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# PASSIONS

TECH

Station F, in Paris's 13th arrondissement, is the world's largest tech incubator.



## IN THE LAB OF LUXURY

Rejecting the hegemony of Silicon Valley startup culture, these rebels are stirring tech's soul. By Richard Morgan

**ROXANNE VARZA** pushes open a door covered in Ken dolls, lures me into the men's room, and begins knocking on stalls, looking for a vacant one. "Here," she says on a third try. "Open it." In contrast to the gray, antiseptic bathroom, the stall is an opulent oasis, as if Alexander McQueen had designed an outhouse. Varza pierced the stunned silence: "This startup is called Trone. We do things very differently here."

Such is Station F, where Varza is director. It's the world's largest tech incubator, housed in an 111,550-square-foot converted Parisian freight train station that's as long as the Eiffel Tower is high. It opened in June 2017 with 1,000 founders and uncanny timing: That same month, President Emmanuel Macron unveiled a new tech visa program and a mission to make France "a startup nation." While Station F hosts Amazon, >>



▷▷ Apple, Facebook, Google, and Microsoft, those blue chips are boilerplate behemoths on tech campuses these days. Much more interesting is the presence of two French megabrands: L'Oréal, the cosmetics giant, and LVMH, the umbrella group covering Louis Vuitton, Givenchy, Hennessy, Sephora, TAG Heuer, and many more.

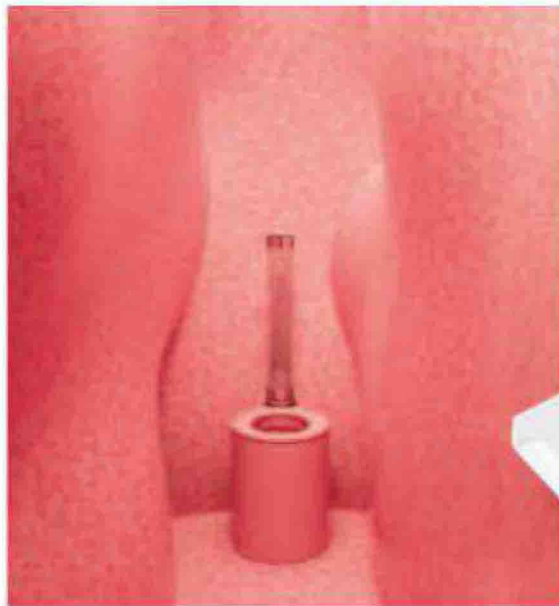
L'Oréal, which made its first-ever tech acquisition in March, runs a Station F atelier of nine beauty-oriented startups. Down the hall, LVMH's venture—La Maison des Startups—has 89 workstations for 23 startups (50 by November). These are not Facebook killers. But while these burgeoning firms are unlikely to change tech financially, interviews with more than a dozen of them suggest something bolder: the ability to revolutionize tech tonally.

While many startups are dreamed up by Bay Area brogrammers as a means of easing and simplifying entitled bachelorhood, the luxury thinking of L'Oréal and LVMH suggests room beyond *la vie en bros* for a new digital dialect, a kind of tech couture. Instead of scale, specificity. Instead of disruption, finesse. An understanding that customers are as sophisticated as founders, and that nothing tailor-made is stuck in beta. Why move fast and break things when you can bask in refined craftsmanship? Who ever stopped to optimize the roses?

Consider LVMH's Euveka, for example, which replaces wooden mannequin torsos with robotics that can adapt to a client's specific measurements. "We were amazed that in 2018 the industry standard is still wood," says sales manager Eva Moudar. Euveka frees designers and tailors to expand their clientele to any body.



**[Clockwise from top] LVMH CEO Bernard Arnault inspects a Euveka mannequin. L'Oréal's Sillages delivers a concierge *parfumeur* to your mailbox. A lavish lavatory from Trone.**



Or L'Oréal's Sillages, which sends personalized perfumes Warby Parker-style for customers to sample before deciding. As founder Maxime Garcia-Janin says, "Choosing a perfume off a piece of paper is like getting married before you kiss." Not only does Sillages shatter the monotony of a room full of Chanel No. 5 wearers, but customers worldwide suddenly have a concierge *parfumeur* in Paris.

Others navigate traditional CES-style thinking: Beautigloo's cosmetics microfridge or Daumet's proprietary technique to make shiny white gold. At Heuritech, an image-recognition trend detector, eight of its 24 employees have Ph.D.s in artificial intelligence.

Of course, without Station F, L'Oréal and LVMH would not exactly operate out of garages in Sunnyvale. The companies' com-

bined revenues in 2017 exceeded \$80 billion. And their digital presence is booming. At L'Oréal, for example, e-commerce represents 8% of overall revenue, but in China it's 26% of sales.

"We don't just want to put luxury shopping online. We want to make online shopping luxurious," says Ian Rogers, LVMH's chief digital officer, an iTunes alum.

For her part, Varza spent Station F's debut year hyperaware of Silicon toxicity—misogyny at Uber, the notorious Google memo, and hate speech on Facebook and Twitter. "Who wants another Silicon Valley?" she asks. "Thank God we can be different." For all of Silicon Valley's range, it's broadly a haven for naysayers who see the world as broken without them. At Station F, by contrast, where there's a will, there's a *ouais*. ■