

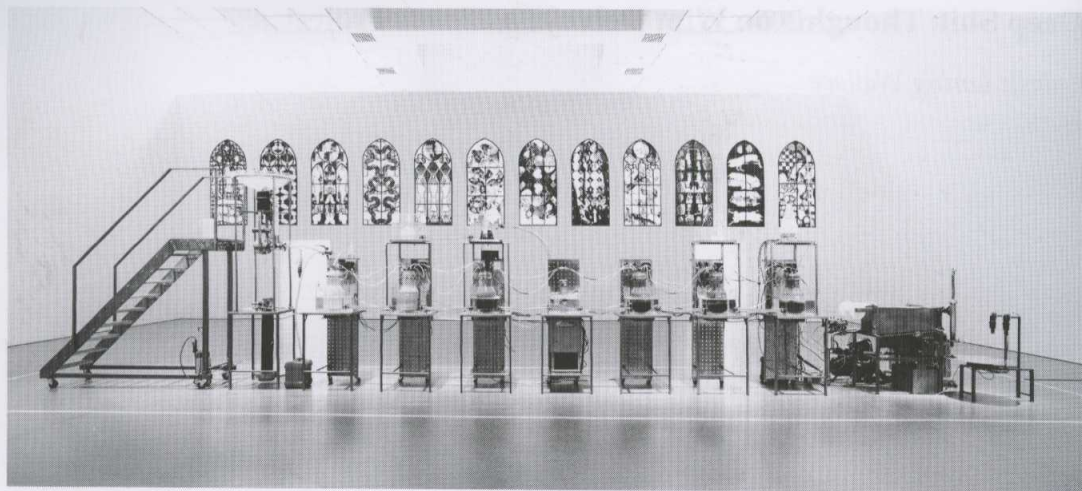
Deep Shit: Thoughts on Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca* Project

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Introduction

This chapter establishes the relevance of Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca* project, 2000–2007, to three classical myths that are themselves provocatively entangled: Medusa, Narcissus, and Pygmalion. Building on the fact that each myth turns on the relationship between an individual and an image or visual art object (Perseus before the shield, Pygmalion beside his statue, Narcissus at the water's edge), my analysis points to essential affinities between these spectatorial scenarios, while at the same time revealing a multifaceted relationship between these mythological encounters and the complex experience of beholding works in Delvoye's series, most notably, the work known as *Cloaca New & Improved*, 2001. To elaborate, my essay is concerned with the entirety of Delvoye's series and with one work in particular; in other words, I take seriously the fact that there is a series (rather than a single work) and think carefully about what the series's trajectory implies about Delvoye's project as whole.¹ At the same time, I often turn to *Cloaca New & Improved* because, from my point of view, it is this particular work that thematizes most directly and self-consciously a set of ideas that are germane to the entire series and the classical myths it invokes. Thus, by way of introduction, some general remarks about the works in Delvoye's series, after which I begin my analysis in earnest.

Described by the artist as a "shit machine," *Cloaca Original*, 2000, like the seven works that followed it in rapid succession, is just that: a computerized machine designed for the purpose of manufacturing real, machine-made shit in the open context of the gallery or museum (Fig. 10.1).² Perhaps more impressive is the fact that *Cloaca Original* achieves this end by faithfully replicating the human process of digestion from mouth to anus. Designed by the artist in consultation with a team of scientists from the University of Antwerp, *Cloaca Original* is thus impressively complex. Fed human food twice a day, it consists of a garbage disposal and extruding mechanism (the mouth



10.1 Wim Delvoye, *Cloaca Original*, 2000, 1,160 × 170 × 270 cm, mixed media. Exhibition view: Museum Kunst Palast, Düsseldorf. Image courtesy of Wim Delvoye Studio.

and anus respectively) and, in between, a formidable tangle of tubing, wires, and six large glass jars full of computer-monitored enzymes, bacteria, and acids that together fulfill the digestive roles of the stomach, pancreas, and small and large intestines. As an object (but also as an installation and performance), *Cloaca Original* is similarly impressive: it is over thirty-eight feet long and over eight feet high and typically fills an entire gallery or museum floor, which is just enough space to accommodate both the trailer-sized machine and, in the fall of 2000, the spectators who gathered daily at the Contemporary Museum in Antwerp to see marketable “evidence” that the first machine in Delvoye’s series had punctually completed its digestive cycle.³

As one might expect from its title, *Cloaca New & Improved* is similar to the first machine, although in keeping with the trajectory of the series as a whole, *Cloaca New & Improved* is more compact and seemingly more high-tech (Fig. 10.2). Whereas the aesthetic of *Cloaca Original* recalls an overly ambitious science project, *Cloaca New & Improved* has a more industrial, streamlined design, its sloppier bits (tubing, wires, etc.) elegantly encased in squared-off, stainless steel vitrines that hide, rather than confess the process’s details. Still, the output of the first and second machines is essentially the same: as with its predecessor, *Cloaca New & Improved* produces between 200 and 400 grams of shit on cue each day in the mid-afternoon.

Likewise, the logos for these two works (each sculpture in the series has one) are also similar. *Cloaca Original*’s logo is the more simple of the two, despite being provocatively multivalent. Best described as a graphic rendering of a shiny blue oval inscribed with the word “cloaca,” the original logo conjures, in its shape and lettering, not only the Ford motor company with whom the idea of mass production is forcefully and foundationally aligned, but also, as Delvoye has noted, Coca-Cola, with which *Cloaca* shares all four of its letters.⁴ To this, the *Cloaca New & Improved* logo adds the recognizable figure of Mr. Clean (both his torso and, beneath the blue oval, a schematic drawing of his intestines), who

notably looms over the series as a whole from this point forward, whether in the context of the voluminous drawings that accompany each work, or as part of subsequent logos within the series (Plate 12).

Consider, for example, the third and fourth works in the series: *Cloaca Turbo* and, its successor, *Cloaca Quattro*. Completed in 2002, *Cloaca Turbo* is, at twenty-seven feet long and six and a half feet tall, still more compact than its predecessors; likewise, its appearance seems more industrial and utilitarian when compared with the first two *Cloaca* machines, their elegant and arguably feminine glass vessels here replaced with three units that ironically conjure the idea of a heavy-duty washing machine. Accordingly, the logo for *Cloaca Turbo* recalls the expressly macho emblem of the Harley Davidson Company, featuring an eagle and, beneath it, a shield filled not with the word "motorcycle" but instead, a schematic rendering of Mr. Clean's intestines. Completed in 2004, *Cloaca Quattro* again features Mr. Clean in its logo, but here combined with the figure of Popeye, whose muscle-bearing pose Mr. Clean adopts in this context. As for the work itself, it exaggerates further the masculine aesthetics of the former (its form less elegant and more utilitarian) and, perhaps relatedly, it assumes, for the first time in the series, a vertical format, which it will in turn share with its successor, *Cloaca N°5*, 2005, despite the incongruous reference made by this title to the legendary Parisian perfume. And, if the proportions of

10.2 Wim Delvoye, *Cloaca New & Improved*, 2001, 1,000 × 75 × 200 cm, mixed media. Exhibition view: Migros Museum, Zürich. Image courtesy of Wim Delvoye Studio.



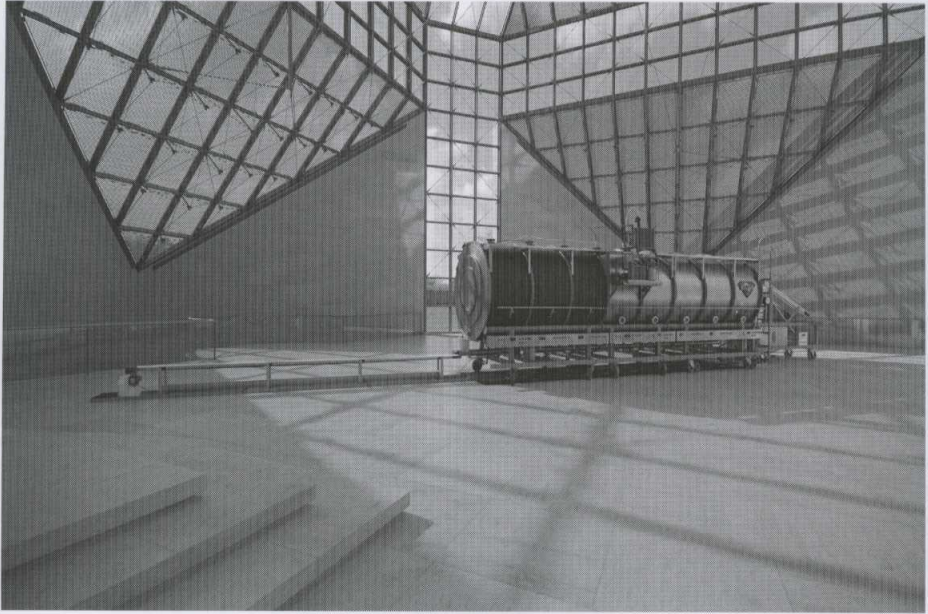


10.3 Wim Delvoye, *Personal Cloaca*, 2006, 100 × 68.5 × 100 cm, mixed media. Image courtesy of Wim Delvoye Studio.

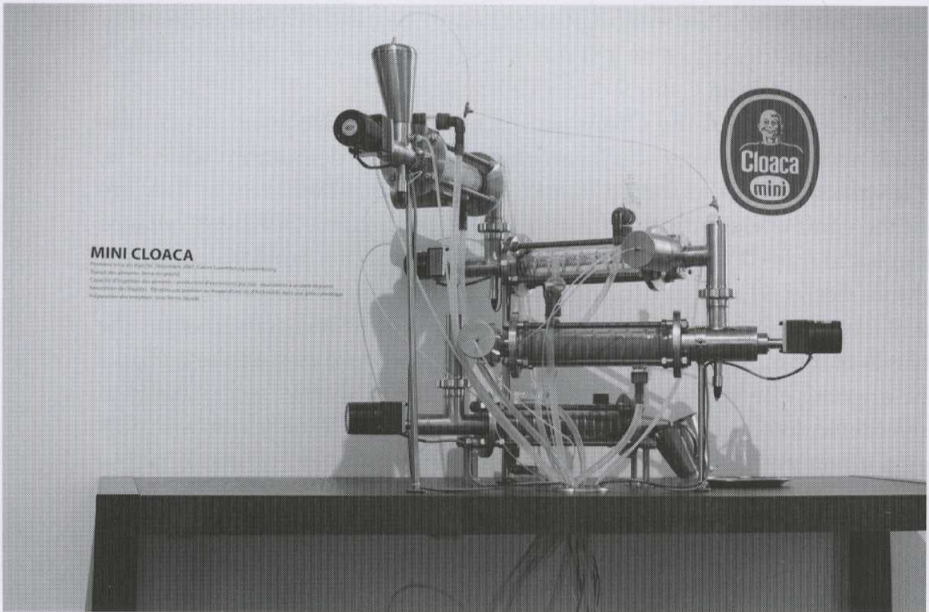
Cloaca N°5, make the fifth machine the most anthropomorphic in the series (like Coco Chanel, it might be described as tall, slender, and androgynous), it is the significantly smaller sixth machine, *Personal Cloaca*, 2007, that forges an intimate relation to the spectator—both because its streamlined logo mimics exactly the logo for Durex condoms and because it is, at first glance, indistinguishable from the commonplace washing machine it resembles (Fig. 10.3).⁵

The final machines in the series to date, *Super Cloaca*, 2007, and *Mini Cloaca*, 2007, break with the ironic concept of the washing machine, the former resembling a freight car stranded on a fragment of track. Accordingly, *Super Cloaca* is monumental in both scale and capacity; at nearly fifty feet long, it is by far the largest machine in the series, consuming in a single sitting roughly 300 kilograms of food, approximately the daily input of 250 people. In turn, and as underscored by the work's Superman-inspired logo, *Super Cloaca's* output is also super-human (between 250 and 300 kilograms)—one of several facts that make this work the polar opposite of the final work in Delvoye's series, the recently unveiled *Mini Cloaca* (Figs. 10.4, 10.5). Returning spectators to the laboratory aesthetic of *Cloaca Original*, *Cloaca Mini* is by far the smallest work in the series and is typically displayed atop a table, its spindly forms at once intimate and, in their delicacy, unnerving. Appropriately, the small, aqua-blue logo for the work recalls another logo charged with the responsibility of branding something small (I refer here to the sticker affixed atop every Chiquita banana), only in this case, one finds Mr. Clean's face and implied torso in the place of Miss Chiquita Banana (Fig. 10.6). Not surprisingly, the machine's input and output are comparably modest; *Cloaca Mini* is capable of digesting only one meal at a time, a quantity the press release described as a "French style breakfast" or, if one prefers, a banana imported from Central America.⁶

As this inventory of the *Cloaca* project makes clear, Delvoye's works are as much about the biological process of digestion and defecation (what it is, how it works, what fears attend it, and, likewise, what fantasies) as they are about the commercial process of marketing. Indeed, given Delvoye's reliance on logos and frankly commercial titles, and given also the rapid succession of machines designed as if to accommodate a variety of constituents (personal, clinical, corporate) as well as, with increasing efficacy and convenience, the demands of the individual consumer, one is tempted to interpret these works as the ongoing effort to realize and concretize human desire as it pertains to the overdetermined subject of shit. As such, my own essay considers Delvoye's series with an eye to determining what those desires might be and how the prospect of their realization might impact upon culture and man, more generally. That these issues are productively engaged through the unlikely lens of classical myth and, in particular, three tales that are themselves concerned with the relationship between people and their two and three-dimensional counterparts, is a fact Delvoye acknowledges most forcefully in *Cloaca New & Improved*, even as this work easily maintains a clear relation to the series as a whole. Mindful of this dynamic, I now take up Delvoye's series in more detail,



10.4 Wim Delvoye, *Super Cloaca*, 2007, 1,470 × 211 × 307 cm, mixed media. Exhibition view: Mudam, Luxemburg. Image courtesy of Wim Delvoye Studio.



10.5 Wim Delvoye, *Mini Cloaca*, 2007, 221 × 90 × 185 cm, mixed media. Exhibition view: Casino Luxembourg, Luxembourg. Image courtesy of Wim Delvoye Studio.

considering through its first and second incarnations, the relationship that exists between the series and the well-known story of Perseus and Medusa.

I.

I begin with a simple observation. Works in Delvoye's series stage publically an activity that is typically hidden from view, both because the digestive process is internal and therefore invisible, and because social squeamishness about shit and the means of its excretion has kept even the visible aspects of this process under wraps. A unifying attribute of humanity (shitting is an activity from which no one is exempt), defecation may also be regrettable evidence of our kinship with most other creatures.⁷ Freud certainly thought so, and in *Civilization and its Discontents* he goes so far as to say that civilization depends upon the suppression of excrement and the body parts with which it is associated.⁸ In other words, Man and animal may both excrete, but, as far as Freud is concerned, Man differentiates himself from animal by suppressing this essential and universal fact. Likewise, Julia Kristeva makes a similar argument at the level of the individual. In her well-known theory of abjection, she argues not only for a lifelong process of casting off materials associated with waste (feces prominent among them), but also for a developmental phase that precedes the Lacanian mirror stage and is a precondition of its narcissistic dynamic.⁹ During this inaugural phase of development—a phase that follows upon and terminates a blissful sense of boundlessness in which the concepts of both self and other are unknown—separation from the maternal begins, albeit in fits and starts. For Kristeva, it is this struggle, this “primal repression” of the material, maternal body, that constructs, or is the essential precondition of, the autonomous human subject, which is finally achieved only later, between six and eighteen months of age, in the course of the Lacanian mirror stage. In sum, abjection is for Kristeva the developmental process by which the Subject comes to be; accordingly, it is also the means by which man differentiates himself from animals and is thus, as Kristeva puts it, the “the primer of culture.”¹⁰

As noted, for Kristeva, the phenomenon of abjection also informs the lifelong relation of the Subject to substances (shit, vomit, puss, the corpse) that are subsequently aligned with the maternal precisely for their capacity to return the Subject to the now traumatic prospect of undifferentiation. Called abject by Kristeva, these materials are negotiated by the Subject through a process of abjection by which the unrepresentable Real is cast off and, with it, various threats to the Subject's borders and coherence.¹¹ As bodily excretions are demonstrable, daily evidence of our border's violation, and as they are thus also a daily threat to the basic constitution of the self as sovereign, they are recurring subjects in Kristeva's discussion of this distressing psychic phenomenon. Even so, it is important to bear in mind that the abject is less an object than a force that draws one to the place where the very idea of a concrete and definable object and, along with it, a discrete and definable Subject, are traumatically undone.

Hence, for Kristeva, the profound prescription and regulation of scenarios likely to trigger this destabilizing force; indeed, from a Kristevan point of view, civilization is nothing if not the ritualistic management of the material body to this end, from birth to bathroom to bier.

Of course, other writers will see things differently: Marquis de Sade, Salvador Dalí, Peter Sloterdijk, and, the so-called excrement philosopher, Georges Bataille will variously insist that such disavowals are symptoms of a diseased and delusional culture, one whose rehabilitation requires an unashamed re-engagement with certain essential excremental facts.¹² Arguably, it is just these facts that Delvoye's series puts on display; indeed, it is not for nothing that writings by these same figures often accompany more conventional art-historical accounts in major catalogues devoted to the *Cloaca* project.¹³ Yet, is it really fair to say that *Cloaca* follows in the spirit of such maverick theorists, artists, and philosophers? Admittedly, the *Cloaca* project does succeed in returning spectators to aspects of existence that culture works hard to suppress. Even so, can *Cloaca* really be aligned with the impulse to re-engage the excremental act? And, if so, does the type of re-engagement it affords so alter the act as to make it something else altogether? After all, what the *Cloaca* machines show us, at considerable expense and labor, is not digestion, but digestion's facsimile, not shit, but shit's representation, and it is in this regard that a correlation at last emerges between the *Cloaca* project and the myth of Perseus and Medusa.¹⁴

The basic narrative of Perseus's encounter with Medusa is well known: under the watch of Hermes and Athena, and wearing a cap of invisibility purloined from the daughters of Phorcos, Perseus sets off in search of the Gorgons, with the aim of retrieving for Polydectes, the king of Seriphos, the mortifying head of Medusa. Upon arrival, Perseus finds the Gorgons asleep, and although he is unable to gaze upon them directly for fear that he will be turned to stone, he sees, in the reflection of Athena's polished shield, their horrible hair of snakes. His gaze locked on Medusa's reflected image (among the Gorgons she alone is mortal), Perseus uses the unbreakable sword of Hermes to sever her head, collecting for his return this most famous of spoils. Various delayed in his journey, Perseus eventually arrives in Seriphos only to discover the many cruelties performed by Polydectes in his absence. Using Medusa's head to turn the evil king and his followers to stone, Perseus then bequeaths the head of Medusa to Athena, who henceforth wears it affixed to the center of her formidable shield.

As many commentators have observed, the myth of Perseus and Medusa turns on a crucial distinction: as with *Cloaca*, there is, on the one hand, the impossible and unbearable Real and, on the other, its tolerable re-presentation as image.¹⁵ In the case of the myth, the Real takes the form of the once beautiful Medusa at whom no person can look; in the case of *Cloaca*, the Real takes the form of human excrement, from which civilization turns in order to gaze upon its manufactured, and thus bearable, simulation. That science and technology play a key role in Delvoye's project—these being for the modern West what the Gods were to the ancient Greeks—makes the analogy between Delvoye and Perseus all the more compelling, as does the fact of Delvoye's

invisibility within a artwork that bears no trace of his hand.¹⁶ Of additional interest—and here we find ourselves returned to both Freud and Kristeva—is the fact that this monstrous or otherwise unbearable realty (as symbolized by either the face of Medusa or our own bodily waste) was once a positively valenced thing.¹⁷ As noted, Kristeva maintains that the Subject abjects any material that threatens to return it to a once blissful state of boundlessness; likewise, Freud reminds us that excrement is, in the first instance, a source of pleasure and pride.¹⁸ Provocative then, the oft-forgotten alignment of Medusa with both pride and beauty—the punishment of which some sources attribute to Athena, arguing that in addition to facilitating the Gorgon's murder by Perseus, Athena also effected her hideous transformation precisely because Medusa claimed to rival the goddess in beauty.¹⁹ Thus, both myth and machine participate in a circular dynamic: having made the beautiful horrible and the pleasurable a source of punishable pride, Athena (via Perseus) then finds a way of reforming the horrible, transforming it into something symbolic, domesticated, and tolerable. Similarly, through Delvoye's machine we are reminded that civilization is responsible both for the banishment of excrement and (via Delvoye and others) its pacified, aestheticized return.

Interestingly, representation and, along with it, aesthetic concepts such as visibility and beauty play a key role in this complex process, just as they do for Kristeva with regard to her theory of abjection. As she observes throughout her writing on this subject, the abject is hopelessly entangled with two things—religion and art—each of which serves to purify the abject, allowing us a glimpse of it, on the condition that we first look awry.²⁰ Needless to say, it is precisely this theory that the myth of Perseus and Medusa anticipates with startling economy, as it is both art (in the reductive form of Athena's reflective shield) and religion (the form of the Gods who oversee Perseus's project) that facilitate Medusa's domestication and subsequent death. Taken further, one might even say that the myth anticipates the alignment Kristeva makes *between* art and religion, since Athena's reflective shield is simultaneously a rudimentary form of art and, at the same time, a concrete emblem of the divine. Turning to *Cloaca* with this in mind, two things are of interest beyond the obvious fact that Delvoye's hygienic shitting machines literalize the concept of art as a form of purification: 1) Delvoye's decision to exhibit *Cloaca Original* at the Museum Kunst Palast in Düsseldorf in front of twelve stained glass windows of his own design, such that the gallery was transformed into a temple and *Cloaca* a purification ritual staged within its walls; 2) the reflective, ovoid logo that everywhere accompanies Delvoye's project and which oversees its remarkable feats as facilitated by the twin gods of technology and capitalism.²¹

I have said already that a relationship exists between Perseus and Delvoye, each of whom functions as an invisible hero in the quest to conquer and domesticate the Real. What I have not said is that Delvoye's project references both the form and function of Athena's protective shield (Fig. 10.6). After all, what is *Cloaca's* metallic logo if not a reflective shield, and what is *Cloaca* if not a means of protection from the Real and, at the same time, a means of



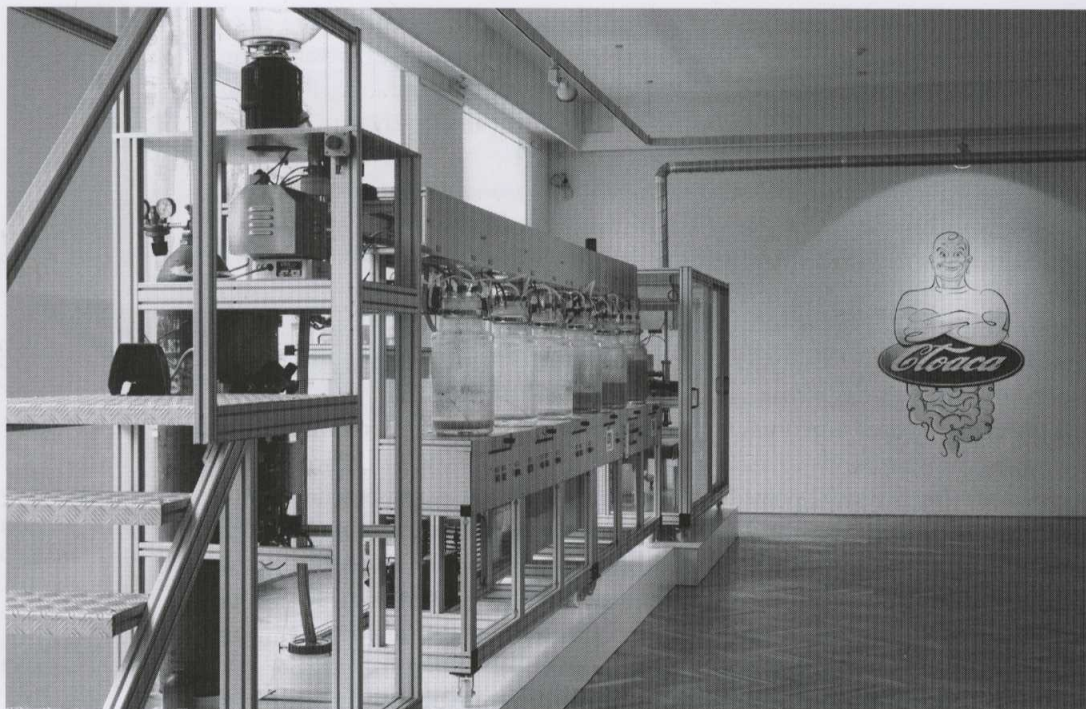
10.6 Wim Delvoye, *Cloaca Original Logo*, 2000, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of Wim Delvoye Studio.

facilitating its oblique re-engagement? Yet, if Delvoye's work is a shield—an idea its metallic logo seems to facilitate—and if, like its mythic counterpart, it is both a form of art and, simultaneously, the emblem of various technocorporate deities, then what are the consequences of proceeding under its aegis? In the case of the myth, the answer is clear: a mediated engagement with Medusa as facilitated by Athena's shield allows for the illusion of mastery over the Real, while ultimately underscoring the absence of the Real from the Symbolic spaces of culture. It is worth repeating, two things happen in the myth once the unbearable Medusa is transformed into an image: in the first instance, she becomes a controllable, manageable entity, and, in the second, she is destroyed, such that only her image or symbolic dimension remains. Murdered and then transformed by Athena into an apotropaic symbol worn on her shield, Medusa remains to this day a visible feature of the landscape but only in a domesticated, symbolic state. Put otherwise, representation happens at the Real's expense, or, as Lacan (following Hegel) would put it two-thousand years later, "the symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing."²²

Mastered, controlled, banished: such is also the fate of excrement in the imaginary world of Wim Delvoye. In fact, the hygienic and efficient excretion of waste and, along with it, the effective elimination of shit as abject Real is perhaps the most basic fantasy to which the *Cloaca* project appeals.²³ Closely entwined with this fantasy is the idea of a human Subject altogether liberated from such functions—hence within the series a push toward smaller and more personalized applications of Delvoye's concept. With this very possibility in mind, consider the logo that accompanies Delvoye's next machine—a logo that looms over Delvoye's work and is arguably itself a "new and improved" meditation on the ideas under consideration here (Fig. 10.7). As noted previously, it includes within it, as both model and surrogate, the figure of Mr. Clean, whose presence within the logo will further illuminate the meaning of Delvoye's series, while at the same time solidifying the concept of the corporate logo as modern-day shield.

Mr. Clean has been associated with cleanliness and the act of cleaning since the 1950s, when he first appeared in the context of television commercials for an all-purpose cleaner marketed by the Procter & Gamble Corporation. Bald and muscular with hands folded across his chest, Mr. Clean appears in Delvoye's logo as he has in commercials over the last half century, save this important distinction: Delvoye's Mr. Clean has a bottom half from which he is separated by the ovoid form of *Cloaca's* metallic label. In contrast, the original Mr. Clean is traditionally shown only from the waist up, and, in that sense, he is clean both by choice and by definition.²⁴ In fact, because he typically lacks any anatomy below the waist, Mr. Clean is clean twice over. Deprived of a lower half, he is visibly stripped of sexual functions and desire (this, a useful safeguard for a figure originally designed to pass the day with women home alone), just as his anatomy also spares him any association with digestive functions that might likewise compromise his squeaky-clean image. Of course, this is how it ought to be, since the essential point of Mr. Clean and the products he endorses is the effective management and eradication of filth. An agent of abjection, Mr. Clean, like the products (both real and fictional) for which he stands, helps the consumer negotiate the unwelcome presence of dirt, such that he or she might notionally become a bottomless figure, a figure precisely defined by an arm-crossed refusal of all substances associated with waste.

Turning to the logo for *Cloaca New & Improved*, we might say that it brings this discussion full circle, as this particular emblem self-consciously thematizes not only the concept of the logo and the product for which it stands, but also (via Mr. Clean) the relation of the spectator/hero to Delvoye's would-be product. Consider again the three elements that make up the image: an iconic rendering of Mr. Clean's head and torso, the *Cloaca Original* logo which bisects Mr. Clean at his middle and, beneath it all, a schematic drawing of Mr. Clean's intestines. Referencing a long-standing opposition between mind and body, the logo for *Cloaca New & Improved* maps atop it a related distinction between clean and dirty. Maintaining the difference, and brokering any relation between them, is the *Cloaca Original* emblem, suspended as if a shield across the midsection of our hero and surrogate. A succinct articulation of this essay's first thesis—namely, that the spectator is to *Cloaca* as Perseus is to Athena's shield, with artwork and shield each functioning as the tolerable reflection of a traumatic and unbearable reality—the *Cloaca New & Improved* logo nevertheless draws attention to an important distinction between the myth and Delvoye's machine. For what we find atop the surface of Delvoye's modern-day aegis is not the tamed image of a snake-headed monster but, instead, the corporate name of Delvoye's fictive product. Recalling Marx's equation of Medusa with, for him, the intolerable realities of capitalism, Delvoye's modern-day shield expands upon the psychoanalytic discourse of Freud, Kristeva, and Lacan, adding to this mythologically resonant nexus an ideological critique in which the spectator/consumer is likewise implicated.²⁵ Indeed, as the *New and Improved* logo illustrates through the bisected figure of Mr. Clean, the Subject's relation to the world and himself is mediated by art, by language, by capital—these the



10.7 Wim Delvoye, *Cloaca New & Improved*, 2001, 1,000 × 75 × 200 cm, mixed media. Exhibition view: Ernst Museum, Budapest. Image courtesy of Wim Delvoye Studio.

modern-day means by which the Real is both purified and banished beneath the threshold of conscious awareness. Thus, like Mr. Clean and Perseus before them, Delvoye's spectator looks, but on the condition that he first turn away. That the spectacle from which he turns is his own body is an idea at the heart of Section II, devoted, as it is, to the myth of Narcissus.

II.

Like many myths, the myth of Narcissus begins with the words of a prophet. Asked by Liriope if her son, Narcissus, will live a long life, the blind seer Tiresias replies cryptically, saying that he will on the condition that he not know himself. Despite these ominous words, Narcissus develops into a youth of extraordinary beauty and proceeds unscathed—that is, until he inspires the vengeance of several scorned admirers, whose prayers for retribution are eventually answered by Nemesis. At rest beside a silvery pool, Narcissus mistakes the image on its surface for the presence of another youth as beautiful as he, and, pining before his own reflection, he is unable to tear himself away, even when he realizes that the visage is his own. Thus, having come to know himself, he dies of longing at the water's edge and is subsequently transformed into the downcast flower that bears his name.²⁶

Another myth about the relationship between representation and the Real, the story of Narcissus turns on their lethal confusion. Provocatively, this confusion

maps atop a second in Narcissus's tale—that of self and other—and in this way the myth anticipates another famous story first told by Jacques Lacan in 1936. Like its mythological prototype, this story is also a tale of self-as-other, and, likewise, it relies on the trope of mirror reflection to tell the story of impossible desire. I am, of course, speaking of Lacan's famous essay on the mirror stage, and if it aligns easily with the myth of Narcissus, it is partially because within Lacan's framework it stands in for the Freudian concept of "primary narcissism," which it reprises and to some degree transforms.²⁷ First theorized in an important essay of 1914, primary narcissism is constitutive rather than aberrant; thus, as with Lacan's mirror stage, it is a phase through which the Subject must go, rather than a perversion under which certain Subjects may labor.²⁸ A preliminary moment in the Subject's psychosexual development—one which precedes even the basic distinction between ego-libido and object-libido—primary narcissism can be further aligned with the mirror stage on the basis of what follows these loosely comparable moments. For, in either case, these phases precede and make possible libidinal investments in objects other than oneself. In sum, these phases are each requisites for normative psychology.

To be fair, there are important differences between primary narcissism and the mirror stage, just as there are important differences between Freud and Lacan more broadly, some of which I return to below. That said, the point of this reading is less to diagnose *Cloaca* in specifically Freudian or Lacanian terms than it is to establish a basic psychoanalytic framework with which Delvoye's project is in dialogue. To that end, a slight detour is required. As art historians know well, Freud's discussion of narcissism does not begin with the 1914 essay, nor does it begin with the notion that narcissism is a requisite for a healthy emotional life. Instead, Freud's first forays into this topic aligned it with homosexuality (which Freud defines as a sexual aberration), as well as art and—provocatively for our purposes—analogy. In this regard, there are two key texts: in the first instance, there is Freud's substantial essay on Leonardo da Vinci written in 1910 in which Freud discusses art in relation to the entwined phenomena of narcissism and homosexuality, and, in the second instance, there is an extended footnote of 1910 and another of 1915 appended belatedly to the 1905 essay, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality"—a text also engaged with the subject of homosexuality, "the essential characteristics of which seem to be a narcissistic object-choice and a retention of the erotic significance of the anal zone."²⁹ Narcissism (a phenomenon that is always at essence, homosocial), analogy, and art: before proceeding further the obvious must first be said. Freud's writing in this period leads us to the very same terms conjoined by Delvoye's *Cloaca* project, that is, provided that one accepts that this series of eating/shitting sculptures functions as an abstract image of oneself. If one does, then the question becomes, to what end this parallel between man and machine?

Freud's essay on Leonardo offers a comprehensive interpretation of a childhood memory recorded in one of the artist's scientific notebooks. Subjecting the artist's recollection to rigorous psychoanalytic interpretation, Freud works to explain Leonardo's sexuality (or sublimated lack thereof) and, by extension,

the phenomenon of homosexuality. This is not the place to rehearse the details of Leonardo's dream or Freud's sustained interpretation thereof.³⁰ Instead, let it suffice to say that although Freud does not use this term in 1910, what he describes in his essay on Leonardo is the phenomenon of "secondary narcissism"—that is, narcissism-as-perversion, from which the Subject suffers given certain formative experiences.³¹ In Leonardo's case, those experiences relate to his loving mother, with whom he identified to the extent of taking himself as his own object of desire. Unable to move beyond the initial satisfaction provided by the maternal dynamic—a dynamic that is considered a normal component of primary narcissism—Leonardo, Freud speculates, may well have found other libidinal objects, but ultimately they functioned as a means of securing and perpetuating a narcissistic loop, whereby Leonardo remained (with the unwitting consent of others) the object of his own regard. Thus, it turns out there are two forms of narcissism in Freud: on the one hand, there is the unproblematic and importantly temporary bliss of primary narcissism and, on the other, there is the disorder known as secondary narcissism, which is at essence the same dynamic, but as experienced by a mature Subject who is either stunted within or who, in moments of duress, regresses toward that initial moment in his psychosexual development.³² That Freud often links this regression to homosexuality, and anality by extension, is all the more interesting when one bears in mind this last additional fact: for Freud, the anal stage is associated with both the active impulse to master and the comparatively passive pleasure of looking.³³

At this point, the relevance of Freud's thinking to *Cloaca* should be clear. After all, the *Cloaca* project is nothing if not evidence of an impulse to master—Delvoye himself says "it's all about control"—and, as an art object, it is also clearly aligned with the concept of scopophilia.³⁴ Of course, as already indicated, the pleasure involved in looking at these installations is of a narcissistic kind, and, as such, we might say that that the *Cloaca* project functions as symptom, or indeed, as a form of mirror in which the image of the spectator and, by extension, Western culture is reflected. Standing before that mirror, entranced by the vision before them, spectators see an image of a society locked in the anal stage and locked, too, in the narcissistic dynamic with which this phase is aligned.³⁵ Succinctly reiterating a critique made elsewhere by others, Delvoye accuses his audience of this regression, while at the same time theatrically suspending his spectators in its grip.³⁶ Reflecting back to beholders their obsession with technological mastery and surveillance, the work also exposes the narcissism that ostensibly underwrites such impulses and levies against its viewers an unflattering and seemingly irrefutable diagnosis. As such, we might say that the *Cloaca* project is ultimately an occasion to see oneself and, in keeping with the words of the ancient prophet, to know oneself, and one's culture, accordingly.

But what of primary narcissism and its Lacanian counterpart? Without discounting the reading above—again, the essential point of this essay is the *polyvalence* of both art and myth—I now work toward another reading, one

no less engaged with narcissism and the mythological figure for whom it is named. As is well known, the mirror stage centers on a moment of confrontation between individual and image, and functions as an important turning point in which ego takes shape against a fantasy of the body in pieces. In this regard, and in its essential vexedness, the mirror stage differentiates itself from Freud's notion of primary narcissism. Indeed, here it should be said that primary narcissism is a comparatively static concept, often described by Freud's commentators as Edenic and entirely free of the complex operations that will soon govern the Subject's psychology.³⁷ In contrast, the Lacanian mirror stage is, as the word "stage" suggests, an episode of high drama—the moment of the Fall and, concomitantly, the realization of paradise lost.³⁸ Because of this, and because of its explicit reliance on the trope of mirror reflection, the mirror stage (as opposed to the related, Freudian notion of primary narcissism) makes for a more exacting comparison with the myth of Narcissus and, in turn, the experience of beholding *Cloaca New & Improved*.

Here are the salient, if well-rehearsed, details. Between the ages of six and eighteen months, the infant, with the necessary help of some external support, finds himself placed before a mirror. And, as with Narcissus, it will be this specular environment that provides the Subject not only with a tangled mixture of pleasure and pain, but also with some ultimate knowledge of himself. Physically uncoordinated and lacking any organized concept of himself—remember that as of yet the ego does not exist—the infant sees in the coherent form of his self-image a totalizing vision of himself freed of any such limitations. Thus, from an initial moment of incomprehension in which the self is both illegible and unknown, the Subject moves to a moment of comprehension that is at once jubilant and tragic: on the one hand, there is the satisfying process of identification, the image providing for the Subject a masterful ideal-ego to which to the Subject in turn aspires. On the other hand, as that sense of self comes from without, this moment of jubilant identification is also a moment of profound alienation, one which gives rise both to the ego and, retroactively, the fantasy of a forsaken, originary plenitude. In sum, a sense of self comes at a price: the tragic experience of oneself as other.

Parallels to the myth of Narcissus are already evident, as both tales concern a painful process of self-discovery facilitated by the phenomenon of an idealized mirror-reflection. Admittedly, the mirror stage lacks the carefully staged progression of Ovid's myth, which moves from joyous ignorance to painful self-recognition across an unbridgeable gap. But it nevertheless shares with the ancient narrative, and in fact borrows from it, a vision of self-as-other, indeed, of the self divided, mediated by an image that is itself external. Of course, for Lacan, this Imaginary mediation is just the beginning; one might say, it sets the stage for another loss that it prefigures. First suffering the loss of an unmediated relation to itself, the Lacanian Subject subsequently suffers the loss of an unmediated relation to the world. This second loss, Lacan famously equates with the Subject's entrance into the Symbolic, after which everything is mediated by language and signs.

With this in mind, let's look again at the logo for *Cloaca New & Improved*. Already, we have considered this image in conjunction with the myth of Perseus and Medusa, reading Mr. Clean as a would be hero in the fight against grime, his chances highly fortified by the commercial intervention of Delvoye's product, the sign of which he wears as a shield across his torso. Without undermining this reading, let's think again about the image of a man divided in two, a reflective blue oval mediating between his nearly identical halves. One thing we have not said about Delvoye's logo is that the form of Mr. Clean's intestines plainly mimics the shape of the torso above it, and does so as if reflected in a mirror the color of water. Note, in this regard, that the curvilinear form of Mr. Clean's earring visible to our right is plainly echoed on the left-hand side of the drawing's bottommost quadrant. An image of Narcissus if ever there was one, the *Cloaca New & Improved* logo, like the spectatorial experience to which it refers, raises several provocative questions, especially when placed in dialogue with the myth's psychoanalytic reprisal.³⁹ That the experience of viewing works in Delvoye's series is an experience of self-reflection is obvious, as is the fact that this form of self-regard splits the subject into the I/eye who looks and the me who is seen. What is less clear and what is, in the end, most provocative is the possibility that the spectator's experience of *Cloaca*—which is also to say the experience schematically rendered in the *New & Improved* logo—corresponds to the notion that the image, or as Lacan also puts it in his essay, the "statue" functions as an ideal-ego to which the spectator asymptotically aspires.

On one level, such an idea seems consistent with Delvoye's series and observations made already about the fantasy implicit in these hygienic, computerized surrogates. What's more, the fantasy of an antiseptic, mechanical body (as discussed in Section II) accords well with fantasies attributed to the infant before the mirror, who sees in his reflection a set of characteristics also attributable to the machines in Delvoye's series. Masterful, organized, and efficient: these sculptural portraits align with Lacan's idealized specular image because they do what they do with enviable regularity and timeliness. Indeed, we might say that in this respect they outperform the spectator who is still defined by the limitations of his largely invisible and often unreliable body. That Delvoye's machines achieve this coordination with respect to the activity one is first charged with controlling—an activity whose regulation roughly overlaps with Lacan's mirror stage—makes the analogy between *Cloaca* and the mirror stage more convincing; and yet, on its own, this fact does not suffice to explain how these sculptures function as idealized self-portraits. After all, if they are portraits, they are grossly reductive ones, offering a vision of man reduced to the very thing he has tried to suppress. However much they conjure the appealing ideas of cleanliness and efficiency, can such objects really function as an idealized fantasy to which we aspire across a painfully unbridgeable gap? In order to answer these questions, and in order to bring this essay to a close, I turn to a third myth—one about aspirations and ideals, as well as the figurative sculpture that brought them to life.

III.

Several things recommend the inclusion of Pygmalion in this discussion, not the least of which is the myth's explicit foregrounding of art and sculpture in particular.⁴⁰ Of equal interest is the myth's relationship to the other myths we have considered thus far.⁴¹ For, if the lover Pygmalion seems to have more in common with the lovesick Narcissus, it will turn out that the myth of Pygmalion is equally aligned with the story of Medusa, whose radical alterity Perseus and Athena punish and expel with the help of a lifelike image. With the myths of Narcissus and Medusa in mind then, reconsider the myth of Pygmalion. Although not endowed with legendary beauty, Pygmalion shares with Narcissus an impressive capacity for contempt and autonomy. As Ovid tells it, the myth begins with this characteristic, informing the reader that Pygmalion has forsaken the company of women, whom he deems wicked and unworthy of affection. A sculptor by training, Pygmalion instead directs his attention to his craft, carving from ivory a statue of extraordinary beauty and realism with which he promptly falls in love. Dressing the object and undressing it, caressing the sculpture and lying with it in his bed, he desires his artwork intensely, but no amount of longing brings his sculpture to life. Thus, when the festival of Venus comes, the sculptor prays not for the animation of his statue—this being, he thinks, an unreasonable request—but instead for a girl possessed of her likeness. Venus, knowing the sculptor's true desire, grants his unspoken wish: when Pygmalion returns home, the ivory at last warms to his touch, and the blushing maiden is at last his bride.

Let's start with an obvious point of contrast between Narcissus and Pygmalion: while the myth of Narcissus tells of longing across an unbridgeable gap, in the myth of Pygmalion, that gap is closed through divine intervention, and all due happiness is said to ensue. Hence a tragedy on the one hand, and, on the other, a rosy love story. Yet, what underwrites this difference in affect is a still more important commonality. At issue in both myths is the concept of the perfect copy—a phrase I use to invoke not only the aesthetic concept of a perfectly executed work (one whose realism effectively erases the difference between the real and its representation) but also the concept of idealism, which one can relate to both an idealized female form and the psychoanalytic concept of the ideal-ego which appears in the mirror during the course of the Lacanian mirror stage.⁴² Consider: in the myth of Narcissus, the mirrored surface of the pond produces a near perfect copy of his own perfect form; likewise for Pygmalion, his statue allows for the perfect illusion—and ultimately, thanks to Venus, a perfect copy—of a form he believed was ideal. To this intriguing commonality, I'll add one more, which is, at first glance, counter-intuitive: in both myths, the perfect copy (or near perfect copy) is a matter of mirror reflection, even though it is only the myth of Narcissus that thematizes this idea expressly. As we shall see, such a claim will not only link together the three myths under consideration here, it will also ultimately reconcile the three readings of the *Cloaca* series that this chapter has endeavored to pursue.

Lore has it that the character of Mr. Clean is based on a sailor in the US Navy; yet, two other readings come easily to mind. In the first instance, there is the association of Mr. Clean with homosexuality on the basis of various stereotypes having to do with both costume and character (the single earring, the shaved head, the tight t-shirt, the muscle-bound physique and, of course, Mr. Clean's signature fastidiousness). In the second instance, many of these same characteristics (again, the bald head, the single earring, the muscle-bound torso), especially when seen in conjunction with Mr. Clean's folded arms and his propensity for doing things in a magical, sparkly flash, align him with the concept of a wish-granting genie whose bottomless, overbuilt physique typically emerges from a brass oil lamp, the form of which is vaguely recalled by the curvilinear form of the logo's bottommost region.⁴³ If nowhere acknowledged, the appeal of such associations to Procter & Gamble is obvious; as noted already, the prospect of male (cleaning) power divorced from any heterosexual threat is useful, as is the suggestion that a fastidious, wish-granting genie lives inside every bottle of Mr. Clean purchased by an individual in pursuit of an effortlessly meticulous home. But what about the usefulness of such associations for Delvoe? It goes without saying that the possibility of cleanliness as wrought by (technological) magic is of interest to Delvoe, but what other wishes might be granted by the *Cloaca* series, and how might they square with the homosocial subtext of Procter & Gamble's product?

To answer this question, it is necessary to return to Pygmalion, a figure whose desires were also realized by the intervention of a wish-granting deity. Taken at face value, Pygmalion's wish is a straightforward one: he wants a girl who matches exactly his ideal, as realized in the form of his sculpture. But what is this ideal? And in what sense does it depart from the intolerable reality of the women categorically scorned by Pygmalion? Of Pygmalion's ideal sculpture we know very little, save the fact that it was made of ivory and was given "perfect shape, more beautiful/than ever woman born."⁴⁴ The other thing we know—and this only by implication—is that this object in some way avoided the pitfalls of real women, with whom Pygmalion had found no communion. Indeed, this last detail cannot be overlooked, as the myth begins with the assertion that women are, as a group, unbearable to the sculptor. The precise reasons for Pygmalion's misogyny are unknown, although the verse does mention the vice of women and, more generally, their wickedness—negative attributes the chaste sculptor presumably lacks. In the absence of further details, we can perhaps leave it at this: lacking anything in common with women, and unable to relate to the female sex in its entirety, he saw in them a vision of radical alterity which was for him monstrous and intolerable. In their place, he erected his statue, the form of which somehow assuaged this terrible predicament.

With these last two sentences, the myth of Perseus and Medusa is already back upon us, but before exploring that link and returning to Delvoe another detour is required—one equally related to mirrors and the peculiar relation they bear to the concept of alterity. In the 1970s, the French writer Luce Irigaray

published two books that together make a compelling argument about women, alterity, and reflection. The core of her argument is this: Western culture is a specular one in which woman is constructed by men as man's opposite: where men are intellectual, women are corporeal, where men are rational, women are emotional, where men are strong, women are weak, and so on ad infinitum.⁴⁵ In short, woman is man's inversion; she is as he would be, were his image reflected in a mirror. For Irigaray the political implications of this system are clear: women do not as of yet exist within representation (both visual and verbal) and will never exist so long as they are reflected through this reductive, misogynist discourse. I leave aside the question of whether or not women exist in the sense described by Irigaray. What I will say, without any pretense of originality in doing so, is that classical myth anticipates and prefigures Irigaray's argument through the figure of the Medusa who can be seen to stand for the notion of woman's intolerable difference and, via Perseus, the heroicizing of her specular exorcism.⁴⁶ With this in mind, let's return to the myth of Pygmalion.

There is no mirror involved in the story of Pygmalion (just as there is none in the "story" told by Irigaray), but its effect is everywhere present and is the engine that drives not only this narrative, but also the other two narratives reviewed in the course of this essay.⁴⁷ Note again: because he is unable to tolerate the horrible reality of women, Pygmalion joins Perseus and Narcissus in turning his back on the Other. While Narcissus settles by the pond and Perseus raises Athena's domesticating shield, Pygmalion sets out for his studio where he produces a work that absorbs him, while simultaneously safeguarding him from the reality he has shunned. Entirely divorced from the unhappy facts of the women outside, Pygmalion's sculpture is, we are to assume, a pure invention—an object borne solely of Pygmalion's mind. She is, we could say, its calcified and inverted *reflection*—a dream come true, and, equally, a blueprint for Irigaray's argument. As such, it turns out that the myth of Pygmalion shares with the myths of Perseus and Narcissus not only an emphasis on spectatorial dynamics, but also, through them, an emphasis on sameness at difference's expense. And, while the myth of Medusa allows us to see this emphasis as a form of defense against otherness, the myths of Narcissus and Pygmalion, like the psychoanalytic myths of primary narcissism and the mirror stage, allow us to think of sameness as the Subject's most profound and long-standing desire. Read in this way, the myths of Narcissus and Pygmalion reconcile the homosocial subtext of Procter & Gamble's icon with the concept of a wish-granting genie—sameness apparently *is* our innermost wish—while at the same time bridging the gap between Delvoye's reductive portraits and the concept of the ego-ideal.

Described in the press as a dream come true, Delvoye's sculptures, it turns out, are equally concerned with sameness and, relatedly, the exorcism of difference.⁴⁸ Indeed, how else to explain portraits devoid of not only subjectivity and cognition, but also the expressly divisive attributes of sex and race.⁴⁹ A "universal" portrait of man reduced to his essential functions—those

that exclude no one and from which no individual is exempt—the *Cloaca* project is, as Delvoye will put it: “both better than a human being and worse than a human being ... The machine is not as sophisticated as the body but in that it is less sophisticated there are benefits.”⁵⁰ Thus, like Narcissus’s image on the surface of the pond and like the object-turned-bride in Pygmalion’s studio, *Cloaca* is reductive and, because of that reduction, ideal. As such, the *Cloaca* project, *pace* Lacan’s anticipatory ideal-ego, may be said to align with a broader impulse to regress.⁵¹ For, while other contemporaneous technological and cultural developments (cloning, mass-media, globalization) suggest that we may look forward to closing the gap between self and Other, perhaps even to the point of the Other’s extinction and the extinction of man, as such, they also suggest that as we look forward, we also look back—not only to the Imaginary moment of the mirror stage (perhaps, even beyond it, to the undifferentiated bliss said to lie on its other side) but also to a moment in our evolutionary history in which we likely shared with other species the orifice known as cloaca.⁵² Indeed, as the myth of Narcissus long ago made clear, the quest for the plenitude of the perfect copy is intimately tied to death—a fact that at last explains how works in the *Cloaca* series can be both the longed-for ideal (at once narcissistic and reductive) and, at the same time, the reflection of the deadly Medusa, whose transformation from idealized beauty to mortifying monster symbolizes yet again the link between death and idealism.⁵³ Summarily put, Delvoye’s spectators are Narcissus at the pond and Pygmalion in his studio, fascinated by the spectacle of their own image, at once simplified, inverted, and perfected. At the same time, they are also Perseus before the shield, suspended in contemplation of death, even as they are, for the moment, protected from experiencing its inevitable effects. Thus, if representation is a source of great misery, if the gap it enforces is, for Narcissus and Pygmalion, a source of unbearable pain, that same gap—the existence of which is representation’s precondition—also affords for Perseus and for us the luxury of contemplation, whether of shit specifically, or more abstractly, the mortification it portends.

After all, although Delvoye’s machines are in some sense sculptures brought to life, they are not perfect copies *à la* Pygmalion’s statue-turned-bride.⁵⁴ Rather, as their seven-year refinement underscores, they are more like symbols of this asymptotic aspiration, which nevertheless warn against its fulfillment. To date, their story, which is of course our story, has not achieved the eradication of difference (in this case, the sculpture is not yet the bride), and, as such, one might say that standing with a *Cloaca* machine in the gallery is rather more like gazing upon one’s reflection, contemplating with Narcissus and the Lacanian subject he prefigures, a gap whose elimination one is powerless to achieve. At once temporal and spatial, the gap that separates us from these objects and our long-standing aspirations is, as well, the gap between the spectator and his ideal, reality and its representation, the original and its perfect duplication. It is also the ultimate subject of the *Cloaca* project, and, likewise, the ultimate subject of the myths it conjures, confuses, and conjoins.