

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

SLANT

Material Value

JALEH MANSOOR ON PIERO MANZONI AT GAGOSIAN

PIERO MANZONI HAS APPEARED in only a small handful of shows in the US over the past two decades, among them the grand “Italian Metamorphosis, 1943–1968” at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1994, curated by Germano Celant, and “Minimalia: An Italian Vision in 20th Century Art” at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in 1999, curated by Achille Bonito Oliva. Both positioned Manzoni’s work as an enigmatic last gasp of modernist painting, and just one example among many of a proliferation of artistic brilliance and productivity in Italy in the 1950s and ’60s. Yet “Piero Manzoni: A Retrospective,” recently on view at the Chelsea branch of the Gagosian Gallery franchise, was a monographic show of such scale that it replaced previous endgames with inaugurations. Also curated by Celant—who, with few exceptions, has monopolized the discourse on Manzoni for four decades—the exhibition presented the artist’s work beyond the terms of painting, stressing his conceptually difficult objects, highlighted in vitrines or placed bluntly on the floor, and emphasizing their incursion into the viewer’s space.

Much of the show’s effervescence stemmed from the productive tension between Celant and Gagosian’s monographic agenda, with its drive to glorify a singular figure and enforce his authorial predominance, and Manzoni’s own project, which effaces authorship by supplanting artistic intention with material contingency and individual conception with dialogue. The dissonance between such a magisterial presentation and Manzoni’s own dismantling of any such bloated frameworks paradoxically made for the best way to acquaint an American audience with him—through negative dialectics. Against all odds, the exhibition achieved a sensitive reframing of the artist’s oeuvre that reshuffled the old postwar art cards. It offered an alternative genealogy of Conceptual art, so often understood as the putative heir to Minimalism’s rejection of painting.

In 1957, after a couple of false starts, Manzoni arrived at the neologism *Achrome* to describe the reduction of his work to the examination of material texture, draining it of color and mark making. That apparent reduction turned out to hold a great multiplicity of

possibilities, generating dozens of works in plaster, kaolin, linen, cotton, rabbit fur, straw, synthetic fibers, and the infinite range of organic and artificial and hybrid stuff of the world. The chance to finally think through the generous plenitude of Manzoni’s production—the lush, dense, and differentiated substances he explored in a very short time (1957 to 1963)—was among this exhibition’s strengths. For the first two of those years, the *Achrome* as a form of nonpainting and nonsculpture—or, rather, those mediums pushed to the point of material excess—occupied Manzoni’s entire field of production.

In August 1959, however, the *Achrome* led to strategies that may have reflected on painting but no longer resembled it in any way. Photographs show Manzoni seated at a newspaper factory, as if at the end of an assembly line, holding a bottle of ink to a running paper feed and manufacturing an inordinately long “line” that was subsequently rolled into a cylinder. Manzoni then replaced the conventional frame with commercial containers: tubes and canisters that packaged this series of painted lines, now

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rendered passive and industrially produced. Likewise, *Merda d’artista* (Artist’s Shit), 1961, offered an analysis of the dialectics of art in the frenzied economy of reconstruction Milan: *Merda d’artista* is precisely that which contemporary artists make, total crap whose value emerges only from the abstractions on its label, or from the artist’s proper name as name brand—



Piero Manzoni executing *Linea m 7200* (7200 m Line) at the newspaper printer Herning Avis, Herning, Denmark, July 4, 1960. Photo: Ole Bjørndal Bagger.

Manzoni’s own refuse held up as aesthetic totem (in an edition of ninety).

Gagosian’s museum-quality show also generously displayed ephemera that testified to Manzoni’s move from painting to an increasingly sprawling practice, including flyers for the artist’s gallery, Azimut, and issues of his magazine, *Azimuth*—in which he reproduced Jasper Johns’s *Target with Plaster Casts*. Manzoni’s close formal exchange with such peers, from Lucio Fontana to Yves Klein, was on clear display through the inclusion of these other artists’ work. And it became apparent that his anachronistic taste for Johns, for example, disrupts the classical narrative that has Frank Stella following Johns, Donald Judd following Stella, and so on in patrilineal formation, culminating in Conceptual art and its retreat from object to idea. If this putative dematerialization is often read as an indictment of traditional artistic media for their promiscuous conjugation with the commodity fetish, Manzoni reroutes the story. He arrives at a similar critique, but by entrenching his work *further* in objects rather than jettisoning them—a radical materialism that works under and against the commodity’s canned dictates. It was as if Manzoni predicted the way in which ’60s Conceptual art would merely come to mimic capitalism’s most seductive strategies: tautologies and Jedi mind tricks, printed matter replacing the work like advertising displacing the product, and an appeal to the viewer’s arrogant



View of "Piero Manzoni: A Retrospective," 2009, Gagosian Gallery, New York. Foreground: Piero Manzoni, *Socle du monde* (Base of the World), 1961. Background left, on floor: Tony Smith, *Black Box*, 1962. Photo: Robert McKeever.

confidence of being in the know. (Of course, there are exceptions to this, such as Manzoni's good friend and mentee Marcel Broodthaers.)

Manzoni's tireless engagement with matter resulted in one of his most humorous works, *Socle du monde* (Base of the World), 1961, a Minimalist cube he turned "upside down" to support the weight of the world-as-sculpture. The base's catholic embrace of materiality yields a conceptual critique of the parameters of art, the limits of the frame, and the traditional art object's failure to provide a realm apart from the world—the false dream of autonomy. In this sense, *Socle du monde* makes good on the plaque marking Manzoni's former studio, on via Fiori Chiari in Milan, which bestows upon the artist the title of "Founder of Conceptual Art." If Manzoni is indeed an avatar of Conceptualism—a thesis the Gagosian show promotes—his particular conceptual practice would pose a radical other to the ideated withdrawal of tactility and corporeality with which mainstream Conceptual art is associated. Rather than abandoning traditional media, Manzoni's conceptual works issue from the artist's investigation, in the *Achromes*, of painting's sensual and textural qualities. There is no telos, like that characterizing the one-upmanship among Stella, Judd, and Joseph Kosuth; the sheer quantity of *Achromes* replaces the old art-historical sport of continuity and progress with the proliferation of endless material difference.

The exhibition's attempt to contextualize Manzoni among his peers was most effective in the stunning play of similarity and difference set up between his and Tony Smith's work. Smith's *Black Box*, completed one year after Manzoni's *Socle du monde*, looks more than ever like an art object—no longer the Minimalist "specific object" that was to have dissolved the frame

and simply been in the world, neither painting nor sculpture. *Socle du monde*'s suggestion that the frame's relationship to the world had to be fully challenged rather than simply elided reveals the degree to which the Minimalist object would all too easily slip back into the realm of painting or

sculpture or design. By contrast, *Socle*'s ostensible operation as an actual base acknowledges the presence of the frame (conceptual, social, and literal) as an inevitable mediating device, and at the same time reaches across that frame to the chaos of the world. It suggests that painting's exfoliation through a radically materialist self-reflexivity dismantles the object/concept binary that mainstream Conceptual art upholds. This recognition of matter and idea as a structural couple allowed Manzoni to achieve the incredibly difficult task of linking abstraction to a social and historical context. Unlike his American counterparts, from Robert Rauschenberg to Stella to Robert Ryman—who asked how far a painting could be pushed and still remain painting, posing a strictly formalist inquiry—Manzoni demonstrated that abstraction was always embodied, contingent, and therefore not transcendental but continuously implicated in its context.

Other pieces almost never seen in American galleries demonstrated how this materialist abstraction worked: *Corpo d'aria* (Body of Air), 1959–60, is a set of inflated balloons that Manzoni would place on a special display stand next to the packaging in which they came (and could be stored after deflating). The piece riffs on Duchamp's *Paris Air*, 1919, a small, sealed glass vial containing Parisian oxygen that mocked the preciousness of the City of Light as capital of world culture. Manzoni's version similarly offers a sharp analysis of the status of the work of art in 1960 as so much hot air and vacuous hype—think of Klein's *Le Vide* (The Void), in which the artist unleashed a PR apparatus to corral a crowd at an empty gallery space. Again, the packaging takes precedence over the work, yet *Corpo d'aria* articulates emptiness rather than spectacularly producing it. A related work seldom on view in the US is *Fiato d'artista* (Artist's Breath), 1960,

which sardonically offers the supposed animus, the breath, of the rarified subject in lieu of his celebrated painterly mark. Only the vessel initially inflated with the artist's breath is now an abjectly deflated bag nailed to a plaque, underscoring art's collapse as soon as the next cool thing hits the tape.

It is, of course, precisely such perverse insightfulness that made the exhibition illuminate Manzoni's relevance today. On the one hand, despite its efforts at contextualization and complexity, it advanced the hagiographic adulation of an artist who exposed the absurdity of any such operation. On the other, the gallery mimicked the art-historically minded retrospective while attempting to attract sales for a lesser known artist's work, acting as a wolf in sheep's clothing even as it simultaneously and provocatively questioned the need for institutional legitimation. The show was the perfect vehicle for a reflection on the physical-oeuvre-as-frame.

This presentation of the spectrum of Manzoni's materialist practice revealed the way it anticipated one of the most important issues in contemporary art: biopolitics. The artist's interest in the base as a strange site of exception and exemption opened onto an investigation of the body's commercial and political mediation. In 1961, Manzoni perched a series of living, nude women on a base. He signed them to "transform" them into art. A series of photographs included in the show are all that remain, documenting the event of magic conversion via the signature.

Manzoni's obsession with the way the signature, frame, and base operated to transform an object, any object, into "art" culminated, perhaps, in *Base magica—Scultura vivente* (Magic Base—Living Sculpture), 1961. Formally resembling *Socle du monde*, the work consisted of a trapezoidal pedestal onto which anyone could step. Was this a proto-Warholian, banal democratization of the artist and artwork, or an early remark on the body as bare life to be marked and made by a commercial system, à la Santiago Sierra? Along these lines, in late 1961 and 1962, Manzoni issued "certificates of authenticity" to friends and colleagues, declaring them "art." This analysis of reification seemed perfectly suited to those things and bodies standing in Gagosian's yawning expanse. □

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