthropological description useful for widely understood media phenomena and non-literary texts of contemporary culture¹³.

The primary stimulus leading to my association of Antoni's work with arachnology was the spider and its web. As Miller in her theory, referring to the myth of Arachne, exploits the metaphor of weaving-creating, work-web and woman-spider, physically present in such created structure. In *Inhabit*, the physical presence of the artist is multiplied. Antoni is present in the photo, she physically experiences being imprisoned in her harness, but she is also real and present in entirety of her concept. The experience of Antoni-performer and Antoni-mother becomes actual in the photo in her body-structure. She is the object and the subject at the same time, the creator and the item present in the work, a spider and a web, a woman and a spider.

Also, the theme of the work is exceptionally important. It is about emphasizing the typically feminine and important experience – motherhood – and women's involvement in social-cultural structures that define them. It is emphasized by the suspension that cannot be read unambiguously – the woman in the photo may rise but also fall or be totally incapable of any movement. Capturing the situation in the photo frame only makes the issue more problematic.

Antoni, who many times mentioned feminist issues in her works, is incredibly self-conscious. Conscious of limitations affecting both women and women-artists, but also of methods to work on those limitations and use them in her own art. To make them visible and meaningful, to take up the space with female presence that was reserved mainly for men not such a long time ago (here I mean metaphorically the space of art, but also the gallery – the first physical gesture of taking up such space was for example painting her own territory in the already mentioned *Loving Care*) and adding value to the female experience (also through seeking not very obvious analogies of the female position, as in 2038).

Such way of perceiving reality and cultivating art may be by any standards defined as arachnological. Antoni uncovers harmful social-cultural mechanisms but shows a peculiar alternative. A space of being open to otherness, to femininity, but also a space of dialogue. She is, of course, aware that not all spectators see that duality and will follow the proposed way of interpretation, but there – there is also a seed of arachnology in it. In leaving some space for tolerance and in openness to a dialogue.

- 1 See J. Fisher, *The Live Tableaux of Suzanne Lacy, Janine Antoni, and Marina Abramovic*, 'Art Journal', vol 56, no. 4, (1997), pp. 28–33.
- 2 D. Łagodzka, *Intymność w kontakcie ludzi i zwierząt twórczości Janine Antoni*, *Kiry O'Reilly i Catherine E. Bell a wybrane idee ekofeminizmu*, [online:] <http://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/artmix/19903> [accessed on: 26.09.2018].
- 3 See R. Enright, M. Walsh, *The Beautiful Trap: Janine Antoni's Body Art.*, [online:] <http://bordercrossingsmag.com/article/the-beautiful-trap-janine-antonis-body-art> [accessed on: 26.09.2018].
- 4 J. Ayerza, *Janine Antoni*, [online:] <http://www.lacan.com/lacinkXXIX9.htm> [accessed on: 26.09.2018].
- 5 This 'natural' division is aptly described by Sherry B. Ortner in her text, already a classic for feminist criticism: See S.B. Ortner, *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?* [online:] https://www.uio.no/studier/emner/sv/sai/SOSANT1600/v12/Ortner_Is_female_to_male.pdf [accessed on: 26.09.2018].
- 6 D. Łagodzka, *Intymność...*, op.cit., [online:] <http://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/artmix/19903> [accessed on: 26.09.2018].
- 7 As cited in: T. Barret, *Krytyka fotografii. Jak rozumieć obrazy*, transl. J. Jedliński, Cracow 2014, pp. 87–89.
- 8 Monograph: M. Weigle, *Spiders & Spinsters. Women and Mythology*, Albuquerque 1982, is kind of a compendium of knowledge on dependence of a woman and a spider in myths and cultures of the world.
- 9 Por. K. Szczuka, *Prządki, tkaczki i pająki. Uwagi o twórczości kobiet*, [in:] op. cit, *Kopciuszek, Frankenstein i inne. Feminizm wobec mitu*, Cracow 2001.
- 10 R. Enright, M. Walsh, *The Beautiful Trap...*, op.cit., [online:] <http://bordercrossingsmag.com/article/the-beautiful-trap-janine-antonis-body-art> [accessed on: 26.09.2018], translated by: E.J.
- 11 An example of such perception of the mother-daughter relation is the text by Luce Irigaray, who sourcing in Lacan's concept and in feminist criticism gets even with her mother. See L. Irigaray, *I jedna nie ruszy bez drugiej*, transl. A. Araszkiewicz, [in:] *Ciało i tekst. Feminizm w literaturoznawstwie – antologia szkiców*, ed. A. Nasiałowska, Warsaw 2009.
- 12 J. Fusaro, *Talking with Janine Antoni, Part Two*, [online:] <http://magazine.art21.org/2009/10/14/talking-with-janine-antoni-part-two/#.W63ju9QS8rj> [accessed on: 26.09.2018].
- 13 I dedicated one of my articles to arachnology and the person of Nancy K., where I consider the importance of this theory for feminist criticism. See E. Janiak, 'Arachnologie' *Nancy K. Miller jako literackie ucieleśnienie teorii*, [in:] *Artyst(ka): obecność i tożsamość*, ed. M. Popiel, K. Węgrzyn, M. Kuster, Cracow 2018.

Edyta Janiak

'Inhabit' of janine antoni as a metaphor of female creation

The article aims to present the figure of contemporary artist Janine Antoni by discussing her most important performances. The author of the article pays particular attention to Antoni's work *Inhabit*, which she interprets and analyzes in the spirit of arachnology. This strategy intends to present *Inhabit* as a kind of metaphor of feminine creativity.

KEYWORDS: JANINE ANTONI, PERFORMANCE, PHOTOGRAPHY, FEMINISM, ARACHNOLOGY, INHABIT



Ministerstwo Nauki
i Szkolnictwa Wyższego

Paid by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education according to the agreement no. 796/P-DUN/2018 signed on 4.04.2018 r.

The assignment name: Creation of the English version of the Scientific-artistic Journal "Dyskurs" publications; DUN financing – 30 000 PLN.