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Frieze

Infinite Jester

*On the occasion of his major retrospective at the Guggenheim, New York, from issue 94, 2005,
Tom Morton on Maurizio Cattelan*

By Tom Morton (October 13, 2005)



Maybe I'm just saying that we're all corrupted in a way; life itself is corrupted, and that's the way we like it.¹ –Maurizio Cattelan

In Philip Roth's novel *The Human Stain* (2000) three anonymous men sit on a bench in the grounds of an American Liberal Arts college, debating the fall-out of the Monica Lewinsky affair. They're brassy guys, with brassy manners, and one of them offers up the opinion that 'If Clinton had fucked her in the ass, she might have shut her mouth. Had he turned her over in the Oval Office and fucked her in the ass, none of this would have happened.'² His companions concur; yes, this would've been the President's best course of action. After all: 'You give somebody something they can't talk about. Then you've got them. You involve them in a mutual transgression, and you have a mutual corruption.'³

Since the late 1980s Maurizio Cattelan has been making art that's tough to talk about, or at least with much rigour or much candour. There's plenty of noise made about Cattelan, sure (few of his contemporaries share his profile), but this is mostly composed of gasps of faux astonishment, or of a frenzied clapping that, while it applauds the artist's work, also attempts to fend it off. The critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud has written that, faced with a new piece by the artist, 'one is always tempted to say: "No, it's not possible. He can't exhibit that, what audacity!"'⁴, and then leave things there, as though the sheer effrontery of Cattelan's art militates against further thoughts or feelings. This position, as Bourriaud implies, is untenable for anybody with a brave heart or mind and does a disservice to the work, which should be no more or less difficult to discuss than the world it inhabits. (The artist has said that 'I actually

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think that reality is far more provocative than my art.'5) Maybe, though, this is precisely the problem, the blockage in the conversational U-bend. Cattelan's oeuvre, like the art world bubble, or the public sphere, or our blue planet itself, embroils us in a series of mutual corruptions. Confronted with, say, *Untitled* (2004), three wide-eyed, waxwork child suicides hanging from a tree in a Milanese public square, we become implicated. Bad thoughts begin to roll in ('Why am I entertained by this piece? Who are the victims of my everyday pleasures?'), and the artist buys our blushing silence.

Read any text about Cattelan and it's likely that to describe him as a 'clown', the art world's 'court jester'. As careworn by repetition as this is, there's some truth to it. The clown's job, after all, is to hold up a mirror to our pomposities, foibles and fears, and this is something the artist does with aplomb, upping the comic ante with each new work he produces. Like Shakespeare's fool Yorick, he is 'a fellow of infinite jest', with all the lightness and weight that this suggests (it's worth reflecting here on how unbearable a life of 'infinite jest' might actually be, and on the fact that Yorick's immortal smile is that of a lipless, choiceless skull). For all this, though, there's something about the analogy that rings false. While Cattelan's art is at pains to entertain – and sometimes comes close, cosmetically at least, to big top populism – it's also characterized by a desire for escape, for emancipation from the art world's customary mechanisms. This is not part of the clown's narrative. After all, who ever heard of a performer running away from the circus? Circus folk have nowhere else to go.

Perhaps it's better to think of Cattelan as an escapologist, a Houdini figure caught up in an endless loop of stage-managed imprisonment and flight. The most obvious evidence for this is *Una Domenica a Rivara* (A Sunday in Rivara, 1992), a piece the artist made for an exhibition at the Castello di Rivara, Italy. Comprising a number of knotted bed-sheets dangling from the venue's top-floor window like a prop from a movie prison break, it's a work that at once refuses institutional authority, while simultaneously embracing it (if this were truly an attempt to avoid participating in the show, the fleeing Cattelan would have pulled his makeshift rope ladder down after him and squirreled it away in some quiet, hidden spot). Similar works have appeared in other spaces, with similarly paradoxical results. Take *Untitled* (1996), a rectangular grave-cum-escape-tunnel dug into the gallery floor of Le Consortium in Dijon, France, the loamy leavings of which formed a Robert Smithson-like earthwork, as though not making art were somehow an impossibility, whatever the artist's efforts. Or take *Untitled* (2001), another tunnel, this time hacked into the floorboards of one of the rooms housing the Boijmans Museum Rotterdam's collection of 17th-century Dutch masters. Here a waxwork Cattelan proxy peeked up out of the cavity at the heavyweight paintings, as though he were taking a last, lingering look at a canon he couldn't hope to compete with, while all the while knowing that by backing away from the museum (and its teleological tug), he was writing himself into future art history. Although each of these three works speaks of emancipation, they're ultimately dependent on its opposite. Like an institutionalized prisoner, what they really want isn't liberty at all but rather a bigger cell, a better tobacco allowance and more accommodating wardens. Cattelan's point (directed at least partly at himself) is that if the prison bars are spaced far enough apart, even the shrewdest inmate will begin to believe that he is free.

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If Cattelan's practice has drawn on the notion of incarceration, it has also drawn on its precursor, the criminal act. For him crime seems to be one solution to the problem of labour, and the way it robs us of time. (The artist has said that 'I hated working [...] and then came art which seemed like a territory of freedom. In the end I realized that with art you also have to work all the time.'⁶) Invited in 1996 to participate in the group show 'Crap Shoot' in De Appel, Amsterdam, Cattelan stole the entire contents of the nearby Galerie Bloom, packed the art works, fax machines and filing cabinets in plastic bags and cardboard boxes and then exhibited them as his own work under the title *Another Fucking Ready-made*. Leaving aside the piece's doubtful status as an unfettered collection of found objects (all that bagging- and boxing-up might be interpreted as a purposefully bungled attempt at a Duchampian ready-made, a perfidy of Modernism, an imperfect art-historical crime), what it foregrounded, in the end, was not itself but a particular type of cultural policing that allowed the curators at De Appel to reframe a real theft as an act of 'appropriation'.

If Cattelan, here, made an art institution his accomplice in a crime, he did something similar with the Italian police in his *Untitled* (2002). Having failed to make a new work for an upcoming exhibition, the artist went to a local police station on the night before the opening and reported that a non-existent sculpture had been stolen from his car. Defeated long ago, perhaps, by the efforts of a thousand small-fry insurance fraudsters, the duty officer duly typed up a report, which Cattelan then framed and hung in the gallery the following day. A fiction begat a fiction, a verbal image of a crime begat a textual one and, by and large, the twin bureaucracies of police work and Conceptual art went undisturbed. Procedure, after all, had been followed in each case, and, as any bureaucrat will tell you, this is much more important than the phantom stuff of truth.

Looking at back much of Cattelan's work from the 1990s, it can sometimes seem as though he's willing the art world's powerful to tire of his impudent, needful fun-making; to turn around and say, 'that joke's not funny any more'. He dresses one of his gallerists up in a pink prick-like rabbit costume to mock his well-known womanizing (*Errotin, Le Vrai Lapin, Errotin, The Real Rabbit*, 1995) and brings down the house. He tapes another to the wall of his own space (*A Perfect Day*, 1999) and provokes little more than laughter and a few prêt-a-porter, infinitely shrug off-able pieties about the market. What's a guy gotta do to piss someone off around here? Cattelan has said that 'you try to move the borders a little bit further, and then you realize how easily the art world can absorb any blow. But that's OK, I guess that's part of the game [...] Wasn't the dream of the avant-garde to become completely mainstream?'⁷ There is mainstream, though, and mainstream, which is why, since the late 1990s, Cattelan has produced a number of works that are primarily concerned with what happens to difficult objects when they (and their media-reproduced images) enter the wider public sphere.

First shown at London's Royal Academy as part of the exhibition 'Apocalypse', *La Nona Ora* (The Ninth Hour, 1999) is a life-size waxwork of Pope John Paul II. Stricken by a meteorite that's come crashing through the gallery skylight (fragments of shattered safety glass litter the red-carpeted floor), things don't look too good for the Holy Father. Blind with pain, unable to buck the alien boulder from his broken legs, he lifts up his crucifix in a desperate appeal to God. The Pope's timing, however, is terribly, terminally off. This is the Ninth Hour, the moment at which, in Mark

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15:33-35, the crucified Jesus cries out 'Father! Father! Why hast Thou Forsaken Me?' If there's anybody up there, then They are not listening. For all practical purposes, Friedrich Nietzsche was right – God, in *La Nona Ora*, may as well be dead.

Despite (and also perhaps because of) its Pop immediacy, Cattelan's installation is a complicated work to unpack. With its high production values it eschews the Arte Povera provisionalism of much of the artist's earlier work – like the Pope himself, the piece is buffed to a news photographer-friendly sheen. Gone too is any sense of marginality, of getting into an institution (nervous and a little grudging) by the back door – this is a work that confidently fills the exhibition space from floor to ceiling. Seemingly no longer concerned with the power plays of a petty cultural élite, Cattelan turns his comedic weaponry on the boss man of a billion hypnotized souls. Or perhaps he doesn't. Looking at the Holy Father's face, with its human frailty, its flicker of doubt and fear, we might interpret the piece as a second crucifixion, a fresh covenant that will restore faith in a Church run to worldliness and fat. At the precise moment when Cattelan promises a partisan image, he destabilizes it with an exhibition of sympathy. This restiveness, this irresolution, is the strength of *La Nona Ora* and what, more than anything else, makes it good art. Like the best of Cattelan's work, it involves us in a series of transactions and trade-offs, not only with the artist but also with the different factions in the internal war we call ourselves.

It is harder to feel sympathy for *Him* (2001), a waxwork of Adolf Hitler made for the Farfagbriken, Stockholm, although the piece does its best to summon up that emotion. Kneeling in worship, prayer or penance, his hands clasped tightly together, the Führer appears oddly vulnerable, a little boy lost in a vast universe. The horror of the piece comes at a slow creep. Questions begin to buzz about our heads – the sort that children ask before being hushed up. What exactly is Hitler praying for, and what if those prayers were heard? Does he pray to the same God as you or me, and if so, does he not test His infinite forgiveness? Is there any difference, in the end, between the Führer and the God that allowed him to perpetrate such evil on His watch? Cattelan's Teflon aesthetic offers no answers, and we're left to work things out on our own. Few of us do this, however, preferring to respond with a sophisticated chuckle ('how amusing of him, how daring!') – the death rattle of feeling, the sound of a mind slamming shut. Like Roth's vision of Clinton, Cattelan knows that moral courage can make us look dumb or banal, and that it risks the scorn of others. He knows too that we are vain and risk averse. This, it seems to me, is the comic pivot of the artist's work. We can't produce the cosmic-scale laughter, tears and rage that Cattelan's art asks for, and so instead we applaud him for the act of asking itself. Rewarded, he becomes even more demanding of our faulty faculties, and we respond as we did before, becoming complicit in a spiralling economy of production and reception in which – brilliantly, brutally – the work itself becomes an unpaid debt, a bill pushed to the back of a dark, forgotten drawer.

Back, for a moment, to the notion of escape. While a number of Cattelan's works (including *Charlie*, a mechanized sculpture of a young boy bearing the artist's adult face that pedaled a bicycle about the 2003 Venice Biennale) ponder bids for freedom and their impossibility, there is a very different type of liberty at play in his collaborative projects. One of the first of these was *Blown Away: The Sixth Caribbean Biennale* (1999), a St Kitts-based event conceived and produced with the curator Jens Hoffmann. Replete with an exotic location, a list of usual-suspect

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artists (including Olafur Eliasson, Rikrit Tiravanija and Pipilotti Rist) and an energetic publicity and press campaign, it would have been an almost too perfect example of the Biennale form, but for the fact that it didn't feature a single work of art. Instead, Blown Away functioned as a tropical holiday for its participants (another example of Cattelan's avowed allergy to work?) and as a swipe at the proliferation of essentially undifferentiated biennial exhibitions that are easy to assemble as flat-pack furniture, and about as tuned into local context as a KFC franchise. Looking back at the event, what's perhaps most interesting about its legacy is that the critique it offered now comes built into almost every biennial on the planet in the form of publications or hand-wringing symposia which, while they probe the problems of such exhibitions, seem always to fall short of radically reforming them. This, though, is the way our corrupt world often works. You set out to blow a powerful idea away, and you end up (because power is a spongy, absorbent thing) providing it with an alibi. What you're left with is memories of small freedoms – building a sandcastle instead of an installation, chatting over cocktails instead of sweating it out in a panel talk. These are the things we cling to; the only life rafts available to us, whether they can bear our weight or not.

Since 2002 Cattelan has been co-Director with Massimiliano Gioni and Ali Subotnick of the Wrong Gallery, which was housed in a space on New York's 20th Street that recently closed, although the gallery will continue to exist in various forms. A white-walled, metre-square exhibition nook behind a permanently locked glass door, its signage was a nearly identical copy of that of the neighbouring Andrew Kreps Gallery, a design decision that from time to time caused inattentive visitors to Kreps' place mistakenly to try the wrong (or Wrong) entrance and, finding it shut, perform a confused double-take. Run by an artist, a curator and a critic, this not-for-profit space (whose exhibition programme included Martin Creed, Elizabeth Peyton, Paul McCarthy and Jason Rhoades) was a closed-shop, near-Utopian art world in itself, in which the buyer, and by extension the whole problematic business of the art market, was left standing on the sidewalk, able only to lick the window in a show of frustrated desire. If the Wrong Gallery was a model of the art world as we'd like it to be (in our more down-on-commerce moments), Cattelan and his collaborators have tested this model over the last two years by taking a booth at the Frieze Art Fair, conforming to the logic of corporate 'growth', while all the time refusing that logic's purpose: making a fistful of bucks. Like Blown Away, the Wrong Gallery resembles a familiar art world institution, but it isn't – not quite. This, though, is of a piece with Cattelan, Gioni and Subotnick's practice – if something looks like a fish and smells like a fish, it is almost certain to be something Wrong. The trio also publish The Wrong Times, a newspaper that features interviews with artists exhibiting in the space, and co-edit Charley, a magazine that changes format every issue. On top of this, since 1996, Cattelan has been editing and publishing Permanent Food a magazine comprised of images borrowed from other publications.

One wonders what they'll do with the Berlin Biennial, an event they're curating in 2006. For now, the Wrong Gallery remain tight-lipped, the only visible output of their efforts being a promotional bumper sticker featuring a photograph of Pope Benedict XIV (an image that speaks of the 2006 Biennial's German–Italian axis, while also echoing La Nona Ora) and an unfinished performance piece created for them by the artist Tino Seghal, in which they wordlessly shake their heads whenever anybody asks them about the exhibition. Cattelan has said 'Could you

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have a surprise that lasts forever? That's what I would love to do.'⁸ Probably not. Surprises, like much of his art, depend on silence. With Berlin the time will come when he must speak.

Thinking about Cattelan's decision to work as part of the Wrong Gallery, it seems to be a way of freeing himself from the struggle for freedom, of escaping his past escapes. While his practice as an artist is often concerned with crises of the self – consider, say, *La Rivoluzione Siamo Noi* (We Are The Revolution, 2000) in which his wax effigy hangs from a clothes hook wearing a Beuysian felt suit, as though he'd been left dangling and half-forgotten in the wardrobe of art history – the Wrong Gallery is a trinity, an unholy three-in-one in which the self becomes blurred and mobile. (Gioni habitually stands in for Cattelan when the artist is asked to give interviews or gallery lectures, and has on at least one occasion donned a wig and played Subotnick's part.) Maybe working collaboratively is Cattelan's ultimate refusal, the ultimate act of absconding. As part of the Wrong Gallery he is no longer a clown, or a criminal or a prisoner. He is rather a true escape artist – an escaped artist – although one who remains bound by the belief that 'no matter how badly you want to be hated, somebody will come and love you. And no matter how much you want to be loved, somebody will always hate you in the end.'⁹ As Cattelan's work has always demonstrated, it is in this hazard zone, in the corrupted spaces between love and hate, that all of us must live.

1 Interview with Nancy Spector in Maurizio Cattelan, Phaidon Press, London, 2000, pp. 34–5

2 Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*, Vintage, London, 2000, p. 146

3 *Ibid.*, p. 149

4 Nicolas Bourriaud, 'A Grammar of Visual Delinquency', *Parkett*, no. 59, 2000, p. 34

5 Bonami et al., p. 17

6 Email to the author (possibly written by Massimiliano Gioni), 2005.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*