

Piero Manzoni's  
*Merda d'artista*



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*That Scandalous Can*

Edited by

Luca Bochicchio

and Rosalia Pasqualino di Marineo

English translations by

Neil Frazer Davenport

Cambridge  
Scholars  
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FOREWORD  
BY ELENA AND GIUSEPPE  
MANZONI DI CHIOSCA

Ever since its “production” in May 1961, Piero Manzoni’s *Merda d’artista* has made us think, talk and debate: mockery and provocation or art and philosophy?

Over the course of its first 40 years, Manzoni’s can has been mentioned in the broader analyses of the artist but for more in-depth research into the work we had to wait until the late 2000s. Finally, after 60 years, thanks to the Rossana Bossaglia Research Centre for Modern and Contemporary Decorative Arts, in collaboration with the Fondazione Piero Manzoni, an important group of international academics was brought together in the March of 2023, exploring for the first time numerous topics in diverse disciplines: from art history and criticism to philosophy, but also from physics to economics and social studies. The results of two intensive study days are published here and it is our hope that they may stimulate further interesting debate around one of the most famous and most iconic works of art of the last century.

Elena and Giuseppe Manzoni di Chiosca  
President and Vice President of the Fondazione Piero Manzoni



## FOREWORD BY VALERIO TERRAROLI

The Rossana Bossaglia Research Centre for Decorative Arts, Graphics and the Modern and Contemporary Fine Arts, the Department of Cultures and Civilizations and the Contemporary Commission of the University of Verona have collaborated on and supported the project developed by Luca Bochicchio, lecturer in History of Contemporary Art at this university, and the Fondazione Piero Manzoni, for an international conference focusing on one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's most controversial, but also most iconic artworks: *Merda d'artista* (1961).

The conference, held at our university in March 2023 represented not only an updating of research into the work and the artist, but also introduced new critical and methodological perspectives in relation to challenging reflections in the fields of aesthetics, museology and historiography, as well as examinations of highly topical issues of restoration and conservation. These Conference Papers, therefore, offer full and rich testimony, along with an articulated horizon of confrontation and debate. More than 60 years on from its invention by one of contemporary art's most talented and innovative figures, Piero Manzoni's *Merda d'artista* has once again revealed its semantic complexity and density, its ever-fresh originality and a provocative and propositional strength capable of capturing the attention and interest of the younger generations.

Valerio Terraroli

Director of the Rossana Bossaglia Research Centre for Decorative Arts,  
Graphics and the Modern and Contemporary Fine Arts,  
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## TITLES OF WORKS IN ITALIAN AND ENGLISH

The titles of the works by Piero Manzoni have been left in the original Italian throughout this book. The English translations are as follows:

Alfabeto -> Alphabet

Base magica - Scultura vivente -> Magic Base - Living Sculpture

Projet de sérigraphie (Calendario) -> Project for a silkscreen print (Calendar)

Certificato di autenticità -> Certificate of Authenticity

Corpo d'aria -> Body of Air

Corpi di luce assoluti -> Bodies of Absolute Light

Fiato d'artista -> Artist's Breath

Impronta -> Thumbprint

Linea lunga 1000 metri -> Line 1000 Metres Long

Linea lunga 1040 metri -> Line 1040 Metres Long

Linea lunga 7200 metri -> Line 7200 Metres Long

Linea m -> Line Metres Long

Linea di lunghezza infinita -> Line of Infinite Length

Merda d'artista -> Artist's Shit

Sangue d'artista -> Artist's Blood

Scultura vivente -> Living Sculpture

Sculture nello spazio -> Sculptures in Space

Socle du monde -> Base of the World

8 Tavole di accertamento -> 8 Tables of Assessment

Uovo scultura -> Egg Sculpture

# INTRODUCTION

## THREE ACTS

### FLAMINIO GUALDONI



*Merda d'artista*, May 1961, tin can, printed paper, 5 × ø 6.5 cm (each one), photo: Bruno Bani

Act one: On August 12, 1961, Piero Manzoni exhibited a new work, *Merda d'artista*, in the group show “In villeggiatura da Pescetto” at Albisola, a Ligurian resort that was a traditional haunt for artists, first and foremost Lucio Fontana.

The work was created in Milan, in 90 examples, and from the outset it was one Manzoni never considered to be his best bet.

In September, he presented 10 examples in a solo show at the Luca Scacchi Gracco gallery in Milan, 15 were shown immediately afterwards at the Arthur Køpcke gallery in Copenhagen where it was clear that his greatest interest was devoted to the *Sculture viventi*: in a letter to the gallerist Manzoni proposed a price of “20 or 30 or 40 Crowns” for the signature on every living work. His dream, as revealed to his friend, was to present 100

naked signed women at the Copenhagen Opera House: “can you get the women and the theatre for me?”, he wrote.

He then presented *Merda d'artista* again, among many other things, in “Nul” at the Stedelijk in Amsterdam.

For Manzoni, this was a particularly inventive period. In April, he sent no less than three projects for “Gorgona” to Matko Meštrović, a militant critic and able organizer, while *Fiato d'artista*, *Impronte* and *Sculture viventi* indicate that at the time he was obsessed with both corporeality (the human body and its symbolic equivalent, the egg) and the convention whereby the artist may confer the dignity of art, that is, a specific value above and beyond its exchange value, to every single thing, by virtue of the power of consecration society rightly or wrongly permits him.

As he writes in *Alcune Realizzazioni - Alcuni Esperimenti - Alcuni Progetti* (Some Creations - Some Experiments - Some Projects), drafted in 1962 as a kind of autobiography through works of art:

In '59 I thought of exhibiting living persons (others, deceased, I instead wanted to place and conserve in blocks of transparent plastic); in '61 I began signing people “to exhibit them.” I provide these works of mine with a “certificate of authenticity.”

Again in January '61 I constructed the first *Base magica*: any person, any object placed on it, was a work of art for as long as they were on the base: I made a second in Copenhagen [...].

In the month of May '61 I produced and tinned ninety cans of *Merda d'artista* (each thirty grams) freshly preserved (made in Italy).” In an earlier project I had intended to produce phials of *Sangue d'artista*.

Seen within this context, the conception in May 1961 of *Merda d'artista*, one of the most controversial art works of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, loses much of its sulphurous aura: it is rather a corollary of other inventions, such as the *Certificati di autenticità*, the *Base magica*, the *Impronte*.

In itself, the object is simple. We are dealing with a can for preserved goods with a diameter of six centimetres, sealed, carrying a printed label created by Antonio Maschera, an invaluable and complicit typographer. In the background can be read a continuous script in block capitals “Piero Manzoni”, similar to that of the stamps of the *Certificati di autenticità*, with which he designated living people as works of art. Overprinted in Italian, English, French and German is the text “Artist’s Shit. Contents: 30 gr net. Freshly Preserved. Produced and tinned in May 1961.” On the top, the script “Produced by” precedes the signature, which is in turn followed by the progressive numbering of the individual cans. The printed label on the bottom reads “Made in Italy”.

The ironic mimicry of the typical language of canned produce is clear. In a slating not lacking in rancour and factionally erroneous preconceptions (for example, Manzoni is accused of living in a luxurious house like “all the most prominent exponents of the Italian left”, a grouping that was wholly alien to him) published on September 21, in the right-wing weekly *Il Borghese*, the author Romano F. Cattaneo noted with a certain pertinence that “it is almost surprising that amidst such descriptive precision the ‘artist’ has forgotten to add: ‘packed in accordance with the law and without the use of artificial colourants’, as prescribed for canned goods.”

The desire to attribute to the object the appearance of a true commercial product is explicit. That what we are dealing with is the sale of excrement simply takes to the extreme a concept already extensively treated by Manzoni that concerns the concrete physicality of the body, evidently charged here with paradoxical and provocative intentions.

Another aspect lucidly and critically introduced by the artist is that of multiplication, through which he intended to strip the work of any sense of uniqueness in favour of its naked conceptual implication: this was something that he had already explored in the *Linee*, the *Corpi d'aria* and the *Fiato d'artista*. Moreover, as with the *Linee*, Manzoni envisaged that the “user” would only observe the container without being able to verify the contents, on pain of losing the work. This is a characteristic that Leonardo Borghese had actually noted in his memorable slating of the *Linee* in the *Corriere della Sera*, considering it to be a particularly tortuous aspect: however, it is in effect one of the key points of the game of mental chess (the Duchampian evocation of chess as a metaphor for intellectual play is highly pertinent) which Manzoni establishes with the spectator, above all in their guise as a potential purchaser.

Moreover, Manzoni reaches the greatest critical peak in relation to the question of value. He set the price of the cans on the basis of an arbitrary shit/gold parity of around 700 Lit. per gram, indicating it as 30 grammes of gold. This all took place in parallel with a fervent debate among the great economists regarding the unsustainability of fixed gold-dollar parity. It is not hard to believe that the appeal exercised by the collapse of the very foundation of the idea of value, the fixed and universal price of gold, might in Manzoni's roving mind have been associated on the one hand with the concept of definitive disvalue implicit in the general opinion on excrement and on the other with the ineffable value of the work of art, which now exists in the pure “consecration” on the part of the author.

The explicit association between excrement and a food container is above all classically *unheimlich* in its by no means arrogant evidence and reaches profound and tortuous recesses of the psyche. Moreover, the fact of

presenting the object as a work of art confers a conventional sacralization in the high statutes of art on the low, very low material par excellence, normally associated with the idea of disvalue. Once again, the atypicality of an object that, in the words of a magistrate called upon to deal with the matter in the line of duty in the Seventies, had nothing to do with “works that in terms of art at least clearly manifest the most essential and undisputed physiognomic features”, requires of the observer a reaction that can hardly be indifference.

In the short term, it is obvious and only natural that the reactions, even on the part of the professional audience, capture the epidemic aspect of the playful operation, of the short-lived provocation, the scatology of which undermines any alibi of theoretical refinement.

The checkmate enacted by Manzoni involved the price of gold, shit and artistry in a single *cupio dissolvi* of the very idea of value, with elements coming into play that include the suggestion of the content as a “negative” relic, the payment for a good of which we cannot verify the nature but only accept its proclaimed artisticness and so on. Whether or not there really is shit in the can is at this point neither here nor there.

The period was particularly active for Manzoni. On May 20 that year, he presented Dada Maino with a text in the Gruppo N space in Padua, at the end of the month he visited Paris and saw “40° au-dessus de Dada” in which Pierre Restany powerfully relaunched the Nouveau Réalisme of Yves Klein, Jean Tinguely, Daniel Spoerri and company at his wife Jeanine de Goldschmid’s Galerie J and met Christo Javacheff and his *Empaquetages* of everyday objects: he also directly approached the Fluxus pioneer Ben Vautier, but a meeting never came about.

Early in July he was in the exhibition “Zero. Edition, Exposition, Demonstration” at the Galerie Schmela in Düsseldorf: that occasion saw the publication of the third issue of the magazine *Zero* in which Manzoni presented the text *Progetti immediati* (Immediate Projects), the studies for the *Placentarium*, photos of the *Linea lunga 7200 metri* and exhibition of the *Linee* at Azimut, a repeated *Uovo* and an *Achrome*.

Towards the end of July he completed two lines of 1,000 and 1,140 metres and early in August he presented a large *Achrome* in the exhibition “Nove Tendencije”, organized by Almir Mavignier, at Galerija suvremene umjetnosti in Zagreb. He then immediately left for Herning where he was to create the crucial *Socle du monde*.

It is here that we may place the end of the first act of *Merda d’artista*. At that time, the horizon of expectation within which it may be read is that of Dadaesque conceptualism, the primary aspect of which is the dematerialisation of the statutes of the objet d’art.

The second act is that of the powerful and unexpected presence of *Merda d'artista* in the public consciousness. When in 1971 Palma Bucarelli, director of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome, commissioned the young critic Germano Celant to curate a retrospective exhibition of Manzoni's work. On that occasion, several examples of *Merda d'artista* were exhibited. Journalistic interest, in search of scandal and faithful to the principle that contemporary art is wholly alien to common wisdom, focused on the "fatal cans", which were also the object of a parliamentary question, in reality part and parcel of the Democrazia Cristiana party's internal diatribe and by Hon. Guido Bernardi's hatred of the "czarina" Bucarelli's protracted domination of the Galleria Nazionale. Leaving aside cheap polemics, it is important here to observe how the work was now perceived in the light of the standards of Pop Art, that is, with a renewed attention to the subject: a theme already eviscerated by Émile Zola in 1867 in relation to Édouard Manet when he wrote about this "preoccupation with subject matter which frets the public above everything else; for them [the painters] the subject is only a pretext for painting, but for the public it is all there is", but which was once again in vogue given that several authoritative artists had decided to turn to canned goods.

While far removed from Manzoni's intentions, the cans of shit were now subjected to an initial mutation, becoming functional to the new horizons of expectation, both in the sense of the Midcult and that of the more pragmatically consumerist Masscult, according to the terminology symptomatically coined and defined by Dwight MacDonal in 1960: "In Masscult (and in its bastard, Midcult), everything becomes a commodity, to be mined for \$\$\$\$ , used for something it is not, from Davy Crockett to Picasso", hence the reputation of the artist equated to a "secure bond".

Regarding *Merda d'artista*, Manzoni was above all interested in the contrast with the *Sculture viventi*, a question around which he constructed the exhibition at Kōpcke in 1961. The shit, that is to say the lowest degree of the corporeal *relictum*, matched with the naked living body in all its glory and beauty, in its equally physical truth, which the *Base magica* transmuted into sculpture.

In Manzoni's intuition, the power of the artist is ultimately the power to introduce and "authenticate" even the living being in all its aspects (consecrating with his fingerprint, or signature, or in any case his designation) within the sacred enclosure of what society recognises as artistic. That this also implies the conscious explication of economic equivalences is inevitable, given that contemporary society confers upon economic value the faculty of consecration and at the same time of confirmation and reassurance.

That Manzoni pays specific attention to the object's mark of sacrality, to its anthropological and cultural foundations, which in *Merda d'artista* unfolds in all its caustic lucidity, is also evidenced by the earlier *Consumazione dell'arte Dinamica del pubblico* (*Divorare l'arte* (Consumption of Art Dynamic of the Public Devour Art), July 21, 1960, which now, in 1971, is catalogued, according to the codes of the day, as a happening. The egg literally consecrated by the artist's fingerprint, and therefore a kind of extension of his body, is ingested by the participant who thereby takes on, physiologically, a portion of artisticness. The equalization of a gramme of shit and a gramme of gold is, Duchampesquely, the closure of a perfect short circuit.

Then came the third act, the mythologising of *Merda d'artista* in the popular imagination. The chain of elements involved in the process resorts to figures wholly removed from the self-referentiality of art and its theoretistic anxieties: here we speak of food and shit, of value and price, within a sphere of experience "vulgar" in all senses of the term, but on a level of extraneousness with respect to specialist clauses and with sharpened symbolic undertones.

It is clear that when the work begins to circulate outside the sphere of the militant public – which, it has to be said, in its turn fails to grasp more than the superficial shades of meaning – and enters into a broader dialogue, its potential for scandal becomes overwhelming. It is not a question of the artistic perimeter. In any case, shit remains shit, unredeemable under any title. The peculiarity of the artist is making it nonetheless desirable, well beyond the horizon that in 1961 he could have imagined. *Merda d'artista* takes on a timeless dimension, in the end, it resymbolises it as a constant of social consciousness that belongs to us in any case, even outside of any artistic reasoning.



CHAPTER ONE

THE SCATOLOGICAL WHITE, OR  
THE SOCIETY OF THE CAN

LUCA BOCHICCHIO

**Foreword**

Taking its cue from several late texts by Enrico Baj—an artist with whom Piero Manzoni had shared the crucial phases of the Milanese avant-garde movement of the late 1950s—this article will attempt to demonstrate the hypothesis that *Merda d'artista* was a work of art that anticipated Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and, by extension, many works of visual art by established international artists of the 1990s and 2000s that carried forward Manzoni and Debord's reflections in the author-production-dung-commodification channel. In these more recent works we can see interconnections between the symbolic-semantic excremental sphere and reflection on the role of the artist in contemporary society, where images and spectacle mediate social relations and where biotechnologies and artificial intelligence are replacing man's most intimate thoughts. In all the cases mentioned, the artists involved have declared some form of debt to Manzoni and his *Merda d'artista*, albeit in order to pass through and go beyond it.

**Enrico Baj: The “Manzoni Theorem” or  
the “shitification” of culture**

Enrico Baj's thinking around the work *Merda d'artista* proceeds by degrees. The first mention of the celebrated and scandalous work appears in a text from 1973, while the last is found in an essay written in 1996.

While in the first text from '73 the reference to *Merda d'artista* falls within the sphere of a recollection of and tribute to his younger friend and

colleague Piero<sup>1</sup>, the next, from 1990, is significantly entitled *The Scatological White*<sup>2</sup> and is the one on which we shall focus now. Baj traces the highlights of his own relationship with Manzoni, recalling his friend's creativity and highly experimental works. At a certain point in the text, Baj advances the hypothesis that the whiteness of the *Achromes* and the repugnant *Merda d'artista* were two complementary faces of Manzoni's restless soul. Baj finally intuits that *Merda d'artista* contained a social message, hurled against a certain form of culture and art criticism that was blind to the ineluctable artistic novelties presented by Manzoni and the artists of his circle and generation. There follows a summary of Baj's recollections.

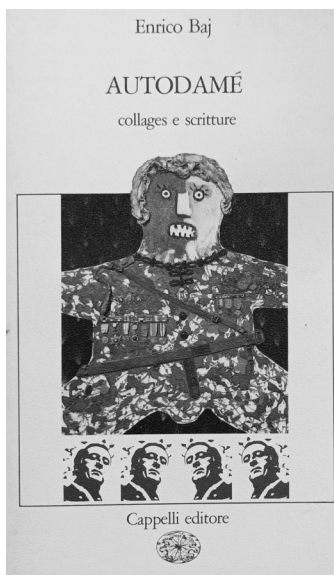


Fig. 1-1: Cover of the book *Autodamé. Collages e scritture*, Cappelli Editore, 1980

<sup>1</sup> The text by Enrico Baj is dated January 1973 and appears in the book *Piero Manzoni: opere e giorni*, edited by the visual-verbal poet Sarenco (Isaia Mabellini, 1945-2017). It was republished in the collection for Cappelli Editore in 1980, under the title “Autodamé. Collages e scritture”, now in Enrico Baj, *Autodamé. Collage e scritture*, edited by Angela Sanna (Milan: Abscondita, 2023), 105.

<sup>2</sup> Initially published in the catalogue of the exhibition of Piero Manzoni held in 1990 at the Hirschl and Adler Modern Gallery of New York, the text was subsequently republished in Enrico Baj, *Scritti sull'arte. Dal futurismo statico alla merda d'artista* (Bertiolo, UD: AAA Edizioni, 1996), 37-39.

Given that there was an extraordinary affinity between the hominids [painted by] Manzoni and the children of my so-called “nuclear period” (1951), I said to him: “Let’s get together, exhibit together, write manifestos. Let’s get under some skins, let’s protest against every artistic mafia and against the aesthetics of “art for art’s sake”. [...] I’d usually meet him at the Giamaica<sup>3</sup> and on occasion I’d go up to his studio: a bare and rigorous room in which he was beginning to immerse himself in the white of kaolin and plaster. [...] He used white cotton, white polystyrene and rolls of white paper.

Something was brewing inside him [...] you could see it in [...] that passion he put into action against the formal and empty aspects of the dominant culture. In short, he continued to protest against the establishment of artists and critics which in Italy was particularly overbearing (and today?). He was against pretentious, conventional, purist, ascetic art: that which always bends to the directives of a kind of bureaucracy of beauty, the “beauty” of the polished, lacquered, painted, gleaming surface. Piero wrote me various letters on this subject. This polemical fury pushed him towards psychological lacerations that gave rise to a complete contrast with the aspiration to purify, to whiten and to conceptualise everything. The conflict ended in tragedy.

In 1961, with the utmost derision for art artists and critics [...] Piero Manzoni invented the “Merda d’artista”. He performed the operation himself: he produced it, canned it, sealed it, labelled it, numbered it and signed it. That lurid, desecrating gesture ruptured his every relationship not only with the world of art, but also with his previous whiteness<sup>4</sup>.

In two subsequent texts from 1992 and 1996, Baj finally moves on to the definition of the “Manzoni Theorem”, or the “Theorem of the can”. In this phase of Baj’s caustic, bitter and ironic reflection on the art system, his distant friend returned to assist him in the interpretation of the contemporary social reality. For Baj, therefore, Manzoni and his shit take on the value of a true paradigm, useful for explaining, for example, the excrement released by the Kiki Smith sculpture in the exhibition *Post-Human* at the Castello di Rivoli Museo d’Arte Contemporanea (1992) as well as the first blockbuster Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Cézanne shows in Amsterdam and at the Grand Palais in Paris (1996) respectively. From this perspective, in the text from July 1996 entitled *Shit in progress*, Baj denounced the process of “shitification” of art exhibitions for touristic purposes:

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<sup>3</sup> A small bar close to the Brera Academy of Fine Arts, Milan, a meeting place in the ’50s and ’60s for young artists, intellectuals and socialites, the Bar Giamaica was located not far from the studio of Piero Manzoni.

<sup>4</sup> Baj, “The scatological white”, 37-39.

[...] touristic shitification of the major exhibitions, in which a famous artist becomes the pretext for selling plane, train and bus tickets, hotel stays, meals, prepaid, fixed time and day visits to the exhibition and so on. At the same time, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam offered the public, almost as a counterpoint to the “painter of light” (Vermeer, exhibited at The Hague in the spring of 1996), an exhibition of flying turds<sup>5</sup>. This was the aerial defecations of Gilbert and George, defecations sailing through the space around their hieratic, king-size figures. [...] We are surrounded by shits, both in the museums and the palaces of government<sup>6</sup>.

To demonstrate that “the phenomenon certainly does not end with a few anal-exhibitionist artists, thirsty for copro-aesthetics”, Baj goes on to present the evidence of the 40 results that a search for the keyword “shit” returns via the then new Yahoo search engine (1994), concluding:

Shit as shit is immediately found in any discourse of an anthropological nature. It reveals to us the consubstantiality of the tie that binds it to humanism and philosophy. The value of the excrement, in fact, is inversely proportional to its animal [read: human] origin. Its fertilising powers are those of the spirit, which is the principle of life in itself. In short, shit is not productive if it is not that of man, a fortiori of homo artisticus (the so-called Manzoni theorem).

It now appears clear how in Baj’s interpretation *Merda d’artista*, in a reverse alchemical process, represents the transmutation of the pure white *Achrome* into a scatological counterpart, to which Manzoni would have been induced as if by an intimate necessity, almost an urge, to react to a certain dominant way of thinking in bourgeois culture and criticism. This took place in 1961, but Baj noted the currency in the 1990s, when the evident commodification of culture (the products of the so-called “culture industry”) led him to coin the epithet “shitification of art”.

With these intuitions, Baj seems to be aligning his own thinking with that of the philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who with regard to the functioning of the contemporary art system affirms in his essay *The Fragile Absolute*:

Its basic feature is not only the much-deplored commodification of culture (art objects produced for the market), but also the less noted but perhaps even more crucial *opposite* movement: the growing ‘culturalization’ of the market economy itself. [...] Today, more and more, the cultural-economic

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<sup>5</sup> The work to which Baj is referring is *Shit and Piss* (1996) by Gilbert & George: “Hand dyed photographs in artist’s metal frames, in 21 parts, 225.7 × 443.9 cm”.

<sup>6</sup> Enrico Baj, “Shit in progress”, in *Scritti sull’arte. Dal futurismo statico alla merda d’artista* (Bertiolo, UD: AAA Edizioni, 1996), 115.



Fig. 1-2: Cover of the book *Scritti sull'arte. Dal futurismo statico alla merda d'artista*, AAA Edizioni, 1996

apparatus itself, in order to reproduce itself in competitive market conditions, has not only to tolerate but directly to provoke stronger and stronger shocking effects and products. [...] Perhaps this is one possible definition of post-modern as opposed to modernist art: in postmodernism, the transgressive excess loses its shock value and is fully integrated into the established artistic market. Another way to make the same point would be to emphasize how, in today's art, the gap that separates the sacred space of sublime beauty from the excremental space of trash (leftover) is gradually narrowing, up to the paradoxical identity of opposites: are not modern art objects more and more excremental objects, trash (often in a quite literal sense: faeces, rotting corpses ...) displayed in – made to occupy, to fill in – the sacred *place* of the Thing? [...] Is not every element that claims the right to occupy the sacred place of the Thing by definition an excremental object, a piece of trash that can never be 'up to its task'<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute or why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London-New York: Verso, 2000), 25-26.

## From “The Society of the Spectacle” to “The Society of the Can”

It is not only for reasons of chronological and geographical vicinity that Piero Manzoni and *Merda d'artista* can be placed alongside the name of Guy Debord and the research of the Situationist International<sup>8</sup>. In a manner similar to the case with Manzoni and his can of *Merda d'artista*, Guy Debord with his *Société du Spectacle* was a prophet, a Cassandra capable of anticipating specific pivotal trends in the cultural behaviour of western mass society. Manzoni and Debord two oracular sources prophesising the very intellectual distress that followed them.

The interrelation between the society of mass consumption and the work of Piero Manzoni had already been discussed by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh in the book *Art Since 1900* in which the American critic affirmed that:

The spectacle of boredom, affirmation, and passivity against the backdrop of a totalizing system of objects of consumption took the work of Piero Manzoni as *one* of its cues, namely the insight that artistic practice would have to be situated more than ever in the interstitial spaces between objects of consumption, sites of spectacle, and ostentatious acts of artistic annihilation<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Piero Manzoni's activity is concentrated, due to his premature death, between 1955-56 and the early months of 1963, within an international, Parisien, northern European and Italian dimension. The Situationist International was founded in July 1957, in Italy, in a small mountain village, Cosio di Arroscia, located on the extreme western border of Liguria, a region that Manzoni knew well due to his decades of frequenting Albisola, where many artists from the avant-garde movements lived, including Asger Jorn, who was in fact one of the founding members of the Situationist International, which soon had its headquarters in Paris.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “The Social History of Art: Models and Concepts”, in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York-London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 30. On the same theme, but with explicit reference to Debord's *Society of The Spectacle*, see also Buchloh in the round table reproduced in Foster, Krauss, Bois, and Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, 322: “If you look at Fontana, Piero Manzoni, and especially Yves Klein, you see the most important efforts in art to define European reconstruction culture. Perhaps paradoxically, the link [...] that connects all these practices is spectacularization. At the moment two major theoreticians of postwar European aesthetics emerge: one is Adorno, and the other is Guy Debord”.

More in-depth research allows us to identify several historical foundations for the singular convergence between the work of Debord and that of Manzoni. In the wake of the now legendary “Cosio di Arroscia Meeting”, during which, through to July 28, 1957, a small group of European artists and intellectuals<sup>10</sup> laid the foundations for the constitution of the Situationist International, Piero Manzoni paid a visit to one of them, the Danish artist Asger Jorn, who had recently purchased an old country house in Albisola, which he transformed into his total work of art<sup>11</sup>. Manzoni’s negative feelings towards and open criticism of Jorn and the Situationist group are entrusted to an outburst that he signed in a private letter sent to Enrico Baj<sup>12</sup>. In a note written literally in the margins of the letter, Manzoni adds that, despite everything, he instead finds “Debord’s booklet [...] very interesting”. It is easy to guess which “booklet” of Debord’s Manzoni is referring to, as the Cosio meeting was the occasion for Debord to deliver his *Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l’organisation et de l’action de la tendance situationniste internationale* to the friends present, written and bound ahead of the meeting and for this reason received coolly by the other members of the group.

Unfortunately Manzoni did not date his letter to Baj. However, given that the meeting in Cosio ended on July 28, 1957 and since his August projects were mentioned in the letter, we can date Manzoni’s visit to Jorn (and thus the correspondence with Baj) to the last few days of July 1957. It

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<sup>10</sup> The so-called Cosio di Arroscia Meeting (Imperia, Italy) brought together for a week at the end of July in 1957 Guy Debord and his companion Michelle Bernstein for the Lettrist International, Asger Jorn, Pinot Gallizio, Piero Simondo, Elena Verrone and Walter Olmo for the Mouvement International pour un Bauhaus Imaginiste, Ralph Rumney for the London Psychogeographical Association. Also present was Rumney’s companion, Pegeen Guggenheim, who did not formally join the new Situationist International, born out of the fusion of the preceding movements. See Guy Debord and the situationist international: texts and documents, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, Mass-London: MIT Press, 2004); Alastair Hemmens, and Gabriel Zacarias, eds. *The Situationist International. A Critical Handbook* (London: Pluto Press, 2004); Luca Bochicchio, ed. Piero Simondo. *Laboratory Situation Experiment* (Pistoia-Turin: Gli Ori-Albertina Press, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> On the Asger Jorn House Museum in Albissola Marina, see the historical and rare Asger Jorn, *Le Jardin d’Albisola* (Turin: Edizioni d’Arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1974) and the more recent Daniele Panucci, ed. *Casa Museo Jorn: la guida* (Albissola Marina: Vanillaedizioni, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Piero Manzoni’s letter is part of the collection of Enrico Baj documents, conserved at the Archivio del ‘900 of the Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea of Trento and Rovereto.

is in fact highly probable that Jorn brought at least one copy of Debord's booklet with him to Albisola and thus shared its contents with Manzoni, who was comfortable reading it as French was his second language.

What might have struck Manzoni in Debord's *Rapport* (Fig. 1-4) is easily intuited if we extrapolate just one passage from the first few pages:

One of the contradictions of the bourgeoisie in its period of decline is that while it respects the abstract principle of intellectual and artistic creation, it resists actual creations when they first appear, then eventually exploits them. This is because it needs to maintain a certain degree of criticality and experimental research among a minority, but must take care to channel this activity into narrowly compartmentalized utilitarian disciplines and avert any holistic critique and experimentation. In the domain of culture the bourgeoisie strives to divert the taste for innovation, which is dangerous for it in our era, toward certain confused, degraded and innocuous forms of novelty<sup>13</sup>.

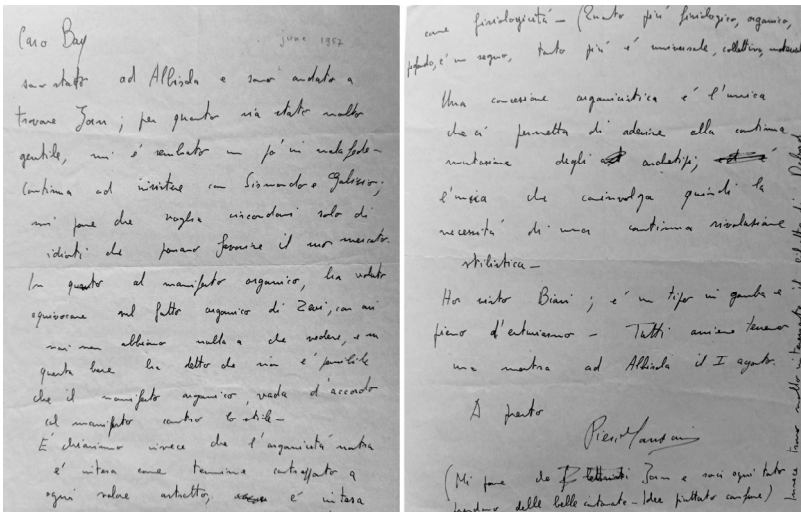


Fig. 1-3: Letter from Piero Manzoni to Enrico Baj, 1957. Courtesy Fondazione Piero Manzoni and Archivio del '900, Mart

<sup>13</sup> Guy Debord, *Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l'organisation et de l'action de la tendance situationniste internationale* (1957), 4.



Furthermore, cross-referencing other correspondence reveals that Debord had already noticed and monitored Manzoni's theoretical work. In a letter to Ralph Rumney, dated January 16, 1957, Debord writes:

Four painters have published in Milan a very short manifesto that, I believe, is entitled "For a New Zone of Images," and have sent a copy to Asger [Jorn]. It falls to you to make contact, as soon as possible, with Piero Manzoni in Milan – he's the one who provided his address. Can you see what value they have, and to what degree their apparent agreement with certain of our positions might justify a collective action with them? If they appear interesting to you, bring them up to date concerning the most serious aspects of our enterprises [...] <sup>14</sup>.

The manifesto to which Debord is referring is clearly "For the discovery of a zone of images", dated December 9, 1956 and signed by Manzoni, Camillo Corvi-Mora, Ettore Sordini and Giuseppe Zecca <sup>15</sup>.

Four years after this reciprocal flirting, Manzoni created his iconic *Merda d'artista*, followed six years later (1967) by the publication of Debord's text-cum-manifesto *La Société du Spectacle*. Today we can safely say that both operations prefigured specific post-ideological scenarios which emerged with greater clarity and radicality following the shift in the global geopolitical configuration after 1989.

In the introduction to the Italian edition of *Society of the Spectacle* published in 2008, Carlo Freccero and Daniela Strumia affirm:

You need to have read the Society of the Spectacle in the 1990s to fully comprehend its meaning. The spectacle is not a utopia, a dream to be realised.

"It is the bad dream of enchained modern society". It is a nightmare. "To wake up from this nightmare is the first task the Situationists assign themselves". But while exploitation was intolerable for the worker, consumption is the new opium of the people. Never has alienation been experienced with such enthusiasm.

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<sup>14</sup> Guy Debord, Correspondance, Vol "0": Septembre 1951 - Juillet 1957: Complete des "lettres retrouvées" et de l'index general des noms cites (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2010). Trans. by NOT BORED! (March 2011).

<sup>15</sup> It might therefore have been this directive by Debord that triggered Rumney and Manzoni's frequentation, the pair probably meeting on the occasion of Rumney's exhibition in Milan, at the Galleria Apollinaire, from January 14 to 23, 1957. The collaboration between Manzoni and Rumney has been partially reconstructed by Francesca Pola, *Una visione internazionale, Piero Manzoni e Albisola* (Milan: Electa, 2013).

The *Society of the Spectacle* written in the 1960s speaks to us of our present, and describes the world that surrounds us. It anticipates immaterial production in which the automobile is replaced by culture as product<sup>16</sup>.

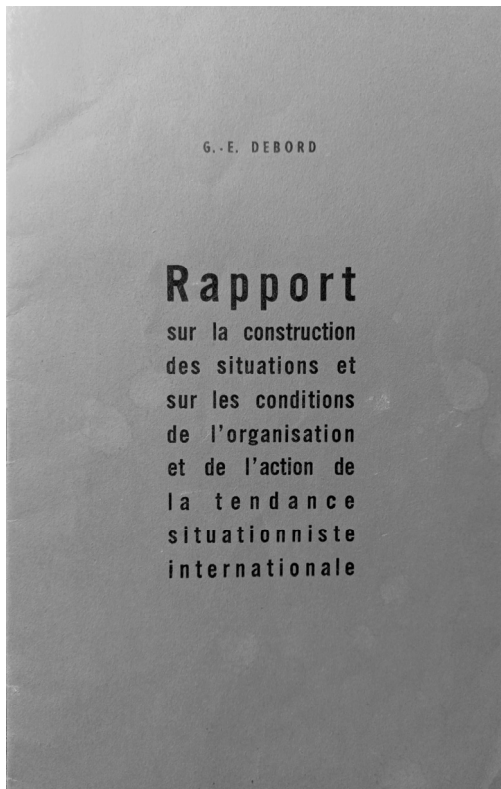


Fig. 1-4: Cover of *Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l'organisation et de l'action de la tendance situationniste internationale*, 1957

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<sup>16</sup> Carlo Freccero, and Daniela Strumia, "Introduzione", in Guy Debord, *La società dello spettacolo. Commenti sulla società dello spettacolo*, It. trans. Paolo Salvadori, and Fabio Vasarri (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi Dalai, 2008), 24-25.

## After Manzoni: Art-shitty-cation

Certain artists working on a global level after 1989 seem to have consciously taken up the baton from Piero Manzoni. In appropriating, citing and then traversing Manzoni's example with fresh impetus, these artists have actually broken through the curtain of hypocrisy that envelops the contemporary society of cultural consumption, previously stigmatised by Enrico Baj and Slavoj Žižek (with the difference that the former had intuited the prefigurative and prophetic power of the little can of shit from 1961).

An initial difference that leaps out is that, unlike Manzoni's *Merda d'artista*, where the excrement was hidden, in the artworks between the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century shit is revealed, declared, imposed on the gaze and the physical experience of the spectator-consumer. For us, the most interesting aspect is that this unveiling, this exposure to the gaze and the senses of the organic material takes place in the name of and in an explicit comparison with Piero Manzoni's *Merda d'artista*, as understood in its polysemic properties as an aesthetic object anticipating trends reifying and trivialising the role of the artists and their work in contemporary society.

In support of this thesis, we shall look at four artists, analysing them in chronological order from the point of view of the works examined: Paul McCarthy, Andres Serrano, Wim Delvoye and Gelatin.

In the well-known video *Painter* (1995), Paul McCarthy portrays not so much a painter at work in his studio, but "the" painter, or rather "the artist" in the archetypal sense, immersed in his daily routine: a toing and froing between the nodes of that symbiotic existential network composed of the art dealer, the collector and the public. This artist seems to traverse, during the phases of the studio process, of which we prove to be conscious voyeurs through the video, the most significant technique and the most significant modern languages of painting, including action painting, pierced canvases and, above all, shit used as an art medium. Having reached the culmination of the process, the artist finally seems to be ready to give himself to the public within the reassuring walls of the gallery. The visitors queue up to enter and, one by one, approach the artist and fill their lungs with his anal exhalations, looking smug and satisfied at having grasped the essence of this new expression of art. The artist, standing on the table, his back turned with his pants down, offers the audience his backside and what we can only assume is being emitted from it. In the face of this epilogue, it is impossible not to hear the echo of the words Manzoni addressed to Fluxus artist Ben Vautier in a letter dated December 1961:



Fig. 1-5: Paul McCarthy, *Painter*, 1995, colour video with sound, duration: 50:01 min. © Paul McCarthy, Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

I would like it if all artists sold their fingerprints, or that they made competitions to see who manages to make the longest line, or that they all sold their shit in cans (the fingerprint is the only admissible sign of personality: if collectors want something intimate, truly personal from the artist, here his Shit)<sup>17</sup>.

McCarthy seems to reiterate the criticism of romantic stereotypes aimed by Manzoni at the bourgeois culture seeking in the work of art the inner life, “something intimate, truly personal from the artist”. Questioned specifically on his relationship with *Merda d’artista*, Paul McCarthy has said:

Piero Manzoni’s Artist Shit has always been meaningful to me in a humorous way. Manzoni was the first to introduce shit as material to art, not in the sense of a painterly or gestural material but as a conceptual idea. In doing so, he defied a taboo.

It is interesting to think about the fact that in our society shit is often infantilized, making it easier for us to speak about something that is considered to be abject. [...]

The Manzoni can of shit is humorous. Is there shit in it? Is it food? The shit is concealed, you can’t see it unless you open the can. Is it meant to be opened? The abject shit isn’t visible, is shit there at all? The piece is conceptual and layered. The photograph of Manzoni holding the can is perfect. My mother loved it<sup>18</sup>.

McCarthy traces *Merda d’artista* back to the challenging of a taboo and the sphere of the abject, but he also recognises that Manzoni has removed this element of scandal from the gaze. Manzoni overexposes himself and his work, it is true, through the photographs that portray him posing together with *Merda d’artista* (as McCarthy recalls and as Arianna Novaga analyses well in this volume), but the shit itself is hidden from view by reassuring packaging.

Jean Clair writes clearly about the concept of “abject art” in his essay *De Immundo* (2004):

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<sup>17</sup> Piero Manzoni’s letter to Ben Vautier was published in Freddy Battino, and Luca Palazzoli, Piero Manzoni. Catalogue raisonné (Milan: Edizioni di Vanni Scheiwiller, 1991), 144, No. 379.

<sup>18</sup> I would like to thank Paul McCarthy for his generosity in having accepted to reply to my questions during the preparation of this paper. The interview was undertaken between February 28 and March 8, 2023 thanks to Karin Seinsoth and Jennifer Voiglio of the Hauser & Wirth gallery, whom I would also like to thank for her invaluable collaboration. I would like also to thank for providing the image and allowing its reproduction.

*Abjicere* means to push away from oneself, to reject. Hence the idea of degrading, of abjection, of rejection, of refusal. The art of abjection would be the state of an inferior art, or even an art of refuse, an art of what remains after everything has been rejected. Even more so than the *tabula rasa* of the avant-garde, which purported to clear away the feast of the ages, the art of abjection is interested in what the body exudes when it is fatigued, what it lets escape when it is wounded, or simply what it rejects when nourishment has been digested. *Abjicere* also signifies to refuse, in the sense of renouncing every authority, abandoning, selling off, doing away with something<sup>19</sup>.

Is *Merda d'artista* therefore abject? Many features of this work actually seem to affirm the opposite: sold for the price of gold, the ultimate reject is well presented, with packaging consistent with the consumer society, a “piece of shit” perfectly integrated with the economic, commodity, market circuit, “augmented” in terms of its value by the artist’s mediumistic power.



Fig. 1-6: Wim Delvoye, *Cloaca Professional*, 2010, mixed media, 710 x 176 x 285 cm © Studio Wim Delvoye, Belgium

<sup>19</sup> Jean Clair, *De Immundo* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 2004). It. trans. Piero Pagliano, *De Immundo* (Milan: Abscondita, 2016), 20.