

The Fiery Furnace

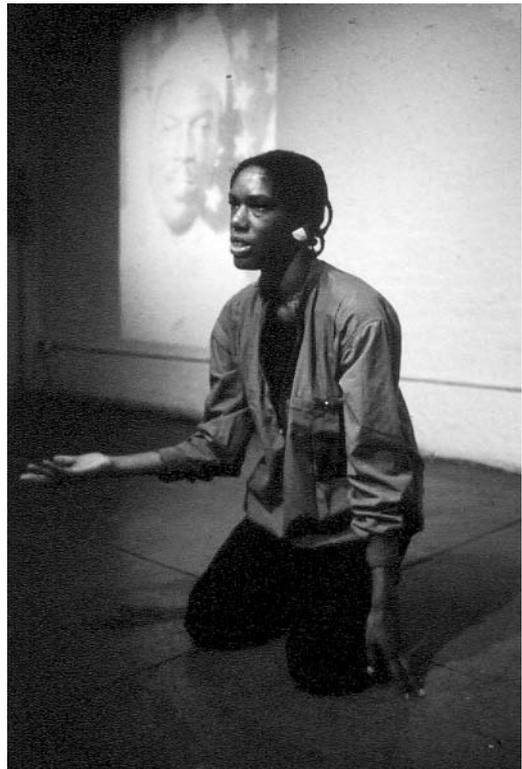
Performance in the '80s, War in the '90s

C. Carr

The performance space at Franklin Furnace never stopped looking like the ordinary basement it was. Exposed pipes. Clip-on lights. Then, “75 people on hard folding chairs.” (So Martha Wilson described the audience [Wilson 1997].) At the back a couple of windows opened on an airshaft, where the occasional intrepid performer entered the so-called stage. (There wasn’t one.) The sink and refrigerator were occasionally incorporated into a piece, while the cement floor and brick walls never got an upgrade even to rec-room ambience. Yet this basement was the opposite of “nothing special.” This was rare. This was an autonomous zone. Since it closed in 1990, it hasn’t been replaced on the New York performance scene, and may never be.

The Furnace accommodated artists the way a gallery does, but like the East Village clubs, the space was funky and impervious, the attitude “no holds barred.” Here an audience could see that part of the performance art spectrum that is *not* about theatre, though there was that too: a first show for Eric Bogosian, for example, in 1977. Here an artist could also choose to work all week on an installation, then perform in it, or live in it. Galleries may support such a project for someone who’s established, but not for the emerging artists served by the Furnace. Even at other edgy downtown venues, you had to strike the set every night.

The Furnace helped fill in some very important cracks, by supporting artists who might have otherwise fallen through them. Tehching Hsieh, for example, created world-renowned year-long ordeals in the late '70s and early '80s, but had no gallery, no funding, no actual toehold in the art world. In 1981/82, he did a piece in which he lived on the street, never entering a building, subway, tent, or other shelter. The Furnace arranged to display the artifacts—the maps he made every day to show where he’d been, his greasy



1. Robbie McCauley in her autobiographical *My Father and the Wars*, 21 November 1985. (Photo by Marty Heitner; courtesy of Franklin Furnace)



2. & 3. Tehching Hsieh
"Living Outside" during a
 One Year Performance,
 26 September 1981 at 2:00
 P.M. to 26 September 1982
 at 2:00 P.M. (Photo courtesy
 of Franklin Furnace) The
 installation at Franklin
 Furnace, 16 February 1983–
 12 March 1983, included
 photos, maps, and artifacts.
 (Photo by Marty Heitner;
 courtesy of Franklin
 Furnace)

pungent clothing, the photo documentation. They did this so soon after that preparations were negotiated with him on the stoop. He was still doing the piece and couldn't enter the space.

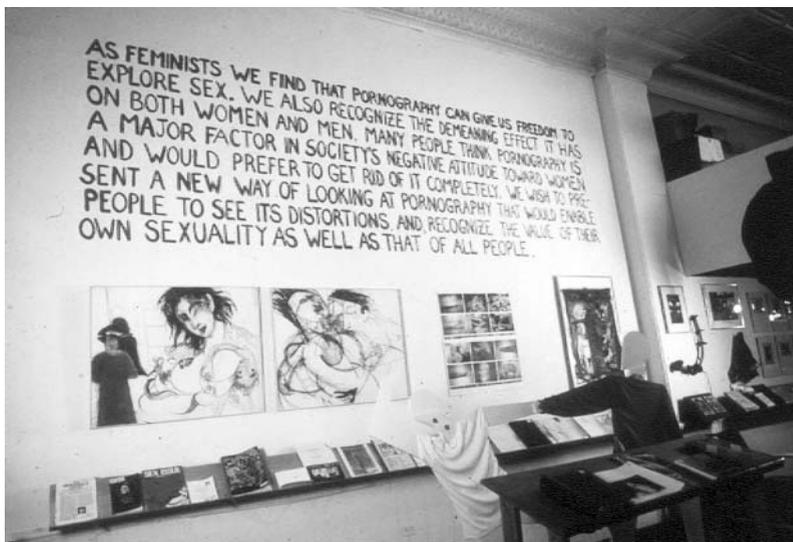
Back when she opened on 3 April 1976, Wilson saw the Furnace as a store and archive for artist books. Then that first June, artist Martine Aballea asked to do a reading from her book. Wilson said, "Yes." "Yes" was the ethos of Franklin Furnace. Wilson approached her job like an artist—with a willingness to take risks—and said "yes" if it was at all feasible. This would end up changing (art) history. For example, Aballea then showed up in costume, lugging her own light and stool—and the performance art program was born.

Franklin Furnace began as one of the alternative spaces made possible after the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts. "In those days, NEA program officers came to the Furnace to encourage us to apply," Wilson remembers. A couple of decades later, she found it shocking to realize that the '70s had been a golden age. "We were the darlings of the avantgarde," she said of the Furnace and its Tribeca/Soho neighbors of that time: Printed Matter, the Clocktower, the Collective for Living Cinema, the Kitchen, Artists Space.

We got money. We got praise. The notion that experiment is good and should be supported by the culture was out and about. We had no idea that the climate would change 180 degrees. I would say by about the mid-'80s, the avantgarde was viewed as a virus eating away at the body politic—something that needed to be stamped out if possible. Artists should be—if not killed—at least silenced. (Wilson 1997)

In the period just preceding the culture wars—late '70s to mid '80s—the art margin percolated with manic energy. That was the era of "schizo-culture," post-modernism crossed with punk, and so much began then: In 1975, a new band, Television, played the first live music at a Bowery dive called CBGBs. In 1979,

artists took studio space, then performance space, in the empty P.S. 122. Between 1979 and 1984, the East Village performance clubs opened in basements (Club 57, Darinka, 8BC), storefronts (WOW, Limbo), actual bars (the Pyramid), even second-floor apartments (Chandalier), and performers had great freedom, restrained only by occasionally raucous audiences with short attention spans. It was a time of political engagement with art's impact (*The Real Estate Show*, 1980) or America's impact (*Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America*, 1984), and galleries blooming in dozens of tiny East Village storefronts (starting with Fun Gallery in 1981). Certain artists took their work directly to the street (Jenny Holzer, Jean-Michel Basquiat) or the subway (Keith Haring), or re-created "street" in an old massage parlor (*The Times Square Show*, 1980). It was an era of fashionable heroin, DIY aesthetics, and Super-8 blockbusters starring Lydia Lunch. "I think it was an age of innocence," says Wilson, "because we were still under the impression that we could change the world."



4. *Carnival Knowledge's* Second Coming, January 1984. Installation view of exhibition manifesto, artist books, and drawings by Nancy van Goethem. (Photo by Marty Heitner; courtesy of Franklin Furnace)



5. Jennifer Miller and Susan Seizer in *Mud Wedding*, 14 January 1984, as part of *Carnival Knowledge's* performance series at Franklin Furnace. (Photo by Marty Heitner; courtesy of Franklin Furnace)

Any space first opened to honor artist books is not concerned with being trendy, but Wilson was attuned to the ferment and provided a door into the art world for people like Holzer, for example, who had her first show (*Truisms*) at the Furnace in 1978. Wilson also turned the space over to Artists Call for an exhibit in '84.

Wilson liked breaking barriers. In January 1984, she presented Carnival Knowledge's *The Second Coming*, a pioneering show that brought feminists and sex workers together to ask: Could there be feminist porn? A porn that doesn't denigrate women or children? These questions were posed in a manifesto painted in red on the Furnace wall. The feminist artists in Carnival Knowledge had first encountered Candida Royalle, Veronica Vera, and Annie Sprinkle at a porn trade show. They all met together for a year, wrote a proposal, and Wilson said, "Yes." Hundreds of artist books and videos with sexual themes went on display on the main floor. Gossamer fabric breasts hung in the stairway leading to the basement, and there Carnival Knowledge featured "domestic" pieces dealing with everything from eating to masturbation. Performances included mud-wrestling done by artists and monologues done by sex workers, most notoriously *Deep Inside Porn Stars*, in which they talked about their lives. Twenty years later, it's easy to forget how revolutionary that was. The Morality Action Committee picketed for an afternoon and soon had church groups all over the country writing to Wilson's funders. Two of them, Exxon and Woolworth's, pulled their money out. Another vanguard moment. And just the prelude to real trouble. But I'll get to that.

Franklin Furnace was small, just a storefront, with a specialized mission defined by Wilson as "time-based art" (artist books and performance). Given that, the range of work was amazing.

For example:

4 October 1985. "The poetry of words is over," announced Jean-Paul Curtay during the opening for *Letterism and Hypergraphics: The Unknown Avant-Garde*. We were in the gallery on the main floor, where work on the walls indicated that, indeed, the alphabet was in deep trouble. Entire new symbol systems covered portraits, musical scores, and calendars like so much code.

Exhibitions at the Furnace usually featured work that was hot off the griddle, but some shows honored precursors to the art that was Wilson's regular fare. Curtay, who'd curated the *Letterism* show, clicked, shrieked, and wheezed his poems that evening. In my notes, I attempted to describe them: "the exasperated protest of an extraterrestrial" and so on. Curtay talked about the work's significance, how Letterism splintered off from Dada in 1945, influenced by that movement but critical of its nihilism. They'd come up with 150 new "letters," all the sounds that written language omitted and polite company outlawed—gargling, snorting, moaning, slurping, etc. Letterist work confronted the inadequacy of language by pushing it into pure sound for greater emotional range. Poetry had returned to some preliterate origin.

Six days later. I returned to the Furnace for a standing-room-only performance of *Made for TV Terrorism* in the basement. I'll never forget it. I'd already seen Dancenoise (Anne Iobst, Lucy Sexton) in the East Village clubs, a setting that relegated their choreographed aggression, combat boots, and ugly soundtrack to the head-banging context of punk. At the Furnace, they looked uncatagorizable. (And they were in 1985.) For one thing, they'd been decorating. Squirt guns, oven mitts, Spidermen and Mickey Mice hung by strings over the audience. Along the west wall a banner read ESCAPE=BANG. Along the east wall hung many surgical gloves. A blue lamb-shaped chalkboard across the back bore the message, "Make your bed." Behind my right shoulder, I saw a baby doll in



6. Anne Iobst and Lucy Sexton, the Dancenoise duo, performing *Made for TV Terrorism* at Franklin Furnace on 10 October 1985. (Photo by Marty Heitner; courtesy of Franklin Furnace)

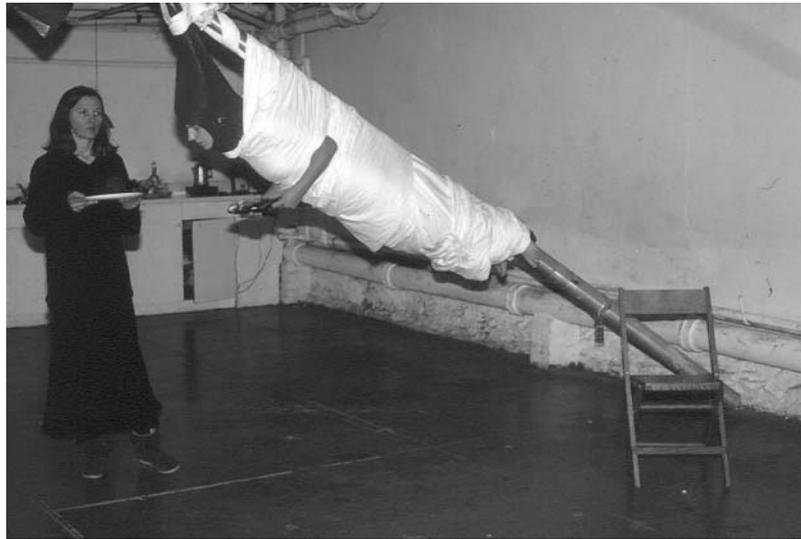
bloody playsuit stuck up in the pipes; behind our chairs, broken dolls and toys. Dancenoise would soon challenge every bromide laid out to little girls—and then some.

Don't make a mess. Don't fuck up your doll.

They performed surgery on a female dummy, tap-danced, ran full force into a wall, removed two male dummies in long johns and lizard heads from a refrigerator, talked about terrorism, and endured many many fast costume changes. I'm sure that isn't the half of it. Near the end, they fought each other with knives, then disemboweled the lizard-headed dummies they'd hung from the ceiling during some hardboiled pas de deux, leaving so much fake blood and real slime on the floor they could have skated away. Here was a "critique of representation" that burst right from the gut. Sexton and Iobst never intellectualized about their stuff, but they were among the transgressive women performers of that era who worked straight from the id to address issues of power and control—a fact I was just starting to put together in October 1985. I only knew then that the show thrilled me.

December 1985. I spent an hour in the basement watching an ordeal—*Heloise's Bird*. Angelika Wanke-Festa had been lashed to a pole cocoon-style, with white strips of cotton. Planted at a 45-degree angle, only her arms dangling free from the elbows down, she was wearing a red rabbit-ear headdress. Wanke-Festa would hang there for 24 hours. Spectators could walk through for nine of them. Around her, the basement had become a bizarre living space. Ancient home movies played across the back wall. At the center of the room, a black rabbit rooted through newspapers at the bottom of its cage. Another woman, Jay Sims, performed maintenance tasks: preparing food she didn't share, occasionally adjusting the helpless body on the pole. At one point, Sims read in German from the letters of Heloise and Abelard, interrupting Wanke-Festa, who'd been intoning, mantra-like, some long surreal text of childhood memory and fantasy: ". . . of course you can't expect people to like what you do, or to respect you for your effort or your ancestors, webbed feet or not . . ." I thought the piece depicted an exaggerated and sick parent/child relationship. When I came back the next day to watch it end, Wanke-Festa seemed barely able to hold her head up.

7. *Angelika Wanke-Festa* remained bound to a pole for 24 hours for *Heloise's Bird*, 12 December 1985. (Photo by Marty Heitner; courtesy of Franklin Furnace)



This was an unusual endurance piece, given that the artist, who clearly suffered physically, turned herself into a character or perhaps just a prop in a story she didn't control.

14 May 1987. A woman in a blue wig and a dress cut full of revealing holes kissed every spectator who entered the basement, directing us to wait for a “mid-priest” who would take us to “the cave of the shaman”—a tent constructed from quilts, sheets, and strips of aluminum foil. There Frank Moore sat naked in his wheelchair. This self-appointed shaman was born with cerebral palsy, 99 percent physically disabled, spastic, and unable to speak. When we were told we could approach him, no one did. Moore lurched forward with a cry. He howled. Soon enough, people began to warm up. Moore's performances focus on what he calls eroplay, “an intense physical playing or touching of oneself and others” (press release), and they don't work without audience participation. Spectators were urged to explore Moore's body, then each other's. *Intimate Cave* went on for five hours, a reprise of the *Summer of Love* complete with group grope. A certain embarrassment threshold was reached, then crossed by some. Others were just uncomfortable. I took notes. That Moore would be the one urging us to stay connected with our physical selves seemed both ironic and poetic, even if his performance didn't motivate me to explore the anonymous bodies around me. As the evening wore on, the basement began to look like a photo of a Living Theatre event—half-naked people walking through a mess.

November–December 1987. I encountered the Anonymous Artist at the Furnace one night when I inadvertently crawled into his “monastery,” a closet-size plywood structure on the main floor, where the artist was fasting and praying for 40 days and 40 nights. In the tiny antechamber, on hands and knees, visitors could peer through a slit about two inches high to see a blue-lit cell and the motionless white-shrouded figure of Anonymous. A single rosary decorated the wall. What distinguished this piece from other ordeals was its sincere and overt Christianity. Anonymous emerged without fanfare on Christmas Day “to share life, God's greatest gift, with the world” (press release). The piece's title, *Ad Interiori Deserti* (Toward the Interior Desert) was a reminder, however, that at such an internalized hermetic contemplative level, all religions begin to blend into

one. Most radical was the artist's decision to take no credit for the work. The Furnace press release promised that this person's age, race, and name would never be disclosed "in an effort to remove the influence of the artist from the artwork" (see Carr 1987).

May 1988. Fiona Templeton's *You—the City* was a Furnace piece set in various midtown streets and buildings, for an audience of one. Spectators entered this astonishing work at ten-minute intervals and had direct contact with each performer, which made the usual audience behavior (e.g., voyeurism) seem quite odd. It began, for example, in what seemed to be an office where each spectator in turn sat down across a desk from what appeared to be a businesswoman. Judging by her body language and inflection, we had an important deal to make. But she was saying things like "Get your desire like you get a joke." Upon completing her short monologue of non sequiturs, she led me from the office and downstairs into Times Square, where she announced, over the traffic din, "Your new idea will get older." Was I supposed to talk back? The "businesswoman" took me across the street and left me, as another woman in a fake leopard-skin coat rushed toward me. She and I, apparently, had known each other all our lives. Taking my arm, this woman guided me up the crowded sidewalk, her speech full of vague threats. I would have to "decide." My family would be "devastated." I seemed to be implicated in something. This charade? My passivity? The usual crises of perception and attention? Over the course of the next hour or so, I was handed on from person to person, even driven for a couple of blocks in a battered car with beer bottles rolling on the floor while the driver said things like, "Sophisticated audiences don't ask questions. You don't either, I see." But *You—the City* was definitely asking questions. What looks like acting and what doesn't? Do spectators need the acting (the distance) to feel comfortable with the behavior they're witnessing? And what's a spectator to do when she isn't just a spectator anymore?

Summer 1991. During a July and August residency at the Furnace, William Pope.L first painted the wall and floor to show a skyscraper falling from the sky to impale one hapless street person. Then he took to the streets himself to perform. Pope.L is an African American artist whose work exposes racial dynamics in ways designed to make everyone uncomfortable. One day he set out to wiggle down the street on his belly along Tompkins Square Park in Manhattan's East Village, holding a potted flower in one hand, dressed in a good black suit. Pope.L has done many of these crawls. For him, they're about the vulnerable black male body, about homelessness and the many black male bodies supine on the street, about the African American tradition of struggle. But that day, a black spectator intervened—first offering help, then confronting the white man documenting the piece, finally forcing the artist to stop after one block. On other days, Pope.L would park himself on a sidewalk to sell aspirin (at a hundred dollars per pill) and mayonnaise (a hundred dollars per spoonful). He also did the first version of a signature piece, *Eating the Wall Street Journal*. He quite literally ate *Wall Street* newsprint while seated on the sidewalk on an American flag.

The abject imagery in much of Pope.L's work speaks to the subconscious damage done by racism—and the humiliating consequences. Fear, anxiety, shame, dyspepsia. In a closing performance at the Furnace, Pope.L sat on a stage built in front of the window, visible to anyone passing by. Dressed in a pair of white Jockey shorts, Pope.L covered the rest of his body with mayonnaise, becoming (briefly) "white." In the 90-plus heat, the mayo soon began to drip, turning transparent and shiny. Then there was the smell, described by the artist as "sickening" (Pope.L 2002). So he stood there, glistening and rank, showing the videotape of *Crawl Tompkins* and reading from the journals he'd kept about his street activities. A sign that read "How Much Is That Nigger in the Window?" hung on the

front door. From gag-inducing foodstuffs to N-word, it's all about what can't be stomached.

The Furnace constantly took risks with people who didn't yet have much of a track record, giving first New York shows to visual artists like David Hammons and Barbara Kruger, and to performers like Karen Finley, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Annie Sprinkle, and Robbie McCauley. I don't mean to imply that every Furnace show was brilliant. Sometimes when you're "emerging," you're half-baked. Sometimes experiments fail. But if they succeed, they can become legendary. In what's left of "alternative space" today, few presenters can afford (literally) to allow failures, and this is terrible. Those who know they mustn't fail can't risk anything. That being said, I saw little outright failure at the Furnace. The old storefront earned its spot on the avantgarde walking tour because Martha Wilson was at work in the office loft, granting artists permission to leave terra firma, and sometimes they soared.

But, on 21 May 1990, Wilson came to work to find large white stickers affixed to the front door: "VACATE—DO NOT ENTER. THE DEPARTMENT OF BUILDINGS HAS DETERMINED THAT CONDITIONS IN THIS PREMISES ARE IMMINENTLY PERILOUS TO LIFE." That day, after 14 apparently perilous years, the Furnace was charged with not having an illuminated exit sign or emergency lighting and with keeping the front door locked during a show. The basement performance space never opened again.

The war against the National Endowment for the Arts was then one year old. I date the opening salvo to 18 May 1989, when Senator Alfonse D'Amato rose dramatically on the Senate floor to rip up the catalog containing Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*. On 13 June 1989, Washington DC's Corcoran Gallery of Art canceled Robert Mapplethorpe's show, *The Perfect Moment*. In July, Republican congressman Dana Rohrbacher initiated the first proposal to defund the agency, and in the fall, new NEA chair John Frohnmayer revoked a \$10,000 grant to Artists Space for *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, an exhibition about AIDS.

These events were mere foreshadowing to the blitzkrieg year of 1990, when repression and paranoia hit nonprofit arts organizations with gale force. That was the year that Mapplethorpe's show opened in Cincinnati and museum director Dennis Barrie was indicted for pandering obscenity and the illegal use of a child in nudity-oriented material (*New York Times* 1990). It was the year that Congressman Rohrbacher accused the Kitchen of using taxpayer money for Annie Sprinkle's *Post Porn Modernist*. (Sprinkle had never even applied for a grant, much less received one.) And it was the year the House of Representatives engaged in an hour-long debate over Judy Chicago's 1974 *Dinner Party*.

No one knows to this day how Franklin Furnace ended up on the far right's radar screen. Maybe it dated back to the Carnival Knowledge show, where Annie Sprinkle made her transition from porn star to performance artist. But that wouldn't explain how they got the names of certain other artists, some of whom weren't even well-known within the art world. In February 1990, the *New York City Tribune*, a right-wing rag published by the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, published an article on "obscene art," singling out performance artists Karen Finley, Cheri Gaulke, Frank Moore, and Johanna Went. All created work that had sexual content. All had performed at the Furnace. In fact, all but Finley were from California and had performed at no other New York arts venue. In March 1990, Senator Jesse Helms ordered the General Accounting Office to investigate the "questionable activities" of the endowment, giving them a list of artists that included the four named in the *Tribune* article.

Then in May, 10 days before the basement closed, conservative columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak published a piece ridiculing Karen Finley

as “a chocolate-smearing woman” (1990:23). Three days before the basement closed, Finley opened upstairs at the Furnace with an installation, *A Woman’s Life Isn’t Worth Much*—words and images about the horrors wrought by sexism and misogyny painted directly on the wall. Finley had done her first New York performance in the Furnace basement in 1983, a monologue called *I Like the Dwarf on the Table When I Give Him Head*. (As Wilson remembers it, the artist also took a bath in a suitcase.) When the fire department shut the performance space, Wilson assumed a Finley critic was to blame. What really happened was that a man had tried to leave in the middle of a Diane Torr performance the night before, found the door locked from the inside, and called the fire department.

It got worse. A couple of weeks after her show at the Furnace closed, Finley was defunded by the NEA—along with John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller—while various officials showed up at the Furnace to grill and to probe. The General Accounting Office began the investigation ordered by Helms, while the state comptroller and the IRS both launched audits. Ironically, the NEA itself had been auditing the Furnace (and other spaces) since 1985, and would continue to do so until 1995, part of what Wilson described as the endowment’s effort “to fund the good-looking and professional side of the art world while defunding the chaotic and hairy” (Wilson 2004).

The Furnace would never again be free from the scrutiny of people who hated everything it stood for. Early in 1992, an NEA peer panel awarded the Furnace a \$25,000 grant, only to have the neocon political appointees in the agency strip it away. The issue was “artistic merit,” supposedly. Of course, what does that mean? According to the neocons, who’d implemented bureaucratic changes to “break the grip of the arts establishment” on the agency (see Carr 1992), it meant the content of one videotape included with the proposal. That tape featured a sexually explicit performance by one Scarlet O. The peer panel—the “arts establishment”—saw more than that, namely the organization’s reputation over a 16-year history. But when the Furnace’s proposal got to the National Council on the Arts, an advisory body of arts luminaries appointed by the President, only the poet Donald Hall voted “yes.” That year, for the first time since the organization opened, the Furnace failed to get an NEA grant.

Over the years, a fragile ecology had developed among the NEA, foundations, and corporations to support the nonprofit art world. Once the Endowment was under attack, that whole ecology began to erode. For example, the NEA stopped granting seasonal support to arts groups—meaning, money to just pay rent and the light bill. They did this to stop tax-funded electricity from shining on the likes of Annie Sprinkle. Conservatives wouldn’t allow it.

That’s admittedly the Cliff Notes version of what went wrong financially on the cultural margin. The point is that everyone has struggled since the ’90s, but the Furnace had a huge extra burden. Losing that basement seemed to cut the guts out of the organization, and Wilson was never able to compensate for that loss with her Franklin Furnace in Exile series at other venues. She spent a year interviewing architects in pursuit of a redesign that would bring the building up to code, finally selecting a beautiful plan by Bernard Tschumi, doable for



8. William Pope.L in a performance that closed *How Much Is That Nigger in the Window?*, an installation at Franklin Furnace from 1 July 1991 through 31 August 1991. (Photo by Marty Heitner; courtesy of Franklin Furnace)

\$500,000. But in a funding climate where it's hard to pay the light bill, a new space was mere pie in the sky.

Wilson went virtual early in 1997 to stay true to the overarching mission at the Furnace: preserving, promoting, and disseminating the work of the avantgarde. But I regard the demise of the Franklin Street space as Exhibit A on what it meant to lose the culture war.

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C. Carr was a staff writer at the Village Voice for 16 years, where she covered the art margins, especially the performance scene, and the ensuing culture wars. Her book, On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century, was published by Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England in 1993. A new book, about the impact of a lynching on a small Midwestern town, will be published in Fall 2005 by Crown.