Andere Tonen #1
Rozemarijn Koopmans – Multitude Creative Agency.

Andere Tonen the podcast in which graphic designer Asja Keeman - together with guests - takes a closer look at the Dutch design climate. The aim is to reflect, learn and deepen the conversation about the position of designers and design agencies. In the first episode, Rozemarijn Koopmans (co-founder and communications director of Multitude Creative Agency) and Asja talk about the social responsibility of brands, diversity & inclusion in the design world and how behavioural design can contribute to a better world.

RK: To give a little more background, because of course there are a lot of agencies working on impact and working for sustainable organizations. The sooner sustainability is mainstream, the better because it's really, really not going fast enough. But five years ago we decided to only work for mission driven and socially engaged organizations and that's a little bit more the zeitgeist now but that was really an exciting choice at the time.

AK: And "then," how many years ago is that?

RK: Five years ago. Then we had two people on our team besides the three of us, so the three founders. Then we really thought this could also cost us quite a bit, so to speak. Because we also had to say goodbye to certain assignments. We started in the crisis period and then we just took on everything.

AK: I think that's quite normal too. Because then you are still looking for yourself: what do we stand for? and so on.

RK: Yes and also after the academy, I don't know if many academy students are going to listen to this.

AK: I hope so.

RK: Yes, I hope so too. At the academy, I'm going to go down a bit of a side road, but at the academy you mainly learn, at least in Arnhem, how to make books that will end up in the Stedelijk Museum. I always thought that's what I wanted to do, but actually I didn't want to do that at all. Also because the urgency that I mentioned earlier is not there at all for me. It's great if it's there for you, or for anyone else listening, but not for me. I just really want to work there with Nick and David, my two business partners, on world improvements. And contribute to that with our own talents, to make those world improvers grow. So for me, there's very much the value of design practice there and I'm glad that's becoming a little more mainstream. At the same time, that also creates a lot of greenwashing.

AK: Yes indeed.

RK: I'm sure we'll talk about that later.

AK: For sure.

RK: Of course very good that we have a generation of super critical consumers. Especially the youngest generation now, they're really not susceptible to bullshit. And fortunately so. It doesn't always go well together: marketing and sustainable ambitions, so it's important to just be very honest about where you stand as an agency. We make fairly rigid choices in this respect. The ones we do want to work with are really the intrinsic, sustainable, socially motivated clients and not, for example, the Albert Heijn supermarket chain. They ask us for the sustainable line, but really a completely sustainable supermarket, which is also an example of how we work. For example, we have been working for Marqt, an organic supermarket, for eight years. I firmly believe that it is great fun to position these kinds of challengers creatively, visually and strategically. And that you also make a lot of impact in the whole sector. An Albert Heijn probably also looks at players like Marqt, because they challenge the status quo and therefore you just have quite a lot of reach. I can't make it hard, but I know it's true.

AK: And so how do we see this reflected in your agency, for example?

RK: For a very long time we were just a design agency and we are now a multidisciplinary agency. We have a development department and we have a content department in addition to our creative team, so we are not only growing in length but also in width.

AK: Yes, that's amazing!

RK: But what comes in to us on design jobs that's really just white people. To talk about multiculturalism, diversity and inclusion. But in our development branch and in our content department and our organizational backbone, which I just mentioned, project management, super important, you just have a much more diverse pool that you can fish from. I think the art schools, bit of an assumption, just based on my own findings in that, is pretty white. In the other branches, fortunately, there's a more diverse picture.

AK: Yes, exactly.

RK: And, the creative world that fortunately does not consist only of art academies. We also became an MBO training company last year, also because our own diversity goals were rather behind.

AK: Okay, can you talk a little bit more about that? What was the trigger for that?

RK: Well, the murder of George Floyd really took a toll on us. You think we're just not doing a good enough job in that area. We really have to work on that, because if you say you work for socially just organizations and you do that with a muscle white team.

AK: There's something to be said about that, of course.

RK: Yes and rightly so. We made the website for BIJ1 last year, for example, and then you quite rightly get the question of whether you can really ensure diversity even in your own team. Well, not enough so I really see that as a problem and we are working very hard to change that. We have had training in it, we have a focus group that is working on that, not full time, but continuously on a regular weekly basis.

AK: So the first steps in that have actually been taken.

RK: Yes, they were put right then but that's not the hardest thing either. The main thing is to make sure they are followed up properly and that they don't end up at the bottom of the pile. And that's also quite difficult, when it's very stressful and busy and all kinds of deadlines but we really stick to that. It's not going fast enough but we're really working on it.

AK: And how do you see that around you? I imagine you're talking to other agencies about this as well?

RK: Well I think it will be recognizable to a lot of agency. And I think a lot of agency will also have the same issues that I just described. A lot of agency say we do have the intentions but we just don't get the applicants. Yes, that's true but of course there's also a reason for that, one side is what I just said, that art schools are just pretty white. On the other hand, if you have a very white team, then someone of color will feel less welcome to come and apply to you. So it's also a bit chicken or egg. We just really need to get going. The intentions are just not enough. Train yourself, get people involved, set up a focus group, make sure you can be more diverse because it's really not only better for your team and for your employees but we just don't live in a white society. Thank goodness for that. Let's use each other's perspective and wisdom to make better work that is meaningful to many people instead of just people who look like you.

AK: Yes exactly, if we also look at how we design, think about: color selection, symbols, form language but also the interaction between design and audience is all culturally determined. Purely objective design is almost impossible, how do you try to give your target audience that recognition?

RK: Yes, that's a very good question. One example that immediately comes to mind is OpenEmbassy. OpenEmbassy is an organization that was founded when a lot of Syrian newcomers came to the Netherlands. And a lot of Dutch people felt they wanted to do

something but were not necessarily able to help out for a day in a shelter, for example, or cook. Then Renee Frissen, who was working at the Institute for Public Values at the time, set up a digital help desk where Dutch people could help newcomers with small everyday questions. For example, I got a letter from the municipality but I don't know what it says. How should I register with the housing association, that sort of thing. It probably seems like small things but those are exactly where the gaps fall in migration policy so migration often doesn't happen so quickly.

AK: Yes and it's also the things that you often only know when you grow up here.

RK: Yes, really the Dutch white noice. So to speak, quite literally.

AK: Yes exactly.

RK: We became creative founding partners of that and still work a lot with OpenEmbassy because that really became the place where Dutch and newcomers could find each other and communicate well with each other. When you talk about multilingualism renove inclusiveness, also in design, a lot of color combinations could not be used because they had a political association. That's also with fonts but even more interesting is that if you have an organization that speaks in Dutch, English, Farsi, Arabic and still other region languages it also all has to fit into a good design system. You actually want a very neutral and inclusive design system, which is very pleasant to read. You can do it very well and take everyone into account, but if people don't use it, it will stop.

AK: Yes, then you still hit the mark.

RK: Yes, but OpenEmbassy was also a project we did with only white people with us. Fortunately, our clients often have a very diverse and inclusive team so we can really test them and end users on what they think. So we now rely on that to test whether our work does what it should and whether it evokes associations that we want it to evoke. Because we can't actually guarantee that sufficiently yet ourselves and I hope that in time that will be possible.

AK: So you actually test it against the people you design it for and it's not just, okay this is the design and that will be used.

RK: No, we have often done that but it's just a bit of a waste.

AK: Yes, but I can imagine that you start this way, you have to start somewhere. And even though it is made by a white team, you can also draw from that. But it's also nice to see that it all comes together again, that you make a design that is tested to see if it works and then go on from there.

RK: Yes, that's right.

AK: Do you think that the problems you are working on: sustainability, bringing communities together, emancipation, that these problems have a solution? And why or why not? And how do you try to contribute to that?

RK: Yes, they have a solution but I think it's mostly a political solution and politics is not moving fast enough. Doesn't feel the urgency enough I think, at least not the current cabinet. So I'm really very pessimistic about that, the urgency that I feel with that is also not contrived or to be coquettish or anything like that, I just really have very little faith in that. At the same time I don't think you should hope for technological breakthroughs to keep political decisions away from politicians, so that's difficult. And at the same time, you can actually move people with a valuable story. Climate science, nobody wants to read a scientific report but if you watch a movie about it that comes in it can really change behavior. So in that sense I do believe very much in Behavioural Design and that the choices we make as designers can indeed make a difference in how people make choices or how people take in information. How they allow that to feed back into their own lives, I think brands and organizations also have a very big social responsibility in that sense.

AK: Yes definitely and then maybe this comes in even more than a political debate or a statement.

RK: Yes, I think trust in politics is low at the moment, at the same time I don't really know if that's the case people have just voted massively for the establishment. Which I don't understand, but yeah, people don't just commit to political parties or maybe less and less to political parties but they do have a lot of trust in the brands that they feel good about. And I think that those brands are an enormously good vehicle for getting people to behave differently. That all sounds very edifying, I don't mean it that way, but I think in principle everyone wants to do what is good for ourselves, for each other, for the planet. The problems are so big that we don't have to rely on political decisions alone, but also on each other. You also hear in the climate discussion a lot of people saying, it doesn't depend on my linen bag so to speak, Shell has to do it. And that's true of course, but at the same time, if we all change something, then social support will increase and so will the pressure on organizations and politicians. So it's playing all the keys of the piano and not just one.

AK: Yes, so really the trickle down effect, one person does it, another person does it, that way we all contribute.

RK: Yes and not to immediately punish people for that but flying a few times a year, I just don't think that's possible. Not because it's not allowed by me but it's just not right. Take

a fresh look at your life, there are so many possibilities to organize it differently and I think creativity can play a huge role in that.

AK: Yes, definitely. Find the adventure, literally.

RK: Yes!

AK: In your eyes, when is a project successful? I can imagine that you test the steps, like we just talked about with the OpenEmbassy project but what kind of impact are you looking for?

RK: Of course you can measure the impact in many different ways, we make a lot of digital products, so a lot of websites, platforms and things like that. To give an example we made last year with Bits Of Freedom FixYourPrivacy.nl that is a digital platform where everyone from 10 to 80 can work on their digital privacy and improve your digital well-being in terms of privacy. Highly needed.

AK: Yes.

RK: But most clients we can test pretty well how their website is visited and if there is improvement in that. You can put all kinds of guidelines on it but Bits Of Freedom, according to their philosophy, doesn't do cookies and doesn't do tracking and that kind of thing. So I can't measure their digital success. What we can do with a lot of other clients but if everyone is very happy with a project and others are very eager to commit to it and start sharing it. That's obviously very nice and I think if a lot of people feel the urgency for a certain project, even if I can't read out the analytical figures, then it's successful as far as I'm concerned. In that sense, the assessment of success always lies with others. So I can have a good feeling about it myself but if Bits Of Freedom can share a lot of information about it with targeted groups of people, for example, I think that's also a very qualitative parameter. So it depends a bit, we don't have a kind of method to measure projects or to measure success but.

AK: So basically as long as it made a positive contribution then it was successful.

RK: Yes, and at the same time, no, because then everyone with good intentions can make a good contribution everywhere. That's not how it works, of course. So you must always hang a certain assessment matrix on it, otherwise it is too non-committal. It depends on the way you measure it and what the most important KPIs are for different projects.

AK: Can you give an example of that?

RK: As an agency we are, for example, B-Corp certified; B-Corp stands for Benefit Corporation and that is a quality mark for companies that do sustainable business. That is an enormous time-consuming process, you are actually completely assisted whether you are reaching target groups with your projects that are lagging behind in the prevailing communication. There is a real independent assessment of whether your work contributes to a better world as you say it does. And the assessments don't stop when you have that quality mark, but it's an ongoing process. So we account for that in a public profile for how we score but also where we don't score well yet.

AK: So that is a kind of sounding board?

RK: Yes.

AK: Because in terms of respect, the B-certificate is not yet being used very much, why do you think that is?

RK: Well, it's also quite difficult to get, it's not like you can just apply for it. So it takes discipline. It's also not like you just fill out a lot of forms and you have it. During those assessments you find out things that are still not going well in your company and then you have to go and adjust that and show B-Corp that you have adjusted it and how do and what effects that has then. So you can imagine if you're going to go through that section by section it's a huge job. So I think it puts a lot of people off. Nice idea, but we have a lot of good intentions so is it really necessary now. I think it's very important to separate the wheat from the chaff in the sense of good intentions are always good of course and it always starts with that. But you have to show what you stand for. And that also has to do with your credibility. I would wholeheartedly recommend everyone to do it.

AK: So all of you go and see B-Corp for a while.

RK: Let's go, yes! And if you want advice on that then they can take concat with me I'm very happy to help.

RK: But just to talk about that new economy what you said in the announcement. I do really believe in bringing about that systemic change and I hope I don't sound too radical in that we are actually very constructive in this at Multitude. Organizations have to be viable to be able to take on something, often the organizations we work with have an inconvenient truth to tell, they are either more expensive, slower: you don't have it like Zolando tomorrow and you can send it back for free. There is often a story attached to it which is just more unattractive than the dominant alternative. But it's still the better choice and explaining it well is only possible with really good creations and communication. I firmly believe in that. But if that doesn't work, it will remain a nice idea in the margins, instead of the new dominant narrative for tomorrow. We believe that this is where the future value lies and that this story must be told.

AK: These are often the smaller companies, how do you work with them? Is that contact different than with a larger sustainable organization? How does that work?

RK: I can't quite compare because we have never been an agency for the larger companies.

AK: Was that a deliberate choice?

RK: In the first couple of years we weren't and then we just decided that we weren't going to be either. I haven't experienced that. But of course we also work with very serious clients such as Bits Of Freedom, Marqt and Fair Phone, which also have 80 employees.
I also don't believe, to look at it from a creative point of view, that it is necessarily different to make a logo for a creative company than for a profit-driven one. Because you're just making a logo but the motivation and the conviction with which you do that and also the creative strategy with which you do that are really different. The raison d'être of an organization is very different, you probably believe in it. People who want to work for us really believe that because it's different from another organization that comes to collect money but doesn't really change anything. People just aren't really interested in it anymore, I think. And that's because more and more people are feeling that urgency.
I think our assignments are also very diverse; changing someone's logo gets a much more protective response than creating a new website for a new service, for example, or a new product. For example, with Fix Your Privacy we had a lot of creative freedom, and then of course Bits of Freedom and the branding of Bits of Freedom have to be very recognizable, but that is really something different. Then you can really make something new, so that's a very different creative process than when you do a re-branding where the identity has to be redefined. And when we do that, we don't design for the first month and a half. Then we are purely engaged in workshops, strategic sessions, research so that afterwards it's not just about taste. I don't like blue, of course jet blue can be adapted but then it has a foundation. And then it's not random, that's why I really trust in the preliminary stages of research. And in the end there is always a dispute about taste, everyone has preferences and also their own reference frameworks about what works well and what doesn't. You can just not like a letter, that's fine. But at that stage it is no longer about whether it is good or not. It's more about the details and whether everyone is on the same page but the creative foundation and why you make certain decisions that stands.

AK: And that is also where you actually work out, first the research, testing and then the visual side.

RK: Yes and also benchmarking, you know, what is everyone else doing. We're also really working on brand strategy and copyright and what words fit your vision. What trade perspective does a user have when they interact with your brand. For people who have

founded an organization or have been working there for a long time, it is often assumed that everyone has the knowledge that they have. I can imagine, as a client, that you're put on the cutting edge of what people expect of you and whether you're distinctive enough in a landscape of supermarkets, for example, to refer to.

AK: Is this also something you have to educate the client on? Do you still have to indicate that this is how we work or is that already clear when the client joins you?

RK: Well, when we receive a request for a quotation, the client receives 14 to 15 pages from us. That sounds very hefty.

AK: That's a lot, why?

RK: That describes our whole approach: who we are, what we do and what we think is the best approach for the project, what steps we take and what each step costs.

AK: Then the expectation is already set.

RK: Yes, the responsibility of clients to keep us focused and our responsibility as an agency to keep clients very close to the strategy in the early stages. So that it's just very clear why you're making certain decisions, which I just mentioned, that it's not just about taste but also about what creative choices fit with this strategy that we've laid out together.

AK: For you, what's one of the most important lessons you've learned?

RK: What I found really liberating myself is that with Nick and David, my business partners, we did a master's in Design Cultures at the VU in Amsterdam after our studies in Arnhem. And I found it very liberating to look at the design profession from a different angle. So not just about a kind of speculative design, which you learn very much at art school: this could be an image of the future and everything I think up, I think up in that direction. Very bold, but at university we learned to look more from cultural anthropology and cultural science to see what cultural relevance design has. I found that a very pleasant new perspective that also provided more of a foothold instead of 'I can argue it extremely well so that's how it is.

AK: Yes, exactly, then you have just a bit more of the theoretical side to it as well.

RK: Yes, it is not now that we are also very theoretical designers. Again, we've let that go to some extent. But I just found it very nice, just like you go on an internship, in the third or fourth year to see how designers put it into practice. I think you just have to look around a lot. Doing internships, I did three internships, at agency and different designers. Even though after an internship you know what you don't want, really super educational. I

think everyone can think of the clients with whom you will have the most affinity, I would work with that in mind. Many of the portfolios that we receive also contain a lot of self-initiated work. What you would most like to make. Suppose you think Daily Paper is a super cool brand, now show what you would like to make for them if they would ask you for a campaign. And so try to get into an agency that you admire and go learn there. And you develop naturally.

AK: Great tip. So how do you see the future of Multitude?

RK: We are now with a group of 15 people, people want to know from us which size will remain comfortable. What kind of agency we will be in 5 or 10 years, I don't really know. I do know that we are not going to be a mega agency. I don't think Multitude will consist of 50 or 80 people. What I really like about the format we have now is that we are big enough to make really complex assignments, also on a technical and creative level, but that we are small enough not to be such a huge agency. I think that's very nice for clients as well.

AK: Yes, that you still have direct contact without having all those lines in between.

RK: Yes, you also have agencies that only do those huge tenders and that is really a different way of working. We often work with creative challengers who have a different story to tell. That is often quite unconventional and I think that also keeps the work very fun and people like to work for us. And why I still really like it. I think that's where the challenge lies, that you know how to preserve and guard that. Rather than having to do it three times over. I can imagine us growing to 20, 25 and maybe 30 but I don't see it much bigger than that. Then that.

AK: Bigger is not always better.

RK: Hahah, no definitely not.