



# Susan Stockwell's Territory Dress: Contemporary Art and Fashion in a Dutch Ethnographic Museum

**Daan van Dartel**

## Introduction

In 2015, the National Museum of World Cultures (NMVW) approached British artist Susan Stockwell (1962 – ) for a commission based on her previous work of paper dresses. Stockwell had exhibited several art works in different spaces at that time, such as the impressive flotilla of small boats with sails from banknotes in *Sail Away* at the Tate Modern in 2013, which “explores the idea of ‘connections’ in travel, trade, mapping and personal and social histories” ([www.susanstockwell.co.uk](http://www.susanstockwell.co.uk)), and which was recrafted in 2015 and 2016 in two other museums. Stockwell's dress sculptures, addressing the reclaiming of her own body and related issues of territory, became

renowned internationally. She started with *Coffee Dress* (1999), followed by several other dresses such as *Colonial Dress* (2008), *Highland Dress* (2009) and *Money Dress* (2010). Other works comprise *A Chinese Dream*, a large money paper quilt work that is now in the Victoria & Albert Museum collection and deals with the importance of China to the global trade network; *Flood*, a site-specific installation in thirteenth-century St. Mary's church in York, referring to York's flooding problems and to floods of information and technology; and one of her latest works *Rumpelstiltskin* (2019), which comments

on the international trade of clothing and textiles.

Stockwell's *Territory Dress* is based on a larger understanding of the determining role of trade and colonialism in shaping today's world. It aims to support the broader process of decolonisation of the museum and its collections and to create a larger awareness among visitors and society at large about the ways in which colonialism still shapes contemporary life. The artwork was commissioned because of its power to address strong and often violent histories. *Territory Dress* uses the language of fashion, through the form of a dress, to make



Figure 1. Susan Stockwell, *Territory Dress*, 2018, paper, wood, glue, printed textile, and computer thread. National Museum of World Cultures, Netherlands, 7175-1a.

the narratives of colonialism accessible to a diverse range of visitors.

The NMVW, which had just appointed a curator of fashion in 2015, unusual for an ethnographic museum, saw the fashion (and art) as a new lens onto the colonial past of the Netherlands and its afterlives. 'Fashion' is often defined from a 'western' perspective, set by globalized capitalism (see Roach, Musa & Hollander 1980, Wilson 2007, Entwistle 2015). However, the NMVW wants to examine fashion from a multicultural perspective, broadening the concept of fashion outside 'the West' (see Craik 2009, Jansen & Craik 2016, Niessen, Leshkovich & Jones 2003; for Fashion Theory see Barnard 2007: 2-4, Welters & Lillethun 2014).

In 2016, Stockwell visited the museum for a month to research the collections and to use the museum's library. She conducted interviews with different curators at the museum, who specialise in the history of imperialism, colonialism, and material culture from the various former colonies of the Netherlands. Dutch presence in Indonesia started with the establishment of the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie – hereafter VOC) at the beginning of the seventeenth century and ended with the Indonesian Republic calling for its independence in 1945. In the Netherlands, this date was not acknowledged until 2004 when the then

minister of Foreign Affairs stated that it was time to understand the importance of recognizing that date. The Dutch government has all that time held on to the acceptance of sovereignty in 1949. Finally the Dutch had to give in to international pressure, after fighting a violent war with Indonesian nationalists under the lead of Sukarno, who became Indonesia's first President. During a recent visit to Indonesia, on 10 March 2020, the Dutch King Willem Alexander apologized for the atrocities carried out by the Dutch army during Indonesia's war of Independence (1945 – 1949). The colonial and political decisions continue to strongly shape diplomatic relationships between the Netherlands and Indonesia today.

For the last decade, the history of slavery in the former colony of Surinam and the Dutch Caribbean have been increasingly present in contemporary Dutch society and memory. The national feast of Sinterklaas on the evening of 5 December, when parents give presents to their children pretending they come from Sinterklaas, and adults exchange presents amongst themselves, accompanied by little home-written poems, is a moment where the Dutch are confronted with their entanglement in the history of slavery through the figure of Black Pete. He is a caricature black minstrel who is the servant of the white Sinterklaas. Each year, a few months before the arrival of Sinterklaas in December, usually starting around

October, debates and sometimes violent protests against the racialised representation of this black character appear in the media and on the streets. Pro-Pete demonstrators, arguing that Black Pete is an innocent children's feast personality, reply in similar ways. These demonstrations have shed light onto the unease the Netherlands has with the slavery legacy what it terms its 'Golden Age' (seventeenth century) and the ensuing centuries.

Heritage institutions, including libraries, archives, and museums, in the Netherlands outside of ethnographic museums, which addressed these issues earlier, are finally looking at the heritage of colonialism and slavery, mostly concerning the Dutch involvement in the Transatlantic slave trade. The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam is organising a large exhibition on slavery in 2020, and de Nieuwe Kerk put together a large exhibition on Surinam in 2019. Smaller museums, such as Museum van Loon, located in a canal house still owned by the family van Loon, who were heavily involved in the VOC and were also implicated in the Dutch slave trade, are also organizing exhibitions on colonialism and slavery. Many objects in these exhibitions come from the collections of the NMVW.

## Making *Territory Dress*

This article is a summary of an interview in August 2018, during which Susan

Stockwell (SSt) talks with me, Daan van Dartel (DvD), about her work, her background, and the *Territory Dress* that is now in the collection of the NMVW. The dress will be part of a large exhibition that is planned for 2022 on the afterlife of colonialism in the Netherlands.

DvD: Can you introduce us to your work in general?

SSt: I work across sculpture, installation, collage and film. I am concerned with examining social and colonial histories and engaging with questions of social justice, international trade, cultural mapping and feminism. As a sculptor, I'm really interested in materials, their inherent content and history, their material culture, the ideas that are held within the materials; materials such as rubber, tea, coffee, computer components, maps and money, the humble every day and industrial products that pervade our lives. In seeking to reconnect an object's past, its related history and materiality with contemporary issues, my practice underscores these materials' urgent interconnection to collective memories, desires and ecological shortfalls; aspects that evoke, expose and challenge social, racial and gender inequality and injustice.

In general, I work with a combination of materials, ideas and processes, in equal measure. When these are combined, a dialogue ensues,

leading to stronger work. The repetitive processes I use, such as sewing, quilting and construction create a meditative state and then unexpected and surprising new directions arise in the work, which leads to richer and more interesting results.

The underlying content in my work is social history and social justice. My father was a historian and a socialist, and I grew up in Manchester in a political household. Manchester is a city with a legacy of the textile industry, Industrial Revolution, and a big colonial history. Marx and Engels were there for a while. Marx wrote the Communist Manifesto there, which was based on the terrible working and living conditions of the workers in the textile industry. This industry grew rapidly, the infrastructure couldn't keep up and the mill owners were ruthlessly focussed on profits, workers were tied to looms for 16 hours a day and child labour was rife. Recently I was at Manchester's Royal Exchange theatre, which is in the original cotton exchange trading building and a woman I got talking to, quoted: 'Britain's bread hung from Lancashire's thread.' Meaning that Britain's economy was totally dependent on Lancashire's cotton industry.

DvD: This area has a lot of links to Britain's colonial history, especially India. All these interactions between the rest of the world and cotton from



Figure 2. Susan Stockwell in her studio with *Territory Dress*. © Susan Stockwell, 2018.

England, and also sumptuary laws that prevented local industries from growing because one had to take the products from the 'mother' country.

SS: Yes, there was a very powerful British monopoly globally and Manchester was part of that. Remnants of the textile industry remain, old cotton mills and so on, though the city has a strong identity and constantly reinvents itself. When I was growing up there in the 60s and 70s it was crumbling and had a lot of deprivation.

Injustice and inequality upset and anger me and this drives the content in

my work. Growing up in Manchester, a tough northern city with that industrial legacy and in a socialist household where we made all our own clothes and recycled everything, formed me, and my practice.

DvD: When did you make the first dress sculpture?

SS: I knew how to read dressmaking patterns from an early age and sewing

was my first language. When I was 16, I won a prize for the best-made dress in my school, I have been making dresses all my life. The first sculptural dress I made, *Coffee Dress* in 1999 was an extension of this, but it was an artwork, not to be worn, so a similar method but with a different outcome. I was subverting clothing. *Coffee Dress* had a train made from coffee filters and



Figure 3. Susan Stockwell's *Coffee Dress* in Pinset Masons. © Susan Stockwell, 2020.



stained paper portion cups. At this time I also began working with maps.

DvD: How did you go from coffee to maps?

SSt: In the late nineties I was teaching in America and reading about the history of tea and coffee. I drank tea and most Americans drank coffee. I read that caffeine is in rat poison, it's poisonous and the poison produces adrenals in the liver, which make you hyper, so the Americans were buzzing around like bees, and I thought that was funny. I read a lot about tea, and about the Opium Wars between Britain and China that made Britain incredibly wealthy and meant that half of China was addicted to opium, but the Brits weren't concerned about that. It paid well, and that huge amount of money went into the economy and made the Industrial Revolution happen when and where it did. This big story and powerful history for tea, a seemingly humble and domestic product, made me think. I began making maps out of tea and coffee and other materials with fascinating trading histories such as rubber, wool and tobacco. These materials have become my personal vocabulary, giving me a language that I am more articulate with than written or spoken words. Over years I have mastered many materials through manipulating and transforming them into artworks that articulate what I have to say. In the 1990s, I began to make

associations between countries and the materials they trade with. South America for me was recycled rubber inner tubes, since rubber originally comes from Brazil; India and Britain were made of tea. I collected and surrounded myself with maps and one day realised that if you make a dress with a map, it becomes a feminist piece, a statement about female territory, demarcating and claiming female territory. Cartography to me is a male language; I didn't understand it for a long while, but that maleness connected to what maps are as political and historical accounts, and as means to gain ownership and power.

DvD: Because the world is mapped by men?

SSt: It is and men historically claim territory. For example, why is the interior of Australia so well mapped when it's so sparsely populated? Because it's full of minerals and therefore very valuable. Mapping is not simply about finding your way from A to B, it is much more complex and political. My work, *Pattern of the World* [now in the collection of the V&A – DvD] is a world map, a Mercator projection, painted and stained with tea and coffee onto dress making patterns. I combined this colonial projection of the world with tea and coffee and dress making patterns, which are maps of the body and have darts and arrows that look like shipping lanes and mapping references

to create a crossover of languages. I enjoy mixing languages via materials and ideas and this is also what led me to make the map in a dress shape, which in turn led to the money dress, which has led me to make *Territory Dress*. It is more complex than my other dress sculptures. Making *Territory Dress* has pushed this series of work on a stretch, and now it's finished I'm ready to make more surreal dress sculptures.

DvD: I remember when we first met, for this commission, and I sort of explicitly asked for a dress, for you that was still not sure if you would want to make a dress.

SSt: Well, I didn't want to close it down too much. I needed to feel free but at the same time it's good to have a framework. I had ideas of the content, of her dragging history in a heavy ball behind her, and then, it could be a train being pulled behind, which hasn't turned out as I envisioned it, but it works and feels, with the computer wires and rubber and batik flowers, as if it's both being left behind and pulling into the dress. The train creates a kind of movement, as if passing through time, pulling a weight.

You approaching me was interesting and flattering, and once I visited and developed the idea, I was very inspired, the museum is impressive, I felt like a kid in a sweet shop surrounded by incredible visual stuff, histories and stories, in all their good and bad

associations. The way the museum is working, with artists and taking on other people's views, bringing all that together as a way of reframing the collection, and decolonising the museum is fascinating and inspiring. This commission offered me a great opportunity, while also pushing and challenging my practice. It has been challenging in lots of ways, the process has been slow, evolving and gradually gathering, reading, researching, reflecting, discussing with you, which has incorporated a collaborative element, plus trying to get my head around the meanings.

DvD: does that happen a lot in your work, that the entity who gives the commission is involved in the development of a piece?

SSt: Not always, it depends, sometimes a commissioner is specific, or you agree on an idea and then they change their mind, or want what you make, but in green! Then I say, '*You* should make it!', sometimes they say make what you want, but ideally it works like it has with you.

DvD: I always thought it would be more like that, to give full freedom to an artist.

SSt: With this it is complex, it's related to an ethnographic museum's collections and there are a lot of questions, it is about questioning rather than giving answers, and it was really important



to get clarity on certain issues, such as cultural appropriation and the material, how things would be read, what the historic relevance of things are now. This was a collaborative effort, and I don't feel this work is a compromise at all. It has given me a framework to make something meaningful within. Commissions usually take longer than you think, that's partly because I'm not a briefcase artist. I don't have an idea, design a work and then give it to someone else to make. I make it myself, it's a process of trial and error – gathering, reading, thinking, discussion and remaking. This is how I learn and it is the process that most engages me.

DvD: How would that have been if this dress were about British colonialism?

SSt: I think that would have been more difficult. I had some distance here, though I didn't have my finger on the pulse, or the Zeitgeist at hand. This is where the museum came in. Your directions and suggestions of things to read and look at when I visited gave me a framework to work with, rather than a completely open space, where I could have got lost. This piece has led in new directions, for example printing maps and images onto material, cutting a hole in the abdomen, adding contemporary references such as the bar codes and computer wires and combining these languages. For an artist, often working in isolation, encouragement is important. The

art world can be very critical and competitive with people scrambling over each other for power and recognition.

There are different art worlds. The art market is one art world, there are other worlds that we artists find and make. You make work that comes from *here* [points to the heart], intimate, and people in the outside world will then tread on you, literally dissing you. I remember Robert Rauschenberg [American pop art artist] said that when he dies he'll go to his studio, and I thought when I die, if I go to heaven, I'll go to my studio, and if I go to hell, I'll be in the art world! Working with a museum in a different context, that of an ethnographic museum, and whose agenda is to welcome other views, felt very positive and beneficial.

DvD: It could be on display now (2018) tackling all these discussions that are currently so important in Dutch society and The Hague, the Dutch political centre. The Hague is also the place where many people of Dutch and/or Indonesian descent went back to after they left Indonesia.

SSt: I learned a lot about that relationship between Holland and Indonesia. In Britain we don't have that kind of relationship with our former colonies. It is different, though with similarities. Food comes into culture. Assimilation takes place and people like to think it is a two-way process.

Many different people have colonized India at different times, Britain is just one layer in Indian history, albeit a very exploitative one.

DvD: In Indonesia apparently, there appears to be not much interest in the Dutch colonial past, whereas in the Netherlands we are trying to deal with the often-confronting aspects of that past.

SSt: In the end the results of colonialism are the same: occupation, taking possession of, colonizing, repression, bloodshed, and repression for the colonised and power for the coloniser. It was challenging to make work more concerned with Dutch rather than British history. I had to keep asking myself 'what am I doing?' and check in with the museum but I read and learnt a lot and sometimes the distance was useful. And as British Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare stated, an artist needs to be able to use and do whatever they need to do, otherwise your hands are tied, but at the same time you have a social responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

DvD: As far as I understand cultural appropriation now, if you acknowledge where you got your information, your material, and give credit, it needs not be a problematic thing.

SSt: Artists have always taken, looked, been inspired by many influences. Dutch painting has influenced me a lot though I'm not a painter.

DvD: But problems arise when there is power imbalance.

SSt: Yes, as with a traditional costume for example and designers using it directly because it looks funky and makes money for them, but they don't credit or share profits. Loads of people have copied my work, which is annoying. My practice has scaffolding, which has built up over many years – one work leads to another and it evolves, it is an evolving dialogue. Whereas a copy is a one-off, it doesn't last – the artist doesn't have the scaffolding.

I think it is important to have a text with the work to fully reference what's in the piece, for instance the boat in the stomach, people may not see that it is made from an Antillean Guilder and the train has an influence from Afro-Surinamese *angisas*, head wraps. At the same time, I don't want to be too prescriptive; I think it's good if people can have the space to be imaginative and bring their own stories and insights, that would be more interesting for them.

DvD: What can you tell us about Territory Dress?

SSt: My initial idea in the proposal was to make a map dress, that would

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<sup>1</sup> Yinka Shonibare made the statement at a public event entitled 'Provocations in Art: Cultural Appropriation', held at the Royal Academy in London on 29 September 2017.

contain, or be pulling the history of Dutch colonialism, as a weight behind it, and it's the female that pulls the weight of history behind her. Somehow portraying the idea that history repeats itself.

DvD: Why a woman?

SSSt: The map dress serves as a device to demarcate female territory and to tell 'her' story. The colonial 'trophy wives' were repressed and had to work

within the confines of their containment and in turn they repressed others – a common trait of humanity. I want it to be contemporary as well as historic.

The maps on the dress and parts of the train show old maps of the colonies of The Netherlands and other places.

The jacket uses contemporary maps of the Netherlands; it was based on the style of what was called a 'Man Jacket' worn around the 1870s but the style didn't last long as it was seen as too



Figure 4. Susan Stockwell, *Territory Dress* (detail), 2018, paper, wood, glue, printed textile, and computer thread. National Museum of World Cultures, Netherlands, 7175-1a.

masculine, with big shoulders, sleeves, no neckline etc.

DvD: So you are addressing gender history as well?

SSt: To a degree, for me it serves as a metaphor to hang ideas on. The old and the new; the outer and the inner space, the stomach – Holland with a boat made with an Antillean Guilder sail, sailing across it, coming from the inside looking out. On the chest is Surinam; a now much talked about but formerly neglected part of Dutch colonial history, which I repeated in the train. The train evolves from maps and beautiful gathering and stitching at the top into a mass of computer wires, and rubber inner tube and batik flowers [that were] symbolic of certain motifs that only royalty could wear. It evolves into the contemporary, a collection of stuff that tells stories. The bustle of the train is based on *angisa* folding techniques. It is not an *angisa*, but is based on *angisa* techniques, a combination of different styles. The way I hope it works is that people see it and start thinking for themselves, what can it mean? There were a few *angisa* titles that I really liked, such as *follow me, you are not as you seem, anger*, and *let them talk*, which could have been a title for the dress, whatever people read into it – let them talk. We tried actual *angisas* but they looked like hats stuck on, and since *angisas* are constantly changing

and evolving I took the reference and changed it.

I wanted the dress to be really seductive and tactile, to draw the audience in to engage with it, and then have a big kick or shock when they realise the darker content.

DvD: Why the computer wire?

SSt: At the base of the sleeves are red road arteries, which I've used in my work before, and here they come out of a contemporary road map of the Netherlands. On the jacket the roads look like veins and arteries and when I cut the maps, they looked like hanging veins, as if blood is dripping. Contemporary Netherlands is built on the blood of the colonies and there is pain in that. The arteries are very red, very bloody. I made a series of Red Road Artery works in the past, for example, *River of Blood* for INIVA (the Institute of International Visual Arts), which was made of red road that looked like arteries in shape of the River Thames. The title referred to Enoch Powell's (a British politician) 1960's fascist *Rivers of Blood*, anti-immigration speech. Churchill called the river Thames the *Silver Thread of Empire*, because it brought massive wealth to England, but there was huge bloodshed in obtaining that wealth, blood that continues to flow. Similarly, these dress sleeves refer to that bloodshed in history.

The computer wires in the train are a contemporary material, they form

boundaries, look like hair extensions and were formerly used in computers – a means of communication, here they reference and visually connect to the red roads in the jacket.

DvD: When you look at the work, you see all this sea, did you address pollution as well, climate change!

SSt: Yes! That was my dilemma with finishing the train, there was so much else I could have put into it – many things are catching up with us, we can't pollute the earth, mine, colonize and not expect this to come back to us – it's karma. The train also references the ocean, coral and shells, plastic and pollution, with materials and debris spilling out of the train and it can be read as caught up in the train and adding to the weight.

*Territory Dress* has turned out to be more than I thought it would be, subtler, stronger and more developed than the ideas I began with. This often happens, I write a proposal, make plans but I can't simply recreate plans. The processes of making change the ideas, they evolve and that's what's exciting and when I surprise myself, I can't plan for that and the peculiarity of meaning and richness of multi-layered readings in visual art works come from that evolving and surprising process. I had planned to put other materials and references into the piece, such as embroidery and tobacco leaves but they didn't work.

DvD: Those materials, like inner tubes, and buttons. Why buttons?

SSt: They were supposed to go onto the jacket, but they were a distraction so I put them in the train, where they worked. Buttons hold things together and I like that association. I also added old Dutch coins, which I hadn't planned. And the staining of the slave ship prints in the train with tea, is not necessarily visible. I thought about staining with tobacco as well.

DvD: An immersion into the materiality of colonisation?

SSt: Absolutely. One of my works was called *Stains of Existence*, because history is a stain, and all these materials are stained with our history, money is stained with oil from our hands. The title of *Territory Dress* took a while to come, I thought of *Memory Dress*, *De-colonial Dress*, *Map Dress*, *A Stitch in Time* and more, however, none worked, they seemed to fix it in one idea, titles often fix and limit readings. *Territory Dress* keeps it open and is a continuum of my other dress titles, such as *Colonial Dress*, *Highland Dress* and so on.

DvD: Batik is a stained technique actually, isn't it? It adds layers.

SSt: Yes it is. And on the frills of the dress I added barcodes. I was trying to invent my own barcode that would have a meaning, but I would have to buy a machine that cost 4,000 pounds

to do that. We could say that there is a language in barcodes – *Language Dress, Text-ile Dress*? But the barcodes are texts, another language, and it is contemporary, it categorizes and demarcates and puts prices on things, and it is international, so a contemporary international language.

DvD: What was problematic when making this dress?

SSt: Well, the flipside of all that was good, *i.e.* not being in the Netherlands. Not knowing so much about your colonial history, the museum, current social debates and discussions, meant I felt a bit removed, but at the same time this gave me a useful distance. The slow pace of the whole process was frustrating at times but has been really good, it has given me a lot more space and time to develop my ideas, try and fail and remake.

DvD: Will you use this experience in future commissions?

SSt: The museum influenced the work through the time I had and through discussions, it has been a two-way dialogue. The dress sculptures are popular, and accessible, which has led to interest from non-art museums as well as art museums. The dress is a good metaphor, but I don't want to be classified as a dress artist, or a map artist. Such categorisation tends to happen, when I worked with rubber inner-tubes I was called 'the Rubber

Queen' and when I made work with toilet paper, my friends called me 'tissue Sue'!

DvD: Isn't this what this work is also about, being framed and mapped all the time?

SSt: Yes, we are being categorised and mapped all the time. Here let me barcode you!

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