

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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The Lighthearted Abstract Expressionist

And Other New York Gallery Shows Worth Seeing

By **LANCE ESPLUND**

New York

"Piero Manzoni: A Retrospective"

Gagosian Gallery

(555 W. 24th St.; 212-741-1111)

Through March 21

Inspired by Dada and Duchamp, pioneering conceptual artist Piero Manzoni (1933-63) waged war against the romance and authenticity of art. He filled balloons with his own breath; signed naked bodies and issued them certificates of authenticity; and produced the "Linea" series, works each constituting a single line drawn on a long sheet of paper, rolled up and sealed in a cardboard tube. He also filled canisters (or so the labels claim) with his own excrement -- weighed and sold by the then-current price of gold.

Gagosian's show, the first comprehensive U.S. retrospective of the Italian artist, is actually more visually alive than one might imagine -- mostly because it puts Manzoni in context, including works by de Kooning, Yves Klein and Tony Smith, among others. The

show includes Manzoni's early silhouetted imprints of everyday objects in oil and grease, and a large selection of the "Achromes," white or "neutral" bas reliefs made of pieces of wrinkled, creased or sagging cloth, or of everyday objects, such as cotton balls, stones or synthetic fur. Perhaps the most intriguing conceit in the exhibit is an iron plinth dedicated to Galileo and placed upside down, thus transforming Earth into sculpture.

Gagosian's retrospective enriches our understanding of one of art's chief provocateurs. And it makes a strong case for Manzoni as a key link between Duchamp and contemporary Conceptual art. How much you take away from this exhibition, however, will be in direct proportion to what you demand from a work of art. I now understand that Manzoni is a bridge -- albeit a bridge from nowhere to nowhere.