A century after Duchamp’s *Fountain*, the Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan installed an eighteen-karat, solid gold toilet in one of the Guggenheim Museum’s public restrooms. Titled *America*, the 2016 piece outperforms Duchamp’s mass-produced, porcelain model in at least one way; it is fully functional. Visitors to the Guggenheim are permitted and encouraged to literally piss and shit on (well, into) the art object. Cattelan’s title seems to single out the United States as the country with the most obscenely bloated art market and general sense of entitlement. Writing for the *Guardian*, a puzzled and distressed Jonathan Jones reacted to the announcement of the installation by opining that

the real miracle of contemporary art is not that it is bought and sold for lunatic prices by oligarch collectors. It is that you and I also find meaning in it. A luxury object sold for obscene amounts is at the same time a popular phenomenon that draws crowds to galleries. Art is both an investment for the 1% and entertainment for everyone else. If we could understand this paradox we might understand how 21st-century capitalism gets away with so much. […] Can it be that we all buy more deeply into the culture of capitalism than
we acknowledge to ourselves? Perhaps this is a philosophical toilet, after all.”

Possibly, some alien species will unearth Cattelan’s toilet from the pile of rubble formerly known as the Upper East Side centuries after climate change has sent the East River surging up over FDR Drive, and perhaps the aliens will praise and admire it, as Bataille admired the pyramids of the ancient Egyptians. However, in all likelihood, the wealthy will simply shit in it until it clogs and overflows while teenage boys get shot a couple of miles away in the South Bronx. They’ll have to call in a janitor making minimum wage, perhaps someone not so different from the Italian housekeeper who threw Sara Goldschmied and Elenora Chiari’s 2015 art installation Where Are We Going Dancing Tonight? away, mistaking the installation’s materials — empty champagne bottles, cigarette buts, and other evidence of a night of privileged hedonism — for a pile of trash while cleaning up after hours. The janitor will mop up the shit. And that janitor will be the only person who ever understands America.