

# What makes you lose your lunch?

by Susan Maushart

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ART critics rarely have the courage to brand conceptual art as total shit, but in the case of Wim Delvoye they have been willing to make an exception. *Cloaca*, the 37-year-old Belgian's latest work, is a room-sized installation of tubes, vats and pumps that mimics the human digestive tract. Six meals a day are fed into it at one end. And at the other . well, suffice it to say that visitors to the New Museum of Contemporary Art in Manhattan frequently find themselves in deep (and putatively meaningful) doo-doo.

People's reactions to Delvoye's work vary. Some stare bug-eyed. Others cry. Many take photos. If my mother were there, she'd rub the artist's nose in it. Yet in Antwerp, where *Cloaca* had its world premiere, the machine's daily bowel motions were signed and sold to collectors for \$1900 a pop. "The line that divides disgust from fascination would seem to be a slim one," notes one observer. But who wants to drag a David Cassidy gig into this?

Disgust has been called "the forgotten emotion of psychiatry" (although most shrinks I know insist it's only been misfiled). Yet the propensity to become grossed-out appears to be a universal human trait. Charles Darwin, in his classic 1872 work *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, included disgust as one of only six basic emotions. (The others were love, hate, terror, joy and fear of turning into one's mother.) According to disgust doyenne Valerie Curtis, of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, it's pretty easy to predict when human beings will go "aaah, icky pooh, yuck", or its moral equivalent. Basically, there are five categories of disgustingness – bodily excretions and body parts; decay and spoiled food; particular living creatures; certain categories of "other people"; and violations of morality or social norms – and most of them can be found under my 12-year-old's bed.

Cross-culturally, we are fairly united on the things that make us want to throw up. Faeces, pus, nasal mucous, my Aunt Tiny's cream cheese, lime jelly and pineapple mould – these were universals. At the same time, there are cultural peculiarities. According to a recent study published in *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, Indians rated "cut hair" as more disgusting than maggots, lice or "liquid animal dung". West Africans rated an

unswept yard as number two (and number two as number one, interestingly), while Dutch subjects rated "aphids on lettuce" only slightly above "politicians".

English people – who, when it comes to feeling distinctly unwell, ordinarily need look no further than their own royal family – reported an aversion to "body parts in jars", "dead sparrows", "cruelty to a horse" and "wounding of an old lady", in that order.

Personally, I used to be disgusted by most of the usual things, from vomitus to other people's toenail parings. Yet, after a swarm of kids and a veritable plague of partners, I've found that almost nothing disgusts me anymore. You name the bodily fluid, I've swum in it. You name the vermin, I've cleaned its cage. You name the slimy or slippery creature, and I've broken up with it.

Other people have gross-out thresholds too subtle for science to pin down. My son Bill, for example, thinks nothing of putting his chip packet down to thread four or five live maggots on a fishhook. Yet the sight of a couple kissing on the beach makes him dry retch. "Ugh!" he says. "I hate it when they wriggle like that."

Using magnetic resonance imaging, researchers now believe they've located the region of the brain that controls the disgust response. Damage to this region is a bit like undergoing three childbirths: it can eliminate disgust altogether. Neuropsychologist Andy Calder of Cambridge University cites the case of a patient who, after suffering such damage, "was willing to eat soup stirred with a washed flyswatter and chocolate shaped like dog faeces, as well as sleep in a bed in which someone had died the previous night".

Yet disgust, like so many of those who inspire it, has formidable survival value. Theorists like University of Pennsylvania psychologist Paul Rozin have suggested that it arose initially as a way of keeping omnivorous animals from ingesting harmful microorganisms. Professor Curtis, who enlivens her hygiene lectures with a lump of plastic poo-poo – hey, it makes a change from PowerPoint – agrees. "Back in the Stone Age," she notes, "the ancestors that successfully avoided disease-causing substances had more success passing on their genes to the next generation." Unfortunately, so did the ones with the jelly mould recipe.