

Contingent Librarian

Simon Browne

Simon Browne is an artist, designer, experimental publisher, researcher and a contingent librarian. He is the initiator of the *Bootleg Library*, a collection of republished texts and the readers collected around them. His practice engages with the social dimension of publishing, free software and infrastructure that supports interpersonal knowledge-sharing networks. He is a member of the Rotterdam based collective *Varia*.

<https://simonbrowne.biz>

<https://varia.zone>

T.C. Could you please remind us what a bootleg copy is? How is it different from a standard copy?

S.B. The meaning of “bootleg” differs greatly depending on the culture within which it is used. The word originally referred to the practice of concealing an item (usually a weapon) in the leg of a boot. Later, during the American prohibition era, alcohol was often bootlegged by being produced and distributed illegally. I use it to mean an unauthorized reproduction of a source publication, in particular relation to the copies of files and books that are in the *bootleg library*. For many, bootlegs are inferior low-quality copies of popular items, made purely for the purpose of profit. They are often parodied for their inauthenticity (read: low-quality), for their “poor” imitation of well known brands. But at the same time there are also many bootlegs being traded online for their cultural value, such as rare unofficial recordings of music performances. And as Byung-chul Han points out, the Chinese phenomenon of *shanzai* bootleg products demonstrates a widespread culture that deconstructs foreign concepts of originality and singular identity¹. The difference is in whether a publication is thought of as a singular work, or multiple text. Copyright regimes assert the singularity of the work, saying it is original. A standard copy assumes a single origin and voice, ignoring what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney describe as the social space of text² and the reader’s part in constructing meaning and paratexts that emerge after publication. To see a copy as multiple in creation, transformation and interpretation is to understand text as interwoven, with overlapping editorial, technical and social dimensions. It depends on being able to access and modify it to make something that is similar, but different.

T.C. In 2018, you started the *Bootleg Library*, “a collection of republished texts and the readers collected around them”³. You define this library as a “digital, physical and social” collection. Could you please explain these three aspects?

S.B. The *bootleg library* was formed through texts being produced by its readers; printing and writing documents, metadata, notes, scripts and software. There are interdependencies between the digital, physical and social; books made with free/libre software, physical limitations of machines and places where files and books are kept, and the need for the bootlegs to be

shared in meetings between readers. Digital, physical and social are not separate, but overlapping aspects of the collection in relation to each other.

T.C. In your conference, you talked about the digital collection, a part of the *bootleg library*, that contains 625 books and 621 categories, almost as many categories as books. I often wonder about these increasingly specific ways in which we try to order art works. Tagging has boomed with AI, since it greatly relies on human labeling to be functional, or to give the illusion of function. Summarizing in a couple of words what an artwork entails became therefore essential to digital marketing. Tags are for sure, necessary. For those who don’t know yet what they’re looking for, they work as a sign, an indication, a small guarantee that they won’t be wasting their time. A physical version of tags would probably be the shelf of the material library, that not only helps readers in finding a specific book but also guides the most curious through writings. Without any shelf, they wouldn’t know where to look, what to pick, what to “give a try at”. But at the same time, tags often completely miss the point of the works they so poorly try to describe. Aren’t all tagging attempts at the same time needed and bound to fail?

S.B. The digital collection of the *bootleg library* began with installing the open-source ebook management software Calibre⁴ on a single-board computer, adding a few files and turning on the content server. I started adding more ebooks one by one, and invited other people to do the same by handing out flyers and putting up posters. I talked with many people about how to approach organizing the collection. For instance, it could be a rigid taxonomy with classification predetermined. Someone mentioned it could instead be a “folksonomy”, a system where unrestricted tagging is the method of organization. It was the first time I heard the word “folksonomy” so I misheard the word “folks” and thought it to be “faux”, or fake (to be fair, it was a native French speaker who introduced me to the word). I set about realizing a “fauxonomy”, a system that falsely appeared taxonomic but gave complete freedom in organizing the collection. In many ways the software suggested in its interface a structure for ordering things, allowing users to edit metadata. They made tags (essentially the categories of the library) with a variety of approaches; using hashtags, full sentences, and sub-categorical tags. Having too many categories is a complete mess for

a large collection, but quite importantly revealing for a small collection. It makes the readers visible to each other, participating in the same system. Slowly, particularities begin to emerge.

When the digital library was ready to move online I installed the web application Calibre-Web⁵, which uses Calibre to serve files online. Calibre-web has private and public “shelves”, which are ways to individually and collectively organize the collection. Calibre (and Calibre-Web) use a relational database to cross-reference metadata, so the “book” can be on multiple public and private “shelves”. Clearly, this is not possible in a material library. Recently, I visited the Social Practice Library in the south of Rotterdam, a “non-complete” collection where a group of researchers are working with a collection gathered over the years by the artist Jeanne van Heeswijk⁶. There are only six categories; activism, cities, care, education, economy and public art. They are trying to work out the sub-categories by rearranging the collection. What ends up happening is that the collection is constantly moving around as visitors re-shelf books. But that’s the whole point of the system, to touch the items and engage with them.

In your project *Temporary Indexing*,⁷

T.C. you separate the books from their metadata, by printing the metadata only on a card, which then becomes a subject of discussion and social interaction, a support for telling about the book. What do actually meta-data tell of a book?

The metadata on the cards made with

S.B. *Temporary Indexing* comes directly from a file produced when you install Calibre or Calibre-Web. The software allow you to either write metadata manually or download it from external sources. With the web application⁸ you can upload a metadata.db file and generate imposed PDF files of cards. Each card displays the title, author, tags, description and timestamp on either side, chosen before generation. The software was made by myself and Luke Murphy, another Varia member, and it also uses his Calibrestekje⁹, a Python library to query the SQL database. It’s meant to be activated in print parties, where people print, cut and share cards. Metadata reflects the needs of the reader to navigate a system of storing texts—and it differs greatly between readers and collections. While testing the software, I borrowed several metadata files from friends. The bigger collections tended to be meticulously organized, the smaller ones not much at all with a lot

of missing metadata. And it makes a big difference whether the metadata was written; downloaded, written by hand, by many people or one. When it is one person’s collection, the materiality of metadata on cards gives an insight that can be revealing. The reference point for finding a text becomes the person who uses the library and an analog interface, telling you not only what they read but also how they find and organize their texts.

You define yourself as a *contingent librarian*. What does it mean? Have the rise of algorithmic recommendations in the last decade modified the role of librarians?

I’ll begin by saying that I am in no way

S.B. a professional librarian, nor have I studied information science. The term “contingent librarian” is a convenient shorthand for what I find myself busy doing; documenting and performing an ever-growing list of actions that support knowledge-sharing systems. I started using this term as I wanted to situate the collective work with a position of contingency; in recognition that situations that are always subject to change. I’d thought I made the word up but later found out that contingent librarians actually exist; they are staff who do the support work in places such as library circulation desks, where books are called up to be collected or returned. As collections become increasingly digital, the work of professional librarians is reduced by self-service software such as Bibliotheca¹⁰, which is installed at many public libraries in the United States¹¹. Library members can search catalogues and reserve files and books using laptops and hand-held devices, and check them out with scanners at the library. This system removes the need for the public to interface with librarians, reducing their workload, but clearly it also removes the possibility to find what you were not looking for.

You said you were interested in crediting the person who told you about a book, or the place where you found out about it in the *bootleg library*. I think this is an interesting aspect of how art still spreads among people. Algorithmic recommendations have not replaced friends tips or library spaces, but exist alongside them. In your opinion, as a librarian, what does it take for a person to meet a book?

Ostensibly, librarians refer readers to information. The romantic view is that this happens through personal recommendations. The reality is that they do this while aided by classification systems, software and ma-

chines that organize vast quantities of books and files. I usually find out about books through writers and readers, noting down new titles and surprising ideas to read and research later. According to Claude Shannon, novelty, or surprisal is the determining factor in how a message can be esteemed to be information. He said that how much information content is included in a message depends on how surprising it is. For example, the statement “an apple is a fruit” is hardly surprising. But saying “a tomato is a fruit” has more information content, because it is a surprising (yet factual) statement. Perspectives can change based on context and interpretation. It may be accepted in the laboratory but disputed in the kitchen or supermarket. Shannon information also played a part in Niklaus Luhmann’s *zettelkasten* (slip box), a hypertextual hand-written system of paper cards by which the prolific German sociologist organized his thoughts and ideas. His system employed atomicity and autonomy; each note containing one idea only that had to be standalone. Notes also needed to be linked and the context recorded. Curiously, Luhmann described the *zettelkasten* as a “communication partner”¹², reminding us that new thoughts are often conceived in communication with an other; not necessarily another person.¹² It could be found in a box of index cards with surprising content, connected with tags.

T.C. Algorithmic recommendations are based on similarity of tastes. If I like artist A and artist B, I will be recommended artist C, which other people who liked artist A and artist B enjoy. These machines are implemented by sellers of digital cultural goods (video and music for most part), whose aim is to keep customers online, streaming content. Is similarity a desirable way to collectively apprehend culture?

S.B. Algorithmic recommendations implemented by these sellers capitalize on the sociality of sharing, resharing, liking, following and making collaborative lists. This is how novelty and difference can be introduced into a system that makes inferences based on similarity. In the case of “you may also like” algorithmic recommendations, similarity is used to produce an outcome that is always the same; that you remain on the platform. Algorithmic recommendations uphold an unspoken promise that everything is there; the main competing point between these sellers is often their catalogues and what they can offer. There is an encyclopedic expectation that is never satisfied. You may also like something that is not

there. Finding difference points towards the particular, and situated, allowing for divergence. To open a new tab, fork a branch, reproduce texts and handle files locally, while also finding connection points of relation between people and communities who access them.

¹ Han, B.-C., Hurd, P., 2017. *Shanzhai: deconstruction in Chinese, Untimely meditations*. The MIT Press, Boston, MA.

² Harney, S., Moten, F., 2013. *The undercommons: fugitive planning & black study*. Minor Compositions, Wivenhoe New York Port Watson.

³ *The bootleg library*, Simon Browne, Website (online library), books (printed library), events (social library), 2018. See: https://pzwiki.wdka.nl/mediadesign/The_bootleg_library.

⁴ See: <https://calibre-ebook.com>.

⁵ See: <https://github.com/janeczku/calibre-web>.

⁶ See: <https://jeanetworks.net>.

⁷ *Temporary Indexing*, Simon Browne, Website, printed cards, [2021]. See: <https://index.simonbrowne.biz>.

⁸ See: <https://index.simonbrowne.biz>.

⁹ See: <https://calibrestekje.readthedocs.io/en/latest/>.

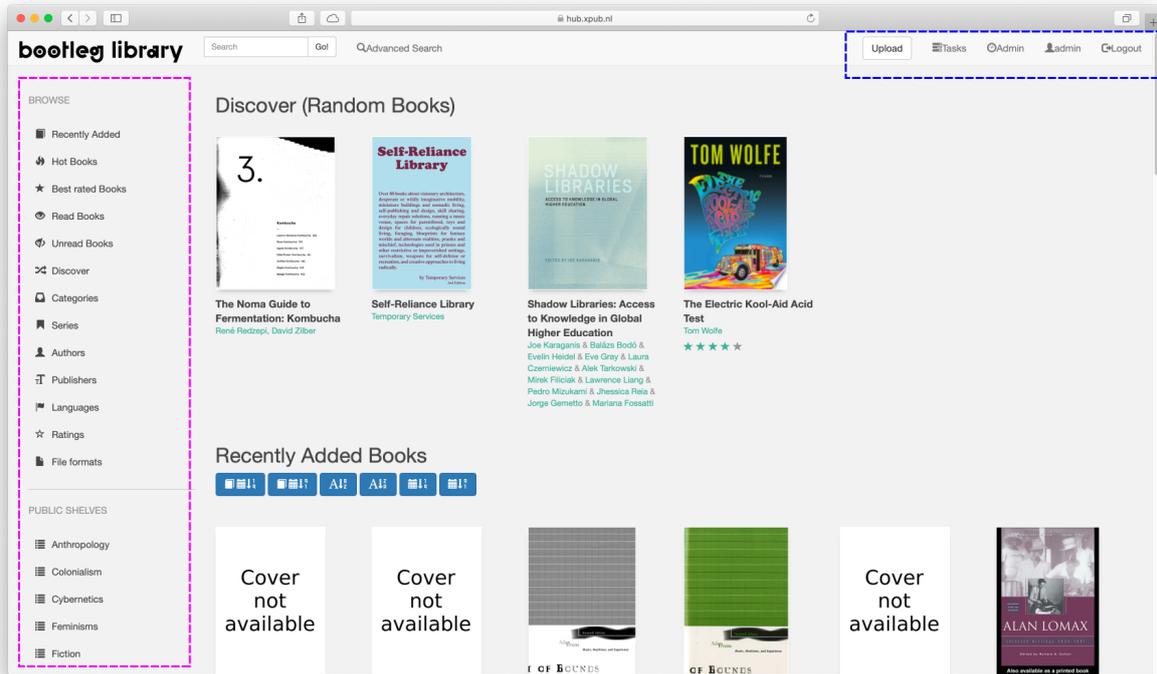
¹⁰ See: <https://www.bibliotheca.com>.

¹¹ Bibliotheca is not to be confused with Bibliotecha, a free and open-source framework for distributing electronic books over a local network <https://biblioteca.info>

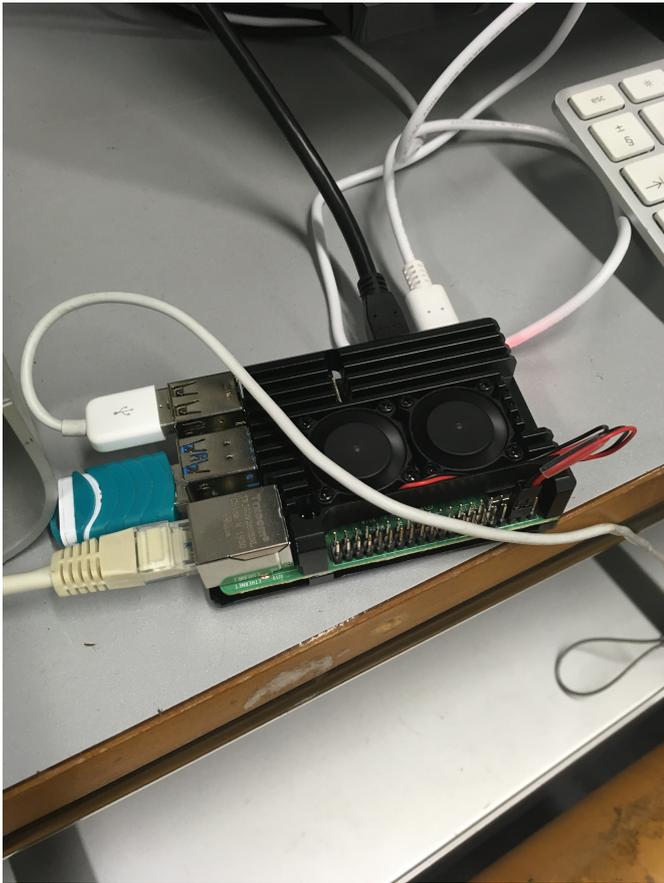
¹² <https://luhmann.surge.sh/communicating-with-slip-boxes>

the "read" navigation

the "write" navigation



The bootleg library, Simon Browne, Homebrewed website, [2020]



The bootleg library, Simon Browne, Home-brewed server, [2020]



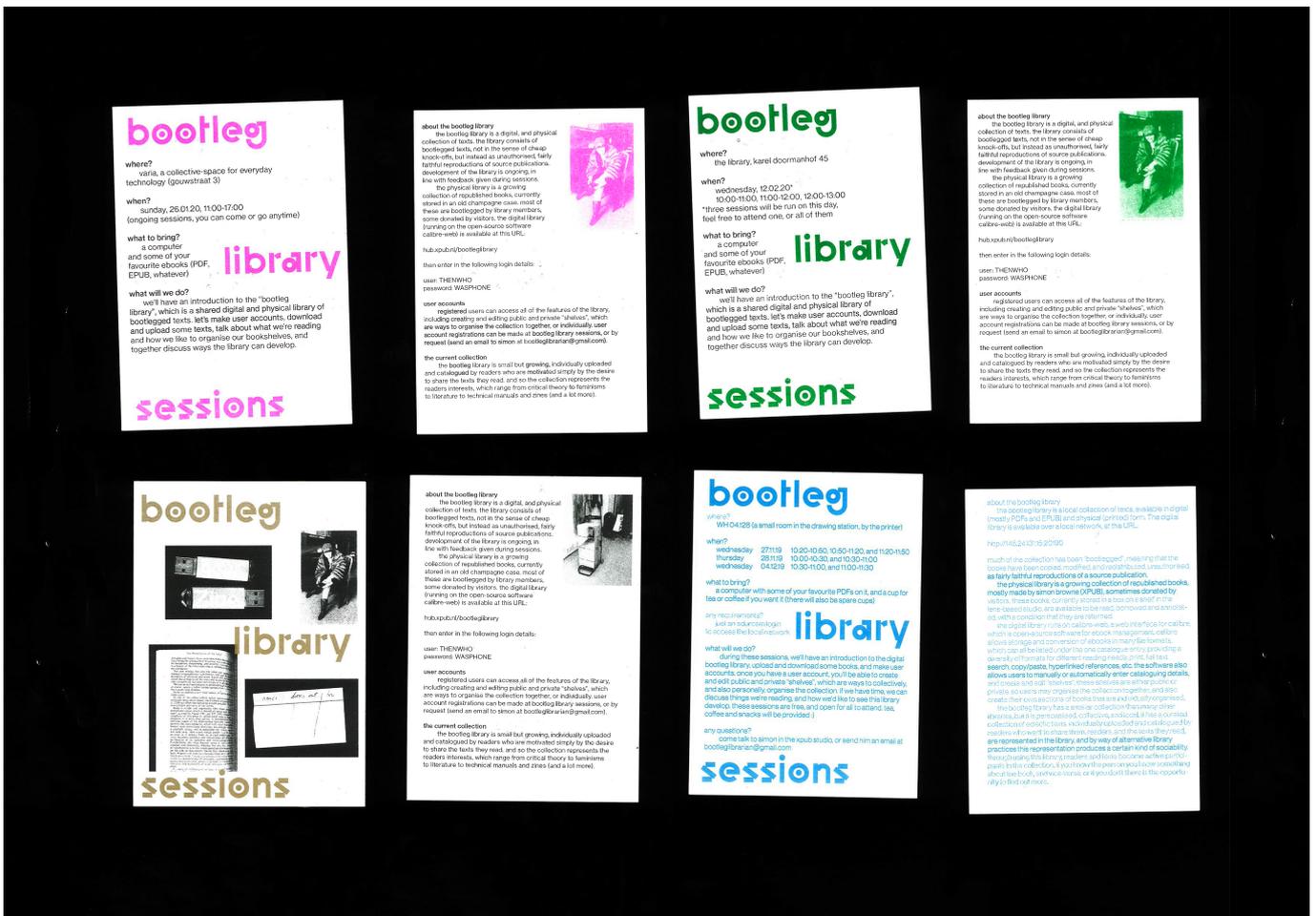
The bootleg library, Simon Browne, Printed collection, Varia, Rotterdam, [2020]



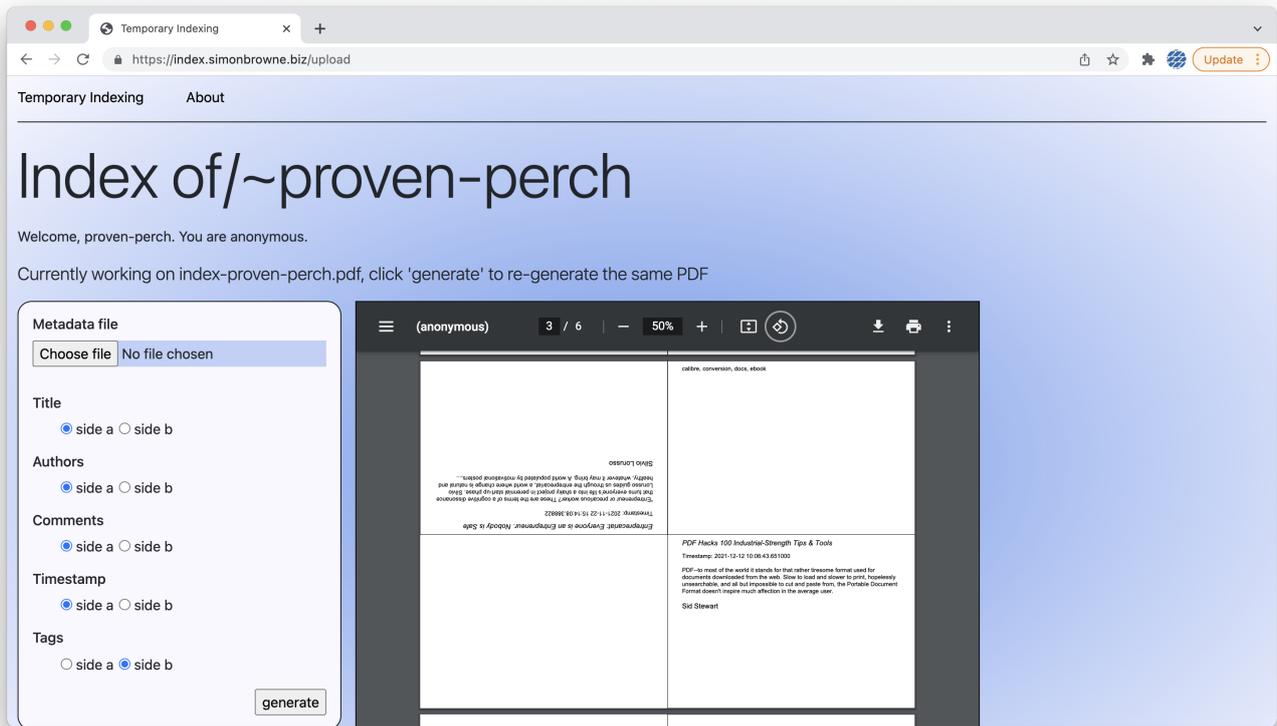
The bootleg library, Simon Browne, Nomadic “mini-bieb” (former champagne box), [2020]



The bootleg library, Simon Browne, Session, Onomatopoe, Eindhoven, [2020]



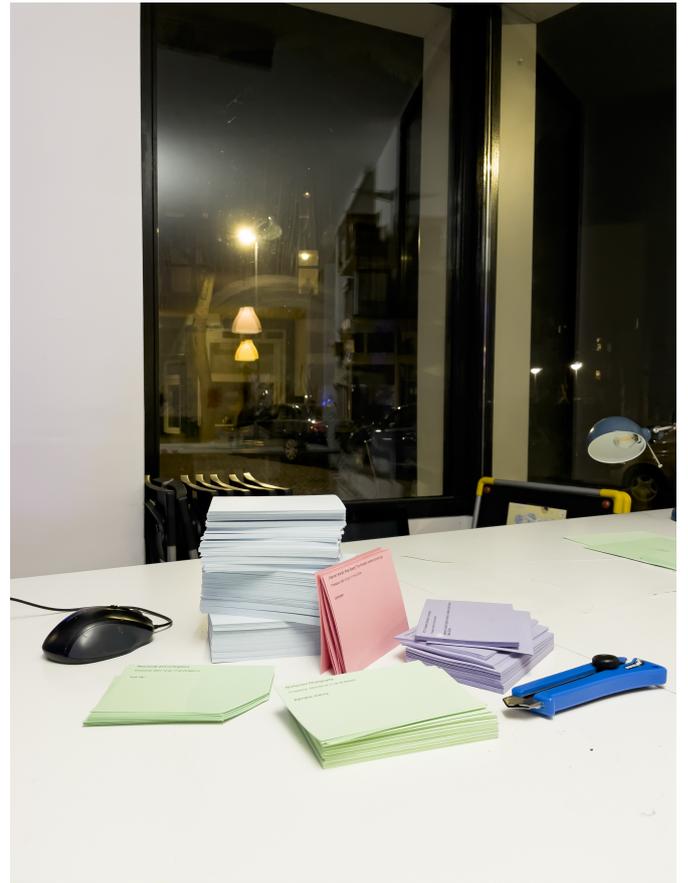
The bootleg library, Simon Browne, Flyers, [2020]



Temporary Indexing, Simon Browne & Luke Murphy, Website, [2021]



A Moment for Temporary Indexing, Simon Browne, Print party, Varia, Rotterdam, [2021]



A Moment for Temporary Indexing, Simon Browne, Print party, Varia, Rotterdam, [2021]



A Moment for Temporary Indexing, Simon Browne, Print party, Varia, Rotterdam, [2021]

Further readings

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