

Jessi Highet

soft goods fabricator / textile artist /
co founder of the workers cooperative *Friends of Light*

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tie dye, dye, Collina Strada, Eileen Fisher, Grimes, prop, macramé, weaving, Pascale Gatzon, Grimes, wardrobe styling, Starbucks, fashion show, High School, learning, Li Edelkoort, overdye, cochineal, paint, 70s, ownership, sample making, knot making, worker cooperative, consensus, Beacon, Brooklyn, Netherlands, Friends of Light, weave to form, handwoven, jacket, couture, transparency, pricing, production, privilege, hourly wage, skill

WORDPLAY

Johanna Schwab: I have this little play, because I'm very much into words as portals. I am just going to say a word and you tell me what comes into your mind. It's quiet a mix, since it's a collection of words that I connect with fashion since I am 16.

WARDROBE

Jessi Highet: Oh, that's funny, cuz I think since we were just talking about *Femail* actually, the first thing that comes to mind is *Wardrobe Therapy*, which is something that Janelle (Abott) is doing, which is really beautiful

CONFIDENCE

JH: I mean, just thinking that that's something that I'm always trying to build and through making things, something that I can have for myself.

BASIC

JH: Oh, unfortunately I feel like these days basic is a negative word. It's like a put down of an idea that isn't thought out very much or creative.

STYLE

JH: Um, I guess I think of that as being very personal. Like each person has their own style.

DO IT YOURSELF

JH: Do it yourself. That makes me so excited.
That just makes me think that's what I want everything to be that's in my life.

MUST HAVE

JH: Oh, that's a hard one. What does that mean? I guess for me it's often the things I need immediately, like art materials.

PASSION

JH: Just anything that makes me happy. I think of my boyfriend and I think of tie dye.

DETAIL

JH: Um, I've been doing a lot of painting lately, and tiny little brush strokes.

PATCHWORK

JH: That's something that makes me think of my time in college. I did a lot of quilting and and applique.

MAINSTREAM

JH: Well, we just came out of fashion week. So I guess I'm thinking, all of that was mainstream understanding.

JS: Thank you. Fashion Week, have you been to shows ?

JH: Only one for Collina Strada and a party for *Femail* and *Teen Vogue*.

JS: Okay. *Femail* and *Teen Vogue*?

JH: Yeah, I can't remember exactly what it was, but somehow *Teen Vogue* had selected different fashion artists and presented them all together.

JS: So that's not a question about you now, but maybe you can say something about it. I feel like *Teen Vogue* and the whole *Vogue* have a thing with DIY and Upcycling at the moment, do you think so too?

JH: I feel like, I don't know too much about *Teen Vogue*. But it kind of makes sense. I remember reading it as a teen. And I feel like teens these days are really aware of the environment and what their purchasing does to the environment and also they want to be unique. I guess teens have always wanted to be unique.

JS: ...the same in their peer group, but unique on another level. It's a paradox somehow, I think... So now I want to start with you. How would you describe your role in fashion?

PROFESSIONS

JH: At the moment, I am pretty in the fashion world. I'm doing dyeing, sampling and production for Collina Strada. Other work I do is a lot of prop work and wardrobe or costume making. That's usually halfway related to fashion, so sometimes it's just ads or commercials, sometimes it's just theater. I also work with Eileen Fisher and Ralph Lauren and I almost consider that to be less of fashion, because my role with them is usually a display or a prop. But yeah, definitely the work with Collina Strada is the most involved in the fashion industry that I've been for a while, even though I went to fashion school, thinking that I'd be a designer.

JS: We come to Collina Strada later, first I want to know what do you mean by saying you make *soft goods* which your website says?

JH: So I refer to myself as a soft goods fabricator, because I am fully trained in all elements of fashion: pattern making, draping and sewing. I worked in a costume shop for a while, so I can do all of those things professionally, but I'm also weaver and a dyer. I do macramé and embroidery and quilting, crochet and knitting.

I can kind of run the gamut on anything that's made from fabric, textiles or soft sculpture, anything in that realm. So soft goods seems to just cover it all.

JS: That's the one part and you also say you're a textile artist. Soft good is all related to crafts where does the art come in now?

JH: I'm going to tell you what fabricator means first, to then explain what artist means. So the soft goods fabricator is that I have all these skills. I'm happy to work with artists and designers where they do the creative part and then I actually physically make it. But within textiles, I'm also the artist, so not only do I have the craft and the skill, but I like to have creative freedom within weavings that I make. I've learned throughout the last 10 years or so that I'm less of a designer. I don't really gravitate towards fashion design, but I do gravitate towards textile art.

JS: But when you started studying, you wanted to be a fashion designer?

JH: Yeah.

JS: How did it change?

JH: Um, that's a good question. I think, part of the reason that I thought I wanted to be a fashion designer is, because that was an option that I knew of. I didn't really know that this fabricator role was even something I could do. So I did go to Parsons and studied not in the fashion program, but in *Integrated Design*, where I could learn all of the things that I needed to learn for fashion, but I could also learn about textiles and performance and painting and sort of just anything that I wanted. I also did make a lot of my own clothes and I still make a lot of my own clothes. But the actual like sitting down and designing for an audience, I think by the time I graduated, by my senior year, I knew that I didn't enjoy that. Anytime I had to do that, I was immediately unhappy.

JS: There was this documentary (*Eine andere Mode ist möglich*, arte, 2018) where I heard Pascale Gatzien talking... and she was talking about the competitiveness in fashion and the stress with the collections, did that play a role in deciding to not be a fashion designer?

JH: For a bit I guess, yeah! Because throughout college, I had internships and part time jobs in the fashion industry. And I did see what that was like to be constantly designing for basically the next year, while in production for six months from now, and just this like constant flow and always thinking so far ahead, and for myself having a desire to live in the present moment. And when I'm thinking too far into the future, I get stressed out. So that was too much for me.

JS: Going through your website, I found that you are a stylist, too?

JH: Yeah. When I was in college, I first started waitressing. My parents were very kind and paid for my education, but because I decided to go to Parsons, a private university in New York City, that was all they were going to pay for. And the rest of it was up to me. So finding an apartment and food and art supplies and you know, everything else that goes into living in New York, I needed to have a job as well. So I was waitressing, but I felt I should be working within my field. Probably in my sophomore year of college, I realized that I could do wardrobe styling, and that that would be related to fashion and I could make money doing, so I started working as the assistant for a stylist, Nicole Gullota.

We did Nickelodeon TV shows, which was really fun. I also did a bunch of commercials and yeah, through that gained, the skills and the knowledge around what wardrobe styling is. And every once in a while I'll still pick up a job just because it's fun.

JS: And what is it? I don't know what actually wardrobe styling is?

JH: Wardrobe Styling is the act of clothing actors in any sort of filmed media. So TV, film, commercial are the three big ones. It could be theater as well. You talk with the producer and the director about what their vision for these characters is and then you create this understanding: if this is who this person is, what would they wear? And then you either make it or you shop for it. And yeah, it's actually similar to the fabrication where it's not like just making clothes out of thin air, it's taking a directive in order to tell a story through what someone's wearing on screen.

JS: Is that something you liked to do?

JH: Yeah, it's really fun. Um, it takes quite a lot of time and energy at least for me; it takes over a lot of my brain space. So I only take that on occasionally, maybe once or twice a year. But when I do, it's always it's always pretty exciting. You get to create all these narratives and understand these characters.

JS: Cool. Yeah. And, another little detail I got from your CV, I found that you were doing something for a Starbucks? What did you do there? Was that textile related?

JH: It was actually, yeah, and I did that with Nadia Yaron, who is a co founder of *Friends of Light*. We have known each other for quite a long time. I was helping her on that job. She was asked to outfit some new Starbucks with beautiful rugs that all had to be stitched together. And then they also wanted the ceiling to be woven. So we took these thick ropes, like paracord and strung them back and forth across the ceiling of the Starbucks and then wove back and forth to create this grid. It was really quite nice. Funny, it was a funny thing.

JS: It was in one store? That's what they do in some stores?

JH: Yeah, it was it was like a special, permanent art installation. In two stores we did it. We did one in Chelsea right near all the art galleries and then one, I think, was near Columbus Circle.

JS: I really was curious about that, because I've never seen a Starbucks that looks different from the other. I didn't know, that they have the freedom to change something in there, but maybe in Chelsea it's a different thing...

JH: Yeah. Probably as it's near all these art galleries and wanting to fit into the neighborhood; make it a little special.

EARLY START

JS: I was asking you so much about what you're doing now, but actually, I would love to also know, because I think everybody who later works with textile started somehow early, how did it start for you?

JH: Yeah, um, it definitely started early for me. I mean, drawing and painting from the first time I could possibly do that, you know, finger paints and holding a crayon as a toddler.

And then I learned how to quilt on this really tiny, just four squares pot holder sized (looms), when I was probably five years old. It was some summer program that I was involved in and I learned how to do it by hand. I remember that feeling of being so excited that I made this soft thing. And then I learned how to crochet probably around the age of 10. And in between, when I was seven, my mom had a tie dye birthday party for me. I have not stopped tie dyeing since I was seven. We all had t-shirts, but then we were taking off our socks and I remember running up to my room and finding anything that was white and bringing it down and wanting to throw that in the dye. And it just grew from there. Then I went to middle school and started making tote bags. Instead of carrying a backpack I would bring a tote bag that I had made myself and then I started making clothes and hosting all these fashion shows in High School...

HIGH SCHOOL

JS: Wow, hosting fashion shows in High School?

JH: Yeah. I don't remember exactly what prompted me to do this. I guess it must have been some kind of community service credit that I had to get in high school. And I thought why don't I combine that with one of my own interests. So I hosted a fashion show to raise money for the local soup kitchen. I sold tickets to get into it, and had vendors there, selling baked goods and stickers for bands and stuff like that. And then had all my friends do the modeling and one of the high school bands play the music and had a couple other friends that were making clothes, so I got them involved. And a friend that was doing after school hair styling and makeup classes. So she did all the hair and makeup and, yeah, it was really fun. And we raised like 1200 dollars for the soup kitchen.

JS: Yeah.

JH: Yeah, felt good, Yeah.

JS: Li Edelkoort is present in my mind, since I've read her Anti-Fashion-Manifesto. There she was talking about how boring she finds a lot of fashion shows, this catwalk thing. Can you relate to that? I'm sure you also know people who make it different than from what she is talking about...

JH: Yeah, definitely. Um, I mean that catwalk thing is what I did in High School, because that's what I knew. And at the time, that was exciting, because I was so young, so everything was still so new to me. When I was in college, we were doing a lot of fashion shows and (with) each one, it was exciting to figure out how to do that outside of that box. I remember going to a show of a friend. She only showed her one collection. The way she showed it, was that she was in a nude body suit. And she'd walk to one area of the room and pick up the garments and put them on and then do a movement and then walk to another area and change. It was interesting, almost provocative in a way where it makes you think: what's going on, is she nude, is she not? Um, but then also seeing how she interacted with the garments and how they look as they're going on and going off was another part that you got to see. (...) And I'm really excited by what's going on in the more mainstream fashion industry now. I think all those sorts of experimental ideas are happening. The Collina Strada show this year was outside near a park, set up to look like a farmers market. And then there was still this back and forth walking and people in chairs, but the models would also stop at the grapes

and start eating fruit or interact with the crowd. (...) So I think there is more play happening with it these days.

JS: Yeah, thank you. That's wonderful. When you start to do something, when you were in High School (doing the fashion show), you don't think about it as something that so many people did before, and that it could be maybe boring. And this point of doing something for the first time and the energy you put in there and don't think about how it's going to be contextualized...

JH: In a way it's similar to how I learn skills and how I learned creativity within that. I really like to do things the "right way". Right way in quotes, because is there a right way I also grapple with that. I like to learn things the way that is most common knowledge first, and then allow myself to sort of do it my own way (...). And I think structures like a fashion show; it is helpful to learn how to host something like that with this baseline understanding and then take it and like jump off in different directions.

DYE

JS: I would love to talk with you about dyeing now... there's different techniques you're doing and one of them is called overdyeing, what is it ?

JH: (...) if you have something that is already dyed, then you can dye it again with a darker color. Or you have a bunch of old linens that have embroidery on them and maybe they're white with yellow embroidery, and we can dye that in an indigo bath. This is a very common thing, that a lot of people want, which is why I am referencing it. And then the white will turn indigo and the yellow embroidery might turn a little green, and it can be really beautiful. Overdyeing is really just dyeing but it is particularly referencing something that is already a finished product in its own right. Whereas I think a lot of times you think about dyeing, as dyeing a white shirt or white fabric, something that's plain and blank. Most of what I do is garment dyeing, so shirts, sweatshirts, dresses, pants, every garment you can imagine comes to me, finished, but blank. So just plain white. And then I either tie it up and submerge it or tie it up to make a pattern and squeeze with squirt bottles. Or what I've been doing a lot of lately, is applying the dye with a paintbrush, just like paint. Only the consistency is so different because it's painting with dye as opposed to painting with paint.

JS: It's just not that thick, or?

JH: It's Yeah, it's really thin, it's like water. I actually was painting with acrylics last weekend just for fun at a friend's studio, and I was having such a hard time controlling it, because I've gotten so used to painting dye. And this thick thing felt like I was trying to paint with mayonnaise or something. Um, but yeah, so, so that I've been doing, a lot of painting with dye and I'm within all of these techniques, there's all sorts of different dye, too. So if you're dyeing something that is polyester, like a man made synthetic plastic fabric, there's only a couple of ways to do that. You need to use a harsher chemical usually or you need to coat it with something in order to use a less harsh chemical. So those are the hardest and then any cellulose or protein fiber can be dyed, either with natural dyes which come from plants or animals, or can be dyed with a chemical dye, but it can be a lot less harsh of a chemical.

JS: So what comes from animals, which colors?

JH: The one, that's the most common, is called cochineal. Cochineal is an insect that lives on cactuses. They're picked off the cactuses and then dried, and then ground up. And they produce a really beautiful pink color.

JS: Because I was thinking about a cow and a pig and their blood...

JH: Yeah, not it's more insects, or like shellfish. There's some mollusks and snails.. There's one particular snail, somewhere near Oaxaca, that produces a beautiful purple color which, unfortunately, is probably going to go extinct soon, because of people overfishing it for dyeing and for eating. But it's really interesting, you think about natural dyes... A lot of people talk about natural dyes as being like this super eco friendly, really fair way of dyeing fabric and it can be, but it depends on what your alliances are. Like if you're vegan, you might not want something that's dyed with cochineal. (...)

JS: (...) so not only because it's natural resource, means it's e.g. eco friendly. Yeah, yeah that's interesting...

COLLINA STRADA

JS: I love your work with Collina Strada... I've seen on your Instagram this photo of Grimes. Did you know that she was going to wear a work of you and Collina?

JH: Not until it happened. Collina texted me or emailed me a picture of that and was like: Look, Grimes in the clothes you dyed... Yeah, and I got giddy!

JS: What's the amazing part, because everybody would be like, you know, a dream come true would be to meet Grimes...

JH: Well, yeah, it makes me feel like there's a little connection there. Um, and if I ever did get to meet Grimes, I could say: Oh, do you remember this shoot you did? I actually dyed those clothes. It would be an immediate thing, that I could talk to her about, that wouldn't just be me gushing about how much I liked her music, like probably most of her conversations are. (..) I think, things like that are really interesting, because it is exciting (..), but it also (..) feels kind of normal, if that makes sense. Like that pair of shorts that Grimes is wearing, they look great on her. Of course they would use it in that photo shoot. And that is very cool, but it doesn't change my life directly in any way. (...) It's just like, okay, that's the thing that happened. (...) And I'm going to continue to shop at the same grocery store and live in the same apartment and work in my studio, just like I would have, if that hadn't happened.

JS: Yeah, what has to happen, that your life really changes... I actually wanted to go more into how you work together with Collina Strada. How I understand your method so far is that she designs the garments and you dye them. How do you work together exactly?

JH: Yeah. So that's a great question. That's something that I feel like a lot of people are curious about. The way that it works with us, is that she designs the garment. The shape of the garments definitely is 100% her and then she has a color palette,

usually, that she wants to work with, and some ideas about design. In the first samples we made together which was a little over a year ago, she sent me photos of what the garments were going to look like. And then she sent me color palettes, like, a swirl of colors that she had photoshopped to show what she wanted for each one. I brought examples of some patterning that I had been doing. From there, she said, okay, let's do this box pattern on these three with the colors I laid out.

Then, I did those samples, showed them again, she gives notes, I do more samples, show them again. So when I take things back after the notes are given, it's sort of up to me to make them in a way that I think she's going to like. So ultimately, she designs all of it, but there is a collaboration element within how the dye is applied and exactly where it lands. And a lot of in the moment decision making; things that I don't even realize that are going to come up while I'm dyeing it, so I don't think to ask in the meeting, and then I just decide as I go and hope she likes it. And also sometimes (..) the theme is pretty loose. So I'll do maybe five different samples for one thing that all relate to a theme she gave me, and then she'll choose which ones she likes. So it is very much collaborative, but ultimately, it's her decision.

JS: I also was wondering, you're dyeing professionally, but is there maybe things that you cannot control?

JH: That's definitely something that, as I'm doing this professionally, needs to be a disclaimer from the very beginning. I can match a color. (..) Especially for a sample, so much time is put into just one garment, so that can be kind of perfect. But you don't have full control over the dye, because it is liquid. And you often do it while the garment is wet. So it's wet on wet, and any painters would know that just spreads, right? It's like watercolor. So you can apply the dye in one very particular place, but it's going to spread as much as it's going to spread. And even things like the temperature outside, and the weather outside will sometimes affect it. Like if it's a really hot day, and the garments are drying quicker, the dye might spread less than on a drippy cloudy day, when it doesn't dry until the next day. It's been really interesting to find that. Um, so yeah, and then through the production, you know, you can tie something up in exactly the same way, you can do exactly the same thing 65 times, and apply the dye in exactly the same way, everything laid out next to each other, repetitive, and then you'll open them up, and they're all going to be different. But it'll be like (..) if you're dyeing a brown and pink spiral, some might be 50% of each color, some 60 to 40, maybe even 70 to 30 (...) they all still look like the same family but each one you can tell has been just made by hand, each one has it's own personality. I think it's so exciting that, when I open them up, it's not only quality control but also opening a present every single time.

JS: It's amazing that you still have that, because that's something I wanted to know, if there is still an excitement, also if you are doing that professionally..

JH: Yeah, I'm lucky, because I do. I mean, I am a person that does get bored with things pretty easily. But this is something that has continued to keep me excited. And even after doing it over and over...

I was afraid that my recorder would run out of batteries and changed them, which brought us to the present again, into the studio. When I stepped into the atelier, I saw piles of boxes standing on the side. They contained only white garments. Jes-si told me, that next week is going to be a light storm, workwise, she has to start dyeing them. All in all she has to color 1.200 pieces for Collina Strada by the end of

November. They will be shipped to shops in California, Canada, Japan and more. Since she is collaborating with Collina Strada, I was wondering how she thinks about ownership...

OWNERSHIP

JS: So the pieces are sold under the name of Collina Strada (..) you could also think of labelling it Collina Strada featuring Jessi Highet...

JH: Yeah, it's interesting. Um, I think different people do it in different ways. I could definitely see that being something I would do in the future. But I think a lot of times, when it's labeled as a collaboration, the main company and the other company are both selling their own things. And for me, I don't actually sell anything on my own. I don't make any clothing under just Jessi Highet (...) for me, it's easy enough to just say: okay, here's my price.

JS: Maybe that was a bit an artist related question, like the artist wants to be named.

JH: Well, I think it goes back to your question about what the process is for developing these pieces. And since I'm still working in a fabricator context with these, there is a little bit of creative collaboration that happens during the process, just because of the nature of dyeing, but it's still the vision of Collina. It's still her design. And ultimately, she has final creative control and creative decision making within all of this. So I don't feel ownership over the design and creative part. What I feel ownership over, is the knowledge and ability to physically make it and produce it.

JS: I was just wondering, if your name appears somewhere on the Collina Strada website...

JH: It's listed in a couple of different places, like they'll tag me on Instagram.(...)

JS: I come from a teacher, where I learned to appreciate, that everybody involved in the process is named...

JH: I think it's a really interesting topic. Um, and I think everyone has their own feeling about it. Yeah, like, for me, I want to feel compensated in one way. And so that can either be financial, or it can be through some sort of credit. Or, I guess I'm sure there's other ways like a barter or something, I guess. For me personally, as long as that triangle is that I'm getting one of those three things, or a combination that makes me feel valued, then I'm totally fine.

MACRAMÉ

JS: That's a great point. Yeah, absolutely. I was wondering, if we talk about teaching now. You teach macramé (..). My mom, she loves arts and crafts so much and she is a big knitter. I feel like there is a revival of macramé and she loves other crafts but she can't see macramé anymore, because it is so 70s. What can I tell my mom, to say it's still fresh ?

JH: I've heard people say that before, too. Um, so one thing (..), when I teach a macramé class, I always try to remember to share a really brief history of macramé,

because I think we do see macramé, and even I, who I wasn't born in the 70s (..) sort of related to that, too. Kind of like tie dye related to the 60s. But the history of macramé dates back way before the 70s, thousands of years before. All the way to the point (..) before trade. The very first place (..) that I've heard of and, this is recorded, so someone might know more than I do, is that it comes from what was tied onto the sides of animals, near their eyes as they were crossing through the desert in Northern Africa. And (..) as people were starting to migrate or move or looking for trade opportunity, crossing through the desert and needing something to help keep bugs and protect from sand to get into animals eyes, (..) any sort of pack, travel animal. From there jumping very far ahead, hundreds of years ahead, to trade, and when the Dutch started coming up and down and that got passed on and became a sailors activity (..). Then jumping even further and faster in time, into the Victorian era in England, when the Queen had all of her ladies in waiting, make these tiny lace macramé pieces, that would then be incorporated into the Queen's garment. So that's just a few snippets of history (...). I don't know, if your mom could look back and think more of the long history of knot making and not just relating it to some decorative time in our very recent history.

JS: Yeah. Yeah, I think that helps. Also I know where her irritation comes from, my grandparents have this old macramé lamb full of dust...

JH: I think the choices that people are making these days, (..), like a lot of the current macramé I see, is either neutral soft cord or maybe in pastels, sort of more (..) contemporary (..) as opposed to the 70s, which was all 70s colors and these thick twines.

JS: Brown!

JH: Yeah, like browns and oranges and creamy, which I don't mind. I like them because I wasn't around at that time probably. But I do think a lot of the more new macramé pieces are more similar to other textile art that's happening these days, unless like reminiscent of the 70s.

JS: And I feel like, since I'm not a big sewer (..), I love every other way to work with textile and I love to make knots. I don't know why that's so fulfilling...

JH: Yeah, there's something about it. It's so repetitive. And, like, you can make them tight, you can make them loose and it works either way. There is something really good about, I'm going to bind these two strings together, and they're going to stay there and I did that. (..) there's something about that, that I think everyone can get into (..) and I see this in my classes. You start with a group of 10 people and some people have textile backgrounds, some people have no textile background, some people are really like type A and want everything to be perfect, other people are more loose about it. (..) it can be a challenge sometimes to get all of those people on the same page and (..) people learn faster or slower than others. But by the end of the two or two and a half hour class, like 99% of the time, everyone is like soothed, talking quietly and happy; generally joyful like: I made this thing with the knots (..). It's like one of the first things you learn as a kid, you learn to tie your shoes, (..) or like making friendship bracelets at camp. It brings you back into this very human thing of using your hands in a basic and practical way.

TEACHING

JS: Yeah, I have one more teaching question. Um, I was wondering what is important? What do you want to teach besides technique ?

JH: So, um, I think it depends on where and for how long I'm teaching a certain group of people. About a year ago, I went over to the Netherlands with Pascal Gatzen, and we taught a class together at ARTEZ, which is a university there, it was an eight or nine day course, all day every day, in functionally weaving to form. And so within that class, there's the skill, there's a very particular way of weaving, there's a little bit of design and there's a community element. There's this group of people, going to be together all day, every day for nine days. It's also at an university, so there's an interest in just helping people open their minds to different possibilities and real full freedom at that point in time. So that's a very particular thing. But here in New York, I do two types of teaching, like one day, or two or three hour craft classes for adults, typically, my intention there is to teach a skill. But maybe even more than the skill is like to teach a way of interacting with your own body (laughs) even though it's not a movement class. I want people to leave my three hour workshop, feeling like they can do anything. Even if they're just learning macramé or weaving. I want them to have this understanding that they can learn how to do whatever they want, and they can take time for themselves, and they can relax, and they can make something and they can feel proud of that. Because I think a lot of the people that come to those classes, work in an office behind the computer every day (...). I always ask people, why are you here? And a lot of times (...) they say, you know, I just wanted to have something I could do after work as a hobby. And so I really want to teach people: you can find joy in doing something. But also, here's how you do it and here's the skill and if you have technical questions, let me know. But also, like, trust yourself and know that you can make this happen. Um, but then the other types of classes that I teach in New York are like corporate classes (...). I taught a class at Converse, where their whole PR team wanted to take a weaving class. So I went in and that's sort of the same thing, but also, like a team building thing. Let's have fun together, let's all encourage each other... I'm trying to teach each person a slightly different technique, so that they can help each other and interact and feel proud of themselves, but also feel proud of each other. So that's a nice thing to facilitate. And I said, there's two types, I guess there's actually three, because I also work with kids sometimes. When I'm teaching kids, (...) there's the encouraging motor skills, since it's all hands and dexterity, but then there's also encouraging, again, that feeling of: yeah, you can do it. Like, if you think that's beautiful, I think that's beautiful. You're doing great. I guess that relates back to the first workshops that I do with adults. Because part of that energy that I want people to leave with, is that childlike excitement, of not judging yourself and not knowing even that maybe this is wrong. Just feeling excited about: I did something. I did something new. And that's great in itself.

JS: That's interesting. I was thinking like, when children say that's beautiful, that it is more related maybe to that they know that they made it, it's not so related to appearance, or?

JH: Yeah, feeling proud of themselves... and I think it's important, people can feel that way even when they're adults. Because we're allowed to feel proud of ourselves and we're allowed to do things ourselves and feel excitement about it and not have to compare it to make it look like someone else's or compete with each other all the time.

FRIENDS OF LIGHT

JS: So now we're talking about *Friends of Light (FOL)*. That's what brought me here. And first I thought, I'm going to meet all of you guys working in Hudson. Is that still

,like, are you still working in Hudson Valley somewhere?

JH: No, no. So we were in Beacon which is on the Hudson and we were working there a lot, because Pascal was living there and had this house, that we could go up and stay at, um, but I've never lived up there. I've lived in Brooklyn for the last 10 years or so. And Mae (Colburn) was living in Brooklyn (..) and then Nadia (Yaron), the fourth member, she was also living in Brooklyn the whole time. So we were doing this back and forth between Beacon and Brooklyn.

JS: How would you describe, what is *Friends of Light*?

JH: Yeah, so *Friends of Light* is a worker cooperative that makes hand woven, woven to form jackets. And one of the main pieces of *Friends of Light* is, that we do everything based on consensus, which means (..) there were four founding members, and each of the four members needed to agree: yes, we will do this. Sometimes that would be very easy to reach and sometimes it would take a long time. So that's one principle. We also keep in mind each one of our values and needs and desires for particularly beauty and aesthetics, because it is ultimately a garment that we want to show and be proud of in that way, um, but also an interest in material and where materials come from, trying to keep it as local as possible. We're interested in supporting people that are nearby, that we can actually interact with; making sure that things are done in an ethical way. We work mostly with wool, and we only will work with farmers that treat their animals really well and create wool that is strong and lustrous and beautiful. Yeah, so those are sort of the principles of *Friends of Light*. And then the actual item that we create, is a woven to form jacket, which means that we weave on these looms that we've created ourselves. Each loom is the shape of one pattern piece of the jacket. And then each of these pattern pieces gets woven together, so that the jacket has no seams, and is a fully finished garment. So there's no seams, there's no waste. It's made to fit the customer exactly. It's beautiful, it's like it hugs the customer, like really gives a hug to the customer. Yeah, and that's *Friends of Light*

JS: I've seen you talking on the *Textile Month* conference. And after your talk, Li Edelkoort was saying something. She was referring to your jackets as *absolute form of couture*. How did that feel?

JH: Yeah, that's a great compliment. Yeah. Um, so, technically, we can't call them couture, because there's a lot of rules. There's a whole society and part of that is, that has to be made in in a particular region. In Paris. Yeah, so we're not there. We're in Brooklyn and Beacon. But one of the requirements of couture is a certain amount of hours that needs to go into each garment.¹ (..) Our jackets do take 160 hours a week. (..) it's fit directly to the costumer. The process of making it is, (that) we develop a relationship through it. It's highly skilled work that we're providing. The materials are really quite strong and fine and the finest that you can find in the area. So yeah, it was it's a great compliment to be compared to that. I wouldn't feel

¹ Li Edelkoort must have meant couture not Haute Couture while speaking about FOL. As Jessi says, there are some requirements to allow for using the term Haute Couture. She is right when she says the business has to be seated in Paris, but there are no rules on how long the process should take, only that the piece is handmade. Also as Jessi says Haute Couture requires fittings, since it's about costumiaztion (https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haute_Couture)

comfortable marketing it as that, because it's not 100% correct. But really, it's a nice comparison.

JS: Yeah, in this context, you know, it was maybe just fine. And yes, she's able to say that from her position, you know, yeah. And so it was perfect. And I had goosebumps. (..) she was also talking about an aura (that the jackets have). And I think I can relate to that.

You mentioned how a jacket costs around \$7,500..

JH: Yeah, actually pricing and the jacket is, I think, something that's been really interesting through the process of *Friends of Light*. We started making jackets, just to see if this was possible - to weave to form - none of us had ever done this before. We were all weavers, some of us are from the fashion industry. We had this interest in: could we do this? So developing the boards, developing the way of weaving: a lot of trial and error...

JS: Did you invent that yourself: *weaving to form*?

JH: There's two ways to answer that. We did not use prior knowledge, in order to make this way of weaving. The way that we came across it, was through our own invention, but we are not the first people to be doing it. Ancient Peruvians actually wove to form: typically in a rectangle, so four sided, but occasionally there'd be more sides. So that's a thing that's been done. And I'm sure - I don't have another reference - but I'm sure someone else has done it, a full garment woven to form. We didn't learn about the ancient Peruvian woven to form, until we had already presented our first six jacket styles. And then we met Elena Phipps, who is a textile historian, who particularly has studied ancient Peruvian textiles. And she was the one that told us about that. It was so exciting to have that context, finally, know where it sort of came from.

JS: (...) but we are talking about the pricing, sorry...

JH: Yeah. So back to the pricing, that was a really interesting thing for us, because generally we just wanted to do this as a project for ourselves, just to learn: Is this something we could do? Can we make something beautiful? Turns out we could. We made six jackets, each a different style. And we thought, well, now we have these, we should show them, have a little party, just to celebrate this project. And Li Edelkoort offered to host us at her townhouse in the West Village - so great setting, beautiful garments. Then, you know, we're going to have this event: will people want to buy them? Are we willing to sell them? This was before we had a name for ourselves, before we decided to call it FOL and call the collection *with light*. We didn't have an LLC, we didn't have a bank account, (..) because this wasn't business, it was just a project. But we thought, people may want to buy these, it took us 160 hours to weave them, let's say \$15 an hour, tack on (..) for materials, (..) ultimately, our very quick math ended up being \$3200 (..). I will speak for myself here: I didn't expect anyone to buy them, because I still thought \$3200 is so expensive, who's gonna want that? Um, we had the event and 10 people wanted to buy them- five of them actually followed through and did buy them. Very quickly, like within two months, we realized that was not enough. All these other costs that came up, that we hadn't even considered, because we didn't think that this is going to be a big thing

JS: (..) to put it in perspective, because as Li Edelkoort also said, Chanel would take

double of the price, but the jackets are machine produced...

JH: High Fashion prices are definitely up there (..). So obviously we realized \$3200 wasn't enough, but what is it? So we took this business course that was amazing. It was called the *Green worker cooperative(s)*, specifically a business course for worker cooperatives. It's city funded, so it was free. We went up to the Bronx every Monday night for six months, and learned everything there is to know. (...) also learned how to make a cost structure, really think about every little cost, and then break it down by: Is this cost, a cost that comes up every time you sell a jacket? Or is this cost just in general a cost of running a business? And then how do you break that down to cover it, so that's something that we have, it's this massive document. And if you're interested in numbers, that's something that I'm willing to share with people, it's part of our businesses, that it's all transparent. Within that we tested: can we pay ourselves \$30 an hour instead of 15? That was a little too much, because that brought it to like a \$9,000 jacket. We landed somewhere in the middle, I think \$20 is where we ended up going. And then also including cost of having a website, cost of actually having the event where we meet the person, cost of the measurements and the pattern making, because that wasn't part of the pricing before. Every little bit is detailed out. Currently, our cost is at \$7500, but it has moved, it has changed. So our original customers have got that 3200 - good for them and we're thankful to them for spurring us on. There's been an increase over time as we realize and come to terms with, how much it really needs to be, and, honestly (..) \$7500 is still not enough to be a sustainable business.

JS: Absolutely. I so know. As a freelancer, you need to take circa 25 Euro in Vienna (..) to make an ok living.

JH: In New York it has to be \$30 or \$40 to be working what is considered to be a regular, comfortable amount of time (40 hour work week).

JS: That really puts it into perspective. (...)
I would love, that you introduce me to how it started. And also how the name came up? You were student of Pascale (Gatzen), or?

JH: I had been a student of Pascal. She created the program that I was in, called *Integrated Design* at Parsons, and I went there from 2008 till 2012. And then in 2013 Pascal created a group called *work circles*. She ran that with a couple other women. And we met at the *Textile Art Center*. And there'd be about 15 to 25, textile and fashion people that would come. We all made a quilt together, over the course of a year, while discussing elements of worker cooperatives. So it was this really wild mash up. We made this crazy quilt. We had to make decisions with a consensus, so for four hours, we'd go around the room, just to decide what colors we should use. And you'd get halfway around and it would completely change again, and you'd have to start all over. It was really interesting, and funny, because even though we used consensus the whole way through, at the end, when we finished this quilt, no one wanted it (laughs). That was not the goal. The goal was that everyone wants it. But because we all had to agree on something, it turned out the opposite. So it was a good lesson in compromise and then learning that a worker cooperative of that size - maybe there's some decisions that should be made in smaller groups or you know, electing a leader that's good at that part. That's something we took away and learned from when we got to FOL. So the way we actually got to FOL, is that through work

circles. All four of us were in work circles, Pascal, Mae, Nadia and myself. And it turned out that the four of us were also interested in weaving. And so Pascal started working on shape weaving, weaving to form and first recruited Mae, because Mae was getting her graduate degree at the time, her masters. They started working on it for a few months, and then invited Nadia and myself to join. So that was really just easy, there was no big ambition. It was just: hey, do you want to join and work on making these jackets? And then, when we got to the point where we're going to show them, we needed to come up with a name. Naming things I find so difficult I can't fully remember all of the things that we thought of for names...

JS: How was the process?

JH: We definitely talked about it for weeks. (...) We thought about things relating to nature, things relating to ethics, things relating to community. (...) What brought us to the idea of light, was that a lot of times working in Beacon, we would find ourselves moving around the house and moving from inside to outside as the sun was coming and going, to be closest to the window and not have to turn on the light bulbs. So that was definitely part of that. And then friends, the four of us are friends. And we were following the light. So it was like the light was our friend. And when we finally got to *Friends of Light*, it was like, oh, okay, we're all fairly satisfied with this. It wasn't like, we were all cheering it on right away. We were like, okay, I can live with this. I can have this represent me. (...) I first had a hard time calling it, (..) and then, I don't know when this switch actually happened, (..) there was one point where it just started becoming natural.

JS: Do you still work on FOL, since Pascale is in the Netherlands ? (Gatzen became the head of the Fashion Design Master at ArtEZ University of the Arts in 2017)

JH: So, it's definitely slow. Yeah. We are still working on it, but it's very, very slow. From the beginning, we all were doing other things as well. We talked about the cost, the cost is not enough to support ourselves. (...) When we're actually making the jackets, it's pretty easy to do separately, because there's six pattern pieces - two fronts, two backs, two sleeves, and each of them is on its own board. So you can take a board, set it up and take it home. That may take 20 hours to weave. So you don't have to come together until all those pieces are done. That allows for some separation and movement. But yeah, now that Pascal is in the Netherlands, it makes it even more separated. We agreed, now that you're over there, let's wait to sell anymore until we're a little more connected or have sort of production lines in place. Right now it's okay that we're separated, because there isn't a lot that needs to be done. (Jessi told me before that they delivered their last jacket around the beginning of 2019)

JS: You can do it separately, but wasn't there also the idea to do it as a community (same time, same place)?

JH: Yeah, the best days of FOL were, when Pascal was in Beacon and the three of us would go up and stay for a few days and we'd have two or three days of just weaving, cooking and doing yoga together and being friends, being friends making something together.

I talked to Mae the other day about how all the stuff we learned (through the weekly meetings for some years) is still applicable and that it's really exciting to be a

founding member of FOL. I still feel proud to talk about it, even though there's not really a lot going on right now...

Also, with all the transparency with what we're doing, I'm happy for other people to try it and take that on. I never necessarily intended it to be a full business that would take over everything. So to have had that for a few years was amazing. And then whatever happens in the future will be fine.

JS: I was reading this book, *Animal laborans*, where Pascale and Mae did this writing... there was a point when you were thinking about outsourcing the production and focusing more on research. But then you decided to not do it, because there is this problem with outsourcing in the fashion industry now...

JH: Yeah, there was definitely a moment where we thought: these are teachable skills. We can have this done in another place where people are very good weavers, probably better than us (..) send it to Peru, where the techniques come from in the beginning (..). We don't have to worry about that whole part of it. We can research new materials, we can do workshops, we can do talks, (..) but that's how people do it and that doesn't feel ethically responsible to any of us. And then you also lose the connection between the customer and the product.

And then there is another thing, that I think is really interesting: this idea that you should cheapen in textile craft, (..) people would say to us all the time: oh, your jackets are expensive, you're only paying yourself 15 or \$20 an hour, you should outsource it, you could get it done for cheaper. But I don't want to get it done for cheaper personally, if anything, I want to get it done for more. Because I value this work so much. And I think today in our society, (..) our only way of valuing things is through money and putting a dollar sign on it. And there's no reason that my work, the thing that I've spent so much time and energy learning, and I do so well, should be less valuable than the work someone does on the computer. Why should someone from Google make \$100 an hour and I make 15 when we've both put in the same amount of time, effort and energy and we're equal as humans.

I recognize that I come from a place of privilege in a lot of ways. And I think it's really important to be my own representative, but also a representative for people that may not have the voice or the privilege to stand up for themselves, and they just kind of have to take what they can get. And I'd really like to see the textile industry be profitable and sort of come back in New York and in the Hudson Valley region, not just for me, but also for everyone else that does this type of work. So I guess in conclusion to that thought: I don't feel comfortable cheapening or devaluing this labor, because if I do it, it means that anyone else can do it. And it just means that no one will ever be able to live a proper life doing this beautiful type of work.

JS: Yeah, amazing! I would love to discuss something now, that's very interesting for me: you were saying about others being better weavers, the skill thing. How are you reflecting on skills? I also read in the book (*Animal laborans*) that the process is more about intimacy with the textile less about skills, anyways what do you think?

JH: Yeah, so my level of skill in weaving is very particular. At this point I'm very good at weaving to form. I'm good at tapestry weaving, in the particular way that I do it. I can weave on a floor loom, I know the basics. But I also do all these other things: I know how to dye, I know how to sew on a machine, I know how to hand sew, I know how to do embroidery, like I have a wide range of skills. And I feel confident in each of those. But someone, who maybe started weaving and spinning as a small child,

who was taught by their mother, who was taught by their grandmother and so on - and then worked on weaving and spinning for their entire lives, is probably going to be better, if you were just going to look at technical understanding: probably a little bit faster than me, probably a little bit less mistakes, more even, just because there's more time and focus on that one thing. (..) but I don't mean that to take away from my own abilities.

JS: Yeah, totally. In this text, it's mentioned, that the process doesn't allow for spontaneous creativity... And sometimes I'm getting angry, because I feel like this world is so messed up, that we have to restrict ourselves in order to not make it messier. When you had this idea of like, making it a research project and outsourcing the production, it was maybe also about allowing for another freedom, not having to sit for 150 hours.(...) Do you something feel that your art work and your commission work are in fight?

JH: I do, yeah, sometimes I find that. So one thing that we did through FOL is, instead of outsourcing,(...) because that's where the sense of connection gets lost, is that we started getting in touch through doing workshops, both here and in the Netherlands, with people that were interested in learning our technique. They would get paid, but it is such a minimal, you know, 15 to \$20 an hour, but within that they would learn the technique, and it would be sort of partial trade that these people start to learn: they're interested, they're local, they're people that are coming to us. So that is something that we started to do and that helped a little bit to relieve from that push and pull, like, I do want to do some creative work, but I have to sit here and weave for 150 hours. So then maybe I would weave for 15 hours, but someone else would weave for 15 hours and get paid for that and learn a new skill and feel excited about that, too. And that's something I've been also trying to push and pull with my own work, the commission work. I've started hiring some people to work with me, especially on the repetitive dye work, where I can say: Okay, I show you how to do this, you're going to do it 75 times. By the end of that 75th time you're going to know how to do this. And I don't have to do it. That frees me up to do something else. And a lot of times, it just ends up being other work (that I have to do) and which is not super creative, but I'm hoping I can find a way to have that going. But also maybe take some time for myself to do more creative work.

Coming to an end of our conversation, Jessi told me that most of the time, she is very lucky about what she is doing, because it often feels like going to the atelier and being able to play...

Then we came back into the very present, into her studio again, where she had this huge wallpaper resembling a self made calendar ...she told me that this is about a bigger project, which is to be revealed at the end of this year...