

METAL

Maurizio Cattelan — The Tragic Ridiculousness of Modern Art

by Harvey Byworth-Morgan (February 27, 2023)



All the images, courtesy of Maurizio Cattelan's Archive

“Value is a word I find hard to define... for art, I prefer to talk about relevance.” This excerpt from my conversation with the notorious troublemaker-cum-artist Maurizio Cattelan largely encapsulates the spirit of his oeuvre – of contentious value, but undeniable relevance. Maurizio Cattelan has been called every name under the sun in the context of the art scene: a prankster, a jester, an enfant terrible, a smart-ass, and even a genius.

His route to the upper echelons of the art world has been an unorthodox one; with no formal training in painting or any artistic practices, Cattelan's career began in carpentry in the 1980s and he only shifted into the art realm towards the end of the decade, as he approached his 30s. Whilst a certain sardonic humour has been a constant of his work through the years, the tools he has called upon throughout the journey have varied massively. As he first began to garner acclaim in the mid-90s, it was Cattelan's use of anthropomorphic taxidermy which caught the attention of many, with suicidal squirrels (*Bidibidibidiboo*, 1996) and hung horses (*Novecento*, 1997) offering an amusing degree of cynicism. At the turn of the millennia came the advent of the pieces for which Cattelan is perhaps best known: his hyper-realistic sculptures, many of notable public figures, ranging from the Pope to himself. As his journey as an artist has continued, the range of media behind Cattelan's work has become more diverse and more abstract; in 2002 he co-founded The Wrong Gallery in New York, which was essentially a door into a tiny empty room. 2019's *Comedian* grabbed headlines over the globe as it saw, at least in theory, Maurizio sell a banana and some duct tape for \$120,000 (although later on in this interview he sheds a bit more light on the concept behind the infamous piece).

Cattelan is everything that traditionalists fear and despise about modern art, which is what makes his work so important within a contemporary context. From the permanence of his artworks to the authorship, there are light years between Maurizio Cattelan and what one's conventional idea of an artist might be; ultimately, he is a figure who deals in ideas, perhaps more comparable to Plato than Picasso. It would not be hyperbole to characterise Cattelan as one of, if not the, most central figures in relation to the concept of value in the contemporary art world, given how central a theme it is in his works. Thus, it would've been inexcusable for us to speculate upon the topic for this issue without asking for his two cents – here's what he had to say...



Comedian, 2019. Banana, duct tape, variable dimensions. Photography by Zeno Zotti.

Maurizio, welcome to METAL Magazine. In this, our 47th issue, the concept that we are striving to dissect is that of value. The absurdity of the post-modern age has led many to question or even ridicule just what it is that makes art valuable, perhaps none more so than yourself. Two editions of your infamous work *Comedian*, a banana taped to a wall, sold for \$120,000 each; what exactly makes *Comedian* a piece of art?

I've always thought that most of the time when people laugh it is not just at a joke; it's at the tragic ridiculousness of the situation, that kind of laughter where if you don't laugh, you'll just cry. Humour and irony include tragedy; essentially, they are just two sides of the same coin, and jokes can be terribly serious, and revealing. Think of the jesters in the courts: they were entrusted with the task of giving bad news to their royal overlords that no one else would dare deliver, and they were heard. That is why I believe that art and comedy are two very similar concepts in essence, rather than different ones. Humour works like a good work of art does: they are both intended to have you look and think twice.

Perhaps the most amusing physical quality of *Comedian* is the owner's obligation to replace the two components as and when it is needed. Whilst there is an accompanying certificate of authentication, it seems that the true artwork is the concept rather than any physical object. This is somewhat reminiscent of Yves Klein's *Le Vide*, a piece of art made from nothing at all. Has Klein's subversive attitude towards the idea of art influenced your own work?

All works that include ephemeral materials come with instructions, similar to the way that a printer or a dishwasher needs an instructions manual. I see it as the same thing. There's nothing too conceptual about *Comedian*, it's all about the actual object itself. And let me add that *Le Vide* is not technically a piece made out of nothing, it is a piece made by a space that delimits a void. It has to do with Buddhism and spirituality more than a nihilistic or conceptual mindset.

The editor's note of METAL 47 refers to a restrictive tightrope that once governed the merit of arts and culture; your picture-based magazine *Toiletpaper*, founded in 2010 with Pierpaolo Ferrari, certainly operates outside of these restrictions. How was the idea for the magazine born?

Dennis Freedman asked Pierpaolo and me to create something for a fashion shoot with Linda Evangelista. It was back in 2009. Dennis was really happy with it, and so were we, so we thought that it would be a good idea to give it a try. That shoot was the very beginning of our collaboration. After *Permanent Food* I was interested in continuing to explore the possibilities of a print magazine: I believe that there is a certain fetishist quality in paper that no other medium will ever quite overcome.

Getting back to the theme of value, a stone's throw from the home of *Toiletpaper* in East Milan, one can find quotes such as, "I wished I had more middle fingers" and "Why do they put pizza in a square box?" above the bar of Caffè degli Artisti. It is alleged that you chose this bustling creative hub to display the works rather than Bar Basso, the historic institution just opposite, as a sort of affront to the established elite. Does this rumour have any credibility?

It's so hard to find a spot to drink at Bar Basso during the Salone del Mobile, that we thought we should try to find some more space on the other side of the street. Seletti put his magical touch on the place, and we named it Lo Sbagliato, transforming the space into a *Toiletpaper* bar. It was a friend's initiative, just to find some place to sit without getting into a fight with strangers.



L.O.V.E., 2010. Hand, White "P" Carrara Marble. Basement, Bright Roman travertine. Hand, 470 cm x 220 cm x 72 cm. Basement, 470 x 470 x 630. Piazza degli Affari, Milan, 2010. Photography by Photo by Zeno Zotti.

Ai Weiwei famously said, "Everything is art. Everything is politics." Do you subscribe to this school of thought?

It was what Beuys said as well. I don't think that everyone can do anything, it is valid for art and many other disciplines, including politics. Many people stop and kneel before the authority of someone who states the absolutes of who is who, and what is what. Contrarily, I am interested in questioning these principles, and in questioning that authority. But I also accept that if I start to write my own personal diary, it may well never become a published book.

***America*, your solid gold fully functioning toilet piece created in 2016, is one of several things that has earned you a reputation as the 21st-century Marcel Duchamp, owing to its similarity to his 1917 work *Fontaine*. Does this comparison sit well with you?**

I'd have to say that the piece is a double-edged sword: it holds out the promise of a quintessential American dream – access to opportunity and development for all – while making visible what is not attainable for most. From the wall to the pedestal, and from the pedestal to the toilet, *America* offered the possibility of being one to one with the newest cult object, works of art inside their sacred spot, the museum. It was about having a spiritual moment of pure, lonely contemplation in the least obvious area of an institution: it was something that doesn't happen so often anymore.

At what point does one gain authorship over a piece of work? Like Picasso, Damien Hirst, and many others, you have on occasion recruited others to actualise your ideas into physical pieces of art; how does this affect the sense of ownership an artist has over his work?

Who is the author of METAL? Is the printer of your magazine the author of the publication? Or is it instead the journalists? Or is it even the photographers that work for you? Would you question who is the author in this case? For art it's the same, the author is the owner of the ideas, not the maker.

On some level, all of your works have an element of humour in them. Do you think that humour can ever undermine the integrity of an artwork? Or is it a necessity?

Humour is a portal to the most profound level of the human consciousness, it allows art to get in contact with much more melancholic, existential issues. Laughter might have two souls, it can be an escape from an embarrassing situation, or, on the other hand, a moment of clarity, an illumination. In that epiphany-moment, you suddenly understand something that you don't want to forget. In this sense, humour is absolutely critical from a cognitive standpoint, and so can be a work of art which is based on it.



Untitled, 2018. Fresco painting, pine wood, steel, 713,2 x 392,7 x 272,4 cm.
The Artist is Present, curated by Maurizio Cattelan, Yuz Museum, Shanghai, China.

Previously, you've referred to your "intruder complex", a disposition which makes you feel undeserving of your position in the art world. Do you think that fear such as this can drive an artist to continue to produce challenging work? It could be argued that the artist who feels accepted has nothing of importance left to say.

Ultimately the great task of the artist is not to challenge their audience, but to challenge themselves. I can only wish to never get bored of what I do and to always face challenges that I have never faced before. If you feel accepted as an artist either you have reached nirvana, or you are looking in the wrong place.

Is there anything that claims to be art, but you do not consider it to be so?

It's very personal. To me, art should be incendiary; it should never satisfy expectations. In the latter case, it is a styling exercise and a waste of time, both for the artist and the audience. Art must change your life; you should not be the same person after seeing a piece of art as you were before you saw it.

You claimed that “a work’s goal and duty are to reach as many people as possible” and that any artist who says otherwise “is a liar”. Do you think the ability to engage as many people as possible is the primary factor that defines a work’s value?

Many things have changed in the world of images in the last few years, and I learnt that it would be a mistake to judge the art only basing it on the size of the audience that it garners. Social media has innumerable increased the possibility of reaching more and more people with an image, but this is not at all related to the genuine quality of the experience. There are artworks that might be popular online but do not have value. It is a shady area, but it's important to remember that popularity does not necessarily equate to quality. Art is consumed as any other image, what is missing is the awe of the experience. Masterpieces are those that manage to maintain a balance between being good artworks and being very popular.

Could the above goal and duty not be construed as a prioritising of a perceived shock factor over the actual message of an art piece?

I personally don't believe in the artist-strategist: one should be absolutely clear in where they want to go, but to make good artworks they must focus on the here-and-now, on their profound necessity of coming out with something to be shared that they believe is important and relevant. As I said, the challenge is with yourself, not with others.



Breath, 2021. Carrara marble. Human figure, 40 x 78 x 131 cm. Dog, 30 x 65 x 40 cm. Breath, Ghosts, Blind, Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan, 2021. Courtesy the artist, Marian Goodman Gallery and Pirelli HangarBicocca. Photo by Agostino Osio.

***Blind*, one of your more recent artworks which depicts an undeniably 9/11-esque scene, has the potential to be considered either sentimental or even perhaps emotionally tone-deaf. How do you think the emotional resonance of an artwork plays into its value?**

Value is actually a word that I find rather difficult to define; inherently, it's too related to money. When talking about pieces of art, I always prefer to talk about their relevance rather than their value. Not all the works are produced with the intention of being sold. And to be perfectly honest, producing something that you intend to sell is not a great position from which to start in general.

In 2011 you supposedly retired after an exhibition at New York's Guggenheim Museum. Why did you choose to do so? And why did you choose to come back?

I would not have retired in 2011 to then come back after just a few years if I was taking into consideration business in the first place. People smarter than me that needed to take a rest from the world of art production as a system for business simply stopped working, without declaring it. I'm the kind of man that can only have a long-lasting relationship if he takes some pauses here or there, and I feel exactly the same way about my art: I could not afford to be faithful to it forever without a breakup making me realise just how much I missed it.

Since presenting *Frank and Jamie* at Marian Goodman in 2002, you haven't shown your work in any private galleries, what has prompted this aversion?

It was not a decision I made. It happened. The reasons are many more than what I can explain, but it is also related to space. When you already know the space it's hard to find a way to find a second idea for how to use it, or to try to do better than what you did previously. It is that kind of challenge in which I don't feel like I want to race. The gallery space has many limits in this sense. I prefer work that has a dialogue with the space and makes it become an experience. The gallery is more suitable for works that need neutrality rather than interaction.

In reference to the work of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, you said that "once you wrap the Reichstag, you can't go back to wrapping a chair". Do you think an artist has an obligation to continually make their work more and more ambitious? And would a return to something more comfortable damage a work's integrity?

I don't believe that life and history are a straight line, in a way everything returns. I think we should live with the awareness that everything we have can be taken away from us at any moment. I'm not saying that we should give up anything, quite the contrary actually. But there is a value in knowing that at any moment everything we have can disappear in a cloud of smoke.

If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, how much will it go for at auction?

In characteristically controversial style, Maurizio declined to answer this final question. Perhaps he deemed a lack of answer to hold more value (or relevance) than an actual one. Or perhaps he just couldn't be arsed to finish the interview. Who's to know? We could go round in circles infinitely speculating such ideas, but it might just be best to follow Maurizio's lead and simply say nothing at all.



AMERICA, 2016. Bowl, 18K gold. Pipes and flushometer, gold plated, 72,4 x 35,6 x 68,6 cm.
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Photo by Jacopo Zotti.



You, 2021. Platinum silicone, epoxy fiberglass, stainless steel, real hair, clothes, hemp rope and flowers, 140 x 40 x 25 cm.
Galleria Massimo De Carlo, Milan. Courtesy the artist and Galleria Massimo De Carlo. Photo by Zeno Zotti.



We, 2010. Wood, fiberglass, polyurethane rubber and fabric, 148 x 79 x 68 cm. DESTE Foundation for Contemporary
Art Project Space, Hydra, Greece, June 16–September 30, 2010. Photo by Pierpaolo Ferrari.