

VOLLAERSZWART

**what
you see is
what you
get**

City Dressing

TERRA





SHUT UP SA

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KOI
GEZE
LLIG!



FUGGER



YOU TOO

NO
BACKSTAGE
ACCESS



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Foreword

The inhabitants of Rotterdam have always been proud of their city, and rightly so. However that pride has only recently developed into self-confidence. A self-confidence fitting for a city that is important both in the Netherlands and internationally. This all has to do with what the city looks like, how it views itself and what its image is. Pascal Zwart and Madje Vollaers' work has made an important contribution to this.

At the close of 2009, a touch shy of a year after being inaugurated as Rotterdam's mayor, Studio VollaersZwart created the work Stars. The glittering heavens on the facade of the Delftse Poort; at the time still the tallest building in the country. At night, the myriad lights made the building visible far and wide. Vollaers and Zwart had transformed the architectural milestone into a beacon of the urban life surrounding the tower. Stars was poetic and magical, powerfully present yet not intrusive.

The artists used the city as their – often large-scale – canvas, over and over again. They truly dressed it, giving it a make-over that surprised everyone, time and again; allowing both visitors and Rotterdam's inhabitants to view the city differently. Citydressing as invented and implemented by Studio VollaersZwart has raised Rotterdam's profile enormously. It constitutes a creative, communicative form of city branding unique to Rotterdam. Because you need guts and a drive to innovate and create grand gestures that everyone can experience and appreciate using minimal means.

The latter is important in my opinion. Sharing is a virtue whose value is often underestimated, but which – as far as I am concerned – provides the foundations for the city's liveability and future prosperity. Sharing is key to what Studio VollaersZwart does. They want everyone to be able to take part and share the experience. In turn, Rotterdam wants to share these artists with the rest of the world. I hope this book will contribute to that.

Ahmed Aboutaleb

Mayor of Rotterdam

**Intuitiveness
and a slight
case of mega-
omania; a
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The city as
display, the
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Well over 3,500 bright orange flags irregularly distributed across 32 struts with a total length of six kilometres. *Wish You Were Here* on the Erasmusbrug [bridge in Rotterdam] is easy to express in large numbers. However, this work is more about the associations it elicits than the overwhelming first impression. The flags change the bridge into a gateway, a beacon, a maypole. In port city Rotterdam the link with decorating ships with signalling flags is also easily made. The cloth used is moreover the material that spinnakers are traditionally made of. The orange stands for cooperation that suits the city of 'Hand in hand kameraden' [hand in hand comrades]. Less festive, but exceptionally contemporary is the association with the life vests used by refugees crossing the Mediterranean. Then there are the texts – wishes, poems, pleas – like those on Buddhist prayer flags – that are spelled out in Morse code using the flags. *Wish You Were Here* is a prime example of 'city dressing'. Instantly recognisable as the work of Madje Vollaers and Pascal Zwart, the instigators of this art form. Though 'art form' may be a misnomer. From the start they have positioned themselves outside all existing categories. 'We don't want to belong to anything, are disinterested in the art world,' declares Vollaers resolutely. 'When we started in 1991 we needed our own niche. We were interested in everything: fashion, food, music, sculpture, architecture. We wanted to mash it all up into a fun supermarket of ideas. At the time we didn't have a term for this non-specialist cross-over.'

The objects the duo created were denoted 'haute sculpture' for want of a better term; images as catwalk material. This was followed by exhibition designs that adhered to no standard format. Subsequently, the crucial step was taken to go outside, into the city. Decorations for the 1998 Holland Festival including loud facade banners, posters and flags all in a consistently applied colour scheme marked the beginning of something new. Their national breakthrough came four years later with the wedding of [crown prince and current king] Willem-Alexander and Maxima [current princess]. Studio VollaersZwart 'dressed up' Amsterdam's city centre and from then on 'city dressing' was a thing.

Studio VollaersZwart is generally commissioned to create work. However, most of their assignments are self-initiated, explains Zwart. 'Often occasioned by an event, the major Jean Paul Gaultier retrospective at De Kunsthal, for instance, or the start of the Tour de France in Rotterdam. As soon as we find out, we find the responsible party and arrange a meeting. Design is often an afterthought for this type of event, but we reverse the process. We challenge organisers to be daring. And we often provide our own crowdfunding. Projects fail if you sit around waiting for someone to fund them.'

Vollaers and Zwart work as equal partners, yet creatively they are more akin to Siamese twins. Or, as Vollaers puts it: 'To us, creation is like eating, drinking, fucking and shitting – it's in our blood. We work intuitively and symbiotically. If we start something, we immediately have a vision of it and always agree. Initially quite baroque, we whittle away at it until we reach the stripped down end result. Our work tends towards Pop Art, but also has De Stijl elements.'

Due to the projects' scope a considerable proportion of the work involved consists of logistics and production. Permits have to be applied for, hanging systems need testing, the same seams need to be stitched 10,000 times. 'Foreplay' is how Vollaers and Zwart refer to this, which says something about their love of the creation process. However, they also enjoy the 'afterglow', repurposing discarded materials into insulation panels or bags – something they started doing long before Freitag came up with the idea of using truck canvas. Zwart writes protocols to help the set up and tear down run smoothly. 'But we've become more fluid at that,' he admits. 'In the past, we used to rigidly adhere to the golden section, now we trust our carpenter's eye. And yes, sometimes things have to be modified because conditions suddenly change or there proves to be less funding. We go with the flow when that happens. We're not the type to fret.'

Studio VollaersZwart's work is extremely diverse. A few recurring elements can however be indicated.

Archetypal shape such as stars, circles and hearts are popular. Texts never occur. And if images are used, their sources are obscured. 'We use the city as a display to communicate something, but we aren't missionaries, we don't push a manifesto or a utopia,' states Vollaers. 'Our message isn't political, it's human. Humans want to be united, if only for a brief period of time and that's what we want to give them. With nothing preachy, being together is quite pleasant. That's why sunsets are so nice.' Dimensioning is of crucial importance for such communication, states Zwart, because 'the message can't be read otherwise. Many posters are designed on monitors and prove too itty bitty in real life. City dressing takes it several steps further to city scale. The end result should be self-evident and indistinguishable from the space whilst simultaneously reaching out to the audience.'

Because the latter is an inseparable part of the work. Only when the spark catches and the work becomes an experience does city dressing function properly. It also has to be an active experience; an audience of users, not viewers. Because no message is expressed except that of being together and every individual is free to project their own meaning or explanation onto the work, city dressing is pre-eminently inclusive. However, in Zwart's opinion, it only truly succeeds if it 'goes viral'. 'You can't force people, but you can enthuse them. You can only do so by handing over control. For the start of the year of architecture we covered 40 buildings in Rotterdam with purple labels. Not long afterwards a patio bar was stickered over. A coffin shop put purple coffins in his window. This makes people accessories, co-owners.'

Transience is another crucial city dressing characteristic. Vollaers: 'Permanent things – that's when things become entrenched. Transient things however become a memory. After a work has been torn down we can continue. Only the afterimage remains.'

Studio VollaersZwart is emulated a lot by former staff and students taught by Vollaers. The painting of Brazilian favelas by Haas & Hahn was clearly inspired by city dressing for example. The term has also been adopted by party tent rental companies and flag makers. Advertising agencies that used to work with conventional facade banners have started using large-format coloured fields on facades. The downside of success is that some of these emulators haven't always treated 'the city's skin' with due attention, thereby devaluing the concept.

This is partly why Studio VollaersZwart is increasingly internationally focused as city dressing outside the Netherlands is still in its infancy. Their first international assignment dates back to 2001 when the duo 'dressed' the Droog Design presentation at the Milanese Salone del Mobile. Projects in, among other places, China, the Cape Verdes Islands and Curacao followed. In some cases prior successes were repeated, but always with unexpected effects. A good example is The Tunnel of Love installation in Istanbul in 2015. Vollaers: 'The opening was on 13 November, the day on which the terrorist attacks took place in Paris. The following day the audience wrote anti-IS messages on the hearts, took photos of them and disseminated them using the internet. Our language was understood, but the Turkish people had a whole different take on it. The experience is universal.'







wish you were here

Erasmusbrug, Rotterdam, 2016





2016 is special in many ways. It marks 75 years of reconstruction in Rotterdam, the 20th anniversary of the iconic Erasmusbrug [bridge] and a quarter of a century of Studio VollaersZwart. All these elements come together in Wish You Were Here. The work is based on a prior VollaersZwart design created for Queen Beatrix's abdication two years ago, but which was never carried out due to Prince Friso's death. Wish You Were Here was inspired by the practice of festively dressing up ships with signalling flags as well as Buddhist traditional prayer flags, though the artists take it to a whole new level. The installation includes 3,500 flags attached to six km of cable lining the bridge's braces using 7,000 tie-wraps. Their installation by eight climbers who abseiled the bridge was quite a spectacle and attracted a lot of media attention. The flags spell out quotes and wishes by Rotterdam celebrities in Morse code. Their orange colour symbolises the spirit of cooperation the city takes pride in. The spinnaker cloth they're made of is pretty rigid and when the wind blows the flags snap against the metal structure making it sound like the bridge is applauding Rotterdam, its accomplishments and its inhabitants.





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tiaras
for máxima

Bridges over the Binnendieze urban
river in 's-Hertogenbosch, 2002

