

Close to your skin

Participatory practices in collecting and exhibiting dress

Museum Rotterdam is the city museum of Rotterdam. Our mission is to explore and present the heritage of the city together with the inhabitants of Rotterdam. Since 2007, some of our curators have been working in projects outside the museum to connect with the diverse population which does not always have a natural connection to the past of the city. Many of these projects were fashion-related.

The collections of Museum Rotterdam contain artefacts related to the history of the city and its population. Some collections, like the collection with artefacts from the culture of the modern city as well as the costume and fashion collection, are of national significance. The costume and fashion collection contains around 25,000 pieces dating from the early 18th century until the present day.

In 2013, the museum premises were closed due to cuts, and the museum started to wander through the city with projects and exhibitions on location. This situation asked for an open mind to experiment and we benefited from the experiences in the framework of these projects since 2007. This contribution focuses on the fashion-related projects and exhibitions and their preparation.¹

Roffa 5314

The Roffa 5314 project was concentrated in Rotterdam-South, the part of Rotterdam that was developed into a port area populated by dockworkers and migrant working-class families in the 1870s. Originally, it was a white urban working-class neighbourhood and it turned into an ethnic zone in the 1970s. Almost 80% of the population today in this socially and culturally marginalized area of Rotterdam is of non-Dutch origin. The heritage and participation project was named Roffa 5314 when a curator noticed that in this part of Rotterdam young adults associated themselves with “5314,” the code for the public transport zone of **Rotterdam South**. Roffa is a Surinamese nickname for “tough” and is used as slang for Rotterdam. Our curators discovered three urban groups strongly associated with “5314”: hip-hoppers,

1. Parts of this paper were published in Sjouk Hoitsma (2015). Het nieuwe elan van Museum Rotterdam, een museum tijdelijk zonder vaste locatie. *Studies in Textiel 3* Textielcommissie.nl and Sjouk Hoitsma (2014). ROFFA 5314, Youngsters in the Rotterdam South Area, Museum Rotterdam and the Shaping of Identity. *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the ICOM Costume Committee, Nafplion-Athens, 7-13 September 2014*, pp. 55-60.

30 | football hooligans of Feyenoord and a large urban group.² Though the groups are different in attitude, dress and ethnic background, they associate themselves very strongly with their urban zone 5314. In their typical Rotterdam South lifestyle, they express a strong local identity as a cultural response to their fellow residents living in the northern city centre, the richer part of Rotterdam. The zip code is not just a graffiti piece tagged on walls, doors and street furniture, but it is also printed on shirts, used as nickname on the internet, in raps and street slang and tattooed and used as golden teeth decoration.

To research these groups, the museum had to come out of its comfort zone and start an outreach project. We actually visited these youngsters in the places where they live, play, party and hang out. We organized events and performances (hip hop and rap open mic nights) for the young 5314 artists, supported by their own local Rotterdam-South fan groups, which were recorded on video³. During these events, interviews were conducted; lifestyle elements, clothes, personal identity markers and accessories were collected and catalogued by the staff of Museum Rotterdam (Hoitsma 2010: 117-190) (fig.1). We published a free magazine (*Roffa 5314 Magazine* No. 1 (February 2008), No. 2 (June 2008), No. 3 (September 2008), No. 4 (spring 2009, published by Museum Rotterdam), specially made for the youth in Rotterdam-South. The Internet played an important role in the Roffa project. A Facebook-like website was set up, where the Roffa youth posted their own pictures and weblogs and created their own virtual Roffa 5314 world.

The results of this program were



Fig.1. DJ Whitney Pinas in the Roffa 5314 project, 2009. Photo Marc Nolte. (Collection Museum Rotterdam)

2. *Urban* is a term used in the Roffa 5314 research for a multi-ethnic group in a city environment with many intercultural crossovers in fashion, music, etc. See also: Kenny de Vilder (2010). Jongerencultuur in Rotterdam Zuid. In Sjouk Hoitsma (ed.), *Roffa 5314 Stijl van Zuid*, Rotterdam, pp. 221-223.

3. Roffa 5314 event #1 (February 2008) en Roffa 5314 event #2 (June 2008) in Club Maassilo, film by Victor Vroegindeweij at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8LwBywoQn2c> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TY9QOIT3UuA>

presented in a neighbourhood exhibition hall and curated by museum staff.

This project attracted national attention and was considered as a ground-breaking participation project from the point of view of modern urban heritage. It helped Museum Rotterdam address controversial cultural and social topics and redefine the role of the curator as an intermediary between the public and the museum.

The sweaters of Loes Veenstra

In 2011/2012, I worked with my colleague who is an urban curator/anthropologist in a project at the Carnisse district in Rotterdam. Together with some residents, we created a pop-up museum annex workshop in an empty building on a street corner in the middle of the neighbourhood. The workshop also housed the local reptile shelter of Mike. Mike acted as a kind of street worker. He helped everyone (including all animals and especially reptiles) and his shelter was a meeting place for local residents. For us, he worked as a guest curator and our guide into the district, its inhabitants and their stories.

Mike introduced us to Loes Veenstra. She lived nearby in a dilapidated building that she had stuffed to the rafters. She was a hoarder. We discovered that Loes had been knitting sweaters



Fig.2. The sweaters from Loes Veenstra, 2012. Photo Theo van Pinxteren. (Museum Rotterdam)

for more than 50 years. She started a sweater and knitted without a pattern description just as it pleased her. When the sweater was finished, she put it in a bag. Then she started a new one. We saw that there were many bags full of sweaters in her house. These were all sweaters that had never been worn (fig.2).

We strongly felt that something had to be done with these sweaters. We thought of a way to make this inheritance by Loes meaningful for the neighbourhood, something that

should also contribute to improve her circumstances. Her house was so dilapidated that it had become too dangerous to live there.

We started buying the sweaters from Loes and removing them from her house. There were more than 500! For a project with these 500 sweaters, we involved artist Christine Meindertsma, known for her projects around craft and participation. She planned a flash mob, a well-prepared performance of a large group of people that starts “spontaneously” in an unexpected place.

For this purpose, large groups of people from Loes’s neighbourhood were secretly summoned to participate. At the agreed time and place, they all put on her sweaters and at the decisive moment they all performed in a dance. All this was a surprise for Loes, who enjoyed it very much. The flash mob was a big success: there were more than 300 people in the street

32| at the agreed time. Everyone was excited. What remained were the many sweaters and a popular movie on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pul1Ja8gWBg>). The sweaters were published in a book: Christine Meindersma (2012). *Het verzameld breiwerk van Loes Veenstra*. Rotterdam. In 2013, this project won the prestigious Dutch Design Award and Museum Rotterdam was awarded the jury's honorary title of "heritage innovator". We decided to collect only a small number of sweaters, enough to show the unique style of Loes, the quality of the knitted fabric and the material. Along with the film, this collection tells the story of Loes and her place in the neighbourhood, poverty (cheap materials and gutted wool), loneliness and the zeitgeist. Most of the sweaters have been adopted by various organizations, auctioned, sold and exhibited. But the film on YouTube is a masterpiece in our collection and can be accessed by anybody at any time. Loes is 80 years old now and has moved to a new house. When I visited her in April 2014, she had already knitted over 25 new sweaters.

Exhibiting True Rotterdammers

The first exhibition on location after the closure of the museum premises was called *True Rotterdammers Who do we think we are?* (October 2013-March 2014). To create this exhibition, we engaged many Rotterdammers by asking them what they think is typical of the Rotterdam people. The underlying theme of the exhibition was migration. Using provocative statements, we tried to interpret the citizenship of Rotterdam as: "True Rotterdammers are tough workers", "True Rotterdammers are landlords", "True Rotterdammers are young" or "True Rotterdammers come from far away". This last statement was illustrated with a catwalk featuring nearly 70 models dressed like Rotterdammers from the past and present (in historical costume and fashion from the museum collection), who walked from the past into the future. The catwalk was in the centre of the exhibition (fig.3).



Fig.3. Catwalk *True Rotterdammers, Who do we think we are?* 2013. Photo Theo van Pinxteren. (Museum Rotterdam)

It started with an English merchant from 1760, who had come to Rotterdam to take advantage of the opportunities in this thriving port. He stood there with his wife who was a local of the city. The various personalities were based on historical data of migrants and other Rotterdammers, linked with items from the costume and fashion collection of the museum.

At the top end of the catwalk was Gino, the hard-core Feyenoord hooligan from the Roffa project. He was unrecognizable, because he wore his typical hooded Stone Island jacket. Further on was Whitney, the 5314 female rapper who performed at a Roffa 5314 party that the museum had organized. And of course, there was Loes, still knitting. And there you could also meet Ivan, an illegal Bulgarian worker in his work clothes, still covered with white dust. We met him in 2012 during a project about illegal immigrant workers in Rotterdam. For this, we used a construction trailer on a building site that functioned as a pop-up museum (fig.4). We made lunch for the workers every day, and this was an ideal situation to get to know them. Ivan, Kamen and Dani told us their stories and we met their families. To illustrate their stories, we bought the working clothes they wore while doing hard and dirty labour. They had bought these secondhand. The men are now working legally in Rotterdam.



Fig.4. Museum Rotterdam as Pop-Up Museum in a construction trailer, 2012. Photo Theo van Pinxteren. (Museum Rotterdam)

Exhibiting True Rotterdam people, What do we make?

In 2013-14, we researched the new craftsmanship in the city, all kinds of small workshops where people have started to make things themselves like repairing and assembling bikes, making leather bags from old couches, growing mushrooms on coffee-grounds, or working with new techniques like robot lasering or 3d printing. The project was about learning to make, sharing knowledge, sustainability and connecting with the old craftsmanship from the city. Can we as a museum add something new, from the heritage of craftsmanship in our collection, to the contemporary “makers”?

One of the new makers we found was a foundation called Viltmannen (in English “Feltmen”),

34 | where unemployed people who had difficulties finding jobs were making felt. For this they used wool from a sheep herd that grazes in Rotterdam.

We presented them with a machine from the museum collection. It was a machine for pressing hats from felt cones (half product) or cloches. It was acquired from the former Rotterdam Grabowski hat factory which had been operational in 1947-1992. Knowledge of how the machine worked had been lost. While searching for it, we found a former worker from the factory, Peter Koenen, who had worked the machine until 1992. With his kind help, we managed to get the machine working again (fig.5).



Fig.5. Peter Koenen makes Rotterdam Caps with the old hat machine, 2014. Photo Rob Noordhoek. (Museum Rotterdam)

Then we connected hat designer Jacky Habets with Viltmannen and asked them to develop and design a new Rotterdam hat. The result of this cooperation was a kind of cap. The prototype of the design was then brought to Peter Koenen, who undertook the production of the new caps on the old hat machine. The process was featured in the exhibition *True Rotterdam people, What do we make?* (October 2014- March 2015) for visitors to see.

In workshops within the exhibition, with the help of Viltmannen, visitors could make their own hat by hand using the wool from local sheep. They could experience that making a hat was hard work which took almost four hours to complete. Afterwards, they could see Peter Koenen working the old hat machine and making hats in a few minutes.

The project was successful in connecting old and new craftsmanship. Old and new makers, professionals and non-professionals participated in the making and the exhibition of this project.

A new Museum

Since February 2016, we have a new museum in a building designed by the famous Dutch architect Anton Koolhaas in the centre of the city of Rotterdam. In this modern building, we have an exhibition space visible from the street, where we stage an exhibition about contemporary Rotterdam people and the way they “use” Rotterdam.

From all the people we met in our projects and who are part of the Museum Rotterdam community, five persons were selected to be on show in this exhibition. One of them is Kamen, the Bulgarian worker. After full-body 3D-scanning and lasering, their figures were transformed into 3D sculpture, 110% in size. So now, we have not only Kamen’s work gear and toolkit, but also his body as a 3D file!

Through the lives of people like Kamen, we look at Rotterdam. Now Kamen is part of the history of Rotterdam (fig.6).



Fig.6. Kamen, the Bulgarian worker (second from the right) as a 3D file.

We, the museum staff, learned a lot about working with people, about working on location and about locating contemporary “living” cultural heritage of relevance to the future story of Rotterdam (van Dijk & van Renselaar 2012). At the same time, a transformation has taken place within the museum. Activities, tasks and processes have changed. As a curator, my task is to establish connections

between my knowledge of the heritage of Rotterdam and with what is going on in the contemporary city. In participation projects, the heritage groups greatly affect how and what is being collected (Simon 2010: 127-172). This means that I have to share my expertise and make quick interpretations of their contemporary heritage. In cooperation with these groups, I also think of ways to present this heritage. Most of the time, these presentations differ from “normal” exhibitions, lectures and publications. They pop up in unexpected locations, have a short production time and require a view that goes far beyond the walls of the museum, close to the skin of the city (Reijnders, Rooijackers & Verreyke 2014: 54-55).

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36 | *Roffa 5314 Magazine* No. 1 (February 2008), No. 2 (June 2008), No. 3 (September 2008),
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DOI:10.7146/mediekultur.v27i50.5247

Sjouk Hoitsma
curator of fashion and costume, Museum Rotterdam
s.hoitsma@museumrotterdam.nl