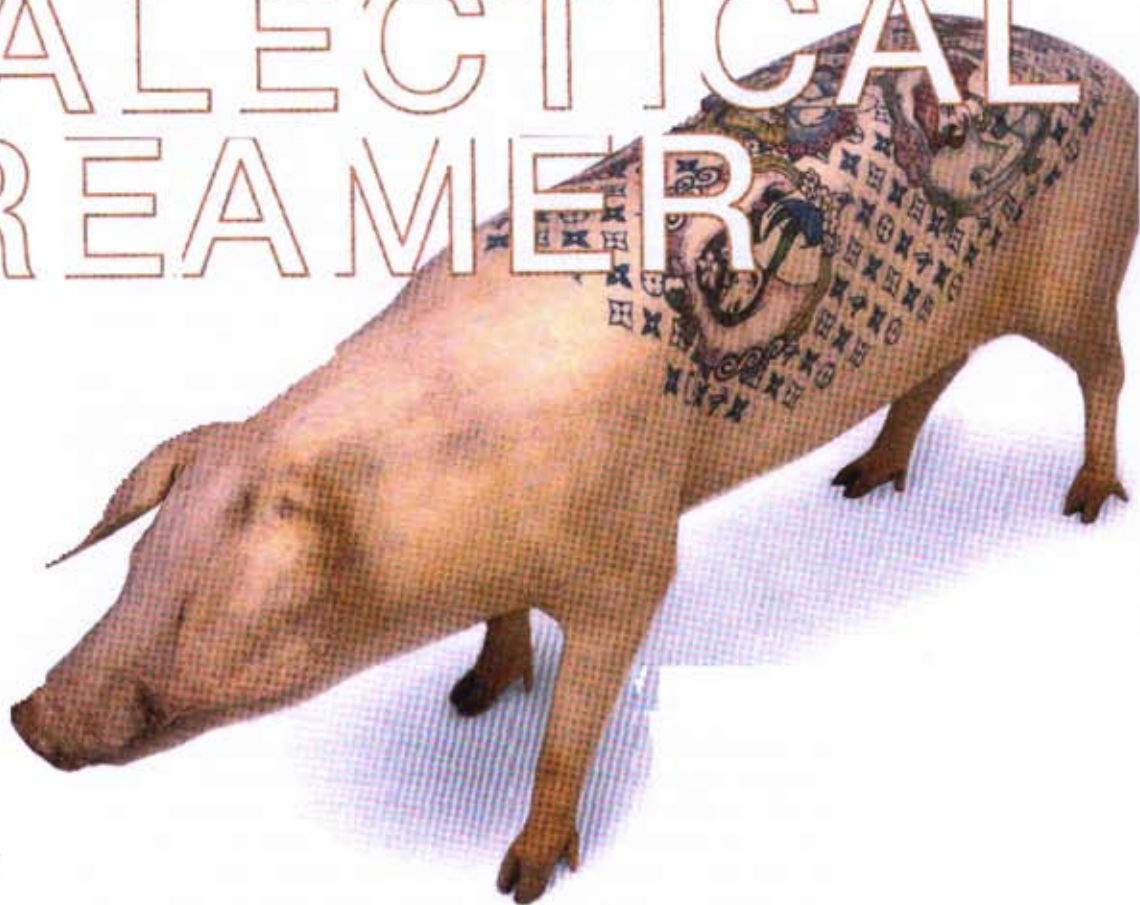


# DIALECTICAL DREAMER



Words | Jocelyn K. Gleib

Wim Delvoye is a trickster, a storyteller, a problem solver, a system maker, and a businessman—but it's only through the guise of the "artist" that he can embody all of these identities at once. And if you asked Delvoye, the artist is coming of age. "We have seen the collector as the star before, the gallerist as the star before, the curator as the star, the writer as the star, and now I'm expecting—we have seen many signs on the wall—that the artist will finally be the star."

Born in 1965 in Wervik, Belgium, Wim Delvoye has been exhibited at the Venice Biennale in Italy, Documenta IX in Germany, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, and the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. He has generated an impressive and wide-ranging oeuvre over the past 20+ years, with works including anal kisses (blooming, lipsticked prints of women's rectums); wooden birdhouses kitted out in studded S&M-inspired harnesses; football goals with stained glass depictions of everyday life and religious figures; drawings of Disney characters portrayed in crucifixion scenes; sculptures of construction vehicles rendered in ornate, laser-cut steel; live pigs tattooed with Louis Vuitton logos; and, his most famous project, Cloaca, a series of incredibly complex gastronomic machines that

process food and excrete true-to-life feces.

While Delvoye's works may seem to have little in common with each other upon a quick gloss, they all bear traces of a worldview that's philosophical, playful and provocative in equal parts. In the posthumous essay collection *The Crack-Up*, American author F. Scott Fitzgerald observes, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." And this is what Delvoye's work ultimately does: it tests us, as he deliberately conflates the beautiful and the ugly, the sacred and the profane, the art world and the business world, the iconography of consumerism and that one of religion.

Started in the late '90s with a series of exploratory sketches, Delvoye's ambitious *Cloaca* project, which simulates the human digestive process in all its gurgling, gaseous glory, has continued to bear "fruit" until the present day. But what might be still more surprising than his devoting over a decade to crafting feces-producing contraptions is that Delvoye saw *Cloaca* as a serious, if ironical, business enterprise from the very beginning. One of the first elements that he envisioned, in fact, was the *Cloaca* logo. His extensive and ongoing branding explorations have referenced the iconography of such larger-than-life brands as Coca-Cola, Ford Motor Company, Proctor and Gamble's Mr. Clean (or "Flash" in the UK) Chanel, and Chiquita bananas.

The word "cloaca" comes from the Latin for "sewer." The *Cloaca Maxima*, built in ancient Rome, was one of the world's first waste management systems. Inverting this notion of cloaca as sewage removal system, Delvoye set himself the problem of figuring out how to accurately mimic the system that actually produces the waste. Much like the Romans' *Cloaca Maxima* was a mammoth public works project, Delvoye's *Cloaca* would be a huge "art works" project. Appropriately then, in order to realize this far-fetched vision, Delvoye had to hire a team of experts—gastroenterologists, computer scientists and engineers—to assist him in sorting out how to execute his dream of building the perfect feces-producing machine. He also set up a company, which was literally capitalized with 100 packages of *Cloaca* feces for which he later sold bonds against.

As Delvoye himself explains, there was nothing simple about the project: "Cloaca was a story that had many interesting aspects, it was many things: it was banking, it was investing, it was gastronomy, it was smell, it was very high-tech but basically it was all about shit. So there was this strange, very rich story to work from."

To date, Delvoye has shown eight versions of his machines, ranging from the *Cloaca New & Improved*, a 10+ meter-long contraption with six visible digestive chambers, to the more self-contained *Personal Cloaca*, which most closely resembles a washing machine. Soon, he will unveil the latest, and perhaps final, installment in the series, the *Travel Kit Cloaca*. Much to Delvoye's delighted surprise, over the past two years the technology finally became available to create a tiny, highly sophisticated machine that fits neatly inside a suitcase.

The Cloaca series has been exhibited solely in museums throughout its life cycle because Delvoye does not wish to sell the machines. To wit, just as a company like Ford Motors wouldn't sell its factories but rather the cars that the factories produce, so Delvoye only sells the byproducts of his Cloaca machines. The only income generated from the artworks—aside from the loan fees he charged in the machines' early days—comes from the sale of the excrement that the machines produce (hygienically vacuum-packed, of course) as well as the related drawings and exhibition catalogs. In a sense, by taking the "commodification" of the art world to such an extreme, Delvoye nearly manages to escape the system even as he mocks it.

Yet, a genuine love of problem-solving (and not just poking fun) seems to be part and parcel of the complex, and seemingly absurd, challenges that he sets himself: "Somehow every project that I start is the living proof that I had a choice in going to art school," says Delvoye. "Often people go to art school because they're not good at anything... So when I'm making art pieces for myself I like to deliver the proof that I could have done something else if I wanted to, that I know something about biology or about business, for example."

Similarly, Delvoye has proven he knows a thing or two about farming, tattooing, and taxidermy through his Art Farm project. In keeping with his twin obsessions with iconography and investment, Delvoye has had a long-held interest in the idea of the "piggy bank"—but not merely as a static object in which one might save pennies for a rainy day. Rather, he has been fascinated by the idea of pigs as "biological paintings," living, growing entities that can evolve as art works (and investments) throughout their lifetime. Initially, when Delvoye was incubating the Art Farm concept in the early '90s, he tattooed pigskins obtained from slaughterhouses with

primitive designs—skulls, crosses, etc—of the sort you might see on any motorcycle-riding tough. As his skill set evolved, however, he started working with live pigs and inevitably began to take their unique anatomy into account when designing tattoos.

Finally, after years of experimentation, he bought a small tract of land in the countryside near Beijing in 2004 and launched a fully functional

"art farm" to house and care for his tattooed pigs. Delvoye had always wanted to launch a project in China and the country also happened to have more lenient animal welfare laws that ensured he could execute the project with little interference.

In fact, the pigs have been quite well cared for over the past five years as Art Farm has evolved into a serious enterprise that employs a number of caretakers to look after the pigs, a handful of expert tattoo artists, and a

farm manager. Throughout the farm's existence, Delvoye and his team have tattooed the pigs with an increasingly sophisticated array of designs, ranging from Russian prison-style tattoos and Chinese characters to Louis Vuitton logo patterns and Takashi Murakami cherry blossoms to Disney characters and, of course, his own Cloaca logo.

The culmination of Art Farm came in 2007, the Year of the Golden Pig. In May of that year, Delvoye was the first non-Chinese artist to exhibit at Xin Beijing Art Gallery, where he installed both a Cloaca machine and a handful of live, tattooed pigs who dawdled about in a nearby pen. It was the rare moment when the imitation of life and the imitated come together; as Delvoye has commented in a past interview, "In a perfect world, I would just show the Cloaca shit machines and live pigs eating and excreting together."

As his focus naturally began to drift toward new projects, Delvoye decided that he would shut down Art Farm in 2008. That is, until the Chinese suddenly became completely enamored with his porcine experiment. Reflecting wryly on this newfound interest, he remarks, "That's the irony, when I wanted to stop that happens to be the moment that the Chinese, the main press, took an interest in my farm. Every week now some journalist or TV station comes over, and I'm intrigued about what really drives them to talk so much about me now. It was like my dream come true, but it was a little too late because by then I'm already thinking of doing other activities."

Delvoye's current obsession is gothic towers. Although his explorations of the gothic are nothing new—he's crafted small- and large-scale gothic construction vehicles (e.g. dump trucks, caterpillars, cement mixers) out of laser-cut steel since the early '00s—the subject seems to have now taken center stage in his psyche, with a new focus on creating architectural works. As he hopes to eventually wind down Art Farm, Delvoye's operational base in China will shift from Beijing to Shanghai, where he now employs a team of nine architects as collaborators on his new gothic tower project. Meanwhile, back in his home base of Ghent, Belgium, another team of eight architects works directly with him, scheming the construction of tall, slender and incredibly ornate steel towers that echo the architecture of medieval cathedrals

Delvoye believes that the Tower project may eventually evolve into an undertaking on par with Cloaca. To that end, he's already set up a company called Celestial Jerusalem to encompass the venture. When asked about the name, he replies with a touch of amusement, "Eventually my gothic work will be culminating into one celestial city—the city for the end of days."

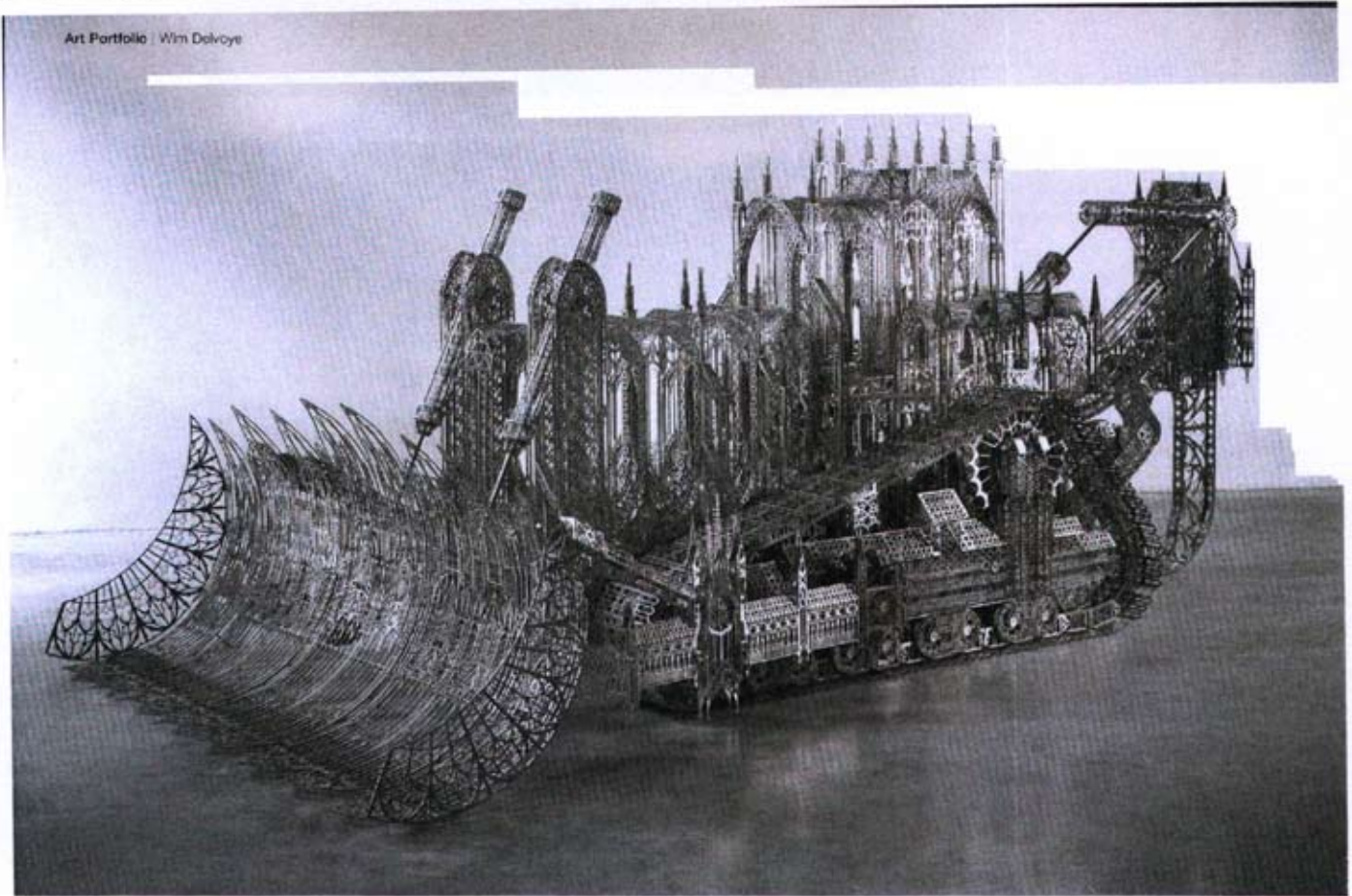
For now though, the potentially grandiose Tower project is only just beginning, with Delvoye and his team building scale models for private collectors and select exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale. Nonetheless, he's already thinking big, dreaming of nothing less than a new (art) world order:

"To make art, artists have to reflect on new ways of making art. Today, everything needs to be transportable, to be bought and sold at auctions, so that's one system. And it affects how the art looks. But if I could find another system, I could make completely different art pieces. So I like the idea

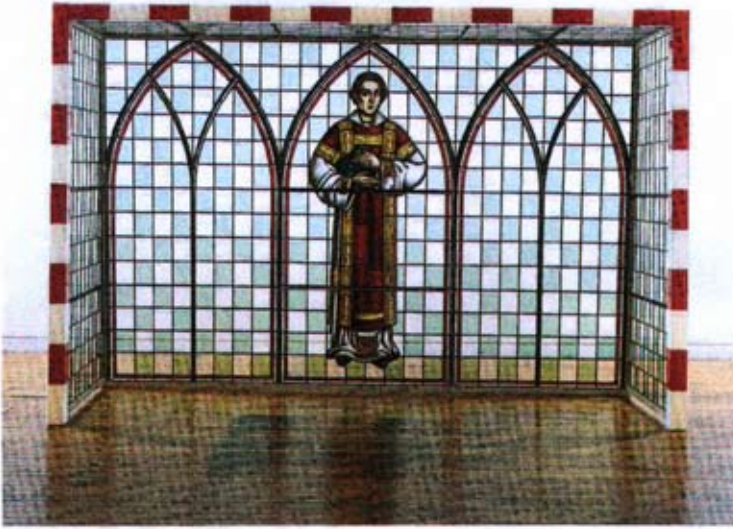
of seeing if there's another possibility. For example, buy a piece of land, commission yourself to be the designer of the building, then construct the building yourself, and then also have people renting the building.

Despite the similarity with architecture combined with real estate developments, in this case anew, Delvoye would not actually commercialize the land or the actual construction, but much like with Cloaca, he would only "rent" the rights to access. "To be commercially able to do such a project successfully, you're actually commercially independent from the market—by being more commercial, you're actually becoming less commercial."

[www.wimdelvoye.be](http://www.wimdelvoye.be)



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