

THE INNER LIFE OF A CAN OF PRESERVES

BORIS GROYS

Few works of art in the twentieth century have gained a real cult authentic status. But after Marchel Duchamp's *Urinal* and Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup* we can count Piero Manzoni's *Merda d'artista* ("Artist's Shit") as one of them. Today a lot of people have heard that someone had the idea of selling his own excrement as a work of art, though they may never have heard of Piero Manzoni and know very little about modern or contemporary art. The fact that the best-known artworks of modernity involve everyday objects is clearly no accident. There's something magical about the ability to represent these objects in ways that are out of the ordinary and even make them into a big success. We get the feeling we are faced with a miracle—and only what is perceived as a miracle can become a cult object. In this respect, moreover, Manzoni's work differs in many ways from works by Duchamp and Warhol. *Merda d'artista* does not fit the category of the readymade. It is not a question of selecting just one example of a mass-produced object and calling it an artwork. Instead Manzoni produced some ninety cans of artist's shit, a number that could potentially have been increased. So here we have a new mass product, a new brand, with a market range not necessarily limited to the art world. This is also the difference between the can of preserve produced by Manzoni and the replicas of the cans of Campbell's Soup or Brillo steel wool turned out in his day by Warhol. Both Duchamp and Warhol play

with the boundary between “high” art and mass culture, which appears obvious to both. To Manzoni, though, this boundary is far less evident. He launched his brand of cans of preserve in the same way a designer would launch a new collection, and yet his *Merda d'artista* is essentially different from every kind of art design. In this work, the crucial element is not its form but its content. And here lies another important difference between Manzoni on the one hand and Duchamp and Warhol on the other. The latter are interested in the form of modern mass culture, but Manzoni is interested in the content. Here, however, the content is not presented as theme, narrative or ideology but as matter. In this sense *Merda d'artista* is above all an ironic comment and at the same time a perfectly accurate comment on the main strategy of Modernism, which consists in explicitly thematizing the materiality of the artwork.

The dominant concern of art is usually the relationship between art and reality. For a long time this relationship was understood in mimetic terms, as the artist's ability to represent reality faithfully. Ever since modern art rejected mimesis as its main goal, the specific materiality of the work of art itself, the material it is made out of, has been the sole element relating art to reality. And this is the reason why modern art is tenaciously anchored to the thematization of its own materiality: only through this does modern



Merda d'artista, May 1961

art acquire a truth of its own, if by truth we understand the relationship with reality. In this way abstract art loses its status as pure form and gains a content—not a literary or narrative content, but real and material. In this respect every modern artwork can be interpreted as a can of preserves whose content is concealed in the form of the artwork itself. Through its form, modern art seeks constantly to refer to this hidden material content. This is why Clement Greenberg wanted a painting to look flat, without depth, to reveal the flatness of the canvas covered by paint and therefore concealed by it. In the same way, numerous modern sculptors thematize the material their sculptures are made out of rather than concealing it in the outward form of the sculpture. But the whole, laborious work of modern art (which has only approximated the concealed materiality of art without ever expressing it directly) is manifested as superfluous by the gesture performed by Manzoni in his *Merda d'artista*. Manzoni explicitly states the content of his work of art: shit. Here the pure identity between form and content, so long sought by modern art, has apparently been achieved and in the simplest way: the surface of the work of art provides exhaustive information about its hidden content. This information appears spontaneously convincing, clear, definitive. But why, precisely? There are some important psychological reasons. When something is concealed, almost automatically we are led to conjecture it is something disagreeable, disgusting and potentially dangerous. Our attitude towards what is hidden is by definition an attitude of suspicion—a suspicion that can be invalidated only when it is confirmed. Only when the hidden content is revealed to be just as disgusting and dangerous as we had thought it to be all along (or even more so) are we willing to believe this revelation.

The truth of what is hidden therefore becomes credible only when it is an ugly, disagreeable truth. The revelation of the inner content can only succeed when it takes the form of an unmasking. In some way we have always harbored the suspicion that everything sold in cans is properly shit, because, as is often said, we have no idea where the substance in the can comes from. On the other hand, starting from the birth of modern art, the general public has got the idea that it is real “shit” sold at very steep prices, in other words that modern art is a gigantic fraud, that it consists in selling some sort of shit at the price of gold. But this is just what Manzoni proposes to do: sell cans of preserve that he guarantees contain his shit at a price amounting to their weight in gold. So the attraction of this work lies primarily in the fact that it confirms directly and unequivocally all the general public’s anti-modernist suspicions. In this respect, Manzoni belongs to a long tradition of modern art, which has always managed to turn anti-

modernist prejudices to its own advantage. Many modern artists, from Marinetti, Dalí and Picasso down to Duchamp and Warhol, have played ironically with anti-modernist propaganda, which always represents the artist as conman, manipulator and false illusionist. And it is hardly an accident that it is these very artists who are now immensely popular. But we should not be deceived by the seeming identity between form and content in *Merda d'artista*. Manzoni only apparently supersedes the gap between form and content. In fact, he radicalizes it. The question is not whether the cans of preserve Manzoni sells really contain shit or not, as has recently been conjectured. The crucial point is that in *Merda d'artista* Manzoni thematizes and reinforces the taboo that prevents the viewer from knowing what material a work of art is really made of. Generally, the work of art that confronts the viewer in a museum or gallery is there only to be seen, to be observed, not dismantled and destroyed. The body of the work of art, protected by the convention dominant in the art system, therefore remains inaccessible to all attempts to know its material content, because the unauthorized viewer is not allowed to look inside the work of art. The true material nature of the artwork is taboo for the art viewer: the viewer's gaze cannot probe beyond the surface of the work, because that would amount to destroying it.

This taboo is further reinforced by Manzoni because he fills the inside of the work with his breath or his shit (alleged or real). If the surface of a balloon inflated with the breath of the artist was to be pierced, the air would be lost and the work permanently destroyed. The information that shit is contained inside the work of art, however, directly discourages viewers, and succeeds better than any taboo in preventing them from probing inside it. The result is that the inviolability of the work of art is secured even when it begins to circulate outside the art system, as Manzoni foresaw in the case of his cans of preserve. So we can say that *Merda d'artista* is not a desecration of the work of art but on the contrary, its sacralization. "Sacer" in Latin is applied properly to everything forbidden, prohibited, because set aside for the gods, but also everything that is impure, defiling. As Roger Callois points out in his book *L'homme e le sacré*, the sacred is ambivalent: it is pure and at the same time impure, holy and polluting. As Manzoni fills the work of art with substances drawn from the human body, the work of art is also humanized—and its inviolability is set on a par with that of the human being. The taboo that forbids us to kill and dismember human beings to see how they are made inside is likewise ambivalent. This prohibition clearly has an ethical foundation, which forbids us to kill because killing is evil, but an equally strong, if not stronger justification, of this taboo, is the fear

of seeing inside the human body, which arouses a sense of dismay. The analogy created between the work of art and the human body is therefore Manzoni's most interesting and radical gesture in his art, as he fills the inside of the work of art with breath or shit, substances that we all habitually expect to find inside a person. People can also be interpreted as two-legged cans of preserve—cans of preserve filled with breath and shit.

This equivalence between the human body and the body of the work of art has a long prehistory. The destiny of modern humanism is closely bound up with that of modern art in at least two ways. Firstly, according to the dominant conventions of European modernity, art is only what has been created by a human hand. Secondly, what distinguishes a work of art from other things is primarily the fact that the former can only be observed and interpreted, but not used. The fundamental maxim of humanism, that people should always be considered as ends and never as a means, already shows that European humanism sees human beings first of all as works of art. Human rights are properly speaking right of art applied to human beings. And in fact, in the wake of the Enlightenment the man is no longer conceived mainly as spirit or soul, but a body among other bodies, and in the last instance as a thing among other things. On the level of things, however, we have no other concept except that of art that would enable us to privilege some compared with all others, meaning to accord them a specific dignity of physical inviolability that is not accorded to others.

For this reason, in the context of European culture, the question what is art? involves more than just the art world. The criteria that we use to distinguish artworks from other things are not very different from those we use to distinguish what is human from what is not. In the European tradition the two processes—recognizing certain things as works of art and recognizing specific bodies together with their behaviors, actions and attitudes as human—are indissolubly linked. So in the context of European culture it is hardly surprising that the concept of biopolitics, introduced by Michel Foucault in recent decades and developed by other authors, particularly Giorgio Agamben, should have acquired a critical connotation from the start. To conceive humanity as a sort of animality, or rather as cattle, means almost automatically debasing its dignity, especially when this concept is used so as to be able to better provide for the physical well-being of this human animal. The true dignity of human beings emerges only when they are conceived as works of art.

This understanding of the human underpins all humanistic utopias, in which not just mankind but society as a whole is seen as a work of art. It seems, therefore, that it is only by answering the question about the nature



Merda d'artista, May 1961

of the work of art that we can answer the ancient question, what is truly a man—that modern individual recognized as the possessor of human rights and the subject of democracy. Human beings and works of art are inseparably united by a dense network of metaphors and metonymies, a network that becomes especially clear to us in the work of Manzoni. The artwork begins to appear to us as the “conserve” of a person, or at least as the “conserve” of the inside of a person. In this way the humanization of art is taken even further, but the same is true of the mirror-image process of further transformation of a human being into a work of art.

From its beginnings, leaving aside much else, art is essentially a process of preservation. Works of art are not only treated differently from other things, but they even survive other profane things. Ordinary things end up on the garbage heap when they are no longer of any use. But works of art are preserved in museums and archives, repaired and restored. Art is thus presented as an institution that governs the promise of earthly immortality—the only promise of this kind left to us ever since god or the gods have lost all responsibility for our immortality. Philosophy, as founded by Plato, was also firmly anchored to religion, as in the course of its long history it represented nothing more than the attempt to anticipate the survival of the soul after death, in other words to achieve metanoia, namely a conversion from the prospect of the here and now to the prospect of the beyond, from the prospect of the mortal body to the prospect of the immortal soul. This type of metanoia is in fact the indispensable premise for becoming metaphysical, for taking up a meta-position towards the world, being able to contemplate and conceive of the world as a whole.

When metanoia, namely the anticipation of one's own immortality, becomes impossible, the individual loses the ability to contemplate the whole. In fact this perspectivism is now seen as almost self-evident, so that whenever someone begins to speak we tend to ask ourselves first of all where he or she comes from, from what point of view he or she is speaking from. Race, class and gender generally act as coordinates of space in which whoever expresses himself is originally positioned. This kind of original positioning also serves as the cultural concept of identity. Even when these parameters are understood not as “natural” determiners but social constructs, their effect remains largely unaltered. Social constructs in fact can be deconstructed but not abolished or replaced arbitrarily by other constructs.

But at any rate, when the body ceases to be a living, animate body, when the soul dies, the body does not disappear but becomes a corpse. If there is no life after the death for the soul, the body continues to live after death as a corpse. In ancient Egypt, of course, bodies were mummified and preserved,

and in a certain sense we can say that modern art continues this tradition of ancient Egypt.

This emerges in a very clear way in Manzoni's case: to the extent that substances from the body of the artist are preserved and placed in museums, he has achieved the dream of individual immortality, without any need for the traditional promise of religion. In this respect, we can use the well-known concept of heterotopia, a term introduced by Michel Foucault, to speak of hetero-metanoia. Foucault lumped the museum together with the cemetery, library, hospital, prison and ship, among "the other places" or heterotopias. The body transcends the place where it was found in life when it is placed in a cemetery or museum. This entails a rather drastic shift in perspective, because from the point of view of the cemetery, museum or library, the world itself is seen in a different perspective, or heterotopic to be precise. Works of art are the living corpses of things. Things are preserved and exhibited in museums of art only after their deaths, meaning after they have been de-functionalized, cut off from practical life. The existence of artworks in a museum is life after death, a vampire life that has to be protected from sunlight. Modern art museums manifest especially clearly the difficulties facing those who aspire to hetero-metanoia. The stated purpose of the European avant-garde was and remains that of producing a "living" art, as opposed to the "dead" art of museums. At the same time modern art seeks to achieve this aim by displaying the material dimension of art, its pure corporeality, which usually remains hidden behind the surface of the image—hence properly the bodily or cadaveric nature of the images and things. By means of art, certain things are detached from the context of their living use and placed in the artificial, cemeterial, heterotopic context of the museum, precisely in order to display their pure materiality, their bodily valence. The life of "living" art is therefore the eternal life of corpse, which transcends all the living uses of things.

At the same time the museum's heterotopic perspective can also be interpreted as a sort of meta-perspective. We can experience a hetero-metanoia to the extent that, when we are still alive, we anticipate the coming status of our bodies as preserved corpses, so attaining a heterotopic perspective. And it is not difficult for us to represent ourselves as corpses, because already in our lifetimes we are subject to an irreversible decline. This is our participation in an eternal, infinite physical decline, which has neither a beginning nor an end. Uniting ourselves with this endless decadence means performing another metanoia, a hetero-metanoia, a change of perspective that enables us to take up a meta-position towards the world as it is, without by this having to invoke the immortality of the soul. A corpse

is immortal by definition, because it has left death behind it. Instead of the metaphysics of the immortal soul, a new metaphysic opens up before us, the hetero-metaphysic of the body. If you ask someone who has experienced this other metanoia where he or she comes from and from what perspective they speak, they will be able to answer calmly that they speak only from the heterotopic perspective of the cemetery, library or museum. Nevertheless modern art can evoke, rather than demonstrate, the advent of radical materialism, of hetero-metanoia, the metaphysics of the body. Precisely for this reason modern art is constantly in search of a new image that can serve as the icon of pure materiality, of pure profanity. Creating such icons of radical profaneness can, however, only be a success for short time—when the violence with which a thing is torn from life is still perceptible. In every individual historic period it thus becomes inevitable to seek for some other new icon of corporeality that has not yet been exploited, the perception of which, as the Russian formalists said, has not yet been automaticized. And yet, even after the passing of a specific historical time, in particular when we see a readymade work of art in a museum, we still perceive very clearly its nature as a corpse. We know that this urinal will never again find its usual place in a lavatory, that Warhol's Campbell's soup will never arrive on the supermarket shelves, will never be bought and eaten.

From this stems that atmosphere of melancholy that surrounds all readymade works of art, quite apart from the playful character they often have. Manzoni's *Merda d'artista* also belongs in this category. This work can clearly be considered a successful joke alluding to the mechanisms of the art market (a perfectly legitimate interpretation). At the same time, however, it is a deeply melancholic work, one that reveals the universal destiny of organic matter exactly to the extent that it promises a new form of preservation, of immortalization, of our living substance. In fact it shows what remains and what can be preserved of a human being in our neo-Egyptian civilization: not much, but more than nothing.