

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

In Readers' Hands, Archives Find New Contexts

by [Megan N. Liberty](#) on [March 30, 2015](#)



Martha Wilson and Andrew Blackley at the 'Innovative Practices of Presenting Archives to the Public' panel at Center for Book Arts (all images courtesy Center for Book Arts)

Now more than ever archives are in a transition, one that offers an opportunity for new potential at a time when there's nostalgia for old, dusty cardboard boxes. In [a *Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art* book](#), published in 2006, dedicated to the subject of archives, its editor Charles Merewether claims: "it is in the spheres of art and cultural production that some of the most searching questions have been asked concerning what constitutes an archive and what authority it holds in relation to its subject." These searching questions were the topic of the [Center for Book Arts'](#) History of Art Series [Repositioning the Archive](#) earlier this month, particularly the second panel of the three-part series, "[Innovative Practices of Presenting Archives to the Public.](#)"

New York University [Fales Library Collection](#) director and curator Marvin J. Taylor organized the panel that featured: [Franklin Furnace](#) director and founder Martha Wilson; archivist, curator and

artist Andrew Blackley; and director of [NYPL Labs](#) Ben Vershbow. Gathered with a packed audience on the snowy first day of spring, the panelists discussed their respective involvement with archives and methods of engaging the public. In his introduction to the panel, Taylor criticized the popular method of adding archival material in vitrines as an afterthought to exhibitions, lauding the invited panelists instead for being innovative with these materials. Yet, as the ensuing discussion revealed, “activating” past documents, projects, notebooks, and ephemera can raise complicated questions of subjectivity, authorship, and curatorial license.

Franklin Furnace originated as an institution devoted to fostering time-based visual art or as Wilson referred to it, “conceptually interactive works of art,” often requiring audience involvement, presenting a challenge to traditional archive techniques. In the case of Franklin Furnace, the physical place is the archive; the place is the record of these interactions. As a consequence, Wilson noted, the institution’s own archive is categorized by event, privileging time and place over a singular work with a singular author.

As articulated in Franklin Furnace’s mission statement, the institution provides for its artists “both physical and virtual venues.” In highlighting the latter, Wilson projected still images from the first netcast, [Halona Hilbertz’s “Pseudo Studio Walk,”](#) performed in 1998. It consists of Hilbertz walking from one end of an empty room right up to the still camera and then turning around and repeating the process over and over. “The performance was filmed at a specific time and then streamed at a specific time,” Wilson explained. “But then it can also be downloaded and played at different times. And the time is different in Hong Kong than in the place where it was uploaded to the Internet.” The performance exists in the digital space of the Franklin Furnace archive, the imprints of which are distributed across time zones and digital spaces around the globe.



Audience at the ‘Innovative Practices of Presenting Archives to the Public’ event at Center for Book Arts

In the opening to her book [Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives](#), poet Susan

Howe proclaims: “we need to see and touch objects and documents; now we often merely view the same material on a computer screen.” Lamenting, “While I realize these technologies offer new and often thrilling possibilities for artists and scholars [this book] is a collaged swan song to the old ways.” Vershbow’s approach to digital archiving at the New York Public Library is a direct response to the experiential quality of archives usually lost through the digitalization of materials. Taylor explained in his introduction, “He’s not just putting things out there, he’s transforming the collection.” Vershbow outlined a set of repositionings of the archive: archive as network, as geography, as data, and as digital material, many of which involved making connections between spatial locations and archival material. For example, one of the projects under the archive as geography category invites the public to identify the shapes of various buildings on old insurance company maps in order to link specific buildings with information in the library’s collection. “It’s about creating relationships and links between different archives,” Vershbow explained. Not only do the materials become interactive through crowd sourcing, this participation allows for future activation of the materials, once complete, the maps and various diagrams won’t just be images but links to various other information all tied to a specific place.

Participation was also at the core of Blackley’s presentation and approach to curating archive-driven exhibitions. He described his curatorial method of “intervention” — sometimes his own, sometimes those of other artists or invited members of the public. In [*Not only this, but ‘New language beckons us.*](#), a 2013 exhibition he organized for Visual AIDS, Blackley commissioned texts by artists and writers about objects in the Fales Archive collection. These texts were displayed alongside the chosen materials and then added to the archive, linked to the material about which it comments.



Left to right: Marvin J. Taylor, Ben Vershbow, Martha Wilson, Andrew Blackley at ‘Innovative Practices of Presenting Archives to the Public’ panel at Center for Book Arts

While creating new interconnections, this process of curatorial intervention questions traditional authorship and authenticity. Firstly, is the work the new text, the original material, or a combination of both? Who is the author of the work, if in fact it is a combination of the old and new? And, can the archival material speak for the artist, even if his or her views and thoughts have since changed? Controversially, Blackley claimed, during the question and answer period, that these distinctions of authorship and intentionality are not what he engages with; instead he prefers to think in terms of “authorship as use,” imagining the *Not only this* exhibition to be something of an editorial project.

In fact, authorship was one of the main subjects during the question and answer session. Audience members suggested various ideas to bring the artist back into the work or archive in a more direct way, perhaps by soliciting and adding their commentary on a past work, or by organizing works not by “author” or “artist” but rather by “creator.” However, these suggestions still conform to the stringent ideas of singular or central authorship present in art making and archiving. In response, Taylor rather emphatically stated towards the end of the discussion, “I wish the art world would catch onto, as the literary world has, the intentional fallacy — that sometimes an artist does not know what they are doing!” Often the ephemera, documentation, and detritus of artists invite new projects and interpretations — like the ones described by Blackley, the ongoing work at Franklin Furnace, and the work of contemporary writers such as Susan Howe — beyond what the artist first intended or imagined. Who claims the ability to reinvent on top of or alongside other’s intellectual property? This tension keeps us returning to archives, with their ripe potential for newness, despite their dusty encasings. As Taylor so eloquently put, “archives continually re-perform themselves.”



Ben Vershbow presenting at ‘Innovative Practices of Presenting Archives to the Public’ panel at Center for Book Arts

[Innovative Practices of Presenting Archives to the Public](#) took place at the **[Center for Book Arts](#)** (28 West 27th St, 3rd Floor, Chelsea, Manhattan) on March 20.



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