

Sharing Knowledge in Art Conservation: From Repository Building to Research Publishing



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Abstract As contemporary art makes its way into museum collections, knowledge sharing between organisations is important for developing a common frame of reference and identifying best practices in an evolving field, but is hampered by ethical, legal and technical complexities. In this article, I ask how constraints to knowledge and documentation sharing between institutions can be overcome. Over the past decades, there have been a number of initiatives for the inter-institutional exchange of documentation and research materials on the conservation of contemporary art. I focus on an online database project created by the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA) to share conservation documentation among practitioners in a semi-public setting. The main success of the INCCA database appears to have been to provide access to templates of forms and reports used in emerging practice, and to enable networking and increased exchange between members. I further identify the network as a research-based initiative and recognise its role in consolidating the conservation of contemporary art as a discipline. I conclude that this shift has precipitated the movement of knowledge exchange away from the circulation of data in the network to publicly oriented knowledge production.

Keywords Art conservation · Contemporary art · Documentation · Database · Network · Research · Publishing

1 Introduction

Contemporary art challenges standard notions and conduct in museums. Artworks such as installations, performances and media art appear in changing iterations and their meaning is often conveyed through their intangible aspects, their biography and tacit knowledge of the artist and the museum (Hummelen and Scholte 2004, p. 208).

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Although collecting institutions have embraced contemporary art, they often lack adequate expertise and resources to care for it. The non-object-based nature of this art creates requirements on laborious testing of new methodologies and increased emphasis on documentation (Heydenreich 2011; van de Vall 2015; Phillips 2015). Meeting the special requirements for its preservation and presentation (van Saaze 2013) is further hindered by its generally secondary position to the more widely recognised older works. One remedy for organisations has been the pooling of resources for the development of new working methods and the co-production of documentation. Here, however, they face another obstacle. Collecting institutions as a whole are reluctant to convey practical knowledge about works of art. This is mainly for their commitment to confidentiality set out in the museum code of ethics, but also for their prevailing attitude of concealment in preservation matters (ICOM 2017, p. 42; Frasco 2009, pp. 85–92; van Saaze 2011, pp. 250–251; van Saaze 2013, pp. 20–24, 43; Scheidemann 2016). As contemporary art enters collections, knowledge sharing between organisations is important for the development of a common frame of reference and the identification of best practices in an evolving field, but is hampered by ethical, legal and technical complexity. How to solve this problem? Is it possible to overcome the constraints on the distribution of knowledge and documentation between institutions? And if so, how to organise this exchange so that it is beneficial for preservation practice?

To answer these questions, in this article I study initiatives for the interinstitutional exchange of documentation and research materials on the conservation of contemporary art. I focus on an online database project set up by the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA) in a pioneering effort to share conservation documentation among experts in a semi-public setting. I place it in a historical context and identify a set of motifs that shaped its mission and form. My analysis of its use over time reveals a combination of factors that contributed to its eventual decline. The main success of the INCCA database appears to have been to provide access to the templates of forms and reports used in emerging practice and enable networking and intensify exchanges between members. My examination of INCCA's further efforts leads me to identify the network as a research-based initiative and recognise its role in consolidating the conservation of contemporary art as a field. I conclude that this shift has precipitated the diversion of knowledge exchange from the circulation of data in the network towards public oriented knowledge production.

2 Setting Ground for Sharing Knowledge in Contemporary Art Conservation

Issues in modern and contemporary art conservation have been discussed among collecting institutions for several decades. An early, significant undertaking to establish a framework for cross-institutional collaboration was an international

symposium organised by Heinz Althöfer in Düsseldorf in 1977. For fifteen years prior to the event, he worked as conservator at Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf that during that time acquired works by contemporary local artists such as Zero Group and representatives of *Objektkunst* (Althöfer 1977, p. 13). Althöfer organised the symposium shortly after his appointment as head of a newly established municipal scientific conservation laboratory, notable for its access to an x-ray machine allowing for more nuanced investigation of objects.¹ The aim was to align its working agenda with the needs of art museum collections in the wider geographical area and establish a research programme on the restoration of modern and contemporary art (Caianiello 2005, p. 41).² The idea was to discuss the questions of modern art conservation in a small working group. The group eventually grew to 58 individuals who gathered at the symposium entitled *Restaurierung moderner Kunst* (1977), coming primarily from museums and organisations in West Germany, but also in Brussels, Amsterdam and Copenhagen and including the coordinator of ICOM's Working Group on 20th Century Paintings.³

Althöfer's 'Working Programme' written after the symposium as the opening essay for proceedings does not deal with issues of painting exclusively, even though they are in majority. Attention is paid to other media and materials, as well as to the conservator's judgment (decay intervention, replaceability/fixability of engines). Althöfer concluded the essay by listing seven problematic subjects in the conservation of modern and contemporary art. Four points relate to heavily cracked, detached, multi-layered paintings, large format paintings, monochromatic painting and coloured canvas. The fifth highlights the use of non-traditional materials in collage and combine painting as well as paper, photography, plastics, and plexiglas. The sixth adheres to the "ideological" question of interference in the natural decay of materials such as chocolate and fat. The last one discusses the reparability of engines. All in all, the 1977 manifesto formulated theoretical issues of the originality and authenticity of modern art as conservation questions. At the closing of the symposium, a working group was set up to follow upon the programme, albeit for the next two decades the activity of the Düsseldorf laboratory remained largely local.⁴ The symposium, however, directed the attention of conservators to changing artworks and to the necessity of interpretative judgment.

Another legacy of this early initiative was the recognition of the necessity of contact and collaboration between conservators and other professions, as well as an outline of the path towards it. In his Düsseldorf manifesto, Heinz Althöfer called for

¹The institution continues to exist today as the Restaurierungszentrum der Landeshauptstadt Düsseldorf/Schenkung Henkel. Since 2019, the centre is led by Joanna Phillips, formerly head of media conservation at Guggenheim Museum, New York.

²"Restaurierung moderner und zeitgenössischer Kunstobjekte" in the original German. Author's translation.

³The group was renamed the Modern and Contemporary Art Working Group by 1981 (Weiss and Stoner 1981, 81/6/1-9).

⁴Notably, between 1978–1981, the Restaurierungszentrum conducted a survey of 442 objects and between 1979–1983 it collected 39 questionnaires from artists (Weyer and Heydenreich 1999).

the intensification of contacts with artists, manufacturers, art historians, museum professionals, scientists and collectors (1977, p. 8). Following the symposium discussions, Althöfer concluded that in order for this to happen, “first, a collection of facts [about materials and methods] is required, followed by an exchange of facts,” and emphasized that “materials and methods should be investigated scientifically” (1977, p. 8).⁵

While collecting institutions continued to develop strategies for preserving changing artworks, significant cross-institutional partnerships began to emerge only much later. Among the most influential were Variable Media Network (2001–2004) and Matters in Media Art (2003–2015). Both were designed as consortia of museums and archives aiming to develop best practice protocols for the collection and preservation of media art.⁶ If their efforts resulted in models and guidelines for the care of time-based media, they did not establish means for documentation interchange. The Variable Media Network published several brief case studies, intended to illustrate the hypotheses of documentation model rather than serve as a platform for exchange (Depocas et al. 2003, pp. 70–114).

Efforts for both the development of new preservation strategies and establishing a platform for sustained distribution of knowledge and data found common ground in another large-scale initiative, entitled International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA). The network is active to this day and offers a compelling example of how contemporary art conservation has sought to reconcile collaboration and sharing with conservation ethics.

3 International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art

INCCA has played a key role in catalysing cooperation among institutions collecting contemporary art. Since its foundation in 1999, the initiative organised three multi-annual projects, two large conferences, a number of seminars, workshops and exhibitions, published two books, realised dozens of case studies and initiated interest- and regional networks. Today it counts over two thousand institutional and individual members worldwide. On an ongoing basis, members publish announcements on the INCCA’s online platform, which has become a go-to source for professional news from the field. For the purpose of this essay, I will focus on one section of the platform, a database for conservation documentation. I will investigate

⁵ Author’s translation.

⁶ The Variable Media Network was founded by Guggenheim Museum and Daniel Langlois Foundation, Montreal. Its members included Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archives (Berkeley), Franklin Furnace (New York), Performance Art Festival+Archives (Cleveland), [Rhizome.org](http://rhizome.org) (New York) and Walker Art Center (Minneapolis). Matters in Media Art was a consortium of three major museums: MoMA, SFMOMA and Tate. See the projects’ websites at <http://web.archive.org/web/20190209014527/http://www.variablemedia.net/e/welcome.html> and mattersinmediaart.org.

motivations behind establishing this resource as a platform for circulating knowledge and data among organisations, how did it resolve confidentiality concerns and to what extent has it contributed to improving the care of contemporary art.

The emergence of INCCA is firmly linked with a defining moment in the area of contemporary art conservation. In the 1990s, many museums began to see that their acquisition, registration and decision-making needs to be adapted to meet the demands of new art, but it was not clear how. With this in mind, the international symposium *Modern Art: Who Cares?* was organised in Amsterdam in 1997. It was hoped that the programme leading up to the event would help collecting institutions build confidence and bolster legitimacy to deal with “non-traditional objects of modern art” (Sillé 1999, p. 14). This was to be achieved by creating new models for registration and decision-making, and developing new terminology and workflows along the way (Sillé 1999; Berndes 1999). The symposium was attended by 450 professionals (Marontate 1997). In terms of scale, it was the largest gathering on the conservation of art of living artists, comparable to general conferences of learned societies in well-established disciplines.⁷ Representatives from key museums such as Tate, V&A, Guggenheim, National Gallery of Art, Stedelijk Museum, Van Abbemuseum, Pompidou and MUMOK were present.⁸

One aim of the event was to design a common pool of resources and expertise among collecting institutions. A seminar was dedicated to establishing an international electronic network (Schinzel and Hummelen 1999). The rapidly growing World Wide Web could improve communication and access to much needed information on artists’ materials and techniques. The participants began outlining a website which would accommodate this exchange. In addition, it would host discussions, profiles of professionals and other resources (Schinzel and Hummelen 1999, p. 340).

The symposium organiser, the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (ICN), followed upon these objectives and together with Tate and nine other museums and organisations prepared a multi-annual project which received funding from the European Commission.⁹ The newly established International Network for the

⁷Six months after the *Modern Art: Who Cares?* symposium, the Getty Conservation Institute organised a conference explicitly dedicated to contemporary art. The three-day long *Mortality Immortality? The Legacy of 20th-Century Art* attracted over 350 participants (Constantine 1998). It brought together “professionals from a range of disciplines—artists, museum directors, curators, conservators, art historians, dealers, collectors, and scientists, as well as a philosopher and a lawyer—to offer their individual perspectives on the intent of the artist, the effect of the art market, ways to cope with rapidly evolving media technologies, and fine art as popular culture” (GCI 1998).

⁸Aside from museums, there were participants from research centres and universities such as Restaurierungszentrum Düsseldorf, Konservatorskolen Copenhagen, University of Ghent and Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. Alongside conservators, the interdisciplinary setting gave voice to academics and researchers, curators, scientists, museum directors and artists.

⁹The founding consortium also included Guggenheim Museum, SMAK Ghent, MUMOK Vienna, SBMK (Netherlands), Restaurierungszentrum der Landeshauptstadt Düsseldorf, Konservatorskolen Copenhagen, La Caixa Foundation (Barcelona), Galeria d’Arte Moderna in Turin and Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw.

Conservation of Contemporary Art created a website as the backbone of the initiative. When it went online in the early 2000s, it was a cutting-edge resource for the new field. It featured announcements, a bibliography, member profiles and, notably, a database of artists' archives designed to handle documentation, supported by a custom thesaurus (Wharton 2005, pp. 174–175).

For the remaining decade, INCCA's core activity was a series of European projects. They represented a pioneering example of coordinated action among dozens of collecting institutions. The questions pertained to the practical issues of restaging works but also more general issues such as methodologies.¹⁰ Results were made accessible to members in the form of metadata in the INCCA database, dossiers on dedicated websites, and articles. There was no journal devoted to this area of study, and there still isn't one.¹¹ But INCCA's cooperative, practice-oriented and organised approach to studying works and issues helped to professionalise conservation research and contributed to establishing this domain in academia as well. The scholarly aspect of INCCA was supported by the continuous presence of universities and research organisations among partners.¹²

Today, INCCA continues to operate as a key agent in contemporary art conservation. Technically, it does not have a legal body; rather, it is a long-term activity of the Dutch governmental agency for cultural heritage (Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, RCE).¹³ It has a steering committee, bylaws and counts a steadily growing number of members worldwide (exceeding 2200 as of 2019, see Fig. 1).

¹⁰The network organised numerous case studies, two large conferences, a number of seminars, workshops and exhibitions, published two books, initiated interest and regional networks and accumulated hundreds of documents in its database.

¹¹Art conservation journals include *Studies in Conservation* published by the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (IIC) in London since 1952; *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* published by the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) since 1960; *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* published by ICON in London since 1977; *Conservation Journal* published by V&A Museum in London since 1991; *Technè* published in Paris since 1994; and *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies* published by Institute of Archaeology of UCL London since 1996.

¹²On average, they made up one third of its 16 to 30 partners per project.

¹³The INCCA initiator ICN became part of RCE in 2011. Between 2007–2021, the network coordinator Karen te Brake-Baldock occupied the post of “(inter)nationale kennisnetwerken” in the department “Rijkserfgoedlaboratorium” (National Laboratory). See RCE (n.d.). Ilka van Steen and Paula Chang successively took on the role of INCCA coordinator. Previously, Tatja Scholte served in the role from 1999–2007 (Learner 2014).

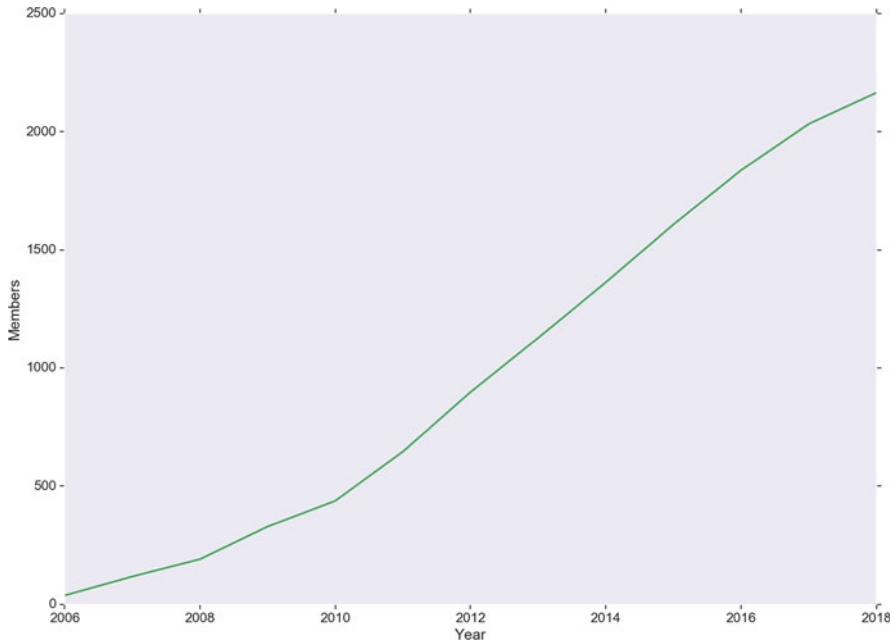


Fig. 1 Number of members of INCCA (This and all graphs included in this chapter result from my analysis of the snapshot of members and documents data from the website incca.org taken on 15 October 2018. The snapshots were created by scraping the website as data could not be exported directly)

4 INCCA Database

Today, the INCCA database makes up the ‘Member documents’ section of the more extensive INCCA’s online platform (Fig. 2). The main section of the platform today is also populated by member contributions, which are publicly accessible and include event and publication announcements and diverse news from the field.

The database contains references to 1100 documents situated in more than 90 organisations. An analysis of the entries according to document type shows that artist interviews now make up the bulk of content, roughly one third (Fig. 3). This is despite the fact that they are just one form of recorded exchange with artists. Other forms are marginal. For example, questionnaires, make up only 4%, artists’ statements 2%, and correspondence less than 1%. One reason for this could be that their inclusion has not been explicitly encouraged. In the case of correspondence, it is also much less portable and more ephemeral type of documentation. Interviews in the INCCA database also outcount other, more traditional forms of museum records such as conservation reports, condition reports, installation guidelines and treatment reports. How can this preference for sharing interviews be explained? Why was it perceived as beneficial for preservation practice?

Fig. 2 The INCCA database section of INCCA online platform, 2019 (Screenshot taken from [https://www.incca.org/search?search_api_multi_fulltext=&node_field_free_tagging\[0\]=6344&page=19](https://www.incca.org/search?search_api_multi_fulltext=&node_field_free_tagging[0]=6344&page=19))

In its mission of advancing art conservation through research and documentation, INCCA echoed calls for researching and exchanging information about materials and methods issued at the Düsseldorf conference two decades earlier (Althöfer 1977, p. 8).¹⁴ As I will argue, Althöfer’s emphasis on scientific investigation has been taken up in INCCA through increasing association with academia. But what is more important now, rather than *facts* per se: the founders of INCCA put *the artist* into the centre of attention. The artist’s opinion was considered relevant not only for weighing options for material treatment, but came to be recognised as crucial for preserving (conceptual) *identity* as opposed to state of the artwork.

Pip Laurenson (2006) defines the concept of the identity of the work as what “describes everything that must be preserved in order to avoid the loss of something

¹⁴ Author’s translation.

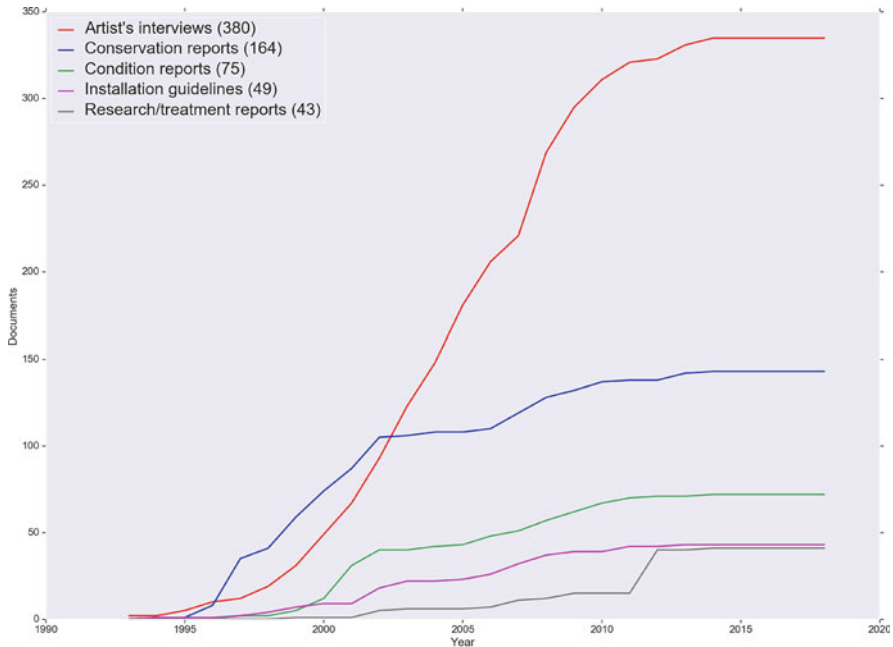


Fig. 3 Number of documents in the INCCA database per type (five largest shown) (This graph does not represent the time when the respective documents were entered into the database; this information was not available for the analysis. Rather, it represents the moment when the documents were originally created)

of value in the work of art.” This shift in focus reflected the changing direction of conversations in the domain of art conservation in the 1990s with respect to the iterativity of the artwork. Artist interviews would record the opinion of the artist and the process of weighing possible options together with the conservator, gradually articulating the artist’s intent. Before then, artists were rarely involved in conservation. In fact, museums seldom followed a systematic approach, nor did they build registries for future reference (Weiss and Stoner 1981). This is why the INCCA network prioritised interviews as the principal research material right from its inception when it specified in more detail its priorities as to set up “the relevant joint international guidelines” for artist interviews, conduct them in order to “collect information direct[ly] from the artist” and build for them a shared registry (Hummelen 2000; Scholte et al. 2001).¹⁵

However, museums collect information from artists under the condition of confidentiality, which is one of the guiding principles in museum practice and conservation. In its code of ethics, the International Council of Museums (ICOM)

¹⁵Later, its twofold aim was reframed more broadly as to “collect primary source information from artists’ archives or artists and their representatives” and to share knowledge and (especially unpublished) information for conservation purposes (Hummelen and Scholte 2012).

prescribes museum professionals to “protect confidential information obtained during their work” and remember that “information about items brought to the museum for identification is confidential and should not be published or passed to any other institution or person without specific authorisation from the owner” (ICOM 2017, p. 42).¹⁶ Collecting institutions are therefore bound to shield documentation from the public as it contains sensitive details. In order to balance professional ethical standards and demand for a cross-institutional resource, INCCA founding members settled on limiting the database content to metadata rather than full documents, in addition to restricting access to members (Tatja Scholte, personal communication, 23 April 2019). As a result, the database provides members a catalogue of records for materials they can request from their individual contributors.¹⁷ This is in contrast to the rest of its online platform which is public without restrictions. First limited to the network’s initiators, membership had been soon expanded to professionals and researchers from across the field. While it offered benefits such as creating public profiles, the most important factor in the expansion of member base was to gain direct access to unpublished research and information in the database, according to a user survey (Brake-Baldock 2009).¹⁸ More specifically, over two thirds of respondents stated that they search the content several times a year to make use of existing interviews and questionnaires for research and as aids for their own organisations (Brake-Baldock 2009). This confirms that artist interviews were indeed the driving force behind the operation of INCCA database.

Despite the increasing relevance of documentation for preserving art, contributions have decreased sharply, however (Fig. 4). How can this be explained? In what follows, I suggest several factors responsible. I will also address the question of whether this also implies that improving the care of contemporary art by maintaining a cross-institutional resource for documentation is no longer viable.

5 The Impact of Cultural Policies on INCCA’s Changing Forms of Collaboration

The analysis of annual contributions to INCCA database reveals that the vast majority of documents were created between 1999–2011. This period corresponds to the duration of INCCA’s main research undertakings. While INCCA’s pilot project (1999–2002) concentrated on conducting artist interviews, producing

¹⁶The principle has been also adopted by national conservation institutes. For example, see the code of ethics of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC), point 7, <https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-conservation/code-of-ethics>.

¹⁷Currently, INCCA steering committee is considering merging the database with its platform and opening up collected metadata records to public, with an opt-out option for contributors (Karen te Brake-Baldock, personal communication, 16 April 2019).

¹⁸In 2009 survey, 29 out of 40 respondents considered it important, unlike 5 who thought otherwise.

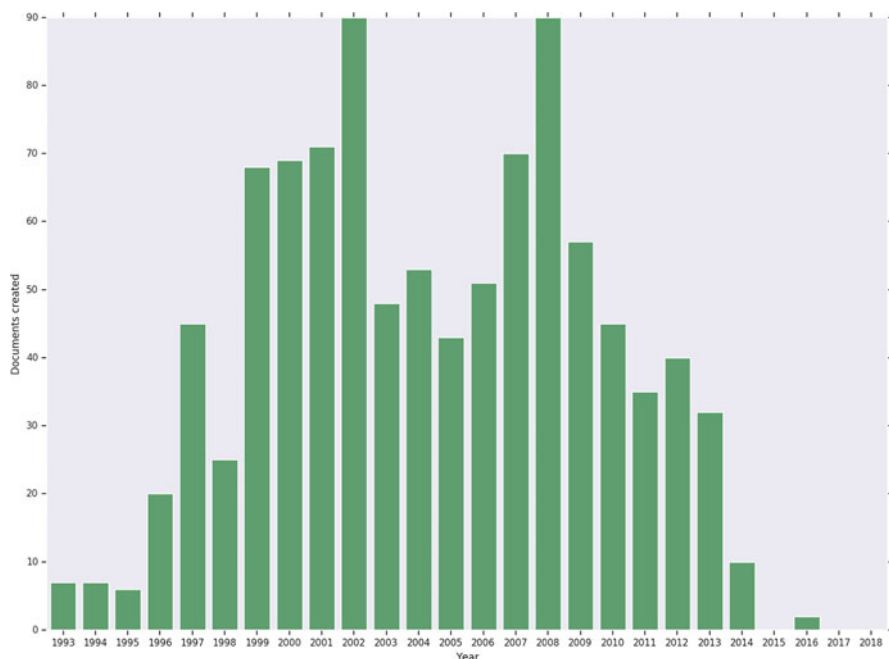


Fig. 4 Number of records in the INCCA database per year of creation

guidelines as well as developing an online database for their registration along with other documentation (Hummelen et al. 1999; INCCA 2002; Hummelen and Scholte 2004, pp. 210–212), it was followed by *Inside Installations* (2004–2007) that kept focus on the artist as a primary source of information but narrowed it down from studying intent across each oeuvre to case studies of selected works. Here, the participating organisations investigated and documented over thirty complex installations from their collections, the process of which was presented and analysed in three exhibitions, a scholarly online publication and a book published through an academic press (Hummelen and Scholte 2006, pp. 8–9; Scholte and 't Hoen 2007; Scholte et al. 2007; Scholte and Wharton 2011).¹⁹ The third, and to this day, last major research initiative of INCCA was entitled *PRACTICs* (short for *Practices, Research, Access, Collaboration, Teaching In Conservation of Contemporary Art*, 2009–2011). Here, the attention leaned towards the profession of conservation itself and explored ways how it can be taught and communicated to the public. Rather than documenting artworks, participants produced a documentary film, seminars and two major symposia, and initiated long-term working groups for education and selected geographic regions (INCCA 2011; McCoy 2010). Taking the three projects together, across the span of a decade we can observe a gradual transition of emphasis from

¹⁹The *Inside Installations* book was eventually published in 2011, as part of the next project *PRACTICs*.

Table 1 Focus shift in INCCA projects

Project	Duration	Main focus	Key method	Documentation sharing	Main outcomes
INCCA	1999–2002	Artist	Interview	Metadata (members only database)	Online platform, Database
Inside Installations	2004–2007	Artwork (Installation art)	Case study	Articles, Documents	Online knowledge base, Exhibitions
PRACTICs, Access2CA	2009–2011	Conservation community, Public	Dialogue, Discussion	–	Symposia, Book, ^a Film, Working groups

^a The main symposium, *Contemporary Art: Who Cares?*, as well as the book produced in the framework of *PRACTICs* feature results of the previous project, *Inside Installations*

building professional information commons, through collaborative knowledge production and publishing to public-facing dialogue and discussion (Table 1). With these developments, the role of non-public databases faded into the background.

Does this mean that museums no longer needed to exchange data and insight as a means to improve the care of contemporary art? I will argue that the answer to this question is deeply conditioned by changing conditions of international cooperation in cultural heritage in Europe where the majority of INCCA members operate. The relevance of studying the impact of funding on contemporary art conservation has been recognised earlier (van Saaze 2011, p. 251) and the following analysis takes a step in this direction.

INCCA's core activities were made possible through cultural funding from the European Union (EU). In fact, INCCA's foundation in the late 1990s coincided with an extension of the domain of cultural policy of the EU to movable heritage. The Union identified its mandate for action in this area primarily as the promotion of networking and partnerships. The repositioning of cultural heritage funding not only made it possible for INCCA to facilitate international programme but had a direct impact on its methods of knowledge production and sharing.

The EU's predecessor, European Communities (EC), first introduced funding for cultural heritage in the early 1980s. Scholars in critical heritage studies identified several factors responsible for it. In the period of energy crises and unfolding economic recession, the EC entered a crisis of political legitimacy. This context prepared a ground for "the idea that monuments and sites could act as a remedy, tying citizens together" (Niklasson 2017, p. 142). By then, it was accepted that social integration will not come about merely as a by-product of economic integration (Shore 2000, p. 18). Other reasons included Italy's continuous call for funds for its cultural heritage, the accession of Greece into the EC, the will to counterbalance American and Japanese cultural authority, and the desire to participate in the international movement for heritage protection (Niklasson 2016). The European Historical Monuments and Sites Fund (EHMF) was established to support the

reconstruction of monumental heritage sites linked to national states. In practice, the scheme sponsored primarily restorations of the archaeological sites of “European significance” with Parthenon and Acropolis as flagship projects (Niklasson 2016, pp. 18, 90–91).²⁰

In the next decade, in the wake of the Maastricht Treaty (EC 1992), the political climate was different. First of all, the fall of the Berlin Wall activated the process of enlargement to the east. The end of the Warsaw Pact marked the emergence of a multipolar world, in which the role of new Europe was uncertain. In the EU, identity politics took precedence, as was soon manifested in the introduction of the EU flag, an anthem and exchange study programmes. This corresponded to a change in its stance on cultural heritage. The economic value of culture had always been essential to the Commission where heritage sites were seen as drivers for tourism. But the policies prioritising monumental sites that emblematised origin myths of nation states were sidelined in the climate of integration. They could no longer be trusted to convey the testimony of European past on their own (Niklasson 2017, pp. 146–147).

In 1997 the European Commission launched a union-wide action programme in the area of cultural heritage, Raphael.²¹ The Commission set networking and partnerships as one of its main domains of funding.²² Projects with participants from multiple countries were more likely to get support. As it happened, both *Modern Art: Who Cares?* and INCCA were part of the first generation of international heritage actions financed through this scheme. It was natural to seek funds for an international initiative in contemporary art conservation from EU’s new cultural heritage programme, as it had no precedent or comparable alternative. The flagship of the nascent INCCA became an online database pioneering novel means of collaboration in cultural heritage.

The subsequent framework, Culture 2000, merged together EU’s three cultural financing programmes and in terms of heritage it prioritised the so-called “Cultural Heritage Laboratories.” Here, rather than an instrument of integration, cultural heritage became a “vehicle of cultural identity.” It was against this context that the INCCA network received financial support for more scholarly oriented, case-based research into preserving installation art under *Inside Installations* (2004–2007). Consequently, the priority in cultural funding in the Culture 2007 scheme shifted

²⁰ While EHEM distributed 42.7 million ECU to restoration action in 459 projects, financial support for Parthenon and Acropolis alone amounted to 5.5 million ECU (Niklasson 2016, pp. 90–91).

²¹ Along with the programmes for “contemporary creation” and books and reading, called Kaleidoscope 2000 and Ariane, respectively (GRRP4 2015, p. 8).

²² The program was divided into five areas, with international networking and partnerships spanning all of them. The areas were “Networks and partnerships” (roughly: thematic networks, collaboration of museums and research institutes, research publications), “Cooperation with third countries and international organizations” (World Heritage List sites preservation, comparative research), “Development and promotion of the cultural heritage in Europe” (preservation and management of sites, laboratory research), “Access to heritage” (memorial events, multilingualism, digital points of access), and “Innovation, further training and professional mobility” (research, conferences, exchange programmes, ICT training). See European Community (1995, p. 4).

Table 2 The impact of European cultural policy on INCCA research design (based on European Commission (2017) and Niklasson (2017))

Programme	Period	Priority	Goal	Supported project
Raphael	1997–1999	Professional networks & partnerships	European integration	INCCA
Culture 2000	2000–2006	Research projects, “laboratories”	European identity	Inside Installations
Culture 2007	2007–2013	Circulation (of workers & works), dialogue	European citizenship	PRACTICs/ Access2CA
Creative Europe	2014–2020	Networks & platforms	Creative innovation	

in favour of fostering the development of European citizenship, encouraging cross-border mobility of cultural operators and works of art as well as intercultural dialogue. The public-oriented *PRACTICs* was supported through this scheme.

In retrospect, it is apparent that European Union’s changing cultural policy shaped the objectives and methods of INCCA projects (Table 1), as can be observed in the network’s transition of emphasis from collecting information through producing knowledge to presentation (Table 2). The support scheme was revised several times in the past twenty years, largely in line with changes to how culture was instrumentalised to meet the political and economic priorities of EU. While in the 1990s, the EU viewed culture as a vessel of integration, the current Creative Europe scheme (2014–2020) frames culture as a catalyst for creativity, growth and employment, perceiving it as an engine of competitiveness on the world stage. In effect, EU’s support of cultural heritage gradually shifted from professional networks to creative platforms. By then, however, INCCA stopped seeking financial support as a cultural heritage project and instead aligned itself with academic initiatives funded through the EU’s research and development programme.

The structural reliance of INCCA’s focal activities on EU’s changing policies explains why maintaining an online catalogue of documentation was seen as a viable way to share expertise only in its early stage, resulting in its eventual retreat. This is not the sole factor, however.

6 From Building Repository to Research Publishing

The process of setting up the INCCA database involved extensive discussions of the project group on whether to include full documents or merely metadata, what should be their structure and which system to adopt (Tatja Scholte, personal communication, 6 July 2017). It was clear, though, that regardless of what information would be shared, access should be restricted to members. Within several years the situation somewhat changed. The sensitivity of conservation information about art objects had been allowed more nuance when it was agreed that documentation of case studies in

the Inside Installations project would be published online without restrictions. However, instead of creating a new, public section in the existing INCCA database, the project group decided to build a new website for this purpose. One reason for this was that its structure proved too restrictive. For example, information did not always come from an artist but often from other stakeholders, including artist's studios, foundations and galleries. More importantly, rather than restricted to self-contained individual files, documentation of contemporary artworks typically includes multi-layered and interdependent items such as interview recordings, transcriptions and notes, threads of e-mail communication and data and multimedia supporting condition reports.

This can be illustrated by Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno's processual work *No Ghost Just a Shell* (1999–2002), selected for a case study in *Inside Installations*. The work revolves around a virtual manga figure brought to life by 18 different invited artists who featured it in paintings, videos, wallpaper, music and various objects. The works were shown separately on various occasions and eventually drawn together in a travelling exhibition that ended at the Van Abbemuseum, where it was acquired for the collection in its entirety (van Saaze 2013). The exhibition was stage-managed by Huyghe and Parreno and later shown in a different version at other locations. The museum, however, was still not prepared to display the work without assistance of the artists.²³ For that reason, as part of INCCA's project, the museum's curator and head of collections, Christiane Berndes, decided to set up the exhibition anew but in different formats and to ask Huyghe and Parreno for their reaction. The process involved a series of new "instalments" at different locations. On this occasion, the researcher conducted meetings and exchanged e-mails with the work's stakeholders. The case study's dossier on the *Inside Installations* website provides a narrative account of staging each iteration and contextual documentation, including the section 'Artists interviews' featuring an inventory of five meeting reports and e-mail correspondence with artists' assistants and three artist contributors (Fig. 5).²⁴ Like other dossiers on the website, its layout had to be adjusted to document this specific artwork.

The database format may be suitable for the description of documents according to complex categories, which facilitates their identification, especially if the content of the documents itself is not included. This was the case of the INCCA database (Fig. 6). Nevertheless, even in contemporary database systems, it would be difficult to extract this complex descriptive information automatically and instead need to be entered manually, which is a lengthy process. In addition, it is hard to comprehensively record the layered relationships between documents in tabular form. The database is not flexible enough to accommodate descriptive nuances and relations

²³http://web.archive.org/web/20071021093447/http://www.inside-installations.org/artworks/detail.php?r_id=378&ct=research.

²⁴<http://inside-installations.sbm.nl/artworks/artwork.356.interview.html>. In addition, the dossier contains a bibliography of writings by and about Parreno, including those related to the work. <http://inside-installations.sbm.nl/OCMT/mydocs/pp%20hov%20bibliography.pdf>. For a detailed analysis of the work's "career" in the museum, see Van Saaze (2013, pp. 143–180).

Project Preservation and installations

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[artist](#)
[artwork](#)
[case research](#)
 01. Report case research
 02. Images exhibition Van Abbeuseum
 03. Floor plan and user manual Travelling Pod, Van Abbeuseum
 04. Infotext exhibition Van Abbeuseum
 05. Images exhibition Van Abbeuseum
 06. Floor plan Van Abbeuseum, Eindhoven
 07. Info text exhibition, Van Abbeuseum
 08. List of works
 09. Images of individual works
 10. Installation Angela Bulloch and Imke Wagener, AnnLee KonnektKit, Lunaphon
 11. Installation François Curlet, Witness Screen
 12. Installation Certificate Liam Gillick, AnnLee You Proposes
 13. Installation Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, AnnLee in Anzenzone
 14. Installation Pierre Huyghe, One Million Kingdoms
 15. Text Imke Wagener, KonnektKit

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 Exhibition Van Abbeuseum
 Images exhibition Van Abbeuseum
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[interview](#)
 Artists interviews

[external links](#)
 Website Anna Lena Vaney
 Anlee Interviews Joe Scanlan-Kristel van Aurdeneare
 Bibliography artists
 Text Elizabeth Bard
 Text "Imke Wagener, AnnLee KonnektKit - activate objects to contact the virtual", prof. A. Heine, Prof. K. Langkilde
 Exhibition Kunststhalie Zürich, Zürich, 2002
 Exhibition SFMoma, San Francisco, 2002-03

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 Kristel van Audeneare, Het Kunstenaarsproject No Ghost Just a Shell, Un film d'imaginaire Van Netwerk Vorming lot
 Tentoonstelling.pdf (pdf/917kb)
 Exhibition Van Abbeuseum (mov/10955 kb)



No Ghost Just a Shell (1999-2002)
 Huyghe, Pierre
 Parreno, Philippe
 collection Van Abbeuseum, Eindhoven

In 2002 the Van Abbeuseum made a special purchase in the form of an exhibition of 28 works by 15 different artists as part of the project 'No Ghost Just a Shell'. Central to this project was a virtual figure made for the multi-million dollar Japanese manga animation industry, in which these kinds of figures and characters are 'consumed' in large numbers. In 1999 the French artists Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno bought the rights to this figure. They gave her the name 'AnnLee' and allowed her to tell her own life story. She was given a voice, a 3D form, a memory, a history and an identity. Huyghe and Parreno then invited various other artists to use AnnLee in their own work and to fill the empty shell with storylines and ideas – free of copyright. They also conceived of a way of producing relatively cheap 3D animations on video, which several artists made use of.

As well as in animation, AnnLee popped up in posters, paintings, objects, an installation, a magazine, a sound work and a book. In all of these she relates her own history – how, following an unremarkable role in a manga comic strip, she was doomed to disappear for good, but was spared the fate by being sold for 46000 yen and given a form, voice and a history. She tells how she gained an identity and experienced adventures. She reads aloud from a book or meets her own image. She is given her own magazine, playthings and soundtrack. Each work forms a chapter from her history. By giving her a coffin, she is also given the possibility to die. In 2002 Huyghe and Parreno concluded the project by transferring the copyrights to AnnLee herself. This means she owns her own identity thus making it impossible to exploit her anymore.

dimensions variable

Fig. 5 No Ghost Just a Shell on the Inside Installations website (Screenshot taken from <http://inside-installations.sbmk.nl/artworks/artwork.356.html>)

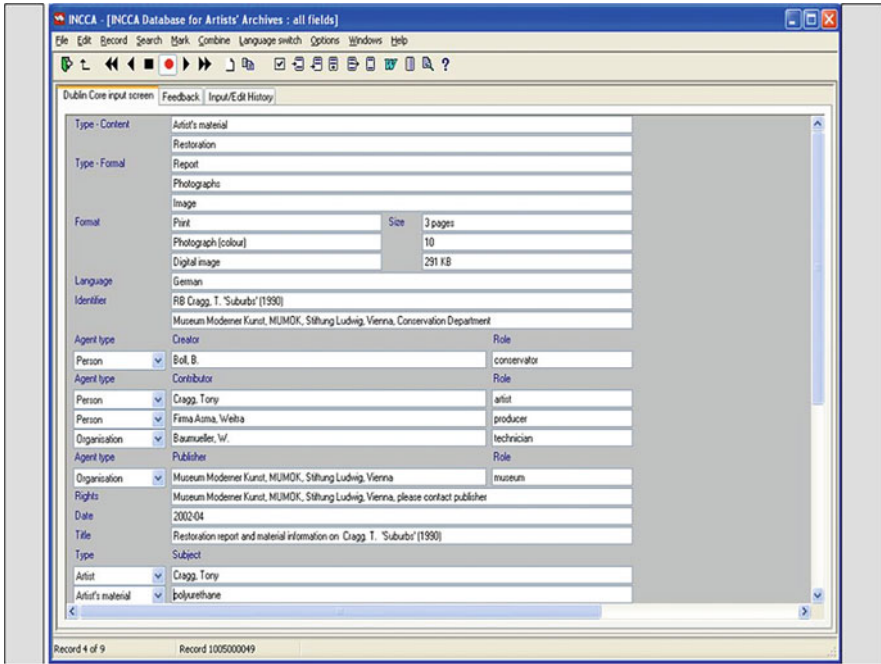


Fig. 6 Section of INCCA database editor, 2004

between documents. Similar challenges are well known from operating collections management systems that are designed to handle object-based works (van Saaze 2013). A more common practice is to store the breadth of documentation in intricate folder structures on an intranet. This informed the way *No Ghost Just a Shell* and other works are presented on the Inside Installation website.

Another factor in INCCA’s database decline is that reports and other documents are structured and use language particular to an institution, as they are not intended for outside use. Substantial effort is needed to make the content and structure of conservation records legible to third parties. This was confirmed in the INCCA user survey that identified the main reason preventing members from contributing as “the documentation [not being] organised enough for distribution to colleagues” (Brake-Baldock 2009). In addition, some documents have since become inaccessible due to changes in staff, confidentiality levels or technical reasons.

We may also observe that over the years, the domain of contemporary art conservation has changed significantly. Specialisations have emerged in time-based media, software-based art, performance, biological materials, plastics and other sub-areas. Document and material types have diversified rapidly, and the metadata sharing approach may prove insufficient for works of art consisting of time-based media and datasets. These areas need to identify and develop their contact points in different ways, rather than a universal registry.

Not less importantly, it appears that the network has established itself as a field. With the growing demand for contemporary art conservators, specialised educational opportunities continue to expand, while professional and academic events have mushroomed.²⁵ Practitioners and researchers might not feel exactly as members of a club rather than colleagues with common sense of practice, references and solidarity. In tandem with this, much exchange has moved to informal channels and social media.

The combination of these factors explains the decline of the relevance of sharing conservation documentation through an inter-institutional reference catalogue. It is also indicative of broader transformations in the ways in which knowledge and information are shared in this field. My examination of INCCA's cooperative efforts following its pivotal database project shows that central to this shift were public oriented knowledge production and alignment with the academic community.

7 Conclusion

The operation of a joint digital infrastructure is one way of creating the space for international and interdisciplinary collaboration needed to improve competencies in the preservation of contemporary art. In the late 1990s, a group of conservators, curators and researchers representing a number of collecting institutions joined forces to establish a network, INCCA, to meet these needs. Their starting point was the realisation that in order to preserve works of art, it is necessary to bring artists and stakeholders to the table, together with conservators and curators. The new initiative designed goal-oriented and practise-based research that brought together practitioners (museum professionals) and researchers (research centres, universities). They set up a database to collect references to research materials and documentation and make them available to participants and others in need. After several large-scale projects, however, sharing activity declined sharply and the relevance of the model could no longer be taken for granted.

I identified a range of phenomena that hinder the further relevance of online record repositories for sharing knowledge in art conservation. In practical terms, the content and structure of conservation documentation is rarely legible to third parties and the tabular database is often not flexible enough to accommodate descriptive nuances and relations between documents. At the structural level, the primary focus of EU policies on cultural funding have shifted from supporting networking to creative industries, where competitiveness rather than care has been promoted. In addition, in recent decades, contemporary art conservation has established itself as a field, became collegial and much of the exchange is taking place through informal

²⁵ See <https://monoskop.org/Art/Conservation#Events> for an overview of contemporary art conservation symposia, conferences, workshops and seminars.



Fig. 7 Professional affiliations of new members of INCCA annually

channels and social media. And as it becomes ever more diverse and specialised, the need for a single resource for the whole field is not as strong.

The key here is INCCA's identity as a research-based initiative. What had been once a progressive approach to tackling practical issues through conducting research and distributing results has now become a norm. Institutions no longer need to rely on an umbrella organisation to initiate collaborative research, nor do they depend solely on a central platform to amplify research results. Rather, its potential lies in facilitating communication and contacts in what can be called networked scholarship. Quan-Haase, Suarez, and Brown note that "networked scholarship can entail exchange of information, insights, and advice across geographic and disciplinary boundaries within connected networks focused on thematic research questions" (2014, p. 14). The 'News & Events' section featured on the frontpage of the INCCA platform could provide a basis for network development in this direction. Further support is offered by the changing structure of the INCCA membership base, but also in the wider field of art conservation. As my analysis shows, while the base was originally made up mainly of practitioners, by 2010 professional researchers matched their annual number of new members (Fig. 7). In a broader sense, the proliferation of scholarly research has led to the professionalisation of conservation research, as is evident from the number of major academic-led research initiatives in recent years.²⁶ I have argued that this has reduced the relevance and appeal of

providing access to conservation documentation as a way of sharing knowledge in favour of scholarly and research publishing.

Publications are not limited to articles, proceedings and monographs but extend to knowledge bases and research catalogues, the example for which was set with the website for INCCA's *Inside Installations* discussed above. More recent examples include the *Rauschenberg Research Project* of SFMOMA and the Rauschenberg Foundation and the Artist Archive Initiative of the New York University, which started, interestingly, from the side of an archive rather than museum collection.²⁷ Although these open access research catalogues contain a large amount of data and information, they are primarily article-based and provide a narrative interpretation of the findings on a case-by-case basis for each work of art included. This approach moves the focus from the circulation of documents as such to their use as archival material to support narration. This not only solves legibility problems, but also leaves room for clearing materials for publishing in terms of sensitive details. In addition, it offers more flexibility in organising content than a tabular database. Ultimately, scholarly research brings more funding opportunities than the construction of repositories.

This shift can also be seen in the recent redesign of INCCA website (Brake-Baldock 2014). Launched in late 2016, the new layout prominently features announcements of new books, articles, conference videos and other publications, many of which are available in open access.²⁸

As museums are currently adopting a policy of open access to collection information, they herald openness as a means of ensuring their social function (Bailey 2019). The trajectory of INCCA can be read in parallel with this call. Starting by sharing documentation metadata through a common protected online resource, the participating museums eventually embraced openness by other means: publishing.

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²⁶For example *New Strategies in the Conservation of Contemporary Art* (NewS, 2009–2013), *Network for Conservation of Contemporary Art Research* (NeCCAR, 2012–2015), *New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art* (NACCA, 2015–2019), *Cultures of Conservation* (2017–2022), *Conservation of Art in Public Spaces* (CAPuS, 2018–2020) and *Documenting Digital Art* (2019–2022).

²⁷See <http://inside-installations.sbmk.nl/>, <https://www.sfmoma.org/rauschenberg-research-project/> and <http://artistarchives.hosting.nyu.edu/Initiative/>, respectively. The Artist Archives is currently dedicated to the work of David Wojnarowicz and Joan Jonas.

²⁸<https://incca.org/updates>.

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