

WE ARE THE HOPE!

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KNOOP

# Reading Between the Lines

Nothing exists outside time and space. The significance of a 35,000 year old cave painting in the Dordogne differs essentially from that of a younger one in another place. Or from one that is undateable, as in Southern Africa where successive generations of inhabitants have kept adding their hand prints—a curious intertemporal dimension. An early Mondriaan in the Rijksmuseum has a different meaning than a late one in the Stedelijk Museum. The same goes for art collections. They're hardly a natural, or haphazard, phenomena. They're defined by a particular time, space and character. And they tell us about the collector—fortunately so. At worst about his or her taste—at best, about much more. But above all, they tell of the place and time of their genesis as a collection, about our times, our aspirations. Their significance will be bound up with the measure in which the works of art, or their constellation, are recognized by those close by. Their meaning's endurance spans only the arch of time during which we feel engaged—beyond some historical or scientific curiosity. Do we still feel our concerns reflected in them, our joys, dreams and anxieties? And if so, who is it that engenders these: is it the artists, the curator, or the collector-owner?

Hairy questions. Of course, it all boils down to both who “we” denotes and the way in which the community of “us” is constituted by the collection's actor-owner. In the case of public collections the answer seems more or less straightforward. The community of “us” would be society at large, though the owner—the government—may prefer to hide behind the museum as an institution and its current director. In the Netherlands, museums are expressly and publicly mandated to serve as many citizens as possible, with an eye toward moral and cultural elevation. Historically, the citizen body was even *created* by the disciplining effect of, i.a., public museums—thank you Mr. Foucault. In turn, museums tend to shun the

limelight, leaving the stage to curators. It is they who, on a daily basis, converse with sufficiently relevant artists to perform on their public platforms. Curator-directors of contemporary institutions are a hybrid phenomenon, sometimes with happy results, often with disastrous ones. Owner-curators form a class of their own, from Scheringa to Caldenborg, from Bencharongkul (Bangkok) to Budi Tek (Shanghai).

How, one wonders, does that work for corporate art collections, such as AkzoNobel's? Like its sisters, it operates in the private domain, while trying to open it up as much as possible. In the freely accessible entrance area of AkzoNobel HQ, the Art Space hovers in what can be described as a ‘free area’. Strictly separated from its owner the organization is led by a striking curator-director and, by way of presenting themed works, aims to connect artists, the Akzo crowd, critics, and the public at large. But what is the works' message? They are made to speak during interactive tours, some with the help of rather with-it ‘visual thinking’ educational methods and some using narratives about their place in the collection, their relation to other works by the same maker, or their contrast to those of others. Do they say anything about our times, our fears, our dreams? The fountain of pastel color I witnessed immersed me like a shower of light, a promising summer's dawn just at sunrise, a blushing cloud of refined pleasure in realizing the transparent nature of our world's skin—if only one is aware of its near-immateriality. Doubtless, that's the sender's message, the direction AkzoNobel invites us to turn to. In our gloomy times, I feel this is a beacon of hope. But that which counteracts—the Mr Hyde to this Dr Jackyll—makes itself painfully present by its very absence, all of which is not only exceptionally well done, but will probably, and regrettably, also be with us for a long time to come.

Riemer Knoop (1955, NL) is a classicist/archeologist and founder of Gordion Cultureel Advies, making varied use of his expertise as an authority on cultural heritage. He taught at academies and universities worldwide and held a wide variety of board positions. In both his work and private life he encourages people and (cultural) institutions to think *outside the box*, and shares his borderless views on the importance of art, culture and heritage in the public domain.

WE ARE THE COLLECTION!