

# The making of Manzoni

The playful and provocative Italian artist Piero Manzoni, a pioneer of conceptualism, created some of his most significant work in Denmark, where a local shirt-factory owner used art to put the town of Herning on the map – and left an extraordinary museum as his legacy

By Harry Pearson. Photographs by Jan Søndergaard

The Steven Holl-designed building that is home to HEART Herning Museum of Modern Art

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Left, Piero Manzoni with one of his 'living sculptures', a seamstress from the Black Factory. Opposite, works by

Manzoni in the archives at HEART: three of his *Achrome* works executed in 1961; and a painting, *Impronte*, 1961

In the summer of 1960, a young, round-faced Italian with the wide, mischievous eyes of a cartoon mouse preparing to strike a sleeping cat with a mallet, stood on a raised platform at one end of a large clothing factory in western Denmark. Piero Manzoni was there to make art, just as the dozens of young women in front of him, bent over their sewing machines, were there to stitch shirts.

The 26-year-old was familiar with factories. His family, wealthy Lombard merchants, owned a number of them. But the Angli shirt factory in the small town of Herning was not like the food-canning plants on which the Manzoni fortunes were built. Indeed, it was like few other industrial sites on earth.

Three years earlier, Angli's owner, Aage Damgaard, a local businessman whose family were as much pillars of the community in Herning as the Manzonis were in Milan, had commissioned the Danish artist Paul Gadegaard to decorate his factory. Over the next four years, Gadegaard – a former student of André Lhote and a member of the Linien II group of abstract constructivists – attacked the project with intense energy. The exterior he painted entirely black. The interiors, by contrast, were decorated in bright, abstract shapes that covered the walls, the ceiling, the filing cabinets, the desks, the lampshades. Installations and sculptures were scattered around the shop floor. The effect was brilliant and slightly disorientating, the bold angular colours breaking up the outlines of furniture in the way razzle-dazzle camouflage did the silhouettes of ships and aircraft in wartime.

It didn't end there. In the Angli factory the rapid rattle of sewing machines was drowned out by the sound of Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman and other giants of modern jazz, whose dissonant improvisations pumped from the speakers throughout the working day.

Despite appearances, Angli was not a fashion house. Its wares were sold in department stores. There was nothing cutting-edge or avant-garde about the designs. Aage Damgaard was no Walter Van Beirendonck or Dries Van Noten. This was not a swinging Yves Saint Laurent hanging out with Andy Warhol and his Factory cohorts on the Left Bank. No, the shirtmaker's association with Gadegaard, the relationship that brought Manzoni, and later Enrico Castellani, to this unsung corner of Scandinavia was something far more singular and surprising.

'The 1950s were a time of sweeping social change in Denmark,' explains Holger Reenberg, director of HEART, the Herning Museum of Contemporary Art. 'Under the Social Democrats, in particular the minister of social affairs Julius Bomholt, two ideas ran in parallel: on the one hand that Denmark must have a world-class gallery of contemporary art, and on the other that art should become a part of the everyday life of the Danish people. The result is that in the late 1950s you see Knud Jensen creating the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art just outside Copenhagen, and at more or less the same time you have Aage Damgaard and Angli here in Herning.'

Herning has a population of around 50,000. It sits on the plains of western Jutland where the tolling of church bells echoes dully across the vast, moist fields, the dripping birch woods, the drainage ditches and the pig farms. About 320km from Copenhagen, Herning sprang up in the 19th century, so has none of the historic buildings, the castles, or pretty half-timbered houses that characterise nearby Viborg. It is a new provincial town founded on hard work.

'As a place without a past, Herning was always trying to get noticed, to show that it was a match for other, longer-established Danish cities,' Reenberg says. 'Suddenly they had this extraordinary factory, and they brought to it Piero Manzoni, a wild young visionary, one of the most important artists of the 20th century. It drew attention, of course.'

HEART has the world's largest public collection of Manzoni's work, much of it created in Herning during the spells the Italian spent there in 1960 and 1961. Originally the collection was housed in the second factory Damgaard built. (This no longer exists, but many of Gadegaard's pieces can be seen at VIA University College, in the former Angli factory, where fashion students now operate the sewing machines.) In 2009 the gallery moved to »

Photograph: Ole Bagger/HEART Herning Museum of Modern Art. Piero Manzoni © DACS 2016





Right, Piero Manzoni, *Socle du Monde*, 1961.  
Below, Manzoni with his *Merda d'artista*.  
Opposite, VIA college, formerly the Angli factory, with decorative elements by Paul Gadegaard from the original Black Factory



Photograph: Ole Bagger/HEART Herning Museum of Modern Art. Piero Manzoni © DACS 2016. Paul Gadegaard © DACS 2016



a new Steven Holl-designed building just across the road. Holl's design draws on Angli for inspiration: the ceilings droop like shirt sleeves and the white exterior walls are textured to resemble Oxford cloth. Despite the witty flourishes and pale beauty, it's a piece of architecture that highlights the art rather than competes with it.

It was Gadegaard who suggested Manzoni to his patron. The Dane had seen the young Italian's work at an exhibition in Amsterdam. The two men's art may have had little in common, but they shared an unruly zest for life. 'There are lots of stories about Manzoni's time here,' Michael Christoffersen, chief curator at HEART says. 'Typically, an old couple told me recently of the summer morning they'd woken to find him passed out unconscious in their back garden.' If the Italian enjoyed himself socially in Herning, he also relished the creative freedom the town offered him, later writing to Gadegaard that he regarded his visits as a little trip to 'paradise'.

Manzoni was self-taught, having shaken off his wealthy and conservative family's determined attempts to make him pursue a career as a lawyer. 'Early on, Manzoni was still trying to please his parents,' Christoffersen says. 'His first paintings are landscapes in the English style, traditional though rather beautiful in their way.'

In the late 1950s, however, when Manzoni saw Yves Klein's exhibition *Proposte monochrome, epoca blu* in Milan, his path took a radical turn. His »





response to the Frenchman's Monochromes was the Achromes – an act, perhaps, of deliberate reductive one-upmanship. While Klein sought the sublime through a single shade of blue, Manzoni produced a series of canvases coated with gesso or clay that were definitively, defiantly colourless. As Gavin Turk observed, 'They were not metaphors or allegories but just things... The frame is full of stuff but emptied out of pictures.'

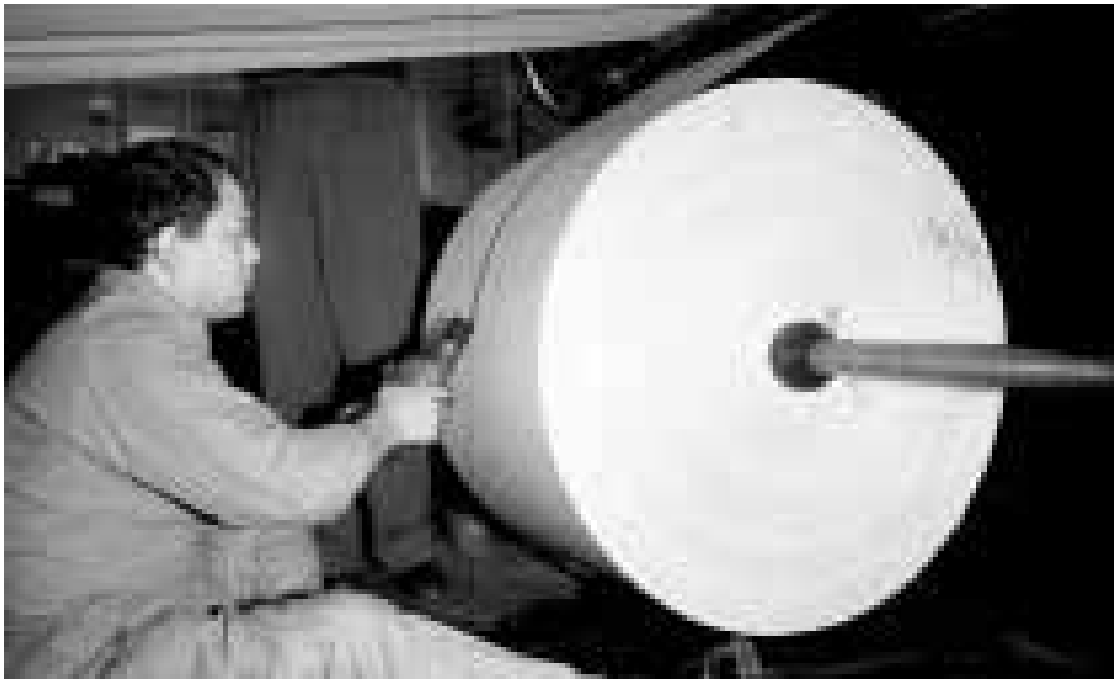
Manzoni continued to produce Achromes, but also experimented with other materials. At HEART, a rabbit-fur ball sits off-centre on a dais of charred wooden blocks, and a hay bale is placed on a pallet of burned planks. Some pieces made from cotton wool resemble wigs removed from the rubble; others are covered in phosphorescent paint or cobalt chloride, unstable materials that give the work a life of its own. The palest baby-blue in most photographs, these Achromes switch to mauve-pink when transported. 'When we loan them to other museums, people get a terrible shock when they unpack them,' Christoffersen says. The impish Manzoni might have relished their surprise.

Some of the Achromes made in Herning used flannellette; one in faint gold was fabricated from squares of silk. 'It's an unusual choice of material for Manzoni,' Christoffersen says. 'And if you look in the top left corner, you can see his fingerprints. It must have been accidental.' Sure enough, there they are, faint dark smudges on the sheen. There's something oddly poignant about them – little marks of human frailty among the monuments.

During his first spell in Herning, Manzoni co-opted the town newspaper to help in the »

Above, Piero Manzoni, *Achrome*, 1961, made of wadding in quadrants treated with cobalt.

Opposite, another *Achrome*, 1961, in silk. Below, Manzoni creating *Linea Lunga*

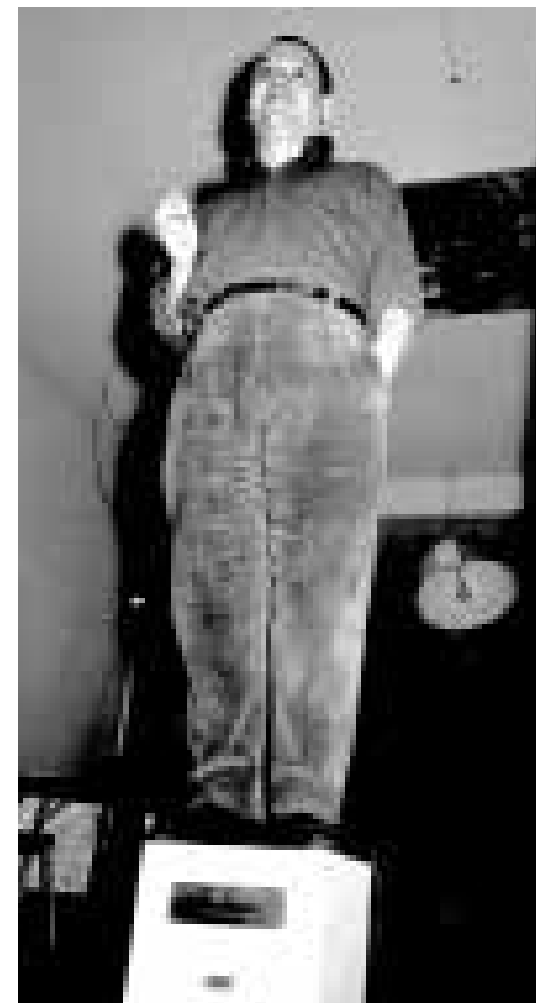


*There's something oddly poignant about Manzoni's fingerprints – little marks of human frailty among the monuments*



Right, Manzoni on *Magic Base No 2*, 1961. Opposite, in the archives at HEART, Manzoni's *Achrome*, 1961, in rabbit fur with a wooden base

Photograph: Ole Bagger/HEART Herning Museum of Modern Art. Piero Manzoni © DACS 2016



Belgian poet-artist Marcel Broodthaers. Many years later, Gilbert & George would do much the same.)

One of the people who stepped onto the base was a local conjuror. Photographs show him balancing on his toes, playing cards flashing between his hands. 'We found the magician,' Reenberg says. 'He lives nearby. He came to see us. He still has the deck of cards he used for the tricks.' While the locals may not have known quite what to make of Manzoni's work, or his lifestyle, it's clear they sensed that his visit was an occasion, something to memorialise.

Manzoni's father was less impressed with the direction his son had taken. 'Your work is shit,' he apparently told him, unwittingly inspiring what would become the artist's most famous works. In May 1961 Manzoni produced 90 small, sealed tins, each – or so the label claims – containing 30 grams of the artist's faeces. Each is labelled as if it were pâté: 'Freshly preserved, produced and tinned'. The words 'Produce of Italy' are printed on the bottom; the artist's signature runs across the top. Manzoni rejected the notion that his art referred to anything, stating his intention 'to make images as absolute as possible that will not be valid for what they recall, explain or express, but only for what they are'. Yet it's hard not to view the *Merda d'artista* series as a stiff-fingered salute to a patriarch who ran a meat-canning factory.

In similar vein, Manzoni preserved his breath in balloons, and placed his fingerprints on hard-boiled eggs, as if in satire of both saintly reliquaries and the reverence in which artists are often held.

Manzoni has been described as the father of conceptualism, but attempts to categorise his work tend to disappear in a blizzard of reference points – Duchamp, Malevich, Klein, Rauschenberg, Vautier, Beuys – through which the Italian's rotund shape is only faintly visible. That his work steadfastly refuses to be forced into any category is testimony to his febrile inventiveness. Like the existential protagonist of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, Manzoni demands the right to regard himself as unique. He is less the child of Dadaism than its orphan. Herning, far from the jaded thoroughfares of Milan, New York or London, is a place where you can fully appreciate the ironic impudence and audacity of the man.

'His work is still provocative today, still making people ask questions, stimulating thought, and that is the mark of great art,' says Christoffersen.

Manzoni collapsed and died at his studio in Milan on 6 February 1963. He was 29 years old. His final 12 months of massive indulgence had something of Marco Ferreri's *La Grande Bouffe* about it. His artistic career had lasted barely seven years. Schemes for electronic brainwashing mazes and inflatable public buildings died with him. His impression on the world, however, is as unmistakable as the finger marks on the silk *Achrome*. ♦

[www.heartmus.dk](http://www.heartmus.dk). 'Piero Manzoni. *Achromes: Linea Infinita*' is at Mazzoleni London, 9 February–10 April. [www.mazzoleniart.com](http://www.mazzoleniart.com)

production of *Linea Lunga 7200 metri*, a line more than four miles long drawn on a roll of paper by the artist at the Herning Avis printworks. The paper was then placed inside a lead case made by a local blacksmith. 'The blacksmith had a lot of leftover lead flashing, so he suggested they use that,' Reenberg explains. 'Later the blacksmith claimed he also designed the case, but I'm not sure he did. I think he and Manzoni didn't get along too well.'

The *Lines of Exceptional Length*, first shown in 1959, began with a small cardboard canister bearing the simple printed label 'Contains a line ... metres long made by Piero Manzoni the ...', the blanks of length and date to be filled in later by the artist. 'Manzoni's intention was to create a series of lines that would total the circumference of the earth and be buried in strategic locations around the world,' Christoffersen says. 'The concept pre-dates Land Art by four or five years.'

During his second spell in Denmark, Manzoni created the *Socle du Monde, Hommage à Galileo*, an inverted steel base that was placed in a field in Herning, thus transforming the world and all its contents into one gigantic work of art; and *Magic Base no 2*, a wooden plinth onto which people were invited to step, instantly transforming themselves into art pieces. (Manzoni explored the same theme by signing women, and more simply by nominating people, including Umberto Eco and avant-garde