

Artist's Shit

Consumption of Dynamic Art by the Art-Devouring Public
Magic Bases - Living Sculptures



Piero Manzoni *Archive*

The Artist's Shit

The Magic Body

The cans of *Merda d'artista* ("Artist's Shit, content 30 gr., freshly preserved, produced and tinned in May 1961"), were first exhibited in the Galleria Pescetto (Albisola Marina) on 12 August 1961.

Manzoni calculated the value of the ninety cans - all numbered each with a net weight of thirty grams - in accordance with the daily exchange rates for gold.

Manzoni's cans of Artist's Shit have some forerunners in the twentieth-century art, like Marcel Duchamp's urinal (*Fontaine*, 1917) or the Surrealists' coprolalic wits. Salvador Dalí, Georges Bataille and first of all Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1896) had given artistic and literal dignity to the word "merde".

The link between anality and art, as the equation of excrements with gold, is a leitmotiv of the psychoanalytic movement (and Carl G. Jung could have been a point of reference for Manzoni).

Manzoni's main innovation to this topic is a reflection on the role of the artist's body in contemporary art.

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Artist's Shit n. 066, 1961.
Metal can (4.8 x 6.5 cm.)

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Artist's Shit n. 010, 1961.
Metal can (4.8 x 6.5 cm.)

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The tautological closure of Manzoni's *Achrome* (an empty space without lines or colours) and the disappearance of the artwork as a literal object (as in the case of the hidden *Lines*), produce a specular self-sufficiency of the artist's body.

Dispossessed of his ancient heroic status of producer and artificer after the loss of the artwork as a literal object, the artist find a place of discharge for the projection of his person, replacing, with his own body, the painting and the sculpture.

The series of *Artist's Shit* (sold at the then-current price of gold), the *Bodies of Air* ("Corpi d'aria", balloons filled with Manzoni's breath) and the only planned containers of *Artist's Blood* ("Sangue d'artista") are the results of a process of expropriation and regeneration of the artist's corporeality.

Manzoni offers his own body as an artwork, and the vestiges of the transfigured body become precious relics.



Artist's Breath, 1960. Balloon, wood, lead seals
(18 x 18 x 2 cm.)

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Artist's Shit
n. 076, 008, 001, 1961
Metal can
(4.8 x 6.5 cm.)

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The Public as a Work of Art: The Consumption of Art

If art has no message, if the artwork doesn't exist anymore, the public cannot be only a spectator.

The public too must become a work of art, following the tracks of the artist and the vestiges of his artistic body.

On July 21 1960, took place in Milan "an exhibition of edible exhibits": the *Consumption of dynamic art by the art-devouring public* ("Consumazione dell'arte dinamica del pubblico divorare l'arte").

Manzoni boiled some eggs on a table. Then signed each egg with the imprint of his thumb dipped in ink and offered them to the visitors to eat. Manzoni, too, devoured an egg. Swallowing the eggs consecrated by the contact with the artist's hand, Manzoni and the public merged themselves in a mystical communion with art.

The Public as a Work of Art: Living Sculptures and Magic Bases

In April 1961, in Rome, in a manifestation at the Galleria La Tartaruga, Piero Manzoni began to sign people (nude models or visitors) changing them into works of art.

The *Living Sculptures* ("Sculture viventi") were completed by a declaration of authenticity.

A *red stamp* certified that the subject was a whole work of art for life. A *yellow stamp* limited the artistic status to a body part, while a *green one* meant that the individual signed was a work of art under certain circumstances (i.e. only while sleeping or running). Finally a *red stamp* stuck on the receipt of authenticity meant that the service was paid for.

The transformation of the human bodies in a "living sculpture" is the aim of the *Magic Base* ("Base Magica").

As long as any person (or any object) stays on the plinth, she (or it) is a work of art.

The "Socle du Monde" (an upside down magic base made of iron) holds on its bearing surface the entire world.

Everything is now recognised as a work of art.

Stefano Cappelli



*Egg with thumbprint n. 22, 1960.
Egg, ink, wood.
(5.6 x 8.2 x 6.8 cm.)*

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*Magic Base, 1961.
Wood (80 x 80 x 60 cm.)*

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Credits

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Bibliography

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Cover: Piero Manzoni, *Artist's breath*, 1960.