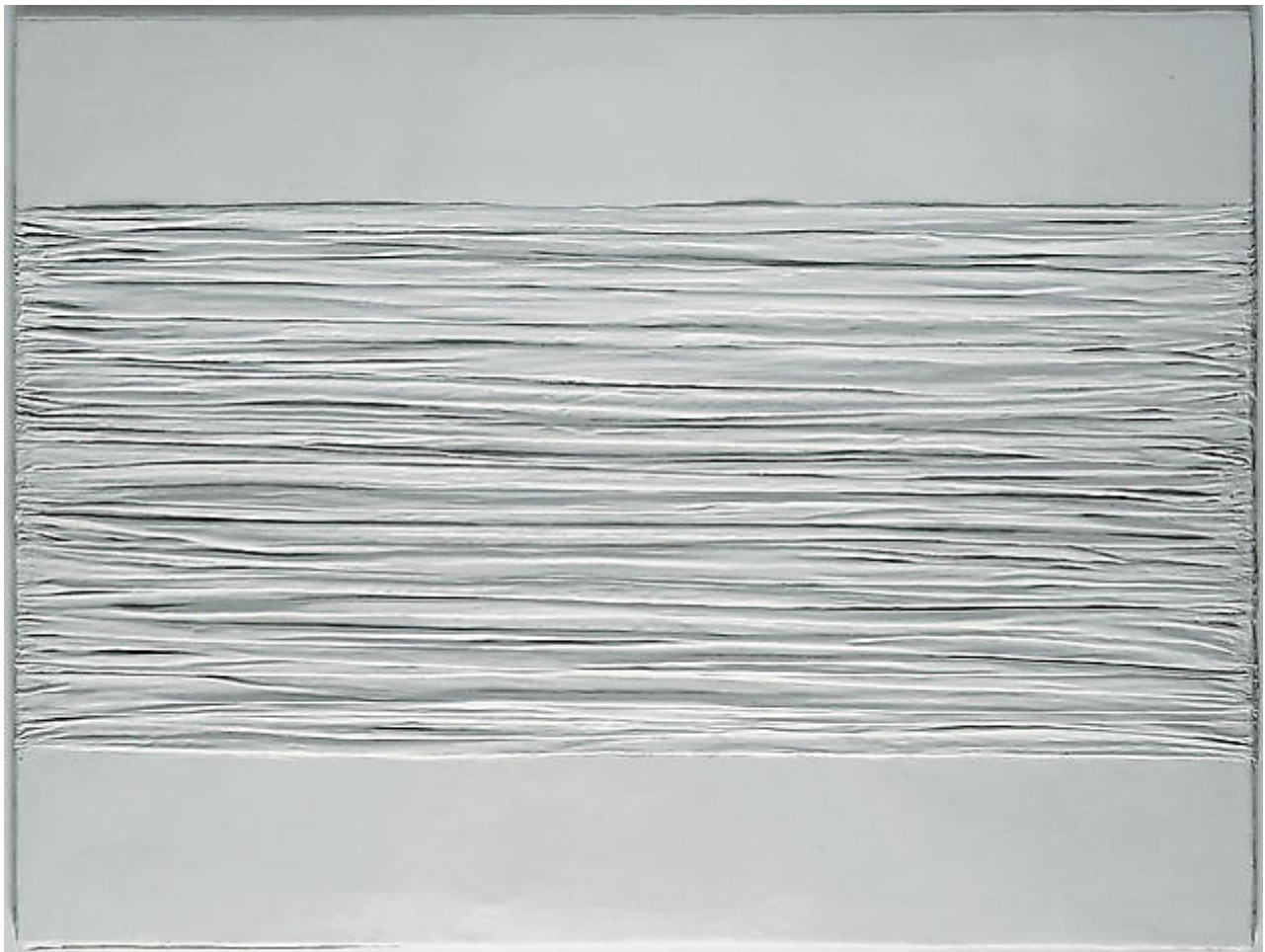


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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

whitehot | March 2009, Piero Manzoni Retrospective @ Gagosian Gallery

by Marco Antonini



PIERO MANZONI, Achrome, 1958-1959, Creased canvas and Kaolin
31 1/2 x 39 3/8 inches (80 x 100 cm), Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, NY

Product of Italy

Piero Manzoni, a Retrospective

Gagosian Gallery

555 West 24th Street, New York

January 24 through March 31, 2009

After Gino De Dominicis' quasi-retrospective at PS1, New York has been blessed by the rare opportunity of a comprehensive look at the lifetime achievement of yet another quintessential *enfant terrible* of Italian art: Piero Manzoni.

Still a relatively overlooked figure, Manzoni (especially in his later work) was pivotal for the development of Conceptualism. Initially inspired by *Arte Informale* and quickly developing Klein's (as well as Duchamp's) radical and irreverent transgressions in the direction of a greater interest for – and ability to imaginatively build upon – reality, Manzoni's art defies easy categorizations and conventional labels.

His first *Achromes* monochrome series, dating back to 1958 and extensively represented in the Gagosian exhibition, are still indebted to *Arte Informale* and in particular to Burri's emotional surfaces in their attention to the plastic values of the support. The clay, caolin and gesso used on the immaculate canvases are stretched and allowed to form expressive wrinkles and cracks. Given the hyper-consistency of the series and the sheer quantity of canvases amassed in a single room I felt a little overwhelmed by the barricade of white, chalky canvases... but hey, we're still at Gagosian, right?



PIERO MANZONI, Achrome, 1961-1962, Artificial fiber
24 3/16 x 18 1/8 inches (61.5 x 46 cm)
Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, NY



PIERO MANZONI, Installation view, Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, NY

Although somehow reminiscent of Duchamp's 1913-14 *Three Standard Stoppages*, the *Linee* (first presented in 1959), represent one of the turning points in Manzoni's career and his first thoroughly conceptual work. Consisting of sealed cylindrical boxes containing a rolled sheet with line drawings of various lengths, these lines, which famously included an "infinite length" specimen, as to further remark the conceptual nature of the work, exist of course solely as a product of our own imagination.

A later series of *Achromes* reveals an artist far beyond the contemporary research of, say, Fontana, Tàpies or *Nouveau Réalisme* in general. Renato Barilli has noted how raw, mundane materials such as bread, felt, cotton swabs etc. are still mostly used as modular components in rationalistic compositions. Barilli's claim that this kind of arrangement was devised to reclaim an order in the inherently "organic" (commas are

de rigueur, as several pieces show a parallel interest for ultra-synthetic, industrial materials) disorder of the materials is more questionable. Manzoni's late *Achromes* seem instead to be concerned with poking fun at the grandiose solemnity of much monochrome painting – including that of his former master/muse, Klein – and, just like the *Linee* and the *Corpi d'Aria* (inflated balloons whose sale price would change depending on who inflated them, the artist or the buyer), aim at an open confrontation with the art world and its economy.

We shouldn't forget that the 50s and 60s were the years of the *Miracolo Italiano*, an expression used to label the widespread excitement that surrounded Italy's post WWII material, economic and social reconstruction under the auspices of both the Marshall Plan and an unprecedented political stability. Manzoni's whole work, at least from the first *Achromes* on, can be considered as a response to the seemingly unstoppable conversion to capitalist values and the commoditization of Italian culture. His great later works sound like a laugh in the face of the art world and its dynamics. Apart from the infamous *Merda d'Artista*, his *Magic Pedestals* and the terrific *Socle du Monde* are the real highlights of the show. An iron cube, inscribed in bronze and turned upside down to function as the ideal base or pedestal or the whole world, *Socle du Monde* (1962) is Manzoni's non plus ultra. Installed in front of a wall-size print of the actual location of the piece, in Hernings, Denmark (..why was the actual image of the artwork redundantly included in the picture?), this brutal and yet hopelessly romantic statement could have deserved a separate exhibition all for itself.



PIERO MANZONI, Installation view, Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, NY

Manzoni's brilliant, often dark humor, together with his ability to expose and deconstruct the most nonsensical aspects of the art world, converting them into new forms and ideas, were an example for generations of contemporary artists. His strategic flirtation with the world of commerce (although almost exclusively addressed in the convenient, familiar niche of the art market) and the extension of his own artistic practice into the, then, still uncharted territory of product design and marketing were probably his most important legacies. Kudos to curator Germano Celant (author of the artist's catalogue raisonné) for his sure-handed – if slightly overzealous, as in the sometimes unjustified juxtapositions of contemporary artworks by other artists – critical lead and to Gagosian for this long awaited retrospective: an organizational effort that few museums would have been able to handle.

