

## Form as Social Commitment:

The Art of Giovanni Anselmo during the *Anni di Piombo*

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**Abstract**

In April 1968, concurrent with the early stages of the student movement in Europe, the young Arte Povera artist Giovanni Anselmo installed his first solo exhibition at a Turin gallery. The sculptures shown there were not static objects, but rather demonstrations of invisible concepts like relativity. What emerged in Anselmo's first solo show and developed over the ensuing decade was a tactical resistance to the crystallization of his works into a single image or static object. This paper argues that this approach was also central to a critical understanding of the roles of the artist and the viewer during a time of great political foment in Italy and throughout Europe. I explore the relationship of Anselmo's sculptural interests to the currency of phenomenology in Northern Italy, the theorization of Arte Povera, in which he figures as a central protagonist, as well as to the socio-political challenges of the 1970s in Italy. Between 1967 and 1978, Anselmo endeavored to reveal tense fullness in empty spaces and to discover latent energy in seemingly inert materials by activating the viewer's ability to recognize them as small indications of a dynamic macrocosm. In the context of 1968 and the ensuing *Anni di piombo*, such macrocosmic glimpses might occasion a broadened worldview, in which the closed perceptual dialectic of self versus world could expand to include other, previously invisible, possibilities. From this expanded point of view prompted by Anselmo's presentation of energies, one can begin to understand, and even undermine, man-made 'invisible' systems like government and class. By doing this through the *form* of the work rather than its explicit *content*, Anselmo models the notion of an artist using form as social commitment. This mode of working has resonance for many artists today, who may struggle with reconciling their material practices with political allegiances in an increasingly co-opted art market.

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**Keywords**

Anselmo, Arte povera, sculpture, anni di piombo

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I, the world, things, life, we are situations of energy and the point is not to crystallize such situations, though maintaining them open and alive is a function of our living.

- Giovanni Anselmo

In April 1968, in concurrence with the intensifying student movement in Europe, the young *Arte Povera* artist Giovanni Anselmo installed his first solo exhibition at a Gian Enzo Sperone's gallery in Turin in Via Cesare Battisti. Although he had been included in group exhibitions there and in Bologna the previous year, this show was the first opportunity Italian critics had to grasp a cohesive sense of his project.

One of the most discussed works in the exhibition was an untitled, tall, black Formica column with a sphere at the top. This ball, which was just above eye-level, appeared to move in response to visitors in the gallery, because the column was filled with water upon which the sphere floated. A deceptively subtle object, it remained in constant motion as the different materials accommodated themselves to each other: the water was contained in the column and partially displaced by the sphere, and yet, the sphere was held up by the tension of the water's surface. In the text published in the show's slim catalogue, which bore an image of this piece on the cover, art historian Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco noted how the work both indicated the instability of every solid, and conversely, «demonstrate[d] that everything mobile can be fixed within the rules of structure», thus offering «a fine lesson in 'relativity'» (Minola 123). The critic's sentiments reveal an acceptance of newly considered roles for artist and viewer in the late 1960s, as well as some insight into the ways in which *Arte Povera* artists were inquiring on their part in the developing drama. In the contemporary reception theories of Turinese philosopher Luigi Pareyson, could read that the interests of the artist and the viewer meet in the work, which structures a viewing experience. However, like much Turinese art of the time, Anselmo's project was designed to specifically challenge the notion of a fixed structure: it created a space of encounter that remained open and flexible during a period of sustained viewing and engagement. *Arte Povera's* founding theorist, Germano Celant, similarly championed the inherent mutability of Anselmo's early sculptures in the show's catalogue, arguing that they should be understood as dynamic situations *posing as* objects, which «recompose themselves each time, their existence depending on direct human interaction» (*Art*, 57).<sup>1</sup>

These notions of relativity and perpetual re-composition, which were seen in the contingent objects of Anselmo's first solo show, became a central part of his practice over the next decade. This paper will argue that the artist's own stated goal of having his work resist crystallization into a single image or static object are connected to both international conversations about process among artists and local aestheticians of Anselmo's generation and can be considered from a socio-political point of view. That is, the artist's aesthetic resistance to stasis and his insistence on active perception during the decade known popularly in Italy as the *Anni di piombo* or 'Years of Lead', can also provide a perspective on the political challenges to individual power in Italy during the 1960s-70s.

<sup>1</sup> Emphasis is mine.

During this period, which was marked by economic recession, generational protest movements, tensions between organized labour and industry, and the escalation of domestic political battles toward terrorism, Anselmo endeavoured to engage his viewers in experiences of expanded consciousness of the phenomenal world. His works reveal tense fullness in empty spaces and recover latent energy in seemingly inert materials, thus revealing the potential to harness power from the most benign situations. He achieved this by creating situations that activate the viewer's recognition of all materials as small indications of a dynamic macrocosm. With this aim, the molecular connections among different tangible forms of matter became of key interest to the artist, and their pursuit often informed the physical makeup of his works. Far from arbitrary, his aesthetic choices often privilege materials, like metamorphic rock, that reveal traces of former states in order to underscore this point. Celant recognized this interest in material possibilities as relating more to process than materiality per se. In 1969, he wrote: «Animals, vegetables and minerals have cropped up in the art world. The artist is attracted by their physical, chemical, and biological possibilities. He is renewing his acquaintance with the process of change in nature [...]» (*Arte*, 225). Anselmo's works often reveal the perceptible signs of the invisible, energetic bonds that bind us to nature through first-hand material encounters.

For many artists and critics interested in such ideas, the writings of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty took on central importance. Merleau-Ponty had argued that the world itself is recomposed for us with every perception (256-57). In the Turinese context, continental phenomenology was working its way through the writings of Pareyson's former philosophy student at the University of Turin, Umberto Eco. In the 1962 book *The Open Work*, for example, Eco argued that when Merleau-Ponty wrote: «it is therefore essential for an object and also for the world to present themselves to us as open...and as always promising future perceptions» (cit. in Eco 384). Here he addresses the fundamental character of artwork as structured to allow on-going perceptions according to the context. For Anselmo, this structural notion is foregrounded in a project that stimulates the viewer's consciousness of dynamic visible and invisible energies, allowing his objects to resist formal and interpretative closure.

Eco's text also notably includes a reprint of his 1955 review of Pareyson's *Estetica* titled "Form and Interpretation in Luigi Pareyson". Reading his former teacher, Eco underscores the notion that «the dialogue with matter is indispensable to any artistic production», and that «physicality, here understood as resistance, is necessary to the formative action both as a motive and as an obstacle», a concept that is particularly relevant to plastic arts like sculpture (160). According to the theories of Pareyson and Eco, the object is the central axis around which each communication or relationship between artist and viewer revolves. In the case of Anselmo's early sculptures, the viewer's co-presence with a sculptural object or immersion in an installation restages the artist's dialogue with matter through the perception of the material traces of the initial encounter.

Anselmo began his artistic career drawing and painting, activities that he has said were unsatisfying because they excluded both the artist and the viewer: «You remain alone with your emotions, instead of really being able to share them» (cit. in Maraniello and Vilianni 211). His turn to a temporally-based sculptural practice came after a period of hitchhiking through Europe, during a formative experience climbing Stromboli. Standing on the slope of the volcano, he reportedly recognized in his shadow a significant relationship between his body, light from the sun, and an infinite conception of time. In 1965 the artist published a photograph of himself taken on that hike as a souvenir, and

perhaps as proof of the crucial experience. Describing the revolution that occurred in his thinking around this time, he has said that:

The event undoubtedly made it possible for me to approach my work in a different way, that is, to conceive works that were no longer the way I had created them up till then—paintings, drawings, etc.—but ‘devices’ in which the energy that surrounds us, and that we ourselves are, is not crystallized, represented once and for all. (cit. in Maraniello and Viliiani 211-212)

After this experience, he began demonstrating perceptible traces of such energy through simple, material – if not sculptural – ‘devices’. The aim was to present material situations that foregrounded contingency rather than unity.

Among the earliest of these is an untitled work from 1966 that was first exhibited in a group show at Sperone in April 1967.<sup>2</sup> A red polystyrene bulb is held aloft, at eye level, by an iron filament that is anchored in a small wooden cube. This piece registers human presence when viewers move through the space of the gallery, displacing air and causing the wire to vibrate and the red droplet to wobble. As an erect object it is an analogue of the viewer’s standing body, but the sculpture also makes viewers self-conscious of the (invisible) air pushed around as they move through the room. The tensile properties of the vertical iron rod, the backbone of the piece, also demonstrate the pull of gravity because the height of the work is a maximum height at which the iron wire will stay erect, at which it can resist gravitational pull (cit. in Maraniello and Viliiani 212 and 138). A related work from that same year was exhibited along side of it. Taller but without the polystyrene blub atop, it is described in the most recent monograph on Anselmo as consisting of «iron, wood, and force of gravity». The viewer is thus made both aware of inhabiting a physical body through the dynamic negotiation of the piece in the gallery, and also cognizant of the subjugation of that body (and the work itself) to unseen but omnipresent and defining forces.

Such notions of invisible energy governing everyday life continued to develop in works that Anselmo exhibited later that year, including one of his best known pieces, *Direction*, (*Direzione*). It was first shown in *Con temp l'azione* (with time action/contemplation), a collaborative exhibition curated by Daniela Palazzoli. The show opened in early December 1967, occupying three different gallery spaces in Turin—Sperone, Christian Stein, and *Il Punto*. It ran in concurrence with the student occupations at the city’s University.<sup>3</sup> The double-entendre of the exhibition’s title nods equally to the prevalence of action-based works and to the time-dependent manner in which they are apprehended. The curator wrote that these artists’ projects encouraged active engagement from the viewer: «[The artwork] contemplates (simultaneously it produces) its own actions via an in-out of itself that presents its events and treats its own objects» (Palazzoli 39). She describes a dynamic model in which meaning is both created and re-

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<sup>2</sup> In correspondence with the author, Sperone notes that this exhibition at his gallery was the first place Anselmo publicly showed work like this (e-mail to the author, October 13 2009).

<sup>3</sup> On 27 November 1967, the student occupation of the University’s central location, the *Palazzo Campana*, and the *Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia* (Department of Humanities and Philosophy) established a model for similar protests nationwide that have been likened by historians to the surprise attacks of guerilla warfare, with students regularly interrupting lectures and hijacking the discussions for their own aims. Also note: Remo Pastori ran *Il Punto*, but Sperone had served as the gallery’s director before opening his own space in 1964. (Minola 17).

flected upon in the phenomenological space of the gallery. It can be read as analogous to the student's youthful desire to re-form the world in the process of living through it, and a fitting description of Anselmo's sculptures included in the show.

The first, *Direction*, is a roughly triangular stone slab that lies on the floor.<sup>4</sup> A small magnetic compass is embedded in the rock's surface. The slab's vertex usually points in the same northerly direction as the tiny compass needle, creating the impression that the stone has also «oriented itself» towards North (1972, 58). This sculpture is presented as though it were a found object, something viewer and artist alike stumbled across. It is revealed upon closer inspection to be pregnant with latent energy and invisible forces. First, because the sculpture is extremely low to the ground—the stone is only a few inches in height—, its mass appears to weigh heavily on the floor, underscoring the gravitational pull that holds it down.<sup>5</sup> Second, the material, schist, has specific geological connotations. Schist is a metamorphic rock, formed of either igneous or sedimentary rock that, through exposure to extreme heat and pressure, has changed molecular constitution. The type of stone therefore perfectly embodies Anselmo's fascination with the molecular exchanges between material states. Third and last point, the compass's small, quivering needle – a visible sign of its subjugation to the forces of the Earth's surrounding magnetic field – enlivens the seemingly inert material. Gravity and magnetism are two physical forces to which bodies are constantly subjected, but which one rarely considers because of their 'invisibility'. In *Direction*, Anselmo highlights these normally transparent forces by making them perceptible in the real space of the exhibition.

Such demonstrations of invisible forces can be understood as part of the work's sociality. By providing a visible example of gravity and magnetism within everyday encounters and common materials, Anselmo's *Direction* allows the viewer to step outside the normative sphere of vision and experience.<sup>6</sup> Such a macrocosmic glimpse might occasion a broadened worldview, in which the closed perceptual dialectic of self versus world could expand to include other, previously invisible, possibilities. That is, in recognizing the limits of visibility, one might be led to consider other invisible forces that shape everyday experience, such as politics, economics, family, tradition, social custom, language, or institutions. From this expanded point of view prompted by Anselmo's presentation of energies, one can begin to understand, and even undermine, man-made 'invisible' systems like government and class. By doing this through the *form* of the work rather than its explicit *content*, Anselmo models the notion of artist using «form as social commitment», which, as Eco describes, «rejects a formal system but does not obliterate it» (141).

Anselmo's acknowledgement of his viewers as active co-creators can also be read through a local interest in phenomenology to reflect a historical context in which social- and self-consciousness were primary preoccupations of both politically-oriented protest-

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<sup>4</sup> Anselmo made another version of *Direction* in 1966, comprised of a hollow wood form covered in Formica, which also had a compass embedded in the surface (Anselmo 1972, 58). His 2007 exhibition catalogue reproduces a period photograph of this work, but its current whereabouts and condition are unknown.

<sup>5</sup> Anselmo recalled that he executed this version in stone because of its weight, specifically that it could communicate that the «universe is not only bulk but also weight». (1972, 58).

<sup>6</sup> Reflecting on this work in 1979, curator Jean-Christophe Ammann wrote that it could be compared with the eastern orientation of Christian ecclesiastical architecture where an unseen power (faith) informs the orientation. In the case of Anselmo, it is not faith but physical energy that provides the impetus for the stone's orientation. (Ammann 16).

ers and of many intellectuals. For Merleau-Ponty, whose writings we have already noted were important for the spreading of phenomenology in Turinese philosophical circles, the physical encounter of the body with the sensible world was understood as a moment in which one's own consciousness came into focus. More radically, he argued that conscious perception actively creates the world:

Every sensation is spatial; we have adopted this thesis, not because the quality of an object cannot be thought otherwise than in space, but because, as the primordial contact with being, as the assumption by the sentient subject of a form of existence to which the sensible points, and as the co-existence of sentient and sensible, it is itself constructive of a setting for co-existence, in other words, of a space. (256-257)

This «primordial contact with being», that Merleau-Ponty claimed established one's perception of the world, provided a model for bringing individuals in touch with a physical relationship to the phenomenal world, from which modern individuals had been alienated by post-war industrialization and consumer spectacles. By occasioning sensible, participatory experiences, Anselmo's works create a space in which the viewer can conceptually master invisible forces. As a result of this experience, other seemingly opaque institutions and rigid structures might also appear to be within reach.

Another project from 1967, also first shown in *Con temp l'azione*, further exemplifies this tension between the individual viewing experience and the broader concepts it might introduce. *Untitled* is a sculpture consisting of two wooden boxes covered in black Formica set atop one another. At first it appears related to American precedents, such as one of Robert Morris's early *Mirrored Cubes* (1965), or Tony Smith's steel *Die* (1962): still and stable, these cubes are easily comprehensible geometric forms made of commercially available, common industrial materials. Certainly Anselmo would have seen such works at Sperone, where many international artists exhibited in the 1960s. However, unlike Morris or Smith, Anselmo's 'cube' frustrates an intuitive recognition of its geometric form. While the volumes themselves are regular (technically, parallelepipeds), the artist 'corrects' the fact that the floor on which they sit is never exactly even, by inserting four steel wedges between the two blocks to level the box.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, this 'stabilized' cube is anything but static. Once the first impression of the work's cube-like character gives way to a focused view of the constituent parts, Anselmo's sculpture becomes dynamic. It reveals itself to be built of parts, and subject to constant, nearly imperceptible forces; its stability is a tenuous balance created by the multiple resistant relationships between the floor, the slick Formica surfaces, and the smooth steel wedges. In order to pointedly foreground these forces, a spirit level is embedded in the surface of the top box, demonstrating the fragile equilibrium in which the 'cube' is being held. What was first seen as solid and stable is revealed through the viewing experience to be fluid and tenuous.

In 1969, Trini wrote that what became clear in the new art (which in this instance he saw as not limited only to Italians) was that «somehow that objecthood was over» (46). Instead, he argued that actions and events were foregrounded. In the Italian context, this new focus extended the kinds of approaches to 'real' space pioneered by Lucio

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<sup>7</sup> Some sources have suggested that the boxes themselves are uneven (Christov-Bakargiev 77), but the artist maintained to me that the boxes themselves are regular and even. Since the floor is always a little uneven, the top volume is almost never level. (Anselmo, interview by author, May 22 2006).

Fontana as much as it responded to the international art seen in spaces like Sperone's gallery or the Venice Biennial. Benjamin Buchloh has suggested that the Italians' interests in simple demonstrations and their juxtapositions of natural and industrial materials – what he calls their «explicitly antitechnological stance», stemmed from a «misreading» of American Minimalism that «emphasized technology as its primary mode of production» (Buchloh 7). This not only ignores Italian precedents like Fontana, Manzoni, and Pinot-Gallizio, it gives the Turinese artists little credit in their reading of Minimalism, let alone phenomenology, and makes their response secondary to that of their American contemporaries.

Unlike the American precedents which *Arte Povera* has been said to 'misinterpret', Anselmo's *Untitled* has its own operation: it does not simply correlate to the viewer's body to create a measurable awareness of architectural space, but rather it offers a glimpse of the invisible forces actively filling the 'empty' space. This box acts like a black hole of sorts: condensing the energy of the room in the relationship between the cubic form, the floor, and the steel shims into the delicately balanced small air bubble that shows otherwise imperceptible pressures (Bandini 26). The artist has stated that this air bubble causes the cube to lose «all its actual value, remaining only an energy situation» (1972, 58). Anselmo's *Untitled* cube demonstrates the power present in all material encounters, aesthetic or otherwise. According to Merleau-Ponty, all sensible beings carry the memory of such encounters with them as an experiential horizon to help interpret later perceptions, suggesting an open and fluid concept of space based on personal interpolation rather than absolutes.<sup>8</sup> This expanded dialectical system counters the notion of a closed, univocal mode of perception and meaning. Akin to Luigi Pareyson's *formativity*, and the thesis of Eco's *Open Work*, the idea that the work is only a fragment held in a triangulation between the creating subject, the perceiving subject, and non-subjective factors such as history, is central to Anselmo's art. The artist's desire to keep his works from closing into a single meaning or image is evidenced by his repeated use of the visible tensions within an artistic gesture and in the interactions of materials, which make the otherwise purely conceptual apprehension of something like energy palpable and immanently present for the perceiving subject.<sup>9</sup> His objects' potential scale foregrounds a new humanism that is foreign to American technological determinism.

Many of Anselmo's early sculptures use geometric shapes antithetically, to reveal instability rather than cohesion. His work titled *Torsion (Torsione)* (1968) is an important example of this counterpoint between highly rational geometry and a visceral phenomenological experience of the object. Here the artist sets two ends of a piece of leather into the top plane of a wet block of concrete. Once the concrete had dried, he positioned this cube near a wall, and inserted a large wooden dowel into the leather 'loop' sticking out of the concrete (in another version, the dowel was iron). Using the dowel as a lever, he twisted the leather around itself, the tension increasing with each rotation. When the material would no longer give, the artist lodged the dowel against the wall, channelling the counteractive energy of the now tightly wound leather into the wall. In a statement of the period, the artist wrote: «The energy of a torsion [...] must live with its true force. It clearly could not live with its form alone» (Anselmo 1969, 109). The work demonstrates

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<sup>8</sup> «An initial perception independent of any background is inconceivable. Every perception presupposes, on the perceiving subject's part, a certain past [...]» (Merleau-Ponty 328).

<sup>9</sup> In a 1972 interview with Bandini, Anselmo noted that while his works from 1967-68 might seem to be at rest, they were in fact actively subjected to invisible forces (Bandini 26).

the principle of latent energy through the leather's tension and the tenuous friction between the dowel and the wall, presenting 'true force' in the viewer's conditional time and space.

Positioned in a room or gallery, *Torsion* solicits an instinctive understanding of its constitutive forces. Anselmo described the way this relationship becomes apparent:

In *Torsion* [...] the energy I transmit to the piece by doing a contorsive movement – and that I press on the work due to the weight of iron or cement bar until I detach myself from the piece – this energy is then immediately returned to me in relationship to the extension of the real force in the return movement (1972, 58).

For the artist, opposing the force of the action and its return is a personal, physical experience, but the viewer can also perceive the tension that suspends the twisted material because it embodies basic physics to which everyone can relate. When children twist the ropes of a swing, for instance, they know it will release into a dizzying counter-spin. When encountering Anselmo's work, such early experiences remain on one's perceptual horizon—a somatic memory—giving viewers a palpable, if intuitive, sense that the friction between the wall and the dowel could slip at any moment, sending the big beam flying across the room with equal and opposite force.

Inasmuch as a work like *Torsion* relies on natural paradigms and ubiquitous forces, it also maintains a dialogue with the facts and myths of a cultural collective past (Eco 42). Following such logic, one can identify formal rhymes with classical sculpture like Myron's *Discus Thrower* (c. 460 B.C.E.), or references to Renaissance predecessors like Michelangelo's tensely static *David* (1501-04), or Bernini's Baroque *David* (1623-24).<sup>10</sup> As fellow *Arte Povera* artist Luciano Fabro suggested, these examples are not just pictures in history books to an Italian artist, but physical examples of a shared cultural heritage, and part of the artist's horizon.<sup>11</sup> The parallels are plainly evident: these well-known sculptural figures are 'caught' at the moment just before the tension is unloaded, before the winding motion releases pent-up energy. Their stasis reveals tension through well-described musculature and concentrated facial expressions.

In *Torsion*, Anselmo does not represent an illusion of twisting flesh in marble or stone, but rather presents us with the real thing: tightly wrung leather. His demonstration of the force applied to real skin makes the concept visceral. Moreover, because he does not create a picture, the work allows the viewers, if they can, to consider allusions to both these past artistic precedents and contemporary 'stresses', broadening the horizon from which meanings can be posited.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, these works take on a variety of significations, depending on the individual conditions of their viewing, apprehension, and re-composition. That is, the meanings depend very much on the person viewing and on the conditions of the encounter, but some examples might clarify the point. Is it too much to read Anselmo's concrete and leather sculpture as an allusion to the human

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<sup>10</sup> Recently, a similar connection between another version of *Torsion* and Baroque sculpture has been made in the textbook *Art Since 1900* (see Foster 513).

<sup>11</sup> Luciano Fabro noted that the context for an Italian artist is different from the American context because for an Italian artist, art history is everywhere (interview by author, written notes, 21 May 2006, Milan, Italy).

<sup>12</sup> Krauss famously argued in 1966 that even in Donald Judd's seemingly most obdurate objects, allusion enters into their perception because of the way the mind seeks to correlate new experiences with those already recorded (1996, 24-26).

body trapped in an urban environment? Or the tightening as a testament to the increasing social tensions of 1968? Can one perhaps read the strain as representative of the harboured resentment of the political left in the post-war period, which laid the groundwork for the counter-cultural, counter-twisting, actions of the 1960s and 70s? Finally, this palpable material tension might embody what has been called the 'strategy of tension' deployed by Italian radical groups on both ends of the political spectrum to provoke each other during the 'Years of Lead'.<sup>13</sup> Certainly, there is a perceptible violence to the object, which might resemble a primitive weapon to some viewers. All of these readings are possible because this work does not *represent* so much as *present*, and in so doing allows for communications that are at once defining and infinitely generative.<sup>14</sup> A 1969 statement by the artist clearly laid out his preference for demonstration and action over representation and illusion:

Since every way of thinking and of being has to correspond to a way of acting, my work really is the physication (sic) of the force of an action, of the energy of a situation or an event, etc., not just the experience of this on the level of annotation or of a sign of dead nature. (109)

By presenting forces and energies in devices that make their action physically perceptible in the present of the viewer's experience, Anselmo's objects maintained an openness that allowed for multiple, simultaneous readings. This vitality created a different experience for viewers who no longer received information handed down by the artist/creator, but rather actively took a role in creating meaning through the perception and interpretation of the work. It created the right conditions for an empowered subjectivity.

While he continued to make sculptural works that solicited active engagement of the viewer's time and mental energy in the real space of the gallery, Anselmo also used photographs to document actions performed outside its walls. This presented particular challenges to his dynamic working habits, since a photograph necessarily 'freezes' an image.<sup>15</sup> Fragmentary and restless, Anselmo's sculptural objects resist singular resolution. That is, even though they can be photographed, the sculptures' documentation remains critically incomplete. A detailed description can help explain how the work operates, but never adequately replaces a first-hand encounter. In 1969, Trini argued that one of the important legacies of Duchamp's readymade for post-war sculpture was that it frustrated photographic reproduction and emphasized first-hand experience (43-45).<sup>16</sup> Photographs

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<sup>13</sup> Tobias Jones cites the first use of the phrase *strategy of tension* as being by the Italian correspondent for the London *Observer* in 1969 (46). I am not suggesting that Anselmo knew of this phrase from this context, but that a reference to *tension* would have been understood by viewers to be more than material.

<sup>14</sup> Anselmo has explicitly stated that his works did not aim for representation so much as presentation, echoing a common statement among the Turin School artists in general (2007, 216).

<sup>15</sup> This work, and others by Penone, Merz, and Zorio that are to be discussed later, are evidence that the *Arte povera* artists did on many occasions use photography. Buchloh has criticized these artists for not making use of photography as Post-Minimal and Conceptual artists did in the late 1960s, writing that it was «nearly absent» from *Arte Povera*. (Buchloh 7).

<sup>16</sup> Additionally, Pierre Restany's extensive series of articles in *Domus* retrospectively charted the development of the *open work* in twentieth-century art on an axis that turns around a Duchampian pole (Restany 41).

often record the actions that extend from three-dimensional practices, in order to document and communicate single performances to history. One of the ways in which Anselmo circumvented this crystallization of action-based works into a single image, was to use serialization to extend the perceptual experience, as in his *Documentation of human interference on universal gravitation*, (*Documentazione di interferenza umana nella gravitazione universale*) (1969), comprising twenty small, black and white photographs of a horizon.<sup>17</sup>

To make this work, Anselmo began by taking a photograph at a fixed spot around sunset. On foot, he began to move quickly towards the setting sun, taking photos at regular intervals. His theorem was that by moving westward, in opposition to the earth's rotation, he could interfere with the normal perception of that rotation, essentially extending the time it took for the sun to disappear below the horizon line. Of course, the action was so minute when compared to planetary movement, that its effect was imperceptible. In *Documentation*, it is only through the microcosm that indications of the macrocosm become perceptible. Inasmuch as one might cognitively recognize that gravity is created by the earth's rotation, it is something that one cannot generally perceive. The photographs of Anselmo's somewhat quixotic action provide a demonstrable, if mostly conceptual way of considering these forces.

The printed images themselves are small, 1-1/8" x 1-1/8" each, but are hung close together and at even levels, in order to create a horizon for the viewer that extends beyond one's peripheral vision. Installed sequentially, this line of photographs also acts as a filmstrip when 'read' from left to right, and in it the viewer can replicate the changing perspectives of the artist as he performed the action. Such a presentation does not employ serialization just as 'one thing after another'. I want to suggest that Anselmo's sophisticated conceptual systematicity is neither rationalistic nor simply ordered, but points to an order that is much larger than our normal ability to perceive.<sup>18</sup> According to a study of repetition in post-war art by Briony Fer, such artwork that extends time through serialization – as many works of the 60s do – give viewers access to new conceptions of subjectivity by transforming and restructuring everyday habits of looking.<sup>19</sup> By his imaginative proposal and serial execution of this irrational action, Anselmo makes the viewer recognize the daily occurrence of the setting sun as a sign of universal forces that act on a much larger scale. The repetition of the sun rising above and falling below the horizon line acts as a sign of these macrocosmic occurrences, which Anselmo condenses here into a single experience.

The concentration of visible signs of an expansive system found in *Documentation* helps contextualize the connections scholars have made between *Arte Povera* and John

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<sup>17</sup> This work exists in a number of versions, some of which have more photographs than others, and are presented in a slightly different manner, for example framed in a single frame, or, alternately, tacked to the wall individually.

<sup>18</sup> Bonito Oliva's account of the relationship between American post-Minimal artists and these European counterparts suggests that in fact they share the aim of creating a transparency between the internal world and the external world (Oliva 32).

<sup>19</sup> In *The Infinite Line*, Fer argues that many artists in the 1960s shared an interest in serialization. However her analysis of repetition and seriality stems from the readings born of American Minimalism vis-à-vis Mel Bochner, and it also looks back to Manzoni's linking of disparate elements into a single project. Of particular interest to this context is her chapter on the way seriality and subjectivity were bound together in works experienced through time on a human scale (Fer 3-4, 48-63).

Dewey's writings.<sup>20</sup> Picking up on this thread, Corinna Criticos has recently argued that what was critical for *Arte Povera* was the American pragmatist's understanding of «the work of art as “clarifying and concentrating meanings contained in scattered and weakened ways in the material of other experiences”» (Criticos 84). In fact, Dewey posited that works of art are fundamentally communication in which things reveal themselves through enunciation, and in this sense *Documentation's* translation of the expansive macrocosm into an intelligible, communicable concentrated form is exemplary (183). Indeed, the setting of the sun is something that everyone can perceive. The earth's horizon and the sunset can be considered a device: the perceivable sign or enunciation of larger planetary and galactic systems that are rarely considered because they are too massive to be fully visible.

If Anselmo's works implore the viewer to consider the visible as microcosmic sign of something that exceeds normal perception, they also occasion a consideration of the way these signs operate. For Anselmo, these early perceptual demonstrations led to an engagement with linguistic structures and systems in the 1970s. In an early example of such work, which bridges his material and linguistic interests, Anselmo used a slide projector to cast the word '*Dissolvenza*' (Fading) onto an iron block. He suggested that the constant projection of light would continue until the block (eventually) dissolved from oxidation (although, realistically, the projector would probably fail first). More than just a simple spotlight on the object, the illuminated word informs the viewer's reading of the whole installation (Anselmo 1961, 161). Would the area of iron exposed to the word dissolve faster than other areas?

Anselmo's interest in language had its own challenges because language itself is based on closed and arbitrary systems so such that a word has only a small range of meanings. Constructing tautologies became an important strategy for Anselmo in countering the prescribed order of linguistic systems and keeping the work open to the vagaries of its reception. In 1971, he began another series of works that used the same slide projectors to spatialize the relationships between word and image or experience: the tautology was established between the projected word and its exhibited context, such that it implicated the viewer explicitly and physically.

In the first of such works, titled *Invisible (Invisibile)*, a slide projector faces out from the wall into the void of the room in which it is exhibited.<sup>21</sup> At a first approach, the viewer focuses on the visible object – the projector – which seems to be simply shining a light into the room. Because the projector is positioned far from a screen or wall, it appears to lose its traditional function of throwing an image onto another surface. Indeed, it seems that whatever is being projected dissolves into pure light in the larger space, and any specific image remains imperceptible. At certain distances from the projector, a blurred outline might prompt the viewer to physically shift and adjust oneself to try to find the right distance at which an image comes into focus.

The 'image' remains obscure until the viewer encounters the beam of light at just this point, when a projected word, "*Visibile*" (visible), appears on the body. Here Anselmo literalized the function of the open work, of prioritizing participation, by making this work literally imperceptible without physical and conceptual interaction. It transforms

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<sup>20</sup> See Kestenbaum.

<sup>21</sup> Although he had earlier done *Fading*, this work is different in character from the other projection works that are not connected to objects, but which instead address space more than time, thus I maintain that *Invisible* is the first of a new type of work.

the viewer's body into the screen on which the work plays itself out. The reception of the work both occurs physically – when walking into the stream of light to reveal the otherwise absent word – and develops conceptually, in the struggle to reconcile these two opposite terms. When the word “*visibile*” comes into focus, does the (invisible) work cease to exist? Or is it only at that moment of visual perception that the work comes into being? Can a work be both invisible and visible at the same time? The slip between these opposing terms recalls a pre-linguistic moment in which the viewer must rely on experience to make the leap between one meaning and the other, between the body and the mind.<sup>22</sup>

In *Invisible*, the tautology of in/visibility is more than a linguistic game; it indicates a vital tension between the macro and the micro, and between intellectual concepts and our sensory perceptions, what we might call the vertical and the horizontal, respectively. In a foundational analysis that has informed the parameters for my use of the terms vertical and horizontal here, Krauss argued that prevailing concepts of modernism that focus on opticality misunderstand artistic practices better understood more carnally in the body, and specifically on a horizontal plane. Based on Bataille's interpretations of Freudian ‘sublimation’ to mean acculturation, she argued that the sublimation involved in, for example, hanging a painting on the wall ‘verticalizes’ it, moves away from the material and tactile nature of its making and toward an intellectual or optical experience.<sup>23</sup> Anselmo's work often proposes a physical engagement over an optical one, and in this work he specifically points to the instability of vision, as well as another ‘vertical’ system: language. The concept of invisibility is apprehensible through negative definition: something that is beyond one's ability to be visually perceived. Yet, as this work demonstrates, invisibility does not necessarily signal absence. Furthermore, the limits of perception are not absolute, but radically contingent. The ‘invisible’ is here revealed only by the physical engagement of the viewer: as the viewer seeks resolution of the tension between visible and invisible—and between absence and presence—the work points to the linguistic slip between these terms, as well as to the intellectual leaps we take in understanding the physical realities of everyday life (such as gravity, magnetism, energy, etc.).

The vast and imperceptible macrocosm in which humans play only a small role is the subject of a slide projection piece that occupied the artist for much of the mid-1970s, coinciding with the most strident political episodes of the *Anni di piombo*. First realized by Anselmo in 1972 and repeated in various iterations over the next six years, *Detail* (Particolare) consists of the Italian word *particolare* cast by multiple projection devices positioned around a room. These machines are aimed at seemingly random spots: the wall,

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<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible* may have been influential for Anselmo, or might more generally have been a topic of discussion at the time. I have addressed the writer's ideas about the *chiasm*, discussed in relation to the work of Giuseppe Penone in a text published by Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. Merleau-Ponty's text was published in 1964 in French and was translated into Italian in a 1969 publication by Bompiani, which also published numerous works by the philosophers of the University of Turin, including Eco.

<sup>23</sup> Krauss's argument refers specifically to the opticality of Jackson Pollock's paintings as claimed by Clement Greenberg. Instead, she asserts that the ninety-degree turn that is made as Pollock's paintings move from the floor, where they were made, to the wall, where they are received, is a verticalizing of the works that «tames» the artist (1993, 246).

the floorboard, the ceiling.<sup>24</sup> The referent to which the linguistic sign ‘detail’ refers is constantly shifting and completely context-dependent. On a small scale, a projector aimed at the floor might reveal a detail of wood grain, while stepping back a bit, it could refer to a detail of a pattern made by the floorboards, or pulling even further away, it could refer to the floor as a detail of the room, or the room as a detail of the building, or the building as a detail of an architect’s work, a civic project, a period style, or a natural resource. It also operates diachronically, pulling past and future into a relationship in which the continual present moment is only a single point of a vast continuum of time and space. The list of possible references is nearly endless, as the work refuses to settle into fixed meaning and synchronicity.

In semiological terms, the word *detail* is a shifter, a word requiring an enunciation or context to have meaning.<sup>25</sup> Shifters such as *this*, *that*, *I*, or *you* were identified by Russian linguist Roman Jakobson and have been correlated to a discussion of art by Krauss in her “Notes on the Index II: Seventies Art in America” (68-81). Shifters are all fragmentary words—or, in Jakobson’s terms, ‘empty signs’—that need to be connected to particular subjects or objects in order to function as a part of the linguistic system. Like *detail* these shifters can point to a wide range of subjects and objects, and the referent can change with each iteration, making shifters the most ‘open’ parts of speech.<sup>26</sup> For Anselmo, *detail* operates to keep the situation/experiment open to what the viewer brings to his or her interaction with the installation, physically or metaphorically. It is a linguistic concept analogous to the fragmentary nature of the aesthetics of open works, being contingent on the audience’s horizon of experience. By pointing to otherwise insignificant or unnoticed areas of an ‘empty’ space in *Detail*, Anselmo allows viewers to consider the act of connecting vision with comprehension, and provokes them to perceive the concept of being one detail among many, one jumble of molecular stuff in a vast network of shifting energies and materials.<sup>27i</sup>

Anselmo’s productions of this decade demonstrate his fundamental engagement with the concepts of material connectivity and co-dependency. Their emphasis on such essential, natural links between seemingly disparate materials opens up a horizon instead of closing them off into a hierarchy, even among substances with more industrial than natural associations. These efforts can be understood as a parallel of the anti-hierarchical, even libertarian sentiment of the early student movement. If all elements, organisms and processes can be seen as equalized on a molecular level—by a natural, biological, or physical order—as they are in Anselmo’s works, then perhaps social hierarchies like class, race, and gender might also be seen on level ground. To be clear, it is not the content of Anselmo’s works that is the primary locus of their connection to the

<sup>24</sup> The original 1972 and subsequent 1974 installations of this work at Sperone are pictured and described in Minola et al. 244-245.

<sup>25</sup> Johannes Meinhardt introduces the concept of the *shifter* in relation to this work by Giovanni Anselmo to argue that it offers another source of potential energy in his work (47-59).

<sup>26</sup> Michael Caesar argues that Jakobson was important to Eco’s formulation of the *open work* (25).

<sup>27</sup> When this work was shown in 1978 as part of a larger exhibition at Sperone Westwater Fischer gallery in New York, an *Artforum* review noted «the viewer will correspondingly see him/herself as a detail in the piece». This is certainly part of the experience of the work, but I am arguing that beyond this, the artwork or installation is a microcosm that projects this experience of physical and perceptual interconnectedness onto a universal scale (Rickey 63).

social and political era, but their very structures—participatory, emancipatory, open-ended situations, experiences, and demonstrations—that embody the contemporary moment of social transformation and political upheaval in which they emerged. The works' resistance to closure marks their social commitment: a refusal to participate in an economy rich with representations, parallel to contemporary social opposition to the closed avenues of politics as usual.

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