

Vertu promises a radical new way of looking at mobile communications — and it isn't about the race to be the lightest, smallest, or the most technologically advanced. Frank Nuovo, the brand's progenitor, introduces some new adjectives that will be the new yardsticks for future mobile phone progress.

FRANK NUOVO

CREATIVE DIRECTOR AND

Franc Nuovo, a familiar figure in black shirt and dark suit, paces the formidably minimalist corridors of the Musée D'Art Moderne de la Ville in Paris nervously. That evening, to a crowd gathered from around the world — journalists from over 30 countries, celebrities from the fashion, business, media and entertainment industry, with Gwyneth Paltrow, Grace Jones and Suzy Menkes among the anticipative faces — he will be revealing a secret he had conceived and gestated for the last seven years.

Without doubt, the announcement to be made that evening would be the industry's best-kept secret. There were hints, since the beginning of the year, that this mystery project financed and propelled by hand-phone giant Nokia will portend a radical reversal of attitude towards mobile communications. All we knew at that point was that its name is Vertu.

On January 14, there is much portentous and elaborate preamble to the final disclosure. The setting in the Musée D'Art Moderne is suitably menacing and mysterious. Beacons of light from the visibly distant Eiffel Tower are among the selective lighting permitted in those dark rooms, penetrating the glass walls of the museum — striking upon a collage of stark artworks by British artist/photographer Christopher Bucklow, and subtly illuminating the room where a short film by American Ron Fricke, titled *Listen*, was being premiered to the highly anticipative audience.

It is all rather highbrow and esoteric, and I breathe a sigh of relief when, finally, released from all this groping in the dark, the product was unveiled. Handled by uniformed staff in dark suits, the sleek metallic shaft



DESIGNER, VERTU



glints and winks in their gloved hands; it resembles none of the handsets in the market and, yet, there is no doubting the instrument's function — a tool for mobile communication.

FASHION, LUXURY AND TECHNOLOGY

Don't expect any superlatives here. The Vertu handset is neither the smallest (it measures approximately 12.2cm), the lightest (its weight ranges from 172g to 213g), nor the most technologically advanced (it won't do anything more than your latest Nokia model) — features that seem to be the industry's yardstick of progress. It could possibly be the most expensive, however, with its most valuable, the platinum-encased model, going for Euro 30,000 (S\$39,000).

"It is a whole new category for handphones," its creator, Nuovo, explains later in an exclusive interview with *THE PEAK*, referring in part to its high price point. "But authenticity is the buzzword here. And you'll find that everything about Vertu — from its service aspect to the craft that goes into its creation — is authentic and luxurious."

Indeed, the Vertu handset, which will be available in Singapore in May, feels cool and expensive in your hand. Besides the obvious luxe touches of precious metals — platinum, white and yellow gold — there are other sophisticated subtleties that are apparent to the user. Like the way the keys

Complementary accessories like this ceramic pedestal extends the luxury of Vertu



on the pad depress with a satisfying firmness, and the leather strip navigating the curves — courtesy of British leather experts Connolly, no less — provides a firm, slip-proof grip. Its ring, a selection of tunes specially composed for Vertu, has the clarity of a Mozart symphony.

The buzz during the event that style arbiters Donatella Versace and Tom Ford have placed orders for the phone makes it immediately covetable to many of the fashion journalists present. Local glamour queen Tina Tan-Leo, a special invited guest of Vertu, expresses much interest in the phone. Certainly, the platinum handset with matching bracelet serves as an ideal complement/accessory to her pearlised cheongsam and silver fox fur stole ensemble she dons that evening.

WHEN A PHONE CALL IS A LUXURY

Vertu, it should be pointed out, isn't the first to enter the market for luxury handphones. Ericsson has made gold-plated versions of its phones, and Motorola has upgraded some of its handsets to appeal to wealthy customers. Even jewellers are getting into the scene with the likes of De Grisogono appealing to the Middle Eastern love for ostentation with handphones encrusted with black diamonds — these can cost anything from £18,000 to £23,000.

But none of these brands, it can honestly be said, has given this niche

market the commitment and investment that Nokia has in the formation of Vertu. While investment figures remain top secret, Vertu has been surreptitiously building its small empire in the last five years — the company now has 200 staff working in key cities, New York, Singapore, Paris, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, and its headquarters in London. The Vertu phone is assembled in the United Kingdom with parts sourced from around the world — its sapphire crystal face (puportedly from the same source as Rolex watches) and scratch-proof ceramic body are from Switzerland.

Despite Vertu's ultra-luxe facade, Nuovo isn't just interested in the phone's aesthetics ("we can't just make it look luxurious, it has to be authentic from inside out") — a definite departure from other attempts at high-end phones that, despite their expensive casings, share the same synthetic parentage with cheaper models when it comes to their electronic innards.

Vertu's internal architecture features more than 400 mechanical parts, among them 18 jewelled bearings, that are protected by a titanium-backed case. All these are hand-assembled by artisans that hail from a background of specialised craftsmanship such as watchmaking. Apparently, 20 new patents have resulted in the creation of Vertu.

The service element is also highly emphasised in the concept of Vertu. Vertu galleries that will be launched in the middle of the year (one of which will be opened in Paragon shopping centre in Singapore, sharing the same elite stretch as other brand names, Salvatore Ferragamo, Etienne Aigner and Ermenegildo Zegna) will soon offer Vertu owners bespoke services, whether it be the addition of certain applications or the ornamentation with favourite precious stones.

A concierge service button conveniently situated on the side of the phone extends the brand's service feature — at a touch, you'll be connected to the Vertu Concierge at your service 24 hours a day that will attend to your whims, such as theatre bookings in

Paris or hotel reservations in Brussels.

In my brief encounter with the Vertu phone, I contact the concierge — a friendly English voice — who promised to get back to me regarding reservations at the notoriously exclusive Nobu restaurant in London. Unfortunately, I have to return the precious platinum piece before it was confirmed.

A NEW MARKET FOR HANDPHONES

Mobile communications is an enormous, established market: nearly a billion people around the world use cellular phones. What Nuovo is proposing here with the introduction of Vertu is a redefinition of what people expect from handphones. For one, Vertu doesn't try to run the race of other mobile phone manufacturers: it doesn't offer some new fangled technology that consumers aren't asking for, or the snazziest GPRS (general packet radio services) tool.

Instead, it aims to create mobile phones that you treasure as much as you do your other intimate and precious tools, such as your Patek Philippe watch or Montegrappa pen — with the possibility of it being regarded as an expensive antique one day.

"From a design aspect, mobile phones are a relatively new product, compared to more matured product segments such as cars, watches, eyewear," opines the 41-year-old Los Angeles-based designer. "Thus, there is excellent opportunity to develop new ideas." Nuovo, who has been Chief Designer at Nokia since 1995, has been largely credited with helping secure the brand's untouchable market share of 37 per cent with handphones that meld the fashion aspect with technology and functionality. He will continue his role in Nokia while heading all matters concerning design in Vertu.

A self-confessed 'phone obsessive', Nuovo relates that he hit upon the idea while having dinner with Vertu President and then Vice President of Concept and Design of Nokia, Peter Ashall, at a steak joint in Santa Monica called the Firehouse. "It was in 1995

Melding technology, luxury and fashion — an accompanying Vertu bracelet in matching precious metal





- 1 Gwyneth Paltrow with Frank Nuovo discovering the luxury of using a Vertu
- 2 Some of the artistic works on display during the Vertu launch
- 3 A fitting showcase for the Vertu handphoned
- 4 The formidable Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville in Paris — where the launch was held
- 5 Gwyneth Paltrow and Vertu CEO and President, Peter Ashall
- 6 Photographic artworks by British artist Christopher Bucklow
- 7 The Vertu handphoned — love at first touch

when I first talked about doing an amazing hand-crafted version of the handphoned. By 1997, the idea was rounded out to a whole concept of service and beautifully hand-crafted materials."

When asked about the feasibility of a multi-thousand-dollar handphoned in a market of cheap and cheerful models, Nuovo reasons, "Handphones have started out as very functional tools, like pens and watches. These two areas have been elevated when precision craft was introduced."

Nuovo says emphatically, "You have to start somewhere. And I can't fear starting. I want to be a pioneer as a designer."

EVOLUTIONARY REVOLUTION

The current Vertu model with its aerodynamic curves and super-sleek keypad that carries the 'V' theme of the design will be a signature of the brand. Though Nuovo concedes that there will be future ranges that will refresh the core line, he reckons that there will be collectors that will want the same style in a different metal, or a special addition that will carry some unique feature.

"It's an offering that's hard to resist when you're in a position to be able to afford the luxury of owning one," he remarks.

From a design point of view, there's no doubt that Nuovo has succeeded in achieving many firsts in the industry. From an economics stance, market observers attribute Vertu as a creation of a new segment in a market that is fast approaching saturation in many countries. They see manufacturers increasingly turning to niche segments; seeking out the market for handset replacement rather than going after new customers.

The evolutionary technology in Vertu could be an additional appeal to buyers of expensive mobile tools. Introduced for the first time, this technology, unique to Vertu, helps extend the longevity of the product. "What was key from the start was the upgradability of the product, its evolutionary technology

FRANK NUOVO: A 'CREATIVE PLAYGROUND' IN VERTU

Frank Nuovo seeks harmony in his designs as he does his music. A professional jazz musician for many years, Nuovo chose to dedicate his creativity in the field of industrial design after graduating from the prestigious Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. Since then, the avenues to display his originality and flair have been wide and varied — in his design company, Design works USA/BMW, he delved into creating motoring interiors in BMW cars, medical products such as a heart monitor, and air-control systems for civilian and military air traffic.

He has been heading Nokia Design since 1995, which has contributed to various features that have helped establish Nokia as a brand leader — colourful and interchangeable phone cases and a myriad of ring tones have been some of the brand's innovations.

"With the launch of the house of Vertu, I don't have any limits to what I will design or what we can introduce in our galleries." At the moment, Nuovo extends himself to creating a suitable boutique interior that will carry the Vertu range; he will be putting his touches to the furniture, the glass stands (crafted by the same artist who works with architect Frank Gehry), the marketing and advertising campaigns, as well as a range of complementary product lines to the Vertu phone.

On display at the Plaza Athenée salon where the interview is held are various pieces of these complementary lines — a supple leather holder for the prized piece, a earpiece with matching precious metal fittings, and a ceramic pedestal that coddles and charges the handphoned.

As he showcases each piece, he remarks excitedly, "It's a total commitment to a holistic experience, as you can see. And an excellent opportunity for me to bring forward the Vertu style."

The youthful 41-year-old Nuovo can barely contain his jubilation — his joy that a seven-year-old project has finally manifested, one which offers vast potential in future for him to flex his creative muscles, borders on disbelief. Despite being on the brink of achieving designer celebrity status, Nuovo is wide-eyed, obliging and eminently likable — lacking the neurosis and haughty disdain other creative geniuses are apt to display.

What drives him is the aspiration to "reinvent experiences". And creating a luxury handphoned will be his take on a radical new way of looking at communications. His vision is only possible, he adds, if the high luxury factor is maintained throughout in the company's dedication, service and entire offering. "It has to be a totally dedicated effort, which is why a whole new company like Vertu had to be formed."

Nuovo, who was a professional drummer for jazz bands, sees his next challenge to "reinvent" the musical performance experience. "There's an opportunity to create an environment that is comfortable for the audience and artist which goes beyond the venue itself — it's something that I've talked about for years."

concept. It's not just what the phone has now, it's what will continue to be offered in the form of upgrades."

Vertu, even though it has its own research team, is riding on the technology of Nokia — which is pretty hard to beat. The Finnish company has spent approximately US\$1.3 billion on research and development, churning out a myriad of applications that truly boggles the mind — among the latest are a phone that can take pictures, another that has a stopwatch and thermometer functions, and yet another that doubles as a digital music player.

Nuovo states that Vertu will

only be using technology that has been proven to be tried, tested and reliable, which means that it might not always be the most cutting edge.

But we've come this far to know that that's not what Vertu is about. Its about building a new brand that will eventually extend beyond the handphoned, it's about creating a new experience in communications, it's about aspirations on being the finest — not the most accessible, nor the lightest, fastest, or the smallest. And it's also about one of these moments when a product is designed so well that old technologies have been made to seem brand spanking new. p