

— DIETER ROELSTRAETE —

# THE TABLE *of* DEMONS

*Wim Delvoeye 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

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*



*Coccyx Double*, 2012  
polished bronze, 140 × 107 × 54 cm

*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 futility in the face of death. And so it is that the fateful entwinement 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 quint-essentially 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 legacy of religiously inspired imagery, much of it cast in the grandiose language of the church, to signature Delvoye-esque iconoclastic effects. The most successful examples of both strands meet in such masterpieces as his X-ray stained-glass window series named after the 9 muses, the months of the year or the days of the week; in many of the so-called *Gothic Works* (many of which carry definite autobiographical overtones — and what is gothic art if not religious in origin and morbid in fulfillment?). It is also quite obvious in the

*Stations of Cross* series and in the aptly titled *Holy Family* sculpture cycle. The somewhat tired notion that the art gallery or museum has become our pagan present’s church — or synagogue or mosque — is alluded to in the works Delvoye designed for chapels and the like, shepherding art back to its historical roots so to speak. In addition, one could probably view Delvoye’s ever-evolving magnum opus, the shapeshifting *Cloaca* project, as an elaborate religious allegory — a millenarian variation on the Frankenstein theme that, much like its original, attests to the profound sense of religious crisis underlying the modern and postmodern condition alike. However it may be, in describing his work as iconoclastic or in characterizing the artist himself as an iconoclast (rather than as a mere provocateur, as an enfant terrible or mad scientist — the staple analogues of Delvoye exegesis), we hint at the definite religious dimension of Delvoye’s work. Both a “challenge to tradition” and the “breaking of religious images”, according to a standard dictionary definition, the very phenomenon of iconoclasm is at the heart of religion’s alternately strained and impassioned relationship with art, and the historical emancipation of art from its theological crucible — the defining transition, heralding the advent of modern cultural consciousness, from *image-making* to *art-making* — is inextricably linked to the history of the various Christian churches’ handling of their respective iconoclastic controversies. (It is no coincidence that the theological disputes that resulted, mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, in the institutional hardening of the Catholic-Protestant divide converged historically with the humanist revolution that gave us the modern idea of artishood — and the notion of artishood as the summum of subjecthood, for that matter. In retrospect, it seems only fitting to invoke the specter of the Catholic baroque in the context of the work of Wim Delvoye, who can hardly be accused of the Puritan’s penchant for frugality and restraint — in short, minimalism. His is more

often than not a *maximalist* art. What, in truth, is 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 inescapable 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 paradoxically indeed, in Delvoye’s own interest in the type of teamwork that makes such projects as *Cloaca* possible. A gothic sensibility that far surpasses the literal association with the gothic architectural setting in which they were first shown certainly pervades Delvoye’s X-ray stained-glass works: looking at a radiograph of our head revealing the fateful contours of our skull, for instance, is much like peering down the dark well of our future demise, encountering the Totenkopf’s ominous grin. The erotic charge of Delvoye’s X-rated X-ray stained-glass series only

enhances the disconcerting asymmetry between *eros* and *thanatos*. I remember first seeing this macabre masterpiece in a chapel in Ghent, right around the time when I first read Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, in which a key scene revolves around the novel’s young protagonist falling in love with a resident of a sanatorium for tubercular patients after seeing an X-ray of his love interest’s infected lungs... And in comparing Delvoye’s *Cloaca* to the monster of Frankenstein, we already referred to an immortal classic of the gothic tradition; one could even argue that Delvoye’s interest in the *animal* kingdom more specifically aligns his work with a mesh of gothic motifs circling around the notion of the uncanny: anthropomorphism, taxidermy, the undead, vampires and zombies etc.

Finally, and most dramatically, we must consider the artist’s ongoing fascination with the motif of the *crucifixion*: arguably the most widespread image of death of them all — and the most ignominious of all deaths too. Here, we find ourselves returned to Evelyn Waugh’s observation concerning the funerary origins of art: from Matthias Grunewald’s *Crucifixion* and Rogier Van der Weyden’s *Descent from the Cross* via Cranach, Rubens and Van Dyck’s endless variations on the bloody martyrdom of Jesus to Marc Chagall’s *White Crucifixion* and Salvador Dali’s *Corpus Hypercubus* or even Martin Kippenberger’s *Zuerst die Füße*, the death of God features very prominently in the history of art — predictably so of course, given my suggestion that the history of art has not just been a religious but an *ecclesiastical* affair for such a long time, and that any *theory* of art must therefore to some extent also be a *theology* of art. (Philosophical talk of the death of art is often a correlate of the notion of the death of God — historically, both concepts certainly belong to each other, even if only dialectically.) Again, it seems apt to construe the morbid strand in Wim Delvoye’s work, parading predominantly as a pre-

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 torqueing as somehow equally religiously charged — ostensibly so, of course, in the case of works such *Moebius Corpus* or *Ring Jesus Inside* or *Outside*, which continue the iconoclastic thread in the artist's work. Why does a 21<sup>st</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> century non-thought — on the bitter 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.*



*Dunlop Geomax 100/90-19 57M 360° 2X, 2013*  
polished and patinated stainless steel, 91.5 × 72 × 31 cm



*Holy Family*, 2011  
polished bronze, variable dimensions  
GARY TATINTSIAN GALLERY, MOSCOW, 2014