

Corporate Collections: on the threshold of a new type of patronage

by Edo Dijksterhuis

Some 45,000 works of art. That's the number of artworks owned by the twenty member companies and institutions upon the 2005 launch of the [Vereniging Bedrijfscollecties Nederland](#) (VBCN – Netherlands Association of Corporate Collections). That's half as many as the Stedelijk Museum has on display and in storage. Less than nine years later the number stands at roughly 100,000 works of art and the ranks of the VBCN have swollen to forty-six. Suffice it to say, corporate collections in the Netherlands – and across the world – are no small patrons of the arts, whether they are engaging with artists directly for commissions or fostering (and financing) an environment in which sales, prizes, residencies, and exhibitions can move forward.

Most corporate collections in The Netherlands are relatively small and have a short history. Even the large ones – ABN AMRO, Akzo Nobel, ING, and KPN – are modest compared to such international giants as Deutsche Bank and Generali. Still, the landscape of Dutch corporate collections is an instructive setting for studying corporate patronage of the arts. The list of VBCN-members includes a broad spectrum of companies, from hospitals and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to energy suppliers, law firms, and the traditionally well-represented banks. With the VBCN there is a lot of sharing of practical knowledge and experience, and also self-reflection, including the publication of a [2009 book](#) critically analyzing the role of corporate collections in the art world.

It's a role not to be downplayed. The VBCN [estimates that](#) corporate collections comprise ten to twenty percent of the Dutch art market. At least until the 2006 economic crisis corporate collections were amongst the most important buyers in the gallery circuit with some galleries depending on them for as much as half of their sales. Indirectly this was also true for the artists connected to these galleries. Most corporate collections buy early, cheap, and diverse but some also collect in depth. KPN, for example, has works by Ger van Elk, Peter Struycken, Sigurdur Gudmundsson, Rob van Koningsbruggen and Carel Visser spanning several decades.

“Patronage – the active support of artists – and sponsoring were and are vital to the creation of corporate collections,” writes Arnold Witte in *Bedrijfscollecties in Nederland* (NAi Publishers, 2009). The author refers to the percentage scheme introduced by the Dutch government in 1951, stipulating that one percent of the building costs for (semi-)governmental organizations must be spent on art. In this way unlikely institutions like the Academic Medical Center in Amsterdam and Ministry of Foreign Affairs have amassed sizeable collections.

The origins of most corporate collections are pretty banal. Empty office walls needed pictures. Lobbies and boardrooms alike begged for something large with wall power to impress the visitors. Soon, however, the notion took hold that art in the office actually improves working conditions, lowering sick rates and stimulating creativity (as is often claimed by the likes of cultural economist Arjo Klamer). As collections grew and management was professionalized, an educational aspect was formalized. Tours, courses, and lectures have not only opened eyes to the art inside the company's own building but have prompted some employees to start collecting privately. The art history crash courses Arcadis organizes for its employees, for example, are very popular.

Today, the scope of these collections reaches beyond office walls and business park lawns. Over the years corporate collections have exhibited in museums such as Haags Gemeentemuseum (Bouwfonds in 2007, Rabobank in 2005), Centraal Museum (SNS Reaal Fonds in 2007), Noord-Brabants Museum (Van Lanschot Bankiers in 1996) and Museum Van Bommel Van Dam (Océ in 2003 and 2008). Only a few companies have full-fledged exhibition halls of their own but most organize shows on a regular basis. Rabobank even has built [a special Kunstzone](#) for the purpose. De Nederlandsche Bank has an exciting program of selling exhibitions promoting emerging artists such as Dina Danish, Raquel Maulwurf and Jack Holden. Moreover, artists are supported with all kinds of prizes such as Akzo Nobel's Sikkensprijs, the temporarily suspended ABN AMRO Kunstprijs, the KPN Kunstprijs and ING's New Talent Photography Award.



Rabo Kunstzone, installation view of visitors with **Folkert De Jong's** *Circle of Trust (Mother and Son)* and *Heritage*, both 2009; Photo: Andrea Alessi

Indeed, corporate collecting – easily dubbed an “unnecessary luxury” by profit optimizers – has over the years tried on different types of justification. Using art collections in company branding is a strategy mostly used by banks and other service-oriented companies that do not sell tangible goods. But the buzzword for the last ten years has been Corporate Social Responsibility and its derivative, Cultural Social Responsibility. For artists, this means they are recognized as socially important and supported accordingly – mostly through acquisitions.

But maybe it's time for corporate collections to move to the next level of patronage. Not just because it would be a logical next step in a development process but also because most mature collections have come to a perilous crossroad. The continuing economic slump has put acquisition budgets under pressure; in some cases there is even an indefinite acquisition freeze. That means a collection's continuity is disturbed and collections start to become fractured.

Organizationally companies are undergoing major transformations. A lot of services are being outsourced, making companies leaner and meaner and occupying less office space (which has to be decorated with art). The same is true for the more flexible working arrangements enabling people to work at home and at irregular hours. This economizes on space but also changes the work environment from many individual offices to large communal rooms – again, with less room for art. It's no surprise quite a few companies have in recent years cleaned up their collections, only to hold on to their valuable core assets which are awarded premium locations within the most important buildings.

In some cases one could even argue it's the collection that has outgrown the company. Many older, larger collections hold museum quality artworks, displaying a consistency and coherence that vastly outstrips a regular "working collection." Few companies, however, are willing or capable to provide a fitting context, the way Swiss supermarket chain Migros has done for its superb collection. The idea of donating to existing museums is being considered here and there, and occasionally put into practice. In 2010, for example, ING turned over 271 works to the Drents Museum.

Some kind of solution needs to be devised. Otherwise these collections run the risk of disintegrating, getting lost or fractured if companies are taken over or merge.



Eric Giraudet de Baudemagne's pigeons on the roof of the Rijksakademie during the RijksakademieOPEN 2013. Rabobank was the head sponsor of the RijksakademieOPEN 2013, and other corporations like KPN, IMC, and ARCADIS sponsor named studios or fellowships at the institution. Photo: Andrea Alessi.

And there are other, new ways to continue corporate patronage to the arts. An increasing number of companies supports post-academic institutes such as the Rijksakademie and De Ateliers. Commissions are a rather traditional path but can be very effective, especially when the company acts as a kind of co-producer. Some pioneers have experimented with artist-in-residencies and have invited artists to become involved in their business. Chemical company DSM for example asked artists to help develop a sports drink based on green tea for the Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008.

The key to this puzzle is finding a form of patronage that benefits both parties involved. Only if the relationship feels natural without the need for constant justification, can some kind of stability and durability be reached.

—[Edo Dijksterhuis](#)