Book Review: ***Digital Art through the Looking Glass: New Strategies for Archiving, Collecting, and Preserving in Digital Humanities***

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Authors: Oliver Grau, Janina Hoth, Eveline Wandl-Vogt

Introduction

Preserving digital art is no small task. It's complex, constantly evolving, and often relies on outdated technologies or platforms that quickly become obsolete. In *Digital Art through the Looking Glass: New Strategies for Archiving, Collecting, and Preserving in Digital Humanities*, editors Oliver Grau, Janina Hoth, and Eveline Wandl-Vogt bring together a group of experts to tackle these challenges. This book offers a mix of theoretical insights and practical advice, making it a valuable resource for professionals in digital humanities, archivists, and anyone interested in protecting digital art for the future.

About the Authors

Oliver Grau is a leader in media art history and digital humanities, with a professorship at Danube University Krems in Austria. His earlier work, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, is a foundational text in understanding digital media's role in culture. Janina Hoth and Eveline Wandl-Vogt bring expertise in digital preservation and cultural heritage, rounding out a team that's well-suited to addressing the book's themes. This book is a collection of short stories, essays, and studies from a variety of well-known researchers, academics, and artists compiled to create an educational outlook for those in the preservation and collection fields.

What's Inside the Book?

The book features essays from experts around the world and is divided into clear sections:

- **Early New Media Art**: Discusses what makes digital art hard to preserve, such as its dependence on changing platforms and technologies. Additionally discusses the origins of media art.
- **Six Decades of Digital Arts & Museums:** Provides the transcript from the DARIAH Connectivity Roundtable.
- **Artistic, Collective & Curatorial Methods for Digital Archiving:** Discussed the technological innovations, as well as address the issues in media art preservation from an

artists' perspective. It highlights tools like emulation and migration to ensure digital art remains accessible and authentic.

- **Digital Cultural Heritage:** Discusses some tools like emulation, redesign, and re-creation of media art by providing real-world examples of successful digital preservation projects that offer lessons and best practices.
- **Curatorial Practices**: Explores big ideas like originality, authorship, and the cultural significance of preserving art, and suggests ways to improve infrastructure and collaboration to meet the demands of preserving digital art in the future.

What Makes This Book Stand Out?

One of the book's strongest points is its interdisciplinary approach. It brings together archivists, artists, scholars, and technicians, showing that no single group can tackle these challenges alone. It also keeps an eye on the future, stressing the need for solutions that can grow as technology changes.

The book also raises important concerns about how museums handle media art, emphasizing the gap between collecting and sustaining these works. As Oliver Grau notes, "...museums rarely include Media Art in their collections, and those that do struggle to sustain finance, expertise, and technology for the preservation of artworks through strategies such as migration, emulation, and reinterpretation," (pg. 197). Grau underscores the urgent need for institutions to prioritize both the acquisition and the long-term care of digital works.

Additionally, the book encourages institutions to rethink their practices to keep up with societal and technological changes. Howard Besser writes, "Like libraries, museums can develop concrete changes in traditional practices that will respond to the new modes of learning and interacting with culture. But first they need to understand the larger trends that are affecting what they do," (pg. 260). This dual focus on adaptability and sustainability makes the book especially relevant for today's cultural heritage landscape.

How It Fits in the Field

This book contributes to ongoing conversations in archival studies about moving from static records to dynamic, digital materials. For example, it complements Ross Harvey's *Preserving*

Digital Materials (2018) by focusing on how to preserve the artistic and cultural value of digital works, not just their technical aspects.

It also pairs well with Freeman and Riter's *An Online Exhibit: A Tale of Triumph and Tribulation* from the Society of American Archives case studies. Freeman and Riter emphasize how making archival processes transparent—what they call "offering a view of the archival perspective" (pg. 7)—can help people better understand both exhibits and the work of archivists. Similarly, Grau et al. argue that collaboration and openness are essential to preserving digital art's complexity and cultural significance. Together, these works encourage us to think of archives as active, interpretive spaces rather than static storage.

Who Should Read This Book?

This book is great for:

- **Researchers**: A solid resource for exploring digital art and archival studies.
- **Archivists**: Practical tips and strategies make it a useful training tool.
- **Educators**: Perfect for courses in digital humanities or archival studies.
- **Museums and Galleries**: Insights that could help communicate the importance of preserving digital art to the public.
- **General Enthusiasts**: If you're curious about the future of digital culture, this is an eye-opener.

As a note though, this book is told from a mostly European perspective. While examples and case studies are taken from Japan and the United States, the majority of the authorship is European. This should be taken into account when considering the differing histories, styles, and priorities of archives in France, England, and the United States.

Final Thoughts

Digital Art through the Looking Glass is an important and timely resource. It balances theory with practical advice, making it useful for a wide range of readers. While some essays lean toward technical jargon or feel a bit uneven, the overall impact of the book is significant. It's a must-read for anyone looking to understand or work in the preservation of digital cultural heritage, especially from a European perspective.

Bibliography

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