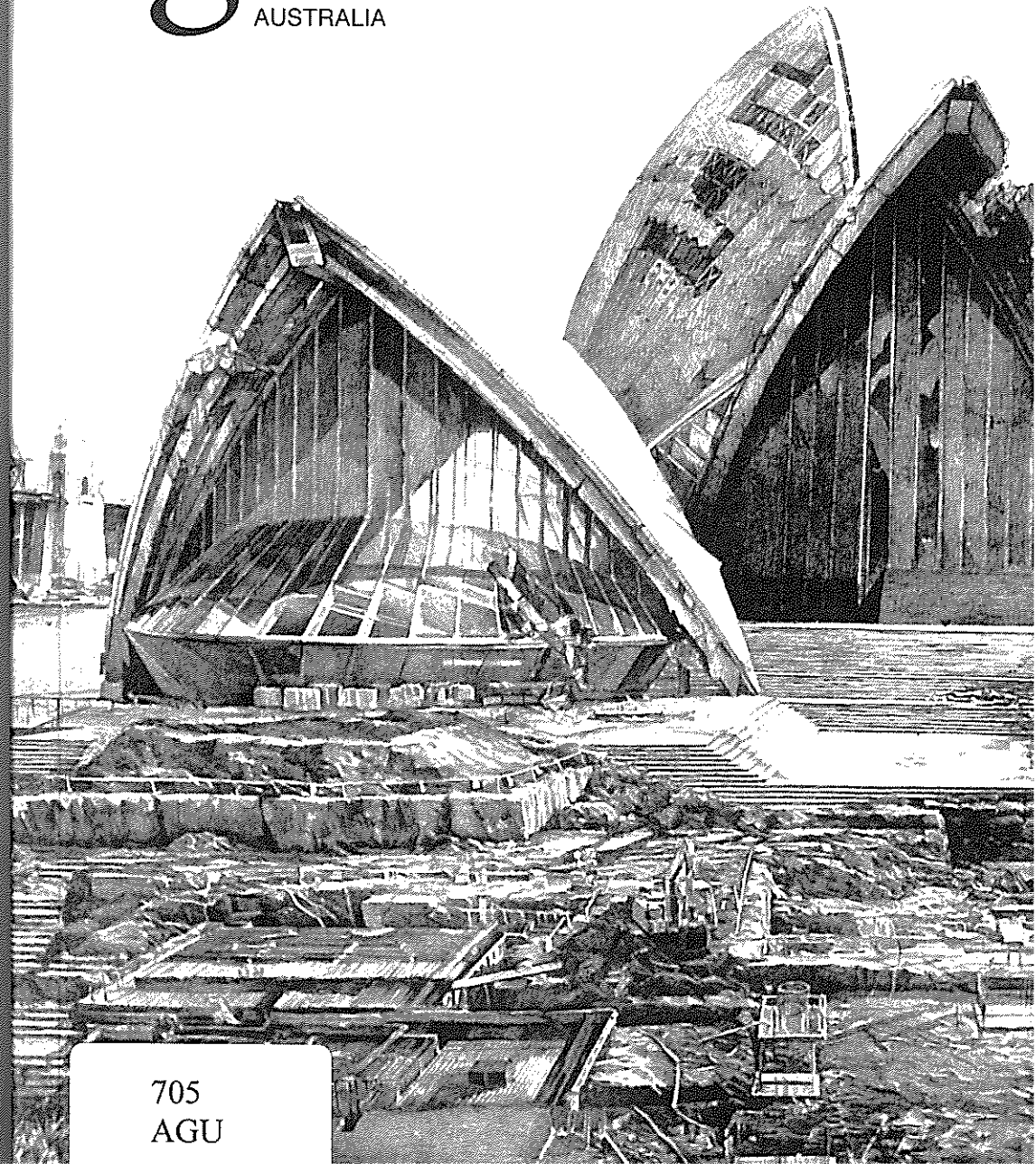


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FEATURE

Shit Stirrer

Sex, tattooed pigs, religion and faeces – Belgian artist Wim Delvoye has made a career of provocation. Ray Edgar catches up with him on the eve of his major survey at Hobart's MONA.



Elvis had Graceland, Michael Jackson his Neverland. In a 13th-century medieval castle south of Brussels, Belgian artist Wim Delvoye plots his Holyland. "I want to build a new Jerusalem," he declares. It's his biggest project to date; one that's been gestating for three decades. Now that he has the castle – bought at auction in 2008 – Delvoye plans to launch his new religion.

"It's my dangerous idea," he chuckles. "It all starts with a place where you can receive

people. They have a focus and from there you can add your value system."

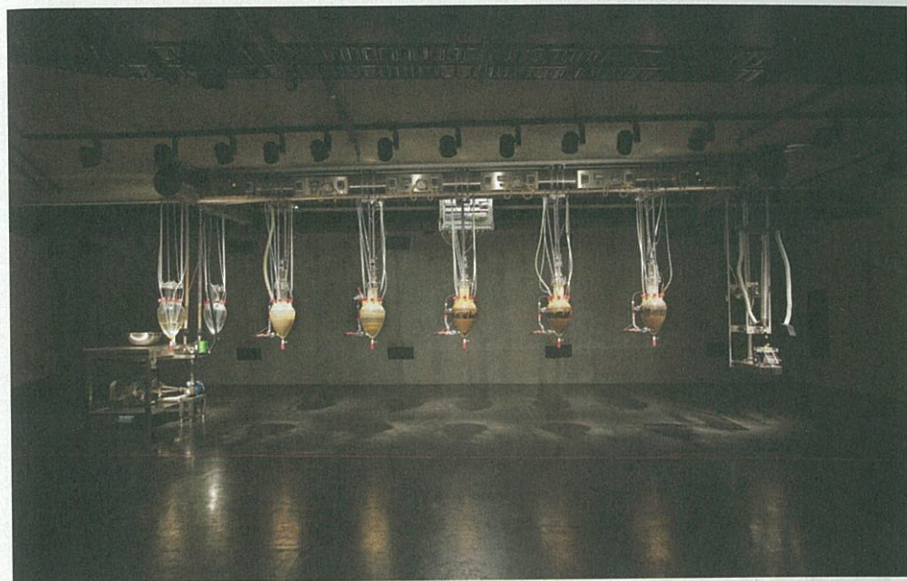
"Every month I design something," he enthuses. "Now I'm working on choreography. How the priest-like figure goes in, and what he does and thinks. What style. Does he need to stand on his head or whatever? All these little details I need to know. It's not like something that grew over [2000] years."

"I'm 46 – I want to be in trouble one more time, before I'm too old," he says.

Above: Wim Delvoye (1965, Wervik, Belgium; lives and works in Ghent, Belgium), *Tim*, 2006-now. Tattooed human skin, life size. Wim and Tim: the process of the creation. Image Courtesy of the artist and MONA Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia.



Wim Delvoye (1965, Wervik, Belgium; lives and works in Ghent, Belgium), *Untitled (Osama)*, 2002-03. Tattooed pigskin, installation view, 127 x 98cm. Collection MONA, Hobart. Photo credit: MONA/Leigh Carmichael. Image Courtesy of MONA Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia.



Enfant terrible, agent provocateur. Given the subject of so much of Wim Delvoye's art, perhaps a more accurate description is 'shit stirrer'.

One can imagine the worshipful Delvoye acolytes cloistered in his new Jerusalem, reverently peering out his stained-glass windows with their X-ray images of bowels and rectums; walking on mosaic tiles designed with Delvoye's own faeces; and kneeling at the altar of the lapsed Catholic's *Cloaca*, or its messianic mascot Mr Clean.

At least *Cloaca*, 2000, is the most likely candidate for iconic reverence in the Delvoye canon. This notorious kinetic sculpture is based on a digestive system and actually produces excrement. The result of three years of consultations with experts in biotechnology, it takes 13 hours to achieve full-flavoured, aromatic results.

"*Cloaca* allowed me to become a renaissance man – an all round person," he says in all seriousness. "It allowed me to go wide in different areas. It allowed me to do branding and marketing and logos. You even need to

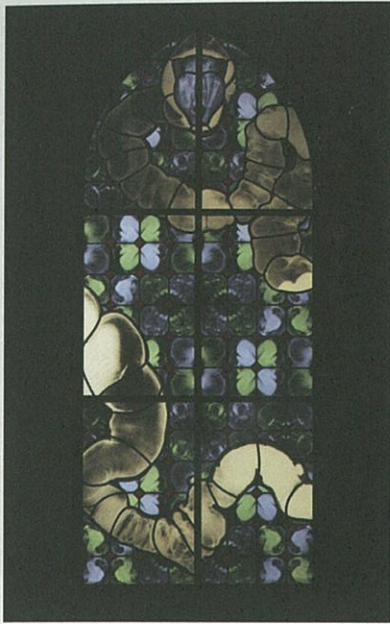
have a culinary interest after a while. It's endless what I've been doing."

Cloaca forms the centre of the survey exhibition of Delvoye's work at Hobart's MONA. Four cloaca machines (he has made 10 over the years – *Cloaca Professional*, commissioned in 2010 specifically for MONA, was the first to be permanently installed in a museum) will be "shitting as a quartet", according to the artist. And until the conversion of castle to Holyland occurs, MONA will have to act as mecca.

"I'm interested in how systems work," he says. But it's transparency in particular that is important to Delvoye. It's all about making the big picture clear. It determines much of his materials – glass cloaca machines, stained-glass windows, X-rays, exposed structural frames make up his gothic sculptures, such as *Cement Truck*, 2007 – and describes much of his frank conversation.

Delvoye credits the Museum of Antwerp with seeing the immediate potential in his *Cloaca* sculpture. When the machine was first exhibited in 2000, the museum suggested he sell

Above: Wim Delvoye (1965, Wervik, Belgium; lives and works in Ghent, Belgium), *Cloaca Professional*, 2010, mixed media, 275 x 710 x 175cm. Photographer MONA / Leigh Carmichael Collection of MONA, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia.



shit multiples in the gift shop. Delvoye says he was “embarrassed” by the proposition. While it’s incredible to think a student of art history would be surprised by this – given such classic purveyors of the abject as Piero Manzoni and his canned *Artist’s Shit*, 1961, not to mention the tradition of multiples, let alone art merch – nevertheless Delvoye says it opened his mind. Chiefly to the museum’s complicity in the commodification of art.

Since then he has gleefully established companies, employed lawyers to ratify bond agreements, started an “art farm”, to raise pigs for tattooing and watched the world react – critically and enthusiastically – to his whimsical notions.

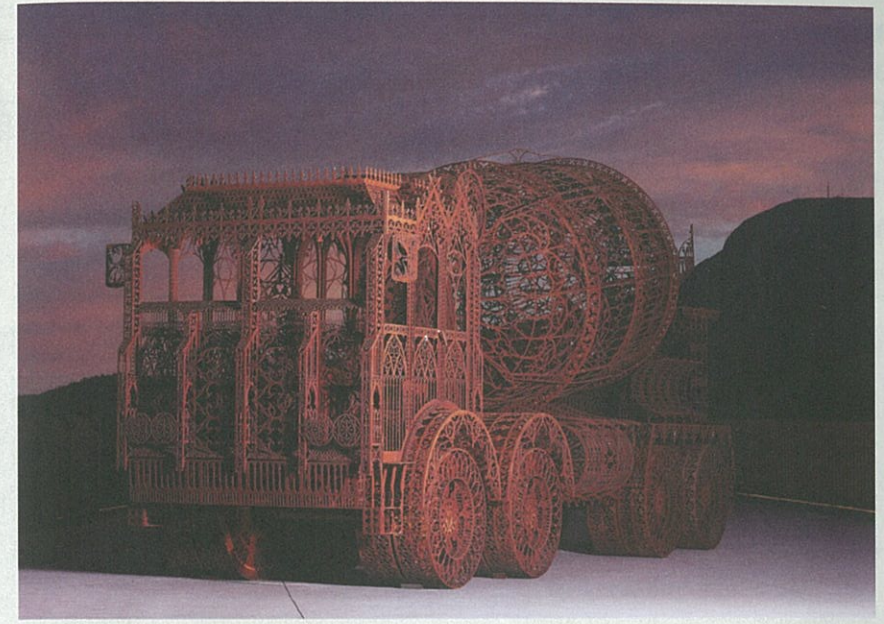
One of the first things Delvoye did was create *Cloaca* bond certificates that could be bought and sold on the basis of *Cloaca*’s production of shit. It recalled Duchamp’s 1924 Monte Carlo bonds. “But there is no Dadaism here,” Delvoye says of his determination to make

everything official and legal. “I wanted to make art that is completely a financial instrument. Not just symbolizes, but just is. They make Duchamp look ‘studenty.’”

It’s hard not to relish the absurdity as Delvoye recounts the conversations he’d have with corporate lawyers over the value of his *Cloaca* bonds: “Each of your poos is different... People will pay more for a poo made on September 11[, 2001]... If your machine keeps making poos they will be less valuable.”

Not that mockery is Delvoye’s intention. “I am sincerely in love with art,” he says. “I want to analyse it as trophy of success and a cultural artifact. Its moral position. I want to see what’s happened and render it transparent by doing so. But mostly I like taking art back in to life.”

In any case, the lawyers were right. While Delvoye has freezers full of excrement from the past five years that he has trouble



offloading for \$1000, he says a 9/11 stool did sell to a collector recently for “\$7 or \$8,000”. “Lawyers understand the art world better than artists do,” he says.

“I’m like a student playing company or a kid playing in an adult world,” he reasons. “I don’t need to be successful like a CEO or a manager. Failure is part of the art piece. Imagine if my social projects would be successful, it would be terrible,” he chuckles.

Among Delvoye’s immensely diverse output MONA’s survey exhibition includes another controversial series, the tattooed pigs. While Delvoye began using stretched pigskins in the early 1990s, he later began tattooing them live to watch the image increase in value. Some would be exhibited stuffed, sometimes live. He even established an art farm in China to produce them.

The rationale behind the series, Delvoye explains, was to dispel the notion of the god-like nature of artists staring at a blank canvas

and creating their mark. “I like to do a way of art that I never feel like a god. I like to feel vulnerable. The pig is always looking at you reminding you that it’s not really art. And people don’t really like pigs. So it stops being art. It’s a half-way thing.”

It’s in this interzone that Delvoye dwells. His juxtaposition of high and low, of kitsch and classical imagery, fine arts and craft, art and technology, ultimately suggests that Delvoye is not just feeding a culture of excess with excessive, often abject, imagery but stuffing it till it shits, or in the case of the taxidermied pigs, can’t move.

As we know, however, the art world can absorb anything. “The only way to get outside it is to create another system,” he says. And like so many before him, he finds religion is the answer. But failure is always an option.

Wim Delvoye is at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), Hobart, until 2 April.

Above: Wim Delvoye (1965, Wervik, Belgium; lives and works in Ghent, Belgium), *Wednesday*, 2008 and *Friday*, 2008; Etched stained glass, steel, lead; 800 x 200 mm; Wim Delvoye Studio, Belgium. Images courtesy of the artist and MONA Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia.

Above: Wim Delvoye (1965, Wervik, Belgium; lives and works in Ghent, Belgium), *Cement Truck*, 2007. Laser-cut corten steel, 313 x 820 x 252cm. Studio Wim Delvoye, Belgium. Photo Credit: MONA/Remi Chauvin. Image Courtesy MONA Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia.