

Money Matters

SANT: Since your life after 1976 has been almost synonymous with Franklin Furnace, I'd like you to give us an idea of why you chose to move to New York City and eventually dedicate your professional life to this organization you've founded.

WILSON: As you know, I was living in Canada, in Halifax, with my boyfriend. He dumped my ass after we had already bought a house and restored it. Well, he was a gracious guy. He paid me the equity that he and I agreed I had put into the property that we owned in common so that I could afford to leave. He gave me \$5,000 when he sold the property.

I had been tiptoeing around the idea of calling myself an artist: I'm going to be an artist and I'm going to put my personality back together somewhere else. Richards just dumped my ass, so I have to reconstruct my personality from the ground up. So I decided to go to New York and called Simone Forti. Simone had been a visiting artist in Halifax at the Nova Scotia College for Art and Design and had rashly offered to be available if anybody wanted to come to New York and crash there. So I called her and told her that I wanted to come to New York in a flash, and I lived with her for 30 days. I got to New York and had to find a place to live, ended up living in Billy Apple's studio on 23rd Street, but Jacki wanted to divorce Billy's ass. So I moved to 112 Franklin Street and at that point Richards had sold the house in Canada and had given me the check for \$5,000.

SANT: What did you do with that \$5,000?

WILSON: I basically set up my living situation, but I used the remainder of the \$5,000 as my capital investment in this new business at Franklin Furnace.

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SANT: Before you started working on Franklin Furnace, where else had you worked in New York?

WILSON: One year I worked in Harry N. Abrams, Inc., and one year I worked at Brooklyn College. Then Brooklyn College fired the English and Art teachers in the great budget cutback of 1975, and I was on Unemployment. And Unemployment was the first grant I ever got. I never looked for a job for a minute. I used the money to start my business and I knew I wanted to be a not-for-profit organization.

SANT: Didn't you need more money than what you got from Unemployment Insurance to run Franklin Furnace and for your own living expenses?

WILSON: I needed more money, absolutely! At that time the state and federal agencies were all actually seeking out worthy projects and saying you can apply to us for money. So the lady from the New York State Council on the Arts came down, looked us over, checked out what we were doing and said, the deadline is March 1st and you can apply for money. And Brian O'Doherty took me to lunch with Richard Kostelanetz and said the same thing, you know, I'm the head of the Visual Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, we want to support budding young arts organizations, and you can apply to us for money. So I did that, and in the first year I got \$5,000 from the New York State Council on the Arts.

cil on the Arts. The budget for the first year was \$12,000 so it must have been five from the NEA. And then the rest of the money that I had to work with was \$2,000 left over from this check from Richards, and Unemployment Insurance. That was the \$12,000 that comprised the first year's budget.

SANT: What did you do with that budget during the first year?

WILSON: Rent. Rent was a big number. Rent was \$500 a month, which I was already splitting with my roommate. That was a lot of money for us! There was rent and stationery. Postage. A lot of postage. Printing and Xeroxing and stuff like that. All the earliest archives are on carbon paper—we kept carbons because that's what we did at Abrams. My year at Abrams was extremely valuable because I learned how a business works. It wasn't like graduate school, which was all about ideas—very nice. It was about how you actually publish something and the way you actually publish something is you keep copies of everything. So I was the air traffic controller for the editorial side.

SANT: Did you also hire people to work for you?

WILSON: Not really. At first I only had volunteer help.

SANT: When did you start hiring people?

WILSON: This is a very good story: Barbara Quinn, a painter, came in to Franklin Furnace and said, "Look I have raised money in order to keep bread on my table—that's what I've done in my professional life to keep my body and soul together. I'm an artist and but I also do this fundraising and you need to hire me because you obviously don't have a flying fuck of an idea what you're doing here." And she was absolutely right. I thought, well I'm getting \$75 a week from Unemployment and she wants \$40 a day that leaves me with \$35 a week left over for myself. If I don't hire her I die but if I do hire her I'll die also, so, I'm going to hire her to work for me one day a week and help me to raise money. She taught me completely invaluable things: for example, if you write to a foundation and they reject your application, wait six months and you write back. I had no idea! It's laughable to look at it now, but she taught me how to do it. The other thing she figured out was, this is work that moves: it's temporary installation work, it's performance work and books. All these things move but visual artists who make painting and sculpture are making this stuff and they understand it and they will help us. So she organized our first art sale. She got big-time artists, her colleagues. At first she asked them to donate work then later we figured out that if we offer to split 50-50 with the artists we could get much better work.

SANT: Working like a gallery.

WILSON: Yes. It happened maybe once a year. She organized the *500 and Under Art Sale*, the *Sweet Art Sale*: for our fifth birthday party, we commissioned birthday cakes and then sold them to the public, and Laurie Anderson performed twice. It was a giant effort! I don't even know how we survived these things. She made a set of William Wegman prints which we raffled off. Anyway, we came up with schemes to raise money.

SANT: How long did she work for you?

WILSON: Ten years, I think. She started pretty early. Jacki Apple, Barbara Quinn, and I ran the joint for some years. Then Jacki and I had a falling out and she subsequently moved to California.

SANT: What had you hired Jacki to do?

WILSON: Actually I never hired Jacki. Jacki programmed the performances and split the gate with the artists, and that's how she made money. She wasn't really making any money from her gate at Franklin Furnace and she was splitting the gate with the artists.

SANT: Was that the only money that the artists were making? The split profit from the gate?

WILSON: In the very early days, yes. But later we started to raise grant money and pay fees. I was trying to raise \$100 a year, so we started out with a \$100 and the next year we paid \$200.

SANT: Was the grant money in addition to half the gate?

WILSON: In the very beginning it was just half the gate, but later we decided it didn't matter. We wanted to unhook the number of people who came from the value of the work. The work can be very valuable and 2 people would be there or it can be not so hot and a 150 people would be there. So the grants made it possible for us to offer a fee. So the artists knew that they were going to get \$350 for this gig.

The artists always knocked themselves out. We would offer \$300, let's say, and Charles Dennis installed a chain-link fence, and Ichi Ikeda created a six-inch-deep swimming pool that filled up the whole basement space. They always spent way more. I think the prize might go to Laurie Beth Clark who spent \$15,000 on her performance installation, bringing 12 people out from Wisconsin and all these props and back-wiring my electrical box. The artists plunged in because it was an opportunity to perform in New York—they put their own resources in as well.

SANT: Did they raise money from other sources too?

WILSON: They raised money. Maybe they had other grants too, who knows? And maybe their grandmother gave them the money. I think Laurie Beth Clark probably worked for a year to get up the money to come and have this gig in New York. It was a very big deal after a while to have this opportunity to present your stuff to the New York audience.

SANT: There was an admission fee for the performances, but was there an admission fee for the installations?

WILSON: No.

SANT: Did you pay a fee for both performances and installations?

This was all fine in the '70s, but then the '80s started and we were expected to institutionalize and become professionals. And that meant first of all take the decisions out of the hands of the artist, which I was not going to do.

WILSON: Everybody got a fee. It was one of the requirements of the grants: "We'll give you this money but you must pay artists' fees." And all artists were fine with that! Later I made it a conscious decision to hire artists to be my Directors of Development and all my staff. The only people on the staff in 25 years who traditionally have not been artists are the financial managers. By hiring artists and having artists on staff, the first response that an artist gets when they come to the door is friendly, warm, and understanding. And we know you're going to flip out at six o'clock right before the doors open for your show as you're hammering the last nail into the wall. And this is all fine because we understand, you're an artist and that's what artists do. This was all fine in the '70s, but then the '80s started and we were expected to institutionalize and become professionals. And that meant first of all take the decisions out of the hands of the artist, which I was not going to do.

SANT: Expected by who?

WILSON: By the National Endowment for the Arts, mainly. They were the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. If you could get an NEA grant for any project then you could get other money to join, because they were an imprimatur of some kind.

SANT: Besides this perspective of legitimacy with other grant-giving institutions, did the NEA also shape the way Franklin Furnace could or couldn't create a comfortable working environment for the artists you wanted to present?

WILSON: Yes. For example I would ask for blanket money for my entire season, and I wouldn't tell them who the artists are going to be. And after a decade had gone by they started to say, "No, we really want to know, we don't want you to pick the artists, we want to pick the artists, we want to know who we are giving the money to. We want to know if Annie Sprinkle is in your program . . ."

SANT: Surely this didn't just happen overnight. Did it? What led to this situation?

WILSON: Take the final report for *Teenytown* [1988]. *Teenytown* was a project of Thought Music, which was Robbie McCauley, Jessica Hagedorn, Laurie Carlos, and John Woo. They designed the whole thing with old animated film footage. It had live performance, recorded sound; it was a multimedia event.¹ We got an NEA grant for that, but by this point we were in the middle of a ten-year NEA audit [1985–1995] for which we had to show the front and the back of every single check stapled to the invoice, every expense. And send it to Washington and they had to approve it and send it back. So can you imagine how many thousands of dollars it cost them to audit my \$5,000 grant. It's just unbelievable, but anyway, at the end of the grant I had already sent in and verified all the expenses according to the budget category that I had originally proposed. Now it's the end of the grant and I have to send in an organizational chart, a written narrative report, written financial report, a list of all the other programs that I've done, and an audited financial statement, to append to this final report. A huge amount of paperwork for a relatively small grant. I think this is a control deal. Through the money, they control these organizations that are getting the money.

SANT: And do you still apply to get this grant?

WILSON: Yes.

SANT: And it's still the same amount?

WILSON: No. That was under the Inter-Arts program, which no longer exists. Then the NEA itself came under fire. At first, under Ronald Reagan, they were being run by Frank Hodsoll, who was an attorney and a friend of Ronald Reagan's who got a nice plum job after this one somewhere else in the government. He dismantled the critics' fellowships first. We didn't see the writing on the wall yet, we didn't understand that the whole fellowship program was going down the drain. It took a decade for it to go down, but where I am going with this is the NEA itself reorganized multiple times to hold off congressional efforts to kill it altogether as an agency. In the old days there used to be all these different programs: Dance, Music, Visual Arts. Now there are four programs: Heritage and Preservation; Access, Arts Learning; Creation; and Organizational Capacity.² So dance will be under Creation, for example. All the programs have been subsumed into these larger efforts.

SANT: Do you get it every year?

WILSON: No. Actually in the old days, in the '70s and the early '80s we could pretty much count on a grant to support our entire season from the NEA Visual Arts Program. Then the fateful day came when my support material including a performance by Scarlet O was played for the National Council of the Arts and they rescinded FF's \$25,000 seasonal grant. That was at the end of 1991 for the 1992 season. Then the Peter Norton Family Foundation replaced it! They just thought it was absurd that the grant was rescinded.

SANT: How did they hear about the situation?

WILSON: I wrote them a letter. One of my Board members said: "The Peter Norton Family Foundation will look at a one-page letter and they'll make a decision in 30 days." They did work fast, and we didn't have to send them an armload of paper.

SANT: And was that the only time they gave you money?

WILSON: So far, yes.

SANT: And how has your relationship with the NEA been in recent years?

WILSON: We got a \$10,000 Creation Grant for our first full season with Pseudo in 1998,³ then we got zero for the second year, so in 2000 we went for Heritage and Preservation again.

SANT: Have you ever sat down with your board, or with someone else, maybe a financial consultant, and specifically discussed changing the way you operate so you can raise more money?

WILSON: With Franklin Furnace's Advancement grant in 1983 I hired Elisabeth Devolder Scarlatos. I've had development consultants. Barbara Quinn was the first one. Second one was Jackie Schiffman, who was with me for a billion years. And we started our education program under Jackie's guidance. And then I got a Capital Campaign consultant when we were to become a downtown art emporium. Steve White was my Capital Campaign consultant. Each person fed into how we put together the budget.

SANT: Was there ever an instance where you saw Franklin Furnace being taken in a different direction than you wanted it to go just so you could raise money?

WILSON: Barbara Quinn and I had the biggest fight one can imagine when she said, "Look, there's money available for us to catalog our collection," and I said I have zero interest doing that. I have no interest in becoming a library and spending our time cataloging. And she said, "I'm sorry! There's money available to catalog the collection, and to do the right thing we have to catalog our collection." So, there's this towering fight, battle of wills. She won! We applied for the money, we got the money, we cataloged the collection. Is that selling out? I don't know. I think one of the jobs of the development director is to say, or Jackie would say, "There is more money available for education programs and we have an education program. Why don't we grow the education program and apply for more money to support it?"

SANT: Is there something that hasn't changed with regards to money matters and Franklin Furnace over the past 25 years?

WILSON: Well, there's never enough money!

The formula for putting together the budget, which started out very, very small and then grew to \$400,000 in the '80s, then shrank again down to \$300,000 or so, the formula has never been a constant. It has always changed slightly each year, how we patched together the money for the program. In the earlier years it was over 50 percent federal money. Later on, during the cultural wars, private foundations picked up where the feds crapped out. New York State Council on the Arts has been steadily supportive for the whole time, 25 years. And now that we are in the virtual state we're again finding new support, whole new foundations that didn't exist before, for example the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology, a foundation started by the inventor of the SoftImage software, based in Montreal. They are giving new money to art that exists on the Internet. The whole foundation didn't even exist 20 years ago.

I like to pay as fat and fluffy artists' fees as possible, so a large portion of the budget always goes out as artists' fees. During the beginning of the '80s I was applying successfully for fairly large NEA grants, \$30,000, 25, 12. Now it has gotten smaller. We put in a good spin on that and said we streamlined and downsized and the reality is that we'd like to have more money, but we do the best we can. We can only have an archivist for two days a week, because I can only afford him for two days a week.

SANT: Are you and the administrator the only full-time employees?

WILSON: No, I'm the only one full-time.

SANT: Do you need a full-time professional staff to run Franklin Furnace?

WILSON: No. We have figured out the drill after all these years.

Notes

1. For more on *Teenytown*, see the "Unwritten History Project" on the Franklin Furnace website <<http://www.franklinfurnace.org/archives/archives.html>>.
2. The NEA has since reorganized its categories yet again. See <<http://www.arts.gov/grants/recent/index.html>>.
3. Pseudo Programs, Inc., provided the first platform for Franklin Furnace's "Live Art on the Internet" programs between 1998 and 2000. For more on Pseudo see Toni Sant's interview with Galinsky in this issue.

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