

Projects 65 : Maurizio Cattelan : Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 6-December 4, 1998

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65

maurizio cattelan

projects



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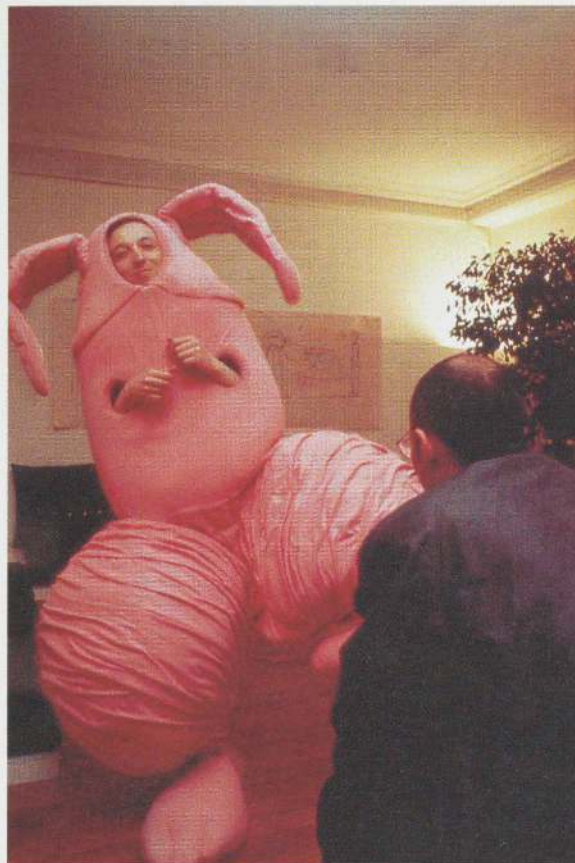
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**The barbarian has gotten
through the gate and is
on exhibit courtesy
of Cattelan.**

The Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan can be described as a practical joker and a trickster, a troublemaker and an anarchist, a bully and a victim, a charlatan and a crusader, a comedian and a ham actor. The moniker that perhaps fits him best, though, is that of jester. His sculptures, events, and "actions," all of which take as their subject a new triangular relationship between the artist, the institution, and the viewer, amuse but also goad. Disclosing no allegiances and taking no sides in the debate between high art and popular culture, cultural production and crass commercialism, the goal of his work is to strip the art world down to its proverbial undershorts, revealing the motivations of all involved in the creation, the exhibition, and the consumption of contemporary art.

Cattelan's Project for The Museum of Modern Art, in which an actor elaborately masked and costumed as a comic-book version of the artist Pablo Picasso greets visitors entering the Museum, is a cheeky parody in which an icon of high modernism is made to act as an icon of popular culture. Using the recognizable image of Picasso as a kind of logo for the Museum (which, because of its sustained support of the artist and impressive collection of his work, has often been referred to as "the house that Picasso built"), Cattelan's work is a simultaneous send-up of the popularity of Picasso as the most famous modern artist in the

world and of the Modern's success in attracting crowds of almost Disneyland-like proportions. The comparison between an ever more popular art museum and an



Errotin, Le Vrai Lapin. 1994. Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris. Foam rubber costume. Photo: Forneaux, courtesy Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris

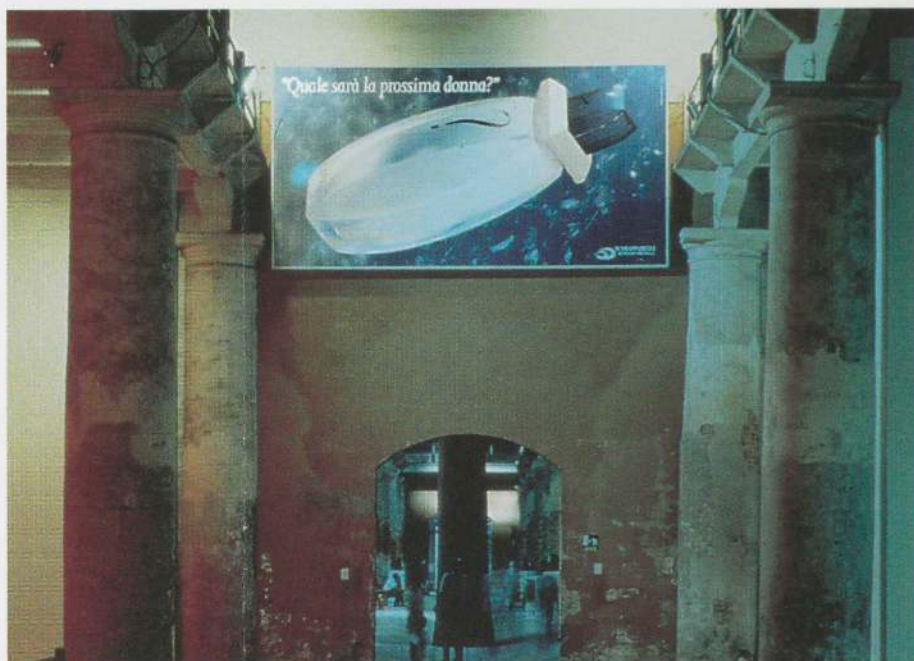
amusement park touches on a widely held view that museums, American ones in particular, with their lavish blockbuster shows of masterpieces by well-loved artists from the European canon, attendant promotions, and brand-name souvenirs, have, in the words of the critic Michael Brensen, "come to seem like satellites of the entertainment industry, in which success is measured by popular appeal."¹ In addition, because of the increasing difficulties of financially sustaining fine arts organizations, it is widely suspected that fine arts institutions have begun to sanitize and "dumb down" their programming in order to appeal to the largest number of paying visitors and future donors.² Cattelan's "Picasso" is a walking, three-dimensional fulfillment of these fears. This image of the most recognizable artist of the twentieth century cast as a mascot of merchandising like Mr. Peanut or Mickey Mouse, at once embodies and satirizes the dread of the encroachment of popular culture into the precincts of high art. The barbarian has gotten through the gate and is on exhibit courtesy of Cattelan. The work itself though, is not merely the mock "Picasso." Neither simply a performance, nor a discrete object, Cattelan's Project is only complete when its most important element is taken into account—our collective reaction to its infiltration.

This work, and others created by Cattelan over the past five years in locations throughout Europe, can be compared to the projects of a growing group of international artists who do not necessarily make objects, but create made-to-order situations specific to the particular sponsoring institution, and/or its geographic

location. Whether organizing a rally of Schwalb motor scooter riders like Gabriel Orozco did in Berlin in 1996, or arranging for a supermarket to open in a Zurich art museum, as Rirkrit Tiravanija has done recently, these artists work with cultural institutions to broaden their parameters and break down the boundaries between the artwork and the audience.

Whereas many artists over the past decade have offered a critique of the overweening power of the museum to dictate masterpieces and cultural products, few have attempted, as Cattelan has, to wrest that power away. Zeroing in on the inequitable economic relationship between institutions and individual artists, in the 1992 work *Fondazione Oblomov*, he solicited money from a series of donors and created a prize that he awarded to an artist on the stipulation that he or she did not exhibit their work for at least one year. Twice he has successfully convinced the gallerists on whom he relies to sell his work to wear full-body animal costumes during the run of his exhibitions at their galleries. However hot it must have been for his two Neapolitan dealers to sport fuzzy lion costumes in *Tarzan and Jane* of 1993, their discomfort pales when compared to that of the French gallerist Emmanuel Perrotin, who, rechristened "Errotin," spent a month in his gallery selling Cattelan's work while dressed as a phallus-shaped rabbit (*Errotin, Le Vrai Lapin*, 1994).

The Museum's "Picasso" aggressively questions the nature of the power relationship between an artist's own work and his institutional or commercial sponsors, the employer and the employed. The situations Cattelan creates invariably necessitate that institutions bend their rules and violate their taboos. These challenges have caused critics to only half-jokingly call the idea of organizing an exhibition with Cattelan "suicidal folly." "Cattelan does not seek to end up with successful projects," one critic has commented, "but much rather continuously designs the failure of those who house him."³ But Cattelan is not a maverick, he is an invited guest (often a salaried one), and his works are not visited upon his hosts but are commissioned. In a now classic analysis of the medieval carnival, the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin defined these traditional, wild revelries before the advent of Lent as a period when social identities were shed, taboos were broken, and power relationships were turned topsy-turvy. By encouraging the "suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions," carnival, emphasized Bakhtin, "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order."⁴ However subversive it was for princes to cavort like street urchins and knaves to strut like kings, these inversions were temporary, and above all, authorized. The raucous and mocking laughter of the carnival observed Bakhtin, "was



Working is a Bad Job. 1993. Color poster, 106 x 228" (270 x 580 cm). 45th Venice Biennale. Photo: Robert Marossi, Courtesy Galleria Massimo de Carlo, Milan

absolutely unofficial but nevertheless legalized."⁵ Safely contained within the confines of a particular festival, carnival transgressions acknowledged and ultimately reinforced the norms that they mocked.⁶

This concept of "legalized but unofficial subversion" aptly describes Cattelan's oeuvre as a whole, because the majority of his work is predicated on the existence of the institutional and market structures it skewers. In contradistinction to sixties-based conceptual art, which denied its connection to the cultural machine, Cattelan's work often revels in its complicity with it. In 1993, when Cattelan was chosen to participate in the Venice Biennale, he leased his allotted space to a perfume company, which used it to display a billboard-sized advertisement for the duration of the exhibition (*Working is a Bad Job*, 1993). Similarly, at a recent one-artist exhibition in Turin's stately Castello di Rivoli, Cattelan scattered a number of his other works around the museum and also parked a pair of metal grocery carts in the permanent collection galleries. Absurdly elongated to accommodate the most unwieldy of his sculptures, the carts' presence was meant as an open invitation to shop (*Less Than Ten Items*, 1997). This promotion of his work as a commodity is the theme of *Permanent Food*, a magazine that Cattelan has published periodically since 1995, that consists solely of pages lifted from other magazines and chosen by the artist's friends and acquaintances. His latest work—the Modern's "Picasso"—cheerfully exploits an image that, since Picasso's death in 1973, has been used to sell everything from khaki pants to computers, to promote one additional product—Maurizio Cattelan.

As the critic Francesco Bonami has commented, "Cattelan embodies both the parasite and its host, cause and



A Sunday in Rivara. 1992. Installation photo, Castello di Rivara, Rivara, Italy. Photo: Studio Blu, Turin

effect. . . ."⁷ If some of his works can be seen (however ironically) as self-promotional, Cattelan is an equal-opportunity satirist who has also produced wincingly honest and hilarious examinations of his own motivations and weaknesses. Cattelan is Italian, and there are affinities between his tragi-comic self-deprecation and the rich tradition of a peculiarly Italian style of comedy. *Commedia all'italiana*, from *commedia dell'arte* to Pirandello, from Dario Fo to Robert Benigni, is farcical and tragic, sardonic, self-critical, and anti-heroic. The hijacking of the image of Picasso surely reveals the desire not only to emphasize this one artist's enormous influence on the art of the past century but to punch a few holes in the myth of artistic genius. It can also be seen as an instance of what Harold Bloom has called in *The Anxiety of Influence*, "self-saving caricature."⁸ By parodying the greatest artist of the twentieth century in the sacred precincts that house some of the strongest evidence of his genius, Cattelan makes brutally clear his own anxieties about being held to the older artist's measure.

Earlier works are equally self-critical, and equally sarcastic about the pressures of producing art on demand. In 1992, when faced with the task of preparing an on-site work for the group exhibition *A Sunday in Rivara*, on the eve of the opening, Cattelan escaped from a third-story window using a ladder



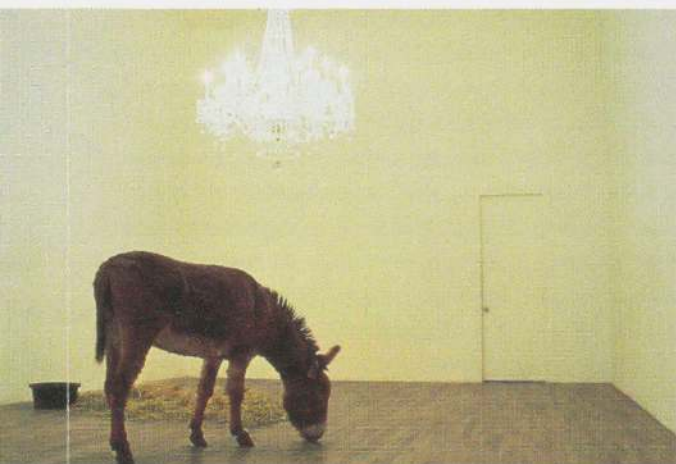
Warning! Enter at your own risk. No Dogs, Thank You. Dimensions variable.

made from knotted sheets and took a train home. The ladder was left intact and remained as his contribution to the exhibition. In 1994 at New York's Daniel Newberg Gallery, Cattelan, feeling, in his words, like a "jackass" because he was unable to come up with a workable exhibition idea for his New York debut, fulfilled his obligation to the gallery by installing a live donkey which he hoped would live there for the duration of the show. The braying of the unhappy animal so troubled the other tenants in the building that it had to be removed less than twenty-four hours after the opening. In its place, Cattelan hung several links of sausage.

There is a difference between self-doubt and self-contempt, and however much Cattelan incorporates the former into his work, he has little use for the latter. His objects and actions are playful, wicked, and sometimes a bit cruel, but in the end they are even-handed and even ethical because they are the products of a skeptic, not of a cynic. Echoing Marcel Duchamp's famous adage that there is no solution because there is no problem, one critic has noted that Cattelan "has made a career of making art question rather than answer."⁹ Elaborate practical jokes set up primarily to prove the contradictions inherent in every human situation,¹⁰ his work brings to light the complexities involved in the seemingly straightforward relationships between artists, patrons and audience. Although the Modern's mock "Picasso" might seem at first to be something of a one-liner, upon reflection it reveals a string of paradoxes. Who is the target of this joke anyway? Is it The Museum of Modern Art? Picasso? The audience? Cattelan himself? As his duties are only to greet Museum visitors with a wave or a handshake, Cattelan's "Picasso" is mute on this question. If it could talk though, one imagines that it might quote that master of irony¹¹ Søren Kierkegaard: "An objective uncertainty," the mock "Picasso" might reply to our inquiry, "is the highest truth."¹²

Cattelan's allegiance is to no one camp and he is free as a result of it.¹³

Laura Hoptman
Assistant Curator



ng! Enter at your own Risk. Do not Touch, Do Not Feed, No Smoking, No Photographs, gs, Thank You. 1994. Daniel Newberg Gallery, New York. Ass, chandelier. sions variable. Photo: Lina Bertucci, courtesy the artist

biography

Born in 1960 in Padua, Italy, Maurizio Cattelan has been working as an artist since the late 1980s. He has shown widely in Europe in one-artist exhibitions at Galleria Massimo De Carlo in Milan (1993, 1996), Laure Genillard Gallery, London (1994, 1996), Le Consortium in Dijon, the Wiener Secession in Vienna, and the Castello di Rivoli in Turin (all 1997) and in group exhibitions at the Museum Fridericianum in Kassel, (1993), The Musée d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, (1994), the ICA in London, and De Appel in Amsterdam (both 1996). In addition, he has participated in major international exhibitions including the Aperto section of the 1993 Venice Biennale, the 1995 Kwangju Biennial in Korea, the 1997 Münster Sculpture Project, the 1997 Site Santa Fe, and the 1998 Manifesta II in Luxembourg. In 1997 he was one of three artists chosen to represent Italy in the national pavilion at the XLVII Venice Biennale.

Since 1995 he has published *Permanent Food*, a second-generation magazine that consists solely of pages appropriated from other magazines and chosen by artists. It continues to be published at irregular intervals. He lives *in situ*.

acknowledgments

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notes

1. Michael Brenson, "Washington's Stake in the Arts: Saving the N.E.A.," *The New York Times*, April 12, 1998, p. 28.
2. Ibid.
3. Francesco Bonami, "Ladies and Gentlemen!," in *Maurizio Cattelan* (Vienna: Wiener Secession, 1996), p. 17.
4. Mikhail Bakhtin, quoted in Linda Hutcheon, "Modern Parody and Bakhtin," in Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, eds., *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1989), p. 99.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Bonami, p. 17.
8. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 30.
9. Jeff Rian, "Maurizio Cattelan," *Frieze* #23 (Summer 1995): 67.
10. According to the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, the definition of the ethical human is one who recognizes the contradictions of existence. See Josiah Thompson, ed. *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: Anchor Books, 1972).
11. This is the title of an essay by Thompson in *Kierkegaard*, pp. 101–63.
12. Kierkegaard, quoted from his "Concluding Unscientific Postscript" in Thompson, "The Master of Irony," in *Kierkegaard*, p. 151.
13. This is an adaptation of a passage in Thompson, "The Master of Irony," p. 116.

Cover: Untitled, 1998. Photo: Armin Linke, courtesy of the artist

Inside Cover: Drawing by Umberto Manfrin

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This exhibition is on view from Saturdays through Thursdays 1:00–4:00 p.m., and on Fridays 4:00–8:00 p.m.