



**FRANKLIN  
FURNACE  
AND THE  
SPIRIT  
OF THE  
AVANT-  
GARDE**

A HISTORY OF  
THE FUTURE

TONI SANT

interviewed Linda Burnham, editor of *High Performance*, about several issues related to performance documentation. Burnham talks about the feedback loop created when artists view documentation of their work prepared by others and defends her attempts at improving performance documentation by saying that she was “sick and tired of looking at all this ephemeral crap in magazines and not being able to tell what really went on” (Gordh 1981: 19). Performance purists would have us believe that “to tell what really went on” during a live performance we need to be there when it happens. Live art on the Internet challenges this position because, provided that there is adequate archiving of the live event, it is indeed possible to recreate the original event at a different time. What makes even the best documentation of live art on the Internet “something other than [the] performance” (Phelan: 146) is the fact that you are not able to interact with the piece, the performers, and other audience members as you possibly could during the live event. The other important variable is the context in which the original event is viewed. Viewing a politically charged performance years later, when the intricate tension between the event and the social, political, and/or economic environment has changed, makes the reception of such a piece quite different by its time-shifted audience. Generally speaking, this is not a problem over relatively short periods of time, and some pieces age well either because they deal with universal themes or because they serve as a time-capsule to be revisited for a taste of the way things were at a specific point in time.

### The future of the present

---

For the 1998–99 season, Franklin Furnace produced a series of twenty-two webcasts called *The Future of the Present*. The poster and all press releases issued by Franklin Furnace at the time describe this series as “22 netcasts of temporal art.” Time and space in performance art have been given broader scope with the presentation of live art on the Internet. This new medium provides the possibility to present interactive live art to an audience that is not present in the immediate physical space where the performance is being presented. Two artists tackled this and other aspects of live art on the Internet directly during Franklin Furnace’s second season at Pseudo.

Dahn Hiuni’s webcast *Art History 487: Late-Twentieth-Century Art* takes the form of a 15-minute prerecorded art history lecture delivered over the Internet by a supposed descendant of Hiuni in the year 2264. When the piece was first webcast from the Pseudo studios, on Friday, 7 May 1999, at the end of the lecture, Hiuni engaged in a live “Global Q&A” with his audience via the ChannelP.com live chat interface on the web. The lecture focused mainly on his own work but moved into a fictional narrative of Hiuni’s work in the early years of the twenty-first century, claiming that “Hiuni continued to perform on the Internet, ... eventually becoming a household name after the merging of the Internet and television. In 2014 he conceived his first son, live on the Internet.” Interestingly, he goes on to talk about a “neo-dark age” in the twenty-first century, when all digital art created,



delivered, and stored on computers was supposedly lost in what he calls "the Great Computer Crash of 2096" – a hidden after-effect of the Y2K bug. While this narrative is amusing as a comedic performance, such a mishap is not only unlikely, but also technically impossible since unlike art in the age of mechanical reproduction and before, digital art is not subject to the relationship between an original and a copy. Live art created and presented on the Internet is not the only form of digital art that is potentially different on repeat viewing, but it is certainly an example of art where time-shifted viewing loses an essential element from the original work. Documentation and archiving (two different activities involving copies of the original live digital art which are often combined into one) result in works that are different from the original (or excerpts of the original) work only in that the artist's actions are not co-present in time with the beholders of the work.

Outside the immediate realm of live art on the Internet, soon after Franklin Furnace started presenting artists on Pseudo's Performance Channel, ABCNews.com began producing a regular news webcast hosted by Sam Donaldson. Just like the shows presented on the Pseudo Online Network, Donaldson's newscast was first presented live to a web audience and then archived online for on-demand viewing. This concept was so alien to broadcasting veterans like Donaldson at the time that he regularly poked fun as he spurted out the standard signing-off phrase customary with many news anchors: "This is Sam Donaldson ... Live!" The notion that one's live webcast can be made accessible for streaming on demand contradicts the established conventions of immediacy and ephemerality associated with live performance, even if presented from a remote location as with live television.

Another webcast from the second season during which Franklin Furnace presented live art on the Internet at Pseudo highlights the importance of recognizing that performance on the web needs to be specific to the characteristics of this new medium. Choreographer Sarah East Johnson's Franklin Furnace webcast appeared live on ChannelP.com on Friday, 20 November 1998, and featured a discussion between Sarah East Johnson, her videographer Nancy Brody, and visual artist Mary Klein. The discussion was moderated by Martha Wilson and dealt with the relationship between the physical body and live performance. During the webcast, Johnson claimed that there should never be any hope of replacing the possibility of seeing performers live, "to hear them breathing, see them sweating, and to hear them thunk on the floor, or not thunk." Her belief is that mediatized performance can make conventional live performance – where the performers and the audience are in the same physical space – even more precious and more valuable as it becomes less available. Speaking from a position where artists dedicate all their energy and resources toward an event that is not mediated through communication technology, she insists that live performance is more expensive to make, support, and go to. While this may be so in some cases, generalizations in this vein are not very useful. During this webcast we are shown excerpts from dances made specifically for video that East Johnson shows during her live shows in theaters and other venues. She also speaks about how different dance for video is from dance created to be performed live in front of an audience.

While admitting that she does not know "what's gonna work as art" on this new medium, during this webcast Martha Wilson clearly shows a preference for work pre-designed for



video over live work captured on the Internet. Wilson recognizes that one of the major features of the Internet that makes it enticing for an audience is the ability to view the work at one's own chosen time. Mary Klein asks whether "the Internet is a body unto itself, that we should be using within that framework." Perhaps because performance on the web was still so new in 1998, Klein conflates text-based performance on the Internet with webcasting and fails to articulate the difference between representations of "the body" in performance in these two aesthetically dissimilar genres of Internet performance. Still, she is very aware that there is something more to the new medium, and proposes that the "live performance has to fuse with the technology" to make a new visual language that is presented by and through digital art. To this Wilson adds that it is very hard for performance artists to perform for "dead air" unless they are already used to performing in radio, television, film, or other kinds of recording studios. To create an in-studio audience for the artists at ChannelP, Wilson regularly invited her friends and encouraged the artists to bring in their own friends so the show would be performed to an audience present in the same physical space as the performance artist during the live presentation of the piece. By doing this, Wilson served the artists' varying levels of technophobia and camera fright but failed to consider the idea that with live art presented on the Internet, the live performance goes beyond what happens in the originating location and what comes out of the streamed media player, because the audience can (and does) almost always interact with the performers or their piece in ways not unlike radio or television call-ins from listeners and viewers. Having attended some of the webcasts live at the Pseudo studios at 600 Broadway, I can say that what the in-studio audience saw was a foregrounding of the background behavior directly related to the performance.

Audience dynamics continued to play an important part of the work presented by Franklin Furnace as *The Future of the Present* program continued elsewhere, after shows at Pseudo ended completely. In April 2001, Franklin Furnace teamed up with Manhattan's Downtown Community Television (DCTV) to present Argentinean artist Anahí Cáceres both online and on cable television. In 2000 DCTV started using webcasting to extend its airtime on the Manhattan Neighborhood Network (MNN) cable access channel.<sup>9</sup> When its time slot on MNN Channel 35 ends, DCTV's live shows often continue online. Cáceres's somewhat mystic piece, entitled *YIWE*, was thus presented as part of DCTV's ongoing series called *Live from Downtown*. Each episode of this series consisted of three basic components: a live performance, a video documentary created by DCTV's production team, and an interactive Q&A between the featured artist, the live studio audience, and the online audience. The Internet audience was invited to ask questions or comment on the show either via email or by text chatting on DCTV's website with the show's chat jockey. Cáceres's work consisted mainly of a temporary interactive installation reconsidering historical aspects of pre-Colombian cultures by assigning contemporary values to old artistic and ceremonial concepts. For several minutes, the artist and her collaborators stepped around the studio floor, in movements similar to Jackson Pollack's action painting, triggering electronic sensors that manipulated an electronic image of an ancient ritual object, the Yiwe, a solid



silver libation receptacle engraved with ceremonial symbols and belonging to the Mapuche, the indigenous inhabitants of the southern tip of South America.

The piece was presented to three audiences simultaneously: the audience of about thirty people at the DCTV studio, the MNN Channel 35 cable TV viewers, and the Internet users who viewed the live webcast. *YIWE* was immediately followed by a discussion with the artist and Martha Wilson, including questions from the studio audience and the online viewers who participated through the live-chat interface on the DCTV website, pre-recorded Internet video-chat questions, and emails to the TV show. In a personal email sent a few days later, Wilson told me she believed that the experience “was compromised by the fact that there were three gods to bow down to in one event: the cable audience expected TV-style applause, and so the live audience was prompted by DCTV staff to perform for them; and the Internet audience got short shrifted because there are no conventions yet.” This notion of evolving conventions will be picked up again later in this chapter.

### **Born digital**

---

Ever since Franklin Furnace's association with Pseudo, Martha Wilson has made sure to provide a special in-studio audience for the artists presenting their work in *The Future of the Present* series. Oddly enough, such a privileged audience often comes to witness works that fall within the born-digital category, created and delivered with digital technology for a screen-based experience. This type of work became even more evident in Franklin Furnace's programs after the end of the second season at Pseudo. Most of the works presented after 1999 did not involve a live webcasting component. For example, *Desktop Theater* by Adrienne Jenik and Lisa Brenneis, presented by Franklin Furnace in 2001, was presented in the 2D online graphic-chat environment known as the Palace.<sup>10</sup> In an article written for the Fall 2001 issue of *TDR: The Drama Review*, Jenik explains that “Desktop Theater” is both the name of her performance troupe and a new performance genre, which she also describes as Internet street performance, because it is performed in public gathering places where virtually anyone can pass by and comment on what is going on. Between 1997 and 2003 Brenneis and Jenik performed about thirty live Desktop Theater experiments ranging from an online version of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* at the Palace during the Third Annual Digital Storytelling Festival, to an elaborate original online performance in front of an audience sitting in a performance space at the Odin Teatret in Holstebro, Denmark, during the Transit III Festival of Women in Theatre.<sup>11</sup> In both these performances, the audience was made up of Internet users logged on to the Palace and festival attendees who watched the online action on a projection screen but who also watched the background work, which mostly involved Brenneis and Jenik tapping away at their laptops, foregrounded as part of the performance. In other Desktop Theater performances, such as *The World of Park*, a reworking of Yoko Ono's performance text *Grapefruit in the World of Park* from 1961, the audience was made up of Internet users only. *WaterWars[2]*, the piece Brenneis and



# FRANKLIN FURNACE AND THE SPIRIT OF THE AVANT- GARDE

A HISTORY OF  
THE FUTURE

TONI SANT

Franklin Furnace is a renowned New York-based arts organization whose mission is to preserve, document, and present works of avant-garde art by emerging artists – particularly those whose works may be vulnerable due to institutional neglect or politically unpopular content. Over more than thirty years, Franklin Furnace has presented works by hundreds of avant-garde artists, some of whom – Laurie Anderson, Vito Acconci, Eric Bogosian, Jenny Holzer, Karen Finley, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Annie Sprinkle, and the Blue Man Group, to name a few – are now established names in contemporary art and entertainment.

Here, for the first time, is a comprehensive history of this remarkable organization from its conception to the present. Organized around the context of the major art genres that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century – artists' books, live art, and digital performance – this book intersperses first-person narratives with empirical observations on issues critical to the organization's success as well as Franklin Furnace's many contributions to avant-garde art.

Toni Sant is Director of Research at the University of Hull's School of Arts and New Media in Scarborough, United Kingdom. He has also lectured about performance and new media at New York University and the University of Malta. For more see <http://www.tonisant.com>

*In telling the story of Franklin Furnace, Toni Sant unfolds its long multifaceted history splendidly, revealing to us its many adventures in a very informative and interesting manner. This book deserves a place on the shelves of art history and should be thumbed by many a scholar and artist.*

- Brian Routh (aka Harry Kipper),  
multimedia performance artist

*A riveting account of the evolution of one of the most innovative arts organizations of all time. An important and long overdue study, and essential reading for those interested in the interdisciplinary impulses of cutting-edge art and performance.*

- Steve Dixon, Professor of Digital  
Performance, Brunel University, London

ISBN 978-1-84150-371-4



9 781841 503714

intellect | [www.intellectbooks.com](http://www.intellectbooks.com)