

# Coolpolitics

## **ART INTERVENTION**

*A report from the cross section of design and sustainability*

## ***About Art Intervention***

Art Intervention researches the crossroads of sustainability, innovation and design in the Netherlands. The first part of our project was all about delving deeper into the Dutch design-scenes, and checking up on how things stand in the field of sustainability. In the beginning of 2015 Lokaalmondiaal / Coolpolitics will be curating an extensive program on design and sustainability in Amsterdam.

Art Intervention is part of the international art project “What’s the Deal” on urban culture and sustainability, in cooperation with Kulturreferat München (DE), Kunstzentrat (DE), Kino Siska (SI), and Schmiede Hallein (AT).

[www.whatsthedeal.eu](http://www.whatsthedeal.eu)

## **Foreword**

*"We cannot hope to create a sustainable culture with any but sustainable souls."*  
Derrick Jensen

Sustainability: a buzzword that travels the world faster than the speed of light. Changing faces, (re)sources, ideas and realities of thinkers and doers on a daily basis. Undeniably, its popularity is a mist settling, spreading its vital message across the globe. Perhaps the angst and desire it instills in corporations, brands, artists and consumers lends to the urgency needed to secure and create a better world for future generations.

During Schmiede 2013<sup>i</sup>, I met up with researches from Ljubljana, Munich and Schmiede to find common denominators that relate to art and connects our individual research to sustainability in Europe<sup>ii</sup>. We decided upon a general focus consisting of umbrella questions that are applicable to our respective fields. In the case of Amsterdam, questions such as "Why are people sticking to the theme of sustainability in their work" helped determine the pool of artists and designers that could also provide insight to the question of responsibility.

Equally as relevant was figuring out if there is actually a scene that designers and artist identify with in Amsterdam? Possibly highlighting a different dimension of our hyper-individual society while embracing its social foundation.

In the course of my research, I spoke to various experts, artists and designers about the complexities and wonders of sustainability and design in Amsterdam. Topics such as reuse, wasted resources, mass consumerism, design processes manufacturing process, green materials, sustainable communities, and pragmatism where mainstays in refreshing and insightful conversations. In this report, I will briefly touch upon the most important themes to give an idea of what occupies the minds of artists and designers in Amsterdam and to a certain extend in Eindhoven<sup>iii</sup>.

Amal Al Haag

## ***Design & sustainability***

In a country, renowned for its enriching design, the concept of sustainability has taken many forms throughout the years. From popular post war furniture by designer Friso Kramer to playful and witty products by cult label Droog Design to 3D Canal house printing by social architecture pioneers DUS<sup>8</sup>. All these examples illustrate that design is embroidered in the DNA of cities such as Amsterdam and Eindhoven.

*But where are we now? What does sustainability mean to contemporary designers and artists in Amsterdam? Who are the key-players and in what way does it shape the future of innovation in a city where creativity is fuelled by ideas and Dutch pragmatism?*

Clichés aside, sustainability is a loaded gun, a Kalashnikov to some artists and designers who are fully aware of the naivety that is associated with 'designing for good'. This 'design for good' is often limited in its reach and influence by a combination of factors such as time, finance and opportunity. Nonetheless global problems are becoming too complex, multi-layered and with too many irreversible realities for artists and designers not to question our (consumer) culture, societies and politics critically. For many artists and designers, sustainability is no longer a luxury, but something so completely intertwined within their work or practice that it no longer needs a separate box.

## ***Collaborations & networks***

Design is a world of collaborations. Whether it's research, technique or production, most artists and designers I interviewed are keen on collaborating with others to create relevant work. Architect and designer Michael Schoner<sup>iv</sup> spoke of interdisciplinary networks or collectives organically formed on the basis of friendships or common interests. Eindhoven seems to be the city where the community flourishes. According to Schoner, in Amsterdam the alternative design network circuit is more art and fashion-minded that produces mostly for small group of costumers.

Collectiveness does play a huge role in the collaboration between social designers Pim van Buuren and Luc van Hoeckel<sup>5</sup>, who found camaraderie in their vision for a better world while studying at Design Academy Eindhoven. Sometimes, collaboration between designers is intentional whereas other times it's mostly out of necessity and the desire to innovate. Such is the case of designer Desiree Hammen<sup>6</sup>, co-founder of Garden Mania- a community garden in the heart of Strijp S in Eindhoven. Garden Mania was inspired by the conscious urban gardening movement across the globe where growing food and plants organically in concrete jungles showcases the city dweller's desire to grow their own food locally again. Hammen's garden uses design as a tool to construct a grid for collaborative gardening where citizens join forces with designers and the TU Eindhoven to explore the possibilities of recycling, green materials and gardening.

The digital sphere also functions as a platform for designers. Designer and artist Ruben Pater<sup>7</sup> collaborates with designers from South Africa to Iran for his work. So maybe in the case of the Netherlands, we should rather speak of collaborations instead of communities. Since collaborations happen on various levels and many individual practitioners explore sustainability in collaboration with others. These niche networks provide a certain degree of independence and equal amounts of responsibilities without losing ones focus or initial vision of design.

## Upcycling Playfulness

Renny Ramakers<sup>9</sup> brought underground designers to the surface of the design world. As the founder of the iconic label Droog Design, she is considered an authority on Dutch design. Posing the question of sustainability to her meant time traveling to an era where Dutch design was not yet synonymous to quality and poignancy. The late eighties, early nineties was a period where contemporary design gods like Marcel Wanders<sup>10</sup> approached sustainability with care and tenderness.

According to her the UP project- UP is an alternative way of dealing with dead stock- shows that sustainability is embedded in the fibres of Droog Design. This is illustrated by Hotel Droog's concept of refurbished furniture and collaborations such as My Cup of Thoughts with designer Annelys de Vet<sup>11</sup>. My Cup of Thoughts is a two-dimensional project that combines social commentary with re-use playfully. Inviting visitors to question and furbish their own opinions on the changing perception of universal themes of freedom and truth. Playfully up cycling products that were once a commodity is to some designers a functional way of creating radars for social change.



Drone Survival Guide by Ruben Pater. Digital image. Web. 23 March. 2014

## Social design: message meets product

Ruben Pater is a designer who extends this dialogue of social change by taking matters into his own hands. As a graduate of Sandberg Institute where designers are groomed to become critical agents of processes, relevant to societies, environments and people. Pater's Drone Survival Guide [picture] is a map designed to increase our understanding of drones. The map helps to demystify drones and has fuelled a necessary conversation on various digital (international) platforms.

Various artists, designers and architects are investigating and negotiating the parameters of social design with citizens, municipal officials and project developers in Amsterdam. It's equally important to note that this negotiation is a dense field where collaborations are accelerated by political agendas, social trends and economic tides. In these situations the designer's role is crucial and simultaneously dependent on the ability to balance vision and message with a social or commercial purpose.

The lingering economic crisis and the limited opportunities within existing structures of design industry and its varying institutions, fuelled the increase of independent and small initiatives within the Dutch design world. The small design companies and initiatives' inventive and resourceful mentality helps them bypass existing institutionalized and non-beneficial production companies to reach consumers either online or offline by setting up pop-up shops and running online outlets. Keeping or sticking to sustainability is an individual matter and each designer chooses his or her own battlefield. Cultural thinker Ellen Bokkinga<sup>12</sup> firmly agrees and believes that *"this generation returned to the fundamentals of seventies hippie ideals and hacked the broken dreams of their parents with the help of modern day technologic tools"*. According to Bokkinga an ideal marriage of strong visionary ideals and sustainable technological awareness is currently becoming the model for art and design initiatives across the country.



Photo of Provo White Bike Plan (social project of 1970s). Digital image.Web. 28 Febr. 2014

### ***Old materials and new methods***

Fashion's love affair with green is nothing new under the sun, nor a guaranteed cash cow. Fashion design collective ...And Beyond<sup>13</sup> played with sustainability in 2008, before green fashion was lauded as the future of fashion, and pioneered with a research based collection. *"Researching and applying sustainable printing techniques and material to our collection was a very complicated paradox since the most sustainable thing to do was to not produce new items"*. Jolanda van den Broek acknowledges that this is the core problem within the fashion industry and its love affair with sustainability. ...And Beyond examined design and print process thoroughly and even travelled to China to help manufacturers with the production materials but the duo came to the conclusion that sustainable fashion is a bridge too far for they lacked the financial capital and technological advancement to keep producing at a level where

quality and sustainability was fully guaranteed.

Nonetheless an alternative vision is increasingly powered by research and/or statistics to address the urgency of a design, product or project. In the case of the Dirty Design<sup>14</sup> project of cultural theorist and fashion designer Marjanne van Helvert, complex global problems are at the centre of her practice. Dirty Design critically examines the chain of fashion from Amsterdam to Bangladesh, while addressing social problems of our consumer-obsessed world from an aesthetical and ethical perspective. Mass produced material is still the bloodline of the fashion industry, but van Helvert's one woman shop swims against the tide by turning to the vintage knitting machine to break the powerful cycle of the fashion industry, piece by piece. Returning to artisan and ancestral methods is slowly becoming more popular to re-use material purposefully.



Video Still by ByBorre. Digital image.Web. 12 Febr. 2014

On the other hand, online platform Cutting Class (2014) shows that there's an equal amount of space for new and innovative methods. For example, material designer Borre Akkersdijk's<sup>15</sup> use of technology, when he refined the use of the circular knitting machine by using organic cotton "outer" yarns and synthetic filler that expands when it's steamed. Here he creates new possibility and purpose for mass production technologies for fashion.

When it comes to trends in the Netherlands, designers are exploring and redefining processes, methods and materials to research new possibilities of reusing, rethinking and recreating all aspects of their specific industry.

*"Design must be an innovative, highly creative, cross-disciplinary tool responsive to the needs of men. It must be more research-oriented, and we must stop defiling the earth itself with poorly-designed objects and structures."* Designer and innovator Victor Papanek<sup>16</sup> might have been considered a fool in the seventies but the current generation of designers doesn't fear tackling social issues, nor the daunting task of making global and ecological issues more palatable to society.

At the core, theirs is a collective and urgent need to design for people who will use, cherish and share

their work purposefully. In a wealthy country such as the Netherlands where oversaturation of design is a reality, the solution for some designers lies in exploring possibilities outside the parameter of this country.

Such is the case of social designers Luc van Hoeckel and Pim van Baarsen, who transformed a parking space into a playground for disabled children for a hospital in Malawi. Van Hoeckel admits that he would rather not design for the 10% who can afford design products, but wants to work for the 90% of the world who could truly benefit from design solutions profoundly.

Marjanne van Helverts sternly underlines in her Dirty Design manifesto (2013) that “the anonymity of mass-produced goods and their dominant surface aesthetics fuels indifference”. She even suggests: *“If you cannot see what a product is made of, you forget about its material existence. If something looks shiny and new, you will not think about the toxic mine it came out of, you can dismiss the underpaid labour of an individual on the other side of the earth, and you can ignore the mileage and the months it took to reach you. These aesthetics are an ethical thing.”* Both designers use their local expertise and talents to tackle intricate global issues from the comfort of their studio.

### ***Space is the place to collaborate***

The consensus among the interviewed designers and curator is that the Dutch scenes lack a place of dialogue outside of the institutional settings. The question on everyone’s lips is: Who will facilitate this? The Dutch design world consists of fragmented one-person islands. This individualism on the one hand and the role social design on the other, equals a paradox that Dutch designers should tackle together. The niche worlds are too small, independent and their agendas may vary, but sustainability within the design community could become a powerful force if there are more grass root platforms that connect various city-based or theme-focused initiatives with each other. What’s happening in Eindhoven<sup>13</sup> is relevant to Amsterdam and visa versa. And currently the exchange among cities and design worlds is limited to initiatives such as the Dutch Design Week in Eindhoven, or What Design Can do in Amsterdam.



Video Still by Luc van Hoeckel. Digital image. Web. 21 March. 2014

Independent spaces that connect designers with researchers, programmers and thinkers could strengthen these initiatives and help seed sustainable models for the future.

In conclusion, the city of Amsterdam is a paradise for sustainable ideas, talent and design, but time will tell if the city is capable of building a strong relationship with the visionary designers, rebels and thinkers who challenge the status quo of the design and art world. Cultural thinker Bokkinga and architect-turned-designer Michael Schoner both emphasize on developing sustainable business models to break the existing ineffective ones practiced by the design and creative industry today. Here's an important role for the city of Amsterdam; to foster and facilitate a sustainable work environment for independent initiatives to cater to a growing group of people in Amsterdam willing to engage. In the meantime, social conscious designers will continue to confront the design-industry's shortcomings by building alternative models, products and ideas to reach new audiences and worlds.

### ***In conclusion...***

Creating a more sustainable world sounds fancy, but it urgently requires changing the nature of design and designing. The designers and thinkers I interviewed for Art Intervention each explore and contribute to *"a world that works for 100% of humanity, in the shortest possible time, through spontaneous cooperation, without ecological offense or disadvantage to anyone"* ( Zung, 2001).

Despite the growing awareness among creative citizens in Amsterdam and other cities across Europe, sustainability has a long way to go if as long as people still flock en masse to Ikea, H&M and the Zara's of this world, where corporate responsibility is merely small change in comparison to e.g. the disheartening conditions under which clothing and furniture is produced. Bridging the gap between awareness and spending power is essential to achieve a lasting change in consumer behaviour.

Fortunately, most designers are positive about the future. Some are more occupied with the logistical technicalities, material use and their respective industry, and for them efficiency is sometimes more of a priority than the ideal to produce sustainable. Even though it might create the same results. Others believe that thinking consciously about the choices during their design process and reducing waste has a much more lasting effect on their work than the mere use of sustainable production methods or material.

## Notes

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- <sup>4</sup> Michael Schoner, . Web. 27 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.michaelschoner.com/>>.
- <sup>5</sup> Pim van Baarsen & Luc van Hoeckel, "A Junkyard Ambulance Transforms Into a Play Structure for Sick Kids." TakePart. N.p., 23 Feb. 2013. Web. 28 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.takepart.com/photos/old-ambulance-and-parking-lot-transforms-playground-kids>>.
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- <sup>14</sup> Marjanne van Helvert, Dirty Design. Web. 16 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.dirty-design.net/>>.
- <sup>15</sup> Borre Akkerdijk, Web. 27 Apr.2014. <http://www.byborre.com>>.
- <sup>16</sup> Victor Papanek, "Victor Papanek Foundation." Web. 27 Apr. 2014. < <http://papanek.org/about/victor-j-papanek/>>.

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