



A Conversation with Hella Jongerius

Louise Schouwenberg: What advantage is there in the credit crisis?

Hella Jongerius: Every crisis offers new possibilities. At this moment, everyone is being exaggeratedly optimistic in saying that. Still, it is not necessarily just allaying fear, but it is true. Through the exorbitant growth of well-being and the attention paid by the art market to design, prices had grown completely out of hand. A kind of design had evolved that makes you ask what it possibly has to do with the design profession. I suspect that the crisis can be a kind of wake-up call. We again have to ask ourselves what it is really all about. Ours is a service profession, but over the last few decennia, that has been pushed back, out of sight.

LS: Apart from the financial crisis, the design profession has been confronted with a growing call to work with more sustainable materials and production methods. We stand eye to eye with potential ecological disaster if we continue to produce, transport and consume the way we have done over the last century.

HJ: Globalization and the enormous rise in welfare have led to a situation in which it was all about consuming as much as possible, regardless of whether this was at the expense of the environment and regardless of whether that consumerism had to do with real needs or just needs that someone else convinces us of. Now that we are confronted in many areas with

the limits of that unbridled growth, it brings new challenges. In literature, they say, 'An unhappy childhood is a writer's fortune'. I think that holds true for all creative professions. When everything goes well, we become lazy and just go with the flow, reacting to success. In times of adversity or setback, we have to rely on our creativity. In a crisis, as a designer, you are forced to design more precisely, more compactly and more clearly. For the design profession, the global crisis can consequently be a very good thing.

LS: Theorists who are concerned about the crisis and the consequences for designers feel that we have to embrace more humanist, more sustainable production methods and that we need to seek production locations closer to home. They also suggest that designers must discourage consumers from perceiving products as throwaway objects. How do you see that issue?

HJ: I have never been involved with durability as an explicit subject as such, at least not in the ecological sense. My products have always been about psychological durability. I find it important that people become engaged with things. You do not achieve that just by working with good raw materials. That is a condition for every design, but not an adequate guarantee for cultural change. That is something you have to seek in improved relationships between people and things. As soon as people are able to relate to things in a meaningful way, they are less inclined to just throw them out or exchange them. I have a responsibility as a designer. I have to design products that are worth being cherished.

LS: That means products that function well?

HJ: No, it is much more than that! Design is about added value.

LS: For functionality, we can formulate very concrete quality criteria, but added value is harder to understand. Added value becomes a plaything of marketplace effects, vulnerable to manipulation and illusion. In the course of the 20th century, design increasingly revolved around a hard-to-define added value, and communications and the media became very important. It was not the real products, but their representation in the pages of glossy magazines that convinced customers of their desirability and their market value. That in turn had consequences for what was produced. The media demand strong, iconographic images and a recognizable style from a designer. However, in the last few years, that is no longer enough. In design, as in the fine arts, people are seriously searching for a different

kind of added value. Perhaps you could call it an inherent value, added value that has to be found in the physical quality of products, the materials, the manufacturing, and the details. That has produced a curious tension between the illusory image in the media and the physical attractiveness of the product itself. How do you deal with that tension?

HJ: For me, it is not such a contradiction. Virtually all my work is about the process of making it and the attention to materials and details. My products literally happen in my own hands, not in my head, as an idea or mental image. Obviously, I am a child of my own times. I too want to define a clearly recognizable line in my work, find my own signature. Clearly, I am aware of the importance of strong images, but all that is contained in the products themselves, both in the concepts that underlie them and in the way they are realized and finished. For the plates I designed for Nymphenburg, I wanted to show the craftsmanship and all the choices and possibilities that the firm traditionally represents. Idea, image and production all come together. Every handmade plate is, as it were, the painter's palette, with which the manufacturer works. The same thing was true for the Polder Sofa. My image of that piece says something about its different layers, about having diverse options and about the past. You can literally experience that through the different textiles, the nuances in colour, the differences in textures and, for example, the old buttons that we found at rummage sales and secondhand stores.

LS: Products communicate a story or idea and are made with the greatest possible care. That strikes me as a condition for every design.

HJ: That is not as obvious or logical as it seems. I am aware that today, a lot of companies and designers talk about the narrative character of designs. Sometimes it is even literally stated in the commission or assignment that they are looking for an emotional design. These are hollow concepts, and they lead to inflation. But that does not mean that when we first began investigating that, 15 years ago, it did not bring important insights. Design can tell a story. At the same time, you risk the story becoming more important than the product. Here, the media play a more important role. Because of the media, a discrepancy has arisen between the experience of the product in the picture and the experience of the physical product. For a lot of design, the picture is more important than the product itself.

LS: The name of a star designer also plays a big role in the meanings and stories game. Chairs are not appealing because they are comfortable to sit in, maybe not even because they are beautiful, but because they bring a real Ron Arad or Marc Newson into people's homes. Or they buy them both, so they can stare at each other.

HJ: It is even worse than that. Those two designers are primarily purchased by collectors who put the products in storage as speculative investments.

LS: That game, as we call it, is part of the law of the marketplace. Consumers are seduced with big promises, and as soon as they arrive home with their purchases, they are quickly bored or disappointed. Then they have to go after the next promise, the next illusion, the next acquisition. The economy does not profit from contentment or satisfaction. It is to your benefit as well that consumers always want to exchange things for something new.

HJ: That is not entirely true. Those developments reach a saturation point. You cannot fill up your home with awkward magazine icons and still feel happy living in it. I suspect the crisis will bring a thinning out of people in the profession, and that is sorely needed. Thanks to the unbridled drive to consume, there has been more and more demand for more and more disposable products. That brought a wild growth in the design world. Today, there are so many furniture manufacturers and an unbelievable number of designers attached to those producers. There has been a lot of employment in the last few years for people who want to pretend they are designers. As a result, we have year-round furniture fairs with giant halls filled with unbelievable junk. Excuse the word. They are rip-offs from better designs, furniture that you can see would fall apart in no time at all, and so ugly! It is high time that less is produced, but that it is of better quality. You should not be lighthearted about buying a sofa, as if it were some short-lived gadget. I want to design high-standard products that you select with care, that you want to keep with you your whole life, because they really mean something and because they are well made.

LS: I will answer with the same question again: is it not simply time for products to function well again?

HJ: The answer is still no. It serves no purpose just to look back and regret the loss of functionality. Essentially design is not art but a service profession. That is still the case when you know that a product represents added value that transcends basic functionality. The strict concept of functionality – a chair is for people to sit in, a cupboard to store things in – was undermined over the course of the 20th century. You could say it was unmasked. As far back as modernism, things were not exclusively functional, but were also about something else. The ideology of form following function produced an exceptional number of recognizable icons that we can immediately link to Le Corbusier, Jean Prouvé, to Eileen Gray or Ray and Charles

Eames. If their forms had actually simply followed function, wouldn't that be a lot more difficult?

LS: Is the only difference a question of style, with the modernists striving to achieve sober designs and the postmodernists more expressive styles?

HJ: No, you cannot say that. The modernists did have a handwriting of their own, their own sober style, but they always closely allied that sobriety with what they saw as the essence of the profession of design. They had an ideology. Functionality was their most important theme, but they also examined the issue of whether or not something could be reproduced and with what ingenious technical inventions that could take place.

LS: That was their added value. They wanted to design affordable products that functioned well, that symbolized belief in progress by the way they were produced. Do you believe that today, the idea of added value has taken on a life of its own, that it has completely separated itself from the affiliated, functional character of the profession? From the latter half of the 20th century, we see how designers were increasingly designing products that attempt to establish themselves as autonomous works of art. They are narrative, conceptual, sculptural. Have we lost something here?

HJ: Absolutely. Design has to be coupled to the real needs of users, but also to the possibilities that are available for reproducing and manufacturing products. I realize that I am saying something dangerous here. In the last few decades, consumers have felt a need for mountains of knickknacks. If people surround themselves with all those throwaway products, sooner or later, it will have consequences for the way they feel and think about themselves. For them as well, a turning point has been reached. We look around us and see people asking themselves what is really important, in all kinds of areas. Design can take the lead by formulating a vision. But that vision has to remain close to the user. Design cannot only be about a designer's need to express himself. That is ultimately a dead-end street. As a designer, if you have too much of a desire just to tell your own story, you run the risk of becoming an artist who is missing

LS: Now we come to the trend of the limited editions, by now both famous and maligned. They are wild explosions of form that want to attract the attention of the international media and put designers and manufacturers in the spotlight.

HJ: When you do not have to stop and consider reproduction in large numbers, when all you need to do is produce things as one-of-a-kinds or in small editions, you have the freedom to experiment. You can investigate themes without being restricted by production costs or expected target groups. That is unbelievably important. As a designer, you sometimes have to step back and recharge your batteries. But some designers have used limited editions as a goal in itself, not just as an experimental stage in the design process. As a result, existing designs are simply produced in outrageously expensive materials and signed by the designer.

LS: Art dealers and galleries were interested in design. Because prices for artworks had become so exorbitant, design suddenly became an ideal object for speculation. It was unusual, because it had special value and was still affordable. Even the million dollars that Marc Newson scored is peanuts compared to the several million paid at one point for works by Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons and paintings by Lucian Freud. For designers who wanted to attract the attention of the art market, it became very profitable to produce special designs in limited editions.

HJ: That meant that a handful of designers earned a lot of money. It also brought a small number of exceptional experiments, but as a whole, all the hype from the art dealers has been very destructive. In both fine art and design, market effects have led to absurd excesses and kitsch, because the concept of value was only being interpreted in economic terms. The current crisis might well bring about a reassessment, a new relevance. We have to again ask ourselves what we want our quality criteria to be. Market value is not the only criterion. We have to look into our own hearts and come up with a new formula for what functionality is and what added value is in a bound, functional discipline. Who knows, perhaps it really is time for a new ideology.

LS: To come back to your own challenge as a designer, how can you design products that are worth being treasured for a whole lifetime?

HJ: By focusing attention on the physical, tactile qualities of products. Together with all the evil excesses of the limited editions, they have brought the insight that beautiful materials and attentive production methods do add quality to products. They have also brought the insight that we should not just let local traditions disappear. In a globalized world, it is important to know where and how things are made. That does not have to be hidden in craftsmanship or traditional techniques, but can also be coupled with careful industrial production. That is something for which I have developed an increasing love over the last few years. With the li-

imited editions, the fact that products were not produced in large numbers and that they were so outrageously expensive was rationalized because of the production. But as a designer, you can of course accept the challenge to industrially manufacture larger numbers with greater care, by coupling industrial production with hand finishing, for example, by bringing individuality and character into the industrial process. What the world wants are clear signs of care and scrupulousness.

LS: You could summarize that with the word attention. Apparently, there is a new desire for visible signs of attentiveness. Is that a feminine quality? Could we say that your work is characteristic of a female designer?

HJ: That is of no interest to me at all! I have no interest in labeling my work with terms like that. It just pushes it away with a false explanation for any meaning that it really possesses. People want to feel that they can cherish the things that they have around them. You have to give them a good reason for doing that. The attention that you devote to making something is one of those good reasons. Is that feminine? Well, yes, I happen to have breasts, but that is the only thing that I can say about it for certain.

(the conversation continues ...)

Louise Schouwenberg, Amsterdam, January 2009