

SITUATED KNOWLEDGES

Prelinger Library
ISSUE 3

Situated Knowledges is part of *Situated Systems*, an experimental, collaborative, site-specific research project which explores military and industrial infrastructure in San Francisco and the Bay Area, investigating how this history has shaped the technology culture of the region and its outputs. This zine series collects interviews with people conducted as part of this project. *Situated Systems* is the inaugural project of the Experimental Research Lab at the Autodesk Pier 9 facility, from February through June 2016. The title of this series comes from Donna Haraway's 1988 essay, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," in which she writes, "Situated knowledges are about communities, not isolated individuals."

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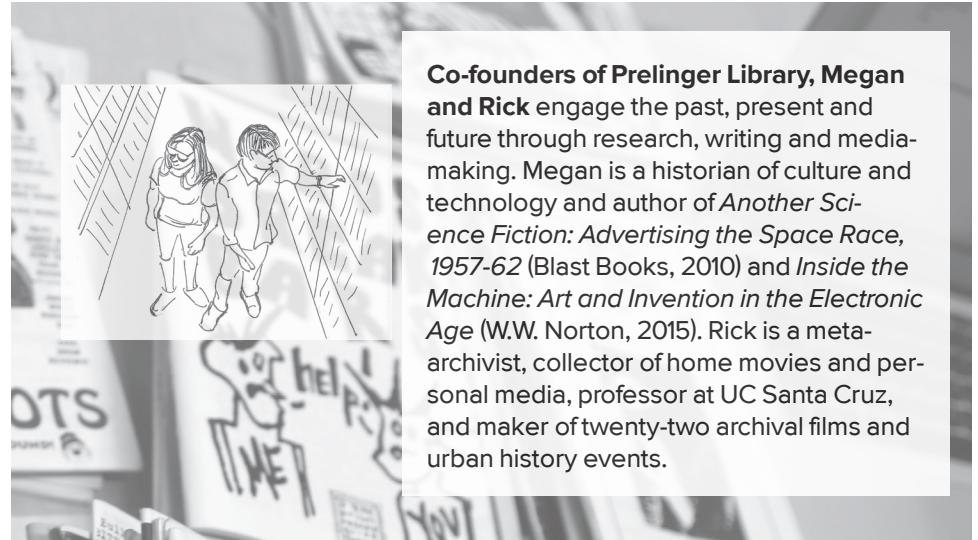


[The interview transcript has been lightly edited for clarity.]

Georgina Voss: Could we begin with a history of the library: how it started, how it came into being?

Rick Prelinger: Well, both of us, for most of our lives, collected books and materials in areas that we were particularly interested in. I originally started collecting books and periodicals and ephemera seriously to contextualize the film archives, which were tremendously large archives of industrial and advertising and educational film, which, interestingly enough, didn't have a lot of context. When you have a film that's made by General Motors about war production, you need to understand—to really work with that film as an object—why it was made, what need it was supposed to fulfill, who paid for it, and how it was received. And that's why I began collecting material. We pooled our collections quite early after we met. We fantasized about libraries. We would drive past storefronts and say, "Wouldn't that make a great library?"

Megan Prelinger: We met in 1998, and we fantasized and workshopped the idea of building a library between '98 and 2003.

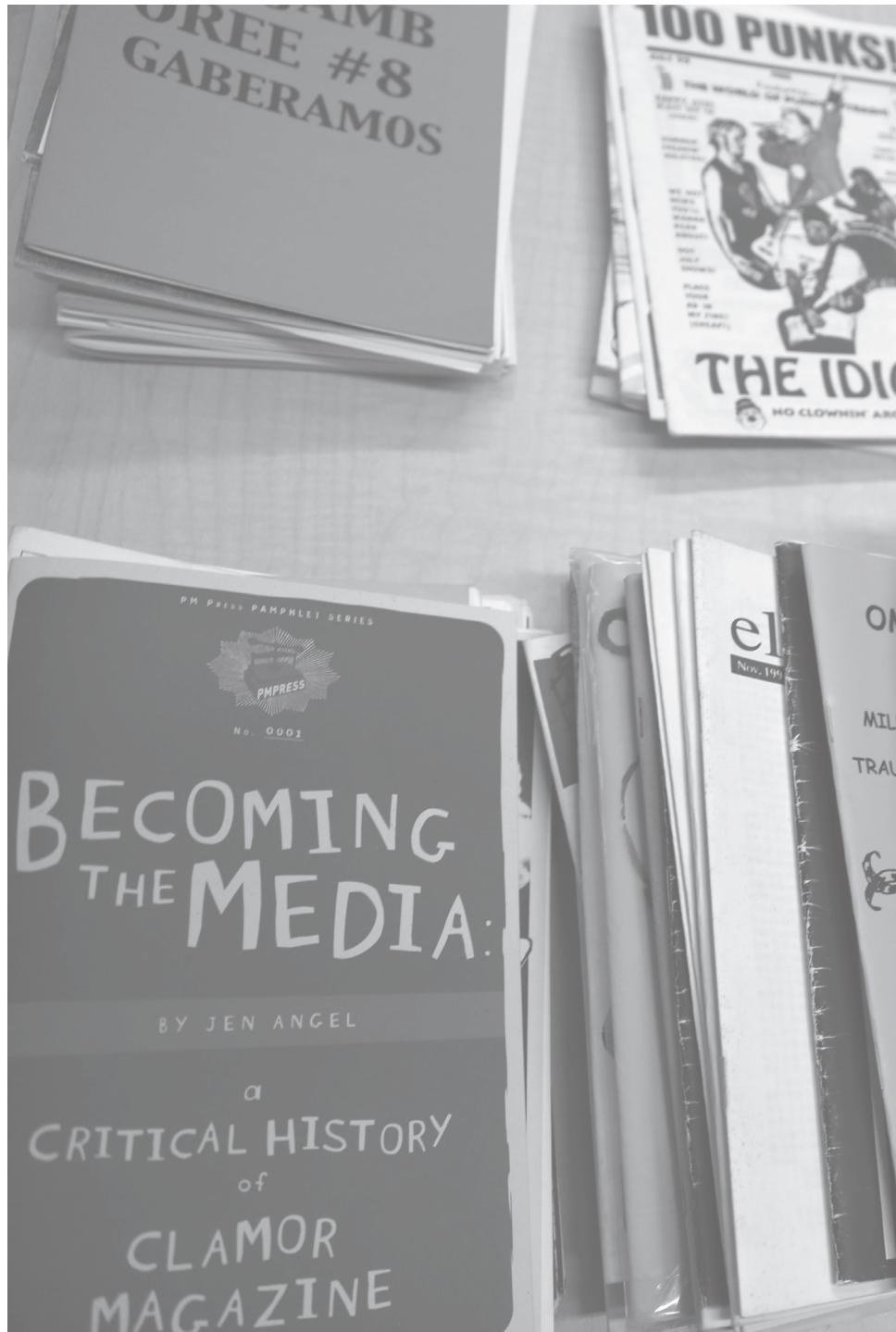


Co-founders of Prelinger Library, Megan and Rick engage the past, present and future through research, writing and media-making. Megan is a historian of culture and technology and author of *Another Science Fiction: Advertising the Space Race, 1957-62* (Blast Books, 2010) and *Inside the Machine: Art and Invention in the Electronic Age* (W.W. Norton, 2015). Rick is a meta-archivist, collector of home movies and personal media, professor at UC Santa Cruz, and maker of twenty-two archival films and urban history events.

Georgina Voss, a *Situated Systems* team member, is an anthropologist of technology and innovation systems, working at the intersection of design, futures, and policy. She is a co-founder of design and research co-operative Strange Telemetry, and teaches at Goldsmiths, University of London.



Images courtesy of Sherri Wasserman for the Situated Systems team.



RP: One catalytic event had been that we partnered with Internet Archive starting in '99 to put thousands of our films online. That happened at the very end of 2000, and the reaction was so positive and transformative for us, entering into a collaboration with hundreds of thousands of people we'd never met and probably won't ever meet, that we started to think about making a physical library as well—or at least that was a powerful impetus.

MP: And I'd been developing a practice as an independent scholar and essayist post-school, specifically interested in what kinds of readings of history could be gained from ephemeral literature. I had experiences finding a lot of very interesting zine and pamphlet literature in unusual places while on road trips all across the country, and I thought, what kind of historiography would be written if you were only looking at the materials that weren't easily accessible, either in public libraries that are comparatively ahistorical or in academic research libraries that may be deep but aren't very—

RP: —but are probably inaccessible.

MP: —and comparatively inaccessible. And I was very interested in the discoverability of physical browsing of the landscape and the idea of conducting research while out exploring in the world. And I started to think that my dream library was not any kind of library I had ever already been in, but a kind of library where the process of research was similar to the process of hiking or road-tripping.

RP: Spatialized, with deep history made visible, and kind of all-access, but not crowded at the same time. The way the really offbeat, interesting historical sites are, and open to everyone, but the kind of place where, when you meet other people who are also interested in being there, you have a lot to talk about with them—that kind of thing.

If I may speak for both of us—both of us felt some suspicion about two trends. One of them was research that's exclusively thesis-driven, where you kind of figure out what you want to say, and then you go and try to find material to support it. We have a deep empirical and evidence-driven streak where we really like to see what the material has to say to us. Our atlases were built around what we could find; the movies I make are built around footage that's there. And then, we try to spin together a framework based on that. And the other thing was deep suspicion of presentism all over, and especially now when you look at the web. There's this incredible flowering of research and uncovering things and pulling stuff out of obscurity. But most of it turns out to be clickbait, or it's extremely superficial, or it's decontextualized. So, all sorts of landscape and history-based projects foreground something, but they do it as a quick grab. There's not a lot of difference in subtlety between a *Daily Mail* article now and a lot of the kind of hip blogs.

And so, we were kind of interested in problematizing these obvious ideas about history. We've always been interested, for example, in foregrounding the idea that the Bay Area was a heavily militarized landscape. People say it as something that was and isn't anymore rather than thinking of it as something that is and could be even more so.

MP: Or still is in all kinds of dematerialized or just less obvious ways.

RP: As a sidelight, the old office of our film archives that I ran in New York is now occupied by Palantir, which I think is so amazing, right?

GV: Wow. So, was this the first space that you had? Was the only space that you could've had to build the library?

MP: Yeah, [our materials] were mostly in boxes in storage before we were here, mostly. Rick had had his version on one wall of shelves in the film archives in New York. But in terms of a jointly-built collection, this room [at the Prelinger Library in San Francisco], was the very first step of moving in.

GV: How did this space come about?

MP: Well, there was an initial tech boom, and then a bubble burst. And there was actually a commercial real estate recession—a very mild one—in 2002 and 2003, and in 2003, we were able to rent this space on a very cost-effective lease condition. This was cost-effective relative to what we were paying for MiniStorage and relative to the year before, two years before, when it wasn't really possible to think about doing it in San Francisco. But this project is situated within a number of traditions—a tradition of social libraries, but also the tradition of the kind of Bay Area-based free culture movement. I'd already been living here throughout the 1990s, being a member of a writing and editing collective that was dedicated to giving information away for free. Rick's experience with putting films online and giving them away for free and actually building



ADDITIONAL READING

Baker, Nicholson. *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*. Random House, 2001.

Feinberg, Melanie. *Classification as Communication: Properties and Design*. PhD thesis, The Information School, University of Washington, 2008.

Mattern, Shannon. "Middleware: Landscapes of Library Logistics", *Urban Omnibus*, June 24, 2015. <http://urbanomnibus.net/2015/06/middleware-landscapes-of-library-logistics/>

Parikka, Jussi. *A Geology of Media*. University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Peters, John Durham. *The Marvelous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. The University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Prelinger, Megan. *Inside the Machine: Art and Invention in the Electronic Age*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2015.

GV: What are your next steps, for the next few years for you?

MP: Well, we're working on that. Our lease here is due to turn over in two and a half years. So, there's a question mark there.

RP: Will it be affordable?

MP: In terms of a five-year plan, like, our two-year plan is to stay right here and keep doing what we're doing. But the five-year plan has to look pretty different. It has to include a lot of options for where to put this if we do need to move and how to keep doing something like what we're doing in the San Francisco of today and not the San Francisco of 2003. So, we're feeling around and talking to people and just starting to put feelers out.

Our objective is to continue keeping this collection freely publicly accessible for at least the next twenty years.

You know, that would be our objective. And then place it in an adoptive home or, if needed, section it and place sections of it in adoptive homes.

RP: Thinking about library as platform. This is something that really came to fruition last year, largely through Megan's efforts. It's the idea that we're not the choke point for everything that happens here; that this is a place where people can come and do residencies, performances, readings, investigations. So the "Place Talks" project, which is a curated series of talks that go through review, that are here—it brings a whole lot of new people into the library, but we don't run it.

So, the library as platform we hope will expand. We've had a bunch of artists-in-residence, mostly international. And we hope that locally more people will do stuff here.

*Interview conducted on April 27, 2016
at the Prelinger Library in San Francisco.*

a commercial market by expanding free access to the films—all of that...

RP: You asked about the specificity of being here in San Francisco. There's a long tradition of collaboration and collaborative spaces here. If you want to look at it in contrast to, say, New York where people tend to work in studios by themselves, where it's much more competitive and where works-in-progress are much more sort of closely guarded—I'm speaking in a general sense. Now, in New York, of course, there's collaborative spaces, but that's a new development.

MP: And it's reactive to what's happened here. It's trendy.

RP: There's been this long tradition of people getting together to make things and people building community around, sort of, interest groups and organizations.

MP: And that happened in the art community, knowledge industry communities, creative communities of all different kinds—even all over the ideological spectrum, from really crypto-conservative techno-futurists who nevertheless had huge, amazing, collaborative projects, to left-utopian, and every point in between.

RP: We wanted to be able to touch our books and our periodicals and all the amazing material we collected, which was in nine storage rooms in Marin County and cost us some money. So, there was that, 'cause we're independent scholars—we wanted to work with this. And at the same time, we remarked on how our personal communities of friends and collaborators were dispersed.

MP: So dispersed.



RP: We had to fly to see our friends, 'cause we knew people all over the country and, to some extent, around the world, but they weren't around us. And we thought, if we built a library and we all set it up, what might happen? There's no mission statement, there was no scoping—none of these things people do now—and critically, there was no attempt to fundraise, because it was inexpensive enough—and in those days, we made enough money that we could support it 100 percent. That changed.

MP: That changed a lot, but also there's the tradition of just hangout spaces. That's where you can have non-commercial transactions that were mostly in music. Or there were places like punk rock record shops where you could hear music, where there'd be couches or a zine library and a zine store, where people who worked there were in a collective. And you could go and just play pool and use the library or buy a record, but you didn't have to. It wasn't like that. There are spaces like that here.

RP: We don't have a true mutual aid economy, and we can. This is capitalism, so there's usually a subsidy behind any project that's about giving things away or sharing things, and we subsidized it for a long time. Now we're supported to a great extent—not completely—by contributions.

MP: We just had to.

RP: But we saw this as a very natural experiment. It was funny. We just eased right into it. It was something that we wanted to do together, and we did. And that's, in a lot of ways, the part of the story that warms me the most.

MP: It's kind of like the natural expression of our partnership. It's what we both naturally sort of gravitated towards daydreaming about together when we daydreamed about our future as a partnership. Other people daydream about other things—

RP: —like a house in the country. But this just was something that we wanted to do together, and we did, and it seems to have struck a chord. We opened up with a kind of grand party in June of 2004, where we invited friends to come and help us shelve and open up those thousands of boxes.

MP: Seven people came from the east coast just to attend our shelving week.

RP: We fed people...

MP: ...and we gave 'em a good time.

RP: Workday people would read. We did screenings and events. It was lovely.

imagine Mass Observation [the Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex], but without anybody asking questions, right? You know, it's as if Mass Observation was spontaneously generated.

GV: Yeah. Mm.

RP: And they're so wonderful. **They're both quotidian and they're transcendent and they're highly quantified, but unpredictable, and they're amazing.** And they're great to work with. I do most of my filmmaking out of home movies now. And now we have archives—there's no physical access. They're mostly stored. There's a lot online. There will be more online. We've been scanning like crazy. But because of the difficulty of working with—I mean, so, what needs to happen is that there's an archive that's holistic that is both an archive of physical objects and a digital workplace, but that is beyond me to build right now without just substantial—you know, it's a substantial research project. But I want to move in that direction. At the very least, sort of sculpt what it might be.



often social activity. People come in here principally in pairs and trios, and they'll move through in some degree of social relation to one another, and be pointing things out to one another. And because it's then dialogic. It's a different way of conducting research than the "one person, one query" dialectical. And that becomes a network.

RP: And, you know, that has been a tremendous problem with archives. You're not allowed to negotiate different kinds of relationships with documents. You can sit there with a box and gloves on, under supervision, and look at things one at a time, and use your pencil. Or you can look at a picture of it online. And that's kind of about it.

MP: And we're interested in exploding, you know, any non-destructive thing that people want to do socially or creatively with a piece of curated evidence.

RP: This is where museums are ahead, you know, in a lot of ways, even though museums are not really ahead of a lot of other things, they're ahead of libraries and archives. So, it really should be MLA instead of GLAM. I don't know why the "G" ever got put in there.

MP: Gallery. But they're not memory institutions or memory organizations.

RP: I guess maybe behind the white walls there's some shelves or something. But I think there's a sense that the innovation is asymmetric there.

GV: Just coming into that as well, we've touched on briefly that there are the texts, this is a paper, but there's also the other media archive as well that you have, the films as well.

RP: Right.

GV: And I was curious about how that gets separated out or not, or kind of where the limits are on what comes in here.

RP: So, the media archives were industrial advertising, educational films. That is largely at the Library of Congress right now, although we still collect in that area. I lead that side, although Megan has fulfilled some extremely key roles, both in terms of the materiality and the labor, but also—

MP: Yeah, I have a—

RP: —but also tagging and cataloging and looking at material. But it's mostly home movies. And home movies are cinema to me now. We have about 14,000 of them. They're the most unprivileged records, but as far as I'm concerned they're the most privileged. You know, imagine you're at Sussex, right? So

MP: It was so much fun.

RP: A real kind of utopian barn-raising. And people still talk about it. There were sixty people.

MP: And then, everybody who'd been a part of shelving week referred anybody they thought might be interested. And a lot of those people taught and started bringing classes, and then the students in the very first classes started referring each other and referring other students. And I think, from that very beginning, we were only here five months, and we started to be a destination for college students in art, sculpture, social practice, film, history, anthropology, media studies. And that has never stopped, and it's wonderful. People aged 18 to 28 are our central community here, which was not what I expected at all when we opened. I thought, we'll get 12 people.

RP: Which really leads to one of the two great lessons that I think we've learned, and there may be more. One of them was that **this project isn't about nostalgia, but it's about discovering that physical objects and digital objects have different jobs to do, and precisely, actually, digital affordances allow us to look at physical materials in a different way.** So, although we're not about trying to save print, and we're not trying to be the Library of Congress or Nicholson Baker, the physical materials actually have a greater place than they may have seemed to a few years back. And the other realization was really first articulated by Megan, but I think it actually has resonance to all kinds of cultural and collecting institutions.

MP: And it doesn't sound very novel anymore, but 10 years ago, it did: which is to say that the library is a workshop more than it's a repository, and that our project was to make a library into a workshop, or to convert what a library means from repository to workshop. And really, ten years ago, when we would say this to people in their tours or at a workshop or whatnot, it was like, "Okay, interesting." We were just at that time of the emergence of the maker movement, which is a whole other—totally other—but similarly, we have in common with the maker movement this





kind of cultural, ideological origin in the kind of complex soup of various free culture movements from decades past, I'd say, to some extent.

RP: And we heard from some people while just digitizing, "Now it's accessible to everybody."

MP: Everybody. "Why don't you scan this?"

RP: But as it turns out, that's not such an easy proposition, because just as—if you take a museum and you shoot pictures of your open art book or you put JPEGs online for people to look at, that doesn't mean that you can touch the object. And if you're working with open source code, you have to be able to touch the code. If you're making a true open source movie, people have to be able to work with files that are production-level files and not just Flash or low-grade MPEG-4. So, it turns out that, if you're really going to scan libraries in a fundamental way that'll allow people to really reuse and cite that material, that's big money, and Google hasn't even cracked that. It's really hard to cite a page in a lot of Google books. First off, most of them are enclosed and not freely available, and second, the whole citation and cataloging mechanism is broken.

MP: And also, there are kinds of research you can only do when you can touch the documents, that you cannot do with digital materials.

GV: Two questions really come to mind. The first one is exactly that: What is the importance of the physical object in terms of what you're talking about here, in terms of this not being about nostalgia—the things you can do with something physical that you can't do with something digital. Why does the object matter?

RP: Analog affordances.

MP: At Gray Area, I talked about a kind of interdisciplinary research that looks at a comparative between the ads in the magazines and the hard news on the facing pages. You can't do art history research with a keyword search, for instance—that's just one point. You can't do dialogic research if you can't see what materials face each other on different pages. And you can't do any image research at all if the magazines have been de-illustrated before they were digitized, which does happen.

RP: And you can't do it on a phone or on a laptop. Most people's internet access now is screens that size, and although you can read *The New York Times* now as it was originally presented digitally, you're gonna be spending most of your time mousing around.

MP: And then, there is no discovery environment, although people are working on it. But there's no discovery environment that can offer you, Georgina, the

she articulated stuff that I'd been thinking about, but not so clearly, about how history is embedded in the landscape; landscape is a set of social relations and, you know, I'd always suspected that it was as foundational as race, class and gender. And in a lot of ways I think that follows through into the taxonomic space here, that's geospatially based, and it's an attempt to embed knowledge in a landscape, to look at landscape as a paradigm for thinking about knowledge. And I think in some ways this is why we kinda like, you know, this book *Geology of Media*, because it's talking about geology as media and an inscription of, not just sort of a channel, but a message, and in rocks and in dirt, you know?

MP: And I like John Durham Peters *Marvelous Clouds*, which is a media archeology book as well, in addition to Jussi Parikka's work.

GV: I'm also really curious about browsing practices as well. At Pier 9, we have objects for browsing, but they're objects. They're not books. They're kind of things to fiddle with and play with and have on your desk. One of the things we've ended up doing when you're getting to grips with the machines is that you produce a lot of crap, basically. You make crappy things and so you walk past people's desks and it's just piled high, but it's the things that you learn from. It's how you learn from how to cut, it's how you learn how to mold.

So what we ended up doing was to try and build in what we'd been thinking about. So, Deb made a series of icons of Donna Haraway, Ursula Franklin. I cut out the San Francisco logo, "Gold in Peace, Iron in War," on the laser-cutter partly to have at my desk, but partly because I was trying to see how finely the cutter would cut, where the plastic would start breaking. There's still text in there and we can't get past that, but it's kind of trying to bridge those affordances. So, I guess we're just coming back to 'why browsing?' What's it do?

MP: Why? Because it gives you—for a whole lot of reasons, you can take in more information from browsing than you can from conducting a query-based search on a monitor. Even if your query-based search—I mean, they just do different things.

RP: You know, this is reading, too. I mean, classification as authorship, as somebody's written about this library in a dissertation or book. This is also real.

MP: This is our collection on history and culture. This is an active reading that actually can be a lot more profound than pedantically working your way through a book page by page. The other thing is the browsing, more often than not, is a social activity in a way that one person to one monitor is less

MP: Well, one thing about space is this is about a seventeen hundred square foot room, thirteen-foot ceilings, and we like this size because we can work the collection within a fully browsable—like, we don't want it to be twice as big, because then your, like, labor-to-reward ratio would go down in terms of how much of it you could take in as you walk through it.

The geospatial arrangement system is a political critique of the encoded injustices that are in the Library of Congress and Dewey Decimal systems. We wanted to use spatialization as a way of kind of rearranging and dehierarchizing the relationships between subjects.

Of course, that's to some extent an exercise. But we're happier with the geospatial and we also find people's relationship to place is more innate than our kind of mainstream culture tends to acknowledge. And most people when they walk in here just find the geospatial—like, we just say, "Geospatial, play space, mediated, abstract," you know, "space sciences," in the far side of the far row. Start here where your feet meet the ground in San Francisco. All the way in between is a chain of logical association that links everything and—I don't need to explain to you. You can just walk through it and follow it. And, you know, people really respond to it and it's been validating and validated. But it is a gesture at a political critique of conventional modes of organizing information. And it's developing other logics for the future. Never mind what it means in reference to things that have already happened. You know, what are some working models for organizing systems, future systems?

RP: That's really interesting. So, my first encounter with Megan was reading some essays that she'd put online, about landscape, class, and kinship. And one of the things that impressed me was:

amount of information about what's in this room that you got from walking around the room for five minutes.

RP: That's right.

MP: That's an irreproducible experience.

RP: Your complex, synthetic picture in a world on the web, which is query-based, where you have to formulate a query, and then you get back something very close to what you put in, which is inherently reductive. That's why we don't have a catalog. We don't support query-based research.

MP: It's also that the human eye, mind, and reach of hand all working together can take in ten times more information than the eye-to-screen alone can take in.

So, the analog browsing environment is a richer, more stimulating environment, and for all the reasons that intelligence is activated by multiple sense engagement, but also just the total amount of your visual availability—your ability to look at what's there on the shelf alone. Even if you were to conceive of the shelf as a gigantic screen and ignore the physical multisensory aspects—even apart from that—it's still more information than any website can give you, even if you knew how to ask for it. If you were ever gonna discover something you don't know exists, then by definition, you can never ask for it. Plus there are things that just can't be digitized.



openness. There's areas of interchange. There's a kind of morphology of growth which nobody's really examined yet. But I think it's a really productive metaphor for thinking about what the specialty archives have been and what they might be. [Mattern's] work is leading in that position. She teaches a library in her class.

GV: You mentioned the spatialized system that you've got here, and we've talked about objects and analog affordances, but what about space in this as well? Where does that come in?

RP: The master planner.



RP: And it must be done many times. Digitization's not a one-time proposition. One of the things I talk about lately is this notion of 'the archives' versus 'the archive'. And, you know, everybody in the arts and in critical theory and in you-name-it speaks about *the archive*. And the archive has a funny kind of *terra nullius* quality to it. It's open for occupation for just about anybody to mean what they want to mean. Whereas *the archives* is a space of labor and it's typically gendered or racialized labor, quite often. And there's a real effacement of the labor.

So, the researchers typically don't necessarily do their own collecting or their research is outsourced to another class of people. And I'm quite interested in bringing this together, because, you know,

just as archival theory is being revitalized by an infusion of people thinking in terms of gender and race, let's say, just for starters, it also, I think, will be revitalized if people think not just about materiality as the media archeologists do, but they think about the labor of maintaining and dealing with that materiality.

That's an exciting prospect to me actually, just as this library excites me about libraries again.

GV: You mentioned "media archeology" and I was wondering if you're referring to any of Shannon Mattern's work...

RP: Well, she's one of the smartest people in the world. What Shannon Mattern does that's super-interesting is she teaches both urban space and she teaches libraries and archives. And it occurred to me after looking at her syllabi—and I know she's thought about this a lot, but one model for thinking about archives in libraries—you know, Megan was the creator of the specialized taxonomy for this place, but in a broader sense, collections are cities. You know, there's neighborhoods of enclosure and





RP: We get a lot of people who come here doing entry-level research. They could go to the San Francisco Public Library where the collections on local history are much deeper than ours. They can go to a university library maybe, but they like the accessibility of everything here. They like the centralist quality, and they also like the fact that, since we don't have a catalog, the metadata and the data are kind of the same, because the metadata is the book spines or what you find when you open up and you look at a title page. We haven't advanced enough yet to do that sort of mind-body split of metadata versus the content that it refers to.

Some other things: we've tried to keep media out of here, 'cause it isn't a good place to store media. But we have so many different kinds of print. We've got books. We've got a huge and wonderful collection of bound periodicals; we have about 700 or 800 titles. We've got a huge zine collection. The print ephemera collection, in some ways, is becoming the heart of the library, 'cause books are easier to source, but the non-book material is often rare. And also, we find that books tend to present ideas that are more vetted, and for the provisional and the sometimes incorrect, or ideas that didn't pan out over time—I'm trying to say "provisional." There's a much greater amount of provisional knowledge in the periodicals and the ephemera, and we're really strong in provisional knowledge. Oh, yeah, these are good things. But also, I think part of it is a bit of a generational thing. As we have an increasing number of people who are emerging into the world as authors and artists and scholars and researchers, they didn't grow up, necessarily, in a huge print environment like I did or like

And so much work that's being done in the new media space, there needs to be some kind of interface where it actually hits people out in the world and it needs to be displayed, otherwise somebody goes to a website or launches an app. I just don't go for this anymore. I did for years. I don't think this changes the world any more. This is now the hegemonic paradigm.

MP: It's normative.

RP: It happens on the screen. And, in fact, there's a reverse digital divide and we kind of feel this here, 'cause it used to be that if you dealt with digital material or used digital tools, that implied a certain privilege, and now that's the other way around: If you have the space and the time and the luxury to touch a physical object and to work with it, that's privilege. If you're a working person or if you're poor, you're dealing with the state and welfare and everything using these crappy, poorly designed websites. You're going to the public library—

MP: —doing query-based searches that are reductive.

RP: Yeah! This is the mass market now. So, the digital divide is twisted back in a funny way.

GV: And there's also still that black-box thing of what happens on the screen as well.

MP: Mm-hm.

RP: That's right.

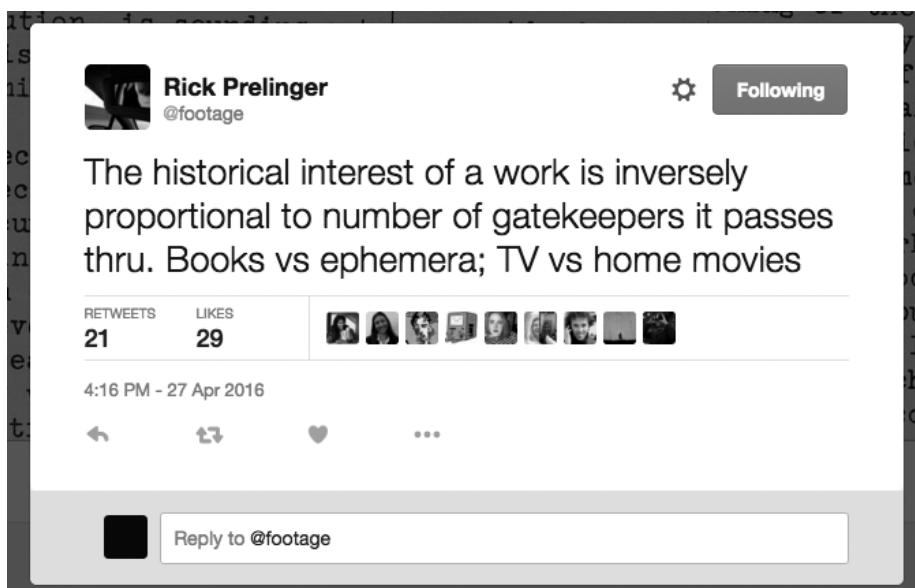
GV: At Pier 9, we're working in a space where there's a lot of software, but what it's used for is to be kind of a handshake into hardware as well. So, you design things, but then that gets funneled through a digital fabricator or a laser cutter.

You design—you don't use it as a manual tool. You design the thing on the screen. And these past few months has highlighted what I knew instinctively, but didn't realize fully materially: That it's really hard, that it takes a long time and software is difficult. Intentionally not digitizing, as you do, seems to recognize that that the digital process is hard and highly political. We don't just 3D scan and then we make a thing. Each step of that process is packed with human labor and materials and choices that we make.

MP: That's right.

of primary, foundational narratives that kind of—I don't want to sound critical of academic history, 'cause all kinds of people in academic history are doing very, very, very interesting things, but there is a legacy, a kind of canonization of kind of desired narratives. If you're doing a counter-canonical, counter-narrative of the military-industrial complex, it's not always appropriate to come out and say, like, "And they did this interesting thing [which] you know, at some level it's value-free", 'cause we're all living with it, like the socialization to look at monitors. You know, that doesn't always fit neat counter-histories.

RP: I just made a tweet. I was trying to think what to say to you and I decided to tweet it: "The historical interest of a work is inversely proportional to the number of gatekeepers that it passes through." So, books versus ephemera. Books maybe have significance, but they're not necessarily as interesting as ephemera, TV versus home movies, and something that hasn't been vetted a great deal, like a trade publication. That's one way of thinking about that.



Rick Prelinger
@footage

Following

The historical interest of a work is inversely proportional to number of gatekeepers it passes thru. Books vs ephemera; TV vs home movies

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I'd say another thing, which is we are totally not nostalgic. We live deep digital lives and yet the digital labor that we experience as digital makers and consumers and researchers is really getting overwhelming. I am fucking tired of the laptop. I am tired of looking at screens.

So, there's a way a lot of students were doing very interesting work in so-called "new media" that has all kinds of implications. But I'm increasingly feeling that when you do work that's about society, you do work that's activist or about resistance or rebellion, to restrict yourself to a small screen is a weird case of simultaneous engagement and retreat.

Megan did. This is a novelty, and there's a cachet to this, which is super attractive to people. Privileged experience.

GV: My doctoral research many years ago was on the adult entertainment industry, for which there was nothing in the libraries. There was nothing in the journals. I was looking at the business side of it, not the performance and studio side. So, I ended up going to trade shows, and I collected trade magazines as paper things, because they weren't online. And I have lots of swag that I picked up from trade shows.

RP: It's a rare collection. It's like the BL [British Library] was collecting the little phone cards that were up in the phone booths, 'cause they were all in the neighborhood.

GV: I'm fascinated by pamphlets, and I'm particularly fascinated by industry material, particularly the kind of stories—who's communicated to, whether it's a signal to clients or customers or a signal to the industry. You knew the adult industry was on the up when they could actually afford to hire decent graphic designers, and the quality of the paper got thicker. So, it's that kind of stuff that completely fascinates me. And I'm curious, particularly given the collections you've got back down there, of the history of the computer industry and so on; and that the work we're doing [with Situated Systems] is on the military-industrial complex. What does ephemera tell us about those faces that we might not get from other materials?

MP: Well, all kinds of things. I'm very focused about sponsored art and the kind of forgotten role that visual artists played in—fine-art-trained visual artists—and kind of corporate communications where it was business-to-business communications and little-seen by the general public, where there were even some very sophisticated visual approaches to communicating ideas about technology that were forgotten, because they weren't looked at by the general public. So, I write books about that. There's that.

But the art history is just one part of it. It's the part I felt was kind of most underserved when I started looking at that literature. But the art points to other larger phenomena, like the natural—that you can look through art, or you can look through ephemeral evidence, non-visual materials, and see the process of, for instance, people being socialized to look at monitors, which is not an organic thing to do. But over time, people get introduced to the idea of a monitor, and then socialized to sitting at desks and primarily transacting with a monitor. Started out in radar, and then television and radar at the same time, and there was synergy.

So, if you go to a library and pull off a book written in the last 10 years about the history of the military, that won't be there. I think it doesn't contribute to the kind

