

# Domestikator is nasty public art. The Louvre was quite right to reject it

Jonathan Jones

In a gallery, obscenity is one thing. But in a public space where people of all ages will see it without choosing to do so? That's bullying

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The other day I walked into a Brussels art gallery where a colossal bronze woman was swooning in sensual ecstasy. In case of any confusion about its sexual content, this new sculpture by Tracey Emin is called All I Want Is You. I couldn't help telling the artist she should erect it in a London park. "Erect" is the right word, for she jokes that from one angle it looks like a giant cock.

Dutch artist Joep van Lieshout's Domestikator, a model of a modernist building that happens to be shaped like a man penetrating a dog, makes me worry that I offered the wrong advice. Raunchy art in the adult and sophisticated context of a gallery - if necessary with warnings about its content - is one thing. Obscenity in public space where people of all ages will see it without making any choice to do so is another.

Domestikator has created a row in Paris involving not one but two of the French capital's art institutions. At the start of October the Louvre rejected this vulgar architectural joke for an exhibition of public art in the Tuileries Gardens. So now the Pompidou Centre has installed it outside instead.

An open-and-shut liberal case, n'est-ce pas? The director of the Pompidou certainly thinks so, claiming this statue is neither "pornographic" nor "obscene". Well it is certainly not pornographic in any mainstream sense: just a horrible, fatuous work of art whose sniggering elitism is profoundly ugly.

Elitist because van Lieshout is making an in-joke about architecture, mocking the Dutch tradition of utopian art and design. In the centenary year of the De Stijl movement, Domestikator resembles a De Stijl design gone badly wrong. It looks as if a socially responsible modernist architect has created a vision of an ideal habitation, only to accidentally make it look like a man penetrating a dog.

It is the glibness and complacency of Domestikator's use of sex that makes it repulsive. Take it seriously, and the image it shows is inherently violent and cruel. Take it even more seriously and it is animal abuse. But of course, we're not meant to take it seriously. We're supposed to laugh along and to understand that, obviously, Domestikator is not celebrating bestiality - merely making a clever comment about architecture.

To do that in a public space where people of all ages, all religions, all sexualities must see it whether they choose to or not, just by walking past, is profoundly arrogant. The Louvre made the right choice to reject this crass artwork. It was headed for the Tuileries, a completely open public garden where young children would unavoidably see it. Maybe it would mean nothing to them, but why should parents be red-faced as they usher their kids past this horrid artwork?

This is not about censorship. It is about politeness. Let's say you are watching Game of Thrones on headphones on a train and one of its highly effective moments of incongruous modern swearing happens. You laugh. It's brilliant writing, well acted. Art, even. The next day you're in the high street, and someone walks by swearing loudly so everyone can hear. Their behaviour is not art or wit. It is ugly, brutal, ostentatiously rude - for that person is communicating a contempt for everyone within hearing range.

Public art shapes the culture of our streets and squares. It should try to make them better places, not worse ones. Van Lieshout's sculpture is an attack on the very idea that art should improve or enrich anything. Mocking the idealism of modern architects, it spreads a cynical nihilism of its own.

Artistic freedom means liberating the imagination. It doesn't mean bullying other people. I think forcing strong sexual content on strangers of all ages is a particularly loutish form of bullying.

In Emin's exhibition in Brussels almost every drawing, painting and sculpture is erotic. There is even a giant enlargement of an old photograph of the artist lying on her front at a party that is probably the most provocative work she's ever done. Yet no one is made to look at any of this. That's reasonable and civilised. Art should be a chosen pleasure, not forced entertainment. I'm not putting on a fake smile to defend Domestikator's loveless aggression, even if I do still dream of seeing that giant nude in a park.

. Jonathan Jones writes on art for the Guardian

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