

## **A conversation that might have taken place.**

Louise Schouwenberg, 2003

HELLA At least your colleagues give you flowers when you have something to celebrate. That never happens if you're a designer. Who'd want to ruin a perfectly good vase by putting flowers in it?

LOUISE Yes, artists get flowers, and then they just grab the nearest pot or bucket to put them in. But it's noticeable that the people who design vases never get flowers. So why do designers design vases?

HELLA Because of the 'stories' they tell. Vases were originally meant to be used, of course, but like any useful object a vase has a potential that goes beyond functionality. The story can rise above the object itself.

LOUISE Then you're talking about art.

HELLA No, I'm not talking about art. Useful objects have a rich history. They are saturated with references to specific contexts and specific moments in history. If you refer to that history explicitly, and include all the associations in a new story, then you are communicating something - and it's something about useful objects.

LOUISE But if it isn't the use that's really important, only your ideas about the significance of the object, why don't you, say, drill a hole in the bottom of the vase? If you work with the pretensions of an artist, why don't you simply ignore functionality?

HELLA I don't believe I have artistic pretensions. Design is my thing. Most of my designs are actually usable, and only occasionally do I completely ignore the actual use. When I decorate cups with embroidery that goes right through the porcelain, I obviously realize you can't drink tea out of them. But that isn't really so important, because you could think up a different function for the cups.

LOUISE So the ideas more or less force you to reduce the functionality?

HELLA Embroidery gives me a way of saying something about customs of eating and decorating, about being trapped in conventions and etiquette.

LOUISE Does the balance sometimes tip the other way? Can the function be uppermost?

HELLA I'm happiest when the design works well in all respects. If, on top of that, it's also suitable for mass production, it's a real kick. I like the industrial process; art can't compete with the scale industry works on. The commission I had from the textile company Maharam brought all these issues together nicely. Besides the design work and the large-scale execution, it also involved me in the adventure of marketing.

LOUISE How important is marketing to you?

HELLA Marketing is never my starting point. I like to experiment quietly on my own. In this respect I feel more akin to artists, who generally put more emphasis on the process than on the final result. I know I will be judged by the end product, but I need plenty of freedom in the process leading up to it. This inevitably creates problems sometimes, particularly with industry.

LOUISE Isn't that a dilemma inherent to the awkward cultural and economic position of avant-garde design? There's admittedly a vast market for so-called 'design products', but the market you address is much narrower, isn't it? In fact you often aim at the same market as art, even though there are crucial differences between what you do and what artists do. As a designer, it's something you have to deal with. Besides being keen to launch your concepts into the world, you hope the products will sell to more than just a few museums and fanatical collectors, after all. Your art is an applied art. Your distaste for marketing actually contradicts the entrepreneurial spirit that goes along with being a designer – a spirit you undoubtedly have.

HELLA My colleagues and I can't help noticing we have gained quite a cultural status. But the fact we get so much publicity in magazines and other media doesn't say a thing about production. That's why I'm so pleased when a manufacturer backs me up unreservedly. It won't be easy for Maharam to sell fabrics with patterns that repeat only once every three meters. It's a case of celebrating the product in its full glory.

LOUISE What exactly are you trying to achieve in the fabric designs?

HELLA I'm trying to make individuals within families. I ask myself, how can you create one-offs, while you are actually working with an industrial, serial production technology? I'm trying to raise both of them, unique objects and serial output, to a higher level of quality. Quite a theme, isn't it?

LOUISE How important is the conflict between concept and use? I take it that you would be capable of designing a nice little coffee table without too much of a concept. You could always fall back on that skill if you were to run out of ideas.

HELLA If I felt I no longer had a story to tell with my products, then I'd stop straight away. There's already an incredible amount of superfluous trash produced under the heading of contemporary design.

LOUISE Aren't you in fact adding to it, the whole production of unnecessary objects? Even more, aren't you profiting as shamelessly as anyone else from the widespread interest in 'design'?

HELLA Point taken, I suppose I do my bit in that area. My critique of the design world applies to myself as well as others. In my view, design has fouled its own nest to some

extent. The world has been designed from end to end, but the quality of that design is generally abominable. Ten years ago, maybe, we still fulfilled an important role. But the profession is now at risk of falling victim to its own success.

LOUISE Ten years ago – that was when you started your career and immediately fell in with Droog Design, wasn't it?.

HELLA We had something worth saying at the time. We shook up the design world with some strong ideas.

LOUISE Such as?

HELLA Everything rotated around the concepts behind the designs, and those concepts had to be strong ones. We pared every product down to the bone: what it's for, what history clings to it, and what idea is lurking beneath the surface. The visual design was completely subordinate to the ideas we wanted to convey. The upshot was that we completely undressed the products so you could see what they were really about.

LOUISE And the Droog designers introduced a touch of humor into the design discipline...

HELLA I think that applies more to the others than to me. What worries me at the moment is that people hardly ever ask questions about the sense and nonsense of the profession. Many designers meekly concede to the market mechanism, and do nothing but offer pragmatic solutions to demands from outside.

LOUISE Yet design revolves mainly around working on commission, doesn't it, producing what the client wants and earning money by doing so? You can't avoid that kind of pragmatism.

HELLA If, as a designer, you don't grab the theme by the throat and probe it to its farthest consequences, you're inevitably going to get stuck at the outer surface. In the long run it's a dead end. I believe we make a mistake if we restrict ourselves to pragmatic aspects.

LOUISE Aren't you in the wrong profession then? Maybe designers ought to leave the other side of the story to art.

HELLA Usable objects have their story too.

LOUISE Are you jealous of the freedom artists have?

HELLA Sometimes I am. I do feel a strain when I'm mainly interested in the content, but have to force myself to stay within the bounds of functionality. Still, does it really matter all that much? Who cares if it's art or if it's design?

LOUISE I'm not talking about a strict dividing line between art and design. It's the motives that count. People sometimes accuse designers of parasitizing art. They borrow their concepts from the art world, and transform a diluted version of them into usable objects. I have no problem with that in principle - there's nothing wrong with parasitizing art or anything else. And perhaps designers should be even more shameless about doing so. There's a lot of inspiration to be had from other disciplines.

HELLA Exactly, from other disciplines! I often get inspiration from literature and art, as well as from simply keeping my eyes open as I walk along the street. Talent alone won't get you far in this profession, because there are too many factors involved. You have to be fully aware of what is going on in the world at large, not just in the design world. And street culture is just as important as high culture. We don't have to be artists or architects ourselves to get inspiration from those disciplines.

LOUISE Artists are notorious for pinching ideas from one another and from other fields. It can lead to resentment and furious arguments, but apart from that nobody turns a hair. If designers steal things from art, though, it ought to be the content and not just the jargon they take.

HELLA Designers always flirt with art.

LOUISE You envy the freedom and higher status of art, yet flirt with the clichés and the jargon of the art world. You exhibit vases on pedestals in white-walled museums and galleries, as though they were autonomous works of art. The air is thick with terms like experiment, content, research and refusal to make concessions. But do they belong in design? Conversely, artists flirt with design because they think it's less isolated and less highbrow than their own area. Design has to meet criteria of usefulness, but art doesn't.

HELLA It's a two-way flirtation in which both artist and designers enjoy a lot of success. Just consider the bizarre mobile houses for which Joep van Lieshout is so famous.

LOUISE They made him famous because the houses not only look amazing but because they present keen artistic statements about the rights of individuals in our society. He's an artist first and foremost. But can you point to any designers who have made a successful detour into fine art?

HELLA I can think of countless examples, but they mostly do it incidentally alongside their other work. A good example is Jurgen Bey. His work is much closer to fine art than mine is. I have done a few public space projects together with him, and they primarily fall under the heading of commissioned art.

LOUISE Curious, isn't it, that in the very period so-called object art was being toppled from its pedestal in the art world, and words like autonomy and uniqueness seemed to have lost their shine, that objects by designers were being promoted as though they were

works of art. Design and architecture, that's where it was all happening. And now, thousands of throwaway products later, art is beginning to win ground again.

HELLA Designers ought to start raising the stakes. It's perfectly possible, because I believe in the potential of intelligent design. Artists do have more scope to tackle big subjects, certainly. They can shock people, and they can grab spectators by the throat. But is that really happening? I read plenty of complicated statements, but the work of art itself often shows a considerable lack of commitment.

LOUISE But designers do the same thing, don't they? They often sell themselves with impressive statements, which don't really fit the facts of what they make.

HELLA Designers can't get away with all too pompous statements. They have to operate with clearly-defined problems, they have to stick to their promises, and they have to relate to the world around them. And then they have to take responsibility for the end result.

LOUISE Accessibility is an important weapon in the designer's armory, isn't it? Usable objects often have unexpected, efficient ways of finding their way to people. After all, we constantly need them.

HELLA True, and designers can find a vehicle for their ideas in objects of everyday use. And the fact that we cannot allow ourselves the luxury of a noncommittal attitude, is also our potential strength. But we have to exploit that strength.

LOUISE How wide is the scope of design, actually? Does design count for something in society, or does it operate only on the fringes of the cultural landscape?

HELLA It has to be about something. Commitment is crucial. Mass-production industry has been ruining the market with superfluous design products for far too long. I think designers have a role in this respect. We can do more than supply industry with original ideas, for we could accept a wider social responsibility. Designers have played a considerable part in creating the consumer society, so it would do us credit to instigate a new, more caring, way of thinking about products.

LOUISE You're presumably familiar with the traditional Chinese and Japanese practice of repairing broken pottery with gold laquer. Throwing things away isn't an option, and the defect becomes a thing of beauty in its own right.

HELLA That's a lovely custom, isn't it? You almost wish you could break another cup, so you can repair it and make it even more precious than the original.

LOUISE You yourself have won fame with your emphasis on the making process and on the little flaws that occur.

HELLA I often use craft production methods. Even while I was a student, I experimented with so-called traditional materials like ceramics and textiles as well as with the high-tech stuff like polyurethane. I'm a firm believer in getting my hands dirty. I practically abuse the materials until I stumble into new ideas, new ways of seeing things. There is an incredible amount of intelligence involved in the making process itself. Trying to invent something by purely rational means rarely generates anything original, but working in my studio and pushing the envelope often yields surprises. So I let my materials and my intuition lead the way, and I put off looking for explanations to a later stage.

LOUISE And then you have to convince the industry people.

HELLA Yes, it's an approach that requires a lot of persuading. For example, I spent months at the EKWC experimenting with firing temperatures, casting techniques, thicknesses, etc. until I got exactly the kind of 'flaws' I wanted for my B-Set china. Then I had to tackle the ceramics industry, and finally I succeeded in persuading Makkum to make the design. It was a real upheaval for them. I admire that company for applying their high standards of care and attention to making a product that clashes with their perfectionist culture.

LOUISE Do your attempts to convince the industry ever come up against a brick wall?

HELLA On a good day, I'm pretty smart at getting them to see things my way. But now and then my efforts are in vain. It regularly happens that the company directors are keen, but the design falls foul of the marketing department at the last fence, because they fear a commercial flop. Good design isn't necessarily good merchandise.

LOUISE Is that down to consumer conservatism?

HELLA Obviously, I reckon on a creative kind of consumer, capable of connecting with my ideas, for example with the story behind my B-Set china. There are plenty of people who prefer the old, cracked crocks from grandma's cupboard to a perfect new 12-piece tea service. Even though My B Set is produced serially each individual piece is actually unique, because they all have random flaws.

LOUISE And does that 'story' amount to commitment? What I miss is the grand gesture. I hear much the same kind of story from amateur watercolorists and potters: they pour their heart and soul into their little masterpieces. You might as well do the same, and just make one-offs in a little ceramic studio.

HELLA And sometimes I do, when a product calls for it. But I like the challenge of using industrial means to create an intelligent product with a high craft quality. I wish my work could make a major contribution to world events, but really I see the social role of the designer as being more modest. You talk of amateur potters and their woolly ambitions, but then you're doing an injustice to the kind of involvement I'm looking for.

Maybe the word commitment is a bit too strong, but designers are capable of arousing an interest in products. And that's where my commitment lies.

LOUISE Are you certain your aspirations go no farther than that? Isn't there a moralist inside you, wanting to tell the world something more than just to take an interest in products? Your Bed in Business, for instance, puts out a pretty explicit message about the way we live, about the way we separate work from life. It's as though you are offering an alternative by building a computer into a bed, and putting a keyboard on the pillow with prissy embroidery.

HELLA I certainly wouldn't call it prissy embroidery. Through that bed, I am trying to give a more human face to a modern piece of equipment, by using old and new techniques alongside one another. Computers are completely integrated into our lives, so why should we hide them away in cupboards? Actually the same happens as in my other products. I boost the individual character of the object, so to speak.

LOUISE Don't you just mean it's well designed?

HELLA No, that's not the point. I am not interested in purely visual design.

LOUISE And you call yourself a designer! Surely you care about whether things are well made or not - that goes along with the territory.

HELLA It's simply not how I see the world. What I do is to keep my eyes continually open for how well things work. I saw a new ticket vending machine at the railway station, for instance, a really efficient piece of equipment. That's great. But one thing was wrong, in my view: you had to choose your destination by going down a list from top to bottom. Somehow my head doesn't like doing that. It wants to go from left to right.

LOUISE Well that's a matter of design, isn't it?

HELLA No, it's psychology: intuitively knowing what's happening to you when you see something. When I consider the fond way people treat old teacups, for example, I realize how people build up a bond with familiar things. I'm gradually accumulating a whole database of impressions and insights like that.

LOUISE And then you convert that database into products that show traces of how they were made. But why does the visibility of the process and its fallibility result in a better product?

HELLA Because you elicit more involvement. The making process in itself isn't the most important thing. That may be the crucial mistake many ceramicists make in their work; they get a kick from kneading the clay but hardly concern themselves with whether what they are making is interesting. In my case, the making process is part of the concept, and

you see that in the end result. It makes the user more aware of the relevance of the production process.

LOUISE So that's why you prefer craft techniques?

HELLA It's an obvious choice, of course. But it's an approach you can apply to industrial products and new, high-tech materials as well. People are fed up with all the throwaway rubbish, and long for things that have some significance to them.

LOUISE Your company is called Jongeriuslab – that just means you yourself, doesn't it?

HELLA Oh, sometimes I regret choosing that name because it gives a wrong impression, as though I always work by myself. But that isn't so. I have a marvelous team backing me up, not the least of whom is Arian Brekveld. As a designer, he sets a definite stamp on everything that leaves this studio.

LOUISE So you're not a one-woman act after all.

HELLA I'm definitely a solo performer by inclination. But I could never get everything done here without the help of the first-rate professionals I work with. What is more, I bring in ad hoc specialists for certain jobs. So Jongeriuslab is teamwork.

LOUISE How much importance attaches to fashions and trends in Jongeriuslab? A concern for materials and a revival of interest in traditional techniques have been in the air for some while. Even commitment is getting to be hip again. Are you sensitive to trends?

HELLA I think I have a good nose for what's in the air – not in a rational sense, but still... My personal preference is clearly something shared by others. Things that I feel are intuitively right often turn out to fit in with the mood of the times. Perhaps that sounds arrogant, but it's simply my experience so far.

LOUISE Isn't that the same as being a sucker for the latest fad, for ephemera? In the dying days of Romanticism, Oscar Wilde said that cultured people don't talk about the beauty of a sunset any more. He wasn't just poking fun at old-fashioned romantics who fussed about things like timeless beauty and eternal truth. He was also poking fun at himself, as the kind of snob who claims that the sunset is not beautiful merely because cynicism is in.

HELLA I certainly don't believe in eternal beauty, in things that preserve their value regardless of the character of the era.

LOUISE Wouldn't you like to design something of eternal value?

HELLA Not at all. My admiration goes out to designs that fit the moment exactly, designs that are cool. I don't give a damn whether my products are still of interest in ten years' time. Quality is perhaps something you can carry across different eras, but even the so-called classics can be placed in a particular geographical and historical context. Nothing is forever.

LOUISE I don't believe a word of it. I think every designer secretly hopes to make an immortal design, one which lasts through all periods and movements. It's just unfashionable to say so.

HELLA The modernists tried frantically to design things that would stand the test of time, but you can see the desperation in their work. Maybe the completely successful nine-days wonder is really the ultimate classic.

LOUISE That sounds odd.

HELLA My work belongs in the present day, and that's the way I like it. I know what's going on in the world, and I know about current issues in the design profession.

LOUISE You sometimes act as a curator, for instance for several museums in the Netherlands, for the Crafts Council in London and for Cooper Hewitt in New York. How do jobs like that connect with your design work?

HELLA I can achieve similar things at a different level. By placing old items from museum collections alongside their contemporary counterparts by myself or other designers, I try to stimulate people to see things in a different way.

LOUISE Isn't that rather a lazy way of making exhibitions? You put old and new together, you do a bit of styling... And there you are.

HELLA It's not lazy, if you're careful to avoid arbitrary combinations. The relations you define say something, and that new story has to be an interesting one. Besides, a new design idea sometimes arises from a job like that; and that is still my main thing, of course, designing.

LOUISE If you were to spend more time and attention on curating the exhibitions, you might be able to make sharper decisions and seek out more evocative contrasts. After all, it's the kind of sharpness you insist on in your design work.

HELLA What interests me in the exhibitions is broadly the same as in my other work. I test the boundaries of ideas that are current at the moment.

LOUISE It's typical of today that designers use existing forms with a rich history clinging to them. Not only you, but many of your fellow designers hark back to the past. You

yourself have talked of archetypal forms. It's up to you if you want to use that term, but what you mean is clear enough.

HELLA Why should I design anything new if certain forms have long proved their usefulness? An archetypal vase is, to me, round-bellied and has a narrow neck. They have been made that way for hundreds of years, and for a good reason.

LOUISE The stems have to be gripped halfway up so that the flowers fan out at the top.

HELLA That's as clear as day, isn't it? Those ridiculous straight-sided vases you see everywhere nowadays are hopeless for putting flowers in. Not that's what I do with my own vases, but when I make a vase it has the tried and tested, ideal shape. Rounded, in other words.

LOUISE Designers nearly always play around with known forms until something expressive arises from the composition.

HELLA Perhaps there are differing degrees to which they do that. I'm fairly extreme because I try not to invent new forms at all.

LOUISE The art of non-design! It's something you often see in converted apartments in old factories or schools, in buildings that were clearly designed for a different purpose. In that kind of place, you don't feel the suffocating pressure of a totally designed interior. Is that a factor for you too?

HELLA Modesty in design, that's what it's about: not adding anything irrelevant.

LOUISE That sounds stringent. During Modernism, we insisted on modesty because we believed it would help us penetrate further and further into the essence of things. The art of omission.

HELLA It's more than that. You consciously avoid designing new forms but you add a new dimension, a different function or a different story. That's what like what I do. When I get a commission from Maharam, I don't rush to my drawing board to design a snazzy new pattern. I pore through the archives, use existing patterns and add a new concept to them.

LOUISE Does that perhaps have something to do with a new concept of beauty – the beauty of industrial form?

HELLA Yes, and the beauty of the fabrication process, of random factors. That beauty is a complete contradiction to the old way of thinking. Functionality was the basis of designing for ages. I was brought up with the slogan 'form follows function', and later it changed into 'form follows concept'. Droog Design had a major influence there, of course.

Until the last years of the 20th century, there was considerable strictness about what you could and especially what you couldn't do in 'good design'.

LOUISE That hasn't changed, as far as I can see. The freedom of Postmodernism hardly left a mark in the vanguard of the design world – certainly not in the Dutch design world, of which you're a product after all.

HELLA But a lot more is allowed nowadays; things have lightened up a bit. Decoration was once forbidden territory, for instance, but now you see products where the function is completely dictated by the decoration.

LOUISE There's more elbow-room in the aesthetics. At the same time, across the board people are apparently seeking a return to essentials, although it isn't often described in those terms. The art of omission, of non-design, is irreconcilable with Postmodernism, in my view.

HELLA If I had to put a label on myself (although I'd rather not), I'd have to describe myself as a Postmodernist. At least, I definitely lack the discipline of Modernism.

LOUISE I have my doubts about that, if you don't mind.

HELLA I use lots of decorative patterns, and I quote my shapes from all over the place. It certainly looks Postmodern enough.

LOUISE That decoration is a logical consequence of your strict concepts. And despite your eclectic form language, you certainly make sure it's all recognizable as the typical work of Jongeriuslab.

HELLA I amalgamate images from both high and low culture. I stack one idiom on another.

LOUISE But the way you do it is definitely not arbitrary. Every ingredient has a substantive justification, for example the packaging tape you used to fix the ceramic bottom to the glass top of Long Neck and Groove Bottle. The tape's not just decorative, but it holds everything together: without it the design wouldn't exist. What is more, it makes an issue of fragility. So in my view your work is dominated by an almost modernist strictness, not in formal respects but in substantive respects. Are you also strict in the area of aesthetics?

HELLA I must admit I am a blatant aesthete. The concept is uppermost in the end, but on the way I am largely occupied with the general appearance. I fiddle about endlessly with colors and dimensions, agonize about which layer to put over the other, and which pattern against which color.

LOUISE Aren't you undermining your own 'story' with those aesthetics?

HELLA I realize it's a danger, but I think I deal with it by getting my aesthetics from things that have long ago proved their worth, from things with a history. The Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen commissioned me to design new products using antique pot-shards from their collection. The bright red car paint I sprayed right over the shards and the new vase form was devilishly beautiful, of course. What is more, it created a marvellous combination of old and new.

LOUISE You did the same thing with Blizzard Bulbs.

HELLA There, I was playing with the form vocabulary of traditional lampshades by putting hand-blown glass shapes on butane gas bottles.

LOUISE You confront tradition with the banality of camping gear.

HELLA To that you can add, I confront the beauty of tradition with the beauty of the banal.

LOUISE Years ago, I heard you say among friends that you can go off people who wear frumpy shoes, and even more off people who lick their knives at the table. I was astonished, because I hardly ever come across that kind of petty phobia among artists, and I certainly never used to among my fellow philosophy students at university. I was glad you couldn't see my down-at-heel shoes hidden under the table. Anyway, I determined to lick my knife in your company next time I had the chance. Are you still that fussy?

HELLA Well, well, I'm amazed you remember. No, I think I can say I've become more tolerant. I've discovered that many people wear unsuitable coats and badly-chosen shoes, but still have important things to say. The converse is much worse, of course.

LOUISE You mean chic designers who make stupid vases which would be better hidden under massive bunches of flowers? Do only vases with a strong intellectual content belong on pedestals, then?

HELLA I'm not in favor of pedestals, literally, of course. But good design can measure up against fine art, it must. By the way, I haven't seen you lick your knife yet. You're not letting yourself be intimidated by a mere designer, are you?

(A conversation that might have taken place.)  
Louise Schouwenberg, 2003