



Suppo (scale model 1:2), 2010
laser-cut stainless steel, 620 × Ø 75 cm
Wim Delvooye, 10.12.2011 – 10.04.2012, MONA, Hobart

METAPHORS *for* THE DISCARDED *and the* NEW

DIRK SNAUWAERT

Wim Delvoye approaches contemporary art's confrontation with traditional academism and its exaggerated seriousness with playfulness and a lack of inhibition. That is the image the public has of him and one he himself has carefully cultivated: a sort of cross between Eulenspiegel and Don Quixote. Delvoye surfs along on the unbridled and ever-growing wave of prestige, mediatization and speculation of which contemporary art seems to have been the prey since the 1980s, though in so doing he unmistakably exhibits the necessary self-relativization. Moreover, under the deceptive facade, he goes in search of the causes and mechanisms of the fascination with the emblematic icon or work of art.

Unlike other international artists of the generation with which he is associated, and who see themselves more as visual interpreters of postmodern

theories – of simulation and simulacrum, of the 'unreality' of the images that communication technologies serve up – in Delvoye's case we detect a clear preference for phenomena from popular and vernacular culture. When it comes to the appeal of recognizable, prevalent images, we discover also no suspicion, reserve or irony. His analysis of the fetishization of the consumer object runs parallel to that of contemporaries: the consumer society has brought about a rift in popular culture because the meaningful, sensory image has been displaced by superficial, industrial mass-production, a phenomenon that has in fact been the benchmark since the pioneers of Pop art in the 1960s.

Delvoye does not subject himself entirely to the primacy of gleaming surfaces and seamless perception at the expense of form and materiality, which

characterizes the prevailing aesthetic climate. And yet he appears to do so: because of their execution and surface appearance, at first glance the aesthetics of his images seems to allude to commodities and mass production. But at the same time it shows a distinct ambiguity because the work always contains a displacement that creates a fissure in the seamlessness, either because of its excessive decorativeness, a contradictory representation, an archaic choice of material or a technology that is pushed to extremes. Traditional representations with an obvious nostalgic content are applied to distinctly technological media or, conversely, new technological processes contrast with dated and discarded symbols and materials. The tension this displacement brings about is the central *modus operandi* of Delvoye's work to date.

Evidently, Delvoye's work also drifts along on the global wave of cosmopolitan mass culture with its obtrusive, saturated images. Despite embracing the popular and the generally recognizable, or perhaps precisely because of that ambivalent attitude, Delvoye has become one of the most prominent representatives in a globalized, international artistic practice, part of the circuit of themed and biennial exhibitions, and also active and visible in all cultural contexts and in all art markets. Even if here, too, we can detect ambivalent (self-)mockery and irony in his attempts to make his name a 'global

brand', a brand with a shareholder structure that is active in all markets. He does not deny or reject his local background, as evidenced you would think by his references to the production of popular images from the Low Countries, such as blue Delftware, stained-glass windows, the neo-Gothic, and ceramics and woodcarving in 'courtly' style. But several series, such as the ceramic drainage pipes and the carved construction equipment, can also be seen as the result of a failed translation from one culture into another. Further evidence of his cosmopolitanism is the invention of new production and distribution methods that meet the demand for originals and authentic reproductions on a massive scale - the result of the changed role and position of the artist, the need to diffuse and promote his work, the policy of personal exposure at exhibitions and fairs. He is also the first to acknowledge that the question of the relevance of rareness or ubiquitousness is invalidated when popular imagery or mass culture is implicated in the problem of the unique and one-off versus the reproduction and general availability.

With his various book and catalogue projects Delvoye wants to decide for himself how he would ideally like to see his work linked to the collective imagination. This can be seen, for example, in his children's book illustrations and colouring books or the Barbie replicas, a parody of the merchandis-

ing that revolves around famous people and the celebrity culture. These catalogues not only express the desire to compare his production with that of the entertainment industry; they are also and above all an indication that, alongside his presence in the art world, Delvoye fosters the ambition of establishing himself in new cultural territories and in everyday imagination. He imagines attaining this not only through products derived from his current works, but via reconsidered and fanciful and ironic ways of reaching an international public that is not familiar with the codes of the contemporary art milieu, but rather with those of the popular.

The artisanal production workshops in Indonesia and his famous pig farm in China are also indicators of that international, tentacular ambition to have a presence in all milieux with a completely self-invented and directed production system, as only global visual industries can. This is almost a reversal of the production method of Jeff Koons – Delvoye’s great mirror image – who, for the sake of authenticity, had his polychrome wooden groups of figures made by traditional woodcarvers in Bavaria. The issue of stock-market certificates for his famous *Cloaca* project is another example of his attempt to involve other milieux in his project, and of his great ambition to compete with the strategies of multinational companies. He undermines himself, however, with a modicum of self-irony, which

compensates for the shamanistic obsessional mechanism or the entrepreneurial quality associated with such large-scale operations.

Delvoye shares the scabrous and self-ironic with his role models from Dadaism and Surrealism, where deviation from the norm was the ideal weapon against the conventional. This also leads to the explicitly grotesque and caricatural character of many works with their mix of Pop art and surrealist elements and, above all, the conceptual citing of communication aesthetics. He differs in this from other ‘object manipulators’, practitioners of appropriation art and neo-conceptual artists, who prefer to keep things detached and expressionless.

Because of his aversion to anything that smacks of depth and weightiness, Delvoye’s work is associated with light-heartedness, humorous iconoclasm and irony. In the true Pop tradition of product fetishism it must be possible to reduce the works to a surface tension, to an apparent realness and a seductive illusion: that would have the ironic game with clichéd representations, icons and emblems culminate in a single perfect make-believe world of masks, mirror image and simulacrum. An important detail, however, dislodges the simulacrum fixation from its generation – namely the choice of material and technique, which reveals a clear preference for craft and tradition: a melancholic undertone that illustrates his ambivalent attitude to

contemporary visual culture. In the last few decades this has become clear from the very fact that he allows the iconoclastic rifts and provocations of the 'new' to go hand in hand with prominent motifs and metaphors for history and tradition. In overlapping an 'inappropriate' motif with a medium from a different genre or of a different character – a way of achieving an uncanny and genre-mixing montage effect – he chooses materials and techniques that allude to traditional and artisanal skills, such as stained glass, Delftware, woodcarving, metal chasing and processing hide. A mortality symbolism also manifests itself in certain motifs and visual elements: the turds, the tattoos, the X-rays, etc. That tension between the eternal and the momentary is characteristic of the melancholy we so often encounter in postmodern thinking: the mix of the anachronistic and the consumer aesthetic.

These distancing effects of which the Surrealists were so fond, do not emphasize their raw sexual and taboo-breaking intention with Delvoye. They

are more like the spin-off from a gentle, humorous game: the pleasure of deciphering visual rebuses; the agreeable frivolity of unravelling 'inappropriate' motifs in backgrounds. In juxtaposing metaphors of technique – or technology – with traditional handicraft, Delvoye does not just address two of the conditions – technological innovation and completeness – that make a work a 'precious' and valuable artwork for Western culture. He also puts his finger on one of the main expectations of art: namely that of technological virtuosity and immortality, basic characteristics of the rare or unique 'piece' and its highly gifted maker.

Thus, more than an iconoclastic impulse that undermines all the sacred cows of classical art, Delvoye plays with the ambivalent, slightly melancholic feeling of postmodern metaphors. Both dated and current, both anachronism and innovation, both pastiche and parody, his work places technology in the realm of the archaic, and vice versa.

Cloaca Professional (Detail), 2010
mixed media, 285 × 710 × 176 cm

Cloaca Professional, permanent collection, MONA, Hobart

