

# Star Commission



The hallways and corridors of Montblanc's Hamburg HQ betray an obsession quite removed from the production of high-end pens and watches. QP goes in search of a very modern corporate collection.

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Montblanc's extraordinary ascent toward the upper echelons of watch *manufacture* has been well recognised and closely followed since the opening of the factory in Le Locle and the purchasing of the watchmaker Minerva. The latest editions to the Star of Nicolas Rieussec and the Villeret 1858 families counted among some of the highlights of a horologically spectacular SIHH 2009. And yet, on a recent visit to the brand's Hamburg HQ, I managed only the most fleeting glimpse of the stunning new Grand Chronographe Régulateur.

My arrival in the North German seaport city was for quite another reason, one that should be considered more a Montblanc preoccupation than a commercial venture.

Brand identity is an integral part of modern business and one that shows itself in ever more inventive ways, but far too often sponsorship programmes and promotional activity can leave you wondering how such tenuous associations ever came about.

Above: Shinpei Naito,  
The River Side, 2007.

Opposite Page:  
Markus Sixay, Untitled,  
2003.



Wang Guangyi, Montblanc, 2006.

For the renowned pen maker-cum-watchmaker, Montblanc, there is no question of fads or loose affiliations; the past twenty years have been spent integrating themselves into the contemporary art scene, both in visual arts and with music. The ambition and scope of the programme is huge and sweeps across the gamut of cultural activity; from a multinational philharmonic orchestra, to an arts patronage award, to a young director award scheme and culminating, at least as far as my preferences are concerned, in the Montblanc *Cutting Edge Art Collection*.

Nuzzling up to the arts community can be hugely attractive for businesses, take a look at Deutsche Bank's art collection, or consider the sponsorship Traveler provide for the National Theatre. If managed correctly there can be massive collateral gains as a patron, most notably by becoming a purveyor of that highly prized (and insistently slippery) commodity, humanity.

As discussed in QP31, Cartier managed this by forcefully separating their business from their art interests; Cartier does their thing, while the

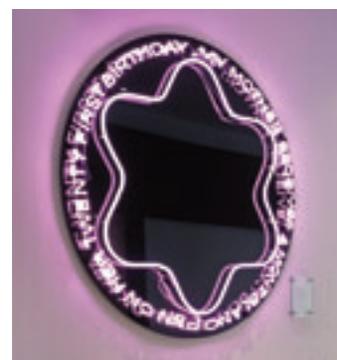
Fondation Cartier Pour L'Art Contemporain does their own.

### Stamp of approval

Montblanc have taken a very different route, one where they literally stamp their corporate identity upon the face of the work they commission. Surely a recipe to provoke the most vehement puritanical cynicism? But the more I have looked into the matter, the more I have warmed to the idea of this very singular art project.

Arriving early for my appointment, I stepped out of the grey wintery morning drizzle and into a bright, low ceiling lobby. What immediately strikes me on entering is that Montblanc have thankfully dispensed with the typical faded reprints of Picasso and Kandinsky paintings, which offices tend to hang morosely above yellowing, lifeless rubber plants. And opted instead for a vibrant mixture of sculpture, photography, reliefs and paintings.

There is a spacecraft hanging from thin wires, shaped like the type of Nasa research modules that were



Clockwise, from above: Daniel Pflumm, *Ohne Titel*, 2002. Jonathan Monk, *My Mother Received a Montblanc Fountain Pen on Her Twenty First Birthday*, 2005. Antonio de Felipe, *Retrato de Audrey Montblanc*, 2005.

sent to Mars and brought back rock samples and atmospheric readings, except this one is constructed from white cardboard and masking tape and looks far too frail and spindly to survive any sort of journey<sup>1</sup>.

Meanwhile, just to one side of the front desk, four tall headless spectres loom, suspended in an eerie dance, dressed in the red and black uniforms of China's Cultural Revolution and with long, wispy skirts flowing to the floor. It is a captivating sight, although slightly oppressive, especially as there is a barely perceptible whispering coming from close by, a palimpsest of murmuring voices, too low and jumbled to decipher<sup>2</sup>.

I had just moved in front of a large red light-box showing the familiar white Montblanc star at the centre, when I was greeted by Ingrid Roosen-Trinks, Montblanc's Director of PR and International Cultural Affairs.

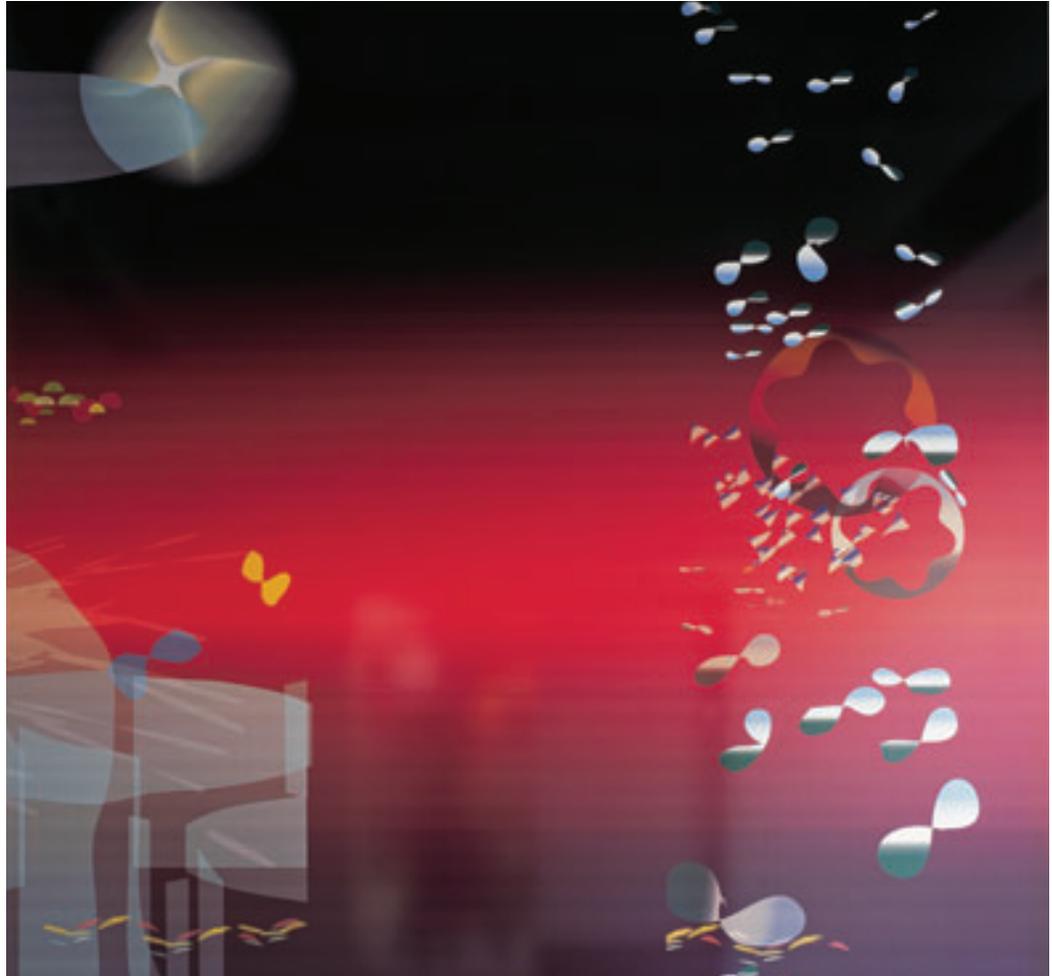
"You've spotted the Daniel Pflumm", she says, looking delighted. "He fits into the Montblanc *Cutting Edge Art Collection* perfectly. We always

ask the artists to incorporate the Montblanc star into their work in some manner, but it was the star that particularly interest Daniel<sup>3</sup>."

Peering a little closer at some of the other works in the lobby, I begin to notice the star more and more often, recurring in differing degrees of prominence, yet ever present. Thomas Ruff's mottled and kaleidoscopic digital image merges the logo into a lava-lamp background, while Gary Hume has taken a typical shopping bag, blown it up into a 10ft aluminium sculpture and then printed his designs, along with the Montblanc star, upon the side. Each example is different, but the Montblanc theme runs through the whole collection, like a thread tying all the work together.

"When we commission an artist the specification is simple: to interpret the Montblanc star motif. How this is done depends wholly on the artist", Ingrid explains. It is Ingrid who has spearheaded this seven-year initiative and along the way she has formed close ties with numerous international galleries, not to mention lasting friendships with the artists.

<sup>1</sup>Tom Sachs "Big Lunar Model", 2002. Created from forex cardboard, Sachs confronts high technology with handcraft, giving a fragile toy-like quality to the multi-million dollar original. <sup>2</sup>Qin Yufen "Legende der Farbe Schwarz-Rot", 2006. Inspired by the Cultural Revolution of 1966, which was an attempt to eliminate traditional Chinese culture and replace it with Communist culture, this piece is part of a series of textile/sound installations in which the artist examines China's recent history. <sup>3</sup>Daniel Pflumm is renowned for expropriating corporate logos for the bold, stylised simplicity common to most emblems. By doing so he is both affirming the spectacle of corporate culture as well as provocatively nullifying the image for being meaningless.



Pae White, *Spinning Star*,  
2002.

We begin a tour that leads us around the entire complex. Our path weaves a route through workshops, down corridors, past meeting rooms and studios, into staff canteens and even up into the office of Montblanc CEO, Lutz Bethge. And there is art work everywhere, lining every wall, exhibited throughout the building. What is more, a lot of it is by well-known names. I am astonished as we stroll past a political pop art piece by Wang Guangi (a Chinese artist familiar to those who have been to Charles Saatchi's new Chelsea gallery) and then to a huge geometric abstraction by John Armleder (the Swiss born conceptual artist who exhibited at the Tate Liverpool during 2007).

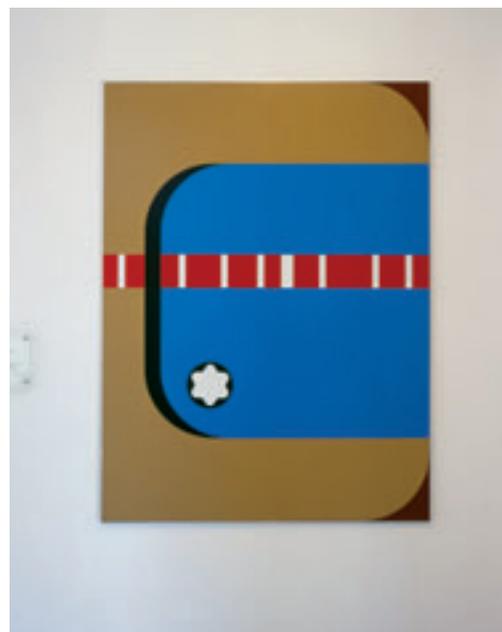
### Starting to grow

The collection started in 2002 and since then it has grown considerably, but rather than hiding it away in a museum or boardroom, it has spilled out into areas where all the staff and Montblanc visitors are allowed to appreciate it. An art for the people, if ever I saw one!

The further we stroll down this rabbit warren of creative output, the more I begin to gasp at the scale of this operation. Buying art at any level is far from a simple matter. Not only does it require a huge amount of consideration (a large portion of Ingrid's time is taken up with events like Venice Biennale, Art Basel, Frieze Art Fair in a search for the next Montblanc artist), but also collecting at this level demands a very generous budget.

As we walk from room to room, there is no labouring under the misapprehension that this is a purely philanthropic venture, the corporate logo is evident in every piece - although some stars are trickier to spot than others. Nevertheless Montblanc has channelled an extraordinary amount of resources into the collection (this is forgetting for the moment that the Montblanc *Cutting Edge Art Collection* is just one of several cultural initiatives), so far having made in excess of 100 commissions.

"Our budget follows hand in hand with corporate strategies", Ingrid says, with a well-what-did-you-



expect shrug of the shoulders. “The collection comprises of works that have our logo as a subject. Montblanc is in every work of art”.

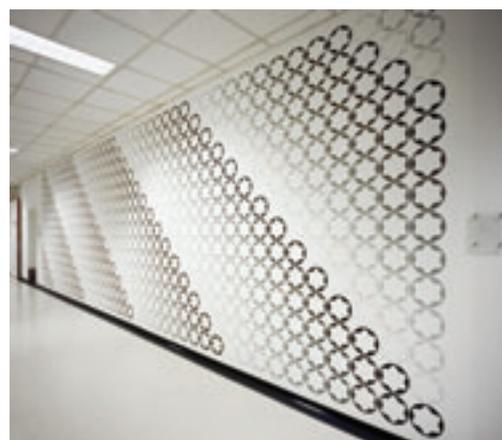
They do indeed all display the logo, but often in elaborate or oblique ways and, for the most part, these artistic examples of corporate identity are seen only by Montblanc employees and visitors of the brand.

Our tour pauses for a moment in a corridor, while Ingrid says her goodbyes to Montblanc’s Indian marketing manager, who had been visiting the Hamburg HQ. The farewell takes place in front of Stephan Huber’s “What’s That?”<sup>4</sup>, and the thought occurs to me, *what an excellent environment for business*. Rather than spending a working day surrounded by drab, lifeless walls, why not create a space that challenges people, one that might stop someone in their tracks and cause them to wonder what on earth it *is* that. And at the risk of sounding hopelessly idealistic, if art can help inspire people to think and work in a more creative manner, then surely that makes sound practical business sense.

And then just think of the number of clients, business associates and guests of the brand who come to visit. Everyone who steps through the main doors finds themselves enveloped by this fresh, vibrant collections. The Montblanc logo is everywhere, but not the empty Baudrillardian<sup>5</sup> logo that is teased by Daniel Pflumm in his work, instead one that is embed in the works of living artists, artists who have provided it with very human interpretations.

So, if the presence of 100+ works of art boosts productivity among the workforce, as well demonstrates to its audience the brand’s creative, forward-thinking humanity, then the venture must certainly be worth every Euro. ☺

<sup>4</sup>Stephan Huber’s “What’s That?” 2002 is a photograph on a light-box, which shows a rather tongue-in-cheek scene of a family standing before a mountain, with one of them pointing upwards, presumably asking what’s that? The mountain is, of course, Mont Blanc. <sup>5</sup>Jean Baudrillard was a French cultural theorist who claimed that the reality and meaning in modern society had been supplanted by a simulacra of symbols and signs.



Clockwise, from top left: Philipps Richard, Spokesperson, 2003. Gerwald Rockenschaub, Folienbild, 2002. Liam Gillick, Montblanc, 2005.