

Multimedia

When we think of the archive, we think of a familiar space of restricted access, white gloves, pencils, and carefully delimited rules. But if we think of an archive as a collection of important primary sources, made available for researchers to use, it becomes clear that there are other kinds of archives that may exist virtually as much as physically. With both architecture and writing produced digitally today, the archive of the future may be a very different sort of place indeed. The first of this issue's multimedia reviews, by Sean Dockray, looks at UbuWeb, a noted online archive of avant-garde media. In posting such material to the web without express permission, UbuWeb raises questions of fair use as well as of the translation of media. How does a video, an electronic poem for 425 speakers, or a work of concrete poetry make the transition to the generic form of the web? The second, by Kevin McMahon, surveys a broad spectrum of recent compilation documentary films that collect vintage footage in order to reconstruct—or comment upon—a particular place. What issues and opportunities does this new trend pose for historians of architecture?

KAZYS VARNELIS
Multimedia Review Editor, *JSAH*

Kenneth Goldsmith, et al.
UbuWeb, <http://www.ubuweb.com>

There is no question that contemporary technology has allowed for a massive

Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 71, no. 3 (September 2012), 429–432. ISSN 0037-9808, electronic ISSN 2150-5926. © 2012 by the Society of Architectural Historians. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/jsah.2012.71.3.429.

redistribution of cultural works. Texts, music, and films have been transcoded and put into circulation on the internet reaching ever-broader audiences. *Whole Earth Catalogue* founder Stewart Brand has been criticized for the way he phrased the idea that “information wants to be free” to Steve Wozniak, cofounder of Apple Computer, in 1984.¹ But in the context of the expanding internet, information has realized a kind of autonomy and tendency toward dispersion that points to H. G. Wells's 1937 idea for a “world brain,” which might have “at once, the concentration of a craniate animal and the diffused vitality of an amoeba.”²

UbuWeb is an enormous online archive of avant-garde artworks, from poetry and conceptual writing, to sound and music, to film and video. The website is a careful exercise in collecting and listmaking: one is presented with general categories like Sound or Film & Video, together with precisely framed and introduced selections, such as Conceptual Writing presented by noted English literature scholar Craig Douglas Dworkin. There is a New Additions list of items shown by date and a collection of top ten lists, wherein various writers, artists, and curators mine the depths of the site's contents.

No matter how a viewer might reach a particular artwork, the experience of encountering that work is a critical matter. Little of UbuWeb's content was created on the computer and even less was intended to be seen there. Moreover, the technologies embedded in web browsers have evolved since Ubu's founding in 1996: initially the site delivered only formatted text in the form of a small collection of visual and concrete poetry from the personal archives of its founder, poet Kenneth Goldsmith, but now it streams audio and video as well. As the capabilities of the

typical web browser expanded, Ubu's archive grew into its current depth. Like any good archive, UbuWeb's strength is as much the depth of its marginalia as the breadth of what it surveys. On the site you might find Philip Johnson discussing architecture, as recorded on a Polygram record; Yve Jalandier's 1996 documentary *Alvar Aalto, Technology and Nature*; or *Poème électronique*, the film by Le Corbusier, with music by composers Iannis Xenakis and Edgard Varèse, played in the Philips Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair.

All of this material is now experienced as MP3 audio files or Flash video on one's computer, rather than in amplified analog recordings or films projected on walls—or in the case of the Philips Pavilion, 425 speakers placed within thin-shelled concrete hyperbolic paraboloid structures. At times, videos appear to be filtered through multiple media formats, for example, films recorded off television in low-fidelity VHS. If there is always a gap in fidelity between the original and its Ubu copy, sometimes this space is what makes the work an important cultural point of reference—as in the *Poème électronique*, for example. But even text often lacks its context when uploaded. For example, ASPEN, “an unbound magazine in a box,” insisted in a 1967 advertisement “you don't simply read ASPEN . . . you hear it, hang it, feel it, fly it, sniff it, play with it.”³ From the blocky pixilation on the videos to the framing text accompanying the content, one is consistently aware that something significant is missing.

Focusing less on absence, Goldsmith describes UbuWeb as essentially a project of “radical distribution,” using the web for “what the Web does best . . . getting things out.”⁴ He elaborates, “UbuWeb posts much of its content without permission;

we rip full-length CDs into sound files; we scan as many books as we can get our hands on; we post essays as fast as we can OCR them.”⁵ Unlike other file-sharing sites, however, UbuWeb is generally praised rather than prosecuted. This is in large part due to the material on the site itself, which complicates the decision of rights holders to pursue property claims. First, it historically has had limited distribution, relying largely on volunteer labor, donations, and increasingly scarce state funding. An antidote to this interiority, Ubu provides a free service of marketing and digital distribution. Second, the rights holders often do not have the time or money to litigate their work’s appearance on Ubu. Moreover, even with the means, artists are often reluctant to treat their work as a commodity if that would be inconsistent with their avant-garde practice in general. Goldsmith suggests that if artists inform him that out-of-print works are going back in print, he will take them offline, and that the low quality of some of the artifacts on UbuWeb is a deliberate strategy:

If John Giorno called me and told me he was putting the Poetry Works stuff back in print, I’d take it down tomorrow because the job would be done. The distribution for these things are extremely marginal in the first place: mostly they just die, or become collector’s items. None of the MP3s on UbuWeb are in print. The Henri Chopin all comes from out of print vinyl. I’d never take an in print Alga Marghen record and put it up, I realize there’s no economy there, and I’m not going to take money out of the hands of people that are doing good work. I’ll put up Real Audio files, but the sound quality there is degraded to the point that it just stimulates sales for the CDs.⁶

Still, there are important exceptions to UbuWeb’s relative freedom from conflict. Take, for example, the discussion “UbuWeb...HACKED!” on the Frameworks mailing list in 2010, in which some experimental filmmakers criticized Ubu for undermining the already waning agency of artists. There Tony Conrad objected to the

dissociation of sound from image of his seminal film *The Flicker*; in response to the posting of “Soundtrack to ‘The Flicker,’ 1965 (MP3)” on Ubu. “Independent films belong to the filmmakers,” he added, continuing that it would be best to wait for culture to mature enough to confront “property ownership at large” without undermining the specific forms of ownership at play in experimental art.⁷

When Goldsmith writes that “if we had to ask for permission we wouldn’t exist,” he succinctly distills the nature of UbuWeb. It articulates itself, neither for nor against, but at a distance from established institutions. It knows that institutions tend toward self-preservation, and that any permission requested to host and disseminate digital copies of artworks would be met first by disinterest, and then obstinate bureaucracy. The statement goes even further, though. Not simply an obstacle, permission has perversely become the only thing that these institutions have to offer. More than a decade ago, Jeremy Rifkin wrote that “ownership is steadily being replaced by access” such that producers “lease, rent, or charge an admission fee, subscription, or membership dues”⁸ in order to extract profit. Within this kind of economy, centered on intellectual property, permission is absolutely not given away. UbuWeb stands as a challenge to this role of the art institution as licensor. At UbuWeb, the issue of appropriation and ownership is not marginal, but rather central.

Although it samples entire works, trampling on legal doctrine such as fair use, we still must recognize UbuWeb as something new, as something that may or may not be “art” but which definitively politicizes appropriation. It extends the territory of artistic intervention beyond the page or the frame and into the systems of distribution and reception. More than that, as a useful thing, Ubu is a resource for innumerable students, inside and outside of proper institutions, who are using the site as raw material for projects and practices. It brings the site of artistic production itself into the work, which is crucial at a time when public services and spaces are collapsing.

SEAN DOCKRAY
The Public School

Notes

1. Stewart Brand, “1984 Ad,” *The Whole Earth Review*, May 1985, 49. Jaron Lanier interview with Erinn Hartman, “Some Q & A Concerning One Aspect of You Are Not a Gadget: The Political/Economic Argument,” <http://www.jaronlanier.com/poleconGadgetqa.html> (accessed 1 Feb. 2012).
2. H. G. Wells, *World Brain: The Idea of a Permanent World Encyclopedia*, <http://art-bin.com/art/obrain.html> (accessed 1 Feb. 2012).
3. jpg scan, <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2007/07/03/books/pc-aspen-big.jpg> (accessed 1 Feb. 2012).
4. “UbuWeb Vu: Kenneth Goldsmith,” <http://archinect.com/features/article/59857/UbuWeb-vu-kenneth-goldsmith> (accessed 1 Feb. 2012).
5. Kenneth Goldsmith, “Ubuweb wants to be Free,” <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/goldsmith/ubuweb.html> (accessed 1 Feb. 2012).
6. “Ether Talkkk, Marcus Boon on UbuWeb,” originally printed in the Wire, 2002, http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/the_wire.html (accessed 1 Feb. 2012).
7. “Re: long live ubuweb!,” <http://www.hi-beam.net/fw/fw37/0590.html> (accessed 1 Feb. 2012).
8. Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism, Where All of Life is a Paid-for Experience* (J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), 74.

Some Recent Place Compilation Documentaries

Thom Anderson, writer, director, producer

Los Angeles Plays Itself

Thom Anderson Productions, Los Angeles, 2003, not available on DVD, 169 min.

Terence Davies, writer, director, narrator

Of Time and the City: A Love Song and a Eulogy

Hurricane Films, Liverpool, 2008, DVD, 73 min.

Yael Hersonski, director

A Film Unfinished

Oscilloscope Laboratories, New York, 2011, DVD, 90 min.

Home Movie Day

www.homemovieday.com/