



Meeting Report

The Conservation of Twentieth-Century Outdoor Painted Sculpture

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
June 4-5, 2012

Tom Learner and Rachel Rivenc



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THE GETTY CONSERVATION INSTITUTE
LOS ANGELES

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The Getty Conservation Institute
1200 Getty Center Drive, Suite 700
Los Angeles, CA 90049-1684
United States
Telephone 310 440-7325
Fax 310 440-7711
E-mail gciweb@getty.edu
www.getty.edu/conservation

Cover image: Roy Lichtenstein, *Three Brushstrokes* (1984), Getty Center, 2011 © Roy Lichtenstein Foundation

Publication Coordinator: Gary Mattison

The Getty Conservation Institute works to advance conservation practice in the visual arts, broadly interpreted to include objects, collections, architecture, and sites. It serves the conservation community through scientific research, education and training, model field projects, and the broad dissemination of the results of both its own work and the work of others in the field. And in all its endeavors, it focuses on the creation and dissemination of knowledge that will benefit professionals and organizations responsible for the conservation of the world's cultural heritage.

Contents

Introduction	01
Issues	
Ethical/Philosophical Issues	03
Material/Technical Issues	04
Legal Issues	06
Management Issues	06
Communication/Information Exchange Issues	07
Responses	
Documentation Responses	08
Material/Technical Responses	10
Communication/Information Sharing Responses	11
Priorities	
Short-term Priorities	12
Long-term Priorities	13
Meeting Participants	14

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Introduction

In June 2012, the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) organized a meeting—hosted by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York—to discuss the many issues and challenges posed by the conservation of twentieth-century outdoor painted sculpture. The meeting was attended by thirty-one invited participants (listed at the end of this report) representing a number of relevant professions, namely conservators (from both the private and the institutional sectors); artists' estates, foundations, and studios; the paint industry; collection managers; and curators.

Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, *Shuttlecocks*, 1994. Aluminum and fiberglass-reinforced plastic, painted with polyurethane enamel. One of four shuttlecocks, each 17 ft. 11 in. (5.5 m) high x 15 ft. 1 in. (4.6 m) crown diameter and 4 ft. (1.2 m) nose cone diameter, sited in different positions in the The Donald J. Hall Sculpture Park, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. © 1994 Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen. Photograph by Attilio Maranzano.



By definition, all outdoor sculpture is exposed to uncontrolled environments, including intense light, UV radiation, and adverse weather conditions, as well as damage through vandalism or accidents. Many outdoor painted sculptures made in the 1970s and 1980s are now thirty to forty years old, an age when major treatment is often needed.

In addition, outdoor painted works present a particular challenge to conservators due to the typical requirements that the painted surfaces remain relatively pristine-looking (i.e., the need to preserve the original aesthetic qualities of the sculpture), and that optimal protection is provided to the substrate, particularly when it is metal, which has to be protected from corrosion.

As such, conservation treatment on outdoor painted sculptures often involves the full repainting of the sculpture, frequently preceded by the complete removal (stripping) of all earlier coats of paint. Although this approach would be considered highly unusual in other areas of conservation, it is relatively common for all outdoor sculpture around the world. It is also a very expensive undertaking.

The broad goals of the meeting were as follows:

- Discuss the main issues faced by the field in the conservation of outdoor painted sculpture and to explore collectively some possible responses.
- Initiate and/or cultivate a dialogue between conservators dealing with outdoor sculpture, and between conservators, the paint industry, and artists' estates, foundations, and studios.
- Discuss the best way to document original paint surfaces, store the information, and make it accessible to the field.
- Consider the formation of a think tank of individuals from the paint industry who would be willing to participate in further discussions about problem-solving or in recommending and developing better paint systems.
- Gather feedback from artists' estates, foundations, and studios regarding the type of information they possess and could provide, along with gaining greater clarity on how they view their roles and on their preferred ways of working.

This report is organized in three main sections: Issues, Responses and Priorities, corresponding to the format of the meeting. It should be noted that its contents are in the form of meeting notes, reflecting an exciting, active dialogue between the participants and therefore should not be viewed as anything more formal. It is hoped that this report will serve as a useful starting point for the profession to consider how best to advance the practice of outdoor sculpture conservation.

Schoolchildren explore Nam June Paik's *32 Cars for the 20th Century: Play Mozart's Requiem Quietly*, 1997, during a field trip to the Samsung Transportation Museum, Yong In, Korea, in October, 2008. Photo: Zeeyoung Chin.



Issues

In the meeting's first session, participants were asked to draw from their own professional experiences to identify the main issues being faced in the field on the conservation of twentieth-century outdoor painted sculpture, and to classify them into categories. Discussions surrounding these categories followed. Five categories were identified:

- Ethical/Philosophical Issues
- Material/Technical Issues
- Legal Issues
- Management Issues
- Communication/Information Exchange Issues

Fading, flaking and delamination on a section of paint of Robert Murray's *Duet (Homage to David Smith)*, 1965 as seen in 2014. Photo: Emilie Faust, reproduced courtesy Special Collections and University Archives, California State University Long Beach, International Sculpture Symposium, 1965.



Ethical/Philosophical Issues

- Approaches to conserving outdoor painted sculpture—specifically, that the practice of stripping earlier paint systems and repainting is often necessary and expected for objects intended for an outdoor setting—are still met with surprise at conferences and the like. Therefore, the need to increase understanding and acceptance of such methods to a wider audience, both within and beyond the conservation profession must be addressed.
- Does a statement need to be made on the following points?
 - All outdoor painted sculpture requires repainting at some point.
 - To date, the guiding principle has been to preserve the original appearance of the sculpture (i.e., the artist's intent), not the original coating/material.
 - Paint layers play an important role in the protection of the substrate. Any form of damage, such as cracks, losses or delamination, can quickly cause corrosion.
 - Stripping and recoating are accepted as a valid (and ethical) treatment.

- That said, the historical and/or technological value of existing original or earlier paint systems—which are clearly lost when paint stripping is carried out—should not be completely overlooked.
- Establishing a reliable description of an artist’s intent, as with all types of modern and contemporary art, is difficult. Complications arise in particular when artists change their opinions, materials and/or application methods over time.
- Deciding at what point repainting becomes necessary needs to be addressed.
- When repainting, should imperfections in the paint be replicated?
- How is the most appropriate approach to repainting determined? For example:
 - Should the appearance of the paint be improved to compensate for changes in aesthetic expectations?
 - Should a sculpture be recoated with a different material to improve its longevity if originally painted with “inappropriate” materials?
 - To what level should brushstrokes and/or splashes, if present, be replicated?
- There are also major issues with the sculpture’s substrate, in terms of whether it is acceptable to modify, replace, and/or refabricate it.

On Niki de Saint-Phalle's *Lifesaver Fountain*, 1993, a conservator has filled the losses with a two-component acrylic filler and is shown smoothing the surface with a micro-grinding machine. Photo: Frederike Breder / Restaurierungsatelier "Die Schmiede" GmbH, 2009.



Material/Technical Issues

- Dissemination of information is needed on the uncertainty of performance, durability, and/or longevity of different paint systems on outdoor sculpture. Although life expectancy is known within the paint industry for generic classes of paints, and weatherability and durability can be compared between paints, much of this information is not well known by conservators and owners; as such, there are no proper guidelines on performance and degradation of coatings.
- The many variables involved in the performance of paint systems on outdoor sculpture—paint composition, application methods (spray vs. roller applied, applied in situ vs. in a controlled environment), exposure conditions, and so forth—make testing and comparisons extremely complex.

- Industrial predictions about the durability of coatings are unreliable. Some coatings are given a specific longevity (e.g., x years), but much of this testing is relevant only to a particular set of application methods and aging conditions.
- There is a lack of knowledge among conservators, and a lack of proper guidelines on best application techniques of coatings and how this can affect appearance and durability of the paint; for example, a paint that sprays well may not brush well, and surfaces may look very different as a result.
- The need for standardized information on gloss, texture, color, and composition of coatings should be addressed.
- Paint industry standards may not be appropriate or relevant for use on outdoor sculpture due to the higher aesthetic standards required. Any change in gloss or color may come well before the point of failure of the protective role of coatings.
- Environmental regulations of coatings make some paint types hard or impossible to obtain in certain countries and states.
- There is a lack of options for the conservator, especially for local treatments; in many cases it is a question of doing nothing or stripping and repainting. It was recognized that local retouching will become a more attractive option as the performance of primers improves.
- Modifying the color of industrial paints to match an existing color or an aged or degraded coating is difficult. Most repainting is carried out straight from the paint can.
- Some brands or lines (e.g., fluoropolymers) offer only a limited range of colors.
- Difficulties arise in treating the substrate or interior structure of a sculpture. There are unknown effects (both chemical and mechanical) of different substrates on paint: steel, aluminum, concrete, fiberglass, and so forth.
- Treatment of very large-scale sculptures has its own set of problems: typically the pros and cons of gaining access to the surface for painting in situ, compared to the wear and tear of de-installation on both the structure and surface. The logistics are complicated (and highly expensive) for either option.

Conservator Nikki van Basten studies paint deterioration on Claes Oldenburg's and Coosje van Bruggen's *Trowel 1*, 1971–76. Steel painted with polyurethane enamel. 41 ft. 9 in. x 11 ft. 3 in. x 14 ft 7 in. (12.7 x 3.4 x 4.4m). Sited: 38 ft. 5 in. x 11 ft. 3 in. x 7.5 ft. 5 in. (11.7 x 3.4 x 2.3m). Collection Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, the Netherlands. © 1971–76 Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen.



Legal Issues

- There is a lack of clarity on the precise role, function, and authority of artists' estates, foundations, and studios, specifically, whether these entities are able to comment on or recommend treatment due to liability concerns and the possibility of enhancing the value of privately owned pieces.
- Who ultimately has the “right” to make the final decision on a treatment?
- How legally binding are artist’s instructions, especially for owners?

Christina Varvi of Rosa Lowinger & Associates (left) and Julia Langenbacher carry out paint excavations on Robert Murray's *Duet (Homage to David Smith)* 1965, to uncover the stratigraphy. Photo: Rachel Rivenc, reproduced courtesy Special Collections and University Archives, California State University Long Beach, International Sculpture Symposium, 1965.



Management Issues

- There is a need to discuss how best to deal with public interaction with the sculptures (all forms, from touching and climbing to vandalism and skateboarding).
- There is a need to discuss how best to implement preventative conservation strategies, such as landscaping.
- Existing and potential owners need to be more effectively informed about the true conservation implications for acquiring and installing outdoor sculpture. This includes museum directors, gallery owners, and public art administrators.
- The high cost of most treatments, and the difficulty of securing resources and funding for treatments, must be addressed.
- Unlike many museum collections, there is a lack of established maintenance programs (or the budget to implement them) in the public arena.
- What is the ‘burden’ of an artist’s instructions on an owner, and to what degree are owners obligated to follow them (also a legal issue)?
- There is a need to discuss how to advise artists, fabricators, and other stakeholders on options for improved fabrication before works are made.
- What should be the response to pressure to use powder coatings as a “one-time” fix?

Communication/Information Exchange Issues

- No centralized information “hub” exists where conservators can access information about outdoor painted sculpture. All unpublished information, knowledge, and accumulated experience and know-how tends to be stored locally by conservators, fabricators, and/or owners. No process is in place to facilitate an information exchange.
- There is very little knowledge-sharing between conservators and related industries, specifically between the paint industry, curators, conservators, fabricators, artists’ estates, foundations, and studios, and the artists themselves.
- Getting information from the paint industry is a particularly problematic issue in information exchange. There is an enormous wealth of knowledge that exists in the paint industry but is difficult for conservators to access:
 - Information on the best choices of coatings
 - Information on application procedures and techniques
 - Information on paint composition, not just on look, color, gloss, and so on
- The conservation field is a very small client base, so there are no financial incentives for the paint industry to get involved.
- There is a lack of good contacts in the paint industry. Conservators have no way of knowing how to get through to appropriate individuals; there is no “dial # for conservation advice” on website menus.
- The following types of information were also identified as difficult to share, for various reasons:
 - Specifics from conservators on treatments, due to liability fears
 - Conservators’ general unwillingness to talk about failures
 - Technical information from fabricators, due to trade secrets
- Information, guidelines, and contacts are needed on all artists’ estates, foundations, and studios—ideally on their respective websites—to facilitate discussion of treatment options and approaches.

Twenty-eight 4 x 8-foot panels painted to replicate the specific black used by Tony Smith. The panels were created to test the possibility of paint roller application of high-performance paints normally intended to be sprayed; paint is less expensive and easier to apply by roller than by sprayer. Photo: American Stripping Company (ASCo), reproduced courtesy ASCo and the Tony Smith Estate.



Responses

At the end of the second session, participants were asked to determine ways in which the field might respond to these issues. Three broad categories were proposed:

- Documentation Responses
- Material/Technical Responses
- Communication/Information Sharing Responses

(From left) Nikki van Basten, Julia Langenbacher, and Catherine Defeyt perform gloss and color measurements on paint swatches in the GCI laboratories. Photo: Rachel Rivenc.



Documentation Responses

- Develop a system of reference paint swatches for individual artists' paint finishes, for both existing paint materials and more historic coatings. This system can be used to inform paint finishes now and in the future:
 - The system is to be produced in consultation with artists' estates, foundations, and studios and with fabricators, as soon as possible to take advantage of their recollections and memories.
 - Matches with "historic" coatings need to be made with available paints.
 - It is important that the swatches be standardized as much as possible (e.g., choice of substrate, size of swatch)
 - A clear description and understanding of the limitations of their use should also be made; for example, if significant modification occurs to the paint color or texture on application.
- Request that fabricators, artists' estates, foundations, and studios; and conservators document examples of failures and unacceptable (to artists) results, as well as examples that were successful. This helps enormously in understanding each artist's intent.
- Establish a central repository of samples and accompanying information:
 - Determine where this repository should be located, for both physical paint samples and accompanying documentation and archival information, specifically the number of sets of paint swatch samples (there should be multiples) and appropri-

ate locations (e.g., individual artists' estates, foundations and studios, as well as the owner of each work).

- Possibly locate the repository at a university, at the Getty, as part of the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA), and/or as part of art history or conservation programs.
- Establish a “common” copyright model to avoid the issue of ownership of knowledge and intellectual property.
- Establish a list of the information conservators require to replicate a coating.
- Have artists' estates, foundations, and studios produce descriptions and/or overviews of their artist's original intent and preferences; that is, establish an “overarching philosophy” and/or “aesthetic guidelines” to aid conservation decisions.
- Establish a list of paint properties (primarily optical/aesthetic) that are important or significant to conservators.
- Access archives and files from conservators, especially those who are now retired or less active in the field.
- Conduct oral histories with fabricators and develop access to their records (it is important to begin immediately while direct links to deceased artists are still available).
- Initiate a series of outdoor painted sculpture artist studies, continue artist by artist, and publish the findings.

Alexander Liberman, *Olympic Iliad*, 1984. Crosby Coughlin Fine Arts. © 2015 Alexander Liberman Trust. Photo: Amy Louise Herndon.



Material/Technical Responses

- Develop improved contact with the paint industry:
 - Establish a small think tank.
 - Organize further meetings to discuss specific issues.
- Establish agreed-upon definitions of gloss, color, and paint failure.
- Access compositional information on paints.
- Develop improved partial touch-up treatments. In theory, these will become more common as the durability of primers is improved.
- Although information is needed on all the types of paints available, establish priorities: for instance, what paint materials do conservators need to know about most?
- Tap into existing technical information on paint systems from, for example, the National Association of Corrosion Engineers (nace.org) and the Society for Protective Coatings (sspc.org).
- Develop with the industry a method for describing color that can be more universally adopted than code numbers (perhaps L, a,b, or an interface between both).
- Clarify hazardous-material issues.
- Establish methods and guidelines to ship paint—nationally and internationally.
- Develop a series of professional workshops for conservators on topics such as:
 - Paint choice and basic information on various classes of paint
 - Methods of paint application and how these affect appearance

Shinkichi Tajiri's assistant Karl Kleimann (center) and daughter Giotta work with the wooden model elements and the molds and tubes in glass fiber-reinforced polyester of different diameters in the production of Tajiri's *Knots*. Art: © Shinkichi Tajiri Estate and Shinkichi Tajiri Foundation. Photo: Lydia Beerkens, reproduced courtesy Shinkichi Tajiri Estate and Shinkichi Tajiri Foundation.



Communication/Information Sharing Responses

- Utilize high-profile, international projects to generate interest from the paint industry.
- Encourage involvement from the paint industry, emphasizing that outdoor painted sculpture is different, artistic, challenging, and high-profile. Do not underestimate the power deriving from the prestige of art institutions!
- Raise awareness of local outdoor sculpture in towns where large paint companies have offices or factories.
- Engage a broader range of expertise that includes professional applicators, paint designers and coatings inspectors, because outdoor sculpture conservators function mostly as contractors and facilitators.
- Create simple instructions on paint application and how to read and interpret information from the paint industry (datasheets, etc.).
- Develop a common language to facilitate communication between the paint industry and conservators.
- Develop workshops for conservators on how to document surfaces.
 - The American Institute for Conservation (AIC) is always looking for workshops and advanced training for mid-level conservators.
 - The Getty Conservation Institute could be a possible organizer.
- Disseminate the results of this meeting to the broader conservation community.
- Create a specialty group on outdoor sculpture within the Objects Specialty Group of AIC; or within the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA).
- Use existing online resources, such as INCCA and conservation listservs to promote information sharing between conservators through web platforms and discussion groups. Identify shortcomings.
- Tap into public art management resources.
- Educate stewards of the works about the need for conservation and for involving conservators.
- Promote the idea that access to information has the added benefit—hopefully—of influencing living artists and current public art.

Members of the one of the meeting's breakouts group draw on professional experience to discuss issues related to the conservation of outdoor painted sculpture. Photo: Tom Learner.



Priorities

For the third and final session, participants were asked to identify priorities for the field, divided into short-term (more easily achievable) and long-term projects. Many of these overlap with those from the “Responses” section. It is likely that different areas of the profession have different priorities, so this section is not intended to be a definitive statement for the conservation profession. Rather, it records the particular thoughts of the participants and is intended as a starting point. The proposed priorities include:

Homage to Simon Rodia by Joop Beljon after the conservation treatment performed in 2015, located on the campus of California State University Long Beach. The landscaping around the sculpture is in progress. © Joop Beljon Foundation. Photo: Julia Langenbacher.



Short-term Priorities

- Explore the possibility of developing standards and guidelines for producing paint coupons and swatches (size, substrate, etc).
- Develop guidelines for characterization and documentation (gloss, color, etc.).
- Conduct a broad survey of coatings used on outdoor painted sculpture.
- Develop contacts within the paint industry who are willing and interested in forming collaborations.
- Compile a central list of artists’ estates, foundations, and studios with up-to-date contact information.
- Create and circulate a statement about the specific needs and expectations of conserving outdoor sculpture, and raise awareness within the conservation field and related professions and stakeholders.
- Create a basic outdoor painted sculpture bibliography to be circulated online and expanded on by those in the field.
- Work with artists’ estates, foundations and studios to collect information on each artist, including published articles, archival information, photos, paint samples and conservation reports.
- Design a questionnaire for artists and their respective estates, foundations, and studios, highlighting the information that conservators need to replicate coatings.
- Establish a list of optical and aesthetic paint properties that are important or significant to aid artists’ estates, foundations, and studios in formulating aesthetic guidelines for the conservation field.

Long-term Priorities

- Create a central repository for all information needed for outdoor painted sculpture conservation, including physical paint swatches, reference samples, and supporting documentation and literature. The repository should include, in part:
 - Paint samples created according to agreed-upon protocols in multiple editions and stored in appropriate multiple locations.
 - An outdoor painted sculpture database with information on artists, fabricators, and archives that is international, web-based, free, and fully searchable.
- Create a professional specialty group for outdoor painted sculpture.
- Cultivate improved relationships with the paint industry.
- Develop improved techniques for local treatment and inpainting.
- Create a written and detailed pictorial standard of paint performance by generic class that can be used as a guide for coating selection.
- Develop workshops for conservators on topics that include the following:
 - Working with the paint industry, interpreting datasheets, etc.
 - Paint application techniques, gloss/texture/color control, etc.
- Produce relevant publications that fabricators should help circulate as pieces are made:
 - Works on individual artists (e.g. along the lines of the GCI's *The Artist's Materials* series).
 - An overall book on outdoor sculpture conservation issues and approaches.
 - A small booklet offering guidelines on the basic care and maintenance of outdoor painted sculpture (i.e., an "owner's manual").

Participants in the meeting pose in front of Mark Di Suvero's *Chonk On*, 2000, on Governors Island in New York. © Mark Di Suvero / Spacetime C.C. Photo: Gary Mattison.



Meeting Participants

Sarah Auld
Director, Tony Smith Estate, New York, NY

Lydia Beerkens
Senior Conservator Modern Art, SRAL Maastricht, the Netherlands

Frederike Breder
Conservator, Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany

John Campbell
John Campbell Conservation, Long Island City, NY

David Collens
Director, Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY

Crosby Coughlin
Crosby Coughlin Fine Art, Alexander Liberman Estate, North Salem, NY

Jack Cowart
Executive Director, Roy Lichtenstein Foundation, New York, NY

John Escarsega
Senior Research Coating Chemist, US Army Research Laboratory, Coating Research Office, Aberdeen Proving Ground, MD

Jennifer Gibson
Director, Art in Architecture and Fine Arts, US General Services Administration, Washington, DC

Tom Learner
Head, Modern and Contemporary Art Research, Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles, CA

Felix Lehner
Director, Kunstgiesserei, St. Gallen AG, Switzerland

Alfred Lippincott
President, Lippincott's, LLC, Wassaic, NY

Robert G. Lodge
President, McKay Lodge Conservation Laboratory, Inc., Oberlin, OH

Rosa Lowinger
Principal, Rosa Lowinger & Associates, Conservation of Sculpture and Architecture, Los Angeles, CA

Abigail Mack
Principal and Object Conservator, Abigail Mack Art Conservation, Red Hook, NY

Katy May
Objects Conservation Department, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

Richard McCoy
Conservator of Objects and Variable Art, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, IN

Ivana Mestrovic
Director, Spacetime C.C., Mark di Suvero Studio, Long Island City, NY

Maria Nevelson
Founder and Executive Director, Louise Nevelson Foundation, Inc., Philadelphia, PA

Janet Passehl
Curator, the LeWitt Collection, Chester, CT

Tracy Power
Conservator, Tracy Power Objects Conservation, San Francisco, CA

Marla Prather
Curator, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

Rachel Rivenc
Assistant Scientist, Modern and Contemporary Art Research, Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles, CA

Kendra Roth
Conservator of Sculpture and Decorative Arts, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

James Sejd
President, American Stripping Company (ASCo), Manassas Park, VA

George T. Smith
Consultant, Florida Protective Coatings Consultants, Inc., Lake Mary, FL

John Steele
Conservator of Sculpture and Decorative Arts, Detroit Institute of the Arts, Detroit, MI

Anne Strauss
Associate Curator, Modern and Contemporary Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

Jeanne Marie Teutonico
Associate Director, Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles, CA

Julie Wolfe
Associate Conservator, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA

Lynda Zycherman
Conservator of Sculpture, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY

