

The following is a transcript of a conversation that took place on January, 25 2002 between the artist Wim Delvoye, and the New Museum's Senior Curator Dan Cameron and Adjunct Curator, Gerardo Mosquera.

Dan Cameron: I think that one's first acquaintance with *Claoca* puts everything into a different perspective. As my colleague, **Gerardo Mosquera**, was the first person from the New Museum to see it, I would like to ask Gerardo to talk about the piece first.

Gerardo Mosquera: I have been familiar with Wim's work for almost five or six years. And even when writing about his work, I was really impressed by this machine—not only from the technological, scientific standpoint, or because of its the spectacular size—but because it is a very subversive concept.

I also like the visual aspect of it. This is a very important "watershed" piece, and I very much wanted to bring it here. What you are actually looking at now is an enhanced version of the original machine that was specially made for the New Museum by Wim and his team.

I think I'd like to ask, 'precisely, how do you react to the piece?' To me, getting science, technology and art together to produce shit is a kind of a metaphor for our civilization. It has a very symbolic aspect to it. After years of research at Antwerp University, this machine was made, exhibited, and transported—a process that is very expensive. So in a way, we are also part of a very strange performance. I was in the galleries today watching people watch the machine defecating at 2:30, and it was very impressive—people were just staring at it and waiting for this thing to happen. At first, it was a like a small drop, and everyone said "Ohhh!" as if it were a miracle. So I was experiencing that, as well as feeling that I was part of a nonsensical

performance. I was looking at a machine producing shit. But here, there are many connotations that go far beyond the humorous or the spectacular, so I would like Wim to comment a little on that.

Wim Delvoye: When I made mosaics from 1990 to 1992, I had this idea. I was already doing shovels, concrete mixers, and ironing boards, and there was something very proletarian about these objects—something very suburban, a little “low-life”, and simple. I was also very interested in kitsch, which again is something that is more “low” than “high”. Then all of a sudden I thought of shit as lowest of the low—as something people would even pay to have thrown out. Soccer, for example, can’t communicate as universally, as it is more important in Europe than it is in America. But there is something so cosmopolitan about shit; it is something that everyone does.

You have to imagine that the 90’s were all about saying, ‘I am different from this group’, and there was an “identity thing” that dominated every conversation. And then I thought, ‘Wow, there is nothing ethnic about shit’. There is something very international, corporate, and global about shit. So I did these images on tiles, with stars that were like aristocratic medallions. And when you got closer to them, you noticed it was shit. So there was this balance between low and high. But with the machine it was different.

I forgot the artist’s name but two or three years ago in London an artist wanted to create a machine that would make paper airplanes and then just throw them out.

Audience member: It was Chris Burden.

Wim Delvoye: Chris Burden, yeah. It didn’t really work, but I liked the idea. It’s a lot of work to make a complicated machine that makes paper airplanes. Then I heard about this artist who was

going to install a truck for playing golf against a wall. He wanted to golf a ball through his third floor window, and he needed a truck because he wanted the ball to fall on this truck and then roll into the hole. But then for the exhibition he took the truck away, so when people came in for the exhibit, all they saw was this golf ball.

I like the idea of waste: of doing a lot of work for nothing—a bit like Christo with his islands. I think art is a little like doing everything for nothing. But the shit guaranteed me so much because it would always remain art, thanks to the shit. So even when I got very professional, found a lot of money, and had a lot of people producing it, it still took years to make. You have to develop it, and get serious about it. You end up always apologizing for it since there is always a taboo about being a professional artist. I always made sure I would be nothing else but a professional artist. So I went for it.

Dan Cameron: One of the comments I heard last night from a professional artist was that rather than calling it a millennial piece, the piece felt like the real first work of the twenty-first century. It's the first work you look at and say that we are entering an age in which many things are foreign or frightening to us. In society, certain very large convergences that represent the unknown are taking place and I think that this work is very much a reflection of that. It's sort of frightening and funny, and it also stimulates deep anthropomorphic attachments. I know that the staff now refers to *Cloaca* as a baby—a large infant that needs care. It needs feeding, and we are concerned about its bowel movements because those are equated with the health of the museum. It seems that in a single work you've touched on multiple levels of meaning. But I think that the "millennial" comment has particular ramifications. Did you give any thought to the date when you presented this, given that we are in a new age certainly from a calenderical point of view?

Wim Delvoye: When I was a teenager, the movies often had names like *Star 2000*, *Space Odyssey 2001* or *Star Trek 2000*—in those days, the year 2000 was really something of interest. I wanted that number, but I had to hurry because of this exhibition. We found an extra sponsor, but he couldn't get his money until the next fiscal year and asked me to wait two months. But in the end, I chose to lose that money and open the piece in 2000.

I have a colleague in Belgium called Panamarenko, who makes machines. His work is very nostalgic, very "bricolage": he makes airplanes and older machines like zeppelins, planes, and motors. But there was this new thing that was probably going to dominate the next century. I like that kind of Frankenstein, Prometheus idea and the tragic aspect of their stories. We make shit without knowing much about it. Even the dumbest people on this globe shit better than *Cloaca*; they do it so much better without any Ph.D. or investment effort. It's so tragic, and I like that.

Gerardo Mosquera: Wim, you once used the notion of the "ready-made" to describe your work. Can you discuss this notion and its relationship to the work *Cloaca*? Because to me *Cloaca* is the "anti-ready made".

Wim Delvoye: If you put a shit in a museum it will be a "ready-made" because of the context. And of course it's not an art piece, but it becomes one because of its context. There is something very proletarian about it: it is worth nothing, but the machine gives it value. So it is very anti-democratic, because in the end, the people who flush away their own waste will pay a thousand dollars for shitty artwork. The machine makes shit aristocratic again. There are objects that are like products and don't want to be more than a product, but this piece was a lot of work and it was made by hand. It is not just about funds.

Gerardo Mosquera: I was also wondering if you could talk a little more about the visual aspect of the piece? For me, it is very important because the machine is beautiful. It has a certain “science fiction” look, but it is very minimal and very clean in terms of its color and distribution of form. This wouldn’t be a display you would have in an actual lab (which is more chaotic from a visual point of view). How did you design the machine? I know it’s made of bricolage parts, but some pieces were specially designed for it. Could you explain a little bit about that?

Wim Delvoye: I remember as a child going to movies like *The Wizard of Oz*. And at the end of the movie, there was an enormous machine that people thought of as a god ruling their country. There was also a scene at the end of the *Planet of the Apes* where people—I forget if they were monkeys or humans—were kneeling down in front of a huge golden rocket. It looked like a very high-tech Buddha sculpture, a huge phallic symbol that was dominating people like a god or a boss. I’ve often thought about a technological Buddha, and wanted this machine to be as pristine as possible. It is like an altar, a table, or even a golden staircase: there is something very repetitive about it, something very orderly. It becomes a surface on which you sacrifice the food that was a lot of work to make but that was made with love. It’s a lot about waste and sacrificing and looking at that idea.

A machine is like a god, and for this reason it has to be very clean looking. I wanted nothing to do with nostalgia—this machine had to look to the future.

Dan Cameron: One of the areas that people are somewhat confused about is *Cloaca*’s relationship to science. Even though you collaborate with science—and the piece would be unthinkable without having experts in computer science, digestive systems and other areas—you have been very emphatic in saying that you do want any confusion to exist in terms of how the work is

classified. You have always said that it is has almost nothing to do with science, and you always return to the aesthetic aspect of the work. Can you elaborate a little on this?

Wim Delvoye: Yes. Of course there were some people who were collaborating with me and there was one guy advising us on the bacteria who was already working with the R&D center of Proctor and Gamble. He said to me 'Oh they would be so happy to have your machine, and use it.' All of a sudden, there was a danger of some medical interest in it, and I was very scared of anyone seeing "use value" in the work. It would be like using Duchamp's toilet—it would destroy the whole thing. So for strategic reasons, I left the piece in a museum context.

Dan Cameron: What about this idea of it being a purely aesthetic device for contemplation? Once again, I think that shit has such a negative social value that people can't help but stare at it—but they also can't help but avert their eyes. There is this struggle as to how to look at it. Can you explore the aesthetic aspects of the work, or how you see it from an aesthetic and critical theory standpoint?

Wim Delvoye: It's a very funny thing, because for the people who have been working on it and have to clean up the shit, the machine no longer does anything for them aesthetically because the shit comes from no one. It's not shit from their friend or girlfriend—it's shit from a machine, so its clean. It's like a Mars bar: when you open one, no one has ever touched it. It has not been tainted by humanity, so people can trust it more. They wouldn't eat the shit, but this thought is less disturbing than if it were from any human being—even the one you love the most.

Dan Cameron: You've also talked about some of the taboos concerning biological functions, and you've mentioned that Americans are a little more squeamish about their bodies. Whether or not

this is the case, I think that the work prompts an almost mystical contemplation of one's own mortality. It really does flirt with death.

Wim Delvoye: There is something diabolic about it, in the effort required to keep it plugged in and "alive". It requires a nurturing quality. When I was tattooing pigs in another work, I saw for the first time that I had made an art piece that forced the museum, directors, and gallery staff to develop nurturing qualities. They wanted to vaccinate the art piece, and it had to go through this quarantine and customs process. And I thought, 'all of this for an art piece?...What about a machine that does this naturally?' At the time, there was this Tamaguchi craze about machines that died if you didn't care for them. What was your question again?

Dan Cameron: I was actually leading up to the issue of death...

Wim Delvoye: For example, if a museum building is usually closed on Monday, this becomes impossible to do because the machine is "alive". You have to feed it when there is no public there: it's day and night. If it doesn't feed and some empty burps develop, bacteria can form in them. There are 400 different species of bacteria that ferment—these are called shimos. First it's called food, and then it's shit, and in-between it's shimos. There are always bacterial flora, intestinal flora present. So the next time you go to the toilet, you should say, 'we go to the toilet' because there are over four hundred bacteria in the digestive system. For me, it's life. This is a human being without a soul.

Gerardo Mosquera: I think that contemporary art and shit are very good friends. You find so many contemporary art pieces related to shit and excrement. But I was thinking it was more about representing that relationship than actually having the real stuff inside the sacred museum

or gallery space. Now what we have here is a machine that is simulating actual excrement that you can even smell. Sometimes it's unbearable how much this machine stinks. I don't know what your feeling is about this in the sense that this is a very direct engagement. Is there a corporeal aspect to *Cloaca*?

Wim Delvoye: Of course. But we are completely aware that we are not dealing with shit anymore. For me, it's like *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* with all the oompa loompas taking care of the situation. Shit is so nothing. It has no value. And then you have all these people around the machine. It creates an enormous performance situation, with its feeding time and pooping time. There is always something happening; it even makes some noise. Some people actually proposed to make a new age CD. They would just record the noise for relaxation—intestinal *Cloaca* noises. It's endless—you can just go on and on.

Artists like Beuys or Warhol had a social project that they somehow had to “fill-in” for their work to remain art. Imagine Warhol having to become a real celebrity, a media or Hollywood star. He wouldn't be a star anymore. He needed to remain tragic to remain in the art world. It's always interesting to try and do something meaningful in a real social context. Imagine if Joseph Beuys really started a political party, became a political leader. I don't know if you would still call him an artist.

I would like to start a company called *Cloaca* and have it listed on the Euro index, something like the NASDAQ. It would be on the stock market and you could follow the value of the shit, and make all these connections—shit, money, control, collecting. You could go on and on, but failure is guaranteed. Shit fails as a social project. It will never become a mass product—there will never be a factory of shit machines. But it is life, and it creates spin-offs, like the brochure I use for the initial public offering, or the video I present to banks. The

bookkeeper has to explain statements about the economic situation of the company. All of this can become an art piece.

Dan Cameron: Do you feel that *Cloaca* is the end of a line of investigation? Or do you see this merely as one stage in an evolutionary or developmental process that will lead to other manifestations of machines that make shit?

Wim Delvoe: Of course the danger with *Cloaca* is that it overshadows a lot of the other work I have already done. But at the same time, people are reading the former works in a really scatological way. Now when they see shovels or concrete mixers, they really start to think of shit. It looks like everything really led to *Cloaca*—which I like. There is this danger of course—this “kamikaze” aspect—that *Cloaca* will not allow me to do anything else because it takes up all of my energy.

At the same time it is not finished. I would now like to follow the same corporate logic as the machine making industry. Now you have *Cloaca*, which is like the prototype for *Cloaca: New and Improved*. So now you have second generation, like Windows 2000. The third one I would like to make is *Cloaca Turbo*, an industrial version that will have 300 times the production capacity. And then I would like to finish with a miniaturized domestic version of *Cloaca* called *Personal Cloaca*, that is portable.

Dan Cameron: I think something that shocked people at yesterday’s media preview—although I think many of them came to be shocked—was your comment that *Cloaca* could end up being a “new religion.” Obviously, there is some irony and a plainly nihilistic attitude here. But I also think that you were being a little bit serious. Do you want to talk about the religious dimension of the work?

Wim Delvoye: There is something very materialistic about *Cloaca*. It's alive without a soul. It eats and it excretes—it doesn't think, it doesn't feel and it doesn't taste the food. There is no hedonism involved. It does not enjoy pooping; it does not enjoy eating. At the same time, you have to go up a staircase to place the food in the bowl. It's an ascension—in biblical times, people would kill brothers and sons for gods. It's what we do now for material things—now everything is about money, shopping, and wheeling and dealing. It's like a new religion, and somehow *Cloaca* plays on that.

Gerardo Mosquera: There is always this concept in the history of religion about those who are closest to a god. The concept is that there is a god who is just there—existing and doing nothing. In a way, I relate this machine to that idea, because it's just there. You notice it producing sounds, it's moving and just making shit. It's not here to produce something or transform existence, so there is this religious side.

I also like the spectacular side. I think you find too much repetitive work dealing with art itself, especially in Europe. So a piece like this is very refreshing. It's taking concepts from the "Warhol spectacle", but it's not just about show. It has a very symbolic aspect to it that goes beyond a very modernist, elitist notion of what art is. Could you develop a little bit on that?

Wim Delvoye: I don't like the steel railing that prevents art from being art. Museums have become like clinics, because they have to take care of art. But I always liked the idea that artwork has to have some street credibility. For instance, if I put my soccer posts back onto a soccer field people would not say, 'oh look, there is an art piece'. But I would still look at it. It would still compete with its environment. It would still be a strange image that had street credibility.

You could put *Cloaca* anywhere, and people would still be looking at it, talking about it or visiting it. I prefer showing it in museums, as they can give art context for the piece, but I still want it to be independent. Even a photograph of the piece could work on the street. When I make a piece, I want it to be photogenic. It has to look good.

Gerardo Mosquera: But don't you think that there is some danger that the spectacular side of the work makes its conceptual side invisible?

Wim Delvoye: I was always hesitant about the idea of the phenomenon, the spectacular. But museums now are more spectacular. People are less ashamed about amusing themselves than before. Especially in Europe people like boring video—they will watch a tap dripping for two hours. It's art because it's boring. It's guaranteed. They put this shit on a cube and they feel guilty about enjoying themselves. They think that art should be "higher" than fun or going to a movie. Boring art doesn't have more meaning; it's just boring. So what is fun about *Cloaca*, is that you can have the paparazzi, and the news just talking about the shit machine in a sensational way, and the radio and TV stations that just make fun of it. But you can also have serious discussions about shit and the psychology and philosophy of it; you can include everything. *Cloaca* has more meaning than a shit machine. It can play on every level, and everyone can create their own interpretation of it.

Gerardo Mosquera: What about the title?

Wim Delvoye: I thought this had a little bit of novelty. I spent a lot of time working on this piece and had to think about the title. But I also had to follow the logic and the idea of the art piece. This machine, this art piece, needed a title but it had to be more like a logo. In the first logo, I

used the letters from Coca-Cola and the colors from Ford, so it looked mass-produced, and represented mass consumption. Coca-Cola and Ford were brands that could represent these ideas so well—they are so global and corporate. As we are also used to seeing these letters and colors, *Cloaca* became not only a title, but also a brand name. You could make merchandise, you could put the logo on a wall or on a T-shirt. This was a new strategy for the piece. A new way of thinking.

Dan Cameron: I know we have touched on many different fantastic ideas here, but I would now like to gather questions from the audience.

Audience Member: My question is for the New Museum. From what I understand, the machine produced revenue for the venues in which it was displayed in Belgium. Why has the New Museum not explored the economic aspect of the piece?

Dan Cameron: Well, we never entirely ruled out the possibility. But what we did consider—and what stopped us—was the practicality of it in terms of the staff and technology that was required to transform the fresh product on the conveyor belt to a finished product ready for sale. This would have involved gathering up the shit and freeze drying it in packages. I don't mean this the wrong way, but if we were more of a state funded institution with greater access to technology and resources, I think it would have been an interesting undertaking. But there was a certain point when we realized it was just taking on too much. Right now it is consuming all of our available resources.

Audience Member: How do you figure out if the machine *Cloaca* has an upset stomach, or has had too many margaritas or Mexican food?

Wim Delvoye: There is something completely diabolic about this machine. It does everything on time, it does not complain about what it eats. It's frighteningly perfect. But at the same time it's also sophisticated because it does not suffer from traumatic childhood memories, or stress, or menstruation—all the things that can effect or change the color and shape of a shit. It just does its job. But sometimes we suspect that it has a personality—there is no logic behind it. We do know that acidic drinks or curry are not good for the machine. I still don't understand how we survive parties.

Dan Cameron: Another thing to mention is that it actually does go through periods of adjustment. As a European machine, it actually spent a few days adjusting to American cuisine.

Audience Member: What is the longest time that the machine has ever run continuously? And what is the difference between the machine in the beginning, and the machine when it gets moved?

Wim Delvoye: Of course the machine gets dirty and a little stained. We have to replace the silicon and the filters—so it's not a static art piece. For every show we change something—it's a constant evolution. And in this way it's very alive.

Audience Member: Now that the piece is in New York, and I'm thinking about what is coming out of Europe in terms of contemporary art, who are you comfortable being associated with? Artists who come to my mind are Maurizio Cattelan, Mark Quinn, or Damien Hirst.

Wim Delvoye: I like their work and I follow their work with great interest. But I don't follow as much the "youngest, hottest, thing." Eventually when a trend gets reproduced everywhere, I get hold of it. But I also like to see movies. What I like about some artists is that they have a certain visual hygiene and efficiency—this is what I really like about American art since the Second World War. It is what it is, and it so streamlined and simple. If you look at British pop, it's so dated, so narrative, it compromises itself with the past. Even the French school of the 1950's is so "old European" looking. When Pollock was doing this "all over thing", or when American pop came a little bit later, it was so fresh. Even when you see it now, it's like it was made yesterday. Like the conceptual artist, Chris Burden, who gets shot in the shoulder. It is what it is. A lot of European art has a little bit of mystery, and a little bit of this and a little bit of that, and the artist wants to show off that he is intelligent and knows his classics. And then from the 1980's onward with the new German "expressionism", a lot of European movements became very confident and fought their way back. But really I see mostly American artists and the European artists who are running around here.

Gerardo Mosquera: Do you feel closer to pop culture than to contemporary art?

Wim Delvoye: It took me years to build up the confidence to just forget about trying to make art. It doesn't matter. We can call it art: it facilitates the piece and my activities. It gives me much more freedom not to use this term; if it fits into the parameters, then there is a consensus that it is art. I think that the infrastructure and the situation make the consensus and it generates a following from there. But it took a long time not to worry about this. And this is a problem in Europe—they really, really want to make art. And so they don't make art, or very interesting art.

Audience Member: What do you think about the humor of the piece?

Wim Delvoe: We have a very loaded memory of shit. There is always something to release. But it also very much about control. We even have an IT connection in Belgium so that our studio in Europe can control the enzymes. It all starts with our mothers and all the work it takes to get on our potty. It's not only a taboo; it's more than a taboo.

Audience Member: How do you relate to the concept of the cyborg?

Wim Delvoe: I thought about that a lot. There is something very eighteenth century about it, it's a baroque idea. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were all about producing machines and little mechanizations.

Dan Cameron: I think that there is also an important idea here about the mind/body duality because in the age of the computer we are all keeping a very close eye on artificial intelligence. We all expect that the machine will reach a new level of intelligence, but yet it is still under our control because we have created it and it is contained.

It isn't until we produce a machine that mimics a bodily function that we are shocked at this uncanny duplication of what we do. And the history surrounding the gastronomic organs and the issue of controlling our waste is rich. All of this is about being able to separate ourselves from our bodies. And this machine has come back to remind us that we cannot separate ourselves from our bodies. I think it puts the question of the cyborg on a completely different plane.

Audience Member: There is a secondary element to the word *Cloaca*. It's not only a place for waste, but also a place for fucking. I was wondering if this was something that we were suppressing, or is the work somehow addressing this?

Wim Delvoeye: I wanted this art piece to have the quality of a product. I wanted it to look like a product and have a logo and a brand. When I was doing this research into possible names for this machine, Renault brought out new model called Laguna—and it sounded a bit like a holiday or an adventure—and it became a successful car. So I wanted to use the letters of Coca-Cola. The second reason is that it is not too descriptive. I could call it “Digestina” but it's too corny. And also *Cloaca* has this sexual undertone because it is the vagina for reptiles and birds, but at the same time the machine is neither a he nor a she. *Cloaca* is also the name for the ancient sewer system in Rome. It means toilet in Latin. There were many reasons, but the name had to seduce, it had to seduce as a product.