

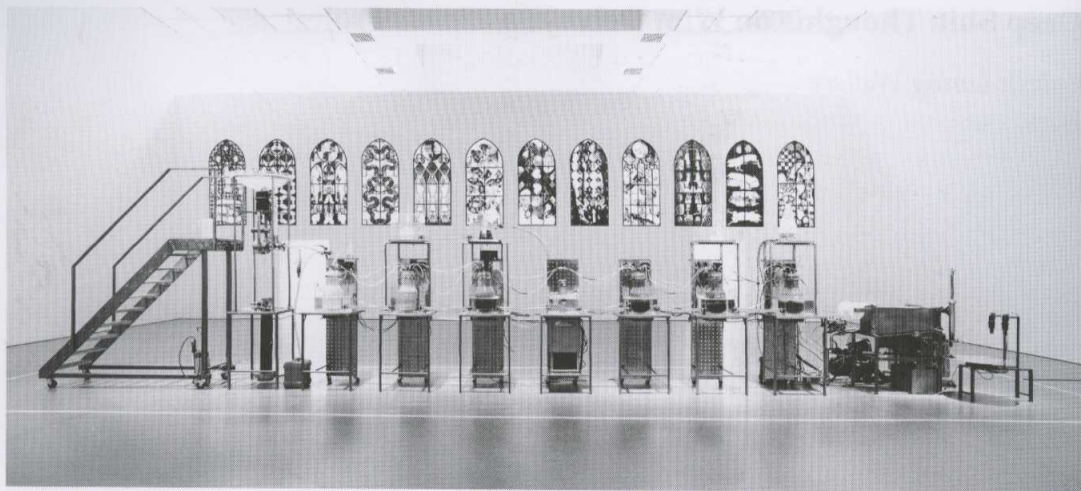
## Deep Shit: Thoughts on Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca* Project

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### Introduction

This chapter establishes the relevance of Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca* project, 2000–2007, to three classical myths that are themselves provocatively entangled: Medusa, Narcissus, and Pygmalion. Building on the fact that each myth turns on the relationship between an individual and an image or visual art object (Perseus before the shield, Pygmalion aside his statue, Narcissus at the water's edge), my analysis points to essential affinities between these spectatorial scenarios, while at the same time revealing a multifaceted relationship between these mythological encounters and the complex experience of beholding works in Delvoye's series, most notably, the work known as *Cloaca New & Improved*, 2001. To elaborate, my essay is concerned with the entirety of Delvoye's series and with one work in particular; in other words, I take seriously the fact that there is a series (rather than a single work) and think carefully about what the series's trajectory implies about Delvoye's project as whole.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, I often turn to *Cloaca New & Improved* because, from my point of view, it is this particular work that thematizes most directly and self-consciously a set of ideas that are germane to the entire series and the classical myths it invokes. Thus, by way of introduction, some general remarks about the works in Delvoye's series, after which I begin my analysis in earnest.

Described by the artist as a "shit machine," *Cloaca Original*, 2000, like the seven works that followed it in rapid succession, is just that: a computerized machine designed for the purpose of manufacturing real, machine-made shit in the open context of the gallery or museum (Fig. 10.1).<sup>2</sup> Perhaps more impressive is the fact that *Cloaca Original* achieves this end by faithfully replicating the human process of digestion from mouth to anus. Designed by the artist in consultation with a team of scientists from the University of Antwerp, *Cloaca Original* is thus impressively complex. Fed human food twice a day, it consists of a garbage disposal and extruding mechanism (the mouth



10.1 Wim Delvoye, *Cloaca Original*, 2000, 1,160 × 170 × 270 cm, mixed media. Exhibition view: Museum Kunst Palast, Düsseldorf. Image courtesy of Wim Delvoye Studio.

and anus respectively) and, in between, a formidable tangle of tubing, wires, and six large glass jars full of computer-monitored enzymes, bacteria, and acids that together fulfill the digestive roles of the stomach, pancreas, and small and large intestines. As an object (but also as an installation and performance), *Cloaca Original* is similarly impressive: it is over thirty-eight feet long and over eight feet high and typically fills an entire gallery or museum floor, which is just enough space to accommodate both the trailer-sized machine and, in the fall of 2000, the spectators who gathered daily at the Contemporary Museum in Antwerp to see marketable “evidence” that the first machine in Delvoye’s series had punctually completed its digestive cycle.<sup>3</sup>

As one might expect from its title, *Cloaca New & Improved* is similar to the first machine, although in keeping with the trajectory of the series as a whole, *Cloaca New & Improved* is more compact and seemingly more high-tech (Fig. 10.2). Whereas the aesthetic of *Cloaca Original* recalls an overly ambitious science project, *Cloaca New & Improved* has a more industrial, streamlined design, its sloppier bits (tubing, wires, etc.) elegantly encased in squared-off, stainless steel vitrines that hide, rather than confess the process’s details. Still, the output of the first and second machines is essentially the same: as with its predecessor, *Cloaca New & Improved* produces between 200 and 400 grams of shit on cue each day in the mid-afternoon.

Likewise, the logos for these two works (each sculpture in the series has one) are also similar. *Cloaca Original*’s logo is the more simple of the two, despite being provocatively multivalent. Best described as a graphic rendering of a shiny blue oval inscribed with the word “cloaca,” the original logo conjures, in its shape and lettering, not only the Ford motor company with whom the idea of mass production is forcefully and foundationally aligned, but also, as Delvoye has noted, Coca-Cola, with which *Cloaca* shares all four of its letters.<sup>4</sup> To this, the *Cloaca New & Improved* logo adds the recognizable figure of Mr. Clean (both his torso and, beneath the blue oval, a schematic drawing of his intestines), who

notably looms over the series as a whole from this point forward, whether in the context of the voluminous drawings that accompany each work, or as part of subsequent logos within the series (Plate 12).

Consider, for example, the third and fourth works in the series: *Cloaca Turbo* and, its successor, *Cloaca Quattro*. Completed in 2002, *Cloaca Turbo* is, at twenty-seven feet long and six and a half feet tall, still more compact than its predecessors; likewise, its appearance seems more industrial and utilitarian when compared with the first two *Cloaca* machines, their elegant and arguably feminine glass vessels here replaced with three units that ironically conjure the idea of a heavy-duty washing machine. Accordingly, the logo for *Cloaca Turbo* recalls the expressly macho emblem of the Harley Davidson Company, featuring an eagle and, beneath it, a shield filled not with the word "motorcycle" but instead, a schematic rendering of Mr. Clean's intestines. Completed in 2004, *Cloaca Quattro* again features Mr. Clean in its logo, but here combined with the figure of Popeye, whose muscle-bearing pose Mr. Clean adopts in this context. As for the work itself, it exaggerates further the masculine aesthetics of the former (its form less elegant and more utilitarian) and, perhaps relatedly, it assumes, for the first time in the series, a vertical format, which it will in turn share with its successor, *Cloaca N°5*, 2005, despite the incongruous reference made by this title to the legendary Parisian perfume. And, if the proportions of

10.2 Wim Delvoye, *Cloaca New & Improved*, 2001, 1,000 × 75 × 200 cm, mixed media. Exhibition view: Migros Museum, Zürich. Image courtesy of Wim Delvoye Studio.





10.3 Wim Delvoye, *Personal Cloaca*, 2006, 100 × 68.5 × 100 cm, mixed media. Image courtesy of Wim Delvoye Studio.

