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Capturing the Ephemeral and Unfinished

Archiving and documentation as conservation strategies of transient (as transfinite) contemporary art

Abstract. This article reflects on recent developments in archiving and documentation as preservation strategies for contemporary art. It describes the increasing importance of documentation of the immaterial, non tangible and ephemeral aspects of contemporary art and the resulting challenges for integrating this documentation in museum information systems. Archiving and documentation strategies are key in the research programme on contemporary art conservation at the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage. Three approaches are presented here. Two were developed in collaborative projects with international conservation professionals: the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art and the project 'Inside Installations. Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art'. The third is a collaboration between ICN, Faculty of Computer Science of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and the Netherlands Media Art Institute/Monteideo.

Keywords. Documentation, archiving, knowledge management, information exchange, conservation, contemporary art, multi-disciplinary network, installation art, artists' interviews.

Résumé. Cet article traite des développements récents en matière d'archivage et de documentation en tant que stratégies de préservation/conservation dans le domaine de l'art contemporain. Il retrace l'importance croissante de la documentation des aspects immatériels, intangibles et éphémères de l'art contemporain et les enjeux qui en résultent pour l'intégration de cette documentation dans les systèmes informatiques des musées. Les stratégies d'archivage et de documentation sont des facteurs clés du programme de recherches en matière de conservation de l'art contemporain au Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage [institut néerlandais du patrimoine culturel]. Trois approches sont présentées ici. Deux ont été développées au sein de projets établis en collaboration avec des organismes professionnels internationaux dans le domaine de la conservation (« International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art » et « Inside Installations. Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art »). La troisième est une collaboration entre l'ICN, la faculté de sciences informatiques de l'université libre d'Amsterdam et le Netherlands Media Art Institute/Monteideo.

Mots-clés. Documentation, archivage, gestion, connaissances, échange informations, conservation, art contemporain, réseau pluridisciplinaire, installations, entretiens, artistes.

Documentation in relation to the preservation and presentation of contemporary art

When Danièle Giraudy started her pioneering research project "boîtes des artistes" in the C2RMF in 1972 she had obvious reasons for her initiative: It was clear that the preservation and conservation of the artworks created in that time would challenge museums and conservators in the future¹. The self exploding machines of Jean Tinguely and the pyrographs and antropometries of Yves Klein for example were already the heralds of a new epoch in conservation in which museums had to face a paradoxical task. These artworks, meant to be self destructive and performative, as happe-

nings, are by definition temporal. But within the paradigm of conservation, at that time, the mainstream strategy for museum objects was based on the ideology to freeze objects for eternity. For the events, the happenings, this is of course impossible. In case of the works of Tinguely and Klein we consider the results of these events or actions, Klein's pyrographs and antropometries and Tinguely's machines, as the artworks to be conserved. However it is, in retrospect, a point of dispute how complete these works are without the documentation, the photographs and films of the performances themselves. No clear line can be drawn between the significance of the autonomy of the results of these actions and the significance of the process or event of their realisation or

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Figure 1. Yves Klein réalisant F3, centre d'essai de Gaz de France, Saint-Denis, France, 1961. © Yves Klein, ADAGP, Paris. © Photo P. Joly-Vera Cardot.

The documentation of the making process, as evidence of an event, has become iconic and is inextricably bound up with the significance of the art object.

execution. The importance of the performative aspects of the execution of a work from the 1950's and 60's is illustrated by the extensive, by now iconic, documentation of artists in action, like the films by Hans Namuth showing Pollock at work, the registrations of the slaughters of Hermann Nitsch and the films of Yves Klein's (figures 1 et 2) and Murakami's. performances As Martha Buskirk has stated in her essays and research on the contingency of the contemporary artwork, this documentation, the photographs and the films representing the events during which the artworks were realised, have an important function in the interpretation of the historical value of the works and occasionally are presented by artists as the artwork itself². Whatever the status of the resulting objects or of the documentation is, they are in the current state of the art of preservation and presentation strategies for contemporary art inextricably connected with each other.

For example in conceptual works and process oriented works, the documentation not only represents the historical value and affirms the evidence for the authenticity of the work but it fulfils the purpose of a score or guideline for reinstallation of installations, recreation of concepts, replacement of ephemeral organic materials and electronic devices, (re)presentation of processes or re-enactment of performances.

Since Danièle Giraudy started her project at the C2RMF, documentation has not only gained importance in the conservation strategies for contemporary art but it also chan-

ged in character, form, applied techniques and aims. These changes are determined by the changes of the artworks in representational, formal and conceptual sense and, in relation to that, by the spread of the techniques and technologies applied by the artists like in installations, new media and digital works.

In paintings, drawings, sculptures and other works, in which the moment(s) of conception and execution by the artists are contained in the finished artwork, the idea and the realisation of the work coincide. However this union is disconnected in a considerable amount of contemporary artworks. In these works artists concepts have been realised by assistants, technicians, specialists and even by museum professionals with different involvements of the artist.

Moreover some of these works can be executed with variable outcomes, dependent on the circumstances. Installations can be (re)installed in different constellations dependent on the space and technology can be updated, migrated or emulated with the involvement of the artists. In other words: the completion of these works till now is not clear. They are unfinished³.

This evolution has far reaching consequences for the established collecting and conservation strategies of museums and collectors. For the documentation this means more emphasis on the qualitative strategies like interviews with the artists and assistants, audio- and video registrations of (making) processes and research into capturing experience and sensorial aspects in relation to intentions of the artists.

These strategies also include collecting data on the materials and techniques used by the artists, as has been put in practice by Giraudy at the C2RMF, which is extremely useful for the established conservation practice for all contemporary objects including paintings, drawings and sculptures as well as for new media art and installations. However, the relatively new qualitative documentation strategies for the conservation and presentation of contemporary art need urgent attention because a considerable amount of the information needed for the (re)presentation – and thus for the conservation – of installations, new media art and process oriented art is about the indispensable immaterial, non tangible and ephemeral aspects of the artworks. Collecting and archiving these aspects needs pro-active documentation the moment that objects are purchased, created, or (re)installed in the museum.

However although the significance of documentation for re-installation procedures is widely acknowledged, museum information systems do not meet the requirements for storage and access to such documentation. The same goes for the abundance of recordings coming from current engagement with the artist and the gathering of artist's

information by conservators. Above all there is need to exchange such documentation throughout the international community. At the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (ICN) over the last couple of years we have investigated a multi-disciplinary network approach and, as coordinators of several international projects, addressed these questions in collaboration with professionals in contemporary art conservation.

Obviously this is a new research area which is being explored by a number of other valuable initiatives as well albeit for practical reasons these are not elaborated in this article⁴. The three approaches introduced here search for a balance between practical applications and more fundamental research into knowledge management and information technology for this particular domain. Rationale behind these approaches is that they meet the questions of conservation professionals and are developed in collaboration. The tools and applications coming from these projects have as distinctive feature that they represent documentation in digital format that is regularly stored in museums' archives. The approaches are different in organisation of the information and in use.

7

Comment conserver l'art contemporain?

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The autonomous status of the object
is disputable without the documentation
of the making process as evidence
of an event.

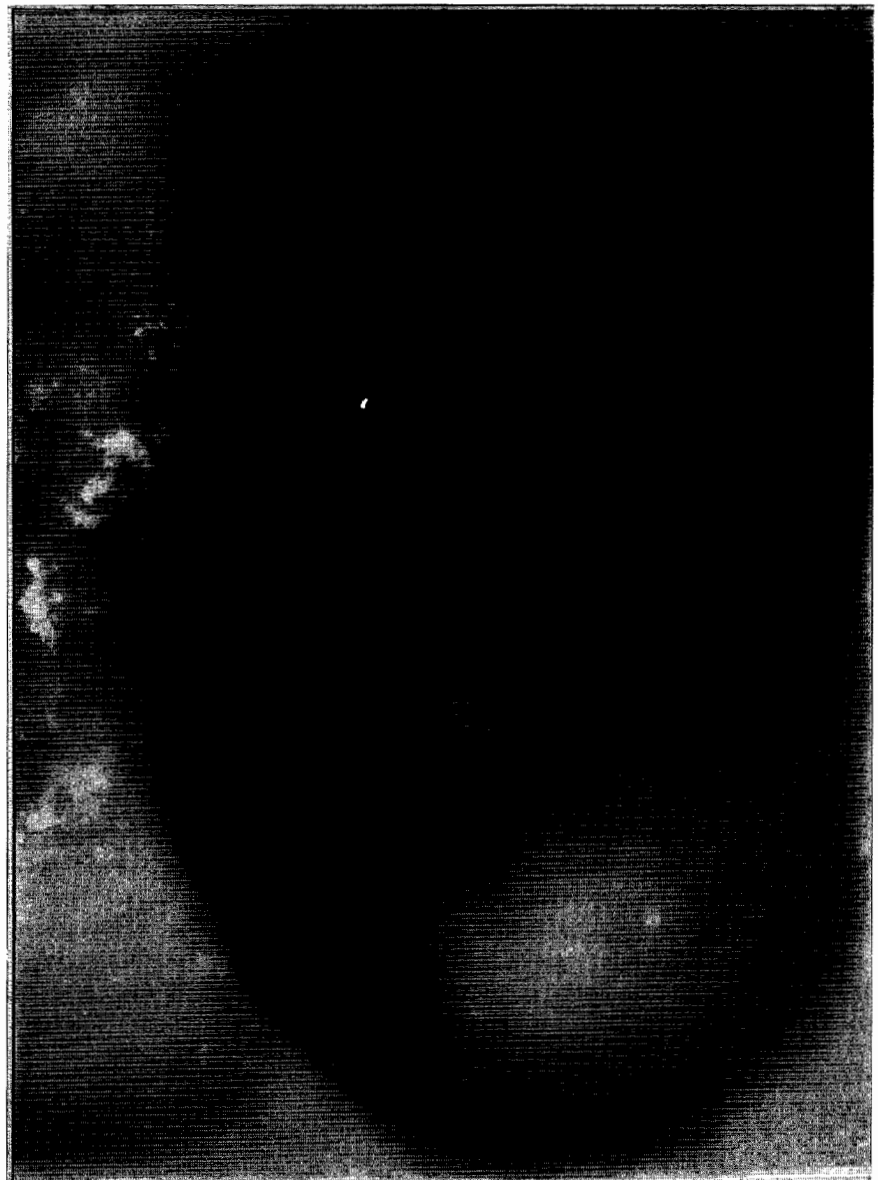


Figure 2. *Peinture feu sans titre (F 74)*.
© Yves Klein, ADAGP, Paris.
© Photo CNAC/MNAM, dist. RMN.

INCCA's reference database

The first approach connects to the daily practice of conservation professionals who wish to share unpublished documentation with their peers. Since 2002 the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA) provides such platform for information exchange. INCCA is organized by the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage in collaboration with an international steering committee, and currently has 115 members working in 50 organisations in Europe and North-America⁵.

A primary tool in the network is the INCCA Database Artists' Archives which is a meta-database of references to documentation held by INCCA's member institutions. Such documentation may consist of conservation reports, recorded interviews, installation manuals, unpublished research result, and so on. The language used for the database is English, but documents to which database records refer are provided in their original language. Because of copyright restrictions the documents themselves are not posted on line. Once a member of the network locates a record of interest in the database, a copy of the document can be obtained from the owner institution. The INCCA database depends on mutual trust among its peers and their readiness to share documentation; therefore INCCA membership asks that one contributes database records on a regular basis.

One of the important features of the database is its potential speed in information exchange. Soon after documentation is created a reference record can be added to the database so that members are updated with current conservation and restoration treatments, research activities, artists' interviews, etcetera. In that sense the INCCA database mirrors the dynamics of an information network and could be considered as a tool for communication rather than as an archive which is build up in retrospect. In spite of this, in the course of time the INCCA reference database will represent museum archives, at least partly, and make these accessible with respect to the professional domain of conservation.

Collective memory

A crucial objective of the INCCA network is for its members to collect information directly from artists on production methods and views on issues such as ageing, transience and representation of their works. Following the idea that artist's intent is key in conservation, the database is organised with the artist's name as main entry. In the course of time these virtual artists' archives will add to a 'collective memory' with regard to works of art and artists represented by the database. The value of this information will even grow over the years when users of the database will still be able to trace an interview of an artist who no longer may be around, and know when and by whom it was conducted (including the

role of the interviewer). If documentation is properly archived in museums' systems, copies of an original recording can still be obtained, even in the long term.

There is another important feature of the network's organisation in that it provides members with access to unique, complete and unedited documentation. During the INCCA project it happened that a compilation of such documentation was made for the Polish artist Mirosław Balka, among which are interviews with the artist, conservation reports, images and instruction drawings for installation made by the artist. Based on this information, an inventory of the most significant conservation and installation issues could be made, eventually resulting in an exchange of ideas on the documentation of the works and questions to the artist. The extra value of having access to this 'mini-archive' for professional use became evident and similar exercises could take place in the future⁶.

It is INCCA's policy that members make their own choice in contributions to the database and thus the content of the database is dependent on personal choice. This strategy is according to dynamics of daily practice and may reflect the issues of the day as well as demand less stringent criteria for a selection of documentation than an archiving organisation would ask for. On the other hand, through INCCA professionals are able to respond to the variability of contemporary art itself and the urgent issues of conservation.

Inside Installations

Refer to www.inside-installations.org

In the current European funded project 'Inside Installations. Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art' (2004-2007) a different approach is followed⁷. This large scale research includes around 30 case studies on installation works which belong to collections of an equal number of participating museums and institutions. The purpose of this project is to gear its activities to the conservation practice, that is to the specific problems, questions, research and strategies followed for installation art. Therefore, next to the 30 case studies, special research is carried out on problems such as preservation of technology-based art, documentation strategies, collaboration with the artist, and reflection on a conceptual framework underlying the care, management and perception of this relatively new art form. As managing institution, together with 5 project co-organisers, ICN set up an organisational structure that reflects the interdisciplinary approach in which a diversity of issues are investigated while there is still a focus on the inter-relationship between these activities.

Let us give an example of how interdisciplinarity plays a role in the project. For one of the case studies quantitative research may be carried out for the long-term preservation of the media parts of an installation and scientific methods

may be used for measuring its sound, space or light as reference for future representations of the work. In the same case study methods of qualitative research may be applied, rooting in the discipline of ethnography, when the artist is interviewed or other forms of artist's collaboration take place. Quantitative research in combination with a qualitative approach may be the ultimate results of most case studies and professionals with different background and skills will be involved. The special research activities will (partly) be based on the case studies and guidelines for good practice in these areas will be developed.

Repository of content-rich resources

All results of the project are being published on the project's website www.inside-installations.org which was launched in May 2006 and will gradually be uploaded with information. The Inside Installations-website is for professionals as well as a wider audience as all documentation is accessible. Different from the INCCA reference database, this website contains a repository of documents in different formats. The metadata and majority of documents are in English. From the site, for example, an installation manual, guideline or artist's interview can actually be downloaded or viewed, providing users with immediate access to content-rich resources on all case studies and wider issues of the preservation and presentation of installation art. An e-learning package developed by Tate enlightens the issues of time-based media installations starting from a case study on Bruce Nauman's *Mapping the Studio II with color shift, flip, flop, & flip/flop (Fat Chance John Cage)* (2001). Two more e-learning sites are currently under development. A point of similarity to INCCA is that all partners of the project contribute to this shared repository and are responsible for the selection, copyrights and content of their published 'archive'.

Dissemination of the results as a repository of downloadable or viewable records again had to represent the interdisciplinary project's approach. Obviously a solid information structure had to be developed and, on top of that, an online content management tool was developed allowing partners to add their content to the repository from remote work stations. For both requirements, we could use our experience gained within INCCA and fall back on a long-standing collaboration with the computer science faculty of Vrije Universiteit (VU) in Amsterdam. In this cooperation a third approach has been developed which we will introduce below.

Digital dossier for Marina Abramović

Generally speaking, this third approach aims to represent works of art in virtual space, and contextualise these works in relation to artist's information and other documentation

(for example on materials and media used, art historical information, and so on). The most recent exploration in this field was the creation of a digital dossier for the artist Marina Abramović⁸. Although Abramović is best known for her video recorded performances which have become iconic works of art, her oeuvre is diverse and covers a wide range of materials and media.

Two video recorded interviews formed the basis of the digital dossier. Fragments of these interviews were used in which the artist speaks about production processes and artistic intent, and discusses with a conservator and curator her views on preservation and presentation⁹. Since the Netherlands Media Art Institute kindly provided a number of digital 'clips' of her video works (two minute-fragments) as well as digital images of works in other media, a selection of works could be included in the dossier as reference material for context information. Users of the digital dossier are able to navigate between the works represented in the virtual gallery and explore related content from the interviews as well as additional topics, such as the preservation of videotape.

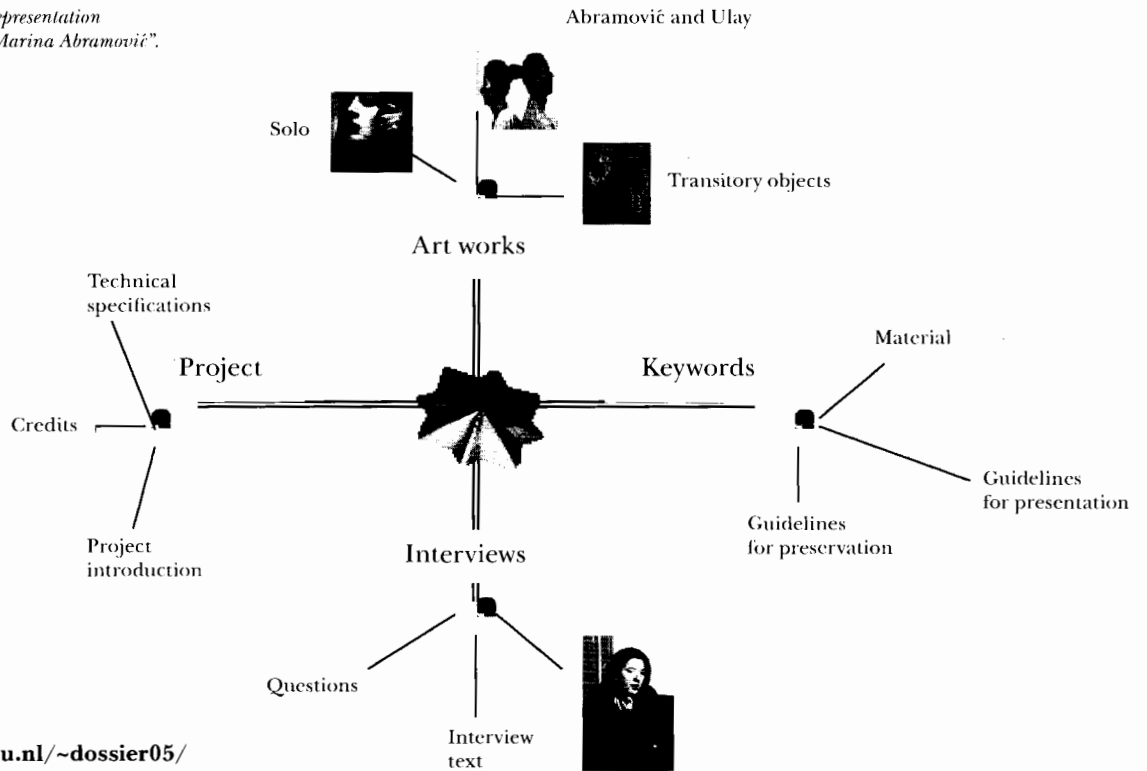
To build the dossier 3D-technology – Virtual Reality Modeling Language – was used which allowed us to integrate 3D models and present the dossier on the web for publication. The information is mainly hierarchical related (additional with some non-taxonomical relations) although the common menu and list structures were avoided. Instead the relations were visualized as a star structure. By using this technology all content could be represented as intertwined subsets in a 3D-space and explored 'intuitively' by the user (figure 3).

China Ring

Refer to <http://catalogue.montevideo.nl/art.php?id=7320>

An example of represented artworks is the polaroid and video installation *China Ring* (Collection Van Abbemuseum, 1988). One of the video works can be viewed showing a close up of a popular ball game played by people in China. Like other works in this series the video shows an activity which is part of Chinese daily life. Additional text explains the background of this project, which was The Great Wall Walk marking the end of the artistic cooperation between Marina Abramović and Ulay Laisuppen. An extra value for professional use, however, is not so much the art historical information (which could be retrieved from other websites) but the chance to find this document in relation to a unique fragment of an interview in which Abramović elaborates on technical specifications of the kind of polaroid camera used in this project and measurements she took for UV-protection, as well as artistic reasons for using polaroid as an 'instant medium'. She also discusses with the interviewers the status of polaroids as unique works of art (in contrast to videotape)

Figure 3. Schematic representation of the digital dossier "Marina Abramović".



10

Comment conserver l'art contemporain?

and conservation options in order to preserve these works in the best possible way.

A variety of information in different formats can be viewed all at once if one chooses the presentation mode of three adjacent windows (like demonstrated in <http://catalogue.montevideo.nl/art.php?id=7320> which shows the video work... *China Ring*). Moreover, it is possible to add more information in the future since the application includes an advanced content management tool, which was re-used for the Inside Installations' website.

Selection and rearrangement of documentation (table 1)

The approach of creating digital dossiers for the purpose of conservation, which indeed has crystallised with this project on the Abramović dossier for the first time, may open up possibilities for information exchange in our professional domain. However, since it is a highly structured recontextualisation of original documentation there are considerations we should take into account. We certainly do not intend to

Table 1. Overview of various mechanisms in three documentation approaches.

INCCA	<p>Reference database</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Metadata refer to documents held in museum's archives • INCCA member selects information and adds metadata • Member searches database and retrieves copy of original document (digital or analogue)
Inside Installations	<p>Repository of documents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digitized documents are presented in relational structure • Project partner selects/edits document and adds metadata • Visitor views or downloads digital document
Digital Dossier Marina Abramović	<p>Representation of (fragments of) documentation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contextualisation of artworks and related documents • Creator selects documents and adds meaning in process of contextualisation • Visitor explores relationships and views document

have all answers as yet and further research into the practice of documentation and information exchange will be needed. Nevertheless, we can state that recontextualising depends on a 'controlling force' behind the selection and rearrangement of interrelated information. In this respect we could compare the creation of a digital dossier – or of any other rearrangement of documentation for that matter – to (experimental) film making: an original recording or other archived material is cut into pieces (like the original footage of a film) and then re-arranged according to meaningful relationships (like montage). And just like a film director a composer of the 'dossier' attributes meaning in the act of selection and re-arrangement, inevitably bringing interpretation and subjectivity into the process. Who then would qualify to be the composer?

As for the Abramović dossier we think the 'composer' was sufficiently qualified. We worked together in an interdisciplinary team of students and professionals in conservation, curation and computer science and discussed the selection of material and re-arrangement within the group as well as with the artist. The distributors of the video works, the artist and interviewers were asked permission to use their documents for this specific purpose and they responded with enthusiasm. Since the dossier resulted from a project, its

aims and methods have been clearly defined and there is transparency in the way the information was used.

In the INCCA approach documentation is transmitted from peer-to-peer and no intervention towards original documentation takes place. Compared to this approach, the creation of a digital dossier (considerable intervention in the selection and montage of its documents) or the composition of a repository (as in Inside Installations) are less 'objective' or neutral activities. In all three approaches, however, one 'rule of thumb' is applied in that documentation is provided with metadata, so that the creator, date of creation and other specifications of the resource as well as the original document can always be traced.

Working in the projects presented here we have learned the importance of being aware of the interventions in archiving and/or using documentation. After all, documenting and archiving are not value free professional activities. In concordance to other activities in the conservation practice subjective choices are underlying the decisions made for documentation. It is important to be well-informed and as transparent as possible in this process, not only within a local museum environment but perhaps even more so in a networked exchange of documentation.

Notes

1. Giraudy D. *Proposition pour une méthode de documentation sur les techniques des artistes actuels*. 4th triennial conference of ICOM-CC, 1972.

Giraudy, D. *Boîtes d'artistes contemporains et banques d'échantillons. Technè, Matériaux et techniques de l'art au XX^e siècle* 8: 77-80, 1998.

2. Buskirk, Martha: *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, Cambridge Mass. London, 2003.

3. Hummelen, IJ. *Conception, Creation and Re-creation. Embodied Knowledge and the Preservation of Contemporary Art*. In: *Theory and Practice in Conservation. A Tribute to Cesare Brandi*, Lissabon, 2006.

4. See an overview of initiatives by Jan Marontate p. 12. For example: <http://www.variablemedia.net>, <http://www.docam.ca>, <http://www.aktivearchive.ch>, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tatcresearch/majorprojects/mediamatters>.

5. The EU INCCA Project (1999-2002) was coorganised by Netherlands Institute

for Cultural Heritage (ICN) and Tate, London. Founding members of INCCA include 9 other museums and institutions. Since the project INCCA is coordinated by ICN who also maintains the website and INCCA Database for Artists' Archives. Since 2005 an affiliated INCCA North-America group is coordinated at New York University. Several INCCA committees in Europe and North America are involved in the organisation. Currently around 115 professionals from 50 organisations in 10 different countries are members of INCCA. Website: www.incca.org. Contact incca@icn.nl The INCCA Database for Artists' Archives is only accessible for members.

6. See Hummelen IJ, and T. Scholte, *Sharing Knowledge for the Conservation of Contemporary Art: Changing Roles in a Museum without Walls?*, Modern Art, New Museum, IIC Congress, Bilbao, September 13-17, 2004, 208-212.

7. The three-year research project (2004-2007) 'Inside Installations. Preservation and Presentation of Installation

Art' is funded by the Culture 2000 programme of the European Union. The project is managed by ICN, together with co-organisers Tate, London; Restaurierungszentrum Düsseldorf; Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art, The Netherlands. See for more information www.inside-installations.org

8. The Abramović dossier was created by a group of students of Vrije Universiteit, faculty of computer science, in collaboration with ICN and Netherlands Media Art Institute/Montevideo.

9. The interviews are part of the project 'Artists' Interviews and Archives' carried out between 1998 and 2004 by the Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art. Marina Abramović was interviewed by conservator Frederika Huys (S.M.A.K.) and Dorinne Mignot (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam).