

Franklin Furnace and Martha Wilson

On a Mission to Make the World Safe for Avantgarde Art

an interview by Toni Sant

Ed. note: Franklin Furnace celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2001. During that period, Toni Sant, who has served as the organization's resident researcher since 1999, had a series of conversations with founder and director Martha Wilson about the early days of the Furnace and the Tribeca neighborhood, its mission and programs, managing an artists' space in New York, the institutions legal and political battles, and the move from 112 Franklin Street to the web. These talks with Wilson run throughout this section, in four parts.¹

PART I:

Art and Real Estate

SANT: Franklin Furnace gets its name from a place: 112 Franklin Street. From the very first day that you and I started planning the celebration of Franklin Furnace's first 25 years, we agreed to address not just that place but also the spatial dynamics that have determined the organization's modus operandi and aspects of the events presented by the Furnace. How did this decision to put so much emphasis on real estate come about?

WILSON: At one point in the early 1990s, when I was looking at new homes for Franklin Furnace, I remember thinking to myself, I'm spending 80 percent of my time on the question of real estate! Franklin Furnace had a home that started out as a sanded patch of floor in front of the loft that was also my home, and then it expended into the belly of the loft, and then I moved into the mezzanine and just the kitchen in the back.

SANT: When you signed that lease back in 1975, what were you looking for in terms of space?

WILSON: Honestly, I was looking for a place to live, as everybody in the building was looking for a place to live.

SANT: So the landlord had spaces he was letting out for people to live in?

WILSON: No, no! It was a net lease of the entire building to a gaggle of artists: Willoughby Sharp, Duff Schweniger, Virginia Piersol, Patrick McEntee, Kurt Maneske, Martha Wilson, Haviland Wright. And we had an agreement between parties that Haviland and I shared the ground floor, Willoughby had the top floor, Virginia had third floor, and so on.

SANT: Was the original concept that all five floors would be living quarters for artists?

WILSON: Well, no. Not exactly. Willoughby's original concept was that it would be the Franklin Street Arts Center. Each floor would have an activity. I was on the ground floor and since there were already bookcases and I was interested in books I would obviously have a bookstore, and he would have a video theatre, somebody else would have film screening and editing services, I guess that was going to be Virginia, I'm not quite sure anymore. Anyway, nobody took it seriously at all; everybody bought hot-water heaters and moved in, including Willoughby! No, that's not true: Willoughby mounted some programs of what he called Live Injection Point in the basement. But his vision was of a building full of artists that would be creating public events and the whole building would be a place for public and community gathering.

SANT: Does this mean that Willoughby was the first live-art event organizer at 112 Franklin Street?

WILSON: Yes. I would say so. Willoughby and Virginia Piersol, an artist whom I had seen perform at the Idea Warehouse, Alanna Heiss's space on Reade Street. Alanna Heiss was busy getting city-owned properties and turning them over for art-use all over the city through the Institute for Art and Urban Resources.²

SANT: What was the first thing you did when you moved in?

WILSON: The first thing I did was buy a vacuum cleaner, the second thing I did was buy a hot-water heater, third I bought a stove; converting the space slowly.

SANT: Was the space officially recognized as a mixed-use building? I don't know what the laws were like at that time, but was it possible for you to be living in this place when at the same time you were having a bookstore there?

WILSON: It was a net lease for the whole building and it was also for commercial use.

SANT: But could you legally live in a commercial space at the time?

WILSON: No, not really. The Loft Law [1982] came in after we were already occupying the space.

SANT: And the Loft Law made it legally possible to live in a commercial space?

WILSON: The Loft Law says you can live in a commercial space, but the landlord is responsible for upgrading the commercial space and making it livable under the terms of the Loft Law. You have to have a way to get out in case of fire, you have to have two ways of egress, reasonable windows, and heat on weekends, whereas commercial leases don't require that kind of stuff. The city was acknowledging that artists were pioneering these neighborhoods and they were trying to shelter this activity by making the landlords come up to a code.

SANT: During those early years of Franklin Furnace, this was happening all over Tribeca and Soho, right?

WILSON: Soho was the first neighborhood that was pioneered—I think the Loft Law was pioneered there too—and then Tribeca was the second neighborhood that was covered by the Loft Law. Now I think it's in Williamsburgh and in Dumbo.³ The Loft Law has now gone on to cover various artists' neighborhoods where pioneering activities are going on.

SANT: The Loft Law is significant in understanding the development of Franklin Furnace. How did you decide to incorporate Franklin Furnace?

WILSON: At first it was not clear if I was incorporating the Franklin Street Arts Center or if I was incorporating a separate entity within the Franklin Street Arts Center. The confusion was in January, February, March of 1976 when I was out pounding pavements, going to the Attorney General's office and incorporating the organization, which only cost a few hundred bucks. I also made this decision that I was a separate corporate entity from the Franklin Street Arts Center. I was Franklin Furnace, an organization that existed on the ground floor of this building known as the Franklin Street Arts Center. Willoughby Sharp coined the term Franklin Furnace; I always give him credit for that. I was going to call it the Franklin Stove and he said, no you must call it Franklin Furnace.

SANT: How does a furnace or a stove relate to a bookstore?

WILSON: It's a hothouse for artists' ideas, a place where ideas create light and heat.

I used the same three months that I was incorporating myself to gather the books for opening day, which was 3 April 1976. So, opening day arrives and I opened the bookstore, and meanwhile Printed Matter is starting to form. Printed Matter is not a sole proprietorship as Franklin Furnace was—I was operating solo—but a collective, about 12 people. They decided that the art world needed books to be published, especially risky stuff that wasn't being published by commercial houses or that artists couldn't afford to do themselves. And, that artists' books needed to be distributed. There was a big need in that. So, first three months I'm gathering books, second three months, April, May, June, we're talking to each other. Printed Matter and Franklin Furnace are talking to each other because obviously our services, our ideas, are overlapping. They want to distribute and I have a bookstore, but I also have this archive and I'm incorporating as a not-for-profit, and they're incorporating as a for-profit because they don't want the Internal Revenue Service to have any control over their content.⁴ What they decide to publish might be too radical for a not-for-profit. So, for a little while, Printed Matter and FF were going to coexist in my loft. That was one of the scenarios.

But that didn't work. So, Printed Matter moved to the Fine Arts Building at 105 Hudson Street, which was a building where a bunch of other spaces and galleries existed, including Artists Space.⁵

It's a hothouse for artists' ideas, a place where ideas create light and heat.

SANT: Why did Franklin Furnace need Printed Matter? I mean, how did Franklin Furnace and Printed Matter come to compliment each other?

WILSON: We figured out that we should just divide the pie up. They would take distribution—I figured out that standing in line at the post office was really not a lot of fun—they would take distribution and publishing, and I would take exhibition and archiving. We took the not-for-profit/museum functions, and they took the for-profit/bookstore type functions. By summer 1976 we had figured out that Franklin Furnace was going to be at 112 Franklin Street and would have a not-for-profit program.

SANT: What was the next significant episode in terms of real estate?

WILSON: Well, the 10-year lease came to an end. We thought it would we never end!

SANT: Was the landlord willing to renew the lease?

WILSON: No.

SANT: Did he have a problem with renewing the net lease of the building or just your part as a commercial space?

WILSON: We were all served with eviction notices but my situation was legally slightly different because by this point it was clear that the Loft Law protected people on the second and third floor, fourth and fifth floors, but it was not clear that it protected people in the commercial space. And I was living in the commercial space. It was one of the vagaries of the Loft Law itself.

SANT: Was it in any way because of Franklin Furnace's activities?

WILSON: No, not at all. Our landlord wanted us to vacate the building so he could sell it empty for twice as much money as his daughter ultimately sold it for. So I got a separate attorney, Paul Gulielmetti, to handle my case and the second, third, fourth, and fifth floors were handled by David Ratner.

SANT: How did the cases end?

WILSON: We all had to establish that we were living there on such and such a date. I did it with my Con Edison bills and with my telephone bills, same as anybody else. The landlord sued everybody on the lease and the lawsuit went for another 10 years or so.

SANT: And meanwhile you were still there.

WILSON: We were putting our money in escrow, and trying to deliver the rent, and he wouldn't accept it, and would put it into his escrow account—and attorneys' letters were going back and forth. This went on for another four years. The landlord died on Halloween in 1990. And his daughter, Louise Longa, told me that he had spent \$100,000 to get us out of the building and she was not up for that, and why didn't we make a reasonable offer to buy. So I called my neighbors right away and we put together an offer for \$650,000 which was half of what he had wanted. So they sold it! We did a big art sale, everybody got up the money, as best they could, we made a \$50,000 down payment and got ourselves a mortgage.

SANT: How did the ownership work out?

WILSON: We formed what is called Cond-Op, that's a co-op on the second, third, fourth, and fifth floors, and a condominium that was FF, the ground floor and basement.

SANT: So you lived there for a good 10 years after the lease expired, first thanks to the litigation, and then to the fact that you bought this space.

WILSON: Yes, and along the way I gathered roommates because the net lease for the ground floor was \$532 or something like that, which was an unheard of sum at that time and I had a whole series of roommates because I could not afford to live there all by myself.

SANT: And all this was during the time before the end of the lease and the litigation?

WILSON: Yes. The basement was occupied also, illegally, because you are not allowed to live in a basement. We kept that really quiet. Finally the co-op took back the basement and leased it to Franklin Furnace. The basement was occupied with people until 1980/81, at which point Franklin Furnace took over the lease to the basement.

SANT: Was that a legal lease?

WILSON: It was more legal than having people live in there. We had storage there, but we needed a performance space and that's why we really got it. In fact you went through the storage unit to get to the performance space.

SANT: And so Franklin Furnace moved its performance space to the basement of 112 Franklin Street.

WILSON: And also around 1980/81 my last roommate moved out. And then I moved out too.

I want to tell a very short story of the early days when a guy with a sapphire ring came around. He was the elevator inspector, the building inspector, water inspector . . . I don't remember . . . he was some kind of inspector from the City. He had this big sapphire ring on his pinkie. He rang my doorbell and I came and he held his hand out and I didn't get it. I didn't understand this was the day when you bribed the building inspector to leave. We were naïve, middle-class people. I didn't understand how the city worked at the time, but those days eventually were over.

SANT: So you didn't grease the hand with the sapphire ring?

WILSON: No. I didn't know! I figured out what I was supposed to do later. We probably had to pay a fine or something that time. They just come around every three months for their regular payoff.

SANT: After some years, however, you did get into some serious trouble and your performance space was closed down. What happened exactly?

WILSON: There are two ideas about what happened around the closure of the performance space at 112 Franklin Street. Diane Torr and I did an oral history of this for my "Archives on the Avant-Garde" page on the website [<http://www.franklinfurnace.org/archival/index.html>]. Karen [Finley] was opening her installation in May 1990 and it was called *A Woman's Life Isn't Worth Much*. There was a group in Washington called People for the American Way, with Norman Lear and other people funding it. They called us and said, "We don't know what's going to happen but we tell you something is going to happen around Karen's opening. We would advise you to invite the entire board and just be

ready for something.” So I did. I invited the entire Board of Directors and we all stood around at the opening and it went off without a hitch, and one of the board members invited me to come over to visit Agnes Denes to have some dinner. So I did, but I felt weird about it because my friend Diane Torr was performing later the same night downstairs in the performing place. And it was really loud and there were cotton balls offered to the patrons who were going in for the performance because it was going to be really loud. But one of the patrons, who is nameless to this day, didn’t see the sign or was outraged that it was loud, and left early. Upstairs there was a buzzer to let yourself out. He didn’t know about the buzzer. The door was locked.

SANT: Was the buzzer not labeled clearly?

WILSON: No, the buzzer wasn’t clearly labeled. The door was locked. I guess eventually he figured out how to get out. He called the New York City Fire Department and said we were an illegal social club. There was a lot of effort by the city to close illegal social clubs because there had been a fire in the Happy Land Social Club and 85 people had died. So the Marshall called me next day and said, “You are running an illegal social club so I’m going to come over and close your ass.” I said please come over and see what we are doing here, we are not running an illegal social club, and you can count how many people we have in the basement, we never have more than 75 people in the basement, that’s the law, please come over. So the next night I’m still not able to see Diane’s performance because I’m upstairs with the Marshall. He’s counting how many people are going downstairs, looking at the egress and everything. And then he gives me a ticket because the people in the basement had to egress through the hallway which went past the boiler room. There was a statute on the books, and it had been on the books all those years and I had never been closed before, but they found that day, that you can’t exit past the boiler room. So we were closed. We had a ticket! And it’s the end of the performance season, we had one performance to go, and we put the artist up at the Kitchen. And then we started to argue with each other, you know, whether the call to the fire department was politically motivated to close the performance space, or just a cranky person who was unhappy that he could not leave.

So the Marshall called me next day and said, “You are running an illegal social club so I’m going to come over and close your ass.” I said please come over and see what we are doing here.

SANT: So this was an ambiguous issue for you and the artists.

WILSON: Even on the staff level there was no agreement. My feeling was that we were told numerous times by People for the American Way and from other people around, Karen’s attorneys, that she was being harassed: “She is being politically harassed and something is going to fall on you too because you are presenting her work.” So I did not know what to do! I really had no idea. I went to Joe Papp who said, “You consider it political harassment and tell every living being whose listening to you that this is what’s happened to you, and you can do a benefit at my place. You just make the biggest, loudest noise possible. The way that political suppression works is that people are silenced. This is what happened in the McCarthy Era. I’ve been through this, I know what it’s like, this is what I advise you to do.” So fine! We did a wonderful benefit at the Public Theater, and Karen performed, and Eric Bogosian performed, Leon Golub talked about political art, and Allen Ginsberg called in from California. And I dressed up as Barbara Bush for the first time.

So the benefit came and went, and the issue never got quite resolved. C. Carr told my story in *The Village Voice*. And then in the book, *On Edge*, she put a footnote saying that she got a call from the unnamed person—we never did find out who it was—who said, “No, I am not a political plant, I’m a cranky person!” But subsequent to this event, as if to bear out my side of the story, I got letters from the General Accounting Office, the Internal Revenue Service, and the New York State Comptroller. All these letters showed up in the summer of 1990 right after Karen’s show at Franklin Furnace, and we went through a triple audit during the summer.

SANT: Did this happen before you had announced the benefit? And if not, were they possibly triggered by the benefit?

WILSON: I think the GAO letter was triggered by Karen Finley's show at Franklin Furnace; they were following her activities. But they knew about these other artists I had shown also: Cheri Gaulke, Frank Moore, Johanna Went. All of them use sexually charged content in their work. So they were after the sexually explicit artists in the program. I think they were trying to establish the idea that we only showed this kind of work and that we were a bordello or something.

SANT: Did all this lead to the decision to sell the space?

WILSON: No. I say what led to the decision to sell the space came a little bit later. We had no interest at all in leaving the space in 1990, but by 1993 we had made the decision. We had started thinking about the long term. What the vision for Franklin Furnace was going to be, and we thought it was going to be a downtown arts emporium. A beautiful gathering place where people can see exhibitions and performance, and there will be a Cyber Café perhaps. I don't think we had the term Cyber Café yet, but that was the idea, some kind of watering hole for artists to look at books and . . .

SANT: In some ways, that was the idea all along, wasn't it?

WILSON: But fully legal this time!

SANT: Would you say that this was a clearly thought-out concept rather than something that would come about by letting it happen organically, as it had before?

WILSON: Yes. Designed by a legitimate architect, and up to code. We owned the building, so now we're not going to exit past the boiler room, we're going to have two means of egress, handicap accessible entrance . . .

SANT: You never told me how you managed to open again after you were closed by the Fire Department.

WILSON: We didn't! We used the basement as storage only. We put all the archives there.

SANT: So that was the end of the basement as a performance space?

WILSON: Yeah, that was it!

SANT: And was the performance program presented on the ground level later?

WILSON: No. Our performances started happening in other people's spaces all over town.

SANT: Oh! Already?

WILSON: 1990 was the beginning of performing in exile in other people's spaces: 1991 was Judson Memorial Church, 1992 was Cooper Union, '93/'94 the New School, and 1995 P.S.122 and NYU, I think, or maybe that was '94. We started making deals to do series in other peoples' spaces.

SANT: This is why the events that led to the closing down are significant. Diane Torr and Karen Finley's shows were the last to be hosted at the Franklin Street performance space.

WILSON: I did continue the installation program on the ground floor right up to the end. February 1997. We closed with our 20th anniversary exhibition *In the Flow*.

SANT: How did the decision to sell the physical space come about?

WILSON: I think in September 1995 I said I want to sell the loft and become a production company.

SANT: Wouldn't you still have needed office space?

WILSON: Yes, but we had a pretty valuable commodity at this point. By the end of the '90s it was clear that the loft was worth something. So the board had a whole committee that for two years was working on this ideas of selling the loft. They bought the idea that we were going to sell the physical space and go virtual, in the broad conceptual sense, but then when we actually started to go virtual they started

to realize we were leaping into the unknown and thought, What business does she have taking us there? She doesn't even have a computer that she knows how to use!

SANT: Did you really not have a computer?

WILSON: It's absolutely true. I got to be horrible starting in Spring of 1996. I started fighting openly with my board. They were prepared to fire me if I couldn't demonstrate that the artists' community wanted to go there with me into this virtual space that I was taking them into. For a little while there was even some question whether the loft would be sold. It was just a horrifying time! But then the loft sold. But we didn't actually close until 9 September 1997. We stayed on at 112 Franklin Street as tenants because the person who had bought it, Christopher Cauldwell, let us stay there for a little bit longer till we found another place to live.

SANT: And you did find the current office space at 45 John Street within a year or so, didn't you?⁶

WILSON: Yes. With a little detour through Chelsea that was going to be a collaboration with other arts organizations but the board said, "Absolutely not, it's not a good idea for leaking boats to lash themselves together!" So we went to the property owned by the deacons and ministers of the Collegiate Church of New York, Dutch Reform Church of New York, chartered in 1628. And they are very good landlords, I have to say.

Notes

1. The conversations were transcribed by Amante Sant.
2. [See Alan Moore and Debra Wacks's article in this issue.]
3. Two Brooklyn neighborhoods. "Dumbo" stands for Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass.
4. Printed Matter was founded as a for-profit alternative arts space in 1976 but reincorporated in 1978 to become an independent nonprofit organization.
5. See <www.artistspace.org> and <www.printedmatter.org>.
6. [On 1 October 2004, Franklin Furnace moved its offices to 80 Arts—The James E. Davis Arts Building, 80 Hanson Place #301, Brooklyn.]

Toni Sant is a Lecturer in Performance and Creative Technologies at the University of Hull's Scarborough Campus in North Yorkshire, England. In 2003 he completed a PhD in the Department of Performance Studies, Tisch School of the Arts/NYU, where he has taught classes about performance and the Internet. He is the Executive Editor of the *Applied and Interactive Theatre Guide* <www.tonisant.com/aitg>, established in 1995. He is currently writing *A History of the Future: Franklin Furnace and the Spirit of the Avant-Garde*.

continued . . .