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Viktor & Rolf:

because

they're

worth it

Amsterdam's playful yet distant fashion designers have won acclaim for blurring the boundary between clothes and art. They've crossed another line, too, in becoming famous beyond the Dutch borders. But building an international fashion house takes a team. *Amsterdam Index* spoke to Viktor & Rolf and others who've worked with them. The resulting portraits show what unites Viktor & Rolf with collaborators like photographers Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin, graphic designers Mevis & Van Deursen, shoe designer Freddie Stevens and music producer Eddy de Clercq – from an affinity with Amsterdam to a modernist, critical stance.

Faith in fashion

Faith in

Viktor & Rolf have become notorious for the ironic, conceptual-art-like way they present their clothing designs to the public. Yet they're not making fun of fashion but communicating a fascination with its 'aura'.

by Dirk van Weelden
photography by Freudenthal & Verhagen

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Faith in fashion

‘The aura is the power that charges clothes, that makes them interesting enough to tell a story, to convey an idea. The clothes are the actors. We’re performance artists.’



Above: Viktor & Rolf’s fall/winter 2005/2006 show.
(photos: Peter Stigter)

Left: Le Parfum, 1996.
(photo: Wendelien Daan)

> Featuring the same font, colours and design used for Chanel’s classic No 5 perfume, a small square bottle of golden liquid lies in a model’s open hand. The label reads ‘Viktor & Rolf Le Parfum’. The bottle appears to be sealed with wax. So much has been used that it’s dripping from the stopper and out of the young woman’s hand and pooling on the light purple surface she’s lying on. Nude and with short dark hair, she is pictured from the chest up, and looks as if she has fallen backward. Her mouth is open: she could be sleeping, unconscious, or even dead. Her eyes are open but rolled back into her head.

The funny yet somewhat sinister image was part of Viktor & Rolf’s ‘virtual perfume’ presentation at the Torch Gallery in 1996. The model’s pale face, her temples and the areas around her eyes feature golden smears – exactly the same colour as the virtual perfume. Or rather, the coloured water in the unopenable bottle.

A year earlier, Viktor & Rolf had shown a collection of gold-coloured women’s clothing hanging from invisible threads, entitled *The Manifestation of Emptiness*, in the Patricia Dorfman Gallery in Paris. But the nonexistent perfume and the decoration of emptiness with golden bows are not the expressions of artists seeking to criticise the sophisticated fraudulence of the fashion and scent industries. Rather, despite their obvious irony, the images show Viktor & Rolf’s fascination and doubts about what they see as the secret power of fashion. The immaterial character of the beauty, perfection and elegance people see in the products of the fashion industry is what animates them and makes them irresistible.

This mysterious, eternally elusive quality can exist separately from the fashion shows and their models, separately from the customers who wear the clothes, even separately from the availability of

the product. Even a virtual product can evoke it. But if the picture accompanying the nonexistent perfume carries the biting humour of a parody advert – scent as *coup de grâce* – alongside the slapstick, Viktor & Rolf’s seriousness also emerges. Fashion’s added element of mystery and immateriality is not only pleasing and intoxicating but also dangerous, even deadly. Stimulants and remedies can also be poisons.

Fashion as art form ~ It wasn’t an aversion to fashion that prompted the designers to use silhouettes of homeless people on the underground to model their apparel. Nor was it the reason they sewed together secondhand rags and new clothes. Or why they dressed a model in nine outfits at once for a fashion show, turning her into a motionless giant dress, a baroque spacecraft with just enough room for the pilot’s face to peek out. Like the virtual perfume and the dressing of empty space, these acts were ways for Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren to experimentally investigate what fashion was and how it worked. And most of all, how they could use it to express their ideas about fashion and beauty.

Perhaps some people were suspicious at first of the associations with conceptual art. Weren’t Viktor & Rolf mainly interested in performance and publicity? Did they really believe in fashion? Horsting says that, although he and Snoeren had both wanted to be fashion designers since they were little, they had had a rather idealised view of fashion. They said they had grown up as provincial boys in boring suburbs surrounded by mediocrity. Fashion was a world of wealth, excitement and beauty, and an escape from their dismal backgrounds. They saw it as an art form they could use to express their imaginations and thoughts.

“In the beginning, we felt mainly anger and frustration,” he says. “That proved to be very productive. The fashion world is an industry, and we had to learn to stick to certain codes and rules. It took ages before we had any kind of success, or so it seemed to us at the time.”

The secret of Viktor & Rolf is not that they take up a critical position outside fashion, but rather that they harbour an intense, almost excessive, unrealistic belief in it. The uniqueness of their work, its humour, the complex performances, the strange twists and turns: it all comes from the clash between Viktor & Rolf’s imaginary view of fashion and the actual industry their work has given them access to. The playfulness in their work is made possible by an almost childlike earnestness and imagination – an uninhibited total dedication to the notion that a true fashion designer is an artist whose work reflects his own untranslatable desires, obsessions, experiences, doubts and fantasies. Viktor & Rolf are keenly aware that the images, moments and clothing they create can actually touch people, because they indirectly reveal some part of the uncertain quest for unattainable beauty, honesty, and tenderness. This is because a part of that childlike earnestness shines through. The lightness and irony, the mystification and absurdity subtly refer to the doubt, insecurity and pain that have been conquered. They are the hallmark of contemporary intelligent style.

Behind the golden seal ~ I’ve come to visit Viktor Horsting and Rolf Snoeren in their villa on Amsterdam’s Hobbemastraat. The gold logo hanging on the front gleams in the sun, and looks even bigger than it is. It’s so huge, so emphatically old-fashioned, that it’s comical rather than imposing. When I sat down with the designers

and their dogs in a virtually empty drawing room, they looked at me expectantly, apparently not eager to take the floor for very long. So I started to talk about fashion’s magical aspect, its illusionism, its game of creating an experience of something that doesn’t really exist.

Snoeren calls this an ‘aura’. “It comes from the desire for unattainable perfection,” he says. “But we want to use it as a vehicle. It’s the power that charges clothes, makes them interesting enough to tell a story, to convey an idea. The clothes are the actors. We’re performance artists. The shows are really the work; they’re where everything comes together – the designs, the ideas, the images, the humour, the words, the music. It’s where everything is at a maximum.”

Earlier in our conversation, Horsting emphasised the commercial aspect of fashion. “A designer needs a large audience, which you can gain only by having commercial success. That’s hard enough as it is. We make it even harder on ourselves by wanting to use our work to tell a story. The clothes alone aren’t enough. In fact, we’re building a parallel world, the best and most beautiful world possible, in contrast to reality.”

I mention that I’ve noticed that in Viktor & Rolf’s universe, a certain emphasis is placed on keeping a distance from the world of film and TV and its stars, as well as avoiding both suggested and explicit sexual imagery. Horsting is clear: “We shun the cult of celebrity because we don’t want to be part of someone else’s story. We have our own story. And that can only be maintained with the necessary distance. Of course fashion is sexy, but we’re looking for an alternative image of that.”

Snoeren says something surprising, which immediately reminds me of the virtual perfume campaign. “Flowerbomb. That’s us all >

Gert Jonkers and Jop van Bennekom

"Apart from being friends with them, we share a mutual ambition with Viktor & Rolf relating to the international world of fashion and contemporary culture. Especially with *Fantastic Man*, we also share their interest in a certain kind of more

mature, 'real' man. Their Viktor & Rolf Monsieur line has always been pitched to a slightly older man, and with *Fantastic Man* we ask ourselves: what do actual real-life, grown-up fantastic men wear? It surely has something to do with being based in Amsterdam, where the 'fashion is for teenagers' rules of the international

fashion in crowd aren't something we're confronted with every hour of the day."

Fashion journalist and editor Gert Jonkers and art director Jop van Bennekom (also of Re-Magazine) publish BUTT magazine and the 'gentlemen's style journal' Fantastic Man.



Viktor & Rolf are keenly aware that the images, moments and clothing they create can touch people, because they indirectly reveal some part of the quest for unattainable beauty, honesty, and tenderness.

the way. It's the ultimate. We created it and designed it all on our own, but it's invisible and fleeting. It has a fantastic aura. It evokes a world of beauty and tenderness, but it's cheeky and playful." Horsting finishes the thought: "For a fashion designer, a perfume of your own is a trophy. It's a dream come true. We can get so depressed by the difference between our ideas about the aura and the actual products. But that isn't an issue with the perfume. It can't be spoiled – it's immaterial."

A silence falls, and Viktor & Rolf look at me like Buster Keaton in a silent movie, one in which chaotic and violent things happen, things which are funny but also mysterious and even grim, thanks to Keaton's expressionless countenance: a blank stare, devoid of all emotion. They wait for each other, and for me. I ponder how well the V&R logo reflects their collaboration. A sturdy circle encompasses the ampersand that connects their initials. In my eyes, it is not the letter O, but a line, a border, representing a gesture designed to keep others at arm's length no matter what. Nothing and no one may disturb or contaminate the searching, hypersensitive, doubting, dreaming dynamic between the two men. The letters V and R stand for two figures in the media and the fashion world who make sure the parallel universe gets a chance to show itself. The logo symbolises the process that dissolves the apparent contradiction between commercial success and independent artistry. It stands for the ultimate magic trick: conquering your past, your darkness, your father, and the system by creating your own imaginary world, which is enough in itself. The V&R logo stands for everything that happens between Viktor and Rolf: a carefully concealed shadowy game involving the search for an antidote, an elixir that can serve as a stimulant, a remedy, and a deadly weapon.

And what is that antidote? A style: a concept of beauty that refuses to reflect mainstream culture. And one that absolutely refuses to graft itself onto a culture of outdated elites and hierarchies. A style that celebrates individualism, inventiveness, intelligence and tenderness – not for fun or for show, but out of conviction. This is what lies at the heart of the playfulness, the festiveness, the craftsmanship, and the commercial bravura. And one can admire Viktor & Rolf for that.

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'I don't think Holland really knows how to appreciate this splendour.'

Siebe Tettero

The man who designed Viktor & Rolf's store in Milan criticises the Netherlands for its bourgeois drabness and failure to nurture creativity, and admires the duo for the way they shake things up.

~
by Mo Veld

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Siebe Tettero started as a retail architect in the 1980s in New York, where he was one of the creative minds of the Ralph Lauren style empire. In 1999 he met Rolf Snoeren. They've been in a personal relationship ever since, and later began working together.

"I started to work with Viktor & Rolf in the typical way," Tettero says. "It was almost by accident. They never do a regular selection procedure. It just develops and grows from dialogue. The idea for their store in Milan came from Viktor & Rolf themselves. They said, 'We want it upside down.' And I said, 'OK, that can be done - let's do it.' I got Sherrie Zwaal of SZI Design involved, and we went through a long process of style development. It had to be very archetypal, so people would recognise it even upside down. We decided on a neoclassical style, and it became a boudoir-like salon.

"Viktor & Rolf are very controversial, very naughty. They really turn the fashion world upside down, tearing everything open all the time. They make these giant, daring steps all the time. I don't think Holland really knows how to appreciate this splendour. Also, we don't really know theatre. We don't like the theatrical. It's still the 'embarrassment of riches', like in the Golden Age."

Even then, he says, Dutch clothing was drab. "We were extremely rich, we dressed in lacy luxury, but it had to look plain, like cotton. In the Netherlands everything is regulated, levelled around the collectivity of the bourgeoisie. We suffocate in this collective environment; there's no air, no space to breathe."

Utrecht Biennale ~ Coming to the conclusion that there was little space for an architect to build anything unique, Tettero

turned to art. He is now head of exhibitions at the Centraal Museum in Utrecht and recently became involved in the Utrecht Manifest, a new biennial design event featuring discussions and exhibitions. "The focus is to get designers and the public to arrive at a conscientious position on preserving our environment and resources, and consequently on a more constructive social climate," he says. "It's a very exciting project, all about research and the unknown. The one in October 2005 was the first of five to be held over the next ten years.

"But at the political level, we are encountering the shortsighted vision of the local and federal governments, which are major sponsors. They are looking to see an impact on the economy by next year. It just doesn't work like that. This will take a long time." Tettero is also critical about the idea of the 'creative class' currently under discussion among Amsterdam's creative establishment. "Richard Florida said a city can only survive if it makes space for its creative class," he says. "Viktor & Rolf are recognised as part of the 'creative class' - but they might as well live and work abroad, because in Amsterdam there's no structure in which they can con-

tribute to the city. Their production happens abroad, so do their shows, and 99 percent of their customers are abroad as well. Their context is international. If anything, they are Dutch contemporary artists."

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Siebe Tettero is an architect and has been head of exhibitions at the Centraal Museum in Utrecht since 2002. He designed Viktor & Rolf's first exhibition in Japan, and most recently, their 'upside-down' store in Milan.

Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen

‘I was proud when I saw that big golden seal on the façade of their headquarters opposite the Rijksmuseum.’

The curator recalls putting together Viktor & Rolf’s exhibition in 1997 and praises them for inspiring other local talent.

~
by Mo Veld

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> The Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, the Stedelijk Museum’s downtown gallery, is devoted to showing cutting-edge art by up-and-coming Dutch and foreign artists. Director Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen curated Viktor & Rolf’s exhibition *Le Régard Noir* there in the spring of 1997. “I’d read about ‘Le Parfum’, their ‘conceptual fragrance’,” he says. “It was the time when

things were starting to open up between art, design, fashion and music. Viktor & Rolf’s project seemed to fit with the mid-’90s trend of looking for connections between different artistic realms and creating opportunities for interdisciplinary exchange.”

Around the same time, the SMBA was also showing work by Inez van Lamsweerde, Pascal Gatzien, and Niels Schumm and Anuschka Blommers, and the graphic designs of Experimental Jetset.

It was Van Nieuwenhuyzen’s first experience working with people from the fashion world. “It was a period of getting to know each other and kind of sounding out each other’s aesthetic frames of reference,” he says.

“With *Le Régard Noir*, Viktor & Rolf created a strangely beautiful environment that was supposed to reflect the transitory nature of fashion. They created several deliberately half-finished black designs, which were displayed on shop-window dummies hanging from the ceiling. There was very loud, disorienting hardcore house music, and stroboscopic lighting. You only got glimpses of the exhibition. It was hard to grasp what was going on. It was a fleeting, fragmented experience. Since that show, we’ve had an ongoing interest in each other’s personal and professional lives. I was proud when I saw that big golden seal on the façade of their headquarters opposite the Rijksmuseum. Wow! It’s such a good thing that they’ve chosen to work from Amsterdam instead of moving

to Paris or New York. It really is a boost for Dutch artistic self-esteem.”

Venice Biennale ~ 2005 has been a special year for Van Nieuwenhuyzen: he was chosen to curate the Dutch presentation at the Venice Biennale. “We [the SMBA] produced the film installation *Mandarin Ducks* by Jercoen de Rijke and Willem de Rooij. It caused quite a stir, as it deliberately did not live up to the image people have of De Rijke and De Rooij’s work. It is a narrative film that’s highly stylised. Through a set of characters, the artists explore tensions between people, in particular in those areas where the personal mirrors social and political conflicts. People were either totally impressed or rabidly against it. It’s been a long time since I experienced such totally contrasting views and intense debates about a work of art. So it must be good.”

Van Nieuwenhuyzen is positive about Amsterdam’s artistic climate. “This really is a place where artists can experiment and push their work in new directions without overtly having to deal with the demands of the market,” he says. “It’s kind of a free space and testing ground.”

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Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen is head of the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam (SMBA), a 300-square-metre project space of the Stedelijk Museum.



A creation from Viktor & Rolf’s fall/winter 2003 collection.

Photo: Anuschka Blommers & Niels Schumm

Anuschka Blommers and Niels Schumm

“Jop van Bennekom introduced us to Viktor & Rolf. Without them we probably wouldn’t have become fashion photographers. It was a time when it seemed natural for fashion to embrace art and vice versa. This made fashion interesting to us. Viktor & Rolf were making fashion statements about the fashion industry. We made fashion photos about fashion photography. “We did a lot of portraits of Viktor & Rolf. They were very conscious

about marketing themselves. The portraits had an extra layer; they referred to fashion history and the glamour and celebrity mechanism. But the fashion business has become much more commercial because of the economic recession, and the art world is turning its back on its flirtation with glamour. “We’re now researching a project about Christian church authorities for an exhibition in the Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht. The show will open in March 2006. We’re visiting people in churches in the

smallest villages, and it’s fascinating to see where our Dutch nature comes from – the lack of extravagance, everything so normal and levelled out. But there are also excessive phenomena, like young girls starving themselves for their faith, which sort of connects to the fashion world. We’ll have our first solo exhibition in February 2006 at the Groninger Museum. And we’re working with Jop van Bennekom on a book to be launched at the same time. It’s not going to be your average catalogue. We plan to mix it all up

– fashion, stills, portraits, everything out of context. We’re still looking for that extra layer in our work.”

Niels Schumm and Anuschka Blommers worked as Viktor & Rolf’s in-house photographers in the early years. They also work for magazines like i-D, Purple, Selfservice, RE-Magazine and Fantastic Man.

‘We need young,
daring new alternatives.’

From left:
Eddy de Clercq,
Anuschka Blommers
and Niels Schumm.



Eddy de Clercq

The producer of musical backdrops for Viktor & Rolf's shows has been famous in his own right since he co-founded the arty nightclub RoXY.

by Mo Veld

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> Nightlife provocateur Eddy de Clercq, a legend in his own right, understands what it takes to put on a show. "My job is about the passion involved in creating a sound that expresses what the designers want to bring across to their audience," he says. "When Viktor & Rolf asked me what I would do to introduce them for the first time in Paris, I immediately came up with the idea of repeating their names over and over, so they would stick. As it turned out, Viktor & Rolf had done this before at a presentation, but using the names of famous models – Claudia, Naomi, Esther and so on. I didn't know that; my idea to create this Viktor and Rolf 'mantra' just seemed like a natural next step."

De Clercq himself had to miss out on that first Paris couture show, for spring-summer 1998, which featured his unforgettable 'mantra' soundtrack, as he was DJing in Brazil at the time. "I saw the video back in Amsterdam, and it was actually my first encounter with their work," he says. "It was more art than fashion. Very inspiring." Ever since, the Belgian producer has provided the sound for all Viktor & Rolf's shows apart from their first prêt-à-porter collection, *American Pie*, and their fall-winter 2005 collection.

"Viktor and Rolf give me total freedom," De

Clercq says. "I start with just a few drawings of the collection and a rough idea of what the show should be about. Then I start visualising the space, how the models will walk, what the show's effect should be. My own style shares the core values of Viktor & Rolf: it's self-willed, high-quality, traditional with a twist, innovative. Music is atmosphere."

Creating the legendary RoXY ~ Conjuring a unique atmosphere is one of De Clercq's main goals when he starts a new project. "I started DJing in '74," he says. "DJs are pop stars now, but back then a DJ was merely an entertainer, creating an atmosphere, a dream world. My first club of my own, De Koer, on Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal, was a pre-new-wave club that played punk, disco, electro, and sixties music. We were the first to serve cocktails. The space was very big and high and white – a very luxurious atmosphere."

"Later, I founded Club RoXY together with Peter Giele and Arjen Schram, and became the art director and DJ. I was following my own intuition, creating a club that was really nice – positive and safe, glamorous and exciting, and new. The audience had to contribute something as well, dressing up, getting the best dancers in. Of course we were inspired by clubs we'd seen abroad, but we

'My style shares the core values of Viktor & Rolf: self-willed, high-quality, innovative.'

didn't copy anything. The location itself was our main inspiration; it was bigger than life."

The RoXY met its notorious end in the summer of 1999, burning down on the night Peter Giele's unforeseen passing was being marked with a big party. After that, De Clercq's attention shifted away from club life and towards producing music. But he hasn't lost his critical voice when it comes to the city's nightlife. He says he's not inspired by the sounds around at the moment. "We need young, daring new alternatives," De Clercq says. "And like Viktor & Rolf, they need time to grow and innovate and build a name for themselves."

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Producer and former club owner and DJ Eddy de Clercq has been Viktor & Rolf's 'sound designer' since their first Paris couture show in 1998.

Armand Mevis & Linda van Deursen



Mevis & Van Deursen's invitation for Viktor & Rolf's fall/winter 2005/2006 show.

The design team behind the seal control Viktor & Rolf's graphic identity, from invitations to magazines.

by Mo Veld

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> Armand Mevis and Linda van Deursen both trained at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy and have worked together under the name Mevis & Van Deursen since 1986. They are known for playing a critical role in modernising the Dutch graphic design scene. "Most of our clients are local," says Van Deursen. "We don't necessarily see this as a bad thing. We have to accept what it means to be so-called Dutch designers. The language we speak and communicate through design is highly specific, and it is only possible to use this language within this cultural environment. At the same time, it is looked at very carefully worldwide. Despite the fact that most of the work we do is marginal, we believe it has a relatively big influence on graphic design worldwide."

Their first work for Viktor & Rolf was the design of an invitation for the clothing designers' exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam; Mevis & Van Deursen also do most of the graphic design for the gallery. Shortly after the exhibition, Viktor & Rolf asked Mevis & Van Deursen to design an invitation for their first couture show in Paris. Assignments for many more invitations, publications, and a graphic identity for the Viktor & Rolf label followed. "It took us a while to understand and accept the

margins that we were supposed to work in,” says Van Deursen. “Their terms were in fact perfectly clear, what they wanted and what they needed. But at the same time, our work was so detached from the language of fashion that it was really hard to work within the existing vocabulary. Fashion was almost too easy and too service-oriented. It was only because we valued the work of Viktor & Rolf so much that we accepted to play along and to support their ideas as much as we could.

“We can’t say everything we’ve done for them is perfect, but we are very proud of the seal, most of the invitations, and the issue of ABCDE magazine ‘Viktor & Rolf par Viktor et Rolf,’” says Van Deursen. “Fashion was fast asleep until they came along. But their work is interesting in far more ways than just in terms of fashion; it is interesting despite fashion. To do what they have achieved would be impossible for an individual; you’d need to clone yourself.”

Recollected Work ~ The ABCDE magazine functioned as a catalogue on the occasion of Viktor & Rolf’s tenth anniversary. Viktor & Rolf came up with the idea of using their ten-year press archive, and Mevis & Van Deursen simply reproduced the material in the form of a fashion magazine. Recently Mevis & Van Deursen published a book about their own work over the last fifteen years, *Recollected Work*. For this book, too, they used archival material in a special way. “We always find it problematic to reproduce or exhibit our work,” says Van Deursen. “Especially because it’s shown out of context. In the end, we decided not to focus on reproducing the work well or trying to make it clear, but instead to concentrate on the formal aspects of our work. We made new pictures for the book, each one constructed out of at least two works – sometimes as many as eight – simply piled up or placed next to each other. We used an archive of printed matter we’ve made over the past fifteen years. This allowed us to show the relationships between recent and older work. In making the images we were also concerned with form, colour and composition. This collection of fragments may not look edited, but it definitely reveals preferences for certain images and typography.”

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Jerry Ornek

“For every occasion – a trip, a magazine shoot, an important meeting – Viktor & Rolf come to me to get their hair done. They’re very pleasant; we chit-chat about all kinds of things. But if it’s about their hair, I listen more to what they don’t say. We’re working towards a new look right now, much more dandyish.

That severe image has got to go. But they have quite different hair. So we’ll have to let go of this idea of an identical look.”

Jerry Ornek is co-owner of the hair salon Headline and has been Viktor & Rolf’s personal hairdresser for the past four years.

Femke Wolting

“I have a lot of respect for their combined artistic and business talent. They’re old-fashioned couturiers and highly contemporary designers at the same time, and have managed to establish themselves in both the commercial fashion arena and the art world. Without being supported by a stimulating environment, they’ve

stood firm and conquered the world with their talent and high ambition. I look forward to making a sequel about Viktor & Rolf in ten years’ time.”

Filmmaker Femke Wolting founded the multimedia production company Submarine with Bruno Felix in 2000. For the documentary Because We’re Worth It!, she followed Viktor & Rolf from the 2003

Viktor & Rolf’s graphic identity since the beginning, designing logos, invitations and publications for the duo. Armand Mevis and Linda van Deursen both teach in the Netherlands (Van Deursen at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy and Mevis at the Typography Workshop) as well as the US (both at the Yale University School of Art).

From left: Linda van Deursen, Armand Mevis and interviewer Mo Veld.



Mevis & Van Deursen’s invitations for Viktor & Rolf’s spring/summer 2004 show

“Our work was so detached from the language of fashion that it was really hard to work within the existing vocabulary.”



opening of their exhibition in the Louvre until the Flowerbomb show and perfume launch in 2005.

At the end of 2005 Because We’re Worth It! will be available on DVD in selected shops and at www.submarinechannel.com/shop.

Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin

‘Because we’ve been together from the very start, the boys feel a bit like our children.’



‘Me Kissing Vinoodh Passionately’ (1999).

The photographers’ willingness to question and experiment and their refusal to separate art from fashion have won them star status in both worlds.

~
by Mo Veld

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Vivianne Sassen

“I remember I always felt so beautifully wrapped in their clothes, like an expensive bonbon or a very special gift. It was great to be part of their creative process – the shows, the shoots, the fittings. Rolf used to do a lot of the photos himself, like for the *Viktor & Rolf On Strike* campaign. I’m most proud of my one and only perfume campaign, even if it was a fake perfume at the time. And – oh, vanity – complete collections used to be tailored to my body, and nobody would fit in them except those skinny

girls in Paris. That feeling of exclusivity; those wonderful creations that had to be taken off so carefully, sometimes Viktor & Rolf would even be wearing gloves – it felt sensational. Royal, almost. They made my girly childhood dreams come true.”

Photographer and art-school classmate Vivianne Sassen was Viktor & Rolf’s model in the early years of their career, before going her own way to shoot distinctive fashion series for magazines like Purple Fashion and a campaign for Prada.

> Amsterdam may well remember a billboard displayed at the old Canon Image Center near the Leidseplein that lit up its already liberated image in 1992. It featured a cool, catlike blonde woman in a couture dress and high heels who was licking a mirror-like floor. It was 1992, and the photographer, Inez van Lamsweerde, had won the PANL Kodak award the year before.

After that, she and her partner, Vinoodh Matadin, provocatively exposed ladies on the underside of the drawbridge near the Hortus Botanicus. The women stared with near-pornographic boldness at us from the photographs as we waited for the bridge to close. But feminist activists cut viewers’ pleasure short. Then the bold new art and fashion magazine *BLVD* became a platform for Van Lamsweerde and Matadin’s wild imaginations for a while.

The duo have been close friends and sparring partners with Viktor & Rolf since their graduation days. “We started our journey into fashion and art at around the same time as Viktor & Rolf, taking part in the exhibition *L’Hiver d’amour* in Paris,” Van Lamsweerde says. “At the opening, we discovered that we had exactly the same ideas, which they transformed into a collection and we made into a photo.

“We felt – and we still do – like a block of

energy, firing sparks everywhere, lighting up paths about to be explored. We reinforce each other in the idea that you should do everything in your own unique way. Our work always originates from a feeling about the times we live in, which is why it is easy to translate these ideas into different disciplines. This mutual inspiration is the most important thing. Because we’ve been together from the start, the boys feel a bit like our children.”

Cultural gap ~ Van Lamsweerde and Matadin sensed a huge gap between themselves and the Dutch cultural elite, and they decided to move to New York in 1995 to start over. Their refusal to separate art from fashion, their questioning of dominant concepts of beauty, and their explorations of the effects of computer-enhanced images – a novelty at the time – resulted in intelligent, amazing, sometimes shocking images.

Ten years down the line, Van Lamsweerde and Matadin have achieved a near-untouchable status as both fashion and art photographers. They are represented by several galleries and have contributed to the Venice Biennale. “We work between art and fashion without distinguishing between the two disciplines,” Van Lamsweerde says. “All our work is very human: it’s about feelings and

our fascination with people and their relationships with each other. To us, the picture ‘Me Kissing Vinoodh Passionately’ is the perfect combination of computer and photography. The visualisation of an inner story – in this case, about loss, love and eternity – comes out perfectly in this image.”

At the moment, Van Lamsweerde and Matadin have their hands more than full, with not only a newborn son, Charles, but also a big exhibition at the Matthew Marks Gallery in New York. “We have found our ideal way of life, travelling, meeting and working with the most talented people around,” says Van Lamsweerde. “It makes our job really great, and we hope to keep doing it for a long, long time.”

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Rietveld Academy-educated photographer Inez van Lamsweerde and then-fashion designer Vinoodh Matadin teamed up in 1991. They began working as fashion photographers and at the same time building a name in the art world. Their client list includes magazines like Visionaire and Vogue and designer labels like Yohji Yamamoto, Louis Vuitton, Gucci and Viktor & Rolf.

Fredie Stevens

From left:
Viktor & Rolf's
long-time model
Nathalie and designer
Fredie Stevens.

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Viktor & Rolf's in-house shoe designer has made an international name for herself alongside them, in a business that's even tougher than the rag trade.

~
by Mo Veld

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> Fredie Stevens was still studying design in Arnhem when her teacher, the late Berry Burn, put her in touch with Viktor & Rolf. They decided to use her shoes in their first presentation in Paris, and the collaboration was a successful one. "We shared the ambition of showing our work to an international audience," Stevens says. "But on a personal level, too, we connected very well, and so we decided to present our collections together at galleries and shows in Paris for several seasons. I also started freelancing for some foreign brands, Martin Margiela for example, and I set up a new high-end label, Red, for an Italian shoe manufacturer." The shoe business is even tougher than the rag trade, but Stevens' star rose alongside Viktor & Rolf's with equal speed. "All the while, we exchanged practical experiences, and advised each other on creative as well as business matters," she says. "Thinking back now to my very first shoe collection in my third year at school, and the first designs I sold during my internships in Paris and London, it's been quite an adventure all along, all starting with money I borrowed from my family. "When Viktor & Rolf started to become a real business, it was only natural for me to become a part of that. I've been designing their shoe collections and accessories four times a year ever since. And I am captivated by the challenge of designing the best

shoe for each new season. Looking for new shapes, reinterpreting a classic feature or creating a new heel, for instance. My way of designing shoes is very artisanal: I learned to make them them by hand, couture-style." Rather than making a sketch, like most shoe designers do, Stevens moulds their shapes by hand.

"The design process of the clothes goes hand in hand with the shoe designs," she says. "Viktor & Rolf and I inspire each other with techniques, materials and shapes along the way. My workload is also growing. I used to design two show collections; now it's four prêt-à-porter collections a year. I'm really excited. I can't wait for the shoes to arrive at Shoebaloo and Metz & Co."

- Ω -

Shoe designer Fredie Stevens graduated from the Arnhem Academy of Art and Design and has been collaborating with Viktor & Rolf since they started. She is now a full-time member of their team. Stevens has also developed her own shoe line and designed for several other labels, including Martin Margiela.





‘We’re building a parallel world,
the best and most beautiful world
possible, in contrast to reality.’

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Frank Bruggeman

"I still remember the moment when *Flowerbomb* started. When my co-workers and I arrived in Paris, after a stressful drive with our truck full of flowers, Viktor & Rolf took a look inside. They seemed thrilled to see that I'd bought all kinds of pink and red flowers, and enjoyed the fact that we'd driven all that way inside a real 'flower bomb'!"

Rotterdam-based artist Frank Bruggeman specialises in nature and design, and exploring the boundary between cultivated nature and wilderness. He has designed floral decorations for Viktor & Rolf's exhibition in the Louvre, a wedding bouquet to match Princess Mabel's Viktor & Rolf dress, and an immense flower arrangement for the launch of Flowerbomb.