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***Coincidentia oppositorum*: The Works of Giovanni Anselmo between the Visible and the Invisible**

I wanted to create an invisible work. However, if I want to verify the invisible, it is possible only through the visible. If I want to materialise the invisible, this becomes immediately visible. The invisible is the visible that cannot be seen.

Giovanni Anselmo (1989)

The work to which Giovanni Anselmo is referring with these words is *Invisibile*, 1971 [fig. 1], a work consisting of a projector that focuses a slide saying VISIBILE not on a screen designed to accommodate it, but in a point in space where no object is placed. It will be the viewer to complete the work and make the projection visible, while passing at the right distance or moving in order to get the image in focus, once he or she understood the mechanism of operation of the device.

Projectors are an instrument of modernity that breaks into the economy of the artwork according to the specificity of its language: they are used, depending on the circumstances of the exhibition, not in focus or in focus, or with the focus on infinity, or on a precise point. Such elements will allow (or not allow) for a clear vision of the projected word. To act as a counterbalance to this mechanical presence is the body of the viewer, which inevitably becomes the projection screen. Germano Celant (1967: 85) states in the text for the catalogue of his seminal exhibition *Arte povera – Im Spazio*, held in Genoa at the Galleria La Bertesca during the autumn of 1967, that, in this way, “the body is ennobled as a ritual altar. [...] The physical presence, the behaviour, in their being and existing, are art.”

The installation *Invisibile* was shown on numerous occasions over the decades. In the photographs taken to document its effect, we often find that the body of the artist becomes the projection screen: Giovanni Anselmo turns himself into a means that illustrates the methods of unveiling the vision. This aesthetic approach, a relational behaviour common among many contemporary artists from Marcel Duchamp onwards, perfectly embodies what Friedrich W. Nietzsche (1872: 29) stated in his seminal book *The Birth of Tragedy*: “Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art.”

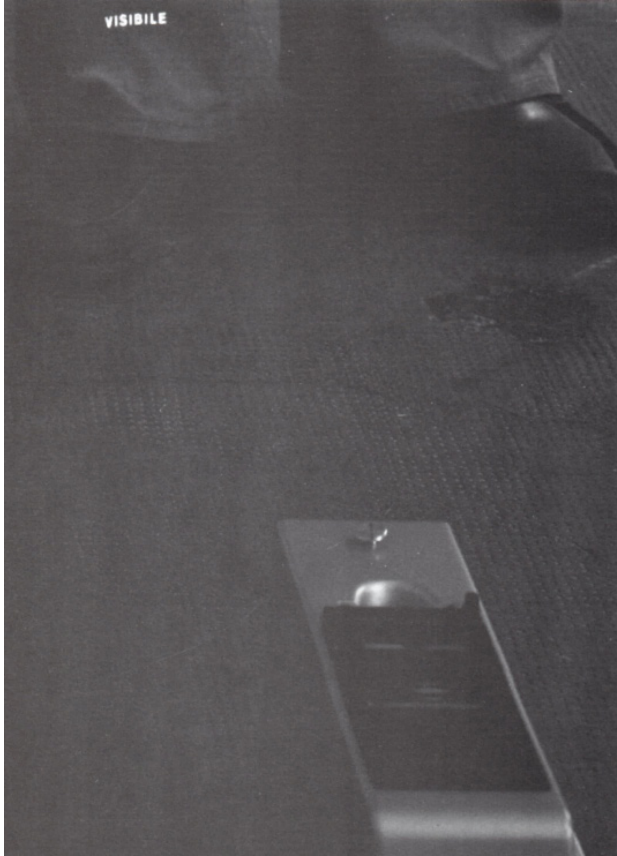


Fig. 1. Giovanni Anselmo, *Invisibile*, 1971

The works of Giovanni Anselmo generally bring into play a tension between forces and weights, while in the works I refer to the same tension embraces the contradiction between the visible and the invisible, involving a material *facies* only to the extent that the latter is indispensable for making visible what otherwise would not be. The intangible element of the light beam is made visible only through the projection. It is always the projection of something immaterial on something material, of something that is seen on something else that is not seen; we could, therefore, say of an entity that participates in the dimension of the non-being that it is projected into the world of the being. This hypothetical material makes, then, the imperceptible turn into the perceptible, it allows it to exist; the matter puts the light beam into being; otherwise, it would not be seen, it would not exist in the end; otherwise, the finished would be lost in the infinite.

This contradiction is clearly defined by the French professor Jean Marc Poincot (1982: 40–41), in an article titled *Anselmo infini* (Eng. Infinite Anselmo), published in the periodical *Art Press*, where he points out: “Every attempt to perceive the invisible is then liquidated through the apparition of the visible.” The

non-being can only begin to be if it finds in front of itself a screen that prevents the light rays from continuing beyond their journey and getting lost in the infinite. In the course of the years Giovanni Anselmo has created works that function in a similar way and that, in different aspects, deal with “abstract and general concepts (infinity, invisibility...), seen as categories existing in ideas, but not in empirical experience, a situation the artist attempts to remedy through the work,” as stated by the Italian art critic Giorgio Verzotti (2000: 297).

For example, Anselmo worked on thematic cycles such as the one entitled *Particolare (Detail)*, a project started in 1972 [fig. 2], consisting of slides saying the word PARTICOLARE (Eng. DETAIL) projected into different exhibition spaces. Sometimes it runs into a wall, almost dignifying in this way the portion of the wall in question, as if it was an important work of art from which a relevant detail has been selected, just as it happens in the monographs of the great authors of the past. In his other pieces, however, the mechanism is the same as the one employed in the work described above, *Invisibile (Invisible)*, in which the focus of the slide is not immediately perceptible, but the viewer needs to physically stand in front of the light beam to become a screen and be able to read the word PARTICOLARE.



Fig. 2. Giovanni Anselmo, *Particolare*, 1975

Referring to Anselmo's decision to show a fragment of surrounding reality as a detail of his artwork, Beatrice Merz (1989:13), daughter of two Arte Povera artists, Marisa and Mario Merz, in her text *Entrare nell'opera* (Eng. Enter the artwork), speaks in verse about this cycle of works by the artist:

Detail of everything.

Finite of infinity.

Visible of the invisible.

Detail of infinity.

[...] A detail of a room is a detail;

a room is a detail of time;

We, the objects and everything on which the projector points, we are details of time, we are also other details in a future time and we were other, different details in a past time.

I am now going to address Giovanni Anselmo's relationship with time. In his art, it appears to be declined with complex modalities in numerous works and it finds an appropriate manifestation in *Dissolvenza* (Eng. *Fade-out*), a work first created in 1970 [fig. 3]. A projector focuses the writing DISSOLVENZA on an iron

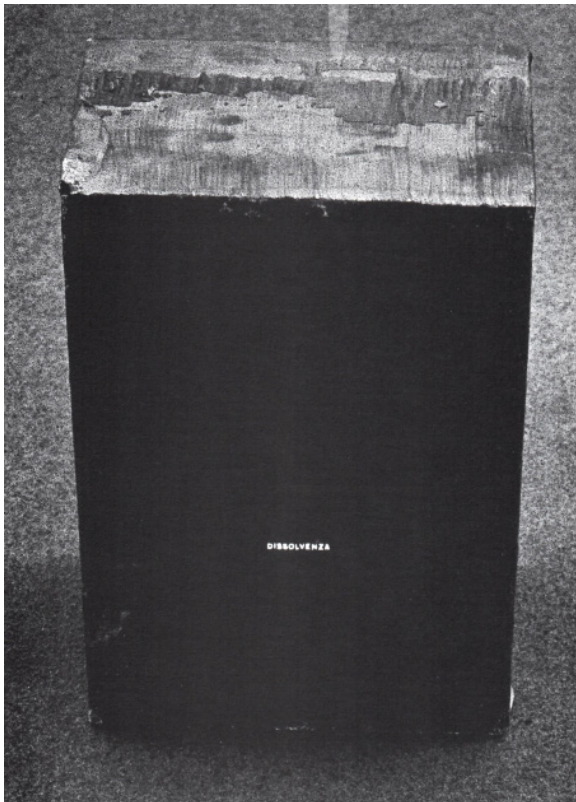


Fig. 3. Giovanni Anselmo, *Dissolvenza*, 1970

parallelepiped, which clearly undergoes a process of continuous oxidation over time. Differently from what happens with the work *Per un'incisione di indefinite migliaia di anni* (Eng. *For an engraving of indefinite thousand of years*), 1969, here the protagonist of the artwork is no longer the trace left by the state of transformation of the iron, but the immediate denomination of the same state of transformation. Anselmo does not use the material to show an iron parallelepiped, but to emphasise a factor that is at the base of the iron material and that transforms it as time passes by. Beyond its nature of rusty material, however, iron, in this case, plays the role of a strong substructure, fundamental to the very existence of the work. It is a hard material support without which each of the "opposing pairs" (Foster, Krauss, 2006) mentioned above would fall into its negative, that is, in the term more closely related to immateriality, to the non-being, and would be lost in nothingness.

As we have seen, there is a diaphragmatic element that interposes itself between the source of the light beam and its dissolution into infinity. It alternately configures itself as a hard, rough, industrial, almost minimalistic material (although the yield is quite different here compared to the rigorous American interventions) in the case of the iron parallelepiped, or as an organic element, such as the palm of a hand, or otherwise related to the field of the human body, as well explained by the example of the photos where the writing is projected on a leg. These projections, writings, and words restore the dignity of the objects they are projected on or of the man-artist when he projects them on himself. In cases when anthropic elements come into play, such as a wall or a parallelepiped, they are turned into man's creations capable of welcoming the impalpable projection of human ideas.

There are some works by Giovanni Anselmo where the indistinct, a beam of light, is projected on a distinct wall; we must not forget that the latter is configured as the parcelling element *par excellence*, a division that creates limits and categories to be respected in the definition of space, which also means the social definition of roles and hierarchies. The wall is *par excellence* something that occludes the sight, as is the hedge in the famous poem by Giacomo Leopardi, *Infinito* (*Infinite*); in this case, however, it expands the possibilities of the visible precisely because it is configured as a barrier. All the objects we have presented are barriers, or they can become barriers: a raised hand, a leg placed sideways to block the passage, a metal parallelepiped, at least for the impression of heaviness and strength that communicates the material itself, whatever form it takes. In the opposition between an open space and a filter, even though it is made up of only one hand, the latter could be read as a hedge, as found in Leopardi's work, which, instead of excluding the gaze, gives it the possibility of expressing its own function, which means to be able to see. This overturning is the vital principle of the works of Giovanni Anselmo.

Being able to watch means being able to know. It is not a mystery that among the forms of the Greek verb ὀράω (I see) we find the perfect οἶδα (I know

because I saw), which is the reason why the connection between the two fields is even more evident from their etymological origin, as underlined by Achille Bonito Oliva (1980) in one of his texts.

With the refraction of the light rays on the support placed in front of them, it seems that this indistinct chaos that runs towards the infinite is somehow physically constrained and overcome by the order that this diaphragmatic element represents. The matter is more complex than what appears, since in many works by Giovanni Anselmo there is no constant physical presence of this material filter, but it is only hypothesised as possible. The possibility of relapse in the indistinct is always imminent. The support is then configured as an instrument of the Apollonian *principium individuationis*, which orders the Dionysian chaos of the world; but this order cannot be truthful: just take your hand off or move the iron parallelepiped to no longer enjoy that taxonomically ordered world, with a name for everything that Apollo had presented to us. We just plunge back into infinite chaos. With regard to the opposition between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, see, again, Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872).

The role that the artist saves for himself appears to be to fight against this risk or at least provide the possibility of avoiding a sudden relapse into the indistinct. This evocation seems to have to do with the divine creation of chaos; it is important to point out that the association of the artist with the creative divinity is widespread. In this regard it is interesting to remember a work by Italian artist Gino De Dominicis, *D'IO*, 1971, titled after a wordplay with the words Dio (God) and Io (Me). It is a strong and prolonged laugh that echoes in an empty gallery: it is also an invisible work that plays on the infinite possibilities of estrangement provided by a pungent use of language. It is superfluous to note how huge is the debt of those artists to Marcel Duchamp. They often employed such, sometimes bizarre, possibilities.

In the work *Tutto* (Eng. *Everything*) [fig. 4], which Anselmo has put on display since 1971, two projectors project the letters TUT and TO onto two different objects, or on their parts. It is undisputed that by indicating everything nothing is indicated, that is to say, equivalence becomes omnipresent. In the works of Anselmo, the possibilities of language are continually challenged because the words we see written could disappear from one moment to the next, but at the same time, they are strengthened precisely by their always possible and imminent negation. As stated by Michel Foucault, in *Les mots et les choses* (1966: 275), the language "defines objects not hitherto apparent" and that could return to their previous latent condition an instant after we have experienced them. Language is reduced to the minimum, but it still has the ability to evoke, to indicate, as pointed out by Rosalind Krauss, in her articles *Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America* (1977).

With regard to the essential use of language, it is interesting to read what Germano Celant (1967) wrote about the artists representing the Arte Povera movement:

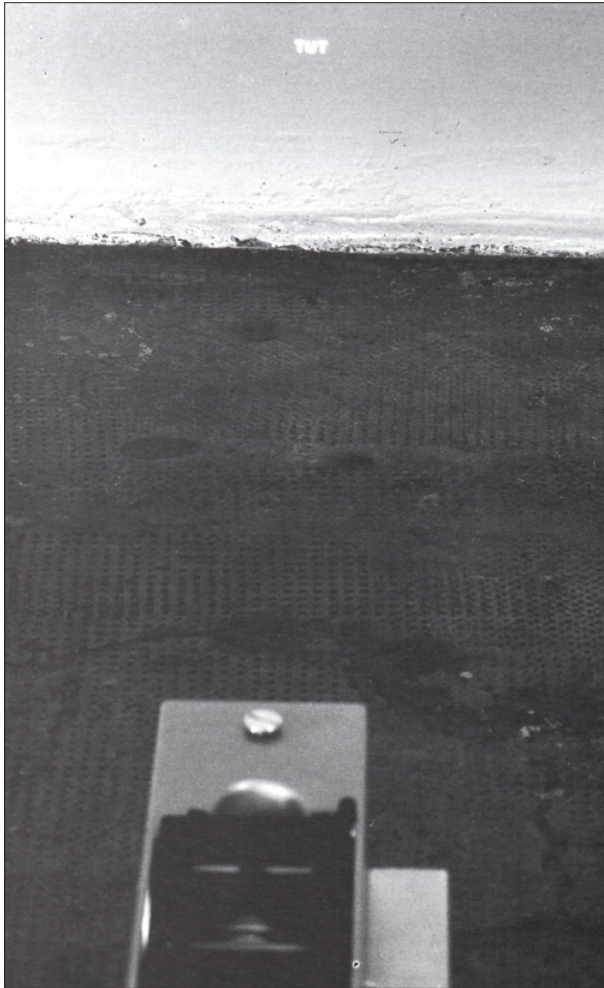


Fig. 4. Giovanni Anselmo, *Tutto*, 1971

The linguistic process consists of removing, eliminating, reducing to the minimum terms, in impoverishing the signs, reducing them to their archetypes. We are in a de-cultured period. Iconographic conventions fall and the symbolic and conventional languages crumble. Thus, in visual arts, the visual and plastic reality is seen in its occurrence and in its being. It is reduced to its accessories and discovers its linguistic artifices. It refuses the visual *complicatio*, not connected to the essence of the object, the language is alienated and reduced to a purely visual element, stripped from every historical-symbolic superfluity.

The works by Giovanni Anselmo I have examined here provide for the evocation of isolated words, according to the dictates of poetic mechanism. The epiphanic appearance of these elements provides the key to understanding the ephemeral nature of the surface of things, which presents us with a truth that is not as stable

and certain as we believe: it can move or be moved from one moment to another. Each entity can fall into its opposite: a wall that closes becomes a device capable of revealing a (possible) truth that otherwise would remain hidden and would be lost. As the Italian art historian Massimo Carboni (2002: 85) states, the epiphany of language, “while taking preliminary action of the irreducibility of the visual to the verbal, attempts to recover and to elect an element that is in some way common to the two registers as the very component of the overall critical-cognitive approach.”

We are facing a poetic reduced to the essential, where the essential is transformed into the maximum of strength. The climax of the antinomy, in which the word is so powerful that it can even disappear, is the series of works entitled *Infinito* of 1971. Among these works, we find a photograph that depicts a blue space. Anselmo focuses the lens on infinity and then takes a picture of the blue sky. In the same year, he inserts a slide with the word INFINITO into a projector [fig. 5]. After setting the focus back to infinity, the result is clearly a blurred, white

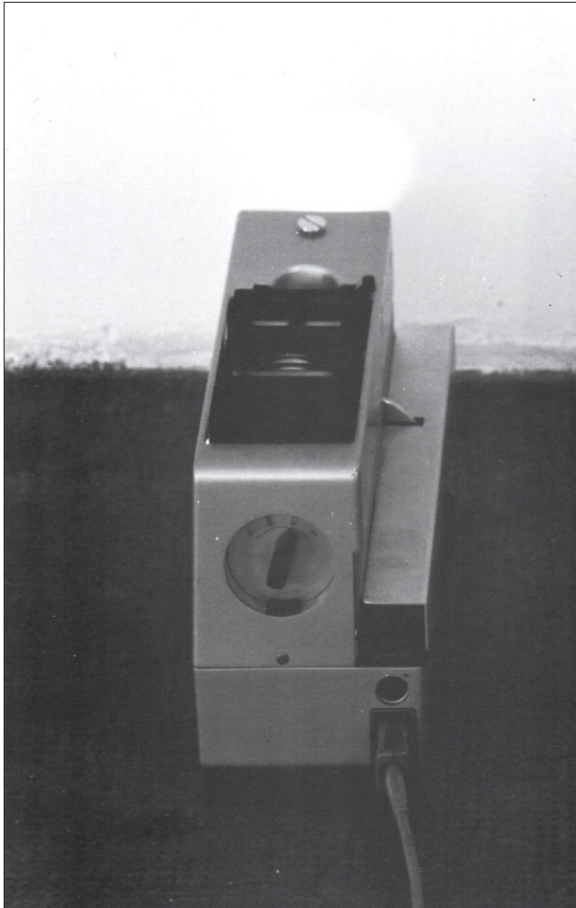


Fig. 5. Giovanni Anselmo, *Infinito*, 1971

image that appears on the wall in front of the projector. Once again, the artist tries to make manifest what is configured as unknowable by its nature. On the wall, we should read the word INFINITO, but it is lost, it is dissolved in the entropic space of the infinite itself. A vain attempt to cling to the last grain of certainty, which has already vanished from our sight and we will no longer be able to reach it because the coveted writing has disappeared in the interstitial spaces between what we can say and what we cannot say. It hides from our sight, so it is also hidden from our own understanding.

From the beginning we knew the risk of such dissolution, it was intrinsic to the premises of the very first works we have dealt with. Now all that remains is to accept it. Jean-François Lyotard (1979: XXV) explains to us, citizens of the postmodern era, the reason why we must learn to deal with the risk of fading into the infinite: "Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable."

*All English translations from Italian and French texts are by the author of this article (when an official translation was not available).

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Coincidentia oppositorum: The Works of Giovanni Anselmo between the Visible and the Invisible

Abstract

The Italian artist Giovanni Anselmo (b. Borgofranco d'Ivrea, 1934) was a member of Arte Povera group, which was put together by Germano Celant back in 1967. Anselmo has addressed the invisible in art since the beginning of his activity, mainly with projections of

words that play with the idea of the visible and the invisible, with the true (or multiple) meanings of language, and with the very nature of art. He refers to universal and eternal concepts and opposite pairs, such as the visible and the invisible, the finite and the infinite, the close and the open, the clear and the blurred, the being and the non-being. In the works discussed in the paper, the intangible element of the light beam is made visible only through the projection. It is always the projection of something immaterial on something material, an entity that participates in the dimension of non-being that is projected onto the world of being.

Keywords: Giovanni Anselmo, Arte Povera, Germano Celant, Italian Art, Contemporary Art, Infinite, projection, visible, invisible, light, Art Press, Beatrice Merz, Jean-François Lyotard, Friedrich W. Nietzsche, Achille Bonito Oliva, Massimo Carboni, Michel Foucault

Słowa kluczowe: Giovanni Anselmo, Arte Povera, Germano Celant, sztuka włoska, sztuka współczesna, nieskończoność, projekcja, widzialne, niewidzialne, światło, Art Press, Beatrice Merz, Jean-François Lyotard, Friedrich W. Nietzsche, Achille Bonito Oliva, Massimo Carboni, Michel Foucault

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