



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.



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.

ENDNOTE

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.

Franklin Furnace and the Spirit of the Avant-Garde, despite any shortcomings, is an important book. It is important because it tells the story of a hugely innovative and influential organization, the Franklin Furnace Archive. This really is a "study long overdue" as Steve Dixon suggests on the book's back cover, and it is essential reading for those interested in artists and histories of the contemporary Western avant-garde, as well as those studying interdisciplinary practices – especially the interplay between performance art and digital technologies. Sant's book is also important for another reason: its focus on the 'mundane' aspects that influence creative processes – often engendering innovation and change much more efficiently than programs that seek to do so purposefully – is both illuminating and transferable to other geographic and social contexts. Throughout this publication Sant insists on documenting (cultural, social, and geographic) specificities, respects the 'anecdotal' oral histories as much as their academic interpretations, and accepts the value and credibility of subjective first-person narratives, placing them alongside 'academic' discourses. Those significant choices are not only stylistic, but also – and primarily – ethical, making this book relevant to those invested in narrating, documenting and archiving complex (his/her)-stories. ■

1. Franklin Furnace official website, "About Franklin Furnace," <http://franklinfurnace.org/about/index.php> (accessed August 2, 2012).