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Avantgardens Robin Hood – Kunstkritikk – Norsk utgave

by GEIR HARALDSETH



Kenneth Goldsmith. Foto: ŠStar Black, 2010.

Mange kunstnere, kunsthistorikere, kuratorer og kritikere kjenner til og bruker UbuWeb på jevnlig basis. UbuWeb deler blant annet store mengder med video- og lydarbeider på nettet og har vært i drift siden 1996. Kunstkritikk har snakket med nettsidens grunnlegger og sjefkurator/redaktør Kenneth Goldsmith om distribusjon av kunstverk på nettet i fremtiden, om ulovlig fildeling og om hvordan man unngår å bli saksøkt. Goldsmith, som også er en ledende konseptuell poet, besøkte Norge i forbindelse med et foredrag på Åpent Forum ved Kunstakademiet i Oslo. Intervjuet er gjengitt i engelsk originalversjon.

Intro in english.

– There are a few points that I would like to get your input on: One is the distribution aspect of video and sound art today, which is something you do through your website UbuWeb, and the legal trouble you've had, which might not be about copyright per se, but rather the status of the art work and the distribution normally associated with art works in the gallery system.

In your lecture at Åpent Forum here in Oslo you talked a bit about the loss of quality when converting videos or film to a compressed file, and that these AVIs are not going to replace the experience of going to a movie theater or watching something in 8mm, or whatever the original format was, but could you say something about the distribution and formats that are challenged by UbuWeb?

– First of all, galleries are a really bad place to watch video. I never want to watch videos in a gallery. If I walk into a gallery and they are playing a video, I usually never feel like seeing it, even if they have comfortable couches. The exception has been the new Christian Marclay piece, *The Clock* (2010), on display in New York, which is a 24-hour piece about time. What they have done there is to turn the Paula Cooper gallery into a movie theater, with seats in a black room and couches, and it's wonderful. It's the first time I've seen people in a gallery where they actually want to sit there and watch it – because the piece is fascinating and fabulous, and because they've actually managed to make it comfortable. I think the best way to watch video would be in a comfortable place, on a couch or in bed. You can take your laptop in bed now, and watch video art and avant-garde film, which is what we facilitate on UbuWeb.

– *And you just make yourself comfortable.*

– Video art is durational. I think the laptop is a really beautiful platform for watching videos. And when you put headphones on, I think it's even better than watching television in a room. Headphones and a laptop is the closest I can come to a cinematic experience, because your visual field is totally enveloped.

– *But what about the loss of quality? Whether it's a 8mm or 16mm film, an HD video, or whatever format, it's turned into an AVI and compressed.*



UbuWeb

UbuWeb: Film & Video

– I think loss of quality has become normal for people. I remember years ago, in the 80s, *The New York Times* began running TV screenshots of presidential debates, captured from the television, on their front page. And they started doing that a lot. Didn't they have a photographer at the debate? I assume that they felt the need to acknowledge a certain type of media debate that was beginning to happen, wherein mass media was beginning to challenge and subsume the then-dominant

print media. Now, of course, that battle has shifted to the realm of the digital, with hi-def competing with cheap, streaming media. And now, of course, everything is pixelated; everything has bad resolution—and I don't think anyone seems to mind very much.

– *It might not be a generational thing, but everyone seems accustomed to some degree.*

– We are used to bad quality; we expect things to be bad quality. It's the new normal.

– *Well, you just get used to it and accept it. I saw a transfer of Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty at the ICA in London and the video was pixelated de-luxe. I was upset. Then I saw the same thing again, years later, and I was fine with it.*

– I think we are adjusting to it.

– *We're human!*

– That's why I think those works of Thomas Ruff, those giant pixelated blow-ups of JPEGs, are some of the smartest photos I've seen.

– *...and they were from the late nineties, early 2000s.*

– Super smart pieces. That makes us understand the power of the degraded image. And yet, there are many people who are still very upset about the quality of the work on UbuWeb, mostly filmmakers who, of all artists, have suffered the most quality-wise. I mean, if you squint your ears, an MP3 isn't so far from a CD and a PDF is reminiscent of a book – but a film, originally intended for an enormous screen, a great sound system, and a warm-bodied audience, which is now reduced to a lonely pixelated postage stamp, is a very shocking format change. Understandably, most of the people upset with Ubu are celluloid filmmakers. However, it's insanely hard to see their work just about anywhere on the globe, so for many people, the lo-res copies on Ubu are «the originals»; it's a very difficult adjustment for a certain generation of artists. However, I feel that without this representation, the works would simply never be seen. And I do love and believe in this work so much that even a shitty version is better than no version at all. In some cases, having stuff on Ubu can reignite a career, leading to works being screened as they were intended to be seen.

– *Do you think the distribution form dictates the output in some way? It does to a certain extent, but what are your thoughts with regards to UbuWeb?*

– I actually feel that the issues of distribution on Ubu are what the site is really about. I mean,

gathering a bunch of cool stuff is one thing, but keeping it all running for fifteen years is a more fascinating idea; it's the meta-ethos of the site. Ubu is an experiment in radical distribution, one that proposes «What if copyright didn't exist?». Ubu is a giant project of radical appropriation, one ignores both money and copyright. And somehow, with this uncompromising attitude, it has become an «institution» of sorts. I'd like to see MoMA become more like us.

– *So you are just sifting through this huge amount of what's already available on file sharing networks?*

– Yes, we don't rip anything ourselves. Rather, we appropriate what's already out there on very private file-sharing groups. In this way Ubu is the Robin Hood of the avant-garde: stealing what has already been stolen and giving it away to everyone, free of charge. It shifts frames of reference, challenging social, economic, philosophical and distributive norms.

– *What about Electronic Art Intermix (EAI), who used to be the go-to-people for distributing video art in the US?*

– We adore EAI, VDB, Film and Video Umbrella, and so forth. They're doing great work and Ubu wants to support – not undermine – their efforts to distribute high-quality, high-resolution works to institutions. High resolution works that are well-distributed, and which compensate the artists are essential. To prove this point, when UbuWeb was asked to screen videos from our archive at Lincoln Center this summer, we insisted on showing AVIs. They looked horrible on a giant screen, dissolving into nothing more than pixels. It was an awful hour-and-a-half of cinema. But the point was to show how essential proper presentation is. And also, to show that UbuWeb is in no way a threat to traditional distribution. Once high-res video becomes possible on the Web, Ubu will step out of the game. We're interested in keeping things crappy, so that those who do things the «right» way can continue on.

– *So how does this collaboration work?*

– Ubu and EAI are partners. Some of their artists are thrilled to be on Ubu, while others are not. Part of our partnership involves removing those artists who don't want to be there and then working closely with those who wish to be represented. So we have brilliant and important artists like Ryan Trecartin, Leslie Thornton, Cheryl Donegan, Peggy Ahwesh, Mike Smith, and many others, who keep contributing works to Ubu with the blessing of their galleries and EAI. It's a win-win situation for all.

– *That's very interesting, because I assumed there was a huge conflict there.*

– I did a show at the Center for Contemporary Art in Montreal and this was an amazing show. It was an archival show featuring the archives of NASA, the Smithsonian, the National Film Board of Canada, and UbuWeb! What does not belong there? And I wanted to do something similar to what I did at the Lincoln Center, where I screened the compressed AVI files in a program of screenings. But they said: «We can't do that, because we're the CCA in Montreal. We're funded and we have to do everything legally and legitimately. We have to get everything in high definition – that's just the way we swing.» And I said «Just download it». But they couldn't do that. It turned out to be a nice thing, because the show was for free on Ubu.

– *But there will be repercussions in the gallery space because of UbuWeb. Some of the shows that I've done in the past, which had no budgets, have used Ubu on other online sources, illegally or not, to show material in an exhibition. You just want to get your point out there.*

– I had Marian Goodman ask me to take Tacita Dean's *Kodak* (2006) off of Ubu, and I understood. The gallery said, «Look, it's a movie about film.» And it really is. It's about marvelous film and I took it down. That piece is about medium specificity and it doesn't work on UbuWeb.

Well it's a sore point for some artists and galleries, but things are changing. In this case, it was Tacita Dean's work on film, but what about video? When video first arrived as a medium, it was a way to distribute things and circumvent the gallery system. And you could show it on TV. But video turned out to be just as susceptible to the gallery system as any other ephemeral practice. It turned into another piece in the gallery system, as a limited edition, a priced possession, copy-written. It turned into three-, five-, or a hundred-screen projections, just to make sure that it's art and doesn't belong on TV and not distributed on tapes or DVDs. It's a cherished object – that's a fallacy. The idea that you would sell a video for \$10,000 is really stupid. Somebody's a real sucker. Video is not a unique object. How can you treat video as a unique object like that? The younger video artists understand that.

– *Exactly.*



Ryan Trecartin, *A Family Finds Entertainment*, 2004. Videostill.

– Like Ryan Trecartin, he really understands that—and believe me, Ryan's career is not suffering because he is on UbuWeb. Ryan is so interesting because he is on Ubu, but he is also represented by Elisabeth Dee Gallery, he is in



museums all over the world, and he takes part in film festivals. You can always get his work. Ryan seems to be doing great. He is thriving

and using this model of making everything available. And it doesn't seem to be hurting him.

– *No, online distribution does not seem like a hindrance to him, but he also provides the museums and the galleries with an experience other than if you were to watch it on vimeo, Ubu, or wherever you access it. There's usually an installation involved and a way of watching the pieces. And sometimes there is extremely comfortable seating, and you can actually spend forty minutes or an hour with his work and not suffer on a bench somewhere. You might even get a bed or a sofa.*

– I love that. Jordan Wolfson is someone who does something similar. When he makes a video, he sends the video over right away and says: «You got to have this on Ubu.» This is fantastic to me.

– *Ubu has in some ways stayed the same since it was launched in 1996, but there have also been some changes and additions, different approaches to working with the material you find on Ubu. But what do you see as the biggest challenge for UbuWeb in the future?*

– Not getting sued. Staying on. Every day when I wake up I wonder what do I have to take down today or what thread am I going to find in my inbox. It's freaky. Every year that goes by and Ubu is still up is a miracle to me. Ubu is wrong. It's completely fucking wrong. It's wrong on every single level, but nobody else is doing it right. Ubu is all we have, and everybody thinks it's the greatest thing, but it's not. It's done terribly and the taxonomy is a disaster. The oeuvres of certain artists are really random; the descriptions of the videos are atrocious; the texts are fucking googled and thrown in there.

– *Copy and paste?*

– Without knowing if it's true or not. It's a mess, but it's a provocation for somebody to go and do it better. But nobody is doing it better. This is when I had the dust-up with the Frameworks community. Did you hear about that?

– *No, another dust-up?*

– There's a statement on Ubu that I made to the film community called Frameworks. Some people on Frameworks celebrated the fact that Ubu went down, so I went to the thread and wrote: «We know that Ubu is not good, the quality is bad, the text is wrong, and yet, if we had to ask for

permission we wouldn't exist. The minute you have to ask for permission it's a slippery slope. I just want to say that in the end, Ubu is a provocation to your community of filmmakers to go ahead and do it right. To do it better and to render Ubu obsolete. Why should there only be one Ubu web? You have the tools, the art work, the research and the knowledge to do it so much better than I am doing it.» Who am I? You should be doing it. I don't know anything about it. I am not the best person to be representing this. I would love for you to step in and make it better. Or better yet; put us out of business by doing it correctly, the way it should have been done in the first place. Ubu is just a provocation. I am a poet. I don't know anything about this. So come on now, let's go MoMA! Let's go EAI!

– But aside from the legal troubles are there any other complications you are worried about? What about the future of online file sharing or how the Internet is changing?

– Ubu is a stubborn web 1.0 thing and its form will remain exactly as it is, even fifteen years from now. I don't care. I am upset that Ubu can't be viewed on the iPad because it's flash-based, so that's bad. But I have a tech-guy volunteer working on a conversion protocol, so that videos on the fly can be converted to html, so you can actually see them. That will come, but the whole world has bought into flash. On all the android phones you can see Ubu. On all the android tablets you can see Ubu. Microsoft OS, which all the Nokia phones are getting, won't have a problem with flash; only Apple has a problem with flash.

– Which might be a big problem in itself? The way that apple is dictating how we devour media.

– Apple and Google are competitors, and the android system seems to be a much more open platform than Apple's. I think that Apple is going to lose out on this one ultimately. Android has a much bigger market share than Apple does.

– Are there other ways of distributing video art? One of the reviews I've done for Kunstkritikk was of a book by Janicke Låker, which comes with nine works by the artist on a DVD. That's one way of distributing the artwork, having it available together with texts and access to the video work

– Who watches a DVD? The Macbook Airs don't have the drives.

– Well, that is something that changes the game when it comes to formats, but the gesture is quite generous.

– I have a billion books with DVDs in them and I forget that they have DVDs in them. They just sit

on the shelf.

– *So for you, distribution wise, that's not a good strategy?*

– That's very bad. It seems great at first, but DVDs gets scratched. I don't use DVDs anymore and any writeable, optical type of media is finished. Who cares about it now? I have a bunch of movies here on my laptop, stupid stuff to watch on the plane, and they are all avi's that I've taken from the web. Do you think I carry a stack of DVDs?

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