

PERROTIN

PRESSBOOK

Wim DELVOYE

Sculpture Magazine

July 2019

Art is Useless: A Conversation with Wim Delvoye



Celebrated for his scandalous *Cloaca* machines, which scientifically transform the cuisine of renowned chefs into manufactured shit, and tattooed live pigs that aesthetically flaunt drawings of Disney princesses and fashion logos while increasing in size, Belgian Wim Delvoye creates art to fascinate people. A neo-conceptual artist, Delvoye is widely known for work that cleverly combines philosophical ideas, a fresh use of materials, and a love for craftsmanship. Blurring the boundary between the art of the past and the digital realm of current art practice, he makes aerodynamic, mathematically perfect, intricate sculptures that take both art and design to new levels of invention.

Continually confronting what already exists with what can exist, Delvoye takes audiences on a virtual journey with his sublime suitcases, cars, trucks, and tires, while bringing us deeper into his church of thought with a stunning array of twisted crucifixes and digitally deformed Neoclassical sculptures.

The subject of a solo show at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in Brussels, which runs through July 21, Delvoye recently sat down with *Sculpture* to discuss the wide range of

works on view. Spread throughout the museum's Old Master and Temporary Exhibition galleries, his striking survey highlights some of his best-known sculptures, while shining a light on his newer and lesser-known works.





Installation view of "Wim Delvoye," with *Cabinet*, 1990. Photo: Odile Keromnes, © RMFAB

Paul Laster: Is this your biggest show in Belgium?

Wim Delvoye: In size, it probably is. It's a very official museum—the money they spent on posters alone is amazing.

PL: But it's not a retrospective, right?

WD: No, I wanted to avoid that idea because it's a bit morbid.

PL: The earliest work in the show is the 1990 sculpture and painting installation *Cabinet*, which consists of gas canisters and circular saw blades painted with Delft motifs and displayed in a decorative armoire that was hand-carved in Indonesia. Is this work a twist on history or a comment on colonialism?

WD: It's both. I started as a painter and wanted to use painting as a way of putting a skin on objects in order to alter their meanings.

PL: It was made the year we first met, when you were showing ironing boards painted with coats of arms at Jack Tilton Gallery in New York, and I believe it was exhibited in your 1991 show at New York's Sonnabend Gallery. What were you interested in conveying with this kind of mash-up of the old and the new, of which your stained glass goalie nets could also be considered?

WD: At the time, I was extremely interested in popular culture and mixing the high with the low. It was about elevating everyday objects to another level of meaning. It was also about good and bad taste, which a few other people were exploring at the time, but I had a bit of a surreal twist to it.



Installation view of "Wim Delvoye," with (foreground) *Helix DHAACO*, 2009, and (background) *Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday*, 2013. Photo: Odile Keromnes, © RMFAB

PL: This juxtaposition of the old and the new is also at play in the display of your works in the Old Master galleries at the Royal Museum, which is how your work has been previously exhibited at the Louvre in Paris and the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow. How do you expect the public to respond when they are confronted by your carpeted pigs in a gallery filled with big paintings by Peter Paul Rubens?

WD: I hope it makes them look at Rubens anew. These days it's not old art that consecrates the contemporary; it's contemporary art that seduces people into going into the galleries of old art. You would think it's a little bit opportunist to show your contemporary art in such a consecrated room, but it's not. It's just another form of presentation. It's more the museum that's being opportunist now, because apart from some Chinese and Japanese tourists, very few people care about these works anymore. However, as you know, I sincerely love these historical paintings, and I've gotten quite good at these types of presentations. I know how to play in these rooms. After the Pushkin Museum and the Louvre, I feel comfortable creating these sorts of dialogues.

PL: Is your contorted crucifix sculpture, which depicts Christ on the cross twisted like a pretzel and is displayed in front of a painting of the burial of Christ, an act of irreverence or a religious embrace?

WD: It's really neither of those things. For me, the crucifix is a biomorphic shape attached to a geometric form. I'm interested in the marriage of figuration and geometry. It allows me to make new geometries, like a Möbius strip or DNA sequence. Viewers recognize it as a crucifix and thus look at my object more intently.



Installation view of "Wim Delvoye," with (background) *Carved Tyres*, 2007–17, and (foreground) *Twisted Tyres*, 2013. Photo: Odile Keromnes, © RMFAB

PL: Further into the show there's a 470-centimeter bronze of twisted crucifixes that create a double DNA helix, which is presented in front of six church-like stained glass windows, made up from x-rays and MRI scans of the human body. What's at play in your merger of religion and science here?

WD: It's a juxtaposition of the factual (the science) and the spiritual (the religion). For example, each x-ray seems to ask the viewer, "Where is the soul?" When I started these DNA strings, there was a big debate going on in the United States between the evolutionists and the creationists. I was amused by all of the fuss, but, of course, I'm siding with the evolutionists. I'm extremely fascinated with the theories of evolution. I read all of the Darwin books and the Richard Dawkins books, as well as others. As an artist, I'm also interested in religion because art is another form of religion. We are living in a time when art is the new religion. People are silent when they look seriously at art in museums and galleries, just like they act in places of worship. I see it as a new form of worship, but it's also entertaining. You could equally ask where is love when looking at these x-rays. Each x-ray

gives you a very materialistic view of life. People are seen kissing and hugging in the x-rays, but it's a very mechanical view, as though people are just machines doing something technical. When you are in love you don't think, "Wow, she has a nice skull."

PL: Science is also at the center of your 2001 sculptural installation *Cloaca New and Improved*, which re-creates the digestive system by consuming food that's turned into shit. How did you come up with this radical idea and what made you think it could be built and shown in a gallery or museum?

WD: It's completely useless, which fits my definition of art. For me, art is useless and anything useless is art. So, of course, *Cloaca* is an artwork because it's completely useless. It doesn't even derive energy from the food. I'm only interested in the process—a useless process. I was horrified when Proctor & Gamble took an interest in my machine. They thought, "That's objective shit; we could test diapers with it." Babies don't make regular shit. They have emotions, which means their shit could be more liquid the next day because of stress. I can control all of the parameters of the digestive system. Because it's a machine producing it, I can make the same shit every day. The British Museum was also interested in it as a science project. They wanted to educate children with it, but I didn't want to show in that context. I want to stay with my crowd, where art can remain useless.



Cloaca New and Improved, 2001. Mixed media, 235 x 1005 x 111 cm. Photo: Studio Delvoye,
© Courtesy Wim Delvoye

PL: What's *Cloaca* eating, how often is it fed, and who's feeding it?

WD: It eats everyday food. We want to humanize it. Maybe it's couscous and vegetables today and a hamburger or mussels and fries tomorrow. Because of the museum's unionized workers, we had to hire outside people to feed it and to clean up the shit. They like to give it vegetarian food, which is their way of being politically correct. In the past, these machines—there are several different versions—have been fed by the best chefs, but they're not picky about what they consume.

PL: Are you still retaining the machine's feces, which I believe you were freeze-drying and shrink-wrapping to sell to collectors when you exhibited the device at the New Museum in New York in 2002?

WD: I no longer keep them. At the New Museum, I probably only kept about 25 turds. In total, I only have about 200 pieces of shit. Piero Manzoni only had 100 cans of shit. I want to limit the amount of additional shit in the world.

PL: Getting back to your practice of twisting things, what motivated you to turn kitsch copies of 19th-century sculptures into 3D Rorschach tabletop works and life-size, distorted statues?

WD: They're not actually kitsch copies. The sculptures that I appropriated were made by some of the best artists of their time. They were the most expensive artworks then, but now you can find them on the flea market or at small auction houses for a couple of thousand Euros. They're beautiful, which is why I'm interested in them; but at the same time, I'm interested in 3D scanning and the 3D materialization of objects. We take all of the coordinates with the computer and we play with it. We play geometric games. We focus on important elements of the original sculptures. For example, two figures are hugging and we focus on the embrace of the lips. When you see my interpretations in the museum, you have to walk totally around them, which is how sculpture should be viewed. They are even more sculptural now—more three-dimensional than the originals.



Daphnis & Chloë (Counterclockwise), 2009. Bronze laqué, 165 x 85 cm. diameter. Photo: Studio Delvoye, © Courtesy Wim Delvoye

PL: How many versions do you make on the computer before deciding on the ones to cast? How do you decide on the final patina?

WD: I make the different versions in the computer. I look at the screen and say, "Let's give it one hour, one hour of twisting." Next we try one and a half hours, and then maybe go back to an hour. As for the patina, I just go through stages. Sometimes I like them black; while at other times, I like them shiny. It depends where they might eventually be exhibited.

PL: Why are you also twisting tires, or at least what look like tires, after you digitally simulate them, cast them in stainless steel, and then patina parts of them to look like black rubber?

WD: I like tires because they're geometric, like the crucifixes. A mountain bike tire or a crucifix is the same thing to me. Everyone knows it, so they can mentally go back to what it used to be. It's something you remember—the tire is a circle and the crucifix is a cross. I use things that people already know. I make them exactly like the original tires, with the wheels having the same number and same positioning of spokes. One is a Goodyear tire and another one is from a mountain bike; we even have a tire from a wheelchair. We start with a real tire and just digitally play around with it. I love tires, and there are many of them in the show, including the big tires that I had hand-carved with decorative designs in China.

PL: Are these works about the speed of progress? What you are making is actually slow art, in that it seems like it takes a lot of time to make these simulated Möbius strips.

WD: It's about making them more geometric and more three-dimensional than they actually are. Yes, it's slow art, but all of my work is slow art.



Installation view of "Wim Delvoye," with (left to right): *Truck Tyres*, 2017, and *Goodyear Optitrac R+250 65 R 2,5 480 3X*, 2014. Photo: Odile Keromnes, © RMFAB

PL: Are the embossed aluminum car bodies and Rimowa suitcases, which are decorated with Islamic motifs by Iranian craftsmen, also hinting at the speed and luxury of travel, at least for some?

WD: Yes, especially with the embossed Maserati. It's like a flying carpet, but it took more than a year to make. It's a modern object that's known for being fast, but then the handiwork takes an enormous amount of time to transform it. I like playing these sorts of things off of one another.

PL: So this isn't fast art that's just made for quick consumption at art fairs, is it? Things that start out digitally take time and expertise to produce and things like your hand-embossed cars and hand-carved truck tires, which are carved in China with typical Asian motifs, are labor intensive, right?

WD: Yes, it's kind of masochistic. I have to skip a few art fairs until I'm ready with the next thing to show. You can see it with my recent marble reliefs, which capture one second on a video game that's frozen in time like an archaeological find.

PL: Your important Gothic works—with many details digitally designed, laser cut, and intricately welded and screwed together—are only present in a small-scale twisted cement truck in the show. Is this body of work less represented here because you

have a full-size, rusted steel cement truck on permanent public display in Brussels?

WD: Yes, these works are very well known in Belgium. Nine times out of 10 when a collector goes to a gallery to buy my work it's going to be a Gothic work. These works never need an extra push, which is why I preferred to show things here that aren't as well known and as easy to sell.



Installation view of "Wim Delvoye," with *Etui for a Castor Wheel*, 2018. Photo: Odile Keromnes, © RMFAB

PL: The carpeted pigs, which are a variation on the tattooed pigs that you've exhibited live and as taxidermy sculptures, seem related to Iran, where you have purchased a number of palaces to transform into an art center. Is there a reference to Iran or a pun about when pigs fly and magic carpets in these pieces?

WD: Yes, but it's also just another way of tattooing. It's a way to give the pigs another skin, which is decorative—it's more ornate. It's a little bit like going back to my early works, such as the shovels, where I applied painted motifs to give them another skin. But I always like the analogy to flying carpets. The carpets come from Iran, but these pig sculptures were not physically made there.

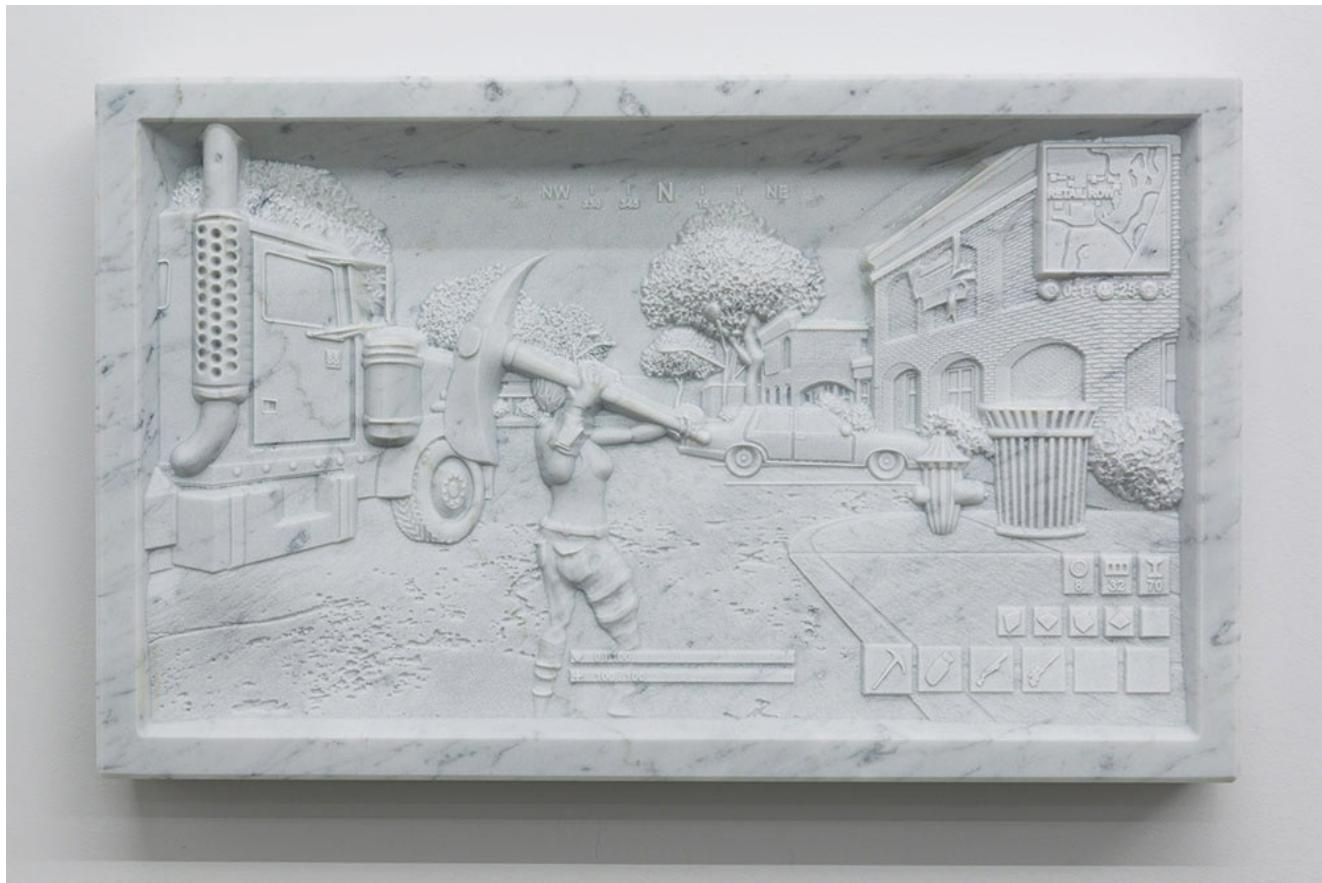
PL: You have one actual stuffed pig that was tattooed in China and videos of a day in the life of your precious pigs as they grew to larger works of art on your "Art Farm" there. I've always been fascinated by your idea of actually growing a work of art by

tattooing the pigs when they were young and not harvesting the final artwork until it had matured. How did you come up with this unconventional concept?

WD: It's simple. It's what a pig symbolizes. For the farmer, it yields a bigger return on his initial investment, and when people put money into piggy banks it grows into savings.

PL: I know that you like to play mental games in your work, but your recent digitally carved marble reliefs use imagery from video games about war. Is this work made to appeal to a younger crowd, or is it commenting on man's engagement in endless wars?

WD: No, I just like video games. I used to play Quake Wars and Doom. These days, you have Counter-Strike and Fortnite, which I referenced in these works; but I only played them to select the images and create the compositions. That said, they are of the moment.



Untitled (Fortnite 01), 2019. Marble, 10 x 64 x 38.5 cm. Photo: Studio Delvoye, © Courtesy Wim Delvoye

PL: Another series of recent works, which includes *Etui for a Castor Wheel* (2018), riff on the idea of the suitcase for travel; the notion of the wheel, tire, and motor vehicle representing movement and progress; and the production of luxury items made solely for consumption. Is this a bit of a Duchampian gesture, which is an act that also brings you full circle in the ennoblement of everyday objects—the artistic transformation of readymades like the ironing boards, gas cans, saw blades, and

goalie nets? Is this concept at the heart of your creative practice?

WD: Yes, I think you've already answered the question. It's the ennoblement of the object that's the appeal. We look for the cheapest objects on the Internet, like the cheapest caster wheel. The rule is that it needs to be a recognizable thing with an interesting shape, and then we give it a beautiful case without changing it in any other way. I'm fascinated when I go to an archeological museum and see some object from thousands of years ago quite beautifully displayed.

PL: You once told me that your studio was the Yellow Pages. Is that still the way you work, by farming out most of the production?

WD: That's a very old quote—now I say it's Google.