

JENNIFER ALLEN TALKS WITH AVL'S JOEP VAN LIESHOUT



UP THE ORGANIZATION

JUST HOW BIG CAN AN ARTWORK GET?

Joep van Lieshout seems determined to find out. The thirty-seven-year-old Dutch artist has recently declared his sprawling studio compound at the Rotterdam harbor a free state. This month, Atelier van Lieshout (AVL) will become *AVL-Ville*, a civic artwork in progress—complete with housing, education, sewage treatment, and even a slaughterhouse. Since establishing AVL in 1995, van Lieshout has produced works on an ever-increasing scale: polygamy-friendly furniture (*Modular Multi Women Bed*, 1997), mobile homes for despotic campers (*Autocrat*, 1997), and shipping containers refurbished as laboratories for making firearms, bombs, medicine, and alcohol. AVL's works combine the pursuit of pleasure with survival; creating an autonomous state was the next logical step.

Despite his desire for self-sufficiency, van Lieshout does not labor alone. He considers his thirty-odd employees to be equal coworkers, if not compatriots, and likens the atelier to an architectural firm that also constructs its own designs. Longtime associates are predominantly Dutch, while many interns come from abroad. With backgrounds in art, design, metalworking, carpentry, and even distilling, the atelier's staff provides a large pool of talent, which allows AVL to make an impressive range of objects—from mobile homes to kitchen sinks. Output is divided equally between works made for AVL's use and those commissioned by private companies and public foundations. To date, AVL has designed, built, and installed more than 500 objects and constructions.

By embracing a collective form of art production, AVL may recall Warhol's Factory, but instead of transforming everyday objects and images into art, AVL puts its artworks into everyday life. Indeed, van Lieshout seems interested in taking on a project only if it can be deployed in several contexts. *AVL-Hospital*, 1998, for instance, is both a sculpture and a fully functioning medical clinic in a 2,688-cubic-foot shipping container. Fusing art and life, the atelier belongs to the interactive art movement that critic and curator

Nicolas Bourriaud has called relational aesthetics. But AVL doesn't seek just any interaction; its inherently collective works directly challenge the state's control of community by ignoring regulations on weapons, architecture, sexuality, alcohol, even food. Part Waco, part Sodom, with a dash of Pioneer Village, *AVL-Ville* is a total geopolitical artwork that targets all government and public services. The strategy is simple: Since the state usually respects the autonomy of aesthetics, why not use art to take over the world?

Given AVL's agenda, it's no surprise that van Lieshout has encountered difficulties with the law. At the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, construction of *Clip-On*, 1997, a parasitic fiberglass structure attached to the museum's classical facade, was interrupted for the usual reason: no building permit. In 1996, Canadian customs officials confiscated *Pistolet Poignée Américaine* (American grip pistol), 1995, evidently missing the aesthetic qualities of van Lieshout's homemade brass-knuckle pistol. The 1998 exhibition "The Good, the Bad & the Ugly" in Rabastens, France, was closed down by the mayor, who felt that AVL's customized Mercedes—outfitted with a homemade 57 mm cannon—might act as a catalyst for youth criminality. Such controversies seem only to inspire van Lieshout, who manages to be both provocative and accommodating. While driving to the country to buy a tractor, the formidable founding father talked about the preparations and future plans for *AVL-Ville*, which opens to the public April 28. New Yorkers who can't make it to the Netherlands for the opening can catch a glimpse of the new city's landscape at P.S. 1, where *Dark Room*, 2001, a shipping container outfitted with a compost toilet, is currently on display; AVL's work can also be seen at Jack Tilton/Anna Kustera Gallery from April 13 to May 19. —JA



Left: AVL members eating dinner in the atelier compound, February 2001. Photo: Derk Jan Wooldrik.
Right: Joep van Lieshout on *AVL-Transport*, 2001, February 2001. Photo: Derk Jan Wooldrik.

JENNIFER ALLEN: How did Atelier van Lieshout evolve into AVL-Ville?

JOEP VAN LIESHOUT: We were making more and more artworks about self-sufficiency—mobile homes and containers for various activities—so the idea of an autonomous village was already taking shape. Then, in 1998, we got a commission to design an urban-planning project for Almere,

WE'RE SUBJECT TO DUTCH LAWS, BUT WE'RE NOT INTERESTED IN RESPECTING THEM. RIGHT NOW, WE'RE TRYING TO GET A BLANK BUILDING PERMIT. WE COULD WAIT FOR APPROVAL, BUT WE DECIDED TO KEEP ON BUILDING. THAT'S WHY WE GET SO MUCH DONE.

a new city that the Dutch government began building in the province of Flevoland in the '70s. We came up with a plan for "Free State Almere," which would have sealed off the city from the rest of the country. Unfortunately, our proposal was rejected, so we decided to create our own free state around the atelier. I wanted to make a beautiful spot for people who work at AVL. We're not interested in having everyone come to live at AVL-Ville; it's intended only for past, current, and future employees. Currently, five of our interns live here, and more of our workers plan to move in this summer. Maybe in twenty years AVL-Ville will be bigger, but it'll never be massive. Right now, it's about the size of a few football fields.

JA: Apart from the studio, you already have AVL-Hospital, 1998, as well as containers for making weapons, bombs, alcohol, and medicine—plus there's a canteen. What other services will residents be able to enjoy?

JVL: We offer housing to people who work in the studio. After a year, when they've shown that they're serious, they can build a house according to their own design on the premises. The materials will be paid for by AVL, but the employees will have to build the structure themselves. That's it. They don't have to pay rent, so it's a cheap way to live. We also have a farm, *The Pioneer Set*, 1999–2000, which produces organically grown food. Everything is mobile, even the trees and plants; because we have little land, we have to use it intensively. Within a year, the farm will be operational and produce food for our kitchen and restaurant. We'll have a cooking club where you can eat, make meals, and learn new recipes. Soon we will open AVL Academy, 2001, which can be used by people from the studio and from outside AVL-Ville.

JA: What can one expect to be on the curriculum at AVL Academy?

JVL: Everything you never learned in art school: specific technical skills like working with fiberglass and wood, as well as management and marketing. It's not only for artists

and designers, but also for people from the business world who can learn a different, more creative way of thinking. The academy will bring together the best of both worlds, so artists can learn from managers and vice versa. We'll even have philosophy courses, but they will be very practical. Try to become friends with a cow. Be a farmer for a while. Do something very slowly. Do something complex

in a short time. We won't be sitting around reading books, because we're people who communicate with feelings and visual effects.

JA: You're the founding father of AVL-Ville. Are you going to be the mayor, too?

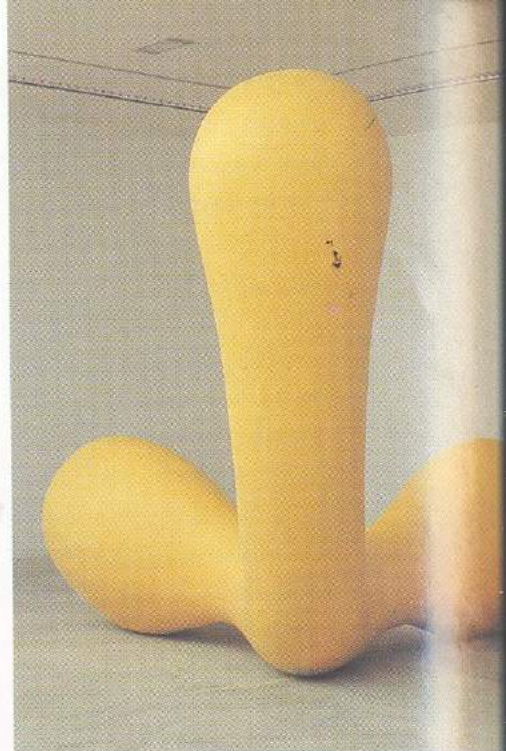
JVL: There won't be a mayor. There won't be a government, or a democracy. AVL-Ville has a structure, but it's not a political one with voting; it will be run like a company. Besides, it's such a small society, there's no need to add such complex systems. It's more important to have good management that can take many points of view into consideration. I'm the artistic director, and Jeroen Thomas is the general director of business and finance. Together with the other AVL members, we'll make the decisions.

JA: What's the difference between AVL-Ville and a company that offers bonuses to dedicated, hard-working employees?

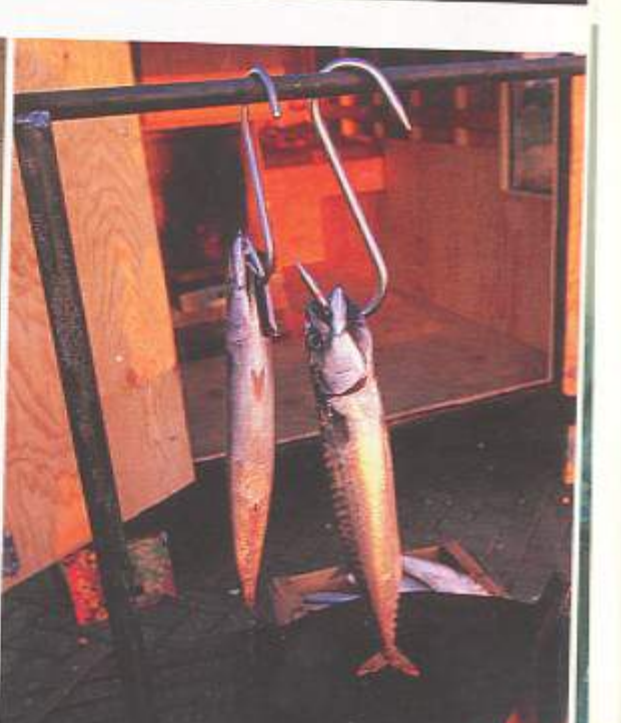
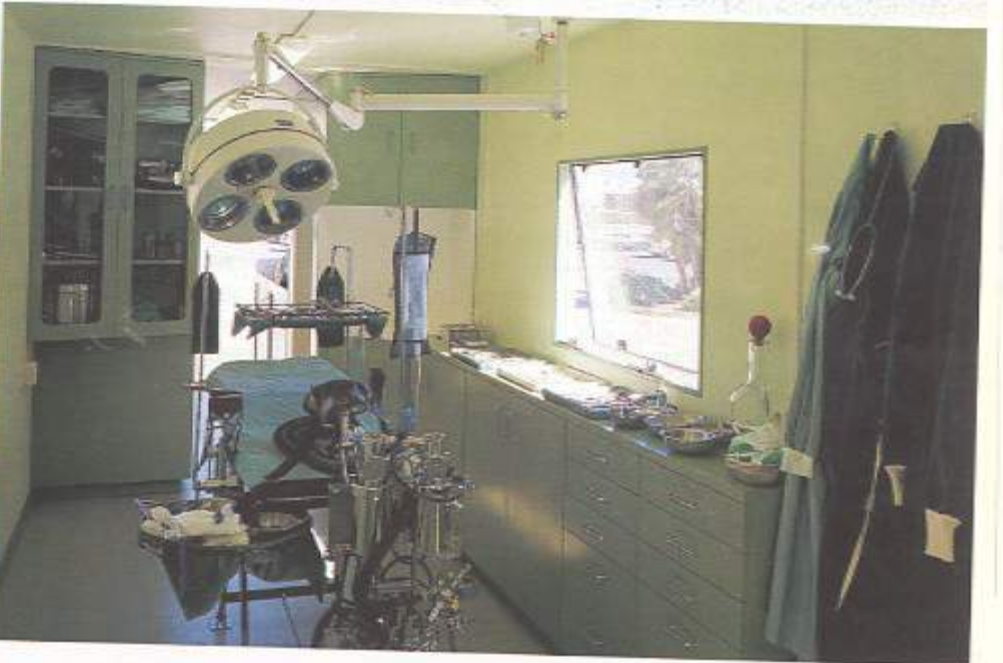
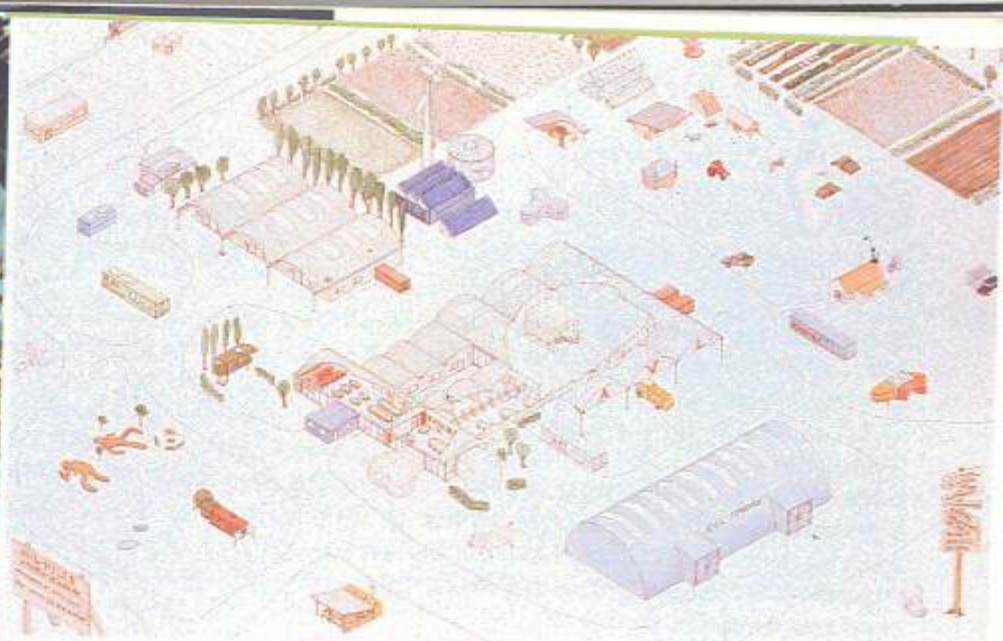
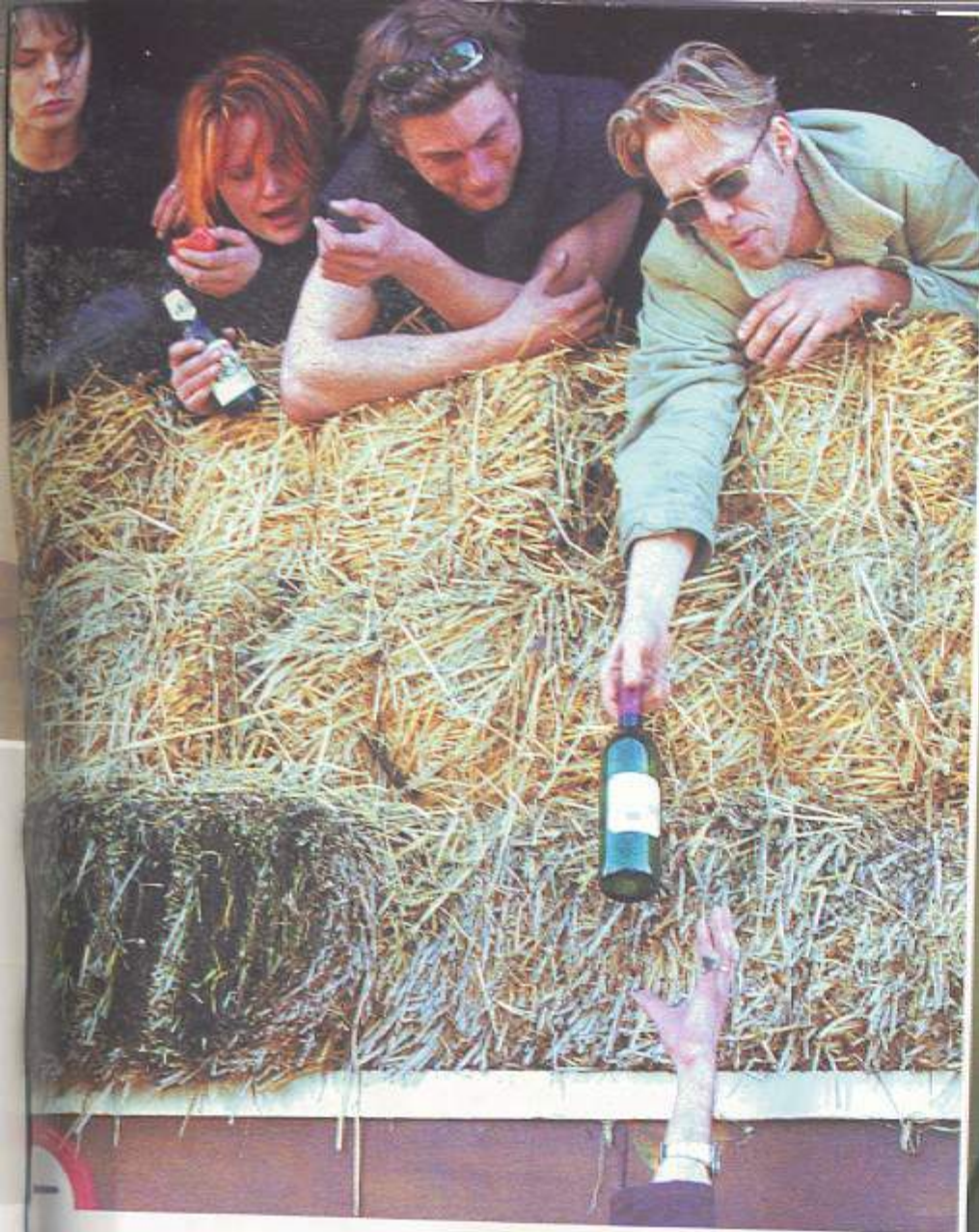
JVL: We give away a piece of land and housing to our employees. Since AVL is paying for a large part of people's lives, we are more like communists, although we don't have a communist political system. Our work is based on piracy, not politics or policy. Companies offer incentives to employees to increase productivity and profits; we use the money we make from commissions to invest in other projects that we think are important but may not be profitable. We aren't going to earn a dime from housing or even from the farm, but earning money isn't interesting. It's more important to create something special, to make something different happen.

JA: Do Dutch laws have jurisdiction over AVL-Ville?

JVL: We're subject to Dutch laws, but we're not interested in respecting them. Right now, we're trying to get a blank building permit. We could wait for approval, but we decided to keep on building. If we already have ten buildings, then it'll be difficult for the city to stop us. That's why we get so much done. We don't secure things; we simply do them. Later we see if it gets approved. Besides the blank building permit, AVL-Ville will have its own



Clockwise from top left: AVL, *Bioprick*, 1992, fiberglass, ca. 84" x 90" x 90". AVL members Yolanda Witlox, Petra Ligtenberg, Michiel Van Der Tuin, and Herman de Jongh, February 2001. Photo: Derk Jan Wooldrik. Joep van Lieshout and Yolanda Witlox, drawing of AVL-Ville, 1999, watercolor on paper, ca. 29" x 39". AVL, *AVL-Hospital*, 1998, mixed media. Photo: Peter Foe. Mackerel smoking outside *Fisherman's Cabin*, 2000, February, 2001. Photo: Derk Jan Wooldrik. AVL, *Modular Multi Women Bed*, 1997, wood, steel, and bedding, dimensions variable. Photo: Peter Foe. AVL member Yolanda Witlox making schnapps, February, 2001. Photo: Derk Jan Wooldrik. AVL member carrying sex robot, 2001. Photo: Derk Jan Wooldrik. AVL, *Pistolet Poignée Américaine* (American grip pistol), 1995, steel and brass, ca. 4 1/2" x 1 1/4" x 4 1/2".



constitution, which promotes individual freedom, honesty, and equality. Our rules are all based on common sense. If there's a problem, you try to solve it. Pragmatism would be the correct term, but it's more about finding solutions and solving problems. I would call it "solivism."

JA: How are you going to solve the problem of sexual practices? Will you promote polygamy or monogamy?

JVL: I think people should do whatever they want. But to make sure they can explore all the possibilities, last year we designed *Robotec*, a forty-by-eight-foot shipping container that will be outfitted for a variety of sexual practices, from bestiality to S&M. We also have robots that can fuck you, or you can fuck them. I have nothing against monogamy, but maybe you don't feel like having sex with the same person. Or with any person. Then you can use the robots. They will be very high-tech, basically computerized pleasure machines. Our work is about being autonomous with respect to energy, food, and the law. *Robotec* plays with the idea of total independence with regard to partners and sex. For me, it would be challenging to have *Robotec* operate in different situations—not only in the art world, which is the easiest, and in the sex industry, but also in the medical world. A hospital wouldn't offer prostitutes to patients with handicaps, who need to have sex too, but it might accept machines. I'm not interested in making just artworks. A work should function on many levels—as art, design, and life.

JA: It sounds like a cross between William Morris's utopian aesthetics and the libertine sexual practices of the Marquis de Sade.

JVL: I like them both, but I don't like the word "utopia." *AVL-Ville* is not utopian; it's absolutely the farthest place from utopia because the latter can't be realized. I have no interest in things that can't be realized. I like Morris's socialism and the absence of morality in Sade, but I also like Machiavelli. They are very much alike: Sade is surrealistic and Machiavelli rational. It's a nice contradiction.

JA: How do your mobile architectural designs further your philosophy of community?

JVL: We made a lot of mobile homes and containers because, at the time, there were no building codes for these temporary structures, so it was a way to work around the law. Things became mobile also because I consider architecture to be an object. I don't like my structures to have a foundation—that would make them too static. The architecture should be dynamic so that the community can move around and be flexible, too. At the farm, the plants and trees are mobile, so we can move them

and set them up anywhere. *AVL-Ville* will never have roots, or foundations.

JA: Why do you use fiberglass, not just for the mobile homes but also for bars, bathrooms, and even your extra-large dildo sculpture, *Biopruck*, 1992?

JVL: It's durable, cheap, and practical. I like the colors, the material, and the surface. You can build a structure with different materials and then cover it with fiberglass, and it's watertight. A house is usually built out of wood, bricks, and steel, but it's hard to make them function together because they have different properties. When you cover a surface with fiberglass, the problem is solved. I also like the fact that it's an artificial material. I use wood, too, for interiors and furniture, which I leave unfinished, like the *Modular Multi Women Bed*, 1997. There is a contradiction between natural and synthetic elements: wood versus fiberglass, an ecological farm versus a sex robot. Everything lies between rational and nonrational decisions; that's the theme of the works.

JA: There also seems to be a contradiction between your belief in individualism and the collective nature of your works. The *Modular Multi Women Bed*—whether it serves polygamy or lesbian orgies—is designed for a collectivity, not an individual. How do you bring the two together?

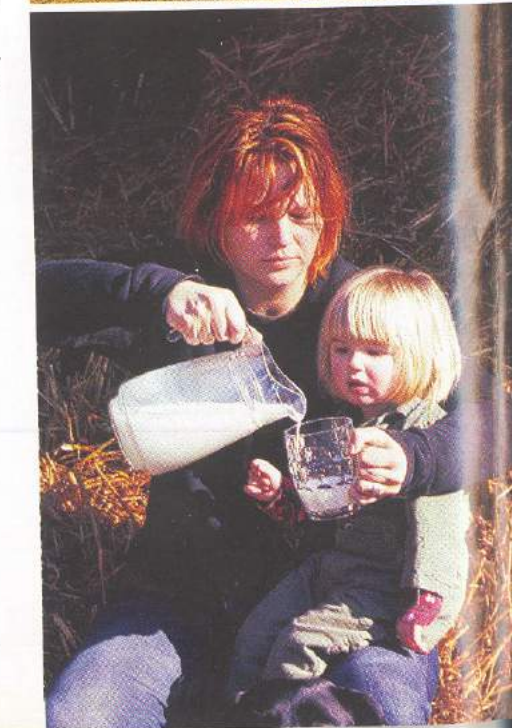
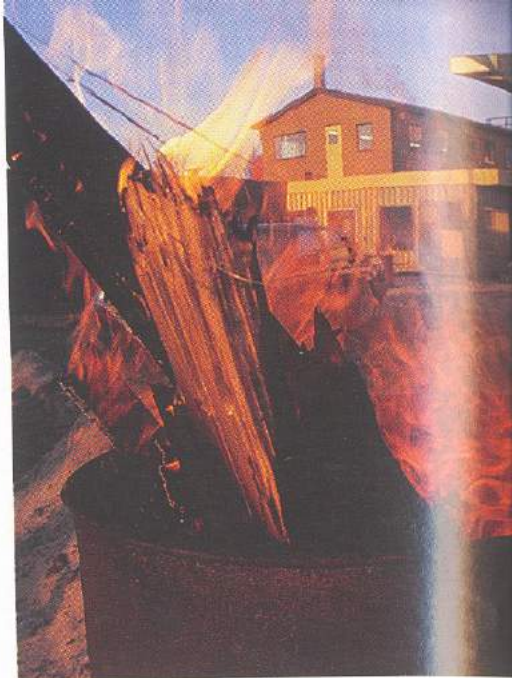
JVL: Again, I like the contradiction. Of course, the bed can be used in many ways, but the point is that the decision will be made by individuals who are free to negotiate among themselves what kind of collectivity and sexual experience they want to create together. A bed with only two sleeping spots decides for you and respects the law of monogamy, which is dictated by the state. With room for up to sixteen, our bed respects the law of desire, which is always being rewritten.

JA: What kind of currency will fuel the libidinal economy?

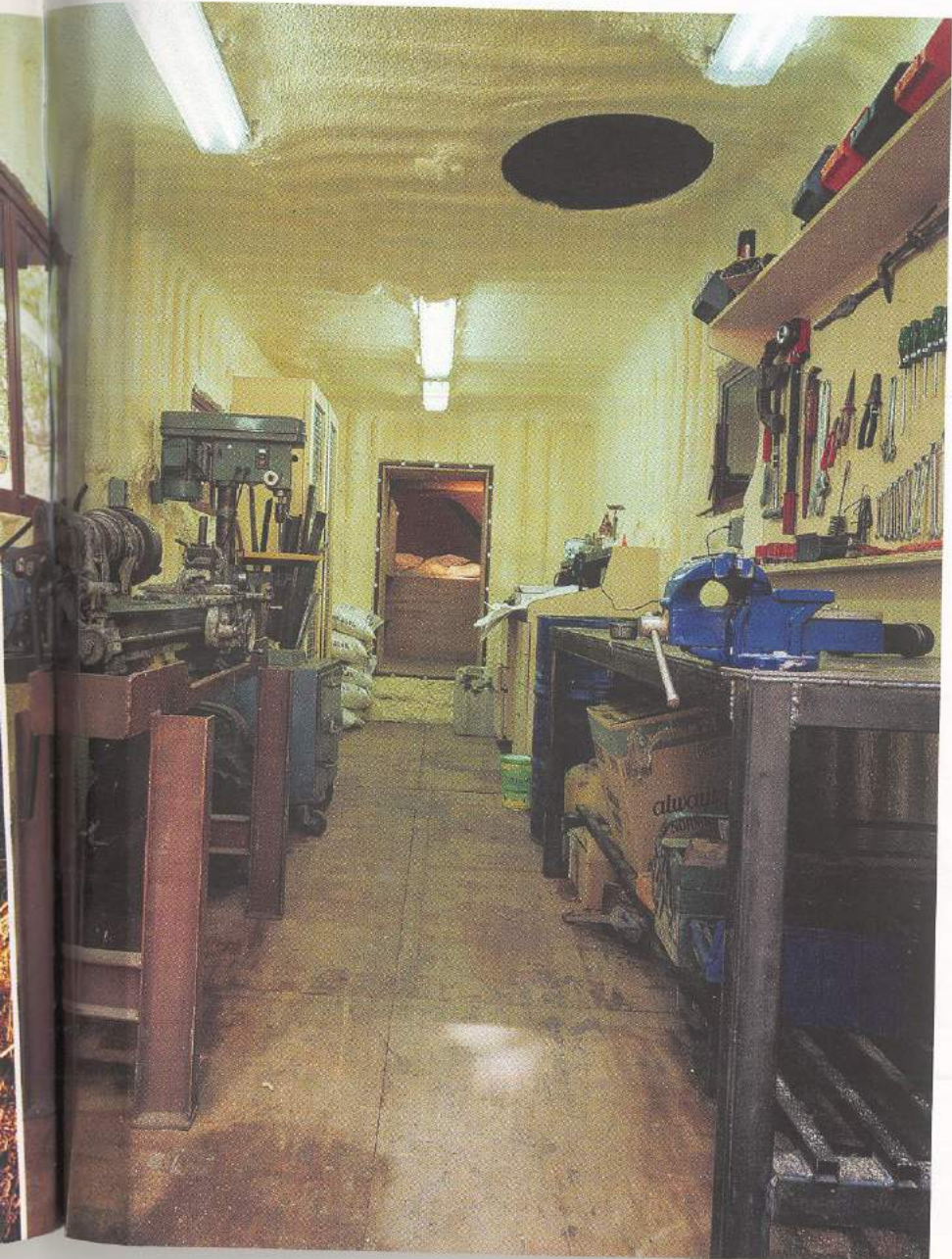
JVL: We are printing our own money, AVL coins and bills, which are fantastically beautiful. We have to find a sponsor, perhaps a museum, to print them. Having our own currency allows us to get around some laws, for example, a liquor license. We will also accept guilders and euros, since *AVL-Ville* is not intended to be completely autocratic. We need many things from the outside world for working: tools, materials, food, drinks. But some parts will remain independent, not only for our economy and freedom, but just because it's possible to do it.

JA: In the past you've made bathrooms for various projects, most notably for Rem Koolhaas's *Grand Palais* in Lille. Are you ready for community sewage?

JVL: Of course. We're trying to manage both waste and energy. Heat will be generated by burning scrap wood;



Clockwise from top left: View of AVL compound with *Autocrat*, 1997, a modified camper, February 2001. Photo: Derk Jan Wooldrik. AVL, *Compost Toilet*, 2001, polyester, fiberglass, and polyurethane foam, ca. 10' 4" x 4' 11 1/2" x 3' 7 1/2". AVL, *Atelier des Armes et des Bombes*, 1998, mixed media. Photo: Derk Jan Wooldrik. AVL members Petra Ligtenberg and Bofil Bulthuis, February 2001. Photo: Derk Jan Wooldrik. AVL, *The Pioneer Set* (chicken coop), 1999–2000, mixed media with chickens, ca. 9' 10 1/2" x 16' 8 1/2" x 7' 6 1/2".



Row v. Wade



WHAT DOES AVL CREATE ON COMMISSION?

Anything from study cells (Maastricht Library, 1999) to bicycle shelters (The Hague, 2000). Of all AVL's recent projects, *A-Portable*, 2001—a gynecological unit in a shipping container that is currently under construction at the behest of Dr. Rebecca Gomperts—best reflects van Lieshout's own preference for piracy over policy.

The founder of Women on Waves, Dr. Gomperts made headlines around the world last year with her plans to put *A-Portable* on a ship and operate the mobile reproductive-health clinic on the high seas. The Amsterdam-based activist intends to make first-trimester abortions available to women in countries where the procedure is illegal by performing them in international waters, twelve miles off shore and just beyond the jurisdiction of national laws.

Although Women on Waves has been likened to pirate radio stations and floating casinos, Dr. Gomperts, who served on the *Rainbow Warrior II*, sees the project as a cross between Greenpeace and Doctors Without Borders and emphasizes its humanitarian dimension. "The World Health Organization estimates that every year, 20 million illegal abortions cause the death of up to 100,000 women," she notes. "Whatever one's position on abortion, it remains the most-performed medical intervention, twenty times more common than an appendectomy. Making abortion illegal does not reduce the number of procedures; it actually increases them since access to information on family planning and birth control is also restricted. And the mortality rate of women increases, too, because they are forced to obtain illegal abortions in unsanitary conditions."

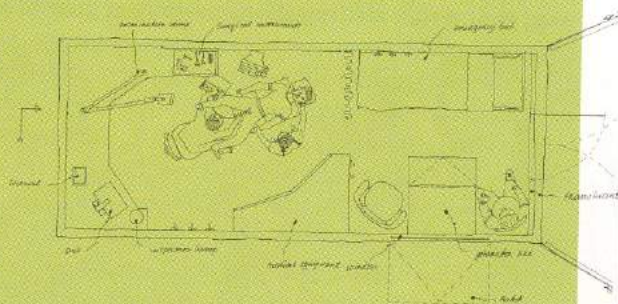
The Netherlands proves her point: The Dutch state pays for abortions as well as birth control and boasts the lowest abortion rate in the world. For Dr. Gomperts, Women on Waves brings the borders of Holland closer to women living in countries where abortion is illegal. "Once the ship is in international waters, Dutch laws prevail on board." In addition to first-trimester abortions, all contraceptives, counseling, education on reproductive health, and training for local practitioners will be provided free. "The container will also function as a floating memorial to the women who suffer and die every year needlessly. Wherever *A-Portable* appears, it will make people aware of this international tragedy."

Like van Lieshout, Dr. Gomperts believes that art should work in different contexts, and she notes that *A-Portable* will cross legal, medical, navigational, and aesthetic territories. She chose AVL not for its ideology, but for its exceptional designs. "For a lot of women

abortion is a frightening experience, and therefore it is important not to make the room too cold and clinical. Joep is an artist who has great insight—not just into technical and functional aspects, but also into the way a space can influence people. He can make the treatment room into a friendly and comfortable space."

With funding in place for the pilot project, Women on Waves will set sail later this year with an all-woman crew to an undisclosed location. In light of the current threat to take away the women's rights gained in *Roe v. Wade*, Dr. Gomperts has not ruled out future voyages to the United States. "If abortion became illegal, we would certainly consider going there, but only with the support of local women's groups." —JA

Sidebar, top and bottom: AVL, sketches for *A-Portable*, 2001.



everything that has to do with excrement will be very visual. We're making a huge machine for generating biogas, *Biodigester*, 2001-, which will allow us to use manure and excrement to produce our own gas for cooking. It's an interesting process that's not exploited enough because these machines are very difficult to make—but we'll solve those problems. Another way to use excrement is with our *Compost Toilet*, 2001, which is designed for domestic spaces. The entire machine is about twenty feet tall and works on two floors: You have a toilet unit on one

MY PROBLEM WITH GOVERNMENT HAS TO DO WITH ITS SCALE—YOU GET ALL KINDS OF RULES AND LIMITATIONS. IF YOU HAVE A SMALLER COMMUNITY, YOU CAN GOVERN AND DECIDE THINGS USING COMMON SENSE: CLEAN YOUR TOOLS, DON'T KILL EACH OTHER. THOSE ARE THE BASICS.

floor and a large cylindrical container below that turns the excrement into compost. The whole process will remain visible; after one year, you can have great compost or sell it as souvenirs, like Manzoni's shit: AVL shit.

JA: Currency, sewage, energy—are you going to tackle any other state monopolies in the Netherlands? What about incarceration?

JVL: I had a plan to make a prison in my proposal for Almere, with an economy based on illegal activities. It would be great to make a factory for prisoners because they're expensive for the state: Guards, medical bills, housing—a prisoner can cost up to \$25,000 a year. We can make cheaper prisons; the prisoners from Europe could come and work here, and the state would only have to pay half the cost. The inmates could work in the drug and alcohol factory and then enjoy themselves at night. It would be free labor for us, the state would save \$12,500, and the prisoners would be happy. It'd be a great way to make money.

JA: That market is already being exploited in the US. How do you distinguish AVL-Ville from conservative and right-wing groups that also question government control and promote individualism, not to mention self-armament?

JVL: I'm not against public services. I don't mind paying taxes to the Dutch government because the money is redistributed to the homeless and unemployed, and everyone gets free medical care and an education. In a way, it's an ideal society. What I don't like is the bureaucracy, and I think there should be more room for experiments. But experimenting doesn't mean creating a reactionary community; I'm not fascist or racist. I believe in harmony, living together, and making things together. My problem with government has to do with its scale—you get all kinds of rules and limitations because of the larger territory and the

growing population. If you have a smaller community, you can govern and decide things using common sense: Clean your tools, don't kill each other. Those are the basics.

JA: If you don't believe in killing, what are you doing with all those homemade weapons and bombs?

JVL: They are there to show people that we can be nasty. There's a thin line between what is serious and what is art. Making weapons isn't interesting; you don't earn money; you only get problems. But as artworks they're

very interesting because a weapon is a strong symbol. You show people that you're willing to fight and to die for your cause. I see the bombs in a similar way. Besides, we'd never blow up any public buildings because the government gives us money.

JA: Did you have to make any compromises to obtain funding for the festivities celebrating Rotterdam as one of this year's two "cultural capitals" of Europe?

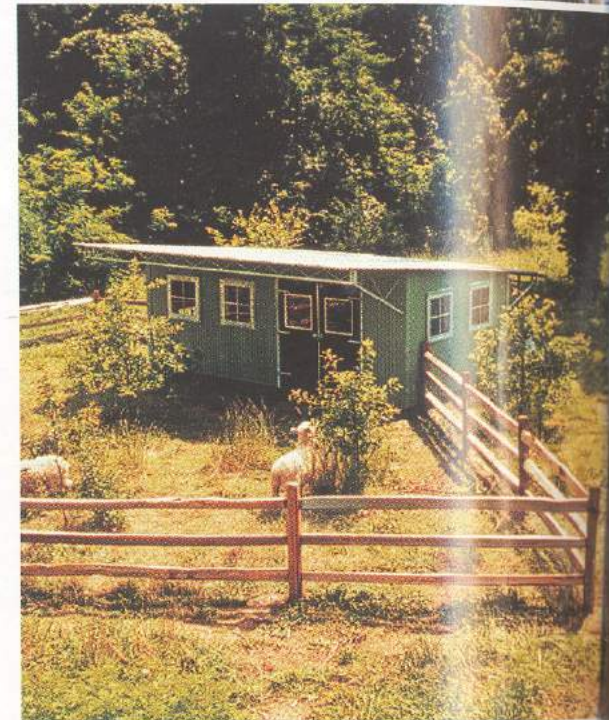
JVL: They wanted us to add activities and events, but that's no problem. We actually made our own public transport company, *AVL-Transport*, 2001, for the tourists. We'll drive around the center of Rotterdam with a farm tractor and trailer and pick up passengers for free. Well, they have to buy a beer—but for a very low price—and drink their way to AVL, which is about ten minutes from the city. Once they arrive, a guide will show them what we build, explain our systems, and answer questions. In our studio, there are skywalks twenty-three feet above the floor, so visitors can watch the works being made below. They can also hang around, have delicious food in the restaurant, or try out the *Compost Toilet*.

JA: Are you going to open a museum?

JVL: No. *AVL-Ville* is a living museum. It's between an open-air museum and a free state.

JA: Without getting utopic, what does the future look like for AVL-Ville?

JVL: We would like to expand and set up franchises around the world. The concept is not to have a state that gets bigger and bigger but to make islands all over the place: AVL West Coast, AVL East Coast, AVL Asia. But for now, we're waiting for a larger piece of land that is close to the Rotterdam airport and the water. If all goes well, we'll simply put everything on a boat and sail to the new location. □



Clockwise from top left: *AVL, AVL Flag*, 2000. Photo: Derk Jan Wooldrik. *AVL studio*, February 2001. Photo: Derk Jan Wooldrik. *Floor Houben, design for AVL Money*, 2001. *Surgical performance*, 1999, at *AVL-Hospital*. Left to right: Marcus Müller, Roy Airts (patient), Christine, and Joep van Lieshout. Photo: Derk Jan Wooldrik. *AVL member Herman de Jongh working on The Pioneer Set*, February 2001. Photo: Derk Jan Wooldrik. *AVL-Transport towing an army stove*, February 2001. Photo: Derk Jan Wooldrik. *AVL, The Pioneer Set (stable)*, 1999–2000, mixed media, ca. 8' 2 1/2" x 20' 3/4" x 11' 5 1/2".



THE SEVEN WONDERS OF THE WORLD

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window, I see this layering—civic engi-
neering, renovation, geographical his-
tory, etc. And the thing I love about
art is that, unlike science, it's tolerant of
contradictions. I can work in whatever
paradigm I choose—psychoanalytic,
magical, spiritual, whatever. It's really
not about whether cultural systems
“explain” scientific theory or vice versa—
I'm dead against either-ors; I'm a great
embracer of complexity, grayness, fuzzy
logic. Loose parameters always lead to
more interesting results. □

30s, Piero Manzoni must have thought he was
with his *Socle du Monde*, which turned the
work of art. But the Italian artist's inverted
beer compared to the cosmological cata-
by Keith Tyson. Tyson's “Magic Items”—
nary objects, sometimes recorded in books
—have created parallel universes, sched-
se, reversed time, and transformed the con-
y single earthling. Or at least, there's no
haven't.

a small studio in London's Bermondsey area,
-old Tyson is an improbable Master of the
st known for inventing “Artmachine,” 1991-
puterized algorithm able to scan the world's
-nd issue “iterations”

