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# How to spend it

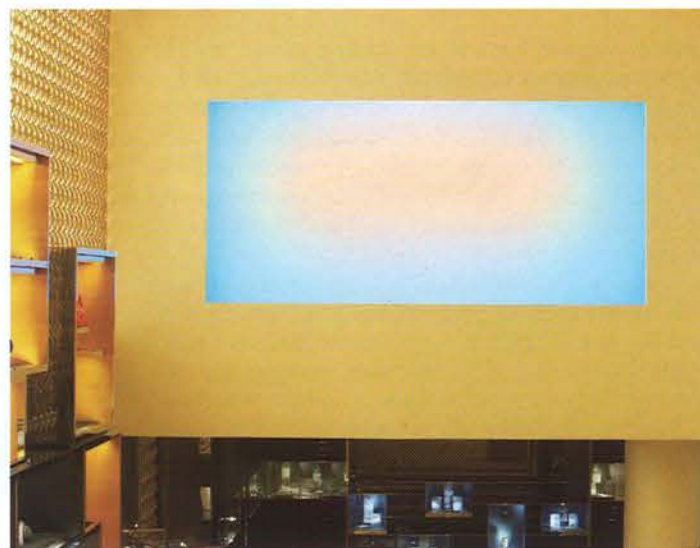
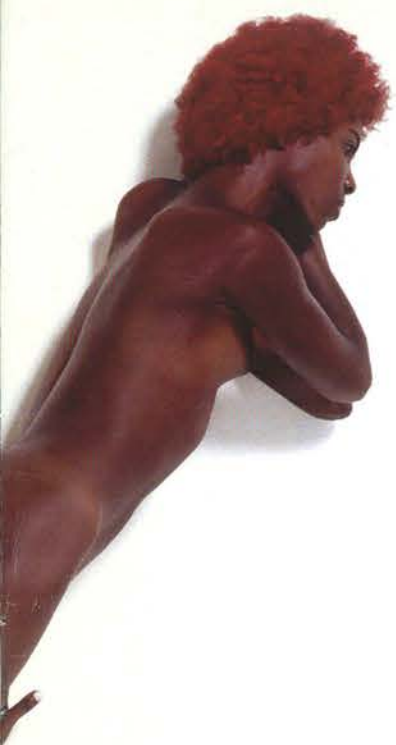
DECEMBER 2005

**A SELL-OUT EXHIBITION?**  
THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP  
BETWEEN FASHION AND ART









# CAN ART EVER SELL HANDBAGS?

**But maybe that's missing the point of Louis Vuitton's new Paris flagship store-cum-gallery, says Vanessa Friedman, who unravels the increasingly complex relationship between art and fashion.**

**I** am so over this whole art and fashion thing." So said one guest to another at the blow-out, celebrity packed party held in October to celebrate the opening of the new Louis Vuitton flagship on the Avenue des Champs-Élysées in Paris. It's a shop that is variously referred to by its owners as "the temple of luxury", "a symbol of France", and "a cultural experience" – anything, in other words, except a shop, despite the fact that its 1,800sq metres and four levels are filled with hundreds of products from the famous logo bags to mother and baby sneakers, limited edition crocodile shoes, velvet eveningwear, sheepskin coats, labradorite necklaces, steamer trunks, tambour watches and barrettes set with semiprecious stones.

As to why the guest was rolling his eyes, it had to do with the "cultural experience" part of the, well, shop: a minor bookstore selling coffee-table tomes about the brand itself (Paul-Gerard Pasols' *Louis Vuitton: The Birth of Modern Luxury*, Harry N Abrams, about £65), travel, art and design – and three major pieces of contemporary art that have been incorporated into the, er, shop.

There is, for example, a 20m long by 2.5m high video work entitled *Alpha* by the US artist Tim White-Sobieski that plays along the escalator (or "travelling staircase") linking one handbag area to the women's shoe department; a constantly mutating modular light sculpture called *First Blush*, Oct 2005 by the US artist James Turrell; and *Your Loss of Senses*, a sensory-deprivation installation by the Danish artist Olafur Eliasson in the elevator that carries customers from the luggage department to the seventh floor. As it happens, the seventh floor is also the level where, next month, Vuitton will officially open the Espace Culturel Louis Vuitton – that is, an art gallery. The inaugural show will be a photography and video exhibit by the Italian artist Vanessa Beecroft, featuring a performance she orchestrated at the store's opening of assorted black and white women, sitting on shelves as if they were pieces of luggage, and composing themselves in the shape of the brand's logo (pictured left).

Of course, the opening of an art gallery by a luxury company is nothing new – Prada has the Fondazione Prada, one of the most important contemporary art galleries in Italy, and Cartier has the Fondation Cartier in the 14th arrondissement of Paris. And the inclusion of art in a store is nothing new, either – Azzedine

Alaïa has Julian Schnabel-designed vitrines and clothes racks in his selling space. But the installation of serious contemporary, as opposed to decorative art – the kind of art normally seen in places such as Tate Modern, where Eliasson recently showed his *Weather Project*, or Berlin's National Gallery, where Beecroft's last performance took place – in a shop is something else entirely.

"It's a major shift," says the art critic Alex Coles, author of a forthcoming book on art and fashion, *Specifying, Filtering, Styling*. "The art critic Clement Greenberg said something like, 'Art has always had an umbilical cord of gold attaching it to the money people' – but that cord also allowed it a critical distance. By placing art in the actual context of the money world, that distance is completely collapsed."

Whether this is a good thing or not, and what it means for the future, is currently a subject of debate in both the art and fashion worlds. Does the Vuitton experiment signify the ultimate selling out of art to commerce, and luxury's ability to buy its way into culture? Or does it herald a new stage in the incorporation of the more challenging aesthetic forms with everyday life? Not surprisingly, the answer depends on who you talk to.

Within LVMH, says Yves Carcelle, CEO of Vuitton, "there was a real consensus that a luxury house could be a vehicle to put art, and especially modern art, in contact with the public. Museums can be intimidating – you feel you shouldn't talk too much in a museum. Here you can, and that creates a different relationship with art."

In this perspective, Vuitton's motives are (not surprisingly) altruistic: bringing high art to a mass audience (although arguably, those who can afford to spend even the introductory 600-750 euros (about £400-£500) on a mini version of an iconic bag are not exactly the "masses"). And certainly, Vuitton's executives, Carcelle and LVMH chairman Bernard Arnault, have a personal history of collecting, the latter being known for his Rothkos, Picassos and Serras, some of which are displayed in the LVMH headquarters. Vuitton also has a history of working with artists: in 2001 Robert Wilson collaborated on their Christmas windows, and last Christmas Ugo Rondinone did the same. Finally, the brand's designer, Marc Jacobs, is famous for both his personal interest in the arts (he is a regular presence at the Basle Art Fair) and his professional collaborations with artists

**Clockwise from left: Vanessa Beecroft's "human" logo, to be shown in January; Tim White-Sobieski's *Alpha* by the escalator; *First Blush*, Oct 2005, James Turrell's light installation is near to women's leather goods.**





such as Stephen Sprouse and Takashi Murakami, both of which produced notably successful handbags for the house. And when it came to working with White-Sobieski, Turrell and Eliasson the company did take care, as Carcelle points out, "to give them complete freedom. We have a philosophy that if you commission an artist, you let them do what they want." In other words, their past actions lend credibility to their claims.

However, as Coles says, "There is a group of people who will be very cynical about what Vuitton is doing and who will jump on it straightaway, because there is a romantic notion of the artist as a pure being working in a vacuum, and this will be seen as dangerous to that." It will be seen, to be blunt, as – literally – buying art to sell shoes; the exploitative end result of a slippery slope.

"Bourgeoisie like to use the intellectuals to clean up their soul; they think progressive, cutting-edge work is good for their image," says Beecroft. "So did they use me? Sure, and fairly cheaply – they didn't pay that much, just like a museum. But in some ways, I like to be used. I felt threatened in the store – it's too much, too many shoes, too many bags, too much with the art – but I like to feel threatened; it's like being in a war zone."

"The reason a brand such as Louis Vuitton is interested in art is because they would like to suggest the design of handbags and clothes is not about just a commercial interest but a quality and handwork – they would like to see themselves in the context of art," says Eliasson. And sure enough, Arnault declares, "The intention is to show the works of art in the house promenade, as if entering the Louis Vuitton house you enter the house of a *visionnaire* who loves art. It shows the relation between Louis Vuitton and the artistic world."

"Of course I was concerned with the idea that art is being used, and whether the context of the work would be disruptive to the quality of the work," says Eliasson. "But in the end I decided it was OK. Besides, I'm being accused of things all the time, and selling out is just one of them."

Not surprisingly, though, this suggestion is rather vociferously contested by the company. "When the great Renaissance painters did the Medici chapels, were they selling out?" cries Peter Marino, the architect who designed the interiors of the store and who has worked with Vuitton since 1998. "No, that's what lasts. We don't

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have popes commissioning art any more; we have big corporations. God help you if the only place someone can see your art is some gallery in Chelsea. You're more likely to be known in 100 years for what you do in a place like this than for one piece of work in a gallery."

Indeed, as Coles says, "In some ways this takes us back to the older system of patronage. After all, there is always this huge financial superstructure holding the art world up and, in many ways, this situation simply lays that bare in a much clearer way. Besides, these artists are smart. They're not just pawns in a company's game. They're getting something out of it too."

"In the end, there are no autonomous non-political spaces left," Eliasson declares. And there's the thing: whatever the true motivations for the development – and like most motivations, they were probably mixed – the corporation has enabled three important pieces of art. And is it better that such pieces exist, albeit in a commercial space, than not exist at all?

White-Sobieski says his work was so technically complicated, "it was the most expensive artwork I've done to date – much more expensive than anything a museum could have supported. I think it's the biggest investment ever in an artist by a company. We developed technology specifically for this work that didn't exist before."

And for their part, both Eliasson and Beecroft describe their pieces as relating specifically to the store's environment. Eliasson's work is, he says, "a suggestion of the opposite of everything that is in the shop: absolutely nothing, a super-empty space in every meaning of the word. I wanted to raise the question of how you engage



Above: the atrium at Maison Louis Vuitton in Paris, where bags are not the only exhibits.

in a shop like this and evaluate what you are there for, and what constitutes the notion of identity? Covering the body with branded material is about creating an image, not about physicality, so it can be quite healthy to understand the physical idea of the body, and taking it away for even 25 seconds allows you to renegotiate 'What is my body?' It could be seen as a critique of luxury and abundance – I guess it is – but it is also up to the person using the elevator to decide for themselves."

Beecroft's piece is about the fact that "luxury includes exploitation, slavery, injustice – it's why it interests me. I always feel when I see Louis Vuitton luggage in an airport that there is something very violent about the skin – it's like human skin – and I wanted to evoke that with the contrast of black and white skin, and install the women in the store with the same violence I feel when I look at the bags."

This is probably not quite what the company had in mind when it decided to incorporate art into the store environment. Indeed, *Your Loss of Senses*, for example, "did give me pause for a moment or two", one executive

Thurman at Carcelle's house). A few months later they came back with their proposals.

What Vuitton got, then, was what they got and, according to Marino, they were careful not to put what they got "directly next to the product" but to differentiate it in some way: though the White-Sobieski, for example, connects the bag and shoe department, it is itself tunnel-like in experience, and the Turrell, in Marino's words, "floats above the product". Interestingly, while the artists claim the product doesn't interfere with the art, Arnault himself says the art "does not interfere with the retailing spaces" – though arguably both distinctions are specious, since you are down there with the product while you are watching the artwork. Either way, however, all the artists say the company behaved impeccably when presented with their ideas.

"They gave me complete freedom," says White-Sobieski of Vuitton. "And when I did my proposal they accepted everything, and we signed a contract that day," even though the sheer logistics of putting these kinds of works in a shop environment, even a big shop environment, were extremely complicated. "There was nothing easy about this project. We had 16 people working on it, which is literally twice as many as on any other project. It's the biggest thing we've ever worked on," says Eric Carlson, the architect for the store, who has worked with Vuitton since 1997.

"In terms of price per metre, it was much more than any museum, and there were a huge amount of worries. We wondered whether people would fall down and hurt themselves on the escalator because they were looking at the video instead of the stairs, for example, and we had everything mocked up and tested."

The Eliasson, in turn, threw up all sorts of fire hazard problems. In the end, a hidden light had to be installed in Eliasson's elevator to please the fire inspectors and cater to those with claustrophobia or a fear of the dark. The artist professes not to mind – "A work of art is not about creating paranoia," he says – though he also remarks, "Of course, I'd like them not to turn it on."

"It took huge balls to sign up these artists!" says Marino, referring to the rather subversive nature of what they produced. Yet as Coles points out, "The fact that there is a tension between artwork and product may actually bring the company more credibility – it looks like it's about more than just sell, sell, sell."

"Look, there is a hugely commercial aspect to art, and this is simply a blatant display of the fact that in many ways art is as commercial as fashion. A lot of people won't like that idea, but it's true," says Andrew Bolton who, as an associate curator of the Costume Institute at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, is familiar with art/fashion controversy. When the Met's big show on Chanel was underwritten by the house of Chanel, accusations of undue influence flew.

"I think it's a good thing," says Angela Flowers, chairman and founder of the Flowers galleries in London and New York. "After all, what do you have if you don't have art? A bare wall? Some mirrors? But the problem could lie in it not being noticed or understood as art, in which case it just becomes an appendage to the shoes."

And that's another question: if art is hung on the walls and no one realises it's there, can it have an impact? Certainly, at the store opening, the various actors in attendance, such as Gillian Anderson and Diane Kruger, seemed more interested in trying on the sunglasses than spending quality time watching the change of light in *First Blush* – if they even registered it at all.

"I don't think it really matters," says Jacobs, "I love the idea that, regardless of whether a customer knows it or not, they've had this art experience."

"Well, it's written there on the wall," says Carcelle. "And we have educated the staff to say, when they are speaking to a customer, 'And oh, by the way, did you see...?'"

"I expect the art world will criticise this," says Beecroft. "But I think it's time for all those people to admit these barriers are breaking down. So ultimately, I'm happy to be there and try this, because I think it's good to provoke the art audience. I'm not sure putting art in a shop is the right thing to do, but I don't think museums are very interesting either. At least this way, we start the conversation." ♦