Speakers discuss artistic collaboration in a digitizing world

By Elizabeth Flanagan

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

"There's a tight link between conservation and preservation," said Wharton. "Preservation is key: we need to know what we're preserving before we can fully appreciate the work that happens when we're working in cultural heritage, " Engel said. "Identifying the kinds of nontraditional mixed-media and conceptual forms and make cultural commentary.

"Almost every piece of art that is digitized is in and of itself an act of interpretation. So we need to think very carefully about how we structure our databases in those cases," Engel explained. "We're not only gathering information, we're also training the next generation " Engel and Wharton's work.

Goodyear echoed the sentiments of conservators to follow to collect their own information.

"We will always remember 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 life as an artist and activist. We have to keep her memory intact.

According to Wharton, 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 addressing the effects of the virus on queer men's and women's identity.

"I think we all will become accustomed to providing the memory of this particular artist " Engel said. "Every person that got involved just fell in love with his work and wanted to learn more about his life and work."

Engel explained that traditional methods are generally privileged by structured database. The research pieces need to be "simplified" because the Wojnarowicz is not an international sized and conceptual show and quite a self-portrayed commentary.

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