

October 12, 2011



**Martha Wilson**

*I have become my own worst fear*  
2011

P.P.O.W Gallery, New York

## Martha Wilson THE LEGS ARE THE LAST TO GO by Alexandra Anderson-Spivy

For women especially, as much as we may fight the truth, the passage of time has toxic side effects -- imposing aging's feared, inevitable entropy in a society that hides from death and worships anorexic female beauty along with the flawless attributes of youth.

Martha Wilson confronts our fears head on in her show currently on view at PPOW, a tough, clever, uncompromising take on changing personal identity vis-à-vis the travails of time's toll. The results are as merciless as the photographs the late [John Coplans](#) took of his ancient, wrinkled body, except that Martha's wry wit elicits our empathy and adds poignancy to her explorations of the significance of personal appearance.



**Martha Wilson**

*Red Cruella*

2010

P.P.O.W Gallery, New York

She's her own subject and her own canvas, starting with *Deformation*, a black-and-white video she made in 1974 when still living in Halifax, Nova Scotia. In this nine-minute-long taped performance, she carefully applied layers of makeup to her face, relentlessly antiquing herself to approximate the way that she imagined she might look in 20 or 30 years.

More time than that now has flown by, and the show's title, "I have become my own worst fear," is borne out in the nine recent photo-text works made since 2008. Here's proof that the drama of aging is far more ruthless than anyone, including Martha, probably could imagine when still young.



**Martha Wilson**

*Growing Old*

2008-2009

P.P.O.W Gallery, New York

Her diptych *Red Cruella* (2010) plays with the artificialities of hair color. In her eight small profile photographs that make up *Growing Old* (2008-2009), Martha again records (in a series of profile mug shots) the evolution of her hair color from her signature fiery red to snowy white.

In *Invisible* (2011), she appears as an old crone obscured and forgotten in the middle of a motley crowd in a convenience store. *Before and After* (1974/2009) compares her youthful breasts with the drooping boobs of 35 years later. And of course she illustrates what we all know in *The Legs Are the Last to Go* (2009).



**Martha Wilson**  
*Growing Old (detail)*  
2008-2009  
P.P.O.W Gallery, New York

Such honest, resolutely good-natured investigations of changing appearance and shifting identity may not be masterpiece art. But they hit a nerve close to some universal concerns, valiantly acting out aspects of waning attractiveness (and thus power) that our self-delusional culture compulsively avoids. Think how shocking it would be to see any of these images in *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar*!

Best known as Franklin Furnace's founder and director, Martha Wilson, a veteran of the avant-garde, has always had courage. (Disclosure: As an early Franklin Furnace board member, I witnessed her principled stands during the culture wars.) She resolutely kept Franklin Furnace edgy ever since its early days (it began in 1976) as a collection of artist's books, a gallery and a performance space.



**Martha Wilson**  
*Invisible*  
2011  
P.P.O.W Gallery, New York

In the 1990s, Wilson reinvented the alternative space on the internet, as she realized its potential as an art medium. She promptly sold the Franklin Street space and turned the Furnace into a largely virtual enterprise whose purpose would be to "present, preserve, interpret, proselytize and advocate on behalf of avant-garde art."



**Martha Wilson**  
*Before and After*  
1974/2009  
P.P.O.W Gallery, New York

Martha's Wilson's creative investigations into physical identity and gender roles using performance, text and images also began in the 1970s and have always been entwined with many concerns central to feminism's then emerging issues. (She just always made them more fun). Her thinking shares some common ground with **Cindy Sherman's** early black-and-white movie stills and subsequent elaborate assumptions of numerous identities, and with **Hannah Wilke's** flaunting of her beauty and sexuality (much despised by more militant and jealous feminists), as well as with the honesty of her final searing, cancer ravaged self-portraits.



Along the way, Martha founded the wacky all-girl punk band, Disband, in 1978. Its other members were **Ilona Granet**, Ingrid Sischy, Diane Torr and Donna Henes. (They wrote and performed songs -- but to the constant delight of their audiences, no one actually played any instruments; I think maybe Martha played the radio.) Shifting her appearance yet again, Wilson also brilliantly impersonated various political wives; opinions varied about whether she was better as Nancy Regan, Barbara Bush or Tipper Gore. Her artistic saga is nicely captured in the new book, *Martha Wilson: Sourcebook: 40 Years of Reconsidering Performance, Feminism, Alternative Spaces*, written by Moia Roth and published by Independent Curators International.

Martha Wilson, "I Have Become My Worst Fear," Sept. 8-Oct. 8,

**Martha Wilson**

*The Legs are the Last to Go*

2009

P.P.O.W Gallery, New York

2011, at PPOW Gallery, 535 West 22 Street, New York, N.Y. 10011



**Martha Wilson**

*Beauty and Beastly*

2011

P.P.O.W Gallery, New York

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**Martha Wilson**

*Mona/Martha/Marge*

2011

P.P.O.W Gallery, New York