

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

The Radical Art of Archiving Performance, as Practiced by Martha Wilson

by [Alexis Clements](#) on April 8, 2015



Hallway entrance to 'Martha Wilson: Downtown' exhibition at the Fales Library, 2015 (all photos by author for Hyperallergic)

The day after I went to go see the [Martha Wilson: Downtown](#) and [Performing Franklin Furnace](#) exhibitions in New York City, a friend brought me to a [lecture-performance by Carolee Schneemann](#) at a raw gallery space in Tribeca run by Hunter College. In the lecture, accompanied by slides, videos, and occasional help from an assistant, Schneemann constructed an art historical biography of herself that felt both earnest and enjoyably absurd. Referring back to drawings from her very early childhood, she drew stylistic and thematic connections between them and the work she has created as an adult over the course of nearly six decades. Her primary argument was in defense of defining herself as a painter, which is how she began working as an artist, and to which she still lays claim despite using

performance and film as her primary media in much of her later work.

What struck me most about Schneemann's performance that evening, beyond her wit and affable charm, was that she was actually narrating her archive to us. On more than one occasion she referred to "you young people interested in archives" — not so much as a plea for attention (the large room was packed, and at least 20 people were willing to stand for the entire lecture in order to hear her talk), but rather as an insinuation that she was laying everything out for others to take up. Her narrative felt less like an attempt at controlling the ways she was historicized and more like a strategy to avoid erasure.

The practices of using [first-person accounts or oral histories](#), [ephemera and grassroots archives](#), as well as [alternative publishers](#), have long been core strategies for feminists seeking to document and preserve histories that have been ignored or mischaracterized by institutions. Watching Schneemann deftly toy with the transmission of her own history, I couldn't help but reflect on the shows I had just seen of work by [Martha Wilson](#) and the organization she founded, [Franklin Furnace](#). Both exhibitions foreground a first-person archive that is, even as it winks and nods, taking a serious approach to preservation and asserting influence.

Wilson is an artist best known for her performance and photography works. Quite often her early photography is mentioned in the same breath as [Cindy Sherman](#)'s. In these discussions, the two are often matched against one another in a false competition — as if the world is only big enough for one woman using photography and performance to ask questions about the limits and problematics of identity (to say nothing of [Suzy Lake](#), [Nikki S. Lee](#), or countless others who employ related strategies, subjects, and media).



Installation view of Martha Wilson's "Composure" series (1972)

Looking at the work of Wilson's that lines the long, narrow hallway just outside the main entrance to NYU's [Fales Library](#), what struck me in the series titled "Posturing" from the early 1970s, were the short bits of prose framed with the photographs — prose written by Wilson that frequently mentions how she felt as she embodied these personae. From "Posturing: Age Transformation" (1973):

I am a twenty-five-year-old artist trying to look like a fifty-year-old woman trying to look like she is twenty-five. I was extremely uncomfortable dressed up like a middle-aged female, which I take to be an index to how much fear I have of 'past thirty' status in society.

It's not so much the autobiographical that I appreciate there, but the plumbing of comfort and discomfort in the adoption of roles — how it feels to try to be someone else. In most of the work in the hallway, the transformations in her photos are recursive: the personae she adopts are people who themselves are trying to be something they are not or to represent something that others do not see in them. Wilson's acknowledgement of her own unease is a way of plumbing the unease with which roles are assumed or imposed at a philosophical level. Her first-person narration is not didactic so much as a further point of inquiry into the questions her work poses: why do we adopt roles; who imposes them; how do we manage the feelings they engender; and how do those feelings shape our further choices and embodiments?

Wilson's narration and commentary also reveals her growing consciousness of her role as an

artist. From the introduction to “A Portfolio of Models” (1974):

These are the models society holds out to me: Goddess, Housewife, Working Girl, Professional, Earth-Mother, Lesbian. At one time or another, I have tried them all on for size, and none has fit. All that’s left to do is be an artist and point the finger at my own predicament. The artist operates out of the vacuum left when all other values are rejected.

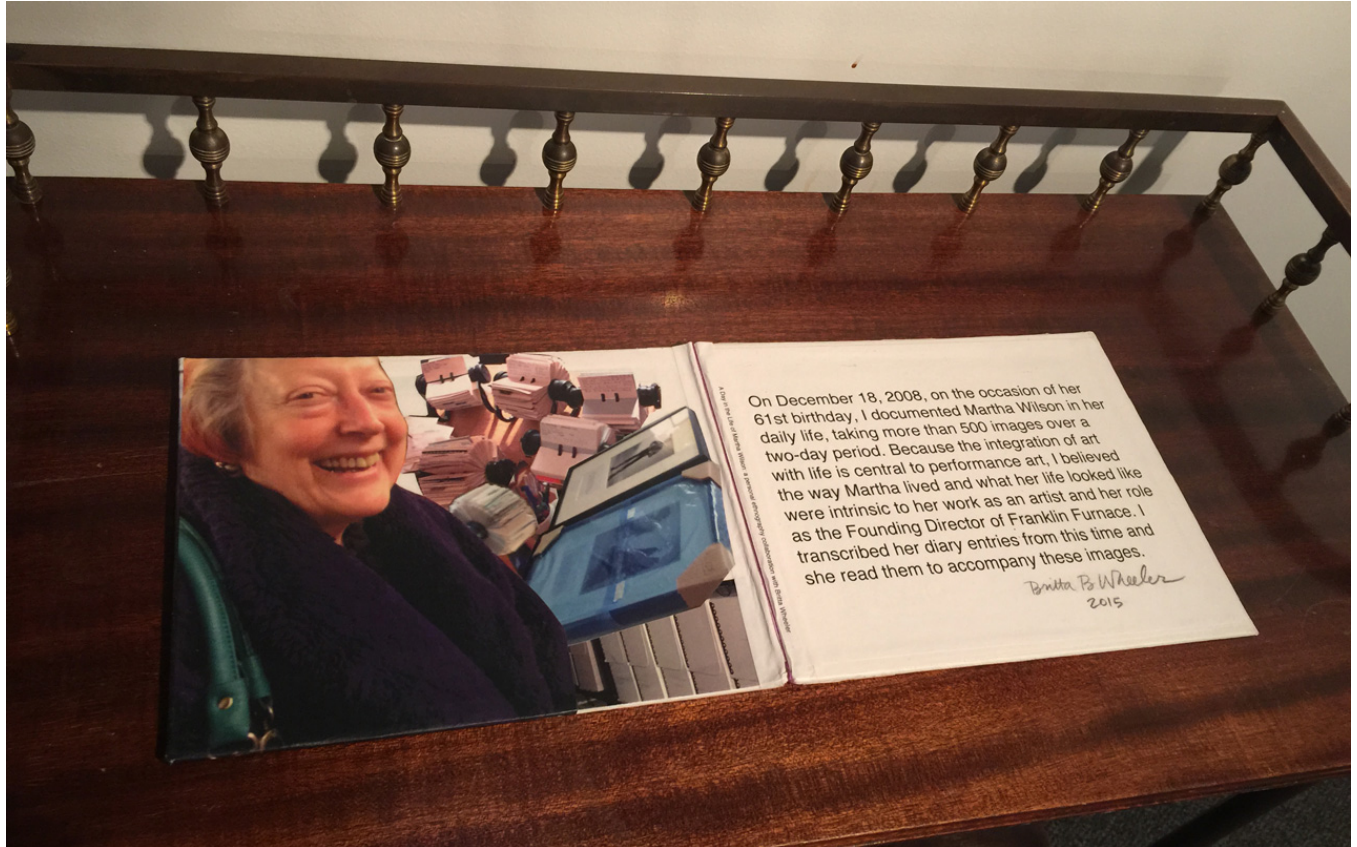


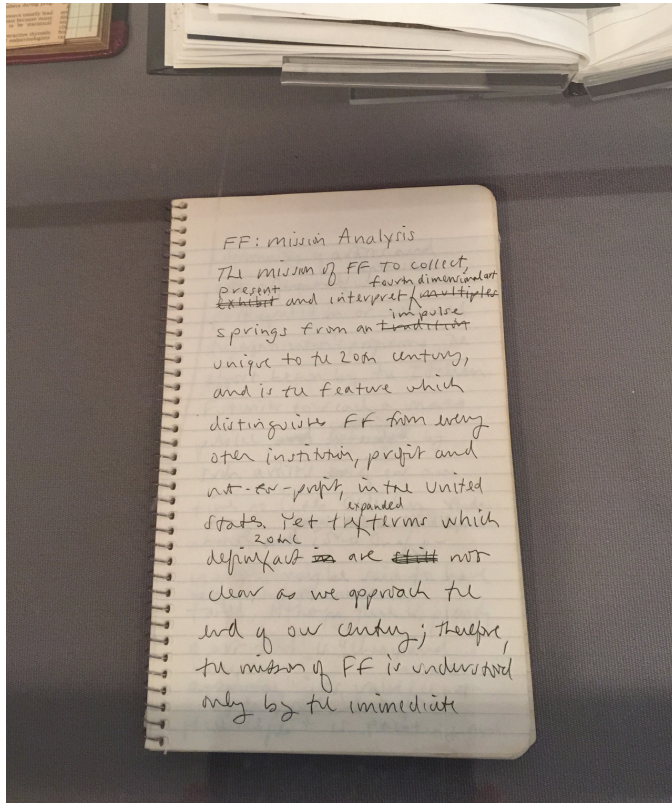
Photo of portfolio accompanying Britta Wheeler’s “A Day in the Life of Martha Wilson: a personal ethnography collaboration with Britta Wheeler” (2015) (click to enlarge)

In fact, much of the show at the Fales Library reflects on Wilson playing the role of the performance artist, feminist, and institution-builder. The main room of the show holds numerous cases of Wilson’s diaries and notebooks, filled with writing covering much of her life and career. In the piece that seems to anchor the exhibition, “A Day in the Life of Martha Wilson: a personal ethnography collaboration with Britta Wheeler” (2015) by artist [Britta Wheeler](#), we see Wilson going about her life in brief snapshots, all arranged in a video slideshow accompanied by voice-over of Wilson reading from her journals.

In this work, Wilson quite literally plays herself and narrates her life, describing her activities from attending events and meeting artists down to the mundane details of waking, reading the paper, and executing her Dadaist morning exercise regime. It’s like a corollary to the glossy magazine profile of her that has never been written, but also a provocation to historians who might prefer to read just one or two pieces of her at time, rather than taking the artist, her work, and her organization as a complex whole.

Though it isn’t featured quite as prominently in the Franklin Furnace show at the Pratt Manhattan Gallery, Wilson’s voice is still very much present there. She collaborated with the

curators in choosing the works on display, many of which center on artists using live performance and their own bodies to challenge or toy with expectations around both identity and art-making.



A notebook of Martha Wilson's in which she is working on the mission statement for Franklin Furnace. (click to enlarge)

Franklin Furnace's mission, which can be seen getting worked out in one of Wilson's diaries in the Fales Library exhibition, is "to present, preserve, interpret, proselytize, and advocate on behalf of avant-garde art, especially forms that may be vulnerable due to institutional neglect, their ephemeral nature, or politically unpopular content."

In addition to her Franklin Furnace work, Wilson has amassed an enormous collection of artists' books. They feature prominently in the Pratt Manhattan show, taking up one corner of the gallery space and a large table in its center. But, in thinking of an archive as a strategy, the artists' books collection came to represent a very literal form of support and preservation for Franklin Furnace.

In 1993, after having collected over 13,000 books and periodicals, Wilson signed a deal with the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) then-director Richard Oldenburg in which [the museum acquired the books](#) for a substantial sum of money, which helped Franklin Furnace gain a foothold. It's worth remembering that the early 1990s were the height of the Culture Wars in the US, and that the [NEA Four](#) were all performance artists, three of whom had previously presented work with Franklin Furnace, to say nothing of the numerous other artists Wilson presented at a time when performance work by gay, lesbian, and feminist artists was regularly being targeted for vilification.

The organization took major financial hits during the Culture Wars: the New York State

Council on the Arts cut Franklin Furnace's funding by over \$100,000, the New York City Fire Department closed their performance space, and the IRS began conducting an audit of their finances under pressure from US Senator Jesse Helms (see an [overview of events](#)). The sale of the art book archive became a key component in Wilson's effort to keep the organization going despite outside forces that sought to wipe it out completely.



Installation view of art book collection at 'Performing Franklin Furnace' Pratt Manhattan Gallery, 2015

More recently, Wilson once again turned to archiving as a survival strategy, this time both for the organization, the work, and the artists it has presented. With an initial grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in 2006, and subsequent support from the NEH and others, Franklin Furnace has worked to build an [accessible digital archive of events and performances](#). These sorts of pragmatic details and financial nitty-gritty may seem removed from feminist politics, and it is fair to question the controls and access levels imposed on the art book collection after MoMA took control of it, but I can't help marveling at Wilson's tenacity. She has established a body of work for herself and her organization that others have been forced to reckon with, even though many may find its form and content too unwieldy or disagreeable to interpret.

Perhaps that's the key to this strategy and what makes it so fascinating: Wilson, like Schneemann, is demonstrating and embodying methodologies for grappling with what others find too messy and confusing to confront through the act of narrating her own archive. Some will dismiss these narrations as too personal or too close to the subject, but we know by now that objectivity is, at best, an illusion. The fact that so many people who have done so much for the arts are forced into the position of writing their own histories remains galling and problematic. But as an act of resistance and a strategy for demanding attention by the sheer

weight of their accomplishments, it's clear that the archive remains a powerful tool.

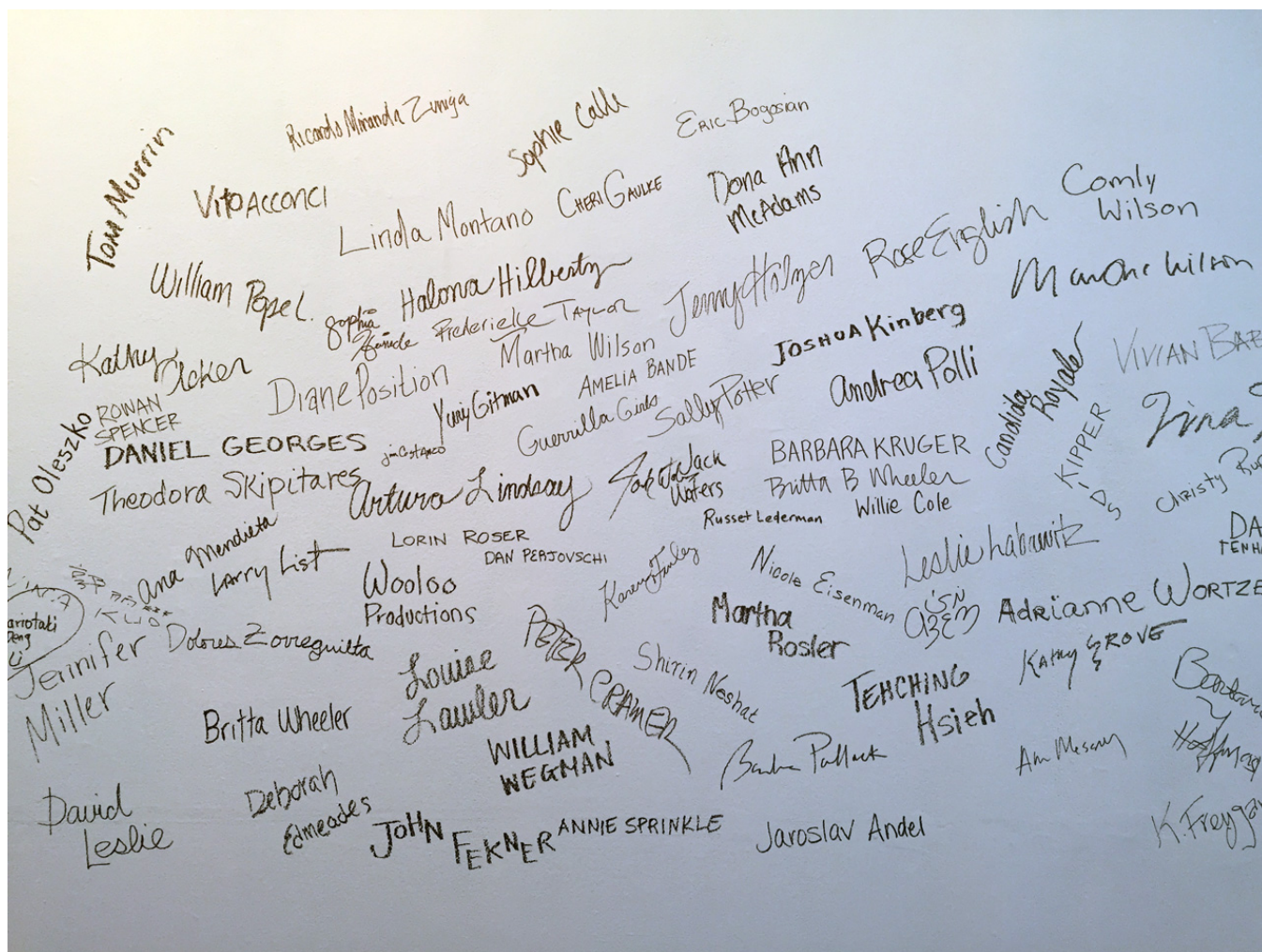
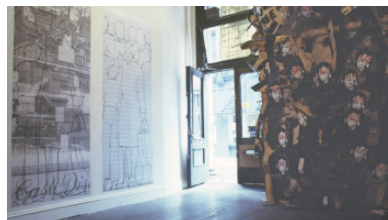


Photo of wall containing the names and some signatures of artists who have presented work with Franklin Furnace, 'Performing Franklin Furnace,' Pratt Manhattan Gallery, 2015

[Performing Franklin Furnace](#) continues at the [Pratt Manhattan Gallery](#) (144 West 14th Street, 2nd floor, West Village, Manhattan) through April 30. [Martha Wilson: Downtown](#) continues at NYU's [Fales Library and Special Collections](#) (70 Washington Square South, 3rd floor, Greenwich Village, Manhattan) through April 30.



Franklin Furnace, Performance Art Pioneer, Relocates to Pratt Under Long-Term Agreement



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