

# ARTFORUM

## Erik van Lieshout

MAUREEN PALEY

Downstairs was a dense, labyrinthine sculptural installation: a crowded maze of plywood structures, photographs, collages, sketches, wooden cutouts, and photocopies. This "Private View," as Erik van Lieshout's show as a whole was called, was seething with anger (I HATE MY FATHER stenciled on a white ground) and Oedipal details (a cutout face of the artist's mother roughly glued atop the body of a model from a girlie

magazine). Recurring throughout was the haunted image of a young man, flashing a peace sign and bearing an air of distant melancholy.

None of this quite prepared us for what was upstairs: *The Workers*, a staggering fifty-two-minute film (shot on HD video), the latest installment in Van Lieshout's magnum opus, the forthcoming feature-length *Ego*. It opens with triumphant news: Van Lieshout has been selected for the 2013 edition of the Venice Biennale! The artist is flattered, nervous, eager to succeed. Deliberating with his collaborators

and family, Van Lieshout quickly chances upon the ideal subject: He will draw parallels between the Italian canals and his local Rotterdam port. Aerial images of the two watery sites confirm a striking similarity.

But the neat solution instantly vanishes, as certainty is replaced with chaos, and doubt overwhelms everyone. Should the hand-drawn charcoal drawing that Van Lieshout produced—one like it was on display here near the film, and in the accomplished, expressionistic style for which the artist was first noticed—act as the literal backdrop in a few shots? Wouldn't it be a good idea to have a script? Is the artist only in it for the money—and will that extra grant cash ever come through? The scriptwriter ponders whether this film is *really* about workers, as the artist nobly claims, revisiting the oppressive integrity of his father—a social worker who'd once trained to be a priest and is, by all accounts, a committed lefty and do-gooder? Or is that just a flimsy premise, and if so, what *is* this film about?

The enduring questions finally boil down to Hamlet's own: Is art, family, or even life itself worth all this heartache and bother? Is the successful artist leading a life as valuable as those of his social-worker parents? Pressing questions never cease. Should Van Lieshout crush the cockroach dying on-screen, or save its tiny skin? (The artist releases the struggling bug outdoors; miraculously, it lives.) Life and artmaking, in tandem, are an endless call for problem solving—material, practical, ethical quandaries to be voiced, debated, temporarily resolved, then tossed into restless doubt immediately thereafter, as the artist and all his fellow travelers shuffle on to the next damn thing.

No one sounds sure of anything, save for the confident Catholic nun whom the artist interviews, who is dead certain we will meet with God in the afterlife. Also arriving at some definitive solution is the tragic suicide, Stephan, the artist's former brother-in-law and the peace-signing young man we saw downstairs—the film's absent center and the only character here who could know for certain whether the nun is right. The film ends with the artist alone in the gallery, pacing, waiting, burning with frustration over a no-show actor. Screaming down the phone, he again offers provisional solutions for moving forward. The work is a rousing allegory of contemporary life, with the usually loud mouthed Van Lieshout mellowing with age, probing closer to the heart of it all, and aching with existential uncertainty—or is that just career anxiety? Van Lieshout's *Ego*, if it is ever finished, will be huge.

—Gilda Williams



Erik van Lieshout, *Stephan*, 2013, black-and-white photocopies on particleboard, wood, 10' 6" x 8' 2 1/4" x 2 3/4".