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Oral history interview with Martha Wilson,  
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**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Martha Wilson on May 17 and 18, 2017. The interview took place at Wilson's home in Brooklyn, NY, and was conducted by Liza Zapol for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Martha Wilson and Liza Zapol have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay, so this is Liza Zapol for the Archives of American Art, [Smithsonian Institution] oral history program. It's May 17, 2017. And if I can ask you to introduce yourself, please?

MARTHA WILSON: My name is Martha Wilson, and I'm going to not hold anything back.

LIZA ZAPOL: Thank you. And we're here at your home in Brooklyn. So, if I can just ask you to begin at the beginning—

MARTHA WILSON: Okay.

LIZA ZAPOL: —as I said.

MARTHA WILSON: Okay.

LIZA ZAPOL: Where and when were you born? And if you can tell me a little bit about your early memories.

MARTHA WILSON: Okay. I was born in Philadelphia in Philadelphia General Hospital or something like that, and raised for the first six years of my life on a houseboat. The houseboat was parked across the Delaware on the New Jersey side, but looking at the waterworks of the Philadelphia city—the city of Philadelphia. So, some of my early memories involve water that was frozen and was washing up on the shore, or stepping from one root to the next through a puddle—I thought if I went fast enough my shoe wouldn't get wet. Seeing a black snake, which I thought was huge, running along the edge of the water; holding a green balloon and letting go of it accidentally and watching it—crying while watching it float into space. I have memories also from later when I saw pictures of myself.

My father was an architect and my mother was a designer. They met at Philco. This was—they met during the Second World War. He was designing radar; she was designing radios. Actually, that's one of her designs right there. And everybody had to wear a smock at work and then, one day, the whole office went down to the [New Jersey -MW] shore and my father saw my mother in a bathing suit, [laughs] became interested, and the rest is, you know.

In the beginning, they had—so, they got married and in the beginning, they had a design company which didn't really work. They were trying to start a business in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, so that didn't work out too well. He then got a job as an architect for Carl White, who was a friend of his, I think, or maybe it was Mickelwright and Monford. Anyway, he was working as an architect. And we were—my sister was born—so I was born in 1947, my sister was born in 1950, and we would fight over, you know, the territory in the bed.

And I went back years and years later to the houseboat. There was a ventilation pipe sticking out of the ground that, as I remember as a child, was a huge, huge thing, and when I went back it was about 12 inches high [laughs].

My best friend growing up at—we were in Riverside or Riverton, a little town along the shore of the Delaware. My best friend growing up was Evelyn Nijsky. She was down the block. And Evelyn's parents served completely different kind of food and spoke in an accent. I think they were Polish. And Evelyn was my best friend. She was, you know, not only the girl down the street, but my best friend.

This went on for some years, and then my mother decided that she wanted to have more help with raising the kids, and so they decided to move to Newtown, Pennsylvania. My grandparents—my grandmother and grandfather—had, after the Second World War or maybe during the Second World War, converted the Victorian house—huge Victorian house—into apartments. One, two, three, four—at least four apartments. Five? At least

four—four apartments. And the barn in the back was not being used as a barn anymore, so my father, the architect, converted the top floor into our living space, and then, as time went by, we got older and bigger and needed more space. Then he started converting the ground floor. Eventually, we occupied the whole barn.

So, there's the Victorian house in the front, there's the barn, and then there's a chicken house in the back, and in the back of everything there's a woods. My mother would go out and pick blackberries, and she didn't care that her arms got all scraped up, and we would go out in the back. And my friend Donnie Motson, who became my new best friend—Donnie Motson lived two doors down Lincoln Avenue. He also had a wood in the back. So, we—Mrs. Hillborn was in the middle, but she didn't care, so we would build roads for the—what is that thing called? You sit on it and you move the handle back and forth and it propels the—this four-wheeled vehicle forward. [A go-cart. -MW]

So, we built roads, we built forts. I was a tomboy. I basically didn't come in unless my mother rang the bell for dinner. My sister was the bookworm; I was the person out in the woods. And at first, my mother was sending me to the Quaker elementary school, the Newtown Friends Elementary School. That was kindergarten—no, kindergarten was in Newtown itself. Miss Starr was my kindergarten teacher. But then, I went to Newtown Friends and Miss—isn't it funny how you can remember the names of your early teachers and none of the names of the later ones?

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: Mrs. Fletcher, I think, and Miss Fulton and Mrs. Atkinson. Then, my mother was not happy with how the school was disciplining or not disciplining kids or something. I don't really know why she took me out, but she took me out after third grade and put me in fourth grade in the public school in Newtown, by which point I could walk to school. Because it was in, you know, the next—we were on Lincoln Avenue and the school was on Chancellor, so I could just cut through somebody's side yard and go to elementary school.

And I want to—the things I want to talk about eventually are Quakerism. I want to talk about Quakerism, and I also want to talk about trauma. I think trauma is a big subject that we should talk about. And maybe my relationship with my sister. We should cover that stuff.

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay. So, do you want to talk about Quakerism? So, you started in the Quaker school—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah—

LIZA ZAPOL: —first, but then you—

MARTHA WILSON: —let's talk about Quakerism.

LIZA ZAPOL: But then, you switched to a—

MARTHA WILSON: Public.

LIZA ZAPOL: —public school.

MARTHA WILSON: Public school.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, what was that environment like in the beginning?

MARTHA WILSON: Well, there's—Quaker—my mother's family was Quaker. My father's family was not Quaker. They were fallen Presbyterian or—who knows what they were? I don't know.

LIZA ZAPOL: And where was your father's family from?

MARTHA WILSON: Scranton. From Scranton, Pennsylvania. But my mother's family—actually, I have a genealogy on the wall over there—came over in 1653 or something and settled in Valley Forge, and then eventually moved to Bucks County, and they have been in Bucks County for 300 years or something. And so, my mother's social life revolved around the family and you—visiting family and taking jelly—you always take a gift; you take jelly or something when you're visiting. And—and being proud of the legacy of the family, the Quaker family. I didn't—I was—I spent most of my young years rebelling against Quakerism.

For example, you get a Bible when you get a certain age, and I think I refused to accept this gift from the Meeting [for Worship -MW] [laughs]. I'm not quite sure what I was rebelling against at the time, but—

LIZA ZAPOL: Who gave—

MARTHA WILSON: My sister told me that I had refused to accept this gift.

LIZA ZAPOL: Who gave [you] the Bible? Where did it, you know—was it—

MARTHA WILSON: I think it was—

LIZA ZAPOL: —part of a meeting?

MARTHA WILSON: I think it was part of the Sunday School, after you got through Sunday School, and you're now a—you know, old enough to make up your own mind. You graduated into the Meeting itself.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: Oh, I know. I was trying to prove that I was a member of Newtown Meeting in order to get my son a scholarship at George School, which I should get to next. So, I went to Newtown Friends Elementary and then, for high school, I went to Council Rock High School, which is the public high school. And then, my mother took me out of there and we went—I went to George School, which is the prep school, but I was a day student. Because we lived in Newtown and the school was in Newtown. So, by this point I was starting to learn about class [laughs], caste and class, so we should also talk about Camp Onas.

Camp Onas was the Quaker camp that I went to when I was 6, and my sister went, too, as well. Our mother had gone there, and now my son has gone there all the way through. So, we're third-generation Camp Onas. And camp was like the woods in the back. It was the only important thing that was happening in the year. Okay, you have to go to school—ugh—but there's camp. We can look forward to camp. So, in the beginning of camp, in the early days, I had a boyfriend, Froggie, and I had a best friend Jill—Maplewood, New Jersey. And I looked her up years later—I mean, we stayed—who was the name of the guy who caught—I saw one of my camp friends catch a ball on TV. Carleton Coe Smith caught—he put his glove out and he caught this ball in a baseball game on TV.

LIZA ZAPOL: From the stands?

MARTHA WILSON: From the stands.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.] So, what was it about that space that was so—

MARTHA WILSON: Right, camp?

LIZA ZAPOL: —wonderful?

MARTHA WILSON: Camp?

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, camp. Camp Onas.

MARTHA WILSON: You're doing stuff instead of studying stuff. You're building fires instead of reading about building fires. And so, you're doing things that are fun and also challenging and—

LIZA ZAPOL: Do you have any particular memories of—

MARTHA WILSON: Well, when I was a camper, the counselors would take us out to the field and point at the stars and tell us the names of the constellations. And I would lie there, completely rapt, so happy and excited to be looking at the stars and learning about the constellations. And then, years go by; I become a counselor and we find out [laughs] they're just making it all up.

[They laugh.]

MARTHA WILSON: I have no idea what the constellations—they're basically supervising the older campers to make sure they don't have sex [laughs]. They're—I mean, making out—okay, there's a little making out going on. And we—the boys would raid the girls' side, the girls would raid the boys' side, and we'd throw toilet paper all over the trees, and so there's this kind of friendly war going on at all times. Swimming; I was a good swimmer. So, I learned how to swim at camp and then became a lifeguard later on, learned how to, you know, rescue people.

And my boyfriend in camp in the early days was Froggie, but then later on it became Marc. Marc Harrison was my boyfriend for years. And then, at the end of camp, I dumped him and started going out with Warren, who had one green eye and one blue eye.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: And so, it was the beginning of social/sexual negotiation—was happening at camp.

Also, George School hits at ninth grade and some of the counselors at camp are students at George School. So, I'm this country girl and I go running up to Abby and say, "Hi, Abby, it's so great to see you! Here we are! We're at George School!" And she just turns her back and doesn't talk to me, because I obviously don't know you're not supposed to be enthusiastic in high school. You're supposed to be, you know, blasé in high school, like "Uh, yeah, yeah."

[They laugh.]

MARTHA WILSON: And then, the other story I have about caste as related to George School—I mean, it was drilled into me over and over that I did not have money and they did. For example, girls would say to me, "What does your father do?" [Laughs.] And we had a Junior League dance one time and Martha Biddle showed up—of Bailey, Banks, and Biddle, the jewelry company in Philadelphia. And so, I said to Martha Biddle, "Oh, my name is Martha, too," and she said, "But your last name isn't Biddle, is it?"

[They laugh.]

[Demonstrates] Turning the knife. So, 50 years later, I went back to my high school reunion and wrote a piece. We were all asked to write a piece and I admitted that what I had learned at George School was about class. I was the only person who talked about anything—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —like that and now it's all written down. And then, later a couple of people came up to me and said, "Oh, you know, I read what you wrote and it's absolutely just absolutely true, that high school is mainly about figuring out where you are socially, where—you know, how do you function socially?" And, okay, you're learning French or algebra or something, but that's not what you're doing. You're doing high school. High school is learning how to negotiate your social being.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, what was your understanding of, your own—so, that's how other people kind of reflected back to you your class or social standing. And what was your understanding, both in Newtown and before on the houseboat, like what your relationship was to the Polish girl, the Polish family? You know, like—

MARTHA WILSON: Well, now—

LIZA ZAPOL: —how you stand—

MARTHA WILSON: —I'm looking back to it, I believe my mother didn't want me to grow up with an immigrant as my best friend. She wanted me to grow up in a middle-class—white, middle-class—it wasn't suburban yet. It was a town, a small town. It became a suburban neighborhood. The farms in back of us and the farms above us and the farms the other way all turned into split-level homes, and now Newtown is a bedroom community for—because Route 95 went right by. You can commute downtown in 45 minutes. It used to take—I don't know, two hours to get downtown Philadelphia. So, Bucks County has pretty much changed.

My mother's values are also gone in that she believed that—well, I should tell the Thiokol story. So, the—a corporation moved in—this is after I had left Newtown, but my mother was still living there. Thiokol Corporation, which is an arms producer, moved into Newtown [laughs] and the little old ladies with wire-rimmed glasses marched up and down the road until they finally left. You know, they let them know that, "Look, this is a Quaker town, founded by William Penn, for God's sake, and you're Thiokol. You're not supposed to be here. You have to leave." And they eventually did.

LIZA ZAPOL: Hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And was your mother involved—

MARTHA WILSON: Oh—

LIZA ZAPOL: —in that as well?

MARTHA WILSON: —she was marching around. She was involved in cleaning up the Delaware River, getting Thiokol to leave. She is a member of a reading group, a quilting group. She's a very busy person and in her social—oh, she was also an artist—this is the—a watercolor by my mother, the iris—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —over there in the corner.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: She did watercolors and she did silkscreen fabric, and she learned how to sew when she was

going to the Philadelphia College of Art. Oh, so let's talk about the Philadelphia College of Art for a second. She was given the option to either go to George School, which is high school, Quaker high school, or not go to George School, go the public high school, and go to college. And this is—I don't think we're in the Second World War yet. But she saw herself as a young woman in a world that was rapidly changing, and she decided she's going to go to college, get a college degree.

So, she went to the art college, learned to be a designer, learned how to make clothes. She made all of our clothes, which embarrassed me greatly, and, you know, many years later I found out that, of course, if you have a personal tailor that's a little bit better than buying your clothes in a store. But she would get hand-me-downs from our cousins and then take the Saks Fifth Avenue label out of the clothes, the hand-me-downs, and sew them into the handmade clothes.

[They laugh.]

LIZA ZAPOL: So, your mother—so, you grew up then in Newtown, in her parents' house, right?

MARTHA WILSON: Parents' barn, yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, tell me a little bit about them, about what they were like.

MARTHA WILSON: Oh, sure.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah.

MARTHA WILSON: Well, I have a good story about my grandfather that relates to my son. I'll get around to my son at a later point. Comly Woodman was a farmer, lived on a farm on Swamp Road outside of Doylestown. And his son Paul, my grandfather, said, "Look, Dad, I don't want to go to school anymore," and Comly Woodman said, "Okay." And the next day, he took his son out and they picked up rocks and put them on a sledge and then they had lunch, and then they picked up rocks and put them on a sledge for the entire day. And the day after that, he went back to school.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: So, Comly Woodman is a very sage guy. He married two Marthas. He married Martha Smith and then he married another Martha. I used to have the teaspoons—they got stolen by the tenants in Newtown—MSW. But I'm named after Thomas Story. Thomas Story was alive during the Revolutionary War and sold chickens to both the British and the American troops. So, they were farmers. Emma—let's see, Paul—Comly was a farmer. His son became—inherited the farm and became a farmer, married Emma from down the road.

I think Emma Smith was the third generation of Smiths and Woodmans that got married, because there really wasn't anybody else around [laughs], and you're supposed to marry inside the fold. You're not supposed to get married to a Catholic guy; you're supposed to get married to another Quaker. So, they got along their whole lives and stayed married and everything. But at a certain point, Paul found running the farm to be an awful lot of work and he had the opportunity to trade the farm for a property in town, in Newtown, this big Victorian that was created—that was built by Mr. Keith. So, he did that.

He traded the farm on Swamp Road for the two-acre property built by Mr. Keith. Then he had two acres, so he was still raising corn and gladiolas and doing some farming, but it wasn't as strenuous. And he was also the Justice of the Peace of the town, of Newtown. Unfortunately, he made this deal in 1929, I think, before the stock market crashed. So, the stock market crashes and the wisdom that came down to me was "always keep a plot of land so you can grow beans." They were surviving. They were just figuring out how to survive.

When you came in, you saw National Geographic magazines on the top shelf. The National Geographic magazines are kind of an economic portrait of the family. They start in the '20s. The issues are consistent—'20, '21, '22, '23. Suddenly, they drop off. In the '30s, there's nothing for a while, then they pick up again in the '40s. It's—I was going to try to catalog them and supplement the issues that I didn't have, but then I thought, "Wait a minute, this is an economic portrait of my family, so I'm just going to leave it alone." [Laughs.]

LIZA ZAPOL: So, then what led to the decision then to have—

MARTHA WILSON: Turn it into apartments?

LIZA ZAPOL: —tenants? Yeah, to—

MARTHA WILSON: That was—

LIZA ZAPOL: —turn it into apartments.

MARTHA WILSON: —Second World War.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: Second World War, I think, was socially such a big deal. Women started to work. I mean, that alone—my mother went to work for Philco and met my father and—

LIZA ZAPOL: Was that something that she was wanting to do? Was to—

MARTHA WILSON: To design radios?

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, or to—

MARTHA WILSON: I don't—

LIZA ZAPOL: —work in manufacturing or something?

MARTHA WILSON: I don't know. I don't know—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —if that's true. She was a wonderful designer, and I have some drawings that she made of glass frames—glasses frames. It's too bad that their design company didn't survive because she was a wonderful designer. But I think the whole society was trying to figure it out after the Second World War. "How are we going to integrate? How are we going to bring the men back and stick them back into their old jobs or"—you know, meanwhile, the whole idea of suburbia is starting to emerge.

We started out with a kind of washer and dryer that had wooden wringers, so you didn't want to get anywhere near it with your little fingers because you might get caught in the wringer. And then, after a while, we had electric dryers and didn't need wringers anymore. So, the industrialization of the economy is going on. Things are getting shorter and faster. And my mother, the Quaker lady, is driving a [laughs] Volkswagen bus with wraparound sunglasses, and she's in there participating in this social change.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What was your grandparents' impression when she married or met your father?

MARTHA WILSON: Outside the fold?

LIZA ZAPOL: An outsider, yeah.

MARTHA WILSON: That's a good question. I think that—I was born in '47; the war ended in '45. I think all bets were off. The Second World War—they had converted their house into apartments. They didn't have the whole house anymore. Also, because of the Second World War, there was a shortage—when people were coming back there was a shortage of apartments, places for them to live, so they were in the middle. I think they—I don't know the answer, but I think they had to deal with it [laughs].

LIZA ZAPOL: So—yeah, so I interrupted you. So, they then converted into the apartments because of the people that were coming and needed places to live?

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: Was it an economic opportunity for them?

MARTHA WILSON: I think so, yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, then—yeah, so then tell me, what was their sense—did your grandparents kind of try to influence your sense of religion as well? Or what kind of values did they believe it—

MARTHA WILSON: Hmm [affirmative].

LIZA ZAPOL: —or were important to them?

MARTHA WILSON: Hmm [affirmative]. The story that comes up is you can only have one cookie [laughs]. So, my grandmother would make these cookies, these sugar cookies, and she'd give one cookie to me and one cookie to my sister. And I wanted another cookie, but you can only have one cookie. There's this scarcity, this idea of scarcity—again, caused by the war and then the Depression—and you have to have a plot of land to grow beans to get through the Depression. It wasn't punitive. It wasn't particularly punitive, but it was—but scarcity was a motivating idea in—certainly in my grandparents' lives and certainly in my mother's life.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: I should add, though, that the family had—these are not all the dishes that I inherited. I inherited a lot of dishes and I gave a whole set away to my friend Donna, who was having dinners. She was making money—after I moved to New York many years later. She was having dinners and so I had a set of 12 dinner plates, 12 luncheon plates, 12 salad plates. I gave them to Donna, and I don't think she had any of them left anymore.

But farming families are these big families. They—the Quakers—hired Native Americans to work the land, so the, you know, economic currents were already happening—when would that have been? Comly died in 1847, so like in the turn of the—at the turn of the century.

The story goes that my grandfather considered himself to be a checkers champion, and this new Indian showed up, a new guy, who didn't know how to play checkers. So, he, my grandfather, challenged him to a checkers game and he loses to this new Indian because there was an old Indian, who had been a farmhand for years and years, standing behind my grandfather doing sign language to the new Indian, because they didn't have a universal language, but they did have a universal sign language, telling him how to play [laughs], how to beat my grandfather.

[They laugh.]

LIZA ZAPOL: What's in that story? [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: Well, I like it. I like it. It shows that my grandfather was a little bit arrogant and that the Indians were pretty smart and able to deal.

LIZA ZAPOL: Were there still Native Americans in that area—Indians in that area when you were growing up? Or did you have—

MARTHA WILSON: Not that I—

LIZA ZAPOL: —any direct interactions?

MARTHA WILSON: Not that I have any recollection of. I had a bow that was made by a Native American, and I was shooting an arrow and my grandfather came over and said, "Stop, stop, you're doing—this is all—you're doing it all wrong." I was trying to shoot the arrow with the light end first instead of the heavy end first. You use a, you know, twig, a branch, and the front of the arrow—the front of the shaft is the heavy end of the branch. And I thought it looked better using the light end and he was trying to explain to me the principles of aerodynamics, which I, you know, just didn't understand.

And I took an arrowhead—oh, this is a terrible, terrible story—I took an arrowhead to show and tell—we were having show-and-tell in fourth grade—and then I lost it on my way over to my friend Dodie's house. My mother—I've never seen her so mad. She was—she had found this arrowhead in the Neshaminy Creek behind the house where they grew up on Swamp Road. She made me go back and look, and I never found it. And I've always felt, you know, a pang of guilt that I lost her—she took it out of the plastic—I mean, I can remember every detail.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: It was in a plastic box. She took it out of the plastic box, put it in an envelope, and then sealed the envelope with a pin, and that was like difficult for me to manage as a fourth-grader. And it fell out or who knows. It fell out.

LIZA ZAPOL: It was—

MARTHA WILSON: It fell out.

LIZA ZAPOL: —her treasure. [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: Her treasure. Her treasure fell out on the ground. So, certainly, there was a Lenape tribe presence all up and down the Eastern seaboard. I don't think I could point to anybody and say, "I know this person's a Native American."

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And then, I'm interested in, also, the relationship of your parents to each other. Like—

MARTHA WILSON: Okay.



LIZA ZAPOL: —what was their dynamic?

MARTHA WILSON: Now, we can get to the trauma story.

So, my father went to Pratt, and he got a degree in architectural construction supervision or something. And then, he became the guy on the site who would look at the bricks that were delivered and make sure that the bricks that were delivered were the same ones that were specified by the architect. Because very often the contractor would just try to skate through with a different set of bricks or doorknobs or whatever. So, he was the guy on the ground, and he—my mother would make him a red shirt for Christmas invariably, every single year, because she didn't want a bulldozer to run over him.

He built schools in New Jersey. The society was burgeoning; split-levels were being built. We needed someplace for the schools to—for the kids to go to school. But what usually happened was that the suburbs were built on the dry land, on the good land, and the school was left with the swamp, you know, with a low-lying field they didn't know what else to do with, so they gave it to the school district.

So, his firm developed a design that pre-cracked the walls so that when the schools settled, you know, an unsightly crack wouldn't go across the whole wall. It would have a place to go. And then they would cover the pre-crack with a piece of aluminum or something so it looked like a design element. And they also built—they poured pontoons—basically pontoons—of concrete for the school to float on. So, that was the firm he worked for for a million years. He was working in New Jersey and living in Pennsylvania. But he was an alcoholic—never admitted that—and one night on the way home, he drove off the road and didn't die in the car crash, but it kind of woke him up and he decided he was going to sleep on the houseboat.

He had a—he kept—it wasn't the original houseboat, the one I was born on, but it was another houseboat they had tied up in the Rancocas Creek. So, instead of going to Newtown to go to sleep, he only had to go from the office to the Rancocas Creek. At a certain point, my mother realized that she was a de facto divorcee [laughs] because he was not coming home, so she lived on the houseboat, too. That was after, I think, I moved to Canada, so that was a little bit later on.

But going back to the beginning of this story, he was a sailor. He had learned to sail—okay, so he went to Pratt, but before he went to Pratt, he got this trophy, the silver trophy on the second shelf down, for building a birdhouse. And I believe—I'm making this up, I admit it, but I believe that this gave him the idea that he could be an architect, this prize that he won for building a birdhouse gave him the inspiration to become an architect. So, he's an architect by day, but really what he wanted to do was to go sailing. That's a picture of him sailing on the Delaware River by Mr. Hinkley [indicates painting on the wall].

So, he met my mother at the beach and she was a farm girl. She had been raised on the land; he loved sailing. So, they were—[laughs] already, you know, there's a difference of opinion going on here. The story about my grandfather is he came—they decided to get married, and they are living on the houseboat and Grandma and Grandpa come and visit them. My grandfather steps on the houseboat and barfs.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: He's never been on—he's never been off the dry land in his entire life [laughs], and the whole idea that this thing could move, that—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: It's a little funny because, you know, you sit on a wagon and there are horses pulling the wagon and it's bumping around. But, no, [he]couldn't handle it.

But I loved my grandma and grandpa. You know, my grandmother would let us come over and play when my mother had to do something, and she had an erector set. Oh, an old-fashioned erector set that might slice your fingers open, but you can screw it all together and build constructions out of it. I don't know whatever happened to that erector set. I'm really kind of devastated by—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —not knowing that. But she had books of 19th century fashion, dresses with bustles. There was all kinds of great stuff that my grandparents would make available for us when we were over there.

LIZA ZAPOL: This is your mother's—

MARTHA WILSON: My mother's—

LIZA ZAPOL: —parents?

MARTHA WILSON: —mother and father.

LIZA ZAPOL: Did you ever know your father's parents—

MARTHA WILSON: A little.

LIZA ZAPOL: —in Scranton?

MARTHA WILSON: They were living in New York—

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay.

MARTHA WILSON: —at this point. My father's father died of a massive heart attack at an early age. He was full of rage and—as was my father—and he died from it. He was the guy who worked for—he worked for the Lehigh Valley Railroad Company and he was the treasurer or something. He had to sign checks. He had a pen so he could sign three checks at one time [laughs], so he could mass—you know, sign all the payroll checks in short order.

So, my father, raised in Scranton, told me stories of skiing to school. He would ski to school. And also, Scranton had sinkholes, so you had to watch out for the sinkholes.

[They laugh.]

MARTHA WILSON: He moved to New York—I don't know when that was. His elder brother Bob—so their father dies, Mom's alone, Bob moves in with Mom and basically takes care of Mom for most of his life till she died, and then he met Doris. And Doris is still alive. She's 101 now.

LIZA ZAPOL: Wow.

MARTHA WILSON: She lives in Florida. Paul was the middle child—Uncle Paul. He had twins, Penny and Julie, and also Lucy, and Aunt Nancy, 'till Aunt Nancy died and then he married Aunt Nancy's sister, Aunt Betty.

[They laugh.]

Just a little weird. So, Arthur was the youngest of three sons and he loved opera. He would go pay for the standing-room-only tickets at the Metropolitan Opera. I'm not quite sure how he got into sailing, but I do have a picture of him wearing—young man—wearing a sailor suit, so that must have happened at a young age, that he got fixated on water.

LIZA ZAPOL: And he—their—in terms of class, your understanding of that side of the family was what? Or—

MARTHA WILSON: I think—

LIZA ZAPOL: —what was your understanding?

MARTHA WILSON: —we're still in the middle class.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: We're basically not rich, but not poor. We're in the middle—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —on both sides.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: I should add, though, that my mother was socially conscious and in a way taught me to be socially conscious, insofar as she knew she could be a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution; she didn't know whether she wanted to hang out with those people. But she kind of wanted to get the credit for being a DAR—you know, being here in 1653. So, I think that was a source of tension in her life.

LIZA ZAPOL: You mentioned her activism or protests.

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: I mean, what—

MARTHA WILSON: Well, the Quakers—

LIZA ZAPOL: Yes.

MARTHA WILSON: Quaker philosophy is "we don't know what's going to happen after we all die, so we're going to do what we can while we're here," and they still do that. They—during the Vietnam War, they were selling medical supplies to the North Vietnamese as well as the South Vietnamese, getting in trouble with the United States government for that. And they—you know, I give money to the—what's it called? The American Friends Service Committee. Because they deliver food and clothing and services to people—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —who need it—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —and don't have an ideological test about it. If you're a refugee and you need blankets, fine, we're going to give you the blankets.

LIZA ZAPOL: Was there a sense of this in your childhood, of that kind of—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah, we would go to bale clothing that was going to be shipped to Africa, that kind of thing. Yeah. As part of Sunday School, as part of our religious training.

LIZA ZAPOL: That's interesting.

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, you were talking about your father and—

MARTHA WILSON: Oh—

LIZA ZAPOL: —sailing and—

MARTHA WILSON: —I'm stepping around it.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: I'm stepping around the trauma part. So, I blocked this completely out of my mind, but my sister helped me to reconstruct the incident that my father probably fingered me or something when I was 6 years old. So, trauma is a fixation of mine because I was traumatized. And many, many years later, I went to a PSI conference and found out that each of my other friends at this conference had also been traumatized, so we started a group called the Traumettes [ph].

And the punchline about trauma is that it was the worst thing that could have ever happened to me as a young person, and yet I have to admit that, because a line had been crossed—my father went over the line; you're not supposed to sexually abuse your child—I grew up without knowing where the lines were supposed to go. The social lines that everybody else knows and understands, I didn't know, and so I became an artist. So, in the Sourcebook [*Martha Wilson Sourcebook*, 2011] I thank my father for it [laughs], for helping me become an artist. Thanks, Dad.

Similarly, after college, my college boyfriend and I—it's the height of the Vietnam War, and he doesn't want to be drafted. And it's 1969 and Kent State wasn't until the next year, 1970, but I was going to college at Wilmington. Wilmington College is a Quaker college in Ohio.

And we met Jerry Ferguson; Jerry Ferguson was [hired -MW] to be a painting teacher at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. And I applied to various graduate schools and I got into the Dalhousie University across the street from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, so we thought it was a sign that we should leave America and move to Canada. So, we did. My boyfriend Richards and I moved to Canada. And five years later, he dumped me and that was the worst possible thing that could have ever happened in the entire universe, though 30 or 40 years later, I realize, "Oh, my God"—

[They laugh.]

MARTHA WILSON: —"I would be a housewife living in Canada"—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —"if he hadn't dumped my ass." So, trauma's the—

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MARTHA WILSON: —worst thing that can happen, and also the best thing in the end. It's—I still believe people who abuse their child should be shot on sight without trial, but I have to admit that it helped me to say and do stuff that other people would not say and do, and that's what I make my work out of.

LIZA ZAPOL: Hmm [affirmative]. You—I mean, that idea of transgression or—and boundaries I'm sure we'll come back to again.

MARTHA WILSON: [Laughs.] Yeah, probably, we might hit on that again.

LIZA ZAPOL: But you know, you mentioned that your sister helped you piece together—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —those memories.

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: But I'd love to hear more about your sister, your relationship to your sister.

MARTHA WILSON: Well, I also had a shrink and the shrink—it was so important, too. My father felt you couldn't go to a shrink because then you would be admitting that you were crazy. Right? And I got to New York and I thought—and my friend Lynne Tillman was going to a shrink, so I couldn't go to her shrink. I had to go to another one, so she recommended somebody else and I went to that shrink. I had tried going to therapists in Canada. I didn't find anybody that I liked. I finally, you know, moved to New York and found somebody I did like who had some remote connection to Quakerism, which I think is interesting.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: In the course of therapy, Alice, my therapist, pointed out that I told her the story of my father in his striped pajamas coming over to my bed, and my sister's over there, the other side of the room, and that I, through the course of therapy, had figured out how to slot it into a closet so I didn't have to know about it. But she had written it all down, so she had the record of this visual image.

And what did my sister do? I think she confirmed—I was on a—let's see, I was on a boat with her. My mother was starting to deteriorate from Alzheimer's and my father was—had moved them onto the boat—on a boat. There were—he had several boats. He had a sailboat and he had a motorboat and houseboat. So, he moved them onto the motorboat. And my mom was working at a factory, a box factory, I think. This is after I had moved to Canada. Callie was younger than I was. Callie was starting to figure out that our mother was not acting right, and that we needed to get a diagnosis here, but it was before Alzheimer's was recognized as a thing. But she was the one who instead of looking the other way, which is what I was doing [laughs]—she was insistent that we had to find out what was going on.

And my father was just annoyed. You know, "why do I have to take care of this person? I don't want to do this." So, we were spending hours and hours and hours deconstructing our childhood and that's when we—I told her—I can't remember exactly how it came up, but she confirmed that there was an incident that she remembered seeing.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: So, she's younger than I am by two years, but she's bossier than I am, so she's always been older in her behavior than I—I've been the one trying to catch up. For example, she had sex first, she smoked pot first—

LIZA ZAPOL: What was your relationship like as teenagers or as you were growing—

MARTHA WILSON: She went away to boarding school in New Hampshire. She went to the Meeting School. I was—I guess I was still in George School. I went all the way through George School. She started—she did not want to go to George School. She knew that was for sure. I don't remember if she started at the—I'm not quite sure if she went to four years of the Meeting School.

But the Meeting School—instead of having a hockey team—we had a hockey team and a lacrosse team and swimming team—you would hoe potatoes or learn how to plant beans, that kind of thing. And there were only—I don't know, six kids in one—in, you know, your class level, so you obviously hung out with your professors and

had dinner with them and had a very intimate education. Marc Harrison, my boyfriend from camp, went to the Meeting School also. I don't know if—I don't think it was at the same time, though. I'm not quite sure about that.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, you were separated during—

MARTHA WILSON: We were separated during those crucial high school—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —years, and then I went to college. She went to a different—she went to—I went to Wilmington College for four years; she went to Reed College for two years, at which point my father couldn't pay for it anymore. Reed was pretty expensive.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: And so, she decided to go to Berkeley, University of California-Berkeley, and become a nurse. And so, my father's response to that, "Oh, I'm really glad you're going to be a nurse; you can take care of me in my old age," and my sister said, "Daddy, you're not going to have an old age." [Laughs.] At which point, he quit smoking and drinking for two whole years and then he thought, "Oh, to hell with it."

[They laugh.]

MARTHA WILSON: And he—you know, he died of acute myocardial infarction in 1980 from smoking and drinking his whole life.

And he had a premonition, because he called his best friends in the world, Sally and John, to go sailing on Saturday, and they said, "Well, can it be next Saturday?" He said, "No, it has to be this Saturday." So, they went sailing down the Delaware to the Quaker City Yacht Club, where they had all been members, and then they came all the way back. And then my father said, "It's time to go in; I'll take down the sail," and he's on all fours forward to take the jib down, but he's not taking the jib down. He's kind of staring at the water. And John is thinking, "He's looking at the water too long," so he goes forward.

Luckily, he grabs my father's belt. He's already had the acute myocardial infarction and he collapses on the hood of the cabin, and John gets him back into the cockpit and then he's got a lady with full-blown Alzheimer's and a guy who's dead. But Sally and John are such great people; they felt God had put them there to deal with this moment. So, they—he figured out how to start the engine; he got the boat to the dock; he called Martha in New York and Martha comes running down; called Paul, his brother, who was alive. Paul joined me like 24 hours later.

And we have to talk about Alzheimer's, too. Alzheimer's is a wonderful subject. But, okay, so I'm going to put the Alzheimer's story in here.

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay.

MARTHA WILSON: So, my mom had been deteriorating for a while. And what happens when you have Alzheimer's is that you lose your short-term memory, but you keep your long-term memory. So, she went backwards in time through her life. At a certain point, I was starting Franklin Furnace, I'm living in New York, and I came down to visit, and my mother's wearing a black slip. Quaker lady; just want to reinforce the idea.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: This is a Quaker lady. She's wearing a black slip, she's sitting on the edge of the bed, and she's arching her back and glaring at me, as if to say, "How dare you come between and my man?" So, she was in her—what? Teenage years during that moment.

Then she's—continues to deteriorate from Alzheimer's. And she remembers—I come down for a visit; she remembers going down, down, down to the Neshaminy Creek for a picnic, so she was still living on the farm on Swamp Road. Her mom and dad and she and her brother would go down to the creek for picnics on Sunday afternoon or something like that.

So, I'm visiting—now we're back to trauma, so we're going to talk about trauma again. I've started Franklin Furnace in 1976, '77. I come down to visit. I was 21? Maybe I hadn't started Franklin Furnace. I think I was only 21. Oh—yeah, I was still in college. I was still in college, came to visit my parents—they were living on the houseboat—and I tell my father that I have had sex with Jim Sanner, who was my boyfriend at the time. So, he—so I'm in bed, I'm writing in my diary, and he comes down the hall stark naked, and I'm writing in my diary, "My father is coming down the hall stark naked." [Laughs.] And he's—you know, and I'm not welcoming him. I'm like traumatized. And so, he says, "I just want to hold you," and I say, "No," in this tiny voice.

And I was in shrinkage [ph] at the time. I talked to my—Alice about this and she said, "Oh, you were reminding him that you are a child, you are his child, with a child voice, so he could understand that." So, he—you know, I wasn't going to cooperate, so he just goes "ugh." You know, he just became disgusted with me, "ugh," turns around, and leaves.

And I think that was the incident that caused me to talk to my sister, and then my sister helped me to figure out that there was an earlier incident as well. And he was justifying all this with the sexual behavior of his brother Paul, who had had sex, actual sex, with all of his daughters, like "this is okay, how about it?"

So, I said, "Well, Lucy can do whatever she wants, but I'm not going to have sex with you." [Laughs.] And Lucy—I don't know, I never did talk to Penny and Julie about this, but I did talk to Lucy about it. Lucy was the youngest one. There are the twins, and then there's Lucy, who was older than I was but closer to my age. She thought fathers and daughters should absolutely have sex. She was like—what—sex-positive. She was a sex-positive. She thought sex was good, useful, wonderful, and great, and there shouldn't be any limits on it.

LIZA ZAPOL: And you were talking about that at this point like—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah, we were talking. I was in—visiting her in Philadelphia. Yeah, what year was that? I'm a little bit lost here. I don't remember exactly when that conversation—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —happened. But we were—she was a grown-up, had had a daughter, and I was either living in Canada or living in New York. We were—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —grown-up at that point.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So—yeah, so these—again, like, what's taboo and what's not. You were being confronted—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —with all these different—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —kind of—

MARTHA WILSON: Value systems.

LIZA ZAPOL: —value systems around you [laughs].

MARTHA WILSON: All the way from stark Quakerism on the one end and free—what is it called?

LIZA ZAPOL: Sex-positivity.

MARTHA WILSON: Sex-positivity.

LIZA ZAPOL: Or just, yeah, free, open—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —completely open relationships.

MARTHA WILSON: Yep.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, how did you resolve that exchange with your father? He just—he left and you—and you're in college at this point?

MARTHA WILSON: He left. I went back to college. Oh, my boyfriend at the time, Jim Sanner, and I got together at MacDowell Colony this past summer after all these years. He had moved to New Hampshire, I think. Or, no, MacDowell's in New Hampshire, so I think he had moved to Vermont. And he—we—he wanted images from college for a painting that he was doing, so we had been in touch about that, and I was coming to his neighborhood. So, we met for dinner. And he turned into an artist as well [laughs]. He's a painter. He's a—it's funny.

Now, Richards, my boyfriend with whom I moved to Canada, has bailed on his art career and he started a company that does embroidery on shirts and hats, and he's got a good business. He's got obsessive-compulsive activity that makes him money and is a business.

LIZA ZAPOL: Hmm.

MARTHA WILSON: And I stayed at—well, okay, so he dumped my ass. It was the worst thing that could have ever happened, but he and his family—they had more money than my family did—helped him to buy a house in Halifax, so he paid me my sweat equity. After he dumped my ass, he gave me the money representing the effort that I had put into the house. That's how I started Franklin Furnace. Without that—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.] I love that story.

MARTHA WILSON: Without that sweat equity, I wouldn't have had the capital I needed to buy a new hot water heater and vacuum cleaner and get the safe moved out and—

LIZA ZAPOL: I love that story, and I want to—you know, I'd love to still kind of go back to Ohio and into Halifax before we get—come back—

MARTHA WILSON: To—

LIZA ZAPOL: —to New York.

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: But, yeah, that's so great that that was sort of the seed funding. Again—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —out of that difficult experience came—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —something wonderful. I'm interested also—you talked about like—so that moment of, you know, telling your parents you just had sex. You know, this was sort of coming into your own as a woman, but you're also confronted with family, trauma. But I'm interested in your own sense, as you're growing up, also of femininity. Like, what were images of, whether in television or film, of characters who—

MARTHA WILSON: Hmm [affirmative].

LIZA ZAPOL: —you want—were—

MARTHA WILSON: Hmm [affirmative].

LIZA ZAPOL: —wanted to emulate or you were uncomfortable—

MARTHA WILSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LIZA ZAPOL: —with.

MARTHA WILSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. All right. So, I'm going to graduate school in English literature at Dalhousie University, across the street from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, but the kids are so much cooler at the art school that I'm mostly hanging out at the art college. And then, I want to create a work of art that is—it is the piece that is called *Breast Forms Permutated*, so I ask women if I can photograph their boobs. And I ask women in the English department and I ask women in the art college if I can photograph their boobs.

And so, I take the photographs and all of the women going to Dalhousie wore brassieres and had bra strap marks and all the women going to the art college didn't wear brassieres and didn't have the bra strap marks, so all of the boobs ended up being from the art college.

[They laugh.]

MARTHA WILSON: So, I'm doing—I'm transitioning from—I haven't left the English literature world at all, but I'm trying to transition into Conceptual art, which is "oh, my God, the word can be used as the image; this is a godsend."

So, the very first work of art—I was just looking at it, actually, when I was looking around for the Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Pena issue of *New Observations*. The very, very, very first work of art I ever did was *Chauvinist*

*Pieces* and it's just text. What if you decided which baby—what if you based your choice of sperm based on the color of the sperm vial instead of the, you know, features of the partner? So, that was the very first work of art I ever did, and then the second one was *Breast Forms Permutated*, visual—a work of visual art that was also a reaction to this notion of permutating everything.

All the Conceptual artists of the day were taking an idea and then going through every possible iteration of this idea. So, I picked something that was limitless in form and couldn't be permutated, basically, to make it into a joke on Sol LeWitt and Jan Dibbets and the artists who were coming to the school and showing us their permutations [laughs]. So, then the third work I did, I think, was the drag piece, *Posturing Drag*, where Richards and I were not getting along at that point. We didn't break up totally, but we kind of didn't get along a couple of times, so I asked Doug Waterman to take that picture.

And I didn't have the term "feminist" in my vocabulary and I didn't have any women friends, really, whom I could relate to and talk to about this work. Terrel Seltzer was in the projects class with Richards and Doug, and I forget who all was in the projects class, but mostly guys. Terrel and—I don't know if there were any other girls. I think she was the only other girl. But the point of this story is that the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, like most art schools, was male-dominated, white male-dominated, and that was normal. That was what was going on.

One day, Carl Andre came to town as a guest artist. He looked at all of the girls in the school; he picked the prettiest one, [ . . . -MW] and said, "You're my new girlfriend." [Laughs.] [She -MW] totally believed him and then, a week later, he went back to New York and dumped her, in a de facto way, without a thought. And [she -MW], meanwhile—her personality disintegrates, and she doesn't know who she is anymore. She's—does she have value? You know, what was that that just happened? So, she [started -MW] taking thorazine, as I recall [laughs].

The point of this story is that women were not valued. They were in the art schools, but they were not valued and considered to be valid practitioners of art, and when I went to Jerry Ferguson and said, "Look, Jerry, I want to be an artist," he said, "Women don't make it in the art world. But if you're serious, you're going to make black-and-white art." So, I walked across the street and bought a roll of color film after that—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —conversation. I just thought, "What are you talk—what do you mean? What do you mean, it's got to be black and white?"

So, again, the difficulty causes the—gives you a path, another path, another way to go. And then, about a year later, after this conversation I had with Jerry, Lucy Lippard came to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and I signed up for an appointment and showed her my work, and she said, "Oh, you're a feminist performance artist."

[They laugh.]

"Thank you. Thank you. I have a label; I know what I'm doing here."

LIZA ZAPOL: Had you—did that—did you have a context for that term at that point?

MARTHA WILSON: I didn't have women friends whom I was able to relate to. I was kind of stuck because Richards and I were getting along and then not getting along. He ultimately got married to my college roommate. He went back to Ohio and he and Marcia had a fling for the weekend, and then he came back and announced that he was getting married to Marcia. That was like '73, end of '73, I think. So, I don't—well, Lucy was the one who told me "there are other women around North America and Europe who are doing work like you're doing."

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: "And I"—Lucy—"am going to put you in this show, *Circa 7,500*," the catalog for which enabled me to meet Jacki Apple, Rita Myers, Alice Aycock, all these other women—Nancy Kitchel—who were doing stuff not like what I was doing, but you know, they're women and they're valid and they're doing this kind of work, concept-driven, performance installation, video-based work. So, then I'm an artist and I'm—was I still going to grad school?

I got the MA in English literature in '72 and then I started working on the Ph.D. That was a year, so '73. Then my Ph.D. thesis idea was not accepted, because this was before the age of interdisciplinary studies, and I got all huffy and went across the street and asked Garry Kennedy, the president of the school who brought Jerry Ferguson up, if I could teach at the art college. And he said, "Well, yeah, the English teacher's leaving, so why don't you teach English?" [Laughs.] "Okay."



So, then I'm loose in the art school and able to audit Vito Acconci's class and David Askevold's project class and use the video equipment, and Dennis Young's art history class. I was basically skating through the college and seeing whatever I could see and having a wonderful time doing it and getting paid to do it, which was very nice.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, I mean, you talk about, you know, what was happening in terms of Conceptual art at that moment. But I'm interested in how you, like, identified what was interesting to you in terms of the work that you'd been doing up to that point, that you're—you know, whether your Ph.D. proposal on [Henry] James or other work—like where did you see yourself in the work of the Conceptualists?

MARTHA WILSON: You are—you're still trying to get me to admit that I'm a feminist, and I think—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —I didn't figure that out for the longest time. I was doing Conceptual art and using the only instrument that I had, which is my female body, to do it, and—oh, but—but—Vito—it was critical for Vito Acconci to come to the college because he was doing Conceptual art but taking sexuality itself as a legitimate subject of art, so that was like the door opened. I could see that I could be a Conceptual artist, still use language, use my female body, all at the same time.

And he was the one who, after I showed him my work, he said, "Oh, you have to read Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*," and it was—it totally rocked my world, that idea of performance being the common denominator that we share in the art world, and not in the art world. Everybody is performing at all times, and it's okay to examine that. And he—Erving Goffman—is very careful about peeling away the layers of performance in everyday behavior, because we're performing first for our internal sense of performance.

You know, our audience, our first audience, is us. We're looking at what we're doing all the time. Our second audience is somebody else who's in the room and the third audience might be our sense of where we fit into the larger context of history or scholarship or architecture or God knows what. So, when I got to New York there were all these other people who were also using performance as the common currency of their work and the uptown institutions were unclear about what they were supposed to be doing. They were basically ignoring us.

You know, the Met, the Whitney, the Guggenheim, and MoMA are—MoMA had a Projects—MoMA had done the *Information* show and they had a Projects Series that they started pretty soon after I got to New York in '74, I think, or maybe they had already started Projects. So, MoMA was hippest among all the major institutions, but they were not paying attention to any of my friends. You know, Laurie Anderson—they didn't know who Laurie Anderson was.

So—okay, so I'd been all alone in Halifax without friends and—because, I mean, I admit that Richards was the prow of the ship, who had done the hard work of making social contacts, and I would follow him and they would—his friends would become my friends and that's how I got—made my way through Halifax society. When I got to New York there's no prow of this boat. I'm here by myself and there are all these other weirdos around who are doing the same kind of work that I'm doing. Great! So, now we can—and everybody was in three bands—so now we can start a band and collaborate.

Instead of being solipsistically stuck inside my own universe, I could talk to other women and find out what they thought about the same circumstances, but different people, and how do you respond to that. I skipped over a step, though, because when I first got to New York, Judy Stein took me to various consciousness-raising groups until I found one that I was happy with. She took me to the National Organization of Women; I forget what the other one was; and then, finally, it was a group of mostly artists that appealed to me.

So, women were not—I thought that women would be competing with each other and fighting with each other and trying to hurt each other [laughs] and when I got here everybody was like lovely and—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —welcoming and took, you know, me by the hand and took me to try different consciousness-raising groups. I mean, oh, my God, it was completely the opposite of what I had imagined New York would be like from the distance of Halifax.

LIZA ZAPOL: What was it that—I mean, I think you've spoken before about the *Information* show at MoMA—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —being very sort of important in terms of your understanding—

MARTHA WILSON: Well, my boyfriend—

LIZA ZAPOL: —of Conceptual Art.

MARTHA WILSON: —was in it.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: So, I—he was invited and I came with him to come to New York, go to the opening, go to, after the opening, the Glass House that was designed by—[ . . . -MW]

LIZA ZAPOL: Yes. Yeah.

[They laugh.]

MARTHA WILSON: So, we had a picnic there—Philip Johnson. There we go.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: And the *Information* show had everybody in it. It had Vito, Doug Huebler, Dan Graham. All the Conceptual artists of the day were in this show and it was, I thought, a watershed moment in the art world, and that now art would be different because the *Information* show had happened. So, I took my—so I started publishing stuff and I took my published stuff to the bookstore, the MoMA bookstore. This was in—after I moved to New York, so it's 1974, and I said, "Look, can you handle my books that I have made?" And the guy said—the manager of the bookstore said, "Look, lady, the book costs \$5, but it would cost me \$5 to do the bookkeeping, so, no, I'm not going to handle your book here." So, then the idea came along that "oh, there are other artists, not just me, who are making this ephemeral stuff and MoMA's not handling it after all," even though they had the *Information* show. So, that's how I got the idea to start Franklin Furnace.

LIZA ZAPOL: Right. You also have in here—in the *Sourcebook* there's an article about another—an artist publishing group that—

MARTHA WILSON: Printed Matter?

LIZA ZAPOL: —was—that failed, but around the time when Franklin Furnace began, so it was like around 1974. It will come—that will also come to me—

MARTHA WILSON: [Laughs.]

LIZA ZAPOL: —in a second—

MARTHA WILSON: Okay.

LIZA ZAPOL: —as I find it. But of course, it came from you. But this idea that you were like "well, other artists are also trying to do this"—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —"there's a need for this."

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: So—the Something Else Press.

MARTHA WILSON: Something Else Press.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah.

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, how did you have the sense, you know—first of all, I'm curious again—

MARTHA WILSON: Well, Something Else Press—

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah.

MARTHA WILSON: —was a legitimate press that was not doing just so-called "artist books."

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: They were doing reprints of Gertrude Stein's *Lucy Church Amiably*—I hope I have that right—and newsletters about what was going on in the community, and like interviews with people, so it was a press that was engaged in the art world.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: The whole notion that the book itself could be a work of art was beginning to emerge at this time.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, I guess I'm also interested then—you know, there's this moment of a great leap, right?

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: You've talked about this, like choosing to come to New York itself when you weren't sure whether you were going to be received or not or how, and what would happen when you arrived. You know, the leap in your work that comes from being among peers and then also, of course, the beginning of Franklin Furnace. So—and that came—you know, the way you described it to me is it came from that breakup, you know—

MARTHA WILSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LIZA ZAPOL: —that you needed to, kind of, find yourself.

MARTHA WILSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LIZA ZAPOL: But I'm curious also if there were other things that were spurring you to make that leap.

MARTHA WILSON: Simone Forti was one of the only women [laughs] who was invited to come to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. She, Yvonne Rainer, Pat Oleszko—you know, I can count the number of women on one hand who were invited to come. And Simone Forti said, "Look, Martha, if you ever want to move to New York, you can crash on me."

[They laugh.]

MARTHA WILSON: So, when I was trying to decide between Montreal and New York, that was a critical factor. Montreal looked good, too, and still in Canada. I took French in high school. I mean, there were pros and cons in both directions, but I think it was Simone's offer that tipped the balance towards New York. So, I moved to New York. I'm living in Simone's loft, trying to make a living by writing short stories. Didn't work; you know, like two months later, I was—I realized, "I'm not going to be able to make it doing this." And so, I got a job.

I looked in the newspaper and I saw an ad for a publishing company they did not name, but you had to have an art history degree or English or and English. Art history for sure was involved. So, I figured out it's either Praeger or Abrams. Those are the two publishers; it's got to be one of those. So, I just went to Abrams at 8:30 in the morning and the managing editor, Margaret Kaplan, liked this can-do girl who showed up without going through a firm. I didn't go through a—what do you—an employment agency.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: I didn't go through an agency; I just showed up [laughs]. And I think my resume said I was blonde, too. I was so naïve, really. She interviewed somebody else before me who I guess had an 8:00 appointment. The somebody-else, woman, admitted to Margaret Kaplan that she was an artist and I saw the look on Margaret's face, so when I got to sit in that chair, I did not admit that I was an artist. I said I was an English lit major, I had an MA in English literature, which was all true.

[They laugh.]

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: And she hired me. She hired me! And Margaret to this day considers herself responsible for—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —my success. And I think, in a way, that is true because she was the managing editor of the editorial side and then there was another managing person on the design side. My entire job was to track manuscripts as they came out of editorial and went over to design, and then they came back from design and back to editorial. So, it's like air traffic control. You have to write down every single piece of paper.

I mean, if there are a hundred pieces of paper held together with a clip, then you can write that down, but does it have a title sheet? Does it have a copyright page? Does it have, you know, all these things—are in the pack? And Margaret told me the story that the editorial department had lost a manuscript back in the day and that if I could ever find it I would get a big prize. I never did find this—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.] You're still looking for it?

MARTHA WILSON: —mystery manuscript [Laughs.]

LIZA ZAPOL: But that like rigorous inventory of—

MARTHA WILSON: Well—

LIZA ZAPOL: —items—

MARTHA WILSON: —what she did was—her assistant was leaving and that's how I got the job as assistant to the managing editor, and the assistant had a couple of systems that I use at Franklin Furnace today. For example, if you write a letter to somebody, you put a carbon copy of that letter into the appropriate file for that person, but you put another copy in the chrono file, the chronological pile of everything that goes out of the department.

And we have a chrono file at Franklin Furnace, and I will remember "I wrote a letter and it was cold, so it was probably in January" of 1988. By gum, we went over to the warehouse and we went through the chrono file and we found the letter that I was looking for. It's like a backup system—

LIZA ZAPOL: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —some kind of failsafe system so that if you can't find it through one path, you find it through the other path. And we do this—we track our cash income. Whenever we get checks, we keep a—just a straight, manual list of the check, who it's from, the date that it arrived, who wrote the acknowledgement letter. You know, really basic stuff.

But I learned how to run a business by running—oh, and then—so, as soon as I got there—I get this job; about a month in, Margaret is called away to Japan because they're behind on a publication and she has to go to Japan to proofread so they can print the thing in a hurry. I'm basically running this department now for months. It seems like it was—it couldn't have been three months, but it was a long time. So, I thought when I got to Abrams—what—my—you know, when my interview was going down I said, "Look, I have an interest in art and an interest in language, English language, and that's why I want this job." I didn't touch the art. I was not an editor. I was not a designer. I was, you know, managing the—helping to manage the editorial department, and so I learned systems.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm [affirmative]. And did—were you an organized person? You know, were—before this kind of—

MARTHA WILSON: Well—

LIZA ZAPOL: —you know—

MARTHA WILSON: —they had systems when I got there—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —and I used the systems that I found when I got there.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah.

MARTHA WILSON: And then, one—

LIZA ZAPOL: But in terms of how you think—

MARTHA WILSON: Well—

LIZA ZAPOL: —and before this, you know.

MARTHA WILSON: And then, one day, I assigned the wrong ISBN number to a book and the ISBN number is the one number that identifies this book as distinct from every other book in the world. So, I—now there are two books with the same ISBN numbers. And they had to take all of these books off the boat, open each and every one of them, stamp a new ISBN number inside, and I was sure they were going to fire my ass. But the accounting department guy—the guy who ran the accounting department—said that he should have caught it,

because they had a backup list of ISBN numbers in the accounting department that they didn't—they'd failed to use. You know, you have this list of numbers and you cross them off so they're no longer available. Well, they had not checked their list and they printed up this book with the wrong ISBN number in it, so they didn't fire my ass after all.

But I knew—that was my first lesson in how your actions in the world have consequences in the world. When you're in grad school, you're reading about it in books, but you're not doing anything that's going to affect anybody's life. You're in the world now; this is going to affect the whole company [laughs] and it did. So, I learned that it's easy to run a business insofar as if you have multiple paths to check on what is going on. Then you can run this business.

LIZA ZAPOL: It sounds mortifying, a mortifying mistake.

[They laugh.]

MARTHA WILSON: I was mortified. It was horrible.

LIZA ZAPOL: I'm interested in, then, you know, what happens next, but I wonder if this might be a good time to take a pause—

MARTHA WILSON: Okay.

LIZA ZAPOL: —to see where we are right now.

[END OF wilson17\_1of2\_sd\_track02]

LIZA ZAPOL: So—great. So, we're just resuming after our short break. So, yeah, so then what happened? How did you—how long did you continue in that position at Abrams Books?

MARTHA WILSON: It was only one year. I thought that one year at Abrams was worth four years in grad school in terms of not—you know, learning. I felt like I learned so much by working in a real-world company. There was a guy, the head—it was the head of the accounting department—was going to Japan. So, I bought a camera, gave him, you know, dollars, and he came back with a single-lens reflex camera, so when I did start Franklin Furnace I had a single-lens reflex camera to document stuff with. So, there was a lot of—in those days, there were telex. I would send telexes to Japan [laughs]. I never used to telex at Franklin Furnace, but I did use carbon paper. I was, you know, careful about keeping copies of everything and—and keeping the filing systems going.

LIZA ZAPOL: How did telex work? What is that?

MARTHA WILSON: It's a hole-puncher and it—there's a tape and it punches on a grid. It punches out holes to represent letters. So, it's really cumbersome. I mean—

LIZA ZAPOL: So, that's in—

MARTHA WILSON: How did we—

LIZA ZAPOL: —communicating?

MARTHA WILSON: —function before—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —we had the internet and our phones? I just don't know.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, that was also communicating to your boss who was traveling—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —at that time?

MARTHA WILSON: Yes, I was communicating with Margaret, but—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —mainly it was corrections. We would send corrections over to Japan.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And simultaneously, it sort of—it sounds like you're developing your network of friends—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —and acquaintances—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —and colleagues and—

MARTHA WILSON: For example,

LIZA ZAPOL:

MARTHA WILSON: Alanna had started the Institute for Urban Art and Resources and she was running a performance program in—on Reade Street in a space, the top floor of a building called the Idea Warehouse. And I remember seeing, after work—you know, I was just desperate to get downtown [laughs] to see a piece by Virginia Piersol which involved a harness and an eight-millimeter movie camera pointing forward and another one pointing backwards. She's on roller skates and she's in this giant loft, rolling around in the loft, so the images are blowing up and shrinking in size as she rolls around in the loft. I just thought it was great. I just thought it was great.

And then, she—Virginia heard that I was looking for a loft for myself and my roommate Haviland Wright, who was a friend of my—son of my parents' friends, sailboat friends. So, Haviland and I were on Park Place looking at a loft that was below grade. It was wet in the basement. These giant roaches—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —that were this big come crawling out of the basement. I thought, "No, no, no, no, we're not going to live there." [Laughs.] And we looked at multiple places. But Virginia heard I was looking, planted herself—she knew where I was going—planted herself on the sidewalk and said, "Oh, you know there's this loft on Franklin Street that is available. You might want to look at that." She was already in the co-op. Or—co-op? Did—it was a net-lease building.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: We hadn't signed a net-lease yet, but Willoughby Sharp, who was on the top floor, publisher of *Avalanche* magazine; Virginia was on the third floor; Kurt Munkasie was on the fourth floor; Duff Schweningen was on the second floor; and whoever was on the ground floor had dropped out, so they had a ground-floor—they couldn't sign the net-lease because they didn't have enough people to pay for this.

So, I went to look at it and it had been a ship chandlery, so it had these exhibition cases with sliding glass doors, lots of them all the way down the side of the loft, because the chandlery would be exhibiting whatever. Portholes, onions, whatever—oil, whatever it is that they were going to put on the boat.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm [affirmative]. A chandler—they—

MARTHA WILSON: They're suppliers.

LIZA ZAPOL: Suppliers.

MARTHA WILSON: They—you radio to the chandler that you need 30 cases of oil or whatever it is that you need and then you also need 12 bushels of onions. So, they're the ones who run all over the city to gather the stuff. They keep it in the chandlery. You pull up to the port, they stick on the boat, and then you're able to leave.

So, I loved it. I completely loved it and Haviland was cool with it, too. He was an accountant and so he ended up being the bookkeeper for this new venture. He was running the numbers. The loft was—our loft, the ground-floor loft, was \$500 a month, which was an insurmountable amount of money to us at the time.

[They laugh.]

I know, it's so laughable. So, we had to have two roommates, and then, later on, I got three—I got another set of roommates, too. The next set of roommates included Michael Barry, who had carpentry skills, so he built the mezzanine using 4-by-4s, and then he decided that was not good enough and he took them all out and used 6-by-6s. And then my father, the architect, came to town and looked at the 6-by-6 mezzanine and said that he had done a good job and that was good.

So, Franklin Furnace was this clearing in the front of the loft, and then it got more space. And the kitchen is in the back and the bathroom is in the back, and then it got even more space. And so, we're up to around 1980 at

this point and the habit that I had was to wake up late—there's—you know, there's nobody watching; I'm here by myself—to open the store in the afternoon and then go out at night and stay out till the wee hours and wake up late the next day.

So, somebody calls me on the phone at 8:30 in the morning, and I pick up the phone and say, "Do you know what time it is?!" I'm yelling at—I don't know who this is, but they're calling me too early. And I hear this fuzz on the line indicating that it was somebody calling from Europe, probably, and they just—boom—hung up the phone. I thought, "You know, this is no good. I'm living and working in the same space, and I'm getting cranky and short with people, and I really should separate my life and my work." Also, if you're living in your work, there's no reason to stop working. You just keep working all the time. And I thought I was going to die.

So, I looked around at a couple of apartments on the Lower East Side, but then I thought my salary, my income, is not going to keep pace with the rent increases on the Lower East Side. And then, Jacki Apple's friend Mark Esper was organizing a building in Brooklyn and he met me at—did I take the subway? I guess I must have taken the subway over. I can't remember how I got over here. What I do remember is that I had never been to Brooklyn in my entire life and he, Mark, was pointing at how close we were to the subway. The subway's here and the building is there. And I just thought, "Where am I?" [Laughs.] "What am I doing here?"

But the co-op was—I think there were five of us, five partners. It only cost me \$1,000. Everybody put in \$1,000 so that we could pay a—like a down payment fee to pay off the mortgage over a 20-year period, something like that. So, I thought, "What's the worst that can happen? I lose \$1,000. This is—you know, life will go on if I lose \$1,000." So, I put my money down and we start paying a mortgage to the owners of the pawn shop.

The building had been a pawn shop and this case came from that pawn shop. There's a window on—facing Fifth Avenue. The guitars and the violins are all displayed in the front area, and then those sliding doors are behind the violins and the saxophones, and then there's a step down and then you're in the store. And then this case separated the store from the fur storage. So, the fur storage in the back was air-conditioned and there were all these racks to keep your fur coats in a cool place.

LIZA ZAPOL: Hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: So, when I got there it didn't really have a toilet. It was a pawn shop. So, I hired my friends who were artists and also plumbers to put in a toilet and a sink—I got an antique cast-iron sink from Frenchtown, New Jersey, and drove that up to New York—and, you know, slowly but surely renovated the loft.

And at the same time I was doing that, we, as a building, were slowly but surely trying to get a C of O. It took us—I don't know—12 years. It took us a really long time [laughs]. We of course replaced the boiler and put in a new roof and had to do all the infrastructure for the building. And at the end of the day, before we could get a C of O, we had to get it inspected and we knew that the stairwell was two inches too narrow to pass the code, so we put Lynn Mills, who lived above me on this side of the building, in hot pants and she walked in front of the inspector up the stairs. He never measured the stairs. We passed the inspection; we got a C of O.

[They laugh.]

LIZA ZAPOL: Good—quite a strategy.

MARTHA WILSON: So, I lived there. And it had been a pawn shop, so it had storage in the basement. Everybody had, you know, a certain amount of shelf space based on the number of shares. Mark, who had a larger number of shares, had the whole basement underneath his shop, and we all had sections of space underneath, actually, my side of the building. And on the other side of the building, we developed a shared laundry room and shared storage for toxic stuff that we didn't want to have in our houses, like paint. It was, you know, great. It was great.

So, years and years later, it's 2012 or something like that, and the Barclays Center is being built because of a, I believe, a handshake deal between Governor Pataki, Mayor Bloomberg, and Bruce Ratner. I think they just decided they're going to do this. And we formed a committee called Develop Don't Destroy Brooklyn, and we mounted lawsuits and we did marching and we wrote letters and we had phone campaigns. And we did everything we could and we lost all five lawsuits [laughs] and the Barclays started to be built. It's going 24/7 over there, because at the end, they were late. You know, they had an opening date, but they weren't done with the building yet.

So, the middle of this time—oh, and the other part of this story is, my boyfriend fishmonger from Westfield, New Jersey, moved from Westfield, New Jersey, to be closer to Martha, to a building on Sixth Avenue and Pacific Street which was smack in the middle of the footprint of the Barclays Center. His building was where the loading dock is today and he stood there and watched it being taken down.

After he—he was like the—he was the last man standing in his building and Dan Goldstein was the last man

standing in the one next door. There was a news segment that showed a sign that was outside his window, outside Vince's window, that said, "I love my [home -MW] and my neighborhood and I have no intention of leaving."

[They laugh.]

So, you know, everybody's gone, the building is empty, and then, a couple of years in, Ratner's people give him a call. "Why don't you come over here? We'll discuss the terms that would make it possible for you to leave." And Vince said, "No, why don't you come over here and look at my loft? And then you'll understand why I have no intention of leaving."

[They laugh.]

So, he is a businessman who runs a fish business in Westfield, New Jersey. He got Ratner to pay his old mortgage off, his new mortgage off, his moving costs twice, his mansion tax, and his attorney's fees. [Laughs.] He took him—you know, he came to the point where he had to decide, "Am I going to fight this to the death or am I going to be a fishmonger in New Jersey?" And he basically thought, "Okay, you know, we're not going to win this thing, and I'm a fishmonger from New Jersey. I have to take care of the business."

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: So, he took him for as much as he could and—well, the other thing that happened was Ratner offered him gorgeous loft spaces in DUMBO, right? But, a fishmonger from New Jersey; he has to come home, change his clothes, get in the subway, and get to the theater by 8:00 p.m. so that he can date Martha and we go out and do stuff. So, he didn't want to be in DUMBO because it takes an hour to just get of the neighborhood, and then you're still trying to get to PS 122 by 8 o'clock.

So, he—Vince—was driving past this site that had been a parking lot and he saw that there was new construction happening, and then one day there was a sign saying, you know, "Opening soon, condominium lofts—condominium apartments." He was the first person in the door [laughs], said, "Look, I want one of your apartments." And he got a four-bedroom and then he said, "Just don't build any walls. Just leave it."

The master bedroom's at this end, there's a guest room at the other end with a door that closes, but that's it. There's—aside from the bathrooms, it's just a big, empty space. It's got a terrace on this end, a terrace on the other end. One is for reading; one is for planting. I mean, he's got a pretty nice set-up—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —I should say.

LIZA ZAPOL: And is that—that's around here?

MARTHA WILSON: It's above—well, the good news is that it's almost literally on top of the Atlantic Avenue subway station. So, I live above Nevins—well, no, I'm not up to that part of the story yet. So, I'm living on Dean Street and so it's one block up the hill. He's living on—now he's living on State where State comes into Flatbush.

Then one of the members of the co-op that I had no intention of ever leaving and thought I would be carried out on a plank from—one of the members of the co-op got prostate cancer and stopped paying his share of the costs of the building. So, at this point, Barclays is being built, one of us is not paying, Vince has already been eminent-domained out of his loft, and we decide—we have a building meeting and decide "okay, we're going to sell this building." Because if you sell your unit you'll make—I don't know—\$275,000, but if you sell the whole building, everybody makes a lot more money. So, that's what we did.

We sold the building in September of 2013, I think, and I didn't want this [the pawn shop's wooden display -MW] case to end up in a landfill somewhere, so I hired a sculptor friend of mine who was also a general contractor to move it out, and we—he—oh, and I haven't gotten to the part where I got this loft. So, we moved it into a storage unit temporarily. He took the top off, he took the drawers out, and he moved it into a storage unit.

LIZA ZAPOL: This is a case that's about—

MARTHA WILSON: Oh, 15 feet—

LIZA ZAPOL: —like 15 feet?

MARTHA WILSON: —long, yeah. And—

LIZA ZAPOL: And—



MARTHA WILSON: —10—

LIZA ZAPOL: —10 or 12 feet high.

MARTHA WILSON: —feet high.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: So, then I'm looking for a two-bedroom apartment. My son has gone to American University and returned. He's graduated and he's come back to live with his mom, while he's looking for a job. So, I'm looking for a two-bedroom apartment in my neighborhood. Nope, can't afford it. It's—the land values—due to gentrification which I helped [laughs] facilitate, the land values are too high. So, about a month into looking, Comly, my son, announces, "Guess what, Mom? I'm moving to Manhattan with my college roommate."

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: So, I had looked in this building and decided that the studio apartments were too small for two people, and I couldn't afford the two-bedrooms anyway. So, I came back and the first thing I did was pace off this wall and make sure that the case could fit there and bought it, bought the studio, hired my friend Scott Pfaffman.

He took the window out, took this window out, hired a company—piano moving company—you know, a truck with a crane on the back; told me, "Don't watch; don't come and watch this," because he didn't want me to know what they had to do to get this case in; took the window out of the frame so they just had a hole out on the street; took—put the case through the hole, put it all back together again [laughs]. And there was some manhandling involved that I noticed later. But I don't care. I don't care. It's here and it's still in one piece and, you know, I have it in my life, so I'm happy with it.

So—and then the other thing I asked him to do was to recreate my old loft in my new apartment. So, the old loft had this tin ceiling in it. These tin ceilings are now manufactured not in Soho, as they used to be, but in Texas, so we ordered tin from Texas. The floor was painted with India ink. The walls are gray; my walls were gray. We've created—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —my old loft in my new apartment. I'm very happy here. And then, I guess I should add to this story that over the years at Franklin Furnace artists would give me works of art and I would put them in a closet. I had a closet in my old loft. Now I have to move—I have to open that closet and look through it. I found a piece by Hannah Wilke. I found a piece by Shirin Neshat; I totally forgot all about it. Leon Ferrari. So, it ended up being a good thing. Again, trauma leads sometimes to beneficial ends. So, now I have my art collection—

[They laugh.]

MARTHA WILSON: —where I can see it.

LIZA ZAPOL: The sequence of homes—

MARTHA WILSON: [Laughs.]

LIZA ZAPOL: —of New York homes. But also, of course, it often follows trails like the changing economics of the city—

MARTHA WILSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LIZA ZAPOL: —and the real estate. And I know that that—certainly, around Franklin Furnace there was a lot of change—

MARTHA WILSON: Oh—

LIZA ZAPOL: —at that time. I mean, it was interesting; in the article in *TDR*, it talks about that below Canal Street was most of the nonprofits; above was the for-profits—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —the galleries—

MARTHA WILSON: Yep.

LIZA ZAPOL: —around art, in Tribeca or Soho/Tribeca. What—you know, at that time, when you moved to Franklin Furnace, what was that area known as? What did it feel like at that period?

MARTHA WILSON: It was pretty empty. It had been egg salespeople, fabric-refolding [companies –MW], spices, ship chandlery, a couple of bars, one diner—two diners. There were two diners. One of them is still there. The Square Diner is still there. Square Diner is now being run by the daughter and son-in-law of the people who were there running it when I was running Franklin Furnace and I would use it as my outer office. I would go over there and be able to think, because there's no phone ringing, or at least it's not ringing for me [laughs]. I just love it that they're still there. It's so wonderful. Everything else is gone, but the Square Diner is still there. [Laughs.]

LIZA ZAPOL: But—and then, in terms of the other spaces where you would go out late at night, till 3:00, 4:00 in the morning—

MARTHA WILSON: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LIZA ZAPOL: —like where were the other—

MARTHA WILSON: Well—

LIZA ZAPOL: —art spaces—

MARTHA WILSON: —there was the Clocktower.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: The Idea Warehouse closed.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: Clocktower was there and was there until really just two or three years ago, right? When the city decided to sell the building to a private developer. The Kitchen was like the bellybutton of the whole neighborhood because it had been in existence since 1972 and they were on Wooster on the second floor for a really long time.

And friends of mine did—Susan Ensley, for example, did a performance [in] the windows of Broome Street across the street from the Kitchen—So the audience is in The Kitchen looking out the windows at the action that's going on inside these lofts. I don't know how she did that. She got the owners to agree to let her have her friends and actors in their homes across the street. The Feminist Art Institute started up in '82 or '92. I forget the year. [1979 – 1990] That didn't last very long. But White Columns had been 112 Greene Street and then they moved to Spring and became White Columns, and then moved again up to Chelsea.

So, the art space—so we at Franklin Furnace—I didn't start it all alone. I had help from my friends. One of them is Jacki Apple, with whom I collaborated as an artist, and she was my first curator, really. We would schedule the artists to be on the dates that were not being used by other art spaces so that we could all go out to each other's work. Laurie Anderson, years later, famously said, "The same 300 people went to everything," and it's really true.

I mean, you knew everybody and we're all going around to—we're all going to The Ear Inn and Jeffrey Lohn's having a concert at The Kitchen so now we're going to The Kitchen. And somewhere around—so we're in the late '70s and the early '80s. Then the East Village starts. The East Village scene is starting in '82, '83, something like that. It was a cab ride, though, so it was—I didn't go to the East Village all that often. It was six bucks to get there by cab. [Laughs.]

But it was the beginning of the diaspora of the art world, where it used to be all Soho all the time and then it was Tribeca and Soho all the time, and then, when the East Village started and then Paula—after a few more years, Paula Cooper moved from Soho to Chelsea, and pioneered Chelsea as a neighborhood. She pioneered Soho first and then Chelsea second. So, we didn't know that the art world was going to become a diaspora and spread out all over the place; we were just going to all these new neighborhoods. PS122 was the main event in the performance side in the East Village. I don't know what the question is. I guess the question is, what else was going on in—

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, it was, you know, where were you going? What was sort of the ecosystem around—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —Franklin Furnace—

MARTHA WILSON: Yep.

LIZA ZAPOL: —Where were you—who was your audience?

MARTHA WILSON: Oh, okay.

LIZA ZAPOL: Where were these people coming from?

MARTHA WILSON: Well, there's one big, critical factor that I should mention here, which is Julian Pretto started the Fine Arts Building, what was called the Fine Arts Building. It was on Hudson and Franklin. And Artist Space had been on Wooster and then they moved to the Fine Arts Building, to the second floor. There were multiple small exhibition spaces that were being used by freelance curators.

Printed Matter—after Franklin Furnace and Printed Matter had a series of meetings about the idea that we should share space at 112 Franklin Street, Willoughby Sharp and his attorney came downstairs and said, "This will never be known as the Printed Matter Building!" which frightened Printed Matter away and they went to the Fine Arts Building. For a while they had an office there and then they got the store on Lispenard—storefront on Lispenard. But even though that was a terrible trauma [laughs] again—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —it had the positive effect of fostering a discussion about how to divide the pie so that we were not duplicating each others' efforts. We all wanted artist books to be published, distributed, preserved, and exhibited. And so, Franklin Furnace took the preservation/exhibition side and they took the publication and distribution side. That was about three months in. I opened April 3rd and—May, June—April, May, June. By—you know, by June, I'd already figured out distribution is a horrible drag because you have to stand in line at the Post Office.

[They laugh.]

MARTHA WILSON: So, I was completely happy to divide the pie up differently. And also, it wasn't a revenue-producing venture. Ingrid Sischy, who was the next director—first it was Irena von Zahn and then it was Ingrid Sischy, who was the director of Printed Matter—made the case to the Internal Revenue Service that "look, this is not a profitable venture here." [Laughs.] "We're running—it's a not-for-profit organization; we need to have not-for-profit status." And they were awarded not-for-profit status. She made a good case. But who else is going on?

But—oh, yeah, the Alternative Museum moved to White Street [Just Above Midtown Gallery was also on Franklin Street -MW]. Let's see. The art space movement was—Exit Art—Exit Art's first physical show was at Franklin Furnace. It was the *Illegal America* show. And then they had a space in their own apartment building on Canal and Church for a brief period, and then they rented a space on Broadway, and then they rented another space on Broadway, and then they ultimately moved to Chelsea as well.

So, Exit Art was a very important exhibition venue because of the intelligence of Jeanette Ingberman, who is the co-director, and Papo Colo—the design ability of Papo Colo, who would walk in and look at all the crap on the floor and put it on the walls and it looked totally great.

[They laugh.]

So, those are my colleagues that I was hanging out with.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, then, you know—at Franklin Furnace—this idea was that you were in charge of presentation/archiving of artists' books. Talk about, you know, where you—what's happening now in terms of your own understanding as an artist, becoming an administrator—

MARTHA WILSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LIZA ZAPOL: —navigating—

MARTHA WILSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LIZA ZAPOL: —or choosing to navigate both? Or what are you prioritizing—

MARTHA WILSON: Okay.

LIZA ZAPOL: —at this moment?

MARTHA WILSON: Okay, that's an excellent question. So, I founded Franklin Furnace in 1976 and I founded

Disband in 1978. And it was annoying to me that administration took up so much of my time. I think I met Anne Focke through the first conference of the—was it the first conference of the National Association of Artists Organizations? I'm not sure if it was.

Anyway, Anne Focke started an organization called And/Or Gallery in Seattle and I called her on the phone and started bitching about [laughs] how annoying it was to be spending all my time doing administration and none of my time doing art. And she said, "Why can't we consider our administrative practice to be a creative practice?" So, that was a huge relief to be able to relax and understand that it's all problem-solving. Really, you're doing the same creative work in your brain the whole time, even though right now you're working on an art idea and over here you're working on an administrative idea. So—

LIZA ZAPOL: So, did that relieve—

MARTHA WILSON: —I did both—

LIZA ZAPOL: —some pressure—

MARTHA WILSON: It did—

LIZA ZAPOL: —in terms of—

MARTHA WILSON: Well—

LIZA ZAPOL: —like—

MARTHA WILSON: —it did kind of relieve—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —the angst of thinking I was abandoning my art career. And also, because I had Franklin Furnace, I had a loft that was big enough to practice in, so Disband practices were invariably in Martha's loft, which was great. You know, I started entertaining. [Laughs.] I started entertaining Disband rehearsals and also, I would have slide dinners. I would invite my friends to come and show slides of not their work, but their summer vacation. And Michael Smith came and he didn't realize that that's what the rules were and he brought slides of his work. [Laughs.]

So, we just showed—you know, we just showed slides of whatever it was people showed up with. And then they were bringing slides of whatever and a dish, and that was the slide dinner. We would—we'd have—slides being the universal currency of the art world. The—I have another story about slides, which is that Jacki Apple—now, you have to understand she invariably wore high heels and wore full makeup and nice clothes. And somebody stole her purse; her slides were in her purse. She, high heels and all, went pell-mell running down the street.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: You can't lose your slides! You have nothing if you don't have your slides.

[They laugh.]

MARTHA WILSON: And I think what happened was they took her wallet out and threw the purse on the—and that was okay with her.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: She picked up the purse, she had the slides.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: "Okay, I've lost my wallet."

[They laugh.]

LIZA ZAPOL: So, your slide dinners are these—really tried to say, "Show me some other part of yourself," really not pushing—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah, yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —that [artist - LZ] part of your identity.

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah, we're looking at grains of sand under an inch of water in Provincetown—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —or something, you know. Pieter Holstein was at PS1 at the time. PS1 was founded I think in '77, '76 or '77. It was founded around the same time. Everybody thought Alanna was out of her mind for starting a space in Queens—fucking Queens? You know, who would ever go there? But she did it. She figured it out with being open on Sundays, having openings on Sundays, and like—like BAM. I think they had busses. BAM had—BAM got people to come to Brooklyn with busses and they just discontinued the busses only like what? A year and a half or two years ago. That was the way to get the Manhattanites to come. Now all the cool kids live in Brooklyn—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —so they don't have to have busses anymore. I forget where I was—

LIZA ZAPOL: We were talking about—

MARTHA WILSON: —going with this.

LIZA ZAPOL: —the—Alanna and the slides.

MARTHA WILSON: Oh.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah.

MARTHA WILSON: So, Pieter was not allowed to live in his studio, but of course, he did. He lived in his studio and he took pictures of the Citycorp building at sunrise, just a beautiful, beautiful slide, and then that was the slide that went missing. It just—I don't know what ever happened to it. It disappeared after the—after we saw it at the slide dinner. That was the last time we saw it.

LIZA ZAPOL: Talk to me about maybe—let's see. We'll talk about one more thing—

MARTHA WILSON: Okay.

LIZA ZAPOL: —and then we should probably—we'll—maybe we'll call it a day for today and resume tomorrow. But I'm interested in the beginning of Disband. So, how—

MARTHA WILSON: Oh, yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —did that—

MARTHA WILSON: How did that happen?

LIZA ZAPOL: —come to be? Yeah, what—out of which friendships—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —and lack of a performance—of a musical expertise.

[They laugh.]

MARTHA WILSON: There was a show at PS1 called *The Sound Show*. Alanna invited me to be in it. I invited my friend Daile Kaplan and my other friend Barbara Ess to be in the very first performance of Disband. Daile was also the drummer for a band called The Gynecologists. It was run by Rhys Chatham. And Barbara had a—I think she had—I don't know if she had started Y Pants yet. I think she was in Static. Glenn Branca's band was called Static and had done a performance at Franklin Furnace.

Everybody was in three bands, I mean, at the time, but they knew how to play instruments and I didn't know how to play instruments. Daile and Barbara and Martha—Martha was throwing a rubber ball against the wall, Daile was drumming, and Barbara was playing guitar? I don't know, I have the video documentation so I can check it out.

[They laugh.]

I can't remember it too well. But it was an excuse to not be alone anymore, to be in a band, to have colleagues and work with other people. That was the important thing.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, what happened when you got together?

MARTHA WILSON: So, then—so we did one performance and then Daile left but invited her friend Donna to join. Barbara left and I think I invited Diane to join, and then later Diane invited Ilona to join. Barbara Kruger was my friend; she lived on Lispenard, I lived on Franklin. You know, we knew each other. I'd shown her work at Franklin Furnace. So, it was—the first performance did not include Barbara Kruger, but the second or third performance did include Barbara Kruger and not Daile and not Barbara Ess anymore.

It turned into the all-girl band of women artists who can't play any instruments, right away. April Gornik came to some rehearsals and just sat on the floor and observed us. Ingrid Sischy came to some rehearsals, sat on the floor, and observed us. April Gornik did not stick with the band; Ingrid Sischy did. So, the first stable form of the band was Martha, Donna, Ilona, Ingrid, Diane—Diane. So, there were five of us for our next big performance, which was at PS1.

I can't remember what the name of the series was, but we had a gig—we had really kind of a big gig at PS1. October 21, 1979, a year after the very first performance, at which point we figured out that we could each come up with ideas for songs, but then the songs would be our individual interpretations of the idea.

For example, the *Sad Song*—my version of the *Sad Song* is [singing] "sad, sad, sad." Diane's version of the *Sad Song* is [singing] "being taken care of." Donna's version of the *Sad Song* is [singing] "Mommy!" and Ilona's version of the *Sad Song* is [singing] "Hate my landlord; want to kill my landlord; don't like my landlord; don't want to have a landlord; I don't [inaudible]." You know, speaking in tongues, usually about the landlord.

[They laugh.]

So, each of us is sad, but in our own voice. After a while, you've collaborated with these people enough you can tell what—you know where they're going—what direction they're going to take in the song, and we could feel each other to the point where we didn't have cues. We just knew that the song was over. You know, we had gone through that emotion sufficiently enough and that was the end. Or we had songs that did have words, like the *Girls' Bill of Rights*. We wanted to make sure that every girl was the right to a pony; every girl has the right to an abortion; every girl has the right to a storage unit.

So, we—you know, we had ideas about what was important and, of course, we could deviate from those ideas as well. Then there were other songs. Barbara Kruger wrote two songs that had actual words and actual tunes, *The End* and *Fashions*. [singing] "The end of movies, the end of boredom, the end of fashion, and the end of art; the end of sunglasses, the end of life as TV." It's a really brilliant song. She's a very brilliant girl. So, Disband did probably 20 performances in the course of four years. I don't know; I have a resume, I can count. Twenty, 25, something like that.

At the end of Disband, I didn't think—I didn't know it was the end, but we went to a gig in Central Park or maybe Van Courtland Park—pretty far away—and there were more people in the band than there were in the audience. [Laughs.] So, Donna said, "Look, it's the end. It's the end of Disband." I thought, "Oh, no, no!" But at that point, we had—Ronald Reagan had been elected in 1980. We had decided to become the members of his cabinet, so each of us had a persona based on his cabinet members and I was Alexander M. Plague, Jr.

And Disband was over, so I did one performance as Alexander M. Plague, Jr., and then I tried Ronnie Reagan, and then I found Nancy Reagan. And Nancy was unguarded in her remarks. She would say stuff that was—I mean, not as bad as Barbara Bush, who said even worse stuff in the newspaper, but I was just amazed that I could underline what she actually said and then I had my script written already.

[They laugh.]

So, I did Nancy for the remainder of Reagan's terms and then I did one performance as Barbara Bush during the George H.W. Bush era, and then Bill Clinton was elected and I was watching the MTV inaugural ball for which he, Bill Clinton, came out playing the saxophone and the youth of America was so happy that our president was playing the saxophone. And then, Hillary came out after Bill, and then Al came out after Hillary.

And then, Tipper came out on this runway in a sea of youth all around and then the mood in the room changed. And it got ugly and people started booing her and they booed her off the stage, and I thought, "Oh, I have to do Tipper." She had wanted parental advisory language on CDs and records and the youth of America couldn't forgive her. And so, during Tipper's time, I talk a lot about freedom of expression, naturally.

And then, George W. Bush is elected. So, "oh, what am I going to do now?" So, then I went back to Barbara. I already had the wig, I already had the suit, I already had the pumps, so we became the mother of the president, which was very good. She—the mother of the president was very busy—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —during the George W. Bush years. And she kept performing after she was all washed up. She kept performing for a while longer. But when Trump was elected—well, before Trump was elected I thought, We're [roughly -MW] the same age. I have the jowls, I have the paunch. I have to do Donald, obviously. [Laughs.] It's my destiny. And I had the suit left over from Disband. So—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.] I see.

MARTHA WILSON: —I had all the equipment. I didn't have the wig. I didn't know what to do about the wig, so I bought myself a flowing red wig and then I had it styled into the mullet that is identifiable as Donald's hair. And before the election, PPOW had a show called *Inauguration*. So, I come out as Donald and I explain actually I'm Martha Wilson dressed up as Donald and this is how I've seen the art and political situation in this country shift over the last 50 years. And then, at the very end, I turn back into Donald and wish everybody good luck. [Laughs.] And then, he was elected, so I thought, "Oh"—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —"no, I have to get my suit dry-cleaned and [laughs] be ready for this—ugh—the Trump era." So, that's where we are.

LIZA ZAPOL: That's where we are. And then, we also spoke about, you know, possible new characters coming up, but I'd love to—maybe we'll stop here—

MARTHA WILSON: Okay.

LIZA ZAPOL: —and then we can resume. There's a lot—

MARTHA WILSON: We'll talk about Melania tomorrow [laughs].

LIZA ZAPOL: —a lot to talk about Melania, maybe Michelle, too.

MARTHA WILSON: Yes, we could talk about Michelle, too.

[END OF wilson17\_1of2\_sd\_track03]

LIZA ZAPOL: But thank you for today.

MARTHA WILSON: Oh, sure. Oh, sure.

[END OF wilson17\_1of2\_sd\_track04]

LIZA ZAPOL: I'm going to do an intro first. This is Liza Zapol interviewing Martha Wilson on Thursday, May 18, 2017, in Brooklyn, New York, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is session two, a day after our last session. So, to continue, in listening back the interview yesterday there are a couple of themes that came up, we've discussed. I wonder if we might begin talking about—really going back a little bit to your background and where the seeds were of experimentation, of wanting to be an artist, and art-making when you were a child.

MARTHA WILSON: Okay. I have to give a lot of credit to my mother, who, as I said yesterday, elected to go to college instead of go[ing] to high school at the Quaker prep school in town. She wanted to be an artist and, really, a lot of the discussion is economic in nature, because artists are not supported by our culture. You know, we can name the 10 artists who make a living from being an artist, but everybody else has a day job or has two jobs or something to make it happen.

So, my mother was being supported by my father. She had enough independence that she could be—she could afford to be an artist, and she was also—having been raised Quaker, my theory about Quakerism is that each member of the Quaker faith has an umbilical relationship directly to God. There's no authority out there telling you "this is what you should believe and you should not believe in that." Consequently, whatever she believed she thought was the Word of God. [Laughs.] You know, it was unimpeachably correct.

So, she was a very independent person who had a pen pal during the Second World War and then later on she went to visit her pen pal in Bath, England. And, you know, I don't know whether I would call it a business necessarily, but she participated in craft fairs and had an enterprise going where she was making art as her passion. Her independence of mind probably led to quite a lot of fights between them. For example, "why are we sending our daughter to a prep school that costs so much money when we could send her to a perfectly good public school that's right down the block?" I'm sure they had arguments about money.

And so, when I got to college I knew better than to major in art. I majored in something else with the thought that I could—I started in botany. I wanted to be an oceanographer, so for the first two years at Wilmington College, I was majoring in botany, taking chemistry, and taking—oh, I don't know. Chemistry—I remember chemistry, because I wasn't very good at that.

[They laugh.]

And minoring in art. Then I thought, "Okay, I'm a big fish in a small pond. I'm going to go to a big pond and see how I do." So, I transferred out my sophomore year to the University of Washington, which actually had an oceanography department, and I got through the first couple of months of the first semester and we had to do experiments on an electron microscope, and my time slot was Tuesday from 6:45 to 7:30 or something like that.

So, the first experiment I didn't complete because I couldn't figure out how to work the electron microscope. The next week, I had two experiments to do in the same 45-minute period. By the third week, I'm failing the course. So, I visit a guidance counselor, and the guidance counselor says, "Well, you know, you get A's in English. Why don't you major in English?" I thought, "That's so easy."

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: "But if I'm going to major in English, then I should go back to Wilmington because at least at Wilmington you can have dinner with your professors and talk about ideas and"—so, after one semester at the University of Washington, I transferred back to Wilmington College, quit botany as my major, became an English major, told my father about this, and he said, "Well, you'll never make any money doing that either."

[They laugh.]

So, a couple more years later, I got into an art college and asked my father if I could transfer out of Wilmington College and go to an art college. Was it RISD? I can't remember, can't even remember what school it was. He said, "Absolutely not. I'm not paying for college twice." You know, you—"Forget it. It's not happening." So, the decision to be an artist was always framed for me as an economic choice that I could not afford, really, to make. So, when I applied to grad school in English literature, the best fellowship I got was from Dalhousie University in Canada, and my boyfriend had gotten in across the street at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. He's getting his MFA in printmaking, I'm getting my MA in English literature, and we can afford it because his family helped us to buy this building and I had a bigger fellowship than I got from any of the schools in the United States.

[Tape stops, restarts.]

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay, so we're going to go back just to Wilmington College just a little bit, just to talk about your—

MARTHA WILSON: Just to talk about what I was doing.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah.

MARTHA WILSON: It was all derivative stuff. I was doing Abstract Expressionist painting and admiring Joan Mitchell, who was like the only girl out there—Helen Frankenthaler—not knowing anything about what a bitch Helen Frankenthaler was or—you know, I didn't know that stuff.

In the thrall of Jerry Ferguson, my painting teacher, I thought he was a—well, I'm not going to use the word "god," but he was an eminence whom I admired, and he thought it was his job to teach us what's been going on in the art world not just from a technical standpoint, but from a Conceptual standpoint. So, I was very happy to learn about Marcel Duchamp and what the Abstract Expressionist painters were trying to do after the Second World War.

So, when Richards—so now we move to Canada. I'm an English lit major and I graduate in English; good grades. [Laughs.] We move to Canada. Richards is now going to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, studying art and in David Askevold's projects class and Dennis Young's art history class, so the level of art ideas coming through the house are considerably higher than they were in college, plus the art college devoted two salary lines to the visiting artist program and brought in all of the Conceptual movers and shakers of the day. So—

LIZA ZAPOL: And did you sit in on the projects class as well? You—

MARTHA WILSON: Sometimes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —ended up auditing that.

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah, sometimes.



LIZA ZAPOL: I mean, do you remember any of the assignments or the work—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah—

LIZA ZAPOL: —that was coming out?

MARTHA WILSON: —Dan Graham did a piece that he shows frequently with a camera moving over—I think they're two bodies. How did that work? It's a portrait. It was done on the citadel in Halifax, so it's at a high point of land and the harbor is down below and the city is over here. And so, you see—I think the two views are one view of the two people manipulating the camera and the other one of the view of the camera as the camera is navigating the surface of the body or bodies. I just don't remember if it's one or two bodies. What I remember is it was really awkward.

[They laugh.]

It was kind of awkward, but it made a wonderful visual piece at the end.

LIZA ZAPOL: But the execution was awkward?

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah, it was difficult to make it happen.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, you were physically there as they were trying to—

MARTHA WILSON: They were trying to move the camera—

LIZA ZAPOL: —do this?

MARTHA WILSON: —across their bodies. I did not go to every single projects class, but I remember going as much as possible.

LIZA ZAPOL: And so, these ideas were coming—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —new ideas were occurring—

MARTHA WILSON: To me.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —to you.

MARTHA WILSON: While I'm studying English literature.

LIZA ZAPOL: Now, you talk about—

MARTHA WILSON: But I guess the crucial moment occurred when the word and—when the word could become art. The word that I loved so much and had studied for so long could be the work itself. So, Lawrence Weiner. You know, somebody like Lawrence Weiner, whose statement is the work—well, no, actually, the statement is not the work; the concept embodied in the statement is the work. This was like [demonstrates] a revelation to me.

LIZA ZAPOL: But can you talk also about your love of—for language? You know, where then—I mean, you say you did well in English—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —that it was easy.

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: But there's something more there. I think it's—you know, where was your passion for reading? You described your sister as being the bookworm when—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah—

LIZA ZAPOL: —you were kids.

MARTHA WILSON: —she was the bookworm when we were—

LIZA ZAPOL: So—

MARTHA WILSON: —growing up.

LIZA ZAPOL: —when did that switch?

[They laugh.]

MARTHA WILSON: Well, graduate school in Canada was kind of a chore, really, because the way American education works is it's horizontal. You get a little bit of French, you get a little bit of Indonesian, you get a little bit of Chinese, history, and culture, and understanding. No, in Canada it's based on the English system; it's vertical. You study Beowulf to Evelyn Waugh in chronological order. Everything that's happened in England, not France, not America.

One reason my Ph.D. thesis was rejected is I wanted to write about Henry James, who's actually American, and he was okay because he spent a lot of time in England, but he's not actually English. So, I remember reading endless documents about 18th- and 19th-century Catholicism and belief systems, which is good. It's good and it's important to understand the cultural context that you're in when Carlyle wrote his stuff. That—it was all worth it, but it was very confining somehow. It was very—it was not about ideas.

I wanted to write a paper about Virginia Woolf for two reasons: one, she's a woman—she's actually English, too—and two, because it was the concept motivating her to write *The Waves* that was of interest to me. No, I wasn't allowed to write about Virginia Woolf at all because they were prejudiced against women. I don't know. Because they had a different agenda than I had. So, it was frustrating to be in the English department and it was liberating to hang out at the art college and see how language could be used in concept-driven projects.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, even though there was still not that significant or much inclusion of women in the art school also across the street, you could insert yourself somehow in that world.

MARTHA WILSON: Not as a serious artist—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —but as an English teacher, I could insert myself.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: And I could use the facilities there.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: That was what was so cool about being at the art college.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, okay, you start to cross—you cross the street, and in your narrative, it sounds like that's when you're crossing the street, you're becoming an artist.

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: But when did you start to self-identify—yesterday we talked a lot about feminism—but as an artist?

MARTHA WILSON: I did not self-identify as an artist. I was too chicken to do that, too anxious to do that. And then when I asked Jerry Ferguson, you know, "I'd really like to be an artist," and he said, "Women don't make it in the art world," I think it was the opposition to the idea that I could be an artist that was the motivating factor, that, by golly, I'm going to try it anyway, and then what's the worst that can happen? I have to be a secretary again. You know, it's no—it's really no big deal. [Laughs.]

So, I saw Richards studying art and trying to make art and it was—you know, he would lie in bed and kind of writhe, trying to come up with ideas and—or answers to projects that he'd been assigned. So, I knew it wasn't a walk in the park. It was difficult stuff. So, that was another reason why I was not going to just jump in with naïve enthusiasm to this role. So, I kind of kept both going.

After 1971, I guess, was—I was still in the M.A.—still getting an M.A. in English literature and my first work of art was written down, the *Chauvinist Pieces*, so it was just text. So, I was kind of like later, when I'm both an artist

and director of Franklin Furnace; I have one foot in one pie and the other foot in the other pie.

[They laugh.]

It's—I don't know—insurance? [Laughs.] I don't know why.

LIZA ZAPOL: Well, both delicious pies, but—

[They laugh.]

MARTHA WILSON: Both of them are, yeah. Good pies.

LIZA ZAPOL: But, yeah, so, at this point, you're still—you know, you're making work; you're still proceeding in English.

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: And then, it sounds like that, at the same time, your work is also about identity, like how do people see you—

MARTHA WILSON: Ah—

LIZA ZAPOL: —how do you identify—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —and you're not sure—

MARTHA WILSON: Already—

LIZA ZAPOL: —what you are.

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL:

MARTHA WILSON: Oh, so—okay, thank you for that cue. That's very good. Richards was socially more adept than I was and so when we split up I did not know who I was. I did not know if I liked a clean place or a messy place, if I liked jazz or if I liked rock-and-roll. I just had no idea who was in there [laughs]. So, my work was experiments to find out who's in there. And I did not know the answers to the problems that I set for myself; I would execute the concept of the problem to find out if our kinesthetic mirrors are more accurate than visual feedback in a real mirror.

Now, Richards was a good sport and took photographs of me during all the times that we were getting along and some of the times that we weren't, so I have to thank him for that. He's [laughs] a great guy. He sat for a piece, *Captivating a Man*, because he looked Marcel Duchamp and I wanted to do a piece about how woman captivates a man and also reference the Duchamp—the Man Ray image of Marcel Duchamp on the cover of this.

LIZA ZAPOL: Of—

MARTHA WILSON: [Laughs.]

LIZA ZAPOL: Yes, yes, on the cover of the *Martha Wilson Sourcebook*. So, it's the Rose Selavy—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —image.

MARTHA WILSON: Which, as an aside, we were not allowed to touch in any way, and so the way the book got sold was we shrink-wrapped it and put the title of the book on a card that was outside the physical book.

LIZA ZAPOL: Because—you weren't allowed to touch it because it had to remain intact? That was sort of the rights?

MARTHA WILSON: We weren't allowed to touch—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —the image in any way.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: We couldn't put the title of the book on top of the image or anything.

LIZA ZAPOL: Whereas in your story, now you're, you know, experimenting and recreating that image. Yeah, so what was that in terms of the drag, sort of even dressing up your boyfriend/ex-boyfriend in drag, sort of manipulating him? What do you feel like was also motivating that in terms of—or just what was motivating that?

MARTHA WILSON: I thought I was doing all these different works and then, 10 years later, I look back it and decided "oh, I'm just doing one work [laughs] and it's all the same, you know, different angles on the same problem," which is the nature of identity. What the heck is that and how is it exhibited and expressed? And so—

LIZA ZAPOL: So, what did you find?

MARTHA WILSON: [Laughs.] I—what I found was—I have a piece of writing in my diary that Marvin Taylor exhibited in a show at the end of the *ICI Show*—Martha Wilson and Franklin Furnace show that traveled around for five years. Marvin showed my early work in the hall to the Fales Library, then he went into the Fales Library and all of my diaries of all time were out there. And he found the most inflammatory stuff to exhibit to the public. "I gave my boyfriend herpes," you know, just really terrible stuff.

But one of the passages is about how I felt like I was writing my way out of this well, that I was in the bottom of a pit and I was—the way to get out was to write it down, and that was how I could manage to escape. So, there's no one-word answer. It's really kind of a process. It's a process. It's about the process of figuring out who you are and what you represent and what you need and what you want, that kind of stuff.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, then—I mean, that process continues. [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: It continues.

LIZA ZAPOL: It continues along, I think. But as you then decide to come to New York, so then it sounds like you're still kind of struggling or deciding whether to identify as an artist at that time. You're saying, "I can't do this full-time."

MARTHA WILSON: Well, Lucy—so—

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah.

MARTHA WILSON: —Jerry Ferguson said, "Women don't make it in the art world." Then—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —Lucy Lippard, a woman, comes to visit Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and I show her what I'm doing. And she says, "Yes, you are an artist and there are other women who are doing this kind of work," which was the tipping point where I thought, "Oh." So, then I got in touch with Jacki Apple, went to New York; we discussed what she was doing, what I was doing. We decided we were basically the same person, we're —

[They laugh.]

—doing similar work and that we're going to collaborate on a piece together. That was in—we collaborated—we went to the Plaza Hotel in December of 1973 and the collaboration was to invent a person who existed between us whom we would both imagine—we both create through our imaginations. And then, we should take her out to lunch someplace where she would be comfortable—

[They laugh.]

—so then we went to the Plaza, to the Palm Court at the Plaza Hotel. And then Jacki's friend Alvin [ph] rented a limousine; we went downtown; we went to the galleries. We went into Sonnabend Gallery and pulled out cameras—you're not allowed to take pictures in a gallery, but we took pictures of ourselves and they threw us out right away. You know, they knew there was something up and "we don't want it to happen in our galley."

[They laugh.]

But we have some pictures from there, too. So, that was a part—you know, a step in the liberating process where I realized that I was an artist, I could do work, and I could further—I could work with a—I could collaborate

with other people to make it all happen. At the time, though, I wrote about how I was so anxious I didn't feel like I could move my neck and I was afraid if I look around—I wanted to; I wanted to look around the restaurant, but if I look around the restaurant, they're going to know I'm a fake.

[They laugh.]

An imposter.

LIZA ZAPOL: You wanted to see people seeing you?

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah, yeah, yeah. But it was like—

[They laugh.]

And we told the photographers that they should say yes to anybody who projected on us. In other words, if they said, "Is that *Vogue* magazine having lunch?" they should say yes. So, the notion of the audience being part of the process was born right there, in 1973. And I think where we diverge, where Jacki and I diverged, was she actually was a glamorous New York artist, and I was this newbie from the boonies. [Laughs.] So, I was very happy to be introduced to the New York art scene and her—I think there were like five or six women friends all having lunch with us.

And then, I went back to Nova Scotia and I ended up being the one who dry-mounted all the photographs, you know, the one who was trying to make it into objective—art objects, because that's what I understood you're supposed to do as an artist. You're supposed to produce [laughs] the work. What is that work? Well, we have a bunch of images. We're going to put them on a board and dry-mount them so they look good.

LIZA ZAPOL: That relationship in that particular period is also in *Heresies* in that article—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —with the letters between the two—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —of you and even your own journaling about that moment—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —too. Just—

MARTHA WILSON: About—now, I can't remember what I said in 1977—

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah.

MARTHA WILSON: —but if you tell me—

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah.

MARTHA WILSON: —it was about our relationship, right?

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, it was about your relationship, your impressions of each other, you know, your first meeting, the way—your impressions of *c. 7500*, the show, and how it was mounted, how you met each other—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —but also, kind of, your trepidations about New York—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —your impressions of her—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —and then, her same sort of a view and—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —her kind of welcoming you into her circle—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —and so on.

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, it's an interesting document of that experiment, but also a little wider, too—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —self-reflexive.

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah, yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: But yeah, so you were going to say—so you created these—also the documents of that performance and that's a—was that your first—I mean, the other photographs are also collaborations with Richards and so on.

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: But this is a different kind of a collaboration, it seems like.

MARTHA WILSON: Yes. The earlier work is Martha's concept and she needs some help to document it, and then the collaboration with Jacki was an actual collaboration, where we talked about what we were doing together and what we were trying to accomplish.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, did that make you want to collaborate more or less? I mean, of course, then later you did—you continued to collaborate—

MARTHA WILSON: Well, we collaborated—

LIZA ZAPOL: —with her, so—

MARTHA WILSON: —in the founding of Franklin Furnace—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —because she was my curator and she would meet [laughs]—artists would come in, show their work, and she would give them shows, so it was a critical role in the early days of the institution.

LIZA ZAPOL: And more generally, kind of what collaboration as an idea, you know, giving over a kind of ownership—what was your feeling about that from that experience?

MARTHA WILSON: I think it was good that I was a newbie from the boonies, because I didn't think that my ideas were the end-all and be-all and that everybody had to do whatever I wanted. So, as a boss lady, I was very much able to ask you what you thought should happen in this situation. And—now, this is going to go on the record, so I don't know how I should deal with it. What I'm going to do is talk about Margaret Kaplan and then later, when you give me the transcript, I'm going to cross this all out. [Laughs.]

LIZA ZAPOL: I may—why don't I pause for a second so we can talk about it? Is that okay?

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

[END OF wilson17\_2of2\_sd\_track01]

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay, so we're just resuming on May 18th and we're just—we're talking about leadership, about how do you want to be a leader in terms of—

MARTHA WILSON: What kind of—

LIZA ZAPOL: —[inaudible]?

MARTHA WILSON: —boss lady is—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —Martha going to grow up to be? And I had worked in an academic situation and I'd worked in a business situation, so I had various models out there. And the model that I wanted to use was a

collaborative model, where I was not the authority who knew all the answers to everything, but rather, I was the person who would solicit opinions from around the table to find out which—what other people thought about a given situation. So—

LIZA ZAPOL: So—okay, so—

MARTHA WILSON: Which works really well in the not-for-profit situation because you are not the boss anyway. It's the board that's the boss and there are 12 of them; there's only one of you, so you have to work it out with your board whatever direction you're taking.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, can you tell me about a memorable board meeting, maybe perhaps on the earlier side, as you're kind of learning about your—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —leadership?

MARTHA WILSON: [Laughs.] Well, we were going to do an art sale—this is very early; Barbara Quinn was my director of development—and Marcia Tucker, who was on my board, nixed the idea. I thought because she didn't want a competing art sale up in the art world at the same time that she at the New Museum was doing an art sale. So, I thought that was pretty underhanded. It taught—what it taught me was that the—it was maybe not the best idea to have other leaders of other not-for-profit organizations on your board because then they are always evaluating what you're doing in relation to what they're doing.

So, there's that. And then, later, I don't know if this is the appropriate moment to talk about it, but 20 years in, I got in a fight with my board. I was taking the organization in a direction that several members of the board felt was not okay and they wanted to fire my ass and hire somebody half my age and—actually, collaboration is the answer to that crisis as well, because—did I already tell you the story that I—my son's basketball team friend [at PS234 in Lower Manhattan -MW] was father—let's see, my son's friend's father was the assistant attorney general for not-for-profit law for the state of New York.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: So, I knew—

LIZA ZAPOL: You haven't told that story yet.

MARTHA WILSON: Okay, I haven't told the story. So, I knew who he was and what his job was, and I took him aside after a basketball practice one night and said, "Look, can I sue my board for wanting to remove me as the director of Franklin Furnace?" And he said, "Sure, it's America"—[laughs]—"anybody can sue anybody else for any reason, but they'll fire you tomorrow because they are the authority. What I advise you to do is get more people who understand the virtual world that you're trying to enter on your side of the table so you keep outvoting them, and eventually they will get bored and leave." And that's what happened.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, just to give a little wider context, and I think we'll get here again—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —as we come through the years, but this was a time when Franklin Furnace, as a physical space, you were thinking about closing or selling the space.

MARTHA WILSON: We were thinking about not only selling the space, but going virtual, taking the organization into this unknown—and it was 1996 when we started talking about this and the internet was brand-new. Several members of the board felt like, you know, "this is unproven; we have no idea if it's even going to be here tomorrow."

[Laughs.] It's so funny to talk about it now. But—"and we don't know if the art is any good. We don't know if the art being created on the internet using the internet as an art medium and a venue is"—so I got artists who are working in the venue of the internet as their work to be on my board. Several—I got several artists to serve on the board. They're still on the board. They never for a second questioned that there was good art happening on the internet, because they were busy creating it. And sure enough, the three board members who wanted to fire my ass got outvoted enough, and they all left.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, a moment of sort of—of shoring up support, but also allowing the—allowing everyone's voice to still be heard by just adding more voices—

[They laugh.]

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —to the pile.

MARTHA WILSON: Well, what was also kind of annoying about this whole process was that we had an artist on the board, Robbie McCauley, whose work consisted of getting people to talk about difficult subjects like race, for example, and the board did not want to enter a process. They just wanted me to step aside. [Laughs.] And you know, today, sitting here, I'm still not exactly sure how I managed to survive that period. There was about a two-year difficult—a two-year patch of time when I was fighting; I was fighting with the board. So, the organization was fighting with itself.

LIZA ZAPOL: You brought up Robbie McCauley. Just explain to me what her place was within this. Was she—

MARTHA WILSON: She was a board member who—whom I thought I could engage to—if we're going to fight, let's fight with rules that Robbie has used before in community dialogues successfully, in Boston and in other cities.

LIZA ZAPOL: But that did not—

MARTHA WILSON: No—

LIZA ZAPOL: —happen?

MARTHA WILSON: —didn't happen.

LIZA ZAPOL: I see.

MARTHA WILSON: They just wanted to fight, really. [Laughs.]

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, I mean—I'm—yeah, I mean, it's interesting. One thought that comes to mind is just whether, you know, these seeds of dialogue and meeting—if there's anything there in terms of your background in Quakerism in terms of—

MARTHA WILSON: Oh—

LIZA ZAPOL: —[inaudible].

MARTHA WILSON: —that's a good question. I was going to tell the story that I became an archivist because the Quakers never threw anything away—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —they just saved it. And you never know when you might need it, right? So, you just keep it. My grandfather had a bushel basket of stuff we found in the barn after I sold the barn and we had to take everything out of it, and it had a label on it that said, "This stuff is no good." [Laughs.] But did he throw it out? No. [Laughs.] So, in the early days of Franklin Furnace, I—not an archivist, but Quaker—would throw a couple of examples of everything into a big box and then later we got somebody who was an actual archivist to create systems to keep track of it all. But it was just a big pile of stuff in the beginning.

LIZA ZAPOL: And what an important pile of stuff [laughs] it has become. I mean, both at—both as an archive at MoMA—the artists' books archive—but then also at Franklin Furnace at Pratt now. You know, just following this line of collaboration a little bit further, I'm interested in talking then—you talked about Disband as being a time when we weren't just working alone, like we could work together. So, again, you're saying like there are these other people we can bounce ideas off of. And it sounded like you were quite sad when that broke up, too.

MARTHA WILSON: I was devastated.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, tell me a little bit more about that. I mean, what happened at that moment? When the breakup happened, you started to decide to make work on—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —or what happened next?

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah. We did an opera at the Kitchen and for the opera at the Kitchen, I think, we became the members of Ronald Reagan's cabinet. And so, I had a character that I had dwelt in when the band—when we went to this concert at which there were more members of the band than there were members in the audience.



So, I used it to try to understand my father better. I used Alexander [Plague] as a door to get into the brain of my father. I think I have been trying to do this for a long time, because *Truck Fuck Muck* is the same story told three times and it—what it basically says is, it all boils down to the childhood personality that you have developed in the course of being in your family.

So, I talk—in the Alexander Plague performance I talk a little bit about how he was short and his son is a hairdresser, which is totally embarrassing, and how he claimed that he was in charge when Ronald Reagan was shot, which is not true. To go through the bombastic personality that was my father also, and dwell in it, try to dwell in it. I think that all of my characters are really an effort to find out what another brain thinks like, to dwell in it long enough to try—I mean, it's hopeless. You can't really ever know what it's like to be in another person's brain, but you can make an effort to read the stuff that they have written or said and deck yourself out with the appearance of the person and try to enter their brain space and see what makes them tick.

They were all political characters because the political—the—as I say in one of my pieces, the audience for politics is the world, whereas the audience for art is usually determined by how large the space is. [Laughs.] They are playing to the world. They have an audience and they have a big one and they know perfectly well how they need to be conscious of their image at all times. So, it's interesting to be—to try to be Donald [Trump] because there's no way to get in there. There's no way to understand. He doesn't—he's so impulsive that there's no "there" there when you go in and try to figure out who's inside.

LIZA ZAPOL: In your performance that I saw a video of—I think it was in D.C.—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —you sort of—you straddle yourself—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —and him.

MARTHA WILSON: Yes, I have never done this before. I have always tried to go all the way into Barbara Bush or all the way into Tipper Gore. I couldn't do it, and I thought—and then my friend Tracie Morris came up to me after seeing me at Smack Mellon, saying, "I think it was a good idea for you to not try to out-Trump Trump; it's impossible to do that. Alec Baldwin is doing a fine job and you don't have to do that. You can [laughs] do something else."

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, I mean, it's interesting. I mean, because you're talking about how, in some way, you're also—you're knocking around in somebody else's head and is also a way of figuring out more about yourself—

MARTHA WILSON: Who's inside—

LIZA ZAPOL: —too. [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: Exactly true, exactly true.

LIZA ZAPOL: And in that narrative, it's happening—or in that performance, sorry—it's happening through the—this—the chronology of your life. You're—

MARTHA WILSON: Mm [affirmative].

LIZA ZAPOL: —kind of talking about the different moments of power in politics—

MARTHA WILSON: Mm [affirmative].

LIZA ZAPOL: —that you hit up against.

MARTHA WILSON: Do you want to pause the—

LIZA ZAPOL: I may pause for a second, yeah. Sorry.

MARTHA WILSON: All right.

LIZA ZAPOL: Thank you.

[Tape stops, restarts.]

LIZA ZAPOL: So, to resume, we just turned off the air conditioner—

MARTHA WILSON: [Laughs.]

LIZA ZAPOL: —so we have a little bit of a smoother sound here. But—so, in terms of entering character, you talk a little bit about, you know, text, costume. Do you—what is your process? What—

MARTHA WILSON: Oh, thank you. That's a good question.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, would—

MARTHA WILSON: Text is first.

LIZA ZAPOL: You talked about Nancy Reagan.

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: If you—

MARTHA WILSON: I would find newspaper articles in which she was quoted and I would just use the quotes as the basis for where I was going, and then I would make stuff up when I—for example, she had cancer. She—both—they both had cancer. So, one of the performances is about how cancer is the natural response to living and the environment. [Laughs.] So, I would use the real world as cues, and then I would make stuff up.

Barbara Bush got married at 20; Episcopal; straight-up wedding with veil and everything. And so, I—that was part of the script. And then, I talk about how—but for her honeymoon, she wanted to do something different, so they went to Baghdad [laughs] and how George had been director of the CIA, so he was off doing that, and she went to the ziggurat where language was invented. And this man with dark eyes offered to buy her a cup of coffee and so she—the coffee was really thick and the spoon was standing up in the coffee. And she had another cup, and she didn't remember what happened.

So, the premise of this performance is that Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush are fraternal twins, that she kept the one who looked George and she gave the other one to an orphanage. And he was raised in an orphanage in Baghdad, so it's—you know, it's not real, but it's—could be. You know, it's close. It's close.

LIZA ZAPOL: It's researched, too—

MARTHA WILSON: It's—

LIZA ZAPOL: I mean—

MARTHA WILSON: —researched, yeah. So, I start—so I don't perform—I don't ad-lib. I have a script and I know where I'm going with the script, and not everybody does that, but I—that's what I do, because I have a—like you just said, a well-researched direction that I'm trying to take in this performance.

So, then the costume—you know, you put on the clothes. You develop a costume for Tipper and a costume for Barbara and a costume for Alexander Haig, and it's usually the wig. You put on the hose, you put on the dress, you put on the suit, jewelry, but then you put on the wig and the wig is what enables you to go over the fence into somebody else's brain.

LIZA ZAPOL: Do you use mirrors as a part of your process or—

MARTHA WILSON: Sure.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah.

MARTHA WILSON: Because you want to look good. [Laughs.]

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.] But when you rehearse, do you rehearse with mirrors?

MARTHA WILSON: Oh, I see. Do I—

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah.

MARTHA WILSON: —rehearse into a mirror? No, I don't care about that. I just—I want to look as close to Barbara as I can, but I want to be—I think I'm more anxious about feeling I'm embodying my text, trying to—now, Donald is kind of a problem because the text is so long that I can't memorize the whole thing. I mean, I can kind of—I know where I'm going with it, but I have a script. So, I memorize the front part of the performance where I don't—where I come out as Donald and I don't have a script, and I memorize the end of the performance where I finish as Donald and I don't have a script, but in the middle, when I'm Martha, I put my glasses on, and I have

the script.

[They laugh.]

LIZA ZAPOL: That's interesting that you want to get—you want to be as most accurate when you're—or that you are following the script when you're yourself. I mean, I ask about the mirrors—was just by way of also kind of thinking about how we see ourselves, like in your earlier experimental work in Halifax or your photographic works. You know, experimenting with emotion both into the mirror and into the—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —camera, kind of looking at the difference. So, not sure about—or just kind of wondering what's the best way for you to figure out—

MARTHA WILSON: Well, I think—

LIZA ZAPOL: —embodiment.

MARTHA WILSON: I think the difference is—the difference between the early work and the later work is for whom the work is being made. The early work is for the audience of one. I was trying to figure out who I was and I was doing this work to find out. Then I get to New York and although it never works, I wanted to influence other people's opinions about stuff, so the audience is the same audience that Donald Trump is playing to. It's the—you know, it's the wider world and it is in a wider social and political context. I'm not going to change the world, but I'm going to try anyway, because if I don't try, then I will explode. [Laughs.] So, I have to feel like I'm making the effort to change the world even though I know perfectly well it's not likely to happen.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, let's talk about that in terms of politics. You talk about Alexander Haig, you know, in a way kind of embodying your father—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —in there. So, jumping from there to Nancy Reagan, what spurs you, both in terms of what's happening politically at that time and how—you know, and how your own political involvement to make that leap into this woman—

MARTHA WILSON: Well—

LIZA ZAPOL: —First Lady—

MARTHA WILSON: —she's—she was so hateful. I think it was—so I did Alexander—I did one performance as Ronald, which I didn't like. I wasn't happy being Ronald. And then I found that Nancy could—because she was so extreme in her own right, I could make her say really extreme stuff. So, I was really happy being Nancy for the second term of Ronald Reagan's two terms of office.

LIZA ZAPOL: What do you remember from those first performances or reception?

MARTHA WILSON: In the beginning, I thought I had to fill an hour of time. And I may even have the videotape today of a performance at Just Above Midtown [Gallery] that was as Nancy. I gave her dark lines and long discussions about I can't remember what. [Laughs.] Pretty soon, I figured out that 10 minutes is about right. Ten minutes; you get your concept across and the audience can hear what you're saying. You don't need to take an hour. It's fine; 10 minutes is fine, or even five.

LIZA ZAPOL: So—and that came from just experimenting—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —playing with people?

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah, trying—performing and seeing how it went.

LIZA ZAPOL: Who do you have—do you perform or experiment for outside eyes? Do you have other people—

MARTHA WILSON: I had a director—

LIZA ZAPOL: —you play with—your—

MARTHA WILSON: —for my first performance as Nancy, it's true. Janet Hicks was my director and she told me I had to memorize—"it's not very long; you have to memorize this." [Laughs.] And she was the outside eyes and

that was very important. That was very important. I didn't always have outside eyes, but I certainly did for the first effort to be Nancy. It was at the ARTISTS CALL Against U.S. Intervention in Central America and it was at Taller Latino Americano and I was in a program of—I don't know, 30 or so other people, lots and lots of other people, so it was short and to the point. And I just spoke to Janet like 24 hours ago or 48 hours ago. It was funny that I should—she should be part of this discussion.

LIZA ZAPOL: So—okay, so you're trying on and you're enjoying Nancy in this—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —period. And—

MARTHA WILSON: Well, for the night that Ronald Reagan was reelected in 1984, I was dressed up as Nancy, and I was at The Kitchen and people spat on me because they were so unhappy that Ronald Reagan was being reelected. So, what's cool about it is you embody this persona for not only yourself, but for the wider community. And it was wrong of them to spit on me, but [laughs] I understand it. I completely understand it, that you're playing a role in—you're playing a role as a performance artist, and you're playing a role in the wider political world.

LIZA ZAPOL: Well, and that sounds like—when you talk about choosing Tipper Gore because she was the most—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —hateful—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —of the four people—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —who came out onto the stage that day, of Al Gore and Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton, you know—I mean, I think you've spoken about this already, but maybe there's something else there about wanting to kind of really embody this dark—

MARTHA WILSON: Mm [affirmative].

LIZA ZAPOL: —what people really—or at least, not everybody—but what you might really find most hateful—

MARTHA WILSON: Mm [affirmative].

LIZA ZAPOL: —in politics.

MARTHA WILSON: Yep, yep. Yep.

LIZA ZAPOL: I feel like I'm putting words in your mouth, so maybe—

MARTHA WILSON: I agree. I don't think you're putting words in my mouth. I don't know why—

[They laugh.]

—I'm attracted to the most hateful people in the political world, but because—but maybe because they are so extreme and so therefore easy to—oh, I know—now I know the answer. I remember doing Barbara, being a hateful person, and then taking the wig off and being able to step away from Barbara. So, you get—it's very liberating to be able to be a horrible bitch, and then to separate yourself from that and be—go back into yourself again. So, there's some mechanism there that is fulfilling.

LIZA ZAPOL: It's a catharsis, as you said, for—not only for you, but for others—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —too—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —to be able to allow them to spit—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah, yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —to have a place to spit.

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

[They laugh.]

LIZA ZAPOL: But I wonder—it's interesting because there's also a function of humor here, right? Like, you're having them say things that are—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —somewhat ridiculous or—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah, that are ridiculous.

LIZA ZAPOL: —or half-truths or not-truths—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —and I mean—so that sense of humor, it seems, goes sort of throughout your work, from *Breast Forms Permutated* and your earlier pieces on, but why—what does humor do? Why use humor in that way, and how does that feel?

MARTHA WILSON: Well, now we should talk about the Guerrilla Girls a little bit. The Guerrilla Girls—okay, there are two Guerrilla Girls who have outed themselves. You're not allowed to out other Guerrilla Girls; you're allowed to out yourself, so Lorraine O'Grady and Judy Bernstein have both outed themselves on their websites and in their writing. So, now I'm outing myself in this interview. Feminists were considered to be dour. And "how many feminists does it take to change a light bulb?" "That's not funny" is the embodiment of that problem—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —that the early feminists, the feminists in the '70s, were perceived as shrill, combative, angry, bra-burning—nobody ever burned a brassiere, but bra-burning is the phrase that we use to describe the kind of anger that was going on in the '70s.

As part of the teach-in over at the 8th Floor Gallery, I wanted to have Faith Ringgold there to talk about how her group—she had a group—she put out flyers—[ . . . -MW]Sorry, I can't remember the name of her group. But the point of the story is that her group consisted of herself and her daughter [laughs], but she managed to foment a lot of discussion because she gave the impression through the flyers that there were a thousand people out there who were angry about the racial imbalance of the art world and the sexual imbalance in the art world as well.

So, the Girls' earliest stuff was not funny; it was posters that named names and were put up on the street, you know, up and down West Broadway, which was at the time the bellybutton of the art world. And we were having meetings and one of the Guerrilla Girls was taking minutes of the meeting and she spelled Guerrilla G-O-R-I-L-L-A instead of G-U-E-R-R-I-L-L-A, so that gave us the idea of wearing gorilla masks to—the anonymity was important because we were naming names, and we didn't want to come out and admit who we were, because then it would be sour grapes. "Just because you don't have a show at Castelli Gallery, you're bellyaching about this."

And later, very quickly it became clear that we could call up the *New York Times* as Frida Kahlo or Gertrude Stein or something like that and they would pick up the phone because "oh, Gertrude Stein is calling?"

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: "Well, fine, I'd be glad to talk to Gertrude." And very quickly, the Girls figured out that if they could list the facts but figure out a satirical angle—excuse me [sneezes]—pardon me.

LIZA ZAPOL: It's okay.

MARTHA WILSON: [sneezes] Got that all on tape.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: That humor is a way to get opposing ideas into the brains of other people. That's really it. And that's it. Humor is the best way to get an opposing idea into the brain of somebody else. So, the posters start getting satirical and the performances—so then there was a lot of debate in the group about whether what we were doing was performance or lecture. What exactly is this that we're doing? We invited some performance

artists to join the group so that we would have better stage credibility. [Laughs.]

A lot of issues were never resolved. There was a lot of yelling that went on. The group was an unincorporated association between 1985 and the year 2000, at which point three branches formed, each with a separate corporate entity and each with a separate direction in the social and political world. So, when I talk about the Guerrilla Girls, I'm really talking about 1985 to 2000, the unincorporated—actually, 1999, I think, somewhere around the turn of the millennium.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: And that—it was—that was really a collaboration because we were operating by consensus. Oh, my God! [Laughs.] Occasionally, we would bring stuff to a vote to see if the majority felt we should publish that poster or not publish that poster or not do this idea. But basically, it was a bunch of girls sitting around and talking about what they thought about it.

And subcommittees; the work got done in—on the side with subcommittees—would work on it—a poster idea would come up—a poster idea would be taken off-camera and worked on separately, and then it'd be brought back to the group and then there would be either discussion or vote or something. And one decision that I remember very clearly was *Guerrilla Girls Advise NEA Cuts* and it had images of knives in it and it was about how guys should cut their schlongs off and mail them to Washington.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: That poster never got postered. It was one of the—one of the Girls made a passionate plea about how violence is generally worst for women, that we're the ones who get victimized, and images of knives wasn't going to work in our favor. And she made this case and she convinced the rest of the group to—we had published the poster. We have 300 copies of it in the warehouse, where it still sits [laughs], but it never got postered.

So, there's a lot more I could talk about in relation to the Girls, but I think that the punchline is that it was an opportunity to work with other women. I feel like the—I feel like they're my family. You know, you work with women over a sustained period of years, and they become more important than your own sister somehow.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, I mean, talk to me more about the way—consensus and the way in which that was maybe reached or not reached.

MARTHA WILSON: Not reached.

[They laugh.]

Sometimes not reached.

LIZA ZAPOL: And even in the early days, the—just coming by how you're going to work inasmuch as you want to talk about this.

MARTHA WILSON: You mean in the Girls or—

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, in the Girls.

MARTHA WILSON: In? Okay.

LIZA ZAPOL: Inasmuch as you want to talk about it.

MARTHA WILSON: All right. The Girls are on record with the Archives of American Art talking about how there was a lot of yelling because there was never any Robert's Rules of Order, and the rules would shift and change depending on who was in the room and who had power and who wanted stuff to—there were two Girls especially who felt it was their job to run the show. And while there are other people who are perfectly capable of doing design work and the—one of these two Girls was a designer and so she co-opted the design, basically. And then, the other one felt that she was the founder of the whole thing.

So, it—when—I'm not allowed to say who that was, but some artists of color were invited into the group for a meeting and they saw how the authority structure was supposed to work and how it was actually working and they left. You know, they were not going to deal with this white supremacy thing [laughs], unspoken, unwritten, but very clearly present. So, that was the—that was one of the reasons for a lot of yelling. There was a lot of yelling. But it was still so rewarding that it was worth it to—okay, to go through the yelling. [Laughs.]

LIZA ZAPOL: Can you talk about some of the initiatives that you were strongly involved in, or posters that you

kind of remember going through?

MARTHA WILSON: That I remember?

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah.

MARTHA WILSON: I remember standing outside of Sotheby's with a flyer. I don't have the flyer anymore; I gave them all away. [Laughs.] You know, archivally, we were not very careful. I was not the Girl who was responsible for any particular idea. I was involved in all of them, but not, you know, the initiator. There was one girl whose name I can't—well, I can talk about her. I can say her Girl name. Her Girl name is Alice Neel and she came up with a poster, *You're Seeing Less Than Half the Picture*. That was her original idea. *It's Even Worse in Europe*. I think there's another one, too.

So, some of the Girls—I remember working on the College Art. There was a College Art hiring poster that we worked on for a long time and I think we turned it into a sandwich board instead of a published poster and somebody wore it to the CAA convention. It was about hiring practice.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: Judy Bernstein worked hard on the billboard project, which I think we never managed to do. We never managed to do the billboard. We did a bus poster, but I don't think we did the billboard. It was difficult. More yelling was involved.

[They laugh.]

LIZA ZAPOL: So, what was the yelling? What was—what were those—

MARTHA WILSON: Well—

LIZA ZAPOL: If you remember it [inaudible].

MARTHA WILSON: —in the earliest days, for example, we were offered a show at the Palladium, which is a club, and so, fine. We invited women whom we admired to submit work and we installed it, and we had the show. And then we figured out, "Oh, we're reproducing the art world that we're not in favor of by saying we like this work and we don't like that work," when, really, what we should be doing here is looking at the representation of women across the board and not—on a purely percentage basis or mathematical basis and not on a quality—so-called quality basis—

LIZA ZAPOL: Hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —the excuse always used to keep women out. So, at that point, we made a kind of a policy to not do a show again. I don't know whether there was a lot of yelling involved in that, but that was an organization-wide decision that was made at a very early point. Whether it was performance art, whether we should wander outside the confines of the art world, was the other big debate that never was resolved at all.

Should we talk about bus companies are more liberated than the art world? And ultimately, we decided, yes, we should talk about how bus companies are more—hire more women than the art world manages to employ. Or the war in Iraq; should we talk about women in the military? So, a lot of the yelling was—it was about the political arena that we—what is—what exactly is the political arena that we're appealing to?

LIZA ZAPOL: And then—I mean, I also imagine so much of what was produced was so funny; there must have been a lot of laughter as well. [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: Yes, and wonderful sleepovers, and we did a retreat, I think, several retreats. Oh, it was great. It was really fun.

LIZA ZAPOL: And—yeah, tell me then about—a story about one of those moments of camaraderie that comes to mind when you think like—these—this is like family.

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah. It's hard—it's hard, because I can't mention the names of any of the people. [Laughs.] When we went to Blue Mountain on retreat, we decided to recreate art historical paintings in our—you know, using our own bodies. And we're in this bucolic situation, so we got naked and, you know, did *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* [laughs] as one of the images that came out of that. And another one was all of the masks lined up on the dock and another one was a naked lady canoeing. And we just had a ball. We just had a ball doing it.

LIZA ZAPOL: Were those documented or—

MARTHA WILSON: Oh, yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —it was really—yeah?

MARTHA WILSON: Oh, sure—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —I have all the images.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: Uh-huh [affirmative]. So—and is there anything else that—you know, in terms of collaboration, in terms of humor, finding the humor, that comes to mind about the Guerrilla Girls?

MARTHA WILSON: It was worth it. All the yelling was worth it because we injected an idea into culture and now the culture can't go back, and that idea is that women should be represented in some proportion equal to men, or if not equal, near equal to men. And the way I know that that idea has entered the culture is that Jerry Saltz reviewed the new installation of the Museum of Modern Art. And he went around to each room and he counted up the number of women and reported on the percentages in the print collection, in the painting and sculpture, and I thought, "Our work here is done." [Laughs.]

And it's truly no longer possible to do the show that the Guggenheim did when they opened their downtown branch, with Carl Andre—three white men—and the Guerrilla Girls sent pink postcards to Tom Krens, a thousand of them, saying, "Dear Mr. Krens, welcome to downtown; we've heard about your show, the white boys—white boys at the white boys' museum; lotsa luck, Guerrilla Girls." And then we, you know, gave these postcards out to people and they mailed them all in and they put Louise Bourgeois in that show. Yeah, they were embarrassed into doing that. So, good.

So, feminists can be funny; that's one idea that was contributed to the wider culture. And women should be represented in art, the art world.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah, and you talk about this tension with women of color—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —you know, coming in and feeling alienated, perhaps, by the Guerrilla Girls, but at the same time, that is a part of—

MARTHA WILSON: By the hierarchical structure that was not supposed to be there but was clearly there.

LIZA ZAPOL: And at the same time, some of the language of the Guerrilla Girls is about people of color or about women—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —of color as well.

MARTHA WILSON: Yes, I mean, that's—there are some women of color who stuck with the group through many, many years, but these three women I'm talking about [laughs] didn't. They just, you know, checked out the situation and took off.

LIZA ZAPOL: I mean, I'm interested in talking—I think there's an interesting aspect about your identity. You talked about your mother, you know, her lineage being as a Daughter of the American Revolution, whether or not to include. You represent or you often take the persona or experiment with the persona of these people of power, mostly white, but not only.

MARTHA WILSON: Oh, now we're talking about Michelle?

[They laugh.]

LIZA ZAPOL: So—

MARTHA WILSON: Okay.

LIZA ZAPOL: —you're anticipating.



MARTHA WILSON: Okay.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, yeah. So, I'm curious for you to speak a little bit more about—yes, about representing race as Michelle, and then maybe we can talk also about making a space for others to experiment around race.

MARTHA WILSON: Okay. All right. So, the backstory is Joe Melillo invited me to curate performance artists for the Next Wave Festival, so I selected Clifford Owens as one of the artists whom I was inviting to be in the Next Wave Festival. He turned around and invited me, Martha, to be Michelle. I thought, "Oh, fuck, what am I going to do?"

So, I asked black woman performance artist Saya Woolfalk what I should do, and she said, "You should refuse the invitation." Then I asked Lorraine O'Grady, black woman performance artist, what I should do and Lorraine said, "Well, you can do it, but you have to do it in your own skin." So, I asked Clifford if he would make me up as Michelle and he said, "No, no, no, I'm—you know, this is"—what he does is a forum. His work is to get the performance artists and the audience to talk to each other, to engage with each other, and he's the emcee of this process so he's not going to be able to spend time making me up as Michelle. Fine.

So, I decide to hire a black woman makeup artist to make up half of my face as Michelle, and then I decide I'm not just going to come out in front of the audience. I'm going to show them that the reason Clifford Owens invited me to be Michelle is because I—you know, 1984, 30 years ago, I was impersonating Nancy Reagan, and then I impersonated Barbara Bush, and then I did Tipper Gore, and then I did Barbara Bush again. I've been doing First Ladies for a long time—and Second Ladies.

[They laugh.]

MARTHA WILSON: That's why he invited me to be Michelle. So, I show—so I'm off camera and I'm reading a script that's amplified to the audience and showing how—

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MARTHA WILSON: —personae has been my gig for a really long time and these are the First Ladies that I have impersonated in the past. And then I come out, half as Michelle. But honestly, I was expecting onions and tomatoes to be thrown at me. I was really anxious about this. So, I come out; I'm Michelle and I'm, you know, facing the audience.

And Clifford is there and he's saying, "Does anybody have any comments that they would like to make?" And one of the people in the audience says, "You know, Martha, if you were Michelle you would own the room. You would look in people's eyes. Your shoulders would be back. You would be in charge of this situation instead looking like [laughs] you're afraid onions are going to be thrown at you." And I thought, "Oh, that is—she got me. She totally got me on that."

So, there were two shows, the 7:00 show and the 9:00 show. So, for the 9:00 show, Clifford does a completely different thing. He engages the audience again, but he says, "Would anybody like to take a selfie with Michelle?" [Laughs.] Everybody lines up. They all have their cameras, you know, they have their phones, and it's a completely different mood. We're in a friendly social situation where we all know "she's not Michelle; it's fake, but we don't care; we're getting a portrait with Michelle anyway."

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: So, then both performances are over. It's the end of the night; I go back downstairs and Clifford's photographer takes a picture of me as half-Michelle and that turned into a work of art that is called *Martha Meets Michelle Halfway*. And we tried to make it presidential, make it—the problem is—there are two problems with this piece. The two problems are, number one, is it ever okay for a white person to wear blackface under any circumstances? That's the first problem. The second problem is, how do you show admiration?

I'd satirized all these people for 30 years and made fun of them and, you know, stuck my knife in and turned it if possible. How do you show admiration? I mean, I talk about how I have nothing but admiration for Michelle. I'm glad she has an organic garden out back and she does care about food that is being served to children in schools. But that's still—there's still two problems with the work. Is it ever okay to wear blackface and how do you show admiration?

LIZA ZAPOL: It's so different from these other performances—

MARTHA WILSON: It's so different—

LIZA ZAPOL: —that—

MARTHA WILSON: —from all the other performances, it's true.

LIZA ZAPOL: It's not the performance of what is most hateful in this case, right? At all. Though, in terms of race or this division of race, maybe there's something there—maybe—in terms of broaching how race is addressed—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —here.

MARTHA WILSON: I don't think I solved any problems.

[They laugh.]

I showed the piece in Washington in the hope that the Obamas would hear about it. [Laughs.] I don't think they did. I got a really good 24-carat gilded frame because I wanted to show admiration. I wanted to do what I could to admire Michelle.

LIZA ZAPOL: I'm going to pause for a second here and we can resume.

[Tape stops, restarts.]

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay, so we're back. And I just wanted to—and we wanted to talk about the culture wars. We wanted to talk about kind of, I think, in particular around Franklin Furnace. And you know, we haven't really gotten into Franklin Furnace itself, like the evolution of—

MARTHA WILSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LIZA ZAPOL: —Franklin Furnace as a performance space and the kind of freedom that you allowed the performers there. So, I'm curious to talk about what that space was like, some of the shows that really exemplified that kind of freedom—

MARTHA WILSON: Mm [affirmative].

LIZA ZAPOL: —and then what happened as the '70s ended, into the '80s, and then the '90s. What happened with the political reaction to—

MARTHA WILSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LIZA ZAPOL: —Franklin Furnace.

MARTHA WILSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay. The mood of the '70s was so unlike today that I will take you there and you'll be shocked to know that funders would come to my door and say, "You're doing a great thing here. You should ask us for money." [Laughs.] This would not happen today.

LIZA ZAPOL: For example—

MARTHA WILSON: The New York State—

LIZA ZAPOL: —what kind of funders?

MARTHA WILSON: Well, the New York State Council of the Arts and the—Brian O'Doherty, who was running the visual arts program—the media—visual arts or media arts? Visual arts. He was running the visual arts program of the National Endowment for the Arts. Invited me to lunch, along with Richard Kostelanetz, and he said, "You know, we give money to arts organizations. We have a"—I think it was a new category now, they had developed—"and you should apply to us for money." [Laughs.]

So, in the '70s there was not very much—what is it called now where you—metrics. There were no metrics applied to what we were doing. The job of the NEA and the New York State Council of the Arts was to support groups to create new art. That was the most important thing. As Ronald Reagan is elected in 1980 and as the '80s start to engage, Ronald Reagan asked Frank Hodson to basically decommission the NEA, and Frank Hodson went out in to the field and looked at what was going on, and he said, "No, I don't really want to decommission the NEA. I want to professionalize the art spaces and get rid of these nasty fellowships for"—first, the critics' fellowships were killed off, and then later the fellowships for visual artists and photographers and performance artists were—you know, we were out in front. They wanted to get rid—they wanted the artists to shut up, is what they really wanted.

As the culture wars progressed—well, okay, so let's talk about the *Carnival Knowledge* show, which was in 1984.

That was our—Franklin Furnace's first encounter with the culture wars. The nine women artists and activists who were curating the show asked if there could be such thing as feminist pornography, and the word pornography was up there on the wall, and our brochure listing all of our funders was right on the desk.

So, members of the Morality Action Committee decided that we were showing pornography to 500 children per day [laughs], took our brochure, wrote postcards to—you know, there were postcards coming in from Wisconsin and people who had not seen the show to Con Edison and Exxon and to the supporters and to our funders, to the federal and state funders. But at the time—it's hard to imagine this also—the religious right was silly. It was not taken seriously yet as a political force.

But they—in a slide that we took of the Morality Action Committee picketing Franklin Furnace, there was one poster that embodies the idea that I believe lost the culture wars for us, which was "no tax dollars for obscene art." We came back with the idea that artists are guaranteed freedom of expression under the terms of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, but that doesn't have quite the same ring to it as "no tax dollars for obscene art." [Laughs.] [In a high voice] "I should have freedom of expression." It just—you know, it didn't sell too well.

So—but we—so, after the *Carnival Knowledge* show, I got a visit from the deputy director of the NEA, Hugh Southern, and Benny Andrews, who was the director of the visual arts program at the time. And they came to New York and we all had lunch and I brought a couple of board members—Frederieke Taylor—and Coosje van Bruggen told me—she didn't come to this meeting, but she said, "Look, you tell them erotic art has been around for 50,000 years. First of all, call it erotic art and say that this is—you know, this has been going on for a long time."

The Europeans, Hugh Southern and Frederieke Taylor, kind of laughed at Americans, at how these gringos are so worked up about sex as a subject. Really, we're Puritans when it comes right down to it. The Puritan legacy of this country has never gone away. It's been right there the whole time. So, they, you know, slapped our hand and said, "Just don't do that anymore," and then they went away. And we kept applying to the NEA and we kept getting the money.

But the professionalization thing was—you really shouldn't have artists running these spaces. You really should have professionals running these spaces, people who are trained curators and trained administrators. The reason being, I believe—was that we were figuring out our program on an annual basis. We would get the money and then we would figure out what the program was. No, they wanted us to tell them what the program was one year, maybe two years, in advance so they could vet the artists that we were going to show. "Are you showing Annie Sprinkle?" [Laughs.] Basically, that was the question.

So, the culture wars are continuing now. Karen Finley had already performed at Franklin Furnace. Her first performance in New York was at Franklin Furnace in 1983 and she totally got naked, she took a bath in a suitcase, she made love to a chair using Wesson cooking oil, and it was fine. You know, nobody called the police or anything. It was completely standard downtown fare. Then she does performances in Pyramid Club and all over the Lower East Side, and then, at The Kitchen, she did—I believe it was *We Keep Our Victims Ready* or maybe it was *Constant State of Desire*. It was one of those.

Anyway, for this performance she smears her naked breasts with chocolate frosting—I said chocolate syrup and she corrected me. She said, "No, no, it was chocolate frosting." Then she sprinkles bean sprouts over herself, and then glitter over the whole thing, to embody the way women are denigrated by our culture. So, she became, after that performance, labeled as the "chocolate-smearing young woman" and any venue that showed her became an obscene arts organization. A couple more years go by—so that was—

LIZA ZAPOL: Because she was covered in the press and the—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes—

LIZA ZAPOL: —like the *New York Post*—

MARTHA WILSON: —she was covered by the *New York Post*. Evans and Novak's column called her the "chocolate-smearing young woman" and that is the label that stuck to her. So, then a couple more years go by, and she has emerged as a performance artist and we're in the business at Franklin Furnace of showing artists who are emerging.

So, she said, "Look, I've emerged as a performance artist, but I haven't emerged yet as an installation artist, as a visual artist." So, she submitted a proposal for a show called *A Woman's Life Isn't Worth Much* and the panel, the peer review panel—because Jacki had moved to LA in 1980 and after that point, we selected the program with peer review panels because I did not want to be both the director and the curator. I wanted to know what the community thought was important rather than project my personal taste year after year.

LIZA ZAPOL: But you—so how was that—just—we'll pause, but how was that—you know, how did the panel work? Were you in—did you sit in on those meetings?

MARTHA WILSON: Yes, I was certainly the person helping to select who was on the panel. It was generally comprised of the people we had already shown in the past and there were five people so that we could break a tie. Diverse; we spent a lot of time trying to make sure we had racial, social, geographic, and age diversity represented, and then, later on, gender issues became important to represent on this panel as well.

It's, I think, a really good process, because what happens is we get proposals from all over the world, but the astral plane must exist, because artists who are in Istanbul and Iowa can be thinking about the same stuff. And each year, there's generally some theme, some kind of fixation that—it's not with every single proposal, but so many years we—we'll say, "Oh, there's another opera proposal," [laughs], you know. It's just—it happens.

So, the panel selected Karen Finley's show. This was May of 1990. Diane Torr was showing downstairs in the performance space. The performance space—well, let's see. We started doing performance art upstairs, then we got the lease to the basement so we turned the basement space over to performance art, and installation was on the ground floor. And then, at this—on this night of Karen Finley's opening upstairs, we got a call from People for the American Way. There was going to be something happening and we didn't know what it was. We were all pretty anxious about it.

LIZA ZAPOL: What did the call—what was that call?

MARTHA WILSON: Well, we didn't know what to expect, but Karen's opening went off without a hitch, and then Diane's performance was in the—you know, later on in the evening. I had left. And somebody left the performance early and there was a locked exit, because there was a buzzer above the mailbox. You—pretty much everybody knew to press the buzzer and open the door. But this person didn't know that, and so they went to the phone booth on the corner and called the fire department and said we were an illegal social club.

The Happy Land Social Club had just burned down like 30 days before. So, the police—no, the fire department shows up the next night for Diane's second night, and I'm welcoming the lieutenant and saying, "Look, please come in and see that this is not a social club. We are a performance space." But he found that the audience had to exit past the boiler room to get upstairs—and there was a law on the books, had been there for 17 years already, but the fire department had never closed us before—but there was a law on the books that you can't have the audience exiting past the boiler room.

Okay, so they closed us. They closed our performance space down, gave us a ticket. It was put on the outside of the building. "This performance space is closed." And we have—I think we had one more performance for the—in the remainder of that year's program, so she found another venue. She went to The Kitchen, I think, did her performance at The Kitchen. So, we figured out that we could perform in exile in other people's spaces.

The following year, we put up the program at Judson Memorial Church; the year after that, it was Cooper Union, and the year after that, it was [at the New School -MW]. And by that point, we were talking about going virtual and so we'll leave that discussion over on the side here for a while, while we finish the culture wars.

So, 1990 was Karen Finley's exhibition at Franklin Furnace. It was also when she and three other artists had submitted applications to the NEA and the panels—the NEA panels—had awarded them grants, but the National Council, which oversees the National Endowment for the Arts, rescinded them because they were politically impossible in the cultural environment that we were in at that time.

This ended up on tape and there was a lawsuit—it went on for 10 years—and their grants were ultimately awarded, but at the end of the process, the Supreme Court put language into the grant applications that the money awarded—the projects for which money was awarded had to abide by community standards of decency. The decency clause was added to the language you had to sign for those grants.

The next year, I applied, as usual, to the NEA for support of our performance program with two tapes as visual support. One was Eileen Myles, whose performance was very simple, but she explains that if she's looking at what she's reading, she's a poet, and if she's looking at the audience, she's a performance artist. [Laughs.] And the other one was Scarlet O, whose performance was also at Judson Memorial Church, about developing characters, sexual personae.

But, you know, looking back at that time, the reason I selected her tape was not because I wanted to scandalize the NEA, but because it was really well shot, really well lit. It was a good piece of documentation. And sure enough, the panel gave us the money. They thought, you know, what we were doing was standard downtown fare. But the National Council found pay dirt. You know, this is—it's about sex; she's wearing a dildo; she's talking about playing different sexual roles in public.

And here I started fighting with my board again, or maybe I started fighting with them for the first time. What year are we in now? '91, '91. One of my board members thought that I had sent this particular tape as a provocation to Washington. But again, the panel was cool with it; it was the National Council that was not happy. Well, you know, they—it was because the content—you're not allowed to make art about sex, in their opinion. And also, they had learned their lesson.

They didn't say anymore that it was politically impossible; what they said was it had no artistic merit. [Laughs.] There's no comeback to that. [Laughs.] So, my—you know, the work that I am presenting has no artistic merit. So, we heard that our grant was rescinded. Eric Bogosian agreed to do a benefit concert and I wrote a letter to Peter Norton and he thought it was completely silly and wrote us a check for the same amount as the grant that had been rescinded.

So, the program continued anyway, but honestly, we—oh, no, I should go back and say that as another aspect of the culture wars that was not visible to the public—this is all visible to the public, but another aspect of the culture wars was the National Endowment for the Arts audit division started to audit us in 1985, and they didn't stop until 1995, 10 years. They audited us for 10 years in a row.

That was kind of—that was the punishment, I think, because you can't say—you can't complain about being audited. That's—if you're being audited, then there's something wrong and the government is just trying to discover what is going wrong. So, I had to suck it up. I hired a whole person whose entire job was to document our NEA grants. We would have to show the invoice stapled to the—a copy of the front and back of each check. [Laughs.] We would send piles of paper like this to Washington. Oh, it was really a terrible, terrible time. [Laughs.] We finally got out of the audit in 1995. I think we framed it and put it above the copy machine—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —so we could [laughs] see it at all times. Let's see, where are we now? So, you know, the NEA's guidelines kept evolving and Franklin Furnace kept going anyway and evolving, because we were busy going virtual. We—one of the impulses for going virtual was to provide freedom of expression to artists. Okay, so maybe I can't give you a performance venue, or maybe I can't give you an installation space where you can have complete freedom of expression, but let's try this next free zone and see how we do. Not that it's always going to be free, but for now, it's a pretty wide-open place.

LIZA ZAPOL: In 1996.

MARTHA WILSON: In 1996. That is correct. So, we're getting up to 1996; we're 20 years old. No, before that—let's back up a little bit. We had the opportunity to buy the loft. The daughter of the landlord—the landlord died on Halloween. [Laughs.] The daughter of the landlord explained that he must have spent \$100,000 trying to get us out of the building and "why don't you just make an offer to buy it?" So, we got together, and we raised the money.

I did an art sale at Marian Goodman Gallery and we raised \$90,000 and we put the down payment on the loft, on our part of the loft. We had to develop a cond-op. There was a co-op upstairs in a condominium unit—that's Franklin Furnace downstairs. We had to develop a legal structure, we had to raise the money, and we did it all. And we bought it. And then the idea was we should not only own it, we should make it handicapped-accessible and, you know, up to code, so we hired—

LIZA ZAPOL: To—in order to continue performances in that space?

MARTHA WILSON: In order to continue at 112 Franklin Street.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: So, we—

LIZA ZAPOL: But performance as well as—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes. We wanted to—

LIZA ZAPOL: —where the artists' books were—

MARTHA WILSON: —create a downtown art emporium.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: We did a search among a bunch of architects that were short-listed and we selected one, Bernard Tschumi. We paid—raised a grant, paid him the money, and he did a drawing for the loft that was

beautiful. It totally respected the historic cast-iron nature of the loft, but it flipped the front door to the other side so that there could be a ramp, because the ramp can only be at a certain degree, a ramp that goes all the way downstairs to the performance space and a ramp that goes upstairs to the exhibition space, so it's handicapped-accessible. And, you know, it's going to have boy and girl bathrooms and it's going to be a beautiful thing.

Summer comes. I'm at my sister's house in Olympia, Washington, staring out the kitchen window at Mount Rainier, thinking "I'm going to be spending 10 years of my life raising capital, enough capital to do this renovation plan, and I really [laughs] don't want to do that." So, I pitched—you know, we had a board retreat, and I pitched the idea that we should consider freedom of expression to be the thing—it doesn't really matter where the event takes place. It could happen in a garage or on a street corner. The important thing is that the event takes place. That's really the important thing, that you document it, you pay the artist, and the event takes place.

So, let's take this thing virtual, sell the loft, put the money in a cash reserve account, and be a small in-your-face arts organization with a cash reserve. So, they went for it and we started the process of going virtual, at which point we started also fighting. You know, a little bit later on, started fighting about what—I think we were really fighting about the resources, the fact that we had resources for the first time. [Laughs.]

Nobody ever cared about the program when we were so poor that it—you know, we didn't have any resources behind it. Now that we have half a million dollars, suddenly the program is really interesting. And the board—some members of the board felt it was their job to get in there and have something to say about the program, which is not their job. But that's a long discussion that I think people reading this document are going to know that that's the job of the staff, is to run the program.

Okay, so we're going through a difficult period of now of going virtual at a time when the internet is newly born, and we don't know what it can do. The artists—we formed a collaboration with Pseudo.com. Pseudo Programs, Inc, was a for-profit dot-com on Houston and Broadway that was trying to be a television station on the internet.

LIZA ZAPOL: Can I ask you—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —one more question just about this decision, about leaving the physical space?

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: I mean, so you talk about not wanting to raise the capital for 10 years—

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: —and you know, as we've seen with so many cultural institutions in New York, this becomes the major—

MARTHA WILSON: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: —enterprise for the director. But what else was driving that choice to leave that particular space?

MARTHA WILSON: Oh, okay, thank you. That's a good question. [Laughs.] The other reason it was—the other reason to leave was that nobody could afford—none of the artists could afford to live in Tribeca anymore. We were building a downtown art emporium in a neighborhood that only bankers could afford to live in. The artists had moved to Brooklyn and we first—so, we sold the loft, moved to John Street. John Street is perpendicular to the World Trade Center. And we were there for a total of five years, but a few years in, 9/11 happened a block and a half away from our office and it was horrible going to work.

It was environmentally horrible, it was spiritually horrible, [laughs] it was just horrible all the way around. And we got an RFP from the BAM cultural district; they were trying to attract not-for-profit organizations to Brooklyn. And I asked the board if we should move to Brooklyn and they said, "Yes, the artists had moved 10 years ago to Brooklyn. We should absolutely move to Brooklyn."

[They laugh.]

So, we answered the RFP, we got selected, and we were at 80 Arts for 10 years, from 2004 to 2014.

LIZA ZAPOL: On Hanson Place?

MARTHA WILSON: On Hanson Place.

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay.

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay.

MARTHA WILSON: With Bang on a Can, *Bomb* magazine, Storycorps, Witness. It was a great group of organizations. And you know, we would see each—they wanted us to all collaborate together on—nobody ever—we never did that, but we would see each other in the elevator [laughs] and make friends.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, in this process—so, during this time at John Street sounds like when you were working, collaborating—

MARTHA WILSON: Starting to—

LIZA ZAPOL: —with Pseudo and like—

MARTHA WILSON: Collaborating with Pseudo and starting to figure out that the artists didn't want to just do television. They wanted to use all the software that was being developed. And so, a couple years in, Pseudo—we didn't know they were going bankrupt either. But a couple of years into the collaboration, we made friends with Zhang Ga, who was teaching at Parsons, who got us a connection to the design school at Parsons. And so, we mounted our performance program for two years at Pseudo and then one year at Parsons, at which point the artists started to just do performances in any venue that was appropriate to the idea and that gave us the idea that "oh, we don't have to have a single venue at all."

We can just give money to the artist and then help them to work out what is the appropriate—is the Gowanus Canal the best place to present this work? Or is Union Square the best place to present this work? So—and that's how it is today. The—I think that the goal of the culture wars was to shut the vocal performance art sector up, try to keep them quiet, and the major institutions really wanted us to shut the fuck up. Anne-Imelda Radice was the chair of the NEA at the time, and I saw her at a reception at the Met and she saw me and literally turned her back and just disappeared

[They laugh.]

I don't know where she went, but she was gone.

LIZA ZAPOL: That was recently or that was at that time?

MARTHA WILSON: No, that was back—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —in—now, what year was that? You know—

LIZA ZAPOL: When you were in—

MARTHA WILSON: It's an apocryphal story—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: —about how the uptown institutions wanted—and I understand, politically, what they were trying to do. They were trying to say, "Art is safe; it's fun; it appeals to everybody. Everybody loves it; it should be funded." You know, I understand that. We were trying to say, "Artists should be able to say anything they damn well please and still get funding," and those two things didn't work together.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, in—

MARTHA WILSON: So, during the culture wars we were fighting with each other.

LIZA ZAPOL: But you're saying—it seemed like you were about to say—but—so—and now what we're doing, it's —

MARTHA WILSON: Oh, so now what Franklin Furnace is doing? Okay.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: We lost our venue. We didn't have one on Hanson Place for 10 years either and we figured out "oh, what we're doing is providing the resources so the artists can do their work," and what the artists are

figuring out is that "I don't want to appeal to people sitting in chairs who I already know; I want to appeal to people in the park who don't—who I don't know at all."

So, I think my favorite work in the recent time was in 2012—I think 2012. Chin Chih Yang's piece is called *Kill Me or Change*, for which he gathered 30,000 aluminum cans and then built a globe and hung it off of a truck with a crane, and then, in front of the unisphere in Flushing Meadows Park, dumped 30,000 aluminum cans on his head to protest our culture of waste. And what was so great about this event was, first of all, he didn't die, and second of all, soccer moms, tennis players—you know, the art world was there, but all these other regular people were there, too, trying to figure out, you know, what this guy is doing dumping 30,000 aluminum cans on his head. So, this was a way for art to speak to regular people and I see that more and more.

I see that the artists perceive their job as breaking out of the art world and being in the regular world, the real world, the world of people.

LIZA ZAPOL: That event, that example of that work, reminds me of your lineage of performance art at the beginning with the manifesto—

MARTHA WILSON: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LIZA ZAPOL: —in Venice. If you want to explain that moment and how you might see those linked.

MARTHA WILSON: Wait, you mean—

LIZA ZAPOL: The—so, the manifesto that was spread and the fistfights that happened from the manifesto, was it in Venice?

MARTHA WILSON: Oh, you mean Venice?

LIZA ZAPOL: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

MARTHA WILSON: Oh, oh, oh, oh.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: Now I'm following you.

LIZA ZAPOL: *Against Past-Loving Venice*, yeah.

MARTHA WILSON: *Against Past-Loving Venice*.

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: I—

LIZA ZAPOL: It was 1910.

MARTHA WILSON: —placed the birth of performance art in June, I think, of 1910, when the Italian Futurist poets and painters produced a manifesto against passe-ist Venice—I mean, it's in Italian. This is—I'm not speaking Italian, but the idea is that Venice is worshipping the past and that that is passé, that only the future has value.

So, they printed up 800,000 copies, if you can wrap your brain around how much paper that is, and then they hauled the paper up to the top of the clocktower, and then they wait for people to come out of church [laughs] and then they start throwing this manifesto off of the top of the church, of the clocktower, into the Piazza San Marco. So, the townspeople of Venice were outraged that they felt that the past did not have value and only the future had value, so they run up the clocktower and the Futurist poets and painters run down the clocktower and there's a fistfight in the stairwell.

So, I use this moment as a way to identify the impulse of artists to reach a regular public, to use the page as art space, to develop an alternative to galleries and museums. The whole thing, in my view, starts right there with this fistfight. Now, the Futurists, interestingly, didn't understand what they were doing very well. I think it was the Russians who figured it out [laughs] better, that they could use the page as art space.

They could use public space as performance space. They could publish magazines and, you know, use magazines and paper as broadcast—well, no, the Futurists were using paper as a broadcast medium, certainly, with the manifestos. And I don't think we have improved on—except for the fact that a lot of artists are not fascists, we have not improved greatly on what it is that the Italian Futurists and poets and painters were up to anyway at that time, so I continue to use the term "avant-garde" because I want to connect what artists are



doing today with what artists were doing in the early days of the 20th century.

And I got in a fight with my board about that, too, [laughs] because "the avant-garde is over and we're in the Postmodern era." Okay, I understand that. That's fine. But I like that—I still like that term and was pretty gratified when I went to—I just got back from Vienna, where the show exhibiting the Sammlung Verbund collection was installed and the title of the show is *Woman Feminist Avant-Garde Artists of the 1970s*. Gabriele Schor, who's the curator, asked me what I thought about using that term, avant-garde, and I said, "I approve!"

[They laugh.]

"I think it's good! I think it's really good!" [Laughs.] Again, because it connects us up with what was going on in the early days of the 20th century.

LIZA ZAPOL: Thank you.

MARTHA WILSON: Okay.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, I want to—maybe we should do a time check right now and we can close things up in a second, okay?

MARTHA WILSON: Okay.

[Tape stops, restarts.]

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay, so we're resuming and I'm going to leave this to your hands. I think you had a couple of stories that you wanted to share.

MARTHA WILSON: [Laughs.] Okay.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: The story I want to tell now in closing is about how I did it all ass-backwards, that I started the organization first so that was my first offspring, really. I think I worked out a lot of kinks, personality kinks, [laughs] by having to collaborate with other people to run Franklin Furnace for 40—we're up to 40 years at this point. Forty-one, to be technical about it.

So, I started the organization first, then I had a son second. I was—let's see, my mom had Alzheimer's and my sister and I were sharing care of our mother. She would spend three months in the summer in Newtown, Pennsylvania, where she grew up, and then nine months in the winter in Olympia, Washington, with my sister. And—where am I going with this? [Laughs.]

So, I had a tenant in Newtown, Maeve, who had a brother whom I met going dancing in New Hope and I said, "You're Maeve's brother?" I love Maeve; Maeve was—she was the de facto manager of the property that had been my grandparents' house and my father's barn and our house. She would prune the plants, she would pull out the bulbs and plant new ones in the spring. Without Maeve, it really wouldn't have looked very good at all. So, I met Scott, Maeve's brother, and we started dating each other; sold the house in Newtown after my mom died; got a little house in the Poconos. And so, my son was conceived on the couch [laughs] of the Poconos house and Scott, bartender, heard that I wanted to keep the baby.

I was 40 years old when I conceived, and I knew—the curtains parted and I understood that this was my only shot. I'm not going to have another opportunity to get pregnant; "you're having this baby or you're not having a baby at all." So, I told Scott I was going to keep the baby. He said, "You're ruining my life; I will never support you." I said, "Fine, go to hell. I do not care. [Laughs.] Just letting you know, I'm keeping the baby." [Laughs.] Let's see, where am I going with this part of the story?

So, then I'm a single parent, because he's living in Pennsylvania. I'm living in New York and I have this baby who's, you know, becoming a real person and he's—I'm still running Franklin Furnace and I'm being pursued by Charles Rembar. Charles Rembar is the attorney who argued the case in front of the Supreme Court that guaranteed freedom of expression for literature. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Lolita*, *Tropic of Cancer*.

The argument was the—you know, they all contain puerile—so-called puerile—content, but taken as a whole, they are works of art. And the Supreme Court decided that that was okay. It was a landmark case and it—he wrote a book about it called *The End of Obscenity*. So, Charles Rembar is 80-something and he's pursuing me because I'm this First Amendment chickee [ph] who's half his age.

And I'm thinking, "Oh, my God, I don't want to fuck this guy." My friend—a friend of mine said, "Fuck him; he'll put your son through Harvard," like "what is your problem?" [Laughs.] But I wanted—well, one of the people who

kept coming to my performance events asked me to go to Eiko and Koma. Oh, I know, I was teaching a class at the New School—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —and he was in my class for two years. He was in my class for a whole year and then he was in my class for another whole year. During the second year—because I knew you weren't supposed to date your students—I couldn't call him, but he called me and said, "Well, I have two tickets for Eiko and Koma; do you want to see Eiko and Koma?" And we went together, and I discovered that he had wanted to be a priest. But then, he didn't believe in God, so they told him, "You can't be a priest"—[laughs]—and then he didn't know what to do, so he was a swimming coach.

And then the father of one of his charges was trying to avoid getting divorced, so he had Vince taken care of his business, and then he got divorced anyway and wanted his business back. And Vince realized, "Oh, I know how to run a fish business," so he bought himself a fish business and became a fishmonger. And the reason he was taking my class and the reason I kept seeing him at various performance art events was he said, "I needed to know the week was over," [laughs] so he wanted to see the weirdest possible shit. [Laughs.]

So, I called Vince and asked him what he was doing on Saturday, December 18th, which was my birthday, but I didn't tell him that part. And he said, "Well, I've already seen it, but have you seen the Anna Deveare Smith piece with the Alvin Ailey Dance Company at City Center?" No! It's uptown! It's \$35! Why would—I would never go to that. He said, "Fine, fine, fine. I've already seen"—

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MARTHA WILSON: —"it, but I'll take you. We're going to go together." So, he took me to this thing. It was the same night as Brian O'Doherty and Barbara Novak's holiday party, so I took him to the holiday party. Brian O'Doherty's tall and Irish; Vince is tall and Irish. They love each other. They're like drinking and talking and having a wonderful time. It gets later and later and later, so he drives me home to Brooklyn even though he lives in Westfield, New Jersey, quite the other direction.

So, he drives me home; I let the babysitter go. We decide he's going to stay; we take off our clothes; we're touching each other. My son wakes up [laughs] and he goes to the refrigerator because I put a bottle in the refrigerator in case he wakes up. And he takes the bottle, he doesn't see the tall bearded man. He's—you know, gets in bed next to his mommy, so it's Comly, Mommy, and Vince. [Laughs.]

We're all in bed together. I'm thinking, "I'm dead, I'm dead." [Laughs.] And Vince did not get up and put his clothes on and leave; he just hung out, just watches this maternal scene go down, and then Comly fell asleep. Then we made love and I thought, "You know, this is—he can see what my life is really like and he's still here, so he's the one." So, I—so that's the story of how I did it all ass-backwards.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

MARTHA WILSON: Now, there was another story that you wanted me to tell at the end. There was this—what was that?

LIZA ZAPOL: I wanted to hear more about where things are right now—

MARTHA WILSON: Oh, what's—

LIZA ZAPOL: —for Franklin Furnace—

MARTHA WILSON: —going on right now. Okay.

LIZA ZAPOL: —and kind of your thoughts maybe about accession or about, you know—

MARTHA WILSON: Why we moved to Pratt and what—

LIZA ZAPOL: Why you moved to Pratt—

MARTHA WILSON: —we're trying to do better—

LIZA ZAPOL: —yeah, what are you up to right now?

MARTHA WILSON: Okay. Ten years—2004 to 2014—we were at 80 Arts. And sustainability is a concept that is being discussed on the foundation level. What the heck does that mean? It means that the organization can continue with and without annual support from foundations. We got two NEH [National Endowment for the

Humanities] grants and have started digitizing the event records of Franklin Furnace and making them available on Artstor for a scholarship. We're a small in-your-face arts organization and we're creating a really valuable asset.

Will we be here in 100 years to preserve that asset and keep track of migration and software changes and—you know, in the new digital world you have to be on it every minute. You have to go back and make sure the files don't get corrupted. You have to make sure that you don't get hacked. There are all these new conditions that we exist in. So—and—so then we—you know, we had a—like a board strategic planning process.

We got money from Rockefeller Brothers Fund to do a strategic plan, and we figured out that the highest and best use of our stuff would be for it to be used by scholars and written about— Ph.D. theses written about Dynasty Handbag. That would be the best, right? So, how are we going to do that? How are we going to inject the ephemeral practice of the artists who are working today into art history? Why don't we collaborate with an educational institution that's in the business of requiring students to write their M.A. and Ph.D. theses about contemporary art practice?

So, we started sniffing around to various institutions in the New York area and outside the New York area. Actually, we looked around the whole country. I kind of wanted to stay here because this is where the art was created. I didn't really want to move to Baltimore. Some—hang on, should we talk about which institute—one institution that'll become obvious in a minute said, "Sure, we'll take your archives, but we don't—we want you to be dead. We don't want you to be alive, creating new stuff. We'll just—you know, we'll just take the stuff that you've already created." So, the board didn't go for that.

We talked to a university, probably obvious which university. We had already given our ephemera collections to the Fales Library of NYU and I mean, that was kind of a natural place to go. But when I talked to—when I spoke to Marvin Taylor, the founder of the Downtown collection, he said, "You need multiple legs on the stool. You have to—you can't have just one dean in your corner. You need three deans in your corner." So, I tried and failed to get three deans in my corner.

And then, I looked at the model that was presented by Rhizome and the New Museum. Rhizome—small in-your-face arts organization with whom we had collaborated; completely virtual—was housed by the New Museum and could employ their development staff if they had a project that they wanted to raise money for. Or they could employ the bookkeeping staff if they—you know, if they wanted other people to be helping them run their numbers. So, it seemed like a simpatico kind of situation.

Plus, I knew Mark Tribe, who is the founder of Rhizome, and he said, "Well, I can't—you know, I don't have access to the agreement or anything, but I can tell you basically what we were looking for." And he went down the terms that they had worked out with the New Museum. So, I pitched this concept to—well, we figured out that practically half of the faculty at Pratt was Franklin Furnace alums—

[They laugh.]

—so—there's so many. I don't know, like 30? So, I asked one of those alums—one of my Franklin Furnace alums is Jennifer Miller. I asked Jennifer Miller to take the concept to her dean and she pitched it to her dean and he loved it. He thought it was a wonderful idea to bring an arts organization onto the campus so the students could see that one of the options you have when you graduate is to found your own institution. That's one thing. And plus, then the resources are available to the students, plus the work that we do is intern-accessible. It provides real-world activity.

So, we made a deal with Pratt. It took a year. Actually, it took two years to work it out. Started in '12. I think we started in '12 and '13, and I signed the deal on the last day of our 10-year lease at 80 Arts, September 30, the date of which will remain in my brain forever. So, we've been—so it's a five-year agreement which can be renewed. We have developed some collaborations with Pratt two-and-a-half years in.

One of them is to propose artists to be presented in the library—the library is an exhibition venue—the idea being that we would present artists who would have a wider appeal outside the school so the wider art world would come inside the campus. So, that's one of the collaborations. Another one is they have an artist book collection, we have an artist book collection. We're re-housing and cataloging them and making them accessible to the student body, and that is going to be a continuous process. It's not like it's done. [Laughs.]

So, why do we have an artist book collection when we sold it to the Museum of Modern Art? We had asked the artists for three copies. That's the archival standard. And the Museum of Modern Art bought the collection and kept the first copies, sold the second copies to pay for the deal, and returned the third copies to us. So, we don't have a complete set of everything that went to the Museum of Modern Art, but what we do have is a really great study collection, and if somebody were to, God forbid, spill coffee on an artist book it wouldn't be the end of the world, because the primo stuff is uptown and under guard.

So, we—you know, we're working out a plan to re-house our collection and re-house their collection and then electronically integrate everything. And we haven't worked out yet where the collection would live. You know, there are things to be worked out, but it's—we're well on the way of developing a collaboration in this. But the third collaboration that we've come up with is to work with different programs in the school to provide real-world internship opportunities for students who are studying.

For example, they're studying arts and education, but we have arts—we have artists who go into the New York City public schools, so they go with our teaching artists into the New York City public schools where there are 32 screaming 10-year-old children sitting there and they learn in practice what you can never learn out of a book. So, there's—the—you know, we're working with their arts and ed program, with their performance and performance studies program, and we are plotting to work with the School of Information, the library people.

It's different than being an independent—we're still an independent arts organization with our own board of directors. They have their own board of directors. But it's different being housed inside the Pratt campus insofar as I used to be able to make decisions and now I have to check with seven or eight people before I can make a decision. So, it's a slower environment than the one that I used to be in. That's a big difference. But it's gratifying to know that they value Franklin Furnace and what we have done in the past and what we are creating in the future. And they're still happy; I'm still happy. We're still doing it.

LIZA ZAPOL: Great. So, one last question.

[They laugh.]

I mean, I always will have another question, but—so you—I mean, you mention that you're going to be in residency in Texas.

MARTHA WILSON: Yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: You're going to be working on a new project. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

MARTHA WILSON: You mean *Makeover Melania*?

LIZA ZAPOL: *Makeover Melania*.

MARTHA WILSON: *Makeover Melania*? So, I'm going to turn 70 in December. I was born in 1947. I'm not leaving Franklin Furnace—we're talking about succession now. I'm not walking out the door. Unless I get hit by a bus, I'm probably not going to die real soon, but I am going to start to wander off more. I just got back from Europe for two weeks. I'm going to be gone for two months at Artpace to do a residency down there to—so the organization can start to adjust to the idea that Martha's not going to be there all the time.

I don't know what we are going to do about succession. We haven't, as a board, worked it out at all. But I want to be more of an artist than I've been able to do as the director of the organization for 40 years. So, Michael Smith, whom I presented in 1976, lives now in Texas. He was invited to curate three artists for residency at Artpace, one Texas artist, one national artist, and international artist. I'm the national artist.

So, I went—they—what—they have a very smart program where they bring you down six months before your residency to get to know San Antonio and get to know the staff and get to know the resources available. And I said I wanted to do a series of political portraits of all of my political characters that I've ever done in my career, and somebody said, "Well, have you done Melania?" [Laughs.] And I said, "No, I haven't done Melania, but I know Nancy Burson," who's the artist who developed software to show what Etan Patz, who disappeared in Soho, would look like the next year.

He disappeared and we couldn't find his body and nobody knew what had happened, so she created software so we could see what he would look like at the age of 7, the age of 8, the age of 9. And then she developed it further so that we could turn ourselves into Andy Warhol or into Elvis Presley, and then she further developed the software so that she could create a composite portrait of every woman in the world based on racial numbers, you know, of Filipinos and Native Americans and Chinese and Caucasians.

So, I asked the good people at Artpace if I could collaborate with an artist friend of mine who I know because we were in the same birthing class—our sons were born at precisely the same time—and they said, "Yeah, you know, that sounds good." So, the piece is called *Makeover Melania*. I bought an image from Reuters of Melania Trump, and Nancy Burson has taken photographs of Martha and now the process begins where they have to Photoshop every single frame of this video so it's going to show Martha turning into Melania Trump.

LIZA ZAPOL: So, the process in Texas will be experimenting within that or what do you think—

MARTHA WILSON: I'm not doing the software.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah.

MARTHA WILSON: It turns out, Nancy's not doing the software either. The guy who's doing the software is—I think he's in Portland, Oregon, but that—you know, it doesn't matter now. We can just [laughs] text each other on our phones.

[They laugh.]

And they were cool with it. They're—I mean, that's what I'm doing, so—

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARTHA WILSON: —they were down with the plan.

LIZA ZAPOL: Well, I look forward to seeing what comes of that.

MARTHA WILSON: [Laughs.] Thank you.

LIZA ZAPOL: I want to thank you so much for your generosity of time and your stories.

MARTHA WILSON: Thank you for reading every single word I've ever written in my life.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.] I'm very grateful for this opportunity, and I wonder if there's anything that you wanted to share today that I haven't asked you about.

MARTHA WILSON: Oh, God, no.

[They laugh.]

I think we covered everything. I can't think of anything that—stone that was unturned.

LIZA ZAPOL: All right. Well, thank you, and we'll continue the conversation—

MARTHA WILSON: All right.

LIZA ZAPOL: —off the record now.

MARTHA WILSON: All right.

LIZA ZAPOL: Thank you.

MARTHA WILSON: Sounds good.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]