

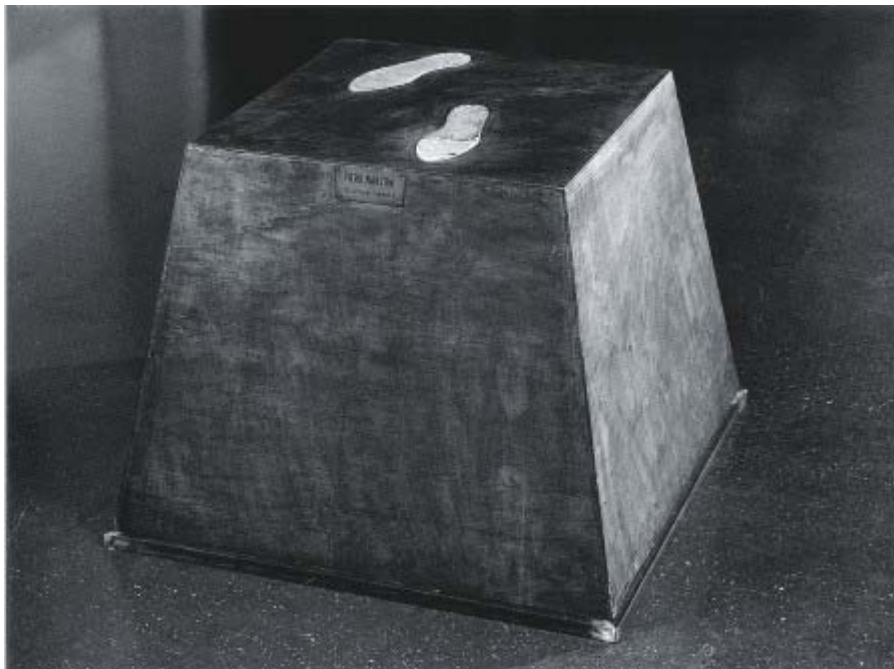
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Piero Manzoni

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Piero Manzoni, *Base Magica - Sculptura Vivente* (Magic Base - Living Sculpture, 1961)

'Painting and pictorial issues (the last post-romantic residues), are not part of the modern cultural cycle; they are long dead (and where they survive, they survive only as "bad literature").' Even in his suit and tie, a cigarette dangling from his lips, the baby-faced Piero Manzoni cut a figure less of a ruthless aesthetic assassin than of a

congenial schoolboy. But this statement of 1960 seems a kind of confession. For, amongst artists of the post-war period sounding the death knell for painting, Manzoni was perhaps the boldest, putting the 'neo-' into the neo-avant-garde more than any other European artist of his generation. This first comprehensive retrospective of his work in the USA, curated by Germano Celant and featuring some two hundred objects by Manzoni and others, formed one of the most compelling exhibitions mounted in New York in recent memory.

To be sure, the 'post-romantic residues' that Manzoni deemed 'long dead' formed the bread and butter of his own first canvases. Two of them on view in the first, small room – Wildflower and Milan and Mythology (both 1956) – set coloured stencils of real objects (most often keys) into a brooding swirl of paint, shot through with some clumsy, new-age literary allusions. If the stencils' readymade seriality seems to augur something about the artist's future practice, it is only in the vaguest sense. But the presence of these early works helps bring into relief the significance – and swiftness – of Manzoni's subsequent achievements. The following year would find him exhibiting alongside the likes of Yves Klein, Asger Jorn and Enrico Baj. Along with the work of Alberto Burri, Baj's 'Nuclear Art' pushed Manzoni to experiment with dark paint mixed with tar, in which brute substance and the presence of pure material do battle with lingering pictorial effects (even the lingering hint of a horizon).

With his first wrinkled 'Achrome' canvases in 1957, Manzoni shifted from an affective overloading of paint to the elimination of expressionist and gestural traces; from the portentous, melodramatic totality of black to the insouciant deadpan of unremitting white. Forming a kind of show-within-a-show, the sight of so many of the 'Achrome' canvases in the exhibition's largest room afforded a look at the range of their furrows and folds, as well as their varying states of preservation. While some have been restored to their original, pristine whiteness, others have been left to age and yellow. A similar effect has taken hold of Manzoni's cotton wadding and cobalt chloride 'Achromes'. Their status as a completely neutral body of work now finds itself inflected with material and historical contingencies. What would the artist have thought of this:

something to be righted with a coat of paint, or a salutary sign of the art work's defiance of its maker's authority? He likely would have relished such defiance; the autonomy of the object – as opposed to the (false) autonomy of the author – was Manzoni's first concern.

What lifted the show to the finest of museum-level exhibitions was Celant's selective juxtaposition of Manzoni's work with pieces by other artists: from Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Ryman to Yves Klein and Jean Fautrier, to Italian contemporaries like Mimmo Rotella, Lucio Fontana and Enrico Castellani, revealing Manzoni's body of work as a vital axis for experiments on both sides of the Atlantic. The presence of some artists was most palpable through their absence. Marcel Duchamp put in a phantom cameo in nearly every room after 1958. Manzoni's series of 'pneumatic sculptures', 'Artist's Breath' (1960), small balloons originally inflated with his own exhalations, inevitably recall Duchamp's glass ampule, *Air de Paris* (1919); likewise, his *Magic Bases* (1961) and the upside-down *Socle du Monde* (*Base of the World*, 1961) respond to the conceptual manoeuvre of the ready-made – the former transform those who stand on them into living works of art, while the latter does the same thing to the entire world, literally and semantically turning artmaking on its head. Even as they raise the stakes of Duchamp's conceptualism, these works, like Manzoni's signed 'Artist's Shit' canisters (1961), his edible 'Egg Sculptures' (1960), and 'Living Sculptures' (1961), comprised of real women signed by the artist himself, push the corporeal stakes of his work further.

In spite of his nuanced revisitings and revisions of Duchamp's and others' precedents, it is striking how little Manzoni's work smacks of some gimmicky postmodern pastiche. If it borrowed something from the prewar avant-gardes, Manzoni's art fashioned its own language entirely, at once derived from and hostile to the 'modern cultural cycle.' What would become of painting? This question, which came to dog modernism with renewed urgency in the twilight of the New York School, found in the concentrated span of Manzoni's experiments an abiding echo chamber. Each reverberation pushed his work in a slightly new direction, or toward a new material – canvas and kaolin, cotton balls, synthetic fibre, bread, eventually air itself. From its emphatic materiality to its playful

metaphysics, Manzoni's work gathered momentum from an older generation of artists, while unleashing an afflatus all his own, the various currents of which have yet to dissipate in contemporary practice, even if the air has long since seeped out of his withered balloons.

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