



On a mission to make the world safe for avant-garde art

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Equity & Social Justice @ Franklin Furnace Archive, Inc. Summer 2020

Dear Franklin Furnace Aficionados:

The tiny and resilient non-profit artists organization Franklin Furnace Archive, Inc. (FF) has built its outsized reputation through hard work. Started in 1976 by the dynamic artist Martha Wilson, the gauntlet was thrown my way a year ago when Martha stepped up to emerita status and I was named Ken Dewey Director.

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Horrifying and seemingly incessant racism and state-sponsored violence, laid bare by the disparate impact of Covid-19, including the murder of Mr. George Floyd and too many others, has left no doubt that Franklin Furnace is complicit in the non-profit art ecosystem slanted towards the economically advantaged. Yet it is important to note that FF has regularly risen to express solidarity and stand with artists fighting oppression. We have focused our power on supporting emerging voices that are not being heard or understood. We are indebted to, and have benefited greatly from, working with artists of every stripe. Many early-career artists who exhibited with FF have gone on to become recognized as cultural visionaries whose concerns and actions significantly elevate their communities. Even more have remained in the margins. We aim to support all artists equally and believe everyone has the right to representation for their work, no matter how difficult, challenging, or provocative their topics. FF does not represent a single community of artists; rather, it has always existed outside of the art commodity market, operating in circular, equitable, intersectional, and non-hierarchical ways that are not geographically or economically defined. FF provides multiple points of view and entry to its archives, which are aligned with and serve as a dynamic beacon for the wide range of local, national, and worldwide communities deploying a wide ecology of practices to get their messages across.

Meaningful decolonization in the artworld remains a challenging goal. We address this issue at every level and purposefully seek to partner with diverse artists, staff and board members, student interns, teaching artists, and organizations. FF has no curator: each year a new panel of artists reviews proposals from artists seeking a place on our platform. We believe this peer system benefits the full and ever-shifting composition of the global art community, and a good deal of FF's success stems from our conscious selection of artists representing a full spectrum of artistic practices, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, gender, sexuality, age, and physical and technical ability.

Franklin Furnace is designed to evolve continually and for 44 years has frequently assessed and adjusted its practices. Though today's nomenclature is different, our goal as artist/administrators always has been to expand best practices and sites for the presentation of avant-garde art aimed at equity and justice. In the late 1970s, FF was founded to address the lack of platforms for artists who were not white males. The first programs revolved around artists' books, but when artists wanted to exhibit and/or 'perform' their books, FF responded to their needs by carving exhibition and performance spaces out of its founder's former living loft. As the new millennium dawned, and the worldwide web rose to prominence, FF's staff and Board decided the internet was the next free zone where an artists' organization should operate. On February 1, 1997, FF leapt into the void and went virtual: our website became our "front window" and we began presenting performance art online. In spite of these advances, by the year 2000, most of the artists who came to us seeking support were activists who wanted to reach not only the art world but everyday people where they lived, on the streets, in parks, at the corner deli or bodega. Now in 2020 we find ourselves at another impasse, working from our homes, distanced yet still together in the search for resources to distribute equally to individual artists whose soulful missions aim at nothing less than changing the world.

Currently headquartered on the campus of Pratt Institute, Franklin Furnace acknowledges its privileges, its origins in white racist systems that dominate and control access and liberty for others, and the fact that there is still much for us to change. We strive to create an all-accepting, ever-growing, and ever-morphing community by continually tacking to the margins and remaining determined to sing the polyvocal songs of the unsung; to support artists left out of the mainstream due to various marginalities; to address hot-button topics such as race, gender, ability, economics, equity, and justice; and to present to the world the abundance of once-disfavored and experimental art and culture represented within our archives. Mirroring Cornell West's assertions about "the central role of the arts for oppressed people," FF's voluminous archives are very real documentation of the art and artists of an explosive period in world culture. FF remains an emergent phenomenon, a vital ongoing art project with a far-reaching network of participants.

As Franklin Furnace Fund recipient and current Program Manager Ms. Arantxa Araujo points out, "What makes FF invaluable beyond its funding, generous administrative support, powerful networking system, and platforms offering unbridled freedom to experiment in ways often labeled inappropriate by the mainstream, is the legitimacy FF name recognition lends and the opportunities it forges to let artists be heard loudly and clearly by insiders and newcomers alike." We stand with #BlackLivesMatter and pledge to take action to eradicate racism; to decolonize; to tear down barriers and replace them with doors and windows. We strive to create inclusive space for questioning, for difficult conversations and action no matter how uncomfortable it makes us. We believe there is no progress without friction, that our efforts need to rest on an open invitation to debate, dialogue, and learn in service to social justice. To this end we are:

- ▶ opening a new Loft on our website this fall, a worldwide platform designed to support a culture of active participation, listening, feeling, healing and action;

- ▶ ensuring that Franklin Furnace's Board of Directors and staff will better represent the incommensurable constituencies we serve; and
- ▶ working to dismantle institutional racism, plantation capitalism, entrenched patriarchy, and other foul systems of oppression.

I believe true humanity, justice, and equity only can be achieved when we advantaged people and organizations act on behalf of all the disadvantaged. I acknowledge my privileges and am determined to continue to learn and act to better our world. Please call me, in or out, anytime.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Harley Spiller". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned centrally below the "Yours truly," text.

Harley Spiller
Ken Dewey Director