



MAURIZIO CATTELAN

THE COURT
JESTER OF THE
ART WORLD

Born in 1960 in the North Italian university city of Padua, Maurizio Cattelan did not attend art school; instead he tried to make a living with a string of jobs such as in a laundry salon, at a morgue as an embalmer, and later in a hospital. By chance, at the age of twenty-five, he discovered a self-portrait by the famous Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto (born 1933), which was like a revelation to him and made him decide to change his life dramatically. From there on he started experimenting successfully with industrial design objects but eventually decided to commit himself to the art world. Since then, Cattelan has become one of the most talked-about artists of his generation, reaching out to the art world with provocative and humorous, grotesque and irreverent installations, sculptures, and performances.

As a “neo-conceptualist,” Cattelan had his first solo exhibition in 1989 in a gallery in Bologna and turned the space into a subversive performance. Due to a lack of ideas, Cattelan decided to not show up and simply closed the door and hung a sign reading “Torno subito” (Back soon). The artist himself did not come back. With his “Torno subito,” his steady “disappearance” began. His early contributions to group shows were equally rogue: in 1992, for an exhibition at the Castello di Rivara near in Turin, he decided only to present a rope of knotted bedsheets dangling from an open window (*Una Domenica a Rivara / A Sunday in Rivara*). At the 1993 Venice Biennale, ostensibly “bereft” of an idea for a work of his own to exhibit or install in the Italian pavillion, he leased the designated space to an advertising company, which installed a billboard promoting a new perfume (*Working Is a Bad Job*, 1993). Once, when there was no time to prepare a gallery exhibition in Amsterdam, he broke into an adjacent gallery and stole all the works on display for his own scheduled show. Furthermore he had the curator and writer Massimiliano Gioni—a younger look-alike—deputize for him giving interviews and lectures. His obscure identity certainly helped to mystify the artist’s image even more. His early performances were mostly self-representations—Cattelan as a prankster, as a delinquent, and as an artist, who disappears.

Among Cattelan’s most famous and startling projects is a trilogy which deals with the nature of power and symbols or personifications of authority. With his life-like waxworks, he portrayed and challenged iconic figures of authority. The most provocative of these works comprise *La Nona Ora* (*The*

Ninth Hour, 1999), his notorious, life-sized wax figure of Pope John Paul II in white robes, felled by a meteorite that crashed through a skylight, and *Him* (2001), a rendering of Adolf Hitler on the scale of a 10-year-old boy, kneeling in a pose of prayer. These hyperrealistic depictions are irreverent and at the same time a scathing questioning of authority and the abuse of power.¹

The Nicola Erni Collection presents the third work in Cattelan’s well received trilogy. Two New York City police officers, *Frank and Jamie*, 2002 are presented as life-sized wax figures, dressed in full uniform, including their formal badges and batons, but have been turned upside-down and leaned against the wall of the museum space—in 2002 they were first installed against a wall in the Marian Goodman Gallery in Manhattan. Similar to the sculptures—*La Nona Ora* and *Him*—those in a position of power have been dethroned. *Frank and Jamie* are truly life-like figures and Cattelan has not missed out any detail. Their poses and expressions seem unfazed. Being rendered in such a subversive pose, they are not able to perform their duty to serve and protect. As security guards who are supposed to stand sentinel over the artworks, they have lost their power and authority. Moreover “this work has been interpreted as a visual parallel to the sense of vulnerability that permeated the country in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.”² Also by installing *Frank and Jamie* like paintings, Cattelan dethrones any authority that art itself may claim to hold. This work can be seen as an invitation not to obey ingrained rules and command structures strictly and blindly.

Ira Stehmann

1 Cf. www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/maurizio-cattelan-all

2 www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/maurizio-cattelan-all

Frank and Jamie, 2002
Polyester resin, wax, pigment, human hair, clothing,
shoes, and accessories

