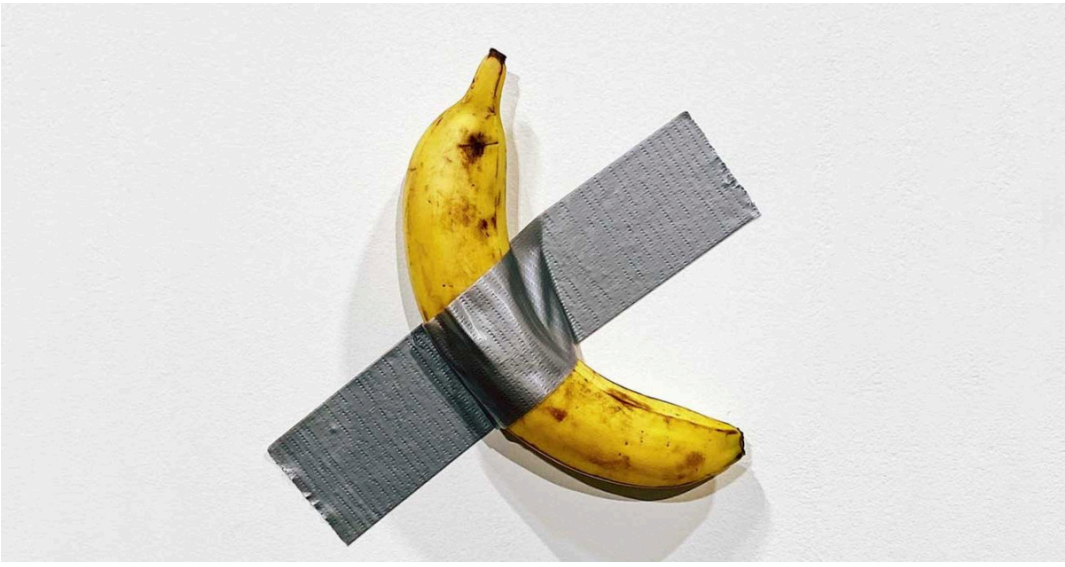
Qicong Wu

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

Maurizio Cattelan’s *Comedian* looks, at many people’s first glance, insultingly simple: it is, literally, a fresh banana duct-taped to a white wall. First exhibited by Perrotin at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2019, the work immediately became one of the most discussed artworks of the year.[1] Two authorized editions of the work reportedly sold for $120,000 each, but the buyers were not purchasing an irreplaceable banana: they acquired a certificate of authenticity and a set of instructions specifying how the banana and duct tape should be installed. When performance artist David Datuna ate the banana in a gesture he called Hungry Artist, the gallery simply replaced it, insisting that the work had not been destroyed. In 2024, the controversy intensified when an edition of *Comedian* sold at Sotheby’s for $6.2 million to cryptocurrency entrepreneur Justin Sun, who later ate the banana publicly. The posterity of these events seems to support a common objection, that a banana on a wall is not art, but only a market spectacle or an expensive joke. Yet that objection rests on a conventional assumption that physical objects may be identified as art due to their visual beauty or technical craftsmanship. As Arthur Danto points out in *The End of Art*, art nowadays resembles non-art “as closely as may be required,” and one could no longer distinguish art merely by looking.[2] Thus, a contemporary piece, such as *Comedian*, qualifies as art on four interconnected grounds: the institutional artworld authorizes it; art historical lineage makes it legible; its concept sustains its identity beyond the physical banana; and the collective experience it produces on the audience side completes it as an artwork.



[1] Within months, Perrotin’s dedicated spoof Instagram account, @cattelanbanana, attracted more than 18,000 followers, while the image spawned hundreds of memes and parodies online. Numéro, “When Maurizio Cattelan’s Banana Thrills Instagram,” April 22, 2020, https://numero.com/en/lifestyle/when-maurizio-cattelans-banana-thrills-instagram-2/.

[2] Arthur C. Danto, “The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense,” *History and Theory* 37, no. 4 (December 1998): 129, https://doi.org/10.1111/0018-2656.721998072.

According to George Dickie's institutional theory, art status is not simply a visible property inside an object. Instead, he believes that art has some underlying, non-exhibited attributes which are not externally observable: namely, the conferring of art status by an established institution.[3] When asked for the definition of institution, Dickie suggests it is an established cultural practice rather than one single organization. Therefore, the core personnel of this institution is rather loosely organized, including artists, gallerists, museum professionals, newspaper correspondents, critics, art historians, etc. These people collectively act on behalf of this informally structured institution, holding the power to decide if a work can be considered art. It is a similar process to a university committee conferring a PhD – the degree is not presented because the candidate physically changes at the moment of approval, but because an authorized institution publicly grants the status.[4]

In *Comedian*'s case, the initial act of authorization comes from Cattelan himself – an internationally recognized artist who had already held solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, the Centre Pompidou, and the Louvre by 2019. Subsequently, the identification of this banana as a serious piece of art was ratified by a much wider institutional network. Perrotin is an international gallery with spaces in nine major art centers, while Art Basel Miami Beach – a premier art fair in the West – assembled 269 top-tier galleries and attracted 81,000 global visitors in 2019.[5] An edition of *Comedian* later entered the Guggenheim's collection through an anonymous gift, while edition number two was auctioned in 2024 by Sotheby's – one of the world's most trusted marketplace for fine art. Thus, the art status of *Comedian* lies not in the biological continuity of the banana, but in the continuity of this institutional authorization, enacted collectively by the artist, gallery, fair, museum, auction house, and collectors.

However, Dickie's institutional account cannot fully remove the public suspicion of theoretical arbitrariness. Cattelan cannot freely designate every thing as art, nor can commercial organizations, the collectors, or sympathetic critics simply vote an object into the rank of art. If that were true, art would become a private game of authority. This is precisely where Danto's idea of the "artworld" provides a deeper explanation.

For Danto, the artworld is not merely a group of powerful people or institutions, but "an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art."[6] In other words, a work becomes

---

[3] George Dickie, "What Is Art? An Institutional Analysis," in *Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Anthology*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and Aaron Meskin (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 427.
[4] Philosophy Institute, "The Institutional Theory of Art: Societal Contexts and Art's Definition," last modified January 9, 2026, https://philosophy.institute/aesthetics/institutional-theory-art-societal-contexts-definition/.
[5] Perrotin, "About," accessed July 14, 2026, https://www.perrotin.com/en/about; Art Basel, "Show Report: Art Basel in Miami Beach Reinforces Its Position as the Cultural Meeting Point for the Americas," December 8, 2019, https://www.artbasel.com/stories/show-report.
[6] Arthur C. Danto, "The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (October 15, 1964): 580, https://doi.org/10.2307/2022937.

legible as art only when it is situated within a historically developed field of artistic possibilities. Within this logic, *Comedian* is no longer an isolated prank. Instead, its art status depends on a lineage of works that made ordinary objects, commercial goods, and critique of institutional protocol available as artistic materials. Like Duchamp's *Fountain*, *Comedian* operates through the logic of the readymades, in which the artist's selection and recontextualization of an ordinary object become a "performative act," making conceptual reframing rather than manual labor the decisive creative gesture.[7] Similarly, without Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, Emin's *My Bed*, Banksy's auction spectacle, and Cattelan's own career of absurd provocations, the banana would struggle to enter art historical discourse at all. Therefore, *Comedian* gains art status not merely because it is authorized by people and organizations in the artworld, but because it finds a place within art historical lineage.

Comedian, on the one hand, depends on the possibilities opened by earlier modern and contemporary art; on the other hand, it secures its place within that lineage by transforming inherited artistic strategies rather than simply reenacting them. It is related to Duchamp's readymades, but alters the mass-produced, durable urinal with an organic object that ripens, decays, and must be replaced, shifting the work's identity further away from the object itself and toward the instructions that allow it to persist through material change. It is related to conceptual art, but unlike Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*, it does not rely on language and definition, but on the stubborn presence of actual objects – the banana and the tape. It is related to performance art, especially after Datuna and Sun ate it, but unlike Abramović's performances, it does not require the artist's body to remain the central medium. It is

[7] The Art Story Contributors, "Marcel Duchamp Artist Overview and Analysis," *The Art Story*, first published November 21, 2011, accessed July 14, 2026, https://www.theartstory.org/artist/duchamp-marcel/.

related to market critique, but also becomes absorbed by the market it seems to mock. In this sense, *Comedian* is an "enrichment" of art historical lineage. In Danto's view, once a category or style enters art history, its opposite also becomes historically justifiable, and "the rest of the Artworld becomes that much richer in having the opposite predicate available."[8] *Comedian* is such a case, combining a sequence of established and opposite predicates: readymade and not readymade, conceptual and physical, natural and artificial, comic and serious. Its shocking absurdity is therefore not evidence against its artistic status. Rather, imagine a comic figure entering an opera: its very incongruity with the surrounding environment changes the atmosphere of the large stage on which it appears. *Comedian* may initially appear out of place, and yet its incompatibility with past artworks or stylistic approaches fills a precise, previously unoccupied position within the matrix of art history, enabling it to alter the trajectory of art history while simultaneously becoming art.

For the most part, Dickie's and Danto's perspectives explain why a taped banana is art, but *Comedian* raises a further paradox: if that banana is the artwork, then why does the work survive when the banana is eaten and replaced? The answer is that the identity of the work is not identical with the identity of the fruit. Once the original banana is removed, the biological object changes, but an artistic proposition remains. *Comedian* is not fundamentally "this particular banana," but rather Cattelan's concept: a banana duct-taped to a white wall under specified conditions, sustained by its title, certificate, and intention. Since "art is a concept" which "necessarily involves human intentionality,"[9] *Comedian* is considered art because Cattelan intentionally frames an ordinary banana as an artistic idea, not because one banana possesses permanent material uniqueness. *Comedian*, to an extent, therefore belongs to the logic of conceptual art, which places concept before object and values ideas over bringing them into physical existence.[10] While some of the more radical writings, such as Weiner's *Declaration of Intent*, suggest that a conceptual artwork may exist through description alone, Cattelan's *Comedian* shows a slightly less extreme version: the physical banana is needed, but it remains replaceable because the concept is well-sustained. Consequently, what the exhibition displays, what the collector purchases, and what the viewer confronts is not a sacred individual fruit but an authorized idea capable of being re-instantiated.

Yet, even the conceptual account leaves out one difficulty from the public's perspective: if *Comedian* is only a concept fully embodied by the sentence "a banana duct-taped to a wall," why does it need to be seen at all? Why is it necessary to appreciate it in a physical exhibition or on a digital platform? In reality, conceptual art has never been merely a matter of private knowledge: it being made

---

[8] Danto, "Artworld," 584.
[9] Dickie, "What Is Art?," 435.
[10] Justin Wolf, "Conceptual Art Movement Overview and Analysis," ed. The Art Story Contributors, *The Art Story*, first published October 1, 2012, accessed July 14, 2026, https://www.theartstory.org/movement/conceptual-art/.

and shown actually creates a situation in which viewers actively experience the idea taking form. Based on Lippard and Chandler's participatory art theory, conceptual works "demand more co-creation by the viewer," because when there are very few visual details or technical magnificence that usually guide one's appreciation, "more time must be spent in processing the work."[11] In *Comedian*'s case, since there is almost no conventional beauty or technical complexity to admire, the viewer cannot passively consume it as an attractive object, but are compelled to engage in active interpretation during their viewing experience: why is this art? Why does it cost so much? Why does this feel like a joke? While contemplating these questions, viewers participate in the perceptual and interpretive experience through which the art status of the work is tested and activated.

Ultimately, *Comedian* functions as a public participatory event whose artistic force depends on collective astonishment. In its physical exhibition, a crowd encountering the banana transforms scattered individual reactions into a shared commotion – a public spectacle through which its art status becomes fully realized. As Dewey argues, an artwork should not be identified with the physical object or the concept alone, but the kind one would remember by saying, "that was an experience."[12] Rather than asking what art is, one should ask *when* art is: art happens when an object gathers thoughts and feelings into an unified event, which distinguishes itself from ordinary scattered impressions. *Comedian* – its display at Art Basel, and all the succeeding mind-blowing incidents – has produced

[11] Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," in *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971), 257.
[12] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1980), 36.

exactly this kind of event, gathering viewers into a common space of confusion, laughter, irritation, and continued debate. There is a decided element of humor in *Comedian*, but this does not make the work unserious: as Lippard writes, "the best comedy is always serious art."[13] The joke in *Comedian* initially catches the audience's attention: people smirk, take photographs, re-tweet memes, or feel mocked by the absurdity of a banana treated as high art. Yet the subsequent serious responses matter just as much. The anger over its price, the skepticism about its artistic status, the theoretical defenses, and the polarizing public arguments all extend the work beyond the white wall. In this sense, *Comedian* is not completed by the banana, nor even by Cattelan's idea or one single viewer's reflection alone. It is completed by the communally discursive experience it produces. What finally makes this piece of work art is the collective event opened by that fruit: a public encounter where people are invited, together, to reconsider the borders of art.

Indeed, to ask whether *Comedian* is art is to trace the intellectual expansion of what art can be throughout modern and contemporary history. Dickie explains its institutional authorization; Danto situates it within the art historical lineage that makes such a work possible; conceptual art locates its artistic identity in its governing idea rather than in any single object; and Dewey and Lippard reveal how the work is completed through public participatory encounter. By each of these accounts, *Comedian* qualifies as art, though no single theory exhausts its significance. More importantly, the progression among them – from institution, to history, to concept, to collective experience – shows that the definition of art has never remained fixed. Even the judgment that "Catellan's *Comedian* is not art" becomes part of this process, demonstrating that art's borders are redrawn precisely where they are most fiercely contested.

[13] Lippard and Chandler, "Dematerialization of Art," 267.

Bibliography

Art Basel. "Show Report: Art Basel in Miami Beach Reinforces Its Position as the Cultural Meeting Point for the Americas." December 8, 2019. https://www.artbasel.com/stories/show-report.

Danto, Arthur C. "The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense." *History and Theory* 37, no. 4 (December 1998): 127–43. https://doi.org/10.1111/0018-2656.721998072.

Danto, Arthur C. "The Artworld." *The Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 19 (October 15, 1964): 571–84. https://doi.org/10.2307/2022937.

Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee Books, 1980. Originally published 1934.

Dickie, George. "What Is Art? An Institutional Analysis." In *Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Anthology*, edited by Steven M. Cahn and Aaron Meskin, 426–37. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

Lippard, Lucy R., and John Chandler. "The Dematerialization of Art." In *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*, 255–76. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971.

Numéro. "When Maurizio Cattelan's Banana Thrills Instagram." April 22, 2020. https://numero.com/en/lifestyle/when-maurizio-cattelans-banana-thrills-instagram-2/.

Perrotin. "About." Accessed July 14, 2026. https://www.perrotin.com/en/about.

Philosophy Institute. "The Institutional Theory of Art: Societal Contexts and Art's Definition." Last modified January 9, 2026. Accessed July 13, 2026. https://philosophy.institute/aesthetics/institutional-theory-art-societal-contexts-definition/.

The Art Story Contributors. "Marcel Duchamp Artist Overview and Analysis." *The Art Story*. First published November 21, 2011. Accessed July 13, 2026. https://www.theartstory.org/artist/duchamp-marcel/.

Wolf, Justin. "Conceptual Art Movement Overview and Analysis." *The Art Story*. First published October 1, 2012. Accessed July 13, 2026. https://www.theartstory.org/movement/conceptual-art/.