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Atelier van Lieshout's Mobile Home for Kröller-Müller

Homespun ideals cracking up

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AXA Art Conservation Project in cooperation with the Vitra Design Museum

Symposium on conservation of synthetic materials

Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, 29–30 June 2005

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These texts are based on notes taken down during the lectures for the conference minutes. They are not written by the lecturer him/herself, nor have they been revised by them.

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Sanneke Stigter, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, NL

Atelier Van Lieshout's Mobile Home for the Kröller-Müller: Homespun ideals cracking up

This talk was concerned with the conservation challenges and material history of the outdoor sculptures made of fiber glass reinforced polyester in the collection at the Kröller-Müller Museum, with a focus on Atelier van Lieshout's *Mobile Home for Kröller-Müller*. The Kröller-Müller Museum has recently begun a research project concerning this installation, in collaboration with Thea van Oosten of the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage. When covering this specific installation, the artist's intentions in relation to conservation ethics is discussed, as well as the artist's philosophy, art making process, and choice of materials.

The museum was founded in 1938 by the Kröller-Müllers, a wealthy industrial family. As an underlying philosophy the museum sought a synthesis between art and nature, a notion embodied by the fact that the museum is situated in the middle of the National Park De Hoge Veluwe. Creating the sculpture garden was also a logical step in embracing this philosophy. The sculpture garden opened in 1961, mostly for sculpture made in traditional outdoor material like stone and bronze. However, right from the start, sculptures made of plastics were introduced in the sculpture garden.

One such early sculpture is Martha Pan's *Sculpture Flottante - Otterlo*, 1960 – 1961. It is made from glass-fibre reinforced polyester, is 180 x 226 x 226 cm, and floats in a pond in the sculpture garden. It is a kinetic sculpture consisting of two parts, rotating independently from one another, creating a movement complementary of the floating itself. Over time the object has changed and distorted. The top of the sculpture is no longer aligned with water level; it has lost its equilibrium, and is therefore disabled and no longer kinetic. The original polyester surface is no longer visible because it has been coated with several layers of a synthetic paint based on PVC, as part of a "repair" contract with a commercial painting company.

This paint repair contract is currently being put on hold, but the results of previous repairs made in this fashion are proving to be problematic when considering conservation treatments for a number of the outdoor sculptures. In order to come up with a treatment proposal for this sculpture, the artist is being consulted, in order to learn more about the making of the sculpture. The artist has expressed that maintaining the original form and shape of the sculpture is of primary importance.

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The largest sculpture in the garden is Jean Dubuffet's *Jardin d'email*, from 1974, made out of concrete, glass-fibre-reinforced polyester and a polyurethane coating. It measures 2000 x 2000 x 3000 cm. People are allowed to enter and walk on this "Jardin", prompting lots of wear and tear. The commercial repair and painting company has been painting over this installation for 30 years. As with the Pan sculpture, the painting by this company has been put on hold, but after 30 years of this "repair" painting there are probably no original traces of paint left. The conservation of this object will be a major undertaking, involving thorough research. Currently there is a conservation student interested in the sculpture as a thesis project and the hope is funding will be found for this.

Another sculpture that presents conservation challenges is Herman Maier Neustadt's *WD-Spiral Part One CINEMA* (2001). It is galvanised steel and aluminium structure covered with glass fibre reinforced polyester sheeting that measures approx. 4 meter high and wide, and is over 12 meters long. The main idea behind this sculpture is presenting nature as a cinematic experience. In order to experience the artist's intent with this sculpture, the viewer enters the

structure and sits down on one of the many plywood chairs available. The sculpture was originally made for a temporary exhibition in Arnhem, but is now part of the permanent collection in the sculpture garden. Material deterioration of the sculpture is visible after being on exhibit for less than a year. Nobody is allowed in the sculpture anymore, because of this deterioration. There is the possibility for research and a conservation treatment to be carried out by an intern from the Fachhochschule Cologne.

The *Mobile Home for Kröller-Müller*, 1995, by Joep van Lieshout is made of glass-fibre-reinforced polyester, polyurethane, plywood, wood, glass, rubber, and mixed materials. It is over three meters high, more than 10 meters long, and 7.5 meters wide, although these measurements can vary. The potential variability of these measurements is grounded in the definition of what the term "Mobile Home" actually means to the artist. The current director of the museum commissioned the artist to make the Mobile Home based on the artist's own ideas. The explanatory drawing supplied by the artist present the idea of standardisation as the underlying theme in this concept. The drawing shows how the individual units or compartments of the home can be combined in any manner within the main unit.

The possibility of interchanging units highlights the artist's fascination with this concept of standardisation.

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From a distance the work still looks the same as when it was purchased 10 years ago, and during this time none of the units have been interchanged. There is a yellow ball that is the sleeping unit, a kitchen unit, and a sanitary unit. Looking at the doors and windows of the main unit, it can be seen that these various interchangeable units could be rearranged and be placed where the doors and windows currently are. A summary of the most imposing conservation problems regarding this object as follows:

- Leakage and a poor ventilation system make the wooden interior receptive to mould. To prevent the rain from seeping in a removable adjustment has been made in the style of the artist. This was made by following the manual he created concerning this piece. This addition has also been approved by the artist.
- The polyester coat has lost its brilliance – it has never been protected from the rain and sun.
- There is a sort of “blanching” of the polyester coat. This degradation mechanism has been identified by Thea van Oosten as osmosis, a degradation process induced by water and oxygen.
- Craquelures have appeared at areas with a lot of stress; such as at the top of the sleeping unit from which it hangs.
- The continual accumulation of dirt, which is particularly disturbing on a colourful playful object.
- Resin is delaminating around the skylight in the sleeping unit.

Moving and / or partly dismantling the object has a big impact on the material state of the object. If the object were to be moved or rearranged a crane would need to be employed, and caution would be in the hands of the people hired for this task. Some manner of damage seems to occur every time the object has been moved. So the question that all of this brings up is twofold: how bad are these material failures and what can be done to overcome these material defects? The easiest way to prevent more damage to the object is to not expose it to weathering, but then the question is, could the object still reflect it's original intended meaning? Like many sculptures in the garden, since 1999 the object is protected by a tent-like construction during the winter season, although unfortunately it has not been used consistently.

To put this quick overview of conservation problems in perspective it is important to understand what the work of Atelier van Lieshout stands for. In 1995 Joep van Lieshout founded Atelier van Lieshout (AVL) to emphasize the fact that the works of art do not stem solely from his brain, but are produced by a creative team.

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The works vary from sculptures and furniture, bathrooms and mobile home units to complete architectural refurbishments. One of the many applications and techniques used by AVL are the large polyester constructions, in striking, bright colors. These polyester constructions, of which the large mobile home units are the best known, form the AVL trademark. For a number of years now the focus has shifted from standardized, made-to-order furniture, to works of art that can be used in realizing a self-sufficient and independent lifestyle. Recently, AVL has produced a complete series of human internal organs, ranging from heart and brain to the liver, the male and female sex organs, and even a representation of the artist's rectum in the form of a bar as presented at the Basel art fair in Switzerland.

There are similarities to be found between sculptures in the Kröller-Müller Museum garden and AVL's *AVL Ville*, a "free state" created in the port of Rotterdam in 2001. This work was not a "show" but "real" in the sense that the work actually provided an opportunity for living in a totally self-sufficient manner. That is, until authorities prohibited everything they had no permit for – which is of course the essence of an independent free state.

Pioneer Set from 1999, is another outdoor installation made for survival and self-sufficiency. The set consists of a big container, a farmhouse, a stable, a rabbit hutch, a pigpen and several tools, equipment and fencing. With *Pioneer Set* AVL has created a prefabricated farm and equipment with which individuals or groups can travel in the world. After arriving at a chosen destination, the large container can be unloaded and set up, and one can live self-sufficiently on this farm. *Pioneer Set* is built in such a way that it can function indefinitely without any need for repairs and extensions. It is interesting to note that there is glass-fibre reinforced polyester resin used in this work. AVL considers *Pioneer Set* to be a very important milestone in art. The goal was to make something real and viable, not imaginary, something built for survival as opposed to creating a farm that would make a profit or be economically competitive with other farms. The piece is a mobile home in which you can survive by simple means. It is a logical next step after *Mobile Home for Kröller-Müller*, which still has the characteristics of a more traditional sculpture, whereas *Pioneer Set*, provides the total survival experience.

Other works with similar aspects include the *Farm House Pioneer Set*, which is equipped with a multi-woman bed, a wood stove and a kitchen; and *Stable Pioneer Set* (1999). The stable is identical in shape and size to the *Farmhouse* of the *Pioneer Set*. Just as with the main aim of the *Pioneer Set*, the components of these sets are functional and solid.

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Being reliable and indestructible is essential for these buildings if this set is going to be used in remote areas. The works *Sceptic tank* (2001), *Fat Filter* (2001), and *Feaces Pump* (2002) all used for recycling and re-use purposes. *Gullet* (2003) is one of the more recent organ sculptures, but also refers to digestion and transformation of material. The creation *A Workshop for Weapons and Bombs* (1998) was made for self-defense purposes. An image of *Mercedes with 57 mm Canon* (1998), includes the artist himself posing as the tough man driving his Mercedes with canon, clearly in control and ready to roll.

The main conclusions to be drawn about the work of AVL is that it is made to fulfil a role in the quest for survival of the fittest, and it is therefore implied that it is made to be used. Whether or not being able to use these works is essential in being able to experience these works as works of art remains to be seen. Furthermore, standardised items and measurements are often a starting point, or play an important role in realising these works, and are sometimes realised in impersonal materials.

To make life and art even more simple the artist has written down his art-making techniques in "Atelier van Lieshout - A Manual", for everyone who would like to try this at home. So, for instance, the techniques in which AVL uses unsaturated polyester are described in detail in the "Glass-Fiber Reinforced Polyester Manual". The idea that a work by AVL can be imitated by everyone can be seen as a certain uncomplicated straightforwardness that characterises all the work of AVL. He also explains how to slaughter a pig and prepare smoked pork step by step in the "Pork Meat Processing Manual". What is interesting is that AVL provides everyone with the secrets of their trade, as if it has nothing to do with any artistic value, yet at the same time they are aware of a "Atelier van Lieshout style", which is even under protection of Dutch criminal law.

Van Lieshout has even made the description of his artists' technique into an artwork itself. Most of the work in polyester is fabricated using a hand lay up technique, laminating an internal structure that is left inside. There is a three-layer system:

- Pre-accelerated all-purpose resin is used to impregnate the glass fibre mat, which has relatively low pigmentation comprised of a commercial pigment paste. When dry, this layer is sanded.
- A sub-topcoat of impregnating resin with more pigment is added, followed by an initial colouring of the object. This is sanded.
- The "topcoat" is applied, which consists of hand mixed material, made by following their own recipe: 50% gel coat 50% resin. Paraffin oil is added and thickly applied.

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More information and insight into the artist's process was gained by visiting the AVL studio, in the Rotterdam Harbor. The studio is in an old factory, and has immense working space areas. AVL is a company with 20 employees, including three interns. The office provides working space for a project manager, engineers and designers. Within this space a special polyester-processing unit is constructed to keep the fumes away from the rest of the working area. An old fashioned balance and the immense variety of used buckets of resin indicates the amount of handwork involved in the processes of the studio. There is also a photo archive there.

Mobile Home for Kröller-Müller was the first Mobile Home made by the studio, and a lot of experimental work went into realising the project, all of which was documented thoroughly. Photos of the production process of *Mobile Home for Kröller-Müller* show how new techniques to model organic structures were explored. A small room sized piece of sealed plastic was inflated and the shape was adjusted using tape. This inflated plastic was then covered with polyurethane foam to make the structure hard. This was all done by hand as illustrated by photographs of this process, taken by the artist himself, found in the archives.

The photos also illustrate how tasks are divided up in the studio. The artist is shown adjusting the form; the hand lay up of the polyester was done by an assistant. Fibreglass is laminated directly over PU foam and impregnated with resin. The Inflatable part, which is the sleeping unit, was adjusted in order to create a flat bottom for a mattress. This unit was closed again with foam held in position with wooden pins, and adhered to the final glass –fibre-reinforced polyester structure. A window was cut out of the form. The photos also relate that the units have always been in a fixed position, positioned exactly as they currently are at the museum. It is possible to suppose then that the way the Mobile Home looks now is possibly preferable to the artist.

This case study was the beginning of preliminary research into the artist's techniques and the meaning of his work, and netted some surprising information and results. It is now known that *Mobile Home for Kroller-Muller* is a very early and maybe the first example of AVL's Mobile Homes, and that the sleeping unit is actually sculpted by the artist himself, exploring new techniques in the fairly traditional manner of a sculptor.

This was not expected considering studio's use of standardised measurements and the factory like impression the studio, AVL as a company, and Joep van Lieshout as an entrepreneur, tend to convey.

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In summing up it is helpful to look back at the first sculpture examples in this talk to remember two things:

- The rapidity with which the outdoor sculptures made of glass-fibre-reinforced unsaturated polyester have degraded. This degradation is exacerbated and accelerated by their context (placed out of doors with lots of interaction from the viewing public). The materials used have probably turned out to be weaker than the artists originally had imagined.
- The attitude of people in relation to modern materials is such that it is not greatly valued, in so far as painting over the material would be considered an option and that many people think of these materials as being cheap and popular materials, nothing to be cherished, nothing so special in our Western minds. These attitudes are dangerous ones in regard to conservation.

In relation to the AVL case study, the issues that remain to be addressed are determining a (preventive) conservation strategy:

- Location of object – sun – shade (birds).
- Loan / exhibition policy – no more movement.
- Maintenance, cleaning – how? How often?
- Protection of polyester in the outdoors – what, additives?
- Research and testing – scientific research in collaboration with ICN.
- Conservation treatment – collaboration with a furniture conservator.

And determining the role of the museum:

- Keep the material object itself or present the artist's intention?
- Participation of the public or static sculpture as part of sculpture garden?
- Discuss conservation issues with the artist (at the moment of purchase).

When addressing these issues, many things will have to be taken into consideration. One consideration will be the notion of reversibility as related to ethical codes in conservation. Signs of weathering could be seen as part of outdoor housing, but is ageing allowed to be shown in a work by Atelier van Lieshout? In an interview, the artist states that he does not mind some "patina", but it "ought to look nice."

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Thea van Oosten kindly analysed several samples of the polyester, which all show signs of degradation due to osmoses – a water and oxygen induced degradation process that occurs in polyester when unprotected from weathering in the outdoors. Tests will need to be conducted relating to the protection of polyesters with a microcrystalline wax containing a certain amount of UV absorbers and anti-oxidisers.