

CLAUDY JONGSTRA
TANGIBLE TRANSFORMATION II, 2023
20.01—17.02.2024

I.

This is how it once began. A plow crosses the autumn landscape and tills the soil. Kernels of grain are sown in open furrows. Farmers cover them with earth, and that's when the magic begins. The winter's cold allows these seeds to germinate, and two seasons later sun-drenched crops sway in the summer breeze. The labor of the fall harvest involves many hands and ends with celebration. With a bit of luck the stores of grain will be so well filled that one or more crusty loaves of bread can be baked every day at the crack of dawn. The miller's bran is used in color washes that stain wool. With the straw, houses can be insulated and cattle helped through the cold winter months. And then, when the next autumn arrives, what's left of the grain will be strewn in freshly plowed fields again. For more than ten thousand years, grain has been cultivated in this manner, according to an age-old process once invented in Persia and now functioning at the very heart of the global food chain. Perhaps the archetypal image of fields of grain is about as old as human memory.

When I visit Claudy Jongstra at her studio in Spannum on a windy day in October, she describes this cycle with impassioned words, moved by the farmer's ritual of plowing open and then closing the earth. She points to the fields of grain in a monumental artwork hanging from a tall wooden framework behind her in the studio. Measuring over eight meters in width and four meters height, the tapestry has just been finished. And it is majestic. The swaying fields have been given the color of sunflowers grown this summer by a friend, a farmer in Navarra. Strands of glossy silk loosely arranged in the wool evoke, with their ripply textures, the image of seed heads, plumes and stalks. The yellow is warm, bright and searing. It is the color of potency, of intense sunlight.

In an expanse of sky above the grain, clouds whirl about. This area was combed and arranged, having been pulled from sheep's wool and silk that was colored with woad from De Beersche Hoeve; the diverse shades, ranging from white to a deeply dark blue, came about due to immersion in various dye baths. In this dynamic brew of blue, which brings together every part of the landscape, the golden yellow grain has its counterweight. "The sky makes an expansive movement," says Claudy, "and thereby offers protection." I look past her silhouette, through the high window to the outdoors, and see vast skies stretching across the immeasurable Friesian landscape, awash with Dutch light.

Then there are brownish and reddish hues in the tapestry. The impenetrable dark brown in the foreground, the deep color of earth, is no more nor less than pure wool from the Zwartbles, a Drenthe Heath Sheep. The light brown alongside that, just as monochromatic, comes from the alpaca. The nuanced beige in the quadrant on the lower right was dyed with the raw shells of walnuts. And take the play of color from coreopsis, also known as tickweed. From a corner of the studio Claudy brings out a bin of the dried, strongly scented flowers. In a dye bath they produce pink, red and rust-like colors that enliven the composition with their expressive character. But from a close perspective they also cause visual sensations due to their phenomenal nuances of color.

By way of successive dye baths in which the ochre of sunflowers is combined with the blue of woad, unpredictable shades of green arise. With these contrasts of green Claudy captured the richness of nature in the quadrant at the lower left; the verdant hues evoke the image of small

mosses, lichens and other organisms that often escape our notice, growing in the shade, while they can actually make for intimate, enchanted scenes beneath the leaves that filter sunlight. When I look outside, I see vast areas of green turf extending to the horizon. In Friesland the lush meadows have given way to monoculture farming. But here, indoors, in this monumental image, the wealth of biodiversity is celebrated to the full. It's no coincidence that this tapestry has been titled 'Tangible Transformation'. This is a harvest festival, a manifesto and utopia all in one.

II.

Nelson A. Rockefeller (1908–1979) was not only a famous entrepreneur and politician, but also an avid art collector. As the grandson of oil magnate John D. Rockefeller, he grew up with visual art; in 1932 his mother Abigail was among the founders of New York's Museum of Modern Art. Around that time Nelson himself also began to collect art. It started with Cubist work by Fernand Léger, Pablo Picasso and Alexander Archipenko, but soon his passion for collecting extended to Precolumbian objects as well as sculptures from Asia, Africa and Oceania. A special project was the series of tapestries based on works by Picasso, which he started having produced in 1955, through inspiration from figures such as the Dutch art advisor Nelly van Doesburg, who had developed an excellent network in the United States. When Claudy saw these tapestries at Kykuit, the Rockefeller family estate along a bend in the Hudson River in New York, she was astounded by their craftsmanship and the intensity of color in them.

But something else happened as well. Rockefeller initiated the Picasso series with what might be considered the artist's most famous work: 'Guernica', painted in 1937 as an indictment of the German Luftwaffe's bombardment of the Spanish city Guernica. The paint was hardly dry when the monumental work was already sent on a meaningful journey to European cities such as Paris, Oslo and London, before it was shipped across the ocean in 1939 to continue its tour in American museums. Due to its visual expression of violence and injustice, the politically activist painting acquired an iconic status during the World War II period. But the downside of all that travel was that its condition had deteriorated to such an extent that in 1958 the painting had to be kept (temporarily) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Rockefeller immediately made his woven copy of 'Guernica' available. In this way the tapestry could serve as a substitute and allow the tour to continue. Evidently, Claudy thus realized, wall hangings can also travel and convey epic narratives.

The plan to have a full-scale reproduction of 'Guernica' carried out, in wool, had been conceived by Nelson Rockefeller three years earlier, in 1955. The commission was granted to the French weaver Jacqueline de la Baume, for whom Nelly van Doesburg acted as a liaison. Rockefeller was so impressed with the woven version that he ordered sixteen additional monumental, woven reproductions of works by Picasso from her studio. Today the tapestries are owned by the National Trust, and they continue to be kept at Kykuit – with the exception of the Guernica tapestry, which has been on permanent display at the United Nations headquarters in New York since 1984. When Colin Powell stood at this spot in 2003, having to justify the invasion of Iraq to the international community, this wool Guernica was covered; the work's moral plea stood in direct contradiction to the American war strategy. That resulted in a storm of international protest. But when, in 2021, the tapestry returned after conservation, secretary-general of the United Nations António Guterres said: "The Guernica tapestry speaks to the world about the urgent need to advance international peace and security. We are honored to serve as careful stewards of this one-of-a-kind iconic work – as we draw inspiration from its message." For Claudy the inspiration was clear. She began a series of monumental installations in which imaginative power and social commitment fuse seamlessly, with the intention of letting them travel throughout the world. This would allow the artworks to leave "a sediment of change" everywhere.

III.

The series began with the provocative 'Woven Skin', developed as an arena for social debate: an installation involving sixty felted pieces of red, pink and white wool, draped over thin racks of black metal. Alternated with the white of pure wool, the red of the madder root used to treat the wool evokes the image of bleeding skin. Arranged as a circle in the space, this impressive installation refers to the 'unmasking' of the truth about the Friesian landscape. But actual conversations and debates can also take place, about the pain of seeing landscape die, or the loss of biodiversity. From Groningen to Palermo, where 'Woven Skin' was widely acclaimed during Manifesta, it triggered new local connections between landscapes and communities.

The second work became 'Guernica de la Ecologia': an ominous expression of grief and loss, inspired by Picasso's famous example and executed in a similarly subdued palette of white, black and grey. Claudy composed a menacing landscape of decayed and wilted fields of flowers that straightforwardly puts focus on our disturbed relationship with nature. Since 2022 it has been travelling continually to art institutions and centers of debate in the Netherlands and abroad. Finally, the previously described, colorful 'Tangible Transformation' is, by contrast, an ode to the vitality of nature, as a beacon of hope. Together the three monumental installations form a trilogy: from the arena, via the indictment, to the dream of a future.

That development from darkness to light can also be seen in other works by Claudy from recent years. In 2019, for example, she produced the installation NINE at Museum De Lakenhal: a staggering woven work measuring over a hundred square meters, which covered the entire floor of the main exhibition space in a penetrating palette of indigo, black and purple. The inspiration for this work in nocturnal hues came from the Kogi tribe in the Sierra Nevada (Colombia), where children grow up partly in darkness so that their sensory perception is stimulated. The Burgundian black used to color the wool and silk was derived from 15th-century recipes that Claudy's team had figured out and tested with scientists. For months residues from bakers, beer brewers and metalworkers were kept in wooden casks and mixed with walnut, madder, woad, cochineal, oak bark and burned wood. This classic example of alchemy yielded an unprecedented intensity: waste products gave rise to an organic black that absorbs all colors – just as the night sky does. Over the past ten years, large-scale works have come more naturally to Claudy. For the new location of the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, she had already composed a series of fifteen works, the largest measuring about fifteen by six meters. And three years later, likewise in Pennsylvania, a series of large tapestries titled 'Fields of Transformation' was made for the Penn Libraries. Both series consist of sublimated landscapes – elongated color fields that evoke a sense of belonging due to their tactile quality. As a result they come across as a hybrid mix of abstraction and figuration: those who wish can interpret them as landscape, whether seeing from a close proximity or from a distance. The choice of such visual narratives that suggest landscape has not only been prompted by her love of nature; it is also consistent with the European tradition of a view of nature in which imaginary landscapes are created on a full scale, so that the observer can become immersed them. In the 17th and 18th centuries, for example, 'verdure' tapestries were popular: woven tapestries of room height that portrayed lush landscapes in exuberant shades of green, interspersed with all sorts of leaves, birds and insects. How wonderful it must have been to live in such a space, surrounded by natural greenery.

IV.

Not surprisingly, Claudy likes those verdure tapestries. She understands the language of art history, from the 16th-century Flemish primitives and the geometrically woven color patterns of Anni Albers (1899–1994) to the colorfully surreal dynamics of a young painter such as Christina Quarles (1985). With her idiosyncratic work she is firmly situated between the giants of art history and international contemporary art. The activist attitude toward life that has so clearly emerged in her work in recent years does not undermine this in the least. On the contrary, it allows her



to have an extraordinary command. Her artworks portray the path she explores, from doom and darkness to the wish and the will to rouse a love of life in herself and others. In this process of healing, frustration and pain are eased and put right for a moment.

But the ultimate always remains possible. As I write this, images of the wall hanging that she has created for EENWERK arrive in my mailbox. Its format is geared precisely to the size and scale of the gallery: a space flanked by windows, causing every day to begin at the left and end at the right. Claudy Jongstra paints with loose fibers, and the cast-in daylight which is in abundance here from morning to evening will continually give the work a different look. This time she opted for the primary colors of art: yellow, blue and red. The colors stem from the biodynamic flowers and plants that she grew this past summer in the greenhouse on EENWERK's top floor. During this project, titled 'Cycles of Growth', safflower, coreopsis, woad, St. John's wort and goldenrod thrived in this sunlit space and provided the basis for this new work's palette. In the densely packed relief of wool and silk, we recognize the wild fields of grain from 'Tangible Transformation', but now in contrast with a fiery red that came about through a blend of madder and coreopsis. I think of poppies and envisage warm summer days, blue skies and fields blowing in the wind, as in a carefree pastorale. But it isn't that. Taking a better look, I now see something entirely different. It is an exercise. An exercise in exuberance, perhaps against all odds.

Meta Knol

translation: Beth O'Brien

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in: *Journal of the History of Collections Advance Access*, October 4, 2014

Boltin, Lee, 'The Nelson A. Rockefeller Collection: Masterpieces of Modern Art',
New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1981

Kabir Jhala, 'Tapestry replica of Picasso's anti-war masterpiece Guernica
removed from United Nations headquarters after 35 years',
in: *The Art Newspaper*, 25 February 2021

CLAUDY JONGSTRA SHORT BIO

Artist and eco-activist Claudy Jongstra is known worldwide for her monumental textile artworks and architectural installations, with organic surfaces and vibrant colours that reflect Jongstra's masterful innovations in the ancient techniques of wool felting and plant-based dyeing. Jongstra's early wool works inspired successful collaborations with John Galliano, Hermès, and Christian Lacroix, and appeared in the first Star Wars movie as the iconic long coats of the Jedi warriors. Later, Claudy Jongstra's oeuvre, often installed in large public spaces in collaboration with internationally renowned architects like Gensler DC and Tod Williams and Billie Tsien Architects (TWBA). Her monumental works are also represented within many international museums and institutions as well as private and corporate collections, like MoMA, New York and San Francisco, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, Triodos Bank Art Collection, NL, Barnes Foundation and Wallace Foundation, US.

In 2001, Jongstra established her studio in Friesland, a rural northern province of The Netherlands, where she also developed a biodynamic farm at De Kreake in Húns with partner Claudia Busson, cultivating dyers plants and collecting generic seed for future propagation. Jongstra sources wool, her primary artistic medium, from a local flock of rare, indigenous Drenthe Heath sheep (the oldest breed in Northern Europe). The radical soil-to-soil philosophy, no-waste approach and inclusive way of working culminates in Claudy Jongstra's charismatic artworks. She collaborates with local farms, schools, and social programs, preserving crafts, centuries-old recipes and tacit knowledge, the artist actively reimagines and revitalizes the local landscape from monocultural production toward a more diverse, inclusive, and ecologically-just model.

In 2022 she extended her studio with LOADS, from which she encourages agricultural projects such as biodynamic cultivation of dye plants and educational projects, such as the very first MBO Master in Sustainability in the Netherlands and collaborations with biodynamic, Demeter certified farmers from De Beersche Hoeve and Entheos in rural Spain and Sekem in the Egypte desert. From LOADS she will launch LOADS Collection, a new, truly revolutionary system that values craftsmanship and supports the cultivation of high quality ecological materials with revitalizing impacts on the very landscape that produces them.

1963	Born in Roermond, The Netherlands
1982–1989	Fashion Design, Utrecht College of Art, Utrecht
1995–2001	First label "nót tom, dick & harry", Amsterdam
2001	Founded Studio Claudy Jongstra, Spannum
2018	Partnership in art historical research program with Artechne, Rijksmuseum, Utrecht University, Antwerp University, and University of Amsterdam
2021	Established WEVED
2021	Guernica de la Ecología, International Tour
2022	Founded LOADS, Spannum
2022	Special Prize of the Interior design Hall of Fame, NY
2023	First solo exhibition in Madrid, Spain
2023	Nominated for Dutch Design Awards- Best Commission, DDF
2023	Launch LOADS Collection, the first Demeter certified textile collection in the world

Claudy Jongstra lives and works in Spannum and Húns, The Netherlands

Represented by Galerie Fontana, Amsterdam
Gallería Aina Nowack in Madrid/Menorca and The Future Perfect, USA