

# A Different World

## A Personal History of Franklin Furnace

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*Jacki Apple*

Franklin Furnace opened its doors in April 1976. It was a very different world. As a cofounder and first curator, it is easy for me to look back on those early years in the 1970s and reminisce about the good times and the accomplishments of our youth. There are many many stories to be told about the art and the artists, and our struggles to keep it all going. But beyond the historical significance of personal anecdotes and descriptive data that need to be documented before they are lost, is the fact that Franklin Furnace is not only still here but continues to thrive when so many other artists' spaces have ceased to exist as such.

This leads me to look deeper into the philosophical underpinnings of the artist space movement and the pitfalls it faced in the 1980s when inflated budgets and ambitions and marketplace values brought about either the demise or co-option of many such spaces. By the 1990s a younger generation of artists emerged, but with ambitions honed by graduate school mainstreaming goals, they failed to lead the way and start new spaces. Not surprising, considering the collapse of arts funding for small organizations in recent years. Thus the artists space as we understood it, created it, knew it in its inception has become a seriously endangered species, almost extinct in some parts of the country. No doubt, there are those who may mourn that the Furnace as a physical space, a geographical site that was a point of exchange for two decades, is gone. But the spirit that fueled the Furnace for all those years is very much alive due to the fact that as an artists institution it has mutated and adapted to the needs and conditions of the times. Ironically perhaps, it has been able to evolve in form in response to the cultural environment without surrendering its primary *raison d'être* because it has not lost sight of those principles on which it was founded.

How does an arts space become "established" without becoming the establishment? That's a bit like asking, How does the revolutionary not become the new dictator after taking power? The parallel between politics and art is apt because the politics of the whole artist space movement was about the empowerment of artists, and the demise of the movement is about the power and politics of money and media both in and out of the art world. So survival is a balancing act. Catch-22! The real politik is that you need to be able to work on the inside in order to stay alive financially and serve your community in a tangible way, and the ideal politic is that you need to remain on the outside creatively in order to remain relevant and meaningful. In the '80s the gravitational pull of a certain kind of "success" was immensely seductive and easy to fall into. In the early '90s

the survival of one's integrity required standing up to the assaults of the culture wars (on both the right and the left); at the same time the notoriety could leave you martyred and defunct. Dead heroes are still dead! Add to that the real estate situation of the boom years, and it took something close to a miracle to keep the doors open in New York City by the year 2000.

How did Franklin Furnace do it? I could cite the obvious: Furnace creator and founder Martha Wilson's moxie. Fundraising skills, chutzpah, bringing in new artistic talent on the administrative end, a supportive and active board of directors, interesting exhibitions and daring performances, community activism. But that could be said about other spaces and organizations too. Minus the Martha part, which is no small thing. Part scholar, part Quaker, part radical, her idiosyncratic vision produced a paradox: a cross between the museum archive, the avantgarde *kunsthalle*, and the cabaret—all housed in a storefront and a basement. It is this paradoxical combination that defines the uniqueness of the Furnace.

A hard wind was blowing on a cold night in December 1975 as Martha and I walked down West Broadway toward Canal Street. We were talking about artist books and a space Martha had been to see that day, a storefront on Franklin Street, which was below Soho in what came to be Tribeca. But in those days it was all still young and raw, and people were just beginning to move into the triangle below Canal. Martha was saying what a great space it was, with really high ceilings so one could build a deck, and since there really wasn't any place to show artists books wouldn't it be great to start a space for that. Willoughby Sharp was putting together the whole building with a 20-year lease, and since it was on the ground floor with a big front window, it would be perfect for a bookstore. What did I think? If she did it, would I help her? I said, "Yes, of course. It's a great idea. Let's do it!" That's how the Franklin Furnace came into being. Its inception reflects a set of values central to the era.

It was a good time, the best of times in fact, the last time in 20th-century America when artists empowered themselves and created the contexts in which their work was seen, written about, and produced. As a generation of artists we utilized the counterculture values we came of age with to create an alternative to the establishment art world. We created a community of visual artists, dancers, musicians, and poets in which we made new kinds of spaces to meet the needs of a new aesthetic. We were both artists and curators and we shaped the discourse around our work by writing about each other. We had no money and it didn't matter. We could take a raw empty space in a depressed neighborhood and make it a center of radical artmaking activities. So we did. It seemed that simple.

In today's heavily commercial, youth-, entertainment-, and media-dominated art world it is difficult to communicate to those who were not there the special quality of those times, the spirit of family within the community, and the truly interdisciplinary nature of the art world. Sculptors doing installations, video artists, performance artists, book artists, composers, dancers, poets, and experimental theatre directors, all came to see each other's works and exchange ideas. And Franklin Furnace became an informal gathering place where, though generations, sensibilities, and media apart, Ray Johnson might appear on one night and Scott Johnson on another; conceptualists and feminists might show one month, and painters and papermakers another. People still talked to each other face-to-face. People had time to hang out, even when they were working hard. Radical form and radical content went hand-in-hand, and the Furnace as a place was a medium of discourse in itself.

The Furnace opened initially as a bookstore in the front part of the Franklin Street space. Martha had assembled an impressive inventory of independently produced small-edition books from a number of artists, from the relatively less

## Nancy Buchanan

*Ten unique books form a portrait of father, Louis N. Ridenour, Jr., from his birth to his death, through documents and letters. In compiling this piece, I also consulted numerous histories of the time—since 1911 to 1959 encompassed the first atomic weapons, the rise of physicists in America, the McCarthy era, space exploration, and computers. I typed fragments of my research on red paper, and cut windows to my father's papers, to demonstrate how his life was shaped by the times. Other pages, blue tissue paper, had brief quotations from interviews with people close to him. My father, though a target of J. Edgar Hoover because of his liberal opinions and flamboyant lifestyle, considered himself a patriot, and I felt a red, white, and blue portrait appropriate.*

—Nancy Buchanan (2004a)

The Furnace has never shirked from political material, as evident in Martha Wilson's own long-running satirical impersonations of Barbara Bush. One of the most powerful political works shown at the Furnace in the late '70s was a series of books by Los Angeles artist Nancy Buchanan. *Fallout from the Nuclear Family* (13–31 May 1980) was a complex portrait of Buchanan's world-famous nuclear physicist father, Louis N. Ridenour, Jr. Ten one-of-a-kind books containing a montage assembled from a vast archive of his birth-to-death professional and personal documents, essays, letters, and photographs, revealed not only the life of the man, but of the social and political culture in which he played an essential part. Found dead at the age of 47 in a Washington, DC, hotel room, Ridenour had been a prominent member of the post-World War II military industrial complex. After editing for MIT the texts on radar resulting from his war work, he left academia to become a Pentagon advisor, and in 1950 was appointed the first Chief Scientist of the Air Force. Although he continued to be active in weapons development, after World War II he became involved in efforts to limit the arms race and keep nuclear research out of military control. At the same time his language shifted as he tried to adapt to the changing political climate. By the late 1940s Ridenour had succumbed to subtle red-baiting and "better dead than red" rhetoric. In 1950 he reviewed a book describing a new weapon of radioactive poisons, "death sands," that would kill civilians but leave cities intact—essentially a neutron bomb (Buchanan 2004a). Aided by the post-Watergate era's Freedom of Information Act, Buchanan discovered that her father paradoxically was not the government's idea of the "perfect" scientist. His FBI files revealed that J. Edgar Hoover signed a number of suspicious memos regarding Ridenour's security clearance, which he, amazingly, always received. The FBI, concerned from the Eisenhower administration forward with increasing the ever-tightening requirements for Federal employees with clearance, focused on Ridenour's liberal leanings as well as his racy lifestyle which supposedly involved "excessive drinking" and "loose [behavior] with women" (Buchanan 2004b).

Buchanan uncovered the darker side of the 1950s, not only in the deep schisms between her father's ideals as a scientist and the political realities that corrupted him, but in the underside of the idealized "nuclear family." Interweaving short quotes from her own research on various sociohistorical subjects—including the Red Scare of the '40s and '50s, scientists speaking out against atomic weapons, etc., and recollections from those who knew him—with his own writings, from youthful utopian short stories to his last disillusioned letters, she allowed us to see the many facets of the man and his time.

In his 1982 *Arts Magazine* article "War Games: Of Arms and Men," Jonathan Crary succinctly sums up the brilliance of Buchanan's work:

Ridenour's failure was ultimately one of critical intelligence, of a willful blindness to the powerful network of institutions in which he was immersed and which crushed him. Buchanan's archive awesomely lays bare the seamless, interlocking texture of the military, academic, and corporate entities through which Ridenour circulated, all the time voicing his belief in the autonomy and incorruptibility of the scientist. The analogy between artist and scientist is a silent but key part of Buchanan's work. No less than the scientists, the artist is also susceptible to illusions of autonomy and independence. (1982:79)

It took Buchanan two years to complete this project and she credits the Furnace with giving her the courage to take this sometimes painful and difficult journey to the end. The timing was prescient, shortly followed by the Reagan era of arms build-up, Star Wars defense plans, and corporate alliances on the one hand and the co-option of the artist by media celebrity and entertainment industry money on the other.

In conjunction with her books, Buchanan did a performance reading selected excerpts—*Glossing the Text* (15 May 1980)—to acquaint people with the contents of the books on view at the Furnace. She subsequently expanded the Franklin Furnace material into a full performance at the University of California, San Diego, and at the Berkeley Art Center, in 1981. She describes it as follows:

I played some of my audiotapes of my father's colleagues & friends, like Jimmy Doolittle and Dr. Abe Taub, while I laid eggshells on the floor. When the voices concluded, I walked over them, crushing them. The lights dimmed, which revealed stars painted on the walls with glow-in-the-dark-paint and the also-painted shells became fallen stars, metaphors for my childhood memory of my father's explanation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics—as well as for his own life of “walking on eggshells” with all the political and security issues in his career. After this, I read one brief selection from each book. (Buchanan 2004a)

The books have been shown several times since in *War Games* at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, NY, and at Baxter Art Gallery, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, CA, in 1982; *The War Show*, State University of New York, Stony Brook, in 1983; *Family As Subject Matter in Contemporary Art*, Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, DC, in 1985; and in a solo show at Walter-McBean Gallery, San Francisco Art Institute in 1991. They will be included in *Shutters*, curated by Sandra Firmin, at the University Art Gallery, State University of New York, Buffalo, 10 September through 27 November 2004.

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1. & 2. Nancy Buchanan's 1980 installation at Franklin Furnace, Fallout from the Nuclear Family. (Photo by Ransom Rideout; courtesy of Nancy Buchanan)



known to such well-established artists as Sol LeWitt. And I was the first “sales-girl.” At that point no one was getting any salary, although Martha hoped that the Furnace would eventually become the means to sustain ourselves and our art, without having to suffer the indignities of working in the uptown world. Martha moved into the back part of the space, and I had recently left a Seventh Avenue fashion career. During that summer the deck was built, a kind of mezzanine overlooking the exhibition space that would later become both Martha’s living space and the offices. It also became clear that we were not going to survive by selling books, so Martha decided to go nonprofit. Thus in the fall of 1976 we became an “official” artists space with our first Board of Directors, which included Weston Naef, Fredriecke Taylor, Henry Korn, and Vito Acconci.

One of the guiding principles of the Furnace from the beginning was to be a place that responded to a range of art activities and forms that artists were engaged in but lacked a venue for. In keeping with the proliferation of the Soho art scene, the Furnace quickly became the location of a discourse generated by both the participants and the audience. At the same time Martha saw no disparity between the pursuit of the new and simultaneously validating historical precedents. Thus one could develop an archive of limited edition printed matter from the past and present, and exhibit the latest one-of-a-kind artist books. This of course opened a whole discussion of what constituted a “book” and how far that definition could be stretched. By allowing for a certain elasticity in what could be considered a book, and because we were willing to present unconventional interpretations, we were able to encourage an enormous range of forms and aesthetics to flourish. It is the continuity of this way of thinking and the capacity to mutate that is at the heart of the Furnace’s ability to both survive and thrive through changing times.

We had been open for barely two months when the first event of what was to become the performance program came into being quite by chance. Around the end of May 1976 Martine Aballea, a young artist from Paris, showed up with some one-of-a-kind books with her writings. I thought they were quite wonderful, in terms of both the literary quality and the vividness of her visual imagery, so I invited her to do a reading. She was reluctant to read alone so I agreed to do

1. *In the first performance at Franklin Furnace, Martine Aballea read from her artist book Sleep Storm Crystals, 26 January 1978. (Photo by Jacki Apple; courtesy of Franklin Furnace)*



it with her, and then invited the dancer/choreographer Erin Martin to join us. We created a setting for her text and the reading became the first “performance” at the Furnace. We opened the doors to the street on a hot late afternoon in June and about 35 people showed up, filling the space and spilling out into the street. This is when I got the idea that we should start a performance series for artists who write, as there were a lot of them (including both Martha and myself). Martha agreed and in the fall of 1976 we launched the artists’ reading series.

The performance program was so popular that in the first year we presented two artists an evening, once a week, and by 1978 expanded to two evenings a week, allowing for more complex stagings. Our performance season went from September through May, and in 1978 we presented 72 performances; 64 in 1979. While for many artists the opportunity to do a reading was sufficient, others began adding visual elements, and the events became more and more “performative.” Eric Bogosian was a young performer who had worked with Richard Foreman. Bogosian was working at the Kitchen, and with a little coaxing from me and a lot of encouragement he did his very first piece, *Slavery*, at the Furnace on 13 October 1977. By 1978 we presented such elaborate productions as Matt Mullican’s *Talking About My Work* (16 March 1978), and with a bit of hand-holding and a few histrionics, Robert Longo did the first version of his “operatic” performance *Sound Distance of a Good Man* (18 April 1978) shortly after coming to NYC from Buffalo. At the time both artists were still relatively unknown.

The list of names of artists who showed and/or performed at the Furnace in the early years of their careers and later achieved widespread recognition is notable: Barbara Kruger, Michael Smith, Kathy Acker, Constance De Jong, Mierle Ukeles, Barbara Bloom, Alice Aycock, Larry Miller, Dara Birnbaum, Lynne Tillman, John Malpede, Ana Mendieta, Ida Applebroog, Stuart Sherman, and Nigel Rolfe are just a few. At the same time we also presented already established artists with their roots in the 1960s, Fluxus, and the Judson Church Dance Theater, giving them the space to try out new works in an informal setting. They included Simone Forti, Alison Knowles, Dick Higgins, Geoff Hendricks, Philip Corner, Jackson MacLow, Carolee Schneemann, John Cage, Lee Breuer, Joan Jonas.<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of 1977 Martha made me Curator of Exhibitions and Performances, as she was fully occupied with her role as Director. Although the idea that an artist could curate and organize exhibitions, write about one’s colleagues and peers, and practice one’s own art on equal terms was a fundamental premise of the artists space movement, the translation of this ideal from theory to practice presented certain challenges. Egalitarian participatory democracy, as anyone who came of age in the free-wheeling 1960s knows, isn’t always as easy as it sounds. Leaders rise to the top; power corrupts. Certain guiding principles have to be laid down, adhered to, and periodically reviewed.

We had a very open door curatorial policy. Anyone could make an appointment to show me their work, and if they just showed up without an appointment and I wasn’t too busy, I would see them. When it was an artist from out of town, or from overseas, I always made a space to see them. We wanted the Furnace to be a place where artists could hang out and feel at home, without adhering to hierarchical formalities. Even if an artist didn’t get to show, it was important that she was treated with respect, and the experience of showing her work to someone was a dialog, a good exchange between artists, not a humiliating experience—which was so often the case with commercial galleries.

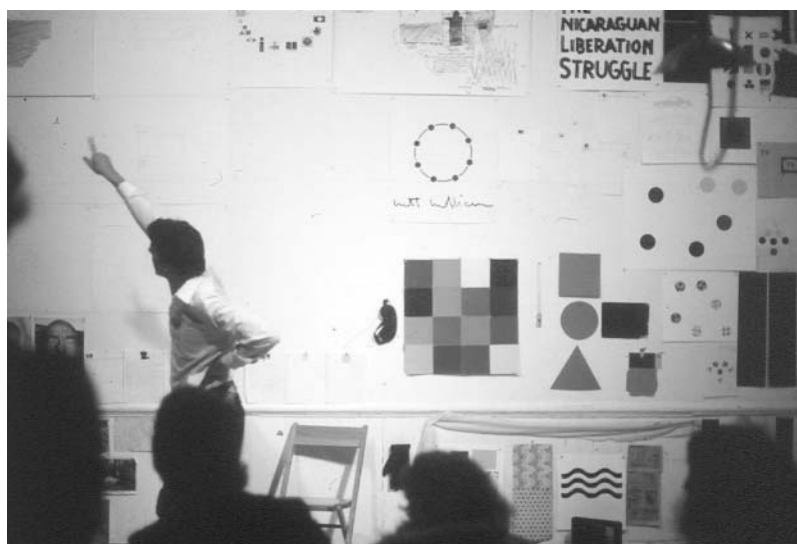
The exhibition program was for artist books, and we featured two artists every three weeks. It was important that the programming remain flexible so that we could respond to the changing needs of artists. Thus we never filled up our time



2. *Eric Bogosian in his first performance, Slavery, 13 October 1977. (Photo by Jacki Apple; courtesy of Franklin Furnace)*



3. *Matt Mullican, Talking about My Work, 16 March 1978. (Photo courtesy of Franklin Furnace)*



4. *Robert Longo's Sound Distance of a Good Man, 18 April 1978. (Photo by Conrad Gleber; courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York)*





slots for more than a few months in advance. Sometimes we would make space at the last minute for someone from overseas who was only in NYC for a brief visit, especially in the performance series, such as Krzysztof Zarebski, who performed *Zones of Content* on 14 November 1978.

We also decided that we would be open to many different aesthetics and sensibilities and show a wide variety of work. For the exhibitions, my goal was to choose the most exciting work in each genre—sculptural books, conceptual books, handmade paper books, photo/text books, painters' books, fiber and textile books, object books—stretching the definition of “book” as far as possible. We dared to show “edgy,” unpredictable, and sometimes difficult work, as well as elegant, beautifully crafted, and poetic work. Raw, brazen, political, satirical, sexy, or just hilarious art could all be part of the mix. Thus the Furnace became known for a willingness to experiment, rather than for representing any one group or style. There was always the possibility of being surprised by something totally outside of one's expectations. In that sense the Furnace as a “site in process” was very much an artwork in itself. It was not very difficult to maintain this in the first few years: it was in tune with the culture of the downtown art world at the time.

What is remarkable is that more than a decade later in a very different cultural environment, Martha, with the backing of her Board and staff, was willing to uphold those values and principles on which the Furnace was founded and stand up against censorship and discrimination in the culture wars of the late '80s and early '90s, despite the risks and pressures.

The philosophy of egalitarian democracy applied not only to our policy for selecting and presenting artists but to all of us who worked at the Furnace. In that sense the Furnace was also a social experiment. Everyone did the dirty work and the fun stuff regardless of title. I picked up cigarette butts and cleaned the floor after performances. I drew my salary out of what was left over from the door after

*5. As Baby Ikki, his diapered toddler character, Michael Smith celebrates Baby Ikki's birthday, 6 June 1978. Smith, a video and performance artist, has also done many performances as his deadpan alter-ego Everyman character “Mike.” (Photo by Jacki Apple; courtesy of Franklin Furnace)*





6. Established artists were able to try out new works at the Furnace. John Cage, *You Will Only Make Matters Worse* Cont'd Pt. III, 10 January 1978. (Photo by Jacki Apple; courtesy of John Cage Trust)

room had no enclosed walls. That meant the toilet sat in full view on a platform in back. It soon became apparent who was willing to use it and who wasn't. Women did, and men didn't, excusing themselves to walk two blocks to Magoo's.

During my time as curator I also established the WindowWorks series, the guest-curated Cabinet Shows, and several national and international traveling exhibitions. We wanted to maximize every available space. Initially the wall that separated the front exhibition space from the performance area was little more than glass-fronted old-fashioned book cabinets. They provided a perfect opportunity to invite other artists and writers to curate theme-based book exhibitions. The first of these, *Artists Notebooks, Scripts, and Scores* organized by Mayra Levy, gave us an inside look at the working processes of performance artists. Subsequent shows brought in work from other parts of the country and the world such as Lynne Tillman's *Recent, Rare, and Remarkable Books from Europe* (March 1978), Los Angeles artists book aficionados Judith Hoffberg and Joan Hugo's *Artworks and Bookworks* (June 1978), and Conrad Gleber's *Chicago Books* (May 1979). Projects for the periodical *S.M.S.* and for *Fandango* magazine were displayed (January 1979) as well as audio art in *Sound Works*, which I organized with guest curators Bob George, Sam Schoenbaum, John Duncan, William Furlong, and Charlie Morrow (April 1980).<sup>2</sup>

The Cabinet Shows also led to some international exchanges. Poet and art critic Wiston Curnow curated a show of artist books from New Zealand (4 May 1978) and artist Jill Scott did one from Australia (3 November 1979), which led to my organizing a traveling show of American books for museums and art spaces in those two countries. Howard Goldstein and I also curated a traveling show of one-of-a-kind *Visual and Sculptural Bookworks* for the Montclair Museum in New Jersey; the Nelson Gallery in Kansas City, Missouri; and the Seibu Museum in Tokyo, Japan. The latter led to one of those cultural misunderstandings that would have been funny were it not for the damage. Judy Simonian, an artist from Los Angeles had contributed several of her sculptural books, which were shown

the artists received their half. Not much, since tickets cost only a few dollars, in keeping with our policy of charging only what our audiences could afford. We also didn't have any, or at least not very much, heat in the first two years. The winter of 1977 was especially brutal in New York City so on any particularly cold day my assistant, Howard Goldstein—who started as an intern from Rutgers University graduate program and could type and take dictation—and I would get into Martha's bed and turn on the electric blanket and work on letters and press releases with our gloves and scarves on.

You can see that even though it was only 27 years ago, it was a very different world. Technology was minimal. Personal computers were rare and we were happy to have a working IBM Selectric typewriter. So we wrote things out by hand and took turns at the typewriter. Later we got another one and I did my press releases on it myself. Videotaping performances was infrequent and usually in black-and-white. I shot color slides of the events. We didn't even have an answering machine.

Our communal ethos included our visitors, and it led to some very funny situations. It was after all still a rather raw space, and the first year and a half the bath-

## Nigel Rolfe

Among the numerous performances presented during Franklin Furnace's first decade, the work of English-born artist Nigel Rolfe remains vivid. Rolfe, who has lived and worked in Dublin since the 1970s, had already carved out a distinctive niche for himself in Europe when he came to New York for the first time to perform *Drawing* at the Furnace on 6 December 1979.

While Rolfe's work was certainly rooted the traditions of early '70s body art and '60s actionists, his work differed. Rolfe used his body as both a drawing tool and as a performative sculpture, directly confronting and interacting with elemental materials and environments rather than employing the body as the site of the action itself. He defined sculptural performance as a process in which the artist directs the material employed within a given space, with all the conditions of the process being of equal importance. He saw himself as a demonstrator of visual changes rather than as a "performer" in the common usage of the term. In describing this process as "sculpture in motion" Rolfe stated, "I believe that we have a fundamental and primitive material understanding which transcends social codes [. . .] and my work often deals with the building of balance in materials followed by an often violent disturbance and collapse [. . .]" (in Apple 1979). These "real time" acts of physical stress were often pushed to the limits of endurance, as demonstrated in *Zone*.

Over several days Rolfe covered the floor of the performance area with a precise "drawing" of alternating, evenly spaced stripes of white flour and powdered brick-red terracotta clay dust, running vertically from the back wall toward where the audience would sit, and bordered on either side by a rectangular "holding" area of dust—white on the left, red on the right. This became the ground for the culminating performance in which Rolfe's naked body met the field of dust and transformed both the landscape and his body. On the evening of 6 December, Rolfe lay down parallel to the first stripe and slowly rolled his body across the striped pigment-dust and flour, from one side to the other and back. He continued this action repeatedly with increasing effort, over and over, each time blurring the lines and blending the colors, leaving imprints where the force of his body impacted the ground. Gradually the original drawing was replaced by this new drawing, and the two colors blended into a fleshy pink. At some point one became aware that the dust would soon be clogging Rolfe's ears, nose, and mouth, making breathing difficult and inhaling dangerous. This sense of elemental risk reinforced the visceral immediacy of the piece.

Although Rolfe was certainly not the first male artist to engage in such tests of endurance and stamina, his work seemed to strive beyond the preoccupation with his own body's limits and capacities. In retrospect I find in it parallels with Japanese *butoh* in its primal energies and imagery (the white-coated, loinclothed body), and its underlying political implications.

This political aspect became more apparent in Rolfe's performance *The Rope* in April 1984. Taken in part from the complete work *The Rope That Binds Us Makes Them Free*, it was about and for Ireland, not only for its current period of political strife and unrest, but for its long history of oppression. In describing the impetus for the piece, Rolfe stated:

In Leitrim, a county towards the North-West, we found cottages left long ago with everything intact. Like the Marie-Celeste float-

ing in a deserted and barren landscape. Tea by the hearth, food on the table, the bed just slept in [. . .]. From one of the cottages, I took a ball of sisal twine covered with creosote. To bind my head with this ball. (Rolfe 1999)

Subsequently, the work became about “those places, a memory, an echo of distant voices” (Rolfe 1999). But more: a symbol of Ireland itself.

Again the performance involved the interface between the material—in this case the creosote sisal twine—and the body. The reference is both more clear-cut and more brutal: separating the head from the body by binding the head with the twine until he could neither see, nor hear, nor freely breathe, leaving the body ungrounded, trapped, and immobilized, and the head senseless.

Rolfe describes *The Rope That Binds Us Makes Them Free*:

A work that is both metaphor and metamorphosis. A process led transformation whereby the head becomes an iconic image of smothering intensity. The binding action is predictable but unexpected, a parallel for cultural isolation and parochial values and the grief that these strictures smother a society with. This is a rural image, organic but in the field of human recognition, something we can have never seen but all the same recognize. We anticipate the lack of breath, the isolation, the bondage. It protects us and we welcome its security but meanwhile and at the same time it smothers us, blinds us, renders us trapped and isolated without hearing or sight or breath or balance. In more sculptural or formal terms from without the figure assumes a medieval mantle. This twinehead is strange and funny but threatening and dark. A transgressive journey into the pagan, a wrapped head, bound repeatedly on the surface but under the skin of time both then but now. It is in the archaeology of the soul, in the territory of psychic history. It is of the earth, the smell of the soil is in its gestures, its ritual, the craft of the hand on hand process. This is a real time action, no tricks, nothing hid-

1. Nigel Rolfe, Drawing, 6 December 1979. (Photo by Marty Heitner; courtesy of Franklin Furnace)





2. Nigel Rolfe, *The Rope*, 22 April 1984. The performance was part of the larger work *The Rope That Binds Us Makes Them Free*, performed from 1984 to 1988. (Photo by Marty Heitner; courtesy of Franklin Furnace)

den, across real time passing. Again and again and then again but somehow time stands still, a few moments or an hour it makes no difference. We are outside but on the inside, we bear witness but take part. To breathe but to be without breath, to see but to have our eyes bound and blinded, to hear but this in turn becomes muffled and withdrawn, the senses are edited and then withdrawn. Inside is an inner world, foetal and far away. Outside is now the domain of the rope man. The creosote sizar twine features are the all turning and seeing face. The rope head looks back and follows around the room taking time and slowly taking stock, the transformation is complete. (Rolfe n.d.)

When I met Rolfe in Dublin in the summer of 1979, I knew that his work was guided by a deep sense of urgency that was already beginning to fade in American performance as the influences of media and entertainment came to the forefront in the fast-approaching 1980s. Thus it seemed imperative to bring Rolfe to the Furnace, where he not only fulfilled, but outstripped our expectations.

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open with all the pages heavily crinkled and crushed, giving them a fan-like effect. The Japanese thought the books had been damaged in shipping and in an effort to return them in proper shape they had carefully ironed all the pages flat. Judy was devastated, and explaining the mistake to the Seibu Museum for insurance compensation involved some very confused and confusing communications.

I am especially proud of all the “firsts,” the opportunities we created for emerging artists regardless of age. During Carole Forget and Kay Hines’s first exhibitions of their sculptural bookworks (1 June and 29 April 1978, respectively), we were visited by the noted collector and art patron, the late Patrick Lannon, and I convinced him to purchase several of their pieces. All the money went directly to the artists. In 1978 three artists received their first NEA grants after having shows at the Furnace. One of the artists, Mimi Smith, had her 1982 politically charged, media-based window installation *Art Lobby* exhibited at the Wall Street headquarters of the Chase Manhattan Bank when the Puerto Rican Liberation Group FLAN bombed the bank. In the grand tradition of the avantgarde, the Furnace has never shied away from controversy, preferring to support the artist’s right to freedom of expression, even if some might find that unnerving or offensive. Long before attracting the attention or arousing the ire of bureaucrats, funders, and politicians in the ’80s and ’90s, works with potentially inflammatory political and/or sexual content found a home at the Furnace, though at the time I don’t think we thought of any of it as being that “radical.” Rather, it was just part of a curatorial philosophy that supported diversity.

Several examples come to mind, particularly in relation to the impact of feminism on the ’70s art world, and the feminist roots of both Martha’s and my own art. We gave our artists a lot of room. We didn’t try to make the Furnace be for one style or even two or three. We tried to stay as wide open as possible. Thus we could show Mary Beth Edelson’s goddess-based narratives and rituals (*Story Gathering Box*, March 1978) and photographer Jackie Livingston’s matter-of-fact, at-home family portraits of her naked husband and child. Livingston’s images hardly seemed like they would be the center of a storm of controversy and charges of pornography, over which Cornell University fired Livingston from her teaching job. Yet the controversy over the work of this recipient of a New York State Council on the Arts grant demonstrated the double standard that allowed the use of the female body in any manner whatsoever by men, while the display of male frontal nudity and male genitals was still not acceptable art—especially when the artist was a woman. Rather ironic since Livingston’s husband was reclining in a manner not unlike Manet’s *Olympia*.

We also showed Los Angeles performance artist Richard Newton’s books of color Xerox photographs (November 1978) from performances as well as a film that played both sides of the gender issue. In *You Take Me to a Room in Brawley and We Smell Onions*, a piece performed in a motel in the desert town of Brawley, California, Newton inhabited several personas, two in drag, first as a white-veiled virginal bride, then as a black underwear-clad whore, and finally in an S&M scenario as a naked man in chains. Newton’s appropriation of imagery used by feminists to express women’s enslavement would have been considered questionable had he not based the piece on an autobiographical text portraying an awful wedding night by his then-girlfriend Linda Burnham, the founder of *High Performance* magazine. He employed these roles as commentary on the situation of the artist, thus equating it with the historic position of women. Some might have argued with that analogy since Newton, as a straight white male, still held a position of privilege in the art world.

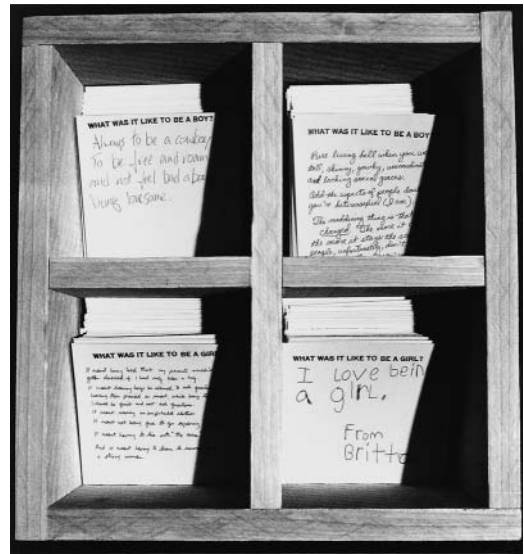
In *Touch a Penis*, however, Newton displayed his own ambivalence and vul-



nerability by exhibiting his organ as an anonymous piece of flesh hanging through a hole in a sheet and offering it up to viewers to touch. The potential dangers of the situation placed the piece within the realm of feminist precedents set by Barbara Smith in her 1973 performance *Feed Me*, which allowed for the possibility of sex with the artist as a mutually agreed upon act; and Yoko Ono's 1964 *Cut Piece*, where audience members were invited to cut off pieces of her clothing. In that context however it could also be seen as a boy's competitive bid for attention: "Hey, Look at MINE."

Perhaps one of the most memorable and certainly more disturbing works for me was the December 1977 reading by Jane DeLynn of an excerpt from her untitled novel. Posited as a feminist work, it was a story of violence and retribution in which three women pay back a man who had raped a friend by subjecting him to an equal degree of physical and sexual abuse and humiliation, not merely as revenge but as an act of empowerment. The man in question was no cliché redneck in a bar with too many beers, but an affluent professional in a high-rise office. Bound and gagged, he was left by his assailants on the floor to be found in the morning by his colleagues, face down, pantless, with a dildo up his ass. The cold precision of DeLynn's language and delivery along with the vivid explicitness of her imagery, seemed both dangerous and thrilling in its implications.

In addition to all those artists who showed or performed at the Furnace and have since received acclaim and renown, of equal interest for me are those who have not received the same degree of recognition despite the quality of their work. The selectiveness of official history, like memory, is always biased. Thus in many ways it is more fascinating to reexamine those artists whose work still resonates for me, even if they may have disappeared from the public eye, and/or dropped out of the art world completely. I have lost touch with Martine Aballea, Carole Forget, Judy Simonian, and Jackie Livingston. And Frank Young, whose ambitious September 1978 installation *Frozen Books & Newspaper Pieces* filled the entire gallery space with huge books constructed out of thousands of newspapers. But I know that Kay Hines is still an active working artist living in lower Manhattan, though she has never received the kind of recognition her work has warranted. She had to be coaxed and prodded into having her very first show at the Furnace (April 1978), and it still remains one of the more memorable. Hines stretched the form of the book to that of a poetic "machine," or a text-producing sculpture, while holding fast to the primacy of the intimate interaction between reader and writer. Her "books" were never static. They required a physical gesture of engagement. In that sense they were performative, and suggestive of her early background as a filmmaker. Among my favorites was a large rotating cylindrical book with bicycle pedals. If you wanted to read it you had to pedal. The other was a vintage Coke machine filled with green Perrier bottles each containing a "message"; an epigram from the mind of the artist/writer was spit out by the machine with the insertion of a coin. I still have mine, and every so often give it a read when I need a little inspiration. Never having made any concentrated or determined efforts at promoting herself, 25 years later Hines remains idiosyncratic and elusive, despite her prodigious talents. Yet she continues to produce complex, thought-provoking work which she occasionally shows.



7. Mary Beth Edelson, *Story Gathering Box*, 1978. These story gathering boxes began in 1972 and are ongoing. The first survey of the story boxes at Franklin Furnace included 13 wooden boxes that contained cards stamped with various topics; spectators wrote on the cards and left them for others to read. (Photo courtesy of Mary Beth Edelson)



## California Feminists

Cheri Gaulke and Linda Nishio

In the 1970s Los Angeles was the heartland of feminist performance, much of which had grown out of the Women's Studies program headed by Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro in the early days of CalArts, and the Women's Building in downtown L.A., a hotbed of feminist art activities. In addition to having presented several of L.A.'s first-generation feminists—Barbara Smith, Leslie Labowitz, Nancy Buchanan—and in keeping with a policy of supporting the work of emerging artists, the Furnace featured works from the next generation, including Cheri Gaulke and Linda Nishio.

*Cheri Gaulke*

*Broken Shoes, 13 March 1981*

As a member of the Feminist Art Workers (Nancy Angelo, Cheri Gaulke, Vanalyne Green, Laurel Klick) and as a solo artist, Gaulke participated in the 1981 L.A./London Lab performance series, conceived by Martha Wilson. "*I felt Feminism was the most important issue of the '70s, and it was high time to see how women artists from different sexual environments presented their work, and how they dealt with their local conditions,*" Wilson stated in the catalog introduction (in Wilson 1982).

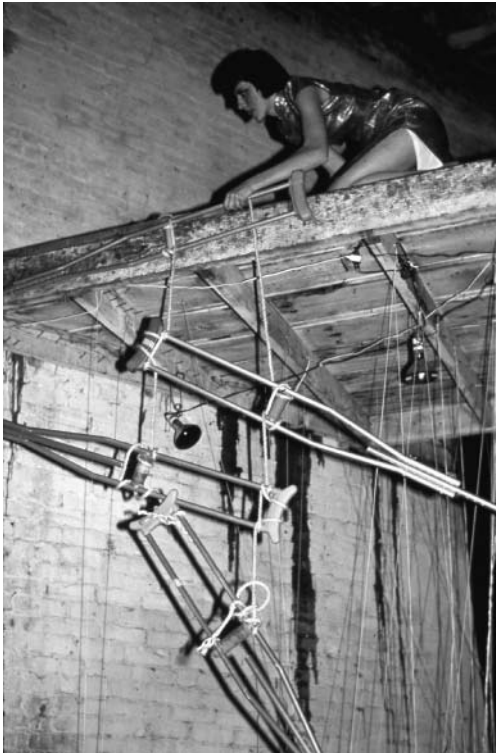
Curated by Suzanne Lacy (L.A.) and Susan Hiller (London) the series served as a vehicle for bringing feminist artists from two different cultural environments together. An articulate leader in the L.A. feminist community, Lacy had already received widespread attention for her own community-based work. Her criteria for selecting artists was to highlight different aspects of California performance and to represent women who had not had much exposure in New York.

Gaulke's appearance—she was a young, beautiful lesbian—in many ways defied the unglamorous stereotypes of '70s feminists, while at the same time her work was firmly rooted in the feminist principles and politics of her California predecessors. In retrospect her performance at Franklin Furnace, *Broken Shoes*, represents an aesthetic bridge between the generations of the '70s and the '80s. Originally performed in the Los Angeles series *Public Spirit*, *Broken Shoes* was an exploration of women's feet and shoes as a metaphor for female sexuality and mobility in society; high-heeled shoes, often referred to in the common fashion vernacular as "fuck me" shoes, were a central visual feature. The sexual implications of these shoes and the fetishism that accompanies them played off of vivid descriptions of the ancient Chinese practice of footbinding, which is also associated with a fetishistic sexual aesthetic. In both instances women not only pay the price of easy mobility for the pleasure of the male gaze and male sexual arousal, but suffer pain and injury in the process.

The performance used the entire space of the Furnace—the entryway, the downstairs performance area, and the mezzanine loft. As the audience arrived, they were greeted by women dressed in loose white pants and shirts and red high heels. They carefully and with intensity removed each audience member's shoes and placed them in the performance space. Later in the performance, the audience's shoes were attached to strings from the balcony and made to dance like marionettes.

The accompanying soundtrack was comprised of various first-person stories: a young Chinese woman's account of having her feet bound from the age of seven; a contemporary woman's harrowing tale of injuries incurred when she tripped in her "*sexy, tough, shoes with attitude*" and fell down a flight of stairs. The Chinese woman's story is a model of women's psychological and physical oppression across centuries and cultures:

I was born at the end of the Manchu Dynasty. In accordance with custom, at age seven I began binding. Mother showed me a new pair of phoenix-tip shoes and beguiled me with these words: "Only with bound feet can you wear such beautiful shoes. Otherwise, you'll become a large-footed barbarian and everyone will laugh at and feel ashamed of you." I felt moved by a desire to be beautiful [ . . . ]. Every other day, the binding was made tighter and sewn up, and each time slightly smaller shoes had to be worn. The sides of the shoes were hard, and I could only get



1. & 2. Cheri Gaulke's *Broken Shoes* utilized the entire space at Franklin Furnace, including the mezzanine loft. 13 March 1981. (Photos by Sheila Roth)

into them by using force. I was compelled to walk on them in the courtyard; they were called distance-walking shoes. I strove to cling to life, suffering indescribable pain.

—anonymous Chinese woman (in Gaulke 1982)

The slender, svelte Gaulke, glamorously attired in a shiny tight-fitting Chinese dress, played a woman “trapped” on the balcony above the audience. At times she used crutches to help her stand on absurdly exaggerated custom-made high heels. At another time, she manipulated a miniature skeleton with bound feet that glowed eerily in the dark. Toward the end of the performance she “escaped” from the balcony by forming a ladder out of crutches tied together. With her bare feet firmly planted on solid ground, the liberated Gaulke, together with the women in white whose feet had been painted bloody red, danced in celebration of survival, freedom, and community.

During the series, Gaulke also performed *Heartbeats* with the Feminist Art Workers, a collaborative performance group formed at the Woman's Building to create work about feminist art and education. *Heartbeats* was a faux panel discussion/performance/lecture about what it means to work collaboratively, both in terms of the group dynamic and in relation to the individualistic art world.

Gaulke's last performance was at Highways, Santa Monica in 1992, and she has since moved on to other media such as video and sculptural public art works, including a completed work for the Pasadena Gold Line Metro-Rail Station in Los Angeles titled *Water Street River of Dreams* (2003) and *Seven Generations* for the Lake View Terrace Public Library in Los Angeles (2003). She is currently designing three bridges over the L.A. River, creating three glowing glass and steel towers for the City of Lakewood, and developing a memorial for Filipino World War II veterans. Gaulke also recently received a COLA grant to produce a series of artist's books. Although her subject matter and media have changed, she remains committed to community-based art and the collaborative processes involved.

*Linda Nishio**Cheap Talk (Great Wall Series), 18 October 1979*

While Linda Nishio also participated in the L.A./London Lab series as the *Ghost in the Machine* (7 March 1981), she came to Franklin Furnace in 1979 to do her first public performance work, *Cheap Talk (Great Wall Series)*. Unlike the more visceral, live action, process-based work of earlier Los Angeles feminists, Nishio's piece signaled the '80s generational shift to media-based and media-influenced work. Combining film, slide images, spoken and visual text, and live action, Nishio engaged in an orchestrated dialog with her own recorded projected image. As she did in much of her earlier work (when she was still fresh from her graduate studies with Geoff Hendricks at Rutgers), the artist was preoccupied with personal angst and issues of identity. Nishio introduced into her discourse material that would become central to L.A. performance a decade later: her Asian (Japanese American) ethnicity.

Nishio used the myth and cliché of the "artist as sufferer" as a vehicle for her own rage and self-critique. The wall, rather than the space, became the central stage for activity and the site upon which the action and interaction took place. The wall was the site of aggression and confrontation with the self as other: Nishio amplified the sound of her own head banging against the wall. Live action reacted to the filmed action and visa versa, as her present persona and recorded alter ego sparred, as monologs slipped into dialogs, and back again. Words, sentences, and phrases were interrupted and split apart and the audience had to string them together to attach meaning and complete a thought. Sometimes the words were visual text on film, sometimes they were spoken; sometimes the words were projected onto Nishio's body. Freudian slips were acknowledged and referred to throughout the work.

At one point the image on the wall was a color film in which the camera panned up and down Nishio's nude body; she paced in front of the screen and carried on a dialog with the film voice.

Live: What's bothering you?

Film: Nothing

Live: Once it's off your chest, you'll feel a thousand times better.

Film: My chest is flat. I've nothing to hide.

(*Film image: FREUDIAN SLIP*)

Performer as narrator: She confuses chest for wall. What she meant to say was, "The wall is flat and I've nowhere to hide."

A little further on:

Live: Do you think I like this division you put between us?

Film: For the time being, yes. It reminds me of the Great Wall of China.

Live: I'm familiar with walls and you're not Chinese.

Film: I'm close. My eyes are shallow but wide apart. I am a deep thinker.

Live: You're like me.

(*Film image: FREUDIAN SLIP*) (Nishio 1979)

One of the greatest challenges of any artist-run organization is raising the money to keep it afloat, pay the staff, and meet the artists changing demands for services and support. In the late '70s the hoops one had to jump through to obtain any kind of private-sector funding seemed somewhat unsavory. Though I must say Martha approached the task with surprising equanimity; the fact that the Furnace was able to sustain its radical programming along with its continually expanding archive for more than two decades, is a testament to her skill and perseverance, especially since she has never compromised her own eccentric style in her pursuit of support.

Still, there were occasions to make fund-raising (something I have an aversion



3. Linda Nishio, *Cheap Talk*, 18 October 1979. Performance with film, slides, and audio. From the *Great Wall series*, 1979–1981. (Photo by Mark Clair; courtesy of Linda Nishio)

Later the same images returned in black and white, and the patter was in couplets from film to live and back again, like a Ping-Pong game: “I’m not myself”/ “I stand behind my words”; “I extend myself in and out of frame”/ “I use my body like a paintbrush”/ “I’m a victim of rape” / “I’m standing here” (Nishio 1979).

Nishio’s angst was intellectual and ironic, self-conscious and self-critical, with language rather than action as the primary medium. She used the body as image as the site of a discourse in which visual and verbal signifiers played off each other. And in that sense she had more in common with the next wave of feminists, such as Cindy Sherman, than with the generation that created *Woman House* and the *Women’s Building*.

In 2004 Nishio is still an active artist in Los Angeles, working with a variety of media. The recipient of individual artist grants from the California Community Foundation, the City of Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department, and the Durfee Foundation, she recently exhibited sculptures, digital drawings, and photography from the *R2W: Rec’reate to Wisdom* series at the Japanese American Community and Cultural Center in L.A.

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1982           *Broken Shoes*. Unpublished performance script.
- Nishio, Linda  
1979           *Cheap Talk*. Unpublished performance script.
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to!) into an enjoyable art event. By 1979 we had such a sizable and notable roster of artists to call on that we decided to have a benefit that would give artists an opportunity to exhibit their culinary talents and would attract affluent guests to buy tickets to devour the goodies. The Paper Plate Benefit was held in May with a buffet of great platters of exquisite food prepared by artists who were also known for their cooking. The guests acted as if they hadn’t eaten in days rushing to sample as many of the gourmet dishes as they could, and I recall a very large fish becoming nothing more than a head and skeleton within 15 minutes. Who knew rich people could eat so much so fast! You would have thought they were bidding on precious art commodities rather than an ephemeral experience.



8. Artists call on their culinary talents for a Furnace fundraiser. Carolee Schneemann at the Paper Plate Benefit, 1979. (Photo by Toba Tucker; courtesy of Franklin Furnace)

Will it survive beyond Martha Wilson's unique leadership and tenure? Will the next generation meet the challenge to carry on and remain true to the founding principles? Hard to say. But a record of the Furnace's accomplishments will be there for future students, artists, and historians to ponder. And I am proud to have been a part of it.

#### Notes

1. For a complete list of performances at Franklin Furnace, see "The Unwritten History Project" at <<http://www.franklinfurnace.org/archives/archives.html>>.
2. *Sound Works* at Franklin Furnace consisted of "sound works and related visual materials including scripts, scores, photographs from performances, albums, etc." (press release). In conjunction, there were six live performances including Arleen Schloss's "play on letters and rhymes" on 17 April 1980, in which "precise verbal execution of sounds using systems of memory and improvisation [was] combined with video film, and slide projection"; The Idio Orchestra (3 April); The Social Climbers performing "five hours of modern renditions of world pop classics" (8 April); Y Pants, three women artists who performed on "amplified toy instruments accompanied by tape loops" (15 April); Louise Guay, a Montreal artists whose "bilingual, multimedia, sound performance" was composed of "fragmented narratives" (22 April); and culminated with poet John Giorno reading from recent work (29 April). Marking the fact that this was a primarily aural exhibition, *Sound Works* was "planned in part for a blind audience, a minority audience usually overlooked by the visual art world" (press release).

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