

Franklin Furnace's Evolving Sense of Identity

SANT: For many years Franklin Furnace was known for collecting and showing artist books. Why did Franklin Furnace sell the collection to MoMA?

WILSON: To do the right thing for the collection. Maybe the largest collection in the U.S. of artist books published internationally after 1960, made of paper, should not be stored in this loft made of wood, with no climate-control, no museum conditions! We were also unsuccessful at raising money for conservation of individual artists' books. I didn't have a conservation staff, I didn't have a lab, I didn't have the basic infrastructure that a museum would have to do the right thing for the books. So we did the best we could, putting everything in acid-free boxes and files, but we also started to explore the idea of placing the collection in the hands of another institution that would value it, continue to enlarge it, and do the right thing for this field that we had established as a legitimate field of art.

SANT: Artist books are now recognized by the art world as a whole category in its own right.

WILSON: But there was no term "artist books" in 1976. It sort of evolved out of the mud, as the term "performance art" also evolved during this same period, to describe whatever it was the artists were doing. We inquired at a few selected institutions the board identified: the Guggenheim, the Walker, The Museum of Modern Art. But The Museum of Modern Art had the advantage of having Clive Phillpot already there.¹ Clive had served on FF's Board, and had wanted to take the B-copies up to MoMA in 1982, but the Board had rebuffed the offer. Ages ago, he had seen that this was not the place for these things to survive. It's a living loft, plus artists use rat poison in their installations, onions and smoke and vinegar in their performances. But the Board blew him off and he went away in a huff and we didn't speak for years. Making the first contact with Clive in 1990, I was very nervous about having this discussion to put FF's collection into the hands of MoMA. But he was in a place in his career where he wanted to make a mark at The Museum of Modern Art. He had spent 20 years in the States, his father was not well, he wanted to return to England, but this was the last big thing that he did before he left. So he went up to the trustees and said if we buy this thing we can keep the A-copies, combine them with our stuff, sell the B-copies, and give back the C-copies—because the plan was that we were still going to have a downtown arts emporium. The C-copies—that's the third copies—which was not a complete set, would be left around publicly to be used and read and coffee-stained and stolen. The way the artists had originally intended, in the hangout that we were going to create. So they went for it! The trustees said, "OK fine, we'll put up \$350,000 over five years, and you can buy this thing." It took about two years to put the deal together, so in 1993 we signed the deal with Richard Oldenburg, who was the director at the time. A year later, they picked up the books.

SANT: Why did it take so long for them to pick up the books?

WILSON: Museums do this all the time! They acquire stuff and they have no idea where they are going to put it. So a year later we still had the stuff, and the day came when the movers showed up. They put plastic wrap around all the boxes, and they put the boxes on these rolling bookshelves and then rolled them onto the truck. In an afternoon they moved the whole thing.

SANT: How did it feel to have all this material taken to MoMA?

WILSON: I was terrified that the artists' community would be furious with me for selling out, and to the biggest institution around, The Museum of Modern Art. But just the opposite thing happened: Artists called me up and said, "Can I still donate my books to the collection?" Because then they could list MoMA on their resumes.

SANT: And what has MoMA done with the collection since they acquired it?

WILSON: MoMA has done the right thing by the collection by cataloging 13,500 items it acquired from us for The Museum of Modern Art/Franklin Furnace/Artist Book Collection. Artists can look up their work on MoMA's website,² or go to Franklin Furnace's splash page,³ which has a link to DADATABASE, where works are searchable by author, title, publisher, form, genre, etc. On the unfortunate side, I heard all the books were rubber-stamped to identify them as property of MoMA, as they would be in a library. This means that there was a disconnect on the administrative level with regard to the value of these objects as art.

SANT: What was going on with Franklin Furnace at the time the artist books collection was sold to MoMA?

WILSON: When the collection was gone we were hell-bent on this idea of creating a downtown arts emporium. We spent the summer of 1994 interviewing 30 architects. We were trying to get legal and provide handicapped accessibility. All this went on until 1996 because I applied for an NEA Challenge Grant and was denied the first year; they said you have to have a clear design done in order for your application to be competitive. So we spent the next year working with the architect we had selected, Bernard Tschumi, to prepare the program and then the design. We submitted the second Challenge application in '95, which we got. We asked for \$100,000 in capital money and a \$100,000 in cash reserve money. Then—so interesting how this happened at the same time—unilaterally, the NEA wrote me a letter saying that due to Congressional budget cuts they were discontinuing capital support. The challenge program would continue to offer cash reserve support for the establishment of a financial cushion, but they would no longer invest in the capital needs of organizations. At exactly the same time, I was in my sister's kitchen in Olympia, Washington, figuring out that nobody was going to care if I had

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a beautiful facility, this would not matter in 100 years when people looked back at Franklin Furnace and its role in art history. I thought, "They're going to remember Karen Finley but they are going to forget that the floor was made of blond oak. I'm raising money for the wrong reason!" I can spend 10 years, I can wreck my life on the rocks of this effort and it's going to be for all the wrong reasons. So I went to the Board in September of 1995 to say I had this crisis during the summer: we've already sold the collection, now we need to dispense with the whole plant and just go the other way totally, away from a physical space, go for a virtual space.

SANT: Did you feel that the physical space had become useless at this time?

WILSON: It was obvious to me that Franklin Furnace's most ephemeral contribution, the program, was what mattered, not the physical housing for that program. Plus, the program could occur anywhere! It could occur on the streets or the Staten Island Ferry. In the beginning it was really a pain in the ass to perform in other people's spaces but after a while we got pretty good at it. It's not wonderful but you figure out how to present artists in other people's spaces. We were already presenting "In Exile." So we were already dematerializing! Let's just go all the way and follow the original plan, which was to present performance artists on television, cable, and broadcast TV. The internet was not in my brain, it was not even a thought at this time, even though my friend Nina Sobell and her partner Emily Hartzell had introduced me to live art on the internet in 1996 through NYU's Creative Artists' Team. They invited me to do a piece as Tipper Gore for Parkbench.org [<http://www.cat.nyu.edu/parkbench/>], which is still up. It played at one frame per second, so I sang the "Star Spangled Banner" in a white dress, in front

of a red velvet curtain, with blue subtitles. It came out very well, but I still didn't get the potential of this new art medium.

SANT: Perhaps the technology wasn't developed enough yet for you to see any use in it for what you wanted.

WILSON: But the online companies were after me! In 1997, Sensory Networks and Pseudo were sniffing around me, but I was after Thinking Pictures for its big studio because it was closer to the facilities needed for performance art in real time and space.

SANT: In 1996 Pseudo.com was experimenting with the first streamed video on the web.

WILSON: Yes. They were saying, "look at this great image we can stream on the Internet." And I'm thinking, it's so small, so chunky, I hate it!

SANT: Were you thinking in terms of television aesthetics?

WILSON: TV is beautiful, it's lush.

SANT: Compared to that early video streaming on the web, it certainly is lush. How did the artists react to this new medium?

WILSON: The first the artists heard about this was that we were becoming a producer instead of presenter, producing stuff that would live entirely in the ether, except it would be the electronic ether of television.

SANT: Do you mean showing video installations on TV?

WILSON: I was thinking more of performance art.

SANT: Televised performance art rather than performance made for video and then shown on TV.

WILSON: Right. Actually, Mark Russell [artistic director of P.S.122] was kind of going in the same direction at the same time. I think we both wanted to get greater visibility for the work that we were doing and we thought that the audience would be out there through broadcast channels. I met with Lorne Michaels [at NBC] and an MTV lady, and another lady from Ovation. I spent \$10,000 of the organization's money, with the Board's approval, to come up with a reel. Then later when I showed them the reel they said, "Oh no, this is horrible! It's awful!" It was about sex.

SANT: What did you have on that reel?

WILSON: Works that dealt with sex, but in all kinds of different ways. One was the corporatization of sex by Moe Angelos and Peg Healey (two members of the Five Lesbian Brothers) in a piece called *Dreamworld*, in which Barbie (the doll) interacts with Barbra (a girl). And then there's Cathay Che who is talking about having gay male sex, passing as a man in gay male bars. And then there is Tom Murrin who talks about how guys basically want food, beer, and sex. And Amanda Vogel talking about the anxiety involved in getting old and becoming less sexually alluring. Anyway, these are performance art works that all address sex but all from different points of view.

SANT: Why did you choose to work with this theme?

WILSON: Because that is what performance art is always accused of anyway: It's always about sex! So I thought, we'll meet this head on, we'll show that it is all about sex, but look at all these various ways we can look at this subject. It's not pornography, but let's not go off over here and pretend artists are going to talk about innocuous subjects.

SANT: There's certainly sexual content in many works of performance art.

WILSON: And in comparison to *Sex and the City* it's completely tame; it's not explicit at all!

SANT: Did you have all the support you wanted from your board on this?

WILSON: The board was not happy with this direction and at the same time that I am producing the reel and taking it around to TV executives I'm being seduced by these Internet companies. And finally Galinsky [of Pseudo.com] called me. I went over there, he showed me the studio, it was a sound studio set up for audio only, and I thought this is not going to work for performance art and I just walked away.

SANT: They had been working with just audio for two years already but they switched to video as soon as it was possible to stream video on the web.

WILSON: Yes. Anyway, I got myself introduced through a Board member to Thinking Pictures and negotiated like crazy for months. Finally they said, you can use our studios and it will cost \$4,000 per use. I couldn't do that. Actually they just wanted me to introduce them to Laurie Anderson, which I did. I don't know if that worked out for them but meanwhile Laurie said, "I'm tired of the Internet I want to go back to performing in theatres for a live audience, big theatres, big productions, that's what I want to be doing."

SANT: Was she an inspiration to you?

WILSON: Yes, certainly. But she was passed it at this point. She served on my Board for some years but not at this time.

SANT: Laurie Anderson stopped looking at the new media at the time you started looking at it. Do you know why she stopped?

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WILSON: There was no audience! She was doing it too early. Let's face it, she was way ahead of everybody, and there was no audience. She produced a CD-ROM—*The Puppet Motel* [Voyager, 1995]—and nobody bought it because there was nobody who had a CD-ROM drive on their computers at the time. So she was disappointed in that, and who can blame her?

SANT: Why did you go in the direction of new media when you knew how disappointed Laurie Anderson had been?

WILSON: The times were catching up, the technology was catching up, getting better and better. Meanwhile, my deal with Thinking Pictures crashed in Fall 1997 and I called Galinsky on the phone and asked him if he would ever speak to me again since I had blown him off and he was completely fine about it. So we cut a deal for January 1998. We were going to give the artists six hours of production time. Franklin Furnace would pay them a \$1,000. We had to lose a lot of the artists we had already selected because we could not fit them all on the program. I paid a kill fee, it was \$600 to a lot of artists. I think Pat Oleszko, Karen Finley . . . I can't remember who else we gave a kill fee to. We ended up with 10 artists that we presented in Spring 1998. At the same time that I didn't know what the hell I was doing in my presenting program, my Board was all over me because they had figured out by this time that I was taking the program virtual, and that television was not working, and that we were going to be doing this on the internet and were not sure if there is any good art happening there. We were not sure that the Internet was here to stay!

SANT: Had you left your physical space at 112 Franklin Street by this time? Or were you just using it as office space and for installations?

WILSON: We closed the physical space on 1 February 1997 and made our website our public face on that date, storing our institutional archives in the basement and administrative space still on the mezzanine. We were performing in exile yet again, but at Pseudo this time.

SANT: What else was happening with Franklin Furnace at this time?

WILSON: We were going to sell the institution's archives.⁴ We had sold the books to The Museum of Modern Art, so what about our almost 20 years records here? That's worth something too! So we had it appraised by Jean-Noel Herlin who valued it at \$240,000. We got Joanne Paradise who is the archivist from the Getty [J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles] to come and look at it. We wanted the Getty to buy this stuff for money so we could use that money to match the Challenge grant. Luckily, the Getty declined, and since that time we have come to recognize that we have a pedagogical resource of unparalleled value on our hands.

SANT: I can see not only Franklin Furnace's evolving sense of identity in the form of the physical move out from the basement into other people's spaces to present performances, but also into deciding to be a production house for broadcasting, or rather for new media. Why did you choose to go to someone else's space rather than use your own basement as a studio?

WILSON: We did explore how much it would cost to convert our basement into a production studio. We decided to rule that out after we found out how much money was involved. Instead, we decided to develop strategic partnerships to leverage our puny resources and still get our programs done.

SANT: Still, the studios you've used over the past four years or so are relatively low-tech compared to the original estimate you got for a broadcast-standard setup.

WILSON: Yes, but that technology was not available at the time we moved out of 112 Franklin Street. Plus, as you know, what looks good on video is completely different than what's good on a computer. The way it is shot is completely different, but we didn't know that yet.

SANT: And now the image is getting larger and larger thanks to broadband, better compression rates, and codex. What happens next in Franklin Furnace's evolution?

WILSON: The space used to be the first thing we considered in our work: here is your space, now come in and do your thing. Now it is: What is your idea and what space do we have to get so that your idea can be implemented? Maybe it's just Desktop Theatre and there's zero space, no space. Maybe it's Jeff Gompertz' *Capsule Motel* project, which will require a link to Tokyo, but it's real space, it's small, it's constrained, but it's real . . .

SANT: All space is real, in some sense.

WILSON: By 2002 Franklin Furnace had gone full circle in its presenting of live art on the Internet, because these works were planned as installations or performance works, and also as online projects. So, FF has become a pimp, if you will, a procurer of the physical or virtual space appropriate to each project that gets selected by our peer panel. At Pseudo, we had the space and the six hours and the technology in place to do one thing, which was streaming video. Now, although we don't have Pseudo's space we're giving the artists more and more time and more money because it's obvious that developing work from the ground up, made for the Internet, using the properties of the Internet to your advantage, requires trial and error, and time.

SANT: How did your relationship with Pseudo come to an end?

WILSON: In the Spring of 1998 and during the 1998/99 season, Franklin Furnace was a client of Pseudo, paying \$1,500 per event for the space, technical staff, and netcasting services they provided. Sometimes artists wanted to go far beyond what was possible in the six hours of production time allotted; for example, Nora York bought animation services from Pseudo above and beyond her production time so she could superimpose Nancy Spero's images on her netcast. Sometimes artists took too much staff time or ran off with the master tape to make a dub or did other things that caused friction between

our organizations. But it occurred to me, about a year into the relationship, that I was providing content for Pseudo but I was paying them and it rightfully ought to be the other way around—Franklin Furnace should be paid by Pseudo to bring in content. So I pitched my idea for a show called *The History of the Future* (Galinsky named both this program and *The Future of the Present*) and actually got somewhere with it—or at least that was the impression I got.⁵ I met with Pseudo's venture capital fundraising dudette and worked up a proposal for 20 weeks, with works selected around themes like the Age of Avantgarde Innocence, the Body As Art Medium, Endurance, Art in the Environment, Feminism, Art in the Age of AIDS, the Culture Wars, Gender Benders, Race, Art/Life. I selected the pieces, and my wonderful intern Alex Burke went up to Pseudo to work cheek-and-jowl with the editor putting the shows together. Carolina Cruz-Santiago who had taken over ChannelP⁶ as executive producer from Galinsky at the time filmed me doing the intro texts. For my curatorial work, Franklin Furnace was to be paid \$25,000 by Pseudo, and I paid the artists \$100 for their participation.⁷ We got half the money, edited and aired half the shows, and then Pseudo's management pulled the plug on ChannelP, the whole shebang. I made the case that we only needed 15 hours of editing time to complete the whole series of shows, but they didn't buy that. Later I made another case to Pseudo's attorney and Josh Harris personally that since the rights belonged to the artists they would never be able to air the shows and Franklin Furnace should get the tapes back, but they didn't respond to that either. Rights schmights! But in the end it was good to have gone through this process because I finally understood that Franklin Furnace possesses two very important things that could be developed: (a) a good relationship with artists, and (b) intellectual property that could be developed as pedagogical resources. *The History of the Future* tapes form the basis of the 50 tapes that are now included in the Franklin Furnace Networked Digital Video Archive Prototype project I am working on with The Studio for Digital Projects and Research of NYU.⁸

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SANT: For over 25 years you have been clearly positioning Franklin Furnace not just as a presenting organization, and not just as an archival record-keeper, but also as a pedagogical resource.

WILSON: Like the early days of Franklin Furnace, the shape of an idea began to emerge through the fog. I realized that Franklin Furnace had gathered a lot of valuable resources in the form of the documentation of its programs by keeping its dual citizenship in presenting and preserving. *The History of the Future* was my first effort to "sell" the content I had created, and it almost worked, too, because although tapes of artists' performances were edited and works were necessarily excerpted, it was the real and very strong work of artists that comprised the content of the shows. This work is valuable to artists and professors in academic programs who don't have access to the raw materials that changed art discourse. OK, you can find information on Laurie Anderson and Eric Bogosian, but what about Susan Mogul's important 1975 feminist performance made for video in her apartment in Los Angeles on the subject of masturbation? Or Tehching Hsieh's performance [11 April 1980–11 April 1981] for which he punched a time clock every hour for one year? Or William Pope.L's *Crawl* in the gutter of the Bowery wearing a suit [1991]? Or Ron Athey's *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* [1993], which was demonized by our elected representatives? Reverend Billy protesting the Disneyfication of Times Square, the corporatization of America [1998 and ongoing]? This is relevant to everyone who lives in this great nation of ours! While presenting artists at Parsons [where Franklin Furnace took the first full season of live art on the Internet after the relationship with Pseudo ended in 2000] and teaching at the Department of Performance Studies [NYU] with you, it came to me that this work could illuminate classes in performance studies, art history, arts administration, theatre, American studies, women's studies, sociology, law, even

economics! But first we have to work out the business plan: How will this work be made available and under what conditions? It's important to me that the artists get paid for their work and we have permission for their images to be used.

I guess what I'm up to now is going forward and going backward with equal velocity, working out the technical and vocabulary issues of cataloging everything Franklin Furnace ever did onto the Internet, while still presenting artists who are questioning the status quo, trying to change the world no matter how absurd this idea may appear to be.

Notes

1. [See Clive Phillpot's article in this issue.]
2. The MoMA Library website is available at <<http://library.moma.org/>>.
3. Available at <<http://www.franklinfurnace.org/archives/archives.html>>.
4. [For more information on Franklin Furnace's archiving project, see Michael Katchen's article "The Hows of Deinstitutionalization" at <<http://www.franklinfurnace.org/michael.html>>].
5. Program details for this series are available at <<http://www.franklinfurnace.org/text5.html>>.
6. All the works Franklin Furnace presented through Pseudo Programs, Inc., appeared on Pseudo.com's Performance Channel, which was also known as ChannelP. The Performance Channel could also be reached directly through <<http://www.ChannelP.com>> between the fall of 1998 and the summer of 2000, when it was taken offline. See also my interview with Galinsky in this issue.
7. When live artists were performing in *The Future of the Present* program, they were paid \$1000.
8. The first phase of this prototype project was completed in 2002 and now serves as a test bed to solve digitization, cataloging, vocabulary, rights, and marketing issues raised by Franklin Furnace's plan to make video documentation of performance art available online. See <http://www.franklinfurnace.org/nyu_database/>.

Reference

- Katchen, Michael
 n.d. "The Hows of Deinstitutionalization." *Texts about Franklin Furnace*. <<http://www.franklinfurnace.org/michael.html>>.

William Pope.L in a performance that closed How Much Is That Nigger in the Window?, an installation at Franklin Furnace from 1 July 1991 through 31 August 1991. (Photo by Marty Heitner; courtesy of Franklin Furnace)

