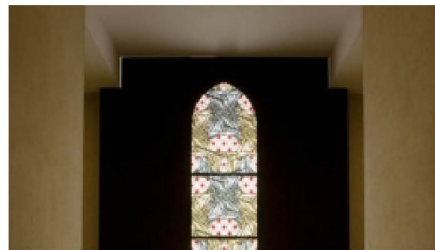
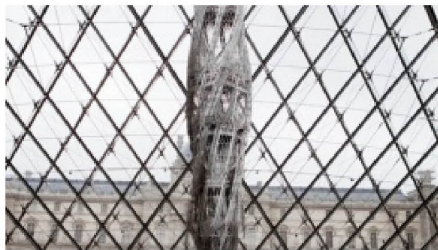


At the Louvre, Wim Delvoye for Dummies

by *alice pfeiffer* 06/04/12

On the day of his opening at the Louvre, provocative Belgian artist Wim Delvoye craved a cigarette. "Sometimes, when no one's looking, I have a quick one in the Napoleon III apartments," he said.

Once a rowdy young man expelled from his prestigious art school in Ghent, the 48-year-old Delvoye thrives on defiance. A recurring work that dates back to 1992 sees the artist tattooing live pigs and exhibiting their skins after death. He made headlines for his work *Cloaca* (2000), a machine that, using a system of tubes and jars filled with gastric juices, simulated a digestive system, receiving food that was processed into excrement.



VIEW SLIDESHOW ; Untitled (stain glass window), 2012, steel, lead and glass, 16.9 by 2.9 feet. Photo: Guillaume Ziccarelli. © studio Wim Delvoye, Belgique. Courtesy Galerie Perrotin, Paris.;

Staged in the museum's decorative arts wing, "Au Louvre" is a game of hide-and-seek: his own works are planted in period rooms for visual harmony. Saws sit on a shelf, among 19th century plates; taxidermied pigs lie near Medieval tapestries. It's a cheeky, subversively violent mirage amidst Napoleon III's chambers.

ALICE PFEIFFER You once said people only come to the Louvre to see the *Mona Lisa* and eat *macarons*. Why was showing there an interesting challenge?

WIM DELVOYE I know nothing about sports. But wouldn't it be terrible if I weren't allowed in a football stadium just because I'm not an expert? I think it's fantastic to show work here, precisely because mama and papa will come, and the conversations won't be that sophisticated. In fact, they probably won't even notice my pieces —which is a thought I enjoy tremendously, the idea that most people are going to entirely miss my show. Sure, most people who come here know very little about art. But the *Mona Lisa* and *macarons*? That's already something.

PFEIFFER You've chosen among the most cluttered rooms of the museum for your show.

DELVOYE As is so often the case, part of the challenge is not to be distracted by your surroundings. This said, it would have been a lot tougher for a minimalist artist. Minimalism is the true kitsch of contemporary society, because it's dishonest: we don't live in a minimalist world, in a world that is smooth and hygienic. We're covered in bacteria; every time I shake someone's hand, I can't help but think that we've just exchanged some 17 million bacteria. In that sense, minimalist art in a white gallery is more artificial and definitely kitschier than the Napoleon III apartments. These rooms here are totally fake, but honestly so, and that's why I feel comfortable in them.

PFEIFFER Your work often deconstructs its surrounding environment. What are you attempting to reveal about the Louvre?

DELVOYE Through this show, I'm trying to say that the Louvre is a great brand. Artists in the past have dealt with the actual space. But when I see people line up at the Louvre, what I can't stop thinking is, what fantastic branding. I wish I were such a strong brand.

But the Louvre sees something in me that it doesn't have. At the moment, there is a feeling that classical art needs a proximity to contemporary art. At Versailles, Petit Palais, Grand Palais, there is a fascination and perceived need for contemporaneity and it's slightly terrifying. But the beauty of such a museum is that these paintings are external to any form of speculation, they are out the market . . . they are truly free.

PFEIFFER You have chosen to leave your ultra-provocative pieces out—there is no *Cloaca* or tattooed pigs in here. Why is that?

DELVOYE Why have *Cloaca* here? *Cloaca* was a great fit for the MuHKA [Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen], because people went there expecting to see art, prestigious contemporary art, and were furious to see shit, or rather, shit officially labelled as art. But the Louvre targets a mass audience, so this show shouldn't be judged as a Wim Delvoye show, but rather as Wim Delvoye for Dummies. Within a few days, thousands of new people are going to be acquainted with my work, and you have to think clearly about what you want to show for this kind of introduction.

Plus, after *Cloaca* and the tattooed pigs, I feel I've proven I can do avant-garde, provocative pieces. I feel the pieces at the Louvre are even more provocative. There are pieces in the show that have taken two to three years to make . . . that's criminal in today's world, in which a new fair opens every week. Today, there is no time to make an *œuvre*.

PFEIFFER You've installed *Suppo* [2012], a giant steel corkscrew suppository, under the museum's pyramid. Is it fair to say digestion is an enduring source of inspiration?

DELVOYE The suppository represented my own visual digestion of my time spent in the Louvre, and looking at ancient art. In art school, one is taught not to compete with the past. But we are better now. That's what I tell my assistants everyday. Better than Viollet le Duc, that's for sure. Better than the guys who tinkered with Notre Dame. They too were just human, and capable of mistakes. Remembering this leads to new anxieties, and a new freedom, too. And this is what every artist needs.