

HAVE A LOT MORE IDEAS than I can possibly execute," declares Joep van Lieshout. Tall, with a piercing gaze and an eyebrow perpetually arched above frameless glasses, the creative force behind the art-design-architecture collective Atelier Van Lieshout (AVL) is an intimidating presence. The 44-year-old Netherlands-born van Lieshout is seated in a small rectangle of an office at his studio complex on the Rotterdam waterfront where I have come to meet him and try to understand his often-outrageous work. His understated wool jacket and button-down ensemble is enlivened by colorful, slightly irreverent touches—a red bead necklace and a pair of wingtip shoes in vivid green suede.

"I have really qualified people doing things for me now. Basically, I'm quality control," says Joep van Lieshout, seen at center in the brown suit, amid the swirl of his studio. Far left: One of his assistants at work on the 31-foot-long *Bikini Bar*, 2006.

IN THE STUDIO

A few assistants work quietly at computers nearby, but most of the labor is happening downstairs, in the main studio, where the sculptures, architectural projects and furniture, all designed by van Lieshout, are produced. "I always start out doing drawings," he says, "and when I like something and the form keeps coming back to me, even if it's something ugly or a little bit deviant, my inner voice says I have to do it. So I say, 'Let's make it.'"

What does "deviant" look like? Since 1995, AVL has realized artworks that skirt the borders of good taste—designs for elaborate brothels; a vividly illustrated how-to manual on at-home pig slaughter—and legality: a handmade gun that sports brass knuckles. With every project, van Lieshout seems to confound distinctions between design and art, dwelling and sculpture.

Using wood, metal and the occasional shipping container but most frequently colored, molded fiberglass—"it stays beautiful for at least 100 years"—van Lieshout has created customized RV-like dwellings on wheels; small portable annexes, called clip-ons, that can be attached to existing structures (in 1997 one was bolted to the exterior of the Centraal Museum Utrecht); modular bathroom, kitchen and living units; roomlike spaces in the forms of wombs, skulls and other bodily cavities, including the nearly 54-foot-long *Bar Rectum*, a saloon in the form of a human digestive tract painted bloodred; and ecoconscious composting toilets that could conceivably convert waste into fuel.

Many of these "conceptual sculptures," as he terms them, are meant to be used, while some others, such as a bomb- and weapons-making facility, are potentially functional but untested. And some—large-scale anatomical models of female and

male reproductive organs—are outside the realm of the practical altogether. In addition to building structures and furniture, "I also make sculptures and paintings about daily life," he tells me. "I don't like borders—or morality."

A libertine, perhaps, but one who has found a way to make the system work for him: Van Lieshout estimates that nearly half his projects are commissions for institutions—his work is in the collections of numerous museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, in New York; the Stedelijk Museum, in Amsterdam; and the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis—and for private clients, most of whom are European. AVL has also done office interiors for several businesses, including a Belgian fashion company and a Dutch insurance firm. Among the smaller-scale fiberglass pieces that can be commissioned from AVL are bathroom and kitchen units, starting at around \$70,000, and tables, which run \$20,000 and up.

Van Lieshout now has about 20 people working with him, but when he started out, in the 1980s, he was on his own. After studying at the Academy of Modern Art in Rotterdam and the Villa Arson, in Nice, and completing a residency at Ateliers 63, in Haarlem, "I was making these halfway forms, utilitarian objects that were also sculpture," he says. "What I was doing was not very popular." »



Clockwise from top: Prototype Potato Chair, 2004; 3M Minimal Multi Mobile, 2002, and AVL Workskull, 2005; AVL Home Edition, 2005; Abdominal Exerciser Horizontal, 2004; Bad Club Chair, 2004; Clip-On, 1997, attached to a museum in Utrecht.



IN THE STUDIO

In the late '80s, he began arranging beer crates and concrete blocks in Minimalist-inspired stacks and then made modular furniture and boxlike sinks, tubs and toilets, which he presented in his first solo show, in 1988 at Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam. These modestly scaled early efforts are the foundation of AVL's predominantly straightforward, even primitive, aesthetic—there are never more features than absolutely necessary. With its emphasis on efficiency and portability, his work brings to mind Andrea Zittel's Living Units—trunks that open and unfold into full-size rooms—but at its most functional, his output most readily suggests that of his Dutch forebear Gerrit Rietveld, whose ultrasimple plywood-and-bolts De Stijl designs are more sculpture than furniture and whom van Lieshout cites as an early influence. As for contemporary Dutch design, "it's too easy," he says. "It's not conceptual enough. An artwork should be a little bit unexplainable." By the 1990s, the scale of his works had increased, and so had the number of commissions. At one point, someone called up and asked if he needed an intern. The studio grew from there.

Since van Lieshout emerged onto the art scene, critics have tried to sort out whether his antiestablishment stance is irony-free or whether he's a provocateur who's thumbing his nose at the

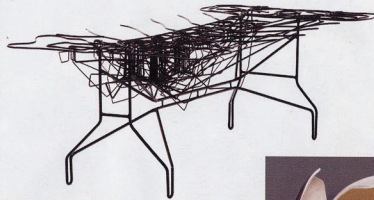
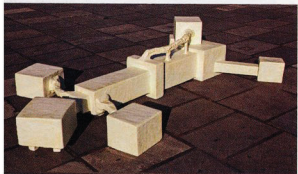
very audiences who support him. Is this art a little too autonomous, they wonder, maybe a bit too lawless to be taken seriously? "To say that an artist is merely a provocateur is disparaging," says the London dealer Michael Hue-William, whose Albion gallery has represented van Lieshout since 2007 (he is represented in New York by Tanya Bonakdar Gallery). "It's a mistake to dismiss his work that way. Joep is fantastically

creative. He's a force of nature really." Hue-William adds that the works have been snapped up by "an amazingly diverse group of collectors." The gallerist matches his clients in enthusiasm, so much so that he decided to expand Albion's upcoming AVL show, which opens in July, to include a few large pieces that will be installed outdoors in addition to a group of new ink-on-canvas works.

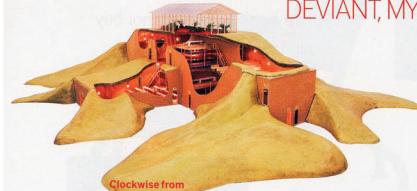
Some of those two-dimensional pieces represent figures; others are renderings of structures. "Yesterday," van Lieshout says, "I made a painting of the Virgin Mary surrounded by some believers." There's even a Deposition, based on Rogier van der Weyden's famous 15th-century composition. Also in progress is a commission for some sculptures in a botanical garden in Mexico.

But what has been occupying much of his and AVL's time lately is *Slave City*, an ongoing body of work, including drawings, small models and full-size constructions, based on a fictional metropolis, population 200,000. In this high-functioning dystopia, the residents, known as participants, are subject to a strict regimen of work, relaxation and sleep. The cooperative community produces its own food and operates a power plant, a university, an airport and even brothels. Freedom is sacrificed for »

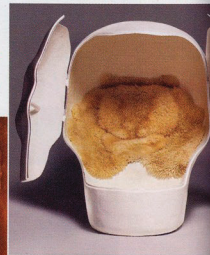
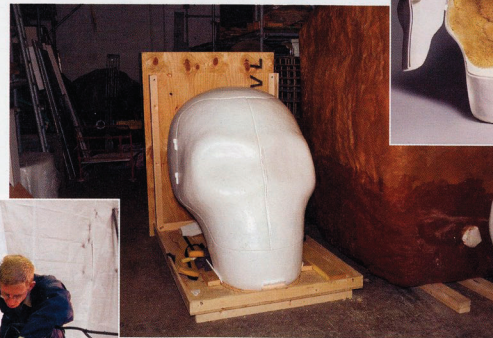
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"WHEN I LIKE SOMETHING, EVEN IF IT'S UGLY OR A LITTLE BIT DEVIANT, MY INNER VOICE SAYS I HAVE TO DO IT."



Clockwise from above: *Female Slave University*, 2006; *Headquarters*, 2008; *Minimal Steel with Red Lights*, 2006; and *Infrastructure table*, 2007. All four works are part of *Slave City*. From far right: interior and exterior views of *Sensory Deprivation Skull*, 2007; van Lieshout, center, at work on a window.



IN THE STUDIO

self-sufficiency. As rendered in wall-mounted wood-and-metal sculptures, the *Call Center Units*, 2005, where the male residents, represented by small white-clay figures, work and sleep in very close quarters, bears a disturbing resemblance to the hold of a slave ship or the barracks of a Nazi death camp.

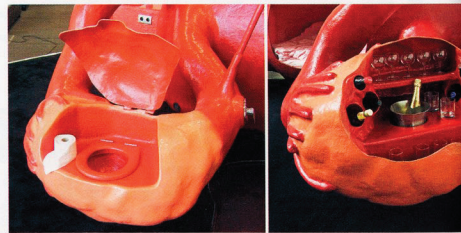
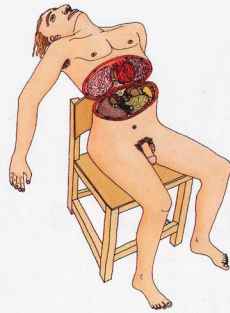
Slave City "plays with reality as well as history," says van Lieshout. "It's ambiguous—the architecture is beautiful, but at the same time, it's something horrible. Parts of it look like a concentration camp. It's also a metaphor for so many things: the economy, world population, endless consumption." Several new components of *Slave City*—among them, a headquarters building and a model for the world's largest mall—will be included in two upcoming exhibitions in Germany, the first at the Museum Folkwang, in Essen, from April 25 through July 6, and a larger retrospective opening in September at the Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen.

Just as we are about to go check on the progress of those new works, the wail of the studio's midday siren announces the lunch hour. (When mealtime ends, the alarm bell goes off again, signaling the end of the break: "If you don't have the siren, then people could go on eating for hours. They have to make art," van Lieshout tells me.) We head downstairs to the canteen to join the staff for a simple meal of soup and do-it-yourself sandwiches. I assemble one of the latter and join van Lieshout on the edge of a communal AVL-designed fiberglass table, where he sips mushroom

soup from a white cup. I sense that this is a rare appearance; no one talks to him, nor does he speak to anyone, and the others look rather surprised to see him there. Are they afraid of him? I ask. "Well, I'm the boss," van Lieshout says, adding that he comes by only once or twice a week, preferring to spend most of his time in his smaller

studio-residence nearby, where he works and lives alone, leaving the day-to-day operations of AVL to others. "I have really qualified people managing things for me now. Basically, I'm quality control."

With that, he briskly suggests we go to the studio. Before I catch up with him, he's already inside the massive 1920s-era structure, originally a warehouse for cotton offloaded from ships and, van Lieshout proudly informs me, the first concrete building in the Netherlands. Inside, the 20,000-square-foot space feels more like a small manufacturing plant than an artist's studio. In addition to affording plenty of room for the simultaneous execution of at least four or five different works on variously large scales, the place provides storage for a vast inventory of artworks, crated and not, as well as hundreds of tools, all kinds of construction equipment and shelves that seem to be piled as high as the 40-foot ceilings. Someone is idling a forklift near an AVL composting toilet that looks like it's been bisected. In a corner, a welder's sparks cascade like a mini fireworks display in the chilly air. "It's impossible to heat the place," van Lieshout says. "Too big." It's expansive enough (continued on page 185)



Clockwise from top: Self-Portrait, 2000; details of Wombhouse, 2004; van Lieshout in his living room; House for Extended Smelly Families, Open View, 2007; Wombhouse, 2004, in full; Bar Rectum, 2005.

