

03 IT'S A BEAUTIFUL LIFE

Hans Lensvelt gives good anecdote, after all this is the man who gave the go ahead for the special edition Torture Chair. It's probably why he is working on a book to preserve and share his memories.



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Although he is not destined to spend the rest of his days knitting – nothing wrong with knitting, mind – in a rocking chair, Hans Lensvelt is eyeing retirement. His is a very personal story, it's reflected in the instinctive way his career has evolved; the companies, designers and artists he has worked with becoming part of his life.

Hans loves to love. He loves to create beautiful things, he loves art, he loves cars, he loved the time he spent living in Shanghai, and some of the other things he loves would probably have to be censored.

For nearly 60 years (not all of his own years, he's only 61) the Dutch company Lensvelt has been a pioneer in creating office furniture. Workstations made of steel metal, the intentionally 'Boring' office furniture designed by Space Encounters, the 'Lazy' chair by the artist Joep Van Lieshout (also creator of the aforementioned Torture Chair), designs by Studio Job, Fabio Novembre, Ineke Hans, Maarten Baas... none of them do workplace anonymity.

You could say that the modern day story of Lensvelt started with righting a wrong. During an internship in Italy, Hans found out that his father had been pushed out of own design company. It was a painful discovery and he stood at the crossroads. Putting aside his original plans to become a bridge engineer, he went down the following-in-the-footsteps path and succeeded in taking over his father's furniture company in 1990.

When Hans entered the office, there was still nothing ironic about the idea of a boring workplace. Whether you loved or hated your job, the landscape was mostly a place where you sent your soul to die. The mission of Hans' company was to "provide architects with the tools to make better interiors". Better places for where people spend so much of their lives. Zero torture.

"My aim is to do things that people use for a long time... I don't like fashion; I don't like redundant things. Beauty is in proportion. Like a painting by Rothko, or Mondrian, which look so easy but is in perfect balance."

Art is great passion of Hans, and he is an avid art collector. "I love art, in particular female nudes. I have a strong preference for contemporary pieces, but I also like to mix old masters and modern art. I have a print by Matisse next to a painting by Marlene Dumas, and I own many works by Joep Van Lieshout, who is a very good friend. I have never sold a single piece of my collection." And if you want another excitable conversation with Hans, just mention two words: Ferrari and Land Rover.

Two significant figures in the book of Hans' desire for beauty are Maarten Van Severen and Marcel Wanders. In both he found that treasured balance.

Hans first heard of Van Severen from OMA's Gary Bates, who was working on Lensvelt's villa at Zalmhaven in

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Rotterdam. "I remember when he showed me the aluminum tables. I was impressed. I had never seen anything like it before." In the early 2000s they worked together, Van Severen being responsible for the interiors of OMA's Seattle Central Library project. To counter its location on a fault line, OMA had come up with the idea of hanging the bookshelves from the ceiling.

"For weeks, months, Maarten and I worked on the hanging library system," Hans recalls. "I appreciated Maarten. I respected him. It had to be done exactly as he had in mind. He never gave up. He just kept examining and re-examining. And all according to the image he had in mind." In the end, the project was never realized. "I donated the first model of the hanging bookcase to the Design Museum in Gent, in Maarten's hometown. I thought it belonged there, where many people can really enjoy it and learn from it."

Hans saw Van Severen for the last time at the museum in 2005, shortly before he passed away. Some years later, in 2012, he met his widow, Marij De Brabandere, who asked him to take over the production of Van Severen's designs. "Maarten's products look simple but are ultimately extremely difficult to produce. That's why Maarten did not like being called a minimalist.

The art of production is often an undersell, but it's been an inspirational bedrock to what Hans has achieved.

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Acquiring sheet metal suppliers has been a canny move – for many designers he has worked with it has been the difference between great ideas and a real product.

That was kind of the case with Marcel Wanders. "He was hot in the design community at the end of the Nineties," he recalls, "especially in the Dutch design community. Looking back to that time, I think that Marcel Wanders was the most important Dutch designer, and he really gave rise to Dutch Design."

When they met in 2000, "Marcel talked about his frustration that the respected design labels did not want to make his designs, so he had started a design label himself with Casper Vissers," Lensvelt says. "The name of that design label was MOOOI. At the time, I owned a number of production companies that made all kinds of products from sheet steel, so I asked Marcel if I could make products for his new design label.

But Hans didn't just end up making things for the fledging company. From 2000 to 2006, Hans was the CEO and for a time one of the shareholders. "We are still good friends. I really enjoy looking back and I have learned a lot. And in this way I have really contributed to what Dutch design is now. And that also makes me feel good".

Speaking to Hans about the future of the workspace and the impact of smart working, which has been accelerated

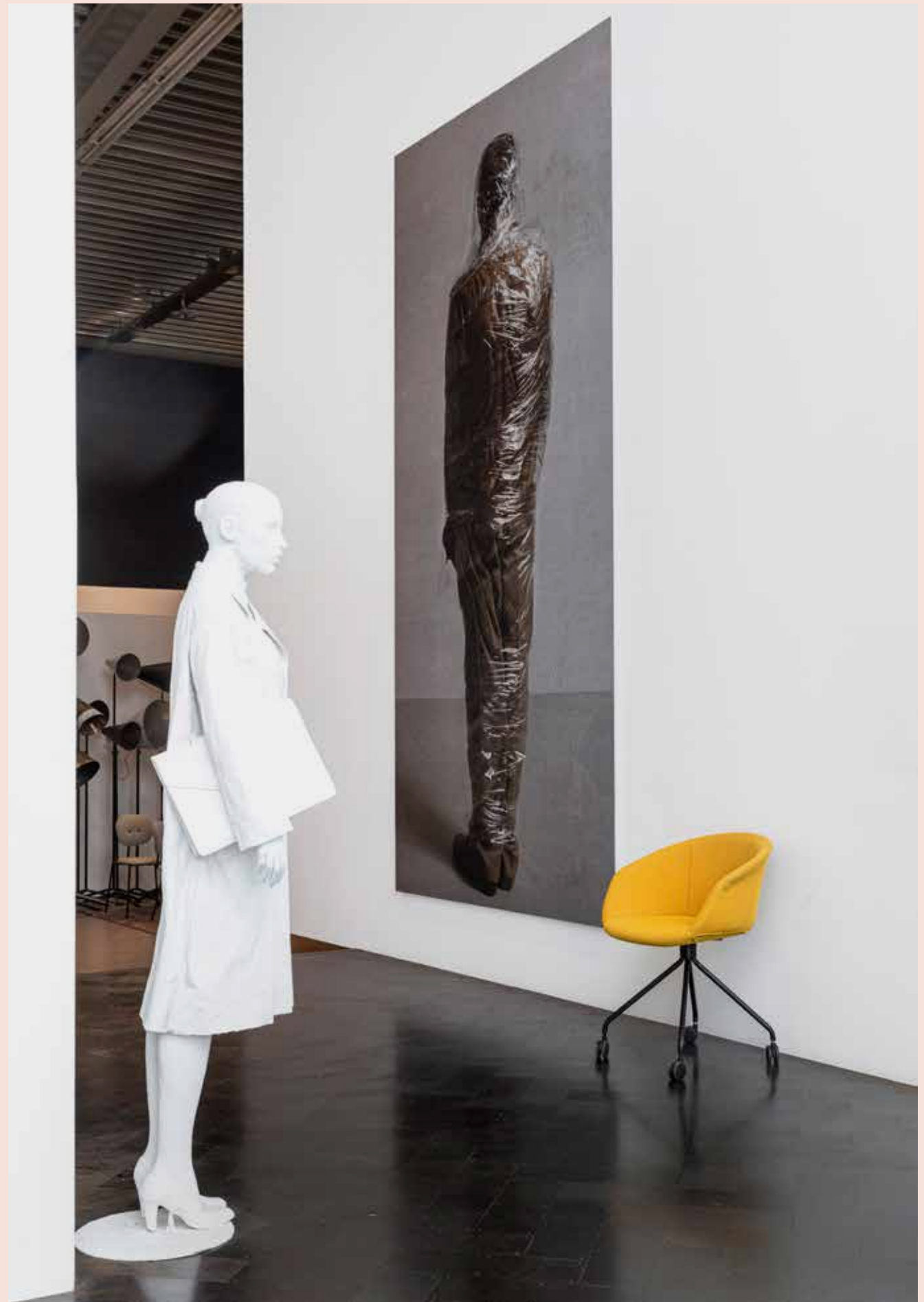
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by the coronavirus pandemic, he thinks, and what many of us are finding out, that the appeal of a pyjama-wearing, bed-to-desk work life has its limits.

“Right now, all the design companies are jumping on the home-based workstation trend, but I don’t think this is the future. For now, it seems a luxury to be at home, and we are getting used to not go out in the morning, not travelling, and using Zoom. But in the future, people will feel the need to go out again and separate working time from the private sphere, and they will look for spaces close to home to work in.”

Right now, the company is collaborating with IWG plc on what he believes is the real future of the workspace. The multinational provides serviced offices, virtual offices, meeting rooms and videoconferencing, and “we are developing working systems that can be installed in former shops and theatres, that are currently not in use because of the pandemic and probably won’t be for a while”. Working with Dutch designer Maarten Jamin, discussions about its production actually started three years ago, but the first models are now ready to be installed in California.

As for those retirement plans, Hans says he has no desire to be “another Ingo Maurer or Oscar Niemeyer”. The timing feels right for him. “When I do a presentation, people in front of me are in their early 40s. I don’t want to lose the connection to my public. So, it’s time to retire.”

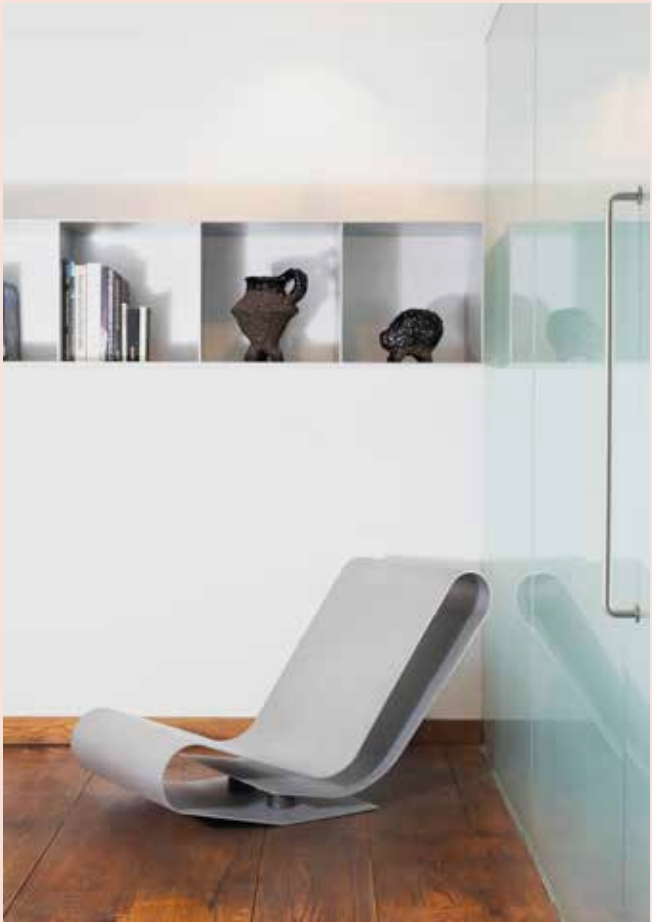
But how? “I have six kids, so I first thought of handing the company over to my sons, but this is not a solution, because most family companies end up infighting, and family is super important to me.” He doesn’t want to sell either – “the value does not reflect the big investments we make in research, development, marketing, and collaborations with artists and designers”. And he doesn’t want the company to grow out of hand: “You spend all your time speaking with accountants and lawyers and bankers.”

It has never been Hans’ desire to create a behemoth, just beautiful things.

→ Text by Silvia Anna Barrilà and Emma Firmin



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1. Hans Lensvelt lying on the Chair 101 by Maarten Baas. It won the Milano Design Award in 2017. On the wall, Mother and Child by Atelier Van Lieshout. Photo: JW Kaldenbach
2. The Bucket Chair by Richard Hutten in front of the Stealth Cabinet (1994) by Wiel Arets. The two artworks on the top are part of Hans' collection and are both by Jan Snoeck. Photo: JW Kaldenbach
3. Cloud Table by Atelier Van Lieshout (2012) in Hans' apartment and sales office in Antwerp.
4. Boring Collection Office Chair by Space Encounters. It won the Milano Design Award in 2016. Desk NaBT (Not a Big Thing) by Dirk van Berkel. Steal Cabinet by Wiel Arets (1994). In the background, Hans' art collection with a mix of works received as gifts or purchased both at auctions and flea markets by artists like Tom Hoffmann, Reiner van der Aart and Marinus Boezem. Photo: JW Kaldenbach
5. Office Desk Lamp by Studio Job (2000) on a furniture piece by Donald Judd. Photo: JW Kaldenbach
6. Bucket Chair with casters by Richard Hutten. Sculpture: Office Girl by Pieter Eliens (2019). On the wall: The Invisible Man by Michiel Voet (2018). Photo: JW Kaldenbach
7. Horse Lamp by Front, Labyrinth Chair by Studio Job, Corks by Jasper Morrison, all for MOOOI, artwork by Wouter Pajmans
8. The MVS LC95 chair and the MVS K7V90 cabinet, designed by Maarten Van Severen in Hans' Rotterdam apartment. The sculptures in the cabinet are by Maaike Roozenburg.
9. The Bucket Chair by Richard Hutten, behind it a painting Hans' bought at the De Zwaan auction house in Amsterdam, the oldest auction house in the city which he often visits to buy artworks and paintings of female nudes, his favourite art genre.
10. From left to right, Skull by Atelier Van Lieshout (1997), Random Lights by Bertjan Pot for MOOOI, Kitchen by Atelier Van Lieshout realized for Lensvelt warehouse in Breda (1999), Bronze Age Lounge Chair by Frank Tjepkema, on the table: Rock by Studio Job, Medium Medical Prick by Atelier Van Lieshout (2010).

Unless otherwise mentioned, all works shown have been designed for the Lensvelt brand.



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