



Designs on your lifestyle

Joep van Lieshout, founder of Rotterdam ideas factory Atelier van Lieshout, says he isn't interested in claiming authorship of his furniture, mobile homes and alternative urban models. But Pablo Lafuente senses a Machiavellian presence at work

Above: Atelier Van Lieshout, 3M, 2002, mobile unit, mixed media **Opposite:** *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, 1998, mobile unit, mixed media

In the 1960s, Jeep launched a new van onto the Spanish market. The SV or Campeador was a simple yet versatile automobile: a white rectangular metal box, with full traction and a 71CV (3,330cc) engine. The van was originally intended for military use, but its large capacity and powerful engine made it ideal for industrial purposes. While the original version of the van ran on petrol, the Campeador had a more economical diesel engine. But the formula didn't work: the engine was too potent for the gearbox, which often broke, sales never took off and the van soon disappeared from the market.

At Atelier van Lieshout's studio in Rotterdam's docks, amid Portakabins and piles of odd-looking machinery, there is a bright green van that strongly recalls the Campeador. The 3M (2002) is a rectangular polyester box with square windows, household door-handles and headlights screwed on in the simplest way. It looks like it should work, but its functionality doesn't seem to be very relevant. It is as if the designer of this van has taken the simplicity of the Campeador to its absolute conclusion, and in the process has ruled out every design decision that might have been made along the way – even at the expense of creating a functional object.

Eliminating the role of the artist by turning him into a designer, and then going one stage further to restrict the possibilities available to that designer, is an idea that has been central to the career of AVL's founder

Joep van Lieshout. This eradication of authorship was first seen in *Untitled* (1987), in which van Lieshout sandwiched three Dommelsch beer crates between 12 concrete tiles, after discovering that the sizes of both (30 by 30cm for the slab of tiles, 30 by 40cm for each crate) were made according to the same standard manufacturing measurements. This idea of standardisation has also been applied to his furniture.

According to the description in Atelier van Lieshout's *Manual* – which doubles as a catalogue and set of instructions to recreate some of AVL's works – all the tables and shelving units are made in polyester and available in primary and secondary colours, and the dimensions are standard. In van Lieshout's own words, the idea was to 'try something stupid, or simple, or less designed as possible, something that could make people say "this is just a piece of furniture".' And the result is that these tables and shelves are the quintessence of furniture – even if it's of the kind you'd find at the cheaper end of an IKEA catalogue.

As if manufacturing art under such a rigid set of rules wasn't enough, van Lieshout also began to produce furniture and interiors on commission. 'The client comes and tells me he needs a kitchen, which has to be this big, with some drawers, this kind of sink, and it has to be ready by this date.' Provided with such a clear brief by clients such as Rem Koolhaas (toilets for the Grand Palais in Lille), the Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam (more toilets) and van Lieshout's ▶



4 Amsterdam gallery Fons Welters, the artist's creative input is rendered essentially responsive, almost to the point of being eliminated. 'I was reducing my role as an artist and working as a contractor,' van Lieshout explains. 'You ask, I do; no design or art is involved.'

The creation of Atelier van Lieshout in 1995 was the logical outcome of this self-effacing process. The decision was initially practical: 'We were working in France [with Rem Koolhaas/OMA at the Grand Palais in Lille],' van Lieshout says, 'and we needed to have a firm because they don't do business with artists. So we invented Atelier van Lieshout.' On its website, AVL is defined as 'a multidisciplinary company that operates internationally in the field of contemporary art, design and architecture'. Its name stresses the fact that 'the works of art do not stem solely from the creative brain of Joep van Lieshout, but are produced by a creative team.' This team, which ranges at any one time from 20 to 30 people, has been prolific in its output over the last 10 years, making furniture, mobile units, anthropomorphic sculptures, urban plans for independent towns and even pork sausages.

If this suggests that Joep van Lieshout is an exceptionally ego-free artist, it is also possible to take the opposite view: as a marketing device, AVL is the perfect vehicle for developing a personality cult around its creator. In pictures from the catalogue of AVL's exhibition 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly', the self-confessedly difficult,

opinionated and straight-to-the-point businessman appears on top of the *Mercedes with 57mm Cannon* (1998), with long hair, open shirt, cigar in mouth and machine-gun in hand, looking more like Rambo or *The A-Team's* Colonel John 'Hannibal' Smith than Subcomandante Marcos. In 1992 he participated in the Zandvoort racing trophy in an Opel Ascona, sponsored by Fons Welters and several other commercial businesses, and in 2001 van Lieshout created AVL-Ville: something between a free-state and a workshop run under his direction.

This contradiction is a strategy rather than mere coincidence, and it is no accident that van Lieshout makes many references to Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Van Lieshout's boldness and ability to set a seemingly firm ground for his practice are not unlike Machiavelli's models for good state foundations. And Machiavelli's embrace of moral imperfection finds a perfect echo in van Lieshout's ambiguity over the meaning and aspirations of his artistic production.

This ambiguity is remarkably present in recent works, where a political engagement is pre-eminent. As the Atelier's website says, AVL's production has 'shifted to works of art that can be used for self-sufficient and independent lifestyle'. For 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly' van Lieshout created a workshop for weapons and bombs, a field hospital and the living quarters of an imaginary freedom fighter. The project was, he says, 'about freedom, morality, state and terrorism', the



same themes that he addressed in an urban planning proposal for the Dutch city of Almere. 'They wanted to build 30,000 houses in three or four years, and asked architects and artists to develop ideas. I proposed that, rather than building 30,000 houses, they should commission the local mobile home factory to build 30,000 mobile homes. The city could function as a free state, with an economy financed through illegal means, like alcohol, drugs, weapons, prostitution and prison camps. Nearby states that had prisoners but didn't want to pay the huge costs of managing them could send them to our free state for half the price it would cost them to keep the prisoners. They could work during the day and at night spend their money on booze or whatever.' Not surprisingly, the plan wasn't accepted, but it was the starting point for AVL-Ville, constructed by van Lieshout in the Rotterdam docks, where it remained for nine months.

These community models, easy to comprehend and, like the rest of AVL's production, immediately appealing, present themselves as, on the one hand, a criticism of an over-designed society and, on the other, as alternative forms of social organisation. The failure of AVL-Ville – in part due to external pressure from local institutions, but also to its poorly articulated combination of libertarian ideas and Marxian productive relations – led van Lieshout to change direction. Since 2001, his works still continue to expose the power structures that articulate

existing communities, but he no longer proposes alternative models.

An example of this is *The Technocrat* (2002), which was shown last November at Hanover's Sprengel Museum. *The Technocrat* is like a big perpetual recycling machinery, in which we are just a little wheel,' says van Lieshout. A kind of Foucaultian nightmare in which individuals are no more than a small part of a highly codified system, *The Technocrat* constitutes a perfectly simple design for community living. One thousand people, stuck in beds, are connected to a feeding system ('The Filler'), a recycling machine that produces energy, and to 'The Alcoholator', a piece of industrial equipment able to produce 800 litres of alcohol a day, which, van Lieshout says, 'should be enough to keep those 1,000 people happy'. 'It's like a mirror image of our society,' he explains – showing us how the rules work so that we can perhaps change them. But somehow you can't escape the feeling that van Lieshout also enjoys playing with these rules, just for a bit of fun.

'Womb House', to 26 Feb. Jousse entreprise, Paris (+33 1 53 82 13 60, www.jousse-entreprise.com). Atelier van Lieshout will also have solo shows this summer at the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, and at the Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Vienna

Opposite page: *The Technocrat* Above: *Sportopia*. Both 2002, mixed media


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Frame 42 > 2005

A choice selection of Dutch designers breathes new life into the infamous Lloyd Hotel in Amsterdam.

BEDTIME STORIES

TEXT BY ANNEKE BOKERN. PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARRIGJE DE MAAR



Above and opposite: A former Nazi prison and migrant hostel in Amsterdam, the Lloyd Hotel has been both preserved and reinvented by MVRDV and a handful of mostly Dutch designers. Carpet by Michel Françoise.

