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NYFA QUARTERLY - Fall 1999

Article 4

Remediation: The Changing Spaces of Multimedia Art

William R. Kaizen

Multimedia art has been around for years. Non-discipline specific art is at least as old as the dada spectacles of Cabaret Voltaire. Today, multimedia has become a pervasive artistic practice, freeing artists from the confines of any particular discipline. Artists are now at liberty to use whatever medium or genre their projects need. Collaborations between dancers and video artists, painters and theater companies proliferate while technology continues to evolve, blurring the lines between media, artist and audience.

Multimedia may be a century old but until recently artists couldn't find venues for exhibiting or performing this type of work. Presenting multimedia art has always been a challenge to older, traditional presentation spaces such as opera houses and theaters. They either refused to show it for fear of alienating their audiences or couldn't show it because they lacked the



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Multiple Mediums: The New Forms of Multimedia

necessary technological infrastructure. Artists whose work couldn't be neatly classified as "poetry" or "architecture" or "dance" would miss out on opportunities for funding because there were no category to which they could apply. There was also a lack of residencies to support the exploration of multimedia art.

By the seventies, artists were able to show their multimedia work in Europe but not in the United States. To give artists opportunity here and to meet the demands of the public, a wave of institutions came to the rescue. Older spaces modified their programming to suit the needs of large-scale multimedia productions. New spaces emerged, featuring the work of artists who would go on to become some of the country's best known artists. Support programs evolved offering funding and residency opportunities.

Almost two decades have passed since the first generation of multimedia spaces formed. Most have thrived, presenting challenging work, transforming our conceptions of both art making and presentation. In fact, it is thanks to the work of these organizations that multimedia work has become not only accepted but also the norm. Recently, there has been an effort within the multimedia community to increase the level of support for artists by undertaking a variety of new initiatives. In order to stay current, many first generation spaces have changed their programming to keep pace with artistic innovations and new technology. These new initiatives are an attempt to remedy to these spaces. Otherwise they run the risk of becoming the conservative establishment they once opposed.

Franklin Furnace was part of the first wave of multimedia presenters. Founded by Martha Wilson in New York City in 1976, its original mission was to support the production of artists' books. Its programming quickly grew to include live performances, showcasing the early work of artists such as Robert Wilson and Karen Finley. When the bottom fell out of the art market in the early nineties, Ms. Wilson says, "our fortunes changed. It became politically and financially discouraging to be an in-your-face arts organization."

After months of soul searching, Ms. Wilson decided that "the most important thing Franklin Furnace had was the most ephemeral thing – the programming." She decided to "de-institutionalize" Franklin Furnace. Their Soho loft was sold and, after partnering with Web broadcasting company Pseudo Programming, Franklin Furnace went online only. Now their performances can be viewed solely on a computer screen, broadcast live on the Web on ChannelIP.com.

Dissolving their physical space was a radical move but it was the right move for Franklin Furnace. Ms. Wilson says, "It seems to me that the Net is the perfect forum for concept driven art. The Net, with its performative, archival and publishing aspects, is the only place for us to be right now. The Net is not about the solo artist working alone in their garret waiting to be discovered. It's much more about teamwork and equality."

Franklin Furnace reaps internal benefits from being online as well. Since all of their content is now produced digitally, archiving their performances is a piece of cake. "Digitization is a great way to preserve the stuff you're doing," says Ms. Wilson. "In the old days, we used to present a performance and all we could do was take slides. Nowadays, we present a Netcast and it's digitally taped. When we're done, the contents of the tape become an infinitely reproducible digital copy of the piece."

The Experimental Television Center (ETC) in Newark Valley, NY has begun a different type of Net-based archival program. Founded in 1971 by Ralph Hocking, ETC is a place where artists can invent new work using video and other electronic image-making technologies. ETC features a residency program where artists from all disciplines come to explore electronic media and a grant program that offers finishing funds for works in process. ETC's newest program is the Video History Project. Undertaken in collaboration with Alfred University's Institute for Electronic Arts and the New York State Alliance for Arts Education, the Project is an on-going research initiative that documents the history of video art and community television in New York State.

The first phase of the Video History Project is a Web site that features an extensively annotated timeline on New York electronic arts. Though not specifically multimedia oriented, the Project records multimedia benchmarks such as the founding of Experiments in Art and Technology in 1967 and the founding of the Visual Studies Workshop at Rochester University in 1973. In the future, the Program hopes to develop strong educational partnerships to insure that all historical materials related to the electronic arts can be accessible for study and exhibition. Other goals include the collection of oral histories and the creation of educational materials for use in the classroom. "It's an ongoing project," Ms. Miller Hocking says, "which acts as both a collection center and a vehicle for the dissemination of video history."

Partnering is one way for institutions to share resources and become stronger together. Like ETC's work with Alfred University and the New York State Alliance for Arts Education, iEAR Studio's (short for integrated electronic arts) is expanding its programming with a little help from other institutions. iEAR, part of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, is a state-of-the-art electronic production facility, which supports undergraduate and graduate studies and presents a variety of programs to the public.

One of iEAR's biggest public events is EAPS (Electronic Arts and Performance Series), a yearlong series of lectures and performances by artists who work with electronic media. In the past year alone, EAPS has showcased the work of artist Laurie Anderson, and Bill and Mary Buchen as well as younger artists like Kristin Lucas. To expand their presentation opportunities, EAPS has begun partnering with other institutions. Last January, EAPS collaborated with MoMA and the Austrian cultural institute to present Austrian video maker and performance artist Valie Export.

Upstate venues for experimental work are few and far between. "There aren't very many," EAPS Director Elise Kermani says, "Many of these artists might not have other opportunities to show their work upstate." Partnering with other upstate such as ETC and State University of New York at New Paltz is mutually beneficial. "We work together to bring people upstate. This way we can all broaden our audiences." iEAR is also working together with New York City based Harvestworks Digital Media Arts Center to sponsor an artist residency program. This summer, for the first time, three sound based multimedia artists are being invited to finish production of their work using iEAR's facilities.

Having access to facilities is what makes the production of any multimedia or tech based artwork possible. Before BAM (the Brooklyn Academy of Music) began offering its facilities to artists, there was no large-scale venue in the United States for multimedia works. Current BAM Director Joe Melillo recalls that in the seventies, though it seems unbelievable now, "artists like Phillip Glass, Robert Wilson, Laurie Anderson and Tricia Brown couldn't get their large scale work produced in the U.S. There were greater opportunities in Europe. Europe had larger theaters, opera houses which would do this kind of work, and performing arts festivals with larger stages."

To meet this need, BAM started the Next Wave Festival in the early eighties, featuring collaborative multimedia productions on its main stage. By offering its space and resources to artists BAM was transformed from America's longest running performance space—in continual operation since 1861—to America's premier space for multimedia performance work.

Mr. Melillo, who was newly appointed director this summer, is instigating many new changes to BAM's programming. The Next Wave will now include, "a global consciousness," says Mr. Melillo, "featuring more representation from Asia, from Africa and from the Latino populations around the world." He also wants to open BAM's doors to a new generation of artists: "We need to try to find younger artists, to begin to identify the next generation of art makers who should be given the opportunity to work on this scale."

Under Mr. Melillo's guidance, BAM is also moving into the world of digital media. BAM and Bell Labs/Lucent Technology have recently teamed up to develop a digital media lab at BAM. Mr. Melillo hopes that "the lab be a place where artists will come and make

art using new technologies. It's a way for us to invest in artists, to teach them how to use new technology and to advance their art." It is also an investment in BAM's programming – the best of the projects will be presented as part of the Next Wave Festival.

While the established organizations try to remediate older programs in an attempt to keep ahead, new organizations continually emerge offering fresh visions of multimedia presentation. This doesn't necessarily mean jumping on the new technology bandwagon. New inspiration can be found in old ideas.

One new organization that has recently formed revives the old variety show format as way of reinvigorating multimedia. Founded in 1997, MANY (Musicians and Artists New York) produces art festivals that features different genres – from music to dance to theater to multimedia – all on the same bill. Like an old time variety show, a MANY's festival showcases talent regardless of genre. Founders, Phil Mantione, Alysse Stepanian and James Martentic see each festival in total as a multimedia event although individual artists' work may be discipline specific. As Ms. Stepanian says, "The individual pieces are not necessarily multimedia but together the entire event is."

The goal of a MANY festival is to create new audiences for different types of work. The founders were tired of going to the same discipline specific art events and seeing the same faces at every event. They wanted to create a festival that would draw a mixed audience, a festival where someone might come to see a dance performance and stay to hear music. "The original idea," Mr. Mantione says, "was to provide a venue to bring different disciplines together. I found it frustrating when I would go to music concerts and see the same people there in the audience. I wanted to expose people to types of work that they may not seek out otherwise. My hope was that people would come for one part of the program and stay for the rest."

MANY offers complete freedom to the artists it invites to present work. They put no constraints on the projects. "We create the possibility for artists to meet and work together," says Mr. Mantione. "What we've found is that when we invite people to be part of a program they may not have been thinking about working collaboratively. But when we tell them that there is going to be a video projector available, they say, 'I've been wanting to do this.' It spawns something that wasn't there before. Often there is the desire there but it remains untapped unless it's the right opportunity is presented."

To date, MANY has presented three festivals featuring over fifty artists in total. The most recent was OnetoMANYthree held at Dixon Place in June. It featured work that ranged from spoken word to new music to dance to mixed media performance. Stepanian says of the event that "they are very stressful to produce but we get such a high from watching the performances. And afterward, when people from the audience show us their appreciation and when the artists are excited -- that's our reward."

William R. Kaizen is FYI's Senior Editor. He is also an artist, writer and designer who lives in New York City.

Contact Information:

Franklin Furnace is live and archived on the World Wide Web at www.franklinfurnace.org. They can also be reached by mail at Franklin Furnace, 45 John Street, #611, NY, NY 10038 or e-mail ffurnace@interport.net.

ETC can be reached at 109 Lower Fairfield Road, Newark Valley, NY 13811 or e-mail etc@servtech.com. They are online at www.experimentaltvcenter.org, where you will also find the Video History Project.

To contact iEAR go to their website at www.arts.rpi.edu. Mail at iEAR, 110 8th St., RPI, Troy, NY 12180 or call 1 (518) 276 - 4778.

To find out more about Harvestworks and its residency programs, visit their Web site at www.harvestworks.org or write Harvestworks, 596 Broadway, Suite 602, New York, NY

10012, e-mail harvestw@dti.net or call 1 (212) 431-1130.

BAM's Web site is www.bam.org. Their mailing address is 30 Lafayette Street, Brooklyn, NY 11217.

Contact MANY at 32 - 14 Astoria Blvd., #3R, Astoria, NY 11102 or visit <http://home.earthlink.net/~manti/>

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