A WORLD IN THREE AISLES

Browsing the post-digital library

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus



"Treeware" is the epithet that, in certain digital circles, is used to disparage what are more commonly called books. Those who find words like "treeware" amusing or useful are the same people who see library stacks as modern reliquaries, crepuscular corridors soon to be abandoned for infinitely available digital databases. Those of us who, by contrast, still feel some fondness for books, even as we view this technological crossing as perhaps a stygian one, tend to take the distinction itself more or less for granted. But Rick Prelinger and Megan Shaw Prelinger, experimental amateur librarians, believe otherwise. They think the conflict between a so-called digital culture and a so-called print culture is fake; they think we should stop celebrating, or lamenting, the discontinuous story of how the circuits will displace the shelves, and start telling a continuous story about how the two might fit together. And they have designed a library project—part public archive, part private collection, part digital-appropriation center, part art installation—to suggest where we might begin.

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For a radical laboratory at the border between our physical past and our digital future, the Prelinger Library is not the world's most glamorous place. It is located in a jaundice-colored converted factory at the corner of Eighth and Folsom, in the South of Market neighborhood of San Francisco. This is a district best known for its proximity to the highway and for its cavernous rooms, which are now used as expensive lofts, leather boutiques, auto-body shops, and commercial spaces that are still empty despite a drastic rent reduction since 2000, when they hummed with faux-wealth-generative activities that now seem both preposterous and naively endearing. The library itself is the size of an elementary-school lunchroom and outfitted in a manner not dissimilar. The walls are a pallid yellow, the floors a hard and unfinished gray, and the haphazardly rigged shelves, eleven-foot stanchions, a gleaming gunmetal. They look haphazard, but it turns out they are solid enough to hold, among many other items, a row of four-inch-thick bound volumes of *Factory* magazine from the 1920s. These shelves and their unconventionally arranged contents take up the vast majority of the room. There are, besides, two six-foot-long folding tables, bowed from book weight. There's an old photocopier one has to feed manually, a functioning scanner, two enormous bright green stepladders on wheels, a few uncomfortable wire-frame chairs with twisted-lollipop backs, and one comfortable chair—which Rick and Megan call "the comfortable chair," and which I carried around with

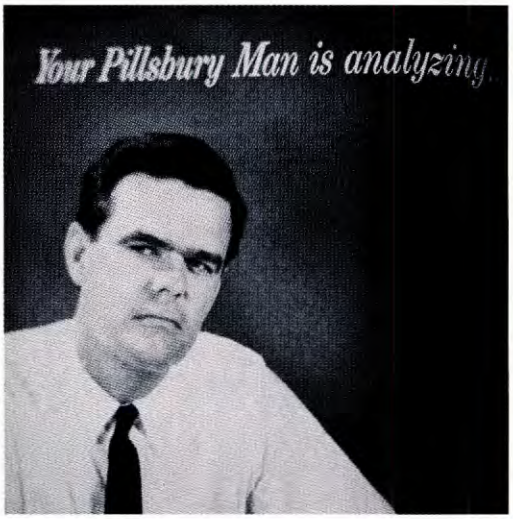
Photographs from the Prelinger Library by Jason Fulford and Tamara Shopsin

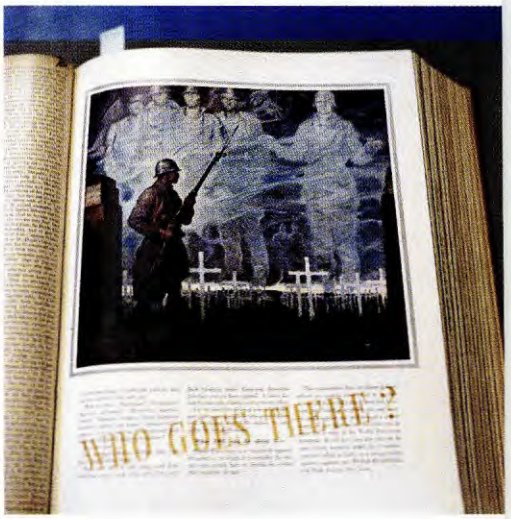












me as I browsed my way along. There is also a great heap of distended cardboard boxes in what is called the "Staging Area," though cursory observation might suggest that the only staging that goes on in the area is the staging of cardboard boxes. These boxes in fact serve as foster care until permanent housing can be found for their inhabitants; until then, the faded bursting boxes sit in service to the sense of bookish shabbiness that Megan and Rick have cultivated amid so much concrete and fluorescence.

Rick and Megan estimate that the library contains about fifty thousand items, which they have obtained from used-book stores, shrinking institutional and public libraries, periodicals brokers, private donors, and eBay. They have thirty thousand books and periodicals, and twenty thousand pieces of what they call "ephemera," maps and charts and brochures and errant scraps of apposite paper. They house the ephemera in deceptively bland gray boxes that are five inches wide and a foot tall and deep; these boxes are intershelved with the books, which are intershelved with the periodicals. Megan and Rick believe that when you are looking for a book, it might be helpful and illuminating and even inadvertently crucial to stumble across a postcard or a leaflet or a glossy city-planning binder from, say, 1940s Baton Rouge. For the most part, it is easy these days to find what you're looking for; one hallmark of digital efficiency is that the more specific the query, the more efficient the query-based search. Megan and Rick, however, would like to help you find what you are *not* looking for. Between the two of them they've seen a lot, which is why they've built their lives—and this reconsidered version of the small private library—around the question of how to make certain that there are still surprises to be had.

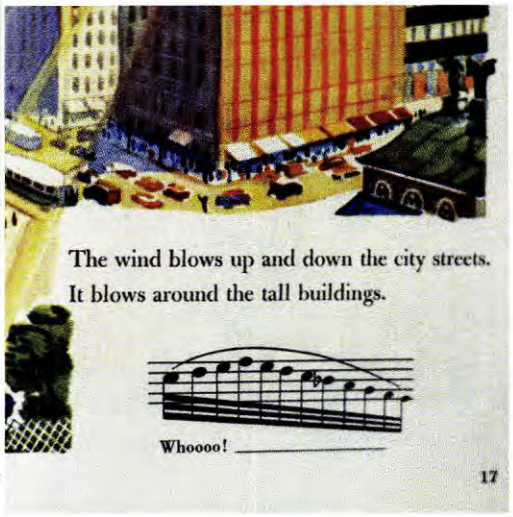
Megan and Rick are decidedly not Luddites. Rick moonlights—in his day job—as board president of the Internet Archive, a Web clearinghouse for free, public-domain information. He flies around the world to help libraries put their books online. Both Megan and Rick would love to one day do the same for their holdings; in recent months they've begun this process, putting two thousand items online. Megan is on the editorial board of a magazine called *Bad Subjects*, which provides fifteen years of back content for free online and no longer even produces a print edition. Which raises the obvious question: if they are spending their mornings digitizing billions of pages to be made instantaneously obtainable by anyone on the planet with access to a modem-equipped computer, or editing a journal that is now entirely digital, why do they truck across town to spend their afternoons painstakingly arranging and rearranging fifty thousand uncatalogued and whimsically classified items, very few of which are overwhelmingly rare or commercially valuable, in a small converted factory above a carpet store in an out-of-the-way corner of perhaps the world's most wired city, building a library that is open to the public a few hours on some days and no hours on other days and is staffed by people with zero expertise in professional librarianship and has only one comfortable chair?

They do it because they are sur-

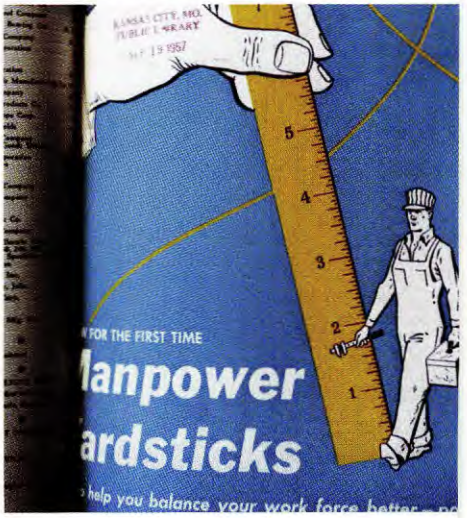












rounded by people who think of the Internet as the new Library of Alexandria, and although they can appreciate this Alexandrian vision for its ambition and scope and sheer usefulness, they are uneasy about what such horizonless repositories will do to the future of information and information retrieval. They are also uneasy about the ways public libraries seem to be adopting a blithe approach to these mammoth Internet caches. So they want to help preserve a space for the physical, the limited, and the fussily hand-sorted alongside the digital pile. And they think there is a way that the small private library—a phrase that, up until now, has tended to connote a marble-busted terrarium of leather-bound wealth—can be reimagined to do just that.

Rick and Megan's idea of such fussy curatorship is embodied by the Prelinger Library's classification scheme. The first rule is that locality trumps all other considerations. So, for example, Frank Norris's *McTeague*—in a handsome old cloth edition—rests in SAN FRANCISCO, not in FICTION. The library contains six rows built around three aisles: aisle one is the broadest and brightest and most congenial of the three; aisle two is the dim slum where one gets the distinct impression that one might in fact be mugged or perhaps sold contraband; and aisle three is narrower than aisle one but less dangerous than aisle two. Row one houses their REGIONAL collection, which reads across like a huge book-spine map of the United States. SAN FRANCISCO starts on the far left, then blurs into MARIN COUNTY and other outlying areas, then expands into a full bank on CALIFORNIA before moving on to the sprawling shelves taken up by the PACIFIC NORTHWEST.

The PACIFIC NORTHWEST is a cornerstone of their collection. Megan is from Eugene, Oregon, and feels a strong connection to the West's embattled landscapes, particularly with regard to her family history. She is one of the thirty thousand living descendants of Pocahontas and is a fifth-generation Oregonian, but she grew up among Eugene's lower middle class. After working her way through South Eugene High School and then Reed College, she found herself in a doctoral program in philosophy at Berkeley's Graduate Theological Union. The narrowness and haughty anti-provincialism of academia were suffocating; Megan was unhappy. "When I left graduate school," she told me one day over lunch at the laundromat-cum-café across the street, "I needed to regain some historical perspective by reclaiming my sense of engagement with the landscape, which then helped me reclaim my relationship to my intellect." This reclamation took the form of a series of solitary road trips through Oregon and the interior West to visit sites of personal and historical significance. By "landscape," as it turns out, Megan means not the unspoiled veld but rather the landmarked history of individuals, communities, and their environs. The library is only one of the Prelingers' many landscape-related projects: Megan works as a wildlife rehabilitator, Rick has made films addressing issues of landscape interpretation, and the two of them together distribute their Landscape

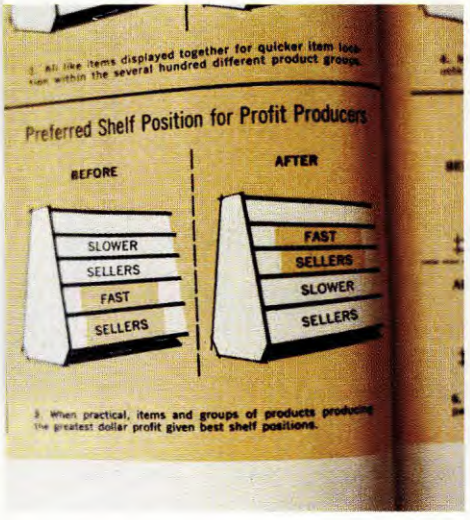
Coin—a brass-colored token they had minted that reads, "Landscape is our memory/A map of hidden histories." They ceremoniously leave it at sites of particular resonance and record the circumstances of these "coin drops," both in a private notebook and on the Web. (Those who find the coins, the back instructs, are to "value me as you please.") Landscape anchors not only the library but the Prelingers' own approach to most intellectual questions.

Rick grew up in New Haven, went to Andover, and then dropped out of Berkeley a mere two units shy of a degree—which takes some real effort, given that this is less than one class. He puttered through the late seventies and early eighties as a typographer in San Francisco and New York until his work on a film called *Heavy Petting* led him into the underworld of "ephemeral films"—industrial movies, safety videos, social-hygiene shorts, and the like. In 1982, Rick started driving around the country in rented trucks to relieve libraries, schools, and garages of their cans of 16-mm film, and before long he had built the Prelinger Archives, the world's most significant collection of such work. He is credited with pretty much single-handedly saving this entire genre from extinction, and to many filmmakers, archivists, and private enthusiasts he is not only a trade celebrity but a genuine hero.

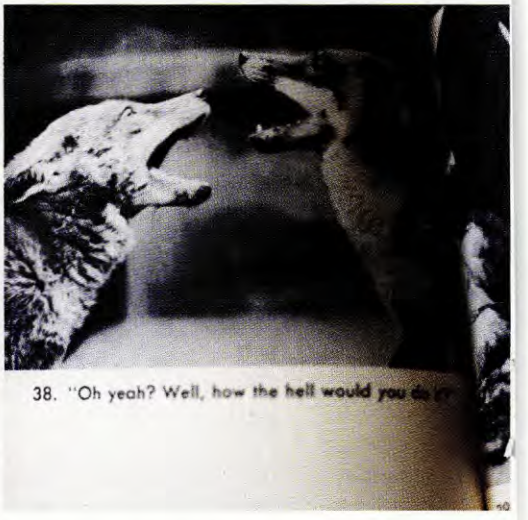
In 2002, Rick and Megan, by then married, sold their collection of more than forty-eight thousand films, one hundred and fifty thousand canisters of footage, to the Library of Congress for half a million dollars, less than a fifth of its appraised value. In exchange, they kept tape copies of four thousand films, and they pay their mortgage with an unconventional stock-footage business. Nearly two thousand of their films are digitally available—in a wide variety of resolutions and formats—for free, at this very moment, through the Internet Archive. If you want to cut up and reshuffle them, if you want to screen them for drug- or irony-addled friends, or if for some reason you just want to relive some sadistic safety video, they are all there for your enjoyment. If, however, you require the contractual niceties most commercial work demands—indemnification, warranties, and other legal provisions—you need to license the footage through Getty Images. Megan and Rick are not wealthy, but this half-gift-economy arrangement has been wildly successful and has allowed them to spend many hours a week happily burrowing around in their library. Megan also has a day job as an oil-spill responder and staff member at the International Bird Rescue Research Center, although she does it because she loves the work, not for the tiny salary. Megan's public concerns (wildlife rehabilitation) are private, and her private concerns (building her own open-access library) are public.

Rick and Megan defy the clip-art stereotype of librarians, though most librarians do; it's a myth about librarians that they look like librarians. Rick has a tousled thatch of pin-straight whitened blond hair and smooth pink jowls, and wears stylish black film-geek glasses, a rotation of three or four black T-shirts, and old black Levi's over scuffed black work shoes. He's both preternaturally mild and a bit impish. Megan has wide eyes and blinks infrequently, walks with long purposeful strides, and chooses her words with care. She often wears a navy blue T-shirt that says LIBRARY in yellow block letters on the front and LIBRARY in even larger yellow block letters on the back. She tends to project the greater seriousness of the two and has a flinty sort of temper, but it is not easy to say anything definitive, as she and Rick tend to freely exchange attributes. Rick is in his early fifties, and Megan is in her late thirties, but collectively they seem ageless, equal parts adolescent ardor and wizened composure. They are very affectionate, but not in that flaky Bay Area way that suggests intimacy seminars.

Their library, which has existed in abstract form from the moment they first exchanged emails, is the command center of their marriage, which seems as much a matter of cerebral cultural gambits as of romance. In fact, this distinction itself, between the library and Megan and Rick's connubial hive-mind, evaporates on close scrutiny: Megan describes the library as fundamentally a physical organization of their own mental furniture. Their as-






38. "Oh yeah? Well, how the hell would you do it?"

sortment maps out the range of future projects they have considered pursuing, and its varying granularity of organization provides insight into what they have worked through and what they haven't quite gotten around to yet.

It was such a vaguely imagined future project that brought Rick and Megan together in the first place. Some of Megan's pieces on politics and culture in *Bad Subjects* caught Rick's eye. He was living in New York and negotiating the rights to resurrect *Landscape* magazine, a periodical founded in 1951 by an early cultural geographer named John Brinckerhoff Jackson. Rick sent Megan a short but striking fan email that, although she didn't know it at the time, was the start of an attempt to recruit her as a writer. Megan half-recognized Rick's name from an essay she'd read in high school called "Industrial Jeopardy Films" he'd contributed to *RE/Search #10: Incredibly Strange Films* (FILM, row four, bank four, shelf three; cf. *RE/Search #11: Pranks!*, by Rick's conjecture the single most popular individual title in the library).

An e-epistolary romance blossomed. Megan was writing an essay on freeways in the American landscape, though she didn't have all the resources she needed. Rick responded that he happened to have, oh, maybe something like five or six closeted boxes of largely unread books on the history and theory of freeways that she might find useful. He had been saving them for an unspecified future foray. That project became their first coauthored essay: it appears in *Signs of Life in the U.S.A.*, a volume they store in AMERICAN CULTURAL HISTORY.

Over the next few months, having met face-to-face in New York to discuss that piece, they exchanged over email more than one hundred thousand—by their rough estimations—of what were probably the most torrid words ever exchanged on such ordinarily blood-unquickening subjects as the sources of far-right-wing antigovernment resentment and the need to reform our dysfunctional copyright system. Rick moved to a courting post in San Francisco. In October of 1999, he was screening a video at the American Institute of Graphic Arts conference in Las Vegas; he called Megan, she flew down the next day, and they eloped (on maverick art historian Dave Hickey's recommendation) to the Little White Chapel. Finally, their libraries could be merged.

Now they no longer talk much about which books originally belonged to whom. If pressed, hard, Megan will report that their books on birds were "historically identified with me," whereas most of the film books were "historically identified with Rick." In a section like AMERICAN CULTURAL HISTORY, Megan scanned the shelves before reporting that "our collections pretty much shook hands here," making that interlocking-fingers motion that seems to have become the international hand gesture for "synergy." On a tour one day through RIGHT-WING STUDIES, Megan pointed out to me their side-by-side editions of *The Turner Diaries*, the apocalyptic manifesto that inspired Timothy McVeigh. It's not that they find race war an aphrodisiac, but their mutual attention to the far right was one of the uncanny commonalities that drew them together.

> THE CHARM OF THE PRELINGER LIBRARY LIES IN THE CANNY AND UNEXPECTED WAY ONE SUBJECT BLENDS INTO ANOTHER

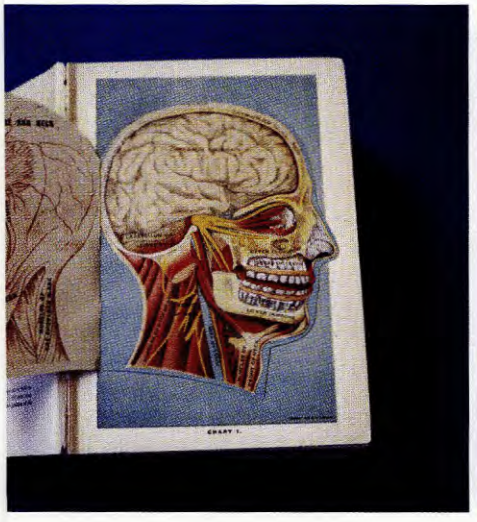
On my first official day of browsing, I worked my way through the REGIONAL section. The area on the PACIFIC NORTHWEST moves across row one through the rest of the West, dabbles in the Midwestern states, dwells for a few shelves in NEW JERSEY and NEW YORK and CONNECTICUT (historically identified with Rick), and then on to GEOGRAPHY (GENERAL), NATURAL HISTORY, and eventually EXTRACTIVE RESOURCE INDUSTRIES, the big but plausible conceptual leap from the land itself to what we take from it. I planted the comfortable chair for a spell near NEW JERSEY (historically identified with me), then frittered away an hour in CARTOGRAPHY with a book called *How to Lie with Maps* (row one, bank six, shelf seven; Rick tells me this is a very popular section and a very popular book), and then moved on to do some more serious research in LANDSCAPE (GENERAL), where the profusion of copies of John Brinckerhoff Jackson's *The Necessity for Ruins* recommended that I pick it up. It became apparent at some point that one of the ways they make sure a book gets the attention it deserves is by securing an unignorable number of copies. (They also tend to give away books to interested parties, so they have to monitor their inventory of their most gifted titles.)

In the title essay of that volume, Jackson sums up the values of site-specificity that root the Prelinger Library's physical vitality. The link between our past and our present, he writes, "is given visible form in monuments and a temporal form in a series of scheduled holidays and days of commemoration . . . the community is constantly reminded of its original identity and its ancient pledges." This, in brief, is the Prelinger Library's rejoinder to the digital prophets of locationlessness and communicative asynchronicity. It's a rejoinder, however, not a rebuke. Rick and Megan are all for the obvious advantages of digital tools: Rick checks his BlackBerry every three minutes, regardless of what he's doing or where he is. What this sort of library offers is a reminder that we submit to a ravenous ahistoricity—the flattening of distinct layers, the TiVo-ish fast-forwarding through temporal punctuation—at the peril of losing some connection to what William James called "a wider self through which saving experiences come."

The charm of the Prelinger Library lies in the canny and pleasantly unexpected way one subject blends into another. For instance, row three starts with SUBURBIA, which then becomes DOMESTIC ENVIRONMENTS—home repair and the like, including a periodical called *Keith's Beautiful Homes*, in which Keith himself remains an elusive and shadowy figure—which in turn leads into ARCHITECTURE. This latter transition is one of the conceptual pirouettes that Megan is proudest of, as it bridges the gap between the material and immaterial worlds. ARCHITECTURE becomes GRAPHIC DESIGN, which in turn hardens into TYPOGRAPHY and

FINE ARTS and then VISUAL ARTS. ADVERTISING and SALES cap the end of row three, and at last the wayfarer through the dark straits of aisle two may bathe in the welcome light of the rear of the room, where there are large factory windows and a thirty-foot skylight.

In ADVERTISING I spent quite a bit of time leafing through old issues of *Modern Packaging* magazine, which perhaps would have been more appropriately titled *Modern Cartoning*, since most pages offer sumptuous and multi-fonted ads for impossibly complex, room-filling automatic-cartoning machines. Aisle two is a trove of similar periodicals, such as *Progressive Grocer* and *Quick Frozen Foods*. In the September 1962 issue of *Progressive Grocer*, one headline announced "Pineapple Cutting Demonstrations Intrigue Customers, Sell Pineapples." The third paragraph of the article, in its entirety, reads as follows: "His technique is to glamorize this exotic fruit, and if that be gilding the lily, then perhaps gilding would be a good way to multiply the sales of lilies." Representative headlines from *Quick Frozen Foods*—March 1960, a few short years before the earth-shattering discovery re: expanding markets for gilded lilies—promised the following string of untethered numbers cleverly disguised as articles: "Next Decade: 60% Climb," "500,000 New Customers," and "$400 Million Plus." These magazines, like the bulk of the Prelinger Library's periodical collections, were tumescent with postwar boosterism and confidence in the top-down technocratic administration of goods and pleasures. This air of mechanical expectancy has rather obvious connections to our own digital utopianism.







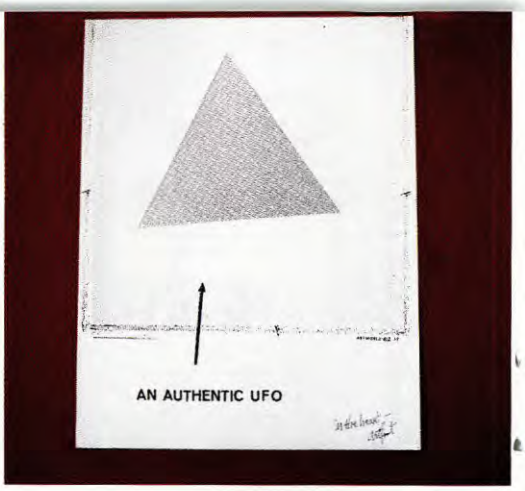
The connections in Rick and Megan's browsable narrative require varying degrees of imaginative exertion. On my first tour of the library, when Megan showed me where COMPUTERS folds into MUSIC, I casually remarked that some of the links were perhaps more tenuous than others. Megan gave me a sharp look, and I thought she was going to ask me to leave. "All the connections themselves are *fine*," she said. "We just don't have all the books to fill them in as explicitly as we'd like, or to arrange all the materials perfectly at once." And thus the library is in a constant state of associative refinement, what Megan characteristically calls "brushing the teeth of the granularity"—that is, "work," which also includes the transport of heavy cardboard boxes from one heap to another. (This was the sort of chore I turned out to be good for.) Even if they never acquired another book, their ultimate plan for the sculpting of the library would take fifty lifetimes and would even then be an asymptotic preoccupation, with their distant descendants bickering about whether *Looking Backward* should go in AMERICAN CULTURAL HISTORY or UTOPIANISM, moving it back and forth under cover of night.

Rick and Megan's desire for browsability functions on two levels. The first level is purely functional: these days, it's simply harder and harder to browse in other libraries. Many of the finest libraries require institutional affiliation for stack entry: at the megalithic Doe Library at UC Berkeley, which I visited for comparison, outside users must petition for day passes. Even worse than this is the trend toward explicitly closed stacks, like the ones at Stanford's Hoover Institution. Public libraries, which Rick reverently calls "one of the last remaining deeply democratic institutions in Western society," are increasingly centered around computer terminals and stupidly grandiose atria that make them feel less like book repositories and more like shopping malls or free Internet cafés.

The San Francisco Public Library, which happens to be only half a mile from the Prelinger Library, was constructed at enormous public expense in the nineties, and the result—a vacuous hotel-lobby sort of space, the actual books peripherized as a guilty afterthought—is unanimously considered a disaster. The vast majority of visitors to the SFPL congregate on the first floor, where they sit in long queues and look bored while they wait to use Internet terminals; there are at least two hundred such islands dotting the large, roomily bookless spaces at the library, and the wait for a terminal is still interminable. The reference librarians, reconciled to their new roles as customer-service technicians in the









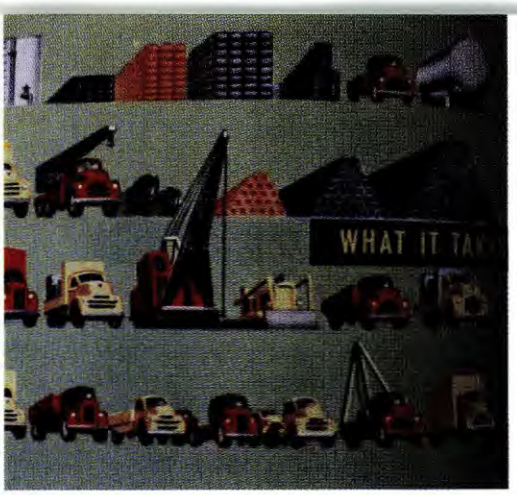


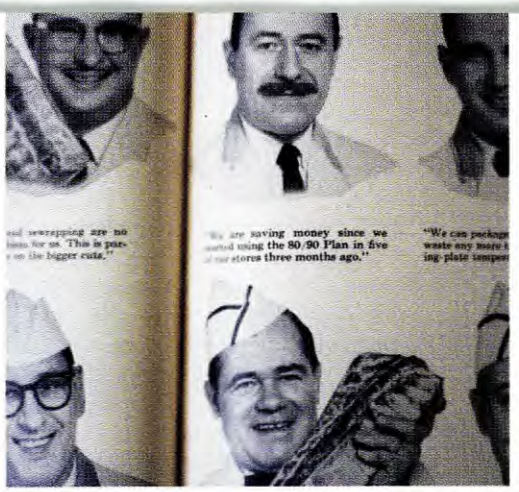


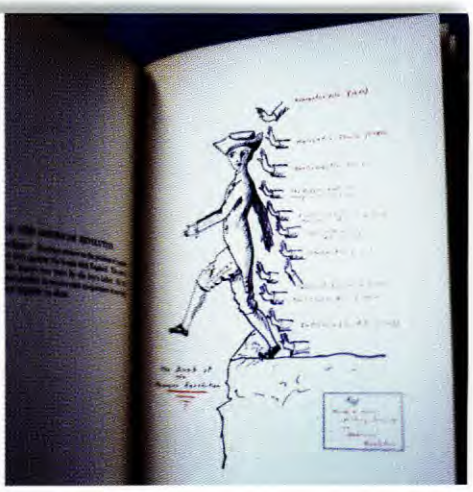
guise of advanced-degreed "information scientists," stand behind high oak-paneled counters and field questions about how to use these Internet resources, or more often just how to get the printer to work. A loft-ceilinged Periodicals Reading Room crowns the atrium. With a vaguely industrial metallic design, it's a bad parody of the Apple Store a few blocks up Market Street near Union Square. Rem Koolhaas, in fact, took his Office for Metropolitan Architecture team on an extended what-not-to-do tour in San Francisco while they were designing the new Seattle library.

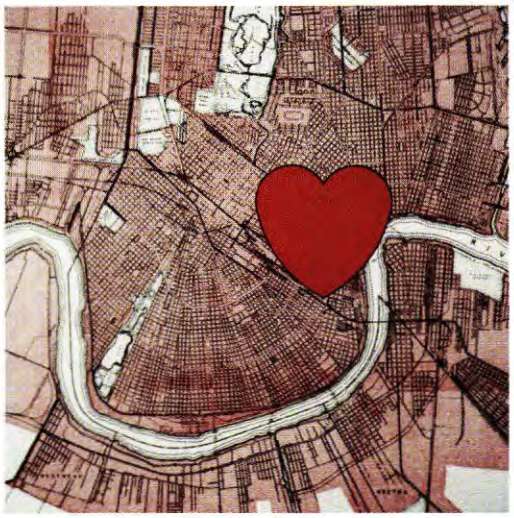
The Prelinger Library was inspired, in part, by the Warburg Institute Library in London, which was founded by the German art historian Aby Warburg. As a student at the University of Strasbourg in Alsace during the 1880s, Warburg found his research on Botticelli thwarted by an either/or system of librarianship: either books were kept in tiny, overspecialized "seminar" libraries or they were lost in the crowds of big storehouses. Warburg imagined an alternative architecture based on what he called the "law of the good neighbor": "The overriding idea," wrote his disciple Fritz Saxl, "was that the books together—each containing its larger or smaller bit of information and being supplemented by its neighbors—should by their titles guide the student to perceive the essential forces of the human mind and its history." He knew that no government or public institution would fund such a project, so he turned to his wealthy father, a Hamburg banker, for the funds to embark on the systematic book collecting that would consume the rest of his life. Warburg's central concern was the relationship between antiquity and the Renaissance, with particular regard to modern appropriations of ancient iconography. A manic sort, Warburg built his library feverishly; it spilled out of his home in Hamburg and had to be moved to a specially constructed building, and then under Nazi threat the whole collection was decamped to London. Today it undergirds the interdisciplinary Warburg Institute at the University of London, which has provided a home for restless scholars such as E. H. Gombrich and Frances Yates. The library's four-floored arrangement moves from ACTION (politics, customs) to ORIENTATION (the turn from superstition and magic to science and religion) to WORD (recurring motifs in literature) and finally to IMAGE (enduring symbols in art and architecture).

The Prelingers' ideal of browsability is much the same: it celebrates context, a shaped approach to the cultivation and distribution of information. It's no coincidence that periodicals like *Modern Packaging* and *Progressive Grocer* sit within a long arm's reach of the resources on hypermedia, for these row-four mainstays represent two equally unappealing versions of twentieth- and twenty-first-century American context. These early marketing journals construct an exclusively commercial frame: they capture the dawn of the corporate realization that one eternally vague suburban context can be elaborated and applied en masse to sell a lot of products to a lot of consumers. These magazines crystallize managerial posturing at its most unapologetic: manipulative, one-way, exclusively













bottom-line-oriented. Hence Rick's interest in what he has called "media archaeology," the protracted sifting through of accumulated media detritus that so often gets swept under the historical rug. As a typographer, Rick had a ground-floor view of cultural fabrication; as a media enthusiast and radio scanner, he has a keen sense for the ways in which media can be alternately used for both univocal and democratic ends.

Rows five and six, which form aisle three, are the Prelinger Library's pith. Here it becomes explicit that this collection is not about browsability per se but tailored and pointed browsability—browsability within a narrative structure and in service to some very particular ideas about the ownership of culture and the cultural frameworks of democracy. Aby Warburg built his stylized library to explore the connections between antiquity and the Renaissance. Rick and Megan have crafted theirs at least in part to address the relationships among intellectual "property," the evolution of the media, and cultural production.

If the REGIONAL section and the centrality of landscape provided Megan's root, and the transition from HOME REPAIR through ARCHITECTURE to DESIGN formed an omphalos, this is the encephalitic head, where Rick and Megan establish the connections between browsability, mediation, and access. Although it brims with lots of interesting items and is clearly the most tightly and lovingly curated aisle, it is also the least surprising. It moves from WOMEN'S STUDIES through exactly seven books of MEN'S STUDIES into GENDER and SEX and FAMILY and YOUTH, then from EDUCATION to PRISONS—Megan's half-joke—to NATION STATES/STATISM and U.S. POLITICAL HISTORY. From there one races through WAR, NUCLEAR THREAT, RADICAL STUDIES, and COMMUNISM, ANARCHISM, and UTOPIANISM. Row five exhausts itself in the final banks with PHILOSOPHY, RELIGION, INTELLECTUAL "PROPERTY," BUSINESS (Megan's second-proudest transition, after the material-immaterial one at ARCHITECTURE, is from PHILOSOPHY through INTELLECTUAL "PROPERTY" to BUSINESS), and then MATH, HARD SCIENCE, and finally OUTER SPACE, a coy twinkle of a finale.

Another principle of the library is appropriation-friendliness, a trait that makes itself felt most clearly in aisle three—obviously in the INTELLECTUAL "PROPERTY" section, but even more so at the end of row six, the epilogue row, a hodgepodge of things that don't fit elsewhere—FICTION (which for a variety of reasons the Prelingers are on their way to phasing out, through either intershelving or just taking stuff home) but also several looming banks of the *Catalog of Copyright Entries* and a 125-year run of the *Official Gazette of the United States Patent and Trademark Office*.

These hulking volumes punctuating the final row of their library indicate how much of the Prelinger mind is preoccupied with questions of copyright and access. In fact, Megan and Rick are co-plaintiffs with their friend Brewster Kahle in a lawsuit to rewrite the current model of copyright protection. This lawsuit was just denied a

hearing by the Ninth Circuit, but they are in the process of appealing. Brewster is straight out of the halcyon days of 1999 San Francisco: an almost unsettlingly affable guy whose conversation jingles with newly coined words like "intertwingling" and "incultrated," he made multiple fortunes in early Internet work and has now dedicated his life and money to making the Internet Archive, which he founded and directs, an Alexandrian source of "universal access to all human knowledge." And the lead attorney for the plaintiffs is none other than Lawrence Lessig himself, who has come closer to cult-figure status than any law professor in the history of the profession. Lessig is an intellectual "property" guru who, depending on whom you talk to, is either a messianic figure or a Visigoth who believes in the sanctity of nothing.

The lawsuit is over the status of what are called "orphaned works." As their case brief puts it, over the last thirty-odd years the United States has moved from an "opt-in" to an "opt-out" copyright regime. That is, before the mid-seventies, if one wanted a copyright one had to mark one's work as such, register it with the U.S. Copyright Office, and then, if it still held residual commercial value after the first twenty-eight-year term ended, renew that copyright, or else the work would pass into the public domain. A series of copyright reforms has reversed the situation. Now, from the moment of inception, any creative work made since January 1, 1964, that can be reduced to tangible form has an automatic copyright for the full duration of the term; that is, life-plus-seventy years for individual authors and ninety-five years for corporate authors.

An orphaned work is a work that is presumptively under copyright even though there's no apparent or locatable or even interested owner. Before the renewal requirement was lifted, only about 15 percent of all copyrighted works were thought worth renewing, meaning that the vast majority of all creative material passed into the public domain at the end of its first term. Now, however, all work is presumptively under private ownership for about a century; as one legal scholar has quipped, the present system offers "perpetual copyright on the installment plan."

There's no way to estimate what percentage of the volumes in the Prelinger Library are orphaned, but it's likely very high—although Megan and Rick have done their best to stack their collection with public-domain works. Regardless of the copyright status of the collection, they're interested in making their library as fecund as possible. They're always on the lookout for image-rich materials and are in the process of creating a digital-appropriation center, complete with a bank of scanners, computing terminals, and state-of-the-art photocopiers and printers. In an era when creative expression is immediately and unreflectively considered property—hence the looming scare quotes in intellectual "property"—and is figured in terms of how best to exploit its commercial viability over the near-limitless term of the copyright, Megan and Rick have revisited the idea of the small public-private library as a sort of "intellectual preserve." The environmental analogy, common in the I.P. literature, is not a coincidence: as with the early preservationist movement (and the actions of current environmental philanthropists like Ted Turner), Rick and Megan hope that by opening this small library as an appropriation center they will encourage others to make similar gestures—both as preservationists and as democracy-minded content providers. The Prelinger Library is a place where creative expression is understood as something that needs a period of limited commercial protection before being released as a gift into the shared commons of information, where it can be used, built upon, responded to, transformed.

MEGAN AND RICK HAVE REVISITED AN OLD IDEA: THE SMALL PUBLIC-PRIVATE LIBRARY AS AN "INTELLECTUAL PRESERVE"

The question of accessibility is a question of invitation: will individuals feel invited to participate in and contribute to a democratic culture or will they live in a world where most content is corporate-owned and -provided? The promise of the Internet-as-Alexandria is more than the roiling plenitude of information. It's the ability of individuals to choreograph that information in idiosyncratic ways, the hope that individuals might feel invited by the gravitational pull of a broad and open commons to "rip, mix, and burn"—to curate. This new sort of curator, in effect, is one definition of blogger: an amateur experimental librarian for the Internet, the curator of (in blogger/writer Cory Doctorow's phrase) a digital *Wunderkammer*, a private informational choreographer who has made her alignments public. And it's in no small part the expansive curatorial freedom of the early Internet that helped convince Rick and Megan that opening a library so distinctively arranged, so spectrally comprised, and so physically magical might be a live option. It's not that the Dewey decimal system isn't in some sense designed for associative browsability; it's that the Dewey decimal system is a helpful but ossified structure best suited to the bureaucratic centralization of thousands of different libraries. There's certainly use for that one great library in the sky, perfectly concentrated, all redundancies eliminated, the searchable catalogue available to everyone at any time. But Megan and Rick's new version of old structures of browsability and access demonstrate that there will always be a need for those small, discrete libraries—part public, part private—on the ground as well. Every Library of Alexandria on some broad boulevard needs Prelinger libraries tucked away in the alleys behind.

Central to the Prelinger Library experience is the orientation tour. I went on as many, with as many different co-visitors, as I could. The best tour I took was with a group of radical reference librarians in town for the Anarchist Bookfair in Golden Gate Park. When we arrived at the end of aisle one, Megan picked up a bound volume of *Display World* magazine and told the group that this periodical—with its rich

illustrations and fantastic advertisements, including an inscrutable mock-up of some kind of mechanical baby—was a particular attraction for the artists and art classes who have come in search of visual materials.

One librarian—who couldn't have looked more like an anarchist librarian, with long greasy hair and a vintage tech-start-up sweatshirt underneath a ratty leather jacket—didn't quite get it. "Well, I can see how it would be interesting to artists," he asked, "but how do they find it?"

Megan, whose overwhelming kindness occasionally reveals truculent edges, looked at him as though his was the stupidest question ever asked at the library. "*We show them*," she said, and moved on.

At the end of this tour, one of the librarians raised her hand and said, "I have to say I'm feeling a bit defensive as a librarian. I mean, you're flouting all of these conventions"—by which she presumably meant having some sort of cataloguing system, ordering things in some vaguely alphabetical way, maybe once in a while putting a periodical run in something akin to chronological order. But I didn't think her defensiveness was wholly due to the library's procedural unorthodoxy. I think there was some part of her that as an institutional librarian was jealous of the fact that to use the Prelinger Library one pretty much has to go through Megan and Rick, who have poised themselves as the inevitable mediators. Even once they phase out their intro tour and offer instead visual user-aids for visitors, which they plan to do, their mediating intelligence will still be the library's vital substrate. "We want to foment bursts of concentrated discovery across the spectrum," Megan told one tour. Which is not to say, of course, that the library experience is a predetermined one. The brilliance of this library is that it represents some midpoint between directedness and freefall.

If the books on our shelves speak about who we are, or stand in for the possibility of whom we wish someday to resemble, what Megan and Rick have done is to replicate this on a community-wide scale. They reached a moment in their book acquisition—at about thirteen thousand volumes, give or take—when they realized they were no longer solely in the business of imagining future selves. They were no longer private bibliomanes with private projects. They had crossed some psychological and physical threshold and now were, instead, public bibliomanes with public projects. They found themselves in possession of enough resources to go into the business of imagining future communities. Rick and Megan understandably distance themselves from the private libraries of the past, which were often viewed as mere morning rooms for gentlemen, inclined more toward fancy pressmarks, ornate ex-libris plates, and fossilized-fish ornaments than toward coherence (or even cut pages) among the volumes. But in the Prelingers' sense of the library as a site of communal exchange, with their ideas about the visual arts and media cross-pollination, their project perhaps more closely resembles classical private collections than it does today's Internet-envious public libraries.

A couple of years ago, the *New York Times* reported that the University of Texas at Austin would be moving almost all of the undergraduate library's ninety thousand volumes to make space for "software suites" that will provide access to the "24-hour electronic information commons." The executive director of the digital-library initiative at Rice University is quoted as saying that "the library is not so much a space where books are held as where ideas are shared." This is odd. Most people might suppose, to the contrary, that a library is *exactly* a space where books are held. There are many, many places on a college campus where ideas are shared: lecture halls, seminar rooms, computer clusters, dorm lounges. The library happens to be the one where ideas are shared precisely *because* books are held.

So much of the current literature of library science is devoted to the idea that the library, if it is to maintain any kind of relevance, can no longer be a "mere warehouse for books." Again and again, the librarians I talked to insisted that the very idea of the library must be startled for it to keep pace with its digital analogue. The Prelingers agree. Their gamble, though, is that the best way for libraries to move forward is to take several thoughtful steps back. ■



