

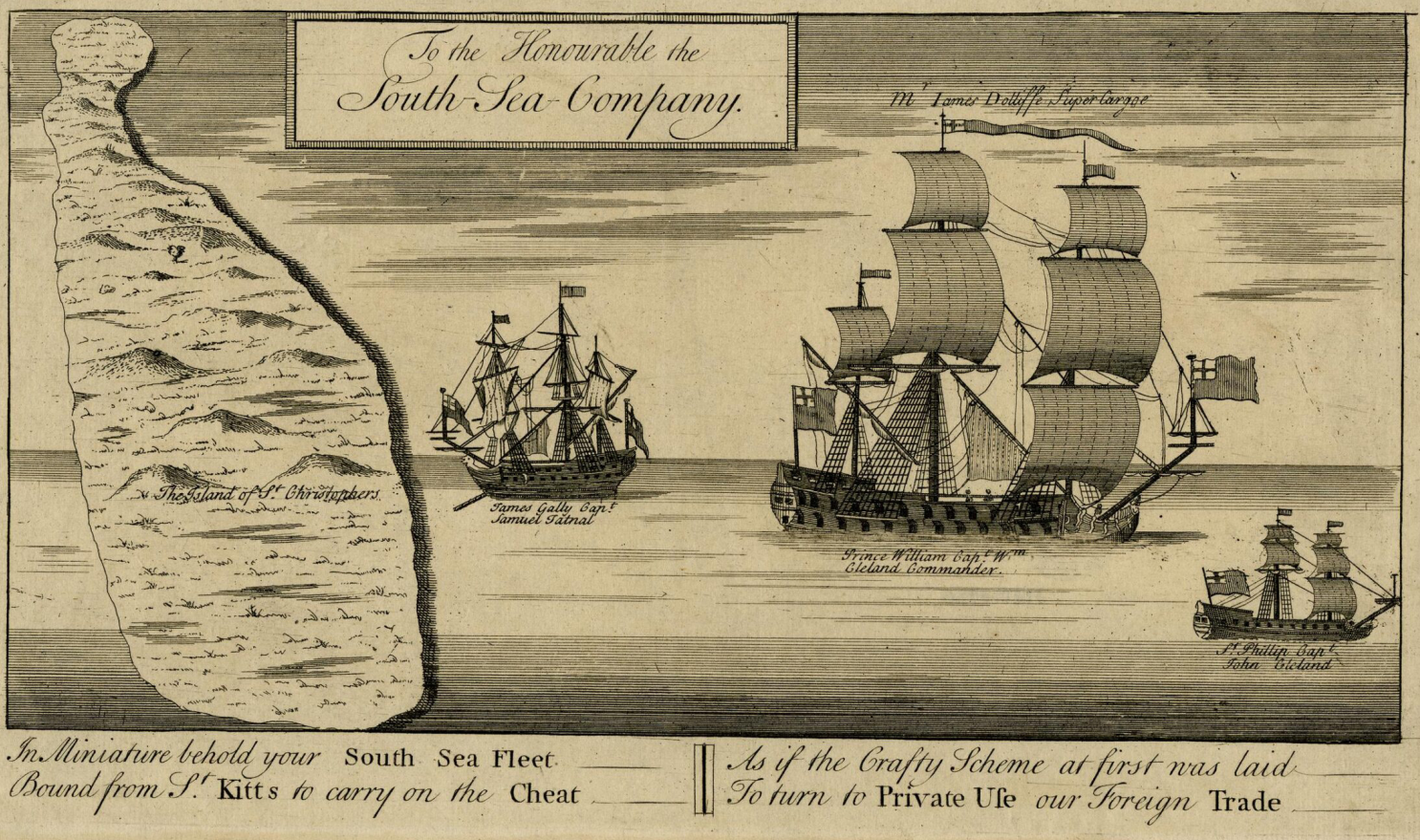
COURTAULD INSTITUTE

Art, Inc.

The Corporation in Art History

A One-Day Symposium

Friday 5 Dec 2025, 09.30–19.00



Across galleries and university curricula, art is still routinely categorised, displayed, and taught according to a conceptual framework that centres the nation. This focus has resulted in a minimisation of the significant role that corporations have played in commissioning art, innovating artistic styles and genres, and transporting art objects across the globe.

Indeed, the historical process of nation-building arguably relied on visual and material practices that incorporated bodies had long used to communicate common values or cultivate loyalty. To this day, private corporations are major patrons of artists and generate considerable contestation over cultural values, with much contemporary debate over the character of corporate-sponsored art. By recentring an overlooked 'corporate art history', this symposium will provide insights into the place of art objects within a range of broader historical phenomena: the role of corporations in the formation of civil society and the state; the expansion of commercial and industrial capitalism; the concomitant globalisation of legal understandings of incorporation; as well as the 'corporate character' of European imperialism. Importantly, it will also foreground how visual and material cultures have historically played a significant role in materialising and making tangible the very concept of incorporation – the abstract notion that continues to underpin so many of today's legal and financial modes of association. Held at a time when the political and environmental impact of multinational corporations is under particular historical and journalistic focus, Art, Inc. will not only provoke new thinking about corporations as significant actors in art history, but will open new insights into the ways visual and material cultures have shaped the histories of empire, commerce, law, and globalisation.

Programme

10.00 **Introduction** Tom Young, *Introductory Remarks*

10.30 **Corporate Associations**

Chaired by Tom Young

Logos in Stone: Guild Mosaics and the Visual Culture of Incorporation in Ostia

David Bellingham

Across the Roman Empire, *collegia*, legally incorporated associations of craftsmen and traders, used art to assert identity and negotiate visibility. This paper focuses on Ostia, Rome's maritime hub, where the Piazzale delle Corporazioni housed dozens of guild offices marked by black-and-white mosaics depicting ships, tools, animals, and inscriptions. These designs functioned as ancient "logos," transforming abstract organisational identities into recognisable visual emblems. Alongside mosaics, altars and inscribed statue bases from guild *scholae* reinforced a shared corporate style and embedded these associations within civic architecture. By analysing these visual strategies, the paper repositions Roman guilds as early practitioners of corporate branding, anticipating modern techniques of spatial and graphic identity. It argues that incorporation operates not only through self-regulation, law and economy but through visual culture, a continuity linking ancient *collegia* to contemporary corporate art.

Norwich and the Material Cultures of Incorporation, c.1500-1700

Victor Morgan

Today, international corporations challenge the power of states. Ironically, it was the early-modern monarchical state that first created in large numbers the types of corporations out of which has evolved the modern corporation. Then, their predominant form was the municipality. This paper focuses on Norwich as an exemplar of the ways in which corporate identity was articulated. It addresses four themes through which corporation was expressed at this time: materiality, embodiment, embellishment and augmentation, and the ways in which these themes found expression in contemporary cultural practices. Surviving material objects are resituated within their contexts of use. This includes reconstructing the ephemerally kinetic occasions when the corporation was 'bodied forth'. Charters, portraits, monuments, urban regalia, robes, 'street furniture', and the adjuncts of feasting are examined. The appropriation of urban spaces for civic purposes and the annual making and re-making of the townscape are reviewed.

11.20 **Coffee Break**

Speculation, Crashes, Crises***Chaired by Upmanyu Magotra****Bubbles and Dudes: British Glass and “Corporate Style” in the Age of the South Sea Bubble***Iris Moon**

Does art made in the age of capitalism have a distinctive look? This paper explores the question of a “corporate style” through British glass stemware amidst the eighteenth century’s financial booms and busts, which transformed the island nation into the center of speculative finance capitalism. Often located at the center of the tables and toasts that marked the financial success of wealthy British merchants, I argue that stemware embodied par excellence a “corporate style” of financial bubbles, speculation, and deceptive notions of polish and transparency. This style of production emerged from the powerful Worshipful Company of Glass Sellers, incorporated in the City of London by royal charter in 1664, which made the vessels that contained distorting bubbles, illusory patterns, and air twists, out of which the agents of empire toasted the financial successes of Britain.

*The Heart of the Andes Insurance: Landscape as Corporate Melodrama***Matthew C. Hunter**

In the fall of 1870, painter Robert S. Duncanson received an unusual commission: he was to replicate Frederic Edwin Church’s *The Heart of the Andes*. Church’s monumental showpiece had been heavily insured when it toured London and U.S. cities like Cincinnati where Duncanson saw it 1860. His 1870 commission too came from the world of insurance: it was part advertisement for a new fire insurance company, part revenge against the Church family. This paper experiments with the literary genre of melodrama as means to exfoliate that strange tale. Doing so foregrounds as much the insurantal context in which both Church’s picture and its Duncansonian double moved as underwriters’ broader interests in the business of landscape.

*Raj Famine Policy and the Engineering of the Agrarian Sublime***Liza Oliver**

The increased scale and frequency of famines in colonial India that coincided with the transition of British power from the East India Company to the Raj necessitated an official set of policies that would buttress the Raj as a benevolent colonial government while adapting and often expanding the East India Company’s profit-driven practices. Raj-commissioned photographic albums of large-scale infrastructure project a narrative of modernizing progress and beneficence through their visualization of India’s land as improved, remolded, and remade by Government. These albums shape India’s natural landscape as the enemy of abundance, and the Raj’s infrastructure interventions as the solution. They construct a novel aesthetic category of an agrarian sublime: awe-inspiring views of terrifying nature that reveal themselves to be the result of British engineering for the purposes of scientized agricultural intervention. In so doing, they demonstrate how Government succeeded in aligning humanitarian and profit-seeking endeavors where the EIC had failed.

13.30

Lunch Break

14.30

Corporations / States

Chaired by Claire Ó Nualláin

Corporate-State Patronage, Islam, and Western Art

Myrna Nader

This paper examines the corporate-state patronage of Muhammad Bin Salman, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, who in recent years has amassed a collection of priceless works of art including Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi*. Saudi Arabia is particularly relevant in a discussion of corporate-state partnership, which allows for direct or indirect involvement of government in the global art market to serve the broader goals of economic diversification. Mecca and Medina are Islam's two most important cities, while the country's history is rooted in Salafism, the basis of Wahabism. The foray into the European art market, notwithstanding Islamic proscription against the possession of religious art, raises questions about the involvement of wealthy Arabs in the globalised art market today as buyers and collectors, specifically, the Crown Prince's acquisition of *Salvator Mundi*, depicting Christ as Saviour of the World, as possible reflection of more moderate Salafi society.

Hydropowered Views: Legacies of Fascist Ambition in Spanish Waterways and their Representation

Georgia Phillips-Amos

Relatively, there are more dams in Spain than in any other country in the world. Most of these were built under the dictator General Francisco Franco, by a combination of state-owned corporations, such as the Empresa Nacional Hidroelectrica de Ribargorzana, and the private corporation Hidroelectrica Española. The latter's then-president had helped finance the nationalist coup in 1936, and the company thrived under the fascist regime. This corporation still exists, as Iberdrola, a leader in "renewable energy" projects globally and one of the world's top five electrical companies, the product of a merger between Hidroelectrica Española and Hiberduero. Iberdrola has become a significant arts patron, sponsoring recent exhibitions by Joaquín Sorolla, the celebrated painter of Spanish waterscapes, as well as the 2021 Guggenheim exhibition *Bilbao and Painting*, in which water figures prominently. With this paper, I explore the ways in which the entwined legacies of fascist and corporate ambition are embedded in the Spanish landscape both literally and in terms of its representation.

The Miner in Art: Postwar Patronage and the National Coal Board

Tobah Aukland-Peck

The National Coal Board (NCB) classified art as part of its welfare program. In the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, the NCB supported art practices of professional miners and facilitated visits of professional artists to mines. Exhibitions in major urban centers used these images, alongside historic depictions, to familiarize the British public with the industry. Given the NCB's status as a nationalized corporation, such marketing operations were motivated not only by profit but by the necessity of public support.

In turn, aesthetic determinations of the corporation influenced the depiction of British mines. Their judgements on style, subject matter, and acceptable artists played an outsize role in defining public perceptions during a period of turmoil over the future of the industry. Attending to the fluctuating definition of welfare over the NCB's forty-year existence, this paper asks whose behalf—the public, miners, executives, or government officials—art functioned in the nationalized apparatus.

16.00 **Coffee Break**

16.20 **Modern Corporations & Corporate Modernism**

Chaired by Clara Shaw

'Artists Prefer Shell!': Shell-Mex and BP Limited's Patronage of the British Avant-Garde in the 1930s

Edward Christie

This paper discusses Shell-Mex and BP Limited's advertising campaign from the 1930s to reveal how the development of the petroleum business in the United Kingdom was encouraged using the visual language of modernism and vice versa. Facilitating works by leading proponents of the British avant-garde – including Ben Nicholson, Paul Nash, Vanessa Bell, John Piper, and Graham Sutherland – an ambitious promotional strategy centred on artist commissions was spearheaded by the marketing executive Jack Beddington, who oversaw the establishment of a joint publicity venture between the two corporations. My analysis will explore how the promotional success of these advertisements hinged on how they collectively brought together British avant-garde movements including Surrealism and Neo-Romanticism to construct an idealised image of the company as being both progressive and traditional that appealed to their broad middle-class consumer base.

How Freelance Curation Ruptured the International Art World: Cigarettes, Advertising, Art, and Phillip Morris International Inc.

Jill Ingrassia

Can a corporate sponsor disrupt the international art world? My research at the Getty Museum's Harald Szeemann Archive documents the role that Philip Morris Inc.'s sponsorship of the exhibition, *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* (1969), played in the emergence of freelance curation. I trace the causal link between the corporation's incentives and the evolution of art-world operations. Beginning with the U.S. ban on cigarette advertising. Followed by a pitch from Philip Morris's advertising agency to convert media buys into sponsorship. Leading to an agreement that enabled Kunsthalle Bern's Harald Szeemann to work independently, effectively making him the first freelance curator. This series of events prompted a transformation in the art world: it shifted from an industry monopolized by curators employed by institutions to one shaped by independent curators as well. Posing the question: If Philip Morris's support for *Attitudes* could revolutionize the industry in 1969, how much should we rethink the history of contemporary art in consideration of the role of corporate sponsors?

Lindsey Reynolds

From the early 1960s to the late 1970s, communes acting as permanent or temporary homes for artists adopted a system of corporate aesthetics and structures in order to manage the flow of people, objects, and finances through their doors. While the underlying ethos of the commune and the corporation appear at first antithetical, this paper will explore the ways in which the former types of organizations capitulated toward capitalist tendencies—branding, division of labor, the sale of products, the establishment of international satellite sites, etc.—to remain financially solvent. Throughout, this paper takes the concept of incorporation literally and as metaphor to probe models of artistic living alternate to the trope of the independent modern artist and parallel to the developing international corporations of the day, situated in the locus of the artist commune.

Against the Grain: American Fine Arts, Co. (1982–2004) and the Subversion of Corporate Art Market Logic

Stephanie Dieckvoss

In 1982, philosophy graduate Colin de Land (1955–2003) founded the commercial gallery “Vox Populi,” which he renamed “American Fine Arts, Co.” (AFA) in 1986. The name served as a conceptual gesture, referencing the growth of the fine art trade in the USA, whilst deliberately resisting its commercial logic. Over the course of two decades, de Land employed a commercial gallery model that challenged traditional views of a contemporary art gallery’s functions, becoming a significant hub for New York’s emerging conceptual art scene. This paper argues that AFA offers a vital counter-narrative to dominant trends in the 1980s and 1990s art market. Based on archival research, this paper examines de Land’s underexplored commercial strategies. It connects AFA’s commercial and curatorial strategies to explore the at times precarious existence of independent galleries amid the rise of corporate art enterprises, offering a compelling example of resilience and innovation.