Wilson, Martha

(b Philadelphia, PA, 1947).

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American performance artist. Wilson graduated in 1969 from Wilmington College in Ohio, where she majored in English literature and minored in art. She completed her MA at Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS, but left the program in 1971 prior to receiving her PhD and began teaching at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax. She started making language-based art about parents and children, as she explored her experiences as a woman and artist. She transitioned to using performance as a medium, focusing on identity formation beginning in 1972 with works such as *Posturing: Drag* where she made herself up in different appearances, documenting each in photographs. This work was the first of several in which the artist examined the fluid nature of gender and self, although her work was dismissed by the male-oriented art world. She began receiving recognition when her 1973 postcard image and text work *Breast Forms Permutated* was included in critic Lucy Lippard’s exhibition *c. 7500* at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia; the first such exhibition to focus on conceptual art by women. She used video as a documentary form in such works as the video *I make up the image of my perfection/I make up the image of my deformity* (1974), where she transformed herself using make-up and props. She relocated to New York City, searching for a more receptive environment. In 1975, she became interested in the ways major institutions were not amenable to contemporary forms of art like performance art and artist’s books. On April 3, 1976, she opened the Franklin Furnace Archive, Inc., in the storefront where her loft was located with a mission to “present, preserve, interpret, proselytize, and advocate on behalf of avant-garde art, especially vulnerable forms due to institutional neglect, their ephemeral nature, or politically unpopular content.” Franklin Furnace focused on support for art that wasn’t receiving attention in other quarters and some of it was branded inappropriate in the Culture Wars of the 1980s and 1990s. While managing Franklin Furnace, Wilson remained active as a performance artist, turning herself into such public figures as Barbara Bush (2009).

**Bibliography**
