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Audrey Amiss, Artist and Patient: Preserving Her Legacy

INTRODUCTION

In 2014, Wellcome Collection received a unique archive collection of works created by a largely unacknowledged contemporary artist and mental health patient, Audrey Amiss. The collection consists of hundreds of sketchbooks, scrapbooks, diaries, artworks, account books, log books and record books—approximately 1500 items in total—in which Audrey meticulously recorded intimate aspects of her life over four decades.

This article explores the physical and intellectual challenges of trying to stabilise and preserve a collection comprised of a collage of complex modern materials, such as food packaging, junk mail, photographs, receipts and food residue. It is based on the talk presented by Stefania Signorello at the 2020 AIC Annual Meeting, with contributions from archivist Elena Carter, who has worked closely with the collection.

BACKGROUND

After Audrey's death in 2013, at the age of 79, her family found her flat full of paintings and sketch books, with hundreds of volumes of scrapbooks fanning out over beds (fig. 1) and stacked high on a dressing table (fig. 2). Confronted with the overwhelming amount of material accumulated and created by Audrey over the years, her family felt that something needed to be done to preserve this extraordinary body of work. A chance encounter led them to offer the material to Wellcome Collection, a free museum and library whose collections explore the intersections between health, life and art. The decision to acquire the collection was a watershed moment in Wellcome's collecting activity and paved the way for future acquisitions focusing on lived experience rather than prioritising the perspective of the medical profession.

Audrey Amiss had been a promising student at The Royal Academy School of Art when, at the age of 18 she experienced a severe mental health episode and was sectioned in a

psychiatric ward. Audrey spent the rest of her life in and out of hospitals and locked wards, often medicated and detained against her will. Alongside living with mental illness, Audrey continued to develop her artistic practice, sometimes exhibiting paintings at small private galleries. During more stable periods, she was employed as a typist for the Civil Service.

Audrey's artistic style develops across the archive, from her art school training to more abstracted, collaged works. In Audrey's own words, she saw herself as an artist who was 'avant-garde and misunderstood', musing that 'there must be a great many more artists whom we have never heard of' (Wellcome Library 2020). She sketched hastily from life, often completing entire sketchbooks in a single sitting, or focusing on a particular subject, such as passers-by, plants or animals at the zoo. Her drawings are abstract, using continuous lines or simple outlines to capture movement or pick out details of significance to her.

Audrey documented her way of seeing and experiencing the world with great commitment and intensity, recording the minutiae and reality of her everyday life—from the food she ate to the people and buildings she saw and drew to the letters she wrote and sent out. Each of these activities was set out in a clearly defined series of volumes.

Audrey's account books document every penny she spent, with pasted-down receipts and frustrated annotations about being short changed in shops. Her record books bureaucratically record a summary of every letter she wrote, and to whom it was sent—quite often public figures and institutions. Her logbooks record her movements in diary-like form, detailing the state of her health and her activities over the course of the day. Her scrapbooks include pasted materials and packaging that crinkle as the pages are turned. The weight of these remnants also cause the volumes to bulge and to bow.

Audrey stuck down junk mail and food packaging that document what she ate every day, as well as other items that caught her magpie-like attention, prompting animated free association annotations and commentaries. Her works are full of material that was not made to last, from throwaway receipts to butter packaging with fatty residues that have seeped into the text of the volume itself. Despite the ephemerality of these materials, this collection offers a unique and

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Fig. 1. Scrapbooks as found, sprawled over Audrey's beds (photograph taken by Audrey Amiss' nephew and niece in her flat shortly after her death).

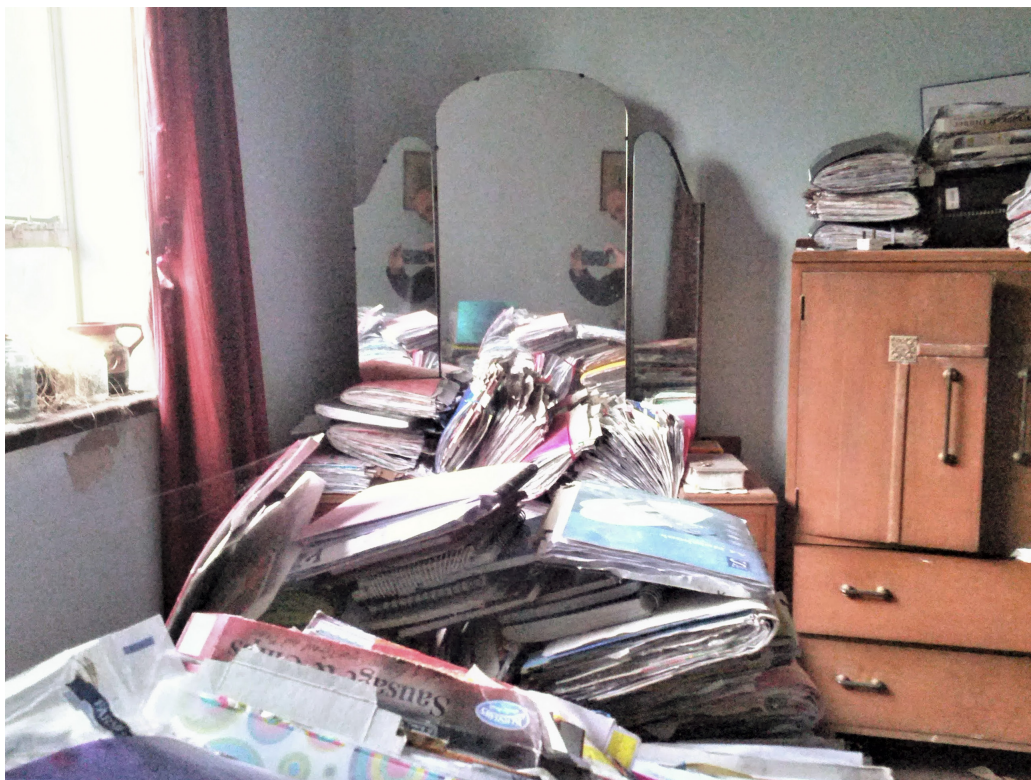


Fig. 2. Scrapbooks on Audrey's dressing table (photograph taken by Audrey Amiss' nephew and niece in her flat shortly after her death).



Fig. 3. A volume from PP/AMI/D: Audrey Amiss: photograph albums and scrapbooks. Wellcome Library.

colourful portrait of a life lived, documenting Audrey's experiences and encounters with the world as both an artist and a mental health service user. The material—and Audrey's legacy itself—will be lost if action is not taken to slow the collection's decay.

PRESERVING AUDREY'S LEGACY

This article focuses on the 234 scrapbooks Audrey compiled from the 1960s to 2013. The nature of the materials she used to assemble them, and the way they were constructed, make them not only a fascinating and unique collection but also a complex one to care for (fig. 3). They are made up of a challenging combination of multiple types of food and drink packaging—only roughly rinsed and dried by Audrey after consumption and with varying lifespans and degradation rates—and the variety of adhesives with which they were attached to the scrapbook pages, including a variety of pressure-sensitive tapes, glue sticks and extremely liquid glues.

MAIN PRESERVATION CHALLENGES

Wedging and Protruding Inserts

The volumes are severely wedged and misshapen due to the large amount of packaging, frequently bulky, secured onto their supporting leaves: paper cups and their lids, cartons, foil trays, wooden ice lolly sticks, plastic shopping bags, used tea bags and other commonly found objects (fig. 4).

For most volumes, the inserts protrude from their edges, even by up to 120–130 mm, exposing numerous vulnerable items beyond the protection of the covers.

Pressure-Sensitive Tapes and Glues

Audrey used a considerable variety of pressure-sensitive tapes to secure items in the scrapbooks. Less often, she used 'non-toxic, non-staining, acid free and washable' glue sticks, preferring liquid glues in the very early scrapbooks, which unfortunately caused significant mold growth. In later scrapbooks Audrey noted when one specific roll of tape had ended

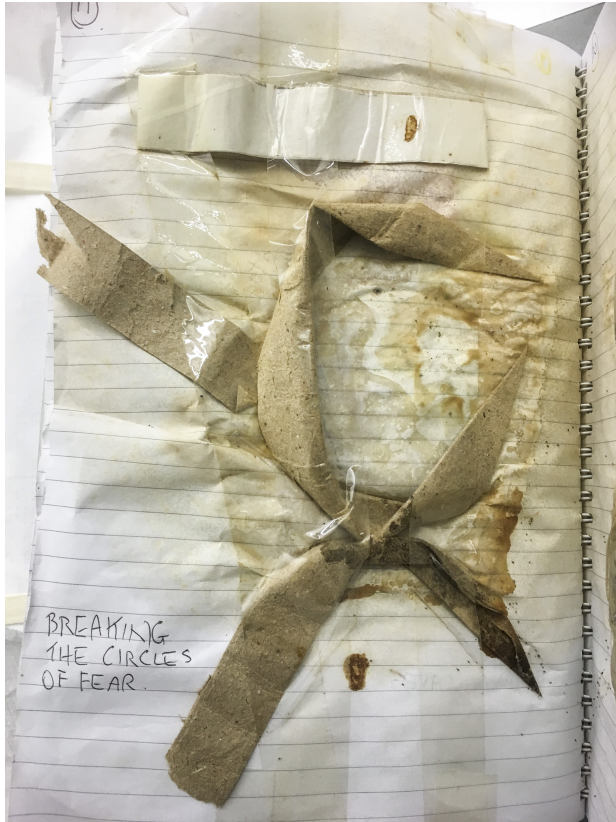


Fig. 4. Everyday found object stuck into a volume with pressure-sensitive tape.

and another had started, where she purchased them and how much they cost, attaching their empty packaging to the leaves.

She meticulously recorded the use of a wide range of tapes: wide brown packing; 'original easy-tear and antistatic', 'original golden', and 'extra sticky and easy-tear' from Sellotape; 'clear tape' from the Post Office (Royal Mail); and 'gift wrap tape refill' from the newsagent WHSmith, among others. From visual examination, it is evident that the antistatic tape, in which the layers of glue are transferring to, and sinking into, the paper, making it look translucent, is degrading the fastest.

Food Residues

Dried-out remains of food lie loose within the leaves and have become powdered over time. Sticky and slimy residues have leaked out of packaging, causing mold and a potential pest issue. Some pages are extensively stained by sugars, flour and butter, whereas others retain the pungent odour of smoked haddock and kippers (fig. 5).

Some types of foods, unexpectedly, look greasy (i.e., flour), and some others look very powdery (i.e., chocolate). Due to the wide variety of food residue, there is potential for professionals to research how the composition of beyond their sell-by date food ingredients have aged on the paper over time in contact with the environment.

Inks

In many areas where Audrey applied pressure-sensitive tape over her handwritten annotations, the inks have



Fig. 5. Kipper fillet packaging adhered to one of the leaves.

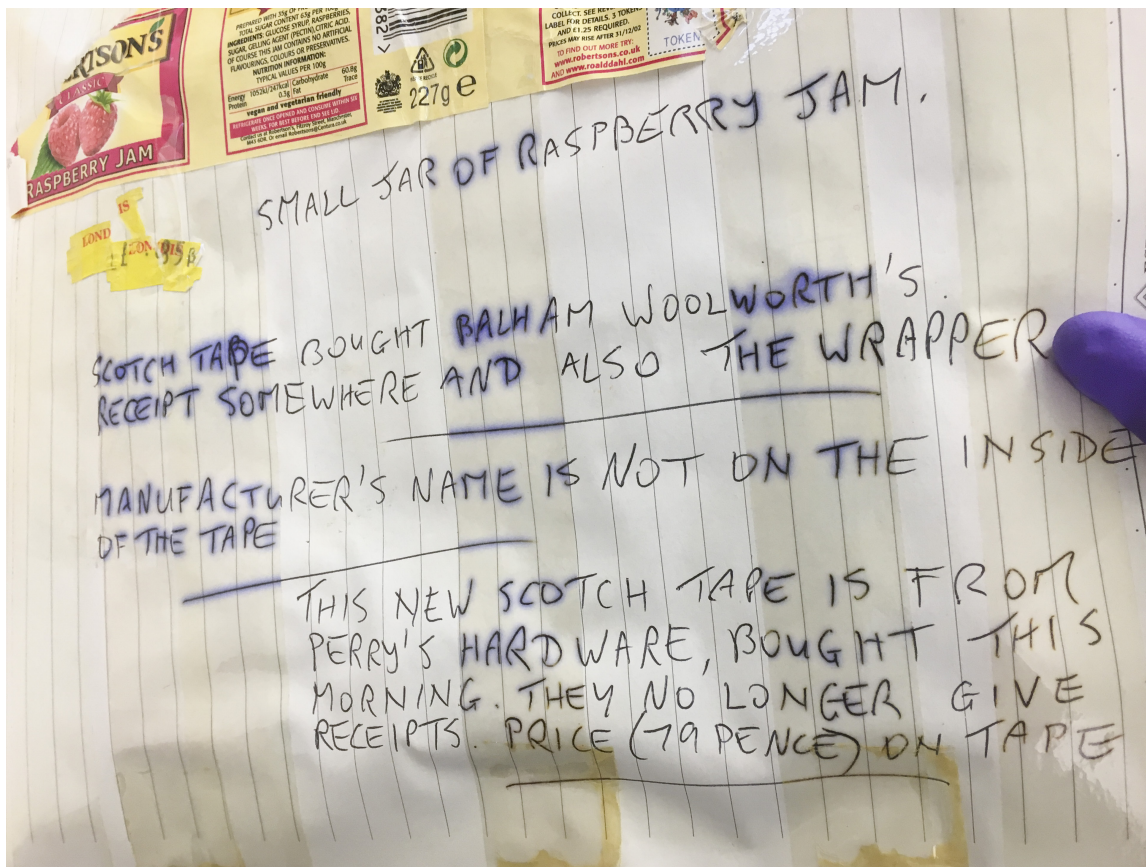


Fig. 6. Detail showing ink bleeding underneath pressure-sensitive tape.

bled significantly (fig. 6). A large percentage of her recorded observations, written after she had secured the inserts in place, consist of barely visible ballpoint pen indentations of faint red ink over the self-adhesive tapes (fig. 7).

Till Receipts

Till receipts, ostensibly for every single item she purchased over the course of four decades, feature heavily in her account books (PP/AMI/E: Audrey Amiss: Account Books. Wellcome Library) and, to a lesser but still significant degree, in her scrapbooks. The poor-quality paper of the receipts and their highly unstable inks, liable to fade or to black out, make them a very vulnerable component of the volumes. The exposure of the receipts to the off-gassing of some of the plastic items in the scrapbooks could further threaten their stability over time.

Mold

The presence of mold, both within the packaging and between the supporting leaves of the scrapbooks and the items secured onto them, generally presents access difficulties and makes the collection even more difficult to care for.

Evaporation of Plasticisers and Emission of Volatile Organic Compounds

The wide variety of plastics contained within the scrapbooks is susceptible not only to external factors like moisture, heat, light and pollution but also to internal factors like the migration of plasticisers and the off-gassing of the plastics. Extending their life span is one of the most important considerations in the care of this collection, together with preserving the carriers of the pressure-sensitive tape.

SURVEYING THE COLLECTION AND CONTAINING RISKS

When surveying a relatively large collection, conservators typically spend a maximum of three to five minutes per item. But because of the unpredictability of the findings within Audrey's scrapbooks, it was considered necessary to examine every single page.

It was also of paramount importance to confirm the suspected presence of mold in the volumes so that they would not be made available to users of the library at Wellcome Collection until treated.

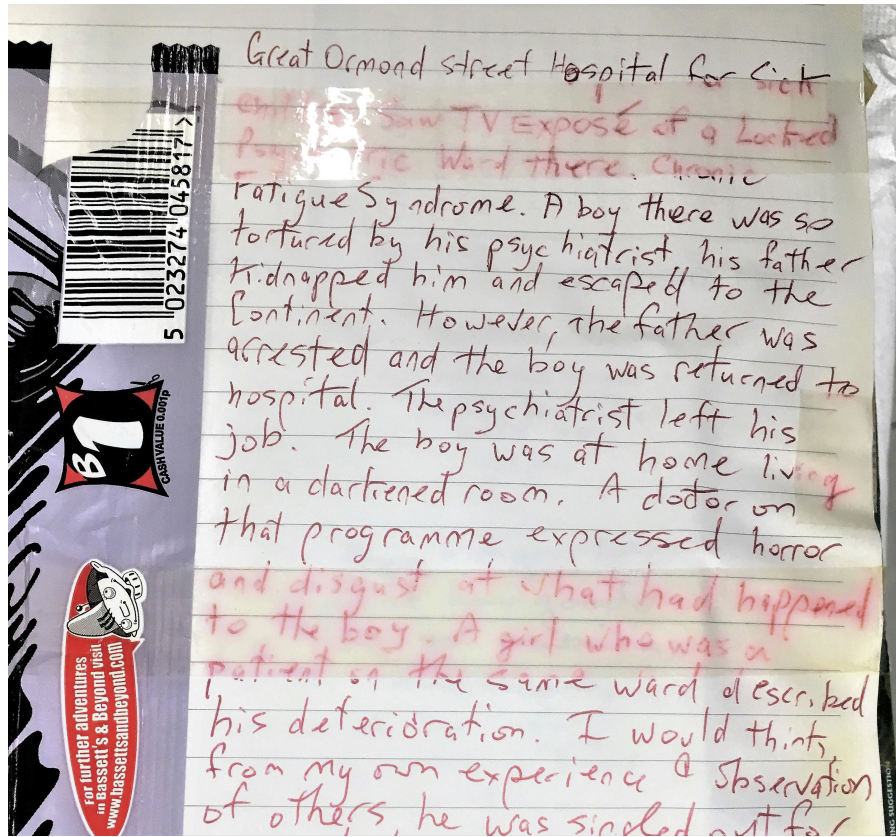


Fig. 7. Detail of red ink over tape.

The survey thus became a unique, intimate, powerful and emotionally engaging experience. Poring through the pages, seeing, smelling and touching these items brought the material to life in a visceral, immediate and evocative way. Often Audrey's words would give clues to the types of materials used and their age, as well as describing her sensory experiences of the items pasted down. Reading Audrey's notations allowed the authors to understand the material in context so that the items secured into the volumes were not treated in isolation but instead understood as part of the rich tapestry of Audrey's creative process.

While recording data on the condition of the volumes in a spreadsheet, it was necessary to deal with the most urgent preservation issues. Minimising the amount of handling and additional time-consuming 'preservation and conservation stages' the volumes would have to go through was deemed the most sensible approach. The main tasks involved the following:

- Ensuring that the volumes were stored flat on the shelves
- Clearly labelling them with warnings about the presence of mold, loose food residues and items at risk of loss—such as a pen and a coin lying loose between the page of a couple of volumes

- Separating inserts stuck against each other from adjacent pages, using a spatula, when possible
- Highlighting in the spreadsheets the presence of detached or detaching items due to the failing of the pressure-sensitive tape, as useful information for prioritising future work on those volumes
- Restricting access to items containing mold, alerting staff of the reasons for the restriction
- Scheduling items at high risk of new pest infestations, due to the significant presence of frass and food remains, for regular pest checks
- Containing those scrapbooks with loose frass and food residues by wrapping in large sheets of Tyvek
- Wrapping scrapbooks with protruding items in Tyvek to ensure extra protection of their edges inside their boxes
- Identifying items that should be prioritised for digitisation, initially sampling five of them to flag and iron out any issues that may arise from the nature of the scrapbooks' shape and contents.

One of the most urgent challenges is the preservation of adhesives and pressure-sensitive tape. It is crucial that it

retains its tackiness for as long as possible, because the drying out of the adhesives will eventually cause the contents of the volumes to become detached.

ACCESS TO THE ITEMS

All of the scrapbook volumes have now been catalogued, although the Audrey Amiss archive collection will not be made accessible until the entire collection of materials has been catalogued in full. Some materials will need to be restricted due to sensitive content or for preservation reasons. Conservation work on the restricted and treatable moldy items will follow, allowing access to a larger part of the collection.

The wrapping of the volumes in large Tyvek sheets (with the smoother and less porous side against the item) will offer containment not only while in storage but also in the library's rare materials room. Handling guidelines and training will be provided for desk supervisors, and the volumes are likely to be set up with their Tyvek sheets onto book supports placed on a dedicated tailor-made tray. The regular pest checks of the stores will be easier against the smooth and white background of the Tyvek.

ACCESS TO DIGITAL CONTENT: PLANNING THE DIGITISATION OF THE COLLECTION

Ideally, the whole collection should be digitised before further deterioration of the pressure-sensitive tape takes place. Incorporating hundreds of complex items to photograph into the Wellcome Collection's digitisation programme, however, presents a challenge.

Hence, priority for digitisation will be given to the volumes with the following:

- Pressure-sensitive tape that is starting to fail, that is carrying notes and that is causing bleeding of the inks
- Large quantities of till receipts
- Mold, food residues and frass
- Plastics showing signs of deterioration, if any, even though currently, surprisingly enough, they are in rather good condition.

Unlike usual conservation preparation for digitisation, mechanical cleaning and removal of debris will not be undertaken prior to photography. This is due to the intrinsically unique reasons the scrapbooks are in their current condition. Dust, food residues, frass, flies and mold (fig. 8) will be left as found, as they show the way in which Audrey worked and how she experienced life. Preparation, therefore, will be limited to releasing the packaging that is stuck together so that an image of each opening can be captured.

The process of digitisation is likely to be slow and labour intensive; the photography studio will need to be prepared, personal protective equipment will need to be worn and

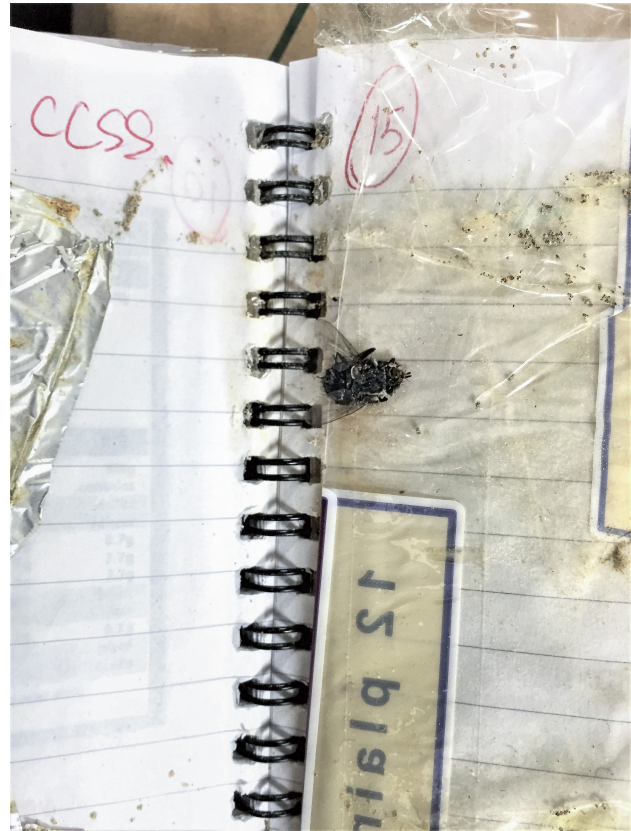


Fig. 8. Detail of a fly trapped within see-through packaging.

checks will need to be carried out to ensure the environment is safe and that other materials from the collections are not at risk of contamination. Digitisation of the volumes will take place using state-of-the-art Hasselblad medium format imaging equipment, ensuring that high-quality imaging standards are met, resulting in colour-accurate reproductions. Once the volumes have been digitised, they will be sealed in low-oxygen enclosures to delay the degradation of pressure-sensitive tapes and plastics. It is hoped that the digital representation of the three-dimensional nature of these volumes can be achieved in the future in a cost- and time-effective way.

Once digitised and sealed, the physical scrapbooks will be made accessible to users only on special request and then resealed immediately afterwards.

STORAGE

For the long term, cost-effective storage solutions have been explored to slow down the degradation of the scrapbooks and thus preserve Audrey's legacy—at least until they are all digitised. This will be attempted by means of anoxic storage. The scrapbooks are kept in a controlled environment, protecting them from environmental fluctuations and reducing to the bare minimum their time away from cold storage for viewing.

The equipment needed for anoxic storage, including a free-standing heat sealer (necessary for large volumes such as these rather than a handheld one), nitrogen gas generators and an oxygen headspace analyser, is currently being purchased.

Anoxic enclosure trials of two scrapbooks were carried out with a colleague from the Natural History Museum, and a demonstration of yearly checks of anoxic enclosures—made nearly 10 years before—was hosted by another colleague at the British Museum. Their kind support, together with consultation by a former senior polymer scientist at the Victoria and Albert Museum, provided answers about how anoxia would work in practice and how it would prolong the useful life of Audrey's scrapbooks. It also enabled invaluable cross-disciplinary networking across four major UK institutions.

CONCLUSION

Balancing the needs, and accepting compromise solutions to contain costs, of such a fascinating and complex collection with its intrinsically short life span and risks for the neighbouring core collection, has proved to be a captivating and enriching experience.

In this first phase of the project, the authors have been working towards making the collection available to the public, and dealing with the risks that might negatively affect collection stores and reading rooms, making sure that the scrapbooks are made safe for handling and restricting access to those volumes that are not.

Once the highest-priority issues have been dealt with, including the digitisation of all volumes, this collection offers great potential for research into the preservation and identification of plastics; the potential effect of off-gassing of the plastics and pressure sensitive tapes on the scrapbooks prior to, and after, their placement in anoxic enclosures; the length of time for which it is possible to prevent the degradation of the material, thus maintaining the current appearance of each different type of plastic in a low-oxygen environment; the development of a prototype of a possible anoxic storage solution that allows at least partial viewing of the volumes without having to break their sealed enclosure; and digitally enhancing the three-dimensional experience of people viewing the volumes.

Archivists and conservators rarely get the chance to acquaint themselves in such depth with a collection and its creator. From an archival perspective, cataloguing the collection has reiterated the fallacy of archival neutrality, as to frame and describe the works has required a deeper understanding of Audrey and who she was. Trying to balance archival 'neutrality' and standardisation against the outpourings of a truly unique mind has been an intellectual challenge. The complexities inherent in preserving and describing such a dynamic and multifaceted collection mirror the complexities and contradictions of Audrey's own life. Audrey was an artist, a patient, a family member who was hard to care for, and a woman who lived mostly in solitude and

had difficult encounters with the outside world but seemed to also crave recognition and understanding. Audrey was compelled to document her daily experiences and encounters, convinced that the world was mad and not her. As caretakers of Audrey's legacy, our responsibility is to present that complexity in its fullness, and to hope that its continued preservation will allow others the privilege of encountering and listening to Audrey for themselves.

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