

Franklin  
Furnace



# Sublime Discomfort

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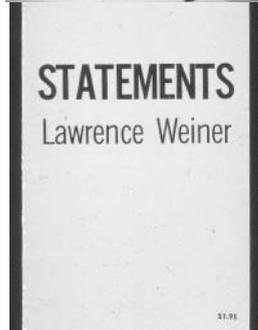
The rough-and-ready basement of 112 Franklin Street was uncomfortable: the stairs were steep, the chairs were hard, and it did get hot down there in the unfinished room back behind the boiler—for me especially in the late '80s when I was first very pregnant and then later carrying my Snuggled baby down below. Some of the performances were uncomfortable too—and that was a good thing. Franklin Furnace was a place for discomfort, for trial and error, for roughness and danger, for anger and humor, and sometimes for moments of great theatre. Frank Moore's *Intimate Cave* made me extremely uncomfortable, as his minions kept hounding me to take the shoes off my swollen feet and tried relentlessly to touch my belly. Robbie McCauley's *My Father and the Wars* was emotionally uncomfortable, but theatrically beautiful. Angelika Wanke-Festa shared her discomfort in *Heloise's Bird*, as she hung bound to a pillar for 24 hours. The discomfort was a treasure, and one that we didn't expect to lose so suddenly.

C. Carr attended these same performances and talks about them in "The Fiery Furnace: Performance in the '80s, War in the '90s." As I read her descriptions they evoke images, and it seems as if I am envisioning several different Furnaces—different sizes, different shapes, and different feels. Martha's open-door policy and permeable art boundaries let a great range of work into the basement. Just a sampling of these has found its way into this issue of *TDR*.

Franklin Furnace Archive, Inc., stoked its first coals in 1976.<sup>1</sup> As you will read in the very personal accounts of its history, the Furnace was first an archive of artist books, and soon thereafter—nearly simultaneously because of the speed with which the founder Martha Wilson tenaciously pursued her vision—a gallery for exhibitions and installations, a performance space, and a publisher. Jacki Apple, there almost from the very beginning, recalls the first few years when she helped initiate the performance program and, in her role as Curator of Exhibitions and Performances, witnessed the very early work of Karen Finley, Eric Bogosian, Ana Mendieta, Michael Smith, Barbara Kruger, and many more. Clive Phillpot also offers his memories of the early days with Martha. First an FF board member, Phillpot later was responsible for the purchase of the Furnace's extensive archive of artist books by The Museum of Modern Art. This divestiture was the first step in the dematerialization of Franklin Furnace. By now, in 2004, Franklin Furnace has been stripped bare of most of its worldly possessions, its material self.

After its basement performance space was closed in 1990—was it the cranky patron's phone call or the pressure of the far Right?—Franklin Furnace took its performances first on the road and then into cyberspace. After a few years of "Franklin Furnace in Exile" when the Furnace produced performances in a different downtown space each year, Wilson moved the Furnace into the ether.

1. Cheri Gaulke in her Broken Shoes on the Franklin Furnace mezzanine loft, 13 March 1981. (Photo by Sheila Roth)



*From Franklin Furnace: 2. Martha Wilson, Diane Torr, and Illona Granet perform as Disband, 24 April 1979. (Photo by Barbara Quinn) 3. Lawrence Weiner, Statements, 1968. (Photo by Marty Heitner) 4. Dolores Zorreguieta, Wounds, 1994. (Photo by Marty Heitner) 5. Michael Smith as Baby Ikki, 6 June 1978. (Photo by Jacki Apple)*

With the book archive safely ensconced in MoMA and the performance space closed, Martha made the decision to give up the battle for New York real estate. In this issue, she talks about her transition from live art to, well, live art on the web.

The “liveness” issue remains a bone of contention. For me, it’s personal—as are most accounts of the Furnace and its history. I need the space and bodies and objects of live art, just as I need the tangible pages of this journal, no matter how profitable or convenient or pedagogically expansive online publication is. I miss the basement, the place, the people. As I said, it’s personal. And it was the personal that was at the heart of the Furnace. As an artist-run space, the artist came first. Jacki Apple talks about the “open-door policy”: any artist could walk in and show her work, be listened to and taken seriously. As C. Carr puts it “‘Yes’ was the ethos of Franklin Furnace.” This was a very personal vision of an ideal art world, a move to change the male-dominated art world of museums and galleries in place in the 1970s when Martha Wilson first sought to single-handedly “make the world safe for avantgarde art.”

In its present incarnation, Franklin Furnace, with Martha Wilson still fanning the flames, is saying “Yes” to artists looking to explore the potential of live art on the Internet. With its Future of the Present program Martha is looking to make the world not just safe for avantgarde art, but to make that art more available to a “socially equal” audience (see <[http://www.franklinfurnace.org/born\\_digital/history\\_essay.html](http://www.franklinfurnace.org/born_digital/history_essay.html)>. Sequential Art for Kids remains active in P.S.52, where teachers and librarians collaborate with artists Benita Abrams, Ron Littke, and others to develop literacy programs where ESL students make their own artist books. And the Franklin Furnace Archive, Inc., website continues to expand its digital “Archives of the Avantgarde” and “Unwritten History Project” (<<http://www.franklinfurnace.org/archives/archives.html>>).

There was a proliferation of new work being done in uncharted locations during the 1970s and ’80s in New York City. Alan Moore and C. Carr talk about some of these. As Moore tells us, the geography of the art world was changing: moving into Tribeca, like the Furnace and the Clocktower; the Lower East Side, like performance clubs Darinka and 8BC; and into the boroughs of NYC, like P.S.1 in Queens. It moved into basements, second-floor apartments, abandoned schools, and warehouses. Performances occurred at sunset on a landfill, at 2:00 A.M. for the partying crowd in the backroom of a bar, for days on end in storefront windows.

Franklin Furnace on Franklin Street was a vital and unique part of this time and place, this art zone of activity. Carr wonders if there will ever be such a place again in New York. I hope so. I hope there is someone out there right now saying “Yes” to an artist who walks in and says, “I want to try something, something uncomfortable . . .”

#### Note

1. The Franklin Furnace website is an invaluable resource, and includes a timeline of key events and performances. See <<http://www.franklinfurnace.org/about/about.html>> for the timeline.

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