

FEATURE

JOEP VAN LIESHOUT

# Saint or Sinner?

Of the many names he's been called, 'fascist' isn't one of them,  
but his plans for *Slave City* may be about to change all that

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"I'M A MUCH MORE ROMANTIC ARTIST THAN MANY PEOPLE THINK," protests Joep van Lieshout. It's easy to see how many people might think something else. On the flight out to his studio in Rotterdam I was reading this from *Faecal Experimental* (2004), an experiment in recycling that involves a shovel, a blender, a match and a laptop – oh yes, and some carefully collected faeces: "For the collection of the excrements I use an extended version of the 'Il primitivo'. This stool that is equipped with a toilet seat, has a camera that records the excrementing together with the date and time." His assistant had assured me that I wouldn't have any problems finding the studio (housed at the end of a pier near Rotterdam's harbour) because the area used to be a famous prostitute hangout: "So all the taxi drivers should know where it is," she said cheerfully. But perhaps she might have said instead that I should look out for the carnival junkyard of van Lieshout's past works that is piled outside the studio.

There's the empty carcass of his *Bikini Bar* (2006), a fibreglass bar in the shape of a bikini-clad torso (looking like it had the legs, arms and head lopped off with an axe). Vandals have smashed in the windows ("We never used to have this problem," his assistant complains). Stacked up behind it are an AVL logo (Atelier Van Lieshout is the company the artist set up more than a decade ago to cover his various productions of furniture, interiors and art), the shipping crates that housed the *Workshop for Weapons and Bombs* (1998) and hospital facilities of *AVL-Ville* (2001), van Lieshout's shortlived independent city-state.

It's easy to cast van Lieshout as the artworld's equivalent of a shock jock. (But just in case you're not convinced, an infamous 2002 show at Amsterdam's Galerie Fons Welters included van Lieshout's take on S&M gym equipment alongside *Joepie de Poepie*, 2002 – a seven-minute film featuring the 'best bits' from scatological porn flicks – while the police have popped by the studio on a couple of occasions to confiscate the guns he made as part of the *AVL-Ville* project.) But that would be to miss some of the more intriguing, effective and – dare I say it? – subtle aspects of his work.

Van Lieshout has been working on his *Slave City* project since 2005. Broadly speaking, these designs (which take the form of drawings, models, sculptures and installations) for an 'up-to-date concentration camp' break down into three parts: the slave department, the public spaces (from which slaves are barred), containing leisure facilities, and an ideal city for the *Slave City* employees. The work includes designs for slave-selection centres and brothels, created, it would seem, to both appal and amaze. And there's no doubt that a type of shock marketing plays a big part in it. "I have to do it because I want people to see it," the artist says. "You see this kind of use of names very often in products people want to sell. I think it's nice to mimic that – like it's another funky product."



*The police have popped by on a couple of occasions to confiscate the homemade guns and tax the homemade alcohol*





"Now what you often see in art is very flimsy, like a one-trick pony, and very much related to selling stuff"

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But for all the fun, *Slave City* poses some serious questions. It is founded on a wealth of data research into things like corporate efficiency in a manner similar to that employed by Rotterdam's resident architects, Rem Koolhaas's OMA and the partnership of MVRDV (both of whom van Lieshout has collaborated with), when they plan designs for an art museum or new town centre. So while *Slave City* may feature van Lieshout's trademark Romantic surrealism – slave-processing buildings shaped like spermatozoa, for example – it also articulates a cold logic about the most efficient way to run a society, a logic not too distant from the corporate logic that runs so much of the world today, simply stripped of its niceties and branded so as to draw attention to itself.

At the project's heart is a reflection on the nature of freedom today. It makes you conscious of the liberties we give up in order to be part of a social group, and conscious of liberty as a contingent rather than necessary part of social life. Don't we sacrifice our freedom every day in order to live in a society? If we had the right kind of dictators running the world, van Lieshout suggests, they could simply command us to cut down on greenhouse emissions and start solving the planet's environmental issues (energy efficiency, and with that, self-sufficiency, have been constant themes in van Lieshout's work) much faster than our democratic representatives do now. It's about now in our conversation that van Lieshout sees fit to add that although he's been called many names for producing the work he does, 'fascist' has never been one of them. Perhaps that's because his work also demonstrates a belief in art's ability to provide a space in which a person can explore almost any and every idea.

"I think art is not about one product or one thing you can put in a house or a museum – it's a life story," he says. "It's something you have to live for in order to make it. You may have to sacrifice and devote your life to doing it. Now what you see very often in art is very flimsy, like a one-trick pony. And very much related to consumerism and trying to sell stuff."

*AVL-Ville* was perhaps van Lieshout's most ambitious work to date, an attempt to transport the freedom he exploits in an art context into the context of 'real' life. Based on an empty site outside his studio, the microtown provided its citizens with food, homemade alcohol, defence (in the form of homemade guns), healthcare (facilities to produce medicine) and accommodation. It sounds like the ultimate van Lieshout production, but it lasted only eight months. One of the reasons it closed was the sheer cost of running it: "I have to earn my money by selling art and making stuff. A freestate is very expensive. I mean, you still have to pay tax to the government." Even though it was independent? "Yes! I'm happy I did that, otherwise I would have real problems. There were many things expected of me – I had to talk to lots of journalists, fix things with lawyers, fix licences. I was lost in those things and I wanted to make art, so I said: 'Fuck it! I'm an artist – there's lots of museums that can take care of this kind of work and I don't have to pay for it!'"

So why did he do it in the first place? "Because I thought it was possible." As I'm leaving, he confesses that he'd quite like to try it again. I don't want to ask if all the work on *Slave City* has been giving him ideas. ■

Models, drawings and installations for *Slave City* are on view at Albion, London, from 11 July to 15 August. See listings for further details

## IMAGES (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Joep van Lieshout, Rotterdam harbour

Workshop view, Atelier Van Lieshout

Atelier Van Lieshout, *Headquarters* (detail), 2008  
Courtesy the artist and Albion, London

Workshop, Atelier Van Lieshout

Atelier Van Lieshout, *Headquarters* (schematic), 2008  
Ink and acrylic on canvas, 166 x 231 cm  
Courtesy the artist and Albion, London

Workshop, Atelier Van Lieshout

Joep van Lieshout, *Fitness Test*, 2008  
Ink on canvas, 122 x 152 cm  
Courtesy the artist and Albion, London

