

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Pak Han

Life Lines: Ally at the Fabric Workshop and Museum

by Carolyn Merritt

Carolyn Merritt responds to the three performance events included in Ally at the Fabric Workshop and Museum: Rope Dance, The Courtesan and the Crone, and Paper Dance. The exhibit was instigated by visual artist and current FWM artist-in-residence Janine Antoni, in collaboration with dance pioneer Anna Halprin and choreographer Stephen Petronio.

"Pay attention (...) Not to the grand gesture, but to the passing breath."

-Lauren Groff, Arcadia (289)

Riven by lines, Anna Halprin's face fills the screen, brightens the dark space. Headphones pump her breath, sighs, gasps, silent laughter, and airplanes, birds, and other woodsy background noise into our ears. Seated in a semi-circle before the larger-than-life moving image of this 95-year-old earth mother, we take her in collectively (sight) and individually (sound). Witness to her witnessing, we see her reaction, never what she sees. No mystery, the promotional materials tell us what we don't see: Janine Antoni and Stephen Petronio's rope dance on [Halprin's legendary dance deck](#). The allure lies less in the unknown, the imagining and filling in the blanks, than in the stories in those lines marking Halprin's face. There is the biography, the particular—the stories, work, the singular life that has been documented. And there is the universal—the multitudes of a single life, the luck of longevity.

I think of the passing breath.

The film cuts, lights rise, and Petronio untangles three white ropes, distributes them through the space. He blindfolds Antoni and guides her toward one. She navigates by inching along its length with her feet, and reaching its end, she feels for another rope with her free foot, then decides against it, retraces her steps backwards. As that alternate path recedes, the route home illuminates—familiar and

safe, but seen from a different vantage point, changed for the journey. A choice that feels honest, her retreat resonates even as it fills me with something like sadness.

I think of my son and his small friends shuffling clear across our loft, backwards all the way, just to experience its expanse in a new way.

Petronio joins Antoni, and now they encircle and link themselves inside the looping ropes. One by one, we are invited in, entangled in the ropes, made part of their dance, led by Petronio's gentle instructions: change levels, close your eyes, fold in, lean away. Until we are the dance. What Halprin witnessed remains beyond reach, but her response is closer. If before we peered around a corner into darkness, now there is light, another door ajar on the other side.

Pay attention, I remind myself.

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High white cocktail tables, sparkling cider in champagne glasses, fathomless white corridor, cold and aloof: The Fabric Workshop and Museum asserts itself as *Ally's* fourth collaborator. A blinding spotlight pops as the plush red curtain rises, and Petronio emerges in mask, wig, elaborate headdress and stilettos, lifting his golden gown like a princess before a puddle. The soundtrack is *Farinelli*-esque, the dance a courtesan's seduction. Squished under black tights, his penis peaks out for a hot second as he flashes some leg. He feigns agony as he sheds his mask and gown, but the revelations—age, gender—feel innocuous. (Perhaps *The Courtesan and the Crone* was different as originally performed at age 79 by Halprin, who gave Petronio the work to perform for *Ally*.) More revelatory is the look on his face after, less that of a seductress than a little boy.

I think of my young son, his coy smile, golden mop, naked body running wild, loudly narrating his nudity. Every inch of his small body such familiar, daily terrain.

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Wooden crates stacked into makeshift seating flank both sides of the FWM's upper floor for Antoni's *Paper Dance*. A small projector screens a section of [Halprin's 1965 masterpiece *Parades and Changes*](#) onto the side of one crate. The dancers stand like pedestrians at traffic lights and ever so slowly disrobe to Petula Clark's *Downtown*. I take a seat on a crate labeled *umbilical*. My focus shifts from the film to the crowd to the crates that surround me, enchantingly labeled *to channel*, *spine-part*, *coddle*. The sounds from the film—a radio announcer, the Beach Boys' *Warmth of the Sun*, the dancers' ceremonious tearing and moving through huge sheets of paper—are oddly soothing. I consider lying back on *umbilical*, closing my eyes, letting the noise wash over me.

Antoni approaches, wraps a small sculpture (too distant to see) in plastic and packs it away in a crate, screws it closed with a power drill. With the drill she opens another crate, unpacks *One Another* (2008), a photograph of her daughter spooning food into Antoni's belly button, and stands it against the seating. Like the dancers on the screen, her actions are both task and ritual. She turns the projector off, removes a giant roll of brown paper from the back wall, lowers it to the ground and gently nudges it through the long gallery space, between the crates and onlookers, where she interacts with it for a good long while, deeply plumbs its possibilities.

The FWM website has prepared me for this. I know that the space is an archive of Antoni's work packed into crates. That she will unpack a work at random during each of the iterations of Paper Dance in the 14-week exhibit. That she will interact with the paper Halprin used in the original Parades and Changes.

She lies down and puffs the paper over herself, like a tomb. Fits it around her legs and feet, as if burying her lower half in sand. Rolls herself up in lengths of it and stands, punches arms and legs out, slowly pokes a hole with her tongue. Shuffling inside the roll, she conjures a cigarette, a smokestack, Gumby. As she pushes the paper skyward from within, it crests and topples in half, and then she is a periscope. The first article of clothing to go is her pants, which she meticulously slides off, sculpts and positions alongside the paper. Eventually, it all goes. And there is communion—with the dancers and with Halprin herself, her spirit housed in those papers, the barrier

between the two eroding with each piece of clothing that comes off. She tears the paper, stuffs pieces into her mouth, nose, ears—ingesting the raw material of Halprin’s work. She steps back into her shirt, pulls the arms over her legs like pants, stuffs more and more paper down the neck until it slowly emerges out the neck hole at her crotch—birthing something new.

My vision is clouded by recent memories of [Zornitsa Stoyanova's Explicit Female](#). The work is different, yet the overlap in certain images—naked women rolling around in heaps of material, consuming and giving birth to them—is jarring. Where Stoyanova sent me reeling through a visceral re-experiencing of pregnancy, childbirth, eternal post-partum reclamation, watching Paper Dance, I float along with Antoni, engaged but unchanged. Yet Paper Dance shimmers with humanity’s essential themes. I watch as an idea, a work takes on a life of its own, follows the path of its making, all the while remaining prisoner to its inevitable impermanence.

She gathers the paper, heaps it atop the pile by the door, turns our attention to the accumulation, to the cycle of making.

I think of my allies, links that root and nourish me. The paucity of the term art. All the different ways of making, in and with our lives. The routes that arise and recede, naive optimism of planning, necessity of cultivating—love, passion, relations, work, home—anyway.

I think of the passing breath.

Ally (Performances): *Rope Dance, The Courtesan and the Crone, Paper Dance*), Janine Antoni, Stephen Petronio and Anna Halprin, Fabric Workshop and Museum, April 21-July 31.

Pictured on the thINKing DANCE homepage: Janine Antoni, Anna Halprin, Stephen Petronio, *Rope Dance*, 2015. Courtesy of the artists and The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia.

Pictured above the article: Janine Antoni in collaboration with Anna Halprin, *Paper Dance*, 2013. Photographed by Pak Han at the Halprin Dance Deck. Courtesy of the artists and The Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia.

Read Ellen Chenoweth’s preview of *Ally*, featuring an interview with curator Adrian Heathfield, [here](#). And read Jonathan Stein’s response to the exhibition and performances [here](#).

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