

symposium Contemporary Art: Who Cares? come and gone, but not forgotten

The long awaited international symposium Contemporary Art: Who Cares? has come and gone, but will not be forgotten. For three days the Royal Tropical Institute (Dutch acronym KIT) in Amsterdam was a buzz with over 550 professionals from 32 countries. Participants were inspired by the plenary lectures, joined discussions on topical issues, worked together in practical workshops, gained new knowledge at the poster exhibition and, last but not at least, forged new professional relationships. Many found themselves in familiar surroundings as the KIT was also the location of the 1997 symposium Modern Art: Who Cares?

Participants and speakers came from diverse professional backgrounds. The organisers aimed to accentuate the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary art conservation by providing an overview of different perspectives: museum directors, private collectors, conservators, artists, artists' assistants, art historians, collection managers, conservation scientists, technicians and students. Nowadays, we all think about conservation and collection management; thirteen years ago, this was not common practice! Another vital stakeholder in the conservation process is of course the museum public. By allowing the access to information on what goes on 'behind-the-scenes' in the museum has proved to increase the public's understanding and appreciation of contemporary art.

So what has changed since 1997?

Artist participation in conservation

Thirteen years ago there was a backlog in material-technical information on contemporary art. In particular, information on the artist's choices for material, technique or medium was lacking. In addition, information on the artist's choices in relation to artistic intent was not often addressed by art critique or in other writings. A general belief in the 'artist's voice' gave an impetus for many conservators to actively engage with artists and assistants in collecting this information and to start a dialogue on conservation. Today, interviewing artists or collaboration in other ways is common practice and in many countries projects have been running on this subject since then.

Platform for information and knowledge exchange

In 1997 there was no platform for sharing information on the conservation of modern and contemporary art. In 1999 a group of 23 European professionals established the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA). Now the network is truly international and has grown to include around 400 members in over 40 countries. Internet provides useful communication tools, but the development of the profession can only be done by the active participation of the members themselves by sharing information and working in collaboration to develop new knowledge.

Installation art

Inside Installations (2004-2007) was an important European project but at the same time, it was just one of a number of projects on this subject running in Europe, USA and Canada. Driven by the art production and museum acquisition policies, installation art and the problems with the conservation of time-based media have, in more recent years, been at the top of the agenda of the museums and conservation studios. Many cross links between the such initiatives can be made and somehow all of them are part of this worldwide knowledge network in which complex installation works of art are situated.

Training for conservators

At the time of Modern Art: Who Cares? there were no specialised educational programmes for the conservation of modern and contemporary art. These days we have all kind of programmes all over the world and only recently an INCCA education group has been established to enable educators to work together to in creating consistency and improved quality in education. In addition, during the symposium, a new network, affiliated to INCCA, has been established, for PhD and postdoc researchers.

Contemporary Art: Who Cares? reflects the development of all of the issues that were raised during Modern Art: Who Cares? The depth of discussion was more profound, and much more open, based on the growth in maturity of the profession. The symposium also illustrates the importance of the network. Not only was the programme built in collaboration, the knowledge shared was developed in collaboration; people working together crossing geographical as well as professional borders.

For more information about the symposium go to:

www.incca.org/contemporaryartwhocares

Over the next few months this website will be filled with videos of plenary lectures, photos and summaries of the parallel sessions. Symposium participants are welcome to share their feedback on the event. General feedback can be added via www.incca.org/cawc-feedback. It is also possible to comment on each of the lectures and parallel sessions individually.