Daimler
Art Collection

Interview for *MB Magazine Argentina*, 2014

Daniel Lippitsch interviews Dr. Renate Wiehager, director of the Daimler Art Collection:

1. **What are the goals and principles that are adhered to by the Daimler Collection**?

   One has to distinguish between the contentual and curatorial goals of the collection and its goals in terms of communication and education.

   In contentual and curatorial terms, we try to give the collection a clear and recognizable orientation in art history terms without imposing too many stylistic restrictions on the approximately 2,600 artworks contained within it. Our collection focuses on 20th-century abstract avant-garde art right up to the art of the present day: from artists of the early era who were students of Adolf Hölzel in Stuttgart circa 1910 (such as Willi Baumeister and Oskar Schlemmer) to the Bauhaus, Constructive and Concrete tendencies, European post-war abstract art and the Zero avant-garde movement, minimalist / conceptual art and Neo Geo and their predecessors, right up to the present day.

   With regard to communication and educational goals, we have been consistently expanding the formats of the exhibitions that we present since 2001: our one or two temporary themed exhibitions with guided tours for company employees at the Stuttgart-Möhringen venue per year have now been supplemented by temporary visits by the collection to other Daimler venues or also in the Mercedes-Benz Museum. For some time now, we have also been staging themed exhibitions in the public museums in the Stuttgart region. All company employees and their children are invited to tour all of these exhibitions, and this means that we are reaching an audience both within the company and among the wider public.

   At the same time, we have also staged by-request exhibitions in certain German museums, in locations such as Würzburg and Kiel.

In 2003, I started the Daimler Art Collection's world tour, which began with a preliminary overview at the Museum für Neue Kunst/ZKM Karlsruhe, followed by major exhibitions in Detroit, Singapore, Tokyo, South Africa, South America or Vienna.

2. **How would you describe the way the collection has developed under your leadership? In terms of themes, what direction have you taken?**

   Firstly, I have taken a European corporate art collection with a focus on the South German avant-garde and on Concrete art and turned it into a collection of international contemporary art with groups of artwork by American, South American, Asien, Australian and South African artists, but also with new artwork groups by European artists working from the 1960s to the present day. We are currently planning to acquire examples of Chinese contemporary art. This "expansion" policy also includes moving beyond the focus on painting that existed prior to 2001, by means of greater incorporation into the collection of photography, video and mixed media. This expansion has gone hand-in-hand with the incorporation of the political and socio-critical aspects of contemporary art. It was this wider scope that made it possible to develop exhibition concepts that give our three-times-yearly temporary themed exhibitions in our Daimler Contemporary public exhibition space at Potsdamer Platz in Berlin a richness of content that brings visitors from Berlin, from Germany and from further afield to the building. It's also true to say that this strengthening of the thematic and media-related aspects of the collection also provided the material basis for the Daimler Art Collection world tour: the presenting of special exhibitions for various major cities all over the world with very different visitor profiles. These might equally focus on the figurative or on the media aspect (South Africa/Tokyo) or with the focus on the post-war abstract avant-garde (Madrid, Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo etc).

   The education program has always been a significant part of the world tour: well in advance of the exhibition, we contact schools, universities, cultural ministries etc. in order to prepare educators for the exhibition and its potential benefits in terms of educational goals. During the run-up to the exhibition, we provide workshops for teachers, and during the setup period we train young art historians and artists to act as guides to groups of schoolchildren and to students once the exhibition opens. For each country, we publish a new "ABC of the Daimler Art Collection", with questions on the artworks, information, culturally specific images and materials etc., which is given to every child and young person as a gift and as a working resource. All of this is accompanied by the specific publications - introduced by me when I became director in 2001, and entirely new in terms of their scale and range of themes and concepts. These are large-scale publications of 300 to 400 pages apiece dealing with the highlights of the collection / with thematic exhibitions / with the Education Program /with the world tour

events /with artists that have major artwork groups or commissioned works appearing in our collection.

3. **What are the main tasks and responsibilities associated with heading a corporate collection?**

   The primary goal is, of course, to be a leader among German and international corporate collections, and this is achieved by ensuring continuity, quality, a distinctive profile, innovation and communication. The tasks and responsibilities attached to this include formulating and implementing a Daimler art collection exhibition plan for Baden-Württemberg, for Germany and for the international context, plus a long-term exhibition, publication and acquisition strategy. The exhibitions and art concepts that we implement for Daimler on a company-internal basis - and also the exhibitions for our public exhibition space in Berlin (Daimler Contemporary) and in international museums - are always coupled with cultural education resources for the employees based in each location and for their children.

   I have curatorial oversight of all the exhibitions, including the details of the artworks' hanging – one reason for this is that Daimler's "art collection" also suits my style as a curator: after all, an exhibition is made to be seen in a specific location and a specific context, and a certain aesthetic "language" of presentation must therefore be developed for each individual exhibition.

   A core responsibility of my job at Daimler is to preserve and to expand the Daimler Art Collection and to handle its communication activities – this requires long-term planning, both in terms of the collection's substantial acquisition activities and, of course, in terms of the plain logistics and restoration work: the six to eight exhibitions that take place every year, some of which may be taking place simultaneously, mean that the approximately 2000 artworks in our collection are in a state of constant "rotation".

   Although this is something that is not automatically associated with working in the corporate art collection field, one central aspect of my work in our organisation is the production of scientific publications on defined areas within the collection and on certain themes, and also monographs on individual artists, to accompany all exhibitions.

4. **How would you evaluate the role of corporate collections in the arts scene landscape of today?**

   In my opinion, the most central responsibility and opportunity associated with a vibrant and courageously led corporate art collection lies in the way that its exhibitions and guided tours speak to people who might not normally visit museums and engage their interest for art and culture. The aim, first and foremost, is to awaken the curiosity of colleagues and to cause them to look beyond the limited horizons of their working environments - but also to encourage people to become more tolerant of phenomena of our age that are expressed in art in a critical and provocative way. If, here and there, a person is encouraged to do something creative by the presence of art in the workplace and the possibility of interacting with it, then we are only too pleased.

   This is one side of things. Another is the fact that we do of course see it as our duty to play a role in terms of "corporate social responsibility". We acquire art by contemporary German and international artists and support young art in a targeted way; we work with galleries within Germany and further afield, we curate and co-finance exhibitions of art from the Daimler Art Collection for museums and promote communication and education in their specific cultural context. All of these activities also have a social value.

5. **How do corporate collections enhance the art scene landscape of today? What kind of positive impact does the collecting of contemporary art within a major company have? Specifically, what opportunities does a curator have within a corporate collection as opposed to a public institution?**

   If, in order to provide a concrete and readily understood assessment, I might be allowed to return to the South German context and to the developments of the past 20 years, then there is plenty of evidence that people make "pilgrimages" to private and corporate collections in preference to other collections because they offer a biographical story that one can "grasp" and a defined and comprehensible scope. In other words, many visitors are somewhat put off by the abundance of the great public museum collections, as they do not know where to start.

   You asked about the "positive impact" of a corporate collections – one part of this is the way that we, as curators, can count on the "trust" that employees have for "their" corporation. Founded in 1977, the Daimler Art Collection has plenty of links with the company's recent history. It presents art from the region, but also art from other countries where the company is active. Company employees see art in the workplace on

a daily basis, and are also able to take part in special guided tours for employees, where they can ask us [the curatorial staff] questions etc. As I have already said, all of this can help in breaking down the barriers surrounding contemporary art and culture (and, moving forward, in animating colleagues to take an active part in the cultural life of their city and region).

So, you wanted to know what opportunities are open to us as curators? It's safe to say that this varies widely between curatorships. Many firms make use of external agencies, advisors, juries, etc., etc. That doesn't happen at Daimler: as collection director, I am responsible for all decisions on the collection's content. This includes central planning, acquisitions, thematic and curatorial decision-making for individual exhibitions and the composition or checking of all the accompanying texts. This probably gives me more scope for shaping the collection's profile than is enjoyed by many of the curators of major museums today; on the other hand, my position brings with it considerable responsibility, as the corporate collections of today are scrutinized closely from so many angles.

6. **What bearing do the company's social obligations have on the collecting of art? Collections of this kind are not always open to the public. What is the Daimler art collections policy on allowing people access to its exhibits?**

The Daimler Art Collection makes its art accessible to the public by means of its lively and diverse exhibition activities: our internal exhibitions and art concepts are seen daily by other guests in addition to our employees. External groups can also request a tour. Our exhibition space, "Daimler Contemporary" at Potsdamer Platz Berlin is open to all seven days a week. We regularly present exhibitions in public museums: in the 2013/2014 period, our art has been on display in the Museum St. Giulia in Brescia or in the Galerie der Stadt Sindelfingen. A core responsibility of my job at Daimler is to preserve and to expand the Daimler Art Collection and to handle its communication activities – this requires long-term planning, both in terms of the collection's substantial acquisition activities and, of course, in terms of the plain logistics and restoration work: the six to eight exhibitions that take place every year, some of which may be taking place simultaneously, mean that the approximately 2,600 artworks in our collection are in a state of constant "rotation".

7. **Corporate entities sometimes see art as a decorative element or as a form of capital that can be quietly sold off if necessary. What is the position of the artworks in the collection as far as Daimler AG is concerned?**

   The Daimler Art Collection represents, first and foremost, an outlet for cultural education, accessible to a wide internal and external audience. If visitors to our exhibitions sometimes find the artworks merely “decorative”, then I don’t have a problem with that. There is, of course, nothing wrong in principle with a corporate collection being treated as capital, but our policy is to consistently expand the collection and to incorporate the most recent developments in art. Daimler “invests” in art as a form of intellectual capital; the company invests in dynamic curatorial innovation and in creating productive new outreach ideas for art – this is our message, and it is reflected in our day-to-day praxis.