







Maurizio Cattelan

# Natureur Provocateur

Milan, June 2021  
Interview by PHILIPPE POURHASHEMI  
Portrait by JOE MAHER  
Courtesy of MAURIZIO CATTELAN'S ARCHIVE

One of the most influential Italian artists in the world today, Maurizio Cattelan is no stranger to controversy and intense public debate, making his art relevant and engaging. Dealing with some of Western history's darkest moments and disturbing paradigms, as well as confronting us with the paradoxical state of our society, is a Cattelan specialty and instinctive process, combined with a goofy and devastating sense of humor. Exchanging views with the Italian artist is as complex and intriguing as some of his most famous works. This year, Milan has honored him with a retrospective show curated by Roberta Tenconi and Vicente Todolí at Pirelli HangarBicocca, which will run until the 20th of February next year. We caught up with the artist to discuss power, provocation, mortality and what he thinks about political correctness.

What are the key themes of your new show in Milan?

Art has been dealing with the same themes since the start of human history: creation, life, death. This fact is intertwined with the ambition of every artist to become eternal through their work. Each artist is confronted with those two sides of the coin: a sense of omnipotence and a sense of failure. It is a rollercoaster of exhilarating elevations and very steep descents. As painful as it is, the second part is also the most significant. Like all the exhibitions that preceded it, this exhibition is the concentration of all those elements.

Why did you choose Pirelli HangarBicocca for this exhibition?

These are not choices that one makes at any moment. I have always thought that these synergies work like a love relationship. You cannot love without being loved: it never happens to fall in love one-sidedly. There always are two desires meeting halfway. Pirelli HangarBicocca was looking for a partner like me and I was looking for a partner like them. And then we danced!

What does the *Breath Ghosts Blind* title mean for you?

These are three words for three times of the exhibition. The exhibitions are made up of a beginning and an end, and a bit of art in between. Originally it was chaos. Or maybe bacteria. Or perhaps just *Breath. Ghosts* is the second time: imagine you are observing an anthill. You understand that ants are very busy doing something very important, industriously and diligently, but their vital reasons elude you. Every life is like this: if you look at it from the outside, it is very easy to question its meaning. From the outside, we can look like ghosts without souls. *Blind* is what we all become in the end.

Is it still possible to shock in 2021?

I have always thought and stated that it is the duty of art to provoke reactions, and I still believe it. Art should be incendiary, and it should never satisfy expectations. In the latter case, art becomes a style exercise and a waste of time, both for the artist and for the audience. So yes, it must be still possible to provoke. I believe art should change your life; you should not remain the same after having been exposed to it. Of course, I'm referring here to masterpieces, like the Sistine Chapel in the Apostolic Palace or the Cappella degli Scrovegni in Padua.

Is it okay to laugh about everything?

Of course, it is. And you can also cry about everything. For instance, I always get emotional in front of a dish of pasta al pomodoro.

What do you think about what is referred to as a 'woke' or 'politically correct' culture?

It depends on the context. In Italy, for instance, there is no such thing, and sometimes we miss it, especially if you look at certain TV shows or newspapers. Many people did not realize that certain words can be like stones, but I think that after supporters of President Trump stormed the U.S. Capitol on the 6th of January this year, no one could say that anymore. I cannot even imagine what would have happened. That said, I am not a fan of extremisms in general.

We're living in a society where people like to judge others, especially online. What do you think about social media today?

Judging in society has existed for as long as human beings existed themselves. Wisdom teeth are in fact called that way because it is by expressing a judgement that one becomes a grown-up. Adulthood symbolically arises from sharing your opinions with others, it gives form to your thoughts. At the beginning, the Internet was exciting, because it allowed the opening of direct channels not filtered by journalists or experts. You would go to the restaurant, and you were the food critic. At the same time, the Internet is an anonymous environment, and this unleashes the worst in people. If everyone can express themselves about anything, even when they have no competence to do so, not a single word said makes sense any longer. Today, we are flooded with a cacophonous excess of information and worthless judgments, and this has made everyone more vulnerable. If we are all broadcasters, who is actually listening, and why should you?

You're not a big fan of talking in front of an audience. Can you explain why?

I don't think I have anything relevant to say on stage. I give great speeches in the shower, though.

Can you be an artist without transgressing?

Sure. If you look at me for example, I actually live a very boring life. I have faith in methodical activities, in being constant more than in transgression. My transgressive side is fully projected onto my works, they are the catalysts of what I am unable to live in everyday life. But the real transgressive guys are those who get up and go to work every morning.

How do you take criticism? Do you find it inspiring?

It depends on where the criticism comes from. There are a couple of people I fully trust, what I would describe as long-lasting relationships, from which I don't expect cheers and applause, but confrontation instead. Of course, we are not made of iron, and criticism can always hurt your pride. Still, I always try to turn critique into something useful.

Do you feel 'contrary' somehow?

I am not sure what you mean by 'contrary' here, but I consider myself a free thinker first and foremost.

Is it better to be hated or loved?

It is much better, and much harder, to achieve love than hate. And it makes it more enjoyable once you actually get there.

How do you explain your fascination with power, violence and anything that is forbidden?

As human beings, we are also fascinated with the intrigue of the sunsets and the deep sea, as well as the mystery of art and life. Violence has always scared me a lot. I understand how it develops, but it disturbs me deeply. You could say the same about power, its fellow traveler. I have always kept away from power and authority in my life, except from the moments when I've tried to question them or deconstruct them.

Would you say that we are living decadent times?

Decadence always marks the end of a hegemonic period; when a system is dying in order to let another one grow from its ashes. We are living at the end of a century, and at the same time, we are immersed in that change. With power shifting, and old systems falling out, everything is being redesigned. Codes are rewritten. So yes, we are living a period of decay, the decay of what we leave behind, but we are also witnessing the first glimpse of what is yet to come.

Does taste matter to you as a concept?

Yes, especially when it comes to ice creams. I hate vanilla.

Can we learn from history or are we deluding ourselves?

Not only can we, but we must. As human beings, our responsibility to the planet and future is to look at the mistakes made and try not to repeat them. But these are obvious things. The question is: why is it so hard to do it?

How would you define the dynamic between death and art?

The relationship between art and death is a never-ending flirt.

What are your fears and passions?

I think we have defense systems, which we can't even see nor admit to ourselves. We experience fears collectively each day: fear of foreigners, fear of growing old. Billboards are full of them. Our society is built on this, the system sells and feeds you with those fears. Fear of failure starts at primary school. What would our society be if making a mistake would become a moment of learning, as opposed to the one when you lose privileges?

What is the role of the artist?

Someone once said that artists can show things other people are terrified of expressing. If you are unable to do that, then you're not doing your job well. ■

Today, we are flooded with information and death is a never-ending flirt. The relationship between art and this has made everyone more vulnerable. Every life is like this: if you look at it from the outside, it is very easy to question its meaning. Art should be incendiary, and it should never satisfy expectations. Each artist is confronted with those two sides of the coin: a sense of omnipotence and a sense of failure.





MAURIZIO CATTELAN  
You, 2021  
Installation view for "Lost in Italy" Luxembourg + Co., London, UK, 2021.  
Polystyrene, epoxy resin, real and synthetic hair, clothes, acrylic paint steel and hemp rope, 1  
40 x 40 x 25cm  
Courtesy of Luxembourg + Co and Maurizio Cattelan's Archive



MAURIZIO CATTELAN  
*Breath*, 2021  
Installation view, Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan, 2021  
Carrara marble  
Human figure: 40 x 78 x 131 cm  
Dog: 30 x 65 x 40 cm  
Courtesy the artist, Marian Goodman Gallery and Pirelli  
HangarBicocca, Milan  
Photo: Agostino Osio



MAURIZIO CATTELAN  
*Blind*, 2021  
Installation view, Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan, 2021  
Resin, wood, steel, aluminum, polystyrene, paint  
1,695 x 1,300 x 1,195 cm  
Produced by Marian Goodman Gallery and Pirelli  
HangarBicocca, Milan  
Courtesy the artist, Marian Goodman Gallery and Pirelli  
HangarBicocca, Milan





MAURIZIO CATTELAN  
*Ghosts, 2021*  
Installation view, Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan, 2021  
Taxidermied pigeons  
Environmental dimensions  
Courtesy the artist and Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan  
Photo: Agostino Osio