AIC's 45th Annual Meeting

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Thursday, June 1 • 3:00pm - 3:30pm

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> (Electronic Media) The David Wojnarowicz Knowledge Base: A Wiki-based Solution for Conservation and Exhibition Documentation

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The treatment of contemporary art relies on a broad range of information gathered from many sources and stored in multiple formats. Prior conservation reports, analytical results, still and moving image documentation, installation instructions, recordings of artist interviews, emails, and publications represent just some of the sources that conservators and their colleagues draw from to arrive at conservation treatment decisions. As variable works change over time from one iteration to the next, their documentation becomes the resource that defines what a work has been and can be in the future. Given its significance for future research, designing good archiving and access systems for this documentation is becoming a major topic of research. Within museums, collections management databases are the primary resources for storing information about collections. Conservators struggle to enter their documentation into

these information management systems. They also strive to incorporate documentation that is archived elsewhere in various formats. They push the limits of what these databases can handle in their efforts capture all of information necessary for future treatment and exhibition decisions.

This presentation provides a model for an alternate software solution to information management for conservation: the wiki. The authors do not recommend replacing hierarchical collections management databases in museums, but they suggest that wiki software provides an option for managing complex conservation documentation in some circumstances. The strengths of wiki software include the category/subcategory functionality provided natively to group documents in unlimited and meaningful ways. Also the powerful hierarchical page/section structure allows conservators to create meaningful URLs for linking within and across webpages.

In collaboration with archivists, art historians, and other scholars at New York University, the authors combined their expertise in conservation and computer science to investigate the potential for wiki software to create an information resource for the artist/activist David Wojnarowicz. As the first task in the larger Artist Archives Project, the David Wojnarowicz Knowledge Base is built with MediaWiki software. It contains information about the deceased artist's materials and technologies, his installations, collaborators, performances, and media works, as well as concerns for future presentation of the work of this pivotal late twentieth century artist. Early in the project, the research team decided that relationships among the elements of the artist's works would determine the nature of the underlying conceptual database. Thus the project became equally a "content" and a "technology" effort. We considered customizing an open source content management system (CMS) using an open source framework such as Drupal but that would have required considerable custom programming leading to both higher development costs and higher future maintenance costs. We selected MediaWiki for our Knowledge Base to insure a stable, open-source, user-friendly and high-performance web environment. In addition we explored configuration options and customization to the MediaWiki software in order to optimize the flexibility of the system design, to support the integration of a wide variety of documentation file formats that support conservation efforts, and to build a flexible user interface to meet the needs of conservators and others in the scholarly community.

Speaker(s)

Glenn Wharton, [Fellow]

Clinical Associate Professor, New York University, Museum Studies

Glenn Wharton is a Clinical Associate Professor in Museum Studies at New York University. From 2007-2013 he served as Media Conservator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where he established the time-based media conservation program for video, performance, and software-based collections. He founded the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art...
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Deena Engel is a Clinical Professor in the Department of Computer Science at the Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences of New York University as well as the Director of the Program in Digital Humanities and Social Science at the Graduate School of Arts and Science at New Yor... Read More →