

HYGIENE IN THE MESSAGE AND THE VIRUS OF THE FORM

on art as a social struggle in the work of Wim Delvoye

an interview by Isabelle De Baets and Hendrik Tratsaert

The arrival of the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye (born 1965, Wervik) onto the international art scene did not go unnoticed. In the late eighties he painted ironing boards and shovels with heraldic emblems, and gas cylinders with blue Delft tile scenes, or else installed a football goal in the museum and replaced the net by a stained-glass window depicting a sower. In these decorated objects he always made unexpected contrasting connections between everyday culture and popularised and devalued visual elements. In later, more complex work, multiplying its meanings - he radicalised the critical function of art and further explored the boundaries of object art, the most striking exponent of this being his tattooed piglets (the end product being the tanned skins of the adults) and his famous *Cloaca* installation, a machine that produces genuine shit and at the same time focuses on the uselessness of the artefact.

How does one reconcile the spirit of Andy Warhol, a passion for Wall Street and an unmasking of hidden structures in the style of the Frankfurter Schule and Chomsky, and call yourself a plebeian with particular interest in scatology and the underside of existence? How do you show the ambivalence of art and commerce, and be transparent in both form and its communication?

THE RENAISSANCE MODEL IN 2004

Let's first talk about your particular attitude in the art world, which is based on a framework of Marxist interpretation. Your own model of an artist makes reference to the one introduced by Warhol, of the artist as a businessman and entrepreneur.

It seems to me that, sociologically speaking, that is the only option one has these days. Artists who take another option are either nostalgic or pretentious.

The formal vocabulary of your work derives directly from the contemporary consumer society. Its content refers to market mechanisms, cultural differences and globalisation, technology and engineering. Surely there are other ways of adopting a position in addition to this one option?

As someone living in the early 21st century, I persist in the only option we have. In my model the artist has a wide radius of action, is enterprising and emancipated. The artist should be aware of what is going on in politics, economics, society and culture and should be able to respond to all these aspects. I believe in the versatile, multifunctional Renaissance model of the artist, the best example being Leonardo Da Vinci. He was a machine builder, a bridge builder, an architect, painter and scientist. In the same way I am sometimes a machine-

builder, then photographer, then drawer, then engineer, and I make stained-glass windows and so on. I am constantly collecting and processing knowledge as an autodidact. All on the basis of an attitude of “what can I add to this or change?”

From the sixties the critic “made” the artist. In the eighties it was the heyday of the curator: the super-curator. In the nineties there was the super-collector, such as Charles Saatchi, who made and broke artists. Now we are in an intermediate zone, but under the surface there is a trend towards the super-artist. The keywords for this sort of artist are self-organisation and emancipation. It is precisely by means of this self-organisation that the artist can emancipate himself from the art circuit.

In your view, the fact that you use a whole range of marketing strategies is fully reconcilable with the creation of art, which has a critical and subversive element.

There is no contradiction because I do not use these strategies in my work. My work is about strategies. I let them run in parallel in the art and thereby make them transparent.

Panamarenko is not a real inventor either: he acts as a sort of inventor because his flying machines don't work. This failure is built into the work, because it remains art. The *Cloaca* works, but in some sense the machine is pointless. Sooner or later art fails in its social commitment and the autonomy of the work of art is again emphasised. It's a drama I rather like. For example, Thierry De Cordier stood on a skyscraper with a megaphone. He made a speech to the world but no one knows what he said: the beauty of failure. This is something Belgian artists make use of out of sheer necessity.

In the case of *Cloaca* I apply the strategy of ‘radical complicity’. It is so extreme that academics don't know how to handle this subtlety. I push the complicity between art and the system as far as it will go. For example, I hand out shares and float the *Cloaca* company. In this way I create a symbolic parallel economy. Does that mean I'm working more commercially? No, my work takes the commercial world as its subject. Was Georges Simenon a criminal because he was writing crime stories all his life? Just as he read about murder cases in the newspaper, I read the financial papers and the works of Noam Chomsky and Michael Parenti.

If the Coca Cola marketing people call me for a design for their can, the fee for that sort of job is negligible. What is more, projects like that are very time-consuming, but I am nevertheless accused of being ‘commercial’. Warhol, to take one example, financed his independent art works, such as his paintings, by means of so-called commercial, non-independent art forms (his magazine, fashion shows, television shows, etc.). I believe that the degree of my independence from the art market is much greater than that of many who pass as sincere autonomous artists. I actually have to be enterprising in order not to become an underdog in a world of trade and money.

THREE-PART LITMUS TEST

How do you start on a new piece? And what are your criteria, your own rules?

I have a highly associative imagination: one thing flows from another. The first part of the litmus test is: does the work survive in an environment that is not linked to a gallery or a museum? And what about on the street? My ambition is to do work with the street credibility of a bag of cocaine. My intention is to become a 'global value', ironically, obviously. But I see to it that there is maintenance involved: you have to feed and vaccinate your pigs, and you have to service your machine. So I make sure the work is not very easy to sell; I hire out the work, as it were. As soon as you become a collector's item, you are *passé*, in the same way as a 1962 car can be a collector's item. The Utopia to which 20th century art aspired has been achieved. Nowadays, every baby-boomer lives more artistically than Picasso.

The second test deals with the photogenic quality of a work: does it look good in a photo? Ninety-five percent of the art production I see I get to know through magazines and art books. So my work has to be photogenic too.

I call the third test 'the hygiene in the message', referring to the hygiene of content by the refinement of the message and the development of an individual ecology. I look for the story with breadth that tells about what we share and understand collectively. It won't be free of ego, but if I was really cynical, as some critics claim, I would look at every situation from a higher position, whereas I want to make something that appeals collectively.

HIGH + LOW

It seems that you are inspired above all by the variety and abundance of forms of expression in high and low culture.

I no longer believe in the dichotomy of good and bad taste. A worker who spends half his monthly wage on a tattoo gets much more respect from me than those collectors who buy my work as an investment. The latter have a resale value. The difference between a so-called work of art and a tattoo, between high and low culture, is a question of price and social position.

That's why I install 'equalisers' in every 'product' in my work. They bring out the universal human aspect, if necessary by means of kitsch, but then only as a partial aspect. These equalisers neutralise high and low culture, by for example setting art and shit at the same level. Or by playing off the aesthetics of the powerless of the world against those of the people with power. I go further than the classic demystification of power because I make

things equal.

Is this part of your basic philosophy, the basis, to use a Marxist concept?

In every work I make the basis is putting my bum, my arse, on the ground: Buddha's litmus test. If you want to reach higher things, you have to keep your bottom as close as possible to the ground. First you brush away the ants - you don't kill them - and then you can put your arse on the ground. Only then do you have the right to reflect on serious matters and to start contemplating. The start of man's misery is that you can't satisfy your hunger by rubbing your stomach, but that you can eliminate your sexual hunger by rubbing your genitals. So the world's problem is greed. Art is then no more than the social struggle that has been coloured in. Legitimising power, carrying on trade. People have an irresistible urge to buy and sell until they are foaming at the mouth. And we artists are the fortunate ones who are allowed to give an interpretation to this, to give it a colour. So I create art that is about exactly the fact that art gives an interpretation to another instinct.

"The message, the content of the work is not the most important thing. It all revolves around expansion of territory. Not only in my own art. I think that the art of the second half of the 20th century was more about the expansion of territory than about dialogue, aesthetics and criticism." Jeff Koons said this in an interview with Anna Tilroe in 1990. Do you agree with him?

Unfortunately it is completely true. I would even take the argument further, and a step back in the genesis of art history. Art did not begin at Altamira and Lascaux, with art as a sacred, ritual event. If you take the birth of art back another 30,000 to 40,000 years, you come to the tattoo. According to me the tattoo is the basis of visual art. Not only is there ritual, but also a sexual, biological aspect: meaning seduction. Further back in evolutionary time, I associate the beginning of art with a sort of hominid looking for shells, or special stones, scarcities, and exchanging them with others. I was recently at an art fair and I thought to myself - no one here is thinking about what the works of art look like. So they are assumed to be good. But sometimes it seems to me to be nothing more than a filler. It is not based on the ritual of the visual happening, but the ritual of trade: apes exchanging things, eight-year-old boys collecting and swapping football stickers. Getting hold of.

THE BOUNDARIES OF OBJECT ART

Back to the work itself. Your credo of the hygiene of the message creates a formal idiom with a maximum sense of reality. In your stained-glass window project for the Chapel of the Norbertines in Ghent (OTE, 2000) you depicted the act of love by means of X-rays. One could hardly imagine a more sterile rendering of this act in a religious setting. It is a depersonalisation and levelling of the high and the low. Harsh anti-romanticism used for a

lucid presentation of romanticism...

I see that sort of rigid rendering of everyday objects or bodies as the only correct strategy for explaining an image. To achieve it I always start with the forms as they present themselves in my immediate surroundings, on the television and in the supermarket. I work with the surfaces of the forms and always try to present my subjects more transparently.

One should always explain a 'high concept', meaning a complex concept, using simple things, as in parables, that use shepherds, lepers, lambs, rocks, bread and wine. The more complex the concept, the tighter your iconography should be.

In the history of object art (subversive and otherwise), which examines the identity of the object to its core, you join the ranks of Duchamp (with his urinal), Tinguely with his self-exploding machines and Piero Manzoni with his merda d'artista.

(Beaming) Yes, they were my heroes, examples to me, together with Picabia and Man Ray. In fact I have never used the term 'objects'. When I was at art college that concept was 'cool', following on from Baudrillard and others. I have always consistently talked about 'products' and 'production' in my work. Nowadays I prefer to talk about 'my harvest'.

Art is the ultimate accomplishment of capitalism and serves only to legitimise power. This fact interests me and that is why I can't stop exploring the boundaries of art. When it comes to objects or products, I am currently working with things that you produce small but which get bigger, with a yield: we do small drawings in the form of a tattoo, transfer them to the pigs, who grow, and in the end we have big paintings. There is no better metaphor for capitalism: everything is sold for profit, even if only as a symbolic parameter. Art and speculation are both the result and the wet dream of the capitalist system.

How far can you take this exploration of the boundaries, as for example in Cloaca? Where does the evolution come to an end?

I believe that *Cloaca* can become a living being: he functions and reacts as such. Only one major condition is unfulfilled: the ability to reproduce. If I succeed in making a machine reproduce, I will have a living creature in the full sense of the word.

I make noticeable progress every three months, but to the outside world it doesn't seem to count. People say, "He's been working on that for three years now", and the timespan of a project - before they are fed up with it - is two to three years. People prefer a trend to a long-term project. In purely technical and craft terms, *Cloaca* cannot evolve in such a short time: the labour and research load is too heavy. After *Cloaca-Original* (the basis, 2000) we developed *Cloaca new and improved*, with a better IT connection, greater user-friendliness even smoother. After that came *Cloaca-Turbo*, which has higher capacity (8 kilos of shit per day), with an input of 50 litres of food a day. *Turbo* consequently eliminates more often in

the course of a day and is therefore able to entertain the public more regularly. We are now working on *Cloaca IV* for 2005. It will be vertical and phallic like a new sort of god, so will have more religious connotations.

AT THE MUDAM

You said just now that the location of the display is not so important, whereas the way it is displayed is. Are you sceptical of museums?

The ideal setting from my work is of course a museum. The purpose of a museum is to show things in the ideal conditions. I just think it's sad that over the last 50 years art has relied on the helping hand of this sort of institution to such an extent that I can compare it to a clinic: the art lies in a coma and so cannot survive on the ordinary oxygen of the street. So that sort of art needs the artificial respiration and protection of a museum.

What would your ideal museum be like?

My ideal museum is somewhere between a church and a gigantic jewellery box that people go to look at because they feel like it. In New York new museums are being built because there is a demand for them, with tens of thousands of visitors per day. And what is important is that they are open in the evening too. In this country museums are open when working people can't visit them. I also wish Mudam were occasionally open in the evening, like cinemas, concert halls and discotheques.

What's your first plan for Mudam? Luxemburg has a context all its own of course.

I visited I.M. Pei's museum while it was under construction. The people behind the museum are building on a tradition and are serious about their plans. This clear commitment on several levels makes exhibiting there attractive, especially as I see that the Belgian museums only have work that's more than 10 years old. I'm going to work here on the spot in a small, dark room that has been made permanently available to me. I'm going to build in twelve new stained-glass windows. To that end I am experimenting with X-rays of the latest *Cloaca* and MRI scans.

In fact I think a museum shouldn't really organise a great many exhibitions. Its first function is as a place to keep art. So above all a museum needs curators in the true meaning of the word. 'Curare' means 'take care of': museums should possess works, take care of them in the best possible circumstances in order to pass on as much as possible to future generations and, if all goes well - in the best-case scenario - show them too.

