HUMANITIES SCHOLARSHIP

Building a Platform

Visual and cultural studies scholar Joan Saab is helping to develop a new model for humanities research.

By Kathleen McGarvey

FROM COMPUTER TABLETS TO SMART phones, digitization has transformed much about contemporary life—but scholarly publishing in the humanities has changed little. Books between covers remain a critical currency for tenure and promotion. But through her own new book project, *Searching for Siqueiros*, Joan Saab, an associate professor of art and art history and of visual and cultural studies, is contributing to what may be a fundamental change in how humanities scholarship is carried out.

We're "working on ways to connect scholarship and visual culture," Saab says, with

"new platforms for scholarly publishing in the humanities." For the past several years, she's been a grant principal investigator for the Alliance for Networking Visual Culture, a group created with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation that aims to enhance scholarly understanding of visual practices in digital culture, and to create scholarly context for use of digital media.

▲ DIGITAL DOMAINS: Focusing on the work of muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros (right, in a 1965 photo with his "March of Humanity" mural), Joan Saab (above) hopes to enhance how scholars use multimedia in their work.

The alliance has brought together scholars, technologists, and staff at humanities centers and professional associations to talk about the changing field of visual culture. Their conversations "address the crisis in publishing," Saab says—the traditional model of scholarly book publishing has become increasingly difficult for presses to sustain economically—"but also aim particularly to help those people working with film to take advantage of the possibility and the affordances of new media in their work."

At the time Saab first became involved with the alliance, she was working on a project about a modernist network of visual artists. One of the figures she was studying was Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros. As she traveled to Los Angeles taking part in the alliance's work, her interest in Siqueiros deepened—especially her curiosity about his 1932 mural "América Tropical."

Painted on an external wall of the Italian Hall on Olvera Street, the 18-by-82 foot mural showed a crucified peasant—and Siqueiros's method was as revolutionary artistically as his subject was politically.

"Siquieros was friends with Sergei Eisenstein, the Russian filmmaker, and he was very interested in making a cinemagraphic mural, something that moved, and in tak-

ing new technologies—spray paint and air compressors—to make something that would be quick" when compared to the laborious process of traditional mural painting, Saab says.

The controversial image was soon whitewashed over by the beer-garden owner who had commissioned it, only to re-emerge in the 1960s as Chicano muralists worked to restore the mural—a nearly impossible task because of Siqueiros's new-media techniques—and began to reference the image in their own works, a process Saab calls "visual citation."

Today the Getty Conservation Institute is collaborating with El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument, a department of the City of Los Angeles, to conserve the mural. They're using digital technology in the restoration, building a viewing platform and projecting what the mural would look like onto the wall—a restoration that has become the core of Saab's research.

"What had been a chapter in a book became a sort of stand-alone project for me. But I still conceived of it as a traditional book," she says.

The project proved thorny. "I was having a difficult time trying to tell the story," Saab says. "There were too many directions" the book could go, "and I was interested in new media."

Soon she realized that the writing she was trying to do was a perfect candidate for the digital platform—called Scalar—that technologists and scholars affiliated with the alliance were building at the University of Southern California. The platform works especially well for scholars who want to include media clips and other images with their writing, and whose projects do not lend themselves to the linear quality of a book narrative.

The platform freed Saab to present her scholarship in multiple narrative pathways—and she realized that there were strong parallels between Siqueiros's experiences with new media and scholars' own.

"It allows me to tell all these different stories, and to go back and forth in time," she says of the digital platform. Her book proceeds along three different paths, each with its own subpaths. For readers interested in learning about Siqueiros's inspirations and influence—one major line of argument—they can follow narrative lines that take them to Italian Renaissance art, or Chicano artists in the 20th century, or the history of Russian film. And for those interested in a "behind the scenes" conversation with Saab about her own experiences in writing the book, there's a different narrative line that considers broad questions of history and ownership in the digital age.

"It's fun, and kind of nerve wracking," says Saab. "It's a different type of writing, and it's a different type of thinking."

Thomas DiPiero, senior associate dean of the humanities and a professor of French and visual and cultural studies, says that traditional books are "time- and narrative-based. What you get in a 'born-digital' work that's multimedia work is that you break that linearity."

He draws a comparison between watching a movie, in which the story unfolds in the way the film passes through a projector, and looking at a painting. "Your eyes can pass over the painting in whatever order you like, and you can look at any individual part of the painting for as much or as little time as you choose." A born-digital book, he says, "exists in time in a different way" than a traditional book does, "and once you break that linearity, you open up all kinds of possibilities."

Critical to the development of multimedia scholarly writing, Saab says, is the foundational input of scholars themselves.

"One of the things we realized was all of this had to come from the scholars," she says. "It couldn't come from the foundations or the technologists, because often what happens is people create a widget or a publishing platform, and they say, 'Here. This is going to transform scholarship,' and you give it to the scholars, and they have no idea what to do with it."

Three university presses—Duke, MIT, and University of California—have agreed to publish the projects being produced through Scalar as part of the grant. The first, Alexandra Juhasz's *Learning from YouTube,* was released by MIT Press last year.

The projects "will be peer-reviewed and vetted like a regular book," a crucial dimension of their academic value, Saab says. "The next stage of the grant is we're working with professional societies to do special issues of journals in this platform. It has to be legitimate in order for scholars to do it." DiPiero allows that it "has taken some time for people to adjust to this kind of work"— professional societies have already had to grapple with online-only journals—but says that as long as works are peer-reviewed, their academic value is not in doubt. "These are bumps in the road rather than true obstacles," he says.

Already for Saab the multimedia book has proven a fruitful experiment, allowing her to present her scholarship on an artistic pioneer in ways that simply wouldn't be possible in a more traditional format.

"It's a case of form and content coming together." Ⓡ