

## Session Summary

Title	<b>The Role of Science in the Conservation of Contemporary Art</b>
Type	discussion
Date, time	Thursday 10th June, 14:00-16:00
Moderator	Tom Learner, Senior Scientist / Head of Modern and Contemporary Art Research, Getty Conservation Institute
Guests	Lydia Beerkens (Private Conservator, SRAL Conservator of Modern Art) Alberto de Tagle (Chief Scientist, ICN) Susan Lake (Director of Collections, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden) Lynn Lee (PostDoc Fellow at the Straus Center, Harvard Art Museums) Bronwyn Ormsby (Senior Conservation Scientist, Tate) Thea van Oosten (Senior Conservation Scientist, ICN)

This session examined the role of scientific research in contemporary art conservation, and each panelist was asked - by moderator Tom Learner - to initiate the discussion on one of four distinct subjects. These were: the emerging conservation needs posed by contemporary art that could be tackled by scientific research; the role of science in time-based media conservation; the balance that scientists currently strike between technical studies and research into conservation treatments; and dissemination/networking amongst the conservation/scientific professions.

Lydia Beerkens kicked off by stating that conservation scientists must learn to be 'co-authors' as well as scientists, as the basic analysis of materials is often not sufficient to develop a comprehensive plan for treatment. Susan Lake described that although she is looking more towards a bigger picture with her work, she still believes wholeheartedly in the need for specific material research. Both participants agreed that scientists need to learn more about the 'essence' of an artwork, so they can place their analysis in a more appropriate context. Several additional skill sets were identified as becoming more necessary, such as computer science and electrical knowledge for time-based media works, and structural engineering for monumental sculpture.

Following on from this, Lynn Lee reported on a recent symposium she organized on the technical aspects of time-based media conservation at Harvard Art Museum and how the primary conclusion was that conservation needs to accommodate more collaboration with all kinds of outside experts, from industrial engineers, to archivists, to computer scientists. Many audience members echoed this thought, suggesting there was already significant expertise out there that conservators could tap into, but that a real challenge was to educate these other professions on the ethical issues of conservation.

Thea van Oosten and Bronwyn Ormsby then discussed a number of specific research collaborations that dealt with conservation treatments, such as POPART and plastics research at the ICN, and the research lead by the Tate on cleaning acrylic paints. It was agreed that these types of intra-institutional research collaborations are a real way for conservators to work together and share the knowledge that will eventually manifest in new methods of treatment. Specific materials in need of further research that were identified by the panel and audience included plastics, latex, found objects, cheap non-archival materials, magnetic tape, and coatings for outdoor sculpture. Many in the audience reiterated the need for a balance between fundamental and applied scientific research, as well as a balance between a basic knowledge of a range of materials, and an in-depth knowledge of a few, specific materials.

Finally, Alberto de Tagle spoke on the importance for conservation scientists to be sharing information, disseminating their work and networking, given the sheer number of materials to be studied and issues to be addressed. The need to expand the traditional roster of conservation science professionals in the networks was also stressed, reaching out to “non-traditional” conservation scientists, such as computer scientists, and IT specialists. While everyone agreed on the need for information to be shared, they also recognized that there is still relatively little exchange happening on larger platforms, for example the INCCA website. It was agreed that this could be improved, but it was also pointed out that smaller collaborations seem to be far more productive and successful in this respect.