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Interview

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# We create the heritage of the future

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photos: Guido Bensschop



For 28 years, Hester Alberdingk Thijm (63) has tirelessly built the extensive art collection of the multinational company AkzoNobel. 'We exist by the grace of this company.'



When the AkzoNobel Art Foundation celebrated its 25th anniversary three years ago, a beautiful book, almost resembling a glossy, titled "We Are The Collection!" was published. The collection includes all of us: those who work for this company, as well as the artists whose works are gathered, and the people who come to admire that art. However, one could also say that the collection is Hester Alberdingk Thijm, as she is inseparably connected to it as the curator from the very beginning. '28 years!' - she says it with a smile of disbelief.

She has been working at AkzoNobel for that long, and over the years, she has built a collection of more than two thousand works. All of them are stored in her mind, cataloged mentally.

These artworks are displayed or placed somewhere, either in the offices of the company or on loan to museums and exhibitions. However, she prefers them not to be in storage, unless they are so vulnerable that they need to rest for a while. 'Art needs to be seen,' says

Alberdingk Thijm, and preferably in an accessible way. And here, in the headquarters of AkzoNobel in Amsterdam, it is accessible. She is also approachable and talks enthusiastically about her work without using fashionable art historical terms like 'Disruptive' or 'Layered.' Alberdingk Thijm – black pants, black T-shirt, black Balenciaga sneakers, and a large half-precious stone pendant around her neck – is from time to time surprised by the long journey she and the collection have undertaken.

A lot has changed. The office in Arnhem where they started was a beautiful, modernist building, lots of windows, light, white. There were a few portraits of executives on the walls, nothing else. The then CEO Kees van Lede, unfortunately deceased, who asked me for this job, was a traditional man who found it all a bit unwelcoming. It needed some color.

'I thoroughly researched what kind of company this was and came up with three pillars for building the collection: innovation, humanity, color and research. I built my work on those pillars for all these years.'

From Arnhem, the headquarters moved to Amsterdam, and six years ago, AkzoNobel moved into this large building on the Zuidas. 'When I started at Akzo, there were only men in three-piece suits. I was still wearing heels, and you only saw a woman with a headscarf after five. Now, employees come from all over the world, it couldn't be more diverse!'

Meanwhile, the collection had become such an integral part of the company that Alberdingk Thijm and her team were involved in designing a dedicated space for art when planning the building. That became the Art Space, immediately to the left upon entering. There are now about forty works hanging, and there is nothing of the sometimes ethereal atmosphere in a museum, where people can feel a bit intimidated and start to whisper. Here, you stand with your cappuccino in front of a painting.

In September, the exhibition **EARTH** opened. 'There were 350 people at the opening, and six museum directors,' says Alberdingk Thijm contentedly. In **EARTH**, two themes important to Alberdingk Thijm in art come to the forefront: aesthetics and ethics.

'For me, a work of art must be beautiful, attractive, fascinating. But it must also tell a story that intrigues you, that makes you curious, so that you may ask a question about it.'

That's the ethical side. An artist creates a work of art because he or she finds something important. In this exhibition, it's the climate, the environment. Because we always try to capture the spirit of the time.'



Hester Alberdingk Thijm (1959, Nijverdal) worked after school at KLM, the Beurs van Berlage, and Boijmans Van Beuningen. Since 1996, she has been employed by the chemical company AkzoNobel as the director of the Art Foundation.

Alberdingk Thijm spends four to five days a week in the office. Evenings and weekends are for looking at art: it's not a job, but a life. 'The most fun thing we do is support young artists and give them a chance. We follow everything and receive hundreds of emails a week from artists and galleries offering their work.' No one is rejected outright. 'We always look at the work. An artist who takes the bold step of asking if we want to buy his or her work – that is touching.'

The exhibition **EARTH** is structured in a particular way. 'We have set it up like a forest path where you are surrounded, almost embraced, by greenery. On the left and right, there are only landscapes. You start in paradise, and then you move from utopia to a dystopian landscape of forest fires and floods. You can always return to the central axis, where you realize that we stand with our feet on the earth.'

When thinking about such a topic and selecting art that fits, Alberdingk Thijm doesn't need to go through folders with images or huge files. Because everything is in her head. 'I have that mental catalog. I know the basics, and then I improvise, like a choreography. What fits best with what? Then we see how to organize it as well as possible. Some things just don't work well together; one work may overshadow another. I do all of that in my head, and in reality, it's never different from what I imagined. I am always focused on innovation, but I bring along everything I have done before. Compare it to your circle of friends: someone joins, someone leaves, that chemistry keeps changing.'

Sometimes it's a bit tiring to have everything in your head. 'For example, I still remember exactly what I bought, from whom, when. What Kees van Lede had hanging in his room, what he said about it.' The chairman is important, of course, also for the Art Foundation, and it's nice if he also appreciates art.

'The current CEO is the Frenchman Grégoire Poux-Guillaume, very nice. And so smart. When I give him a tour, he can do it himself the next time – and maybe even better! In his office hangs a very good Appel, from 1960, which I recently found neglected in a Sikkens factory in Sassenheim.'

Hester Alberdingk Thijm didn't follow an art historical education. She worked as a flight attendant, ended up in the Beurs van Berlage, and then in the Boijmans Van Beuningen, until she was asked for this job. Yet, she sees early signs of a special interest in art.

'I come from a family of four. We lived in Twente, and my mother gave each of us a small garden. My brother immediately put animals in it: he became a veterinarian. My sister approached it ecologically: no spraying against the caterpillars. She has always worked for human rights organizations in New York. I put little castles and gnomes in it; now I buy sculptures.'

Being the curator of the art collection of a multinational in paints and coatings doesn't really fall within the core tasks of this company, which operates in eighty countries, has a turnover of around 9 billion euros, and about 35,000 employees. 'Certainly not! I'm in the soft sector. But I've learned so much here, more than I could have learned in a museum. This is a *hardcore* company where money has to be earned, and yet the Art Foundation has always been preserved.'

It has a purchasing budget of between 400,000 and 600,000 euros: 'the exact amount depends on the economy and the business results. If business is slow, we sometimes have to cut back midway through an exhibition. Do we always spend it all? Loud laughter. Yes, of course. We have experienced challenging times, but with creativity, you always find a way out. You need vision and perseverance. Sometimes there is a hiring freeze throughout the company. Happened often enough. But, of course, we mean a lot to this company.'

'How does she see her role here? 'Someone once said: you are like the troubadour who walks ahead and occasionally comes to the court to tell how things are going. I think that's true. I represent a different voice, but we listen very well to what is happening inside the company. You are actually bringing the outside world in. I am always building a bridge between society and the company.'

When you talk about branding and PR, about logos and everything related to corporate strategy, such a collection really helps the company. If you want to do this well, you need high ambition but also need to be willing to go low. We exist by the grace of the company, and we are here for everyone who works here.' The Art Foundation has now become such an integral part of AkzoNobel that most people working there are proud of the collection and enjoy bringing family and friends for a tour. 'You have to do things that benefit the company. And because it's a company dealing with color, there's an organic connection with art.'

Do museum buyers sometimes envy the possibilities the Art Foundation has? The budget is determined annually and fluctuates, but, says Alberdingk Thijm, there are no conditions attached. 'It's different for national museums. They have to meet all kinds of social conditions to continue receiving subsidies. After all, that is public money. There are no restrictions here, perhaps also because, over the past 28 years, Alberdingk Thijm has shown that she understands the spirit of the times.

It's also handy that this company knows everything about color. 'AkzoNobel also supports the restoration of the *Night Watch*: we not only cherish heritage from the past but also create heritage for the future. We don't have those white boxes, the spaces where museums display their art. We can choose any background we want.' There is a lot of 'visual noise,' as Alberdingk Thijm calls it. 'Because this is an office with a certain layout where people work, walk.

The current exhibition is set against a background of mossy green. For the next one, which is already in the works, all the walls will be dismantled, creating one space where a large, specially built object will stand. 'Like a scale model,' says Alberdingk Thijm, who already has it all figured out.

She has never regretted a purchase. She has thought: I wouldn't buy that now. Regret for a work of art not bought? Yes. She remembers it exactly. 'I really wanted to buy a sculpture by Antony Gormley, a man with his hands up. Exactly the logo of AkzoNobel, without it being specially made. That would have been silly. I was so happy when I found it! But Van Lede thought it was too expensive at the time. Now those sculptures are worth a million. Missing out on something once in a while is inevitable. That's also good because you can go on forever.'