

Marco Belpoliti
On the Art of Massimo Antonaci

The human being's most impelling desire is to examine the depths where truth resides. Art, which teaches us to see the visible, can attempt to manifest those depths only by way of brief allusions, sudden epiphanies, since truth is truth only insofar as it escapes us. What appears on the surface of a painting, or in the space of a sculpture, is only a semblance of the invisible, its shadow, a simulacrum. The truth of what we are, the true image of ourselves, is always denied to us. All that remains is the drama of bewilderment, an impermanence of images reflected everywhere around us, but always mendacious precisely by virtue of their ubiquity. None of us can see ourselves if not by way of absence, as though in a tarnished mirror.

In the presence of these sculptures, I experience the malaise that all human beings should feel when observing the image of ourselves on the silver surface of a mirror: disorientation, discomfort, dismay. The figure reflected on these panels of glass in the ungraspable moment when light strikes their surfaces, then to be turned back from them, is surely my own. But something on that polished surface subtracts itself from my gaze. I look at the black mirror and see myself, but the features of my face and the shape of my body are uncertain, indistinct, vague. I recognize myself imperfectly. Is this truly my image? Confronted with this dark expanse which reflects my features, I think of Paul's letter to the Corinthians: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as I am known."

A small vitrine in the museum in Ankara contains a mirror: an obsidian surface, six thousand years old. As I left the museum I noticed the sale of its reproduction as a postcard, and couldn't help buying it. Two hands that shape a concavity, nearly a frame, hold up the rounded sliver, and its black surface reflects the face of a woman no longer young. Those are her hands, and her face is remote, as though peering across the edge of the six thousand years of age of this piece of stone. This immemorial mirror moves me, because the face that it reflects helps me to understand that the very remotest times are hidden in the spaces that are closest to us.

We all know perfectly well that we see ourselves in mirrors by reflection: we "re-gard" ourselves. But on the surface of these black mirrors—a surface both opaque and polished at the same time—light is both reflected and absorbed. Their opacity traps it, their polish rejects it. The duality of the rejection and grasping of every deliberated revelation is what generates the drama of this place. I use the word "place" advisedly, since these sculptures are *locus* and "receptacle," but also *loculus*, because this space belongs to the architecture assigned to the custody of bodies, both living and dead. (Perhaps it is only in death that my face achieves the image of itself reflected on the polished mirror.) Light, which by nature would tend immediately to show the whole of the image, is forced to linger, and to lose at least a part of itself in the abyss that opens up both before the glass and behind it, where tar plays off against the clarity of its form. The elevated tension that comes to be established between above and below, between previous and subsequent, between what counts as painting and what, instead, is sculpture, is the expression of the drama that's underway: between reflected light and absorbed light, between what returns to us, and what's withheld from us.

The abyss of black space—signaled by rooms, windows, and doors—and the chasm of the well and the sarcophagus incessantly pose the question: from where will truth arrive? What locale does it inhabit? But, as said before, I cannot imagine that truth knows any image or local habitation if not in death. This black light bears witness to that conviction. Its color is blinding because it withholds all reply, jealously containing and guarding whatever a reply might be, since black is all the colors: this is its unplumbable secret.

The gaps, the slashes, the vertical and upright openings, as sharp as spears, the filaments of tar that cut diagonally across the surface of the painting/sculpture, connecting and separating, alluding to another light, the light that reveals and manifests. These thin fractures allow the intuition that behind them, beyond that blackness of space, or even perhaps within it, lies truth: that truth of which theology and philosophy can only babble. The lines that everywhere traverse the sculpture, following apparently known geometries and generating forms and spaces, evince the drama of this art that holds the cipher of metaphysics in the reality of its bodily structure. This is what those sheets of glass intend to remind us: that everything we know of truth is known by way of reflection, since truth has seen fit to withdraw.

The sarcophagus. Seeing on the floor with its three sheets of glass, solid bodies of infinitesimal thickness, resting on a white sheet, its edges held together by leaden clasps, reminiscent of the molten metal in fissures in the stones of Greek and Roman architectures, one can't help thinking back to the "flesh eater," as the ancients termed the stone—*sarkophagos*—of their sepulchers, which so rapidly consumed the corpses it enclosed. Bending down over the tomb's reflecting blackness, I'm unable to conclude whether a body lies within it. Once again, the thickened tar on the glass allows no penetration, and reflects my image back to me. Just as with the sculptures (and paintings) propped against the walls—propped, not hung, since these sculptures against the wall are the pediments of another architecture—there's a suspension, a waiting time that can't be measured on the dials of clocks or the pages of a calendar. An eternal time.

No one looking down at the blackness of this sarcophagus can say when this time began, or when it will end. Waiting means lending attention. The tomb is empty; the stone that closed the sepulcher has been rolled away; the bandages and the winding sheet have been placed beside the blackened fragment of the urn—the white of the sheet is both stone and a cloth on which to lie—but no angel stands guard at this burial place, no one has proclaimed, "He is risen; He is not here." Again, the drama of an absence. The absence of redemption, of the proclamation of the victory of life over death, leaves us standing alone before this bottomless crypt.

How is it possible for these thin sheets of glass to possess a physicality? I have attempted to look at them in profile, but they nearly disappear. It's only when seen straight on, as with certain Byzantine paintings, that they reveal the full extent of their power. Yet I am also certain that their physicality isn't exclusively a function of their need to be frontally addressed. There's something more. The panes of glass, these *lastre*—a word reminiscent of the shells and terracotta rubble of antiquity's terrazzo floors—don't have only a front, but also a behind, which however we cannot see. But surely we can feel it, and we do so with our eyes. Because our gaze, which encounters the image on the surface of the sheet of glass, finds a counterpart in the way that image arises from its other side. And now that I have written "from its other side," I realize that this sheet of glass has no sides, and that the material of which it's made is transparent. So, every image it transmits "transpires," since

the nature of the glass negates itself. The sides of the sheet of glass consist of the coming and going of images; and its surface, which is both a before and behind, has a density: this is a place of bodily presence, and it's here that an invisible thickness reveals itself, again by way of an absence. But where can that body be, if the before is also a behind?

I remember the reliefs of Wiligelmo on the façade of the Cathedral of Modena, and think back to the words of the friend, who, seated with me at a table, gave a brief, gestural description of their qualities as frontal reliefs. He showed me how they deal with the line of demarcation between the visible and the invisible, between the going and coming of figures between one place and another.

The space of these sculptures is always immense. It's the space of a Romanesque cathedral, seen as though in a dream: enormous, unlimited, dark, traversed by shafts of light that ceaselessly descend from above. It's the space of a crypt, a grotto, a hidden place, of difficult access. Looking into the sheets of glass suspended on the wall, one is able to imagine how vast an urn must be, how limitless a sepulcher, how incommensurable a tomb. You get lost in this space, and, just as when standing in front of your image reflected in the glass, you find yourself disoriented. That space is inside, but also outside, always infinite, just as it must be for every work of art, to enable it to take the measure of our solitude.

I don't believe it possible to approach a work of art without experiencing a profound sense of solitude. In order to be seen, the work in fact demands from us the act of solitude. We must isolate that canvas or that block of marble from all the rest, separate it from what surrounds it, in order to begin a relationship with what reveals itself in the colors or the stone, in their sense of line or volume. Art is the representation, the presentation, of the solitude of objects, as said before, and summons up in us an analogous experience of the world. I write these words because I am perfectly convinced that here too, in the vicinity of these sheets of glass, there's an experience of solitude. But in the case of these sculptures/paintings, unlike other works, the things that make us feel their isolation, that force us to perceive their intangible "thingness," are not at all a question of things the works depict. These works are not things, as a piece of bread or wood would be, nor even images of things, like a bowl of fruit or a drinking glass represented on a canvas.

If I look at Cézanne's apples, or at the apples in the early work of Alberto Giacometti, I immediately perceive the absolute solitude of those fruits. An unbridgeable distance lies between them and me—even if I'm perfectly aware that they are images. But here with these sheets of tar on glass, these works in black, deaf to all representation of things, even to the silhouettes of things, it's on terms of space itself that they make me experience the solitude that's inherent to the experience of fragments. While appearing to have been conceived to attest to the need for totality, these works repeat with their every pane of glass that space presents no other possibility than the experience of fragmentation and separation. The color black itself, which is the means by which all other colors have been eclipsed—concealed, not annulled, just as the light at the bottom of a well remains concealed—is the silent witness of a separation already taken place from the past, and from all possible memory of the past. There is nothing other than space and the solitude one experiences within it, yet this space is also the place in which to attempt to remember. The relationship that these images entertain with the world—because these works too are images—can only be expressed through geometry, since geometry is the ultimate language, the final language, through which to continue to manifest one's own experience of the world, including the experience of absence. (Perhaps one should speak of geometry as a contemplation of totality and, thus, too, as a contemplation of the lack of all totality. Geometry's mission is to make the world invisible, but perhaps as well to attempt to save it, by way of abstraction, and intangibility.)

There are previous sculptures, of several years ago, composed of fragments: shards of vases, amphora, clods of earth; fired clay or clay simply dried in the air; and also long, rusted nails driven into pieces of white marble; shattered reliefs, bricks and other remnants of a distant past. Every object or piece of material bears signs of intentionally having been broken, through an act that was first thought out, and then carried out. Here too, the form of these sculpture/paintings preserves the notion of the fragment. It has only changed in appearance: now it's a "panel" that comes together with others to generate a form and design, but every individual pane of glass continues to speak of an absence. Yet these sculptures—I feel it very intensely—were conceived as proclamations of the irrefutable possibility of unity. Their division into panels declares it, and anyone who views these sculptures from a distance will feel themselves to be faced with successful recompositions. But it's only from closer up, from the distance of just a few centimeters, that we can make out the separation between one panel and the next, along the lines where the pieces of glass approach one another but never meet, held apart by the nails that anchor them. In Ravenna, Justinian and Theodora, with their court of dignitaries and following of courtiers and courtesans, are immense mosaic figures designed to be seen at a distance, in accordance with the goal of instilling fear and reverence. Their form, articulated by thousands of miniscule, colored tesserae that refract all incident light into an infinite medley of rays, is full and complete. No one, no one at all, could approach them. Power is sacred and does not permit it. But here, on the walls of this room, the opposite takes place. Power grows manifest by way of allusion, by way of unfinished form, by reference. Of course, anyone who contemplates from afar the form construed by the sheets of glass can easily reconstruct it, but in doing so will alienate their intimate absence. It is only in near proximity to the opaque, translucent sheets of glass that one feels the power they emanate, that very same force with which every fragment is imbued. As he draws up his plans for these sculptures, he proceeds by way of cancellations. His notebooks are full of blackened squares, of layered pastels that coalesce into textures of color. And yet, whenever he covers the space of a page with drawing, he reveals the white paper that supports it. He is as though obsessed by that emptiness, by the absence that stands at the beginning and end of every work.

In a number of drawings that he published in a magazine, he attempted to contain their space within an empty square—outlined and emblazoned with the word "threshold"—that opens out to beyond the area it circumscribes, but he made the attempt in vain. On every side—and, thus, as well, in these sculpture/paintings which are saturated with layers of tar—absence makes its appearance. It's inherently a part of that infinite space which he experiences as never fillable, eternally unbridgeable, destined to inexorable misadventure. His art is dramatic because it bears the sign of this action, the drama of actions directed to the void, in opposition to the void. But not to eliminate it. How could that be possible? Without the void he could undertake no action at all. The goal is, rather, to delimit it. It's as though it were possible to leave a space for the void, a space full of emptiness; and since space is always empty, it is we who attempt to fill it, to charge it with our objects, with our presence.

The geometries we see in these sculptures are "geometries of the void," tesserae, *tasselli* of void; literally: *taxillus*, dice, dice full of emptiness.

He began by partitioning each sheet of glass with diagonals in all directions, intending to trace out a great cube: the fruit of his obsession with geometry. He aimed for a space his lines could treat as entirely divisible, but divisibility is always infinite. Another in his place might already have hesitated, might already have come to a halt. There are some, obsessed

by the infinity of space, who have pushed their sculptures toward the infinitesimal, making them vanish in a handful of dust. He, on the other hand, would like to circumscribe space. His panels of glass become ever larger, embracing ever more space. Confronted with the scale of his cube of glass and tar, I take a step backward. Looking at the wall of his little room I cannot even shape a mental image of the entirety of such a sculpture. I see that the black, dark blue and nocturnal red with which he has painted the tar might engulf me. I step aside.

He is also obsessed with time. Not the time past of the fragment or the histories of materials—marble, ceramics, slats; not time present, the time that continually reveals itself in images of things and persons. What he fears is time future, the twin brother of space. It too is endless, infinite. One might say that it's with time that he has cut his panels of glass, to compose his impossible mosaic of blacks. And yet, faced with these works in black glass, with these forms that display the beauty of simply existing, I feel that this art belongs to itself alone, since its task is to show us the beauty of truth, which always withdraws.

Now he has a new studio. It's a large white room with ample walls. It's a basement space and along one side, just beneath the ceiling, runs a row of narrow windows that open at street level. The first time I saw it, he had just moved in, and it was empty. The next time I saw it, it struck me as small, miniscule, suffocating: the two works that leaned against the walls took up all the space around them. It was as though the space were no longer able to circulate, blocked by the large black squares of glass and tar. As Genet has written, there are works, drawings, sculptures, paintings, in which air circulates: Monet, Bonnard. In the works of Giacometti, on the other hand, what circulates is space, and also light. Here the space is blocked, and the air is motionless. For light, the only possibility is the diagonal or vertical gap between one sheet of tar on glass and the next. The space in this basement has grown suffocating, and even when light slants down from the windows, in the morning, it is dark; the neon lights must always be turned on. I was reminded of another studio where he had worked for a brief period of time. A long, narrow room, very narrow, which you were barely able to enter, its floor encrusted with clay, and sound-proofing panels on the walls—the former headquarters, perhaps, of an independent radio station—and dust everywhere. At the time he was working with earth, with clay. I asked myself how much he had really gained by taking this large studio. Surely, his works had grown larger, a great deal larger than those he'd mount on the walls of the little house where he subsequently lived. But now it was as though he were offering his works more space to devour.

I have frequently visited his studio, but still I have never seen him cut the tar and heat it over a flame. When I enter the basement, there is still the odor of something burnt, and the pile of discards, next to the door, directly in one's path, is always larger. It seems every time as though he had just completed the celebration of a rite; I find him seated at the table, with a notebook open before him, between two bird-shaped lamps and the tape recorder that plays sacred music. At times I joke about it. He smiles. Basically, he has no other choice than this ceremony: he erects black icons that swallow space, subtracting it from us, the mortals. Rapacious divinities.

As time has passed, every sign that recalls a known form, an object, has disappeared from his work. In his first models in terracotta, in his drawings, and in his earliest works with glass and tar, there were lines that represented spaces of passage and waiting—doors,

thresholds, apertures, centers, edges, pendulums, pits—but now they have turned into pure geometric sign, diagonal lines, lines defined by the distances between one sheet of tar and the next. These gaps, at times, may also still contain a black line, like a thread running back to an interior, a thread that we're able to see as such only from very close up, and which might resemble a core of darkish metal that traverses this sudden lack of matter. It's a remnant of an initial drawing, when he traced out lines on his panels of glass before covering them with tar and heating it. They remain from the work's first plan, destined then to disappear beneath the blackness of the tar. I have asked myself about the relationship between this core and the final work: whether finally it constitutes its framework, its origins, but also its destiny; whether perhaps it expresses the true form of the work's space, a form that finds manifestation by way of the polish of the glass and the bituminous opacity of the sheets of tar.

Once again I am talking about space, because what strikes me about these works is their ability to render space absolutely continuous, to make the observer experience the sensation of belonging to the same space as the one to which the work belongs. And what, more precisely, is the space to which the paintings and sculptures we're observing belong? Since every object has a space of its own, what is the space of the work of art? The pencil holder on my desk creates an absolute and infinite space. As I look at it, this space would seem to ray out in all directions; the pencil holder generates a discontinuous space, and isolates itself, and in doing so isolates me: it makes me feel its total solitude. I experience this space on terms of discontinuities. With these works composed of panels of glass, both lucent and dark at the very same time, the experience is quite the opposite: they allow me the sensation of unlimited continuity.

If I look at a painting by Cézanne and observe the objects it reproduces, I see that their image reconnects to my experience of space, to the discontinuity and solitude of the objects that surround me; the very purpose of such images is to speak of that solitude, and likewise of the solitude of the person who painted them. This work aims, instead, to represent space itself, in its absolute purity.

Or, better: it aspires to *be* space, and therefore devours the space that emanates from me. So, what's the difference between this work and the work, say, of Klee or Mondrian? First of all, we're not dealing here with paintings. Or, better, we're here in the presence of sculptures which are also paintings, and the dividing line between the two is quite instable. It lies in the place where the work's "above" turns into its "below," and vice versa; there's a passage back and forth between painting and sculpture in an almost continuous way; the very demarcation between sculpture and painting is a continuity. Secondly, what reveals itself in the work is not the anatomy of a painting or a picture, remembering how Klee remarked, "A picture with the subject 'naked person' must be formed in accordance not with human anatomy, but with pictorial anatomy." These works' ambition is to represent the anatomy of space itself, as though that were truly possible. I mean to say: as though it were truly possible to make an incision in space, to lance it, to section it, to reduce it into parts, and then to show those parts; as though space truly had a skeleton, hidden beneath the skin, and muscles and nerves; as though it had bones consisting of lines, segments, curves; and as though it were possible for anyone to fill, twist, model, weave, ornament or pave, without the anatomy of space, or better its representation, swallowing everything up: the work, the objects, ourselves, the world.

Black. The color with which he has chosen to explore the anatomy of space, making it visible by way of its negative—pure absence—is a part of his paradoxicality. He has elected shadow

to the station of the supreme language of the eye, blindness to a privileged condition of the spirit. As in Plato's myth of the cave, a double blindness afflicts the eyes: the blindness that overwhelms sight in the passage from the darkness of the cave to the light of the sun, which Plato equates to the dazzling light of truth; on the other hand, the blindness that darkens the eyes of the human beings who return back into the cave, passing from the light of the outside world to the obscurity of the cavern, and find themselves dazzled by blackness—obscurity as ignorance of Truth. That first loss of vision results from excessive light; the second from its total absence, its withdrawal.

The desire to see everything finds expression in the work's encounter with the impossibility of making everything visible: a negative theology.

One day he left for the United States. He went and came back. We talked again. I asked him what had struck him most about New York. He replied: the light.

Now he has begun to investigate that light which before was concealed, at rest within the sheets of glass and the tar.

His works have turned white.

The first time we saw each other after his lengthy stay in the United States, he showed me photos of the works he had done in his New York studio. I repeatedly passed them back and forth between my hands. I felt uncomfortable. The black tar had disappeared, or at least had as though been exiled to the center of the works, or to its edges, or was a thin diagonal line, between panels of white.

In the room where we were talking, there was also an earlier work, entitled *Porta*: "Door." I'll attempt to describe it. (But can a work be described? Is it possible to "tell" a work with words? And what's a novel, a film, a painting when you recount it? What work does it become in its description?) There was a long fissure at its center, and through it one glimpsed the white of the wall; then there was a black rectangle, splayed out into a bugle shape at its top and bottom; and then two smaller black rectangles, above the glass; elegant textures and further minor fractures, a few stretch marks in the black, barely visible fissures. The panels of tar in the work, which dominated the wall, were very frayed and seemed to accentuate the skewed movement of the work; and as if in response to that solid, central fracture, even its borders were crackled. It's a door, but also a warp in space, a gash, something that opens by splitting apart. Instead, the American works in the photographs seemed to have clear edges, well-defined fields, decided diagonals, vertical and horizontals. Geometry seemed to prevail in these photographs, as though the true face of the work, the perfect face—so perfect as no longer to seem its own—were its geometry.

(I have often asked myself if it is possible to photograph a work of art, not, of course, in the technical sense, but if it's possible to photograph the *being* of a work, since a work too has a being of its own.)

White. When he invited me to visit his studio, all the works on the walls were white. I write the word "white" simply to make myself understood: I am not a painter. My white is the white of snow, of milk, of white paper, the white of plaster, of walls, of clouds, of smoke, the white of the fur of animals. All of this is white for me. The white of these works is a white I do not know. First of all, I should describe the way in which he obtains it, by painting the tar white and gluing it to the glass: it's through the pale green of the glass that one sees this white. Every painter has his palette—Giotto's blue, Piero della Francesca's bone pink, Gauguin's orange, and the joyful orange of Matisse, Albers' pure yellows—but I can't recall

the white of anyone's palette. Yes, in the Italian painting of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries there are the white robes of Christ and the Saints, but that's first of all a symbolic white, the white of beauty, of faith, of dignity, of truth: those clothes must be painted white! (Yet Piero, in Borgo San Sepolcro, when he depicted the sheet that drapes the Resurrected Christ, painted it pink.) I know the white of Fontana's canvases, but there are also others of other colors. They are always canvases, and what has been slashed is the white of the canvas. This isn't the white of a canvas; it's instead the color of his palette, as before his color was the black of tar. It is *its* white (and *its* black)—the palette's white, I mean—and also white as a symbolic color. Mondrian comes to mind.

The black and the white that he uses are neutral (even if previously, perhaps perplexed by the neutrality of that black, he sometimes attempted to color it red, and blue, the colors of sunset and dawn).

What neutral means is clear. It means that something is neither one thing nor some other. A double negation in a single word: *ne-uter*. That there can be such a thing as a neutral color is a mystery to me. Just as it's difficult to think of a thing that is neither one thing or another. A neither-the-one-nor-the-other of a unity composed of two opposing parts; but also neutral like the interval between two opposites.

As always, the work is made of glass and tar, but now it's no longer a black mirror in which to reflect oneself. There's no longer opacity or transparency. Or, better: its opacity is the whole of its surface, and transparency belongs only to the glass. The color white has rendered this transparency neutral. The space which before I felt to be practicable, even if by subtraction, since the work saw fit to subtract it from me, devouring it, (the color black is insatiable, and dries up the entirety of space), has now, by addition, grown impracticable—it's the white that offers itself. Here again a paradox. Whiteness neutralizes space and offers the surface of the work to our gaze, but only as surface. But still there's a depth: the depth that conceals itself in the color white's neutrality.

Him: I experience this point as point.

Me: I don't understand.

Him: It's like the comprehension of light. In a perfectly sterile room we couldn't see it. It's dust that makes light visible. It's in this point... being in the midst of things... it's in the midst of things.

There's white, and there's black, at the two extremes, and in the middle there are grays, modulations. And on the other side, what lies between the white and the black? Isn't this perhaps the space that belongs to the neutral? But how does one depict neutrality?

Perhaps I should already have understood that the black of the previous works was neutral, since their profundity coincides with surface, and surface summons profundity, and vice versa. A dividing line: between front and back, above and below, between the seeable and the always invisible. The depth of a mirror is flagrantly superficial, but also the other way round: its surface is deep, as Narcissus learned at his own expense. Neutrality forces presence and absence to cohabit, with nothing left over. Neutrality in white is self-evidence. The neutral part of these works, the white part—no matter if the white is above or below the glass—is their greater part, and the division of the work into modular panels is no longer what first strikes the eye. It's as though the color white had made the work more compact; the fissures are sharper, the black lines between one sheet of glass and the next, one sheet of

tar and the next, are clearer (the verticals, straighter, as though drawn with a ruler, communicate a feeling of immobility, whereas the horizontals, to the contrary, vibrate). The black inserts no longer insist on their materiality, as they did in previous works. They reduce to pure triangles, squares, rectangles. Variations are minimal. Everything presents itself as absolute (again the absoluteness of the neutral). The work tends to remove itself, to diminish itself, as though, with respect to before, it were made of less matter. Its physicality has been sublimated. There is light, but it's the idea of light; there is space, but it's the idea of space. Painting and sculpture are at minimal distance from one another. Before, addressing the incorporeality of glass, the impalpability of sheets of glass, I would never have thought it possible for anything more to be removed from these paintings/sculptures. But that can be done, by way of thought, by way of an act of the mind.

Space is still there; on the surface; it's the semblance of space, just as Veronica's veil bears the semblance of Christ. This is the sudarium of space.

The intermediate place, the neutral, is the place of suffering. Or at least that's how I see it, and how I experience it. The borders that unite and separate opposites—light and shadow, good and evil, white and black, visible and invisible—the door, the bridge, the threshold are painful places.

(A friend, once, talking about the Moebius strip, where above again is likewise below, remarked: "It's in pain on both of its sides." That's why the person who made these works had to stand both above and below the limit: to sublimate.

None of the previous works were as beautiful as this one, to which he has given the title *Fiore (D)*, "Flower (D)." Twelve white panels, so tightly juxtaposed as to form a compact surface, entirely white. The last row of panels, at the top, seems to be a flash of reflected light, whereas a line of black traverses the work from top to bottom. In the middle—but how can one talk about a middle of a surface that appears to have no middle?—two black diagonals depart from the black line and rise up to embrace the flash of reflected light, but in vain. This work is charged with great intensity, an intensity held in check by the neutral white that dominates it, just as that glare which finds its beginning out beyond one edge of the work and then terminates out beyond the other, at the top, is held in check: there is only a sliver of that light. Behind, the work is the color of tar, but that's something no one can see.

So, in 1989 he moved to New York. On the occasion of his show at the John Weber Gallery. He had found his place in this American city. He no longer felt at home in Milan, the new world suited him better. He once remarked to me that the city looked to him like a medieval citadel. Walking in the area near central park with its neo-Gothic buildings, that's just the way it feels. A modern middle ages. Better than living in Italy's modern middle ages. These years were long and dark, interrupted here and there by a moment of light. We were both at work, on our separate endeavors, but weren't in touch with one another. I knew that he continued to show at the John Weber Gallery, for as long as John and Joyce kept it open, but I didn't know what he was showing. Then there was news of traveling, of a pilgrimage, of a revitalized interest in the Romanesque, which had always been a period he felt to be his own: artifacts, things made by hand. In New York, I imagined, he might find himself closer to the Greek and Messapic tombs of the region where he was born: Apulia. New York's lights and shadows are clearer and more southern than the grey, livid light of Milan. I often

wondered how he had been able to live so long here, in Italy, buried in a basement space, working in a small apartment, living and cutting tar and glass in a studio below street level. New York, as I know today, was his explosion of light.

A series of small works. Collage on glass, if that's a permissible description, with images of Indian temples, European cathedrals, postcards, landscapes, mountains, clouds. Real and imaginary voyages. Voyages of the mind and the heart. Slashes of red and white, as though intending to engrave the material of his dreams, images that appeared for a moment, visions captured forever. He wants to take possession of everything that has settled into his memory, and he wants to commit to memory everything that's there, beyond the ocean, beyond the Pacific and Atlantic that now hold him apart from other lands and other countries. That's where he wants to be, in the Old World, in Antiquity, in the Remote, but he can't. He engraves, circumscribes, inscribes, describes, juxtaposes. He brings sudden flames to panes of glass; he paints them with immediate and even brutal gestures. He sets things afire, without fire. Always as image. He lives and dies in the image: the life and death of the image.

The works that hang on the walls of his New York studio are obsessions. Yet they never lack a certain grace, or even an intentional pictorial equilibrium. He's always painting, even when he cancels things out. His images are never unpleasant, never violent. No iconoclasm. Quite the contrary: a cult of the image. He loves painting, and goes about it with absolute devotion, nearly the devotion of the neophyte. As though there could never be enough of it. That's what explains those slashes of color on sheets of glass, amidst the images, on top of the postcards and the clippings from his private journals: they are acts of faith. Lustral signs—like the small painting with women in yellow ready to immerse themselves in the waters of the Ganges—purifications, rites. Ever since he has been there, in the New World, ritual has continually grown in importance for his painting, dilating the space between one sheet of glass and the next, coloring the tar, assuring the entrance of light into the fissures between one sheet of glass and the next. He travels up the Nile of his existence. Even to places before it, before his having been conceived. Before his Christianity, before the Greek tombs of his childhood, before the Etruscan vases of the Italic past. He wants to go back to the origins of things: the Origins are his goal, the Circle his form. Perfection closed up within itself has become the mantra of his painting, and sculpture, since once again he moves along the threshold between them, in an interstitial space.

The interstitial has become the mode of his art. Standing "in between," in spatial and well as temporal terms. All of the themes of these small collages—even if "themes" is a somewhat inadequate word with which to address what we're faced with—in fact are interstitial: voyage, chance, ritual, waiting, silence, But the whole of his art is involved with the interstitial: gaps, fissures, hollows, openings, cavities, indentations, glimmers, lacunae, orifices, holes, punctures, traps, breaches, windows. What, finally, can I say that his art is talking about to me as I look at it? About difference, abandonment, distance, separation, deviation. And still something more? I see it as an art that's moored in time: interval, intermezzo, interlude, interruption, detachment, intermittence. And again: suspension, halting, arrest, pause, truce.

Ever since he moved to New York, I've been struck by the thought—a thought that comes and goes—that he has chosen to position himself at a distance since his elected form is

suspension, halting, arrest; but also delay, deferral, hesitation, dilation, adjournment. Massimo Antonaci's art is a solitary route, outside the paths we customarily glimpse. He entertains no dialog with the art of his time. He abstains from that, because his own is a time in the middle of the things, or, better, *of* the middle of things. His intentionally chosen form and content—a dreadful distinction, as I know quite well—is the furthestmost edges of the interstitial. He wants to be and to live at the threshold, the edge, the lip, the brink, the confine and frontier of art itself, and not only of his own. And not simply as limit and extremity, but rather as the point at which everything collapses towards the *I-don't-know-where*. That's a very strange notion, I have to admit, that art finds its purpose in precipitating towards a place or a point that's so indefinite. But Antonaci's art is eminently spiritual, and I'm convinced that its destination can lie in no other place than this non-definite.

I do not know if I can follow him into the place he indicates. I look at it from a distance. I am a spectator. For what his art concedes to those who view it—and I am certain that it does—and no less for what it does not concede, but demands—requires of me, and of everyone else—I do not know if I can follow him. Moreover, he crossed that Ocean, he transplanted himself into an elsewhere, he speaks another language—perhaps he dreams in his new language—and I remain here, faithful to my connection to a single language, to a single mode of thought, to a single locale which will never abandon me, and which I will never abandon. The livid light of Milan is enough for me, its grayish sky-blue. Its old streets and new suburbs; that however much it is, slight or great, that I recognize here as my own, as already seen, or yet to be seen. I continue to dream of the place where I was born. I return there at night or in my thoughts. Open-eyed hallucinations: suddenly I am there. Massimo Antonaci's art looks towards neither the past nor the future, but toward the Remote; towards Origins.

His e-mails have brought me photos of his New York studios. In America. On Canal Street, which I know since I have walked along it, but also because of its link to the memory of Saul Steinberg, another European immigrant, a draftsman and a writer. Pictures of works on studio walls: white, red, black, and blue circles, across two or three brown rectangles, the very same tesserae found in his previous work. But different. He wrote to me about those works on paper, those rectangles: papyri. I recognize the previous themes, as though the material were only a transmutation of the supporting thought at the bottom of everything. Here too he is self-consistent. I know that he's still searching. But for what?

He sent me these photos as a kind of report on his movements through New York City, but what most arouses my curiosity is the accumulation of objects in his studio. A goblet there in the foreground, then an old world map. It might be the confusion that reigns during a moving. Is he always, in perennial movement, even in his fixity? And that lamp, which I recognize, since I own an identical lamp, with its light directed upwards. But still there's a great deal of light in this picture, and delight as well. The same *allegria* that I find in his recent works. He writes on the sheets of paper in a simple, dry, essential hand. When asked why he now makes use of papyrus, he replied that he discovered it one day in India while eating from a palm-leaf plate. It's not an image, but a material. From leaves to leaf. Papyrus is paper. His desire to write through painting is intense. Tracing out signs is not enough for him. He wants to write letters. Alphabets. Signs and still more signs. He wants to be a writer. And where does he find the words? He writes without words, like a child drawing

marks on paper. Not scribbles, but lines and circumferences. His primitivism—where “prim” as in “primary” means “before”—is self-consistent. Yet his writing is no act of expression, but of hiding. If before he hid in interstitial spaces, today he hides in his signs. Within his signs, or with his signs? I couldn't say. I know only that he wants to leave marks on paper, on sheets of papyrus. A wordless alphabet.

Then his most recent works appeared. I visited him in New York, at his home. After so many years, we see each other again in his studio, where he also lives. At the edge of Central Park. An evening at dinner, seated around a table, his papyri on the walls. Only two large works, as a frame to all topics of conversation. He entitles them *Opus*: four triptychs with signs at their center. They are not minimalist works. He does not speak the language of little or nothing. They are works which are charged with meaning and physical matter. Layer after layer. Volumes, or thicknesses, of colors and physical matter. He showed me the one with the black circle, bordered in red, at its center. An eye that observes and captures you. An eye that presses forward and judges you. Even more than before with the works on glass, which, basically—I think back to it now, more than a decade later—desired to speak of ourselves, of our existence as human beings, and were therefore so close to our flesh, even if transfigured into that other material. But now these sheets of paper observe and question us. He has reached a point of no return. Is that what he wanted? I do not know. I do not ask. If that question has an answer I have to find it alone, standing face to face with this work, looking steadily into the eye of this black Polyphemus. The only possibility that's offered me is to grasp a revelation. I hesitate. I follow him to the threshold of knowledge, but further than that I hold back. I know quite well that Massimo has accomplished all of this with the sovereign humility of the scribe. He has rolled up and unrolled the papyrus. He pinned it to wall and painted it with devout simplicity, no less than astutely. Then he hoisted it up and looked at it. And now this black eye looks at me and asks if I want to accede into its secret. It speaks a single phrase: Follow me!

There's a thought to which I have no access. I am a layman: I remain on the threshold of the Temple. I walk through the exhibition halls. I pass before works I know—and which also know me; I step quickly through the rooms. Everything speaks to me as though it were a sensory manifestation of Consciousness. I stop in front of the four *Opus* triptychs. And now I've arrived.

October 1987 – February 2011