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EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

Maurizio Cattelan: Is There Life Before Death?

by Franklin Sirmans

The exhibition catalogue features new works by Maurizio Cattelan and several of his large-scale pieces dating from 2003 to 2007. Published by the Menil Collection; available at the Menil Bookstore and distributed internationally by Yale University Press.

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Notes

1. Although the phrase could relate to any common usage, it is also the title for the 1969 exhibition by Harald Szeemann "Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form." The innovative exhibition was one of the first to recognize and acknowledge the process of creation as a work of art.
2. Maurizio Cattelan, quoted in Michele Robecchi, "Maurizio Cattelan," *Interview*, June 8, 2009, <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/maurizio-cattelan>.
3. Maurizio Cattelan, quoted in Andrea Bellini, "An Interview with Maurizio Cattelan," *Sculpture* 24, no. 7 (2005), http://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag05/sept_05/webspeccs/cattelanenglish.shtml.
4. Cattelan, quoted in Robecchi.

front:
Maurizio Cattelan, *Untitled*, 2009. Canvas, wood, and plastic, 82⁵/₈ x 33¹/₂ x 23⁵/₈ inches

All works by Maurizio Cattelan © Maurizio Cattelan.

Work by Lucio Fontana © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ SIAE, Rome.

THE MENIL COLLECTION

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Maurizio Cattelan



THE MENIL COLLECTION

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The exhibition "Maurizio Cattelan" presents a unique examination of the enigmatic Italian artist's work up to this point in his career. Cattelan has worked in a wide variety of media over the years, but the desire to create a body of images that "lives in your head" has remained at the heart of his endeavors.¹ Whatever the format, his often ambiguous images demonstrate an acute awareness of politics, religion, and society, as well as a sophisticated sense of humor. This exhibition focuses on the artist's recent sculptures in a new presentation—interacting with works from the Menil Collection.

Cattelan was born in 1960 in Padua, Italy. While in his twenties, he saw a small exhibition of mirror paintings by Michelangelo Pistoletto; intrigued, Cattelan asked the gallerist about them. The gallerist's recommended reading led to Cattelan's discovery of additional artists, and eventually to his own private course of study and creation. Of that early period Cattelan has said, "Here I was, in my late twenties, with no art education or anything like that, desperately trying to come up with something clever without making a complete fool of myself... I didn't even consider myself an artist. To a certain extent, I still don't."²

Despite any doubts Cattelan may have about his identity as an artist, over the last twenty years he has created an impressive body of work in a variety of media, including sculpture, photography, and artistic actions. In addition to his solo work, Cattelan has displayed a continuing passion for the collaborative pictorial essays he has worked on since the mid-1990s. In journals such as *Permanent Food*, 1996–2007, and, more recently, *Charley*, Cattelan has worked with hundreds of artists, writers, curators, and others to produce these eye-popping magazines filled with curious juxtapositions of images. Made up of pictures appropriated from various magazines and other sources, *Permanent Food* included no text, just images from front to back. The editing was carefully done, and though narratives sometimes

appeared, most often the choices were based on what layout would leave the greatest, most enduring impression.

Cattelan's fascination with images—he has said that "more than anything else, I listen to the murmur of images"³—is essential to his art making. His desire to create images that linger is evident in many of his artistic choices, certainly in the text-free pictorial essays, but in much of his other work as well. His sculptures are usually fabricated, and his wax figures, taxidermied animals, and photographs all avoid any display of the artist's hand. The result, as illustrated by several works in this exhibition, is that the emphasis is squarely on the image, rather than on the art-making process or materials.

This preoccupation with images can be seen even in his conceptual art actions. For *A Sunday in Rivara*, 1992, his contribution to an early group exhibition at the Castello di Rivara in Italy, Cattelan unfurled sheets in the form of a rope out of a second-story window of the building, hinting at a certain shyness, as well as a possible escape route. Rather than confronting the absurdity of the object or his lack of confidence about making a "beautiful" work of art, Cattelan vanished. But the trace he left behind was more than enough to make his point about the subtlety of conceptual art. Along with many of his generational peers, Cattelan seemed to be working against



Maurizio Cattelan
All, 2007
White P Carrara marble
316 x 79 inches
Photo: Markus Tretter, courtesy Kunsthaus Bregenz

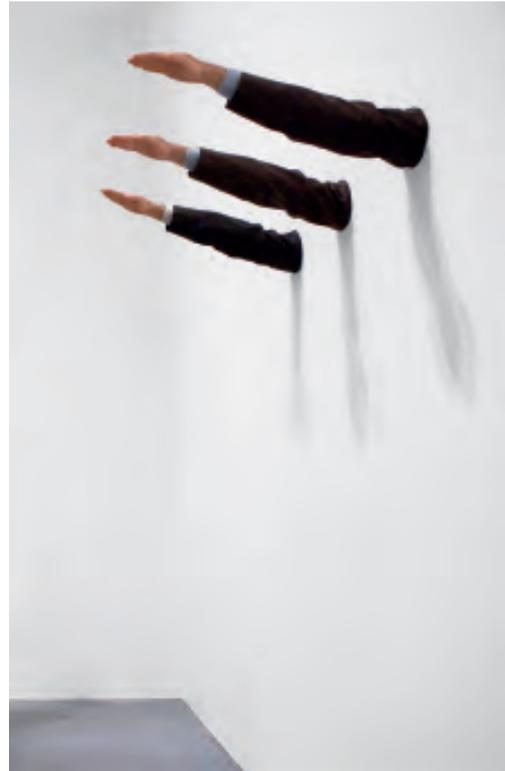
the 1980s' emphasis on easily commodified paintings, and rather than faux heroic gestures relegated to canvas, he seemed intent on exploring more ephemeral forms, as if to question the validity of recent art history. But with Cattelan it has never been purely about the action. He could have refused to participate in the exhibition or taken his rope with him as he escaped, leaving only a story behind; he chose not to. Despite his mastery of the conceptualist gesture, the image remains integral to his work.

Among the most striking images Cattelan has created are his taxidermied animals. Cattelan recently completed a fourth piece involving a taxidermied horse, making this subject a significant theme in his career. Rarely does a form recur so often in his work, but the horse has been a persistent sight, along with its cousin, the donkey. Between 1994 and 2004 the artist realized four installations with donkeys, including his first New York exhibition at the Daniel Reich Gallery. Reminiscent of Joseph Beuys's first New York action, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, 1974, in which he spent three days with a coyote, Cattelan's work *Warning! Enter at your own risk, do not touch, do not feed, no smoking, no photographs, no dogs, thank you*, 1994, consisted of just two elements: a crystal chandelier and a live donkey. But in contrast to Beuys's action, there was a characteristic leavening of sobriety in

Maurizio Cattelan
Untitled, 2009
Taxidermied horse, wood, and paint
Life-size



Maurizio Cattelan
Ave Maria, 2007
Polyurethane and metallic parts, clothes, and paint
Approx. 18 x 20 x 40 inches



Cattelan's piece. Cattelan's undomesticated animal was a stand-in for the young artist, bereft of ideas but stubborn enough to make something work.

In an untitled piece from 2007, the body of a horse juts out from the wall above the viewer, the head stuck into the wall just far enough to support the suspended animal. The gravity-defying equine looks as if it could fly. The lightness of the piece contrasts greatly with Cattelan's newest horse sculpture, *Untitled*, 2009, in which the animal lies prostrate, inspiring pity rather than delight or awe. Lodged in the carcass is a sign reading "INRI," short for the Latin phrase *Iesus Nazareus Rex Iudaeorum* (Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews), which most often appears on plaques accompanying images of the Crucifixion. But what cause did this horse die for? Or is Cattelan, who consistently treads a fine line between humor and gravitas, contrasting the brutality of Christ's death with the idiom "Never beat a dead horse"?

Cattelan's sculptures *Ave Maria*, 2007, and *Untitled*, 2007, which depicts a woman standing upright and possibly crucified in a packing crate with her back to the viewer, may also evoke religion, a recurrent theme in his work. With the possible exception of *La nona ora (The Ninth Hour)*, 1999, Cattelan's

sculptural depiction of Pope John Paul II being felled by a meteorite, the artist's work deals with issues of religion and power enigmatically, with dual and dueling propositions. The three outstretched arms projecting from the wall in *Ave Maria* may be familiar as the Roman salute or the hail of the Third Reich, while the title suggests the Catholic prayer.

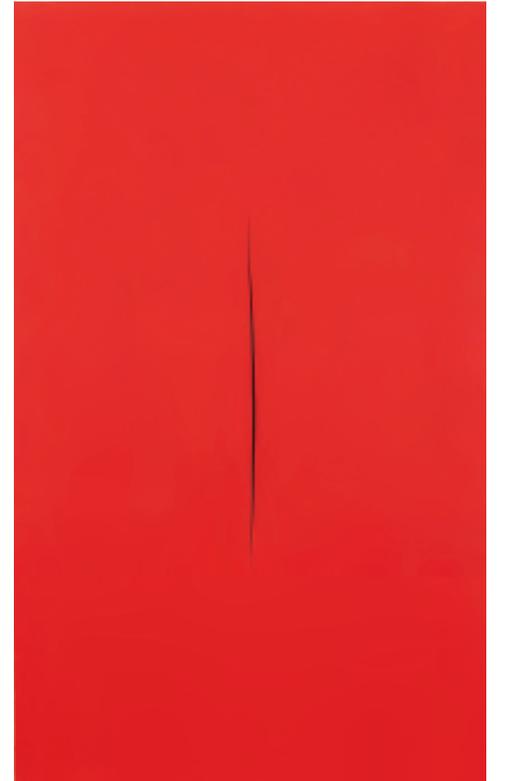
Planning for this exhibition began in 2007 when Cattelan had just created a new body of work, including the two sculptures just mentioned. It was a return to making sculpture after a few busy years of curatorial commitments, including the Berlin Biennial and the Wrong Gallery, a closet-sized gallery originally in the Chelsea district of New York and currently located at the Tate Modern in London. Both projects were done in collaboration with curator and writer Ali Subotnick and curator Massimiliano Gioni. Cattelan has consistently avoided any canonizing survey exhibitions, and no coffee table tome exists about him and his work. So rather than a smattering of new pieces in a single gallery at the Menil, Cattelan's work has been integrated into the collection. The exhibition catalogue, *Maurizio Cattelan: Is There Life Before Death?*, echoes this presentation, featuring works from the Menil Collection in dialogue with a wide range of Cattelan's pieces.

Cattelan was critically involved in the selection of works for this show. This sort of collaboration continues the legacy of the museum's founders, John and Dominique de Menil. Long before the museum was built, the de Menils were working closely with several contemporary artists, including Andy Warhol, whose work has exerted a particular influence on Cattelan. The accessibility and iconic imagery of Pop Art are consistent components of Cattelan's work. Included in this exhibition are works by Warhol reflecting popular icons of art history, politics, religion, and capitalism, subjects often addressed in Cattelan's own work.

Because Cattelan's lineage harkens back to the Arte Povera movement in Italy, a group of postwar artists who shunned traditional artistic practices and emphasized process by using unconventional and often "poor" materials, the exhibition includes several pieces by Michelangelo Pistoletto, Alighiero e Boetti, and their forerunner, Lucio Fontana. Cattelan's relationship to Arte Povera is fraught with ambiguities, as are most generational gaps in art history, yet the work of Arte Povera artists has a special resonance for him. He finds sustenance or at least creative juice in both admiring—after all it was Pistoletto's mirror paintings that first inspired Cattelan—and questioning the movement to some degree.

Both Pistoletto and Boetti, two of the most important artists associated with Arte Povera, are represented here by several works in their trademark styles. Boetti's method of collaboration shares some traits with Cattelan's process of creating fabricated sculptures—"I never even use my hands to cre-

Lucio Fontana
Concetto spaziale, ATTESA
(*Spatial Concept, WAITING*)
ca. 1965
Water-based paint on canvas
75 x 45 inches
The Menil Collection
Photo: Hester + Hardaway, Houston



ate my work, just my ear glued to the phone."⁴ Boetti worked with a group of Afghan weavers for years, providing, or sometimes crucially *not* providing, instructions to create works, such as the two-panel *16 dicembre 2040 11 luglio 2023*, 1971, which immortalized the centennial date of his birth and his prediction for when he would die.

As with *Permanent Food* and *Charley*, placement has been as essential as the selection of works in constructing this exhibition. Themes of materiality are a distinct part of the conversation around Cattelan's monumental sculpture *All*, 2007, which portrays nine life-sized shrouded bodies rendered in marble. The nearby silk work by Robert Rauschenberg, a felt piece by Robert Morris, and an almost invisible projection by Giovanni Anselmo each contributes to the exchange. Other pieces are in even starker juxtaposition, such as the untitled crated woman displayed in the antiquities gallery. Cattelan's work has been inserted into several other spaces throughout the museum, and although this is a group show in a sense, both the structure and content of the exhibition reflect Cattelan's artistic style, influences, and place in art history. And of course, his trademark wit is ever present.