

# B'L'ING VS. UBUWEB

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When Matt asked B'L'ing to contribute something to *North Drive Press*, it didn't take us long to decide that we wanted to sit down with UbuWeb. As fans of hard-to-find digital media and as collectors of VHS, DVD, AVI, and other forms that rare videos and films take, we find UbuWeb to be the ultimate online archive of all things beautiful, strange, and hard-to-find.

**B'L'ING X:** Kenny, can you summarize the inception of UbuWeb for us? When exactly was it founded? Was it borne out of another project?

**UBUWEB:** It started in November of 1996 as a repository for concrete poetry.

**B'L'ING Z:** '96!

**B'L'ING Z:** That was like the beginning of interwebbing.

**B'L'ING Y:** You are a poet right?

**UBUWEB:** I am a poet.

**B'L'ING X:** Did you envision a video component early on, or did that just happen?

**UBUWEB:** Well, the site began simply as scans of concrete poetry and JPEGs, and then grew to encompass sound, then video.

**B'L'ING X:** Do you remember the first poem you uploaded?

**UBUWEB:** No, but there was something about the way an interlaced GIF appeared on screen that was reminiscent of historical concrete poetry—like a digital flipbook.

**B'L'ING Z:** I remember those early interlaced GIFs...

**B'L'ING Z:** That and ASCII drawing.

**B'L'ING Y:** That's really interesting.... Do you mean the way code looks?

**UBUWEB:** Yes, concrete poetry on the page wanted to be kinetic, but it didn't have the technology to do so. Interlaced GIFs came slowly into view with alternating lines, very much like the early concrete poems that grew one letter at a time over the course of many pages.

**B'L'ING Y:** I see. In terms of how slow the uploading of the GIF was...

**UBUWEB:** All of concrete poetry—the manifestos as well as the practice—predicted the digital environment that we find ourselves in now.

**B'L'ING Y:** That seems so true—the relationship between code (language) and image, and images made literally of language in concrete poetry...

**UBUWEB:** Well, the digital is the embodiment of "inter-media," as Dick Higgins named it back in the 1960s.

**B'L'ING Y:** Were the pages of [Phyllis Johnson's] *Aspen* magazine some of the earlier uploads on Ubu?

**UBUWEB:** No. They came later.

**UBUWEB:** *Aspen* was called "The Multimedia Magazine in a Box," which was predictive of the digital present/future.

**B'L'ING X:** At some point you decided to include digitized video. Did you view it just as more digital text?

**UBUWEB:** No, the video came long after the textual focus of Ubu, which had moved on.

**B'L'ING Z:** It's true.... Being on the Internet is about reading images and text simultaneously.

**UBUWEB:** And now hearing sounds and seeing pictures. The Web is an intermedial space.

**B'L'ING Z:** True.

**UBUWEB:** When intermedia happens, taxonomy gets really slippery.

**B'L'ING X:** Were you thinking about it in terms of an archive at that time?

**UBUWEB:** It soon became clear that the only way to understand UbuWeb was to call it an archive of the avant-garde.

**UBUWEB:** Of course, back in the '80s you couldn't use the word avant-garde.

**B'L'ING Z:** Can you now?

**UBUWEB:** Due to patriarchal connotations of modernism...

**B'L'ING X:** Ah...

**UBUWEB:** But the Web has given us back the notion of intermedia, and now we can call it avant-garde again.

**B'L'ING Y:** At this point, UbuWeb is one of the most comprehensive online sources for experimental works of the past and present. Do you have any hardcore viewpoints about the accessibility of artworks, written work, etc.?

**UBUWEB:** Only that all works must be downloadable and available to all, at no charge. We don't—and won't—touch money.

**UBUWEB:** Sort of like B'L'ing, no?

**B'L'ING Z:** B'L'ing believes in sharing.

**B'L'ING X:** We seem to be allergic to making money... even on the few occasions that we tried.

**UBUWEB:** Ubu has never tried. The minute we take money, we must pay out money to all five thousand artists on the site. It's corrupt.

**B'L'ING Y:** I know so many people who love Ubu, and in a way it has made it possible to enjoy the works simply as pleasurable things, rather than in a fetishistic way. You lose the anxiety.

**UBUWEB:** Ubu deals in works that are in an economic gray zone. They have never made money, and never will.

**UBUWEB:** So the only fetish about it is people cramming hard drives with the stuff.

**B'L'ING Y:** Yeah... ha ha ha.

**UBUWEB:** After all, the Web site could disappear tomorrow. It's a mirage, made of spit and tissue paper.

**B'L'ING X:** B'L'ing is basically a barter culture. We're different from Ubu in that we fetishize the physical, if anything.

**UBUWEB:** [UbuWeb] is an overgrown fansite that has begrudgingly become an institution. It's all façade.

**B'L'ING Z:** I think the value of the video works you post is that they return to the realm of the artist's intentions. And it's possible, just by seeing these things, to enter into dialogue with other artists. When we started B'L'ing, we were not thinking about an archive; we were just trying to get our hands on videos that were otherwise hard to see. Either they were available in some kind of limited edition that you'd have to see in a gallery—if you were lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time—or they were works not available at the corner video store (or the corner art-video store!). We were in school, so we had access to library collections and a network of friends who were constantly discovering new and old works that they wanted to share...

**UBUWEB:** Barter implies a direct correlation: one to one, two to two, etc. Ubu deals in unknowable types of transaction.

**B'L'ING X:** We've tried to emphasize the social aspect of physically trading videos, since most things are downloadable on the Web.

**UBUWEB:** It's so vast that it cannot be quantified.

**UBUWEB:** So the B'L'ing scale is small?

**B'L'ING X:** Extremely.

**B'L'ING Y:** The B'L'ing scale is mostly face-to-face.

**B'L'ING Z:** Barter is only a technique to encourage conversation. It is a point of entry into a relationship.

**UBUWEB:** UbuWeb encourages no conversation. We hate community.

**B'L'ING Z:** It's true.

**B'L'ING Z:** We are very different.

**B'L'ING X:** I'm seeing that Ubu is the antidote to B'L'ing, and vice versa.

**UBUWEB:** Democratic Web 2.0 is a horrible free-for-all.

**UBUWEB:** Ubu is NOT a democracy, that's why it's so good!

**B'L'ING X:** We exist because of the immense amount of content that you provide.

**B'L'ING Z:** Well . . . . We have a collection that only partially overlaps with Ubu . The collection is almost a map of our interests as artists, and of our interactions with other artists.

**B'L'ING X:** Ubu provides a social service in a way.

**UBUWEB:** We provide a service, but don't want anything in return. Nothing, no interaction.

**UBUWEB:** No. We're into being silent and monolithic, like a library . . .

**B'L'ING Z:** This interview is an interaction . . .

**UBUWEB:** Well, we're friends. Don't get me wrong—I believe in all sorts of social relationships. I just want Ubu to be silent.

**B'L'ING Z:** Or perhaps let it speak for itself?

**UBUWEB:** Sure.

**UBUWEB:** No ego, no names attached. It just exists. And will disappear quietly without notice.

**B'L'ING X:** Understandable . . . . Its collection is too diverse to imply a position.

**UBUWEB:** Ubu disdains the real world and real-world interactions. It loves the coldness and distance of the digital.

**B'L'ING Z:** Here's a good question. How long do you see yourself doing this? It must be a lot of work to maintain.

**UBUWEB:** Well, it's been a long time, and I consider the work to be community service. Some day our ISP will pull the plug, or our university support will dry up, or we'll just get bored and blow it up, walk away. What does it matter, really?

**B'L'ING X:** Someone else will come along and pick it up, I'm sure.

**B'L'ING Z:** I don't know about that.

**UBUWEB:** Quote from the *Parkett* (No. 82, May 2008) article I wrote on Ubu: "Acquisition by a larger entity is impossible: Nothing is for sale. You might remember the climax of the film *24 Hour Party People* (2002) where a large record conglomerate swoops in to buy the stubbornly independent Factory Records for millions of pounds. Factory head Tony Wilson produces a document sworn in blood stating that the bands own the rights to all their material; the record execs grin madly as they walk away with the Factory's catalog for free. Wilson muses in the coda that, although it was financially worthless, Factory Records was a great success, a fantastic conceptual art project, full of integrity, one that never had to make a single compromise. UbuWeb is similar except unlike pop music, what we host has never made money."

**UBUWEB:** We own rights to nothing.

**B'L'ING X:** Well, Ubu has proven a demand for the work . . . but more important, it's stimulated the process of digitizing and creating a canon.

**B'L'ING Z:** B'L'ing is interested in a canon that exists for each person.

**UBUWEB:** Not interested.

**B'L'ING Z:** With no hierarchy of legitimacy.

**B'L'ING X:** But in the case of Ubu, there is a digital history being written.

**UBUWEB:** There's a digital history being written by Ubu by default. No one else is doing it, so we're the canon. Sad, really.

**B'L'ING X:** I think that's an interesting side effect.

**UBUWEB:** What is?

**B'L'ING X:** That Ubu initiated the digitizing of a lot of video art that may have gone away with the VCR.

**B'L'ING X:** We do it as well, and it's another side effect.

**UBUWEB:** Actually, no. We don't digitize anything. We just post things that are already out there on, say, KaraGarga, releasing it to the public instead of the elite few who have KG invites!

**B'L'ING X:** I understand, but your platform inspires others to digitize. People will digitize media in order to trade with us. Videos that have been collecting dust...

**UBUWEB:** We're the Robin Hood of the avant-garde.

**B'L'ING Z:** Do copyright issues ever arise? Do artists ever ask you to remove something from the site?

**B'L'ING Z:** It's a boring question, but I have to ask.

**UBUWEB:** Quote: "It seems to be working: As of this writing, October 2009, a total of 21 artists have been removed to date from the film & video section which is currently made up of 387 artists and less than a dozen from the sound section which is comprised of nearly 800 artists. That makes a total of about 30 artists of nearly 1200 whose works of media (sound & film/video) have been removed since the site's beginnings in 1996 (and this doesn't include hundreds of other artists in our contemporary, historical, outsiders & papers sections, for which we've never received any takedowns)."

**B'L'ING X:** Basically, people are happy to be included.

**UBUWEB:** When someone asks us to remove something, we respond and try to convince them that it's in every-one's best interest to be represented on the site. It usually works. If not, we take down work immediately. After all, it's not ours!

**B'L'ING Z:** That is a good track record. Do you think that it is because things on the Web lack materiality, so it's not a threat to whatever market that may exist for video art?

**UBUWEB:** We are an ally, a friend to artists. We never want to make enemies.

**UBUWEB:** The market for video art is an illusion.

**B'L'ING Z:** As in the market for all art?

**B'L'ING X:** In as much as the market for all collectibles.

**B'L'ING Z:** But still, I know galleries care.

**UBUWEB:** Well, when paintings sell for millions of dollars, it's a legit market. We respect legit markets. I don't want to interfere with something that people are willing to pay for. It's just that what we traffic in has no economic value (but great historical/intellectual value).

**B'L'ING Y:** That market for luxury products that brings a smile to many a face.

**UBUWEB:** We're not out to trash or burn down the system.

**UBUWEB:** A sort of ethics makes the whole thing work.

**UBUWEB:** And yet...it's pretty much all illegal.

**UBUWEB:** Contradictions abound.

**UBUWEB:** B'L'ing and ethics. Can you speak to that?

**B'L'ING X:** Well, we don't often encounter ethical issues with what we do.

**B'L'ING Z:** When people trade something they've made, we ask if it would be okay to trade it on. If they say yes, great. If no, then it's just for us.

**B'L'ING X:** But often we trade things that come our way without permission.

**B'L'ING Y:** Many of us come from a background of record collecting and videotape collecting.

**B'L'ING Z:** If we come across something that someone made, but from a third party...Well, it goes in the pot.

**B'L'ING Z:** Exactly.

**UBUWEB:** Of course, but it's like tape-swapping. Ubu entails serious, large-scale distribution.

**UBUWEB:** There are big issues that come with that scale.

**B'L'ING Y:** Out of boredom and disdain and wanting life to be more fun.

**B'L'ING Z:** Also, we enjoy the aspect of blind trading.

**B'L'ING X:** We fixated on the DVD as a kind of a last-stop object.

**B'L'ING Z:** Where we disguise the DVDs.

**B'L'ING Y:** We like the chance aspect of the blind, grab-bag trade.

**B'L'ING Y:** So people can take a chance on discovering something outside of their usual wants, needs, tastes.

**UBUWEB:** That's wonderful!

**UBUWEB:** Any feeling about B'L'ing going online?

**B'L'ING Z:** It wouldn't really jibe with our whole vibe.

**B'L'ING X:** The DVD is a physical and tradable object that forces human interaction.

**B'L'ING Z:** Face-to-faceness.

**B'L'ING X:** KaraGarga and Ubu are doing fine.

**UBUWEB:** Ah, so that's where we really diverge.

**B'L'ING Z:** Totally.

**B'L'ING Z:** We are not so hardcore.

**B'L'ING Z:** And we are sometimes very irreverent with the contents of our collection.

**B'L'ING Z:** Like, for example, we make "mixtape" compilations of not just our favorite videos but JUST the bits of each one that we might really like.

**UBUWEB:** Well, it might have something to do with age ...

**UBUWEB:** Hear me out.

**UBUWEB:** I, approaching fifty, am a digital utopianist.

**UBUWEB:** And extremist.

**UBUWEB:** Whereas I see that your generation is much more catholic about genres, distribution, style, etc.

**B'L'ING X:** Trust .... We are heavily digitized in our own lives, but B'L'ing is an alternative experience to that.

**B'L'ING X:** Because of P2P sites, people can get almost anything they want online.

**B'L'ING Z:** Hmm.

**B'L'ING Z:** There are lots of things that are not online.

**B'L'ING Z:** I hunt for them on KaraGarga all the time.

**UBUWEB:** B'L'ing includes subjectivity .... Ubu is completely objective.

**B'L'ING Z:** Yes.

**UBUWEB:** I'm not sure that people can get almost anything they want. Which is why Ubu is such a success.

**B'L'ING X:** B'L'ing is a social alternative. We curate based on things that come to us socially.

**B'L'ING Y:** For the B'L'ing generation, many of us were once collectors of records: LPs, seven inches . . . and we appreciated the feeling of surprise when finding something new that sounded great. Then quickly came the digital, the re-issues of records that changed everything . . .

**UBUWEB:** Yes, but I'm a HUGE record collector. I have over ten thousand LPs—ask Chris—but for me, if it's not digitized and shareable, I'm no longer interested in it.

**B'L'ING Z:** There are those record players that have USB outputs now, and that's all. How crazy.

**B'L'ING Y:** I would agree that the digital part is great, too. I definitely download from blogs and the Web.

**UBUWEB:** Again, your generation is catholic, marvelously so.

**B'L'ING Y:** In fact, my entire record collection was stolen from my storage space some years ago, which forced me to go digital with many things.

**B'L'ING Y:** Although losing all those records was sad, it was also a bit of a relief, to be honest.

**UBUWEB:** As part of the older generation so taken with the digital, everything seems to be much more extreme.

**B'L'ING Y:** Do you enjoy other blogs that post downloadable music, etc?

**UBUWEB:** YES.

**UBUWEB:** We just partnered with Continuo, which is just amazing!

**B'L'ING X:** Who is Continuo?

**UBUWEB:** <http://continuo.wordpress.com/>

**B'L'ING Y:** Thanks for the link!

**B'L'ING Y:** There was this one blog from Norway that I loved, but the guy took it down b/c he said it was destroying his life ... he was too obsessed and lost his job, etc.

**B'L'ING Y:** It was pretty wild.

**B'L'ING Z:** What is your position on bootlegging in regard to music?

**UBUWEB:** Download as much as you can. It won't be there forever.

**B'L'ING Y:** Are you fascinated with these youngsters and teens who know so much about everything?

**UBUWEB:** I'm not into fucking with legitimate economies—so if bootlegging interferes with someone's cash flow, I won't touch it.

**B'L'ING Y:** I mean, because of the way info is so available via the Web, etc.? The teens?

**UBUWEB:** I'm not sure which teens you're referring to.

**B'L'ING Y:** Maybe you have students like this? Who are super young, but also very savvy.

**UBUWEB:** Well, they've always been around. WFMU has been crawling with smart kids for twenty years. Problem is that they rip through experimental music quickly and end up fixating on the mainstream!

**B'L'ING X:** That's interesting.

**B'L'ING Y:** Do you know about the eleven-year-old fashion blogger who's obsessed with Comme des Garçons?

**B'L'ING Y:** She is thirteen now.

**B'L'ING Y:** <http://tavi-thenewgirlintown.blogspot.com/>

**UBUWEB:** Eh.... Let's see what happens in thirty years.

**UBUWEB:** Ubu has a very long point of view.

**B'L'ING Z:** Or ten years. B'L'ing has a short point of view. We never plan beyond our next screening or trading session!

**B'L'ING X:** Sometimes kids peak young experimentally.

**B'L'ING Y:** DKNY.

**B'L'ING X:** And then end up working for Marc Jacobs.

**UBUWEB:** I'm interested in long-term commitment, extreme devotion.

**B'L'ING X:** Now that's Catholic.

**UBUWEB:** Would B'L'ing like to work with Ubu?

**B'L'ING XYZ:** Yes.

**UBUWEB:** How could this happen?

**B'L'ING X:** Is this the first step to fixating on the mainstream?

**B'L'ING Y:** We have a lot of work by lesser-known artists ...

**UBUWEB:** We have unlimited server space and bandwidth.

**B'L'ING Y:** I mean, work that is pretty awesome, but maybe not known by many yet.

**UBUWEB:** Well, that would be something different for us!

**B'L'ING X:** We could curate something.

**UBUWEB:** Absolutely.

**B'L'ING X:** Maybe a B'L'ing guest page.

**UBUWEB:** Sure. You do whatever you want to do.

**UBUWEB:** I can send instructions and templates, and you can build the whole thing!

**B'L'ING Y:** We did a screening just the other day with George Porcari, an artist from LA who has been making video works there since, I think, the '70s. Maybe we could interview him ...

**B'L'ING X:** But if we do this, it will have to coincide with a warm-blooded party.

**B'L'ING Y:** We would love to curate.

**B'L'ING Y:** Ha ha ha.

**B'L'ING Y:** Warm-blooded.

**UBUWEB:** A Porcari feature would be great.

**UBUWEB:** For starters.

**B'L'ING Z:** He's giving me a few [videos] tonight at Momenta Art.

**B'L'ING X:** Okay. This interview was really great.

**UBUWEB:** Really, the sky is the limit. Whatever you want to do, you should do.

**B'L'ING Y:** He is the acquisitions librarian at Pasadena Art Center.

**UBUWEB:** Ubu will support it.

**UBUWEB:** Fab all around!

**B'L'ING Z:** Thanks, Ubu.

**UBUWEB:** Great chatting!

**B'L'ING Y:** Thanks.

**B'L'ING Z:** xoxo

**UBUWEB:** Out.

**B'L'ING Z:** This was fun.

**UBUWEB:** Bye. 📺

