

Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni: On the Perils of Posthumous Retrospectives

Double review of the solo retrospectives of Yves Klein (Hayward Gallery, London, 9 February-23 April 1995) and Piero Manzoni (Serpentine Gallery, London, 28 February-26 April 1998), previously published in Matthew Arnatt, Matthew Collings, Cornelia Grassi (eds.), 100 Reviews Backwards, Alberta Press, Cologne 2002, p. 73-75.

PIERO MANZONI AND YVES KLEIN WERE BOTH YOUNG WHEN THEY DIED, BUT THESE IMPORTANT, WELL-PRESENTED AND TIDY SOLO SHOWS RESPECTIVELY AT THE SERPENTINE AND HAYWARD GALLERIES MADE THEM SEEM OLD. The two artists had each radically embraced variety and heterogeneity of means. Both combined philosophical idealism with adroit manipulation, yearnings for transcendence with bodily abjection, and extremes of innovation with traditional ambition. But in these exhibitions, Manzoni and Klein were both effectively reduced to manufacturers of collectibles.

The artefacts resulting from their thinking and their actions were beautiful, and beautifully exhibited in both shows. Yves' sumptuous colours glowed; Piero's off-white Achromes modulated the white gallery walls tenderly. Performance residues or conceptual propositions were elevated to the status of relics and their incidental aesthetic appeal, instead of jolting us

into questioning the traditional values of painting and sculpture as both artists intended, elicited murmurs of appreciation from connoisseurs. At the Hayward, some films of Klein's events were presented to provide context, but the fascinating black and white footage of naked women with beehive hairstyles, covered in paint and overseen by a besuited man, looked fairly antique and therefore irrelevant. A live performance using the painted body of a naked man under the direction of a clothed woman reversed the roles somewhat, and alongside other events programmed at the Hayward by contemporary artists working perhaps 'in the spirit of' Klein, underlined the uneasiness of the curators in the face of problems created by an exhibition celebrating Yves Klein's work in a series of objects. Nothing so disquieting occurred at the Serpentine, where Manzoni's Magic Base (1961, a wooden pedestal with metal footplates designed to transform participants into artworks) was presented as an untouchable object to be looked at.

In these two exhibitions, Manzoni and Klein, who were audacious, critical, multifarious, energetic and articulate artists, were the victims of an art historical desire for simple closure. It was tragic. There were two huge illustrated catalogues. The work of both artists appeared to be finished, acceptable and rather old hat.

At some point in both exhibitions it was pointed out that some young British artists were using Manzoni's and Klein's ideas 40 years on, a suggestion that confirmed the extent to which those ideas, in becoming part of a commonplace art language, are beginning to seem authorless. But without an acknowledgement of the past, of the difference between then and now, nothing intelligible could be made of the objects on display apart from their sensuous and physical aspects, since their essential criticality was based on a radical departure from earlier art. The institutions' desire to assert the importance of today's remakes, while erasing temporal succession by skipping over all that's happened since the 1960s, simply confirmed a lack of willingness to grasp the significance of Manzoni's and Klein's contributions to the history of ideas. It isn't very intelligent to speak

glibly of the uneasy fit between the work of Klein or Manzoni and the museum as an institution, while editing the work so that it can be situated quite comfortably in a museum. If the work is reduced to a succession of attractive objects without any critical framework or intellectual content, it would be honest to admit this is a trivialization of what both artists were about.

Manzoni was 29 when he died, Klein 33, both in 1962. They might have gone on through the rest of the 1960s, 70s, 80s and 90s still multifarious and audacious but not fashionable any longer because they were no longer young, or they might have invented video or political art or some other genre. They would have learned a few things from feminism. They might have got better and better although we have absolutely no idea what that might mean, maybe simply the slower working through of ideas that came early and all at once to each of them, bursting rapidly into full flower. If they had lived longer they might have begun to seem rather beside the point (like Arman, Klein's closest friend and collaborator), or dated, or tiresome through our over-familiarity. They both would have been offered solo museum shows and maybe they would have refused or figured out a better way to manage them than these posthumous examples. Maybe they would have more or less given up making art, having said so much so early. Maybe their appetites for fame and recognition would have been satisfied and their researches intensified in private, like Duchamp. Maybe they would have repeated themselves even more. Maybe they would never have repeated themselves.