Piero Manzoni: A Queer Reading
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Abstract

The following essay, inspired by Professor Benjamin Buchloh’s course “American and European Art, 1945–1975” at Harvard University, unites the artistic practice of Piero Manzoni, exemplified by his Achromes, with emerging concepts of queerness and transgender theory.

We absolutely cannot consider a painting to be a space in which we project our mental sets, but rather as our area of liberty, where we can go in search of our first images. Images that are as absolute as possible, which cannot be valued for what they recall, explain, express, but only inasmuch as what they are: being (Manzoni in Celant, 53).

The trajectory of art history, in its refusals and oversights, stubbornness, and volatility, maintains a definite adherence to a masculinist understanding of artistic subjecthood, though perhaps in subtler ways now than in the past. In this vein, this quote from Piero Manzoni is indicative of the interpretive tendencies that accompany him, even though his short career undoubtedly resists any unified theory. The work of Piero Manzoni, the interpretation of which represents the fatal re-inscription of potentially subversive content into an easily understood lineage, despite its multifaceted meanings, stands as an exemplar of the analytical limitations that remain in the field of art history. The above quote illustrates the refusal of contextualization that plagues interpretations of Manzoni’s art and fails to take into account the full range of theoretical possibilities that can be attributed to him, specifically regarding theories of gender and sexuality.1 His work has not been viewed in this light, though, as I will explain, many analyses of his work are decidedly, yet insecurely, gendered. Each time, discussions of Manzoni’s Achromes refuse to deal with this essential characteristic of his short-lived career, thereby replacing a frank discussion of sexuality and identity with an effacement of nuance. It is with Jaleh Mansoor that the body returns full force, and I will take her analysis one step further and discuss the implications of her observations. A new understanding of modernism is necessary, one that allows for the capability of artistic practice to transcend simple narratives that offer occasional nods to underrepresented groups as exceptions to a rule. As a result, it is my intention to offer a reading of Manzoni’s Achrome with Bread Rolls that stands alone in its understanding of a short, yet bountiful career. As succinctly as possible, I will attempt to undo history, to untangle the legacy of an artist from a limited and exclusive reading that mistakes progress for regression and incommensurability for safety. In fact, I will propose a queer reading of Manzoni’s work that refutes the artist’s own words and analyses, for in Achrome with Bread Rolls, masculine, heterosexual privilege is, in fact, dismantled, and replaced by a space that defies traditional understandings of subjecthood and artistic expression, as well as interpretations that hinge upon a totalizing reading of a work of art.

It is important to note at the onset that much of the language used to discuss the corporeality of Manzoni’s Achromes is gendered, though an explicit connection has yet to be made. Achrome with Bread Rolls is especially notable within the series because of its occupation of an indistinct area between the bodily and the detached. The piece consists of bread rolls arranged in a grid and covered in kaolin; in this way, the canvas becomes the site of life that is at once halted by and constitutive of the modernist aesthetic conventions of the monochrome and the grid. Though Manzoni used other materials in his Achromes, such as cotton, the bread rolls in all their irregularity within the organizing functions of the grid and the monochrome bring forth bodily associations that stem from the unrealizable arousal of the appetite. In this way, Manzoni forcibly exposes the presence of the body in the modernist tradition with an “appeal to oral and somatic processes,” a direct assertion of the process of physical integration, as well as the impossibility thereof, a product of the kaolin that coats the bread rolls

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1. When asked for an example of a gender-cognizant artist of this period, many art historians would offer Eva Hesse as a token, thereby presenting her as a brief phenomenon that does not represent the power of art to question norms but rather the placating power of offering a single woman’s story void of context or significance beyond the simple fact of her biological sex. Understanding modernity in this way, as a seamless tale of masculine achievement marked by brief identity-based interludes, assumes the inherently politicized nature of marginalized artists, that is, the idea that a woman artist, for the simple fact of her gender, stands opposite to male practice in every case. With this understanding of art history in place, the narrative of the triumphant male artist whose contributions creates an aesthetic teleology that perpetually remains secure.
(Mansoor, 43). At its core, the work presents an incongruous combination of two forms—the “modernist monochrome, heavy with its historically determined purity and factual self-evidence” and the “grid—as the axiomatically deduced, central organizing principle that claims to transcend particularity,” all combined with a kitchen staple (Mansoor, 31). This creates a fundamental confusion of identity, a precarious placement between two monolithic aesthetic categories that could be called as stable and historically consecrated as the gender binary itself. The presence of the bread rolls complicates the already precarious piece; they act as asymmetric, illogical foils to the purity and reason of the structures that they inhabit. I purposefully use the term inhabit, following Jalch Mansoor, who writes, “Unruly in their columns and rows, the rolls appear as both figure and ground, literally welling up as embodied figure and visually withdrawing as support. They perform this oscillation in the register of the material” (Mansoor, 32). Mansoor thus fills a void in the literature on Manzoni, and she contends with a history of writers who deny the presence of the body, even as they draw ever closer to naming it in the Achromes.

Germano Celant, for example, sets up an argument that considers gender only asymptotically; he comes near to the unmasking of underlying forces while continuously refusing a definite identification. In effect, Celant takes Manzoni for his word, that his work represents the expulsion of the artist, as well as outside control, from his work. Even if Manzoni’s work supposedly exists for itself, this autonomy is, by default, masculine; the heteronormative framework is reproduced constantly without being noticed, as it is the norm by which other configurations are measured. Celant makes his position clear: “In [the Achromes], the artist arrested and blocked the fertilizing power of his own participation, leaving out his gesture and action, in the hope of reducing the work to its own self-ecstaticating process. In this sense, the achrome opposes the artist’s corporeality with an independence of its own” (Celant, 31). It is no mistake that he uses terms such as “fertilizing” and “self-ecstaticating,” since the Achromes represent a process contingent upon gender rather than a self-sufficient illustration of artistic absence.

Surely, Manzoni’s practice is bound up in the rhetoric of gender, despite the alleged divorcing of the work of art from the artist; even in the creation of a seemingly independent work, there exists the masculine prerogative of subjecthood, of existence for and within oneself. As constructed by heteronormative forces, the feminine is but a vehicle, the foil to the masculine that allows for differentiation and thus the entry into language, or sign production, that marks the supremacy of the speaking subject, the “I.” Therefore, that which is seemingly independent, or pre-cultural, as Celant claims the Achromes are, rests upon gender in its claim to autonomy. Even though the Achromes may reject an aesthetic projection of maleness, their assertion of a self-constituting being is in itself a masculine process, though it is never named as such. What results from overlooking the gendered nature of an allegedly autonomous object is the replication of the masculine in analyses of the Achromes, even if one contends that they represent the artist’s absence. By omission, Celant’s viewpoint on the Achromes becomes a part of the masculine existence, even as he claims that Manzoni strives for a self-administered process. It is Celant himself, however, who paints the Achrome as something that “unravels and renews, offering thus its carnal, sensual dimension, or else it crystallizes and congeals, resorting to the impersonality of stitching or geometrical structure to convey a mental or conceptual state” (Celant, 37). Generally speaking, therefore, the Achromes refuse categorization even as they inhabit two organizational spaces, the grid and the monochrome, a concept that Mansoor elegantly explicates.

Though the status of the body in Manzoni’s piece is ambiguous, it is nonetheless present as both part of and separate from the grid and monochrome that sets up the framing slippage. Manzoni sets up a space that is based on violation of tradition even in its production, and, “paradoxically, each violated cell is constituted by the roll that it also seeks to contain,” which places the representation of the body in a position of creation and undoing, filling and evacuating (Mansoor, 32). The body held within Achrome with Bread Rolls, as one can see, does not operate in the conventional sense. Its identity lacks the structural components to allow it to enter into unified subjecthood; neither does it offer a clear sense of differentiation, and thus entry into language, nor does it contain an innate unity that allows for linguistic solidity. Surely, “the status of the rolls as body—as the non-molded—remains opaque. Obviating metaphor and figuration, the mounds suggest disparate possibilities” (Mansoor, 32). The specific nature of these disparate possibilities is what interests me here.

It is in this unintelligibility that Manzoni’s work enters into the realm of the queer, what could be called an indeterminate space that does not cling to the binaries of gender and sexuality. Manzoni hoped for an art that “wishes always to be ‘other,’” and strives for “organize[d] disintegration,” and he certainly accomplishes this task by noting the indeterminacy of his work (Manzoni in Mansoor, 36). Still, the process cannot be described in terms of a subject

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See Irigaray for a further explanation of this concept, especially Chapter
and an Other, because, as was discussed in the previous paragraph, there is an inescapable insecurity of the function of the body, both linguistically and physically, in Achrome with Bread Rolls. Indeed, “Manzoni does not pretend to wrest material presence free of a set of rigid structural determinations—one of which would be the mapped-out pictorial surface, the visual schema” (Mansoor, 42). It is clear, then, that Manzoni’s paradoxical bodily process is contained by and exceeds the conventions of the grid. He presents the body within the grid, within the syntactical construct, in order to expose its limits; indeed, “the Achrome’ very deployment of a modernist syntax unravels the systematicity of that language from an internal vantage” (Mansoor, 43). Language itself is both constituted and undone by the body, a rejection of gendered binaries that assert language as the unfailing indicator of phallic power.

To begin to understand the subversive sexuality manifest in Achrome with Bread Rolls, I begin with a quote by Luce Irigaray: “Women don’t have a soul; they serve as guarantee for a man’s. But it does not suffice, of course, for this soul to remain simply external to their universe. It must also be rearticulated within the ‘body’ of the speaking subject” (Irigaray, 97). The feminine is thus manifest in and constitutive of the masculine, a phenomenon that reframes sexuality not as a distinct binary but rather as a process of interdependence. Irigaray continues, “Sexual pleasure is engulfed then in the body of the Other. It is ‘produced’ because the Other, in part, escapes the grasp of discourse . . . Phallicism . . . [nourishes] itself through the Other” (Irigaray, 97–98). The gendered parallels in Manzoni’s work are thus manifest, for in the rolls’ uncertain status as both the unifier and disposer of a binary of modernism, they function as reminders of the uncertain nature of gendered constructs. Gender, though a binary, is a contingent one. Gayle Salamon suggests that rather than viewing this as producing a dichotomy, as Irigaray does, this could be the basis of fluidity of sexuality and gender that springs from the erotic battle that takes place within structures of discourse. Achrome with Bread Rolls, therefore, is in dialog with Freud’s formative assumption that the “admixture of masculine and feminine within the same register [in this case, modernism] is socially and psychically unbearable” (Salamon, 19).

However, Achrome with Bread Rolls does not affirm this binary; instead, it insists on its fluidity, that “embodiment is intersubjective” and incapable of being captured in a single schema (Salamon, 46). The production of sexuality is therefore a constant process of inversion, an unsure intrusion upon historically and aesthetically established structures that are both strong and vulnerable to revision. Foucault’s conception of power is important here, for queerness as such was theorized through its pathologological features as not heterosexual, an example of the indistinguishable boundary among identities that allows for mobility, change, and insecurity (Foucault, 11–13). As a result, the dominant paradigm constitutes the system that brings about its antithesis, as Manzoni does in his combination of the grid and the monochrome with the imperfect, disrupting rolls. It is clear that “an embodied response to desire is, through its radical particularity, unpredictable and impossible to map onto the morphology of the body . . . [and creates] a function that emphasizes a shifting from one mode of being or bodily inhabitation to another” (Salamon, 49, 52). The appearance of the body in Achrome with Bread Rolls certainly follows Salamon’s argument; order and disorder come together without the emergence of a clear winner, and no gendered or bodily register can be said to take hold completely. Achrome with Bread Rolls becomes “the place where I confront the otherness of the other without annihilating or canceling that difference or replicating the other in my own image” (Salamon, 140). It is an exemplar of this arrangement wherein the body faces its Other, the grid and the monochrome, and is incorporated, yet resists full absorption. It therefore presents a transgendered space, one in which the body is in a state of indeterminacy, unable to be mapped fully by the grid due to its own semantic and physical richness.

This reading of Manzoni’s work must not be taken as a token example of a queer artistic practice that can be gleaned from history. I do not mean to propose a revisionist methodology centered on sleuthing for ways to “include” queerness in an already established progression of modernism. It is exactly this line of thinking that allows for the perpetuation of a history that marginalizes those voices that do not conform to a dominant narrative by allowing norms to continue as unexamined phenomena that are affirmed by

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It is important to note that Irigaray’s critique could be faulted for its creation of a universal patriarchy that applies equally across boundaries of history, sexuality, and socioeconomics. Scholars such as Chandra Mohanty have questioned this Eurocentric line of thinking by explicating the various factors that complicate an essentialist tendency, especially with regard to transnational feminist thought. It is thus essential to take into account the historical and social circumstances that frame Manzoni’s work in order to engender an analysis that does not limit gender to abstraction. Please see Mohanty, Chandra, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.” Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
underdeveloped tokenistic insertions. Incorporating queerness, as if it belongs to a separate sphere that requires special attention, is not satisfactory, and finding occasional examples of subversion is not enough. Instead, longstanding discourses, such as those concerning both Manzoni’s practice and modernism itself, must be undone and replaced by readings that actively aim to eliminate interpretational biases. Though Manzoni has never been associated with an analysis of this kind, his legacy need not serve a singular purpose. Art history contains a variety of unnoticed stories that are undoubtedly valuable to the modernist narrative; it takes an inversion of conventional interpretational modes to rework the discipline into a discussion that invites contradiction, questioning, and openness.

Works Cited


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