# Exercise 2

## Dealing in the Obsolete: A Conversation with Conservator Jonathan Furmanski

By Marissa Clifford

*How a lab of old technology keeps archives alive*

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In the depths of the Getty Research Institute, just above the vaults and below the library, a wall of outdated tube televisions sits tucked into the corner of an imaging lab. Stacked as high as the ceiling, they are the domain of conservator Jonathan Furmanski.

There are many archives in this country, but ones of the kind Furmanski oversees are rare. While many archivists are scrambling to learn the newest collection management software, Furmanski is romancing the obsolete: stuff like the portable turntable you finally convinced your father-in-law to sell on eBay, or the yellowing tape recorder that still smells like Camel cigarettes in your grandpa's garage.

Furmanski collects and organizes gadgets like these in the Getty Research Institute for one simple reason: the items in modern collections, such as tapes from The Kitchen Archive or recordings from the Long Beach Museum of Art Video Archive, need the right machines to be heard, watched, or read. It's Furmanski's job to find the right technology to match a piece of ephemera or artwork, restore that artwork as much as possible using analog machines, and then digitize it so contemporary viewers can watch, listen, analyze, and write about it.

I joined Furmanski in his personal time capsule to learn more about his work.

### Marissa Clifford:

**What does your job entail?**

### Jonathan Furmanski:

I make digital surrogates, but I'm actively preserving and conserving materials in the act of doing so. I'm not merely making a facsimile of something like a photographer would.

### MC:

**What is your background?**

### JF:

I studied art and art history in college. I concentrated on performance art and contemporary art, but I also have experience with electrical engineering so I can do things like fix tape recorders.

### MC:

**What are the challenges of working with obsolete technologies?**

**JF:**

- We have a lot of half-inch open reel tape that was recorded in the early to mid 1970s, so I need use a cleaning machine a lot.
- Moisture starts degrading tape, and if you play it back without cleaning, the surface can drag, scrape and hurt the tape as well as the machine.
- Being one of the first personal video recording formats, there is a lot of unique material committed to open reel tape. It can take a whole day of work to get one half-hour tape cleaned and transferred, and it can be stressful when you know that content of that tape exists nowhere else in the world.

**MC:**

**What are the rarest technologies or materials you work with? What about the most common?**

**JF:**

Our collections are so varied, it's hard to predict what I'll be working on next. We have boxes of obscure Dictaphone recordings from the 1950s alongside more familiar items like VHS tapes from the 1980s. Each format presents its own set of concerns for the lab.

Sometimes the most common formats can present the most problems. U-Matic tape, for example was very successful from the late 1970s into the 1990s but then went obsolete very quickly. So we're stuck with all this stuff on obsolete technology, and the cost to move it has been so high in the past that archives like the Long Beach Video collection, that is primarily on U-Matic tape, was forced into hibernation. Now, we're slowly working through the collection, year by year. Similarly, audiocassettes proliferate the collections because they were such a successful medium. Cassettes have a similar problem to the open reel video, in that it was such an easy technology to use, there are a lot of personal recordings that exist nowhere else.

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# References

Clifford, M. (2017, October 02). Dealing in the Obsolete: A Conversation with Conservator Jonathan Furmanski. Retrieved February 22, 2018, from http://blogs.getty.edu/iris/dealing-in-the-obsolete-a-conversation-with-conservator-jonathan-furmanski/

Article has been shortened and the format modified to include headings and lists.