

ARCHIVING AND PRESERVING THE WORK OF JOHN LATHAM

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When a visionary artist dies leaving his house and everything in it in disarray, thoughtful and sensitive decisions have to be made if an accessible archive is to be established. John Latham (1921–2006) was one of the most influential and charismatic conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s, using his artwork to challenge conventional thought through his theory of ‘flat time’. He pioneered the artists’ residencies system by way of an artist placement group and lectured at the world renowned Central Saint Martins art school, London, UK. His recent exhibitions include *John Latham in Focus* at Tate Britain, London, and a show at PS1 Gallery, MoMA, New York.

Flat Time House, the embodiment of Latham’s enduring legacy, contains a lifetime’s worth of artwork and a substantial archive of correspondence and philosophical writings. By dividing Flat Time house, the place in which Latham lived and worked, into four separate areas, ‘the face’, ‘the mind’, ‘the brain’ and ‘the hand’, Latham designed and created an environment that reflected his mindset. It seems fitting that he stored the archive, the physical representation of his mindset, in boxes in ‘the brain’. The archive itself is made up of correspondence of all types and also includes notes, sketches and photographs. It is mainly paper-based. Latham himself had sorted through this material, so at his death it was ordered in a way that reflected his ideas.

The material contained within these boxes holds a profound insight into Latham’s prominent works. The curatorial team at Flat Time house was eager to find ways of saving such a valuable archive and exposing its intellectual potential. Four conservation students from nearby Camberwell College of Arts visited Flat Time House during an open exhibition and in discussions with the curatorial team discovered the plight of the archive. Upon entering the house for the first time the conservators saw problems with how the archive was being kept and were able to offer suggestions for realistic improvements that could be carried out immediately. The students and the curatorial team agreed to work together. Through this collaboration the students aimed to devise and implement a strategy based on professional standards, to record and assess the contents of the archive while

simultaneously introducing effective preventive conservation measures.

The team began by carrying out some basic improvements to the boxes and their storage. These included replacing the deteriorated boxes with archival standard boxes, raising the archive from the floor to promote better air circulation and moving them away from the central heating system, to avoid excessive heat and fluctuations in temperature. As the project progressed more knowledge of the archive emerged. This additional information was added to the database, promoting its evolution into a beneficial research tool.

Each item was accessioned, initial conservation treatment carried out and vital information entered into a searchable database. By improving physical access, introducing protective measures and a retrievable numbering system, the foundations for a valuable, intellectually accessible archive were laid. Each item was treated individually. Detrimental materials such as staples, paper clips and plastics were removed and replaced with conservation-grade equivalents. Items were then placed within their own acid-free folders and returned to their original order.

The contribution of the student conservators was effective, as it brought different aspects of the archive to the attention of the curatorial team. The students were able to step back and to look analytically at the problems presented. Now that an effective system has been devised, the current student conservators can hand on the work to subsequent Camberwell students who will in turn enrich their learning while facilitating access to a collection of immense value for researchers, artists and the general public.

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