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## Is Art Sponsorship Going Out of Style?

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NEW YORK— When Palestinian artist Emily Jacir accepted the 2008 Hugo Boss Prize last week, the champagne-sipping crowd at the Guggenheim Museum radiated all the glitter expected at a confluence of the fashion and art worlds. But that glitter, given the present economic state, also gave the event the indulgent feel of a relic from a bygone gilded age.

While partnerships between fashion brands and the arts are part of a longstanding, mutually beneficial game of glamour marketing, it's not clear that such a strategy would still be effective in today's economy. But that would depend on the brand's goals. While companies from Louis Vuitton to Gap use art-world collaborations to create and move merchandise, an approach that is prey to fluctuations in consumer spending, Hugo Boss's strategy — to create long-term associations with art and arts institutions in buyers' minds — is less susceptible to tough times.

For Hugo Boss, involvement in the arts is based on a somewhat traditional model. "Our arts sponsorship emotionalizes the brand," said Hjördis Kettenbach, Hugo Boss's head of corporate communications and arts sponsorship.

Since 1996, the German fashion label has partnered with the Guggenheim Foundation to award the biannual Hugo Boss Prize, which recognizes a mid-career contemporary artist with a \$100,000 award and a solo show in the New York museum. Hugo Boss is also a major supporter of other exhibits at the Guggenheim — including, coincidentally, the museum's current exhibit "theanyspacewhatever."

But for all of Boss's sponsorship efforts, equally significant is what it doesn't do: cross-promote its own products through the arts. There will be no Hugo Boss scarves with prints designed by Emily Jacir, nor T-shirts with the artwork of Jacir and her fellow nominees. The reason for that is based on a firm belief in boundaries. "This is the art world, and what we do is fashion," Kettenbach said. "If you mix it too much, it gets too commercial. We don't want to lose our good reputation with the art world."

Of course, commercial tie-ins have certainly worked for Louis Vuitton, which boasts an enthusiastic dialogue between artists and fashion design. In 2003, Takashi Murakami created a wildly popular series of handbags for the brand; last

year, as part of the artist's retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Vuitton sponsored a shop containing Murakami's designs that was controversially located within the exhibition itself.

Richard Prince, too, was invited by Louis Vuitton artistic director Marc Jacobs to design a series of handbags for the spring 2008 collection; at the runway show, the bags were presented on models dressed to look like the subjects of Prince's "Nurse" paintings. In January, the company hosted a party to celebrate the bags at the Guggenheim, which was hosting a survey of Prince's work at the time; the bags were available for pre-order at the event.

On the mass-market end of the fashion spectrum, Gap entered the fine-art mix earlier this year with T-shirts designed by artists included in the 2008 Whitney Biennial. And on the occasion of this year's presidential election, the brand invited artists including Kara Walker and John Waters to design "Vote" buttons that sold for \$5 each.

But Hugo Boss is having none of it: no sales, no crossover merchandising, no discernible spike in receipts at its Manhattan stores after the award ceremony at the Guggenheim, according to Kettenbach. "This is not our aim," she said. "It's more for the image and the brand."

That image is meant to attract a shopper who has an interest in luxury, clothing, art — and most important, in aesthetic values. Someone who cares equally about what's on the body, the table, and the walls, but doesn't need to shout about it. The Vuitton customer, on the other hand, is more interested in communicating to the world that she knows the work of Prince and Murakami — she wants it on the wall and on her shoulder, too.

That said, Vuitton covers all its bases by directly supporting emerging artists as well. Its discrete gallery space — located above its flagship store in Paris, accessible by an elevator designed by Olafur Eliasson — hosts shows bearing only a loose connection to the brand — or none at all. Hermès and Ferragamo present art in their own spaces, too. But the luxury brand that goes the furthest, perhaps, is Prada, which since 1993 has operated the contemporary art-focused Fondazione Prada in Milan, whose artistic director, Germano Celant, is also coincidentally a curator at the Guggenheim. Every year, the foundation exhibits two artists, but its activities are largely separate from what comes down the runway or is found in the stores. If anything, it is through the physical stores themselves that Prada links retail to the arts. The New York flagship by Rem Koolhaas — who also did work for the Fondazione in Milan — is in the building that once housed the Guggenheim SoHo.

Even if the future of retail collaborations between fashion and brand-name artists is less promising than in the recent past, the broader connection between the two fields is strong. Luxury brands have created the expectation that they will be associated with creative institutions or show the work of artists directly. And after 12 years of the Hugo Boss Prize, it is highly unlikely that a year of economic instability will shake the award. As Kettenbach said: "We put serious effort and budgets into this. To give it up because of one bad year would be stupid."

