



# Smithsonian

*Archives of American Art*

## Oral history interview with Martha Wilson

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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	Archives of American Art
<b>Title:</b>	Oral history interview with Martha Wilson
<b>Date:</b>	2017 May 17-18
<b>Identifier:</b>	AAA.wilson17
<b>Creator:</b>	Wilson, Martha, 1947- (Interviewee) Zapol, Liza, 1978- (Interviewer)
<b>Extent:</b>	8 Items (sound files (5 hr.,4 min.); digital, wav) 88 Pages (Transcript)
<b>Language:</b>	English .
<b>Digital Content:</b>	<a href="#">Digital Content: Oral history interview with Martha Wilson, 2017 May 17-18, Transcript</a> <a href="#">Audio: Oral history interview with Martha Wilson, 2017 May 17-18, Digital Sound Recording (Excerpt)</a>

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## Administrative Information

### Acquisition Information

This interview is part of the Archives of American Art Oral History Program, started in 1958 to document the history of the visual arts in the United States, primarily through interviews with artists, historians, dealers, critics, and administrators.

### Available Formats

Transcript is available on the Archives of American Art's website.

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## Biographical / Historical

Interviewee Martha Wilson (1947- ) is a performance artist and administrator of the Franklin Furnace archive based in Brooklyn, New York. Interviewer Liza Zapol (1978- ) is an oral historian at the Archives of American Art.

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## Scope and Contents

An interview with Martha Wilson conducted 2017 May 17-18, by Liza Zapol, for the Archives of American Art at Wilson's home, in Brooklyn, New York.

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## Scope and Contents

Wilson speaks of growing up in Philadelphia area on a houseboat; moving to Newtown, Pennsylvania to live with her grandparents; her Pennsylvania Quaker upbringing, philosophy and family lineage; her experiences rejecting Quakerism as a teenager; her school and camp experiences; her mother's background as an artist; the history of Native Americans in Newtown; her father's family, character, and sexual abuse; her studies in Nova Scotia and her transition from studying English Literature to her inclusion at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD); her early works, such as Breast Forms Permutated, and her drag pieces; the treatment of women at NSCAD and her identification as a feminist performance artist, inclusion in c. 7500 and relationship to Lucy Lippard; using her body in Conceptual Art; the influence of Erving Goffman in her understanding of performance; moving to New York; her interest and work in performance art and Artists' Books; decision to move to New York; working in publishing and learning organizational systems; the founding of Franklin Furnace; her home and real estate conflicts in Brooklyn and protesting the Atlantic Yards Barclay Center development in Brooklyn; the development of Tribeca in 1976 and collaboration with other art spaces. Spreading of the arts spaces to East Village and Chelsea in the early 1980s; the management of Franklin Furnace as an extension of her artistic career; the creation of Disband and their collaborative; the creation of her political characters: Alexander Plague, Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush, Tipper Gore, Donald Trump; the way she approaches characters; audience reactions; the decision to go virtual with Franklin Furnace, and conflict with the board; being a member of the Guerrilla Girls; the use of humor; the process of working by consensus; the conflicts within the Guerrilla Girls about hierarchy, race, debates about mission of the Guerrilla Girls; her performance as Michelle Obama; institutional and NEA responses to Franklin Furnace in the 1970s and 1980s; the professionalization of the arts spaces; the "NEA Four" and fighting for freedom of expression; the lineage of Performance Art and the lineage of the avant-garde; her son's birth and meeting her partner; current work of Franklin Furnace at Pratt. Wilson also recalls: Simone Forti, David Askevold, Vito Acconci, Margaret Kaplan, Printed Matter, Exit Art, Diane Torr, Barbara Kruger, Jacki Apple, among others.

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## Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Arts administrators -- New York (State) -- New York -- Interviews  
Performance artists -- New York (State) -- New York -- Interviews

Types of Materials:

Interviews  
Sound recordings