

Daimler Art Collection

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Interview with Renate Wiehager

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Daimler's corporate art collection was founded in 1977. It now contains approximately 2,600 artworks by around 700 artists, from within Germany and from abroad. Initially, the artworks were placed on display within the company. In 1999, the collection was given its own exhibition space in the restored Haus Huth building on Potsdamer Platz, and began to exhibit in major museums worldwide. Today, the collection is one of the foremost 100 corporate collections in the world.

Questions put to Renate Wiehager, Director of the Daimler Art Collection, Stuttgart/Berlin, by Wulf Niestendiedrich und Mac Rohrbach

You work within a corporate entity that is remarkably successful in combining art and corporate culture. How did this begin? What provided the driving force? What path did events take?

The art collection was founded in 1977, in response to a decision taken by the company's leadership. It was founded upon three key ideas, and these continue to be valid today, albeit in an extended form:

1. To acquire high-quality, gallery-standard artworks and to display them in public corporate areas.
2. Critically, to thereby open up artistic media to company employees in the name of cultural education.
3. It was decided that the focus would be on 20th-century abstract avant-garde art, owing to the role played by southern Germany in major developments in abstract art in the post-1910 period.

At the time of the collection's founding, there was no art historian within the company itself. Karin von Maur, the then curator for classic modernist art at the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, was therefore commissioned to create an initial concept for the collection's content.

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Between 1980 (roughly) and 2000, the art collection was overseen in-house by Hans J. Baumgart, a legal expert with responsibility for art. As the holder of a PhD in art history, I have been responsible for the collection since 2001, acting in consultation with the board member for human resources. The collection was built up on the basis of discussions and decisions within the company, uninfluenced by external advisors or juries; this was critical in allowing art to “take root” within the company, and in allowing a real, “lived” identification with the company’s own art collection.

You certainly have a very considerable and extensive collection. What are the collecting criteria? And who makes the decisions?

One significant aspect of the criteria for building up the collection is the maintaining of its characteristic profile through the restriction of collecting activities to a limited number of topics: abstract avant-garde groups operating in the circa-1900 to present-day period / international photography and video art / commissioned artworks / public sculptures. As curator, I draw up a long-term acquisition plan with my team based on this principle.

This restriction of collection acquisitions to certain topics is important, for a number of reasons:

1.

It was recognized from the beginning that a well-thought-out art history concept was needed – as opposed to simply visually filling “empty walls” in corporate premises and in office spaces.

2.

It is easier for company employees to recognize the value of a collection in its own right if they get to know the collection as a unified conceptual entity, through regularly alternated company-internal exhibitions – rather than simply looking through the artworks for suitable items of “office decoration.”

3.

A demarcated concept that is well-substantiated in terms of art history enables and requires an in-depth treatment of themes, and avoids a broad but poorly-defined approach.

4.

A distinctive profile for the collection and long-term acquisition planning prevents purchases being decided by the personal tastes.

What are the reasons for bringing art into a company?

From the start, the art has been seen as a way of “making cultural enrichment available in the workplace.” With around 100 exhibitions to date within Germany and abroad, the

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Daimler Art Collection has since acquired an additional aspect as a multifaceted medium of communication. Around 1.5 million visitors have seen our exhibitions – everywhere in the world from Singapore to Buenos Aires, from Cape Town to Berlin. Visitors take part in tours and artist talks, and in the accompanying education program. Since 2000, we have improved the art presence at various company locations in Stuttgart and Berlin by offering regular tours of the temporary exhibitions to employees and their families. The Daimler Art Collection also plays an active role in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), through public exhibitions at the Daimler Contemporary Berlin, at German institutions and in museums worldwide.

How do company employees benefit from this enormous deployment of capital and art? In what ways do they participate?

It is not now – and has never been – a question of “an enormous deployment of capital and art” – that way of putting it suggests that the art comes close to a soulless functionalism. The purchasing budget for the art collection has always been “reasonable” and transparent. At the same time, it is kept as a continuously steady, calculable value. Employees come face-to-face with a changing selection of museum-standard artworks in their places of work: this enables them to get to know a significant section of 20th-century art and of the international contemporary art world – *en passant*, as it were – and to discuss this art with colleagues. For many employees, this will be the first serious encounter with art of any kind. It may even give people a whole new interest in their culture, awakening curiosity and encouraging people to overcome the unease associated with the unfamiliar territory of public museums and contemporary art galleries. Even if this does not happen, however, regular “encounters” with art in the working environment still represent a first step on the road towards respecting the full cultural and intellectual variety of our world, and may lead to people developing a new openness to this in their own individual way.

Upon what does your commitment to art depend? “Only” upon personal interests, or (also/solely) upon a company policy?

The structure of the Daimler Art Collection and the nature of its exhibition presentations are exclusively the product of a strategic position taken by the company: Daimler is the only automobile company in the world that has spent nearly 40 years building up an art collection with clearly defined goals and areas of interest, using it to address people within the company, the region and internationally. This is a “unique selling point” of the highest value.

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Art as a way of showing real authentic corporate values in a credible and evident way. Do you believe that this is feasible? And if so, how can this be done?

Art speaks differently to each individual person. The tours and talks that accompany our temporary exhibitions always begin with art, but they often lead to extremely personal and emotional discussions. As a part of this, key corporate values are quite naturally expressed: quality, authenticity, cultural diversity, respect for unfamiliar and initially incomprehensible ideas, open-mindedness with regard to new developments, discipline, and an enthusiasm for the experimental. The success of a committed examination of corporate values through the medium of art – or with art taken as an example – depends upon continuity, and upon both the art and the communication being kept to a consistently high standard.

What qualities should I associate with the term “defining value,” which appears on your homepage?

Enthusiasm, recognition of true worth, integrity, discipline, a culture of excellence – the key Daimler corporate values can also be reflected by art.

Does your art have an influence on the company’s visual profile? And, if so, what form does it take?

The Daimler Art Collection has become renowned in the international art scene by maintaining high standards, continuity and innovative curatorial practices – as has been shown by the approximately 100 exhibitions that have taken place in more than 20 countries since circa 1990, and by the numerous accompanying publications that have been produced. All of this has significantly influenced the cultural profile projected by Daimler/Mercedes-Benz.

Which corporate values (mission statement/policy rules) relate – directly or indirectly – to the art? Is there, for instance, a “bridge” between employee dialogue and art promotion activities, innovation and exhibition design?

High-value, excellent design, a refusal to compromise on our high standards in terms of quality and innovation; all of these are ways in which our company’s cultural aspirations are expressed in the medium of art.

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Is art used as a vehicle of communication in the presenting of products or services offered by your company? Does the firm use art as a way of making its range of services stand out?

Art is not deployed in a functional way (in the advertising of products etc.) Instead, the presence of art within the company is experienced as an independent, additional enhancement, and as part of a social stance.

Do you hold events, vernissages, exhibitions, individual formats etc. to which you actively invite clients or that you inform clients about as a way of fostering client relations?

Yes, as part of our internal and external exhibitions, in the context of the Daimler Art collection world tour (embarked on in 2003) as well as on the occasion of temporary exhibitions and art projects at German and international Daimler sites. E.g. we invite clients and partners from the areas of economy, politics and culture for specific events at Daimler Contemporary Berlin and in the context of international museum exhibitions. These are normally specifically conceived invitations, connected with guided tours, lectures on the activities of the Daimler Art Collection, offering opportunities for questions and discussions.

Can “corporate culture” be represented more easily or more successfully through art?

Our art is a part of our corporate culture, but corporate culture also includes projects and support etc. in the fields of donations and sponsoring. Daimler is worldwide active in diverse ways.

Do you discuss and agree upon corporate communication goals relating to art internally, within the company? And if so, with whom? Who “has the last word”?

The structure of the Daimler Art Collection and its communication strategy, the internal and external exhibitions, publications, art concepts for new buildings and the way the profile and activities of the collection are presented on the homepage are all developed and conceived by the Daimler Art Collection team, but of course a lot of diverse ideas and input from our concern put life into it. I’m reporting to Wilfried Porth, member of the Daimler Board of Management, Human Resources & Director of Labor Relations.

What do you do to advance the cause of fine art? Can you give me some specific examples?

Our promotion of contemporary art begins with the acquisition of artworks for the collection. The next major step in the process is the presentation of these artworks in the temporary exhibition format, within the company, at the Daimler Contemporary in

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Berlin and in major museums worldwide. In many cases, this allows artists to make new contacts, and opens doors for them. A further significant aspect is provided by our accompanying publications and artist books, and by their art appearing in our collection and on our homepage. It should be understood that around two-thirds of the artworks in our collection of around 2,600 artworks are constantly on display to the public, in alternating arrangements, whereas in the case of many museums, new acquisitions vanish into storage and are not seen for years. This ties into an additional significant aspect of our support program: we build a relationship with many artists that lasts several years and that includes the purchasing of their artworks, the commissioning of artworks from them, and the publishing of monographs and themed catalogues that are sent to major museums worldwide. Additionally, there are our various prizes for the promotion of art.

Do you make use of art to communicate the implementation of strategic directions in company policies more easily or more successfully?

Art is not used in the sense of “being pressed into service” for the company. Instead, the art is simply always there, always in new contexts and with new themes. In individual cases, this produces spin-off effects. When colleagues from the fields of design, management, finance, research etc. come to attend tours of the latest exhibitions, and when people in Tokyo, Johannesburg, São Paulo or Vienna come to visit our museum-based exhibitions, this constantly leads to new, more open and inspiring discussions.

Do you award bursaries?

From 1999 to 2009, the ‘Daimler Award for South African Culture’ was awarded nine times. This award was a way of allowing young South African exponents of culture to present their work in an international context for the first time.

Art Scope Daimler Japan is a support program for young artists working in the fine arts in Japan, which was founded in 1991. In 2005, this prize was restructured as an “artist in residence” program to provide German-Japanese artist exchange opportunities.

Daimler Financial Services, which is based in Stuttgart, first inaugurated the ‘Emerging Artist Award’ in 2005. The winner of this award is nominated from among the graduates of various art disciplines at the famous Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Detroit. The nominees and the award winner then stage a joint exhibition, whilst the accompanying publication helps to further the careers of the young artists by bringing them to the attention of a global audience.

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I am familiar with your “ABC Work Books of the Daimler Art Collection”. I am deeply impressed. What is the central message that all the Work Books have in common? What are the culturally conditioned differences that exist?

The central “message” shared by all of the different “ABC Work Books of the Daimler Art Collection for Learners and Students” (seven have been published in total since 2004) is the *asking of questions* about art. They prompt discussions and conversations, and encourage people to develop their own views, their own opinions. Additionally, “factual knowledge” useful in understanding art can be found in the appendices to the books, which contain explanations of art-related terms and biographies of artists.

For each country, we selected the featured artworks based on a different set of criteria, depending on the culture and the history of art in the country in question: Brazil and Argentina have an abstract and constructive/concrete art tradition, and so in their case we focused on art of this type. For South Africa, we emphasized the figurative, and for Asia, we emphasized photography, video art etc. The selection of artworks featured in the book and the questions relating to the selections are altered accordingly.

Do employees enjoy having art in their workplace? How are you aware of this, and how do you experience it? What forms of direct impact does it have?

It is about an encounter – not about decoration or the generating of “enjoyment” – although of course it is welcome news if some employees enjoy their daily encounter with art in their workplace! It is equally welcome, however, if people are critical and dispute vigorously, initially expressing aversion, reservations and incomprehension: critical debate often has a more profound effect on everyone concerned than superficial “enjoyment.”

In what ways does art improve performance or working atmosphere for employees (empowerment, inspiration, innovation, creativity etc.)?

The presence of a succession of artworks and changing theme exhibitions within the company – I always emphasize the element of *change*, as this is essential for maintaining interest and making people notice the art: the same piece of art hanging in the same place for years soon becomes merely a decorative object. A varying presence of art can significantly help people to identify with the company. These days, this is a very important factor in attracting new employees, and in retaining them. Art, however, also allows understanding “culture as a locational factor” – something whose importance should not be underestimated – to be brought into the company in a direct and authentic way.

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What specific projects are you pursuing at the moment?

In 2013/2014, around 10,000 employees came to see our exhibitions. They took part in tours and discussions, which shows that what is on offer in terms of support and accompaniment under the headings previously mentioned is being actively used. In 2015/16, we will give this lively interest a new focus by staging three exhibitions of our recently acquired examples of contemporary Chinese art, in dialogue with art of other nations from our collection. First in Berlin at the Daimler Contemporary, Potsdamer Platz, and later at our Stuttgart site, we will jointly organize themed evenings, talks by artists, lectures and tours to accompany these exhibitions.

What mission and vision do you have in mind for the art collection's role in the company's future?

We would like to encourage a sense of company identity through the medium of art, to indicate the company's real and genuine sense of cultural responsibility, and to play a role in the company's internationalization. To be specific, our "mission" is to maintain the collection as a presence within the company, to continue to offer regular new museum-standard exhibitions, complete with tours, and to exhibit in German and in international museums.

Our "vision" is expressed in our steady expansion of the collection through the addition of young international art and – via our world tour and education program – our communication with and offering of new knowledge to a young international audience.

To touch on a further important aspect of the actual working process within an operation like yours: what is the role and task of the curator in the corporate environment?

The Daimler Art Collection's curator bridges the gap between the company and the public cultural institutions, and creates a balance in terms of contemporary cultural and aesthetic phenomena.

How would you describe the role of an art consultant or gallerist in the setting up, implementation and maintaining of a "Corporate Collection" within a company?

As they act according to their own interests, consultant firms and galleries should not play a major role in the founding and in the building up of a corporate collection. They can, however, be valuable partners in a collection's maintenance, expansion and publicity work.

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What are the challenges associated with a modern exhibition design? What are the conditions required?

The selecting of the artworks, the arranging of the artworks within the space, the combining of the different media: all of these things must have a proper relationship to their cultural situation, and must be radically contemporary. The presentation must be precisely matched to the configuration of the space, and the handling of the artworks must be visibly and evidently professional. Visitors should have the opportunity to learn about the content/about the artist, without the information being too intrusive or didactic. As a first step, however, it is important to create an animated dialogue between the artworks themselves by placing them in original and unexpected conjunctions, so that viewers are “drawn in,” and become interested in going further, and in learning more.

What are the key skills that must be mastered by an “exhibition designer” or curator?

A wide knowledge of art history and a detailed understanding of recent art – based upon one’s own engagement with, knowledge of and experience of the subject – plus suitably high standards in one’s handling and conserving of the artworks. Additionally, a curator must adjust/adapt to all sorts of people from all sorts of different cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, and to people with different levels of knowledge. This means that it is essential to constantly adjust to one’s target group!

Do you have a preferred curatorship concept? If so, what does it look like?

No, the concept is always a new concept. It always has to be updated, according to contemporary aesthetic developments and cultural discussions.

Mrs. Wiehager, thank you for this interview.

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