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‘My work has always been serious’: Maurizio Cattelan on his \$6m banana, his gold toilet – and bringing Hitler to Berlin

He is famed for creating a golden loo that was stolen and a \$6m banana that was eaten. But, says the sculptor ahead of a major new show in Germany, there’s more to his work than pranks and provocation

By Deborah Cole (September 3, 2026)



The problem is, people often stop at the joke’ ... Maurizio Cattelan at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. Photograph: Christian Jungeblodt/the Guardian

Maurizio Cattelan, the art world’s merriest prankster, pauses when asked which object in his sprawling new Berlin show is most likely to be defaced, stolen or eaten, then emits a foghorn of a laugh. “There is no need to vandalise anything,” says the trim, soulful Italian, explaining that he has already taken care of all that, given how the work cuts villains, imposters and straw men down to size. “But,” he says, referring to the show’s more daring works, “maybe we need someone to resuscitate people.”

Cattelan, who speaks in a lilting English, grins broadly, a mischievous glint in his brown eyes. Speaking on the subterranean level of Mies van der Rohe’s weightless Neue Nationalgalerie (NNG) in Berlin, he darts between the impish and the profound in conversation, mirroring the dizzying range of his work. The silver-haired sculptor is best known for duct-taping a banana to a wall in 2019 and calling it Comedian, in a droll commentary on the excesses of the art market. The joke became even funnier when it sold for \$6.2m, then hilarious when its buyer took a bite out of his purchase and swallowed it.

There was also the gold toilet, called America, that was installed in New York's Guggenheim in 2016, its curators later offering the piece to Donald Trump's White House instead of the Van Gogh that it requested. Thieves later made off with the 18-carat loo when it went on display at Blenheim Palace, Winston Churchill's Oxfordshire birthplace.

"It's rare to be with an artist who's recognised on the street," says NNG director Klaus Biesenbach. "He reached a level of accessibility with these very easy-to-communicate ideas: 'Oh God, a person puts a banana on the wall and it's sold for six million!' He is a very deep thinker who camouflages seriousness with humour, and who camouflages the sublime with irony."

Night, Cattelan's first major solo exhibition in Germany, was granted to him as winner of this year's Neue Nationalgalerie prize honouring influential contemporary artists. Cattelan collaborated with curator Lisa Botti on new commissions, as well as selecting historic works from the past three decades, noticeably skipping over his greatest hits. "They were part of a different conversation," he says. "My work has always been serious. The problem is people often stop at the joke."

The show spotlights the wax and wane of power, the contentiousness of collective memory, and the horror and hope of history, as symbolised by its scarred and vibrant host city. "Night," he says, "is a beautiful title. We sleep, we love, we dream, we fear. It's a moment where things get fuzzy. And after night, there is dawn and another day. But it's definitely a suspended moment – a magic moment."

'I suffer when making a show – but I love the rush. It's a fix, a dependency'

At the entrance, peering down from the roof, the 2003 work Never features Oskar, Günter Grass's eerie child witness to the Nazi era from his novel The Tin Drum, silently beating out his warning. Purgatory, created for the show, presents a stunted-scale version of Berlin's Brandenburg Gate as an ambivalent landmark, a portal for visitors to rethink their engagement with European history.



Kneeling for \$17m ... Him, from 2001, is Cattelan's most controversial – and lucrative – sculpture. Photograph: Attilio Maranzano/Maurizio Cattelan

Him, from 2001, features a diminutive kneeling man who is revealed to be Adolf Hitler in a prayer-like pose, facing off against 2007's Dawn, a female figure with real human hair, her hands pinned in a crucifixion pose. Overhead, thousands of stuffed pigeons are absorbed by the black ceiling. They, for Cattelan, are "a menacing presence", though Botti adds: "It's also about the holy spirit, about looking up. It's a bit of optimism." It all calls to mind La Nona Ora, or The Ninth Hour, an infamous work from 1999 (sadly not in the show) depicting Pope John Paul II resplendent in ceremonial garb, having been struck down by a meteorite.

The Hitler piece Him has been Cattelan's most lucrative, selling for \$17.2m in 2016. It had courted controversy in Warsaw, where it was displayed on the site of the wartime ghetto, recalling the day in 1970 when West German chancellor Willy Brandt dropped to his knees in front of the city's Monument to the Ghetto Heroes to beg forgiveness for the crimes of the Nazi era. The Simon Wiesenthal Center called Cattelan's work "a senseless provocation".

Cattelan is satisfied the Night exhibition is in the right place at the right time, lending the works fresh power. He confesses to a certain obsession with the darkest chapters of German history, but primarily for the universality of their nightmarish resonance. "Hitler in this case represents evil," he says. "It could have been Genghis Khan or another very popular, very famous leader." He is unafraid of the possibility of a Berlin audience questioning his right to borrow from German iconography, "like if I was wearing rasta hair or something". Cultural appropriation, he believes, is a "very American" accusation.

Cattelan calls the NNG "an incredible building" and considers this modernist masterpiece with its famously windswept plaza "a major contributor" to the show. "There is no separation between inside and outside here," he says. "I had to find a way not to dominate it, not to be dominated but to have a conversation. I connected with the idea of a church. My Catholicism comes out when I don't want it to! But this time it came out as a structure, on this idea of central axes through the exhibition." Botti describes Cattelan's work as "comic existentialism", saying: "You laugh about something, but then the laugh gets stuck in your throat."

His work comments on an era of crumbling social structures and disinformation, created by an artist who divides his time between Trump's US and Italy under hard-right prime minister Giorgia Meloni, choosing New York and Milan as his bases. "Internationally, there is now a resurgence of people asking for more strong leadership: Meloni is a very cunning and astute politician." Expressing a grudging admiration for her unusual staying power, he says: "It's disappointing to think that the left weren't able to produce, in all the occasions they had, such stability. What didn't they have that she has?" He suggests an answer: scapegoats. "We have always these enemies that are offered to us. They give us problems that probably we don't have. But nobody has the magic wand."

Cattelan was born to a working-class family in Padua, a historic city 40km west of Venice, and famously had no formal art training. Having Berlin put on one of his most ambitious exhibitions in years has felt like a kind of homecoming, given it's now 20 years since he co-curated the fourth Biennale, a barn-burner of a show that made the most of the now-restored capital's "poor but sexy" era.

“Maurizio really participated in Berlin becoming Berlin,” says Klaus Biesenbach, director of the NNG, calling that 2006 biennale “a watershed moment for this city” and its creative scene. Cattelan believes Berlin “still carries scars, history, contradictions – it’s a sort of outdoor experiment”. He credited it with helping him recapture part of his youth, his days spent as a postman, a mortuary attendant and a sperm donor. “Berlin definitely was about clubbing,” he says. “It was very interesting because in Berlin stuff can grow overnight, last like a mushroom for a few days and then disappear. [Clubbing] was something I didn’t experience during my 20s or 30s. I had a serious ... well, four or five years of taking back lost time. It was beautiful, it was very raw. Now it’s over again. The city became more mature.”



Novecento (1997), showing in the Castello di Rivoli in Torino. Photograph: Paolo Pellion di Persano/Maurizio Cattelan

For Cattelan, the 2010s brought a highly publicised retirement, then a ferocious comeback. “At that time, it was like that pressure, the anxiety, the making of the shows we were producing – you reach a level where it’s like” – he makes a drowning sound – “where you have to raise a white flag.”

Each major exhibition sends him on a rollercoaster of exhilaration and panic, he says, admitting to being “extremely desperate” while planning Night. “Do I suffer? Yes, I don’t like it. It’s always a challenge. I still need the rush. It’s a contradiction, but I love the hate of making a show. It’s a fix. It’s a dependency. Maybe a therapist would say, ‘We can solve your addiction problem.’ And I’d say, ‘No, no, I love it.’”

I wonder, given the death of David Hockney, another epochal figure of the art world, if Cattelan has given any thought to his own legacy, but he does not seem to envision a future in which his work endures. “I don’t have a foundation,” he says. “I don’t have a studio, never had. I also don’t have a family. A legacy would be like being so conscious about yourself that you have these constructions.”

However, now being in his 60s, he says: “Maybe I should think about who I want to pass my problems to. I’m super lucky. I did have doubts [as an artist]. But I jumped into the void and said, ‘If we overcome fear, there will be a fantastic dawn. A fantastic dawn.’”