

TEMPUS RIDENDI?

BART VERSCHAFFEL

Flat is good, and Ugly and Ordinary is usually the way to go.
Denise Scott Brown

TEMPUS RIDENDI?

What is there to laugh about? On the one hand, wit, wordplays, mental associations, adroitness, brilliant answers, exaggeration, artfulness, pleasant surprises and good fortune. And on the other, man himself. Haughtiness, misplaced pride, self-delusion, affectation, stupidity, clumsiness and failure. When philosophers look at the spectacle man performs on our terrestrial globe, it elicits two fundamentally different, even opposite reactions. What is man really like? You can cry and complain about him, or burst out laughing. *Tempus flendi, tempus ridendi*. The first reaction is traditionally embodied by Heraclitus, the ‘dark’, morbid, melancholic philosopher. His crony and counterpart, the philosopher who bursts out laughing, is Democritus, the atomist. This is not the contrast between optimists who believe that everything will turn out well and pessimists who believe that it can only get worse. After all, both agree about the essence of things. Democritus is certainly no less serious than his sorrowful friend. He doesn’t laugh because he is enjoying himself.

We find that same contrast, embodied by Heraclitus and Democritus, in art. There are ‘heavy’ and ‘light’ genres in visual art, theatre, literature and music. The distinction relates to the way a work of art comes across to the viewer and to the demands it makes on the public. But this distinction does not relate to the way the work, light or heavy, ‘is in reality’; that is to say, the way the work relates to life. The distinction says nothing about the extent to which, or the way in which, the artwork takes life and art seriously. In theatre terms: comedy is potentially just as weighty and potentially just as true as tragedy. In painting: Pieter Bruegel’s *The Fight between Carnival and Lent* is as weighty and as serious and real as a Crucifixion by Peter Paul Rubens. Not to be trusted on the other hand is tragicomedy – the spectacle that is looking

to tone down both genres with a laugh and a tear, and lies 'that things are not as bad as they seem' and 'everything will come more or less right in the end'. Either laughing or crying; not a mixture of larkiness and crocodile tears. In other words: the enemy of art is Hollywood.

'Flat is good, and Ugly and Ordinary is usually the way to go.'¹ This adage of the architect and theoretician Denise Scott Brown, the godmother of postmodernism, sums up in a nutshell the basic recipe for comedy. Man is ridiculous *because he is just what he is* - i.e. he cannot live up to his pretension to be 'extraordinary' - and man is ridiculous when he is *ugly* - i.e. when he cannot even keep up the appearance of being human. And you don't have to think too long or too hard to see that - and to laugh. Much of Delvoye's work can be attributed to the genre of comedy. He wants to make superficial, accessible art: art that draws the viewer in simply because it is not off-putting and it is immediately understandable. And then, once the viewer is chuckling or laughing - because he understands and approves of the work and has chosen the side of the artist - Delvoye gives the meaning a quick 'twist'. It leaves a nasty taste at the end. Delvoye's 'comic' works still tell an uneasy truth about mankind, or about art. So the jolly public figure Delvoye appears to be in talk shows is misleading. He is not an entertainer.



Art Farm China, 2003-10
live tattooed pigs
Beijing, China, 2007



Jacob Duck (1598-1667),
Laughing Democritus, seated next to terrestrial globe
oil on panel, 38.2 × 30 cm

THE CARPET PAINTINGS

As early as 1985 when studying at the Academy in Ghent, Delvoye drew attention to himself by painting on rolls of wallpaper, and then by making a series of 'carpet paintings'. Taking part in the Young Belgian Painters Award that year for the first time, these were the works he submitted and that he showed in his first gallery exhibitions. It was a way of painting 'conceptually': he could (still) paint figuratively and yet escape the outdated Romantic melodrama of expression that lived on in the Academy studios. Delvoye bought up second-hand carpets and painted on them mainly with dramatic representations of male heroic figures and sometimes with weapons, heraldic animals, classical architectural elements, etc. The painting never entirely covers the background; it is always a fragment painted on top of a background that is geometrically pre-structured and full.

It is not difficult to understand why Delvoye's carpet works attracted attention back in the 1980s and are as powerful as ever today. They combine two important traditions from tapestry-making. First of all, there is the tradition of figurative tapestries, which was very important in Flanders and Europe from the late Middle Ages to the eighteenth century. This was linked mainly to monumental painting and palace architecture, and thus to serious and tragic art genres. Most of the subjects were derived from biblical and ancient history or chosen from contemporary events and characters, and then modelled on ancient examples. However, in the nineteenth century, the classical tapestry disappeared along with the heroic story. Secondly, there is the tradition of the oriental carpet: the carpet that covers the floor with non-figurative symbols. Most of the patterns are magical in origin; they were supposed to exorcize the dark forces in the ground below so as to create a safe place to live. But gradually they lost their original meaning and



Faits Divers, 1986
acrylic on carpet, 118 × 56 cm

became purely decorative signs and symbols, geometric patterns and flower motifs, which are standardized and mechanically reproduced to this day. The absence of figures and stories in the oriental carpet tradition is explained by the fact that they cannot be represented for religious reasons. That ban on the visual representation of sacred figures and the like was respected in the carpets introduced into European interiors in the nineteenth century, perhaps because while Westerners are prepared to hang ancient representations and heroic figures on the wall, they prefer not to walk over them. With his 'carpet paintings' young Delvoye was aiming somewhere in the middle: the heroes who had vanished from the tapestry tradition returned home after long peregrinations – albeit rather dirty-looking and anonymous – just as they returned elsewhere in painting at the end of the 1980s. But now they were painted on a medium that was already covered with cheap, stereotyped, stencil-like decorations.

Delvoye's fascination with ornamentation is one of the mainsprings of his entire output. What does the ornament mean *today*, now that the oldest, magical origin of those motifs – the spiral, the scroll, the labyrinth, the circle, the triangle, the reflection, etc. – has been forgotten and their symbolic power is spent? The question is not what decorations mean, but what they *do*.

In one of a series of interviews that Koen Brams and Dirk Pültau conducted with Delvoye,² he made a crucial statement: 'I was interested in the ornamental and I associated it with something that was not clean. I have always been aware that ornaments and shit are excesses of the same order.'³ In the world of images, ornamentation is indeed the equivalent of the natural: it exists and it covers, but it doesn't *mean* anything. So it is always 'excess' which, like waste matter, can arouse disgust. Delvoye's purely decorative artworks, such as his floors, which resemble a sort of ceramic tile carpet or marble carpet, are made up of photographs of excrement (*Mosaic*, 1990) and slices of salami (*Marble Floors*, 1999). They make the 'excess' of ornamentation literal and explicit.

It has been said that Delvoye makes 'democratic' art. He makes expensive, self-evident art for collectors and museums, art to sell, but he also makes cheap art products - which in actual fact don't sell that well - and, more generally, he makes art for the public. But who is the public? Everyone? The masses? Is 'popular' also 'democratic'? There is a sense of justice, anarchy and subversion in the popular and the plebeian, but little democracy. After all, democracy is discursive and playing the game of democracy presupposes an ability to abstract: the notion of formal equality, the separation of the public and the private... The popular culture Delvoye works with is in fact not democratic at all, but the very opposite. It fantasizes and cultivates the exception - what is extraordinary because of its origin, heroic feats, beauty, selection or misfortune. It favours everything that reminds us of kings, heroes and leaders, princesses, adventurers and victims, but not of politicians and orators. It chooses the fairy-like, which does not exist, over and above the incomprehensible, which does exist. But that is not to imply that it always believes in what it admires. Delvoye's art never comes from on high. It is never 'sublime'. He always works with material ordinary people are familiar with. That is, the commonplace, but also the miraculous and the fantastic. Even the early carpet paintings were made according to this basic formula: start from the familiar (a discarded carpet rather than white paper) and make a 'distorted' image by adding something that, all things considered, is also familiar (not unintelligible signs and symbols, but our discarded heroes).

MISPLACED KITSCH

Where are people vulnerable, how can you ‘get to them’? Through everything that is dear to them, through everything they own, because we chime with what we *have*: my body, my name, my children, my money. And, since this society is almost entirely gentrified, first and foremost: *my house*. When art wants to be critical and offend the citizen, it turns against the house and homeliness. From Henri De Braekeleer to James Ensor, René Magritte and the Surrealists. Delvoye does the same thing in a light, gentle manner.

Living, committing oneself collectively or individually and in the long term to a place that acts as a reference point for life, does not always or in itself require ‘homeliness’ and ‘snugness’. ‘Homeliness’ has to do with the specific way the ‘inside’ – which man isolates and takes complete possession of – is furnished and experienced: as a separate *world* that dreams itself apart from the rest of reality, and develops in the imagination into a self-satisfied, entirely safe reality. The culture of living is not only about protection and passing on life, cooking and hospitality, resting and intimacy; it also implies that we show what we have – the house is also a *possession* – and above all that we have more than we need. The specific form the accumulated luxury takes is *a supply of decorations*. A well-filled and beautifully laid-out interior. The walls and the interior are packed with symbols – wallpaper, ornamental furniture, wall hangings, paintings, old maps, vases, crystal chandeliers, ivory animals, kids’ drawings, house plants – which together constitute a surrogate universe that makes us forget all the rest. In the middle-class culture of the Low Countries homeliness gave rise to a specific visual language. In Flanders it manifests itself typically in the leaded windows and the little panels of stained glass that are hung in front of windows. Their fixed iconography is one of identity logos: heraldic motifs, famous



Untitled (Sawblade), 1989-90
enamel paint on metal sawblade, Ø 24 cm

cityscapes, Flemish heroes, Brueghelian weddings and kermises, and traditional crafts.

In the Netherlands that homeliness is embodied in kitchenware and the blue Delft tiles, which in the mid-seventeenth century became a popular alternative to expensive imports from the Far East. Visual traditions drawn from higher culture, which had since been exhausted by or disappeared from high art forms, were selectively absorbed into and passed on in that popular kitchenware, and indeed in many other decorative arts. But along the way that content was separated, simplified and scaled down. Thus the Arcadian, music-making shepherds, the fishermen, the mythical creatures, sirens and sea monsters, and the flowers, mills and landscapes survive and live on in modern houses and lives: on teapots, biscuit tins, place mats, on the Delft dinner service in the display cabinet and on the Delft tiles in the kitchen, where - like the letters of some sort of Scrabble game - they tell a story and provide a miniaturized world view.

Delvoye has developed a number of artistic 'products' that subvert homeliness. His way of working is always the same: he removes decorative layers from their normal medium and reuses them elsewhere - 'inappropriately'. Generally he chooses technical instruments, tools or machines, where decoration always seems incongruous. In the first instance the viewer sees the displacement as a mistake, a sort of blunder, but then suddenly he realizes it is intentional, and so a joke. For example, Delvoye painted the blades of circular saws, gas canisters and shovels with Delft blue motifs; sometimes the blades and canisters are decorated with the red and black figures from ancient Greek vases (e.g. *Gandagas A78522*, 1988 and *Sawblades*, 1989/90). Usually, as well as running counter to expectations, the displacement also expressly activates a connotation that clearly conflicts with the 'homely' origin of the iconography. Thus a Delft Gandagas canister, or a display cabinet filled with sawblades with sharp teeth, contains a double displacement: the decoration is out of place, but then neither is the gas canister nor the sawblade in its place as a showpiece in an interior or in a display case. They are dangerous things, they are weapons, which threaten the homeliness of the symbols they bear. Painting Delft motifs or heraldic signs on shovels and coats of arms on ironing boards (1988-9) is much less aggressive, but is nevertheless based on the same principle. Delvoye's use of leaded glass for the nets of football goals (e.g. *Finale*, 1990) is another variant, but again with a sting in its tail: anticipating the potential pleasure of playing and scoring is tied up in the imagination with the deep, taboo desire to shatter that little bit of domestic bliss.

SEEING THROUGH THINGS

What should be done to expose false claims to dignity and to break up the suspected alliance of order, cleanliness and beauty? The artist can turn to the body. After all, everybody is unique, and yet the body is first and foremost an anonymous thing, and the thing in which everyone is the same. Not in terms of outward appearance of course, but in the way the body functions. Secondly, the body is everyone's Achilles' heel: nobody is sure of his body. And thirdly, the last truth about the body is that man is only an animal, and that is a secret that everyone knows but is also an unspeakable truth. So, on the one hand, the body is ordinary and banal, but, on the other, it is also a very dark, incomprehensible and sacred thing. It is – as the child says – 'my life', it is the *body-of-the-soul*. But when it is cut open there is no trace of that soul. Hence the extraordinary ambiguity and the fascinating power of the body's 'openings'. It seems that the eyes and the ears – the 'intellectual' senses of seeing and hearing – lead straight to the person himself and have little corporeality. But the mouth is the most ambivalent: biting and kissing, speaking and spewing. Kissing someone on the eyes is very different from a French kiss. The mouth is also very personal and seen as highly subjective, but, unlike the eyes and the ears, it is an entrance, a *threshold*, a hole through which one can look not into the soul but into the body, and penetrate. And then there are also the other openings. The ambiguity of the mouth implies that its counterpart is the anus. These two are like beginning and end. And the inversion is the beginning of all subversion: of course the anus is also a mouth, and the mouth a sort of exit (Magritte, together with Irène Hamoir, edited one of his short films so that she chewed a banana and little by little pulled it out of her mouth so that at the end she was able to fold up the skin again and put the banana to the side: *démanger une*



Rose des Vents III, 1996
polyester, steel, 640 × 280 cm

banane').⁴ So, tied up with the representation of the body is a cluster of meanings and impulsive emotional reactions with which you can make art. But the logic of comedy, when it shows that the king and the pope sit on the chamber pot just like everyone else, risks evoking something that no longer makes us laugh.

Delvoye declared that he is looking for 'transparency', which may be a postmodern word for wisdom or truth. It is certainly the case that all understanding implies simplification, and all simplification provides a sort of pleasure (the pleasure of saying 'what something amounts to', the pleasure of the clear line, of the caricature). In the figures in the *Rose des Vents I* series, dating from 1992, Delvoye makes the body totally transparent: four bronze male figures, facing the four corners of the globe, have their hands in front of their eyes, but the spectator can look straight through each body to the stars through a telescope from arse to mouth. There are variations in which the figures squat in a row. The essence of the image - the 'bypass' from arse to mouth - makes the body transparent, but also represents penetration, and resonates with various forms of fetishistic eroticism and with

impalement as a form of torture. Delvoye developed this first series into *Rose des Vents II* and *III*, two sculptures erected in public spaces (Knokke, 1995; Evergem, 1996), which activate connotations of a different register. So the sculptures not only awaken old desires and fears in everybody, but also refer to important images from European iconography. *Rose des Vents II* is a male figure on a pole that turns with the wind, thus indicating the wind direction: he stands on top of a compass rose, has the wings of an angel, and always urinates in the direction of the wind – he is Angel Pis (cf. the popular *Manneken Pis* fountain sculpture in Brussels). *Rose des Vents III* consists of a wheel made up of four identical male figures with spread wings, tilted forwards, holding each other and so looking into each other's behinds. The angel wings and the wheel lead back to the origin of this image: since the late Middle Ages the wheel of fortune has been represented by a wheel that carries characters upwards – in some depictions they really look as if they have been impaled on the wheel – before falling irrevocably into the deep. Fortuna, frequently depicted as an angel figure, turns the wheel. In the *Rose des Vents* series Delvoye combines elements from that traditional cluster of images, not to form a clear 'message', but a composition of his own, which has a powerful effect because of several built-in associations. Fortuna is now a winged male figure that looks more like a gargoyle – a grotesque carving on a medieval cathedral – than an angel. And Delvoye has the angel, who is expected to control and explain human destiny, transformed into a sort of demon, himself turning on the wheel and acting as a weathercock. Ixion... Thus the four figures revolve so indecorously close, one behind the other, that – this time because *there is no* telescope – they see for eternity 'everything' (of the other's body) but in the end 'nothing'. (In a different, related sculpture Delvoye has a row of geese with their beaks in each other's behinds, so blind, walk one behind the other.)

NAKED ANIMALS

All cultures say a lot about man by talking about animals. Here the ‘animals’ category is all-embracing: it includes tamed bears, caterpillars that become butterflies, talking animals, horses with wings or with male torsos, people with fish tails, dragons, monsters of every description, women who turn into cats and men who turn into beetles. In the card game of life, ‘animal’ is a joker, a part played on discretion. It is one of the costumes man can put on to show what he is, or to try and find out what he is: the animal as a human being, the human being as an animal. Certainly one of the animals that most often features in stories, and which man has most to do with, is the pig. The pig has an unusual, emotionally charged history and tends to arouse aversion. It is an omnivore, an ugly, *dirty* animal. The latter is almost a tautology. The fact is, *all* animals are rather dirty and unclean, and human beings are by definition clean. But for us the pig is not just a dirty animal like the other animals: the pig is man’s *negative*, the definition of the difference between animal and human. He who eats and drinks and makes love like a pig is the opposite of man: he is a beast. He who associates with a pig – by eating it, for example; even by touching it – runs the risk of becoming pig-like (and ‘unclean’). It is not difficult to see that an uncomfortable inversion takes place here, and the pig is pushed away just because it comes so close. So what do we have in common? The grunt? Guzzling and gluttony (*gula*, one of the Seven Deadly Sins)? Maternal instinct?

Man and pig are both sinful animals and both are born naked. It is said that when God clothed and adorned the animals at the Creation, the pig arrived on the scene much too late. All the feathers, all the fur and all the colours had been used up; the only other thing the Creator could think of was to give him a curly tail. The pig had to go through life uncovered and

naked. So like man. Man is ashamed of the body he was born with and invents all sorts of things to cover it and even transform it, such as clothes, hairstyles, make-up, jewellery, and, since time immemorial, also tattoos: indelible marks or signs made on the skin that fix an identity. Do we feel an affinity with pigs and vicarious shame for their nakedness? You can only tattoo naked bodies.

Delvoye owes his fame beyond the art world to his tattooed pigs, which he first showed at Documenta IX in Kassel in 1992. The project developed into a permanent part of the Delvoye consortium, into what he calls an Art Farm, founded in 2003 and based in China. The pigs are tattooed there and then taken, alive, straight to an exhibition, and/or after dying, relinquish their flayed, tattooed skins as works of art. Alternatively, they are stuffed. Delvoye does not decorate the pigs with motifs from high culture. He does not produce designer pigs. Here, too, he keeps the displacement simple: he doesn't design his own language but borrows patterns and visual language from the existing tattoo culture, supplemented with logos or motifs from his own artistic world. The pigs walk round with camp versions of Catholic devotions on their backs, Goth babes, winged skulls, roses, dragons, eastern gods, pornographic versions of Snow White, supplemented and mixed with the *Cloaca* logo, clown faces, wallpaper patterns, or just Delvoye's own signature. Here, too, it is certainly possible to play an insiders game with erudite references and to link the pigs in Delvoye's museum to Joseph Beuys's coyotes, or to link the signed pigs to the prints Marcel Broodthaers made with his initials, and so forth. It is, however, more important to see how forgotten and suppressed visual material has been preserved in the iconography of the 'low' functional and decorative arts, and how here a mix of half-digested fragments, deriving from 'high culture', return to the museum on the backs of the tattooed pigs. The pig is the postmodern art product *par excellence*.

Delvoye is rightly described as a postmodern artist. Art is not about truth and the artist doesn't know where we should be going either. There are problems with low culture and even more with high culture. It is easy to make difficult art. So Delvoye does not identify with the 'critical' position of the artist and modernism: he plays high and low culture off against each



Art Farm China, 2003-10
live tattooed pigs
Beijing, China, 2008

other, he uses the art tradition instead of fighting it, he doesn't make unique artworks but designs series of art products, and he openly combines irony and paradox with public fame and commercial success. The essential feature of *modern* artworks, writes Anne Cauquelin, is that they *disappoint* (aesthetically): artworks are '*objets déceptifs*', they are capricious, *difficult* things.⁵ *Postmodern* art products are, to use Glenn Adamson's description, 'indecidable things'.⁶ They are ambivalent objects, *and-and*-things: both serious and foolish, usable and vicious, valuable and cheap, attractive and disgusting, superficial and intangible. Postmodern like Walt Disney's cartoon *Three Little Pigs*. Have you ever taken a good look? Have you seen what is hanging on the wall in the third house, the snug, sturdy, safe little brick house? A portrait of mother: a sow with lots of piglets on her many teats. And a portrait of father: nothing but a string of sausages. So what is that Disney film about? Is it a moral lesson for children? *And* also a way of saying: 'Father is a turd'?

THE WRITING ON THE WALLS

In 1996-7, before Photoshop was widely used, Delvoye manipulated a number of photographs of natural landscapes by inserting short, casual texts that look like monumental inscriptions cut out of a rock face. 'Where are you? I'll ring you later. Linda'; 'Susan, out for a pizza. Back in 5 minutes. George'; 'Mike, dinner is in the oven. Jill'. In these works the inversion is simple, light. Through the messages, which - not surprisingly - often have to do with eating and food, the banal swaps places with the monumental, the intimate with the public. After all, public space is structured by symbols and messages that, in principle at least, are valuable and important for everyone, and are directed at everyone. This even applies to the large advertising hoardings with messages of little general importance. The size and visual impact of monuments are adapted to the scale of the town. Only exceptionally does a monument try to and succeed in dominating not an urban environment but a natural landscape. Of course the city and nature also provide room for informality and even for intimacy, but just so long as it respects the rules, and does not usurp the official and monumental space. It is momentarily moving or funny when someone breaks these rules and declares his love on a banner above the motorway or proposes during a television broadcast. After all, there is always something transgressive and intriguing about the clash of the personal and the public, as the work of Jenny Holzer and others shows all too well. But nevertheless, someone bickering loudly on the street with their spouse, someone dictating a shopping list over their mobile phone in a full train carriage, or complaining about his mother-in-law, goes too far and makes himself ridiculous. Delvoye picks up on this and takes it to the extreme: imagine that on a rock face someone would write... But crucially he does



Mike, dinner is in the oven. Jill, 1996
laser inkjet on canvas, 146.5 × 242 cm

not 'really' make a gigantic misplaced monument, he just manipulates a photograph and hangs it in an art gallery or museum, and in the caption gives the size of the computer file: 'For John: bell broken, knock hard please.' (1997, 52 EPS, 1 Mb). So it's still just fooling around.

In another medium Delvoye parodies monumentality in a similar way but in the other direction. A short video entitled *Sybille II* (2000) shows human skin from so close that the folds, wrinkles and little hairs begin to look like an abstract mountain landscape above the tree line or like the surface of a strange planet. The camera zooms in on what resemble volcanic eruptions, accompanied by a tape recording of dramatic, sonorous muzak as used with the simulations of geological dramas in the opening scenes of nature documentaries about the origin of the earth and dinosaurs becoming extinct. But in fact these are pimples and blackheads being squeezed, and so no more than a little squirting pus. In the Post-it messages on the rock faces the monumentality is ridiculous because the everyday is enlarged out of all proportion. In *Sybille* the monumentality is miniaturized and used as a carnival costume for the trivially small. The sum of both is Pascal's view that we cannot possibly determine how small or how big we really are, and that man is *not* 'the measure of things'.⁷

SHIT HAPPENS!

From 1997 Delvoye worked on a series of machines, called *Cloaca*, that manufacture excrement. It is to these that Delvoye owes his greatest notoriety. The first version was first shown in Antwerp in 2000, and a total of seven machines have been built. Interviewed by Josefina Ayerza in 2001,⁸ Delvoye said a number of things he tends to keep to himself when speaking to the general public: ‘What do most people do except reproduce, eat and shit – not much more. What percentage of human beings do something more valuable than making shit? [...] they don’t want to create anything else but shit.’ He outlines the way scatological themes are used in the Western cultural and artistic tradition. Along with death, the lavatory is the great equalizer: ‘Shit is like showing the human being without races, classes, and sexes.’ It doesn’t even distinguish between gender. Consequently the lavatory, as a comical variation on the theme of death, is part of a popular pagan discourse on wisdom and its potential to subvert is strong – politically, artistically and intellectually: from the naturalist Pierre Cusson’s *Ode à la merde* written in 1807, to the book *Histoire de la merde* written by the psychoanalyst Dominique Laporte in 1978.⁹ After all, one can dress how one likes, and in life play king or pope, but in the smallest room and at the end, everyone is the same, and nothing is left of all that dignity. Delvoye: ‘The anus is a plebeian.’ Shit and matter: the truly ‘generally human’? Up to a point: see Freud’s case study ‘From the History of an Infantile Neurosis’, where a patient becomes obsessed by the question of whether the incarnation of the Saviour also meant that He had to crap like everyone else.¹⁰ My patient, writes Freud, was obsessed with the idea of ‘God-pig’ – ‘God-shit’ – and in company discussed the question of whether Christ also went to the toilet. He saw this as blasphemy, whereas a well-functioning digestive system is



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Desidia (Sloth)*, 1557
pen and brown ink, 21.4 × 29.6 cm

desirable and pleasant, and young children can be particularly pleased with themselves when defecation is timely and correctly aimed, proud of what they have done all by themselves. See the childish grin of Piero Manzoni who exhibits his tinned *Merda d'artista (Artist's Shit, 1961)*. Naturally, seen in this way, art is just shit like all the rest. But it is shit one can be proud of. Delvoye: 'My shit is fine because I also produce art.' Isn't that what we are all doing all the time? Be proud and carry on with something that ultimately – certainly figuratively, and in the case of 'shit' as an artistic product also literally – represents *nothing*?

The moralizing, subversive scatological visual tradition, which derives secret pleasure from detailed representations of what we should find distasteful, begins with Hieronymous Bosch and Pieter Bruegel and continues to Ensor. Delvoye might have given the faeces machine a high-tech look, but he certainly didn't invent it. His *Cloaca* links up with a specific visual home-grown tradition. The first representations of the production of 'shit' as a collective, organized activity date back to Bosch when – so we believe – he depicted the interim state where people/the dead sojourn between the end of time and the moment of judgement. Note, for example, the large barrel in the bottom left-hand corner of the middle panel of the *Last Judgement*

in the Groeningemuseum in Bruges, and the bird-headed monster on the potty-chair seen at bottom right in the hell panel from *The Garden of Earthly Delights* in the Prado. In his print series on the cardinal sins, Bruegel shows not just numerous scatological elements, but in the representation of Desidia (Sloth) even a prototype of a *Cloaca* – a *faeces machine*, as the planned, rationalized manufacture of waste as an end product. A little shelter has been built around the great excreter, and a group of workers are making holes in his bottom and allowing the production to run into their boat. The urine is also collected in a flask attached to a wheel. In the seventeenth century, following Bruegel, scatological elements find their way into the genre scenes depicting village fairs and revelling peasants. The little pissers and shitters, the mothers changing their babies in public and the puking drunkards are usually pungent, telling details in a large portrayal of life and customs, but in some cases they are themselves the subject of a small painting or drawing. Here it is more about pointing out class difference, the lack of manners and decorum and the crudeness of country dwellers, than about moral lessons about man in general.

Delvoye plays with the basic ingredients of scatology, but not just to make an impression on the viewer by means of a little revulsion and coarse pleasure. (Almost) the reverse. By not anthropomorphizing the *Cloaca*, but emphasizing the technical and mechanical nature of its production, ‘shit’ becomes a clean product whose quality is guaranteed. It is even something you can be enthusiastic about and sell as art: ‘Now you can own an important piece of contemporary art for a bargain price. Add an avant-garde ambience to your interior, impress friends and family! See how this rare product enhances your inner self and social standing. Be an investor, be smart. Buy Cloaca Faeces now!’

FUCK DEATH!

Death, along with the wc, is the great equalizer. But something different happens when Delvoye uses his tried and tested approach in this area. To start with, there is less to laugh about. This is because, so long as we are dealing with the mouth and the chamber pot, it's about pleasure. And there is (as yet) no sexual differentiation between the organs and the working of the digestive system. When it comes to the eye and death, however, it is about gender difference and desire. It is certainly the case that the desirous look brings the whole body into play above and beyond the genital, that true love forgets the difference between biting and kissing, and finds every part of the body and its openings equally attractive. But that does not remove the fundamental difference between gluttony and desire, and between man and woman.

The X-rays Delvoye produced in 2000 are particularly noteworthy. The most famous are the shots of couples having intercourse. This series is not about looking through a body to the inside to see the future skeleton, the hard core, and predicting death. It is not a simple *memento mori*, for the images show some form of penetration, so an encounter, a snapshot in time. You don't see a skeleton through the flesh, but anonymous skeletons - each making love. Desire, it seems, is lasting, even beyond death. Not the soul but desire is immortal. When they desire, the living sip at the eternal. Delvoye certainly wasn't the first to discover this cluster of meaning. His X-rays are part of a long visual tradition, which begins in the medieval dance of death and the classical *vanitas* paintings of several German Renaissance artists - Albrecht Dürer, Hans Baldung and Niklaus Manuel Deutsch - and which has been taken up by late Romantic and modern artists such as Edvard Munch, Otto Dix and Alfred Kubin. All these images show how a



Fuck 1, 2000-1
cibachrome on aluminium, 125 × 100 cm

moralizing, edifying theme is reversed and starts to contradict itself. The realization of death does not temper desire. However anonymous and foolish it may make a person, desire always wins.

Besides making X-rays of fellatios, Delvoye also made them of the pelvis and the abdomen, of the passage of the intestines and of anal penetration. He also made them of objects, and even of rats enacting the Stations of the Cross (*Viae Crucis*, 2006). He exhibits the X-rays as independent works, but also uses them in assemblages, frequently in the form of Gothic stained-glass windows, sometimes room-size, sometimes incorporated into scale models of Gothic buildings. The use of the form of the church window obviously reinforces the reference to the origin of the visual cluster, but the compositions also resonate with more recent and contemporary art. Most directly perhaps with Gilbert & George's stained-glass-window-like photo compositions, which have a similar decorative structure, with separate focal planes, wide use of symmetry, reflection, frontality, etc., but which also have parallels in terms of content. In their compositions Gilbert & George also monumentalize intimate representations and scatological elements, which they then bring into the sphere of desire and aestheticize, as Delvoye does in his stained-glass windows. There is in fact little visual difference between the enlarged X-rays of full intestines and the clouds in the Ascension scenes that adorn Baroque stained-glass windows.

COLOURING INSIDE THE LINES

In the attic of every house in Flanders is a box containing drawings and handicrafts made by the children at playgroup. They are the kind of things nobody can do anything with, but nobody wants to throw away. Eventually they are discarded when the occupants become aged or they die and their home has to be cleared out. Unless, that is, the child has become an artist, in which case the childish scribbles suddenly take on a whole new status. They become potential retroactive evidence, proof of the child's early natural artistic skill and bent. After all, every successful artist is asked about his 'early days'. How did he get started? When did anyone realize he was or wanted to be an artist? Who first recognized, inspired and supported his talent? What was his 'first work'? In most cases, the 'early works' are roughs from the artist's student days. In 2002 Delvoye, who carefully stage manages his act of artistry and partly uses that staging as an experiment to show how the art world works, made a book that solves this problem in exemplary fashion and with amazing clarity. He retrieved his collection of nursery-school drawings from the attic and published them in large format and in full colour under the title *Early Works (1968-1971)*. In one of his interviews with Brams and Pültau, Delvoye says that his talent for drawing was recognized even at nursery school, where his classmates asked him to draw in their notebooks 'because he was so good at drawing rabbits'.¹¹ But that of course is not what it's about. Here we are not concerned with the artistic quality of the drawing itself - which some will certainly find really beautiful - but the book is a statement and, as such, now an autonomous part of Delvoye's 'oeuvre'. In fact, printed on the cover is not a child's drawing but an anus kiss, and on the back a fork with its teeth bent into a small hand whose middle finger is extended. In his later exhibition catalogues Delvoye



Untitled (Dog), 18.11.1968
collage with glazed orange paper
on orange paper, 23,5 × 19,5 cm

often reproduces not the nursery-school drawings themselves but, consistently, the pages from *Early Works* in which they are included.

With his *Early Works* Delvoye gives new meaning to a term from the history of art, which serves to periodize an artistic oeuvre and provide it with a beginning so as to denote later ‘developments’: the time early in every child’s life when he is (still) an artist, and draws both brilliantly and banally. The more than 250 drawings and collages are described in the captions as the rules of the art sciences dictate: format, paper and drawing technique, signature and date. The collection is arranged neatly, in almost day-by-day order according to a periodization based on the kindergarten teachers who knew Delvoye as a tot in short trousers. In each drawing the respective contributions of the teacher and little Wim are indicated in the creation. Turning the pages of the hundreds of drawings gradually reveals a set scenario: the teacher draws the outlines or chooses a drawing from the colouring book and the children have to colour and paste inside the lines. The *Early Works* show that little Wim Delvoye was not an extremely gifted draughtsman and a born artist but that he did not manage to keep within the lines. This in its turn shows of course that he was a rebel artist from birth, albeit in a different sense. He who laughs last always wins.

GIVING ART A TWIST

The Dutch expression *'iets een draai geven'* means 'give something a twist' or 'take something in a different direction'. But in the dialect of West Flanders where Delvoye hails from, a *'draai'* also means a 'pasting'. So if you give *someone* a *'draai'*, you give them a clip round the ears. That is the principle of a large series of new works by Delvoye that set out to 'clobber' a classical sculpture. The principle is memorably prefigured in Goscinny and Uderzo's *Asterix and the Laurel Wreath*, namely in the passage in which Asterix and Obelix, now slaves, want to be sold by the up-market trader Typhus and have to go into the arena at the market with the rest of his merchandise. The superior Greek slaves pose as classical sculptures. In response to their disdainful remark that Asterix and his friend are just 'small fry', Asterix gives the slave who poses as Myron's *Discobolos* (discus thrower) a clip around the ears. He gives him a *'draai'*. That is what Delvoye does in a series of sculptures – sometimes classical images from high culture, sometimes kitsch – including *Discobolos* (2006) with its echoes of *Asterix*, and Michelangelo's *Pietà*. It is nothing short of disrespectful to scan those figures, make them into 3D models on the computer and then manipulate and distort them, cast them in bronze or silver, and thus drop them back in the world, sometimes as a scale model and sometimes life-size.

A special case, however, is an exceptional sculpture, which has no original and which does not interpret and reinterpret a theme, but is always first and foremost an example of a type: a crucifix. *Crossing crucifixes*: what happens when it is not Jesus who is crucified but crucifixes? It is striking how the formal operation that Delvoye carries out compensates for the way the crucifix's meaning has gradually been eroded in that long history of endless reproductions and reductions in scale. The simplest bending operation



Discobolos (clockwise), 2006
patinated bronze, 50 × 27 × 32 cm
Bronzes, 25.08.2006 - 28.10.2006
de Pury & Luxembourg, Zurich

Delvoye performs is to fold the crucifix into a ring with the body facing inwards or outwards. But he also experiments with more complex contortions, such as the Möbius ring; and also by combining several crucifixes in rings, Möbius rings; and finally in series of crucifixes remodelled into fragments of an infinite helical spiral, and into closed Pretzel shapes that turn in on themselves, which can even be opened up or flattened. All these images are extremely complex, and can only be made with the aid of sophisticated computer drawing programs. It is, however, fascinating to see how, when Delvoye turns those designs back into artisanal drawings, he adds shadows and gives the sculptures scale and spatiality by suggesting an urban environment. The spiralling crucifixes – even just on paper – thereby acquire a monumentality that makes us forget the banality of the ‘normal’ crucifixes. In this way, Delvoye closes the circle: the quasi-systematic application of the formal ornamental principles that have been used in the decorative arts from time immemorial – where meaningful motifs were repeated and abstracted for thousands of years until they became purely decorative figures – seems here to inject new life into enfeebled, impotent figurative representations in an entirely unexpected way. It becomes patently obvious that these crossed crucifixes, executed as sculptures, belong in a church and not in a museum.

THE SKY'S THE LIMIT¹²

Denise Scott Brown once explained that in the late 1960s she and her partner Robert Venturi played the game 'I can like something worse than you can like'. At London's Architectural Association School of Architecture, where she was teaching at the time, the objects used in the game were dubbed 'Gothic'. From the Gothic which, as the name tells us, was a barbarian architectural style that preceded the noble, classical art and architecture, to the nineteenth-century 'Gothic', and the 'Goths' subculture of today: Gothic was, and is again, almost a term of abuse. It is perhaps no coincidence that when choosing to defend the beauty and purity of one style against the prevailing eclecticism and the anti-aesthetic, Delvoye skips 'classical' art and falls back on the Gothic. After all, in recent decades there have been numerous classically oriented trends and projects in art and architecture, including a number that are very defensive and conservative in nature. Delvoye certainly does not want to end up in those waters. By defending the Gothic - not as a tradition, not as a social project, but as an *interesting style* - he isolates himself, albeit with Denise Scott Brown as his ally.

Delvoye has made full-scale 'Gothic' versions of lorries, breakdown trucks, cement mixer trucks and bulldozers. Functional, industrial machines - not the sort of thing one decorates - 'spiritualize' and thus dissolve into extremely detailed models, whereby the outlines, the articulation of the parts and the silhouette of the machine are true to life, while within that model it is not the machine that is represented but the graphic system's own logic, which unfolds freely and completely. Just as a painting by Arcimboldo represents a recognizable face, but is obviously made up of fruit and vegetables and the fruit and the vegetables take over the picture, so too Delvoye's sculpture is always a cement truck, but first and foremost



Chantier, 2003

laser-cut corten steel, variable dimensions

Beaufort, 2003, Belgian coastline, Middelkerke

you see the ‘material’ it is made of: proliferate, rusty Gothic. *The Gothic as material.*

The Gothic is a system of fully articulated, consistent, regular distribution and organization of space, which can develop endlessly and clearly determines the place of each element. Gothic was the first architecture that was wholly designed, that had to be drawn before it could exist. The design logic establishes the form, the place, the articulation, the relationship between parts, from the tiniest detail to the all-encompassing contour, according to the same simple, clear principles. The materiality dissolves in the structure, the decoration dissolves in the substance: the structure becomes geometry - a regular play of lines; and the substance becomes immaterial - glass, light. Gothic architecture is pure architecture, the content is the arrangement of the space itself; it is pure construction.

Delvoye’s fascination is not with the landscape of French cathedrals or the world of the Gothic. It begins with the nineteenth-century, illustrated historical overviews and the design books, with the volumes that reproduce the drawings of the old master builders. It is the Gothic detached from its

history, which has become a style and a (dead) language – perhaps because, like every language, every system of signs whose meaning has been forgotten and lost, it can be used as decoration, and pleasure can be derived from playing with its rules and forms. It is possible that Delvoye wants to place his tower in the world as he places a tattoo on the back of a pig. But that's not the way it works. Delvoye keeps to the comic logic when he makes breakdown lorries or cement mixers in his Gothic fashion. Here the Gothic looks bizarre, and the viewer can find it amusing. It is different when Delvoye makes towers (from 2009 onwards). The issue is that the tower is precisely what it is, and nothing else: a contemporary – because it is made of metal, and it is an artwork looked at by art-lovers – Gothic tower. A tower or the model of a tower? According to Delvoye the scale is 1:6, and it is the design for a tower that will soon rival the Eiffel Tower in height. But the thing is that this is not apparent and cannot be apparent. The model of the tower is itself a tower but also like a tabernacle, it is the model of a spire and also the enormous enlarged model of a monstrance. A cathedral is a jewel, a jewel is a building. Go from 1:6 to 6:6, or 12:6, it makes no difference. The drawings are the same whether the construction is in wood, gold, stone or steel. Gothic is a language, Delvoye's tower is a construction of language, the convergence of structure and appearance, pure language, and with language *per se* there is nothing to laugh about.

NOTES

- 1 Denise Scott Brown, 'Our Postmodernism' in *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion, 1970-1990*, eds Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt, V&A Publishing, London 2011, p. 110.
- 2 Koen Brams and Dirk Pültau conducted a series of interviews with Wim Delvoye about the beginning of his artistic career: 'Over opus een en min een' in *De Witte Raaf*, 140 (July-August 2009); 'Het werk der leerjaren' in *De Witte Raaf*, 146 (July-August 2010); 'Creating icons of a new tinsel' in *De Witte Raaf*, 147 (September-October 2010). See www.dewitteraaf.be.
- 3 Dirk Pültau and Koen Brams, 'Het werk der leerjaren. Interview met Wim Delvoye' in *De Witte Raaf*, 146 (July-August 2010): <http://www.dewitteraaf.be/artikel/detail/nl/3543>.
- 4 See René Magritte's amateur footage included in the TV films *Les Vacances de Monsieur Mag*, BRTN, 1994, 59'52", directed by Jef Cornelis, research and screenplay by Bart Verschaffel, and *Een weekend met Mijnheer Magritte. I: Zaterdag, II: Zondag*, 1997, 28'52" and 25'07", directed by Jef Cornelis, screenplay by Bart Verschaffel.
- 5 Anne Cauquelin, *Petit traité d'art contemporain*, Seuil, Paris 1996, p. 106ff.
- 6 Glenn Adamson used this term in his lecture 'Substance Abuse: Making the postmodern object' at the Yale School of Architecture, New Haven, CT, on 12 November 2009.
- 7 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Louis Lafuma, nos. 198, 199: 'Disproportion de l'homme', 200.
- 8 'Cloaca. Josefina Ayerza interviews Wim Delvoye', *Lacanian Ink*, 19 (autumn 2001): <http://www.lacan.com/frameXIX7.htm>.
- 9 Pierre Cusson, *Ode à la merde* (1807), L'Archange Minotaure, Apt 2002; Dominique Laporte, *Histoire de la merde* (1978), Christian Bourgois Editeur, Paris 2003.
- 10 Sigmund Freud, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis' (1918) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume xvii (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, London and New York 1955, pp. 1-124.
- 11 Koen Brams and Dirk Pültau, 'Over opus een en min een. Interview met Wim Delvoye' in *De Witte Raaf*, 140 (July-August 2009): <http://www.dewitteraaf.be/artikel/detail/nl/3439>.
- 12 This section picks up on the last part of my text 'Gotiek als statement', which first appeared in *Wim Delvoye: Knockin' on Heaven's Door*, Bozar Books & Lannoo, Brussels 2010.