

WIM DELVOYE

Entrevista realizada por Sandra Martínez Rossi en junio de 2020

Interview conducted by Sandra Martínez Rossi. June, 2020

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ABSTRACT: Wim Delvoye is a multidisciplinary artist who lives and works in Ghent (Belgium) and in Brighton (United Kingdom). His artistic projects focus on various issues of contemporary society and subliminal messages existing in advertising, political and religious discourses. His critical and parodic view of reality opens the debate not only on the eternal discussion about what is art and what is not, but also in relation to who determines this distinction. On this sense the artist is fascinated by crafts and popular culture. Immersed in this current context, the subject constructs a unique identity through editing his own body with tattoos, and assumes a personal anthropological and artistic discourse exhibiting their exclusive marks of differentiation.

In the mid-1990s Wim Delvoye began tattooing animals and quickly his works of tattooed dead chickens and living pigs crossed that tiny line between ethics and aesthetics. At the same time, they propose other ways of distribution, commercialization and exhibition, some because of being perishable and others for being live animals.

A little more than a decade later, the artist started the *Art Farm Project* in Beijing in which he continued using tattoos on pigs' skin. In 2006 Delvoye began one of his most controversial works tattooing the Tim Steiner's back. An anonymous person that from being tattooed by the artist became simultaneously an edited body and an artistic object (*Art Farm-Tim*, 2008).

Through this interview, *SOBRE N06* proposes to display all aspects that concern these projects and the particular circumstances regarding to their sale and exhibition.

KEYWORDS: Wim Delvoye, animal, body, tattoo, marketing, exhibition

RESUMEN: Wim Delvoye es un artista multidisciplinar que vive y trabaja entre Gante (Bélgica) y Brighton (Reino Unido). Sus proyectos artísticos se centran en aspectos diversos de la sociedad contemporánea, así como en los mensajes subliminales existentes en la publicidad y en los discursos políticos y religiosos. Su visión crítica y paródica de la realidad abre un debate que va más allá de la eterna discusión entre lo que es y lo que no es arte, ampliándolo hacia quién determina dicha dicotomía; en este sentido el artista muestra un especial interés por la artesanía y la cultura popular. En dicho contexto, el sujeto construye una identidad única a través de la edición de su propio cuerpo por medio de tatuajes y asume un personal discurso antropológico y artístico mostrando sus marcas exclusivas de diferenciación.

A mediados de los años 90, Wim Delvoye comenzó a tatuar animales y, rápidamente, sus trabajos de tatuaje sobre pollos muertos y cerdos vivos cruzaron la delgada línea entre la ética y la estética. Proponía nuevas maneras de distribución, comercialización y exhibición del arte, por el hecho de tratarse de elementos perecederos o, incluso, de animales vivos.

Algo más de una década después, el artista comentó el *Art Farm Project* en Pekín, en donde continuó su trabajo de tatuaje sobre pieles porcinas, y arrancó uno de sus trabajos más controvertidos, el tatuaje de la espalda de Tim Steiner, una persona anónima que a partir de este momento se convirtió en un cuerpo editado y en un objeto artístico (*Art Farm-Tim*, 2008).

En esta entrevista, *SOBRE N06* propone desarrollar aquellos aspectos que tienen que ver especialmente con dichos proyectos artísticos, así como las circunstancias concretas relativas a su exposición y venta.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Wim Delvoye, animal, cuerpo, tatuaje, marketing, exposición

[Sandra Martínez Rossi] First of all I would like to thank you for accepting conducting this interview. I would also like to present the journal we are making this interview for, just in case you don't know it. It is called *SOBRE, Artistic Practices and Politics of Editing*, it is a journal dedicated to reflect on the possibilities of editing. The present issue (number 6) will be focused on the topic *Edited Body*, trying to explore those projects in which the body is the main object of the artistic intervention. In relation to that, we are very interested in your works related to tattooing and how images and marks on the skin can create a new version of oneself, letting us being deciphered¹. Can you talk about the first project in which you tattooed chickens and pigs between 1994 and 1997? They have conceptual differences, the first with dealing with dead animals, and the second one having more complex problems related to feeding, domestication, sacrifice, etc. Why do you decide to use tattooing as an essential instrument of your artistic approach?

[Wim Delvoye] I think that many young people, mostly boys, at the age of sixteen, are fascinated with the idea of tattoo. I was. My father is a teacher and he took care that I would not get a tattoo because, well... I imagine my parents had some middle-class aspirations for their children, and having a tattoo doesn't fit into that picture. There is where my fascination started.

Then, a little later, in the nineties, I started to be fascinated about the iconography of tattoo. My main interest was the free use of images and the heavy symbols around. I grow up studying arts and I learnt that art deals with big themes. In cinema, in popular culture, in music, etc. art can deal with big themes like life, death, love, revenge, jealousy, religion, ideology, etc. But when I open my books or magazines in my studio, I see that contemporary art do not know how to deal with big themes. It is difficult to deal with big things and not becoming tasteless.

I am also very fascinated with the iconography, because it is a very universal language, socially speaking, amongst classes. Of course, tattoo is dealing with classes. Originally tattoos where done to students, prisoners, criminals, bikers... I little bit like the *wild side of life*. So, my interest is how the iconography of tattoo adapts to contemporary life and deals with big themes. It is done by people that maybe do not have a university degree, they may do not even know who Michelangelo or Raffaello were... They have their own visual culture, and I like that, I'd like to study that. Not as a passive archaeologist but as an active artist.

This is how I got to be interested in tattoos and its relation with class and social issues. As an artist, I depend on money from a small group of collectors. But a tattoo is financed by someone that may not be called collector but client. The engagement here is bigger. Let's say the guy makes 3,000\$/month, and the tattoo is 5,000\$. People in the world of art spends a lot of money, but it is different, they can sell it again. They don't have it on their bodies, and maybe it is not so much of their monthly income. I admire people on the tattoo world, because they do not have this notion of speculation.

And this also interests me. How to make art that do resist the market forces. This art cannot be sold. If you want to be a famous artist, it is better if you aligned with market forces. At that time (middle nineties) I was interested in objects that particularly fit for museums but not for markets.

[SMR] What was the reason you decide to use pigs for your work?

[WD] I had a very good friend, Gerardo Mosquera, he is from Cuba but lives in Madrid. When he was going out of Cuba in the nineties, travelling a lot, he told me a story about that Fidel Castro wanted to relax his anticapitalistic ideology, and one of his measurements to relax it was to allow people to have a pig. Gerardo was telling that most of the people in Cuba was surprised because although they didn't have a pig, they didn't know it was forbidden. They asked the reason why to buy a pig. Pigs are like primitive bank accounts. Capitalism is saving for later, and it is a very agricultural ideology. If you have maize you can eat it or save it. If you save it, you can plant it and you will have more maize. The more you save, the richer you are going to be, and the more you are going to eat... Pigs in agricultural times were equally a way to save money. Once you ate at home and you had leftovers, you would give it to the pig. Then winter came, the harvest was over, and instead of heating the stable you would kill the pig. You would attract your piggy bank.

Art is also a little bit like that. When people buy art, they say "later on, my children will be so happy that mamma bought an art piece for only 20,000 and now it's worth 500,000...". Art pieces are like piggy banks for rich people, while pigs are piggy banks for poor people. But they are kind of the same, they are savings for later.

[SMR] Thinking about indigenous people in South America, tattoos express a need to differentiate themselves from Gods, and also means a clear distinction between human rationality and animal irrationality. Regarding to this project, could the signing of the animals that you executed by tattoos be interpreted as a process of humanization? and, at the same time, an instrument of artistic objectivation?

[WD] There is a long tradition of doing things with animals. In Chinese tradition they painted on turtles. They didn't do anything harmful to the turtles. I like placing human pretensions, dreams, aspirations, ambitions (that are very visible on tattoos), on something that no one cares about it. That is what I really like about this idea.

Maybe if you tattoo "Jesus" in your arm, it is because you do love Jesus, you think Jesus is a lovely man, you believe in Jesus, etc. But if you put this tattoo in another context, on a pig for example, the pig doesn't know anything about Jesus. The pig doesn't even know that it is tattooed. It is not going to go to Paradise, to the house of Jesus. Pigs don't care about Jesus, about Elvis, about Greta Thumberg, about Hitler, about nothing...

These tattoos represent all aspects of life: love, relationships, important events in lifetime. It is like Facebook. Facebook users think the world should know about them. You eat anything and you post it on Facebook, because you think it is important for everyone to know. It is kind of immodesty. Most of the tattoos I do are the most famous tattoos, the most

¹ For more information, see the artist web page: <https://wimdelvoye.be>



Figuras 1, 2 y 3: ©Wim Delvoye, Belgium, Tim, 2006-current, tattooed skin, lifesize.

Figura 4: © Wim Delvoye, Belgium. Art Farm China, 2003 – 2010, live tattooed pigs, Beijing (China)

used ones. But the whole composition is already a conflict. For example, I place a straight tattoo together a homosexual tattoo. I make sure to contradict each other by putting them on the same pig.

Sometimes I like to have a pig representing something that I cannot represent. It is the same as when you are making a movie and you are writing about a killer. You are not a killer, you write about it and you can be fascinated by people who kills. So, here, pigs allow me to be as a writer, they allow me to be a third person.

Or for example I can have a pig with an extreme-right tattoo. It is interesting. Anything you do on a pig is going to be funny. I can put it on a pig, and no questions will be asked. It is understood that I do not necessarily feel it if I tattoo it on a pig. I am allowed to do more things. I am allowed to more promiscuity. More promiscuity than if I would have painted it on canvas. If I paint, let's say, Franco on canvas, I would receive a call from you asking me: "Wim, why did you do Franco, can you explain it to me?". And I would say "I am just trying to be funny". You would probably tell me "this is not a very good reason, you have to know why you do this kind of things". But when you are tattooing, you can use the big iconography and promiscuity that you get from the tattoo world. It is kind of a postmodern situation, that goes beyond ideology, beyond truth. People use all kind of themes that are important for them in that moment, and it will be forever on their bodies.

[SMR] So, when you tattoo on pigs you change the symbolism of the images, you are giving the pigs another meaning, maybe dignifying an animal.

[WD] If you tattoo Elvis Presley on a pig you are making Elvis Presley look meaningless. All our wishes and dreams can become meaningless. And if you tattoo Elvis on a pig, you are also changing the pig. The pig is getting a human personality, like in a fairy tale, like an animal that knows how to speak. In most of the old stories, animals were speaking. So, you have this strange communication between human and pigs. But they won't even notice they are tattooed, even if they look into a mirror. So, it is also about modesty, because some of these tattoos are pretentious. You want to show who you are, or who you are ideologically, how dangerous, how aggressive you are. Whatever you want to show off, you do it with tattoos, it is very tribal. They are like medals and they can become a little ridiculous.

[SMR] I know this project had a lot of controversy in Belgium, and you had to move it to China. What were the reasons? I know you received some critics from animals' rights organizations, was it the reason?

[WD] No, this is not right. In 1997 I showed my work with pigs in Antwerp and it was very successful, nobody cared about animal rights at this moment. I became a little big famous at this time for that. I was only known previously between peers, specialists. But I became just half as famous as the pigs. People loved the pigs. This is very typical in Belgium, here we are not as concerned as in Australia or Germany or other countries. We are a bit like Spanish people, we are always a bit late in these topics.

I went to China because I wanted to do something there. I believed on China's future. I like to go to countries that are on the rise up. I went to Indonesia before. I was planning on continuing the project *Cloaca*². I wanted to do several more machines (that I did later on), and when I arrived in China in 2002 I thought: "let's see if I can make a Chinese *Cloaca*". I had made nearly three of them in Belgium, let's make the number 4 in China. But it wasn't possible. At that time Chinese people had no technological advantages to do it there. It would have been very difficult and it would have had some misunderstandings. Now they have, but then there was not the level that I have had in Belgium.

I preferred to center on agricultural things. The pigs project was done only five years ago. I only tattooed five or six pigs. If you want to put the pigs to sleep you have to have an advantage in skills. You need two veterinary doctors, that make them sleep, for tattooing. After that, you have to let them rest to recuperate at least two weeks because it is like an operation to them. So, with that schedule I need to have at least ten pigs, five per week, working with one pig in the mornings and another one in the afternoons. But we had to stop it because tattooing is a very hard work. It is a handwork, it should be better paid. But anyway... we didn't have any problems with animals' rights. We were very careful with sanitation security.

[SMR] Ok, I read something about it but thank you for the explanation.

[WD] If you google me you will find strange things, like I went to China just to tattoo pigs. But this is not true. I wanted to continue *Cloaca* but I couldn't. *Cloaca* is my favorite project, because I do not make anybody angry. I am not making fun of anybody, because everybody shits, it is so universal. But with pigs is the opposite. Anything you tattoo is not universal, it is differentiation, it is making a difference between you and me. But as I said, we were very careful. My pigs were safe, they were not killed, some of them have had a long life. Now people are very sensitive, and so I was. I took it into account and I made sure everything was ok. Now things in social media, in Instagram, are strange. Let's say someone is called "mickeymouse" in Instagram, and he says: "Wow, I hate this guy who is tattooing pigs, he is a bad person...". You can't take this people seriously. They don't know anything. They don't know, for example, that I am a vegetarian for most of my life, that I grow animals, that I have 18Has. of land with special animals... I do a lot for animals. And this people, that maybe eat hamburgers every day, were very offended. And, they were offended because of an industrial product. We cannot forget that pigs are living animals, but the shape, the color, etc. have been created by human selection. During many years we have been selecting pigs with a disease that make them get fatter quick, pigs that don't break their legs. With this weight, sometimes we have to kill them because they brake their legs. Pigs are full of genetic problems because of this selection. We, as a society, just want them to be fat, we don't care about anything else.

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² Wim Delvoye developed his *Cloaca* project between 2000 and 2006. The artist created a machine that performs the human digestive process, which is necessary to "feed" twice a day so that it can expel the excrement.



Figura 5: © Wim Delvoye, Belgium. *Art Farm China*, 2003-2010, live tattooed pigs, Beijing (China).

[SMR] How the public reacted to this project, and how did the art market receive these new places of exhibition? You exhibited the tattooed pigs in pens, exploring new ways of distribution, exhibition, edition of this art practices.

[WD] Pigs living in a farm is the best artwork. If you go there now, and ask about the crazy white man that was there some years ago tattooing pigs, they would say that they didn't really understand what happened. They didn't understand that I was telling a story about China, like a documentary. In fact, there is a very good documentary by Ben Lewis³. I tattooed Ben Lewis with the same tattoo that a pig that was next to him. Human and animals are all the same for us. There was a Chinese lady, miss Wong tattooing a pig while I was tattooing Ben. We were both tattooing Micky Mickey Mouse on a cross with Minnie crying. It's beautiful... You have all themes there: Disney, capitalism, consumerism... Then you have Jesus, religion, monotheism, popular culture, human, animals and art. But art that refuses to be art.

Image that Leonardo is alive and you invite him to come to Beijing to tattoo a pig. And he would say "Ok, I have an image of a beautiful woman, Mona Lisa, I would like to tattoo it". And we would let the pigs sleep, and help him mixing (...), mixing the ink with him, etc. Let's say you come another day to visit the farm, while Leonardo is busy, and you see the pig with the tattoo by Leonardo. You are not seeing an artwork, you are just seeing a pig. The image is beautiful, it is a masterpiece, but it is lost because it is done on a pig. The first thing a pig is, is a pig, even if Leonardo have tattooed it.

It is very beautiful that the activity of art is not having any result on art, except in very indirectly way. It is also funny because I didn't sell it to a collector. I sold them alive to foster parents. And the collector didn't get the art piece. He paid me but he didn't get the piece. Why not? I was not going to kill them!! They had to wait for three years and, in return, his art piece would be much larger. And also, in return, pigs lived their lives until they died, and they had a long life.

We are also making here a very funny comparison between foster parents and collectors. And by extension with investors. Collectors don't want to be called investors, but you know, when you are buying art you are expecting a future gain. None investor would like to buy an animal which is alive, which lives on the other part of the world, which has to be fed, etc. So, we are also criticizing some attitudes we are having these days. It is funny because I am not talking here about a future gain in euros, or in dollars, but in kilos... and that is hilarious. This is a metaphor. When I tattoo the pig is small so I can put it on a table. But later it grows, it gets to 250 kg, and the tattoo grows. It is beautiful how nature makes this art piece grow. It is like Dolly, my biggest inspiration. When I did this, I was so in admiration with these scientists that were making these new questions about life, who were playing God, who were also asking questions about human identity as well. During the nineties, the big fashion was asking questions about your identity. I am Belgian, lesbian, Hispanic, Black American, etc. We are all fragmented, and we have the right to be fragmented. We are not anymore behind the same flag.

³ Ben Lewis is an interdisciplinary cultural historian. He is an award-winning documentary filmmaker. See: <https://benlewisprojects.com>
He made a series of documentaries called Art Safari and in serie #2 (2005-2006) there is a video about Wim Delvoye's Cloaca Project. In this documentary Ben tests his shit against the shit produced by Wim Delvoye's machine. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vcmlUqN-rg>

[SMR] I wonder if you have organized this project in different stages, including the final dissection of those pigs, these tattooed skins that you referred to, to be sold as collection objects. Or maybe it was a consequence when the pigs died and you decide to take their skin off.

[WD] What I wanted was to sell the pigs when they were small, and let them be seen through a webcam. How they become bigger and older, and how the investment keeps growing. Then, when the pig dies we stuff the pig and that's it. We would put the skin on a wall.

But later on, the skin was on the wall and I decided to get it stretched on a canvas. And now it is trying to compete with traditional art. I wanted to have it on a stretcher and make the reference to Renaissance art, or painting in general. When I was able to have an entire skin without holes, I was able to do a taxidermy. To do it with the whole skin is very hard, this is not a good skin to prepare. But if I am able to do a taxidermy job then I would prefer the pig to be three dimensional and have it stuffed. Sometimes it depends on the tattoo, if it is small, I prefer it to be on a stretcher, because you can see the details of the skin and the hair.

Here I was making small art piece and let it grow. I found it very beautiful. It is bioengineering, it is bioethics, that's 21st century, finding genetic sequences, finding vaccines for coronavirus, everything we are doing now it is coming from Dolly.

[SMR] In western society we are discussing on the dissection of a skin, it has been always something controversial. When you presented it, did you have any criticism on that?

[WD] It was a logical sequence. In my earlier works I was dealing with skin, but skin had a different meaning. For example, I was painting on skin of Delft porcelain. I did it for a while. It is kind of oxymoron objects. There are many oxymorons in art. For example, you have a big museum that is showing art from the European history, and all of a sudden you have these pigs in there. The pig is not a noble animal, it is not a powerful animal, it is not very respectful. If you have a horse, a lion, people will respect you, but not with a pig. So, I am not putting a horse or a lion in the museum, I am putting a pig, the most proletarian animal in the world. I couldn't think on any animal more proletarian than a pig.

And with tattoos is the same, if Leonardo would put a Mona Lisa on a pig it won't be called fine arts. So, there are a lot of issues on context, on class, on value, what really art is, and what it means. But tattoo is a maybe the oldest artform. Thousands of years ago we were painting our bodies, doing something on our bodies. Before making pots, we were painting bodies. Before thinking on painting on a rock we were painting on a body.

[SMR] The following project within *Art Farm Project* was presented in 2006, it was called *Tattoo Shop*. You started then tattooing Tim Steiner's back. I would like you to comment on the objectives of *Tattoo Shop*, and the impact of this project.

[WD] I had trouble showing pigs anywhere, I had two pigs in Antwerp, I brought them to France, Milano, Siccard in Holland,



Figura 6: ©Wim Delvoye, Belgium. Untitled (Osama), 2002-2003, tattooed & tanned pigskin, 125 x 96 cm, collection MONA Tasmania.

every time the same pigs. But every time, the director of the museum wondered about the paperwork needed to be done to have them. I was very complicated. It is not so simple to just bring a pig from one country to another. I was interested as an artist in dealing with reality, and in these cases, the curator had to deal with real things, with things normal people deal with. And I liked it.

But after a few tries of getting the pigs in various places (for example into the center of Milano it was amazing) it became a little boring. And I thought: "maybe it is easy if I tattoo a human being. It will be easy to transport it". I had an art fair in Shanghai, I had already tattooed Tim, and the pigs were not allowed to go from Beijing to Shanghai, so we called Tim. Tim was also accidental. I was in Switzerland in an art gallery in Zurich, and I was asked for a project for group show. Eduard Mook, that is a big gallery, so I was a little worried. At that time, I was thinking on opening a tattoo shop in Zurich. It is not much, what is a tattoo shop? A table, a lamp, a chair and a tattoo machine, anybody can open it. But it is only real when you tattoo. So, I decided let's tattoo a person in Zurich. We met Tim then and I started to tattoo him. I have a secret idea from the very beginning: let's auction him! What is this people doing that pay millions for that shit? What do you see in these auctions? Monochrome canvas, canvas with just some strokes on it, a photograph that is a reproduction, maybe someone who is letting the paint drop off the pot, maybe another person printing his ass on a canvas... Let's make fun of art and let's have a human being doing the catwalk at Sotheby's or at Christie's. The owner of the gallery was Simon De Pury, he was also the owner of Phillips, an auction company. It is a little bit as if I were a student, the view of a student. Simon said: "ok, let's show him in the gallery. But I have to sell him first because I cannot put it in auction if he hasn't been previously validated by the market, so he has to be bought by one of our collectors". The gallery sold Tim two years later in the summer of 2008.

Tim became famous not because of the tattoo, but because he was sold. The tattoo is less important than the idea of selling a living person. Tim and I are friends, that has nothing to do with slavery or anything like that. We are approaching a few issues that are taboo, and most of them are taboo for a very good reason. It is linked with the art world. It is as if I were a pimp and Tim was a prostitute, but, it is not always like that in the art world? That is making transparent something that is already there. A very crude comparison.

There is this guy from Munich, Rik (Rik Reinking the buyer), who is very lucky. He is a nice man, he understands the project. You can also see that the market in contemporary art world is about complicity. If you are buying a car, you are not complicit with the salesman. If you buy a Toyota you are not supporting this company, you just liked the car. In art world things do not happen like that. Maurizio Cattelan, Marcel Duchamp, etc., radical art needs complicity from the buyer, and the buyer has a special price because he knows he is the one validating the art piece. So, it was more important Rik buying Tim, than me tattooing Tim. People was fascinated with that, in newspaper it got a lot of attention. I am surprised because intelligent people, I mean cultured people with a PhD and so on, were fascinated with this human transaction.

There was a huge queue for an exhibition of Picasso and Matisse in the Grand Palais of Paris. Why were this people queuing for this exhibition? Do they see Picasso as a great artist? No, they waited for hours because Picasso is expensive, rich people buy

Picasso. Poor people pay 20 € and queue for hours to see in a museum what rich people buy for themselves. They probably won't be able to see the quality of his works if rich people wouldn't have been buying Picassos since a long time ago. It is like Ferrari. It is expensive, it is about status.

But I am not an economist, I am interested in these situations, researching on them and making interesting images of it. I love doing things without knowing 100% why am I doing this, and how would the outcome be. Everything is not in my hand. The script is not even in my hands. Maybe the police come and they tell me to go to jail for tattooing pigs. You don't know, when you are doing something like this, the whole idea is doing an art piece and the rest is the result of it. Tattooing Tim and selling Tim was the best. But then when Tim will die, we will see how to preserve it.

The best is when Tim is alive. The best is when the pigs were alive. The best is when we told collectors that they cannot be collectors but foster parents.

[SMR] Signing a tattoo is not usual, but in art world the signature is essential. In tattoo world the signature that identifies each tattoo artist is the style of the design and the artistic quality of the execution. In relation to Tim's back, do you think your signature gives Tim's back this status of art work? You worked together with a tattoo artist, why is it only your signature the one that appears in his back and not both signatures?

[WD] That started from the very beginning as conceptual art. So, I looked for good tattoo artists willing to help me, they had to have time to help me in this project. So, this art work was basically conceptual art.

But latter I was more interested in the artisan aspects of doing so. I was always interested in the iconography of tattoo world. People became more aware of tattoos. People from all classes, that have not ever seen a tattoo, or a tattoo shop, could see it now. The world is aware of the tattoo crafts, and over the time people became more interested in the artisan aspects of it.

This is not that I am an artistic tattooist and the other aren't. No. I admire many tattooists and I think they are great artists. I don't believe in the differentiation of artist and artisan. A tattooist, a wood carver, a painter, a ceramist, an architect or whatever, they are all craftsmen. In most of my works you can see the fascination for crafts, often even if it is conceptual and ironic. I started to be competitive, to see tattoos from others, trying to make them better. I am very aware of what is happening in the tattoo world. Maybe someday they will put me in jail and I will have a job: I will tattoo all prisoners!

[SMR] I think your work meant also a better appreciation of tattoo within artworld. Because it is considered as handcrafts and not as art. Do you agree with that?

[WD] Yes, tattoos are things you can see in prisoners and not in aristocratic people, for example. Although during the nineteenth century it was a little different. Some English aristocrats travelled to Japan and got themselves tattooed, what made tattooing famous in the nineteenth century. From twentieth century on, tattoo is mostly associate with a low life, or at least with people who hasn't have a safe life. And



Figura 7: ©Wim Delvoye, Belgium. *Tim*, 2006-current, tattooed skin, lifesize.

people in this social class is more aware of death. Every tattoo here is a testimony to death, because you are doing something permanent on a support which is not permanent. That is also something beautiful about tattoo and art, and why are they related to each other. People buy art not to eat it, not for having it during two days or two weeks. They buy it to keep it for later. To invest, as a piggy bank. People remember exactly when they bought an art piece. Just the same as when they got a tattoo.

But the body is not so permanent as a canvas, the body is not as eternal as marble, so you have a big problem here. You have something forever on something that won't last forever. This also explains why so many people get a skull or a heart tattooed. Even other body organs that means life and death. Unconsciously people know that it is about death. Imagine that someone with many tattoos dies. There will be more tattoos, because his friends would make a tattoo to remember it. Many tattoos are made to remember someone's death. People who are more sensitive with dead are more interested in tattoos. I decided to use this art form that is always in dispute with eternity. Tim is going to die sometime, and my pigs are already dead.

[SMR] You said that you have lost total control of this project. You do not know exactly when Tim will die, or in which circumstances. Regarding to this, I think one of the aspects that has created a bigger debate is everything related to the contract. The contract that you, Tim and Rik signed. There were many conditions in the contract in

order to manage how Tim would be exhibit, or what would happen if Tim would die in an accident, for example. Was the collector interested in all these terms?

[WD] The project of tattooing Tim has inspired a Tunisian film maker a few years ago. She contacted me and said "look, my scenario is completely inspired in your work". She created a love story on it, and made it more political. It was a refugee from Syria, and the tattoo artist tattooed a visa on his back, so that the Syrian refugee could go to Belgium. I wasn't sure about the film, I told them to change my name. They asked me if I wanted to play the artist, and I thought maybe it was too much. At the end the insurance agents came, and they asked me how could we sold a human being legally. You cannot sell human beings, and neither can you sell part of human beings, organs, etc. Selling Tim was a legal challenge. The tattooist, including me, were not the greatest artists of the story. The greatest artists were the lawyers who made it possible. To sell him legally from Switzerland to Germany? There were many jurisdictions. *Chapeau!* Tim got sold officially, with a money transaction, that was so much difficult than tattooing a human body. They are like artisans, for me they are like Picassos in their field. We had German lawyers and Swiss lawyers that were interchanging emails to make it possible. These emails are very interesting, they are like part of the project. I cannot tell where the art work is here. Is it in the pig's skins, in the farm, in my tattoo artist tattooing pigs, in selling Tim, in having Tim exhibited? I don't know. The tattoo is not so much important, it is quite accidental. Tim said "don't tattoo "Sylvie" on my back. My girlfriend is



126 Figura 8: ©Wim Delvoye, Belgium.Tim, 2006-current, tattooed skin, lifesize.

called Stephanie". "Ok, let's tattoo Stephanie", I said. And he replied "no, I don't want to have any girl on my back, I don't know if I will be my whole life with her". So, we didn't do it. Pigs weren't complaining. Tim was. So, I experience that I was only 90% free artist that day. He didn't like "Sylvie" and changed it. You cannot do whatever you want in someone's body. It is like a hair dresser, tattooing is a little like hairdressing. You are able to do many things, but you have to deal with your "canvas". You can talk to "it". And this is much more interesting than painting.

Every line you put is a wound. You are giving pain. So, you have to think on every single line. Every line will be pain. Every dot means pain. Every line should be important. If I want to do a name here, it shouldn't be just "Sylvie" when you don't know any Sylvie, because it is painful. You have to be sure, it is a bit like a sacrifice, showing your convictions. Painting on a canvas is kind of a therapeutic masturbation, most of it. As soon as the paint dries you can paint again. You don't have to think so much. But when you do a tattoo you have to think because everything will be there forever, and it is going to cause pain.

[SMR] Is Tim thinking that when he will die his skin will be taken off? Will it be possible to do? Even legally?

[WD] Yes, it is easy. We will use a product, "Trichloroethylene", then we will cut under his arms, and inside of his legs and we will get the skin off easily. We will clean it, and we will have to be very careful because human skin is not as strong

as pig skin. And legally? Nobody knows... Police called me once to ask me if it was legal. There was an auction in Paris, and there was a tattooed penis from a criminal for sale. The owner of the auction company didn't know what to do, he called the police and the police called me. They asked me: "Mr. Delvoye can you explain me legally how do you transport a human organism?" So..., it is very interesting because nobody really knows how do this work.

[SMR] I imagine this is why it is such a controversial project. And it depends also in the context in which the exhibition is held. For example, Tim has been exhibited in the Louvre or in pens with pigs. In some museums he has been presented beyond a line, that separates him from the public, like an exotic object we have to watch from the distance. Hundreds of years ago tattooed people were exhibited within circus and other spaces.

[WD] Since 16th century we have been fascinated with tattoos, since the beginning of colonization. There were books published on this topic, that were a scandal during late 16th century. It was on fashion to discuss on the tattoos of the "wild people" as they were called by the white people. Missioners and priests were trying to stop the practice of tattooing. They didn't think it was very Christian to tattoo yourself, but neither it is for Jews or Muslims. Historically, monotheists religions oppose to tattoo. Tattoo is tribal, that is one of the reasons why so many young people are insistent on getting a tattoo, even small tattoos on their ankles, on their

knees. This is because we are more and more falling back into tribalism, even more than what we think.

[SMR] The impact of Tim been exhibited has been different according to the country of the exhibition, as you have said depending on the culture, tattoos have different reception. I do not know if Tim has been exhibited in Asiatic countries.

[WD] There is an artist (I think he is from Spain) who is working on tattoos. But his work is really dealing with exploitation. He paid twenty prostitutes to get a line tattooed on their backs. Just a line. He was wondering how far could he go with human beings just by paying them.

[SMR] Yes, his name is Santiago Sierra.

[WD] Sure, he is a very interesting man, a very radical artist. I met him once.

He paid druggists or prostitutes maybe 100 €, and because they are so desperate they say ok, ok to whatever. So, it is about exploitation. He makes comments on our society. Activities become the content of the exhibition, the art piece becomes a political message. My work with Tim is different. Tim is white, he is from Zurich, he is not poor (in fact his surname is Steiner, which sounds very rich...), he is also good looking. It is completely another story.

[SMR] But do you think Tim's back is also a political art work.

[WD] Yes, but less journalistic. I think Santiago is not exactly a visual artist. He mixes strong proposes with great poetic moments, he is not a guy that makes beautiful objects. But in all my projects I am interested in creating visual objects, at the end. I need something tangible and visual. Because we are in visual arts.

Other great projects, like Santiago's, are conceived to deal, for example, with a documentary movie. If you just look at the art piece you cannot understand what this is. You will always need someone next to the art piece to explain it (for example the photograph of the prostitutes with the line in their backs). Some of them can be understood now, but in fifty years maybe there is not so much immigration and, for example, everyone in Mexico is very rich. I mean, journalistic art is going to have a hard time in the future. Every art piece will lose its meaning overtime, it will become more mysterious or visually intriguing... I am not sure.

There are some other artists working with tattoos. I remember scottish artist who tattoos "trust me" on peoples' arms⁴ and another one who draws tattoos on fashion pictures. He draws on images from models published in fashion magazines.⁵

The thing that they all have in common is the fascination for popular culture and for the range of imaginary coming out

of that. The freedom you have doing it, the promiscuity. It is also a way of expression for so many people, people which maybe are not so smart... So, it is fascinating to see what is important for them in their lives.

[SMR] In another interview, related to the exhibition you had in the Phi Foundation, you commented that it would be more interesting to have a conversation on art with someone that spends a big part of his/her monthly salary in getting a tattoo, than with someone that spends it on buying or selling art to make a profit with it. Why do you think so?

[WD] Tattooists live in another world. I showed pictures of my work to them and some of them came to the opening. Their looks, their hairstyles, everything is different. And I love it. I love the contrasts of these different worlds. Tattooists are happy with their world, they don't like ours. At the opening I was with a bunch of them, and there were more art pieces in other rooms. So, I talked to Jonathan, about an art piece there. And he didn't like it. Jackson Pollock? Andy Warhol? They didn't like it. Then, I showed Velázquez, and he said: "No, that is very good". We both agreed on something: Velázquez, but nobody really likes Pollock in contemporary popular culture.

It is like in art school. If you gather 20 contemporary artists you will just have 2 of them that really can draw. Even a perfect freehand circle with free hands. Most people who are successful in New York today don't know how to draw. Basquiat didn't know how to draw... Do you really think that a tattoo artist would like this kind of art? No! They don't like these artists, they think it is not beautiful, that their art is not skillful. They don't have any admiration for them.

It is a completely different world. They don't complain for not being in the art world. I like the mix, I listen to them. It is the same with people in the world of comic books. They all know how to draw, perfectly, but most of them are not interested in contemporary art. And they do not complain for not being in the art world. Tattooists, comic artists, etc., they have their own organizations, magazines, exhibitions, conventions, etc. Most of them think that the world of contemporary art is a very pretentious world with very boring art. So, they are not interested at all in being recognized by the art world. Young people are not so interested in going to a museum. I asked some guards at the museum. One of them who has been working there for twenty years told me he didn't like contemporary art. I asked: "you don't like my work either?". He told me: "No, your work is different. I like yours". "Why?" I asked. "Because It is very difficult to do, not everybody can do it". I think it is a very proletarian idea of art... Tato artists' judgments are very important to me.

[SMR] I think that your work is dignifying tattoo art. It is placing it inside museums, art centers, etc. Tattoos used to be exhibited in anthropological or ethnographical museums. But here it is different.

[WM] Yes, probably. It goes along with the people's freedom that we have nowadays. Something that historically was never like that. Now, everybody has an opinion, people behave and dress the way they want, they choose to live the way they want to live. That has never been seen in History before. We are so diverse. Getting a tattoo is a way of making yourself

⁴ Douglas Gordon. *Trust me* (1997).

⁵ Wim Delvoye refers here to Daniele Buetti and his photographic series *Good Fellows* (1996-2000). The artist marks the skin of models on images taken from fashion magazines. These interventions simulate scarifications on the skin and in some examples the tattoo represents the designer's name as a property mark.

diverse, it makes you belong to a club, to a group, but it also makes you different from any other people.

[SMR] That is the reason why we find this topic so interesting for our journal. A tattoo is a way of editing a body. Each person edits his/her body as he/she wants.

[WD] I am always astonished about how little the art world is interested in other worlds. You would think that they would be in a constant need for inspiration, for great ideas. Great ideas are made like children in fairy tales. For example, they are made by a *cinderella* and a prince (not a prince and a princess), or by a poor shepherd and a princess. So good ideas come like that, if you are not interested in anything else than art, how can you have a good idea for art? I see very few people in art world interested in other things and vice versa. I am like a tourist when I am with tattooists. I pretend to be one of them, I am with them but I can always scape. It is like a tribe, there is the art tribe, the tattoo tribe, or the bitcoin tribe..., there are lots of tribes. Each one is just interested in their own stuff. Most people are not reading newspaper anymore. Previously, everybody read the same newspapers. Now, you have newsletters. I read many of them. You have newsletters on tattoos, on art, on everything. Let's read newsletters from other groups! Let's try to understand what bitcoin means! Try to understand, I don't know, about horses! About how this world works, how to sell a horse, how to feed it, etc. Then you will get ideas.

People say I am very creative. I don't think so, I am interested in many things. Maybe I do so many things because I am not very sure about my own ideas. If you are not doubting, and most artist do not, you will be doing the same thing the whole time. It's like religion, they think: "This is art, I believe in this" and they go and on. I am doubting. So first I did "Cloaca", then I worked with pigs, then I changed again. Completely different things because I am not sure. Doubting is what makes beautiful doing what I do. I prefer not knowing what will happen, if I do this what will happen?

[SMR] My last question is about your agnostic vision of art, that you have just referred to. Could you tell us a little bit more about it?

[WD] Yes, I don't see art as something that is disconnected from reality, detached from the real world, something that is in a pedestal... Art is around us, just like spoons or knives are. I love art but I am not into believing in it. Why would you believe in art? It is too much. Please do not believe in art!! Just like it or not. I don't think art should be defended. When I was young, there was a whole generation who always wanted to convince people about art. Like if they were missionaries. So working people would have the chance to come and contact with high culture in museums. This is what politicians do, they want to open a museum in Valencia, or where ever, to put the city in the art map, and so people will be enlightened by art. But this is completely idiotic. People is busy with their own things: music, tattoos, videogames (*Fornite* is great! by the way), and they don't really care about what the bourgeoisie says. What time does a museum open, at ten? what time does it close, at six? When normal people are not working, museums are closed. But you can go to the movies at ten in the evening, or even later. Popular culture pleases people

much more than art does. You have to be a rich person to really know about art.

There are people still making a separation between high and low art. But who are they to say that tattoo is not art? Why would it be? Because of the price? Because of the social background of the consumer? So, to keep it simple I often say that art is what people collect. So, apart from a few exceptions, people do not collect tattooing, you cannot collect it, buy it and sell it during generations, like it has been done with paintings for centuries.

[SMR] Thank you very much, Wim, for your time. You have been very kind with us, and your answers have been really interesting.

[WM] Thanks to you.