In 2012, in conjunction with his solo exhibition at the Musée du Louvre, Wim Delvoye installed a large work of art beneath I.M. Pei’s iconic glass pyramid. Visible from the courtyard and, once again, upon entry to the museum, the sculpture marked the Louvre’s main entrance, while granting visitors a preview of the work in Delvoye’s show, much of which used gothic architecture as a subject and medium. If representative, the object in question is not easily described, and for all the immediate impact of its installation, digestion takes time. One notices first its shape and scale, also its reflective material, exaggerated at the Louvre by the light that poured down on all sides through Pei’s diamond-shaped windows. Conical and tapered at both ends, the work is eleven meters tall and has the contours of a missile or un-husked ear of corn, though the light might initially obscure this fact, as well as the debt this form owes to gothic architecture. Once the details of Delvoye’s work come into focus, they facilitate an economic, if perplexing, description: two twisted gothic spires, as if sutured together at their broad ends to form a menacing, if arrested, torpedo. Indeed, a threat is implicit here, and, if Delvoye’s sculpture served to anticipate other gothic works in the show — secular stained glass windows, lacy metal dump trucks with beds in the shape of a nave, a gothic tower curved in on itself in the shape of a nautilus — this comparatively more abstract sculpture, made of stainless steel and perforated by glassless arched windows, also served as a worrisome foil for Pei’s glass and steel pyramid, which was likewise perceived by some as a threatening intervention in its own right.

Commissioned to accommodate the Louvre’s daily onslaught of visitors, the pyramid complex, which opened to the public 1989, appeared futuristic to traditionalists and, at the same time, Pharaonic — an interloper from a distant, pre-classical past and, simultaneously, a suite of alien objects, recently landed from an encroaching, post-classical future. Of course, in time, Pei’s pyramids would find acceptance and even admiration, and, for some, the
logic of their installation was always apparent. For although Pei’s pyramids are both pre- and post-classical, their symmetry, triangularity, and transparency established unexpected affinities — not only between Classicism and other, pre-classical cultures, but also between high Modernism and the staid classicism of the Louvre. Hence, we might say of Pei’s pyramids that they created alliances that Delvoye’s gothic sculpture would then solidify and exploit.

For although “gothic” is an unruly term with diverse connotations in a variety of fields — a fact to which I’ll return — it first emerged as a stylistic concept in conjunction with architecture and was deployed in an effort to mark something off and differentiate it from the classical art of the Renaissance, itself a revival of classical antiquity. Entangled with the idea of various gothic tribes who were perceived as barbaric, by the seventeenth-century “gothic” had come to connote cruelty and excess in a stylistic sense, especially when seen in contrast to classical art and its renewals.1 Accordingly, it replaced the circle with the square, from the pure style of the antique2 and put the style of the late medieval period in place as a devalued, graceless form of expression.

There’s much to say about art history’s investment in the ideas of antagonism and renewal, but in the context of this essay there are two major points worth underscoring. First, if key to art history, the opposition between the Classical and the Gothic is also key to Delvoye’s installation at the Louvre, and key even to the sculpture when seen in isolation. Second, within art history, Gothic is not the only style charged with possessing an anti-classical aesthetic; in time, the Gothic will come to share this status with the Baroque, which was also (and through its very name) demonized as an unwelcome departure from the ostensibly normative tendencies of the classical tradition. As we shall see, the Baroque is also an important aspect of Delvoye’s recent work, including his theatrical installation at the Louvre.

II.

The history and etymology of the term “Baroque” is complex, but scholars agree that it derives from the Spanish term “barrueco,” and the Italian word “barocco” — that denote irregularity and excess, originally in the context of jewelry, as in the word “baroque,” the Spanish term “barrueco,” and the Italian word “barocco” — that denote irregularity and excess, originally in the context of jewelry, as in the baroque or irregular pearl. Hence, when used subsequently, in conjunction with the visual arts, as it was by the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin in his canonical text Renaissance and Baroque (1888), the point was to insist on its difference from the sober classicism of antiquity and its revisions.3 Characterized by a sense of drama and energetic movement, the baroque style, which begins for Wölfflin with various late renaissance or manierist tendencies, is associated with dynamism, fluidity, and exuberance. Accordingly, it replaced the circle with the oval, the vertical with the diagonal, and the relationship of its more dramatic cousin, the spiral. With this in mind, let us return to Delvoye’s installation at the Louvre.

At first, there is the simple fact of the opposition Delvoye’s work stages between the Gothic and the Classical, and the pointed suggestion that the one serves as a threat to the other. Jagged-edged and possessed of a needle like nose at each end, Delvoye’s work literalizes the notion not just of difference — an elongated, dramatic, and ornamental form in stark contrast to the Louvre’s classical structure and façade — but also the notion of risk and incipient violence, as if the Gothic’s resurgence might again derail Western civilization, shattering its very structure into a pile of irrecoverable shards. And yet, Delvoye’s sculpture isn’t simply gothic, nor is its environment (the Louvre) simply classical. Indeed, even if we set aside the majority of the Louvre’s history and concentrate on the mid-seventeenth-century structure and façade one sees today, there is still the fact of Pei’s pyramid, the glass canopy under which Delvoye’s sculpture stands, poised like rocket before take-off.

Directly situated beneath the main pyramid’s apex, Delvoye’s sculpture was juxtaposed with Pei’s modern addition as much as it was with the grounded classicism of the Louvre, evervisible through Pei’s glass canopy. As an effect of this juxtaposition, the Louvre’s own internal differences began to recede in favor of various commonalities that bring Modernism and classicism together against an enemy deemed too emotional, ornamental, and excessive by contrast. Again, if the structure of the Louvre is rational and symmetrical with one side left open to signal its status as the structure’s front, so is Pei’s complementary installation, in which the view to the main pyramid is left open when considered from the west. Moreover, if the Louvre’s exterior embodies a certain restraint and sobriety, with its details deriving from classical architecture and seeming to serve assorted architectural needs (pediments, columns, etc.), so do the forms and materials of Pei’s pyramids, which lack superfluous details and seem as if an austere solution to a complex architectural problem.

Of course, the problem Pei faced was light — its capture and passage through architecture — and if he managed a technical solution to this problem late in the twentieth century following in the footsteps of other modern architects and their famous, stripped-down experiment with glass and load-bearing steel (Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson among others), it’s also true that gothic architects engineered a solution of their own in the late medieval period, using vaulted ceilings and flying buttresses to open up the cathedral’s walls and in that way maximize the effects of light via the power of glass. Thus, even as Delvoye’s installation makes strange bedfellows of classicism and Modernism, uniting them against the perceived threat of the Gothic, it also undoes their opposition to the Gothic, establishing a series of unwelcome affinities between the Louvre and the primary style deployed in Delvoye’s promiscuous object. After all, Delvoye’s sculpture echoes the materials of Pei’s pyramid and is a pyramid (or too) in its own right, albeit one that is distended and busy with detail. Made of steel and perforated by windows, Delvoye’s sculpture is in many ways an uncanny reflection of Pei’s central pyramid, which is also both sculpture and architecture and a steel armature perforated by windows. What’s more, the form of Delvoye’s symmetrical, self-mirroring object echoes the forms and overall structure of Pei’s complex, not only because it includes an inverted pyramid that descends into the space of the Louvre but also because the reflecting pools on the main pyramid’s three sides create a comparable illusion,
at times making this pyramid into a symmetrical di- 

amond in its own right.

And the Baroque? If Gothic was the first villain of the Classical, then the Baroque is its more modern antagonist, a point in no way lost on Delvoye. In fact, a significant portion of his recent sculptures, especially those based on 3D scans of academic bronze, uses exagerrated spirals, often at the expense of their nominal subjects. That some of these subjects are classical in nature — Daphnis and Chloé, l'hibiscides satys, etc. — seems important, since it again suggests Delvoye's interest in conmbing ideas thought to oppose one another in principle. Literalizing the notion that the Baroque distorts the Classical — twisting it in ways that pervert its judicious aesthetics — Delvoye's spiraling sculptures also align them, exposing affinities where we are trained to see difference. After all, some of the objects from which Delvoye works — Daphnis and Chloé as executed by Auguste Moreau (1834-1917) and Le Baiser du Satyre as executed by Claude Michel Clodion (1738-1814) — name two — highlight the legendary interest of the ancients in excess, the very crime of which the Baroque and Gothic are accused. Further undermining received notions of the Classical are the Rorschach works, an exuberant, grandiose form from those of classical art, with which they wanted to align. In other words, just as the Visigoths had invaded Rome, so gothic art (at times erroneously linked to these early gothic tribes) was seen as a threat to legacy of classical antiquity.

The pertinent facts about the latter are as follows: gothic art and architecture are a late Medieval phenomenon that originates in the middle of the twelfth century in France and lasts until the middle of the fifteenth century, by which time a classical remit is still well under way. Called "modern" by contemporaries, this new style of art and architecture eventually earned the description “gothic” for two reasons: first, because it originally flourished in the North before spreading across the rest of Europe and, second, because various humanists found this label a useful as a way of distinguishing these more exuberant, grandiose forms from those of classical art, with which they wanted to align. In other words, just as the Visigoths had invaded Rome, so gothic art (at times erroneously linked to these early gothic tribes) was seen as a threat to legacy of classical antiquity.

In the first instance, there are the Goths themselves, an ancient, East Germanic tribe, rumored to have come from modern-day Sweden. Migrating west and south, they made their way to modern-day Po- land and East Germany over the course of the third and fourth centuries, eventually splitting into the Ostrogoths and the Visigoths, the latter of whom are famous for having achieved the sack of Rome in 410 AD. More than any other event, this inva- sion cemented the Goths' reputation as the enemy of Western civilization, making barbarism synony- mous with their name. In addition, these historical events establish a context for many of the themes explored in gothic literature, which so often turns on the concepts of incivility, transgression, and in- 

vocation, all of which are also at issue in the art of Wim Delvoye. For, as we have already begun to see, Delvoye uses the forms of gothic architecture, but does so in the service of ideas that are more closely related to the concerns of gothic literary, which postdates gothic art by a good half century.

The pertinent facts about the latter are as follows: gothic art and architecture are a late Medieval phenomenon that originates in the middle of the twelfth century in France and lasts until the middle of the fifteenth century, by which time a classical remit is still well under way. Called "modern" by contemporaries, this new style of art and architecture eventually earned the description “gothic” for two reasons: first, because it originally flourished in the North before spreading across the rest of Europe and, second, because various humanists found this label a useful as a way of distinguishing these more exuberant, grandiose forms from those of classical art, with which they wanted to align. In other words, just as the Visigoths had invaded Rome, so gothic art (at times erroneously linked to these early gothic tribes) was seen as a threat to legacy of classical antiquity.

There is one more chapter in all of this, and, here, the art-historical and literary come togeth- 

er in opposition to the rational, humanist impuls- 

es of modernity and the Enlightenment. The first self-consciously gothic novel, Horace Walpole's Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Novel (1764), was writ- 

ten by an English man of letters, who also played a major role in the late eighteenth-century vogue for reviving gothic architecture. His home, Straw- 

berry Hill, located in Twickenham South West of London, dates from the seventeenth century, but shortly after its purchase in 1749, Walpole remod- 

eled the estate adding various gothic elements to both interior and exterior. Likewise, his novel con-
quires the late medieval period, and deploys gothic architecture as a meaningful backdrop. Originally published anonymously, the novel has a complex conceit, which Walpole explains in his book’s preface. Claiming that the tale was first published in Italian in 1529, he observes that the story was actually composed several centuries earlier within a properly gothic or medieval context. The plot of the novel centers on Manfred, the gloomy Prince of Otranto, who has fallen tragically in love with his son’s intended, Isabella. Predictably, this romance is ill-fated, and, in the course of the novel, characters are subject to extreme emotional states as well as a number of other, inexplicable forces. Indeed, we are prepared for the role that the supernatural will play in this tale from the beginning, since the novel opens with the son’s death at the hands of a statue of the previous Prince of Otranto; mysteriously, its helmet comes loose and crushes Manfred’s son.

Many gothic novels are set in the middle ages, wherein gothic architecture is a recurring feature. But, as literary scholars repeatedly attest, the gothic genre is resilient and elastic, enduring endless adaptations in written and filmic form. Thus, although initially set against medieval backdrops populated by degenerate counts and virtuous maidens, the Gothic soon came to encompass scientists, vampires, and aliens in urban, suburban, and extra-terrestrial locations. Taken together, they evidence the impressive adaptability of the genre and, by virtue of what does not change, its essence.

Initially serving as an antidote to the optimism of the Enlightenment, gothic literature is always a matter of doubt and anxiety, as well as the oppositions from which they stem. Reason versus emotion; man versus both monster and machine; the clear light of reason versus the ambiguities and depravities of emotion; the superstitions of the East versus the West’s secularity; the uncivilized past versus the progressive, acculturated present. Within the gothic novel these dichotomies are rendered temporarily uncertain, as is the society they undergird and maintain. Equally important to gothic fiction are the concepts of invasion and transgression, which typically inspire this uncertainty, as when Count Dracula the immortal, feudal figure from the East, arrives in London with the aim of feeding on and infecting his modern, mortal counterparts via a barbaric, blood-thirsty practice that confuses a number of additional distinctions: insemination and infection, life and death, heterosexuality and homosexuality, man and beast, self and other. Indeed, although the particulars vary, the gothic tale is often the tale of the Goths, at least as the West has preferred to tell it: an ill-intentioned invasion of an ancient, even primordial thing that hails from somewhere else (often the North or the East, but sometimes the protagonist’s own unconscious or past), the effect of which is the contamination of one thing with its demonized opposite. How this relates to Delvoye may already be clear.

IV.

Suppo is the name of the sculpture Delvoye installed in the Louvre — a fact I have deliberately withheld in favor of more formal and historical concerns. Suppo is short for suppository, and, with that, we find ourselves in well-trodden territory, at least for this particular artist. From small scale prints made by the impress of a lipsticked anus on hotel stationery to ceramic tiles installed on the floor decorated with arabesque turds, Delvoye’s fascination with feces, defecation, and anality is well established and finds its most elaborate expression in his well known Cloaca series, a body of ten high-tech machines that eat and defecate on cue within the public space of the museum or gallery. There’s a good deal to say about all these works and especially the latter, logo-bearing machines. Yet, in this context,
the simplest point might be most apt: when consid-
ereated in isolation and together as a larger body of
work, these images and objects recall our strange fas-
tion with shit and the processes by which it ap-
pears.

Shit and suppositories are clearly linked, but they
are also fundamentally different. The question for
us is this: how are they relevant to Suppo and all
that’s been said of this sculpture already? Let’s
start with shit and then move to its medicinal coun-
terpart, the suppository. That shit is transgressive
goes with out saying. That it inspires nervousness
and anxiety is also beyond debate. That it comes
from the past and makes an unwelcome incursion
into the present is also apparent. Moreover, like
the Goths and the protagonists of so many goth-
ic novels, shit crosses borders, temporarily con-
fusing inside and outside, self and other, subject
and object. Hence the highly regulated business
of border crossing of interest across a wide range
of media and subject matter.

As we’ve already seen, the styles of Western art his-
tory and the many ideas for which they stand are
provocatively commingled in Suppo, something
that was especially highlighted during the course of
its installation at the Louvre. What’s driven home
by the work’s title is the fact that these perversions
are conceived as a beneficent form of aid, adminis-
tered toward positive ends.

There are important precedents for the idea of
a healing and beneficent hybrid. Take the merci-
ful figure of Christ, for example, who has also ap-
peared in Delvoye’s work with increasing frequency
since 2006. At once mortal and immortal, man
God, the inhuman, hybrid figure of Christ is the
archetypal border-crosser, violating lines that are
both real (for believers) and conceptual. Moving
between the sacred and secular realms, assuming
both human and divine form, Christ is by his own
account both alpha and omega, a point Delvoye
conceptualizes well in several of his Holy Family
works, all of which can be described as a crucifix
bent into the shape of a circle without end. Thus,
while the hybridity of Dracula makes him mon-
strous (like Christ, the Vampire also drops out of
time), the inhuman hybridity of Christ — the
fact that he is, simultaneously, two irreconcilable things
— is nothing less than the miraculous sign of God’s
love, whose blood Christians ingest in the ritual-
istic form of the Eucharist. In this way, Christ aligns
not only with the gothic figure of Dracula (Christ’s
perverse reiteration) but also with Delvoye, who
also believes in the redemptive, healing power of
impurity, variously conceived.

Indeed, in the end, one must concede that there
is a religious dimension to Delvoye’s work — a fact
the artist seems prepared to admit. Among his re-
cent gothic works, many of which get their charge
from combining the ornate aesthetic of gothic ca-
thedrals with the modern forms of assorted utility
vehicles (here, yet another kind of unexpected,
impure hybrid), there are also a few small-scale
gothic churches, as well as a stand-alone series
of seven stained glass windows, one for each day of
the week. Their imagery derives from x-rays of the
body (ours and those of animals), with special at-
tention paid to sex, shit, and the parts of the body
they implicate. Certainly, from a Christian point
of view, such imagery is irreverent and deliberately at
odds with an implied religious context. But if one
considers such topics from a secular perspective, it
is possible to see among them a shared interest in
the idea of transgression and contamination. After
all, sex is an activity in which the body is invaded
especially since the idea of the double helix is overtly
referred by the artist in two works that turn on
the rungs of its ladder — seems important, es-
pecially among them is the impossibility of conclusively
distinguishing between their two sides, as the fa-
mous anecdote about the ant makes clear: if an ant
were to crawl along the length of a Möbius strip,
it would eventually return to its starting point hav-
ing traversed its entire length on both “sides” but
without ever crossing an edge. Thus, while other
works by Delvoye revel in the theatrical crossing of
boundaries, or call attention to the liminal zones
that serve as boundaries (as with Delvoye’s tattooed
pig skins and anal prints on hotel stationary), the
Tyre and Holy Family works use the concept of
the Möbius to bear out the idea of the boundary as illu-
sory — something we cling to despite the difficulty
and, in these works, impossibility of maintaining
these kinds of distinctions. That objects in the Tyre
series also conjure the double helix — their spokes
as if the rungs of its ladder — seems important, es-
pecially since the idea of the double helix is overtly
referred by the artist in two works that turn on
the conventional image of the crucifixion. Made of
patinated bronze, Double Helix Crucifix of 2006 and
2009 are, at 985 and 470 cm respectively, imposing
works, populated by several representations of Jesus
along its twisting, helical form. Neither religious nor
indifferent to religious ideas, the Double Helix Cruc-
ifix sculptures may allow us clarify the role religious
references play in Delvoye’s work, be they the eccle-
siastical forms of Gothic architecture, crucifixions in
the form of Mohitius strips, or stained glass windows that make reference to shutting and sex. Discovered in 1953 by James Watson and Francis Crick, the double-helix structure of DNA has numerous implications beyond the scope of this essay. As deployed by Delvoye in both versions of *Double Helix Crucifix*, it is, at the very least, a secular counterpart to the image of Christ and attendant Christian beliefs about the origins of human life. Yet, it seems to me that the sculpture’s juxtaposition of science and religion actually reveals a deep commonality between these spheres that in turn suggests the totality of the double helix motif to Delvoye’s concerns more generally. We’ve said already that Delvoye is interested in border crossings and that Christ is emblematic of this idea within Christianity. We’ve also noted that in Delvoye’s series of stand-alone stained glass windows, the artist turns away from religion to embrace secular, profane activities that also entail the crossing of borders. Taken together, the basic idea seems to be this: Delvoye is sketching out the basis for a secular religion, one dedicated to impurity, hybridity, and fluidity. As his stained glass windows seem to suggest, affirming one’s faith in the healing power of these ideas requires participation in acts that recall the body’s porosity, while shamelessly calling attention to facets of our anatomy that open out the body’s porousness, while shamelessly calling attention to facets of our anatomy that open out and the sense of movement it everywhere implies. For when housed within a structure that obscures doorways with walls shaped like a nautilus or breaking wave, *Suppo* ebbs too, only to return to one’s contemplation altered in ways that are almost imperceptible: the spine becomes a minaret, the twisting spiral a form of vegetal abstraction and, simultaneously, a vortex in which its styles and many contradictory ideas are multiplied and, by the power of the building’s dynamic design, suspended in a state of temporary resolution. Deeper within the Center’s confines, the experience continues, past tyres and dump trucks, stained-glass windows and torqued crucifixions, and we, like ants, proceed, covering it all without ever encountering an edge.

**NOTES:**
1. See, for example, François Blondel, *Cours d’Architecture* (Paris: De l’imprimerie de Lambert Roulland, 1675–78), preceded by *Lettres,* trans. Mrs. Jonathan Foster (London: George Bell & Sons, 1900). It is important to note that although Vasari lays the groundwork for using “gothic” in a disparaging way, in this sentence he uses the term “tedeschi” (German) rather than “gothic”: “Onde ne vennero a risorgere nuovi architetti, che della loro barbara maniera fecero il modo di quella maniera di edifici, ch’ingià da noi son chiamati toledesi.”
2. See Le cri du pois esthétici puter, sculte et architetti (Rome: Graniti Tascabili Economici, 1991), 100. However, in some English translations, the word “gothic” is seen as an appropriate translation, presumably because throughout the first preface Vasari miskinably attributes the twelfth-century phenomenon of gothic art with assorted gothic tribes, all decried for their barbarism. Hence, it is a commonplace within art history to say that Vasari was the first to attach the idea of the “Gothic” (i Goti, p. 101) to this new, anticlassical style, thereby laying the groundwork for the use of “gothic” as a direct style disparaged by classicists. On Vasari and the idea of the gothic, see Ernest Parody, “The First Page of Vasari’s ‘Liber: A Study on the Gothic Style in the Judgement of the Italian Renaissance’ in Meaning and the Visual Arts” (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1953), 160–225.
3. Foster, 24.
5. A key figure in this regard is Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who publishes an influential diatribe against Baroque art in 1755, but without ever using this term. See *Reflections on the Instinct of the Painting and Sculpture of the Ancient Greeks,* trans. Elizabeth Hoyer and Roger C. Norton (New York: De Luxe Library, 1907).
7. On these topics and their relevance to Wim Delvoye’s Cloaca series, see my “Deep Shit: Thoughts on Wim Delvoye’s Cloaca Project” in *Contemporary Art and Classical Myth* (Isabelle Loring Wallace and Jennie Hird, eds. (Farhamb, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011): 217–241. Isabelle Loring Wallace is Associate Professor of Contemporary Art at the University of Georgia, Athens (USA)
Suppo & Holy Family, 2010
laser-cut stainless steel and nickeled bronze, variable dimensions
CHIESA SAN CRISTOFORO, LUCCA, 2013