

ANOTHER DAY AT THE ORIFICE: ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT

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... the waste-disposal industry takes over the commanding positions in liquid life's economy. The survival of that society and the wellbeing of its members hang on the swiftness with which products are assigned to waste and the speed and efficiency of waste removal.¹

The present ecological crisis seems to demand a radical response: a paradigm shift in patterns of consumption and the methods by which we handle the mess we've already made. But how uncompromising should our strategies be? The Dutch artist Joep van Lieshout, working under the name Atelier Van Lieshout, asks this question by proposing numerous solutions, some more capable of being realised than others, almost all of them unsettling. Through his provision of prototypes for alternative social, economic and ecological regimes our appetite for decisive action is challenged. His work, which cannibalises the bloodless logic of design and urban planning, effects a marriage of best intentions and unsavoury methods.

For millennia people have taken to caves, far-flung mountains, islands and cloisters to be apart from profane reality. But the urge to create a sanctuary in which to pursue human flourishing dovetails all too easily with the cowardly impulse to avoid facing challenges head-on. The self-sufficient life is a life apart. In the course of his career Lieshout

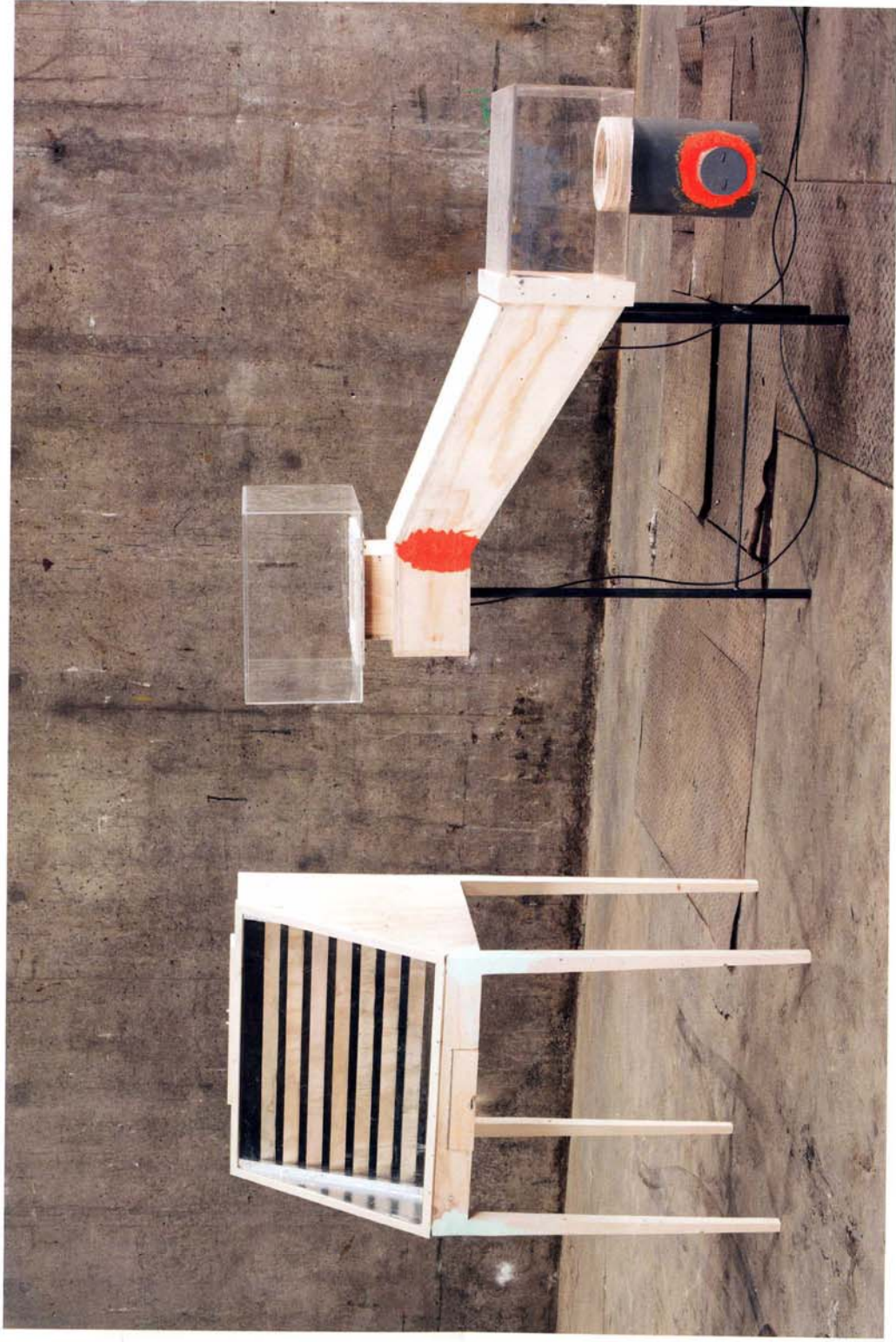
has frequently constructed objects that are supposed to serve as refuges, but which double as prison cells or tombs. His *Vostok Cabin*, 2010, an armoured steel bunker, is explicitly offered as an architectural respite from 'the changing climate, growing poverty [and] wars'.² Other structures don't so much reference the chaotic outside world as propose a *heimlich* inner space. Works like *Wombhouse*, 2004, and *Darwin*, 2008, a large purple sperm containing a bed and desk, offer the would-be hermit a minimum of facilities for domestic existence. But there is a note of *vanitas* in their provision, reducing life to bodily functions – consumption, excretion and sleep. The sculptural forms of other pieces hammer the point home: the *Wellness Skull*, 2007, 'a place to relax'; and *BarRectum*, 2005, a dingy site in which to drink time away. What could be more self-sufficient, more sustainable, than death?

But Lieshout doesn't just offer prototypes for resigned, albeit comfortable, isolation. Another strand of his practice looks outwards, meeting the issue of efficient waste management with stark resolve. What we need to do, his works seem to suggest, is own up and reclaim our shit. Only then can we give it a re-use value. This is what recycling is: extracting value from garbage, making it, once again, *consumable*. Hence Lieshout's fibreglass *Pig Toilet*, 2005, into which people defecate, their

contributions collecting in a trough behind the structure that is attended by hungry pigs. *Total Faecal Solution, the Technocrat*, 2003, is a more sophisticated mechanical undertaking: a set of toilets that produce biogas from human faeces. Each toilet only accepts excrement, as too much water complicates the treatment process. But what might stop users from making liquid deposits? These works expose a tension that drives Lieshout's oeuvre – that the technical pursuit of sustainability can engender some exceedingly unsustainable ethical positions:

While the toilets are designed for the best results in recycling, they involve an element of control. Inside the faecal toilet there is a video surveillance camera ... Friendly ecology meets voyeuristic suppression.³

Of course the above sentence may be a little mischievous, but a dark undercurrent runs throughout much of Lieshout's work. If the imperative of counteracting the nexus between consumption and waste forces people into sustainable practices, how far can things be taken? Comments by the Polish thinker Zygmunt Bauman sketch a picture that is given palpable form in the artist's *SlaveCity*, 2005⁴, a collection of architectural maquettes and sculptures that amounts to a fully envisioned model society. The other major challenge is the threat of being consigned to waste. In a world filled with consumers



ABOVE
Inset Experimental, 2012
Photograph and © Atelier Van Leishout

RIGHT
Slave City, Male Slave University, 2007
Photograph and © Atelier Van Leishout

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP
The Farm, 2011
Photograph and © Atelier Van Leishout

Wellness Skull, 2007
Photograph and © Atelier Van Leishout





LIESHOUT'S MAIN CONCERNS ... ARE THE PROFOUND BIOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF OUR COMMITMENT TO EVER-INCREASING CONSUMPTION AS THE PRE-EMINENT ECONOMIC MODEL.

and the objects of their consumption, life is hovering uneasily between the joys of consumption and the horrors of the rubbish heap.³ The useless consumers in *SlaveCity* are recycled in the manner illustrated by the sprawling *Cradle to Cradle*, 2009, a mixed-media installation that makes up part of this *gesamtkunstwerk*. Old, crippled, sick and bad-tasting people are recycled in a biogas digester, while healthy but not-so-clever people are recycled in the meat-processing factory. Young and very healthy people take part in the organ-transplant program. Each of these scenarios is modelled in a sculptural language that sits uneasily between the cartoon grotesques of Claes Oldenburg and the rump-modernism of corporate logos, abstract clip art and key chains. The figures being eviscerated have no faces, distinguishing features or clothes. They are ciphers, little homunculi with guts like white plasticine, totally subjected to the banality of evil.

Elsewhere in *SlaveCity* an architectural model stands for the world's largest shopping mall, featuring luxury shops among other amenities. There is also a brothel in which those slave-worker men intelligent enough not to be immediately recycled must run a life-or-death gauntlet for the right to claim a fuck. Opting out is impossible, as time off from work is strictly regulated. There are universities and schools. In this dystopia every aspect of life is designed to maximise production and consumption, every opportunity taken to separate wheat from chaff, and to extract value from waste. It is a closed system – a rationalised, inhumane plenitude.

It would be too simplistic to read *SlaveCity* as a clunky exercise in stating the obvious: that bureaucratic political dictatorship is bad, though the work obviously draws from the well of Yevgeny Zamyatin, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley and the Nazi death camps. Neither is Lieshout's oeuvre making the shrill case that being forced to recycle amounts to an oppression akin to slavery or worse. His main concerns – so disturbingly expressed in *Cradle to Cradle* – are the profound biopolitical implications of our commitment to ever-increasing consumption as the pre-eminent economic model.

Perhaps as we grow more desperate some previously unpalatable options may look more enticing. *New Tribal Labyrinth*, 2011, another sprawling microcosm, is 'a new world order, a society inhabited by imaginary tribes ... a return to farming and industry'.⁵ These tribes have achieved 'self-sufficiency' through a mixture of ritual and advanced manufacturing techniques. It is not clear, however, whether their methods are part of a 'post-apocalyptic survival strategy' or, instead, 'a new utopian way of durable production'. *Insect Experimental*, 2012, encapsulates the blurred boundary between trauma and liberation; it is a 'preview of the future of farming, an installation for breeding insects for consumption purposes'.⁶ As prototypes for solving the global food crisis go, it could be worse. In 2011 a Japanese scientist called Mitsuyuki Ikeda announced that he had successfully extracted edible proteins from human faeces while eliminating bacteria, combining them with soya to create a very new kind of hamburger.

1 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 3.

2 'Vostok cabin, 2010', Atelier Van Lieshout website, <http://www.ateliervanlieshout.com/works/vostokcabin.htm>.

3 'Total faecal solution, the Technocrat, 2003', Atelier Van Lieshout website, [http://www.ateliervanlieshout.com/works/totalfaecalsolutionthetechnocrat\(2\).htm](http://www.ateliervanlieshout.com/works/totalfaecalsolutionthetechnocrat(2).htm).

4 Bauman, op. cit., p. 9.

5 'The farm, 2011', Atelier Van Lieshout website, <http://www.ateliervanlieshout.com/works/thefarm.htm>.

6 'Insect experimental, 2012', Atelier Van Lieshout website, <http://www.ateliervanlieshout.com/works/insectexperimental.htm>.