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Best Most Sensational Balloons: Piero Manzoni's *Corpo d'aria/Fiato d'artista*

Gregory Tentler

Writing to the Danish gallerist Arthur “Addi” Köpke, the Italian artist Piero Manzoni (1933–1963) described his recently completed pneumatic sculpture kits, *Corpi d'aria* (Bodies of Air, 1959/1960) as “the best, most sensational things I have done.”¹ Coming fast on the controversies that accompanied his recent works, the rolled and canned ink drawings *Le linee* (The Lines, 1959–1961) raised high hopes in the artist for a strong critical response. *Le linee* had been vandalized in their August 1959 debut at the Pozzetto Chiuso in Albisola Marina and an interviewer would declare Manzoni mad in print.² The artist added to the controversy by anonymously penning press releases cited and republished in newspaper accounts of the destructive event.³

When Manzoni exhibited *Le linee* again in December 1959 at his Galleria Azimut (Milan), he received a three-column savaging in the largest circulation daily newspaper in Italy, *Corriere della Sera*.⁴ Manzoni again attempted to continue the controversy. The artist wrote to the review's author, Leonardo Borgese, on the day his review appeared to invite the critic to a public forum to “better explain to [Borgese] the motives and results of [his] artistic activities.”⁵ In response to the *Corpo d'aria*, however, there was near critical silence. Even with the introduction of completed sculptures by the artist (closed with a monogrammed lead seal with an additional per liter fee for Manzoni's breath) titled *Fiato d'artista* (The Artist's Breath, 1960),⁶ it would not be until 1962 that the act would get a rise out of the Italian press.⁷ And although the sculpture kits did not elicit the same critical response as the previous canned lines, now reviewing the artist's brief career reveals their creator's initial estimation to be correct. *Corpo d'aria/Fiato d'artista* are among Manzoni's most important pieces. They are central works that bind together and clarify the motives that governed the artist's entire artistic production. They

¹ Piero Manzoni, Letter to Arthur Köpke, undated, probably January 1960, Fondazione Piero Manzoni (Milan). Unless otherwise noted all translations are by the author. Information on number, composition, and dates of works are provided by Germano Celant, *Piero Manzoni: catalogo generale* (Milan: Skira, 2004).

² Wladimiro Greco, “8 Domande al pittore Manzoni,” *Il Travaso* (Milan), no. 39, October 1959.

³ Wladimiro Greco, “Don Lisander compromesso,” *Il Travaso* (Milan), no. 38, September 1959. Greco cites at least three separate press releases in his article preceding his interview with the artist. *Il Giorno* reprinted the longest press release in its entirety for a regular feature, “Accade di tutto” (It Happens to Everyone), under the headline “Vandali” in the September 5, 1959 edition.

⁴ Leonardo Borgese, “Al di là dell'estremo astattismo. Il pittore che “crea” linee a metratura,” *Corriere della Sera*, December 16, 1959, 3.

⁵ Piero Manzoni, Letter to Leonardo Borgese, dated December 16, 1959, reproduced in Franca Zamberletti, *Piero Manzoni*, Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, Corso di pittura, relatore: Jole De Sanna, anno accademico 1986/1987: 120. Lamentably, no response from Borgese is known.

⁶ Manzoni would also fill *Corpo d'aria* balloons, but stipulated a change in title to *Fiato d'artista*. A similar Manzoni authored press release (May 10, 1960) was sent to the artist's press surrogate Antonio Caputo at *Il Pensiero Nazionale*, however, it was unpublished.

⁷ Franco Serra, “Costa Duecento Lire Al Litro: Il Fiato Del Pittore Che Non Usa Pennelli,” *Settimana Incom illustrata* (Milan), 15, no. 50, December 16 1962, 49-51. The works are discussed also in the Danish press: Vitrus Schade, “Kunst og ægbakker,” *Nyhedsbladet* (Copenhagen), June 20, 1960, 16.

are also the works through which Manzoni gave shape to his critique of artistic labor and privilege, an extreme position that few of his contemporaries were prepared to take.

Those familiar with the scholarship on Manzoni's art will find the claim of unity slightly, if not largely, suspect. Made of a variety of materials from foodstuff and industrial products to bodily ephemera, Manzoni's conceptual works are motley and have resisted easy classification. After *Le linee* and *Corpo d'aria/Fiata d'artista* in late 1959 and early 1960, Manzoni introduced hard-boiled edible sculptures signed with his thumbprint, *Le uova* (The Eggs), in July 1960. From January 1961 until his death, Manzoni designated people as works of art by way of a bodily signature and a signed receipt with a color-coded stamp for the project aptly titled *Sculture viventi* (Living Sculpture, begun January 1961).⁸ The infamous thirty-gram tins of named—but ultimately unknown—contents,⁹ *Merda d'artista* (Artist's Shit, 1961), sold at the daily price of gold, appeared in a single issue shortly thereafter.¹⁰ After 1961 the artist made no conceptual projects. Because of this formal and material diversity, Manzoni's oeuvre has often been interpreted as a satirical critique of works by his international contemporaries, most often of the French artist Yves Klein,¹¹ or of art in general.

Certainly Manzoni was adept at polemics. The artist would describe his monochromatic paintings—which he called *Achromes*—less than a month after the Milan debut of *Le linee* in terms meant to court similar controversy. Sending a note to the editors at *Art Actuel International*, Manzoni wrote: “I’m very happy to know that my pictures make people scream. I call them pictures for violent-tempered people because they don’t break when you throw things at them.”¹² Yet this does not mean that his works were only protests. The provocative statements made by the artist were part of a promotional strategy he employed exclusively with the popular press and its widespread fascination with the excesses of vanguard art. The characterizations Manzoni made of his art in the media had, at best, limited connections to the works themselves. In his correspondence and manifestos, however, the artist did not repeat these press portrayals and instead stressed continuities in his practice.

The gap between Manzoni's self-presentations in the press and his manifestos was further complicated by a shift in the artist's writing style. Coincident to the outrageous pronouncements

⁸ The stamps came in red, yellow, green, and purple. Red indicated that the individual was a complete work of art and would remain as such until his death. Yellow was valid only for the part signed, which was indicated in writing on the card. The color green was limited to behavior and one was a work of art only in given positions: for example drinking or singing. The color purple had the identical functions as red only it was paid for. Additionally, the Fondazione Piero Manzoni has an identically formatted gray stamp; however, it was never given a function by the artist nor were any issued to a recipient.

⁹ Manzoni's former exhibition partner Agostino Bonalumi, for instance, has written that the works are filled with gesso, supporting several other accounts that make similar claims. See Agostino Bonalumi, “Solo gesso, nella scatoletta di Manzoni,” *Corriere della Sera*, June 11, 2007, 30.

¹⁰ *Sculture viventi* inspired a series of empty pedestals called *Base magica* (Magic base, 1961) that transformed the people standing on them into works of art. This article, however, will focus on *Le linee*, *Corpo d'aria/Fiata d'artista*, *Le uova*, *Sculture viventi*, and *Merda d'artista*. The removal of *Base magica* is due to the series' unique development in successive stages of production—culminating with *Socle du Monde* (Base of the World, 1961)—and the project's relationship to Herning Denmark and the Düsseldorf Zero Group. For a longer discussion see: Gregory Tentler, “Impossible Projects, Incomplete Systems, and Infinity: Piero Manzoni's Aimless Pursuit of an Imaginary Utopia,” in *Without Expense Transport and the Bother of Customs: Piero Manzoni and the International Avant-Garde, 1956–1963* (Ph. D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2010).

¹¹ Yves-Alain Bois, “Base Materialism,” in *Formless: A User's Guide*, ed. Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

¹² Piero Manzoni quoted in “J'ai beaucoup de plaisir de savoir que mes tableaux font hurler,” *Art Actuel International*, no. 14 (January 1960).

made to journalists was an increasingly restrained prose used in his published statements. During the first twelve months of his career (late 1956–1957), the artist composed six manifestos based loosely on concepts taken from the works of the dissident Freudian psychiatrist Carl Jung.¹³ In rather purple prose, Manzoni declared that the ambitions of the artist were “to join one’s own individual mythology where it connects with universal mythology” and that this union would be expressed in “historically determined variations of primordial mythologems.”¹⁴

While introduced to Jung’s writings before he became an artist,¹⁵ Manzoni’s use of Jungian terms in 1957 was part of a larger trend in vanguard art. The psychiatrist’s writings were the basis for critical celebrations of the painters who were identified with the international style of gestural abstraction called Informel. In particular, Jung’s notion of a collective unconscious was employed to claim direct communication for the spontaneous mark making typical of the abstract style. And though Manzoni conceived of his work as entirely distinct from Informel and wrote disparagingly of gestural abstraction,¹⁶ his application of phrases such as “universal mythology” inevitably drew comparisons to Informel. In fact, any reference to Jung was likely to suggest Informel, a movement that over the course of the 1950s had, in the words of the Italian art critic Cesare Vivaldi, “extended everywhere, little by little, arriving to dominate unopposed.”¹⁷

With the advent of his conceptual works in late 1959 the artist’s written description of his art abruptly changed. In *Libera dimensione* (1960) Manzoni mocked the pretensions of Informel artists.¹⁸ He abandoned all Jungian rhetoric and claimed that his works were unconcerned with the “non-existent” problem of “expression” and added that “psychoanalytic intimacies” were an empty fiction.¹⁹ While the desire to distance himself from Informel might explain the initial shift, it does not explain what occurred next. In the last years of his life Manzoni began to write in an unadorned style that verged on indifference. The artist’s final manifesto, *Progetti immediate* (1961), was simply a record of his projects, realized, unrealized, and impossible. The statement

¹³ *Per la scoperta di una zona di immagini* (1956), *L’arte non è vera creazione*[...], *Per una pittura organica, Manifesto di Albisola Marina, Mostra di giovani pittori al bar Giamaica, Prolegomeni ad un’attività artistica* (1957).

¹⁴ Piero Manzoni, *L’arte non è vera creazione*, signed Manzoni, Ettore Sordini, Angelo Verga. Published in connection with the exhibition Manzoni, Sordini, Verga at the Gallery Pater, Milan, May 29, 1957.

¹⁵ Records show Manzoni attended a psychology course taught by Freudian analyst Cesare Musatti while he was a student at the Università degli studi di Roma in 1954.

¹⁶ Manzoni’s artist’s statements from 1956–1957 regularly describe the “wasted gestures” of Informel painting as a form of hedonism at odds with true art. The artist particularly disliked the claims of individuality perceived in the signature styles of Informel painters. Manzoni would expand on this point in correspondence with Antonio Caputo (undated, probably January 1960, Caputo Collection, Fondazione Piero Manzoni), noting that the desire to create a signature style resulted in the manufacture of empty formalist repetitions and concluded that “in sum [the signature style is] always copied and always copied badly.”

¹⁷ Cesare Vivaldi, “Dizionario di nuovi simboli e di nuovi termini usati nella critica d’arte moderna,” *L’Almanacco Letterario 1960* (Milan), 1959, 138–143.

¹⁸ Manzoni begins the statement: “The emergence of new conditions, the appearance of new problems, entails new methods, new measures, with the need for new solutions [...] For this reason I cannot understand painters who, while saying they are interested in modern problems, still approach a painting as if it was a surface to be filled with colors and forms, according to a taste more or less well known, more or less already seen. They trace a mark, step back, look at their work, tilt their head to one side and half-close an eye, then jump forward again, add a mark, another color from the palette, and continue these gymnastics until they have filled up the painting, covered the canvas: the painting is finished.” *Libera dimensione* (1960).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

was so devoid of explicit artistic intentions that its main use was as Manzoni's biography/curriculum vitae in exhibition catalogs in the years following the artist's death.²⁰

In the roughly 22 months that made up Manzoni's conceptual production, the artist's written and spoken contributions to the public's understanding of his art fell into two camps—deliberate provocation and disinterest—with almost no middle ground. This is in no small part why most retrospective accounts are selective with regard to statements and writings made by Manzoni during the last years of his career. Attempts to collect Manzoni's works into a coherent group more often focus on biography and the shared subject matter of his conceptual works. And while both strategies have produced compelling insights, they have resulted ultimately in only partial explication.

Consider the most common theme—the invocation of the body—perceived in the later three conceptual projects, *Fiato d'artista*, *Merda d'artista*, and *Sculture viventi*.²¹ Though a promising approach, it has proven problematic. Only two of the conceptual works, *Merda d'artista* and *Fiato d'artista*, claimed to involve bodily ephemera.²² One here must emphasize the word “claim,” because verification of the contents of either work would necessitate its destruction. *Merda d'artista* is composed of a hermetically sealed can with a label that stated its contents. *Fiato d'artista* provided a guarantee of contents in a similar inscription of text; this was, however, exclusive to the specialty edition. For the balloon in a *Corpo d'aria* kit filled with Manzoni's breath, which necessitated the specific title *Fiato d'artista*, the artist was less strict about the source. Writing to his colleague Heinz Mack, Manzoni noted: “I'm selling them [*Corpi d'aria*] at 30,000 lire a piece: but I'll charge more for those balloons with the artist's breath (that is to say by me or other artists!).”²³ In the case of *Sculture viventi*, the fading of the signature on the body and the degree of its status of art, indicated by the color-coded stamps, meant that the receipt, not the body, was the locus of meaning for the work. As for the stand-alone *Corpo d'aria*, it made no allusion to the corporeal (Manzoni initially recommended a pump for inflation) and the “body” offered, at best, is the balloon's form, not human.

Attempts to unify the works through Manzoni's political beliefs are also unsatisfying. Beyond the contradictions between his comments to the press and his manifestos, Manzoni's opinions are further muddled by the inconsistent and shifting positions he expressed in his private correspondence and by anecdotes recorded by his peers. The artist's only substantive statement on politics appears in his late teens in 1952 and is quite conservative. In an essay for the student publication *La Gioventù Sociale*, Manzoni declared support for Friedrich Hayek's classical liberal condemnation of Socialism as a “road to serfdom” and described the market

²⁰ In every Italian catalog between 1964 and 1972 found during research, if artist biographies are included, Manzoni's entry is this manifesto or the expanded 1962 version *Alcuni realizzazioni – Alcuni esperimenti – Alcuni progetti* (*Evoluzione delle Lettere e delle Arti*, no. 1, January 1963). Even when new biographical text was produced for other participants, Manzoni is still described through a block quote of his own writing. Similarly, in non-Italian publications the chronology outlined in the manifesto is used as the structure for the text. It is not until Germano Celant's *Piero Manzoni: catalogo generale* (Milan: Prearo, 1975) that this practice ends.

²¹ For the best example of this approach see: Martin Engler, ed., *Piero Manzoni: When Bodies Became Art* (Bielefeld: Kerber, 2013).

²² Several writers also note a passage in Manzoni's late 1962 manifesto “Alcune realizzazioni – Alcuni esperimenti – Alcuni progetti” as evidence of a third conceptual work directly involving the artist's body. Manzoni writes: “In a previous project [to *Merda d'artista*, 1961] I intended to produce vials of ‘The Artist's Blood.’” However, no evidence of planning exists and there is no correspondence that would suggest the artist was seriously planning to undertake such a work.

²³ Piero Manzoni, Letter to Heinz Mack, probably early April 1960, reproduced as fig. 216 in Freddy Battino and Luca Palazzoli, *Piero Manzoni: catalogue raisonné* (Milan: Vanni Scheiwiller, 1991).

economy as a “natural plebiscite.”²⁴ The artist tempered his views in a brief and episodic journal kept two years before he began his artistic career, at which time he aspired to be a writer. In these entries Manzoni voiced general sympathy with the equality aspired to by Socialism; however, he also expressed concern about Socialism’s lack of respect for the individual and described life as a “religious rite.”²⁵

Critics perceived him as ideologically antagonistic with those on the right declaring him a socialist and those on the left proclaiming him a reactionary.²⁶ His critical adherents are also divided; depending on the author, family member, or friend consulted, Manzoni was either an anarchist, apolitical, a registered member of the Communist party, or a Christian Democrat.²⁷ As an artist, Manzoni made a single antifascist comment concerning the wildly unpopular far-right Tambroni cabinet weeks before its fall, and that in a Danish newspaper.²⁸ He is silent on all political issues in the Italian press.²⁹ The artist’s private correspondence is similarly devoid of identifiable political positions, aside from a handful of oblique comments such as his jesting lament to Mack in 1960 that since they were “constructivists” he would have to sell one of his paintings at a discount.³⁰ The spectrum of ideologies perceived by these various sources has the aggregate effect of transforming the artist’s voice from a clarion call to a cacophonous chorus.

²⁴ Piero Manzoni, “L’Economia del Carnefice [The Executioner’s Economy]” in *La Gioventù Sociale* (1952).

²⁵ Manzoni’s journal was kept between March 1954–April 1955. Its probative value is slight for several reasons. Several entries may be abortive attempts at fiction and it is difficult to discern these from his recorded experiences. The final months of 1955 are largely poems trading mostly in religious imagery with almost no events described. Manzoni is also an inconsistent writer, sometimes composing entries of one or two sentences and with up to one month intervals between them. Several are citations of other authors. Moreover, the discussion of politics and ethics is less a set of beliefs than the expression of intergenerational conflict. Manzoni at various points will describe as immoral and corrupt a wide range of figures from named individuals such as Giovannino Guareschi and Indro Montanelli to more abstract entities like the Fascist leadership and the crowd that hung Benito Mussolini’s corpse in Piazzale Loreto.

²⁶ For the left see (f.d.p.), “I falsi rivoluzionari: Piero e Alessandro,” *Il Discanto* (Milan), April–May 1964, 82–84, and for the right, Leonardo Borgese, “L’Assoluta purezza del nula nell’opera di Piero Manzoni,” *Corriere della Sera*, February 10, 1967, 3.

²⁷ Much of the discussion of Manzoni’s ideological views is derived from characterizations of his beliefs on the role of the artist. Germano Celant, for instance, writes, “as a Catholic, and as an anarchist, he believed in fact in the infinite and uncontrollable power of artistic creativity” (see Germano Celant “In the Territory of Piero Manzoni,” in Germano Celant, *Piero Manzoni* (Naples: Museo MADRE, 2007), 43). The dispute is not limited to scholars. Friend, artist, and registered Communist, Dadamaino, claims Manzoni belonged to the party; however, various family members, in particular his sister Elena, claim he supported candidates from the Partito Cristiano Democratico. She also connects this to Manzoni’s views on art, claiming Manzoni believed that art could only flourish in a liberal regime (“Intervista con Elena Manzoni di Chiosca (23 April 2002),” in Emiliano Dante, “Piero Manzoni: ‘Merda d’artista,’” *Tesi di Laurea, Università degli Studi L’Aquila*, 2001/2002).

²⁸ Manzoni’s comments appear in Jen Jørgen Thorsen, “Han sælger idéer på dåser,” in *Akuelt*, June 20, 1960. Fernando Tambroni would resign the prime minister’s position on July 26, 1960 after only 116 days in office. At the moment Manzoni made his comment there were massive nationwide demonstrations occurring from the left as well as grievances within Tambroni’s own center-right Christian Democratic Party. For the best contextualization of Manzoni’s political and social milieu see Jacopo Galimberti, “The Intellectual and the Fool: Piero Manzoni between the Milanese Art Scene and the Land of Cockaigne,” *Oxford Art Journal* 35, no.1 (2012): 75–94, and Francesca Pola, *Piero Manzoni e Albisola: Quaderni dell’Archivio Opera Piero Manzoni I* (Milan: Archivio Opera Piero Manzoni, 2006). Both offer compelling accounts and the former offers important counter examples to the claims made in this essay.

²⁹ This also includes Manzoni’s press releases and reviews in *Il Pensiero Nazionale* published through his surrogate Antonio Caputo.

³⁰ Piero Manzoni, Letter to Heinz Mack, probably early May 1960, reproduced as fig. 224 in Battino and Palazzoli, *Piero Manzoni: catalogue raisonné*.

The instinct to perceive coherence in the whole of Manzoni's art is, however, proper and important to an understanding of the artist. Without recognizing a larger logic that directed his work, Manzoni's significance becomes largely comparative. He is either demonstrative of wider continental tendencies or he conforms to the dismissive characterization of being merely satirical. These characterizations are a disservice to the artist and to the larger historical moment, because both assume an orthodoxy within the avant-garde that did not exist. International tendencies, such as Conceptual Art, are retrospectively constructed and diminish individual idiosyncrasies to better highlight common traits. Similarly, satire is premised on there being a norm that is being exaggerated or critiqued. Rather, vanguard art in the 1950s and early 1960s was composed of a broad collection of loosely affiliated artists who were uneasily mapping new directions. The value in an examination of Manzoni's work is that of recognizing that the artist was offering an alternative vision of where art might develop in an ongoing dialogue with his contemporaries.

The unity of his works, however, will not be secured by a thematic or authorial hermeneutic approach alone. Instead they are bound structurally. Manzoni's larger project can be most clearly revealed in the consequences that extend from the similarity of the production of his works and their publicity. Four of the conceptual projects were promoted in a nearly identical fashion. Manzoni issued various press releases following the initial exhibitions of *Le linee*, *Le uova*, *Sculture viventi*, and *Corpo d'aria*, also having them filmed for news shorts.³¹ The shorts, appearing in leading newsreels in Milanese cinemas, showed the pieces being constructed.³² *Merda d'artista* fits this model though in a slightly altered manner. In lieu of a film, a series of photos taken by Giovanni Ricci of the artist contemplating the finished work were sent unsolicited to various journals.³³ Significantly, the artist didn't use the film shorts or photographs to elucidate his work. Manzoni actively dissembled his art and willingly undermined his stature as an artist for a humorous effect. The premiere short made for *Corpo d'aria*, for example, claimed—for the first and only time—that Manzoni's inflation of the balloon was intended to

³¹ The importance Manzoni gave the conceptual projects is also suggested by his exhibition practices. When the artist debuted these works in major cities they were usually in one-project shows. *Corpo d'aria* debuted in Milan at Galleria Azimut, "Corpi d'aria di Piero Manzoni," May 3–9, 1960. *Le uova*, also in Milan, at Galleria Azimut, "Nutrimenti d'arti di P. Manzoni. Consumazione dell'arte dinamica del pubblico divorare l'arte," July 21, 1960. Only the debut of *Sculture viventi* in Rome was exclusively exhibited in a group show (Galleria La Tartaruga, "Castellani & Manzoni," opening April 22, 1961). The remaining projects debuted in Albisola Marina before their respective Milanese inaugural exhibitions. *Le linee* were first displayed at Pozzetto Chiuso, "Piero Manzoni," August 18–24, 1959 and then Galleria Azimut, "Le linee di Piero Manzoni," December 4–24, 1959. *Merda d'artista* was shown first in Galleria Pescetto, "In villeggiatura da Pescetto," August 12–19, 1961 and then Galleria Luca Scacchi Gracco, [Solo Show], September 1961. Francesca Pola has suggested the reason Manzoni did this was that he "sought to address the international element of the artistic milieu in Albisola as a sounding board for his inventions" (see Pola, *Piero Manzoni e Albisola*). This thesis is made more plausible given the particular qualities of the two works exhibited in Albisola. *Le linee* were the first conceptual projects and *Merda d'artista* the most outrageous.

³² The four works Manzoni made about his conceptual projects with Gianpaolo Macentelli and Sedi Filmgiornale occurred in the following sequence: *Corpi d'aria* (Bodies of Air, December 1959), *Le linee* (The Lines, December 1959), *Sculture viventi* (Living Sculpture, 13 January 1960), and *Nutrimenti dell'arte. Consumazione Dinamica* (Nourishment by art. Dynamic consumption, 21 July 1960). Unfortunately, only a copy of *Corpi d'aria* is known today. The transcript for *Le linee*'s newsreel also survives. It is reproduced in addition to a transcript of the *Corpi d'aria* newsreel in Enzo Rossi-Ròiss, *Dossier Piero Manzoni (tomo primo)* (Milan: Edizioni Svolta, 1991), 23.

³³ It is unclear how many portfolios were sent; however, there were at least two responses: Romano F. Cattaneo, "Il Barattolo dell'Arte: Un Campione del Nostro Tempo," *Il Borghese* (Milan), n. 38, September 21, 1961, n.p. and Francis Earl, "Il Caccatore," *Bertoldo*, n. 1, November 30, 1961, 11.

create a likeness of the model Lucie D'Albert. Instead of a transformative artistic act the audience witnessed a clown trying to exhale a portrait.³⁴

These shared promotional strategies are based on and extend from the foundational tenets of all of Manzoni's works. Manzoni's art required participation (*Corpo d'aria*, *Sculture viventi*, *Le uova*, *Le linee*) or purchase (*Merda d'artista* and *Fiato d'artista*) to confirm their status as art. Art in Manzoni's method was a compact. Manzoni elicited from the viewer the validation that the work was art. Audiences participated in the production and provided a necessary endorsement of the work as art. The activities engaged in (they imagined the line, inflated the balloon, ate the egg, were signed as art, or they agreed to pay arbitrary prices for useless ephemera) did not conclude with an object/ beholder relationship but one more akin to co-authorship.

Unlike mid and late 1960s kinetic art that required a viewer's direct physical participation, Manzoni sought audience interaction in the form of sanction. And it is this motivation that provides the artist's confusing self-presentation. The participatory nature of these works meant that the proposed partnership would not be influenced or eased by an agreeable message or romantic personality that the beholder would acquiesce to or embrace. Doing so would repeat the traditional, hierarchical relationship between artist and viewer. It bears noting, however, that the goal of this strategy was counterintuitive. Manzoni lampooned his art with the intention of encouraging audiences to reject traditional notions of art and to participate and validate his work as art of their own accord. The artist described the situation in the following terms: "Reshuffles, modifications are not enough: they still belong to the past; a new language and a total transformation can have nothing to do with the old language, an artist can only use the materials, thoughts, and forms of his own time."³⁵

The origin of these strategies is found in *Corpo d'aria*. The pneumatic sculpture kits were the first to employ the conventions for production and promotion that were applied to Manzoni's subsequent projects. Moreover, the confidence Manzoni had in his strategy was immediate. The second newsreel was not made for Manzoni's ensuing conceptual project *Le uova* in July 1960. Instead it was produced later that same month, December 1959, for his initial and already publically introduced conceptual works *Le linee*.³⁶

Corpo d'aria (fig. 1) established two design principles applied to his later works. First, the prefabricated parts were unmodified and maintained their original functions. The tripod base still acted as a stand, the balloon remained a non-porous bag inflated with air or gas, and the box functioned as a container. An extension of this was that when Manzoni created new objects he complied with the rules and regulations of the industries that produced such items.³⁷ Second, it is with *Corpo d'aria* that Manzoni began to designate his works as "samples without value" during

³⁴ Filmgiornale Sedi No 1020: "Aree e sfere di gomma per opere d'arte."

³⁵ Piero Manzoni, "Inchiesta sulla Pittura," *Almanacco Letterario Bompiani*, 1960, November 23, 1959, reprinted in Germano Celant, *Catalogo generale* (Milan: Skira, 2004).

³⁶ Filmgiornale Sedi No. 1021: "La lungha linea" made about *Le linee* was produced less than a month after *Corpo d'aria*'s treatment. It was similarly conceived and in it photographer Uliano Lucas portrayed a naïve art collector who purchases Manzoni's work with the contention that it is to be unfurled and admired for its visual properties. Again, this was counter to the work's intended conceptual experience. Manzoni even added the text (15 | Capolinea), and, for the day-to-day experience of the viewer, the end of the metro or bus line at the far end of his drawing to further ridicule his art.

³⁷ The preparation for creating hermetically sealed cans in his 1961 *Merda d'artista*, for example, involved consultation with technicians and firms on their methods of production. Battino and Palazolli, *Piero Manzoni: catalogue raisonné*, 72.

his travels to avoid foreign duty.³⁸ These decisions would be critical for the creation of his future projects and would allow for the full realization of his larger artistic conception, that of a radically empowered beholder. Yet, to recognize these achievements, a better appreciation of Manzoni's practice in relation to the Italian vanguard is required, most importantly to Italy's premiere avant-garde artist and Spazialismo founder Lucio Fontana.



Fig. 1. Piero Manzoni, *Corpo d'aria* (Body of Air), Edition 45, 1959/1960, Wood, rubber, and metal, 42.5 x 12.3 x 4.8 cm. Collection Fondazione Piero Manzoni, Milan, Italy. Piero Manzoni: © 2016 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome. Photo: Fondazione Piero Manzoni.

Piero Manzoni and Lucio Fontana circa 1959

Though Manzoni is most often compared with international contemporaries, it was Fontana who provided a crucial model for Manzoni's early artistic career. A 1957 review of one of Manzoni's group exhibitions notes that "[Manzoni] has not attended any courses on painting, he prefers to come to it through direct experience, frequenting the studio of Lucio Fontana."³⁹ And although Manzoni belonged to the rival Movimento Arte Nucleare founded by Enrico Baj and Sergio Dangelo, he would have been well aware of Spazialismo's activities since the two groups engaged in on-going discourse.⁴⁰ Both Arte Nucleare and Spazialismo attempted to create art

³⁸ This addition followed an incident in the Netherlands January 1959 where customs refused to accept Manzoni's works as paintings and declared them "decorations in plaster" and subject to a 23% tax. See Hans Sonnenberg's letter to Piero Manzoni, January 29, 1959, reprinted as fig. 82, in *Ibid.*

³⁹ Anonymous, "Dipingono insieme espongono insieme," *Il Corriere Lombardo* (Milan), June 7–8, 1957, 21. The review was of the exhibition *Manzoni, Sorini, Verga* at the Galleria Pater (Milan).

⁴⁰ Manzoni is listed as a member of Arte Nucleare between 1956 and 1958, during which time the artist authored two manifestos: "For an Organic Painting" for the entire group and "The Manifesto of Abisola Marina" for an exhibition of younger Nuclearists. He also signed Enrico Baj's "Against Style" for the group exhibition "Arte

capable of capturing the dynamism following the advancement of postwar science and technology. Members of these groups produced a wide range of works that included both figural and abstract subjects and were executed in a variety of traditional and experimental mediums. The ties between them were so close that the critic and gallerist Arturo Schwarz would include an entry on Fontana and his role in Spazialismo in his history of Nuclear Art in 1962.⁴¹

Manzoni exhibited with Fontana each year from 1957 to 1960. He would adapt language and concepts from the manifestos of Spazialismo for the first of his artist's statements. And as late as 1959, when Manzoni had his own gallery and membership in the international collective Zero (Düsseldorf), the artist still directly compared his work to Fontana. Writing the critic Vincenzo Agnetti, Manzoni claimed Fontana's "space is limited with regard to ours: it is the air, the atmosphere, not absolute."⁴² That Manzoni's comment about Fontana appears in the middle of a longer passage describing the *Corpi d'aria* is noteworthy and reflects the abrupt shift in his artistic production. On the one hand, Manzoni was convinced that with his new project he had overtaken Fontana. On the other hand, the artist could not yet describe what that meant. Manzoni's success could only be comprehended through the standard of Fontana. Indeed, though the trajectories of the two artists were diverging—Manzoni had just inaugurated a sequence of conceptual objects, whereas Fontana had left non-traditional media and had been primarily an easel painter for the previous 8 years—Manzoni's art in late 1959 was very similar to the work of Fontana.⁴³

By the middle of the 1950s, Fontana's painting techniques revolved around a limited set of canvas-piercing gestures, "I buchi" and "I tagli" (the holes and the cuts; fig. 2). By doing so, Fontana's works resisted the subjective expression linked to the gestural marks of Informel. Though recognizable as a painting by Fontana, the extreme reduction in his marking made an emotional reading of the work nearly impossible. Instead, the various perforations of canvas allowed Fontana's painting to highlight both the physical support while stimulating beholders to expand the physical space of the work beyond the picture plane through the openings. This imaginative projection triggered by the slashed canvas would grow to incorporate the space between the beholder and the painting. By doing so, Fontana's work would exceed the limitations of the two-dimensional pictorial surface and encompass the ambient environment.

Nucleare 1957," Galleria San Fedele (Milan), 12–20 October 1957. Manzoni's break with the group was acrimonious and he later would claim only to have signed, not authored, "For an Organic Painting." He also wrote that he left the group in 1957: see the draft autobiography by Piero Manzoni, probably January 1960, reproduced as fig. 173 in Battino and Palazzoli, *Piero Manzoni: catalogue raisonné*.

⁴¹ Lucio Fontana's ties to Arte Nucleare include his participation in the exhibitions "Il Gesto" (1955) and "Arte Nucleare 1957." He also designed the cover for the third issue of the Nuclear journal *Il Gesto* in 1957. Because of these shared activities and mutual interests, even today some scholars wrongly claim that Fontana was a Nuclearist.

⁴² Piero Manzoni, Letter to Vincenzo Agnetti, probably October/November 1959, Fondazione Piero Manzoni, Milan.

⁴³ For some of the best English language analysis of Fontana's work see Anthony White, *Lucio Fontana: Between Utopia and Kitsch* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2011). White's work provides the dates for Fontana's move to painting as his primary medium (1951 until Fontana's death in 1968) and best describes the motivations for Fontana's limited gesture. Also of note is Stephen Petersen, *Space-Age Aesthetics: Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, and the Postwar European Avant-Garde* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

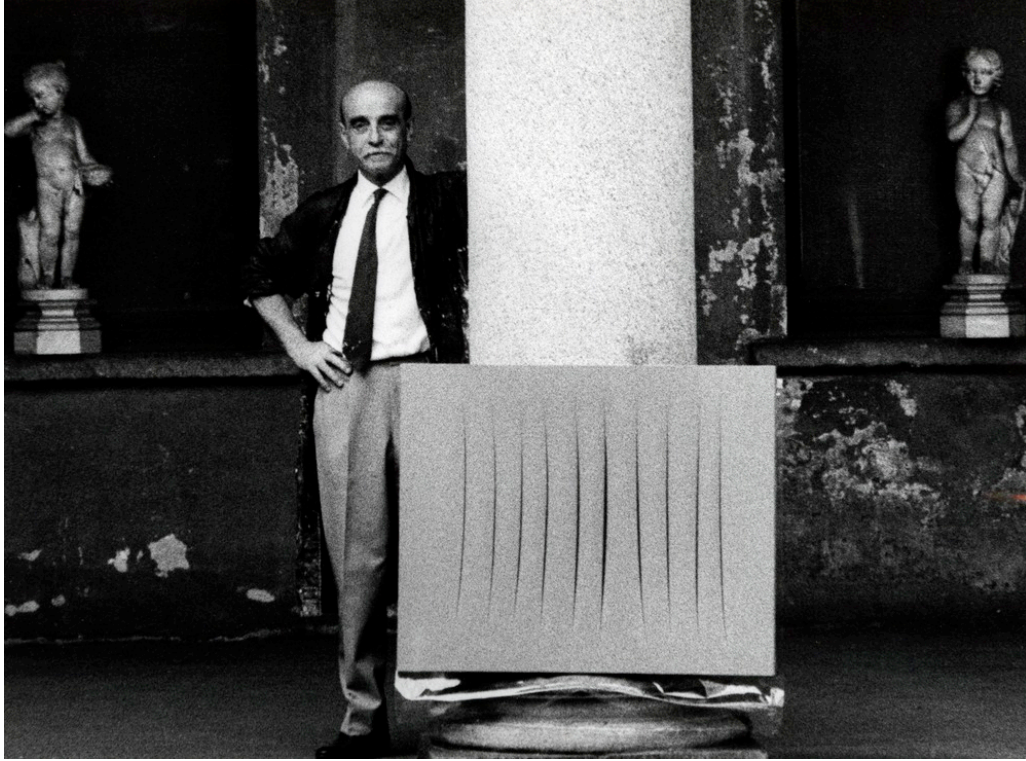


Fig. 2. Harry Shunk and Janos Kender, *Untitled (Lucio Fontana with a Spatial Concept, 1961)*, Silver gelatin print. © J. Paul Getty Trust. Photo: Courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Trust.

Manzoni would similarly describe his serially produced, uniformly named *Achromes* in a manner that downplayed subjective interpretation. He wrote that the canvases in various patterns were “saturated by kaolin” to underscore process and material over the role of authorship.⁴⁴ The title too diminished the role of the artist. Rather than the single color of the monochrome, Manzoni’s *Achrome* was intended to suggest no color at all. Whereas contemporaries like Yves Klein had specific symbolic associations with their monochromatic works, Manzoni’s painting was in essence a blank slate. Or as the artist wrote “a wholly colorless, neutral surface.”

Manzoni further echoed Fontana in his account of the beholder’s experience. Describing the “infinite” of his achromatic surfaces as “limitless and absolutely dynamic,” the artist intended the viewer to activate space beyond the material boundaries of the painting.⁴⁵ Since color had been divorced from symbolic association and the kaolin held no evidence of artistic subjectivity, the beholder could not study the pictorial relations within the frame to locate meaning. Instead the surface became a point of contact with the external environment. Indeed, several formal features about *Achrome* (fig. 3) were designed to promote this. Variations in light falling on the relief surface cast continuously shifting shadows. The bands of canvas wrapping around the picture frame provoked a lateral conceptual expansion of the composition and accentuated the

⁴⁴ The word “saturate” is more accurate than the more often cited “impregnated.” Though quoted from a text by Manzoni, the use of the word “impregnate” is a mistranslation made by the artist in an English language version of an earlier autobiographical statement in Italian. Manzoni is using the false cognate of the verb “impregnare” (to saturate). To impregnate would be the apt translation if the Italian source used the verb “fecundare.”

⁴⁵ Piero Manzoni, “Liberia dimensione.”

physicality of the work. The formal properties of the kaolin also added to this latter quality. Encasing the canvas like a chalky husk, the dried clay emphasized the painting's role as an object on the wall rather than its traditional characterization as an illusionistic window.

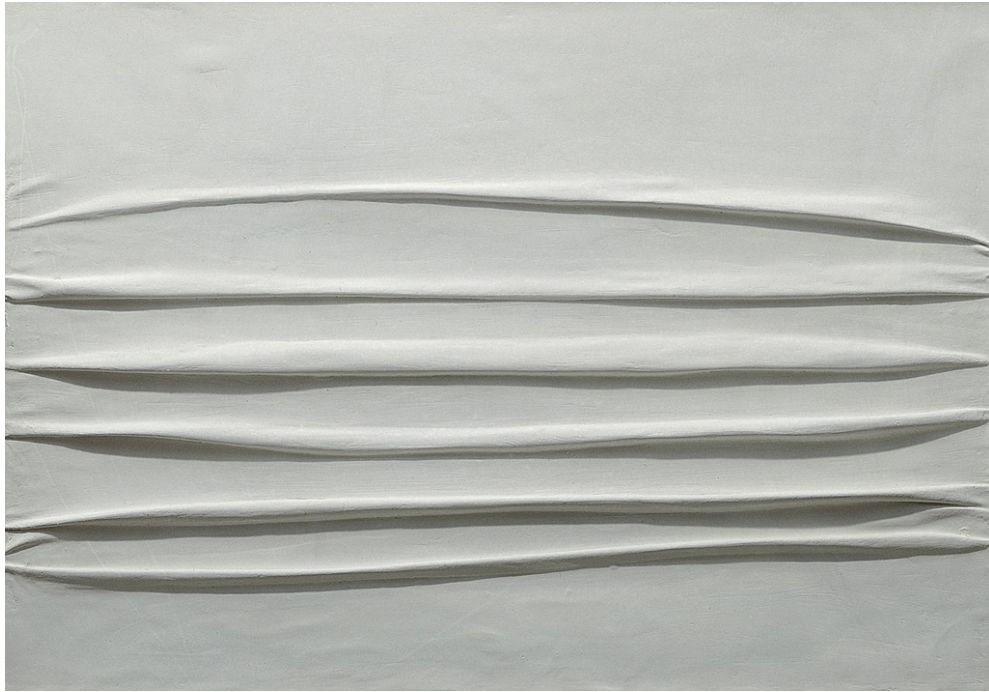


Fig. 3. Piero Manzoni, *Achrome*, 1958, Kaolin and canvas, 50 x 69.5 cm. Collection Fondazione Piero Manzoni, Milan, Italy. Piero Manzoni: © 2016 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome. Photo: Fondazione Piero Manzoni.

Finally, Manzoni emulated Fontana in presenting his larger body of works. Since 1947, Fontana had connected all his various projects, whether they were fine arts such as painting and sculpture, or non-traditional media like neon installation, under the term “spatial concept.”⁴⁶ Manzoni would also tie together his entire artistic program under the larger concept of the “infinite,” including the recent conceptual works *Le linee* and *Corpo d'aria*. Noting that the infinite dynamism of the *Achromes* were qualities “more clearly manifested in the Lines,”⁴⁷ Manzoni would extend the concept to incorporate *Corpo d'aria*, stating that the balloon's inflation expanded “from nothingness to infinity.”⁴⁸

Both artists saw their collective bodies of works as demonstrative of larger artistic concerns, each engaged in serial productions, and each developed works that prompted the beholder to by-

⁴⁶ Fontana would accentuate the holistic understanding of Spazialismo and declared in 1951 that, “painters, sculptors, writers adhering to the Spatial Movement are called ‘Spatial Artists,’” Rule 5 in “Proposta di un regolamento del Movimento Spaziale” (sometimes referred to as the Third Manifesto of Spatialism), 2 April 1950, Lucio Fontana, Milena Milani, Giampiero Giani, Beniamino Joppolo, Roberto Crippa, Carlo Cardazzo signatories. It is in this text that Fontana is recognized as the founder and leader of the movement (Rule 1).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

pass the author's subjectivity in the experiences of their art. Critics did not miss these parallels. Most contemporary accounts discussed *Le linee* as issuing from the legacy of Lucio Fontana and his Spatialist movement. Milanese art critic and Fontana champion Guido Ballo claimed in a 1960 review that Manzoni's *Achromes* and *Le linee* (fig. 4) were joined by a mutual "spatial" preoccupation.⁴⁹ According to the critic, *Le linee* was a "discovery" and Fontana understandably "follows the experiments of [this] young [artist] with much interest."⁵⁰ Ballo would continue to push this perceived connection in future publications, as did his contemporaries.⁵¹ Fontana himself saw the importance of Manzoni's work in regard to his artistic interests. In a radio interview just after Manzoni's death, Fontana stated: "I have the firm conviction that the lines of Manzoni mark a fundamental moment in the history of contemporary art."⁵² Nor did this esteem wane; in one of Fontana's last conversations with Tommaso Trini in 1968 the artist praised Manzoni's Lines as "pure philosophical facts" that "the Americans still haven't reached."⁵³



Fig. 4. Piero Manzoni, *Le linee* (The Lines), Approximately 87 examples, 1959-1961, Cardboard, paper, and ink, varying dimensions. Various Collections. Piero Manzoni: © 2016. Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome. Photo: Fondazione Piero Manzoni.

That *Le linee* developed from Manzoni's *Achromes*, which itself had followed from the example of Lucio Fontana, was widely agreed upon in early 1960. Yet no effort was made to

⁴⁹ Guido Ballo "Lucio Fontana et le Spatialisme," *Cimaise* no. 48, April–May–June 1960, 12–25.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ See Guido Ballo, *La linea dell'arte italiana: dal simbolismo alle Opera moltiplicate* (Rome: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1964); Gillo Dorfles, *Ultime tendenze nell'arte d'oggi* (Milan: Feltrinelli Editore, 1961); and Udo Kultermann *The New Painting* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969).

⁵² Transcript from RAI Gazzettino Padano, February 8, 1963.

⁵³ Tommaso Trini, "Colloquio con Fontana," *Domus* no. 466, September 9, 1968, 312.

connect *Corpo d'aria* and the subsequent conceptual projects to Fontana and Spazialismo. The assertions by Manzoni of unity in his work through concepts that should have been seen as sympathetic to Fontana's movement were neither claimed nor defended. Manzoni's work, by Spazialismo's interests, was limited to the *Achromes* and *Le linee*. This perception went beyond contemporaries aligned with Spazialismo, as demonstrated in *Domus*'s 1963 obituary for Manzoni, which noted "His godfather, at first, was Lucio Fontana. After this, he began his series of 'inventions,' which he exhibited at many foreign shows."⁵⁴

Manzoni's claim that *Corpo d'aria* was connected to his earlier works was not credited by either Fontana or contemporaries outside of Spazialismo. There appears to have been consensus that the works after *Le linee* constituted something separate. In a simple analysis, when Fontana opted not to advocate for Manzoni's later conceptual works it was because they no longer addressed issues central to Spazialismo. From Fontana's vantage point, he perceived separation where previously he had perceived overlap. But Fontana, despite his muted appreciation, did not dismiss Manzoni over the new directions taken in his art. The elder artist was even photographed consuming one of Manzoni's thumb-printed edible sculptures *Le uova*.⁵⁵ What exists then is not an abandonment of Spazialismo—which did not occur—but rather Fontana's near total silence with regard to such a significant portion of Manzoni's work. Addressing this issue requires several considerations. First is to identify the differences that caused a break for Fontana and other critics. The differences between *Corpo d'aria* and Manzoni's earlier works must also be reconciled with the larger oeuvre. Finally, the impetus for such an abrupt shift must be explained.

Although ultimately the conceptual projects are connected, there are several features of the sculpture kits that might have produced a perceived split with Manzoni's earlier works. Beginning with *Corpo d'aria* the participation of the beholder was physical and mental rather than only mental (as with the *Achromes* and *Le linee*). Unlike the varied lengths of *Le linee* and the diverse materials and sizes of the *Achromes*, *Corpi d'aria* and later conceptual projects were uniform in production and presentation. *Corpo d'aria* also limited any technical input from the artist, as did subsequent projects. Manzoni's labors consisted of inflating balloons, imprinting his thumb, and signing certificates and cans. The decision to offer his breath for sale, however, was unique to the sculpture kit.

Though the frivolous nature of selling the artist's breath might appear as a probable reason for Fontana to lose interest in Manzoni's works, it is unlikely. The parody of personality-based pricing rampant in Informel painting would have found a sympathetic audience with Fontana. Moreover, this monetary aspect of Manzoni's kits had precedent in his early works. At least by June 1959 the artist was selling *Le linee* by the meter and his *Achromes* by size.⁵⁶ The seemingly rational basis (more painting or more line for more money) was as absurd as the per-liter price for signature air. The lines were rolled and hidden in tubes, and the scale of the paintings failed to account for the complexity in their surface design or in the various materials of their composition.

Fontana's decision to focus his attention on and limit his praise to the initial projects of Manzoni was more likely due to his reaction to Manzoni's minimal artistic commitment. Despite

⁵⁴ Idem, "Piero Manzoni," *Domus*, no. 400, March 1963.

⁵⁵ The photograph is mentioned in a letter from Manzoni to Heinz Mack dated August 8, 1960, reproduced in Pola, *Piero Manzoni e Albisola*, 66.

⁵⁶ Piero Manzoni, Letter to Hans Sonnenberg, February 23, 1959, reprinted in Celant, *Piero Manzoni: catalogo generale* (2004). Manzoni notes, "The prices are approximate (2,500 Lit. au point). They will rise in a few months to 3,000 Lit. au point." In his interview with Jen Jørgen Thorsen, the artist notes the lines are priced at one Marc per meter. Subsequent letters reveal other currency equivalents for exhibitions in other countries.

his catholic attitude towards non-traditional media and his support of experimental works by younger artists, Fontana always favored artisanal labor. His reduction of gesture to limited and repetitious actions that evaded the extreme subjectivity of Informel also reflected, as Anthony White has noted, a strategy to preserve artistic creation in an industrial age.⁵⁷ Initially, Manzoni had followed this pattern. Both *Le linee* and the *Achromes* had been based on traditional fine arts—painting and drawing—executed by the hand of the artist. This is not to say that Manzoni’s earlier works had been celebrated for their technique. His works were disparaged as amateurish and described variously as “nothing sensational” and “sheets of white paint, damp like in the bathtub wash.”⁵⁸ But these semantics were akin to the criticism hurled at the holes and cuts found in Fontana’s paintings. The difference was that there was little connection, despite the claim, of *Corpi d’aria* to sculpture. The prefabricated materials in 1959 were neither novel nor radical and the end result was, at best, a rather conservative exercise in the physicality of the object. The commodities that composed the kits were cobbled together and unaltered. There was no gesture that would evince Manzoni’s hand, beyond the artist’s signature on the cases.

It was this mixture of minimal effort and utter banality that constituted the artist’s breakthrough. Although the requirement of beholder completion and validation remained constant, starting with *Corpo d’aria*, the work to be engaged held only the slightest allusion to a traditional understanding of the art object. Instead of provoking a conceptual elaboration of canvas and hidden drawings, the beholder’s involvement with Manzoni’s work would necessitate the validation of quotidian materials and actions as art. This raised the stakes for the beholder. While the creative investment in painting and drawing was safely outré, blowing up a balloon and declaring it art was much less certain. Audiences could not be sure that Manzoni was not poking fun at them. The distant authorial stance that artists like Fontana and Manzoni used to critique the overly emotive approach of Informel artists was given legitimacy based largely on its seriousness. *Corpo d’aria* eliminated this security and created the possibility of convincing gullible collectors to contemplate a child’s toy without hesitation as art.

Artistic Labor and the Postwar Vanguard

In presenting largely unaltered quotidian objects as art, Manzoni uncovered an anxiety concerning the vanguard in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Indeed, Fontana’s move back to the easel was in part strategic and was demonstrative of a wider practice. Artists, particularly in continental Europe, regularly made overt ties to a traditional understanding of art in a bid to ameliorate the tensions aroused by experimental activities. Whether it was in locating new actions within the established fine arts or securing value through expensive materials and unique objects or limited editions, artists were keenly aware of a need to allude to conservative dogma about art. In Fontana’s case the cuts and perforations were “art” by virtue of their placement within the boundaries of stretched canvas. While the work might be judged unsuccessful or incomprehensible, it still existed within the realm of an established medium.

In retrospect the diverse set of practices that were emerging in 1959 is difficult to ignore. Alan Kaprow’s 1958 description of art in the impending decade as “the alchemies of the sixties”

⁵⁷ For the best discussion of Fontana’s reaction to Informel and his continued interest in artistic labor see Giulio Carlo Argan, “Reconstruction in Postwar Italy,” in *Breakthroughs: Avant-Garde Artists in Europe and America*, ed. John Howell, 1950–1990 (New York: Rizzoli, 1991).

⁵⁸ Vitrus Schade, “Kunst og ægbakker,” *Nyhedsbladet*, June 20, 1960, and Adele Cambria, “Visoni, patate fritte e bianche lenzuola inchiodate sul muro,” *Il Giorno*, March 5, 1959.

seems today more observant than prophetic.⁵⁹ In the moment, however, fine arts held sway and their advocates understandably believed that their arguments had carried the day. Consider the dominant mode of vanguard art making of the 1950s, Informel. Although various Informel artists asserted their independence from established critical and formal criteria, the works produced under this moniker were technically a smooth continuation of traditional art forms. Painting and sculpture were the preferred media, despite Informel's declarations of a divorce from the past. The plasticity of paint, lauded previously for its success in producing the effects of the natural world, became an equally effective material to register the interior psychological struggles of the artist. The technique of the artist's brush and the painting's composition continued to demonstrate the qualities of sincerity, mastery, and skill, even if the painting's contents differed radically.

The resilience of the armature and the easel as the basis for most art works extended in part from a critical reception of the historic vanguard which ignored the social or cultural challenges posed by their various projects. Under these terms formal changes were more likely evinced by a shift in sensibility and style of individual practitioners than the potentially revolutionary shifts in modes of production or distribution. Art history was less historical than an oscillation between temperaments. Cool cerebral art gave way to an impassioned emotive art in a continuous cycle, more in dialogue with itself than the wider world. Gillo Dorfles's 1961 survey of recent and contemporary art, for example, framed Dada's nihilism as directed against traditional art movements and located its influence in the recent paintings of figures such as Jasper Johns and Salvatore Scarpitta.⁶⁰ When advocates for vanguard art of the present and recent past did celebrate non-traditional media, they did so by means of formal innovation that was usually invested back into practices of painting or sculpture.

Conservative critics gladly embraced these terms and in their various columns they regularly dismissed new art if it recalled a pre- or inter-war precedent. When Galleria Schwarz in Milan held an exhibit of Kurt Schwitters in October 1954, the local press informed its readers that Alberto Burri's work with burlap and tar had already been done thirty years prior and that his multi-media paintings were no longer of interest.⁶¹ Despite his hatred of Futurism, Leonardo Borgese criticized Lucio Fontana's works as simple repetitions of Futurism that were "not very new."⁶² Even when Borgese declared the hidden line drawings of Manzoni's *Le linee* "cerebral flashes" rather than actual works of art, he still reminded the reader that Manzoni was copying Jean Tinguely.⁶³

Conservatives allowed non-traditional materials to expand art on the grounds of originality. Novelty exempted the work from technical evaluation in its first iteration. However, the faintest echo of these historic works in a contemporary artwork was cause for immediate dismissal from serious discussion. Needless to say, painting and other traditional mediums were exempt from

⁵⁹ Alan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," *Art News*, no. 6, October 1958, 24–26, 55–57.

⁶⁰ Dorfles, *Ultime tendenze nell'art d'oggi*.

⁶¹ Anonymous review of *20 Merz (1919–1920)* at the Liberia Schwarz, quoted in Ariella Giulivi and Raffaella Trani, *Arturo Schwarz: la Galleria 1954–1975* (Milan: Mudima, 1995).

⁶² Leonardo Borgese (Polignoto), "Ancora un manifesto: L'assurda gara tra arte e scienza," *Corriere d'Informazione* (Milan), August 14–15, 1957, 3.

⁶³ Leonardo Borgese "Al di là dell'estremo astattismo. Il pittore che 'crea' linee a metratura," *Corriere della Sera*, 10 February 1967. The criticism comes in a section of Borgese's review erroneously titled the "English Rival." The critic's designation of the French artist Jean Tinguely as English was due to confusion over the location of Tinguely's métamatic performance/lecture "Art Machine and Motion" (November 12, 1959) at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.

such criterion and could be repeated in perpetuity. The historic vanguard was acknowledged, if unloved, because it provided a reservoir of precedents to reject emerging experimental art, consigning avant-gardism to a definite and largely closed moment in the historical past.

Of course for younger vanguard artists resisting Informel these critical arguments held little in common with their concerns. Giovanni Anceschi of the interactive art collective Gruppo T described even favorable critics such as Dorfles, Ballo, and Giulio Carlo Argan as incapable of “talk[ing] about what we were making.”⁶⁴ This does not mean that artists were not aware that the terms of the debate were strongly dictated by the substantial audience a column in a major daily had compared to the numbers attending exhibitions. Because the desired outcome of these artists was to address the contemporary world in a direct and meaningful manner, the popular conception of “what is art” was of crucial concern. Artists needed to coexist with a critical class that was apt to be ignorant of historical examples of art that had addressed social and cultural realms, let alone the revival of such ambitions.

That vanguard art situated itself in relation to tradition and often to something verifiably “artistic” was neither a concession nor much of a surprise. The desire for mass appeal necessitated it. Yet these decisions were not without consequences. The discrete space of art, as previously imagined, guaranteed the beholder critical distance and placed the activities that produced the object distinct from the everyday. In aligning their production to the social praxis this distance was closed and opened artistic labor to new scrutiny. Artists might rhetorically claim their activities as aligned with more prosaic labor, but surrendering the privilege that had previously characterized that role was another case. Flirting with mass production by decorating a studio as a factory was much different than joining the alienated classes for a double shift.

While this tension within the wider critical milieu certainly helped give shape to Manzoni’s work, it alone does not explain the changes inaugurated by *Corpo d’aria*. In particular, why the artist began to present his works in editions. Both *Le linee* and *Achromes* were characterized by variations in length, scale, and materials. The projects were also executed over extended periods of time and evinced the hand of the artist. The resulting objects were more serial than Manzoni’s later works, which were more akin to mass produced commodities. The shift to a standardized presentation reflects Manzoni’s response to two developments in vanguard art in 1959. First are the activities surrounding the publication of Robert Lebel’s *Sur Marcel Duchamp* and Duchamp’s on-going project *Boîte-en-valise*. And the second is the initial publication of Daniel Spoerri’s Edition Multiplication d’art Transformable (MAT).

Manzoni, Edition MAT, and the Revival of Marcel Duchamp

Though now seen as the central figure in postwar art, Duchamp received quite a different response in 1959. In the opinion of the Milanese gallerist and Duchamp expert Arturo Schwarz and many of the contributions to Lebel’s monograph, Duchamp and his readymade were important for different reasons than those celebrated today. Schwarz held that Duchamp had promoted the commodity from mass production to a “consecrated” work of art by way of artistic choice. Idle and singular, the commodity was released from its common status in an act that segregated mental labor from and promoted it over technical skill. The emphasis on the singularity of the readymade affected even the historical account of Duchamp. Schwarz and fellow champions conceived of the various permutations, replacements, and luxury copies of the

⁶⁴ Giovanni Anceschi, e-mail correspondence with the author, November 18, 2007.

readymades as all commemorating the original historical act. Both Lebel's work and Schwarz's later publications in the 1960s would refer to the additional examples as "replicas."

In short, Schwarz and most experts at the time understood Duchamp as the agent of choice visiting the factory. The commodity selected was transformed and elevated from an everyday object to a work of art. Importantly, in doing so Schwarz and critics romanticized the absent artistic labor and reclassified it as immaterial mental labor. It was a verdict that kept meaning integral to the object. No ink was spilled to indicate if the transformation of the commodity was effected or not by its transition into an artistic space, nor did the productive activities of the factory workers who made the commodity contribute to the readymade cause.

Schwarz and his contemporaries might be forgiven if the issue of factory labor and institutional context had largely receded from view. Despite the well-documented history of the readymade, the experience of Duchamp's work in 1959 was predominately through the luxury limited edition *Boîte-en-valise* (fig. 5). Begun in the 1930s, the work reproduced the nearly complete oeuvre of Duchamp, sixty-nine objects in total (some still existing and some lost) in the form of miniatures. The specially made case that held the objects doubled as a display venue, described by the artist as a "portable museum." Duchamp had the readymades recreated as handmade sculptures from which molds were cast. He reproduced the glass works on celluloid, and remade the paintings as collotypes hand-colored in a labor intensive stencil technique.⁶⁵ In 1959 only about 125 of the eventual 300 had been made, one of which belonged to Schwarz.



Fig. 5. Marcel Duchamp, *Boîte-en-valise*, 1934–1941 (Published 1942–1966), Leather, wood, metal, plaster, celluloid, collotypes, photographs and mixed-media assemblage, Edition 300). Collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. Photo: Courtesy National Gallery of Art.

⁶⁵ All information concerning the production of the *Boîte-en-valise* comes from Ecke Bonk, *Duchamp: The Box in a Valise*, trans. David Britt (New York: Rizzoli, 1989). Two of the reproduced paintings, *Nu descendant un escalier No.2* and *Mariée*, were signed and notarized and an additional four works were varnished.

While the objects in *Boîte-en-valise* had been reproduced, they were decidedly not mass-produced.⁶⁶ Duchamp's role shifted from the initial cataloging and creation of proofs to a supervisory one once the first editions were completed. Importantly, the means of production seems to have been designed to avoid any connotation to the assembly line. With the change from single creator to supervisor Duchamp ran the risk of functioning as a manager fabricating objects through a fractured and alienated processes akin to that of industry. While limiting the number of editions diminished this comparison somewhat, the apportion of labor to professional craftsmen precluded comparisons to mass production. It was the work of skilled artisans and artists. The *Boîte-en-valise* became the result of a network studio directed by an old, but modern, master.

Whether fortuitous or strategic, Duchamp's practice was well poised for the critical atmosphere from which it emerged. His recreations engineered both a more palatable version of the original unassisted readymade and rehabilitated the shock that accompanied its initial debut. The retrospective affect of the valise/portable museum turned its contents into totems and handmade objects became the symbols of the readymade's radical break from artistic labor. Nor was the valise isolated in its recuperation of craft. The limited works by Duchamp produced in the intervening years were largely hand-made,⁶⁷ as was Duchamp's major project of 1959, a deluxe edition of Lebel's monograph.⁶⁸

Perhaps the most important indication of the critical grounds in which Manzoni operated in 1959 is the artist's position in the ongoing revival of Marcel Duchamp. Given the current consensus that Manzoni figures as one of the more important examples of the postwar revival of Duchamp, it is remarkable how infrequently Duchamp is invoked in relation to Manzoni during his lifetime.⁶⁹ Even if one includes references to "Dada," the number is negligible. Of these rare instances, the most direct comes from an interview in 1959 conducted by journalist Wladimiro Greco in which he asked about Duchamp's role (called "Dada" by Greco) in relation to Manzoni's *Le linee*. The question prompted the following response from the artist:

Yes, I am a member of that movement that arose in Paris around 1910 with the aim of renewing art against tradition: The Dadas [sic] put a mustache on the Gioconda [...] At the abstract art exhibition held in 1913 in New York, the Dada group sent the porcelain parts of a urinal from Montmartre. Bidets and chamber pots are welcomed, and still conserved, [at] the Amsterdam Museum of

⁶⁶ Martha Buskirk, "Thoroughly Modern Marcel," in *The Duchamp Effect*, eds. Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1996), 191–205.

⁶⁷ Of particular note are works such as the bookbinding done with Mary Reynolds in the 1930s and 1940s and the cast erotic objects of the 1950s.

⁶⁸ Among the amenities included in the 110 copies were two original works—the self-portrait *Marcel déchiravit* and the enamel plaque *Eau & gaz à tous les étages*—as well as hand-colored photographs of *Grand Verre*, and authenticating signatures from both the artist and the author. *Marcel déchiravit* (Marcel tore this quickly) were paper sheets torn against a metal silhouette of the artist in profile. The sheets were mounted on velvet-covered paperboard and employed as frontispieces for the edition. This image was reproduced again later that year as a promotional poster for the monograph's release party at the Parisian bookstore Librarie La Hune. Duchamp would sign 40 copies of the poster, unaccompanied by text, in another limited edition connected to his work.

⁶⁹ This comparison has even been extended in recent scholarship to relationships between Manzoni's *Achromes* and the work of Marcel Duchamp. See, for example: Matthew Gale "From Alphabet to Zone," in Matthew Gale and Renato Miracco, *Beyond Painting: Burri, Fontana, Manzoni* (Milano: Arti Grafiche/Tate Publishing, 2005) and Briony Fer "The Scatter: Sculpture as Leftover," in Helen Molesworth, *Part Object, Part Sculpture* (College Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

Contemporary Art and the Galleria of Art Informel of Liège. I have a rare piece; do you want to buy it?⁷⁰

Though Manzoni confuses the 1913 Armory Show and the 1917 Society of Independent Artists, his statement demonstrates a working knowledge of Duchamp gained through his interaction with Schwarz and his gallery/library as well as his friendship with Jean-Jacques Lebel, son of Robert Lebel.⁷¹ Yet despite these knowledgeable sources, the quote reveals several idiosyncratic appraisals of Duchamp's work, particularly at that moment.

In Manzoni's assessment, Duchamp's work was framed historically as a defiant stand against abstract artists—essentially the same fight in which Manzoni saw himself with Informel. This contradicted the consensus of the time that the readymade was a celebration of the act of selection and an optimistic assessment of the potential of art. Manzoni also ignores the idle nature of the readymade and describes *Fountain* both as useless and as a still potentially useful object (chamber pot).

Unlike the various repurchases and recreated luxury curia described as “replicas,”⁷² Manzoni understood Duchamp's readymades as a series of accumulating works. Their individual power, however, did not wane with repetition, but expanded as the various porcelain parts infiltrated collections across Europe. Manzoni envisioned an assembly line atelier whose potential was found in its ability to make copies. The readymade was in the plural, the better to reach more people. Under Schwarz's assessment the still-functional components of Manzoni's conceptual works, at best, fulfilled only half of the requirements (there was no technical skill). Certainly this may help to explain why Manzoni was not shown in the Schwarz gallery until the posthumous exhibition in 1964.⁷³

Importantly, Manzoni was not simply satirizing the revival of Duchamp, but engaging with aspects of the French artist's work, which were downplayed at that moment. This was also the case with Manzoni's response to the aims of the multiple that also extended from the revival of Duchamp. Though it was in 1955 that Victor Vasarely would propose what would later be termed the multiple—works characterized by ease of replication through modern technology that would democratize the access to art and undermine the myth of the unique art object—it was actually in 1959 with Daniel Spoerri and Edition MAT that these aims were realized. Conceived

⁷⁰ Wladimiro Greco, “8 Domande al pittore Manzoni,” *Il Travaso*, no. 39, October 5, 1959. Manzoni's description of *L.H.O.O.Q* as the Gioconda with a mustache and not a mustache and goatee suggests that he was referring to Francis Picabia's recreation of Duchamp's work for the cover of *391* (no. 12), which omitted the goatee and was one of numerous Dada and Surrealist related periodicals in Arturo Schwarz's collection opened to the public in the late 1950s.

⁷¹ Manzoni's relationship with Lebel dates to at least 1957 according to correspondence and he is claimed to be attending Schwarz's Libreria/Galeria even earlier. Furthermore, Manzoni knew Roberto Crippa and Giovanni Dova—working for the former as a studio assistant—who were both intimates of Duchamp.

⁷² Tancock addresses this in his 1971 essay noting that the replicas issued by Duchamp are further promotions of the idea and provide the rationale for contemporary multiples. John L. Tancock, *Multiples: The First Decade* (Philadelphia: PMA, 1971).

⁷³ Among the notable exclusions are *Arte fantastica italiana*, October 1960, *L'oggetto nella pittura*, March 1961 (which exhibited Duchamp's *Tabliers de blanchisseuse*, 1959 and *Rotorelief*, 1958), and the Christmas exhibition of 1960, which included works of almost every major Milanese artist. Additionally, Nouveaux Réalistes Daniel Spoerri, Arman, and Martial Raysse and Greek kinetic artist Takis (presented in part by Duchamp) were all given exhibitions in 1961 at Schwarz. During this time Manzoni collaborated with Spoerri, was in the midst of producing the conceptual works, and no longer had his own gallery space.

as an inexpensive way to distribute three-dimensional artworks, the initial publication included such notable figures as Man Ray, Vasarely, and Duchamp.

Spoerri's project, however, was risky. In the midst of a conservative critical milieu the artist maintained that the publication would not employ traditional methods of reproduction such as bronze casting or tapestry. Spoerri also rejected what he called "personal handwriting" from contributions because the individual marks of an artist would become diluted in repetition. The multiple would be something different. It would be a mechanically reproduced object that would evince each particular artist's intention without his or her signature mark. Moreover, it would also be distinct from other identically produced works.

The questions that arose from Spoerri's decisions were significant. How would the work of art remain art in its move from studio to assembly line, and by extension how would the process allow privilege to the status of the artist? The gallerist Denise René notes that she initially rejected Spoerri's 1956 offer to make multiples because:

We still hadn't left expressionism or tachism behind us [...] It was dangerous to introduce into the market works that one could have considered not as serious creations but as gadgets. It was necessary for the ethic of the artists to be accepted before their works could be disseminated in the form of multiples.⁷⁴

In order to combat this feared impression, Spoerri concluded that only those works that incorporated movement were suitable for multiplication.

The concentration on movement as a foundational criterion was meant to rescue the multiple from becoming an ordinary commodity. Jean Tinguely's untitled 1964 contribution to the publication (fig. 6) offers a good demonstration of how the incorporation of motion allowed standardized elements to become singular aesthetic objects. A simple black metal unit functioned as the rear wall and base of the sculpture, with the base housing an electric motor. A small screw clamp connected colorful feathers to a wire that was threaded through a small opening on the base to the engine. When activated the feathers would vibrate and in their oscillations would blur and visually meld into a continuously shifting, ephemeral volume of black, white, and red. The tactile vanes and quills and the varying edges of the feathers lost their physicality and became momentarily smooth and transparent. The metal casing became a stage for the feathers' animated performance. The beholder would witness the common elements unite and transform into a playful visual display. The unpredictability of the movements also promised a unique experience, which further distanced the multiple from the commodity. Despite the sculpture's composition of prefabricated parts, the apparatus could not replicate any previous activation of the work. Nor could it replicate those from another representative from the edition. Movement also testified to and preserved the author as a creative presence in the works. Though the beholder controlled the duration of the sculpture's performance, the artist's intentions were aptly recognized. The mechanical structure was easily deduced, which revealed that the aleatory motions of the multiple were purposeful. Denial of a definitive order reflected the artist's desire for the object to provide an ever-changing appearance for each beholder. In Spoerri's assessment this preserved the distinct categories of art and artist within industrial production. Yet in a move that betrayed some doubt, Spoerri decided to limit editions of the "multiplied originals" to a connoisseurial 100.

⁷⁴ "Interview with René Denise," *Connaissance des Arts*, n. 191, January 1968, 66, cited in Tancock, *Multiples*, n.p.



Fig. 6. Jean Tinguely, *Untitled* (Edition MAT), 1964, Metal, electric motor, feathers, and wire.
Private Collection. Jean Tinguely: © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.
Photo: Courtesy Lempertz.

Spoerri's concern appears to have extended to the selection of contributors. Manzoni was eager to participate in a future MAT publication and wrote to Spoerri communicating both his interest and the technical specifications of *Corpo d'aria*.⁷⁵ He was ultimately not included. Katerina Vatsella has suggested recently that the works were rejected from Edition MAT because they were perceived as not serious or as satirizing the democratic aims that the multiple's wider access afforded.⁷⁶ This is seemingly confirmed by Spoerri's later verdict that while Manzoni was "extremely well informed" his multiple works were "technically, not good at all."⁷⁷ Spoerri's assessment is interesting for two reasons. It assumes an established definition of the multiple, one with expectations and criteria that could foster a qualitative judgment. And second, Spoerri's criticism ignores the fact that Manzoni fully complied with the desire for easily reproducible work. The lack of additional labor performed by Manzoni meant that *Corpo d'aria* was, by definition, factory quality. Through the absence of the artist's touch and the continued utilitarian functions of the component parts, the pneumatic sculpture kit would maintain its previously recognized standard of quality.

It is the closeness of the factory that must have most concerned Spoerri. Manzoni's works indicated a canny understanding of the anxieties that the early multiple held. The association of

⁷⁵ Piero Manzoni, Letter to Daniel Spoerri, 1959, Archive Sohm, Staatgalerie (Stuttgart).

⁷⁶ Katerina Vatsella, *Edition MAT: Die Entstehung einer Kunstform: Daniel Spoerri, Karl Gestern und das Multiple* (Hauschild: Bremen, 1998), 76.

⁷⁷ Hapgood, *Neo-Dada*, 134.

art and the commodity did not trouble Manzoni, but he was well aware of the connotations and provocative associations that this relationship held for many artists and critics. This nervousness by industrial proxy was exacerbated by Manzoni's custom claims, "samples without value" (fig. 7). Though useful in facilitating transport and passage through customs, which Manzoni described as a "Kafka story," the claim fit well the radical vision of the artist.⁷⁸



Fig. 7. Piero Manzoni, *Le Uova (The Eggs)*, unknown number, begun July 1960, egg, wood, cotton, and ink.
Sample number '11' in lid with an Italian customs stamp on the left.
Collection Fondazione Piero Manzoni, Milan, Italy.
Piero Manzoni: © 2016 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome.
Photo: Fondazione Piero Manzoni.

Beyond the declaration of no value, sample status assumed that the works were prototypes. Unlike the "multiplied originals" that stemmed from a MAT edition or the handcrafted limited issue objects in the *Boîte-en-valise*, Manzoni's prototypes were the first of an endless line to come. The numbered and signed examples of the other multiple artworks, while not auratic, were scarce and precious. Manzoni's kits were defined by their lack of value. Opting to forego the declaration of "art" to relieve foreign duties, Manzoni put his pneumatic sculpture kits entirely into the category of mass production. Even if the editions produced by Spoerri and Duchamp had

⁷⁸ Piero Manzoni, Letter to Almir Mavignier, March 1960, reproduced as fig. 216, Battino and Palazzoli, *Piero Manzoni: catalogue raisonné*.

been unlimited, they would be scaled to order, and all the repetitions would be equally valuable. Manzoni's samples, however, were not yet in this state. The prototypes were duty free because their existence was in part predicated on their function as solicitations for investment. Like the unrealized status of art in Manzoni's work, the sample without value was a proposal that purchase would validate.



Fig. 8. Piero Manzoni, *Fiato d'artista*, 1960, 18 known examples, rubber, lead, and wood.
Collection Fondazione Piero Manzoni, Milan, Italy.
Piero Manzoni: © 2016 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome.
Photo: Fondazione Piero Manzoni.

The conflicts at the heart of Edition MAT were the preservation of singularity within a model of standardization, which would thereby escape the assembly line and preserve the creative author. Yet Manzoni's *Corpo d'aria* did this. Following the instructions, the disparate parts would be joined together in a process that when completed would create a work of art by way of viewer interaction. The problem came less in the idea than in the execution. Any suggestion of a democratic art of participation was undermined by the virtually identical end products that voided participants' aesthetic choices. It was this same strategy of idealized concept ruined by practice that led to Manzoni's *Fiato d'artista* (fig. 8). The completed sculptures, though literally containing the artist's presence, were kinetic only in their inevitable deflation (though repeat purchase was available, and encouraged, since Manzoni stockpiled component parts). The artist never explained how the price became set at 200 Italian lire per liter, or why other professions, say "fireman's breath" or "banker's breath," did not warrant an exchange rate. Taken together the constricted choice and the baseless exchange rate combined to close off all possible romantic association or privilege for artist or beholder. Ultimately it was this lack of seriousness that supposedly separated Manzoni from the ranks of artists like Spoerri

and Duchamp. Following the rules was not enough. In the eyes of his contemporaries and present scholars, Manzoni just wanted to topple the apple cart, as revealed in such oft-quoted passages as this one taken from a letter he wrote to Ben Vautier in December 1961 where he claimed:

The fingerprint is a unique sign of personality that one can talk about, if the collectors want something intimate, truly personal from the artist there is the artist's shit, truly from him.⁷⁹

And standing alone, the quote would seemingly support the contention that Manzoni's art was satire tout court. If this conveys Manzoni's intentions it could be rightly assumed that the artist saw his work as a response to and a critique of the works of others. But the full quote reads differently. In the December letter the artist actually wrote:

I would wish that all artists sold their fingerprints or else put on competitions to see who could succeed in making the longest line or that everyone sold their shit in cans. (The fingerprint is a unique sign of personality that one can talk about, if the collectors want something intimate, truly personal from the artist there is the artist's shit, truly from him).⁸⁰

Read in this fuller context, Manzoni's statement becomes more complicated. Certainly the idea of selling excrement poked fun at the elevated creative act of the artist, but there was another dimension. The statement entwined several of his previous conceptual works together and highlighted the pulse between individual and mass, universal and common that so often concerned Manzoni's art. The fingerprint was individual, yet everyone had one. Everyone could draw a line. Everyone defecates. Yet each product remains differentiated and particular to the producer. The wording of the sentence even began to collapse the division of artist and audience with the artist selling fingerprints, then hosting line competitions, and then everyone selling their waste.

The proposals offered by Manzoni in this letter offer some insight into where he envisioned his artistic activity progressing. It was illogical, unrealizable, and made the boundaries between artist and beholder so porous that neither was coherent. Despite its impracticalities, the radical potential of this vision still reverts to and connects Manzoni's early and late works. It also provides the likely motivation for the artist's sudden decision to undermine the luxury multiples of Spoerri and Duchamp beyond mere satire. Experimental art as presented in 1959 and 1960 was more a reshuffle for Manzoni than a new language. In a brilliant display, however, he took the old language and made it new. The idea in Manzoni's pneumatic sculpture kit was coincident with the commodities' intended function. Movement, if considered to be evident, was a part of the sculpture's making. Promoted by use and bought in bulk the still-functional readymade components seemed to have no appreciation of canonical understandings of Duchamp's legacy. It was a piecemeal, pragmatic assembly presented as worthless industrial prototypes that reduced variation to a rather low standard deviation (the sphere's diameter). To suggest that the kits demonstrated a shift to intellectual labor strained credulity. To suggest the beholder would gain insight by divining its construction was similarly dubious. The command of a premium to purchase Manzoni's breath was designed to draw attention to the absurdity of these claims. The

⁷⁹ Piero Manzoni, Letter to Ben Vautier, December 1961, French, reprinted as fig. 379 in *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

artist's fiat was revealed as insubstantial, immaterial "fiato d'artista." Manzoni's works embraced the possible, if not probable, subsuming of the work of art into the realm of the commodity. Yet only by undoing all the pretenses and offering his kits for consideration as art could the total transformation of art occur. It was *Corpo d'aria/Fiato d'artista*'s ability to catch the tensions possessed by so many of the issues that haunted advanced art in 1959 that today fulfill Manzoni's original prediction. Genially exhaling, the artist really did make the best, most sensational balloons.

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