

Over Exposure

The Art of Erik van Lieshout

238

[FRANK VAN DER PLOEG]

What is going on in today's visual arts? Refinement, precision and finish are often nowhere to be seen. Installations are erected here and there, as raw as life itself. One of the most inventive representatives of what can almost be seen as a genre is the Dutch artist Erik van Lieshout (Deurne, 1968). He draws, paints, builds and makes films. And all with the energy and expressionism of someone with ADHD. Or is this just the way it seems?

'I want too much. I want too much in one image. I want too many topics. I want to belong too much. I want to be accepted far too much. I want to say far too much in a single image. I want to be political *and* abstract *and* do paintings. *And* show people's lives. And I want to make regressive work. I want psychological depth. And abstract beauty. And to achieve great profundity and weight. I want to achieve all this in one artwork.' Halfway through *Sex is Sentimental* (2009), in which the above words are coupled with shots of dung beetles copulating, changing graffiti and Rorschach ink blots, Erik van Lieshout explains these objectives and then tells us that he has lost his way. The reason? His assistant, Suzanne Weenink, has also become his girlfriend. And he is struggling with this. But while struggling he satisfies all the ideals he has sketched out. With as a bonus an ode to art and, why not, to the love of a person. A successful, many-layered artwork.

Memory

Erik van Lieshout is everywhere. It seems that no self-respecting art event is complete without him. In 2012, for example, in Belgium alone his work could be seen in two places at the same time. His film installation *keine Kohle kein Holz* (2009) was given a reprise in a completely new setting at 'Manifesta9' in Genk and as a participant in 'Track' in Ghent he fitted out a former video rental shop with a 'Dutch exhibition'. His film *Janus* (2012) was projected amidst a tangle of carpentry filled with artists' household goods.¹

Van Lieshout always adopts a position. In this case against the cutbacks in the arts in the Netherlands. As a Dutch artist he sought refuge in Belgium, which in his view has a friendlier cultural climate. To represent/symbolise the



— What I do is harmless.
I received a project subsidy.

Commission, 2011, still, HD, colour, sound, 49 min. Made for Sculpture International Rotterdam and Hart van Zuid. Courtesy Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam

Netherlands in this installation, he used the colours of De Stijl, a movement he admires. Its original members, including Rietveld (1888-1964), Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), Van der Leek (1876-1958) and the architect J.J.P. Oud (1890-1963), would turn cringingly in their graves at the sight of the rough construction in which Van Lieshout, with good intentions, squanders their rectilinearity in his pursuit of the 'Hollandisation' of the space. He completely subordinated the formality of De Stijl to his inner need to dress up his installation.

Van Lieshout refers to and shows his penchant for De Stijl in other work too. The film at the heart of *keine Kohle kein Holz* features models of furniture by Rietveld, including the 'Zigzag Chair'. This is not so surprising, as the film is a cobbled-together animated tribute to *Misère au Borinage*, the renowned 1933 film by another great Dutchman, Joris Ivens (1898-1981), about miners in a time of crisis. The concept for Rietveld's chair dates from 1932, the same year that Ivens was shooting his documentary. It is an atypical van Lieshout film, because he himself does not appear in it. The installations around it (those of both 2009 and 2012) do comply entirely with the image he is keen to create. Using very few resources (wooden slats and angle plates symbolise the miners and BBQ briquettes represent the black gold) he keeps to the principle of the original film; projected text – in *keine Kohle kein Holz* it is slogans on poster-sized paper – provides the accompanying commentary: *Jetzt ist es genug / Weltkrise / Widerstand von der Bergleute!* The installations surrounding the film bring the crisis atmosphere into the present, in both the personal and political spheres. (The Dutch populist Geert Wilders is a prominent presence, not for the first time and definitely not for the last.)

(Neighbourhood) director/recorder

Erik van Lieshout's usual mental and working processes can be distilled from the film *Janus*. He combines filmed images of street life – Van Lieshout likes to be among people – with such studio creations as painted works, drawings and collages. This is because Van Lieshout also likes to spend several days alone in the complete isolation of his studio. To keep track of all his visual material



Holland House, 2012, detail, various materials. As exhibited in *Track*, Ghent. Photo by Jhoeko. Courtesy Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam

– the studio works can be used as props for the film, but also become part of later installations – he works with an editor, Core van der Hoeven. This solid figure remains out of shot, though in every interview, which Van Lieshout sees as part of his role as an artist in the world, he gives him the credit he is due. Watching material shot previously and giving an accompanying commentary regularly forms part of the end product. (The finest example is a scene from *Up* (2005), in which Van Lieshout, while looking into the lens, fulminates to Core against his mother's egocentric tone in an excerpt they are watching together at that very moment).

Janus is the result of a project by the Museum Rotterdam, which wanted to make portraits of 'ordinary' people. Van Lieshout ended up in the house of a man who had died four weeks previously, made the acquaintance of his relatives and made arrangements to use some of the household objects for his art project at the museum. The essential ingredient of the film is the run-up to this experience, which was quite extraordinary for the family ('this way we can go and look at his things for a while rather than everything going straight into a skip'). Museum staff appear in shot during and after the viewing of the household objects and the image of the deceased is built up in commentary spoken by the relatives concerned, the compassionate museum people and the neighbours (who are negative). Van Lieshout interlaced these images with more or less philosophical reflections on art, subsidies and so on, which he shares with the theatre-maker Marien Jongewaard. He also reacts – though less than usual – with shots of his own drawings and writings, and local residents turn up here and there too. In an interview on the occasion of 'Track', Van Lieshout himself said: 'Obviously in *Janus* you don't have to expect a film with a beginning, a middle and an end, in that order or otherwise, but neither is it a load of arty-farty inaccessibility.'²

But for all that it is still desirable to watch the full 50 minutes to experience any coherence. Little by little the stories emerge about Janus Noltee, the 73-year-old victim of a hospital infection, his relatives and people from the surroundings in the small neighbourhood of Rotterdam South, where the museum

was so keen to install an artist. In this instance, Van Lieshout's presence is by his standards relatively modest. He occasionally throws a statement at the camera, such as 'subsidies make for mediocre art... I am a Dutch state artist, I hate the ordinary people', and he has Jongewaard recite theatrical lines while playing the part of 'Erik van Lieshout, the artist'. But he would not be Van Lieshout if he did not take on an extra part for himself too. Under the motto 'an artist is actually a bacteria, a virus' – an idea prompted by the multi-resistant hospital bacteria that spares no one – he dresses up as a bacteria and goes out into the street. By the end of the film he is visiting two of Janus' relatives to tell them that the project has been cancelled due to the cutbacks.³ *Janus* is no more... There is no mention of the fact that Janus will rise again like a phoenix, this time in a comparable neighbourhood in Ghent, though this was certainly already known at the editing stage.

Erik makes us happy

A year earlier, Van Lieshout moved into empty shop premises in the indoor 'Zuidplein' shopping centre in Rotterdam. It was a commission for Sculpture International Rotterdam and Hart van Zuid. The title of the film was *Commission*. In this typical shopping mall he fitted the shop space out with what he himself called 'a bit of junk', which was intended to be given away. The accompanying film shows the way there, the onsite investigation – the police considered Van Lieshout an alien element and repeatedly questioned him and sent him away – the building of the interior and especially the conversation with the building workers (perhaps stand-builders is a better term) and future fellow shopkeepers. The result is of course a typical Erik van Lieshout installation. And when he reads this in the newspaper it actually disappoints him! But what would



Home Stretch, 2011, collage, 33.5 x 42 cm. Collection Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Photo by Jhoeko. Courtesy Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam

one expect with such slogans as ERIK MAKES YOU HAPPY and REAL LUXURY IS BUYING NOTHING in capitals on the shop windows. So he doesn't sell anything either; though people can just take his things with them. Van Lieshout is disappointed. It has turned into art again. He wonders what added value he has given, and asks others too. Fortunately he is able to end the film with the encouraging words of one of the proprietors at the Zuidplein. This man, who had previously spoken to the camera about sales strategies, observes that Van Lieshout has indeed been seen by his fellow shopkeepers. His hard work and above all his enthusiasm gave them the impression he was a passionate entrepreneur. This is the enthusiasm that the Zuidplein actually really needs. Ergo: added value! And Erik? He's happy again.



Left: Janus, 2012, still, HD, colour, sound, 51 min. Courtesy Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam

Right: Das Museum, 2009, colour, sound, 21 min. Wood. As exhibited in Im Netz, Museum Ludwig, Cologne. Photo by: Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne. With the financial support of Rheingold Sammlung. Courtesy Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam

Commitment

Erik van Lieshout comes from a family brought up on left-wing political commitment. While others went on nice picnics, the inhabitants of the Van Lieshout house were dedicated to demonstrations. Taking action is so much in his blood that he became an active member of the 'Youth Against Nuclear Arms' movement. When no cruise missiles were stationed in the Netherlands, he started embroidering large wall-hangings – couldn't help himself? Having made three or four of them, and doing his first drawing, he discovered his inner artist. This is the image of himself that he broadcasts to the world.

Those aspects of his work that are political can be traced back to his early years. He attacks Geert Wilders' populism. The murdered Rotterdam politician Pim Fortuyn crops up regularly too. Having now finally reopened, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam has set up a room containing Van Lieshout's drawings and collages of Fortuyn. Intense and raw, sexually charged, banal. These are the manifestations of Van Lieshout's ideas that show up more in his 'flat' work than his films. As a bonus, he donated a collage to the Stedelijk Museum in which Geert Wilders is sitting on Van Lieshout's back and is reining him in by his bra straps – both men have women's bodies: *Home Stretch* (2011).

As far as art is concerned, he is exceptionally aware of what is in store for him. For an exhibition at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne (*Das Museum*, 2009) he spent the night in the museum. At a certain moment he sighed out the names of such illustrious predecessors as Vermeer, Mondrian and Van Gogh and blissfully added his own name to the list.

What is more interesting, as far as content is concerned, is his awareness of links with people like the Dutch conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader (1942-1975), who is a benchmark. When Van Lieshout himself cried in a therapy session during the shooting of *Up*, he knew at the same time that the camera was there, was able to forget the camera, and was also able to start up the crying for a second time. And he knows his classics. In this case Ader's *I'm too sad to tell you*



(1971). Van Lieshout shares more than just tears with Ader. In his view artists have to be able to bare themselves completely. There is also a practical reason why he so often appears in the films himself. Van Lieshout: 'The films are always about other people. But the problem often lies with me and so I want to solve it myself first. They say it has a liberating effect if you try it out on yourself. When I am at the start of a project, I often try everything out on myself, asking questions. They call that consensus. The result is that you know what you are up to. Other people often have the same problems.' It has to be noted here that those others may not want to spend the time to think so deeply about things, especially when it becomes more intellectual.

Spiderman

At the start of the film *Das Museum*, Van Lieshout transforms himself into Spiderman. The aim is to expose networks. He takes this literally by making a web with lots of lengths of black tape. When he has put on a reasonably successful Spiderman head (red plastic and black tape) he gazes into the camera (with his characteristic black glasses on, of course) and says: 'so now I actually have

to do something I suppose?' Nothing ever happens, however, at least not as a superhero. In a metaphorical sense he really is the spider in the web. Not only in the direct sense, with his work, but also regarding its presentation. He is for example a welcome guest on discussion panels and YouTube is full of short films of him at work.

So the invitation to appear on *Zomergasten* (Summer Guests) in 2011 was a gift from heaven.⁴ This is a television programme in which a guest is asked to compile his own evening of television using excerpts from programmes and then comments on them with a presenter. Van Lieshout was able to zap through his sources of inspiration and muses in precisely the way he puts his films together: not in a straight line, but with his own logic. Those who can tolerate lots of changes of images and ideas – the children of today – could really enjoy themselves. Van Lieshout knows that – above all as an artist – he exists by the grace of the footlights. At a certain point in the middle of the broadcast he looked around him, sought out the camera and said: 'If you turn off the camera, we can go away, we don't exist anymore.' ■

<http://erikvanlieshout.com>

Erik van Lieshout lives and works in Rotterdam. He is represented by the Annet Gelink Gallery in Amsterdam (www.annetgelink.com), Galerie Guido W. Baudach in Berlin (www.guidowbaudach.com), Maureen Paley in London (www.maureen-paley.com) and Galerie Krinzinger in Vienna (www.galerie-krinzinger.at).



Up!, 2005, still, DV, colour, sound, 18 min. With the financial support of Beyond, Leidsche Rijn. Courtesy Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam

NOTES

1. Films like *Janus* and *Commission* tour various institutions, where the setting (the form of the installation) is often adapted to the location. In 2013 *Janus* was shown at the International Film Festival of Rotterdam (IFFR) (www.filmfestivalrotterdam.com/films/janus/) and others.
2. Geert Simonis' blog: *Gent als oefenterrein* (French translation); interview with Erik van Lieshout at <http://trackundercover.wordpress.com/category/geert-simonis/>.
3. That the cutbacks are not a fantasy is apparent from the fact that since the end of 2012, Museum Rotterdam has disposed of its two fixed locations, the *Dubbele Palmboom* and the *Schielandhuis*. For the time being it will be wandering the city streets.
4. Broadcast on 21 August 2011. Can be viewed (without the excerpts) at <http://programma.vpro.nl/zomergasten/vorige-seizoenen/zomergasten-2011/erik-van-lieshout.html>