

Culture

DESIGN BOOKS

Designs by Hella Jongerius: A series of vases created for Ikea and the Polder sofa, for Vitra, with mismatched cushions.



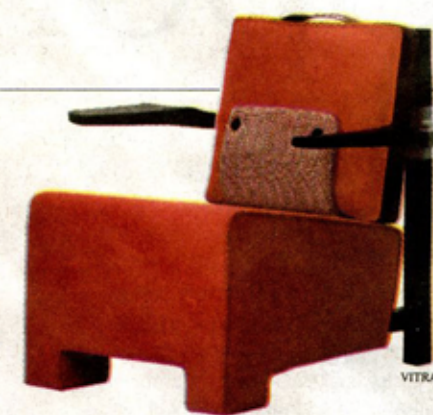
IKEA, SWEDEN



VITRA



FABRICE GOUSSET/GALERIE KREO



VITRA

A Turtle Table and flowers and vases for Galerie Kreo, and a Worker Chair for Vitra.



MORGANE LE GALLE/GALERIE KREO

A designer who takes things personally

BERLIN

BY ALICE RAWSTHORN

Some designers seek inspiration from nature. Others find it in books, or geeky stuff like new materials and technologies. Hella Jongerius has a different source: She has hit upon many of her best ideas by poking around friends' cupboards.

"What interests me is the relationship between objects and people, and what triggers it," she said. "I often find clues by looking in friends' cupboards to find out what's there. Then I ask them what makes this cup better than that one? How do they use it? How long have they kept it, and why?"

The answers help Ms. Jongerius to forge what she hopes will be an equally affectionate and enduring relationship between the objects she designs and the people who use them. "It's my way of being sustainable," she explained. "If you create products that have real meaning for people, they're likely to last longer because they'll want to keep them."

As the environmental crisis has

deepened and consumers have tired of stylistic tricks, other designers have tried to imbue their work with the emotional qualities we associate with family heirlooms or cherished antiques — mostly unsuccessfully. Ms. Jongerius is one of the few to have succeeded, and she has developed increasingly sophisticated strategies of doing so. "Hella's great ability is her sensitivity to color, texture and materials, combined with an uncanny knack for creating a fresh expression of our times," said the designer Jasper Morrison.

One of her favorite tactics is to use decoration as a benign way of tricking people into associating her objects with the intimacy of hand-craftsmanship, even if they were produced in tens of thousands of units for IKEA. In her latest project, which is to be unveiled in an exhibition opening Saturday at Galerie Kreo in Paris, she has made three-dimensional versions of decorative patterns. One table takes the shape of a turtle in an explosion of multicolored resin and wood. Another sports a frog carved from the same wood as the top. "Decoration is



GARY HUSTWIT/OBJECTIFIED

The designer Hella Jongerius in a scene from the documentary film "Objectified."

a great way of triggering the imagination, and of making you think that an object really is yours," she said.

A vigorous 45-year-old with a rollicking laugh, Ms. Jongerius is one of the few women to have infiltrated the "boy's club" of design. Having been brought up with three brothers, she said it feels "quite natural" for her to work in a male

environment. After high school in the Dutch village of De Meern, she enrolled in a carpentry course at a local technical college, then studied product design at the prestigious Design Academy Eindhoven. She graduated in 1993, and was one of the young designers who participated that year in the "Droog Design" exhibition at the Milan Furniture Fair that established contemporary Dutch design on the international scene.

Making her work seem personal and meaningful was always her objective, even as a student. "When I look back now, I think yeah, yeah, yeah, but I didn't put it into words at the time, it was instinctive," she said. "Now there is this whole marketing story of 'emotional design,' but no one was interested in it then."

As Ms. Jongerius admits, it is relatively easy to individualize limited edition pieces, which she often makes singly. Her real achievement — and toughest challenge — has been to achieve similar effects on an industrial scale.

This was surprisingly straightforward in her designs for IKEA, a series of vases and textile wall-hangings, which all were

made by hand in China and India, respectively. But in most industrial projects, she has adapted the production process to make each product distinctive, or seem distinctive. Her goal is for people to sense "the hand of the designer" in her work, just as they do a craftsman's signature.

She made her B-set dinnerware for Royal Tichelaar Makkum by firing the porcelain at an unusually high temperature to ensure that each plate or bowl is distinguished by tiny flaws that not only make it unique, but remind us of the quirks in antiques and handmade pieces. Her Repeat upholstery fabric for Maharam has complex patterns stretching across three meters, or about 10 feet, so that a different variation appears on each chair.

When she started designing furniture for Vitra, Ms. Jongerius had to find a way of making identical products look like one-offs, too. She designed the Polder Sofa as an optical illusion of an old sofa with cushions in subtly different colors and shapes, dangling cotton threads and mismatched buttons. It is impeccably engineered in Vitra's state-of-the-art factories, yet we feel as fondly toward it as we

would a shabby old sofa.

The Polder has been a hit for Vitra, and Ms. Jongerius deployed a similar strategy for the Worker Chair. Having spent the last year revising all of Vitra's colors and fabrics, she is now experimenting with new approaches to "individualization" in office furniture.

"I'm not interested in repeating myself," she said. "Design is so tough — especially for women — that each piece you bring out has to be an improvement, and to push your work forward. That's important for me too, to keep me interested."

To that end, she has even changed the way she works. Last autumn, Ms. Jongerius and her architect husband, Lucas Verweij, moved with their two young daughters to Berlin from Rotterdam, where her studio and team of nine people are based. She spends a few days a month in Rotterdam, and talks to the team on Skype. The studio will close in June, and her colleagues will then work independently.

"I felt claustrophobic in Rotterdam, and work so much better here in Berlin," she said. "It's like being back in a bubble with my chaos — and I need that."