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Exhibition Review: *Le Fil Rouge*, Espace Louis Vuitton, Paris 6th Feb-3rd May 2015.

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Introduction

In the foyer of Espace Louis Vuitton in Paris an introduction offers visitors insight to *Le Fil Rouge* ('The Red Thread'), curated by Michoko Kono. It reflects on the role of thread in Louis Vuitton's (LV) historic and contemporary products; the thread is integral to the product's construction, binding its components, defining its boundaries and representing LV's historic commitment to craftsmanship, establishing the integrity of the product (LVMH 2014). However in being so literal, the introduction understates the significance of the exhibition and its more abstract relationship with the LV brand. The exhibition is located on the top floor of the Champs Elysees *Maison*, LV's flagship store and arguably the epicentre of contemporary French luxury fashion. Hence the exhibition serves some role in the promotion and therefore practice of this most international of luxury fashion brands; this review of *Le Fil Rouge* contextualizes the exhibition in respect of LV's branding activities.

<INSERT FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE>

Overview

The exhibition's catalogue details its inspiration: Goethe's 'Elective Affinities' speaks of a red thread woven into British Royal Navy ropes in a way such that "even the shortest section can be identified as belonging to the Crown", signifying that wherever the red thread is found, the British crown reigns. The power of the red thread in defining the extent and (in Goethe's time) apparent permanence of the British empire is interesting in context of all three Espaces LV (Munich, Tokyo and Paris) for the first time simultaneously hosting *Le Fil Rouge*, collectively exhibiting eight artists' work inspired by one concept. This offers a metaphor for the global reach of the brand and in respect of LV's role in signifying culture and style around the world; the exhibition, and therefore LV, is presumed to inspire intellectual and creative interest globally. That each Espace hosts four pieces of work, with one artist (Hans Op de Beek) contributing work in all three locations and two artists (Ghada Amer and Michael Raedecker) contributing to the Munich and Tokyo exhibitions is also significant. The exhibitions share universal inspiration and each share a common exhibit in Op de Beek's film, but the Paris Espace is host to the most exclusive iteration and the only location showing work by artists not exhibiting elsewhere. A parallel with the brand is apparent. LV has a globally consistent position in the minds of consumers, is promoted universally with evocative imagery, and sells products via global stores inspired by consistent architectural and design themes (Kissa 2011); but the flagship store hosts unique products and personalisation options unavailable elsewhere (Nobbs & Moore 2010). The purest LV experience is available only in the flagship; and for the ultimate expression of *Le Fil Rouge*, one must visit the Paris Espace.

Review of Exhibits

The works exhibited in Paris share connection with the LV brand. The power of Fred Sandback's contribution (*Untitled* - developed from sketches dated 1977 but not realised during his lifetime) defies description: a single thick black thread crosses the floor and ceiling via vertical sections. The effect is discombobulating; spaces between the geometric frames formed appear as canvases awaiting decoration, or mirrors awaiting reflection. The placement of this work to be encountered first by a visitor is significant. Downstairs in the store itself, visitors are seduced by the opulent atmosphere

and possibly overlook the essence of the product. However, Sandback's work invites observers to reflect on simplicity, the statement being that were the glamor removed, the stripped-back product would remain constant thanks to its fundamental of quality, innovation and style. The commentary on Sandback's contribution (from personal notes, reproduced in Kono 2015) states that "Illusions are just as real as facts, and facts just as ephemeral as illusions". As a critique of fashion branding, this statement is edifying; in the international market, a brand must inevitably create an image (or illusion), but be substantiated by definitive values and qualities (or facts), and the success of the business is defined by the coincidence of both.

<INSERT FIGURE 2 AROUND HERE>

Isa Malsheimer's *Hyperboloide III* is visually more complex. In two white rooms, countless white threads stretch from each corner and from floor to ceiling, their anchors precisely measured to cumulatively form three-dimensional parabolic curves around the observer. Despite the visitor being enveloped by these soaring shapes, the space created is open and inspiring, serving as a metaphor for LV's simultaneous ubiquity and aspirational qualities. Malsheimer notes that "...art can only make apparent what is already there – not only in the sense of harmony or beauty, but in the sense of clarity" (Kono 2015). Clarity in concept is apparent in the atomically-precise placement of pins anchoring each thread, and beauty is conjured by each single thread merging with others to suspend elegance mid-air; an opportunity to reflect on the precision of LV's manufacture, the alchemy of the brand in conjuring mass desire for everyday objects, and perhaps also in Creative Director Nicolas Ghesquiere's subtle re-invention of previous incumbent Marc Jacob's extrovert interpretation of the brand's aesthetic.

Chiharu Shiota's *Infinty* is seemingly the darkest work. A claustrophobic tunnel is formed by thousands of dark threads, at first reminiscent of a spiderweb-covered cave. However as visitors pass through, lights slowly pulsate, representing human heartbeat and providing reassurance. Despite the initially malevolent impression, Shiota's work is intended to represent a beginning or birth; light at the end of the tunnel. The concept of succour in a dark place may be alliterative of LV's roots in crafting products to secure the belongings of nineteenth century travellers; whatever benighted spot an explorer may find themselves in during the 1850's, their LV trunk encased a portion of civilisation. As LV seeks authenticity and substance, it mines this heritage and interprets that provenance as relevant today. Shiota's notes invite visitors to "contemplate the relationships between themselves and the work" (Kono 2015); LV invites clients to contemplate the craft and characteristics of today's products as rooted in the lineage of the brand, accompanying them wherever their journey goes.

<INSERT FIGURE 3 AROUND HERE>

Hans Op de Beek's *The Thread*, the only work exhibited at all three Espaces, is a film telling the story of the life together of a girl and boy, portrayed by Japanese Bunraku puppets. Inspired by a Chinese proverb describing an invisible thread connecting us to our destinies, in the film the puppets meet, fall in love, separate, reconnect and age together before one dies. Augmenting the emotional effect is the visible presence of the black-clad puppet operators, perhaps representing destiny or the thread that determines the fate of the lovers. An analogy in respect again of 'the journey' message LV favour, in this case less a geographic voyage and more a journey through life or time. Among the predictable fashion-centric celebrities who endorse their brand, LV have collaborated with more unconventional personalities such as Rolling Stone Keith Richards, tennis couple Steffi Graf and Andre Agassi, and

former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. Each of these personalities has experienced a compelling personal journey through life, experiencing and achieving the remarkable and influencing whatever realm they occupy. Similarly, a LV product, although expensive, perhaps represents tremendous value thanks to its intrinsic quality guaranteeing longevity throughout a customer's life and indeed allowing the product be passed from generation to generation. Clearly LV conceives itself as contributing to the metaphoric thread, defining the lives and achievement of its customers. Just as the puppets in Op de Beek's film are connected by a thread of love, so LV's customers, by buying the product, are investing their destiny with the values of the brand.

Conclusion

Le Fil Rouge in Paris is an extraordinary exhibition, using a simple concept as the inspiration for four accomplished and intellectually- and emotionally-resonant pieces of work. The fact of the exhibition being hosted by the Espace Louis Vuitton (as per previous and future exhibition here) is obviously intended to invest LV with cultural and intellectual capital and position the brand as a patron of the arts rather than simply the maker of desirable handbags. However beyond this strategic role, and beyond the rather literal relationship of the thread and the product offered by the official introduction, Le Fil Rouge offers sometimes quite profound analogies for and insight to LV brand. The exhibition underlines notions of craft and creativity that are fundamental to the LV identity, while exploring the concept of journeys both geographical and through life that are part of its heritage. When examined in context of LV's wider promotional activities, the value of Le Fil Rouge not only as a fascinating exhibition in its own right but also as a contributor to Louis Vuitton's own thread of life, is readily apparent.

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Author Biography

Stephen Wigley is the Subject Leader for Fashion at the University of Huddersfield. His research interests include the internationalisation of fashion businesses, fashion branding and the nature of relationships between the creative and commercial disciplines of fashion practice.

Figures



Image 1: Le Fils Rouge, Espace Louis Vuitton, Paris (photograph by Paige Denny)



Image 2: *Untitled* by Fred Sandback, Espace Louis Vuitton, Paris (photography by Ruby Lynch)

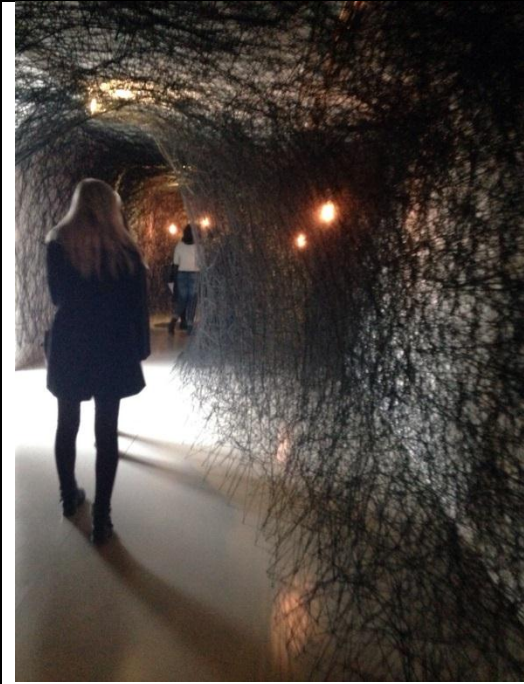


Image 3: *Infinity* by Chiharu Shiota, Espace Louis Vuitton, Paris (Photograph by Ruby Lynch)