

Martha Wilson, Franklin Furnace Founding Director, 1998

I wish that I could say that Franklin Furnace's evolution from an avant-garde presenter to a virtual institution was a conscious, planned and steady process, but it was not. Moments of clarity appeared through the fog, and we're still in a groping phase, checking with various parts of our community for feedback and adjusting our path accordingly.

A Fast History of Franklin Furnace

It all started in 1976, when the fog cleared and I saw that major institutions were not accommodating works of art being published by artists, and decided to gather, exhibit, and sell, preserve and proselytize on behalf of the form that came to be known as "artists' books." I opened Franklin Furnace Archive, Inc. in my living loft (which happened to be a storefront) on April 3rd, 1976. Soon after, Printed Matter, Inc. came into being to publish and distribute artists' books; we reapportioned the pie, Franklin Furnace taking the not-for-profit activities of collecting, cataloging, preserving, exhibiting and related activities like artists' readings, the activity that evolved in turn into the performance art program. Printed Matter published and sold artists' books as a for-profit corporation, (and later sought and received not-for-profit status too).

Franklin Furnace's presentation of temporary installation work and what came to be known as performance art started right from the getgo. The artists who were publishing artists' books were the same ones who considered the text to be a visual art medium (Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger come to mind). Martine Aballea, whose book was in Franklin Furnace's collection was invited by Jacki Apple, Franklin Furnace's first curator, to read it in our storefront in June 1976. When she showed up in costume, with her own lamp and stool, the performance art program was born. Although I called it Artists Readings in the beginning, every artist chose to manipulate the performance elements of text, image and time, from a very simple 1977 performance by Robert Wilson of the word "there" repeated 144 times with a chair on stage, to the more messy 1983 performance of Karen Finley taking a bath in a suitcase and making love to a chair with Wesson oil.

Franklin Furnace's niche became the bottom of the food chain, premiering artists in New York who later emerged as artworld stars: Ida Applebroog, Eric Bogosian, David Cale, Willie Cole, Guillermo Gomez-Peña, Ann Hamilton, Theodora Skipitares, Michael Smith, Annie Sprinkle, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Paul Zaloom, and hundreds of others.

Around 1980, I perceived another vacuum in the art world. No one seemed to be researching the history of the contemporary artist book in any thorough-going manner, so I tried to do it in a year, hiring four guest curators/teams to tackle four 20th century time periods of The Page as Alternative Space. Clive Phillpot organized material for 1909 to 1920; Charles Henri Ford from 1921 to 1949; Barbara Moore and Jon Hendricks from 1950 to 1969; and Ingrid Sischy and Richard Flood from 1970 to 1980. After this heady year, Franklin Furnace hired a slew of guest curators to explore the history of the published artwork in even more depth, organizing usually one big exhibit per season such as Cubist Prints/Cubists Books, The Avant-Garde Book: 1900-45, Fluxus: A Conceptual Country, Books by Russian Avant-Garde Artists, as well as thematic shows such as Artists' Books: Japan, Multiples by Latin American Artists, Contemporary Russian Samizdat, Eastern European Artist Books. Taken together, the magazines and catalogues published to document these exhibits form a history that is still not available under one cover.

Although we had been reprimanded in 1984 by Hugh Southern, Deputy Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts and Benny Andrews, Director of the Visual Arts Program for our exhibition

entitled *Carnival Knowledge*, the conservative tide in this country was not strong enough yet to be taken seriously. 1990 was a fateful year, however. In this year, the Democratic Governor of New York State, Mario Cuomo, cut the NYSCA budget in half, decimating support of Franklin Furnace to the tune of \$100,000 from one year to the next; and Franklin Furnace exhibited an installation by Karen Finley entitled *A Woman's Life Isn't Worth Much*. This in itself was not a crime, but by May of 1990 she had already been branded "the chocolate-smearing young woman" by columnists Evans and Novak and conservative forces in Washington had gained much credibility and momentum. Following Karen's exhibition, Franklin Furnace was turned in to the New York City Fire Department as an "illegal social club," closing the performance space; and our program and financial records were audited by the General Accounting Office, the Internal Revenue Service, and the New York State Comptroller. The National Endowment for the Arts audited Franklin Furnace continuously from 1985 to 1995.

Clarity started to be glimpsed through the fog. The cost of cataloguing and conserving Franklin Furnace's collection of artists' books published internationally after 1960, by this time the largest in the United States, was going up; but the public support of small arts institutions, especially those that chose to exhibit "difficult" art, was going down. Further, the beautiful, 19th-century Italianate loft in which Franklin Furnace was living was made of wood, while its collection was made of paper. Lastly, we did not own the building, so bringing the space up to code for performances and installing climate control equipment for the maintenance of the collection did not add up financially. Also the landlord was suing us to get us to vacate so he could sell the building. In the Fall of 1990, I made the decision to mount Franklin Furnace's performance program "in exile," in other institution's spaces around town such as Judson Memorial Church, Cooper Union, The New School, P.S. 122, Dixon Place, the Kitchen, NYU. And then on Halloween of 1990, the landlord dropped dead, and his daughter offered the artists who occupied 112 Franklin Street the opportunity to buy the building.

Ideas were forming in the aftermath of the events of 1990. One was to place the collection of artist's books in the embrace of a larger institution that would value it, and continue to catalogue, exhibit, lend and enlarge its scope. The Board made inquiries at a few select institutions. But it was really Clive Phillpot's resolve to acquire Franklin Furnace's collection for the MOMA Library that made this deal happen in 1993. The terms that were important to us were that Franklin Furnace's name would remain on the Museum of Modern Art/Franklin Furnace/Artist Book Collection; and that its collection policy would be open to any artist who claimed, "this is a book." It remains the only uncurated collection at MOMA. In 1998 the collection became accessible through MOMA and Franklin Furnace's websites so artists may look up their works to see how they are catalogued.

The other idea that galvanized the Board was that we should raise the money to make the down payment on purchasing Franklin Furnace's loft, and eventually bring the "c" copies of the artist book collection home to be handled casually, get coffee stained and read, as the artists intended; and to bring the performance art program home as well. In short, our idea was to renovate Franklin Furnace's loft into a downtown art emporium. After a Summer long search in 1994, we hired Bernard Tschumi to prepare a physically and visually accessible design that was still sensitive to the historic nature of the building and the neighborhood. And we hired a Capital Campaign Consultant to help us raise the \$500,000 it was going to cost to make the design a reality.

During the 1994-95 season, four separate donors asked us, "Have you been to the American Center in Paris?" Here is an institution that sold its Beaux Arts building downtown to build a Frank Gehry building on the outskirts of Paris--and ran out of money to mount its program. The fog cleared in the Summer of 1995 when, sitting in my sister's kitchen staring at Mount Rainier, I realized that Franklin

Furnace would never be remembered for its blonde oak floors, but rather for its program--and I was raising half a million dollars for the wrong purpose. Omigod.

In September of 1995, I took a radical concept to my Board: I wanted to sell the darn building, and concentrate the program on broadcasting artists' ideas. This was not really dissimilar from the original purpose publishing itself served in 1910 when the Italian Futurists threw 800,000 manifestoes berating past-loving Venice onto the heads of folks emerging from church. Except now there were all sorts of new ways to broadcast artists' ideas including broadcast and cable television, and the Internet. They really went for it, especially the plan to get performance artists on broadcast television, which I ultimately failed to accomplish; more on the vertigo that accompanied this decision later.

1996 was another fateful year. By the time we had made some decisions that changed the path of the organization's history:

1. We collectively pledged to look beyond artist development, our focus for 20 years, toward audience development. Could we cultivate a broad audience for the consumption of avant-garde art by utilizing electronic delivery media?
2. We decided to sell the loft, a step which would separate us from real-estate based presentation activity and commit us to an unknown course with rapidly evolving technology.
3. We embarked on a multi-year project to electronically catalogue, digitize and build a relational database of our program files from 1976 to 1996. My dream for Avant-Garde New York, the working title of this project, is to keep going after we have completed bringing our own history on line, to make accessible the archives of Fashion Moda, Minor Injury, JAM Gallery, the Collective for Living Cinema, ABC No Rio -- small, but important centers for avant-garde art activity, many of which are now out of business-- to make the "unwritten history of American art," as Jeanette Ingberman (Co-Director of Exit Art) calls it, accessible to future generations of artists, scholars and aficionados. Well, a girl can dream.

Not too long after the decision to sell Franklin Furnace's loft was made, I was invited by performance artist Nina Sobell and artist Emily Hartzell to perform on ParkBench's ArtisTheater. It was Nina and Emily who, in 1994, performed and archived their first realtime web performance via a remotely-controlled webcam; and saw the potential of the Internet as an art medium, with its new textual and visual vocabulary, as well as its potential to draw artists and audiences into interactive art discourse. I decided to do Tipper Gore singing "The Star-Spangled Banner" to accommodate the one-frame-per-second speed of the netcast. The performance was a collaboration: They hung a red velvet curtain behind me, and an intern, Cory Muldoon, was inspired to superimpose the lyrics of our National Anthem, in blue, upon my body as I sang. I came away satisfied with my first virtual performance. This was in October of 1996. In December, Jordan Crandall, Director of the X-Art Foundation, invited artists to curate works for Blast 5, and Adranne Wortzel selected Nina and Emily, who in turn invited Franklin Furnace to be a part of the cyber/physical space/time installation at Sandra Gering Gallery. I selected four artists/collaborations: Alexander Komlosi, Tanya Barfield/Clarinda MacLow, Anita Chao/Rumiza Koya, and Prema Murthy/Diane Ludin prepared works that are still archivally available at parkbench.org.

But back to the whys and hows of deinstitutionalization: Altogether, Franklin Furnace got in trouble four times with the forces of darkness in Congress and among conservative Christian right groups. Most recently, in September, 1996, the Christian Action Network mounted a performance art spectacular on the steps of the Capitol Building to protest the \$132,000 in federal dollars (not true) we

were spending on our Voyeur's Delight exhibition, and to call for the death of the NEA. Their press release linked us with the virus eating away at the health of the body politic, and the performance included two coffins and a guy dressed up as the Grim Reaper. (I think it says something when the Christian conservatives recognize the power of performance art tactics in getting their point across.) But this time, Franklin Furnace was building its website as its public face, so I decided to put up a page called U-B-D-Judge, to collect public comment, both positive and negative, regarding the works in exhibition. We reprinted CAN's press release in its entirety, and ours; and asked permission of the artists to publish their work on our site, each piece accompanied by the artist's statement explaining why Jocelyn Taylor had a speculum up her vagina, for example. Sure enough, this page has generated both positive and negative comment, intelligent and stupid comment, all of it I believe valid and important to the discourse that surrounds and emanates from contemporary art.

In 1996-97, I mounted a pair of 20th Anniversary exhibitions to go out of the physical space with a bang: Voyeur's Delight, organized by Barbara Rusin and Grace Roselli (discussed above) examined the power of looking; and In the Flow: Alternate Authoring Strategies, organized by artist and curator Daniel Georges, traced the evolution during the last two decades of art as flowing information rather than property, including works by Sol LeWitt, Group Material, Louise Lawler, Frank Gillette and David Ross, the Thing, X Art Foundation, Guerilla Girls and others. A printed catalogue of In the Flow was not published; Daniel Georges wished to embody the idea of this exhibition in its virtual catalogue. On February 1, 1997 this exhibition closed, and Franklin Furnace's website was launched as the institution's public face.

Also during the fateful year of 1996 I developed a pilot tape to show to cable and broadcast television producers in what turned out to be a futile effort to get performance artists on television. It was called Untitled, and it showed a wide array of artists' approaches to the subject of sex -- since the commonly-held belief is that that's all we think about anyway, I wanted to show approaches that were humorous, despairing, scary, satirical of corporate exploitation -- a wide range of approach. Some members of my Board felt this represented a tactical error, and that I would ever succeed in catching the interest of TV execs. And indeed, after meeting with Lorne Michaels, Tom Freston, Eileen Katz, Mary Salter, Susan Wittenberg, Sue West and a bunch more executive types, it became clear to me that broadcast and cable television represents an entrenched industry, one that has become highly regulated, developing "standards of conduct" and clear taboos in order to continue to blast content directly into our homes.

Meanwhile, I was being courted by Internet-based broadcast companies. Sensory Networks, Thinking Pictures, Pseudo Programs -- these start-up companies were broadcasting over the net from facilities such as clubs, a gorgeous blue-screen studio, a funky loft in Soho. At first, I was put off by the tiny, jerky image and the cramped, smoke-filled facilities that Sensory Networks was proposing to use to mount a performance art program. I wanted the gorgeous studio that Thinking Pictures had built on West 16th Street, and entered a long conversation with their principals that would have included asking Laurie Anderson to kick off our virtual performance program. But on September 19, 1997 our deal crashed and burned over the issue of money: Thinking Pictures wanted \$4,000 for each use of their studio - which they were getting from their fashion, music and sports clients. So I went hat in hand back to Galinsky at Pseudo Programs. Galinsky had proposed a performance program in collaboration with Franklin Furnace during the Summer of 1997, but I blew it off because their studio was not capacious, nor set up for visual artists -- Josh Harris, the founder of Pseudo, had established it as a radio network first, but was luckily at the same moment (Fall, 1997) preparing to become the largest producer of television-style broadcast over the Internet. Further, these guys wanted MORE

Annie Sprinkle. They were not only not afraid of the tendency of artists to get naked, they embraced the challenging stuff wholeheartedly.

By the 1998-99 season, artists began to figure out that netcasting was completely different from performance art. Our audience had fundamentally changed from 75 people sitting on hard folding chairs to an international audience of aficionados who view netcasts on their computer terminals: artists, art professionals, college students, office workers--and we think geeks and young folks, though we're not sure; we get statistical analyses of the number of .coms, .nets, .edu, .govs and have found that viewers in the United States are down the list after Japan, Australia, Eastern Europe, Western European countries! In gross numbers, we have seen our audience increase from an average of 500 "hits" a week in our first season, to 600 in our second, to 700 now.

With the change in the presentation of avant-garde art has come a fundamental shift in the relationship of the artist to audience as well. "Chat" allows the audience to interact with the artist, to ask questions about the work. Artists may utilize chat commentary by members of the audience as part and parcel of their performance, as Anna Mosby Coleman did in "an non," during which she sang words that appeared on the computer terminal before her. Artists may also pre-record their performance entirely as did Alvin Eng, in order to fully respond to questions and comments during the live netcast. An artist may build audience response into the content of the work, as did Rae C. Wright in her piece entitled "Art Thieves," a sendup of the notion of originality in Western art. Or the artist may utilize chance to allow audience members to experience different versions of a performance, as Kathy Westwater used Shockwave to randomize dance sequences so that no two audience members see the same presentation.

On the receiving end, a netcast is slightly desynchronous, as sound and image signals are sent out separately; depending upon the congestion on phone lines, images and sounds may link, then go out of phase. Some artists view this as a unique feature of netcasting that may be exploited, as Irina Danilova and Steven Ausbury did in their performance "Mir is Here," a meditation on inner and outer space, private and public space, which looked very much like images beamed to Earth from NASA's Apollo missions. Others view animation as a new visual tool, as Nora York's employment of Nancy Spero's images to augment the impact of her songs attests. Mark Fox created little bodies (puppets) especially for the scale of netcasting so that the figures would fill the small netcasting screen.

Most profoundly, netcasting differs from presenting in other media because it may be viewed at the audience member's discretion, as after the live netcast has been aired, it is stored on Pseudo Program's server to be viewed later from any point on the globe. During Franklin Furnace's second netcasting season, I was struck by often artists (especially dancers) were unwilling (perhaps because they view their bodies as their instruments) to make the leap from the human body to the body of the net, with its parallel circulatory system and interactivity. The netcasting experience was sometimes viewed as a means of broadcasting existing work, rather than a new art medium to be explored. (Granted, artists were given only six hours of production time with Pseudo equipment and staff, so the artists who really wished to exploit the Internet as an art medium often did so on their own time, and at their own expense.) Perhaps this contemporary moment bears comparison with the "golden age" of American avant-garde practice in the 70s, when artists were encouraged to experiment wildly; the Internet is still a wide open frontier with very few fences (read: censorship) in place. This is the time for artists to get their underground ideas to the broadest possible audience through the convergent art medium I believe the 20th century spent itself looking for.