

Symphony of Shades

WHAT ROLE DOES COLOUR PLAY IN AN INTERIOR? PRODUCT DESIGNER *Hella Jongerius* IS OPENING HER COLOUR LAB IN BERLIN TO ANSWER JUST THAT QUESTION.

WORDS Femke de Wild
PORTRAIT PHOTO Louise Bilgert



TODAY'S COLOUR EXPERTS THE PRODUCT DESIGNER

You've built up a reputation as a colour specialist. When did you start working with colour?

It's always been an important aspect of my work, but colour gained even more significance while I was designing the Polder sofa for Vitra. I developed a palette of five coordinated colours in a range of fabrics for that sofa, and colour has intrigued me ever since. After creating three new shades of white for the Lounge Chair, also part of the Vitra collection, I was asked to continue developing new colours for future collections.

What was your point of departure?

We – Edith van Berkel and I – started with the Eames plastic and aluminium chairs. I look at what's been done in the past for nearly all my work, and here too I based the new palette on original colours from the company's archive. The vintage plastic chairs had a two-tone effect created by the plastic fibres. Because manufacturing methods have advanced so much in the meantime, today's plastic chairs have a uniform colour. I wanted to get those original nuances back again. For the Home Collection, I began by compiling a modest palette that's suitable for everyone involved – the people at Vitra, as well as the customer. Currently, I'm working on a new, larger-scale project that I can't say much about at the moment.

Why is a palette of colours so important?

One colour is nothing. A piece of music is also made up of different notes. A palette

is an ensemble of colour, material and size. Whether a surface is shiny or matte, large or small – and whether an object has this shape or that one – such factors determine how hard something shouts or how softly it whispers. Every day my children ask what my favourite colour is, and every day I think up something new, but I really don't have a favourite colour. All colours are interconnected, and finding the right palette is like going on a treasure hunt.

You also developed new colours for Camper shoes. Was the process very different from the way you approached the Vitra Home and Office Collections?

Women shop for home furnishings; office furniture is often the responsibility of men. And rather than selecting items solely for themselves, men buy for an entire company. That's why 80 per cent of the office furniture sold by Vitra is 'safe black'. For the Vitra Office Collection, I started by developing dark colours that represented a slight shift away from pure black. Fashion is faster, lighter – and you buy shoes for yourself. Crazy colours are seen far more often in footwear. Now I could offer fresh colours to Camper's young, alternative target group, and that meant singing a totally different tune. But the colours for both Vitra and Camper have the same sort of grey blur that clouds the colours of many of my designs. It's my way of letting the customer experience colours within colours. Although the research I'd done on colour in the interior

wasn't really relevant to the process, it's nice to have experienced both the tranquil pace of interior design and the speed of fashion.

What's the difference between your approach to colour and a more conventional approach?

I don't approach it as a stylist. I consider all aspects of colour. What you're seeing nowadays in interiors are industrial colours that have emerged from trend-forecasting. The 'in' colours are determined for us. You no longer hear anyone asking, What do I like? What suits me? Only series of system colours are available. There's no connoisseurship involved, no artistic hands-on experimenting while relying entirely on intuition, no language of colour, no knowledge and little experience. It's all exceedingly flat.

Why do you think colour isn't taken very seriously?

The modernists saw colour as decoration. Architects and designers had to express themselves through their materials. Besides the natural colours of materials, only grey, black and white were permitted.

What is it that aroused your fascination for colour?

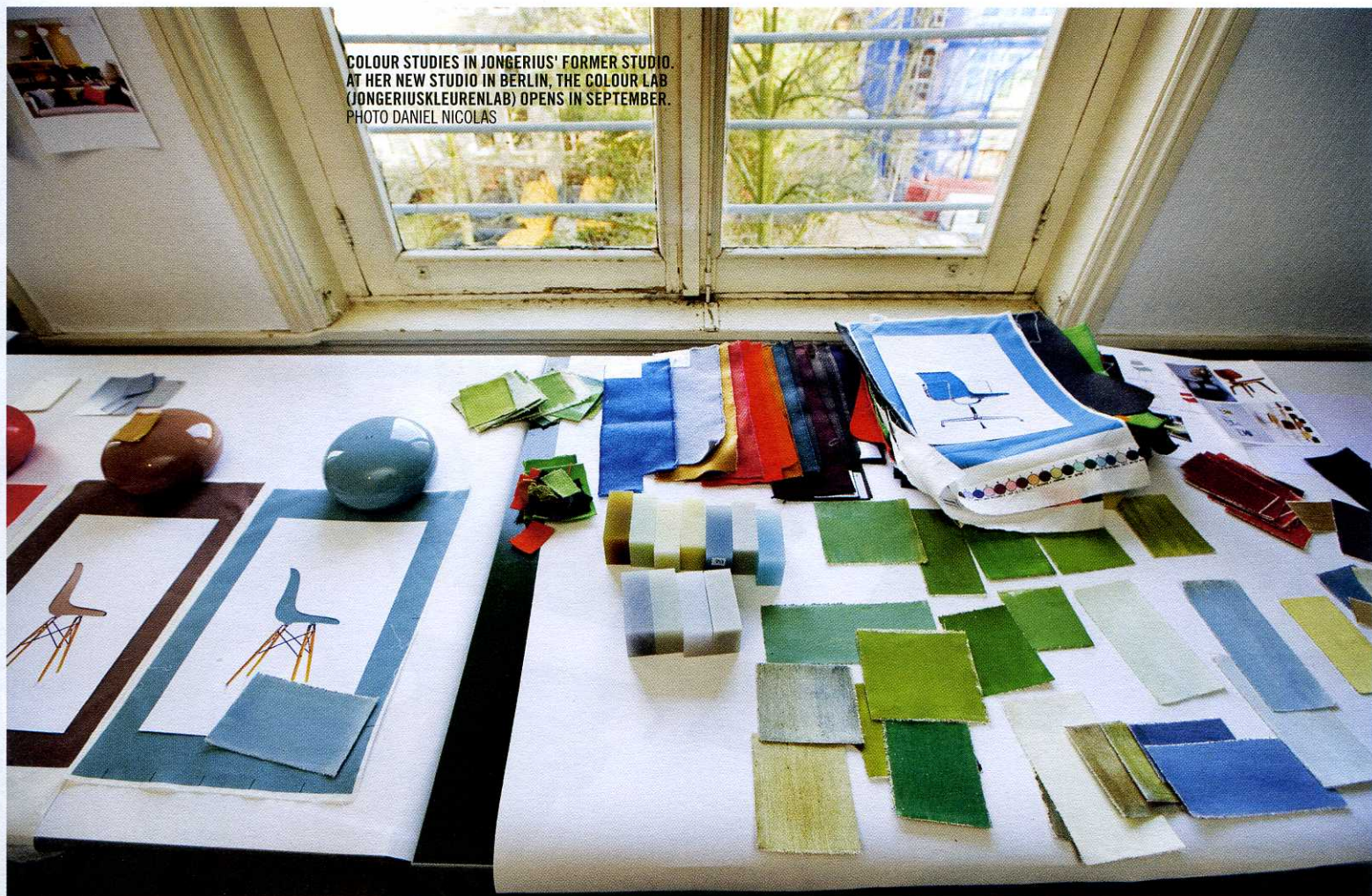
I think it's a very important topic, because everything you see has colour. Even when you look at one of Mies van der Rohe's steel buildings, you see it in colour. Colour is still approached as decoration, though. All other aspects of an object are designed first; only in the final phase is colour added. If you study colour and handle it well, however, >>>



IN HER FORMER STUDIO IN ROTTERDAM, HELLA JONGERIUS
WORKED WITH SENIOR DESIGNER EDITH VAN BERKEL
ON THE VITRA COLOUR PALETTE.
PHOTO DANIEL NICOLAS

'I WANT COLOUR PUT ON THE AGENDA'
HELLA JONGERIUS

COLOUR STUDIES IN JONGERIUS' FORMER STUDIO. AT HER NEW STUDIO IN BERLIN, THE COLOUR LAB (JONGERIUSKLEURENLAB) OPENS IN SEPTEMBER. PHOTO DANIEL NICOLAS



it can be your starting point. In any case, that is what it's been for me. It can enrich the discipline and prevent less 'design shit' from reaching the market. Design can be so much subtler. In our profession, we should start working in subtleties, and colour is one of them.

How can colour enrich the design discipline? Where do you think the strength of colour lies?

To clarify the answer for myself, I've made a list of keywords: resetting, fuel, imagination, mood, reorganization, harmonization and vitalization. Colour can calm you, give you energy, let you disappear by stimulating your imagination and influencing your mood. You can organize a room around colour, and colour can allow objects to merge, to whisper or to shout. Ultimately, the need for colour is about wellbeing. Shoved aside by decoration, wellbeing means far more than just feeling good. Wellbeing entails a greater awareness of the world around us, and with that kind of awareness, there's simply no way to ignore colour.

Decoration is important in your work as mediator between objects and people. Does the same apply to colour?

Decoration is more limited, because only certain surfaces of an object are decorated, whereas all are coloured: concrete, natural materials, everything. This makes colour both interesting and quite complicated. An artist has the freedom to experiment intuitively with the phenomenon of colour,

whereas scientists base their findings on cold, hard facts. In recent years the colour industry has relied too much on hard data in its pursuit of a large palette of colours. Quantity has triumphed over quality. It's become a sort of fast-food colour industry. As a designer, I'd like to examine colours and their effects with the intuitive hands-on approach of the artist, as well as with the exactitude of the scientist. Through this kind of exploration, I want to develop artistic, high-quality colours that can be applied within both design and architecture. I want colour put on the agenda. One of my goals is to develop an open language for the profession – a system, but without numbers and colour fans.

How would such a system look?

I have no idea. I'm still trying to formulate the questions to which I need answers. Until now, for example, colour has been studied only as a two-dimensional phenomenon and not with regard to volume. I'm working with miniatures to explore how colour and three-dimensional form go together. The relationship between colour and material is something else I'd like to chart. You can't apply the same shade of red to a wooden tabletop and a steel leg, because the result will be very different. The composition or build-up of colours is another branch of my research. It formed the point of departure for Swatch, the table I made for Galerie Kreo. Swatch features various colours, but its individual colours aren't monochrome either.

And a build-up of colour is interesting because . . . ?

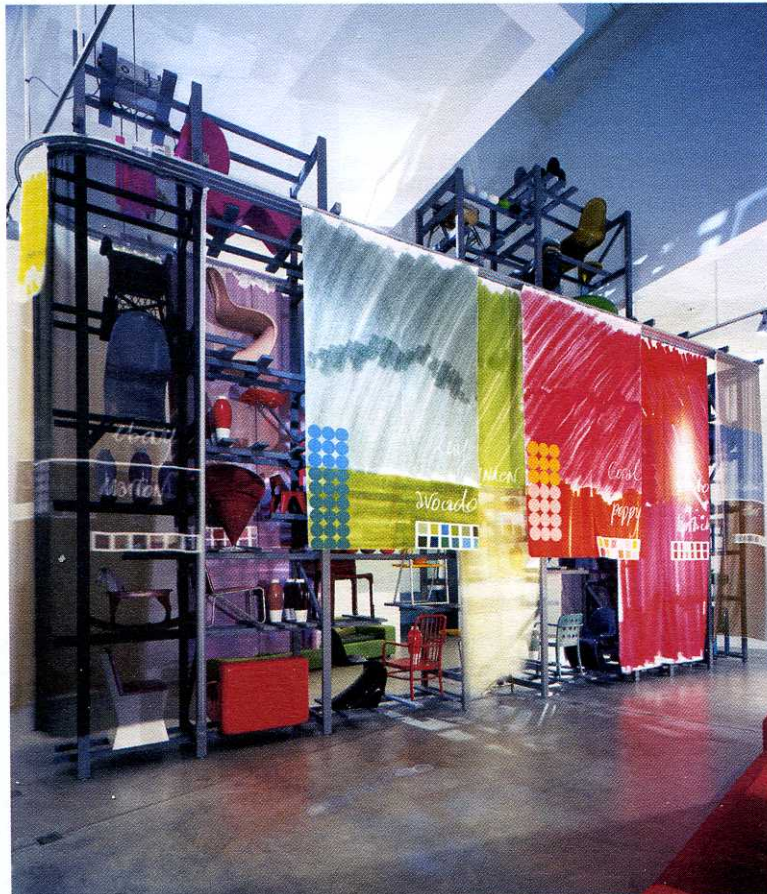
I think it's interesting when someone looks at a colour composed of layers and has to blink twice. Is that surface red? Or is it grey? As a customer, you should pick a certain colour because it's fascinating, because it doesn't look the same in the morning as it does in the evening, because your partner experiences it differently than you do. I see colour as a material, and I want users to develop a sensitivity to this material. Now we're back to connoisseurship again and, ultimately, to the forging of a relationship between user and object, and to making people aware of what they're building and what they're surrounding themselves with.

Does your research include the Orient, where the use of colour is much more popular?

I suppose you could say that a veritable feast of colour typifies India, but those colours are extremely loud and flat. Great for holidaymakers, but as a designer, I can't do much with them. For connoisseurship, you can look at Japan, with its grand tradition in the application of countless nuances of colour, combined with many, many shades of wood. But all those colours are natural. They can only whisper, and it's a whisper we recognize; we've heard it in modernism. But can you whisper in green and red as well? Can you make a layered piece of music with bright colours – a composition that stirs the tiniest cilia in your body?



'DESIGNERS SHOULD START WORKING
IN SUBTLETIES, AND COLOUR IS ONE OF THEM'
HELLA JONGERIUS



POLDER, A SOFA DESIGNED FOR VITRA, IS BASED ON A PALETTE OF FIVE
COORDINATED COLOURS IN A RANGE OF MATERIALS, INCLUDING LEATHER.

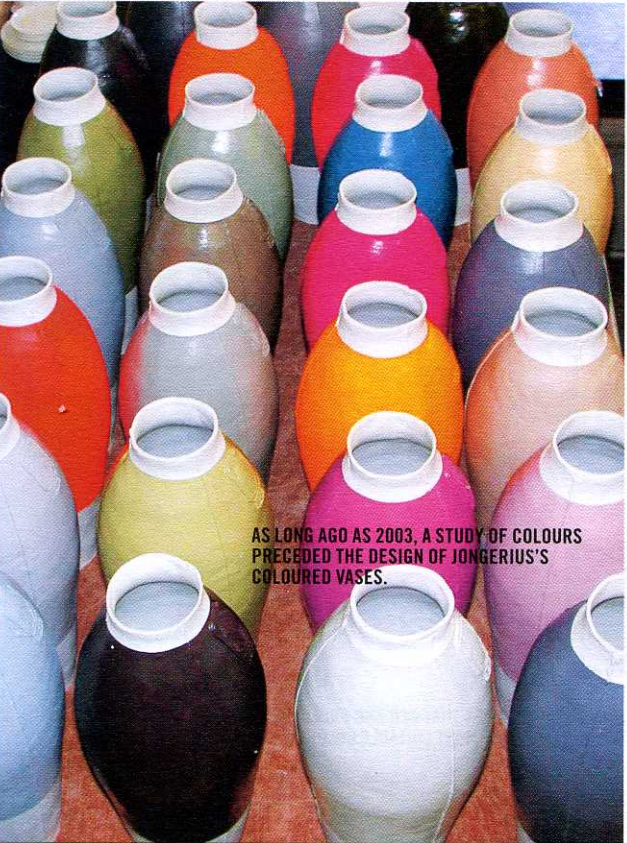


JONGERIUS BELIEVES THAT RED AND GREEN, WHICH DOMINATED INSIDE
COLOURS, ARE THE MOST SUITABLE COLOURS FOR AN INTERIOR.

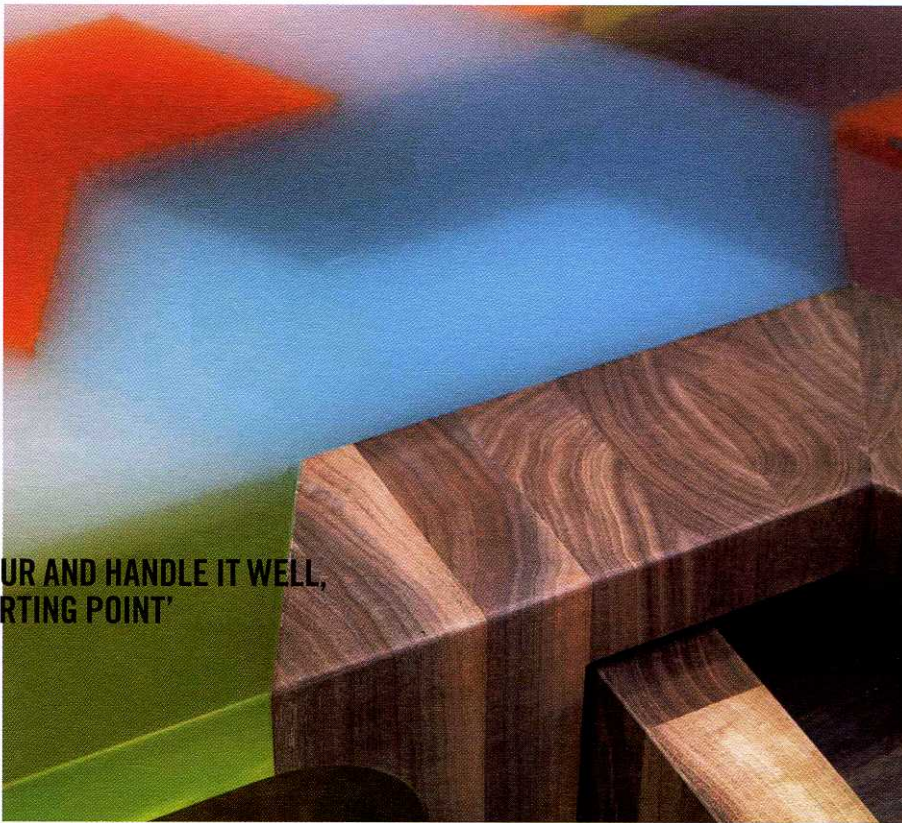


**'IF YOU STUDY COLOUR AND HANDLE IT WELL,
IT CAN BE YOUR STARTING POINT'**
HELLA JONGERIUS

IN RESTYLING FOUR EXISTING MODELS FROM THE CAMPER COLLECTION, JONGERIUS WORKED WITH COLOUR IN A WAY ENTIRELY DIFFERENT FROM THE WAY SHE HANDLES COLOUR IN INTERIORS.
PHOTOS ERNST MORITZ



AS LONG AGO AS 2003, A STUDY OF COLOURS PRECEDED THE DESIGN OF JONGERIUS'S COLOURED VASES.



BECAUSE SWATCH CONTAINS NO MONOCHROME COLOURS, THE TABLE'S VARIOUS ELEMENTS APPEAR TO CHANGE COLOUR, AND THE COLOURS THEMSELVES SEEM TO INVITE ANY NUMBER OF INTERPRETATIONS.
PHOTOS FABRICE GOUSSET, COURTESY OF GALERIE KREO

