ADVICE AND TIPS FOR PROTEST MATERIAL PRESERVATION: PRODUCTION, STORAGE, AND DOCUMENTATION

This document presents practical advice gathered from consulting with textile conservators, paintings conservators, paper conservators, object conservators, and archivists. It provides useful insights and advice relating to the preservation of the different materials commonly used in activist objects, from banners and fabrics to painted surfaces and paper-based placards. Protest materials are often made from a mix of different materials, so caring for them might require knowledge from more than one field within preservation.

It is not intended to dictate how protest materials should be made, but to provide makers with information so they can make informed choices. Museum professionals understand that protest objects often need to be lightweight, affordable, and created quickly, and that the message of the object is always more important than its longevity. This guidance simply helps makers consider durability alongside meaning, so their work can be preserved when possible.

1. PRODUCTION

1.1 TEXTILE

- Choose a natural fabric like cotton or linen. These fibres age in ways we understand – they may yellow slightly, shrink a little, or fray at the edges, but these changes are gradual and manageable. In contrast, many modern plastics and synthetic fabrics can become brittle, discoloured, or sticky unpredictably, making them harder to preserve over time. Similarly, sticky-back plastics such as cellotape should be avoided.
- Generally, more stable, durable, and flexible decoration options include embroidery, appliqué, or stitched lettering, which tend to age more reliably than paint, plastic or vinyl elements.

- If painting onto fabric, linen canvas is a strong choice. Prime it with several coats of acrylic gesso to reduce absorbency before applying acrylic paint. Acrylic dries quickly and remains reasonably flexible, though it can attract dirt and may become brittle or tacky over time, depending on conditions. Avoid making paint layers too thin, as this can lead to cracking. Oil paint is not recommended due to its long drying time.
- For sustainable alternatives, reusing an old cotton sheet rather than new linen canvas can also be effective. Glitter and heavily adhesive decorative materials can be difficult to preserve long-term.

1.2 CARD/PAPER

- The use of acid-free paper or card will support long-term preservation. There are pH testing pens for paper or card available to purchase online, which would give an indication of how acidic scrap card or paper is before committing to use.
- For paper or card, PVA glue can be effective, especially when applied with a brush. Avoid overly wet applications, as this can cause the paper to cockle. Thicker mixtures applied sparingly work best; if necessary, dry the paper under a weight to help it remain flat. Extremely strong PVA mixtures that include epoxy resin should generally be avoided, unless glueing wood supports, in which case they might be considered more appropriate. Similarly, hot glue is more suitable for wood but should be avoided on paper or card.
- Pritt-stick can be used sparingly, but it loses stickiness quickly and is not durable over time. Sticky-back plastics such as cellotape should also be avoided, as the adhesives degrade rapidly and are difficult to repair compared with stitched, painted, or layered elements.
- Avoid laminating sheets of paper you want to keep.
- Avoid applying fixative to the paper or paint you want to keep
- For decoration, most paints are equally effective - acrylics, powder paint, poster paint, or house paint
- Be aware that coloured felt-tip pens may fade over time
- Coloured pencils can be effective, though are lighter and more dispersed.

- Coloured paper is a good option for layering or collage with suitable adhesives and application.
- Printed leaflets or posters are long-lasting if stored safely
- Glitter and heavily adhesive decorative materials are difficult to preserve long-term and should be used cautiously.

2. STORAGE

2.1 TEXTILE

- If a banner with a painted surface gets wet, lay it flat and allow it to dry naturally rather than attempting to wipe it dry.
- Store textile banners rolled, not folded, whenever possible. Use large-diameter rolls to minimise stress on the surface.
- Painted textiles should ideally be rolled with the paint layer facing outward to reduce the risk of cracking or compression damage.
- Avoid stretching the fabric during rolling or storage.
- Wrap rolls in an acid-free/archival material such as Tyvek for protection, but ensure the paint is fully dry first.
- Keep textiles in a cool, dry environment and away from light to prevent fading or deterioration.

2.2 CARD/PAPER

- Store paper or card flat whenever possible; horizontal storage is ideal.
- Use neutral, acid-free supports, materials, or tubes. If rolling is necessary, avoid tension and consider a large archival tube, or add an acid-free barrier layer such as Tyvek.
- Torn posters or placards should not be repaired with tape. Place them in a polyester sleeve or keep them flat in a box. Archival transparent folders made from inert polyester are also suitable.
- For large collections, consider archival boxes or folders, and interleave oversized items with acid-free tissue or paper.
- Avoid commercial transparent folders or sleeves, which can degrade over time, releasing plasticisers that embrittle paper and soften inks.

- Keep all paper and card in a cool, dry environment and away from light.

3. ARCHIVING, DOCUMENTATION, PRESERVATION ETHICS

3.1 ARCHIVAL PRACTICE

- The most important thing you can do is keep your items. Your belongings are valuable, and even small ephemera such as pamphlets, posters, and flyers are worth preserving.
- Organise a filing system by grouping materials together according to protest, event, or organisation. For example, keep items from protest X with other materials from the same protest, and items from group Y with that group's materials. By organising and backing up your materials, you ensure they remain accessible, meaningful, and useful for future documentation or archival purposes.
- Items like pamphlets and posters are worth keeping in their original formats, whether they are 'born digital' or printed. If possible, obtain two copies of important items.
- Create backups by digitising analogue materials and make analogue copies of digital content where appropriate.
- Own your archive by regularly downloading content from social media or cloud services to ensure access, especially if platforms remove material, restrict access, or ban queer content.

3.2 DOCUMENTATION AND PRESERVING CONTEXT

- The story behind an object can be just as important as the object itself. Museum professionals of the future will value the context you provide. Think about the protest or event – What happened? When and where? Who made the item, and why? Are there photos of its creation or use? How was it made, and what materials were involved? Are there personal reflections, diary entries, or other details that capture the significance of the object? With many museum objects that were once personal items, this kind of information has often been lost over time.

- Context is key. A banner or placard on its own rarely tells the whole story. Adding supporting materials such as photos, leaflets, written notes, or recordings can help future researchers and audiences understand who made it and why it matters.
- Take photos of items in use if you are comfortable doing so. If you don't have your own, see if press coverage or other documentation exists and save it.
- Create a written record of how the banner or placard was used. Note the protests it appeared at, including the date, location, and significance. Include details such as whether you organised with a group, union, or bloc, and provide translations if appropriate.
- Store this information in accessible places, such as on your phone, in a notepad kept with the object, or even written on the back of the banner or placard.

3.3 PRESERVATION ETHICS

- Using and storing protest materials. You don't have to keep it pristine. Damage can tell a story. Reuse it, use it naturally, drop it in the mud and pick it back up. If a banner gets rained on, soiled, or bent out of place, that's part of the object's story and nature.

4. SUSTAINABILITY

- There can be a tension between environmental ethics and material longevity. Some environmental activist groups, such as 'Extinction Rebellion' and 'Just Stop Oil', deliberately avoid plastics and synthetic materials when creating protest material. The choice to use biodegradable or recycled materials aligns with their environmental principles and becomes part of the message itself. From a conservation perspective, this material choice can have a direct effect on the longevity of the objects being created.
- Materials such as papier-mâché can create beautiful and powerful forms, but may be unable to withstand rain, being affected both structurally and aesthetically. This raises an important question: if sustainability is prioritised and

results in objects that readily degrade and are likely to be used only a few times, is it more environmentally responsible to use durable materials, even synthetic ones, that would allow these objects to be reused for many years? This is something for environmentally conscious activists to consider when making protest material. This is a consideration that conservators are also often faced with.

5. SUPPLIERS OF CONSERVATION-GRADE MATERIALS

- Conservation Resources (UK) Ltd - www.conservationesources.com
- Preservation Equipment Ltd - www.preservationequipment.com
- G Ryder & Co Ltd - https://www.ryderbox.co.uk/archival-preservation
- Secol Ltd - www.secol.co.uk
- Klug Conservation - https://www.klug-conservation.com/paper-archival-paper

If you are an archivist, conservator, or museum professional and have insights that could improve or enhance this document, we ask that you share these insights with us by emailing them to inherentvicezine@gmail.com. The intention is that this document may serve as a foundation for the development of future community preservation workshops that include both archiving and conservation.

Jaime Starr currently runs 'Archiving Ourselves' workshops, which work to demystify the concept of the archive for queer communities across the country, encouraging participants to recognise that archives extend far beyond official government records or professionally produced art. Jaime's research and practice draw on materials ranging from teenage diaries and draft designs for event advertisements to pornographic classified ads, promotional balloons, and even condom wrappers printed with safer-sex messaging. Many queer people may feel their lives or ephemera are not significant enough to warrant preservation, despite them holding huge personal significance. Jaime's workshops work to inspire attendees and champion the idea that these everyday materials will enable future researchers to understand the lived realities, interests, hopes, and anxieties of the LGBTQIA+ people of today. To enquire with Jaime about holding one of their workshops at your museum, archive, or gallery, contact them at jskstarr@gmail.com.