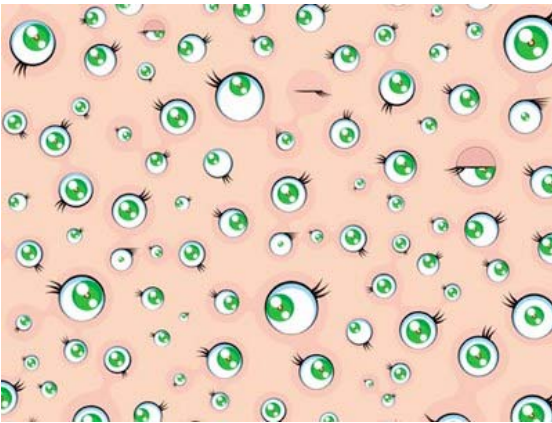


In Between Art and Commerce

Louis Vuitton and Takashi Murakami

No one does deny that Louis Vuitton is the incontrovertible symbol of modern luxury today. The most interesting aspect is that we can see the Louis Vuitton's products and store in an exhibition of a museum. Is not that surprised? In 2004, when I saw the color patterned monogram bag at the first sale in Korea, I was not sure whether the new color patterned monogram bags could succeed or not because I thought that Louis Vuitton had chosen a wrong artist for the collaboration, because cartoon character for Louis Vuitton did not make sense at all. However, my guessing was totally wrong, and in 2008, now most of people have known the artist and the collaboration. It was extremely successful compared to other collaborations between artist and Louis Vuitton. Why and how was this collaboration so successful? Compared to other collaborations that did not get that much attention from the public, Louis Vuitton's collaboration with Takashi Murakami, who was already blurs the boundary between high and low art by combining manga and animation into his artwork, innovatively blurs the border between high art and daily objects with opposite aesthetic of Louis Vuitton. Because of those reasons, the collaboration is suitable for the Louis Vuitton and Takashi Murakami, and it brought great benefits into the company and the artist as well.



randomly, and then repeating the circles completes another whole pattern. In addition, Takashi Murakami creates original

Influenced by popular culture and the popular Japanese art forms of manga and animation, Murakami is one of the most significant artists who blurs the border between high and low art. He has produced his own characters based on details of comic book illustration. The details finally grow into fantastical patterns. For example, *Jellyfish Eyes* is an installation that covers an entire wall. Interlinking and concentric circles look like the eyes of manga characters. He placed vivid and bright colors inside the circles. The different sizes of circles are arranged

characters in his paintings and sculptures that are influenced by comic book characters such as *Tantanbo*, *Kaikai kiki*, *DOB*, and more. For instance, his painting, *Tantanbo*, which Murakami explains as his self portrait, the head of mouse figure has big ears, and round things in its head have different shape and color of circles overall, and although the picture is very colorful and pleasing to our eyes, the expression is violent, and looks like a dark wicked figure with sharp teeth. He produced those original characters which have positive and negative moods at the same time. The moods make us feel weird but very curious. According to *Arnheim's Art and Visual Perception*, those bright colors and different sizes of circles give movement and a dynamic mood. Thus, we feel more active and alive when we see those pictures in a museum.

For me, although he blurs the boundary between low and high art, his artwork and Louis Vuitton's products did not match at all in the beginning of the collaboration because they were aesthetically mismatched. Most of us have a perception of Louis Vuitton as extremely elegant, classic, conservative, and heavy. When you analyze the form of the Vuitton bag, the bags represent perfectly symmetrical, rigid, and static aspects. Louis Vuitton even seriously considers its trimming. The monogram print of each piece of leather is exactly perfect symmetry. The shape of *Steamer bag* (Figure a), *Alma bag* (Figure b), and *Speedy bag* (Figure c) are very static and stable. In terms of color, Louis Vuitton has had only heavy colors such as black, brown, deep dark blue, dark red. Those static shapes, rigid forms and dark colors have definitely affected the perception of the brand image as too conservative and strict.



Figure a



Figure b



Figure c

On the contrary, Takashi Murakami's artworks seem very light, rude, aggressive, casual, and even rebellious. *Tantanbo*, *flower*, *Jellyfish eyes* are all asymmetrical and dynamic because of the figures' shapes and forms. Also the saturated and bright colors intensify the same mood as well.

These are totally opposite characteristics and it would seem that they could not collaborate with each other.

However, what happened with this collaboration? In 2007, his retrospective exhibition at MOCA was a very controversial exhibition among the public and critics because his exhibition included Louis Vuitton's store which was fully functional. Several museums and critics expressed their uncomfortable feeling for the relationship that seemed to be commercial rather than art. In terms of product design among Takashi Murakami's handbags, there are also negative results which are imbalance and ugly. (Figure1, 2) Louis Vuitton traditional monograms and the cherries, and cherry blossoms are extremely unbalanced when they are placed on the leather. Another minor fact is that the saturate and

bright colors are heavy to our eyes. As an independent artwork, those colors and shapes are beautiful enough, but the balance with the bag seems not quite right.



Figure 1



Figure 2.

However, not all is negative. The color pattern of the monogram (Figure 3) was so great because it does not distract your eye. His pleasing colors certainly break the heavy voice of the brand. The design gives a youthful and dynamic pattern by combining different sizes and colors. As a result, the public, myself included, can enjoy the innovative idea without the psychological burden from heavy brand image although the company still suggests a higher price for the product. According to the theory of *Empathy*, as explained by Arnheim in the book, "Art and Visual Perception", there is a relationship between physical structures or patterns and expression. The physical structures or patterns can convey a mood or feeling as same as human's face can. Compared to Louis Vuitton's traditional brown dark monogram, the colorful pattern monogram designed by Takashi Murakami certainly replaced a heavy mood and feeling with light, childish, and bright moods. This part is a perfect match, and this is the collaboration that was rebellion against static, heavy, conservative perception of Louis Vuitton. (Art and Visual perception, Arnheim, Rudolf, p449, p451, p457)



Figure 3.



There is one more important point. Louis Vuitton's collaboration with Takashi Murakami also blurs art and daily object. Louis Vuitton's marketing has raised its handbags' status from daily object to high art, and the brand's marketing

strategy exactly found a suitable artist for the company. The company eventually pushes its products into the museum. Besides, Takashi Murakami push his art on the street. Although he has already blurred high and low art, but the influence of the collaboration was very powerful in the \ Western market by using Louis Vuitton's powerful mass culture. According to Louisa Buck, the author of the article, "The Louis Vuitton project is my Urinal!", points out that since the collaboration, he has launched his office, Kaikai Kiki in long Island City, New York, and he is characterized by energetic work through his exhibitions and merchandises for sale. Now his artwork ranges from highly priced paintings and sculptures to affordable low priced products included his imagined characters. (The art Newspaper, No.184, Louisa Buck) Although it has still aroused serious controversy among art critics, the concerns have certainly turned out advantages for the artist rather than the bitter critics. According to the MOCA's chief curator, Paul Schimme, he points out, "it symbolizes the interweaving of high art, mass culture and commerce that has become essential to Murakami's philosophy." (The New York Times, 8/9/2007, An Exhibitions art is in the bag, Randy Kennedy) Also, Gail Andrews, director of the Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama and president of the Association of Art Museum Directors, said, "Takashi Murakami's Retrospective exhibition has made the case that luxury goods are a part of Murakami's artistic expression. They are doing what contemporary museums do, pushing the boundaries." (The New York Times, 8/9/2007, An Exhibitions art is in the bag, Randy Kennedy)

I can not help admitting to myself that this is a great collaboration although there are some minor aspects. The collaboration of Takashi Murakami delivers an important message that blurs the border between art and daily object that suggests a new concept of contemporary art. The public also gets the idea through high and low mass culture on consumerism. Through these points, the communication between Louis Vuitton and Takashi Murakami exactly has penetrated publics' mind and their eyes with enhanced visual perception. That is the reason why I think the collaboration as so successful today. I have gotten so much inspiration from those innovative people and their different philosophy. Their experimental events and collaborations always stimulate me. For me, as a designer, artist, and crazy consumer of Louis Vuitton, the collaboration certainly gave me tremendous delight and inspiration into my professional life. I really appreciate what Louis Vuitton and Takashi Murakami made today.

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