



# Real True. Serious

Art in a Brand New World

words CHRISTOPHER MOONEY

*A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking.*  
**Andy Warhol, 1985**

## NON-SITE 90210

*They wanted what we did to come across as a serious work of art...  
They saw the potential in the reception, that it would come across  
as 'Louis Vuitton did a serious work of art'.*

**Danish conceptualist Olafur Eliasson, *New York Magazine*,  
9 November 2006**

It's hard enough to find a good book in Beverly Hills, let alone a serious work of art. Especially devoid of the latter is Rodeo Drive, the shiny shopping bauble at its core. A 14-foot *Torso* (2003) by Robert Graham stands at the intersection with Dayton Way – its statuette version is the 'Oscar of fashion' for the Beverly Hills Walk of Style Award. A fine art gallery a block or so north offers immediate access to a wide variety of paintings, drawings and graphics in all price ranges. I dropped the quotation marks in that last line – you know where they go.

While there may not be much art, there is some starchitecture: Anderton Court Shops by Frank Lloyd Wright ('the greatest visual artist ever born and raised in America', according to Robert Hughes in a recent issue of *The New York Review of Books*); and the Prada Epicenter, a three-floor facadeless retail 'experience' by Rem Koolhaas ('an artist and innovator in the vanguard', according to the Praemium Imperiale committee).

The rest of Rodeo is pure commercial outlet – a three-block strip of nondescript, anywhere-upmarket brandscape.

And that's as it should be. Rodeo Drive is aggressively and brazenly about shopping – 'shopping as shopping', as Koolhaas puts it. Yes, the aspirational branding blather applies, but as Koolhaas might say, the bottom line is, well, the bottom line: Rodeo Drive does not want to sell you a bill of goods; it wants to sell you a bunch of stuff.

## ART SHOP, SHOP ART

*Art Nouveau botanical prints at Prada, hand-painted brush strokes at Dolce & Gabbana, luminous blocks of color at Jil Sander – fashion week here was an Italian renaissance, the runways filled with moving artwork.*

***Los Angeles Times*, 7 October 2007**

Koolhaas's 'experiential space' is driven by high-tech Prada yada about aura and spectacle, but the art isn't in the store; if anything, it is the store (and of course, the clothes – 'true works of art', as the collocation goes). 'Artwork' in the traditional sense – paintings, photographs, prints, films, books, sculptures, videos – are in the Fondazione Prada in Milan.

The newly redesigned Chanel flagship on the corner of Rodeo Drive and Brighton Way seeks to be seen and viewed differently. Peter Marino's very present facade of white microglass in a grid of blackened steel mimics the famous Chanel N°5 perfume box. Hundreds of backlit Chanel monograms glow inside the wall of the terraced top floor. In between, a large second-storey window displays a 105-foot-long double strand of hand-blown Murano glass balls extravagantly

lined with gold leaf. Visible from the street and dramatically lit at night, the installation is the most beautiful object on the Drive. More than anything else on view – the pretty dresses and the impeccable suits and the fancy gimcrack – it is a true work of art.

But is it an artwork?

## 'BELLE HALEINE, EAU DE VIOLETTE', 1921, PHOTOCOLLAGE

*In a futuristic pavilion created by the architect Zaha Hadid, some twenty internationally renowned artists will exhibit work that was inspired by the elements that give the Chanel bag its identity. Their unique visions, unexpected interpretations – poetic, cheeky and inspirational – cannot fail to reveal the multiple facets of this legendary bag.*

***Chanel's Mobile Art press release*, 10 June 2007**

When 'superflat' art star Takashi Murakami reinterprets a handbag for Louis Vuitton, the result is a new handbag design, not a work of art. When Pierre Huyghe designs a changing room for Dior, the result is a changing room. When Zaha Hadid, inspired by a handbag, designs a Chanel Contemporary Art Container, the result is a building. But what do you call the handbag-inspired 'contemporary art' that it contains? What do you call a photograph by Nobuyoshi Araki of a naked woman suspended in the 'signature' gold chains of a Chanel handbag?

Returning to Olafur Eliasson's comments about Louis Vuitton's desire for a 'serious work of art', what do you call a Louis Vuitton Christmas window display by Olafur Eliasson? What do you call a Louis Vuitton elevator by Olafur Eliasson?

Back on Rodeo Drive, is the colossal necklace specially commissioned for Chanel – 'the iconic modern woman, Mademoiselle Chanel was seldom seen without her pearls' – a 'serious work of art'? It certainly has 'serious' artworld cred. Its creator is Jean-Michel Othoniel, whose jewel-like installations have adorned the Pompidou, the Louvre, Tate Liverpool, the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice and the Fondation Cartier. Installed in any of these institutions, or in Emmanuel Perrotin, Othoniel's Paris gallery, the art/not-art question would never arise. Why would it? In 1961 Robert Rauschenberg sent a telegram to the gallerist Iris Clert proclaiming, 'This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so'; at the Mobile Art conference that accompanied Hadid's Art Container, Karl Lagerfeld said, "Design and architecture are the *real* art of today. Otherwise, it is just a question of point of view, a gallery's decision as to what is and what is not art."

Bracketing for now the phenomenological and design-and-architecture-as-art debates, let's focus on context. Does something happen to a work of art when it hangs in a shop window? How does it maintain its integrity as art? And in an art age of hypertrophied market, where curators, dealers and directors leapfrog to and fro, from gallery to auction house to art fair to public art institution, and artists like Murakami put their stamp on brands and sell the resulting merch at twice the Rodeo Drive price in installation-cum-shops as part of midcareer retrospectives – what can integrity possibly mean?

Bear with me as the rhetorical deluge renarrows: what keeps Othoniel's necklace from becoming store decor? Would it be a work of art if made out of identical elements but by a window dresser? Is Othoniel, in this context, a window dresser?

I'll stop there – the questions are naive and miss the point.

**'PRADA DEATH CAMP', 1998, CARDBOARD, INK AND ADHESIVE**

*Very often I feel very culpable for being a brand... [Tom Sachs] talked about how at some point something that was against a brand became a brand – for himself. So everybody wanted this kind of art because it was a brand. And so he decided to not do it anymore. And then he confessed that 'sometimes I prostituted myself and did some'. I am aware of all these people who don't like brands.*

**Miuccia Prada, New York Magazine, 1 April 2006**

Mobile Art's curator, Fabrice Bousteau, adamantly assures me that the project is not *la pub*. "It is utopic, a contemporary art exhibit free to everybody, nourished by Chanel but profoundly artistic. There is no commercial value. It is a generous gift."

Karl Lagerfeld: "Fashion and luxury are the taxes of vanity. We are now returning these taxes to the artists and architects... For what this costs, we could have inundated the world with posters and ads, if it was a commercial operation. But it is a nobler project."

Hans Ulrich Obrist, the Serpentine Gallery codirector who has held exhibitions in hotel rooms, kitchens, on board aeroplanes, in the Battersea Power Station and yes, in a shop, is generally positive about the phenomenon. "It allows artists to spread beyond the limits of the artworld." But: "I think of that great slogan of [the Vietnamese military strategist] General Giap that the artist Mario Merz used: 'When we win territory, we lose concentration'. Through these other endeavours art gains territory, and is able to gain 'ubiquity', but only so long as there remains a concentration of exhibitions in galleries and museums."

Here, as elsewhere (Eliasson gave his Vuitton money to charity), is Prada's and Sach's sense of culpability, though only just. The Murakamian interpenetrations of art and commerce, much more than Duchamp's or Warhol's or Koons's or Kostabi's or Hirst's, have redefined integrity. His is an honest buck. Contemporary art, commercial art, high, low and 'fine art' – the taxonomical distinctions have been superflattened into lucrative dust. Art is design, architecture is fashion, a museum is a store and a store is a museum. The stigma of commodification has been recommodified, repackaged and resold.

Art and commerce have eaten off the same plates since the Greeks, who flogged Hellenic paintings and sculptures up and down the Mediterranean. The Church invented the site-specific commission and, along with princes, bankers and merchants, cobranded the Renaissance. Michelangelo was as 'compromised' as Murakami. 'Selling out' is a bill of goods, 'keeping it real' a fraud. If people want to keep it real, says U2's Larry Mullen, whose band took flack for selling their song *Vertigo* (2004) to Apple, "they should work in a fucking coal mine".

**HOW FAR WOULD YOU GO FOR LOVE?**

*It's the duty of a brand like Cartier to spread different messages.*  
**Frédéric de Narp, president and CEO of Cartier North America, 1 June 2007**

The Cartier boutique across the street from Chanel on Rodeo Drive has an eye-catching window – a giant Pop-arty, Robert Indiana-looking LOVE sculpture. The piece decorates Cartier windows in New York, Waikiki, Boston, San Francisco, Tokyo, Paris, Shanghai and London. It is

part of a promotional campaign for the brand's Love line of jewellery. Introduced more than 30 years ago, the iconic Love bracelet, with its immediately recognisable screw motif, has become one of the most coveted designs in the world, and the ultimate symbol of love.

OK, not fair. Press release piffle aside, the Cartier brand is undeniably a true, genuine and serious artworld player. The Fondation Cartier, a must-have of the Paris artscape, opened its doors in 1984, long before Prada's Fondazione, François Pinault's Palazzo Grassi in Venice or Bernard Arnault's Espace Louis Vuitton on the Champs-Élysées, and long before the first Hugo Boss Prize, Mandarin Duck's Search for Art and Bulgari's Art Basel Conversations. Back when art patronage was the exclusive territory of banks, biscuit-makers and the National Endowment for the Arts.

"The role of the patron is to disseminate art," says Cartier's director of exterior relations. Why? Because art is a "communication tool that supports an image of creativity". That I'll buy. Cartier art branding is traditional. It does not 'intervene' or 'penetrate' the way Chanel does when it commissions Hadid, Araki, Sophie Calle (actually Soju Tao, who responded to the 'Urgent! Artist Required' ad Calle placed in a Japanese art magazine to find an artist to do her piece in her place), Wim Delvoye, Fabrice Hyber, Stephen Shore, Subodh Gupta, Pierre & Gilles, Yoko Ono and 12 others to 'interpret' a handbag, or the way Louis Vuitton does when it pays Eliasson in order to place one of his 'irises' in each of its 364 shops.

True, Cartier's Love campaign has an online art exhibition – to 'illustrate that our notions of love are all poignant vignettes and works of art', with commissioned works by eight young artists. But these are virtual realities. Cartier's keen interest in the arts is especially visible in its commissions policy: a key feature of patronage, commissions reflect a total commitment to artistic production, from the moment of conception to the finished work.

No quotation marks, but you get the picture.

Cartier does not put art in its windows.

**URGENT! ARTIST REQUIRED (WORK IN PROGRESS)**

*I think commissions are great. But it's the same for Chanel as it was for the Church. If the Pope is paying, you have to put Christ in the painting. It's propaganda.*

**Peter Marino, Spago's, 18 September 2007**

Inside the Chanel shop are other works, including an elegant multi-stranded bead piece by Paolo Pivi, again 'inspired by Chanel signature pearls'. Dozens of Coco's favourite flower – the camellia – encrust a Sèvres porcelain torso by Johan Creten and a digitised découpage by Peter Dayton (the latter lines the inside walls of the elevator; on the day I visited, the architect was working with engineers to make sure it remained parked on the ground floor with the doors open when not in use, "otherwise it's just a fucking black box"). The French artist François-Xavier Lalanne is represented by a stylised stag cast in bronze, modelled on a deer statue in Coco's collection.

In all, there are five finely crafted works produced by internationally renowned artists through the largesse of a creative brand whose connection to the arts goes back to Coco's prewar collaborations with Cocteau, Picasso, Stravinsky and Diaghilev. Some – the gold-laden Othoniel, for example, which took eight months to build, or the Creten, a single piece of bisque-fired ceramic so big it

required a new Sèvres recipe for porcelain – are extravagant and ambitious *tours de maître*. It is fair to say – and both artists say it – that if Chanel hadn't commissioned these works, they probably would have never been made. And they are respectfully presented: unlike the feather-filled glass table by Fredrickson/Stallard, the cast-bronze chandelier by the Goosens atelier and the outfits and accessories by Karl Lagerfeld, the artworks are accompanied by museum-grade wall labels. The Chanel staff is fully briefed and answers questions. There is a handsome catalogue.

"I promised them a dress rack wouldn't end up in the middle of it," Marino tells me over a chicken lunch at Spago's. A coalescing force behind fashion's fusion with contemporary art, Marino has designed most of the fashion world's flagships – Chanel, Armani, Fendi, Valentino, Louis Vuitton, Dior, Donna Karan, Ermenegildo Zegna and Barney's New York – and helped build and showcase important private and public art collections around the world. He is very protective of his artists, and they are devoted to him ("I don't work with the brand, I work with Peter," they each said in turn). He is a passionate and prodigious art collector – modern and contemporary art, vintage photography, Renaissance bronzes, nineteenth-century ceramics and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century books. His first private commission was to remodel Andy Warhol's townhouse – for which he was paid in pictures. Now busy building megahotels and shopping malls and flagships, he has no time for talk of culpability. "Putting Murakami bags in a Louis Vuitton shop in an exhibition space to draw attention to the commerce-art connection. Hello? Give me a break. Warhol was drawing these same parallels in 1966. Art is commerce, baby, and right now it's a three-way collision – art, fashion and architecture. As long as the money lasts, it's great for everyone. As long as the money lasts."

## A COKE IS A COKE

*When I decided I wanted to be an artist I decided I wanted to communicate with people. That's why I make paintings and drawings. But now I have a much bigger desire for direct representation.*

**Takashi Murakami, CNN, 4 October 2006**

Direct representation: Murakami's much bigger desire and Obrist's reference to General Giap's slogan call to mind a different kind of concentration, one touched upon by Emmanuel Perrotin at a conference held in Paris last March to study the 'limit point of intervention' between artists and luxury brands.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the big luxury groups began investing in galleries, which will become their research centres, just as they have their small brands, which they hope will grow. We are going to see constellations of galleries under one management. I think that this will exist secretly. And I think it will have to stay secret."

Let's push it further. When fashion designers sell controlling stakes in eponymous labels, they are potentially forfeiting the right to continue designing under their own names – think Jil Sander, Helmut Lang, Inès de la Fressange, Chantal Thomass and Hervé Léger (who changed his name to Hervé L. Leroux to produce his work independently).

Could what happened to Léger/Leroux happen in art? Could fashion's much bigger desire swallow whole identities?

It has been reported that Lord Foster (praised by the 1999 Pritzker Prize jury for 'his steadfast devotion to the principles of architecture as

an art form') commands additional fees for projects promoted with the words 'designed by Norman Foster' rather than 'designed by Foster + Partners', his multinational practice. Meanwhile he's sold a stake in his firm – and by extension, his name – to a private equity group. Similarly, Murakami envisages a day when he will step down as president of his multinational art production and management corporation, which will keep his name – an art first. Or maybe he'll sell his controlling interest – and his eight artists – to Louis Vuitton (or any other major fashion house you choose to name), resign his post and change his name. Or maybe Sophie Calle will pull a David Bowie and float her persona on the stock market, get caught up in a hostile takeover and change her name to Sophie C. Casse. Would it matter? A Sophie Calle is a Sophie Calle is a Soju Tao is a Sophie C. Casse. As with Warhol's Coke, would any amount of money make it any better?

No artist approached turned down a Chanel commission. No artist approached to participate in the Mobile Art project said no. Why would they? In this brand new superflat world, where everything is transparent and market-driven, including the words we use to say so, only a sap would do otherwise.

As being and doing dissolve into the virtual shadows, art alone retains a connotative vestige of the noumenal, and holds out for a higher perch. Higher than base 'luxury' and more than mere celebrity, it is the limit point of the name. Artists don't have to be 'it' or 'just do it'; they only have to sign it. Which is why fashion has such a jones for art. Fashion offers artists 'exposure' and 'freedom', what Obrist calls new 'circuits' of communication and 'parallel realities', in exchange for their names, which are not just shortcuts to highbrow hipness, but lodestones of uniqueness, ready-made talismans of creative power.

You want integrity? Individuality? Artistry? Name it, it's yours. •

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### WORKS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Peter Marino  
*Chanel Rodeo Drive*, 2007  
photo: Martin Muller  
Courtesy Peter Marino Architect, New York

Rem Koolhaas  
*Prada Epicenter Rodeo Drive*, 2004  
photo: Lydia Gould  
Courtesy OMA - AMO, Rotterdam

Zaha Hadid  
*Chanel Contemporary Art Container*, 2007  
Courtesy Zaha Hadid Architects, London

Jean-Michel Othoniel  
*Mon lit (adaptable en salon ottoman)*, 2002  
Murano glass, steel, 290 x 190 x 240 cm  
Courtesy Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris