



JOEP VAN LIESHOUT

One man and his baggage



— The Dutch artist and designer Joep van Lieshout – founder of Atelier van Lieshout – brought the world fully-realized ‘Free States’, slave camps and rectum bars. Now he’s just come out with a line of unisex handbags. Is he undermining his past work, playing with people or just being funny?

Actually, he’s following his chaotic mind.

WORDS STEVE KORVER PHOTOGRAPHY BIANCA PILET

Since the 1980s, Rotterdam-based artist Joep van Lieshout has produced an array of objects and installations that blur the boundaries between art, design and architecture – as well as between the rational and irrational. He founded Atelier van Lieshout in 1995 to ‘undermine the myth of individual artistic genius’, but in the end just embraced it. Today, he rates as one of the most successful Dutch artists worldwide.

Van Lieshout first established himself with the making of series of functional works, such as *Hard Edge Furniture*, *Soft Edge Furniture*, *Mobile Homes* and *Clip-ons*, which were executed in polyester, the material that would become his trademark. He went on to establish the *Free State of AVL-Ville* (2001) with its own weapons, medicine and money in an abandoned Rotterdam shipping yard – until the city closed it down. *Slave City* (2005) was an updated concentration camp as a self-contained ‘cradle-to-cradle’ system run on biogas power, complete with health centers and brothels. In 2011, Atelier Van Lieshout even designed a set for a Wagner opera.

What unites his works is an obsession with recreating complex systems – and how these systems result in the good and the bad. For example, humans can be all rationale and talk about the abstractions of art, but they also shit, piss, fuck – and fuck things up. Society is another such system: we are amazing at organizing things, but then, when it gets *too* organized, it ends in ideology and repression.

So where do handbags fit in all this exactly? To find out, *CODE* spoke with Van Lieshout at Ewald’s Mode, the shop of his tailor Faruk, and later at his nearby studio in an old industrial complex by the Rotterdam harbor, where he and his 20 employees are working on his latest ongoing project: *New Tribal Labyrinth* (2011-ongoing).

“Like how a table is a flat surface with four legs, a bag is something to carry stuff in with one hand.”

What was the first ‘system’ that struck you?

I’ve always thought about machines and how they worked. I was a boy scientist and always busy with experiments. I remember one very well: I had taken peanut butter jars and filled them up with dog shit and then, with hoses and tubes, tried to capture the released gas.

So that was the beginning of your, um, recycling obsession...

Yes, these bio-gas experiments became very important in later installations like *Technocrat* (2003) and *Slave City*. I see obsessively recycled excrements as defining the borders of rationality, humanity, ethics...

But as a child, what were you thinking?

I just wanted to prove that it was possible. It was just an experiment – and it failed, by the way. Later I figured out that the excrement I was using was not fresh enough...

There’s a life lesson: the fresher, the better... Actually I was hoping that the first system you encountered was the one you discovered looking into your mother’s handbag. With all the reproductive organs in your work, I would then have a nice Freudian link to your new line of handbags. So if it wasn’t Freud that brought you to the handbag business, what was it then?

My sister [laughter]. She has a leather workshop and makes bags herself. I was also in contact with Margreeth Olsthoorn, who has a store who could sell them. And I think a lot about bags, luggage, how to organize stuff. I am more interested in bags than, for example, jewelry or fashion.

The purely functional aspect attracted you...

Yes. It has something to do with tools. I am an artist. I produce all the time so I am crazy about tools, efficiency, the organization of the workshop. And a bag is like a workshop, or a toolbox.

What did you hate about the bags that are already out there?

It’s that fear of emptiness. You see all these made-in-China bags with an extra zipper here and another compartment there, extra features everywhere. I just needed a bag to put stuff in. It had to be very basic: a zipper to close it and handles to carry it. Like how a table is a flat surface with four legs, a bag is something to carry stuff in with one hand.

How was the working process designing a bag different compared to your ‘usual work’?

Well, I am more used to working with wood, fiberglass, steel, rock. With these sorts of things, if you make an artwork, it’s either good or bad. But with such a minimal bag as this, it’s much more difficult. The size of the handle, the zipper, the thickness of the leather and stitches is very important. It’s much more about fine-tuning. In art, you can have a moment of genius in five seconds, and you can make a masterpiece. The bags are much more about technique and finishing. It’s the details that make the bag either good or bad. ▶





One thing I couldn't help thinking when you came out with a handbag collection – ah, you are smiling already! – was that you were happily subverting expectation. It does seem to go against all your anti-consumerist themes...

No, no. It's actually exactly what I am busy with. My latest work is related to Arts and Crafts, let's say a 'no-logo ideology': honest products, fucking simple. I refuse to buy in the normal shops with their huge distances between designer, producer and consumer. I think it's important to regain a closer, more honest, relationship with the product you own. I think we are in a swamp-like situation. We're sinking because we are spoiled. We can buy furniture for 25 euros, a lamp for 7, leather shoes for 10, a bag for 12, whatever. It will be very difficult to go back to a situation where production becomes part of the society you are living in again.

But the bigger bags are 675 euros... That's a bit of a leap.

[laughs] Yes, I must admit they are not very cheap.

While you get your suits made by Faruk for very cheap.

Yes, I find the fabric myself and I give it to him and he makes me suits for a very good price. The only thing you have to say is if you want to have two or three buttons. [laughter]

Where do you find the fabric?

Anywhere. It could be on the market or in a fabric shop. Faruk also has some stuff...

I was admiring his selection earlier. Colorful stuff... He told me you have quite radical tastes for a Caucasian. But is there another way that your bag fits into your body of work – beyond the craftsmanship?

I don't like to limit my work. If I think making porn movies is interesting, then it becomes part of my work. I made one about fecal sex, smearing and shit. Really disgusting. I got some very extreme reactions... [laughs]

But it does link nicely back to your childhood...

I didn't think of that at the time, but now that you mention it... [laughter]

Clothing makes the man...

It's what you see. On the other hand, the clothes I have made at Faruk's are like uniforms. In fact, all men's fashion is very much about uniforms. There is not a huge range. And I think it should be more that way. I think society should just have five models of solid, set colors and three different kinds of fabrics. One black, one light, one color. That would make life a lot easier. But at the same time I have a great love of clothing. So when I see a shirt or fabric of a different color, I get greedy. I love color – that's my real reason behind having more clothing. Maybe if I had decided a long time ago that I would only wear black or white, it would have made my life a lot easier – not staring at a rainbow of choices every morning. It would also make traveling easier.

There's nothing like a bit of variety... But yes, there's a contradiction there.

My girlfriend says I should buy jeans. But for me, that would make me feel like a traitor. I am not going to be in this group who wear, phhh, jeans. Like some kind of real estate agent. During the day they wear their suits and then they change into jeans when they are not working. I just can't do it: make that switch. You are a traitor then, a criminal. I don't know how to explain it. I know I am being contrary. I just think having a tailor-made suit is something left wing and wearing jeans is something right wing... OK, I'm also trying to provoke here, but it is how I feel.

[Interviewer squirms uncomfortably in his jeans]

But I noticed your shoes are rather nice...

They're cordovan. Horse leather. The most durable kind of leather. A normal shoe could be good for 20 years and these for, say, 50. Only officers could afford to wear these, and only one part of the horse is strong enough – so basically one horse, one set of shoes. These are from Church.

So it's about durability. But they are much more expensive than your suits.

Oh yes, these shoes are really fucking expensive. [laughter]

So why expensive shoes and not expensive suits?

These shoes still look like workers' shoes – basically no design. Just like this suit, look, it's a similar material they use for work clothing. And if I did go for silk suits I would probably have to find another tailor and I don't want to do that. I just really like that Faruk is around the corner, next to my local supermarket.

How did you find Faruk?

Because he was next to my local supermarket! [laughter]

[Entering studio] **How important is it that you stay working the metal, the wood, the fiberglass, the polyester resin – working the tools...**

Very important. I'm here every day. Too many artists and designers are growing apart from the things they are doing. They spend too much time designing on a computer, then making a prototype in Hungary or wherever, and then getting it produced in China or wherever. Any real contact with the object is often lost. And that's bad. Because if you're sweating to make something, you will feel it if it's no good. If you are always behind your computer, you can make a piece of shit without knowing it. ▶

“The Arts and Crafts movement tried to save the crafts from the industry, and I am trying to save industry from the service industry.”

You have 20 people working for you in this huge studio. Do you have a system that harnesses their creativity while still maintaining the focus on your own vision?

There are projects that I am more involved in than others. The ones I am most involved with I do myself, beginning to end, others I am just controlling, in others I am more loosely involved as advisor. It's not a group effort in the creative sense. I just wake up in the morning and decide I want to have a farm and then I decide what the farm should look like. Usually I am straightforward, but other times I am more open to suggestions. But everything that leaves this studio should have my stamp of approval.

What's your relationship between the idea of artist versus entrepreneur?

I am the owner of the company. But all the management tasks I delegated to my managing director. So I am not very involved in that and I don't want to be.

So these bags are not a sign you are moving towards a more business-minded direction?

Who me?!? I'm going in the opposite direction. I am actually becoming more reckless...

Like your New Tribal Labyrinth project?

Yes, it's very reckless [laughter]. I am rethinking all the main components of the industrial revolution through six different farms covering year zero to the future – that last one will grow insects as they will be the world's main protein source. It's like a journey through time, and all the farms will be connected by a labyrinth. I'm going to make blast furnaces, textile industries, refineries, all kinds of industrial installations that will produce stuff. But all the production will be done by only muscle power.

Industry has disappeared in the western world. Like with mental institutions and prisons, society pushes it all out of sight. It's the same with farms.

Even though we are totally reliant on all of this...

Yes, and that's why I am reinventing these processes: the dirtiness, the hardship. I see this project as a parallel to the Arts and Crafts movement, only going one step further. The Arts and Crafts movement tried to save the crafts from the industry, and I am trying to save industry from the service industry.



PHOTOGRAPHY MENNO BOUMA

Do these farms have any similarities to your past 'self-sufficiency' projects?

No, it has nothing to do with self-sufficiency or survival anymore. Now it's more about voodoo...

Voodoo?!? Is anyone going to live on these farms?

I'm making it all for an imaginary tribe – an Arts and Crafts tribe – that also happens to be cannibalistic. That's why I am interested in voodoo, rituals, new religion, new types of tribal organizations...

What's the timeframe?

Parts have just been shown in Milan. Every time something is finished, it will be exhibited. I've been busy for a year and it will take another two or three years.

There's a rumor that you're going to develop a whole neighborhood in Rotterdam...

Yes, basically I want to take over this whole area around the studio here with all the old factories and make a giant open air museum.

And how realistic is this plan?

It's going well. We just got the space next to the studio. We are probably going to get this huge factory nearby. We will need some partners to make it happen but it's in process, we're talking.

And the city is cooperating with the plan?

Oh yes, they want to redevelop this area anyway over the next 30 years and they are very happy with anything that happens here – as long as it's not car dealers or prostitution.

Where will it all end?

Well once I've taken over this whole area, I do want to start franchising [laughter]. There's a lot of empty real estate out there for me to make sculptures in...

So with all these projects, when do you seek chaos and when do you seek order?

[Ponders] I believe the mind should be chaos and the workshop should be order. ♦

LIESHOUTT HANDBAGS

LIESHOUTT handbags were developed and produced by Amine van Lieshout (BagMe) in collaboration with MARGREETH OLSTHOORN. The bags are available in three different models and four different colors – each version coming in a limited edition of 10 and with an original illustration by Joep van Lieshout on the inside. The bags are available through:

MARGREETH OLSTHOORN,
Rotterdam, the Netherlands
► margreetholsthoorn.nl

VAN LIESHOUT'S TAILOR:

Ewald's Mode (ask for Faruk),
Rotterdam, the Netherlands