

ARTFORUM

October 6, 2011

Martha Wilson

P.P.O.W

535 West 22nd Street, 3rd Floor

September 10–October 8



Martha Wilson, *Growing Old (April 1)*, 2010, color photograph, 20 x 20". From the series "Growing Old," 2008–10.

For the past four decades, Martha Wilson has mined herself and others to reveal the masquerades required and produced by everyday life. In particular, her project has involved highlighting, undermining, and subverting the construction of femininity in works that draw on and develop the political tenor of Conceptualist and performative practice in the 1970s. As part of a series of events commemorating Wilson's forty-year career—including a recent traveling retrospective and forthcoming archival publication—this exhibition presents both early and recent works, illuminating the ways the questions and conclusions her art evokes have changed in the shifting contexts of politics and biography.

Chronologically, the exhibition begins with documentary photographs firmly situated within Conceptual practices; *Alchemy*, 1973/2011, for instance, consists of three precisely cropped shots of dyed hair, with a caption detailing the conditions of each aesthetic transformation. The deadpan presentation stresses the malleability of identity but also the perpetual pressure on women to maintain their appearance. Recent works also engage with issues of gender and identity, but with an approach more informed by the passage of time and, especially, the artist's own aging. A series of large-scale color photographs titled "Growing Old," 2008–10, for example, presents images of Wilson in the same pose against a black background, documenting with precision the transformation of her appearance over the course of two years.

The sense of evolution implied by the exhibition is most pointedly noted in several recent reprisals of earlier pieces. *I Have Become My Own Worst Fear*, a 2009 photographic self-portrait, is shown alongside *Deformation*, a 1974 video in which the artist transforms herself, exchanging the precise conditions—including makeup, camera angle, and pose—that enhance her appearance most for those that flatter it least. Her inspiration for the pairing, she proclaims, is her desire to become her greatest fear, establishing the later work, in which Wilson looks forth, androgynous and unapologetic, as both a complete realization of personal and collective anxiety and, more broadly, an effective reminder of the artificiality of gendered identity.

— **Britany Salsbury**