

COMMENT

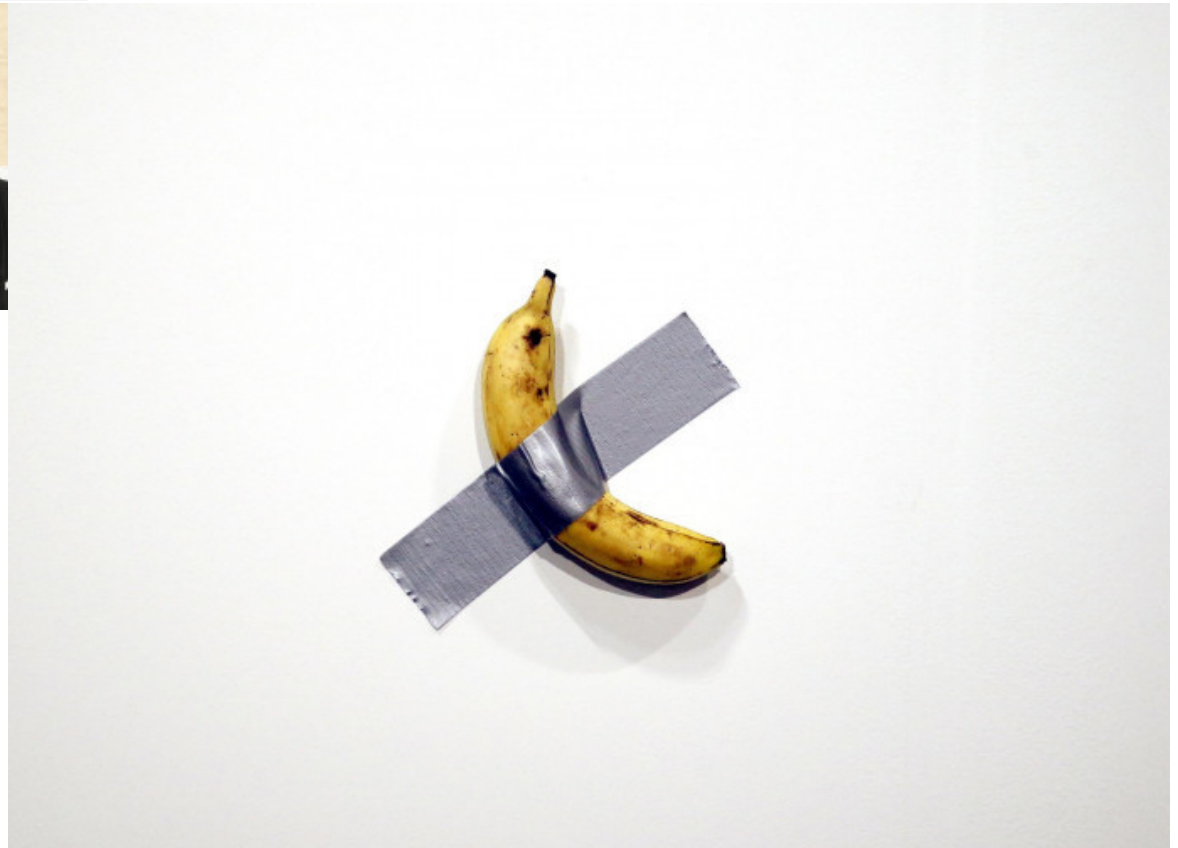
Cattelan's banana is business not art

CULTURE

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The most expensive banana in the world, declared newspaper headlines. The cost: six million two hundred thousand euro. It is the artist Maurizio Cattelan's banana, the infamous fruit stuck on the wall with adhesive tape titled *Comedian*. Mere window dressing, the art critic Philippe Daverio would have said. Yet for this sum, it was bought at Sotheby's by the collector, not of bananas but of artworks, Justin Sun, founder of the

cryptocurrency platform Tron.

It is called conceptual art. Meaning, the important thing is the concept that the work expresses, not its beauty. And with regard to the lack of aesthetics, conceptual art has succeeded very well. As for the expression of the concept, most of the time this is well hidden in the work itself, thus leaving room for the most diverse interpretations.

Let us take Cattelan's banana as an example. Since a banana stuck to the wall tells us nothing - but a lot about the author - we are helped by the title: *Comedian*. One can then think of the banana peel on which one slips, causing hilarity among onlookers. A profound concept, no doubt. Or let's call in the monkeys, since in the collective imagination the banana is their favourite food. For the Darwinist masses, we are descended from the apes, so that artistic banana could mean that art has become so involuted that it has reverted to the primordial. Or will that banana sooner or later rot: a reminder of the transience of existence, of the corruptibility of everything? Either way, Mr Sun has bought himself a concept, not a banana. So much so that if he pulls that banana off the wall, it will cease to be art and return to being a fruit.

Then there is the fact that many conceptualists want their works to be polysemantic. Sometimes, moreover, the concept goes beyond the work and involves the effects caused by the work itself. For example, in the present case, it is also art that a boy ate that banana on display in Seoul and that on another occasion a copy was eaten (perhaps there was a hidden hand orchestrating this?). It is art the uproar caused by this same auction. That is perhaps why it was necessary to find the most insulting and - it has to be said - the most trivial thing ever to be auctioned off at the craziest price ever seen: in this way the clamour and publicity would have been assured. It is art to think that this is not art when it is just a mockery. And the title *Comedian* may be a confirmation of this.

So far the byzantinisms of the experts. Let us pass the pen to common sense. Conceptual art, including the aforementioned yellow berry, is mere merchandising. It is not Cattelan's banana that is worth 6 million cocuzze, but the Cattelan brand. It is not the jeans made in China that are worth the price, but the Levi's brand. If instead of a banana he had put an aubergine or a cucumber, it made no difference, the important thing is that he had made it. The ultimate would have been to put a roll of tape stuck to the wall with a piece of tape from the same roll. Endless lucubrations would have started on the self-consciousness of the roll and the reflexive condition of the glues, the existential paradigm of today's collective consciousness.

So what Mr. Sun will have to put in the safe is not the banana but the certificate of authenticity because it attests to the authorship of the work. Sun, it seems absurd to say, has made a bargain. In fact, this banana has multiplied its value a good 50 times in five years. In the same auction, the starting bid was set at €800,000 and experts thought it would go for a maximum of €1.2 million. The continuous bids were not made by madmen, but by collectors or experienced businessmen who know that that certificate combined with any banana and tape will increase in value exponentially over time. That fruit is therefore an investment whose value will grow in the future. But not because of the work itself, but, again, because of the person who created that work.

This conclusion is also confirmed by the artist's legal troubles: Cattelan was in fact accused of plagiarism three times. Once was precisely about the millionaire banana. Joe Morford in 2001 attached a banana and an orange to a wall. Only they were plastic, less eco-friendly, but more durable. Then came Cattelan's banana and the lawsuit for plagiarism, but it all came to nothing: the latter's banana is not plastic and the slant on the wall is different. This court case shows well both the breadth of the Paduan artist's imagination and the importance of Cattelan's name: Morford had already presented a similar idea but did not have Cattelan's financial fortune simply because the latter's name is worth its weight in gold, his is not. So it has nothing to do with the idea, but with the creator. Even if he came second.

What does all this tell us? It tells us that art has nothing to do with this banana, only business. Art is the communication of beauty and instead that banana is just a luxury product. And indeed like any product it can be replicated. Many have reasoned thus: that banana will rot sooner or later. Is Cattelan's work therefore destined to disappear? No, because being a product - or a concept made into a product - it is fungible, that is, replaceable with another banana that can express the same concept. That is why its Chinese owner has stated that as soon as the banana arrives at his home, he will eat it. On the one hand, this is an assertion intended to show that, with ill-concealed boastfulness, 6 million euros is peanuts to him, and on the other hand it was made because he is aware that that banana can be changed an infinite number of times and is therefore indestructible. A Van Gogh can be destroyed, Cattelan's banana cannot. To consign it to eternity, all that is needed is to more or less respect its length, shape and inclination according to the instructions attached to the fake work of art itself, which, among other things, warn that the banana must be replaced every time it discolours, otherwise it becomes a fake. Extraordinary mockery even of those with the IQ of a dung beetle.

Cattelan's banana is therefore just a product, not art. A product that is worth a lot not because of its quality, but because of the author of the product. So don't bother auctioning off a chamber pot in which you have inserted a tennis racket. Nobody will buy it. Unless the racket belongs to Sinner.