

Art and design

Manzoni and me: Gavin Turk on the artist who got away with merda

Tickling the very concept of art, the Italian artist gained fame by tinning his own profundities and taking a line for a four-mile walk - all before he died aged 29

Gavin Turk

Wednesday 10 February 2016 10.21 GMT



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Piero Manzoni in his studio in Via Fiori Chiari, Milan, 1962, with Linea lunga 1,000 metri (Line 1,000 metres long). Photograph: Archivio RCS/Courtesy Fondazione Piero Manzoni, Milan

I first discovered Piero Manzoni when I was, as Gilbert and George call it, “a baby artist cogitating on what art was and what art could be”. On my own and among friends, I was trying to find the point where the real world stopped and art began. Originality appeared to be a process of “coming up with” ideas and then checking them off against art history to see if anyone else had already had them.

On a trip to the Tate, in the presence of an Yves Klein monochrome blue painting, I could hear people of all ages saying “anyone could have done that”. Which got me thinking of things that everyone *has* done. “What about shit?” I thought, “that’s been done by everyone”, only to find out it actually had been (and before I was even born), in 1961 by Piero Manzoni.



📷 Piero Manzoni's Achromes: Linea Infinita.
Photograph: Fondazione Piero Manzoni, Milan



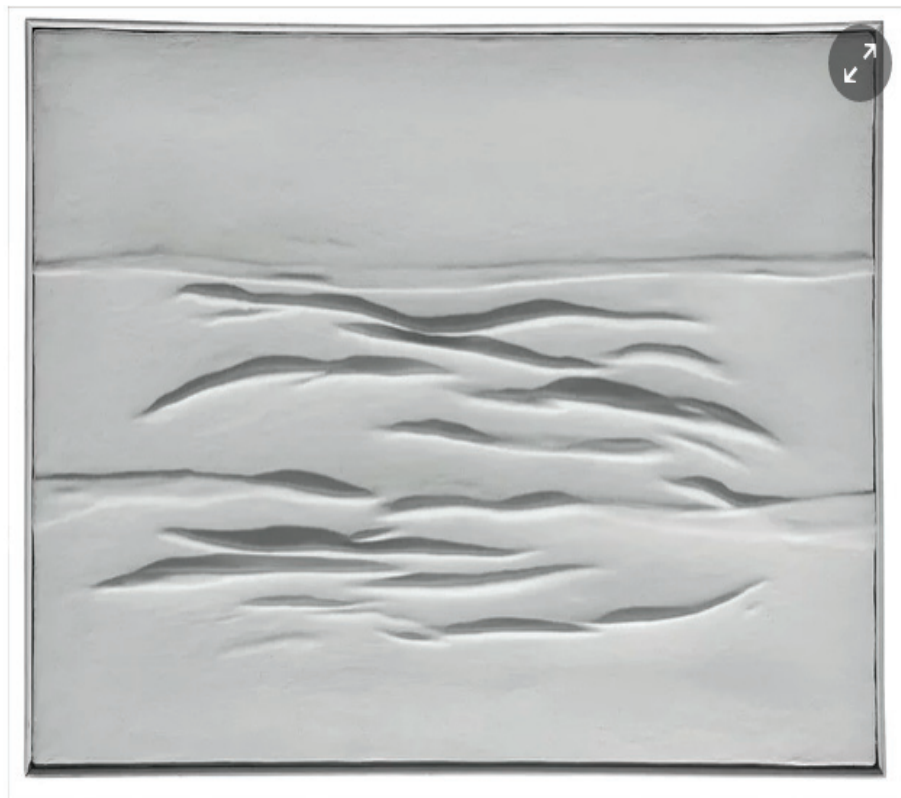
Merda d'Artista consisted of 30g of the artist's [shit preserved in a tin](#), to be sold for the equivalent value of the gold price of the day. In today's money, a can should cost £500, as opposed to the £180,000 and upwards you would actually have to pay if you wanted to take this shit home. Why is it so expensive? Because it's just such a "good" idea. It's definitive and takes art to its edge - that is to say it's art that defines art.

This is the legacy of Manzoni, who repeatedly exercised his ability to purify thought into action and deed. Paul Klee is quoted as saying "[drawing is simply taking a line for a walk](#)". For his series Linee, Manzoni set up a machine that would run a huge roll of paper in front of his pen and let him take his lines for long walks of up to 7.2km. He reduced the artistic action of organising marks on a piece of paper to a single line.

Manzoni was a player, we can tell. But he always took his art seriously; I think he thought he could change the world with it. I imagine how much he must have laughed when he had his ideas. Manzoni managed to communicate how much he enjoyed the process of being an artist and I've always been inspired by this and found his attitude a valuable motivator.

He saw materials as stages on which to act out his artistic games - the platonic white gallery space could be filled with white "canvases", only not made of canvas anymore but fluff, fur and straw, polystyrene and felt.

Several of these works, which Manzoni named [Achromes](#) ("colourless"), can be seen in a new exhibition at Mazzoleni Art, the first to focus uniquely on the relationship between the Achromes (1957-1963) and Linee (1959-1963). These surrogate paintings really engage the audience in the stuff of "now" - the sculpture (or physicality of sculpture) was no longer on the floor but on the wall.



📷 One of Piero Manzoni's Achromes (1958-59). Photograph: Mazzoleni Art



Manzoni died in 1963. He was unbelievably young, just 29, but managed to leave behind a fantastic legacy, which digs deep and simultaneously tickles at some of the profundities of being an artist. And his oeuvre got the proverbial ball rolling for the conceptual art movements that followed.

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One thing to watch out for with any show of Manzoni works is the frames. They're notoriously broken. I don't know if it's that no one dares to fix an original 1960s Perspex box frame, or if it's part of the work, or if no one even notices. But I think not, that Manzoni made them himself.

It never fails to irk me. "You're looking at the wrong bit," I hear you say! To which I reply: "There is no wrong bit - it's all connected - art doesn't start and stop like that." The frame is the door into the work and if it's off its hinges I can't help feeling like I'm sneaking into an abandoned house.



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I have made several works that have borrowed heavily from Manzoni's artistic oeuvre and a few years ago, when in a nightclub in Italy (a very rare occasion), I was approached by a boy who recognised me and knew of my work and interest in Manzoni. We shouted above the music to each other for a while trying to make a connection before he told me that his mother had been a girlfriend of Piero's. It was odd, irrelevant, yet somehow it did make me feel weirdly connected to him.

● [Achromes: Linea Infinita](#) is at Mazzoleni Art, London, until 9 April. Gavin Turk's [Petroleum](#) is at Baldwin Gallery, Aspen from 12 February to 12 March

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