

## “I NEVER SAW MYSELF AS AN ARTIST”

Sculptor Sheila Hicks has become a star of the art scene with her wool and fabric sculptures. For a long time she was smiled at for her weaving work. A conversation about staying on task for over sixty years.

Christopher Amend, *Zeit Magazin*, 9 August 2023



“It was like this with a German professor: You do what he tells you.” © Paul Rousteau

We’re actually scheduled to meet Sheila Hicks that day in Paris to talk about her life, but she brings up another topic first: “Do you want to know where you are?” Sheila Hicks, 89, wears her gray hair half-length with red lipstick. She has been making art for over sixty years. Her works are as abstract as many of Gerhard Richter’s works - only they are made of textiles, a material that has long been neglected in the art world. That has changed in the last ten years: Hicks has been honored with major exhibitions at the Tate Modern in London and the Center Pompidou in Paris.

We visit her studio in a backyard in the Latin Quarter, full of her work, full of woven carpets and her famous colorful bolts of fabric sewn into soft sculptures. In the middle of it all, a few employees are sitting at the table, sewing and sorting fabrics.

Of course we want to know what this place is all about. So Sheila Hicks goes first, leads the photographer and I through the yard of the old building, we walk on cobblestones, the yard is full of trees, very well maintained. “The Giacometti Foundation is over there,” she says, “Balthus had his studio here,” and there are references to famous artists everywhere. Together we take a few steps over the cobblestones, she opens the wrought-iron gate to a small alley, “the restaurant Le Procope is the oldest in Paris”, the year 1680 is written on the wall. “Up there,” she now points to the attic, “were the editors of the *Journal du peuple*, the newspaper of the French Revolution.”

# ALISON JACQUES

Sheila Hicks has had her studio here since the 1960s and lives next door. As a young artist, she often took a shortcut through the courtyard on her way to the post office. One day, the owner of the building at the time approached her and wanted to know what she did for a living – in the end he offered her a room.

Sheila Hicks, born in 1934 in Nebraska, USA, moved out into the world early on, first to South America, later to Asia and Africa, but above all to Paris. After our photos, she asks if we don't want to do the interview in a café around the corner, since it's lunchtime. Two women are sitting in front of the café, one almost her own age, the other much younger. "Give me a moment," she says. The three chat in French for a few minutes, then Sheila Hicks comes back, "These are the two people I've known the longest in Paris." We go to the café, now the conversation can begin.

ZEITmagazin: Mrs. Hicks, who were the two women?

Sheila Hicks: They are mother and daughter, I knew her husband and father respectively. His family owned a large building in Paris, and in the 1960s he gave me a room to work on a project for the Ford Foundation.

ZEITmagazin: In 1967 you were commissioned to furnish the New York rooms of the foundation, which supports artists and human rights organizations, with your sculptures.

Hicks: That was one of my earliest projects, yes. When I got the request from the architects, I didn't even have a studio! I happened to have lunch with the man and the older of the two women who are now sitting out there, and I complained about my situation. And he said you can have one of the empty rooms in our house, you just have to promise to move out when the project is done. He was an architect, in the course of the work he became an important advisor, I was completely inexperienced, and he was so proud of it that he even came to New York with me for the opening. That evening he said goodbye to me and said he was now flying on to Chile. And then he's gone.

ZEITmagazin: Disappeared?

Hicks: Yes, he got on a plane on his way back to Paris and the plane disappeared. In the Bermuda Triangle.

ZEITmagazin: You have experienced such dramas again and again. I read about a fellow student with whom you studied painting in the American city of Syracuse and with whom you were accepted at the Yale School of Art in Connecticut in 1959. She committed suicide shortly thereafter.

Hicks: It was even her idea that we should apply there together - give me your portfolio, she said, I'll submit it too. I didn't know her very well. We got accepted, and the summer before we were supposed to start, she killed herself.

ZEITmagazin: Why is that?

Hicks: That never became clear, I hadn't had enough contact with her either. I was confused, I was so young myself and didn't know what to do afterwards. Go back to our old school? But start at Yale?



When the Louvre is closed on Mondays, Sheila Hicks sometimes walks through the museum with other artists to talk about their favorite paintings. © Paul Rousteau

ZEITmagazin: In the end you chose Yale.

Hicks: And I didn't even know what to expect there. I had no idea about Bauhaus!

ZEITmagazin: Josef Albers, one of the most influential artists of the 20th century, was teaching at Yale at the time. He had previously been at the Bauhaus in Weimar, in 1933 he fled from the Nazis to the USA.

Hicks: Yes. That's how life can play. He was my main influence when it came to abstraction and the use of color.

ZEITmagazin: The art professor George Kubler, a colleague of Josef Albers at Yale, drew your attention to the prehistoric textile handicraft in Colombia, which captivates with its abstract color scheme, also an important influence on your work.

Hicks: Yes, I've noticed that I can best implement my abstract pictorial ideas with

# ALISON JACQUES

textiles. That suited me more than painting, for example.

ZEITmagazin: Your knitted or sewn objects are just beautiful to look at at first glance, also because of the often bright colors, but you also tell stories with your abstract art. A work of yours that was recently shown in Berlin consists of many thick ropes hanging side by side on a string: a portrait of your class at Josef Albers in Yale. Each rope represents a student.

Hicks: Yes. The ropes differ, each stands for the respective personality. You have to imagine that time like this: Josef Albers had 20 students in his class, he showed up, gave us an assignment in broken English and disappeared again - that's how he taught. He was like a mathematician, he came up with his theories and we should then prove these theories in our work. When we were done, he would come back, put our paintings and objects together in a group exhibition, and talk to the class about what he had noticed. That's how we learned to analyze our work, including what we had done unconsciously, it was about the question: Is that really what you want to say?

ZEITmagazin: What did you learn about yourself?

Hicks: That I love the challenge of constantly working on myself. That's how I came to Chile, by the way. Albers said to me one day, "I want you to teach my class in Chile."

ZEITmagazin: You were still a student yourself.

Hicks: He was a guest lecturer in architecture in Santiago de Chile and had promised the principal that he would send a student from Yale to continue working with his class there in his spirit. Of course I was completely unprepared, but I just said "Yes, yes" and flew to Chile. The class was made up entirely of men, young aspiring architects, and I represented Josef Albers.

ZEITmagazin: Was that exhausting?

Hicks: Not at all. It was fun, we laughed a lot.

ZEITmagazin: How would you describe the influence of Josef Albers on your way of thinking?

Hicks: It's about perception, about looking closely, again and again and again.

ZEITmagazin: You were born in Nebraska. But you also have German roots, your mother originally came from Germany. Where was she from exactly?

Hicks: That's funny, I don't remember, but my daughter Itaka recently visited the place my mother's parents came from. Wait, I'll call you quickly. (She picks up her cell phone.) Itaka, I'm sitting here with a gentleman, he asks me where exactly in Germany my mother came from, wait, I'll give it to you briefly.

# ALISON JACQUES

The daughter tells us on the phone that she was in Dunzweiler, a village on the border between Rhineland-Palatinate and Saarland, just a week earlier. Not even 1000 people live there today. Her grandmother always said it was a good place to be born, which meant it was also a place to leave.

ZEITmagazin: Do you know what's interesting? Your family's home village is near the French border.

Hicks: I didn't know that.

ZEITmagazin: And you live in Paris today, for 60 years.

Hicks: Most of my life! I owe that to Henri Peyre, a French professor at Yale, who said to me one day: South America is good, but you can't stay in Mexico all your life.

ZEITmagazin: You lived there from 1959 to 1964.

Hicks: He said: If you haven't been to Paris, you don't know what art is! He was right.

ZEITmagazin: Apparently you were never afraid of traveling alone: in the late 1950s you moved to South America alone as a young woman. And then alone to Paris.

Hicks: But I can adapt easily. My first trip was to Chile in 1957, when Josef Albers sent me there. It was like this with a German professor: You do what he tells you. (Laughs) You know I had a German grandfather and when we spent summer vacations with him and his three unmarried sisters in Nebraska, they took care of my upbringing and my brother's. So we did what we were told. And we learned a lot.

ZEITmagazin: What exactly?

Hicks: I think I learned most of what I do now back then. The very simple but important things: always keep your eyes peeled, always listen carefully, learn how to fix your bike so you don't depend on anyone, start friendships and pay attention to what those friendships consist of. And of course all the crafts, embroidery, sewing, painting.

ZEITmagazin: How can you imagine your childhood?

Hicks: Have you ever been to Nebraska?

ZEITmagazin: No.

Hicks: There's a lot of farmland, the prairie, it's the Midwest. We have never provided a US president, and there aren't many people from there that you know,

# ALISON JACQUES

apart from Marlon Brando and Henry Fonda. As a child, I always wondered who was actually from Nebraska that I knew but couldn't find anyone, especially not political role models.

Sheila Hicks' mobile phone rings, someone from her family answers, thanks for "the nice day" yesterday, "a big merci", she says in English-French, "I felt very comfortable".

ZEITmagazin: What was yesterday?

Hicks: I met my children and their partners for dinner, my two grandchildren were there too, the children of my son who also lives in Paris. The daughter is 22 and the son is 16. We talked about their plans for the future. She is studying in Kent, England and will soon be graduating. The 16 year old will work in a factory in Guatemala in the summer, we trust the owner of the factory, it will be a great experience for my grandson.

ZEITmagazin: Traveling obviously runs in your family.

Hicks: That's so important, don't you agree?

A newspaper vendor comes up to our table, "Bonjour Madame!" he says, he has copies of the satirical magazine "Charlie Hebdo" with him, Sheila Hicks buys a copy from him, introduces us and asks him how long he has been working in the area, "Since 1972, Madame," he says and beams, then he goes to the next table.

I remember meeting him on the street years ago and he looked sad. I asked him if everything was ok and he said, "My wife is leaving me." I replied, "Maybe it was time." Then he had to laugh.

ZEITmagazin: Ms. Hicks, when you read interviews that you gave earlier, it is noticeable that you didn't want to talk much about your past.

Hiccup: Who would want that?

ZEITmagazin: You allegedly insist on talking about the future.

Hicks: I'm not ashamed of my past, but it's behind me.

ZEITmagazin: Why should you be ashamed?

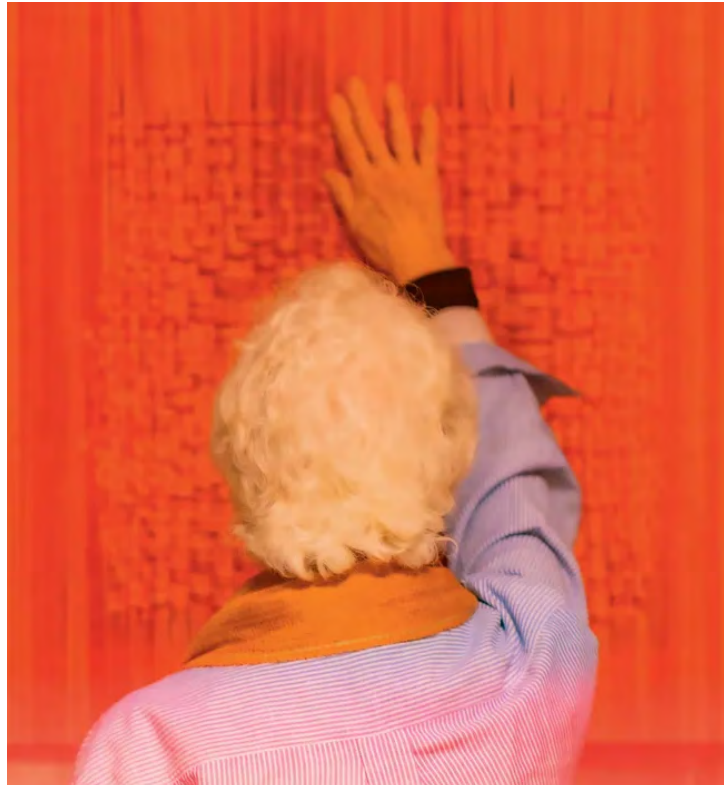
Hicks: Shame might be saying too much, but I've always had my own mind and was always on the go. I've married three times, which is rather unusual for women of my generation. (She laughs.)

ZEITmagazin: For a long time, textile art was not as well recognized as it is today, you had to fight for it. How hard was that?

Hicks: Let me put it this way: in France, for example, the prejudice against the

# ALISON JACQUES

material used to be even greater than the fact that I was a woman. There used to be so few female artists who were shown.



Sheila Hicks in front of her work "Writing With Brick Dust", which is woven from linen. It was created in 2023. © Paul Rousteau

ZEITmagazin: Is it actually true that you drew so well as a child of eight or nine that adults were amazed?

Hicks: Oh yes. My brother and I made posters for our geography teacher. She taught us there was a world outside of Nebraska. My brother and I actually drew all the time – he was better than me, by the way.

ZEITmagazin: How did you come up with that?

Hicks: I imitated him, he knew how to draw perspective. He later became a psychoanalyst.

ZEITmagazin: As a child, despite your talent for drawing, you didn't dream of becoming an artist, you dreamed of becoming a professional swimmer.

Hicks: Yeah, I was a really good swimmer when I was in high school. At the time I was smitten with Esther Williams, she was a star in Hollywood in the 1940s, she became known as an artistic swimmer. She has appeared on television with her synchronized swimming shows. We imitated them with the performances of

# ALISON JACQUES

our swimming group. Incidentally, at that time there was still discussion about whether our sport should become an Olympic sport, but that didn't come until 1984.

ZEITmagazin: Today you are working harder than ever, new exhibitions are planned all over Europe, next week you will travel to Málaga to prepare another exhibition. Where do you get your energy from? You will be 90 next year.

Hicks: Did someone tell me yes. Is it bad?

ZEITmagazin: Not at all! But where does your energy come from?

Sheila Hicks looks out the window of the cafe at the street.

Hicks: The neighborhood just does me good, just look at how busy it is. There is so much to see. I know many artists who are like me, who always continue to work. We're just different. At the moment I really enjoy going to the Louvre on Mondays when it's deserted.

ZEITmagazin: Monday is a rest day. How do you get in there?

Hicks: The curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist invited me and other artists to walk through the museum with him on some Mondays when the Louvre is closed and show him our favorite works and talk about them. I've avoided the Louvre for a long time, it's just too crowded. But this invitation now to be alone with the art there again: There is nothing more beautiful.

ZEITmagazin: At the beginning of our conversation you mentioned the assignment for the Ford Foundation. You have repeatedly worked for clients such as the American furniture manufacturer Knoll, for whom you designed upholstered furniture with woven fabrics. Was that a conscious decision to fund your life?

Hicks: It wasn't a plan, it happened, I suddenly got calls with requests like that. But in hindsight, accepting these assignments was a good decision, yes.

ZEITmagazin: Others might have said: I'm an artist, I don't do commissioned work.

Hicks: I've never seen myself as an artist, I've never said that in my entire life.

ZEITmagazin: Really? What do you describe yourself as instead?

Hicks: Maybe: as a migrant working in a foreign country. (She laughs.)

ZEITmagazin: You have worked almost everywhere, in Japan, in ...

Hicks: ...India, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, South Africa. In Cape Town I worked with women from all over Africa more than 20 years ago, that was on behalf of UNESCO, the workshop was called "Traditions of the Future". We had nothing,



# ALISON JACQUES

no material, no fabrics. So I said: Let's walk the streets together and collect everything that people throw away.

ZEITmagazin: You often use old clothes in your objects and weave them together.

Hicks: Now if we walked out of this cafe and looked for discarded things, what do you think we would find! The life! Take a look out the window: Did you also notice that it had just started raining?

ZEITmagazin: No. They observe their own surroundings very carefully.

Hicks: I'm on, that's all.

ZEITmagazin: Switched on?

Hicks: Yes. Present. I often ask myself where other people are right now. Why aren't they really there, now, in this moment? The newspaper vendor right now - he's definitely on. He looks and listens, he knows where he is going, he observes and reacts.

ZEITmagazin: Is that a way to be happy? to be on?

Hicks: When you're on, you experience both happiness and unhappiness, but you really experience it, and that's what it's all about.

ZEITmagazin: I have one more question, Ms. Hicks. Is it true that you normally spend your days and nights in a four-hour rhythm? Four hours sleep, four hours awake?

Hicks: Yes, often, that's how it turned out. When I'm awake, I work most of the time. Wait, I can show you the most important thing I've done in the last 24 hours: I wrote this text for an exhibition. (She hands her phone across the table.)

ZEITmagazin: Can I read it out loud?

Hicks: Of course.

ZEITmagazin: "When I crawled out of a camping tent for the first time as a child, I discovered trees and forests, the wide sky and clouds on the horizon. Later I discovered architecture, gardens, streets, cars and trains. I have shelter in rooms I have searched and found my way home from school by memorizing streets and buildings, certain houses are burned into my memory and this still happens to me almost 90 years later, so I salute the architect's work Álvaro Siza by lending some of my own linen works to be exhibited alongside his drawings."

Hicks: The work will soon be on display in a house in Belgium built by Álvaro Siza. He's my age, 89.

# ALISON JACQUES

ZEITmagazin: There is another sentence from you on your mobile phone.

Hicks: Yes: "It makes me feel closer to paradise."