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WHAT I'VE LEARNED Twenty-eight creatives share career-defining insights

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JOEP VAN LIESHOUT
has produced
weapons, alcohol,
drugs and abortion
clinics. 'I don't have
regrets, because
I'm blessed with a
terrible memory'

WORDS
Jeannette Petrik

PORTRAITS
Marte Visser



JOEP VAN LIESHOUT

1963
Born in Ravenstein,
the Netherlands

1988
Shows first solo exhibition
at Galerie Fons Welters,
Amsterdam

1995
Tours the US for the first
time with Mobile Home,
which is now part of the
Prada collection
Arrested in the name
of art

2001
Establishes AVL-Ville in
the port of Rotterdam, a
free state with its own
constitution, currency
and flag

2010
Exhibits a large body
of work at Rotterdam's
Submarine Wharf
(in collaboration with
Museum Boijmans
Van Beuningen)

2013
Establishes AVL-Mundo,
Van Lieshout's foundation
dedicated to art

2015-17
Shows one of Atelier
Van Lieshout's largest
installations at
Ruhrtriennale, Bochum

OPPOSITE PAGE DOMESTIKATOR,
CENTRE POMPIDOU, PARIS, 2015.

PREVIOUS PAGE 'BEHIND THE
PROJECT LIES A VERY ROMANTIC
IDEA ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE
OF LIFE,' SAYS VAN LIESHOUT OF
NEW TRIBAL LABYRINTH. FOOD
PROCESSOR (2015) IS A RECENT
WORK FROM THE SERIES.

FOLLOWING SPREAD HUIZE
ORGANUS, ZUIDERZEEMUSEUM,
ENKHUIZEN, 2008.

'I've always had this idea about starting a revolution – about overthrowing the world. I don't have a political background; I just wanted to start a revolution. I used to be a communist and an anarchist, but that was when I was about 15.'

'My family was middle class, and it was logical for me to become a self-made man like my father. He grew up in very poor conditions and climbed his way up to the middle class. I had to do that too, and I don't regret it. A different upbringing might have helped me to understand certain things faster or to have a different network, but I'm happy with the way things went. It was the hard way, but it's interesting to learn how to do everything yourself.'

'I was extremely young when I started art school. As a 16-year-old from a village, I was a bit of an outsider. Others at the school had done military service or studied before. They'd *lived*. I was often on my own, which was good for me. This was in 1980. It was a time of full-on punk, squatting, crisis and a lot of idealism. There was a very strong left-socialist movement, with demonstrations and the like. Someone I met introduced me to political thought. She was a communist, of course. Everyone was. Apparently it was a cool thing to be.'

'If I hadn't gone to art school, I would probably have studied physics and become an inventor. I like to think about how I can improve things. I'm never satisfied, always thinking that things could be different.'

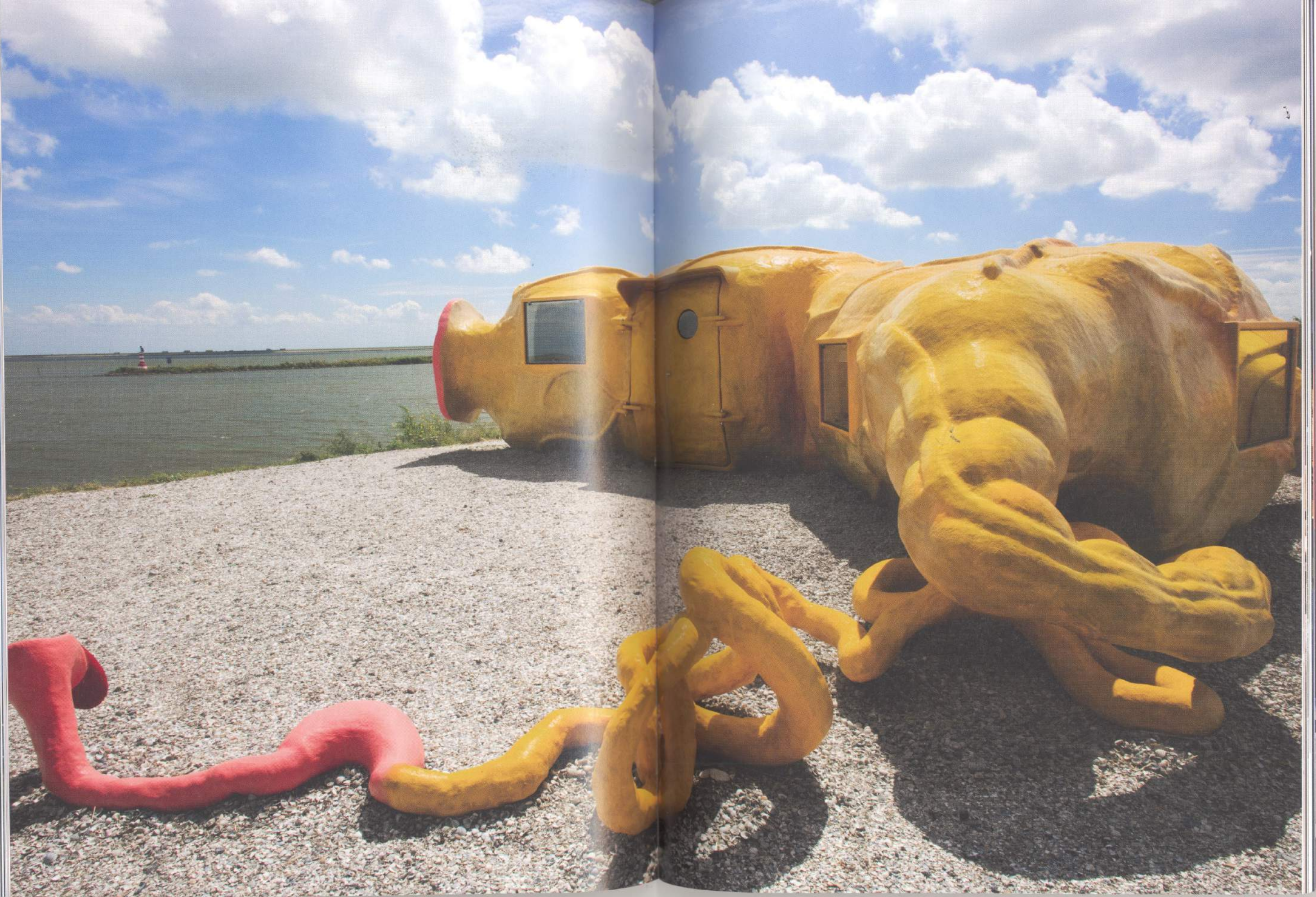
'Squatting became difficult recently, but I still live in a building that started out as a squat before being legalized. [Van Lieshout's studio is in the same building.] Today I express my thoughts through my work, which is still critical of society. I wouldn't call it political. It's about social criticism.'

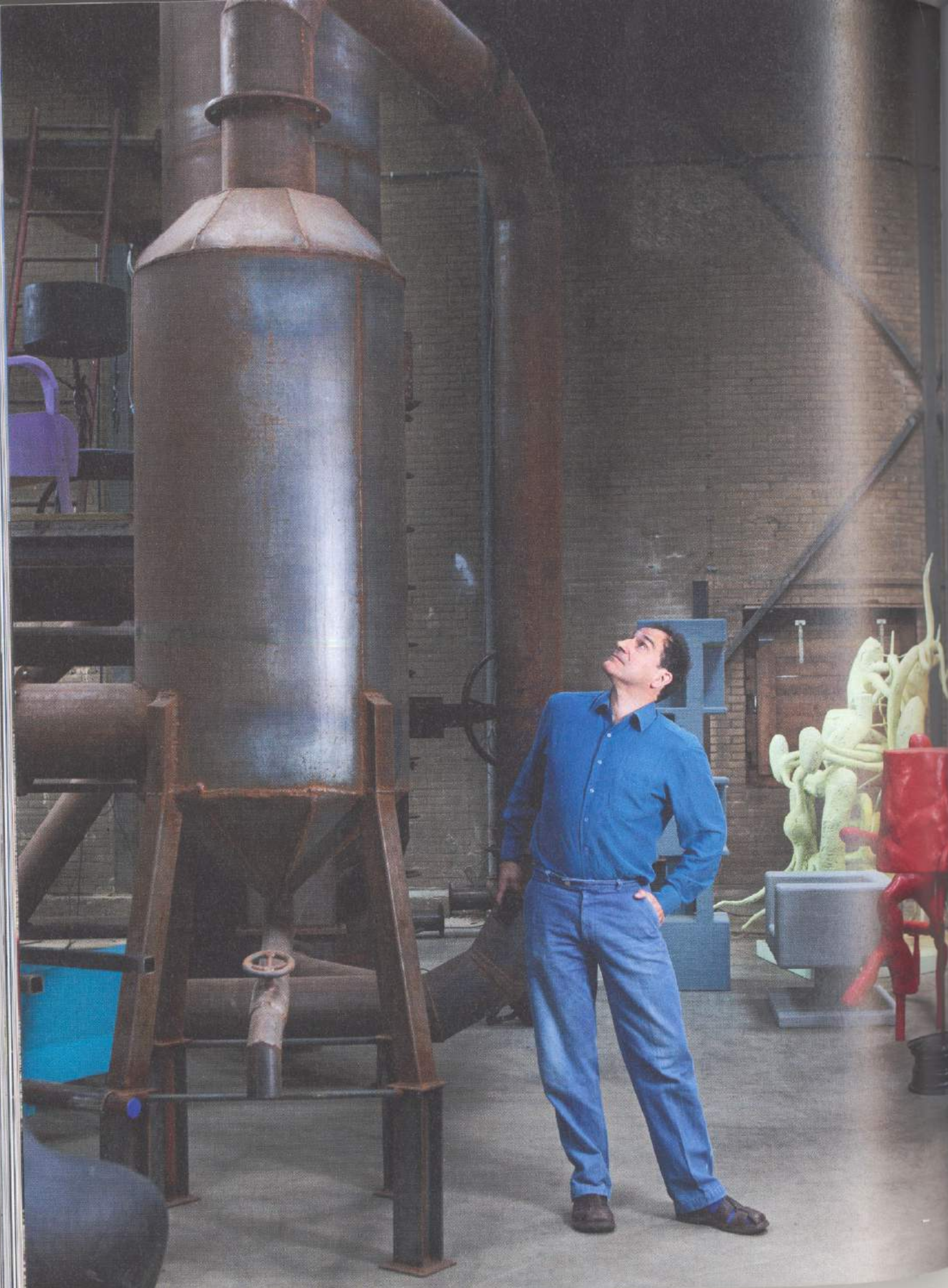
'*SlaveCity* portrays a horribly rationalized and hyper-organized society in which Excel sheets dictate life. I'm currently working on *New Tribal Labyrinth* [an ongoing series that began in 2011]. I'm reinventing the Industrial Revolution by really going back to the roots of modern



Jean-Pierre Vallancourt

'My art speaks about
our society and about
how we organize it'





ABOVE DAALDEROP, 2017.

OPPOSITE PAGE VAN LIESHOUT SHOWS OFF THE IMPRESSIVE DIMENSIONS OF BLAST FURNACE (2013). THE PIECE IS PART OF HIS ONGOING NEW TRIBAL LABYRINTH PROJECT, WHICH HE SAYS 'REFERS TO THE ABUNDANCE OF STUFF IN TODAY'S WORLD'.

**'CONFLICT
MAKES ART
INTERESTING'**

production – to the blast furnace, which was used to make everything from casserole dishes to heavy machinery, but not things like iPhones or the kinds of lifestyle products you might find in *Frame*. This is a strong statement that refers to the abundance of stuff in today's world. Behind the project lies a very romantic idea about the importance of life.'

'In 2001 I created a free state here in the harbour [at Atelier Van Lieshout in Rotterdam]. We do things differently now. We've become bigger and better – and more organized. We bought two buildings next-door to use as an exhibition space and an artist residency programme. We also collaborate with the neighbourhood food garden. We're trying to improve the area on a local and international level through my practice. What I'm really good at is making works of art, so you might say it's a very megalomaniac place. By making art, I communicate my ideas, which speak about our society and about how we organize it. My art makes people think, I hope.'

'To set up the free state, we basically squatted a piece of land and started filling it with housing, restaurants, a workshop for weapons and bombs, an abortion clinic – all kinds of stuff. We built on the squatted land and wanted to be independent. We had a power plant and water-purification systems. We decided to forgo any rules; you could do what you wanted.'

'I didn't see people going crazy and fucking dogs or anything. Some babies were born. Nothing really bad happened; it was more like a party. But I felt as if all I was doing was talking to the press and to lawyers, which I don't like to do. Nine months is quite a long time for an independent state to survive. If you look at the history of utopian states, that's about average.'

'At that time I really wanted to set up a free state. I saw it as a development towards self-sufficiency. It was necessary as a rebellious act. Nowadays I don't feel the desire to express what I did back then, so there's no need to ask for permits. In reality, though, it's far easier to ask for permits than *not* to do so. It's simply a different time now. Back then I was producing weapons, alcohol, drugs,



medicines and abortion clinics. Our abortion clinic has a permit now. We initially made it for Women on Waves, a Dutch organization that used it for a number of years. Now they just send people a pill by post, and the clinic is ours again.'

'Activism is very one-dimensional in my opinion. There's no depth to it. You might say you're against seals being butchered for fur coats, but there's no underlying layer. The statement says nothing about contemporary life. With art you could say that you don't like seals being slaughtered, but you *do* like naked women in fur coats – as a way of pointing to the complexity of things. You can convey different messages and use layers to create something complex. The conflict of meaning, of interest, of ideology – that's what makes art interesting. That's why art is art. I'm not one-dimensional; I'm multidimensional.'

'I might think that what I'm doing will end up perfect, but it never turns out that way. Being an artist is pretty nasty. There's a lot of insecurity and a lot of competition, and it's very hard to survive financially. I'm doing well, but it's still a bitch, you know? The difficulties of being an artist can't be denied, so you better make sure that the process and the work itself are exciting.'

'I would have liked to marry a billionaire – to have unlimited resources so that money would never be an issue. Then I could buy a steamroller, destroy a city and build beautiful high-rises there – or whatever I felt like building. It's important to go through the struggle of course, but this is a company. We need cash to pay our staff their monthly salaries.'

'In reality, I like making things that nobody wants to have, like *Blast Furnace*. That type of piece costs money, but it will never sell. If I had unlimited resources, maybe I'd become lazy. I don't know. I don't have regrets, because I'm blessed with a terrible memory. I even forget the good things, so good or bad – it's as if nothing's ever happened.'

ABOVE UNTITLED, 1988.

GITANE, GALERIE FONS WELTERS, 2000.

OPPOSITE PAGE **TECHNOCRAT**,
MUSEUM BOIJMANS VAN
BEUNINGEN, ROTTERDAM, 2005.

