

**Giving What You Don't Have**  
Cornelia Sollfrank in Conversation

Kenneth Goldsmith  
**The Poetry of Archiving**

Berlin, 1 February 2013

[00:12]

Kenneth Goldsmith: The type of writing I do is exactly the same thing that I do on UbuWeb. And that's the idea that nothing new needs to be written or created. In fact, it's the archiving and the gathering and the appropriation of preexisting materials, that is the new mode of both writing and archiving. [00:35] So you have a system where writing and archiving have become the identical situation today.

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UbuWeb

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It started in 1996, and it began as a site for visual and concrete poetry, which was a mid-century genre of typographical poetry. I got a scanner, and I scanned a concrete poem. And I put it up on Ubu, and on those days the images used to come in as interlaced GIFs, every other line filling in. So really it was an incredible thing to watch this poem kind of grow organically. [1:21] And it looked exactly like concrete poetry had always wanted to look – a little bit of typographical movement.

[1:27] And I thought, this is perfect. And also, because concrete poetry is so flat and modernist, when it was illuminated from the back by the computer screen it looked beautiful and graphic and flat and clean. [1:40] And suddenly it was like: this is the perfect medium for concrete poetry. Which, I do worry still, is very much a part of Ubu. [1:50] And then, a few years later real audio came, and I began to put up sound poetry, you know, little sound files of sound poetry. So you could look at the concrete poetry and listen to the sound poetry. [2:07] And a few years later we had a little bit more bandwidth, and we began to put on videos. So this is the way the site grew. [2:16] But also what happened on Ubu was an odd thing. Because it was concrete poetry, so I put up the poems of John Cage – the concrete mesostics of John Cage. And then I got a little bit of sound of John Cage reading some of these things, and suddenly it was Cage reading a mesostic with an orchestra behind him. [2:40] And I said, wait a minute, this no longer sound poetry, this is something else. And I thought, what is this? And I said, ah, this is avant-garde.

[2:50] And so from there, because of Cage and Cage's practice, the whole thing became a repository and archive for the avant-garde, which it is today. So that's how it moved from being specifically concrete poetry in 1996, to today being all avant-garde.

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Avantgarde

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In the 1980s you never could use that word, avant-garde. It was patriarchal, it was modernist, it had all sorts of, you know... In post-modernism and revisionism, it was a terrible history of white male oppression. [3:30] And then something happened in the digital, where it seemed to... All of that fell off. Because we already knew that. [3:42] So

it was an orphan term. It became detached from its nefarious pre-digital context. And it was an open term. [3:51] I was like, we can actually use this term again, avant-garde, and redefine it as a way of, you know, multi-media, impurity, difference, all sorts of ways that it was never allowed to be used before. So I've actually inhabited this term, and repurposed it. [4:15] So I don't really know what avant-garde is, it's always changing. And UbuWeb is an archive that is not pure avant-garde. You look at it and say, no, things are wrong there. There's rock musicians, and there's performance artists, and there's novelists. [4:33] I mean, it doesn't quite look like the avant-garde looked before the digital. But then, everything looks different after the digital.

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Selection / curation

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I don't know anything. I am a poet. I'm not a historian, I'm not an academic. I don't know anything, I've just got a sense: that might be interesting, that sort of feels avant-garde. I mean, it is ridiculous, it's terrible: I am the wrong person to do this. But, you know, nobody stopped me, and so I've been doing it. You know, anybody can do it.

[5:11] It's very hard to have something on Ubu, and that's why it's so good. That's why it's not archive-type of work, where everything can go, and there're good things there, but there is no one working as a gatekeeper to say, actually this is better than that. [5:26] And I think one of the problems with net culture, or the web culture, is that we've decided to suspend judgment. We can't say that one thing is better than another thing, because everything is equal. There's a part of me that really likes that idea, and it creates fabulous chaos. But I think it is a sort of a curatorial job to go in and make sense of some of that chaos. In a very small way, that's what I try to do on UbuWeb. [5:52] You know, it's the avant-garde, it's not a big project. It's a rather small slice of culture that one can have a point of view. I'm not saying that's right. It's probably very wrong. But nobody else it's doing it, so I figured, you know... 6:12 But by virtue of the fact that there's only one UbuWeb, it's become institutional. And the reason that there is only one UbuWeb is that UbuWeb ignores copyright. And everybody else, of course, is afraid of copyright. There should be hundreds of UbuWebs. It is ridiculous that there's only one. But everybody else is afraid of copyright, so that nobody would put anything on. [6:41] We just act like copyright doesn't exist. Copyright, what's that? Never heard of it.

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Contents

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I think that these artifacts that are on UbuWeb are very valuable historically and culturally, they are very significant. But economically, I don't think they had that type of value. And I love small labels that try to put these things out. But they inevitably lose money by trying to put these things out. So when somebody does put something out, sometimes things on Ubu get released from a small label, and I take them off the site, because I want to support those things. [7:28] But it's hard, and people are not doing it for the money. Nobody ever got into sound poetry or orchestral avant-garde music for the money. [7:37] So it's kind of a weird lovely grey area that we've been able to explore, a utopia, really, that we've been able to enact. Simply because the economics are so sketchy.

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## Copyright

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I am not free of fear, but I've learned over 17 years, to actually have a very good understanding of copyright. And I have a very good understating of the way that copyright works. So I can anticipate things. I can usually negotiate something with somebody who, you know... [8:26] There's so many stories when copyright is being used as a battering tool. It's not real. I had one instance when a very powerful literary agency in New York... I received a cease and desist DMCA Takedown, which I require a proper takedown. It was for William S. Burroughs, and the list went on for pages and pages and pages. And then, at the end, it says, "Under the threat of perjury, I state these facts to be true," signed such and such person. 9:05 Now, what they did, they went into UbuWeb and they put the words "William S. Burroughs," and they came up with every instance of William S. Burroughs. If William S. Burroughs is mentioned in an academic paper: that's our copyright. Nick Currie Momus wrote a song "I Love You William S. Burroughs." Now, Nick gave UbuWeb all of his songs. I know that Nick owns the copyright to that. [9:30] I said, you know, it's ridiculous! And even the things that they were claiming... It was the most ridiculous thing. [9:37] So I wrote them back. I said: Look, I get what you're trying to do here, but you're really going about it the wrong way. It's very irresponsible just putting his name in the search engine, cutting and pasting, and damn you own the copyright. You don't own the copyright to almost any of that! And as a matter of fact, under law you perjured yourself. And I can came right back and sue you, because this is a complete lie. But I said, look, lets work together. If there's something that you feel that you really do own and you really don't want there, let's talk about it, but could you please be a little bit more reasonable. [10:13] And then of course I got a letter back, and it's an intern, the college student saying, the state of William S. Burroughs just asked me... [10:23] I said, look, I get it but, you know... let's try to do it the right way and let's see what happens. And then they came back with another DMCA Takedown, with a much shorter list. But even in that list, most of the copyrights didn't belong to William S. Burroughs. They belonged to journal poetry systems, many of them were orphan. [10:45] Because in media, often if you publish in a publication, often the publisher owns the copyright, not the artist, you know. You have to look and see where the copyright resides. [10:59] Finally, I said, look this is getting ridiculous. I said, please send a note on to the executor of Burroughs' estate, who is James Grauerholz, and he's a good guy. He's a good guy. And I said, I quoted, and I said, look Mr. Grauerholz, William S. Burroughs' poetry wants to be free. You know, and I quoted from Burroughs. And also it's a great thing that Burroughs said. I said, you know, we're not making any money here. I'm not going to pirate *Naked Lunch*. I know where are you making your money, and I swear I wouldn't want to touch that. That does well on its own. [11:30] But his cut-ups, his sound collage cut-ups? I mean, came on, no. This is for education. This is for, you know, art schools, kindergartens and post-graduates use it. [11:40] So this was a way in which copyright is often used as a threat, that's not true. And then, a little bit of talking, and you can actually get back to some logic. And then after that it was fine, and there's all the William S. Burroughs that's there that it was always there. And everybody seems to be okay.

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Opt-out System

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Things get taken down all the time. People send an email saying, you know, I don't want

that there. And I try to convince them that we don't touch any money. Ubu runs on zero money, we don't touch any. I try to tell them that is good, it's all feeling good, positive. [12:19] But sometimes people really don't want their work up. And if they don't want their work up, I take it down. An opt-out system. Why should I keep their work up if they really don't want it there? [12:30] So it's an unstable archive. What's there today may not be there tomorrow. And I kind of like that too.

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Permission culture

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I understand people get nervous. They would prefer me to ask. But if I ask, I couldn't have built this archive. Because if you ask, you start negotiations, you make a contract, you need lawyers, you need permissions. And if something has... a film has music in the background by the Rolling Stones, you have to clear the right for the Rolling Stones and pay that a little bit of money. And you know, licenses... I couldn't do that. I do this with no money. That would take millions... [13:14] To do UbuWeb permission, the right way, correctly, would take millions of millions of euros. And I built this whole thing from nothing. Zero money. [13:26] So, you know... I think I'd love to be able to ask for permission, do things the right way. It is the right way to do things. But it wouldn't be possible to make an archive like this, that way.

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*Cornelia Sollfrank: How much does it happen that you are approached by artists who say, please put my work down?*

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Almost never, almost never. It's usually the estates, art dealers, the business people, you know, who are circling around an artist. But it's almost never artists themselves. Artists, you know... I don't know, I just think that... [14:07] For example, we have the music concrete of Jean Dubuffet on UbuWeb. Fantastic experimental music. And it's so great that many people now know of a composer named Jean Dubuffet, and later they hear: he's also a painter. Which is really very beautiful. [14:33] Now, the paintings of Jean Dubuffet, of course, sell for millions. And the copyright, you know... You can make a T-shirt with a Jean Dubuffet painting, they're going to want a license for that. [14:44] But the music of Jean Dubuffet, the estate doesn't quite understand the value of it, or what to do with it. And this is also what happened with my Warhol book. [14:56] Before I did my Warhol book, I went to the Warhol Foundation, because it's big money, and you don't want to get in trouble with those guys. And I said to them, I want to do a book of Andy's interviews. I know that they don't own the copyright, I just wanted their blessing, from them. And they were really sweet. They laughed at me. They said, you want Warhol's words? Take them! We are so busy dealing with forgeries, well, you know, exactly what your piece was about. And they laughed at me. They were like, have fun, it's all yours, glad, go away. [15:32] So I kind of feel, if you ask Jean Dubuffet, I would assume that Dubuffet understood that his music production was as serious as his paintings. And this is the sort of beautiful revisionism of the avant-garde. This is a perfect example of the revisionism of the avant-garde that I'm talking about. You say, oh, you know, he was actually as good of a composer as he was a painter. [15:58] So, you know, this is the kind of weird thing that's happened on UbuWeb, I think. [16:04] But what's even better, is that UbuWeb, you know... I care about Jean Dubuffet, or I care about Art Brut, and the history of all that. [16:14] But usually what happens is,

kids come into UbuWeb and they know nothing about the history. And they're usually kids that are making dance music. But they go, oh, all these weird sounds at this place, lets take them. And so they plunder the archive. So you have Bruce Nauman, you know, "Get out of my life!" on dance floors in São Paulo, mixed in with the beat. And that to me is the misuse of the archive that I think is really fantastic.

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Technical infrastructure

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It's web 1.0. I write everything in HTML, by hand. Hand-coded like I did in 1996, the same BBEdit, the same program.

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*C.S.: But it's searchable.*

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Yea, it's got like a dumb, you know, a little free search engine on it, but I don't do anything. You see, this is the thing. [17:15] For many, many years people would always come up to me and say, we'd like to put UbuWeb in a database. And I said no. It's working really well as it is. And, you know, imagine if Ubu had been locked up in some sort of horrible SQL database. And the administrator of the database walks away, the guy that knows all that stuff walks away with the keys – which always happens. No... [17:39] This way it is free, is open, is simple, is backwardly compatible – it always works. [17:45] I like the simplicity of it. It's not different than it was 17 years ago. It's really dumb, but it does what it does very well.

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Search engines

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I removed it from Google. Because, you know, people would have set a Google alert. And it was mostly the agents, or the estates that would set a kind of an alert for their artists. And they didn't understand, they think we're selling it. And it creates a lot of correspondence. [18:20] This is a lot of work for me. I never get paid any money. There's no money. So, there's nothing, you know... It's my free time that I'm spending corresponding with people. And once I took it off from Google it got much better.

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Copyright practice

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Nobody seemed to care until I started to put film on, and then the filmmakers went crazy. And so, that was something. [18:47] There was a big blow-up on the FrameWorks film list. Do you know FrameWorks? It's the biggest avant-garde film list – Listserv. And a couple of years ago Ubu got hacked, and went down for a little while. And there was a big celebration on the FrameWorks list. They said, the enemy is finally gone! We can return to life as normal. So I responded to them. [19:14] I wrote an open letter to FrameWorks (which you can actually find on UbuWeb) challenging them, saying, actually Ubu is a friend of yours. I'm actually promoting your work for no money. I love what you do. I'm a fan. There's no way I'm an enemy. [19:31] And I said, by the way, if

you are celebrating Ubu being down, I think it's a perfect time for you to now built Ubu the way it should have been. You guys have all the materials. You are the artists, you have all the knowledge. Go ahead and do it right, that would be great. You have my blessing, please do it... Shut them down. Nobody ever responded. Suddenly the thread died. [20:00] Nobody wants to do anything. It's kind of, they considered it right to complain, but when asked to... They have the tools to do it right. I'm a poet, what do I know about avant-garde film? They know everything. But when I told them, please, you know, nobody's going to lift a finger. [20:18] It's easier for people to complain and hate it. But in fact, to make something better is something that people are not going to do. So life went on. It went up and we moved on.

[20:32]  
Un/stable archives

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If you work on something for an hour a day for 17 years – 2 hours, 3 hours – you come up with something really substantial. [20:45] The web is very ephemeral, and UbuWeb is just as ephemeral. It's amazing that it's been there for as long as it has, but tomorrow it could vanish. I could get sued. I could get bored. Maybe I just walk away and blow it up, I don't know! Why do I need to keep doing all this work for? [21:03] So if you find something on the Internet that you loved, don't assume it's going to be there forever. Download it. Always make your own archive. Don't ever assume that it's waiting there for you, because it won't be there when you look for it.

*C.S.: In the cloud...*

Fuck the cloud. I hate the cloud.