



LIKE JUDAS KISSING JESUS

Wim Delvoye talks to Marc Valli about his sex-rays, touching upon subjects as varied as political correctness, the peculiar absence of the X-ray in art history, movies, cyborgs, the fear of litigation as a modern form of censorship, and how the radiologist he worked with had never thought of placing his dick in the mammography machine, whereas Wim...

Great artists tend to be candid when talking about their work. It is one of the benefits of success and security. When I talk to Wim Delvoye, he is nothing if not candid. His work calls upon a complex framework of references, but he is not the type to hide behind concepts.

I start by asking him when he first thought of using X-ray photography?

'I think it was after I saw a film with Jeremy Irons playing these twin brothers... I forgot the name of the film...' I know the film too, but I struggle to come up with the title. I suggest it's a Cronenberg film and he agrees with that, but we're still unable to come up with the name. He carries on regardless, 'When I saw that movie, I thought there was something weird going on between men and science. I happened to be chewing on the idea that so many women were exploring their femininity and making it the main subject of their art, as in, "I'm a bad girl, and I am doing a cucumber on a mattress, and I am getting the Turner price... And this is contemporary art. It's a statement about patriarchal society, blah, blah, blah..." My generation specialized in that kind of thing. The nineties were all about that. And I was looking for a way of responding to that. Not that I felt threatened, it was more that, as they were saying, "We

are not just artists, but female artists..." I kept wondering if I shouldn't be more clear about being male. There was a lot of academic writing about gender at the time. And all this business about the other. Museums were showing interesting art by African artists, Indian artists, Afro-Americans, etc. But everything else was suspected of being "colonialist". We were guilty of all these things... We were all Germans. Or male, or American, or Western. You were eating a Mars bar and then suddenly you were a colonialist... We were all feeling bad about something. We thought we could make people better. There was a lot of paranoia about being politically correct and this affected the whole art production of the period, which now looks very dated in my opinion. So I was thinking about the Cronenberg film and I told myself, "Look, this is about men, who are scientists, but they're crazy scientists!" It made me think of the 19th century and all that crazy science, when, for example, doctors were letting people die on scales in order to measure the difference in weight before and after death in an attempt to weigh the human soul. At the same time, I was thinking a lot about how to talk about myself, as a male person and as a kind of a nerd with glasses... And I started having these ideas: *Cloaca* (the shitting machine), the sex-rays...'

'The sex-rays and *Cloaca* were ways of thinking about the human as a cyborg, about looking at bodies and love-making in a mechanical way, unscrewing the nuts and the bolts of the human machine, then

noticing, for example, that this person has a silicone breast, a tooth implant, etc. I think it's a fascinating relationship, that of the human and the machine. You see, if we don't have a soul, then maybe a machine is a human being too? Machines may not yet have fully developed nervous systems, but we're getting close... Most of the artists that I like - Picabia, Man Ray, Duchamp... - dealt with the relationship between the human and the machine.'

'*Cloaca* too was closely related to movies: Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*... There were so many films that helped me. *Willy Wonka & The Chocolate Factory*! Since I was a little boy I wanted to make a shit machine, and all the theory of the art critics is just a way of justifying a need I had when I was a little boy: to make a big shit machine! For other people, it's art - for me? I just wanted to make more shit than all other people together...'

'In fact, X-ray photography has existed for as long as the movies. At the same time as people were experimenting with moving photography, Professor Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen took his first picture, still hanging at the Röntgen Museum. Professor Röntgen was very faithful to his wife and his first picture was of Mrs Röntgen's hand with her ring. Of course, neither Mr nor Mrs Röntgen knew how dangerous the rays they were playing with were. But that picture is very beautiful, charged with romance, just a small picture of a hand. Then you notice the metal ring... See? A cyborg already. Animals

Previous page:

Fuck 1
C-print on aluminium,
100x125 cm, edition of 6
2000-2001

Below:

Kiss 1
C-print on aluminium,
100x125 cm, edition of 6
2001



Below:
Dick I
C-print on aluminium,
125x100 cm, edition of 6
2001

don't put metal rings around themselves. As soon as we start putting metal things and jewels around ourselves we are already turning ourselves into cyborgs.'

'I find curious the idea that X-ray photography was born at the same time as moving photography, and whereas moving photography went on to become a great art form, X-ray photography hasn't produced almost any art. So I thought of picking up on that. Andy Warhol used X-ray photography, because of its banality, and there were a few pictures painted from X-rays, or on X-rays, but otherwise almost nothing.'

'Now a few kids are using it. Even porn mags have copied me. I was once at a petrol station and I noticed this X-ray pastiche on the cover of a porn mag... It was pleasurable to see how badly this was

done. They did tricks with Photoshop. We didn't use the computer at all. We didn't manipulate or use the computer for anything, except maybe for cleaning white dust spots. Otherwise it was just barium and X-ray machines. Some of my pictures have also been circulating on the internet. I have even received jokes via email with my sex-rays in them.'

I ask him if all that bothers him.

'Not really. I am an empiricist. The notion of Art seems to be something that gets wrapped around a product when you are selling it. Oh, I see, that's Art then... In fact, if I flashback now, I think one of the key ideas of my generation was that of not differentiating between high and low. I very quickly gave up on any differentiation, on any dichotomy, any taxonomy. More than ten years ago, I laid down

a rule for myself, which said: I don't give a shit if people want to call it Art. I am an eye-man, and I look and look... And if I see something I find interesting, whether in a theme park, or a museum, then it has value for me. High, low, one stop up, one stop down... Is there a lift that takes one up from kitsch to art? Imagine if you were to worry every day, "Is this really art? High art?" You would shit in your pants! You would end up trapped in your story, not being able to move on, change. The more people are around you and your work, the greater the risk of you getting trapped. "More butterflies, Damien, more butterflies..." Of course I run that risk too. That's why I try to position myself slightly on the periphery. Design can be an interesting periphery. Belgium can be an interesting periphery. A folksy and as





Left:
Kiss 4
C-print on aluminium,
100x125 cm, edition of 6
2000

Right:
Dick 3
C-print on aluminium,
100x125 cm, edition of 6
2000

yet unknown painter whose work I have started to collect can also be an interesting periphery. Art is not what people expect. If you keep on making what is expected of you, the only person you are going to surprise is your banker. I pretend I am very young and I have so much time to become serious later... I feel like I am a student and I want to learn. Maybe in a hundred years people will decide that what I did is not art. That's a risk. But I'm never worried. I love my work. I do it out of sheer pleasure. So far, I have produced nine shitting machines, and they are still all here, and they are not for sale. I grew too attached to them. The tenth is being produced for a museum built under the ground by a collector in Tasmania. The museum has a very interesting collection ranging from Egyptian to contemporary art. It is carved out of the rocks, like a James Bond set, fifty metres under the desert, ready for the next nuclear outfall.'

Nuclear outfall? I can't help making the obvious connection between this and

the X-rays: radiation. It seems to haunt Wim's work, while health & safety issues follow him like austere governesses.

'It was only later that I realised that, with most of my projects, whether making shitting machines, tattooing pigs, or x-raying people, that it would not have been easy to do them if I happened to be an American artist working, say, in New York. I would have had serious problems convincing doctors in such a litigious country. They would also have been more puritanical. You need to be pretty relaxed as a doctor to let an artist play around with people and spaghetti and all the things we've done. Not all these experiments worked and ended up as art pieces, but we spent a lot of Saturday afternoons on them. I doubtless would have had animal rights issues in relationship to the pigs. Over here, in Belgium, if I suggest some crazy thing on the phone to someone, and then add, "but it's for art." They say, "Oh, if it's for art, then it's OK." Here artists enjoy a certain public status.

If you say that "it's for art" you can get away with so much stuff...'

Like asking the director of a clinic whether you can use his equipment and his staff to make X-rays of people having sex?

'Exactly. Eventually we bought a machine and did some X-rays, like the mice, in our studio, but for the obvious health & safety reasons we would only do people in a clinic. Usually the models were very straight couples, who had been picked because they were friends, or because they already knew the work. They would have a little bit of privacy inside the X-ray machine. But then they only have sixty centimetres of space inside. The machines are made for just one body, and as soon as you bring in a second body then it gets very tight... That's why you have this close-up aspect to the work. We once worked with a very large X-ray machine, used to scan trucks at customs at the port in Rotterdam. But we didn't do it with people as the radiation is not adapted to human bodies.



Opposite:
Viae Crucis
C-print on dibond,
variable dimensions
(each panel: 80 x 100 cm)
2006



I was always very concerned as to how far I could go medically.'

'I wouldn't radiate anyone for 6 months after they had one go (and had such a good time with their girlfriend). Sometimes I was desperate, and I would do it myself. I would also do that when there was something no one else wanted to do. For example, penetrating a chicken. There were many amateurs for blowjobs, and everyone was in there with their wives, girlfriends and neighbours... Imagine. They all loved the idea of having their picture in a museum in a secret and non-embarrassing way. And people have all these romantic ideas about art. They think of it as eternal... Still there were no amateurs for the chicken. In the end, the picture wasn't so good. It only worked when I cut it and used it as pattern in one of the windows. But you would need to be either a doctor or a radiologist to be able to tell what it is.'

'We would always work with a willing doctor. Over the years, I went through many different doctors. They would rarely let me do it twice. It was just too much trouble doing this on a Saturday afternoon, and they would give me excuses like, "Oh, this Saturday? I am skiing. Oh, I have an appointment..." Then I found a doctor who was enthusiastic. He came to me himself, and we worked together for a couple of years.'

'I remember how this doctor would gasp and say, "It's amazing! I have been working for twenty years with this machine and I never thought of that!"'

'And I would say, "What? You didn't? It was the first thing I thought about!"'

'We spent a lot of Saturdays together doing experiments. I will do many, many pictures until I find something that approaches what I want. But you're very limited, because you can only use the same models for three or four shots, then you have to change them. The waiting room at the clinic was just filled with friends waiting. I had to ask them to keep calm and stay serious, but it was difficult... I just can't imagine that you could go to a clinic and make art in, for example, the US.'

Anything I see I think of putting my dick in it, to find out what it feels like

'You have to imagine the set-up. I will be behind the machine choreographing the work according to what I would see on a screen. The models will be in the X-ray machine and they'll hear me yelling, "To the left! To the right!" The doctor is in the room too, with his white clothes and glasses that make him look so nerdy. He is being super serious as he doesn't want to hurt anyone, and I am asking him these crazy questions, and I am sure that deep down he is enjoying this...'

'He happened to be going through a sort of mid-life crisis and needed to break out a bit and was scared. So he needed me, whereas I needed him for his medical knowledge. At first I felt I needed to give the pieces medical titles, but after a while I scraped all of those and gave all the pieces 4-letter word titles like *Jerk*, *Dick*, *Fuck*, etc.'

'And every time we did something, the doctor would say, "But I never thought of that!"'

'Consider the situation of the doctors: you study for years to become a doctor, then specialise as a radiologist. You are thirty when you finally finish studying and you have to buy the machines to start a private clinic. etc. Not surprisingly, they are a bit late in their development. They are these very straight men, and it was a bit of a culture shock for me to work with them. It was like a great, exotic thing for me, an adventure, meeting these non-artistic people, who get up early in the morning, and have to behave as they have many people queueing, for example, to get their tits checked.'

'Actually when I first saw the machine that does that, I asked, "What's that?"'

'And the doctor replied, "That's a mammography machine. What is it for? But for tits, of course."

'And I thought to myself that if I put a tit in it, well, that would not make it art. What could I put in that would make it into art? So I started putting my dick in it.'

'And the doctor said, "But I never thought of that!"'

"You didn't?" I asked him, "How long have you had that machine for?"

'Anything I see I think of putting my

dick in it, to find out what it feels like. It's like touching it. The doctor was so amazed by this weird man... There was a mutual fascination.'

'The X-rays go in periods. First I had a sexual period and stopped. Then there were the 3D ones. Then I was doing *Cloaca*, the shitting machines, and then I scanned the machines. Then I did the *Stations Of The Cross* with mice...'

As I listen to Wim talk about the different stages in his career – sex-rays, shitting machines, stained glass windows, tattooed pigs, architectural models of great cathedrals... Sex, excrement, religion... – I cannot help noticing how his work seems to swing on a pendulum, oscillating between the most concrete (and often unpleasant) realities of life and a somewhat nonchalant desire to reach a spiritual dimension, the all too obvious realities of life always pitched against the unintelligible reality of death. Radiation haunts his world like death's grim (and invisible) angel.

A strange idea occurs to me: I suddenly see Wim Delvoye as a post-modern version of the medieval mystic. His X-rays remind me of those bones and body parts preserved in Catholic churches. The body of the medieval mystic would survive his death. His body, his bones, would be broken down and scattered as relics, which were supposed to radiate eternally with great power. I think of Wim's sex relics, hanging on museum walls, and of groups of people stopping to gape at, and be inspired by, those bones glowing in that dark celluloid substratum. I think of Wim's middle finger, raised in defiance, radiated into eternity.

If the sex-rays first started as a youthful reaction against gender politics, they ended up going in quite a different direction.

'One of the qualities I like about both the sex-rays and *Cloaca* is the fact that they are all sexless. *Cloaca* is neither male, nor female. It doesn't excite, or tell anything particular about gender, or politics. It is just the story of shit. Everyone shits, young, old, poor, rich, even Prince Charles... Shit is one of the great equalizers. The sex-rays are equalizers too.

Looking at the sex-rays is like seeing someone becoming super naked. It's like going one step too far. It's like a striptease gone wrong. The sex-rays are a form of hyper-pornography, which is in a way a form of anti-pornography. These people are doing something very romantic, but inside a machine. It's about the organic body and the machine, and how they meet. It's like Judas kissing Jesus, kissing your enemy softly.'

I suggest that the sex-rays emphasize the iconography of sex, with hanging tongues and dangling penises and gaping jaws.

'Yes, and the gestures, and the positions, how one body is lower than the other, and you see the hand of one being on the head of the other, and how one becomes like a stool for the dominating person, etc. Thanks to the X-rays, sex becomes timeless and mythological. You can imagine in a hundred years people recognizing X-rays as a classical way of looking at people, an idealized way of looking at people.'

Wim may possess a mordant sense of humour, but he isn't just a prankster. There is a deeper and more emotional side to the work. When I look at the X-rays, I see religion, and I see sex, but there is also something else, and it touches me very differently. I cannot say it moves me deeper than sex, or religion. That wouldn't be accurate. Rather, it evokes how deeply and inexplicably the aftermath of love-making or of religious ecstasy can move a human being, churning the pit of one's stomach, keeping one out of breath long after all the pitch and movement have stopped.

And all the time, the sex-rays kept reminding me of something in particular, though I couldn't quite picture what it was, just as Wim and I couldn't come up with the title of that Cronenberg movie. Then suddenly it hit me. What the X-rays reminded me of: a fetus, scanned, photographed, inadvertently captured, amid that peaceful and sexless ballet inside the mother's starlit womb, dancing weightlessly, thoughtlessly, on the cusp of life.

Dead Ringers. The title of the film has just come back to me too ●