Franklin Furnace and the Spirit of the Avant-Garde: A History of the Future

by Toni Sant


Franklin Furnace, itself an archive, means that the organization as inextricably linked to the sociopolitical and economic context of its times in New York. The histories offered by Sant, Wilson and others are conscious culturally and site-specific, documenting the complexities and sensibilities of the stories he is documenting. Sant avoids the temptation of ‘tidying up’ his narrative. He allows Martha Wilson, the main person behind Franklin Furnace, to come forth as a ‘protagonist’, and other key contributors to also claim their parts in those histories. In this way Sant succeeds in offering an account that is representative of the narratives told and stories left unsaid; as well as how and by whom those stories are being told. In this way Sant succeeds in presenting the history of Franklin Furnace alongside the Furnace, such as porn-star-turned-performance-artist Annie Sprinkle, and Barbara Quinn, Furnace’s director of development (1976-1985). The nature of Franklin Furnace Archive, Inc. is a renowned and hugely influential New York-based arts organization whose mission is “to present, preserve, proselytize and advocate on behalf of avant-garde art, especially forms that may be vulnerable due to institutional neglect, their ephemeral nature, or politically unpopular content.” Founded in 1976, the organization occupied 112 Franklin Street for 20 years before going virtual, and has presented, produced and supported work by hundreds of artists including Vito Acconci, Laurie Anderson, Ron Athey, Eric Bogosian, Karen Finley, Richard Foreman, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Barbara Kruger, Yoko Ono and Annie Sprinkle, to name but a few. Many of the artists that commenced their career with the support of Franklin Furnace have since become established names in the world of contemporary art; some have redefined the terms by which contemporary art is theorized, debated, presented and valued; some have challenged the nature of contemporary art itself. Throughout its long and often turbulent history Franklin Furnace has demonstrated an unaltering polemical spirit in its support of artists and practices that pose uncomfortable questions, engage with society critically and politically, and push the boundaries of art through their innovative approaches to media and format. This is an institution that is deeply anti-institutional in its stance – a contradiction that must be inherent to any organization that aims to support the ‘avant-garde’. Considering the length of Franklin Furnace’s ongoing history and the sheer volume of its heritage, one must acknowledge Toni Sant’s undertaking as both historically essential and rather daunting in terms of its scale and implications. Writing a comprehensive history of Franklin Furnace entails making choices about stories told and stories left unsaid; as well as how and by whom those stories are being told. It is to Sant’s credit that he did not choose to document and analyze those complex histories by himself; his book offers a range of perspectives. The most important voice that comes through this publication alongside Sant’s own is that of Martha Wilson, founding director of Franklin Furnace Archive. Sand has also invited first-person contributions from key figures associated with the Furnace, such as porn-star-turned-performance-artist Annie Sprinkle, and Barbara Quinn, Furnace’s director of development (1976-1985). The nature of Franklin Furnace, itself an archive, means that the author does not need to concern himself with the immensely arduous task of documenting artists that have been produced or supported by the organization over the years. Those documents are already publicly accessible in New York (via appointment), while many of them have been digitized and are also available online. The existence of those archives allows Sant to present a meta-history of the organization itself, the major strands of its activities and the mutations of its identity and purpose rather than detail its innumerable undertakings, and assess its overall impact on the New York and international art scene. The book is divided in two main parts: Part One opens with a timeline of Franklin Furnace’s history; features a long, in-depth interview with Martha Wilson; and includes first-person accounts from artists and partners of the organization. Part Two constitutes three chapters authored by Sant, which are primarily concerned with the main types of artistic practice that Franklin Furnace supported and produced: artists’ books, performance art and digital performance. The book closes with a list of Franklin Furnace’s publications.

Franklin Furnace and the Spirit of the Avant-Garde is successful in approaching the history of Franklin Furnace over the years as not one but many stories, that are, as yet, unfinished. Like the organization itself, the book is discursive, open to multiple views, and presented in a range of formats. Conscious of the complexities and sensibilities of the stories he is documenting, Sant avoids the temptation of ‘tidying up’ his narrative. He allows Martha Wilson, the main person behind Franklin Furnace, to come forth as a ‘protagonist’; and other key contributors to also claim their parts in those histories. In this way Sant succeeds in offering an account that is representative of the narratives told and stories left unsaid; as well as how and by whom those stories are being told. In this way Sant succeeds in presenting the history of the organization as inextricably linked to the sociopolitical and economic context of its times in New York. The histories offered by Sant, Wilson and others are conscious culturally and site-specific, documenting
occurrences such as the ‘Culture Wars’ of the 1990s, and illuminating the continuous interplay between art, policy, and society. As a result, it offers interesting insights about the impact of ‘mundane’ matters such as the cost of real estate, urban regeneration, health and safety regulations, and changes in art policy on the creative aspects of an art organization’s programming and decision-making. What comes out very strongly in Sant’s book is how inventive and ‘ahead of its times’ Franklin Furnace has been throughout its historical trajectory; but also how practical matters, such as restricted funding and limited resources, can push an organization to seek out innovative solutions that, possibly, a more comfortable endowment of means would not have necessitated. This is not to encourage cuts in arts funding (we don’t need more of those, thank you very much), but to point out that institutions that exist peripherally of the mainstream cultural sphere and marketplace (as any institution that seeks to position itself in the avant-garde must do) are often obliged to lead in more ways than one. It is thus fascinating to find out, for example, that Franklin Furnace ‘went virtual’, and embarked upon a partnership with Pseudo.com which led to some of the first netcasting events in 1998, as a result of a very tangible problem: the gentrification of downtown New York that pushed artists and art organizations out of that part of the city. Sant’s discussion sheds light on those important aspects of Franklin Furnace’s history that are, maybe, less ‘sexy’ than its artistic, creative and educational endeavours, and not as well documented.

For all its strengths, Sant’s book also has some shortcomings. The long dialogue between Sant and Wilson, though interesting, is also, on occasions, difficult to follow. The discussants move from one subject, person, or type of practice to another without an obvious structure in their exchange. They both speak as people who have themselves been immersed in those happenings and know the stories first hand. This seemingly unrehearsed, spontaneous exchange is lively and engaging, but can also appear fragmented and confusing – especially to readers from other cultures who might not be familiar with the New York art scene. Both parts of the book offer a wealth of information, referencing names, dates and occurrences. One does wonder though whether there is too much detail in this account. Sant offers a close-up view of Franklin Furnace that illuminates specificities, but sometimes hinders a broader and, possibly, more comprehensive perspective of the organization’s historical trajectory and impact. Furthermore, the two parts of the book do not cohere as seamlessly as one might have hoped. Though the dialogic nature and relevant ‘messiness’ of the overall account is appropriate and, in some ways, ‘daring’ on the part of the author, the shifts from one style and subject to another can be slightly awkward, and there are instances of repetition.

Franklin Furnace and the Spirit of the Avant-Garde is important because it tells the story of a hugely innovative and influential organization, the Franklin Furnace Archive. Finally, one does wonder why a catalogue of publications is the appropriate material with which to conclude this publication, which never set out to operate as an archive in itself.