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CINE-GT 1803

7 October 2011

Assignment #2: Presentation of Information

For this assignment, I explored the moving image resources of the following two organizations: Media Burn, an independent video archive, via the Internet; and Franklin Furnace, an institution that sponsors and documents time-based visual arts, via an on-site research visit. The institutions are similar in that each currently functions as an archive, rather than as a library, museum, or exhibition space. They are small organizations, with minimal office space and few staff members. While both provide physical access to materials upon request, neither maintains a readily available public facility. For Media Burn, this has always been the case, whereas Franklin Furnace has a very complicated institutional history that includes numerous performance/exhibition spaces, art object collections, and organizational missions.

In an effort to clarify this complex history, Franklin Furnace's website provides detailed documentation of its evolution from a foundation formed to support print-based book art to a funder, chronicler, and repository of avant-garde art in all its varied forms. In addition to a basic introduction in twenty-seven languages, including English, the website's splash page provides tabs for the following categories: "For Artists," "Goings On," "Research," "Support Us," and "About." "About" provides an institutional history, further broken down into an organizational overview and a timeline. For the purposes of this assignment, I focused on the research information. Under "Video Directory" I found only eighteen listings, so I went back and clicked on "Event Archives." This led to information regarding the "Franklin Furnace Event Archives

of Variable Media Art,” which “consist[s] of documentation of events presented or funded by the organization from 1976 to the present.”

Event information is available in an online catalog, the link to which is highlighted for the user by its graphic presentation in a hot-pink, prize-ribbon-style circular frame labeled “FF Event Archives.” Unfortunately, the catalog itself is not entirely user-friendly: the most problematic feature is the inability to get a consolidated list of search results. Instead, the screen switches directly to the results page for the first record that satisfies the search, and any subsequent records must be accessed by arrowing through to the next relevant record. Time-consuming and frustrating, this process entails an entire screen refresh for each record. The only way to return to the original search is to go back and re-enter the information, a repetition that I found frustrating and confusing, with no way to keep track of my search progress. There is a separate help document for the event archives, but it simply details what I have described.

For some of the records, there is online video available and, via an advanced search, it is possible to “Browse Records with Videos.” Electronic access to Franklin Furnace’s moving image collection was initiated in 2006 with the receipt of a “two-year grant to digitize and publish on the Internet records of performances, installations, exhibits and other events produced by the organization during its first ten years.” However, there are currently only 34 records available. Thus ending my online exploration of Franklin Furnace’s moving image materials, I then returned to the “Research” information. While it is noted that the organization is trying to raise funds to put its in-house database online, access to this resource currently requires a visit to the archives. Researchers are advised to call or email to make an appointment. There are no fees. When I contacted Franklin Furnace, I was able to make an appointment for that week. Online, researchers are advised that “you will be given a pencil and paper to record your observations

when viewing original physical material. Copying of original material in any way is strictly prohibited. The use of personal computers, cell phones, cameras and other similar devices is not allowed.” The “Lending and Viewing Policies for the Moving Image Collection” section forewarns: “The Moving Image Collection is composed almost exclusively of video documentation of artists presented or funded by Franklin Furnace. Because it is a research collection and permissions have not been granted by the artists for distribution, you may view tapes onsite but they may not be copied or removed.” For the video rental of materials, the site provides contact information and links to Electronic Arts Intermix and Video Data Bank.

Franklin Furnace Archive, Inc. is located in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, where the offices and much of the archives have been housed, since October 2004, on the third floor of the James E. Davis Arts Building. The door to room #301 leads directly into the office, which has an open floor plan. There are only seven permanent staff members (four of whom were present), and I was first greeted by the senior archivist with whom I had made the appointment and then, unexpectedly, by a New York University Museum Studies graduate student, Lizzie Stevens, whom I had previously supervised at my current job. Since I had a personal contact at the archives, my experience there is probably atypical. Lizzie, who is interning at Franklin Furnace, showed me around the facility, which is only about 1,500 square feet in size. All materials that are currently part of the archives are stored on-site in archival boxes; unfortunately, the temperature and humidity are not currently maintained at preservation-recommended levels.

Usually, the Senior Archivist, Michael Katchen, conducts a research interview prior to the researcher’s visit to the archives so that he can have materials ready for viewing. The in-house database, which is currently being transferred from IMAP-based to PBCore 2.0 metadata standards, is available to the on-site researcher; constructed with FileMaker Pro, it is easier to

use than the online event archives catalog. All access copies are on DVD and are screened on a standard desktop computer LCD monitor. Franklin Furnace no longer has ½-inch open reel or U-matic playback equipment, so original analog materials are not available for viewing. I was given a copy of Franklin Furnace's "Best Practices and Guidelines" document, updated this month. Judging by the extensive and informative website, my reception at the archives, and the mission statement, Franklin Furnace is very concerned with public access and is doing its utmost to provide a easily-navigable, online portal to all of its moving image holdings. They continue to fund and support new artists' projects.

By contrast, my virtual visit to the Media Burn Independent Video Archive did not uncover a surfeit of online information. Founded in 2003, the archive is a project of the Chicago-based Fund for Innovative TV. Although there is an "About Us" link on the splash page of the website, the most concisely stated information regarding the archive can be found via the blog (a link to which is also available on the home page): "The central focus of the archive is a unique collection of Chicago-based independent video—the most extensive of its kind anywhere.... The works...cover many topics, but they share important qualities: all were produced by independent videomakers outside of corporate contexts...." The site encourages serendipitous exploration of the collection, via a search box that is more or less incorporated into the logo on the splash page; "Viewer's Choice" and "Explore the Media Burn Collection" curated links; and a home-page-level "Videomakers" tab which leads to a page highlighting eight video creators.

The Media Burn archives house "a collection of over 6,000 hours of independently produced, non-fiction/documentary videotapes." According to the website, not all of the materials are available online, but the entire catalog can be searched via the main search box, where, in addition to title, description, and producer, there is a checkbox to "expand search to

include videos not yet available online.” In the “About Us” section, users are advised that “not all of them [the video holdings] are online yet, but we can move them to the front of the digitizing line upon request.” There is also a title index, which is searchable alphabetically, and provides screenshots for available videos. Curiously enough, there is no option to search or to sort by year.

Registering and logging in to the site—a simple, no-fee procedure—is required to be able to save videos and clips to a playlist, participate in the forums, and create custom DVDs for purchase. After locating a video which has been digitized, the user can click on the video screenshot to launch a Clipstream™ viewer, the functionality of which is, unfortunately, questionable. On my computer at home I could, after a short pause, stream video online, but I was not able to enlarge the viewing screen or to make use of the “jump-to” feature for the nicely detailed shot lists. At work, perhaps because of a better Internet connection, both of these functions worked. I was able to create a DVD playlist but could not discover the order/purchase process.

When I wrote to Media Burn with several questions about the video viewer and the site, the Executive Director, Sara Chapman, quickly responded: “We built our site in 2005 and now a lot of things are broken or outdated and need to be replaced.... We are still in a research and testing phase...I would hope that we would have transitioned within 6 months to a year. The new site will use current technologies to provide full-frame resolution, embedding, commenting, and all the now-standard elements of online videos.” Surprised that I was able to access the playlist-creation system at all, she suggested the following routes to acquire viewing copies: “DVDs are generally \$20 for up to 2 hours of material to cover our staff and equipment time. Or we can send high resolution digital files for \$5/hr. We are gradually increasing our offerings of some of our

most popular titles through Tribeca Film Institute. Digital rentals of these titles vary from 1.95 to 2.95, digital download is 6.95-12.95, and dvd purchase is 24.95.” Forty-eight works are posted on the Media Burn YouTube channel, and there are nine documentary DVDs available for purchase in the online store.

According to Chapman, most of the requests for video come from teachers. Accordingly, Media Burn is very focused on being a resource for educators and provides online teaching models which include “clip sets, suggested activities and discussion questions to use in class.” Furthermore, they are working to create a set of DVDs that addresses specific topics and to make it easier for teachers to download moving image material for classroom use. For both educators and researchers, viewing access—at what their website notes is a “crowded storefront” location—needs to be scheduled a few days to a week in advance and is free of charge. Access copies are created from uncompressed AVI files.

As with Franklin Furnace, Media Burn is committed to preserving and providing access to creative works. While both organizations are actively working to transfer their moving image collections to high-quality streaming versions, this work is dependent on grants and donations. When contacted directly, both Franklin Furnace and Media Burn staff members not only willingly gave thoughtful answers to my numerous questions, but also provided me with unpublished documentation regarding their preservation process. At present, it appears that both collections are underutilized resources. Hopefully, the growth of the Franklin Furnace and Media Burn online offerings will lead to greater interest in their holdings, increased participation in their individual organizational missions, and a heightened awareness of the importance of the work required to maintain and provide access to moving image collections.

Works Cited

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