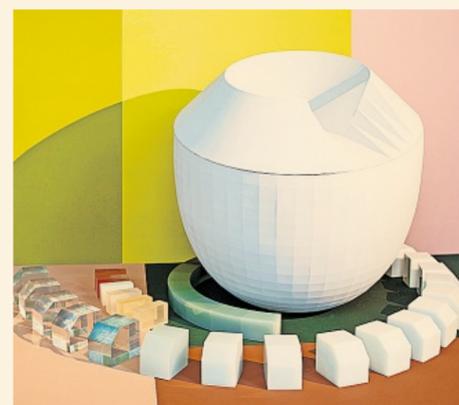


Threads that show the way ahead

Hella Jongerius | The artist and designer has made her name with innovative woven works which reimagine the ancient craft.

Kristina Foster talks to her in Berlin



Modern and contemporary artists have often revived the ancient craft of weaving as a way of reconnecting with the past. For the Dutch designer and artist Hella Jongerius, this technique can be used to look towards the future by combining the threads of traditional craft, innovative processes and responsible manufacturing which run through her work.

"We are all born on a thread," Jongerius says as we walk around her studio in the Prenzlauer Berg district of Berlin, a haptic wonderland teeming with spools of yarn and fabrics. "People understood the world by comparing a turning spindle to the earth's rotation. The cycle of the moon and the sun was all in one story with spinning."

In her studio, home since 2009 to her design practice, Jongeriuslab, one can see a cross-section of the contrasting spheres of craft and technology, the handmade and the industrial, which Jongerius is known for fusing in her work. Adorning the walls are her many woven experiments, seemingly fashioned out of anything: scraps of wool, paper, masses of knotted cords. Textile samples share an area with a digital jacquard loom — a machine that uses software to generate complex patterns — which the artist is using to create a woven portrait.

"Weaving has been an important part of my career for a long time," she says. "I started off as an industrial weaver for Maharam, a textile company in New York, but over the past five years I've wanted to use technology to rethink the kind of work you can do with industrial processes. That's why I bought this jacquard machine. On this machine you can really find new questions and answers."

Using jacquard-weaving techniques, Jongerius has been able to redefine what's possible with thread, whether that's spinning three-dimensional fabric "bricks" that could potentially function as eco-friendly architectural elements or creating "woven windows", whose warm, sensual grids of colour resemble abstract paintings.

Her connection to weaving is personal. She remembers how, growing up on a farm near Utrecht, her first brush with art and design came through textiles. "There wasn't a lot of culture in our house. My father was a farmer and my mother was trained as a patternmaker, and growing up in the 70s all we did as girls was knitting and macramé."

Drawn to the art world but needing a field of study with more "boundaries", Jongerius, who was born in 1963,

eventually enrolled at the Academy of Industrial Design in Eindhoven. A few years after graduating she was already presenting her designs in museums, from MoMA in New York to the Stedelijk in Amsterdam. Being appointed art director of colours and materials at Vitra in 2007 allowed her to delve into the archive of the Swiss furniture brand, a period of research which, she says, "became a whole study in itself, and at a certain moment it was ready for an exhibition".

In 2017 she presented a series of objects and textile works at London's Design Museum in a show called *Breathing Colour*. Some muted, some intensely vibrant, these works showed how special pigments and yarns — typically shunned by manufacturers for their changeability — reacted to light and evolved across the day. "Colour is for me a material," she says. "As a designer the only colours you can use in the industry are stable... it looks the same in the morning as in the evening. And I don't

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think that's what makes quality of colour. I think it has to breathe with light."

With this innovative approach to materials — which has also won Jongerius commercial projects for brands such as Ikea, Kvadrat, Vitra and Dutch airline KLM — the artist seeks to challenge the rigidity of the design industry, especially when it comes to its attitudes towards manufacturing and sustainability. A large part of this involves reconnecting people with production processes. Last year she explored the "healing" potential of weaving in society and the environment in a solo show titled *Woven Cosmos* at the Gropius Bau museum in Berlin.

Throughout the rooms, Jongerius installed looms designed to be activated by several hands. One such device, "Dancing a Yarn", invited visitors to collaboratively make a rope by moving around the room holding strands of

Clockwise from main: Hella Jongerius; 'Dancing a Yarn' (2021) from the 'Woven Cosmos' exhibition; part of her Design Museum installation, 'Breathing Colour' (2017); Frog Table (2009) — Roel van Tour; Laura Florio

fibres attached to rope-braiding machines. "The togetherness of making textiles was for a long time a very important social aspect of the craft," says Jongerius. "But since fast fashion a lot of this has been lost. So I wanted to address this."

Today the art space is her preferred arena to explore urgent issues in the design industry: "I think I have a better

voice in a museum. In a museum you can really make contact with people via a material or craft, even more so than with a product. Something aesthetic makes you concentrate a bit longer on a certain item. And since they don't have to open their purse, they look at things totally differently. They're more open."

Jongerius hopes these experiences will extend beyond the boundaries of

the museum and encourage us to be more sensitive to the objects around us, from the clothes we wear to the colour of our furniture. "I think that's also the role of a designer," she says. "That you can show people what's possible and help people relate a bit more to the things they buy."

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