

Isaac and Ishmael:

Tom Morton on Erik van Lieshout

'As it was, his favourite website was pretty much not sexy, at least to him. You could just go there, and there would be about a dozen photographs of this one dumpy guy dressed as Tarzan with a goofy orang-utan trained to poke what looked like roasted chestnuts up the guy's ass.

The guy's leopard-print loincloth is tossed to one side, the elastic waistband sunk into his tubby waist.

The monkey's crouched there, ready with the next chestnut.

There's nothing sexy about it at all. Still, the counter showed more than half a million people had been to see it.

[...]The point was, it's not the sex part of pornography that hooked the stupid little boy. It was the confidence. The courage. The complete lack of shame. The comfort and genuine honesty. The up-frontness of being able to just stand there and tell the world: Yeah, this is how I choose to spend a free afternoon. Posing here with a monkey putting chestnuts up my ass.

And I really don't care how I look. Or what you think.

So deal with it.

He was assaulting the world by assaulting himself.

And even if the guy wasn't loving every moment, the ability to smile, to fake your way through this, that would be even more admirable.'

Chuck Paluhniak, *Choke* (2001).

There are really only two characters in Erik van Lieshout's video installations and drawings. The first is Not-Erik. The second is Erik himself. Not-Erik is a shape-shifting creature, resembling by turns a Ghanaian rap tutor, the residents of a home for the mentally disabled, immigrant kids in a Rotterdam suburb, a beautiful Chinese girl, a right-wing politician and Van Lieshout's lovers, family and friends. Erik is more physically consistent - a bespectacled man with a shaved head, casual hip hop-informed clothes and a compact, puppyish body alive with an energy that hovers between love and violence. If Van Lieshout's videos were works of science fiction (and one of them, 2005's *Awakening*, is arguably precisely that), it would be tempting to interpret Not-Erik as an alien species, a bizarre and perhaps unknowable other, and Erik as point-of-view character, an all-too-human explorer of new worlds. While this is, in one sense, correct (Van Lieshout's work is nothing if not about the encounter between self and not-self), in another it is not. Crucially, the artist presents *himself* as an alien, a creature who he's not fully familiar with - not quite. In Van Lieshout's work, both Erik and Not-Erik are extra-terrestrial territories, and their topographies are in a state of permanent flux. The last, best hope for understanding, for becoming human, is when their borders meet, bashing together like great tectonic plates. This is a risky business (it may lead to new spaces of sympathy, or it may lead to a drowned world) but risk is what Van Lieshout's work is all about. Not risk as an end-in-itself, although the artist is no stranger to existential thrill seeking, but risk as a route to (self) knowledge - as a technology of both 'I' and 'us'.

Looking at Van Lieshout's videos from the late 1990s to the present day, one can trace a trajectory in which the artist moves ever closer to Not-Erik, and thus ever closer to himself. An acronym of 'Erik and Marinus [Jans, Van Lieshout's collaborator on the piece] Making Deutschmarks', *EMMDM* (1990) is a parody of Life-Ain't-Nothin'-But-Bitches-and-Money hip-hop aesthetics and their appropriation by young white middle-class consumers. To a hip-hop soundtrack, Van Lieshout and Jans (their Caucasian features masked with

cardboard box helmets) fill up a shitty-looking car at a petrol pump, and then cruise through Berlin's streets until they happen across two black men driving a shiny new Mercedes. Removing the cardboard boxes to reveal Afro-wigs and blacked-up faces, they force the men from the road, steal their tracksuits and then make off with their vehicle. From this point, the video fragments into a farcical series of 'hood-flavoured' vignettes: the boys pose menacingly against a grimy wall, a glamorous girl (also blacked-up) makes a call on a mobile 'phone to some invisible pimp or pusher, and the stolen *Merc* terrorises pedestrians before finally crashing into a heap of cardboard boxes, for all the world like a scene from a cheap, straight-to-video action movie. For all its comic bite, *EMMDM* is not an exercise in sympathy (except, perhaps, with white boys looking for a fantasy escape route from suburban banality) but an exercise in mask wearing. Mask wearing, of course, does not transform the self into the not-self, but into a composite creature, alienated both from one's own identity and (because a mask is an image, not an experience) the identity one wishes to adopt.

Like *EMMDM*, *Lariam* (2001) is a video installation that takes hip-hop as a starting point to explore the spaces between one person and another. The piece relates Van Lieshout's encounter with a Ghanaian man who has set himself up as a 'hip-hop coach' providing tutorials for white tourists. While the coach's lyrical stylings are based on LA gangsta-isms (and not, interestingly, the more Afro-centric hip hop of some 'conscious' US rappers), on becoming his pupil Van Lieshout insists on rapping in the very uncool, very un-Global language of the Netherlands, and on the subject of *Lariam*, an anti-malaria drug that, while it causes mild psychotropic effects in some users, certainly has none of the urban glamour of, say, Dr. Dre-endorsed 'chronic' weed. What's remarkable about *Lariam* is how the bad faith of both coach and artist (one of them playing up to a stereotype of black cool, the other to a stereotype of white nerdy-ness) is transformed into something joyous. His technique honed through tuition, Van Lieshout performs to a Ghanaian audience, rapping the package warning 'there have been reports of suicidal tendencies / but a connection with *Lariam* has not been proven' in guttural Dutch. The local kids grin, boogie and chant the words "Lariam! Lariam!"

' as though they were engaged in a call-and-response session at a Naughty by Nature gig. It's not a Benetton-ad fantasy of a perfect, colour-blind world (the tough politics of race, here, have if anything been brought even closer to the surface) but rather an argument for responding to mutual miscomprehension with good humour rather than fear or hate. The fact of self and not-self is, after all, a cosmic absurdity. The most enlightened thing – perhaps the *only* thing - we can do about it is laugh.

While in *EMMDM* and *Lariam* Van Lieshout presents himself as, essentially, a white everyman, *Happiness* (2003) sees him begin to probe his own consciousness, his alien Erik-ness. Invited to work as an *art therapist* at Heimerstein, a rural home for the mentally disabled, he took the opportunity to interrogate the notion of normalcy and to build some bridges with his estranged brother Bart. The result was *Happiness*, a kind of contemporary *Midsummer's Night Dream* in which the forest becomes a place where the siblings embrace 'madness' in order to emerge as healthier, happier and perhaps more sane. In a sense, the piece's point is something like "physician, cure thyself", but in another it is about ceasing to critique oneself in terms of one's racial or socio-economic identity (the middle class white guy of *EMMDM* and *Lariam*) and critique instead one's mind, heart and soul. As the multiracial, multi-class residents of Heimerstein attest, 'madness' cares little for the colour of your skin or the money in your pockets. What matters, here, is one's own reality, and how comfortably it sits with the reality of others. Erik's final words in the video, spoken to Bart but perhaps subconsciously directed at himself, are "You always rule. All the time. I

don't like it". It is a melancholy moment. The unilateral self, Van Lieshout seems to say, will never connect successfully with others, and is doomed to remain an alien within.

The Van Lieshout brothers appear again *Respect* (2003), a video (sound-tracked by 50 Cent's *In Da Club*) that combines the broad political strokes of *EMMDM* and *Lariam* with the more intimate brushwork of *Happiness*. As 'Fiddy' informs us that he "don't give a fuck it's not your birthday", Erik and Bart are frisked by various black passers-by, as though this were an episode of the rap-soundtracked, politically dubious American reality TV show *COPS* played through a busted camera obscura. This sledgehammer inversion ("the suspect is a white male; repeat: the suspect is a white male") segues into a sequence in which the tipsy siblings roam late-night Rotterdam with their camerawoman, Ol, in tow. Bart complains about his lack of a boyfriend, and Erik, with the sense of mission only a skinful of beer provides, rejects Bart's plan to see a midnight skin-flick in favour of cruising the local North African teens, despite his giggling, guilty admission that he doesn't "know how to approach Moroccans".

Cut to a montage of clips (backed again by 'In Da Club') in which Erik and Bart muck about with their new friends Fatih, Nedim, Ali, Hakan and Osman. We see the brothers riding upright on the panniers of the boy's pizza delivery bikes, kerb crawling in an unaccounted-for Ferrari, and dancing with witless, white-boy rhythm. Several scenes - shot in a gritty underpass - seem to involve transactions gone wrong, with Bart's implied purchase of a blowjob or a bag of weed ending with him clutching his pained, freshly punched stomach. Knives flash, girls hang out of the windows of gleaming cars, and chubby street kids boogie, creating an absurdist multicultural pop promo. The last shot is of Erik and Bart engaged in a frenetic, slightly embarrassed French kiss, observed by the Moroccan teens. They stand still, their faces a little wary, except for the youngest member of the crew, who pumps his pelvis like a crazed, clownish pimp.

There's a lot to unpick here, and a lot - potentially - to balk at or be offended by. *Respect* has no truck with the careful, quasi-academic ethnography or one-line worthiness common to much contemporary art that deals with questions of race and difference. Instead, it insists on asking difficult questions. Van Lieshout's conflicting feelings about Rotterdam's Moroccan community (somewhere, it appears, between fetish and fear) are presented with sharp candor, needling the sort of soft liberal agenda that treats minorities with an arm's length, undifferentiated 'respect', whether they be prowling gay guys or macho, mosque-tinged immigrants. This, of course, is politics for people who live on the hill - vaguely leftist individuals who've never entered a bathhouse or public housing project, who never imagine that there might be tensions (some funny, some sexy, some plain frightening) between marginal groups. The sly genius of *Respect* is that it's got nothing to do with tolerance, which, after all, approximates only to tight-lipped, silent distaste. By facing cultural collision full on, Van Lieshout demonstrates all its daffy, surprising, occasionally stupid fun.

It's important, I think, that 50 Cent thrums through the piece. Boasting that "when you sell like Eminem [...] the hoes wanna fuck", he is the spirit of spurious Hip-Hop cool, aped with hilarious lack of success by Erik, Bart and the boys. Preoccupied with sex, money and drugs, his party music also has a political tang, becoming here a cross-ghetto good-times fantasy that couldn't give a damn for the permission of the powerful. In the Morocco-fied, *faux* Rietveld structure in which Van Lieshout presented *Respect* at the 2003 Venice Biennale (with its associations of beautifully polluted identities) it sounded a lot like the future.

Fantasy Me (2004), a video presented in a vast red paper lantern, records Van Lieshout's relationship with 'Tessa', a shy Chinese girl, during a four-month residency in China. Like *Lariam*, the piece centres on pedagogy – Erik teaches Tessa English and self-assertion, while she in turn teaches him Kung Fu. Her vocabulary is enlarged by the words 'feminism' and 'fuck you!', and the pair engage in mock-punch ups, mock-sword play and what appear to be erotically charged massage sessions. At one point, Van Lieshout recommends "Being strong and getting more power" to the timid girl as a (Nietzschean) life strategy, but by the end of the piece we realise that rather than giving her new weapons with which to fight the struggle for self-realisation, he has utterly disarmed her – Tessa has fallen in love with him. There's something uncomfortable, even abusive, about this fact (at the very best it's clear that disparities in age and geography make any lasting relationship between the two the stuff of fantasy, and nothing more), but it is at the heart of Van Lieshout's unflinchingly honest film. If *Fantasy Me* has a message, it is that love is not a panacea when it is bound up with the stuff of power. Rather, it is something that wounds both parties, making them monsters or midgets, too much or too little themselves.

Perhaps, in the end, Van Lieshout's work is about love, and the things that make love hard. In his video installation *Awakening* (2005), the artist meditates on the future of Dutch liberalism after the assassinations of the gay, anti-immigration politician Pim Fortuyn and the controversial filmmaker Theo Van Gogh, the second by a militant Islamist. Footage of street protests by Rotterdam's immigrant community is set alongside that of far-right political candidates, a woman whose communist youth has given way to a near-fascist old age, and a filthy-looking 'shooting gallery' where Dutch heroin addicts legally inject government-subsidised drugs. This material is mixed with more personal moments, in which Van Lieshout smokes dope with his friend Geert (a formerly gay Fortuyn voter) and discusses his own late-blossoming bisexuality, or else wanders naked around his apartment before placing his dildo on the floor – an action that seems at once to confirm and refute his masculinity. *Awakening* is a piece in which solid categories melt into air, no matter how hard they try to assert themselves, and its particular genius is to expose this in both the public and private spheres - for Van Lieshout, the political *is* the personal, and vice-versa.

Back, for a moment, to the notion of *Awakening* as a work of science fiction. On the face of things, this is nonsense – there are no cyborg meldings of man and machine here (apart, perhaps, from Van Lieshout and his sex toys), and no space ships swoop over the Rotterdam streets. Real sci-fi, though, the stuff that sticks in the cultural craw, has always been less about surface aesthetics than about the future of the self. *Awakening* asks the question "who is an alien?" and the answer seems to be not only those who inhabit strange bodies and stranger minds, but also our best friends, and even – the piece hints – ourselves. 'I', after all, is not always familiar ground - witness the disbelief and wonder with which Van Lieshout tells Geert that he's noticed that when "I watch a porno, I look at the dick!" as though he were a *starship* captain breathlessly describing a new world. Not-Erik is an alien – this much we know from Van Lieshout's previous works. What *Awakening* suggests is that Erik is an alien too.

To love well (which means without exercising power over another, and without expecting one's fantasies to transform themselves magically into facts), we must move closer to both the alien without and the alien within – something Van Lieshout attempts in his recent video installation *Up!* (2005). Here, in an apparently solipsistic move, the artist turns his usually outward gaze inwards, attempting through a series of therapeutic treatments to overcome a crisis of being. There's a lot of rage, despair and psychobabble here (one

lanky alpha male therapist remarks that 'men give with their penises and receive with their hearts, women receive with their vaginas and give with their hearts', as dubious a bit of biological determinism as you're ever likely to hear), interspersed with periods in which Van Lieshout lounges depressed between rumpled bed sheets that, were we to sniff them, would surely smell of spilt semen and spilt tears. From time to time he addresses the camera directly, confessing to various loveless, almost pornographic (mis)adventures. Relating an anonymous encounter with a guy in sex shop ("such a dong in my mouth!"), he informs his cameraman that "This isn't go on the video... This can't go on, Core". But the footage is, of course, does 'go on' – the artist could no more leave it on the cutting room floor that the guy in Chuck Pahluniak's story could stop posting images of the monkey poking chestnuts up his backside on the web. But while Pahluniak's hero (and he is a hero, of sorts) is bent on "assaulting the world by assaulting himself" Van Lieshout's purpose is somewhat different – not a matter of uttering a firm 'fuck you!' but rather a bewildered 'well who the fuck am I?'. It's by asking this question that we can begin to understand our alien selves, and by answering it that we can begin to love (in our blundering way) the aliens all around us.

Perhaps the most important scene in *Up!* shows Van Lieshout walking through what looks like a shopping mall, where he is approached by a smiling, slightly goofy man holding a bottle of cleaning fluid. We see him remove the artist's glasses and give them a wipe, an action that renders him momentarily short sighted – an enforced myopia that blurs the other, but brings the self into sharper focus (when do we feel more aware of our vulnerabilities that when we can't see?). A few moments later, the man returns Van Lieshout's glasses and his 'normal' vision is restored. What's significant here is not only the play between looking out, looking in, and then looking out again, or the suggestion (there in the man's white, hygienic hands) that others shape these processes. The fact is that after a time any pair of prescription spectacles - any particular lens - ends up accumulating dust, dirt and smears. Clean them, and they only become soiled again - wash, rinse, repeat. *Up!* may feel like an epiphany, but Erik'll be on this alien planet for many years to come. This business of self and not-self isn't settled yet, not by a long way.