

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

HE'S THE SHIT

by Ben Davis

In the textbooks, Piero Manzoni usually comes off as some kind of a novelty act, an oddball cross between Marcel Duchamp and Roberto Benigni. The recent retrospective of the Italian artist at Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea, which brought together works from throughout his brief, fertile career (he died at 30, in 1963), was above all an opportunity for New York audiences to see for themselves that Manzoni was more passionately engaged, more conflicted and more contemporary than he's usually given credit for. In some contradictory way, even the fact that the work in the show looked dated made Manzoni seem like a man passionately engaged with the problem of how to relate to his own particular moment -- which in turn makes him seem all the more relevant today.

But to understand Manzoni, you need a critical framework that's up to the job. In the show catalogue, curator Germano Celant touts his subject as a ruthless "materialist" opposed to the "spiritualism" of his colleague Yves Klein. This is a warped use of a philosophical term -- but it probably would have been OK with Manzoni, who got a kick out of overturning lofty conceptions of art.

It's bizarre, then, that Celant devotes so little space in his long essay to unpacking how the actual material reality of Manzoni's background in postwar Italy affected him. Instead, Celant rehashes the development of Western modernism as a set of autonomous "problems" that presented themselves for artistic "research." In the exhibition, Celant's key curatorial gesture -- juxtaposing Manzoni's various experiments with visually similar, contemporaneous works by obvious kindred spirits like Klein, and less obvious ones, like Willem de Kooning -- had a parallel effect. It made Manzoni's contribution seem like just another moment in some nebulous visual zeitgeist.

And yet, at the same time, an appendix in the catalogue offers comprehensive biographical and historical information about Manzoni, the best that's out there on the artist; it's just partitioned off from Celant's more "theoretical" pontifications. And at Gagosian, each room was devoted to one year of the artist's creative output, with wall-painted timelines listing context that included not just art-historical events, but political and economic happenings as well, giving the sense of a real life. It's as if Manzoni's career both demands and repels a proper "material" analysis, and Celant can't quite tie the knot. And, in fact, Manzoni revealed precisely in highlighting the contradictory relation between the reality of the artist and his work -- a late project (not included at Gagosian) was a self-published monograph, *Piero Manzoni: The Life and the Works*, which contained only blank pages.

To really present Piero Manzoni as a "materialist" means filling in these blanks.

The dates that bookend the Gagosian show see Manzoni progress from early abstractions in tar, in 1956, still mired in the pathos of European lyrical abstraction -- albeit of an adventurous kind -- to his more puckish, self-referential gestures, mocking himself as an artist and interrogating the idea of art in general, most famously with his cans of his own excrement, *Artist's Shit*, from 1961, but also in works like his empty pedestals, which were supposed to render anything and everything that landed on them as art. Compare this trajectory to a concurrent example from Italian film: In 1956, Federico Fellini released the lyrical, almost neo-realist *Nights of Cabiria*; by 1963, the year of Manzoni's death, Fellini was making *8½*, the quintessential self-referential auteur film. This example gives a sense that if Manzoni's evolution was part of a general art-historical development, it also had a specific Italian context, the explosive post-war reconstruction of Italy, when the Mediterranean nation's economy was reconfigured to be less agricultural and more international, bringing with it a corresponding explosion of cosmopolitan ferment.

Manzoni had box seats to this transformation. His father was a Count; his mother, from a family of industrialists. He grew up dividing his time between a variety of estates and

vacation homes. As a boy, he attended the elite Istituto Leone XIII in Milan. He was born, in other words, into an archetypal bit of Old Italy just as Old Italy was cracking apart and reinventing itself. Under fierce pressure from his parents to study law, he enrolled at Milan's Catholic University in 1955, and seems to have found himself torn between fondness for the familiar idylls of his youth and the pressure of being groomed to be part of Italy's ruling class. "I hate this feeling of destruction and incompetence," he wrote in his diary, "maybe because I don't know how to submit to it. On the other hand, suffering is life. Without it life would be death."

Art, which Manzoni never studied formally, seems to have taken on a significance for the young man as the unalienated antidote to such pressures: "the best thing would be to find respectable work, like my folks want, and then paint without having to live on my painting." In 1955, he moved to Rome to study philosophy and escape his family's demands, then shortly after moved back to Milan and resolved to devote himself totally to art-making. From then on, profession and art, career and leisure, would be one, and his artistic path is a kind of dialectical navigation of the resultant tensions.

Here is where it seems deceptive to frame U.S. post-war developments in art as continuous with European ones, as Celant does. The U.S. emerged from the war in a strong position, and relatively unscathed. This was the context for the flourishing of the Ab Ex painting in the U.S. in the '40s, giving steam to its aura of progress and expansive confidence. Europe, on the other hand, was a wreck. Every major nation had stared annihilation in the face, and was to be rebuilt with massive American investment. Abstraction in Europe in the form of Art Informel consequently had a much more wounded, less transcendent character. By the time Manzoni dipped his toe in, American abstraction had been canonized in its homeland as representative of new-found cultural superiority. Meanwhile, the variety of painting that was close at hand for Manzoni in Milan, "Arte Nucleare," was an explicitly political formation -- it attempted to tie an indistinct, half-way form of abstraction to the attempt to figure the possibility of global annihilation in the nuclear rivalry between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. The idealism of "absolute" abstract painting was less immediately appropriated by the powers-that-be in

Italy; at the same time, the tradition in which Manzoni personally participated started from a more cynical point. He would combine these clashing sensibilities in novel ways.

Having committed himself to art, Manzoni spent 1957 associating with the Arte Nucleare artists, penning and signing onto a maniacal series of manifestos and statements of principle. These writings oscillate between two poles. On the one hand, art is tied to the search for "primal myths" (artists must venture "where mythologies have their ultimate foundation and their origins," Manzoni wrote with Ettore Sordini and Angelo Verga), and this origin-quest seems connected to his early attraction to art as unalienated labor. On the other hand, he harps relentlessly on the need to be "modern" -- obviously connected with a sense of a fast-emerging new reality during the "Italian Miracle" decade -- with a kind of militancy. With Enrico Baj, he even half-jokingly proposed the need for "a large and violent demonstration against art criticism or, better, against certain aspects of it," because of the lack in Italy of "a modern terminology or style that suited the subject in question."

By the end of '57, Manzoni had arrived at an artistic formula that seemed momentarily to resolve these tensions: his "Achromes," completely blank canvasses which he dipped in liquid clay and allowed to dry, thus giving them a rough, in-your-face materiality. In a catalogue text about this new work, he stated, "Here the image takes form in its vital function; it cannot have value for what it calls back to mind, explains or expresses (if anything, the question is to fuse/merge), nor for seeking or being able to be explained as an allegory for a physical process. It has value only insofar as it *is*: only as being." The "Achromes" are at once metaphysically primal and relentlessly forward-thinking in spirit. Manzoni believed passionately enough in the need to be contemporary in this way that he would shortly disown his colleague Baj as a "novecentista" for clinging to representational painting.

"In Italy," writes Chris Harmon in *The Fire Last Time* (1998), "the boom years of the 1950s were also years in which formerly skilled jobs were 'deskilled' and taken over by semi-skilled workers, in which labour discipline was tightened and production norms

increased massively." In Manzoni's notion that being "modern" meant breaking sharply from literary allusion and personal style ("Against Style" is another manifesto he signed), you can see a garbled echo of this background. The fact that this relentlessly independent conception of the artist made for its own kind of alienation, producing a whole new set of compulsions at the same time as it separated itself from the compulsions of history, is evidenced by Manzoni's ensuing restless trajectory. In the exhibition, you could follow the arc of his "Achromes," which went from the rippling white, clay-soaked canvasses, to experiments with segmented panels, to aggregations of cotton balls, to weird shaggy panels of synthetic fibers. Far from just "letting it be" in some Zen-like way, the concept of the "Achrome" evidently opens a path towards the artist as a relentless generator of novelty, unable to stand still.

Which is why, paradoxically, Manzoni's work lurches from trying to present a pure, absolute image, to a riff on the self-cancelling nature of this "absolute" concept of art. His next major series was the "Artist's Lines," which saw him draw a series of straight lines on long scrolls of paper -- about as fundamental an artistic gesture as you can get -- which he then rolled up and put in cylinders, so that you had to take his word for it about what was in there. This ironic gesture of self-concealment, nevertheless, was his way of returning indirectly to the cosmic "mythologies" he had pined for not so long before: His proposal was to bury cylinders in cities throughout the world, until the combined length equaled the circumference of the earth.

Manzoni's turn toward process-based and performance works was explicitly an effort to seek out "a more direct relationship between artwork and spectator," as he put it, getting any alienating layers out of the way. Next up was his attempt to create edible art, feeding people hard-boiled eggs as a sort of esthetic ceremony. A similar motivation -- to situate art at its most primal level -- can be seen in *Artist's Shit* (he also planned to make *Artist's Blood*). But by then Manzoni was directly embracing the idea that you cannot escape the reification of even the most primordial gestures -- the joke of *Artist's Shit* was that the tiny tins of feces were to be sold according to the price of gold.

Whether the cans actually contain excrement is another, possibly intentional, part of the gag, reminiscent of the veiled contents of the cylinders of *Artist's Lines*.

In a similar vein, Manzoni's "living sculpture" project of 1961, for which he offered up gallery-goers to themselves as artworks, may seem to express a Beuys-ian utopianism. Except that he gave it the following flourish: Each participant was granted a certificate with a sticker of a different color. As one observer explained, "the color red means that the individual is a complete work of art and will remain so until his or her death. The color yellow: the only part that is valid is the signed part, indicated in writing the ticket. With the color green, on the other hand, there is a limitation or conditions. One is a work of art only in certain conditions: e.g., drinking or singing, etc. The color purple has the same functions as red, but for a fee." Art's power to sanctify the everyday collapses indistinguishably with commerce's ability to whip up desire.

Where would Manzoni have gone if he had the chance to keep going? It is worth noting how his oeuvre, remembered mainly as insider-ish art-world jokes, was directly tied up with exploring the new potentials of Europe's re-industrialization. The "Achromes" are not just riffs on the metaphysical pretensions of Ab Ex painting. They are also an exploration of the properties of the new materials that were appearing in the post-war world; Manzoni brags of having "experimented with phosphorescent ones and others soaked in cobalt chloride." His *Artist's Breath* works -- represented in the exhibition by a series of sad, deflated balloons -- were not merely Duchampian riffs on anti-opticality, but part of an attempt to realize "pneumatic sculptures," fully independent floating structures. Manzoni theorized about making robotic sculptural environments. Somewhat ghoulishly, when he spoke of "living sculptures," he also said he wanted to "enclose and preserve dead people in blocks of transparent plastic."

The point is this: The "anti-art" sensibility, the ironic distance towards art with which Manzoni is usually associated, the knowing jokes about art's commodity value -- these things are actually part and parcel of the arrival of the artist as a professional. Manzoni's works are often read as quirky critiques of capitalism. There is no real evidence of this.

In fact, one must have separated oneself from art's traditional, auratic function, reimagining it as shit, before one can throw oneself ahead into the bold new world of art as the production of spectacle. From his initial artistic rebellion against the rationality of post-war Italy, Manzoni was led in the course of a few short years of furious experimentation to a position that was something very much like an engineer, albeit an engineer of playful experiences -- what these days you might call an "imagineer."

To give a sense of Manzoni's thinking, here is one of his final proposals: "I am currently (1962) studying an electronically controlled 'labyrinth,' which may be useful in psychological tests or brainwashing." Art has, in a way, been in that labyrinth ever since.

"Piero Manzoni: A Retrospective," Jan. 24-Mar. 21, 2009, at Gagosian Gallery, 555 West 24th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*. He can be reached at

bdavis@artnet.com



Piero Manzoni's *Artist's Breath* (1960), foreground, in "Piero Manzoni: A Retrospective," at Gagosian Gallery



The timeline in "Piero Manzoni: A Retrospective," at Gagosian Gallery, with Enrico Baj's *Figures* (1956), right



Piero Manzoni's *Linee (Lines)* (1959), in "Piero Manzoni: A Retrospective," at Gagosian Gallery



"Piero Manzoni: A Retrospective," installation view at Gagosian Gallery



Piero Manzoni "Achromes" (1960-61), with *Magic Base No. 2* (1961) on floor, in "Piero Manzoni: A Retrospective," at Gagosian Gallery



Piero Manzoni's *Base of the World* (1961), at left, in "Piero Manzoni: A Retrospective," at Gagosian Gallery



"Piero Manzoni: A Retrospective," installation view at Gagosian Gallery



"Piero Manzoni: A Retrospective," installation view at Gagosian Gallery, with Tony Smith's *Black Box* (1962) at left



"Piero Manzoni: A Retrospective," at Gagosian Gallery



"Piero Manzoni: A Retrospective," at Gagosian Gallery



Piero Manzoni

Merda d'artista

1961

Photo by Tomasso Mattina



Piero Manzoni

Base Magica -- Scultura Vivente

1961

Photo courtesy Attilio Codognato Collection



Piero Manzoni

Achrome

1958-1959

Photo by Rob McKeever



Piero Manzoni

Achrome

1961-1962

Photo courtesy Archivio Opera Piero Manzoni



Piero Manzoni

Linea m 7200

1960

Photo courtesy Herning Kustmuseum, Denmark



Piero Manzoni

Corpo d'aria

1959-1960

Photo courtesy Archivio Opera Piero Manzoni



Manzoni and Uova

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Courtesy Gagosian Gallery