

# A Brick is Born

Introduction Felix Chabluk Smith Photographs Fabian Frinzel

*Interlace, textile research* wasn't finished by the time of this interview. Neither was it finished on the opening night, nor when the first members of the public entered the gallery on the following day. It won't be finished all summer and it probably won't be finished in early September when it ends, which also may not be the end. What's more, it isn't exactly an exhibition, but it is exactly what Hella Jongerius wants it to be.





Interview



Throughout her career, Jongerius has been used to dealing with the definite. Work for Vitra, Artek, KLM, Maharam, Ikea and the UN<sup>1</sup> (to name but a few) all resulted in definite projects with definite deadlines – products and spaces produced with definite processes that definitely work. Yet after 25 years in industry, Jongerius felt she knew too much and also not enough. Design decisions were being made almost automatically because an established process was certain to work. There was no time to experiment,

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The invigorating excitement of *Interlace*, *textile research*’s purposeful lack of clarity and definition is palpable as Jongerius walks around the space in Lafayette Anticipations, Paris. There are no objects, no “pieces”, but there are lots of things. The work on display is the process, rather than the product. A three-month exploration into the possibilities of weaving, beginning with multitudes of threads and strings; endearing scraps of woven cloth and abstract structures seemingly made from whatever was lying around; hacked looms making strange woven bricks; and a second-hand industrial rope-braiding machine being fed with shredded paper and spongy insulation, enveloping whatever it is given in a black polyester cocoon. Walking into Lafayette Anticipations this summer is like walking into a designer’s studio and watching them doodle, thoughtfully, on a grand scale.

The show came about almost coincidentally. The curators of the gallery happened to be thinking about weaving, and Jongerius is always thinking about weaving. One level of the space is given over to the Weavers Werkstatt, a mixed school of industrial, textile and fashion designers, weaving professors and

professionals, including Jongerius herself, all working on a TC2 digital jacquard loom, producing what they will and then displaying the results in an art school-style show-and-tell along the opposite wall.

The Seamless Loom occupies another level in every sense of the word. It is operated by two people working four manual looms to produce bricks of varying sizes in three dimensions. The machine itself is captivating, with the wooden looms jacked-up and actually looming, almost bearing down on the aluminium structure similar to the frame of a 3D printer in the centre. The bricks produced so far are ethereal and delicate, with mixed yarns and open structures that bring to mind insect cocoons or magnified plant cells, each one unique. By the end of the summer they may have evolved into something else entirely.

It is the bulbous sinewy cords produced by the braiding machine, sometimes slashed open to swell and spill their innards, that form the final part of the show. Hanging from the roof of a central atrium, dominating the space, they are abstract at first. However, if you spend time looking, a huge sun-like sphere starts to emerge high up in the hanging skeins, picked out in a Morse code of fraying paper. A cube becomes vaguely discernible lower down, while the dots and dashes of a future ovoid form lie coiled and confused on the floor.

Perhaps as an echo of its former life as a fin-de-siècle warehouse, Lafayette Anticipations is composed of floors that move like huge goods elevators, with almost 50 different configurations. The building itself brings to mind some kind of weaving machine, with an open skeleton of horizontals and verticals combined with perfectly engineered sliding parts that allow a myriad of possibilities – a similarity not lost on Jongerius.

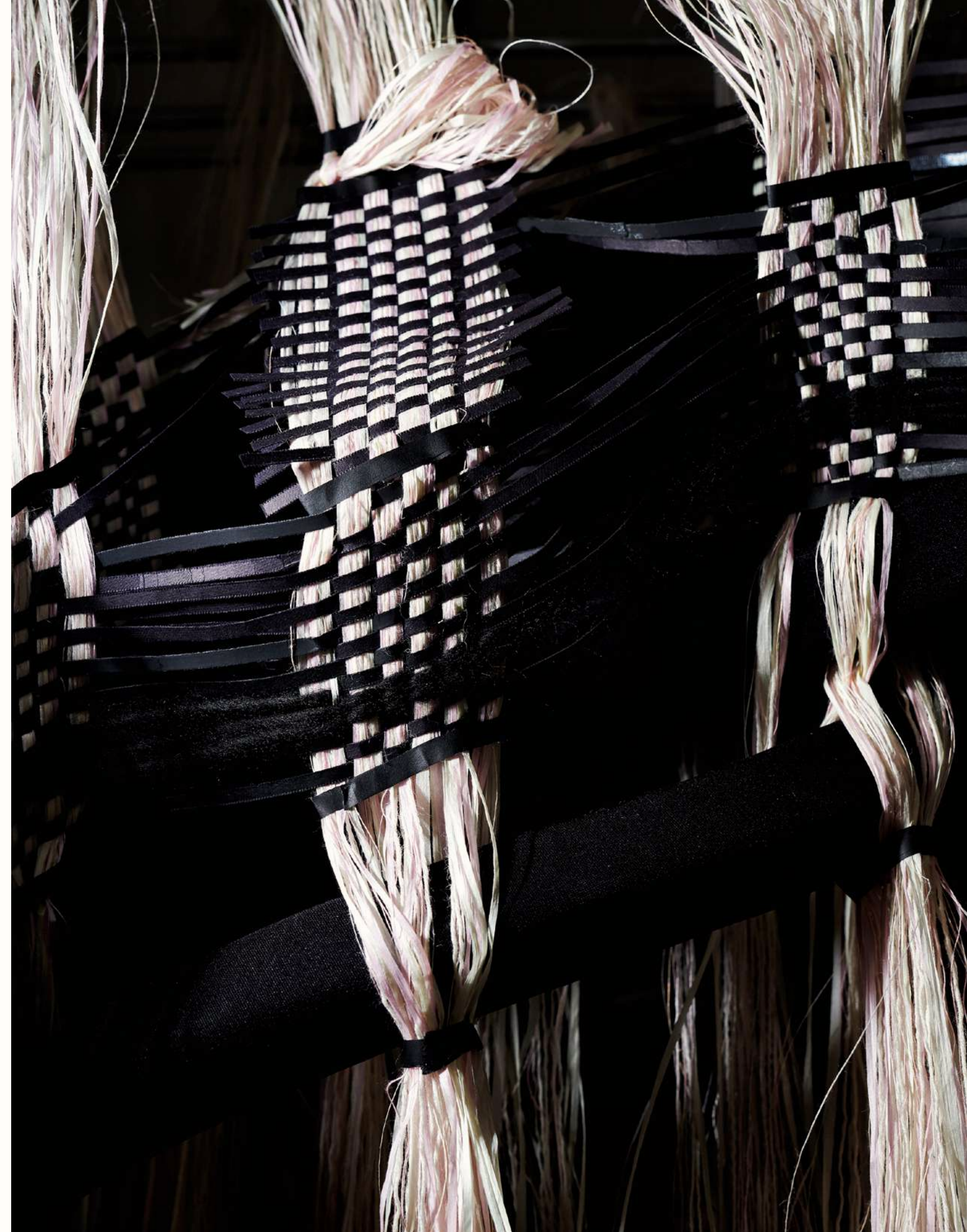
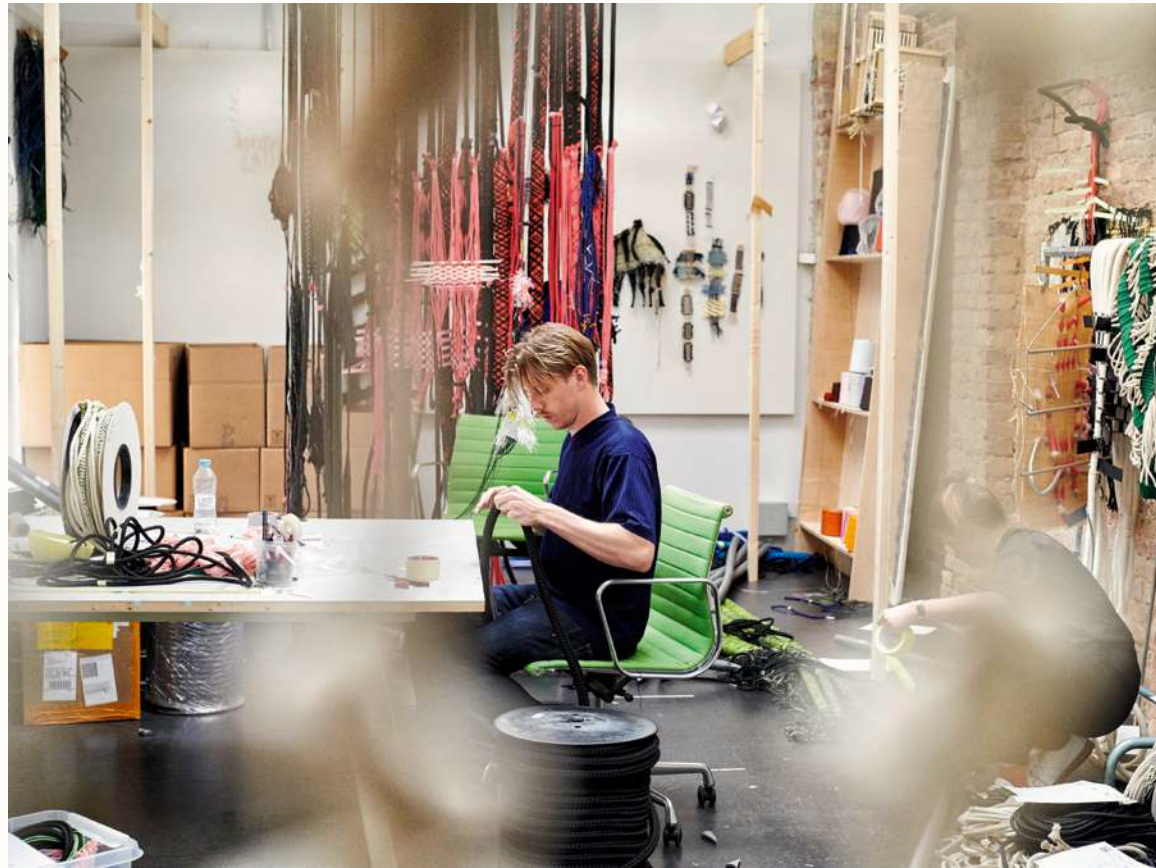
Dropping the floors and opening up a huge void, she has created the four-storey vertical Space Loom, of which the braided cords, already planted with the slub-like seeds of future forms, are the warp. Industrially produced textiles, constructed of warp and weft threads, use the warp as a kind of basic structure, and it is the weft that carries the design. By designing both, and arranging the warp threads in a grid as opposed to a single row, huge three-dimensional forms can be achieved. It will be tended to throughout the run, the weft woven through the hanging warp. It is beautiful right now, monumental and slightly forbidding, a cross between Sheila Hicks and Louise



The photographs accompanying this interview were taken at Hella Jongerius’s studio in Berlin, a few weeks before the looms were installed at Paris’s Lafayette Anticipations.

1 See ‘UN North Delegates Lounge’, *Disegno* #5.



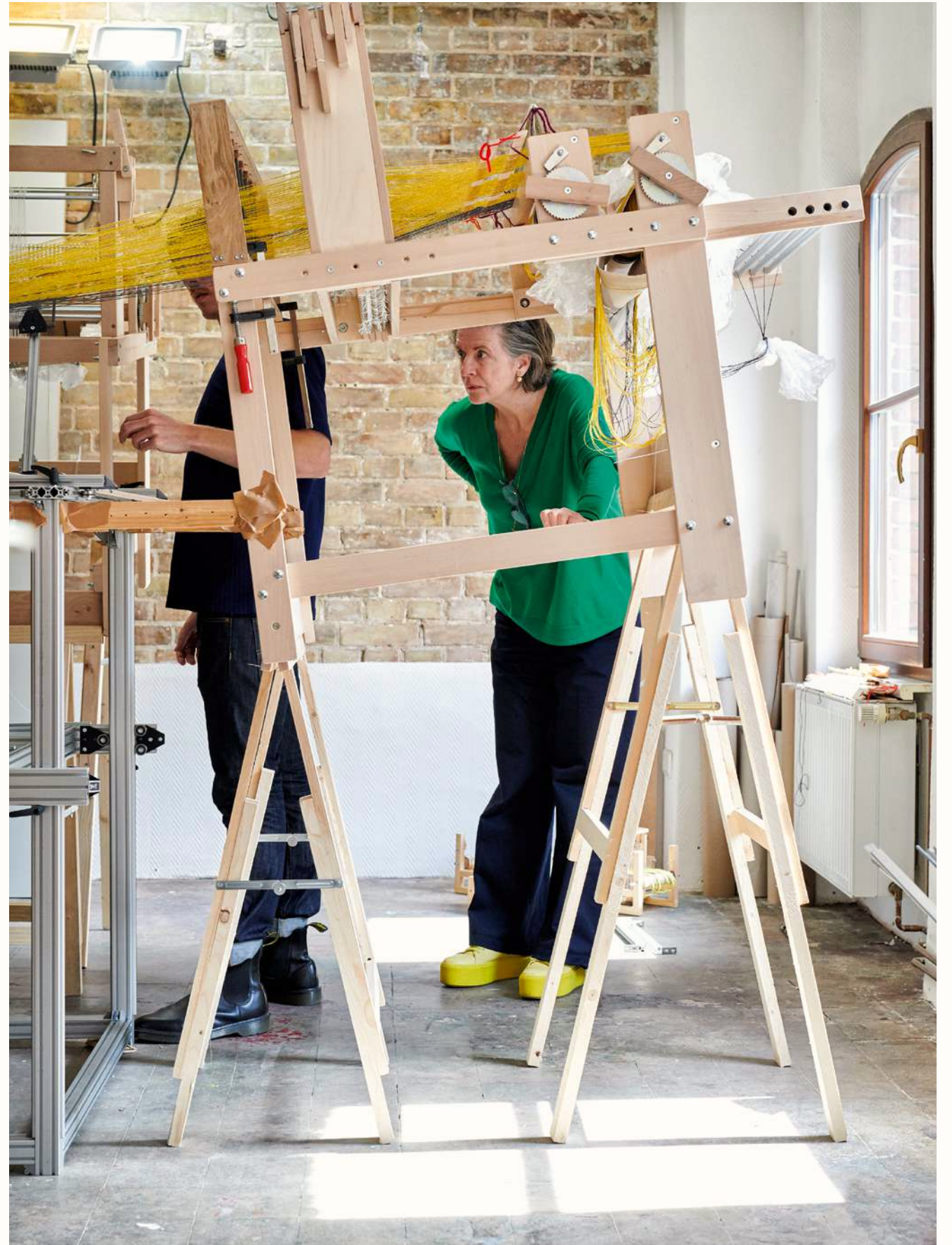


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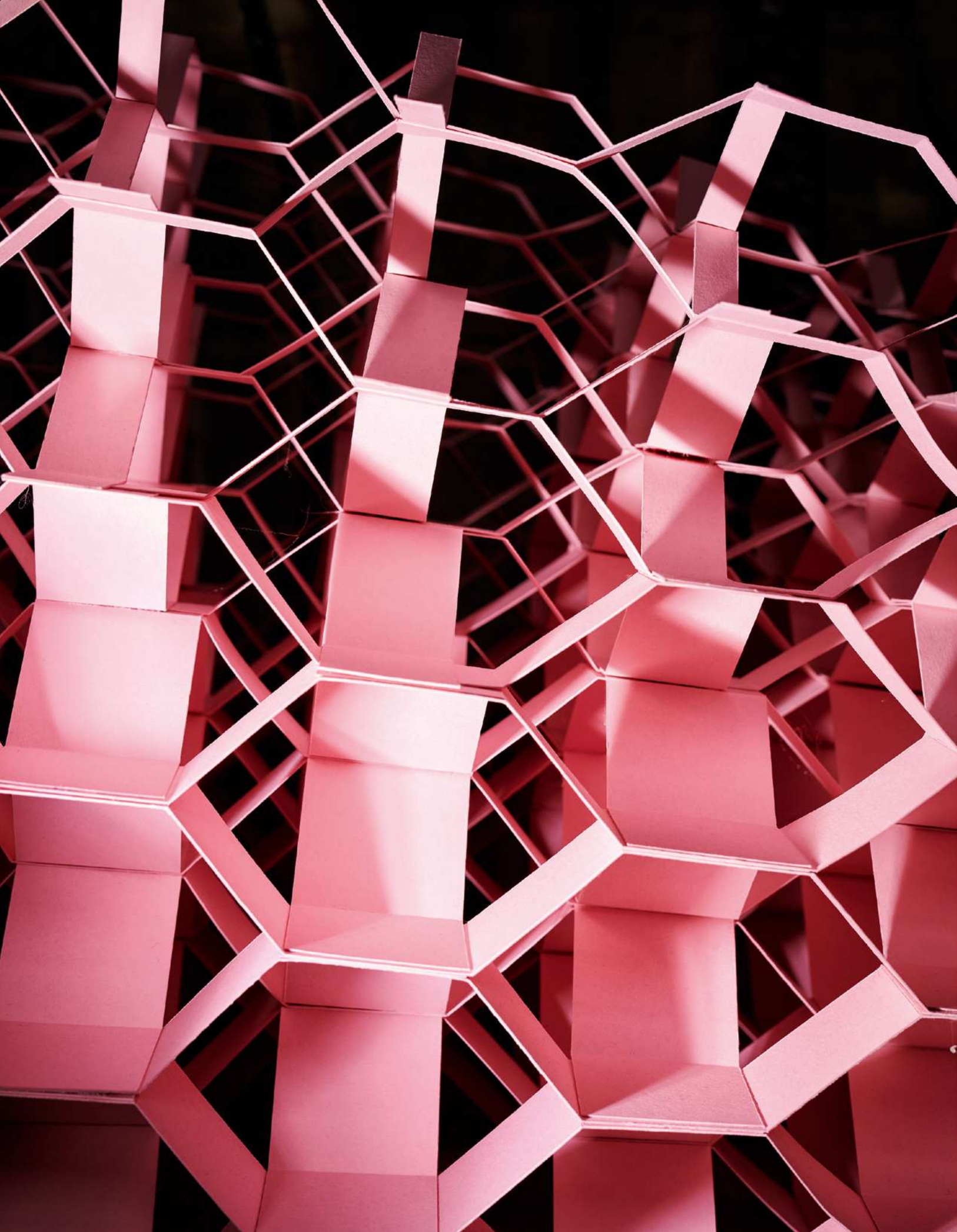




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Bourgeois. Yet, like everything Jongerius is doing in Paris this summer, after a quarter-century in the industry, it is only the beginning.

**Felix Chabluk Smith** Why did you choose to focus on weaving for this project?

**Hella Jongerius** I'm always weaving for clients in industry, so I've never had the chance to do it freely without any questions being asked of me. I've never been able to really look into the skills and the looms. Last year, however, I took a sabbatical and said no to all clients. I had planned it in my schedule for years, because otherwise I couldn't do it. It was a total luxury, but I really had to liberate myself. Industry is very restricted, but I wanted to unravel this idea of cloth without having any boundaries. I know so much about industry – I know its restrictions so well – that I had stopped looking outside of those very narrow parameters. When the director of Lafayette Anticipations François Quintin came to visit me a year ago, the first thing he asked was, "Are you a weaver?" I said, "Yes, I weave", and we immediately decided to focus on that. I thought how wonderful it would be to study weaving for a year, so I bought a digital jacquard loom and spent a whole year working with it. I felt liberated. I opened up my creativity and I opened myself up to the material and its possibilities.

**Felix** As part of the work at Lafayette Anticipations, you've designed the Seamless Loom, which almost looks like a 3D printer with an X and Y axis.

**Hella** It's a system with which we can make 3D-woven bricks. We're looking for a 3D effect without any seams in the corners, so we will spend the whole summer weaving those. The process requires four people to operate and every three days we can make one brick. The brick is really a canvas for anything; I just wanted to have an archetypical, simple shape.

**Felix** In the catalogue, the curator Anna Colin calls this an exhibition, but it doesn't seem like one to me. How do you see it?

**Hella** It's research and the research is ongoing. It's almost as if you are in my studio. We've been creating these elements over the past year and now we can keep on studying. It's not a final thing.

**Felix** It seems quite an unusual way of working with a team. The people working with you are not technicians, or even all industrial or product designers. You have a whole group of industry professionals, who are all either designers themselves, tutors or students.

You even have the guys from Bless working with you, who are from the world of fashion design.

**Hella** There's a team of Jongeriuslab designers working on the ongoing hands-on research and production on the Seamless Loom and Space Loom. Although it's my initiative, they're all quite free. I won't be here every day, so they will have to make decisions without me. Another element is the Weavers Werkstatt. This is an ongoing initiative to stimulate skills and knowledge of weaving amongst designers. It's temporarily based at Anticipations, and so we've invited designers like Bless to work on their individual weaving research here. Everyone has their own field and research, and they will all weave on the digital jacquard loom. The good thing is when I work in industry with

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jacquard looms, I always have another person standing there who knows the software – which I don't. They are always interpreting my ideas. But with this specific loom, I can just do it myself with Photoshop. It's direct.

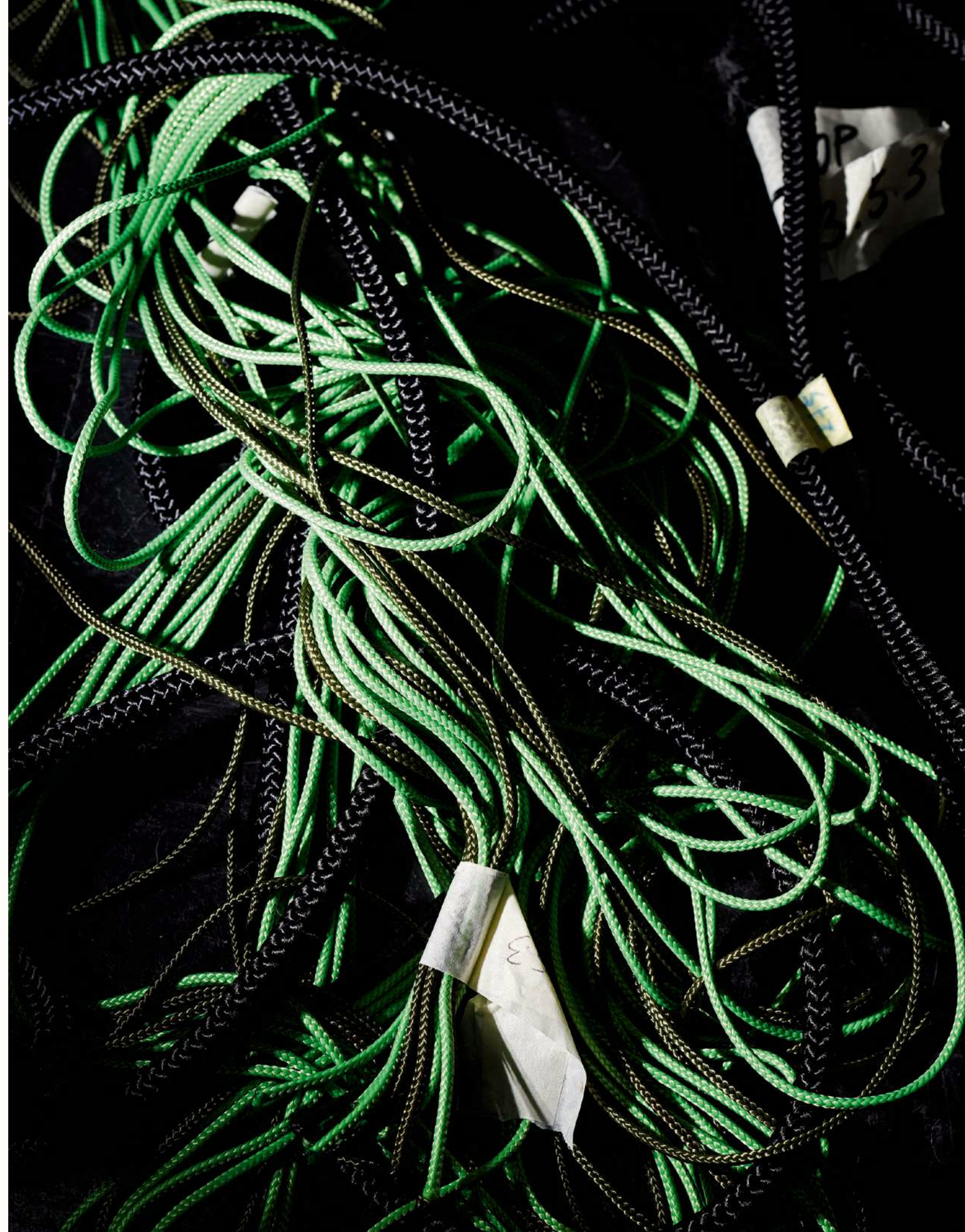
**Felix** Do you think people coming out of design and textile education today are more or less interested in being hands-on?

**Hella** I think there is a generation who don't want to work with their hands. But I think your hands are intuitive and if you work manually then surprises inevitably emerge. You can recognise it when people only design from a computer and when Google is their only inspiration – you can always tell. You'll see there's no tactility; no knowledge of the material.

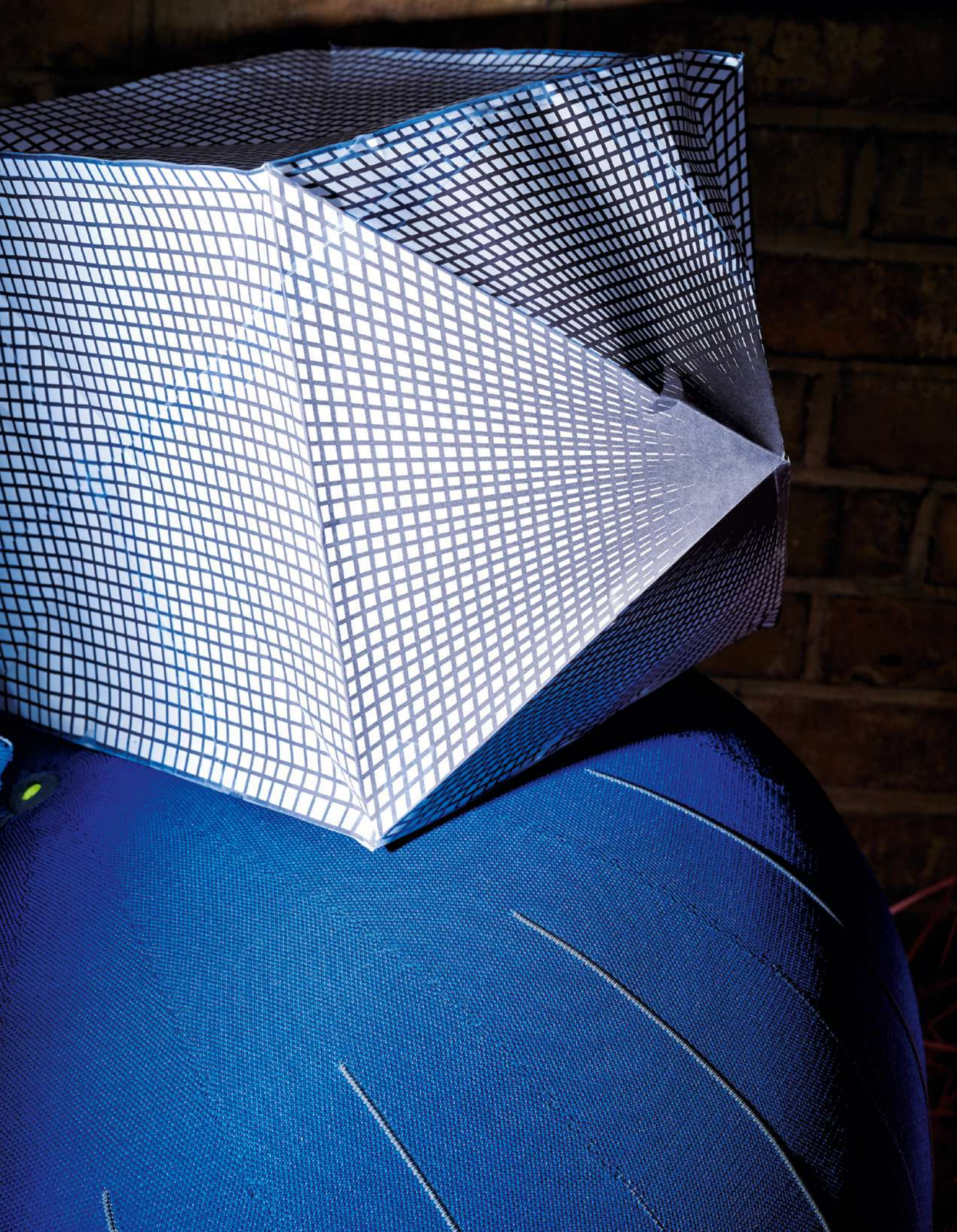
**Felix** You've talked before about the lack of tactility within fast fashion and how there's a paucity of materials there. Do you see fashion as completely separate to other aspects of product or textile design?

**Hella** I find that the fashion industry's connection to the market – it is so close to capitalism and the money machine – kills creativity. I don't like the speed of it, and the fashion and textile industry need to undergo









something like what happened in the food industry, which completely changed when consumers called for less sugar, salt and so forth. But it's difficult for consumers to learn about textiles. Who is teaching you? What should you upholster your sofa in? Nobody knows. You might know about what materials are good to wear – like linen – but for a sofa or curtains or bedsheets or carpets, everyone goes for the safe option because you will have those pieces for 20 years and they're very expensive. You change your clothes every day, but your sofa is something you can't change so readily – if we don't talk about weaving or textiles, then nobody knows about it. That's why I don't want to only communicate with people via their wallets, but through a medium that's more open like this project. You have to feed it from the bottom up.

**Felix** Do you want to educate people about what a textile is?

**Hella** What a textile is; what it could be; what weaving is; how slow it is; what an artform it is.

**Felix** Weaving is a slow process, even with the highest speed industrial looms. When people look at clothes, I think they underestimate not just the design and cut of the garment but also that the designers are already working with a finished project – the textile. Even in the case of a switched-on consumer who would have knowledge of sweatshops, for instance, their knowledge usually starts from where the garment is being sewn. There is a whole other life of a textile before it enters the fashion industry.

**Hella** The weaving is also just a small part of the whole process. There's also making the yarns, spinning, twinning, twisting, dyeing – that already takes half a year. Then it comes to a weaver, who produces a half-fabricated product and only after that does fashion come in. But the power of the consumer is enormous. If we all turn our backs, companies change in a second and suddenly become flexible. So that's why I think we have to communicate weaving and help inspire consumers. To empower people.

**Felix** Do you find that enough people are interested in weaving and textiles within design education? When I went to college in Edinburgh, they were in the process of dismantling the ceramics and glass departments. Those departments were established in the 1960s and 70s and had very specialised equipment.

**Hella** At Design Academy Eindhoven, they haven't taught weaving for 15 years. You don't learn weaving anymore, only styling. Mood boards, you know.

At the same time, I find it difficult to embrace craft because there is a nostalgic element to it. I always like to see crafts and skills and knowledge in terms of where are we now. How can those things be used in industry?

**Felix** What is relevant for now?

**Hella** Why am I doing 3D weaving now? It's because I believe we will all have flying cars given that cities are becoming so dense. We will need very light materials and textile composites to enable this. Textiles are the lightest material and why would we leave this to technicians? We could make beautiful, nicely woven cars. You could also use textiles as architectural elements, because weaving can create such a strong web. You can then use less stone, less cement, and you can build lighter. It's really something that will have a great future, but it's one of our oldest technologies. Textiles are not only potentially very long-lasting but also deeply cultural. It's a production system you find in all the different cultures. If we lose this, it's really losing a big part of who we are as human beings.

**Felix** It's universal to all humans, I think. You've always been attracted to weaving. What was it initially?

**Hella** I was a kid in the 1970s and all girls did back then was knit. We all had sewing machines and it was really the hobby of our generation – I think that's where it started. My mother was a pattern-maker, so she was always sewing. We had a lot of textiles at home.

**Felix** But do you think that would be possible now?

**Hella** It's not natural or easy, no. There is of course a DIY culture. You can look up anything; you can figure out, repair things or whatever. So there's this crafty, digital path that is interesting to kids, but I have two daughters and they are not interested in doing anything with their hands. It may be a generational thing. I was weaving throughout the last year and every morning I went to this loom and I thought, "Today I'm going to make it." I sat down, spent the whole day working and then came home frustrated. "Shit! I didn't do anything today. It's so slow! I've got something in mind and it's not coming out of this machine!" But every morning I was fresh again and wanted to go.

**Felix** In such a mechanised production society, spending time on something is really a luxury.

**Hella** It's the cliché of craft.

**Felix** Would you say you dislike nostalgia?

**Hella** I find it very conservative. I find it so important that objects have a zeitgeist, that they are particular to this moment. Or preferably five years ahead. **END**



A close-up, macro photograph of dark brown leather. The texture is highly detailed, showing a pebbled grain with numerous small, irregular bumps and creases. The lighting is soft and directional, coming from the upper right, which creates a gentle gradient of light across the surface, highlighting the tactile quality of the material. The overall tone is warm and sophisticated.

# imagination by you

- high comfort
- durability
- easy to clean
- sustainability