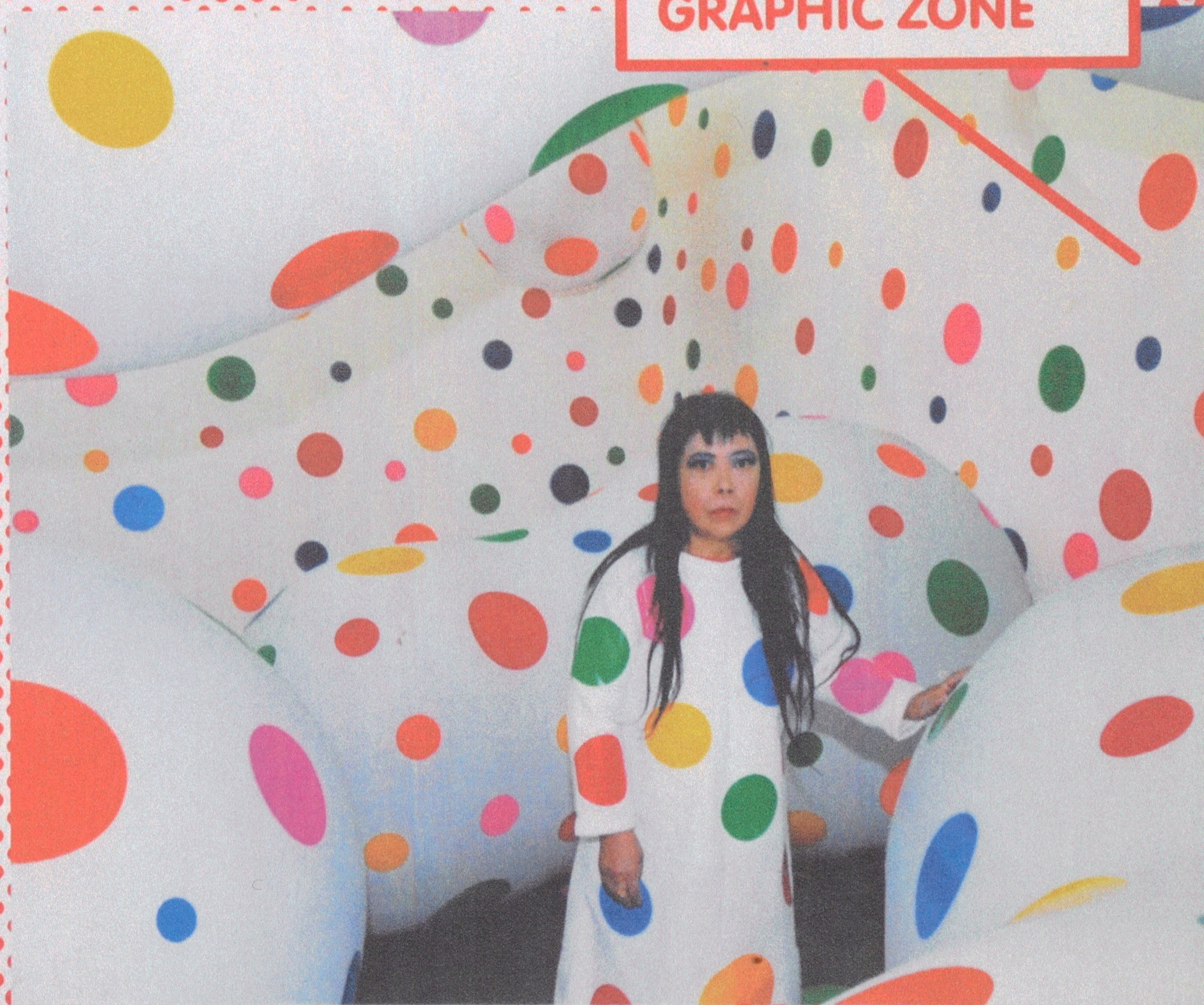


FRAME

THE GREAT INDOORS > SEP/OCT 2005

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CURATOR AND DROOG DESIGN DIRECTOR RENNY RAMAKERS ON NEW DUTCH DESIGNERS

'The New Dutch Designers exhibition spotlights what's happening in the Netherlands. In terms of age, it focuses on a new generation, but that doesn't mean that they work in a different way than their predecessors did. One important similarity linking these four to their predecessors, for instance, is work that often zeros in on themes such as time and transience. But there are differences as well. These four have more of a tendency to decorate. A good example is Joris Laarman's radiator Heatwave. Then again, members of the older generation have also been into decoration to an increasing degree in recent years. This trend may have more to do with the spirit of the times than with a specific generation. Another thing that typifies the younger generation of designers is how level-headed and practical they are. Even though they're all conceptual thinkers, they don't consider the concept to be the only vital facet of their designs. If, on occasion, one of their designs remains a prototype or becomes a museum piece, fine – but this doesn't seem to be the primary objective. Compared with earlier generations, on this subject they've made themselves clearer. They've seen that in the case of their forerunners, too many good things never made it anywhere. Another major difference is that these people are getting a lot of media attention at a young age, long before they've built up a substantial oeuvre. Critics have praised Joris Laarman to the skies, yet he still has to prove himself over the course of time. The previous generation – designers like Marcel Wanders and Hella Jongerius – worked freely, on their own, for a much longer time before gradually drawing media attention and having clients knock at the door. Working for clients doesn't imply the end of freedom, however. It's just another kind of freedom. A designer can develop an initial idea in an entirely different way than the client may have had in mind. Chris Kabel, for example, is good at working on commission. Such projects lend direction to his work. Kabel seems to like looking for solutions, whereas Joris Laarman is so full of ideas that he may be more inclined to first decide whether or not a specific project fits in with his ideas. Simon Heijdens' work, on the other hand, is of an entirely different nature. It has the same poetic value that characterizes the work of Jurgen Bey. In that respect, the two generations correspond. In general, you can say that the younger designers are level-headed and practical and that they don't feel like artists, although artistic freedom is something they thoroughly enjoy.'

'THIS GENERATION
IS LEVEL-HEADED
AND PRACTICAL.'
RENNY RAMAKERS

JUST AS WE'RE GETTING USED TO HELLA, MARCEL, RICHARD AND JURGEN, DROOG DISCOVERS ANOTHER FOUR DUTCH TALENTS READY TO SHAKE UP THE DESIGN WORLD. COUP, NEW GENERATION, NEW DAWN? FRAME SPOKE TO WIEKI SOMERS, CHRIS KABEL, JORIS LAARMAN AND SIMON HEIJDENS.

TEXT BY EVA SCHAAP

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANIËL NICOLAS

NEW DUTCH ON THE BLOCK

FRAME: Having spotted what appears to be a new generation in the making, Droog Design organized New Dutch Designers, an exhibition based on your work. Do you see yourselves as a new generation of designers?

WIEKI SOMERS: It wasn't easy being introduced as *the* new generation. Suggesting that we belong together and that we're a new generation is exactly what we *didn't* want to do. Imagine people's expectations. Let's focus on what we make, what we do, how we work – that's the point, and not some statement explaining why we're the new generation.

SIMON HEIJDENS: I think it's impossible – counting yourself part of a new generation. A new generation is something you see in retrospect. Only then do you discover connections and similarities. It's not something you can make happen by staging an exhibition. And it isn't our job to do that. When Droog came up with the 'new generation' concept, we immediately said that we have no idea how our work is interrelated. For that reason, throughout the exhibition the basic question for us was whether or not we *are* this new generation and what does it mean. You can really do that only by displaying the work. If the answer can't be found in the work itself, maybe it's discernible in the sources of inspiration. That thought led to the idea of showing not just the work, but also the material that influenced it – of showing how we work, where our interests lie, what we're doing. We wanted to find out whether there are aspects that we share. SOMERS: Droog sees us as a new generation because they think all four of us use quite a bit of decoration – not decoration per se, but decoration with an underlying meaning.

CHRIS KABEL: It's also telling, of course, that all of us have worked for Droog. HEIJDENS: And part of the generation idea is based on the fact that we graduated, one year after the other, from the Design Academy Eindhoven. We were part of the first classes representing the 'Eindhoven School', which is probably what it will be called someday.

KABEL: And we all work independently. That's part of it, too. Not many people do that immediately after graduating.

SOMERS: In my opinion, it's more because we all approach our work somewhat experimentally, with an investigative eye.

FRAME: Unlike your predecessors – Marcel Wanders, Hella Jongerius and Jurgen Bey, to name a few – you four

had barely left school before clients came calling and your names appeared in the press. What about those clients? Why do they want you and not someone else? And how do you feel about the limitations that come with commissioned work, as opposed to the freedom that goes with personal projects? How have clients and publicity influenced your private evolution?

KABEL: Dutch designers have an ideal situation. Thanks to subsidies, they're never completely without funds, which give them the space and a fair amount of time to work on their own projects and to experiment.

SOMERS: Young designers in other countries usually gain experience by working for a number of design agencies before setting up their own businesses. In our case, no sooner had we left the academy than we were asked to work on commercial projects, which allowed us to go to work for ourselves. JORIS LAARMAN: Immediate independence is *the hard way*. You're thrown off the deep end and left to figure things out for yourself. A whole lot goes wrong at the beginning. But you've got to be crazy not to take the first commission that comes along after graduation. I think that designers working for an agency see money as a major stabilizing factor. As for us, it's not easy to make ends meet when you're running a young, independent firm.

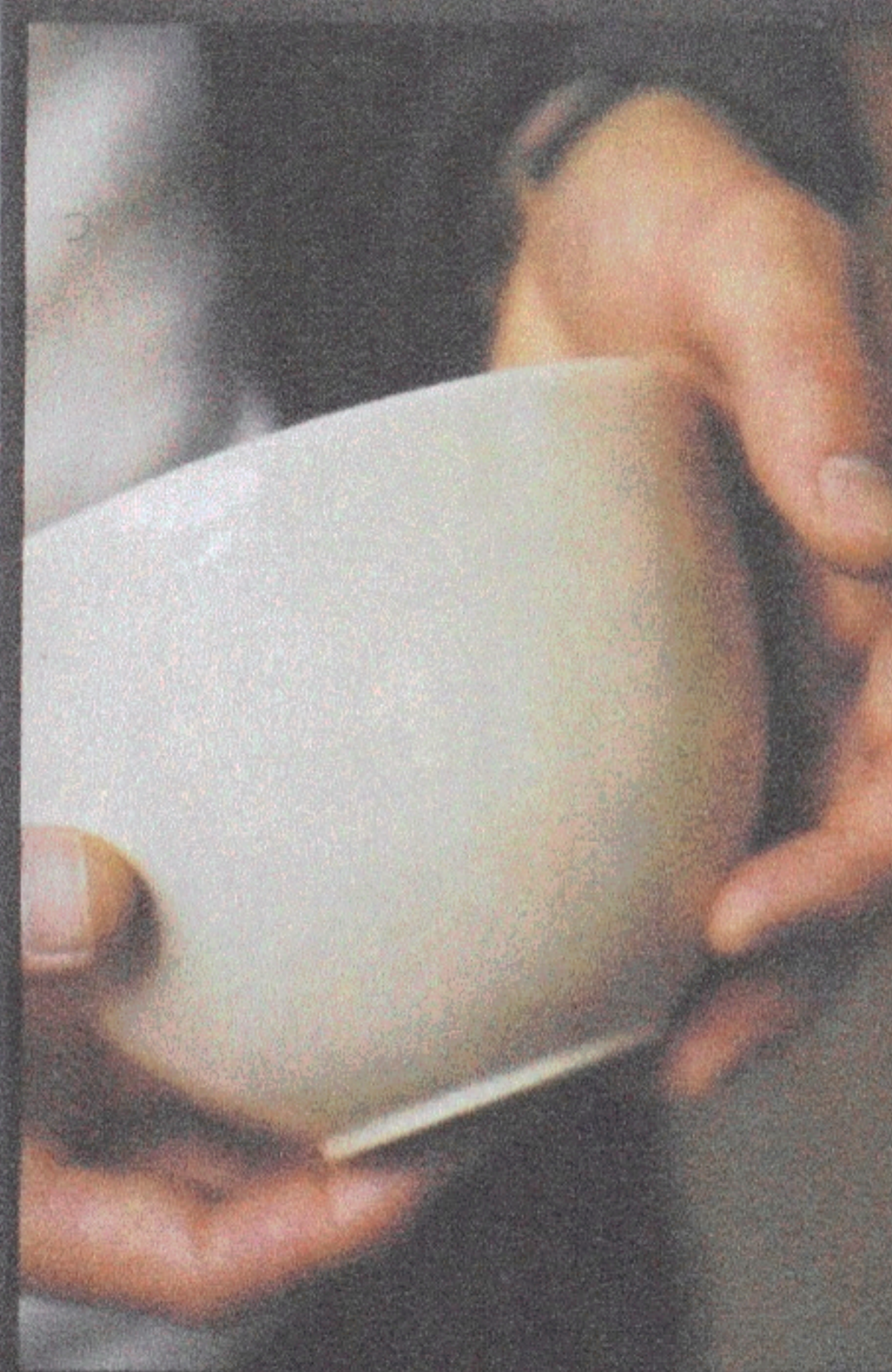
HEIJDENS: That's something you notice after graduation. There are plenty of people with talent to spare who don't have what it takes when it comes to business and organizational know-how – or who lack perseverance.

SOMERS: In my case, I discovered during my work placement that it's really hard to design something based on someone else's ideas.

FRAME: Why do clients pick you, specifically?

SOMERS: I recently got a commission from Montis. They want their collection viewed from a fresh perspective. So I'm trying to design something that will add a new dimension to the existing product line. You look at the client's history and vision – Montis, in this case – and put your stamp on it. It can't be just another chair. It's got to have that little something extra. The freedom involved is essential. A company should pick me because I make what I make. And I'd hope that previously designed products would have convinced the client that I can be given a certain amount of freedom.

'ADDING YOUR STORY OR EXPERTISE TO A PRODUCT IS ULTIMATELY WHAT MAKES A PROJECT WORTHWHILE AND VALUABLE.'
SIMON HEIJDENS



Simon Heijdens (1978)

Design Academy Eindhoven 1997-2002
Hochschule der Künste Berlin 1999-2000
Clients include: Droog Design, Prada, OMA,
Jurgen Bey and Concrete Architectural Associates.

Broken White: After the ceramic body of this white cup has been fired, the pattern of fine cracks initially applied to the inner surface becomes even more visible on the exterior. Cracks, considered to be an error, are decorative elements of these bowls.

Opposite: Wall Tree (2004) is a projection of a mock tree, including branches that sway and leaves that flutter to the ground. Heijdens made the light installation for the city of Eindhoven.

