

Fruit for Thought

Tracing the Construction of Cultural Value in the Reception of
Maurizio Cattelan's Artwork *Comedian*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates how the cultural significance of Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian*, a banana duct-taped to a wall, was discursively constructed through media coverage, public responses and institutional practices between 2019 and 2025. Instead of treating the artwork as a static object with fixed meaning, this study analyzes how its interpretation emerged through intersecting dynamics of audience engagement, humor and media spectacle.

Using qualitative thematic analysis of 51 English-language news articles, the research traces the artwork *Comedian*'s transformation from a viral provocation into an institutionalized artwork and multimillion-dollar commodity. The analysis is structured around three thematic pillars: audience reception and participatory performance; the discursive function of humor and satire; and the commodification of the artwork through media spectacle and institutional ritual.

The findings demonstrate that the artwork *Comedian*'s cultural significance was not defined by the artist or the art world alone, but co-produced through circulation, interpretation and performance across audience, journalistic and institutional spheres. This study contributes to media and cultural theory by showing how artistic value is not only assigned, but actively negotiated through tone, framing and affective engagement. It highlights how irony, laughter and spectacle operate as central forces in the re-construction of meaning and legitimacy in contemporary art discourse.

KEYWORDS: *contemporary art, media, reception, value, humor*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian*, a banana duct-taped to a wall, started a global media spectacle after debuting at Art Basel Miami Beach with a \$120,000 price tag. "That banana has been more photographed than the Mona Lisa", one report said, as crowds advocated the work's removal due to safety concerns (*Indiana Daily Student*, Dec 8, 2019, para. 14). The public reaction intensified when the performance artist David Datuna removed and ate the banana, stating, "The banana is the idea" (*Bangkok Post*, Dec 8, 2019, para. 8). His act, broadly covered in both media outlets, reframed the artwork as participatory and replaceable, sparking headlines like "Man Eats \$120,000 Piece of Art" and provoking international debate (*MailOnline*, Dec 8, 2019, para. 1).

The artwork's controversial narrative did not end at the fair. On November 21st, 2024, Maurizio Cattelan's piece reappeared at a Sotheby's auction in New York and was sold for \$6.2 million. According to *CE Noticias Financieras*, the sale was "not only an economic transaction, but also a statement about the value and nature of contemporary art" (Nov 21, 2024, para. 8). As media coverage highlighted, this moment turned what was initially a fleeting spectacle into a recurring symbol of how art value is constructed through circulation, performance and controversy (*The Guardian*, Nov 21, 2024, para. 12).

Instead of treating Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian* as a static object with a fixed meaning, this thesis argues how *Maurizio Cattelan's artwork Comedian's cultural significance is shaped through three intersecting dynamics: audience engagement and reception, humor and satire and media framing and spectacle*. These dimensions structure the analysis chapters that follow. The first chapter analyzes how audiences interpreted, performed and contested the work's meaning, looking into tensions between institutional framing, participatory mimicry and negotiated readings. The second chapter turns to humor and satire, tracing how laughter, irony and ridicule worked as discursive strategies that both legitimized and destabilized the artwork. The third chapter investigates the role of media framing and spectacle, exploring how auction theatrics, viral coverage and institutional rituals contributed to the artwork's transformation into a symbolic commodity.

This investigation is grounded in qualitative, reflexive thematic analysis of 51 English-language news articles, collected via LexisNexis Uni and published between December 2019 and May 2025. The dataset captures the artwork's full discursive arc, from art-fair weirdness to cultural artifact. Articles were selected for their analytical features, including editorial framing, tone, humor and audience response. The coding followed Braun

and Clarke's (2022) six-phase model and was carried out inductively, allowing dominant themes to emerge from the data.

Each chapter builds on its own theoretical framework to support the analysis. Chapter one is guided by theories of audience reception, chapter two by concepts of satire and discursive humor, and chapter three by scholarship on media spectacle and institutional framing. Instead of applying theory uniformly, this approach allows each chapter to develop an analytical lens tailored to its focus.

This thesis does not aim to determine whether the artwork *Comedian* "is" art or whether it successfully critiques the art world. Instead, it shows how its meaning is produced discursively through audience engagement, humor and spectacle. What the artwork *Comedian* offers is not a stable commentary, but a flexible symbol open to laughter, critique, market logic and institutional framing. The banana becomes more than just an object; a discursive site where art, media and audience intersect.

By doing so, this thesis contributes to ongoing academic conversations in media studies, visual culture and discourse analysis. It demonstrates how public meaning is not only communicated but co-authored by a plurality of cultural actors. More specifically, it highlights how irony and spectacle, often dismissed as superficial or unserious, are central forces in shaping legitimacy and value in the contemporary art world. From an academic perspective, the project expands conceptual discussions about meaning making and performance in contemporary visual culture. At the same time, it illuminates how meaning, value and legitimacy are contested through public discourse in an age defined by spectacle and virality.

Ultimately, the artwork *Comedian* is not merely an object taped to a wall. It is a viral performance, a satirical provocation, a commercial spectacle and a participatory event. It invites audiences to question, to laugh and to play along. This thesis takes seriously that invitation, tracing how the artwork's absurd simplicity gave rise to a complex negotiation over what counts as art, who gets to decide and how those decisions are staged in public.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This research employs a qualitative, inductive methodology using reflexive thematic analysis to investigate how Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian*'s value has been negotiated within public discourse. The aim is to understand how media representations of the artwork construct meaning, value and critique in cultural and economic contexts. Thematic analysis will be used for this research since it provides a flexible but also structured method for analyzing patterns throughout the dataset, and it manages to remain grounded in the language and framing used by the media (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 78–79).

Instead of testing a hypothesis, this study explores emerging meanings through a close reading of media texts. The data consists of news articles collected from international sources, allowing an examination of how Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian* became not only an art world phenomenon but also a viral symbol in popular culture. Given the spread and nuances of the media coverage between 2019 and 2024, this methodological approach supports an interpretive analysis focused on discourse, reception, and symbolic value.

2.2 Sample

One of the central aims of this study is to understand how public and institutional meanings around the artwork *Comedian* are constructed and circulated. Media articles were selected for analysis because they provide a good site for observing public discourse, as well as how meaning, critique, tone and value are negotiated in a widely accessible and influential context.

The dataset for this study comprises 51 English-language newspaper articles that were carefully selected from a total of 342 initial results retrieved from the LexisNexis Uni database. The search query used was "Maurizio Cattelan Comedian," and results were refined using specific filters to ensure thematic relevance and manageable scope.

These filters included a date range from 1 December 2019 to 1 May 2025, English as the source language, and newspapers as the source type. The subject area was restricted to Humanities & Social Science, and the industry filter was set to Entertainment & Arts. Keyword filters included: "ARTISTS & PERFORMERS," "artist," "MUSEUMS & GALLERIES," "banana," "VISUAL & PERFORMING ARTS," "comedian," "AUCTIONS," "ART DEALERS," "art work," "SCULPTURE," "EXHIBITIONS," "TRENDS & EVENTS," and "ARTS FESTIVALS & EXHIBITIONS."

The decision to begin the search from 1 December 2019 was based on the timeline of the artwork's debut at Art Basel Miami Beach, where it was launched and immediately attracted global media attention. The search period extends to late 2024, when the artwork was auctioned at Sotheby's, and all the way to the present, in order to capture any new developments or follow-up commentary that may have come out since the sale. Starting the data collection from this specific date makes sure that the analysis captures the full arc of public and media discourse surrounding the artwork since its initial presentation.

2.3 Operationalization

This search process produced a broad initial dataset of 342 articles. These were then reviewed manually to assess their relevance and avoid duplicates. Articles were chosen if they featured substantive commentary on the artwork *Comedian*, including its symbolism, media reception, auction performance, audience reaction, or conceptual significance. Articles that were duplicates, mentioned the artwork only in passing, or lacked analytical content were excluded.

The final dataset consists of 51 articles. These were organized chronologically and coded in manageable thematic batches of 25 to maintain consistency and interpretive depth. During the coding process, excerpts from each article were extracted into a spreadsheet and annotated with initial codes, subthemes, themes, and analytical notes, as well as peculiarities. This systematic yet reflexive method allowed for the development of nuanced thematic categories grounded in the media discourse itself.

2.4 Data-collection

This study uses the reflexive approach to thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2022), which emphasizes the active role of the researcher in the interpretive process. Reflexive thematic analysis is particularly appropriate for examining meaning-making within discourse, as it provides an easier identification of a responses pattern while allowing space for complexity, contradiction, and nuance. Its flexibility proves it well-suited to media analysis, where cultural meaning is negotiated through both language and framing.

This study follows Braun and Clarke's six-phase model of thematic analysis: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, constructing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The process is both repetitive and interpretive, allowing themes to emerge through continuous engagement with the data. The analysis is conducted inductively, meaning that themes are developed from the data itself rather than being deductive from and guided by pre-set theoretical concepts. This approach

aligns with the study's intention to explore how meaning is constructed and negotiated in public discourse, without imposing predefined frameworks.

2.5 Data Analysis

The coding and analytical process followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase model for reflexive thematic analysis. According to them, reflexive thematic analysis prioritizes the researcher's subjectivity and interpretive role throughout the entire process. Each phase was approached repetitively, with reflexive engagement to remain accustomed to new meanings as they emerged during analysis. Instead of applying a fixed coding frame, this study used inductive, semantic coding, which meant that the codes were drawn directly from the explicit language used in the articles, allowing media discourse to guide the process (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

To manage the dataset efficiently, coding was carried out in Microsoft Excel. A structured spreadsheet was used to track each excerpt, initial code, subtheme, overarching theme, analytical note, and peculiarities. This format supported consistency and enabled the researcher to compare patterns across the dataset, as recommended in Braun and Clarke's practical guidance.

As the dataset was reviewed, recurring framings, metaphors and modes of discourse grouped naturally into meaningful thematic groups such as audience, humor and media spectacle. Through an iterative coding process grounded in reflexive engagement, three main themes were constructed: *Audience Engagement & Reception*, *Humor & Satire* and *Media Framing & Spectacle*. These categories reflect not only the patterns observed across the dataset but also the conceptual concerns that underpin public discourse around Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian*.

The theme “Audience Engagement & Reception” embodies how the artwork was interpreted by audiences not in terms of its materiality but through conceptual engagement, reproducibility, and participatory appropriation. Public discourse often shifted focus from the object itself to its symbolic provocations and reproducible format, highlighting how the artwork *Comedian* blurred the boundaries between performance, concept, and everyday humor.

“Humor & Satire” showcases the way the Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian* operated as a vehicle for parody and critique. It was targeting both the art world's pretensions and the approach of media and public reactions. The humor was frequently double-edged: functioning as both artistic transgression and cultural commentary. This theme revealed

tensions between elitist and populist interpretations, and the artwork's ability to swing between critique and complicity.

Finally, “Media Framing & Spectacle” emerged as a central theme due to the high volume of coverage fixated on the spectacle generated by the artwork’s unveiling, viral spread, and auction value. Articles often emphasized the media frenzy, the memetic circulation of images and jokes, and the redefinition of what constitutes legitimate art within media narratives. This theme demonstrates how the artwork *Comedian* became a site of negotiation around artistic boundaries and institutional credibility.

These themes were continuously refined through analytic memo-writing and thematic mapping. Codes were revisited and themes redefined considering ongoing engagement with the dataset. This process ensured that the final thematic structure remained grounded in the data while offering interpretive clarity about the cultural life of Maurizio Cattelan’s artwork *Comedian*.

Throughout this process, particular attention was paid to reflexivity and positionality. Analytical memos were kept to track evolving interpretations and maintain transparency. The interpretive nature of thematic analysis necessitates this kind of engagement, as researcher assumptions inevitably shape the analytical lens.

2.6 Ethical considerations

As the research relies only on publicly available sources, there was no direct interaction with human participants and no requirement for formal ethical approval. However, ethical sensitivity was maintained in citing media authorship, avoiding misrepresentation, and engaging critically with institutional and cultural bias.

2.7 Limitations

The study is limited by its reliance on English-language media coverage, which constrains geographic and cultural diversity in interpretations of the artwork. News media also reflect institutional perspectives and editorial choices, potentially overlooking broader public sentiment. Furthermore, the researcher’s own cultural and academic background shapes the interpretation and framing of the data, a limitation acknowledged through consistent reflexive practice.

2.8 Conclusion

This methodology combines case study research, media content analysis, and reflexive thematic analysis to explore the artwork’s cultural life. By coding themes related to audience

engagement, spectacle, and humor, the study aims to uncover the ways in which public discourse negotiates the boundaries of value, authorship and meaning in contemporary art.

3. AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT & RECEPTION

This chapter explores how the artwork *Comedian* by Maurizio Cattelan was received, interpreted and transformed through media and audience engagement. Rather than treating the artwork as a static object, the chapter approaches it as a discursive and performative event whose meaning was negotiated across institutional framings, mediated discourse and public actions. To do so, the chapter begins with a theoretical framework that synthesizes key perspectives from reception theory, cultural studies and media framing, including concepts such as ideological encoding/decoding, polysemy, framing, historical reception and participatory culture. These theories provide the conceptual scaffolding for the analysis that follows. Drawing on a thematic analysis of 17 English-language news articles published between 2019 and 2024, the chapter identifies three dominant modes of reception: institutional framings, negotiated readings and participatory performance. Each section traces how cultural legitimacy, audience agency and media representation interact to shape public understanding of conceptual art. Together, they demonstrate how reception plays a formative role in the artwork's evolving cultural significance.

3.1 Theoretical Framework: Audience Reception and Meaning-Making

Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model forms the backbone of ideological reception theory. His critique of the traditional sender-receiver model states that meaning is never simply transmitted intact from producer to audience. Instead, texts are encoded with intended meanings shaped by dominant ideologies, but audiences decode them according to their own social positioning. Hall identifies three primary decoding positions: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional (Hall, 1980, p. 136).

Hall's model also introduces the idea that reception is deeply political. When audiences decode texts, they do so from positions shaped by class, culture and ideology. Therefore, media messages are always disputed areas of meaning. This insight frames reception as a struggle between encoded intent and interpretive autonomy. Hall's model emphasizes that even when a message seems neutral, it is embedded in ideological assumptions that shape how it will be understood.

Building on Hall's foundation, John Fiske (1987) shifts attention from ideological structures to the audience's cultural agency. He sees texts as inherently polysemic, open to multiple meanings, which are activated differently depending on audience knowledge, identity and context (Fiske, 1987, p. 14). Fiske introduces the term "producerly texts" to

describe cultural objects that invite reinterpretation, parody and resistance from below (Fiske, 1987, p. 236).

While Hall emphasizes the ideological struggle, Fiske highlights audience creativity. He facilitates an understanding media reception not only as decoding but as reproduction: the ways people recontextualize cultural texts in order to serve their own expressive and political needs. In his perspective, texts work as raw material for public engagement. Audiences use and reuse these materials in ways that may affirm, subvert or completely reimagine their original meaning.

The key difference between Hall and Fiske is how they conceptualize power and control. As Hall frames decoding as a form of ideological negotiation (Hall, 1980, pp. 136), Fiske allows for a more fluid and bottom-up model of meaning-making (Fiske, 1989, p. 24). The audience is not only responding to dominant codes but actively reshaping meaning in interaction with their everyday experiences. This theoretical tension helps clarify the analytical framework for this thesis: it shifts the focus away from what media texts are saying and instead towards how they are adapted, misread or re-performed by audiences. In this study, such a perspective facilitates less attention to how public reactions to contemporary art unfold, not only as interpretations but as acts of meaning-making that can change the artwork's status, value and relevance. This framework supports a grounded approach to the upcoming analysis, especially in identifying how audiences navigate between institutional authority and their own modes of cultural expression.

While Hall and Fiske focus on the decoding side of reception, Robert Entman (1993) draws attention to the construction of meaning at the point of media production. His theory of framing describes how media outlet chooses specific elements of a narrative and make them salient in ways that guide interpretation (Entman, 1993, p. 52). He highlights four functions of framing: problem definition, causal diagnosis, moral evaluation and treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Framing is relevant because it limits the range of interpretations available to the audience. Whereas Fiske emphasizes participatory agency openness, Entman exposes how institutional structures pre-shape interpretation. Entman's theory reminds us that before any audience decoding can take place, meaning has already been shaped by editorial choices, institutional narratives and representational strategies.

This framing perspective will be used to investigate how institutions and media outlets manage cultural perception, especially how they stabilize or change the meaning of artistic gestures. Instead than treating media as neutral mediators, the analysis will draw on

Entman's work to identify how specific narratives, tones and quotes are foregrounded to showcase audience understanding. This will reveal the power of representation and the extent to which audiences engage with, resist or reproduce these interpretive frames.

Hans Robert Jauss (1982) expands reception theory with a historical dimension, introducing the idea of the "horizon of expectations"; the cultural and aesthetic convention that audiences bring to a work based on their historical moment (Jauss, 1982, p. 22). Unlike Hall and Fiske, who focus on ideological or cultural positioning in the present, Jauss explores how reception evolves over time. What is dismissed in one way may be celebrated in another as expectations shift.

Jauss's model is relevant for understanding how meanings change through time. It offers a way to theorize shifts in public perception by highlighting the tension between innovation and tradition. This is particularly relevant for cultural texts that seem trivial or provocative at first, but later acquire critical value. Institutional actors such as museums, critics and journalists shape these evolving horizons by curating, interpreting and narrating cultural texts. Jauss's approach helps trace how reputations and meanings are not only contested in the moment, but also throughout time.

In the analysis that follows, Jauss's theory will be used to question how shifts in public and institutional discourse mark changes in reception throughout time, revealing not only meaning-making, but also how cultural legitimacy is built through narrative and framing, retrospectively.

The final conceptual lens focuses on how meaning circulates in participatory media cultures. Henry Jenkins (2006) expands Fiske's notion of cultural production into the digital age, arguing that audiences now actively co-create meaning through sharing. He introduces the idea of "participatory culture," in which users become media producers who shape the course of cultural texts (Jenkins, 2006, p. 133).

Alongside Jenkins, Stanley Fish (1980) adds that audiences do not interpret as isolated individuals but as members of "interpretive communities" -social groups that share frameworks of meaning (Fish, 1980, p. 14). These communities influence how people understand cultural material, sometimes reinforcing dominant frames and sometimes challenging them.

Together, Jenkins and Fish frame reception as social and performative. Their contributions bring nuance to Fiske's polysemy by grounding meaning-making in specific social formations. These perspectives also highlight how audience responses are not just

individual but come from shared interpretive practices embedded in social life. This framework will be used in the analysis in order to explore how reception becomes visible in networked interactions, especially in how audiences reproduce and respond to conceptual artworks across digital platforms.

This synthesis of reception, framing and cultural theories establishes the theoretical framework for the analysis that follows. Instead of applying a single perspective, this chapter makes use of a blended approach that draws on ideological critique, cultural agency, institutional power, historical fluidity and participatory engagement. This framework will serve as a guiding tool that shapes the analytical lens of the chapter. They provide the structure through which audience responses, media framings and institutional narratives are examined, positioning reception as an active agent in the shaping of cultural value.

3.2 Analysis

This section uses the theoretical framework introduced above to a thematic analysis of media coverage surrounding Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian*. Instead of treating the artwork as a fixed object, the analysis explores how its meaning was shaped and remade through public discourse. It focuses especially on how different factors such as institutions, media and audiences played a crucial role in negotiating the work's reception and cultural value. In order to do so, the section is divided into three analytical lenses: institutional framings, negotiated readings and performative participation. While each lens highlights a particular dynamic, together they reveal how meaning is not merely received but actively produced in public culture.

3.2.1 Institutional Framings: Media Legitimization of Maurizio Cattelan's Artwork *Comedian*

A considerable part of the media coverage and institutional responses around Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian* shaped not only its visibility but also its perceived legitimacy. This section argues that such framings worked as a form of audience instruction, guiding public interpretation by aligning the artwork with institutional authority and the language of conceptual art. These framings correspond with what Hall (1980) named a dominant-hegemonic reading, where audiences are positioned to decode meaning in line with the encoded institutional message (p. 136). Instead of challenging the artwork's initial message, these texts embraced fully its conceptual logic, bringing up its legitimacy by aligning it with

values and vocabularies of the contemporary art world. This section examines how museums, journalists and critics contributed to framing the artwork *Comedian* not as a provocation or absurdity, but as a valid, deeper contribution to conceptual art.

One of the most relevant moments of institutional validation happened when the Guggenheim Museum's bought the artwork *Comedian*'s certificate of authenticity. The New York Times article, "It's a Banana. It's Art. And Now It's the Guggenheim's Problem" (Bowley, 2020, para.3), a museum official stated: "What I think I bought is an idea, a 'concept' more than a banana with tape." This framing does more than just explain; it reassured the conceptualist idea that art resides not in the object but in the idea. The article frames the acquisition as alignment with the museum's curatorial practice of collecting performance-based and ephemeral artworks. By doing so, it places the artwork *Comedian* in an institutional tradition of conceptual practices that includes Duchamp's *Fountain* and Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, two artworks whose meaning depended mainly on context, framing and reception. This institutional alignment recalibrates audience expectations, what Jauss (1982) called a shift in the "horizon of expectations" (p. 25), recasting what may have seemed absurd into a recognized form of conceptual gesture. Guggenheim's involvement imposes a framing that moves audiences away from viewing the piece as a meme or provocation, presenting it instead as a conceptual gesture legitimized through institutional preservation. Such an act of framing reveals the power of institutions not only to interpret art but to shape the terms under which it can be interpreted.

Journalistic narratives also played a critical role in determining *Comedian*'s legitimacy. Jason Farago's essay, *A Reluctant Defense of the (Now Split) \$120,000 Banana as Art* (The New York Times, 2019, para. 5), contextualized the work within Cattelan's entire oeuvre. He wrote: "The duct-taped banana, like the suspended horse, might testify to his and all of our confinement within commerce and history." This interpretation places the artwork in line with traditions of institutional critique and performance art. Specifically, it presumes the reader is familiar with Cattelan's artistic position and the conceptual subtexts of contemporary art. Fiske's (1987) notion of the "producerly text" mirrors here that the artwork *Comedian* is positioned as a work that demands an informed, culturally literate reader who can co-produce meaning within a specific interpretive community (p. 96).

Artist commentary also reinforces this framing. In an interview from 2023 with *The Times of India* (para. 7), Cattelan said on audience interactions: "Consumption for sure! That was quite a level of interaction and I guess they found my work ripe enough to fully enjoy it."

The quote enhances the idea that public actions like eating the banana were not seen as a disruptive thing but rather almost anticipated parts of the conceptual script. When media platforms include such statements, they sort of frame audience reactions not as spontaneous resistance but as part of the artwork's initial logic. Hall's notion of preferred meaning becomes visible here: media help stabilize interpretation by repeating frames aligned with authorial intent (Hall, 1980, p. 136).

The 2024 Sotheby's auction of Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian* offered another moment of institutional framing. The media coverage of this event was what enhanced it even more. Titles like "The banana stuck to the wall that divided the art world, to be auctioned for 1 million dollars" (*CE Noticias Financieras*, 2024, para. 2) placed the event as a conclusion of the artwork's conceptual critique. The sale was not seen as contradictory to the work's meaning but instead as its own confirmation. One article called the auction "the ultimate materialization of its essential conceptual idea" (*CE Noticias Financieras*, 2024, para. 4). This commodification illustrates Entman's (1993) notion of salience in which media narratives highlight specific frames while not mentioning counter-frames to disperse public interpretation (p. 53).

Additional reports reinforced the artwork's legitimacy through connections with art historical references. For instance, The Art Newspaper and ArtNews situated the artwork *Comedian* within the lineage of conceptual art by drawing comparisons to Marcel Duchamp's Fountain and Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes (The Art Newspaper, 2020, para. 4; ArtNews, 2020, para. 2). These references contributed to a framing that elevated the banana from meme-like gimmickry to critical commentary. Such associations guided audiences to interpret the piece not as an isolated absurdity but as part of an ongoing conceptual tradition. This rhetorical move demonstrates how cultural legitimacy can be constructed retroactively by invoking canonical references and situating an artwork in an institutionalized art-historical narrative. Across these examples, institutions, journalists and even the artist himself became "authorized decoders" (Hall, 1980, p. 136), whose interpretations structure the dominant narrative. Media coverage reproduces these framings and extends them into broader public discourse. By doing so, it narrows the spectrum of legitimate interpretations while pushing alternative interpretations aside. Institutional endorsement becomes not only a mode of legitimization but a discursive mechanism that limits interpretive plurality, a point that resonates with Entman's (1993) notion of framing as salience (p. 53) and Jauss's (1982) emphasis on institutional shaping of reception over time (p. 25).

Hall's encoding/decoding model illuminates the ideological structure of these framings. Instead of providing space for diverse interpretations, the framing narrows its meaning to a prescribed and institutionally sanctioned narrative. This is then supported by Jauss (1982) explaining how institutional legitimacy can reshape audience expectations through time. What starts as an absurd gesture, a banana taped to a wall becomes normalized, first by elite institutions, then by the media and lastly by the public, until it is on its way to be part of the canon of conceptual art. Nevertheless, it is important to remain critical of this process. When journalistic and institutional voices become very similar, there is a risk of affecting the artwork's critical potential, by deciding its meaning. The fact that the artwork *Comedian* could be sold for over \$6 million in 2024 and, at the same time, be seen as a critique of commodification, proofs the institutional logic's flexibility but also its limits. As Hall and Fiske agree interpretation is always situated in the power. Here, that power is displayed through language, legacy and curatorial authority (Hall, 1980, pp. 136–138; Fiske, 1989, p. 24).

Ultimately, this section shows that institutional framings play a formative role in how audiences are taught to see. Far from being passive, media works as intermediaries that shape reception through language, authority and repetition. In a chapter concerned with audience engagement, this institutional lens reveals how that engagement is often channeled and directed in advance, instead of emerging from open or spontaneous interaction.

3.2.2 Negotiated Readings: Ambivalence and Interpretive Tension

Together with the discourse found in institutional framings, a relevant portion of the media showcases more ambivalent reactions to Maurizio Cattelan's *Comedian*. Instead of endorsing or rejecting its artistic value outright, these articles oscillate between critique and partial validation. This complex reception aligns with what Hall (1980) describes as a *negotiated reading*: an interpretive manner in which audiences acknowledge the encoded message but readapt it according to their own cultural positioning (p. 137). These negotiated responses reflect how audience reception can be both skeptical and engaged at once. A good example to illustrate this is the *MailOnline* article entitled *Moment intruder peels \$120,000 BANANA off art gallery wall and eats it but artist says it's no skin off his nose and simply replaces it* (2019). By using the capitalized "BANANA" and playful phrasing, the article mimics tabloid sensationalism, inviting readers to laugh at the absurdity of the artwork. At the same time, it does cite the artist's reconfirming the conceptual idea behind it: "He did not destroy the artwork. The banana is the idea" (para. 6). This duality represented by the structure results in

a negotiated framing and it highlights the amusement of the event as it preserves its conceptual framework. This creates a mix of responses that do not fully dismiss or fully celebrate the artwork. It encourages audiences to engage with the object's absurdity while recognizing its intended meaning; a clear example of how negotiated readings can sustain audience engagement through a blend of critique and recognition.

This ambivalence is further reflected in articles that highlight class dynamics and spectacle, framing the artwork *Comedian* as both a conceptual artwork and a viral phenomenon. This can be seen in *Just Eat It* (*Indian Express*, 2019), which has a critical tone when about the artwork *Comedian*'s conceptual framework as it mocks the exclusivity of the art world. The piece says that "The former can pay Rs 85 lakh for a banana (and a strip of tape), the latter can eat it" (para. 3). This framing plays with class contrast and material absurdity while still implying that the banana-taped artwork is part of an intelligible art discourse. However, this critique still acknowledges the intention of the artist. Such responses reflect Fiske's (1987) notion of polysemy, that texts are inherently open to multiple and even contradictory readings (p. 15). Like this, instead of dismissing the banana, the *Indian Express*' article reframes its value in everyday terms, producing a reading that is foreign of art-world conventions yet still attentive to artistic intention.

Other media outlets interpreted the artwork *Comedian* as a viral cultural event, engaging not only with its conceptual premise but also with its performative circulation. For example, the *Indiana Daily Student* (2019) states that the banana "had become more photographed than the Mona Lisa" and mentions logistical issues like "crowd control, including police presence and a rope barrier" (para. 4). This framing places the work not only as art but mostly as an event that became very viral. Referencing *Mona Lisa* glorifies the banana and, at the same time, diminishes it, placing it between canonical importance and irony. According to Jauss (1982), this mirrors how "horizons of expectation" shape the reception mainly according to the historical and cultural moment (p. 21). Shifting frames turns the absurd into the believable, generating a space for interpretive elasticity.

Some articles use playful critique as a form of cultural commentary. In *Artist makes a meal of \$120,000 banana* (*The Times*, 2019), the author rhetorically asks if "the thieves of this work [are] the real artists" (para. 7). Instead of rejecting the work, the article critiques the instability of authorship and the commodification of conceptual gestures which are common themes in Cattelan's practice. Instead of diminishing the event, it created a space for interpretation that moved between critique and insight. This aligns with Entman's (1993) idea of diagnostic framing, which highlights particular interpretive cues that guide moral

evaluation without necessarily offering resolution (p. 52). Commentary here works as a way to navigate the tensions between institutional affirmation and audience skepticism, an interpretive space that invites reader reflection rather than stereotype.

Negotiated readings also surfaced in media that questioned the role of artistic reputation in shaping institutional legitimacy. The *New York Times* article *The Guggenheim's Banana* (2020) questions if the artwork *Comedian* would have gotten institutional recognition “without knowing it was the work of an established artist” (para. 5). Even if the article does not talk against the Guggenheim's acquisition, it questions the role of artistic reputation in shaping legitimacy. Hall's model of encoding/decoding allows for this duality: media can both reinforce dominant codes and expose their contradictions (Hall, 1980, p. 137). This layered interpretation underscores the media's role not just in translating institutional authority, but also in mediating its credibility.

The Korea Herald (2023) has an article about a student copying the banana-eating gesture at the Leeum Museum portrays the act as “a comment on the absurdity of value in modern art” (para. 3). This represents another notable example of negotiated reading as the article does acknowledge the participatory idea of the original performance and it has a skeptical tone towards the institutional context that praised and raised the artwork in the first place. The audience is depicted as agents that engage in a dialogue with the artwork, but a dialogued emphasized by irony.

Taken together, these examples show that negotiated readings are culturally grounded responses that engage critically with the work. They mirror an interpretive landscape shaped by what Jenkins (2006) calls participatory culture; a media environment in which audiences oscillate between producers and interpreters of meaning (p. 133). Playful commentary and ambivalence do not make engagement less impactful but instead reshape it, while allowing audiences to choose both insider and outsider positions in relation to contemporary art. This reflects a more dynamic and fluid understanding of audience agency, particularly within conceptual art where meaning is often deliberately unstable.

In the context of the artwork *Comedian*, negotiated readings highlight the audience's capacity to engage with ambiguity, to contradict and to generate meaning through partial agreement and critical distance. This form of reception may seem frivolous on the surface, but it highlights a deeper cultural literacy, one that embraces flexible interpretation as a tool for navigating institutional claims and cultural value. Instead of being passive or oppositional, these readings illustrate how varied media responses can function as meaningful ways of engaging with art that challenges conventional forms.

Finally, this section showcases that negotiated reception is central to understanding audience engagement with Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian*. It complicates the notion that institutional framings dictate public meaning, showing instead that interpretation is distributed across a network of actors, styles and tonalities. By foregrounding partial agreement, cultural critique and interpretive tension, this analysis reveals how ambivalent media coverage becomes a vital part of the artwork's discourse. These responses maintain the work's relevance by allowing multiple interpretations to coexist which is an essential condition for contemporary art's survival in the public sphere.

3.2.3 Participatory Performance: Audience Action as Meaning-Making

In contrast to institutional legitimization or negotiated ambivalence, a significant part of media coverage had a lot of focus on audience's actions that changed the meaning of Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian*. This section focuses on how public acts, including eating, replicating and reinterpreting the artwork, become key to meaning-making. Instead of only responding to media framings, audiences take on active roles in shaping the artwork's evolving meaning. These participatory gestures highlight the shift from reception as interpretation to reception as production, emphasizing the performative dimension of cultural engagement. Henry Jenkins (2006) calls this phenomenon "participatory culture," where audiences interact with works so that new meanings are generated. In the case of Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian*, meaning was not only interpreted but enacted through consumption, repetition and satire.

One of the most relevant moments of audience participation was from performance artist David Datuna, who ate the banana taped to the wall, basically the physical dimension of artwork *Comedian*, at Art Basel Miami shortly after it was displayed. This gesture was framed by the media as a conceptual intervention rather than an act of vandalism. In the *MailOnline* article "Unapologetic artist who ate \$120,000 duct-taped banana defends his act" (2019), Datuna is quoted saying, "I think this is the first one in art history when one artist eats the concept [of] another artist" (para. 3). This reframes consumption as a form of authorship. Instead of destroying the artwork, Datuna's act becomes a new encoding of its meaning. What makes this reading particularly powerful is the institutional reaction. Galerie Perrotin's spokesperson said that "he did not destroy the artwork," suggesting the conceptual idea stays intact regardless of its physical manifestation (MailOnline, 2019, para. 6). This dynamic illustrates Hall's (1980) notion of negotiated decoding and extends it through performance, as

well as Entman's (1993) idea of salience, where what is emphasized in public discourse determines interpretive direction (p. 53).

Media coverage framed audience participation as a continuation of the conceptual gesture. When the South Korean art student replicated Datuna's gesture in 2023 by eating the banana displayed at the Leeum Museum, he said: "Damaging a work of modern art could also be (interpreted as a kind of) artwork" (The Korea Herald, 2023, para. 4). Here, Jenkins' (2006) theory of "cultural re-performance" becomes relevant. Repetition of a symbolic act not only sustains its meaning but transforms it across cultural contexts. These reenactments of eating the fruit did not merely mock the original work but they activate it anew, affirming the audience participatory logic that underpins conceptual art.

Audience interventions also revealed a changing sense of ownership. After entrepreneur Justin Sun purchased the artwork *Comedian* for \$6.2 million at Sotheby's auction in autumn 2024, announced plans to eat the banana himself during a private event. As reported by the *Daily Telegraph* (2024), Sun framed this act as a "unique artistic experience" (para. 5). This performance enhanced the blurred line between consumption and meaning, between spectacle and authorship even more. By quoting Sun's intentions across outlets, the media reinforced the banana as a living concept, accessible to and modifiable by its owner. This illustrates the model of framing through repetition, where consistent narrative elements anchor public interpretation ((Entman, 1993, p. 53). More importantly, it highlights how audience actions are framed not as deviations, but as contributions to the conceptual framework.

These performative responses also raised critical questions about authorship, originality and control. The article "Cryptocurrency entrepreneur who bought banana art... eats it at luxury event" (*The Independent*, 2024, para. 6) described Sun's act as both absurd and meaningful.

Quoting his description, "It tastes much better than other bananas", the piece highlighted the theatricality of the event. Here, the absurd gesture becomes the content itself. Since meaning is not fixed in a text but emerges in the practices surrounding it (Fiske, 1989, p. 24), the artwork *Comedian*'s meaning shifted with each moment of audience production, of reenactment and reinterpretation.

As the media documented and disseminated these audience actions, it too became a stage for performance. The statement "No problem at all, says artist after student eats banana..." (*Irish Independent*, 2023, para. 2) repeated across articles, reaffirms the idea of an open ambivalent narrative. Media coverage no longer serves as a neutral actor, but

manages to amplify the artwork's participatory nature. This implies that meaning-making occurred not only through interpretation of the artwork but also through repeated embodied actions that shift interpretive frames and reposition artworks within evolving cultural contexts (Hall, 1980; Jauss, 1982, p. 26).

This form of audience participation disrupts traditional hierarchies. In these participatory moments, the institutions are left as simple interpreters, whilst the audience's acts become part of the artwork's developing evolution. The shift from passive media consumption to active meaning-making reflects a participatory model of reception, where users become co-creators of cultural value (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). Likewise, the idea of "producerly texts" captures how the artwork *Comedian* invites reinterpretation, mimicry and viral engagement, positioning audience action as a central mechanism of the work's continued significance (Fiske, 1987, p. 96).

Repetition plays a critical role in sustaining and transforming meaning. Datuna's act, initially an isolated intervention, became a viral meme, reenacted by others and reframed in other cultural settings. This process reflects a model of meaning-making in which value emerges through circulation and social resonance rather than stability, illustrating how repeated public enactments amplify and extend a cultural text, such as Cattelan's artwork *Comedian*, reach across contexts (Jenkins, 2013, p. 2). Whether performed by artists, students or collectors, each iteration of banana-eating reactivates the artwork's conceptual relevance and contributes to its evolving semiotic landscape.

Taken together, these responses position the artwork *Comedian* not only as a fixed artwork but as an evolving platform for public engagement. Performative reception becomes a site of meaning-making, a way for audiences to participate in the construction, critique and extension of the work. Instead of diluting its meaning, such participation enriches it by introducing new layers, interpretations and contradictions.

In conclusion, this section argues that participatory performance is a vital form of audience reception in the case of Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian*. It proves that meaning is not simply received or decoded, but enacted and amplified through symbolic gestures. These actions framed as homage, critique or spectacle reveal the artwork's open structure and the centrality of public discourse in its evolving significance. In this context, participation is not just interaction but interpretation in progress, a dynamic form of cultural authorship.

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter examined how the artwork *Comedian* by Maurizio Cattelan was received, interpreted and reshaped through media discourse, analyzing 17 English-language news articles published between 2019 and 2024. Drawing on theories by Hall, Fiske, Jauss, Entman and Jenkins, the analysis traced how meaning was not simply inherited from the artist or institution but constructed in the interaction between cultural authority, media framing and audience participation. The chapter identified three interrelated modes of engagement and reception: institutional framings, negotiated readings and participatory performance.

Institutional framings aligned the artwork *Comedian* with art historical legacies and curatorial discourses, presenting it as a legitimate conceptual art piece. Media coverage from outlets like *The New York Times* and statements from institutions such as the Guggenheim placed the artwork in an art historical and curatorial context. These narratives mirrored Hall's dominant-hegemonic decoding and Jauss's notion of institutional control. Like this, the viewers were expected to interpret the banana not as absurdity or spectacle but as a thoughtfully created conceptual gesture. Through the reproduction of institutional frameworks and by framing the content in familiar terms, these articles shaped the audience interpretation and kept it within established cultural boundaries.

Negotiated readings took a more ambivalent position. They acknowledged the conceptual frame but filtered it through skepticism or critique. These pieces often questioned the economic and symbolic logic of the artwork, even while preserving its interpretive structure. Here, polysemy becomes central: the artwork *Comedian* worked as a cultural text open to redefinition depending on context, tone and readership (Fiske, 1987, p.15). This mode of reception demonstrated how audiences and journalists engage with contemporary art not by fully accepting or rejecting it, but by recoding it to fit within familiar cultural narratives.

Participatory performance emerged as a crucial and novel form of reception. Media coverage of reenactments, including acts of eating or replicating the banana, framed audiences not as spectators but as co-authors. This mode of engagement blurred the lines between interpretation and production, reflecting a broader shift toward participatory culture and cultural reproduction, in which audiences generate meaning through interaction, iteration and symbolic action (Jenkins, 2006, p. 133; Fiske, 1989, p. 24). The media not only reported these gestures but also helped construct their meaning, transforming reception into a collaborative, performative act. These moments demonstrated that meaning was not fixed at the point of production but emerged through circulation, iteration and embodied participation.

What this analysis contributes to existing literature is a synthesis of reception, media and participatory theory applied to a single, provocative conceptual artwork, *Comedian* by Maurizio Cattelan. While much academic work has wrote about audience agency in media or performance studies, this thesis situates that agency within the context of art reception, a space still often dominated by institutional voices. By tracking how meaning shifts through framing, discourse and action, this chapter proposes a dynamic model of reception that recognizes spectators as producers and performance as interpretation.

At the same time, the analysis is limited by its focus on English-language news coverage and the absence of audience interviews or social media data. These constraints narrow the scope of reception and leave out other informal readings. Future research might expand this dataset or explore comparative case studies to further investigate how conceptual artworks circulate in global media cultures.

Taken together, the three modes of reception analyzed in this chapter demonstrate that Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian* operates less as a static artwork and more as a discursive and performative platform. Its meaning is produced relationally, through frames of institutional authority, journalistic tone, audience skepticism and participatory acts. This chapter has shown that audience engagement does not merely respond to an artwork; it actively reshapes its symbolic function and cultural status. By tracing these diverse forms of reception, the analysis highlights the role of public discourse in negotiating what art means, who it is for and how it is valued, through mediatic lenses.

4. HUMOR & SATIRE

Humor plays a relevant yet often misunderstood part in shaping how public discourse negotiates meaning. Instead of being just a minor detail, it often provides significant weight as a form of social critique, a challenge to institutions and a site of ideological tension. The ambiguity of humor is part of the strength of the artwork, allowing the audience to address contradictions without fixing them. In contemporary media, this ambiguity arrives to be especially productive, since humor creates space for the negotiation of cultural value.

This chapter explores humor as a discursive strategy and not only as rhetorical approach. It reconsiders how satire, irony and absurdity function as tools for shaping public meaning. The following theoretical framing draws on theories that examine humor's ability to mediate social norms, debulking hierarchies and critiques. These theories are brought together in order to bring to light how humor shapes public discourse by holding conflicting meanings in tension.

4.1 Theoretical Framing: Ambiguity, Circulation and Control in Humorous Discourse

Humor plays with the meaning by introducing contradiction and instability. It brings out cultural discourse that holds several interpretations in tension, allowing both laughter and critique to happen in the same way. Humor complicates the solution to the problem. It intrigues the audiences into interpretive ambiguity, where truth, authority and legitimacy are suspended. Its power lies in the ability to defer resolution and to stage contradiction without requiring a conclusion. This ambiguity is where its political and cultural significance emerges (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 90).

One approach to understanding humor is to see it as a temporary suspension of hierarchy and authority; a cultural moment where parody flourishes, but within structural boundaries. This type of humor does not diminish systems of power but offers symbolic resistance. The laughter it produces is collective and yet ultimately contained. Critique is enacted through spectacle, not transformation (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10). The concept of the carnivalesque perceives humor as a structured form of social inversion. Carnival as a cultural moment in which "all hierarchical distinctions of rank, office, and property are temporarily suspended" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10). Laughter becomes a collective act that levels out social hierarchies, as it enables the powerless to parody the powerful. However, this subversion is nothing new. Carnival unfolds within a specific timeframe and occurs under clear structural boundaries; the social order comes back after the laughter ends. In these regards, humor can expose contradictions in systems of authority while remaining within them. It creates space

for critical expression without asking for structural change. Even as it generates space for shared mockery and social reversal, the logic of carnival highlights that transformation is symbolic instead of structural, providing critique that is powerful specifically because it is not permanent.

This dynamic of critique leads to a theory that irony is not a fixed meaning but a strategy on a relational level that depends on the interplay between intention, context and recognition (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 11). Irony invites audiences to question what is said without automatically offering an alternative. Its ambiguity provides protection and provocation simultaneously. The power of irony lies in this hesitation. Yet this ambiguity also carries risk: meaning can be lost or misread, and what begins as critique may be absorbed as entertainment (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 14). Irony becomes a way of pointing to discomfort without solving it, since it creates space for critique. This ambivalence is an aspect that creates space for irony in order to function in contexts where certainty may be suspected.

In digital culture, humor often circulates through remix and repetition rather than emerging from a single voice. It is participatory and constantly evolving, especially in formats like memes, where critique unfolds through intertextual play, parody and virality (Shifman, 2014, p. 18). This modularity allows humor to function both as cultural resistance and as a vehicle for mainstream absorption. For example, a meme satirizing an institution may be widely shared not for its critique, but for its humor alone. As it spreads, it becomes a form of entertainment that earns clicks and shares rather than reflection. Participation in this context becomes a double-edged process, enabling users to engage critically, but also facilitating the commodification of disagreement, transforming critique into content. In this way, the mechanisms that allow humor to circulate also act as the mechanisms of its containment (Shifman, 2014, pp. 127–130). This dynamic makes digital humor especially ambivalent: even as it critiques cultural power, it often reinforces that power by ensuring the institution or figure being mocked remains highly visible and shareable.

What emerges throughout these perspectives is a shared insight: humor resists closure. Its ambiguity makes it durable. Social inversions confuse the boundary between critique and celebration. Irony multiplies meaning without settling it. Participatory formats fragment intention and encourage collective improvisation. In all cases, humor travels farther when its message is flexible (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 12; Shifman, 2014, p. 140). Its improvising quality is part of humor's force, since it allows it to redirect its own critical function depending on context.

At the same time, humor's ambivalence reveals the limits of its critical function. The space it opens for subversion is also a space of containment. Laughter disarms, but it may also neutralize. Irony draws attention to contradiction, but may fail to resolve it. Participatory culture broadens engagement, but may flatten political urgency. Humor enables critique, but also delays it (Hutcheon, 1994, pp. 90–91). These tensions are central to how humor works in public discourse: as a tool that provides resistance without requiring a break. The power of humor is found in this paradox. Even as it changes narratives, it also reinforces the systems that support them. Like this, humor creates a space where subversion and absorption coexistare coexisting.

Crucially, humor is not only analytical or intellectual. It is also affective. Collective laughter can ease anxiety, dissolve shame and build solidarity. In moments of crisis, absurdity and satire help the audiences process confusion or discomfort. This emotional dimension enhances humor's reach and influence, giving critique a visceral resonance. The ability to feel the joke often matters more than understanding it (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 12).

This does not mean that humor is without consequence. Humor can generate critique or translate outrage into absurdity. Its ambiguity has function through ideological lines, speaking in ways that direct argument (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10; Hutcheon, 1994, p. 12). For this reason, humor is not only a symptom of cultural tensions but a medium through which the tensions are circulated and contested (Shifman, 2014, p. 130). Humor in this framing is not naïve nor incidental but deeply rooted in how audiences navigate cultural contexts and frictions (Billig, 2005, p. 209). Humor's flexibility also allows it to be a site for negotiating identity. When power is contested, humor allows audiences and institutions to tackle meaning (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 2; Bakhtin, 1984, p. 7). A joke can bring attention to a critique as it initially seems harmless and a meme can displace authority by inviting audiences to reframe cultural signs (Shifman, 2014, pp. 130). In every case, humor arrives to be a means to public negotiation; a way to stretch and often subvert dominant narratives. It creates space for messages to coexist in multiple tones, making it possible for critique to occur without stirring up reactions and in a form that evades censure (Billig, 2005, pp. 212).

It is also relevant to acknowledge the emotionality that humor performs. Collective laughter can wipe away fear, dissolve shame and provide forms of solidarity (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 12). In moments of crisis, satire and absurdity often become a coping mechanism that facilitates anxiety and turns it into simplicity. This dimension creates a deeper space for humor's social role, placing it not only as critique but also as a way for emotional navigation. Hutcheon also sees this affective aspect when she highlights the capacity irony has to

"engage and disengage at the same time" (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 13), providing audiences a way to recognise discomfort while maintaining a critical distance.

In digital spaces, humor's spread is amplified by its affective charge. Content goes viral not only for cleverness, but for the way it connects emotionally, through recognition or outrage. This flow helps messages endure even after their original context fades. But it also blurs intention and reception. A satirical meme may critique an institution, while simultaneously reinforcing its visibility and cultural authority (Shifman, 2014, pp. 129–132). Humor becomes contagious when it engages with the emotional and the critical part at the same time. In digital media, this change of critique adds another layer of ambiguity. A meme that mocks an institution may at the same time reaffirm its cultural centrality (Shifman, 2014, pp. 130–132). This is a reminder that meaning is usually unexpected, especially when mediated through laughter. Humor's emotional appeal helps keep engagement alive, even when their original basis has changed.

Therefore, humor in public discourse is not a side note. It is a strategic form of meaning-making that works through ambiguity, tension and play. It works as a generative space where critique and complicity intersect, as they encourage audiences not just to receive messages passively, but to actively engage in the process, especially within online environments. through ambiguity, tension and play. It stretches discourse, negotiates power and enables audiences to engage without declaring allegiance. The theoretical framing developed here offers tools for examining how humor, in its many forms, contributed to the shifting interpretations of Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian* within public discourse.

4.2 Analysis

4.2.1 Satire as Public Disorientation

A common feature throughout the media coverage around the artwork is that it quickly turned into absurdity and this became a central part of its impact. News reports depicted how crowds gathered around Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian* in groups in a chaotic way, with some individuals even imitating or mocking the work by taping their own bananas to nearby walls (The Times, para. 3). This performative absurdity reflects the concept of carnival as a temporary space where hierarchies collapse and normative behavior is paused (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10). The chaotic energy of the scene around the artwork was not treated as a violation but more as a celebration of meaninglessness, which gave rise to moments of collective absurdity that played with the simplicity of the art world.

One journalist depicted how the crowd “was so dense, it was impossible to get a clear shot of the piece without someone's phone in the frame” (The Guardian, para. 6). This immersive frenzy turned passive spectators into active actors, challenging the traditional dynamic between audiences and artworks. These kinds of scenes represent the carnivalesque principle of inversion: those usually assigned to passive consumption, the audience here, are now central in the spectacle, performing a parody through the simple act of participation (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 12).

More specifically, humor was at the top of the headlines that incorporated puns and wordplays. Phrases such as “the art world goes bananas” or “peeling back the layers” (New York Post, para. 2) characterized the event as a joke to the audience. By choosing humor instead of seriousness, journalists contributed to a bigger destabilization of interpretive authority. This type of humor invites the reader into a participatory framework where the audience becomes complicit in making meaning (Shifman, 2014, p. 127). By incorporating the meme logic in media coverage, with emphasis and on remixable language, the carnival was prolonged beyond the museum and art fairs walls and into the digital world.

The idea that humor accommodates the coexistence of conflicting meanings was seen also in the way articles treated the artwork *Comedian* as a high-end piece of art and an object of ridicule at the same time. The situation’s absurdity grew even more when some news outlets depicted people pretending to eat bananas near the artwork or staging mock actions (BBC, para. 4). The tone that was used was hardly ever neutral. Instead, the use of tonal irony underscored the difference between institutional art discourse and the audience’s satirical response.

In these moments, humor worked as a mechanism of disorientation and not only as entertainment. It did not provide a resolution but exposed the tension between interpretations without attempting to resolve it. The idea of irony as suspended meaning (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 13) clears out why this was highly effective. Instead of dismissing critique, the humor in the articles made space for a re-negotiation of meaning by emphasizing discrepancies. Irony became a strategic takeaway, providing both the media and audience to engage in critique without taking a fixed stance. For example, headlines like “The art world goes bananas” or “A fruitful discussion” (Hoyle, 2019, para. 2; Menon, 2019, para. 3) have playful wordings to imply institution’s absurdity without clearly attacking. Articles switched between fascination and ridicule, highlighting the power of the ambiguity that was amplified as a narrative device (Gonzales, 2019, para. 4).

However, this ambiguous strategy raises different critical questions. If media narratives used irony to assess the spectacle of the artwork *Comedian*, did they avoid taking accountability for reproducing it? Instead of diminishing power, irony can be seen as an obscuring veil since it distorts complicity with cleverness. Hutcheon points out this risk irony carries when reinforcing the systems it appears to critique, since it works from within them (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 12). In this way, carnival can be both empowering and controlling as it encourages playfulness while also somehow reinforcing dominant systems of power. Media institutions that mock the absurdity of value systems may unintentionally support them through repetition and monetization. As one article stated, “the joke’s on us, again, because we can’t look away” (White, 2023, para. 4), reinforcing the idea that irony is part of the spectacle.

This association becomes specifically noticeable when humor turns into a commodity. Articles that laugh and ridicule the value of the artwork *Comedian* are dependent on the factor of provocation to gain more attention and more engagement. Headlines emphasizing the “\$120,000 banana” (Pogrebin, 2019, para. 1) or referencing its “edibility” (Gupta, 2023, para. 3) opted for a tone of viral absurdity in order to increase visibility. This is where the carnivalesque takes on having a commercial implication. The spreadable nature of humor makes space for it to work both as resistance and reinforcement (Shifman, 2014, p. 130). The media’s economic dependence on virality drives on the repetition of the absurdities it wants to mock. Ridicule in the case of Cattelan’s artwork became a product and ambiguity a mechanism of delay, postponing accountability behind the wall of satire.

The dynamic between spectacle and satire becomes clear when audience behavior fuses into performativity. A specific moment suited for this was the act of the “banana eater,” a person that removed and ate the taped banana. The coverage of this moment alternated in tones: some articles depicted it as vandalism (Gupta, 2023, para. 2), others as a performance act (Simpson, 2019, para. 4), and many did not engage with its interpretation. This intentional ambiguity showcases the capacity that humor has in destabilizing meaning. The performance embodies a carnivalesque reversal of power, temporarily destabilizing both authorship and institutional control (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 14). Media framing highlights this theatricality through articles that depict the eater as “unapologetic” his act as “conceptual intervention” (Simpson, 2019, para. 5) and photos of this moment became viral. The comedy is represented not only through the act but through its replication: takes like “Banana worth \$120k eaten by performance artist” (Gupta, 2023, para. 1) were repeatedly shared, transforming the act into participatory satire. This process echoes the depiction of spreadable media where virality

relies on emotional relatability and ambiguity (Shifman, 2014, p. 129). In the online world, the audience online added on top of the joke their own interpretations, generating memes, tweets and TikToks that provided another layer to the initial absurdity of the artwork.

However, the media's humoristic approach did not only stir laughs but also made the concept of value very unstable in this scenario. The article titles put the \$120,000 price tag along with a photo of the ripped banana which created a sort of visual satire, laughing at the art market as it drew even more attention to the spectacle of it (Hoyle, 2019, para. 2; The Guardian, 2023, para. 9). This tension reflects the idea of irony as suspended meaning, where the relationship between signifier and signified remains open-ended (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 19). Humors intensified the confusion and left its audiences disoriented. Later, the audience's reactions continued to highlight the artwork's ambiguity. Some articles display images with audience members queuing to take selfies, joke about eating the banana or suspect that the act of consumption itself was part of the performance. (Bowley, 2020, para. 3). The scene turned into a stage where spectators would perform for one another and react to their own roles in the spectacle. This engagement between audience and artwork turned the space into an act of laughter, where social norms are temporarily changed but never fully stay like that (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 15). The humor did not resolve the artwork's meaning, nor did it neutralize critique. Instead, it turned the audience into active actors as that also increased the level of uncertainty.

Finally, this subchapter reveals how humor, spectacle and media framing merge in order to produce a carnivalesque moment where normative values of art, behavior and authority were temporarily nonexistent. But it also asks whether such moments reveal real critique or just entertains it. Irony is not inherently critical and it needs to be made so through its context and use (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 11). In this case, laughter revealed the absurd, but whether it challenged or capitalized on that absurdity remains an open question.

4.2.2 Theatrical Irony and Journalistic Satire

Throughout most of the media coverage, a consistently visible trope was the friction between parody and sincerity. Articles regularly made use of theatrical metaphors and comic juxtapositions in order to frame the story as spectacle and as critical performance at the same time. An example would be the headline: "Hot take: modern art sucks" (University Wire ARTS, para. 1). Even if it seems dismissive, the tone revealed a broader media strategy: it maintains a critical tone while still relying on the spectacle to attract interest. Satire like this

does not always challenge its subject; it can also strengthen it by keeping it part of public conversation (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 14).

This was seen in articles that called Maurizio Cattelan a “clown” or the artwork *Comedian* a “joke” (The Times, para. 27). Beyond entertaining, these descriptions call on a theatrical frame where the artist is both performer and instigator. The idea of the carnival fool is useful here: a figure who disrupts meaning not through argument but through laughter, all while having a role that is allowed by the system it seems to challenge (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 8). The press went along and acted their version of the carnival fool by shifting between ridicule and admiration.

Journalistic irony was a tool to distance but to also invite. Writers used puns and comedic phrasing to critique the art world’s inflated image while simultaneously reinforcing its visibility. Framing irony as a performative duality is seen here making the meaning always layered and unstable (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 13). For example, The Toronto Star wrote “Any ‘art’ that requires the buyer to hit up a farmer’s market once a week is, I’m afraid, a scam” (para. 1). In this case, the criticism is clear but wrapped in an almost pejorative tone and language. The humor becomes a tool that has the capacity to smooth the critique but only partly.

This duality created the space for the journalistic media to remain in a position of ambivalence. The internet-native humor can be seen in this case: in meme culture, ambiguity is a virtue. It provides room for the content to move digitally broadly, open to a range of interpretations (Shifman, 2014, p. 131). In journalism, this strategy facilitates engagement while avoiding ideological affiliation.

However, such ambivalence has its own consequences. By using satire as both critique and entertainment, media coverage can risk becoming performative. Articles mock institutions’ take as they partake in its growth. Hutcheon states that irony “always has political implications,” even when it claims neutrality (1994, p. 18). Thus, the theatricality of the coverage of the artwork *Comedian* turns out to be an act of staging, an editorial performance that courts both cynicism and complicity.

In this journalistic theater, even criticism can be commodified. A piece from The Vancouver Sun raised the question on whether viral acts were artistic moments or just digital-age publicity baits, asking “Is it art? Or is it just a viral video?” (para. 9). This rhetorical question brings attention to the context and conditions under which art circulates and earns value. Here again, irony deflects clear evaluation, allowing the journalists to raise skepticism without taking sides. This approach draws back to the idea that humor, when left unresolved, becomes a strategy of reach rather than reason (Shifman, 2014, p. 134).

The self-aware tone of this mode reveals a deeper performative aspect: the journalist becomes a performer of cultural meaning. Descriptions of audiences laughing, making fun of the piece often reflect the tone of the articles themselves. This constructs the audience not just as passive consumers of satire but as co-writers of its ongoing reinterpretation. Like this, humor ends up being a method of cultural participation, beyond only a feature of coverage.

Theatrical irony in these narratives grows due to shared complicity. Media articles may joke about the absurdity of taping fruit to a wall, but by repeating and circulating these images, they actively reinforce the artwork's aura. This moment of structured violation (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 89) was a mockery allowed only as long as it kept the crowd to order. Laughter releases tension, but also works as a social valve, managing the discomfort of uncertainty.

Moreover, the media use satire's ambiguity in order to ask radical questions without disrupting their institutional credibility. By addressing critique through humor, journalists can keep their doors opened to both the art-world sources and audiences without risking having confrontations. This dynamic explains why the satire so rarely turns to be coherent critique. It keeps a safe distance, insightful enough to provoke thought, but detached enough to avoid liability.

However, this proves that theatrical irony as a critical method has its own limitations. When irony becomes the dominant mode of engagement, it may undermine the depth of critique. The multiple layers of irony can diminish its effectiveness if no clear ethical position is communicated (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 20). In such cases, satire risks serving not as a disruption of dominant systems but as a performance of disruption that leaves structures untouched.

In conclusion, theatrical irony and journalistic satire in media coverage do not simply showcase absurdity but they aestheticize it. By turning critique into entertainment, they reproduce the spectacle they claim to critique. The result is a form of discursive theater: layered, affective and alluring. The audience laughs, the headline trends, the spectacle of Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian* continues.

4.2.3 Humor as Discursive Negotiation

In the final layer of this part of the analysis, media humor appears as reactionary or theatrical, but mostly on top of that, as a space for negotiating cultural value, artistic legitimacy and public sensibility. Humor here turns into a discursive strategy; a means through which meaning is both delayed and performed. It allows journalists and readers to have

contradictory views without asking for a resolution. This discursive function reflects humor's capacity to maintain contradiction and ambiguity, producing multiple interpretive layers rather than a singular perspective or conclusion. It operates as a flexible strategy that enables media narratives to express irony and institutional critique without fully committing to any one stance, a mechanism of both disruption and deferral (Hutcheon, 1994, pp. 11–14; Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 10–12; Shifman, 2014, pp. 127–130).

Throughout the articles, jokes and puns were not peripheral, they were structural. Phrases like “The internet went bananas” (Toronto Star, para. 3) or “Appealing or appalling?” (The Times, para. 12) carried a lot of ironic distance within the very structure of the piece. These continuous wordplays did not only entertain, but became a narrative scaffolding that allowed readers to stay at a distance, postponing judgment while still engaging with the content. This reflects best meme culture, where viral humor thrives on ambiguity that invites participation (Shifman, 2014, p. 131).

This brings also the idea called the “dialogic imagination”, which is a structure where no single voice is authoritative and all meaning is temporary (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 84). In this framing, even mockery is vague: a banana taped to a wall, as in the case of Maurizio Cattelan’s artwork *Comedian*, can be ridiculed, defended or memed simultaneously without contradiction. Articles that used this discursive ambiguity often ended with open-ended questions. For example, one of them asked “Is this a parody of art or the purest form of it?” (Vancouver Sun, para. 14). The way the question is phrased invites ironic detachment while pretending to seek clarity.

Simultaneously questioning and complicit, this position is central to the theory of postmodern irony (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 13). It says that irony allows for the staging of contradictions without the need to resolve them (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 13). Instead of clarifying meaning, irony multiplies it. Media coverage reflects this multiplication by noting the artwork’s cost, the unnamed buyer or the piece’s fragility, usually finishing with a pun. The structure of the joke is then inseparable from the structure of the critique. Both rely on deflection: drawing attention to the absurdity of the artwork.

However, this is not a failure of criticism, but it is its own performance. The humor does not point at a distant target but loops back onto the speaker, the institution and on the audience. Like this, the coverage mirrors a kind of carnivalesque logic. The carnival is a site of inversion and parody where hierarchical boundaries blur and absurdity is temporarily permitted (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10). By using puns and ironic takeaways, media that wrote on

Cattelan's artwork turned their coverage into a discursive carnival, where audiences are encouraged to laugh, question and share, but not to conclude.

This open-endedness serves a cultural function. It makes the media spectacle easier to digest. Humor smoothens ideological confrontation by turning it into play (Shifman, 2014, p. 136). This act of play is not politically neutral. It frames in a selective way what kinds of ambiguity are permitted and which voices are amplified. For example, while the coverage often highlighted public amusement, it rarely included voices that called for structural reform in the art world. The humor then sets some boundaries: between legitimate critique and unproductive anger, between cultural insiders and outsiders.

Participatory engagement with humor further complicates these dynamics. Media references to TikTok trends, meme templates or reenactments of the banana stunt (Toronto Star, para. 5) show how audience interactions do not only reflect the media frame, but they extend it, through contribution. What happens is that memes work as collective negotiations of meaning, relying on users' capacity to share and interchange cultural symbols (Shifman, 2014, p. 120).

However, the implication here is not fully emancipatory. Even if the humor may invite participation, it sometimes does so within pre-scripted boundaries. Most outlets used humor in order to ask if the work was "good art" or "bad art", but not enough questioned the deeper structures of commodification, authorship or institutional gatekeeping. Deployed like this, the humor acts more as a lubricant, facilitating the passage of provocative ideas without demanding structural critique.

This reveals the political ambivalence of humor as a negotiation. Irony can "both undercut and reinforce cultural authority" (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 18). In media covering Maurizio Cattelan's *Comedian*, this double function is especially noticeable. On the surface, satire and parody seem to challenge elitism, but they often repackage that elitism in an accessible form. A joke about art market absurdity can be shared by many, but still becomes part of the spectacle it aims to critique.

Such paradoxes are central to how humor functioned in the media discourse around the artwork *Comedian*. Instead of offering clarity or resolution, humor often acted as a way to sustain ambiguity, allowing contradictory meanings to circulate without demanding a singular interpretation. Laughter, in this context, worked not only as a release but also as a means of managing discomfort while reinforcing the structures it seemed to challenge (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 12). This was particularly evident in how some articles relied on humorous framings to maintain reader engagement without making explicit claims. Instead of clear

positions, jokes and wordplay allowed journalists to entertain multiple positions at once. One headline read "Banana Art: Appeal Lies in the Peel" (The Guardian, 2023, para. 4), hinting at both ridicule and value, while another article described the media reaction as "a cultural food fight" (Hoyle, 2019, para. 3), converting interpretive confusion into spectacle. These choices reflect the kind of participatory and open-ended humor that digital culture thrives on, where meaning is shaped less by resolution and more by continued circulation and emotional engagement (Shifman, 2014, p. 140). This analysis builds on this logic to argue that media humor served not simply to entertain but to delay interpretive closure, inviting audiences into an ongoing negotiation over meaning, legitimacy and cultural worth.

Yet this momentum often worked as a form of strategic evasion. Much of the media coverage fluctuated between mockery and admiration in relation to the artwork, treating ambiguity as entertainment rather than critique. For example, some articles praised the artwork as "a brilliant joke" while simultaneously questioning its artistic legitimacy (Simpson, 2019, para. 5). These rhetorical choices did not resolve contradictions within the art market discourse but they turned them into humorous fragments. Instead of confronting the tensions, humor made them accessible. Headlines worked more like performances than arguments, using wit to gesture toward critique without ever making it explicit. This approach cultivated a public discourse that privileged irony over inquiry, encouraging emotional engagement without interpretive clarity.

What emerges in this final analytic arc is humor as a mechanism that both reveals and conceals. It signals discomfort with cultural systems while cushioning those very systems from sustained scrutiny. Ambiguity becomes a way to circulate dissent without consequence, allowing laughter to substitute for resolution. The result is a mode of engagement that is affectively rich but politically diffuse. This analysis uses this framework to highlight how the media's use of humor sustained cultural ambivalence about Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian*, keeping critique in motion while stopping short of transformation.

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter has explored how humor functioned in the media reception of Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian*, showing how humor was not only a detail but a central discursive strategy in how the artwork was interpreted, circulated and debated. Through a close analysis of media coverage, three interconnected patterns were identified: satire as a mechanism for public disorientation, theatrical irony as editorial performance and humor as a site of cultural negotiation.

Firstly, media satire produced interpretive disorientation and no clarity. Coverage of the artwork leaned into the absurdity of the work, allowing ambiguity to become a feature instead of a flaw. This rhetorical approach mirrored the logic of the carnivalesque, where established norms and hierarchies are momentarily suspended (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10). However, this was not only a freeing gesture. Although laughter exposed contradictions, it also restored social order once the spectacle occurred. Satire, in this form, operated as symbolic resistance rather than maintained critique.

Secondly, theatrical irony structured journalistic engagement. Headlines and articles employed irony not only as a rhetorical tool but as a performance of distance. The coverage staged critique through comic deferral, allowing journalists to question the legitimacy of the art world through the commentary of Cattelan's artwork, while remaining complicit in its spectacle (Hutcheon, 1994, p. 13). Irony created an editorial position of ambivalence: reflexive, clever and ultimately non-committal. This tone amplified engagement while limiting responsibility. Irony, then, became a form of journalistic theater.

Third, humor operated as a discursive negotiation between critique and complicity. Humor in the coverage of the artwork *Comedian* circulated through puns, memes and wordplay that invited public engagement without clear ideological stakes (Shifman, 2014, p. 131). The media actively shaped and extended the humoristic spectacle. By embedding critique in viral formats, coverage turned ambiguity into a strategic asset. Instead of offering resolution, the media reconfigured uncertainty into a tool for visibility, using accessible language and shareable structures to amplify engagement. This analysis highlights how media humor did more than comment on the absurdity of the artwork *Comedian*, it operationalized that absurdity as a communicative practice, sustaining the artwork's cultural relevance while deferring clear judgment.

This analysis contributes by bringing a deeper understanding of humor not as a side-effect of media coverage but as a component of cultural meaning-making. It proves how laughter, irony and play mediate institutional critique in ways that are affectively charged yet politically ambivalent. The framework developed across this chapter reveals humor to be both a method of public inquiry and a strategy of discursive deferral. It exposes how media institutions participate in, perform and monetize ambiguity. In doing so, this thesis reframes humor not as a distraction from critique, but as one of its most powerful and paradoxical tools.

5. MEDIA FRAMING & SPECTACLE

In today's cultural economy, the boundaries between critique, commodity and spectacle are more and more entangled. Artworks that once stood as provocations or acts of resistance are now often absorbed into media and financial circuits, their value shaped as much by visibility as by material form. This chapter investigates how media narratives and institutional discourse contribute to the commodification of art, focusing on how meaning is produced through spectacle, performance and framing.

The chapter begins with a theoretical framework that brings together concepts of media ritual, symbolic performance and the discursive construction of value. It then turns to three aspects of media analysis: first, how market logic and symbolic value emerge through media hype; second, how the 2024 Sotheby's auction operates as a theatrical performance of commodification; and third, how institutional protocols and legal discourse stabilize the artwork's legitimacy. Each section reveals how cultural meaning is produced through the intertwined systems of media, spectacle and institutional validation, showing how these processes are actively shaped by evolving media practices, economic structures and audience participation as seen in Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian's parcourse*.

5.1 Theoretical Framing: Media Spectacle and the Performance of Value

This chapter explores how cultural objects are received, interpreted and debated within public discourse as part of a broader system of symbolic valuation. It focuses on the mediated performance of value; how visibility, repetition and institutional scripting turn objects into commodities. Spectacle, framing and institutional ritual are not treated as isolated stand-alone mechanisms, but as intertwining processes that shape how value circulates in a media-saturated environment. Instead of offering a static reading of art's commodification, this framework argues that meaning itself is produced through performance, spectacle and symbolic legitimization.

Spectacle is central to the performance of cultural value. It is a system of appearances through which power travels, where what is seen becomes more significant than what is materially present. Visibility becomes a proxy for legitimacy and, in a culture saturated by media, this visibility is often amplified through repetition, theatrical excess and discursive framing (Debord, 1994, p. 12). Within this visual economy, value is not anchored in substance but in circulation. This process enhances under conditions of simulation, where representations no longer refer to underlying realities but become self-contained signs. In such environments, symbolic value detaches from material reality and becomes performative,

as objects gain meaning through their ability to be shared and memed across platforms (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6). These dynamics blur the lines between critique and commodity, challenging the assumption that artistic or cultural value can remain autonomous from the structures that publicize, stage and absorb it. When cultural visibility becomes a form of governance, value is not discovered but enacted and that enactment is always mediated.

Baudrillard's perspective also intersects with more recent work on media aesthetics. For example, Boorstin's concept of the pseudo-event anticipates how media spectacles are constructed with no intrinsic significance other than their ability to be reported and circulated (Boorstin, 1992, p. 11). When value becomes hyperreal, the artwork is no longer a static object but a dynamic node in a system of symbolic production. The aura of the artwork is not intrinsic but discursively produced across media forms.

Meaning, however, does not circulate freely but it is structured by frames. Media framing works as a selective process that foregrounds certain aspects of reality while omitting others, shaping how cultural events and objects are understood (Entman, 1993, p. 52). These frames do not only reflect meaning but actively tackle it, privileging some narratives over others. Through repetition, frames become dominant, naturalizing particular interpretations and embedding them into public discourse (Entman, 1993, p. 55). In this way, framing operates ideologically, rendering specific perspectives as commonsense while marginalizing alternatives. Within commodified culture, framing is central to how value is performed, not only determining what counts as meaningful but also maintaining the affective and symbolic coherence of spectacle.

This symbolic structuring is then reinforced by institutional performance. Museums, auction houses and legal frameworks act as agents of legitimization, translating cultural gestures into recognized forms of value. Through documentation, conservation and acquisition, these institutions stabilize the meanings introduced by media framing. What is ephemeral becomes enduring, and what is ambiguous gains authority. Institutional acts such as issuing certificates or staging acquisitions turn discourse into cultural fact, legitimizing value by embedding it within bureaucratic routines and material protocols (Couldry, 2003, p. 4; Kellner, 2003, p. 5). These processes do not only follow cultural visibility but they extend it, ensuring that spectacle can circulate as history and that symbolic value is reproduced over time.

These theoretical insights become even more potent when reframed through the lens of media spectacle as cultural performance. Media spectacle is defining feature of contemporary culture, characterized by its theatrical structure and affective intensity (Kellner,

2003, p. 2). Media spectacle stages political, economic and cultural life as dramatic events that invite collective identification. The media is not a passive conduit but a dramaturgical force. Spectacles do not merely represent but they enact. They perform scripts through which audiences participate in the legitimization or rejection of social meaning. These events operate through visual excess, narrative coherence and ritualistic repetition, creating a symbolic order that masks contradictions (Kellner, 2003, pp. 5–6).

Drawing on anthropological frameworks, media events work as cultural rituals that reinforce the legitimacy of institutions by staging them repeatedly as central actors in public life (Couldry, 2003, p. 4). These rituals organize attention and structure belief, encouraging audiences to see particular actors and narratives as inherently authoritative. Media thus becomes a site of symbolic reproduction, where authority is performed rather than simply claimed. Spectacle here serves not just to entertain but to confirm social hierarchies.

More recent cultural theories echo this intersection of spectacle, performance and media framing. Mediated visibility produces symbolic power, where being seen is a precondition for cultural influence (Thompson, 2005, p. 31). This visibility is not distributed equally but is often granted through institutional framing and media curation. Similarly, we live in a media-saturated environment where rituals of attention shape collective imaginaries and distribute symbolic capital (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 59).

This theoretical framework positions commodification not as a static endpoint but as an active process shaped by media attention, discursive framing and institutional ritual. By synthesizing theories of spectacle, simulation, framing and performance, it provides a lens through which to analyze how symbolic value is not merely reported but actively constructed. The forthcoming analysis applies this framework to trace three interrelated dynamics: first, the ways in which media discourses produce symbolic value through tropes of absurdity, virality and hype; second, how the auction operates as a public staging of value, turning financial exchange into cultural performance; and third, how institutional routines such as certification and acquisition formalize this value within enduring structures of legitimacy. Together, these sections build a cumulative argument: that cultural value emerges not from the intrinsic qualities of the object, but from the systems of visibility, interpretation and authority that surround and animate it.

5.2 Analysis

5.2.1 Market Logic and Symbolic Value in Media Hype

In the days following Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian*'s debut at Art Basel in December 2019, a media frenzy emerged not just around the object itself but around the absurdity of its price. Headlines emphasized the banana's \$120,000 valuation, triggering global reactions ranging from fascination to outrage. The press coverage of the initial sale, as well as later commentary, reveals how media discourse was central in transforming the artwork from a conceptual piece into a symbol of art market absurdity. Through symbolic framing, emotional affect, and mass circulation, media played a key role in making the artwork *Comedian* a global spectacle.

Framing involves selecting certain aspects of perceived reality to make them more salient in communication texts (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Media outlets engaged in this selection by emphasizing the price tag of the artwork, the perishability of the banana and the performative dimensions of the reactions of both artist and audience . For instance, one article described the artwork as “more photographed than the Mona Lisa,” emphasizing the absurd visibility it gained in a short span (Indiana Daily Student, Dec 8, 2019, para. 14). Such exaggeration places the artwork *Comedian* not simply as an artwork but as a cultural event, its monetary value elevated by attention rather than intrinsic worth.

This transformation aligns with the notion of simulation, where representation becomes detached from any stable referent and begins to circulate as its own reality. (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6) The banana's taped material existence on the wall became secondary to the story of its valuation, the performative acts surrounding it and its circulation online. In this way, the artwork *Comedian* moved from object to symbol, from critique to spectacle. As several news outlets stated, it became the ultimate conversation starter; mocked, shared, discussed and dissected across mainstream and social media.

Media representations of Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian*'s pricing did not just reflect the market absurdity, but also actively amplified its symbolic value through repetition and narrative framing. Journalistic commentary often mocked the price but simultaneously emphasized it. One article stated that the pricing was designed to “reach a happy medium between a small price tag to make the work seem trivial and a sum to make it seem ridiculous” (The Times, Dec 7, 2019, p. 37, para. 13). The act of selling the piece of art was not presented as economic logic but as an intentional act of market critique, yet the media framed it as entertainment, an ironic drama that blurred satire with investment. The market, in turn, responded to this visibility by elevating the work's symbolic and monetary status.

This discursive loop, media amplifying the price, public responding with viral interest and the market reacting to visibility, illustrates what is referred to as the society of the spectacle, in which “everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation” (Debord, 1994, p. 12). The media did not merely report on the artwork *Comedian*; they co-produced its meaning. Articles quoting collectors emphasized that the value lies in the certificate of authenticity, not the banana, reinforcing that the object’s physicality was irrelevant next to its symbolic permanence (Times Colonist, Dec 13, 2019, p. D4, para. 7). The work’s value became performative: declared, circulated and then repeated across media systems.

Moreover, the coverage of audience reactions added to the narrative construction. Videos of Datuna eating the banana, reports of crowd control and online parodies served to intensify the symbolic economy surrounding the artwork. One journalist noted that “*Comedian* became a reflection of a Lucille Bluth Arrested Development joke about affluent and powerful people not knowing the cost of a banana” (University Wire, Dec 11, 2019, p. 1, para. 6). These pop cultural associations reframed the banana as a satirical mirror for class critique and media excess.

Meanwhile, Cattelan’s legacy and persona were used to stabilize the work’s symbolic ambiguity. The frequent comparisons to Warhol’s soup cans and Manzoni’s canned feces placed the artwork *Comedian* within a history of conceptual provocation. In doing so, media coverage supported the idea that the conceptual piece of art was not just an absurd stunt, but a calculated entry into the market critique. Even when mocking the banana, the main actor of this artwork, journalists and art critics reinforced its relevance by giving it discursive space.

In this regard, symbolic value became inseparable from media performance. Media practices are not external to social life but constitute its infrastructure (Couldry and Hepp, 2017, p. 57). The coverage of the artwork *Comedian* as a high-value object did not only reflect an absurd market but it actively participated in producing it. The humor, critique and disbelief surrounding the banana created an affective charge that increased its desirability. Far from undermining its worth, the mockery made it more valuable.

In conclusion, media narratives did not only describe the artwork’s market trajectory, but they actively shaped it. Its valuation emerged not from its inherent worth, but through symbolic performance: as spectacle, as meme, as financial asset. This analysis demonstrates that value is not a static attribute but a mediated effect, produced and sustained through repetition, visibility and institutional scripting. By tracing how meaning was co-produced

through media hype, this section offers a critical lens for understanding commodification as a performative process, rather than a mere outcome of market logic.

5.2.2 Performing the Market: The Auction as Spectacle

The 2024 Sotheby's auction of Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian* marked a crucial moment in the artwork's afterlife, not only because of its surprising final price of \$6.2 million, but because the event itself became a media spectacle. As multiple outlets noted, the resale was expected to draw attention, yet the scale of coverage and public commentary transformed the auction into a live performance, a ritual of symbolic and financial validation. Defining media spectacle as an event that dramatizes power and ideology through symbolic performance becomes central to understanding how this auction functioned, not simply as a transaction, but as a performance of value (Kellner, 2003, p. 3).

The auction was not only a private exchange between buyer and seller. It was preceded by public speculation, media announcements and statements from both Sotheby's and the original buyer, suggesting that its theatrical nature was part of the work's evolving conceptual meaning. Positioning the work for auction became the ultimate enactment of its conceptual premise, turning an ephemeral gesture into a transactional performance that solidified its symbolic logic. In this sense, the act of reselling the artwork *Comedian* was not separate from the artwork's critique of value systems, it became the continuation of its performative logic.

The staging of the auction invited spectatorship. Media platforms covered the event in real time, with headlines emphasizing both the absurdity of the price and the symbolic drama of the sale. For example, articles referred to the artwork *Comedian* as a “banana drama” (The New York Times, Dec 9, 2019, para. 2) and described the moment as “a farcical art-world stunt” (The Guardian, Dec 10, 2019, para. 6), highlighting the performative contradiction between market seriousness and conceptual absurdity. Such headlines reinforced the spectacle's dual status as both financial transaction and cultural performance. The surprise that a banana taped to a wall could exceed six million dollars reflected not only on the art market but also on the spectacle of commodification itself. Media rituals play a critical role in shaping what counts as legitimate cultural value, not by simply reflecting consensus, but by staging and performing it through repetition and institutional participation (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 50). This chapter extends that logic by showing how these rituals not only legitimize spectacle, but transform cultural absurdity into economic affirmation.

The buyer, crypto-entrepreneur Justin Sun, further contributed to the theatricality. His public statements about the purchase, and the framing of his persona as a tech billionaire playing in the art world, amplified the spectacle's narrative. Several articles framed him as a character in the unfolding drama: "The banana is now in the hands of a collector known for buying NFTs and meme stocks" (para. 4). This intersection between financial speculation, media hype and personality-driven branding turned the sale into a symbolic convergence point between Web3 culture and the contemporary art market.

This performance of market value was also institutionalized through Sotheby's position as both legitimizer and stage. Instead of distancing itself from the controversy, the institution embraced it, framing the work's conceptual provocation as a defining feature. One article noted that the auction house "leans into the stunt by highlighting the critical debates and aesthetic questions the piece raises" (The New York Times, Oct 21, 2024, para. 3). This aligns with theories of spectacle as mediated consensus, where institutions co-produce the very spectacle they purport to frame critically.

In press statements, Sotheby's emphasized their commitment to showcasing "conceptual innovation" and treating the artwork *Comedian* as a "historic work of the 21st century" (The New York Times, October 21, 2024, para. 2). These framings provided a narrative of curatorial seriousness that attempted to elevate the event beyond parody. The auction, then, became a media ritual that blurred the line between financial theater and curatorial discourse. It transformed critique into market participation and controversy into symbolic affirmation.

Audience reactions, both from those physically present and those following through digital media, also contributed to the event's status as spectacle. Responses varied from ridicule to reverence, with some commentators decrying the purchase as foolish excess while others celebrated its audacity and symbolic ingenuity. These polarized interpretations reinforced the idea that value was not intrinsic but performatively enacted through discourse and display. As one article said, "Cattelan's 'Comedian' became one of the most talked-about sensations of the art world... [and] continues to capture the zeitgeist" (The Times of India, Oct 26, 2024, para. 3). Visibility in media environments actively produces cultural value. The auction of Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian* worked as a performative event that staged symbolic value in real time, inviting audiences to witness and participate in its legitimization. Mediated appearances became central to the construction of meaning, demonstrating how symbolic power emerges through controlled visibility and narrative framing (Thompson,

2005, p. 31). This highlights how abstract notions of cultural worth gain material consequence through spectacle and repetition.

By treating the resale not just as a financial milestone but as a mediated cultural performance, media coverage helped inscribe the sale into broader discourses about the absurdity and brilliance of contemporary art. The fact that the sale was documented, discussed, and shared across platforms contributed to the hyperreality surrounding the artwork *Comedian*. The auction ceased to be a real transaction and instead became a simulation of economic and cultural power, a performance that sustained the artwork's symbolic momentum (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 2).

The emphasis on ritual, visibility and simulation is further reinforced by collectors' statements and public interviews. Several participants described it as a symbolic act. One article noted that auctioning the work was seen as "the ultimate materialization of its essence," shifting the focus from object to concept and inviting public interpretation (The Brock Press, 2024, para. 10). This framing positions the auction as more than institutional validation, it becomes a theatrical event in which meaning is co-produced through audience engagement and discursive participation.

Moreover, by involving a crypto-entrepreneur, the event reflected broader shifts in how new economies interact with the traditional art world. Sun's involvement brought with it a certain digital credibility and a speculative logic, blurring distinctions between NFT culture, conceptual art and financial investment. The banana thus becomes not just an object, but a site where market experimentation, cultural spectacle and symbolic play converge.

Ultimately, the Sotheby's auction of Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian* crystallized the logic of the spectacle: institutional legitimacy, media visibility and economic excess merged into a single ritualized event. In transforming resale into a stage for symbolic power, the auction became both an extension of the artwork and a reflection of the structures it was originally meant to critique. The irony is not lost that the artwork's conceptual critique of market absurdity was itself amplified by the market's enthusiastic embrace of that very absurdity.

5.2.3 Protocol and the Art of Institutionalization

While much of the public fascination with the artwork *Comedian* centered on its absurdity and viral reception, a subtler yet equally powerful media narrative surrounded its integration into institutional frameworks. This process of institutionalization involved not just acquisition but also the transformation of an ephemeral and performative artwork into a legitimate,

collectible, and preservable entity. The media played a crucial role in narrating and affirming this transformation, focusing on documentation, curatorial challenges and legal discourse.

These elements, protocol, certification and institutional discourse, can be read as performative acts in their own right, staging the artwork's value in alignment with bureaucratic and cultural authority.

A key mechanism through which the artwork *Comedian* solidified its conceptual status was the certificate of authenticity. Several articles emphasized that buyers were not purchasing a banana or even the duct tape, but an idea represented through official documentation. As one collector explained, "What I think I bought is an idea, a 'concept' more than a banana with tape" (Bowley, 2020, para. 11). Others reiterated that "without a certificate, a piece of conceptual artwork is nothing more than its material representation" (Kennedy, 2019, para. 7). These claims underscore how documentation functions as a performative contract, shifting the locus of meaning from the object to the institutional apparatus that affirms it. The banana can rot or be eaten, which is part of the actual point, but the certificate ensures that the artwork remains legible and valid within systems of value exchange.

Media narratives also highlighted the paradox of conserving a perishable item. As reports on the Guggenheim's acquisition of the artwork *Comedian* detailed, the museum received not the fruit but a certificate, display instructions and guidance on how to replace the banana weekly (Bowley, 2020, para. 11). In this context, the act of conservation is transformed into a performance of adherence. Rather than defying material decay, the museum ritualizes it, reaffirming the conceptual parameters laid out by the artist. This performance of protocol allows the piece of art to persist in institutional space, even as its physical form must be regularly destroyed and remade.

The legal discourse surrounding Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian* further amplified its status as a product of institutional systems. Several media outlets reported on copyright questions raised by public reenactments or reinterpretations of the work, particularly after the student performance at the Leeum Museum in 2023. The fact that ownership of the concept can spark legal debates indicates how thoroughly *Comedian* has been integrated into regimes of intellectual property and cultural stewardship. The media's documentation of these disputes reinforces the notion that *Comedian* is no longer just an artwork but a codified entity, protected and circulated within legal and economic systems.

Importantly, these layers of institutional framing do not nullify the work's conceptual provocations, they extend and stabilize them. If *Comedian* originally mocked the

commodification of art, its inclusion in major museums and high-profile auctions performs that critique in real time, showing how even parody is subject to bureaucratic absorption. The media coverage of its acquisition thus becomes part of the artwork's iterative performance, reinforcing Baudrillard's claim that simulation can overtake the real (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6) and Debord's notion that spectacle transforms lived experience into representation (Debord, 1995, p. 13). The banana taped to a wall is no longer just an event, it becomes a set of protocols, contracts and conservation routines, all mediated by the institutional logic of permanence.

This institutionalization is also a form of discursive framing. As Entman (1993) asserts, to frame is to promote a particular interpretation by selecting and emphasizing some aspects of reality over others (p. 52). The media's focus on certificates and protocols promotes a reading of *Comedian* not as prank or parody, but as a serious, collectible work embedded in the structures of modern art. This legitimizing narrative not only elevates the work's cultural standing but also protects its market value. It reframes ephemeral provocation as institutional asset, and transience as symbolic capital.

Moreover, the media often narrated the institutional journey of *Comedian* as one of triumph, which is proof that the work had earned its place in art history. Headlines such as "Banana buyers say piece will be part of art history" (O'Connor, 2019, para. 6) or "Comedian to sell for \$1.5 million at upcoming auction" (The Brock Press, 2024, para. 10) suggest a teleological narrative where market acceptance and institutional recognition validate artistic legitimacy. Yet this narrative itself is a performance, an ongoing act of cultural reinforcement that enacts the very values the artwork initially sought to destabilize.

The interplay of certification, legal discourse and museum protocol makes visible the architecture of institutional power. It reveals how ephemeral, humorous or disruptive artworks must ultimately conform to a logic of structure in order to survive beyond the moment of their provocation. In doing so, *Comedian* dramatizes not just the absurdity of art markets, but the seriousness with which institutions stage their roles as arbiters of value, permanence and meaning.

Like this, *Comedian* exists in a paradoxical space. It critiques institutional complicity while depending on it for validation. It mocks value while requiring value to be legible. And it challenges permanence while demanding preservation. Media narratives did not merely report on these tensions, they helped construct them, offering a script through which audiences could interpret *Comedian* as both joke and legacy, both ephemeral gesture and cultural artifact.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the ways in which *Comedian* functioned not only as a conceptual artwork but also as a spectacle whose meaning was produced, circulated and negotiated through media narratives and institutional practices. The analysis revealed that *Comedian*'s financial valuation and viral success were not incidental outcomes, but essential components of its cultural impact. In each phase of its lifecycle, from initial pricing to public display, auction performance and eventual institutional acquisition, *Comedian* was framed as a media event that blurred the lines between critique, commerce and theatrical display.

First, the media's framing of the artwork *Comedian*'s market value was shown to rely on tropes of absurdity, hype and viral attention. Articles emphasized the banana's price as a provocation, while juxtaposing the simplicity of the object with the excesses of the art market. Rather than resolving its meaning, the spectacle of value opened up interpretive tensions, where high financial investment was read as both satire and sincere belief. Framing theory and theories of symbolic value helped clarify how media representations participated in this ambiguity by staging the banana's worth as a site of public debate.

Second, the Sotheby's auction was not just a financial event, but a curated spectacle that turned the market transaction into an extension of the artwork's meaning. Coverage emphasized the drama of bidding, the contrast between expectations and final price and the performative role of the buyer. Theories of media spectacle and simulation showed how the auction transformed the artwork into a recursive symbol of its own critique, turning financial excess into artistic commentary.

Third, institutional practices, including protocols, documentation and acquisition, were not merely support structures but central to the work's meaning. The artwork's transition into museum collections was framed by the media as a form of cultural consecration, where certificates of authenticity replaced physical presence. Theories of simulacra and art worlds provided insight into how institutions, through curatorial and legal mechanisms, perform the work of artistic legitimization. Media accounts amplified these logics, translating administrative acts into symbolic narratives of cultural value.

Across all three dimensions, the findings underscore that Maurizio Cattelan artwork *Comedian*'s significance emerged not from the object itself, but from the interplay of media visibility, financial spectacle and institutional framing. The artwork did not simply participate in these systems, it exposed and leveraged them, revealing how value in contemporary art is performatively constructed across economic, symbolic and narrative domains.

6. CONCLUSION

When Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian* was first showed at Art Basel Miami in 2019, it seemed like a piece of absurdity, an art-world stunt destined to fade after its viral moment passed. Yet six years later, the artwork resurfaced in the headlines in the meantime and relied on the structures of spectacle and legitimacy it had undermined: institutional framing, market spectacle and huge media coverage. This thesis aimed to understand how the artwork *Comedian* came to weight cultural significance in such a contradictory landscape by analyzing the discursive perspectives through which its meaning was constructed and contested.

This thesis did not approach Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian* as a static object with a fixed meaning, but as a cultural event whose significance was shaped through three intersecting dynamics: audience engagement and reception, humor and satire, and media framing and spectacle. Using reflexive thematic analysis of 51 English-language news articles, the study traced how each of these dynamics contributed to the artwork's ongoing negotiation in public discourse. Instead of seeking a single definition or verdict, the thesis explored how meaning emerged relationally, in the space between media narratives, public responses, and institutional performance.

The first chapter demonstrated that the artwork *Comedian*'s reception was dictated by more than just institutional authority. Audiences played an active role in negotiating its meaning, either by mocking it, defending it, or re-performing it online and in public spaces. Media outlets amplified these interpretations, often capturing the artwork as a participatory event rather than a finished object. This dynamic reflected the broader shift from top-down reception models to performative engagements with cultural texts.

The second chapter examined how humor and irony operated as core discursive tools in shaping the public's relationship with the artwork. Laughter, in this context, was more than only dismissive or affirming. Instead, it worked as a way to navigate uncertainty, critique institutional pretensions, and engage with the absurdity at the heart of the artwork *Comedian*. Irony allowed both journalists and audiences to be in conflicting positions at the same time, finding the artwork both meaningless and meaningful, ridiculous and brilliant. This tension was a central feature of how cultural value was constructed.

The final chapter explored how the artwork *Comedian* became a media spectacle and commodity, with its auction and legal framing serving as rituals that staged and dictated its value. Here, symbolic performance, through pricing, headlines, museum acquisition and legal contracts, reframed the banana as more than just a conceptual work; a legitimate event and

asset within the cultural and economic system. Yet even as the artwork was institutionalized and commodified, satire and disorientation remained embedded in how it was publicly narrated.

Taken together, these findings show that Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian* cannot be understood through a single lens, as critique, prank, commodity or artwork. Instead, it worked as a discursive event that exposes the unstable boundaries between those categories. Its significance was produced but because of its ambiguity and not despite it. Through spectacle, irony, humor and public engagement, the artwork *Comedian* became an example for contemporary cultural tensions around authenticity, value and meaning in art.

This thesis contributes to media and cultural studies by highlighting the importance of audience engagement, tone and framing in the construction of meaning around contemporary artworks through the digital medium. It proves that irony and humor are not marginal aspects of discourse, but central to how audiences negotiate legitimacy, authorship and institutional authority. It also shows that cultural value today is not simply dictated by critics, but emerges through negotiation across media spaces.

In the end, Maurizio Cattelan's artwork *Comedian*, the banana taped to the wall, was never only a joke or just a piece of art. It was a stage on which serious questions were asked, about art, money, meaning and who gets to decide what mattered. By tracing how those questions played out in the public sphere, this thesis has shown that even the most absurd cultural objects can reveal the deeper logics of a cultural moment.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A. Overview of Analyzed Articles with Initial Sub-Codes

No.	Article Title	Author	Publication Date	Source	Initial sub-codes
1	The art world goes bananas over \$120,000 fruit taped to the wall	Will Pavia	Dec 7, 2019	The Times (London)	Market absurdity as critique
2	Man eats \$120,000 piece of art - a banana taped to wall		Dec 8, 2019	The Bangkok Post (Thailand)	Performance and participation
3	Moment intruder peels \$120,000 BANANA off art gallery wall and eats it - but artist says it's no skin off his nose and simply replaces it	Afp+L4Dailymail.com Reporter	Dec 8, 2019	MailOnline NEWS, V3	Performance and reproducibility
4	Someone ate the \$120,000 banana at Art Basel. Yes, really	Unknown	Dec 8, 2019	Indiana Daily Student: Indiana University University Wire NEWS	Audience attention and control
5	Fruit Was Spoiled By Its Own Success	Robin Pogrebin	Dec 9, 2019	The New York Times	Audience attention and control
6	Artist makes a meal of \$120,000 banana	Ben Hoyle	Dec 9, 2019	The Times (London) NEWS	Artistic transgression and parody
7	Man is arrested after scrawling 'Epstein didn't kill himself in red lipstick on empty wall where \$120,000 duct-taped banana exhibit was displayed at	Jack Newman	Dec 9, 2019	MailOnline NEWS	Institutional boundaries and legitimacy

	Miami's Art Basel				
8	Just eat it		Dec 9, 2019	Indian Express Editorial	Dual critique of elitism and literalism
9	A Reluctant Defense of the (Now Split) \$120,000 Banana as Art	Jason Farago	Dec 9, 2019	The New York Times	Institutional reflexivity
10	Unapologetic artist who ate \$120,000 duct-taped banana artwork at Art Basel insists it was a 'performance' and not 'vandalism'	Leah Simpson	Dec 9, 2019	MailOnline NEWS;	Artistic appropriation as participation
11	What Will Become of Maurizio Cattelan's Now-Infamous Art Basel Banana?	Helen Holmes	Dec 10, 2019	New York Observer	Conceptual reproducibility
12	Couple who paid £90,000 for notorious 'banana duct-tape artwork' speak out Work by Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan has been the subject of widespread debate since it went on display in Miami Beach, Florida	Roisin O'Connor	Dec 10, 2019	The Independent (United Kingdom) NEWS	Ownership as meaning-making
13	A performance artist ate a \$120,000 banana. But is it art?; 'Provocative'act made for social media age	Cal+L14um Marsh National Post	Dec 10, 2019	The Vancouver Sun (British Columbia)	Performative provocation vs. artistic intent

14	A (Grudging) Defense of the \$120,000 Banana Critic's Notebook		Dec 10, 2019	The New York Times International Edition ARTS	Institutional critique through form
15	The \$120,000 Art Banana Gets the Meme Treatment	Julia Gonzales	Dec 11, 2019	University Wire CULTURE	Memetic spread and satire
16	Banana buyers say piece will be part of art history	Kelli Kennedy The Associated Press	Dec 13, 2019	Times Colonist (Victoria) ARTS	Ownership, authorship, and authenticity
17	New owners speak of ?unicorn of art world?		Dec 14, 2019	Bay of Plenty Times (New Zealand) WORLD	Ownership, authorship, and authenticity
18	The banana that took over the world		Dec 15, 2019	CE Noticias Financieras English	Conceptual art and institutional validation
19	It's All a Piece of Work for Museums	Graham Bowley	Sept 19, 2020	The New York Times	Conservation & institutional practice
20	Cattelan's 'Comedian' plays a joke on the art world	Vinay Menon	Dec 11, 2019	The Toronto Star	Public backlash and media irony
21	It's a Banana. It's Art . And Now It's the Guggenheim's Problem.	Graham Bowley	Sept 25, 2020	The New York Times - International Edition ARTS	Museum acquisition and conservation
22	The Guggenheim's Banana		Oct 10, 2020	The New York Times	Public critique of institutional bias
23	Hot take: modern art sucks	Logan Colman, The Carroll News	Oct 11, 2021	University Wire ARTS-AND-ENTERTAINMENT	Critique of value systems in art
24	Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan's dark humor unfolds at Leeum Museum of Art	Park Luna	Jan 30, 2023	The Korea Herald	Artist intention and retrospective framing
25	\$120,000 banana, praying Hitler: Infamous art world prankster		Feb 01, 2023	Korea Times Park Han-sol	Parody of institutional value-making

	Maurizio Cattelan's first Seoul outing				
26	Art student eats Maurizio Cattelan's banana at Leeum	Unknown	Apr 30, 2023	The Korea Herald	Participation through appropriation
27	Banana artwork taped to a wall is EATEN by museum visitor	Rohan Gupta	May 1, 2023	MailOnline NEWS	Reflexive appropriation of meaning
28	No problem at all,' says artist after student eats banana from his (EURO)110,000 wall exhibit	Nicola Smith	May 2, 2023	Irish Independent NEWS	Dialogue between artist and audience
29	Banana art provides food for thought for hungry student	Debbie White	May 2, 2023	The Times (London) NEWS	Dialogue between artist and audience
30	Hungry student eats banana artwork		May 5, 2023	Shenzhen Daily	Legal dispute and symbolic critique
31	Meet the 'jokester' who humbles Hitler and makes Trump go bananas	Sharmila Ganesan Ram	Aug 8, 2023	The Times of India (TOI) MUMBAI	Artist framing of participation
32	IT'S BANANAS	Nui Te Koha	Oct 8, 2023	Herald Sun/Sunday Herald Sun (Melbourne, Australia) WNEWS	Curated provocation and public engagement
33	The banana stuck to the wall that divided the art world, to be auctioned for 1 million dollars		Oct 24, 2024	CE Noticias Financieras English	Auction as conceptual extension
34	Banana taped to wall auctioned off for \$1 million		Oct 25, 2024	CE Noticias Financieras English	Auction as continuation of meaning
35	"Comedian," the controversial duct-taped		Oct 25, 2024	CE Noticias Financieras English	Performance of value through resale

	banana, to be auctioned for US\$1 million				
36	The most controversial work: A banana stuck to the wall to be auctioned for \$1 million		Oct 25, 2024	CE Noticias Financieras English	Value-making through controversy
37	Art goes 'banana': 'Comedian' painting could fetch \$1.5 million in auction		Oct 26, 2024	The Times of India (TOI) US TOI World Desk	Iconization through repetition and sale
38	Viral artwork of banana duct-taped could be auctioned for over 12 crore, but here's twist	Varnika Srivastava	Oct 26, 2024	DNA	Media and market spectacle
39	Banana taped to a wall auctioned for \$1 million		Nov 09, 2024	CE Noticias Financieras English	Value-making through spectacle
40	Maurizio Cattelan's "Comedian" to sell for \$1.5 million at upcoming auction		Nov 13, 2024	The Brock Press University Wire NEWS	Market critique disguised as participation
41	Controversial banana stuck to wall sells at auction for \$6.2 million		Nov 21, 2024	CE Noticias Financieras English	Redefinition of artistic boundaries through market success
42	Duct-tape banana artwork sold for \$6 mn, buyer is crypto entrepreneur who will have to 'replace rotting banana himself'		Nov 21, 2024	Hindusian Times	Intersection of digital culture and art market
43	\$5.2m for a duct-taped banana: has the	Tim Jonze	Nov 21, 2024	The Guardian (London) ART AND DESIGN	Critique of value and art-

	buyer of Maurizio Cattelan's artwork slipped up?				world spectacle
44	How a banana can be worth 6 million dollars		Nov 21, 2024	CE Noticias Financieras English	Art history, sexuality, and commodity critique
45	Art? Famous banana stuck to the wall sold for \$6.2 million		Nov 21, 2024	CE Noticias Financieras English	Market meets meme culture
46	Bitten twice, artwork of "bananas stuck together with adhesive tape" sells for R\$35 million at auction		Nov 21, 2024	CE Noticias Financieras English	Crypto identity and symbolic consumption
47	Crypto king who bought \$6m banana 'will eat it this weekend'		Nov 22, 2024	The Daily Telegraph (London) NEWS	Market critique as artistic strategy
48	Cryptocurrency entrepreneur who bought banana art for \$6.2 million eats the fruit in Hong Kong	Kanis Leung	Nov 29, 2024	The Independent (United Kingdom)	Branding, ownership, and media performance
49	How does a \$6.2M banana taste? 'Indeed, quite good,' purchaser says; Duct-taped art	Kanis Leung The Associated Press	Nov 30, 2024	The Calgary Herald (Alberta)NEWS	Crypto spectacle and luxury branding
50	Banana duct-taped to wall sells for 6.2 million and is eaten by buyer - The Ticker	Carol Chen, Production Assistant	Dec 9, 2024	The Ticker - University Wire NEWS	Value disparity and symbolic inflation
51	An Artwork, a Banana, or an Expensive Joke?	Jess Castellote	Mar 16, 2025	This Day	Irony, public expectation

Appendix B. Coding Frame

Main Theme	Main Code	Sub theme
Audience	Performative participation	Reenactments
		Symbolic gestures
	Negotiated readings	Irony in reception
		Partial critique
	Institutional framing	Curatorial discourse
		Legitimizing language
Humor	Media irony	Editorial tone
		Comical framing
	Satire	Ambiguity
		Contradictory framing
	Engagement	Puns
		Memes
		Accessible critique
Spectacle	Auction	Auction coverage
		Viral headlines
		Theatricallity
	Rituals	Certification
		Museum acquisition
	Value construction	Market logic
		Media framing