Conservation of Time-Based Media Art

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Institutional Assessments and Collection Surveys for Time-Based Media Conservation

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INSTITUTIONAL ASSESSMENTS AND COLLECTION SURVEYS FOR TIME-BASED MEDIA CONSERVATION

Lia Kramer, Alexandra Nichols, Mollie Anderson, Nora Kennedy, Lorena Ramírez López, and Glenn Wharton

Editors’ Notes: To address the preservation needs of its fast-growing TBM collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York conducted a major collection survey and institutional assessment in 2017–18. The project identified necessary staff and infrastructure adjustments and resulted in the creation of a permanent TBM conservator position. Based on their first-hand experience as project participants and drawing from conservation literature and numerous interviews with collection professionals around the world, the authors of this chapter offer a roadmap for tackling complex TBM collections of unknown conditions and preservation needs.

Met staff at that time included Nora Kennedy (Sherman Fairchild Conservator in Charge of the Department of Photograph Conservation, The Metropolitan Museum of Art) and Mollie Anderson (now Executive Assistant at Weights & Biases, Inc.), as well as Alexandra Nichols (now Time-Based Media Conservator at Tate, London), who at the time was a Sherman Fairchild Foundation Fellow in Conservation at the Met. Lia Kramer (now Andrew W. Mellon Fellow in Media Conservation at MoMA, New York) and Lorena Ramírez López (now Consultant for Digital Preservation and Conservation, Myriad Consulting) were hired as project contractors, and Glenn Wharton (now Professor of Art History at UCLA and Chair of the UCLA/Getty Conservation of Cultural Heritage Program, LA) acted as an external assessor.

4.1 Introduction to TBM Conservation Assessments and Surveys

Acquiring, exhibiting, and caring for time-based media (TBM) artworks can be a daunting challenge for many institutions. To non-specialists, TBM artworks can easily be misconceived as nothing more than simple digital files. In reality, even single-channel videos are often complex, requiring extensive documentation, research, and ongoing attention to preserve them. The dependence of these works on compatible technologies, obsolescence-threatened equipment, and thorough display guidelines puts them at high risk, particularly as time passes. Moreover, because professional TBM conservators have only recently begun to work in museums, many
Institutional assessments and conservation surveys are vital investments in the survival of these artworks. They form an important first step toward understanding TBM collections, allowing conservators to identify the needs of these collections, evaluate institutional policies and procedures, and advocate for funding and staff resources. Ultimately, they can help museums and other collecting institutions build TBM conservation initiatives, develop effective conservation strategies, and ensure the ongoing care, accessibility, and exhibition of TBM artworks.

From 2017 to 2018, the authors of this chapter conducted a combined TBM institutional assessment and collection survey at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. During this project, the authors interviewed key staff members, evaluated existing policies and practices relating to TBM conservation and care, and examined the collection holdings (see fig. 4.1), identifying risks posed to the collection and areas for further documentation and care (Kramer et al. 2021). The recommendations put forth in the final report helped improve practices and attitudes toward TBM conservation, and as a result, the Met hired its first TBM conservator in 2019. Through this chapter, we hope to share our experience and provide proposed methodologies for surveys and assessments that can be applied to a range of collecting institutions. We begin with traditional methods developed for cultural heritage institutions and how they can be adapted to serve the unique needs of TBM collections. We then provide guidelines for planning and executing institutional assessments and collection surveys, along with implementing recommendations in the final report.

4.2 Foundational Methodologies for Conservation Assessments and Surveys for Cultural Heritage Collections

Conservation assessments and surveys are commonly utilized for a wide range of collection types such as museums, historic houses, libraries and archives, and materials including paintings, sculptures, textiles, books, paper, and photographs. There are several well-established methodologies for conducting these evaluations.

4.2.1 Conservation Assessments

In 1990, the Foundation for Advancement in Conservation (FAIC) and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) developed the Collections Assessment for Preservation (CAP) program to encourage a more holistic approach toward collection care with broad, general
conservation surveys of collections and museum environments, as opposed to item-by-item collection surveys which examine the condition of individual objects (Berrett 1994).

The FAIC/IMLS CAP program handbook advises that the assessment team should be composed of three individuals who work collaboratively on the assessment: a collection assessor, a building assessor, and a key staff member of the museum (FAIC 2019, 4). The collection assessor is an external specialist working alongside on-site staff members. They provide professional expertise with broad organizational evaluations and an outside perspective that can carry more weight with upper administration or board members (FAIC 2019). The building assessor is responsible for examining the condition of the building envelope and historical environmental data, which is then compared to the risks that materials in the collection face. The key staff member’s role is to provide information about current policies, schedule interviews with other staff members, and facilitate access to various areas of the museum during any on-site visits. The final report, written by the collection assessor and building assessor, provides a summary of the current state of the collection and the building envelope and identifies ways in which collection care can be improved. For more information on this subject, see related publications by the Getty Conservation Institute (Avrami et al. 1999), the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (Brokerhoff et al. 2017), and the Council for Museums, Archives, and Libraries (CMAL 2018).
4.2.2 Collection Surveys

Conservators use collection surveys to achieve a variety of goals, such as creating an updated inventory of a collection, evaluating the condition of objects, cataloging components, identifying risks faced by a collection, and prioritizing objects for conservation treatment. Typically, these surveys do not address larger institutional issues such as policies, procedures, and the building envelope. Staff conservators or collection managers commonly complete these surveys, but institutions frequently utilize contract conservators as well.

There is no uniform standard for collection surveys (American Museum of Natural History—Collection Surveys n.d.), but they generally fall into one of the following five categories:

1. A broad, general inventory is used to first identify the scope of a collection and is especially helpful when a collection is first being formed when a large donation is entering the collection, or if there has been inconsistent documentation and registration of the collection in the past. This category of collection survey covers high-level “tombstone” information, such as the name of the artist/creator, culture or region of origin, the date of creation, and the appropriate medium line.

2. Some surveys may focus on a specific type or group of materials, such as a survey to identify works that contain precarious plastics or to identify objects that contain ivory and, therefore, would be subject to government regulations.

3. A storage survey evaluates how items are being stored, assesses whether custom housing is required, and approximates the amount of space available within a specific unit or warehouse.

4. A condition survey focuses on the current condition of objects, estimates the amount of labor required to make a particular object suitable for exhibition or loan, and identifies objects that should be prioritized for treatment.

5. A risk assessment survey calculates the likelihood of future damage based upon the severity of damage from “agents of deterioration” (CCI—Agents of Deterioration 2017) and the frequency of occurrence (Ashley-Smith 2013, Brokerhoff et al. 2017). Often, risk assessments include recommendations for mitigating the risks identified (Taylor 2005; Waller 1994; Xavier-Rowe and Fry 2011; Digital Preservation Coalition—DCP Rapid Assessment Model 2021).

Collection surveys are very flexible and can vary in scope, but they are generally time-consuming and labor-intensive. Staff members working with particularly large collections may adopt certain methods to complete surveys quickly and efficiently. One option is to conduct a sample survey rather than examine every item in the collection. This may include evaluating a certain number of objects per drawer or shelf or creating a random sample to evaluate (Henderson 2000). Another approach is the so-called modified McGinley method, in which the surveyor does not provide detailed information about each artwork but instead assigns each object a numerical score that corresponds with a predefined condition status (Favret et al. 2007; Waller 1995; Carter and Walker 1999).

The results of a collection survey can be summarized in a final report that details the state of the collection and highlights artworks that are in need of immediate treatment, thereby informing institutional priorities going forward.
4.3 Frameworks for TBM Conservation Institutional Assessments and Collection Surveys

4.3.1 TBM Conservation Institutional Assessments

Our suggested methodology for TBM conservation institutional assessments is strongly influenced by the methodologies developed for the FAIC/IMLS CAP program. An institutional assessment for TBM collections differs from a traditional CAP assessment in that the institutional assessment is led by a TBM conservator and employs a digital archivist or IT specialist as the second assessor rather than a building assessor. This reflects the importance of digital storage and preservation in TBM collection practices.

Ideally, the institutional assessment is conducted by an independent TBM conservator who liaises with a member of the institution’s conservation or collection care staff (such as registrars or collection managers). Independent specialists have the advantage of greater objectivity and the cachet of being an outside expert with greater potential for advocacy. If there are no TBM conservators in the region or if a contractor is not a feasible expense for the institution, several initial steps can still be accomplished by staff members that will increase awareness of TBM artwork needs, improve practices, and provide data to justify a future assessment; see Sections 4.4, “Conducting a TBM Institutional Assessment,” and 4.5, “Conducting a TBM Collection Survey,” for more details.

Institutional assessments for TBM collections focus on evaluating the organizational policies and procedures in place at an institution, including acquisition and collection care policies, resource allocation, staff hierarchy, and organization, and how an institution’s operations align with its mission statement. The assessment also is geared toward identifying needs for equipment to view media for condition assessments and to display the artworks in the gallery. Finally, institutional assessments evaluate the storage conditions of a collection by examining not only the storage vaults that house media carriers and sculptural components but also the digital storage utilized for preserving media files.

It is important to include the perspective of stakeholders across a wide range of roles and departments when evaluating policies and procedures. Curators, collection managers, conservators, audiovisual specialists, and registrars can all make valuable contributions and will have amassed institutional knowledge through their involvement in the artworks’ acquisition and past exhibition. Input from a digital archivist or IT specialist, ideally with experience working with TBM collections, is recommended to facilitate communication with other technical staff and provide advice for improvements to digital preservation practices. The final report summarizes the existing procedures, identifies deficiencies, and recommends concrete actions the institution can take to refine and upgrade its practices.

“From my digital design background, we have been taught that all the digital or technology products couldn’t be done by one person, it’s always a team. I always think it is very funny that someone expects that a conservator can be proficient in all kinds of mediums. So I continue to tell all of my colleagues that these products and digital files are not designed by one person, so people who want to conserve them should also be a team, not an individual.”
—Yuhsien Chen, Freelance Time-based Media Conservator, Taipei, Taiwan
4.3.2 TBM Conservation Collection Surveys

In contrast to the institutional assessment, a TBM conservation collection survey is an audit focusing on individual artworks rather than the greater museum environment. This item-by-item survey seeks to document the makeup and condition of the collection; what media carriers, sculptural components, or dedicated equipment are present; and what supporting internal documentation is available.

Collection surveys for TBM collections require special considerations beyond those of more traditional media. In addition to focusing on the preservation of physical components, TBM surveys also examine digital files and intangible conceptual aspects that may be central to the artwork. Each of these components, whether analog or digital, requires a thorough cataloging review for accurate tracking and historical record (Sherring et al. 2018). The artwork might rely on unique or obsolete hardware or software for display. Taking stock of available viewing, playback, and display equipment will inform conservation purchasing needs and in-house migration capacity relative to the size of the collection.

Documentation plays an important role in transmitting and communicating the understanding of the conceptual aspects of a TBM artwork, particularly how it may be displayed and preserved and what conservation interventions are appropriate. This supplementary documentation is integral to the preservation and continued ability to display TBM artworks and thus should form a significant portion of any TBM collection survey. Such documentation may include noting the existence of any acquisition agreements, copyright agreements, recordings or transcripts of artist interviews or correspondence, installation specifications, conservation treatment reports, and documentation of past displays. If the collection does not have policies for creating and maintaining this documentation, a TBM institutional assessment may be needed.

Prior to embarking on an institutional assessment or collection survey, an institution should consider the formation of a TBM working group. TBM working groups are composed of institutional stakeholders from a range of departments who have a vested interest in the continued acquisition, care, and display of TBM artworks. Its members may include conservators, curators, collection managers, registrars, audiovisual specialists, exhibition designers, and members of the legal team, among others. TBM working groups can function as a means of support and education, through which its members can share concerns, address challenges arising from specific artworks and exhibitions, and develop policies and procedures relating to TBM artworks. Holding regular working group meetings can help build relationships and foster consensus across departments, and advocate for continued focus on the issues surrounding TBM artworks (see Chapter 10).

“I started in 2015 as the first full-time art conservator for the Portland Art Museum in Oregon. We didn’t have any specific funding or dedicated time for this project, so we had to be very strategic and focused with what we could do. It was very clear that the approximately 25 TBM artworks had been overlooked and needed some attention. Since I was new, it was a good opportunity to compile a working group so we could talk about these issues. I approached people individually to talk about how this might impact their work and what they would like to get out of the group. When we met all together I made sure for everybody to have a voice. That helped to make sure that there was buy-in; everybody wanted to participate and help it work. Looking back, the small size of the institution was beneficial to our success. With a smaller staff and fewer levels of hierarchy,
Assessments and Surveys

it was easier to communicate and collaborate than I had experienced in larger organizations. Several departments had only one person, which helped our team feel empowered to make change once we identified our needs. I used the Matters in Media Art collection survey document (Matters in Media Art 2015) to inform my approach. As I went through the collection object-by-object, I was able to consult with these colleagues who had institutional knowledge of the work and could collaborate to put policies into place. Having that support was the key to success.”

—Samantha Springer, Owner and Principal Conservator of Art Solutions Lab, Portland, Oregon

“The first conversations with management around setting up an interdepartmental task-force to tackle issues related to the acquisition, display, documentation and preservation of TBM objects started in summer 2017. Later that year, then Senior Conservator Christel Pesme and then TBM Conservator Shu-Wen Lin organised an international symposium to introduce the institution to the current discourses and practices related to TBM conservation. In 2018, Pesme and then TBM Conservator Yuhshien Chen established the Time-based Media Committee, which is an interdepartmental platform among Curatorial, Conservation, Registration, Databases, Digital Team, Rights and Reproductions, IT, and Installations departments. Through this platform, David [Smith] and I have worked with other departments to develop cross-departmental workflows for TBM conservation. We had a huge help from our registrarial and curatorial teams. As we’re a new museum, we had to design everything from scratch, departmental roles are in flux—our very special circumstance means that we’re still learning. Conservation has taken a leading role in proposing solutions and workflows to outline who is doing what, from the very moment that you pull a hard drive out of storage, to how it is brought to the conservation station, how the hard drive’s contents are ingested . . . how to store information about the hard drive and where—what is going to TMS, and what is going to our object files. It took a while to design these processes and they were quite complex.”

—Aga Wielocha, Conservator, Preventive, and David Smith, Conservator, Time-Based Media, M+ Museum, Hong Kong

4.3.3 Organizing the Institutional Assessment or Collection Survey

TBM institutional assessments and collection surveys (see Table 4.1. for a comparison of core characteristics of both) require an array of resources. For a collection survey, one may need to consider whether the institution has staff members with specialized knowledge and experience examining, evaluating, and caring for TBM artworks and whether they are able to set aside time to contribute to such a project. Similarly, an institutional assessment will also require a significant time investment from staff and outside contractors and may require institutional support for grant applications or other fundraising efforts to hire an external TBM conservator as the primary assessor. External consultants have the advantage of an impartial, third-party perspective, and their critiques and recommendations are often better received by colleagues and leadership than that of existing staff. Although an experienced TBM conservator is necessary to properly evaluate the condition of media files or advise on institutional practices relating to TBM artworks, initial steps toward more in-depth projects can be completed by conservators in
Whether planning an institutional assessment or collection survey, the collection will benefit if the methodology and structure of the project are tailored to the resources, needs, and structure or composition of the institution or collection. Table 4.2 details the staff and resources recommended for each type of evaluation.

An initial or limited collection survey can also be utilized to advocate for additional funding and support to conduct a more in-depth survey or institutional assessment. Some basic statistics about the collection, knowledge of its importance to the institution and the public, and an evaluation of the inherent risks of TBM collections are useful in creating compelling arguments.

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**Table 4.1 Core characteristics of a TBM institutional assessment and a collection survey in comparison**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Assessment</th>
<th>Collection Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- A holistic evaluation of the entire institution as it pertains to TBM artworks.</td>
<td>- Evaluates the condition of individual artworks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Evaluates established policies and procedures relating to TBM acquisition, exhibition,</td>
<td>- Creates an inventory of the collection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conservation, and collection management.</td>
<td>- Identifies analog and digital media carriers present.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Examines staffing and other resources for TBM conservation.</td>
<td>- Tests media carriers for the ability to access content; evaluates the quality of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Builds awareness and support across departments.</td>
<td>content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Assesses suitability of physical storage vaults for media carriers and display equipment.</td>
<td>- Evaluates the condition of artist-modified or dedicated display equipment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Assesses suitability of digital storage infrastructure (servers, LTO tapes, etc.) and</td>
<td>- Prioritizes artworks for digitization or other conservation interventions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>preservation practices for digital artwork files.</td>
<td>- Assesses risks to individual artworks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Gauges TBM-related equipment purchasing needs.</td>
<td>- Creates an inventory of any display equipment used for the exhibition of TBM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Identifies funding and staffing deficiencies.</td>
<td>artworks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Provides prioritized long- and short-term recommendations for improvements.</td>
<td>- May provide prioritized long- and short-term recommendations for improvements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Provides information about the collection that can be used to do the following:</td>
<td>- Provides information about the collection that can be used to do the following:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Advocate for funding.</td>
<td>○ Advocate for funding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Advocate for improved storage.</td>
<td>○ Advocate for improved storage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Aid in writing grant proposals.</td>
<td>○ Aid in writing grant proposals.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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“My initial goal was just to bring awareness to the fragility of the objects and to get a sense of what we had and whether it was stored properly and not sitting on someone’s desk or in a file folder. The second goal was to consider what was being requested at acquisition. The third goal was to educate colleagues about and create protocols for various file types, handling, accessibility, sharing, and storage. I looked at it as slowly, stepwise putting those things into place to first raise awareness and create a baseline to then consider what we could do to protect the collection.”

—Samantha Springer, Owner and Principal Conservator of Art Solutions Lab, Portland, Oregon

Whether planning an institutional assessment or collection survey, the collection will benefit if the methodology and structure of the project are tailored to the resources, needs, and structure or composition of the institution or collection. Table 4.2 details the staff and resources recommended for each type of evaluation.
### Assessments and Surveys

**Table 4.2 Necessary project staff and resources**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Institutional Assessment</th>
<th>Collection Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Existing Staff</strong></td>
<td>• Conservator, curator, collection manager, and/or registrar to act as liaison to the assessor(s).&lt;br&gt;• IT specialist or digital archivist to advise on digital preservation of TBM artworks.</td>
<td>• TBM conservator (ideal).&lt;br&gt;• Conservator in a related specialization, collection manager, registrar, digital archivist, audiovisual specialist, or curator (dependent upon the individual level of expertise and scope of the survey).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **External Consultants** | • An experienced TBM conservator to act as primary assessor (ideal).<br>• Digital archivist or preservation specialist, if not available on staff. | • An experienced TBM conservator will be required to complete technical evaluations and condition assessments of TBM artworks if not available on staff.  
|                       |                                                                                         | • Artists, programmers, and others with specialized expertise may be consulted. |
| **Time Commitment**   | • Time commitment for on-site assessment work will vary based on assessors (internal vs. external, part-time vs. full-time). Depending on the size of the collection, this may be concentrated over a week or weeks or extended over a longer period of time.  
|                       | • Existing staff must be willing to participate in interviews and act as liaisons for assessor(s), providing existing policies and procedures and access to internal documents and storage spaces.  
|                       | • Ample time should be devoted to writing and editing the final report and may extend weeks or months beyond the assessment. | • Time commitment will vary based upon the hiring of external contractors or utilization of existing staff members and the amount of time they are able to devote to the survey. Depending on the size of the collection and their availability, this may be concentrated over a week or weeks or extended over a longer period of time.  
|                       |                                                                                         | • Facilitators/liaisons across collecting departments may need to have overlapping availability with surveyor(s).  
|                       |                                                                                         | • Ample time should be devoted to writing and editing any final report, spreadsheets, or other summary documents and may extend weeks or months beyond the survey. |
| **Material Resources** | • Desk, table, or another workspace.  
|                       | • A private room to conduct interviews with key staff members.  
|                       | • Access to physical storage vaults.  
|                       | • Access to a networked computer to examine and evaluate the digital storage environment and content management system. | • Desk, table, or another workspace to examine TBM artwork materials and documentation.  
|                       |                                                                                         | • Access to a networked computer to examine digital documentation of TBM artworks and content management system.  
|                       |                                                                                         | • A forensic write blocker.  
|                       |                                                                                         | • Access to physical storage vaults and the digital storage environment.  
|                       |                                                                                         | • If evaluating the content of TBM artworks (“the media”), a viewing workstation with equipment able to play back analog and digital content. |
| **Funding**           | • Compensation for the assessor(s).  
|                       | • Cost for transcribing interviews.                                                    | • Compensation for the surveyor(s).  
|                       |                                                                                         | • Purchase of a write blocker or viewing equipment. |
4.4 Conducting a TBM Institutional Assessment

A TBM institutional assessment guides an organization toward developing strategies for improved care and display of TBM artworks. The assessment helps staff focus efforts on the immediate needs of the collection, such as obtaining master-quality files or backing up artist-provided materials, as well as achieve longer-term goals, such as establishing permanent staff positions, creating a TBM conservation lab, or building a digital repository.

An institutional assessment consists of five phases:

- Phase 1: Information-gathering prior to the assessment.
- Phase 2: Interviews with key staff members.
- Phase 3: Examination of museum spaces, storage, and infrastructure.
- Phase 4: Crafting the final report.
- Phase 5: Follow-up.

4.4.1 Phase 1: Information-Gathering Prior to the Assessment

To establish a baseline for the assessment, the assessors will need to review the institution’s mission statement and established policies, digital storage practices, and staffing levels, roles, and responsibilities. To assist with this, the on-site liaison should provide the assessors with access to existing acquisition workflows, acquisition agreements and contracts, legal agreements, and artwork documentation templates. The assessors should meet with the institution’s TBM working group or current practitioners to review the state of TBM care and gauge staff members’ needs and interests. The perspectives and concerns of the institution’s stakeholders will influence the structure and focus of the interviews to be conducted during the on-site visit. Goals and deliverables for the assessment and the intended audience for the final report should be clearly defined at this stage.

4.4.2 Phase 2: Interviews with Key Staff Members

Confidential staff interviews, conducted by the assessors, form the core of the institutional assessment. Interviewees are most likely to be candid when speaking with an external assessor rather than an internal colleague. Interviewees may include members of the upper administration, curatorial, exhibition design, registrarial, collection management, legal, conservation, IT, and audiovisual departments. It is best to arrange a private, quiet space for one-on-one interviews so that staff members feel comfortable speaking freely about current TBM conservation practices and needs. The interviews should be recorded to assist in report writing and extracting quotes to support final recommendations. Interviewees should be assured of the confidentiality of these conversations. Interview topics may include the following:

- The staff member’s understanding of TBM artworks and related conservation issues.
- The nature and time commitment of each staff member’s involvement with TBM.
- What challenges or accomplishments the staff member experience when working with TBM artworks.
• What policies and procedures govern their work.
• What TBM-related equipment is currently utilized or needed.
• The nature and level of collaboration with other departments.
• The budgeting and staffing needs in the staff member’s department.
• The need for any future improvements.

Depending on the department or person interviewed, the discussion may also cover acquisition, storage, documentation, exhibition, loan, and conservation intervention practices or needs.

4.4.3 Phase 3: Examination of Museum Spaces, Storage, and Infrastructure

During their time on-site, the assessors visit storage vaults to examine housing and environmental conditions for storage of tape media, external hard drives, and display equipment. They also visit conservation labs and exhibition spaces to learn more about the institution’s capabilities for inspecting, treating, and displaying TBM artworks.

The assessors work together to inspect digital storage servers and infrastructure. The staff liaison walks them through digital preservation and cataloging workflows, detailing how digital files are transferred from artist-provided devices, how technical metadata is gathered and stored, file-naming conventions, and what digital preservation practices, such as fixity checks and file redundancy, are in place. The assessors also examine the institution’s content management system to see how media carriers, digital files, and other TBM artwork components are identified, described, and tracked by the collection’s registrars.

If more time and resources are available, an expanded assessment may be conducted in addition, incorporating a collection survey alongside the assessment during the on-site visit. For those with limited budgets or time constraints, a smaller, more focused assessment addressing just one aspect of TBM conservation, such as acquisition procedures or digital storage policies can nonetheless be impactful and serve as an important step to improving TBM practices and building support for additional resources or funding for a TBM contractor or staff position.

4.4.4 Phase 4: Crafting the Final Institutional Assessment Report

The final report should include an executive summary for senior staff who may not read the entire report, an overview of the project, a description of the collection, a detailed evaluation of current practices as compared to best practices in TBM conservation, and short- and long-term recommendations, all written with input from staff interviews. When possible, institutional practices should be compared to industry standards. Quoting department heads from staff interviews in the final report can alert upper administration and board members to the broad support of the report’s recommendations. Quotes detailing staff experiences and challenges working with time-based media can be used to illustrate recommendations. If such quotes are used, permission must be obtained, and interviewees should have a chance to edit the quotes. Common threads from multiple conversations can be distilled to reflect concurrence.

When formulating final report recommendations, the assessors should consider the capabilities and workload of the individuals that will be tasked with meeting the goals. Based on the staff interviews, they can help existing staff define roles and responsibilities for various stakeholders across the institution. Creating a chart of responsibilities to define roles for all stakeholders can be a useful tool for this discussion (see Table 4.3).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acquisition Paperwork</th>
<th>Artwork Intake</th>
<th>Documentation</th>
<th>Physical Storage</th>
<th>Digital Storage</th>
<th>In-House Exhibitions</th>
<th>Outgoing Loans</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservation</td>
<td>• Determines deliverables.</td>
<td>• Processes delivery and intake of artwork.</td>
<td>• Generates checksums and metadata reports.</td>
<td>• Labels and rehouses all physical components.</td>
<td>• Creates installation instructions.</td>
<td>• Completes loan evaluations.</td>
<td>• Conducts conservation interventions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Drafts Identity Report.</td>
<td>• Verifies deliverables.</td>
<td>• Researches artwork.</td>
<td>• Monitors digital files to the digital repository.</td>
<td>• Conducts condition assessments.</td>
<td>• Conducts condition assessments.</td>
<td>• Migrates artworks from at-risk technological formats to preservation formats.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Identifies artwork risks.</td>
<td>• Conducts condition assessments.</td>
<td>• Conducts artist interviews.</td>
<td>• Monitors T/RH for storage locations.</td>
<td>• Creates installation instructions.</td>
<td>• Creates installation instructions.</td>
<td>• Acts as courier/ installer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Assigns TMS components.</td>
<td>• Attaches documentation to TMS record.</td>
<td>• Migrates digital files in collaboration with Digital and IS&amp;T.</td>
<td>• Advises exhibition design.</td>
<td>• Completes Iteration Report.</td>
<td>• Completes Iteration Report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collections Management</td>
<td>• Sends acquisition documents to artist or artist representative.</td>
<td>• Processes artwork intake.</td>
<td>• Retains a copy of all acquisition paperwork for the department files.</td>
<td>• Labels and rehouses all physical components.</td>
<td>• Completes Iteration Report.</td>
<td>• Generates outgoing loan paperwork.</td>
<td>• Liaises with artists and borrowing institutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Creates temporary TMS record.</td>
<td>• Documents deliverables.</td>
<td>• Requests replacement deliverables.</td>
<td>• Manages component locations in TMS.</td>
<td>• Oversees internal artwork moves.</td>
<td>• Updates TMS artwork locations.</td>
<td>• Processes incoming loans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registrar</td>
<td>• Arranges artwork delivery.</td>
<td>• Requests replacement deliverables.</td>
<td>• Conducts artist interviews.</td>
<td>• Manages component locations in TMS.</td>
<td>• Processes outgoing loans.</td>
<td>• Oversees artwork shipping and insurance.</td>
<td>• Processes outgoing loans.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3: TBM conservation roles and responsibilities. Chart created by Alexandra Nichols during the institutional assessment conducted at The Metropolitan Museum of Art from 2017 to 2018. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Design</td>
<td>Maintains database for digital repository.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital</td>
<td>Maintains hardware for digital repository. Manages LTO tapes. Conducts regular fixity checks. Creates exhibition files for gallery installations and outgoing loans. Assists the conservator with artwork migrations and treatment interventions when needed. Collaborates with conservation on changes to the digital repository.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Systems and Technology</td>
<td>Creates acquisition contracts. Approves modifications to legal documents. Authorizes final payment to the seller only once all components pass condition assessment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The final report also should provide a plan for how the institution can address any backlog of TBM conservation actions. The assessors may recommend the establishment of temporary or permanent staff positions to apply newly established standards to the existing collection of artworks, train permanent staff in the updated practices, and address workloads for upcoming acquisitions, displays, and loans of TBM artworks. Underlining the ways in which a TBM conservator could relieve current staff of some of these responsibilities and improve institutional excellence can generate support from colleagues.

Finally, a draft of the report should be reviewed by all stakeholders to ensure that all reporting is accurate and that all viewpoints are represented correctly. This practice not only increases the veracity of the report but also creates a sense of teamwork and collaboration in compiling the data that ideally will provide broad support and pave a positive path forward for the institution.

“For the assessment I completed at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, there are two intended audiences for the final report—the first audience is the conservator at the museum who is directly in charge of the TBM collection, and the second audience is the museum head, as she will need to approve the adoption of any templates suggested in the report. The report consists of five sections. The first section briefly describes why the museum needs to address the preservation needs of the TBM collection. The second section provides an overall review of the status and condition of TFAM’s TBM collection. The third section focuses on the long-term preservation requirements for the digital and physical artwork components, as well as the intangible elements based on the assessment. The fourth chapter gives suggestions for how the staff members caring for these artworks can work cross-departmentally. Although this might be difficult depending on the structure of the museum, I think having a committee from different departments is very important for the care of these artworks. In the fifth section, I provide data about the TFAM collection, especially indicating artworks which are at high risk as potential candidates. Since TFAM is in the middle of a construction project, I will provide some suggestions for how the museum’s new building can be utilized to care for TBM artworks. I will also hold two lectures for museum staff—one is to teach staff the characteristics of TBM works and how to describe TBM works for collections registration, and the second which goes over the very basic risks and threats to the preservation of TBM collections from assessment, documenting, iteration reporting to digital file preservation.”

—Yuhsien Chen, Freelance Time-based Media Conservator, Taipei, Taiwan

4.4.5 Phase 5: Follow-up Visit

Approximately six to twelve months after the dissemination of the final report, the assessor should arrange one or more follow-up visits—either virtual meetings or on-site visits—to check in with staff members and evaluate the institution’s progress toward its goals, as well as the effectiveness of the assessment and report. This follow-up provides an opportunity for staff members to talk about any challenges they may have faced, ask questions, solicit advice for moving forward, and celebrate the progress made so far. It also provides feedback to the assessor to improve their practices when consulting with other institutions in the future. Funding for this visit should be built into the original budget.
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“We have a small, but growing collection of approximately 25 TBM works. I joined the museum in 2018 as the Objects Conservator, and in my initial walk-throughs of the galleries, I could tell that some of the TBM works on display had issues. There had been previous interest in establishing a lab, but ultimately it wasn’t practical for such a small collection without resources for indefinite funding. It seemed like the best strategy was to hire a consultant with a specialization in time-based media. The consultant we hired was contracted to perform an assessment and survey and provide us with recommendations for next steps, including the basics of cataloging and documentation.

“In preparation for the consultant’s visit, I met with the newly established TBM working group which includes staff from IT, library and archives, database management, registration, curatorial, and collections management, and explained the goals of the assessment. The TBM consultant also held a meeting with this group at the start of his week-long visit. This helped everyone feel involved and that their input was valued, and established trust with the consultant. He and I later held individual meetings with stakeholders to answer questions and explain findings. These meetings helped get us all on the same page, which was one of the main goals for the project. The consultant helped us understand roles and responsibilities for each department moving forward.

“The working group allowed me to strengthen cross-departmental relationships and build buy-in. One of the most fruitful activities in terms of engaging everyone in the group was bringing members into collections storage to examine physical components of artwork with me—this was of particular interest to those who did not typically work directly with art objects. Another rewarding experience was working alongside an IT colleague in collections storage to examine and understand the behavior of a computer-based work.

“The consultant’s final report served as a roadmap, helping us recognize what we had accomplished, what improvements we needed to make, and provided recommendations for how to achieve them. We have come to see the advantages of working in a small institution—we can work collaboratively with little bureaucracy—and we now understand how to use our strengths and resources.

“One of the biggest concerns for the collection was that we did not have master materials for several of the artworks. We now have a better idea of what to ask for and have the confidence to reach out to artists and galleries to obtain these materials retroactively and for new acquisitions. The assessment and survey have given us new strength to move forward. We hope to bring on short-term or project-based consultants again in the future who can be dedicated to TBM, and we are now more informed and can submit stronger grant applications to achieve this.”

—Liz Homberger, Objects Conservator, Detroit Institute of Arts

4.5 Conducting a TBM Collection Survey

Depending on the size of the collection and the extent of the survey, several types of documents may be needed to clearly and adequately record and describe survey findings. Individual object reports can be created to describe detailed findings for each artwork and can be written in prose for greater clarity. A spreadsheet is an efficient way to record quantitative data such as the number of tapes of a specific format that are present for each artwork, or a score indicating an
artwork’s priority for treatment. Creating “yes” and “no” columns for completed documents or actions is key for turning findings into easily communicated percentages and visuals. If a scoring system is used, consider color-coding these score assignments within the spreadsheet. Using qualitative data to highlight statistics along with visualizations, such as graphs or pie charts, will concisely drive home the conclusions of the final report—for example, the precariousness of the collection resulting from a lack of dedicated TBM staff.

The format of any spreadsheets and supplementary documents should be reviewed by the institution’s catalogers, registrars, and conservators in advance to ensure that the data can be merged with existing collection management databases. Establishing controlled vocabularies or adopting those created by the institution prior to embarking on the survey will provide consistency in findings and will aid when drawing statistics for the final report. Preparing a survey guide can improve the results by ensuring that the surveyor understands the intended scale and depth of the evaluation and adheres to it consistently. The guide should instruct the surveyor on how to populate designated spreadsheets or templates and assign scores to artworks.

### Case Study 4.1  Recording your Survey Findings

Creating a template for clear and concise reporting of survey findings is strongly recommended. In the 2017–18 TBM collection survey at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Kramer et al. 2021), a summary report, reproduced in Appendix 1, was used to describe the findings for each artwork. The template describes format inventory, risk assessment, component checks, documentation review, and storage assessment, as well as recommendations for treatment, display and research needs, conservation goals, and assigning conservation priorities. This information complemented the concurrent institutional assessment, as it helped underline which policies were already being implemented, what would need to be retroactively addressed, and what still needed improvement. Overview summaries were included in the forms as a way to succinctly convey the artwork’s display and components for individuals that may not have technical backgrounds and would, in the future, be integrated into the Met’s record management system. Data also was recorded in a spreadsheet in order to later collate data for the final report. Recognizing that these individual reports would be unwieldy for collections managers, a ‘quick-reference’ table was created to highlight the most significant findings for each artwork. These summaries, along with individual reports, were distributed to the respective collection departments for their later reference. While the extent of this particular survey may be out of scope for collections with fewer resources, it presents a wide spectrum of possible survey options.

There are several types of TBM collection surveys, which will require different expertise and resources and may be used in any combination to suit the collection’s needs:

#### 4.5.1 Format Inventory and Identification of Migration Needs

High-level surveys such as format inventories or evaluations of digitization needs can be effectively executed with limited resources. These types of surveys can, in some cases, be collaborative efforts. Registrars, collection managers, and conservators in related specialisms may work together with a digital archivist or IT specialist—for example, if a TBM conservation specialist is
not available. The surveyor(s) will need to be able to identify physical and digital media formats and should have an understanding of acceptable master formats, archival standards, and obsolescence risks. There are several resources available to aid in the identification of physical media carriers. Analog and digital tape formats are described in glossaries published by the Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI 2013), the Texas Commission on the Arts (Jimenez and Platt 2004), and the American Institute for Conservation (Vitale and Messier 2007).

4.5.2 Storage and Housing Survey

A storage and housing survey addresses the housing materials and physical environment used to store media carriers and dedicated or artist-modified equipment. This may include indicating whether hard drives and USB flash drives are stored in anti-static bags to prevent them from being affected by electrical discharge, noting whether artwork components are stored in conservation-grade housing materials, ensuring magnetic tapes and films are stored in the correct orientation, and obtaining data on temperature and relative humidity in storage spaces (see fig. 4.2). The Image Permanence Institute’s Media Storage Quick Reference, second edition (Adelstein 2009), describes degradation mechanisms and proper storage conditions for various media carriers (see also Chapter 15).

Figure 4.2 From left to right: Met Collection Manager Catherine Burns, Lorena Ramírez López, and Lia Kramer evaluate film materials stored in The Met’s cool storage.

Image: Naoise Dunne, © The Metropolitan Museum of Art
4.5.3 Documentation Survey

Holding and compiling relevant documentation for TBM works is crucial for their preservation. A simple “yes” or “no” answer can be entered into a spreadsheet to indicate the kind of documentation available. This practice is helpful when tabulating statistics. The resulting data can help identify the level of care the TBM artworks are receiving and highlight any examination and documentation protocols that can be improved. Documentation categories to survey may include acquisition paperwork, technical specifications, file metadata, exhibition parameters, display histories, installation guides, floor plans, artist interview transcripts, video documentation of performances, and other records describing past treatments or displays, such as Identity Reports, Iteration Reports, condition assessment reports, conservation treatment reports, and display specifications. Templates for documenting TBM collections are available online through organizations such as Matters in Media Art (Matters in Media Art 2015) and on the websites of several collecting institutions, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (Guggenheim Museum—Time-Based Media 2011; Guggenheim Museum—CCBA n.d.), The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Metropolitan Museum of Art—Time-Based Media Working Group n.d.), and the Smithsonian Institution (Smithsonian Institution—Preserving and Collecting Time-based Media & Digital Art n.d.).

4.5.4 Equipment Inventory

An equipment survey will assess the condition of artist-modified and dedicated display equipment as well as the availability and condition of non-dedicated obsolete playback equipment at the institution. Creating an up-to-date record of available display equipment is an essential step in establishing a shared audiovisual playback and display equipment pool. The inventory can support efforts to stockpile obsolete equipment, source backups for dedicated or custom equipment, or outfit a lab with format-specific monitors or decks to view content (e.g., from analog and early digital media carriers) more efficiently.

Record all brand names and models for the equipment inventory in a spreadsheet along with their current location, noting which items are unique and artwork-specific and which could be utilized as a part of a general equipment pool. Be sure to obtain user guides and service manuals for all equipment whenever possible (see Chapter 15).

4.5.5 Registration and Cataloging

A registration and cataloging review for TBM artworks verifies that the institution owns all the components that are necessary to preserve and display the works and that these components are consistently cataloged in the institution’s collection management system (ideally with controlled vocabularies) and tracked with locations (physical storage as well as server locations). The surveyor should verify that the institution has collected master and exhibition materials for all artworks and that any artwork files and formats received match the artwork description and acquisition deliverables.

Checksums and metadata reports, such as those generated by MediaInfo (Pozdeev and MediaInfo 2021) or ExifTool (Harvey 2021), can help to check formats and digital files against the expected deliverables (see Chapter 18).

“In the last 3–4 months we have been working with our Databases team, using TMS’s “flex fields” to record each video file’s technical metadata within the object record. We’re...
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Recording the relationships from the source material (e.g., artist’s masters) to derivatives (e.g., migrated materials, exhibition copies, and viewing copies) is vital to monitoring an artwork’s history and integrity. This so-called chain of custody information may be recorded in the institution’s collection management system, text documents, or visual aids, such as media production diagrams (see fig. 4.3).

**4.5.6 Digital Storage**

Digital storage should be evaluated in consultation with a digital archivist, member of the IT department, or some other digital specialist who is knowledgeable about digital preservation practices for cultural heritage institutions. Digital artwork components should not be stored within individual staff members’ personal file folders or storage devices but on a secure artwork server. The surveyor should evaluate current server space capabilities, redundancy, and backup protocols, file fixity practices, and access and security regulations. Adherence to digital storage best practices can be evaluated with the aid of tools such as the National Digital Stewardship Alliance’s Levels of Digital Preservation (NDSA 2020), the National Information Standards Organization’s Framework of Guidance for Building Good Digital Collections (NISO 2007), and the Digital Preservation Coalition’s Rapid Assessment Model (DPC 2021). For detailed information, see Chapter 8 on digital storage and Chapter 13 on digital preservation and the information package.

**4.5.7 Condition Assessment**

Accessing and examining the content of analog tapes, film components, or artwork computers will require specialized equipment and expertise, which may necessitate consultation with a third-party lab or specialist. Part IV in this book offers detailed information on conducting condition assessments on a variety of mediums (see Chapters 18–22). When connecting
artist-provided hard drives and flash drives to a computer, a forensic write blocker (e.g., a Tableau T8u write blocker) should be used to guard against accidental deletion, modification, or corruption (see Chapter 14.4). Digital files may then be tested by viewing a copy in multiple players or editing software, such as VLC, QuickTime, or Adobe Premiere, to at a minimum confirm that they are not corrupted. The content may be spot-checked for anomalies but should be viewed in its entirety when possible.

### 4.5.8 Treatment Prioritization

Collection surveys bring attention to particularly vulnerable works and create an opportunity to advocate for necessary action. When conducting the survey types outlined earlier, certain artworks will begin to emerge as particularly in need of treatment. Artworks in this category may have aging or deteriorating carriers, unique analog or digital media with no copies, a lack of documentation, or insufficient storage. Significant risk is introduced when any one of these conditions is present. If the artwork has not been properly acquired and stored, artwork materials may be impossible to recover should the artist or their representatives be unwilling or unable to provide replacements, while a lack of display documentation threatens the accuracy and authenticity of future installations. A scoring or stoplight color-coding system applied to each artwork will quickly communicate a holistic picture of the state of the collection.

“Media carriers were the main means by which we held our collection, and I knew that the ones in our collection would be past their acceptable life span. What I wanted to instigate was a traffic light system based on the life expectancy of the carriers and how long the work had been in the collection. We created a key, so we had green/low risk—stable or stored according to best practice, which I don’t think anything is—yellow/medium risk, which was partial or total loss imminent within the next five to 10 years, and red/high risk, which is the media carrier’s lifespan has been exceeded, and there was a risk of loss of part or all the artwork and action is required now. And what I expected is what we got, which is largely a sea of red. The aim is that this will go to our leadership team and it’s a very visual, very easy way of them seeing how high risk our collection is.”

—Kirsten Dunne, Senior Projects Conservator, National Galleries of Scotland

### 4.5.9 Crafting the Final Collections Survey Report

Methods for describing findings in the final report should be structured with the final audience and next steps in mind. Who will be able to address the issues identified in the survey? A conservator may want the greatest possible detail about the condition of the artworks in the collection and what documentation is present; a curator or exhibition designer may want exhibition guidelines; a collection manager may want information about storage conditions for physical components; a registrar may need a summary of cataloging and location needs; an IT specialist will want to know about digital storage needs; a member of the upper administration may only want a summary of the institution’s capabilities and needs, along with projected costs for addressing them.

Whatever the approach, gathering statistics of what work is yet to be completed provides support for arguments for funding a TBM staff position or contract work to address these issues. The surveyor should make note of any artworks that are particularly vulnerable or bring...
attention to aspects of TBM stewardship that fall outside of the expertise of current staff members. Worst-case scenarios can have a silver lining here as they add urgency and provide excellent leverage for improving preservation practices.

The final report should include an executive summary and a description of the collection holdings. It should provide a clear outline of short- and long-term steps that can be taken to improve any areas that were found to be lacking. Urgent tasks should be featured. Steps may include reaching out to artists or galleries to gather files or installation instructions, generating documentation, improving cataloging practices, selecting works for digitization or migration, sourcing playback or display equipment, and overhauling digital storage procedures.

“I was initially employed by The Art Gallery of New South Wales, Australia in 2015 on a 6-month part-time contract to undertake a collection survey of the time-based art (TBA) collection and thereby identify gaps and areas for development in collection management and preservation activities. From the perspective of Head of Conservation Carolyn Murphy, the collection survey project served an additional purpose: to develop TBA conservation as a specialisation to address collection needs and following from that to advocate for the need for a permanent role in TBA conservation. Upon reflection, I did not anticipate that as a TBA conservator I would need to acquire advanced skills in advocacy. Moreover, what I presumed would be a short-term collection survey project, actually turned into a complex five-year change management journey for the institution.

“Our approach was to break down what was held in the gallery’s contemporary art collections in order to identify where the inconsistencies were in terms of which artworks were and should be classified as TBA. Once the gallery stakeholders agreed on a definition for ‘time-based art’, I was able to classify 40 additional artworks into the TBA collection. Once that first step was completed, we turned our attention to the Vernon collections database, for the purposes of reviewing terminology and the descriptors the gallery used to manage TBA. A small cross disciplinary team across curatorial, conservation and collection documentation developed standard terminology for the collection and an approach to determine the integral, variable and auxiliary components for an artwork. This was the most complex and, in hindsight, crucial aspect of the project. The magnitude of that task meant that it was easily three months into the survey before I even touched a single artwork!

“As another part of the survey, I investigated the analogue and digital components related to each artwork to ascertain whether the gallery had acquired the work in a master format. Through research and forensic data checks we sought to obtain clarity around what we originally received from the artist, versus what formats had been created at a later date. Specifically, we asked questions like: for how many works in the collection do we only have compressed DVDs, which are not considered a master version? And how many works in the collection currently require digitization or a migration intervention? This part of the survey helped to establish the gallery’s digital storage needs and prioritise funding for the digitisation of analogue carriers. I also gathered data on the documentation related to each artwork. This helped me to identify how many artworks required artist consultation because we didn’t have installation documentation and raised questions as to what the gallery considered standard documentation for TBA.
“Due to the fact that the survey addressed all aspects of TBA—from artwork concept through to media carriers—the results, in conjunction with strong advocacy from Carolyn, supported further project development over the period of 2015–2020. The survey data formed the basis for several secondary conservation survey projects, which created more opportunities for temporary TBA conservation roles to be created. My role was generously supported by gallery benefactors until it was made permanent in July 2018.

“An artist documentation survey followed the initial collection survey. The core TBA project group worked together to establish the base-level documentation requirements including artist created/artist approved installation instructions, a certificate of authenticity, a list of technical specifications etc. Once we had established all of the things we needed, we then surveyed how many works in the collection had this base level of documentation, and how many artworks would require artist/artist studio consultation. Lisa Catt, Curator of International Art, and myself then contacted each artist/artist studio seeking to obtain outstanding material related to an artwork in the collection, including master artwork formats. This was no easy feat as with some artworks 10+ years had passed since acquiring the artwork. We undertook this legacy work at the same time the gallery acquired artworks using our newly established standards.

“The next major survey was undertaken in 2018/2019 to address physical media carrier re-housing and storage, ensuring that all TBA had the new cataloguing system applied. Due to the time-consuming nature of this work, it wasn’t until my colleague Rebecca Barnott-Clement, TBA conservator, began a project-based role with me in early 2018 that we were able to make significant progress on this area of collection care. Rebecca finalised the rehousing, relabeling, and cataloguing of the time-based art collection and conducted a thorough inventory of the collection.

“The most recent major survey is currently being undertaken, which relates to obsolete legacy equipment essential for the functionality and display of many artworks. Project funding through benefaction was obtained for a TBA technician to undertake a survey of all of the artworks in the collection that rely on obsolete equipment. In the same way that the 2015 survey eventually secured the full-time ongoing role of senior TBA conservator, it is my hope that the equipment survey will secure the role of a TBA technician within conservation.

“The survey data has informed all of our procedures and workflows and in a sense, the collection survey has never quite ended, because, as we discuss in the journal paper, “What is the Object?” (Sherring et al. 2018), every time an artwork goes on display, is acquired, or is loaned, TBA conservators use this as our moment to review what we did not receive at acquisition and is still outstanding—master files, documentation, artist interview—and engage the curator and artist in conversation in an attempt to ensure that the artwork can be preserved and displayed in the future.”

—Asti Sherring, Doctoral Research Candidate, University of Canberra, Australia, and Former Senior Time-Based Art Conservator, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
4.6 Next Steps

After an assessment or survey has been completed, a TBM working group meeting is an excellent venue to present the findings and recommendations of the final report, and additional one-on-one presentations should be scheduled with department heads and/or upper administration if possible.

In assessing how the institution can implement the report’s recommendations, consider which actions may be taken on by existing staff and what will require external specialists. While some institutions will be able to hire a full-time TBM conservator to take on responsibility for these artworks, individual tasks or projects may alternatively be addressed by contracting with TBM conservators in private practice. As depicted in Table 4.3, a chart outlining department roles and responsibilities can help to define tasks and new workflows.

When tasks are distributed across departments, it can be helpful to communicate how this engagement is directly improving the state of the collection and how these policy changes can relieve future workload strain. For example, conducting detailed documentation and condition assessments as part of the acquisition process is often time-consuming, but this ensures that the right materials are obtained and that these artworks are able to be readily displayed in exhibitions.

“I think having dedicated time is more important than having dedicated funding. Taking time to engage with colleagues to get access to the information you need. When I was trying to collect information about some of the artworks, we have people who’ve been here for 20 years who may have actually been installing it or even just remember it being on view. And if there was no record of it on view, but somebody has a memory of it, that’s pretty important, because there may not be any record of the exhibition or installation in our management system. I think I received support from staff members because when I tapped into their knowledge, it provided an opportunity for them to be engaged and see that they were contributing incredibly valuable information. Now I can go to those people and continue to ask questions about other artworks.”

—Kristin MacDonough, Assistant Conservator of Media, Art Institute of Chicago

When advocating for a TBM conservator or contractor on a permanent or longer-term scale, it can help to not only look at the identified workloads but to evaluate the acquisition pattern for TBM objects in the collection. The urgency for action will be amplified if TBM artworks are being collected at an accelerated rate or occupy a significant percentage of the collection. (see Chapter 6.)

For smaller collections with only a few TBM works and infrequent acquisition, it may be more cost-effective to rely on contract TBM conservators and consultants rather than establish a permanent position. One option is to raise funds for a limited-term TBM conservator in order to address the most pressing needs of the collection and then bring on consultants to assist with special projects and exhibitions as needed (see Chapter 9). Similarly, a small TBM artwork collection may not justify the purchase of a full inventory of obsolete viewing equipment if there is a rare occasion for use and no one on staff with the expertise to maintain it. Such tasks are better outsourced as the need arises.
"I’ve been at SFMOMA since ’98 and was here for quite a while before we had a media conservator, and there are parallels to this earlier time now that the position is vacant. So how do you build capacity, within a staff where everyone’s workload is already maxed? The way we had done it is to bundle the needs with existing activity that is already planned. You can build an activity into your loan, you can incorporate it into your on-site exhibition. Or it can be around an accession or an artist who is coming to town for some other reason, or a donor who is gifting a media artwork. It’s during these opportunities when you can advocate for a better master or additional research. Building up capacity and opportunities around existing activity can often support bringing in a consultant or contractor to address collections care during that time period.

“When I joined Team Media [SFMOMA’s TBM working group], there was an ongoing advocacy for a media conservator. There was a little resistance, and I think that some people may have felt a little bit threatened. But the truth is, it’s one of those things that if you haven’t seen it in action, it’s very hard to understand or visualize what it could be. Once we hired Martina Haidvogl, our first media conservator, everybody said, ‘Oh, how did we exist without this?’ I’m sure that other institutions where people are trying to advocate for a media conservator experience the same thing; it can be hard to get support when people don’t quite understand or visualize what it looks like. If you have these opportunities, these cumulative one-offs for incorporating media expertise into an existing museum activity, then everybody can begin to visualize what it looks like to have a media conservator. It’s a way of building capacity and expectation and understanding for what somebody can do, what skills they can bring to care for the collection.”

—Michelle Barger, Head of Conservation, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Keep track of staff accomplishments and improvements throughout the assessment or survey process; this will help reassure staff members that their actions have improved the collection and will also be important in reporting to funders or for demonstrating institutional buy-in for future grant proposals. Any and all steps taken toward improving TBM conservation practices should be considered a success.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter provides a roadmap for those who are developing policies and procedures for TBM collections care. Though addressing the needs of a TBM collection may initially feel like a series of insurmountable hurdles, the successful completion of an assessment or survey helps make this process more manageable by taking stock of the contents of the collection, identifying an institution’s unique needs, and laying out clear steps to pursue. Even if one is unfamiliar with TBM artworks, their care centers around the core principles of preventive conservation in use for other artwork mediums. It is important to keep in mind that one’s skill set, foundational ethics, and experience caring for more traditional artworks often may be applied to the care of TBM artworks, despite their use of obsolescence-threatened technologies, display variability, intangible conceptual aspects, and unique storage and documentation needs.

Once improvements are identified, they cannot be implemented and managed by a single individual or department. TBM artworks require true collaborations in care, with working
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groups forming the backbone of TBM conservation initiatives. It is in this working group that one can build alliances and make use of internal resources to jointly achieve the preservation goals of an institution. Indeed, these interpersonal networks can be the strongest driving force in advancing conservation practices as well as gaining buy-in from upper administration that may not otherwise be aware of the level of care required for TBM collections. It is our hope that the range of individuals quoted throughout this chapter can serve as a secondary support system and expanded network for consultation and discussion. Through collaboration, communication, and teamwork, these complex and engaging artworks can be preserved at any level of resource.

Bibliography


Appendix 4.1

ARTWORK SUMMARY
TEMPLATE USED BY THE AUTHORS FOR THE 2017–18 MET TBM COLLECTION SURVEY

TBM Artwork Summary

*Please provide sources for all information contained in this report*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prepared by:</th>
<th>Date Prepared:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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General Information

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accession No.:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of Artist:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title of work:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of work:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Technical Summary

Include a brief, high-level description about the presentation of the artwork, including the use of any display equipment, props, or fabricated objects, and whether video and audio channels should be synchronized.

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
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<td>Recommendations:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tombstone:</td>
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<td>Components Listed in TMS:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation:</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Physical Storage:</td>
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<td>Digital Storage:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exhibition Requirements:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loans:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Prior to Exhibition:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conservation Goals:</td>
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</table>

**Conservation Priorities:**

Assign numerical score

Artwork Documentation/Research:
Physical Storage:
Digital Storage:
Media Documentation:
Media Acquisition:
Media Migration:
Equipment Purchase:

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