

Introduction

A paradox lies at the heart of Erik van Lieshout's hyperactive, gregarious, messy practice; an internal struggle that feeds his work and gives it the edge, the bite, that makes it so important, so enjoyable, so irritating, so human. This is the struggle between the artist's egocentricity and his social conscience. It is the battle between his neurotic desire to be the centre of attention and his conception of the artist's political role in society. He believes that it is his function as an artist to speak about the world in which we live. Yet he is never dogmatic, never moralistic and seldom leads by example.

Van Lieshout's wrangling between the personal and the political has been present since the early days of his practice. However, in his most recent works there is an intensification of this tension, which comes in part through a growing maturity and self-confidence, an expanding mastery of his tools and techniques. It is also the result of the increasing violent intrusion of the political into the personal that we have been experiencing recently in Western Europe. For an artist so attuned to shifts in social values and to the revealing rhetoric of the man on the street and the politician on his (or her) podium, Van Lieshout is clearly influenced by the enormous changes taking place around him.

The six films presented in this exhibition were all made between 2009 and 2016. They reveal a distinctive shift along the spectrum from the egotistical to the politically engaged, from the introspective towards the altruistic. However, the transition is neither complete, nor always moving in the same direction. That would suggest a strategy that is quite contrary to Van Lieshout's intuitive, reactive practice. Nevertheless, the exhibition opens with *Ego* (2013), where he is central, and ends with *Die Insel* (2016), where he tries to remove himself from the work and vanish.

Van Lieshout always builds installations in which to show his films. As critic Sven Lütticken has noted, these constructions are "starkly opposed to the elegant minimalism of art spaces; intimate spaces within the exhibition space, they are a strange blend between the cinema and the living room, between film and TV."¹ At WIELS, Van Lieshout has built new installations, creating a dense labyrinth of spaces, a kaleidoscope of images and materials. Further complicating our reading of his films, sculptures and works on paper are the photographic images that he uses as wallpaper. They are taken from interior design magazines, scanned and enlarged and then pasted onto the architecture, at times creating a *trompe l'oeil* effect, at others a collage of almost abstract fragments. Architecture has long been one of his subjects and here he explores how Modernism has been appropriated and filtered down into the composition of "tasteful" spaces for living.

1 Sven Lütticken, 'Erik van Lieshout's Video Shacks' in *A Prior Magazine* 12, (2006), p.7