HELLA JONGERIUS confronts the colour industry

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HOME-GROWN HOTELS Taking local to the extreme
‘Our world suffers from colour anorexia’

Cultural entrepreneur HELLA JONGÉRIUS has learned to embrace the industry to bring more colour into the world.

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HELIA JONGERIUS: I have a great need to lose myself in something. Over the last ten years I’ve focused completely on colour. The more I read and research, the less I know about the subject. I feel like a beginner again, and it feels good. In that sense, colour is a metaphor for life itself. I’ve also started painting recently. Not with the pretence of a visual artist, but as a way to experience how colours blend and what the properties of certain pigments are. Once I’ve become fascinated by a subject, I want to understand it to its core. I become incredibly persistent. That’s why I only work with a few companies—one that offers me freedom. Innovation is only possible if there is room for serendipity—coincidence can push you onto a certain path. I didn’t name my studio longeristal on a whim.

‘My first job was as an occupational therapist. The only resemblance to designing is that you work with your hands. It was mostly a way to escape my upbringing, which had a limited room for self-discovery. It felt like an enormous relief when I decided to attend the Design Academy instead. I’d finally found my place. The freedom and non-conformism of the art world drew me in. But instinctively, I knew that the Design Academy wasn’t the right place for me, either. There was too much freedom. I’m more practical. Even back then, I was fascinated by mechanical processes. To not just make one of something, but a whole series of those things at the same time. I wasn’t surrounded by much in the way of art and culture as a child. My mother was a patternmaker, so we did have various sewing machines at home. I even had a small one of my own, but I hated it. I thought, I’m not going to sew while the men design real industrial products. But at Design Academy Eindhoven, a world of yarn development, weaving and knitting for the industry opened up. That’s how I discovered I had a talent for textiles, even though I only started with that years later. And when you follow your talent, you’re in a flow.’

‘Design Academy Eindhoven, which wasn’t even its name at the time, was more vocational than it is now. I received a traditional education in industrial design. I learned all kinds of manufacturing techniques, such as making ceramic and injection moulds, and weaving textiles. These days, you’re mostly taught how to have an academic attitude. You have to be able to think in concepts and be critical. Personal development is very important, but the skills are lagging behind. Students know very well what they want nowadays. They just can’t do it. But for now, almost all products are made by the industry. So if we don’t want our world to be shaped by marketers, we have to sit at that table. Otherwise there won’t be any space for research, for experiment, for quality. That’s why knowledge of industrial processes is essential. I firmly believe that the economic system has to change—and will change. For that reason, economics should be a mandatory course at design schools.’

‘Immediately after my graduation, or during really, I was picked up by Droog Design in 1992. That was the turning point in my career. My work coincided with a movement, which enhanced its cultural importance. I was also influenced by Droog Design’s way of thinking. I met influential contemporaries such as Jurgen Bey and Piet Hein Eek through the brand. And don’t forget the publicity. But in the end, working under the Droog flag became too constraining. By then I had my own fascinations about the mix of industry and craftsmanship, whereas Droog moved towards design art, where huge amounts are paid for often senseless statements. That’s not my cup of tea. The brand’s logical successor was Super Normal, led by Jasper Morrison. Not that I feel much kinship for that, but it is fresh. And at the least it offers an alternative to an out-of-hand production system that continues to pump out new products, each demanding more attention than the next.’

‘I’m a real cultural entrepreneur. Because of that, working for a company or a large design studio isn’t an option. That’s something I gained from my upbringing. My three brothers are also entrepreneurs, just like my father. To successfully lead an independent studio, you have to be entrepreneurial. You need to be able to assess the risks and also have the courage to take them, free up money for experiments and invest time in research. Apart from these business aspects you have to organize and build a network. Direct your staff and be able to bind them to you. And maybe the most important thing of all: have the focus to get where you want to go. All things I’m good at and enjoy doing. I don’t like all of it, though. In particular, having too many employees can be a burden. I know brilliant designers from my time at Droog who never became successful, because they don’t have entrepreneurial skills. It’s such a shame.’

‘After running a studio for ten years, it became apparent that I’d created a building that didn’t fit me. Too many employees, too many clients, too much white noise. I could have gone on successfully for years, but that would have just been more of the same. Something wasn’t right, I felt it intuitively. And my intuition is spot on, always. I trust it blindly.’

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"Students know very well what they want nowadays," says Jongerius. "They just can't do it."
'My exhibition is a pamphlet against colour monotony'

Hella Jongerius

1963 Born in De Meern, the Netherlands
1993 Graduates from Design Academy Eindhoven
1997 Participates in Dry Tech, a Droog Design research project
2002 Designs for Maharam
2003 Mounts solo exhibition at the Design Museum, London
2005 Works for Vitra as designer and art director of colours and materials
2005 Designs for Ikea
2009 Relocates Jongeriuslab to Berlin
2010 Publishes Misfit and mounts solo exhibition of the same name at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam
2011 Designs for KLM
2012 Appointed as design director at Danskina
2015 Presents pamphlet 'Beyond the New: A Search for Ideals in Design'
2016 Publishes I Don't Have a Favourite Colour: Creating the Vitra Colour and Material Library
2017 Exhibits Breathing Colour at the Design Museum, London

The solution was distance. Literally, I closed the studio in Rotterdam and left for Berlin, a city unknown to me. I even wanted to work completely alone at first. In hindsight, this move was one of my best decisions. I like that in Berlin, which has no international design scene worth mentioning, I can work in peace. Luckily, several large clients like KLM and Vitra called in at that moment. Here, I created a new structure and now everything fits.’

‘Making exhibitions is an irreplaceable part of my design practice. They’re a chance to take a step back and reflect on what I’m doing. Even the panic that comes from once again diving, head first, into something without fully understanding the consequences, is cleansing. In 2003, Alice Rawsthorn gave me the chance to create an exhibition at the Design Museum in London. She was the first to have the guts to put me on an international stage. That opened the door to a bigger playing field; I still feel indebted to her. As such, to be back in the Design Museum in London this summer is a very special feeling. Breathing Colour is the presentation of ten years of colour research. But in fact, it’s a pamphlet against colour monotony. We’re bound to a colour system in which the industry uses a very limited palette of pigments. Fortunes are spent on research into scratch resistance or lightfastness, but not on the development of layered colour recipes. According to the industry, a colour always has to be the same, whether it’s used on textile or shiny metal. A colour also has to look the same in the middle of the day as it does at dusk. I, on the other hand, believe in changing colours, colours that breathe with the light. There is no market for such unstable colours, says the industry. This is nonsense. With this exhibition, I want to show consumers that there is an alternative to the prevalent colour monotony. Just like the food industry that now has to deal with a consumer who wants to know where his meat comes from or what’s in his soup. The industry only listens if you hit them in the wallet.’

‘Our world suffers from colour anorexia. It’s my mission to change that. But I have to admit, during my work for Vitra I discovered how hard it is to introduce new colours. First, the existing colours have to stay available for a minimum of three years, because clients have to be able to replace furniture. This means that you’ll have to have two collections in storage for years. Then there are the technical limitations. A paint fabricator has to develop new pigments. Do new pigments mix well with plastic in an injection mould? And how does that coloured plastic compare to the colours of the woolen upholstery or the varnish for the wood? When that’s been sorted out, the marketing division enters the picture. How will the colours be communicated? As a designer you’re the filter between the consumer and the industry, with an understanding of what is possible and a vision and need for innovation. This process takes years. But big changes always come in small steps.’

With the pamphlet ‘Beyond the New’ that I launched two years ago during the Milan Design Week with critic Louise Schouwenburg, I put myself in a vulnerable position. Up to the day before, we were asking ourselves: should we do this? But I feel a responsibility to speak my mind. I’m in a position where people listen to me. I didn’t become a designer just to make pretty things!'

Breathing Colour will be on show until 24 September at the Design Museum, London
jorgeriuslab.com