Dear all good people of the Verhalenhuis Rotterdam,

We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks, respect and deep gratitude to your brilliant and hard work on the ICORN Rotterdam Meeting and PEN WPC Conference and the Rotterdam literary programmes. I believe we speak on behalf of everyone when we say that you make us feel welcome right at home in your city, and now a bit ours, Rotterdam.

Thank you for the spectacular festival programme throughout the whole week; the beautiful (and delicious) welcome dinner reception at the Rotterdam Theatre in the true spirit of the Verhalenhuis; the great speakers and performers who all gave us a flavour of what makes up a home; the Rotterdam welcome desk by enthusiastic and helpful volunteers; the literary tour, praised by those who attended; the smooth and well-organised handling of registration, hotel, venue, transportation, and practical (and moral) support at the SS Rotterdam.

We experienced a very personal welcome to ICORN and PEN, to all our guests, we fell in love with your mayor, your people, your stories – our stories, food, atmosphere and rich programme, and felt rightly at home in Rotterdam, at the ship, at Verhalenhuis.

We take with us new memories and stories that will live long into the future.

Warm regards,

On behalf of the ICORN and PEN team

Cathrine Helland
Introduction: Rotterdam, City of Refuge

2019: At Home, Everywhere

1. Lecture programme
2. Essay on meaning
3. In the neighbourhood
4. Music & poetry, participation & pop-ups
5. Film programme
6. Exhibition & activities

Participation, audience & publicity

Organisation and finances

Rotterdam, City of Refuge in the future
Refugee writer Hamed Ahmadi (1982, Iran) arrives together with his wife Mojde Radankoupaei at the guesthouse of Verhalenhuis Belvédère.

Hamed and Mojde are being received at the Library of Rotterdam, at the world largest Erasmus collection with original texts by Erasmus (1466-1536).
More than 250 writers, musicians, filmmakers and artists from around 74 countries all of whom live under threat visited the city of Rotterdam and Verhalenhuis Belvédère for ‘At Home, Everywhere’, the Rotterdam Stories for Freedom Festival.

In late May 2019, Rotterdam’s Kop van Zuid district became the heart of the International Cities of Refuge Network conference held by ICORN & PEN International, and the Stories For Freedom Festival. The Steamship Rotterdam made an ideal setting for the conference, the subject and the participants.

Erasmus of Rotterdam now
In 2019, Rotterdam was the city for the biennial international conference of ICORN and PEN International. Rotterdam ‘won’ against competitors Pittsburgh and Barcelona. For the Verhalenhuis, in the first place this meant it had to develop an accessible programme of literature and music, personal (nearby, informal, homely) and inspiring (high-quality crossovers and participative presentations). The multidisciplinary programme took place in various venues, with creative collaboration with organisations and artists in Rotterdam.

Cooperation among cities
Amsterdam was one of the founding partners of ICORN and has been a City of Refuge since the 1990s. The former home of the Anne Frank family in Amsterdam, from which they fled to the Secret Annex, now serves as a writer’s residence.

At Home, Everywhere
In 2016 Verhalenhuis Belvédère became a member of ICORN on behalf of the City of Rotterdam. In 2018, Leiden joined Amsterdam and Rotterdam as an ICORN City of Refuge.

The 2019 conference of the International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN) and the international PEN association took place in Rotterdam and was a public collaboration with partners including Verhalenhuis, writers and performers forced to flee.

The steamship Rotterdam made an ideal setting for the conference, the subject and the participants. Verhalenhuis Belvédère (Stuy Huis Belvédère), located in Katendrecht, was the central and departure point and home base for five days of public lectures, films, storytelling, library loans and meetings, an exhibition of artists, pop-up performances by the participating musicians and poets.

ICORN International Cities of Refuge Network
The 2019 ICORN International Cities of Refuge Network conference, ICORN & the international PEN association’s Writers in Prison Committees (PEN International), the Writers in Prison Committees, PEN Nederland and Verhalenhuis Belvédère hosted a large, international conference with a very diverse target group, whose members were often in a difficult situation. As a result, the cooperation between Verhalenhuis and ICORN was very valuable, minimal resources were often in a difficult situation. As a result, the cooperation between Verhalenhuis and ICORN was very valuable, minimal resources were often a limiting factor.

Erasmus of Rotterdam now
The 2019 conference title, ‘At Home, Everywhere’, the Rotterdam Stories for Freedom Festival, was chosen to reflect what it means to feel at home in today’s world and what it means to be rooted in your home. Artists worldwide are increasingly under threat in their freedom of expression. To what extent can art and story tell, safely and securely, the stories of people who have to flee, because they were no longer safe in their own country? This facilitated mutual inspiration and connection between international artists and those from Rotterdam or elsewhere in the Netherlands. There was ample room for interviews, the biennial international conference of ICORN and PEN International: Rotterdam ‘won’ against competitions Pittsburgh and Barcelona. For the Verhalenhuis, in the first place this meant it had to develop an accessible programme of literature and music, personal (nearby, informal, homely) and inspiring (high-quality crossovers and participative presentations). The multidisciplinary programme took place in various venues, with creative collaboration with organisations and artists in Rotterdam.

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ICORN and Verhalenhuis on the International map
In 2019, Rotterdam hosted the ICORN International Cities of Refuge Network, in close collaboration with Rotterdam Partners, successfully applied for Rotterdam to be the host city for the biennial international conference of ICORN and PEN International. Rotterdam ‘won’ against competitions Pittsburgh and Barcelona. For the Verhalenhuis, in the first place this meant it had to develop an accessible programme of literature and music, personal (nearby, informal, homely) and inspiring (high-quality crossovers and participative presentations). The multidisciplinary programme took place in various venues, with creative collaboration with organisations and artists in Rotterdam.

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Erasmus of Rotterdam now
For the congress, Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536), as a self-proclaimed world citizen, is an important source of inspiration. He roamed between countries and continents, rejected old beliefs and prejudices, and fought for a new, more just and enlightened humanity. The phrases ubi bene, ibi patria, which is attributed to him, means ‘where you feel comfortable is your home country’. His proclaimed world citizen, is an important source of inspiration: he roamed between countries and continents, rejected old beliefs and prejudices, and fought for a freer, more just and enlightened humanity.

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Welcomes dinner with lectures and stories at the stage of Theater Rotterdam Schouwburg
The international programme in the city centre and neighbourhoods was extremely varied. Below we review the highlights in word and image.

1. LECTURE PROGRAMME

Date 28.5.2019Venue Theather Rotterdam Schouwburg

1.1. LECTURE PROGRAMME

Theater Rotterdam was an important partner. This enabled the festival to start with a dinner and lecture programme for more than 300 guests at the Theater Rotterdam Schouwburg: 

**Michelle Provoost**, director of Crimson Architectural Historians and consultant in the field of communication and intercultural diversity in the Netherlands and the Middle East. Moreover, she had recently written the essay Here is There, There is Here – Story House as Sanctuary in Rotterdam, a City of Refuge. Her lecture was a response to the arrival of the first City of Refuge writer in Rotterdam, Adnan Alaoda. From the review by Tineke Bennema - The Great Middle East

**M. Pijbes**

Director of the Dream and Action Foundation (Stichting Droom & Daad), presented Rotterdam through the eyes of migrants and refugees who have recently arrived in the city. He presented Rotterdam through the eyes of migrants and refugees who have recently arrived in the city.

**Esseline van de Sande Bakhuyzen**

Professor Maarten A Hajer is professor of Urban Futures at Utrecht University, and also curator of Places of Hope. He presented his column on ‘Neighbourhoods of the Future’.

**Adnan Alaoda**

A new country to which they too can make an important cultural and unifying contribution.”

Adnan Alaoda was a filmmaker and cook from Syria, who provided the food for the evening. He referred to as his ‘Ramadan voice’, he pleads for “a space for oneself” and “a space for others’ stories. How can we design cities and places where people feel they can participate and contribute? How do we create physical and social spaces which makes you feel at home somewhere, which is welcoming? What are good examples for this and what makes them work?”

“The mayor of Rotterdam is the first speaker to be called to the stage, and he welcomes us to the festival. Rotterdam’s Ahmed Aboutaleb is not only the first Moroccan-Dutch mayor in the Netherlands, he also happens to be an expert on all things poetry. In what reference to his roots in the Moroccan Rif?”

Aboutaleb pronounces the word ‘refugee’ as ‘riffugee’. A subconscious effort to create resilient cities that are well prepared for migration. Provoost believes that planning and architecture play a crucial role in ensuring that everyone had a place and was served with interesting food. The programme was intended for the many invited guests, of course, but it was also open to the public, which made for a very diverse audience being drawn together. The location and setting were a major part of the concert: all the writers and musicians seeking refuge were made to feel welcome by being invited to take the city’s stage.

The mayor of Rotterdam, Ahmed Aboutaleb, opened the programme with a story of his own, emphasising Rotterdam’s character as a city of refuge. “The mayor of Rotterdam is the first speaker to be called to the stage, and he welcomes us to the festival. Rotterdam’s Ahmed Aboutaleb is not only the first Moroccan-Dutch mayor in the Netherlands, he also happens to be an expert on all things poetry. In what reference to his roots in the Moroccan Rif?”

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Wim Pijbes, director of the Dream & Act Foundation (Stichting Droom & Daad) & Emigrantmuseum De Fenix 2023. Architectural historian Michelle Provoost over the City of Comings & Goings.
Rotterdam's first refugee writer Adnan Al-Awadi (Raqqa, Syria) together with Rotterdam musicians Gabby Bakker and Andreas Suntrop. Maher Al Sabbagh, filmmaker and guest cook tells about his youth in Damascus, his arrival in Rotterdam in 1992 and his dream for Syria.
but also her essay ‘Here is There, There is Here. Story House as Sanctuary.’ Esseline van de Sande followed the first refugee writer for a year and not only presented the lecture program it turned out to be about her flight from Syria in an unstable boat. Laughing with the woman. When the story was translated into Dutch, it was apparent a funny story, the Syrians were present in Arabic: ‘It was apparently a funny story, the Syrians were inspired to set up Story Houses in their own cities, among them Syria and the story house in the Netherlands.’ The essay and hence the concept and heritage of the Verhalenhuis is therefore now accessible to an international audience. Jamilah Al Araa, a Syrian author, wrote: ‘I like the comparative and philosophical methods to explore the differences between the story house in Syria and the story house in the Netherlands.’ The American author Rebecca Joubin described it as an ‘imposing new book on Syrian storytelling, art and culture.’ ECO participants were immediately inspired to set up Story Houses in their own cities, among them Syria, the Netherlands, and Sweden. The essay was translated into Arabic and available as a digital edition.

Adnan Alaoda
Syria / The Netherlands, the Syrians. Some of the Dutch people present were amazed by the resilience of the Syrians. They are lively gatherings filled with music, by Syrian and Dutch artists, both professional and amateur. During the festival he presented readings or performances by both international and local poets and musicians. The public could take a 90-minute tour of the various participating venues. Volunteer guides helped the audience to find the locations, and at the same time told them about the neighbourhood and the organisation and exchanges at venues that represent At home, Everywhere. The programme was officially opened at Verhalenhuis Belvédère with the personal story and a poem by Heinsohn Huala, who fled the regime in Chile to arrive the Netherlands in 1978. He was active with the personal story and a poem by Heinsohn Huala, who fled the regime in Chile to arrive the Netherlands in 1978. He was active with the programme was officially opened at Verhalenhuis Belvédère with the personal story and a poem by Heinsohn Huala, who fled the regime in Chile to arrive the Netherlands in 1978. He was active with the programme was officially opened at Verhalenhuis Belvédère with the personal story and a poem by Heinsohn Huala, who fled the regime in Chile to arrive the Netherlands in 1978. He was active...
own performance, Claudia Maroto accompanied the poets Lety Elvir, and Ishmail Kamara and Alvaro Rovira Ruiz did the same for the poets Salah Hassan and Adnan Alaoda.

The line-up of poets and musicians from Rotterdam and beyond: Amir Afrassiabi (Rotterdam/Iran), Ishmail Kamara (Rotterdam/Sierra Leone), Salah Hassan (The Hague/Iraq), Ricardo Cuadros (Amsterdam/Chile), Shakila Azizzada (Houten/Afghanistan), Alvaro Rovira Ruiz & Claudia Morato (Rotterdam/Argentina), Semere Tesfaldet Yohannes (Rotterdam/Eritrea), Jamil al Asadi (Rotterdam/Iraq), Sarah Schützle (Rotterdam/Germany), Aktas and Fusan Erdogan (Rotterdam/Turkey), Arie van der Krogt (Rotterdam/The Netherlands) and Zyia Ertekin (aka Blue Flamingo DJ, Rotterdam/Turkey).

Two days before the conference began, we knew who would be coming and assembled a performance. We then mixed the ‘Dutch’ line-up with the international artists from ICORN/PEN.

They were: Sahar Mousa (Palestine), Mohammad Habeeb (Syria), Mohammad Bamm (Iran), Adnan Alaoda (Rotterdam/Syria), Hamed Ahmadi (Rotterdam/Iran) and Lety Elvir (Amsterdam/Honduras).

“At four in the afternoon, we are once again gathered at the Story House Belvédère, the At Home Everywhere headquarters. To me, this event is the absolute highlight of the festival. Juan Heinsohn, a poet living in Rotterdam who once fled the Pinochet regime, starts us off with a poem about freedom. Next up is the Poets for Freedom Tour. Not very far from the City Story Centre is the ROS, an extraordinary house where undocumented people are lovingly taken in by Tineke van der Burg and other staff members. There is a shelter with eighteen beds, mostly given out to women. Here, we listen to the poem ‘Smile’ by Sierra Leonean funny man Ishmail Kamara, to Lety Elvir, who talks about the dead in her native country of Honduras, and to Claudia Morato’s sweet harp sounds. We carry on, turning the corner twice, and end up in Kopi Soesoe/Katendrecht (kopi soesoe is an Indonesian drink consisting of coffee and milk), an intimate musical café where the show goes on. We listen to a recitation by Mohammad Habeeb (from Syria originally, but residing in Norway) and to Semere Tesfaldet’s performance on an amplified krar. The Afghan Shakila Azizzada has taught herself Dutch, and recites some Dutch poems, one about De Dam, and finally, an erotic poem. Concluding this part of the tour, city troubadour Arie van der Krogt gets us going with his multilingual song about the same sun and the same sea he is longing for the beach in Bulgaria where he realizes that the sun is just the same sun he was in the Netherlands. Later globalization, I say. Our last stop is the beautiful U2 partnership, where, in 14/8, represents the Romantic’s very own, Jamaica. Jamil al Asadi from Iraq plays a churning song on an u-9 piano. Later, an impromptu sound takes the stage, leaning on a snarling voice. We hear the poem ‘Girl takes the day off’ and halt at this point, in Poland, to save a little black bull in a real fight. We want to touch the little bull that has turned out to make us up. Now, who’s in all directions. Notably curious to truth. Absolutely naked. Lastly, we’re still around to achieve this day. What can we learn more in just a few hours’ time? Is the result that Rotterdam has to offer A rich blend of poets and musicians from all over the world and a group of committed Rotterdammers always ready to conclude that they exist, whatever be their home or native country.”

from a blog by Nico Haasbroek

Lety Elvir

Lety Elvir (San Pedro Sula, Honduras / Amsterdam, the Netherlands)

Writer and poet Lety Elvir has been living in the City of Refuge Amsterdam since August 2015, as a guest of the Dutch Foundation for Literature and the City of Amsterdam. She fled from Honduras, where she studied Spanish language and literature and worked for more than 20 years as a university lecturer and author. Lety was threatened and persecuted by the repressive regime that has been in power since 2009. Even at university, one of her colleagues was killed. In 2015, Lety received the prestigious International Latino Book Award in Los Angeles for the bilingual collection of poems Women’s Poems of Protest, Honduras (2009-2014), which portrays peaceful activism in a context of conflict, violence and fear.
Aktas Erdogan is a Rotterdam musician born in Istanbul. Aktas talked about coming to the Netherlands and especially about his parents, both of whom are journalists and have been in prison in Turkey for a long time. What is it like to live with your grandparents as a child and to visit your parents in prison? Aktas also talked about the campaign he started for the release of his mother, journalist and writer Füsun Ergodan, who was sentenced to life imprisonment. In May 2014, she was unexpectedly released after eight years. She was also present at the performance. Aktas concluded with a performance accompanied by his musical friends.
Alvaro Rovira (Argentina)

And right: Jamil Al Asadi (Iraq), Ishmail Kamara (Sierra Leone) and Semere Tesfaldet Yohannes (Eritrea)
at the Fenix barns, at hairdresser Is op de Kaap and cafe Kopi Soesoe.
The festival offered the international poets, writers and musicians many more opportunities to perform in the city and to connect with visitors, poets and musicians from Rotterdam. Both in the meeting room of the Verhalenhuis, and spontaneously in the city, on the ship, and at a school, there were personal meetings involving the public.

Arrival in the city

On the first evening, Café Floor and in the foyer of Theater Rotterdam, there were various pop-up performances by the international guests attending the conference. Basim Jamal (clarinet, Iraq), Cris Gera (piano, Zimbabwe) and Arya Aramnejad (guitar, Iran) performed in the theatre foyer – ‘the living room of Rotterdam’ – for visitors and passers-by.

Iranian music & poetry

This international refugee invited an audience of literature and music, with his personal story, an Iranian dancer, strings and various music, dusted off to poetry and performance, including a performance by Sadaf Abazari (storytelling) and Hamoud, ‘Year’, Sadat Ekhtesari and Arrow (spoken word), all of whom live in the Netherlands. There was specifically reserved in the programme to include the Netherlands, Denizhan Altay (music), all of whom live in the jam’ Saidi Massoud ‘Farar (poetry), Shahyan Ghanbari (storytelling) and Sahand Sahebdivani (poetry), a film, and various music, stand-up and poetry performances, Iranian literature and music, with his personal story, an Iranian din.

On 29 May 2019, international ICORN refugee writers Firas Shamsan (Iraq), Firas Shamsan and Zamira Abassanova joined the Verhalenhuis’s education department on a visit to the Wattez school Schouwburg there were various pop-up performances by the international guests attending the conference. Basim Jamal (clarinet, Iraq) in the theatre lobby.

The Iranian refugee writer presented an evening of Iranian music & poetry, including Mostafa Heravi (photography), the music then continued even later into the night at the guest residence of Hamed Ahmadi on the top floor of the Verhalenhuis. It was an opportunity for this diverse group of musicians to make lasting contacts.

Schools visit

On the second evening of the conference, especially later in the evening, several international musicians felt inspired to perform at the Stories for Freedom Festival at Verhalenhuis Belvédère. The atmosphere was electric as one after the other they took to the small stage in the city and treated the audience to the best of their repertoire, and at the same shared their story and their message, from the guitarist and freedom fighter Hamed Ahmadi (Iran), the former young pop singer Ayje Anvarzade (Irán) to the heavy metal guitarist Nikur-Khosravi (IR). The music then continued even later into the night at the guest residence of Hamed Ahmadi on the top floor of the Verhalenhuis. It was an opportunity for this diverse group of musicians to make lasting contacts.

Hamed Ahmadi

Hamed Ahmadi is a writer, poet and journalist, born in Tehran in 1962, and the second City of Refuge writer to stay in Rotterdam at Verhalenhuis Belvédère for a year. Hamed’s work includes the poetry collection, Horror with no captions (2008), the novel Strange and Incredible Story of Maradona (2009) and a book about his arrest and imprisonment, Mercury’s Moon: Goriz in 2009 he was arrested during a peaceful demonstration and was imprisoned for several weeks. After his release, the government put him under pressure to write propaganda for the regime. When he refused, it became too dangerous for him to stay in Iran, and he left the country with his wife, Mojde, and their son, Hamed Ahmadi is a writer, poet and journalist, born in Tehran in 1962, and the second City of Refuge writer to stay in Rotterdam at Verhalenhuis Belvédère for a year. Hamed’s work includes the poetry collection, Horror with no captions (2008), the novel Strange and Incredible Story of Maradona (2009) and a book about his arrest and imprisonment, Mercury’s Moon: Goriz. In 2009 he was arrested during a peaceful demonstration and was imprisoned for several weeks. After his release, the government put him under pressure to write propaganda for the regime. When he refused, it became too dangerous for him to stay in Iran, and he left the country with his wife, Mojde, and their son, Hamed Ahmadi is a writer, poet and journalist, born in Tehran in 1962, and the second City of Refuge writer to stay in Rotterdam at Verhalenhuis Belvédère for a year. Hamed’s work includes the poetry collection, Horror with no captions (2008), the novel Strange and Incredible Story of Maradona (2009) and a book about his arrest and imprisonment, Mercury’s Moon: Goriz. In 2009 he was arrested during a peaceful demonstration and was imprisoned for several weeks. After his release, the government put him under pressure to write propaganda for the regime. When he refused, it became too dangerous for him to stay in Iran, and he left the country with his wife, Mojde, and their son, Hamed Ahmadi is a writer, poet and journalist, born in Tehran in 1962, and the second City of Refuge writer to stay in Rotterdam at Verhalenhuis Belvédère for a year. Hamed’s work includes the poetry collection, Horror with no captions (2008), the novel Strange and Incredible Story of Maradona (2009) and a book about his arrest and imprisonment, Mercury’s Moon: Goriz.
Rafaa Ismael

Baghdad, Iraq / Rotterdam, the Netherlands

The filmmaker, writer and translator for Iraqi film director Hamed Ahmadi with Mostafa Heravi (Iran).

In her hometown, music, music and films were the building blocks of the society. Until 1990, Al-Rihab was a meeting place for writers and musicians, but later on, it was under siege. In 1991, the building was destroyed. The government banned music and any musical activity and he has been offered bribes to stop his music career. In an interview with the Spanish newspaper El País in 2010, he said that the best way to help political prisoners is to act as a voice for them internationally. Arya was nominated again in 2011 and 2012 after his release, the government ordered him to make statements about his social media posts. His song Ali Barkhiz came to fame with his song Ali Barkhiz (‘Ali stand up’), in which he condemned the violence used by the Iraqi government during the 2009 Ashura protests. He came to fame with his song Ali Barkhiz (‘Ali stand up’), in which he condemned the violence used by the Iraqi government during the 2009 Ashura protests. He

Basim Jamal

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Hamed Ahmadi with Mostafa Heravi (Iran).

Arya Aramnejad

Rafael, Iran / Stockholm, Sweden

The popular young Iranian pop singer Arya Aramnejad came to fame when his song Ali Barkhiz (‘Ali stand up’), in which he condemned the violence used by the Iraqi government during the 2009 Ashura protests. He came to fame with his song Ali Barkhiz (‘Ali stand up’), in which he condemned the violence used by the Iraqi government during the 2009 Ashura protests. He

For At Home, Everywhere, Adnan presented a new edition of his poetic novel: workshops and debates about how modern literature influences the exile, about the role of the writer in combating xenophobia, and about what cities can do to promote inclusiveness for refugees and migrants, with contributors including representatives of European cities that facilitate particularly well the integration of refugees and migrants, and with contributions including artists, poets, filmmakers and representatives from International Cities of Refugees (ICORN) and from Culture Unlimited Foundation and Beyond Festival, and from ICORN.

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Faarjam (Iran/NL)
Asraf Bagheri (Iran/Sweden)
Zamira Abbasova
Armenia - Azerbaijan
Leiden, the Netherlands
Zamira makes podcasts and is an advocate for peace. She was born in Armenia and grew up in Azerbaijan as a refugee, living through war and conflict. Her peace work for Armenian and Azerbaijani young people made her persona non grata in Azerbaijan and forced her to live in exile. Her problems arose when in 2010 she joined Tekali Association, named after a Georgian town at the intersection of the borders with Armenia and Azerbaijan, where the organisation aims at bringing young people from the two countries into conversation. Armenia and Azerbaijan went to war in a dispute over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The war ended in 1994, but the conflict continues. Via Georgia and London, Zamira came to the ICORN City of Refuge Leiden in 2018.

Nikan Khosravi
Tehran, Iran / Harstad, Norway
The Iranian metal musician Nikan Khosravi of the band Confess was arrested and held in solitary confinement for three months. He was tried in 2016 on various charges, including blasphemy, illegal activities and interviews with banned foreign radio stations. He was sentenced to 12.5 years in prison and 74 lashes. His crime: making music. Nikan is a guitarist, and performs songs with lyrics that are critical of religion and the Iranian government. Due to his conviction and serious threats, Nikan fled to Turkey in 2017. Via ICORN he was then invited to go to Harstad, Norway.
Zamira Abbasova (Azerbaijan) at the Vrije school de Kaap

Left Arya Aramnejad (Iran/Sweden) and right Nikan Khosravi (Iran/Norway)
5. FILM PROGRAMME

The Rotterdam-based Syrian filmmaker Rosh Abdelfatah (1982, Amouda, Syria) acted as a guest programmer for his personal film programme. Rosh Abdelfatah is a filmmaker and the artistic director of the Arab Film Rotterdam. He was born in 1982 in Amouda in the Kurdish region of Rojava in northern Syria. In 2000, when he was 18, he was arrested and given a jail sentence without any charges being made. On his release after four weeks, he fled the country, and through contacts he ended up in the Netherlands, in the Crooswijk district of Rotterdam. In 2006 he graduated from the Academy of Art and Design St. Joost in Breda. In addition to directing the Arab Film Festival, he now works as an artist and free-lances for various Arab TV channels and Dutch organisations. Rosh invited his friends and artist Balout Khazraei (Persian lute), Maher Al Sabbagh (filmmaker/guest chef), Marieke van der Lippe (filmmaker) and Bero Beyer (lecture/keynote speech) to contribute.

Bero Beyer is the general and artistic director of International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) and also produced the films Paradise Now (2005), Atlantic (2014) and Milh Hadha al-Bah (2008). Bero is committed to films that deal with urgent societal issues, and the IFFR programmes a lot of work by filmmakers who in their own country are banned from making such films or are unable to have them screened.

The evening was presented in cooperation with Jeroen de Loor from the Rotterdam Undocumented Support Centre (Rotterdam Ongedocumenteerden Steunpunt, ROS), with which the Verhalenhuis has been programming a film festival by and for undocumented migrants for five years.

Through PEN and ICORN, there were various contributions to the evening by the animation filmmaker and cartoonist Khalid Albaih (Sudan), musician Abazar Hamid (Sudan), filmmaker/Artist Mohsen Hossaini (Afghanistan) and Kurdish video/film artist Fikret Atay (Turkey), and the programme concluded with a special Iftar meal by guest chef Maher Al Sabbagh.

Rosh Abdelfatah interviews Marieke van der Lippe

Khalid Albaih Sudan / Denmark

The celebrated Sudanese artist and cartoonist Khalid Albaih appeared in the film programmes of the Verhalenhuis. Khalid drew cartoons commenting on the unfolding events during the Arab Spring of 2011, and thus became the ‘artist of the revolution’. Many of his cartoons were reproduced on walls in Beirut and Cairo, and are still used by revolutionary groups in his native Sudan and by political activists in Yemen, Tunisia and Syria. They were also published in newspapers such as The Guardian and The New York Times, shown by the BBC and Al-Jazeera, and shared thousands of times via social media. Khalid’s cartoons are fiercely critical of authoritarianism and injustice, but also express solidarity and hope for a better Sudan. Facing next to expectations from traditional media due to his cartoons’ unconventional style and critical content, Khalid turned to the internet and social media to promote his work. His Facebook page, Khartoon! – a play on words on his hometown of Khartoum – has no fewer than 80,000 followers and has drawn interest from all over the world.
At the Verhalenhuis, the two-month exhibition At Home, Everywhere/Heel de wereld is mijn vaderland (‘The whole world is my country’) was specially curated and designed, with art and stories about migrants and refugees of the past and present. In addition to works dealing with this theme by famous Rotterdam artists such as Dolf Henkes (1903-1989), Wally Elenbaas (1912-2008) and Henk Chabot (1894-1949), which were specially on loan from the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed) and the Chabot Museum, there was also work by contemporary Rotterdam artists with a refugee background: Fatima Bahrang (Kurdistan, Iraq), Maher Hasan and Mosab Anzo (Syria), Parisa Akbarzadehpoladi and Behrouz Naghipour (Iran), Ole Suleiman (Syria, Lebanon), Joren Houttuin (Estonia), Pashon Ablade (Nigeria), Eliza Bordeaux (Netherlands/Indonesia), Machyta Giebels (Netherlands/Equatorial Guinea), Ozed Omigié (Nigeria), Maureen Ghazal (Netherlands/Palestine) and Kidane Berhe (Eritrea). They not only presented their work, but also their story, bringing to life universal stories of the fear, pain, sadness, desire and hope experienced by people fleeing, both past and present.

There was also work in the exhibition by one of the participating ICORN refugee artists, Mohsen Hossaini (Afghanistan): three animations and other artworks, creating a dialogue with the work of Chabot and Elenbaas. Mohsen was obliged to leave his originals behind in Afghanistan due to the war, but digital versions were available, so the Verhalenhuis had quality reproductions made. The exhibition was officially opened by Arjan de Zeeuw, head of the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands, and was accompanied by a performance by visual artist and poet Maureen Ghazal (Netherlands/Palestine).

The exhibition lasted two months. Pupils from various International Transitional Classes for migrant secondary school pupils entering the Dutch education system from Rotterdam were among the visitors. The exhibition ended with a fassade, a special event in collaboration with the Holocaust commemoration organisation Lodz24 Foundation and the cultural agency’s centre AZC Beverwaard. A group of AZC Beverwaard residents were especially invited to visit the exhibition and were collected by bus. The visit was followed by a meal during which personal stories were shared, after which the participants – artists, guests, asylum seekers and visitors – went on a walking tour in memory of the Jewish Holocaust victims from Rotterdam and elsewhere in the Netherlands, to the memorials the Wall and the Jewish Children’s Monument on Eva Cohen-Hartogkade. Speeches included the mayor of Rotterdam, Ahmet Aboutaleb, and the event concluded with a procession past the memorial. Everyone present received a flower from the Verhalenhuis to lay at the memorial.

Mosab Anzo
Ammap, Syria / Rotterdam, the Netherlands
At an early age, Mosab Anzo already dreamed of coming to the Netherlands, to the land of Rembrandt and Van Gogh, to paint in complete freedom. Forced by the war to flee his native Syria, Mosab had the opportunity to make this dream come true. The Syrian artist studied in Damascus and in Lebanon and in 2014 came to Rotterdam, the city he now calls home. In the Netherlands he started to accompany his paintings with his poetry in a project entitled Zerøan Dunart (‘Without Daylight’). “In Syria, people have no more air; no respect, no life, no freedom, no security. You can see this in my work.”
The conference focused on around 300 registered participants, members of ICORN and PEN from 74 countries.

The activities in the Stories for Freedom Festival received a total of more than 1,700 visitors over six days, comprising participants, invited professionals, associates, local residents and other visitors. In addition, the exhibition was open to the public for two months and received a total of 3,200 visitors.

Design agency 75B (Rens Muis) designed a clear, appealing and easily recognizable logo and house style for the event, with variants for the conference and for all the public programmes. In addition to the themes related to the programme in Dutch and English, which introduced many of the people involved and their personal stories. Nico Haasbroek, journalist and former head of the public news broadcaster NOS, kept a daily blog via social media. Media coverage included articles in the national dailies AD and NRC Handelsblad (two) and items on local TV station Open Rotterdam. Moreover, Al Jazeera TV was present for three days, and articles followed on the websites Het Groot Midden Oosten Platform (‘The Big Middle East Platform’) and Kantelpunt.

The event had a wide international reach, particularly via the live video streaming with which the Verhalenhuis already had extensive experience due to the Al Rewaq events, and via social media by keynote speakers, artists, participants, etc. In particular, the live performances by Adnan Alaoda, Abazar Hamid, Alvaro Ruiz and Claudia Morato and the report on the tours received thousands of views.
ORGANISATION & FINANCE

TheStoriesforFreedomFestivalwascuratedbyICORN, PENandVerhalenhuisBelvédèreandsupportedbytheCityofRotterdam, City of Amsterdam, Dream & Act Foundation (including Dreams & Dares), Dutch Council for Refugees (VluchtelingenWerk), Dutch Foundation for Literature (Nederlands Letterenfonds), Cultural Heritage Agency (Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed), Rotterdam Partners, ROS Rotterdam Undocumented Support Centre (ROS Rotterdam Ongedocumenteerden Steunpunt), Theater Rotterdam, SS Rotterdam, and Theater Project Management and Conference Organization. The dedication of the team and the volunteers of Verhalenhuis Belvédère played an essential role in the event’s success.

ROTTERDAM, CITY OF REFUGE IN THE FUTURE

• The event, the many contacts and connections made, and the shared attention put Rotterdam and the Verhalenhuis on the map internationally.
• The essay on the significance of Story Houses worldwide will be translated into Arabic in addition to English.
• The form of a public festival around the conference generated a strong sense of togetherness and uniqueness among the participants, organisations, volunteers, artists, associates and audiences.
• There was close cooperation with cultural partners such as the Cultural Heritage Agency, Chabot Museum, Theater Rotterdam, Arab Film Festival and IFFR. ROS Rotterdam Undocumented Support Centre, SS Rotterdam, Kopi Soesoe, = Op de Kaap, Bosch & de Jong and Fenix Music Factory participated in the neighbourhood and the festival was inspiring to all involved.
• As the Poetry International festival has been moved to June, unfortunately this partnership has not been further developed.
• Financial support: For a small, private organisation like the Verhalenhuis, the organisation of such a large event on this kind of topic — compared to other conferences that are always supported by municipal bodies — turned out to have a bigger impact and carry a greater financial risk than had been anticipated. Fundraising was difficult. A number of parties provided vital relief at the very last minute.
• In future we would like to bring the resident refugee writer into closer contact with Poetry International and develop new forms of cooperation with the organisation.
• The educational programme developed by the Verhalenhuis will be followed up with a teaching programme in relation to the City of Refuge which can be provided to schools.
• It proved difficult to attract coverage in the digital or conventional media. This subject is sensitive. Open Rotterdam, AD, NRC, the Middle East Platform and Al Jazeera television still covered the event. The festival was widely shared via live streaming, Facebook and other social media, which made it accessible to many more people. This is an area that should be prepared for even better in future.
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WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK:

Partners:
City of Rotterdam, Dream & Deal, City of Amsterdam, Dutch Foundation for Literature (Kultuurfonds Letterenfonds), Cultural Heritage Agency (Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed), Rotterdam Partners, Dutch Council for Refugees (VluchtelingenWerk), Elise Mathilde Fonds, Theater Rotterdam, SS Rotterdam, Heritage Foundation Organizations, Chabot Museum, Rotterdam Undocumented Support Centre (Rotterdam Ongedocumenteerden Steunpunt, ROS), Biezo & Sons, Hair Salon = Op de Kaap, Van de Kaap School of Dance.

Programme team:
Nadja Ismael, Eveline van de Sande, Janneke Joost, Rob Matesiak, Juan Heinsohn-Huala, Afrodite Abdi & Mojde, Adine Kenda, Badin Alles.

Verhalenhuis Belvedere production team:
Melanie van Twelwijk (project manager), Eve van Breugel, Paola Marchesi, Eva van Breugel, Paola Marchesi, Anja Brand, Myriam Eijgenraam, Jenny Touw, Map de Brooy-Prinse, Nadine Zuidema, Marit Elzinga, Irene Alexander, Peter Klijn, Colin McClure, Fenna Hu, Jannes Roolder, Stijn Koster, Laura Schalkwijk, Ellen Hiep, Joyce Shaw, Cor van Heevel, Chris de Jong, Joop Regupout, Eelke de Boer, Linda Malherbe.

Assisted by all the festival volunteers:
Hennie Dasly, Anne Opmeer de Graaf, Bokhakhshi, Leon van Leeuwen, Leon Gilbo, Cor Tiemo, Rita de Jong, Yaela Kamermans, Jos vd Schot, Lies van Engeleer, Eline van Deursen, Kate Clark, Laura van Nhuan, Josephine Buuring, Menno Mulders, Zien-Sani Sido, Nael Tamizi, Gbenero Ogunyemi, Richard Dettke-Antoine, Nicole Bremmer, Shane Harrington, Yohfeth Salay, Eddywarda Nana Gomes, Merel van der Haar, Paul van Leeuwen, Lali Fleisch, Peter van Reppen, Pia van Leeuwen, Martine de Man, Arthur Slegers, Aukje Tackx, Mickebeek, Jacine Bos, Malou Al Sadek, Wolfram & Mina, Lena Even, Anoukelle van Hollen, Theo Huiggen, Dina Mijese, Lot Meliere, Vera Expoudch, Ginger Haddo, Shiblin,…

and of course all the participating artists, artists, writers, speakers and guest chefs, the directors, advisors and other supporters!

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75B, Rens Muis

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Photography:
Joop Regupout

Text:
Linda Malherbe, Laura Schalkwijk

Initiator:
ICORN, PEN, Verhalenhuis Belvédère

Maureen Ghazal (1995, Palestina) writes poetry and stories and makes drawings and mixed media works. In her work she explores the question of home in a world that is always in transition.