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Issue Paper

ISSUE STATEMENT

> Artists often act as the primary archivists of their work for most of its lifecycle, despite lacking formal preservation training. Frequently, their archival practices intimately shape the creative process. This paper examines how artists manage their archives, addresses knowledge gaps and climate-related losses, and advocates for information professionals to support artist-led preservation strategies that embed climate resilience as a central component of cultural preservation.

Art Preservation in a Changing Climate

I. Introduction

PRESERVATION AS A VITAL CONCERN IN CONTEMPORARY ART

What does it mean to preserve culture when both our technologies and ecosystems are built on shifting ground? This question has become increasingly urgent—not only for institutions, but for artists themselves. As contemporary artists continuously navigate more fragile digital and physical landscapes, their preservation practices are becoming as vital and creative as the works themselves— shaped not only by individual practices and needs but also by climate risk, institutional gaps, and a need for more inclusive, distributed archival models. Art preservation today requires methods to support artists early, especially those working outside traditional systems or those in particularly climate risk prone areas. Most artists' work includes archival practices to a greater or lesser extent, but

many are ill-equipped to navigate the ever-competitive art world without fundamental preservation strategies employed by GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums) institutions. Without these strategies, the contingencies of life alongside the inevitability of more climate-fueled disasters make preservation of art in the custody of artists more challenging than ever.

DIGITAL PRESERVATION FOR EMERGING ARTISTS

In an era where digital tools permeate every aspect of the artistic process—from creation and exhibition to distribution and archiving—the importance of digital preservation strategies cannot be overstated. This is particularly critical for emerging artists whose work is increasingly born-digital and whose careers are shaped within the context of rapid technological change, climate instability, and precarious economic conditions. As time-based artwork presents particular challenges to traditional preservation practices, museums and collecting institutions have made headway in devising strategies of accessioning that reflect the complexity of emerging digitally hybrid work. But more must be done to adopt more inclusive and sustainable stewardship models. The LIS field should be at the forefront of empowering artists themselves to build preservation habits early in their careers, ensuring the longevity of their practice, artworks, and legacy.

Traditionally, art preservation has operated under the assumption that traditional artwork like paintings and sculptures can remain largely undisturbed for decades, awaiting future recognition of their cultural value, with digital or digitally hybrid works taking the forefront of new preservation strategizing within collecting institutions. However, this assumption is tenuous in the face of more frequent and severe climate events. While physical artworks are clearly at risk of destruction in these scenarios, the loss of digital art, records, documentation, and portfolios poses an equally ominous threat. Nearly all contemporary art has a digital footprint, whether through its creation, presentation, or distribution—yet digital preservation remains largely overlooked in formal art education. The devastating wildfires that swept across Southern California in early 2025 underscore how environmental instability amplifies artistic vulnerability, especially for those lacking institutional support.

METHODS

While creating a digital preservation toolkit for emerging artists which was to serve as a companion to this paper, one of the main research questions that emerged was how early-career artists and art students conceive of the preservation of their artwork, processes, and documentation. This paper reflects on feedback received in interviews and conversations with art students and educators, as well as testimonies from artists impacted by natural disasters, centering losses from the Los Angeles wildfires. An interview was conducted with the co-founder of an organization which mobilized funding and mutual aid for artists impacted by the Los Angeles wildfires, which provides insight into the scale of loss and the resources necessary for recovery.

Existing preservation strategies are examined as to how they can be scoped to fit the needs of individual artists, alongside preservation initiatives designed specifically for artists. By assessing preservation gaps in relation to existing institutional strategies, this paper offers recommendations for integrating preservation education into art training and institutional support systems, while

highlighting what artists' networks are already doing to address these issues.

II. Context

CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN PRESERVING DIGITAL ART AND DOCUMENTATION

There is a wealth of literature that discusses the many challenges of preserving complex digital files, including multimedia artworks, and many of the evolving methods for managing digitally hybrid artworks can extend to strategizing how artists working in any medium can maintain digital portfolios of documentation of their artwork (photography, video, descriptive metadata, exhibition histories, etc.). Peter Lyman and Howard Besser laid out the risks of migrating media to digital formats in 1998 with prescience in their essay, "Defining the Problem of Our Vanishing Memory: Background, Current Status, Models for Resolution". They speak to how digital cultural heritage is lost at roughly the same rate that it is digitized for preservation, engendering a recursive race between emergence and obsolescence, and ask who should be responsible for the persistence of digital information considering the cost, technical competencies, and labor involved. The authors liken the issues of digitized media storage, management and preservation to the first environmentalist conferences, when the reality of an immense and looming crisis first began to surface.[1]

In *Preserving Complex Digital Objects*, Perla Innocenti highlights how collecting institutions are evolving more systematic and scalable methods of preserving artwork, especially digital, multimedia works. But these approaches require continued empirical research that identifies broader themes and concerns beyond isolated cases, which, while quite valuable at gathering certain trends amongst different types of artists, do not always leave a strong takeaway for actionable next steps for artists working across various media. Her work argues that research must reflect the lived experiences of artists, particularly those outside major collecting institutions.[2]

Innocenti also speaks to the fragile, fluid, "performing" nature of digital artworks: "Because a digital artwork consists of a set of code, for the artwork to become…it must be performed. Before the viewer interacts with the digital artwork, this process of becoming has to occur." The artwork has no fixed material state and is inherently variable and computational; each rendering might best be described as a "representation" or "instantiation." Like Innocenti, Jon Ippolito emphasizes the performative and experiential aspects of digital or digitally mediated art, arguing that traditional object-centered conservation methods are inadequate. Instead, preservation must accommodate interpretation, variability, and participatory dynamics.[3]

Research in the field of New Media art preservation in particular has evolved to reflect the progressively complex challenges faced by both institutions and independent creators. One of the earliest and most comprehensive frameworks is the Variable Media Initiative, developed by a consortium of art museums and organizations like the Guggenheim, The Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archives, The Walker Museum of Art, and Rhizome.org, allowing for re-creation and migration to future platforms.[4] This flexibility acknowledges the mutable nature of digital media and empowers artists to determine the

core elements that must remain intact across instantiations to maintain the defining characteristics of any given work. This shift was crucial in understanding how artworks could persist across technological change without compromising their integrity or the artist's intent.[5]

The conceptual frameworks of the Variable Media Initiative were put into archival practice by Rhizome.org, who in 1999 built an archival management system called ArtBase. ArtBase was specifically designed to preserve digital and internet-based artworks, supporting artists working with variable and digital media who reflect, critique, or employ networked technologies. In 2011, Rhizome's digital conservator, Ben Fino-Radin, summarized the initiative, highlighting emulation, documentation, and collaboration as a tripartite strategy for sustainable preservation going forward.[6]

ARTISTS AS ARCHIVISTS

Personal archives are essential to artists' professional and creative activities, supporting the creation of new work as well as maintenance or reiterations of past work. Nearly all the artists I spoke with during research emphasized the importance of their personal archives for pursuing professional opportunities, such as applying for grants, residencies, or exhibitions. Drawing on images of past works or documentation of previous exhibitions, artists create portfolios, generate artist statements, create collections of photographs and reference images to work from. There is an immense amount of supporting documents that go into any studio practice that are only tangentially related to finished works, albeit very important to their creation. Artists' archives also help retain skills and knowledge gained from past projects and experiences.

In "Preservation Practices of New Media Artists," Colin Post examines how digital tools and creative practices influence both the creation and long-term preservation of multimedia artwork. By applying a media archeological approach, his research examines how technological choices impact the artwork's longevity and how preservation concerns shape artistic processes.[7] Conducting research specifically within a network of New Media artists, he structured his findings from interviews into four categories: preservation challenges, preservation strategies, preservation attitudes, and personal archiving practices. Artists described complexity, obsolescence, corruption/deterioration, size/storage, and the non-salability of works as the primary impediments to their long-term preservation. As Post notes, preservation constitutes a unique form of information behavior, with distinct needs and methods.[8]

The significance artists place on their personal archives, studio space, and digital storage media emphasizes this hyper-fluidity between artworks and archival materials. This ambiguity arises from the creative processes of many artists, who watch their works transition from sculptural objects in exhibitions to disassembled parts in their studio, blurring the lines between the work itself and the archival materials related to it:

> Documentation is a surrogate of the work, but in many instances, becomes the object artists preserve over time, as storing documentation in a personal archive offers a resource-efficient alternative to maintaining complex art objects. Many of the preservation strategies discussed, such as the re-creation of works or translation of works across media, bypass the necessity of storing a

single, durable entity, and instead treat the artwork as a variable body of information stored in different places across digital and analog archives.[9]

COLLABORATIVE MANAGEMENT & STEWARDSHIP MODELS

Cultural heritage at large benefits from better understanding the preservation issues artists face outside institutional settings. As early as 1924, Ruth Wilcox argued that cultural heritage institutions have the responsibility to document their local art scenes.[10] Museums, galleries, and archives can support preservation by engaging with artists directly. This includes incorporating preservation questions into acquisition processes, facilitating co-authored documentation, and maintaining open lines of communication regarding future migration strategies.

Collaborative projects between artists and institutions demonstrate the benefits of shared stewardship. Another essay by Colin Post, "Ensuring the Legacy of Self-Taught and Local Artists: A Collaborative Framework for Preserving Artists' Archives," details an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) funded initiative called "Learning from Artists' Archives", which he participated in during his MLIS. This program ran between 2014 and 2017 and paired MLIS students at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill with local artists to appraise, arrange, and describe his materials, which were housed at the local library.[11] This not only provided artists with insight into archival practice as a form of cultural technology but also allowed for a more accurate and artist-driven archive.

Collaboration with creators must also grapple with ethical considerations. The International Council on Archives' Code of Ethics emphasizes impartial appraisal, which can be challenged when donors influence the process.[12] Real-world collaborations often involve complex negotiations of power and authorship. These tensions are particularly acute when working with marginalized communities or artists who lack institutional affiliations. In this way, preservation becomes not just a technical or curatorial endeavor, but a political and ethical one. Anne Gilliland and others have argued for a post-custodial approach to archives that embraces the involvement of communities in shaping their historical record.[13] This participatory model not only decentralizes authority but ensures that preservation efforts reflect a broader range of voices and values.

CLIMATE CONSIDERATIONS

Paucity in the literature seems to be in how to adapt preservation strategies developed in GLAM institutions for use by individual artists, particularly in terms of outreach and education. The need for this is dire considering the proliferation of large-scale climate events that place both digital and traditional artworks at heightened risk, especially those in the custody of artists. While much of the existing literature emphasizes the relative stability of physical artworks over time compared to digital ones, the growing frequency and intensity of natural disasters complicates this assumption. Information professionals in the arts must closely consider the vulnerabilities of all mediums in artists' custody—especially through geographically specific approaches that account for environmental risks unique to certain locations where particular types of disasters are more prevalent. Carl Philipp Hoffmann, in "Not Only the Climate is Changing: Adaptation and Mitigation within a Changing Ecology of Conservation," re-frames obsolescence, knowledge management, and resource scarcity through the

dual lenses of adaptation and mitigation, encouraging the LIS field to shift our custodial mindset from reactive triage toward intentional, generative continuity and preparedness.[14]

California, for instance, is prone to earthquakes and fires. Its ever-expanding population has evolved into what climate scientists refer to as a Wildland-Urban Interface, areas where human development meets natural landscapes. Today, nearly 13% of the state's population resides in high-growth census tracts along the WUI.[15] This increases the chances of fire ignitions from human activities, like faulty power lines, vehicles, and campfires. It also increases the stakes, as more homes and lives are at risk.[16] Collecting institutions should not only be at the forefront of developing climate resistant strategies that recognize specific climate risks of their areas, but should also widely advocate and distribute knowledge and competencies about preservation risk abatement to local communities for better preparedness.

III. Findings

PRESERVATION ATTITUDES AND CHALLENGES AMONGST ARTISTS

In *Re-Collection: Art, New Media, and Social Memory*, the authors open with a quote that captures a common indifference among artists toward preservation: "Jean Cocteau was asked what he would save if his art collection caught fire and he could rescue only one thing. 'The fire,' Cocteau answered." While certainly not representative of all contemporary artists, this sentiment sardonically reflects a broader tendency for artists to treat preservation as a non-issue, an attitude echoed in case studies, my conversations with early-career artists and UCLA Design Media Arts (DESMA) BFA students, as well as in my own experience documenting my work and the work of my peers.

At the very least, emerging artists do not consider preservation a central concern, particularly early in their careers when resources are scarce and priorities lean toward creation and exposure. Others feel overwhelmed by the technical complexities involved or assume that institutions will eventually step in to preserve their work if that is what is meant to happen, as if institutional notoriety was an indicator that one's work deserves to be saved. Some artists express concern about the longevity of their digital work and documentation, but as with many aspects of life, the urgency of preservation often only becomes apparent in hindsight. This was true in my own experience: I did not fully grasp the stakes until I lost a hard drive, and perhaps even more painfully, work I had collected from friends over the years, during the CZU Lightning Complex fires in the summer of 2020. The hard drive contained my entire archive, including only copies of several digital artworks.

One DESMA student, when asked about any training their program offered for managing their digital portfolios commented, "At some point in one of my foundation courses, we were encouraged to purchase an external hard-drive or two. There is no class that covers how to organize our [digital] portfolios or digital work that is composed of many files or with specific displays in mind, or best formats while exporting, nothing like that. You just have to figure it out on your own."[18] This same student commented that her sister had attended Cal Poly San Luis Obispo's Photography BFA program; the curriculum was geared toward career readiness and she had left with skills on how to

manage a complex digital portfolio that the student I spoke with wished she had learned in her own program.

FLOOD CASE STUDY

I interviewed the artist Heather Drayzen, a painter and art teacher based in Brooklyn, New York, about an incident which occurred during the first days of a residency she was awarded at the Vermont Studio Center in Johnson, Vermont in the summer of 2023. Significant rainstorms were forecast the week Heather's residency began. On her first day, the residency's director emailed resident artists to reassure them that, while the weather was concerning, significant damages were unlikely, as such events were considered extremely rare in the area.[19]

The next day, Heather, who lived on-site in another building a couple hundred feet away from her studio, was unable to access her studio due to the degree of flooding. The Gihon River, visible from her studio window, had overflowed, triggering sewage backups and pushing the town's high water mark to seven and a half feet.[20] By the time Heather was able to reach her studio, the water was still over three feet high, a retreat from over six feet she and the studio manager measured. While her paintings warped from the water that partially submerged them, they were all salvageable. The greatest loss was of equipment (air purifiers, projectors, paper, brushes, etc.) and a hard drive where she stored images from photo shoots she painted from, documentation of finished paintings, and an archive of her body of work. Three other resident artists lost work in the flood, as did the studio manager—a painter who had also lost work in a fire earlier the same year.[21]
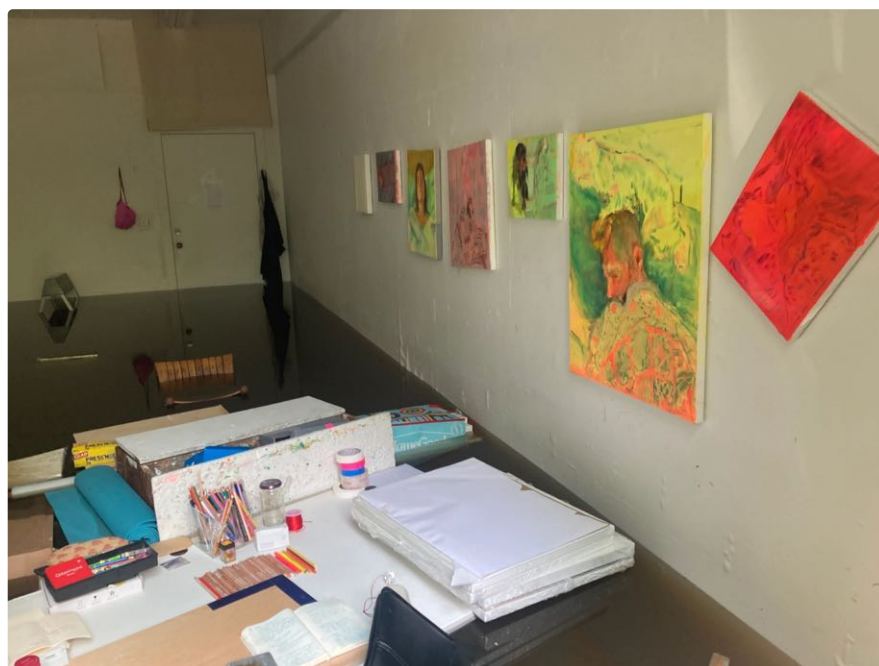
Photos taken by Heather of her studio on July 14, 2023. The closeup image on the right indicates the level the water reached.

Photos taken by Heather of the hallway leading to her studio, and the studio manager cleaning and assessing damages.

It took another few days to pump the water out of the building, and ultimately, the Vermont Studio Center had to demolish the building that once housed Heather's studio.[22] The storm was broadly categorized as a 100-year flood, with some regions experiencing rainfall that fell into the 500-year flood category,[23] a designation corresponding to a flood of that size or greater having a 0.2-percent chance of occurring in a given year.[24] The destruction of Heather's studio is emblematic of how environmental disruptions reshape the conditions in which artists create and preserve their work, and of a broader crisis facing artists in the age of climate change: the precariousness of artistic labor and the lack of structures in place for artists to safeguard their work.

THE LOS ANGELES WILDFIRES

The first weeks of 2025 were marked by the devastation of thousands of acres of wildlife and urban dwellings. The physical and emotional toll of witnessing entire neighborhoods incinerated was overwhelming. At the time, I was drafting the preliminary outline for a paper on preservation strategies for emerging artists that would eventually become this paper. Amid the headlines, I was struck by the overwhelming sense of loss in both the digital and physical realms. My attention was fixed to the ubiquitous reports of artists losing everything: their life's work, equipment, raw footage, studios, homes, jobs. The pioneering installation artist Dianna Thater was sleeping on a friend's couch with her cats after losing her home, her studio, all her equipment, and any work she ever created that was not held by institutions. Similarly, the conceptual multimedia artist Paul McCarthy lost his home and entire studio.[25] An archive of nearly 100,000 scores by the 20th century avant-garde composer Arnold Schoenberg was lost in his son's Pacific Palisades home.[26] I thought of all the artists who were not famous enough to be written about, without the notoriety or means to recover their practices in the

ways the artists I was reading about inevitably would.

The communities the LA wildfires decimated, Pacific Palisades and Altadena, have both historically attracted artists. In the 1950s and '60s, Pacific Palisades was a hub for modernist artists; today, it is home to some of Los Angeles' wealthiest art collectors. As a result, the Palisades fire led to the loss of an astounding number of privately held artworks.[27] Altadena, on the other hand, has fostered artistic communities for decades. In the 1950s and '60s, Altadena became a haven for middle-class Black families, nurturing a community of Black creatives which included the celebrated science fiction writer Octavia Butler, the painter Charles White, and the mixed-media artist Betye Saar, known for her work in assemblages. This legacy continued with artists like painter Kerry James Marshall, conceptual artist David Hammons, and muralist Judithe Hernández.[28] In the wake of the fire, there are increased calls for a more rigorous approach to preserving and commemorating these artistic legacies.[29]

FIRE RECOVERY EFFORTS FOR ARTISTS

I spoke with Ariel Pittman, a ceramicist, gallery director, and co-founder of *Grief and Hope*, a small organization which quickly mobilized to address the immediate needs of artists affected by the wildfires. Ariel grew up in Los Angeles and has been involved in the arts and community service throughout her life. On the night the fires began in Altadena, she and a group of friends were texting about what was happening when she received a message from a donor of one of the galleries she ran asking how they could support. As the fires spread over the next few days, the group developed two surveys; one was to assess the most urgent needs of artists and art workers affected by the fires, and the other survey collected information regarding mutual aid.

> We had insurance professionals reach out. There's an art advisor I know who had been a wildfire insurance appraiser in the past. She offered help for free. We've got a list of mental health counselors that were offering services for free. Basically we were just aggregating direct aid being offered in our own community, like, you can come, stay in my house, or lists of available rental properties that realtors were putting together, places you could go to get furniture or clothing or baby stuff, or other things that other community groups were organizing.

Knowing that many artists had lost their studios, homes, and the income they relied on, Ariel described how housing was the immediate priority, connecting people with spare rooms or guest homes to artists who needed a bed. They had over 100 responses for free housing solutions for those impacted. They were amazed by the local response, as well as support from the New York and San Francisco art communities. By early February, they had met the first stage of their fundraising goal, and on February 27 they were able to distribute $4,500 to each of the over 60 artists who applied for aid. [30] At the time of our interview, Ariel reported that a second round of $4500 payments was about to be dispersed. The organization is still raising funds for artists through their GoFundMe.

A common theme that emerged from our conversations was the lack of affordable housing in Los Angeles and how this disaster would compound that significantly. Many artists in Altadena had purchased their houses decades before and simply did not have the resources to find alternate

housing in Los Angeles:

> The people who were paying far below current market, I don't know what's gonna happen
> to them or where they're gonna go. A lot of the people that I'm in direct contact with
> through *Grief and Hope* are still struggling to find long term housing. They're living in guest
> rooms. They left town. They're staying with family. They're still really, really struggling.

As we move from emergency response to long-term recovery, we cannot abandon these creative communities. Supporting artists is an investment in our city and in the social and cultural fabric that sustains it, and it is essential to the preservation of cultural memory. This should be of great concern to the cultural heritage community at large.

Grief and Hope's organizational model offers lessons for the broader field of preservation and cultural heritage on how it can support artist communities and help facilitate mutual aid. Mutual aid strategies should be a fundamental skill in the LIS-professional's toolkit, one that compliments traditional archival practices and stands to reinforce long-term cultural preservation methods. While traditional collecting institutions may be slower to respond to such large-scale disasters, it is community-based networks like *Grief and Hope* that often act with agility. Ariel suggests that it is precisely because artists are used to precarity that they are more prepared to mobilize quickly and compassionately. Their networks, often undervalued by traditional metrics, became the infrastructure through which care, funds, and housing flowed; individuals who knew how to make calls and spreadsheets, and show up. "If all you know how to do is spit, you spit for the revolution," Ariel said one of her mentors once told her.[31]

IV. Proposed Solutions

The information and cultural heritage field must urgently address the increasing frequency and scale of climate-fueled disasters, which not only devastate entire communities but also threaten cultural and social memory. As recent wildfires in California have shown, these disasters result in the loss of invaluable artistic works, highlighting the need for proactive preservation strategies. Given the growing prevalence of climate events, these losses should be seen as indicators of a larger, ongoing crisis. An intervention is critical to ensuring that art, art communities, and cultural memory endure.

One solution lies in educating artists about digital preservation practices early in their careers. Adopting effective preservation strategies employed by collecting institutions, such as redundant backups and geographically dispersed copies, ensures that their work is safeguarded against potential disasters. However, many early-career artists lack awareness of these strategies, which can lead to irreversible losses. Currently, preservation education is often absent from Bachelor of Fine Arts curricula, leaving young artists unprepared to protect their work. This gap must be addressed through both institutional training and alternative learning opportunities.

Peer learning also holds potential. Artist-led initiatives, online forums, and community archiving projects can foster knowledge exchange outside institutional channels. Los Angeles Contemporary

Archive (LACA) in downtown LA is an artist-run archive that stewards local artists' materials. This spring, LACA put out a call for an 8-week course to strengthen artists' ability to identify, acquire, and process art archives, focusing on collective research, critical recovery, and concrete archival skills. The program emphasizes participatory education and practical techniques, equipping artists to care for and share their materials while fostering community engagement with contemporary art preservation. Representatives from LACA noted the extraordinary number of applicants to Archiving Night School, emphasizing that these archival skills are highly sought after by the art community, particularly given the significant losses experienced by Los Angeles artists.

In addition to artist-focused education, there is an urgent need to train future librarians, archivists, and information professionals to meet the unique needs of artists' archives. By incorporating artist-specific preservation strategies into MLIS programs and offering specialized workshops, these professionals can better support the growing body of personal archival materials created by artists and offer them discipline specific tools that will help them manage their portfolios, improving their chances of gaining institutional support in the form of exhibitions and funding opportunities. We can no longer expect young artists to organically pick up these skills on their own. Proactive training will ensure that emerging artists and their work are supported so that they do not lose work or need to give up their practice prematurely.

Given the increasing threats posed by climate change, local preservation strategies must be tailored to the specific vulnerabilities of each community. By combining institutional knowledge with grassroots efforts and ensuring that artists, educators, and archivists are equipped with the tools to safeguard their work, we can begin to address the exigent need for cultural preservation in the face of growing climate disasters.

V. Conclusion

In facing the challenges of conserving digital cultural heritage, we find ourselves in a dynamic ecosystem. Like the climate crisis, this is not a problem with a singular solution, but one that demands iterative, interdisciplinary, and collaborative action. Artists must consider the lifecycle of their work from the point of creation, laying groundwork for its stewardship beyond their lifetime and amid life's uncertainties in a shifting climate. But they should not have to do this alone. LIS professionals, educators, and GLAM institutions must advocate for the tools, education, and infrastructures that will allow preservation to become an innate part of artistic practice. LIS professionals also have plenty to learn from artists about how to carefully manage artistic intent over time, but also how to engage networks of care and manage resources creatively and make them accessible for communities quickly when they need it most.

By embedding preservation literacy in art education, fostering direct collaboration between artists and IS professionals, and supporting decentralized archiving and preservation practices, we can begin to cultivate a more equitable and enduring cultural heritage landscape. No single project, platform, practitioner, or even discipline can resolve the complexities of digital preservation in times of climate crisis. But through small, interconnected acts—interfaces left for those who follow—we can begin to

shape an electric ecology that can outlast us.

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