

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Art

Italian Conceptualist Piero Manzoni: More Than the Guy Who Canned His Caca

By Robert Shuster

Tuesday, February 3rd 2009 at 3:29pm

A provocation vocation: Manzoni

Details:

Piero Manzoni: A Retrospective

Gagosian Gallery

555 West 24th Street 212-741-1111

Through March 21

Irreverence is such a cheap commodity these days, available everywhere, that it can be difficult to imagine a time when an artist's nose-thumbing act could be termed radical. That's why Gagosian Gallery's retrospective of the impish Piero Manzoni, an Italian provocateur who ushered in conceptualist hijinks almost 50 years ago, feels less a tribute to ground-shifting work than a nostalgic tour of a more earnest era. The art is enjoyably quaint, and even a little melancholy, considering Manzoni's all-too-brief life.

In 1957, after abandoning a law degree and directing his efforts to painting, Manzoni, at age 24, joined the Nucleari, a group whose art addressed the atomic bomb, and produced some of his first important work, haunting images painted in black tar. Swirling and heaping gobs of the stuff onto canvas, Manzoni conjured organic shapes that rise against glimpses of red and burnt brown. The three versions at Gagosian are visions of apocalyptic gloom, infused with a young man's angst.

But Manzoni, ever restless, quickly dispensed with raw emotion as he found himself drawn to purification and reduction, common urges in that postwar decade. Taking his cue from earlier works like Rauschenberg's white paintings or Guy Debord's film without images, Manzoni eliminated "all useless gestures" and began making his Achromes, virtually colorless three-dimensional surfaces created, in the best of them, by coating wrinkled canvases in white clay. Dominating the Gagosian show, the Achromes demonstrate that, for all his brash manifestos and proclamations, Manzoni had a gentle sensibility. The undulating patterns, like those of a stream, suggest a simple *joie de vivre*. Less successfully, Manzoni experimented with other materials for the Achromes, reducing them further and further, eventually framing just clumps of rabbit fur. The object had reached an absurd level, shrunk into little more than Idea.

But, more and more, it was the Idea that Manzoni wanted to emphasize—particularly the notion that simply "being" created art. In the last years of his life, his objects became containers or pedestals for existence itself. In 1959, Manzoni printed single black lines of various lengths on rolls of paper and enclosed them in cardboard tubes; the longest one, measuring four and a half miles, he placed in a galvanized drum. You see only labeled cylinders, but the works, which seem to preserve Time, sit there with a certain poignancy.

Later, Manzoni filled balloons with "artist's breath"; stamped hard-boiled eggs with his thumbprint and handed them out as food; signed the bodies of patrons, declaring them art by way of a certificate; and, most famously, canned his own shit (he claimed) and sold the samples based on the price of gold. Impressively collected (though lacking needed explanations), the objects sit in their cases like *memento mori*. Two original balloons, congealed into sad little puddles, remain tied to their wooden bases, as if still clinging to an existence cut short—Manzoni, his health diminished by heavy drinking, died in 1963 at the age of 29.

You can take conceptualism too far, of course, dragging it into silliness. Certainly, elements of the publicity stunt figure into Manzoni's late work. But he was too serious-

minded, too thrilled with art, to be dismissed as a prankster. Consider the simple, clever, engaging notion of the iron block that Manzoni planted in a Danish field, displayed here in an enlarged photograph. Based on his Magic Base, which turned anyone who stood on it into a living sculpture, the block is labeled "Socle Du Monde" ("Base of the World"), with the words printed upside down. No gadfly, Manzoni was a wry charmer, the guy who turned us all into art.