



Koehl Face

We were star struck. We have to admit it. Our heads were turned. You know what we're like – cynical, hard bitten, done it, read it, seen it, bought the T-shirt. 'You should meet with Angelika Seeschaaf,' we were told. We shrugged. 'She's a cool designer, really interesting.' Hmmm, we thought. 'And she's worked with Fosters, Herman Miller, Jaime Hayon...' Really? Tell us more. What's she working on now? Show us...

You should meet with Angelika Seeschaaf,' we were told. We shrugged. 'She's a cool designer, really interesting.' Hmmm, we thought. 'And she's worked with Fosters, Herman Miller, Jaime Hayon ...' Really? Tell us more, what's she working on now, show me ... To be fair, we're not normally like that. We're in our 10th year now, and in that time we've profiled plenty of design stars such as Ken Shuttleworth, Mario Ruiz, Bill Stumpf, Ettore Sottsass. Top people, all of them. To be honest though, it's the less well known industrial designers that often get us going. The sleeves rolled up, hands dirty in the factory, tweaking and tweaking with R&D and marketing until you've got a product that you can make in volume at a profit – with added flair and style and a dash of pizzazz to blend with the engineering.

So the weird thing is, having organised a meet with Angelika expecting to be dazzled by starriness, we discovered she's not that way inclined at all. As we were told, Angelika's certainly a cool designer (did we mention some work for Damien Hirst, through Mike Smith Studio?) but she's no fancy pants.

This is someone who likes nothing better than working with the engineers, someone who understands production inside out. And someone who learned to weld at Bremerhaven shipyard. But don't worry, Angelika's also someone who talks about frog footed cutlery, and can wax lyrical about the cultural impact of superstition given half the chance. Read on ▶▶▶▶▶





▶▶▶▶▶ 'I'm from a small town in Germany called Frankenberg,' she tells us. 'Actually, Thonet have a factory there. I started with the idea of being an actor – but I realised I didn't like being told what to do by a director. In that respect, design's not that dissimilar from the theatre and I still have the same problem! I did some professional theatre in Bremerhaven, and during the day I did welding in the shipyard – a nine month apprenticeship – so that if the acting didn't work out I could do design.'

'Having made a firm decision to get into design college, I continued to make sure I had the technical skills as well as the artistic side. So I also did timber construction, working on rooftops, learning how to hammer in a nail at the first attempt. I understood how things are made, and absorbed the craft perspective.'

'When I got to Universität Gesamthochschule Kassel – the only university in Germany offering combined honours in architecture and product design – I learned about space, and I learned the detail about how things are made. During the course I did an exchange year at Ravensbourne, followed by a Diploma at the University of Arts in Berlin and a Masters at the RCA. By now I knew I wanted to earn my living doing product design. I'd got experience working on chair design for Thonet at Foster and Partners, and had spent time at Mike Smith Studio where I was in charge of design, construction and project management – where I worked on various projects such as Damien Hirst's White Cube exhibition.'

'My first product design projects were working with Haworth-Roeder on a support chair and some garden furniture for Garpa. While I was working on a lot of retail designs for Ka De We (the big German department store), my design partner in Germany put me in touch with Koehl. This is an interesting company: a well established German seating specialist with a really good story to tell on ergonomics and environmental issues. Koehl are very down to earth, they know their roots and are not too crazy. What they wanted to do was to blend their strengths with something a little bit more design led, which is where I came in three years ago. The three new designs I produced for Koehl were launched successfully at Orgatec 2008 – Aureo, Artiso and Calixo.'

'It's been a great relationship because I can apply the combination of skills I have developed: the artistic side with the hands on side. The marketing aspect, the costing of moulds and so on was a big learning curve for me, but I've had the support of a good team of engineers so we've been able to develop good seating products with good quality, with real market understanding▶▶▶▶▶





Koehl



Koehl

▶▶▶▶▶ As far as I'm concerned a chair can't be a comfortable product if you're not comfortable with the price. This is real product design.

'The concept of these chairs was based on a flower. Within this there were a lot of ideas and questions going on in my head: how do you incorporate ecological factors without being too green; what about comfort, being friendly on the eye? The flower concept is all about being inspired by nature, with nice proportions – and also of course as a differentiator.

'I produced a lot of models and worked a lot with visual images that could help communicate the ideas through the sales and marketing process. The whole process – the model making, CAD, giving it to the engineers and receiving the model back, making the changes and communication throughout the company and with customers – takes a lot of time. You have to go through this if you want to produce a good chair that's intended to be sold in volume – otherwise you're wasting your time. I also appreciate that it took a lot of guts and investment for Koehl to do this with me!'

We changed tack and talked about what makes Angelika tick. It quickly becomes clear that multi-culturalism is not only something which interests her; it's an aspect of life she immerses herself in. German, with a design partner in Germany, and with German clients, she lives in (and loves) London. 'I really appreciate living in London because of its internationality and the inspirations you can get from visiting the vast amount of cultural events like exhibitions, museums, music events and the little things you discover when cycling through the city. For instance: a shop with a little sign in east London saying 'Selfridges', hidden squares, workshops under railway arches and beach parties on the Thames. Living as a foreigner makes you see the small fragments that shape the culture of the country you are living in, but also sharpens the senses towards your own country. You see a clearer picture of the certain specialities and characteristics of Britain and Germany – not only culturally, but also in terms of crafts and manufacturing.

'However the down part is that London is very inspiring, and life is running at such a sharp pace here that I sometimes find it difficult to concentrate. I am most productive in my work when I am able to lock myself in the workshop in a very small town in Germany – and just work and sketch away. I suppose it's kind of trying to take the best for me out of two countries.'

A fascinating, creative person, Angelika Seeschaaf is good company. We chatted about all sorts of things such as current freelance collaborations with Jaime Hayon, the importance of crafts ('big brands are boring') and recent work on improvements to the product and display design at Herman Miller's flagship London showroom. We somehow got on to her award winning bicycle lock system, her RCA MA project which included her flower cemetery for Columbia Road Flower Market. Then, when we were talking about her frog footed knife-spoon for Hoefler goods, a porcelain piece that materialises a southern German village's traditions and stories, we got on to discussing the cultural impact of superstition.

'It's very important, for example, if a product can tell a story on a different level,' says Angelika. We thought, and we hope you'll agree, that that's a whole new conversation. So we decided to part, said our Happy Christmases, and agreed we'd meet up again soon to put together a little piece on the cultural impact of superstition. Hopefully, you'll see it right here in April. Definitely our kind of designer. Top lady ●

