

TANK
Tank
Magazine

*Informed,
articulate and
original style,
photography,
art and
writing.*

[Current Issue](#)
[Features »](#)
[Fashion](#)
[Flash Fiction »](#)
[Talk](#)
[About](#)
[Contact](#)
[Buy or Subscribe »](#)
[Blogs »](#)



TALK- Kenneth Goldsmith



Kenneth Goldsmith talks to Nadja Romain

Kenneth Goldsmith is a poet and critic, and the founder and driving force behind the cult online archive Ubuweb.com. Ubuweb offers an entirely curated collection of sounds, texts and videos from Dada to Fluxus by way of the Vienna Actionists and the Situationists, with thousand of hours of material by Andy Warhol,

John Cage, Yayoi Kusama, Marina Abramovic, William Burroughs, Laurie Anderson, Roland Barthes, Merce Cunningham and many more. Ubuweb has been called the WikiLeaks of the avant-garde; over a Skype conversation with Tank's Nadja Romain, Goldsmith tells us why.

Nadja Romain: To create Ubuweb back in 1996 was visionary. How did it start?

Kenneth Goldsmith: Ubuweb started as a site for visual and concrete poetry. I was a collector of that stuff and I began to put up some of it online, just to see what it looked like and to share it with people. It looked amazing. At some point, shortly after we started, we added John Cage, who did sound poems, but sometimes in combination with an orchestra. So it was no longer pure sound poetry, and I began to think of Ubu as an archive for the avant-garde. The archives grew organically; there was no intention behind it. At the time – the early 1990s – there was nothing at all like this on the web. You couldn't have access to this kind of material, so by default, Ubu filled this niche, and has become the only place like it on the web. There should be hundreds, but there is only one.

NR: Why do you think that is the case?

KG: Everyone is frightened of copyright. Ubuweb simply acts like copyright doesn't exist: we just ignore it. Everything on Ubu is free. We don't touch money. The site is run by students and volunteers, and our server space and bandwidth is donated by universities. Ubu has discovered an economic gray zone by hosting out-of-print and hard-to-find items that aren't valuable, economically speaking. It's mostly artists' ephemera and although it might not be worth a lot of money, intellectually and historically it's priceless. The only value of the avant-garde is artistic and political.

NR: What's your definition today of the avant-garde and what is its place on the web?

KG: I'm not sure what the avant-garde is. On Ubu, our definition of it is always changing. But in the 1980s, you weren't allowed to use the term "avant-garde" due to its patriarchal and modernist connotations. Now, with the advent of the web and the rise of revisionist ideas of what constitutes art (for example, Ubu proposing that modernist ephemera might be more important than the modernists' "primary" works), somehow that funny idea of the avant-garde seems appropriate for today. Likewise, the web is such a new frontier that there's this crazy utopian sense of "future" again, which is not so different from the original avant-gardists'.

NR: Who contributes to Ubu, and how is it curated?

KG: Ubu doesn't generate any of its own content. Instead, films and sounds are taken from very exclusive file-sharing groups and released to the public. The decision as to what goes on Ubu is made by the section's curator, or by me. There is no committee, no discussion. Whatever we think is good goes on the site.

NR: How do you think new digital technology affects how artists create and show their work?

KG: If you look at art galleries and art fairs, you'd forget that the internet even exists. To me, that's not being contemporary. The market is still the thing that drives the art world, to the exclusion of almost everything else. I feel the art world is falling behind culture. Art used to lead culture – if I wanted the latest and most innovative ideas, I'd go to a contemporary art museum. Today, I'll go to Apple. Corporate and mainstream culture makes the art world look like an antiques shop. What the art world is missing is the idea that it's not the content any more that makes a work radical; instead, it is the way it's distributed. A Matthew Barney video is still a Matthew Barney video, just as it was 20 years ago, but how it is distributed – across file-sharing networks to far-flung corners of the world, for free and on demand – is what makes it radical. For the art world, the primacy of content has long been replaced by market status. The art world doesn't care what artworks are about; they care how much money they are worth.

NR: How are you perceived by the mainstream art world?

KG: The mainstream art world knows nothing of Ubu. Why would they be interested? Ubu is intended for people who don't have access to the centres of urban culture and all the riches they offer. We often receive emails from people living in rural, isolated or suburban areas whose only line to the outside world is a web connection. For them, Ubu is an open-source museum and offers a full education on a type of culture that is unavailable, say, in their local mall or library. The museum world, although claiming to be interested in education, only serves those who can afford to come to them, a privileged class. Ubu is free and embracing of everyone, regardless of their geographic location or income.

NR: What are you the proudest of having broadcast on Ubuweb?

KG: There's too much to pick just one thing. But the things I'm most proud of are the artworks whose copyright holders have requested we remove, but after some dialogue and conversation, they agree to keep them up on the site. They approach us suspiciously, but after understanding that we love art and artists, and that we don't touch money, they come to want to be a part of Ubu.

NR: You have said you don't believe in a democratic approach to art – why is that?

KG: One of the problems with the web – and social media in general – is the ethos of “everything is good” (the “like” button on Facebook), or “everybody has a voice”. Everybody might have a voice, but not every voice is worth listening to. You need someone to separate and discern which ones are worth hearing. And that's always been the role of the curator. In the age of the archivist – and we are all archivists by default in the digital era – curation has become even more important. With more and more artworks and files, you really need someone to sort it all out for you. Ubu doesn't have an open policy or any social media or “community” attached to it. It's more like a library where you come to it and take what's there.

NR: How do you see the future of Ubuweb?

KG: The future of Ubu will be the same as it has been for the past 15 years, just bigger and deeper. It's all

hand-coded, written in html 1.0, and that's why it works – no gimmicks, no tricks, no Flash, no advertisement, no donation buttons, no mailing lists, no promotion. Nothing but art.

NR: By getting bigger, you mean more followers?

KG: No, I don't need more followers – I don't even know how many I have. It doesn't matter for me if three people watch or 3,000 – we don't advertise, we don't ask for donations, we don't promote. We're opposed to that and it allows us to do what we want. We don't care about community. But Ubu is generous, available, open to everyone, and it is democratic in this sense.

NR: Before we spoke I went on Ubuweb and watched Pilot, a show for made for public TV in Ontario by General Idea. I feel like it is exactly what Ubu offers, this specific, rare thing you can't see anywhere else.

KG: We didn't ask General Idea or [its co-founder] AA Bronson – we just found it and put it out online. So this is it: you benefit from us breaking the law.

NR: There is something very political about Ubu. Is it an anti-capitalistic tool?

KG: Ubu ignores capital – we're neutral about it to the point where, like copyright, we just pretend it doesn't exist. We propose a utopia where culture is free and open to anyone, regardless of where they're from or how much they have in their bank account. Ubu is the kind of world that we dream of living in.



Tags: [andy warhol](#), [anti-capital](#), [avant- garde](#), [copyright](#), [digital technology](#), [internet](#), [john cage](#), [Kenneth Goldsmith](#), [marina abramovic](#), [Nadia Romain](#), [poetry](#), [Ubuweb](#)




« *TALK- Andrew Blick*

TALK- TO DEAN KISSICK »

Search the archives

- [Popular](#)
- [Latest](#)
- [Comments](#)
- [Tags](#)

-  [Crazy Horses](#) 15. Jun, 2010
-  [Gypsy Rose](#) 06. Sep, 2010

-  **TANK ART ISSUE on sale NOW** 27. Sep, 2010
-  **Yoko Ono** 15. Jun, 2010
-  **JJ Charlesworth talks to Dean Kissick** 06. Sep, 2010

© 2011 Tank Magazine. All Rights Reserved.