

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Speakers discuss artistic collaboration in a digitizing world

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Angel Ramirez

PRESERVATION IS KEY: Art conservationists Deena Engel and Glenn Wharton discussed their artistic conservation work with BCMA Co-Director Anne Goodyear on Monday night.

Deena Engel, clinical professor in the department of computer science at New York University, and Glenn Wharton, professor of art history and conservation of material culture at the University of California Los Angeles, addressed questions of preserving art, artistic media and artistic integrity in a digitizing world in their talk on Monday titled “The Artist Archives Initiative: The Digital Future of Preserving Artistic Practices.” The two visitors are co-directors of the David Wojnarowicz Knowledge Base—an online database of the works and life of the late artist.

Wojnarowicz was a multimedia creator active in New York City from the 1970s until his death due to complications with HIV in the 90s. An artist and activist alike, he was committed to effecting change and reflecting on his life as a queer man developing his own identity.

According to Wharton, the David Wojnarowicz Knowledge Base really aimed to keep the work and memory of Wojnarowicz intact.

“I think we all just became committed to preserving the memory of this particular artist,” he said. “Everyone that got involved just fell in love with his work and realized, we have to do this.”

In developing a database of his work, the group collected spreadsheets, documents, audio recordings and images along with other files. But collection was only the easy part. Difficulty came when the group was tasked with developing an online platform to store the work, dubbed the “database challenge” by Wharton.

Engel explained that traditional works of art generally privilege a strictly-structured database. But such structures pose trouble for more “nontraditional” artworks like Wojnarowicz’s, which take nontraditional mixed-media and conceptual forms and make cultural commentary.

“There is a high cost to the kind of database structure that I’ve just described around the [traditional work] that happens when we’re working in cultural heritage,” Engel said. “Identifying the kinds of information that we think are important to track about every artwork, and doing so within the structure is in and of itself an act of interpretation. So we need to think very carefully about how we build our databases for works of art, especially for contemporary art.”

She outlined the goals of their project, which include the creation of a system that was user-friendly and widely open as a resource for scholars, researchers and anyone else interested in accessing the work.

Currently, Engel and Wharton are working to develop their second information resource, this time focusing on a living artist. They have selected 80-year-old Joan Jonas, the so-called “mother of performance art.”

“She has very warmly allowed us to come in, scan her notebooks [and] interview her. She said she wanted to be interviewed many times. Not only about individual works and exhibitions, but also her thoughts about lighting her works, re-performing her works, audio quality and on different levels building information for future conservators,” Wharton explained.

In building these databases for specific artists, Engel and Wharton hope to create models for future conservators to follow to collect their own information.

Bowdoin College Museum of Art (BCMA) Co-Director Anne Goodyear echoed the sentiments of Engel and Wharton’s work.

“[Wharton] and [Engel] are not only gathering information, they are also training the next generation in how to conduct this important archival material and how to preserve it,” Goodyear wrote in an email to the Orient.

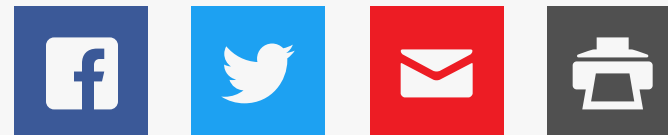
Goodyear also hopes that Engel and Wharton—as a computer scientist and art conservator, respectively—demonstrate the power of interdisciplinary collaboration modeled by Bowdoin’s Digital and Computational Studies program.

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