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# The Synthesizer

*The man behind Formavision reinvisions brand relevance*

words | tamara warren

Sebastien Agneessens stands in front of the store, observing the cosmopolitan crowd on Wooster Street at the flagship Marithé + François Girbaud shop in Soho, New York City. He is observing quietly off to the side, away from the clamor of clinking glasses and buzzing swirl of French and English, before going back inside to mingle. Patrons are lined up out the door to investigate the latest installation in the CONSTRUKT series—a chic annual event featuring in-store installations by original artists. For this series, *Moment of Impact*, Belgian architect Jeroen De Schrijver created towering, 7-foot tall cardboard sculptures. The commissioned work is a commentary on explosive moments, citing volcanic eruption and the violent impact of two bodies as the context. But the theme is twofold; the work also reflects on the Girbaud *Non-Surgical Surgical Lift* patented technology for their current collection. Champagne flows early in the evening as the store morphs into a festive gallery setting featuring the latest Girbaud designs and a mishmash cast of art and fashion patrons; Agneessens can relax after the opening, his latest exhibition.

Through his agency, Formavision, Agneessens has curated installations for Coca-Cola, Lexus, Starbucks and Diesel, pairing visual artists, architects and designers with corporations. "We translate the essence of the brand with designers and artists," he explains. "Traditional advertising isn't effective. It makes more sense for brands to create cultural content. That's what I do—produce

and curate art shows, projects for different brands."

If art is a reflection of the surrounding world, then French-born Agneessens is at the cusp of an emerging movement. "I believe that brands are an important part of contemporary culture. In the beginning of the twenty-first century, brands became the main force, like the church was the main force and commissioned great pieces during the Renaissance. Today, it's the brands that are driving contemporary culture."

With a marketing background, Agneessens transitioned into art from a successful career in the perfume and cosmetics industry, working for Armani and Chanel. "When I arrived in New York, I met many people in art and design, and I understood that New York was center of the art world." With a partner, he opened the exhibition space The Point; it wasn't long before curious corporations sought him out. "Girbaud was the first one to call me," he says. "Having brands sponsor artists enables new work to be made. To produce the work, you need money to do it."

In collaboration with corporations, he sees added value not afforded by art galleries. "The dynamics of the project are different from the gallery world, where there's always this commercial aspect. In the branding world, you just



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have to produce the message, meaning that you're actually freer."

The challenge is to create a discourse between two very different entities: the artist who seeks authentic expression, and the corporation that is looking to persuade with a calculated statement, though both messages contain a common thread. "The language is very different. My role as a curator is to translate between two different worlds."

With Belgian product designer Arne Quinze, Agneessens created an installation of wood centered around Lexus's debut of the LS 460 as a comment on light, speed and travel. After winning a design contest, he curated a permanent installation for the *New World of Coca-Cola* in Atlanta, Ga. *Kaleidoscope* includes a sweeping, pop-art mural map made up of words, art content for several rooms and a video component. "The level of relevance of the project totally depends on the client," he says. "Sometimes they are open to explore, and sometimes they are eager to control the message. The more freedom we have, the better the project is from an artistic standpoint."

Drawing from his thoughts on imagery and context, Agneessens's book *Remastered* was first released in 2006, making a splash at Art Basel Miami Beach for its launch. "I was interested in the social custom of remixing and rematching. It started with the culture of remixing music. A big movement in culture has to do with post-production remixes. The last thing to be remixed is the

master painting." Agneessens literally commissioned 55 contemporary artists to reinterpret and remaster classic Western painting.

"It made people think about the status of the original art pieces," he says. "We take them for granted. We don't really understand why they were made in their time. I wanted to create a dialogue with contemporary society and history."

Agneessens is taking his vision to couture, planning fashion shows for New York Fashion Week this fall, using a church-like environment as the backdrop for one runway show and conceiving another to look like a circus. He's exploring the design concept of biomimicry, too, which is, as Agneessens describes it, "an idea of science replicating the behaviors of nature to create intelligent products, new materials." He plans to incorporate this into his ideas for the International Contemporary Furniture Fair.

"My medium is to do shows with brands. I would like to start producing indie projects and collaborate with brands as sponsors and sustainable design in general." As curator, marketer and brand impresario, sustaining any idea, green or otherwise, to flourish in a space and in the mind is, for Agneessens, just a matter of planting a creative seed. Under his watch from there on in, growth, it would seem, is inevitable.

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**N° 1** *Moment of impact* study, CONSTRUKT series, Marithé + François Girbaud by Jeroen De Schrijver **N° 2** *Kaleidoscope* mural, The New World of Coca-Cola  
**N° 3 & N° 4** *Details from the book Remastered* by Sebastien Agneessens **N° 5** *Light and Speed* Lexus 460 Degrees gallery Sculptures by Arne Quinze / Photo studies by Miranda Lichtenstein **N° 6** *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife* The Diesel Denim Gallery **N° 7** *Mo'Scum* The Diesel Denim Gallery **N° 8** *Automatic* The Diesel Denim Gallery **N° 9** The New World of Coca-Cola building