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To cross that sunlit landscape for a little longer – particles and particulars

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To put it concisely, we could say that since the late 1960s Giovanni Anselmo's artworks have channeled the energy and liveliness of real-life situations in order to keep the energy of life in circulation and to keep real-life situations in a state of openness and potential change—never crystallized into an inert object or series of things. His practice—like those of his fellow artists of the Post-Minimalist, Conceptual and Arte Povera period—was never mimetic nor representational of his beliefs, but was based on the notion that an artwork is a condensed, essential, emblematic, and perceivable example of what goes on in the world at large. As Anne Rorimer has brilliantly summarized in her essay in this catalog, in Anselmo's works “the real encompasses the here-and-now and the infinite. It points to what cannot be seen but also to that which can be indicated through the representational possibilities of art by means of signifying elements: materials responding to gravitational force; the needle of a compass; or by language, photography, or color. Ultimately, Anselmo has uniquely participated in the revision of former notions of sculpture in works that place observable phenomena within a terrestrial framework.”ⁱ

The word *particolare* (particular) signifies in Italian both detail and something distinctive or special; it derives its root from the Latin *partire*, to separate, to divide, also at the root of the term “particle” in physics, the smallest elements that we can identify as building blocks of the universe. Thus the continuity of matter and immateriality, of a heavy rock and a very light thought, is evoked—both made up, ultimately, of elementary attractions.

In particular, Anselmo's practice concerns being embodied and oriented according to the planet's magnetic fields and the gravitational forces of the universe, and doing so in a specific place, at a specific moment. It concerns how the elements of the universe orient themselves in relation to each other, as particulars within it, and how every point is a particular if focused upon at one moment in time. Consequently, it concerns how all that is invisible becomes, under certain conditions, visible. Since the physical forces that govern our complex universe are essentially elemental, boiling down to relations of mass, force, electrical charge, time-space, and waves, the works of Anselmo are also based on the infinite variations of an elementary vocabulary that has become visible over the decades—projected light, slides, stones, magnetic needles, earth, ultramarine blue, some photographs, and a few drawings. Each exhibition, each manifestation, is based on the notion that less is more and that only what is necessary need be shown. Each manifestation has the ambition of creating an exemplary situation able to provoke in viewers a phenomenological awareness of their place in the here and now, while at the same time generating a sense of their cosmic and astral entanglement with the entire universe at every moment. Therefore, Anselmo's artworks are today of the utmost relevance, since they starkly remind us of what lies beneath and beyond the overload of images, cheap virtual products, and messages shooting across our internet platforms, gaining more

and more of our mental space while our physical relations shrink due to lack of time and attentive care.

When Giovanni Anselmo enters a room, he looks around quickly and sharply; he ascertains almost immediately the important elements having to do with weight and position—where he is standing in relation to the places where walls and floor join together, or where and how doors and windows and ceiling create a space through their mutual relation. He also calibrates this fundamental awareness of the here and now with what he knows about the world outside that room—where the Sun is at that moment, or where north is, thus grounding himself within the universe at large (and understanding how he is being orientated by it at the same time), a universe of which he knows he is just one particular.

Only then does he sit down and relax, entering into deep and focused conversation about art and the world, moving back and forth between speaking about art as a practice that needs to be *of the real* and making oblique references to serious social and political situations of our times, the wars and violence we hear echoes of, or the state of confusion and disorientation we are more and more accustomed to in the digital age in which the Cartesian mind-body divide has been virulently re-established in recent decades. When we meet, we discuss how nowadays people often do not know what direction north, south, east, and west lie in, nor what time of day it is, unless they look at their phones. There is a sense of deep empathy when the conversation slips towards the “outside” of art, to our environment with its ecological crises, and to the people who inhabit it, their struggles and their pains. But Anselmo quickly returns to the here and now, as if to eschew any grandiose statements severed from the locality of his daily experience; it is as though only direct, *real* experience were ethical and “speakable.” This notion that art, in order to be art, has to be *real*, appeared in the mid-to-late 1960s and it did so through a politics of aesthetics based on a notion that art had a major role to play in the emancipation of people from lives alienated by consumer culture. And it did so one person at a time, starting with the artist him/herself.

In a conversation regarding his youth, Anselmo once told me that his eyesight was extremely precise (tests showed that he had 24/20 vision, that is, eyesight with stereoscopic vision) and therefore, during his compulsory military service, he was sent to a division specialized in learning to coordinate instruments in order to aim at targets as exactly as possible. Life brought him eventually to art and obviously he used his special eyesight for peaceful purposes.

Anselmo’s stance of perceptual and ethical modesty runs parallel to the phenomenological approach that emerged in the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) whose *Phenomenology of Perception* appeared in 1945, and whose late work *Le visible et l’invisible* (The visible and the invisible) was published in 1964. Here, the interconnection between seeing the world and touching the world is established through a sense of a wandering visibility into that which is nearby, close, and yet always changing. There is not, on the one hand, a world “out there,” nor is there a pure consciousness “in here,” but a third way of seeing experience as a form of behavior—of acting in the world, a world/consciousness encounter where consciousness exists only when it is actually involved in the matters and bodies of the world. Consciousness is this becoming visible of the world in the engagement with its Being. Yet Being never shows itself to our consciousness in all its fullness; thus experience is limited by the partial perceptions we have of Being. For Anselmo, this is the understanding of the particular, and seeing the world as a potentiality of particulars is also a form of partiality. For both Anselmo and Merleau-Ponty, the body, our body, is a perceiving instrument, or embodied consciousness with intentionality. It is not an object nor a container of the mind but an encounter. There is a facticity to this phenomenological outlook, a holding together of the smallness of scale of one’s perceiving body-consciousness and the sense of the vast universe

within which it is inscribed. There is a tension between the daily-ness, the realness, the authenticity of the granite rock in his installations and the sense of the greatness and siderality of the universe, of the cosmic within which the daily is always inscribed. This tension is physically embodied in the presence of the magnetic needle, its particles pulling it to the North Pole. To perceive these cosmic spheres means to live also on the astral plane and to be aware of how the cosmic informs all things, no matter how small. Throughout his oeuvre, Anselmo has thus attempted to relate and commensurate this intimately small (which is *invisible*) with the scale of the infinitely large (which is also *invisible*), to see both as interconnected through different forms of one unitary underlying flow of energy that is constantly mutating. Such a perspective locates the artwork at the nexus between these two scales—and this nexus is the space of the visible, the space of the exhibition, the space of an *intentional* presence (as opposed to the unintentional presence of things in the universe outside of art) indicated by the artist and understood and experienced by the visitor in a dance of mutual understanding and awareness.

The question of how to make manifest what is normally invisible may of course lead us back to the late nineteenth-century obsession with seeing what was previously invisible—electromagnetic waves in frequencies not visible as light such as radio waves, or the infinitely small through the microscope, or the inside of a body with the X-ray, or the previously unnoticed details of the world through photography, or the inside of a building through glass architecture. Yet Anselmo's practice is unrelated to such impulses and more akin to modern physics, in particular to twentieth-century theories attempting to unify all fundamental interactions, to combine the forces previously thought of as separate: the strong force, the weak force, the electromagnetic force and the gravitational force. The motion of electrically charged particles gives rise to magnetism, where objects produce fields that attract or repel others, and while all objects experience magnetism, some do so more strongly, such as the planet with its North and South Poles. The gravitational force tells us that all objects with mass are attracted to other objects according to their respective mass and to how close they are—in lay terms, the fact that everything in the universe pushes or pulls something else in the universe. The gravitational force being the weakest, its agency has very little effect on the shape and appearance of our bodies and things we see, but it is the main force responsible for the behavior of very large structures on a macroscopic scale, like when hydrogen fuses under pressure to form stars and then groups them into galaxies, or closer to us, the orbit of the Moon and the tides on our planet. According to Einstein, this force is a consequence of the curvature of space/time and very recently, in early 2016, just a few months prior to the publication of this catalog, scientists have listened to the universe so finely that they have found proof of gravitational waves or ripples in Einstein's theory of space/time curvature, caused by the collision of two black holes (objects with a mass so dense that even at the speed of light no other object can pull away from them).

But what does Anselmo's fascination with such imperceptible forces regulating the universe have to do with us, and with art? How can someone so small as a human being relate to these matters beyond an abstract and academic knowledge of them? A simple answer is to be found in his poignant metaphor of the black hole, *Neon nel cemento* (Neon in cement, 1967–1969), part of the collection of Castello di Rivoli, a neon turned on and running through cement so that its light is never visible to us, yet its energy is indeed traversing the cement block. This seminal work has been restored and installed on the occasion of this exhibition. In many ways, Anselmo's task is to make manifest these knowledges in the most simple and exemplary ways via tangible examples of their workings, making his artworks akin to simple science experiments that anyone can grasp. This is the meaning of his 1969 statement that his artworks are “physical manifestations of the force of an action, of the energy of a situation or of an event”—and not “still lifes.”ⁱⁱ

Anselmo's appreciation of the void in the exhibition space, which enhances the space itself, and his focus on light (the ray of light coming from the slide projector's bulb since he began using it in 1970) and on other essential elements might suggest that an analogy could be made with the aesthetics of the sublime in Burke and Kant. Yet his art only superficially enters into the Romantic sphere of the sublime. Indeed, the artist reverses the Romantic sublime's tendency to belittle the human being, reduced to a microscopic level in comparison with the vast terrifying forces of nature that may potentially destroy him. The aesthetic of the sublime emerged in the eighteenth century when the infinitely small was the human body and not subatomic particles as we perceive it today. In Anselmo's work, the astronomical scale instead connects directly to the scale of the single body so that a sense of great empowerment, proximity and agency emerges from his works—not the drama of loss and distance. It is the human body and its perceptual and energetic abilities that form the basis of Anselmo's practice. Often referred to in his works is the "span," the width of a person's hand as well as the height of the stone that allows us to reach just a little closer to the sky if we stand on it, as he invites viewers to do in many of his exhibitions.

In 1969, Anselmo made the work *Interferenza nella gravitazione universale* (Interference in universal gravitation) for which he took photographs of the setting Sun every twenty footsteps while walking westwards, thus extending ever so slightly the time of viewing the Sun before it set, or put another way, slowing down the rotation of the Earth by walking in the opposite direction to the rotation of the Earth. Stemming from this project is a new installation in the Manica Lunga of the Castello. The work was first shown in 1971 as a multiple titled *Documentazione di interferenza umana nella gravitazione universale* (Document of human interference in universal gravitation, 1969–1971). We move from the entrance at the north-eastern end of the space towards the west and find the images on the south side as we walk. They show that as the Earth turned towards the darkness, the artist moved an infinitely small distance closer to the Sun, gaining an infinitely small duration of sunlight, taking him through a sunlit landscape just a little bit longer. This extra time, gained not thanks to interstellar journeys at the speed of light but instead with our feet firmly on the ground, acts on our emotions at a symbolic level, reminding us of the eternal natural desire to dilate time and lengthen our lives. But for Anselmo what counts is that this dilation or lengthening of the day, even though invisible to the naked eye (the position of the Sun in the twenty shots is practically identical), is real and not a metaphor nor a representation. The photographic medium, which we associate with representation and duplication of reality, reveals itself to be an instrument able to measure our lived life, a true proof of our Being in the world and of our freedom to be in it as we intend to be, having made the conscious decision to oppose ourselves to the waning Sun, at least for a little bit longer. And that an analogic photograph is the material recording and registering of light refracted off an object adds an even more literal level to this discussion, in so far as what is recorded by the camera is the source of all light on Earth, that is, the Sun.

The artwork, exhibited initially in 1971 as a multiple made up of twenty tiny photographs, has been taken up by the artist various times over the years in different formats. This openness to the fact that an artwork can appear over and over again through the years is at the basis of Anselmo's vision, which does not seek invention in form and materials. His vocabulary recurs over the years according to each new situation. How many times have we seen *Particolare* and how many *Direzione* have we encountered? Each time, it is the pleasure of recognition first of all that moves us, the feeling of belonging to a world that we know and that yet is always different, like seeing the stars every night—on some nights they shine more brightly and clearly and on other nights less—or the sunrise, always repeated and always different according to the season and our position on the planet as we gaze on it. This is the profound meaning of the word "open" that Anselmo used in a

1969 note published by Germano Celant in his book *Arte povera*: “I, the world, things, life—we are all situations of energy. The point is not to fix the situations, but to keep them open and alive—like life processes.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This new version for the Manica Lunga, built in the sixteenth century as a picture gallery where paintings along the walls were to alternate with real windows onto the world, is over 100 meters long. Walking down the gallery towards the window at the back end, towards the west and the setting Sun, we experience yet another iteration of one of Anselmo’s works, this time inverting the scaling down of the distance between the images as in all previous presentations. Instead, he has amplified it so that an epiphany occurs: when walking down the Manica Lunga today, we realize all of a sudden that our procession through the images coincides with the original walk that Anselmo took during his photographic project—it takes about twenty footsteps to move from one image to another. And suddenly we understand the simplicity and the radicality of the artist’s gesture as he walked alone in the landscape in 1969 taking a picture with his camera every twenty steps. The relationship between art and reality is reversed once again, and not only do we gain an infinitely small amount of extra time before the Sun sets behind the Manica Lunga towards the hills beyond, but time itself curves and then folds, and we find ourselves right *there*—crossing that landscape still lit by the Sun for a little longer. It is the year 1969.

ⁱ See p. 88 in this catalog.

ⁱⁱ G. Anselmo in G. Celant, *Arte povera* (Milan: Mazzotta, 1969), p. 109 (see English translation in C. Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera*, London: Phaidon Press, 1999, p. 233).

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.