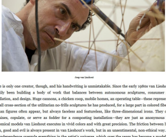


INTERVIEW WITH JOEP VAN LIESHOUT: TOTEMS FOR THE NEO-INDUSTRIAL TRIBE

BY EDO DIJKSTERHUIS

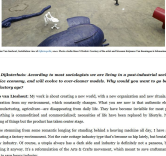
As a teenager Joep van Lieshout diligently saved all the money be earned from his first job as a waiter in a diner, until he had enough to buy himself an electric drill. Next was a proper set of angle grinders, followed by a welding machine. Van Lieshout has always been a lover of tools; the workshop is his natural biotope, the place where he thinks with his hands and molds a world all his own. His studio at the Keileweg, a frayed part of Rotterdam formerly known for its street prostitution, reflects how far Van Lieshout has come since those humble beginnings of a single electric drill. It's like a factory, filled with the smells and sounds of heavy machinery and sweat-soaked overalls. Numerous assistants and interns busy themselves with sculpting plastics and welding metal structures. The output is enormous, both in size and number. Everything made here receives the label Atelier Van Lieshout or AVL, underlining the fact that the works are the result of a collective effort.



Joep van Lieshout

There is only one creator, though, and his handwriting is unmistakable. Since the early 1980s van Lieshout has steadily been building a body of work that balances between autonomous sculptures, consumer goods, installation, and design. Huge cannons, a chicken coop, mobile homes, an operating table—these represent only a small cross-section of the utilitarian no-frills sculptures he has produced, for a large part in colored fiberglass. Human figures often appear, but always faceless and featureless, like three-dimensional icons. They operate machines, copulate, or serve as fodder for a composting installation—they are just as anonymous as the anatomical models van Lieshout executes in vivid colors and with great precision. The friction between life and death, good and evil is always present in van Lieshout's work, but in an unsentimental, non-ethical way. Power and independence overrule everything in the artist's universe, which over the years has become a model for an autarchic society. The reduction of humans to the level of mere raw material for production, stripped to their basic needs and physical functions, has resulted in haunting installations such as *Slave City* which don't always sit well with critics who see parallels with World War II concentration camps.

Over the years van Lieshout's works have grown increasingly bigger. Standing more than eleven meters tall, *Blast Furnace*, which premiers during Art Rotterdam Week, is downright huge. The machine is powered by simple mechanics and people. The exhibition of which it is the prime piece is filled with other machines, furniture, and sculptures. These are family of the works now shown at GRIMM Gallery in Amsterdam: oversized tools with a fleshy appearance, sexy in the way *Crash*-author J.G. Ballard made prosthetic limbs a source of arousal. They are an extension of the *New Tribal Labyrinth* series, with which van Lieshout aims to start a neo-industrial revolution.

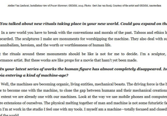


Atelier Van Lieshout, Installation view of *Infernopolis*, 2012. Photo: studio Hans Wilschut. Courtesy of the artist and Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen & Submarine Wharf

Edo Dijksterhuis: According to most sociologists we are living in a post-industrial society, a service economy, and will evolve to ever-cleaner models. Why would you want to go back to the factory age?

Joep van Lieshout: My work is about creating a new world, with a new organization and new rituals. I take inspiration from my environment, which constantly changes. What you see now is that authentic elements—manufacturing, agriculture—are disappearing from daily life. They have become invisible for most people. Everything is commoditized and commercialized; necessities of life have been replaced by lifestyle. Not the making of things but the product has taken center stage.

Maybe stemming from some romantic longing for standing behind a heaving machine all day, I have started recreating a factory environment. Not the cute cottage industry type that's become so hip lately, but brutal, dirty, heavy industry. Of course, a utopia always has a dark side and industry is definitely not a panacea, but I'm building it anyway. It's a reformulation of the Arts & Crafts movement, which meant to save craftsmanship. I want to save heavy industry.



Atelier Van Lieshout, Installation view of *Power Hammer*, GRIMM, 2015. Photo: Gert Jan van Rooij. Courtesy of the artist and GRIMM, Amsterdam

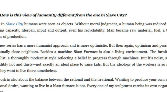
ED: You talked about new rituals taking place in your new world. Could you expand on that?

JvL: In a new world you have to break with the conventions and morals of the past. Taboos and ethics have to be discarded. The sculptures I make are monuments for worshipping the machine. They also deal with subjects like cannibalism, heroism, and the worth or worthlessness of human life.

What the rituals around these monuments should be like is not for me to decide. I'm a sculptor, not a performance artist. But these works are like props for a movie that hasn't yet been made.

ED: In your latest series of works the human figure has almost completely disappeared. Is your utopia entering a kind of machine-age?

JvL: Well, the machines are becoming organic, living entities, mechanical beasts. The driving force is the human desire to become one with the machine, to close the gap between humans and their mechanical creations. To a large extent we are already one with our machines. Look at the way we use mobile phones and computers as if they're extensions of ourselves. The physical melting together of man and machine is not some futuristic fantasy. When I'm at work in the studio I feel one with my tools. I myself am a machine—totally focused and closed to the rest of the world.



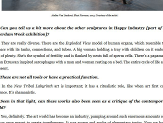
Atelier Van Lieshout, *Cradle to Cradle*, 2009. Photo: JW Kaldenbach. Courtesy of the artist and Kasteel Keukenhof Art Foundation

ED: How is this view of humanity different from the one in* Slave City*?

JvL: In Slave City humans were seen as objects. Without moral judgment, a human being was reduced to his earning capacity, lifespan, input and output, even his recyclability. Man became raw material, fuel, a tool, a means of production.

The new series has a more humanist approach and is more optimistic. But then again, optimism and pessimism are usually close neighbors. Besides a machine *Blast Furnace* is also a living environment. The furniture is brutalist, a thoroughly modernist style reflecting a belief in progress through machines. But it's noisy, smelly, incredibly hot and dusty—not exactly an ideal place to raise kids. But the ideology of the workers is so strong that they want to live there nonetheless.

My work is also about the balance between the rational and the irrational. Wanting to produce your own steel is a rational desire, wanting to live in a blast furnace is not. Every one of my sculptures carries its own negation in its core.



Atelier Van Lieshout, *Blast Furnace*, 2013. Courtesy of the artist

ED: Can you tell us a bit more about the other sculptures in* Happy Industry *[part of the Art Rotterdam Week exhibition]?

JvL: They are really diverse. There are the *Exploded View* model of human organs, which resemble the *Blast Furnace* with its tanks, connections, and tubes. A big woman holding a tray with children on it embodies the horn of plenty. She's the symbol of fertility and is flanked by nests full of sperm cells. There's a papamamalamp and an Etruscan inspired sarcophagus with a man and woman resting on a bed. The entire cycle of life and death is present.

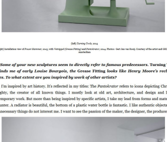
ED: These are not all tools or have a practical function.

JvL: In the *New Tribal Labyrinth* art is important; it has a ritualistic role, like when art first came into existence. It's shamanistic.

ED: Seen in that light, can these works also been seen as a critique of the contemporary art world?

JvL: Yes, definitely. The art world has become an industry, pumping around such enormous amounts of money. Art was once meant to create togetherness. It was scarce and spoke of elementary topics. Now we have art in abundance and the urgency is gone. But I can't be too critical in this respect. I am part of that world myself after all.





(left) *Turning Tools*, 2014
(right) Installation view of *Power Hammer*, 2015, with *Vetnippel (Grease Fitting)* and *Pantokrator*, 2014. Photo: Gert Jan van Rooij. Courtesy of the artist and GRIMM, Amsterdam

ED: Some of your new sculptures seem to directly refer to famous predecessors.* Turning Tools *reminds me of early Louise Bourgois, the* Grease Fitting *looks like Henry Moore's reclining nudes. To what extent are you inspired by work of other artists?

JvL: I'm inspired by art history. It's reflected in my titles: The *Pantokrator* refers to icons depicting Christ the Almighty, the creator of all known things. I mostly look at old art, architecture, and design and less at contemporary work. But more than being inspired by specific artists, I take my lead from forms and materials I encounter. A radiator is beautiful, the bottom of a plastic water bottle is fantastic. I like authentic objects. Fake or unnecessary things do not interest me. I want to see the passion of the maker, the designer, the producer in it.



Atelier Van Lieshout, Installation view of *Power Hammer*, GRIMM, 2015. Photo: Gert Jan van Rooij. Courtesy of the artist and GRIMM, Amsterdam

ED: Besides large-scale sculptures you have recently also been making woodcuts. How are these related to the machine monuments?

JvL: It's another way of highlighting humanity, emotions, and the mystery that goes with it. One woodcut is based on an old photograph I saw at the Tropenmuseum, in an exhibition about death. It depicted two sisters, one of them dead but lying there with her doll as if she's sleeping. The other sister stands behind the sofa looking at her sister holding her own doll. Often when I'm in museums I make sketches of things I like instead of photographing them. I stick them in a folder and usually see them again a couple of years later. When I use them it's very intuitively—I never work with a concept or a detailed plan. It's the same for my sculptures: I don't make a drawing beforehand; they grow and erupt.

Wood, of course, has its limitations. You have to work around nodes and other irregularities. I seek out such limitations. I would like to make a large machine sculpture from wood. But then again, it would take too long. And yes, speed is important to me: I want to produce, produce, produce. If possible I would fill the entire universe with my work.

ED: What can we expect after* New Tribal Labyrinth*? Where is your evolution going after the melting together of man and machine?

JvL: For a while I was thinking about working with robots. But unless you invest massively, it doesn't look good. I would rather take it one step further, towards genetically manipulated organisms performing machine-like tasks. But this can be realized as art, as a sculpture. Things do not have to be real in order to be powerful.



Atelier Van Lieshout, *Hapiscope*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist

ED: Finally, would you call your world a utopia or an apocalyptic doom scenario?

JvL: If I'd have to choose: a utopia, I guess. But it's more correct to just call it an alternative reality. Only if I could realize it and live in it, then it would be a true utopia. The Goetheanum in Dornach, designed by Rudolf Steiner, is reality. If I had the number of followers Steiner had, I would start building right away. But Steiner had clear ideas and knew how to communicate them. I make sculptures, not words, and in order to generate a following you need words. Words are more powerful than sculptures in that sense.

—Edo Dijksterhuis

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