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ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT
BIPOLAR

Opening: November 3, 2026, 7 pm
Duration: November 4 – December 23, 2026

There is only one certainty in life, and that is death. In the years before reaching that final finish line, we navigate peaks and valleys, tossed back and forth between emotions, states of mind, and beliefs that are often diametrically opposed. Especially in an era where truths are increasingly precarious and the forces pulling at us grow ever stronger, we trade one extreme for another with increasing ease. Individually and collectively, we have arrived at a state of bipolar confusion.

This ambiguity is woven deeply into the DNA of Atelier Van Lieshout (AVL). The sculptures and installations are two-faced, carrying conflicting meanings. They epitomize progress and optimism, projecting a utopian vision of the future; on the other hand, they can just as easily be read as dystopian and even destructive. With the current exhibition *Bipolar*, AVL has its finger firmly on the pulse of a society polarizing at breakneck speed.

Visitors to *Bipolar* are welcomed by Death. Like a modest doorman, he ushers us into the realm of life—a life into which we were thrust as the result of "a little death" (*la petite mort*), and which we will eventually depart hand in hand with the Grim Reaper. Between those two moments, we are like Daniëlle: a jumping jack puppet in the hands of fate, yet clinging to the illusion of autonomy.

From the entrance area, visitors can go in two directions. One path leads to a hall filled with raw, earthy, and expressive works. Here, walking sticks for leaders and visionaries are on display: symbols of authority and idealism that can abruptly tip over into brutal violence. Sculptures of crushed consumer goods form the fossils of late capitalism. On an operating table, the *Nordic Warrior* endures his suffering without anesthesia—though a primitive anesthetic machine is present. The human body here is a construct to be disciplined, modified, rebuilt, and upgraded. Everything is sacrificed on the altar of growth for the sake of growth, until we suffocate in material excess and waste.

The space on the other side is filled with white works. The figurative sculptures depict gods and goddesses, warriors and heroes. They evoke heroism and "the good fight" for the higher cause—whatever that may be. Plaster is the dominant material here: fragile, porous, and stripped of industrial noise, yet possessing a distinctly monumental quality. It carries sacred connotations, recalling the heroes of Classical Greece who were promised eternal life in the Elysian Fields—all they had to do was die.

Bipolar by AVL is an amplification of contrasts that can be distilled down to "flesh versus spirit," yet interpreted in myriad ways. The sacred confronts the banal, while holy stillness clashes with primal energy. The tranquility and unity of the monochrome plaster hall contrast sharply with the restless visual language of the expressive room. Mechanical coercion and bodily manipulation serve as a reality check against the elevated ideals of heroism.

Yet even within the rooms, visitors are tossed between contradictions. Does that medical equipment actually bring healing, or are these instruments of torture? Are we standing in a clinic or a slaughterhouse? And is this immaculately white heroism truly so noble, or are we looking at terrorists in disguise?

Vienna is the most fitting setting imaginable for *Bipolar*. After all, this is the city of Sigmund Freud, the psychoanalyst who defined human behavior as a dynamic interplay between Eros and Thanatos—a perpetual flux of rational deliberation and subconscious desires, fears, and instincts. Vienna also

possesses a genuine *Totenkult*, a historical fascination with funerary rituals and baroque memento mori. Moreover, it is the city of Viennese Actionism (*Wiener Aktionismus*), in which radical corporeality and pain are inextricably bound to spiritual catharsis.

a text by Edo Dijksterhuis

Atelier Van Lieshout is a studio founded by sculptor, painter and visionary **Joep van Lieshout** (born 1963 in Ravenstein, Netherlands, lives and works in Rotterdam, Netherlands) in 1995.

After graduating from the Rotterdam Art Academy, van Lieshout quickly rose to fame with projects that travelled between the world of easy-clean design and the non-functional area of art: sculpture and installations, buildings and furniture, utopias and dystopias.

In 1995, van Lieshout founded his studio and has been working solely under the studio's name ever since. The studio moniker exists in van Lieshout's practice as a methodology toward undermining the myth of artistic genius. Over the past three decades, van Lieshout has established a multidisciplinary practice that produces works on the borders between art, design, and architecture. By investigating the thin line between manufacturing art and mass-producing functional objects, he seeks to find the boundaries between fantasy and function, between fertility and destruction. Van Lieshout dissects systems, be it society as a whole or the human body; he experiments, looks for alternatives, takes exhibitions as experiments for recycling, and has even declared an independent state in the port of Rotterdam AVL-Ville (2001)—a free state in the Rotterdam harbour, with a minimum of rules, a maximum of liberties, and the highest degree of autarchy. All of these activities are conducted within van Lieshout's signature style of provocation—be it political or material.
Van Lieshout combines an imaginative aesthetic and ethics with a spirit of entrepreneurship; his work has motivated movements in the fields of architecture and ecology, and has been internationally celebrated, exhibited, and published. His works share a number of recurring themes, motives, and obsessions: systems, power, autarchy, life, sex, and death—each of these traces the human individual in the face of a greater whole, such as his well-known work *The Domestikator* (2015). This sculpture caused controversy before even being placed at the Louvre in Jardin de Tuilleries, but was adopted by Centre Pompidou where it was shown during FiAC (2017).

Van Lieshout's works have been included in the Gwangju, Venice, Yokohama, Christchurch, Shanghai and São Paulo biennials. AVL is part of the permanent collections of public and private institutions such as: FNAC, Paris; Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Prada Foundation, Milan; Ludwig Forum, Aachen; Folkwang Museum, Essen; Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zürich.

Van Lieshout has shown his work at Galerie Krinzinger multiple times since 2008. His last solo exhibition, *Light in the Darkness*, dates back to 2022 and took place at Krinzinger Schottenfeld. The same year, his work was shown at the main gallery as part of the group exhibition F*oreign Affairs*.