

A banana taped to a wall sells for \$6 million: Maurizio Cattelan's *Comedian* and the state of contemporary art

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Artist Maurizio Cattelan's *Comedian* (2019), a work consisting of a banana duct-taped to a wall, sold for \$6.24 million, including buyer's premium, at an auction at Sotheby's in New York on Wednesday. The piece's final price far exceeded the presale estimate of \$1 million to \$1.5 million. This work, the hype surrounding it and the auction itself are an indictment of the contemporary art world and the society that nourishes it.

The title of Cattelan's work could well apply to the artist himself. Since the 1980s, Cattelan (who has no formal training in art) has been known mainly for satirical work. One of his well-known pieces is *La Nona Ora* (1999), a realistic wax sculpture of Pope John Paul II having been struck by a meteor (see below). *Him* (2001) is a smaller-than-life-size sculpture of Hitler kneeling in prayer. Many of Cattelan's works seem like punch lines or provocations that provide little, if any, meaningful commentary.

Comedian has precedents in the "readymades" of French artist Marcel Duchamp, which were the origin of conceptual art. Questioning art itself and the reverence in which he believed it was held, particularly in light of the slaughter of the First World War, Duchamp selected objects that he found to be aesthetically neutral and displayed them as his works. *Bottle Rack* (1914) and *Fountain* (1917), the latter being a porcelain urinal, are two notable examples. Although Duchamp did not create many readymades, they have cast a long shadow over subsequent art.

Playing this sort of joke (i.e., demonstrating that any object on which the artist places his or her name thereby becomes valuable, collectible "art") does not

express a profound truth. It is instead rather trivial. It does not do much more than point to the fact that important art and the bourgeois art market, with its vagaries, blindnesses and financial shenanigans, may have almost nothing to do with one another. The serious artist passes by or outgrows such pranks and gets on with the task of confronting life and reality in his or her work.

Cattelan's banana has spawned memes and been the subject of tremendous media hoopla. Sotheby's was packed during the auction, and so was its virtual viewing room. Auctioneer Oliver Barker (the name is fitting) introduced *Comedian* as a "viral sensation that has skyrocketed to universal recognition.... Here it is in all its splendor."

Far from being a probing analysis, the catalogue essay about the work is a remarkable piece of puffery. "No other artwork from the 21st century has provoked scandal, sparked imagination and upended the very definition of contemporary art like Maurizio Cattelan's *Comedian*," it reads. The work "belongs to the rare league of artworks that need no introduction, having quickly erupted into a viral global sensation that drew record crowds, social media inundation, landed the cover of the *New York Post* and divided viewers and critics alike. Passionately debated, rhapsodically venerated and hotly contested ... the work headlined news stories shared around the world, becoming the most talked-about artwork of the century."

But what does *Comedian* mean? The work is not a joke, Cattelan insisted in a 2021 interview with *The Art Newspaper*, but "a sincere commentary and reflection on what we value." He created it specifically for the Art Basel Miami Beach fair. "Art fairs are all about

speed and business, so I saw it this way: if I were at a fair, I could sell bananas the way other people sell their paintings. I could play the system, but by my own rules,” he said in the same interview. If *Comedian* is not a joke, then, given Cattelan’s explanation, it is hard not to see it as an exploitation or a con job.

Conceptual art, as developed by artists such as Lawrence Weiner, Robert Barry and others, initially was a rebellion against the commodification of art. It rejected the gallery system and the art market. But Cattelan’s conception behind *Comedian* is 180 degrees from this standpoint. It represents capitulation to the art market, an attempt to cash in.

“What bothers me is that after the first sale, the artist no longer profits as the work changes hands,” Cattelan wrote in an email to the *New York Times*. “Auction houses and collectors reap the benefits, while the creator, who makes the very object driving the market, is left out.” It is difficult to feel sympathy for the artist.

The buyer of the work is Justin Sun, a cryptocurrency entrepreneur. He founded the TRON blockchain platform and developed the associated cryptocurrency, USDD stablecoin. Cryptocurrency is a speculative instrument without any value of its own. Sun also owns BitTorrent, a protocol for peer-to-peer file sharing. His net worth is estimated to be at least \$1.43 billion. Last year, the US Securities and Exchange Commission accused Sun of manipulating the market to inflate the value of TRON and BitTorrent tokens.

As one might expect, Sun paid for *Comedian* in cryptocurrency. In exchange for \$6.24 million in fictitious capital, he will receive a banana that was purchased at a Florida supermarket. It will be up to Sun to replace the banana (which he plans to eat) and tape as necessary. He also received a certificate of authenticity and instructions for the work’s display. The entire event has an air of unreality about it. A fictitious work of art has been bought with fictitious wealth.

During the auction, the notorious banana was on display near paintings by Monet and Picasso. In the art market, the work hanging on the wall or resting on a plinth is ultimately a matter of indifference to dealers (and perhaps to many collectors as well). For this social layer, the bottom line is the work’s market value, the potential profit to be realized.

The juxtaposition of Cattelan’s work with those of

Monet and Picasso highlights the vacuity of much contemporary art, which has little to say about the world. As the broader economy has become increasingly divorced from material production, the art market has become separated from questions of aesthetic value and artistic truth. Both have become dominated by hype and speculation. This same process is exerting a noxious effect on art itself.

At the same time, one needs to point out that Cattelan’s is not the only form of charlatantry currently on offer in the artistic field. Online publications that are now waxing indignant about *Comedian* have for decades promoted reactionary identity politics, prattled on about “whiteness,” “cisgender privilege” and the like. In fact, the deliberate effort to turn artists away from broader realities and the conditions of masses of people, the cultivation of social indifference and the creation of an art world obsessively awash in “self” have helped create the present foul cultural atmosphere.



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