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Nothing New Needs to be Created. Kenneth Goldsmith's Claim to Uncreativity.

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What does building an online archive have to do with writing poetry? For Kenneth Goldsmith it is the same thing. Goldsmith is a New York-based poet, writer, editor and founder of UbuWeb,¹ an online repository of avant-garde art. His claim is that his way of writing poetry is exactly the same thing as he does when he is gathering, selecting, arranging and publishing material at the archive he has been building over the last seventeen years. Goldsmith's artistic credo is that nothing new needs to be created: "In fact, it is the archiving and gathering and the appropriation of pre-existing materials that is the new mode of both writing and archiving."²

Creating and archiving have become identical, as he asserts. As a poet, Goldsmith has published ten books, which all consist of transcriptions of either newspapers or radio and television broadcasts. While *uncreative* practices such as collecting, arranging, modifying, appropriating and the like have a century long history in visual art, where they have become established practices, they still lack acknowledgement in literature, as Goldsmith claims, and it is his mission to change that.

Parallel to his writing practice, Goldsmith has accumulated a vast online archive: UbuWeb.³ The archive contains thousands of art works ranging from visual, sound and concrete poetry to dance, film and sound art. All the works are available online for free. Ubu contextualizes them within curated sections and also provides framing academic essays. Although it is a private project, run by

¹ "UbuWeb. Online repository of avant-garde art," last modified January 7, 2014, <http://ubu.com>.

² Kenneth Goldsmith, *The Poetry of Archiving*. Interview with Kenneth Goldsmith. Interviewed by Cornelia Sollfrank. Berlin: 2013. Last modified January 7, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/60377169>.

³ Named after Alfred Jarry's play *Ubu Roi* (1896), one of the first dramatic works of the theatre of the absurd. "In his book *Jarry: Ubu Roi*, Keith Beaumont detailed three accusations that were made against *Ubu Roi* by spectators and critics in the aftermath of the outrageous performance. The first focused on the play's "alleged" vulgarity and obscenity. Secondly, perhaps in view of the political atmosphere of the time, critics condemned the play and its performance as the theatrical equivalent of an "anarchist" bomb attack and as an act of political subversion. The third accusation leveled against the play and its performance was that they in no way constituted a "serious" piece of literature or of theater but rather a gigantic hoax." (author unknown. Last modified January 7, 2014, <http://www.enotes.com/topics/ubu-roi>).

Goldsmith without a budget, Ubu has become a major point of reference for anyone interested in exploring 20th century avant-garde art, and it has built a reputation of making all the things available one would not find elsewhere.

Both creating an archive and writing uncreative poetry are based on managing already existing information. Building an archive implies collecting, selecting, arranging, categorizing and making available already existing works, a way of working similar to that which has been introduced as *uncreative* art practice. In fact, Goldsmith's reputation as a poet goes hand in hand with his reputation as the creator of UbuWeb, however, both activities take place within different frames of reference. What I'm trying to do, therefore, is to investigate what the different implications of 'managing information' in the context of poetry *and* archiving are. Is it possible to maintain and substantiate Goldsmith's claim that they are the same? If not, what is the difference? And what might be the function of such a bold assertion – even if it cannot be substantiated?

Uncreative Writing

Goldsmith's book *Day*,⁴ as one example of his poetry, is the transcript of one edition of the daily newspaper "New York Times." Out of thousands of newspapers that are published every day, he selects one, retypes it and transforms its content one-on-one into a book. While the selection process involved can be considered the key operation of his working method, it remains random as he could as well have chosen any other day or any other newspaper. His book is not about what has happened exactly that day, or how the newspaper has treated the events of the day, but rather by selecting any one day and any of the newspapers, he points to the flood of information that is published on a daily basis and that becomes obsolete the next day when the next wave of late-breaking information infests the media landscape. Instead of highlighting certain material through selection, what his method does is demonstrating that the sheer abundance of information makes it impossible to get a grasp of it all. The amount of news we are able to process will always be just a tiny drop out of the ocean of information, and even that drop out of which we have generated meaning will have become obsolete the next day. Therefore, the little fragment Goldsmith has isolated and presented in the book format is not meant to be read in the traditional sense, but rather to be thought about. The newspaper which serves as source is analog and also the resulting book is decisively analog, whereas the applied concept represents what Goldsmith conceptualizes as "the new illegibility."⁵ The book thus makes reference to the digital environment by "mimicking and commenting on our engagement with digital words,"⁶ which also proposes new ways of reading such as skimming, browsing and aggregating data.

⁴ Kenneth Goldsmith, *Day* (New York: Figures, 2003).

⁵ Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 158.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

Interestingly, this conceptual piece of writing about reading and writing in the digital age is only able to perform its task by drawing on a traditional literary format. The book, to which we own the invention of authorship in the first place, serves as the site for demonstrating not necessarily the death of the author but certainly his transformation into a new type of author. Instead of creating an original – a related concept that has equally been contested since its invention – the person who selected, arranged and republished an already existing text, now assumes the role of the author, in large letters on the book cover. And together with the appropriation of a mundane piece of text, which is of no literary quality at all, it is this claim for authorship and the appropriation of the book format that cause the irritation necessary to make the reader *think* instead of *read*.

The Uncreative Genius

What is the function of this *uncreative* author, who is performing in the system of the literary world as a star at the same time?⁷ In his own theoretical essays, Goldsmith elaborates his rejection of individual expression and the traditional notion of the genius,⁸ however, strongly sympathizing with the term “uncreative genius.” Literary critic Marjorie Perloff⁹ suggests this term to denote an updated notion of the genius who no longer is the isolated romantic figure, but instead strives for mastery in managing information. She derives her argument mainly from the changes brought about by digital technology and the internet. While post-structuralist theory discussed the crisis of the author in the 1960s as a symptom for the crisis of the essentialistically conceived subject and suggested an analysis and the deconstruction of his/her various functions without referring to any technological developments, Perloff – and following her, Goldsmith – explain the necessity of expanding writing and the notion of authorship as a response to the exigencies of technology. The ingenious subject and his mastery can remain largely intact, with the only difference that it operates on a different level. The brilliance of this term is its inherent contradiction, which serves to create the notion of something radically new while still centering it around an exceptional subject. Even if it does so with an ironic wink, this strategy already has proven to function perfectly well within the traditional modernist operating systems – be it the art world or the literary world – with Duchamp’s ready-made and Warhol’s infamous *uncreativity* being the best examples.

Most theories that have been developed with regard to new authorship models in the digital age, such as Michael Wetzel’s concept of the “meta-author” show an awareness of the shifted function of the author under digital networked conditions. According to Wetzel, the meta-author is an operator of copies (instead of originals), of quotations (instead of assertions), of simulations (instead of descriptions), and of pluralities (instead of individualities).” With the increasing relevance of mediality and intermediality, the author has become “a collector, pathfinder, assessor

7 In 2013 Goldsmith was the Museum of Modern Art’s first Poet Laureate.

8 Collection of theoretical essays: Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

9 Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2010).

or operator of data streams.”¹⁰ Art and literature provide numerous manifestations of such models. Introducing new ways of writing which include the collection of text, their filtering, arrangement and modification reminds of the scenario that Wetzel described when he was exploring recent aesthetic positions and the authorship models they imply: “Authorship and artistry become epiphenomena of performative staging or disturbing of informational processes.”¹¹ What used to be the production of text exclusively, now also comprises its post-production – various ways of managing it. While recent authorship theories, such as the one by Wetzel, upstage the author in favor of the materiality of digital media and the processuality of its workings, Goldsmith makes sure to stay center stage as the manager of these processes. The creativity he denies relating to the creation of the content, he claims all the more when it comes to the creation of the concepts underlying his practice.

The double strategy of denying traditional authorship while at the same time performing a different kind of *genius* by shifting authorship to a meta level now also seems to work in the ecosystem of the literary world after having proven to be successful in the visual art for almost a century. That it is still necessary, however, to back up such aesthetic practice by providing a theory of *Uncreative Writing* supports Goldsmith’s claim that the literary world still needs to develop a more natural attitude towards meta-authorship and literary post production. Having said that, once this mission is completed, the ingenious self-staging of *uncreativity* will equally have become redundant.

UbuWeb

Looking at UbuWeb, the massive archive Goldsmith has accumulated in almost two decades, the question arises whether this artist archive is another of Goldsmith’s uncreative art projects. Where does it sit in relation to what Goldsmith has conceptualized as uncreative art? And is it another evidence for Goldsmith’s claim that nothing new needs to be created?

The Artist Archive

In 2004, Hal Foster identifies a new tendency in contemporary art, which he describes as “An Archival Impulse.”¹² This impulse to collect, to arrange and to archive as art practice is not new, as he states. Many artists have dealt with retrieving historical information, collecting samples from mass culture, or have arranged material from obscure sources in an attempt to create alternative knowledge or counter memory. He contextualizes the new version of the artist-as-archivist with the emergence of the age of digital information and concedes that the ideal medium for archival art would be the internet. However, the works he emphasizes are not concerned with processing

10 Michael Wetzel, “Autor/Künstler,” in *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden, Band 1, ed. Karlheinz Barck et al. (Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 2000), 486.

11 Ibid., 541.

12 Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” October 110 (2004) 3-22.

or reprocessing data; they are not about setting up inventories, sampling or sharing online, but rather about creating installations that make information physically present. Foster celebrates the stubbornness of the tactile material and reads it as a resistance to the exchangeability of data. These new practices would produce informal archives and do so “in a way that underscores the nature of all archival material as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private.”¹³ The works would follow a “quasi-archival logic” and present their items in a “quasi-archival architecture.”

Most interestingly, Foster juxtaposes this archival impulse with the allegorical impulse attributed to postmodern art by Benjamin Buchloh.¹⁴ While there are ostensible procedural similarities in archiving and postmodern art practices, Foster also reveals an underlying incomparability. Challenging aesthetic autonomy and formalist hegemony, and rethinking representational systems, postmodern art has confronted the concepts of uniqueness, originality and authenticity with modes of production that encompass reproduction, repetition, and copy. Or, as Douglas Crimp has summarized it, “postmodern art moves from techniques of production to techniques of reproduction.”¹⁵ In this sense, the concept of *Uncreative Writing* as elaborated by Goldsmith perfectly complies with the basic principles of postmodernism just as postmodern art practices as appropriation art did in the 1980s. And while Foster recognizes that “archival samplings sometimes push the postmodernist complications of originality and authorship to an extreme,”¹⁶ he identifies an absolutely antithetical aspect. Archive projects are frequently driven by “a desire to project meaning onto a world drained of the same” and thus to overcome the frightful state of fragmentation and disconnectedness. The decentered subject would no longer only represent orderless fragmentation but work it through to suggest new partial and affective orders. Hence, the artist archive is a hybrid between a postmodern approach that is based on the reproductive rather than the productive mode, and a strong authorial gesture expressed in the subjectivist quasi-archival logic and architecture.

Authoring the Archive

Foster’s model of the artist archive provides a useful reference for a further exploration of *UbuWeb*’s conceptual foundation. As the maker of the archive, Goldsmith does not assert any scientific or academic legitimacy, and he makes no claim to completeness or objectivity either. Instead, he points out that he selects along the personal criteria he has developed as an artist – without specifying them. What he is interested in collecting is what *he calls* avant-garde art.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Benjamin Buchloh, “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,” *Artforum XXI Number 1* (1982) 43-56.

¹⁵ Douglas Crimp, “The Museum’s Old / The Library’s New Subject,” in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 61.

¹⁶ Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October 110* (2004) 3-22.

This alludes to a neighborhood to what Foster has termed “quasi-archival logic”: a subjective way of creating systems of ordering – and meaning. Considering himself the “gatekeeper” of UbuWeb, Goldsmith claims that such function would be indispensable in the chaos of net culture and the flat hierarchies of digital networks where everything is equal and quality control has been suspended: “It’s a curatorial job to go in and make sense of some of that chaos.”¹⁷ What he is doing as the operator of UbuWeb, ensuring the quality of the single items included as well as creating a classification system, is nothing else than the strong authorial gesture Foster has talked about. It is a practice of meta-authorship, of selecting and arranging information, which is artistic/subjective rather than scientific/discursive.

Such activity could structurally be compared to uncreative writing as discussed earlier. Having said that, there is a major difference between UbuWeb and Goldsmith’s uncreative writing practice. The content of his books of poetry is rather random and of no particular artistic quality; it is everyday language, information taken from mass media. Its function is to point to the information overflow *outside* the book and its value lies, first of all, in the underlying concept. This is antithetical to the archive, which unfolds its quality on the basis of what is *inside*, the quality – and the quantity – of the works it contains and the way they are organized.

The Functioning Form

The informal artist archive as described by Foster is a fragmentary collection of information, which, also due to its way of presentation, will necessarily remain a symbolic gesture of information politics. Using tactile materials to create an *interface*, such artist archive resembles a sculpture rather than a functional repository of useful information, expressing an artist’s idea rather than the actual issue at stake. As such traditional artwork it may serve certain aesthetic objectives and behave as commodity on the art market, but its function as a tool to share information is rather limited.

This is different with UbuWeb. Although the archive is the result of an artistic way of collecting and arranging information and does not claim completeness or scientificity, as explained earlier, it nevertheless has accumulated a substantial amount of expert information in definable and distinctive areas. The thousands of art works Ubu contains – amongst them almost 700 films and videos, over one thousand sound art pieces, dozens of filmed dance productions, an overwhelming amount of visual poetry and conceptual writing, but also musical scores, patents, electronic music resources plus an edition of vital new literature, the /ubu editions – largely belong to what could be described as the canon of 20th century neo-avant-garde, complemented with historical predecessors as well as contemporary works, partly mainstream, partly fringe. What characterizes the archive is that most of its content is hard to find elsewhere, being out of print, or simply never

¹⁷ Goldsmith, Kenneth. *The Poetry of Archiving*. Interview with Kenneth Goldsmith. Interviewed by Cornelia Sollfrank. Berlin: 2013. Accessed January 7, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/60377169>.

having been made available for wide dissemination. Unlike in the case of uncreative writing, it is this content of the archive, which determines its relevance. The concept of managing information by creating a repository is a necessary starting point, but Ubu's value as an important source for avant-garde art well exceeds this conceptual aspect. Ubu does not make its visitors *think* about archiving, but rather invites them to use the resources, to immerse in consuming the treasures it contains. The archive directs the users' attention away from its concept and structure right through to the archived artifacts – which are not randomly chosen mass media items, but in their majority carefully selected original artworks.

Instead of embedding the information in a sculpture and thus enclosing it, Ubu provides a perfectly functioning digital archive. It embraces digitality and the internet as the ideal way of distribution. UbuWeb *is* about processing and reprocessing data. It is about sampling and sharing online, about accessibility. Residing in the "ideal medium for archival art,"¹⁸ all works are available in digital format and can be viewed and downloaded for free. In the case of pre-digital works, which are certainly the majority, Ubu has managed the digitization of the material, which might be considered a valuable contribution to the preservation of ephemeral works in itself.

Reproducible Stubbornness

The archive has, in fact, become a unique resource, rich of rare artifacts, summing up the achievements of idealistic labor – and a certain intellectual disobedience. Instead of projecting stubbornness on to the material manifestation, as Foster does for the archival sculptures he describes, UbuWeb produces resistance not against the exchangeability of data, but exactly through the very properties of the digital networked medium. The project owes its existence and with it its success to a consequential abnegation of copyright on the basis of digital reproducibility. What has started out of economic necessity – "... if we had to ask for permission, we would not exist. Because we have no money, we don't ask permission. Asking permission always involves paperwork and negotiations, lawyers, and bank accounts"¹⁹ – has turned into a more or less offensive copyright criticism or anti-copyright activism. In a keynote speech at Matadero Madrid,²⁰ Goldsmith describes a world with no copyright as utopia, a utopia, however, which has found its realization in Ubu!

Its declared abnegation of copyright, however, is only half the story. It is true that the archive could not exist if it would formally clear all the copyrights involved. At the same time, Goldsmith has been anxious not to make himself vulnerable. One major policy underlying his curatorial decisions is to

¹⁸ Foster, Hal. "An Archival Impulse," *October 110* (2004) 3-22.

¹⁹ "An Open Letter to the Frameworks Community," last modified 18 October 2010, <http://www.ubu.com/resources/frameworks.html>.

²⁰ "Keynote speech at Matadero Madrid," last modified 17 March 2012, <http://www.ubu.com/resources/paradise.html>.

present orphaned and out-of-print works.²¹ This entails not only conservational and educational efforts but also the certainty of not interfering with anyone's business interests. In case a work ends up on UbuWeb whose copyright owner does not agree, Goldsmith apologizes and takes it down. Added to this, more and more artists understand the value of UbuWeb. They accept it as another means of making their work known and accessible to the public and even appreciate the slightly notorious reputation it enjoys.

Despite its precarious nature, UbuWeb has managed to grow into a well-respected institution; an extra-institutional institution, however, whose secret lies in the combination and layering of such diverse aspects as avant-garde art, anti-copyright activism and pragmatism when it comes to administrative, organizational or technical aspects. Thus, 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. Yet, it is an *unstable archive* in its very foundations. Goldsmith himself points to this fact when he invites everyone to download as much material as possible and build one's own archives. In the meantime, he goes on to perform the uncreative genius who promotes his uncreative poetry together with the archive, mixing creative and uncreative practices, theories and activism thus weaving an oscillating fabric which embraces various and not always compatible aesthetic positions.

The Archive as self-issued social assignment

The point of departure for this text was Goldsmith's claim that uncreative writing and building an archive are similar aesthetic practices. Discussing the implications of both results in the clear finding that they are not. In both cases, the creativity lies in the conception of the particular project and in the (re-)contextualization of pre-existing material. Thus, both may imply managing information as opposed to the creation of original artworks in the traditional sense. Yet, this superficial conceptual parallel, overlooks the aspect, which I find most important.

Goldsmith elaborates his concept of uncreativity related to writing mainly drawing on the ideas of 1980s postmodern aesthetics. His aesthetic position related to the archive, however, largely remains implicit. It is not limited to the selection and arrangement of the presented material; the content is crucial, as he explains, but the creation of the independent infrastructure and the maintenance of the archive are another essential part of the concept. This allows for linking the archive with, on the one hand, more contemporary aesthetic practices spawned by digital network culture, and on the other hand, with a tradition highly neglected by bourgeois art history, the historical avant-garde.

UbuWeb provides a service to the community of its users and the artists it presents. In an atmosphere of growing enclosure of cultural goods, it produces a real opening. Hence, it steps out

²¹ Kenneth Goldsmith, *An Open Letter to the Frameworks Community*, 18 October 2010, <http://www.ubu.com/resources/frameworks.html>

of the constraints of traditional aesthetics altogether. It leaves the realm of symbolical politics behind in favor of conceiving new forms of organization, and inventing new structures of production and dissemination, thus embodying an idea of art that invokes a self-issued *social* assignment. While the contents of the archive can be considered as neo-avant-garde, which, according to Peter Bürger “institutionalizes the avant-garde as art and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions,”²² the archive as framing infrastructure serves a real function. And it works. The following quote by El Lissitzky supports Goldsmith’s claim that nothing new needs to be created, even though in a slightly different sense than intended by Goldsmith:

“The use of an artist's work has no value *per se*, no purpose of its own, no beauty of its own; it receives all this solely from its relation to the community. In the creation of every great work the architect's part is visible and the community's part is latent. The artist, the creator, invents nothing that falls into his lap from the sky. [...].”²³

This text is based on an interview Cornelia Sollfrank conducted with Kenneth Goldsmith in Berlin, 1 February 2013. The interview has been part of the artistic research project Giving What You Don't Have: <http://artwarez.org/projects/GWYDH/>

²² Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 58.

²³ El Lissitzky, “Ideological Superstructure,” in *Programs and Manifestoes of 20th-Century Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971(1929)), 121.

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