



A Banana on the Wall

Maurizio Cattelan:
Comedian, 2019
Banana and tape

In 1960, a German sociologist, Arnold Gehlen, tried to name the main feature of modern art. In a survey of paintings and drawings by artists from Paul Cézanne to Paul Klee, he found a pervasive commitment to what he called “image rationality.” If one knew the concepts that led to the various, often abstract pictorial inventions, he argued, one could understand the art, or at the least be made very curious about it. Now, just recently, at this year’s *Art Basel* in Miami, a normal, medium-sized banana was hanging on the wall. It was attached with gray duct tape. *The Art Newspaper*, an absolutely serious publication, reported on the front page of a special edition that with this work—the banana—Maurizio Cattelan was reintroducing himself to the international art fairs after a fifteen-year period of abstinence. He had considered casting it in resin, then he thought of bronze, which he could have patinated or painted, until finally his idea was born: a real—a normal, as it were—piece of fruit in yellow, attached to the wall with a broad, gray, slightly repulsive strip of Gaffa Tape, which has the virtue of adhering to just about anything. **The title of the work is *Comedian*, and the price was set at \$120,000. It came in an edition of three; there were two artist’s proofs.** Now, this work, which was viewed either deliberately or inadvertently by ten thousand visitors on the first day of the fair, was sold three times. One of the buyers was said to be a museum, which allegedly was made to pay a considerably higher sum. **Cattelan in Miami: this raises some philosophical concern.** The town, *The Art Newspaper* informs us, too, would do well to reflect on climate change, because, as is otherwise usual only in European cities, a “climate emergency” has been proclaimed here, quite independently from the fair. Indeed, the town is already suffering from floods on a regular basis, and if the world’s sea levels were to rise by as much as six feet, the very existence of 13.1 million people would be threatened. Miami Beach, meanwhile, was dressed to the nines for *Art Basel* week, as it had been in previous years. Once again, subwoofers resounded from cars and motorcycles. The barely countable parties and openings frequented by stylish men and women were all but inescapable. The press meanwhile discussed the fact that art is “only” there for the rich. Yet many new fora and vast amounts of new art demonstrate more than ever, especially in the new satellite fairs, that in a historic and social stage of excess and tedium, countless new applicants are seeking their place in society.

One collector said after visiting only one of the satellite fairs that she was “underwhelmed.” Given this state of affairs, the ostensibly simple work of Cattelan in 2019 can be seen as a challenge. A society that is quite enlightened, as ours is today, and that may nonetheless be acting stupidly around the world, can be answered with cynicism. Marcel Duchamp established this principle in exemplary fashion a hundred years ago with the help of the art collectors Walter and Louise Arensberg and later in consort with well-known colleagues and followers. He supplied the Arensbergs with his own art and successfully advised them on what to buy from his most esteemed colleagues. His *Bottle Rack* and his urinal (*Fountain*) have since made it into thousands of art history publications. Cattelan builds on this. But his banana is not a readymade. This work is not about fruit, nor is it a case of following in the wake of the so-called *Eat Art* invented by Daniel Spoerri in the 1960s. **The point is a quid pro quo that is frequently established in art. If you buy me—according to our present-day image rationality—you have understood. Indeed, you have come into possession of a part of my artistic existence.** In 1962, Yves Klein held a check book in his hand with which he sold “immaterial zones of artistic sensibility.” In 1961, Piero Manzoni exhibited small jars containing “artist’s shit” (*merda d’artista*); it is a multiple that changed hands for \$281,000 during an auction in 2015. In his best works, and such do exist, Cattelan is no mere successor, but neither is he a trendsetter. He is a desperate human being, as perhaps we all are. For *Art Basel Miami*, like many moments, many places, many events on the planet, has reached a critical ceiling, even if the collectors Don and Mera Rubell have now erected a large museum for their 7,200 works. We sense that the art market should not continue like this. We sense that too much is on the wrong track. But not everyone knows what to do, except that many are prepared to give money, often a lot of money, for something they feel is good. **The banana is most certainly an allegory of our era.** It is crooked and it spoils. We like to eat it, but we should for the moment perhaps think a little bit further.

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