

# Open Participation in Piero Manzoni's *Living Sculpture* and *Magic Base*: between Bodily Reification and the Spectacle

## Abstract

In 1962, semiotician and writer Umberto Eco (Alessandria 1932 – Milan 2016) published his pivotal *The Open Work*, proposing a new awareness of the art object and developing groundbreaking perspectives on participatory art from both an aesthetic and a historical point of view. Concurrently, artist Piero Manzoni (Soncino 1933 – Milan 1963) designated his spectators works of art by applying his signature to their bodies or making them stand on ‘magic’ pedestals. In so doing, he forged a new dimension, both problematic and interactive, between author and audience. This article adopts Eco’s aesthetics to discuss Manzoni’s *Living Sculptures* and *Magic Bases* series, both from 1961. Reading Manzoni through the lens of Eco’s semiological model reveals the paradoxical nature of both series, works that disrupt the canonical opposition between audience activation and passive spectatorial consumption. The adoption of Eco’s theory, therefore, reveals the sarcastic *raison d’être* of Manzoni’s dystopian yet constructive practice. Manzoni will be also paralleled here with two contemporaneous Latin American artists, Alberto Greco and Oscar Bony, whose works manifest striking similarities but also fundamental differences. Manzoni’s approach will then also be investigated in light of the theories of Guy Debord and Julio Le Parc.

## At the Dawn of Performativity: *Living Sculpture* and *Magic Base*

The work [of art] is something more than its year of birth, its antecedents or interpretations made of it. And how it is ‘something more’ is usually explained when it comes to a crucial ‘opening’ or ‘ambiguity’ or ‘plurisigness’ of the work – meaning that the work of art is a matter of communication that asks to be interpreted and then completed and supplemented by a relationship with the consumer.<sup>1</sup>

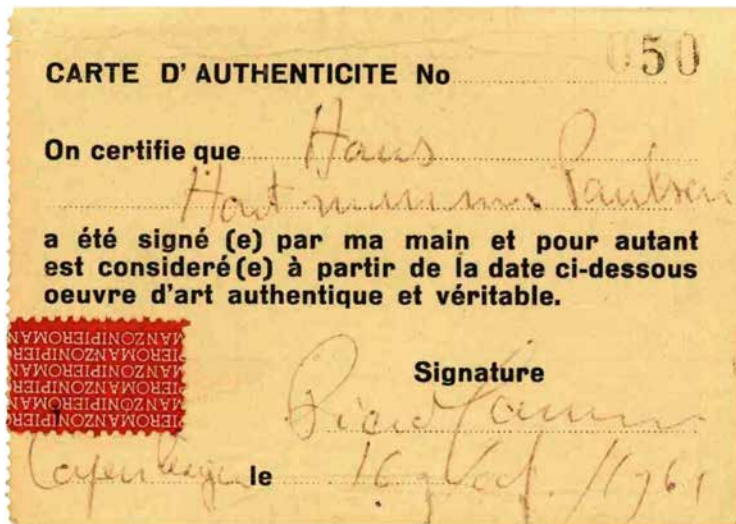
On 13 January 1961, models Andy Stoppani and Clara Siviero became the first *Sculture viventi* (*Living Sculptures*) of Piero Manzoni, who staged the event in front of Giampaolo Maccentelli’s camera for the *Filmgiornale SEDI*.<sup>2</sup> In one of the most famous snapshots from the happening, Manzoni appears like Pygmalion alongside Stoppani and Siviero, who stand in sculpturesque poses on a cake board signed by the artist, though this detail is cropped out of the photograph (fig. 1). The models look towards the wall, hiding their faces from the camera, covered from the waist down with transparent drapery. As he signs their naked backs, Manzoni almost winks at the camera with a mischievous grin.<sup>3</sup> This photograph documents the first staging of Manzoni’s *Living Sculptures*, in which he labels the models works of art by signing their bodies and also the support on which they stood.<sup>4</sup> Despite his playful presence as a joker in the photograph, Manzoni exerts his status as an undisputed creator over the work in these signatures and beyond: in the composition of the work featured in the photograph, with the bodies carefully posed and the background deliberately contrasting shapes and undertones, and by issuing a bilingual *Authenticity Card* to the participants whose bodies he signed, formally certifying them as a “living” work of art in a process that critic Antonio Caputo then referred to as a “consecration of persona as artwork” (fig. 2).<sup>5</sup> These cards were completed with a colour-coded stamp that indicated the conditions of a person’s status as art, which varied across the participating public.<sup>6</sup>

But it was not enough for Manzoni to disrupt the boundaries between living flesh and sculpture. He also transformed the plinth on which the living sculptures stood into art in its own right with a series of three 1961 works, each known as the *Magic Base* (fig. 3). This work comprised a wooden plinth in the shape of a truncated pyramid topped by a pair of footprints, which John Thomas McGrath describes as “arranged at an angle to one another, the left foot straight forward, the right slightly behind and slanted off to the side – perhaps to encourage a decorous pose befitting a classical figure”.<sup>7</sup> Once a mere plinth, the *Magic Base* signals a second conceptual metamorphosis in the potentiality for the viewer to assume the role of a living sculpture. The work encouraged interaction from the public, its footprint markers begging to be occupied. Caputo confirmed that viewers were asked to step onto the plinth, stating that “all those who stand on top of it become works of art for the time of their stay; [...] it is appropriate to say ‘sic transeat [sic] Gloria mundi’”.<sup>8</sup>

Manzoni’s embrace of mockery, carnivalesque creativity, avant-gardism and an idealistic belief in the transformative power of art emerged even more fully in the later magic bases. The second iteration was a regular parallelepiped smaller than the first and lacked footprints

1 Piero Manzoni signing a *Scultura vivente* (*Living Sculpture*) for *Filmgiornale SEDI*, Milan, January 13th, 1961 (photo © Fondazione Piero Manzoni, Milan)





2 Piero Manzoni, *Carte d'authenticité* No. 50 (Declaration of Authenticity No. 50), October 16th, 1961, ink on paper, inscribed and signed, two-sided (front), 10 x 7 cm, courtesy Joanne and Jon Hendricks, New York (photo © Fondazione Piero Manzoni, Milan)

and thus repurposed the base as a plinth for both people and any number of objects (fig. 4). Manzoni further exploited this opened functionality with the third magic base, the title of which – *Base of the World* – he emblazoned on its side (fig. 5). Manzoni placed this iron plinth in the park at the Angli factory in Herning, Denmark, seemingly upside down, if the orientation of the words is considered. The subtitle to the work, *Homage to Galileo*, references the altered perspective promoted by the great scientist and, in turn, by Manzoni's work, which simultaneously up-ended the spectators' point of view and encouraged them to consider the entire world as a sculpture.

This essay aims for a similar perspectival shift by focusing on Manzoni's interest in the body within a performative framework, an angle heretofore neglected in scholarship.<sup>9</sup> I concentrate on the com-

municative interplay between the author, the participating public and the audience, a triangular relationship that preoccupied Manzoni and his contemporaries. Chief among them was Umberto Eco, whose 1962 *The Open Work* reflected on the intrinsic openness of contemporary works, a quality that Eco perceived in the "activation" of the piece by the audience.<sup>10</sup> I claim that Manzoni's *Living Sculpture* and *Magic Base* possessed this openness and, as such, they became liable to multiple interpretations and were ascribed multiple functions by their participating public.

1 Eco 1968a, p. 61: "L'opera d'arte è qualcosa di più del suo anno di nascita, dei suoi antecedenti e dei giudizi formulati su essa. E in che modo sia 'qualcosa di più' viene spiegato di solito quando si parla di una fondamentale 'apertura' o 'ambiguità' o 'polisegnicità' di un'opera – intendendo con questo che l'opera d'arte costituisce un fatto comunicativo che chiede di essere interpretato, e quindi integrato, completato da un rapporto del fruitore." All unattributed translations are my own.

2 Manzoni had already collaborated with Maccentelli. Four newsreels were recorded: Giampaolo Maccentelli and P. Finocchi, *Aeree sfere di gomma per opera d'arte (Surfaces and Spheres of Rubber for Artworks)*, Filmgiornale SEDI, no. 1020, happening no. 4, December 1959; *Le lunghe linee (The Long Lines)*, Filmgiornale SEDI, no. 1021, happening no. 5, December 1959; *Consumazione dell'arte dinamica del pubblico. Divorare l'arte (Consumption of Art Dynamic of the Public. Devouring Art)*, Filmgiornale SEDI, July 1960; *Sculpture viventi (Living Sculptures)*, Filmgiornale SEDI, January 1961.

3 The first public staging of the *Living Sculptures* took place in Rome at the Galleria La Tartaruga on 22 April 1961. See Perna 2017.

4 Despite the recent scholarly suggestions for a gendered perspective on Manzoni's work, particularly considering his uses – and misuses – of the female body during the signing of the *Living Sculpture*, this article avoids such an approach as a discourse on gender does not align with its guiding thesis and as it considers Manzoni a man of his time and therefore one of many protagonists of the patriarchy then affecting society.

5 Caputo 1961, pp. 36–37.

6 Red denoted that the individual was a complete work of art and would remain as such until their death, while purple had the identical function only paid for. Yellow was valid only for the body part signed, which was indicated on the card. Green was limited to behaviour, so a person became a work of art only in given positions, for example, drinking or singing. See Tentler 2010, p. 147.

7 McGrath 2014, p. 178.

8 Caputo 1961, pp. 36–37.

9 Besides McGrath 2014, even the most relevant studies on Manzoni – including Gualdoni 2013 and *Piero Manzoni. Nuovi studi* 2017 – fail to emphasise this perspective. The present article instead homes in insights from Galimberti 2013; Tentler 2010; Caplan 2022; McGrath 2014.

10 Eco (1962) 1989.

The adoption of Eco's theory as an exegetical tool – a model that I use, in turn, as an object of scrutiny of the theory itself – reveals not only the wry dystopian impulse in Manzoni's practice but also the issues embedded in its formulations. Eco's thought is also a useful means for exploring the fundamental ambiguity of Manzoni's output and thereby resisting the circumscribed readings of his work. I then interpret and compare Manzoni's ideological yet pragmatic openness with Eco's hermeneutic and theoretical model. Beyond fostering new nuances in the reading of Eco that arise when *The Open Work* is used to interrogate 1960s participatory practices *tout court*, the present encounter between Manzoni's work and Eco's theory broadens the spectrum of possibilities inherent in Manzoni's oeuvre itself, particularly concerning the artist-viewer dynamic and the ways in which the former manipulates the latter.



### Manzoni, Eco and the Italian Semiological Debates

Manzoni began his career exhibiting with the Milan-based Movimento Arte Nucleare, which stemmed from the international Informal style and was fuelled by new scientific discoveries related to the atomic bomb.<sup>11</sup> During this period, he produced three series of works: the *Impronte* (*Imprints*), *Catrami* (Matterist paintings from 1954–1956) and the so-called *Jungian Paintings* (fig. 6). The *Imprints* – difficult to date as they were never exhibited during Manzoni's lifetime – featured ordinary objects such as pens, nails, keys and buttons impressed onto a canvas pre-treated with tar and sometimes also oil to create a heavy, dark background. Notably, this series engaged with issues that would resurface in Manzoni's later output: the focus on materiality, the denial of subjective self-expression through the serial repetition of fixed forms and the rejection of gesture associated with Informal painters. While *Catrami* were influenced by Enrico Baj's *Nuclear* canvases, characterised as Informal, Manzoni made the *Jungian Paintings* after reading the psychoanalyst's ideas of archetype, mythology and the collective unconscious. Manzoni's hominids, furthermore, displayed the influence of early avant-garde motifs, particularly in their resemblance with James Ensor's work.<sup>12</sup> Manzoni broke with the Nuclear group in late 1957 when many of the artists reverted to figurative painting. He instead joined the global resurgence of the monochrome and focused on his *Achromes*, blank paintings that did not represent iconic images or convey symbolic meanings but, by eschewing colour and abstract forms, made representation an ineffective and obsolete conception (fig. 7).

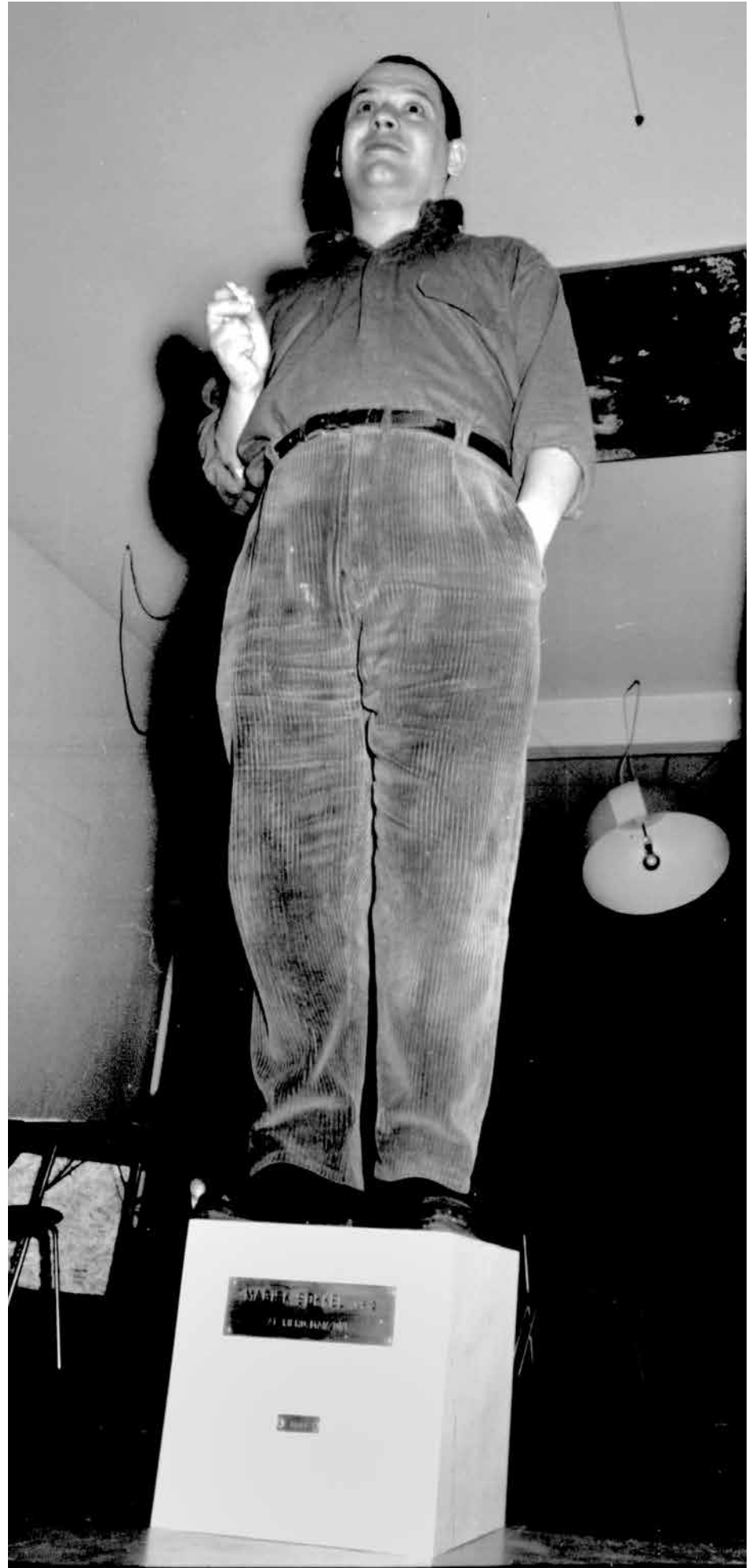
In the early 1960s, Manzoni began experimenting with the body, associating it with themes not only concerning what Guy Debord described as “the spectacle”, which is “a social relation among people mediated by images”, but also concerning an open relationship between subject and author.<sup>13</sup> Manzoni's pioneering work and practices anticipated discourses of audience engagement that would rise to prominence only in the 1960s and 1970s. By advising the public of the limits of a form of participatory art yet to come, Manzoni attempted to disrupt passive spectatorial consumption by activating his audience, granting them intellectual and physical engagement with the work without necessarily bestowing them auto-

3 Piero Manzoni, *Base magica – Scultura vivente* (Magic Base – Living Sculpture), wood, 60 × 79 × 79 cm, 1961 (photo © Fondazione Piero Manzoni, Milan)

11 The discovery of the nuclear fission of uranium by German chemists Otto Hahn and Fritz Strassmann and the theoretical explanation of the phenomenon by Lise Meitner and Otto Frisch were published in early 1939. The discovery of fission and the subsequent hypothesis of the chain reaction advanced by Enrico Fermi paved the way for the production of the first atomic pile and the construction of nuclear devices.

12 In a diary entry, Manzoni comments on the grotesque style of Ensor's 1889 *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889* and the prototype and significance of its mask. See Manzoni 2013, p. 67.

13 Debord (1968) 1994, p. 12.



4 Manzoni standing on *Magisk Sokkel Nr. 2* (Magic Base No. 2), Angli Shirt Factory, Herning (Denmark), 1961 (photo © Ole Bagger/HEART, Herning Museum of Art)

my over it. This newfound engagement is enabled through the multiplicity of roles conferred to the viewer/participant: if standing on the *Magic Base* or posing as a *Living Sculpture*, this person becomes both subject and object or, if not, stands as viewing public.

Such a twofold role was evident in the staging of *Nutrimenti d'arti di P. Manzoni: Consumazione dell'arte Dinamica del pubblico Divorare l'arte* (*Consumption of Dynamic Art by the Art-Devouring Public*, fig. 8). First held at the Gallery Azimut in Milan on 21 June 1960, this work is considered the first happening organised in Italy and consisted of Manzoni 'signing' approximately one hundred hard-boiled eggs with his fingerprint before inviting the public to eat them.<sup>14</sup> While not strictly passive, this act was still not fully active on behalf of the audience, who were prompted by Manzoni: the public in fact played the role of witnesses validating these as works of art.<sup>15</sup> Unknowingly transformed into actors at the mercy of his diktats, the public thus not only endorsed the author's practice but, given that all members of the audience were invited to eat, also performed the dual role of both performer and viewer.

This relationship between the author, participating public and audience also presides over Eco's *Open Work*. Since its publication in Italy in 1962, the book has played a pivotal role in shaping criticism on participation, intellectualizing a hermeneutical model that frames a new understanding of the art object, and has paved the way for pioneering aesthetic and historical perspectives on participatory art.<sup>16</sup> In its first edition, however, the notion of an open work was somewhat ambiguous: Eco affirmed that a completed work of art was by definition open to different interpretations yet also defined openness as the absence of structural completeness. But in his preface to the second edition, from 1965, he unambiguously defined the open work as an organic form with an unfinished nature.<sup>17</sup>

### Debates on Openness and the Birth of Semiology in Italy

In *The Open Work*, Eco prescribes to the audience what he terms a reciprocal relation of usage, a dual concept. The spectator who physically experienced the work becomes a participant or, in Eco's phrasing, a "performer" but, meanwhile, the spectator who contemplates and engages intellectually with the work becomes the "viewer" or "user."<sup>18</sup> In an obvious nod to the Marxist duality on value/use value, Eco thus ascribes the same degree of importance to different participatory modes when experiencing and interpreting a work of art, like bodily interaction and cognitive engagement.

Eco's ideas stem from debates concerning aesthetics and art criticism that roiled Italy following the war, including those about the contamination



5 Piero Manzoni, *Socle du monde* (Base of the World), iron and bronze, 82 × 100 × 100 cm, 1961. Herning (Denmark), HEART, Herning Museum of Art (photo Louis Schnakenburg)

14 According to Giorgio Zanchetti, Manzoni performed the piece twice: publicly – with the participation of many friends and students at Brera academy – and subsequently in front of a selected audience; see Zanchetti 2000, p. 11. This second staging was documented on film by Maccentelli (now lost) and in photographs by Giuseppe Bellone. The first mise-en-scene was playful, perhaps given the public audience, while the second recalled the sacredness of a ritual.

15 The witness can be defined as a spectator who develops the position of the subject and the role and function of the witness are always connected to ritualistic acts. In an interview, Manzoni expressed his disappointment regarding the performance: "it is difficult to get the public closer to the work of art", he claimed, blaming the audience for not understanding his original intent and deciding to leave the room with no explanations. See Serra 1962, p. 49: "Le hanno mangiate (le uova N.d.R.), ma quando ho spiegato qual era il mio scopo ci sono rimasti male. Ho preferito abbandonare la sala, approfittando dello smarrimento. Non mi avrebbero capito."



6 Piero Manzoni, *Paradoxus Smith*, oil on board, 100 × 130 cm, 1957, The Sander Collection (photo © Fondazione Piero Manzoni, Milan)

between art, linguistics and semantics. Such intellectual discussions were no doubt influenced by the spread of the Theory of Signs by Charles Sanders Peirce and Charles William Morris and the Theory of Information by Max Bense and Abraham Moles.<sup>19</sup> Among others, Gillo Dorfles became a main spokesperson in Italy for Bense's theories and American semiotics, subjects on which he expounded in journals like *Aut aut* and *Rivista di estetica* and in the first issue of *Azimuth*, the journal Manzoni and Enrico Castellani edited from 1959 to 1960. Dorfles's "Comunicazione' e 'consumo' nell'arte d'oggi" ("Communication' and 'Consumption' in Today's Art") addresses the same influences and cultural backdrop as Eco's *Open Work*, in that each understands that communication permits the survival of the artistic product – and the idea of art at large – while a faster consumption

qualifies the contemporary art object and its reception:

a communicative function [...] can allow the survival of art that has broken every bridge with the representativeness and the figurative as traditionally understood. Only a communicative function – which does not need to be figurative or anecdotal, which can be signs, gestures, semantics – but which must also somehow allow that particular osmosis of the artistic event between creator and audience.<sup>20</sup>

Intersubjectivity, a key term for Dorfles, signified the communication between author, object and audience and contributed to the shaping of a novel aesthetic that would find its home in Eco's *Open Work* and in new research on language and semiotics.<sup>21</sup> Dorfles was among the first to introduce debates on semiotics

16 There has been a reclamation of Eco's theory in recent literature on participation. Claire Bishop, for example, not only quotes an entire section from *The Open Work* in Bishop 2006 but also refers to Eco in Bishop 2004 and Bishop 2012. Judith Rodenbeck also advances a twofold discussion on Eco's theory as an exemplary model of participation: first by adopting the *Open Work* as an exegetical frame for John Cage's 1952 composition '4'33", considered in turn the purest exemplar of Eco's theory, and then by selecting Eco's model and particularly his idea of "oriented insertion" as the definition of participation par excellence. See Rodenbeck 2011, p. 252.

17 Kovács 2010, p. 33.

18 Eco (1962) 1989, p. 251.

19 Morris (1946) 1949; Peirce 1931–1936; Moles (1958) 1969; Bense (1956) 1974.

20 Dorfles 1959: "una funzione comunicativa [...] può permettere il sopravvivere d'un'arte che ha rotto ogni ponte con la rappresentatività e la figuratività tradizionalmente intese. Solo una funzione comunicativa – che non ha bisogno di essere figurativa o aneddotica, che potrà essere segnica, gestuale, semantica – ma che dovrà pure in qualche maniera permettere quella particolare osmosi dell'evento artistico tra creatore e pubblico."

21 In Italy, 'semiology' and 'semiotics' are often used as synonyms, surprising those who remember that intellectuals have busily delineated the differences between the two. Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, for example, defines semiotics as the "general science of signs" and semiology as the "science of codified signs"; see Rossi-Landi 1968, p. 53. Eco qualifies semiology as the continuation of the linguistic genealogy starting with Ferdinand de Saussure but defines semiotics as descending from the philosophical approach of Peirce; see Eco 1965, p. 13. This same distinction is supported by Cesare Segre, who explains semiotics as a Greek term first appropriated by John Locke and Immanuel Kant and then legitimised by Peirce in its current usage; see Segre 1969, p. xii. I align with Eco and therefore acknowledge *The Open Work* as a semiological text. See also Mirabile 2012, p. 110.

as well as the binomial of communication/consumption. Guido Morpurgo-Tagliabue, too, promoted aesthetics, linguistics and semiotics as instrumental in identifying the communicative function of art, in contrast with Benedetto Croce, who denied the importance of the communicative purpose of language.<sup>22</sup> Another significant voice in the debate, Galvano Della Volpe discussed the idea of multiple meanings (*polisenso*) as characterizing poetic language and, more generally, contemporary artistic expressions, an understanding of the multiplicity of significance that lay closer to Eco's ideas of ambiguity and polysemy and that would in turn shape the theory of the open work.<sup>23</sup> The essays included in *The Open Work* were "intimately familiar with the milieu of contemporary artistic experimentation, especially in Milan" where, between 1954 and 1959, Eco was working for the Italian state television industry (Radio Televisione Italiana) as a contributor for *Il Verri* and was also acquainted with the generation of the Gruppo 63 close to Manzoni.<sup>24</sup>

Semiotics was officially established in Italy with the 1965 publication of a study on structuralism and criticism edited by Cesare Segre for *Il saggiaiore* and with the 1969 formation of the Association for Semiotic Studies in parallel with the publication of Segre's book *Segni e la critica. Fra strutturalismo e semiologia (Signs and Criticism. Between Structuralism and Semiology)*.<sup>25</sup> The Theory of Information, which arrived in Italy with the first debates on semiology, had a fundamental influence on Eco, as witnessed not only in *The Open Work* but also in *La struttura assente (The Absent Structure)* from 1968.<sup>26</sup> *The Open Work* draws from an eclectic number of sources – including medieval aesthetics, Luigi Pareyson's Theory of Formation, American semantics, the Theory of Information and Transactional psychology – theories also characteristic of Dorfles, Della Volpe and Luciano Anceschi. Despite reflecting the same sociocultural background as these writers, Eco's *Open Work* differed from their approaches, not only in its militant aesthetics but also in its dialectic between aesthetics and poetics and focusing on the phenomenology of the contemporaneous work of art understood as an epistemic metaphor. In his preface, Eco announces that "the Open Work can be read in many ways and reference to subsequent discourses. Perhaps, one of the most exciting readings is still the one that leads one back to the cultural context in which it was born".<sup>27</sup>

Understood in this context, Manzoni's practice can be seen to absorb and comment on contemporaneous narratives on the threat of post-industrial capitalism as well as on current experiments in conceptual art. Beyond these correspondences, his work acted equally as an epistemic metaphor for the contemporaneous cultural backdrop, reflecting the novel relationships between art, science, technology and ideology and especially between art and its user.



7 Piero Manzoni, *Achrome*, creased canvas and kaolin, 160 × 130 cm, ca. 1959, private collection (photo Jon Etter/Hauser & Wirth)

22 Morpurgo-Tagliabue 1961, p. 325.

23 See Della Volpe 1960.

24 See Caesar 1998, p. 16.

25 *Strutturalismo* 1965. See also Mirabile 2012.

26 Eco 1968b. On the Theory of Information, see, among others, Trager 1958; Eco 1968a.

27 Eco (1962) 2006, p. 41: "Opera Aperta può essere letta in molti modi e in riferimento ai discorsi successivi. Ma forse una delle letture più stimolanti è ancora quella che la riconduca allo sfondo culturale in cui è nata."





8 Piero Manzoni preparing *Egg Sculptures* for Filmgiornale SEDI, Milan, 1960 (photo Giuseppe Bellone)

### Eco's Open Work

*The Open Work* emerged from Eco's early meditations on aesthetics from within an intellectual environment where theorists were shifting focus from expression to production and thereby stimulating a new-found interest in modes of reception and the understanding of the recipient as interpreter. Pareyson, Eco's mentor, proved especially influential as Eco developed his emphasis on the relationship between the work, the interpreter and the producer who had conferred a "distinctive seal" onto that work.<sup>28</sup> Yet Eco's theory had just as deep a dependence on the literary and artistic neo-avant-garde then active, which legitimised the constant development of multiple meanings and the coexistence of different readings of the same work.<sup>29</sup> This

consideration of the potential of a work to perpetually arise from nothing by rearranging its structure also reflected the post-war desire for reconstruction Eco's contemporaries expressed.

In just one of the many examples that he and others used to illustrate the Open Work, Eco found in the structural relationships of constellations and causality in James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* the potential of acts and words to intertwine ad infinitum, creating a continual metamorphosis of possible configurations.<sup>30</sup> Likewise Eco's theory has become a lens through which to reconsider works across an eclectic range of media and styles – 'works in movement', musical compositions reconfigured for every performance, novels with ambiguous signifiers, Italian-based Arte Programmata – that all espouse the same model of authorship Eco outlined.<sup>31</sup>

Manzoni's works are an ideal vehicle for examining Eco's theory, even more so than the Informal paintings or Arte Programmata experiments often held up as exemplars of openness. Unlike Manzoni, Arte Programmata insisted on the creation of collectives resulting from audience interaction.<sup>32</sup> Manzoni's works instead display the dual nature of the recipient experiencing the work – both interacting bodily with the object and also witnessing the spectacles – such that it supersedes Eco's formulations of openness. Neither Eco nor Manzoni, however, progressed as far as Roland Barthes's notion of the death of the author, regardless of their emphasis on the openness of a work.<sup>33</sup>

28 Eco 1955, partially republished and translated in Eco (1962) 1989, pp. 158–166.

29 Caesar 1998, p. 6.

30 Eco (1962) 1989, p. 86.

31 Caplan 2018, p. 58; Caplan 2022.

32 Michele d'Aurizio similarly argues that Radical Design objects of post-war Italy and examples of kinetic art represent stronger instantiations of the *Open Work* than Informal Art. D'Aurizio also claims that Eco pays scant attention to kineticism in his book; see D'Aurizio 2016. In the foreword to the 1962 exhibition catalogue *Arte Programmata, arte cinetica, opere moltiplicate, opera aperta*, Eco considers kinetic artworks and qualifies them not only as open works but also as works in motion: "the inventors of mathematical forms were trying to find ways of three-dimensional 'motion', constructing non-moving structures which, seen from a certain perspective, looked as moving, or 'kinetic' structures. In this way [...] the latter was creating works that were not only 'open' but directly 'in motion.'" See *Arte Programmata* 1962, n.p.

33 See Capozzi 1997, p. 219.

According to the nature of the message conveyed by a work, Eco distinguished between a general openness that characterises the “good literature of a period” and a more specific openness that was proper to the given decade and that featured a “semantic polyvalent message”.<sup>34</sup> He outlined the concept of open work as

not a critical category, but a hypothetical model, even upon the basis of numerous concrete analyses, useful to indicate a direction of contemporary art [...]. The ‘structure of an open work’ is not the individual structure of a certain work but the general model that describes not only a group of works but a group of works in a certain relationship of usage with their receptors [...]. The model of an open work does not redisplay an alleged objective structure of the works, but the structure of a relation of usage.<sup>35</sup>

These ‘relations of usage’ arose from the open structure of the work, which in turn needed to be ‘activated’ by the reader to reach an envisioned significance. And Eco was not only referring to kinetic works of art that require direct handling or practices that demand the spectator’s bodily involvement but also intellectual/conceptual engagement, such as with Informal paintings that prevented all physical engagement and thus represented a weaker case of the model proposed. With these examples, he nonetheless validated and attributed equal importance to different modes of public participation in contemporary art – that is, the modes of bodily interaction and cognitive engagement. Indeed, Eco remarked that the open work is a constellation of elements in which the observer can identify multiple possible connections by modifying the reciprocal position of the elements themselves.<sup>36</sup> But the viewer’s agency is not alone in transforming the work, as the forms themselves possess mutable elements:

What critics should realise is that art in the twentieth century was attempting to propose to man the vision of more forms simultaneously and in continuous becoming, because this was the condition to which he was submitted, to which even more he submitted his sensibility.<sup>37</sup>

Eco further described the work of art as an “organism in the process of indefinite completion” and as having a “propositional function”, apparently conferring upon it a certain autonomy.<sup>38</sup> Autonomous behaviour was therefore ascribed to both the viewer/user and the work itself and the merging of both achieved the meaning of the work, which would not have been fully realised without audience intervention.

Eco did eventually limit the theoretically infinite semiosis advanced by contemporaneous deconstructive theories. In his 1990 *Limits of Interpretation*, he not only underscored the undeniable existence of an author “who plants all the textual strategies” but also discusses *The Open Work*, translated into English only one year prior, to assess the constraint of the *intentio lectoris*:

34 Mallac 1971, p. 32.

35 Eco (1962) 2006, 85–86, 92: “La nozione di ‘opera aperta’ non è una categoria critica, ma rappresenta un modello ipotetico, sia pure elaborato sulla scorta di numerose analisi concrete, utilissimo per indicare una direzione dell’arte contemporanea [...]. La ‘struttura di un’opera aperta’ non sarà la struttura singola delle varie opere, ma il modello generale che descrive non solo un gruppo di opere, ma un gruppo di opera in quanto poste in una determinata relazione fruitiva con i loro ricettori [...]. Il modello di un’opera aperta non riproduce una presunta struttura oggettiva delle opere, ma la struttura di un rapporto fruitivo.”

36 *Arte Programmata* 1962, n.p.

37 *Arte Programmata* 1962, n.p.

38 *Arte Programmata* 1962, n.p.

In that book [*The Open Work*] I advocated the active role of the interpreter in the reading of texts endowed with aesthetic value. When those pages were written, my readers focused mainly on the ‘open’ side of the whole business, underestimating the fact that the open-ended reading I supported was an activity elicited by a *work*. [...] I have the impression that, in the course of the last few decades, the rights of interpreters have been overstressed.<sup>39</sup>

Eco thus did limit the rights of interpreters a posteriori, concurrently reinforcing the importance of both *intentio operis* and *intentio auctoris*.<sup>40</sup>

### Encounters: Manzoni’s Intellectual Entourage

On 22 June 1962, Eco became the last *Living Sculpture* signed by Manzoni.<sup>41</sup> The two were already acquainted, having moved in the same intellectual circles then animating the Milanese artistic scene. This company included the Novissimi, a group of writers and artists that would later become Gruppo 63, a prominent literary and artistic neo-avant-garde group that made Eco’s *Open Work* its theoretical basis. It is therefore likely that members of the Novissimi – including Nanni Balestrini, Elio Pagliarani and Antonio Porta – acted as intermediaries between Eco and Manzoni.<sup>42</sup> The two also had friends in common and supposedly met in the lively Brera neighbourhood, though the encounter between the two is not reliably documented outside Eco’s brief recollection and the authenticity card testifying that Eco had been transformed into a living sculpture.<sup>43</sup>

Despite these shared networks and the clear overlap of intellectual interests, it is unlikely that Manzoni read Eco’s *Open Work* and there is no proof that the artist was formally acquainted with semiotics. Manzoni may have known of Eco’s theory, first presented in 1958 and published as an essay 1961.<sup>44</sup> But even without directly engaging with Eco’s published works, Manzoni was undoubtedly aware of the general concepts that Eco pursued, having studied philosophy for a year at the University of Rome. Manzoni was nonetheless acquainted with Pareyson’s *Estetica. Teoria della formatività (Theory of Formation)*, upon which Eco would establish his argument on the openness of contemporary works.<sup>45</sup> Manzoni’s diary entries from 1954–1955 demonstrate a further fascination with

39 Eco 1990, p. 6 (italics in original).

40 Capozzi 1997.

41 Piero Manzoni. *When Bodies* 2013, p. 33.

42 Edited by Manzoni, Baj and Sergio Dangelo, the third issue of the journal-manifesto of the Nuclear movement, *Il gesto*, included Nanni Balestrini’s “l’uomo vive di incontri.” This issue also reproduced one of Manzoni’s *Achromes*, dated 1958. Despite attending the same high school, the Jesuit Istituto Leone XIII, Manzoni and Balestrini became friends only afterward, perhaps at the Bar Jamaica in Brera. Three of the five Novissimi poets wrote about and collaborated with Manzoni during his lifetime: Balestrini, Pagliarani and Porta. See Cortellessa 2018, pp. 68–70.

43 This hypothesis comes from a conversation between Eco and art historian Gregory Tentler. See Eco 1994, p. xiii: “Brera was a Montmartre, a Montparnasse, a Greenwich Village, where things happened at an accelerated pace because the lost years had to be made up and the new freedom, the chance to attempt every adventure and every experience, enjoyed. I arrived in Brera after its heroic period, but many of its main figures were still there. Joe Colombo, Enrico Baj, and Sergio Dangelo [...]. [...] I also met the masters of the previous generation, including Lucio Fontana, as well as the younger artists. Indeed, one day Piero Manzoni signed my wrist in indelible ink, as he did with certain friends to make them into works of art. The ink eventually faded, of course, even though for two weeks I didn’t wash my right arm. But this is a problem for some future restorer; I remain a certified work of art by Manzoni, and I am happy he immortalised me that way instead of putting me inside one of his famous little boxes.”

44 *Libertà* 1961, p. 139; Eco 1961.

45 Pareyson 1954. Pareyson’s importance for Manzoni is discussed in Gualdoni/Mascheroni 2000, p. 31; Galimberti 2012, p. 81.

Søren Kierkegaard and existentialism and a profound interest in Croce, who argued that the unity of a work and the multiplicity of its executions were impossible, a theory with which Pareyson took great issue.<sup>46</sup> But Manzoni's oeuvre itself offers the most compelling evidence to support his intellectual engagement with Eco's ideas, if not his writing: from the mid 1950s, polysemy and execution became central ideas in Manzoni's practice.<sup>47</sup>

Manzoni's 1961 *Magic Base*, an incomplete work that acts as a stage prop, requires physical participation: a plinth without a statue demands that the spectator become a participant by posing on top of it and only then can it become a complete artwork. The footprints on its top and the subtitle *Living Sculpture* can thus be read as instructions for the work. The illusory potential to empower the audience by freeing them from passive contemplation engages the relationship between aesthetic and physical usage Eco theorised.<sup>48</sup> The subtitle, furthermore, foregrounds the spectator's body, shifting it from the human condition to the transcendent status of a work of art: by standing on a base, their body is intentionally made pre-eminent, superior to the surrounding audience and the artist himself. Nonetheless, the *Living Sculpture*, by inverting the viewpoint, is at the mercy of both author and spectator. Since this *Magic Base* requires the bodily presence of the audience to achieve the meaning envisioned by the artist, it possesses an open structure, which could be read in light of Eco's understanding of openness – a structural component that does not undermine the overall organic conception of the work yet still points to its fundamental incompleteness.<sup>49</sup> Formally open, Manzoni's works advance what Eco's model surfaces, posing a dual problem: the reification of the body of the participant and its spectacularisation.

### Transnational Parallelisms: the Reification of the Body

Issues around the reification of the body in Manzoni's practice have been acknowledged in the most recent critical literature.<sup>50</sup> McGrath, for example, embraced an Adornian standpoint in his discussion of Manzoni's satirical objectifi-

46 Explicit references to existentialism and Jean-Paul Sartre can be found throughout Manzoni's diary. On 13 April 1954, Manzoni writes that he is about to finish "the little book on existentialism by Prini, in its part on Sartre", alluding to Prini 1952. See Manzoni 2013, pp. 61, 185. Barbara Sartre discusses the issue at length in Sartre 2017. On Manzoni and Kierkegaard, see also the interview in which Manzoni defines Kierkegaard his putative father, originally published in the *Herning Folkebad* on 6 July 1960 and translated into Italian and English in Galimberti 2013. For references to Benedetto Croce in Manzoni's diary, see Manzoni 2013, pp. 129, 203–204.

47 Eco 1968a, p. 20: "Nella prospettiva crociana non era possibile la coincidenza tra l'unità dell'opera e la molteplicità delle sue esecuzioni." Leo Paolazzi, alias Antonio Porta, also quotes Pareyson in his preface to the catalogue for the *Bonalumi, Castellani, Manzoni* exhibit at the Appia Antica gallery in Rome from 3–15 April, 1959.

48 Although Bishop discusses the "serate futuriste" ("Futurist nights") as an ante litteram form of participatory practice, Italian Modern art saw little to no engagement between spectators and works. See Bishop 2012, pp. 42–49. It is worth clarifying here that I understand a contemplative position as 'passive' when opposed to a situation of physical engagement that requires 'active' interaction with the work. A contemplative position is not passive *tout court*: Eco himself acknowledges contemplation as an act performed by the audience to activate the work.

49 On the coexistence between organicity and openness, see Kovács 2010, which summarises some of Eco's seminal ideas expressed in *The Open Work*. I disagree with Kovács's description of Eco as a man of late Modernism attempting to save the classical conception of the work of art; see Kovács 2010, p. 31. As I will argue, Eco, despite standing on the liminal edge of Modernism, understands the open work by shifting emphasis from the object to its production and consumption and thus prompts a dismantling of the ideological, avant-gardist character of the work of art.

50 The use of the term "reification" to describe Manzoni's *Magic Base* first appears in McGrath 2014, where John Thomas McGrath argues that Manzoni's appropriation of bodies could be predicated only on the precedent of Marcel Duchamp, establishing a link between participation and the ready-made "in an aggressive practice of reification"; see McGrath 2014, p. 144. I ins-

cation of the human body in terms of commodity and alienation.<sup>51</sup> Beyond the Marxist sense, the idea of reification was reworked in the early twentieth century alongside the development of Georg Simmel's social theory and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. This non-Marxist version of reification appealed to the Frankfurt School thinkers, who gave it a preeminent position in their diagnosis of social relations, and to Habermas, who released it from its Marxist origins.<sup>52</sup> I likewise adopt reification here to analyse social relations within an artistic system, yet I understand the term generally as 'becoming a thing,' 'becoming an object.'

Combining the theory of reification with the work of Marcel Duchamp, McGrath understood these works as ready-mades that included the human body. Nancy Spector similarly examined Manzoni's 'participatory' works from a socio-political perspective, as offering an internal critique of contemporary capitalism:

Ironically suppressing the separation between artist and work of art (and also between the spectator and the work of art), Manzoni demystified the purely modernist belief that artistic work is a non-alienated labour. He recognised that the aesthetic object, and by extension famous artists, had become like everything else in the post-war capitalistic economy, a reified commodity.<sup>53</sup>

But Spector does not explain the prominence of this critique or identify the kind of participatory processes at stake in Manzoni's practice. Her reading of the *Living Sculpture* as a bodily ready-made, furthermore, fails to offer a complete understanding of these works.

However deliberate, Manzoni's pioneers in acknowledging the art object as a mere commodity subsumed to the mechanism of the market and so anticipates, among others, Jean Baudrillard's later postmodern narratives.<sup>54</sup> An interpretation of the *Living Sculpture* as a critique of capitalist society nevertheless does little justice to the plurality of meanings that profoundly characterised Manzoni's oeuvre. It has also been argued that Manzoni did not consciously embrace a Marxist perspective, largely evidenced by his proclaimed lack of interest in politics and the absence of any reference to politics between 1957 and 1963.<sup>55</sup>

The reification of the body in Manzoni's corpus may thus be analysed from multiple perspectives, for instance, as a challenge to physical participation ante litteram that originates in his interest in science and science fiction, visible in the double nature of his artwork, ever straddling the organic and the synthetic.<sup>56</sup> The

tead untie this Duchampian knot, dismantling the understanding of such a fetishizing and nihilistic form of engagement with the body of the audience member. Here "reification" designates the general meaning of turning something into an object. The term comes from Marxist doctrine in reference to the process by which the capitalist economy transforms human labour into a simple attribute of a thing and treats it as such. The term spread through the French translation of German "Verdinglichung" as "materialization", for example, in Lukács 1922.

51 McGrath 2014.

52 See Simmel 1908; Heidegger 1927; Habermas 1981.

53 Spector 1992, p. 43: "Sopprimendo ironicamente la separazione tra artista e opera d'arte (e anche tra spettatore e opera d'arte), Manzoni demistificò la credenza prettamente moderna che il lavoro artistico sia lavoro non alienato. Riconobbe che l'oggetto estetico, e per estensione l'artista famoso, era divenuto come tutto il resto nell'economia capitalista del dopoguerra, una merce reificata."

54 Baudrillard (1970) 1998; Baudrillard (1981) 1994.

55 In an interview with Adele Cambria, Manzoni announced: "Politics? It has no meaning for us, we live in a futuristic world!", see Cambria 1957.

56 This duality and interest in science and science fiction are evident even in his earlier Nuclear works, as in the manifesto "Towards an Organic Painting" signed by Manzoni, Guido Biasi, Mario Colucci, Ettore Sordini and Angelo Verga in June 1957. In the later *Achromes* series, Manzoni often employs synthetic materials like fiberglass. See Grazioli 2007, pp. 11–55.

first *Magic Base* could also be described as a site of agency that demands performance or as a stage prop that similarly implied the happening of a pantomime. The *Living Sculptures* thus exploit the spectator's body by making it the object of contemplation and, through film, simultaneously enable the infinite extension of an audience, although both spectator and object retain traces of the artist's subjectivity and authority. This point seemingly contrasts with the democratic and cheerful forms of participation, which created "empathetic" horizontal links between authors and participants. Grant H. Kester and others discuss these "axes" as naturally resulting from the involvement of the public.<sup>57</sup> But if the audience's creative action is only apparent – that is, if they only perform situations already constructed by the artist – then their conceptual awareness increases as they realise the participant's limited role. Manzoni's satirical approach should not be explained as "an evil nihilistic attitude," as McGrath argues, but instead as a constructive will that fostered the public's understanding of its role.<sup>58</sup> Such an attitude originates from a highly experimental position, which Manzoni hid under a veil of irony. This ironic stance affected his entire practice, as is evident in the only surviving Filmgiornale SEDI newsreel and in numerous photographs that portray him playing the part of a Shakespearean fool.<sup>59</sup> The irony blurred the nature of the message of the work, stretched ambiguously between gravitas and satire.

Manzoni's *Living Sculpture* could also be related to the works of two non-European artists: Alberto Greco's 1959 *Vivo dito* (*Living Finger*) and Oscar Bony's 1986 *La familia obrera* (*The Worker's Family*, fig. 9). While Manzoni's work has usually been put in dialogue with North American or European artists – particularly Yves Klein – I here expand this frame to include artists whose work investigates much more deeply both the reification of the body and the spectacle: Bony and Greco indeed enact situations in which the body is so determined by conditions of visibility that objectification itself becomes visible. I therefore consider the parallelism between Manzoni, Greco and Bony more productive in eliciting issues at stake in these artists' use of spectators' bodies.

Alberto Greco (Buenos Aires 1931 – Barcelona 1965) lived in Brazil in the 1950s, where he became acquainted with Informal painting and experimented with materials in ways similar to Manzoni's in his Nuclear paintings. Greco travelled around Italy and elsewhere in Europe in the early 1960s, where he staged extremely provocative and blasphemous happenings, including *Cristo 63*, an improvisational theatre piece by Greco, Carmelo Bene and Giuseppe Lenti. A member of Bene's experimental Teatro Laboratorio in Rome, Greco undressed completely before urinating on the Argentinian ambassador; Bene, playing Christ, crucified himself while the apostles engaged in a drunken food fight.<sup>60</sup> Throughout the performance, the supporting actors, all non-professionals, provoked spectators with insults, making them active components of the piece. The performance ended as expected, with police intervention, and Greco, accused of blasphemy, was forced from the country.<sup>61</sup>

In *Cristo 63* and other works, Greco's conception of open experience shared a spiritual kinship with Manzoni's derision of the artist's authorship and its audience. This analogy was particularly clear in Greco's *Vivo dito*, which he performed in both Paris and Spain: Greco drew chalk circles around things and

57 Kester 2004.

58 The phrase recurs frequently in McGrath 2014 to describe Manzoni's practice.

59 *Aeree sfere di gomma per opere d'arte* by Maccentelli and Finocchi. Consider especially, for example, Ugo Mulas's photograph of Manzoni holding a can of *Artist's Shit* in front of a toilet.

60 Petrini 2021, p. 34. Giuliana Rossi maintains Bene urinated on the audience instead. See Rossi 2005, p. 58.

61 Bene/Dotto 2013, pp. 131–132.

9 Oscar Bony, *La familia obrera* (The Working-Class Family), installation for the exhibition *Experiencias '68* held at Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires, 1968 (photo © Oscar Bony Estate 2023)



people on the street, declaring them works of art. Similarly, Greco, in a small town near Madrid called Piedravales, began working on *Grande rollo*, a large roll of paper that he covered in notes and drawings that chronicled daily events in the village. When his friend, photographer Monserrat Sans Maria, joined him in Piedravales, Greco wrapped local people with the roll as part of his *Vivo dito* performances. The manifesto that he wrote concerning this series reads:

Vivo Dito is the adventure of the real, the urgent document, the direct and total contact with things, places, and people, creating situations, creating the unexpected. It means showing and encountering the object in its place. Totally in accord with cinema, reportage, and literature as a living document. Reality without touch-ups or artistic transformation. Today I am more interested in anyone at all recounting his life on the street or in a streetcar than in any polished, technical account by a writer.<sup>62</sup>

Greco here recalls Manzoni's ideas about Informal painting as created via useless and superfluous actions.<sup>63</sup> Greco's practice of including anything in the realm of art simply by marking it with a finger, furthermore, resonates strikingly with Manzoni's signature on the audience's body parts. What differs is context and

<sup>62</sup> Greco 2004, p. 38.

<sup>63</sup> Such early works contrast with the poetics of the blank canvas of the *Achromes* that Manzoni discusses at the beginning of "Liberà dimensione" ("Free Dimension") in Manzoni 1960. As explained above, the *Achromes* are empty canvases in which the artist's gesture is reduced to the minimum. These series, therefore, were born in reaction to – and greatly in contrast with – Informal paintings.

the use of media. Unlike Greco's embrace of spontaneity and open-air spaces, Manzoni created staged situations in galleries, with photographic and film documentation, signalling his desire to not only remain in control but also reach a wider audience. Manzoni thus made a spectacle of his participants, while serving as both director and actor.

Together with its reification, Manzoni's spectacularisation of the body thematically resembles Oscar Bony's (Posadas, 1941 – Buenos Aires, 2002) *Familia obrera*. Shown for the first time in the exhibition *Experiencias '68* at the Instituto Torcuato di Tella in Buenos Aires, Bony's work consisted of a working-class family – mother, father and son – sitting on a platform eight hours a day, with an accompanying label: "Luis Ricardo Rodríguez, a professional die-caster, is earning twice his usual wages for just staying on the show with his wife and son."<sup>64</sup> Denouncing the underpayment of the working class, *La familia obrera* had a well defined political dimension. The work pushed to its limits the avant-garde blurring of the boundaries between art and life but, beyond aesthetics, Claire Bishop and others have underscored two controversial issues. First, the piece was staged in a museum, thus working as institutional critique while also subjected to the regulations of that institution. Second, Bony's work was directed towards a middle-class audience, fetishizing the conditions of a working-class family:

Although the family is literally and symbolically elevated, they are also subjected to the scrutiny of a primarily middle-class audience who comes to view them, as installation shots make clear: a well-to-do family of three inspects the shorter, less well-dressed family, who averts their gaze.<sup>65</sup>

This inverted perspective had an unexpected outcome: the potentially shocking power of the work risked being institutionalised, its political potential infiltrated with patronizing condescendence. At the same time, the working class underwent a process of commodification through Bony's appropriation, resulting in a spectacle of the vernacular. This unintended consequence of the work was perhaps best addressed by the much later 'delegated performances' of Santiago Sierra.

Despite both Bony and Manzoni disrupting the equilibrium between participation and emancipation, Manzoni's work did not actively pursue social critique: the audience taking part in his *Living Sculptures* was mixed, from celebrities to gallery attendees to paid models. While Bony paid individuals to perform as themselves, Manzoni departs from him again by occasionally receiving payment from participants for his *Authenticity Cards*, a transaction signalled by a purple stamp. Ironically, Bony, in paying his participants, inherently rejects the supposed spontaneity claimed by much participatory art and theory but Manzoni, in getting paid himself, rebuffs Bony's modernist utopian view, both in its attempts to merge art and life but also in its insistence on the social critique that threatens to make a spectacle of art.<sup>66</sup> Manzoni instead adopted a glaringly cynical attitude and used media to his own ends, deliberately constructing 'spectacular' situations.

64 Bishop 2012, p. 114.

65 Bishop 2012, p. 114.

66 With the emergence of 'relational art' in the late 1990s, Bishop, Kester, Nicolas Bourriaud and others began discussing practices that triggered new relationships between author, work and audience. These discussions emerged within exhaustive and lively debates on the merging between the 'aesthetic' and the 'social', which have scrutinised participatory practices as the condition for the foundation of a 'democratic art'. Bourriaud and Kester share similar positions: Bourriaud tends to equate aesthetic with ethico-political judgment, assuming that relations that produce dialogue among their parts are necessarily democratic and therefore good; Kester too evaluates works on the basis of ethical concerns and for their merit of producing empathetic axes. Bishop instead introduces 'antagonism' as ever-present in social relations, arguing that



Francesca Pola stresses Manzoni's powerful film capacity, emphasizing his attention to both the communicative process by which the work was transmitted and received as well as to the mythologising of his persona.<sup>67</sup> But little attention has been paid to the connection between bodily participation and spectacle and the sources of Manzoni's interest in a new visual dimension. Bishop observes that the use of people as a medium results in the conservative reification of their bodies but Manzoni's engagement with the audience went beyond this claim to pioneer a critique of later participatory art.<sup>68</sup> The dual nature of Manzoni's audience in *Living Sculptures* and *Magic Bases* – both participant and viewer – can be seen in the communicative relationship between the author, the spectator-turned-participant of the performance and the witnessing public. Such a dual nature results from a semiological approach to Manzoni's work.

### The Spectacle

As I have argued, the open participation of the audience pertains even more appropriately to Manzoni's work than to French Informal Art, since his public was called upon to either step onto the *Magic Base* or be signed as a *Living Sculpture*. But this dialectic did not dismantle or question the intention of the author, who, in the case of the *Living Sculpture*, was not only present but also enacted the metaphorical transformation with his gesture. The reading of these works in light of Eco's theory instead divides the participating audience into two complementary categories: the participant/performer, who physically experienced the work, and the viewer/user, who witnessed the act. If the viewer is apparently subsumed to a passive consumption of the piece and could eventually have a cognitive engagement, I argue that the performer experiences both a physical and conceptual commitment. From such forms of participation, this dialectic necessarily produced both the reification of the body and its spectacularisation.

Despite being published four years after Manzoni's death, the ideas presented in Debord's 1967 *La société du spectacle* (*The Society of the Spectacle*) illuminated some aspects of the "spectacular" nature of Manzoni's work. As a matter of fact, Debord saw the spectacle as a visual phenomenon exclusively effective in reification and reflective of "the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life."<sup>69</sup> As in his relationship with Eco's work, Manzoni was likely familiar with the theories of the Situationist International by 1957, the year Manzoni sent a letter to Jean-Jacques Lebel and Ralph Rumney inviting them to take part in a protest, ultimately unrealised, against what he called a conservative critical establishment.<sup>70</sup> Writing to Baj, Manzoni mentioned

without antagonism there is only the imposed consensus of authoritarian order and, therefore, the lack of true democracy. Bishop ultimately advocates for a reconciliation between the social and the aesthetic, the ethical and the artistic judgment. See Bourriaud (1998) 2002; Kester 2004; Bishop 2004.

67 See Pola 2013, pp. 157–216.

68 Bishop 2012, p. 115.

69 Guy Debord (1968) 1994, p. 29.

70 See Manzoni's letter to Baj from June 1957, in Gramegna 2008–2009, pp. 222–223: "Baj and I have decided to organise, here in Milan, a remarkable and violent protest against art criticism, particularly against some of its aspects. Mostly, here in Italy, there are no critics able to propose the beginning of a new poetic: these individuals are mainly caring about doing 'journalistic chronicles': but they also dare to give artistic judgments, fallacious most of the time, but still dangerous, given the influence these newspapers have on the audience. Those deliberately against every avant-garde action are to a certain extent 'honest': dangerous are those who pretend to adopt 'modern attitudes', with absolutely no understanding of the reasons for our practices [...]. This will be a serious event, it will cause a scandal, with police action, etc.: we wrote to Jorn and Klein: let me know as soon as possible if we can rely on you. The matter will have to be truly colossal."

that he found “Debord’s little book interesting.”<sup>71</sup> Manzoni was likely referring to the *Rapport sur la construction de situations* (*Report on the Construction of Situations*), which Debord published in 1957 when the SI replaced the Lettrist International and advanced the novel idea of “constructed situations.”<sup>72</sup> The *Report* in part reads:

Integral art [...] can no longer correspond to any of the traditional aesthetic categories. [...] The construction of situations begins beyond the ruins of the modern spectacle. It is easy to see how much the very principle of the spectacle – non-intervention – is linked to the alienation of the old world. [...] The situation is thus designed to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing ‘public’ must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term ‘livers’, must steadily increase.<sup>73</sup>

With the *Living Sculptures* a few years later, Manzoni arguably reached his complete disillusionment over the possibility of constructing collective situations that could contrast and prevent the alienation caused by the increasing capitalisation of society. To a certain extent, Manzoni’s body of work seemed like a deliberate opposition to Debord’s critique of the spectacle and his utopian communitarianism, preferring instead a one-on-one relationship between author and user. Yet Manzoni continued to defy traditional aesthetic categories as a pivotal element of his practice: the reification of the human body is part of this effort. Unlike a left-wing approach or an antagonization of the growing collective character of contemporary art and literature, Manzoni did not believe in the democratising the power ascribed to the arts by many of his contemporaries, including Bony. Through the construction of spectacular situations staged with active participants, Manzoni addressed the failure of the arts to achieve a social impact, such as ameliorating society or creating communities.

At first glance, Manzoni’s attitude towards the spectacle seems closest to *À Propos de art-spectacle, spectateur actif, instabilité et programmation dans l’art visuel*, a 1962 pamphlet by Julio Le Parc, active in the Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel. This group experimented with kinetic art, spectacle, and participatory environments that occupy a grey area between technological integration and social intervention.<sup>74</sup> In his pamphlet, Le Parc argues that new forms of engaging the spectator had dismissed the passive role of aesthetic contemplation and that there lies the potential to renovate the spectacle:

The notion of spectacle has always been pejorative when applied to the visual arts. By frankly admitting this reversal of the traditional situation of the passive spectator, we find a way around the idea of spectacle and come to the notion of activated or active participation.<sup>75</sup>

Le Parc advocated the reconciliation between the spectacle and the audience, inverting the contemplative situation of spectators in favour of their active participation and establishing the degree of such evolution.<sup>76</sup> Notably, the artist’s description of a process of reciprocal usage between the work of art and its user

71 See Gramegna 2008–2009, pp. 222–223.

72 See Galimberti 2012, p. 79.

73 The *Rapport* was one of the preparatory texts for the July 1957 conference at Cosio d’Arroscia, when the SI was founded, and is translated in *Situationist International Anthology* 2006, pp. 40–41.

74 Busbea 2013, p. 95.

75 Le Parc 1998, p. 97.

76 Le Parc 1998, p. 97.

was strikingly similar to one articulated by Eco, that the spectator was “intended to recompose indefinitely, in the same work, a multitude of works to passive contemplation” and that the author could be qualified as “producer of transformable works.”<sup>77</sup> For *Le Parc*, this passive situation was not a form of surveillance keeping spectators in captivity but, rather, allowed their active participation.<sup>78</sup> Manzoni doubtless shared with *Le Parc* the desire to both naturalise the spectacle in the art world and also increase the conceptual awareness of the spectator as a form of participation. Yet Manzoni exploited the situation of the spectacle even further: in aligning himself with the principle of the non-intervention of the spectacle, Manzoni unveils the inner failure and misleading character of a ‘bodily’ form of participation.

His ridicule of the necessity of a living public eventually reached an extreme in which he fantasised about canning the audience’s bodies. In a playful, hyperbolic and provocative letter to Ben Vautier, Manzoni wrote: “I thought of sealing them in parallelepipeds in transparent plastic material; they die (naturally) and stay there, and you can see them and laugh at them.”<sup>79</sup> From these words, one might infer that Manzoni had adopted a nihilist stance that would belie the constructive attitude claimed by the present study. But in the 1975 catalogue of Manzoni’s works, Germano Celant notably proposed a different interpretation, describing the signing of the *Living Sculptures* as a “gesture of love”:

With the Bases, unlike the ‘predatory’ attitude shared by [Allan] Kaprow, [Robert] Whitman, [Claes] Oldenburg, and Klein, who ‘appropriated’ the bodies for actions and gestures with anterior and outwards ends to the bodies themselves, Manzoni makes a ‘gesture of love’: he doesn’t use but enhances the body and the individual as living sculpture.<sup>80</sup>

Celant later modified his position slightly, while still reading the *Living Sculptures* as a utopian stance that dealt with the desire of being “immortal”:

These proposals, from the construction of robots to the ‘preservation of dead people in transparent plastic blocks’ must not appear as ‘inhuman,’ as they are linked to a different notion of time which, being linear and organic, should continue to exist, passing from life to death until reaching immortality.<sup>81</sup>

While the rather stiff Marxist interpretation of these works as a blatant attack on the capitalist system of production proves reductive, Celant’s analysis is equally problematic, almost hagiographic. With the encounter between author, public, and work, Manzoni sought a balance between a passive participatory situation and conceptual awareness, while vacating any possibility for the creation of a collective community with the participants: he indeed enabled the audience to have an unlimited experience of the work of art by becoming art themselves. At the same time, by standing on the pedestal of the *Magic Base* or being signed as a *Living Sculpture* and thus transforming into the object of a spectacle, the

77 *Le Parc* 1998, p. 97.

78 *Le Parc* 1998, p. 97.

79 McGrath 2014, p. 90.

80 *Piero Manzoni. Catalogo* 1975, p. 55: “Con le basi, a differenza dell’atteggiamento ‘predatorio’ di Kaprow, Whitman, Oldenburg e Klein, che si ‘appropriano’ dei corpi per azione e per gesti con fini anteriori e posteriori agli stessi corpi, Manzoni compie un ‘gesto d’amore’; non usa, ma esalta il corpo e l’individuo come sculture vive.”

81 Celant 1992, p. 14: “Tali proposte, dalla costruzione di Robot alla conservazione di persone morte in blocchi di plastica trasparente non devono apparire disumane, poiché esse sono legate a una diversa nozione di tempo che, essendo lineare e organico, deve continuare a esistere, passando dalla vita alla morte, sino all’immortalità.”

participant perceived the limitations of participatory art practice as such. So despite losing its aura, Manzoni's work of art maintains an epiphanic power.<sup>82</sup>

### The Death of the Avant-Garde

This study suggests a shift in focus concerning Manzoni's oeuvre and urges us to transcend the mystic understanding of the art object as such to consider the communicative structure between author, public, and work by concentrating on reception. Just as Eco's *Open Work* emphasised a plurality of meanings, so too has Manzoni's practice "spawned a 'field of possibilities' rather than a definitive work of art."<sup>83</sup> As Lindsay Caplan rightfully acknowledges, "open-endedness operates on many levels in Eco's notion of the open work: as a formal characteristic (movement), a message about reality, a metaphor for epistemology, and a model for the political function of art. It is also a quality of aesthetic experience, which Eco ties to the structural compositions of the work."<sup>84</sup>

Eco's semiological model described the ambiguous nature of Manzoni's work as a process of delegating authorship, in which the artist passes on to the public the labour and creative agency. As we have seen, the adoption of Pareyson's *Theory of Formation* to analyse certain relations of usage enacted by a work led Eco to identify a twofold audience possessing a dual function. The same differentiation – between actor/performer and witness/viewer – must be remembered when considering the positioning of the public in Manzoni's practice. Both roles share an interpretative stance that allow the work to achieve a complete but polysemic significance – for, as Eco argued, ambiguity was a fundamental feature of the open work – and both roles unveil a contrasting dialectic affecting Manzoni's practice, tethered between the reification of the body of the audience and its spectacularisation.

In both the *Living Sculptures* and *Magic Bases*, Manzoni privileged a zone of silence, a condition of stillness that translated into the search for a balance between the reification of the participant's body and the elevation of conceptual awareness in both the performer and the viewer. If Bony's work was involuntarily haunted by the ghost of the spectacle, Manzoni created spectacular situations that strove to mock the physical presence of the spectator within the work yet preserved the sacredness of cognitive engagement. By staging a participatory situation in which the author stands in apparent antagonism to the public – since it is the author who manipulates and reifies the participant's body, which in turn becomes the subject of the spectacle – Manzoni wryly dismantled the notions of empathy and emancipation ascribed to collective practices by much contemporary criticism, unconsciously challenging the ideals of democratic participation embraced by later artists.<sup>85</sup> By retaining the artist's *auctoritas*, Manzoni's work also illuminated the *intentio auctoris* to which Eco's *Open Work* ascribes much importance, while also sharing a fundamental scepticism regarding the death of the author that poststructuralists would later celebrate.

82 Consider Benjamin 1936.

83 Caplan 2018, p. 58.

84 Caplan 2018, p. 73.

85 On dialogic art practice, see Kester 2004, pp. 115, 150: "Dialogical works can challenge dominant representations of a given community and create a more complex understanding of and empathy for that community among a broader public. [...] Empathetic identification (between artists and their collaborators and among the collaborators themselves) is a necessary component of dialogical practice. It facilitates a reciprocal exchange that allows us to think outside our own lived experience and establish a more compassionate relationship with others."

But the implications of Manzoni's work move beyond semiotics, contemporary art and literature and even criticism of the art system but could instead be read in a broader history of global phenomena. By disavowing the alleged democratic nature of art in participatory art among other practice and thereby denying some of its utopian ambition, Manzoni attempted to end modernism, sanctioning the death of the avant-garde already cherished by Cesare Brandi, Alfredo Giuliani, Edoardo Sanguineti and others and, above all, implicit in Eco's assumptions that entail that the work of art definitively loses its ideological character.

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