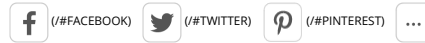


Making America Great Again: Martha Wilson in Washington, DC

BY MARGARET CARRIGAN | NOVEMBER 11, 2016



Detail of "THUMP," 2016.
(Photo by Kathy Grove)

The United States didn't do much for the feminist cause this week when it collectively decided to take a hard pass on a woman president and instead elected a rabbleroxing, anti-establishment misogynist. But never fear, America, we still have Martha Wilson.

For the last 40-odd years, Wilson has been a force for feminism. The pioneering performance artist is known for her exploration of gender roles through role-playing, costume transformations, and incisively witty performances of both male and female personas. In the male-Conceptualist-dominated early 1970s, while she was studying for a Ph.D. in English at Nova Scotia's Dalhousie University, Wilson began making videos and photo/text works that explored various aspects of femininity. Her enactments of First Lady Nancy Reagan really put her on the map, though, and she has continued personifying various women of the White House throughout her career.

Two years after moving to New York City in 1974, she started [Franklin Furnace](http://www.franklinfurnace.org/) (<http://www.franklinfurnace.org/>), a revolutionary artist-run center in Tribeca dedicated to "keeping the world safe for avant-garde art." For two decades, the organization was a hotbed for performance innovation and freedom of creative expression — which also made it an ideal target for conservative scorn and reprimand during the Culture

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Wars.

The exhibition "Martha Wilson & Franklin Furnace" opens this weekend at American University Museum's Katzen Arts Center in Washington, DC. Presented by the DC-based [Transformer Gallery](http://www.transformerdc.org) (<http://www.transformerdc.org>) as the fourth installment of their "Do You Know Where Your Art Comes From Series," the show surveys Wilson's dual practice of performance and arts administration while highlighting how she has continually pushed the boundaries of cultural expectations when it comes to art, politics, gender, and race.

While in DC for a corresponding talk at American University, Wilson took a few minutes to speak with ARTINFO about the history of her First Ladies, the perils of performing as Trump,

and the prospect of a new Culture War.

Your work deals a lot with gender roles, identity, and politics. Given that our country just elected a man known for his blatant disrespect for women and minorities to the presidency mere days ago, there's no better time than the present moment for it to be displayed in our nation's capital. Can you tell me a little bit about your performances of First Ladies over the years and, most recently, Trump, our now president-elect.

I've been performing as First Ladies for 30 years. But when this election season started to crank up and I thought, "I have the paunch and I have the jowls — I'm going to be Donald!"

The First Ladies performances started back in 1984. I was invited to perform at Artists' Call Against US Intervention in Central and South America and I hit on doing Nancy Reagan. At that time, Nancy was recommending that Ronald consult astrologers; the first thing she did when she got into the White House was to buy all new dishes even though the country was in a recession at that moment. I mean, she was just unguarded and unapologetic in her behavior, so all I had to do to write a script was read the New York Times and underline things she'd actually said — just like that I had a performance. I was Nancy for both of Reagan's terms. When George H.W. Bush was elected, I kind of reluctantly did Barbara for a while.

Then Bill Clinton was elected and I decided to do something different. There was this moment that he came out playing the saxophone at the MTV Inaugural Ball and the youth of America was overjoyed — "Oh my God, our president is playing the saxophone! This is so great!" Hillary and Al [Gore] followed him out and everyone was cheering. And then Al's wife, Tipper, came out. The mood of the crowd just changed all together and they started booing her — they booed her all the way off the stage! — because she had wanted parental advisory labeling on records. So I decided to be her for the duration of the Clinton Administration.

When George W. was elected, I thought, "Well I already have the wig, so I'm going to be the mother of the president." So I was Barbara again. Then, in 2014, I was invited to curate a selection of performance artists for the Next Wave Festival and one of the artists I selected was Clifford Owens. He was familiar with my First Lady performances and he asked me to perform Michelle Obama in the festival. And I was like "Oh crap, what am I going to do!" So I asked Saya Woolfalk, who is a friend of mine and Franklin Furnace alum — and a black female performance artist — and she said, "You should refuse the invitation." I had also asked Lorraine O'Grady, another Franklin Furnace alum, and she said, "You can do it but you have to do it in your own skin." So, what I ended up doing was showing my history performing as First Ladies and then I came out with makeup on just half of my face. We took a picture after the performance and the piece that resulted, which is in this show, is called 'Martha Meets Michelle Halfway.'

This was an important piece I think, and I've been talking about it to students while I've been here at American University, about how you show admiration through performance. I've been satirizing First Ladies all these years, but how do you show approval? I have nothing but good things to say about Michelle and, you know, her organic garden behind the White House. I think she's great.

She was the last performance you did before "THUMP," in which you performed Donald Trump, correct?

Yes. Donald was just too juicy to pass up. I already had the suit and everything. I thought, "This is a chance to satirize somebody who *deserves* to be satirized." So I performed as Donald this year at Smack Mellon, the Creative Time Summit in Washington, DC, and at PPOW. This performance was a bit different than my others. I came out on the stage to Queen's "We are the Champions," and then just kind of glared at everybody. I sang a song as Donald. But in all my other performances, I tried to go into the head of whomever I was performing, you know? To try to understand what makes them tick. But with Trump, I just couldn't go in there.

So really, the performance was just Martha Wilson dressed up as Trump, and I talked about how I've seen the art and politics scene change over the last 50 years that I've been making art. I started by talking about what it was like to live in the Vietnam War era and move to Canada in 1969, after my college graduation. Then, you know, there was the Watergate scandal, Richard Nixon was impeached, the infamous Robert Mapplethorpe show that Dennis Barrie lost his job at the Cincinnati Arts Center over, etc. Everyone in the crowd was so depressed by the time I was finished talking! No one was laughing. The people who were alive through all of it are just reliving it as I'm talking, and the people that weren't alive through all of it were thinking, "Oh my God, nothing ever changes!" We are a country divided, just like the in the Vietnam era.

Anyway, the photo shoot of the Donald performance, which is where the "Thump" work in this show came from, grew out of a collaboration that I've been having for some years at this point with Kathy Graves, who is a photographer and compositing artist. We did a shoot that we did at the appellate court at 25th Street and Park Avenue in New York. There's a statue there that has a sword lying across its knees and the word "FORCE" is on its plinth.

Franklin Furnace played a huge role in promoting and preserving creative expression during the Culture Wars of the 1980s and '90s. With the recent GOP sweep of the Oval Office, House, and Senate, a lot of people in the arts community are concerned that we're in for round two of the Culture Wars. Do you agree?

Well, the Culture Wars of the '80s and '90s were fought over sexuality as a legitimate subject of contemporary art. Legislators felt that sex was just not appropriate and shouldn't be shown in public. So I set out to create an organization that wouldn't tell artists that they couldn't show their boobs, or discourage homosexuality, or anything like that. Freedom of expression is the highest value that we have and I wanted safeguard that.

But, you know, we *lost* the Culture Wars. After 10 years of the NEA lawsuit, what was inscribed in the law books of this great nation is still there: If you accept federal dollars, you have to abide by so-called community standards of decency. Nobody knows what those *are*, but it's the law of the land. Right now, today, artists do not have freedom of expression. We have these standards of decency, which is just not the same thing. For that reason, I don't know that the Culture Wars ever really ended. We're still under siege. But, the next round of them will probably be fought over issues of surveillance.

Can you tell me a little bit about the impetus for the exhibition "Martha Wilson and Franklin Furnace" and how it relates to your career as a whole?

I am an artist *and* an administrator. Administration itself is a form of creative practice that is seldom given any credit. And this show does that:

It combines a survey of my performance work as well as an overview of other artists' projects I've helped support through my work as an administrator at Franklin Furnace. The first version of this show, curated by a friend of mine, Peter Dykhuis, was called "Martha Wilson: Staging the Self/30 Projects from 30 Years of Franklin Furnace Archive." That included my personal work from 1971 onward as well as one project from each of Franklin Furnace's first 30 years, up to 2006. The exhibition traveled around for about five or six years and we did the grand finale of it in New York City in February 2015.

For this show in Washington, we've updated the former exhibition and added works from Franklin Furnace fund winners from the last 10 years, 2006-16. It includes performance, but also temporary installations, artists' books, time-based media, etc. There's some great stuff: One of the pieces is a feminist intervention into World of Warcraft; I think it's really good. Also, the show contains works that are 100 percent online in addition to works that are in real time and space, which I think is important.

Do you think you'll do any more First Lady performances in the coming four years?

You mean of Melania? No, I don't think so.



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