

Extreme normality – a celebration of the mundane in fashion

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Abstract

This paper will be a largely visual exploration of the northern aesthetic, a movement in fashion which emerged in the Dutch and Belgian lowlands during the 90s that challenged the classical approach to fashion and beauty – going against the preoccupation with the body and the enhancement of physical attractiveness, especially that of the female. It also challenges the idea of glamour most often associated with fashion, instead propagating a low profile in a play on simple silhouettes with a fixation on nondescript details and a deliberate rejection of style. Aligned to the general movement towards the more conceptual and introspective fashion of that time, and part of a reaction against the design hysteria of the 80s, it nevertheless forges its own particular path, developing a fashion statement which can safely be called a celebration of the ordinary – to the extent that it turns into the supra-normal.

Context

We think of the austere costumes of the Flemish burghers of the 17th century, those sometimes extreme forms in black relieved only by a few touches of white, with a clear link to Calvinism and its iconoclastic tradition, its rejection of ostentation and idolatry and to Dutch pragmatism with its focus on the ‘ordinary burgher’.

Modernism and credos like ‘form follows function’ and ‘less is more’, especially strong in the Netherlands, also play a role, but with a peculiarly post-modern perspective.

Examples

Fashion designers include: Martin Margiela, Raf Simons, Af Vandevorst (Belgian) and G+N, Orson+Bodil/So by Alexander van

Keywords:
modernist,
iconoclastic,
pragmatic

Slobbe (and previously Nannet van der Kleijn), and Saskia van Drimmelen (Dutch). The latter two are AMFI staff.

Photography in magazines like: Dutch, Re, A, Purple Fashion, Dazed & Confused and product design like that of Droog Design, Jurgen Bey, Hella Jongerius and Tejo Remy complete the picture.

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Self-sufficient cheeseheads

As an immigrant in Holland, I have observed the culture for thirty years and developed a great respect for the country and its people; pragmatic and businesslike, with an unusually broad perspective, and a sense of the abstract, and the conceptual.

I saw individuals with a strong sense of self and a total belief in *maakbaarheid*, their ‘can do skills’: the personal ability to design or manage circumstances to meet their needs, making a virtue of necessity.

I saw large strong-looking women and less-than-macho men with an understated sense of nationhood and no feeling for grand leaders, pomp and ceremony, but a clear sense of individualism and citizenship. Burghers, not bourgeoisie, who believe in cooperation and consultation, possibly a legacy of surviving in the marshy deltas. An entrepot country with an economy based on trade and transport, the distribution of goods.

I saw a prosperous country with a strong economy but no show of glamour. Old money, I thought, so settled in their wealth that they had no need for display. This was, in fact, more likely an antipathy towards ostentatious display, a playing things down; ‘doe normaal dan doe je gek genoeg’ (be normal, that’s mad enough), with more attention for the simplicity of ‘home contentment’ (gezelligheid) and pop music bands called ‘doe maar’ (just do it), and ‘normaal’ (normal).

I saw a flat country, with endless straight lines and immense sky: Netherlands means lowlands, Holland, literally hollow land, in many places below sea level. I saw manipulated water and land – clearly visible dykes and barely visible waterways both functioning as barriers or fortifications in the regained polder landscape. One holding the sea at

bay, the other, instead of fences and like an understated moat, the intruder. Almost all of nature is artificial, a result of efficient engineering.

I felt a sense of freedom from the constraints of tradition – certainly in Amsterdam – while history was all around me. I saw a secular nation, where churches had become exhibition spaces, community centres, a rock ‘temple’. But that may well be seen as an expression of the urban iconoclastic side of the rural core of the society – Calvinist Protestantism.

I saw a design mentality from the abstraction of the regained landscape to the remarkable institutional design the Dutch have become so famous for.

In all that flat green and towering grey I saw a bright yellow streak – a train!

I saw money and postage stamps of the most abstract design, more like monopoly money and totally unlike anything anywhere else in the world and thought – what a weird country, going their own way with play money, fun trains and prostitutes openly displaying their wares in their very own shop windows.

To my delight I found these observations echoed in books like Simon Schama’s *The Embarrassment of Riches* and by the Dutch themselves!!

But how do we go from here to extreme fashion?

Visual traditions – sobriety, quirkiness and recalcitrance

The Netherlands is long renowned for its fine art tradition – from Hieronymus Bosch in the fifteenth century to Rembrandt in the seventeenth and Mondrian in the twentieth; but not for its design and certainly not for its fashion. Only in the twentieth century did a number of factors coincide to bring about a change.

The era’s modernist movement fitted the Dutch like a glove, opening the way for the no-nonsense ethics and understated, clean-cut formal language of their graphic and product design. Fashion however, was still deeply suspect, seen as too frivolous and too much a statement of status and power to be taken seriously. That seems paradoxical seeing that status and power are widely seen as pretty serious preoccupations, but the Dutch have a centuries-old history of anti-authoritarian civil action.

The spirit of Dada in the twenties and the crossover between social awareness and unconventionality of the sixties with art movements like Fluxus hit another chord, adding quixotry and parody to their repertoire. The strict functionalism of Wim Crouwel, the poetic purism of Walter Nikkels and Anton Beeke's provocative theatricality reigned side by side in the graphic design world. The movement between sobriety, recalcitrance and the poetry in between reminiscent of the art world, was now established in the design world.

The excessive eighties saw Dutch designers battling with post-modern design anarchy and their natural tendency towards abstract pragmatism and tended toward a more investigative, theoretical examination of the identity of archetypal forms and the intrinsic value of materials. At the end of the eighties international political, social and environmental issues caused a sobering down on all fronts.

Archetypes and concerns about recycling came together when Marcel Wanders created a new lamp by simply stacking five archetypal shades. The concept of 'less is more' or rather, 'more of less' is expressed in a new, more extremely literal form. This is maybe more clearly expressed a few years later by Rody Grauman's grand chandelier made of simple lightbulbs – but then eighty-four of them – plus the necessary wiring and connectors.

The growing stream of neo-minimalist products – “so ordinary that the extremeness of their simplicity and restraint threatened to go unnoticed” (Brentjens, 1998, p91) – prompted art historian Renny Ramakers and product designer Gijs Bakker to set up Droog Design (dry design) to confront the world with these offbeat products, starting with the Milan design fair of 1993. They presented what looked like design accidents: Tejo Remy's 'cabinet' consisting of a tied-up pile of miscellaneous used drawers and his similarly conceived rag chair of lengths of cloth held together by steel strips.

Neither user friendliness nor purely formal aesthetics determine the design of the products, rather context, underlying ideas, humour and down-to-earth simplicity. Most famous for this is Jurgen Bey, master of associative twists and unexpected results. The story behind the object overrides pure functionality like his 'tree trunk bench' which graces the manor park where one can sit on a raw tree trunk leaning against

bronze backrests, replicas of the antique chairs inside the manor. His 'cocoon' designs are inspired by the way our skin holds us together – stretchy synthetic skin holds together and transforms various stylistically different items of furniture (chairs, tables and lamps) into something totally visionary and new. Archetypal forms, familiar to all, push out the thin resilient skin revealing their original identity and history in a surrealistic or post modern collage of forms and stories which has become one piece of furniture.

This brings us up to the mentalities that would ignite the world of Dutch fashion

Fashion – nothing is the new something

During the seventeenth century glamorous court fashion (and along with it industry) was stimulated and promoted in France and abroad by Louis XIV and his minister of finance Jean Baptiste Colbert. Their grand visual display of personal, political and economic power was countered in Holland by a totally different ethic and aesthetic.

There the real power lay in the hands of towns and local districts, not at court, and the Dutch regents and merchants sartorially expressed their own 'golden age' in a rather austere fashion, to match their Calvinist ethics and lifestyle, in severe black and white; the fine quality of the lace and fabrics being the only clue to their real wealth.

Paris developed its fashion focus into a tradition, and so did the Netherlands by dressing down. In the belief that focusing on luxury and outward appearance distracted from the essence of life, they sport practical shoes, sports clothes and a casual, not to mention sloppy style. Clothing, even festive wear is invariably tested on the 'can I wear this on the bicycle' scale. So every day is casual Friday and denims are not an unusual sight at the opera. Viktor and Rolf, always the intelligent conceptuals, appropriately clothed the Utrecht Museum attendants in denim outfits - but remained true to their form, and completed these with ironic (oh shades of Louis XIV!) seventeenth-century styled sashes embroidered with the attendant's name.

Could it also have been a question of size? Through the centuries travellers to the Netherlands made mention of the tallness of the Dutch, and especially the bountiful healthiness of the women not suited to the daintiness of Parisian styles.

The start of the twentieth century saw the relatively late rise of the ready to wear industry. The clothing and textile industry initially developed into a strong sector, especially for the low and middle markets, and only changed its form to the more traditional Dutch business model of trade and distribution when faced with cost cutting benefits of the third world. The mercantile tradition led to an extreme preoccupation with value for money which finally degenerated into quantity over quality – even in the case of the rich, the millionaires. In the best sense democratic fashion for the masses, affordable, non hierarchical, casual, like the social structure is supplied by excellent brands like the tough denim brand g-star, the ironic g-sus ... not extreme, but fitting the mould.

The turn of the twentieth century also brought the establishment of the German houses Hirsch & Co. and Maison Kuhne to supply the wealthy with suitable adaptations of Parisian styles, and the curious and culturally rich traditional costumes still worn to this day, albeit by the often ultra-religious elderly, are a paradox of time-frozen development and often plundered by postmodern (student) designers. But design for the top end of the market failed to develop a fashion culture of national signature and international significance until the 1990s.

That other road, that of high fashion, started finding its artistic legitimacy with the initially strongly geometrical designs of the Dutch couturier Frans Molenaar with his circles and squares and later international acclaim for abstract conceptualists Alexander van Slobbe and Nannet van der Kleijn of Orson+Bodil, who themselves paved the way for that renowned duo Viktor & Rolf. The latter seem to form a break from the modernist mould, from less is more to more is more, with their totally extravagant work fitting seamlessly into the traditional fashion tradition – except for the strongly conceptual ideas behind their collections which reveal their roots.

In the postwar period – the fifties – art schools accepted fashion as an important new creative discipline. These strongholds of modernism, influenced by the great masters of De Stijl, Mondrian and Ferrit Rietveld and the Bauhaus ideals of the synthesis of architecture functionality and technology, promoted for all disciplines a break with classical and traditional forms – the pursuit of ultimate form without

historical references or decorative detailing. Like the Bauhaus, education later became more intellectually and conceptually orientated, spreading to all of the eleven higher education fashion schools in the country, art school or not. The artistic validation, increasing self awareness of the youth and the changing times...

This development corresponded roughly in time with the disappearance of technical and production expertise in favour of the cheaper alternatives in far flung countries. The resulting twofold handicap of production backup and fashion tradition turned into a boon for some, providing artistic freedom from the constraints of wearability and industrial production. Belgian designers of the 1990s suffered a similar lack of fashion tradition but were considerably aided by structural state help in forging links with their still existing textile industry. The resulting fashion was and is always more wearable than that of the Dutch, even the work of arch conceptualist Martin Margiela. In both countries the affinity with modernist arts and architecture created independent fashion thinkers who wanted to progress beyond mere beauty, the traditional national reticence paving the way for a different take on gender imagery. More poetic or emotionally loaded than the Dutch, fragile but tough, with a total lack of smiling seduction. Serious. They call it realism.

Of the wind and the cry

Fashion theoretician Guus Beumer, in an essay on fashion in the nineties for the 2000 yearly report of the Dutch arts fund, links the western preoccupation with minimalistic product over stylistic image as essentially rooted in Dutch fashion. He goes on to explain the pivotal place held by the Dutch label Orson+Bodil and their photographer/visualiser Joke Robaard. She saw the body in its formal sense and not the aesthetic quality of the model, the make-up or the styling, as the most important. This led to such extreme images that her early photos for Orson + Bodil were not recognised by the fashion world as fashion shoots but as art. The quiet or recumbent body/figure in a neutral two-dimensional space became just as abstract and formal as the clothing and the quietude and artificiality of the constructed interior space replaced the dynamic and authenticity of the street. This recumbent body became a typically nineties motif in fashion photography – strangely reminiscent of late nineteenth-century imagery of women.

In a time that was ruled by the deconstruction of designers like Belgian Martin Margiela with the authenticity of the street, van der Kleijn and van Slobbe experimented with construction and silhouette, a minimalistic path that led to the re-evaluation and renaissance of couture, previously deemed dead, an anachronism. This fashion turned away from the street and moved towards a more formal and conceptual approach in a search for the stylised perfection of the ultimate garment in all its non referentiality. In the book *Droog & Dutch Design* José Teunissen (fashion lector) and Ida van Zijl (fashion conservator) remark: “inventing variations on standard clothing forms...at a time when fashion was dominated by retro styles, they were coming to grips with garment basics, asking themselves how they could make a blouse or jacket with a form so abstract as to be timeless. Just when the fashion world had come to believe that every possible variation on the themes of ‘skirt’ or ‘shirt’ had been tried, a minimalist path to yet more innovation was opened up.” “What happens if I reposition a seam?” (1998, p19), thinking simply and directly, posing seemingly naive problems/questions to start off and leading the design process seems a constant in the methodology of the designers. A largely formal, more sculptural approach in terms of body and garment which nevertheless makes a statement about the wearer. Stylistic preoccupations previously reputed to the art world like conceptualism, surrealism, deconstructivism, minimalism can also be applied to this Dutch generation as well as a few other mostly northern European designers like the Belgians, Hussein Chalayan and Helmut Lang. And of course the Japanese, especially Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons, the mother of the new wave of thought who blasted Paris and the world at the beginning of the eighties.

The stylised perfection of the ultimate garment was echoed by photographic duo Inez van Lamsweerden/Vinood Matadin who first drew attention with digitally photoshopped images like that of a young child with a rather disturbing face – caused by simply switching its normal mouth for that of an adult and followed that up with asexual nudes without body hair and genitals, like totally unappealing and strangely detached barbie dolls. Playing with perfection and imperfection they enriched the world of fashion photography with their perfect glossy hyperrealism and, according to i-D Magazine, “razor sharp tableaux of clean perversion and awe inspiring beauty” (as quoted in Teunissen, ed, 2006, p130).

In 1994, around about ten years after the Belgian fashion coup of the Antwerp Six and the first Dutch attempt at international attention, 'le vent du nord', another cohort, young designers from the Arnhem Fashion Academy, set out to storm Paris under the title 'le cris néerlandais'. This time it worked and they and van Slobbe who had finally decided to go international with Orson+Bodil, gained the name 'Dutch modernists'. The Netherlands had finally arrived on the international fashion *createur* scene. The Dutch forerunners of 'le vent du nord' had a certain amount of attention, but was a more motley group of designer labels who operated in a more conventional manner, and the fashion world needs a clear and unusual statement to really sit up and take notice. Le cris néerlandais – Saskia van Drimmelen, Pascale Gatzien, Lucas Ossendrijver, Marcel Verheijen and Viktor & Rolf were a new breed with a fitting image. After establishing their reputation at their third presentation – the next phase in hypermodernity, a virtual presentation on CD-ROM – the members each went their own way. Lucas Ossendrijver went on to do Dior Homme (and recently Lanvin), Pascale Gatzien went further into the world of fine art, and the rest struggled on as independents with a little subsidising help from the Dutch government. Only Viktor & Rolf developed fully, especially after finding a backer at the start of the new century.

Akin to the graphic and product design categories mentioned above, José Teunissen divides the nineties Dutch fashion wave into three approaches: the initial sober and refined abstraction of Orson+Bodil and van Drimmelen; the following surreal minimalism of G+N, Aziz Bekkaoui and Niels Klavers and Astrid van Engelen; and the seemingly baroque chaos of Rozema/Teunissen and Keupr/vanBentm. While becoming more colourful and expressive, the new designers nevertheless remained true to their abstract experiments with archetypes and patternmaking, remaining on the sidelines of glamour fashion.

The latest wave of the new millennium has brought different kinds of colour and mindsets through the worlds of immigrant cultures. Aziz Bekkaoui's work seems to fit perfectly in the Dutch context of the late nineties but the richness of his fabrics and dessins may be a hint of his Moroccan background. Hamid Ed-Dakhissi carries on this sensitivity for textiles in more emotionally charged work based on

painstakingly reworking meaningful fabrics in a play on what's hidden and what's revealed.

The black/white mixture of Daryl van Wouw with his large headphones has brought us funky street couture, and Percy Irasquin's Antillian sisters have inspired him to the heights of brightly coloured airy glamour.

So what do I see now?

Extreme normality rules

I see a multi-cultural country in a chaos of polarisation, struggling to regain her balance after the socially devastating assassination of the dandified openly gay but strangely right wing politician, Pim Fortuyn and the messy-looking recalcitrant left wing journalist Theo van Gogh who dared air outspokenly politically incorrect views about foreigners and especially Muslims. I see radical conservatism.

I see many cultural forms being unmasked as elitist and under attack while the globally successful Dutch TV programme *Big Brother* brings Andy Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame to the talentless ordinary individual. The previously so pragmatic Dutch have caught the celebrity bug and the rest of the world, is becoming extremely normal with the same aspirations and fears.

I see the surreal imagery of van Lamsweerden's early photos become real life. Being normal in the most artificial way has taken over – the body itself has become a surreal work of art, dehaired, rehaired, botoxed, liposuctioned, augmented, designer-pubed. I see plastic surgery becoming a new subject at design schools.

I see Nannet van der Kleijn after years of conceptually infusing product designers at the renowned design academy return to her clothing roots as mother of a great new concept – the 'individuals' collection, the student brand label of the Amsterdam Fashion Institute.

I see van Slobbe going back to his roots after the international success of his men's label 'SO' made him realise that he missed the intimacy of the seam and the body. Re-establishing and re-interpreting the name Orson+Bodil he is reviving some of the old designs, every garment touched by his hand.

I see a strong visual statement made by Viktor & Rolf with their latest collection – winter 2007/8. Broadly enveloped in the plainest of national dress and weighed down by spotlights the models struggle down the catwalk on high-heeled clogs.

What could that possibly mean? Where are we heading.....?

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About the author

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Trained firstly as an artist at the university of Cape Town and later as a fashion designer at the Rietveld Academy, I worked as a designer for about twenty years, commercially and on my own more experimental label.

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