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"I Would Be Very Happy in China": Belgian Provocateur Wim Delvoye on Why Ai Weiwei Should Stop Complaining

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Wim Delvoye, "Art Farm China, Beijing," (2003 – 2010)

by Coline Milliard, ARTINFO UK

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Wim Delvoye has never been afraid of tweaking taboos. The Belgian artist made a name for himself in the 1990s with "Cloaca," a feces-producing machine, now in its 10th version. Until 2010, he worked with a pig farm in China where he had swine tattooed with intricate pictures, selling their skins were as artworks after their natural death. The artist even tattooed and sold the back of a human being, one Tim Steiner, in 2008.

The great provocateur is also behind X-rays of rats in a mock crucifixion position, tires hand-carved like precious wood, and gothic structures made from laser-cut steel. More than a 100 of his pieces are to be shown starting December 10 at the [Museum of Old and New Art](#) in Tasmania, Australia, a new institution that is the brainchild of collector and gambling genius **David Walsh**.

Delvoye was in the news recently for having publically invited **Ai Weiwei** to rebuild his studio, destroyed last year by the Chinese authorities, in the grounds of his mansion in Ghent, Belgium. He talked to **ARTINFO UK** about the failure of modernism, his hatred of nostalgia, and why he would feel less oppressed in China than in Europe.

You are about to open a very large exhibition at MONA, in Tasmania. How have you been working on this, and what can we expect?

MONA is a new museum. It doesn't have a reputation or a long history; it doesn't have the quality stamp yet. The museum and I have to work on this together. Nothing comes for free. Being a young museum also means that the attention is on them: it keeps them very focused, and it keeps me very focused. It's an interesting experience because it's not an established institution and things like decision-making and consensus-making are easier. Everything goes extremely quickly — no compromise.

How has it been working with David Walsh?

Sometimes I think: If I wasn't Wim — I'm very happy to be Wim — but if I wasn't Wim, I wouldn't mind being him. He's a very interesting character. I adore him. I cannot be like David because you need to be very good at maths. But I wish he could teach me how he's done it. He amassed a fortune gambling. I like that.

I take into account what David likes, and what he doesn't like. The process is more about consensus than it would be in an institution where they couldn't care less about what you do. And he always explains why he is against something. For example, he didn't like my ironing boards painted with medieval coats of arms because he thought heraldry wouldn't work in Australia, that it wouldn't have the effect it has in Europe.

Jerome Sans has described your work as a "re-zeroing," a *tabula rasa* of art. What do you make of this statement?

Of course, I want to go back to basics — but for me going back to basics means going back to the genetic basics of us liking art. Genes have created something: we like to make art, we want to see art, we buy art, we pay money for it. This is more basic, more truthful than a square.

Do you mean that it's more universal and "back to basics" to look at social interactions around art than to consider primal shapes and forms?

Yes. People think that abstract art is more universal: a square, a circle, boring minimalist art, is more universal because it doesn't have any culture itself, it doesn't have any ethnic ties. But it is as ethnic as anything else, and if it was so basic, and so essential and cosmopolitan, how come people I see in the streets don't like it, or don't regard it as being wonderful, or special, or artful? How many more centuries do we need to realise that going back to something simplistic, like a square, has nothing to do with international or cosmopolitan values, nothing to do with going back to something pure, or essential? It's another of these 20th century obsessions. The modernist project failed because people don't like it. On a social level, the society, the experiments of the 20th century are completely irrelevant.

Do you see your own work as more universal than modernism? Is universality something that you are trying to achieve?

Of course! Every generation is trying to do this and say: Ok, that's the universal thing, that represents my time, or my place. We want to find universal values. When I grew up in the 20th century, the values were the square and the circle. I think it could just as well be children's drawings, or medieval paintings. This is how MONA approaches things as well.

Your work is full of art-historical references, particularly to the Middle Ages in your gothic sculptures. Why do you think these motifs are relevant to our contemporary world?

Contemporary art is completely victorious and dominates everything. Even the Louvre and Versailles have to get contemporary artists to be relevant today. It is victorious on a market level, but still irrelevant to society and uninteresting for the people. Old art is not victorious at all. Old Masters, top names, are affordable. Nobody wants these paintings in a loft, so they don't buy them.

Are you using gothic elements as a symbol for going back in time — or are they present in your work in and for themselves?

Actually, I'm never going back in time. Everything I use is what still exists today. A lot of things look historical, but they are actually of today, ordinary, banal things. I use all this, I'm aware of history, but I'm not going back in time. There's no nostalgia involved. Works that wouldn't look like going back in time could be much more nostalgic. The worst is nostalgia. I always try to avoid that.

You've been working in China quite a lot. You had the pig farm there, and you have also recently invited Ai Weiwei to rebuild his studio in the grounds of your Ghent mansion. Has his incarceration changed your vision of China? Are you as willing to work in this country as you have been working in the past?

Ai Weiwei and I are very good friends. And we have this ongoing, joking discussion about China. It goes more or less like this: he would say, "Oh man, you are so naïve, you think China is this, and this, and this." And then I would say, "But China is really great, blah blah." I would exaggerate my admiration for China a little bit to oppose him. He is a very, very angry man, very angry in China. They have done things to him, and he cannot forgive. I'm a foreigner, I'm an outsider, I see things more with rose-colored glasses. But he doesn't see a great future for China. So even my argument "at least you have a great future" doesn't work with him.

We are afraid of China. And he gives us hope. Every night in the newspaper or other media, we are told that we are in a good country, that Europe is safe, that we can get on with our lives, that we are better here than in China — which I do not agree with. I think I would be very happy in China. I think I would be less oppressed.

Have you heard back from Ai? Do you know if he will accept your invitation and rebuild his studio in Ghent?

If he would come to my studio, I could show him how many fines I have to pay the government. If it's true what the government claims about Weiwei, that he has to pay — what is it? \$1.7 million? — in America, he would still be in jail. But he goes to jail for three to four months, and people say, "Where is Ai Weiwei? We are a democracy and these people have such a terrible lives!"

It's true, a lot of work has to be done, and Weiwei is completely right about his job. I'm very happy that he chooses to do that — so many Chinese artists are just doing candy-coloured paintings with smiling people. Weiwei is a very interesting artist. But when I last spoke to him, he gave me the impression that he didn't really care about art anymore. Instead of concentrating on art, he is more into politics.

But is he going to re-build his studio in your garden or not?

Well, it's like he foresaw it. When the government broke his studio down, he kept all the main pieces. He could ship all this to Belgium, and we could build it without permit. And then, at least at my provincial level, I would show how autocratic my country is — because they would have to destroy it. My country loves Ai Weiwei, everybody loves him, everybody wants to be in pictures with him. They gave him a medal. And Weiwei loves Belgium a lot because in 2005, he did his first retrospective exhibition in Belgium — and the Belgians were extremely quick in assimilating him, getting him shows, buying his work, and so on. We were very aware of what he was doing. So this is also about Ghent. He would love to be in Ghent, but it's not in his mind to leave China.

Is it going to happen?

Well, we might build his studio, and then see if he lives in it or not. He cannot really leave China, but just building the studio would be a great idea. It was broken down by the Chinese government, and if we rebuilt it, the Belgian government would have to break it down too — that's the law. So I say, "go ahead: show how much better you are than the Chinese." Ai Weiwei is half-unconsciously used by the West for anti-Chinese propaganda nowadays. Ai Weiwei's work is very good, but it doesn't help his work that he is playing the hero all the time. He knows I'm his friend. That's why I'm not saying the usual clichés. It's much more complex.