When we think of the archive, we think of a familiar space of restricted access, white gloves, pencils, and carefully delimited rules. But if we think of an archive as a collection of important primary sources, made available for researchers to use, it becomes clear that there are other kinds of archives that may exist virtually as much as physically. With both architecture and writing produced digitally today, the archive of the future may be a very different sort of place indeed. The first of this issue’s multimedia reviews, by Sean Dockray, looks at UbuWeb, a noted online archive of avant-garde media. In posting such material to the web without express permission, UbuWeb raises questions of fair use as well as of the translation of media. How does a video, an electronic poem for 425 speakers, or a work of concrete poetry make the transition to the generic form of the web? The second, by Kevin McMahon, surveys a broad spectrum of recent compilation documentary films that collect vintage footage in order to reconstruct—or comment upon—a particular place. What issues and opportunities does this new trend pose for historians of architecture?

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Kenneth Goldsmith, et al.

There is no question that contemporary technology has allowed for a massive redistribution of cultural works. Texts, music, and films have been transcoded and put into circulation on the internet reaching ever-broader audiences. Whole Earth Catalogue founder Stewart Brand has been criticized for the way he phrased the idea that “information wants to be free” to Steve Wozniak, cofounder of Apple Computer, in 1984.1 But in the context of the expanding internet, information has realized a kind of autonomy and tendency toward dispersion that points to H. G. Wells’s 1937 idea for a “world brain,” which might have “at once, the concentration of a craniate animal and the diffused vitality of an amoeba.”2

UbuWeb is an enormous online archive of avant-garde artworks, from poetry and conceptual writing, to sound and music, to film and video. The website is a careful exercise in collecting and listmaking: one is presented with general categories like Sound or Film & Video, together with precisely framed and introduced selections, such as Conceptual Writing presented by noted English literature scholar Craig Douglas Dworkin. There is a New Additions list of items shown by date and a collection of top ten lists, wherein various writers, artists, and curators mine the depths of the site’s contents.

No matter how a viewer might reach a particular artwork, the experience of encountering that work is a critical matter. Little of UbuWeb’s content was created on the computer and even less was intended to be seen there. Moreover, the technologies embedded in web browsers have evolved since Ubu’s founding in 1996: initially the site delivered only formatted text in the form of a small collection of visual and concrete poetry from the personal archives of its founder, poet Kenneth Goldsmith, but now it streams audio and video as well. As the capabilities of the typical web browser expanded, Ubu’s archive grew into its current depth. Like any good archive, UbuWeb’s strength is as much the depth of its marginalia as the breadth of what it surveys. On the site you might find Philip Johnson discussing architecture, as recorded on a Polygram album; Yves Jallander’s 1996 documentary Alvar Aalto, Technology and Nature; or Poème électronique, the film by Le Corbusier, with music by composers Iannis Xenakis and Edgard Varèse, played in the Philips Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair. All of this material is now experienced as MP3 audio files or Flash video on one’s computer, rather than in amplified analog recordings or films projected on walls—or in the case of the Philips Pavilion, 425 speakers placed within thin-shelled concrete hyperbolic paraboloid structures. At times, videos appear to be filtered through multiple media formats, for example, films recorded off television in low-fidelity VHS. If there is always a gap in fidelity between the original and its Ubu copy, sometimes this space is what makes the work an important cultural point of reference—as in the Poème électronique, for example. But even text often lacks its context when uploaded. For example, ASPEN, “an unbound magazine in a box,” insisted in a 1967 advertisement “you don’t simply read ASPEN . . . you hear it, hang it, feel it, fly it, sniff it, play with it.”3 From the blocky pixilation on the videos to the framing text accompanying the content, one is consistently aware that something significant is missing.

Focusing less on absence, Goldsmith describes UbuWeb as essentially a project of “radical distribution,” using the web for “what the Web does best . . . getting things out.”4 He elaborates, “UbuWeb posts much of its content without permission;