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**THE MACABRE  
ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT**





This spread  
Joep van  
Lieshout with  
his sculptural  
version of  
Courbet's  
L'Origine  
du Monde

DESIGN ART

# Van Lieshout's land

The sculptures and furniture dreamed up in Joep van Lieshout's Rotterdam studio are the imagined products of dark, violent and anarchic worlds: a vast slave city, a World War Three landscape or, in his latest works, a pre-industrial tribal community.

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PHOTOGRAPHY: Raoul Kramer



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ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT

Next to the Atelier Van Lieshout warehouse in south Rotterdam, there is a fenced-off compound with a bright green sign, which reads AVL Mundo. The enclosed space could be a sculpture park or an adventure playground. On the corner nearest the street is an eau-de-nil coloured statue on a plinth, of a horse rearing up on its hind legs, its forelegs bearing down upon the figure standing before it. In the centre of the enclosure is a cruciform adobe hut; at the far end, a giant white skull with steps at the back, which lead up to and into what would be the brain's occipital lobe.

Outside there is no traffic nor any passers-by when I visit in early March, but it is surprising to find tranquillity within: just three men at work, one of whom seems to be perched up a dead tree, chainsaw in hand. The space is almost entirely empty of people on the ground, but dominated by a faceted steel cylinder – it looks like a rocket – reaching up to the skylights. Joep van Lieshout confirms

that it's an unusual state of affairs: "It's worrying. It's a little bit strange to have the studio empty." Most of his 20 employees, he explains, are busy taking down an exhibition in Amsterdam and installing another in The Hague. When I ask him about the exhibition of his work currently on at the Carpenters Workshop Gallery in Paris, for a moment van Lieshout looks blank. It was installed in January. "It looks like ages ago."

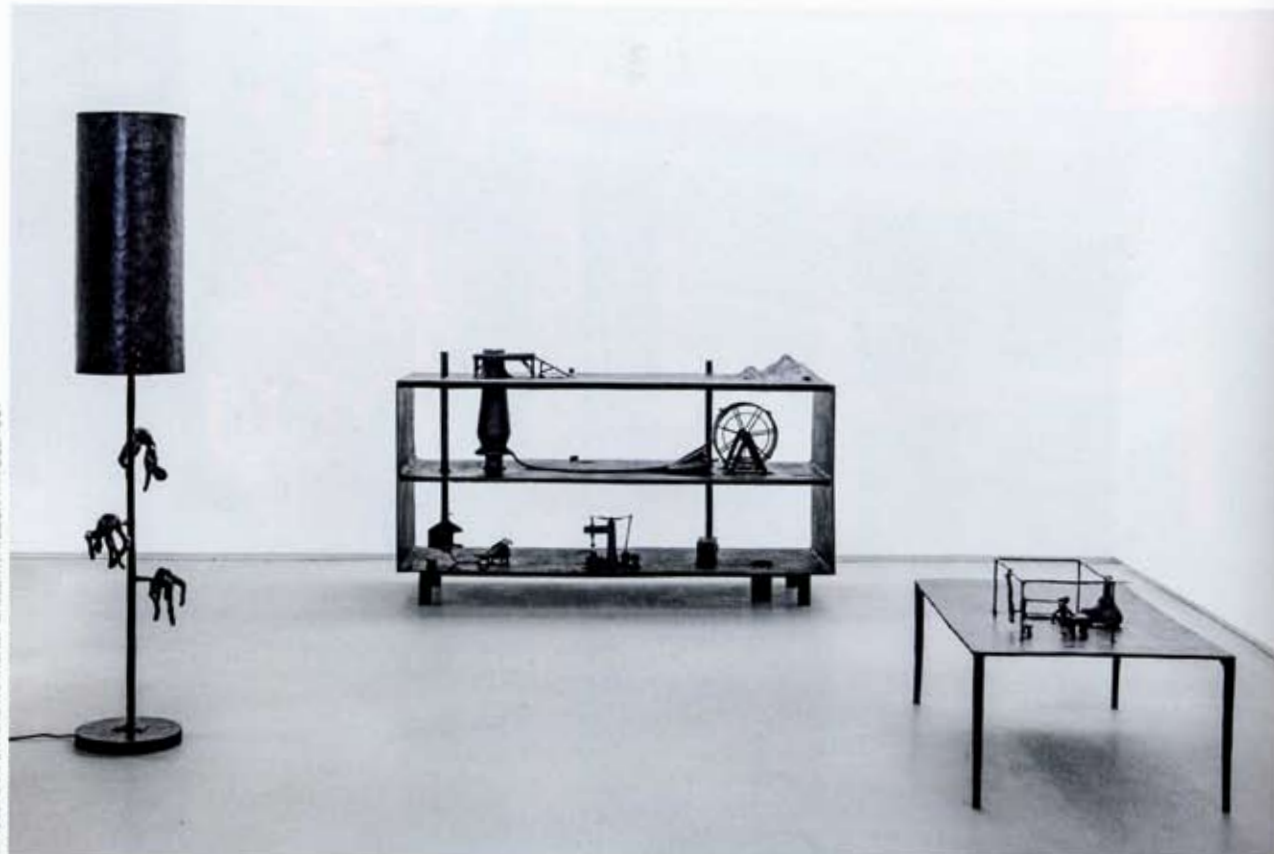
The most striking objects in the Carpenters show are made of bronze. Van Lieshout trained as a sculptor, graduating from the Academy of Modern Art in Rotterdam in 1987, but didn't make his first work in sculpture's prestige material until 20 years later. One of the pieces in Paris is Blastfurnace (2012), a three-tiered bronze shelving unit that has cast into it details of steelmaking including a bellows, a furnace and a waterwheel. Van Lieshout says, "Bronze casters can only do good bronze casting, which I don't think is that interesting. If I cast bronze, there are many more mistakes

Right  
Van Lieshout  
is making  
a full-scale  
blast furnace

Below  
Acrobat  
Lamp, 2013;  
Blastfurnace,  
2012,  
Gastronomy,  
2011

and beautiful flaws in the production process. If you ask a [house] painter, "Can you paint this wall – not white, but like Willem de Kooning or Jackson Pollock?" they cannot do it, they cannot." The cabinet is also, in a statement about product design, deliberately impractical: "It's full of stuff. You can hardly use it any more."

Regular showings in a gallery specialising in design art: employees who are mounting and demounting shows rather than practising free love at work; turning to a traditional art material ... This seems tame stuff from someone who once described himself as an "anarcho-capitalist". Van Lieshout is >



IMAGES - CARPENTERS WORKSHOP GALLERY, ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT



It's much easier to sell furniture than it is to sell art, even if the prices are the same







best known for grotesque anatomical sculptures and installations such as Wombhouse (2004) and Bar Rectum (2005), and as the maker of worlds such as AVL-Ville (2001), his self-declared free state complete with a constitution and its own currency, and more conceptual creations such as Slave City (2005-9).

Van Lieshout started working under the name Atelier Van Lieshout in 1995 – partly to reflect the collaborative, studio-based nature of his work, but also to satisfy a client who preferred dealing with a company rather than a solo artist. In the late 1990s, while Damien Hirst – a comparison to return to – was showing pickled sheep and sharks, van Lieshout was converting his Mercedes into a pickup truck and arming it with a gun (Mercedes with 57mm Cannon, 1998) or making homemade mortars (AVL Mortar 80, 1999).

It would be wrong, however, to see van Lieshout as a reformed enfant terrible now making dealer-friendly works after years of trying to shock the local bourgeoisie. In a 2007 monograph on AVL, Jennifer Allen, one of its four authors, offers ten steps for understanding van Lieshout's vast output. One of the steps is "Make it Modular". Allen takes this in two senses. Firstly, to refer to works such as Modular Multi-Woman Bed (1998) – a bed frame that you can expand horizontally and vertically into a multi-level bunk-bed system. Secondly, van Lieshout constantly makes new works by remaking old ones at a different scale and placing them in defamiliarising contexts.

At Ventura Lambrate in Milan in 2012, AVL showed a range of blue office furniture for Lensvelt, which combined two strands of work in an unusual display. The bravura touch was the presence of a blue cannon, the third in a series of cannons that van Lieshout has produced in his WWII project. The next war to end all wars, it seems, will feature very attractive artillery pieces. "Ah, but Hans Lensvelt, like me, is a little bit loco," is Van Lieshout's engaging explanation. (The two

have been friends since they met through Rem Koolhaas.) "So then we said, let's make everything blue to make a statement, to make a kind of provocation. Normally furniture is ethically clean. There's never been a designer or an architect who went to prison because of his work."

Van Lieshout may have strong views about furniture, insisting that it "can be combined with sex or with violence or with politics or with craziness or with deviance", but he defines himself as an artist. "It's much easier to sell furniture than to sell art, even though the prices are the same," he says, but his pieces are really more about furniture and about design than it is either of these things in themselves.

His biggest statements are in the large cycles of work, of which AVL-Ville is perhaps the best-known example. In this year-long anarchist experiment, van Lieshout divided his old warehouse into an office space and a communal space where members of the studio could do whatever they wanted. He declared the area a free state and the arrangement ran for a year until the Hall of Delights, a pier-side restaurant meant to fund the commune, was shut down for its lack of licence.

Some detected a darker turn in AVL's output after the end of this experiment. Slave City, effectively a concentration camp, contains built pieces of furniture and machines and larger elements that remain the stuff of concept sketches. As van Lieshout said to Winy Maas of MVRDV (Icon 061), "I don't think that many of the structures that I have designed for Slave City could ever be built, or if they could you would need a budget of billions." The 200,000 inhabitants of the imaginary Slave City are required to work in call centres, with on site, outside-of-work privileges including access to brothels and higher education.

AVL's current cycle of work is New Tribal Labyrinth, which incorporates works such as Blastfurnace and Gastronomy (2011), a bronze table (or table sculpture) with a small >



Above  
WWIII for  
Lensvelt  
at Ventura  
Lambrate, 2012

Above left  
The set for  
Sebastian  
Baumgarten's  
Tannhäuser at  
Bayreuth, 2011

Normally furniture is ethically clean. There's never been a designer or architect who went to prison because of his work

IMAGES: ENRICO NAWRATH / BAYREUTHER FESTSPIELE; ILCO KEMMERE





I confiscated this piece of land ... The authorities said, 'We don't know, it's difficult,' so I just put a sign on it that said it's mine



IMAGES: ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT

Giacomettian figure working at a miniature table, and two rather more mysterious figures. The series is dedicated to social rituals, work and a world inhabited by a tribe who don't yet have a back story. If *Monument* (2012), the statue of the rider and horse in the courtyard, offers any clues, the tribe's existence involves violence as well as crafts skills. The contrast between the piece's pretty colouring and its pose is typical of all the *New Tribal Labyrinth* objects. *Le Machine Célibataire* (2012) is a loom in which you operate the pulley system by sitting inside and working it with all your fingers and toes. It would, in fact, be agony. And even *Hagioscoop* (2012), an outwardly serene, primitive hut, is imagined with a bag of body parts hanging up inside.

Van Lieshout gives me a tour of the pieces in the warehouse, most of which belong to the new series. The

**Above**  
*Hagioscoop*, 2012, a *New Tribal Labyrinth* farmhouse

**Opposite**  
*Le Machine Célibataire*, 2012

steel rocket is the central core of what could theoretically be a working blast furnace – there are five more volumes like it to come. It's an impossible proposition: "This is a machine that will never work because it produces 200,000kg of steel a day, which I won't know what to do with." So it's going to be shown in Marseilles this summer. It's an absurdist take on desires for self-sufficient farming or for industry with a craft ethic. In Van Lieshout's scenarios, these dreams will only be fulfilled in some kind of post-apocalyptic scenario (in the aftermath of WWII, perhaps?).

In 2011, van Lieshout designed a production of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* at Bayreuth, for the director Sebastian Baumgarten. The hero finds himself transported at the beginning, not from a castle, but from a factory, in what van Lieshout calls, "a post-apocalyptic or pre-industrial, pre-electrical time". (The sets look just like the 2010 *Inferno* installation at Rotterdam's Submarine Wharf. Van Lieshout is unruffled by the audience's reaction: "They always boo if you make a new production, so if you do something like this, it was a big boo.")

Elsewhere in the warehouse, the new work recalls the old. We walk round an orange table with a melted female form lying across it. I wouldn't have guessed, but Van Lieshout explains that it's a version of Gustave Courbet's

*L'Origine du Monde*, which shows a vagina and torso (in the painting the model's head is out of the frame). His interest in fetishistic, anatomical forms crops up at all scales, and in all materials; even his drawing of *Modular AVL Man* (1998) came with an erect, screw-on penis.

This summer, van Lieshout is curating a group show, including "a Dutch artist who's famous for pissing everywhere" and Philippe Meste, who "attacked" the French naval base at Toulon in 1993, by sailing towards it in a tiny fishing boat. Meste is collecting sperm, his own and that of volunteers, to display in a glass cube. It sounds like a 1990s revival, of *Sensation* (1997), in particular, but the venue isn't as grand as the Royal Academy; the exhibition will be inside the warehouse and spill out into the enclosure.

More than ten years have passed since *AVL-Ville*, but Van Lieshout, an artist with an entrepreneurial itch, still does as he pleases. The sculpture park cum playground for *AVL* is on land he simply fenced off. "I confiscated this piece of land ... They [the authorities] said, 'We don't know, it's difficult,' so I just put a sign on it that said it's mine." The anarcho-capitalist spirit still lives or, as Van Lieshout says: "It's much easier if you just take it. As an artist you can have advantages, you can improvise. You can do stuff a real company wouldn't do." ■