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*focus (1-8)*

**Piero Manzoni**

**Marianne Vitale**

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*focus (1-8)* signals the beginning of Ibid's enquiry into the numerous historical threads that proliferate the world of contemporary art. Art History may be taught in a linear fashion but it is emphatically cyclical: every developing artist – unconsciously or consciously – finds an historical artist or moment that they resonate with. By hanging only two works of art in their lofty London space, one historic and one contemporary, Ibid is pitching us into a visual and philosophical dialogue, one that engenders important questions about time, permanence, society, value, intention and the power of art.

More specifically, it raises salient questions about the history of art and why a particular movement or artist is given primacy over others, and how important storytelling is in our appreciation of their work. Why is it that certain works reverberate through time, and do their echoes always carry the same meanings? What qualities does a work of art need to retain this lasting impact? Also, do these historical pieces transcend time or are they charged with the accumulation of time? In other words, do they become more important because they contain the history of their making, and come to represent a moment in time?

Perhaps this last point is precisely why Ibid chose to begin the program with a dialogue between the late 20<sup>th</sup> century innovator Piero Manzoni and contemporary New York based artist Marianne Vitale. At very different points in time and place, both artists address the subject of materiality through their practice and by extension the very meaning and purpose of what constitutes an art form, including its value.

Piero Manzoni's irreverence for the accepted hierarchy of traditional materials available to the artist was expressed through ironic, often humorous, appropriation of everyday materials that proliferated Italy's new post war consumer society. Though his time on this earth was too brief (he was only 30 when he died 1933 – 1963) his audacious and sometimes profane art works called into question the very nature of an artwork, and challenged the consumer's blind acceptance of new materials and novelty products.

Largely self-taught, Manzoni's practice was centered on an obsession with the limits of physicality whilst also making a mockery of the Art World's obsession with permanence. His early "paintings" were largely monochrome – or rather colourless – which he called Achromes (influenced by Yves Klein's *Epoca Blu* in 1957). He initially experimented with canvases coated in gesso, then with kaolin (white clay) which he soaked his canvas in and either folded or cut out sections to produce a series of nine large-scale relief paintings. Quickly he moved on to using cotton wool, fiberglass, rabbit skin, felt and even bread rolls. These would be covered in phosphorescent paint and cobalt chloride to ensure that the colours might change over time – he constantly disrupted the notion of an artwork being stable or fixed.

In 1959 he opened up his own gallery with the artist Enrico Castellani and after *12 Lines* (tubes containing one line) followed the show *Corpi d'Aria* – an edition of 45 balloons on tripods that could be blown up by the buyer or the artist himself, depending on the price paid. Next he staged *Consumption of Art by the Art-Devouring Public* in which he hard-boiled 70 eggs, printed his thumbprint onto them, and after eating several himself handed them out to the public.

Perhaps he is best known for his ironic 30g cans of *Merda d'Artista* priced by weight on the current value of gold, cleverly the contents of the 90 cans remained an ensnaring but unresolvable enigma since opening one would essentially destroy its value. One might say with these cans he sealed the future of Conceptual Art, or made the ultimate product for Duchamp's *Fountain*, but he certainly influenced a whole generation of post war Italian artists grappling with the tsunami of ready-made consumerism. In 1967, the Italian critic Germano Celant brought a group of these artists together with Manzoni's work in an exhibition titled *Art Povera*, coining a movement that translates as *Poor Art*. This movement was defined by the use of unconventional processes with simple, every day materials. It was anti-form... or at least it attempted to be. There was a methodical geometry to these forms, one that gave them an impression of being complete.

It was perhaps Manzoni's sense of waste – both his own corporeal and society's thoughtless junking of everyday materials – coupled with his total irreverence for the status quo that makes him resonate so well with Marianne Vitale. Working across all mediums and disciplines from performance and video to sculptures made out of reclaimed wood and found materials Vitale defies easy categorization, but she is brave.

Much of her work acts like a stealth bomb. Vitale draws you in with pleasing symmetries and the recreation of recognizable forms made up of inappropriate or damaged materials, and then messes with you. Some works are poised at the moment of destruction like her wooden torpedoes, or her shingle "paintings" and others have literally been pulled out of the flames like her burning bridges. Vitale sees waste in a different way, and this touches on a deeper need in society to find new purpose for what we throw away.

Aside from burning bridges, Vitale hit the international scene with her short video *Patron* – one of the standout pieces of the 2010 Whitney Biennial. It consists of a headshot of the artist shouting like a drill instructor with mock military music in the background. Opening with the line "Welcome to the future of neutralism," her commands are impromptu, associative and wildly profane but also nonsensical. "I'm not a rigid believer in causes!" she says, "I'm known for my flexibility!" For Vitale, just as with Manzoni, 'the idea becomes the machine that makes the art' Sol LeWitt.

And so from these two artists we have one piece each. Manzoni's old piece made of new material and Vitale's new piece made from old reclaimed wood. Indeed, it is a rare feat for Ibid to have secured these two, stand-alone works – so much of what both artists did was temporary or destroyed. Behind these works there are many stories, but the question is where and why do they connect. What makes Vitale such a relevant and protean force in the art world today, just as Manzoni was?

Text by Nico Kos Earle