

Shit! Manzoni's work doesn't do what it says on the tin

So Piero Manzoni filled his cans not, as labelled, with Merda d'Artista, but with plaster. Does that matter? Does the concept still stand? Or should the Tate get rid of their investment fast?

Stuart Jeffries

Tue 12 Jun 2007 11.03 BST

In 2000 the Tate bought a tin purporting to be the excrement of Italian artist Piero Manzoni for £22,350 from Sotheby's. The news provoked outrage. How could Nicholas Serota lavish such money on this four decades old send-up on the absurdity of the art market, whose artistic intervention, after all, was not intended to be a thing of beauty or permanence? Indeed, Manzoni once said that he was exposing "the gullibility of the art-buying public" with his tins of Manzoni's Merda d'Artista. Hadn't the Tate been had from beyond the grave by the cheeky Italian?

Maybe not. Maybe the Tate's purchase was astute. Last month a tin of Merda d'Artista as sold by the same auction house in Milan for £81,000.

Perhaps now the Tate should offload their can on the market pronto and pocket the profits. I say pronto, because there are reports that Manzoni's excrement did not fill those tins. Agostino Bonalumi, who worked with Manzoni, recently wrote in Corriere della Sera, that the 90 30-gramme tins that Manzoni filled in 1961 before his untimely death aged 29, contained not faeces but plaster. This might be one of the greatest outrages perpetrated in the history of art. Or not.

Quite possibly the contents don't do exactly what they say on the tin. "I can assure everyone the contents were only plaster," writes Bonalumi. "If anyone wants to verify this, let them do so." Good point: surely now is the time for Serota to get out the can opener and find out. Is there a conceptual art curator at Tate Modern who specialises in determining the authenticity of 46-year-old Italian artist's faeces? It would be a singular job description.

But no. The Tate tin will keep its mystery. A Tate spokesperson says: "Keeping the viewer in suspense is part of the work's subversive humour." But did Manzoni leave instructions to that effect, or are the Tate making it up as they go along? If the latter, the thought is that they are protecting their investment: the value of the work might well plummet if the boring truth that Bonalumi posits was discovered.

Does it matter? Does it matter if Manzoni's tins do not contain merda d'artista? It's actually a more serious question than you might think because it concerns what kind of authenticity is necessary in art and what is contingent. For example, would it matter if the 8,601 diamonds that stud Damien Hirst's new work, For the Love of God, were really paste? Would it be an hilarious Manzonian artworld gag if all the cordons, bag checks and bouncers that prefigure the spectator's five minutes' face time with Hirst's head were completely unnecessary and that the diamonds were not worth £15 million? Or would the revelation be really, really annoying and make us poor shnooks queuing at the White Cube feel cheated? And, even more crucially, how much would the revelation that the diamonds were dross affect For the Love of God's £50 million price tag?

Similarly, would it matter if the condoms on Tracey Emin's bed had not seen active service in the artist's love life? It's an intriguing question since, surely, much of the interest in and value of Emin's self-revelatory work relies on the presumed authenticity of the sex life she discloses in her work. Her condoms must be real or we would be entitled to be quite cross. Or would we?

Either way, if there is an afterlife, Piero Manzoni surely must be enjoying the fact that the art world remains just as ludicrous as when he sought to expose it nearly five decades ago.