

L'OFFICIEL ART

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N°31

SOCIETE GENERALE

“In a world increasingly divided and tense, access to culture is primordial.”

Interview by Emmanuel Rubin and Yamina Benaï

Since its inception in 1995, the Societe Generale art Collection set up numerous initiatives to expand its selection of works, to make it available to the widest public through exhibitions in France and abroad, and to build bridges with the projects led by the Societe Generale Foundation that operates in occupational integration and education through sports and culture. Its success is a case in point. *L'Officiel Art* met Frédéric Oudéa, CEO of Societe Generale.

Frédéric Oudéa, CEO of Societe Generale
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CORPORATE COLLECTION

L'OFFICIEL ART - N°31 - October-November-December 2019

INTERMISSION guest curated by Olympia Scarry

II. Corporate Collections / Societe Generale - Frédéric Oudéa

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www.galeriegaillard.com



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L'OFFICIEL ART: With more than 550 original artworks and 750 multiples, the Societe Generale Collection, created in 1995, now features both historical figures and emerging artists. What were the circumstances of its inception and what is your take on its evolution and identity?

FRÉDÉRIC OUDEÁ: The Collection was founded on the initiative of Marc Viénot [CEO of Societe Generale from 1974 to 1986 then chairman and CEO from 1996 to 1997]. This initiative coincided with the move of Societe Generale from its former headquarters in Paris to La Défense. I think that in some way, Marc Viénot wanted to symbolise this move from tradition to modernity, from the traditional headquarters to the La Défense district, which at the time was quite daring. The different spaces of the new buildings allowed for a collection that could be displayed and visible by all the employees of the bank and would leave a mark on these new grounds. We wanted to carry on from there, to make the collection last, and to keep in line with the initial idea of making it available to all co-workers. Through the years, we developed and expanded the initial mission by associating our collaborators to the project. We wished to build a collection whose artworks would be accessible, triggering an immediate reaction – positive or negative – from the public.

Who is part of the acquisition committee created in 2003, and how can employees of Societe Generale get involved?

We ask the employees who want to be part of the acquisition committee to write a letter of intent. After an interview with mandated independent experts, the chosen employees can join the selection committee. This committee is doing a pre-selection of new artworks: the idea is to add pieces that show the presence of Societe Generale abroad. The last selection is collegial: a meeting is organised with members of the direction, the voluntary employees chosen for the mission, and two specialists. We all discuss together, every one of us expresses their opinions, and at last, we all come together, mostly harmoniously, towards the final choice. These exchanges were an opportunity for me to understand better the bond and fondness that grow between a co-worker and an art piece and the importance of its potential presence in the Collection.

Societe Generale is widely established abroad: what is the international dimension of the Collection?

The Societe Generale Group can be found in more than 60 countries. We want to materialise our commitments in each of these countries, whether it be through patronage or sponsorship. This

sense of unity, harmony, and consistency in our commitments – in the fields of contemporary art, music, rugby, and solidarity – contributes to the cohesion of the Group. As a result, it is a collection that travels according to the opportunities and projects that feel relevant. For instance, since I was the President of the patrons' committee of the France-Romania Season, we set up an exhibition at the National Museum of Contemporary Art of Bucharest, where about 20 of our artworks have been displayed. On top of that, these last few years, our subsidiaries have been autonomously building their own contemporary art collections. Our subsidiary in Morocco, for instance: with 1,300 pieces, it is one of the biggest Societe Generale collections outside of France. Tunisia and Algeria are also very active in that respect. In Tunisia, the subsidiary will open its collection to a broader public in a new location where it will be fully accessible, and in Algeria, the subsidiary chose to offer an annual prize to Algerian painters. In Côte d'Ivoire, our subsidiary started its own collection as well and is currently working on opening an exhibition space and artist residencies.

How do you choose the orientation of the purchase policy of the artworks (sculptures, paintings, photographs) and what is the annual budget allowed?

We chose to not communicate on the exact budget. It allows us, within its limits, to acquire each year one or two major works that can cost up to tens of thousands of Euros. We also purchase via galleries very interesting artworks of young artists. I like this balance between pieces by emerging artists and works by very famous artists. For instance, we commissioned a sculpture from Jean-Michel Othoniel, *Le Nœud grec*, set in our trading rooms building. I would like to point out that thanks to our acquisition committee's expertise, we purchased pieces by great artists like Pierre Soulages and Zao Wou-Ki at opportune times.

What are your preferences when it comes to painting?

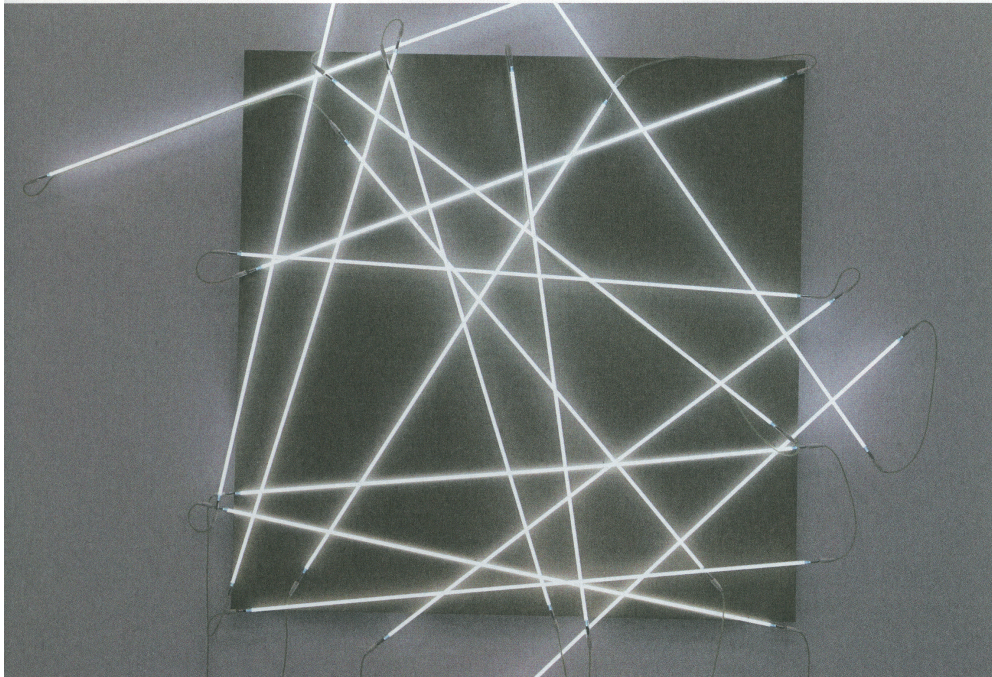
Personally, I like the French production from the 1950s-60s, so I am especially pleased that the Collection features works by Atlan, Georges Mathieu, and Geneviève Claisse... Just as it features pieces by the young Julien Des Monstiers that we identified through the work of the specialists collaborating with us. In the future, we will maybe have the opportunity of buying paintings by Jean-Baptiste Sécheret, whose studio I had the chance to visit and who I especially like. The fact of purchasing works by young or unjustly underrated artists is also, according to me, a way of providing both support and a form of recognition that comes with the fact of belonging to the Collection.

What does involving your colleagues in your work related to the Collection mean to you?

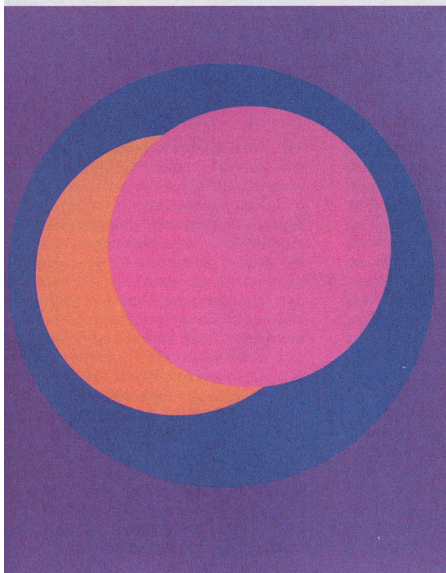
I think that in a world increasingly divided and tense, access to culture in primordial. These actions and policy of openness are in tune with the values of solidarity, commitment, and team spirit dear to Societe Generale. This is also why we created the Societe Generale Foundation for Solidarity in 2006. Its mission is to support education and occupational integration. We consider working with associations that help people to get back to the professional world the duty of a company. In 2014, our Foundation extended its field of action notably to education and integration through sports and culture. We work to facilitate the inception of places offering activities – music, hip hop, classical guitar... – to the youth so they can overcome limitations and borders. This is what the Ali Zaoua Foundation, partner of the Societe Generale Foundation and our Moroccan subsidiary, does. A culture that is shared, interdisciplinary, and transnational is a valuable asset. We have a role to play in connecting people. To achieve that, culture is a wonderful medium.

You joined the Societe Generale Group in 1995 and worked in different positions before being named CEO in 2008. Your taste for art and music can probably be put to use in the actions led by Societe Generale. How did you envision your mission regarding this three-decades-old Collection?

I believe in long-term commitments. It is true for rugby just as it is true for musical patronage and contemporary art. We have been carrying these commitments for more than 30 years. Our vision and expectations are never short-term. These choices have internal repercussions: just like art occupies our buildings, our employees take part in a project I would describe as exceptional. In 2013, with François-Xavier Roth, conductor of the Les Siècles Orchestra, we launched a mixed orchestra composed of professional musicians, Societe Generale employees, and a 300-people choir mostly made of Societe Generale employees. It is a way of bringing unsuspected callings or talents to the surface. This association of professionals and passionate amateurs turned out to be a complete success, both individually and collectively. The ambitions and energy were such that we quickly envisioned a concert at the Salle Pleyel, one of our partners. Since 2015, the project took an international dimension: Royal Festival Hall in London in 2017, the involvement of Senegalese and Romanian employees in 2018, and Russian and Ivorian employees for 2020. We now perform at the Philharmonie de Paris, another partner venue. Singing



François Morellet, *Les 16 Côtés du carré*, 2001 © Paris ADAGP 2019 - Collection Societe Generale.



Geneviève Claisse, *Cercles*, 1968
© Paris ADAGP 2019 - Collection Societe Generale.



Julien des Monstiers, *Brand New Old*, 2016
© Julien des Monstiers - Collection Societe Generale.



Liu Bolin, *Hiding in the city* – Paris 03, 2011
 © Liu Bolin - Courtesy Collection Societe Generale.

together generates so much joy and pride; it is an extraordinary tool to straighten the cohesion within the company. At a time when some build walls, we aim to show that culture can be globally shared.

Initially intended for the collaborators of Societe Generale, the Collection's public widened thanks to exhibitions organised in museums and institutions: how do you introduce the Collection to the wider public?

On an almost daily basis, we organise guided tours for the general public – collaborators, partners, customers, students, school groups – and, by reservation, for anyone who shows an interest in the Collection. It also lives through different displays realised by mandated independent curators. Indeed, except for a few pieces like our Soulages painting, the artworks exhibited change regularly, following the different thematic exhibitions we program. It is also important to us to highlight the

most recent additions to the Collection. Around a certain theme, we draw parallels between new works acquired in France and abroad and between different media. Photography, especially depicting architecture and urban construction, is prominent: we aim to explore these subjects as much as we can. As their reactions and questions show, the 14 years-old students, often coming from disadvantaged areas, we welcome for one-week-long internships respond enthusiastically to the artistic initiation we provided them with.

What do the presence of art and the existence of such a Collection bring to the Societe Generale Group?

We try to draw a coherent picture with all our actions, always putting the involvement of the collaborators at the forefront. To me, it isn't just about signing a check, it is about involving the employees in the choice and thus in the life of the company. This premise is very dear to

me. If the budget allowed to a certain project plays an obvious part, I always try to go beyond simple financial support and make sure our collaborators get involved in what is happening, for instance through mentoring in associations we support. Here lays the real difficulty. Many companies can contribute financially, but to make sure that the teams get involved in the project, invest ideas and energy so it can be completed, and can be proud and satisfied with the outcome is a challenge of another level. "You are the future", our new signature, which suggests that our bank is here to help you, is what we imply when we buy the work of a young artist. This admission in the Societe Generale Collection can make a difference in terms of confidence, recognition, and credibility with galleries, museums, and collectors. It is also a way of supporting our ambitions for the youth: by opening the doors of the company, we hope they will discover other views and a world that may differ from their daily lives.



Jean-Michel Othoniel, *Le Nœud grec*, 2014
© Paris ADAGP 2019 - Collection Societe Generale.

In 2016, the Group asked 8 artists to invest the 5,000 meters-square basement of Les Dunes, the second headquarters of Societe Generale in Val-de-Fontenay. What did you think of this experiment?

At first, some of the teams involved in the move were reluctant, but eventually, everything worked out extremely well because it is such a wonderful place. The spaces are completely flexible, without assigned offices: our collaborators like this flexibility. We tried to involve them in this project as well, as far as asking for their opinion about the furniture: the place has been co-constructed with the employees, which is a success in itself. In that respect, we reached out to these eight artists to mark a high point. We worked with the real estate management and the city council to choose local creators through an association. Each of them was given a surface of about 1,000 meters-square. The idea was to start from an interpretation of the signage system

found in the parking lot. It was such a success that collaborators have wanted to get involved, with the help of a street artists collective, in the realisation of frescoes in the ground level of the building. We used the same tools – working with local people for better integration in the district and consultation of the employees – to give them moments of openness, breakaways, pauses in their daily life. I think it is a breath of fresh air, a break from increasingly demanding tasks. Banking is a tough job and these activities and cultural exchanges we offer our collaborators are positive, unusual experiences that open new horizons and feed their personal path.

After the France-Romania Season 2019, what is the upcoming program for the promotion of the Collection?

We just unveiled the "Little Stories" exhibition that focuses on active learning and the reception of the artworks by the public. We are now working on the Africa 2020 Season. We are thinking about different actions that

could be launched within the program. It is a great opportunity for Societe Generale: we are widely established in Africa where we started a development program that supports positive changes throughout the continent. The project is wide and enthralling.

An essential tool: mediation

Besides the guided tours of the Societe Generale Collection available for all by reservation, digital tools are used for education as well. The Collection has its own website listing all its artworks. On top of that, for the new exhibition "Little Stories", an application has been developed: it provides information on a piece and the artist that made it by taking a picture of it.

"Little Stories", sharing 1001 stories and anecdotes around the artworks of the Societe Generale art Collection, exhibition open to the public and free for all from the 20th of September 2019 to the 30th of April 2020, every day from 9.00 to 18.00. Closed on the weekends. By reservation at visites@collectionsocietegenerale.com