

## **Franklin Furnace**

### **Archiving Avant-Garde Art**

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Safety is a relative concept. On my way to visit downtown arts and cultural organization Franklin Furnace Archive, my subway was diverted to the World Trade Center stop - which I had not seen since 2001. At the nondescript office building two blocks west housing the Furnace's world headquarters, the guard said he needed to take my photograph for a temporary building ID. When I asked him why, he said, "It makes people feel safer." Appropriately documented, I went up to the 6th floor.

Ironically, Franklin Furnace's mission statement is to "make the world safe for Avant-Garde Art." Founded in 1976, this relatively modest and gutsy organization has played a significant role in documenting and defining the lower Manhattan arts scene. Chameleon-like, it has reinvented itself on at least three occasions, reflecting changes in artistic practice, technological innovation, as well as real estate and economic vicissitudes - a prime motivator of downtown arts.

Founding Director Martha Wilson started the organization because there was no outlet for what became known as artists' books - galleries didn't want them, and publishers didn't know what to do with them. In fact, no term even existed for artists' books. Franklin Furnace's purpose was to collect, exhibit, and preserve them (which became the hardest task of all). Wilson initially knew that she was dealing with unique artifacts - "books" that were not necessarily text-based, but more a visual medium onto themselves.

Since cataloging terms were not available to describe them, over the years Franklin Furnace developed and contributed numerous terms to the Getty Art and Architecture Thesaurus. Some terms now in the vernacular include mail art and Xerox books, facilitated by artists' adoption of photocopiers and offset printing. Seeking a secure, permanent home for this collection, the Museum of Modern Art/Franklin Furnace/Artist Book Collection was initiated in 1993 as an accessible resource at one of the world's leading art institutions. Franklin Furnace still accepts donations for this repository.

The Furnace never anticipated becoming a performance venue, but when an artist showed up in costume with a lamp and stool to give her reading, they realized this threshold had been crossed. Soon William Wegman was offering readings from War and Peace to his photogenic Weimaraner, Man Ray (the performance ended when the dog walked away). Many prominent downtown artists - Vito Acconci, Eric Bogosian, David Cale, Karen Finley, Robert Wilson - honed their early craft at the Furnace. The modest storefront on Franklin Street was often completely redesigned for installations. One artist converted it into a travel agency - passersby came in and tried to purchase tickets to Aruba!

With its penchant for experimentation, skewed entertainment, and pushing the envelope on "taste," Franklin Furnace has never been successful in staying out of trouble. The Giuliani-era Fire Department closed down its performance space for not being up to code - vindictively, it was perceived - coinciding with a controversial exhibition by Karen Finley. During the summer of 1990,

Franklin Furnace was subjected to no fewer than three aggressive audits from the IRS, General Accounting Office, and the New York State Comptroller.

Ever the crusader, Martha Wilson retaliated by embarking on a campaign to purchase and renovate their historic building with its resident artists. Part way into her \$500,000 fundraising campaign, she had an epiphany when she realized she was trying to raise half a million dollars for a shell. Her work was about artistic content, after all. Doing an abrupt about face, she proposed to her Board in 1997 the radical concept of Franklin Furnace becoming a virtual organization, with no tangible physical location. Placing the bulk of organizational records in storage, they relocated to 500 square feet on John Street - their most extreme reinvention to date.

At first, Martha Wilson conceived of the Furnace operating as a netcasting facility. But relationships with sponsoring dot.coms proved problematic: prohibitive studio time and lack of flexibility for artistic needs. Artists also required adequate "ramp up" preparation to maximize their studio time. Fortunately - with the development of web-based art - she discovered that resources could be reallocated to an active commissioning program for net.art.

Through its Future of the Present program, Franklin Furnace currently funds both online works and public performances, which have a documentation component and may be webcast in various locations. As an example, this season a credentialed robot will conduct online psychoanalytic sessions. As a virtual organization, the Furnace has managed to attract an international roster of artists, as well as an international audience. Paradoxically, by downsizing to an arts institution primarily accessible through its website portal, it effectively has extended its reach globally, with 60,000 individual visitors last year alone.

Since its early days as a collecting entity, Franklin Furnace has paid particular attention to documenting its work. Growing up in a Quaker family, Martha Wilson was accustomed to saving everything. Installations and performances were described - artists were asked to submit explanatory statements. The Archive contains over 50,000 slides recording its output. It transferred original ½" open reel tapes to VHS, then recently to mini DV - not a preservation format, but at least rendering work in an accessible digital form. They are seeking funding to transfer hundreds of VHS videotapes to higher quality digital counterparts.

The Furnace recently has created The Unwritten History Project, an ambitious undertaking to make their retroactive catalog available online. So far 26 artists and theme shows have been posted, providing visual documentation from scanned slides with accompanying description. Plans call for the integration of streaming video as well. The interface on FileMaker Pro software is intuitive and user-friendly. Simultaneously, they are building the complex backbone of the system, containing metadata linked to press articles and publications, still and moving images, in conjunction with artists' contact information, image rights, and permission releases. Obviously, according to Senior Archivist Michael Katchen, negotiating the rights and releases has been problematic. Some artists understandably may be reluctant to have images of their work displayed on the free Web, while others favor making it available to all.

The ultimate challenge, however, will be providing subject indexing to aptly describe this unique and frequently unclassifiable oeuvre. When employing a controlled vocabulary, how would you characterize Karen Finley's performances as the "nude, chocolate-smearing young woman?" Will assigning existing terms, sex role and gender issues, be adequate? When completed, this will be a rich and dynamic resource combining visual documentation and performance description, culled from

the organization's extensive press files. Moreover, the database software is web-enabled, conforms to existing cataloging standards, and is highly adaptable to migration in the future.

Thinking about the future is unavoidable in this era of diminished resources and funding, as well as the largely unknown preservation issues surrounding ephemeral media art, particularly those that are born digital. To mitigate these threats and gain access to a network of sophisticated research and information exchange, Franklin Furnace is an active partner of both Conceptual and Intermedia Arts Online (CIAO) and the Arts Space Archives Project (ASAP). CIAO, an innovative consortium comprised of arts organizations, museums, and universities (Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive, Cleveland Performance Art Festival, Getty Research Institute, Guggenheim Museum, University of Iowa, Walker Art Center, etc.), sponsors research on software emulation programs, develops standards and best practices for image formats and file maintenance, proposes new terms for describing this variable media, as well as advocates for funding and public education on these issues. ASAP - consisting of affiliates such as College Art Association and Bomb magazine - is an online information network which attempts to locate materials from defunct Downtown arts organizations, and also advises on conservation and cataloging issues. As a smaller group, Franklin Furnace realizes the future of its output is dependent on sharing knowledge, pooling resources, and lobbying on a larger scale with the cultural heritage community to achieve visibility and support. Safety in numbers, as it were.

Leaving the office, I remarked, "Given Franklin Furnace's history, I'm afraid that the world will - thankfully - never be safe for the avant garde." Martha Wilson responded, "You're right! We're going to have to rethink our motto." The only constant with this organization is change.

As I left the building, I surrendered my ID badge. The guard let me keep my photo. "Get home safe," he said.