

# Too rude for Paris? 'Copulating' sculpture causes stir in French capital

Dutch artist says it is not sexual, but Louvre decided giant sculpture of human appearing to copulate with an animal was too rude to be displayed



▲ Explicit sculpture finds new home at Pompidou Centre – video

From a **vandalised butt-plug** to a desecrated **“queen’s vagina”**, Paris has often been at the centre of rows over whether some public art is supposedly too rude to go on show.

But the latest spat over a giant metal sculpture of a box-like figure appearing to copulate with a geometric being on all fours is proof that the label “too rude” can, for some **Paris** museums, be seen as a badge of pride.

Domestikator, a 12-metre-high, 30-tonne rust-red work by the Dutch sculptor Joep van Lieshout, has just been installed in Paris’s prime spot for modern sculpture: the esplanade of the Pompidou Centre modern art museum. But it was only given refuge there after being rejected by the more genteel **Louvre** museum as too sexual in the city’s latest sculpture spat.

The work was initially to be shown in the Tuileries Garden, adjacent to the Louvre – France’s most visited museum – as part of the annual international contemporary art fair in the French capital.

But at the last minute the Louvre’s president, Jean-Luc Martinez, backed out of hosting it, fearing controversy.

In a letter to FIAC’s organisers, Martinez said that internet posts and social media about the sculpture had created “an erroneous perception of this work that might be too rude for the traditional crowd in the Tuileries Garden”.

The Louvre’s decision came after discussion online about whether van Lieshout’s work looked animal or human and whether it was too tacky and lewd to stand outside **France**’s most prestigious museum. The Louvre only usually shows modern works if they are linked to or commissioned around its own historic collections.

The artist van Lieshout insisted his sculpture was in no way explicit, saying it was about highlighting “the questions raised by domestication in our world” and was not intended to elicit a sexual interpretation.

“I was surprised first of all, and then of course disappointed, because [the Louvre Museum] couldn’t show the art work,” he told Reuters. “I don’t think it’s very sexually explicit. I mean, I don’t know what I can do to make it less sexually explicit.” He insisted that his work defined the domestication of animals by humans for agriculture and industry, highlighting the ethical issues surrounding that.

The Pompidou Centre said the work was in no way obscene, rather that it was funny. Bernard Blistène, the Pompidou director, argued: “Obscene, pornographic? Well, obscenity is everywhere, pornography, sadly, is everywhere – certainly not in this work of art.”

The sculpture had been displayed for three years in Bochum, Germany with no controversy. But Paris is fertile ground not just for seeing racy connotations in modern sculpture, but also for vandalism against outdoor works deemed controversial.

Three years ago, the American artist Paul McCarthy put up his work *Tree* – described as resembling a giant inflatable **“butt-plug”** – near the French justice ministry and Ritz hotel in Paris’s Place Vendôme, only to become the target of a conservative backlash. When McCarthy then had his face slapped in public and vandals cut the inflatable sculpture’s cables, the artist decided to give up on the installation. At the time Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo said the incident was an unacceptable attack on artistic freedom.



▲ Paul McCarthy’s giant inflatable ‘butt-plug’ in Paris’s Place Vendôme. Photograph: Chesnot/Getty Images



In 2015, the artist Anish Kapoor’s *Dirty Installation*, a vast steel funnel amid broken stone on the lawns of the Château de Versailles – described as **“the vagina of the queen” taking power** – sparked rightwing complaints and was twice vandalised with antisemitic graffiti.