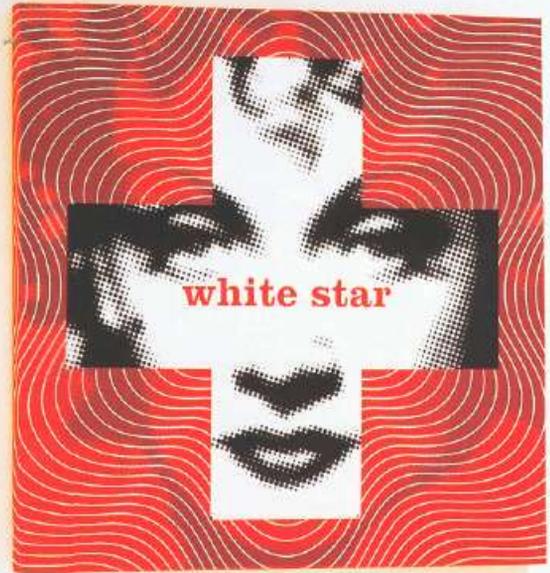


Off the wall

Beside vending machines and ceiling ducts, in the corridors and the workshops, Montblanc has turned its corporate art collection into a very unusual factory floor show

PHOTOGRAPHY: JOËL TETTAMANTI WRITER: SOPHIE LOVELL



STARATTRACTION

The Montblanc art collection features works by international contemporary artists, all of which take as their starting point the company's white star logo. This unfitted piece, next to a cold drinks vending machine, is by Finnish artist Robert Lucandet



The Hamburg-based company Montblanc, 102 years old this year, has long been synonymous with handcrafted writing instruments of the highest quality. For over a century, no self-respecting royal, head of state or CEO would be seen signing an important piece of paper with anything other than a pen topped with that little, white, soft-edged star that is the company's trademark.

Cultivating and maintaining a brand identity long term can be a difficult business, especially in a world where constant innovation is so commonly considered to be the key to success. For a brand that engenders a certain timelessness and talks of handcraft and

quality of materials, this can present something of a problem.

Montblanc's technological and economic breakthrough came in 1909 when it introduced a new kind of fountain pen. The iconic Meisterstück 149 appeared in 1924. And not a lot has changed in the design since. Tinkering with a brand of this kind can be catastrophic unless carefully managed.

In the company's view, writing is about culture and literature, so a strong commitment to the arts in general makes good brand-boosting sense. Or, as Ingrid Roosen-Trinks, head of international PR for Montblanc, puts it: 'The brand gives easy access to the world of the

arts. The connection was already there when the brand was born.'

When Roosen-Trinks joined Montblanc in 1996, it was already engaged in a number of cultural programmes. She was initially drafted in to do more, including developing the sponsorship of the Philharmonic der Nationen, an international orchestra conceived by Leonard Bernstein and Yehudi Menuhin, as well as award schemes for outstanding arts patron. But Norbert Platt, the then CEO of Montblanc, was keen that the brand also involve itself with fine art.

'Our first thought was to work with artists in relation to our products,' recalls Roosen-Trinks. 'But most of them »



GREAT WHITE

In a rest area, next to a hot drinks vending machine, is Danish artist Jan Christensen's *Superimposed Stars* (left), while Moscow-born photographer Viktoria Binsehtok's *White Bedstr* is by a staircase (below)

has been a strong connection between German business and fine art. Some of the largest and best-known collections in the country belong to the likes of Deutsche Bank, Dresdner Bank, Daimler, the Deutsche Bb' rsc, and industrial manufacturers such as Wirth.

Dr Stephan Frucht, head of the Cultural Committee of German Business within the BDI (German Industry Federation) and an expert on corporate cultural involvement, says that art is traditionally collected by companies such as banks and insurance brokers who have products and services that are hard to represent physically. 'These companies use the sensual presence of art to create a more intensive connection to the customer on one hand, and the employee on the other,' he says.

'Exhibiting the collections,' he continues, 'offers an ideal cultural and societal framework within which to build up and deepen this contact, as well as giving visibility, in the truest sense of the word, to the cultural engagement of the company.' Montblanc, on the other hand, having a very tangible product, uses a contemporary art collection to symbolise a sense of innovation without actually having to change or follow fashions with its core product.

Another interesting feature of the Montblanc collection is that specifying the inclusion of the company logo within the artworks actively distances the collection from what Roosen-Trinks calls 'the speculative commercial arts environment'. In other words, from an investment perspective, the collection probably isn't worth close to what a similar collection of works would be by the same artists without the added (Montblanc) star quality. Roosen-Trinks explains that this is not just corporate egotism, or even plain bad taste, but part of a strategy to strengthen the function of the collection as part and parcel of the company's world of work.

In order to underline this internal branding role, the Montblanc collection is not housed in a purpose-built gallery or in the corridors of power on the executive floor, but integrated into the entire Montblanc workplace. The artworks are hung in corridors, staircases, coffee rooms and production areas. You will find a Lars .Morell tucked behind a fire exit door where smokers gather for a quick fag on their break and a Yang Yong next to a »

wanted to design a pen.' Tampering with the company's iconic product, however, was not an option, so instead they hit on the idea of commissioning artists to create pieces that somehow incorporated the Montblanc star, itself an abstracted image of the snow-topped peak of the real Mont Blanc. The idea marked the start of what is now one of the world's most idiosyncratic corporate art collections.

In 2002, assisted by the Hamburg Art Society, Montblanc began commissioning works from young, up-and-coming artists. Roosen-Trinks acted as curator. The Montblanc Cutting Edge Art Collection grew rapidly and now includes some 100 works, with pieces from artists such as Tom Sachs, Liam Gillick and Gary Hume, and photographers such as David LaChapelle and Sam Taylor-Wood. The collection is predominantly housed at the company international HQ in Hamburg, which is also where the pens are manufactured, and every piece of art features at least one Montblanc star.

Company art collections are nothing new in Germany. Since the 1970s, there





vending machine or a Heimo Zobernig by the emergency defibrillator. On the factory floor, there is an installation piece by Stefan Kern suspended between the ceiling ducts and the Monica Bonvicini ... in the delivery area has a chunky iron bar fixed to the wall beneath it to protect it from close encounters with passing forklifts. There's no special lighting, no fancy framing and very little of the respect usually accorded to company investments. It provides a refreshing contrast to all that high-end luxury that the company workers produce.

Montblanc is a rapidly expanding company these days* As part of the giant Swiss luxury goods group Richemont, which also includes Van Cleef & Arpels, Cartier and Dunhill in its portfolio, it has grown way beyond being just a manufacturer of pens into a full luxury lifestyle brand. Montblanc now has 28 subsidiary companies in 70 countries and produces leather goods, watches-jewellery (including its own patented-cut, Montblanc star-shaped diamonds) and fragrances. The firm also has more than 360 boutique outlets worldwide, compared to just 60 ten years ago.

Given such rapid international expansion, communicating identity and core values to its people and beyond is



SIX OF THE BEST

Stefan Kern's ceiling installation (top), and Philippe Decrauzat's Six Star, next to fire extinguishers (above)

essential. Every two months, and whenever there is a training seminar in the Hamburg headquarters, Rooscn-Trinks gives guided tours of the arc collection to new Montblanc recruits and first-time visitors, and she has just introduced a new scheme to display limited-edition prints of selected works in the company's boutiques. She values the challenging effect that contemporary art has on people and, precisely because art is not always easy, believes it challenges people to think in new ways.

Lutz Bethge, Montblanc's current CEO, is just as enthusiastic about the collection as his predecessor, Platt (who has gone on to become CEO of Richemont), especially this role in stimulating creative challenge.

'A company like Montblanc, with its century-old tradition, must keep questioning itself, must always be prepared to explore new options, not breaking with tradition yet remaining open to new forms of audacity and creativity/ says Bethge. 'This is why we see our collection as [being] not decorative but rather provocative.' And in this sense, the rather unorthodox Montblanc Cutting Edge Art Collection has turned out to be a pretty shrewd investment. www.montblanc.com/95.php