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Hella Jongerius

“Colour is a topic you can lose yourself in. It touches everything”

Interview by Debika Ray
Portraits by Catherine Hyland

You could describe Hella Jongerius as an agitator. Despite working for some of the world's highest-profile brands over the course of her career, the celebrated Dutch designer has always sought to challenge the industry's conventions – whether it's the churn of products for the sake of newness or the prejudice against ceramics and textiles. Her latest exhibition, at London's Design Museum, is a culmination of her decades-long interest in the subjective nature of colour and texture. Composed almost entirely of new work, it's a conceptual outlet for her frustrations about the restricted, unimaginative way in which much of the design world deals with

these subjects. In a series of installations clustered around the titles 'morning', 'noon' and 'evening', in reference to how our experience of colour changes throughout the day, she explores ideas such as the depth and variety of what we consider to be black, the way colour and shape interact, and the phenomenon of 'metamerism' – when colours that are different appear to match. She told us more in the lead-up to the opening.

ICON As art director of colour and surfaces for Vitra, you've been engaged in a ten-year research project exploring the potential for colour and texture within the brand's collection. How does this exhibition take your research further?

Hella Jongerius It's helpful to have a question to address like this as it gives you a reason to research, and an end goal. In industry, it's quite difficult to do research of this depth. As an industrial designer for Vitra, for example, I can't use pigments or ingredients other than those the industry offers you. Everyone has to work with colours that are tested, stay stable the whole day, and have their light-fastness proven. All those tests mean we're fixed to a certain range of colour products. What I did here was use pigment recipes I can't use in other contexts. I went to a smaller factory making [pigments] for crafts so I could see what colours could be brought to shapes and surfaces. I want to make people aware of what colour can do. ►

ICON You've achieved that by using what you describe as 'colour catchers' – faceted objects fabricated in folded cardboard that act as three-dimensional colour charts, reflecting light and shadow in different ways on various surfaces. Could you explain what you are trying to achieve?

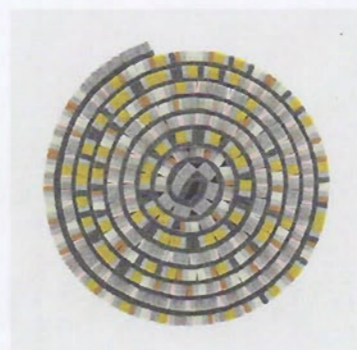
HJ As a designer, but also as a consumer, if you go to a store to choose a colour, it's always a flat selection, a flat swatch. But nothing is ever flat – you don't use your colours flat; you always use them at an angle [which also then includes] the shadows of the colour.

I wanted to create this folded shape that shows what really happens to colour. You could look at it and say, 'I don't know how I can use this knowledge', but actually everything has folds – a chair is also folded: it has horizontals and verticals. In the exhibition, I made the shapes more abstract so they would be easier to study, but this knowledge shows how you can use them [in everyday life].

ICON You've also explored texture in the exhibition, through a series of textiles inspired by different times of the day and a selection that shows how different patterns of weaving affect how a surface appears. What, for you, is the relationship between texture and colour?

HJ Textiles are another way of mixing colour – it's an optical mix, so rather than stirring them together, you have [colours] on top of each other. I've been doing textiles for 20 years, but it's still difficult to know how to come to a certain colour and to pinpoint the right combination, as in each construction – each yarn or each binding – something happens with the mixing that you can't predict, which is kind of mystic. Colour is a topic you can lose yourself in. It touches everything. Art, of course, but also chemistry, philosophy: everything from chemicals to culture. Early Greek thinkers always thought of it as something within an object, not on the outside.

For me, colour is a material – it can help you shape an object, downplay it or lift ►



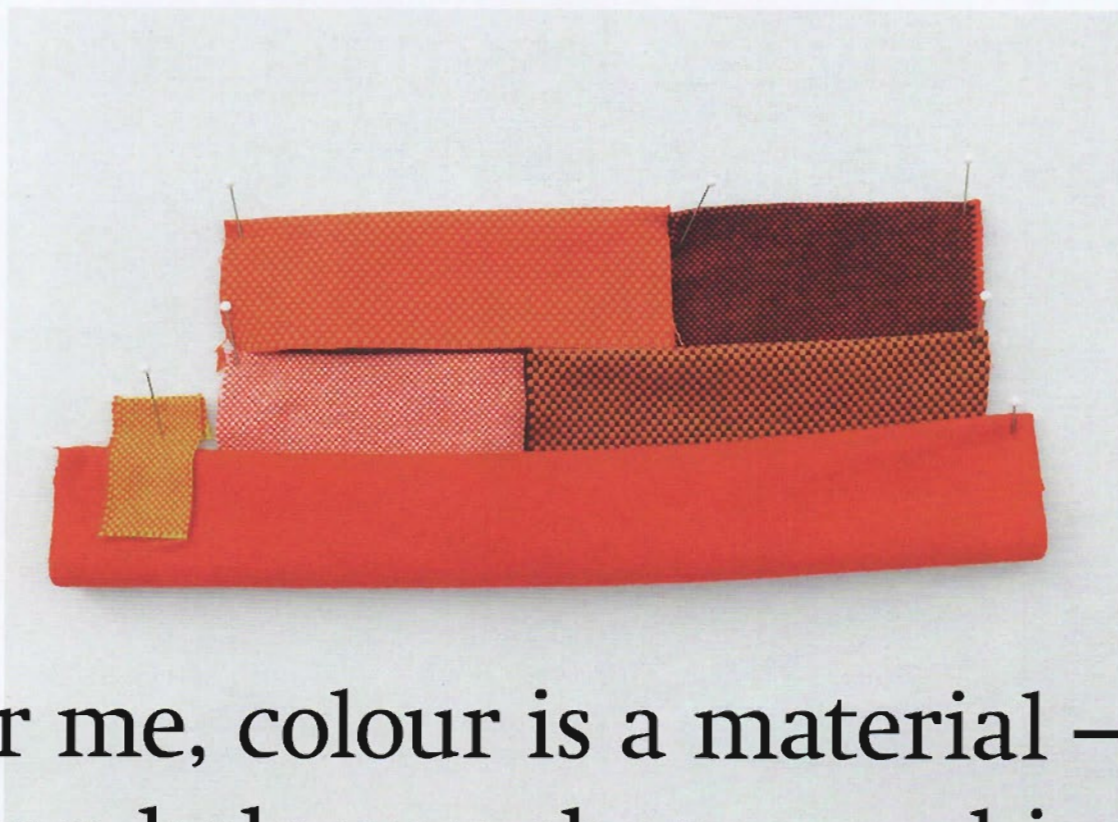
“In each yarn, something happens with the mixing that you can't predict, which is kind of mystic”



THIS PAGE Cork and felt rugs for Danskina where Jongerius is creative director

OPPOSITE An exhibit for the Design Museum that shows how colours look under different lights and against other colours

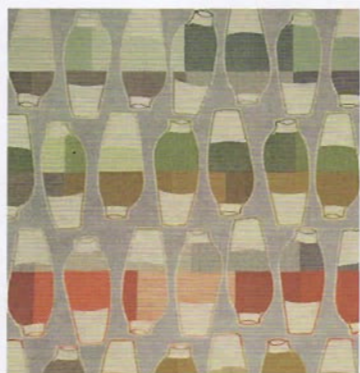




LEFT Fabrics used in the Polder sofa for Vitra

BELOW Vases for Maharam – the vases that inspired the design are on display in the Design Museum exhibition

“For me, colour is a material – it can help you shape an object, downplay it or lift it up”



it up, make it look bigger or smaller, or give a shadow. It's a powerful tool, but it's something designers forget, or are afraid of. They think it's something you do at the last minute or that it's just decoration. I think it's something our profession needs more knowledge of – what colour can do beyond just [being used for] marketing. What is also interesting is that people see things differently depending on where they come from. I work for the American market too, where I choose, say, ten colours [for a particular range], but the [brand] will choose the seven they think American people would like. I can't predict that – I have a taste for or knowledge of Europe, but I can't, even after 20 years, say these are the top seven colours people [in the US] will be attracted to.

ICON In your work, you've often used colour to refresh an existing product in a brand's collection, for example your recent take on Alvar Aalto's 1936 tea

trolley for Artek. Does this relate to your contention a few years ago that 'there's too much shopping without any social or environmental consciousness' – that designers have a responsibility to produce fewer new things and instead think about what they can do with existing objects? Is that why you 'never start with a blank piece of paper'?

HJ Yes, how could I, when so much has been done before? If the company asked me to do something, I always ask, why do you want it? What have you done before? Can I use something from your archive or of your knowledge? In science, you build up knowledge from [previous work in the field] – so that's how I think. For example, when I worked with KLM, we worked the old cabin crew uniforms into the weave of the carpets. I think it's a very good idea to look at an archive to see what the best designs are or what designs could have another life if you can make it in another material or colour, lifting it into the ►

“I think today I’m less interested in ‘things’ – more in the abstract and in having an overview”



ABOVE Knots and Beads curtain in the North Delegates Lounge at the UN Headquarters in New York

contemporary world. That’s a sustainable way of looking at design – doing something else rather than just making things that are new, new, new. We have a world filled with stuff and we have to take care of the Earth. This is my way of contributing, while also diving deeper into topics that could help our profession. You need very good reasons to come up with a new item. A new design has to have a poetic outcome and it has to have research or an innovative way of being. I think if you touch on those three points, then you can have an object that’s worth being new.

ICON Do you think this drive in the design industry to continually produce new items is dissipating? There does appear to be a shift in thinking among the next generation of designers.

HJ I do see young people doing other things than just making stuff, so I’m happy with that – to see them making movies, or commentaries on our profession. But also, all designers need to make their own statements and express themselves – you can’t say, ‘you’re not allowed to make a chair’. What I hope is that consumers [change their attitude]. Just like the food industry has reacted because

people are aware of what they don’t want to have, I hope that people no longer want crappy furniture that falls apart or carpets you have to throw away after a year.

ICON You started your career doing quite experimental work and then moved on to working with much bigger brands because you wanted to influence the mainstream. Do you feel you’ve been successful in that respect? And how have your interests changed over the course of your career?

HJ You never know how great your influence is, but in my years of working for the industry I think I’ve touched a lot of people and pushed boundaries. With a project like this research with colours, for example, you reach a whole new audience. I think today I’m less interested in ‘things’ – more in the abstract and in having an overview. In this industry it is quite tough to make mistakes, so I’m happy to again do experimental work with my own boundaries and focus. I also find it difficult to concentrate on new furniture so I like to do colours, materials or textiles. I’m happy with the small group of clients that I have – I can express myself well with a small group of people I’ve known for a long time and with whom I share values. ♦