

COLLECTION:

REF NO.:

DATE:

TITLE:

ARCHIVING HANDBOOK

NOTES:

V1.0 for artists and art spaces,
for introductions and beginnings

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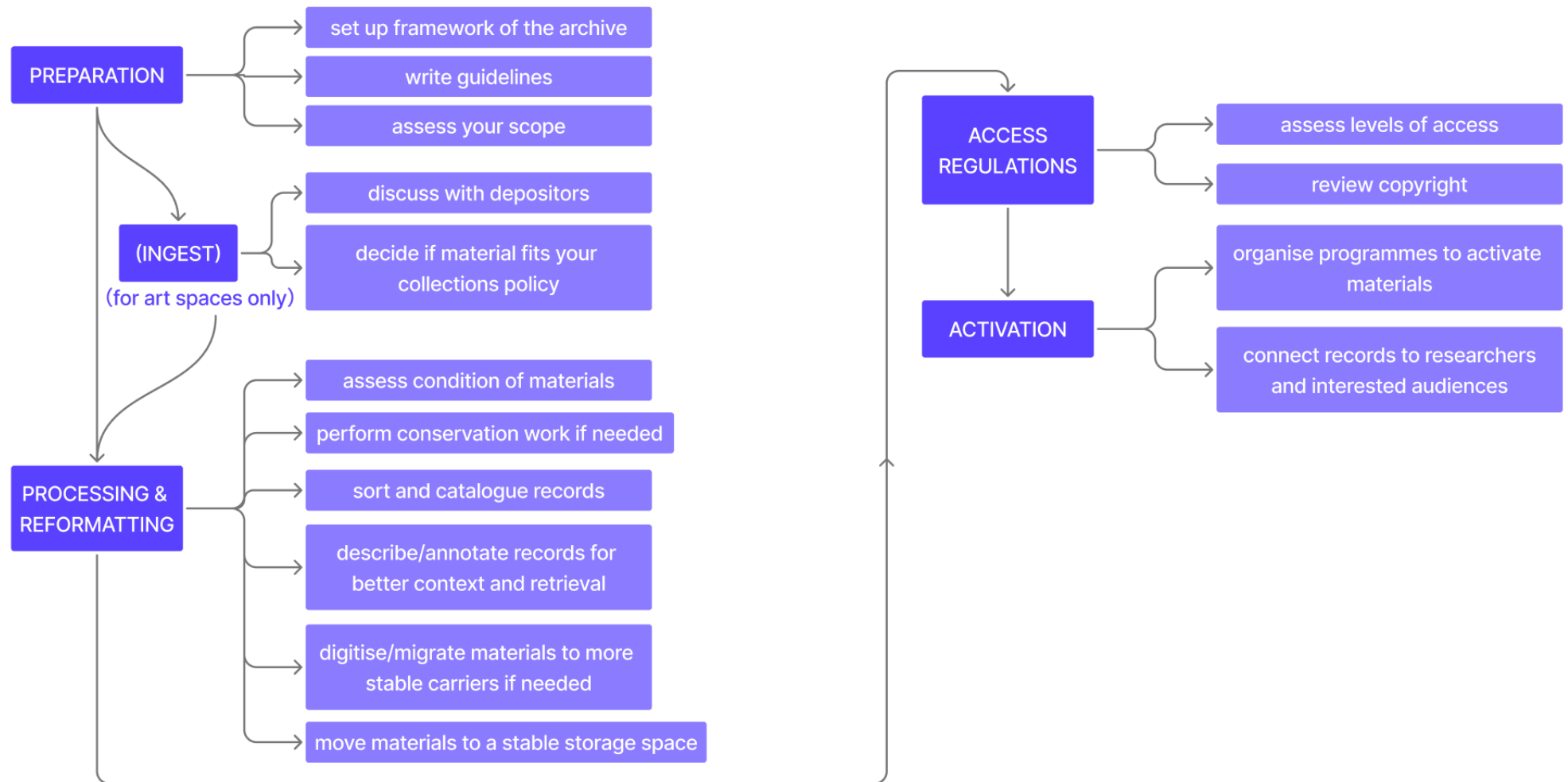
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INTRODUCTION

This handbook is an introductory guide to archiving for artists and art spaces. For those who are thinking about starting an archive of their own, this booklet will walk you through key premises, basic technical skills, important questions, and suggestions for good practice. Our goal is to help you establish good record-keeping habits and arm you with the tools you need to move forward.

As Asia Art Archive (AAA) celebrates our 25th anniversary, we look back on our journey and take note of all the ways that we have grown—through trial and error, learning from other archives, and designing new methods that suit the specific art communities we serve. In this handbook, we share the lessons we have learned in these past two decades with the hope that you can join us in preserving knowledge and addressing the gaps in our history.

WORKFLOW

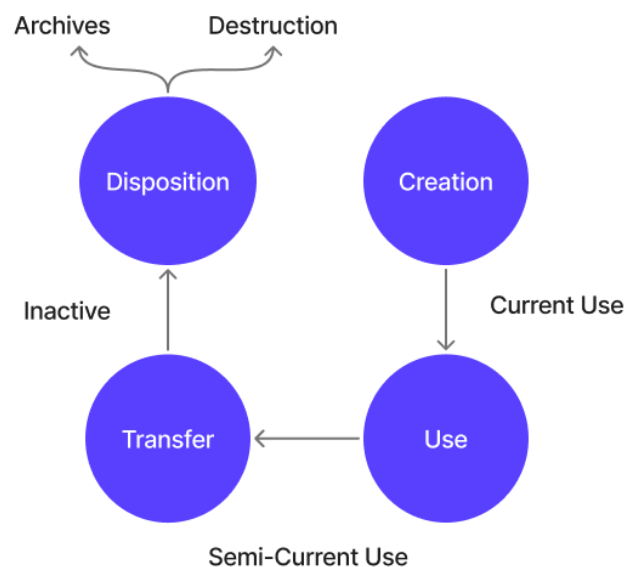


IDENTIFY YOUR NEEDS - ARE YOU KEEPING A RECORD OR MAKING AN ARCHIVE?

Though similar, record-keeping and archiving are separate concepts with differing workflows. While an archive concerns itself with preserving and making accessible the historical records in its collection, record-keeping looks at current and ongoing records and ensures they are managed correctly. You can refer to the **Records Lifecycle*** (below) for a simple visualisation of this concept—though we keep the archive in mind from the moment of a record's creation, the record doesn't enter the archive until it reaches the end of its lifecycle, which is to say, when it is no longer being actively used.

Understanding the difference is crucial to knowing what steps to take and using your time wisely. For example, an artist with an ongoing project does not need to decide what records to keep or throw away. As long as they practise a good cataloguing and naming policy, they are already on the right track. After the project is complete and some time has passed, then it may be appropriate to begin the archival process.

Remember: Half the battle of creating an accessible and retrievable archive can be won through good record-keeping practice!



* Referencing Simon Chu Fook-keung, *The Complete Guide to Record Management* (Hong Kong: Cloud Publication, 2019), p. 21.

WHY DOES GOOD RECORD-KEEPING MATTER?

If kept properly, easily retrievable records offer accountability and transparency, with some even valid as legal evidence in court. Though often perceived as a passive storage space, archives are ongoing sites of curation and activation that ensure their records remain accessible and meaningful.

For the individual artist, a well-organised archive can be a fantastic point of reference. As your career develops, you may find yourself needing to refer to past documentations such as exhibition catalogues and correspondences. You may find yourself asking, what inspired me to make this decision at that point in time? Which artists did I work with in that group show and how can I reach them again? How was this piece installed? The ability to look back at past decisions offers valuable perspective and saves time on research.

Similarly, an art space has just as much reason to record and archive its output. The collaborative nature of most art spaces means that everyone remembers and records a different history. Administrative and legal demands aside, consistent record-keeping will keep the facts straight, while leaving room for a polyphonic narrative. People who have worked with the space before, or communities involved with its projects, might also want to have access to the records held in such an archive.

I. PREPARATION

The most significant step to forming an archive happens before any archiving begins. To set yourself up for success, it is important to first think about the goal of your archive, and to establish parameters and guidelines for your work. Laying these down first will help clarify later decisions on structure, content, and access, and guide you towards a more streamlined and sustainable process.

In this section, we will walk you through some key questions that will help you build your archival framework. These questions are in the worksheet we have designed for you to complete in [Further Resources](#) section, which you can print out and keep as a reminder of your goals.

FOR WHO? FOR WHAT?

- ◆ Every archive has a purpose and an intended audience, whether that is just yourself or the entire world. It may seem obvious, but knowing for who and for what your archive operates is essential to every decision you make. Whether it is a question of accessibility, language, or storage, the answer will be shaped around your audience.

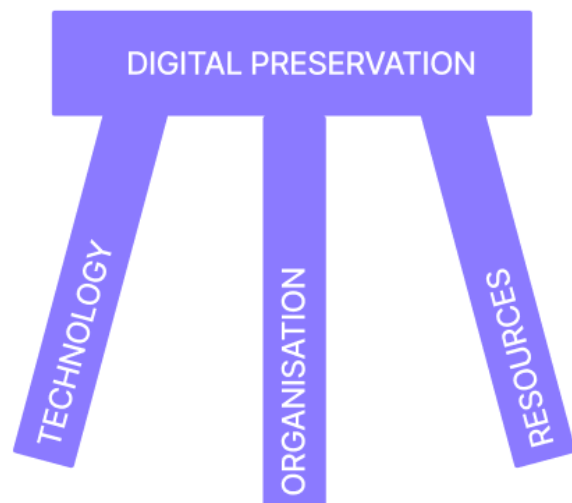
As a collecting archive with a worldwide community of audience members in mind, our archive is designed in anticipation of the need for offsite access, and for searchable language that is in use with the broader public.

SUSTAINABILITY

- ◆ Though we encourage paying attention to sustainable materials and energy usage, in this context, we are referring to the archive's ability to continue sustaining itself. Archiving is not a one-and-done project. It is a system that requires constant maintenance, and therefore, necessitates the foresight to think about long-term survivability.

The “**Three-legged Stool**”^{*} model commonly used in digital preservation communities can be a useful tool to understand this concept. The archive is held up by three legs: **technology**, **organisation**, and **resources**. Do you have the necessary software or hardware to preserve your collection? Do you have enough storage space? Are you or your staff trained to maintain the archive? Do you have the funding to upkeep this work? Without any one of these legs, the archive becomes a precarious project.

Try to do some simple calculations and look three to five years into the future—can you sustain your archive until then?



WRITING GUIDELINES

Something you will hear repeated throughout this handbook is the importance of being consistent in your work. A functional archive is only possible if its archivists cohere to a standard practice that everybody follows.

But what guidelines need to be written? Where do you even begin? Here are some common ones to get you started. Though we will not walk you through the steps to writing each of them, there are links in this section to in-depth guides on how to do so.

- ◆ [COLLECTIONS POLICY](#)
- ◆ [NAMING POLICY](#)
- ◆ [RETENTION SCHEDULES](#)
- ◆ [INGEST GUIDELINES](#)
- ◆ [ACCESS GUIDELINES](#)

^{*} The “Three-legged Stool” model was originally developed by Nancy McGovern and Anne Kenney of Cornell University in 2003.

COLLECTIONS POLICY

- ◆ This guideline outlines the scope of your archive. What will you keep in your archive? How does it align with your mission? If you are a collecting art space that foresees constant growth, a Collections Policy helps to guide and justify your acquisitions. If you are handling your own records, or the records of another artist, a Collections Policy will help you figure out what to keep and what to throw away.

Larger organisations often refer to other established institutions or international standards when writing their Collections Policy, and most institutions make this information publicly available. The National Archives in the UK has an in-depth guide on how to write a Collections Policy.*

To address the broad field of contemporary art in Asia, AAA's Collections are determined by a set of content priorities that we review and adjust as needed on a yearly basis. This allows us to maintain a strong focus, while being responsive to the needs of the current art historical research community.

* <https://cdn.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/writing-a-collections-development-policy-and-plan.pdf>

NAMING POLICY

- ◆ Adhering to a naming policy makes it much easier to retrieve records as needed, especially in regard to digital records when creating an inventory. Ideally, a good name is descriptive and makes clear what you are looking at immediately.

It might look something like this: **yyyymmdd_xxx**, where "xxx" is the name of a project. At AAA, we use unique three-letter project initials for all associated project files to make accessing related files quick and easy.

TIPS:

- ◆ Use only one format for dates, e.g., 250521
- ◆ Put the date at the beginning for easier sorting
- ◆ Use standard terms
- ◆ Put surnames first for individuals
- ◆ Avoid special characters, as some software used in cataloguing cannot recognise them

RETENTION SCHEDULES*

- ◆ These have more to do with good record-keeping practice than archiving. A retention schedule helps us keep track of record lifecycles. When records reach their natural end, a retention schedule helps us systematically initiate the keeping or discarding process, which saves us the hassle of making that choice every time. While retention schedules are primarily used by large organisations with high documentary output, you might consider a scaled-down version that suits your needs.

To create a retention schedule, it is ideal to first have a good grasp on the types of records you or your organisation outputs on a regular basis. To do this, you can first take inventory of records you have created so far, and how they have come to be. If you are just beginning, look ahead, and try to anticipate the kinds of records you will be producing. You can refer to our **Material List** for ideas.

Some questions to keep in mind: If these are official documents, are there legal mandates in your region that outline how long they should be kept before they are redundant? If not, what evidence does your record provide about your activity, and does it align with your archival goals and audience?

* <https://www.rgm.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Company-Records-retention-times.pdf>

INGEST GUIDELINES

- ◆ When a collection or item is transferred from the depositor to the archive, it is useful to have a checklist to cover your bases. Furthermore, a discussion should be had prior to ingest with the depositor on issues of copyright and levels of access. Ideally, a contract should be drawn up and signed, to protect the archive from incurring unnecessary liability. This is especially applicable in the case of art spaces collecting materials from artists.

Additionally, the process for ingest of digital materials should follow digital preservation standards. The “Novice to Know-How” course offered by the Digital Preservation Coalition is a great start to learning how to do this.

ACCESS GUIDELINES

- ◆ The legality and concerns behind access will be covered in more depth in the **Access Regulations** section of this booklet. For now, keep in mind that when opening up your archive to external parties, you also open up the archive to the risk of improper material handling. Whether that is illegally using the material for a commercial venture, or accidental damage to the item itself, access guidelines can help both the users and the archive to minimise such risk.

MATERIAL LIST

To give you an idea of the kinds of materials found in art archives, we have compiled a list based on our Collections.

Records in an art archive do not need to be directly related to creative output! We encourage both artists and art spaces to think about other aspects that intersect with their practice, inform their work, and shape their voice—such documents are important too. You might spend some time brainstorming, and draw up a list of possibilities before deciding what aligns best with the goal of your archive.



FROM ARTISTS:

MATERIALS FROM CREATIVE PROCESSES	MATERIALS RELATED TO PUBLISHED WORK
Artist Statement/Manifesto	Copy of the Work (digital versions only)
Concept Map	Preview of Video Work
Manuscript (e.g., notes, sketches, storyboards)	Artwork Documentation
Unpublished Textual Material	Curatorial Statement
Research and Reference Material (including textual and multimedia material)	Exhibition Floor Plan
Interview or Location Documentation (including textual material and raw footage)	Ephemera (including exhibition posters, leaflets, and other publications)
Proposal	Event Photography/Recording
Exhibition Plan	Press Material
Bibliography	Chronology/Portfolio
	Correspondence with Institutions

To offer some examples from our Collections, check out the [Ha Bik Chuen Archive](#), which contains not only Ha’s own artwork documentation and reference materials but also a wealth of photographs taken of the exhibitions he attended over the years. Consider also the [Mrinalini Mukherjee Archive](#), wherein detailed installation instructions of her work are stored alongside personal photographs, allowing us to see not only the attention she paid to her work but also the relationships she developed with the art community.

FROM ART SPACES:

ADMINISTRATIVE DOCUMENTS	RECORDS FROM PROJECTS
Accounting Documents	Proposals and Reports
Meeting Agendas	Press Materials
Correspondence	Unpublished Textual Materials
	Curatorial Statement
	Exhibition Floor Plan
	Ephemera (including exhibition posters, leaflets, and other publications)
	Event Photography/Recording

The [Paint House Studio Archive](#) is one of our archives from Taiwan. It documents five distinct phases the art space underwent over the span of two decades. It's a great example of how shifts in the nature of the space resulted in different types of documents to be archived. You can also look at the [Green Papaya Art Projects Archive](#), an artist-run organisation in Manila that started off as an exhibition space but later branched off to many offsite projects—some extending beyond the visual arts. This similarly resulted in a diverse range of documentation, which we recommend looking through for reference.

II. PROCESSING & REFORMATTING

Processing involves surveying, conserving, sorting, and cataloguing your materials. It is a time-consuming process that is made easier by consistently setting aside time to archive records as they reach the end of their lifespan. We recommend setting up a check-in date every month to assess and process your records, or even every three months if that is all the time you can spare.

Ideally, starting an archival practice early means that your materials have yet to degrade into a state that would require conservation work. In this section, the tips and techniques we share on handling different material types and maintaining a good storage environment act as a preventative measure to avoid the need for future conservation work.

PHYSICAL MATERIALS

Though having a clean, well-organised storage space for your physical materials can go a long way in keeping them “healthy,” there are lots of other details you should take note of to ensure their longevity. These are things that all of us can do—you don’t necessarily need archival-grade storage to keep your materials safe!

TIPS TO MAINTAIN A GOOD WORKING AND STORAGE ENVIRONMENT:

- ◆ No food, beverage, or liquids should be allowed in the space.
- ◆ Maintain stable temperatures and relative humidity.
- ◆ Minimise exposure of the materials to light; avoid direct sunlight.
- ◆ Prepare a clean work surface for any work related to the materials.
- ◆ When handling archival materials such as photographs, film, or tape, wear white cotton or nitrile gloves. Unless there is actively harmful material on the document, gloves may not be necessary when handling paper, as it can lead to lower sensitivity in the hands, thereby increasing the likelihood of tearing fragile paper.
- ◆ When handling an item bare-handed, it is recommended that you clean your hands before and after touching the material to protect the material and yourself.
- ◆ If materials are dusty or have been in storage for a long time, you can also consider wearing a mask to prevent yourself from inhaling any irritants or mould spores.

PHYSICAL FORMATS	THINGS TO CONSIDER
Bound Volume	◆ Use acid- and lignin-free folders and boxes* ◆ Ensure boxes are around the same size as your documents, minimising room for movement ◆ Ensure any staples and fasteners are rust-resistant ◆ Documents should be unfolded and laid flat whenever possible
Bundle of Loose Documents	
Photographic Print	◆ Store inside material that has passed the Photographic Activity Test (PAT), such as inert polyester sleeves, or acid- and lignin-free boxes ◆ Do not touch the emulsion side of any photographic image with your bare hands ◆ Negatives should be stored away from photographic prints
Photo Negative	

PHYSICAL FORMATS	THINGS TO CONSIDER
Magnetic Tapes	◆ Keep away from magnetic fields ◆ Do not stack tapes on top of electrical equipment ◆ Store tapes vertically, in a clean environment ◆ Do not expose tapes to the sun ◆ Avoid sudden changes in temperature ◆ Avoid contaminating tapes with dirt, dust, fingerprints, food, etc. ◆ Handle with care when moving or storing; avoid dropping or knocking it over

* For more information:

- ◆ <https://www.archivalsurvival.com.au>
- ◆ <https://www.preservationequipment.com>

REFORMATTING MATERIALS

Reformatting refers to the conversion of information to more stable carriers, including analogue to analogue and analogue to digital—the latter is also known as digitisation. Though digitisation is not a fool-proof preservation method, it still offers a number of benefits, and is often recommended for analogue materials that are fragile or face hardware obsolescence. The digital versions of analogue materials are known as **digital surrogates**. As digital archival material can be easily duplicated and shared, it has the potential to reach a much wider audience than a traditional physical archive, thus keeping it in circulation within the public consciousness.

Successful digitisation hinges on quality control, which can be difficult, as the process of converting analogue materials into digital formats can be time-consuming and potentially costly. Certain mediums require specific hardware to undergo conversion, and the cost of the hardware might not be in your budget. Look into commercial options around you, or see if there are archives that specialise in this format that can help.

However, if most of your materials are a combination of A4-sized papers and photographs, then a simple scanner set-up should suffice for your needs. For larger materials, you can even consider creating a DIY copy-stand set-up.

MATERIAL FORMATS	RECOMMENDED SPECIFICATIONS	REMARKS
Paper Documents	TIFF files, at least 300dpi	Usually exported as a PDF file for access purposes
Photographs	TIFF files, at least 300dpi	
Negatives and Slides	TIFF files, 600-2400dpi	The smaller they are, the higher the resolution needed
Video	Uncompressed Codec	Keep in mind the amount of storage space available
Audio	WAV format	
Other Formats	Best quality possible	

It should be noted that digital surrogates of inferior quality, such as low-resolution images or compressed files, should not be considered replacements for the originals. While they open up the doors for good access, they do not properly **preserve** the materials, and therefore, cannot function as your only copy.

DIGITAL MATERIALS

Digital material forms a large part of many contemporary archives and presents its own gamut of challenges. Despite their seemingly enduring quality, we should remember that digital materials, like their physical counterparts, are also subject to degradation and loss if not properly maintained.

Digital preservation is often thought of through two lenses: bitstream and content. **Bitstream preservation** focuses on keeping the bits of a digital object intact so that it does not degrade or corrupt over time. Regular integrity checks and virus scans are needed to ensure the health and authenticity of the digital object.

One key way of doing so is by generating a **checksum** of your digital objects. A checksum allows you to regularly confirm that the data has not been altered, and that your objects are not suffering from bit rot. You can generate these with free tools like **FreeCommander** or **Fixity**.

On the other hand, **content preservation** looks at maintaining meaning, usability, and functionality of the digital object. When file formats are only accessible via proprietary software, or when hardware goes obsolete, archivists need to devise new ways of maintaining access to the content without sacrificing too much of the meaning found in its original format. Common ways of doing so include **migration** and **emulation**. This is a field of preservation that can get quite technical, but institutions like the **Internet Archive** or **Rhizome** have been tackling it since the turn of the century, and can be good reference points to start with if you have a particularly complex digital object that needs preserving.

If you are an artist working with niche file formats, in addition to keeping one copy of the original project file, consider keeping another copy in a more universally readable file format. Make a note of the software programme that is used to open those files, and the computer operating system you work on. This is useful information for conservators who may need to reverse-engineer a solution that will allow your file to be displayed most effectively.

In general, good record-keeping practice will be your greatest tool. Name your files properly, and follow a retention schedule that allows you to delete unnecessary files and duplicates.

When it comes to digital infrastructure, there are primarily three options for storage—external hard drives, local Network Attached Storage (NAS), and cloud systems. On the next page, we have listed some of their pros and cons for you to consider.

STORAGE OPTIONS	PROS	CONS
External Hard Drives (Brands like Seagate, Western Digital, Samsung, etc.)	- Information does not belong to a third-party, and you retain permanent and absolute control - Immediately accessible to you - Relatively cheap, one-time purchase	- Will need to be replaced every few years - As it is a physical object, you will need to maintain and keep it in a suitable environment to prevent degradation (away from sunlight, in a cool and dry space) - May be logistically inconvenient for larger groups of people, as they will need to back-up their data individually

STORAGE OPTIONS	PROS	CONS
Network Attached Storage (NAS) (e.g., Synology, QNAP)	- Information does not belong to a third-party - Connects multiple devices together in one private network - One-time purchase - Fast access to data in local network, less reliant on internet speeds - Ample and scalable storage space	- Initial purchase cost may be high - Maintenance is your responsibility - Slightly harder to set-up compared to Cloud systems or external hard drives

STORAGE OPTIONS	PROS	CONS
Cloud Systems (e.g., Google Drive, iCloud, Amazon S3)	♦ Extremely convenient for sharing and transferring data, especially for larger groups of people ♦ Ample storage capacity available ♦ You do not have to perform any physical maintenance to keep it running	♦ Data is hosted by a third party, and you have to trust their security, privacy, and service stability ♦ Subscription-based plans may become a long-term financial commitment

A good rule of thumb for those who are dedicated to archiving their digital data is **3-2-1**. Keep **3** copies of the data in **2** separate locations, with at least **1** being offsite.

ENVIRONMENT

None of us are immune to heat, dust, or humidity, and our archival materials are the same! Many environmental factors can pose a threat* to archival material—physical and digital alike. Here are some key dangers to look out for, and some budget-friendly tips to handle them.

- ◆ Temperature and Relative Humidity (RH)
- ◆ Air and Particle Pollution
- ◆ Light
- ◆ Insects and Pest
- ◆ Mould

TEMPERATURE AND RELATIVE HUMIDITY (RH)

Different combinations of temperature and relative humidity* can lead to different issues in the care and keeping of your materials. Overall, it is best practice to keep temperatures and humidity levels **consistent**, as sudden changes and frequent fluctuations can lead to harmful outcomes. If you need to adjust either of these factors, do so gradually so as not to damage the materials.

A good habit to form would be to monitor temperature and humidity levels constantly, and to maintain good air flow. If you are in a humid country, invest in a dehumidifier or desiccants that you replace regularly. Bear in mind how dehumidifiers work, as they may raise the indoor temperature whilst operating.

* For more information:

- ◆ <https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/agents-deterioration.html>
- ◆ <https://www.cimam.org/sustainability-and-ecology-museum-practice/bizot-green-protocol>

AIR AND PARTICLE POLLUTION

Air pollution can also have acidic effects that are damaging to most materials. Particulates like soot, dirt, and dust are capable of speeding up the rate of moulding, and can spark destructive reactions when they land on material surfaces. Once again, good air circulation and regular cleaning should help with this issue.

LIGHT

The higher the UV, the more harmful, which is why it is best to keep materials in an environment where you can eliminate natural light. Items should be kept in a windowless room, or one with strong blackout curtains/UV filters. Different lighting options can also impact the UV levels, so consider the pros and cons of those before proceeding.

A light/lux meter can help you check the UV levels in your environment. You are encouraged to keep the UV levels as low as possible.

For art spaces, or those considering exhibiting their works, ensure that the light levels in your space do not exceed the recommended illuminance levels of 50–70 lux, especially for light-sensitive materials.

INSECTS AND PESTS

Warm, dark, damp, dirty, and poorly ventilated conditions facilitate insect and pest infestations. Keep your working environment clean, and do not bring any food or beverage into the space!

MOULD

In general, poor air circulation, moisture, and darkness can promote mould growth, but mould grows everywhere! If large areas of your collection have already been contaminated, consult an expert for their removal. For smaller, one-off cases, remove the item from the rest of the collection and take it outside on a non-windy day. Make use of a vacuum cleaner that has a HEPA filter installed, and gently remove mould from the surface.

Some simple precautions you can take to prevent mould are as follows:

- ◆ Do not shelve items against an outside wall
- ◆ Vacuum and clean items and surroundings regularly
- ◆ Do not keep plants in the same room
- ◆ Check new acquisitions, and section off if mould is present

Ultimately, the best way to prevent mould growth is having good control of environmental factors like RH and air circulation.

HELPFUL MATERIALS

- ◆ A dehumidifier/desiccant (for humid regions)
- ◆ Insect glue traps
- ◆ A vacuum/air purifier with a HEPA filter

Consistency and **stability** are key! These materials are helpful, but if you are unable to regularly maintain and replace them, the sudden change in environment can do more harm than good. Set up a schedule, and allocate a portion of the budget to maintenance so that you don't forget this essential aspect of your archive.

CATALOGUING

A comprehensive catalogue* doubles as a useful navigation tool for your archive, and allows it to be more accessible to users (even if that user is just yourself!). This entire process will likely take some time, depending on the size of your collection.

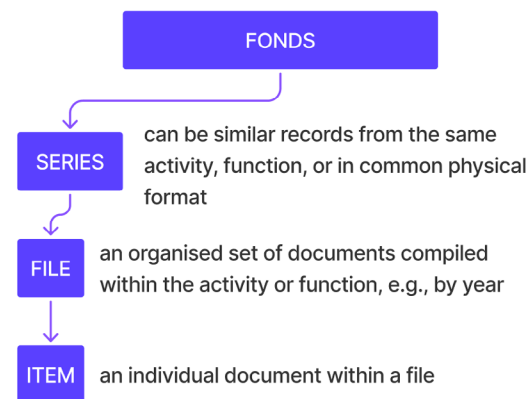
A key concept involved in cataloguing is the idea of **levels**. Archival cataloguing differs from museum cataloguing, which has a flatter structure due to their object-first approach. Museums work bottom-up, where each individual object has an entry in the catalogue, accompanied by a description.

In our archives, we take a top-down approach that preserves the original order of the records. We might visualise this order as a tree structure: a single, organic body of records from one source is known as a **fonds**, and within the fonds are **series**; within the series are **files**, and within the files are **items**. This hierarchy usually reflects how the records were originally used, which is another source of information for the user.

In order for users to understand the background and significance of the materials they access, description of relevant records provide helpful information. This is also known as annotation in AAA.

* For more information:

- ♦ <https://docs.wellcomecollection.org/archive-cataloguing/general-guidance/preparing-a-collection-for-cataloguing>
- ♦ <https://yourscottisharchives.com/guide-to-cataloguing#1687449458804-b02f2d25-58dd>



In the archival approach to catalogues, the very top level receives the most comprehensive description. Occasionally, there might not even be descriptions at the item level due to the sheer number of items. For example, individual photos in a photo album may be too numerous to describe one by one. When cataloguing, you may use this as a strategy—if the size of the collection seems overwhelming, you can first focus on the fonds, series, and files that require more extensive description, and catalogue only the number of items contained within. Additional description of items can be set aside for a later date.

At AAA, each of our archival projects is headed by a researcher that is familiar with both the content and context of the archive, and they provide a general description at the top level of each fonds. In some archives, individual items will also have specific descriptions for further contextualisation.

For more guidance, you can refer to the [General International Standard Archival Description](#), or [ISAD\(G\)](#).

Reminder: There is no need to catalogue records that have not yet reached the end of their lifecycle. As they are still active and prone to change, this will be a redundant effort. You can instead focus your attention on finished projects, exhibitions, or spaces.

Description involves [standard metadata](#), which can be divided into [essential](#), [recommended](#), and [optional](#). Create a spreadsheet for yourself. (Saving it as a CSV file is recommended—you should avoid using a Word document for this, as data is less transferable in this format.) Fill it in accordingly, with consideration for time constraints and the information you deem necessary. There are several free templates online you can use as a starting point, such as the ones on [Archives Hub*](#) and the [National Archives](#) website.

ESSENTIAL	RECOMMENDED	OPTIONAL
Title	Description	Subject
File Name	Format	Creator
Ref. No.	Place	Contributor
	Date of Coverage	Copyright
	Date of Creation	Access
	Recorder	Licence
	Date of Recording	Storage Location
		Language

* <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/contributing/spreadsheets>

III. ACCESS REGULATIONS

If your archive is intended for use by external parties, you need to think about access and how it is governed. Especially for archival material for which you do not possess copyright, there are legal and ethical concerns that you must consider before opening them up for access. Many of these questions can be addressed by having the necessary discussions with depositors before the materials enter the archive. Existing collections may need to conduct a thorough survey to ensure compliance with local law.

COPYRIGHT

The specificities of copyright law vary from country to country, but in general, copyright is a type of intellectual property right granted to the maker of any creative work for a limited period of time. It primarily covers the acts of copying, distributing, lending, performing, and making derivatives of the work in question. Rights holders have the power to grant licenses that permit these acts, and archives should ideally obtain such licenses to establish access to their collections.

Even for artists who might believe they are the sole creators of the records in their collection, look carefully again. For example, for photographs of artwork, the photographer may also hold copyright. The same may go for reviews of artwork written by others, or work published while working for a company, as companies usually have copyright to work created by its employees. It is usually best practice to consult a practising legal professional in your region for details.

FAIR USE/FAIR DEALING AND CREATIVE COMMONS (CC)

Fair use/fair dealing is a legal doctrine that allows the limited use of copyrighted material without seeking permission from the copyright holder. It usually applies to criticism, commentary, news reporting, teaching, or research. Whether a use is “fair” depends on four factors: the purpose of use (e.g., not-for-profit vs. commercial), the nature of the work, the amount used, and the economic impact on the original work. Creative Commons (CC) is a global, standardised licensing system that creators use to grant permission in advance for others to use their work under specific conditions. CC operates on a “Some Rights Reserved” basis. Creators can mix and match conditions like requiring attribution (BY), forbidding commercial use (NC), banning modifications (ND), and requiring others to share alike (SA). Archivists and the public should understand the relevant legislation in order to strike a balance between protecting original works and facilitating academic dissemination. You may also refer to AAA’s digital copyright policy.*

PRIVACY

Many records found in artist/art space archives are also personal in nature. These include letters, diary entries, photos, notes, or any other kind of record that may not be strictly professional. Though they are undeniably valuable historical artifacts, you should consider whether you want such items to be accessible, and if they involve other parties that may not be comfortable with that decision.

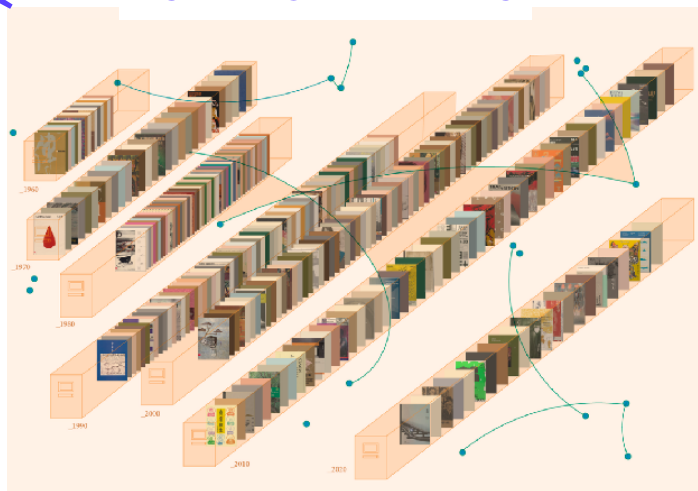
* <https://aaa.org.hk/en/footer/copyright>

IV. ACTIVATION

At AAA, a core part of our work is the activation of our Collections—ensuring our items are not just static records, but active catalysts for inquiry. How we activate these materials depends entirely on who our audience is and how we can support them.

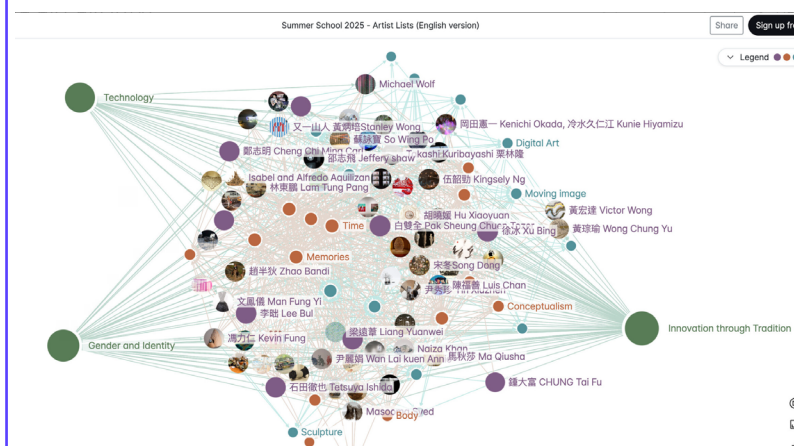
While some researchers arrive with specific queries, many visit to browse and be inspired by unexpected encounters with history. To increase the “surface area of chance” for these discoveries, AAA invests heavily in diverse programming, including exhibitions, talks, workshops, screenings, publications, performances, residencies, open calls, and research projects.

ACTIVATION EXAMPLES



Visual Archive of Hong Kong Art: A data visualisation project that allows users to browse Hong Kong art monographs and exhibition catalogues by colour and decade. It offers an intuitive, image-driven entry point for designers and visual thinkers.

ACTIVATION EXAMPLES



2024 Educators-in-Residence: During their residency, established art educators Peggy Kwan and Carmen Kwok mapped Asian art histories by utilising AAA's resources to connect key artists, themes, and media on Graph Commons. Made with the Hong Kong arts curriculum in mind, this interactive map was later used in our Summer Studio programme to train emerging educators on bringing archival history into the classroom.

Activation goes beyond the archive's walls. By inviting communities to contribute their own voices, we breathe new life into historical records. We encourage all archivists to consider: Who does your archive serve, and what form of activation will benefit them most?

CONCLUSION

With these basic skills in your toolkit, we hope that you feel ready to get started on your archival journey. It is important to remember that even if an archive lacks specialised, sophisticated technology, everyday maintenance is vital!

As you move further along your journey, you may encounter questions that we have not covered in this handbook. For more specialised expertise, we have included links to advanced guides in our [Further Resources](#) section.

Happy archiving!

GLOSSARY

ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility in the archive refers to how easy it is to retrieve information you need from the collections. Well-designed catalogues are key to this, as they make navigating the archive easier.

ARCHIVE

Archives come in many different forms and serve as a space for preserving and accessing records of enduring value. They are often attached to institutions like museums, foundations, or governments, but can also exist as collecting archives that work to accrue records under a specific theme or goal. AAA is a collecting archive.

ANALOGUE MATERIAL

Analogue material refers to media and technical systems that record, transmit, or represent information using continuously variable physical quantities, such as voltage or gear rotation. Analogue material holds information that is not encoded digitally and requires physical contact or specific mechanical equipment to retrieve. Examples include paper documents, VHS tapes, and compact cassettes.

CATALOGUE

A catalogue is a structured directory of archival holdings. A catalogue keeps track of your collection, presenting the scope of your archive and ensuring you do not host duplicates or records that do not fit in with your collections policy.

DEPOSITOR

A depositor refers to the person or organisation that passes external records to your archive. Though the depositor may not always be the record creator, they will be a key contact for establishing access rights to the records in question.

DIGITAL MATERIAL

Digital material refers to media encoded in binary digits (consisting of “0s” and “1s”), which must be decoded and rendered using computer hardware and software. Different file formats are used to preserve the unique properties of the material, such as JPEG for images or MP4 for videos. Digital material can be divided into two categories—born digital material and digital surrogates. Some digital materials are held in physical carriers, such as DVDs, mini DVs, and CDs.

BORN-DIGITAL MATERIAL

Born digital material refers to items that were originally from a digital source, with examples like emails, spreadsheets, and digital photography.

DIGITAL SURROGATES

Digital surrogates are materials that were originally analogue in nature, but have since been converted to digital formats for archival purposes. These include scanned documents and video files converted from VHS tapes.

FILE FORMATS

Digital materials are encoded in different file formats to serve different functions. File formats can be open source (JPEG, PDF, TIFF, etc.), proprietary-open (DOCX, XLSX, etc.) or proprietary-closed (PSD, PPT, etc.), and knowing which is which can help you establish access to a file.

INGEST

Ingest is the term used for the transfer of materials from depositor to archive. Ideally, ingest follows a standard procedure to ensure both parties know the exact contents being transferred, their original provenance and order, and the rights and licenses covering said materials.

RECORD

A record contains information that is created, received, and maintained by an organisation or individual as evidence of any transaction or activity. Records may be established and preserved due to legal requirements and serve as evidence in legal or business contexts. They can also exist in various carriers, including digital.

FAQ

How do I make a decision on which materials to keep in my archive? What if something becomes valuable in the future, and I throw it away today?

The archive is by nature a project that will never be complete, as it is simply not possible to record and keep everything forever.

One way to think about this is simply considering what the most sustainable method of maintaining an archival practice looks like for you. Take into account space, funding, and time. If I keep this volume of records for this project, and it takes me this long to process, can I see myself sustaining this practice for all my future endeavours?

How do I archive intangible and conceptual works, such as performance art or site-specific installation?

It can be argued that these works cannot be archived, as the unique relationship between time, space, and body cannot be recreated through a document. However, some information can still be preserved through materials such as artist statements, event photography, recordings, and notes. For reference, you can explore the Lee Wen Archive or the Ray Langenbach Performance Art Archive to see what has been recorded there.

I work in an art space, and the records are created and handled by different people—how can we consolidate all the materials together?

If your archive is a group endeavour, it is important to discuss the guidelines and procedures together beforehand, so that everyone is on the same page. You should all agree on your reasons for making an archive and understand the importance of adhering to the guidelines you write together. Schedule regular check-ins to ensure records are being managed and processed properly, and designate a storage space that is accessible to everyone involved in the project.

How long does it take to build an archive?

Archives can take anywhere from weeks to years to build, and they depend on a number of factors, such as scale, human resources, and accessibility. The Ha Bik Chuen Archive's goal was to make all records on the item level accessible online. It comprised over six hundred boxes and took over seven years for us to launch! And there are still parts that remain unprocessed due to their sheer volume. Hopefully this handbook encourages people to start thinking about their archives earlier and makes things easier down the road.

I have limited funding and time, what should I prioritise when building an archive?

With limited resources at hand, focus first on moving your records into a safe and stable storage space, and creating a simple inventory list and backup for fragile materials. Treat any materials that require urgent care and focus on preventing further decay. Once conditions are stabilised, you can then focus on slowly processing and writing descriptions, starting from the top level downwards.

How do I handle an archive that contains both digital and physical materials?

The catalogue that you create for your archive centralises all relevant information, and should have a field for location, whether that is a file path on your computer or a physical shelf on your cabinet. If your physical collection is large, you can number and name your boxes and shelves.

How do I handle access to records that might double as artworks?

For mediums like video art or photography, it may be difficult to decide how to handle access to the archival copy due to its potential commercial value. Ultimately, the decision will rely on a mutual understanding and discussion between artist and archive. For example, AAA has the full copy of some of Ellen Pau's video artworks but only makes them accessible on-site. Other archives might make public a lower resolution copy, or one with a watermark, and keep the archival copy to a by-request basis.

FURTHER RESOURCES

1. Archive Organisations & Research Resources

Archives Association of British Columbia Archivist's Toolkit:
<https://aabc.ca/Archivist-Toolkit>

ARCHIVO Photography and Visual Culture Research Platform: <https://www.archivoplatform.com>

Art Libraries Society UK & Ireland: <https://arlis.net>

Hong Kong Archives Society: <https://www.archives.org.hk>

International Council on Archives: <https://www.ica.org>

International Council on Archives, East Asian Regional Branch: <http://www.eastica.net/home/main.php>

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions: <https://www.ifla.org>

Preservation and Conservation Division, HKU Libraries: <https://lib.hku.hk/preservation/index.html>

Society of American Archivists: <https://www2.archivists.org>

UNESCO Memory of the World Programme: <https://www.unesco.org/en/memory-world>

2. Digital Preservation

Digital Preservation Coalition: <https://www.dpconline.org>

Federal Agencies Digital Guidelines Initiative: <https://www.digitizationguidelines.gov>

Internet Archive: <https://archive.org>

3. Government Archives

Government Records Service of the Government of the HKSAR: <https://www.grs.gov.hk>

Guangzhou Archives: <https://www.gzdaj.gov.cn>

National Archives Administration of China: <https://www.saac.gov.cn>

The UK National Archives: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk>

The US National Archives and Records Administration: <https://www.archives.gov>

WORKSHEET

11/F Hollywood Centre, 233 Hollywood Road, Sheung Wan

Tel: +852 2844 1112, Email: info@aaa.org.hk

Opening Hours: 10AM–6PM, Monday–Saturday

What is the goal of your archive?

1. to keep a record of my activities

2. to document a community/individual/event/etc. history

3. to open access to a specific history

4. to support research in a certain field

other:

If your archive has a specific content priority, elaborate here:

Who is your target audience?

1. the general public

2. a specialised field

3. family and friends

4. myself

others:

What formats do you have?

Analogue

photographic negatives/slides

contact sheets

film

video tapes

cassette tapes

photographs

paper documents

Digital

websites

movie files

audio files

image files

text files

spreadsheets

emails

forums

e-journals

3D models/scans

hard drives

floppy disks

CD/DVD-ROMs

Archive Information

Name:

Date created:

Region (keeping in mind related laws):

Estimated frequency for upkeep:

Daily

Weekly

Monthly

Scheduled check-in dates:

How much space do you have?

Digital

Physical

How much does it cost? (est.)

6 months

1 year

3 years

10 years

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