ARTREPUBLIK 7

ELITISM FOR ALL

THE INFLUENCE OF INDONESIA

FEAT.
HERI DONO / ENTANG Wiharso
HANDI WIRMAN SAPUTRA
FX HARSONO / TINTIN WULIA
IRWAN AHMETT & TITA SALINA
JATIWANGI ART FACTORY / JOMPET
RUANGRUPA / NINDITYO & MELLA
PLUS: AI WEIWEI / DAVID ZWIRNER
UTE META BAUER / CHARLES LIM
Wim Delvoye is shameless and defiant. In 2000, he made faeces officially labelled as art. "Cloaca" was a bio-machine that, through a system of tubes and jars filled with gastric juices, simulated a digestive system, transforming food like Belgian fries with mayonnaise into excrement that could be vacuum-packed and purchased—a method of revealing the truth and entertaining. Yet his work isn't about telling jokes; viewers must read between the lines. He is the kind of artist who follows an idea through to its completion even if it stirs up controversy. With 'Art Farm', he bought a pig that he discovered artists like Bosch, Brueghel, Duchamp and Warhol. At his museum, the man who sold his body for art, in freak show style. A living, breathing work of art with his back and arms tattooed by Delvoye, Steiner's skin will be harvested and framed upon his death, already paid for by a collector, and be bought and sold like a commodity in the future.

Provocative, his works may take some three years to make, criminal and exploiting it at the same time, he is always willing to play the game. Delvoye has always had the ability to shock people. At arts school in Ghent, he learnt that showing skillful work incorporating traditional crafts was a no-no in the art world— it was viewed as kitschy and relegated you to the status of a ‘lowly’ craftsman. But that didn't deter him. Debuting his career in the late 80s, his early works with carpet weaving and tapestry depicted himself as Procter & Gamble's Mr Clean of KFC's Colonel Sanders and his coat of arms transformed the famous Warner Bros. logo into his own initials 'WD', owns the largest collection of Laughing Cow-processed cheese boxes and labels, has taken on the appearance of Comic Book superheroes, and his coat of arms depicts himself as Proctor & Gamble's Mr Clean in a kind of commentary on how consumers are bombarded daily by brands, logos, images and messages. Delvoye has always had the ability to shock people. At arts school in Ghent, he learnt that showing skillful work incorporating traditional crafts was a no-no in the art world—it was viewed as kitschy and relegated you to the status of a ‘lowly’ craftsman. But that didn't deter him. Debuting his career in the late 80s, his early works with carpet weaving and tapestry perturbed people because it infringed on the sphere of the traditional arts and artisanship.

Today, his works continue to show off artisanal skills: weaving, tattooing, carving, embossing, and messages. Nonetheless, it was not the first time that Delvoye had tackled cultural iconography: he signs his name in Disney characters, has transformed the famous Warner Bros. logo into his own initials 'WD', owns the largest collection of Laughing Cow-processed cheese boxes and labels, has taken on the appearance of Comic Book superheroes, and his coat of arms depicts himself as Proctor & Gamble's Mr Clean in a kind of commentary on how consumers are bombarded daily by brands, logos, images and messages. Delvoye has always had the ability to shock people. At arts school in Ghent, he learnt that showing skillful work incorporating traditional crafts was a no-no in the art world—it was viewed as kitschy and relegated you to the status of a ‘lowly’ craftsman. But that didn't deter him. Debuting his career in the late 80s, his early works with carpet weaving and tapestry perturbed people because it infringed on the sphere of the traditional arts and artisanship.

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His ornate, filigreed and laser-cut Cor-ten steel and stainless steel Gothic cathedrals displayed expert craftmanship. Though an immensely popular series, Delvoye isn’t one to rest on his laurels and feels the need to move on although the conservative art market would want him to continue this work, repeatedly producing the same things for collectors. However, he doesn’t want to be the artist making variations on the same theme for the rest of his life, believing it’s imperative to be flexible and want his work to evolve. Thus, his eclectic oeuvre exposes a wide range of themes. Enjoying working on many projects at once, he mixes genres, categories and periods. By referencing the past, appropriating art history and deforming existing motifs that influence him, he gives a unique take on contemporary society. His work spills out like a fan, moving in all directions simultaneously and incorporating new techniques and ways of working. He wants to free himself from the art market while reaching the maximum number of people.

Describe your work process.

Usually we make a computer drawing, then we look for the best material. First, you need the idea – you want to know what you want to do and why, and if you solve this, the other things are easy and fun. With my way of working, you don’t define yourself by a material but by a way of thinking and working. This allows me to be very free and to do very different things. Many people who are maybe more commercially successful cannot change their work. If they change even the size of their paintings, they’re in trouble because the market is conservative and always wants to reference the past.

How did you become an artist?

My parents were very art-minded. Every weekend, we went to visit museums and historical places. My father was always drawing. He decided that I should go to art school because he didn’t get a chance to. I enjoyed art school but I was much busier preparing my future. For me, school was not an end in itself. A lot of people, when they go to school, they want to get points. I didn’t want to have points. Now when I employ people, I don’t want to know what they studied. They just go on the computer and show me what they can do. I don’t believe too much in the school system.

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How do you view the contemporary art world?

The art world is a very dirty house and I feel like I’m Mr Clean coming in sometimes. This is one reason why I like Mr Clean. The Amsterdam Mr Clean is a great man. He’s very philosophical. He talks about God and Mr Clean. I think you should be Mr Clean because I think it’s very important. You cannot avoid. Wherever you go, you see Mr Clean smiling at you. So I got engaged just in time. A lot of art doesn’t engage you. In 1977, I was 12 years old and I went to see a Rubens show in Antwerp. After four hours, my parents begged me, “Please can we go?” I was not finished. I hope I can do shows like that. Some shows when I was 10, 11 or 12 years old interested me a lot and later in school, some artists or movements made an impression on me, which was very important, otherwise I would not have continued to study. I think if the same thing, I would be very happy that I stimulated people to pick up the brush or the pencil, because I was going to stop when I was a student. The teachers talked about Dadaism and all of a sudden I thought, no, let’s cut the crap. I am a student and I want to do it my own way. So I got engaged just in time. A lot of art doesn’t engage you.

Where do you show your work?

I like to show my work when it’s controversial, when it’s difficult. I enjoy doing something that’s difficult and that’s taboo. When you say taboo, it means not accepted by society. It’s a human activity that you cannot completely justify, so these things are far more interesting. It adds another layer to the thing. For example, in Paris, you’re constantly in danger. You never know what’s going to happen. There is justice and law and order, but there you see graffiti and it’s dirty. The French don’t like Dada. They say it’s too much of a plastic world. But there’s nothing wrong with the plastic world. Give me the plastic world. I really like Singapore for that reason. I’ve been speaking with the government about living there. They say I’m welcomed. Belgium is the Italy of Northern Europe. It’s a very corrupt country. I’m now a resident of Brighton, England, to be a bit away from the European community because here they only want to make war and tax people. It’s a very bad situation here. The Happiness Index is very low. And we think we are the free world. We are not a free world. I think Singapore is a much more fair world.

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