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Maurizio Cattelan

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On the occasion of his first solo exhibition in New York, Maurizio Cattelan found himself at an organizational and psychological impasse. Two consecutive installation projects proved to be both impossible to carry out and too costly. What to do? Seeing that he felt like a jack-ass, he tried to externalize, as it were, those feelings of low self esteem, with a stroke of ingenuity that would both redeem him and save the show. Thus he exhibited an actual ass in the gallery, along with an opulent chandelier. This operation did not pass unnoticed within the microcosm into which it descended: the inhabitants and owner of the building where the gallery was located saw that the ass was removed the day after the show's opening, in compliance with regulations relating to domestic animals; a long sausage was exhibited in its place. The impasse became the very subject of the exhibition, and by playing with metaphors, the artist transformed a weakness into a strength. This took place in 1994, at Daniel Newburg in New York and the situation can be seen as emblematic of Cattelan's working method. Reacting to a state of mind, he creates an event that exposes the specificities of the context within which he is working and the social dynamics that can be glimpsed beyond that context.

The state of mind connects the private to the public sphere, subjectivity to collectivity; it functions as a sensor to orient the artist's movements, his responses to the stimuli he receives from the art system. *Il Bel Paese* (Lovely country) stems from a feeling of nostalgia, banal but predictable in one who travels or works abroad, but it is immediately turned into parody. The logo of the homonymous cheese becomes a broad circular carpet on which the public can walk, trampling upon the image of Italy. In *La Ballata di Trotski* (Ballad of Trotski), a horse, tied up and suspended in mid-air, is a perceived image (whether in reality or in some mass-media replay is unimportant) that refers to an existential state, to a sense of deprivation of the ability for decision and action. An analogous state, one that can evidently be generalized for the artist, is alluded to in the reworking of the same image in *Novecento*, where, however, the horse's legs stretch down to touch the floor and go beyond the stall.

In 1997 Cattelan was invited by the Wiener Secession to have a solo exhibition in the basement level of the museum, while an exhibition of another artist's work was to be held on the main floor. Cattelan installed two bicycles linked to two electrical generators, from which long electric cables emerged and led to the four rooms of the basement level, continued up to the ceilings and switched on the light bulbs that the artist had installed, replacing the normal lighting system. What the public saw was this dim light, which intermittently illuminated the bare space, and the two museum custodians who made it all possible by sitting on the bicycles in the last room and pedaling. The visibility of the work was literally delegated to the physical effort of the bike riders, who worked according to an established schedule. Agreeing to exhibit in a secondary area of the Wiener Secession, Cattelan thematicized the minority condition in which he found himself and, in Vienna as in New York, transformed it into a presence of strong emotional impact. That same year, when the Dijon Consortium invited Cattelan to have a solo exhibition, his reaction took the form of his decision to close off a wing of the space. He had a false wardrobe built, which, in fact, served as a door; in the remaining wing he hollowed out a rectangular pit, just like a tomb, visible at the center

of the floor of the room and adjacent to the pile of earth that it had contained. Instead of exhibiting work upon work, Cattelan added void to void, and a strategy of escape, in fact, inserted tension into the exhibition space through the excess depicted, disconcerting the spectator who questioned this (apparent) self-inflicted damage.

For Cattelan, ambiguity is home-grown. He himself has explicitly stated that the work stems from an intuition that is difficult to translate into intentionalities and into clear concepts in all their premises and consequences. An intuition can be clever, but it is always tied to chance, escapes analysis and does not result in a system. Thus the work floats amid a sea of meanings and remains on the surface. As the artist himself never tires of repeating, profundity should not be sought because it is not achievable, because it does not exist.

However there is a great possibility for expansion over this surface. Cattelan has also said of his work: *I believe (...) I respond to an increasingly widespread need for new moral arguments... even if in the end we find ourselves face to face with ourselves more than with the system... I think that the true situation to be undermined is the interior one: the more my work refers to the exterior the more I think it addresses my problems, my interior state*¹.

If the work speaks principally of an interior state, it has often also resonated in the interior state of others. His reference to the self involves and interests many others.

In 1994 Cattelan decided to exhibit the ruins of the Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, destroyed by an attack that bore the mark of the Mafia. That year, organized crime struck the Milan museum, a wing of the Uffizi and a Roman church. Cattelan collected the plaster fragments in a large blue bag, similar to those used to carry clothes to the laundry; he exhibited these in Laure Genillard's Gallery in London and also created an analogous statement for the exhibition *L'hiver de l'Amour* at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. In the latter venue, the rubble was exhibited in two rectangular blocks wrapped in transparent plastic, on top of a wooden base, in a presentation that echoed minimal sculpture. The artist's intention was to express the profound emotion caused by the criminal event; the Via Palestro car-bomb exploded at a somewhat confused and dramatic moment in Italy's political life, and it spread a sense of threat that directly touched the art world. It assumed a symbolic value that the artist understood and emphasized with the action of his exhibition, without any provocative intent.

Cattelan's gestures are not dadaist, for they lack any disruption that could justify them. This is not the result of his own choice or fault; artists today know how to live in a tragic era, but they have learned to do so without availing themselves of a language that expresses tragedy. In the cultural field, authentic provocation serves to indicate an equally authentic and incurable contradiction. The modern rendition of the tragic is precisely the awareness of the irresolubility of the contradiction, and the impossibility of the choice. Instead, the reality we are living today is the neutralization of all conflict transformed into spectacle. And so the tragic is transformed into the tragicomic, and thus indicates the extreme ambiguity into which reality has fallen, the reality of things and the words that we call them. Cattelan's black humor, certain excesses of apparent cynicism, move in this direction. At Daniel Buchholz in Cologne, the photograph of Aldo Moro with the star of the Red Brigades was transformed into the Christmas comet.

Then there was the squirrel suicide, supine on the table in a miniature kitchen, complete with sink and water heater, small pistol on the ground, as if in a perverted tale of a reprobate adolescent...

The grotesque as parodistic counter-melody of high culture (à la Bachtin!) is one possible interpretation of much of Cattelan's work. As Roberto Daolio has written, he is interested in intervening in the *displacements that are created in the transmission of specialized knowledge*². The position he attempts to assume, and which he had already tried out in the production of

a paradoxical design for non-functionality, is chosen to combat the very idea of specialization, of knowledge separate from the contradictory complexity of reality.

In 1992, with *Una Domenica a Rivara* (A Sunday in Rivara), Cattelan was involved with a thematic show for the first time. The work, which he decided to create after some second thoughts, was a reflection upon knotted sheets hung from a window of the top floor of the medieval castle where the group show was held. The presence was not merely virtual, for the artist himself used the installation to escape from the site, the evening before the show's opening. The art system as a prison from which one escapes? Cattelan doesn't declare himself to be outside the game, but rather he has the desire to remain within the system and to observe its functioning from a position that allows a critical interpretation of its internal mechanisms, an interpretation cloaked in irony, in a sense of spectacle and humor, as the flight from the castle clearly announces.

In 1993, in Massimo De Carlo's gallery in Milan, a teddy-bear tightrope-walker rode a cycle uninterruptedly, back and forth, across a rope suspended between two walls of the space. The spectator could see the work only from outside, through the window, because the gallery door was walled up. For the entire duration of the show, the evicted gallery owner carried out his normal work in another place, and visitors had to be happy with that view from afar and from a single viewpoint. What mattered more than the choice of the teddy-bear on a bicycle, suggested by an analogous toy seen in a shop in New York, were the conditions of its visibility and the fact that it was the artist who imposed them, thereby bringing into question the privileges he is allowed by the art system. That same year, at the gallery of Raucci & Santamaria in Naples, Cattelan decided to create a first-person embodiment of the concept of the work of art. Throughout the length of the exhibition, the two gallery owners had to remain in the gallery, disguised as lions, wearing two carnival costumes specially made by a Cinecittà workshop. The following year Emmanuel Perrotin, the director of Ma Galerie in Paris, found himself sporting the incredible features of a large pink rabbit with a penis-shaped body. All this represented an efficacious way to contextualize the gallery, and its directors as functions of a structure, the ideological implications of which are sounded out, along with the specific relationships – those dealing with friendships, economics and power – that are created there. The grotesque language denotes only the amused aggressiveness with which this sort of relationship is thematized.

It is not enough for the strategies by which Cattelan introduces himself and works within the art system to carry out the normally assigned roles and functions. Many of these strategies are elaborated in clandestine conditions, as the artist himself has stated, with an exchange and a superimposition of roles at the limits of lawlessness. In 1992 he designed the Oblomov Foundation and involved private sources to subsidize an artist, who was asked to not exhibit for an entire year. For *Aperto 93* at the Venice Biennale, he leased his exhibition space to a perfume company, which installed an advertising poster there. For *Interpol* in Stockholm in 1996 he arranged for his participation to be transformed into the establishment of a cash prize, "Interprize", to be awarded each year to someone who created new structures for the promotion of art; the first year, the artist himself awarded the prize to the French magazine "Purple Prose". Significantly, these actions directly touch upon an economic plan for artistic productivity. Yet Cattelan's interest is also directed toward questions of a more general, more theoretical nature, which emerge, for example, in his working relationship with other artists.

At the last Venice Biennale he was invited by Germano Celant to collaborate with Enzo Cucchi and Ettore Spalletti in the installation of the Italian Pavilion, dedicated solely to the work of these three artists. This collaboration allowed three utterly different natures to emerge. Cattelan created works that functioned as factors that disturbed one's perception of the work of the other's: the chandelier hung right next to Cucchi's painting, or as (auto)ironic comments, the "fragments of reality" introduced into the exhibition, namely the bicycles leaning against the wall next to Spalletti's monochrome pieces and the pigeons roosting along the ventilation ducts, with "traces" of their

presence left on the carpeting below... In his most recent solo exhibition, in Perrotin's new gallery in Paris, Cattelan recreated, piece by piece, the Carsten Hoeller show, which was being held at the same time in the adjacent Air de Paris gallery. The viewer experienced a temporary sense of "embezzlement", seeing the same works twice, installed in the same fashion, before recognizing the presence of an operation that negated the role of the artist as an indefatigable producer of formal innovations.

It is the sensation of the separateness of art from the broader sphere of social communication, or simply of reality, that pushes Cattelan to reflect on the insufficiency that makes it second nature for many attempts, while generous, to go beyond that boundary.

His participation in the 1997 *Skulpture Projekte in Münster*, a decennial survey show, dedicated entirely to the relationship between artwork and urban space, represented a good occasion for reflection. In addition to creating his sculpture, a horrific "Lady of the Lake", the rubber statue of a female corpse, sunk in the Aasee, its feet tied to a large stone, inspiring film noir shudders, the artist also participated by commenting on his art projects that, over the course of the exhibition's three installments, could not be realized. He involved the critic Francesco Bonami, who rewrote the projects in the form of fables, and the children's illustrator, Edda Koechl, who illustrated them. The twenty-one short stories emerged from the memories of those who had followed the artist's work and his imaginative interpretations; these stories then were clearly offered as an intervention on individual memory, the oral telling and the writing at the time the images were created. However their irreverent tone (sometimes full of blunders) indicated that they also referred to something else, namely to the scant attention that artistic practices often give in response to questions posed by social issues.

Cattelan's work consists in the doubting of the relationship between the artist and his external world (the world, reality, society, the public, the city), in the sense that the theme of many of his operations, explicated or only alluded to, is this very relationship, seen more in terms of its problematic nature than in terms of its possibilities. At *Aperto 93*, economic reality was made to erupt within the exhibition space, replacing the work of art. The Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea in Milan rubble brought to mind an event that was contingent but extremely significant politically, and, as in various other cases, the work became an indicator of tensions and contradictions generated in the social field.

For example, *Stand abusivo* (Illegal stand) recalled the intervention organized in 1991 at the Bologna Art Fair. Earlier, the artist had created a soccer team made up of Senegalese immigrants, called A. C. Forniture Sud (A. C. southern supplies), which participated in regional competitions in Emilia Romagna. The team was also engaged in a table soccer competition, characterized by the use of a table designed by the artist and adapted to two teams of eleven players each, as in real soccer. One interesting detail: the sponsor's logo invented for the team was the word *Rauss*, the Nazi slogan directed against the Jews. With these operations, the artist was able to relate soccer as popular entertainment and the problem of racism that is surfacing in Italy as a result of immigration. On the other hand, the clandestine conditions of life and work for many immigrants was alluded to in the Bologna Art Fair stand, where Cattelan arranged the *Rauss* gadgets on a little table, with sales proceeds going to support his team.

Some of his works end up being incomprehensible if separated from the reality to which they refer. The forced-open safes shown at the group show *Ottovolante* at the Accademia Carrara in Bergamo in 1992 are a case in point. After reading in newspapers about various thefts, the artist asked the victims, both institutions and private citizens, to sell him the safes, which he then exhibited with all signs of the break-ins left visible. Seen in the museum, they acquired meaning, not so much because of the process of decontextualization to which they were subjected, as in the best tradition of the readymade, but because of their insistent indication of the context from which they were taken and

which, in its turn, referred to a contradiction of a social nature. This is a contradiction that sometimes explodes, in the sense that its incandescence makes it impossible to propose a work of art understood as an object of reflection, but is defined by what is possibly a trauma and experienced as a provocation. In Holland, on the occasion of *Sonsbeek 93*, Cattelan's proposed the use of posters to announce a Nazi skin-head rally; his project was rejected by the curator, with good reason (the possibility of riots, respect for the memory of the Dutch victims of the Holocaust), but also with a touch of moralism.

For the exhibition *Il villaggio a spirale* (The spiral-shaped village), which opened in 1996 at the Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Turin, Cattelan conceived large anthropomorphic bundles that perfectly mimicked the bodies of two sleeping homeless people, of the type one might come across in the streets of any city. In the Ars Futura gallery in Zurich, he rebuilt, down to the smallest detail, the place where a satanic sect in the city had celebrated a ritual that concluded with a mass suicide. In both cases it is the obstacle of reality that occupies the museum or gallery spaces; these are objects, images, signs that are not subjected to any artistic process and that are not meant to refer to any esthetic whatsoever, but rather to the broader problematic issues of which they are an indication.

For his exhibition at Castello di Rivoli, Cattelan has decided upon a use not completely in conformity with the museum's spaces, taking into consideration not only the room turned over to him, but also temporarily occupying the rooms that house the permanent collection, as well as places of passage, in such a way that his works inserts unforeseen relationships of meaning into the setting.

In their diversity, the pieces created for this occasion nevertheless and openly play with the surprise factor and once again they end up being more than a little disorienting.

Some abnormally elongated supermarket carts seem conceived to contain works by other artists belonging to the Museum collection; parked in the spaces of the museum, they seem to warn us of dangerous (but effective) affinities between collecting and accumulating merchandise.

Elsewhere, a curled up dog sleeps placidly, presenting an image of sweetness, however inconsistent, given the context, and a child with an astonished air sits on a school bench, evoking ambiguous phantom realities of punishment, given that ball point pencils nail the child's hands to the bench. The ambivalence (are the phantoms sadists or masochists?) that this sort of figure instills in the observer is deliberate and openly stated, since the artist identifies himself in a transference, the irony of which makes it no less striking.

In the Sixties and Seventies the question felt to be most urgent, the relationship between art and life, was confronted with disruptive strategies that emphasized the separateness of art; these strategies were clearly effective, and their cultural impact was indubitable. The tension to fuse art, no longer intended as specialized knowledge, with undifferentiated life, traversed all neo-avantgarde movements. However the other pole of the relationship, life, remained imbedded in these for the most part unexamined and aprioristically accepted experiences as a positive value, as a term of comparison and verification. The space and time of life were thought of as free territory of unconditioned experience, liberating and full of meaning, in a view that only the most politicized (and marginal) circles of the time perceived as idealistic. In fact, life is not a free dimension, it is crossed by alienating dynamics where the very possibility of having an authentic experience of reality is lost. If it is true that the spirit of the current time is once again feeling those experimental and utopian experiences, it is equally true that its reactualization is taking place with a critical spirit that negates its optimistic setting.

Artists today thematicize the dissension and negativity of their works, which consequently seem or are irritating and provocative and therefore constitutively ambiguous. Like Cattelan's work. Jeff Rian is correct³: for Cattelan, art is a device for survival, and the works are tools for coping with that great cosmic joke which is life.

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- ¹ R. Pinto, "Maurizio Cattelan", in *Flash Art*, Milano, October-November 1991.
- ² R. Daolio, *Il re crede di essere nudo*, Essegi Editrice, Ravenna, 1990.
- ³ J. Rian, "Maurizio Cattelan", in *Flash Art International*, Milano, October 1996.