

## Niels van Eijk & Miriam van der Lubbe

An interview by Maria Elena Fauci



Photo © by Vier/A Studio, Peer Van de Kruis

When thinking about Holland, tulips may cross your mind, however, when we think of Niels van Eijk & Miriam van der Lubbe, then flowers take the shape of dresses, walls, interiors... unimaginable scented masterpieces! Each single nuance, the most delicate motion of the smallest petal plays its role in enormous and engaging settings, similar to immense “flower paintings”, whose colours enchant and whose figures inebriate visitors, enhanced by their various fragrances.

The duo began in 1997, sharing one office, though often moving in different directions, working with and reinterpreting everyday forms and objects. Varying from products to exhibitions, from interiors to small works of architecture, using an ironic and playful approach, based on intuitive and simple solutions, all characteristics of the best expression of Dutch Design. However, each project conceals more than a single story: in their experiments with materials and techniques for interior concepts they create atmospheres that mislead people, through a sort of disorientation. This “confusion” is no longer a psychological state, but merely the sweet illusion that moves our feelings into imaginary sceneries.

**MEF: The two of you hail from different educations and backgrounds: how did you meet?**

M.v.d.L.: We met at the Academy in Eindhoven. Niels was already an engineer, though after earning his technical degree he began studying at the Design Academy, where I was already a student. We met at school.

**MEF: In 2006 you conquered the Salone del Mobile in Milan with your theatrical flower dresses from the “With Love” collection. I would like to know how you developed the idea, even if the association Holland-flowers comes naturally to me, as well as asking “why just dresses in the Italian fashion capital?”**

M.v.d.L.: It was a special project we made for the Flower Council of Holland and the Chrysanthemum Promotion group. They wanted to promote the flower industry worldwide, so we were asked to see if we could reach other audiences, another field of the market, and then how we could involve it. This process took the name “influential” because, as a matter of fact, we had to think about how to draw the

attention of new consumers and how to influence their interest.

Since flowers represent characters and emotions, we created four living dresses that walked around during the fair and invited people to enter into a special environment where objects were shown in a surprising way. And it was a success!

**MEF: Your Flower Walls for Moooi inside Superstudio in Milan are simply marvellous. They are immense three-dimensional perfumed frescos, lively backdrops to interior spaces. Is this something that can also be applied to outdoor facades?**

M.v.d.L.: Due to the way we used this system it was not developed for this purpose, as is the work of Patrick Blanc. For us it is more about “how” to use colours and different kinds of plants. However, the result is beautiful only when we use a large quantity of flowers. In fact, for temporary presentations we have used more than 4,500 specimens.

**MEF: If I were asked to make a comparison with your spectacular flower creations for public spaces, your interior projects for private commissions appear to be extremely simple and sober. They seem to be essential on purpose. Does this difference in language depend on function, or is it rather a characteristic of your experimental attitude?**

M.v.d.L.: I think it is both. With the flower presentations there is no function we can develop. During the work for The Flower Council of Holland we were questioning: “What we can do with them”? But then our answer was: Awareness!

On the other hand, function is very important to us, especially for design objects as well as for interior concepts. There is no awareness to achieve there. In general what we do is to create a sort of confusion. We always try to let people see things in a different perspective, so that the normal way of experiencing them causes disorientation. Materials instead draw attention, but they do not need to be expensive to ensure a positive effect. So function, materials and confusion are our means of surprising people and, at the same time, our way to offer them new experiences that arouse feelings. “Experience” and “function” are always related to emotions.



With Love, Miss Malicious, Photo © by Vier/A Studio



**MEF: In your Interior design office, as well as in the Eigen Huis pavilion inside the Furniture fair in Amsterdam and in the private house in the Swiss Alps you chose particle board, which is very easy to work with and above all cheap. Is this simply a sustainable choice, since “green design” is a growing phenomenon in Holland, or do you have a preference for this material for other reasons?**  
M.v.d.L.: We do not choose materials because they are sustainable, even though we are also busy with green design. As I said, it is not that relevant if a certain type of wood or whatever material is cheap or not.

In particular, in the Swiss apartment, the view was really breathtaking so we did not want to distract owners and visitors. This is why the interiors are so neutral, and why we chose a very basic essence of wood. We wanted to exalt the environment surrounding the apartment through the project.

**MEF: Let’s talk about the Frits Philips Concert Hall in Eindhoven. It is considered the music centre of the future, where lighting, design and technology are integrated with very innovative solutions. What was your main task there?**  
M.v.d.L.: I must to tell you about the history of the project. We started in 2007. At that time, the management of the Concert Hall was already in contact with Philips Ambient Experience, whom they set up a workshop with, for a renovation project. Then we were invited to participate. Actually, the Art director of the Philips Concert Hall already knew how we worked, because he had visited the Fortis exhibition we curated. In this project we gave a different atmosphere to each collection, which was shown expressly through various settings. For this reason the Art Director wanted us for the workshop. Thus, in almost two days we had to write a list of ideas, some “keys-aspects” about what the Music hall could become. The Director appreciated our proposals and initially commissioned us to renovate only the foyer, since the acoustics and the rest of the building were already really beautiful. Later they wanted us to develop a project for the main façade. We developed other sketches and later, little by little, we were asked to think about the interior design of the entire Music



Fortis





hall. As a result, we designed what is really visible there, working as interior architects. We set up a very heterogeneous design team: a lighting designer, a graphic designer and an acoustics expert, who was of primary importance in translating our ideas into multimedia technique and, of course, Philips was involved from the very beginning in the fulfilment of all our concepts.

**MEF: You designed and produced a special lighting system together with Philips Ambient Experience Design. How does this LED system work?**

M.v.d.L.: The ceiling was an example of cooperation with the Major of sounds. He was able to translate our fantasies into sounds. In the concert hall, music and sound represent the means to guide you inside spaces in an intuitive manner. The walls glow with images and lights, while the ceiling itself moves and illuminates your way while you are walking. The ceiling, in particular, consists of suspended panels that move independently of one another, directing the lights in all the rooms of the building.

**MEF: Coffee and teacups, special listening armchairs, staff uniforms, in addition to the total architectural design; you designed everything inside this large project. Even the smallest detail has been developed, designed and realized. Which among all the items and spaces that you developed most intrigues you?**

M.v.d.L.: It is very difficult to say. In reality each element supported our ideas and everything was related to the overall concept. For example, we were very intrigued by the ceiling: it was a real challenge! But we did not want to intimidate people with technology... On the contrary our intention was to let them feel welcome. Offering a cup of coffee to guests is as important to us as allowing them to listen to a nice concert. Social integration combined with the event contributes to enhancing the quality of the visitors' time there. Hospitality was one of the "keys" on our list. Greeting people kindly and welcoming them with a cup of coffee is simply one way to let them feel good, the same feeling they have in their comfortable dresses.

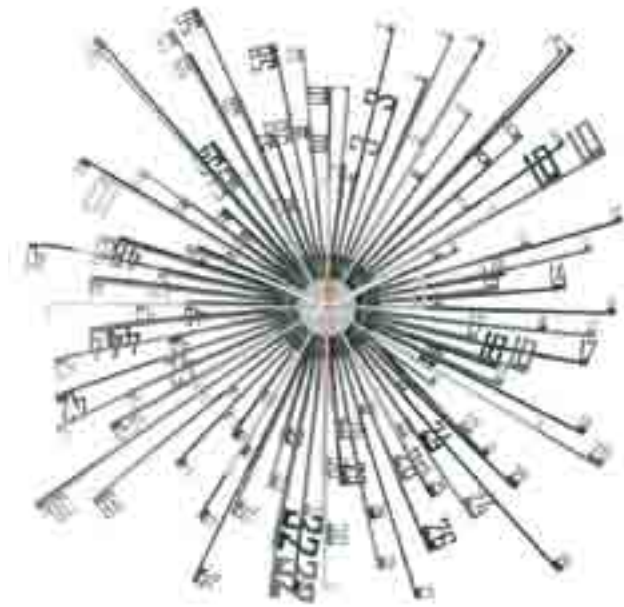






Bobbin Lace Lamp , Photo © by Studio 4/A Peer van de Kruis





**MEF:** Your installations surpassed the museological manner of showing collections. Thus interior spaces and settings contribute to narrating stories about what is exhibited, transporting the visitor into an imaginative context. Is this a storyteller's skill?

M.v.d.L.: I think you are right however, with regards to the interiors, it is not merely "storytelling". Art should reveal its "own story". Art speaks about and evokes feelings... Instead, we like to change the perspective of what people are seeing, and this is achieved using our favourite tools: humour, materials and confusion. In our interior projects and exhibitions we love to trick people, to mislead them...

**MEF:** What is "Niels" and what is "Miriam" in your interior design?

M.v.d.L.: It's a funny question. In the design/creative process we have quite equal approaches. At the outset, instead, we are rather dissimilar: I focus on the storytelling and on the concept development, while Niels is more concentrated on materials and technology. I would say he is more practical than me and sometimes I tease him for his farmer's attitude towards finding simple solutions. But, I have to admit he is truly very good at it!



Tea Cozy,

