

The Franklin Furnace Programs

SANT: When you first organized Franklin Furnace, your main activity was collecting artist books and showing them to the public. How did you start your performance program?

WILSON: Our thought was that the same artists who were publishing these books could be invited to read their published stuff, the stuff that we had in the collection.

SANT: Isn't this similar to the many public book readings that happen at many mainstream bookstores now?

WILSON: But not at the time! No.

SANT: Readings in bookstores have been around for quite sometime, haven't they? I mean, if we go to a different place and time other than New York in the mid-1970s, such as San Francisco in the mid-1950s with the Beats, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti and the City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco, and Allen Ginsberg reading *Howl* . . .

WILSON: That's absolutely right. OK.

SANT: Were you building on anything like that? Were you aware of such things or were you reinventing the wheel?

WILSON: Reinventing the wheel, I would say. I was not focused on the performance program at all because my friend Jacki Apple was my coconspirator and curator. We had already collaborated on a performance work in 1973. I was living in Canada at that time.

SANT: What had you done together before Franklin Furnace?

WILSON: We started corresponding because Lucy Lippard had come to Halifax and introduced us through the catalog to an exhibition that existed only on notecards, about 7,500. So I knew Jacki: she had been in the art world for a billion years already. She had this idea of doing a reading, inviting Martine Aballea to read her work.¹ That was in June 1976. There wasn't a performance program, you know, not even a concept yet. In fact, for the first two years the calendars say "Artists' Readings."

SANT: Can you elaborate on the first reading?

WILSON: Sure. Martine came to Franklin Furnace in June 1976 for her reading, bringing her own lamp, wearing a costume, reading in character. So from day one the artists are not considering these things to be readings where you stand at a podium and read your text. And many years later [in 1991] at Judson Church, Eileen Myles did a wonderful performance called *Life* where she explains that she made the break from being a poet to being a performance artist when somebody pointed out that the way poets read is like this [*demonstrates*], and the way performance artists read is like this.

SANT: So poets read with their head down while performance artists look at their audience. Perhaps that's because most poets are absorbed in the words whereas performers are more concerned with their audience.

WILSON: Yes!

SANT: Was there any art hanging at Franklin Furnace in 1976?

WILSON: Yes, both hanging and lying down. September was the first show, but even before this, in the Spring of 1976, I was accommodating artists who did one-of-a-kind books, like Karen Shaw and Power Boothe. We started the artists' readings in September, October, November, December. We had a calendar: a series of readings, a number of exhibitions, mainly one-of-a-kind books—artist books, but

they're objects—plus there were exhibitions of artist books that were published. But there were no terms yet and the artists themselves were not making distinctions among all these things. John McClurg's books hung from the ceiling, which was 16 feet high, and Charlemagne Palestine's books were like giant flowers covered with pigment, but they were blank notebooks from Canal Street, the pages of which he had crumpled. So they're kind of multiples/not multiples. My point being that it was not a big step from where the artists were . . . no, I'm putting this wrong! The artists didn't make a big distinction among all the forms. They were also doing installations, pretty soon audiotape, film, music . . . it was all one big blob. It was the beginnings of postmodernism, and everybody played in three bands, and made films, and did street performances, and events inside and outside, installations in the backyard—everybody was doing everything. You were just an artist and you used whatever form was appropriate, which I believe harks back to the Futurists. The Futurist poets and painters were experimenting with everything, as avantgarde artists should do.

SANT: Did the main newspapers cover the early performances?

WILSON: I embarked on a quixotic effort to get the *New York Times* to recognize that there was this “not theatre” category called performance art. I must have spent 10 years trying really hard to establish performance art as something in the visual arts tradition as distinct from this thing called theatre.

SANT: Did any critics write in the “Art Review” sections?

WILSON: No, in theatre. Well, dance. There wasn't any real place for performance art. Sometimes dance, sometimes theatre. C. Carr² single-handedly created a space for performance art. She was a political writer, a cultural-scene writer, not exactly an art-world writer.

SANT: She created that space in the *Village Voice*, not in the *New York Times*.

WILSON: Yes, in the *Village Voice*. And then the *New Yorker* had another category, I think they called it “Acts” for some years, and then they abandoned the category altogether. I took this point seriously: what Franklin Furnace was doing descended from the avantgarde work that was done in the early part of the 20th century by the Futurists and Constructivists. By 1980 I started to do shows to prove, in a way, never having been trained in art history, that the contemporary artist books movement had historical antecedents. So I invited guest curators to prepare exhibitions, autodidactically giving myself and Franklin Furnace's public lessons in the history of avantgarde practice. *The Page As Alternative Space, 1909 to 1980* [1980–1981] was the first of these historical shows: a year-long exhibition in four sections with four curators who showed the magazines and the books, photo-works, posters, and boxes of the contemporary and historical avantgarde.

SANT: Did your interest in artists' books develop through your formal training in English literature?

WILSON: From literature, yes. But, I was dissatisfied with literature.

SANT: Dissatisfied? In what way?

WILSON: It wasn't smart enough, and broad enough. All these white guys as my PhD advisers at Dalhousie University rejected my thesis as “visual art” in 1972.

SANT: What was your proposed PhD thesis about?

WILSON: Based on the idea that Henry James, who was a novelist but also an art critic, may have created a model before he wrote each one of his novels, I would read the novels and then I would re-create the model that I believe he must have created in order to write the novel.

SANT: What did you do instead?

WILSON: I went in a huff over to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and got myself a job teaching English grammar.

SANT: Although you soon left education as a career, within Franklin Furnace you had an Education Program for some time. What led to the creation the Franklin Furnace Education Program?

WILSON: Franklin Furnace developed most of its new programs by responding to artists. Diane Position, an artist and bookmaker, wanted to organize art classes around books at P.S.130 in Chinatown to subversively promote literacy while the kids were having fun. At the end of the school year, the proud kids and their proud parents came to Franklin Furnace to see their books on display. They were great—trap doors hinged on toothpicks, clouds made of cotton balls, liberal use of glitter. They were autobiographical books so the kids didn't have to "learn" anything—but they were writing in English! Right away, Jackie Schiffman, my Director of Development, recognized that we had a literacy program here. She asked me what I wanted to call it, and I decided on Sequential Art for Kids. This left the door open to performance artists like Laurie Anderson and Eric Bogosian, who said teaching kindergarteners was the hardest job they had ever done. We had in the program artists who made paper, like Ken Polinskie, artist bookmakers and illustrators like Susan Share and Ariane Dewey, photographers, filmmakers, and animation artists, videographers—anything but painting and sculpture, line and surface, all that formalist crap.

SANT: How do you describe Sequential Art for Kids now?

WILSON: This was a subversive effort to validate what the kids already knew but didn't know was knowledge. For another example, artists and videographers Ron Littke and Benita Abrams divided up the ESL kids at P.S.52 in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, into the younger set and the older set. The younger ones wrote, acted, and produced videotapes based on Russian, Middle Eastern, and Chinese folktales they already knew. The tapes are completely charming, with radical changes in scale and narrative that don't bother the kids at all.

SANT: So although the program has one goal, its methods are diverse. What did the older kids do?

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WILSON: The older ones did video documentaries of the streets where they lived. This exercise gave them the chance to examine their situation in this new world, as kids of first-generation immigrant parents who sometimes would give them the lease to read because these parents couldn't understand English.

SANT: When did you start this program? And is it still running?

WILSON: Sequential Art for Kids started with one artist in one school in 1985, and at its zenith a decade later, had 19 artists in as many schools in all the five boroughs through a collaboration with Library Power, which Jackie organized. Now it is small again, and concentrated upon video because P.S.52 had all this great equipment and no personnel who knew how to use it. Sheila Salmon at Library Power recommended Franklin Furnace. Enter video artists!

SANT: It seems to me that the connection between art and education is quite strong for Franklin Furnace. Has this been the case throughout the past 25 years? What role does education play in your organization's *raison d'être*?

WILSON: In the early days, when I was trundling around Lower Manhattan getting incorporated, it struck me that one of the agencies to which the not-for-profit sector is beholden is the Department of Education. The charitable purpose of Franklin Furnace is not art, but education. Ever since day one we have assumed an aggressive educational stance with regard to the value of avantgarde art to contemporary cultural life. This is not to say that we put labels on the wall explaining the art, as in the '80s we were encouraged to do, nor did we ever have docents or audio guides. But I still believe contemporary art has a lot to say to contemporary culture, and that American society doesn't get how valuable a resource their artist community is. Our student interns are almost always from anywhere but here—Europe, South America, Israel—places where studying the American avantgarde has value. I think Franklin Furnace's work will have value to America too, but we will be long dead.

SANT: Do you have a strategy that will ensure that it will be valued in the future?

WILSON: I am seeking a partnership with a collegial institution that will be here when I'm not, and will perceive Franklin Furnace's archives not only as historical commodity, but as pedagogical material sooner rather than later. And this leads into my ongoing discussion with the behemoth, New York University.

SANT: How has the way artists are chosen for your program changed over the years? Are there any artists you as Martha Wilson, or you as Franklin Furnace, invite to produce a piece?

WILSON: None. None at all.

SANT: How long has it been this way?

WILSON: Very long. When Jacki Apple left the position as curator I didn't want to be the curator. I didn't want my taste to determine the program. I wanted the artists' community to tell me what was happening in the future of the art world. So we installed a panel system.

SANT: Who chooses the panel?

WILSON: I choose the panel.

SANT: Doesn't that imply that in some ways you're actually choosing the artists by proxy?

WILSON: Yes. And I yell during meetings, but I don't vote on the panel. I can't tell you what I yell about because it will reveal who the artists are. Anyway, I make my opinion known, but the panel blows me off. They don't have to pay any attention to my opinion, although I might direct the panel.

SANT: Give me an example of how you direct the panel.

WILSON: In 2001 I asked them to please give more money to less artists to create live art on the Internet because it's taking more time and they don't have enough money to do what they want to do. So we asked the panel to please select three artists to get \$5,000 each, and that means these artists are still going to be short because they always do projects that fill to capacity all the available time, space, and money. That just comes with the territory. At least I'm giving them enough money for maybe two months of expenses.

SANT: That sounds rather reasonable. Have you ever directed the panel by saying there should be more grants given to women and/or minorities?

WILSON: No. But I select the panel and I put a lot of women and artists of color on the panel. And to be fair, the field that came to be known as performance art is chosen by many outstanding women because they couldn't say what they wanted to say in the form of paintings, so they took up this flexible form, which came to be known as performance art.

SANT: Are you saying that women picked up what we have come to call performance art because they could not work in the appropriate environment or they could not express themselves freely through painting or sculpture?

WILSON: Actually there is something in there that needs to be teased out. That is true. Women have not met with success often in the commercial system and had to choose alternative organizations like Franklin Furnace and also alternative media like performance art—but they wanted that. I mean I am deliberately a performance artist myself because I don't want to have a studio, I don't want to store sculpture, I don't want to work in bronze. No! I want it to disappear. I want it to be an idea-driven product that I'm making. I don't know whether I made that clear. Performance art is a good category for that. But at no point did I consciously say I'm not going to show men and I'm only going to show women. Or I'm going to show political work. That came up once when an artist asked me, "Do I have to do political work to be selected by Franklin Furnace?" In reality, the panel selects work that appeals to them, which is often activist and political.

SANT: That's not the case so much anymore, with the *Live Art on the Internet* program.³ Since your first season at Pseudo there have been some very noticeable works that aren't overtly political or activist in context.

WILSON: Covertly political, I think. Like Patricia Hoffbauer's *Carmenland, The Saga Continues* [6 March 1998] or even *Pseudo Studio Walk* [by Halona Hilbertz; 6 February 1998] in a certain remote way could be read as political.

SANT: I see what you mean. I would add Irina Danilova and Steven Ausbury's *IR MIR Is Here!* [15 January 1999] to that list.⁴

WILSON: Speaking of political, I want to talk also about the maneuvering that took place both in public and behind closed doors as Franklin Furnace went through the process of becoming virtual, and how the Board and I have resolved our differences by developing a new initiative that has a spiritual purpose.

SANT: You have not used the word spiritual before.

WILSON: Not in the organized religion sense. But as I was taking Franklin Furnace into the unknown, there were some members of the Board who wanted to be reassured that there was good art happening on the Internet. So we convened three town meetings to air all points of view, and while we were excoriated by artists who felt the loss of Franklin Furnace as a clubhouse, artists like Jordan Crandall of X-Art Foundation eloquently defended artwork taking place in the virtual realm. But the Board wanted

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to go even further to support the spirit of risk that they felt had been beaten out of the art world during the Culture Wars. David Perlmutter, my intrepid Chair at this time, proposed a fund—a cash prize, an award—to go to artists who were attempting the impossible, trying to do projects that would never have been funded anyway by the NEA's discipline-based categories. We cast around for a name, in jest called it the McMartha Award, and in the end, this was the name that stuck. The first award was to be given on 7 November 2001 by Yoko Ono to Kyong Park for his *Adamah* project in Detroit, where he and community members are establishing a new society on the xeric space left by the failure of the capitalist system.⁵ His project coincided with the 300th anniversary of the founding of Detroit, making *Adamah* an un-fundable, in-your-face project developed by a brilliant artist and architect, whom most people know as the cofounder with Shirin Neshat of Storefront for Art and Architecture. But September 11 intervened, the market tanked, and our dream of an annual award in collaboration with Creative Capital Foundation didn't materialize. In the end, without fanfare, we gave \$25,000 to Kyong Park to celebrate Franklin Furnace's 25th Anniversary.

SANT: This is not being given to online projects, then?

WILSON: It could be. The idea is that these projects fall out of the confines of what we usually consider to be art practice. They can be in any medium, now known or hereinafter imagined, and concern any subject under the sun—in the postmodern spirit.

SANT: Is that what you mean by spiritual?

WILSON: Yes.

Notes

1. [See Jacki Apple's article in this issue.]
2. [See C. Carr's article in this issue.]
3. See "Historical Summary: What We Learned from Franklin Furnace's Presentations of Live Art on the Internet, from 1996 till Now" by Martha Wilson <http://www.franklinfurnace.org/born_digital/history_essay.html>.
4. The original performances were webcast live from New York by Pseudo Programs, Inc., from its studio at 600 Broadway, and then archived for at least six months on the Pseudo web servers. Pseudo's archives from this period are no longer available to the public, but the works presented by Franklin Furnace at Pseudo.com are now documented online at <http://www.franklinfurnace.org/born_digital/born_tffpseudo.html>.
5. See "25th Anniversary McMartha Award" at <<http://www.franklinfurnace.org>>.



Kyong Park, Detroit, Making It Better For You. Images from a video produced in December 2000. The Adamah project is comprised of multiple events and discrete works including videos, installations, and text pieces. Portions of this project were made possible by Franklin Furnace's 2001 McMartha Award. (Still from a video by Kyong Park; courtesy of Franklin Furnace)

Adamah, meaning "of the earth," is a long-term urban renewal project meant to inspire the local community and provide a new equity for Detroit. We believe that solid growth of communities does not come from casinos or stadiums, but rather that it comes from the people of the city investing time and care in themselves. Adamah is a reclamation project focusing on an area northwest of downtown Detroit, an area historically abandoned and disused. The plan seeks to turn the area's idle land into productive, educational, and job-creating spaces by evolving the land into a self-sufficient agricultural zone. By depositing these public spaces into a community owned and governed land trust, a new and shared equity for the economic development of the area will emerge. [. . .] A plan for Adamah's completion in 2010 has begun, with hopes of its attaining sovereignty in 2075.

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