

ARTFORUM
December 2009

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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BEST OF 2009

“Manzoni: A Retrospective”

Gagosian Gallery, New York

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IN THE CATALOGUE to the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris's 1991 Piero Manzoni retrospective, Nancy Spector wrote about "a temporary blindness" of American institutions with regard to the Italian genius of the postwar period. That blindness seems to have been only partially remedied now. The first American retrospective of Manzoni's work, curated by Germano Celant, the godfather of post-war Italian art in general and of *Arte Povera* in particular, did not take place in a museum but in Larry Gagosian's Chelsea gallery (January 24–March 21, 2009), a locale that has lately taken on the various categories and ambitions of the highest-caliber museum shows. (Gagosian's earlier, and equally exquisite, Pino Pascali exhibition and the Bacon-Giacometti dialogues performed at the gallery's uptown space might easily have qualified for "Best Show" of 2006 and 2008, respectively.) It would require more space than is available here to analyze why, in recent years, the balances of curatorial competence and institutional power seem to have tilted toward commercial enterprise, as though at this moment only capital can sustain artistic knowledge and mediate aesthetic desire.

One explanation might be that museums have to pretend to be public, and therefore tend to popularize, whereas capital and speculative investment can be elusive and *must* be exclusive. Yet, paradoxically, no other artist since Duchamp has withdrawn and withheld the conciliatory and the compensatory functions of the aesthetic object in a comparably radical manner—a practice that becomes palpable

in Manzoni's at times childlike (as in Dada), at times savage (as in Tzara) anti-aesthetic gambits, and in his denouement of artistic conventions, echoing Beckett's *Endgame*. Marcel Broodthaers was the first to have recognized this, in his eulogy for the artist in 1963:

Manzoni is dead, physically dead. He was young. Is there a connection between his untimely death and the attitude that he took on in the context of art? It is most certain that insisting on his kind of humor was not a very comfortable position to have taken. And if this should be the reason, then our inquiry into artistic events, into all kinds of events, will have to be profound and thorough. In any case, Manzoni will be in the history books of the terrible twentieth century.*

What made this year's retrospective all the more extraordinary, beyond its almost complete compilation of the artist's work (the only regrettable absence was that of Manzoni's portfolio of maps, numbers, fingerprints, and alphabet charts), were Celant's tutorial asides, linking Manzoni to the practices of his presumed peers, from de Kooning to Rauschenberg, Stella to Ryman in the United States, and from Fautrier to Fontana, Klein to Lo Savio in Europe. Yet when reading the curator's attempt to construct a fertile ground of aesthetic influence and dialogue, these furtive encounters only intensified the recognition of Manzoni's utter singularity and incompara-

* Marcel Broodthaers, "Gare au défi! Le Pop Art, Jim Dine et l'influence de René Magritte," in *Journal des Beaux-Arts*, no. 1,029 (November 14, 1963): 9.

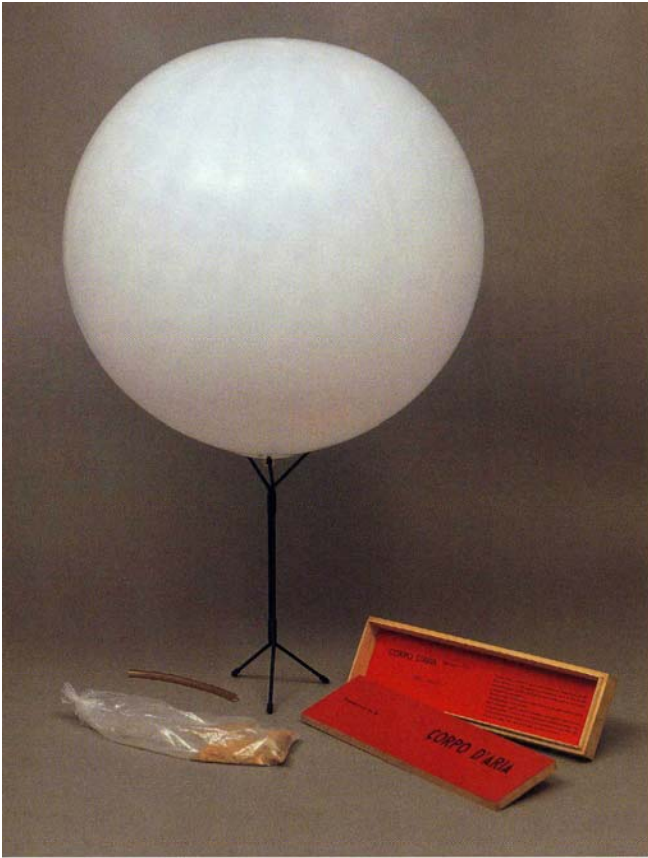
bility, reached in the short time and space afforded by not quite thirty years of life. (He was born in Fascist Italy in 1933 and died in Milan in 1963.)

Almost inadvertently, then, this exhibition seemed to suggest that one could look back at the twentieth century and divide its greatest artists into two types: those whose seemingly new discoveries engender a potentially infinite production (from Picasso to Rauschenberg and Richter), and those whose definitions of aesthetic practice have radically diminished the variables and systematically curtailed the options that would allow for continuing an expansive artistic production (from Duchamp to Cage and George Brecht). While this distinction in and of itself might not be all that innovative, it certainly points to a much more important second question: What kind of pleasure is offered by the work of the first type of artist, whereby the discovery of a new paradigm becomes the legitimizing principle for seemingly endless productivity, and what kind of aesthetic experience do we gain from an asceticism that withdraws and withholds in negation, an anti-aesthetic clearly constituting Manzoni's oeuvre?

Manzoni (along with Beuys) was one of the very first artists in postfascist Europe to cancel the utopian and progressive legacies of the modernist avant-gardes in systematically structured transgressions. He did so not only by eroding the traditional categories and disintegrating the genres (i.e., the willful collapse of those boundaries that had distinguished painting from sculpture, sculpture from



Opposite page: Piero Manzoni, *Base magica—Scultura vivente* (Magic Base—Living Sculpture), 1961, mixed media on wood, 23 1/2 x 32 x 31 1/4". This page: View of "Manzoni: A Retrospective," 2009, Gagosian Gallery, New York. Background: Six *Achromes* from the early 1960s. Foreground: *Magisk Sokkel Nr. 2* (*Base magica Nr. 2*) (Magic Base No. 2), 1961.



performance, and performance from spectatorship) but also by giving us the most ethereal and seductive simulacra of modernism's many progressive guises: reductivism, empiricism, self-reflexivity, the monochrome, opticality, tactility, participation. Only on second glance, or even later, does it dawn on the viewer that Manzoni's work is not a precursor to Ryman's but rather performs a mournful travesty of such avant-garde strategies—and the promises they had once made—with a heretofore unknown and succinct cruelty (just compare Manzoni's *Achromes* with the monochromes of his slightly elder yet contextual contemporaries Ellsworth Kelly and Rauschenberg, and Manzoni's annihilation gains a compellingly different profile), explaining perhaps the "temporary blindness."

Manzoni bleached color, gesture, and composition out of painting much the way Atget pumped aura out of his photographs like water out of a sinking ship, as Walter Benjamin famously put it. In ceaseless permutations, Manzoni initially structured canvases with their own textural folds. Subsequently, he fused reductivist monochrome abstraction with found textures and materials by covering canvases with straw or bread rolls, all dunked in the same dead white kaolin. Eventually, the artist even left that artisanal residue behind and shifted to accumulations of pure white Styrofoam pebbles, grids of cotton balls, or

informes of polyester fibers, delivering the modernist adage of truth to materials and their innate colors a death blow by making white monochromes out of rabbit fur. Yet by imbuing painting's ethereal dematerialization in a sudden volt with the repulsive intrusion of an animal's bodily excrescences (yes, like Meret Oppenheim's fur cup, almost), Manzoni also opened up a wide set of questions concerning the fate of somatic experience and the condition of the bodily dimension of art in an emerging empire of accelerated and totalitarian object consumption.

It is impossible to approach Manzoni's project descriptively, without an adequate theoretical

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framework, since the scope of his work addresses simultaneously all the questions that would emerge soon thereafter, in the 1960s, as art's central challenges and critiques (now conveniently universalized as the myth of "Conceptual art"): the impact of the institutional frame on aesthetic experience and on the object status of the work; the distribution form and the assignment of aesthetic versus economic value to the object; the persistent claims for art as private property versus the manifest and

universal availability of aesthetic experience (both productive and receptive). Nobody—at least, nobody since Duchamp—had even approached these immense contradictions with a comparable dialectic.

After being seduced by Manzoni's sublimely resolved aesthetic economy, the spectator inevitably confronts a schism created by the work's anti-aesthetic impulses. What appears at first blush as the sudden shock of discovering a hitherto unimaginable independence (exemplified by the performative display of bodily functions in the synecdochic form of excrement, breath, and blood), as a rite of initiation into what the aesthetic object actually addresses, is simultane-

ously revealed as a regime that puts even the most fundamental gesture of the self's assertion under instant surveillance. What simulates universal access to the liberatory impulses of a collectivized aesthetic (as, for example, in Manzoni's parodic

iteration of the liberatory powers of automatist drawing in his *Linee* [Lines], 1959–61) is instantly enforced as an insuperable condition of administrative control. After the end of the avant-gardes, so Manzoni's work signaled to us as early as 1959, the spaces of artistic negation and critique and the spaces and gestures of cultural control had become identical and inextricably fused. □

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Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Piero Manzoni, *Corpo d'aria* (Body of Air), 1959–60, wooden box, rubber balloon, mouthpiece, base, 4 7/8 x 16 1/2 x 1 1/4". Piero Manzoni, *Achrome*, 1958–59, kaolin on canvas, 31 1/2 x 39 1/4". Piero Manzoni, *Achrome*, 1961–62, synthetic fiber, 24 1/4 x 18 1/4". Piero Manzoni, *Merda d'artista* (Artist's Shit), 1961, tin can and printed paper, 1 7/8 x 2 3/4". This page: Piero Manzoni executing *Linea m* 7200 (7200 m Line) at the newspaper printer Herring Avis, Herning, Denmark, July 4, 1960. Photo: Ole Bjørndal Bagger.

