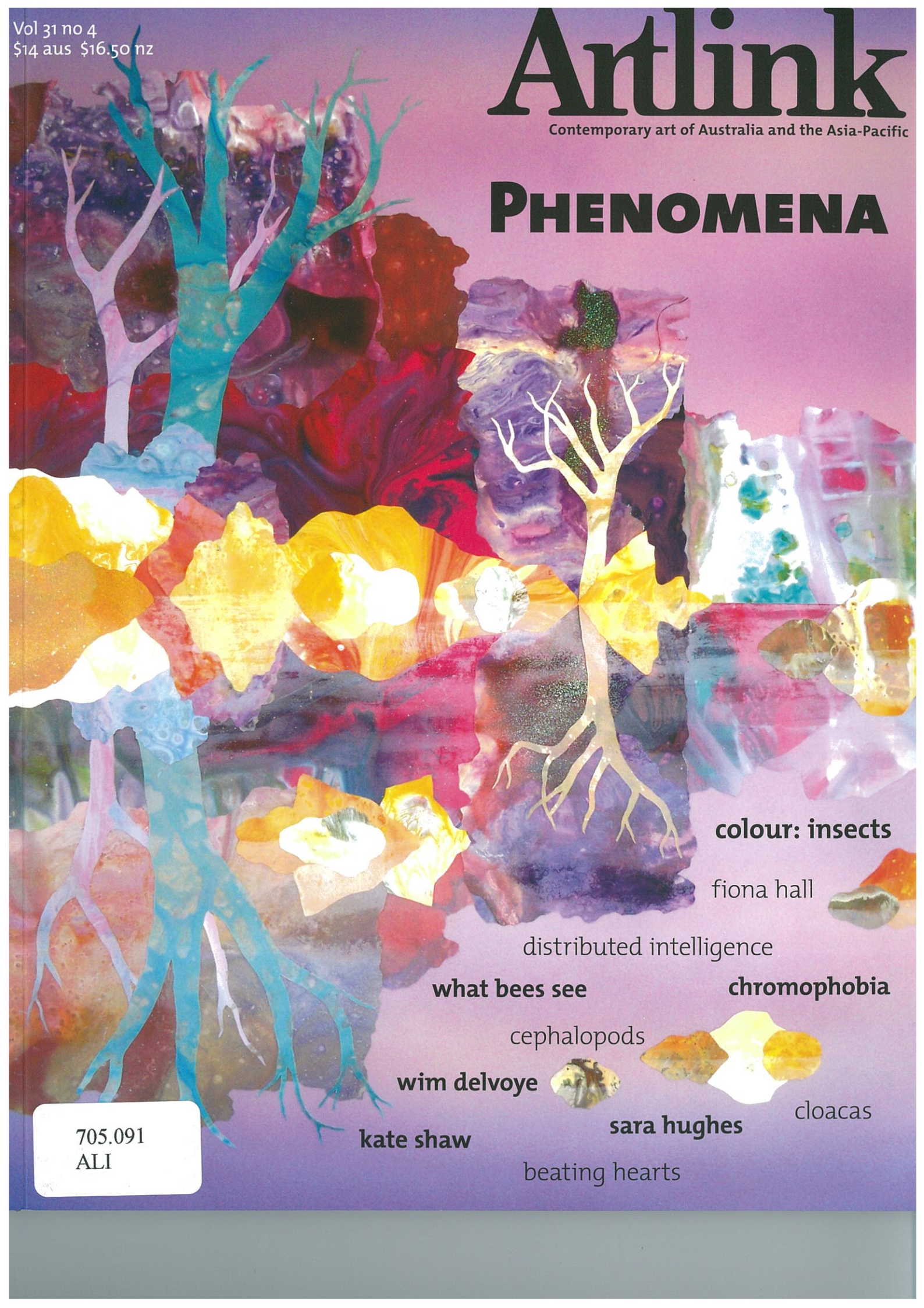


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The MYSTERY OF SHIT

Stephanie Radok

Wim Delvoye

The first time I ever saw what I thought was tattooed pigs (they were actually painted) was in the 1996 Asia-Pacific Triennial catalogue. This vivid image that etched itself into my memory shows a work by Chinese artist Xu Bing called *A Case Study of Transference* (1994) which involved a pig covered in nonsensical writing in the Roman alphabet fucking a pig covered in fake Chinese writing (Xu Bing devised the script) in a gallery filled with open books in different languages. It is a clever and humorous work that plays to the full the instincts of the pigs and the cultured sophistication of writing. Is or was Chinese culture being fucked by Western culture in 1994? Are four legs, speaking in the spirit of George Orwell's novel 1984, better than two? Do we communicate best in words or through our bodies?

The work touches on a border, a frontier, a taboo of acceptability – watching animals fucking, whether it is meant metaphorically or not, is embarrassing. The artist invented the work without being certain how its audience would respond yet with it he approached the edges of one of those big themes: sex, death, culture clash.

The first tattooed pigskin I ever saw was at MONA in Tasmania where I encountered Belgian artist Wim Delvoye's *Untitled - Osama* (2002-3) looming at me out of the darkness. Mostly in dark blue ink almost like a biro drawing and including the head and legs of the animal's body it is displayed inside a vertical glass case like a piece of fabric or a shaman's robe. What really struck me was the humanness of the skin with its fair reddish hair. Delvoye has pointed out that these pigs are very Caucasian in their colouring. So for a minute it was like seeing a human body and that, of course, is shocking. As is the insult to Muslims offered up by linking Osama bin Laden and a pig.

Like Xu Bing's pigs the artwork of Delvoye confronts taboos, combining cultural signifiers and nature, though Delvoye is concerned always to embrace and exploit commodity culture at the same time as commenting on its extremities or indeed being one of its extremities.

Iconoclastic British art critic and filmmaker Ben Lewis made a documentary on Delvoye and got a Delvoye tattoo in China in 2005 to match one that a pig was getting at the same time. Lewis wrote in the British newspaper *The Telegraph*: "This is, of course, silly art: Delvoye's work satirises the art world, with its inflated prices and daft intellectual cul-de-sacs."

There is a cool exploitative level to Delvoye's work that is married to frenetic energy. Notoriety sells art as well

as drawing attention to it which may be one reason that Delvoye's work appeals to David Walsh of MONA as confrontation with the gentility that can waft around the corridors of art is clearly important to both men. Then there is the 'bad boy' factor, the 'ennui' and novelty factors, the need to transgress, to push boundaries deeper, further, wider.

In an interview in 2003, with Ward Daenen for the Flemish newspaper *De Morgen*, Wim himself said: "The plebian likes me. He takes me for a Robin Hood who takes his side because I reveal what the art world is: a machine that produces shit."

Shit happens

Delvoye has been tattooing pigs or having them tattooed on and off since 1994 when he started tattooing on dead pig skins. In 1997 he showed live tattooed pigs in Middelheim Museum in Antwerp. The main difference is that on a live pig the shaved hair grows back through the tattoo making it more like flesh and less like a conventional art surface.

The Art Farm in China started in 2004. Collectors buy the pigs while they are still alive, wait for them to grow (like carving your initial onto a baby apple the design on a small pig grows over time), have them stuffed or framed, and meanwhile watch them being pigs on live pig-cam. In 2009 a taxidermied tattooed pig called *Last Port* (2006) was sold at Christies for £90,000 (\$A139,255). It would certainly be a startling conversation piece to have sitting around the house – spooky, sad, funny.

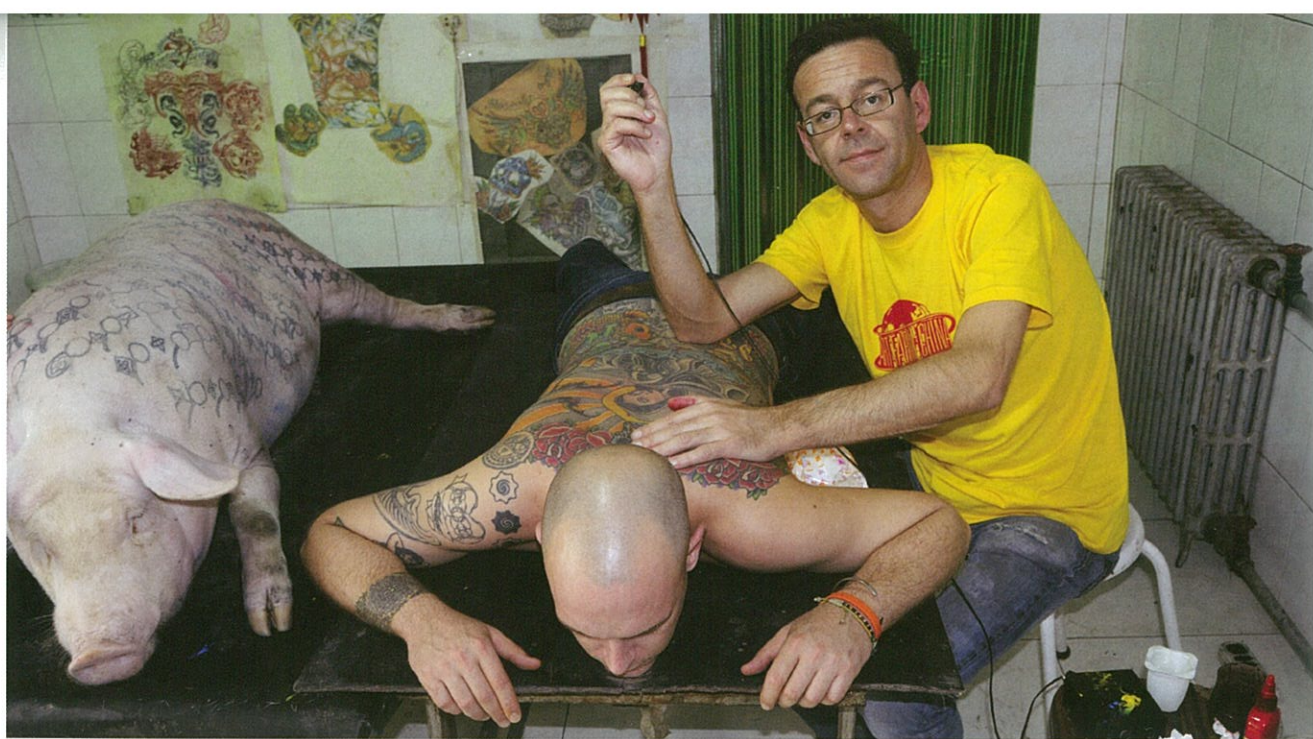
Some of the pigs are tattooed with Louis Vuitton brand symbols, others with Russian prison tattoos and Walt Disney characters. Disney and Delvoye share initials and sometimes a similar logo. For all its grit there is definitely something light-hearted and slick about Delvoye's work, and a kind of brio possibly shared by a certain Mouse also bent on world domination that is both commercial and entertaining. Spectacle and empire - though shock rather than sentiment is Delvoye's chief tool. And to extend the marketing he has brought out a Wim Action Figure complete with tattoo gun and cloaca machine.

Delvoye is reported as saying: "Instead of producing art I wanted to harvest it. The pigs are a nice allegory that makes us think about what art means to us, and where the line exists between what art is and what art isn't."

As a complement to the Osama pigskin there is a Jesus pig. But Delvoye is an amateur of the tattoo. I spoke to Australian long-term tattooist, photographer and painter Ex De Medici about Delvoye's work. Her opinion is that his understanding of tattoos is very elementary. For De Medici tattooing is a living



Wim Delvoye *Untitled - Osama* 2002 - 2003, tattooed pigskin, tanned. Collection MONA Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia. Image Courtesy MONA Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia.



Wim Delvoye *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

art that gets its vitality partly because it is embedded in life (on a body) and cannot be commodified (that is resold). She regards Delvoye's tattoo work as abusive to animals (even though the pigs are anaesthetised while being tattooed De Medici says the pain continues after the actual operation). Indeed Delvoye undertakes this work in China in part to get away from animal rights activists in Europe.

Turning shit into gold (Buddhist saying about meditation)

In the most recent extension of his tattoo work Delvoye tattooed a Swiss man Tim Steiner. In 2008 A German art collector bought the tattoo on Tim's back for €150,000 (\$A203,072). The collector can view the tattoo four times a year and when Tim dies he may claim it. In the meantime Tattoo Tim as he is known appears at art fairs or in exhibitions as a living canvas. What do we know about Tim? He is a friend of Delvoye, is in a band called Passive Resistance and every year teaches art to war orphans in East Timor. There are unresolved legal issues involved. What if Tim changes his mind about being harvested, what if the tattoo gets worn? What if Tim hides when he is about to die?

Curiously De Medici has also made a work on a human body that is destined for an ongoing life as an artwork though she points out this is never certain as the person must die in a situation where their skin can be suitably harvested. *Skin*, one of a trilogy of documentary films made in Australia by Big and Little Films in 2008 under the overall title *Anatomy*, is about ex-schoolteacher Geoff O. He has been tattooed with flowers, mostly Australian natives, over 15 years, and has what is called a full body suit, 90% of it applied by De Medici. It is Geoff's dream to give his skin to the National Gallery of Australia and he has researched and put in place the complicated administrative, financial and technical work needed for it to happen. It would be a gift and in the film the National Gallery's Roger Butler says the gallery will consider it when the time comes, to add to their collection of De Medici's work. When Geoff dies he needs to be frozen immediately and then airlifted to Japan where the necessary work can be done.

Full of it

Delvoye's work was first seen in Australia in the 1992 *Biennale of Sydney: The Boundary Rider* curated by Tony Bond. The work *Labour of Love* (1992) consisted of a concrete mixer, wheelbarrow, lamps, bricks, shovel and road signs fabricated in Indonesia from teak and carved with decorative patterns. It dealt with economics, tradition and the confounding of categories referencing colonialism and the complex layers of international trade over time like the work of Yinke Shonibare, Narelle Jubelin and Fiona Hall. It also called to mind links between the masculinity of work tools and the femininity suggested by decoration as also seen in *addressing the wounds: in corde* (1991) a memorable work orchestrated by deceased Australian artist Neil Roberts consisting of a work shovel the edges of which were finely engraved with delicate designs by traditional metalworkers in the Philippines.

But on Delvoye's page in the Biennale catalogue it is not the wooden cement mixer we see but *Mosaic* (1990-92) a photograph of a series of glazed white tiles on which images of his own faeces are printed, their twisted curves forming a decorative repeat pattern. It is this work with which he began to 'make his name' at Kassel Documenta IX in 1992. The artistic director Jan Hoet stated: "The strength of Wim Delvoye lies in his ability to engineer conflict by combining the fine arts and folk art, and playing seriousness against irony." Though curlicues of shit are surely neither folk nor fine art they do confound categories of clean and dirty. In the past Delvoye has painted blue and white Delft patterns on gas canisters and had stained glass soccer goals fabricated. More recently he has shown photographs of mosaics featuring mortadella and salami, their pale pinks and mottled reds imitating rare marbles and porphyry.

Scatology rules

Delvoye's fascination with shit is of longstanding and has found expression in his Cloacae, only one of which he has ever sold (though many sun-dried and vacuum packed faeces have been sold) and that was to David Walsh for MONA where

they say it is the most hated work they possess and yet it is the one that is the most 'pondered' ie that people spend the most time with. When I was there for the opening the room attendant expressed his disbelief at people choosing to stay in the room with the *Cloaca Professional* (2010), which seems part science experiment, part zoo animal. Maybe the zoo angle is why they stay. Zoos smell like shit but we tend to sit in them and watch, spending time with the animals.

A nihilistic 'artwork' about waste that is a vehicle for literal transformation and metamorphosis, the Cloacae suggest Delvoye really is a mad scientist, especially when you learn that he has made ten of them since 2000 – *Cloaca Original*, *Cloaca – New & Improved*, *Cloaca Turbo*, *Cloaca Quattro*, *Cloaca No 5*, *Personal Cloaca*, *Mini Cloaca*, *Super Cloaca*, *Cloaca Professional* and *Cloaca Travel Kit*.

To continue the mad science angle Delvoye has also made many works using X-rays, sometimes of intestines processing shit, sometimes of couples having sex.

And you think your shit don't stink (Australian saying)

The Cloacae are objects/machines of amazement like strange fancy milking machines they churn and chug and turn the bright colours and varied shapes and textures of food into smelly brown paste. As we all do, only more privately. Here the art material used by babies and madmen finds its apogee as both contemporary art and quasi-fart joke. Cloacae take the work of the stomach changing food into shit as their task and the simple mystery of shit is thus foregrounded. Why is it brown and why does it smell so?

A reductive reflection on human life – a futile journey of waste – the Cloacae are missing what happens in the human body in-between the mouth and the anus, ie not just digestion but everything else which is also admittedly fuelled by air but also intensely, unreasonably, by the food we eat. This thought was once a bowl of soup.

It is valuable to think about Delvoye's work in relation to that of Fiona Hall or indeed that of Ex De Medici. Each possesses an intense creative frenetic energy. Hall makes her work

laboriously by hand, the birdnests are woven from paper money, the beaded seedpods and coral polyps threaded onto wire and formed over many hours; De Medici tattoos intricate designs for hours and paints very large finely detailed watercolours of guns camouflaged as moths; militaria and mining sites; while Delvoye designs his carved rubber tyres, gothic CAD/CAM laser cut corten steel cement trucks and twisted gothic crucifixions and has them made by others. The fact that Hall and De Medici make their work and for many years Delvoye has had his work made is not really the issue here. In each case the nature of work, of crossing categories, of layering tradition, of the clotted histories of humanity, art and ideologies are present yet in the case of the work of both Hall and De Medici there is a moral agenda of revelation, not of mystic truths but corporate truths, about corruption, environmental destruction and exploitation while Delvoye's work seems to revel in amorality and to end up both talking about exploitation and being it.

When the shit hits the fan

David Walsh reflects on Wim's work: "...mostly he is trying to think about things that he can't quite grasp, that his audience can't quite grasp. Nobody has captured these ideas yet, we can't see them in focus, just descry them from the corners of our eyes."

Maybe Delvoye's work is making critiques (I've never been good with irony) or is he helplessly joining the corporations, seeing art as just one more game to be won by a smart cookie who knows how to play dirty? Or perhaps his work is the guffaw-provoking spectacle that gets all kinds of people into art galleries and who knows what might happen then? ■

Stephanie Radok is an artist, writer and the General Editor of Artlink.

Over one hundred works by Wim Delvoye curated by David Walsh and Olivier Varenne with Nicole Durling and the MONA team will be on show at MONA in Hobart from 10 December 2011 to 2 April 2012.

The exhibition will include six Cloacae: *Cloaca New and Improved*, *Cloaca No 5*, *Cloaca Quattro*, *Mini Cloaca*, *Personal Cloaca* and of course MONA's *Cloaca Professional*. A Gothic-style, full size, laser-cut corten steel Concrete Truck (2008) will stay on the MONA roof until May 2012. After MONA, Delvoye will have a solo show at the Louvre Museum in Paris, in 2012.

Wim Delvoye *Cement Truck* 2008, laser-cut corten steel. Photo: MONA/Remi Chauvin. Image Courtesy MONA Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia.

