Game Boys
The Considered Palette

As art director of Vitra's colors and materials, Dutch designer Hella Jongerius has spent a decade researching shade and tone.

By Jessica Bridger

There's something refreshing about a design practice that doesn't engage with the all-consuming, black-and-white hype machine that has swallowed up the design industry. The only black hole in Hella Jongerius's design studio in Berlin is a脚步, spiky doogon painted made of triangular pieces and painted an industrial noir so deep it pulls light into it. There's no type, no starlight so bright as to blind. That there easily could be, given Jongerius's standing among today's most influential designers, makes its absence all the more sweet.

Jongerius is a measured collaborator—a builder of relationships with mutual benefit, as is best illustrated by her longstanding relationship with Vitra. In 2006 she began working with the Swiss furniture company, and she is now its art director of colors and surfaces, in that role Jongerius has been largely responsible for overhauling Vitra's entire color catalogue. The partnership, much like her own alluring designs, has unfolded over the course of years, not seasons. "It's true love—maybe it's too easy to say that—but like for Vitra, I did the last ten years for colors, that's something you grow into."

This evolution has resulted in updated colors for Phantom chairs and other classics, but it has also yielded a broader process of thinking. The new book "Don't Have a Favourite Colour" ( Gestalten, 2006) renders readable this process, depicting a decade of Jongerius's research into shade and tone. In that time, she has succeeded in building from the ground up a company's color and material library. Developed with her collaborator Till Weiher, the library is organized according to a taxonomy of personal color predilections with palettes that correspond to the brand's regions of designers, such as Rietveld, Paeck, and the Bármeses. Color wheels bearing these names and more are defined by swatches of light and dark, red and green, following an entirely different classification of primaries than those more familiar spectrums ROYGBV and CMYK. "Today, there is no place for seduction or questioning in the objective, all-encompassing RAL, Pantone, or NCS color systems," Jongerius writes of the industry's rigid pigment standards. And yet this space is necessary, particularly since color is fundamentally a "visual expertise, not a scientific one."

Jongerius's own work is strongly focused not just on color but also texture, as the book demonstrates. "Textile, the writer, helps bring color out of 'abstract illusion' and into 'materialized reality'," a transmutation that reflects the demands of commercial production. "We have the reality of testing and of the industrial process," she says, and that distinctive pragmatism complements her penchant for research and her striving for "balance between richness, sophistication, elegance—textures!" This is the red thread—"rotten Reden" in German—that runs through everything she does, especially at Jongerius.

The studio, on a quiet residential street in chic Berlin, is an elegantly obsessive space filled with tactile invitations to reach out and touch a slick surface of glove or an intricate woody texture. >
Studies of objective and subjective color systems at Jongeriuslab

Jongerius’s decade of color and textile research has yielded a process of thinking depicted above in the form of color wheels that is documented in the new book I Don’t Have a Favourite Colour (DeLafiten, 2016), which will be released this month at the Salone del Mobile.

“In my approach the personal reigns,” Jongerius writes in the book. “It’s by intuition that you take a meaningful step forward in creating new colors, and recreating the colors we lost along the way of industrial production.”
“I wanted to see myself in another daylight,” says Jongerius of her move to the German capital seven years ago, and of the famous blue hour of Berlin around twilight that paints the white-gray city pale cerulean. But Jongerius’s “another daylight” is also an existential shift, a move to the low-pressure village mentality that the city is known for. “I came from this Dutch design culture, which is huge, and it’s everywhere, so to come here, it’s nice and quiet.”

Berlin gives Jongerius the relaxed space in which to forge her research and practice, to move her ideas forward in the real world through production. Capitalism has the power to make all things available, if not universally attainable. Even an entry-level Fames chair is an aspirational good for most people, and yet Jongerius finds the silver lining. “The idea behind these objects represent[ing] will eventually penetrate down ten years from now—or maybe two with IKEA,” she says. 

The yearning and knowledge embedded in high-end design objects, from color to ways of living, influence all of design, from the top down. Admittedly, this is not a perfect system, no Rauschen dream of democratic design as a self-sustaining prophecy for an equitable good life, but there is the power to influence people’s lives by “working from the inside.” Jongerius is an expert at this, and her products, for Vitra and other manufacturers, are the better for it. The (also) ventures about

**Bouroullec color wheel**

**Jongerius color wheel**

**Jasper Morrison color wheel**

**Eames color wheel**
and serious rebuttal to design’s infatuation with newness and the industry’s dependence on built-in obsolescence. “It was a way to come to deeper meanings about design. Just an object is not interesting—I think it is important to push the envelope, not just create stuff,” Jongerius says. Ever active internationally, she will present a second manifesto this summer at the Serpentine Gallery in London, part of a perforative installation that intertwines elements of practice and play and that will feature shadow plays projected onto textiles. In positioning ideas as objects and experiences, it will be an intelligent counterpart to this summer’s multiple-position extravaganzas by the likes of Eileen Gray’s lesser-known, to be erected adjacent to Jongerius’s installation. Design and architecture typically take an opposite tack.

“We are what we are with the things that surround us,” Jongerius says. “Of course, you can say I work for top-level markets, but all the things we’ve done—this knowledge will trickle down to us all.” Jongerius’s book will be launched at Salone del Mobile in Milan, one of the biggest international furniture fairs on an increasingly wearying calendar of荷nephe spectacular. Salone is somewhat above the fray, as an original and serious fair. In a space away from the main exhibition halls, Vitra will mount an installation based on Jongerius’s color and textile research: it will be a fun palace celebrating her work but also closing a decade of collaboration in order to begin anew. As Jongerius says, “I have a feeling I’m just starting.”