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LIMITED EDITION COVER
BY CAETANO PESCE



CUP RUN

Italian coffee maker Illy's artist-designed ceramics are on a long winning streak

PHOTOGRAPHY: ALBERTO ZANETTI WRITER: JJ MARTIN





SOME OF THE HUNDREDS OF ILLY ART COLLECTION DESIGNS, INCLUDING 2013'S FIRST MODEL, BOTTOM RIGHT, THE TWO-HANDLED 'THE THIRD PARADISE' CUP BY ITALIAN ARTIST AND REGULAR ILLY COLLABORATOR MICHELANGELO PISTOLETTO



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t Illy's global HQ in Trieste, a far northeastern Italian city that is five minutes from the border of Slovenia, it's not surprising that the company's ebb and flow follows the sweet swirl of rich espresso. Every three hours, the ground floor reception is transformed from a tranquil space to a buzzing, in-house piazza where mobs of bright-eyed employees are looking for a caffeine fix and a bit of conversation. The first wave begins at breakfast, the next after lunch, then finally in the late afternoon, with employees gathering around a central bar where they are efficiently served a shot of the velvety coffee they help produce, roast, package, label, ship, sell and market every day.

A company watering hole might not be novel, but at Illy, the signature nine-bean is beautifully proffered in Matteo Thun-designed porcelain espresso cups and matching saucers, decorated with butterflies by the artist Kiki Smith. At least, that's what's featured this month. Glance up from the bustling baristas and you will see a chandelier composed of 352 small espresso cups, all uniquely designed by different contemporary artists, and each featured, at one time, inside bars around the world over the last 20 years.

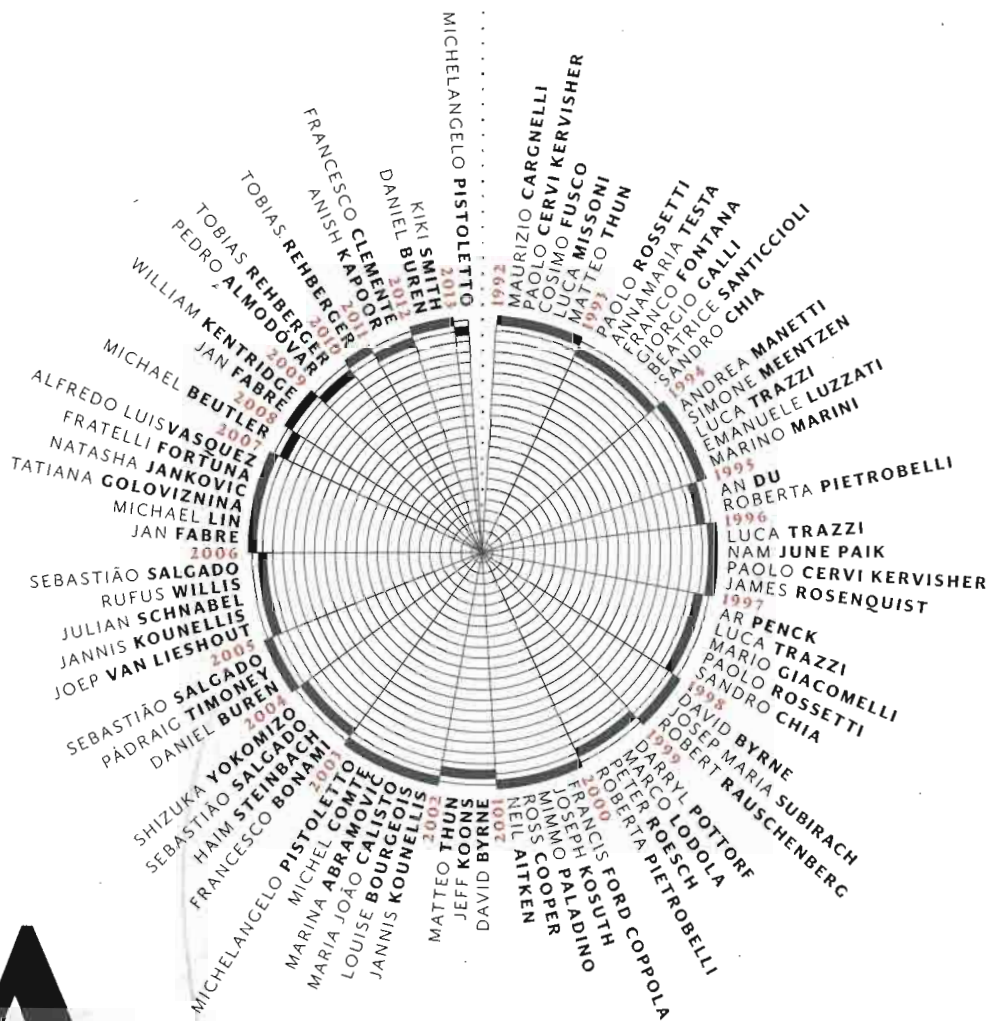
Contemporary art collaborations are in such swift rotation as to almost merit a marketing division of their own, but Illy has a few decades' lift on the competition. Founded in 1933 by Francesco Illy, developer of the world's first modern espresso machine, the company was already dabbling outside of coffee as early as 1934, when it hired the Bauhaus artist Xanti Schawinsky to illustrate its modernist advertising campaigns.

A fuller commitment to art and design, however, occurred in the 1990s, when, after 60 years of tinkering,

Illy decided it had produced a truly perfect coffee product no longer in need of any improvements. 'So it was the right time to see what surrounds the coffee,' says Carlo Bach, Illy's art director and the man responsible for wrangling the company's high-calibre art talent. The first thing to conquer was the cup design, which Ernesto Illy, son of Francesco, handed to Italian architect and former Memphis Group member Matteo Thun.

'He provided me with a very long, very technical brief,' Thun says, recalling the meticulous details necessary to keep the beverage between the ideal 78 and 82 degrees, but the top rim cool for the mouth. 'Ernesto couldn't care less how it looked, but he wanted the best cup that would ensure the best coffee.' Thun took pages of science and translated it into art, creating a compact puff of porcelain whose proportions are as sensual to the lips as they are to the eye and hand. Together with Illy's red brushstroke logo, designed by the artist James Rosenquist, the cup has become the proud symbol of the brand, as instantly recognisable as Coca-Cola's flying ribbons. 'It became the most copied coffee cup on the planet,' Thun adds, laughing. Today the cup is still standard issue for the 100,000-odd bars in over 140 countries that sell Illy coffee.

In 1992, Francesco Illy, grandson of the founder, asked a group of six young artists to put their own imprint on the cups. The art cups were shipped off to the bars. 'But all the customers started stealing them,' Bach recounts. 'So our clients started asking us if they could sell them.' The company soon brought on Bach, a conceptual artist himself, to formalise and structure its art programme. Now Illy commissions two artists per year for two cup collections that are issued to bars





for customer use, but are also packaged in limited quantities that are numbered and signed by the artist, and available for sale.

The project, which has lassoed 93 artists including stars such as Daniel Buren, Anish Kapoor, Louise Bourgeois, Jeff Koons, Julien Schnabel, Francesco Clemente, Pedro Almodóvar and, starting in October, Chinese artist Liu Wei, has been a hit with consumers, but also with notoriously busy artists, none of whom has said no to Bach. The result is an unexpectedly rich body of work that features 253 artworks applied to cups and, in some instances, coffee cans.

'The collection is at once original and playful,' says the Serbian New York-based performance artist Marina Abramović, who first contributed to the collection in 2002 with her 'Beach Body' espresso cups. 'But then the project became more integrated into my own work and into several events that I was involved in,' she adds. Some of those events include Abramović's well-known Spirit gatherings at New York's New Museum and LA's MoCA museum (where Illy coffee became a prop for the

ABOVE, ILLY ART DIRECTOR CARLO BACH JUGGLING WITH THE BRAND'S ICONIC ESPRESSO CUPS, DESIGNED BY MATTEO THUN IN 1991 AND LAUNCHED IN 1992

OPPOSITE, SINCE 1993, ILLY HAS COLLABORATED WITH OVER 70 ARTISTS, INCLUDING JEFF KOONS, LOUISE BOURGEOIS AND MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ, FOR ITS ILLY ART COLLECTION

ILLUSTRATOR:
THE LUXURY OF PROTEST

lab coat-clad guests), as well as her 60th birthday at the Guggenheim (where 'Sixty' mugs were offered to all).

Part of the appeal to artists is that no limitations are placed on them. Kapoor's pierced metal saucer features his signature sculptural effects, while Buren's square saucers line up to create his trademark stripes. Working with Illy also helps artists to mingle with the masses: 'The public that goes to a museum is much smaller than that which visits our bars around the world,' explains Bach. 'If your goal is to promote your point of view and your aesthetic, the cups represent a nice opportunity.'

Illy sells anywhere from 500 to 25,000 of the signed artist cups. 'But we are a roasting company, not a porcelain company,' Bach is quick to point out. 'So we reinvest the money in other art projects.' These include helping young artists get a foothold in the industry, supporting existing artists, and sponsoring scholarships and art fairs. But cups remain the heart of the project and are a symbol of the company's attitude towards it. 'Basically,' Bach says, grinning, 'we just love art.' ★

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