



SEBASTIÁN E., MEET FAME

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Best in Show

Introducing design's new breed of curators. Unbound by museums but linked to commerce, they scarcely resemble their art-world contemporaries and work almost nothing like each other. They can be retailers, agents, architects, promoters, or all-purpose Svengalis. Here are three of the finest.

Portrait by Mark Mahaney



Sebastien Agneessens.1973

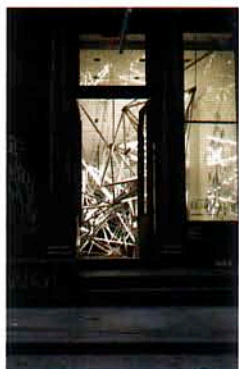
/Sebastien Agneessens

"I call myself a curator because otherwise people wouldn't know what to call me," admits Sebastien Agneessens, the 33-year-old impresario who's behind some of the most bizarre brand extensions in recent memory. (In 2006, he convinced Starbucks to outfit its pop-up salon with furniture by the Belgian interiors firm Quinze & Milan.) "But it's not a very precise definition. Curators show existing work. I mostly collaborate to create new work," he says.

In 2002, Agneessens founded the boutique consulting company Formavision. Since then, he's moved around downtown New York like a dapper French yenta, creating unlikely unions between brands in need of an image rehab and niche designers who could use the exposure. For the past 18 months, he's collaborated with Marithé + François Girbaud, a fashion house whose reputation in America, at least, was built on its success as a purveyor of 1980s designer denim. Agneessens conceived "Construkt" as a series of exhibitions and designer editions that would bring to light some of Girbaud's lesser-known innovations; last year, to highlight the label's pioneering use of temperature-regulating ceramic fibers, he enlisted New York designer Dror Benshetrit to produce a collection of sculptural jewelry made from fur dipped in porcelain and fired in a kiln.

Agneessens's work lies somewhere between curating and branding. As an MBA who left a marketing position at Chanel to open a gallery, he's equipped to mediate between the two worlds, whether that means working with Japan's Kenzo Minami to create CNC-milled sculptures for Sharp Aquos or asking the Australian metalworkers Korban/Flaubert, among others, to design installations for New York's Diesel Denim Gallery, Agneessens's first and most loyal client. "More and more brands are trying to be involved in art, but they need a curator to be relevant," he says. "And they have bigger budgets than museums, so you can really do amazing stuff."

Currently, Agneessens is working with Koan-Jeff Baysa, a New York-based doctor, to co-curate a series of self-regenerating sculptures that will incorporate plant life and travel the world from greenhouse to greenhouse. Vegetation as art? "I know a curator is supposed to rationally explain his decisions," he says, "but most of the time I can only articulate my choices once the project is done." — JILL SINGER



above For "Automatic," a 2007 installation at New York's Diesel Denim Gallery, Agneessens asked Sydney-based artists Korban/Flaubert to explore organic growth patterns found in nature.

left In 2006, Agneessens worked with Starbucks to create a salon-style space in New York's Soho, outfitting the lounge with foam seating by Quinze & Milan.

right Lepage and designer Tobias Wong's Wrong Store, a retail experiment that provoked desire through denial: The shop was always closed.

