

The Digital Revolution and Cultural Reconfiguration: The Impact of the Internet and Social Media on Values and Behaviors

Carla Ioana Ana Maria Popescu

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Philosophy, Romania, carlisfilm@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper analyzes the impact of digital technology on cultural paradigms, with a specific focus on the transformation of art perception and consumption. Considering the influence of the internet and social media on cultural values, behaviors, and identity, the study explores how these technologies have democratized access to art while also contributing to its potential trivialization. The viral example of Cattelan's "banana" is used to illustrate how an artwork can become a viral phenomenon in the online environment, generating extensive public dialogue while simultaneously diluting the initial artistic message, alongside changes in the actual valuation of objects. The paper argues that digital technology not only changes how we consume art but also fundamentally reconfigures our relationship with it, influencing the perception of artistic value, authenticity, and the emotional impact of the aesthetic experience.

Keywords: Cultural Paradigms, Art Perception, Art Consumption, Phenomenology, Cattelan's Banana

Introduction

In the digital age, access to vast forms of technology, whether we speak of the internet or social networks, can be considered as factors, exposing individuals to a multitude of cultures and values from around the world, thus leading to a process of cultural globalization. Consequently, these factors, being omnipresent in our lives, have led to a fundamental transformation in how we communicate, interact, value, and thus, relate to the world. This profound transformation has a significant impact on cultural paradigms, namely the sets of beliefs, values, behaviors, and practices that define a culture. The present paper aims to analyze how the internet and social media influence individuals' values, particularly in relation to art and the artistic domain. A fundamental question for this paper lies in questioning the artistic experience, attempting to understand and define what it means to experience art in an authentic and autonomous way. This leads us to the question of what the artistic experience means today and whether it is possible in the era of consumerism. One of the most relevant examples for questioning the impact of how intertwined we are to consumerism and its typical behaviors is the case of the buyer of Cattelan's Banana. As noted in the article by Bryzgel (2019), an artist eats the piece of art—the banana—responding in a humoristic manner that, in a sense, it was worth it.

Contents

Firstly, to analyze how we relate to art today, it is necessary to delve into and address several key elements. We cannot help but wonder if there has been a change in the status of art, specifically, a trivialization of the artistic phenomenon. Thanks to the internet, a simple museum visit has become much more accessible. Thus, an individual can "visit" a museum through a virtual tour or even be part of a virtual exhibition. However, we can observe a first step towards a superficialization of the artistic experience, through the loss of direct contact with the artwork and its exhibition context. Walter (1969) supports such an argument, considering that a digital reproduction of artworks, such as a photograph of a painting, by definition, reduces or even loses the aura of the original—a concept further explained by Keller (2019). Moreover, online distribution can dilute the uniqueness and value of the work. Thus, I tend to believe that an artwork is meant to be viewed in the intimacy in which it was created: in a confined space,

designated for one purpose and only one purpose—a place created by art for art, a museum in the true sense of the word. Another possible argument in this discussion can be found in Merleau-Ponty's (2012) phenomenology regarding the dimension of perception. Perception is not a simple passive reception of sensory information but an active and corporeal interaction with the surrounding environment. We see, hear, touch, smell, and taste the world through our body, which is always situated and involved in the experience. Although technologies like VR (Virtual Reality) attempt to create illusions of bodily presence, they remain mediated representations, lacking the materiality and complexity of direct interaction with a physical artwork. The contemplation of a painting in a museum involves not only sight but also the movement of the body in space, the perception of the canvas texture, the smell of paint, and natural light, all contributing to a holistic experience that the digital environment can hardly replicate fully.

The use of artworks in memes and other forms of online humorous content represents a complex phenomenon with significant implications for the perception and value of art. Through rapid reproduction and distribution in the digital environment, artworks, once objects of contemplation and admiration, are often reduced to mere objects of visual consumption, detached from their original artistic and cultural context. Humor, while it can be a way to bring the public closer to art, can also lead to its trivialization, diminishing its emotional and intellectual impact. Thus, masterpieces like the *Mona Lisa*, through the multitude of memes that use it in comic or unexpected contexts, lose part of their mystical aura and the complexity of interpretations, becoming a cultural symbol emptied of its initial meaning. Adaptations of classic paintings in popular memes, while demonstrating the public's familiarity with these works, also underscore a tendency to consume them superficially, without paying attention to deep meanings and historical context. This meme culture, by its viral nature and its emphasis on humor and immediate reactions, contributes to a banalization of art, transforming it into a product of rapid and ephemeral consumption.

Case Study: Cattelan's Banana, Comedian

Comedian was first presented at Art Basel Miami in 2019. The work consists of a real banana duct-taped to a white wall. There were three editions of the work, each sold for amounts between \$120,000 and \$150,000. Cattelan is known for his satirical and provocative works, which question the conventions of the art world and society in general. In the case of *Comedian*, his intention seems to have been to comment on the absurdity of the art market, its speculative values, and its ability to transform banal objects into valuable artworks. The radical simplicity of the work was a key factor in its virality. The image of a banana taped to a wall spread rapidly online, generating a huge number of memes, parodies, and comments. *Comedian* thus became a global cultural phenomenon, far exceeding the boundaries of the art world. The impact on the public was diverse: some considered the work a good joke, others a pertinent critique of the art market, and others simply considered it an absurdity.

As mentioned, Cattelan's work sparked heated discussions. We begin with a first question, namely whether a banal object, like a banana, can be considered art simply because it is displayed in a gallery and labeled as such? After the wave caused by the duct-taped banana, young people on the social media platform TikTok began to create such “works.” Several teenagers gathered in a museum, and one of them decided to take off his shoe, placing it in the middle of the gallery. After a little while, visitors became aware of the “piece of art” or object and started to take pictures and even admire a mere, usual, and very much mundane shoe. Those images went viral on several social media platforms, bringing satire and questions on what it means to be an artist and why certain individuals deserve such status. Such an example serves for the famous art and non-art debate and the attempt to define, in the present, what elements are necessary to define an artwork. Moreover, to what extent is the work *Comedian* an authentic work, considering its simplicity and the possibility of being replicated by anyone? These thoughts lead to another relevant question, namely: What exactly

is being sold, the banana, the idea, or the certificate of authenticity? Bryzgel (2019) offers an answer to the issue, stating that the buyer is rather interested in the certificate of authenticity, at the expense of dismissing the piece of art. The focus is on the idea (perhaps in the platonic way), the concept proposed and certainly not on the empirical aspect of the art piece. Even though this argument was presented, the issue is still a topic for debate since it involves entering a new paradigm, changing the founding values of art, and the shift or perhaps a fundamental change of our values (the scale of values of the consumer and the artmaker as well). While I fear I cannot provide definitive answers to these questions, I consider this research necessary to understand the direction in which culture and the arts are likely to head.

From Merleau-Ponty's (2012) phenomenological perspective, *Comedian* calls into question our corporeal and perceptual relationship with the artwork. Traditionally, the artistic experience involves a complex sensory interaction with the physical object, a contemplation that engages our body and senses. In the case of the banana, this interaction is reduced to a minimum: a banana, adhesive tape, and a wall. Through digital reproduction, this experience is further mediated, reduced to a two-dimensional image on a screen. Here, the concept of simulacrum, developed by Jean Baudrillard, comes into play. A simulacrum is a copy that no longer has an original. In the case of *Comedian*, we can argue that the work became a simulacrum the moment it entered the online media circuit. The image of the banana taped to the wall became more important than the physical object itself. The direct experience with the work no longer matters, but its image, which circulates and is reinterpreted infinitely in the digital environment.

We could also say that the work created a hyperreality, a kind of simulated reality that becomes more real than reality itself. The image of the banana became a powerful symbol, far exceeding its initial significance. Of course, we cannot conclude this case study without briefly touching upon the fact that it perfectly illustrates the process of banalization of art through social media. The work is reduced to a simple image that is easy to replicate and distribute, losing its complexity and depth, fundamental elements for an artwork. However, we cannot help but question whether this might be the future of the arts, works that are easy to capture, digest, and thus have the potential for viralization. *Comedian* has become more than a simple banana taped to a wall; it has become a symbol of a new cultural paradigm, where its image and online circulation are more important than the physical object itself.

Conclusion

The analysis of art mirrored in the digital screen of the present, reveals a continuous metamorphosis of values, experience, and artistic consumption, with art being a seismograph of the human spirit, reflecting and influencing society. Digital technology, with its democratization, has opened the doors to infinite virtual galleries, but has also blurred the aura of uniqueness and direct contact with the work. We have witnessed the birth of new forms of artistic expression, but also the banalization of masterpieces, reduced to simple memes. The *Comedian* case has shown us how a work can become a simulacrum in the media whirlwind, losing its initial contour but generating extensive public dialogue. Merleau-Ponty (2012) reminds us of the importance of the body in perception, and Baudrillard warns us of the danger of hyperreality. In the end, each of us is a creator of art, through the way we perceive and interpret the world. But, like a mirror, we see only what our own values allow us to see. We cannot know more than we allow ourselves to understand, and herein lies, perhaps, the deepest and most personal form of art: the art of opening ourselves to the new, to the unknown, to the infinite possibilities. For ultimately, art is not just what we see, but also how we choose to see.

References

- Bryzgel, A. (2019). The \$120,000 banana: how to have your art and eat it. *The Conversation*.
<https://theconversation.com/the-120-000-banana-how-to-have-your-art-and-eat-it-128571>
- Keller, D. (2019). *Jean Baudrillard*, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ baudrillard/>
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012). *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trad. Donald A. Landes,
<https://ia601000.us.archive.org/11/items/G.BachelardThePoeticsOfSpace/Phenomenology%20of%20Perception.pdf>
- Walter, B. (1969). *The work of Art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, from the 1935 essay New York: Schocken Books,
<https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf>