In 1947, the British writer Evelyn Waugh noted the following in his essay *Half in Love With Easeful Death: An Examination of Californian Burial Customs*:

“...the wish to furnish the dead with magnificent habitations, to make an enduring record of their virtues and victories, to honor them and edify their descendants, raised all the great monuments of antiquity, the pyramids, the Taj Mahal, St. Peter’s at Rome, and was the mainspring of all the visual arts.” At the time, Waugh had already raised more than just a few eyebrows following his much-publicized conversion to Catholicism in the 1930s and his subsequent turn to a rigid, occasionally outrageous cultural conservatism. Having been raised a devout Anglican, Waugh’s change of religious heart was shaped in part by his aesthetic sensibilities: the attraction that the Catholic faith held for him (and for many like him ever since — including the undersigned) was intricately tied up with its rich symbolism, its innate knack for spectacle (what the British like to refer to as “pomp and circumstance”), its reliance on mystery and ritual, its visuality — in short, its artfulness as well as its formative implication in the history of art as we know it. The history of images and imaging that the Western art tradition is such a prestigious part of, is in essence and origin a religious history indeed. More narrowly still, it could even be called an ecclesiastical history. In addition — and this is where the above quote comes into play — said history of (western) art could also be understood as a history of the west’s religiously, or ecclesiastically, mediated response to the inevitability of death, to the enduring enigma of the one thing we know for sure: that we are all going to die. Many of the defining early masterpieces of the Western art tradition — especially those conceived “before the era of art”, as the German art historian Hans Belting puts it in his magnum opus *Likeness*...

— DIETER ROELSTRAETE —

**THE TABLE OF DEMONS**

*Wim Delvoye and Religion*

« The secularists have not wrecked divine things; but the secularists have wrecked secular things, if that is any comfort to them. »

G. K. Chesterton
and Presence, or in "Gothic" times — are funerary in character, related to the business of commemorating, as much as reminding us of the finitude (and hence ultimate futility) of all life. Recall the memento mori motif as one of art's most hallowed allegorical figures, for example: art reminding itself of its own finitude in the face of death. And so it is that the fateful entwining of God and Death — arguably different sides of the same coin — casts its long shadow over the genesis of art, and continues to make its presence felt in much of contemporary art's most potent manifestations.

Whether Wim Delvoye is a religious man or not hardly matters here — though it is tempting to speculate about the influence the Catholic church might have had on his development as an artist in particular. Delvoye and I grew up seven years and some fourteen kilometers apart, and coming of age in small-town Catholic Flanders undoubtedly attuned me to discerning certain religious undertones in modern and contemporary art, no matter how heathen. In fact, it has led me to believe that art is fundamentally a monotheistic concept that reached its grandest articulation in the quintessentially Catholic art of the Baroque, i.e. of the Counterreformation. This is probably a matter for another essay but certainly, some of Delvoye's best-known works constitute a direct commentary on religious matters, while others mine the monumental spirit is mirrored, if inevitably somewhat parodical, in an analogous fashion, we hint at the definition, the very phenomenon of iconoclasm is as an enfant terrible or mad scientist — the staple that the art gallery or museum has become our pantheon of artisthood as the summum of subjecthood, for the concept of the gothic, which is such an import-

Like all religious art, many of the most powerful aspects of Wim Delvoye's work reveal a deep concern with mortality, with the cycle of life whose inevitable conclusion, no matter how great its inner mystery, we only know too well. Indeed, if there is one way of countering the facile but no less pertinent impression that Delvoye's work is sometimes irresponsibly irreverent, frivolous, a mere string of parody and pastiche or just one joke too many, it would be by pointing out the artist's constant preoccupation with death. (That said, it is worth keeping in mind the German theologian Karl Barth's wise observation that "laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God.") We already alluded to the fact that the concept of the gothic, which is such an important frame of reference for much of Delvoye's work, is rooted in part in both the ethic and aesthetic of medieval Christianity — an ethic whose collectivist spirit is mirrored, if inevitably somewhat parodical, in Delvoye's own interest in the type of teamwork that makes such projects as Cloaca project, as an elaborate religious allegory — a millenarian variation on the iconoclastic impulse other than a wordless acknowledgment of the power of the image — of art! The realization that the power of art as embodied by the icon is such that — recall the strategically placed second of the Ten Commandments, enjoin-

whether art's most potent manifestations. Whether Wim Delvoye is a religious man or not hardly matters here — though it is tempting to speculate about the influence the Catholic church might have had on his development as an artist in particular. Delvoye and I grew up seven years and some fourteen kilometers apart, and coming of age in small-town Catholic Flanders undoubtedly attuned me to discerning certain religious undertones in modern and contemporary art, no matter how heathen. In fact, it has led me to believe that art is fundamentally a monotheistic concept that reached its grandest articulation in the quintessentially Catholic art of the Baroque, i.e. of the Counterreformation. This is probably a matter for another essay but certainly, some of Delvoye's best-known works constitute a direct commentary on religious matters, while others mine the monumental spirituality of art: from Matthias Grünewald's Crucifixion and Rogier Van der Weyden's Descent from the Cross via Cranach, Rubens and Van Dyck's end-less variations on the bloody martyrdom of Jesus via Van Eyck's and Presence, or in "Gothic" times — are funerary in character, related to the business of commemorating, as much as reminding us of the finitude (and hence ultimate futility) of all life. Recall the memento mori motif as one of art's most hallowed allegorical figures, for example: art reminding itself of its own finitude in the face of death. And so it is that the fateful entwining of God and Death — arguably different sides of the same coin — casts its long shadow over the genesis of art, and continues to make its presence felt in much of contemporary art's most potent manifestations.

Like all religious art, many of the most powerful aspects of Wim Delvoye's work reveal a deep concern with mortality, with the cycle of life whose inevitable conclusion, no matter how great its inner mystery, we only know too well. Indeed, if there is one way of countering the facile but no less pertinent impression that Delvoye's work is sometimes irresponsibly irreverent, frivolous, a mere string of parody and pastiche or just one joke too many, it would be by pointing out the artist's constant preoccupation with death. (That said, it is worth keeping in mind the German theologian Karl Barth's wise observation that "laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God.") We already alluded to the fact that the concept of the gothic, which is such an important frame of reference for much of Delvoye's work, is rooted in part in both the ethic and aesthetic of medieval Christianity — an ethic whose collectivist spirit is mirrored, if inevitably somewhat parodical, in Delvoye's own interest in the type of teamwork that makes such projects as Cloaca project, as an elaborate religious allegory — a millenarian variation on the iconoclastic impulse other than a wordless acknowledgment of the power of the image — of art! The realization that the power of art as embodied by the icon is such that — recall the strategically placed second of the Ten Commandments, enjoining us not to make unto ourselves "any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath" — it can rival that of God and death alike?

Like all religious art, many of the most powerful aspects of Wim Delvoye's work reveal a deep concern with mortality, with the cycle of life whose inevitable conclusion, no matter how great its inner mystery, we only know too well. Indeed, if there is one way of countering the facile but no less pertinent impression that Delvoye's work is sometimes irresponsibly irreverent, frivolous, a mere string of parody and pastiche or just one joke too many, it would be by pointing out the artist's constant preoccupation with death. (That said, it is worth keeping in mind the German theologian Karl Barth's wise observation that "laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God.") We already alluded to the fact that the concept of the gothic, which is such an important frame of reference for much of Delvoye's work, is rooted in part in both the ethic and aesthetic of medieval Christianity — an ethic whose collectivist spirit is mirrored, if inevitably somewhat parodical, in Delvoye's own interest in the type of teamwork that makes such projects as Cloaca project, as an elaborate religious allegory — a millenarian variation on the iconoclastic impulse other than a wordless acknowledgment of the power of the image — of art! The realization that the power of art as embodied by the icon is such that — recall the strategically placed second of the Ten Commandments, enjoining us not to make unto ourselves "any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath" — it can rival that of God and death alike?

Like all religious art, many of the most powerful aspects of Wim Delvoye's work reveal a deep concern with mortality, with the cycle of life whose inevitable conclusion, no matter how great its inner mystery, we only know too well. Indeed, if there is one way of countering the facile but no less pertinent impression that Delvoye's work is sometimes irresponsibly irreverent, frivolous, a mere string of parody and pastiche or just one joke too many, it would be by pointing out the artist's constant preoccupation with death. (That said, it is worth keeping in mind the German theologian Karl Barth's wise observation that "laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God.") We already alluded to the fact that the concept of the gothic, which is such an important frame of reference for much of Delvoye's work, is rooted in part in both the ethic and aesthetic of medieval Christianity — an ethic whose collectivist spirit is mirrored, if inevitably somewhat parodical, in Delvoye's own interest in the type of teamwork that makes such projects as Cloaca project, as an elaborate religious allegory — a millenarian variation on the iconoclastic impulse other than a wordless acknowledgment of the power of the image — of art! The realization that the power of art as embodied by the icon is such that — recall the strategically placed second of the Ten Commandments, enjoining us not to make unto ourselves "any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath" — it can rival that of God and death alike?

Like all religious art, many of the most powerful aspects of Wim Delvoye's work reveal a deep concern with mortality, with the cycle of life whose inevitable conclusion, no matter how great its inner mystery, we only know too well. Indeed, if there is one way of countering the facile but no less pertinent impression that Delvoye's work is sometimes irresponsibly irreverent, frivolous, a mere string of parody and pastiche or just one joke too many, it would be by pointing out the artist's constant preoccupation with death. (That said, it is worth keeping in mind the German theologian Karl Barth's wise observation that "laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God.") We already alluded to the fact that the concept of the gothic, which is such an important frame of reference for much of Delvoye's work, is rooted in part in both the ethic and aesthetic of medieval Christianity — an ethic whose collectivist spirit is mirrored, if inevitably somewhat parodical, in Delvoye's own interest in the type of teamwork that makes such projects as Cloaca project, as an elaborate religious allegory — a millenarian variation on the iconoclastic impulse other than a wordless acknowledgment of the power of the image — of art! The realization that the power of art as embodied by the icon is such that — recall the strategically placed second of the Ten Commandments, enjoining us not to make unto ourselves "any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath" — it can rival that of God and death alike?
dilection for the macabre, as religiously charged — if unwittingly so.

Let us conclude, for now, with a brief reflection on one specific figure or iconographic motif that recurs (no pun intended) in much of the artist’s recent work in particular — a tangle of tropes consisting of circles, helixes, Moebius rings, spirals and the like. In light of the above, it is tempting to interpret this ongoing fascination with cycles and loops and twisting and torquing as somehow equally religiously charged — ostensibly so, of course, in the case of works such as *Moebius Corpus* or *Ring Jesus Inside or Outside*, which continue the iconoclastic thread in the artist’s work. Why does a 21st century artist like Delvoye elect to revert to the theme of the crucifixion at all, and why in this particular fashion? Are we to regard these seeming profanations and heresies as an artist’s homage to the Christian promise of resurrection, of eternal life? Or rather as a present-day Cynic’s take — I am referring here to the Cynic philosophical tradition represented by such intellectual renegades as Diogenes, and not to the torpid sarcasm of 21st century non-thought — the latter Nietzschean joke of the eternal recurrence or return? As a caustic conflation of the Darwinian specter of evolutionary determinism, hinted at in the sculptural appropriation of helix-like structures, (it is easy to imagine the artist enthusing about Richard Dawkins’ theory of the “selfish gene” — perhaps a little too easy) with the Christian parable of emancipatory suffering? And what to think of the fact that, when seen from one particular angle, the spiraling crucifixes in *Helix DHAACO 90* appear to congeal into a dollar sign? I may be getting carried away though, and who better to stop me from doing so than Wim Delvoye himself, the master of disillusion, by way of referring me back to a recent body of work that seems to hint at a return to the mundane, plebeian and decidedly materialist motifs of old, namely the *Tyres* and *Twisted Tyres* series? Here, perhaps, is the circle/cycle in its truest guise, unadorned, brusquely stripped of any spiritual overtones whatsoever: as a wheel that, much like an artist’s career and life, just keeps spinning.

Dieter Roelstraete is a member of the curatorial team of Documenta 14.