

TRUSTING ART?

A Reply to Malcolm Bull

WHY IS THERE the amount of art that there is?’—the title of Malcolm Bull’s stimulating article—is an original, odd, question-provoking question.¹ Not least: how much art is there? We can perhaps imagine a time when one could have totted up all the finished paintings and sculptures coming out of artists’ workshops. In our era, however, matters are more ontologically complex. To work out how many works of art exist—and to hazard explanations about why just that many do—we need to agree on what counts as one. This is an issue that acquired a vexatious salience in the twentieth century, after Duchamp signed a urinal ‘R. Mutt’, titled it *Fountain* and attempted to exhibit it in New York in 1917. Readymades and other avant-garde innovations, Bull argues, have thrown the category of art wide open. Now, he contends, ‘anything can be art’, including a banana duct-taped to a wall—otherwise known as the Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan’s 2019 piece *Comedian*, which sold at Sotheby’s for \$6.2 million last November.

Before the twentieth century, artworks were largely confined to established mediums, and to a circumscribed range of specific materials—oil paint on canvas and so on—and tended to be prized in part because they were visibly the results of skilled craftsmanship. Contemporary art, by contrast, can be made out of virtually anything, even nothing much at all: a balloon of the artist’s breath. The advent of conceptualism, Hal Foster notes, ‘especially as it prompted the “post-studio” and “post-medium” practices of the 1970s and 1980s’, permitted ‘almost anything—a statement, a snapshot, the slightest gesture—to qualify.’² Less the product of virtuosity than choice—or chutzpah—such art can be cheap, even free,

to make (or is the right word ‘install’ or ‘think up?’): Cattelan’s \$6.2 million banana cost him 35 cents.³

Given this seeming free-for-all, why isn’t there ‘a lot more’ art? Bull presents this as a mystery:

If the artworld is able to make art out of anything, then there would appear to be clear incentives, whatever the criteria invoked, to maximize the quantity of art. Not only is art often considered, especially by those involved in the artworld, to be an intrinsic good, but having more art would mean that the artworld could expand as well, and, given that art objects are often worth more than their non-art equivalents, that there was an economic basis for this growth. The artworld has indeed expanded enormously, and there are now museums of contemporary art in many cities of the world, but it has, nevertheless, not expanded as much as it might have done, given the theoretically limitless potential for growth.⁴

Bull is not after empirical, sociological explanations—hypotheses about why more people don’t become artists, and why those who do aren’t more prolific—but the abstract laws governing the dynamics of the artworld. The latter was the conceptual linchpin of the institutional theories of art developed by the American philosophers Arthur Danto and George Dickie in the 1960s, when conceptual art was reaching ‘both its apogee and crisis’, as Tony Godfrey observes.⁵ Danto was attempting to explain, Bull notes, ‘how it was that something could be art while being identical to something which was not’: how it was, to take Danto’s example, that Warhol’s replica Brillo boxes are artworks while ‘real’ Brillo cartons in a stockroom are not.

Danto and Dickie both argued that it was the ‘artworld’ that could turn an everyday object into an artwork, though they meant different things by the term. Danto claimed that ‘To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld.’ He goes so far as

¹ Malcolm Bull, ‘Why Is There the Amount of Art That There Is?’, NLR 151, Jan–Feb 2025.

² Hal Foster, ‘Exhibitionists’, *London Review of Books*, vol. 37, no. 11, 4 June 2015.

³ Zachary Small, ‘Who’s Laughing Now? Banana-as-Art Sells for \$6.2 Million at Sotheby’s’, *New York Times*, 20 November 2024.

⁴ Bull, ‘Why’, p. 90.

⁵ Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, London 1998, p. 6.

to insist that theories ‘make artworks possible’.⁶ Dickie brought Danto’s rather nebulous artworld down to earth: an artwork is an ‘artefact’ on which ‘some society or some sub-group of a society has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation’. An artwork is an artwork because someone ‘vested with authority’ ‘christens’ it so. Such authority, Dickie writes, is ‘nowhere codified’ but exists ‘at the level of customary practice’ which ‘defines a social institution’. Thus ‘it all depends on the institutional setting’.⁷ A banana is a banana; the bananas selected by Maurizio Cattelan (*Comedian* was released in an edition of three), promoted by his dealer, sold at Art Basel Miami Beach and Sotheby’s, or donated to the Guggenheim, are artworks.

What does Bull himself mean by ‘artworld’? He seems to adopt Dickie’s ‘emphasis on the actual social networks—artists, gallerists, curators, critics, auction houses, museums, academic institutions—that collectively make something into art’. Yet Bull’s use of the term suggests a narrower application. The artworld has ‘clear incentives . . . to maximize the quantity of art’, he writes, because ‘having more art would mean that the artworld could expand as well’, yet he does not explicitly say what is driving that expansion. The most obvious incentive—the dominant force of expansion in the contemporary world—is the accumulation of capital. In that case, it’s not simply that there is an ‘economic basis’ for the growth of the artworld, as Bull’s slightly euphemistic formulation has it, but that the *raison d’être*—the prime mover—of such growth is economic: the acquisition of—and potentially profitable trade in—valuable assets. An artworld set on expanding for the sake of it is not ‘an atmosphere of artistic theory’ but a capitalist market for art.⁸

⁶ Arthur Danto, ‘The Artworld’, *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 61, no. 19, October 1964, pp. 571–84.

⁷ George Dickie, ‘Defining Art’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 3, July 1969, pp. 253–6.

⁸ Hal Foster dates the emergence of the modern art market to the 1960s—perhaps not coincidentally the decade that also saw the rise of the institutional theories of the ‘artworld’ and of conceptual art as a practice: ‘The art market as we know it now . . . is an effect of the growth of an international bourgeoisie that emerged in the boom years of the 1960s with surplus capital to expend, some of it on art, particularly American Pop, that brand which, as the art historian Thomas Crow recently put it in *Artforum*, “looked like products being sold like products”. The network of commercial galleries expanded greatly at that time, as did the influence of dealers and collectors’. ‘The Medium Is the Market’, *London Review of Books*, vol. 30, no. 19, 9 October 2008.

In this sense, despite the passing allusion to art as an ‘intrinsic good’, Bull’s overarching question appears to be a hardnosed one, which we might paraphrase as: why isn’t the artworld fully exploiting the ‘theoretically limitless’ opportunities for profiteering—in the form of all the everyday objects that haven’t yet been defined and sold as artworks? What regulates—i.e., constrains or inhibits—the size of the market for conceptual readymades? Bull’s ingenious answer to this question draws on the work of the Chicago economist Frank Knight, who argued that profit ultimately depends on uncertainty—it ‘arises out of the inherent, absolute unpredictability of things’—without which it would be gamed out of existence.⁹ Duchamp’s urinal, Bull proposes, ‘introduced uncertainty’ about ‘what a work of art actually was’. Yet this profitable uncertainty has to be managed, lest it deter buyers and destroy the market—Bull cites George Akerlof’s example of ‘the automobile market’, in which bad cars (‘lemons’), dishonestly sold, tend to drive ‘legitimate business out of existence’.¹⁰

The artworld, in Bull’s reading, functions as a ‘trust intermediary’, offering reassurance that the risk ‘involved in treating an everyday object as a precious work of art’—in, say, investing \$6.2 million in a banana and a piece of duct tape—is worth taking (‘a good bet’). The artworld therefore needs periodic ‘injections of distrust’—the avant-garde’s offerings—in order to justify its actuarial role. An everyday object like Cattelan’s *Comedian* ‘introduces uncertainty’, and its sale ‘completes the cycle, confirming that the artist, the dealer, the museum and the auction house can be trusted after all’. Bull’s hypothesis is that the size of the artworld—‘the amount of art that there is’—is determined by a ‘delicate balance between too little trust, which suppresses demand, and too much, which undermines the unique role of the supplier.’ He goes on to explore the dubious fortunes of the market for digital art—Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs)—and to consider how far they break free from the ‘trust architecture’ of the artworld by offering the ‘trustless trust’ of blockchain technology, an ‘anonymous decentralized system’ in which, Bull explains, ‘nothing is assumed to be trustworthy’ except the network, ultimately the algorithm, itself.¹¹

⁹ Frank Knight, *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit*, Boston 1921, p. 311.

¹⁰ George Akerlof, ‘The Market for Lemons: Quality Uncertainty and the Market Mechanism’, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 84, no. 3, August 1970, p. 495.

¹¹ Bull, ‘Why’, pp. 97, 99, 101.

Yet a more obvious, if less imaginative, answer to the question of why there isn't more art, specifically more 'readymades and other forms of deskilled art', has to do not with the intricacies of trust but the banality of demand. The value of readymades, like that of other commodities, is, one assumes, partly sustained by their scarcity. To present too many everyday objects as artworks would risk flooding the market. Bull himself seems to admit this explanation late on: too much new art 'could ultimately devalue existing art (both aesthetically and economically), making the artworld very cautious in its expansion'. In the course of comparing the art market to that for crypto currencies and NFTs, he thus notes that Bitcoin is 'relatively resilient' because it is capped at 21 million. Toward the end of the article, he also describes the 'traditional art market' as beleaguered by 'chronic overproduction; massive unsold inventory, and poor returns on all but a fraction of products'—which implies that there is already a glut of artworks, and that there isn't an obvious 'economic basis' for the artworld's further expansion.¹²

The uses of bananas

Consider an analogy. Say there were a 'theoretically limitless' supply of oil and that nowhere was out of bounds—it was feasible and legal for oil companies to drill on every piece of land and sea (anything can be art)—but not everywhere was being drilled (there are fewer artworks than there could be). In such circumstances, we would likely not assume that the oil companies were behaving with 'self-restraint', as Bull puts it, but that they had evidently determined that drilling for more oil was not profitable because supply would outstrip demand. Thus even in the real world, where the supply of oil is ultimately finite, OPEC frequently reduces output to shore up prices, and by extension profits. Ostensibly, the artworld, like the consortium of oil companies, recognizes that scarcity—an artefact of demand relative to supply—underpins market value, and thus the need to maintain it, artificially if necessary.

The analogy between oil and art is of course inapt in interesting ways: oil is finite and expensive to extract and refine; art in the age of conceptual

¹² Bull, 'Why', pp. 103, 100, 108. It's perhaps worth noting that Bull's question—why is there not more art?—could in principle be asked no matter how much the artworld had expanded: if the artworld's 'potential for growth' is truly 'theoretically limitless', then it will always be smaller than it could be, and so the question could always be posed.

readymades, by contrast, Bull suggests, is ‘limitless’ and can be produced for as little as 35 cents. Consider the different sorts of factors that determine demand in each case. The demand for oil is dictated by, among other things, how much people commute and travel, how far we move goods, how much we need to heat and cool buildings, how available and affordable alternative fuels are, not to mention how many states are at war. Oil consumption is a function of aggregate activity, of what billions of people find it necessary or useful or desirable to do. The demand for readymades, by contrast, judging by the \$6.2 million purchase of one of Cattelan’s bananas—the buyer was Justin Sun, a cryptocurrency magnate—would appear to be far more anti-social and weightless: the whim of one ultra-wealthy individual.

The economic determinants of demand for readymades are more mystifying in part because their ‘use-value’ is less apparent. ‘Art objects are often worth more than their non-art equivalents’, Bull notes: they have a higher exchange-value, in some cases exponentially higher (35 cents vs \$6.2 million). Yet everyday objects arguably have a higher—or at least more conspicuous and immediate—use-value than their art equivalents. Duchamp’s *Fountain* is not a functioning urinal, and Cattelan’s bananas are not for eating (though Sun did eat his onstage, claiming ‘the real value is the concept itself’; the work includes instructions for replacing the banana).¹³ Bull refers, following Danto, to the artworld’s ‘Midas touch’, and it was after all because Midas’s wished-for alchemical powers transmuted food into gold—use-value into exchange-value—that he starved. The ‘uselessness’ of art has classically been seen as the ground of value of a more immaterial kind: aesthetic, ethical, spiritual, social, political. But art is also a commodity whose value is thoroughly worldly: a prestigious luxury, used to display wealth or make more of it—a speculative asset in a sphere that tends to be less regulated and rigorously taxed than the official securities market.

Why did Sun buy the banana? The purchase of *Comedian*, Cattelan’s gallerist claims, is itself part of the artwork: ‘The fact that somebody buys it makes the piece’.¹⁴ He may be right insofar as the sum Sun paid was in a

¹³ Kaye Wiggins and Chan Ho-him, ‘Trump-Linked Crypto Founder Eats \$6mn Banana on Stage’, *Financial Times*, 29 November 2024.

¹⁴ Robin Pogrebin, ‘That Banana on the Wall? At Art Basel Miami It’ll Cost You \$120,000’, *New York Times*, 6 December 2019. Eminences in ‘Business Art’—Hirst, Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami—‘work in such a way as to make the market the medium of the art’: Hal Foster, ‘The Medium Is the Market’.

sense itself what made the work valuable to him: the \$6.2 million price tag succeeded in producing headlines that may end up being worth more than the amount he spent eliciting them, if the stunt helps with what Bull calls a ‘banana-based rebrand’ of Sun’s line of NFTs, Tron Bored Apes (he has ‘an unsold inventory of thousands of unminted Mutant Apes’).

Readymades ‘are so rare as to generate headlines’, Bull observes, and this tends not to be an incidental feature.¹⁵ If their value in part depends on their publicity, then the economy of attention might also explain why there are not more of them: they would stop generating news stories. Sun presumably figured *Comedian* was a ‘good bet’ not because he thinks he can re-sell it for more than he paid (though who knows), but because he realizes that money can buy attention and attention can in turn be monetized. Insofar as the wild sum Sun paid for Cattelan’s banana attracted attention which can be converted into value, it may not have been so wild an extravagance after all.

On this view, precious readymades may be rare because attention is scarce and valuable. Perhaps then the analogy with oil is more exact or salient than it appeared. “Data is the new oil” has become a kind of mantra of the age’, but in reality information ‘is the opposite of a scarce resource: it is everywhere and there is always more of it’.¹⁶ It is attention that is ‘like gold in a stream, oil in a rock’, a finite resource for which competition is becoming increasingly ferocious, as Big Tech seeks to bore ever further into the untapped crevices of our waking hours.

Indifference

How might we answer Bull’s question if we were to take readymades seriously as artworks as opposed to regarding them merely as commercial stunts or speculative assets? That is to say: are there aesthetic reasons—reasons internal to art, reasons relating to what a readymade *is*—why there aren’t more of them? What conclusions should we draw from the sale of Cattelan’s *Comedian*, not simply about the mechanics of the art market but about the values of the artworld and the laws of art history?

¹⁵ ‘The avant-garde, mass media and scandal have often gone together; the difference today is that the proportions are way out of whack’: Foster, ‘Exhibitionists’.

¹⁶ Chris Hayes, *The Sirens’ Call: How Attention Became the World’s Most Endangered Resource*, New York 2025, pp. 14, 5.

As Bull's elaboration of the artworld's 'trust architecture' implies, one reason why there aren't more readymades is that inducting too many everyday objects into the hallowed realm of art could desacralize the category. It seems plausible to imagine that art as a valued cultural practice can only withstand so many of these stunts before the public's patience—and perhaps faith—would be exhausted. But from this point of view—according to which one readymade may have been one too many—the mystery is not that there are not more readymades but that the artworld has gotten away with as many as it has. Or perhaps contemporary misgivings are such that it hasn't gotten away with it. How do we know there aren't already too many, rather than too few, readymades? In *Kant After Duchamp*, Thierry de Duve argued that the contemporary art public is not indignant or outraged but as 'indifferent' to readymades as readymades themselves are 'indifferent', made from 'indifferent' objects:

the public at large has lost all interest in contemporary art, in which it sees nothing but the reign of the whatever, while the art establishment works hard to prove to the public, or to itself, that this whatever is not just anything whatever.¹⁷

Bull faults the institutional theory for failing 'to specify the criteria by which qualitative judgements are made'—the criteria according to which everyday objects are defined as artworks—but he does not remedy this lacuna; his focus is on the 'quantitative dimension'. He doesn't ask whether *Comedian* is a good artwork, or whether we might *want* there to be more art like it. 'One achievement of the avant-garde has been to show that anything can be art', he begins. The tone of this opening statement is somewhat inscrutable, but it is not beyond challenge: is it an unmixed 'achievement'—an unambiguous sign of artistic progress—that fruit can be exhibited alongside, and sold for as much as, a Rembrandt? The impassive omission of explicit qualitative considerations from Bull's article, which seems not to flinch at the prospect of art museums turning into warehouses of bananas, seems itself a sign of cynicism about the artworld, now seen to be little more than an engine,

¹⁷ Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, London and Cambridge MA 1999 [1996], p. 330. In 1961, Duchamp said that 'A point which I want very much to establish is that the choice of these "Readymades" was never dictated by an aesthetic delectation. This choice was based on a reaction of *visual* indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste . . . In fact a complete anaesthesia': quoted in Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, p. 27.

fuelled by spectacle and fashion, for untrammelled commodification—a cynicism so entrenched it goes without saying.

And whether or not it constitutes an ‘achievement’, is it entirely true that the avant-garde has shown that ‘anything can be art’? That because urinals and bananas have been exhibited and sold—institutionally certified, so to speak—that any everyday object at all could become an artwork? Is it the case that because one of Carl Andre’s neat pile of fire-bricks, *Equivalent VIII* (1966), was bought by the Tate in 1972, there are as many possible artworks as there are bricks, or different building materials? Presenting a pile of different bricks would likely not be seen as presenting a new artwork. Justin Sun ate his pricey banana onstage to demonstrate that ‘the real value is the concept itself’. One doesn’t need to take this stunt seriously to recognize that in practice we do treat Cattelan’s bananas as a single conceptual gesture. When Yves Klein held an exhibition of an empty gallery in 1958, it did not give licence to other artists to make similar artworks out of ‘thin air’, just as John Cage’s 4’33” did not lead to a proliferation of silent compositions (that we know of).

If Duchamp’s signed urinal opened floodgates of a kind, it didn’t make it possible to turn all urinals into artworks. In fact, *Fountain* arguably foreclosed that possibility: although a perennial point of reference, spawning homages made out of bronze for example, the porcelain urinal as an artwork—the urinal as an idea for an artwork—is, as it were, forever taken. Avant-garde art progresses by a kind of one-upmanship—‘the negation, critique or calling into question’ of ‘an existing value or institution’, as per the theories of modernism described by Bull. Hence in 2016 Cattelan installed a toilet made out of solid gold in the Guggenheim (as though to literalize Bull’s question about whether the artworld has a ‘Midas touch’).

Cattelan’s gold toilet (titled *America*) highlights another feature of this conceptual kind of readymade which casts doubt on the idea that they can be anything at all. Doesn’t the efficacy of such works precisely rely on juxtaposing the banality of the mass-produced commodity—as ubiquitous and ignoble as urinals or bananas—with its sacrosanct singularity once it has been canonized an artwork, an object that was traditionally handmade and singular? Readymades highlight the radical difference in value accorded to the object in its functional environment and in a museum (they are thus always self-reflexive). ‘Anything’ is a

subtly equivocal word: that any old thing can be an artwork does not necessarily mean that absolutely everything can be art. A traditionally precious artefact such as a handmade mahogany armoire would be a puzzling offering. Readymades tend to be not simply commonplace objects, but paradigmatically commonplace ones—vacuum cleaners and urinals, bananas and unmade beds—and are thus pointed, provocative, often ludic choices.

Recognizing art

The question the original institutional theorists of art sought to resolve was: how do we know that—or when—an object is an artwork? How can we be sure to recognize art when we see it now that replica Brillo boxes turn up in galleries? Danto claimed that ‘telling artworks from other things is not so simple a matter . . . and these days one might not be aware he was on artistic terrain without an artistic theory to tell him so’. For Dickie, as we saw, it is not ‘theory’ so much as ‘what is done with’ the artworks—where they are displayed—that settles the matter. This leads him to claims with extreme implications:

The Field Natural History Museum in Chicago recently exhibited some chimpanzee paintings. In the case of these paintings we must say that they are not works of art. However, if they had been exhibited a few miles away at the Chicago Art Institute they would have been works of art. (If, so to speak, the director of the Art Institute had gone out on a limb.) It all depends on the institutional setting.¹⁸

Following Dickie’s logic, must we also accept that a Rembrandt displayed in a science museum—or used as an ironing board, as Duchamp considered doing—would cease to be art? The answer Robert Hughes gives to this question in *The Shock of the New* is ‘no’. He agrees that Carl Andre’s ‘array of bricks depends not just partly, but entirely, on the museum for its context’, but nothing follows from this: ‘A Rodin in a parking lot is still a misplaced Rodin; Andre’s bricks in the same place can only be a pile of bricks.’¹⁹ No matter how much history and theory you’ve mastered, if

¹⁸ Dickie, ‘Defining Art’, p. 256.

¹⁹ Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change*, London 1980, pp. 392–4. The idea that artworks can be (institutionally) misplaced—a Rodin mislaid in car park—might give us cause to question Bull’s claim that ‘There is nothing that is generally considered to be art that the institutional theory cannot account for’: Bull, ‘Why’, p. 90.

you came across Andre's *Equivalent VIII* on a building site, you might not even notice it, let alone realize you were in the presence of art. On the other hand, you might, for such Minimalist sculptures have altered our way of seeing, such that we're more attuned to the aesthetic properties of raw materials and industrial landscapes. Cattelan's *Comedian* might be undetectable in a fruit bowl, but does its dependence on context oblige us to generalize to a definition of art as a whole? Is there nothing 'the eye can descry', as Danto put it—no 'exhibited characteristic', in Dickie's terms—in a Rembrandt painting that makes it an artwork beyond its being hung in a particular building and the beholder happening to be an artworld initiate?

It's not in any case universally true of readymades that there is nothing visible that gives the game away. Duchamp's urinal, after all, was turned upside down and signed. Cattelan's *Comedian* also differs somewhat from its 'non-art equivalents' since it is not just a banana but a banana duct-taped to a wall. What is such an object's natural habitat, its plausible everyday context? The duct-tape, fixing the banana at eye level, is a signal that something is on display. It's not clear we need institutional signals—whether a theory of art or the four walls of a gallery—to infer that such an unusual sight is something like an artwork, understood in the minimal sense of something that someone meant us to look at.

Even though some of the institutionalists' claims can seem wrong-headed or unconvincing, the issue they were preoccupied by—how to recognize art when we see it—is a profound one. It is a question not confined to avant-garde art, even if the latter poses it with special force, since the viewer can't rely on the usual clues such as classic formal properties or traditional materials. There is 'uncertainty involved in treating an everyday object as a precious work of art'—doing so is a 'risk', as Bull observes, but not just a financial one. What does it mean for a work of art to be a 'good bet' in aesthetic terms? What would have to happen for Justin Sun's purchase to be proven a bad bet? Arthur Danto insists that it is 'theory' that takes a readymade 'up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is'.²⁰ What if Sun, after bringing *Comedian* home—removing it from the artworld's 'atmosphere of artistic theory'—realized with horror that all he'd bought was a banana? Supposing Sun's investment in Cattelan's *Comedian* were

²⁰ Danto, 'The Artworld', p. 581.

genuinely connoisseurial rather than instrumentally entrepreneurial, he might feel cheated or disappointed by the banana not if he realized it was a banana—how could he fail to have realized that?—but if he realized it was *no more* than a banana: not a work of art.

This risk—not the risk that an artwork will depreciate in value, or even that you’ll cease to like it, but that what you thought was art is in fact not art at all—is among the subjects of an essay published in 1967, the year before Dickie’s, by the American philosopher Stanley Cavell. ‘Music Discomposed’, though it makes no mention of the ‘artworld’, is concerned with how to tell the difference between art and non-art, and with the question of uncertainty—not in Bull’s sense as an element of institutional logic, a condition of profit, but as an experience, a feature of personal encounters with art. Cavell was not interested in the possibility of misrecognition—the public failing to realize that Warhol’s Brillo box is art—but in the ‘possibility of fraudulence’: the possibility that Warhol’s Brillo box *isn’t* art, that it is only pretending to be art. Extrapolating from contemporary music, he argued that ‘the experience of fraudulence, is endemic’ in contemporary art:

its full impact, even its immediate relevance, depends upon a willingness to trust the object, knowing that the time spent with its difficulties may be betrayed. I do not see how anyone who has experienced modern art can have avoided such experiences, and not just in the case of music. Is Pop Art art? Are canvases with a few stripes or chevrons on them art? . . . the dangers of fraudulence, and of trust, are essential to the experience of art . . . Contemporary music is only the clearest case of something common to modernism as a whole, and modernism only makes explicit and bare what has always been true of art. (That is almost a definition of modernism, not to say its purpose.)²¹

Contemporary art such as readymades, on this view, radicalizes the ‘dangers of fraudulence, and of trust’ (they are ‘injections of distrust’, as Bull puts it). When Piero Manzoni drew lines on sheets of paper and sealed them in boxes in 1959, the viewer, Tony Godfrey explains, ‘had to take it on trust that there really was a line inside. He or she had to make an act of faith.’²² The same is true of the ‘invisible’ sculpture Walter De Maria made in 1977, ‘a hole one kilometre deep into which a brass rod one

²¹ Stanley Cavell, ‘Music Discomposed’, in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, updated edn, Cambridge 2015 [1969], pp. 174–5.

²² Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, p. 81.

kilometre long was inserted' and which was then 'capped with a metal plate'. As Robert Hughes notes, 'few works of art have required such an act of faith in their existence' ('which is why', he adds, 'publicity was an essential component of *Vertical Kilometre*').²³ The latter is an extreme instance of a provocatively dubious form.

'A work of art', Godfrey observes, 'normally behaves as if it were a statement: "This is a sculpture of the Old Testament hero David by Michelangelo" . . . We accept it both as a representation and as being *ipso facto* art. In contrast the readymade is presented not as a statement, "This is a urinal", but as a question or challenge: "Could this urinal be an artwork? Imagine it as art!".²⁴ I would argue that a sculpture by Michelangelo doesn't even behave as a statement: its status as art isn't in question so it doesn't need to superadd a claim to be. If all artworks ask our trust—ask that we make an investment of time and attention that we don't know in advance won't be 'betrayed', in Cavell's terms—they can also earn and repay it. Conceptual artworks like De Maria's *Vertical Kilometre*, by contrast—an artwork which we can't fully see no matter how long we inspect it—can in a sense never earn our trust and never vindicate it, except in so far as we come to the view that abstract reflection on the conceit—including the conceit of having to take the artist's word for it—is interesting and worthwhile. Yet if its 'real value is the concept', as Sun said of Cattelan's banana, then one can't help feeling that the brass 'invisible sculpture' needn't have been made (if indeed it was): you could gain as much by hearing about it.

'Could this urinal be an artwork?', Duchamp asked. 'What about if I make it out of gold?', Cattelan's 18-karat toilet seems to be asking in return. The Ur-emblem of value, a rare metal whose worth is steady enough to underpin currencies and to be a 'safe haven' for investors, gold seems a way of certifying the artwork, of putting its worth, its trustworthiness, beyond doubt. At a recent exhibition of Arte Povera at the Pinault Collection in Paris there was a pile of potatoes among which were nested a few that looked like they were made of bronze, as though to provide the visual confirmation we seek, the something the eye *can* descry that proves it is an artwork. But of course even a precious metal

²³ Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, p. 390.

²⁴ Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, pp. 4–6. Thierry de Duve, by contrast, defines the readymade 'as neither an object or a set of objects nor a gesture nor an artistic intention, but rather, as a statement. It is the sentence, "this is art", such as it is pinned to absolutely any object whatsoever': *Kant After Duchamp*, p. 333.

cannot provide the certainty that it purports to. It can certify an artwork's material value—we can be sure that the toilet and the potatoes are worth their weight in gold and bronze—but it cannot dispel our doubt about its worth as an artwork: whether it is what Cavell calls 'the genuine article', or just a gratuitously flashy, aesthetically bankrupt repetition of a century-old gesture. (Indeed after the likes of Hirst's diamond-studded skull, one may feel that such conspicuously luxurious materials are cheapening, and even underscore, as though compensating for, the vacuity of the object as an artwork.) 'About works of art one may wish to say that they require a continuous seeing of the point', Cavell writes. This is the grain of truth in Danto's notion that 'to see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry'. 'Seeing the point', we might say, is seeing something the eye alone cannot descry.

The idea of ownership

If avant-garde artworks are in some sense inherently untrustworthy, whom or what can we trust? Bull argues that we need the artworld as a 'trust intermediary' precisely because we can't trust the artist alone: 'Nobody is likely to hand over a million dollars to an artist in exchange for a banana bought for 35¢ just like that, because the artist might easily change their mind about whether it was really a work of art.' This implies that an object is an artwork only as long as the artist intends it to be, that the artist, were it not for the institutional veto of the artworld, would have the power to retract its status. But Cavell argues that 'the artist himself may not know' if his artwork is 'fraudulent'. 'How can we be sure you're not putting us on?'; a resident of Hartford, Connecticut, asked Carl Andre, whose outdoor work 'Stone Field Sculpture', composed of 36 boulders arranged in rows, had been installed downtown. 'Matter-of-factly and with no apparent resentment', the *New York Times* reported, Andre replied: 'I may be putting myself on. If I'm deceiving you, then I've deceived myself. It's possible.'²⁵

As we saw, Bull argues that the sale of the object that introduced uncertainty—in this case Cattelan's *Comedian*—'completes the cycle, confirming' that the artworld 'can be trusted after all'. An untrustworthy work like *Comedian* may call for a 'trust intermediary', but for its

²⁵ Quoted in Randy Kennedy, 'Carl Andre, 88, Austerely Minimalist Sculptor, Is Dead', *New York Times*, 24 January 2024.

sale to confirm that intermediary's trustworthiness, wouldn't we already have to be convinced that it is a 'precious work of art' as opposed to an overpriced banana? To take George Akerlof's example: the purchase of a second-hand car from a car dealer doesn't exactly '*establish* trust' in the dealer, as Bull puts it, though it's true if the car dealer is popular—has lots of evidently trusting customers—then that might encourage new customers to take the risk of trusting it too. Buying a car from a dealer may be an *expression* of trust in the dealer (though it may be closer to an 'act of faith'). But the purchase doesn't itself vindicate that trust; only the car subsequently proving to be in good working order would do that, retroactively. You would think, moreover, that the trustworthiness of the institution—whether the artworld or the car dealer—would be affirmed by the *ejection* of the source of uncertainty—the dodgy car or spurious artwork—not its lucrative sale. Couldn't the sale of Cattelan's banana be seen as a case of the institutional endorsement of ersatz art, which would undermine rather than shore up faith in the certifying authority? The sale of *Comedian*, on this view, would appear to be closer to a successful scam that dents what remains of our trust in the artworld. The source of the 'quality uncertainty', in Akerlof's example, is precisely the existence of dud cars—'lemons'—and dishonest salesmen attempting to palm them off as good ones. In submitting a urinal to the Society of Independent Artists exhibition in 1917, 'Duchamp exploited this unacknowledged area of uncertainty' about what art was, 'and his urinal was rejected', Bull notes—not sold for a profit. Can the source of uncertainty in the system—a banana or a urinal posing as an artwork—itself be the source of profit? Trust in the artworld would surely be earned more effectively by a salon of the rejected—an exhibition of would-be readymades, everyday objects that didn't make the cut.

Herein lies what may be some confusion in Bull's comparison between the market for readymades and those for crypto and Non-Fungible Tokens. NFTs—which can be used for anything, from images to songs to concert tickets—are digital certificates of ownership, as Bull notes. Bitcoin and NFTs use blockchain technology to assure users that each coin or token is not a counterfeit or a copy but 'verifiably unique'. What they certify, in other words—what the 'trustless trust architecture' guarantees—is that you own something, not that that thing has, or will continue to have, any worth (just as your confidence that your £10 note is authentic does not protect you from a sterling crash). To take the example of concert tickets, which might be sold as NFTs in future to prevent

the proliferation of scams and illicit resales: what an NFT concert ticket would guarantee is that your ticket can't be copied or faked, not that the concert will be any good.

In 'Music Discomposed', Cavell argues that exposing 'false art' is precisely not analogous to exposing a forgery:

Showing fraudulence is more like showing something is imitation—not: *an* imitation. The emphasis is not on copying a *particular* object, as in forgery and counterfeit, but on producing *the effect* of the genuine, or having some of its properties . . . there is no one feature, or definite set of features, which may be described in technical handbooks, and no specific tests by which its fraudulence can be detected and exposed.²⁶

After all, Warhol's Brillo boxes *are* in a sense forgeries—replicas or facsimiles, just as Koons's stainless steel sculptures that look as though they are made of cheap plastic are in a sense inverted knock-offs. If an auction house were to discover a forged Rembrandt among its stock, we might regard the counterfeit as having generated distrust and its exposure as having bolstered our trust in the auction house, and reinforced our view that such a 'trust intermediary' is necessary. But if experts can determine the provenance of an object—whether it is a genuine Rembrandt or a forgery—what can never be resolved through inspection alone, however expert, is whether Warhol's Brillo boxes are 'precious works of art' or merely pretending to be.

What can the art market learn from NFTs? Bull suggests that

On the face of it, it would appear that NFTs had solved the problem the artworld could never resolve, the almost limitless production and sale of art with minimal marketing, transaction and storage costs. Warhol provided the model for making reproductions of popular imagery in expensive limited editions. But the new technology means that whereas Warhol would usually only sell an edition of 150 or 250 silkscreen prints, it is quite possible to sell 10,000 unique NFTs of the same line at an equivalent price.

It surely wasn't 'marketing, transaction and storage costs' alone that prevented Warhol from making more than 250 silkscreen prints. Editions of readymades tend to be limited because their value relies on a claim to exclusivity and thus on supplies being limited (luxury fashion brands,

²⁶ Cavell, 'Music Discomposed', pp. 175–6.

following a similar logic, sometimes destroy unsold stock rather than sell it at a discount). Nor is it true that what distinguishes NFTs is ‘minimal marketing’. Rather the opposite: NFTs often rely on intensive marketing—many are arguably no more than marketing. As for storage costs: consider the energy inputs involved in running the enormous servers storing and verifying every transaction ever made on the blockchain.

Although NFTs are unique tokens, the digital artworks of which they certify ownership are not necessarily unique: it could be a ‘trading card, where there’s 50 or hundreds of numbered copies of the same artwork’.²⁷ While NFT ‘technology does not prevent [an artist’s] work from being copied, it does prevent it from being faked, since each token is verifiably unique’, Bull writes. But if the work can be copied—if we can all tape bananas to our walls or screenshot a Bored Ape—what is the difference between a copy and a fake? (What would it mean to ‘fake’ Cattelan’s *Comedian*?) Since there is no perceptible difference between your NFT and my screenshot of it, no difference between my banana and the one Justin Sun bought for \$6.2 million (or the one he bought the right to replace), what, in buying Cattelan’s banana, did Sun buy? What does he now own? ‘The real value is the concept itself,’ he said. But what is the concept? (What is the concept of?) Insofar as a piece of conceptual art like *Comedian* resembles an NFT—‘bridges the worlds of art, memes and the cryptocurrency community’, as Sun put²⁸—we might conclude that what Sun bought—bought into, as it were—is not only the exclusive ownership of a concept, but the concept of exclusively owning a concept: the private knowledge or highly publicized claim that he alone owns the artwork (where ‘artwork’ means not a banana but the idea of presenting a banana as an artwork). Traditionally, an artwork was a unique object and ownership of it guaranteed exclusive access to it; readymades relinquish actual uniqueness and exclusive access, one could argue, for conceptual uniqueness, verified by institutions. It’s as though NFTs have perfected this paradoxical possibility of extracting value from the idea of uniquely owning a non-unique good. Buying unique ownership without exclusive access, we might conclude—formal ownership without content, in a sense—is little more than buying (into) the idea of unique ownership itself.

²⁷ Mitchell Clark, ‘NFTs, Explained’, *The Verge*, 6 June 2022.

²⁸ Associated Press, ‘Why a Crypto Entrepreneur Ate \$6.2 Million Banana Art’, *Inc.*, 30 November 2024.

In this sense NFTs perhaps distil the logic of much of what drives the art trade in its upper echelons: in buying a multi-million-dollar artwork you are not just buying it, you are buying the idea of owning it—not just buying a vacuum cleaner but the idea of owning a Koons. And part of the point of owning it is to be able to display the fact you own it, as well as, by implication, the vast surplus capital that enabled the purchase, of which your possession of an expensive artwork is a symbol. In this context, the artwork may be a Rembrandt but a \$6.2 million banana is just as good. It's owning it that matters, and what owning gets you: to show that you own, to associate with others who own, and, if you're lucky and your asset appreciates, the prospect of owning more.

Nor is this logic confined to the art market, of course. Indeed although Sun's purchase might seem grotesque, spending large sums on ostensibly ordinary objects—objects with an exchange-value far in excess of their use-value—is a pervasive principle of contemporary consumption. As Naomi Klein argued in *No Logo*, in buying Nike trainers one is buying not simply trainers but the swoosh: 'What these companies produced primarily were not things, they said, but *images* of their brands. Their real work lay not in manufacturing but in marketing. This formula, needless to say, has proved enormously profitable'.²⁹ Insofar as Sun's purchase was part of a 'banana-based rebrand' of his NFT line, one could think of him as buying a logo—an image of a brand—before it has the social cachet that makes it valuable, in order to artificially pump it with that cachet and value: splashing out on the tick before anyone wore Nike.

The most obvious reason why demand for NFTs has plummeted is not because people don't trust each token of ownership is 'verifiably unique'—don't trust the blockchain technology—but because all the tokens are, as Bull notes, 'are bits of code': little more than a location on the blockchain. The value of a line of NFT artworks is dependent on demand for them, and since this isn't underpinned by any use-value—any exclusive right to look at or use the image—demand is maintained by demand itself, hence the bubble and crash dynamics that beset the sector. If one regards *Comedian* as an asset whose worth is a function of hype not grounded in any real-world application, there's some truth to Bull's idea that Sun's purchase 'completes the cycle', since the value of such goods is in effect powered by a kind of tautologous or self-fulfilling

²⁹ Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, New York 2009 [1999], p. 4.

logic: these objects are worth as much as people think they're worth, as much as they continue to be willing to pay for them. NFTs that provide membership perks—a form of real-world 'utility'—are usually desirable insofar as belonging to that club is desirable, and that too is related to demand: part of what underpins the success of the original Bored Ape NFTs is that possession of one gives you membership of the Bored Ape Yacht Club, which has various supposed benefits, including invitations to exclusive events (desirable because of the club's clientele, which boasts various celebrities). Thinking of such NFTs as essentially membership cards—belonging to a 'community' in the faux-hippie parlance of Silicon Valley—highlights the relative 'indifference' of the digital image, even if it happens to be technically 'unique'.

Dissensus?

According to the institutionalists, an artwork is little more than one decreed as such by fiat. For both Danto and Dickie, the 'artworld' is in effect someone-saying-so: for Dickie the someone-saying-so is embodied in institutions, for Danto it's embodied in the theory and history of art (in effect a canon, the evolving precipitate of value judgements or expressions of taste: the accumulation of certain people having said so).³⁰ Yet if it's true that the artworld has the authority, in the sense of arbitrary power, to induct objects into art, it doesn't seem self-evident that it has authority in the deeper sense of being able to inspire trust. The headline-making sale of one of Cattelan's bananas—sold as a commodity called 'art'—and the donation of another to the Guggenheim may force us to concede that *Comedian* is part of the history of art, that it has been 'accepted by a public', in Cavell's terms, but it can't rule out the possibility it is 'false art'. Especially when we know, as Bull has argued in the past, that museums of contemporary art 'celebrate capitalism's limitless fecundity in the manufacture of pleasures, its mysterious ability to work without foundations, to turn anything, for no reason, into an exchangeable object

³⁰ Danto doesn't consider whether his own theory counts as part of the 'artistic theory' that tells us when an object is an artwork, nor whether new artworks can themselves alter 'artistic theory' and the 'history of art'—alter the general criteria for artworks by which individual instances are identified—in the dialectical manner that T. S. Eliot explored in 'Traditional and Individual Talent': 'what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it . . . for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered': T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, John Hayward, ed., London 1953, p. 23.

of value . . . The institutional theory of art on which the [contemporary art] museum is built is essentially a theory of fashion'.³¹ The 'indifferent' public has long known that the inordinate market value accorded to certain artworks is an unreliable guide to their aesthetic value, much as stock market valuations are often deliriously untethered from the profitability—let alone social usefulness—of companies. Cavell's concept of 'fraudulent art'—non-art masquerading as art—insists on the possibility of dissent, of scenarios in which art is wrongly elevated by the artworld. The readymade, in Tony Godfrey's view, presents a question about whether it is an artwork or not; it doesn't settle it.

'How can fraudulent art be exposed?', Cavell asks. For Danto, 'theory' and 'history' can show that dubiously ordinary-seeming objects like Warhol's Brillo boxes are *bona fide* artworks; for Cavell, there are no such guarantees. Knowing art when you see it is not simply a matter of heeding institutional clues. We come, or do not come, to 'see the point' of an artwork by way of the uncertain, open-ended business of exercising critical judgement. 'The only exposure of false art lies in recognizing something about the object itself, but something whose recognition requires exactly the same capacity as recognizing the genuine article . . . You often do not know which is on trial, the object or the viewer: modern art did not invent this dilemma, it merely insists upon it.'³² 'Recognize', after all, can have different senses: recognizing art, in Cavell's conception, is less like recognizing someone you know on the street—realizing something is something, for example that a pile of bricks is *Equivalent VIII*—than like granting something recognition, acknowledging, discovering or determining that something is something.

Danto and Dickie are scrupulously careful not to pass judgement on the artworks they are discussing. 'Never mind that the Brillo box may not be good, much less great art. The impressive thing is that it is art at all', Danto writes, while Dickie boasts that his definition 'does not attempt to smuggle a conception of good art into the definition of "art"'. Bull observes that the 'institutional theory explains very little' since it fails 'to specify the criteria by which qualitative judgements are made'; arguably Danto and Dickie's comments suggest qualitative judgement is not involved at all. Yet although the institutionalists purport to make

³¹ Malcolm Bull, 'Between the Cultures of Capital', NLR 11, Sept–Oct 2001, p. 112.

³² Cavell, 'Music Discomposed', p. 176.

no qualitative claims for the art they are discussing, neither do they brook qualitative counter-claims—since, ultimately, as Cavell’s notion of ‘fraudulent art’ suggests, whether something is ‘art at all’ is often precisely what is at issue in our assessments of art. Thus, in a pungent review of an exhibition of Cattelan’s work at the Guggenheim in 2011, Peter Schjeldahl argued that the Italian’s offerings were not works of art but merely ‘tendentious tchotchkes’:

Membership in this class [the category of art] is not a high hurdle. Marcel Duchamp’s carefully managed readymades clear it . . . Bad art qualifies, too; it mobilizes the aesthetic criteria of badness. Even amid today’s pandemonium of bizarre modes and myriad mediums, it would seem to be no easy matter to achieve a high-flying art career with productions of non-art. But Cattelan has an interim laugh—if not the last one—by proving that he has done precisely that.³³

For Schjeldahl, Cattelan’s art—or ‘art’—is not good enough to be bad.

The last laugh

In navigating the endemic ‘possibility of fraudulence’, with no way of outsourcing the task of adjudicating—‘no technical handbooks, and no specific tests’ by which ‘fraudulence can be detected’—‘the critic’ must learn to trust themselves, Cavell writes elsewhere: you must learn to ‘educate your experience sufficiently so that it is worthy of trust’. This ‘trust’ or ‘authority’ in your own experience, he says, is ‘expressed as a willingness to find words for it’, as ‘taking an interest in it’.³⁴ What words might one find for one’s experience of *Comedian*? One might find oneself reflecting on the sterility and cynicism of the artworld. Or one might find the sight of a living, and so dying, thing—the banana growing speckled over time, maybe gashed with brown where the tape is holding it in place, eventually rotting—a moving spectacle, a poignant comment on the way art tries in vain to arrest time and pin down life. The angle at which the banana is taped to the wall conjures up Warhol, as well as the mass-market commodity of the Velvet Underground album cover, while the title of the work also summons the association of bananas (or banana skins) with pratfalls.

³³ Peter Schjeldahl, ‘Up in the Air’, *New Yorker*, 13 November 2011.

³⁴ Stanley Cavell, ‘Words for a Conversation’, in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Cambridge MA 1981, p. 12.

But if *Comedian* is a partial joke, one might wonder who the butt of it is. If the banana is an immanent critique of the artworld as a fatuous system of commodification—a comment on the fact that ‘anything can be art’ and sold as such—its being so enthusiastically welcomed by that system and so profitably commodified has, at a minimum, ambiguous implications. A hundred years after Duchamp’s urinal was rejected by the Society of Independent Artists, it’s hard to regard similar gestures as critical, a genuine challenge to the artworld; difficult to say, when a banana is sold for millions of dollars, who is having the last laugh. Schjeldahl insisted that Duchamp’s readymades did not prove that anything goes: ‘Duchamp proved that the boundaries of art are dizzyingly ambiguous; he didn’t question their existence’. Whereas Duchamp ‘thereby grounded his ironies’, Cattelan, ‘a darling of jaded art sophisticates’ and ‘perfect festivalist’ ‘must simultaneously suggest offensiveness and disarm it, with an invitation to hip complicity’.³⁵ Hal Foster, too, argued that readymades once ‘played ambiguously on the convergence of art exhibition and commodity display’, but no longer:

With Warhol, arguably, there was a moment of disruption in this confusion of positions and values: of artistic and commercial, high and low, rare and mass, expensive and cheap, and so on. There is little tension, and not much insight, now that these pairs have imploded: just a giddy delight, a weary despair, or a manic-depressive cocktail of the two.³⁶

Comedian could be seen as a costly, nihilistic joke, one that mocks not only the artworld but other artists, mocks art itself, mocks its audience: snubbing, even ridiculing, our offer of attention, abusing our ‘willingness to trust the object’.³⁷ De Maria’s allegedly brass-filled hole, Hughes

³⁵ Schjeldahl, ‘Up in the Air’.

³⁶ Foster, ‘The Medium Is the Market’. See also Foster’s review of a Koons retrospective at the Whitney in 2014: ‘In its first incarnation, with Dada, this device was taken to be critical of the cultural-economic system in which it was enmeshed, but by the time of Pop such negativity had all but drained away’: ‘Jeff Koons’, *London Review of Books*, vol. 36, no. 15, 31 July 2014.

³⁷ In a postscript to *A Story of Art*, E. H. Gombrich writes that ‘when I first conceived and wrote the Introduction and the chapter on Experimental Art I took it for granted that it was the duty of the critic and of the historian to explain and to justify all artistic experiments in the face of hostile criticism. Today the problem is rather that the shock has worn off and that almost anything experimental seems acceptable to the press and the public. If anyone needs a champion today it is the artist who shuns rebellious gestures. I believe that it is this dramatic transformation rather than any particular new movement that represents the most important event in the history of art which I have witnessed since this book was first published in 1950’: Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, Oxford 1978, pp. 483–4

noted, required ‘an act of faith’. With an artwork like *Comedian*, it can seem as though there is little left to believe in.³⁸ And if the artworld needs ‘injections of distrust’ to justify itself as trust intermediary, then this implies a complicity between artists and art dealers—between those who make art and those who sell it—working together to create just enough uncertainty to sustain profits without undermining demand.

One intriguing thing about Bull’s question—why is there not more art?—is that an artwork like Cattelan’s *Comedian* could have prompted it. A duct-taped banana does not put one in mind of the exhilarating possibilities for this kind of art so much as their exhaustion. How many more variations on this gesture can there be? How could anyone top this? Who would want to? (As Bull observes, ‘the negation of value does not usually lead to its proliferation.’) The effect of readymades is often somehow stumping. Cattelan’s *Comedian* can, from a certain perspective, look like a *reductio ad absurdum*, a bathetic culmination, a dead-end.³⁹

Danto once argued that it is ‘of vastly greater philosophical importance’ to explain why a square of primed canvas is an artwork than to identify ‘whatever may divide it under the perspectives of connoisseurship from its immeasurably richer ontological peers’, such as Rembrandt’s painting *The Polish Rider*: ‘all that may be pertinent to enjoyment of the latter, to appreciation of style and touch and the delectation of paint and form, will have to be put to one side’. Dickie similarly contended that ‘as works of art Duchamp’s readymades may not be worth much, but as examples of art they are very valuable for art theory’.⁴⁰ If there is something inexhaustible about conceptual stunts—bottomless grist for the philosophical mill—there is theorizing still to be done about particular

³⁸ ‘Trust without suspicion is the recipe for a false and meretricious art; but suspicion without trust is the recipe for a shallow and empty art’: Gabriel Josipovici, *On Trust: Art and the Temptations of Suspicion*, New Haven 1999, p. 3.

³⁹ Danto elsewhere reflected on Warhol’s Brillo boxes that with such works ‘the history of art attained the point where it had to turn into its own philosophy. It had gone, as art, as far as it could go. In turning into philosophy, art had come to an end’: ‘Approaching the End of Art’, *The State of Art*, New York 1987, p. 216. Schjeldahl said something similar about a retrospective of Carl Andre’s work at the Guggenheim. Each object ‘presents itself to the viewer with an aggressive air of completeness and finality, as if each were the only, or anyway the last, work of art in the world’: Peter Schjeldahl, ‘High Priest of Minimal’, *New York Times*, 18 October 1970.

⁴⁰ Danto, ‘The Transfiguration of the Commonplace’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 33, no. 2, Winter 1974, p. 140; George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Ithaca NY 1974, p. 34.

artworks as inexhaustible objects, ones whose principal interest is not their dubious ontological status as an ‘example’ of art (isn’t Dickie’s word itself so tellingly expressive of the ‘indifference’ of the particular object?) In his fine book *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge writes that ‘we have not succeeded in accounting for the intensity and directness of the effect many works have upon us, often without our possessing any knowledge of their place in the history of art’. These remain ‘puzzles’, Attridge suggests, ‘that have never had fully satisfactory answers.’⁴¹

Elaborating on his indifference to readymades, Thierry de Duve notes that ‘I don’t accompany my judgement, “this is whatever”, with an outraged judgement, “this is not art!” . . . I know all too well the absurdity of denying that today, those objects that Duchamp chose as readymades are art.’⁴² Tyrannized by the publicity of Cattelan’s stunt, it may feel futile to claim that a banana isn’t art—no doubt continuing to discuss it only cements its place in the history of art, burnishes its spot in the ‘atmosphere of artistic theory’. Yet we can determine how to weight it, how much attention to devote to it: not art’s final destination, nor the linchpin of our theories, but merely the tip of one of its branches.

Carl Andre, who saw himself not as a conceptual stuntman but as a sculptor, said of one of his floor pieces: ‘There are no ideas hiding under those plates. They’re just plates.’⁴³ ‘For socialism, the disenchantment of the world has always held a utopian promise’, Bull once wrote.⁴⁴ Perhaps the utopian promise, or utopian insight, of art that flirts with fraudulence—of the multi-million-dollar purchase of the idea of owning a banana—is to remind us that ownership is just an idea: a fiction. In that case, there’s an idea lurking behind that banana after all.

⁴¹ Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, London 2004, pp. 41, 45.

⁴² De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, p. 334.

⁴³ Quoted in Kennedy, ‘Carl Andre, 88, Austerely Minimalist Sculptor, Is Dead’.

⁴⁴ Bull, ‘Between the Cultures of Capital’, p. 113.