

It's a Banana. It's Art. And Now It's the Guggenheim's Problem.

Ephemeral works of art, like Maurizio Cattelan's creation out of fruit, can often pose conservation challenges for the museums that have them.



By Graham Bowley

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Few art works sold in the past few years have drawn as much attention as “Comedian” by the Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan, in part because, despite its price and ironic humor, it is at its heart a banana that one tapes to a wall.

The sly work's simplicity enticed collectors to pay as much as \$150,000 for it at a Miami art fair last fall, an act of connoisseurship that delighted them but astonished the many people who had not imagined that a, um, “sculpture” of fruit on a wall could command such a price.

Now the work's aesthetic merit is being reinforced by the Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan, which is accepting it into its collection as an anonymous donation.

“We are grateful recipients of the gift of ‘Comedian,’ a further demonstration of the artist's deft connection to the history of modern art,” said the Guggenheim's director, Richard Armstrong. “Beyond which, it offers little stress to our storage.”



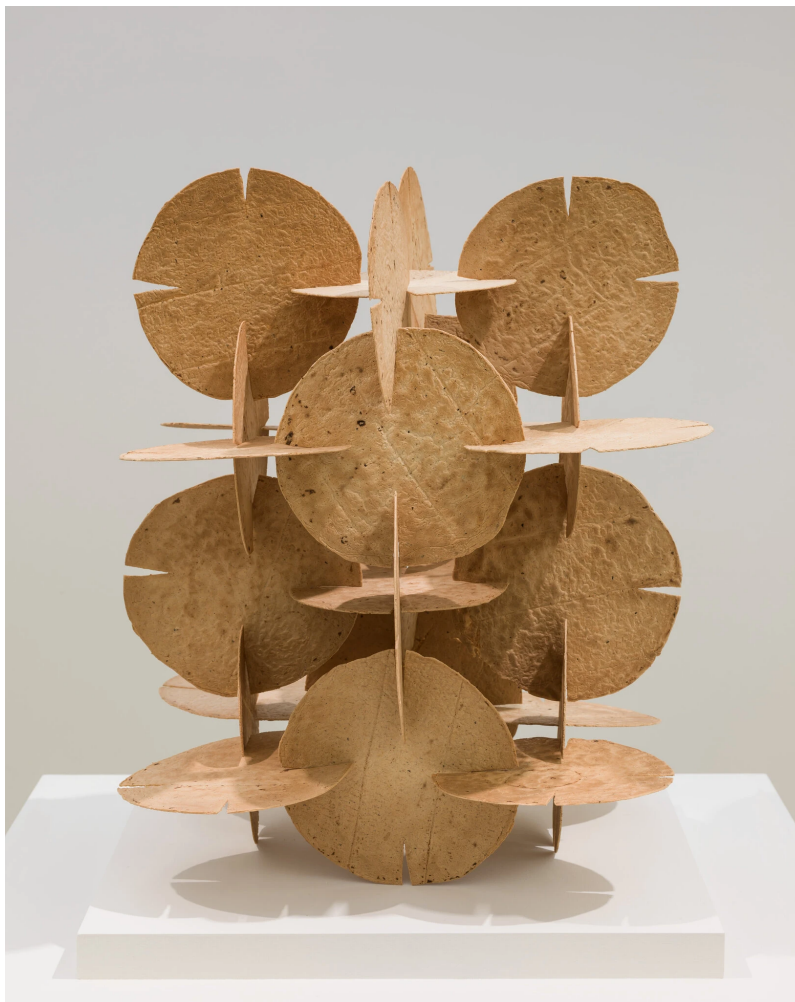
The startling simplicity of “Comedian” drew attention and many selfies in Miami. John Taggart for The New York Times

In fact, “Comedian,” as sold, does not include a banana or tape. What one buys is a “certificate of authenticity,” a surprisingly detailed, 14-page list of instructions, with diagrams, on how the banana should be installed and displayed.

Lena Stringari, the Guggenheim's chief conservator, said the instructions will be quite easy to follow and are quite complete in addressing questions like how often to change bananas (7 to 10 days) and where to affix them ("175 cm above ground").

"Of all the works I have to confront, this is probably one of the simplest," Ms. Stringari said. "It's duct tape and a banana," she added.

The conservation of conceptual art is not always so straightforward for museums increasingly asked to preserve works made from of all kinds of ephemeral substances, like food.



The Mexican artist Damián Ortega's "Tortillas Construction Module," from the Guggenheim's collection, uses tortillas to create structures. Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation; Kristopher McKay



"Artist's Breath," a work from 1960 by the Italian artist Piero Manzoni. The balloon was inflated initially but lost its shape over time. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome

How does one care for a scale model of an Algerian city made out of couscous? A sculpture made of interlocking tortillas? Fruit stuck on a coatrack? (All works the Guggenheim has shown.)

Given the expectation that museums will preserve works for generations, centuries, maybe even forever, the host of tricky questions that surface around this sort of work go beyond the more typical concerns of how to touch up an oil painting or mend a crack in a sculpture.

How do you preserve a balloon that contains the artist's breath (it's called "Artist's Breath") and that inevitably is going to deflate? (Tate Modern.)

What about computer-based art when the computer or its software is out of date and can't work anymore? Or the many pieces that have been created from fluorescent lights when the fluorescent lights are no longer manufactured?

The answer, for some, is as high-concept as the art.

"Once you think art is an idea and the material is secondary then it does not matter if that material lasts for a long time," said Melissa Chiu, director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden at the Smithsonian in Washington. The Hirshhorn has its own conservation specialists who tend to art created from "time-based" materials that degrade. "A lot of them are really challenging. The museum's role in a way is to preserve the work forever."

The focus is so much on the idea that, in some cases, the materials do not outlast the end of the exhibition. Like the works involving bananas or couscous, the art object is thrown away but the art idea lives on, to be recreated in the future according to the artist's instructions.



“Lick and Lather” (1993-1994) by the artist Janine Antoni, portraits of the artist in chocolate (left) and soap, which were created from molds and then licked or washed by the artist. HirshhornMuseum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution

The Hirshhorn's challenges include “Lick and Lather,” a gender-political work involving two busts of the artist Janine Antoni, one made from chocolate, the other from soap, which she wore down by licking and washing — and which the museum preserves in cool storage when it is not on display.

Another of its pieces, “palimpsest,” by the artist Ann Hamilton, involved snails devouring cabbages. The curators had to make sure the cabbages were the kind the snails could eat, and then finally dispose of the snails.



Ann Hamilton's "palimpsest" from 1989, a meditation on memory, included snails that feasted on two heads of cabbage. Ann Hamilton, via Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington

A famous example of art created from organic matter is Yoko Ono's 1966 "Apple," featuring an apple on a plexiglass pedestal. When it was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 2015, the apple was bought from a store on 53rd Street and replaced a couple of times over the four weeks of the exhibition, said Christophe Cherix, one of the curators who put on the show.

But he never worried about people stealing it.

"Once you remove it from its pedestal, then it's just an apple," he said.

Earlier this year, the Whitney Museum of American Art went further — exhibiting a work of art by Darren Bader using 40 pieces of fruit and vegetables — from rambutans to star fruits to daikon radishes — sourced and refreshed from a weekly Fresh Direct delivery and regular trips to a nearby Chelsea fruit market.



Tomatoes, but also shapes. via Whitney Museum of American Art



Darren Bader's installation at the Whitney reimagined fruits and vegetables as sculpture. via Whitney Museum of American Art



The Bader work, exhibited this year, used pedestals to present the 40 pieces as formal objects. via Whitney Museum of American Art

The point of the show? To see “fruit and vegetables as they function as sculptures,” said Christie Mitchell, a curator. “You find yourself admiring a fennel bulb in the same way you would a carved marble bust.” Before they lost their freshness, the objects of art were regularly washed, chopped and served to visitors in a salad.

Darren Bader's work "lasagna on heroin" involved injecting lasagna with heroin. The gallery replaced the lasagna three times during its exhibition in 2012. Buyers received a certificate of authenticity with instructions on how to recreate it. -

Another work by Mr. Bader, exhibited in London, was made of a slice of lasagna injected with heroin, and presented different problems of sourcing. "We bought the lasagne from Marks and Spencer and the heroin from a dealer," said the gallerist, Sadie Coles, who put on the show. She said the work is "both ridiculous, pointless and hilarious in concept, but is also evocative and melancholic, and like all of Bader's work makes us question accepted ideas of authorship, value and plausibility."

Kader Attia's model of an ancient Algerian city made from couscous, a staple food of North Africa. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

At the Guggenheim, staff members like Esther Chao worked with the artist to create the model using stainless-steel molds and materials like salt to help preserve it for the duration of its exhibition. Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation; Erick Munari

At the Guggenheim, for a 2016 show Ms. Stringari and the museum's staff cooked couscous according to the artist Kader Attia's specific recipe, along with wallpaper paste and salt to keep it together and deter mold. Her staff, with the help of the artist, used stainless-steel molds to recreate the model of the desert city of Ghardaia, which Mr. Attia designed as a commentary on colonialism. The city inspired Western architects, but they rarely acknowledged its influence.

Over the three months of the exhibition, the museum team monitored the sculpture for pests like bugs. Cracks appeared, but that was one of the points, mirroring the age of the ancient city. Any couscous that fell away was swept up.

Another artist whose work is in Ms. Stringari's care, Dan Flavin, used fluorescent tubes in his art. Ms. Stringari said the tubes, once easily bought, now have to be custom-made. She worries about how she will conserve Flavin's art when the tubes are no longer available. "Red tubes are very difficult to get," she said. "They contain mercury."

Although Flavin did not consider himself a conceptual artist, there are conceptual aspects to his work. Ms. Stringari said conservators have to think carefully about the conceptual underpinnings of all works and whether the repairs are preserving the concept.

"We have to constantly make decisions about how they live on in the future," she said.

The artist Dan Flavin found beauty in the colors, light and geometric arrangement of fluorescent tubes. But the tubes, once commonly manufactured, now need to be custom made. 2018 Stephen Flavin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Sally Ritts

If they can, curators with questions consult artists when they show such works. Typically, they might try to interview the artist about display protocols when they accept a work into their collection. Sometimes, as in the Cattelan piece, artists leave precise written instructions that will outlast them.

The ideas underpinning ephemeral art often inevitably include concepts like loss, mortality, life and death.

In the case of "Comedian," the subject is also the art world itself — and questions about who decides what constitutes art, and the huge amounts of money that is spent on it.

Perrotin, the gallery that sold three editions of the work at the Art Basel fair in Miami, said that "'Comedian,' with its simple composition, ultimately offered a complex reflection of ourselves."

One of the buyers, Sarah Andelman, a French fashion consultant and tastemaker, wrote in an email, "It appealed to me for its absurdity and the effect on the public. I observed all the Basel visitors taking their selfie and I thought that was such a reflection of our time."

Ms. Andelman said she has not hung her "Comedian" yet. She's still waiting for the instructions but added that she is in no rush. "What I think I bought is an idea, a « concept » more than a banana with tape," she said in an email.