

*Wedge: A Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration* by Janine Antoni and Jill  
Sigman  
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In 2012, choreographer and dancer Jill Sigman of jill sigman/thinkdance and visual artist Janine Antoni collaborated to produce *Wedge*, a live performance at the Albright-Knox Gallery. My aims here are to describe the collaboration and the resulting work, and to examine the benefits and challenges of the collaboration.<sup>1</sup>

Collaboration: history and process

Janine Antoni and Jill Sigman came together because both had been exploring performative practices drawing on both dance and visual art.

Jill Sigman is a dancer and choreographer who founded her company, jill sigman/thinkdance, in 1998 while still a PhD student in philosophy. Her artistic practice has spanned choreographed solo and ensemble works and the *Hut Project* (2009-present), for which she travels to a site, collects and constructs a hut out of cast-off materials available at that site, and uses the hut for social, living, performance and dance activities. While Sigman's huts are physical constructions that exhibit a strong sculptural sensibility, she sees them as part of her choreographic practice: she choreographs the materials out of the environment, into a physical configuration, and then back into the environment as the project is completed.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Janine Antoni and Jill Sigman for discussions of their work together and to Douglas Dreishpoon, now Chief Curator Emeritus of the Albright-Knox Gallery, for supplying me with the recordings of his interviews with Antoni and Sigman. Material that is taken from interviews will be indicated as follows:

[1] Interview of Antoni and Sigman by Dreishpoon, May 25, 2012

[2] Interview of Antoni and Sigman by Dreishpoon, November 19, 2012

[3] Interview of Sigman by Irvin, June 11, 2014

[4] Interview of Antoni by Irvin, June 17, 2014

Some quotations have been edited for length and clarity.

Many of Sigman's choreographed works of dance are grounded in movement scores with extensive improvisational elements. She sometimes works with dancers lacking formal dance training. The audience is frequently invited into the performance space for a participatory experience. For instance, in *last days/first field* (2013), an ensemble dance performance transitions into an activity in which the dancers plant rows of kale in the performance space, after which the audience is invited out into the kale field to sit and chat while eating kale salad.<sup>2</sup>

Janine Antoni is a visual artist who first came to prominence in the 1990s with works such as *Gnaw* (1992) and *Lick and Lather* (1993-4). *Gnaw* involves a 600-lb. cube of chocolate and a 600-lb. cube of lard. Antoni sculpted the materials by chewing on the edges of each cube; she then used the chewed material to make objects that were displayed along with the cubes. For *Lick and Lather*, she made seven self-portrait busts of soap and seven of chocolate. She then sculpted the soap self-portraits by washing with them and the chocolate busts by licking them, gradually wearing away the specific features. Antoni's works often bear traces of her physical presence: for *Saddle* (2000), she made a cast of her body using a whole rawhide, leaving behind what she has described as a ghost of herself.<sup>3</sup> She has also done a number of performative works, including *Loving Care* (1993), in which she used her hair to paint on the gallery floor in hair dye, and *Slumber* (1993), in which she slept each night in the gallery space and spent each day working at a loom to weave an ever-growing blanket, using the pattern generated by an EEG of her sleep rhythms. She practiced tightrope walking for a year and a half as part of the process that eventuated in her works *Touch* (2002) and *To Draw a Line* (2003).[1]

Antoni and Sigman met in London in 2010 at a movement workshop Antoni had been invited to lead under the auspices of Performance Matters.[2] Antoni had for several years been exploring forms of dance including the Five Rhythms, through which, Antoni says, "I found access to my unconscious in a way that I had never found before." [4] In an

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<sup>2</sup> A full performance of *last days/first field* can be seen here:

<https://vimeo.com/68498739>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/art21/images/janine-antoni/saddle-2000>

attempt to bring this influence into her work, she had installed a dance floor in her studio, both for her own dance practice and to invite other movement practitioners into the space. Sigman had long been familiar with Antoni's work and attended the workshop in order to meet Antoni. They liked each other and began meeting frequently for discussions: as Antoni describes it, "I'll tell you everything I know about sculpture if you'll tell me everything you know about dance." [1] They visited each other's studios, and Antoni saw performances of some of Sigman's work. Sigman helped Antoni teach one of her classes to visual arts students at Columbia University. Eventually, they began to engage in movement practices together.

Antoni was interested in the prospect of doing a retrospective of her work through dance, and this provided much of the initial impetus for their movement explorations. However, both Antoni and Sigman felt a pull against the most obvious understandings of this idea. Antoni worried that, though "each piece encapsulates a gesture," it would be too didactic simply to repeat those gestures in dance. [1] As Sigman put it, "The works are the works, and we don't need to replay them. I felt what was interesting but also had integrity was the challenge of addressing the *quality* of Janine's works." [2]

Many of the movement exercises were structured around questions connected to Antoni's works: for instance, "What was the feeling of making *Gnaw*?" and "What would be the feeling of being under the hide in *Saddle*?" [2] Antoni felt that a question about the feeling of making one of her works was "a curious question, and it was the perfect question because there was no rote physical answer." Moreover, "it was transformative to find myself doing the things that were the response to that question. Something that was completely unknown to me or mysterious came forth, and for me that was probably one of the most exciting parts of the process." [2]

Through these and other improvisational exercises, a movement palette developed that was eventually drawn on in *Wedge*. However, *Wedge* evolved well beyond the idea of a retrospective of Antoni's works, to become a fully collaborative performance addressing themes related to the work of both Antoni and Sigman.

### Description of the performance

*Wedge* was performed in the Albright-Knox Gallery, in a relatively open gallery space where several paintings by Clyfford Still are permanently on display. Antoni and Sigman performed in a roughly square performance space defined by four corners where objects to be used in the performance had been placed. Sigman saw this placement as related to the four winds or four temperaments, and as alluding subtly to George Balanchine's famous ballet *The Four Temperaments* [3] in which, as is characteristic of Balanchine's work, classical ballet movements are combined with jazz-derived movements that challenge or break the balletic form.

Antoni and Sigman wore costumes of Antoni's design and fabrication. Both costumes were predominantly black with high necks. Antoni's costume had long sleeves and long pants, and was embellished with white lace running down the torso and down the inside of each leg. She stitched across the lace many times on a sewing machine with white thread, and left many white threads hanging from the costume: "I wanted this to almost disintegrate into something that looked like a hairy chest or a dog's belly, and these would come out between my legs and be kind of visceral but have the ballet reference with the lace." [4]

Sigman's costume was asymmetrical: one arm was sleeveless and the other long-sleeved, and the legs were cropped at different lengths. It was embellished with white stitching at the arms, neck, and one of the legs.

[INSERT FIGURE X.1 HERE]

#### **CAPTION:**

**Fig. 1**

**Janine Antoni and Jill Sigman**

*Wedge* (2012)

**Photodocumentation of performance**

**Photo T. Loonan**

**© Janine Antoni and Jill Sigman; Courtesy of the artists and Luhring Augustine, New York**

*Wedge* was composed of six episodes or sections. In the first section, Sigman rolls slowly in the space as Antoni molds pieces of wet clay onto various parts of her body. Antoni presses clay around Sigman's hip,

drops Sigman several times onto a piece of clay positioned under her crotch on the floor, and positions a piece of clay so that Sigman's nose will press into it. As Sigman continues rolling, the clay is left behind on the floor, and its pale gray traces have marked her black costume. Sigman continues to roll even after Antoni stops working the clay onto her body; Antoni performs a series of gestures that are derived from the actions of working the clay onto Sigman's body (Fig. 1). This section was inspired in part by Antoni's fascination with Sigman's use of the expression "making a piece on" someone: namely, choreographing a work of dance "with that person as an originary performer. The piece is made using their skills, their body, their physicality." [2]

[INSERT FIGURE X.2 HERE]

**CAPTION:**

**Fig. 2**

**Janine Antoni and Jill Sigman**

*Wedge (2012)*

**Photodocumentation of performance**

**Photo T. Loonan**

**© Janine Antoni and Jill Sigman; Courtesy of the artists and Luhring Augustine, New York**

Antoni performs most of the movement in the second section. Holding a pair of hipbones sculpted from clay, she walks and shakes the hipbones rhythmically, in a fashion reminiscent of how cowbells are played in the junkanoo celebrations of her native Bahamas. She then shifts into walking rapidly in a large circle, holding the hipbones out in front of her as if they were a divining rod. Sigman's only vocalization during the performance, a loud "Whoa," signals Antoni to transition into a position on her hands and knees in which she makes a series of awkward mouth movements (Fig. 2). She slowly rotates 360 degrees so that these movements are visible to the whole audience. As Antoni says, "Normally when you witness a sculpture you circumnavigate it. [Sigman] made me move around in a circle like a clock so you saw it from all sides but the audience is still." [4]

[INSERT FIGURE X.3 HERE]

**CAPTION:**

**Fig. 3**

**Janine Antoni and Jill Sigman**

*Wedge* (2012)

Photodocumentation of performance

Photo T. Loonan

© Janine Antoni and Jill Sigman; Courtesy of the artists and Luhring Augustine, New York

In the third section, Sigman uses the objects stationed in the four corners of the performance space – raw clay, water, hipbones made from hardened clay, and a pile of pointe shoes – and uses them to make sounds that accompany and guide Antoni’s movements. As Sigman creates water sounds with a rag and bucket, Antoni performs a movement sequence involving fluid arm gestures. As Sigman clacks together a pile of clay hipbones, Antoni’s movement quality becomes more staccato and is driven by movements of her pelvis (Fig. 3).

[INSERT FIGURE X.4 HERE]

**CAPTION:**

**Fig. 4**

**Janine Antoni and Jill Sigman**

*Wedge* (2012)

Photodocumentation of performance

Photo T. Loonan

© Janine Antoni and Jill Sigman; Courtesy of the artists and Luhring Augustine, New York

In the fourth section, as Antoni sits in the center of the space playing with fragments of clay, Sigman dons a pair of pointe shoes and begins to perform a series of small steps (*bouffée*) en pointe. While her leg movements and upright posture are balletic, her arms are more casual. When she arrives at a pile of small clay fragments on the floor, she gradually bends over until her fingers are on the floor, and begins a rapid *bouffée* in a slight *plié* to pulverize the fragments (Fig. 4). Mechanistically, she straightens her legs, rotates, then repeats the *bouffée* to pulverize the clay pieces. Eventually, Antoni rises and begins to guide Sigman’s movement, grasping her hips and rotating her between pulverizing movements, then sliding her body to another pile of fragments.

[INSERT FIGURE X.5 HERE]

**CAPTION:**

**Fig. 5**

**Janine Antoni and Jill Sigman**

*Wedge* (2012)

**Photodocumentation of performance**

**Photo T. Loonan**

**© Janine Antoni and Jill Sigman; Courtesy of the artists and Luhring Augustine, New York**

In the fifth section, Sigman, with help from Antoni, puts on a tutu fabricated by Antoni from clay hipbones (Fig. 5). Antoni sits in one corner and manipulates raw clay while watching Sigman. Now barefoot, Sigman performs a solo that quotes from ballet, ritualistic dance, folk dance, and contemporary dance practices. The clacking of the tutu provides a soundtrack, aurally underscoring the movement quality. Eventually she lowers her body to the floor and performs a rolling sequence that alludes back to the rolling in the first scene, still accompanied by the sounds of the tutu. In Antoni's words, "it's the worst sensation – it feels like teeth grinding or something. It becomes like a cog." [4] Sigman eventually rises to standing and performs a sequence of pelvic-driven movements that rattle the hipbones together. She ends the section in a balletic high fifth.

**[INSERT FIGURE X.6 HERE]**

**CAPTION:**

**Fig. 6**

**Janine Antoni and Jill Sigman**

*Wedge* (2012)

**Photodocumentation of performance**

**Photo T. Loonan**

**© Janine Antoni and Jill Sigman; Courtesy of the artists and Luhring Augustine, New York**

In the sixth section, Antoni and Sigman, still in the tutu, kneel together in the center of the space. They use their sleeves to wipe the sweat from each other's faces, and then use the clay pulverized by Sigman to powder each other's faces (Fig. 6). They stand and look at each other's faces briefly and finally turn and walk away from each other.

**Themes**

*Wedge* explores several interconnected themes, many of which relate to the artists' prior bodies of work. In the opening sequence, Antoni uses

clay to “make a piece on” Sigman’s body, finding a literal application in visual art for the dance expression she found strange and perplexing. “When you throw a pot, you’re working on a moving surface. I thought, Jill is a moving surface; what if I tried to make a piece on her?”[2] Reciprocally, Sigman is “making a piece” on Antoni by choreographing a dance with her as ordinary performer.

Like much of Antoni’s prior work, *Wedge* examines the “body as a tool,”[4] most obviously in the section in which Sigman’s body is being used as a tool to pulverize the clay fragments. Of the hipbone tutu worn by Sigman, Antoni says, “It plays like an instrument and it’s constructed like a tool belt. It references the primitive use of bones as tools, not to mention that they are also tools for movement in your body.”[4]

Several of Antoni’s recent works involve casts made from actual hipbones of deceased women. In many of these works the hipbones refer to the maternal; but Antoni sees the hips also as a center of women’s strength, both because of their connection to birth and because of their proximity to the center of gravity.[4] Some of her hipbone-derived works are named for her “art mothers” Mary Cassatt, Martha Graham and Gertrude Stein.[4] A collection of hipbones strung together in a tutu, then, draws attention to the strength and functioning of the female body, and may also be a subtle tribute to Antoni’s and Sigman’s feminist forebears in visual art and dance.

Those familiar with Antoni’s work might also have recognized an allusion to *Saddle* when Antoni performs on her hands and knees in the second section; the mouth movements she performs might make one think of the chewing activity that was involved in *Gnaw*. But many of the connections to Antoni’s works that informed the development of the movement palette for *Wedge* would not be transparent to viewers, since the movement arose from psychological rather than formal or gestural responses to the works.

Another central theme, which connects to many of Sigman’s prior works, has to do with the relations among dance, ritual and everyday life. Sigman’s concern with ritual is one of the things that drew Antoni to her as a collaborator.[4] Sigman has a longstanding interest in the way that forms of dance, particularly ballet, have marked themselves off from



ordinary life while retaining traces of their roots in folk dance and ritual,[3] and has written on developments in 20<sup>th</sup>-century dance whereby the manifest connection between dance and everyday movement was reestablished. (Sigman 2000) Sigman's prior works such as *Brain Song* (2011), *last days/first field* (2013), *(Perma)Culture* (2014) and the ongoing *Hut Project* delve into the possibility that we require new rituals for living in a world where virtual connections are ubiquitous but full somatic awareness of and connection to ourselves, each other and our physical world are increasingly scarce.

The title, *Wedge*, picks up on many of these thematic dimensions. To wedge clay is to prepare it for use through such actions as kneading, cutting and slapping to ensure a uniform consistency. The name *Wedge*, then, calls attention to preparatory activities that are often in the background. Insofar as the performance itself is named as an act of wedging, this suggests that it has a preparatory function, perhaps readying both artists to move forward in their respective bodies of work as they deepen their knowledge of each other's disciplines.

'Wedge' also refers to an object that is driven between two things to separate them, or to an act of cramming something into a small space. Both of these senses resonate with the relationship between dance and visual art that served as part of the impetus for the performance. Does the performance make manifest a wedge between these two disciplines? Is the performance itself a wedging of dance into a visual arts space?

### Collaborative challenges

Several collaborative challenges arose from what we might see as the wedge between dance and visual art. Antoni and Sigman have different personal histories with dance and approaches to the project of building a movement-based piece. Antoni was particularly interested in movement as a means of access to psychological states: "I would have revelations in the movement, and Jill didn't want me to speak about those. She said, 'That's your information to recover the movement.' And then I would remember the revelation but forget the movement."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Antoni during a 2013 interview by Klaus Ottman, available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUoAO9C2yxQ>

As Sigman says of Antoni, “She’d go to the psychological thing through a different door.”[1] “Because she’s not a trained mover, she has a challenge in retaining or repeating anything. Often she doesn’t know what she did, and that was a very new concept for her: not learning steps, but being aware of what you did so you could go back into that same movement palette.”[3]

This challenge opens out into larger issues about the nature and object of the collaboration. As Sigman says, “An interesting question that came up was, what is it to repeat something? We realized we had very different assumptions about what it is to do the same thing.”<sup>5</sup> “When I’m guiding her and saying do ‘it’ again[,] I realized the ‘it’ for me is different” than for Antoni.[1]

This misunderstanding operated in both directions. When Sigman would attempt to take up and repeat one of Antoni’s gestures, Antoni “was so offended that she would even do my gesture. If I was imitating the way you say hello, you would be insulted.”[1] Also, Antoni felt that Sigman misrepresented the gesture in repeating it: “Does she actually think she’s doing my gesture? That has nothing to do with my gesture.”[1] In general, Antoni finds the idea that “a step could be taken from your body and put onto another profoundly weird, especially because I’m not a dancer and what comes out of me is mine.”[4]

As Sigman notes, taking on another person’s gesture and translating it to fit one’s own body and movement style is a very common practice in contemporary dance. “For me,” she notes, “the transformation of it is what’s interesting, and the fact that it can take on a different shading when someone else does it. Suddenly this multiplicity of meaning opens up.”[1]

The challenge of meanings, where they are located and how they are fixed was ongoing. In dance, Sigman says, “you get very specific at the fine-grained level and let it be open at the meta-level.”[3] Sigman is comfortable with ambiguity and favors openness of interpretation, while Antoni resists the language of ambiguity and speaks of a desire to

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<sup>5</sup> DD interview 2

provide the audience with concrete reference points or “anchors” to promote the work’s accessibility.[2]

This apparent tension over ambiguity is linked to what Sigman calls the “different ways of mechanically creating meaning” in visual art and in dance. The collaborative process revealed

that we have very different practices, and that was surprising to us, because our products didn’t work so differently. We gravitate toward the same kinds of materials, and we have a lot of common themes, but we have very different ways of getting that stuff, making. In dance there’s a lot of searching physically, a sense of kinesthetic rightness. In certain kinds of more conceptual visual processes, there is a presumption that one should have the idea before one starts.[3]

Antoni describes a similar “difference between mediums and how mediums make meaning.” In dance, she perceives “a desire for a kind of openness” that contrasts with her attempt “to nail things down.” In dance, she says, “there is a certain surrender to that kind of meaning making, because you have a body and your body is relating to the movement of this other body, it’s a very different reception of an artwork. It taps into a different place in the brain.” Though she sees her object-based practice as tapping into the audience’s kinesthetic awareness, working with Sigman made her aware of how conceptual her artistic process is. “I would want to know, ‘Why? Jill, why do you say that?’ And it was startling to her. It’s a very immediate process, choreography. You have a body there, and you say, ‘Do that,’ and either you like it or you don’t like it. There is this kind of play and experimentation that can happen that is very fluid and beautiful, and that’s the part I’m learning from.”[4]

Varying expectations about the role of the conceptual and verbal were a challenge for both artists. Sigman says,

When we have conversations, at some point I lose my anchor, my compass. I only know if I’m in the studio. If we don’t have enough time working, the answers don’t become evident. [Antoni’s] comfort was more figuring things out in the realm of ideas, and then she’d be more comfortable in the movement.[3]

Antoni concurs:

She gave me a lot of visualizations, and they were very palpable, and gave me a kind of confidence in my moving that I wouldn't normally have, not being a dancer.[2] She would come up with the most poetic things to instigate movement out of, [such as] "Write a sacred text with your coccyx." [4]

Until a week or two before the performance, some of this verbal material was incorporated into the work: as Sigman says, "I was calling the piece kind of like a square dance caller," [2] providing cues that would signal transitions and provide the audience some insight into the origins of the movement. Sigman decided to eliminate the verbal prompts because they made the work "sonically too cluttered." [2] Antoni had mixed feelings about this decision: "I was attached to the language because we had used it for so long, and I was interested in it." At the same time, she recognized that taking away the verbal prompts "integrated the thing we were doing in the piece already, which had to do with materials and processes: to take on the sound of them, or bring people's attention to those processes as producing sound, seemed to make rich the texture of the piece." [2]

The verbal structure might have served to orient the audience, most of whom had a high degree of familiarity with visual art but not with contemporary dance. After Antoni gave a lecture about the performance, a museum patron asked whether she had considered telling the audience about some of the conceptual references prior to the performance. In their absence, he said, "It just seemed so strange to me." [2] As Sigman suggests, this may be a function of the fact that [w]e're in a world where the physical seems strange to people, where people – at least people of a certain social class – are very disembodied, and they're not going to be able to have even a kinesthetic recognition of certain things in their bodies without a further intellectual interpretive experience. We all agree that we want the work to be accessible. But there is a whole realm of questions about what counts as access. A physical experience can also be a form of access. We shouldn't fall into assuming that access is verbal, because by doing that we're actually undermining the power of the piece and doing a disservice to our viewers in training them to be at peace with the physical experience. [2]

### Fruits of collaboration

As we have seen, differences in the ways of working that Antoni and Sigman had derived from their prior artistic practices were salient throughout the process of making *Wedge*. As Daliah Touré (2013) discusses, consensus about goals, values or outcomes is often seen as a precondition for collaboration. Drawing on her experience with the improvisation performance collective Mathilde, comprising three dancers and two musicians, Touré questions this idea, arguing that non-consensus can be creatively fruitful. Collaborators who can learn to tolerate non-consensus and its attendant frustrations, and even to invite them, may break out of stifling habits associated with seeking harmony. “Consensus settles in stasis and the habitual. Non-consensus is restless and impulsive.” (Touré 2013, 64)

Inviting non-consensus, Touré argues, establishes a new kind of relationship among performers.

The performer in an improvisation can be perceived as thinking and acting primarily for the purpose of the ‘collective brain’ or as an individual insistent on maintaining their own journey within the piece. A third ‘identity’ would accommodate both states of being. (Touré 2013, 33)

Performers who are conscious of each other’s activities and aim to construct a joint work, but also do not readily acquiesce in the directions proposed by others, can achieve this sort of third identity whereby they participate in the collective but also maintain “a certain amount of singularity, in order to introduce the creative tension necessary to generate engaging work.” (Touré 2013, 35)

In light of this analysis, we can consider some points of apparent discomfort in the collaboration: in particular, uncertainty over whether and how the audience should be provided with conceptual “anchors” and the different understandings of how choices about the work should be made and what should ground them. Whereas in a non-collaborative situation, choices might be driven by unquestioned background assumptions, in a cross-disciplinary collaboration these assumptions were foregrounded, revealing to each artist some fundamental aspects of how the other’s discipline works as well as of how she works within her own discipline. This consciousness gives each artist more flexibility about how to work in the future. Even if she does not change her ways

of working, she can move forward with greater clarity about what they are and why she is employing them.

As Touré's discussion suggests, the role of non-consensus deeply implicates relationships: it involves ongoing renegotiation of membership in the group vis-à-vis individual identity. Antoni and Sigman found, in showing the work to an audience, that this negotiation was as salient in the product as in their collaborative process. Antoni says,

There was this relationship between women that was very specific: women working in the same space together, coexisting and at moments in relation, and with awareness of each other, but interacting only at certain moments. We didn't understand this until we showed it to people. [4]

As Sigman describes it,

there's definitely a sense of two people coming together and meeting which inevitably starts to suggest relationship. There is a lot of connection and there is always a gulf, a gap or veil. And there's this meeting that does dissolve at the end; we do leave each other. [2]

Collaborative artworks are not always about relationship. But when a work crosses disciplines, artistic relationships come to the fore: they help to determine to what extent each discipline's conventions and practices will govern the making of the product. As a collaborative work of dance in which both artists perform, *Wedge* is a perfect vehicle to explore this dynamic, since it showcases the very relationship that drove its creation. Each artist makes work on the other; each uses the other as material and as tool; and each artist is, to some extent, remade.

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