

Event Transcript

October 29, 2020 - *Political Drag: A Retrospective* - Martha Wilson in Conversation with Sara Reisman

Sara Reisman:

So I think we're going to get started. Welcome everyone, thank you for joining the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation and The 8th Floor for *Political Drag: A Retrospective*, which is part screening, part conversation with performance artist, Martha Wilson. As part of our *Performance-in-Place* series, this video screening and conversation features performance artist, Martha Wilson, who will present a selection of her seminal works addressing political persona that she has inhabited over the last 40 years. The artist's embodiments of political figures like Nancy Reagan, Tipper Gore, Barbara Bush, and Donald Trump serve as time capsules for issues prevalent at the time of their original staging. A throughline in Wilson's practice is her use of film and documentation as political mediums to record the temporal and often seismic moments occurring in the public realm; and we are in a seismic time right now.

Before we begin, please note that this event includes ASL interpretation and captioning, so I recommend that you refer to the chat section for accessibility resources and for captioning please look for Renee Russo. If Renee can... Well, you can see the name is "captioner". And then we have two ASL interpreters, Veronica Steiler and Candice Davidor, maybe they can wave? And also please check your sound to make sure it's set to mute for the time being. If you have questions during the talk, we do encourage your participation, please write them down first using the chat function, and when we open the conversation up to questions, I'll call out each of you one by one. A few points of introduction, my name is Sara Reisman. I'm the Executive and Artistic Director of the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation, which is based in New York City where we've supported art and social justice through grant-making for the last 25 years. Since 2015 at The 8th Floor, we've been organizing exhibitions and public programs that address themes of social justice and political import.

Political Drag: A Retrospective, is the seventh installment of *Performance-in-Place*, a virtual performance series we launched back in May of this year as a way to resume our programming while complying with current social distancing safety guidelines. These virtual commissions highlight the artistic potentials inherent in our current reality, demonstrating the adaptability of artists whose practices continue to evolve in response to the restricted mobility that we're all experiencing around the world. Recent performances have included LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs, Alice Sheppard of Kinetic Light, Nicolás Dumit Estévez Raful Espejo, Maria Hupfield, Eileen Myles, and Aliza Shvarts. Our next *Performance-in-Place* event is with Baseera Khan, titled *Waste of a Nation* on November 5th. For more information on these upcoming performances, please visit our website at www.the8thfloor.org. I'd like to quickly mention that the Rubin Foundation's 2021 Open Call for Art and Social Justice Grants to New York City-based organizations is now live with the deadline of November 20th. Please visit the Foundation's website for more information www.sdrubin.org.

In other news, two weeks ago The 8th Floor opened a physical exhibition titled *To Cast Too Bold*

A Shadow with a very soft launch. Over the course of the day we had about 30 people. *To Cast Too Bold a Shadow* examines entrenched forms of misogyny in our culture to understand how feminism, misogyny, and sexism intersect. The exhibition is open by appointment through January 23rd, featuring works by Aliza Shvarts, Joiri Minaya, Yoko Ono, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Anetta Mona Chisa & Lucia Tkáčová, Furen Dai, Maria D. Rapticavoli, Rajkamal Kahlon, Tracey Emin, and Betty Tompkins. Appointments can be booked by visiting The 8th Floor website www.the8thfloor.org/visit.

Before I introduce Martha, I want to take a few minutes to recognize our respective relationships to place. We are gathered virtually in many locations at once: Manhattan, Brooklyn and other places in the US most, if not all are unceded lands. As this event is organized by the Rubin Foundation, I've chosen to address a specific site where our offices are located near Union Square, New York City, thereby acknowledging the Lenape community past and present as well as future generations. The Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation and The 8th Floor acknowledge being founded upon exclusions and erasures of many indigenous peoples, including those on whose land where the foundation is located. This acknowledgement verbalizes a commitment to beginning the process of working to dismantle the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism, a commitment that's become all the more urgent and poignant in this time of political upheaval and resistance that have already resulted in transformative activist engagement across the country. I'll also add a virtual layer to the land recognition with language devised by Jill Carter, professor in the Indigenous Studies and Drama Theater and Performance Studies Departments at the University of Toronto.

Carter writes, "Zoom has erected its headquarters in San Jose, California, while Skype has erected one key arm of its operations in Palo Alto, California. This is a traditional territory of the Muwekma Ohlone tribal nation. Current members of this nation are direct descendants of the many missionized tribal groups from across the region. We who are able to connect with each other via Zoom or Skype or other platforms are deeply indebted to the Muwekma Ohlone people as the lands and waters they continue to steward now support the people, pipelines and technologies that carry our breaths, images, and words across vast distances to others. Thank you.

Now to introduce Martha. Like Marilyn Monroe, she doesn't need an introduction, but I'm still going to give the introduction. Martha Wilson is a pioneer and feminist artist and gallery director who over the past four decades has created innovative photographic and video works that explore her female subjectivity through role-playing, costume transformations, and invasions of other peoples' persona. She began making these videos and photo text works in the early 1970s while in Halifax, Nova Scotia and further developed her performative and video-based practice after moving in 1974 to New York City. In 1976, she founded and continues to direct Franklin Furnace Archive Incorporated, an artist-run space that champions the exploration, promotion, and preservation of artists, books, installation art, video, online and performance art; further challenging institutional norms, the roles artists play within society, and expectations about what constitutes acceptable art mediums.

Martha Wilson joined PPOW Gallery, New York City, and mounted a solo exhibition titled *I Have Become My Own Worst Fear* in September 2011. In 2013, Wilson received an honorary

doctor of fine arts degree from Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University. In 2015, she received the Audrey Irmas Award for curatorial excellence administered by the Center for Curatorial Studies Bard College and the College Art Associations Women's Caucus for Art Lifetime Achievement Award and mounted her second solo exhibition at PPOW gallery.

And I'll add to the bio that in 2017, Martha had work featured prominently in a show that we organized at The 8th Floor, *The Intersectional Self*. We invited her to present a performance of *Martha Does Donald*, which we'll see later in tonight's program. When I approached her about doing that performance back in 2017, I asked if there were artists she'd recommend we engage to round out the program. Her response was, could we organize a teach-in on artistic activism? And so we had an iterative back and forth exchange about whom to invite. We ended up bringing together around 15 artists, activists, and educators who presented their artistic activist methods in an evening program, April 2017. This feels a perfect example of Martha's inclusive approach to art, one that brings people together at recognizing a diversity of practices. So welcome Martha.

Martha Wilson:

Thank you, Sara.

Sara Reisman:

So great that we're here together. The structure of the program is we'll watch part of a video or a full video, and then Martha and I will have some conversation. The first video is DISBAND from 1979 performed at PS1. Martha, do you want to say anything before we start, or should we move right into the video?

Martha Wilson:

I think that's perfect. It was PS1 before it became MoMA PS1.

Sara Reisman:

Right. It'll look a little different.

DISBAND:

I got a disease the clinic can't fix. We got a disease that nobody gets. We got it last week from a radiation leak. My sister's infected plutonium needles injected ,but the doctors are sure that they'll find a cure. It's a disease you can't see, it's a disease you can't inflict. It's a powerful strain, we'll all go insane. The future is bleak, intimidation gets unique, your resistance is low and your courage can't flow. You've got it twist, you can't [inaudible 00:10:40] because your channel is over and out, lights blink off and on, your connection is gone. Radiation in the air, radiation in your hair, radiation in your food, don't take that abuse, don't take that abuse, get rebel, get rebel, get rebel, get rebel, get rebel, rebel, rebel. (silence)

Martha Wilson:

I asked Sara if we could start with DISBAND's "Get Rebel" because all art is inherently political. It was also a political moment, and I want to back up and explain how we got to that moment.

Sara Reisman:

Can I interject quickly just to let everyone know that we're recording [inaudible 00:12:11].

Martha Wilson:

I graduated from college in 1969. The Vietnam War was being fought on the other side of the planet. I was raised a Quaker. I went to Quaker elementary, Quaker high school, Quaker college Wilmington College, in Ohio. My boyfriend didn't want to get drafted into the United States Army. He got accepted at the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design. I got accepted at Dalhousie University. We saw it as a sign from above that we should leave the United States, we should move to Canada. So we moved to Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1969. He was going to the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design studying printmaking. I was going to Dalhousie University studying English literature. But the kids at the art college were way cooler. So I would go across the street and hang out over there where the conceptual artists of the day were invited to visit from Vito Acconci to Lawrence Weiner. And visual art is being made out of language.

This for an English major was a revelation to me. And so I decided to be an artist. I talked to my mentor at the art college and said, "I wanted to be an artist". And he said, "Women don't make it in the art world". So when my boyfriend dumped me, I decided to move to New York and find out if I really was an artist or not, fully expecting the art world of New York to be a hostile environment for women. There was no feminist movement at the time in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

But when I got to New York, I found all these other weirdos who were politically motivated and producing all kinds of stuff; performance art, books, installation work, street actions, posters. So I found DISBAND, the all-girl band of women artists who couldn't play any instruments, and you just saw one of our songs. They tended to be about our real lives. There was another song called "Look At My Dick" that got us thrown out of Italy. This one, "Get Rebel" is about nuclear power and nuclear radiation.

Sara Reisman:

It sounds timely for now though, one of the lines is, "The future is bleak. Resistance is low. Don't take that abuse". It's not about this moment, but it could be.

Martha Wilson:

It brings up the question of the entire program, which is, because I'm older than everybody who's here. I just want you to know that we live in a political environment and the job of art is to provoke thought. And so that's what artists I feel must do to continue.

Sara Reisman:

I agree. So what was DISBAND's lifespan? It's a collaboration-

Martha Wilson:

It was a collaboration. The members were Alona Granite, Ingrid Sischy, Diane Tour, Donna Hennis, and Martha Wilson. Ingrid was the one with the hammer. Everybody else had flags and was lying on the floor. We were active between 1978 and 1982 when DISBAND disbanded. At the end of DISBAND, we were playing the members of Ronald Reagan's cabinet. Reagan had been elected in 1980 and then he was reelected in 1984. So the next performance you're going to see is Martha as Nancy Reagan singing songs in 1984.

Sara Reisman:

Should we go to that?

Martha Wilson:

I don't know.

Sara Reisman:

The one thing I just wanted to ask, it's less apparent in your other works as the performance output, doesn't reveal as much of the collaborative nature of your work [inaudible 00:17:16].

Martha Wilson:

On the surface it doesn't.

Sara Reisman:

Right, right. So it's not as transparent. I should say DISBAND is more transparent as a collaboration. And I just wondered if that's something that's continued through your work, I assume it has given the layers of production that happened within and around the work, right?

Martha Wilson:

Yes.

Sara Reisman:

Can you tell me about how [crosstalk 00:17:41]. The answer is yes?

Martha Wilson:

I would say my first big collaboration was Franklin Furnace, which wouldn't exist today. If it were not for student volunteer interns and early staff members who got paid \$35 a week. It was a dirt poor effort, but it has continued for 44 years through the collaboration of a lot of the people. DISBAND was a collaboration. Nowadays, I've returned to the photo text works that I was doing in Halifax, Nova Scotia. But I don't know how to do Photoshop, so I collaborate with other people who know how to do Photoshop and for video I collaborated with Nancy Morrison who developed a software. I don't know if you were aware of this, but in the 70's, Aitan Pots, a six year old boy disappeared from Soho.

So she developed software to age his face so that the images would be published on milk cartons and we could recognize him as he got older. And then she developed that software further so that we could turn ourselves into Elvis Presley and we could turn ourselves into Andy Warhol. And in my case, the collaboration that we did was called make-over millennia starts as Martha Wilson's face and it turns into Melania Trump's face and then it goes back. So every 60 seconds the video image goes from Martha's face to Melania Trump's face.

Sara Reisman:

I'd love to see that. Well, let's go to Nancy Reagan. What's the title of the Nancy Reagan performance?

Martha Wilson:

I forget, but we know it's from 1984 because she sings the song, and it says it's 84 now, put your faith in our hands.

(Video begins: [MUSIC])

Nancy Reagan:

Singing:

Time's up. Price has tried. The remedy I always choose. [Laughter] and I have a vision everyone else is pointing out to you. [Laughter] enter the glad gap. It's ugly. Just ignore everything I do. Don't wish you see. [Laughter] it's a glad gap. It's not opposed. It's a glad gap. [Laughter] it's old and worn. It's a glad gap. It's an invisible world. It's a glad gap, glad gap.

Psych tropic medication cannot cure your ills.[Laughter] if it's six or seven hundred thousand times, gives you the chills. Try collective inattention, much like a charm. Your intersection might not find the sight of a barn. Enter the glad gap. It's a latest hit. It's a glad gap. It's a trip. [Laughter] it's a glad gap, just proceed, enter the glad gap, be behind and be seen. Enter the glad gap, glad gap. [Laughter].

Speaking:

Good morning. I'm Nancy Reagan, First Lady of the United States. It's a quarter 10, time for breakfast at the white house. I usually have the mineral water with my medication. Then I feel great for the rest of the day. People shouldn't consider themselves to be hungry, if they have pains down here, people should consider themselves to be on a diet. I believe, I can relieve world hunger by spreading this idea. Most poor people need to go on diets, they are so fat and ugly-looking. I would like everyone in America to be the beautiful people. I would like everyone in the world to be happy and beautiful. So take my advice. If you are poor in pockets, feel rich in spirit. The world is a terrible place, but if we could all rise above and have faith in [inaudible 00:23:59] and God, everything will be okay.

Singing:

Rise above and have faith in Ron and God, everything will be okay. (Music in background.) He takes a stand. He's not a sham. We need a man. He stands for good against evil. I believe in Ron. Give us the royal nod. This man looks like a God. Have faith in Ron and God (singing ends) (music in background).

Speaking:

Calvinism, I mean capitalism is going to rebuild America, right? The business of America is business. After all as Calvin Coolidge said, and those words mean even more today than they did then. Look at the advances in high technology, laser research. Look at the efficiency with which we didn't take over whole countries in a couple of days. In the last four years, we have helped America to become a feral country again, and we hope to continue. And tonight I'm privileged to announce that Ronald Reagan will run as this nation's first synthetic president. Through collaboration between private enterprise and the arts. Ronnie will be our leader until his warranty expires in 2084.

Singing:

It's the coming of the solid state. (Singing) when we'll all be together again just like I can't remember when, we'll have paradise on earth at last. It's the coming of the solid state. Instantaneous can roll what it takes. No more drum has to spoil the view. Our [inaudible] will be so cute. It's the coming of the solid state. When morality follows interest rates, making money is a radical given. Here's to cal vin is it cool idge or ism? [Laughter] (applause). (Music stops).

Speaking:

Most world leaders suffer from paralysis, fear and lack of the courage of their convictions, but not Ronnie. Ronnie can withstand public criticism on any issue you can name. From nuclear contamination of the environment to human slaughter in El Salvador. If you know how he does it, he knows. The picture stays backstage. I know that my public image means a lot to Ronnie. And so for 1984 my New Year's resolution is to stabilize my weight at 84 pounds. And go down in history as the first lady who was too rich and too thin.

Singing:

I'm on the TV every day. At night they interview for what, okay. About addiction, the cabbage patch dollars, it's so rewarding, I have to have it all. Maybe I know that he's been speaking. Maybe I know that he's been untrue. But what can I do? Da, da, da da, it's so important to be too thin. If I could do it all over again, I'd be a vision to be a success, be the first lady and be so well dressed, whoa, we don't have to read the papers. He's the son press and we are the news. We don't get the blues. Da, da, da da. It's so important just to be seen and so good looking when next to him. I've never cheated and slept with a man or taken hard drugs, who do you think I am? [Laughter] oh, I see who keeps the biggest cigarettes and diet pills and booze. The life I would choose. [Laughter] da, da, da da. I like to play with shit all over. I know that Ronnie does. To make the mess all over the place and lots of people not safe, I put a Coke bottle in my pussy, and so his [inaudible] is taken. Oh what am I doing? In conclusion, this is great to have this chat with you and tell you straight that everything is according to plans. They say the boredom, put your faith in our hands. Our democracy is supreme. Western Civ is all there is to freedom. So let's be in love. (Singing stops.)

Speaking:

Hello, everybody.

(Video ends)

Sara Reisman:

So, one of the things that comes to my mind in watching these videos is how you compose the script? How did you start doing that? And this script with Nancy Reagan specifically, it covers so much political and social ground.

Martha Wilson:

It was actually pretty easy in the Reagan era to write a script, because Nancy would say all kinds of unguarded stuff in the news, and it would be reported in the newspapers, and I could just underline it, and I would have my script. Kind of like Trump, you can't believe the stuff that Trump is saying. But you underline it and you have your script already written for you. I think where your question is going though, is; what is the function of the script in relation to the performance? It was important to me to have a script and to know where I was going in the performance. I am freaked out by the idea of ad-libbing in front of an audience. So I always wrote a script. And then after DISBAND, I always wrote songs too, because songs are words in tunes. They're easy for people to grasp, you can... "Western Civ is all there is to dream of, so let's be in love." It's a way to get your idea across in a mellifluous manner.

Sara Reisman:

And we didn't have... I just want to maybe reflect on some of the language. The audio for me was perfect. The video was a little bit choppy at points, but I think that's my connection at our office. But there's a question about the glad wrap is wrapped and what looks like saran wrap. And our

ASL interpreters wanted to know what is she saying? What with the glad gap, if that's about just choosing what you see-

Martha Wilson:

What you want to see. Exactly, your inspection need not find the side of a barn. You just don't look if you don't want to know about COVID you just say, "We're rounding the corner and it's not a problem, it doesn't exist". And what I think is interesting about watching this video is the same playbook that Ronald Reagan used is being recycled by Donald Trump.

Sara Reisman:

Let's go to the next video. It's Bush?

Martha Wilson:

Are we doing Barbara? Okay.

Sara Reisman:

I think so.

(Video begins)

So, our next guest we said [inaudible 00:34:11] of course you should come here, do whatever you want to do. So without further ado, ladies and gentlemen, Barbara Bush.

Barbara Bush:

Good evening. Martha Wilson couldn't be here tonight for Avant-Garde Rama. So even though Jen is getting married today, I agreed to perform on her behalf. I'm Barbara Bush, First Lady of the United States. Wife and confidant of George Herbert Walker Bush, 41st President of the United States. Mother and confidant of Jeb Bush, ex-governor of the great state of Florida. Mother and confidant of George W. Bush 43rd, President of the United States. If power is the ultimate aphrodisiac, you might say, I'm the sexiest woman in the free world.

Okay. I'll admit that when George Jr. was growing up, I thought he was a lemon; that Jeb Bush would grow up to become the political superstar. George flubbed a congressional level election, coming off to the voters as a rich kid. He failed in the oil business, although we handed it to him on a silver platter. And he drank and snorted the equivalent of a small African nation's GNP up his nose.

Finally, he hit rock bottom, he married a control freak, he quit drinking and he found Jesus. I'm a little concerned, he feels it's his job to bring on Armageddon. So all Christians will be raptured up to heaven. But his religion helped him beat his addiction. I'm all for it.

I have another son, we kept him under wraps for a good while after the savings and loan crisis of the 80s. But now he has a successful new venture that has captured the interest of school districts in Florida, Nevada, and in Texas. Where in 2006, I donated eight machines to the children evacuated after Hurricane Katrina. They're called COWs, curriculum on wheels. And \$3800 a pop, they're much cheaper than teachers which typically cost \$38,000 a pop.

Recently, Neil sold a quarter of a million dollars worth of COWs to the Houston School District, which used Hurricane Relief Funding to pay for them. I was raised Episcopalian, it bothered me that George left the church in which he was raised and became born again. And, I certainly don't consider myself to be among the born again, but I do have to admit that it might be possible that the apocalypse is coming.

There was first the plague of AIDS, then the floods in New Orleans, and recently, wildfires in California. What is a sensible Christian political leader to do? George started bombing [inaudible 00:39:46], on the first day of spring, as if to say that paganism, and all those other misguided religions like Islam, Zoroaster, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shinto, Daoism, had better wake up and smell the Christian coffee. George consults with God the father before he launches any initiative. So he knows the Clear Skies Act, No Child Left Behind, and Operation Iraqi Freedom will succeed in making this world a better place.

In conclusion, you could grow up to be President of the United States, even if you are a lemon. All it takes is money, family, and political connections, so vote Republican. Republicans can be venal in the open, Democrats have to cover it up. Thank you.

(Video ends)

Sara Reisman:

That was great.

Martha Wilson:

Any questions?

Sara Reisman:

What you hit on here is that, we... I looked at these before we prepared and now here we are. And it hits a little bit differently, I voted a few days ago, early and it's kind of a reminder that some of this is politics as usual, not all. A lot of it is not and it's worse now. But I think that you hit on a few notes. Just your selection of videos for this evening, are timely considering the reference to Hurricane Katrina. And the disregard at that time, there's some parallels to now.

It's just that, COVID is more widespread, but it's says urgent, right? I don't know what to say-

Martha Wilson:

There's a question from Michael Bramwell. He wants to know if the performance was memorized. Michael it takes a lot for me to memorize. But yes, I've memorized it first.

Sara Reisman:

You actually earlier-

Martha Wilson:

I was talking about using a script because [crosstalk 00:42:54] memorizing.

Sara Reisman:

Right and you use... Sometimes you wanted to use cards, or No?

Martha Wilson:

I have used cards.

Sara Reisman:

It works either way. Do you ever find yourself going off script and-

Martha Wilson:

Oh, like Trump going off script? No, no. I never go off script.

George Bolster:

I really liked the line about venal in the open. I feel like this is the first time that Democrats have had to actually be venal towards Trump in the [inaudible 00:43:29]. Just like calling him a clown, for instance. I feel like that must be an unprecedented situation for instance.

Sara Reisman:

When we were looking at these videos together last week, I wondered if you've ever met... Like you've impersonated so many political figures. Have you ever met any of them? [crosstalk 00:43:55]

Martha Wilson:

The closest I've gotten was my sister who's a nurse in Olympia, Washington, who went to Seattle to see Tipper Gore in person. And I asked her to tell me what Tipper is like and what she sounds like and she explained to me that Tipper does not have a southern accent, even though she's supposed to be the southern Belle. But you'll see in the next tape, which I think is Tipper up soon-

Sara Reisman:

It is, yeah.

Martha Wilson:

That I give her a southern accent. I need to give her a southern accent because I need to be able to keep some distance from her. Tipper among all the first ladies and second ladies that I've impersonating and presidents. She and I are the same age, she and I are both in bands. She and I both smoke pot. So I needed a mechanism some way to give myself space.

Sara Reisman:

You've given some context for how you chose Tipper because there's some parallels?

Martha Wilson:

Oh, the Tipper story. Oh, yeah. It's really good.

Sara Reisman:

But how do you choose? How do you... Maybe we can get to that later? But I'm curious how you choose who to impersonate-

Martha Wilson:

The people to impersonate?

Sara Reisman:

Yeah.

Martha Wilson:

The very first impersonation I did was after DISBAND and we were the members of Ronald Reagan's cabinet and I was Alexander M. Plague Jr. instead Alexander M. Haig, Jr. I did one performance as Alexander. I did one performance as Ronald Reagan, for Soho TV, didn't think it went very well. And then for artists call against US intervention in Central America, which was a city wide festival. I did Nancy and I found Nancy to be... I could make Nancy say stuff like, "Cancer is the natural response to the environment." I could make her say outrageous stuff because she said outrageous stuff all the time. So then that's when I got started on the First Ladies. Barbara Bush was a natural because she was both of the consort of the President and also the mother of the President.

But Tipper, the story about how I found Tipper is that I was watching the MTV inaugural ball for Bill Clinton's inauguration. And you have to imagine the sea of youth in this giant ballroom, with

a causeway coming out and our president comes out playing the saxophone. And the youth of America go nuts. Our president is playing the saxophone, it was so great. Then Hillary comes out, an [inaudible 00:47:04] comes out, and then Tipper comes out and the mood in the room changes. And they boo her off the stage, the youth of America, booed Tipper Gore off the stage. I don't know if anybody knows why that happened. She had wanted Parental Advisory language on records and CDs, explaining to the parents this record contains dirty language, so you should not buy it for your kids. And the youth of America 10 years later had not forgotten this. And so I thought at that point, I'm going to be Tipper for the Clinton years.

Sara Reisman:

Should we go to the video?

Martha Wilson:

Do you want to see if there any further questions? On the-

Sara Reisman:

There's a comment from Lisa Bateman?

Martha Wilson:

Okay.

Sara Reisman:

I'll read it out loud, "Martha, one of my favorite memories of you was seeing you on the F-train mid-afternoon dressed as madam Bush. Looking tired on the platform, not sure where you were coming from or going to, but you were in full regalia, the true most valuable nature of public art going forward, going truly public and getting on, thank you." Thank you Lisa.

Martha Wilson:

Thank you, Lisa. That's a wonderful story.

Sara Reisman:

Shall we cue the video, William. Thank you. Great.

(Video begins)

Tipper Gore:

Good evening. Tipper Gore, second lady of the United States. So, I didn't get *Vogue*, Okay. But I did make the front page of the living section of *The New York Times*, for losing twice as much

weight as [inaudible 00:49:16]. Now she can gain it all back. Tonight I'd like to tell you the story of Beauty and the Beast; the weight thing. Weight has been a preoccupation of mine really, since high school when I was a drummer in an all-girl band called The Wildcats. I was the drummer of the band, so I could burn the most calories. At night, in my room, I would pace like a wildcat. Instead of do sedentary things like studying, But then I'd go to practice, and I'd [inaudible 00:50:12] and then eat an entire bag of chocolate chip cookies spread with peanut butter. The weight didn't come off.

By the time I was a senior in high school, I was getting desperate for a boyfriend. So I'd go to parties, get drunk, and wake up with strange men. Tipper, they called me. I don't remember much from this time, my parents helped me apply to colleges. My father finally got me into one. You see, at that time, if you went to a shrink, you we're considered to be certifiably insane. So I just kept drinking and smoking, while I went in my fat, until one day, this tall guy, considered by all my friends to be a stiff, ask me to a dance. Well, I thought he wanted to get drunk, and fuck me, but he just wanted to fuck me without getting drunk. This was a revelation to me, he could see how fat it was and he was fucking me anyway. So I married the guy.

And girls, my advice to you is. If a guy can see how fat you are and fucks you anyway, marry him. Thank you.

(Video ends)

Sara Reisman:

Again, it hits me harder watching this with the group. There are a number of themes that run through this; attitudes about weight, body image, mental health. It's a dark parody, right? And I don't know if you want to talk about parody in general. I don't want to put you on the spot, because it's also a different time. If this were made now, it might be received differently.

Martha Wilson:

Yes. Now, when people came in to the website, did we put up the image of Tipper Gore in the front window of Printed Matter? That was a piece called "Tipper's Advice for the 90s," in which she... There's a picture of Tipper Gore on the right, and on the left is a text that says that, "Artists should allow me, Tipper, to censor everything that they're doing because the risky stuff will sell like hotcakes. And the other stuff will make it through to the market and everybody wins. What is your problem with this Parental Advisory stuff?" So Tipper had a political side as well as a personal side. The weight thing, though, I think speaks to people like me who have used their image as a woman as the material for their work for a really long time. And I don't know who in this room has ever struggled with their weight? But there might be a few?

Sara Reisman:

Yeah. I'm sure. Yes, I have. It's universal, I think. So, satire-

Martha Wilson:

Okay, so satire.

Sara Reisman:

I actually really kind of felt like I was absorbed into Tipper's persona more fully than the other characters. And it might be the accent, even though-

Martha Wilson:

Oh, really?

Sara Reisman:

It's not her accent. The accent is important, why? If it's not her accent, your [crosstalk 00:55:06] character why do you do that?

Martha Wilson:

Why do I do that?

Sara Reisman:

Yeah.

Martha Wilson:

She lived and worked in Tennessee. I think she was from Tennessee. And she never, ever identified as a southern Belle, but I identified her as a southern Belle. I went to a wig shop and said that I needed a Tipper Gore wig, and the person in the shop said, "Oh, come right this way." I was in Florida, I don't know, 30 gigantic blonde hairdos. So I picked up... Tipper, actually this goes for everybody. When I go into a character, I put on the costume, but it's when I put on the wig that I can go into the brain of the person I'm impersonating. And try to be there, look around and feel it. So the hair is my mechanism for getting into Tipper's brain.

Sara Reisman:

But I think you said something to me once about accent. Sort of shifting that it gives you some distance too.

Martha Wilson:

Yes, it's important to be able to go in to Barbara Bush but then to be able to leave again. And because Tipper is so close in age, it was hard to leave, so I gave her an accent so I would have a way to distance myself from Tipper.

Sara Reisman:

Right, not to get too absorbed-

Martha Wilson:

...too close.

Sara Reisman:

Yeah. So, in thinking about this conversation we've... The context is, we have an exhibition on view at The 8th Floor titled *To Cast Too Bold a Shadow*, which looks at how misogyny, feminism, and gender intersect. And at this time, there are all kinds of conditions that are coming to the fore. Thinking about how women are probably most severely affected by the coronavirus in terms of work; for instance, labor in the context of families and I think of you as a really important feminist artist. How have you thought about misogyny? If you have thought about it directly in your work? I assume you have. How has it played into your work and maybe have things changed? Do you think? Has the world become less misogynistic? If we go back to Nancy Reagan or even you?

Martha Wilson:

Yeah, [inaudible 00:58:01]. He shall remain unnamed, but as an artist came to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, looked at all the girls, and picked the most beautiful girl in the whole school, although she already had a boyfriend and said, "You're my girlfriend." And for about a week, when he was there, she piled around with him. And then he left. He left the school and he left her hanging, thinking that she meant something to him. She meant nothing to him. And she started taking [inaudible 00:58:37]. So I'm just telling this story because misogyny has been around for a while and it hasn't gone away, as far as I can tell. I think people are nicer now about it, we appoint women, we appoint a black woman to be our vice presidential candidate, there are efforts being made. Black Lives Matter was founded by three black women. There are steps being taken in the right direction, but I can't say that misogyny is gone, that has not happened.

Sara Reisman:

There's a question actually from Priscilla. Priscilla, do you want to unmute and ask the question while William sets up the next video? Should we do that?

Martha Wilson:

Okay.

Sara Reisman:

I can read it for you, Priscilla, or if you want to unmute-

Priscilla:

Sure, hi Martha. Hi, Sara. Hi, everyone. Hello, hello. Thank you for this event tonight, it's amazing. And Martha, I was just wondering. Well, first of all, besides your performances, the outfits were really fantastic. And then, I'm wondering over the course of your decades of performing, what have you found the most challenging? And also what's been the most fun for you?

Martha Wilson:

Among the characters that I've performed? Is that-

Priscilla:

However you want to take the question is fine with me.

Martha Wilson:

Okay, what has been the most fun-

Priscilla:

Most challenging and most fun? [crosstalk 01:00:34] Yeah, and most challenging?

Martha Wilson:

Well, Trump is the most challenging because, as I said, I tried to go into Barbara Bush's brain and live there for a while and figure out how she thinks to develop my script. But Trump is impulsive, and doesn't have any there-there. When I went into his brain, I couldn't find any rationale. I couldn't find any reasoning, any structure. So when we get to the Trump performance, you'll see how I managed the dilemma of not finding any there-there. The most fun, is probably Nancy. I would say Nancy Reagan, she tried to convert Ron to astrology. Her first act as First Lady, first thing she did was buy all new dishes for the White House. Even though, the country was in a recession. The cost was \$125,000, which at that time was quite a big pile of money. She would just do that all this great stuff and I could just report it and have my script.

Sara Reisman:

Shall we go to the video, William?

Martha Wilson:

Okay.

Sara Reisman:

Yeah, just for time sake.

(Video begins)

(Applause.) (Music in background.) (Queen “Till the end. We are the champions, we are the champions. No time for losers because we are...” (music stops).

Donald Trump:

Speaking:

Are the champions. Hello, America. (Audience screams.) How am I going to make America great again? With you, we're going to do this.

Singing:

It's the coming of the solid state. Instantaneous control is what it takes. No more dropouts to spoil the view. Our society will be so cute. It's the coming of the solid state. When morality follows interest rates, making money' a right God given. Here's to Calvin isn't it Coolidge or ism?

Speaking:

I don't care if you record me talking about grabbing women's pussies but I never allow images of myself wearing glasses to go out on the media. I don't want to be perceived as a four-eyed egghead loser... This presentation is in the context of the art world, which does not count.

Martha Wilson:

Hi, I'm Martha Wilson, an artist and an art administrator dressed up like Donald Trump. In all my previous performances, I've endeavored to go completely into Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush, Tipper Gore, to go in their brains look around and see what makes them tick. But I had to turn off Donald's speech to Republican National Convention. I'm here today wearing both persona. To say a few words about how I have seen the relationship of art and politics evolve during the last 50 years. In the 1960s, the Vietnam War was like a black curtain hanging behind everything. The cultural scene was one of the protests with marches, [inaudible 01:05:58], teachings, tax protests, nonviolent and violent confrontations of ideas. [inaudible 01:06:11] was perhaps the danger of this time when the National Guard shot and killed students.

People left America for Canada. I was one of those. There was a time when neither side would listen to the complaints of the other. Our society was truly divided. The 1970s saw Watergate go down. This is when Richard Nixon's dirty tricks were exposed, he had to take responsibility and was impeached. The way this happened was when Robert Redford, a successful actor paid *Washington Post*, Douglas Woodward and Bernstein to research and publish what the administration was up to. In the art world, artists of the 1970s were inventing post modernism, becoming socially conscious, and invading the commercial gallery scene with temporary

installations, and video. Performance Art too was entering the mainstream through the [inaudible 01:07:18].

There was recognition that the art world was a white place. Artists who were white, were [inaudible 01:07:28] dialogue through friendships with artists of color. Jen Halters collaborations with Lady pink come to mind.

In 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected. Although as president of the Screen Actors Guild, he started out as a liberal, after he married Nancy, she persuaded him it was politically smarter to be conservative. He in turn [inaudible 01:07:57] [Frank Console 01:07:57], with shutting down the National Endowment for the Arts. The agency put in place by Richard Nixon to fund the arts.

In the beginning, the NEA and the US Information Agency were seen as a way to protect America's cultural hegemony. Abstract expressionists had fled Europe as a result of World War II. We were better than anyone else in the world. Whilst abstract expressionist art kept its mouth shut. However, when Franklin Furnace tried to send politically explicit artists book works to South America through the US Information Agency, they were rejected. Later the agency itself was killed off, that took Frank Console, the first thing we did was kill off [inaudible 01:08:53] critics fellowships. We the arts organizations did not see that the goal would be to kill off the artist fellowships, and later to professionalize the [inaudible 01:09:05]. The culture wars began in the late 1980s with a furor caused by Robert Mapplethorpe's show the Perfect Moment as it traveled.

Dennis Barrie, director of the Cincinnati Center for Contemporary Art lost his job as a result of his decision to take this show containing explicit Images of S&M practice. The culture wars were fought over sexuality as a legitimate subject of contemporary art. After a lawsuit brought by [inaudible 01:09:43] Karen Finley, John Black, Howard Hughes and Tim Miller made it all the way to the Supreme Court, the arts community lost. The court installed community standards of decency over artists First Amendment rights to freedom of expression.

This brings us to the 1990s. And the notion that no tax dollars should be paid for obscene art. This decade is when the internet became widely accessible and artists started looking at surveillance instead of sexuality as the locus of threat. Meanwhile, the locus of the culture wars changed too, from art to a more granular and local series of battles over women's reproductive choice, balance of equal numbers of radical and conservative views on university faculties. Free speech granted to corporations and Super PAC money allowed to influence public thought. As Donald, I am a beacon of hope for the white working class because I am so rich, nobody can buy me. I represent the desire to shake up the binary political system or just fuck things up. I let the barking dogs of racism, sexism and xenophobia run free. If I'm a billionaire, I must know something about business.

Donald Trump:

Singing:

Tit for tat, politics is made of this. You give me this, I'll give you that. And we'll both smile. [inaudible]... strategy due to public memory, which lapses so conveniently in a few years. We could raise a family. No scandal's bad enough to be. The United States is still all milk and honey to me. (Singing ends). (Applause).

Speaking:

On April 18th, the Daily Show figured it out. They announced that I am a performance artist. Of course, I want to defund the NBA, I want to eliminate the competition, smart businessman. And talk about audience response, have you seen how my approval ratings have gone up since I bombed Syria? I will go down in history as the president who made politics and performance art, one and the same. Good luck.

Sara Reisman:

So the last words, "Politics as performance art, one and the same", I think that that's a good place to start the conversation. And we do have a few questions which... At least one, Edwin Moran. Edwin, do you want to chime in? Are you still with us?

Edwin Moran:

Hi.

Sara Reisman:

Hey.

Edwin Moran:

Hey, Sara. Hi, everyone. You're starting with that point because, the thing is with the word performative is used so much in the political state right now, right? On that stage. But my question was actually on a practical level. I was wondering how large your drag box is Martha, and my question is, are there notable collaborators and accomplices with your looks?

Martha Wilson:

Diane Torr died. And her papers went to the Fales Library, to the downtown collection of the Fales Library of NYU, but her costumes were not welcome. And she had bushels, literally bushels of costumes from her career in dance and contact improvisation performance art, Shiatsu. My costume collection is considerably smaller, but the drag portion of it is really skimpy. I have one suit that I wear and the wig is stupid. The wig doesn't look anything like Trump, but everybody knows that it's... When I get on the subway, and I'm going to my gig. People look at me, and they say, "Oh, hi, Donald. So it works anyway".

Sara Reisman:

But when was the last time you went out as Donald Trump?

Martha Wilson:

Let me think-

Sara Reisman:

While you're thinking-

Martha Wilson:

2017, I think it was performance at PPOW.

Sara Reisman:

Okay, but it's interesting, because we've been doing Performance-in-Place this series, we had asked you to read reprise "Martha does Donald." And you declined.

Martha Wilson:

Refused.

Sara Reisman:

Yeah. I mean, refuse is more... Stronger than declining. So, I think it's interesting, because it made me wonder, is there a point where you have to retire Donald Trump? [crosstalk 01:16:16]

Martha Wilson:

Well, I thought about it, and the point that I wanted to make was the point that I think we have made tonight, which is; art is political, and the artist's job is to create discourse about the political context in which we all live all the time. When you buy a roll of toilet paper, it's a political act, everything we do is a political act. So I wanted to point out that Donald is current and contemporary and on our minds, and we're either electing him or not electing him tomorrow. But that politics is forever. The world has been a political place, from the earliest societies and that's not going away. One way to deal with the fact that the world is a political place is to protest, to find creative ways to get your opinion across in visual ways and mass demonstration ways. I, raised Quaker, don't approve of violent ways, although that has happened to in recent history. Because, what's important is that the range of people and expression needs to be available and out there. Now, with social media, it's like too much, it's all out there and it's all out there all the time.

Sara Reisman:

You've described these performances as inhabiting another psyche.

Martha Wilson:

Yes.

Sara Reisman:

What do you get from that? What do you learn from that? I mean, you have this division between yourself and-

Martha Wilson:

Well, there are two benefits; one is, I get to go into another brain, not my own and the other benefit is I get to find out that it's not me that I am not that person. So, it's a liberating process.

Sara Reisman:

Do you think it helps you to understand... Maybe not- [crosstalk 01:18:49]

Martha Wilson:

I am for sure.

Sara Reisman:

...you are but who they are. Do you get-

Martha Wilson:

And who they are. I do try. I do try to... Barbara Bush said the most amazingly horrible stuff. Because she's a white upper class, privileged person so she said this stuff that came out of her heart, that's who she is. So yes, I get to find out that I'm not Barbara.

Sara Reisman:

And that must give you some comfort.

Martha Wilson:

It gives me some comfort.

Sara Reisman:

Yeah. Are there questions from our audience? I don't see that many faces, I see names. Are there politicians you're looking towards now, that have come out of having seen the debates? Like seeing Pence with a fly on his head? Fading Kamala Harris.

Martha Wilson:

Yes.

Sara Reisman:

Thinking about the recent debate where Trump and Biden were debating, and it became clear that Trump actually can control himself. Right?

Martha Wilson:

Well, if he knows that somebody is going to turn his mic off, then he can control himself.

Sara Reisman:

So I just wonder, is there anyone that has in this... The political race is, pretty narrow now. Right?

Martha Wilson:

Yeah

Sara Reisman:

Given 2016, we're not hearing so much about independent candidates, but are there candidates that you're looking to? Or would like to-

Martha Wilson:

I want my career to be over tomorrow, if possible.

Sara Reisman:

You mean this-

Martha Wilson:

My career as Donald, I want my career as Donald to be over?

Sara Reisman:

Okay, great. Because I don't want you to stop. That's just me. Questions from anybody?

Martha Wilson:

There's some chat, but I haven't.

Edwin Moran:

Sorry, can I ask a follow up to what I said earlier?

Sara Reisman:

Yeah, sure.

Edwin Moran:

Martha, appreciate you giving respect to [inaudible 01:21:23] artists, as we all know, and that's what I'm trying to think of. Franklin Furnace, you brought up Fales and Fales actually didn't... There's clearly a certain urgency when artists have an archive that won't get put into a certain archive, if you will. So is there something urgent there? This is three years ago now that Diane passed away, correct?

Martha Wilson:

Yes.

Edwin Moran:

So there's something urgent there that I feel and that's I just wanted to put that out there.

Martha Wilson:

Let me pick up on the Fales question you asked. Marvin Taylor founded the downtown collection now 20, some years ago, and he started collecting... Oh, and the reason he did that was his supervisor at NYU the head librarian for the whole place. He said he wanted to collect the papers of David Wojnarowicz, who had died of AIDS. And the supervisor said, "Why would you want to collect somebody like that who died of AIDS?" And the light went on, and he realized, "Oh, other libraries, other institutions are not valuing the downtown art scene and collecting the papers of the artists who were members the groups of downtown visual aids and act up".

So he started collecting this stuff, and now they have... Well, and the other thing that she said was, "Nobody's interested" and the downtown collection is the most used collection at NYU now. It's got writers, it's got visual artists, it's got musicians, theater, artists, photographers. And they collect, for example, Stuart Sherman, is best represented by his performances.

So they have converted his video to DVDs so scholars can watch his performances. They're really doing a great job of collecting the downtown scene. Well, just to finish the story, I knew Diane was dying. And I went to Scotland, she was in Glasgow, Scotland. And I told Marvin

Taylor that she was on her way out, and he prepared a contract and I got there and she signed it and she was pleased. She was not doing very well at the end but she could tell that her legacy was going to be preserved. She was really pleased about that.

So, this is a plug for the downtown collection of the Fales library of NYU. NYU has three giant libraries Tanaman, Fales, and the other one I can't remember. And they have just joined all those libraries together on the second floor. It took them two years, I think, to renovate the library. But you too, can go to the Fales library and do the research on the downtown collection.

Sara Reisman:

So along those lines... We have a few minutes left. If there's a question, please write it in the chat. But while you're thinking I wanted to pose this question to you, Martha. You founded Franklin Furnace in 1976. And it was like the city was in financial crisis. So there's some parallels to the current moment, at least in terms of economic scenario. Do you have any advice for people who are thinking about how to...

Martha Wilson:

How to start an arts organization?

Sara Reisman:

To do that, in a time where it doesn't seem easy? It's not to say, opening a space is the answer to what's going on right now. But facilitating space for art is very, very important. Somebody wrote earlier in the chat artist is life [inaudible 01:25:57]. There's a lot of love for this kind of context. So do you have any advice?

Martha Wilson:

One thing that's important is to have some capital to start with, all the arts organizations in the downtown scene were founded by not rich people. And I had \$5,000 in sweat equity from my from my boyfriend dumping my ass in Canada. I used it to buy a vacuum cleaner and put in a bathroom. It is important to have some something when you start. And the other thing that's important is to remain flexible. Franklin Furnace decided to go virtual, because we thought the next free zone was going to be the internet. And we went virtual in 97. And just lately, this Spring, several of the fund winners, we give grants to crazy artists so they can do their performance art in New York. Several of the venues canceled their performance artists. So Aranxta, who's the program manager for the Franklin Furnace, designed the Franklin Furnace digital loft. We created a virtual space so that we would have a venue for artists to perform in. So, number one, make sure you have some capital, number two, remain flexible.

Sara Reisman:

And when in doubt, there is the internet. I remember when you were thinking about what to do with the artists books, right. And then also moving to the digital platform that was very avant.

Martha Wilson:

Very avant?

Sara Reisman:

Yeah. Well, I want to thank you for doing this. I've had the biggest smile on my face during this talk because it's such a pleasure to be in your company. We have a note from Robin Stein: "Hi, Martha. I was honored to live through several Nancy Reagan years at Franklin Furnace with you [crosstalk 01:28:15] to be a small part of those days of activism and innocence." So I guess here's to more activism, because the innocence is gone. At least for me, I'll speak for myself. Thanks, everybody for being here tonight. Thanks for coming out in this weather. Thank you, William for production support.

Sara Reisman:

Bye, everybody.

Martha Wilson:

Thanks, everybody for coming.