

art JOEP VAN LIESHOUT

IDEAS FOR ALTERNATIVE LIVING... DYSTOPIAN PROJECTS ON HOW SOCIETIES COLLAPSE AND DISAPPEAR... AND BACK-TO-BASICS SURVIVALIST SYSTEMS THAT FUNCTION IN NATURE

INTERVIEW BY KAITLIN PHILLIPS

ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT, *TROGLODIET*, 2018, NEERPELT, BELGIUM
COPYRIGHT ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT

OPPOSITE PAGE: ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT, *AUTOCRAT*, 1997
COPYRIGHT ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT

KAITLIN PHILLIPS — What was *SlaveCity*?

JOEP VAN LIESHOUT — *SlaveCity* was a utopian or dystopian project in which I created a city for 100,000 female and 100,000 male slaves. You need about 23 square miles for 200,000 people to be completely self-sufficient and sustainable. I made an urban plan, designed the buildings and systems, asking myself ethically unanswerable questions: how can we deal with the efficiencies or deficiencies of humans? For those not capable of working in *SlaveCity*, how else can we make use of them? The obvious answer is to recycle useless humans — to transplant organs, consume their meat, make compost or biogas out of them. Basically the project was the most extreme Excel sheet that you can imagine to maximize profit from human beings. The goal for this utopia was to create wealth, to earn tons and tons of money for a sustainable society with the best education and museums, tons of culture, organic food, but zero carbon dioxide. The surplus of organs generated through recycling humans could also be used to cure

people. And we could spend the money made from harvesting and transplanting organs on things like great universities and art institutions, to create a better world. *SlaveCity* was a comment on the rationalization of our society, a society in which everything has to be efficient and calculated. And evidently it also reflected on the Holocaust and the very rational processes behind extermination that happened in Germany, which is only a two-hour drive from Rotterdam, where I live. It's like going to New Jersey from New York — that's how close the Holocaust was.

KAITLIN PHILLIPS — Do you think the lack of resources will create dystopia, chaos, and fascism?

JOEP VAN LIESHOUT — Do you know the book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* by Jared Diamond? It's basically a book about the disappearance of civilizations, from the Roman Empire to the Vikings, Easter Island, and ancient indigenous populations. Societies disappear because they don't live in harmony with nature and the

world's natural resources. As systems get too sophisticated and societies advance, they also become vulnerable. If, for instance, the Internet breaks down, many of our systems — and the entire world — could collapse. At the same time, I think people are very creative: they will always find new ways to deal with these emerging challenges. But fascism is always lingering in the shadows. People will invent solutions on the go. Humanity is Darwinian, and the strong survive. It's fascinating to me: how do we persist? How do we deal with a crisis? Do we become the saint, sinner, or savior, the hero or worse?

KAITLIN PHILLIPS — Can you describe the perfect design for the future?

JOEP VAN LIESHOUT — On the one hand, I want to have everything: plenty of good-quality things, food, and freedom. But I also think we have to be more efficient in how we generate food, water, energy, and how we manage waste. We will eventually become dependent on algorithms and systems to do that... People will also

increasingly choose to share products instead of owning them. In the distant future, I can imagine it becoming possible to separate the body from the brain: to give the body everything it needs — food, drinks, dance, sex — while the brain will be hooked up to an everlasting support system. Our brains will be connected to the Cloud — thinking, communicating, improving as fast as the Wi-Fi.

KAITLIN PHILLIPS — You've made lamps, toilets, tables, and chairs as artworks. How do you feel when people refer to you as a designer? JOEP VAN LIESHOUT — I equally love and hate it. I'm an artist, but since the beginning, I've always made sculptures as objects that were functional, and I used the language of functional design as a means to express myself. With my newest body of work, *Renegade*, I turn everything into a lamp. I'll even take my own artworks, add a lampshade, and it becomes a design piece. It goes back to the anarchist roots of my work. At times, I get fed up with the whole art thing and think about





ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT, *CASANUS*, 2007,
VERBEKE FOUNDATION, BELGIUM
COPYRIGHT ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT

becoming a hobby artist, or jacking it all in and becoming a real estate developer. It's a bit of a provocation, you could say, but it comes from the heart. I'm tired of what's expected of an artist today — the interviews, having to explain the work, social media... We live in an Instagram world, and it's fun to dip your toe in, or swipe left and right once in a while, but I don't like being dictated to. I like creating my own terms and not having some antiquated art world telling me what I should do or deciding my value. The whole thing is a bit of a joke, but of course I'm playing the system; it's in my DNA, I suppose.

KAITLIN PHILLIPS — Would you describe yourself as more of a pessimist or a dreamer?
JOEP VAN LIESHOUT — I'm the kind of person who can construct, dream of something, and shape and realize it. If anything, I'd maybe say that I'm a realistic optimist because I can sculpt my way out of any problem. I can create and build anything that I think will help improve the world. That's the backbone of my work, whether it's a waste- or water-purification machine, a legal abortion clinic (like the unit that I made for *Women on Waves*), or an *Insect Farm* to grow sustainable food for the future.

KAITLIN PHILLIPS — You once collaborated with a chef to feed collectors rats and swans. The geopolitics of food seems to be a compelling obsession in your work and life, like the discrepancy between starvation in one part of the globe and obesity in another. Can you talk about food and why you see this as a global issue?
JOEP VAN LIESHOUT — I'm very much interested in food. The project you mention is called *CryptoFood*, in which I explored two extremes of food. On the one hand, it's about eating whatever you can find and whatever is available, rather than importing. Eliminating the footprint. Eating unwanted animals like muskrat that dig holes in our dikes or swans that are being shot down around airports to prevent damage to planes but are perfectly fine to eat. For some people, it's considered taboo, but it's also



the ultimate free-range meat and delicious, too! But I'm also fascinated by futurist food: vegan, but also genetically manipulated foods and food grown in completely artificial surroundings. We have tomatoes and other vegetables grown on laboratory farms using LED lighting systems that only use a fraction of the water and energy of the outside world. They don't need insecticides and other poisons. It's said that these tomatoes can help prevent prostate cancer, and they've never seen sunlight.

KAITLIN PHILLIPS — You often say that if you weren't an artist, you'd be a cook.
JOEP VAN LIESHOUT — I love to cook, and food is an important part of my work and life. Cooking is a constant, rapid, and highly visceral form of experimentation. I use a knife both to carve my sculptures and to cut ingredients. In fact, I've merged the two practices: yesterday, I bought the restaurant next to my studio, and I'll start a *CryptoFood* restaurant. No matter the medium, what motivates me is feeling challenged, doing something that's difficult or

has never been done before. That's what triggers me — experimentation, exploring the unknown, things that are forbidden or taboo. I've been using food since the '90s in my work. The *Auto-Crat* was a large kitchen with a bed in it. On the outside, there was a place for butchering animals. For the piece, I wrote a manual explaining how to butcher animals and how to preserve the meat and not waste any part of the animal. I currently have a show opening in Venice that stars sausages. In Dutch and German, the equivalent of "whatever" or "duh" is "wurst," or sausage, as in: "Whatever, I don't give a shit. It's all sausage to me." I started making hundreds of sausage sculptures again in the fall, and even smoked them. Then, of course, I had to make them into lamps. In Venice, I'll show a sausage table, a chandelier, and even a bronze sausage.

KAITLIN PHILLIPS — How does your work reflect where we are now and where we need to go?
JOEP VAN LIESHOUT — I think that my work always has a



ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT, *UNLIMITED*, 2012
COPYRIGHT ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT

OPPOSITE PAGE: ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT, CLOSING OF THE "INFERNOPOLIS" SOLO EXHIBITION, 2010, BOIJMANS MUSEUM, ROTTERDAM / COPYRIGHT NATALIE KOVACS

relation to the future and the past. With society and the world I live in, the people I know... I look at this and try to make art that is a reflection of society and also a proposition for an alternative or parallel world. I want my work to act as a catalyst for discussion. I made a giant sculpture called *Domestikator* that was censored by the Louvre and adopted by the Pompidou Center. The piece was about domestication and how people try to control the world. It was amazing how that got manipulated and interpreted, which only affirms that we seem to be facing an information crisis about what's important and what's not.

KAITLIN PHILLIPS — Will art matter in the future? And has it ever mattered?
JOEP VAN LIESHOUT — Art will matter in the future and has always mattered. Art will never die, unless people die. I make art about the future all the time, maybe because I want to make art that matters. I like to make propositions for alternative ways to live without being constrained by ethics.

I flirt with technology, utopia, and fascism, but I do so to sound a warning.

KAITLIN PHILLIPS — Time seems to be your current obsession — you've been making hundreds of clocks — and you speak of change and transition, specifically "the end of everything and the beginning of everything." Can you elaborate on this catchphrase?

JOEP VAN LIESHOUT — A lot of my work is about finding solutions for the future, and I'm not the first artist to do so. The Italian Futurists were part of an extreme and anarchic movement; they wanted to make really big changes and break with the past, with religion, aristocracy, classicism. They envisioned a new world in which technology would create new ways of thinking. They were crazy about speed, dynamic movement, and new inventions. They saw violence and war as the ultimate way to speed things up. They were optimistic when World War I started. They thought it would be a short war to end all wars and to start a new and better world. This was their first

real mistake — many of them volunteered for the war and died. [Laughs] Many of the survivors became supporters of Mussolini. They saw fascism as a way of proposing innovation, and they wanted to make official fascist art, or propaganda. Another mistake! But their interest in utopia aligns with my thinking, and their flirtation with bad ideas interests me. We are now in a time of extreme technological change that mirrors that moment just before World War I. New technologies like Big Data, artificial intelligence, genetic manipulation, and robotization have an immense influence on how we live and how we communicate with one another. We are in an era of fascist and populist tendencies. "The end of everything and the beginning of everything" has to do with sounding a warning about the problems of our time and offering a solution: to find a positive way to renew by destroying stuff. I like to take old consumer products that are wasteful — in some cases, old artworks, old systems and ideas — and transform them into something useful, something new

that relates to tomorrow. Being destructive is productive! Time, in a way, is possibly the greatest destroyer of all. Everything changes over time, and time always moves forward. It's a certainty that people expect. With the *Back to the Future Clock* or the *Down the Drain Clock*, I take away the security of time always moving forward. These pieces raise the question that society may be out of time to deal with the challenges imposed on the world. What's still possible? How to change, and how fast? Should this change be slow, or fast and revolutionary? Do we need a new system, new rules — or a new leader? Hence my sculptures based on walking sticks and scepters of wisdom for our new tribal leaders of the future.

END



ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT, *OLD MAN LAMP*, 2019, BRONZE
COPYRIGHT ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT