

# When Touch Is Refused or Accepted in Art

## A Comparison of Van Gogh's *The Sunflowers* and Maurizio Cattelan's *The Comedian*

Ying Wu

Moments of crisis are always worth analysing. When confronted by visitors' hands, *The Sunflowers* and *The Comedian* represent contrasting attitudes. This divergence is determined by differences in their modes of existence, durations, irreproducibilities, and ways of being experienced. The existence of *The Sunflowers* depends upon the permanence of its physical substance; however, *The Comedian* is an ephemeral event, inhering in fluid relationships and forms of interactions. From the former to the latter, artworks have embodied a detachment from their *Objecthood*. The spectator's experience also changes from the pure gaze to corporeal, emotional and behavioural engagement. Traditional museum provides a distanced space, reinforcing the untouchability of artworks by maintaining a separation between the spectator and the work, while *The Comedian* created an interactive space, where the artwork itself is more of a *process* than a *product*. | Keywords: *Materiality of Painting, Artwork as Event, Theatricality, Ephemerality, Tactile Engagement*

### 1. Introduction

On October 14, 2022, one of the Vincent Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, displayed at the National Gallery in London, became the focus of the museum that day. Two members from the British climate group Just Stop Oil, Phoebe Plummer and Anna Holland, entered the museum and threw two cans of tomato soup on the work, then glued their hands to the wall beneath the painting before making their statement: "What is worth more, art or life? [...] Are you more concerned about the protection of a painting or the protection of our planet and people? [...]" The public was shocked, even though this was not the first attack on famous paintings to raise public awareness of the climate crisis, and it will be far from the last. In general, not to mention 'attacking' artwork, a light touch is strictly forbidden in museums. Therefore, although the painting is unharmed but just some minor damage to the frame, two activists

were still arrested and finally sentenced to two years and 20 months of imprisonment on September 27, 2024.

Another example proves that touching artwork is sometimes acceptable. In 2019, at the famous international art fair Art Basel Miami Beach, Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan taped a banana to the display wall of Perrotin gallery (*The Comedian*, 2019), which set off a series of imitations, satires, and debates on “Is this art?”. Two days after it was put on display, American artist David Datuna walked through the crowd towards the work, took the banana off the wall, and, to the surprise of the public, ‘ate the work’ right in front of them. Datuna claimed that this is a performance entitled *The Hungry Artist*. However, what are more surprising are the reactions of the artist and the gallerist. Cattelan said that there is no problem at all, on the other hand, the gallerist Emmanuel Perrotin quickly replaced the eaten banana with a spare one and explained that *The Comedian* has a certificate of authenticity, which contains exact instructions for installation and authenticates the work. He added that without this COA, a piece of conceptual artwork is nothing more than its material representation (artnet, 2019a). Finally, this installation is sold for \$120,000 to two collectors.

The different reactions from the public and the different outcomes of these two *tactile events* are worth discussing, but before analysing, it is important to clarify whether the performers truly touched these two artworks. In the case of *The Sunflowers*, there are two contacts, one between the tomato soup and the glass frame, another between the hand of two activists and the display wall of museum. Although neither of them physically made contact with the painting itself, this act was still denounced by the public, whereas, regarding *The Comedian*, the physical substance of the work is not only touched, but chewed through the teeth, passed into the digestive tract, and finally expelled out of Datuna’s body. The physical materials of the work can be replaced, but the work still ‘exists’! At least some art institutions continue to exhibit it. Additionally, Datuna’s performance is not unique. When *The Comedian* is exhibited at the Leeum Museum of Art in Seoul in 2023, the banana is eaten again by Korean student Noh Huyn-soo. The Leeum Museum of Art later replaced the banana and stated that it would not claim damages against the student. In fact, the banana is reportedly replaced every two or three days during the exhibition.

From *The Sunflowers* to *The Comedian*, artwork seems to be changing from *untouchable* to *touchable*. How does this happen? This article focuses on the contrasting attitudes towards the visitors’ hands demonstrated by these two works, seeking to elucidate the reasons through an analyse of their distinct modes of existence and interactions with the spectator. The first part delves into the varying degrees of the two works’ reliance on their material supports; the second part explores the substance and the form of *The Comedian*; lastly, the third part extends the analyse and comparaisn of the artworks to the aesthetic experiences they create.

## 2. An Escape of Artwork from Its *Objecthood*

Through analyse, I noticed some key differences between these two events. First, Cattelan's installation and Datuna's performance are relatively limited in the contemporary art world, with the aim of bring into question the authority of art; while Just Stop Oil protesters enter the public realm to raise awareness about climate change. Secondly, the ownership of the two artworks differs as well. *The Comedian* can be purchased privately, while *The Sunflowers* is a public heritage. Thirdly, and more importantly, these two works rely on their physical mediums in distinct ways; therefore, the performers' acts affect them differently. *The Comedian's* artistic value originates from its concept, from the reputation of its creator and that of the gallery who exhibits it, as well as from its certificate of authenticity as Perrotin explains. The banana taped on the wall is a representation of all this, ready to perish and to be replaced at any time; thus, consuming it not only does not affect the existence of the artwork, but also attracts more public attention and enhances its economic and artistic value, which, unfortunately, is not the situation with *The Sunflowers*. For the latter, throwing tomato soup on it risks destroying it, because the painting's physical materials serve as its only proof of existence. For this reason, Cattelan's work is replicable in material terms, while van Gogh's cannot be. These two artworks have different modes of existence: one is more material; the other is more immaterial.

From *The Sunflowers* to *The Comedian*, there is a tendency for artworks to become less dependent on their physical mediums. Artworks of the past demonstrate a strong attachment to their physical materials; however, this relationship has gradually been abandoned in contemporary art. The damage or replacement of an artwork's physical substance no longer necessarily impacts its existence. The argument for this shift involves a discussion of Modernist art, to which *The Sunflowers* belongs, and contemporary art, to which *The Comedian* belongs.

Modernist art, especially painting, primarily demonstrates a revelation of its own material properties. This has been confirmed both in the study of early modernist painters, notably in Foucault's analyse of Manet's paintings, and that of late modernist art movements, as exemplified by Michael Fried's critique of minimalist art.

In 1971, during a lecture entitled *Manet's Painting* delivered in Tunisia, Foucault identifies Manet as the first painter, since the Renaissance, at least since the *quattrocento*, to use or exploit the material properties of pictorial space in his work. Foucault believes that, as a pioneer of Impressionism, Manet's most important significance is that he created a fundamental break with Renaissance's perspective-based painting tradition, thus making the entire modernist painting possible. The Old Masters, skill in perspective drawing, seek to conceal, avoid and make people forget the material presence of the painting's support as much as possible, extending the illusory space created by their techniques beyond the two-dimensional plane of the work: they employ depth of field to create a sense of depth in two-dimensional

space; highlight the main oblique lines or spiral lines to cover up the straight lines and right angles at the edge of the frame; use soft light coming from within the picture (from the bottom, right or left) to create dramatic scenes; and determine an ideal and fixed vantage point. In short, they attempt to render three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional plane, evoking what Bernard Berenson described as tactile imagination. In contrast, Manet closes the depth of field (*The Execution of Emperor Maximilian*, 1867–1869); emphasizes the vertical and horizontal lines that define the canvas by repeating them (*Argenteuil*, 1874); places figures facing and turned away from the viewer simultaneously to highlight the limitations of the canvas's representational space (*The Railway*, 1873); and uses frontal, direct, and harsh light coming from outside the painting (*Olympia*, 1863) as well as unfixed viewing positions (*A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1882) to reveal the fact that “painting rested on a rectangular surface, truly illuminated by a certain real lighting, which, moreover, varied obviously with the placement of the painting and with the lighting of the day”, and that “painting is a piece of space in front of which viewer could move and around which they could turn” (Foucault, 2004, p. 23). Thus, Foucault concludes that through these changes in painting techniques, Manet accentuates the materiality of painting.

The Old Masters create a tactile space that invites the beholder to engage through imagination. In contrast, Manet, by emphasizing the materiality of his paintings, closes off this imagined tactile space and pulls the beholder back into the real world. The *materiality* of painting according to Foucault's (2004, p. 23) interpretation refers to the “rectangular, flat surface illuminated by a certain light, around which or in front of which, one could move”. In Michael Fried's terms, this is called the *objecthood* of artwork. In his essay *Art and Objecthood* (1967), Fried uses this concept to criticize the minimalist art, which he refers to as *literalist art*. He writes:

Modernist painting has come to find it imperative that it defeat or suspend its own *objecthood*, and that the crucial factor in this undertaking is shape, but shape that must belong to *painting* – it must be pictorial, not, or not merely, literal. Whereas literalist art stakes everything on shape as a given property of objects, if not indeed as a kind of object in its own right. It aspires not to defeat or suspend its own *objecthood*, but on the contrary to discover and project *objecthood* as such. (Fried, 1998, p. 151)

Manet's painting fully recognises and acknowledges its *objecthood*, a characteristic that is equally manifested in Van Gogh's *The Sunflowers*: the depth of field is closed, the plane is almost two-dimensional, the uniform and bright light coming from outside the painting, and the viewing point of beholder is no longer fixed. Foucault claims that Manet reinvents, or perhaps even invents, the *painting-object* (*tableau-objet*), because his paintings are “the painting as materiality, as a coloured object illuminated by external light, in front of or around which the viewer moves” (Foucault, 2004, p. 24). Foucault's definition brings attention to another characteristic of modernist painting, namely, based on the acknowledgement of its own material properties, modernist painting manifests a close attachment to its physical mediums. Artwork stepping into modern society gradually abandoned the

mysterious power given by religious culture in the Middle Ages and became a pure aesthetic object. Meanwhile, it is also during this period that museums flourish in the Western world and increasingly protect the physical existence of artwork. As Boris Groys (2016, p. 2) points out in *In the Flow*, “The museum promised a materialist eternity secured not ontologically but rather politically and economically”. By taking certain objects out of the material flow, securing and putting them under protection, it enables these objects to escape the torrent of time and attain eternity (Groys, 2016, p. 2). Although the heightened materiality of modernist painting has to some extent enhanced their tactile allure, the possibility of direct physical contact with them remains largely unattainable within the context of modern art museum. Museums aspire to achieve the material eternity of artwork; physical interaction with it may lead to irreversible damage and break this sense of permanence. Therefore, the physical substance of *The Sunflowers*, housed in the National Gallery in London, remains the only physical proof for the existence of this post-impressionist masterpiece. It is irreplaceable and is not permitted to be touched.

However, this is not an issue for *The Comedian*. Owing to its immateriality, *The Comedian* survives the mortal dangers faced by *The Sunflowers*. Among all the elements that compose this work, except for the specific angle of installation, others – such as the banana, the gray tape and the exhibition space – are all conceived to be replaceable and need to be replaced. That is one of the reasons why Datuna and Noh Huyn-Soo’s performances not only don’t damage the work but enrich its meaning. Some may question whether *The Comedian* is an artwork, because anyone can achieve it by taping a banana to the wall. To address this question, I will draw on Michael Fried’s theory of *theatricality*, likewise developed in his analyse of minimalist art. Fried employs this concept in a completely negative way to criticize minimalist art, nevertheless, he demonstrated a profound insight into its essence. He remarks that different with previous art “what is to be had from the work is located strictly within it”, the experience of minimalist art is “of an object in a situation – one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder” (Fried, 1998, p. 153). Art is theatricalized. It detaches itself from its *objecthood* and is placed within a situation that includes the spectator. What matters more is not the specific objects, but their arrangement, their *mise en scène*.

*The Comedian* serves as an exemplary instance of *mise en scène*. With a real, replaceable banana, Cattelan created a *scene* that expands from a banana taped to a wall to the exhibition space, from the art gallery to the public realm, and from the physical space to the virtual realms of social media. In this *scene*, he brings to the stage the absurdity of the contemporary art world. Every element is indispensable: an internationally renowned artist represented by a prestigious gallery; the audience, media and celebrities attending one of the world’s most important art fairs; the huge contrast between the cheap, ordinary materials and the expensive price; the public’s expectations of artwork and the rapid development of social media in the 21st century, etc. The lack of any of these components would not render this work from being

performed smoothly and successfully in any way. The high standing of Maurizio Cattelan, Perrotin gallery and Art Basel ensures that this banana on the wall would not be ignored. If an identical installation were created by an unknown artist and displayed in an everyday environment, it would not provoke as much reflection or admiration among art enthusiasts. They would not even take photos with it. Moreover, the huge contrast between the ridiculous price and the cheap materials ensures ongoing attention and debate surrounding the piece as well. Given all this, Datuna's intervention, along with the subsequent reactions from the gallery and the artist, ruthlessly exposed the absurdity behind the work: what makes people watch, reflect, discuss, mock, scramble to take photos and have debates, is merely a banana that can be casually taken off, peeled and eaten, which is like a modern-day version of *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Although Datuna's act may seem offensive, it aligns perfectly with Cattelan's intention. In this sense, Cattelan's banana resonates and extends the meaning of Duchamp's urinal (*Fountain*, 1917).

In addition, the title *The Comedian* deserves further reflection. As Italian curator Francesco Bonami said, "a comedian is someone that make you laugh but also talk about something very seriously. So, the banana taped on the wall is a comedian. It makes you laugh, enrage you, but also makes you think and reflect about art" (Maurizio Cattelan: Comedian by Francesco Bonami, HENI Talks, 2021). In fact, the comedian in this work does not confine in this installation, nor in those three certificates of authenticity, but extends to all the spectators, journalists, collectors, influencers, critics, the gallery and the fair who participated in this show. All the participants contributed to the comedy, without them, the banana is merely a banana, however, through their involvement, it becomes an integral part of the artwork. In this *scene*, the banana taped to the wall is comparable to a score of music or a script of drama. It guides the reproduction of the performance, such as at Leeum Museum of Art in Seoul, but does not determine directly the existence of the artwork. As an organism that decays with the passage of time, the banana needs to be constantly replaced during exhibition. Therefore, touching it or eating it does not directly lead to the destruction or disappearance of the artwork.

Thus, it can be seen, *The Sunflowers* and *The Comedian* present two different modes of physical existence of artwork. For *The Sunflowers*, the existence of the artwork is directly dependent on its physical medium. The destruction of its physical medium equated to the destruction of the artwork. However, by the time of *The Comedian*, art began to escape from its *objecthood* and connect with other *non-objects*. These non-objects are different from the religious mysterious power of the past, but represent themselves in conceptual, participatory, immersive, and digital forms. The physical substance of artwork is no longer unique but can be copied and replaced at any time without directly affecting its *existence*, just like human body organs can be replaced with the help of modern medical technology. For an artwork, when its "existing material support decays and dissolves, the work can be copied and placed on a different material support" (Groys, 2016, p. 12), then it is immortal. Nevertheless, is *The Comedian* truly immortal?



### 3. Replaceable Banana, Unrepeatable Artwork

Previously, I argued that *The Comedian* goes beyond the banana taped to the wall and encompasses the entire dramatic spectacle from Art Basel to virtual space. This suggests that Cattelan is not the sole creator of this artwork. The final form of the work cannot be achieved without the involvement of the audience, social media, and Datuna. Without Datuna, we wouldn't have known that the banana could be taken down, eaten and replaced with another one. Without social media, the banter and parodies on this piece wouldn't have reached a broader audience of art lovers or even the public, and accordingly, the work wouldn't have been able to gain as much attention and visibility, which would probably affect whether the piece could ultimately be sold. Lastly, without the audience, any discussion about this work would simply be impossible. In fact, Cattelan's consistent approach to creation demonstrates that he always expects and relies on other's participation in his work. In an interview, He explains to Nancy Spector:

My creative process, as they say, usually starts with a phone call. I call a gallery, ask for an exhibition date, and only then do I start thinking of a project. I send the description to the gallerist. He or she phones back, we discuss it a bit. After all this, I start looking for people to produce the work. I never touch the work myself; it's out of my hands [...] The meaning of the work is really out of my control. I prefer to borrow someone else's interpretation. (Spector, Bonami, Vanderlinden and Gioni, 2003, p. 12)

Regarding *The Comedian*, Cattelan spent a year conceiving the work, agreeing on the price with Perrotin and choosing to exhibit it at one of the world's most influential art fairs. All these prior arrangements were like setting up a line of dominoes and tipping over the first one. Once the fair opened, a subsequent chain of reactions – whether it was the coverage by influencers, the parodies on social media, or Datuna's performance – were beyond the artist's control. These uncontrollable parts contributed to the completion of the work and endowed it with new meaning. As Dewey said: "The unexpected turn, something which the artist himself does not definitely foresee, is a condition of the felicitous quality of a work of art; it saves it from being mechanical" (Dewey, 2005, p. 144). Concerning *The Comedian*, during its conception, Cattelan considered using a banana made of bronze or resin, but these two materials have never been able to satisfy him, until one day he realized that "the banana is supposed to be a banana" (artnet, 2019b). By substituting a bronze banana with a real one, Cattelan likely anticipated, to some extent, the audience's surprised reaction. However, Datuna's act of eating the banana – if not premeditated – may represent the *unexpected turn* that lay beyond Cattelan's original intentions. This gesture not only played a pivotal role in amplifying the work's subsequent impact but also emerged as an indispensable token of the piece itself and ultimately internalized as an integral part of the work. In November 2024, Chinese-born cryptocurrency entrepreneur Justin Sun purchased *The Comedian* for \$6.2 million at a Sotheby's auction in New York. He then immediately decided to eat the banana again in front of journalists and influencers to carry out his own comedic performance.

If the *substance (what is said)* of *The Comedian* lies in bringing to the stage the absurdity of the current art world's rules that are dominated by the capitalist consumer society and social media, then the selection and arrangement of various elements, as well as the connection, continuity, and interaction between these elements, collectively constitute the work's *form (how it is said)*. First, on the choice of the banana, as it has been proven, bronze or resin bananas would not generate the same kind of sensational impact created by a real banana. The use of real banana disrupted the permanence that artworks traditionally possessed in physical terms. Based on Duchamp's *man-made ready-made*, Cattelan employed *natural ready-made*, endowing the artwork with a flexible substitutability in the material dimension. It liberates artwork from the constraints of fixed *objecthood*. The artwork is no longer a static object that must be preserved and restored, but rather a perishable item – food – that must be regularly replaced and can even be consumed. Compared to new media art, which also relies on the regular replacement of display equipment, the banana's inherent perishability further intensifies the frequency of such substitution. The idea of *replacement* thus entirely supplants the centuries-old mindset of *preservation* concerning art. This marks a fundamental shift introduced by *The Comedian* – one that distinguishes it from the earlier conceptual works, such as *The Fountain*. Secondly, using tape as a temporary and reversible medium reserved a potential opportunity for Datuna's performance. Since the banana is taped to the wall rather than permanently affixed, it implies that it could be easily removed without the need for any tools. This very act of taping enabled the possibility of its removal. Moreover, choosing to exhibit it at a short-term, high-traffic art fair rather than a conventional art institution such as a museum, where touching artworks is explicitly prohibited, facilitated more encounters and interactions between the visitors and the work. This ensures that discussions about the piece could persist and quickly gain momentum within a short period. Art institutions' authority and their display rules typically require spectators to maintain a certain distance when viewing artworks. The convention of *Do Not Touch* would also impede Datuna from removing the banana in front of the public. On the other hand, art fair visitors – artists, collectors, celebrities and influencers – are often creators of trending topics on social media. Hype driven by trending topics has already become a major factor in the astronomical prices of contemporary artworks, which is also the reality faced by *The Comedian*. In fact, after successfully selling two pieces, Perrotin and Cattelan immediately agreed to raise the price of the work to \$150,000. Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that the work's auction price of \$6.2 million benefited, to some extent, from the public attention and cultural impact it had generated.

Through the selection, installation and arrangement of all these elements, Cattelan successfully orchestrated a series of *encounters* between them, however, the duration of these *encounters* is limited. *The Sunflowers* has a solid form; the various material elements that constitute it – colours and lines – engage in a *durable encounter*, thus allowing it to persist and to be exhibited repeatedly. *The Comedian*, however, exists within fluid relationships and forms



of interactions. The spectators' participation and interaction, once it takes place, becomes part of history. After the work is completed following the fair, one can no longer create any *durable encounters* as before. Similar to performance art, "once it is done, all that remains is documentation, which is distinct from the work itself" (Bourriaud, 1988, p. 29). These factors cannot be controlled or represented; therefore, *The Comedian* more closely resembles an event. It's ephemeral and can only exist once. Regarding the banana taped to the wall, even though it continues to be exhibited as artwork, for example, at Leeum Samsung Museum of Art, it is no longer the original artwork itself. Upon the completion of *The Comedian*, the banana taped to the wall transforms from being a part of the artwork to its imprint, comparable to the video of a performance, every new exhibition in a new art center could remind spectator's memories of this work. "As Philippe Parreno explains, it does not represent the logical conclusion of the work, but an event" (Bourriaud, 1988, p. 56).

*The Comedian* has no copies, because we cannot replicate an event. *The Sunflowers* is also irreproducible, however, there resides a distinction between their irreproducibilities. The latter originates from its materiality, while the former stems from its immateriality. When Benjamin states, "in principle a work of art has always been reproducible" (Benjamin, 2007, p. 218), he argues this in the artistic and aesthetic dimensions. A painter skilled at imitating Van Gogh or a cutting-edge technology company that uses AI and 3D printing to duplicate artworks has the competence to reproduce another *The Sunflowers*, which is indistinguishable in both visual and aesthetic aspects from the original one. Nevertheless, in the physical dimension, the material that constitutes the work *The Sunflowers* is unique. Its paint cannot be the same as that of another painting. Moreover, the *historical testimony*, an important component of its authenticity, cannot either be transplanted onto copies (Benjamin, 2007, p. 221). In contrast, *The Comedian*'s authenticity drives not from material uniqueness or historical evocation power but rather is rooted in *hic et nunc* (*here and now*), namely, the process one must engage in, experience and respond to within a given time and space. Compared to *The Sunflowers*, the question of reproducibility of *The Comedian* presents a higher degree of complexity: on the material level, it can be infinitely replaced; on the artistic and aesthetic level, it is unique; yet, on the commercial level, it is restricted to three editions. This demonstrates a contradiction when contemporary artworks confront the capitalist art market.

From an ontological standpoint, Gregory Currie and David Davies (1989) also attempt to characterise artworks as *process-like* rather than *product-like* entities. Currie argues that all artworks are action-types capable of being multiply realised by different agents on different occasions. As an action-type, an artwork is a *discovery* of a particular *structure-type* by a particular *heuristic path*, which is identified by all relevant features of the method used to make the discovery. Building on Currie's work, Davies proposes the Performance Theory, according to which an artwork is a *performance* that specifies a *focus of*

*appreciation*. He likewise asserts that artwork is not the product of the artist's labour, but rather the very creative *process*. The product itself serves as the focus of appreciation, helping to *complete* the performance and delineate one of its temporal boundaries (Davies, 2003). It seems that the theories of Currie and Davies provide strong support for my claim that *The Comedian* should be understood as an event, particularly Davies's point of view that the focus of appreciation plays a constitutive role in the *completion* of a performance. However, it is important to note that Currie and Davies are working at a more abstract level, aiming to offer general definitions of *process-like* entities that are applicable to all artworks. In contrast, this article adopts a more pragmatic and empiricist perspective, focusing exclusively on the specific works, and it tends to treat *The Sunflowers* as a *product-like* entity, distinct from the *process-like* nature of *The Comedian*. Secondly, in Davies's definition, an artwork has solely one focus of appreciation, whereas *The Comedian* presents two such foci: the banana taped to the wall and the act of removing and eating it. These two foci – one on the nature of the *product*, the other on the *process* – later became intertwined in the subsequent exhibition and auction of the work. Moreover, Currie's definition of action-type artwork emphasises the *discovery* of the *structure-type* through the *heuristic path*, rather than the individual or the context in which it was discovered. This suggests that a work can be multiply realised by different individuals. Nevertheless, this claim does not apply to *The Comedian*. The following discussion will further elaborate on the singularity and the uniqueness of the work through Currie's concepts.

First and foremost, the original *The Comedian* is fundamentally distinct from its later exhibitions and imitations because of its core feature in the *heuristic path*: a one-time-only surprise effect, which also marks a key difference between *The Comedian* and more traditional forms of performance art, such as music or theatre. In general, even when interpreted by different artists in varying contexts, different performances of the same musical or theatrical work may still attain comparable achievements. However, *The Comedian* is predicated on an effect of astonishment. The existence of social media has further accelerated the exhaustion of this surprise effect, facilitating its rapid diffusion across the world. As a result, the work becomes unrepeatable. Even if Cattelan himself were to exhibit it elsewhere, he could no longer rely on the same *heuristic path* to evoke its original achievement. Consequently, when Korean student Noh Huyn-soo ate the banana again, he attempted to replicate and challenge Datuna's performance; however, the effects of these two *touching experiments* were not identical. This result is not due to the non-commercial nature of the Korean exhibition, but rather because when faced with the banana presented as an artwork and the artwork eaten as an ordinary banana, spectators' emotional reactions (such as surprise, confusion) and behavioural responses (such as taunts, imitation) occur only once. When someone does it for the second time, people will begin to take it in stride. Another example is that during the 2023 West Bund Art & Design in Shanghai, Karin Sander, artist represented by Esther

Schipper gallery, nailed a blood orange to the gallery's exhibition wall (Blood Orange, 2012)<sup>1</sup>. The result is that the visitors did not make a fuss about it, nor rush to take photos, and there were no heated discussions about it either. Until 2024, this 'unique' work is still awaiting purchase on Artsy.

Furthermore, each subsequent exhibition or performance of *The Comedian* is fundamentally built upon its predecessors. Their *heuristic paths* are cumulative in nature. Every new performance constitutes the creation of a new 'comedy' by different 'comedian', in other words, the discovery of new *structure-types*: Cattelan discovered that a banana can become an artwork; Datuna discovered that an artwork is edible as an ordinary banana; the Korean student discovered that the re-exhibited artwork remains consumable; Karin Sander discovered that repeating the same method – selling food as art – leads to public indifference; and Justin Sun discovered that this work could somehow be valued at \$6.2 million. Each new discovery enacts a new comedic gesture, yet none of these subsequent performances can substitute for the original, nor can they exist independently of it. Conceptual art? Sculpture? Installation? Performance? Participatory art? In reality, *The Comedian* cannot be simply classified into any of the above-mentioned existing forms of art. Even though the banana taped to the wall shares some similarities with the paint in painting, the script in theatre, the score in music, and the video in performance art, it also differs from them in important ways. It serves simultaneously as an integral part of the work's *matter*, contributing to its realisation, and as a token, recording the work and evoking the public's memory of it.

#### 4. Aesthetic Experience: From Gaze to Corporeal Engagement

In his essay *Modernist Painting* (1960), published several years before Foucault's lecture, Clement Greenberg, like Foucault, identified Manet's painting as among the first modernist works because of his revelation of the flatness of painting. Greenberg writes:

The limitations that constitute the medium of painting – the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment – were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Modernist painting has come to regard these same limitations as positive factors that are to be acknowledged openly. Manet's paintings became the first Modernist ones by virtue of the frankness with which they declared the surfaces on which they were painted. (Clement, 1965, p. 194)

Unlike Foucault's perspective, which emphasised the material properties of Manet's painting, Greenberg focused on its strong connection with vision. From his point of view, modernist painters led by Manet created a "purely optical experience" that underlines the flatness of the painting, which was

<sup>1</sup> Esther Schipper Gallery claims that the creation date of this work is 2012, which is a few years earlier than *The Comedian*. However, no exhibition record of this work prior to 2023 can be found on the gallery's website. Regarding the concept of the work, the gallery provides the following explanation: "The sculpture is a temporary piece that can be repeated as wished. The artist issues a certificate according to which the particular kind of vegetable or fruit can be displayed in the future" (Esther Schipper, no date).

fundamentally different from the painting tradition formed since the Renaissance – “the optical experience modified or revised by tactile associations”. Greenberg explains: “Where the Old Masters created an illusion of space into which one could imagine oneself walking, the illusion created by a Modernist is one into which one can only look, can travel through only with the eye” (Clement, 1965, p. 198). If the modernist movement has directed painting towards being an object of purely visual experience within the realm of art itself, then externally, the formation of *aesthetic contemplation*, the iterative advancements in reproduction technologies, and the exclusion of all senses except vision – particularly touch – in modern art museums, have collectively reinforced the aesthetic tendency to regard artworks merely as objects of pure gaze.

During the pre-modern and early modern periods, the gaze did not yet occupy an independent and dominant position in the practices of art collection and display; but rather formed a reciprocal relationship with conversation and other senses (Bennett, 2006, p. 268). In that context, pure visual gaze was regarded as an insufficient means of acquiring information, while touch, owing to its intimacy and thoroughness, was even considered a sense of higher aesthetic value (Howes and Classen, 2014, pp. 18–19). Nevertheless, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, privileging the contemplative sight over touch began to emerge as an elaborated aesthetic concept. During this period, Kant’s disinterested contemplation and judgment, separates vision from the mixture of senses and elevates it as the noblest and most suitable sense for the ‘proper’ appreciation of art (Howes and Classen, 2014, pp. 19–20). By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, with the establishment of public art museums, touching not only became inappropriate but also unnecessary. The display design of art museums prevents visitors from touching artworks and reduces their desire for physical contact: sufficient lighting and transparent showcase not only ensure unobstructed visibility but also help visitors keep their hands to themselves (Classen, 2012, p. 146). On the other hand, art historians of this period, such as Alois Riegl, Bernard Berenson and Erwin Panofsky, also categorized the sense of touch as a pre-modern, subjective and limited mode of perception, thus excluding it from artistic experience (Candlin, 2006). In addition, the development of reproduction technology, for example, the invention of photography, transforms a work of art into an image and transmits it to thousands of individuals. Today’s digital technologies continue to reinforce this aspect by liberating images from their physical medium and converting them into assemblies of pixels. Virtual Reality technology goes even further by enabling us to visit art exhibitions without stepping into a museum. However, what we see is no longer a physical entity standing in three-dimensional space, but merely its appearance. Regarding *The Sunflowers*, it has transformed from a tangible painting existing in three-dimensional space into a postcard, and subsequently, from postcards to pixelated images on computer screens and VR devices. When it is only meant to be viewed (merely an image), then there is no place for touch. This is one of the factors that makes the prohibition of touch in modern art museums seem natural and unintentional.

Therefore, *The Sunflowers* exhibited at the National Gallery exists simply as an object to be gazed at. The museum creates a *distanced space*, where any bodily interaction between artworks and visitors is strictly forbidden; only visual appreciation is encouraged. In this distanced space, the spectator and the artwork are two separate but interdependent entities. The former requires the existence of the latter to undergo an aesthetic experience; the latter also relies on the former to realise its artistic value, while an insurmountable boundary remains between the two. This boundary is sometimes clearly marked by signs reading *Do Not Touch* and barrier lines, whereas most of the time, it becomes a social consensus, an unspoken convention between institutions and their audiences.

This *distanced mode of viewing* not only generates a separation between artwork and spectator but also endows the work of art with a sense of sanctity and authority, which, in turn, continuously reinforces the untouchability of the artworks conserved in museums. Numerous art theorists have compared museums to religious ceremonial architecture. Bernard Lahire points out that the invisible wall constructed between spectator and artwork marks the boundary that separates the sacred from the profane (Lahire, 2020, p. 308). In Benjamin's discourse, the *aura* of the original artwork is built upon its ritual value. Although religion has gradually declined since the modern revolutions, the ritual function of artworks has not entirely disappeared. Instead, it has transformed into a secularised worship of beauty, persisting in public institutions such as museums. In these spaces, the original artwork retains its *aura*, signifying that it continues to maintain its authority and ritual value, remaining inaccessible to visitors in a physical sense. Groys also remarks that

In the context of early modernity, art functioned as a secular, materialist substitute for the lost belief in the eternal ideas and the divine spirit. Contemplation of works of art took the place of the contemplation of the Platonic ideal or of God. (Groys, 2016, p. 2)

Erkki Huhtamo employs the term *Tactiloclasm* to describe the taboo against touching in museums. He comments that

the Romantic cult of the genius had emphasized the *otherworldly* quality of the artwork; as a product of *divine* inspiration, it had a special *aura* that made it almost sacrilegious – and therefore also tempting, at least for those longing for a *touch of genius* – to touch it with one's hands. (Huhtamo, 2006, p. 76)

Ocular perception necessitates a certain distance to function, while touch is different. "To touch something is to situate oneself in relation to it." (Berger, Blomberg, Fox, Dibb and Hollis, 1990, p. 8) For *The Comedian*, artwork is no longer a self-contained, independent entity; instead, it requires the participation of the spectator to complete itself. Artwork's independence is broken down; the spectator transforms from a *detached observer* to an active participant as well. The *distanced space* became a *relational space*, in which the physical and psychological boundaries that were built over centuries between spectator and artwork have been simultaneously eroded. Through corporeal, emotional and behavioural engagement, the spectator enables the artwork to regain its *hic et nunc* that was abandoned by modern art museums, however,

this *hic et nunc* do not exclusively belongs to the artwork itself but is shared between the work and its spectator. The *aura* of the artwork has displaced from itself to its public. In this regard, Nicolas Bourriaud explains that the work of art:

No longer originates just from ocular perception: the beholder contributes his whole body, complete with its history and behaviour, and no longer an abstract physical presence. The space of art [...] is worked out in inter-subjectivity, in the emotional, behavioural and historical response given by the beholder to the experience proposed. The encounter with the work gives rise not so much to a space as to a time span. Time of manipulation, understanding, decision-making, going beyond the act of 'rounding off' the work by looking at it. (Bourriaud, 1998, p. 61)

In *The Comedian*, composed of fluid relationships and interactive forms, the spectator's physical, emotional and behavioural engagement, including touch, disrupts the traditional subject-object division between artwork and its spectator. In Perullo's (2022, p.99 words, haptic perception "opens up to a different way to conceive of Aesthetics, beyond the subject-object dichotomy". It is related to relational and cooperative aesthetics, which "perceives *processes* instead of *products*, knots of relations instead of stable objects", and "requires haptic disposition which is, in turn, attentive and wise" (Perullo, 2022, p. 99). Judging from the subsequent reactions, it is evident that the tactile engagement played a crucial role in shaping *The Comedian*. Just ten seconds after acquiring the piece, Justin Sun made the immediate decision to consume the banana in public, as if the performance could not be completed without eating the banana. This indicates that the intervention of Datuna introduced a new *focus of appreciation* and extended the temporal boundary of the artwork as an event. In this sense, Datuna can also be regarded as a significant co-creator of the piece.

## 5. Conclusion

Looking back at history, it becomes evident that the history of artwork *being gazed upon* – pure gaze as the sole artistic experience – subtly overlaps with the history of artwork *being objectified* – artwork detaches from its religious function and transforms into a pure aesthetic object. There seems to be an inherent connection between the exaltation of viewing and the enhancement of an artwork's material properties. The modern art museum promises a material eternity of artwork; this focus on preserving its *material integrity* fundamentally underpins the prohibition against touching it. Consequently, as work of art gradually transcends the constraints of *object* and instead embraces other forms of *non-object*, such as conceptual, participatory, immersive and digital practices, the incorporation of touch and other sensory dimensions in aesthetic experience becomes natural and inevitable. Today, art continues to oscillate between its traditional function – providing objects for contemplation – and its active involvement in the socio-economic field. An increasing number of artistic practices advocate breaking away from the conventional logic of *object-based* art creation and display. Ruangrupa, the curatorial collective of Documenta 15, explicitly states to *ArtReview* that the *object-based* approach to creation has never been their way of working



(Rappolt, Rakun and Darmawan, 2022); Corina Chutaux Mila likewise highlights the spirit of dematerialisation and the trend of abandoning art objects throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century in her book *Esthétique de l'art invisible* (2021). She employs the concept of *Invisual Art* to describe the artworks that do not seek to produce material objects, a stance that not only addresses the connection between visibility and the objectification of artwork but also suggests an emerging decentring of vision in contemporary artistic practices.

Since the visual tendencies in modernist painting, the development of reproduction technologies, and the visual turn in museums and aesthetic theory could give rise to the tendency of *artwork as pure aesthetic object*, then why would it not be possible that the bodily turn in contemporary artistic practices and theory, the development of human-computer interaction technology, and the multisensory engagement in museums once again reshape and redefine our aesthetic experience in the new era?

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Ying Wu  
 Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne  
 12 Pl. du Panthéon, 75005 Paris, France  
[yingwu.ind@gmail.com](mailto:yingwu.ind@gmail.com)

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