fig. 1

Considered Non-completion:
A Correspondence Between Rick Prelinger and Sara Dean

Rick Prelinger is an archivist, teacher, writer, lecturer, and film-maker. He is founder of Prelinger Archives and co-founder (with Megan Shaw Prelinger) of Prelinger Library, an appropriation-friendly research library open to the public in San Francisco. Sara Dean is a spatial and graphic designer who works, often through collaborative structures, through design, fabrication, and curatorial practices. Last fall, both participated in an event, Lost and Found Detroit, which featured Rick's film *Lost Landscapes of Detroit* and Sara's work with the group 1/X, *Anecdoted City*. This led to a conversation about the role of iteration and collaboration in their practices and imaginations. What follows is an edited transcript of their correspondence.

Sara Dean When I saw *Lost Landscapes of Detroit*, I was struck by how the film communicates as both an artifact of a time and place that is considered and complete, and also as a work of intentional non-completion, inclusive of the footage that was missing—footage that is not yet included, or cut, or never collected. The film feels simultaneously like a completed project and a work in progress, which it is. For me, this is exemplary of a database mentality. You design with the cultural tools afforded by the database—filter, order, array. In one iteration, a film is place-based and shown chronologically; in another screening, it is presented thematically. This works because of the careful consideration you give each film. Through your recognition of an excess of available information, information yet to be found, and a nearly infinite narrative potential, the iterative film has a digital cultural mentality, even in its analogue and artifactual medium. I am interested in exploring this schism between the analogue physicality of the image, and our iterative, constant-refresh understanding of the world.

Rick Prelinger My archival films, especially the urban histories of Detroit and San Francisco and my new film on automobility (*No More Road Trips?*), are in constant process. I source new material continuously and re-edit regularly. When it is time for a screening, I stabilize the edit and present its current state, which functions as a snapshot of a continuously evolving text. I say "text" rather than "matrix" or "database," as I don't know if that deep structure actually resides within a work itself or within a collection of material. Certainly films and other texts possess perceptible (and sometimes less apparent or even covert) structures; such structures support narrative strategies that are quite often extrinsic to the images and sounds contained in the films and exist largely to guide them through narrow and judgmental channels of distribution. We know about narrative "arcs," conflict and resolution, ending on an optimistic note, and so on. But we know much less about deep structure, and I would contend that deep structure is as much a perceptual construct as it is said to be the premeditated work of an artist.

Take, for example, the evolving state of the database in the realm of information technology. Once synonymous with structured arrangements of information, databases are evolving (or perhaps more precisely, devolving) into minimally arranged collections. The intelligence once embodied in data structures is shifting into the "queries" that interrogate the database. Google's "Bigtable," for example, is described as "a sparse, distributed, persis-
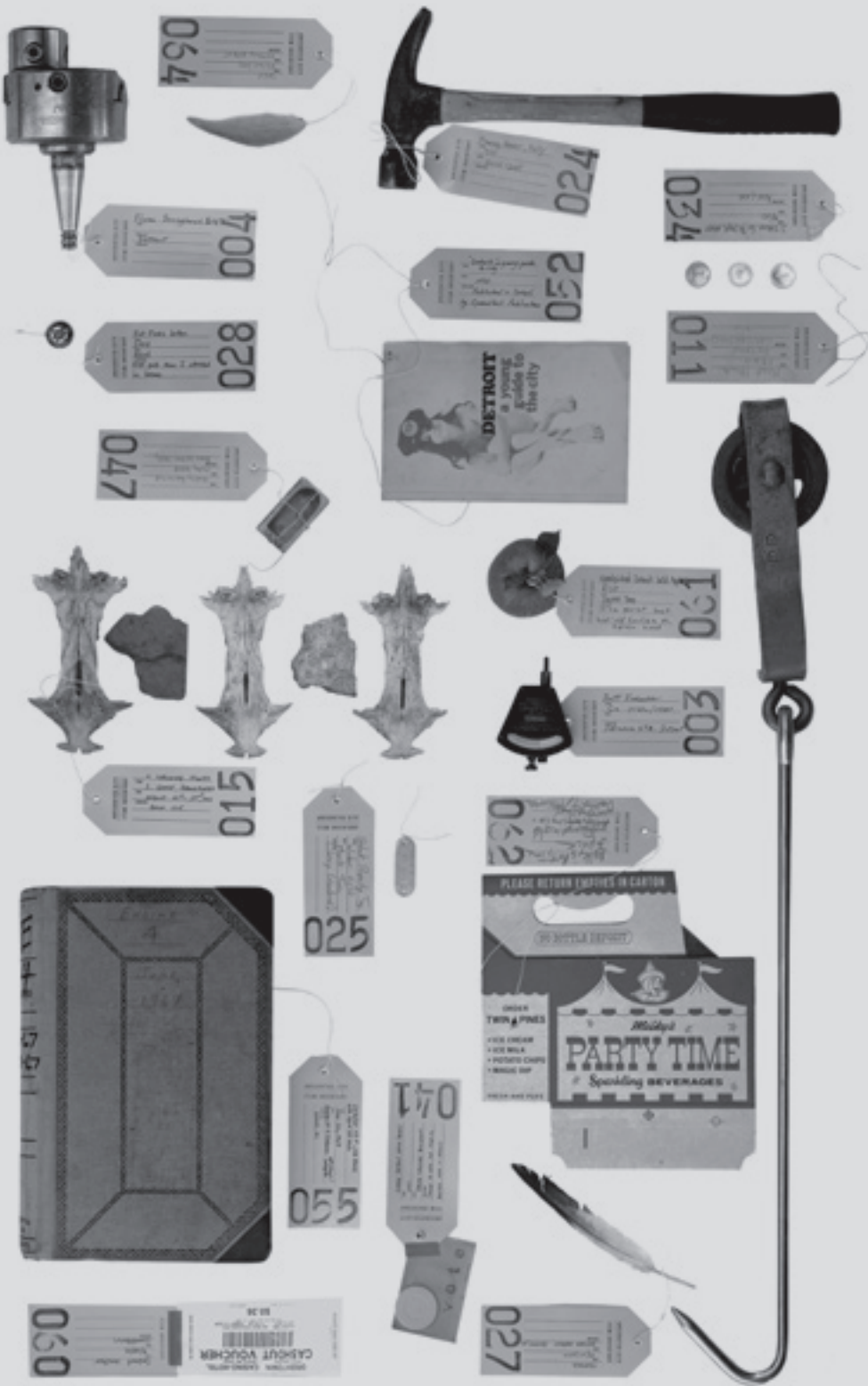
fig. 2

tent multi-dimensional sorted map. The map is indexed by a row key, column key, and a timestamp; each value in the map is an uninterpreted array of bytes."[1] Parsing and interpretation are accomplished by translating a user entry into a sophisticated database query that becomes the means by which structure meets data.

I liken the dumbing-down of the database and the growing sophistication of the query to the emerging shape of the film-text, to the process by which the contemporary observer and user of culture ingest pre-existing material, and perhaps even to the process by which we now experience the city. Not just digital data, but geography and geographical experience themselves are raw material which we interpret and narrativize through a fuzzy series of ideological and experientially determined frames. If this hyper-subjective mode of apprehending the information landscape reeks of postmodernism, it also speaks to how permeable data and engineering are to philosophical constructs.

SD The move from hierarchical databases to the flattened search structures of the Internet is itself a move to responsive and open-source structures. The Internet as query-able material gives its content an iterative and adaptive character. Where the database predicts hierarchy and significance, the query produces instantaneous

evaluation through use. The meme is a great way of looking at the validity of experiential and subjective narratives as a way of engaging the socius. The meme is an individualized response within a very specific framework. It is a cultural conversation channelled through an informational platform.

RP And yet memes, queries, languages, and perceptions are so often born in multiples. So many of our individual inputs simply re-enact each other or repeat mass-produced, pseudo-individualized memes. We cannot easily tell what is new in what we say, yet in a few years machines will be smart enough and fast enough to distinguish repetition from originality. But like anti-spam filters spooked by random text in mass emails, the machines may not be able to distinguish human contributions from those generated by cultural systems and submitted by humans. I am therefore worried about the durability and survivability of iteration when what we iterate with is so often repetitive. For iteration not to spiral inward, we need to constantly generate surprises and monkey-wrench systems. I have convinced myself that an orderly environment helps me think in disorderly and exciting ways, but can we thrive in rectangular buildings and on streets placed at right angles to one another? And can bytes—the most

universally reductive information medium, next to atomic and subatomic particles—be fuzzy enough to permit true iteration? Or are we just pretending?

SD I am curious about what digital technology has structured culturally, and whether or not the appearance of digital participation is a guise; maybe it is an especially convincing guise because we all know it is nothing more than that. Our collective cultural understanding of a digital participation methodology has primed new ways of engaging analogue practices. As methodologies such as constant iteration and multi-authorship move out of their assumed technologies into design practice, I think they can become actionable in the analogue world.

The constant-iteration structures that we understand digitally are very similar to structures that we construct in our respective practices through analogue media. Multi-authorship and anonymous contributions to work corrupt, or at least question, narrative hierarchies. This is true for digital platforms and for cities. Crowd-sourcing, like querying, can be part of a creative practice because it creates a *structure* for creative inquiry but doesn't guarantee a formal result. Crowd-sourcing allows for unexpected additions and even unexpected priorities in the system. Anecdotal, qualitative, and peripheral information thrives within this type of system.

This type of practice moves the designer from a formalist to a structuralist or post-structuralist position. I've called this a move from form to platform. In the collection that I co-curate as a member of the group 1/X, *Anecdoted City*, we are interested in how to collect memory of a place through objects and stories. We staged an exhibition as a method of collection in last year's Detroit Design Festival. The exhibit opened empty and a call was put out for people to bring in an object that represented the city to them, to add to the collection. We had no idea what objects and stories we would collect, or what the formal character of the show would be. Our role as designers was to set the stage; we *structured* the collection. And I think a digital understanding also structured the public to react.

During the course of the show, people brought things in, picked things up, and

told us stories about the objects and their own lives in Detroit. The multiplicity of the city that was presented had a strange and fleeting but historic longevity; it was specific to a person, or neighbourhood, or city. A Marvin Gaye studio recording receipt sat next to a locally picked apple, an earring found on the street, and a locally patented depth gauge. While the show was tactile and physical, it relied upon a digital priming of the public to a crowd-sourced, aggregate understanding of the world.

RP While we can't fulfill this ambitious participatory, deconstructive, and reconstructive agenda alone, I eagerly look forward to the kind of collaboration that allows exercises to end and the commons to be born. We take it on faith that representing a desired reality sets in motion some sort of chain of events that, if allowed to successfully sprout and fledge, brings about this reality. And yet we are rarely able to move beyond representation into the world we would most like to live in. Can we employ design so as to move beyond a designed world? Can tricksters and designers authentically collaborate? How can we make design actionable? And how can we employ design and its toolsets as temporary expedients, means to desired ends that we will discard when ends are reached? Can design be like the skin that moults when no longer needed? I value non-completion, but there should come a time when we are clear that we have reached a plateau.

SD Tricksters are great collaborators for gauging designed actionability because they tend to have their own agendas. Maybe if we look again to digital structures to find ways of talking about the analogue, we could use the separation of database and interface as a means for thinking about these questions. In digital design there is a complete separation between the collection of information (the back-end) and the means through which it is seen and accessed (the front-end). They are independent. And we, as designers, generally build up the back-end to be able to work on the front-end, or the form that a work takes on. To collaborate with the trickster, I think the designer needs to develop the back-end

fig. 3

as a design in itself, understanding that their interpretation of its merit is one of many. The relinquished control over subject is one of the products of open-source systems. Really, this is the archive as a design project.

RP It is true that open-source platforms or datasets, which barely exist (ours is a modified, "lite" version of open source due to its reservation of certain rights and formats), imply that data and information function as an infrastructural commons upon which users may build layers of their own, public and private. In general, this confirms my conviction that archives must reach out to the public and push information in the direction of a public. Participation is key to this belief, but our sense of what constitutes true participation in a commons-based information scheme is embryonic and, I believe, still has to evolve. At present most of us probably construe participation as commentary, posting to social networks and uploading content to privately owned web services. Schemes of social organization that might embody purer forms of participation arise rarely, and typically as proofs of concept floated by artists that fail to escape the sandbox in which most contemporary art seems to play. But your description of my archival mentality is an accurate indication of

where I would like to go. And to move in a specific direction is best accomplished by imagining that one is already there. While it is difficult to build institutions whose models depend on conditions that have not yet arisen, it is a simple matter to tweak and even monkey-wrench the conditions by which films are made and shown. My current model mobilizes some very old tricks in order to point ahead. It asks the audience to behave much as the rowdies in the Elizabethan theatre audience behaved, or to mimic the participant/observer role we see in contemporary sports audiences, who actively follow the progress of a contest, speaking loudly to one another and to the players.

SD Yes, and the way that you structure the film screenings also acknowledges there are always more stories to tell about the footage and the city, and more people to add to that telling. They embrace this excess of information, acknowledging all of the footage, objects and narratives yet to be included. This designed non-completion, although formal, artifactual, and directly designed, highlights the system that created it, the filter that narrowed the search. In *Anecdoted City*, our design effort focused on designing the engagement of the public with the show. We wanted to create a space for a conversation about Detroit as it is. Your films do

that by allowing the audience conversation to complement, complicate, and augment the work being seen on screen.

Your films show the artifactual quality of information, and the cultural importance of our ability to be excessive, both digitally (in our ability to store, share, and collect endlessly) and in our physical lives. I think this is a changing understanding of design and practice, the practice of collecting, filtering, curating, preparing, priming for design, as a way of setting the stage for interventions in that system.

RP I respect your practice of making an open framework, a framework that is not purpose-built to confine its contents, a structure that aims to liberate. A scheme, perhaps, where the structure of information is co-equally as important as whatever information the structures may contain. Who said that, "as the metadata increases in detail, it approaches and ultimately exceeds the value of the data?"

SD The value of design is moving, as it should, from the ability to control and contain, to the ability to leak and adapt. The co-equal structure is very important. We structure the work of 1/X as a space for a conversation, both on the subject matter of the work and also with our collaborators. Although, in the end, my practice produces physical objects, I work on the structure for the broader project and try to let the outcome be responsive to that. Through this mentality, I don't prioritize a medium. The medium that the work takes on then becomes a mode of dissemination in itself.

RP I see suggestions of a growing divide between what designers do and daily human experience. Consequently, my hunch is that we need to let go, to relinquish much of the control that we habitually seek when we make work, projects, and communities. This is not to say that we should simply adopt passive, observational roles, but that we might perhaps consider ourselves as arrangers rather than authors, as toolmakers rather than artisans. The appearance of completion is, quite often, a distortion enabled by stylistic flourishes. We should not seek stylistic expertise that enables us to create the appearance of non-completion.

Non-completion is not a style; it is the recognition of certain real limitations. Non-completion is walking away from the coyote who has taken your house cat. I am aware that this is not a new idea and that much contemporary art and para-artistic work (such as social practice) already operates with these assumptions. And I am acutely aware that very little art leaves much impact upon the communities it seeks to influence. But I strongly believe that committing to collaborative work with audiences and those affected by the work initiates a process that is hospitable and may ultimately be utopian.

And, perhaps not so constructively, I'd conclude by suggesting that the sense of privilege implicit in the act and discourse of design might lead us to thinking about a new set of terms that ride over and beyond—without erasing—such words as object, agent, goal, environment, and requirement. I want to set up an equivalency between trusting the evidence, the information that floods into our projects and practices, and trusting the audience, those who live and work with the materials, tools, projects, and communities we design. In my films, I let the evidence play with minimal editing, expecting that the audience will successfully parse, interpret, and contextualize it. I trust the audience to come up with a variety of interpretations, some facetious, others aggressive, others perhaps more reasoned. But in essence I throw the film out to the audience for them to consume, reproduce, rework, and remix. Some of this occurs in real time, some in contemplative time after viewing the work. Hopefully some of what the viewers do with the film happens to be actionable. And for me the value of a work is best determined by its resonances outside it, the ripples it spreads into the world.

Informational excess, like ambition, is a great servant and a bad master. In some situations an excess of information functions as a defense against problematics. An obsession with earlier configurations of a city in great detail—simply documenting where the old movie theatres were exactly located, for instance—tends to crowd out consideration of more complex and troubling ideas that don't easily resolve into positivistic tidbits of knowledge. Trivia crowds out imagination. It is

important to know when to stop the flood of facts, in life as well as in film.

Finally, it takes a secure artist or designer to recognize that problems and mysteries do not have to be solved. It helps to be skeptical about simple truths and organized efforts to escape doubt, and it also helps to appreciate diversity and polyculture. None of these acts are necessarily simple for audiences and citizens; it helps to step back before designs are complete and give affected subjects a real role in determining the content, organization, and expression of an idea.

SD Given the embryonic stage of collaborative practice that you described earlier, perhaps these types of design interventions can be considered as relays within an open conversation about how design, curation, and archival practices can learn from a mentality of considered non-completion. Designing in a hyper-connected world requires rethinking the practice and the role of the designer. We need to consider what design practice could learn from informational excess.✕

Figures

1   Detail from *Anecdoted City,* Detroit; courtesy of 1/X.

2,3   Stills from *Lost Landscapes of Detroit*; courtesy of Rick Prelinger.

Endnote

1   Fay Change et al., "Bigtable: A Distributed Storage System for Structured Data," Google Inc., http://research.google.com/archive/bigtable-osdi06.pdf.