

MARTHA WILSON  
LECTURED  
ON FEBRUARY  
19<sup>TH</sup>, 2014 AT  
PORTLAND STATE  
UNIVERSITY



[STUDIO] IS THE  
DOCUMENT OF  
PORTLAND STATE  
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MFA STUDIO  
VISITING ARTIST  
LECTURE SERIES.

50

STUDIO

INTERVIEW WITH  
MARTHA WILSON

“  
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takes time itself to be its primary subject.”

After her lecture at Shattuck Annex, Martha Wilson answered our questions about her work as an artist and founder of Franklin Furnace, the performance/project space and archive she began in 1976 “to champion ephemeral forms of work neglected by mainstream arts institutions.”

[STUDIO]: What do you consider your most important work and why?

MARTHA WILSON: When I was in Halifax, experimenting with my own personality as a sculptural medium, I thought each piece was very different from the next. Then 40 years went by. Looking at this body of work now, I can see that all the works I did between 1971 and 1974 hang together with the notion of self-transformation as the common denominator. So perhaps the most important work I have done is myself!

[S]: Do you have any advice on starting and sustaining a successful arts organization to support contemporary avant-garde art?

MW: In the early days of Franklin Furnace, I thought I would discover the formula for raising money. But every year, it's a new crapshoot as the social, political and economic winds blow in new directions. So my advice is to understand that it continually is your job to adapt to changing circumstances, while holding tight to the principles upon which you founded your organization.

[S]: In interviews you have stated that you have begun to view your administrative work as a part of your art practice. Is it possible that, conversely, your art practice serves to “manage” arts and cultural institutions in an administrative way? If yes, do you feel this is the role and/or duty of the artist? Or is it simply a natural reaction to conditions of institutionalized censorship by way of funding scarcity?

MW: It was Anne Focke who asked, “Why can't we regard our administrative work as an art practice?” This was a totally liberating thought because at the time I was feeling angry and distracted by the amount of administrative work required by my young arts organization. The converse idea, that my organization is actually a work of art, is a radical concept that was first proposed to me in 2009 by my artist friend and curator, Peter Dykhuis. I'm not sure I like it, because I have been careful to NOT use Franklin Furnace as a bully pulpit for my own work and ideas. In answer to your question, I'm not sure how my art would “manage” my organization, except in that the ideas that inform my work also inform the administration of my organization.

You ask about conditions of institutionalized censorship by way of funding scarcity. During the Culture Wars, some artists like Bella Lewitzky refused to sign the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) contract that required them to not produce works that did not meet “community standards of decency.” I signed right away because I feel it is my job to get money to artists so they can do their work, and in so doing, embody the values of the contemporary avant-garde art community. Here is an article that looks at the constitutional ramifications of the NEA Decency Clause: [bu.digication.com/spsuthwr150/Final\\_Draft1](http://bu.digication.com/spsuthwr150/Final_Draft1)

[S]: What is your opinion of the current state of the NEA?

MW: The controversy caused by the “NEA Four” performance artists unfortunately caused the NEA to gut the fellowship program. Now you can only get an NEA Fellowship if you are an artist in “Literature” or “Jazz.” Creative Capital Foundation is a good but different alternative to this program. Here is a link to the NEA Four section of Franklin Furnace's website: [franklinfurnace.org/research/related/nea.php](http://franklinfurnace.org/research/related/nea.php)

[S]: In a conversation sparked by your lecture, you said artist's bodies are disappearing in new media, and in newer art generally. Would you reiterate some of your thoughts in relation to the corporeal and transgressive work exhibited by Franklin Furnace during the 80s and 90s? What were the defining factors of that work?

MW: At the end of the 1990s, artists started to regard the body of the Internet as a circulatory system in its own right and to see surveillance by private corporations and government as a threat. When Franklin Furnace “went virtual,” I thought the body of the artist would be left behind. Indeed, our first collaboration in 2000 was an online game, “Superschmoozio: The Game of the

International Art Market,” by artist Jack Waters. This interactive online game replicated the climb through the ranks of the art world necessary to become a “professional artist,” complete with schmoozing and backstabbing. Franklin Furnace assisted Waters by introducing him to artists Lisa Brenneis and Adriene Jenik, who had developed “desktop theater,” in which avatars, controlled by individuals located around the world, interact. The use of avatars in place of the body and virtual environments in place of real ones touches the heart of the discussion of live-ness, presence and the mediatization of performance.

There has been a big discussion in Performance Studies circles represented by such thinkers as Peggy Phelan, who believes that a viewer must be present for the actual performance, and Philip Auslander, who argues that the mediatized image is just as valid as the real-time experience. This is a crude summary of their differences, so if you are interested, I would urge you to research their writing further.

[S]: From your curatorial perspective, how do today's art schools, if at all, play a role in neutralizing or abetting art's transgressive role in society?

MW: Often, the best artists don't come from art backgrounds. Vito Acconci was a poet before he became an artist. Then he went into public art, perhaps out of frustration with the insular quality of the art world. Also, art can be made out of anything: in 1972, I visited Bas Jan Ader at his home in Los Angeles. He was making drawings out of Commodity Market fluctuations on the price of lettuce (get it? Lettuce equals money.) I was shocked that he was using commodities trades as the basis of his drawings—but why not? Art schools that focus on conveying the craft of printmaking, for example, may not convey the larger social, political and economic context in which students must live after they graduate.

[S]: At your lecture you gave a fantastic explanation of the difference between theater and performance art. Would you please expand on that for our publication?

MW: Performance art in my view is the opposite of theater, which holds, according to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “the willful suspension of disbelief” as its objective. Performance art has raided literature, music, dance and theater traditions (while theater has borrowed from performance art conventions), spreading confusion. In general, performance artists remind their audiences: THERE IS NO ARTIFICE HERE. THIS IS HAPPENING NOW, IN “REAL” TIME. Because it is embedded in the body, performance art takes time itself to be its primary subject. Tehching Hsieh's one year performances—during which he, for example, lived in a cage, punched a time clock every hour, lived outside, was tied to another person, and did “no art”—place the body's expenditure of time at the center of the idea.

[S]: Will you please discuss the role of the absurd gesture in your work and the work of artists who have been involved with Franklin Furnace? Do you think this is a way to subvert the dominant culture's patriarchal lens?

MW: By 1992, the Culture Wars were getting Franklin Furnace down. We had been investigated by the General Accounting Office and audited by the New York State Comptroller during the summer of 1990. But more debilitating still, from 1985 to 1995, the Audit Division of the National Endowment for the Arts had installed us on grant reimbursement basis, which basically meant we were lending the United States Government money by incurring the costs of funded programs, then submitting copies of checks stapled to invoices to find out how much of the costs the NEA would allow. I hired a person whose entire job was to prepare cash requests. Anyway, in the midst of this dismal time, our peer panel selected a proposal from artist Nicole Eisenman and sex worker Chris Miller for “The Lesbian Museum,” an exhibition of contemporary and historical dildos. We thought: if we can't laugh, we're going to explode! (The show went off without a hitch.) The moral of this story is that the absurd act can vent your frustration while also acknowledging the hopeless situation in which we find ourselves as individuals battling larger forces.

Thanks for your questions!

[S]: Thank you, Martha!

UNFOLD FOR STUDENT RESPONSES

MARTHA WILSON is a pioneering feminist artist and gallery director who over the past four decades created innovative photographic and video works that explore her female subjectivity through role-playing, costume transformations, and “invasions” of other people's personae. She began making these videos and photo/text works in the early 1970s while in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and further developed her performative and video-based practice after moving in 1974 to New York City, embarking on a long career that would see her gain attention across the U.S. for her provocative appearances and works. In 1976 she also founded and continues to direct Franklin Furnace, an artist-run space that champions the exploration, promotion and preservation of artists' books, installation art, video, online and performance art, further challenging institutional norms, the roles artists play within society, and expectations about what constitutes acceptable art mediums. In 2008 she had her first solo exhibition in New York at Mitchell Augus Gallery, “Martha Wilson: Photo/Text Works, 1971-74.” In 2009, “Martha Wilson: Staging the Self,” an exhibition of Ms. Wilson's early photo/text work and one project from each of Franklin Furnace's first 30 years, began international travel under the auspices of ICI (Independent Curators International), and in 2011, ICI published the Martha Wilson Sourcebook: 40 Years of Reconsidering Performance, Feminism, Alternative Spaces. Martha Wilson joined P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York, and mounted a solo exhibition, “I have become my own worst fear,” in September, 2011.

NEXT

LECTURE

Tony Feher • May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014

EDITION OF [STUDIO]

Andrea Geyer



The new PSU MFA Studio Lecture Series brings together artists from a variety of disciplines to explore the subjects of their own work before a live audience. Lectures and related events are held throughout the year, most often at 1914 SW Park Avenue in Shattuck Annex on Wednesday nights at 7pm.

PSU's two-year, full-residency MFA in Contemporary Art Practice/Studio degree program is dedicated to interdisciplinary exploration through the experience of making. Students are supported in a range of production disciplines, from the traditional to the emerging, as they consider the multiple ways art can live in and beyond the studio.

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02

It is certainly true that Martha Wilson's early artworks *Deformation* (1974) and *Self-Portrait* (1973) can be described as having a concern for physical appearance and an anxiety about the process of aging. But it is important to investigate the context in which these pieces were produced to fully understand the impact they had on the viewing public and the history of performance art. When Wilson began exploring female identity through video, photography and performance, there were very few women widely recognized within the art world. As founder of Franklin Furnace, her work supporting other women and marginalized artists was a quiet force buoying up these new voices. When she began impersonating first ladies, there were very few women in politics and leadership roles in general. Perhaps today it would not be considered bold or radical to put oneself on display, but imagining a time when it was rare casts such gestures in a different light.

*Deformation* (1974) is a video and series of photos with Wilson as subject showing the process of using makeup to accentuate facial features she considers "bad." Wilson starts with no makeup and describes to the viewer what she does not like about her looks. She then proceeds to apply makeup and prove her point, stating, "If I call attention to the things that I fear the most, then I know that I don't really look this way most of the time. It makes me feel a lot better after I see myself this way and I know I don't look like that..." In the performance *Self-Portrait* (1973) she was seated in the gallery while the audience was encouraged to make notes on their impressions of her appearance so she could better understand her identity. In effect, she was creating a document that reflects back on the culture of the time. As one would expect, there were a lot of negative comments, many from men

essentially questioning, *who does she think she is?* These performative actions combined with the responses they received paint a somewhat grim portrait of the milieu in which she was working.

She revisited the *Deformation* piece later in her career under the title, *I Have Become My Own Worst Fear* (2009). As a mature woman, the features she contrived as a young woman have now become part of her actual self, albeit likewise exaggerated. Earlier, with the piece *Posturing: Drag* (1972), in which she dresses as a man dressing as a glamorous woman in drag, she mentions the idea that "form determines feeling."

**Over Wilson's 50 or so years of playful investigation of identity and appearance, she has presented us with several opportunities to reflect on our feelings about our own appearance and to confront the taboo notions of "ugliness" and self-loathing.**

Taking into account Wilson's wider body of work and history as the founder of Franklin Furnace, I found it somewhat troubling that I was not fully aware of her impact until now. Her relative obscurity, at least on the west coast, suggests that public display of the less radicalized aspects of gender identity creates a quiet shift that isn't associated with a leader or figurehead, particularly if that leader is representing the opposition forces during the Culture Wars. It is something that seeps into our consciousness without us really knowing it is there.

04

**The stage is normally a judgment table where musicians serve themselves up as a delectable spectacle. By inserting themselves, unchanged, into the context of music, DISBAND claims its place.**

This declaration not only serves as the formation of a group but also stands in opposition to what bands are supposed to be. No wave's fine disregard was the mother of the Pacific Northwest Riot Grrrl movement of the '90s. The third-wave-femme Riot Grrrls took DIY to the next level by unabashedly challenging sexual identity, patriarchy, and the notion of what underground punk could be. Fostering community and pushing for communication, zines were published calling for a girl riot. Second-wave feminism provided a model for how infrastructure would transform the stage from a table to a platform.

Adopting DISBAND's attitude and high energy belief in women, bands like Bratmobile, Le Tigre, and Jack Off Jill challenged the mostly male punk scene, hoping to dissolve the division. Although the fight for equality, respect, and legitimacy persists, bands like DISBAND create a continually expanding space for activist punk and girl power. As time goes on, more credit is being given to the radical females who have influenced no wave, punk, grunge alternative, and, most recently, electroclash.

05

**Martha Wilson is a pioneering feminist artist of the 1970s. In her forty-year career, she has used photography, video, and performance for her own artwork and has also been a curatorial force in New York's art scene through her organization Franklin Furnace.**

Much of her work is self-portraiture, using her body as the raw material for an investigation into issues of gender and identity. Even though thought on sexual politics has evolved since the 1970s, Martha Wilson's work from that era still holds up because it focuses on fundamental, universal ideas of beauty and role-playing.

Martha Wilson has addressed beauty many times in her career. In her 1974 video *Deformation*, she starts out trying to look as beautiful as possible through the use of makeup and camera angle. Over the course of eight minutes she applies makeup and changes her hairstyle to make herself as ugly as she can. This very simple gesture and simple artistic strategy of "misusing" is actually very rich and layered. As she said in an interview<sup>1</sup> published in 2011, "does makeup embolden expression, inhibit expression? Does it operate like a mask? Or does it operate like a means or a conduit, a way to get expression across?" This idea of revealing weakness and insecurities through everyday self-expression is still widely explored. One recent popular example is Baltimore art student Lindsay Bottos, whose Tumblr blog received widespread attention when she posted self-portraits of herself overlaid with harassing anonymous messages that had been posted to her account. While the times and technology have changed, the theme of women (or anyone) facing fears of being unattractive is still relevant.

Another important strategy Wilson has used is that of role-playing. Using costumes and altering one's own identity in images is still ubiquitous in the art world. It is a simple and effective way to say "I am this and also I am not this." In the 1970s, she did a series of photographs entitled *A Portfolio of Models* in which

she dressed up as female stereotypes: goddess, housewife, working girl, professional, earth mother, and lesbian. With work like this, she was "trying to find a voice, an identity, a sense of self, a way to exist in the world, sometimes by assuming the position of the other, sometimes by parodying one's self."<sup>2</sup> While the terminology for these tropes has changed over the years and has gotten more complex, the idea of predetermined roles in society is still very much with us.

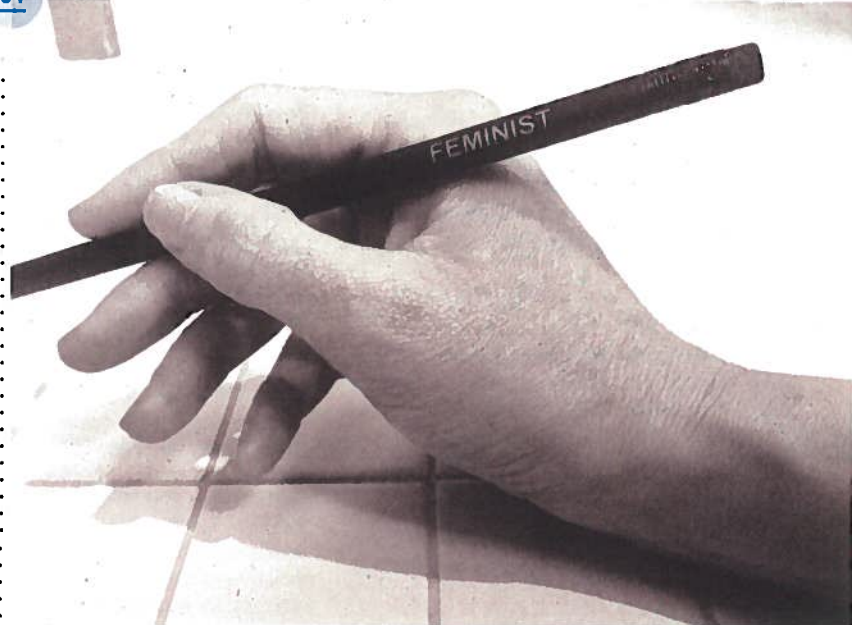
Martha Wilson's 1970s feminist artwork was fairly simple with low production values, but the concepts behind the work were strong. In exploring her identity and place in the world, she hit upon something most artists can only dream of: she found universal human themes that resonate through time.

<sup>1</sup> Wheeler, Britta. "Martha Wilson." *BOMB Magazine*. Oct. 2011. Bombsite.com Web. Accessed Feb. 2014. <http://bombsite.com/issues/999/articles/6158>

<sup>2</sup> Lynn Hershman Leeson, filmmaker and director of the documentary *IWomen, Art, Revolution*

<sup>3</sup> Gómez, Edward. "Martha Wilson and the Well-Examined Female Self." *The Brooklyn Rail*. Nov. 2011. <http://brooklynrail.org/2011/11/artseen/martha-wilson-and-the-well-examined-female-self>

01



03

**THERE IS A SPECIFIC DISTANCE TIME OFFERS. THE "OHhhh ALL RIGHT, THAT'S HOW WE GOT HERE" MOMENTS HAVE STOPPED SURPRISING ME.**

And if you were born before (or maybe a bit after) 1980, please feel free to roll your eyes a million times over when I reveal that I'm endlessly jealous of the no wave era. Wikipedia describes the 1970s to mid-1980s underground New York scene as a "wasteland of cheap rent and cheap drugs." (Sounds like a dream.) Reacting in opposition to the new wave genre, no wave offered a gritty DIY approach to music. This attitude predicted notions of the "nondifferent" that Boris Groys hails as the solution to the dichotomy of new vs. different within art. With songs like "Look At My Dick," "Hey Baby," and "Every Girl," DISBAND created the foundation for the Riot Grrrl musical and political movement of the 1990s as well as the electroclash music of artists of the early 2000s like Gravy Train!!!! and Peaches.

DISBAND, born in 1978 when Martha Wilson invited friends to participate in an all-girl conceptual art band, was—and still is—experimental to say the least. None of the members play instruments. Videos of their performances in Rome circa 1980 typically show two members on stage chanting phrases at each other and challenging one another with authoritatively cheeky demeanors. In "Look At My Dick," two members are battling. (This is a pun, for all you wet noodles.) The performers share a garden hose, one end of which runs up a leg of either artist, to stand in for the signified member. As one tries to show the other her dick, there is a struggle, which humorously critiques showy masculinity.

In most of DISBAND's videos, there is no traditional singing and no particular skill. It's more like a sing-songy loud-speak with occasional clapping and performative gestures. The power resides in the difference beyond difference. We can recognize the artists as non-singers positioning themselves within the

structure of a band, which implies enjoyable entertainment for those watching. DISBAND doesn't deliver fancy grooves with theatrical costumery like the majority of new wave bands. DISBAND revels in its fun-time lack of skill and runs with it, displacing value from mechanics and focusing more on yelling out the message. This ordinary approach holds a mirror up to the struggles of womanhood, the opposition between can and can't, saying, "WHO CARES?"