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‘Catellan’s Comedian (2019) is not art’. Discuss.

Clement Greenberg, the critic of American modern art, once stated that art “no longer needs to be justified in other terms than its own¹.” “Art for art’s sake” became a central value of modernistic art.

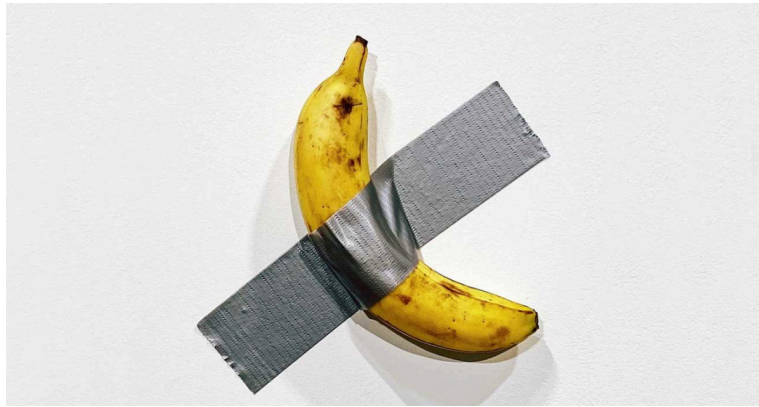


Fig. 1: *Comedian*, Cattelan, 2019

Yet defending contemporary visual art is particularly difficult. We recognise literature by its shared conventions of writing, and music by its notation, but visual art can now be created from any medium – paint, marble, installation, or an everyday object. This vague boundary between “art” and “non-art” makes Maurizio Cattelan's *Comedian* (2019), a banana duct-taped to a wall, a genuinely contested case.

The statement “Cattelan’s *Comedian* is not art” neglects the subtleties behind the work and the history of artistic traditions. The debate over his work reveals the internal contradiction within theories of art. In this paper, I will discuss the context, concept, and aesthetic value of *Comedian* based on two philosophical definitions of art.

The Definitions of Art

Arthur Danto laid the foundation of institutional definitions of art by coining the term “artworld” as “an atmosphere of art theory²,” but art’s definition varies throughout the ages, influenced by historical events, societal norms, and artists’ choices.

Stephen Davies proposed a disjunctive definition of art in 1987. He holds that something is art (a) if it shows excellence of skill and achievement in realizing significant aesthetic goals, or (b) if it falls under an art genre or art form established and publicly recognized within an art

¹ Greenberg, Clement, and Robert C. Morgan. *Clement Greenberg, Late Writings*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

² Danto, Arthur. “The Artworld.” *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 61, no. 19, Oct. 1964, pp. 571–84.

tradition, or (c) if it is intended by its maker/presenter to be art and its maker/presenter does what is necessary and appropriate to realizing that intention³.

Around the same period, in 1982, Monroe Beardsley proposes that something is art if and only if it is “either an arrangement of conditions intended to be capable of affording an experience with marked aesthetic character or (incidentally) an arrangement belonging to a class or type of arrangements that is typically intended to have this capacity⁴.”

These two definitions, proposed in the contemporary period, are of distinctive categories, highlighting the contradiction within art: how different artistic values are prioritised. *Comedian* embodies certain characteristics while also revealing weaknesses in each, demonstrating how contested the theories of art can be.

Art Tradition and Movement

Comedian belongs to the art tradition of Conceptualism in the Postmodernism movement, satisfying statement (b) of Davies’ definition. Davies values artistic traditions as implicit backgrounds required to understand an artwork. It establishes the necessary “artworlds” – historically developed traditions of works, genres, theories, criticism, and conventions of presentation – required to define, interpret, and appreciate the arts.

Conceptual art is art in which the concept behind the work is more important than the depicted scene, person, or event. Banksy’s *Love is in the Bin* (2018) demonstrated the art tradition to the full extent, where it was partially shredded during an auction at Sotheby’s in 2018⁵. The meaning of the work lies not in the picture itself, which is destroyed, but in the entire contextualised process of creation, presentation, destruction, and the reactions from different parties.

³ Davies, Stephen. “Defining Art and Artworlds.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 73, no. 4, Oct. 2015, pp. 375–84, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12222>.

⁴ Beardsley, Monroe, 1982, *The Aesthetic Point of View*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

⁵ Gompertz, Will. “Will Gompertz on Banksy’s Shredded Love Is in the Bin.” *BBC News*, 12 Oct. 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-45818204>. Accessed 9 July 2026.



Fig. 2: *Love Is In The Bin*, Banksy, 2018

Conceptual art is an established art tradition institutionally accepted within the professional art world and academia. Conceptualism is institutionally established, where MoMA⁶ lists it as an official art term, the Philadelphia Museum of Art has exhibited readymade conceptual works such as Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917)⁷, and Perrotin Gallery, which represents Cattelan, deals in conceptual work generally⁸. This institutional acceptance matters because by validating and contextualising a work, museums and galleries transform objects into historical records and set the standards for cultural and financial value⁹. This formal recognition by museums, galleries and permanent collections defines art's historical importance and shapes what is taught as art history. For instance, Duchamp's *Fountain* is included in the AP Art History course syllabus¹⁰.

⁶ MoMA. "Conceptual Art | MoMA." *The Museum of Modern Art*, www.moma.org/collection/terms/conceptual-art.

⁷ Dos, Miguel F. "Duchamp's Paradox." *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. o, no. o, Oxford University Press, May 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqaf045>. Accessed 30 Sept. 2025.

⁸ "Perrotin." *Perrotin.com*, 2026, www.perrotin.com/en/collect. Accessed 30 June 2026.

⁹ Davies, Stephen. "Defining Art and Artworlds." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 73, no. 4, Oct. 2015, pp. 375–84, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jaac.12222>.

¹⁰ *AP Art History Course And Exam Description*. 2019, <https://apstudents.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/ap-art-history-course-and-exam-description.pdf>. Accessed 11 July 2026.



Fig. 3: *Fountain*, Duchamp, 1917

Various published books and research papers described the history, characteristics, and significance of Conceptual art, including *Philosophy and Conceptual Art* by Goldie and Schellekens¹¹ and *Conceptual Art: a critical anthology* by A Alberro and B Stimson¹², in which Conceptualism was a recognised and established art tradition. Conceptual artist and theorist Joseph Kosuth argues that the “idea of art” and the realm of “art” should be considered identical, asserting that the essential meaning of art lies not in the physical quality of the work, but in the idea it carries¹³. Demonstrated by the various institutional and philosophical recognition of the tradition, Conceptualism is a consensus in the art world.

Comedian’s concept lies in its critique and satire of consumerism and art market speculation. Through its form of art transaction, buyers do not purchase the tape and the banana, but the Certificate of Authenticity, which grants the buyer the rights to display the work, and instructions for specific installation and replacement of the banana¹⁴. The product of selling and auction differs from the contemporary art market tradition, which directly trades visual art or art objects of editions¹⁵. This creates shock value, mocking how the market values abstract prestige and artist signatures over tangible craftsmanship. By selling the banana at a ludicrous price, \$120,000 in 2019 and \$6.4 million in 2024¹⁶, Cattelan exposes how market elitism in the capital society creates its own rules of worth, rendering the object itself secondary. These physical qualities of

¹¹ Goldie, Peter, and Elisabeth Schellekens, eds. *Philosophy and conceptual art*. OUP Oxford, 2007.

¹² Alberro, Alexander, and Blake Stimson, eds. *Conceptual art: a critical anthology*. MIT press, 2000.

¹³ Kosuth, Joseph. “Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990.” *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 167, Apr. 1992, p. 262, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2220232>.

¹⁴ Dere, Mehmet. “Araştırma Makalesi.” *The Parody of Irony: Maurizio Cattelan’s Comedian (2019) within the Framework of Linda Hutcheon’s Parody Theory*, vol. 14, no. 89-113, Aug. 2025, <https://doi.org/10.46372/arts.1636921>. Accessed 27 June 2026.

¹⁵ Robertson, Iain, ed. *Understanding international art markets and management*. London: Routledge, 2005.

¹⁶ Nigrelli, Craig. “Winning Bidder Pays \$6.2 Million for Duct-Taped Banana Artwork.” *Straight Arrow*, 21 Nov. 2024, san.com/cc/winning-bidder-pays-6-2-million-for-duct-taped-banana-artwork/?utm_source=chatgpt.com. Accessed 23 June 2026.

Comedian are the “mediums of access to the idea” according to Kosuth. The explanation above demonstrates Conceptualism as an established art tradition and plausible categorisation of *Comedian* to it based on distinctive characteristics. Hence, Cattelan’s *Comedian* is considered art when using Davies’ definition (b), which prioritises artistic tradition and practice.

However, Conceptualism still faces public scepticism. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy notes that many people view Conceptual Art as requiring less technical skill to execute and lacking traditional aesthetic experience¹⁷. The public’s more traditional notion of art, which emphasises craftsmanship and aesthetics, clashes with a more radical view of academia. This clash, highlighted by the paradox of Conceptual Art and *Comedian*, reflects the conflict of the definition and who holds the authority to define art.

The Concept and the Context

The creation context of Cattelan’s *Comedian* also renders it eligible to be considered art under Davies’ definition. Active since the 1980s, Cattelan became known by the early 1990s for his artistic pranks and sarcasm¹⁸ that rejects the traditional notion of beauty, craftsmanship, and permanence¹⁹, as in *La Nona Ora* (1999) and *We* (2010). Following this consistent professional trajectory, *Comedian* extends a long-running practice of gallery-based parody rather than one-off stunts.



Fig. 4: *La Nona Ora*, Cattelan, 1999

¹⁷ Schellekens, Elisabeth. “Conceptual Art.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2019, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019, plato.stanford.edu/entries/conceptual-art/#LimArtRolArt.

¹⁸ Editors, Britannica. “Maurizio Cattelan | Biography, Art, & Facts | Britannica.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2019, www.britannica.com/biography/Maurizio-Cattelan.

¹⁹ Dere, Mehmet. “Araştırma Makalesi.” *The Parody of Irony: Maurizio Cattelan’s Comedian (2019) within the Framework of Linda Hutcheon’s Parody Theory*, vol. 14, no. 89-113, Aug. 2025, <https://doi.org/10.46372/arts.1636921>. Accessed 27 June 2026.



Fig. 5: *We*, Cattelan, 2010

One might object that Davies' intentional criterion – art is art when intended by the maker to be art – risks classifying any ordinary object, as everyone could declare an object “art.” Davies avoids this trivialization by stating that artistic intention must be realised through practices appropriate to artistic presentation rather than mere assertion. Cattelan's standard-wise art-making process consists of ideation, preparation, and finalisation²⁰. He worked on the concept of *Comedian* for a year and tried to physicalize the idea with different materials, including bronze and raisin²¹. As he told Journalist Sarah Cascone, “Wherever I was traveling I had this banana on the wall...one day I woke up, and I said ‘the banana is supposed to be a banana²².’” Also, every formal detail was deliberate: the banana was placed precisely 60 inches from the ground with one standard strip of silver duct tape at an 45 degrees angle relative to the floor²³. Not only did Cattelan, the maker of *Comedian*, do necessary practice to realise it to be art, but art dealer Emmanuel Perrotin, the presenter, also consolidated the notion. When he presented this work at Art Basel Miami Beach art fair in December 2019, it was sold quickly to art collectors²⁴. This action demonstrates institutional endorsement and professional recognition of the work's emphasis on “idea”, which evinces *Comedian* to satisfy statement (c) in Davies' definition of art.

²⁰Di Pietrantonio, Giacinto. "Interview of Maurizio Cattelan." *Maurizio Cattelan*, 2nd ed., edited by Francesco Bonami, Nancy Spector, Barbara Vanderlinden, and Massimiliano Gioni, Phaidon, 2003, pp. 142–45.

²¹ Cascone, Sarah. “Maurizio Cattelan Is Taping Bananas to a Wall at Art Basel Miami Beach and Selling Them for \$120,000 Each.” *Artnet News*, artnet News, 4 Dec. 2019, news.artnet.com/market/maurizio-cattelan-banana-art-basel-miami-beach-1722516.

²² Cascone, Sarah. “Maurizio Cattelan Is Taping Bananas to a Wall at Art Basel Miami Beach and Selling Them for \$120,000 Each.” *Artnet News*, artnet News, 4 Dec. 2019, news.artnet.com/market/maurizio-cattelan-banana-art-basel-miami-beach-1722516.

²³ Nigrelli, Craig. “Winning Bidder Pays \$6.2 Million for Duct-Taped Banana Artwork.” *Straight Arrow*, 21 Nov. 2024, san.com/cc/winning-bidder-pays-6-2-million-for-duct-taped-banana-artwork/?utm_source=chatgpt.com. Accessed 23 June 2026.

²⁴ Cascone, Sarah. “Maurizio Cattelan Is Taping Bananas to a Wall at Art Basel Miami Beach and Selling Them for \$120,000 Each.” *Artnet News*, artnet News, 4 Dec. 2019, news.artnet.com/market/maurizio-cattelan-banana-art-basel-miami-beach-1722516.

Even so, the emphasis on institutional acceptance can be refuted, as it may be argued that *Comedian* simply becomes structurally similar to a legal instrument, a contract conferring ownership rights over a concept. Such a counter-argument can be mounted, revealing the instability in Davies' framework.

Aesthetic Value and Formalism

Under Beardsley's aesthetic definition, however, *Comedian* largely fails. In *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (1959), Beardsley argued that a work's value derives entirely from its intrinsic, perceivable properties, independent of the artist's biography or intentions²⁵. This is the theory of aesthetic formalism. In Beardsley's argument, if you admire an abstract painting, discovering it was painted by a chimpanzee does not invalidate your aesthetic response.

Comedian's success, however, relies almost entirely on external factors, including the artist's provocative reputation for sarcasm and parody, the creative process, its placement in Perrotin Gallery and Miami Beach Art Fair, and the reaction on social media. Because Beardsley rejects these external elements, the piece falls flat under his model. Imagine a kid taping an apple on a wall before Cattelan did; it would hardly be regarded as a process of creating artwork.

Beardsley asserts that the value of an artwork depends directly on evaluating its "aesthetic experience" using the UCI model: unity, complexity, and intensity²⁶. *Comedian* demonstrates a high degree of formal cohesion: a yellow banana, a single strip of silver duct tape, and a vertical wall work together to form a singular visual focal point. Its simplistic composition, however, lacks the richness and diversity of elements that Beardsley's "complexity" model is looking for. Also, formally, the contrast between the organic curved banana and the geometric silver tape only creates a minor visual intensity. By Beardsley's standard, its objective aesthetic value is low and thus does not meet Beardsley's criteria for being an art. Some may argue that the irony and conceptual surprise of *Comedian* are aesthetic, but the argument would be unsound under Beardsley's formalism criteria. They are a derivative interpretation of the work's external context, not its intrinsic value. Hence, *Comedian* essentially exposes the clash between contemporary conceptual art and aesthetic theory when aesthetic experience is critical to the criterion of art.

Why Does the Debate Persist?

The enduring controversy surrounding *Comedian* arises because the artwork exposes tensions between competing philosophical conceptions of art. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu claimed that the power to define art is a form of cultural capital, unevenly distributed among museums,

²⁵ Beardsley, Monroe C. "Aesthetics; Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism." *Notes*, vol. 16, no. 2, Mar. 1959, p. 245, <https://doi.org/10.2307/892728>.

²⁶ Beardsley, Monroe C. "Aesthetics; Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism." *Notes*, vol. 16, no. 2, Mar. 1959, p. 245, <https://doi.org/10.2307/892728>.

critics, collectors and artists²⁷. Therefore, art is contingent on one's social class, education, and the professional artworld. Different definitions privilege different values: Davies prioritises institutional recognition and artistic practice, while Beardsley privileges aesthetic experience. *Comedian* becomes art under one definition but not another.

Cattelan deliberately exploits these philosophical disagreements by defying traditional expectations of art. Without any formal art training, Cattelan claimed to be an “art-worker²⁸” and delivers critiques of the art market with parody and sarcasm, intentionally creating ambiguity between art and non-art²⁹. His conceptual art *Working is a Bad Job* (1993)³⁰ challenged traditional art norms at the Venice Biennale by turning a gallery space into a commercial billboard for a perfume company. By deliberately replacing creative labour with corporate advertising, Cattelan critiqued the art market's obsession with commercial value and questioned the definition of artistic labour. *Comedian* continues this project. Because audiences generally expect elaborate skill and craft from art, radically unconventional works like this provoke resistance. The intentional shock value deliberately makes this controversial discussion inevitable.



Fig. 6: *Working is a Bad Job (Lavorare è un brutto mestiere)*, Cattelan, 1993

Final Thought

The persistent disagreement surrounding *Comedian* should not be regarded as a failure of philosophy but as evidence that the artwork successfully exposes the competing values underlying the definitions of art, including aesthetic experience, artistic tradition, institutional recognition, or conceptual intention. Rather than showing that one theory is correct, *Comedian* reveals the limitations of each. Whether one considers *Comedian* as art becomes less important

²⁷ Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* 1984. 1984, monoskop.org/images/e/e0/Pierre_Bourdieu_Distinction_A_Social_Critique_of_the_Judgement_of_Taste_1984.pdf.

²⁸ Di Pietrantonio, Giacinto. "Interview of Maurizio Cattelan." *Maurizio Cattelan*, 2nd ed., edited by Francesco Bonami, Nancy Spector, Barbara Vanderlinden, and Massimiliano Gioni, Phaidon, 2003, pp. 142–45.

²⁹ Bhalerao, Arav Dogra1 Nilesh. "Subversive Satire and Postmodern Provocations: A Critical Analysis of Maurizio Cattelan's Artistry through the Lens of 'Comedian'." *"Innovation in Visual Arts" (ICIVA '23)* (2023).

³⁰ "Lavorare è un brutto mestiere." *Perrotin.com*, 2026, www.perrotin.com/en/collect. Accessed 30 June 2026.

when this argument brings forth new philosophical and sociological insights. *Comedian* is sensational because it cannot be classified consistently by existing definitions of art, and exposes the contradiction within societal beliefs attached to the value of art. Just as Cattelan himself remarked, “When art makes us feel something and puts us in a position of discomfort, that’s when it has an impact³¹.”

Word count (excluding title and captions): 1989

³¹ Pitre, Alanna. “Sotheby’s to Offer Cattelan’s ‘Comedian.’” *Sothebys.com*, 24 Oct. 2024, www.sothebys.com/en/articles/sothebys-to-offer-maurizio-cattelans-comedian?locale=de. Accessed 23 June 2026.