



Stop Pretending AI is a Choice: The New Reality of Digital Memory

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Abstract:

The cultural heritage sector, and especially the field of memory studies, is currently stuck in a cycle of denial. Artificial intelligence fundamentally changes the reality of how art and history are produced and saved. At the same time, the most common response from scholars and curators has been fear and outrage. Walk into the fine arts department or flip through the latest issue of the Cultural Memory Journal, and you will find people obsessed with drafting essays against tech companies. We hold tightly to the outdated idea of human purity.

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The cultural heritage sector, and especially the field of memory studies, is currently stuck in a cycle of denial (Spennemann, 2024). Artificial intelligence fundamentally changes the reality of how art and history are produced and saved, as AI can now generate hyper-realistic but entirely fabricated historical artifacts and documents. Walk into the fine arts department or flip through the latest issues of some academic journals, and you will find many papers against tech companies or at least skeptical of AI output and impacts (Flenady & Sparrow, 2026). We hold tightly to the outdated idea of human purity.

This institutional resistance is framed as a noble defense of human creativity and historical truth, as a position of moral superiority. On the other hand, it risks becoming a potential barrier to further advances in the field.

Let us start with clearing up the main illusion of AI denialists. There is a belief that we can choose not to participate. Memory scholars often treat AI as a negative trend or an untrustworthy assistant, fearing that algorithmic generation threatens authentic human governance of the past (Schuh, 2024), so we can politely refuse to use it. But AI is not a passing fad. It is a permanent shift in how the world operates. The integration of AI into art creation and archiving is not a debate waiting to be settled. It is an economic and technological reality that is already here / that is here to stay.

Look at the everyday reality of modern archives. We are currently drowning in data. A cultural institution is sitting on a mountain of unsorted digital files and a deteriorating hard drive. The money required to pay a human archivist to manually sort and save all these items does not exist. Decades of severe budget cuts have ensured that most museums and historical societies are barely surviving.

When a journal or museum refuses to use a machine learning tool to sort and save a collection out of fear of algorithmic bias, what is the actual result? That collection sits in a dark room, inaccessible and completely forgotten. Total invisibility is a far worse bias than a machine making a small sorting error. Gatekeepers in our field would rather let collections rot in the name of human-only purity than save them with a computer. A decaying, uncatalogued historic photograph is no more authentic just because AI has not touched it. It is simply dead.

Hypocrisy within memory study is especially frustrating. Scholars in this field built their careers on the idea that human memory is not a perfect recording. It is an active process that constantly changes and reshapes the past. Yet the moment machines help us with this process, these same scholars panic. Looking at the history of the field as a media theorist, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun pointed out in her book *Discriminating Data* that our digital archive is not just a passive storage box (2021). Rather, it is an active digital process. Cultural memory is already deeply tied to the computer. Denying this reality and stubbornly demanding that memory must only involve the unassisted human mind is to willfully ignore the digital world we actually live in.

The biggest danger of this denial is not only that artists look old-fashioned or that archives stay disorganized. The true danger is that through boycotting AI, the cultural sector gives up its voice. Silicon Valley loves our boycott. When historians and artists refuse to engage with AI, big tech companies breathe a sigh of relief so that they do not have to listen to us. If the cultural sector steps out of the room, tools that will inevitably organize and save cultural memory will be built entirely through a software engineer who thinks curation just means compiling a Spotify playlist and that memory is just a hard drive.

This brings us to the core of what responsible use actually means. We cannot create a special framework for responsible AI while claiming that an ethical amount of AI is zero. Abstinence-only education does not work for teenagers, and it is a terrible approach to technology policy.

If we want AI to respect historical facts and archival rules, archivists must help train an alternative model. We need to explore how AI can bring complex digital artwork back to life for new audiences. This is not just about talking about it theoretically, but actually working with software and testing limits.

What is at stake here is not just about protecting the pride of the creative artists and the academic class. It is about who gets to build the future of human memory. AI is not a neutral tool, but refusing to use it is not neutral either. Current gatekeeping practice is silently handing over the keys of digital heritage to a profit-driven tech monopoly simply because we find technology uncomfortable.

It is time for the community of memory studies and the broader art sector to drop the pure-and-perfect act, to stop waiting for technology to go away, to stop pretending that a boycott is a substitute for strategy.

The algorithm is already inside the archives. The only question left is whether we are going to let Silicon Valley dictate how it operates or whether we are finally going to roll up our sleeves and take control.

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