

# A new way into understanding clothes

# Christel Vesters





*Elisa van Joolen works at the intersection of fashion, art and design. Her projects often investigate everyday phenomena and emphasise collaboration and participation. Her ongoing project PORTAL explores a new ‘way into’ understanding clothing as part of a network of personal, economic, social and cultural contexts.*

For a long time, a designer was considered to be a creator and developer of new things—furniture, clothing, buildings, books, etcetera—paying attention to function, aesthetic form, or both. With growing awareness of the negative social, economic and ecological impacts of the global ‘fast fashion’ industry and our (mass) consumer culture in general, for a growing number of designers, including Dutch artist and designer Elisa van Joolen, object making no longer seems to be the primary purpose. ‘There are enough “things” in the world as it is,’ Van Joolen says, ‘instead of focusing our creative energy on making new things from scratch, why not pay attention to the things that are already here?’<sup>1</sup>



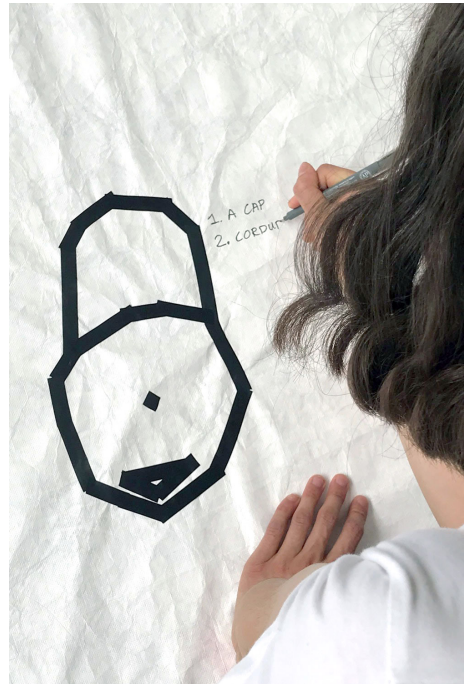
So, when Van Joolen was invited to participate in the 2017 design exhibition *Change the System* at Museum Boijmans van Beuningen<sup>2</sup>, she was reluctant at first. Uninterested in putting yet another new design object or fashion item on display for visitors to passively gaze at, Van Joolen decided to focus on the objects that we already have, turning the tables and giving the visitor agency over the project by making them an active agent in the ‘design process’. With this decision, Van Joolen not only questions the role of the object and visitor; she also critically addresses her role as a maker-designer. ‘I was interested in learning from the people who use the objects that we make, in listening and collaborating, instead of making another statement.’<sup>3</sup>

#### PORTAL 001

Van Joolen’s participatory research project **PORTAL**, which developed from her interest in how different garments worn by different people might be related, had piloted the previous year during her residency at the IASPIS Arts Programme in Stockholm.<sup>4</sup> Curious to see what the project’s outcome might



be in a different context, Van Joolen decided to use the invitation extended by Museum Boijmans van Beuningen to do a Rotterdam version: **PORTAL 001**. **PORTAL 001** consisted of four phases, the first three taking place on-site and the final taking place in Van Joolen's studio. This has become the format for ensuing editions.



### Phase 1: Gathering the research objects

Visitors entering the exhibition space were invited to participate in the research by volunteering an item of clothing worn by them that day and answering some questions about it. If they accepted the invitation, visitors were asked to take off the garment in question and to lay it down on a crispy white sheet of Tyvek covering the museum floor.<sup>5</sup> Next, they were asked to trace around the item's edges with black tape, creating an abstract imprint before putting their garment back on again. Over time, more items of clothing were added. Socks, sweaters, t-shirts, scarfs, shoes, belts, and the occasional bra, transformed the white floor into a landscape of black contours; remnants of their owner's presence, like the outlines of bodies at a multiple-crime scene.

### Phase 2: Gathering data

Once the garment outlines were traced Van Joolen and her assistants, in this instance students from ArtEZ MA Fashion Strategy, interviewed each participant, penning the answers down on the Tyvek sheet. The interviews started with a set of questions created to determine some basic facts about the garment: What is it? What material is it made of? What colour is it? Where was it made? The next set of questions pertained to the item's history as a commodity: Did you buy the item yourself or was it a gift? Is it new or second hand? Did you buy it online or offline? How much did it cost?

Let's pause here for a minute and contemplate what this gesture means. First of all, the act of removing a piece of clothing from one's body and submitting it for investigation means the item is being transported from the personal sphere of our body (and, by extension, of our identity and self-constructed public appearance) to the neutral, detached and objectifying domain of investigation and data retrieval. It is removed from our warm body and placed onto the cold Tyvek covered floor. This action also involves a spatial repositioning of the garment: moving it from the vertical plane (on our body) to the

horizontal (flat on the floor), shifting our gaze accordingly. The combination of these two movements alters our perspective, both literally and figuratively. It changes from a casual looking—the way we superficially glance over clothes in fashion advertisements or shop displays—to a mindful, investigative seeing, much like the way a forensic analyst visually probes their evidence.

This adjustment in our outlook on clothes is one of the fundamental objectives of **PORTAL**. ‘I want people to look at these garments in a different manner; not just as images in a magazine or on Instagram, but as physical objects that are in many ways very complex.’<sup>6</sup>



### Phase 3: Processing the data

Once the interviews were completed and the participants had put their clothes on again, Van Joolen and her team started processing the collected data. First, by literally drawing lines visualizing the different connections between the garments that were submitted to the Tyvek. A pink and orange line, for instance, connected all items that were made in China; a red line connected all items purchased online; a light blue line connected all items worn daily; whereas a light and dark-blue line connected all items that were only worn about once a year.

At the end of the two-day work period in the museum, the white Tyvek had transformed into a colourful web of lines and shapes so dense and complex that the black taped outlines, references to the garments that had been gathered on the Tyvek in the days before, had vanished from sight. The colourful image of lines and shapes reminded me of the foldout sheets found in the centrefold of DIY fashion magazines like the Dutch *Knipmode*, or the German *Burda*, which contain the sewing patterns of the ten or so designs featured in that magazine. For a novice like myself, the foldout was an incomprehensible mesh of coloured lines and markings. The only way to identify and assemble the different parts was by tracing each line separately; reconstructing each pattern by isolating it from the web of visual information in which it was entangled.



Just as with these foldouts, it is hard to imagine how any useful information might be deducted from the enigmatic ‘maps’ with lines and colours produced by the **PORTAL** team. But for Van Joolen, the seemingly illegible and impenetrable map of lines and shapes is a most appropriate image to illustrate the idea of clothing as a complex thing, as it makes tangible the interconnected realities that our clothes are a part of.

Even if we use and treat our sweater, skirt or shawl as a commodity, each piece of clothing is part of a larger network or system. It is made somewhere, by someone, from something that comes from somewhere else, before being transported to a warehouse and into a shop. This chain of production makes our sweater or jeans part of something bigger. And it is this interconnectedness that makes one piece of clothing the perfect point of entry to discuss topical questions that are not immediately evident on first glance.

#### Phase 4: Producing alternative perspectives

So far, each edition of **PORTAL** has generated a unique outcome.<sup>7</sup> For **PORTAL 001**, Van Joolen and her team delved deeper into the data collected by tracing each connection and comparing it with other connections, to see what they may reveal about our relationship to the clothes we wear. But the team also ‘used’ the data as a starting point, to reflect on topical questions regarding the labour conditions in the global fashion industry; regarding ownership (Is the person who made the garment also its owner?); regarding production value (Is a handmade garment more valuable than industrially produced apparel?); regarding the economic and emotional value, and of course regarding the ecological footprint of a pair of jeans.

Interpretations of the data were published in a booklet. This contained texts exploring, for instance, the different—monetary, emotional, social—values people attached to their garment in relation to their age, how frequently they wore the item, or when and where it was bought. Indexes and diagrams support the texts; some are pretty straight forward, mimicking the traditional bar graph or pie chart, others are more of a visual experiment, creating a whole new image to be decoded.



## PORTAL: A different way into clothing

Albeit speculative, the analysis and interpretation of the data allow for new angles and fresh perspectives on our clothing culture today. None of the data collected through the interviews in phase 2, nor the connections established in phase 3, is the kind of information you will typically come across in the market research carried out by big fashion brands. These global companies are interested in quantifiable data so that they can assess what trends to capitalize on to engross their profits. They would probably consider the information produced by **PORTAL** too subjective, too random, too unscientific, too speculative and therefore futile and worthless. The data they produce relates to growing market shares; rises in sales and new global markets.<sup>8</sup> But if we want to counter the negative impact of our consumer culture and the fashion industry, in particular, don't we urgently need a new outlook on things? Hasn't the profit-driven 'take, make and dispose of' model of 'fast fashion' by now proven to be detrimental and obsolete?

Van Joolen conceived **PORTAL** as a doorway, an entrance into the complex and interconnected reality of the clothes we wear, in which everything affects everything else. As a reader, visitor or participant, zooming in on just one of the items we are wearing today, carefully paying attention to not only its material or aesthetic qualities, but also to the different roads it has travelled before ending up on our bodies, contemplating, *seeing* rather than *looking* at how one garment is linked to another like nodes in a web, may just be the best antidote against the high-speed consumption cycle that drives our fashion culture today.

[Christel Vesters, January 2020]



1

In conversation with the author, November 2019.

2

*Change the System*, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen [November 7, 2017 – January 4, 2018] curator: Annemartine van Kesteren

3

In conversation with the author, November 2019.

4

Van Joolen piloted **PORTAL** during her residency at IASPI, Stockholm, in November 2016. After **PORTAL** 001, Van Joolen initiated another 4 editions: **PORTAL** 002, *State of Fashion*, Arnhem (June 2018); **PORTAL** 003, *TXT Department Gerrit Rietveld Academie* (September 2018); **PORTAL** 004, *OSB 't Twiske*, Amsterdam (February 2019) and **PORTAL** 005, *Punkt Ø – Galleri F 15 & Momentum*, Moss Norway (September 2019).

5

Tyvek® is an air, water and fire resistant material that is neither paper nor fabric. It is used, amongst other things, to make throwaway 'white suits' worn by forensic analysts, as well as to wrap and preserve antique textiles.

6

In conversation with the author, November 2019.

7

For **PORTAL** 002, a booklet was produced following the same format as **PORTAL** 001. For **PORTAL** 004 at Basisschool Twiske in Amsterdam Noord, Van Joolen produced a colour and exercise book instead. Working with the children, she noticed how beautifully they made outlines of their garments and intuitively started colouring them in. So rather than documenting the project through reflective texts and diagrams, Van Joolen decided to make something that kids could actually use.

8

A quick Internet search tells us that in 2017 the fashion industry represented 4% of the global market, which amounts to a market share of 406 billion US Dollars. Today, according to McKinsey's 2019 Fashion Report, 'not only is the average person buying 60 percent more items of clothing than they did 15 years ago, they are only keeping them half as long as they used to.' These numbers are set off against data that tells another story about the fashion industry: according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the textile industry is the second most polluting industry worldwide. 200 litres of water are typically needed to produce 1 kg of fabric, which amounts to 93 billion cubic meters of water used in the textile industry per year – 'enough to meet the needs of five million people.' But the most shocking statistic is the amount of clothing that ends up as waste: 90 million items are either thrown away or shredded annually.