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CG: You have been working together as Kueng Caputo for 12 years. How did you meet and end up working together?

LC: Sarah was the first woman I met who was interested in design. We were both studying industrial design at the Zurich University of the Arts and we worked together on “Hosting a Guest.” It was one of the last projects before graduating. The idea was: how can you go on vacation in your own city? So we opened a temporary cardboard hotel at the freight yard in Zurich. We called it 72 Stunden because it lasted 72 hours. We built two large spaces containing six suites that could be booked for between 15 minutes and a whole night. It was completely sold out.

SK: While we were still studying, we had the opportunity to show the project at the Salone Satellite, a sector for young designers which is part of the Salone del Mobile in Milan. And then at a group exhibition in South Korea. That’s when it took off, all of a sudden we became a “brand”: Kueng Caputo with an email address and a website. It happened more or less by chance.

CG: So you decided to collaborate again for your graduate project?

LC: After the cardboard hotel, we decided that we wanted to do the practical diploma project together as well. We based it on the concept of a copy, a paradoxical notion in the world of design. You’re always trying to make something new and you don’t want anyone to copy you, and yet people keep talking about being inspired by others. This rhetoric already starts in school. We wanted to challenge that, to emphasize the fact that we are influenced by what’s around us and that as long as you specify your source, a copy can also be an homage. It’s like quoting something in a thesis. We decided to copy the diploma projects of our classmates, specifically, to create objects borrowed from their projects. At the graduation show, our “copies” were on display in between the originals.

SK: It worked really well. People would see one of our strange things and think, hey, that other object over there looks a lot like this one. You could tell pretty quickly that it was about a dialogue between the items. As a result, people took a closer look at the originals because our copies drew attention to certain details. In the end, practically all our classmates wanted to be copied. When you study someone else’s work so carefully, it’s inevitably more of an homage than a copy.

LC: We also produced a catalog while our classmates were still working on their projects. It contained copies of familiar design objects. We juxtaposed pictures of our copies with the



originals. Later our catalog was published, which proved very important for our future careers.

CG: And you were awarded a prize for this project in 2009?

SK: Yes, we were awarded the Swiss Design Award of the Federal Office of Culture for the project and at the same time there was heated debate at school whether we even deserved to get a diploma for it.

LC: It's important to mention this—especially for students. You should be able to use your years at school to try things out, to test things. That kind of freedom is what made it possible for us to try working together. It's not about making things that the instructors will like or getting a certain grade. That doesn't necessarily mean much. It always depends on who the observer is.

CG: What did this prize mean for you as young designers?

SK: At the time, it was still possible to choose between prize money and an artist-in-residency grant in New York. We picked New York.

LC: Unfortunately we couldn't both go to New York because my visa was denied. That was the first test for us as a young duo. Sarah went to New York as planned; I needed a plan B and spontaneously organized a stay in Japan on my own. I was able to use the office of a designer friend, Teruhiro Yanagihara. But Sarah and I still worked together on projects, long-distance and with many miles and hours between us.

SK: Lovis had a table to work at in Osaka while I had a whole studio in New York—and no restrictions. I worked mostly at night so that we could both be working at the same time. Lovis used matches to try things out in miniature and I was able to test them and produce larger models. I had also taken some copies of our Copy catalog to a pop-up bookstore in New York. Fabienne Stephan from Salon 94 bought one and got in touch with us. Since my studio was nearby we met at the gallery. It was an art gallery that had just started to represent designers as well, in response to the emerging market for collector's items in design. The gallery invited us on the spot to contribute to a show. We designed the series Old Tennis Balls, which I produced right there in New York.

LC: At the same time—I'd only been in Japan for a week—I was invited to join a panel discussion in Osaka. It was a major design event with some 3000 visitors and I was on the podium with the famous Japanese designer Hironao Tsuboi. After that a lot of designers in Japan knew about me and Kueng Caputo. I was invited to teach at the university in Kyoto; it was my first teaching job. And I produced another Copy project with Teruhiro Yanagihara. They copied something of ours and we copied something they had done, and so on. The result was exhibited in Tokyo. We were able to establish a network both in Japan and New York, and we still benefit from that network today.

CG: Artist-in-residency grants were discontinued in 2016. What do you think about that?

SK: It was a unique opportunity for designers—and a privilege. Just being able to take some time off, get involved somewhere and do whatever you want.

LC: I don't understand why they canceled the program. Prize money helps too, of course, but I think that having a studio abroad is the best thing that can happen, especially at the beginning of a creative career. I think the program should be revived.

CG: How did your stay in New York influence your career?

SK: Salon 94 included us in their roster of artists and suddenly we were established in New York. The gallery went to all the art fairs and also to the design fairs that were popping up all

over the place. We developed new works for each fair, like Sand Chairs or a series of bowls and furniture called Never Too Much.

LC: We literally slid into the art market. It was a great stroke of luck. It meant we never had to take a job on the side after finishing our studies. We were able to make a living right away, albeit a small one, working independently and full-time as designers. It was always important for us to work with artisans, with people who are exceptionally skilled in a particular trade. But that takes time and it is also costly. We were able to do that thanks to gallery sales because production costs are very high if you want to produce in Europe. We have always done our best to make sure that we pay the people we work with well. Unfortunately, given the circumstances, you automatically land in the high-end segment of the market where a design object becomes a collector's piece.

SK: A second gallery, Etage Projects in Copenhagen, started representing us in 2015. In addition, other galleries and cultural institutions have invited us to contribute objects to group shows. But over time we noticed a change: instead of representing artists or designers, commercial galleries started focusing more on organizing curated group shows. I also think the collector's market has shifted towards vintage furniture.

CG: How did you become aware of these changing developments in design galleries?

SK: It's very simple: we were selling fewer pieces. At the same time, though, we wanted to be less dependent on this market segment anyway. We did not want to earn our money only from that one percent of society. Lovis started doing more teaching, we had more commissioned work outside of the gallery market, and we also started financing certain productions and projects ourselves.

LC: For example, the gallery didn't want to produce the Never Too Much bowls, so we decided to do it ourselves. That made us less dependent and we weren't as pressured for time, which was good because the development and production of our projects is a lengthy process.

CG: A couple of times you mentioned how important it is for you to work together with producers and artisans. Why is that?

SK: That started very early on. After New York, we received additional grants and were able to travel to India and South Africa for two months. That gave us the chance to work on site with local artisans. We now work closely with production specialists and artisans in practically all of our projects.

LC: It's often an extremely time-consuming process. First you have to find out what know-how is available in order to develop something from it. Then you have to create prototypes, initiate production, and stay in constant communication.

SK: We want to work with familiar materials and traditional crafts because we want people to relate to our pieces. But we also want them to question things, so our pieces have a twist. For example, you might think from a distance that the Never Too Much bowls and furniture are marble but when you come closer and feel them, you realize that they're leather. We found a company in Italy to produce these leather objects. Ordinarily they make small things like wallets and they had never produced anything as big as bowls or even furniture. Manufacturers have to have a lot of faith in us because our approach is risky. They are making something that's new, untested, and it might not work.

LC: In a lot of cases, there are only a few people left who still have certain skills. We run up against that time and again. We were doing renovations and needed someone who could instruct our people on how to work with felt. We finally found a pensioner who still had that skill. There are so many crafts that have to be preserved before they get lost forever.

CG: The project Arita 2016/ had a similar agenda. Can you tell us something about it?

SK: Several manufacturers got together in the Japanese city of Arita to rescue the region's economy. Arita has produced porcelain for 400 years. Everything is available locally from raw materials to molds to glazing. The trades are all interdependent both in terms of production and economically. Orders have declined in recent years, which meant that know-how and, of course, many jobs were endangered. Thanks to Teruhiro Yanagihara, a number of international designers were invited to work on site with one of the small businesses and to give its specialty international reach by designing a series. Altogether, they would show how great the potential is in Arita.

LC: We were invited to work with the porcelain manufacturer Kin'emon Toen. A lot of people arrived in Arita with finished designs, but we first spent a month there observing from the sidelines. In the end, we developed a series together with Kin'emon Toen. We didn't have translators for the entire month, but we were extremely motivated and so were they, so we managed to find ways of communicating. It's always a great honor to be able to develop a project in collaboration with a company like Kin'emon Toen, which has so much know-how.

CG: How do you find the balance between the projects you want to work on and the financial pressure of earning a living?

LC: We are self-employed and always have to figure out how to make ends meet. This year, for example, we don't know what the future holds. That's how life is for us and we have to accept the uncertainty. In addition, rates for designers are not standardized as they are for other professions, like architects. Design unions do exist, but it has been our experience that they are not very influential. Still, in spite of all the difficulties, it's an incredible privilege and wonderful to be able to do this work as a full-time job, to be our own bosses, and to work independently.

SK: We don't work in design to earn lots of money. We are perfectly happy if we can break even and strike a balance between satisfaction, work, and money. We don't need much to live on but we do have to be realistic and be aware of the risks independent designers face. Usually, design projects don't have big budgets, in fact, they are mostly very small, so you really have to stay on top of things. But you can also try things out at a faster pace when you have so much control of the process. A lot of people may think it's a dream profession, but you also have to face certain realities.

CG: You mentioned the difference between design and architecture, but you've also been commissioned to design interiors. Is that something that you would like to do more often—something more architectural and spatial?

SK: We've been interested in space as a concept for a long time. You can make something small look big or something big look small in the same space just by adjusting lighting, surfaces, and angles. And it's especially exciting when questions of perception are not just confined to specific objects, but when the room itself becomes the design object. For SiloSilo, a cultural space in Zurich, and the boardroom of the Zurich Cantonal Bank, we only did the furniture. So far, we've had two opportunities to renovate entire spaces, both for private clients. We're currently working on converting an old stable into an apartment. We would like to do more things of that kind. It's nice, too, when a room is not a white space but already has a history of its own. It's something you can start from and react to.

LC: If we could choose, I think what we would like to do most would be to design public spaces or public buildings like libraries or hospitals, in other words, spaces that are not geared exclusively towards consumption. We are really beginning to

question the consumer society in which we live. It's absurd that you can buy a T-shirt for three francs. Low prices like that are always at the expense of someone else. But in our frenzied pursuit of more and more things, we don't ask many questions. Our greatest dilemma as designers is that a lot of what we make is for a very small, affluent segment of society.

SK: People who buy such high-end pieces probably just use them for a while, get a kick out of them, and then move on to the next thing. But they represent the painstaking work of so many people that we employed, people dedicated to what they're doing and who depend on the income. It's a predicament sometimes, but it has to be our market because that's the only way we can finance the cost-intensive collaboration with skilled artisans.

LC: That's exactly why it's so important for Switzerland not to skimp on grants and scholarships for design, and to encourage projects that are focused more on content and social relevance.

CG: You spoke about projects in public spaces that would allow you to create works for a broader group of users. Are there any other projects that give you the opportunity to pose critical questions?

SK: Lovis used to ask someone to take a walk with her every week so that they could think about design together. They addressed such questions as: What is our design work actually about? And how can we as designers and human beings contribute to society? Projects like that don't get any coverage in trade magazines because there's no clearly tangible project or object involved. And yet maybe a group of people taking walks like that achieve more than designs created for a big brand.

LC: Along with the designers Yiannis Mouravas and Erasmus Scherjon, I finally converted this idea of taking walks into a school project for the Sandberg Instituut in Amsterdam. I walked from Delphi to Athens in two weeks with a group of 25 students. That really pushes you to the limit both physically and as a group. For example, after a while the faster walkers wanted to get rid of the slower ones. Which is exactly what it was not about, namely, sidelining everything that doesn't correspond to an ideal. The project was primarily about becoming sensitized to thinking collectively. And looking after one another. One woman actually carried a classmate who had trouble walking for three whole days. The goal itself was not the least bit important. It was about the process, the path that would enable us to reach our goal as a group. When we teach, we consider it a great responsibility to make sure that the students don't just make beautiful things. That can have long-term consequences because today's students will someday be in positions where they in turn will be able to exert influence.

CG: Are there any other socially relevant projects you'd like to mention?

SK: We've always done do-it-yourself projects. In 2009 the Architectural Association in London showed do-it-yourself furniture by the Italian designer Enzo Mari and invited designers to create new pieces. We designed a lamp: la lampada a stel. Over the years, we've added other pieces, for example the Flying Shelf. We were lucky because such DIY projects had started attracting a lot of attention in the field of design. Instead of selling the objects, people build them themselves with simple materials. We just deliver the impulse, the impetus.

LC: We are always pleased when we receive photographs from people who have built one of our designs. And sometimes, they even suggest improvements. That's wonderful because we believe that you learn the most from each other. That happens all the time. Our thoughts don't come out of nowhere but from a dialogue as a duo and also from the dialogue with everything that's around us.

CG: Dialogue is apparently very important for you as a duo. How does that work in everyday life?

SK: We have to do a lot of talking in order to find out what interests us about a particular object, otherwise there's no point in pursuing it. Political relevance also plays a role. Then you start looking for forms, materials, and spatial effects that will express a thought or idea. Working together on this step is essential. For example, we stack 1:1 boxes, manipulate them, cut them up, and shift them around until we find the perfect proportions.

LC: We have a more detached view of things because there are two of us. We can take things less seriously, in a good way, and without getting completely sucked into the process. For instance, we own practically none of the pieces that we have designed.

CG: What happens after the initial shared thoughts and models? Do you each have certain roles?

LC: We do have our roles, but they are not set in stone. Although we mostly end up with a similar division of labor. But, like a married couple, we occasionally change things around. We now have two assistants as well who each help us one day a week in executing projects. Actually, we never wanted to grow because that would mean more orders. But we really appreciate not being just two people. We could never have managed alone. There are so many people who helped us over the years, and still do. But it's not like I do something alone with my team and Sarah with hers, and it still goes under our name; we really design every project together.

SK: It's also important for us to give each other space. It's a great art to find the balance, a kind of independent dependence. We are two people with different interests and different lives. Maybe Lovis is interested in something that she came across in Buenos Aires—where she had just spent some time—or somewhere else at some point in her life, and I have my own influences. So we have multiple inputs.

CG: Lovis, at the beginning you said that Sarah was the first woman you met who was also interested in design. Your two assistants are also women. To what extent does being a woman play a role in your work?

LC: We are women and experience the world as such. The fact, for example, that women still don't receive equal pay shows that we still have a long way to go.

SK: Women see things differently, but they obviously do things just as well as men do. That's perfectly logical for us but not necessarily for someone of the opposite gender. In our experience, men clearly tend to promote other men over women. Women are always having to prove themselves more.

LC: We always had women who believed in us. The two galleries that represent us are both run by women. Things began to change when we did the boardroom for the bank. Actually, women commissioned us to do that job but afterwards men started commissioning work from us too. It's as if men only acknowledge that a woman is capable after she has received her first prestigious commission. Sometimes when we're invited to give a lecture, they tell us they invited us because there are so few women. That's intended as a compliment, but I think it's more of an insult. It's also a statement that indicates extreme shortsightedness.

SK: It's not that there are no women in design; it's a question of visibility. Women who are already making important contributions should be highlighted. That's why I recommend a quota until it becomes normalized in future generations. I take every opportunity to be visible because it's about taking up space as a woman. When we were younger, men always thought we should be grateful for being given a chance. That's not expected of men, but it certainly is when the combination is

“man – young woman.” We're older now and it happens much less but we are still acutely aware of the uneven balance of power. You also get more radical with age.

CG: What does it mean to you, being awarded the Swiss Grand Award for Design?

LC: I was pretty surprised at first. I mean, it's a prize for someone's lifework and we're not all that old yet. But, of course, it's wonderful to receive such recognition. The prize gives us the freedom and time to question, reexamine certain things, to reposition ourselves after twelve years, to think about what direction to take next.

SK: It gives us a chance to think about what we as human beings and designers have to do, given the situation in the world today. We really have to give some serious thought to what we will do in the future. It doesn't help to just keep running all the time.