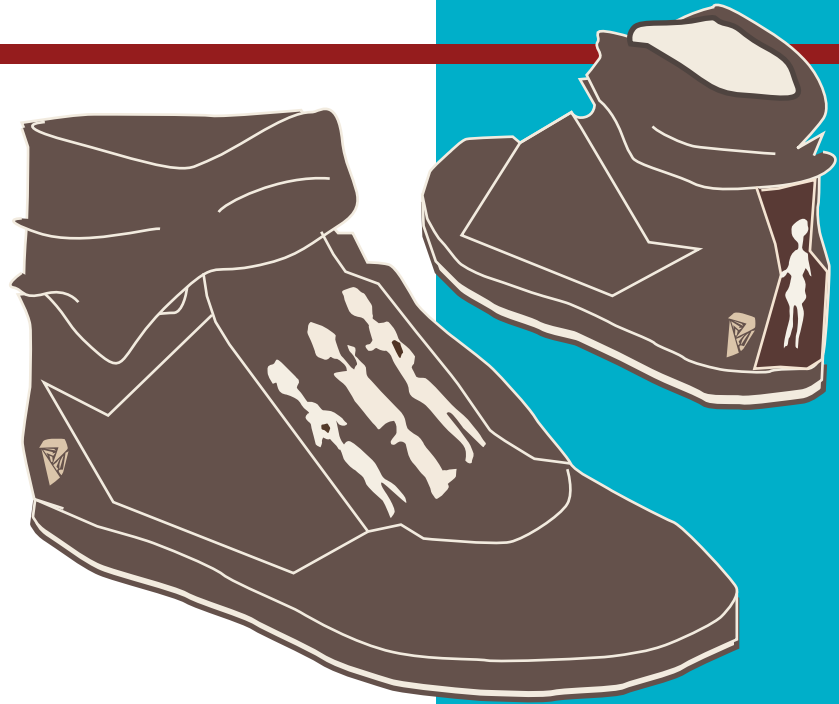




KICKS & ACCESSORIES

A CURATORIAL PROPOSAL AND HISTORY
BY. JAZZMEN LEE-JOHNSON

Look down. Admire your shoes; examine your shirt, pants, skirt, dress or jacket. Notice the stitching, feel the textures of the fabrics that make up your outfit today. What moved you to purchase these pieces? Cost. Comfort. Trend. Style. What sort of labor do you think went into your attire? Hours. Cents. Energy. Transport. The journey of many garments from ideation to stitch to store rack is, often an unpleasant one, paved with exploitation and built on slavery. This is a story of colonialism, capitalism, and consumerism.

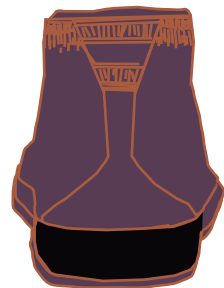


Darling, what are you wearing? Such fine threads adorn your shoulders!



Kicks and Accessories

is an exhibition that will focus on the complicated and contradictory relationship of the Dutch to West Africa from the perspective of the 19th century textile industry. Dutch wax print textiles have become the quintessential fabric in West Africa. Bold and brilliant in color with asymmetrical geometric shapes, polyrhythmic patterns, and renderings of everyday objects, pop culture, and local politics, this fabric is used to make everything from ladies purses, lapas and head-wraps, to blazers, slacks, dashikis, and backpacks. Yet there is a great spool of irony binding the social fabric of Dutch wax print textiles—this “African print” is really the result of Dutch aesthetic acculturation, a colonial relationship with Indonesia, and prolonged contact with West Africa and the Atlantic slave trade.







HISTORY

Over the past 150 years, the production of Dutch wax print has been a thriving industry in West Africa.¹ These textiles are Dutch interpretations (or bastardizations) of Javanese Batik—a traditional dying method that spread from India to the Indonesian Islands in the late 12th century. Batik (beeswax) is a process in which applied designs are covered with wax resin to resist the color. This technique works best on cotton and indigo-dyed fabrics. Attributed to its Hindu roots, batik was a symbol of fertility, womanhood, and prosperity, often used in rituals of birth, initiation, and marriage.² The Javanese began to adopt and perfect the batik technique, later optimizing the process by developing the wood-block wax applicator.³ When the Dutch became colonial overlords of Indonesia, in the 19th century, they capitalized on this cultural commodity by introducing the batik textile to Europe and then later exporting and industrializing the batik technique.

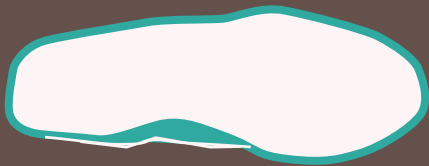
Dutch colonists sought to imitate batik and capitalize on its popularity by undermining production in Indonesia and creating machine-made wax copies. However, the Dutch imitations were terrible. The copies were not well received in Indonesia or Europe due to their substandard quality, and they could not be exported to Indonesia because of trade restrictions that had been placed on the import of foreign textiles into Indonesia, so as to preserve and promote local batik production.⁴ Having mastered a method to mass-produce batik, the Dutch went looking for a new market for their product. With the founding of the Dutch West India Company in the 17th century, and the growing



demands of the Atlantic slave trade, the Dutch had developed extensive networks of trade and commerce in West Africa.⁵ With the infrastructure *already in place to purchase or trade African human cargo alongside cotton, textiles, palm oil, and exotic seashells, West Africa was an obvious target market for Dutch wax prints.*⁶ *The paradox of Dutch wax print lies in the fact that the Dutch define “African-ness” and batik through their interpretation and imitation of Indonesia and West Africa.*




THE EXHIBITION



Kicks and Accessories

explores the story of how Dutch “African print” came to be seen as part of African culture. This exhibition calls into question: what are the ethics around representing Dutch wax as African textile, and what is our rubric for cultural authenticity? The European idea of “African print,” which is used to describe a style of textile, is a false idea and an erasure of colonial actors in continuing this imagining.⁷ The continent of Africa, which consists of over 50 countries, hundreds of languages, and hundreds of thousands of traditions, should not be seen as a monolith that churns out a single cohesive style. The term “African print” has been used to characterize an entire industry of textile that is not African but instead a European imagined “African-ness.” Dutch wax “African Print” is a metonymic fallacy by which the term is associated with an aspect of West African culture as an umbrella term for the visual style of the entire continent of Africa. Even West Africa as a



category of style is inaccurate as there is a diverse spectrum of aesthetic from Benin, Mali, Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Togo.

During an interview in 2000, regional director Henk Bremer of Vlisco—the largest Dutch Wax print textile firm—affirmed, “We try to have a feeling with the African buyers of our products, and with the people who distribute our textiles, but we don’t hire Africans for the designing. We do that ourselves.” There is a level of bravado and irony in Bremer’s statement, which posits the notion of reselling “Africa” to Africans. Bremer goes on to say, “In our view, African designers are too dependent on traditions. From olden days, African artists have been, first and foremost, the people to [give] voice to the traditions. In many societies, they are the keepers of history. So in that sense, they are craftsmen rather than artists. They know their



crafts very well, but once they start being creative and come up with new ideas, it is not appreciated in their own environments.”⁸ Which then leaves it to the European designers, who already have a great deal of influence on the global fashion industry, to dictate and render “African Prints,” a textile which has become unique to West and Central Africa.

By questioning the role of the Dutch as an outsider group imagining and constructing through mass production and consumption of local identities, Kicks and Accessories will doubly expand upon a larger question of the consumer role in contemporary prison industry—a modern system of slavery. Enslavement and incarceration: two systems of oppression patterned, threaded, and sewn with capitalism and consumerism.



POP-UP!



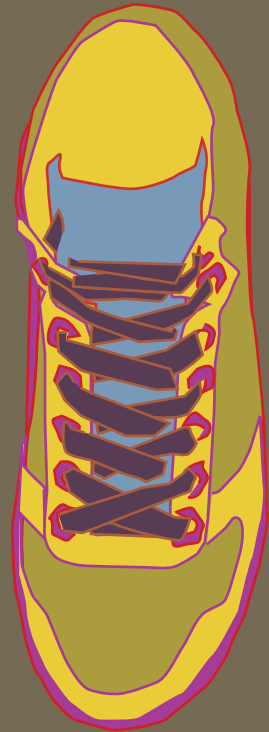
Kicks and Accessories

is an interactive exhibition where visitors peruse the aisles of history. Set up as a pop-up shop, “customers” engage with the pieces—rummage the racks and even try on the clothing. Traditionally, historical exhibitions consist of material culture in displays, and labels hefty with text and scanned primary sources. In Kicks and Accessories the garments upholstered with Dutch wax print and Shweshwe fabrics, t-shirts silk-screened with text, and sneakers lined with audio, chronicle the history of the Dutch influence on the textile industry, and comment on the contemporary corporate impact on prison industry. The visitor must engage with the items; “shop” in order to follow the narrative of the exhibition. Mass-produced historical tees, limited edition “African print” lingerie, and one of a kind furniture, sneakers, and accessories, are the trendy products of this exhibition.

Through “shopping,” the articles of clothing and accessories will demand the audience to challenge and confront their habits of consumption. prison industry—a modern system of slavery. Enslavement and incarceration: two systems of oppression patterned, threaded, and sewn with capitalism and consumerism.







NOTES

- 1 Wyger Wentholt. "The Real Dutch Wax...the company that clothes Africa" *New African* 383 (Mar 2000): 28-31.
- 2 "batik." Encyclopaedia Britannica. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online Academic Edition. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2014. Web. 12 Apr. 2014.
- 3 Tirthankar Roy, *India in the World Economy: From Antiquity to the Present*. (New York 2012), p43.
- 4 Eccentric Yoruba, "#71 "African Fabrics": The History of Dutch Wax Prints." *Beyond Victoriana*. Web. 22 Apr. 2014.
- 5 Johannes Postma. "The Dimension of the Dutch Slave Trade from Western Africa," *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1972), pp. 237-248
- 6 Colleen E. Kriger, "Mapping the History of Cotton Textile Production in Precolonial West Africa," *African Economic History*, No. 33 (2005), pp. 87-116
- 7 Tunde M. Akinwumi, "The "African Print" Hoax: Machine Produced Textiles Jeopardize African Print Authenticity." *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol.2, no.5, July 2008. 179-191.
- 8 "The Real Dutch Wax...the company that clothes Africa"