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Erik van Lieshout: the Ali G of art

Would you buy a dried-out sprout from this man? Adrian Searle is tickled by what happened when Dutch artist Erik van Lieshout opened a store . . .



Innocent idealist . . . Erik van Lieshout at the Hayward Gallery
Photograph: Graeme Robertson for the Guardian

Zuidplein is a 30-year-old shopping mall in Rotterdam. It's a convenient place with, at the last count, 10 mobile telephone outlets, eight opticians, 15 cheap fashion stores and a lone independent Christian bookshop. Patrolled by security guards and monitored by 63 security cameras, Zuidplein is a faceless nowhere zone, a limbo for lost souls; retired locals who have nowhere better to hang out, wandering gangs of mostly immigrant kids – and the local artist Erik van Lieshout.

Van Lieshout wants to add value to the mall. He's making a film there. He also wants to open a shop, where he'll give things away rather than sell them. The almost 50-minute-long film of his efforts is the centrepiece of Van Lieshout's *How Can I Help You?* at the Hayward Project Space in London's Southbank Centre. In his films, Van Lieshout comes across as a brat with geeky glasses and a firecracker mouth. Affecting an air of troubled bafflement, he's an innocent idealist in an incomprehensible, often hostile world.

Van Lieshout could have been an investigative documentary maker – a Nick Broomfield or a Louis Theroux. Instead, he's an artist, making cartoonish drawings and films that are part documentary, part staged performance ("I'm just a comic myself," he has said). Like a cross between Thomas Hirschhorn and Sacha Baron Cohen, he goes out, meets the people (and sometimes their fists), gets himself into awkward situations, soliloquises directly to the camera and generally cocks things up.

As well as making films, Van Lieshout builds ramshackle environments in which to view them, with home-botched Rietveld chairs, bits of old carpet, gaffer-taped walls. Sometimes you have to sit in a circle, like a group-therapy session, or clamber into some snaggy, ill-constructed chamber of dubious cleanliness. Whenever I have come across these funny little pop-up cinemas that he knocks together himself – a ramshackle shed outside the Dutch Pavilion in Venice, a converted shipping container in Berlin, a sort of daft, play-time spaceship at the Frieze art fair – my day has been lightened.

In his films, Van Lieshout has cycled from Rotterdam to Rostock in eastern Germany, encountering unrepentantly stupid antisemites and scary neo-Nazi skinheads; wandered the damp Dutch countryside with his brother, Bart, winding his sibling up and offering helpful advice about his sexuality (Bart didn't speak to Erik for a year after this particular film); and fallen among a group of mentally ill patients on a day's outing. The artist's parents sometimes make an appearance. Van Lieshout's films are frequently very funny and touching and painful, not least because he is forever giving himself a hard time – about his love life, his lostness in the world, about being an artist. The tragedy and ridiculousness of masculinity is played out time and again.

How Can I Help You? is Van Lieshout's first solo show in the UK. Here's Erik, trapping himself in a box he's built in his studio. Here he is arguing with one of his assistants (who has revealed himself as a fan of ultra-rightwing Dutch politician Geert Wilders), and here he is again, bullshitting about having permission to film in the Zuidplein, pursued by security guards and people who want to beat him up. When Van Lieshout wants to open a shop in the mall, he fills it with dried-out stalks of Brussels sprouts, posters of Rotterdam notables including the assassinated Islamophobic politician Pym Fortuyn and "starchitect" Rem Koolhaas, and piles of old junk he's bought from a Croatian bloke called Swonko. But Swonko's swag of screws and nuts and bolts bursts on the mall's elevator, mangling its mechanism and closing it down for a week.

Van Lieshout argues with fellow shopkeepers because he insists on filming them, plays cat and mouse with the mall's security patrols, hangs out with the old folks, alcoholics and deadbeat junkies who populate the halls. His camera lingers on window displays: artificial flowers, a mouse running in the corridor, the perpetual, casino-time sallow brightness of the precinct.

With its concert halls, galleries, chainstores and restaurants, London's Southbank Centre is itself a sort of cultural shopping mall, another Zuidplein – but at least you can get your nails done at the Rotterdam shopping centre. The signage for the show at the Hayward reads "Erik Makes Happy" in big, bold lettering. Other signs are inversions of the usual dismal Pavlovian slogans of consumerism: "Dress Less to Impress", they say, and "Last Chance". In Van Lieshout's work, good and bad are slippery terms, and he frets about being too arty, not artful enough, about what art is and isn't. At heart, he wants to make people happy, which is something else to worry about, and to make a difference, whatever that might mean.

An employee at one of Zuidplein's stores tells Van Lieshout that people buy to fill up their emptiness. Isn't that the void art tries to fill, too? A lot of the time, what we get is just more emptiness. The void is unfillable. Towards the end of his film, we see Van Lieshout dismantling his shop, clearing away all the accumulated rubbish he's been trying to give away. Really, all he's doing is moving it from one place to another. "Pity he's not an entrepreneur but an artist," one of the shopkeepers says. "In here, we need enthusiasts like him."

–Adrian Searle