

Joep van Lieshout

SlaveCity (in the context of Jheronimus Bosch 500)

11 June - 16 October 2016

Joep van Lieshout (Ravenstein NL 1963) is an unorthodox artist and a passionate entrepreneur that prefers to operate on the fringes. With his sinister installation *SlaveCity* he also pushes at the boundaries – between good and evil, life and death, man and machine. The exhibition is being held within the context of *Jheronimus Bosch 500*. Five hundred years ago this visionary painter was already holding a mirror up to his audience. In this sublunary world between heaven and hell, people may well be aspiring to good, but the diabolical temptations of greed and lust can seldom be resisted by them.

Recently the discussion concerning art and social commitment has erupted again with new intensity. Can contemporary art contribute to the solution of social problems? Or does this conflict with the autonomy of art and the artist, an idea that dates back to the age of romanticism? This complex issue has preoccupied Joep van Lieshout since very early on his career. His responses are both headstrong and inquisitive.

After finishing his training as a visual artist at the Rotterdam Academie van Beeldende Kunsten and Ateliers '63 in Haarlem, he made his debut in the art world in the late 1980s. While the geometric sculptures of stacked beer crates (1987) could still be related to the traditions of pop and minimal art, his series of tables, storage cabinets and bathroom fixtures that he produced from 1988 onward, some of which have been exhibited in museums and galleries, became everyday utilitarian objects that could also be seen and celebrated as sculpture. Although some art critics were able to discern some formal similarities between the crate sculptures and the new works – e.g. standardization, seriality, functional design – the hand of a purposeful sculptor who creates functional objects could also be recognized. The individual tables, chairs, kitchen units, shower cubicles and toilets were the initial building blocks for something bigger, an all-encompassing *Gesamtkunstwerk* in which Van Lieshout lays out his vision of the world.

An impressive start was made with the *Mobile Homes*, Van Lieshout's variation on the caravan. At the same time these propagated the idea of self-sufficiency eradicating limits and erasing boundaries between art and architecture, sculpture and design, making it a lifestyle; a total work of art.

What sort of things are needed in order to achieve the ideal of an economically independent commune? From food supply to producing electrical power, Van Lieshout came up with practical solutions for everything. Many of these ingenious alternatives were very sumple or age-old: the raising and slaughtering of pigs, or producing electricity with human faeces.

In order to carry out these utopian projects, Joep founded Atelier Van Lieshout, to undermine the myth of the artistic genius and has worked under the moniker

ever since, to build his utopian dream projects - today his studio is a massive art complex to carry out his vision. Included in his AVL universe complex/ compound - are Joep and his team's atelier, an exhibition space, and artist residency and a sculpture park - "it's a world in and of itself" according to Joep.

During the summer months of 2001, the ideal of a hedonistic, autarkic commune was put into practice on the premises of Atelier Van Lieshout. For the infrastructure of *AVL-Ville* ingenious installations were designed – not only for the production of food, energy and (of no minor importance) alcohol, but also for the purification of water. Free transportation from downtown Rotterdam to the 'free state' would draw sufficient numbers to the restaurant and thereby generate income using their own currency (1 AVL = 1 beer). Ultimately, a conflict with the municipality contributed to its closing.

Joep van Lieshout is 'fascinated with power' and 'with organizations and systems', as he once said in an interview. In his work he reveals the oppositions that inevitably accompany these: freedom and the lack of it, rationality/irrationality, the individual versus the group. Every utopia has a dark side to it. After the closing of *AVL-Ville* Van Lieshout developed *The Disciplinator* (2003), a labor camp designed with mathematical precision, where seventy-two prisoners are disciplined into time zones from grinding tree trunks to tooth brushing in shifts maintaining full control of them and their actions.

The Technocrat (2003) goes a step further in the suppression and maximal physical exploitation of human beings. Central to this closed system is a biogas installation that processes human excrement into methane gas. By way of funnels and tubes, a thousand subjects are administered, on a daily basis, food and alcohol that have been prepared with this gas. The ten-meter-long *Funnelman* (2004) which stretches out along the A27 near Breda, bears a resemblance to the subjects in *The Technocrat*. At first the sculpture might give rise to associations with the forced feeding ideas to people. But perhaps, to an even greater extent, the man expresses the sense of being in a straitjacket that many working people have when they end up in a traffic jam every day.

To organize rationally and efficiently, earn lots of money and do so preferably in the most sustainable way possible: nowadays almost any business or organization would endorse this motto. And that also goes for *SlaveCity*, on which Van Lieshout has been working since 2005. He has meticulously calculated that, with the use of 200,000 slaves working in a call center for seven hours a day, the annual profit can amount to 7.8 billion euros. The slaves earn no wages; but expenses, housing, entertainment and visits to the brothel are all arranged perfectly. By now there are models, sketches or paintings of all of the buildings and installations, and the urban plan is now realized in this zero footprint city which – of course – with green renewable energy as part of its self-sufficient ambition.

Everything is recyclable, including the slaves themselves. When they no longer function, their bodies are processed and vital organs become available for transplants. Also included in the *SlaveCity* planning is a centrally organized hospital with well-equipped operating rooms.

Those who get the uneasy feeling that *SlaveCity* bears a suspicious number of similarities to a concentration camp are not wrong. These macabre places of mass destruction and enormous atrocities were part of the research for *SlaveCity* which according to Van Lieshout is completely up-to-date. In his *Gesamtkunstwerk* man has been reduced to a cog in a well-oiled machine, which is completely geared to sustainability and profit. Though we aren't entirely unfamiliar with these basic principles, the situation in *SlaveCity* raise infinite questions and warning about humanity, society and compassion.

Hieronymus Bosch, too, was a master of humor and satire. Some critics see parallels between his visionary art projects and the world of Bosch, in which darkness and light, heaven and hell exist alongside each other. Bosch was critical and denounced human weaknesses such as gluttony, greed, folly and lust; but the interpretation of his visions is not unambiguous. It is particularly that latter quality, in Van Lieshout's view, which is Bosch's great strength: 'In the triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, heaven on earth is perhaps just as alienating and disturbing as hell.'

On the macro level, a great deal has changed in five hundred years; but on the micro level, man's behavior has hardly changed at all. At least it seems that way when we see the most bizarre excesses of the figures in Bosch's paintings. In the Groeninge Museum's triptych *The Last Judgment*, for example, we discover a large barrel of beer surrounded by naked peeing, pooping and puking people who are getting drunk on the beer that flows freely out of its holes. A Van Lieshout installation before its time! Joep has conceived this in an organized in a more sustainable way.

SlaveCity is part of the Bosch Grand Tour. In 2016 not only the birthplace of Jheronimus Bosch (c. 1450-1516) but also all of Noord-Brabant will be dedicated to the best-known medieval painter of the Netherlands. Under the title Bosch Grand Tour, seven prominent Brabant museums are presenting a series of special exhibitions.

The Bosch Grand Tour is a project of the Van Abbemuseum, De Pont museum, MOTI Museum of the Image, Natuurmuseum Brabant, Het Noordbrabants Museum, Stedelijk Museum 's-Hertogenbosch and the TextielMuseum within the context of the event *Jheronimus Bosch 500*.

The De Pont Museum will also reveal highlights from Joep van Lieshout's new body of work, Crypto-Futurism, in which Van Lieshout revisits the Italian Futurists a century later to look at resonances between emerging Fascist tendencies today, using his art to reveal the interplay between Utopia and destruction. Van Lieshout embraces emerging technologies from genetic manipulation to robotics and big data to draw parallels between the societal threats faced in the early 20th century and the perhaps graver circumstances we face today. Starting his research by building huge machines in order to destroy or recycle all possible materials, Joep van Lieshout deconstructs notions of sustainability with techno-modernist speed, playing a dangerous game with nostalgia for bygone political theorems.