«There are few objects in my work. Engaged gestures, the loss of control that is fully assumed and proposed as an active experience: my way of proceeding consists of such loss of control, the absence of overbearing materiality, the attempt to escape from the tyranny of objects.»

Ann Veronica Janssens
Public Program
15 and 16 April: Premiere of the choreography *Pioverà* created and performed by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker.
18 May, 7pm: Walking conversation in the exhibition between Ann Veronica Janssens and Roberta Tenconi.

Cultural Mediation
Cultural mediators are present in the exhibition spaces to answer questions from the public, give information and context elements that can deepen the fruition of the artworks. The dialogue between mediator and visitor should take place in compliance with social distancing policies and the norms on the protection of personal health.

Discover more on our website.

The Artist
Ann Veronica Janssens (b. Folkestone, United Kingdom, 1956) has been conducting extensive research into perception since the early 1980s, exploring intangible physical phenomena such as light, color, sound, and air. Her works elicit various sensations, ranging from joy to vertigo, from disorientation to dazzlement to the point of inducing hypnotic states that immerse the visitor in sensory environments.

The artist’s preferred medium is light and she uses it like a sculptor in all its forms: liquid, solid, and gaseous. Infiltrating the exhibition space, light is manipulated by means of clouds of artificial fog, glints of color, or glittery surfaces in pieces that explore the fine line between appearance and vanishment and seem to “escape” the viewer, revealing the indefinable nature of the bodies.

Using basic gestures for the dispersal or attraction of light particles, the refraction of optical prisms or the combination of fluids with different viscosities, the artist creates “indefinite zones” of matter that...
she herself named “super spaces” in the early 1990s: «the spaces surrounding a given space, spaces without space, places for the capture of light, cement and glass cases, spaces conceived as springboards towards the void.»

Janssens studied at the École nationale supérieure des arts visuels de La Cambre, in Brussels, where in the late 1970s she met the Polish sculptor known as Tapta (1926–1997) and became her assistant together with artist Monica Droste (1958–1998). Her creative identity was also fundamentally shaped by encounters with different cultures, including her childhood years spent in Kinshasa—now the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo—which played a decisive role in the exploration of the relationship between art and nature that characterizes her work. Indeed, experiences made while traveling have always been a key focus of her practice.

Ann Veronica Janssens’ work revolves around the investigation of the permeability of different contexts, combining artistic research and scientific experimentation with an interest in architecture and technological evolution and its socio-political repercussions. This process allows momentary situations to emerge, transitional states between matter and environment, which reveal the close interconnection between the physical agents of a certain space (heat, vibrations, sounds, etc.) and the effects they have on the subjective perception of the visitor. As the artist said, «the techniques and media I use make my works very vulnerable, but it is precisely this vulnerability that interests me, because it relates to the reality of the world.»

Although her creations are generally ephemeral, Janssens’ art focuses on sculptural research and its relationship with time, and can be associated—in terms of both the materials used and the spatial strategies adopted—with the American post-war movements of Minimalism and conceptual art. For example, her first production developed from the second half of the 1980s, in which she investigates the interaction between the surface and the volumes of the elements, recalls Carl Andre’s installations with modular geometric elements. In this corpus, she creates temporary architectural structures from concrete blocks, wood, or polystyrene, arranged to cover almost entirely the floors of galleries or exhibition spaces.

Often linked to the Light and Space movement of the 1960s, which brought together figures such as Maria Nordman and James Turrell, Janssens gradually oriented her oeuvre towards overcoming the art object by means of its dematerialization and deconstruction. Using anti-monumental forms and interventions, she alters the public’s visual, temporal, and spatial perception. These pieces are created on a very large scale, like in the case of the saturated environments with artificial fog in which visitors are required to immerse themselves (produced from 1997 onwards, now among the artist’s most recognizable oeuvre). Some iterations are realized on a much smaller scale, such as Prototype (1991), which spawned the large sculptural series Aquarium (1991)—several examples of which are featured in the exhibition. Here Janssens allows a drop of silicone oil to fall into a mixture of alcohol and water contained in a transparent glass box, creating the impression that this particle is suspended in the container defying the laws of gravity.

Janssens’ corpus is based on identifying minimal elements whose manifestation encourages a broad spectrum of experiences in the viewer, whether perceptual, sensory, or motor.
This is why she usually calls her creations “proposals” to the visitor, a term that emphasizes both the experimental and the individual nature of a given situation. The encounter with the work thus becomes an invitation to experience, which does not necessarily occur within the exhibition space, but enters everyday life. An example is *Phosphènes* (1998), initially distributed as a card in an Istanbul market (during the 5th Istanbul Biennial) and subsequently published in newspaper advertisements (on the occasion of her solo exhibition at the Salzburger Kunstverein in 2000). The work is a black-and-white double image of a man pressing his fingers on his eyelids—an action that, as described in the instructions on the back of the card, generates the appearance of colored, glittering geometric patterns with closed eyes. As well as illustrating the central role of the viewer, it exemplifies the humorous approach with which the artist sometimes responds to disorienting situations.

Janssens’ oeuvre also provokes an intense dialogue between built and immaterial space, site-specific context, and natural phenomena, while at times evoking forms of lyricism from the language of abstraction. The use of light projections is an example, as in *Hot Pink Turquoise* (2006) in which she creates an environment that artificially reproduces a natural optical phenomenon, iridescence, by breaking down the spectrum of visible light. From pink to blue, the composition creates a visual effect reminiscent of atmospheric events such as rainbows. The sculpture *Aerogel* (2003), on the other hand, is an experiment using the lightest material ever created. Composed of 99.5 to 99.9% air, it is an almost incorporeal substance whose particles emit a light similar to that of the atmosphere, offering to the observer the typical colors of the first bright rays of dawn.

Through a practice that sparks transformations of glowing materials and activates exchanges between different spheres of knowledge, Ann Veronica Janssens opens up possibilities for cross-disciplinary study. In 2009, she founded with curator and art historian Nathalie Ergino the Laboratoire Espace Cerveau within the IAC-Institut d’art contemporain in Villeurbanne, a research facility that explores the relationships between space, time, body, and brain in art. More recently, for the series *Structural Colors* (2021–ongoing), she has started working with scientist María Boto Ordóñez on the development of alternative uses for melanin pigments to produce “structural colors,” a new type of biodegradable, non-toxic tint obtained from the interaction of these particles with sunlight.

Over the course of her 40-year career, Janssens has forged partnerships with various figures in the cultural sphere, such as the artist Michel François, with whom she represented Belgium in 1999 at the 48th Venice Biennale, and the avant-garde choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, who collaborated with her on several projects for museums and institutions around the world.

The Exhibition

“Grand Bal” explores Janssens’ career through many aspects of her artistic practice, presenting for the first time the widest selection of her past works together with new productions, in a narrative conceived to dialogue with the space of the Navate of Pirelli HangarBicocca, thus expanding its boundaries, and the outdoor area.

The title of the exhibition, which means “grand ball” in French, refers to the performative dimension of the project that calls upon visitors to experience each piece, emphasizing the dynamic relationship that is established between the installations, the architecture, and the human body, like in a dance in which each element is necessary for the other to reveal itself fully.

Thanks to the movement of the sun during the day, visible through the opening on the ceiling of the building and along the outer wall of the exhibition space, the measurement of time is signaled by the beams of natural light on the floor and on the artworks. Like a sundial, they mark the duration of the visitor’s experience and simultaneously punctuate the rhythm of the aleatory choreography created by the artist in a composition reduced to the bare minimum: light, sound, and movement.
unexpected perspectives and details that would be otherwise imperceptible. The artist radically alters the fruition of the environment, exploiting the ability of mirrors to distort the characteristics of a place and suggesting viewpoints to observers that disrupt the normal points of reference.

*IPE 1200* also resonates with the architecture of the Navate, cutting diagonally through the exhibition space by means of a steel beam whose upper side is burnished and mirror-polished to reflect its surroundings. The title is a direct reference to the language of the construction sector, in which the European I-beam standard indicates a girder conventionally 6 meters long, which in this case is extended to the length of 12 meters to engage with the large volumes of Pirelli HangarBicocca. The artist describes the installation in these terms: «I liked the idea of taking this very ordinary object, which is made from a dense
material, and unleashing a luminosity from within it through the simple act of polishing. I also like the fact that the shiny surface will rust if exposed to water. In a way, these works also have a fragility and ephemerality to them.»

2. **MUHKA, Antwerpen, 1993–2023**

On display for the first time since its installation at the M HKA museum in Antwerp in 1993 and at the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian in Lisbon in 1994, **MUHKA, Antwerpen** is a work in progress. It is made up of around 460 black-and-white photographs photocopied in A2 format of ephemeral constructions taken by the artist over the years during her extensive travels where she came into contact with different cultures. The images are assembled in a grid on a monumental wooden wall to create a visual narrative, depictions of fragile and unfinished-looking dwellings made from materials such as mud or sheet metal in peri-urban, remote, or natural settings. The project attests to the origins of Janssens’ interest in the permeability of social and cultural contexts, and her intention to render fluid the otherwise static perception of architecture. These precarious structures include, for example, the functional dwellings of the fishing community in Essaouira, Morocco, made from materials returned from the sea. These were photographed by the artist with the aim of immortalizing their transitory nature in a continual relationship of exchange with the surrounding environment, in contrast to the rational approach of Western architecture.

3. **Area, 2023**

The site-specific installation **Area** consists of a series of concrete building blocks and extends over a large section of the Navate, forming a structure that visitors can walk on. The work derives from the artist’s first productions defined as “super spaces”: «spatial extensions of existing architecture» developed from the late 1980s. An example is the project entitled **Gallery Inexistent** (Antwerp, 1988), created by stacking concrete blocks borrowed from an urban construction and reassembled in the gallery after which the work is named. **Area** emerges in space as the ruins of a transient place that does not belong to archaeology but challenges the visitor’s notions of the canonical definitions of sculpture and architecture. The coarse, unrefined appearance of the blocks is a reference to the evolution of construction in the second half of the twentieth century and recalls the Minimalist experiments of the 1960s, in particular Carl Andre’s series of sculptures **Equivalent** (1966–69), made by geometrically assembling industrial blocks to define and manipulate space. However, Janssens has designed an installation that is also an agora, ready to accommodate both visitors and more of her production.
or an end. Joyce’s one was randomly chosen, enlarged, and created in the forest by arranging red gravel in the woods in order to generate a 200-meter-long path following the spontaneous movement of the act of drawing.

6.  

L’espace infini, 1999

9.  

Rouge 106–Bleu 132 (Scale Model), 2003–07

L’espace infini is one of Janssens’ installations that act on the viewer’s sensory and perceptive capacities. It is in fact an inaccessible concave rectangular structure without any corners. Standing in front of it, visitors are faced with a totally white environment, in which the eye can no longer discern boundaries and proportions due to an optical effect. Between painting and sculpture, the piece allows the corporeal and material value of white to emerge through the visual experience, generating a sensation of vertigo and disorientation. The artist has also created two works closely related to this installation: the model Maquette (1999) and the photograph Claudio (2009), in which a human figure with outstretched arms faces the infinity of the built space as if suspended between appearance and disappearance.

The spatial dimension of L’espace infini can also be found in Rouge 106–Bleu 132 (Scale Model), a cabin with intermittent blue and red lights, which combine to produce a glaring, incandescent white that dazzles visitors upon entering. Inside, the light illusion takes on the form of a luminous solid, heightening the effect of visual instability. An earlier version of the work, presented in a room of its own, opened the group exhibition “The Origins of Abstraction” at the Musée d’Orsay in Paris in 2003.

7.  

Swings, 2000–23

Suspended above the bricks of Area (2023), three swings sway from the ceiling of the exhibition space and form Swings. The visitor’s body plays a key role, as viewers are invited to use these devices—usually associated with a playful dimension and designed
for the outdoors—in a different setting that can disorientate the exhibition experience.

As dissonant elements in an enclosed space, the swings become an expedient for visitors to perceive their own movement and the air shift caused by their swaying motion. The seats are covered with a heat-reactive film that changes color upon contact with the human body, temporarily altering the appearance of the installation and leaving an ephemeral trace of the person who sat on it. Like many of the works in the exhibition, *Swings* explores the fine line between interior and exterior space, bringing into play the perceptual coordinates of the visitors, who find themselves in an unusual position: that of observer and at the same time object of observation. These are part of the series *Liquid Crystal* (1999), consisting of benches—usually installed in public spaces—also covered with a liquid-crystal film that reacts to the slightest variations in temperature by changing color. Their transient nature prompts viewers to focus on the most imperceptible aspects of their experience, such as air, temperature, and movement. As Janssens says, «While swinging, one cleaves the air, one can become fully conscious of this breaking through the transparent materiality of the light and the air.» *Swings* creates a kinetic collective experience, similar to *Bikes* (2001): bicycles custom-made by the artist whose mirrored wheels reflect light onto the walls and floor of the space when in motion.

12.  

*Oscar*, 2009

The video shows a close-up of Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer (1907–2012)—an icon of modernist architecture—at the age of 102, smoking a cigar in his studio in which we can glimpse some of the volumes that constituted his conceptual references. The scenes, recorded live, trace an intimate and moving portrait of Niemeyer, who is caught on film during a highly introspective moment, appearing both authoritative and human. Accompanied by absolute silence, visitors are invited to contemplate this man, whose creative vision has influenced the daily lives of countless people.

Janssens’ gesture is captured through almost imperceptible camera movements, which serve to generate a link between
a sensation of displacement. The interference between the different weaves is also related to the natural light that strikes the elements, generating an iridescent phenomenon similar to the movement of the waves that inspired the title.

In its simplicity, the artist's intervention gives the space a sense of lightness and creates openings between its interior and exterior.

Once again Janssens intervenes on a liminal area of the building—in this case, the doors—to draw attention to its surrounding environment. Another example of this is the *Horizons* installation showed at her solo exhibition at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark in 2020, where she covered the lower part of several windows overlooking the sea with paraffin oil, generating optical lenses that distort the view of the landscape. In addition to the horizontality that characterizes waves, the artist also uses the verticality of the exhibition space, allowing overhead light to filter through the openings in the ceiling. With the work *Untitled*, she colors in gold a triangular section of the girders supporting the ceiling of the Navate, a transitory act that alludes to trespassing on otherworldly spheres.

10. *waves*, 2023
13. *Untitled*, 2023

The work *waves* is a completely new intervention designed for the Navate of Pirelli HangarBicocca. The numerous security doors that punctuate the longitudinal perimeter of the gallery become openings and are transformed into membranes permeable to wind, natural light, temperature, and sound. Indeed, Janssens has replaced the doors with rectangular sections of mosquito nets, securing only their upper edges and leaving the lower ones loose so that they can move freely. Two overlapping layers of mesh ripple in the air, while the surface tension created causes a moiré effect, or

Niemeyer’s statuesque presence and the contingent presence of the viewer. The coherent, static, and consistent framing on the screen is the perfect showcase for the intensity of Niemeyer’s pensive moment, his absorbed expression underlining the inscrutability of his thought, and in contrast with the continuous movement of the cigar smoke.
Travel thus becomes a fundamental aspect in the creation of these works that explore the multiple manifestations of natural light and its relationship to darkness. In these short sequences, Janssens captures the abstract beauty of rare optical astronomical phenomena that occur when a body comes between the star shining with its own light and the observer, at the moment when the Moon comes between the Earth and the Sun (in the case of a solar eclipse). In the space of a few minutes, the light source becomes dimmer until it is almost invisible and then reappears. The work is also a tribute to Joseph Plateau (1801–1883), a Belgian physicist and mathematician, the forerunner of cinema, who is said to have lost his eyesight due to prolonged observation of the Sun.


Glass is a key material in Janssens’ art, as she continuously experiments with its translucent and transparent properties to explore phenomena such as dispersion and propagation. This element is shaped to create sculptures such as *Blue Glass Roll 405/2* (2019) and *Blue Glass Roll 405/3* (2019), two blue and turquoise glass wheels whose inner and outer surfaces contrast with the semi-polished sides. Air bubbles have been trapped in the glass during the casting process, giving the sculpture a sense of lightness. The artist explains, «I became fascinated by glass casting techniques when I was developing a project for the Chapelle Saint-Vincent in Grignan, France, and *Blue Glass* came out of that research. It’s partly about the idea of movement expressed through a particular form but it also captures the idea of an effervescent air bubble inside the sculpture.»

Sometimes her pieces derive from a simple gesture, as in *Magic Mirrors* (2013–23), part of a series in which safety glass is shattered into fragments and then sandwiched between sheets of dichroic glass covered with gelatin filters.

15. **Bitter, Salty, Acid and Sweet #2, 2019–23**

Two large luminous spheres drift over the surface of the lateral partition of the exhibition space. They follow, attract, and repel each other in the background without ever overlapping, following a random program of light projection created by the artist. *Bitter, Salty, Acid and Sweet #2* has been adapted for the monumental spaces of Pirelli HangarBicocca. Using beams of color, the artist transforms an architectural element into a viewing space. The constant movement of the two circular shapes generates ever-changing compositions that provoke a different hypnotic experience in each visitor. The play of lights can evoke natural phenomena such as the movement of celestial bodies like the Moon and the Sun, key elements in Janssens’ art. In addition to exploring perceptual aspects and existential states, the installation also elicits the sense of taste through its title, which incorporates different flavor sensations, almost inviting a synesthetic experience. The work was first conceived for a solo exhibition at the Galerie Micheline Szwajcer in Antwerp in 2019 along with the *Eclipses* (2006–17) series.

Screened on cathode-ray-tube monitors, these works show a series of eclipses filmed by the artist during trips, for example to Turkey, China, and America. The series commenced with *Side (studio version)*, featuring images of a solar eclipse documented by Janssens at Side in Turkey on 29 March 2006.
The result is a kaleidoscope of colors and reflections of the surrounding space, whose changes are visible in constantly different ways depending on the viewer’s movement, and it is no coincidence that Janssens often calls these works “performative sculptures.” The dichroic film creates iridescence, while the shattered glass layer resists transparency and reverberates the light through the surface of the outer layer. With Atlantic (2020), composed of nine glass plates printed in relief and laid one on top of the other on the floor, Janssens investigates the movement, inertia, and density of water. In its configuration at Pirelli HangarBicocca, the installation interacts with the natural light filtering through the doors. Similarly, Prism (2013-23) interplays with the beams of light and their colored effects by means of a crystal prism embedded in a glass plate, which breaks up the white light, generating a rainbow and making all the colors of the spectrum visible. The same effect can be found in Untitled (2019–23), a parallelepiped optical glass that captures the surrounding space and colors and whose shape recalls a block of ice.
In the sculptures of the *Aquariums* (2008–10) series, the artist plays with the texture of the material by investigating the fluctuation of light. The works show perfectly superimposed transparent liquids inside an aquarium that generate a mirror effect where they come in contact. The light spectrum refracts differently depending on the viewpoint, resulting in various colors each time.

17. **La pluie météorique**, 1997

*La pluie météorique* consists of an expanse of small river pebbles in shades of green and blue from Indonesia (where Janssens lived for a while) that she scattered in part of the exhibition space without following a specific predetermined pattern. As the title suggests, the installation evokes the remains of a meteor shower: a seemingly alien material fallen onto Earth, dispersed over the floor without precise boundaries. Visitors who decide to wander cautiously through the winding passages created by the piles of stones have to contend with an unusual sculptural and architectural perception of space, completely altered by the presence of countless small obstacles. As recalled by the name, the shifting of the stones generates a sound that brings to mind heavy rain. Over time, progressively clearer paths will be defined, a tangle of passages caused by the abstract traces left by the movement of visitors’ bodies.

The piece precedes the series started in 2015 in which the artist uses different colored glitter to produce delicate floor sculptures characterized by their extreme fragility, which can be altered even by a simple breath. While in *La pluie météorique* the materiality of the stones is used to highlight the sedimentary aspect of the installation, in the glitter works the artist expresses a transitory and ephemeral equilibrium, destined to vary depending on the use of the exhibition area.


Janssens has been incorporating artificial fog in her installations since the second half of the 1990s. Impalpable yet marked by a strong visual presence, it gives an illusory sculptural quality to the intangible properties of light, as she states: «Gazing at mist is an experience with contrasting effects. It appears to abolish all obstacles, materiality, the resistances specific to a given context, and at the same time, it seems to impart a materiality and tactility to light.» At Pirelli HangarBicocca, the artist fills the space of the Cubo, bathed in natural light, with a dense white fog that alters the perception of the environment, resulting in disorientation due to the dissolution of the outlines of objects and even the body of the visitor who enters it. The version presented in Milan refers to the first staging of the work at M HKA in Antwerp in 1997, which was later followed by other versions with added artificial colored lights. As in the production of artists such as Fujiko Nakaya and Olafur Eliasson who experiment with natural phenomena, Janssens’ work becomes an immersive sensory labyrinth that allows the visitor to enter an altered, dreamlike reality, guided only by the heightened senses of their body.
The deceptive materiality of fog has subsequently been used by Janssens. For example, in *Stella* (2006), *Rose* (2007), and *Bluette* (2007), artificial beams of light cross each other to form stars with five or more points, presented in a new installation titled *for PHB* in a room next to the Cubo. Instead of flattening into simple geometric images on the wall, the intersecting rays of light seem to burst out toward the viewer.

**MUHKA, Anvers, 1997**
Artificial fog
Site-specific installation
Collection 49 Nord 6 Est – Frac Lorraine
20. **Souffles**, 1995

Echoing the air infiltrations seeping through waves, the sound piece **Souffles** reproduces Ann Veronica Janssens’ deep and continuous sigh played extensively and rhythmically throughout the day. The work, originally made for an old tobacco warehouse in Dunkirk, France, is here presented in a new version relating again to a monumental industrial space. **Souffles** traverses the exhibition path and acoustically connects the works on display.

The wordless yet communicative breathing sound, as for some other exhibited pieces, engages with the body of the visitor and reveals an intimate aspect of the artist proposal. The artist employs sound as another element relating to the materiality of air, in an attempt to fill the void of the surrounding area. There is an emotional connotation to the sighing sound, which can be associated both to the idea of relief and to exhaustion, a vivid feeling which is ultimately linked to the inhalations and exhalations of living creatures.

Making of the exhibition at Pirelli HangarBicocca, March 2023
Photo Francesco Margaroli
Selected Exhibitions


Janssens also participated in many biennials, including Sharjah Biennial (2019); Manifesta 10, Saint Petersburg (2014); Biennale of Sydney (1998 and 2012); Biennale de Lyon (2005), and Biennial de São Paulo (1994), as well as in numerous group shows in institutions like Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, SMAK, Gent, Grand Palais, Paris, Punta della Dogana, Venice (2019); Hayward Gallery, London (2018); Mudam, Luxembourg, Sprengel Museum, Hannover, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Buenos Aires (2015); Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2014); Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona (2013).

In 1999 she represented Belgium (with Michel François) at the 48th Venice Biennale.
Pirelli HangarBicocca is a non-profit foundation, established in 2004, which has converted a former industrial plant in Milan into an institution for producing and promoting contemporary art. This dynamic center for experimentation and research covers 15,000 square meters, making it one of the largest contiguous exhibition spaces in Europe. It presents major solo shows every year by Italian and international artists, with each project conceived to work in close relation to the architecture of the complex, and explored in depth through a calendar of parallel events. Admission to the space and the shows is completely free of charge, and cultural mediators are on hand to help the public connect with the art. Since 2012, Vicente Todoli has been the foundation’s Artistic Director.

The complex, which once housed a locomotive factory, includes an area for public services and educational activities, and three exhibition spaces whose original twentieth-century architectural features have been left clearly visible: Shed, Navate, and Cubo. As well as its exhibitions program and cultural events, Pirelli HangarBicocca also permanently houses one of Anselm Kiefer’s most important site-specific works, *The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004–2015* commissioned for the opening of Pirelli HangarBicocca, while the exterior area hosts *La Sequenza* (1971–81) by Fausto Melotti.
Pirelli HangarBicocca
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Free admission
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