

Hella Jongerius in her Berlin studio with, from left to right: Bovist pouf for Vitra, 2005; Felt stool for Cappellini, 2000; Rotterdam Chair for Vitra, 2008.

Industrial Evolution

Following recent appointments as art director of Danskina and Artek, Hella Jongerius shares her thoughts on the design industry and its future.

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¹ Jongerius's studio was formerly used for the storage and distribution of sausage ingredients.

² In 2013 the interior of the UN North Delegates' Lounge in New York was redesigned by Jongerius together with Rem Koolhaas, Irma Boom, Gabriel Lester and Louise Schouwenberg. See Disegno No.5 p.152.

³ Danskina, founded in 1973 by Piet and Ina van Eijken, was acquired by Danish textile company Kvadrat in May 2011, and is now under the joint ownership of Kvadrat and New York-based Maharam.

⁴ KLM commissioned Jongerius in 2011 to redesign its World Business Class cabins. See disegnodaily.com/features/hella-jongerius-for-klm.

Hella Jongerius is playing with the knots of a rope like you might the beads of a rosary. Just as the rosary is an aid for saying prayers in the correct sequence, so too does the rope seem to help Jongerius meditate on her answers. This is, after all, one of her least favourite aspects of being a celebrated designer: the interview.

We're sitting at a table on the second floor of her Berlin studio, a former warehouse¹ in the district of Prenzlauerberg. The Dutch designer recently moved her practice Jongeriuslab here from a building a few blocks away (yesterday was dedicated to potting plants in the courtyard) and, apart from the office of Jongerius's long-serving assistant Siska Diddens, which is scrupulously neat, everything seems in a state of flux. "She's very organised. I'm not. That's why I hired her," whispers Jongerius as we leave Diddens's office to tour the rest of the building.

The first-floor studio has been turned into a print workshop for a few weeks over the summer and, as a result, the ground-floor workshop with its many material samples and tools has become a temporary home for Jongerius's design assistants. "This is my favourite place," says Jongerius, a designer who takes great pleasure in the making process. At the top of the building there is a room full of colour swatches spread over the floor and stuck to the walls, but hardly any furniture, only a waist-high table and two stools that are too short to reach the tabletop. "This is my room," says Jongerius, proud of its ad-hocism. The second floor, where we eventually sit down, is also sparsely furnished. The early stages of a Knotted curtain (of the same type Jongerius created last year for the North Delegates' Lounge at the United Nations² in New York) awaits completion nearby, and it's from this that the knotted rope in Jongerius's hand is sourced. "I am very happy here," she says, considering the studio's new home. "It's giving me the freedom I was looking for. The space gives me energy and potential. I like how it doesn't just belong to me, it only needs a different person to walk in with some cardboard and a table, and something new can start."

This is the studio's fifth incarnation. The practice was set up in Rotterdam in 1993 and grew to a team of six before Jongerius left the Netherlands in 2009 for a small studio in Berlin, looking for the freedom that is vital to her productivity. She worked alone that first year in Berlin, undistracted by her team in Rotterdam, but then the studio grew again. There are now nine staff members and the new space represents a new chapter in Jongerius's career. Last year she was appointed design director at Dutch rug producer Danskina³ and art director of Finnish furniture company Artek. These roles add to existing commitments as art director for colours and surfaces at Swiss furniture maker Vitra, and an ongoing assignment to revitalise Dutch airline KLM's World Business Class cabin interiors⁴. Hella Jongerius has become a powerful player in the design world.

It's telling that Jongerius's work touches more people than you might think. Her colour research for Vitra has far-reaching influence – even outside the Swiss company's showrooms – thanks to the trickle-down effect luxury design tends to have on mass culture; two million people fly KLM annually; and some of the world's most powerful leaders relax in the North Delegates' Lounge, sat in chairs designed by Jongerius and in interiors devised by her. Yet this success is somewhat >

Jongeriuslab moved to a new studio in a former warehouse in Prenzlauerberg, Berlin in April.



This page: A length of Eden fabric, 2014, for Maharam, hanging in the studio's stairway. Opposite page: Soft urn, 1993, in natural PU rubber was part of Jongerius's Design Academy Eindhoven postgraduate work and was later put in production by Droog. Detail of plate from the Nymphenberg Sketches series, 2004.



⁵ In the late 1970s and early 80s, a Dutch financial crisis sparked by a lack of wage controls led to high unemployment and economic growth hovering near zero for a decade.

> surprising when you consider Jongerius’s craft-based approach and anti-consumerist leanings. “I really don’t believe in the world of consumerism, this stuff that is filling our lives and poisoning the Earth,” she says. It leaves a question over whether her recent appointments represent a positive development for an industry in desperate need of reinvention, or a contradiction that will prove hard to resolve. “Even five years ago,” she says, “I couldn’t have foreseen this, it wasn’t in my realm.”

In 1987, at the age of 24, Jongerius applied to study industrial design at Design Academy Eindhoven (DAE). She was turned down; the feedback letter said she was too technical. Jongerius had spent four years on benefits – unemployment was very high at the time⁵ – doing odd volunteering jobs for a feminist collective, repairing things for people and taking evening classes in carpentry (“I realised I didn’t know anything about making or repairing anything”). But she was developing an interest in art and design. “I had never been to a museum. Then I was unemployed for five years and part of this nice crowd of art-school people, so I started going to museums and we discussed art a lot,” she says. After the initial DAE rejection, she rearranged her portfolio and was accepted on her second

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attempt.⁶ “When I started studying, I was 25 and had this whole hippie existence behind me,” she says. “I found it quite difficult. I was older than the others and had this experience in life.” Jongerius was convinced she wanted to design appliances – razors and mixers – but she now laughs as she recounts this. At DAE it emerged that her gift lay in the opposite direction. “I had a talent for textiles and materials; the teachers saw that. They were the ones who told me, ‘Don’t swim against it, swim with it.’ I took that advice.”

Some of her natural affinity with textiles Jongerius attributes to her childhood. She grew up in the countryside outside De Meern, a small town in the centre of the Netherlands where her father ran a plantery. “It was very small, there was no staff so he worked alone; he was always at home,” recalls Jongerius. Her mother was a housewife with impeccable sewing and pattern-cutting skills. “There were always fabrics all over the house and patterns of what she wanted to do, many dreams on the table,” says Jongerius, who therefore never had to buy clothes of her own. “But the freedom from my youth came from the land belonging to my father. My mother was quite strict, so I didn’t really like being in the house with her. I was always out with my three brothers and we had this freedom to create our own world.”

The idea of being unrestricted is important to Jongerius, and she refers to various “freedoms” throughout the interview. In fact, freedom seems to be the starting point for most of her work as a designer. “For me, creativity is to feel free, to create your own world,” she says. “That is why I left Rotterdam. Not living in your own culture gives you freedom because you don’t have the social pressures and rules. I don’t have this tradition and I don’t have this culture, I am the exception, the outsider.” Similarly, she has freed herself from the constraints of the design industry while still working within it, and with this outsider position has gone about revolutionising it. One of the best examples of this concerns her first commercial client, US textile manufacturer Maharam, which Jongerius has worked with for 16 years. The relationship got off to a shaky start. After speaking at a conference in Aspen in 1998 she was approached by Maharam art director Mary Murphy. “She asked if I wanted to work on a project to celebrate their 100th birthday, and my reply was, ‘I’m not interested in simply doing a fabric.’ She still reminds me of that response,” says Jongerius. Undeterred by her frankness, Murphy and Maharam directors Michael and Stephen Maharam then came to visit. “My only thought was, ‘I can’t believe people are coming to my studio, they’re disturbing me!’” Jongerius says. “They came straight from the plane and I really wasn’t very friendly. After a couple of hours I put them out on the street in Rotterdam without calling a cab, thinking, ‘I have to work!’ It’s amazing they still wanted to collaborate with me.”

Maharam connected Jongerius with a Swiss textile mill and she soon had the idea to experiment with the repeat. Traditionally a pattern repeats every 35 to 70cm, but Jongerius wanted a 3m repeat, previously never attempted on an industrial scale. It adds individuality to the textile; the pattern is bigger, but trickier to manufacture. Despite having acquired weaving knowledge at DAE, Jongerius had no concept of industrial weaving. “They had to make an extra step to accommodate me, I really was an amateur and I remember the director saying in frustration, ‘If you can’t cook, you should stay out of the kitchen!’” She didn’t, and Repeat (2002) was extremely successful, both commercially and in terms of realising its concept. “It is the best-selling of all the textiles designed by Hella Jongerius in collaboration with Maharam,” says a company spokesperson. >



⁶ For the five years that she studied at DAE, Jongerius commuted from Utrecht, close to her home town De Meern.



Coloured Vases, 2007, on display in the office of Hella Jongerius's personal assistant Siska Diddens. In the foreground, white Soft Vases made for On the Shelves at Villa Noailles, 2005; Soft Vases in Layers fabric and plaid are from the Layers show at Moss, 2006.

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⁷jongeriuslab.com

⁸ Artist, curator, teacher and writer Louise Schouwenberg (b.1954) has contributed to various designer monographs, including Hella Jongerius: Misfit, released by Phaidon Press in 2010.

⁹ The EKWC was established in 1969 to provide workspace and career opportunities for trained ceramicists. In 1981 its three-month artist residency opened to non-ceramicists, and it now offers residencies to experienced designers.

> “Beyond the hard numbers, the longevity – that it was introduced in 2002 and continues to sell today – is remarkable.” It was Jongerius’s first attempt at working with industry on this scale and she got her first taste of how stubbornness and alternative thinking can lead to desirable results. This idea of believing in your own thinking was, perhaps, the most valuable lesson she took from her education. “I didn’t understand what teachers wanted from me. I think one of the main things I couldn’t really find was my own handwriting. I was so busy all the time with design. I thought there was a golden method I had to follow and it took me a long time to realise it didn’t come from the college, it had to come from me. I had to find it in myself.”

So what is Jongerius’s handwriting exactly? A quick glance around her studio reveals a predominant number of textile and porcelain projects that seem defined less by form – the shapes Jongerius uses in her vessels are largely borrowed from archetypal urns and vases – than by surface decoration. The finishing feels imperfect at times, like in the bowls and plates of her 1997 B-set series of plainly glazed porcelain, fired in too hot a kiln and thus distorted ever so slightly. At other times she employs kitsch, as in the use of flowers, animal figurines and gold enamel in her long-running Nymphenburg Sketches bowl and plate series. Yet behind all this decoration there’s a serious, succinct message.

Most of Jongerius’s work is preoccupied with the creation of individuality within serial production and how this effects our emotional connection to objects, and her 20-year career is a prolonged experiment in how industry can be challenged to do things differently. It’s an idea that seems to be gaining traction. Using Jongerius’s website⁷ as a guide, you can trace how her influence has moved from independent batch production in the studio’s own name, via traditional Dutch and German tableware manufacturers, to large-scale producers. From exclusive Dutch porcelain manufacturer Royal Tichelaar Makkum, to multinational furniture giant Ikea; from Dutch design collective Droog, to KLM airlines; from personal colour experiments in her studio, to heading up colour and textiles at Vitra. Though perhaps not an immediately obvious candidate to end up being a creative director for three leading design brands, it seems Jongerius’s trajectory was already spelled out in her constant search to challenge conventional systems. Her work since graduation has been one long research process, through words, making and informal experiments, all now culminating in plural and heavyweight commitments. Her daring to not follow the path of other product designers has set her apart. “I don’t just want to make a nice new chair,” she says. “I am in this profession because I hate it, because I want to change it. We have to have another answer [to consumerism] and that could be to change something in the object itself, to build upon the relationship between the human and the object, or replace the ‘new’ as the main feature when buying stuff. If it wasn’t about the new, what could it be? That’s the search.”

To contextualise and conceptualise her ideas, Jongerius works closely with Louise Schouwenberg,⁸ head of the DAE masters programme in Contextual Design. The two met at a residency at the European Ceramics Work Centre in 1997⁹ and discovered their twinned thinking. “Intuition is a very strong tool I have,” says Jongerius. “My words come much, much later.” Their exchanges are regular, with Schouwenberg often coming to Berlin to discuss the studio’s process. “I show her the work and she gives me a broader concept and new hooks to build on. Our exchanges take many >

A tea pot, 2003, and B-set small cups, 1997, for Royal Tichelaar Makkum, on the studio’s kitchen table. Below: Nymphenburg Sketches: Flowers and Game, 2004, and Animal Bowls, 2010.





This page, from left to right:
the dining area features
Artificial Flower for Galerie
Kreo, 2009; Worker sofa for
Vitru, 2006; Multitone rug
for Danskina, 2014, and Non
Temporary earthenware
for Royal Tichelaar Makkum,
2005 (far right).
Opposite page: The kitchen
at Jongeriuslab is housed
in a makeshift trolley.

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This page: Diamond Seat for KLM's World Business Class cabin interior, 2013. Opposite page: Confetti fabric for Maharam, 2013; the four versions of PS Jonsberg vases for Ikea, 2005, on display in the toilet. Jongerius oversees colour experiments in the studio over the summer.

¹⁰ Rival by German designer Konstantin Grcic (b.1965) for Artek is a swivel chair designed for working from home. Its splayed legs are milled from solid birch wood and the swivel mechanism is concealed within the seat.

¹¹ The high-backed 401 armchair was designed in 1933 by Finnish architect Alvar Aalto (1898–1976), whose signature L-shaped plywood legs support a cantilevered seat with a slight tilt to support the back and neck, and thin side panels near the head to minimise peripheral vision.

¹² Jongerius was Vitra's head of international PR and marketing when she first met Marianne Goebel (b.1975), who worked at Vitra for 10 years before joining Design Miami.

> guises: either I have a specific writing job for her, or sometimes it's just to ask me some questions, so that I start talking and thinking. She's important, and words are important," she says. "It's underestimated to be sharp with words, as well as having a vision as a designer. You need to step out of your own little profession to make connections with daily life and other disciplines. The topic of design isn't big enough in itself."

In order to maintain some distance, Jongerius spends every morning in her home office and goes to the studio at lunchtime. "It's no longer possible to make everything myself, but I have become good at directing other hands," she says, referring to the print workshop downstairs. "I let them free for two days, but I'm close to the making, and then at a certain point I'll take it home because I can't work here. I need a lot of space and to keep my own world. I'm something of a hippie. In fact, when I was a girl and people asked what I wanted to be, I'd reply that I wanted to be a hippie."

At Milan's Salone del Mobile in April, Jongerius presented her first work as art director of Artek. Her appointment had come only three months earlier, following Vitra's takeover of the company in late 2013. The timescales meant that Artek showed projects Jongerius hadn't been involved in, such as German designer Konstantin Grcic's Rival chair,¹⁰ but also her first work for the brand: an edition of Alvar Aalto's 401 chair¹¹ with new upholstery. It was difficult to draw conclusions based on this presentation – a taste of what's to come, or a minor concession to introduce the new art director? – but further change seems to be afoot. A month before our interview, Artek appointed Marianne Goebel¹² as its new director, who left her director's post at Design Miami earlier in the year. Jongerius remains tight-lipped about her plans, but praises Artek's ethos: "Artek is not about the new. That's what I really like. It's about conserving what you have and keeping it alive."

If you look back at Artek's history, and co-founders Aino and Alvar Aalto's approach to the brand and design, it chimes well with Jongerius's experiments with industrial manufacture. "Artek" is a portmanteau of art and technology, and it was founded in 1935 with a preoccupation to humanise modernism, to move away from man-made towards more natural materials: timber, plywood and leather. Furthermore, Artek industrialised a process that was largely craft-based at that point: the bending of wood. Almost a century on, it seems this humanising philosophy is ripe to revisit, and Jongerius the right person to develop its message. "The DNA of Artek is the archive, but you need a vision for the future to build that concept. Of course, you'd like to add new pieces, but then with whom, what line and how will it connect?" says Jongerius. "First we have to analyse and design a vision."

Danskina is an altogether different undertaking. The project is more a profile-building exercise, an effort to promote a Dutch brand with no prominent public or international image prior to its 2013 takeover by textile manufacturer Kvadrat. Jongerius and her long-term collaborators – textile designer Edith van Berkel and technical designer Hanneke Heydenrijk¹³ – have developed a new collection and new possibilities for Danskina, leading to rugs like Cork and Felt, a piece that uses an innovative bonding technique to combine two materials rarely used in conjunction. Textiles and soft furnishing is an area in which >





¹³ A freelance senior designer in textiles and colours at Jongeriuslab, Edith van Berkel worked on KLM, as did Hanneke Heydenrijk who, while at Dutch carpeters Desso, developed Cradle to Cradle carpet from recycled stewardess uniforms for aircraft cabins and the UN North Delegates' Lounge.

READING LIST

Hella Jongerius: Misfit by Louise Schouwenberg, Paola Antonelli and Alice Rawsthorn, Phaidon Press 2010

Hella Jongerius by Louise Schouwenberg, Hella Jongerius and Joke Robaard, Phaidon Press 2003

Make-up by Jazz Mang (basics-berlin.de) working with products from CK One

> Jongerius is already established, so instead of seeing Danskina as a platform for only her own work, she considers it a hotbed for introducing and nurturing new design talent, something she finds lacking in a market where the same ten designers are constantly recycled by brands. “It’s not because I don’t like [those designers], but it’s too easy,” Jongerius says. “This is something I feel responsible for. I’m ready to build on a young group of people and teach them how the industry works, because when they show me their samples, they don’t understand that it takes two years to make a product out of them. That, at that point, the real work starts.” Yet is it not a conflict of interest to have someone like Jongerius in such similar roles across so many different companies, all showing in the same exhibition hall at the Salone Del Mobile? Are we heading towards a Jongerified world, where the ten designers she mentions above are replaced by the one? Monopoly is, after all, an undesired side effect of most political and commercial systems. Jongerius rebuffs: “It’s not a Jongerius thing,” she says. “It’s a group of interesting authors that are working together.” She explains that her work is collaborative and that she has no decision-making autonomy. “And the other side of the coin is that I’m a woman, and this is not a very macho role, it’s very service-orientated.”

Jongerius temporarily lets go of the knotted rope to drink her second coffee and I sense I might soon be relegated to the hot Berlin street. Perhaps it will be in a manner less abrupt than Maharam’s first encounter with her, but the working day is in full swing and Jongerius seems keen to move on. Someone at Vitra is waiting for her call to discuss a detail of her East River chair; the assistants in the print workshop need her input ahead of next week’s trials that will form the basis for new work for Galerie Kreo in Paris; and Diddens looms in the background, checklists and schedules in hand. “I’m very, very efficient,” says Jongerius, “and very quick in making decisions. It’s all about making up your mind. It might be the wrong decision, but it’s about getting the car started. Questions keep me rolling but I have to keep my own questions on the agenda too. That is the most difficult part.”

Without these questions, that have followed her since her student days and which are the very ones she set off to Berlin to answer, Jongerius’s role could easily become managerial; an adept and interesting manager perhaps, but a manager nonetheless. Yet looking at her across the table, it’s obvious that despite multiple commitments she still has her own agenda, research, a desire to change the system – and for once, enough power to make a difference. What was it she said earlier? Only five years ago her current role wouldn’t have been possible? Why?

“I was much more radical when I started,” says Jongerius. “I now understand better how the world turns, I appreciate and respect all the other voices, because they have taught me a lot. There’s not just one voice, it’s a conversation, and I’m very happy that I have intelligent-enough clients that I can express myself. I’ve got big goals, but if you walk too far ahead of the curve, nobody listens.”

But for now, it seems that everybody does. ●

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This page: Siska Diddens carrying a Rotterdam chair for Vitra, 2008, to her office. In the foreground is the East River chair for Vitra, 2014. Opposite page: The Long Neck and Groove Bottles, 2000, were developed while Jongerius did a residency at the European Ceramics Work Centre in 1997.