



Claudy Jongstra, **Woven Skin**,
Stone Barns Center For Food and Agriculture USA,
(2.2 x 48 x 10 m), 2018 Foto © Jeroen Musch

INTERVIEW WITH CLAUDY JONGSTRA

Wool is a natural skin

Claudy Jongstra, born in the Netherlands in 1963, is a textile artist whose works are exhibited all over the world. She studied at Utrecht College of Art and, since 1994, has worked with wool felt, humanity's oldest textile. She sees felt as offering a way to connect art directly to the cycle of nature. With her large-scale works of art and architectural installations, Claudy Jongstra follows a holistic approach from the moorland sheep that supply the wool via the plant dyes that are produced on a biodynamic farm in the north of the Netherlands.

Jongstra views the earth, minerals, plants, animals and human beings as existing in a creative interrelationship. Especially in our present day, great responsibility and care are needed to understand and cultivate this.

Claudy Jongstra is coming to the Goetheanum at the invitation of the Section for Agriculture on the occasion of the Agricultural Conference entitled «Finding the spirit in agriculture». Jean-Michel Florin and Ueli Hurter met her in summer 2019 at the annual general meeting of Demeter International in Holland. She was exhibiting her work there and described how the biodynamic materials give the dyed wool a warm inner shine. The Visual Arts Section established contact with Claudy Jongstra and her team on a professional level and is curating the exhibition at the Goetheanum. Christiane Haid and Barbara Schnetzler visited Claudy Jongstra at her artist's farm in Holland and brought back the following interview.

CHRISTIANE HAID I believe you use pure original materials in your works of art. How did this come about?

CLAUDY JONGSTRA In the Netherlands in the 1990s there was little sense for textiles and traditional crafts, so I went to Great Britain. I first studied modern design and worked in this area for a while until I found it increasingly meaningless and started to get interested in natural materials like wool.

HAID How did you as an artist come to raise sheep?

JONGSTRA When I started to work with wool, I found it odd to be buying wool from an anonymous supplier. Something about that seemed wrong. So I very soon began getting wool from local breeds of sheep. This makes an immediate relationship to the place where you live and where you have your roots.

Soon we started to keep our own sheep – Drenthe Heath sheep. We now have a flock of 250 sheep and a shepherd who carries out natural landscape management with them. This has led to a kind of nature reserve – a wonderful harmonious biotope. Obviously the wool from these sheep has a special quality which influences the processing and then the work of art. But that is not all. From the start I had a vision of working ethically and not buying materials from just anywhere.

In general it is possible to observe a growing awareness of the whole. People want to take responsibility.

BARBARA SCHNETZLER What is it that's so special about the substance of wool? It gives you warmth, both physically and emotionally. What is it about this substance that inspires you?

JONGSTRA The genius of wool, its whole spectrum. It keeps you warm in winter and cool in summer. It has the ability to be very flexible. When you take a woollen jersey out of your suitcase it resumes its shape immediately. The fibres always spring back again, the wool is antibacterial, self-cleaning. These are things that inspire me.

SCHNETZLER Wool has totally lost its commercial value nowadays, synthetics have taken away its value – you don't get much for a kilo of wool any more.

JONGSTRA Exactly! Wool is often viewed as a waste material. By recycling the wool in our projects, we are trying to show people the value of this material.

This material is lacking right from childhood. Not every child can go to a Steiner school where children get to handle wool and learn things like weaving and spinning.

So we run a lot of educational programmes for children. This is especially important in the Netherlands. 80 per cent of young people attend university, so there is almost no one who can make something with their hands. But these are exactly the kind of people we need. So we invite vocational school classes to visit: 16- and 17-year old fashion designers, game designers and florists. They learn to connect to seeds, plants, the harvest: it gives them a different awareness of these things. Only this can give rise to a new way of thinking about our world and to the start of a transformation. The change can only come about by doing: it is no use just talking about it.

HAID How did you come across biodynamic agriculture?

JONGSTRA Through our own farm. It isn't a big farm, just a little one where we mainly grow dye plants. However, this is not enough for our artworks, so we have broadened our colour range and now work in cooperation with biodynamic farmers. For example, we get the dyes extracted from sunflowers and marigolds from the farms we work with.

HAID Do you also work biodynamically on your farm?

JONGSTRA Yes, we do. We have now become something of a role model here. There are many conventional and traditional farmers who are interested in our way of working. Due to the dominance of monocultures in the Netherlands, interest is growing in biological diversity. There is an increasing awareness that monocultures damage nature and our entire lives. Through farming biodynamically we awaken an awareness of a new way of working with nature.



Impressions from Jongstra's studio. Photos: Ch. Haid, B. Schnetzler.

HAID Your works of art often have a close relationship to the buildings where they are exhibited. How did this cooperation with architects come about?

JONGSTRA The architects have gradually discovered me, or rather my art. My work with wool provides a contrast to today's mostly cool and at times cold architecture. Wool can enliven this in the broadest sense, and also individualise the architecture to a certain extent. Many of today's modern buildings cannot be distinguished from each other, they are all the same. Mass production produces identical buildings, just think of Ikea, Obi (a DIY store) and other global home furnishing chains. Everything looks the same, everything feels the same, and finally everything becomes the same. Alienation sets in and people can no longer feel themselves as part of a larger whole. Rooms in particular can have a strong influence on alienating people from themselves. Works like mine help to make the rooms more human – you might say that a kind of humanising of the space takes place.

But working with the architects was preceded by a long process. When I started it was difficult to find commissions because I was working with an unusual material. Then the wool became interesting for practical reasons – with the focus on acoustics. Now, after having worked with this medium for a long time I see a shift from the practical functions to the creation of spaces which are used for healing, spaces in which people need to feel comfortable. This finally led to working with hospitals.



Impressions from
Jongstra's studio.
Photos: Ch. Haid,
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In general it is possible to observe a growing awareness of the whole. People want to take responsibility. In the Netherlands we are seeing the emergence of more and more small independent communities, which produce a lot of things themselves. Hand-made things are regaining value.

A very successful fashion designer from Belgium, Veronique Branquinho, recently gave up her fashion label because she no longer wished to be part of the fashion industry. She now makes designs for home dressmaking and sells them as sewing kits. A skirt that you have made yourself on the sewing machine is something you'll keep for a long time because of all the effort that went into it. You don't simply throw it out.

SCHNETZLER What areas are you currently working in?

JONGSTRA In January we set up a new company which covers the social aspect, education and also agriculture – it's called Extended Ground. All the projects have a social dimension. In terms of agriculture we are also involved in landscape gardening and we design dykes. In the care setting we are working with scientists who, through neuroscience studies, are able to demonstrate that contact with wool, for example in creative therapy, has effects on the brain. It produces a demonstrable change in serotonin levels. As many people are far removed from contact with natural materials or completely doubt their healing ability, scientific studies can be very convincing.

Our social programmes are mainly intended for victims of human trafficking. Many of the victims come from Africa and therefore have a very strong inherent connection to natural materials. This enables a dialogue at a different level because it is easy to communicate via the material, the colour, and this creates a connection. The victims of human trafficking in particular have absolutely no connection to Dutch society. No one is interested in them and they are not part of anything. How can they ever find their place here? By working with them on things that they know from their past, something new can come about. We had a young man from Eritrea who, it soon became apparent, was a weaver. He found a connection immediately and now works with a carpenter. His old work has led to a new perspective, in a manner of speaking. You could also say that we hold a conversation with these people via our work.

A totally different area consists in developing a perfume. You need flowers and a binding agent, which can be oil from sunflowers or coconuts. We use sunflowers and beeswax. This is also an idea to create stimulus through diversity. Using fields of potatoes or maize, agricultural economists carry out research for us on the returns for agriculture. Making perfume is expensive, so what plants lead to what profit?

For farmers in the transition phase, this research has now shown that it is a new revenue model, with growing being done locally. The idea is to set up a manufacturing industry here in the north, but every farmer, e.g. in Switzerland, can acquire a licence and grow the necessary plants in their country. We have been developing this with the team for around two years now. Next year we will start on the manufacturing infrastructure, because there are a lot of farmers who are interested.

HAID What are the inner motives for your work?

JONGSTRA Climate change and human development. I want to do justice to people and to nature.

HAID You talk about «we»: how big is the team you work with?

JONGSTRA We are about 20 to 25 in total. We are an international team and also try to provide space for young people. Right now we have a young French girl working with us who is very good at embroidery. Where can you find a job producing embroidery nowadays? In haute couture, but that's about it. I believe that encouraging people like this has potential for the future.

We are also very interested in saving and demonstrating lost handicrafts e.g. straw embroidery, embroidery using yarn from maize and rye. This had a great tradition in Switzerland. In times past people were resourceful, using the waste that was produced from baking bread for embroidery. The straw as a golden thread. But there are now only five people in the world who can do this.

SCHNETZLER You also work with dyes, particularly indigo. What sort of research are you doing in this area?

JONGSTRA Over the past two years we have carried out research along with scientists on the most difficult natural dye, natural black. This requires us to go far back in history to find out how the dyes were made. The recipes use things like wood ash and sourdough. People used to borrow and share everything. At the beginning we had no plans for a bakery. But now the recipes make it clear how the people lived together. So now we have set up a bakery on our farm.

Here, this is a very interesting item, it is a root from the madder plant. Making dye from this takes five years. Its famous red colour. It is very special for the Netherlands: Rembrandt used it a lot. We have one piece which is now eleven years old. It is absolutely fascinating to do these analyses with the scientists to get an understanding of the recipes. It is a very expensive aspect, because many processes are involved from many dyes. But in the end you get an unbelievably warm black.

HAID How do you choose your subjects? Where do you get your inspiration?

JONGSTRA The subjects are usually connected to the type of commission, so it might be the coast, the sea, a heath landscape. On the other hand the subjects can be more abstract, taken from current events. We are currently working on a piece of art for a museum – it is political in nature. It involves a landscape, a rectangular landscape. It is an expression of the economic profit which controls the land. This is complemented by a piece of embroidery in a very organic pattern, a pattern from a card from the 17th century. When the people in the 17th century partitioned the land, they did so with aesthetic aims, not economic ones.

HAID So your work arises from the context, it is itself a kind of weaving process?

JONGSTRA Yes. Right now we are working on a project for a bank in Germany – Bocholt. The bank's vision is that it wants to be a kind of community hall, a bank with open doors and a café. Young and old are welcome; start-up companies work there and share knowledge. This bank's cross-cutting idea is itself a kind of fabric. So you could say that the concept for the artwork is the created, woven peace.

HAID What philosophy underlies your works?

JONGSTRA To do justice to people and to the land. So, it is more about human ability. We are not a factory, we are not Louis Vuitton or Dolce Gabbana, but our farm can be a model for others to understand: I can change my life. It is real and not impossible.

HAID Can you say something about the artwork «Woven Skin», which you are going to exhibit at the Goetheanum?

JONGSTRA Yes. It is a very political work. It is a work which is literally woven skin. It looks like skin but is wool. It has this typical range of colours and it is maybe a little shocking. It is not a case of aesthetics, because creating something aesthetic is not difficult. It is a work of art that calls us to do something, to become capable of acting. For this reason Woven Skin should be erected as a circle or a spiral so that people can actually go inside it.

Woven Skin was part of the climate week in New York last summer but was also shown in Palermo at the Manifesta 12. The Italians had to problem with it as they have a strong relationship to death. They understand the work with their hearts.

HAID Initially, seeing it for the first time from a distance, you can have the feeling that it is raw flesh. I find it very interesting that you use the term skin. The skin divides the inner world from the outer one, I believe it is also about vulnerability.

JONGSTRA What is skin? It protects us but it is very sensitive.

SCHNETZLER And it is very similar to wool.

JONGSTRA Yes, wool is a natural skin.

HAID I think it is important for the people at the exhibition site to understand what your idea is, so that when they visit it they are not shocked. Although it is maybe not at all bad to be a little bit shocked.

JONGSTRA Yes, they are meant to be! Because that also belongs to the purpose of art, it is a manifesto. External beauty does not change the world. We have to wake up! •



Events

Friday, 7 February: **Artist's talk with Claudy Jongstra** beside the Woven Skin sculpture, 15–16 hrs

Saturday, 8 February, **Contribution by Claudy Jongstra** at the Agricultural Conference, 8.30 hrs

The large-scale installation **Woven Skin** can be seen in the Goetheanum park from 5 to 8 February. A further three-part work by Claudy Jongstra «landscape in pointillism» Triptych (110 x 80) from 2019 will be on display in the foyer of the Goetheanum until the end of May 2020.

Information www.claudyjongstra.com, Instagram: [claudyjongstra](https://www.instagram.com/claudyjongstra)