

What Franklin Furnace Learned from Presenting and Producing Live Art on the Internet, from 1996 to Now

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I founded Franklin Furnace in 1976 to champion ephemeral forms neglected by mainstream arts institutions. Franklin Furnace has developed a place in art history for artists' books, temporary installation art and performance art, and has researched the history of the contemporary artists' book through such exhibitions as *Cubist Prints/Cubist Books*, *The Avant-Garde Book: 1900–1945* and *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country*, as well as thematic shows such as *Artists' Books: Japan*, *Multiples by Latin American Artists*, *Contemporary Russian Samizdat*, and *Eastern European Artists' Books*. The organization set upon a course of substantial change in 1993, when its collection of artists' books published internationally after 1960, the largest in the United States, was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. During its 20th anniversary season, Franklin Furnace reinvented itself as a "virtual institution," not identified with its real estate but rather with its resources, made accessible by electronic and other means, in order to provide a freedom of expression to the artists it presents equivalent to that which was possible in its loft at 112 Franklin Street in TriBeCa in the 1970s.

Fig. 1. Emily Hartzell and Nina Sobell, *Web Séance*, 1994. (© Emily Hartzell and Nina Sobell) This first live Web performance via remotely controlled webcam consisted of "brainwave drawings," live heartbeats and a question-and-answer interface of e-mail and video conferencing. Digital photograph by Hartzell/Sobell/ParkBench taken at Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre for the Arts, Canada.



Franklin Furnace has had an indelible impact upon art by launching the careers of artists whose work has influenced art and cultural discourse. Franklin Furnace's niche remains the bottom of the food chain, premiering artists in New York who later emerge as art world stars: Ida Applebroog, Eric Bogosian, David Cale, Patty Chang, Willie Cole, Nicole Eisenmann, Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gomez-Peña, Ann Hamilton, Murray Hill, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, Liza Lou, Robbie McCauley, William Pope.L, Theodora Skipitares, Michael Smith, Annie Sprinkle, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Paul Zaloom and hundreds of others. Franklin Furnace's web site, which we are building as a research resource documenting ephemeral practice, receives more than three million hits per year, reaching an international audience of every stripe, including artists, arts professionals, scholars and the general public.

FRANKLIN FURNACE'S 20TH ANNIVERSARY SEASON

In 1996, not too long after the decision to "go virtual" was taken by Franklin Furnace, I was approached by performance artist Nina Sobell and artist Emily Hartzell to perform on ParkBench's ArtisTheater. ParkBench was originally conceived by Sobell as a network of kiosks, which through videoconferencing, Internet access and a collaborative drawing space would enable people in diverse neighborhoods to access the Internet, talk to and see one another, and communicate collaboratively. This project became part of NYU's Center for Advanced Technology before the Web's emergence, so the artists used Director to design the ParkBench interface, and later after the graphical Mosaic browser was introduced, they adapted ParkBench again. It was Sobell and Hartzell who, in 1994, performed and archived what C. Carr of the *Village Voice* believes was the first live web performance in the history of the World Wide Web via a remotely controlled webcam. Their

ABSTRACT

The year 1996 saw the dramatic transformation of the artists' organization Franklin Furnace from a site-based entity to a conveyor of live on-line art. From early experiments in "live" Internet video to public art drawing on wireless technology, the author traces the development of a nascent art practice through its both groundbreaking and idiosyncratic formative years.

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Fig. 2. Alexander Komlosi, aka Walter T. Komslowli, 1996. (© Alexander Komlosi. Video still from footage © Emily Hartzell and Nina Sobell.) Performance component of *Blast V* at Sandra Gering Gallery, NYC, in conjunction with Franklin Furnace's 20th anniversary exhibition, *In the Flow: Alternate Authoring Strategies*, curated by Daniel O. Georges.



Fig. 3. Halona Hilbertz, *Pseudo Studio Walk*, video still from footage by Galinsky, 1998. (© Halona Hilbertz) This deceptively simple netcast showing the artist walking up to the camera and then deep into the loft raises sophisticated issues.

Web Séance (Fig. 1) was composed of “brainwave drawings,” live heartbeats and a question-and-answer interface of e-mail and video-conferencing kiosks [1]. These artists saw the potential of the Internet as a live art medium, with its new textual and visual vocabulary as well as its potential to draw artists and audiences into interactive art discourse.

For my October performance on ParkBench, I decided to impersonate Tipper Gore singing “The Star-Spangled Banner.” I thought the well-known lyrics and my pantomime of them would best accommodate the one-frame-per-second speed, and the silence, of the netcast. The performance was a collaboration: The ParkBench crew hung a red velvet curtain behind me and was inspired to superimpose the lyrics of the U.S. national anthem, in blue, upon my body as I sang. I came away satisfied with my first virtual performance, although I now admit I was in a fog as to the potential of the Internet as an art medium.

That December, Jordan Crandall, director of the X-Art Foundation, invited artists to curate works for Blast 5. From its beginning in 1990, Blast set out to explore contemporary texts and images and their accompanying practices of reading, viewing and authoring by embracing content that is material and digital, on-line and off-line, recorded and

live—abandoning its role as a conventional publication and instead positioning itself within the globalized sphere of communications. Artist/curator Adrienne Wortzel, who was involved in the preparation of Blast 5, asked Sobell and Hartzell to recommend work; they, in turn, invited me to select Franklin Furnace performers to be a part of the cyber/physical space/time installation at Sandra Gering Gallery. I selected six artists/collaborators: Alexander Komlosi (Fig. 2); Tanya Barfield and Clarinda MacLow; Anita Chao and Rumiza Koya; Prema Murthy and Diane Ludin; Deborah Edmeades; and Murray Hill and Penelope Tuesdae. Their performance works are still archivally available at www.parkbench.org.

SPRING 1998: TIME AND SPACE

The first netcasting season presented by Franklin Furnace was produced in collaboration with a for-profit dot.com company, Pseudo Programs, Inc., located in a loft on the corner of Broadway and Houston Street in New York. On 6 February 1998, artist Halona Hilbertz (Fig. 3) performed *Pseudo Studio Walk*, consisting of video documentation of her figure walking up to the camera, obscuring the lens with her bushy hair, then receding deep into Pseudo's loft, then up to

the camera, then deep into the loft . . . for 50 minutes, from 5 to 5:50 p.m., EST. Upon reflection, this deceptively simple performance raised some sophisticated issues: Exactly when is the “live” performance of the pre-recorded video presentation? What space is the artist occupying, the loft or the circulatory system of the Internet itself? Live “chat” was being received by the Pseudo chat jockey from viewers around the world. After the “live” show was performed, the streaming video image was saved on Pseudo's server for 6 months. The event could subsequently be viewed “on demand” from any point on the globe with a live Internet connection for as little or as long a time as the viewer chose, adding yet another dimension to time and space as embodied by art on the Internet.

The level of discourse during this first on-line event was disappointing; instead of commentary about the shifting parameters of space and time created by works of live art on the Internet, several viewers commented, “Nice ass.” Franklin Furnace understood that it would need to “prime the pump” to get discussion of “liveness” going, and henceforth invited its museum interns and Franklin Furnace members to chime in with their views.

The artists selected by annual peer panel review to be part of Franklin Furnace's program lost no time in exploiting the artistic properties of the digital realm. Nora York paid \$750 of her \$1,000 honorarium to Pseudo animation technicians (our agreement with Pseudo provided only 6 hours of technical staff time for each artist's netcast) to animate a Sheela-na-gig, an image by Nancy Spero of a Celtic fertility figure. Then York (Fig. 4) situated her mouth inside its vagina to sing, producing the image of a “vagina dentata”!

1998–1999: DIGITAL ORIGINALITY

Franklin Furnace presented 10 live netcasts during its first season in spring 1998, and 22 during its second full season of collaboration with Pseudo, whose goal was to emulate television with the added feature of chat interaction. During this full season, renamed *The Future of the Present* at the suggestion of Franklin Furnace's producer at Pseudo, Robert Galinsky (known universally as Galinsky), Franklin Furnace learned that trying to produce a work of live art on the Internet every other week from September to July (infrequent by live performance standards) was difficult to do in cyberspace. Franklin Furnace's artists ulti-

mately were frustrated by the lack of time and support available to take advantage of the array of possible digital technologies, such as animation and randomizing software. Yet others, such as Irina Danilova and Steven Ausbury, exploited the quality of the crude, jerky image being broadcast, investigating inner space by pretending they were in outer space, moving slowly in motorcycle helmets and ski boots and looking for all the world like an astronaut and a cosmonaut. Still others, such as Mark Fox, took advantage of the extreme close-ups that made streaming video images readable on the Internet by utilizing puppets as performers.

Rae C. Wright's netcast *Arthieves* (Fig. 5), presented 25 September 1998, skewered Western pride in originality, proposing that it has always been the modus operandi of artists to steal from generations who have gone before. She stole cloud images from Anna Moseby Coleman, an artist presented in Franklin Furnace's inaugural netcasting season, demonstrating that digital technology makes it easier than ever to borrow, copy, alter and distribute other artists' work.

Franklin Furnace's first full netcasting season, presented September to June, 1998–1999, was collected by Steve Dietz, then director of the Walker Art Center's Media Initiatives department and founding director of Gallery 9 (the Walker has eight physical galleries; Gallery 9 exists solely in cyberspace), where it became archivally available through the Walker's web site. In the spring of 2003, the Walker made the decision to terminate Dietz's employment, to eliminate the curatorial acquisition of new works for Gallery 9, and not to provide space dedicated to new media in its new building. However, the works Dietz collected are still archivally available on-line at <www.walkerart.org>.

2000: THE TEAM APPROACH

The process of creating live art on the Internet must accommodate the interactive and highly technical properties of the Internet itself. Live art on the Internet is created by a team of people, each of whom contributes different skills to a project. A concept might involve programmers, animators and network administrators in addition to camera, sound and projection personnel. Furthermore, in Franklin Furnace's experience, everyone has a hand in developing the final form of the artist's initial concept; in almost every instance, discussion of technology and available resources had an

Fig. 4. Nora York with Nancy Spero, *Fox Fire*, video still, animation by Pseudo Programs, Inc., 1998. (© Nora York and Nancy Spero) Nora York's mouth is situated behind the vagina of Nancy Spero's drawing of a Sheela-na-gig, a Celtic fertility figure.



Fig. 5. Rae C. Wright, *Arthieves*, video still, 1998. (© Rae C. Wright) This netcast concerns the ease with which artists can borrow, copy, alter and distribute using digital technology.



impact upon the final form of the work. So in 2000, at the invitation of Sven Travis, chairman of the Digital Design Department at Parsons School of Design, and Zhang Ga, artist and faculty member at Parsons, Franklin Furnace redesigned *The Future of the Present* as a residency program. Ten artists were each given a one-month residency and an honorarium of \$3,000.

The staff of Franklin Furnace thought that when the organization "went virtual," the body of the artist would be left behind, and indeed, our first collaboration in 2000 was an on-line game, *Superschmoozio: The Game of the International Art Market*, proposed by artist Jack Waters (Fig. 6). This interactive on-line game replicated the climb through the ranks of the art world in order to become a "professional artist," complete with the schmoozing and backstabbing necessary to reach this goal. Building a game modeled on Super Mario Brothers, which predicts every possible interaction, costs approximately \$500,000 in programming and was therefore far beyond the reach of the classroom environment as well as Franklin Furnace's budget. Franklin Furnace assisted Waters with implementing his idea by introducing him to artists Lisa Brenneis and Adriene Jenik (selected to present in their own right in 2001), who had developed "desktop theater" using The Palace on-line software in environments in which avatars,

controlled by individuals located around the world, interact. The use of avatars in place of the body and virtual environments in place of real ones touches the heart of discussion of liveness, presence and the mediatization of performance [2].

The body, however, never disappeared from Franklin Furnace's programs, or from the discourse. Also in 2000, Franklin Furnace presented a work by Scott Durkin centering on the nature of identity, which involved performances in New York and California by the artist and his identical twin, as well as the participation of people around the country named Scott Durkin, whom the artist had contacted. Each Scott Durkin received a bottle of sand representing his identity. One of the Parsons M.F.A. Digital Design students pointed out the parallel between particles of sand and the pixilated digital image of the netcast. I later asked Durkin how he felt about this idea that was implicit in his work being identified by someone else, and he opined that our notions of originality and authorship were being changed by the team process.

Andrea Polli, an experimental programmer, sound artist and technologist, created *Rapid Fire* (Fig. 7), a technically intricate performance presented at the Kitchen in New York on 19 June 2000, using tracking technology first developed by the United States military. A giant image of Polli's eye was projected on the

rear wall so that the audience could see the voluntary and involuntary eye movements that produced sound through her experimental software program, which laid out a grid that tracked where she was looking, allowing her to make music with her eye movements. Another lesson of 2000 was the realization that some artists, such as Polli, were training themselves to become competent software designers in their own right, and therefore were capable of sophisticated investigations into the nature of the Internet itself as a venue and art medium.

2001: ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

In 2001, Franklin Furnace again reduced the number of artists in residence, from 10 to three, and raised honoraria from \$3,000 to \$5,000 in order to provide more

time and support for the development of these complex works of art. We also made the decision to facilitate partnerships with other collegial institutions as appropriate to artists' ideas. Artists could choose to utilize the resources of Parsons School of Design, or Franklin Furnace could broker a relationship with another suitable partner such as the Eyebeam Atelier, Location One, Rhizome.org, Downtown Community Television, Hunter College or the Kitchen—to name a few local organizations with which we have worked.

2002: HUMAN INTERACTION AND INTERACTIVE TECHNOLOGY

The body of the Internet itself was the subject of Jeff Gompertz's *Capsule 2002*, a two-city Internet work that linked a

capsule hotel site in Tokyo (these are beehive-shaped spaces large enough for one person to occupy) and a reflective installation environment in New York City. The project drew a parallel between the compartmental nature of a capsule hotel's physical structure and the structure of on-line experience: In a chat room or other multi-user social environment, individuals are electronically interconnected but physically alone; in a capsule hotel, individuals are physically connected by a common space but are electronically and psychologically isolated [3].

Claims on the body and on both private and public space; parallels between human interaction and interactive technology; and translation, understanding and misunderstanding across cultural and technological boundaries are themes of G.H. Hovagimyan's perfor-

Fig. 6. Jack Waters, *Superschmoozio*, screen grab by Tiffany Ludwig, 2000. (© Jack Waters) *Superschmoozio* is an on-line game prepared as "Desktop Theater" developed by Adriene Jenik and Lisa Brenneis with The Palace software, which allows visitors' avatars to the virtual space to interact. Jack Waters's residency at Parsons School of Design's Digital Design Department took place in January 2000.



mance *Brecht Machine (EU Popstar)*, which used the Internet to stream, translate and play audio and video between two sites on two continents. The two points, Split, Croatia, and New York City, connected via the Internet and streamed live audio and video using a video chat program. At each location, a text was read out loud in one language into a microphone connected to a computer. The computer, using a dictation program, converted the speech to text. The text was then fed into a translation program and automatically translated to another language and sent across the Internet. On the receiving end a synthetic voice read the translated text. In September 2002, the performer in Split spoke French and the New York performer spoke English, with the programming interface translating each performer's text into the other, so that the software itself was "performing" its adequacy and its mistakes for the live and international viewing audience [4].



Fig. 7. Andrea Polli, *Rapid Fire*, video stills by Tiffany Ludwig, 2000. (© Andrea Polli) Andrea Polli, an experimental programmer, sound artist and performer, used tracking technology first developed by the U.S. military to make music with her eye movements.

2003: THE BODY OF THE NET

Franklin Furnace presented Mouchette in collaboration with Postmasters Gallery in New York on 20 April 2003. "Mouchette" is the Net-based alter ego of an anonymous artist whose identity is a closely guarded secret. Mouchette is a

very young artist who remains perpetually "not yet 13" and who created her own web site in October 1996. Since then, she has taken part in numerous art manifestations, exhibitions and events in the art world, creating a new part of her web site each time and developing an important presence within the Net Art community.

Fig. 8. Ricardo Miranda Zuñiga, *The Public Broadcast Cart*, 2003. (© Ricardo Miranda Zuñiga. Photo © Brooke Singer) A shopping cart transformed into a mobile radio station broadcasting via miniFM and on-line, the Public Broadcast Cart is designed to enable any pedestrian to become an active producer of a radio broadcast. The Broadcast Cart was funded by the Franklin Furnace's Future of the Present Fund; the broadcast was supported by NYC Wireless and THE THING; technical assistance was given by Jan McLaughlin, Greg Gong, Dana Speigel and Darrel O'Pry.





Fig. 9. Adrienne Wortzel, *Eliza Redux: Robot Psychoanalyst Experiences Counter-Transference*, 2004. (© Adrienne Wortzel) Theatrical scenarios in the form of on-line psychoanalytic sessions available to visitors to an interactive web site featuring streaming real-time video of a physical robot equipped with an interactive conversational computer program in the tradition of ELIZA, enabling it to play the role of a psychoanalyst by responding vocally to visitors' text-to-speech input. Actor: Steve Mittelman.

The power of the Mouchette persona and this anonymous artist's exploration of identity on the Internet was demonstrated recently when the widow of Robert Bresson, director of the 1967 motion picture from which the contemporary Mouchette took her name, brought the influence of the French *Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques* to bear in seeking to censor part of Mouchette's site. Still more recently, right before the event in New York at which Mouchette's identity was finally to be revealed to the public, discussion raged on Rhizome.org: if Mouchette was actually a man or an adult, her site was the work of a pedophile. None of this discussion was picked up by local print media; C. Carr of the *Village Voice* attended the public event but explained that since it did not fit into any existing column (theater, film,

art, dance) at her paper, she could not cover it.

On 5 November 2003, Mouchette launched her identity-sharing interface at *mouchette.net*, a web site that allows every registered user to share Mouchette's on-line identity. Personal e-mails may be read and web pages added, and users may "pass" as the author. There is an internal message board, and users may meet privately. While the identity of the artist who created the Mouchette persona is still anonymous, this persona is now open to endless expansion and change, rendering discovery of the artist's "real" identity moot.

While Future of the Present 2003 artist Ricardo Miranda Zuñiga is profoundly engaged with new technology in the creation of his work, his Public Broadcast Cart (Fig. 8) allows any pedestrian

to become an active producer of an audiocast, thereby reversing the usual role of most people as audience for radio broadcasts or on-line content. The Public Broadcast Cart is a shopping cart—outfitted with a microphone, speakers, an amplifier, a personal computer and a mini-FM transmitter—that Zuñiga wheels to various locations. The microphone is plugged into the amplifier, which feeds the audio to the speakers and the "audio in" of the computer, which has a wireless Ethernet card and a sound card, and to the mini-FM transmitter. The audio captured by the microphone is converted into an MP3 audio stream via the computer and on-line radio software. Using free wireless nodes (802.11b) available at various public locations in Manhattan such as Bryant Square Park, the stream is fed to the

Thing.net's server, which hosts a net radio station. The stream is then available to anyone logged onto the net radio station on-line [5].

CONVERGENCE

On 21 May 2003, *K9*, a work by Zlatko Kopljár, a performance artist from Croatia, was presented at the Kitchen. To my thinking, this event marked the conjunction of the body and technology. The piece consisted of a 5-minute video of a series of identical performances made at various places around New York City; this video record was then visually manipulated by software written on the basis of the artist's DNA, moving the pixels of each video frame to new locations within the same frame. The result was a visually abstract portrait of the artist.

Well before September 11, 2001, artists were exploring the ramifications of surveillance and intrusions into privacy as ever-present realities of contemporary life. Julia Scher and the Surveillance Camera Players, for example, presented coordinated outdoor actions intended to be recorded by surveillance cameras. In 2004, a trio of artists, Beatrice da Costa, Jaimie Schulte and Brooke Singer, proposed *Swipe* to Franklin Furnace. The artists constructed a bar equipped with a tablet laptop, an electronic driver's

license scanner and a receipt printer and arranged for it to be installed in art spaces. They then served as bartenders in order to "card" visitors, revealing to the visitors the personal data contained in the magnetic strips on their driver's licenses and discussing with them the possible use of this information after it has been collected in consumer databases built without notification or consent by subjects [6].

A project selected by Franklin Furnace that is still in process challenges the nature of identity and the composition of personality as it has been mediated by technology. Adrienne Wortzel's *Eliza Redux* (Fig. 9) is based upon her studies of Joseph Weizenbaum's 1966 computer program ELIZA. This project will enable theatrical scenarios in the form of on-line psychoanalytic sessions available to visitors through an interactive web site featuring real-time interactions between a physical robot responding vocally as a psychoanalyst to the "patient's" text-to-speech input [7]. Presently, the robot is housed in a blue-screen studio at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York, such that virtual backgrounds may be added to its environment as interpolations of Freudian psychoanalytic "projections." The artist plans to archive sessions in text form, developing in the robot a form of "mem-

ory" so that it can recognize patients in subsequent sessions.

A collaboration by Joshua Kinberg and Yuri Gitman selected for Franklin Furnace's current 2004–2005 season also marks the convergence of the body and technology. Their *Magicbike* (Fig. 10) is a mobile WiFi (wireless Internet) hotspot that provides free Internet access wherever it travels. A custom-designed printing device mounted on the bike prints spray-chalk text messages from web users to the surfaces of the street, overlapping public art with techno-activism by creating a montage of the community wireless movement, bicycle culture, street demonstrations and contemporary art. Theory became practice on 30 August 2004 when the Magicbike being ridden by Kinberg in preparation for protest at the Republican National Convention in New York was impounded by the police on the grounds that text messages being printed on the street would deface public property and were therefore subject to laws intended to prohibit graffiti. (Kinberg's collaborator, Yuri Gitman, was on the scene with a camera as the arrest took place. The court case is going forward, and the Magicbike is still, as of the date of this writing in November 2004, in the possession of the NYPD [8].)

As this historical summary of projects presented and produced by Franklin Furnace during the last decade demonstrates, there seems to be convergence taking place not only among technologies (Palm Pilots becoming telephones that can transmit images), but also in the practice of artists and their audiences. International on-line discourse has been the theater in which issues raised by live art on the Internet have been played out, an appropriate development for a form that is perhaps the first truly international art medium. Franklin Furnace has seen the audience for live art on the Internet grow from 700 "hits" per week during its inaugural netcasting season in collaboration with Pseudo to 3,000,000 per year, representing 60,000 individual visitors to its web site, <www.franklinfurnace.org>, at present. The reasons for this growth are several: physical location of viewers is limited only by access to the Internet itself; the World Wide Web is now the first research resource of choice for students; and the networked environment in which Franklin Furnace now operates vastly extends its reach.

I believe artists' use of the Internet as an art medium will have profound effects upon the culture at large. In the networked environment in which e-mail is

Fig. 10. Joshua Kinberg and Yury Gitman, video still from *Magicbike*, 2004, videography by Yury Gitman (© Joshua Kinberg and Yury Gitman.) Joshua Kinberg riding the Magicbike during the Bikes against Bush protest before the Republican National Convention in New York on 30 August 2004. The Magicbike was impounded by NYPD under anti-graffiti statutes.



commonplace, individuals are more socially equal than they were in the hierarchical art world of only 10 years ago. This equality is fostering partnership instead of competition among individuals as well as organizations and is additionally “flattening” the internal structures of organizations. The creation of artworks by teams is challenging long-held notions of “originality.” What’s next? Perhaps a radical reevaluation of the role of art in re-

lation to society, made possible by the networked art and social environment. Well, a girl can dream.

References and Notes

1. See Emily Hartzell and Nina Sobell, “Sculpting in Time and Space: Interactive Work,” *Leonardo* 34, No. 2 (2001).
2. Jenik and Brenneis are represented by avatars on their site, www.desktoptheater.org, and Jenik told me she had been reproached in the past for repre-

senting herself with a fat avatar (why not be an idealized figure if you have the chance to create your own image?).

3. See fakeshop.com/installation/capsulehotel.html.
4. See <http://artnetweb.com/gh>.
5. See www.ambriente.com/wifi/.
6. See www.we-swipe.us.
7. www.elizaredux.org.
8. A QuickTime movie of these events may be seen at www.bikesagainstbush.com.

