

MAISON MARTIN MARGIELA
AND THE CULT OF INVISIBILITY

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Introduction

Between 1988 and 2009, Maison Martin Margiela grew into a global cult brand. At the heart of the cult was the noisy invisibility of the eponymous designer.

In October 2009, after several years of intrigued - then frustrated - rumors among journalists, fashion editors and fans, Maison Martin Margiela announced that Margiela was no longer designing at the brand that he created.

The reaction was confused. People wanted more information. As a cult brand, it had spent 20 years inspiring loyalty, love, and disciples. Despite years of communication that the brand was designed by a team – the hand of Margiela, albeit invisible, was a big part of the brand’s equity.

With Margiela gone, how should the brand evolve? There are lessons to be learned from real-world cults – who face varying levels of crisis when a leader leaves, retires, dies, kills himself, is proved embarrassingly wrong or - in some other way – is no longer available.

We believe that the future of Maison Martin Margiela can benefit – in strategic and business terms – from leveraging the heritage of the brand, and to integrate lessons from real-world cults about how leaderless cults evolve...

To understand the cult elements that animate the Margiela brand, it’s important to understand the role that invisibility and anonymity has had throughout the brands history.

A sense of invisibility has been incorporated into the DNA of the brand since the beginning. Patrick Scallon, the right hand person to Margiela once characterized the marketing strategy of Margiela as “absence equals presence” and “the cult of impersonality”, indicating that it was a central part of the brand identity.

This cult of impersonality spread through the aesthetic of the brand.

Signage - Stores are never listed in phone books or identified with signage.

Uniforms - Staff at stores and at Margiela HQ wear standard white labcoats.

Colors – White - called “whites” in Margielaspeak - is the ubiquitous color of all stores,

Margiela HQ, and of the sheets that covered all in-store furniture and displays.

Packaging – Margiela packaging is monochrome and logo free.

Models – Runway models at MMM more than any other designer often appear on the runway with covered faces.

Runway shows – Seating is mostly first-come, first-served, avoiding the industry standard of seating hierarchy.

Collective speaking – The brand used a first person plural response to all requests, emphasizing the collaborative, disciple-like consensus of their thoughts.

As the brand became successful in the mid-90s, Martin Margiela retired completely from public view, at a time when the idea of the invisible designer found itself at odds the accelerated rise of celebrity culture. As other designers chose – or were required to become – famous; Margiela's anonymity became louder than ever. And ironically, his invisibility became exponentially interesting to the media. No article was written without some reference to his invisibility. It was part of the appeal, it defined the brand. But the clothes still dominated.

The figure of Martin Margiela became relevant to wider debate – still going on – about the relationship between designer, celebrity, and the brand they represent... A debate summed up in this comment by Zac Posen.

"I think there's a great divide in fashion right now between the desire of the old school, which valued being hidden and shy, and what is going to bring our industry forward, which is connection, personality and craft." -- Zac Posen

In fact, Margiela uniquely was operating at both levels simultaneously. The hidden part WAS the personality...

So far, so Jean Baudrillard.

But then in 2002, in an acquisition that was described as Greta Garbo marrying Harpo Marx, the Maison Martin Margiela brand was acquired by Only the Brave, owned by Renzo Rosso, making it a sister brand of Diesel.

Between 2002 and 2007, the cult of invisibility turned into confusion as for journalists and editors it was turning into a crisis of confidence. The clothes seems to show his hand at work, but it was increasingly difficult to tell, and increasingly distracting.

When asked in June 2008 if he could imagine Martin Margiela leaving the brand, Renzo Rosso said – *"Never say never, but I cannot imagine. I love him."* – Renzo Rosso, June 2008

By the Spring of 2009, there were some uneasy signs that a transition was underway, *"He's concentrating on more strategic projects... He's more consulting with us than designing every product. The team is more Margiela than him."* -- Giovanni Pungetti.

In June 2009 the statements took a turn for the political with an official statement that said *"We neither confirm nor deny anything."* –

Journalists were suspicious... *"Where has Martin Margiela gone? Now we're a little bit worried"* said The Guardian.

"In the absence of any definitive corporate statement, the only test of whether Margiela is still in the house must be down to whether the inimitable dialogue of excellence, intellectual challenge, and wit is still there in his show. Safe, yet very sad to say, this time it was gone." - Style.com, June 2009

"The mystery is not yet solved, but given the visible signs and ongoing rumor mill, it seems increasingly likely that the label's dear namesake is gone." – JC Report, June 2009

And then suddenly, it seemed to be over. Before the Spring Summer 2010 show in October 2009, the rumors raged... The show took place, it was described by Suzy Menkes at the IHT as "tragic" and then a statement from Maison Martin Margiela seemed to attack the cult of invisibility head on.

"Martin has not been there for a long time... We have a new fresh design team on board. We are focusing on young, realistic energy for the future; this is really Margiela for the year 2015." – Renzo Rosso, October 2009

In three sentences, the statement seemed to do several things; all of them damaging. It undermined the role of Martin Margiela. The announcement of a "new fresh team" seemed to disrupt the importance of any transitional talent at the brand. It set a course for the future which sounded more like a business plan than a brand positioning. And to loyal followers who had invested so much time and energy in their loyalty to the cult, the brisk talk of a "Margiela 2015" seemed baffling. The statement had the effect of opening the curtain to reveal nobody was there, while inviting people to believe nothing had changed. It trod on people's dreams.

The JC Report commented soon afterwards that fashion editors were abandoning the brand in droves.

It didn't – and still doesn't – have to be like this.

At Agenda Inc., we believe that organized religions, esoteric beliefs, and cult ideology can deliver an amazing amount of best practices when it comes to luxury brand management. Our research has built up thousands of case studies and recommendations of how luxury brands can leverage ideas around community, loyalty and communication from such sources.

As a truly cult brand which borrowed implicitly and explicitly from cult strategy, Maison Martin Margiela could easily have borrowed the strategies for success during the changeover period. Indeed, the cult of invisibility was set up to do exactly that.

Three things Maison Martin Margiela could have learned from real-world cults...

#1 – An immediate need for communication

At a time of crisis, or apparent lack of leadership, it is critical for the messaging to be clear. For those invested in the cult / brand, their sense of community is disrupted when lack of leadership is apparent.

During times like these, cults need to over-communicate on the continuity of power, or on the abilities of a temporary council to create reassurance.

In the case of MMM, the communication that the brand is business-as-usual both undermines the importance of Martin Margiela in the heritage of the brand, and also fails to calm the rumor that recent runway shows have been sub-standard.

#2 – A call to community

When a cult leader leaves, the typical reaction of a cult would be to draw a celebratory – rather than dismissive – line under the moment, with an invitation to encourage followers to celebrate in some way the life of the leader; usually via some kind of ritual.

We define a ritual as a performance of a myth. So typically it would be a recreation of some aspect of the origin of the community – in particular, about its origin - to help align thinking, and to remind people of their shared role in its success.

The aim of the ritual is to give followers a sense of closure, and also to invest them in the next phase of the cult's life.

While a global Martin Margiela ritual might be a little excessive; there are lots of ways that they could be conducted; via product portfolio, communication, in-store elements, or more.

For example, one of the 4 stitches in the MMM logo could be changed in color, or removed. A limited edition line of products released. An annual celebration set up for the brand. Etc. A leadership crisis – as every cult knows – is one of the best times to build the business and evangelize.

As well as a neat ritual it could have been a great business opportunity...

#3 – A new shared vision

Cults are built on passion and community. Community is built on shared ideas and conversation.

If the principles of a cult needs to change, and they often do - for example when the extra terrestrials fail to appear on the appointed day and everyone has to grudgingly remove their pointy tinfoil hats – it's a nasty shock.

And it's a shock that needs to be addressed at a community level. A new shared vision needs to be articulated, and confirmed. Energy and consensus needs to be redoubled. New tasks allocated. A new ideology embraced.

While the presence – or at least the phantom – of Martin Margiela was hovering at the brand, the direction seemed clear; and the shared conversation was the amazing innovation of the clothes, the mystery of their production, and the games of presence, evanescence and invisibility.

But now the invisibility is lost; leaving the brand – from a strategic point of view - in a whole series of contradictory double negatives.

According to the official statements, neither Martin Margiela nor recent design teams are working at the brand. Yet, the course seems set for the future, and it should have no difficulty attracting fantastic talent which will build on the incredible heritage of the brand.

But, in strategic terms, the cult of invisibility has enormous value in both emotional – and financial – equity. And it's clearly suffering.

While the moment for the immediate need for communication may have passed, it's not too late for the cult of Maison Martin Margiela to take this opportunity to galvanize its followers for what's next.

Members of the cult of Margiela still want to believe. The brand just needs the right cult strategy; and would do well to study the way in which real-world cults have faced the same issues.