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UbuWeb at 15 Years

by KENNETH GOLDSMITH

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It's amazing to me that UbuWeb, after fifteen years, is still going. Run with no money and put together pretty much without permission, Ubu has succeeded by breaking all the rules, by going about things the wrong way. UbuWeb can be construed as the Robin Hood of the avant-garde, but instead of taking from one and giving to the other, we feel that in the end, we're giving to all. UbuWeb is as much about the legal and social ramifications of its self-created distribution and archiving system as it is about the content hosted on the site. In a sense, the content takes care of itself; but keeping it up there has proved to be a trickier proposition. The socio-political maintenance of keeping free server space with unlimited bandwidth is a complicated dance, often interfered with by darts thrown at us by individuals calling foul-play on copyright infringement. Undeterred, we keep on: after fifteen years, we're still going strong. We're lab rats under a microscope: in exchange for the big-ticket bandwidth, we've consented to be objects of university research in the ideology and practice of radical distribution.

But by the time you read this, UbuWeb may be gone. Cobbled together, operating on no money and an all-volunteer staff, UbuWeb has become the unlikely definitive source for all things avant-garde on the internet. Never meant to be a permanent archive, Ubu could vanish for any number of reasons: our ISP pulls the plug, our university support dries up, or we simply grow tired of it. Acquisition by a larger entity is impossible: nothing is for sale. We don't touch money. In fact, what we host has never made money. Instead, the site is filled with the detritus and ephemera of great artists—the music of Jean Dubuffet, the poetry of Dan Graham, Julian Schnabel's country music, the punk rock of Martin Kippenberger, the diaries of John Lennon, the rants of Karen Finley, and pop songs by Joseph Beuys—all of which was originally put out in tiny editions and vanished quickly.

However the web provides the perfect place to restage these works. With video, sound, and text remaining more faithful to the original experience than, say, painting or sculpture, Ubu proposes a different sort of revisionist art history, one based on the peripheries of artistic production rather than on the perceived, or market-based, center. Few people, for example, know that Richard Serra makes videos. Whilst visiting his recent retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, there was no sign of TELEVISION DELIVERS PEOPLE (1973) or BOOMERANG (1974), both being

well-visited resources on UbuWeb. Similarly, Salvador Dalí's obscure video, IMPRESSIONS DE LA HAUTE MONGOLIE—HOMMAGE Á RAYMOND ROUSSEL from the mid-70s can be viewed. Outside of UN CHIEN ANDALOU (1929), it's the only other film he completed in his lifetime. While you won't find reproductions of Dalí's paintings on UbuWeb, you will find a 1967 recording of an advertisement he made for a bank.

It's not all off-beat: there is, in all fairness, lots of primary expressions of artists' works which port to the web perfectly: the films of Hollis Frampton, readings by Alain Robbe-Grillet, Samuel Beckett radio plays, the concrete poems of Mary Ellen Solt, the writings of Maurice Blanchot and the music of Meredith Monk, to name a few.

UbuWeb began in 1996 as a site focusing on visual and concrete poetry. With the advent of the graphical web browser, we began scanning old concrete poems, astonished by how fresh they looked backlit by the computer screen. Shortly thereafter, when streaming audio became available, it made sense to extend our scope to sound poetry, and as bandwidth increased we later added MP3s as well as video. Sound poetry opened up a whole new terrain: certain of John Cage's readings of his mesostic texts could be termed "sound poetry," hence we included them. As often, though, Cage combined his readings with an orchestral piece; we included those as well. But soon, we found ourselves unable to distinguish the difference between "sound poetry" and "music." We encountered this dilemma time and again whether it was with the compositions of Maurico Kagel, Joan La Barbara, or Henri Chopin, all of whom are as well-known as composers as they are sound artists. After a while, we gave up trying to name things; we dropped the term "sound poetry" and referred to it thenceforth simply as "Sound."

When we began posting found street poems that used letter forms in fantastically innovative ways, we had to reconsider what "concrete poetry" was. As time went on, we seemed to be outgrowing our original taxonomies until we simply became a repository for the "avant-garde" (whatever that means—our idea of what is "avant-garde" seems to be changing all the time). UbuWeb adheres to no one historical narrative, rather we're more interested in putting several disciplines into the same space and seeing how they interact: poetry, music, film, and literature from all periods encounter and bounce off of each other in unexpected ways.

In 2005, we acquired a collection called The 365 Days Project, a year's worth of outrageous MP3s that can be best described as celebrity gaffs, recordings of children screeching, how-to records, song-poems, propagandistic religious ditties, spoken word pieces, even ventriloquist acts. However, buried deep within The 365 Days Project were rare tracks by the legendary avant-gardist Nicolas Slominsky, an early-to-mid-twentieth century conductor, performer, and composer belting out advertisements and children's ditties on the piano in an off-key voice. UbuWeb had already

been hosting historical recordings from the 1920s he conducted of Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles, and Edgard Varèse in our Sound section, yet nestled in amongst oddballs like Louis Farrakhan singing calypso or high school choir's renditions of "Fox On The Run," Slominsky fit into both categories—high and low—equally well.

A few years back, Jerome Rothenberg, the leading scholar of Ethnopoetics, approached us with an idea to include a wing which would feature Ethnopoetic sound, visual art, poetry, and essays. Rothenberg's interest was specific to UbuWeb: how the avant-garde dovetailed with the world's deep cultures—those surviving in situ as well as those that had vanished except for transcriptions in books or recordings from earlier decades. Sound offerings include everything from Slim Gaillard to Inuit throat singing, each making formal connections to modernist strains of Dada or sound poetry. Likewise, the Ethnopoetic visual poetry section ranges from Chippewa song pictures to Paleolithic palimpsests to Apollinaire's Calligrammes (1912–18) There are dozens of papers with topics like "Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat" to Kenneth Rexroth's writings on American Indian song.

There are over 2500 full-length avant-garde films and videos, both streaming and downloadable, including the videos of Vito Acconci and the filmic oeuvre of Jack Smith, You can also find several biographies and interviews with authors such as Jorge Luis Borges, J. G. Ballard, Allen Ginsberg, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline. And there are a number of films about avant-garde music, most notably Robert Ashley's epic 14-hour Music with Roots in the Aether, a series of composer portraits made in the mid-70s featuring artists such as Pauline Oliveros, Philip Glass, and Alvin Lucier. A dozen of the rarely screened films by Mauricio Kagel can be viewed as can Her Noise, a documentary about women and experimental music from 2005. There are also hours of performance documentation, notably the entire Cinema of Transgression series with films by Beth B and Richard Kern, a lecture by Chris Burden, a bootleg version of Robert Smithson's HOTEL PALENQUE, (1969) and an astonishing 21-minute clip of Abbie Hoffman making gefilte fish on Christmas Eve of 1973.

Other portions of the site include a vast repository of papers about audio, performance, conceptual art, and poetry. There are large sections of artists simply placed together under categories of Historical and Contemporary. And then there is /ubu Editions, which offers full-length PDFs of literature and poetry. Among the 73 titles, authors include Tim Davis, Ron Silliman, Maurice Blanchot, Caroline Bergvall, Claude Simon, Jeremy Sigler, Severo Sarduy, and Juliana Spahr. And finally there is a Conceptual Writing wing which highlights contemporary trends in poetry as well as its historical precedents.

How does it all work? Most importantly, UbuWeb functions on no money: all work is done by

volunteers. Our server space and bandwidth is donated by several universities, who use UbuWeb as an object of study for ideas related to radical distribution and gift economies on the web. In terms of content, each section has an editor who brings to the site their area of expertise. Ubu is constantly being updated but the mission is different from the flotsam and jetsam of a blog; rather, we liken it to a library which is ever-expanding in uncanny—and often uncategorizable—directions. Fifteen years into it, UbuWeb hosts over 7,500 artists and several thousand works of art. You'll never find an advertisement, a logo, or a donation box. UbuWeb has always been and will always be free and open to all.

The future is eminently scalable: as long as we have the bandwidth and server space, there is no limit as to how big the site can grow. For the moment, we have no competition, a fact we're not happy about. We're distressed that there is only one UbuWeb: why aren't there dozens like it? Looking at the art world, the problem appears to be a combination of an adherence to an old economy (one that is working very well with a booming market) and sense of trepidation, particularly in academic circles, where work on the internet is often not considered valid for academic credit. As long as the art world continues to prize economies of scarcity over those based on plentitude, the change will be a long time coming. But UbuWeb seeks to offer an alternative by invoking a gift economy of plentitude with a strong emphasis on global education. We're on numerous syllabi, ranging from kindergarteners studying pattern poetry to post graduates listening to hours of Jacques Lacan's Séminaires.

And yet . . . it could vanish any day. Beggars can't be choosers and we gladly take whatever is offered to us. We don't run on the most stable of servers or on the swiftest of machines; hacks and crashes eat into the archive on a periodic basis; sometimes the site as a whole goes down for days; occasionally the army of volunteers dwindles to a team of one. But that's the beauty of it: UbuWeb is vociferously anti-institutional, eminently fluid, refusing to bow to demands other than what we happen to be moved by at a specific moment, allowing us flexibility and the ability to continually surprise our audience . . . and even ourselves.

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