Dis-continuities: The role of religious motifs in contemporary art
Alexandrova, A.A.
Chapter 7

Breaking Resemblance:
The Sculptures of Berinde de Bruyckere
A body of work by Belgian artist Berlindé de Bruyckere presents its viewers with a radical sculptural interpretation of the human figure. Recurring themes in her sculptures, shown internationally, are the fragility of the human body, its mortality, suffering, and such states as loneliness and intimacy. She is known for her sculptures made out of taxidermied horse bodies, usually without heads and rendered into unnatural and deformed shapes. For her sculptures that reinterpret the human figure, she uses wax, wood and horsehair. She colours the wax in such a way that it resembles the natural colour of the human body including the structure, blood vessels and veins under the skin. In many of the figures the pale complexion stands in contrast with the bluish traces and suggests a dead body. In her work she is inspired and influenced by a variety of visual sources from images circulated in contemporary mass media to religious art.

On several occasions de Bruyckere has shown sculptures together with a painting that has inspired her. In 2011, she was invited to make an intervention in the Venetian and Flemish Masters collection at Bozar in Brussels. She responded with two pieces: Pieta, 2010, and Lingam, 2010, to paintings by Giovanni Bellini: Mother and Child, 1500, and Pieta: Dead Christ Supported by the Madonna and St John, 1455. Prior to this, her work was shown in a dialogue with two paintings, Saint Bartholomew and Prometheus Bound, ca. 1660, by Luca Giordano at Hauser and Wirth, London. Another time she was invited to create and show works in dialogue with the painting of Lucas Cranach and Pier Paolo Pasolini at the Kunstmuseum, Bern.

In De Bruyckere’s work the human figure is rendered as a transformable, fluid entity endowed with a great plasticity. She is particularly aware of the history of representing bodies in art, and much of her art refers to and problematises the practice of image making. The figurative power of morbid, vulnerable figures coexists with an interest in making visible the very operations of producing the sculptures, and a particular awareness of the procedures of their presentation. Arguably, the focus of her work is not so much on the traumatic moment, but more on the constellation of elements that produce and support the image as an artifice, a work of art.

Fig. 69 Berlinde de Bruyckere, *La Femme sans tête*, 2004

Fig. 70 Berlinde de Bruyckere, *Jelle Luipaard*, 2004

Fig. 71 Berlinde de Bruyckere, *San S.*, 2004
In 2005, a group of sculptures she produced in 2002-2004, built of casts of body parts in coloured wax, were shown in De Pont, Tilburg. The sculptures are either assembled and form incomplete body figures or individual body parts such as feet, legs and hands shown as separate pieces. Such works as Aanéén-genaid, 2003; Aanéén, 2003-2004; Wezen, 2003-2004; La Femme sans Tête, 2004; Jelle Luipaard, 2004, are incomplete or distorted human figures, while 14 september, 2003; Limb, 2004, and San S., 2004, are casts of feet, legs or a hand shown separately. All of the works are made of material that renders the colour of human flesh very realistically. The traces of grey, green and blue in the wax suggest the structure of the blood vessels beneath the skin, and simultaneously make the flesh of the figures look as though it is decomposing. The constellations of casts of body parts, which De Bruyckere puts together to form the sculptures, do not reproduce the normal shape of a human body. Their shape is severely distorted, and some of them appear as if they are melting. Most of the figures have openings on their surface, which reveal that they are hollow inside. As a result, they look like skin unsupported by a bone structure, which is normally inside the flesh. None of the sculptures have faces – they are either covered or there is no head at all. In addition, the figures lack any indication of gender, though the body structure and the proportions might suggest either a male or female body. The artist usually combines her figures with different objects: pedestals, tables, showcases or stools, and old blankets. Some of the sculptures are displayed in glass showcases such as La Femme sans Tête, 2003, while others are placed on small pieces of furniture covered with folded blankets, or are hanging on supporting structures attached to the wall such as Jelle Luipaard, 2004 (Figs. 69 and 70).

Jelle Luipaard is made of wax casts of body parts assembled to form a figure that hangs on an iron hook attached to the wall of the exhibition space. There is a wooden bar inserted in it in such a way that it looks as if the flesh of this disfigured body is melting over it. The separate parts out of which the sculpture is built do not follow the line of a normal body – there is no head, one of the arms is missing and only part of the other is attached to the torso. The body parts, which look sewn or welded together, and the texture of their skin are rendered very realistically. The figure is abnormally long and thin, and the traces of blue and grey in the wax material make its flesh look simultaneously alive and decaying. The disfigured body-wound stands in striking contrast with the coarse surface of the metal hook.

San S., 2004, is built of wax casts of the lowermost limbs of a human body (Fig. 71). Two legs and feet are positioned on a small metal stand attached to the wall of

---

3 Berlindie de Bruyckere, Eén 2002-2004, exhibition catalogue with texts by Barbara Baert and Harald Szeeman (Tilburg: De Pont, 2005).
the exhibition space. The shape of the legs is slightly elongated and distorted which makes them look simultaneously torn and fluid, as if they are without any bones to support the flesh. The way in which the separate casts are joined looks, as in the other figures, like stitching or welding. The most realistically rendered parts are the feet with the toes and the nails. *Hanne*, 2003, represents a naked female figure with very long hair, almost reaching her feet (Fig. 72). For that sculpture De Bruyckere again used wax casts with traces of grey and green and horsehair. The head of the figure is bent downwards and her hair falls in front of her face covering it entirely. The shoulders are lifted upwards and the knees are slightly bent, her feet are firmly set on the metal stand that is attached to a wall approximately a metre above the ground. Another version of *Hanne* is shown in a church where it actually forms part of the interior.\(^4\) The sculpture refers to the iconography of Mary Magdalene with the combination of long hair and nudity and, when placed in a church interior, this reference becomes even stronger. In this case the feet are missing, the upper part of the torso is more distorted, and the hair is longer than the body. The figure is attached to the middle of the church wall without any visible support, so she appears to be flying.

These sculptures present their audience with confrontational images of headless, contorted and disfigured bodies that hover between life and death. Most of them are set in positions that reveal their helplessness and vulnerability. But, the figures also appear to be absorbed and looking inwards, holding themselves in the warmth of their intimacy, or literally melting into each other as in *Eén* (Fig. 73). These figures share a similar mode of address in the sense that they make the viewer uncomfortably aware of her own presence in the exhibition space. The absence of faces combined with realistic rendering of the colour and the texture of their flesh makes the figures uncannily real and present.\(^5\) On another level the positions of the figures convey scenes of pain or intimacy and thus make the viewer feel uncomfortable in their presence, as if she is witnessing something that she should not. The distortions of the body parts make the sculptures appear as if melting or almost tearing, which further enhances their presence. They look as if there is enormous tension in their material, which can be read as an indicator of the intensity of the emotion or the pain these bodies supposedly experience. The objects that De Bruyckere includes in her pieces (blankets, stands, show-

---

\(^4\) The sculpture is installed in the Falls Church, Virginia, United States.  
\(^5\) Other artists working with casts to produce life size human figures such as Antony Gormley, usually use other materials, such as bronze or bricks, which do not resemble the colour of flesh. They trigger a strong reflex of identifying with them, simply because they are human figures, and thus can be said to address in a more direct way the bodily presence of their beholders. In De Bruyckere’s work, however, this effect is enhanced even further by the uncanny presence of the fleshy colour of her sculptures.
cases, stools) increase the ambiguity of the wax figures even further. Blankets are usually associated with the safety of home or bed, but also with tragic images of refugee camps. Similarly, the showcases offer a protective shelter, but also refer to the morbid imagery of a morgue or a natural history museum.

De Bruyckere’s figures appear iconographically ambiguous in the sense that they resemble a variety of images from very different contexts, in terms of the moment of historical time, the media and the social context they are circulated in. Her sculptures resonate with Christian iconography, and with documentary photographs of concentration camps, images of trauma and of self-absorbed states. These antithetical meanings are simultaneously present and make her sculptures resistant to univocal interpretation. Their broken symbolism defines them as carefully modelled ruins, open images, which embody archetypal imagery associated with life and death, imprisonment and sheltering, power and powerlessness.

De Bruyckere’s pieces pose a question concerning something religious and non-religious at the same time, by addressing a modality of our gaze that would recognise almost by mistake, involuntarily, images from the past. The figures are familiar, and yet this familiarity is not quite there, it is interrupted. The long hair and the naked body of Hanne refer to the figure of Mary Magdalene, and to the particular episode in her life when she withdrew to an isolated place, where she lived for thirty years as a penitential hermit without clothing or food. San S. refers to another Christian saint, both with its title, which is a shortened version of the name of Saint Sebastian, and with the position of the legs, which resemble the way his legs are usually depicted in the scene of his torture. Finally, Jelle Luipaard hangs on the wall in a way that resembles a crucifix. However, the headless body does not represent Christ and the iron hook is

---

6 As Barbara Baert points out: “Berlinde de Bruyckere has her own Bilderatlas. The walls of her studio are hung with miscellaneous cuttings from art magazines, books, newspapers, old photos, memories, pictures that appealed to her. I saw the excavation of a petrified body, a man who had hung himself from a tree, a straw roof, a dejected stream of refugees, a textile market in Turkey, a baby wrapped up against the cold, and Mary and Elizabeth embracing each other in the painting by Giotto. Images from classical art history and also of harsh present-day reality. This wall gives us a glimpse into the artist’s mind. The pictures that float around there, stored in old boxes, to be rediscovered, or forgotten forever. De Bruyckere’s Bilderatlas has little to do with Aby Warburg’s great wish, but she does share with him the belief in ‘prefiguration’. Every image has its advance sign. It may lie in that one Giotto in Padua or in that refugee camp seen on the news. It is the germ, the seed that carries a new image within it. No one knows when or how it will emerge, not even the artist. This is the mystery of the image: the cyclical power and intrinsic reproductive urge that transcends the creator herself.” (unpaginated text, last two paragraphs), http://www.mcaf.net/html/D-e-sept-dec-2005-Berlinde-text-Baert-Bearers-and-the-bearable.htm, (accessed 23 June, 2012).
Fig. 72 Berlind de Bruyckere, *Hanne*, 2003

Fig. 73 Berlind de Bruyckere, *Eén*, 2004
not a cross. Besides that most obvious and general reference to a crucifixion scene, *Jelle Luipaard* reminds one of the figurative language of pain developed by late medieval and renaissance painters to depict the tortured bodies of the two thieves crucified next to Christ. The slim and disfigured body also resembles the figure of Death as interpreted by sixteenth-century German painter Hans Baldung Grien (1484-1545) (Fig. 74). These are just a few examples of figures associated with death and suffering with which this sculpture resonates.

The described references place *Jelle Luipaard, Hanne* and *San S.* in a dialogue with the tradition of Western religious art, but they cannot be qualified as religious art, as they neither treat a religious theme explicitly, nor refer to Christian iconography in any straightforward sense. This makes it impossible to read them as reproductions of particular religious figures. The absence of faces and their titles, which are contemporary names (perhaps with exception of *San S.*), detach them further from being religious representations. Could it be that precisely through that interrupted resemblances these works of contemporary art acquire power to critically address not only the role of representations of violence massively present throughout the history of the Christian image, but a set of deeper questions concerning the functioning of the image as a religious medium? The familiarity of these sculptural figures both invites their viewer to identify the model that they resemble, and simultaneously suspend the resemblance to one single image. In this sense, De Bruyckere foregrounds the problem of resemblance itself, as a drama of resemblance between images, and not between an image and something that will guarantee its truth, be it God or a divine origin. In her pieces the artist substitutes the arch-resemblance, with a broken one – between her sculptures and religious iconography, but also between her sculptures and real bodies.

In the case of the *acheiropoietic* image a community deems a visual object to be true, but it has to simultaneously erase the procedures of inventing the truth of the object. Precisely this concealment guarantees its public status and importance.7 The subsequent interpretation of this motif of Veronica’s veil within art was associated in many cases with meticulous realism, which stands both for the erasure of the trace of the work of an artist’s hand from the surface of the painting so it can appear as a miraculous, spontaneous creation, a true image.8 In this sense realistic images are

---

7 As Mondzain points out in the case of the shroud in the fourteenth century “…the bishop of Troyes denounces the shroud as mystification and states that he knows the artist. The Vatican, however, demands that the bishop keep a *perpetuum silentium* on the subject, and henceforth, with this silence as security, the shroud is placed on exhibit.” Marie-José Mondzain *Image, Icon, Economy. The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, Trans. Rico Frances (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 196. 8 For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Chapter Two.
Fig. 74 Hans Baldung Grien, *Death with an Inverted Banner*, 1505-7
associated with rendering the procedures of their making invisible, and illusionism as a strategy can be considered as a presentational device insofar as it supports the “truth” of the image.

De Bruyckere makes her hand as an artist strongly present on the surface of her works – the traces of stitching and welding, deforming the bodies in her sculptures, rendering them fluid and endowing them with plasticity, highlights their artifice. They are very visibly a result of the work on an artist. But she also renders the texture and the colour of the bodies very realistically. The visible traces of the artist’s manual labour co-exist with realism as a strategy that is usually associated with the erasure of the trace of making. De Bruyckere then re-works not only religious imagery on the level of iconography, but addresses a set of questions associated with the motif of acheiropoietos. Her works simultaneously maintain something of religion in themselves and are about religion; they articulate a way for artworks to critically appropriate religious motifs without being seen as scandalous, or inherently religious.

**Counter-Time**

With Jelle Luipaard, San S. and Hanne, De Bruyckere re-works images from the past, which indicates her desire to position her work with regard to art history. But her sculptures also strongly resonate with present-day images. In this sense, they become temporally complex objects, sites where past and present motifs co-exist. Generally speaking visual objects are temporally impure; in images there are multiple strata of time, which appear through resemblances between images belonging to distant historical moments. Being temporally complex, images resist attempts to be inscribed in linear explanatory narratives of history, which seek the key for understanding of a past visual object in the moment in which the object, or the artwork, was made. This “canonical attitude of the historian,” what Didi-Huberman terms euchronic consonance, reduces the temporal complexity of the object, which itself makes reference to different moments in time. In their book on Renaissance art, Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood make a distinction between the terms anachronism and anachronic. Anach-

---

RONISM IMPLIES THAT “THE WORK IS BEST GRASPED NOT AS ART, BUT RATHER AS WITNESS TO ITS TIMES, OR AS AN INALIENABLE TRACE OF HISTORY; IT TRIES TO TELL US WHAT THE ARTWORK REALLY IS.” TO NAME A WORK ANACHRONIC IMPLIES THE QUESTION OF “WHAT THE ARTWORK DOES, QUÁ ART.”

WORKS OF ART ARE ANACHRONIC ENTITIES THAT ADDRESS THE VERY MECHANISM OF REPRESENTATION THOUGH RE-WORKING MOTIFS AND ELEMENTS THAT BELONG TO DIFFERENT MOMENTS IN THE PAST.

JELLE LUIPAARD, HANNE AND SAN S. ALL EMBODY A FOLD IN TIME – THEY ARE WORKS OF CONTEMPORARY ART, OBJECT-BODIES PLACED IN THE SPACE OF THE PRESENT-DAY GALLERY, BUT ON THEIR SURFACE THEY ARE SIMULTANEOUSLY PRESENT IMAGES THAT WE USUALLY ATTRIBUTE TO DIFFERENT MOMENTS IN TIME. DE BRUYCKERE GOES “CONTRA” HER TIME, BECAUSE SHE RE-APPROPRIATES IMAGERY THAT COMES FROM THE PAST AND CONFLATES IMAGES OF RELIGIOUS ART WITH CONTEMPORARY IMAGERY. THE TEMPORAL COMPLEXITY OF JELLE LUIPAARD RESULTING FROM THIS STRATEGY CANNOT BE EXPLAINED WITHIN A LINEAR MODEL OF HISTORICAL TIME. IT IS AN IMAGE IN COUNTER-TIME. CRUCIAL TO THIS MODE OF CO-PRESENCE OF DIFFERENT IMAGES IS THE IMPOSSIBILITY TO ENTIRELY DISENTANGLE THEM. THEY ARE NOT ISOLATED UNITS THAT CAN BE IDENTIFIED. AS A MUSICAL TERM COUNTER-TIME DESIGNATES THE SIMULTANEITY OF TWO DIFFERENT TEMPI, IN OTHER WORDS A UNITY BUILD FROM TWO HETEROGENEOUS ELEMENTS. IN A SIMILAR MANNER, IN JELLE LUIPAARD WE SEE A CRUCIFIX AND THE FIGURE OF DEATH AND A DEFORMED BODY. HANNE IS BOTH A MAGDALENE AND AN ANONYMOUS FEMALE FIGURE, WHILE SAN S. BOTH REFERS AND SUSPENDS THE REFERENCE TO THE CHRISTIAN SAINT. BUT THEY NEVER OVERLAP FULLY WITH THE RELIGIOUS IMAGE THEY REFER TO. THIS JUXTAPOSITION, OR RATHER OVERLAYING, OF DIFFERENT MOTIFS, CREATES A DIALOGUE BETWEEN TWO DIFFERENT REGIMES OF IMAGES – RELIGIOUS AND AESTHETIC – CENTRED UPON DIFFERENT RULES RELATED TO THE PROCEDURES THAT INVEST A VISUAL OBJECT WITH TRUE STATUS. SEEN IN THAT PERSPECTIVE, BY USING PAST IMAGES JELLE LUIPAARD NOT ONLY THEMATISES SUFFERING, MORTALITY OR VULNERABILITY, BUT ALSO FOREGROUNDS, AND THUS CRITICALLY ADDRESSES THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONTEMPORARY ART AND RELIGION BY USING RELIGIOUS IMAGES AS THE VERY MEDIA OF THAT CRITICAL GESTURE.

JELLE LUIPAARD, HANNE AND SAN S. CAN BE PLACED IN THE INTERNALLY HETEROGENEOUS GROUP OF CONTEMPORARY ARTWORKS THAT DEAL WITH OR REFERR TO RELIGIOUS THEMES AND MOTIFS, BUT DO NOT FUNCTION IN RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS, AND CANNOT BE DESCRIBED AS RELIGIOUS ART. DE BRUYCKERE LOOKS AT THE LEGACY OF RELIGIOUS ART AND BORROWS FROM THE PAST, BUT HER WORKS REMAIN IN THE MODE OF INDIRECT REFERENCE. AS A RESULT SHE ARTICULATES A POSSIBLE SPACE FOR NON-RELIGIOUS ART TO ADDRESS RELIGIOUS ISSUES WITHOUT BEING SCANDALOUS OR ICONOCLASTIC, I.E. WITHOUT SENDING AN INHERENTLY RELIGIOUS MESSAGE. DE BRUYCKERE’S SCULPTURE CONFRONTS WITH THE SHOCK OF SEEING A DEAD OR DEFORMED BODY, AND BY INDI-

rectly referring to a central religious image, emphasises the violence that the Christian tradition placed at the heart of its images. The artist then addresses a very elusive and difficult space, where religious meanings can be present in contemporary art, as if she is aware that the return of the religious in the contemporary pieces has to be disturbing and monstrous, and referring to religious image can be done, but only as demonstration of an act of loss of religious faith.

**Faith Displaced**

Discussing Manet’s *Dead Christ and the Angels*, 1864, De Duve concludes that the painter problematised the distinction between faith in God and faith in painting. By treating a Christian theme, but in a way that deviates from a canonical interpretation of a biblical scene, Manet invited his audience to see this painting not only as a religious representation, but also exclusively as art. His artistic strategy was successful to the extent that it demonstrated that the separation between faith in God, faith in painting, and faith in man was not as self-evident for the nineteenth-century audience as it is for us in the present moment. De Bruyckere’s pieces, at a later moment in time, articulate a doubt similar to the one Manet touched upon. The resemblance to religious imagery is no longer an interpretation. The uncanny, disturbing realism of De Bruyckere’s sculptures makes their viewer uncomfortable on a somatic level. Their viewer then must “tame” their disturbing reality by seeing them as art, as images that belong to the history of art. Similarly to Manet’s painting, the fact that De Bruyckere includes references to other images and artworks in her sculptures introduces a

15 “Manet had certainly no knowledge of the theological bedrock of his practice, but, like all his colleagues, he was dependent on a long tradition which had assimilated its tenets, secularised them, and forgotten their origins, but in which they remained subterraneanly active. They would stay active throughout the history of modernist painting.” Thierry de Duve, *Look! 100 Years of Contemporary Art*, Trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, (Brussels: Ludion, 2000), p. 243. 16 Ibid., p. 18. 17 David Freedberg argues that by calling images and things art we “anesthetize their real strength and powers” *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 425. Further, he refers to the eloquent formulation of Roland Barthes concerning the photographic image: “Mad or tame? Photography can be one or the other: tame if realism remains relative, tempered by aesthetic or empirical habits; mad if this realism is absolute and so to speak original. The choice is mine: to subject its spectacle to the civilized code of perfect illusions, or to confront in it the wakening of intractable reality.” *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Trans. by R.Howard (New York, 1981), p. 76 as cited by Freedberg, p. 430.
double moment, an aberration, that makes the image offer several possible interpretations, and most importantly serves as an indication that her sculptures are art images. Without this Jelle Luipaard would confront its viewer with the frightening reality of a dead body, and Hanne would become a figure of a traumatised being that places its viewer in a voyeuristic position. De Bruyckere suggests many possible readings or her works, yet she does not leave an easy answer to the viewer, provoking questions instead of producing certainties.

Objects of contemporary art retain something of “religion.” De Duve insists on the quotation marks and points out that they are imposed by a long history of gradually abandoning the idea of many gods, than of a single God, which culminated in facing the empty place of God, the absence as such. Then, for artists to assume the task of presenting this Absence, it took a “spectacular secularization of minds.” Art’s struggle with this task, or the desire to present an absence, resulted in a permanent crisis in representation, which is “one of the names of a God-less world.”

[...] the greatest artists knew that the function of art was to fit Absence with a void at the heart of the social and to display the void to those willing to look. Yet this metaphysical void is not displayable as such. It cannot be put on a stand and presented. Nobody can say that he or she has seen death itself, which is its sign here on earth. It is only negatively displayable, which is an unfathomable paradox, given that, for us, death is only absolute negation.

Art has an irrepressible desire to show that void, and this is why it is “doomed” to resurrection, and artworks become focal points of acts of faith. They are deemed to be alive, venerated and placed in museums: “The artist’s task is to turn a thing into a living being so that it can be mortal.” Resurrection then becomes a matter of common belief that this or that is a work of art. It amounts to a thing presenting itself as “Here I am”, and as De Duve points out, is no more than that, nothing particularly religious or glorious.

This line of argument at first glance is symmetrically opposite to that of David Freedberg, who claims that we “tame” or “anaesthetize,” and deprive images of their real powers by deeming them to be art. According to Freedberg images that disturb us deeply or invoke a powerful response, in other words images that have power, do not qualify unquestionably as art. He argues that in order “to install the shocking in the museum” it first has be deemed to be art in order to be able to cope with the impossibly upsetting powers of those images. To call them “art” is a way of making them

safe, by way of stripping the image of all reference, or by saying that the sign, that is, the image, is the signified. In De Duve’s view central to displaying objects in an art context is a series of social pacts or agreements that invent their truth as an artwork, while in Freedberg’s analysis, the art context “disciplines” the power of the image, by separating its reality as representation, from the real world. Interpreting something as a representation, and, moreover, to be an artwork, an invention of an artist, makes it safer, tames its reality. But, as Freedberg argues: “However much we strive to do so, we can never entirely extract ourselves from our sense of the signified in the sign; and our responses are irrevocably informed by that.”

Jelle Luipaard addresses the power of images to elicit a response in its viewers. It oscillates between being an object that is made and shown as art, and the frightening reality of a dead body, present though the way the artist renders the flesh of the figure. This headless figure is an image-body deprived of its primary physical agency. It has an enormous physical presence, as if the absence of life makes it heavy and confronts its viewer with the mere weight of a dead body. This is expressed through the way it drapes over the supporting structure. It is difficult to remain at a safe distance from the figure by assuming that it is just an object of art, because it confronts us with the reality of flesh as if it were before the sign, or before being a representation. It is unquestionably a fabricated or artificial object, and at the same time the realistically rendered skin mirrors our own, thus making us uncomfortably aware of our own presence. As a result, in the moment of looking, the sculpture acquires a striking actuality, a force of presence that other images do not have. In order to be able to deal with the compelling address of this image, to be able to bear its presence, its viewer must suspend the reality of the mutilated body, to kill its death in a way, by looking at it as an object of art or a mere representation. The stands, the showcases and the folded blankets on which De Bruyckere places the sculptural figures function as presentational devices. The frame, the stand and the showcase are the devices that, besides referring to the display structure of a natural history museum, also present the object as art, i.e. as something that is made, thus taming its reality. By presenting the sculptures to the viewer, they “tame” their reality of being dead or dismembered bodies, thus making it possible to look at them.

Presentations

De Bruyckere is aware that a dead body cannot present itself without the help of a presentational device. In many of her pieces she uses stands and vitrines that simultaneously present and shelter the sculptural figures – faceless bodies hovering between life and death. By combining the traumatic materiality of a deformed body with a presentational device, De Bruyckere addresses the “void at the heart of the social” to use the formulation of De Duve. In her work the dead body, or its representation coincides with its life as an artwork. With the iconic force of pieces she addresses an issue related to the very institution of art, the museum. With her use of presentational devices she addresses power associated with the art institution is twofold. Her sculptures point to the cruelty of placing objects on display, and to the iconic force of images that triggers fear – scandals if they are not framed as art.

Jelle Luipaard is not framed or presented as an intact figure, but is cut by the metal hook and the wooden bar. With this the artist suggests that the procedures of putting things on display in the museum space do not always equal veneration, as De Duve argues, but can also be inherently violent. They are also procedures of objectification that pin down the meaning of the object on display to a reading associated with the context in which it is shown. In De Bruyckere’ words:

There is a sort of aggression in the sculpture, which I would like to emphasize even more by the way I present it. It might be an indirect reference to the Crucifixion, but on closer consideration you see that it is much more than just a religious subject. 25

The stands and the showcases in her other works are taken out of their usual function as presentational devices and form an integral part of her pieces. This strategy takes the presentational device out of its usual invisibility and indicates a concern with its role and power to determine the identity of the objects they present.

De Bruyckere makes the work of her hand strongly visible on the surface of her sculptures. She closes what looks like wounds or openings in the flesh by stitching or welding surfaces together, or by joining body parts in a way that radically distorts the normal shape of the human body. The distorted shape conveys the idea of plasticity of the material and suggests the operations of shaping and moulding. The use of welding and its visible traces, together with the hollow parts, suggest the stage of a sketch, a stage in the process of making of an image. The hands of one of the versions of Hanne

melt into each other; in another *Hanne* does not have feet. On the surface of the legs in *San S.* there are long scar-like lines that look like surgically closed wounds and the body of *Jelle Luipaard* appears as if melting over the wooden bar it is attached to. In other words, they all carry the trace of the gestural subjectivity of the artist. This indicates that they are artworks, thus presenting them as art, and in a sense functions as a presentational device similar to the stands she uses. By distorting the wax casts De Bruyckere in fact makes plasticity the very subject matter of her sculptures. They become *anti-portraits*; they are still identifiable as human figures, but are framed by the marks of the work of the artist. The facelessness of the figures removes them further from being an *image* of a body or a representation of a person. Although *Jelle Luipaard* invokes a religious figure, it does not convey any transcendence, any divine invisibility beyond the image. It is both a body, and not quite, a corpse and not quite, a non-body.

**Death and Resemblance**

Contemporary artworks both retain something of religion in them, and acquire critical agencies through being about religion. In De Bruyckere’s work this modality of “being about” is related to the fact that she reworks and inverts religious imagery. By embedding a motif, specifically one of the central and most recognisable images in the Christian tradition, *Jelle Luipaard* turns the life of religious images into a topic. By being about religion, by embedding a visually recognisable motif, *Jelle Luipaard* addresses violence as a key aspect of Christian images on at least two planes – as violence against images and as a representation of violence in images.

Religious iconoclasm, specifically in the Christian case, and some of its internal dynamics, can shed more light on the way such artworks as *Jelle Luipaard* reposition themselves with regard to Christian iconography. The gesture of the religious iconoclast involves a paradox. He believes that the image is everything for someone else and in fact attacks not the artefact itself, but the deception he thinks is attached to it. This makes him simply “another person with ‘a strong commitment to representation,’ in this case, that of naïve belief itself.”²⁶ In other words, the act of breaking a religious image paradoxically means recognition of its power. Furthermore, Christian images are themselves inherently iconoclastic. By placing at its centre an image of “God’s only son, an image not made by a human hand (*acheiropoetos*)” that is already broken

---

and transformed into “the ugliest of things”, the Christian image acquired power, and pre-emptively questioned its criticisms and rejections.\(^\text{27}\) That determined the Bible’s aesthetics as aesthetics of the ugly, and not of the beautiful; its ontology of the image was based as much on dissimilarity as on resemblance.\(^\text{28}\) This gesture of allowing death to insist in the religious image resulted in what Koerner calls infinite regression related to the question of how it is possible to break an image that is already broken?\(^\text{29}\) He concludes that, by attacking the crucifix the iconoclasts: “at once negate and repeat the likeness cultivated in their target. Their blows are negations of a negation, ‘no’s’ canceled by an ultimate ‘no’. Religious imagery has iconoclasm built into it.”\(^\text{30}\)

Some appropriations of religious themes and motifs by contemporary artworks are inherently in danger, in a way similar to the iconoclasts, of affirming the power of that which they try to disempower. In contrast, artworks that are about religion are not iconoclastic or scandalous, because they are aware of the internal iconoclasm already embedded in the way Christianity thought of its images. The modality of being “about” is a way to be critical in precisely non-religious terms. The fragmented figure of \textit{Jelle Luipaard} is already a broken, self-negating image. However, this work does not simply resemble \textit{the dissemblance} that Christian images show, but the drama of resemblance between God and man that ends with the breaking of God’s true image. The body of \textit{Jelle Luipaard} dissembles itself, apart from the fact that it resembles a crucifix, in the sense that it is and is not a body. The absence of a head and arms, as well as the deformations of its torso, set it distant from being a truthful representation of a human body. Also, the resemblance to a crucifix is ambiguous, which leaves the image open to other possible readings. It suggests it visually, but the title of the sculpture detaches it further from the religious model. In other words, the sculpture does not embed a Christian motif in order to break it. \textit{Jelle Luipaard} is not a scandalous or iconoclastic work in the narrow sense, but it uses the image as the very medium of its critical gesture without repeating, and thus bringing back, that which it criticises. Sim-

\(^{27}\) “At the center of the great machinery of Christian images stood the paradox of the cross: what to the rest of the world was the ultimate punishment – crucifixion as the most painful, public, and humiliating of deaths reserved for criminals, traitors and slaves, as the ‘most crude and horrendous torture’ (Cicero), the unspeakable ‘sign of shame’ (Hebrews 12:2) – was for Christians the emblem of their God.” Koerner, “Icon as Iconoclasm,” p. 192. \(^{28}\) Georges Didi-Hiberman discusses this extensively in “The Image as Rend and the Death of God Incarnate,” Chapter Four of \textit{Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art}. Trans. John Goodman (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), pp. 139-219. \(^{29}\) As Koerner puts it: “Religion becomes negation in infinite regress: the chosen people scourged, their redeemer scourged by them, they scourged by his people, the Christians, who, from time to time, in order to renew their faith, will scourge his effigy.” Ibid., p. 190. \(^{30}\) Ibid., p. 191.
ilarly, San S. and Hanne both refer to and remain distant from religious iconography. They do not strike the image, or the material medium associated with it, but employ another strategy – they resemble it, but in a broken way.

By not breaking the image, but the resemblance, or by modifying the religious motif, Jelle Luipaard critically addresses the violence in Christian iconography, which placed at its centre an image of a body that dies and no longer resembles itself. This violent imagery, as Didi-Huberman argues in discussing the anthropological significance of the idea of the incarnation, was determined to a large extent by the communal desire to kill death itself:

It is perhaps the fundamental dialectic of incarnational images to carry within themselves this double, contradictory movement [...] to carry death within them, to proceed to something like perpetual "putting to death" – a sacrifice, then – to the end of managing religiously the common desire for the death of death [...] 31

Christians gave themselves "the central image of God who agrees to die for them", but in order to do that it was necessary to "let death insist in the image. To open the image to the symptom of death." Thus the images of Christian art carried the double desire to simultaneously "kill death" and to "imitate" it, in order to allow the believer to believe that "they have killed their own death, always in the image of their resurrected God." 32 The invention of the incarnational schema can be interpreted as an act with which Christian religion empowered itself, since coming to visibility of a transcendent and invisible god through a body implies power to constitute and manage a common gaze, or the desire to see together "the death of death." 33 Mondzain also points to the inherently political question that Christian images answered. She points out that the shared show of Christ's passion "became the foundation of the solidarity of a Christian community freed from all anxiety of death." 34

Next to the more general iconographical reference to a crucifix, Jelle Luipaard is evidently influenced by late mediaeval painting, which represents the scene of Calvary – the crucifixion of Christ and the two thieves in a particularly violent way. De Bruyckere drew inspiration from Crucifixion, 1350-60, by a painter known as the Bohemian Master (Fig. 75):

A detail of this scene appealed to me, that of the evil murderer next to the figure of Christ,

Fig. 75 Bohemian Master, Calvary, c.1360
of which there was a full-page illustration in the book. The way the figure was bent and twisted around the cross particularly drew my attention and that is what led me to work with a male model, whom I had pose in the position shown in the book. Then I had casts made for Jelle Luipaard.  

The position of the figure on the supporting structure and the contortions of its parts, as well as the openings on its surface, visually resemble the position of the bodies of the two thieves (Dysmas and Gestas) in Crucifixion by Bohemian Master (c.1350-60), Robert Campin’s (1375-1444) Thief on a Cross, 1428-30, and Albrecht Altdorfer’s (1480-1538) Crucifixion, 1518 (Figs. 76 and 77). This resemblance functions as a visual index embedded in De Bruyckere’s sculpture pointing to a period in European history when spectacles of punitive violence had an important social function. Late medieval representations of the scene of Calvary form one of the moments in the history of European art associated with the development of the confrontational visual vocabulary of pain and suffering. Late medieval realist painters presented the sacred scene of the Crucifixion relating to their own, and more importantly, to their audiences’ experience with criminal justice rituals. In this sense the spectacles of penal justice and art were interrelated. Painters were influenced by publicly performed executions, and the other way around: “the visual habit and modes of perception that were acted upon by the spectacle of bodily violation and pain have also been shaped by the experience of looking at pictures.” In the later Middle Ages, rituals of punishment were played out before the collective gaze, and thus demonstrated publicly the power of the sovereign to monopolise violence. In addition, the spectacle of punishment shaped a kind of social relationship grounded in the shared religious imperative towards compassion. The act of seeing the suffering of the condemned had the function to actuate emphatic bonds between people: “Suffering as spectacle could become, under these mental conditions and religious imperatives, a form of what anthropologists call communitas.”  

Jelle Luipaard can be considered as a conflation of the figure of Christ with those of the two thieves, which makes the figure a generalized image of suffering, vulnerability and death. This co-presence of different motifs is present in many of De Bruyckere’s works and endows them with a temporal complexity. The sculpture becomes an instance of what Merback calls intervisuality because it is the place where different images associated with different media and modes of address of the community of their

Fig. 76 Robert Campin, *Thief on a Cross*, c.1428-30

Fig. 77 Albrecht Altdorfer, *Crucifixion*, 1518
viewers are co-present. The ambiguity of this image reclaims the vulnerability of the body from its appropriation by the religious spectacle of violence that will “kill” death for those who believe. De Bruyckere addresses a contemporary community, which, similarly to the medieval citizen, will be reminded of other spectacles of pain, as for instance those seen in present-day media. But do the pervasive images of violence find a new communitas? A “small dose” of religious imagery reminds the viewer of religious painting. De Bruyckere uses a visual motif to comment on the status of the spectacle of violence. The message of *Jelle Luipaard* is that death cannot be killed, and the communal desire to kill itself has a violent nature.

**Death in the Image**

On a visual level the elongated and very thin appearance of the body of *Jelle Luipaard*, as well as the way it hangs on its supporting structure, resembles the figure of death with the rags of flesh hanging from its skeleton, next to the reference to a Christ-like figure. In painting Death is a fantastic image. It does not represent an object; instead its proper referent is an event. Koerner provides an extended analysis of the figure of Death in Hans Baldung Grien’s work. His central thesis is that the image of the corpse, especially considered in the context of the myth of the Fall, thematises “the very activity of seeing and interpreting that make the production of meaning possible.” In the myth of the Fall, Adam and Eve bring mortality into the world defining death not only as an event that ends each person’s life, but as “a punishment leveled against humanity for Adam’s sin.” Adam gains access to the true meaning of his punishment, or his mortality, only through seeing the dead body of his son Abel. The vision of his cadaver transforms death into a spectacle, “an ostentatious message that God directs at the living to inspire terror in them.” In that religious context, according to Koerner:

> [... ] death transforms the body into a *sign* that is directed at the gaze of the living; and this spectacle, the cadaver, mediates certain fundamental knowledge about the nature of our postlapsarian existence that would otherwise be inaccessible. It is the sight of the corpse that enables us to regard life in its proper relation to death.

According to Koerner, in Baldung’s art death functions as a meta-image based on the

---

painter’s interpretation of the Fall; it is a mirror that interprets the living. This mode of signification implies a full overlap between the image and its referent – the dead body cannot be signified, but it is the very sign.

The figure of death is pictured in Baldung’s woodcuts and paintings as an animated corpse in several types of scenes – overtaking a knight, standing next to a young man, as an isolated figure, in a series of painting with Adam and Eve or with a young woman (Figs. 78 and 79). The figure is very thin, with rags of flesh hanging off its bones and it is usually represented as gazing intensely at the other figures in the image. Koerner argues that the animation of the corpse renders death representable:

The effect of death returns to become death’s cause; the knight is killed by the very thing that he will become[...] The function of such a reversal of temporal of temporal contingencies (present, past and future) is to make death representable and therefore accessible to the experience of the living beholder. Death, that state which is by definition outside of human experience and which also defines the irreversibility of history, must be imagined as a dramatisation or an event [...]45

The animated figure of Death appears in different versions. In the drawing *Death With an Inverted Banner* (1505–7) it appears alone (Fig. 74). In *Death Overtaking a Knight*, where the corpse returns to cause death, the corpse overlaps with Adam, who is the cause of our own mortality. As a result he “becomes an emblem of his own effect.”46 The gaze of Death can be seen as yet another mode of indication. A corpse or what will become of the body comes to get its younger version, thus indicating to the viewer the inevitable end.

Koerner explains that, according to the theology of the Fall, God initially created nature as a sign perfectly readable to man, who could reach the proper of end of mediation – his Creator. After the Fall the world became unreadable on its own and “between it and the man rose the sign of Scripture.”47 In that sense, the Fall implies a corruption in the very way man saw the world. Koerner argues that Baldung’s art itself attempts to articulate this fallen vision. The corpse in his art does not only serve to remind us of our mortality, to mortify our flesh, but it represents the mortification of the visual image itself that happens after the fall as a result of the corruption of man’s sight. As he puts it: “The figure of Death emblematizes the loss of a more direct access to meaning by demonstrating this very loss in the way it mediates its “content” to us.”48 According to Koerner the allegorism of German art expressed this fallen state of knowledge, where any object or relationship can mean something absolutely else,
thus evacuating it from any stable, original and stable meaning.\textsuperscript{49} Koerner concludes that in Baldung’s art Death does not mean anything in particular; what is important is not what it means but how it means, death itself becomes a hermeneutic, “a mode of figuration that [...] demands that images be regarded signs pointing beyond themselves [...] Itself as empty of specific content as it is of life, the corpse signals the presence of meaning elsewhere.”\textsuperscript{50} The figure of Death is an empty sign that connection coincides with, and thus signifies the bodily presence of the beholder; in other words it is a device of address.

\textit{Jelle Luipaard} is a contemporary piece that does not function in a religious context and it cannot be read as a religious allegory. In contrast to the depictions of Death in Baldung’s art, \textit{Jelle Luipaard} mirrors or addresses itself to the viewer directly, without the help of another mediating figure (knight, Eve, Adam). Yet, it is equally evacuated of a stable meaning as the figure of Death because it does not simply represent a dead body. The figure is so severely distorted, that it becomes an equally unreal or fictional image as the figure of Death. Both the figure of Death in Baldung’s art and Jelle Luipaard claim to represent a corpse, but they never fully overlap with it; they never fully signify a “corpse.” The corpse and its pictorial interpretation becomes a mode of figuration of breaking reference and not only of breaking resemblance.

In Baldung’s art his figure of Death functions as a visual sign that reminds us of the broken resemblance between God and man brought into the world by Adam. \textit{Jelle Luipaard} is an image-ruin, which can always mean something else and suspends attempts to be pinned down to a particular religious figure. The conflation of the multiple iconographical references co-present on its surface produces an image than means only itself– it signifies only itself. Yet, it does not define \textit{Jelle Luipaard} as a religious, or documentary image. On the contrary, this excess of references is a means of figuration of the moment of breaking the resemblance with a particular figure. The sculpture does not represent death as a reminder of our mortality, but addresses the very issue of its figuration in an art context. It presents the mortification of the art object itself. \textit{Jelle Luipaard} is a critical image in a double sense. It critically addresses the violence in religious iconography because it displaces a central religious image we are used to seeing, and repeats its violence in order to confront us with its logic. In that way the work acquires a critical agency without being a scandalous image from a religious viewpoint. On the other hand, it critically addresses our “consistent folly,” as Freedberg puts it, “of making images safe by ranking them as art,”\textsuperscript{51} thus, addressing the power of religion or of Art with a capital A to tame images and direct gazes.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., p. 89. \textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p. 93. \textsuperscript{51} Freedberg, \textit{The Power of Images}, p. 426.
Fig. 78 Hans Baldung Grien, *Death and the Woman*, 1518-20

Fig. 79 Hans Baldung Grien, *Death Overtaking a Knight*, 1510-12