

# The Culture of Commerce

Brand curation and the art of communication

by **Sebastien Agneessens**

in conversation with editor **Lucy Johnston**



Sebastien Agneessens is a New York-based curator and founder of Formavision, a boutique that aims to expose contemporary art and design to a broader audience than its insiders. He curates and produces art projects for Diesel, Lexus, Coca-Cola, Sharp, Starbucks and Converse. He graduated from Bordeaux University, France, and received an MBA from SDA Bocconi, Milan. He was a marketing executive for Armani in Madrid and for Chanel in New York before he opened The Point, a gallery showcasing multimedia installations and collaborations with artists. In January 2007, German publisher Die Gestalten Verlag internationally released his first book, *Remastered*.

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At a time when consumers are increasingly informed, independent-minded and aesthetically sophisticated, brands are challenged to assume the role of cultural curators in order to inspire meaningful – and culturally relevant – dialogue within their customer communities.

## Lucy: What was the thinking behind Formavision?

**Sebastien:** The desire to create Formavision came from my observation of a serious gap between branded communication campaigns and consumers' interests. I was also greatly influenced by the concept of emotional branding developed by Marc Gobé of Desgrippes Gobé, and I wanted to explore its artistic and design connotations. To me, art and design are the epitome of intellect and emotion, which is why the marriage of branding and art seemed like a natural *mélange*. That is the business explanation.

Now this wouldn't have worked without my sincere interest in art and design, and my earlier experience of working hand in hand with artists to develop exhibitions. Before I founded Formavision, I had set up a gallery called The Point with two partners, where we developed installations. Since nothing was for sale, I decided to look for sponsors to finance our shows, and after a few successful episodes, Diesel contacted me to curate and produce their own art programme. And so Formavision was born.

## Lucy: So how would you define Formavision's mission and relationship with brands?

**Sebastien:** Formavision is a brand curating boutique that collaborates with contemporary artists and creative studios to design, develop and produce original art campaigns that resonate with consumers on an emotional level. People are increasingly informed, independent-minded and aesthetically sophisticated so brands have to generate a culturally relevant dialogue within their customer communities and show in every communication effort that they bring genuine added value.

Each campaign we create tells a story distinct to the brand it serves, reinforcing the brand vision and harnessing creativity, authenticity and self-expression to create a cultural infrastructure. Consumers, especially target market influencers, experience the brand's values and aspirations through that infrastructure.

**“To me, art and design are the epitome of intellect and emotion, which is why the marriage of branding and art seemed like a natural *mélange*.”**

## Lucy: How do you define these target market influencers?

**Sebastien:** I think that most of our projects speak to the creative community as it is defined in Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Estimated at some 40 million Americans, this creative community lives and works pretty much like artists and scientists traditionally have. They are independent in their choices, personal tastes and relationships and in their use of time, and appear to be major influencers of society. This large community is composed of many subgroups which can be targeted individually, but it is generally the whole creative class that we target through our projects.

## Lucy: How do you view your role as 'curator'?

**Sebastien:** Every curator has a different approach. I see myself as a catalyst of creative projects, encouraging artists and designers, and working closely with them to develop installations. These differ from traditional brand campaigns or advertising in that we don't mix the products and the art in our installations. We evoke the values of a brand through our installations, and then directly showcase the product in a different environment. Our initial motivation is to maintain our artistic integrity, and our style is to deliver strong messages in an elegant way.

**“Today brands must find ways to infiltrate the fragmented media; and mostly this can be done through entertainment and culture. Brands now create their own media content, through sponsored concerts, exhibitions, documentaries, films, books and environmental efforts. Through this effort, they bring culture to the world.”**

#### Case study

**Starbucks Salon**\_ Striking a chord with the local community

**Location**\_ New York

**Date**\_ 2006

Positioning the brand in a culturally sensitive light and combining a coffee house with a gallery and performance space, this temporary, touring venue brought together free live music, book and poetry readings and an art exhibition, with an emphasis on showcasing local talent. In a survey by *Time Out New York* 68% of respondents said the project made a positive contribution to New York.



**Lucy: How you approach ‘evoking the values of a brand’?**

**Sebastien:** The most critical part is to forget the corporate background that the brand might come from. Your thought process should be confined to the role that the brand plays in our lives – either its current role, or the ideal role – and then play with that. For instance, when Lexus launched the new LS460, they wanted to convey the fact that the car offered a seamless driving experience. For me, a seamless driving experience is when you don’t realise that you’re driving any more. Which is why we created Light and Speed, a show based on the travel of the mind, and invited artists whose work expressed that concept.

We took the same approach for Starbucks. We didn’t want the show to speak about coffee, but rather about the culture of coffee shops and the fact that Starbucks produce music, books and films, and are a true force in contemporary culture.

**Lucy: What is the motivation behind brands incorporating culture and art into commerce?**

**Sebastien:** When you look at the evolution of media today, you notice that people are increasingly able to edit the information they are exposed to, whether it is online, on TiVo, iTunes, YouTube, or wherever. This means that brands must find ways to infiltrate these fragmented media; and mostly this can be done through entertainment and culture.

So this is why you see a whole series of cultural efforts coming from brands, which now create their own media content, through sponsored concerts, exhibitions, documentaries, films, books and environmental efforts. Brands need to positively contribute to our lives to be listened to and adopted – and they can do this through delivering culture in an engaging and provocative manner. We were lucky to work with Diesel as our first client because they do all of the above, and always experiment in several creative areas, most of the time with great success.

**Lucy: Where did these ‘cultural efforts’ from brands start emerging?**

**Sebastien:** I think it all started with the fashion world. Aside from the Diesel Denim Gallery, I could list the Prada Foundation, the series of art projects of agnès b in their Paris gallery (Galerie du Jour) and their related publications, the Guggenheim Hugo Boss Prize, and the Espace Louis Vuitton in Paris. I also personally love Swarovski’s concept Crystal Palace, for which numerous editions of design sculptures, integrating the brand’s crystals, have been produced and sold to collectors over the years.

But today this goes further than fashion. In the automotive industry Volkswagen opened Hotel Fox in 2005, commissioning around 21 artists to design the 61 guestrooms, and Ferrari are developing a gigantic museum in Abu Dhabi. And Starbucks are obviously doing a great job with their label Hear Music; after signing Bob Dylan, they released the new Paul McCartney album, *Memory Almost Full*, in May. They have become a genuine, strong voice in music distribution.

**Lucy: Do you think consumers respond particularly positively to brands that incorporate cultural and artistic references?**

**Sebastien:** When we worked on the Starbucks Salon in SoHo in New York, we thought that we were really taking our concept to the extreme. We were walking on thin ice because Starbucks are a global brand sometimes portrayed as a threat to local communities and local culture. That’s why we decided to work mainly with local musicians, artists and designers, and to push them to contribute new work and original performances to the Salon. Then *Time Out New York* did a survey of the Salon, which found that 68% of the visitors interviewed thought that it was a positive contribution to New York, so we were reassured.

We have also noticed that whenever we have installations at the Denim Gallery, footfall in the store generally doubles. This is particularly notable when our installations take over part of the street or the storefront.

But when brands initiate cultural efforts, people do sometimes feel threatened by the involvement of commerce with the creative disciplines. Brands must realise that if the content is not relevant, or is too branded, the public will walk away from it and it may actually give the brand negative publicity.



#### Case study

**Diesel Denim Gallery**\_ Installations with a proven popular appeal

**Location**\_ New York & Japan

**Date**\_ Ongoing

Formavision has curated an ongoing series of exhibitions for the Diesel Denim Gallery – a branded concept store that combines retail with art gallery space. The art installation Cornucopia (above) incorporated a reflective tunnel and paintings by architect Jeroen de Schrijver and painter Ellen Depoorter, while the earlier Moscum installation (below) covered part of the retail area with a strange scummy substance. Store footfall doubles when these installations are in situ.



**Lucy: What form does the 'cultural content' that you produce generally take?**

**Sebastien:** We started with multimedia installations, or 'experiential environments', and this is why Formavision are usually associated with large-scale work. While this represents the base of our work and what differentiates us, we also work on books, packaging projects and graphic design. However, even when dealing with two-dimensional design projects, our work remains highly physical.

It is very important that form follows concept. Once your content is generated, the idea is to maximise the return on investment by applying it to as many media as possible so that it is exposed to a wide audience. Brands, through this effort, create cultural content that would not otherwise exist. They bring culture to the world.

Let's take the example of the Aquos project that we created for the launch of Sharp's LCD screens. Each artist was asked to generate a video and an installation for a gallery we opened for three months in New York. The video animations were aired in the gallery, on a dedicated website, on various TV programmes and on several web portals and DVD magazines. The installations were featured in books, magazines and newspapers. We interviewed the artists and created a documentary about the project, produced collectable prints and so on.

Another example of our non-installation work is a personal project we did called *Remastered*, a book published earlier this year, for which we invited 55 artists to reinterpret the Great Masters of western painting. Several brands proposed their involvement but, for a change, I decided to do something on a personal level. We wanted the project to be a comment about customisation and remixing, which is a very important trend in contemporary culture and can be observed across industry and media.

**"For our project *Remastered*, we wanted to create a comment about customisation and remixing, which is a very important trend in contemporary culture and can be observed across industry and media."**



**Case study**

**Lexus 460 Degrees\_** Art and culture meet automobile

**Location\_** New York, Los Angeles, Miami & Chicago

**Date\_** 2006/07

Entitled Light and Speed, this touring show to launch the Lexus LS460 linked the automotive industry with the sensory worlds of art and culture, to respond to the car's positioning as a seamless driving experience. The gallery hosted an exhibition of the exploratory work of commissioned artists, alongside gala events, seminars, samplings and presentations by complementary luxury brands.

**Lucy: Do you think that brands will increasingly need to become culturally integrated in order to maintain a consumer audience?**

**Sebastien:** The brand of the future is the leader of a community of people who believe the brand in question can improve their individual lives and the lives of community members. Because of the fragmentation of the media, brands need to be involved in a number of cultural projects if they hope to be visible. This is especially true for brands that target the creative community. Diesel are, for me, a fine example. Their success is largely due to their communications strategy: ads that state a strong message relevant to our lives, plus a myriad of initiatives in music, film, art, design, fashion, graphic design, video animation... and more recently a dating blog. They definitely know how to involve their customer base.

I think that our period will be remembered as a time when brands played a major role in our lives. Artists didn't wait for brands to commission them to convey this message. Look at Andy Warhol's silk-screens of Campbell's Soup cans or Coke bottles back in the early 60s. He was simply the precursor of what is happening widely now.

Throughout history, art has been used to glorify the people in power. Once it was the Church, kings and emperors, governments. But now that power is decentralised and some brands have become wealthier than countries, it is they who have the power to contribute to culture, and more specifically to art. With the rise of this phenomenon, corporate values and visions are playing a growing part in artistic commissions. In this context, curators play a crucial role in delivering a constructive and culturally relevant message for both the brands and their audiences.



**Case study**

**Sharp\_** Celebrating colour and technology

**Location\_** New York

**Date\_** 2004/05

The concept of this show was to react to the Sharp TV campaign, 'More to See' by Wieden+Kennedy, which was based on the intrigue surrounding the coded 15th-century Voynich manuscript. Japanese artist Kenzo Minami took this as inspiration for a multimedia exhibition, curated by Formavision, to celebrate the true colour and greater detail of Sharp's Aquos liquid crystal display television.

**Case study**

**Converse\_** Artful launch of basketball shoe

**Location\_** New York

**Date\_** 2005

This exhibition celebrated the launch of a limited edition shoe by basketball player Dwyane Wade. The large mural by French artist Stéphane Manel captured the 'fierce instincts' of Wade's playing style and translated his movements into 2D: fully integrating brand and art. To accompany the launch, Formavision also designed a shoe gallery tracing the history of footwear manufacturer Converse.

