

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ArtSeen

The Last Breath of Piero Manzoni

by Robert C. Morgan



Piero Manzoni, "Achrome," 1961-62. Artificial fiber, 24 3/16 × 18 1/8 inches (61.5 × 46 cm). Photo Archivio Opera Piero Manzoni. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

There is as much to say about Piero Manzoni, the artist, as there is to say about his work. They are, more or less, inextricably bound to one another. His case is much like that of Warhol, Beuys, Duchamp, or for that matter, Hilna af Klimt. When an artist takes the risk of creating a self-invested myth, the repercussions that follow may appear overwhelming. The shorter the lifespan, the more likely the myth will survive. Examples range from the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley to the painter Paula Modersohn-Becker, from the '50s film-idol James Dean to the Haitian-American painter Jean-Michel Basquiat. Historians and theorists rise to the occasion with a massive urge to decode, deconstruct, and demystify these artists. We are not content to allow the work to speak

on its own terms or even on the artists' (a premise for which there is some justification). Rather, we want to peer through the keyhole and examine their intimate lives as if to catch a glimmer of the way they saw the world. We thereby attempt to fathom a contiguity or to construct a semiosis among various signs and symbols that would explain what appear as contradictions, often in a tone that contributes to a greater degree of mystification than the mystique that enshrouded them in the first place. Manzoni is no exception to this inevitability. His disconsolate and blatantly non-conformist objects keep interjecting themselves in the penumbra between Modernist anti-aesthetics and Postmodernist disaffection—an apt setting by which to identify his position. One might argue that he was simultaneously at both ends of the spectrum—the culmination of the former and the harbinger of the latter. Like the French monochrome painter Yves Klein, with whom he is often compared, Manzoni attests to a form of spirituality that exists outside the conventions of those who live in the everyday world. Whereas Klein was compelled to leap into the paradoxical void of creation and destruction, Manzoni was more interested in containing the world by drawing a line around it or by defining it through the boundaries of his own body, offering relics of his own breath, blood, and excrement. In each case, Manzoni methodically shows us the evidence by way of concealment. A large portion of his work takes the form of containers, such as the deflated balloons mounted exquisitely on blocks of wood, or his own excrement presumably sealed in uniform cans resembling Starkist Tuna, of which there was an original edition of 90 made in 1961, stamped, signed, and numbered.



Piero Manzoni, "Corpo d'aria," 1959-60.

Wood box, rubber balloon, mouthpiece and base, 4 7/8 × 16 13/16 × 1 7/8 in. Attilio Codognato Collection, Venice. Photo Archivio Opera Piero Manzoni. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

Piero Manzoni spent most of his adult life living and working in the Brera district of Milan. I once made a pilgrimage to see the place—the studio where he lived and worked—and found a relatively humble house inside a tesseræ courtyard with a few trees, enclosed behind a wrought-iron gate. A young gallery dealer from the area graciously agreed to take me there, otherwise it would have been difficult to find, given that there are no major signs offering information. Once we arrived, I espied a small plaque on one side of the entrance with Manzoni's name and the years that he occupied the studio in the fifties up until his premature death (at 30, apparently from alcoholism) in 1963. In this sense, he might be viewed as the Italian counterpart to the French Neo-Impressionist, Georges Seurat, who also died at age 30. While the historical time periods are different, as were, needless to say, their styles of working, each artist retained a certain obsession and sense of completeness about their works that endured, for the most part, throughout their careers.

Manzoni was a Colossus who took giant steps each year of his creative output. When he tired of producing relics from the body, he presented the days of a monthly calendar as art, reminding us of the course of diurnal existence. In another work, he reproduced an enlarged thumbprint as a metaphorical labyrinth in which the human imprint symbolizes all that we consider ethical, even in times of debilitation and nausea. Life goes on. It persists like art, in a way, but they are never exactly the same. This idea was more or less consistent throughout Manzoni's career. While life and art may discover a meeting point, or at least coincide with one another, they do not and cannot remain together. While they are destined to galvanize the human condition through a kind of magnetic force, their fusion, like lovers, will end in passionate disillusion. Such moments are fleeting. The artist proceeded to sabotage the laws of stasis and kinesis by designing an ironic steel plinth on which the world might rest when it rotates upside down. This was followed by another protracted project involving a sequence of unilinear drawings on rolls of paper, each sealed in a tube or canister, which become part of an imaginary trajectory ultimately circumventing the globe. Projects such as these function as impossible forms of architecture that ultimately become virtually inscrutable to visualize.

In his series of "achromes" (beginning in 1957), Manzoni's folded white Kaolin sheets suggest rituals of purification. They are impossible paintings in that they exist equally in terms of absence and presence, depending on what kind of material is applied to the surface. In either case, these works challenge the improbability of any predetermined aspect in painting. In such a world, painting no longer serves as an aesthetic model by which to transmit meaning outside of itself. Rather the achromes (literally "without color") conceal the trade secrets of painting before any pigment is applied, namely, that the surface already contains the answer and the limits that inform our perceptions. In a way, the desire to paint or construct a picture without color (other than white) implies another sort of cleansing ritual in which the secretions and excretions that emit from our corporeal apparatus betray an implicitly relative understanding of human cognition. In a word, the achromes suggest that our response to any phenomena in the natural and physical worlds is completely contingent on how we conceive meaning in relation to the

body. This appears a key factor in nearly all of Manzoni's work, regardless of the degree of abstraction that we give to the physical laws that substantiate our existence.

The curator for the Gagosian exhibition, Germano Celant, curated his first exhibition of Manzoni's work on a more modest scale in 1972 at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York, less than a decade after the artist's death. While many of the artist's important works and multiples were shown, the catalog was modest and the concept of the exhibition was relatively conventional. For the current Gagosian exhibition, titled *Piero Manzoni: A Retrospective*, Celant decided to look beyond the artist's oeuvre as a contained entity, severed from the continuum of neo-avant-gardism of the fifties and sixties, and to place Manzoni within a Structuralist context.

Borrowing from Piaget's concept of diachronic and synchronic time, the exhibition not only traces the thirty-year lifespan of the artist in terms of his conceptual and aesthetic development, but also shows the vertical "cuts" of each significant time period, thus allowing the viewer to understand Manzoni in both an art historical and a world political context. Such a decision allows the master plan of the exhibition to show works by other artists in relation to Manzoni's point of view. At the outset, we see Alberto Burri and Willem de Kooning. Towards the middle we see Dubuffet, Rauschenberg, and Ryman. By the conclusion, we see affinities that include such diverse artists as Mimmo Rotella, Yves Klein, and Jean Fautrier. The point is to see Manzoni not as an isolated eccentric who concealed in order to reveal, but who avidly understood what was happening around him and appropriated it according to his own needs. While Manzoni appears to have an innocent, boyish face, his antics also suggest that he knew precisely what he was attempting to deconstruct. In the photograph where he signs the torso of a nude female model (as an edition of ten) in 1961, the smile on his face tells all that we need to know. Manzoni is performing according to the system of art that we now call the art market. By performing, he is looking ahead, perhaps cynically, to what his audience really wants—the need to engage in the artist's lifestyle and romantic freedom, the same sensation that inspires collectors to collect and frantically invites investors to the party. Manzoni was not simply trying to shock his audience, but to open the doors of

consciousness to a new way of seeing art, and a new way of thinking about art. In this sense, we might consider Manzoni as a proto-conceptualist, an artist who worked with ideas, yet was not willing to disengage the necessity of using materials. While he may have denied the importance of the object (in some cases), he introduced the possibility of packaging art, thereby suggesting that if we aestheticize the packaging, it does not matter what is inside. The point for Manzoni is that we believe the substance could be there, even if it does not exist. Even if the balloon that once held his breath is now deflated, decomposed, and beautifully mounted on a block of wood, we may still believe that the oxygen still hovers around it, containing the aura that continues to illuminate our senses.