

Jens Weidmann: Opening – “Building a Dialogue. Two Corporate Collections of Contemporary Art”

Opening by Dr Jens Weidmann, President of the Deutsche Bundesbank and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Bank for International Settlements, of the joint art exhibition of the Deutsche Bundesbank and the National Bank of Belgium "Building a Dialogue. Two Corporate Collections of Contemporary Art", Brussels, 16 May 2019.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

art lovers and friends of the central banks,

dear Pierre,

It gives me great pleasure to join you here today in opening this exhibition of artworks from the collections of the National Bank of Belgium and the Deutsche Bundesbank. I must say, this is an impressive and exceptionally pleasing space for an exhibition of this kind. We jumped at the chance of sending exhibits from our collection on a journey to Brussels, to our friends at the National Bank of Belgium in the capital city of Europe. It's a premiere for us – never before have we shown our works outside Germany.

Many are the areas in which the National Bank of Belgium and the Bundesbank can look back on a rich history of cooperation: indeed, our collaboration stretches back to the days when we each still had our respective national currencies – the Belgian franc and the Deutsche Mark – and our partnership is just as close today in the era of the single currency, the euro. Not only do Pierre and I see each other every two weeks on the ECB Governing Council and also in places like Basel – there are a great many colleagues from our respective institutions who work hand in hand in Eurosystem committees and working groups. And I am particularly delighted to now see that the curators of our art collections have also teamed up to organise this outstanding exhibition. They have brought together large-scale paintings, photography and all manner of sculptures. All the works on display here are taken from the collections of our respective institutions.

Both the National Bank of Belgium and the Bundesbank have been avid collectors of art for many decades now. Over the years, we have each gathered quite sizeable collections which shed some light on how art has evolved in Belgium and Germany. But why do central banks collect art in the first place? There are two reasons for that. First, because we're looking to engage with society at large. As public institutions, we have a sense of commitment to the arts and culture in our respective countries. Second, we also feel that it is crucial to incorporate art into working life, because that brings our colleagues, and our guests and visitors, too, face to face with artistic expression. So over the years, collecting and exhibiting art has become part of our institutions' DNA.

Encountering artworks on an everyday basis makes art part of our routine, a commonplace occurrence in our daily lives. Not just that: art also has the ability to surprise, challenge and inspire us. It lets us see things from a different angle and opens up a world beyond our own horizons. And in my experience, it can quite often be a cue for some fascinating conversations.

This exhibition now marks our own attempt to spark a special type of dialogue. Not just between visitors and the artworks, but also between two art collections which have evolved at two similar institutions in neighbouring countries. And that's what makes the title of this exhibition – “Building a Dialogue” – so apt.

In this day and age, it's certainly not a question of finding out what aspects of the collections are

“typically Belgian” or “typically German”. Not least because artists in Europe, as we know, have been seeking to build a dialogue across national borders for centuries now. And yet for all that, it’s interesting to observe how well the works from the respective collections complement each other, and how the individual artistic statements interact.

To channel this dialogue between the artworks, the exhibition’s curators chose six different themes and sought out exhibits which add their own perspective to each of them. Thematic groups such as “Autonomous Form” and “Back to Figuration” focus on different artistic movements, while others explore specific contemporary issues – the “Cityscape” heading, for example, looks at architecture and urban planning, while “History and Society” examines how we look at history.

The exhibition starts off with the theme “Art & Viewer”, the very fundamentals of which are addressed by Ann Veronica Janssens. In her sculpture, the perception of materiality ceases to be a given, leaving the viewer feeling slightly disorientated. She challenges us to take a closer look and reflect on what we are experiencing. And then there are the works of photographer Barbara Klemm, who photographed visitors to museums and exhibitions in various countries over the course of several decades, and thus, very different ways of observing art. Her images range from protagonists deep in contemplation all the way to what appears to be a jolly family outing.

The different ways in which we experience artworks would appear to be a rich seam of inspiration, particularly given our respective banks’ collections. “Art in the workplace” does, after all, offer a very special situation in which to encounter creativity. Day-to-day working life tends to revolve around performing a clear set of tasks and the routines they entail. There’s no denying that artworks in the workplace can sometimes also be a disruptive element, or quite literally “get in the way” whenever technical equipment or the like is being installed. And yet time and again, there are moments in which a work of art does indeed catch our eye, thereby creating another setting in which the topic “Art & Viewer” comes to the fore.

The thematic group entitled “Back to Figuration” brings together works whose very format alone makes them stand out. For the most part, these are paintings dating back to the 1980s – a time in which a group of artists deployed gestural brushstrokes and applied layer upon layer of paint in revisiting figurative art. Representational though these works may be, there is more to them than just a depiction of reality.

These brief remarks are all I would like to say about the exhibition. No doubt you will make many more discoveries this evening – particularly in the way the exhibits contrast with one another – and be inspired to “build dialogues” of your own. And you wouldn’t be alone – on our first tour of the exhibition, Pierre Wunsch and I both found that this setting made artworks we knew from offices and conference rooms appear in a whole new light.

Before I conclude, let me just say how grateful I am to everyone who made the exhibition project such a success. I owe particular gratitude to Yves Randaxhe and Anne Bambynek, the curators of the Belgian art collection. Together with their counterparts from Frankfurt, Iris Cramer and Anja Hägebarth, they have devised the exhibition in an ongoing dialogue, and the end result is most impressive.

This art exhibition is uncharted territory for us, too. We’re delighted to have this forum to present our collections beyond the confines of our respective central banks. Let’s hope that our invitation to “build a dialogue” with artworks which are otherwise reserved for our colleagues, guests and visitors will meet with the interest of the general public.

Thank you for your attention.