

BEING WIM DELVOYE

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Wim Delvoye was born on 14 January 1965 in Wervik, a small Belgian town in west Flanders, just a stone's throw from the French border. Even today, nearly fifty years later, what wouldn't we give to know the secrets of the fairies who leaned over his cradle. The many gifts granted to the young Flanders boy are only equalled by the Machiavellian gratification with which he would later contrive to use them for their subversive potential. Which amounts to saying that, with Wim, surprises started in the cot. For example, few people know that he owes his first name to a pop singer. He was a star in Flanders, unknown elsewhere, who fell into oblivion after having produced a Christmas hit that resulted in a whole generation of babies being named after him. According to the critic Adrian Dannatt, this name was as rare, regional and ethnic

as if it had been Cherokee.¹ As a boy, Delvoye already had a vague idea that he wanted to become an artist, even though he was still too young to fully understand the meaning of the word. However, he was bright enough to see that artists (good and bad) enjoyed an aura that other kinds of professions cruelly lacked.

As soon as he could hold a pencil, Wim drew with as much pleasure as skill. This gift came to him from his father's side of the family. Indeed, his father would have liked to have been an artist and had dreamed of going to Lille's *École des Beaux-Arts*, even if it meant cycling there every day. Alas, his dreams were quickly shattered. Someone happened to say to Madame Delvoye that sending her son to art school was the same as allowing him to draw naked women all day long. The plan was



Logo Wim Delvope, 2000

forgotten, and Wim's father became a teacher. He spent four years in the Congo teaching French language and history to young Africans. This is why Wim was photographed as a baby on a real leopard-skin rug. The family home was stuffed with treasures brought back from Africa, including an unbelievable quantity of statuettes and tomtoms. Huge elephant tusks presided over the corridor and the children's bedroom walls were covered with masks. Wim's father brought back an elephant's foot magazine rack from the Congo and this had a particular fascination for the boy. Clearly, the youngster was already developing a real taste for objects with ambiguous identities - things that show a blend of two distinct wholes. Perhaps this unusual elephant's foot was one of the distant sources of inspiration for those gas canisters created from Delft pottery? Or those dolled-up Louis XV-

style cement mixers, or even those football goals made of Limoges porcelain?

In 1973, when he was eight years old, Wim believed that he had found his vocation: he wanted to be Walt Disney. The first book to make a real impression on him was one with a collection of pictures from the famous animated film *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*. The artist had always loved to parody the kitsch world of Disney icons. Even today his business card takes the famous Walt Disney Pictures logo hostage. Since there was no cinema in Wervik that would show cartoons from Burbank's Disney Studios, the small boy was initiated into Walt's fairytale world mainly through remarkably orchestrated merchandising such as plastic toys, promotional gadgets and stickers. Above all, Wim spontaneously realized that Disney was as much a hunter of icons as a master of cinema.

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Wim Shop Poster, 2009
 inkjet print on paper, 594 × 420 cm



Untitled (Sawblade), 1989
enamel paint on metal sawblade, Ø 24 cm

A few years later, in 1977, he was very impressed by a visiting exhibition commemorating the 400th anniversary of Rubens's birth in Antwerp. But he was less fascinated by the works of the Baroque master than by the huge crowds who had come to the museum to religiously admire them. Every opportunity had been taken to sell beers, chocolates and cheeses, all stamped 'Rubens'. Once again, it was the complex merchandising mechanisms that obsessed the boy. However that may be, Rubens is the Baroque, and Wim loved it! The decorative overload that characterizes this period of art considerably pleased Delvoye who, like a serial killer, returned time and again to his crime of ornamentation.

What about his school career? There were not too many upsets, apart from one strange thing: a basic antipathy to ball games. Is this the reason that, later, Delvoye would settle his score with the football goals? As early as 1989 he was to imagine

them as cages whose stained-glass nets would cynically refuse any attempt to penetrate them. Two heroes had a profound effect on Delvoye's adolescence. Definitely unlike his peers, his juvenile affections naturally led him to identify with the 'truly villainous' such as Dr. No or with the 'seemingly nice' such as Willy Wonka. In his eyes, the fusion of these two heroes embodied the most perfect model - one that displays unashamedly the misanthropic superiority of the intellect over intellectual poverty.

As surprising as it might seem, it was the intervention of a counselling centre that was to decide Delvoye's career. After an unpleasant medical examination and a tedious series of tests, the psychologists reached the conclusion that the young man was no good at maths and should specialize in artistic studies. This is how, when he was fifteen, Delvoye entered the Vrij Technisch Instituut in Kortrijk, where, without great enthusiasm, he



Ultrabutane 505703, 1987
enamel paint on gas canister, 57 × Ø 31 cm



Saxen Bosh, 1990
enamel paint on shovel, 157 × 42.5 cm

studied for three years. In 1983 he entered the Koninklijke Academie voor Schone Kunsten in Ghent. Unfortunately for him, the art world, which had been dominated up to this point by conceptualism, was experiencing a renaissance in painting. This renaissance, which was imbued with a cumbersome pathos, left Delvoye completely cold. It was especially discouraging to be confronted by teachers who asked you, in all seriousness, to paint like Willem de Kooning or Karel Appel. So Delvoye deserted the studio in order to work at home in secret. Having cultivated a certain air of mystery around himself, he quickly became a real celebrity among his fellow students. In 1985, in order to get his own back on the much-vaunted painting of the pictorial, he began a series of paintings on fake Oriental rugs. These were the first works that Delvoye exhibited. The exhibition took place at the Galerie Plus-kern, Brussels, in 1986, when he was only twenty-one. The rug paintings are an ironic take on Mannerist or Rococo art, but they are full of surprises! Olympian gods

appear side by side with kangaroos, Dalmatians and ladybirds.

Between 1986 and 1989 Delvoye's art was influenced as much by the theories of the French Jean Baudrillard as by those of the Hungarian Arnold Hauser. He read with much interest Baudrillard's *Les Stratégies fatales* (1983), whose ideas on the 'simulacrum' - the fake copy - were to stimulate him greatly. Delvoye found here a legitimization of the principle of 'emulsion' with which he had been comparing his art for a long time. The objects that he created in the late 1980s - gas canisters in Delft-style pottery, shovels and ironing boards with heraldic designs, football goals in stained glass - all obey the same principle. The aim is to force two contradictory worlds to coexist in an ensemble where no mixing is possible. With no stable identities, these objects are transformed into hybrids capable of any interpretation. They had an immediate and dazzling success. After taking part in a few group exhibitions such as the one in the Museum voor Hedendaagse Kunst in Ghent in 1988 and in the Centraal Museum



Rose des Vents I (scale model), 2011
bronze and telescopes, variable dimensions

in Utrecht the following year, Delvoye was invited to exhibit at the Venice Biennale in 1990. In the same year he was offered a one-man exhibition in the Jack Tilton Gallery, New York. And, a year later, it was the Sonnabend Gallery, also in New York, that showed his range of 'emulsive objects'. Similarly, he showed at the Castello di Rivoli in Turin and the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney.

These objects have obvious sociological implications. The shovel with the heraldic designs forces an aristocratic coat of arms to cohabit with a workman's tool. This is unquestionably a settling of social scores. The writings of the art historian Arnold Hauser probably suggested to Delvoye that there can be no art without social conflict. So, the first gas canister in Delft-style pottery, in 1986, wasn't just a simulacrum, it was also a battlefield.

From the very beginning of his career, Delvoye deliberately amassed a provincial iconography. He considered himself a tribal (or ethnic) artist who was not afraid to flourish the materials and sym-

bols of his own culture, including the most crude. So, when preparing his portfolio, he deliberately chose neglected themes: the decorative, folk culture, craftsmanship and, before too long, the scatological. In 1992 this led to him causing a sensation at Documenta IX (directed by Jan Hoet), in Kassel, by presenting splendid white tiles with decorative designs using excrement: *Mosaic* (1990). This work was met with scandal and disgust but also fascination, and featured on the cover of *Flash Art* magazine. Very quickly, Delvoye became known for his obsession with shit and, especially, for anality. The many versions of the anus in his art are explained by his wish to give a certain universality to his work. For proof we should mention the work shown, also in 1992, at the Galerie Micheline Szwajcer in Antwerp: a sculptural group entitled *Rose des Vents* (1992). This consists of four naked men, standing in a circle, all of whom are pierced right through (i.e. from the anus to the mouth, or vice versa) by telescopes. This demonstrates that a man is merely a tube between two orifices. The merging of the



Anal Kiss, 2000
lipstick print on hotel stationery, 53 × 44 cm



Marble Floor #93, 1999
cibachrome on aluminium, 100 × 125 cm

mouth and the anus culminates with the *Anal Kiss* series (1999–2000), which are prints of anal sphincters made using lipstick. For Delvoye, the *Cloaca* machine was none other than a dialogue between our two basic orifices, with the anus symbolizing the material side of life and the mouth the spiritual side.

Delvoye's work during the 1990s owes much to the theories of Peter Sloterdijk on 'kunic' thought. This word refers to the cynicism of the philosopher Diogenes, who set store by everything that was judged to be low and outcast: sex, excrement and nudity. This makes it easier to understand the particularly 'kunic' interest that Delvoye has always had in shit. But he was to develop another theme throughout the 1990s: the 'criminal' use of ornament. One flagrant example is the work entitled *Cement Truck* (1990–9), exhibited in 2000 at the Pompidou Centre in Paris. This was a 7-tonne concrete mixer made entirely of teak and decorated in Louis xv style. Delvoye uses ornament as a crime in the sense that he deliberately verges on bad taste.

The fact of decorating a construction vehicle with precious ornament has something blasphemous about it, as regards both the decoration and the decorated object. In the series of digital photographs *Mountains* (1996, 1997, 2000 and 2003), we see mountainsides engraved with gigantic messages along the lines of 'Honey, don't forget to take out the garbage'. Another fine example of 'vicious' ornaments is the series of sadomasochistic *Birdhouses* (1997 and 1998). Here, Delvoye combines the sex life of birds with a clear liking for spiked underwear. This is not the only time that he was to indulge in incursions into the love life of animals. This sculpture, called *Trophy* (1999), shows two stuffed deer copulating in the very incongruous missionary position.

Staying in the animal register, we find that, in 1994, the artist began to tattoo pigs. The first tattooed skins were exhibited in the Galerie Tanit in Munich the following year. The first live tattooed pigs were displayed at the Middelheim Open Air Sculpture Museum, Antwerp, in 1997. Pigs are also



Cement Truck II, 1990-9
carved teakwood, 295 × 690 × 225 cm
2000, Centre Pompidou, Paris



Cloaca Travel Kit, 2009-10
mixed media, 26 × 78 × 53 cm

found in some stained-glass windows in the series *Chapel* (*January, October and November*, 2001) and in several of the *Sex-rays* (2000-1): *Shit, Finger Pig* and *Lick Pig*. The series *Marble Floors* (1999 and 2000) presents photographs of tiled floors made entirely of sliced ham and sausages. In 2003 the artist moved to China where he founded the Art Farm, near Beijing. There he raised and tattooed a large number of pigs. There was talk of creating a limited company to issue shares and thus generate profits for any investors. Finally, we note that in 2008 Delvoye also tattooed a Swiss man: Tim Steiner, a musician. His skin was sold to a collector, and he must make himself available from time to time to be exhibited.

The years since 2000 have been marked by the *Cloaca* project on the one hand, and the continually growing importance of the Gothic in the artist's work on the other. The world of *Cloaca* cannot simply be reduced to strange machines that show everybody their faeces; it also includes hundreds of drawings, models, stereoscopic photographs,

T-shirts, toilet paper, dolls, View-Masters, etc. In short, it is a wide-reaching business with stock-market pretensions! For Delvoye, this project is tantamount to building a cathedral. Scientists, computer experts and microbiologists, as well as labourers and plumbers have been working on it for years. So far, ten machines have been built and exhibited all around the world: Vienna, Düsseldorf, Luxembourg, Zurich, New York, Lyon, Toronto, Bordeaux, Brussels, Beijing and Hobart. To summarize, the first, called *Cloaca Original* (2000), was unveiled at MuHKA in Antwerp. This was a structure 12 metres long, with 6 retorts representing the stomach, the small intestine and the large intestine. The machines differ in the number of kilos of shit excreted (record for *Super Cloaca*: 300 kilos a day!), their design (super elegant for *Cloaca No. 5*, of course), their size (*Cloaca Travel Kit* fits into a suitcase), or the number of meals taken during a day (*Personal Cloaca* only eats once a day). The shit is sold in limited editions. Basically, the *Cloaca* machine is little more than a digestive tube without a body. Thus it



Double Helix cc 360 45, 2008
Berlin silver, 38 × 110 × 110 cm

is the ‘universal anus’: the most existential and the most materialist portrait of the human condition. In 2011, Wim exhibited the *Cloaca Professional*, specially designed for the art collector David Walsh’s extravagant museum near Hobart, in Tasmania. For this version he changed the design of his machine by placing the digestive retorts in Greek amphorae suspended from the ceiling, as is done these days for chic toilets. You can bet that he must have loved this experience in this fantastic and labyrinthine museum that can only be reached by crossing a river. Furthermore, Walsh and he have long shared, each in his own way, the same sincere affection for scatology.

Let us turn now to Delvoye’s other production, the most representative of the years since 2000: the Gothic. For almost fifteen years this question has been taking on endemic importance in his work. After having built flamboyant diggers and cement mixers out of Corten steel, he designed entire chapels in which to install his X-ray stained glass. Delvoye’s Gothic may have lost its faith but not its digestive system! The windows made, in 2006, for

his *Chapel* at Mudam, in Luxembourg, are evidence of this when they reveal the incredible luminescence of our loops of intestines. In fact, Delvoye’s architecture is a kind of neo-Gothic, cloned and perfected by computer. His models in lacy metalwork could be the creations of a computer-literate Pugin on acid. Delvoye’s swirling Gothic recalls the shell of a nautilus, or the most unbelievable of sine waves, or even the dynamics of the double helix. Giddy bronze figures of Jesus spiral upwards and church spires transformed into Towers of Babel dance the hula hoop. In 2009, Delvoye built a Gothic tower on the terrace of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice. At that time it measured 10 metres tall and was composed of 4,000 laser-cut components assembled in a studio near Ghent. At each showing it rises one stage higher; this tower is clearly intended to fly into the clouds. In Venice there was only the pinnacle. By spring 2010 an extra level had been added for its showing at the Musée Rodin in Paris. And by autumn of the same year a base 5.7 metres tall was



Tour (Brussels), 2010

laser-cut corten steel, 1,700 × 260 × 260 cm

Knocking on Heaven's Door, 20.10.2010 - 23.01.2011, BOZAR, Brussels

created for the exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. Now, at 17 metres overall, it may look complete, but, with a personality like Delvoye's, there is every reason to think that one day it will reach the stars!

Like a Renaissance genius, Delvoye has toyed with a number of extravagant projects that have never come into being: an equestrian statue made of bogeys, a giant table-football figure placed in the grotto at Lourdes, a dog whose facial features have been altered by plastic surgery, and a rug made from his own cloned skin! At one time he even thought of creating Cloacaland, an amusement park entirely devoted to the workings of the gut. Now he is dreaming of erecting a heavenly

Jerusalem – that is, an entirely Gothic city – in the very real park of the castle that he owns in Kwatrecht, near Ghent.

Decidedly, much water has passed under the bridge; the days when the little boy in Wervik imagined himself as Disney or Rubens are long gone. Today, Wim Delvoye is a world-famous artist. The deciding moment in his life was when he took the train out of his village for Kortrijk, and then for Ghent. He may well have conquered the planet, but nothing can erase that moment when he left his home and turned his past into an 'emulsive' weapon, transforming ironing boards into shields, lorries into cathedrals, and shit machines into cornucopias.

1 Adrian Dannatt, 'Un anecdotaire acrostiche de Wim Delvoye', in *Wim Delvoye*, Musée départemental d'art contemporain, Rochechouart 1995, p. 11