



Vol. 43 No. 7 · 1 April 2021

Your hat sucks

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DUCHAMP IS MY LAWYER: THE POLEMICS, PRAGMATICS AND POETICS OF UBUWEB

by Kenneth Goldsmith.

Columbia, 328 pp., £20, July 2020, 978 0 231 18695 7

IN 1988 the veteran conductor Nicolas Slonimsky, having built a career on the most experimental of repertoires, sat at the piano to record a ditty about a constipation remedy. The music was his, but he had lifted the words – verbatim – from an advertisement that had appeared many years earlier in the *Saturday Evening Post*. ‘Children cry for Castoria!’ Slonimsky quavered, then well into his nineties. ‘O gentle harmless laxative which never fails to sweeten the stomach and open up the BOW-ELS.’ It was a surreal slice of late-career whimsy recorded for a giveaway flexidisc on a magazine, unlikely to feature in any histories of the modernist musical canon. But that’s precisely the reason you’ll find it on UbuWeb, Kenneth Goldsmith’s online ‘clearing house for the avant-garde’ (at www.ubu.com). Slonimsky’s world-premiere recordings of Charles Ives and Edgard Varèse are catalogued on the website under ‘Sound’, but he’s also in the ‘Outsiders’ section, with other novelties and curios, such as Louis Farrakhan’s unexpectedly chirpy calypso songs. UbuWeb is a place where the cerebral and the silly, the ephemeral and the weighty, are given equal prominence.

UbuWeb is a compendious resource of everything from Kathy Acker to Frank Zappa, but has no systematic collection policy, being steered only by the instincts, enthusiasms and seemingly boundless energy of Goldsmith, a poet and lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania, who founded it in 1996 (he is also a senior editor at the PennSound archive). In the early days he focused on concrete poetry, scanning and uploading old anthologies from his own bookshelves and wherever else he could find them. Around the turn of the century – when bandwidth became sufficient for audio and video streaming – Goldsmith branched out into sound poetry, experimental music and video art poached from other sites. Nowadays people all over the world send him entire hard drives full of films, images and books, an indication of what an institution his site has become.

In internet terms, UbuWeb is antediluvian – dating back to the era of dial-up modems and Ask Jeeves. Even more remarkable, it’s existed fundamentally unchanged. It’s still programmed in plain old HTML and has resisted the lure of advanced interfaces, fancy graphics and third-party cloud storage platforms. Such platforms – Flickr, for instance – rise and fall, but UbuWeb has outlasted them all. It’s remained fiercely independent, not affiliated with anything or anyone, except Goldsmith.

UbuWeb's mission is to democratise the avant-garde, taking the kind of material that resides in niche film archives or research libraries and making it available to everyone. It's the only place you can browse a whole run of *Aspen*, for instance, the iconic and rare-as-hen's-teeth 'Multimedia Magazine in a Box' with work by Andy Warhol, John Cage, John Lennon and Roland Barthes. There's no shortage of big names mixed in with the obscure stuff – but they're often not doing what you might expect. As well as Slonimsky's hymn to Castoria, there are Samuel Beckett's radio plays, Richard Serra's video art, Maurice Blanchot's mystery novels and a 1971 promotional disc made by Salvador Dalí for the Crédit Commercial de France. One of UbuWeb's specialities is the B-sides and rarities overshadowed by an artist's greatest hits. Want to find Claude Closky's poem that lists the numbers one to one thousand in alphabetical order, or hear the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* sung solo from start to finish? It's the avant-garde, just not as you know it.

One of UbuWeb's inspirations is Clive Phillpot, the curator who opened a 'back door' into MoMA, inviting artists to post him things – postcards, photocopies, flyers – which he would then catalogue as part of the museum's collections. Over time, the sheer volume of this flotsam shifted the institution's centre of gravity, skewing its collections towards new forms and genres including mail art and Xerox art. Goldsmith's aim is similar, to drag culture away from the centre and into the open-source era of sample and remix, copy and paste. It's a kind of left-field Pirate Bay.

But where internet piracy is usually a covert, shady business, Goldsmith is cheerfully upfront about it. His new book, *Duchamp Is My Lawyer*, is a freewheeling eulogy to flagrant copyright violation, documenting the life and times of UbuWeb and its various brushes with the law. As the title indicates, Goldsmith's main defence is the avant-garde itself. When, in 1917, Marcel Duchamp rechristened a urinal 'Fountain' and submitted it to an exhibition, he instigated a whole tradition of readymades and 'objets trouvés', making conventional notions of originality and creative ownership look tired and prissy. UbuWeb is simply the apotheosis of this cultural logic: a repository of pilfered creations, many of which themselves are borrowings.

If UbuWeb is breaking the law it's because the law is an ass: that's Goldsmith's basic position. There's a lot of sticking it to the man and pushing back against legal threats – many of which are bogus, it turns out, since the internet is awash with 'copyright trolls' hoping to make a quick buck from things they don't even own. The book pokes fun at the absurdities of copyright: what if, for instance, the John Cage estate demanded the removal of unauthorised copies of his completely silent piece, 4'33"? (Spoiler: they have.) Beyond this, though, Goldsmith insists he is keeping alive 'obscure and unloved cultural artefacts' which, left to market forces, would simply vanish. Artists who request that their work be taken down – and there have been plenty – fail to see that 'piracy is the highest form of flattery.' In any case, UbuWeb doesn't host original, singular artworks, but, like everything else in the digital era, multiples and copies. This ethos makes a virtue of the often iffy quality of the videos. Goldsmith proudly recounts screening some of UbuWeb's art films to a live audience, with resolution so low and sound so muffled that the room cleared within half an hour. But this is the point, he insists: these are not the films themselves but remediated iterations, like Warhol's smudgy screenprints. If we're wondering what the avant-garde looks like in the 21st century, one answer is 'heavily pixellated'.

After the 'polemics' and 'pragmatics' – why copyright is wrong and how to get around it – we come to its 'poetics': a celebration of the celebrants of recycling and reworking. On performing 'Ursonate', a 45-minute barrage of cut-up language and nonsense syllables, in Potsdam in 1925, Kurt Schwitters was met first with gales of laughter and then with tears of admiration. Bern Porter, a physicist turned outsider artist, spent the war helping to build the atomic bomb, before turning his back on his career and devoting the rest of his often isolated existence to creating what he called 'founds'. He rearranged news clippings, magazine ads and junk mail into collage poetry,

bound the pages of old newspapers into books to create a kind of accidental literature and recorded himself reciting the phone book to the accompaniment of didgeridoos and mouth harps. Porter never owned a TV, phone or computer, but he was obsessed with the media-saturated age, sifting through its waste and detritus, obsessively reassembling it into new and strange combinations. The work of Vicki Bennett continues this tradition. Under the name 'People Like Us', she raids popular culture's stock of images, mischievously splicing together the opening scenes of *The Sound of Music* and *Apocalypse Now*, so that Julie Andrews sings on a mountain-top while napalm explodes in the background. *Duchamp Is My Lawyer* remixes the avant-garde itself, presenting a version based not on auteurs and individual creators but on bricoleurs and magpies, foregrounding what had fallen between the cracks. ('Ursonate' was originally excluded from Schwitters's official oeuvre for being too 'literary', while Porter's works were also misfits, not exhibited until late in his career.)

But if Goldsmith reimagines the avant-garde in ways that resonate with 21st-century media, he also slyly reinvents it in his own image. He's best known, after all, as the godfather of 'conceptual writing', a movement motivated by the idea that poetry is lagging decades behind the art world, still wedded to outdated ideas of the lyric voice. He's not just UbuWeb's curator but one of its stars, a provocateur and poet. Or, as he prefers to style himself, a 'word processor', since he takes intention, expression and even authorship out of the equation by copying and arranging existing text – and sometimes not even that. *Soliloquy* (2001) is an unedited transcript of every word he spoke in the space of a week, resulting in a one-sided but sometimes disconcertingly intimate dialogue: 'I can't turn the tape off.' 'Can I put my finger in your ass.' For *Day* (2003), he typed out an entire issue of the *New York Times* and published it as a 900-page book. In *The Weather* (2005), he did the same for radio weather forecasts; in *Traffic* (2007), for traffic reports and in *Sports* (2008) ... well, you get the idea. This is literature as readymade, recycling language rather than urinals or piles of bricks.

It is also unreadable. 'I am the most boring writer that ever lived,' Goldsmith boasts. But then his books aren't intended to be read: he invites a 'thinkership' rather than a readership – it's the concept that matters not the content. Despite his declaration that he expresses nothing, however, he has become something of a literary celebrity, appearing on late-night talkshows and reading his work at the White House during Obama's time in office. Sporting his signature straw hat, he often appears in person as a thrift-store dandy whose flamboyant dress (Obama reportedly asked why he was wearing golf shoes) and mannered vocal delivery are part of a carefully cultivated persona. He courts the art establishment too. For his contribution to the 2019 Venice Biennale he downloaded the entirety of Hillary Clinton's supposedly missing email correspondence from WikiLeaks and bound all 62,000 pages of it into books, displaying them on specially made library shelves alongside a facsimile of the Oval Office desk. When Clinton herself visited the exhibit she sat down at the desk to read them. Works like this are performances, and even if you don't want to read every word you may want to watch them in action, as you can on UbuWeb. Seeing him read from *No. 109 2.7.92-12.15.93* (1993) – a concrete poem that collects every word ending in the vowel sound / ə / or 'schwa' – you're reminded of his admiring description of Schwitters in Potsdam. It's a string of gibberish and guttural sounds which goes on for long enough to make language itself seem strange, and the listener uncomfortable. The content may be boring, but Goldsmith himself is not.

BUT IT TURNED OUT there were limits – besides those of copyright – on what could be repurposed into poetry. Not everything is up for grabs. In 2015, Goldsmith performed ‘The Body of Michael Brown’, which took and reordered the official autopsy report of the teenager shot and killed by police in Ferguson, Missouri. Although he claimed afterwards that his intention had been to expose the rhetorical violence of the report, Goldsmith faced savage criticism for appropriating and aestheticising what wasn’t his, turning brutalised Black bodies into a spectacle for his niche, mostly white audience. Conceptual poetry’s whiteness, its tendency to wield privilege unthinkingly, was something the poet Tan Lin and critic Dorothy Wang had already taken a stand against. Goldsmith may declare that ‘inauthenticity is the new sincerity,’ but revelling in inauthenticity – adopting and shedding identity at will – is a luxury not available to all. For someone whose career has revolved around avant-gardist appropriation, Goldsmith seemed remarkably oblivious to its fundamental lesson: context changes things. And in the current climate the act of appropriation itself has become differently freighted, acquiring a new set of meanings, implying the erasure of other voices.

These were accusations for which Duchamp wasn’t sufficient defence. And last year Goldsmith again found himself in the eye of a Twitter storm. When, on 24 May 2020, the *New York Times* listed the names of every Covid-19 victim in the US on its front page, he tweeted that ‘the most important political poem of the 21st century so far has been written.’ The ensuing pile-on was predictable: ‘You vulture’; ‘Shut the fuck up’; ‘your hat sucks.’ Worst of all, that indictment of clueless middle-aged entitlement: ‘OK Boomer.’ With these clouds hanging heavy, *Duchamp Is My Lawyer* perhaps seeks a measure of reparation and rehabilitation, focusing on Goldsmith’s role as custodian rather than plunderer, someone who selflessly promotes and curates the work of others, widening the canon to include the traditionally excluded. The term ‘avant-garde’ is one he carefully glosses, distancing himself from its militarist undertones and lingering machismo.

There are signs if not of a mid-career handbrake turn then at least of an attempt to diversify. His recent commercial breakthrough – *Wasting Time on the Internet* (2016), a manifesto for ‘mindless surfing’ – introduced Goldsmith to new audiences, aiming not only at readability but likeability. This book is similarly upbeat, veering between guilelessness and bombast. Things are ‘insanely prolific’, ‘vast’ and ‘huge’. People are always ‘grabbing’ things from the internet, ‘throwing’ them up on file-sharing sites, ‘jumping’ online or ‘plunking’ names into a search engine. Clearly, there are only so many ways you can describe people tapping on a keyboard, but still, there is something odd about this folksy register. What kind of book is this? Another manifesto of sorts. But it is also, according to Goldsmith, a ‘memoir’ of UbuWeb, which raises the question of who exactly is speaking. When he writes that ‘we’ve been a bit too bold, a bit too brash, a bit too obnoxious,’ it sounds like a mea culpa from Goldsmith himself, rather than from UbuWeb. The pronouns oscillate between ‘I’ and ‘we’ since, as he points out, UbuWeb’s identity overlaps with his own, but this creates the opportunity for a kind of oblique apologia and autobiography by stealth: ‘You need a thick skin to play this game . . . although in real life we are as thin-skinned as any artist.’ It’s a quandary: what kind of authorial voice is available to someone who refutes the very concept of authorship?

If Kenneth Goldsmith used to be very much the Kenneth Goldsmith show, he now stresses UbuWeb as part of a collective endeavour. There’s a tribute to all the other ‘shadow librarians’ and guerrilla archivists embarked on a crusade to prevent the privatisation of culture, including a number of immensely valuable websites. Monoskop, the Artists, Architects and Activists Reading Group (AAARG) and Memory of the World are vast online repositories of philosophy, critical theory, political writings, literature and more (all freely downloadable). Goldsmith pits UbuWeb and these allies against the algorithm, the corporate juggernauts of Facebook, Amazon and Google that track our tastes in order to monetise them, ushering us always towards our next

purchase. He hankers instead after a lost version of the internet, when it held out the possibility of ‘disorientation and drift’. His trademark techno-hyperbole (‘the internet is the greatest poem ever written’; ‘when the art world can produce something as compelling as Twitter, we’ll start paying attention to it again’ and so on) needs therefore to be taken with a sizeable pinch of salt. The internet is something he doesn’t actually like very much, or not in its current form, with its ‘ever-mounting stupidity, commercialism and surveillance capitalism’.

One good thing about UbuWeb is that it doesn’t much resemble the rest of the internet. A remnant of Web 1.0, it’s uninteractive, with no comment function, encouraging solitary reflection. You can find much of UbuWeb’s material elsewhere on the net – Slonimsky’s performance of his ditty about Castoria, Porter’s droning of the phone book and various recitals of Schwitters’s ‘Ursonate’ are all available on YouTube – but without some kind of imprimatur they don’t have quite the same meaning. Avant-garde eccentricity risks dissolving into the background noise, indistinguishable from the everyday babble and narcissism of YouTube, Instagram or TikTok: people destroying iPhones in blenders, ranting that the earth is flat, filming themselves unboxing games consoles or eating ice sculptures.

It may be true that, in Goldsmith’s words, ‘magical things . . . happen in the margins,’ but on social media there is no longer any mainstream or margin, any forwards or backwards. Coordinates are scrambled. Perhaps the internet doesn’t so much reboot the avant-garde as make the whole concept obsolete: it has its own home-grown provocateurs in the form of trolls and shitposters and arguably its own culture, the emergent contours of which have become visible over recent years in new visual languages of gifs and emojis, and in exponential layers of ironic memes. With an online world so disorienting and surreal, why do we need actual surrealists? Outside the walled garden of UbuWeb, the gesture of cutting something loose from its moorings is no longer radical: it’s just the quotidian stuff of social media. We are back, once again, with the problem of context. The readymade only works in the quiet of the gallery. The internet dumps it back into the din of the everyday, taking the urinal off its pedestal and putting it back on the lavatory wall to be pissed in.
