

TOWERING WIM DELVOYE AMBITION

A CONVERSATION WITH
PAUL LASTER

Celebrated or reviled for his "sex-rays" (X-ray images of sexual acts), tattooed pigs and digestive-tract machines that eat food and produce shit (Cloaca Machines), Belgian artist Wim Delvoye thrives at the center of controversy. Given the challenge of creating a monumental work for the Peggy Guggenheim Collection during the 53rd Venice Biennale, Delvoye has come up with what he considers the ultimate artistic statement, a tower. Paul Laster recently sat down with Delvoye at his studio in Ghent to discuss his Venice project, its relationship to his previous works, and a newly acquired castle in Kwatrecht, Belgium, about 10 miles from Ghent.

PAUL LASTER Tell me something about your exhibition for the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice.

WIM DELVOYE My project, *Torre*, is up during the Venice Biennale, so lots of people will be there. And when it gets really hot, people won't bother much with the satellite exhibitions, but they'll still visit the Peggy Guggenheim Collection. I had to consider what I could do in a museum where the modern masters rarely get moved. Everything in the collection was Peggy's. The bookshop is all about Peggy—Peggy's collections, Peggy's life and Peggy's lovers. But she did live in Venice and the Guggenheim has the highest status there, even during the Biennale. That put pressure on me, but I did not want to do anything inside the museum. It's extremely small. I don't even know what other artists previously did there, because every time I was in Venice for the openings I never managed to get in. It's such an elite place.

I flew to Venice twice, and then a year ago I started building something ambitious: a Gothic tower. Making a tower is the ultimate expression of ambition. Making art is usually more about movable objects that you can buy and sell. I like to avoid that kind of thing, plus I'm interested in architecture. I decided to adapt the tower idea to the first opportunity that came up, and that turned out to be the Peggy Guggenheim Collection.

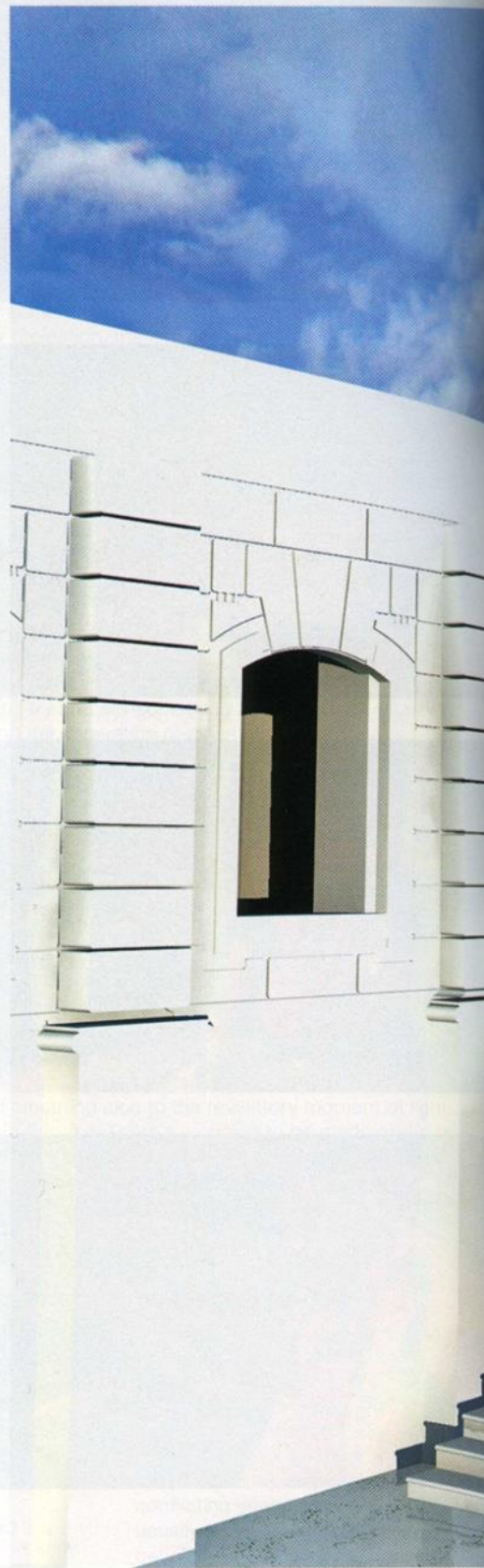
PL Where will the tower be located?

WD I originally thought of placing it on the ground level of the atrium, from which it would rise 10 meters [33 feet] above the roof, but the floor consists of stones on sand, which would not be able to carry the weight. I then con-

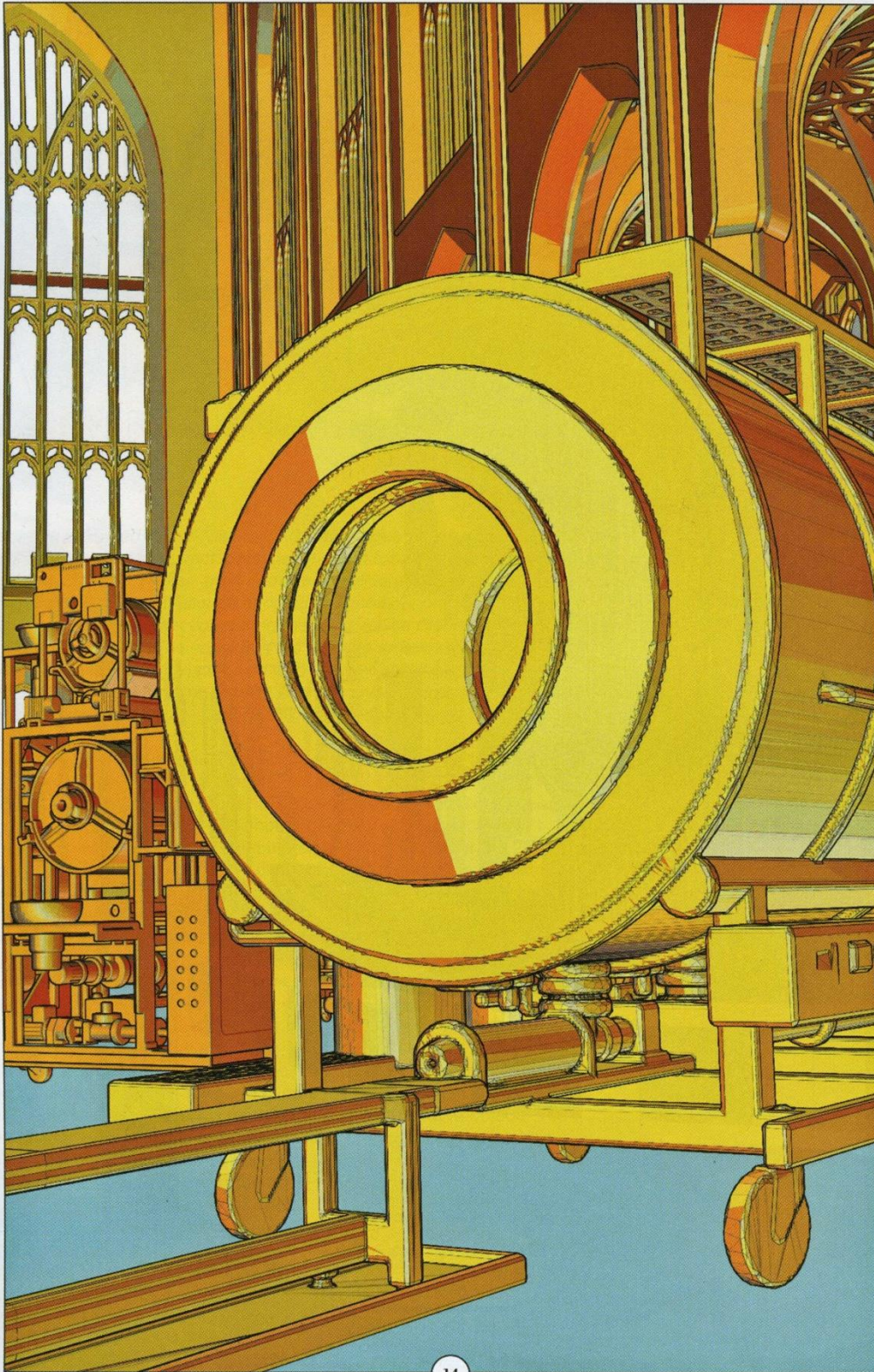
Wim Delvoye: Digital rendering of *Torre*, 2009, laser-cut Cor-Ten steel, approx. 33 feet high; for the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

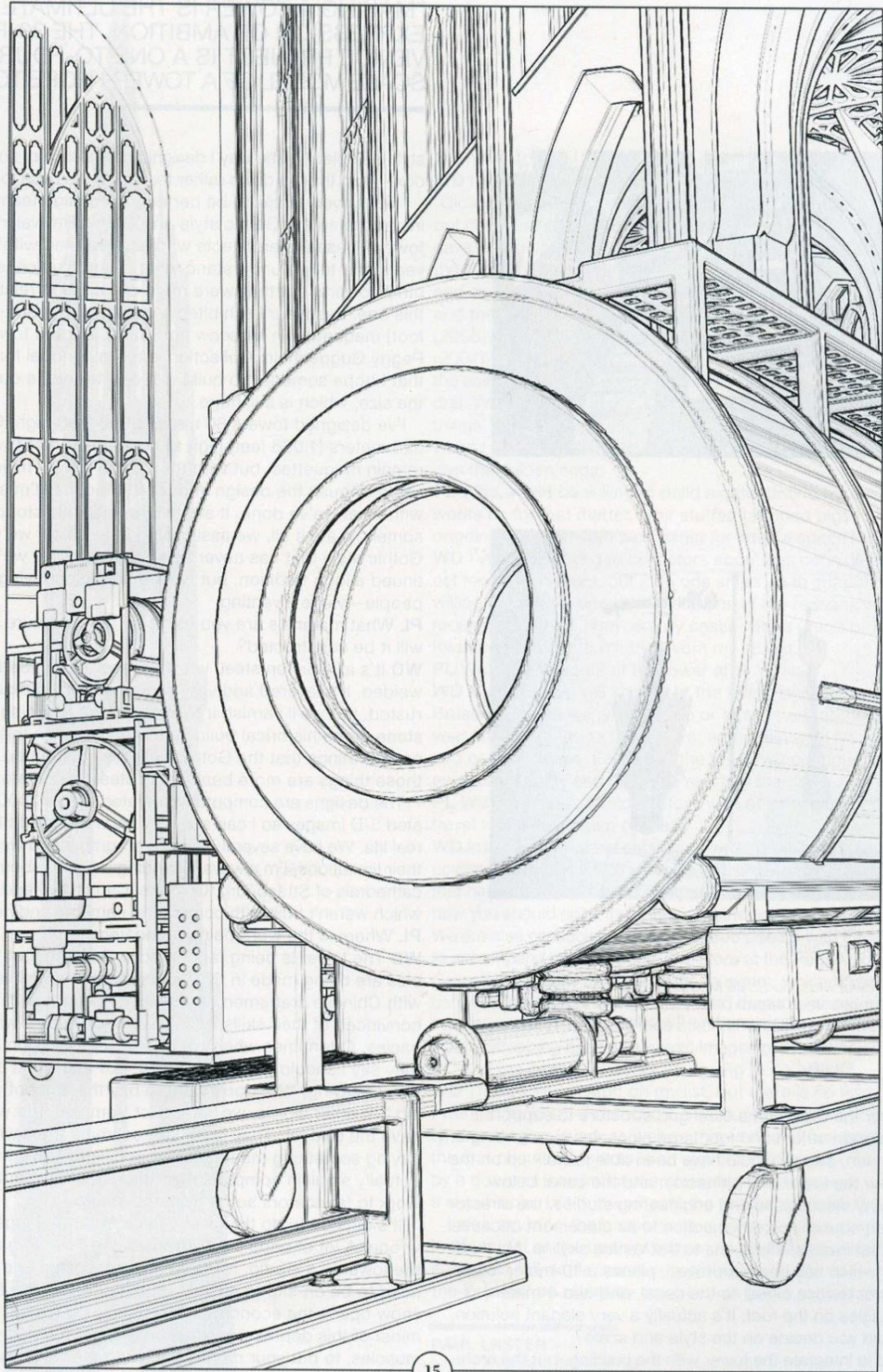
Wim Delvoye's *Torre* at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, June 3–Nov. 22.







Pages 14-15 from the 64-page *Wim Delvoye Colouring Book*, 2009, showing (foreground) *Cloaca No. 5*, 2006, and (background) *Super Cloaca*, 2007.



**“MAKING A TOWER IS THE ULTIMATE
EXPRESSION OF AMBITION. THE 33-FOOT
VENICE PROJECT IS A ONE-TO-FOUR
SCALE MODEL OF A TOWER I HOPE TO BUILD.”**



Above, snapshots of the pencil boxes being manufactured in China.

Opposite, *Tower Moscou Scale Model*, 2008, laser-cut Cor-Ten steel, approx. 18 by 2½ by 2½ feet. Images this article courtesy the artist.

ceived it for the roof, with a steel grid structure to support it above the open atrium and four large pinnacles surrounding it. With that plan, people would have been able to walk on on the roof to view the tower and pinnacles, and the canal below. After lengthy discussions and engineering studies, the director of an urban council voiced objection to its placement because of a rule that forbids alterations to the Venice skyline. My third proposal, which has been approved, places a 10-meter tower on the lower terrace closer to the canal, and two 4-meter [13-foot] pinnacles on the roof. It's actually a very elegant solution.

PL How did you decide on the style and scale?

WD I tried to integrate the tower with the building, but the architecture of the building is Neo-Classical. My project is another

style completely. The way I designed it is also very unorthodox—from the top down rather than from the base to the peak.

I want every detail to be perfect. My design team has incorporated the Gothic style and Gothic Revival into the tower. These are architects who have worked with me for years and totally understand what I want. I've constructed other towers, but they were mere exercises in relation to this one. Last year I exhibited a couple of 6-meter-tall [20-foot] maquettes in Moscow and Basel, but the tower for the Peggy Guggenheim Collection is a scale model for a tower that I hope someday to build. It's one-to-four, a quarter of the size, which is still huge.

I've designed towers 80 meters [262 feet] high. One is 325 meters [1,066 feet] high to match the Eiffel Tower. They remain maquettes, but with the Venice tower I'm very motivated to push the design into reality because I'm satisfied with what we've done. It starts where Gothic stopped. We somehow ate it all, we assimilated it, and now we've done a Gothic style that has never been done. It's like we've continued a long tradition, but we are not just copying other people—we're inventing.

PL What materials are you using for the sculpture and how will it be constructed?

WD It's all Cor-Ten steel, which is laser-cut, folded and welded. It's layered and very sculptural. The surface will be rusted, but we'll varnish it to keep it from bleeding into the stone of the historical building. By making it in this steel we can do things that the Gothic builders couldn't do. Some of those things are more beautiful in steel than in stone.

The designs are computer-generated. Since 2000 I've created 3-D images so I can see how my works might look in real life. We have several different programs and we play with their limitations. I'm always reminding my staff about the great cathedrals of Strasbourg, Cologne, Canterbury and Paris, which weren't built with computers, cameras and helicopters.

PL Where is the work being fabricated?

WD The tower is being fabricated in Belgium, but the pinnacles are being made in China. It's the first time I've worked with Chinese craftsmen on the steel sculptures. I'm not convinced of their skills, but I'm willing to risk it with the pinnacles. Oftentimes when I'm doing a commission for people, they say I should make it in China, but that's just a polite way of saying, "We don't want to pay the amount you're asking." In other words, we want a lot from you, but we don't have the budget. They really overestimate the savings from having something manufactured in China. The savings are actually small in comparison to the risk of delegating the work to fabricators so far from the studio.

It's difficult to do things in Venice. A lot of things can go wrong. A lot of people are involved. We have to assemble the tower in a studio. It has to be transported and cranes need to be on-site to move it off the boat. By the time the show opens the economy will probably be worse. Yet in the midst of this depressive situation, it's good to show your muscles, to put your money back into the work and make it better than anything you've previously done.



PL What actually led you to the idea of a tower?

WD I was looking for something a bit more difficult than the "Cloaca" series [2000-09]. From day one, I decided to pay for but never sell the Cloaca machines. It's been very difficult. We have nine different machines. The ninth is only just finished. It's the *Cloaca Travel Kit*. If I combine my collection of shit machines and my "Gothic Works"—including the stained-glass windows, and the laser-cut steel *Caterpillars* [2001-02], *Dump Truck* [2006], *Cement Trucks* [1990-99, 2008] and *Flat Bed Trailer* [2007]—with the idea of a Gothic cathedral, of which the tower is the essence, I can eventually create a proposal for my ideal cathedral. What will I put in this cathedral? Well, I need a place for these things, and I'm not planning to sell my shit machines. Why would I when I can just sell the shit? It would be like selling the goose that lays the golden eggs.

PL Who would be willing to build a cathedral to house these works or, for that matter, your stuffed tattooed pigs [1997-ongoing], which seem well suited for such a space?

WD I've been talking to collectors about this considerable project for several years, but if no one steps up to support it, I'm willing to finance it myself. That's one of the reasons why I recently bought a 17th-century castle with a grand property in Kwatrecht, some 15 minutes from my studio.

PL What will become of the tower after Venice?

WD Next year we will show it at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, where we will add two or three levels at the base. A year later, it will go to the Louvre, and again we'll add another two or three levels. Each time the tower will continue to grow and eventually it may end up in the realm of the castle.

PL Will there be a catalogue for those of us who cannot afford to travel to Venice or visit castles?

WD Instead of a normal catalogue, we're producing a large-format coloring book of my Gothic works and Cloaca works—everything that has been done on the computer. The left page will show you how you should color the image and the right page is ready to color. We are also producing a box of colored pencils with Faber-Castell to accompany the catalogue. The store at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection is nearly as large as the museum, which is very American, and the products are more varied than the museum's collection. We'll also play on the idea of merchandising with T-shirts and plastic shopping bags with heroic images of the tower.

PL And the castle, what are you going to do with it?

WD There's lots of stuff on my list, but there is no time pressure. I want to build up a collection, distributed throughout the property, including my work as well as the work of other artists. One of the first planned projects is an exhibition of birdhouses designed by a group of international architects. A birdhouse is easier than a skyscraper, but it still reflects the nature of architecture.

I also envision the property as a repository for my dreams. In the midst of the open meadow, I could do something grand, such as a full-scale tower or a cathedral. In the end, the cost of the land will be offset by the success of the projects. ○

PAUL LASTER is a New York-based artist, writer and independent curator.