

The Laws that Bind Us

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This session asks: what is the relationship between law and art histories? How and why has the law/policy shaped or created art histories? And how can a deeper understanding of this relationship help us rethink art histories? What are the laws that bind us, and what happens if/when we change or challenge them?

This session explores the underlying and often overlooked structures that support, define and create art histories.

Throughout the lifetime of an artwork, through its production, sale, dissemination, collection and display, the work interacts with many structures outside of the disciplines of art history and visual culture. Disciplines that traditionally are seen to act as supporting players help to insert and translate the art object into wider systems of ownership, protection and status. These legal structures, including property law, copyright law, government policy, insurance, tort law, data protection, conservation science and museum accreditation are all seen to support and be subservient or work in reaction to the artist, art object and creation of art histories.

This session asks to what extent these under-studied points of contact between the artwork and the surrounding disciplines have written art history. Does copyright or policy or an accessioning contract author a collection to the same extent as a curator? How has the law shaped taste, how have contracts defined the art object, and how has copyright sustained or critiqued positions of privilege? How has conservation affected display and meaning? Are these supporting structures, in fact, the dominant authors of meaning?

This session welcomes papers and case studies that explore the relationship between the law, policy and the art object, and in particular those focusing on how the use, reading or application of these disciplines has shaped art history. Of special interest are papers and case studies that ask how experimental, non-Western and international approaches to law and policy can be applied to alter the history and future of art.