Industrial Evolution

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

WORDS Johanna Agerman Ross
PHOTOS Peter Rigaud
ella Jongerius is playing with the knots of a rope like you might the heads 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 warehouse 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 Nations 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 Danskina 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 interiors. 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 >
attempt. “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. Jongerius 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. >

4 For the five years that she studied at DAE, Jongerius commuted from Utrecht, close to her home town De Meern.
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> “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 affects 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 website 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, head of the DAE masters programme in Contextual Design. The two met at a residency at the European Ceramics Work Centre in 1997 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...
This page, from left to right: the dining area features Artificial Flower for Galerie Kreo, 2009; Worker sofa for Vitra, 2006; Multitone rug for Danskina, 2014, and Non Temporary earthenware for Royal Tichelaar Makkum, 2005 (far right). Opposite page: the kitchen of Jongeriuslab is housed in a makeshift trolley.
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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.

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

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

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 Heydenrijk – 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 Jongerius oversaw interior appointments in the studio over the summer.
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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