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COUNTER FORMS
Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

For 'Counter Forms', curator Elena Filipovic brought together the work of Tetsumi Kudo, Alina Szapocznikow, Paul Thek and Hannah Wilke. This deeply researched selection rehabilitated the significance of a group of somewhat under-theorized artists, suggesting that the manner in which they engaged with the body has had profound implications for contemporary art practice. Each artist has attracted institutional re-examination in recent years, on the heels of which Filipovic accepted the invitation to bring together several works never before seen in the US. While Kudo, Szapocznikow, Thek and Wilke never worked together, and may only have had a passing familiarity with each other's practices, they share formal approaches and ideological relationships to the chaos and destruction of the mid-20th-century.

It is tempting to read these works through each artist's biography. Kudo's dismembered, haunted terrariums as post-Hiroshima provocations about radioactivity and impotence; Thek's morbid enclosures of flesh might be read (anachronistically) along with his diagnosis with AIDS; Wilke's latex and terracotta forms have a vocabulary of vulnerability (the artist succumbed to a well-documented battle with lymphoma in 1993). Szapocznikow's biography – life in Nazi-occupied Poland, tuberculosis and terminal breast cancer – has likewise heavily influenced much commentary on her work. Filipovic measured such interpretations carefully, opting for a revised reading that counters perceived wisdom about the period.

Kudo rose out of the young Japanese Neo-Dada Organizers whose milieu was the burned detritus of the war-torn city. His striking models and psychedelic colours were a key influence on Mike Kelley, who once described the work as resembling 'movie props from lurid science fiction scenes'. Likewise, in other writings, Kelley cited Thek as being among the first to show him the potential of large-scale environments constructed through recycled, heterogeneous materials.

The chilling presentation at Andrea Rosen connected Kudo's view of humanity with Thek's objectification of the carnal – both are obsessed with scientism gone awry. The former's themes of radioactive-induced-impotence, garish neons and impossible biologies interact with Thek's 'Technological Reliquaries' (1964–67), meat sculptures and laboratory-like sections of human forms. Kudo's *for nostalgic purposes, for your living-room, souvenir 'la mue'* (1965–66), takes direct aim at the US: a tall signpost, labelled 'For Your Living Room', supports cages containing dismembered human forms. The work represents Kudo's response to the overextension of American scientific and military advancements.

The most pronounced counters to minimalism are found in the objects from Wilke. Her painted terracotta sculptures make simple, near-accidental forms carry provocative messages. Wilke began working with gum, which she viewed as a metaphor for women's role in society – 'chew her up, get what you want out of her, throw her out and pop in a new piece'.

Szapocznikow's haunting *Foot [Fetish V]* (1971) was made in France after her diagnosis with cancer. Anchored by a cast of the artist's foot, a dried blue nylon stocking emerges, resembling the tibia and fibula with considerable anatomical veracity. Newspaper and polyester resin moulds join a flesh-coloured cast of the artist's breast. It provides the balancing support for a disfigured human leg lying desolate, abandoned from the body. In an adjacent room were several of Szapocznikow's *Petite Tumeurs*, polyester resin and gauze sculptures that she began making shortly after her diagnosis in 1969. Hanging nearby was Kudo's *You are metamorphosing* (1967), a green biomorphic form that mimicked the process of two organs duplicating.

What was most striking about 'Counter Forms' was the way in which these works' appeals to the abject seemed wholly contemporary, while the industrial sheen and conceptual gestures of their better-known peers remains pegged to its historical period. The abject is still a theme of great interest to so many of our strongest voices. One thinks of artists such as Robert Gober, Paul McCarthy, David Altmejd and the late Kelley, whose work deals in personal reflections on memory, fascinations with a latent human form, or nightmarish technological situations. The subtext in 'Counter Forms' might have been how these artists embraced Susan Sontag's famous call for an 'erotics of art'. Their work relies on a direct, sensuous connection with what is almost always a human subject, be it memory, fear, disease or inhuman manipulation. Historians searching for a clean post-conceptual lineage of what we mean when we speak of contemporary art will find this show troubling.

MICHAEL PEPI

ARTFORUM

Hannah Wilke

ALISON JACQUES GALLERY
16 - 18 Berners Street
June 4–August 14

Hannah Wilke's premature death at the age of fifty-two can sometimes overshadow her work: While some people romanticize her as an artist struck down in her prime, others point to a one-dimensionality in her practice that, with more time, might have developed in a wider variety of directions. Whatever view one takes, there is little doubt that her focus on feminist issues was unwavering. This exhibition, though, clearly shows that her practice was much broader than it is often given credit for.

The show includes several of Wilke's most iconic photographs from her "S.O.S.—Starification Object Series," 1974–82, and the later series "So Help Me Hannah," 1978. Detractors have asserted that these images fail to pull off the undermining irony they aim for—and that Wilke's use of model-like poses slips into a narcissism that actually reinforces the stereotypes she seeks to subvert. It's an unfair characterization, but one easy to arrive at when the images are taken in isolation. By including several of Wilke's lesser-known works, however, this exhibition gives viewers a more complete picture. The centerpiece of the show is *Elective Affinities*, 1978, in which eighty-six porcelain sculptures are arranged in four faux-Minimalist grids. But rather than having the hard edges associated with Minimalism, every one of the ceramics collapses into labial folds. Then there is *Lincoln Memorial*, 1976, in which a postcard of the American monument is covered with kneaded erasers shaped into vaginal forms. With greater subtlety than her photographs, these and several other works on view undermine the masculine structures they take on. They demonstrate a clever, sardonic humor that permeates the whole exhibition—a raised eyebrow that manages to make its message understood in no uncertain terms.

Hannah Wilke, "S.O.S.—Starification Object Series," 1974–82, vintage silver gelatin print (detail), 7 x 5". Copyright © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt/VAGA, New York, NY. Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles.

— Anthony Byrt

Art in America
February 1997

Mirror of Venus

Surveying Hannah Wilke's performance photographs, films and videos of the 1970s and '80s, a New York exhibition revealed the contradictory forces within the late artist's work.

BY NANCY PRINCENTHAL

Hannah Wilke's 1994 show at Ronald Feldman Gallery, a year after her death from cancer, provided an almost unbearably painful picture of a fall from grace. This past autumn an exhibition titled "Performalist Self-Portraits and Video/Film Performances 1976-85" revealed the gumption, wit and basic humanity that enabled her to face the plunge with such remarkable composure.

Wilke's physical decline was the occasion of what is arguably her most heroic work, a series of big color photographs called "Intra-Venus" that charts the devastation wrought by lymphoma on a once very beautiful face and body [see *A.i.A.*, May '94]. This spectacle of impending death contains as much glory and mordant humor as indignity; indeed, the three are hard to disentangle. To look for the first time at those photos was to feel one's eyes grow wide with astonishment—and in that state to recognize the same unstable mix of triumph, comedy and self-abasement in Wilke's earlier photos and performances.

Those previous works are still outrageous. It's not hard to see why some feminists considered Wilke an embarrassment, while others hailed her courage. In a 1978 series of black-and-white photos called "Snatch Shots with Ray Guns," Wilke cavorts unclothed amid the glamorous decay of P.S. 1. Wearing high heels, she crawls across the building's roof, crouches in a dumpster, pees into a toilet and sprawls at the bottom of the stairs. A toy gun is in her hand throughout. Six of these photos, enlarged to poster size, are emblazoned with slogans that sound like crude forerunners of Barbara Kruger's: "Beyond the Permissibly Given," "Opportunity Makes Relations as It Makes Thieves," "What Does This Represent? What Do You Represent?" Victim, waif, vamp, hooker —there's hardly a role Wilke missed, many of them contradictory. Even the collection of "Ray Guns," assembled from a variety of found materials and displayed at Feldman in vitrines on the floor, breeds uncertainty. Was she capitalizing on her romantic involvement with a powerful male artist (Claes Oldenburg) or boldly reclaiming work that she said she helped him bring about?

Two major performance works were also included in the show. One, presented on a bank of 10 video monitors, documents a nude Wilke making sexy while a female voice reads quotes that range in source from Goethe to Donald Kuspit. Similar quotes appear, flash-card style, in typescript on the wall. *Through the Large Glass* is a film of a 1976 performance in which Wilke does a slow striptease behind Duchamp's so-called *Large Glass*, formally titled *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even.*

But Wilke's attention was hardly monopolized by art-world heavies. Like the ray-gun photos, the video/performance piece and the related texts are part of a body of work titled "So Help Me Hannah." The hectoring voice evoked by this title—loving, bullying and forgiving—belongs unmistakably to the Jewish mother of American myth and, on the evidence of interviews and statements, of Wilke's own experience. Included in this exhibition was a photograph documenting her mother's unsuccessful battle with breast cancer, part of a series which eerily foreshadowed the "Intra-Venus" self-portraits. Not just being her mother's daughter, but also being Jewish, was of great importance to Wilke, who began one interview by claiming, "My consciousness came from being a Jew in World War II" (she was born in 1940). That this statement confounds commonsense understanding of her work, and persona, is part of the point. Memorably if inelegantly, Wilke also said, "When people get so annoyed with content [that] they don't look at things formally, then it's necessary to continue." Which, even posthumously, she does. □

Film still from Hannah Wilke's* Through the Large Glass, *1976, performed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Opposite, black-and-white photographs from the series "So Help Me Hannah: Snatch Shots with Ray Guns," 1978. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

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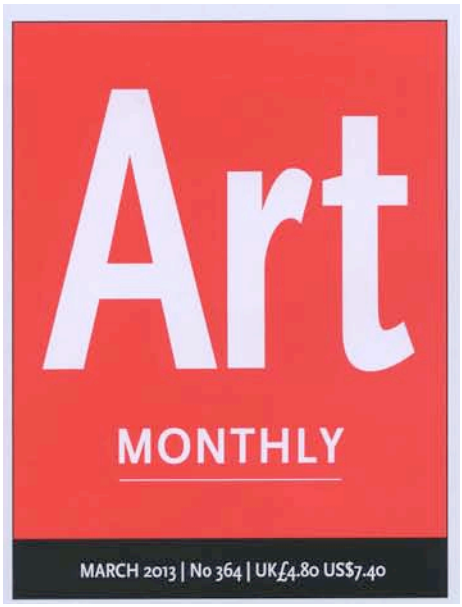

Body I Am

Alison Jacques Gallery London 22 January to 16 February

This show of three early feminist pioneers – Birgit Jürgenssen, Ana Mendieta and Hannah Wilke – is a scanty but tasty hors d'oeuvre to a much-awaited feast that has yet to be curated. Celebrated in a welcome monograph in 2009, now sadly out of print, the work of Jürgenssen (1949-2003) is also currently being revived in a solo show in her native Vienna. Represented here by two drawings, three Polaroids, two sculptures and a wall installation, Jürgenssen was also known for performances and collage. Part of the feminist Avant Garde in Austria that included the more infamous Valie Export, Jürgenssen's wit, intelligence and surrealism cleverly disrupted gender and sexual stereotypes. The cost of this is captured by her pencil drawing *Backbone Alteration*, 1974, in which the spine of a female torso has been prised apart as if the strength needed to exist in a female body wildly distorts its frame and central support. Her *Muscle Shoe*, 1976, shows the ruddy sinew of a skinned foot drawn as a high-heeled shoe, implying that the hideous morphing of the female foot to western erotic standards causes lasting deformity: this hybrid raw form would be impossible to function in. Other works, not shown here, however, convey the lively humour Jürgenssen brings to her theme: in *Balloon Shoe*, 1979, for example, a pair of stockinged buttocks rests roundly on two stumps of shoeless high heels. The show includes her Polaroid *Untitled (Self With Skull)*, 1979, which signals her interest in masks, costumes and animalistic symbolism. Here, what could be a goat or sheep skull is attached to the artist's face above her neck and shoulders which have been pigmented into a patterned hide. There is a spooky timelessness and placelessness to this image that allows it to resonate far beyond the narrowly defined and too-often routinely dismissed 1970s feminist 'body art'. It emits the lasting clarity of purpose of a Claude Cahun self-portrait.

My heart sank when I read the title for this show, 'Body I Am', and my anti-essentialist hackles rose. It is somewhat misleading as each of these artists uses their body in very different ways and to differing ends. It is important to note that the title comes from a poem by Mendieta (1948-1985) which indicates that her use of her own body in her work was as much about constructing and commenting on a cultural and spiritual identity as defining the confines of gender and sexuality: 'Pain of Cuba/ body I am/ my orphanhood I live/ In Cuba when you die/ the earth that covers us/ speaks/ But here,/ covered by the earth whose prisoner I am/ I feel death palpitating underneath the earth.' Landscape and exile are key to Mendieta's creative process. Her earthworks were as influenced by Land Art, Conceptual Art and Performance Art as feminism, and the use of blood in many pieces has roots in Cuban voodoo and rites of death and rebirth, as well as in addressing menstruation and violence against women. Here, in a series of six colour photographs called *Untitled (Self-Portrait with Blood)*, 1973, Mendieta poses in macabre mug shots or morgue shots, her face smeared with fresh blood. They are undoubtedly linked to pieces such as *Rape-Murder* of the same year in which she re-enacted the sexual killing of another student. It is always hard to look at such brutal explorations without revisiting the story of Mendieta's own violent and tragically early death and inscribing the images with prescience. In two Super-8 films, *Mirage* and *Mirage 1*, both 1974, Mendieta crouches naked in a wood, reflected in a mirror. She holds a gourd against her belly and then begins to stab it repeatedly. She then forces it apart and grabs out clumps of white feathers. The relationship of fecundity to self-destruction, of creativity to self-sacrifice is hauntingly and viscerally played out.

There are probably more formal links between Mendieta and Jürgenssen than between either artist and Wilke. In two of the pieces shown here, Wilke is in direct conversation with two male artists. In

Cherry Smith, *Art Monthly,* March 2013

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Ana Mendieta
Untitled (Self Portrait with Blood) 1973

Period, 1991, made when Wilke was 51 and approaching menopause, she takes four postcards of an Ed Ruscha print which uses the word PERIOD and draws little winged seedlings and the words 'and more to come', 'and me to grow'. Linking the word 'period' more explicitly with menstruation and her loss of fertility, she interjects playfully and poignantly into the male canon. In *What Does this Represent*, 1978, one of the most confrontational pieces in the show, Wilke reworks Ad Reinhardt's cartoon of the same title of 1945 in which he drew a man pointing to an abstract painting and jeering, 'What does this represent?' Below, the painting is redrawn as an angry face asking the man, 'What do you represent?' This photograph shows Wilke seated naked (apart from a pair of white high heels) on a gallery floor, amid an array of toy guns and Mickey Mouse figures, holding a whistle in her hand. The text reads 'What does this represent/ What do you represent'. Wilke's face is glum, resigned. Her vagina is centrally placed, with one plastic gun directed at it.

The battlefield of art and gender is sharply staged and still needs to be staged over 30 years later, as galleries and museums abandon gender parity and young male artists recycle feminist tropes without giving any credit where it is due or reiterate violent misogyny without any attempt to deconstruct it.

In another more subdued vein, Wilke's terracotta pussy sculptures (all untitled and from the 1970s) dance delightfully between sexual explicitness and abstract formalism. Some are neat as putty-pink purses, while others make roomy yellow handbags. The female sexual object is powerfully embodied as the erotic, or possibly quite everyday, subject.

While there are many more thematic links among these artists than could possibly appear in such a small show, it does provide a cogent appeal for a more thorough and expansive survey of this significant work. ■

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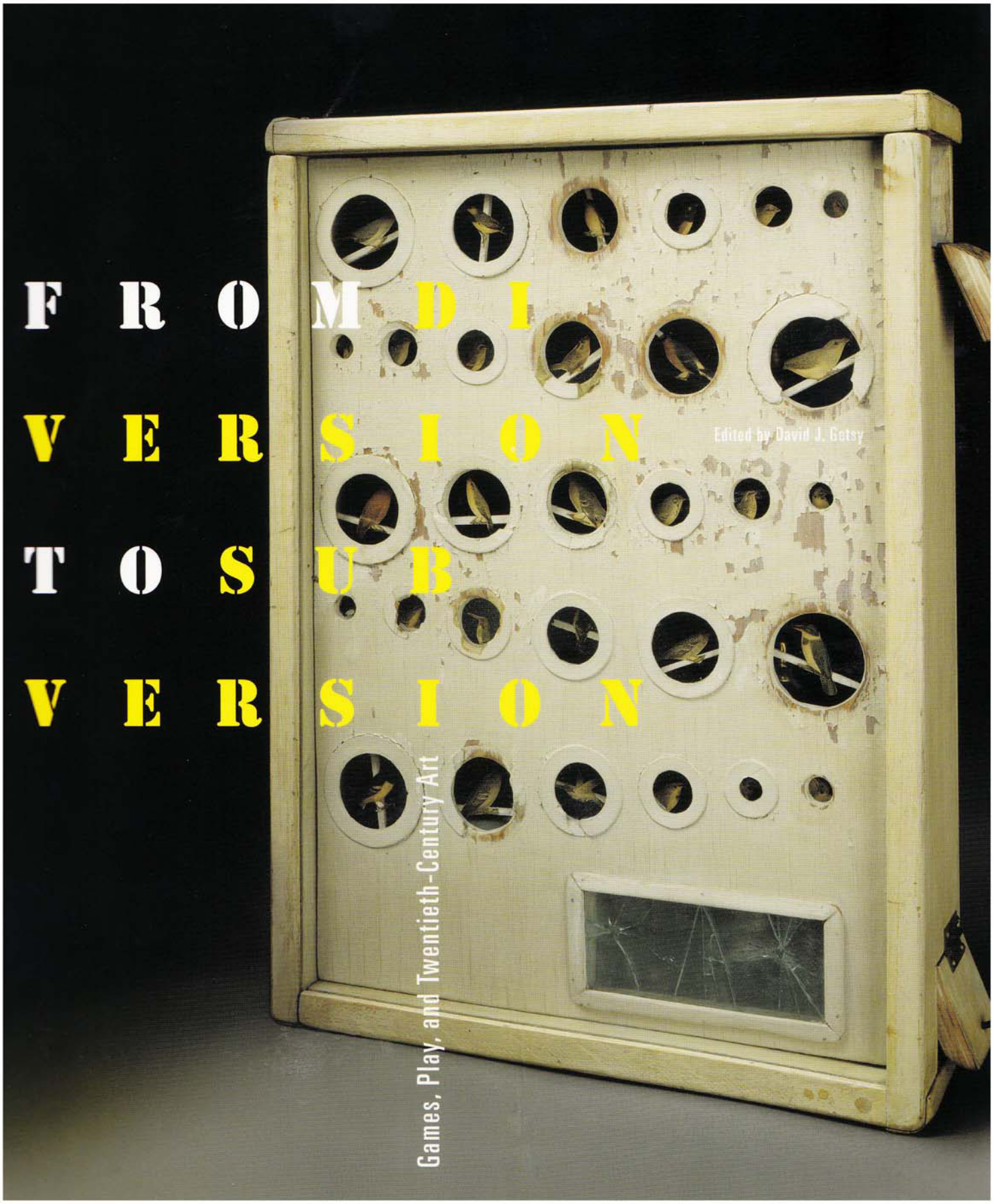
Cherry Smith, *Art Monthly,* March 2013

Wacks, Debra. From Diversion to Subversion. *Excerpted from* Getsy, David. From Diversion to Subversion. University Park, Pennsylvania:The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011. p 105-117.



PLAYING WITH DADA: HANNAH WILKE'S IRREVERENT ARTISTIC DISCOURSE WITH DUCHAMP

DEBRA WACKS

Satire is a lesson, parody is a game.

—VLADIMIR NABOKOV, *STRONG OPINIONS*

I really don't look like I'm serious, but I'm very serious... humour is much more difficult to attain than humourlessness... it's hard to make a joke...jokes are like the most serious things in the world.

—HANNAH WILKE

Hannah Wilke (b. 1940) produced sculpture, paintings, performances, videos, and photographs until her untimely death in 1993. Although she often declared the importance of feminism to her life, Wilke did not belong to any women's group in particular. Instead, both her feminism and her art were cultivated on her own terms, which almost always included humor. This humor operated in constellation with play, puns, parody, and the carnivalesque as a means to convey her serious sociopolitical observations. Humor provided an irreverent tool with which Wilke could chip away at established ideas and hierarchies. As part of this subversive process, Wilke challenged all sorts of authority, including that of a most venerated "father" of both twentieth-century avant-garde art and of the pun—Marcel Duchamp. For he was the one to compete with in order to play the postmodernist game.[1] In this chapter, I will examine Wilke's periodic unrequited art dialogue with Duchamp, one that lasted for years.

Wilke is perhaps best known for her public and private performances of *S.O.S.—Starification Object Series* (1974–79). The private performances—what Wilke called "performalist self-portraits"—are documented through a series of photographs depicting Wilke as she parodies clichéd representations of femininity.[2] In most of the images, Wilke appears partially nude, yet she is always covered with small vaginally shaped chewing-gum sculptures that work to interrupt the scopophilic gaze as well as point to the parodic nature of her gestures.[3] Parody is understood here in terms of Linda Hutcheon's definition, as "repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity."[4] It follows that one must acknowledge the *difference* Wilke produces through her parodies in *S.O.S.* as well as her other works in order to recognize their critical elements—that is, their ability to question and to deconstruct problematic stereotypes.

For their thoughtful comments regarding this chapter, I would like to thank Kathleen Wentrack and Debra Kalmanowitz, with additional gratitude extended to Stuart Spencer and Donald Goddard.

At about the same time that Wilke began working on *S.O.S.* in the mid-1970s, French feminist Luce Irigaray was extolling the subversive power of parody in her 1975 essay "Pouvoir du discours/subordination du féminin."[5] Here she urged women to "play with mimesis," for she explains that to "assume the feminine role deliberately...means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it."[6] By playing with mimesis (or parody), one can invert the power structure defining the feminine.[7] Rather than the passive wearing of femininity, Irigaray calls for an active use of feminine mimicry as a conscious citation and parody of male discourse. Although Irigaray writes in regards to language, an intentional parodic play with visual culture proves to be a likewise formidable strategic method.

Similarly interested in the rebellious potential of play, Susan Rubin Suleiman observes in her book *Subversive Intent* that whereas men regularly use play in their avant-garde work conservatively to reenact patriarchal scenarios, women who play through their art depart from the status quo to produce something innovative. Suleiman praises the liberating effects of laughter, parody, and play in the art and writing of progressive women. For "it is in playing that the 'I' can experience itself in its most fluid and boundaryless state."[8] "I believe," continues Suleiman, "that women—women artists in particular—must be strong enough to allow themselves this kind of play."[9] Later in the text, Suleiman envisions a time when women and future generations of women play together to rewrite traditional psychological and social patterns.[10] This notion of play—as potentially subversive, even transformative—underlies my reading of play in Wilke's art.

Originally, Wilke created her *S.O.S.* images literally to be played with in her work / game entitled *Mastication Box* (1974–75, fig. 34). Taking a cue from Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise* (1941), the piece consists of a black box that contains a variety of chewing gum flavors, game instructions, playing cards, and the thirty-five *S.O.S.* photographs of Wilke.[11] As a game, *Mastication Box* requires the players to chew the provided gum and then, following Wilke's photographic examples, produce their own witty parodies. In terms of wordplay, "Mastication" clearly puns on the act of chewing gum, while "box" evokes the slang term for vagina. The most obvious pun, however, "masturbation box," parallels contemporary 70s feminist calls for self-pleasure (like those of author Betty Dodson).[12]

Pleasure, language, and the body meld together in most of Wilke's work, particularly through the multiple meanings afforded by the pun. For example, the title of *S.O.S.—Starification Object*

Series conveys Wilke's multivoiced sentiments: referring not only to different types of scarification but also to the objectification of famous figures (stars), as well as a dire call for assistance (SOS). Wilke's vaginal-scarification also may be viewed as a response to Duchamp's earlier version of self-starification, when in 1921 he had shaved a star shape onto the back of his head and sacrilegiously called it *Tonsure.*

Such ironic wordplay appears in the work of both artists throughout their careers. With puns, words are placed within a context that suggests layered readings based on similarities of look, sound, or meaning. Strict language systems cannot accommodate the various meanings fostered by puns, which "totally undermine the explicit."[13] Puns fundamentally exploit the ambiguities of language and contradict the concept of singular, unquestionable meaning.[14] From a semiotic perspective, a pun has great potential for causing disorder and confusion because it inherently suggests the disruption of language. Indeed because language is a critical ingredient in the foundation of society and the formation of individuals, then the manipulation and breakdown of words and their meaning should be seen as a socially radical gesture.

Yet Joanna Frueh notes that while the puns in Wilke's work incorporate the sociopolitical and the personal, Duchamp's wordplay is, by contrast, "that of indifference."[15] There is a kind of "cool" detachment in the way Duchamp uses language, whereas Wilke's puns—and her use of humor and play in general—are intrinsically linked to the "hot" context provided by the women's movement in the United States.[16] This was a time when 1970s feminists employed humor strategically. For instance, the November 1973 cover of *Ms.* magazine confronts presumptions concerning feminists' humorlessness with a comic-strip-style cartoon. A bubble over the man's head reads: "Do you know the women's movement has no sense of humor?" To which the woman answers: "No.... But hum a few bars and I'll fake it!" Marie Severin's mocking image succeeded because it used playful humor as the means by which the woman articulated a defense against the criticism implicit in the initial question.

Strategic or "serious" play was also central to more public actions involving the women's movement. In August 1970, fifty thousand women marched down Fifth Avenue in New York City to celebrate the anniversary of women's suffrage. Simultaneously, thousands of people participated in rallies across the country. Photographs of the marches show women laughing and chanting as they take over public streets—all in the name of changing society. By acting en masse against the status quo, these women created contemporary parallels with Mikhail Bakhtin's theories concerning carnival.[17] He believed that carnival activity provides a site for social and linguistic transgressions in which the populace employs humor to rebel against and alter established sociocultural norms and authorities. "Anything goes" during carnival because it is a time of upheaval, blurred boundaries, laughter, and irreverent play. Moreover, once a carnivalesque act occurs, according to Bakhtin, its radicality has the potential to forever alter society as well as the constantly renewing cycle of life and death.

Carnival supplies both a method and a space for change. I am suggesting that, during the 1970s, the women's movement fostered a carnivalesque context that stimulated sociopolitical transformations.[18] In turn, this carnivalesque spirit was embraced and cultivated by feminist artists, particularly by women performance artists. There are many examples of this carnivalesque play; for instance, Linda Montano's *Chicken Dance* performed on the crowded streets of San Francisco in 1972.[19] Dancing around dressed like a chicken, Montano created a playful, yet disruptive, communal spectacle.[20]

Similarly, Wilke deployed play while embodying the carnivalesque spirit in her performances, as in *Through the Large Glass* (1976). In this case, parody acts as Wilke's challenge to Duchamp's monumental sculpture, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (also known as *The Large Glass,* 1915–23) (see fig. 7). According to Duchamp's notes, his sculpture depicts an abstracted narrative about sex, or the lack thereof.[21] The work is explained as a "machine" divided into two parts: the upper register for "the bride," the lower for her "bachelors." The bride, however, forever remains a virgin in Duchamp's onanistic plot. She is caught in the endless cycle of stripping, which is mechanically produced by the frustrated bachelors.

In contrast to Duchamp's representation of masturbation as doomed sexual failure, Wilke had earlier linked it to pleasure and games in her *Mastication Box.* In *Through the Large Glass,* she went further when she erotically played with Duchamp's words and literally stripped *through* the glass sculpture in a performance at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.[22]

Wilke's performance has been captured in a three-part, color art film, *Through the Large Glass.* The first two segments track Wilke as she enters and examines *The Large Glass* while wearing

FIG. 34

Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S.—Starification Object Series, Mastication Box,* 1974–75, chewing gum, black-and-white photographs, playing instructions, and playing cards, 12 × 8 1/2 × 2 inches. © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon, and Andrew Scharlatt / Licensed by VAGA, New York.

FIG. 35

Hannah Wilke, *Through the Large Glass,* 1976, still from the film *C'est la Vie Rrose.* © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon, and Andrew Scharlatt / Licensed by VAGA, New York.

a white three-piece suit, scarf, heels, and fedora hat— an outfit that she associated with her masculine persona (fig. 35).[23] In response to the glass sculpture, Wilke strikes a series of both sexy and silly poses that intertextually recall gestures from her past works, as well as the curved hands from Duchamp's famous self-portrait as Rrose Sélavy (1920–21). Wilke then rhythmically removes every piece of clothing, except for the hat—a marker of her play with gender and a symbolic link to criticality—which always remains on her head. The strip is effortless and graceful, made simpler by the lack of any undergarments. But before she discards her scarf, the camera consciously zooms in on the initialed letter "H," which brands it like a signature on a work of art. Wilke's authorship is made clear.

The third and final segment of the *Through the Large Glass* represents Wilke's performance as a series of snapshots, the movement between poses now removed. This steady and abrupt slide show theoretically parallels the spirit of mechanization fundamental to Duchamp's narrative of *The Large Glass.* Yet Wilke's sexuality remains undeniable, ultimately serving only to contradict the asexuality of Duchamp's "bride."

Throughout Wilke's performance, the camera/viewer stays in front of *The Large Glass* with Wilke remaining behind it. Like the chewing gum in *S.O.S.,* elements of the sculpture (a cone, a sieve) always interrupt any direct viewing of Wilke. Her body is constantly negotiated through Duchamp's work, ensuring that it becomes part of his work and vice versa. Wilke's seduction, however, visually asserts itself and the sculpture eventually slips into the foreground, like a metaphorical scrim. And although Wilke's contemplative gaze stays fixed on Duchamp's sculpture (for the strip is first and foremost in heated dialogue with the work of art), *she* becomes the spectacle—the one to watch.

Whereas essayist Octavio Paz partially described the bride's striptease in Duchamp's *Large Glass* as "a spectacle," Wilke's performance clearly out-spectacles both the bride and her bachelors.[24] Duchamp's sculpture cannot help but appear inert in its role as prop, while Wilke intentionally turns her self / body into a spectacle. In a chapter entitled "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," Mary Russo speaks of "making a spectacle out of oneself," and writes that feminist parody is most disruptive when women employ mimesis to aggressively repeat the feminine.[25] This aggression not only redefines the feminine as a visible force but also produces excessive, subversive *difference.*

Building upon Russo's ideas and writing about hyperbolic, visible femininity, Kathleen Rowe observes that although women have traditionally been objectified and rendered powerless via the spectator's gaze, "in a postmodern culture of the image and the simulacra, power also lies in possession and control *of* the visible."[26] This affords them the power of aggressive visibility in contrast to passive objectivity. In her dual function as artist and model, Wilke deliberately demonstrates her power to (re-)create parodies of femininity in order to skew them (differentiate them). Rowe further explains that women (like Wilke) who purposefully become spectacles engage the carnivalesque and may be labeled "unruly"—one who disturbs social and gender norms, behaves disorderly, and acts out of turn.[27]

Wilke's unruly parody of *The Large Glass* was initially produced for and edited into the German film *C'est la Vie Rrose,* in which Wilke plays herself (1977).[28] The idea that someone else might have more control over the representation of one of her works, however, bothered Wilke enough to simultaneously make her own videotape, a black-and-white "auto-documentary" of *Through the Large Glass* entitled *Philly* (1976). The latter video records Wilke's actions leading up to and during the actual performance and includes some closing scenes as well. As can be expected from Wilke, wordplay contributes to the meaning of the video. The title, *Philly,* not only puns on the site of the performance but also on "filly," a slang term for a vivacious young woman. It plays with the suffix "phile," which connotes "one who loves" when added to another word. And it alludes to the specific Latin word for "love," as in Philadelphia, the city of "brotherly love."

Meant to be viewed together, the film and the auto-documentary not only contrast in appearance (color versus black-and-white, stylized versus documentary) but also in sound.

Through the Large Glass is silent, while *Philly* showcases Wilke's voice. She is heard analyzing art with the museum's curator (Anne d'Harnoncourt), choreographing shots with the film's director (Hans-Christof Stenzel), and chitchatting with the video's cameraman (Andy Mann), all in her noticeably cheerful New York accent. Her instructions are constantly self-interrupted by jokes, double entendres, and carefree laughter, regularly punctuated by her steady champing of chewing gum.

The gentle clash between Wilke's rebellious spirit and the traditions represented by the imposing beaux-arts architecture of the Philadelphia Museum is underscored by a scene from the video that begins with a spotlighted nude bust of a woman. From out of the darkness Wilke's arm can be seen placing her fedora hat onto the sculpture's head. The juxtaposition of the stylish, contemporary man's accessory on the idealized, nude body of the "lady" is not only visually ironic, but also calls attention to constructions of gender—still a novel concept in the 1970s. The hat, however, transforms the timeless beauty from passive object and activates her—emulating the way Wilke complicates her own classically beautiful image. This defiant moment, however, is soon interrupted by an annoyed, off-camera male voice, who asks Wilke to "please remove the hat."

Acute confrontations continue throughout *Philly,* as does Wilke's preoccupation with Duchamp's work. For instance, Wilke is seen walking through the Duchamp exhibit at the museum. She enthusiastically discusses the French titles of the works, all the time holding a vaginal gum sculpture that she playfully threatens to stick to one of Duchamp's pieces. A voice of authority is heard again, this time instructing Wilke "not to touch anything"—unequivocally contrasting with Duchamp's wall sculpture *Prière de toucher* (*Please Touch,* 1947).

But once Wilke enters the private space of the women's restroom—to change into her "male character"—she is free to ignore standard rules of public decorum. She casually discusses Duchamp's work with the unseen cameraman, who pans around the bathroom and excitedly notes similarities between the restricted space he has entered and a typical bathroom for men. When Wilke points to the lack of urinals, the camera purposefully turns to focus on a water fountain, creating a visual pun with Duchamp's notorious porcelain sculpture, *Fountain* (1917). After Wilke mischievously urinates for the camera, she gradually removes her jeans and blouse and dons her white suit. It is not without irony that Wilke undresses and dresses for the camera

while describing the voyeuristic elements of *Etant donnés.* As a finale, Wilke aggressively spits out her gum onto the bathroom floor. She laughs hardily before retrieving the debris and folding it into a familiar vaginal form. With obvious pride, she then sticks the tiny sculpture onto the bathroom wall—surreptitiously ensuring that the Philadelphia Museum of Art displays at least one of her works.[29]

Along similar unruly lines, another scene from the *Philly* video catches Wilke as she plants several steamy kisses onto *The Large Glass* itself, leaving traces of breathy lip marks across the impotent mechanical figures.[30] Wilke's passionate yet sympathetic kisses appear to ameliorate the sculpture of its sexual woes. Bride and bachelors alike are temporarily, simultaneously eroticized by Wilke, whose sensual body transgresses the *Glass'* isolated gendered registers. In this manner, Wilke one-ups Duchamp at his own game—echoing his risqué and antiauthoritarian alteration of Leonardo's painting with *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919). Just as Duchamp had scandalously sexualized *Mona Lisa* with a moustache, Wilke co-opts and transforms Duchamp's masterpiece for her own irreverent sexual scenario.

The Large Glass moves from foreground to background in the final scene of *Philly,* in which Wilke sits at a table playing chess with another woman (I Sa Lo) (fig. 36). Wilke is nude, except for her white hat and high-heeled shoes. She embodies the collapse of traditional mind/body dichotomies and represents a type of thinking nude. Her female companion is dressed androgynously in black. Together they represent a gamut of gender possibilities. Occasionally whispering to each other, they concentrate intensely on the game before them. Reminiscent of Suleiman's feminist vision, they are women playing together and they are rewriting traditional social patterns. Wilke moves a piece and smiles as she says "checkmate." The video cuts to black and ends.

The sense of competition and play in Wilke's chess scene, however, references something beyond the video skit. This performance parodies a famous 1963 photograph of Duchamp playing chess in front of *The Large Glass* at the Pasadena Art Museum (fig. 37).[31] In the photo, he sits at a table with a visually anonymous woman, who is not only completely nude (no hat or shoes), but her face is obscured by her hair, making her identity appear inconsequential.[32] Comparing a film still of Wilke's chess-playing scene (that was used as a promotional image) to the Duchamp photo, one sees that the curved body of the Pasadena nude looks inactive next to Wilke's upright and physically engaged position. Wilke's raised arm is poised to move, which actually mimics Duchamp's ready pose. Compositionally, the images mirror each other, but the firmly maintained gender codes in Duchamp's photograph are ultimately parodied, conflated, and rejected by Wilke's representation.

The relationship between Wilke's work and that of Duchamp sometimes appears to be a game of tug-of-war. As Suleiman suggests: "A double allegiance characterizes much of the best contemporary work by women: on the one hand, an allegiance to the formal experiments and some of the cultural aspirations of the historical male avant-gardes; on the other hand, an allegiance to the feminist critique of dominant sexual ideologies, including the sexual ideology of those same avant-gardes."[33] Through her art, Wilke obviously pays homage to Duchamp as a "father" of both pre-postmodernism and the artistic pun, acknowledging his importance to her work specifically and to art history in general. At the same time, of course, she also misbehaves as a disruptive "daughter."[34] She reiterates, manipulates, and radically alters Duchamp's work, all the time suggesting a kind of heretical play; refusing to follow any law of the father (especially sexual), blurring boundaries, and exaggerating feminine stereotypes. She is an artist jockeying/joking with the / her father's body of work, subsequently providing a feminist / artistic slant to Roland Barthes' bold claim that a "writer is someone who plays with his mother's body."[35]

And so it goes. Wilke continues her parodic/critical challenge to Duchamp's work when she next takes on his final grand piece, *Etant donnés: 1 La Chute d'eau, 2 Le Gaz d'éclairage* (1946–66) with her *I Object: Memoirs of a Sugar Giver* (1977–78, fig. 38). As mentioned earlier, voyeurism is key to *Etant donnés.* Its three-dimensional tableau—which depicts a hidden-faced, disfigured, nude woman sprawled out on a bed of twigs, holding a lighted lamp—can only be seen through two peepholes set in a forbidding wooden door permanently installed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (fig. 39).[36] Wilke responds to the eerie female body with two poster-sized, color performalist-self portraits that together act as a pseudo book jacket belonging to her (not yet formulated) autobiographical text, "I Object: Memoirs of a Sugar Giver."[37]

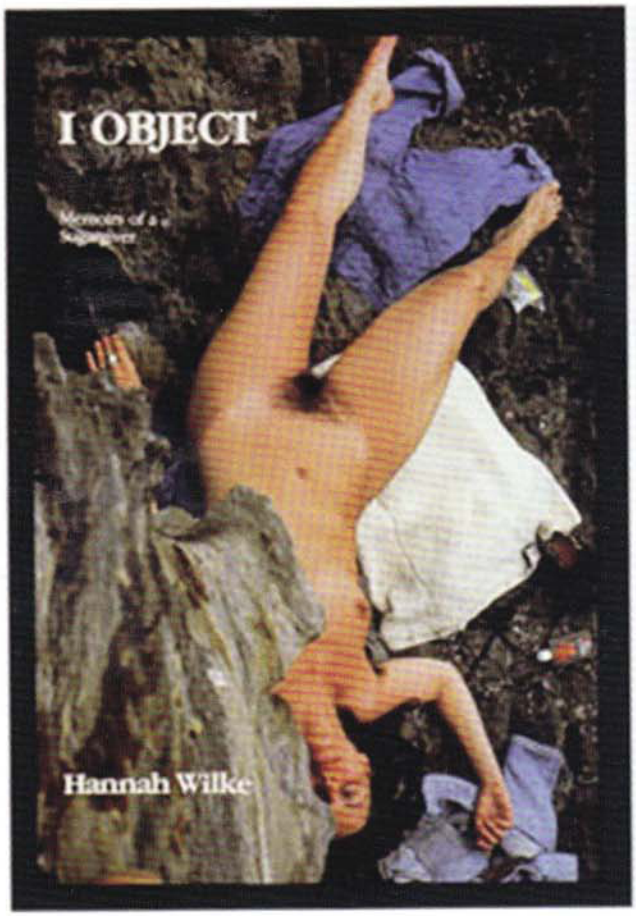
On what is understood to be the "back cover" of the imagined book, Wilke's foreshortened feet are in the foreground; her eyes are hidden and her nostrils exposed. The central focus of the photograph is occupied by the relaxed open thighs of Wilke's appealing nude body—boldly reaffirming Wilke's

FIG. 38

Hannah Wilke, *I Object: Memoirs of a Sugar Giver,* 1977–78, two Cibachromes, each 24 × 16 inches. Performalist Self-Portraits with Richard Hamilton. © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon, and Andrew Scharlatt / Licensed by VAGA, New York.

FIG. 39

Marcel Duchamp, *Etant donnés: 1 La Chute d'eau, 2 Le Gaz d'éclairage,* 1946–66, mixed-media assemblage, 95 1/2 × 70 inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of the Cassandra Foundation, 1969.



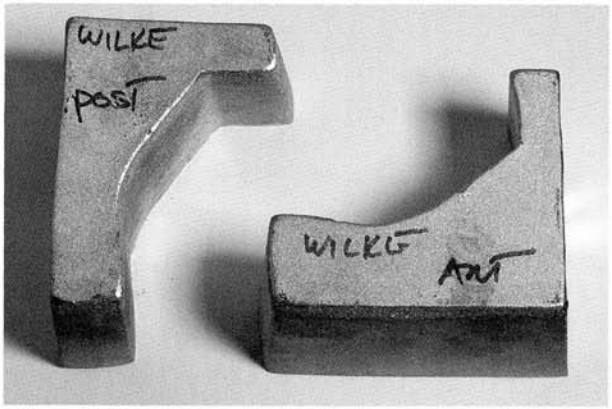


FIG. 40

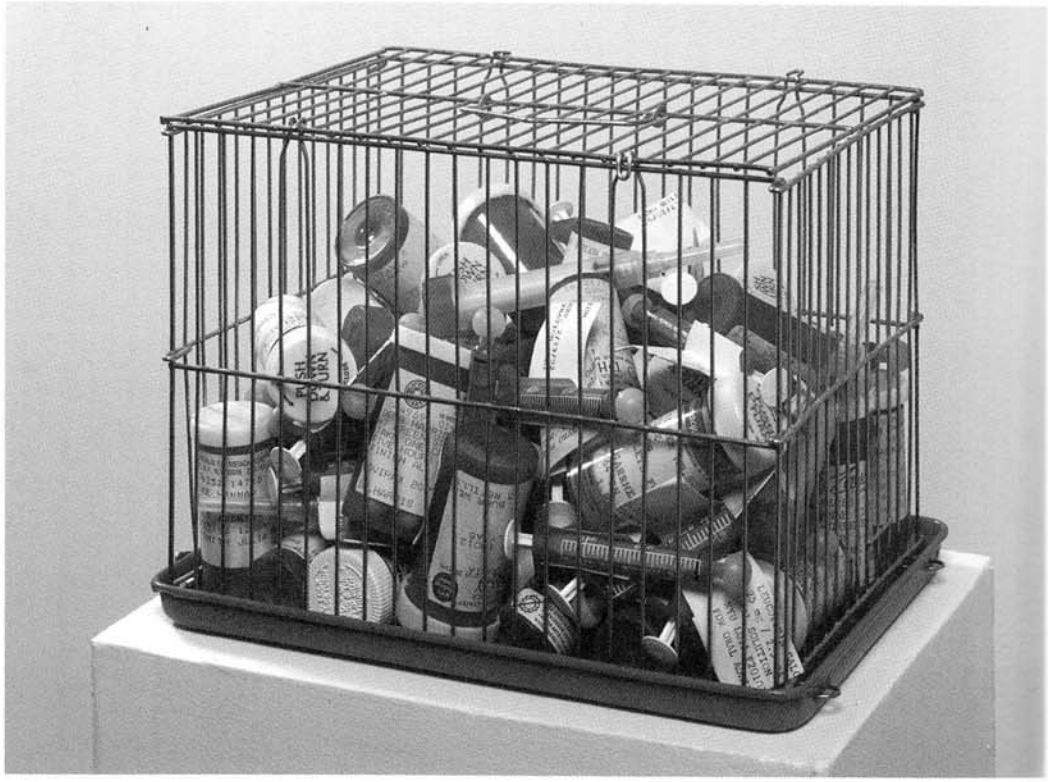
Hannah Wilke, *Wedges of...*, 1992, two lead alloy radiation blocks, $3 \times 6\frac{1}{2} \times 6$ inches. Courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

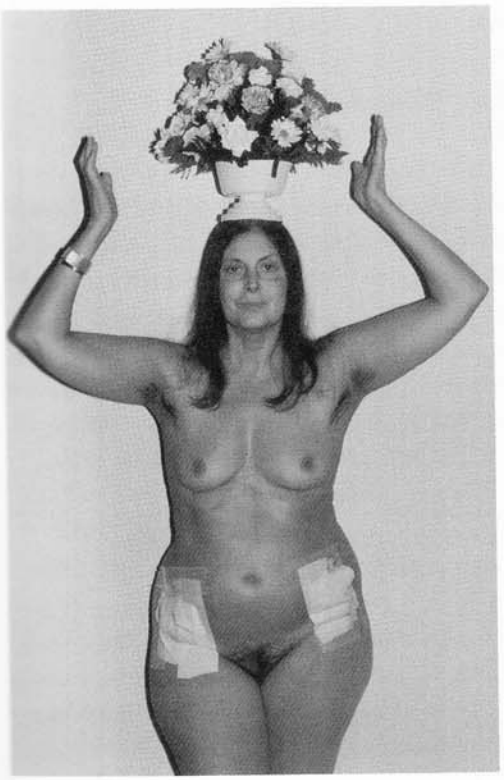
FIG. 41

Hannah Wilke, *Why Not Sneeze?* 1992, wire birdcage, medicine bottles, and syringes, $7 \times 9 \times 6\frac{7}{8}$ inches. Courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

FIG. 42

Intra-Venus Series No. 1 June 15, 1992 / January 30, 1992, 1992, one of two panels, $71\frac{1}{2} \times 47\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Chromagenic supergloss. Performalist Self-Portrait with Donald Goddard. Courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.





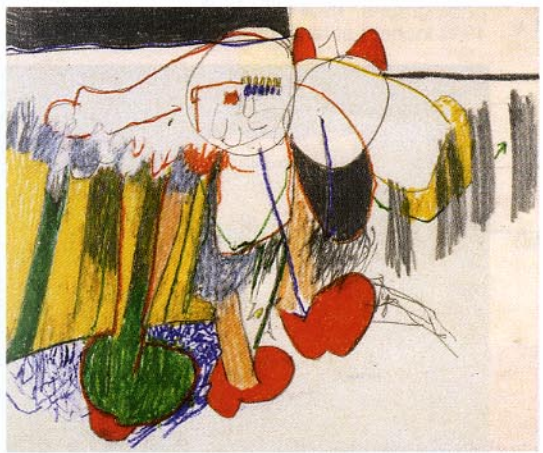
do with Duchamp. If anything, the carnivalesque became adopted instead by the queer movement. Yet Wilke continued to address her body via humor, even in the early 1990s, as she documented her failing battle with lymphoma.

It is under these dire circumstances that Wilke produced two found-object sculptures that finally conclude her games with Duchamp. The first, *Wedges of...*(1992), counters Duchamp's *Wedge of Chastity* (1954), a small sculpture consisting of a rectangular brick of galvanized plaster erotically lodged into a slab of pink dental plastic (fig. 40).[42] In an interesting turn of techniques, the latter sculpture was fabricated by Duchamp, but Wilke's work—two C-shaped, lead pieces—are readymades. They are neck radiation blocks used in Wilke's cancer treatment. And unlike the overt, generalized eroticism of Duchamp's work, Wilke does not attempt to suggest a palpable sexuality. Instead she directly references the growing loss, even the absence of her own, specific (and measured) body. Similarly, Wilke's *Why Not Sneeze?* (1992) (fig. 41) responds to Duchamp's *Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy?* (1921; see fig. 6). Here Duchamp's nonchalant nod to sickness assumes a serious reference. Rather than a generic thermometer and heavy marble cubes, Wilke fills her birdcage with her many empty medicine bottles and used syringes. The fantastic, fictitious persona of Rrose Sélavy is now symbolically replaced by Wilke's very ill, very real body.

The later work that Wilke produced continued to move away thematically from Duchamp's art. In her performalist photographic diptych *Intra-Venus Series No. 1 June 15, 1992/January 30, 1992* (1992), pain blurs with pleasure, beauty with the abject. Intrusive tubes and medical paraphernalia abound as cancer ravages the once-familiar body of Wilke in both images. One of the photographs displays Wilke at her most intense, clearly wrought with pain. The other image shows a nude Wilke with tacky hospital flowers on her head and oozing bandages on her bloated anticlassical form. Despite this, she raises her arms to parody a Greek caryatid figure (fig. 42).[43] The carnivalesque now simmers in a private and more grotesque manner. The latter was always considered by Bakhtin as crucial to cultural subversion—for he believed that the grotesque, especially when suggesting death, regenerates the cycle of life. Once and for all, Wilke blatantly rejects Duchamp's cool irony. And yet, Wilke still played with words. In a manner that is characteristically both personal and passionate, Wilke jarringly brings together invasive hospital procedures (intravenous) with her ongoing identification with Venus, the goddess of love.

Barliant, Claire. "Hannah Wilke: Ronald Feldman."
Art in America, no. 1 (January 2011): 111.

Hannah Wilke: Untitled, 1965, pastel and graphite on paper, 12⅜ by 14⅜ inches; at Ronald Feldman.



HANNAH WILKE
RONALD FELDMAN

Hannah Wilke (1940-1993) is best known for her performative work: the "Starification Object Series," begun in 1974, in which she photographed herself with vaginal-shaped pieces of chewed gum stuck to various parts of her body; *Through the Large Glass*, a video of the striptease she did behind Duchamp's iconic piece at the Philadelphia Museum in 1976; and the "Intra-Venus" photographs (1992-93), self-portraits documenting her struggle with the lymphoma that killed her at age 53. While her greatest notoriety arose from the use of her own (often naked) body as material, Wilke was also an avid draftswoman, as seen in a recent show that included works on paper dating mainly to the late '60s.

Made in a range of styles, Wilke's early drawings offer a glimpse of the artist she was to become—playful, witty, sexy. Pieces from the early 1960s executed in charcoal and black ink display a fierce, raw vitality, their abstract imagery often suggesting breasts or phalluses. Wilke then added pastels to her repertoire and began experimenting with a more graphic, bold, colorful style with elements recalling Miró's airy blobs or Adolph Gottlieb's hovering orbs. In the early '70s she adopted a softer touch and palette. In one drawing, a scalloped circle inscribed with the words "This was once my mother's plate" is placed next to a few delicately rendered flowers that extend from the crumbling end of a pale yellow rectangle. One feels that Wilke is beginning to explore, and tentatively celebrate, her femininity, allowing a vulnerable, personal side to show through. She continued in this vein with mixed-medium works that feature collaged elements with distinctly sentimental overtones—a flower (*Rose in Water*, ca. 1970) or details from Victorian-era illustrations, such as a hound peering from his wooden shelter, three little boys drinking tea, and an elegant dandy. What saves these collages from mawkishness is the quiet minimalism present in the almost invisible pastel stripes that frequently serve as a ground.

It would be misleading to propose that Wilke's work followed a linear trajectory. She continued to use biomorphic, eroticized forms as well as figurative imagery, as seen in a few pieces from the '70s. But some works took a more conceptual turn. A scribbled text piece, *Crucifixion Complex* (1978), alludes to Wilke's Jewish heritage through wordplay, turning PREJUDICE into PRAY JEW DIES; and for *Criminal Fingerprint Record* (1977), she asked a local police precinct to take her fingerprints, then incorporated them into the piece. It's a crucial shift, revealing an artist confident enough to push social limits as well as her own esthetic.

—Claire Barliant

Smith, Roberta. "Hannah Wilke, Early Drawings." *The New York Times*, October 29, 2010, p. C28.

Hannah Wilke

Early Drawings

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts
31 Mercer Street
SoHo
Through Saturday

Before Hannah Wilke became Hannah Wilke, feminist provocateur with a camera (and gum or ceramic vulvas in a range of sizes), she was a spirited, often wicked draftswoman. This informative exhibition features 49 of her early efforts on paper, mostly from the 1960s, but also the '70s. Beginning with works in ink and charcoal that mine the vocabulary of Abstract Expressionism with increasingly emphatic marks and shapes, these drawings constantly flirt with sexual suggestion.

Strong color seems to encourage the tendency, and by the mid-'60s, a series of pastel and graphite works features satiric phalluses, saturated tones and a thinly disguised glee. Among the strongest images are several pastels from 1964 that take things a step further into symmetrical forms that seem to conflate torsos, faces and internal organs into monumental masklike arrangements.

One can imagine Ms. Wilke being inspired first by the brooding reliefs of Lee Bontecou and then the early paintings of Eva Hesse or perhaps the more obstreperous sexuality of Lee Lozano's cartoonish depictions of brightly colored tools. Whatever the course of influence, there is surely a drawing exhibition to be done focusing on these four artists.

Ms. Wilke also had a penchant for refinement and explicit autobiographical references. Both tendencies comes out in the drawing "This Was Once My Mother's Plate" from the mid-'60s, and in "Left-Wing Angel," a delicately rendered portrait of herself with angel wings, from 1976.

In the early '90s, after Wilke had documented her mother's fight with cancer in numerous large photographs, she also recorded unstintingly her own battle with the same disease. But the earlier image of her angelic self assumed a life of its own after she died in 1993, at 52 It is engraved on her tombstone.

ROBERTA SMITH

Rosenberg, Karen. “Commentary That’s Both Visual and Vocal.” *nytimes.com*, July 1st, 2010. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/02/arts/design/02contemporary.html?_r=2

The New York Times

ART REVIEW

Commentary That’s Both Visual and Vocal

By KAREN ROSENBERG

Published: July 1, 2010

Jennifer S. Altman for The New York Times

Geneva Clark, a 16-year-old from Texas, following Yoko Ono’s instructions for “Voice Piece for Soprano”: scream into the mike.

Marina Abramovic’s survey has come and gone, but another longtime performance artist is at large in the Museum of Modern Art. You probably won’t see this one, but you’ll definitely hear visitors carrying out her instructions to step up to a microphone and scream.

That is Yoko Ono, who is reprising her “Voice Piece for Soprano,” originally from 1961, and other pieces as part of MoMA’s latest reinstallation of its contemporary galleries. Like previous exhibitions in the series, “Contemporary Art From the Collection” presents a loosely thematic take on art since the late ’60s. But it’s also a shock to the system, not unlike the screeches and shrieks that emanate from the atrium.

Its stated focus is “current events from the past 40 years,” made literal in Robert Rauschenberg’s 60-foot screenprint of press clippings from 1970, “Currents,” but otherwise suspiciously broad-sounding. (What contemporary art isn’t, in some way, about current events?) Really, though, it’s about the different ways that art can convey urgency and immediacy.

Thus the organizers — the museum’s associate director, Kathy Halbreich, and the curator Christophe Cherix, serve up plenty of performance and performance leftovers. Both are making their first big statements with the contemporary collection, though since arriving at the museum in 2008, they’ve worked on smaller shows, like Ms. Halbreich’s “9 Screens” and Mr. Cherix’s “In & Out of Amsterdam.”

Ms. Halbreich, formerly the director of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, deftly weaves film and video into the mix: short, saucy pieces by Kalup Linzy and Hannah Wilke, and longer, more intense ones by Glenn Ligon and Paul Sharits. Mr. Cherix’s touch can be felt in the many works from his department: prints and illustrated books.

Each has made some inspired choices, in the selection and the installation. They pick uncharacteristic works by the artists we know well, and turn up major statements by the ones we don't. (And, yes, a healthy percentage of the art is by women; a set of posters by the Guerrilla Girls reminds you that this is a relatively new development.)

Among the gems the curators have unearthed is a bridge made of linked pads of steel wool, by the Arte Povera sculptor Pino Pascali; it shares a small gallery with a body-impression drawing by David Hammons, a photograph by Sigmar Polke and a puddle of white spray lacquer by Lawrence Weiner.

The curators also mine the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, a 2009 gift of some 3,000 works relating to the Fluxus movement. This explains Ms. Ono's prominence in the atrium ("Voice Piece for Soprano") and the sculpture garden ("Wish Tree," 1996/2010). And in "Whisper Piece" she's written brief invocations in tiny handwriting on walls throughout the exhibition.

Another Fluxus artist, Alison Knowles, will perform a version of a work from 1969 titled "The Identical Lunch." Beginning next January, she'll serve the same meal — a tuna fish sandwich — to one table of eight visitors to the second-floor cafe who have registered in advance. In the meantime you can see vintage photographs of her friends and colleagues eating their sandwiches.

And just below Ms. Knowles's photographs, a major installation by an underrated elder statesman of Fluxus, George Maciunas, incorporates emptied lemonade cans, sugar boxes and other containers: the remains of food and household products consumed by the artist over a period of one year.

Other bodycentric art is summarily acknowledged in a small gallery of ephemera. Here are the provocative posters and Artforum advertisements through which Robert Morris and Lynda Benglis waged gender war, as well as grainy 1972 Super 8 footage of Vito Acconci performing his autoerotic "Seedbed."

The show's most memorable performance, though, belongs to Ms. Wilke. In a video made in 1976 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the distractingly stylish artist struts and strips behind Duchamp's "Large Glass."

At this stage of the exhibition, the dearth of painting becomes hard to ignore. It's remedied soon enough, with dueling stripes by Daniel Buren and Agnes Martin and a mesmerizing multicolored abstraction by Simon Hantai. Let the others have their Minimalism and institutional critique; the only theory in Mr. Hantai's "Untitled (Suite 'Blancs')," made by painting exposed parts of a crumpled canvas, is string theory.

Even better is the gallery devoted to the 1980s, partly covered in General Idea's {ldquo}AIDS (Wallpaper).{rdquo} Modeled on Robert Indiana's "LOVE" letters, it makes a striking background for Warhol's immense gold Rorschach painting and Bruce Nauman's drawing "Punch and Judy II Birth & Life & Sex & Death." The elements of the installation are so carefully interwoven that the show starts to look like a Biennial, in a good way.

The final section, though, has some of the not-so-good hallmarks of Biennials: uninspired found-object tweaking, meaningless clustering and text that's full of curatorspeak ("willful mistranslation"). The sweet scent of Cildo Meireles's hay-bale cube, "Thread," helps a bit, as do strong drawings and prints by Huang Yong Ping and Huma Bhabha.

The intensity picks up again at the show's end, with an installation that documents Paul Chan's "Waiting for Godot in New Orleans." Mr. Chan's 2007 staging of that Beckett play in the Katrina-scarred Lower Ninth Ward was, by all accounts, a profound and cathartic event.

Some of those emotions get lost in Mr. Chan's exhaustive archive of audio, video, photographs, maps and props. But they return, suddenly, with a scream.

"Contemporary Art From the Collection" continues through Sept. 12, 2011, at the Museum of Modern Art; (212) 708-9400, moma.org.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: July 3, 2010

Schedule information on Friday with an art review of "Contemporary Art From the Collection," at the Museum of Modern Art, misstated the closing date. It is Sept. 12, 2011 — not Sept. 12 this year. The review referred incorrectly to the performance piece by Alison Knowles called "The Identical Lunch" that will be part of the exhibition. When it begins in January it will be during the run of the show, not after the exhibition has closed. In the piece, which will run twice a week

from Jan. 13 to Feb. 4, Ms. Knowles will serve the same meal to one table of eight visitors to the second-floor cafe who have registered in advance. She will not be serving it to all visitors to the cafe.

Jennifer S. Altman for The New York Times

Hannah Wilke’s “Through the Large Glass,” left, and part of Robert Rauschenberg’s “Currents.”

Micchelli, Thomas. "Hannah Wilke: Early Drawings." *The Brooklyn Rail* (October 2010): 46.

HANNAH WILKE *Early Drawings*

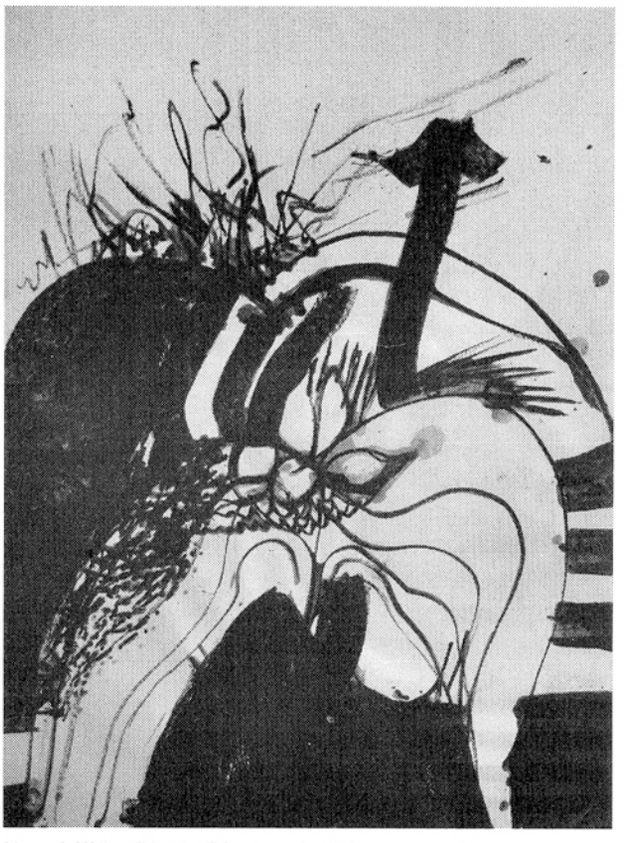
RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS | SEPTEMBER 11 – OCTOBER 30, 2010

THOMAS MICCHELLI

Walking in off the street, it's immediately obvious that these drawings need no footnotes, subtext or backstory. They are the markings, of a restive, smoldering intelligence—barreling through ideas, conjoining and discarding influences, resisting and succumbing to the pull of the senses. Above all, they are the work of a sculptor engaging the hazards of two-dimensional space. She digs into the surface, packs in forms and scoops out voids, simultaneously envisioning image and object.

The drama of Hannah Wilke's life and death has often obscured that, at her core, she was a maker of things. Her notoriety as a pioneer of body art who reveled in her own sexiness, followed all too quickly by her harrowing cancer chronicles, has created an overpowering narrative that is only now, more than a decade and a half after she died at 52, beginning to admit some of the complexity beneath the surface. A major exhibition of her sculpture two years ago at the Neuberger Museum, and now this show of early drawings at Feldman, have reintroduced Wilke as an artist whose sensuality and humor are matched by her formal acumen and tactile rigor.

Mostly undated, many unsigned, and often made on thin, inexpensive-looking paper, the sheets comprising this exhibition have the feel of working drawings, not unlike those of Claes Oldenburg, with whom Wilke was involved during much of the period covered by the show, or Louise Bourgeois, who possessed a similarly sly, sensually surrealist wit. But rather than visualizing a specific project, these drawings, most of which were done in the 1960s, tackle head-on the task of making art in a transitional time. Fresh and unflinching, they set their sights and go for broke.



Hannah Wilke, "Untitled" (early 1960s). Charcoal and ink on paper. 24 x 18 inches. Courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

Throughout, you sense a tug of war between Pop and abstraction: scribbles jostle with five-point stars; funky vintage postcards hover over strips of pale, Agnes Martin-like color; geometric shapes smack up against Gorky-biomorphic swells. This continual agitation eventually leads to something else, a unique vessel that is infectiously neither and both.

In a discussion with Lil Picard published in *Andy Warhol's Interview* (January 1973), Wilke describes her vulva-shaped sculptures, which became something of a signature image, in this way: "I think I am very much concerned with form and the relationship of form. The Vagina is an internal object, and therefore it can't be castrated. It is a much more metaphysical statement, has no reality—clinically it has—but nobody has a real and direct picture of what one looks [like], and therefore it can be abstracted, and I can make it into art." This comment perfectly encapsulates the paradigm that Wilke appears to be seeking in these works: real, organic, platonic, abstract.

Wilke's restlessness is manifest in the abrupt stylistic shifts documented by the show, from geometric to expressionistic, totemic to conceptual. While not every work is a knockout, with some slipping into generic abstraction and others unable to construct a scaffold for Wilke's youthful energy, there are quite a few that seem to land just where she wants—achieving secure form and an autonomous line—with a palpable shudder of satisfaction.

In Feldman's second room, there are two sketches from 1976 depicting the artist with wings sprouting from her shoulder blades. They are studies for "Self-Portrait as Angel," a commission from the Museum of Modern Art that was published as a greeting card the following year. "Self-Portrait as Angel" is an uncharacteristically sweet, quietly preposterous image—an unexpected sidebar to an unpredictable and unprecedented career. It feels ripe for any kind of reading: the artist as holy fool; a foreshadowing of her death sixteen years later; a bit of before-the-fact institutional critique, gently mocking the immortality a museum can bestow. But in its strangeness and apparent untethering from self-censorship or autocritique, it amounts to an icon of Hannah Wilke's legacy—audacious, immodest, flagrantly incorrect.

Cotter, Holland. “Landscape of Eros, Through the Peephole.” *The New York Times*, Friday, August 28, 2009, pp. C21- C22.

August 28, 2009
Art Review

Landscape of Eros, Through the Peephole

By HOLLAND COTTER

PHILADELPHIA — “Marcel, Marcel, I love you like Hell, Marcel.” So ran a mash note written to Marcel Duchamp in 1923 by the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, one of the scores of women, and many men, for whom Duchamp was a personal fixation, erotic, aesthetic or otherwise.

For many contemporary art lovers he is a fixation still, the archangel of a once and possibly future avant-garde and a patron saint of postmodernism. And the Philadelphia Museum of Art, rich with relics of his sly, seductively standoffish spirit, is a pilgrimage site.

The 1912 painting “Nude Descending a Staircase,” Duchamp’s first succès de scandale, is here. So is “The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even” (1915-23), also called “The Large Glass,” a see-through mural about mechanized love and erotic frustration. And then there are the “erotic objects,” paperweight-size things molded from the body’s intimate nooks and crevices.

Duchamp’s great monument to eros, though, is the tableau called “Étant Donnés: 1. La Chute d’Eau, 2. Le Gaz d’Éclairage” (“Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas”). Created in almost complete secrecy between 1946 and 1966, it was his final work, and also his weirdest and most mysterious. And it is the subject of a potent exhibition at the museum called “Marcel Duchamp: Étant Donnés,” which, among other things, finesses the lingering myth that Duchamp ended up abandoning art for a life of chess and cogitation.

In reality, and by his own description, he simply went “underground.” He went on with his very active art-world social life, but told almost no one about the art he was making. He left the completed “Étant Donnés” in his bare-bones Manhattan studio when he died in 1968. The next year it was placed, as he had assumed it would be, on permanent view in the Philadelphia Museum gallery dedicated to the big cache of his work that came to the museum with the Arensberg collection in the 1950s. The gallery has been reinstalled with new material, much of it never before exhibited, to create the present show.

Jasper Johns, a longtime Duchampian, once referred to “Étant Donnés” as “the strangest work of art in any museum.” And strange it is. It occupies a closed-off room in a dead-end area at the back of the main Duchamp gallery. The room can’t be entered. The entrance is blocked by a pair of locked antique wooden doors, solid except for two tiny side-by-side peepholes in their center.

When you look through the holes — only one person at a time can do so, making for a very self-conscious viewing experience — you see a shattered brick wall just beyond the door, and in the distance a painted landscape of hills, autumn-tinged trees and what appears to be an actively flowing waterfall.

In the foreground, just past the shattered wall, the nude body of a woman reclines on a nest of dried branches, her legs spread wide to reveal oddly malformed genitals. Her face is obscured by her blond hair. Her lower legs and right arm are out of the range of vision. Her left arm is raised at the elbow, and in her hand she holds a small, glowing electric lamp.

The sight, at once bucolic and freakish, provoked an uproar when the piece had its public debut 40 years ago. What are we looking at? The aftermath of rape, mutilation and attempted murder? A profane update of Bernini’s “Ecstasy of St. Teresa”? (Duchamp sometimes referred to the figure as “Our Lady of Desires.”)

Either way, it must have struck some feminists as one more addition to art history's archive of aggression against women. And these viewers would have found small comfort in learning that the piece was conceived as a kind of erotic homage to two specific women in Duchamp's life.

One was the Brazilian-born sculptor Maria Martins, with whom he had an affair from 1946 to 1951. His art went wild during that time. The "erotic objects" proliferated. He made paintings from semen and collages from body hair. The nude in "Étant Donnés" is largely pieced together from casts of Martins's voluptuous figure. She was both the object of the work and a collaborator: Duchamp consulted her repeatedly as the work progressed.

The other woman was Duchamp's second wife, Alexina, known as Teeny, whom he married after the Martins affair, in 1954. It is a cast of her hand that holds the electric lamp in the tableau. She was privy to every step in the progress of the piece as it evolved toward completion.

It is the making of "Étant Donnés," rather than its enigmatic meaning, that this exhibition focuses on. Michael R. Taylor, curator of modern art at the Philadelphia Museum, essentially gives us a detailed backstage tour of the fabrication process, a tour all the more intriguing for being devoted to an artist who, it is often said, came to disdain all creative tools apart from ideas.

Proof to the contrary is here. Almost every surviving scrap of physical material related to "Étant Donnés" has been gathered, either from the museum's deep Duchamp archives or from other collections. From 1946, early in the piece's history, comes a highly polished pencil drawing of Martins's nude body; later come plaster casts of her limbs and samples of "skin" made from parchment, all evidence of Duchamp's fascination with craft and the naturalistic effects it could achieve: flesh that was smooth but not slick; skin that looked warm but not too flushed.

The background landscape was a similar blend of artifice and realism. The scene originated in photographs Duchamp took on a vacation in Switzerland. He enlarged the prints, cut them up and rearranged them to eliminate any evidence of buildings. After photographing and printing the altered panorama on cloth, he meticulously colored it with oil paint and chalk. He made the "moving" waterfall from translucent plastic backed by rotating discs powered by a motor housed in a biscuit tin.

The illusion of space and atmosphere seen in the peephole view is remarkable, especially given the out-of-sight construction that produces it, a ramshackle exercise in bad carpentry and precarious wiring, with pieces of drapery held in place by clothespins. It's all documented in a series of Polaroids Duchamp took of the nearly finished piece in 1965, when he learned that the lease on his longtime studio in Manhattan wasn't being renewed and that he had to move everything to a different space.

The Polaroids, being exhibited publicly for the first time, left me a little breathless. They are documents, not of a fabled retirement, not of cerebral dandyism, but of effort, effort, effort, and the strain and anxiety Duchamp was under as he began to form, through photographs, the rudiments of an instruction manual for dismantling and reassembling the flimsy product of nearly 20 years' work.

The same dynamic of effort animates Mr. Taylor's exceptional catalog, which weighs a scholarly ton but is as absorbing to read as a whodunit. I wolfed it down, transfixed, in a night and a day.

It covers not only, step by step, the two decades of the tableau's creation, but also the minutiae of its delicate transfer to Philadelphia, an operation overseen by a young curator named Anne d'Harnoncourt, who a few years later would help to organize the museum's great Duchamp retrospective and would then serve as the institution's much-admired director from 1982 until her sudden death last year.

Both the book and the exhibition are dedicated to her. And both include something she would have liked: work by contemporary artists for whom Duchamp, and "Étant Donnés" in particular, has been an inspiration. Robert Gober and Marcel Dzama are among those covered in the catalog. Ray Johnson is in the show, with some snappy mail-art drawings that filter Duchamp's piece through a homoerotic lens — quite plausibly, given Duchamp's efforts to scramble conventional gender categories in his work.

And there is a film by a contemporary female artist, Hannah Wilke (1940-93), who went to art school in Philadelphia, saw “Étant Donnés ” soon after its installation and remembered finding it “repulsive.” She later did a performance about it in which she assumed the place of the prone figure. And in a 1976 film made in the museum’s Duchamp gallery, she engaged with “The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even,” his other grand erotic masterwork.

Dressed in a high-fashion white tailored suit and fedora, she does a slow striptease in front of the piece, or rather behind it, as the camera shoots her performance through the glass and through Duchamp’s painted phallic and vaginal forms frozen in unconsummated union.

Wilke, who was a great beauty, preens, shifts, undoes a button, tips her hat, shifts, stares, slowly pulls at a zipper. The Bride and the Bachelors can never complete their erotic task, but she can. In her performance she was the cool but active counterpart to the woman in “Étant Donnés,” just as exposed but in control of the exposure.

Duchamp, the transcendent pornographer, would have understood all these contradictions. I suspect he saw himself both as the distanced creator of his final work and as the passively light-bearing figure lying within it. And surely he would have agreed with Wilke’s tough-love words: “To honor Duchamp is to oppose him.” Because he opposed himself — or the mythical self he invented — by slaving away at material forms of art that he had declared beneath contempt. His dispassionate passion is what continues to make him magnetic. Tough self-love, perverse and seductive, is what “Étant Donnés” is about.

“Marcel Duchamp: Étant Donnés” continues through Nov. 29 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Benjamin Franklin Parkway at 26th Street; (215) 763-8100, philamuseum.org.

Chave, Anna C. *"'I Object' Hannah Wilke's Feminism."* Art in America, no. 3 (March 2009): 104-109, 159.

Art in America

"I OBJECT" HANNAH WILKE'S FEMINISM

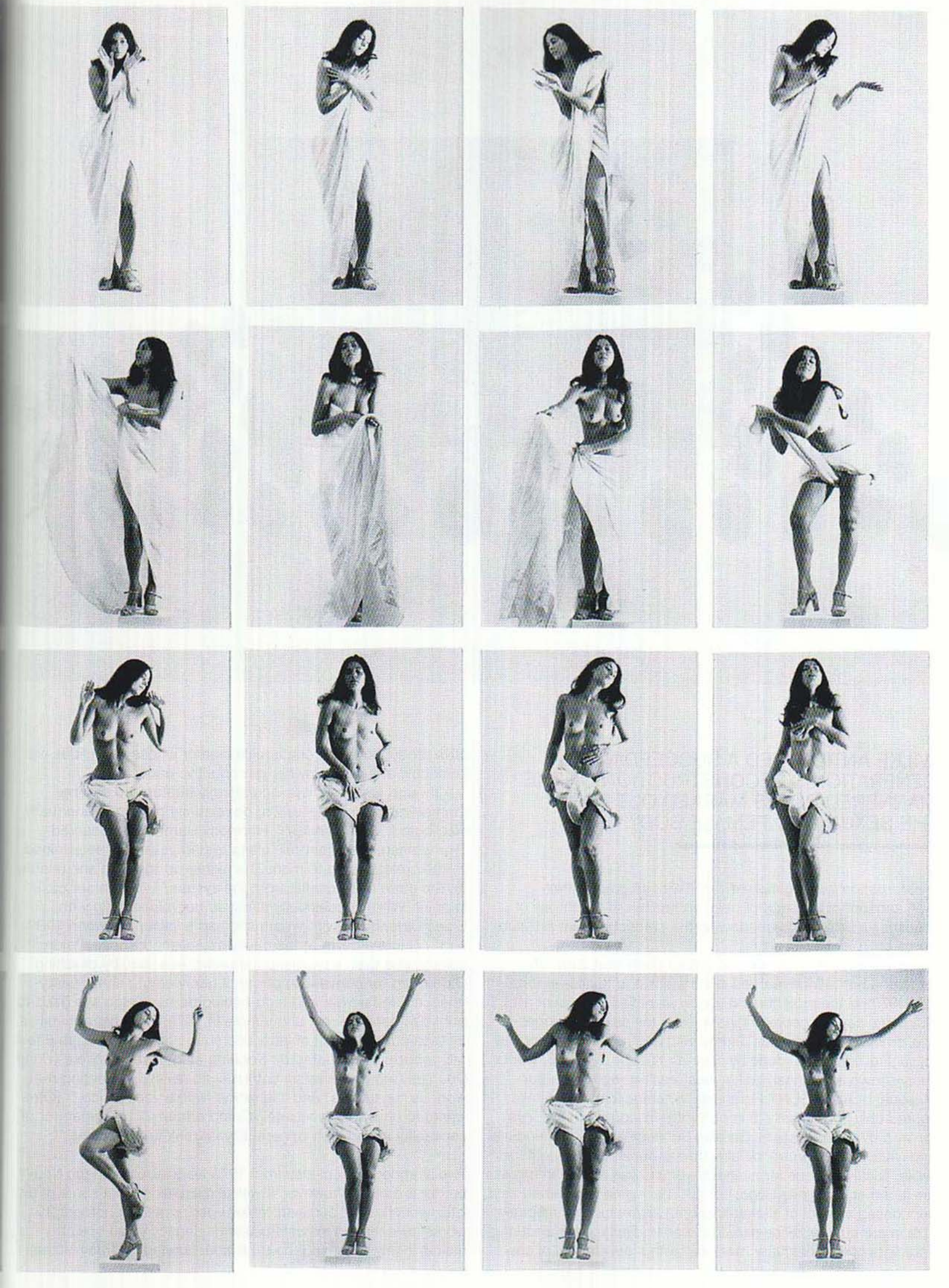
In her groundbreaking sculpture as well as in her better known photo-based work, Wilke developed a body-centered expressive language that gleefully violated protocols of social, visual and ideological etiquette.

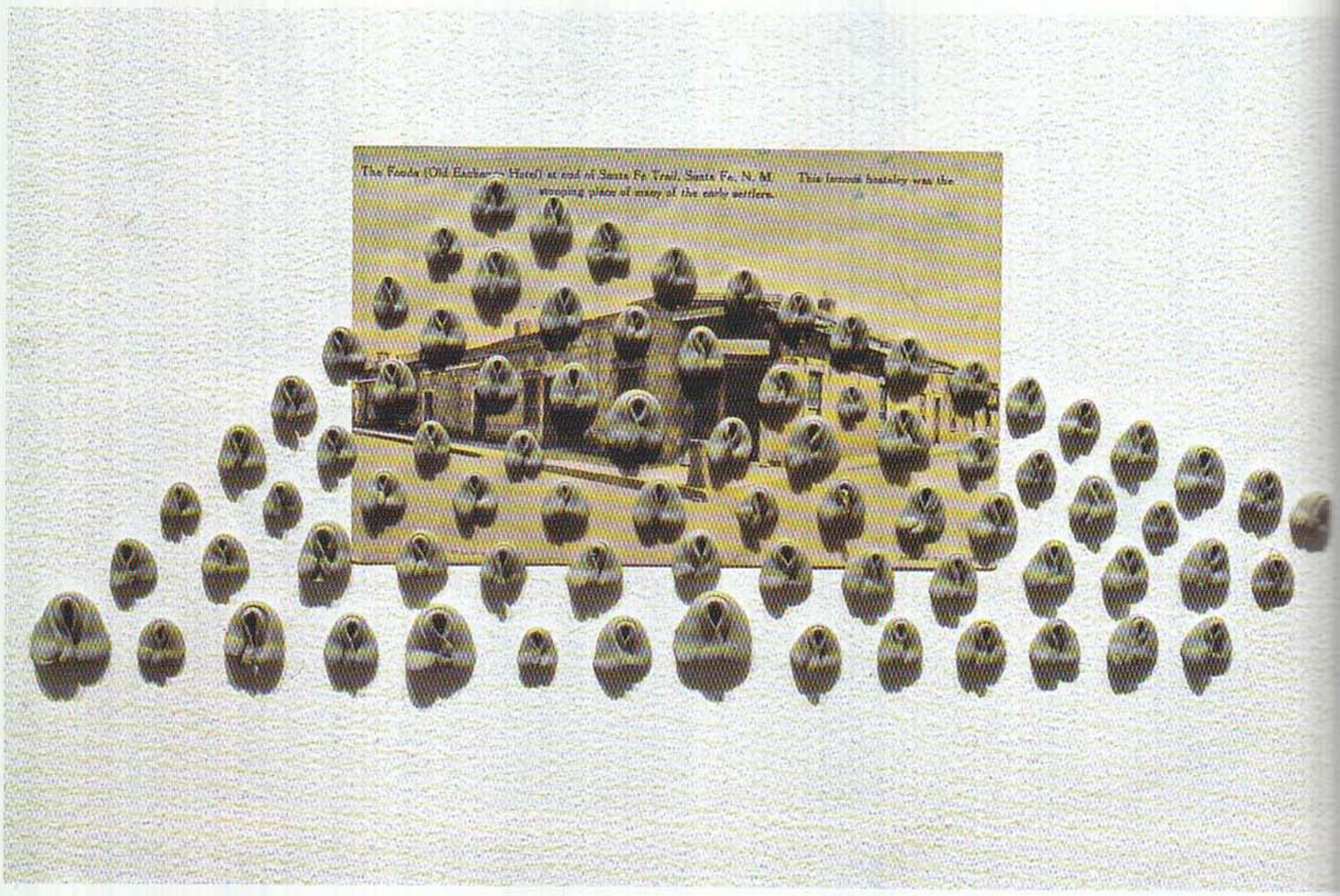
BY ANNA C. CHAVE

FOR MOST WOMEN MAKING ART in the 1960s and '70s, the prospect of being no longer implicitly diminished as "women artists," but acknowledged simply as artists—as male professionals always had been—remained an overriding goal. But there were countervailing ambitions. Some feminists dreamed that the epochal emergence of a full generation of women recognized as artists might spell not merely an expansion of art-world business as usual, but a duly epochal shift in art practice worthy of the radicalism of the times. These feminists envisioned the advent of an authentically different art, marked by women's experience. In 1969, Lee Lozano argued that there could be no "art revolution that is separate from . . . a political revolution . . . [or] a sex revolution."[1] For her part, Lozano deferred her painting practice in favor of conceptual, life-into-art exercises such as her

Above, *Early Box and Six Phallic and Excremental Sculptures*, 1960-63, terra-cotta and plaster of Paris, 7 sculptures in 8 parts, between 7 and 1¾ inches high. Courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard, and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

Opposite, Hannah Wilke: *Super-T-Art*, 1974, 20 silver gelatin prints, each 6½ by 4½ inches. Photo courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt/Licensed by VAGA, New York.





WILKE ANTICIPATED A SUCCEEDING GENERATION'S DECONSTRUCTION OF THE MANNERED ROLES MARKED OUT FOR THE SEXUALIZED FEMALE BODY.

Masturbation Investigation of 1969, with its graphic (textual) account of the sight of her own genitals in the throes of orgasm—a project foreshadowing the notorious "cunt art" subgenre of '70s feminist art.[2]

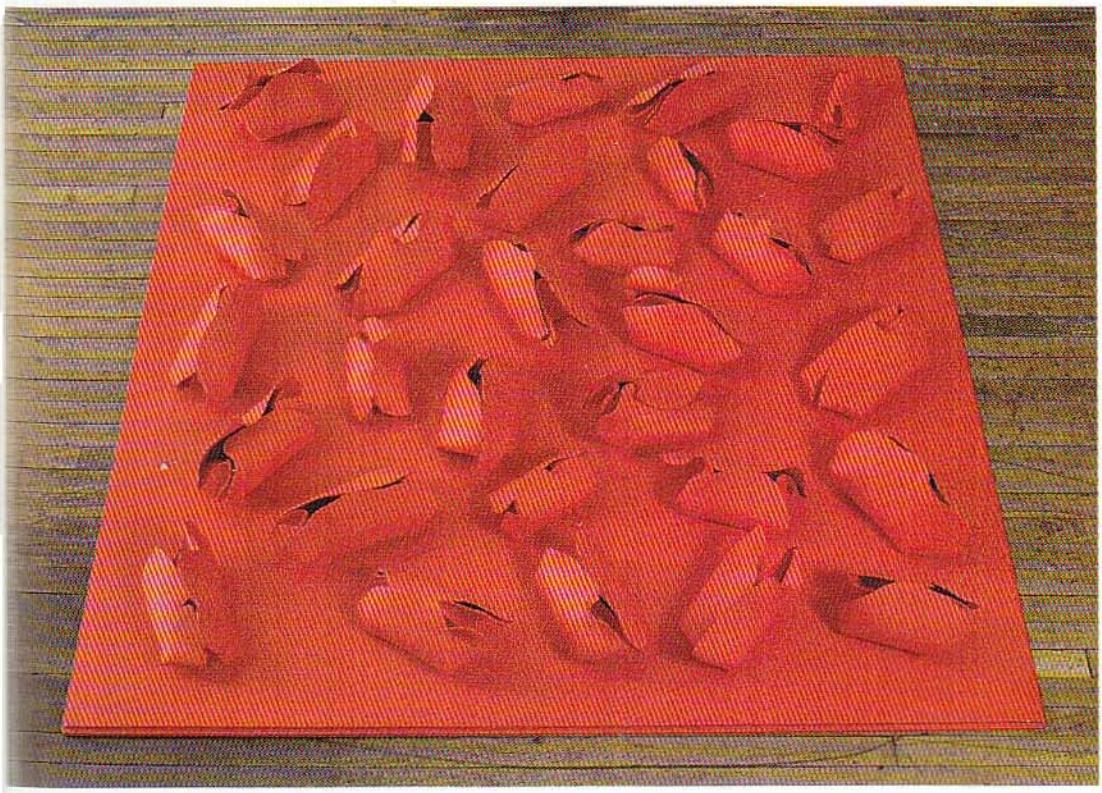
The both vaunted and reviled *Dinner Party* that Judy Chicago and her retinue realized in ceramics and textiles in the mid-1970s is the project most widely identified with "cunt art." But some say the genre originated with the sexually suggestive, small ceramic "boxes" (some with abstractly penile as well as vaginal flourishes) done by Hannah Wilke in 1960-65, works lately shown in "Hannah Wilke: Gestures" at the Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase. Whereas female genitalia figured only sporadically (if importantly) in work from the '70s forward by such artists as Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta and Nancy Spero, vulval or labial forms became a leitmotif for Wilke. Tacitly at issue for all these women was a drive to redress the fact that, as Lynne Segal put it, "The vagina has served as a condensed symbol of all that is secret, shameful and unspeakable in our culture."[3] The aim, too, was to displace the enduring paradigm of the "bachelor machine" with a new model of creative production: that of a female creator whose bona fides are somehow attested to by her reproductive capacity.[4]

Although female artists increasingly strategized among themselves during the 1970s, opportunity remained unequally distributed. Writing in 1977, Harmony Hammond observed, "For women, the economic class system is largely determined by their relationship to men. The higher up the man she relates to, the more she benefits from the system."[5] As a minor case in point: Wilke successfully parlayed her relationship with Claes Oldenburg (with whom she had a liaison between 1969 and '77) into a berth at the newly established Ronald Feldman gallery; she even advertised the tactic, in a way, by crediting Oldenburg for a revealing photo of her, wearing sheer pantyhose, no underwear and high-heeled boots, which she used to publicize her premiere show there in 1972. Her abstract vulvae, by then contrived out of latex and snaps on a scale up to 6 feet tall, reportedly attracted de Kooning as a buyer,[6] while a young Douglas Crimp proved an enthusiastic reviewer, greeting the work as "unsettling" and "'feminine' with a vengeance." "[O]ne wants to unsnap—to violate," Crimp added; "This metaphor of sensuality mixed with vulnerability is frank and touching."[7]

Two snapped latex pieces from 1975 were included in the Neuberger exhibition; however, a wall text explained that some of the latex work has not survived. Wilke's performative/photographic works have tended to overshadow her legacy as an object maker, in any case, and the exhibition, curated by Tracy Fitzpat-

rick, was accordingly conceived to advocate for her strength as a sculptor. This aim was somewhat undercut, it must be said, by the decidedly uneven quality of the works on view, which included dozens of examples of ceramic and terra-cotta vulvae, along with a few photographic works, a single video, and assorted pieces made from chewing gum, kneaded erasers and laundry lint. In certain instances, as with the important "Starification Object Series (S.O.S.)," 1974-75, Wilke's labia-shaped, chewing-gum sculptures were actually embedded within her performance works, as well as within the quasi-documentary artifacts that followed. Such projects, which generally entailed skewed enactments of erotic stereotypes, showcased Wilke's mischievous efforts to extrapolate a model of released sexuality for women. Unlike her peers who advanced earth-goddess visions, Wilke mostly crafted her vulval objects from contemporary materials—ostensibly worthless, vulgar stuff transformed by her ingenuity. Affected by Oldenburg's "Mouse Museum" project (1965-77), whose Ray Gun wing incorporated found, phallic objects—found in part by Wilke, she claimed—she also began to use or to counterfeit objects within the general culture that had vulval shapes, such as fortune cookies and tortellini.

Wilke's tie to Oldenburg would fairly obsess her after their relationship ended, as attested by some highly Oldenburgian works at the Neuberger, including proposals for colossal vulval forms installed in public settings. During her romance with Pop's sculptor-in-chief, however, Wilke made no secret of her sexual availability. Hence the often charged tone of the messages from a queue of art-world men (interspersed with endearments from her mother, among others) animating the cache of answering machine tapes that she spliced together in her riveting *Intercourse with . . .* of 1975. This seldom-exhibited work (which was not included in the Neuberger show) proved one of the great finds of the huge 2007 exhibition, "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution," where there was also a notebook listing the callers. Insofar as *Intercourse with . . .* afforded a glimpse into the mundane operations of the



Opposite, *The Fonda*, 1975, kneaded erasers on postcard on painted wood, 16 by 18 inches. Courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard, and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

Above, *Through the Large Glass*, 1976, film still from performance at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Also in the film *C'est la vie, Rrose*, 1977, directed by Hans-Christof Stenzel for German TV. Photo courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt/VAGA.

Left, *The Red One*, 1980s, 34 painted ceramic elements on painted wood base, 5 feet square. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

intertwined social and professional networks of a noted female artist of her day, it incisively demystified the art world's back channels. Though the initial project relied mainly on aural suggestion, a 1977 version featured one of Wilke's offbeat stripteases, in which she methodically peeled off the names of callers that had been spelled out across her body in letters applied to her skin.

Prior stripteases had included a 1976 gambol behind *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (a.k.a. *The Large Glass*) at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, affirming the artist's intensive engagement with Duchamp's legacy,[8] and *Super-T-Art* of 1974, wherein Wilke arranged a tablecloth around her bare body into getups ranging from goddesslike drapery to a Christ-like loincloth. A photo made of the performance *Super-T-Art*, showing the high-heeled artist tickling a bare nipple, later figured in *Give: Hannah Wilke Can*, subtitled *A Living Sculpture Needs to Make a Living* (1978), in which the artist poses as a seductive mendicant whose coin-collection canisters announce that she "can"; the kittenish image reinforced the invitation to give it to Hannah in her "can," or through her slot. At the Neuberger, eight of the cans were shown, along with a conceptual piece incorporating the photograph that appears on the cans.

Throughout her performance work, Wilke's intent was at once serious and humorous, coyly and slyly feminist. But few other feminists laughed along. At a time when foiling the indiscriminately objectifying male gaze seemed an overriding goal—and when feminists were widely policing one another over the cosmetic use of razors, tweezers and the like—Wilke's efforts to mime, and send up, the role of the sex object tended to be viewed as complicit (a view likely cemented by the fact that *Oui*, *Penthouse* and *Playboy* all ran stories about her during the '70s). Criticizing Wilke for trying to have it both ways, "flaunt[ing] her body in parody of the role she actually plays in real life . . . as beautiful woman and artist, as flirt and feminist," Lucy Lippard sagely commented in 1976, "it is a subtle abyss that separates men's use of women for sexual titillation from women's use of women to expose that insult."[9] Though Wilke's art had drawn some respectful attention from critics outside the feminist fold, Lippard's critique came from an ambit that ideally would have yielded its most engaged supporters. And whereas Wilke's punning claim "I Object," on the cover of a fake book jacket, resonated loudly in that circle, her simultaneous plaint, "I Ob*ject*," fell on deaf ears there. Instead of spurring a lively, wide-ranging discourse on Wilke's art, Lippard's critique of her performative work, and a correlative complaint about the artist's narcissism, have ever since dominated—and so, arguably, short-circuited—the (rather sparse) Wilke literature.[10]

"[I]n spite of the excellence of [Wilke's] work," writer Edit deAk warned as early as 1974, "people talk about *her*."[11] "[T]he basic problem that most women have had making things," Wilke herself once complained, is that "people would rather look at women than . . . look at art."[12] Of course, Wilke explicitly chose to force this issue; as soon as she lost her clothes, her audience lost its cool, even though public displays of nudity (outside the sex industry) were by then established as markers of antibourgeois, ergo radical, behavior in both the art world and the culture at large. In 1989, Wilke defiantly though ambivalently claimed, "Harold Rosenberg in one of the quotes I dance nude to said something like, 'As soon as one sees a portrait of a nude woman, one never thinks of art, one thinks of woman.'" Added Wilke, "[O]ur seductiveness . . . [is] our power. [But] our power prevents people from listening to us."[13]

The troubling equation between women's seductiveness and their power lingers still, of course, but for those who came of age in a time when few other avenues to power were on offer, that equation was quite commonplace. For young women in the 1950s, Yvonne Rainer noted recently, "It cannot be said often enough that . . . everything in the culture militated toward pleasing men." Citing Shulamith Firestone's 1970 assertion that "[a woman's] whole identity hangs in the balance of her love life. She is allowed to love herself only if a man finds her worthy of love," Rainer reminisced that, in her own case, "it was the light from *his* eyes as I described the making of *Trio A*—the dance that was to become my signature piece—that first illuminated my achievement . . . I was saved."[14] Wilke's persistent demonstrations of her status as a man-magnet might well be viewed in this light.

By contrast with Rainer's typically more matter-of-fact displays of nudity, however, Wilke anticipated a succeeding generation's deconstruction of the mannered roles marked out for the sexualized female body within the commercial culture. In the "Starification Object Series," for instance, she blankly struck a number of stock feminine poses, anticipating the masquerade soon to emerge in Cindy Sherman's celebrated "film stills." But unlike Sherman, whose enactments of feminine roles mostly deviated rather subtly from their models in the commercial realm, Wilke explicitly disrupted those models by marring her own flesh with labia-shaped chewing gum "scars." She thus alluded to the tribal practice of scarification, which is designed to beautify yet bound to be painful, and hence is resonant of Western imperatives that women suffer to achieve beauty. While Wilke referred to her use of gum as a signal of the disposability often associated with women, her gummy labia were not, in fact, negligible wads, but—as could be seen in the gum-on-rice-paper examples at the Neuberger—colorful, exquisite little sculptures meant for sale. By marking virtual polymorphously perverse entryways all over Wilke's body, moreover, they represented a super-added orgasmic potential unique to women—represented women's *jouissance*—and so further fulfilled her stated aim, to revalue the denigrated cunt.

Lippard was completely justified, of course, in charging that Wilke wanted to have it both ways: she did want to be both agent and object. What often got lost in the ensuing conversation is that, broadly speaking, so do we all want that basic possibility, women and men alike. In psychoanalytic terms, all integrated individuals typically want and need to be objects, at least to someone—if not objects alone. Besides positioning herself as sexual prey, for that matter, Wilke also disported herself as a sexual huntress. (In art world conversation, she was often termed a slut—a slur without masculine equivalent since libidinousness tends to be valorized in men.) In playing both sexual subject and object, however, Wilke violated feminist edicts against soliciting the male gaze; by the same stroke, she challenged an abiding fiction that the contemporary art market (especially as reborn in the then retail-free SoHo district) disdained to deal in objects or commodities. Regardless that her work proved too extreme to garner much commercial success,[15] Wilke perversely played the part of a

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Right, Untitled, from the "Sotheby's" series, 1991, ink on magazine page, 16½ by 10¾ inches. Photo Jim Frank, courtesy Solway Jones, Los Angeles. © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt/VAGA.


Dune Manor, West End Road, East Hampton, New York
Could commodities themselves speak—
they would say our use/value may
be a thing that interests men—
In the eyes of each other—
we are nothing but exchange
values.—
K Marx—
Front elevation
Ocean
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Telephone: 516 283 0600
Please contact John Golden
1991 Summer
Hannah Wilke
SOTHEBY'S

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whore to the marketplace. And whereas, say, Andy Warhol could openly call art a business, and thereby draw (in time) the approbation of leftist critics for illuminating the art world's capitalist core, Wilke would be denied a comparable reading. In a problem that also plagued Yayoi Kusama and Lynda Benglis, who likewise (if more briefly) undertook some provocative vamping, revisiting the age-old trope of the artist as prostitute to the marketplace proved particularly taboo if the artist was female—an insight lately acquired anew by Andrea Fraser (who controversially sold her sexual services to a client-collector for an untitled 2003 artwork, documented on videotape).

"The society we know . . . is based upon the exchange of women," observed Luce Irigaray in 1978, citing Lévi-Strauss's explanation that the "most desirable women" are "scarce [commodities] . . . essential to the life of the group." "Marx's analysis of commodities as the elementary form of capitalist wealth can thus be understood as an interpretation of the status of woman in so-called patriarchal societies," Irigaray argued. Further, "Participation in society requires that the body submit itself to a specularization, a speculation, that transforms it into a value-bearing object" or commodity.[16] Inasmuch as the prostitute collapses the distinction between the sold and the seller, she represents the apotheosis of the commodity; as such, she has served as an avatar of urban modernity in the Euro-American world.[17] "Could commodities themselves speak," Marx wrote, in a passage that Wilke incorporated in a performance titled *So Help Me Hannah* (presented several times between the late 1970s and the mid-'80s), "they would say: Our use-value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects. What, however, does belong to us as objects, is our value. Our natural intercourse as commodities proves it. In the eyes of each other we are nothing but exchange values."[18]

In the 1980s, New Museum founder and director Marcia Tucker listed a range of initiatives that female artists had been credited with advancing in the prior decade, such as "the use of a subjective, personal voice; overtly political content; . . . performance as autobiography," and so forth. "Certainly it seemed as though women had defied the canon," she declared; but, "Unfortunately, it was the men who became famous and reaped the economic rewards."[19] By now, many women have achieved substantial rewards of their own, if not full parity—but not Wilke (or her heirs). And it is especially younger women who have mined her pioneering work, often while holding it at arm's length. In a 1998 exhibition catalogue essay, Laura Cottingham cites Sarah Lucas, Janine Antoni, Vanessa Beecroft and Renee Cox, among others, as Wilke's present-day artistic heirs.[20] Wilke and her cohort, long scorned for harboring naively essentialist convictions said to be discredited by a theory-wise generation to follow, in fact produced work that was throughout "intensively mediated"; so Abigail Solomon-Godeau recently adjudged, while further lauding Wilke's generation for having "intuitively grasped the difficulty of extricating the woman who speaks from the discourses that speak her."[21]

Though feminist discourse could not easily assimilate Wilke's practice in her day (a failure that caused the disappointment she betrayed in a poster of 1977 that read, in part, "Beware of Fascist Feminism"), today her feminist thinking appears not only vexing, but also, by turns, premonitory, ingenious and compelling, arguably delivering on the poignant feminist dream that an art made by women might look genuinely different, unexpected, and so might open fissures in the sociocultural field. Such was the suggestion, in a way, inscribed in Wilke's witty "Kneaded-erase-her" works of 1975-76, several of them shown at the Neuberger, in which vintage postcards of landmarks ranging from the New York Public Library to the Atlantic City boardwalk bear ranks of tiny labia modeled from bits of gray erasers: if the promise of the available, nubile woman is everywhere, the reality of her being, emblematized by her genitals, remained broadly suppressed—an erasure that Wilke's assisted readymades fantastically redress. ○

1 In "Open Hearing," *Art Workers Coalition Handbook*, New York, 1969, as cited in Helen Molesworth, "Tune In, Turn On, Drop Out: The Rejection of Lee Lozano," *Art Journal* 61, winter 2002, p. 68. **2** Lozano finally declined to join the women's movement, even ceasing to speak to women as a conceptual piece begun in 1971; see ibid., pp. 70-71. **3** Lynne Segal, "Body Matters: Cultural Inscriptions," in *Feminist Theory and the Body*, edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 109. **4** "'[T]he asexual reproduction of fathers on their own' is part of the European literary tradition from Genesis and *Paradise Lost* to . . . James Watson's *Double Helix*," observed Elaine Showalter in *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, New York, Viking, 1990, p. 78. **5** Harmony Hammond, "Class Notes," *Heresies* 1, no. 3, 1977, p. 35. **6** See Lil Picard, "Hannah Wilke: Sexy Objects," *Andy Warhol's Interview*, January 1973, p. 18. **7** Douglas Crimp, "Hannah Wilke," *Artnews*, October 1972, pp. 77, 83. **8** Evident also, for instance, in her references to his alter ego Rrose Sélavy, as in her series of latex works "Ponder-r-rosa (White Plains, Yellow Rocks)," 1974-75. **9** Lucy R. Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art," 1976, reprinted in *Art and Feminism*, edited by Helena Reckitt, New York, Phaidon, 2001, p. 214. **10** Wilke's principal champions have been Joanna Frueh, who wrote the exhibition catalogue *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective*, edited by Thomas H. Kochheiser, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1989, and Amelia Jones; see Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998. **11** Edit deAk, "Hannah Wilke at Feldman," *Art in America*, May-June 1974, pp. 110-11. **12** Cited in Leslie Dick, "Hannah Wilke," in *X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly* 6, no. 4, summer 2004 (accessed in August 2008 at www.x-traonline.org/past-articles.php?articleID=161). **13** Garry Noland, "'I could be representative of every woman': An Interview with Hannah Wilke," in *Forum* 14, no. 5, November-December 1989, p. 11. **14** Yvonne Rainer, "Skirting and Aging: An Aging Artist's Memoir," in *Yvonne Rainer: Radical Juxtapositions 1961-2002*, Philadelphia, University of the Arts, 2002, p. 89. **15** On the occasion of her sole (noncommercial) U.S. retrospective, at a St. Louis university gallery in 1989, Wilke noted that "you could buy the entire show for the price of one Frank Stella," in Noland, "'I could be representative...'," p. 11. **16** Luce Irigaray, "Women on the Market," in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985, pp. 170 (ellipsis and brackets as in original), 172, 179-80. **17** See Hollis Clayson's discussion of Benjamin, Baudelaire and Simmel on the topic of prostitution, in Clayson, *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1991, pp. 7-9. **18** Cited in Frueh, p. 30. **19** Marcia Tucker, "Women Artists Today: Revolution or Regression?" in Randy Rosen, et al., *Making Their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream, 1970-85*, New York, Abbeville, 1989, p. 199. **20** See Laura Cottingham, "Some Naked Truths and Her Legacy in the 1990s," in Elisabeth Delin Hansen, et al., *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective*, Nikolaj (Denmark), Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, 1998, pp. 57-58. **21** Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Woman Who Never Was: Self-Representation, Photography, and First-Wave Feminist Art," in Lisa Gabrielle Mark, ed., *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2007, p. 339.

"Hannah Wilke: Gestures" was on view at the Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase, New York [Oct. 3, 2008-Jan. 25, 2009].

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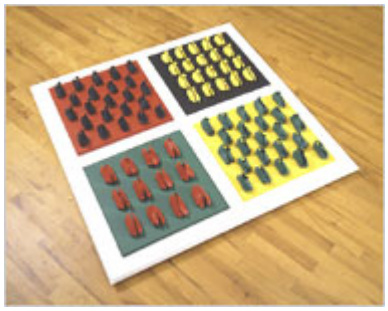
ART REVIEW

An Artist's Roots in Sculpture, Reclaimed

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO
Published: October 10, 2008

"Hannah Wilke: Gestures," at the Neuberger Museum of Art, is a complex exhibition with a simple point: that Ms. Wilke's roots and practice as a sculptor have been largely forgotten, replaced by a narrow view of her work as a photographer and performance artist.



FOURSQUARE Hannah Wilke's "Geo-Logic 4 to One," from the "Generation Process" series (1980-82), in which Ms. Wilke used color to dramatic effect.

It is not entirely clear how this historical oversight happened, though Tracy Fitzpatrick, the exhibition curator, has a theory: the widespread display and dispersal of reproductions of Ms. Wilke's photographs, stripped from their original context, perpetrated a condensed vision of her art.

The exhibition puts sculpture back in the picture, beginning with a concentrated look at early, little-known clay pieces by Ms. Wilke (1940-1993). Among the displays are several of her small, fragile clay forms in the shape of female genitalia.

Produced in the early 1960s, these sculptures represent some of the first explicit vaginal imagery arising from the feminist art movement. Ms. Wilke was not just an experimental artist, but a feminist pioneer.

Further displays show that Ms. Wilke worked with clay throughout her career, but she also experimented with other sculptural materials. There are sculptures

made of latex, wax, cookie dough, erasers, chewing gum, Play-Doh — even laundry lint.

All the materials are malleable, and all her sculptures are based on a specific method of folding, through which she turns flat, surfaces into three-dimensional vessels. The final shapes have vaginal connotations of varying degrees. Sometimes the forms are laid out along the floor in a line or arranged in a grid, but beyond the momentary delight of discovering a work's unexpected material, the shapes can all start to get monotonous.

Ms. Wilke was aware of this concern. Her roots as a sculptor lie in minimalism, but she never wanted to be associated with the minimalists, who prized standardized geometric shapes and forms. Her sculptures, she argued, were different insofar as each of them was unique.

She also employed color to dramatic effect. Some of her folds are painted in bright primary and secondary colors, while others, like the "Generation Process" series from 1982, are spattered and flecked with paint. The point was to make each one different, to give it a personality. Among the hundreds of folds in this show, no two are the same.

Most probably, the choice of colors was also deeply personal. Nine ceramic folds titled "Blue Skies," begun in 1987 but completed shortly before her death six years later from lymphoma, are dark and bleak — a mess of swirls of blue and white on a black field.

Given her work with body imagery, it was inevitable perhaps that Ms. Wilke should also begin to work with her own body. In her 1974 video "Gestures," shown here, we see her using her skin as a sculptural material as she slowly kneads and pulls at her face.

This led to other videos and photographs of herself, usually in the nude, the most important and best known of which are the photographic body-art pieces from the "S.O.S-Starification Object Series," begun 1974, in which she merged sculpture and her body by creating little vulva-like sculptures out of chewing gum which she then stuck all over herself.

One image from the “S.O.S” series is here. It shows the artist, naked to the waist, a veil wrapped about her head, her face and body covered in the chewing-gum sculptures, which look like hives or welts, or even some kind of painful tribal scarification.

The display could have included more than one of these works, along with other examples of the artist’s body-art photography and video. (I am thinking of the photographs of Ms. Wilke in pin-up poses.) But given the show’s ambition to resurrect her sculpture, it is understandable that the curator has sought to minimize the inclusion of this line of work.

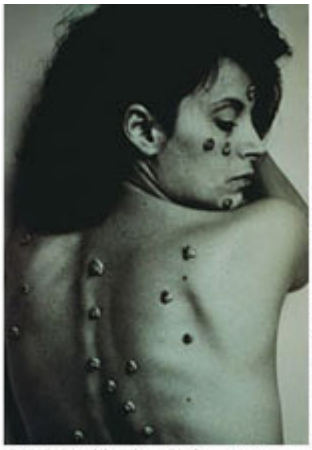
Over all, this show is not so much a retrospective as a kind of art history search-and-rescue project. It is not easy to experience or even to like, given the confrontational, repetitive use of female sexuality. But in earnestness and for art historical purpose, “Hannah Wilke: Gestures” sets a standard to which most museum shows don’t even bother to aspire.

“Hannah Wilke: Gestures,” Neuberger Museum of Art, 735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase, through Jan. 25. Information: www.neuberger.org or (914) 251-6100

Everybody Dies…Even the Gorgeous: Resurrecting the Work of Hannah Wilke

Amelia Jones in http://www.markszine.com/401/ajind.htm 2003

1 Hannah Wilke once answered her critics, who accused her of flaunting a too-beautiful body in her body art work, with a blistering insistence that death's democracy be acknowledged: "People give me this bullshit of, 'What would you have done if you weren't so gorgeous?' What difference does it make? ... Gorgeous people die as do the stereotypical 'ugly.' Everybody dies."[1] It has been argued, often in regrettably hackneyed ways, that creating art is about resisting the inexorability of death. Hannah Wilke's flamboyantly courageous feminist practice, from the early 1960s until her death from lymphoma in 1993, is testament to this notion that making art can sustain the subject beyond her bodily demise.



© Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt
Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

S.O.S Starification Series, 1975
one of 35 B&W photos in
Mastication Box 5 x 7 in. ea.

2 Of particular interest is the way Wilke's work was ghettoized as "feminist" and "essentialist" until her extraordinary *Intra-Venus* project was posthumously exhibited at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in 1994. The death-struggle documented with such wit and clarity in the harrowing pictures of *Intra-Venus* shocked the art world out of its complacent categorization of Wilke's work. In so doing it also may have shifted long-standing assumptions about so-called 1970s feminism, with which Wilke had so damningly been connected. In this essay, I want to sketch some of the high points of her rich career before concluding with a brief discussion of her final project, the traumatic nature of which sufficed to change, at a single stroke, the dominant art world's perception of Wilke's art and legacy.

3 I was fortunate enough to have seen slides and some prints of Wilke's *Intra-Venus* project in the late fall of 1992, just before she died. I saw these images as groundbreaking work, not only within the history of body art, but also within the context of photograhpic self-portraiture, an increasingly popular mode of self-performance. I would argue that Wilke's role was equally crucial to the latter – beginning with her self-described "performalist" self-portraits in the *S.O.S.* series of the mid-1970s – but had been marginalized or submerged in favor of the work of postmodern feminist luminaries such as Cindy Sherman, who for various reasons (primarily her age and connection to other postmodernists such as Robert Longo), had not been tarred with the brush of "1970s essentialist feminism" as had Wilke.

4 

S.O.S Starification Series, 1975
one of 35 B&W photos in
Mastication Box 5 x 7 in. ea.

On the strength of what I had seen, it was with some confidence that I proposed a feature article on *Intra-Venus* to the editor of *Artforum Magazine*. After all, Wilke's final project – as yet unveiled to the New York art world – was clearly a major body of work and it was equally clear that Wilke's work had not been given the attention it was due. Unfortunately, the editor replied that they were not interested in Hannah Wilke's work. I took this somewhat personally, as might be imagined. But the stronger part of my reaction, by far, was a sense of outrage that gound-breaking artist was being bypassed once again. Less than a year later, coinciding with the exhibition of *Intra-Venus* at the Feldman, a very fine and lengthy review by Andrew Perchuck appeared in *Artforum*. Perchuck notes that "what separates these photographs from other artists' portrayals of disease and impending death is the seamlessness with which they fit into the body of Wilke's artistic production."[2] He goes on to connect *Intra-Venus* with Wilke's career-long negotiation of her own self-image - in particular, her prescient engagement of performative relations through her photographs of herself, in various states of undress, her naked flesh covered with bubble-gum wounds or, as she described them, "cunts," in the *S.O.S. - Starification Object Series* (1974-82).

5 For the moment, I want to go back farther to Wilke's fleshy objects and nascent performative displays in the 1960s and even earlier. As Perchuck points out, Wilke herself begged the question of her obsession with self-display by beginning her 1989 retrospective at the University of Missouri with a photograph of herself nude at age four. This image, which she entitled *First Performalist Self-Portrait*, and dated 1942-1979, shows Wilke (born Arlene Hannah Butter) entirely naked except for white shoes, standing in a sunlit yard with great self-possession.[3] Thanks to the generosity of her sister Marsie Scharlatt, I have been privy to family photo albums where Marsie's demure demeanor in the photographs is aggressively countered by Hannah's defiant self-presentational strategies, all of which seem to have been aimed at getting the lion's share of parental attention (honing her skills for attracting the later eye of the art world). As I have noted elsewhere, Wilke's her entire career can be seen as a profound meditation on what Craig Owens has called the "rhetoric of the pose."[4]

6 The pose, Wilke illustrates time and time again, not only enacts the subject (producing the subject as a body and a self) but also of unhinges the notion of the subject as a stable, centered individual. The

insistent, reiterative self-posing that Wilke documents in her work from around 1970 until her death stubbornly resists the notion that representation's reveal some latent knowledge about who and what the subject actually is. The subject is known only through her appearance – via the image or in the "flesh" – and yet this appearance is infinitely variable. The portrait's subject calls out to us, but each of us receives it in our own particular way.

7 One of Wilke's first self-portraits adorns an outrageous advertisement for an early exhibition at the Ronald Feldman Gallery. The photograph, by her then-lover Claes Oldenburg, shows Wilke standing in front of a desk in her studio at the Chateau Marmont, Los Angeles. Her torso is fully clothed while her ass points defiantly toward the camera, clad only in the thinnest veil of hosiery. Her booted lower legs and feet stand firmly, one propped on a chair. She is absorbed in something on her desk and her defiance is marked by her ass-in-your-face pose and her seemingly complete lack of interest in or concern for the viewer's potentially devastating "male gaze."

8 In the catalogue for the University of Missouri retrospective, the first and only major publication to date on Wilke's work,[5] this advertisement is placed opposite a page illustrating two of her 1960s ceramic "cunt" sculptures – gorgeous folds of fleshy (yet fired and hard) clay which look like nothing but the female genitalia, blossoming in a moment of vertiginous pleasure. Sharing the page with the advertisement are formally similar "lint" sculptures from 1974. Employing two very different materials, one apparently soft and skin-like but actually crusty and brittle, the other made of the most fragile conglomeration of laundry lint, and working in roughly the same scale (about 12 inches long) – Wilke produces more flesh, which is seemingly female in its reference to labia, but (with a slightly skewed glance) also resembles the head of a circumcised penis).[6]

9 The folded ceramic and lint sculptures are arrayed across the gallery floor, sometimes in rows, other times in a loose conglomeration forming a large rectangle at the edges. Meandering through, the visitor feels at once dominant to the works at her feet and very aware of their engulfing expanse and immense fragility. If she were to trip on one of the ceramic folds, she would surely shatter it – the lint would dissipate into the air. Combining delicacy and brittleness with their aggressive spread across the floor, these snappish mouths beckoning or perhaps leer at us – eliciting an uneasy response. Drawing on the spatial strategies of Minimalism, Wilke produces feminized genital objects that both seduce and repel the visitor by solici physical *qua* emotional sensations. The folds thus speak to the simultaneous aggression and receptivity of the female sex as it is woven into the cultural unconscious as well as into individual masculine and feminine psyches.

159 One-Fold Gestural Sculptures

Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

10 From the mid-1970s into the 1980s, Wilke spent more and more of her time on performances

documented on video and in photographs such as *Garfield Park, Chicago* (1975) and *ART News Revised* (1976), wherein Wilkes sums up the co-extensivity of the flesh sculptures and the flesh of self-display. She poses topless in the gallery space surrounded by her dripping, sensuous latex “flowers” (variations on the ceramic fold pieces).

11 The *S.O.S., Starification Object Series* noted above was her earliest and most insistent photographic statement on the reiterative performance of the self as an elusive promise of authenticity. These seemingly endless photographs, often arranged in grids, show Wilke posing flirtatiously, often with bare chest, her naked flesh covered with her infamous bubble-gum cunts – tiny folds of colored gum mimicking the larger form of the folded sculptures. The photographs document(though not necessarily directly) a series of performances Wilke presented to the public: she would hand fresh sticks of gum to audience members as they entered; the she would strip After audience members chewed the gum, she would ask for it back, twisting each piece into cunt forms that she then applied to her naked body. “I chose gum because it's the perfect metaphor for the American woman – chew her up, get what you want out of her, throw her out and pop in a new piece.”[7] The cunts are not celebratory, as the label of “essentialism” would imply; rather, as marks of suffering they suggest that gender – in particular femininity – is culturally marked as a condition of woundedness.

S.O.S. Starification Object Series 1974-82
© Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt
Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

12 Other projects – the video pieces *Gestures* (1977) and *Intercourse with...* (1977), and the *So Help Me Hannah* series (1978-1984) – deployed performance and photographic or videographic representation in order to explore further the performance of femininity as marked or wounded. The erudite bases of Wilke's practice are revealed in the complex interconnections of the latter, an extended performance and series of photographs in which the marks of the female sex are connected to Marx's theory of exchange value and the pithy pronouncements of other, primarily male, “authorities” from Ad Reinhardt to James Joyce. In all of these works, Wilke's naked or almost naked body is enacted in representation so as to foreground representation itself as the site of human exchange. Even the “live” performance of the 1985 *So Help Me Hannah* “original,” – wherein Wilke tumbled, naked and holding a gun, through the architectural setting of P.S. 1 in Brooklyn – would have been experienced as mediated through the representational. One prominent part of the performance involved men with video cameras documenting (hunting or haunting?) her every move.[8]

13 Throughout the 1970s – as Minimalism, Conceptualism, and body art bloomed and shriveled with the rise of appropriation postmodernism – Wilke was known as a character to be reckoned with on the New York art scene. But, like many women artists during this period, her work was not taken seriously

or extensively exhibited – beyond the tenacious support of her gallery, Ronald Feldman. The fact that the first large-scale show of her work took place at a relatively obscure university gallery in Missouri (spearheaded by the support of feminist artist and writer Joanna Frueh, who contributed to the catalogue) – and then only in 1989, after a thirty years of art making – testifies to the fact that Wilke's work was largely excluded from the center of the international (still New York based) art world.

14 As was suggested to me by the response of the editor I had approached, Wilke's work was not to be taken seriously because of its perceived connection to early 1970s U.S. feminism, which was considered "essentialist" even by some of the most powerful feminist critics, whose judgment unfortunately enabled the willful suppression of such work by the mainstream art world.[9] As a young feminist who came of age intellectually in the late 1980s, I had a personal stake in teasing apart this debate, which by this period had reified into an "essentialist" versus "anti-essentialist" schism that was exceedingly damaging to feminism's potential role in shifting the terms of cultural analysis beyond the dichotomous logic of modernism.

15 Wilke's career and her work offered a case in point. She had never clearly or neatly aligned herself with the most visible figures associated with "essentialist" feminism – including Lucy Lippard and Judy Chicago (though I would argue for withholding such labels from these two figures as well). She had even produced work that specifically challenged Lippard's critique of her work for its supposed "confusion of her roles as beautiful woman and artist, as flirt and feminist, [which] has resulted at times in politically ambiguous manifestations."[10] Wilke's response is the funny but angry poster of herself, topless and arms akimbo, gum cunts on her chest with a tie dangling between her breasts, accompanied by the text: "Marxism and Art: Beware of Fascist Feminism" (1977). She performed her position as a feminist against a feminism of prescription, presciently pointing an accusing finger at the essentialist/anti-essentialist impasse towards which feminism seemed to be heading.

16 Feminist art found itself in a curious state by the 1980s, when some feminist artists, such as Wilke, Chicago, and Carolee Schneemann (then in their thirties and forties), found themselves increasingly marginalized as the art market exploded in a frenzy of intense commodification. At the same time, a slightly younger generation of women artists, such as Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman, emerged into an art world that embraced their work, sucking it voraciously into the turbine of the Reagan economy. A growing number of exhibitions of work by even younger feminists in the 1980s and early 1990s (such as *Bad Girls*, shown in tandem at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York and the Wight Art Gallery in Los Angeles in 1994) was followed by a spate of shows, including Lydia Yee's *Division of Labor: "Women's Work" in Contemporary Art* (at The Bronx Museum of the Arts in 1995) and my own *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (at the UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art in 1996), which attempted to re-examine the continuum of feminist work from the late 1960s up to the late 1990s and to place feminist art and art history within a historical frame. Taking seriously the work of so-called 1970s feminists such as Chicago and Wilke,

these shows began to revise the categories through which the work of certain feminist artists had been dismissed by art world – and, unfortunately by some feminist – rhetoric.

17 Unlike many feminist artists who had been active in the early 1970s and thus were tarred with the brush of essentialism, Wilke's entire career, as noted, was reopened to view with the presentation, posthumously, of her *Intra-Venus* project. This project consisted of a number of large-scale performative color photographic self-portraits, watercolor self-portraits, pieces she called "Brushstrokes" – "paintings" made from the hair that fell out during Wilke's cancer treatments – and several objects (bloody bandages mounted on paper, and pieces relating to objects by Marcel Duchamp). Each aspect of the project forced a dramatic re-evaluation of the sculptural, video, performance, and photographic works from earlier in Wilke's career on the part of those who had superficially viewed her work as self-obsessed or essentialist.

18 First and foremost, Wilke's willingness – even seeming eagerness – to perform a body that was now extremely bloated, bloody, hairless, and otherwise visibly compromised by the cancer and its treatments, provoked a thorough reconsideration of the charges of narcissism that had haunted her career up to that point. While she could certainly still be accused of narcissism up to a point – the focus on the self is still the key strategy of the project – she cannot be accused of the classical narcissism that derives from the Greek myth: a kind of obsessive self-love based exclusively on the beauty of one's surface appearance. Wilke's self-love, so *Intra-Venus* seems to say, had a depth that is moving in a lacerating kind of way. Paradoxically, through the reiterative self-display of the *Intra-Venus works*, Wilke suggested that her self-love was built of self-knowledge – and thus subversive of the patriarchal construction of the feminine body as *only* a picture, only display. This, then, is the other side of the artifice highlighted in her earlier performative self-portraits.

19 Some simple readings will serve to make my final point: that Wilke's works have never been about a superficial self isolated as pretty picture, but about a female subject deeply absorbed in its own embodied self-reflection. *Intra-Venus*: the medical invasion of the intravenous line turned, with tongue in cheek, into a metaphor for the "inner" aspects of Wilke's "beauty" (as goddess of love – a theme she had addressed earlier in her "Venus Pareve" sculptures, themselves based, as one might expect, on her own likeness).

20 One picture (*Intra-Venus Series No. 10*, June 22, 1992) shows Wilke – bald and bloated from chemotherapy and steroid treatments, completely naked, reclining in her hospital bed. Some kind of intravenous shunt is attached to her chest, which is bruised from the invasion. The inevitable hospital bracelet ... a crumpled sheet. Her head falls off to her right, mouth opened and eyes closed in a state of exhaustion. The beauty here is not that of appearance, but of being – a being that persists, struggles, in the face of death's inexorable and "untimely" approach. Attaching me to the scene, but also propelling me out into my own realm of desire, the pinky and ring finger of her right hand draw my attention: they are perfectly manicured, elegant, their middle-aged wrinkles smoothed by flesh-inflating steroids. They call out to me, tenderly, in their false appearance of youthful elegance.

Intra-Venus Series No. 10, June 22, 1992
71-1/2 x 47-1/2 inches chromagraphic print

21 

December 27, 1991 #2
71-1/2 x 47-1/2
chromagenic supergloss print

A second image (*Intra-Venus Series No. 2*, December 27, 1991) – the face still gorgeous, a laugh in the eye, the mouth framing a huge grin – Wilke, dressed in art world black, lifts her hair as if in a gesture of flirtatious seduction. However, what she reveals is not the slender, kissable neck of, say, the *So Help Me Hannah* images; what she reveals is a huge tumor, bulging outward from under her right ear. Her laugh is infectious and not at all dark; she seems to be certain she will beat the thing one way or another – and who is to say she didn't, in the end?

22 A third image (*Intra-Venus Series No. 4*, February 19, 1992) was, understandably, chosen over the more overtly traumatic images for the invitation to the *Intra-Venus* show. Here, Wilke's face seems to radiate peace and well being, glossing over the trauma of the diseased body. Filling the frame, her face emerges from a swathe of thin blue hospital blanket that covers her head. Eyes rapturously shut, her lips closed in a slight smile, Wilke looks like nothing but a Madonna – yet under and around the eyes – an ominous purplish cast points towards trouble. The smile, on second glance, is tired rather than inspired. The face glows, but perhaps the glow is otherworldly.

Venus, 1992-1993
2 panels 71-1/2 x 47-1/2 each
chromagenic supergloss prints

23 I met Wilke in November of 1992. She died of cancer shortly thereafter, early in 1993. After *Intra-Venus* changed the all-too collective mind of the New York art world, reminding its members that there were other – even more outrageous – feminist self-performers preceding Cindy Sherman, another retrospective of her work took place across Europe in 1998 and 1999.[11] This flowering of interest in Wilke's work indicates that it has insinuated itself into a counter-cannon of rigorous art-making, one that those in the know understand to have been formative to all that followed. Through *Intra-Venus*, Wilke could be said to perform herself beyond death – if death is the oblivion of never having been seen. Through *Intra-Venus* she staged her own resurrection.

[1] Marvin Jones et. al. interview with Hannah Wilke, “Hannah Wilke's art, politics, religion, and feminism,” *The New Common Good* (May 1985), 11.

[2] Andrew Perchuck, “Hannah Wilke,” *Artforum* 32, n. 8 (April 1994), 93.

[3] The image is reproduced in the catalogue for the show, *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective*, ed. Thomas h. Kochheiser (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 67.

[4] Owenses term is actually “Rhetoric of Pose.” Craig Owens, “The Medusa Effect, or, The Spectacular Ruse” (1984), reprinted in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, ed. Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 192. I explore Wilke's performative self-portraits at great length in Chapter three, “The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hannah Wilke and the Radical Narcissism of Feminist Body Art,” of my book *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minnapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 151-195.

[5] A dissertation on Wilke by Saundra Goldman was completed in 1999 at the University of Texas at

Austin. One hopes this will end up in book form to fill the lack of serious writing on Wilke's work.

[6] In Wilke's words, the “wound” sculptures and bubble-gum cunts “can be seen as female and male, just as the head of a cock looks very much like a vagina. So they are really male-female gestural sculptures.” Wilke in Jones et. al., “Hannah Wilke's Art...” 1.

[7] Cited in Avis Berman, “A Decade of Progress, But Could a Female Chardin Make a Living Today,” *Art News* 79, n. 8 (October 1980), 77.

[8] For photographs showing the men with cameras see the retrospective catalogue 31-32.

[9] See my extended discussion of the essentialism debate “Sexual Politics: Feminist Strategies, Feminist Conflicts, Feminist Histories,” and “The 'Sexual Politics' of The Dinner Party: A Critical Context,” *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press and Los Angeles: UCLA/Hammer Museum of Art, 1996), 20-38; 82-118.

[10] Lippard, “The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art,” *Art in America* 64, n. 3 (May- June 1976), reprinted in Lippard's *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), 126.

[11] See note 9.

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Hannah Wilke

by Katerina Gregos

Hannah Wilke's recent exhibition, six years after the artist's death from cancer, provided us with an opportunity to re-evaluate the work of a multi-faceted artist who was one of the driving forces in feminist art of the 1970s. Throughout her career, Wilke centred on the exploration of female identity and experience, focusing on the construction, representation and consumption of the image of woman.

This exhibition included sculpture and other work from the first twenty years of the artist's career, from the clay box-shaped sculptures of female and phallic imagery of the sixties and continuing through her trademark chewing gum 'sculptures' of the seventies to her clay sculptures of the eighties. In these, one can trace Wilke's preoccupation with biomorphic forms that allude to sex and female genitalia; throughout there are references to the experience of female sexuality, and articulations of a very specific feminised sculptural idiom in which process and gesture are equally as important as form.

The *176 One-Fold Gestures* (1973–4), displayed on the floor at Ronald Feldman, are a series of understated pink ceramic vaginal sculptures; the pieces are similar but no two are alike. In contrast to the minimalist geometry and austerity so prevalent during that time, these objects are fleshy, sensuous, luscious, curvilinear and boldly suggestive of female sexuality. Here Wilke unabashedly reveals that which is normally concealed, and makes public a woman's intimate experience of her body in a corporeal sculptural landscape that is as visually enticing as it is upfront. In *Rosebud*, on the other hand, a large wall piece in which delicate layers of latex flow over one another in an accumulation of flesh-like folds that seem to develop organically, Wilke is more suggestively sensual, hinting at a kind of abstracted eroticism. *Needed Erase-Her* is also a comment on gesture and variation. Wilke has transformed grey erasers into a variety of vulval forms. Applied to old postcards of cities and monuments, they mark what the artist considers to be predominantly male spaces and structures with very private symbols of female presence.

The show also included works from Wilke's well-known *S.O.S. – Starification Objects Series*, photos of Wilke herself in a variety of glamour-girl poses that reference fashion photography and pin-ups, and attempt to challenge stereotypical representations of femininity while also commenting on the commodification of desire. Wilke's otherwise picture-perfect image is disrupted by a multitude of vaginal, scar-like shapes sculpted from chewing gum; affixed to her body, they stigmatise it and disrupt the pleasure of the gaze.

Despite being relegated to a strictly feminist discourse, Wilke's work reveals a plurality of strategies and methods which continue to be relevant today in the post-feminist nineties. Her use of a wide range of media, from video and performance to photography and sculpture, makes her one of the first cross-media practitioners. In her use of autobiographical references and personal narrative strategies, in the deployment of her own body as a fetishised object and her willingness to expose herself and make art out of her life, she reflects concerns that lie at the forefront of artistic production today. In a formal language that is specifically female, she manages to transcend the issue of sexual politics, pointing to the wider complexities of gender and identity. Profoundly humanistic, Wilke's work is an affirmation not only of her sex but of life in general. It may be seven years since her death, but Wilke's work and courage continue to haunt, intrigue and inspire.

Hannah Wilke was at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, 16 October – 13 November

HANNAH WILKE, Rosebud, 1976, latex rubber and metal snaps, 61 x 234 x 20 cm. Photo: John Lamka. © Donald Goddard. Courtesy: Ronald Feldman, New York

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Naked Truths: Hannah Wilke in Copenhagen

Debra Wacks

Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective. Exh. cat. Copenhagen: Nikolaj, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center and Helsinki: Helsinki City Art Museum, 1998. Essays by Saundra Goldman, Alfred M. Fischer, Laura Cottingham.

Exh. schedule: Nikolaj, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, October 31–December 23, 1998; Umea Konstmuseum, Sweden, March 21–May 16, 1999; Helsinki City Art Museum; Liechtensteinische Staatiche Kunstsammlung, Lichtenstein.

You can say a Gothic church is a phallic symbol, but if I say the nave of the church is really a big vagina, people are offended.
—Hannah Wilke[1]

Hannah Wilke no doubt would have immensely enjoyed the fact that her retrospective opened last fall in the Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, for the building was once a large communal church (the Nikolaj, completed in 1517). There the artist's (often vaginally iconic) oeuvre was installed on two floors of what originally had been the central nave.

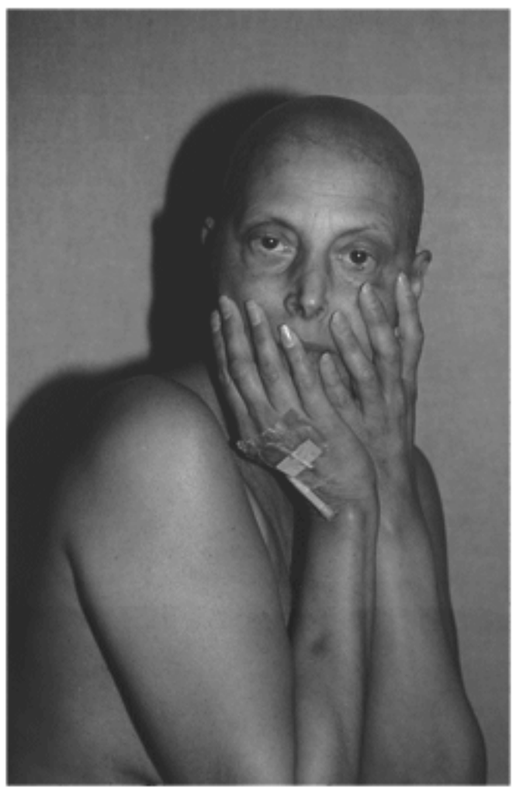
The exhibition is the result of close collaboration among the Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, Helsinki City Art Museum, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, and the Estate of Hannah Wilke.[2] As the first retrospective dedicated to Wilke since her death in 1993, it represents a notable attempt to acknowledge her artistic significance. This overdue recognition, however, becomes bittersweet when one learns that the exhibition is not scheduled to travel to the United States (at the time this issue went to press, no U.S. institution had accepted the show). Is it any surprise that Wilke's importance as a postwar U.S. artist is more readily celebrated by "foreign" institutions, which are drawn to, rather than frightened by, her playfully intellectual investigations of social and erotic representations of the/her body? Perhaps U.S. museums have shied away from her frank female sexuality or the fact that her art is difficult to categorize, market, digest. Her work does not fit comfortably into a particular ideology or artistic style. In fact, one of its strengths is that it must be permitted to defy typical boundaries. Elisabeth Delin Hansen and Tuula Karjalainen, curators of this retrospective, have perceived and embraced this essential fluidity.

In Copenhagen, approximately thirty-five years of Wilke's artistic production (seventy-eight works) were on display, yet the abundance of open space was striking in comparison to the more common kind of visually overpacked retrospectives. The Art Center's airy space was particularly evident on the first floor, a long room with open alcoves that offered a sweeping initial view of the various media Wilke used in her work—including photography, video, ceramic, latex, ink, paint, and, of course, chewing gum and kneaded eraser. Walking into the exhibition, one was immediately confronted by a most haunting work: a photographic diptych from Wilke's *So Help Me Hannah Series, Portrait of the Artist with Her Mother, Selma Butter* (1978–81). On the left side: a nude Wilke from the waist up, her health and beauty contrasted with her mother's frail, mastectomy-scarred body on the right. The images are powerful in their representation of the mother-daughter bond wrought with the emotional and physical trauma of loss. As one of the first works in the exhibition, the piece also served as a harrowing thematic bookend, since it foreshadowed the fact that the retrospective would ultimately end with the artist's photographs of her own fight with cancer.

Despite these somber subjects, the exhibition contained many uplifting elements. Wilke's own voice, combined with soundtracks of kitschy television shows, echoed throughout the space. The noise pulled the viewer to an alcove gallery dedicated to performances of *So Help Me Hannah*. Ten monitors, showing five such performances from 1979 to 1985, lined a wall. Here was Wilke, nude, except for high heels and a gun, moving excruciatingly slowly across the screens as she reads aloud statements co-opted from Goethe, Ad Reinhardt, and other famous philosophers, artists, and political figures. On the opposite wall were "performalist self-portraits" of Wilke in similar "dress," parodying television cop

shows in a statement against gratuitous violence.[3] I watched as viewers patiently read the many quotes recited by Wilke before they studied the nude imagery.

As I watched viewers' reactions to Wilke's work/body, an elderly Danish man began a conversation with me. He pointed to the various photographs around him and said that he saw Wilke as a symbol of sexiness (to be adored in general) and as an individual woman—a woman with particular feminist ideas conveyed through warmth and humor. He added that he appreciated Wilke's technique, because, he explained, having worked in advertising his entire life, he recognized the power of the manipulated images. In the United States Wilke's nudity is often overemphasized and consequently misunderstood. It seems to me that her art benefits from the casualness surrounding nudity in Denmark. There, her images of her body lose any sensationalism and instead become an integral element of the performances/photographs.



Wilke's own body, or its generalized abstraction, remains a consistent theme throughout her work. In what was once the apse of the church were three walls, each carrying one of Wilke's hanging latex sculptures—two pinkish in color, one black (*Pink Champagne*, *The Orange One*, *Melancholy Mama*, all 1975). The fleshlike reminder of the layered latex combined with the pungent smell of rubber to give each work an organic quality. Another example of the way Wilke abstracts the body could be seen in *Elective Affinities* (1979), comprised of four blue-gray wood bases that sit low on the ground. On top lay short rows of shiny, white ceramic forms. Each gestural sculpture abstractly suggests individual vaginal shapes, yet together they act as a group: fragile, graceful, and enduring. This piece reflects the artist's politically motivated desire to transform the negative associations of the vagina into positive, even beautiful, forms.[4]

One of Wilke's best known groups of performalist self-portraits, *S.O.S.: Starification Object Series* (1974–79), hanging in the adjoining room, was a good example of her multilayered use of punning. In this case the title simultaneously refers to ritual scarring and the objectification of famous figures (stars), and is an urgent plea for help. The series of black-and-white photographs depict Wilke in various poses that parody, exaggerate, and dismantle stereotypical representations of "femininity." During public S.O.S. performances, Wilke gave members of the audience pieces of gum to chew, which she then made into small, vaginally-shaped sculptures. She placed the tiny sculptures on her partially nude body and face as she mimicked the clichéd women seen in popular culture: the sexy housewife, the fashion model, the exotic lover, et al. Glamour gives way to playful, yet critical, images as the vaginal scars work to disrupt the pleasure of the scopophilic gaze.

When Wilke first gave these performances, certain New York critics often ignored the symbolic vaginal gum pieces and focused only on the stunning body wearing them. They overlooked the strategic mimicry that would elevate Cindy Sherman to star status in the 1980s because they could not accept Wilke's nude body as an integral ingredient to the process of rewriting (and challenging) visual codes. Lucy Lippard set the tone by reprimanding Wilke for the "confusion of her roles as beautiful woman and artist."[5] But isn't that very confusion an important aspect of Wilke's art? Why must she (or anyone) choose between static, predetermined identities, when fluidity and paradox are so much more interesting? Wilke responded to such criticism with *Marxism and Art: Beware of Fascist Feminism* (1977), in which the title of the work is boldly printed above and below an image taken from *SOS*. Her words warn against the potential self-righteous and censoring attitude of feminist discourse as her intrepid image confronts the viewer.[6] The original Plexiglas silkscreen is included in the retrospective, but the artist eventually turned it into a poster that was wheat-pasted all over SoHo. Through this work, Wilke emphatically states that her version of feminism is completely valid because it invests her with control over her own representation(s).

In the retrospective, much of the complexity of Wilke's art is neglected because of the lack of a wall text to summarize historical and theoretical information. A written description of her performances would have added a great deal to the public's understanding of such events. Most of her performances are accounted for, but the curators failed to clearly distinguish between the artist's performalist self-portraits (which are works of art in and of themselves) and stills excerpted from her videos. For example, *Gestures* (1974–76), a thirty-minute videotape, is (misleadingly) represented in the exhibition by still photographs. Ideally, the entire tape would have been included, but at the very least, there should have been a wall label explaining the origin of the images. At the same time, it was a pleasure to see the bulk of Wilke's self-portraits united visually, even if they were slighted analytically.

Hannah Wilke. *July 26, 1992–February 19, 1992: #4 from Intra-Venus*, 1992–93. Chromagenic superglass print. Two panels. Each, 71½ x 47½ (181.6 x 120.7). ©The Estate of Hannah Wilke. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. Photo Donald Goddard.

The final room on the first floor contained Wilke's earliest work. (Chronologically, this room should have been at the beginning of the exhibition, but the sounds of Wilke's performance pulled viewers in the opposite direction.) That last gallery held two rarely exhibited Surrealist-inspired fiberglass sculptures from the 1960s (*Untitled* and *Anthropofaunic Form*) and ink drawings like *Self-Portrait on Tricycle* (ca. 1956). But more interesting were the small prototypical clay sculptures that are phallic, excremental, and "box"-shaped (1960–63). Another ceramic, *Teasel Cushion* (1967), further evolved the abstracted vaginal form and characteristically incorporates wit via a punning title and a fabulously unruly Astroturf base.[7] The disruption of chronological sequence, along with the absence of wall texts (although a one-page biography on Wilke was available at the front desk), avoided hagiography about the artist (a norm in most retrospectives), but it also missed a crucial opportunity to inform the public about Wilke's artistic development. Instead, the art was left to speak for itself. And although the work conveys many messages, the involved artistic production only would have been enriched by additional information—especially in a country where Wilke is not a familiar artist.

The exhibition catalogue offers more insight into Wilke's work. The art historian Saundra Goldman's thorough essay is noteworthy in its tidy focus on Wilke's consistent use of life-affirming gestures. The critic and curator Laura Cottingham discusses specific works, while examining the art's impact on younger artists in the 1990s. Both essays impart innovative ideas that enhance the overall retrospective. Scandinavians and Americans alike, however, would have benefited from historical contextualization of Wilke's production—specifically in relationship to the contemporary Women's Movement in the United States. Unfortunately, the well-produced and designed catalogue is published in a limited edition, for the wonderful images alone make owning this book crucial to any art library.

Upstairs, Wilke's work needed no explanations, for illness is a context everyone fundamentally understands. In this case it is the battles with cancer Wilke and her mother both faced. A stone Romanesque arch led into an intimate space, where one discovered Wilke's diaristic series of self-portraits, B.C. ("Before Consciousness" of her cancer, 1987–90). These powerful, boldly colored watercolors are de Kooning-esque in their painterliness, though they are far more personal and psychically penetrating. Each painting abstractly represents Wilke's face as it gradually changes to reflect her emotional and physical shifts.

Wilke's final series, *Intra-Venus*, continues in the same vein as her earlier performalist self-portraits, but the representation of her cancer now makes the effect painfully ironic. Large, color photographs portray Wilke's once familiar and beautiful body in hospital surroundings. Obviously ill, she appears calm and characteristically searching for the subtle humor and beauty in the serious situation. The left-hand photograph in the diptych *Intra-Venus Series #4, July 26, 1992/ February 19, 1992* is a half-figure portrait of a bare-skinned, hairless Wilke. Her hands, one pricked with an IV, cradle her face, while her clear eyes emit inner beauty. The photograph to the right shows Wilke softly enveloped by a blue blanket, her eyes closed as she turns inward. This series is not about documenting the horrific lymphomic effects on the artist's deteriorating body, but instead imparts an inner spirit and tremendous peace.

After seeing this later work, it is impossible not to reevaluate Wilke's earlier performalist self-portraits. This profound shift is the retrospective's greatest accomplishment, for it affords one the opportunity to perceive Wilke's work as a continuous and coherent project. Clearly, the artist's youthful beauty was not the primary force behind her public/private performances. Rather, her art, as a whole, consistently emphasized life—its sensuality as well as its ironies, tragedies, and struggles. This intimate, lived experience serves as the starting point that infuses her art with an often disquieting provocation. The ensuing discomfort, although always intellectually and socially challenging, is first and foremost visual in its impact. The result is some of the most courageously moving art in decades.

On the way downstairs, as I was leaving the Art Center, I came across a "permanent installation"—a kind of jukebox that played samples from a variety of artists' performances. As an added bonus, there was a track of Wilke singing her song "Stand-up" (1982).[8] The song rallies the listener to "Stand up when people put you down/stand up and dance above the ground/you've got to stand up, stand up." Wilke's confident voice pervaded the room, and even when the song ended, her message of strength and celebration remained.

Notes

1. Interview with Chris Huestis and Marvin Jones, "Hannah Wilke's Art, Politics, Religion, and Feminism," *New Common Good*, May 1985, 1.
2. In 1995, the Nikolaj hosted Wilke's *Intra-Venus* exhibition and the Helsinki City Art Museum included Wilke's work in *Desire*, which inspired both institutions to plan a future retrospective.
3. "Performalist self-portraits" is the term Wilke used to refer to her private performances. They were documented with the help of someone, usually her partner and later husband Donald Goddard.
4. Wilke explained her use of vaginal imagery: "My concern is with the word translated into form, with creating a positive image to wipe out the prejudices, aggression and fear associated with the negative connotations of pussy, cunt, box," text from her performance *Intercourse with . . .* (1977); reprinted in *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective*, ed. Thomas H. Kochheiser (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 139. Even when Wilke used "low" materials, like gum or kneaded erasers, to create her gestural vaginal forms, the result is an object of beauty.
5. Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays in Women's Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976) 126.
6. "I felt feminism could easily become fascistic if people believe that feminism is only *their* kind of feminism . . . real feminism does not judge"; cited in "Artist Hannah Wilke Talks with Ernst (Part 2)," *Oasis d'Neon* 1, no. 1 (1979): 1.
7. Judy Chicago, who was working on the West Coast, produced her sexually ambiguous *Pasadena Lifesaves* in 1969 and completed her *Dinner Party* in 1979. Both artists have been accused of "essentialism" by later feminists, which has only hampered discussions concerning feminism and the work at hand.
8. The song is from Wilke's album *Revolutions Per Minute: The Art Record*, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts and Charing Cross Co.

Debra Wacks is a doctoral candidate at the Graduate School, City University of New York. She is currently writing her dissertation, entitled "Subversive Humor: The Performance Art of Hanna Wilke, Eleanor Antin, and Adrian Piper."

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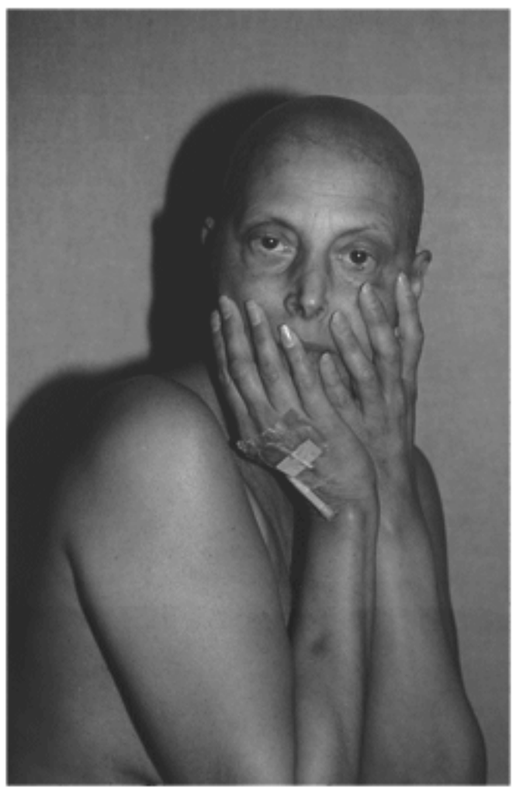

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The final room on the first floor contained Wilke's earliest work. (Chronologically, this room should have been at the beginning of the exhibition, but the sounds of Wilke's performance pulled viewers in the opposite direction.) That last gallery held two rarely exhibited Surrealist-inspired fiberglass sculptures from the 1960s (*Untitled* and *Anthropofaunic Form*) and ink drawings like *Self-Portrait on Tricycle* (ca. 1956). But more interesting were the small prototypical clay sculptures that are phallic, excremental, and "box"-shaped (1960–63). Another ceramic, *Teasel Cushion* (1967), further evolved the abstracted vaginal form and characteristically incorporates wit via a punning title and a fabulously unruly Astroturf base.[7] The disruption of chronological sequence, along with the absence of wall texts (although a one-page biography on Wilke was available at the front desk), avoided hagiography about the artist (a norm in most retrospectives), but it also missed a crucial opportunity to inform the public about Wilke's artistic development. Instead, the art was left to speak for itself. And although the work conveys many messages, the involved artistic production only would have been enriched by additional information—especially in a country where Wilke is not a familiar artist.

The exhibition catalogue offers more insight into Wilke's work. The art historian Saundra Goldman's thorough essay is noteworthy in its tidy focus on Wilke's consistent use of life-affirming gestures. The critic and curator Laura Cottingham discusses specific works, while examining the art's impact on younger artists in the 1990s. Both essays impart innovative ideas that enhance the overall retrospective. Scandinavians and Americans alike, however, would have benefited from historical contextualization of Wilke's production—specifically in relationship to the contemporary Women's Movement in the United States. Unfortunately, the well-produced and designed catalogue is published in a limited edition, for the wonderful images alone make owning this book crucial to any art library.

Upstairs, Wilke's work needed no explanations, for illness is a context everyone fundamentally understands. In this case it is the battles with cancer Wilke and her mother both faced. A stone Romanesque arch led into an intimate space, where one discovered Wilke's diaristic series of self-portraits, B.C. ("Before Consciousness" of her cancer, 1987–90). These powerful, boldly colored watercolors are de Kooning-esque in their painterliness, though they are far more personal and psychically penetrating. Each painting abstractly represents Wilke's face as it gradually changes to reflect her emotional and physical shifts.

Wilke's final series, *Intra-Venus*, continues in the same vein as her earlier performalist self-portraits, but the representation of her cancer now makes the effect painfully ironic. Large, color photographs portray Wilke's once familiar and beautiful body in hospital surroundings. Obviously ill, she appears calm and characteristically searching for the subtle humor and beauty in the serious situation. The left-hand photograph in the diptych *Intra-Venus Series #4, July 26, 1992/ February 19, 1992* is a half-figure portrait of a bare-skinned, hairless Wilke. Her hands, one pricked with an IV, cradle her face, while her clear eyes emit inner beauty. The photograph to the right shows Wilke softly enveloped by a blue blanket, her eyes closed as she turns inward. This series is not about documenting the horrific lymphomic effects on the artist's deteriorating body, but instead imparts an inner spirit and tremendous peace.

After seeing this later work, it is impossible not to reevaluate Wilke's earlier performalist self-portraits. This profound shift is the retrospective's greatest accomplishment, for it affords one the opportunity to perceive Wilke's work as a continuous and coherent project. Clearly, the artist's youthful beauty was not the primary force behind her public/private performances. Rather, her art, as a whole, consistently emphasized life—its sensuality as well as its ironies, tragedies, and struggles. This intimate, lived experience serves as the starting point that infuses her art with an often disquieting provocation. The ensuing discomfort, although always intellectually and socially challenging, is first and foremost visual in its impact. The result is some of the most courageously moving art in decades.

On the way downstairs, as I was leaving the Art Center, I came across a "permanent installation"—a kind of jukebox that played samples from a variety of artists' performances. As an added bonus, there was a track of Wilke singing her song "Stand-up" (1982).[8] The song rallies the listener to "Stand up when people put you down/stand up and dance above the ground/you've got to stand up, stand up." Wilke's confident voice pervaded the room, and even when the song ended, her message of strength and celebration remained.

Notes

1. Interview with Chris Huestis and Marvin Jones, "Hannah Wilke's Art, Politics, Religion, and Feminism," *New Common Good*, May 1985, 1.
2. In 1995, the Nikolaj hosted Wilke's *Intra-Venus* exhibition and the Helsinki City Art Museum included Wilke's work in *Desire*, which inspired both institutions to plan a future retrospective.
3. "Performalist self-portraits" is the term Wilke used to refer to her private performances. They were documented with the help of someone, usually her partner and later husband Donald Goddard.
4. Wilke explained her use of vaginal imagery: "My concern is with the word translated into form, with creating a positive image to wipe out the prejudices, aggression and fear associated with the negative connotations of pussy, cunt, box," text from her performance *Intercourse with . . .* (1977); reprinted in *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective*, ed. Thomas H. Kochheiser (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 139. Even when Wilke used "low" materials, like gum or kneaded erasers, to create her gestural vaginal forms, the result is an object of beauty.
5. Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays in Women's Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976) 126.
6. "I felt feminism could easily become fascistic if people believe that feminism is only *their* kind of feminism . . . real feminism does not judge"; cited in "Artist Hannah Wilke Talks with Ernst (Part 2)," *Oasis d'Neon* 1, no. 1 (1979): 1.
7. Judy Chicago, who was working on the West Coast, produced her sexually ambiguous *Pasadena Lifesaves* in 1969 and completed her *Dinner Party* in 1979. Both artists have been accused of "essentialism" by later feminists, which has only hampered discussions concerning feminism and the work at hand.
8. The song is from Wilke's album *Revolutions Per Minute: The Art Record*, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts and Charing Cross Co.

Debra Wacks is a doctoral candidate at the Graduate School, City University of New York. She is currently writing her dissertation, entitled "Subversive Humor: The Performance Art of Hanna Wilke, Eleanor Antin, and Adrian Piper."

ART PAPERS

January/February 1997

Hannah Wilke
Ronald Feldman Fine Art
New York, New York
September 21 - October 19

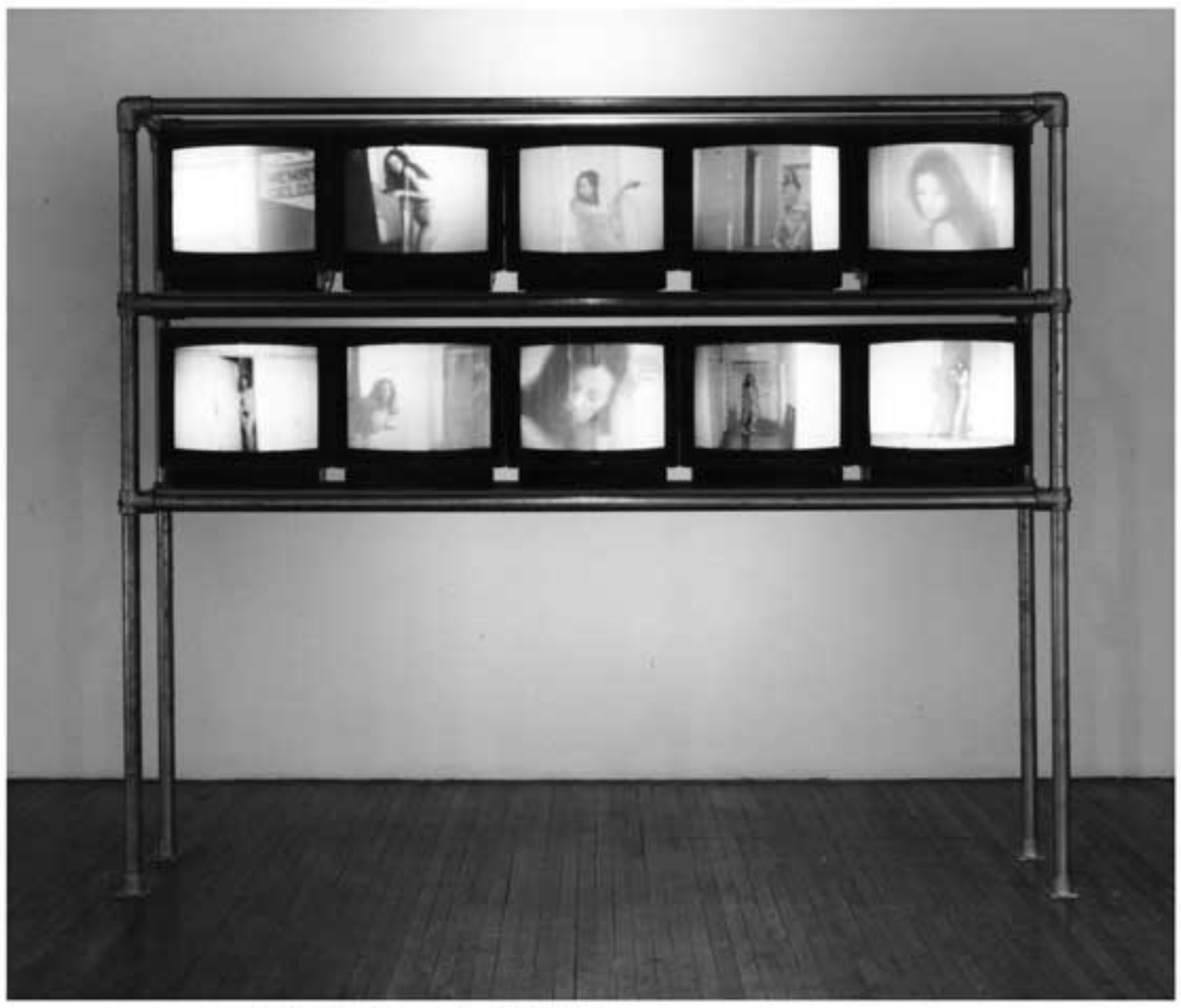
As she requested just before her death in 1993—"Remember me/Remember me?/Remember me"—Hannah Wilke's body of work was re-membered in "Performalist Self-Portraits and Video/Film Performances, 1976-1985" at the gallery that has represented her since 1972. One of the strengths of this show was the effect of ensemble, the bringing together of disparate parts of a practice—props, texts, photographs, videos.

Upon entering the gallery, one was bombarded head-on by Wilke's voice-over rising above the grating music of 1970s melodrama coming from 10 monitors installed in a large rectangle. This arrangement of five performances taped in various locations between 1979 and 1985 was particular to this exhibition and afforded insight into process by offering multiple viewpoints. The camera approaches Wilke from various angles; she poses actively, unclothed, constantly moving, insistently speaking. Some of the monitors showed the view through the camera stalking her body. Others offered a detached perspective that included both Wilke and the cameraman at work in the frame, and functioned to deconstruct the capturing, anonymous gaze. The screen in the upper left corner flashed the names of the writers whose texts Wilke had appropriated and given voice; the instructions for viewing *So Help Me Hannah* were hung, typewritten, under a hundred pieces of plexiglass on a wall nearby.

Closest to the entrance were six confrontational poster-sized photographs of the bared Wilke with high heels and ray guns. One-liners like "annihilate illuminate" (Oldenburg) or "beyond the permission given" inscribed on the posters ring out like gunshots and call up issues crucial to this body of work: those of agency, manipulation, and (dis)empowerment. On the floor in front of the posters were two large, plexiglass cases holding the 229 ray guns Wilke assembled, the conception reclaimed from her (unacknowledged) collaboration with Oldenburg. The surprisingly touching objects were found, or shaped of mangled tinfoil, a toothless comb, a broken Mickey Mouse water pistol; they sat as abased bits of urban detritus that trigger images of vulnerability and violence. Wrapping around the walls above these cases was a long filmic frieze of photographs, the *Snatch Shots with Ray Guns* (1978), in which Wilke poses in grungy industrial spaces armed only with high heels and ray guns. Without text, they were disturbingly silent.

Without the mediation of text, Wilke's work is disarmingly ambiguous, a kind of "social irritant" as she called it. It can be difficult for someone who has not followed her career to figure out Wilke's intentions. One young female art student wrote angrily in the comment book how terrible a role model Wilke is. She thought the work exhibitionistic and self-exploitative. Is this, in fact, a seductive dance of the seven veils or a critical unveiling, a stripping away of propriety and pretension? One is given pause to wonder as Wilke transforms herself from bachelor to bride stripped-bare behind Duchamp's *Large Glass* in *Through the Large Glass* (1976). This ambiguity makes the work problematical; it is also the motor that generates its interest. Lucy Lippard's quote in*From the Center* (among those selected in *So Help Me Hannah*) is just right: "A woman using her own face and body has a right to do what she will with them, but it is a subtle abyss that separates men's use of women for sexual titillation from women's use of women to expose that insult." The strength and the enigma of Wilke's early work is that it consistently and insistently straddles that precarious and "subtle abyss."

The overarching narrative theme of Wilke's career is the fragility of the human psyche and its vessel. But the wise curatorial choice to include only two respectful reminders of Wilke's death in this exhibition enables viewers to take a fresh look



Hannah Wilke, So Help Me Hannah, *1979-85, multiple video performance (photo: Zindman/Fremont, courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Art).*

at work that has been so strongly inflected by Wilke's last major project, *Intra-Venus*, a documentation of the ravages of illness eating away her vital form. One piece, a photo diptych of Wilke and her mother, Selma Butter, foreshadows *Intra-Venus*. Both women are shown from the waist up, nude. Wilke's heavily made-up eyes are wide open, seducing the camera; she wears ray guns as wounds all over her body. Butter's eyes are closed and she turns her head away from the camera. She wears the literal scars of a mastectomy but exudes the emotional strength of a single-breasted Amazon, so often called upon in ancient Greek art to stand for the threat of female excess. This mother-daughter pairing calls up a medieval vanitas image: a youthful beauty looks into a mirror to see herself, reflected back in a state of physical decay.

It was the self-image Wilke would indeed have to face as she followed her mother into the battle with cancer and lost. It was a fate she courageously presented to the world as a heart-rending response to criticisms that her body beautiful nullified her feminist intentions. The only piece in the show related to her illness was *Why Not Sneeze?* (1992), a witty sculpture that functions as a ready-made aided by Duchamp's original object of the same name, a small cage filled with pieces of marble cut to look like sugar cubes, wielding its surrealist punch when one tries to lift the object. Wilke picked up on the implication of illness in the title and replaced Duchamp's tooth-cracking cubes with medicine bottles and syringes. The piece was likely chosen to stand in dialogue with the poster-sized cover of Wilke's autobiography *I Object: Memoirs of a Sugargiver* (1977-78) hung behind it. The series of transpositions here gave an inkling of Wilke's strategy: she may come off like sugar, but beware the sugar cubes that break your teeth. The words "I Object" read "I am an object and I object to this status." They stand as a perfect, succinct summary of Wilke's early practice.

Wilke believed in the potency of the image. She spoke of hoping to save her dying mother by capturing her spirit in photographs. Pictures did not save her mother's life, nor her own. The power of photography to function as a vehicle through time was palpable in the gallery space, though, as these pioneer performance pieces were re-experienced. There was an innocent moment in the 1960s when standing naked before the world seemed the most forthright expression of honesty, a political gesture aimed at societal repression. Work in the early 1970s by artists like Wilke, Edelson, and Schneemann, among others, served as a jolting reminder that too much has been written on and projected onto the female body for it ever to evacuate the discourse of nudity and appear naked. Wilke's images found themselves in fine feminist company this season in New York with Yayoi Kusama at Robert Miller, Nancy Spero riding the crest of a great wave with no less than three simultaneous gallery shows, and with a Carolee Schneemann retrospective at The New Museum. The crucial question is, why now and not always?

Claire Daigle,
Brooklyn, New York

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
October 21, 1996, p. A20

Hannah Wilke, in Her Prime

By TAYLOR HOLLIDAY

New York

Sporting nothing but high-heeled sandals and a small handgun, the nude Hannah Wilke prowls the room. In slow-motion action, she flips her long brown hair off her shoulder and slinks past the deserted school room, the school yard, the bathroom, the rooftop, the dumpster. She points her shiny gun and stalks her prey—and we are ensnared.

Self-image

Wilke carried out this bit of performance art for the camera in 1978 in New York, where it was first shown and can be seen again now at her gallery, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts (up through Oct. 26). It's the midcareer work of an American artist who in her teens began to photograph herself in the nude and who made the female body—her own, specifically—the subject of her life's work, which ended in 1993 when she died of cancer at the age of 52.

She worked on this project, titled "So Help Me Hannah," from 1978 to 1985. In the 48 black-and-white "performalist self-portraits" (her husband, Donald Goddard, held the camera), her audacity—and her appealing body—get our attention; her attractive face, and obvious sense of humor, hold it, as we try to figure out just what she's up to. She's playing a role, maybe James Bond's Pussy Galore but without the tease. Her look is not come-hither or pouty, but sometimes deadly serious, others mildly amused. In one shot, she huddles on the ground, arms wrapped around her legs, gun in hand, staring up at us, faintly frightened but defiant. Is her art about her body or her mind?

If the photos aren't clear on this point, 100 individually framed quotations from various artists and critical writers help to focus Wilke's intentional ambiguities. Across the room, they all come together, as 10 video monitors play five different versions of a similar performance, with Hannah's monotone voice-over repeating the wall quotes. Here she again graces an empty room with the heels-and-gun-only look; in a slow-motion dancelike series of poses she writhes, twists, reaches out and lolls on the floor, ending up in a sprawl of death as the last quote rings in our ear.

In 1985, Wilke told an interviewer: "In the 'So Help Me Hannah' performance I am nude for 28 minutes, and after a few minutes people forget the nudity and begin to listen to what I have to say in the quotations by Nietzsche, Hitler, Oldenburg, or other artists and historians."

For me, first seeing the piece in 1996, it did work that way. But it had a very different effect on people who saw it in the '70s, when it was first exhibited. Wilke was one of the first and most controversial of the artists who used their own bodies in the creation of feminist art. Sex and violence were certainly not new to art then, but the way in which Wilke presented them was. Exploiting her own body to comment on the history of exploitation of women in both high and popular culture didn't go over that well with either the mainstream art world or the mainstream feminist camp.

"Narcissistic" was the popular judgment of her work at the time. And the second room of this exhibition gives it some credence. In this 1976 work, "Through the Large Glass," she performs a seductive striptease behind Marcel Duchamp's plate-glass sculpture "The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even"; stripping away a man's white silk suit she plays the roles of both bride and bachelor, once again wresting back control of the female body.

Those who said she was just an exhibitionist insisted that she couldn't or wouldn't use her body in her art if it weren't traditionally beautiful. Were they ever wrong. And Hannah proved them so with her last project, "Intra-Venus" (first shown posthumously, and now on view at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography), a series of large color portraits of herself, once again nude, as she loses her life to lymphoma. Now she is bloated, bald and violated by intravenous tubes, but she is ever the in-your-face exhibitionist, exploring the realm of the forbidden.

"The image of the artist was always male," she once explained, and his subject female. "But why should we have this mind-body male-female duality? The mind and body are one, so I tried to make art an expression of that connection."

Her photos are deliberately of pedestrian quality, the video production values low, so that no slick technique, no beauty besides her own, detracts from Wilke's message, which is the sole aesthetic of her art. That message was always ambiguous, if not ambivalent. However, viewing her work from a hindsight of almost 20 years, one can finally get past the scandalous aspects of her art and reflect on the conditions that compelled her to make it. This work is a product of its times, and if in many ways it seems almost laughable now, it's only because women's roles as artists, and their artistic freedom, are taken for granted. But for that very fact, we have Wilke and a few other fearless pioneers to thank.

The nude Hannah Wilke gets the last laugh after all.

The New York Times
September 27, 1996

Art in Review

■ Undressing for the camera with a vengeance ■ Exoticism and its dangers ■ A show by three friends in a firehouse ■ Hints of ancient Egypt.

Hannah Wilke

Performalist Self-Portraits and Video/Film Performances, 1976-85'

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts
31 Mercer Street, near Grand Street
SoHo
Through Oct. 26

The performance artist and sculptor Hannah Wilke, who died in 1990 at the age of 52, wielded her body like a blunt instrument. Her aim was far from precise, but luckily her target was large: the male dominance of art and the long tradition of the female as subject, muse and (mostly nude) model.

Designating herself the latest in that line, Wilke became her own model and muse, undressing for the camera with a vengeance, flaunting her good looks with a combination of honesty, pleasure and irony that was, and is, hard to decode. Was Wilke simply a victim of her own narcissism, or was she really upsetting the apple cart?

This exhibition suggests that it was a bit of both, that Wilke rebelled against her further objectification as a woman by taking matters into her own hands, objectifying herself even more blatantly, while taking on the male artists who piqued her interest or her ire. On view is the ray-gun collection that Wilke accumulated in response to the work of Claes Oldenburg, with whom she lived for several years starting in the late 1960's.

Also here is a 1976 video, "Through the Large Glass," in which Wilke executes a languid striptease behind the cracked transparent surface of Marcel Duchamp's masterpiece "Large Glass: The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even" at the Philadelphia Museum of Art; shedding a man's white satin suit, she cleverly becomes both bride and bachelor.

On a bank of video monitors that combine tapes of five performance pieces, she romps and preens for the camera, rolling about on the floor, slinking her hips and cocking an eyebrow; her voice-over spouts pertinent quotes from Marx, Nietzsche, David Bourdon and Lucy Lippard concerning capital, creativity, art and herself. Finally, a piece contrasting photographs of the naked torsos of Wilke and her mother, who was recovering from a mastectomy, presages the artist's final works, when, dying of cancer, she would continue to vamp for the camera, as if daring the illness to take her life.

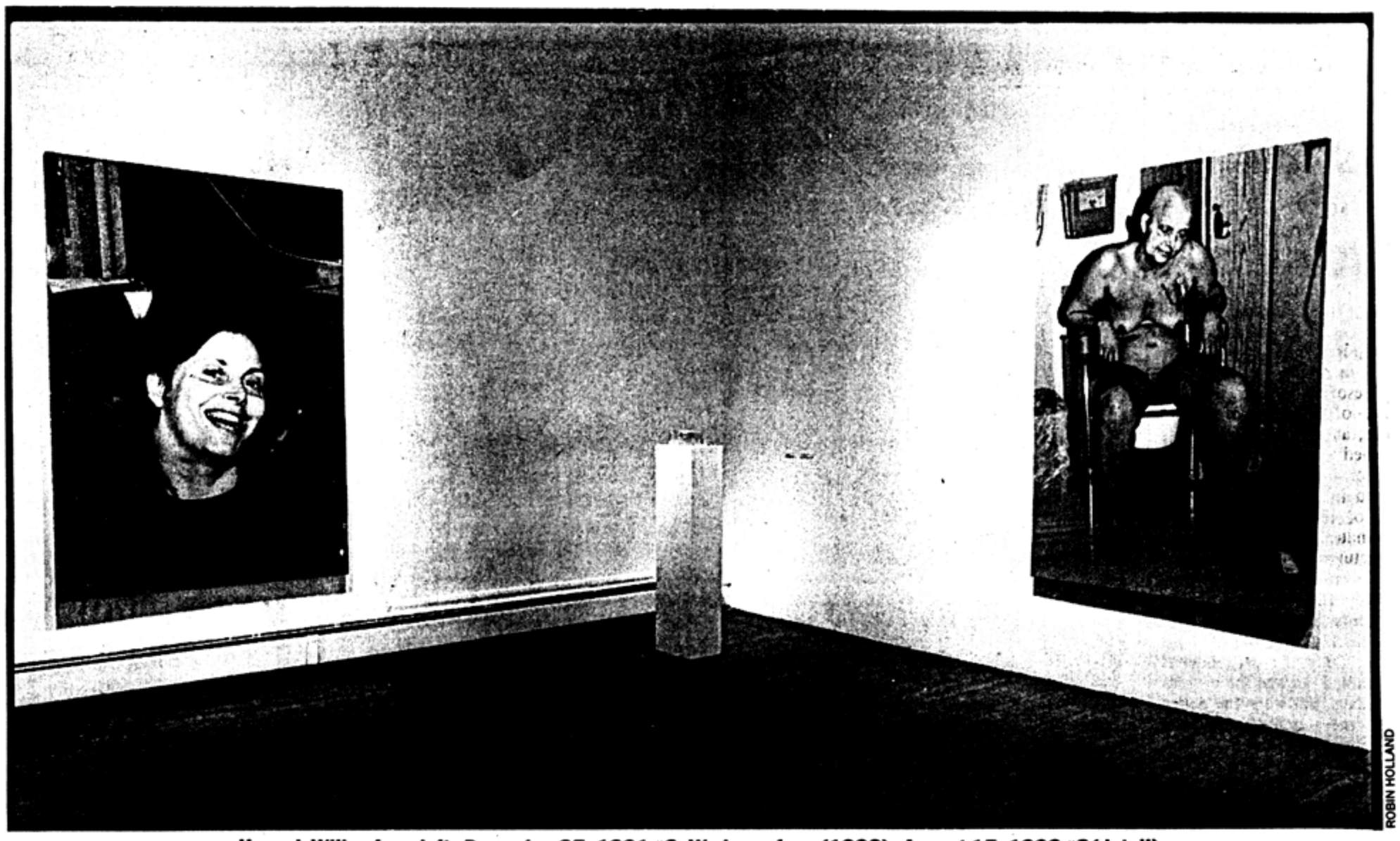
There are times when Wilke's work doesn't quite come together, when it's too casual and not thought through enough. But she was indisputably among the first of her kind as a feminist performance artist, as this exhibition, so full of her anger, intelligence and physical bravura, almost unfailingly confirms.

ROBERTA SMITH

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

Hannah Wilke in a video still from her "Through the Large Glass" at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

the village VOICE
January 25, 1994, p. 82



Hannah Wilke: from left, *December 27, 1991 #2*; *Wedges of . . .* (1992); *August 17, 1992 #3* (detail)

Fem Fatale

By Elizabeth Hess

Hannah Wilke
Ronald Feldman Fine Arts
31 Mercer Street
Through February 19

Joan Snyder
Jessica Stockholder
Jay Gorney Modern Art
100 Greene Street
Through February 12

If Hannah Wilke slipped through the cracks in the last decade of her life, making art in an unappreciative world, she will not be overlooked in death. As artists die younger and younger, they are making work that speaks from the other side. This is Wilke's last and ultimate picture show. Every piece, every frame, every inch of the installation was planned by Wilke prior to her death from cancer on January 28, 1993. The show is as devastating as it is extraordinary. It should be a milestone for this exhibition season.

This presentation, ironically, breathes new life into Wilke's entire oeuvre. What more could any artist demand from his or her final body of work? It has always been difficult to place the variety of Wilke's objects into one conclusive, neat category. Wilke is known, largely, for her self-portraits, and for her abstract but suggestive ceramic sculptures; she was also an early performance artist and always a biting conceptualist. All her art, regardless of medium, was an ongoing, frequently irreverent exploration of the female form; Wilke's own body was the body in question, which the artist readily showed off to viewers.

Always an exhibitionist, Wilke was an early transgressor who felt antagonistic toward the more puritanical, more rigid elements of the feminist art movement. Her interest in her own image eventually took on narcissistic proportions as the artist photographed herself throughout her career. It is crucial to understand, prior to viewing this final group of self-portraits (made in collaboration with her husband, Donald Goddard), that Wilke's use of her naked body was consistent throughout her work. She didn't get sick and suddenly decide to display the ravages of illness. Wilke just continued to make her art up until her death, fiercely insisting on the vitality of her own body and the immortality of her art.

Walking into the exhibition, we are greeted by a room of large (71½-inch by 47½-inch) color photographs, each one dramatically presenting Hannah Wilke bigger than life. In the center of the room lies a black, funereal sculpture: a flat grid of ceramic squares with a number of the artist's trademark abstract vaginas. The portraits are horrifying and mesmerizing. Wilke's body is violated by chemotherapy and bone-marrow transplants in ways that only cancer patients know. In one work, her nose is plugged with cotton, presumably to stop the bleeding, and her open mouth reveals a layer of skin that has peeled off the back of her tongue; in another piece, Wilke sits in a stupor, naked and hairless, on a portable john. In a photo that comes closest to depicting the reality of death, Wilke lies naked in a bathtub as the last bit of water goes down the drain; her most private parts are revealed absolutely matter-of-factly.

The fight depicted in these images is to preserve life—at almost any cost. But the more time we spend with these images (13 in all), the more the initial shock of malady recedes, and the old Wilke emerges, posing, posturing, mimicking, in total control of her misshapen, yet always heroic, body. These are courageous works of art.

A series of "drawings" made with the artist's hair, as it fell out during chemo treatments, are surprisingly seductive while at the same time somewhat chilling; the simple act of transforming her hair into art becomes a testimony to the artist's adoration of her own body, and to the essential value of every (female) body. These works bring Wilke's physical presence right into the room. While traditional drawing was never the artist's best medium, a series of small works on paper, done in the hospital, are the most intimate statements in the exhibition. Wilke painted miniature watercolors of her face, with and without hair, or wearing a turban, treating these changes in physical attributes like changes in her wardrobe; the works are light, but tinged with tragedy. There are six exquisite portraits of hands that Wilke made lying in bed with an IV stuck in her wrist; she used her other hand to paint. The color stains the paper and seems to flow through her translucent flesh like blood. All these works compose a series called "Intra-Venus," the title of the show and one of Wilke's signature puns. Perhaps her last one.

Putting Joan Snyder and Jessica Stockholder together is an inspiration. Formally, this is a show about paint and color, but it's also a statement about the relationship between the women's art movement of the '70s and the current one. The romance between Snyder's paintings and Stockholder's sculptures is visually tangible, yet their objects are worlds apart.

Three canvases by Snyder in the upstairs gallery are sensual masterpieces that unabashedly celebrate nature; color and surface come together in a wave of irrepressible passion. The largest work reads like a fictive garden, filled with flora, fauna, and pigment that streaks across the painting; rectangles of deep red velvet and small pieces of wood attached to the canvas assert themselves like signposts, structuring the eye's passage through the work. *Red Field* is another garden with two dark shapes that hover and want to embrace. Snyder is painting at full speed, making intensely emotional, optimistic work. What is remarkable is her control of the paint, which looks absolutely wild and spontaneous. While these works are much less raw than her earliest and most respected canvases, they are also "vintage" Snyders. They take us back to the painter's most polemical, messy creations, which in their time were heretical; the artist wrote on her canvases, stitched them with material, gave them vaginal openings and left them bleeding. Snyder was a pioneer of abstract diaristic painting, a genre that inspired a subsequent generation.

Stockholder's almost whimsical sculptures benefit enormously from this context; we begin to read them more as paintings, through their color and surface. Works are tethered to the wall, but most of them sit on the floor like derelict objects. Stockholder likes garish colors and materials that are vaguely recognizable. A red umbrella is the basis for a work downstairs that has humor and wit: Mary Poppins meets David Hammons. But unlike Hammons, Stockholder pushes her materials to shed their poignancy. These works emit few emotions, despite a reference to a bed, or a dress hanging on a wall. Stockholder's objects seem to enjoy making no sense, while Snyder's paintings work to convince us of their authenticity, their dedication to the project of beauty. What both artists share is an insistence on freedom in their art. Snyder has always bucked trends, and Stockholder is part of a postmodern movement that is compelled to break through theoretical monopolies. Not all her pieces work, but when they do, social issues become a springboard for aesthetic innovation.

Stockholder's work is youthful, intentionally unformed, and refreshingly experimental. It is precisely what Snyder's work used to be; there's an obvious shared sensibility that connects generations and historical moments. Currently, numbers of midcareer and young women artists are linked in ideological and aesthetic spirit. It's a good time for them, despite the recession. Together, they do not form one movement that can be labeled and sold. But, more importantly, their art is equally notable for its form and content. When critics, such as my esteemed colleague Peter Schjeldahl, argue that there's nothing significant going on at the moment, I want to reach for my . . . computer. Déjà vu. In the 1970s, most critics refused to look at or write about women's art; many of those ignored remain underappreciated, or, as with Hannah Wilke, had to wait until their deaths for some weighty ink. The same '70s movement is directly linked to the current wave of feminist—or whatever you want to call it—art. Dead artists are always easier to digest, but I suggest that my frightened colleagues open their eyes before dismissing all so-called "political" (buzzword) work. Any reports of the death of feminist art are premature. ■

Art

ARTFORUM
XXXII, no. 8 (April 1994):
93–94

Hannah Wilke, *June 10, 1992/December 10, 1991, #5*, from "Intra-Venus," 1991–93, two panels, chromagenic supergloss prints, 71½ x 47½".

NEW YORK

HANNAH WILKE

RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS

"Nowadays us pretty white girls have to watch what we say," Hannah Wilke remarked when I first met her several years ago. The triumph of her final exhibition, and of her entire career, is that she never heeded this advice. "Intra-Venus," 1991–93, is a microcosm of the forms and concerns of Wilke's oeuvre, as well as a document of the last few years of her life during which she underwent treatment for lymphoma.

The images that quite literally dominate the exhibition are the 13 larger-than-life-size self-portraits, done in collaboration with her husband, Donald Goddard, which depict Wilke at various stages of her illness and treatment. Most often grouped into diptychs or triptychs, these photographs are unsparing and severely test the viewers' endurance. A particularly arresting diptych shows Wilke at an early stage of her treatment with a shirt tied around her head and a bright-red tongue sticking out of equally red lips, with an exaggerated half-laughing/half-screaming expression, alongside an image of her, head tilted back to reveal cotton plugs completely closing and distorting her nose, her open mouth holding a tongue that is a mass of blood, loose skin, and pus. Perhaps the most chilling is a single image of Wilke staring directly at the viewer, long wet strings of hair coming down over her head and face, revealing her mostly bald scalp. What separates these photographs from other artists' portrayals of disease and impending death is the seamlessness with which they fit into the body of Wilke's artistic production.

Wilke chose to begin her 1989 retrospective at the University of Missouri with a nude photograph of herself at age four, and one of her first works of art was a self-portrait, again naked, at 14. Wilke used her body in the guise of pinup, Playboy centerfold, and classical goddess. This was part of a complex discourse that refused to deny the pleasure of both narcissism and of being the object of voyeurism, while maintaining control of production and representation. But two sets of earlier work that directly presage the "Intra-Venus" series more obviously reference the harsh social realities that underlie these presentations of herself. In the "S.O.S.—Starification Object Series," 1974–82, Wilke photographed herself with her body covered by her signature folded vaginal shapes made of chewing gum. She referred to herself as the "S.O. (Starification Object)" in recognition of the fragility and the consuming nature of the bubble-gum fascination with beauty and celebrity. The "So Help Me Hannah Series: Portrait of the Artist with Her Mother, Selma Butter," 1978–81, juxtaposes Wilke—bare chested, fully made up, and with a come-hither expression—beside her mother, whose bare chest is marked by a long mastectomy scar and lesions, looking shyly away from the camera. Wilke covers her chest with small metal objects, "scars" she called them, "To wear her wounds, to heal my own."

While the photographs in "Intra-Venus" form the last link in a consistent chain, the drawings and sculptures construct a parallel dialogue with other kinds of artistic production. A box made out of a wire birdcage and plastic medicine bottles and syringes is a witty reference to Marcel Duchamp's *Why Not Sneeze Rrose Sélavy?*, 1921, while a series of exquisite abstract drawings made from the artist's hair as it fell out from chemotherapy give new meaning to the notion of process. Two matching, lead-alloy neck blocks (used during radiation treatments) perform a function Wilke had often set for her work: using gesture to turn Minimalism into Abstract Expressionism.

To critics who often denigrated her work for being too narcissistic or exhibitionistic, Wilke had and deserves the last word, "It was risky for me to act beautiful, but the scars representing the ugliness of society sometimes went unnoticed. People often give me this bullshit of, 'What would you have done if you weren't so gorgeous?' What difference does it make? . . . Gorgeous people die as do the stereotypical 'ugly.' Everybody dies."

—*Andrew Perchuk*

Art in America
May 1994

REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

Hannah Wilke at Ronald Feldman

From the day she first posed nude and wrapped in her mother's mink stole at the age of 14, Hannah Wilke presented endless variations on the theme of the female icon—from male fantasy object to defiant feminist to unabashed narcissist. Throughout the '70s and '80s, she used her stylish and slightly dangerous beauty to suggest—through arresting photographs, sculptures, performances and writings—the subliminal power struggles inherent in "civilized" sexuality. "Intra-Venus," the punning title of her last exhibition, seemed to promise more of the same: the 52-year-old love goddess in treatment, healing herself. Nothing, not even prior knowledge that the works would actually document Wilke's losing battle against lymphoma, could prepare viewers for the devastating color images that awaited them.

At once macabre and humorous, terrifying and sublime, the 13 over-life-sized prints were personally selected by Wilke from slides taken by her second husband, Donald Goddard, during the five years (1987-93) that the artist struggled with her fatal disease. Overwhelming in physical candor as well as scale, these shots deliver a kick-in-the-stomach effect—recalling those photos of her cancer-ravaged mother with which, just a decade ago, Wilke matched pictures of herself in radiant midlife health.

Here she is peering out through the last strands of wet hair, here showing her blistered tongue, here holding a pot of hospital flowers on her head, here striking a calendar-girl pose that only accentuates the bloat and sag induced by time and malady, here nonchalantly exposing her anus and genitals as she reclines in a tub. Even at the most humiliating moments, Wilke retains her dignity, her sense of self-affirmation through physical and emotional boldness. Bald, naked, hooked to IV tubes, squatting on a portable toilet, she sports the saving irony of a performer playing a last, uncompromising role—as dying crone. The frontality of her images, the directness of her gaze, obliterate all esthetic defenses.

On the floor in each room was a tile grid supporting aggressively enlarged ceramic versions of the vulvic forms Wilke previously made in miniature, using materials like chewing gum, latex or lint. But nearby stood evidence of the body's negation: two lead alloy neck radiation blocks, a cagelike basket of pill cases and syringes, framed bandages from a bone-marrow harvest, globs of hair shed during chemotherapy. A series of expressionistic watercolors in which she depicted her debilitated face and hands seems mild by comparison.

Watching her mother die, Wilke once complained that clinical procedures take the afflicted away from us, hiding them as though death itself were a matter of personal shame. Her own last gesture, rare in this self-pitying age, demonstrates a better way to handle genuine trauma, without becoming a victim: by facing the truth without blinking, by bearing it. —*Richard Vine*

Hannah Wilke: Right panel of *June 15, 1992/January 30, 1992*, 1992-93, chromagenic supergloss prints, 2 panels, 71½ by 47½ inches each; at Ronald Feldman.

The New York Times
FRIDAY, JANUARY 29, 1993

Hannah Wilke, 52, Artist, Dies; Used Female Body as Her Subject

By ROBERTA SMITH

Hannah Wilke, a sculptor and Conceptual artist who made the body and female sexuality the subject of her work, died yesterday at Twelve Oaks Hospital in Houston. She was 52 and lived in Manhattan.

She died of complications from lymphoma, said her husband, Donald Goddard.

In the late 1960's and early 70's, Ms. Wilke startled the art world with beautiful sculptures made of latex or ceramic whose layered and folded flowerlike forms were both abstract and yet highly suggestive of female genitalia. This fortune-cookie-like configuration became the artist's signature; it was sometimes small and made of homey materials like chewing gum or laundry lint, or it could be larger and painted with Abstract Expressionist brushstrokes. These forms could hang on the wall, or be marshaled in great numbers across the floor, or be stuck directly to the body of the artist herself, as they were in some of her Conceptual photographic pieces.

In some ways, Ms. Wilke was part of the Post-Minimalist soft-sculpture esthetic that emerged in the early 1970's and that included artists like Eva Hesse and Keith Sonnier. But she brought to this esthetic a stronger sense of the erotic and an often witty political edge. Striking in appearance, she forthrightly made herself the primary subject of her videotapes, performance pieces and photographs, often posing nude or partially clothed in ways that ridiculed the role of the female nude in art. While some critics called her work narcissistic, others saw it as probing the mechanism of narcissism and voyeurism.

Les Wollam

Hannah Wilke in the 1970's.

In the late 1970's, Ms. Wilke's involvement with the female body became even more personal when her mother contracted cancer and the artist began to photograph the physical ravages of the disease and its treatments. In 1986, when cancer was diagnosed in Ms. Wilke, she began a series of daily watercolor drawings of her face, her hands or flowers. With the help of her husband, she also turned the camera on herself, documenting her illness in a series of large-scale color photographs.

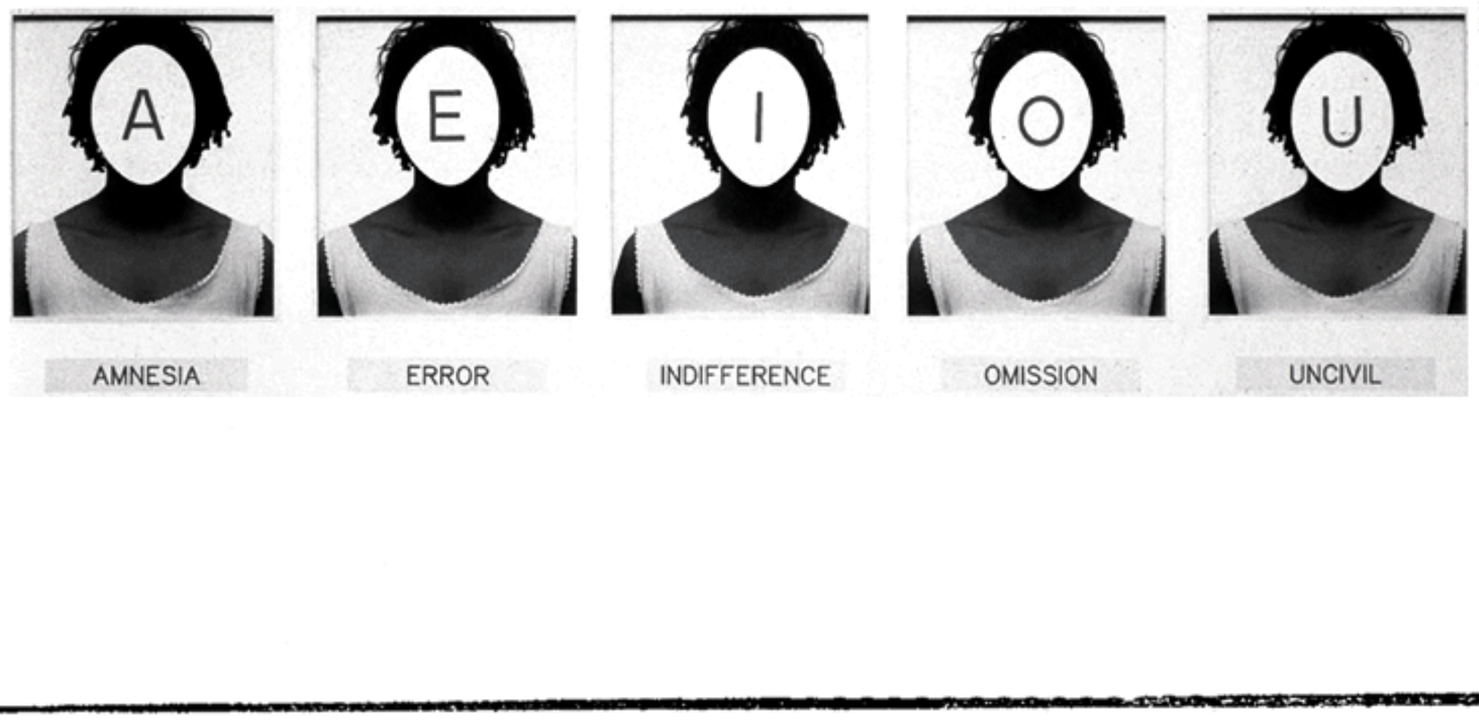
Ms. Wilke, whose original name was Arlene Hannah Butter, was born in New York City on March 7, 1940. She earned a bachelor of fine arts degree and a teaching certificate from the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia in 1962 and taught sculpture at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan for many years. Since her first one-woman exhibition in 1972, she has been represented by the Ronald Feldman Gallery in Manhattan.

"B.C. Series," a 1988 watercolor self-portrait by Ms. Wilke.

Her work is represented in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Jewish Museum in New York City, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, the Milwaukee Art Museum and the Allen Art Museum in Oberlin, Ohio. A retrospective of her career was organized at the University of Missouri at St. Louis in 1989.

In addition to her husband, she is survived by a sister, Marsie Scharlatt of Los Angeles, and two stepdaughters, Katie Goddard of Minneapolis and Nellie Goddard of Chicago.

the village VOICE
September 26, 1989, p. 93



Lorna Simpson: *Easy for Who to say* (1989)

Self- and Selfless Portraits

BY ELIZABETH HESS

HANNAH WILKE. Ronald Feldman, 31 Mercer Street, through October 7.
LORNA SIMPSON. Josh Baer, 270 Lafayette Street, through October 14.

Feminist artists aren't usually known for their bodies, but Hannah Wilke is an exception. She has been flaunting her naked self in performances and photographs since the early '70s, and her figure has become her signature image. Vaginas, for instance, were once putty in her hands, as she fashioned tiny facsimiles out of chewing gum, and then stuck them all over her skin. Wilke has struck innumerable narcissistic poses to wallow in cultural obsessions with the female body; her goal is not so much to annihilate these obsessions as to reclaim them, for better or worse.

"Body Art" worked its way into critical vernacular as Wilke, along with Carolee Schneeman, an originator of the genre, liberated their libidos in live performances. Postmodernists, such as Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman, who continue to mine the same vein, prefer to dress up the body or employ its appropriated versions; Wilke has always emphasized flesh—her flesh. She is one of few artists who continues to place their own bodies on the front lines of their work.

In her current exhibition, the main gallery is filled with a new series of watercolor self-portraits of the artist's face. These abstract, masklike ovals of color look like private exercises or experiments, nevertheless, they are surprisingly slight in comparison to Wilke's previous achievements. The heart of the show is in the back room, where Wilke continues to take on the difficult issues of illness, family, and body.

In a series of large photographs of her aging and ill mother, who died of cancer sevent years ago, Wilke takes us instantly into the psyche, if not physical body, of a woman who is knowingly facing death. These are intimate shots, blown up larger than life, which freeze and contemplate the relationship between mother/subject and daughter/photographer. Wilke's identification with her mother is tangible; one can sense the artist attempting to prolong her mother's life through the work. Beneath her mother's portraits, Wilke sketches a number of delicate birds, in contrast to the harsh black-and-white realism of the photos; the maternal portraits hover over the small birds, as if

ART

they are nesting.

Wilke has also recently gone through a bout with illness. In a diptych titled *Handle With Care*, she lies in bed with her eyes closed and a large bandage on her neck. A colorful bird (the artist, apparently, has a number of pet birds) sits on her head quite naturally, like a hat. In the second photo, Wilke cups one of her breasts, as if guarding it from potential tumors or hasty surgeons; her mother had a mastectomy, which was the subject of an earlier work. Even in illness, however, the artist's "Hollywood" glamour—her trademark—shines through. Wilke's body has become a temple of sorts, and, despite her bandaged wound, it looks as sacred as ever. Yet, this show is tinged with fear. The inclusion of several older pieces, which feature a little girl, and a self-portrait of a younger Wilke creates a sense of loss. Illness may be Wilke's current metaphor, but autobiography remains her antidote.

Lorna Simpson, a Conceptual photographer whose central image is also the female body, strips her figures of their identities, not their clothes. Simpson takes on some of the same ideological blockbusters as Wilke, but using a radically different strategy. Over the years, Wilke has constructed a narrative around her self, while Simpson, a generation younger, is more interested in the racial, or racist, construction of female identity. Wilke's work is infused with her own personality, while Simpson's is the antithesis; she uses one black model (not herself), who remains faceless, in a series of highly schematic photos and captions.

Simpson turns anonymity into a weapon. The figure, a young black woman in a nondescript outfit, is theatrically posed in front of a blank background; the model is used more as an icon than a character. Simpson's project is one of reconstruction, rather than depiction of black women. The generic figure never identifies herself, but poses the question "Who do you think I am?" or "Who am I supposed to be?" Simpson's work gets at the assumptions about black identity that have little to do with anything other than: color. Her model may appear to be anonymous, but her black skin and dreads are telling.

Artists commonly use texts as symbolic systems, but Simpson is more interested in real systems, and the necessary social activism required to undermine them. As a result, pieces comment directly on overtly political issues such as rape, along with more subtle, equally devastating aspects of daily life; her most humorous piece dives into the banality of upper-class authority by simply placing a pair of white kid gloves on her model. The world is ruled by people who know how to wear white gloves.

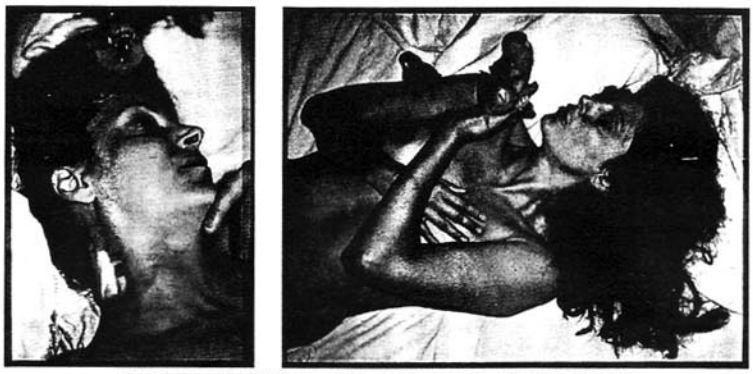
Six no-frills pieces are uniformly clear, angry, and compelling. Simpson's show may be formulaic, but her formula is not the least bit facile. The combination of text and image creates a three-way dialogue between viewer, artist, and model. Words lead us deeper into the identity of the enigmatic figure, who, in part, is a prisoner in every piece. Simpson's model offers her back to viewers in *Guarded Conditions*; a repeated and sliced image of the woman stands with her arms folded behind her back as if she is being arrested. Her identity has been arrested.

Throughout, Simpson's model is a passive carrier of cultural codes, who remains rigid, unable to make an antagonistic move. Her thoughts of resistance, however, occasionally pop up in Simpson's captions, indicating the presence of a vital, albeit quiet, interior life. There's a calculated coldness in this work, yet Simpson's figurative scale allows for a modicum of personal identification. The model's absence of expression, let alone a face, is continually unnerving, but she is not so much silent—as silenced. The artist always gets the last word. ■

Hannah Wilke: *Daughters* (1975–82)

ARTFORUM

XXVIII, no. 4 (December 1989): 138



Hannah Wilke, *Handle With Care*, 1987, color C-prints, left: 30 × 21½", right: 30 × 39¾".

HANNAH WILKE

RONALD FELDMAN GALLERY

Hannah Wilke makes feminism look easy, and why shouldn't she? After all, she's been committed to sketching out a language of female eroticism on the drawing board of representation for years now. The strongest work in this show was the "Seura Chaya" series, 1978–89, which juxtaposes photographs of Wilke's mother, ill from cancer and bald from chemotherapy, with drawings of the artist's bird, Chaya. (Wilke got the bird after her mother's death.) This work is testimony to the courage of both mother and daughter. Wilke has written that by obsessively photographing her mother, she had hoped to give her more life. She wants to transform the will to fix an image, to represent her mother, into an act of lifegiving. But Wilke's mother, with her huge eyes, smooth head, and emaciated body, looks all the more fragile and isolated by her physical deterioration. Yet there is beauty here and strength as well.

Wilke is well-known for appearing nude in her work. She projects a hippylike comfort with her own nakedness. But her self-exposure, which translates as some kind of rhetoric of sexual freedom for women, is too facile, too simple a formulation. The work of artists like Cindy Sherman and Aimee Rankin has shown female sexuality to be the site of as much pain as pleasure. The culturally acceptable forms of abuse of women have been giving way at a painfully slow rate, rendering Wilke's position both problematic and out of sync. Her self-portrait, naked in bed with her birds (*Handle with Care*, 1987), is sweet but remarkably lifeless.

Wilke's watercolor self-portraits are more contemplative than introspective. Made obsessively over a number of years, they show Wilke's varying vision of herself. Some are moody and angry, some remarkably opaque, others dense and animalistic. These images are painted with large daubs of swirling color. The most recent ones, from the "About Face" series, 1989, consist of nine masklike faces on one piece of paper. The earlier ones are huge, almost expressionistic in style. Each presents a face that is like a new distorting mirror, faithfully reproduced by an artist who, in the process of reenacting the false myth of feminine narcissistic rapture, reveals entirely other truths.

—*Catherine Liu*

Art in America
(July 1985): 139

Hannah Wilke at Feldman

Having watched her development as an artist for a decade, this observer has come to the conclusion that Hannah Wilke has two great loves—the love of the amorphous, and the love of the highly personal. It was personal, highly personal, when in a 1978 show Wilke featured answering-machine messages from, among others, several lovers. Amorphousness characterized Wilke's early sculpture, assembled from masses of petallike, flesh-tinted layers of thinly poured latex, held together with grommets and mounted, quivering, on the wall. Personal *and* amorphous were the wads of chewing gum Wilke stuck all over her nude body in photographs which are remembered, fondly or not, by art cognoscenti to this day.

These two principal tendencies in her work carried over into her latest show; but, in the intervening years since '78, they have become passions—indeed, compulsions. The amorphous? It was all over the place in the new sculptures Wilke exhibited. These were tabletop, pedestal, and on-the-floor pieces composed of one or two or maybe three polychrome pastry-shell-like forms, with more "pastry" inside and painted all over à la de Kooning. They were shown resting on semi-oblong masonite bases of a single color, often bordered by paint-speckled bands. There were row upon row of these objects, with titles like "Of Relativity Series" or *Support Foundation*.

Also on show were photos from Wilke's highly personal "In Memoriam Series"—black-and-white and Cibachrome pictures of her mother, Selma Butter, taken as she was dying of cancer. She was depicted in progressive phases of her illness—looking wasted in the hospital with no hair, looking frail in bed, and so on.

The photos evidence a real talent for loving informal portraiture. They have much of the same courageous sensitivity to the subject that Avedon showed in his portraits of his dying father. But in my view Wilke went too far in certain works. A *Portrait of the Artist with Her Mother, Selma Butter* was a diptych featuring, on the left, Hannah posing attractively nude with various metal objects stuck to her body (a throwback to the chewing gum, no doubt), and, to the right, a nude, gaunt Mrs. Butter, one breast removed and cancer festering over her right side. The effect, to me, was cruel, though Wilke showed as much courage in taking these photos as her mother did in being photographed. Perhaps Wilke was trying to exorcise our common fears of death, especially death by cancer. Whatever her intention, the effect of the show was devastating, but with art played off against death, the fascination of death got the upper hand.

—Gerrit Henry

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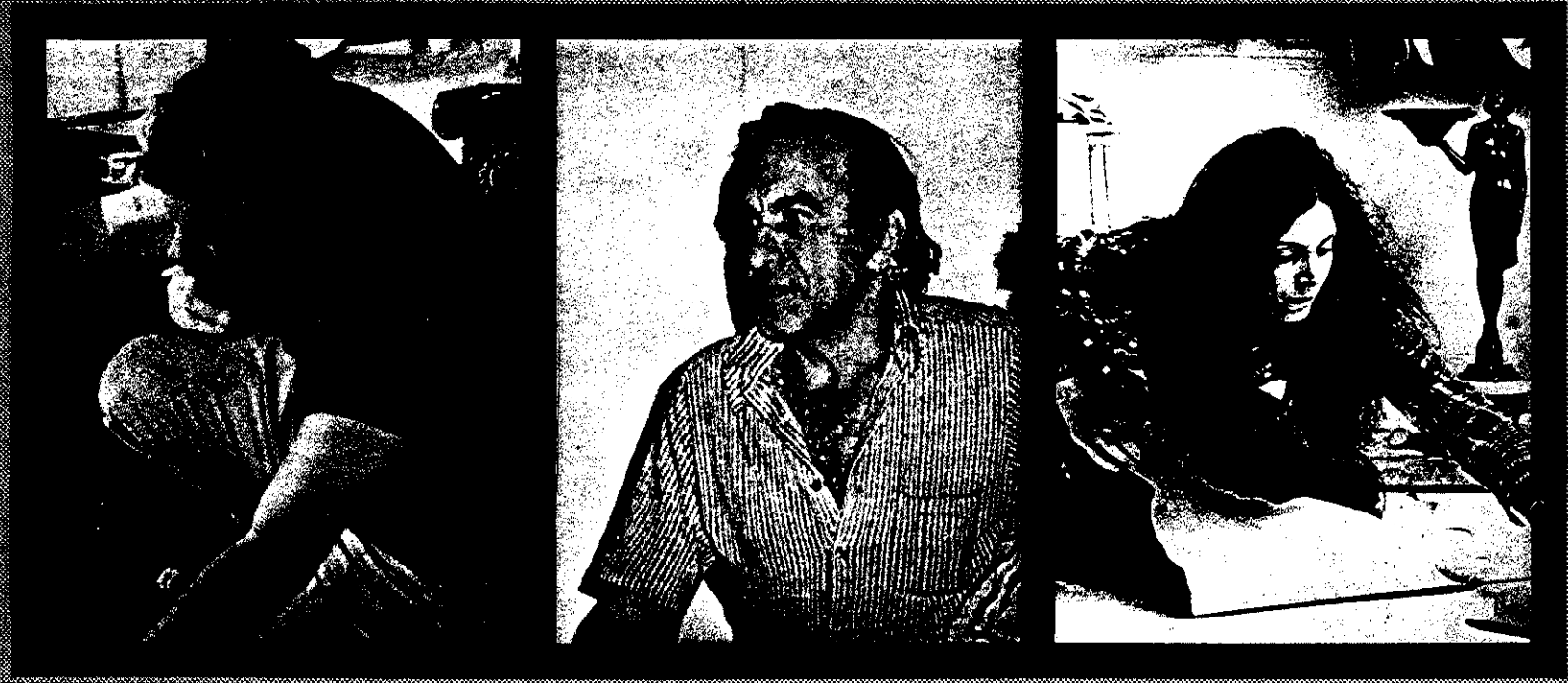

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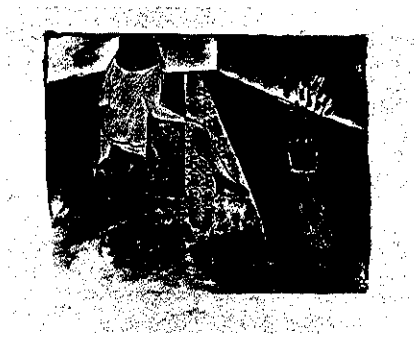

The above print is a Visual Dialog subscriber's print. The original lithograph, AFTERNOON, by Inez Storer was done at Artist's Proof Workshop in Larkspur late in 1976 as part of a portfolio entitled: "Women Artists: Realities." Each Visual Dialog photo offset print is signed by the artist, Inez Storer, and is available to Visual Dialog subscribers only.

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"Sculpture"

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HANNAH WILKE

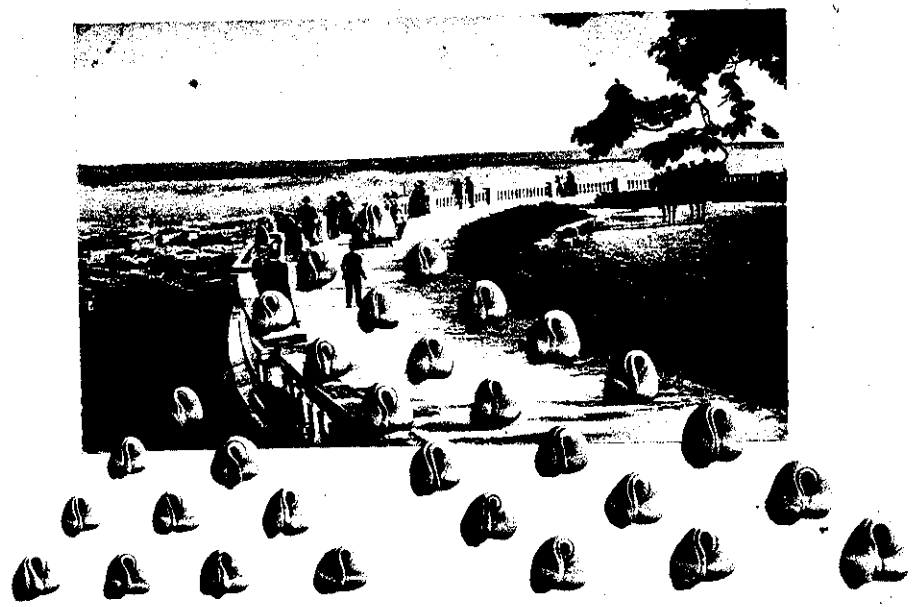
In Conversation with Ruth Iskin

New York artist Hannah Wilke has been known for her colored latex abstract sculptures. Originally working with clay in the mid-sixties, Wilke created early representations of female genitalia called **BOXES.** *The imagery of* **BOXES** *was of the kind that the women's art movement would term "cunt art" or "female sensibility" a few years later. During the past several years, she has worked primarily with poured latex, creating monumental pieces of luscious erotic female forms. She has also worked with chewing gum, kneaded eraser, lint and dough.*

Wilke creates her sculptures by manipulating materials while they are soft or liquid. They all convey the process of pouring or folding, which are Wilke's essential gestures. In whatever materials she works, she creates humanized and specifically feminized forms. Wilke has also worked in performance and video; characteristically, she describes her performances as "sculptures of the human gesture." They contain the double-edged quality of sexual come-on, emotional suffering, vulnerability and aloofness while also conveying acute parodies of stereotypes.

When de Kooning bought one of her latex sculptures, he commented that she succeeded in doing three-dimensionally what the Abstract Expressionists had done in their painting — thus he felt she was able to make the Abstract Expressionist sculpture which they hadn't done. When looking at her latex sculptures one gets a sense of infinite layers of flesh-like or skin-like substance which face the viewer like icons. They are modern day fetishes — powerful, aesthetically beautiful, delightfully seductive, playfully humorous and wholly positive images of women's sexuality. Unlike many contemporary female artists who hedge or vehemently object to sexual interpretations of their work, Wilke joyfully insists — and did so early on, before the woman's movement had brought these ideas to public attention — that her sculpture is precisely about that taboo subject of female sexuality. Yet she is fully aware that "people sometimes can't look at my art as sculpture because I labeled it cunt." Wilke declares herself a feminist and there is a strong sense of freedom in her work, at times with a twist of the "enfante terrible."

In her postcard series, Wilke superimposes the kneaded eraser cunt symbols upon diverse grand panoramas reproduced on old postcards. The result is a fantasy of female power and creativity prominently infused into the world of architecture and nature. The small three-dimensional eraser pieces imposed on the two-dimensional postcard surface result in no less a monumental vision of feminine power than her thirty foot wide latex hangings. In the postcards she in fact enacts what at the present day is still a surreal projection: female symbols ruling the world. As one reviewer (Edit deAk in ART IN AMERICA) aptly put it, "Her show made me imagine paradise under female control."



LAKE ONTARIO, Hannah Wilke, Postcard on board with kneaded erasers, 15½" x 17½", photo: Frank Thomas.

RI Did you make sculpture before your ceramic BOXES of the sixties?

HW I started making fiberglass pieces in my senior year in college because its plasticity allowed me to create curvilinear and architectonic form simultaneously. I painted them black in the tradition of metal sculpture. Fiberglass at that time was a brand new material, not yet widly used by many artists (this was in 1959/60, I graduated in 1961). Those sculptures were abstracted arm- and leg-like structures reaching up with big separate centers connecting them, and they were definitely vaginal. I named them with erotic titles (EMBOUCHURE, NYMPHAEA CANDIDA, ONCOS — for oncoming, etc.). I was aware by the time I was 20 that they were vaginas and we talked about it in college at the time. In 1963 or 1964 I came to New York. I was making the ceramic pieces called BOXES, and in 1966 I first exhibited them in a group show at Castagno Gallery (and also in an erotic art show which was reviewed by Lucy Lippard in the *Hudson Review).* I exhibited about half a dozen pieces which were more overtly cunt-shaped than the later BOX pieces. These later ones were more symbolic and they were more about layers, skin-like layers and softness evoking flesh. I also became intensely involved in the gesture and the material itself in the later pieces. By contrast, the idea of the vagina image for me is primarily about inner feeling, the feeling of getting beyond oneself that one experiences when making love. That is probably why in my new latex pieces hundreds of separate layers expand horizontally, becoming more than the sum of their parts. It is an additive process of building up form; the piece is holding itself together, fragilely defying gravity.

RI Many women artists, and men too, have made erotic art of various sorts, but before the advent of the women's art movement around 1969/-70 it was usually not much discussed, and certainly not with a feminist consciousness. What led you as early as the mid-sixties to make such art, and discuss your experience of female sexuality as a subject matter of your art work.

HW Innovation was the most important idea to me at that time; what could I do that thousands of male artists hadn't done already? They just weren't women. I wanted to make my own statement. Probably also having a good sex life and being from a Jewish family in which we were very open helped too. I think my work is related to my Jewishness. Judaism says that you should not create a graven image, and it also says that women are unclean because of their periods. I think I might have rebelled against that very early. I wasn't Orthodox, but my relatives

ere. My uncle was a rabbi and we had all that ritual. I think the repetitiveness of ritual is contained in my art; instead of making one sculpture I made 176. The gum sculptures are like dipping one's finger in wine (in Christianity it became the blood) and each time it is different, like saying a Hebrew chant that one doesn't understand. All that was very magical to me. I think that the idea of not creating an image of God, which Judaism teaches, came out in my creating an abstraction of a female body. That allowed me to both get away with not trespassing on Judaism and at the same time to make an art that was a personification and glorification of women. I didn't like the Jewish custom of women sitting separately from men in the synagogue, and I am still offended by habits of Hassidic men wearing their black hats. Maybe that is why I did my hat routine. Edit deAk once asked me what makes my video different from others (for an issue of *Art Write* Magazine). My response was, "The way I wear my hat, the way I sip my tea, the memory of all that, no, no, they can't take that away from me." I think there is a truth to that, a happiness. I will risk being ridiculous — I want to have some joy. Most of the people in video have these dead faces; they are pulling at themselves, biting or kicking themselves. When Edit saw what everyone else sent in she put me on the first page. Many of the other people said, "My video is this, my video is that." They were even more egocentric than I was, and so serious. Seriousness sometimes overshadows art. Real art sometimes has a level of non-seriousness to it; it is what Picasso said about the genius of being child-like.

RI You were talking about being in school in Philadelphia, getting married and divorced and moving to New York in 1963/64; what happened at that point?

HW In 1963/64 I was teaching ceramics in a high school and I was doing ceramic sculptures for which I almost got fired. I was asked by the school authorities if my pieces were representations of genitals, and I had to lie because I needed my job. I taught there for six years.

RI Did you study ceramics when you were in school?

HW Yes, but I was a sculpture major. Clay seemed a perfect material at the time though. I also liked the fact that it was a natural material that wasn't bastardized. Clay folds, moves, is alive and maleable. I also liked the idea of rescuing clay, a material that nobody liked and which was considered a crafts material; so in the early sixties I used it as an art material. By 1970 I was doing the latex pieces. In 1970 or 71 I was in a group show at Feigen Gallery downtown (it was almost an entire show of mine, because there were ten of my sculptures all around the space while other artists' pieces were on the walls). Later my work was also exhibited in uptown Feigen, and in 1972 I had my first one-women show at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York. I have had three one-person shows with him by now. I have also had two one-person shows at the Margo Levin Gallery in Los Angeles and an exhibition of performance documentation at the University of California, Irvine Gallery last year.

RI What kind of work did you show in your first one-woman exhibition?

HW Big latex sculpture pieces, about eight feet tall (one of these was in the Whitney Museum Biennial in 1973). They were vulvic hangings that were all layers snapped together.

RI How do you make the latex pieces?

HW I like one side to be opaque and the other shiny. I pour the liquid latex on a 17 foot plaster of paris floor. The moisture is absorbed from the plaster floor so that the pouring gesture is arrested and caught, and the latex doesn't move any farther. I get a nice bubbly surface, and after a day I can pull the dried latex up and work on it. By having such a large floor to work on I can get 12 or 14 foot long pieces if I want to. In the last few years I have only been working in circular shapes which are snapped together like folded petals in a long, additive structure either vertical or horizontal. They all came from the flat poured circle and became three-dimensional sculptures in soft, geometric patterns. The pieces I did in 1972 were more tear-shaped and they were longer, so that I needed a very long floor and could only pour about three pieces a day because of the space. When I poured the shapes for the sculptures the process was similar to the gestural dance of Jackson Pollock's painting process; that is what de Kooning meant. I want to be as immediate as possible in my art and I think that is quite important about my work — the human gesture becoming sculpture. That is probably why I abandoned the drawings I had been doing concurrently with the ceramic BOXES, once I was making the latex sculptures, because the drawings didn't have the same immediacy. I lose a lot of latex because sometimes the shape turns out aesthetically ugly. I try to draw the holes — the negative space — too. I pour from a cup; it is like making a line drawing. With bigger pieces I might throw the latex and then work on the edges, or I might create the structure by just throwing it. In my sculpture things flow into each other. I always liked that ambiguity. It appeared in my earlier drawings too, where one wonders if a certain shape is male or female. The drawings are erotic but they do not obviously represent a cock or a cunt, yet you know damn well that there is something very sexual about them. The androgyny of form in my work becomes more obvious in the one inch gum pieces where the shapes can be read as both vaginal and phallic. In the large latex pieces each petal form touches the next, creating three-dimensional movement with a kind of weightless energy. It is almost like music. Recently someone told me that the edges in my drawings are similar to the way I pour the latex in my sculpture pieces. That was a terrific observation; I pour the latex and fold it, and I never noticed the relationship between the drawings and sculpture except for the color. Painting is always an abstraction because it is on a flat surface; representing a cunt in a piece of sculpture is much more involved with nature and more life-affirming than representing it two-dimensionally. With painting and drawing there is always a distance you don't have in sculpture. It is a real object.

RI When did you first start making the gum pieces and how did they come about?

ROSEBUD, Hannah Wilke, latex, 2" x 8", photo: Frank Thomas.

HW I was making grey sculptures made of kneaded erasers. When Edit deAk commented in a review about their anonymous grayness, I wondered how I could make them less depersonalized, and decided to buy some bubble gum. When I went to the store I saw that, God bless America, it's no longer just pink gum, but blue, purple, yellow, black, white and green gum. I made some test pieces and then went to a stationery store uptown and bought some beautiful paper. I was coming home and saw Peter Frank and Irving Sandler on the street. I picked them up and offered them a piece of gum. Peter was generous enough to take one and and I said, "Peter, you have to save it for me; I want to make an art piece from it." He respected my seriousness and saved the chewed gum for me. That was when I made my first gum piece. Those pieces were so precious and tiny — you know what it is to chew a piece of gum; who wants to chew gum. So when I was teaching at the School of Visual Arts I bought $10 worth of gum and did a little performance for my students; it probably was my earliest gum performance. They really liked this form of oral communication. That was when I saw how one could double fold different gums so that the internal and external colors are different and each side is in a different color. The center becomes a line of a third color. It is a sophisticated way of color naturally forming itself.

RI Do you mix the latex with color?

HW Yes, I mix it beforehand and then pour it. I don't mix it scientifically so as to make sure that I will get different colors within the color system of the piece. I like those imperfections; sometimes not mixing color properly will create a linear pattern. The early pieces were translucent and the later ones were opaque; I just added white. I want to explore color more. The latex in its original form is beige. It is really skin-like; that is why I recently tried working with more opaque colors although I worry about them being too beautiful. Because my sculpture pieces go so large, you can really see the difference in color.

RI Did you also make art with dough?

HW Yes, I made a few cookie pieces during 1970/72. When I moved to my present loft about three years ago I had the cookie pieces and also the fortune cookie which I had used for my show in 1974. All of a sudden one day I noticed that the cookies were gone and it wasn't registering why that was happening. Then I caught sight of a rat which was eating all the sculpture up! It was awful seeing that rat eating my art!

RI That reminds me of the "You Art What You Eat" show we had at Womanspace (in Los Angeles) around 1973. We invited women artists to create special art pieces in edible materials and auctioned them off during the night of the opening. Many of the works were exquisite; yet I remember the attitude that was going around in the (male) art community was that the ladies are having a cookie sale . . .

HW That is probably why I baked too — to show that it is art; it's sculpture, not baking, and maybe we can do things like baking too. I am sure that the rolling out and play that is involved in baking is related to the folding of the clay and latex in my pieces, but if you are an artist you must get past the craft. The media is not always the message.

RI Actually, just like sewing, embroidering or quilting, baking is another old tradition of women's forms; it is the kind of work that absorbed much of women's creative energies for centuries, and therefore is also a medium that women have a long tradition and experience to draw from.

HW The *hamentaschen* for example . . .

RI Yes, which like the fortune cookies are quite close to the folding imagery in your clay pieces. Did your relationship to women, particularly

women in your profession, change as a result of the women's movement?

HW *I think* that perhaps I wouldn't have taken the risk if it hadn't been for a lot of people pushing along side with me. Michael Findley of the Richard Feigen Gallery probably would have given me a show in 1971 anyway, but women were helping by pushing all around - and perhaps he thought my work was the best. I don't like being political, yet I find it necessary in my art to be so. Although I appear to be loud and vocal to a lot of people, I am shy in my own way. That is the dichotomy between me, what I look like and the work.

RI Have you participated in any kind of group activities with feminist artists?

HW I was in an early group about erotic art with Louise Bourgeois, Juanita McNeally, Anita Steckel and others. We wanted our art — which was erotic art — and women's art in general to be shown in museums and galleries. All of us were doing erotic art very early; a result was a wonderful article on several of us in *New York* Magazine. I would have been interested in being part of other feminist groups, like *Heresies* Magazine, but I wasn't invited. I don't know how to go about saying, "Do you want me?" I couldn't stand the rejection. Deep down there is an old elementary school feeling of the girls not wanting us, and if you are not invited to the party you feel terrible.

RI You mentioned before that you love Mondrian's watercolors of flowers. Did you also look a lot at Georgia O'Keeffe's flowers?

HW Yes, I know there is a relationship; the difference is that she didn't admit to them being sexual. I think that is a difference in time. I think it was important that I insisted on saying that my pieces are not just flowers, but also metaphors for female genitals, and that there is nothing wrong with that. I wanted to put us on the pedestal that we deserve, to make emotional and physical contact, to make real blossoms out of us like books or Toras opening up — real objects of worship. We deserve it. I still get into a lot of trouble for the sexual meaning of my work, no matter how beautiful I wanted to make it.

RI You lived with Claes Oldenburg during 1969-75; what effect did that have on you as artist?

HW He gave me emotional support for being an artist. He gave me a work ethic and insisted that if I was going to be an artist I should be a real professional. He was wonderfully hard on me, insisting that one has to do, one has to exhibit and get one's work out. When I first met him in 1967, I was 27 and didn't know how to fight for myself. He is the most prolific artist; and I think I became extremely competative with him in a healthy way, though I didn't realize it at the time. My making 176 sculptures was inspired by his prolificness too, and by his demand of me that I had to do more than one precious piece of sculpture to be an artist. I think we are taught as women to be failures so often that it is hard to get past it. I finally had the courage last year to give him some of my work, and now my pieces are hanging on his walls. I had the courage to know

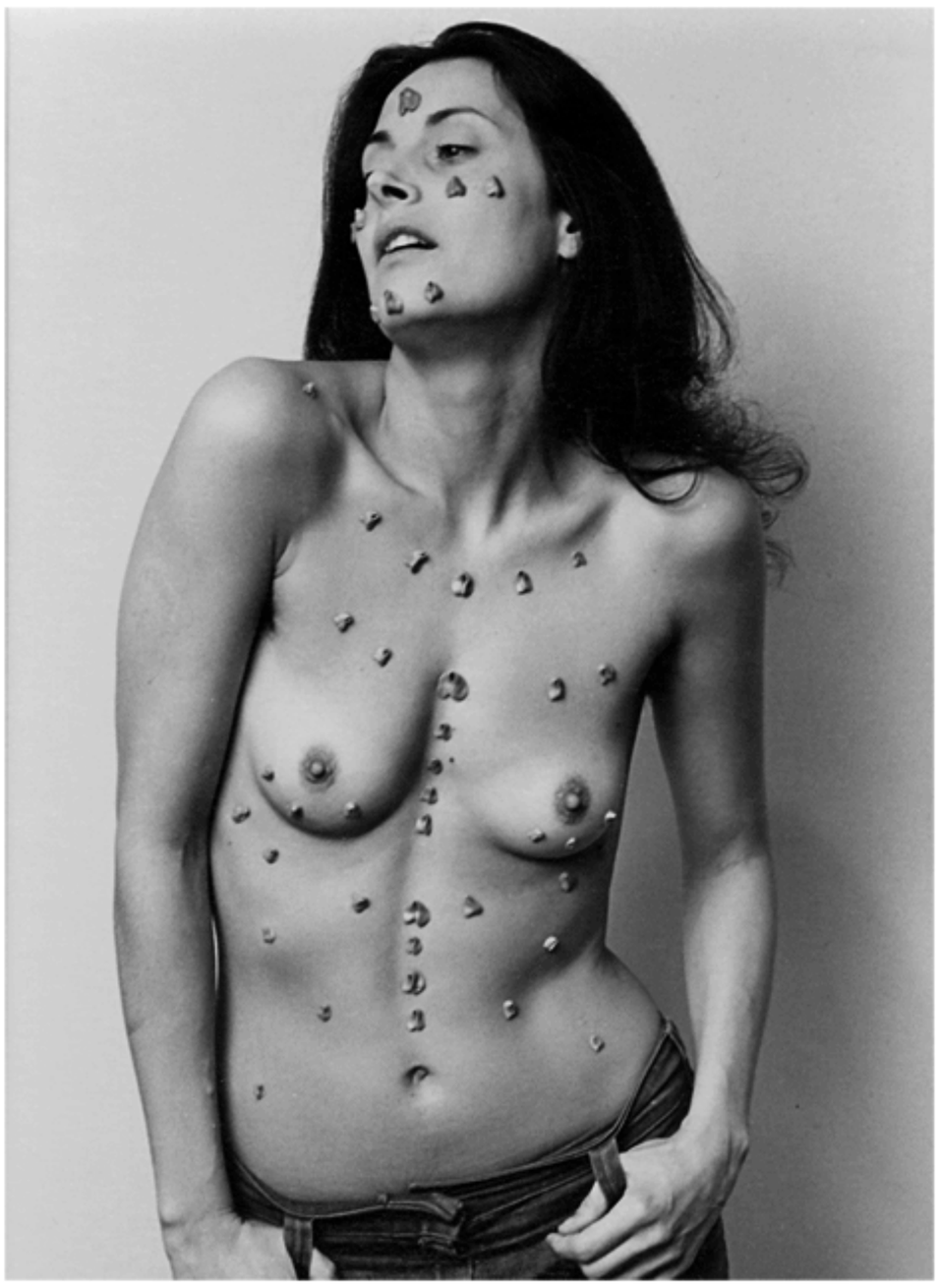
Hannah Wilke

that I was good too. One of the things I love about the gum pieces is that they were the first work that I could do quickly and easily with people around, and therefore could give many of these pieces away. That too was one of the nice influences from Claes; I used to admire how he was able to knock out those fabulous drawings when we would go out with people for dinner, and then he would often give his drawings as presents. I was living with him in California in 1969-70. I didn't yet exhibit my art in California at that time, but I did show it to many California artists. Oldenburg was working at Gemini and I was working on my art in the back yard of the house we lived in, just a block away from Gemini. At that time I also did some 8mm films. They were early performances for Claes. He was the cameraman, so I was always switching roles to make the woman — myself — the artist rather than the model. Actually I met Claes first when one day, in 1967, I walked into Leo Castelli's Gallery with a crash helmet on and no motorcycle. It was a "life performance." I enjoyed causing all that flourish and I felt that I was making a comment about these men's aversions to women's individual identities. Another time I came in with a fake wig on, and — would you believe it — Leo Castelli tried it on. We had a good time. I guess these were private performances. That is why I like video tapes; they too are private performances, with just the cameraman there or alone. That confrontation is so above-board that sometimes it is frightening. Ree Morton told me that she almost cried when she saw my first video tape, *Gestures,* 1974. It was wonderful that she had the courage to tell me that. I exposed myself by posing, and she saw past it; she saw the pathos past the posing. ■

Arts Magazine, September 1975

HANNAH WILKE: THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

MARK SAVITT



Hannah Wilke, S. O. S. (Starification Object Series), 1975. *Photo Les Wollam. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.*

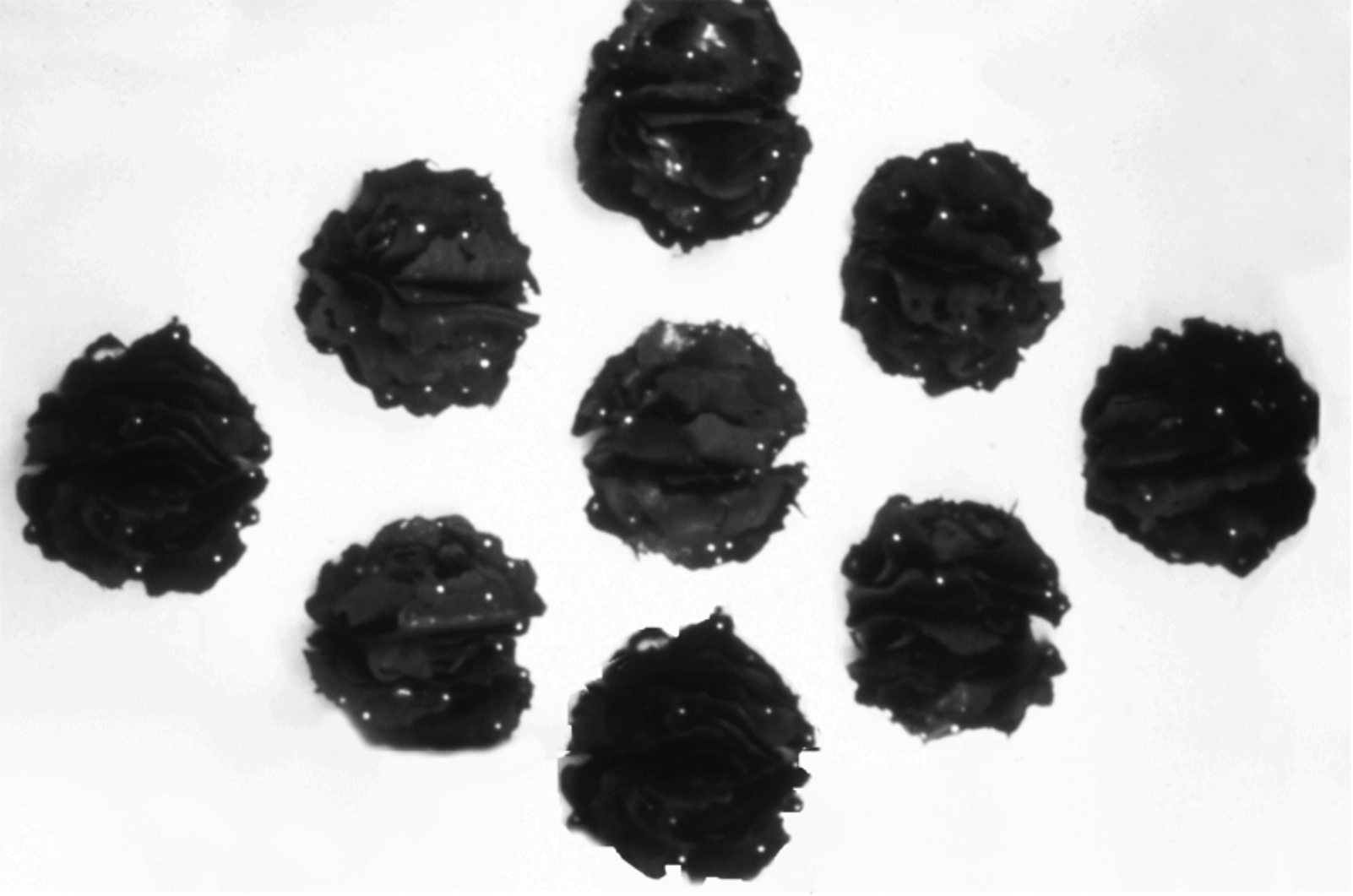
By now everyone is quite well aware that Hannah Wilke does cunts. What her show at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts will reinforce is the wide range of her interlocking concerns and the multi-level evocative quality of her work.

The *Ponder-r-Rosa* (1974) latex wall pieces use opaque, roughly circular modules arranged in a number of ways. The most satisfying are the first in the series in which the modules form circular clusters which float on the wall. These are further grouped by color into sections that become circular, square, and triangular arrangements. Unlike her earlier, more translucent latex and snaps works which sagged down with the burden of gravity deeply expressed, these works dot the wall with light and color. Like floating disks denying any sense of weight, they remind one of water lilies swimming in the expanse of the dematerialized wall, as the wall becomes both a literal structural anchor and a metaphorical reservoir of space. They also have a playful quality reminding one of pastel-colored candy dots on huge rolls of white paper.

Another more recent member of the series transforms the circle into a sculpted line. The green color with orange-speckled accents of the pieces, folded one above another, confirms one's desire to read this piece as a stem complementing the flowers. Taking up an idea embodied in her 1972 *Chocolate Pancakes* (in the collection of Claes Oldenburg), the new piece drops the anal associations of the earlier work to deal more playfully with associations to organic forms. At the same time, Wilke maintains a more assured formal rigor.

Her childlike playful attitude is most fully apparent in her bubble gum system *S.O.S.* in which a delicately colored curve of the chewed materials, evoking perhaps a disembodied nipple, the head of an erect penis, a clitoris, or a collar, is put on a piece of paper. In this manner, an evocative, composed form is fashioned by the artist with a perfect economy of means. It takes more effort to chew the gum than it does for Wilke to transform it into an art object. Noting the many hundreds of these curves produced, one sees that it is with the obsessive determination of an Abstract Expressionist that she achieves the purity of planar shape. Her new work, as pure embodied gesture, achieves the goal of immediacy of Abstract-Expressionist desires without the labored look of many Abstract-Expressionist sculptural works. Going beyond the existential torment of action painting and the cool indifference of Pop and Minimal art, Wilke's work exudes a kinky come-on, an engaging wistfulness which may well define the positive pole of 1970s sensibility.

Wilke explains that her art is "seduction." In her S.O.S. performance, she sits semi-nude and flirts while she has her audience chew for her. Wilke then proceeds to decorate her body w the bubble gum "stars." In the ceremonial aspects of the piece and in her treatment of her body as a decorative surface, the work relates to African cicatrization



18" each. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

decoration, a reference held in mind by the artist. The dual nature of the African custom (it enhances beauty and is a sexual come-on, and also relates to the status of the woman behind the markings) is reflected in the seductiveness of Wilke's performing persona and the playing with women's roles as evidenced by the poses recorded on the playing cards. The performance only alludes to one's real inner scars. Since the "stars" are removable, Wilke experiences (and gives) more pleasure than pain.

In her last New York show, Wilke exhibited a series of kneaded erasers whose somber, drained gray tone and minute obsessiveness exhibited a sort of morbid humor (contained as well in the puns in the titles *Need It–Erase Her, Need to Erase Her*) expressive of our culture's anti-feminist stance. In her new drawings she puts some life into these works by sending them out into the deep perspective of old post cards, thereby causing Dada-Surrealist disruption of scale and meaning. The erasers pour out en masse into an otherwise deserted street scene invading the landscape. Like alien creatures in a sci-fi film, they overtake the sculptural base, thus wreaking havoc on our sense of limits and bounds. Wilke is an artist of transgression challenging our culture's veneer of high seriousness and offering an anecdote–pure pleasure.

Wilke, who, unlike fellow soft-sculptor Claes Oldenburg, is "for an art that sits on its ass in museums," fantasizes repeating the performance process in the Museum of Modern Art's projects area where she could gleefully hand out gum to young chewers. One imagines the liberating aspect of Wilke's pleasure of offering being countered by the reprimanding reaction of hostile parents, "Didn't I tell you never to accept candy from a stranger?"

Indeed Wilke herself is often the content of her art. Her activities in a variety of media often relate directly to this. In addition to *S.O.S.*, one sees Wilke's face in her first videotape *Gestures* (her body in a series of new tapes made with the cooperation of Paul Tschinkel), one hears her voice in her telephone tapes, and one sees her do a campy crucifixion in sandals and loincloth at the Kitchen. By manipulating the image of a sex kitten (female sex object), Wilke manages to avoid being trapped by it without having to deny her own beauty to achieve liberation.

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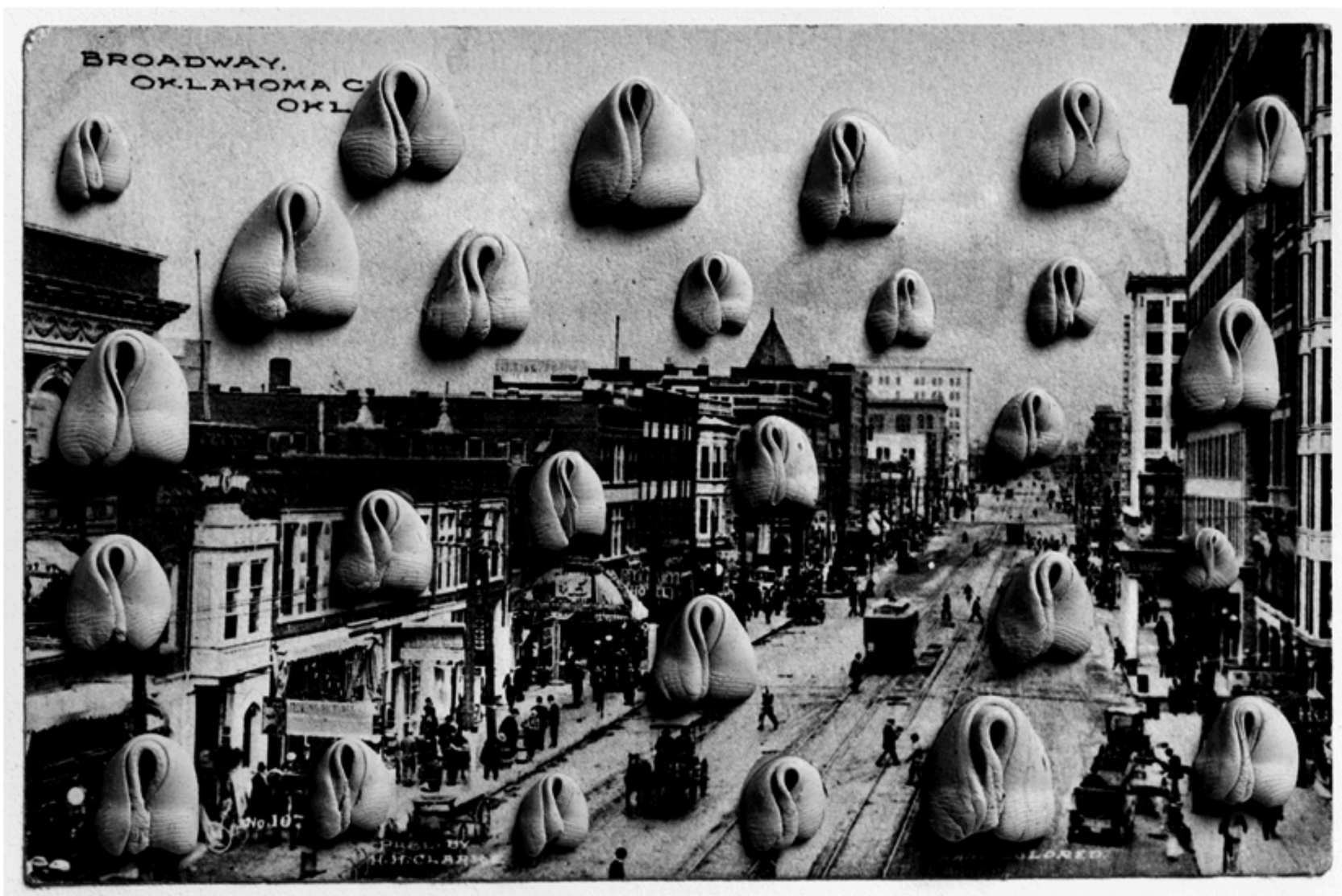
In this respect Hannah Wilke's works are exemplary. Rather than representing cunts, cock heads, flowers, stems, or breasts, her terra-cotta folds, kneaded erasers, *Ponder-r-Rosa* series, and bubble gum curves allude to one's experience of their shapes and textures when encountered in nature. Using elements of the joke–Freud's powerhouse of compacted allusion–Wilke explores a range of evocative images and presences which affirm with a new sense of openness the pure humanistic pleasure principle (Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, *September 13-October 11*)



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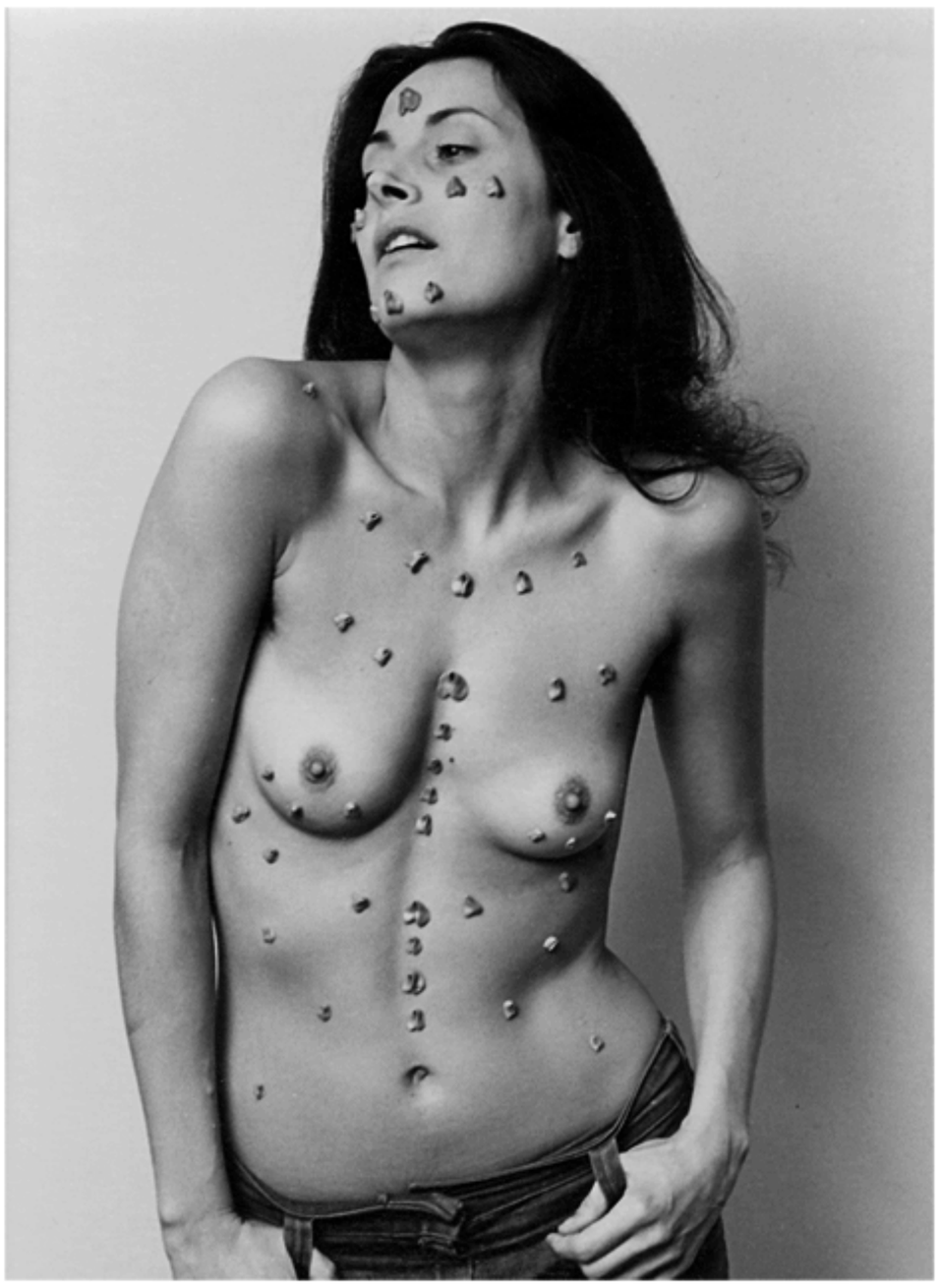

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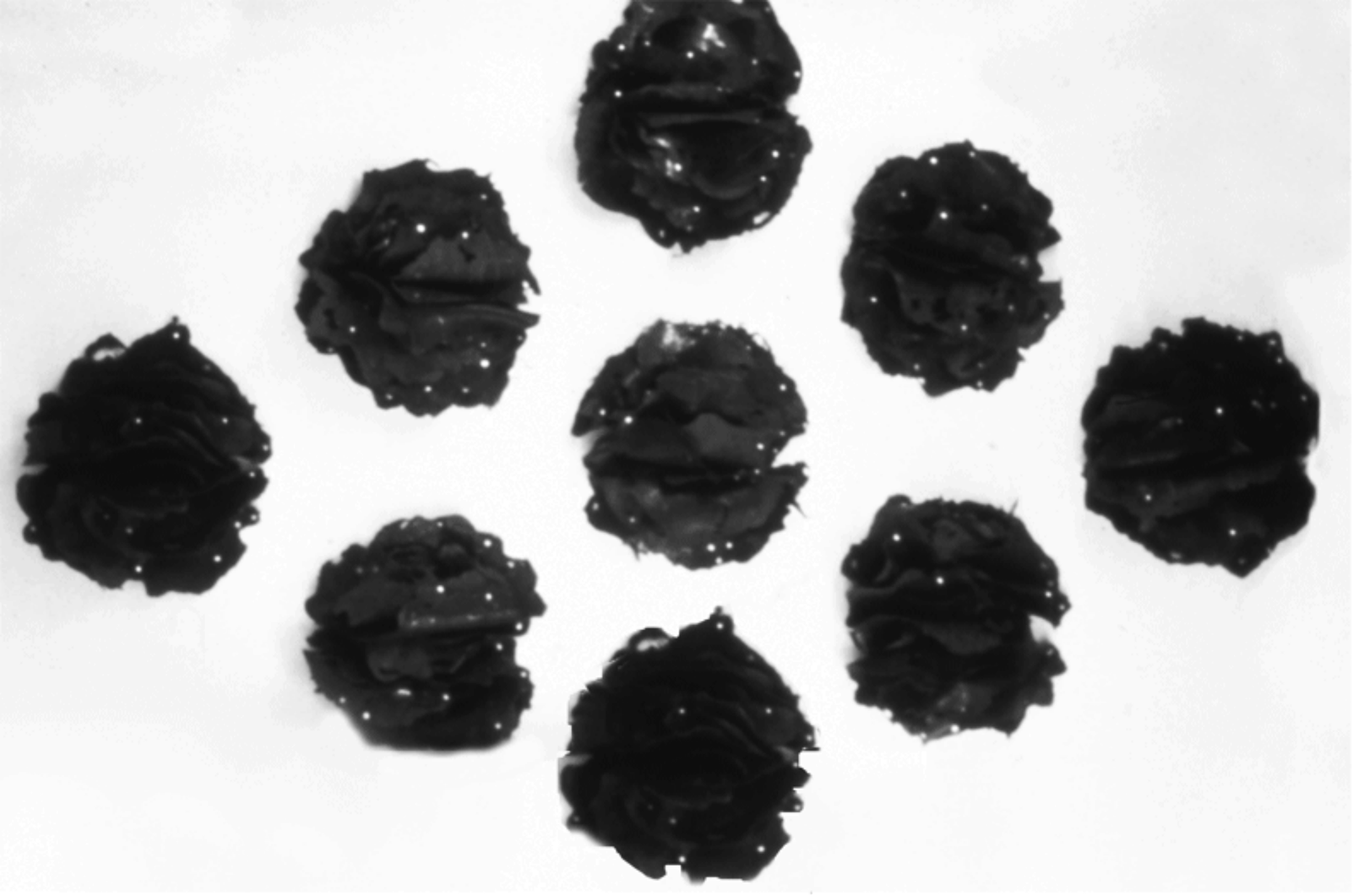

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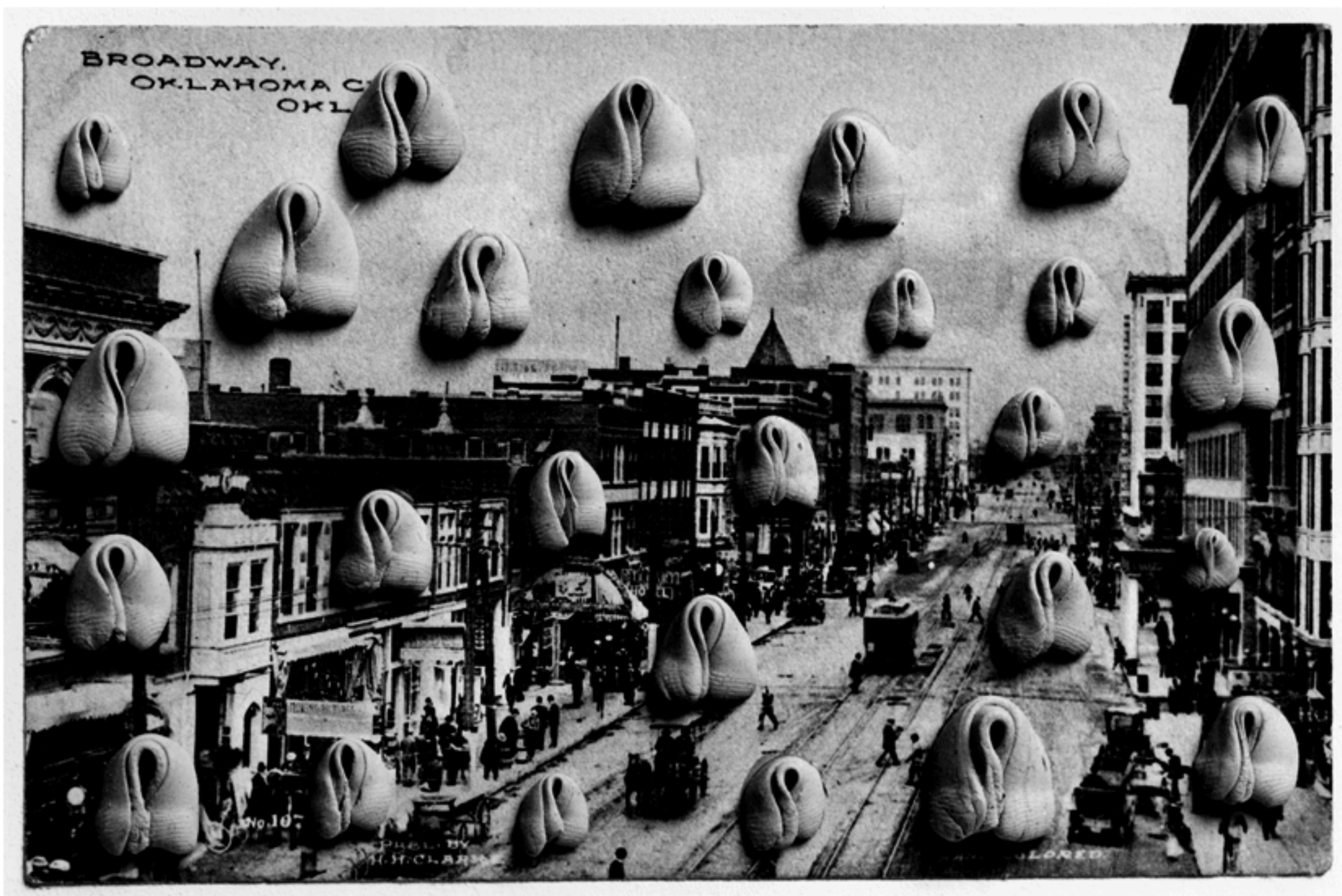

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3½ x 5½". Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine A

"Hannah Wilke." *Arts Magazine* (May 1974).

Hannah Wilke, One-fold Gestural Pieces, 1973-74. Torra Cotta. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

Hannah Wilke

Hannah Wilke's "Floor Show," her second one-woman New York exhibition presents recent sculptural images of female genitalia and black and white video tape. Since the early 1960s Wilke has made small terra cotta boxes and shapes resembling vulvas and vaginas. Now, she continues to develop this iconography. Included are '176 one-fold gestural terra cotta pieces" (1973-74). The number and arrangement of the pieces is arbitrary, and each element is a separate and complete sculptural form. These pieces vary in size (some are tiny), but all are painted a uniform soft pink. Each pocket-like form is made from a single thin layer of clay which Wilke folds into a multilayered piece that may look like a flower or a shell as well as a sexual organ. Some open up, while others turn inward; and edges may be ragged or smoothly scalloped. Thus here, as in the latex wall hangings exhibited in 1972, Wilke is concerned with the hardness and softness of "femaleness." The clay is hard but thin and somewhat fragile, whereas the delicate color and the folds and curves of the shapes suggest softness and flexibility. Wilke also works with soft materials. For example, there is a piece composed of a row of twelve lint sculptures on a board. (It took two years to collect enough lint from the washing machine.) The colors of these double-fold, open forms range from a warm rose to paler pinks, beige and yellow tones. Also, there are five works in which gray, round forms made from artists kneaded erasers are placed on square boards—in two pieces the elements are lined up in precise patterns, while in the others the arrangements are more casual. Wilke displays a sense of humor in the piece made up of thirty-one fortune cookies lined up on a board. The artist's presentation of this "found object" which resembles so closely the modeled genital images, causes the viewer to see the "real" world in a new way. In the silent video tape, Wilke makes gestures with her hands, head, and face which relate to the shapes or gestures of the sculptural floor pieces. She examines herself carefully and thoroughly—patting, massaging, caressing, pulling, pinching, and slapping each feature. Wilke expresses a range of moods—she appears sad, joyous, playful, dazed, or remote. Her gestures are always sensuous and often erotic. (Feldman, *March 16-April 6*)

Picard, Lil. "Hannah Wilke: Sexy Objects."
Andy Warhol's Interview, January 1973.

Hannah Wilke & furry friends captured by the camera of Claes Oldenburg.

Hannah Wilke does beautiful objects, objects of Art. She, as a woman, a very beautiful woman, does not believe that women are sex objects. But she loves LOVE, men, art things, poetry, roses. Her favorite color is pink. Pink of all the different nuances appear in her work. Clear rosy pink, pale pink, beige pink, yellowish and whitish pink. She uses these shades and tones of flesh for her pastel and acrylic paintings and for her works made from ceramic clay, and lately latex and plastic. Her latest works, exhibited during September and October in the Ronald Feldman Gallery, 33 East 74th Street, are made from Latex and look like large pink wallhangings, elegant drooping structures, resembling voluptuous roses, elongaged roses, which have the quality of flesh, of lips, of female erotic forms. They consist of many petals spreading to the outside shaping into a density at the middle, but nevertheless open, free, sensual, feminine: vaginas. The female form glorified. They are pin-up objects, fastened on the wall with tiny stickpins,—and represent—what Hannah calls: "Beautiful agreeable objects."

Hannah Wilke is tall, slender, a longhaired brunette, in fact she looks like a rose, but she talks like Voltaire. She is smart, and strong—but she has the appearance of a fragile and very tender creature. Her living loft in Westbeth is large and filled with objects of all kinds. Things she collects, artworks by friends, Art Nouveau, cookie jars, porcelain animals, shells, Art Deco Objects. Above her queensize double bed-couch hangs a large pale Wilke canvas showing a white organic form painted in immaculate perfection. On the round table in the front room, where Hannah's pink Latex "Hangings" are fastened with stick pins to the white walls, stands a bouquet of lusciously full blooming roses. They give out a delicate scent.

"I bought them myself; men don't buy flowers anymore." In the Art Deco cookie jars are pinkish sugar powdered scallopped cookies.

"I found them in a small grocery store and bought them because I liked their shape—but they also taste good."

Everything Hannah Wilke loves or chooses to own turns for her into an Art Object. She made multiples from Chinese Fortune Cookies, painting them pink, but she was very careful never to tell a "bad" fortune by peeking inside and only using the Good Fortune paper strips. Her first one woman show at the Ronald Feldman Gallery was a kind of "Women-in-the-Arts" season opener, on September 12, 1972, and catapulted the 32 year old artist with a pink bang, smash into the Art Scene.

I had noticed Hannah's early work in the Richard Feigen Gallery on Greene Street (now closed), at the time managed by Michael Finlay. They were fragile Terracotta Ceramics in pale colors in vaginal forms, and their personal statement had interested me. Much later I met Hannah in 1972, and she was included in the first American Women Artists Show in Hamburg's Kunsthaus with 45 other female artists. I liked her work and Hannah as a person at first sight.

I see you are a collector of Art Deco objects. Why?

I've always collected things. Objects have always been important for me. But the older I get the less I need things, especially since I am concerned with my work now. I haven't been really collecting much lately. My work is my collection; the small sculptures replaced the objects that had been made by society, and my work is more important now than any objects I might collect. My own works are my icons.

When did you have your first show?

In 1970. I was in a Group Show at The Richard Feigen downtown gallery.

Only two years ago . . .

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Do you work out of a feeling of challenge?

Yes. I think Sex is one thing most people cannot deal with. I am a spontaneous person. I spill things, knock things over, touch people, hug people. That's why to be interviewed is so hard because I am used to moving, and an interview is not involved with seeing people's visual expressions.

Maybe we can make it a moving interview. So tell me what moves you, and we will move.

I think I am very much concerned with form and the relationship of form. The Vagina is an internal object, and therefore it can't be castrated. It is a much more metaphysical statement, has no reality—clinically it has—but nobody has a real and direct picture at what one looks, and therefore it can be abstracted, and I can make it into art.

You feel it's a very complicated form?

Yes. And it changes—but so does the male organ. But I don'tmake male forms. They would accuse me of castrating men, and essentially I like men. I think my works are female organic forms as gifts for men. So I am a female chauvinist artist.

You want to give them away as gifts to men? No kidding?

Emotionally yes—they are pleasurable objects, they are not negative. They are made from soft clay, and later I used malleable plastic and latex. I experimented with those soft forms and colors.

You mentioned Marcel Duchamp who made a feminine object, a Vagina sculpture, and you also mentioned his Pun piece "Rose Selavy"—you like roses and rose-pink colors.

Yes.

Did you talk to Duchamp?

No—I peeked at him. I was too shy to talk to him.

Why are you shy? You are beautiful, intelligent, talented, men like you. and you are a good artist?

It's like the roses on the table. I bought them for myself yesterday, and they are as beautiful as the roses—as the roses that nobody bought for me. I mean if a person is beautiful she often does not know she

is—nobody bothered to give roses to me, nobody bothered to tell me that I am beautiful. I don't know or think I am beautiful. Maybe if I would know I would possibly never have become an artist.

You talk very nostalgically. You talk about men of another period, not of men of our time, men of today don't send roses.

Why not?

Because today's men are such rude bastards. Your lovers, your famous lovers They don't buy you roses?

One bought tulips.

They are also very gorgeous flowers—kind of male-female—when closed male, when opened female.

Let's not talk about famous lovers.

Right—let's talk about your beautiful large flower-vagina hanging on the wall to the right.

Oh yes, that one Bill de Kooning bought when I had my show at Ronald Feldman.

He knows what he does. He also liked an early Marisol, which I saw standing in his studio in Tenth Street, long before Marisol became world famous. Do you like de Kooning's latest sculptures shown in the Sidney Janis Gallery?

Yes, I do, though I thought he should have painted them in beautiful colors.

Like the 12 objects, which are hydrants aren't they, standing on top of your bookshelf?

Yes, they are Claes Oldenburg's plaster cast hydrants. Multiples he had made for the Chicago 7 show, they had been made as prizes to win, but the ones you see here, are rejects. I liked them and wanted to save them and painted them in the bright colors, red, green, yellow, silver, gold . . . .

Maybe you should also paint the sculptures of Bill de Kooning? Do you know him?

No . . ... but I am glad he liked my work and bought one . . . .

The Oldenburg Hydrants look from here like Corinthian Capitals.

I tested colors out, when I painted them and I recall that I learned something by doing it: I learned that color changes form. I made my own multiples when I did my Chinese Fortune Cookies. One of them was in the Oldenburg Mouse Museum in the Documenta in Kassel, Germany—some I gave away to friends.

They are very fragile. They might crumble.

One has to be careful that they don't crumble—anything can break, things handled carelessly can break.

Women can break?

But we get repaired more easily. I am very strong. Marilyn Monroe didn't, but I will stay here . . .

I hope so.

Me too. One has to have a sense of humor.

Looking around your loft, one can't help to notice all those "masterpieces" by artists of the New York Art Scene. We talked about your own beautiful agreeable objects, your gadgets and bric-a-brac, and cookies, but here I see some goodies which are museum pieces . . . the little collage box, with a revolver and a woman's face, and the drawings above it, one shows a long stretched-out form, like a soft gangway and I read the word BUTTER written on it.

Those are works by Claes Oldenburg. The woman is supposed to be Wonderwoman and the drawing is a butter drawing, because my maiden name had been Hannah Butter . . .

Oh, that's a hard name to live and deal with . . .

Oh yes, too many people wanted to spread me . . .

Did you ever make a statement, what your intentions in Art are?

No, I am just interested in doing better work and I am interested in watching my work change. That's the magic of being an artist. I might say I love people, beauty and Art and I don't want to "make it", but I want to make Art.

That's a nice final statement . . . but tell me, what is this little onion here on the table?

That's a peach, not an onion, and it's a birthday gift Salvador Dali gave to me. . . . He met me a long time ago, but before he met me personally, he had inquired about my work in the Erotic Show in the Nycata Gallery . . . later I met him at his party in the Cultural Center and he said to me: "How are you jeunestra?" I think he meant jeunesse, youthful girl or something like it, with his Spanish-French accent, and then he invited me to his Sunday soiree in the Hotel Pierre and it happened to be my birthday and so I got the peach with the pit in the middle as a gift from him.

Picard, Lil. "Hannah Wilke: Sexy Objects."
Andy Warhol's Interview, January 1973.

Hannah Wilke & furry friends captured by the camera of Claes Oldenburg.

Hannah Wilke does beautiful objects, objects of Art. She, as a woman, a very beautiful woman, does not believe that women are sex objects. But she loves LOVE, men, art things, poetry, roses. Her favorite color is pink. Pink of all the different nuances appear in her work. Clear rosy pink, pale pink, beige pink, yellowish and whitish pink. She uses these shades and tones of flesh for her pastel and acrylic paintings and for her works made from ceramic clay, and lately latex and plastic. Her latest works, exhibited during September and October in the Ronald Feldman Gallery, 33 East 74th Street, are made from Latex and look like large pink wallhangings, elegant drooping structures, resembling voluptuous roses, elongaged roses, which have the quality of flesh, of lips, of female erotic forms. They consist of many petals spreading to the outside shaping into a density at the middle, but nevertheless open, free, sensual, feminine: vaginas. The female form glorified. They are pin-up objects, fastened on the wall with tiny stickpins,—and represent—what Hannah calls: "Beautiful agreeable objects."

Hannah Wilke is tall, slender, a longhaired brunette, in fact she looks like a rose, but she talks like Voltaire. She is smart, and strong—but she has the appearance of a fragile and very tender creature. Her living loft in Westbeth is large and filled with objects of all kinds. Things she collects, artworks by friends, Art Nouveau, cookie jars, porcelain animals, shells, Art Deco Objects. Above her queensize double bed-couch hangs a large pale Wilke canvas showing a white organic form painted in immaculate perfection. On the round table in the front room, where Hannah's pink Latex "Hangings" are fastened with stick pins to the white walls, stands a bouquet of lusciously full blooming roses. They give out a delicate scent.

"I bought them myself; men don't buy flowers anymore." In the Art Deco cookie jars are pinkish sugar powdered scallopped cookies.

"I found them in a small grocery store and bought them because I liked their shape—but they also taste good."

Everything Hannah Wilke loves or chooses to own turns for her into an Art Object. She made multiples from Chinese Fortune Cookies, painting them pink, but she was very careful never to tell a "bad" fortune by peeking inside and only using the Good Fortune paper strips. Her first one woman show at the Ronald Feldman Gallery was a kind of "Women-in-the-Arts" season opener, on September 12, 1972, and catapulted the 32 year old artist with a pink bang, smash into the Art Scene.

I had noticed Hannah's early work in the Richard Feigen Gallery on Greene Street (now closed), at the time managed by Michael Finlay. They were fragile Terracotta Ceramics in pale colors in vaginal forms, and their personal statement had interested me. Much later I met Hannah in 1972, and she was included in the first American Women Artists Show in Hamburg's Kunsthaus with 45 other female artists. I liked her work and Hannah as a person at first sight.

I see you are a collector of Art Deco objects. Why?

I've always collected things. Objects have always been important for me. But the older I get the less I need things, especially since I am concerned with my work now. I haven't been really collecting much lately. My work is my collection; the small sculptures replaced the objects that had been made by society, and my work is more important now than any objects I might collect. My own works are my icons.

When did you have your first show?

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arts
Smith, Roberta. *Arts Magazine*, November 1972.

Hannah Wilke, Venus Cushion (1972), 5′ 3″ x 2′ 8″, latex, snaps, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc.

Europe. But whatever the case, the results here are not equal to either their African source or the results in Europe. Concurrent with this exhibition is one of contemporary graphics by international artists. (Barney Weinger, *Oct. 17-Nov. 18*)

HANNAH WILKE showed five wall pieces and some drawings in her first one-woman show at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. Four of the works consisted of innumerable pieces of poured latex tacked to the wall and variously folded, overlapped and snapped to each other. The fifth was a row of fourteen smaller pourings of latex embedded with pieces of string. The latex is dyed many pink and flesh tones, all within a close, bright range. The pieces involve obsessive repetition, either of the string, the folds or the overlapping. The color and nature of the latex is itself extremely fleshy and suggestive; the folds, always around a small central opening, make it more so. But the obsessions never become excessive or forceful; the suggestions never succeed to a full-fledged, abstract sexuality. An overriding sense of delicacy and taste restrains them in a state of overt, decorative pubescence. A mild objection is that the work involves an able but superficial use of some of Eva Hesse's ideas about imagery and materials: an "eccentric substance" used without eccentricity is at first conventional and pleasant and ultimately blatant because the material itself remains the most visible aspect of the work. Despite Wilke's obvious ability, the pieces simply do not get beyond their material at this point. (Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, *Sept 12-Oct. 13*)

Hannah Wilke: A Very Female Thing

"In the early sixties I was scared to show my work around; you were put down if you were doing female genitalia. It's okay for Vito Acconci to do his sex thing under the floorboards—that's called Conceptual Art. But when I wanted to do a Conceptual piece—a massage parlor with me being massaged by men—my dealer just smiled and said, 'Hannah, why don't you come up to my hotel instead?'

"In 1966 I exhibited a lot of my terra-cotta boxes. The shapes were very sexy, like little tiny genitalia. But nobody noticed them. If you do little things and you're a woman, you're doomed to craft-world obscurity. But if women can allow their feelings and fantasies about their own bodies to emerge, it could lead to a new kind of art.

"My art is a very female thing; it is about multilayered forms, and it's organic, like flowers. When I developed my latex hangings, I decided to use metal snappers to hold the folds together, but also to combine toughness and softness. This effect is frightening to some people, but I like the shiny, gritty nastiness and the fact that the snaps make the structure possible—as well as vulnerable. You want to unsnap the piece, but that would destroy the shape.

"Being an artist is difficult, an unbelievable risk, and making a female sexual statement is even riskier. Guys looking at it think you're a lesbian or an easy lay. But Dubuffet saw my work and was impressed. 'She's quite crazy,' he said, and I was thrilled." ■

Art/Barbara Rose

VAGINAL ICONOLOGY

"... By depicting female genitals, women artists attack a fundamental idea of male supremacy—that a penis is superior ..."

In 1972, Professor Linda Nochlin caused a scholarly sensation at a meeting of the College Art Association: she exposed the obvious fact that nineteenth-century erotic art was created by men for men, and suggested a facetious female analogy. First she showed a slide of a popular French illustration of a woman, nude except for stockings, boots, and choker, resting her breasts on a tray of apples; then she projected a photograph of a bearded young man, nude except for sweat socks and loafers, holding a tray of bananas under his penis. Instead of the invitation "*Achetez des pommes*" (Buy some apples) inscribed under the maiden, the man advertised "Buy some bananas."

A decade ago Professor Nochlin's comparison would have been unthinkable at an assembly of art historians. Even more unthinkable, however, would be the idea that women might begin producing their own erotic art, aimed at eliciting a response in a female audience. Today, women are among the most prolific producers of erotica, suggesting that if there was a revolution in the sixties, it was not political but sexual. Perhaps sexual issues appear to dominate the women's movement at this moment because erotic arguments do not fundamentally challenge the social structure as political disputes do.

By equating sexual liberation with radicalism, the women's movement is following a direction other initially revolutionary forces have taken to survive in our time. The most obvious example of the displacement of revolutionary political aims to more acceptable targets is the history of modern art itself. When the goal of social and political revolution seemed unobtainable, the ideology of modernism rephrased itself so as to locate "revolution" exclusively within the boundaries of art itself. "Radical" became the most flattering adjective one could apply to art, and aesthetic experiments were validated on the basis of how "revolutionary" they were.

Now something similar is happening with sex, which, like art, has become a pursuit for its own sake. Within the general context of feminism, the women's art movement has been one of the most energetic exponents of an altered concept of female sexuality. Publications, university courses, and women's cooperative galleries stress the importance of women in art. In meetings, "rap" sessions, and symposia, women examine the question of whether or not there are such things as a "feminine sensibility" and a subject matter that can be described as "female." According to women artists associated with the feminist movement, there is. They cite Georgia O'Keeffe's voluptuous flowers and Louise Nevelson's sculptures of dark, mysterious interiors as early examples of female imagery; and they are searching out the names of the daughters, nieces, and students of famous painters whose works in the past often were attributed to the men they worked with.

Such a re-examination of the forgotten chapters of history is analogous to the quest among blacks for their essence in a universal *negritude*. Indeed, the parallel between women and blacks is one of the fundamental premises of the women's movement. As Gunnar Myrdal wrote in 1944, women, like blacks, had high social visibility because they were different in "physical appearance, dress, and patterns of behavior." Most men "have accepted as self-evident, until recently, the doctrine that women had inferior endowments in most of those respects which carry prestige, power, and advantages in society."

Inferior status has stimulated both groups to assertions of pride in their "differences." Black art frequently serves as propaganda for the important idea that "black is beautiful," essential in creating not only an ideology of equality, but a psychology built on the confidence that black is as good as white. To dignify female "difference," what should feminist art glorify?

The answer is obvious, and even if feminist art bears no slogans proclaiming "power to the pubis," that is what it is essentially about. For much of the feminist art that has been labeled "erotic" because it depicts or alludes to genital images is nothing of the sort. It is designed to arouse women, but not sexually. Hannah Wilke's soft latex hanging pieces, Deborah Remington's precise abstractions, Miriam Schapiro's ring-centered *Ox*, Rosemary Mayer's cloth constructions, Judy Chicago's yoni-lifesavers are all vaginal or womb images. What is interesting about them is the manner in which they worshipfully allude to female genitalia as icons —as strong, clean, well made, and whole as the masculine totems to which we are accustomed. Although there are many categories of women's erotic art, the most novel are those that glorify vaginas. This category of women's art is profoundly radical in that it attacks the basis of male supremacy from the point of view of depth psychology. At issue is the horror of women's genitals as mysterious, hidden, unknown, and ergo threatening—as chronicled by H. R. Hayes in *The Dangerous Sex*, a fascinating compilation of age-old prejudices against women as unclean Pandoras with evil boxes, or agents of the devil sent to seduce and trap men.

By depicting female genitals, women artists attack one of the most fundamental ideas of male supremacy—that a penis, because it is visible, is superior. At issue in vaginal iconology is an overt assault on the Freudian doctrine of penis envy, which posits that all little girls must feel that they are missing something. The self-examination movement among women that strives at familiarizing women with their own sex organs, and the images in art of nonmenacing and obviously complete vaginas, are linked in their efforts to convince women that they are not missing anything. In realizing that "equality" depends on more than equal rights and equal salaries, women are exalting images of their own bodies. Their erotic art is, in effect, propaganda for sexual equality based on discrediting the idea of penis envy. Equality on these grounds is far more humane than the alienating prospect of women treating men as sex objects—my favorite example of this being Sylvia Sleigh's group portrait of nude male art critics. Turning the tables is not the road to equality; nor will male brothels solve anyone's problems. But a healthy self-respect may help diminish the debilitating inferiority complex the second sex finally shows signs of transcending. ▬

The Argument for Impeachment, by Richard Reeves

Why Women Are Creating Erotic Art

Perils of Sibship, Or How Birth Order Affects You

50 CENTS

FEBRUARY 11, 1974

NEW YORK

The New York Actor:

The Truth About Us Is in Our Stars

New

Hannah Wilke

A Retrospective

Edited by Thomas H. Kochheiser
Essay by Joanna Frueh

Hannah Wilke has been an active and influential presence in the world of contemporary art since the early 1960s. Working primarily as a sculptor committed to social, sexual, and philosophical issues, she is best known for her chewing-gum and kneaded-eraser sculptures that aim to challenge cultural stereotypes of women and female sexuality. Of the medium of gum Wilke says, "In this society we use up people the way we use up chewing gum. I chose gum because it's the perfect metaphor for the American woman—chew her up, get what you want out of her, throw her out and pop in a new piece."

Yet Wilke's importance as an artist goes far beyond these signature pieces: she has produced paintings, drawings, videotapes, and photographs, appeared in films, and been involved with performance art and body art. In addition to Joanna Frueh's substantial introductory essay exploring the diverse aspects of Wilke's career, *Hannah Wilke* includes video texts, performance scripts, and other writings by Wilke, along with over 125 black-and-white and color photographs. By presenting the myriad aspects of this talented artist, *Hannah Wilke* represents the first comprehensive overview of a woman whose work is in the forefront of art today.

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Wilke, photographie représentant l'artiste extraite de *S.O.S. Starification Object Series: Game of Mastication (Mastication Box)*, 1974-1975, installation, technique mixte
oint de la Centre Pompidou Foundation et de la famille Scharlatt, 2008

HANNAH WILKE
S.O.S. STARIFICATION OBJECT SERIES : AN ADULT GAME OF MASTICATION (MASTICATION BOX), 1974-1975

Née en 1940, Hannah Wilke fut l'une des artistes les plus représentatives et engagées du féminisme dans les années 1970. Elle marqua l'art contemporain par le regard franc et dérangeant qu'elle porta sur le cancer qui la rongea et provoqua son décès précoce en 1993, à l'âge de 53 ans. L'œuvre acquise par le Musée, *S.O.S. Starification Object Series : An Adult Game of Mastication (Mastication Box)*, 1974-1975, est à la fois l'une des œuvres essentielles de cette artiste et une œuvre séminale du mouvement féministe en art. Première œuvre à représenter l'artiste au Musée national d'art moderne, elle entre dans les collections grâce à un don conjoint de la Centre Pompidou Foundation et de la famille Scharlatt. Les éléments qui la constituent sont à la fois les préparatifs et les vestiges d'une performance participative réalisée entre 1974 et 1975 : l'artiste invitait le public à mâcher des chewing-gums puis à les lui coller sur le corps selon des règles précisées sur de petites cartes qui, avec les photographies réalisées alors, font partie de l'œuvre. Les images produites évoquent, tout en les critiquant, les poses lascives et convenues des mannequins dans les journaux de modes. Cette référence acide au monde publicitaire et aux clichés de beauté qu'il impose à la femme, ainsi que la présence du corps de l'artiste comme matériau, sont deux caractéristiques des œuvres féministes qui émergent dans les années 1970. Entre la performance et l'installation, cette œuvre complexe se situe aussi dans la mouvance Fluxus : les cartes à jouer, le mode d'emploi, l'idée d'interactivité avec le public qui composent l'ensemble renvoient à de nombreuses œuvres similaires qui se trouvent déjà dans la collection. Quant à la forme des chewing-gums – simplement pliés de manière à dessiner une coquille dont l'artiste ne cache pas l'inspiration organique : la vulve – elle renvoie aux gestes simples et aux nouveaux matériaux qui traversent la sculpture au cours de ces mêmes années, proches du « Process art », de l'Art minimal et conceptuel.

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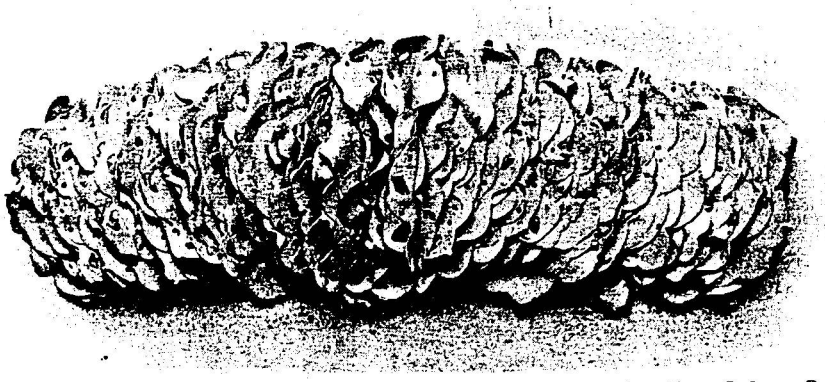
C2 → Cinéma 2, niveau -1

Spotlight



Hannah Wilke, *Pink Champagne*, 1975, latex, 54 inches by 18 inches by 7 inches. Photo: D. James Dee.

More Than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the '70s at Rose Art Museum

More than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the '70s, at the Rose Art Museum through June 30, 1996, features the following artists: Lynda Benglis, Jackie Ferrara, Nancy Graves, Eva Hesse, Ana Mendieta, Mary Miss, Ree Morton, Michelle Stuart, Dorothea Rockburne, Hanna Wilke, and Jackie Winsor.

This exhibition has been generously supported by The Charles Engelhard Foundation; Lannan Foundation, Los Angeles; The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc.; and the National Endowment for the Arts. Educational programs are also funded in part by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency that also receives support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

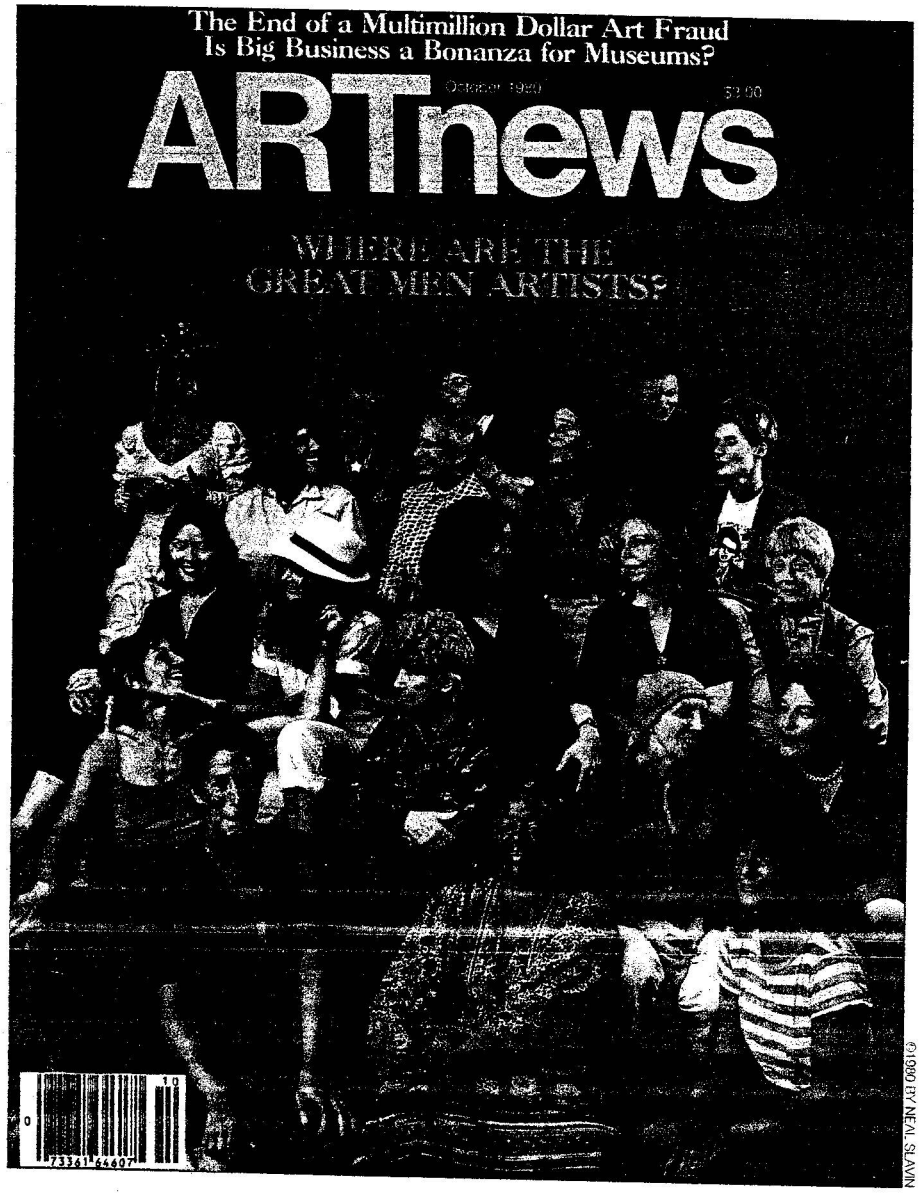
Looking back, the early '70s signified not only a watershed for the American feminist movement but also a shifting of sensibilities within the dominant abstract esthetic of the art world. No mere coincidence, but what was the cultural fallout from the convergence of these two apparently disparate forces? By considering that question, *More Than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the '70s* raises a number of challenging propositions about the relationships between politics and culture, gender and subjectivity, authority and language.

In conjunction with *More than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the '70s*, the Rose Art Museum is offering a film and video program. Many of the exhibition artists, including Lynda Benglis, Nancy Graves, Ana Mendieta, and Hannah Wilke, challenged traditional boundaries in a range of media including film, video and performance while artists such as Eleanor Antin, Chantal Akerman, Dara Birnbaum and Joan Jonas explored parallel issues in their investigations of female subjectivity and representation.

All screenings take place in Pollack Auditorium (next door to the Rose Art Museum) at 7 pm unless otherwise noted. Thursday, June 6: Videos by Lynda Benglis; Thursday, June 20: Performances by Ana Mendieta; Videos by Eleanor Antin, Joan Jonas, and Dara Birnbaum. Thursday, June 27: *Jeanne Dielman*, directed by Chantal Akerman, at 6 pm.

Art with a View: on Sunday, June 2 at 3 pm, artist Jill Slosburg-Ackerman will lead a gallery tour and share her perceptions of the exhibition. All events are free and open to the public.

The Rose Art Museum is located on the Brandeis University campus, 415 South Street, Waltham, MA. The museum is open Tuesdays-Sundays, 1-5 pm and Thursdays, 1-9 pm. For more information, please call 617-736-3434.



Twenty women artists: 1. Barbara Zucker 2. Faith Ringgold 3. Barbara Schwartz 4. Rosemarie Castoro 5. Charmion von Wiegand 6. Louise Bourgeois 7. Miriam Schapiro 8. May Stevens 9. Hannah Wilke 10. Joyce Kozloff 11. Nancy Holt 12. Elaine de Kooning 13. Dorothea Rockburne 14. Isabel Bishop 15. Jackie Ferrara 16. Nancy Graves 17. Colette 18. Audrey Flack 19. Rachel bas-Cohain 20. Laurie Anderson

Gender Bender

They came a long way, and ARTnews *was there*

The story of the famous cover of the October 1980 issue began in January 1971. That month, *ARTnews* published a special issue, "Women's Liberation, Woman Artists and Art History," which featured Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking, passionate, and rigorous essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" The fault, she said, was with the institutions of art history and art education, which offered few provisions for the training or recognition of women artists.

In the following decade, women artists, reflecting the feminist movement in the culture around them, explored new ways of art making as they also employed increasingly militant methods for making their presence known. The magazine chronicled those efforts in another special issue devoted to women, in October 1980. It included articles by Grace Glueck, Kay Larson, and Avis Berman on the evolution of women's art—and the status of women in the art world—during the 1970s, as well as a provocative essay by Richard Whelan titled "Are Women *Better* Photographers than Men?"

For the cover, *ARTnews* invited 20 top women artists to the studio of photographer Neal Slavin. The group was diverse—from the eminent Isabel Bishop to the up-and-coming performance artist Laurie Anderson. Sculptor Nancy Graves was there, and so were painter Elaine de Kooning and Miriam Schapiro, whose assemblages called "femmages" were discussed in the issue. Some of the artists met there for the first time. But Faith Ringgold already knew Louise Bourgeois. "'Louise,' I said, 'You look so pretty,'" Ringgold recalls. "She didn't usually pay attention to things like that. She looked at me and grumbled and picked that fisherman's hat out of her bag and put it on."

At first the shoot was tense. "We did several formal poses," says Nancy Holt. "We had a kind of conscious look. Then the photographer said we were going to take a break. We started talking, and he caught us unawares. It was a more vital picture."

That shot, the last in the session, was the one the magazine used—with that classic cover line, which played off Nochlin's title to show how much women had, in that turbulent decade, achieved: "Where Are the Great Men Artists?"

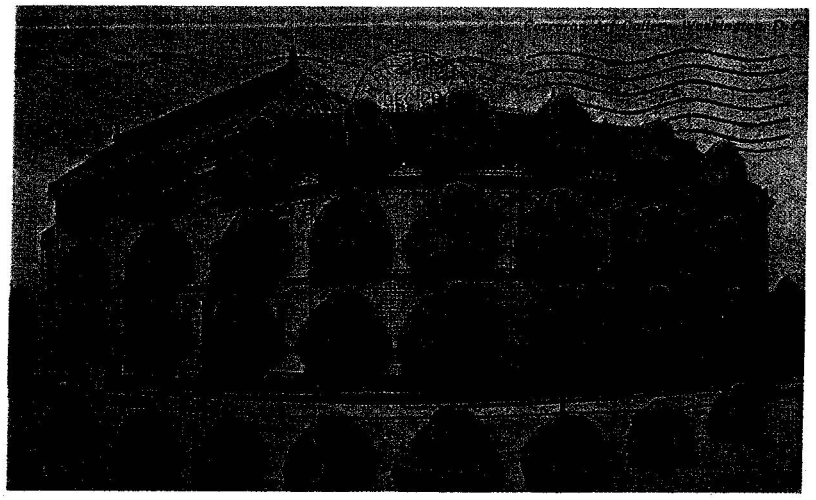
—Robin Cembalest

ART NEWS October 1980

HANNAH WILKE, 40, sculptor and performance artist, says her art has been based on vaginal imagery since 1959, when her teachers were too embarrassed to question her about it. She has remained preoccupied with eroticism and sensuality, making gestural, folded, layered forms that remind one not only of female genitalia but of flowering buds and fruit, honeycombs, seashells and fortune cookies. Wilke works in clay and bronze, in pulled and snapped latex, rubber kneaded erasers and chewing gum. Although the chewing gum nubbins and swirls are invariably delicate and appealing, there's a sardonic edge to the double-bubble smoothness. Explains Wilke: "In this society we use up people the way we use up chewing gum. I chose gum because it's the perfect metaphor for the American woman —chew her up, get what you want out of her, throw her out and pop in a new piece." The dark side of Wilke's politics is more explicit in her witty performances, in which she has never hesitated to exhibit her naked body to reveal pain (*S.O.S. Starification Object Series*), make a joke or prove a point. She tries to exploit herself as an object before a man has a chance to do it first. Wilke's intent is moral, though the means are often misunderstood and the results misconstrued.

"Feminism has existed in my work since the 1950s as a political appeal in esthetic terms to reverse man's use of woman as anonymous object in art," says Wilke. "Being a woman, I felt and still feel responsible to create an abstract female iconography that symbolically as well as visually elevates the status of women—a symbol of creation. As Eros is an affirmation of life, which originates within the body of a woman, feminism may soon become the truly universal religion that resolves the separation and alienation caused by nationalism, racial and religious prejudice, language and sexual discrimination.

"While feminism in a larger sense is intrinsically more important than art, the individual remains superior to any system or dogma. I hope that women will not sacrifice their biological superiority to doctrinaire collectivism, or to their intellectual equality in an artistic arena dominated by male ideology. In the narrow politics of feminism, art is only a weapon, which may endanger women's art that is formally and humanly relevant but does not adhere to a specific political or commercial concept. Why are there no great women artists? . . . Judge not lest ye be judged. . . . Marxism and Art. Beware of Fascist Feminism. There is an ethics as well as a warning in esthetic ambiguity."



COURTESY RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS

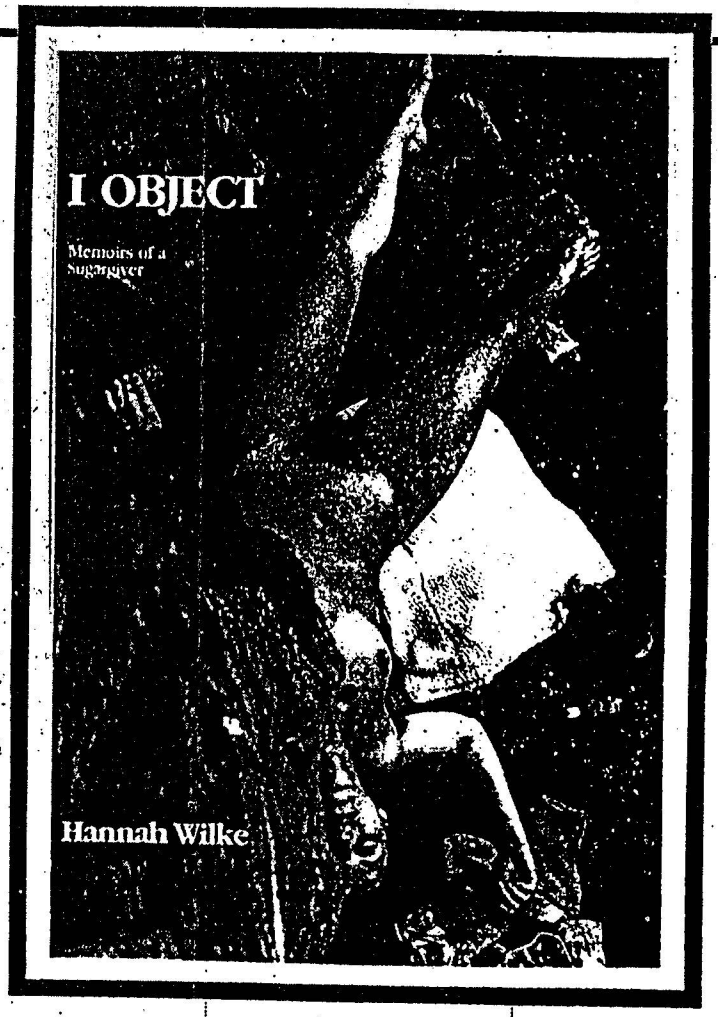
Hannah Wilke makes "a political appeal in esthetic terms to end man's use of woman as anonymous object in art." Shown is her *Corcoran Museum*, 1976.

art

HANNAH WILKE
at Gallery 400,
through September 21

By Fred Camper

MULTIPLE EXPOSURES



I OBJECT: MEMOIRS OF A SUGARGIVER

If she were really the simple narcissist many have accused her of being, Hannah Wilke wouldn't have become the kind of artist she did. Wilke, a self-declared feminist who often performed and photographed herself in the nude, inspired resentment in the 60s and 70s both because of her beautiful figure and because many feminists looked askance on any imagery of female nudity, feeling that such imagery was too loaded with a history of male usage to be redeemable. Such concerns were not likely on Wilke's mind in the mid-50s, however, when she had herself photographed at 14 wearing only a mink stole. "I was always asking people to take pictures of me," she later recalled, also acknowledging that in that early picture she was being "sexually silly." But there's nothing sexually silly about *Gestures* (1974-76), one of 12 Wilke works—photographs, sculptures, videos, and a watercolor—now at Gallery 400.

The classic narcissist, in love with her own image, tries to express that love in life, in art, or in both. But the woman in the multiple photographs of *Gestures*—grids of 9 or 12 photos arranged on three sheets—is hardly lovable at all. She thrusts her hands against her face, compressing the skin, or stretches her face by pulling at it; she covers her eyes, or places her hands beside her face as if about to pinch it. Mostly she's rebuffing the viewer, denying the erotic pleasure usually sought in images of women by the male gaze. But the multiple shots have another effect as well. Many of the different poses seem expressions of differing personalities. As the eye goes from one image to another in the grid, they begin to cancel one another out. Woman, so often judged by her appearance, here eludes the camera's defining eye. Each pose is a momentary mask, a superficial glimpse contradicted by the next one. Wilke's essence lies elsewhere, beyond imagery.

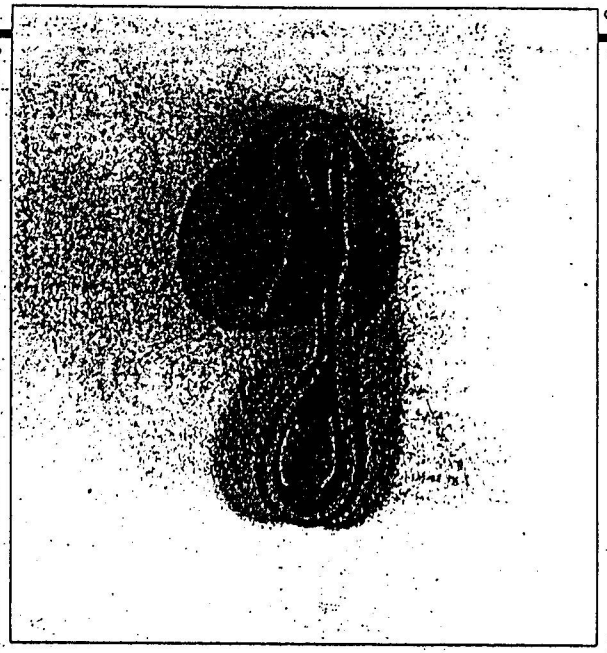
The photos in *Gestures* came from a video of a 1974 performance of the same name, also on view. But as is often the case with artists who try to add film or video to their oeuvre, Wilke doesn't make very good use of the moving image. Her simple framing of herself doesn't capture the time and space of a live performance, though her slowly changing gestures are rather intriguing, as the performance must have been.

Wilke did a variety of performances, almost all involving her body. In one she disrobed behind Marcel Duchamp's famous *The Large*

Glass in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In others—part of her "S.O.S. Starification Object Series"—she chewed gum, curled wads of it into the shapes of vaginas, then stuck them to her body and had herself photographed. Those photos are not on view here, but we can see the two panels of *Mastication Box Sculpture* (1975), in which Wilke mounted these wads on paper, grids of 16 pages on each panel. These small gum sculptures—usually of two or three colors and formed into an inverted U whose ends cross, creating a tiny hole at their center—are surprisingly elegant. If the vagina of male imagination is a mysterious and chaotic space, hidden by hair and somewhat fearsome, Wilke's striped objects are amazingly precise. Varying from one large shape on a page to groups of as many as six similar smaller shapes, they are weirdly fetishistic but also playful and humorous, their colored stripes curiously assertive. They have some of the power of the more solid, phallic objects that male sculptors often make but without mimicking them.

These works are rich in associations, Wilke called them "cunt/scar" forms, and her series title is a play on scarification, the practice (common in Africa) of marking important women by burning patterns into their skin. These wads of gum are doubly naughty: they recall the childhood sin of random gum storage (memorialized in popular songs like "Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavor on the Bedpost Overnight?") as well as the adult naughtiness of depicting vaginas. Wilke wrote: "Since 1960 I have been concerned with the creation of a formal imagery that is specifically female, a new language that fuses mind and body into erotic objects that are namable and at the same time quite abstract." These vagina shapes manage to avoid the phallic thrusts-into-space of conventional sculpture, while at the same time they remain power objects. Curved, handmade, their color bands twist the straight lines of minimal art—which Wilke, a New Yorker with many art-world contacts, would have known well—into female curves. "You can say a Gothic church is a phallic symbol," she once wrote, "but if I say the nave of the church is really a big vagina, people are offended." Despite their multiple references, these wads of gum are visually unlike anything I've seen before. They have the feeling of a new beginning.

It's apparently a beginning she didn't follow up on, to judge from this exhibit, which includes only a tiny portion of Wilke's vast output between 1965 and 1992. Many of the other works here are more commentaries on existing attitudes than fresh starts—which is not to say that they're ineffective. The photographic diptych *I Object: Memoirs of a Sugargiver* (the title a pun on "eye object") is rich with references to Marcel Duchamp. "Sugargiver," which perhaps refers to herself, is one clue: Duchamp, like Wilke a lover of wordplay, called himself Merchand du Sel, or salt seller. The photos themselves—which suggest a book jacket, since the title and Wilke's name are printed on one of them—depict Wilke lying nude on the ground in poses that both recall and refute *Etante Donnes...*, Duchamp's last work.



DETAIL OF "MASTICATION BOX SCULPTURE"

In this Duchamp (permanently installed near *The Large Glass* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art), one looks through a peephole in a wooden door at a magical miniature scene. In the foreground of a forest setting with an optical waterfall a sculpted female lies nude on a bed of twigs, her legs spread, shaved genitalia facing the viewer. By contrast, Wilke photographs herself from above, with her feet at the top of the shot; one no longer gazes directly into a vagina, and the inversion defamiliarizes the nude, preventing its easy assimilation into a long history of images of female genitals. What's more, the clothes she's taken off in order to pose nude lie scattered about, distancing us further from Duchamp's mythic mannequin: the way you get a naked lady, Wilke seems to say, is by having an actual woman undress. A small bottle of what seems to be suntan lotion makes the point that nudity poses not only spiritual and cultural problems, but real risks to real skin.

The Duchamp itself (which I recently had the good fortune to see again) is magnificently complex. Seductive and repellent at once, it not only critiques its own apparent sexism but the voyeurism inherent in

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art

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all seeing. Comparing its mixture of sensuality and ideas with Wilke's *I Object* makes the latter seem more like an essay.

Still, I was intrigued, as I was by one essaylike series of nine photographic diptychs titled *Advertisements for Living* (1966-84), which includes scenes from Wilke's daily family life. The right photo in each depicts one of Wilke's lovers or Wilke herself with one of them or with her stepdaughter. In the left photo a famous male name—Marx, Matisse, Oldenburg—is printed over a shot of an ordinary background, a doorway or window or tiles. By converting her own life into "advertisements," Wilke comments on the way our culture—even our tradition of family-snapshot photography—can make us consider ourselves art objects, appropriate subjects of contemplation. By pairing the names of famous men with her own men—though the two categories sometimes overlap (she lived with Claes Oldenburg for some years)—she inscribes a kind of anxiety about the conflict between art and family life, especially for women.

When Wilke's mother discovered she had breast cancer, the artist documented her deteriorating body alongside her own in a series of photographic diptychs, one of which is in this show. Later, when Wilke herself had lymphoma, of which she died in 1993, she unstintingly photographed her own deteriorating body many times, giving the lie to a narcissistic interpretation of her work. The small triptych *Tree of Life: Red, Yellow and Blue* (1992) shows her face now thin, her hair stringy because much of it has fallen out due to chemotherapy; each photo is printed in a different primary color. She looks out at us in the center photo, and a bit toward the center in the two side shots. The form hints at an altarpiece, but what I noticed most was how similar Wilke's expression was in each photo, unlike those of *Gestures*.

Variety, instead of residing in her face, now resides in the different colors, which one senses as impositions on her figure. The three colors together represent a whole spectrum just as Wilke's various gestures did, but the colors cancel one another out more strongly and more movingly. I took them as markers of the pressure on one's self-conception in the face of approaching death.

VILLAGE VOICE, JAN 1993

HANNAH WILKE, 1940–1993

Fourteen years old and naked, Hannah Wilke smiles over her shoulder, clutches a mink stole to her bosom, and shows a lot of leg. At her ankle, Wilke's 1940 birth name, Arlene H. (Hannah) Butter, is lettered across the print in this, the first of the many Conceptual photographic works in which she used her own body as an evolving subject and consistent female emblem. Wilke also bared herself in sculptures, performances, and films for personal self-documentation and as a feminist art form until shortly before her death in Houston, Texas, on January 28 at age 52.

Wilke was a forerunner for a generation of younger Conceptual and performance artists and one of the most germinal of contemporary practitioners to use her nude beauty to valorize female form and to criticize the cultural devaluation of the feminine. Completely abstract, her ceramics (shown at the Castagno Gallery in New York City as early as 1966) and her latex works of the late '60s and early '70s seemed at the same time to be faithful representations of flowers, fortune cookies, and the folding labia of female genitals. She was thus the first to use the vaginal imagery that—for advocates and detractors alike—became a hallmark for feminist art during the 1970s.

The intelligence in Wilke's work is always visceral and often erotic. Her materials, which range from clay and latex to laundry lint, kneaded erasers to chewing gum and chocolate, are analogies for female physiology—the guts she wanted to show "through" her skin, and her intention to get under yours.

HANNAH WILKE: FROM S.O.S. STARIFICATION OBJECT SERIES, 1974

Beautiful by anyone's standards, Wilke used her shape, her surface, and her stance paradoxically, to express rage, disgust, self-hatred, and defiance. "In the United States," she said in 1976, "the state of nudity is still a problem." The complicated and perverse connection of women to the womanish body and its allure can be glimpsed in Wilke's sassy demeanor on an edge between glamour and the grotesque. *Venus Pareve*, a sculptural self-portrait of the artist's torso in chocolate (that can, according to Jewish dietary laws, be eaten with anything) is a succinct summing-up of Wilke's abilities to embody living the contradictions of woman and artist.

Abstract Expressionism was not only her signature stroke and immediate historical heritage but also emphasized her commitment to process itself. Wilke "soiled" Minimalism, on the other hand, by using its forms for off-color presentations of the foul feminine organism. Her *Needed-Erase-Her* series of 1974 features six squares in two neat rows, each composed of a different size or style of tiny cunt sculpture.

So Help Me Hannah (a 1978 installation from a performance in which the artist was photographed nude at P.S. 1) appropriates texts from critical writers. But Wilke's conversation is with viewers and is always deconstructive in its impassioned analytical posture, while postmodern in its mixing of texts and images, styles and media, representation and formal purity.

Wilke attended the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, where, at the Philadelphia Museum, Duchamp's *The Large Glass* is on permanent display. Her felt connection to Conceptual Art is expressed most specifically in relationship to Duchamp. In the filmed performance *Hannah Wilke through the Large Glass*, she is, she claimed, stripped bare and a bachelor. Her involvement with puns as deconstructive tools and with language in general contributes to the effectiveness of this work as a turnabout tale that both honors and unmasks a male myth while proffering a feminist revision.

Hannah in jeans, breasts and belly out there, leans against a wall of delicate latex sculptures in a 1980 photo. These works were larger, more controversial—cunts, pussies, boxes, she insisted—less embraceable despite their formal appeal. The picture, snapshot size, is an installation photo of the *Ponder-r-rosa Series* at Ronald Feldman gallery. On the back of the card, an invitation to a party for Hannah's 40th birthday. Above the handwritten information appears the small cunt that is her essential autograph.

Imposing color photographs graphically portray Wilke's mother, Selma Butter, after surgery for breast cancer. Wilke called Butter's baldness from chemotherapy treatments "her Auschwitz." Yet Wilke, in almost identical poses, complements Butter's portraits with her own: "to wear her wounds," Wilke said, "to heal my own."

Wilke believed in art magic. But taking photographs did not save her mother. The scarred, emaciated exposure of Butter served up a view of human suffering, mutilation, and the inevitable deterioration of the physical self that would, moreover, prove prophetic. In June 1987, Wilke was also diagnosed with cancer—lymphoma in her neck, shoulders, and abdomen.

Visiting the Ronald Feldman gallery, where Wilke has shown her work since 1972, I saw the color slides that she had selected to be printed for her next exhibition. Characteristically, she provokes via the confrontational poses of an unruly subject. Hannah without hair, body bloated and bandaged, tubes everywhere, once more puts her self right in my face.

Hannah wrote,

Remember me
Remember me?
Re-member me

I will.

—Arlene Raven

BAY WINDOWS Oct. 18, 1990

visual arts

Scar quality

For this artist women's bodies—including her own—are canvases for dealing with women's issues

by Ingrid Sell

'Hannah Wilke, Past and Present,' sculpture, photographs and watercolors, at the Genovese Gallery, through Nov. 1.

The approach to the Genovese Gallery (at 535 Albany St., Boston) focuses on a pair of large color photographs that are a perfectly appropriate introduction to Hannah Wilke's work: in one, she lies asleep, while a small green bird perches on her head; in the other, she's waking up and sleepily playing with three of these birds. At first glance the photographs look harmless, almost sentimental. Upon closer inspection, they take on a disturbing, dream-like quality. In the first photograph, Wilke's neck sports a bandage, and the bird, despite its sweet and vulnerable appearance, seems capable of a hidden malice. In conjunction, even the cozy playfulness of the second photograph carries a sense of impending danger. The title, "Handle With Care," implies the combination of danger and delicacy that is inherent in much of Wilke's work.

The birds are a recurring theme in much of her recent work. In a series called "Seura Chaya," they appear as dreamy watercolors in association with photographs that document her mother's battle with cancer. The photographs are starkly honest, even startling, showing her mother's emaciated arms and chemotherapy-baldness yet sparkling with the wit of this woman who herself seems to resemble a bird—from her beak-like nose to a darting spiritedness in her eyes despite her physical weakness.

She remembers mother

Another pair of color prints, "So Help Me Hannah Series: Portrait of the Artist With Her Mother," (197-81) juxtapose Wilke—bare-chested, in make-up and a come-hither expression—with her mother, who is also bare-chested, revealing a long masectomy scar and lesions all over her chest, but with a shy, self-conscious approach to the camera. Wilke's youthful chest is covered with small metal objects, symbolic "scars" that identify her mother's suffering, while at the same time referring to the knife-edge of social opinion that deems a woman worthless once she's lost that youthful beauty. Since her mother's death in 1982, Wilke herself has also battled cancer (in her case, successfully), a fact that leads a certain irony to these works.

Also entitled "So Help Me Hannah Series," a group of black and white poster prints show Wilke, naked, in high heels, in various squalid settings, holding or surrounded by guns (some appear to be toys, others real), while the images are completed by snippets of quotes from writers whose work she admires. Perhaps the most suggestive of her combined daring and vulnerability is a shot in which she straddles a toilet, standing up and pissing while she lazily rests a gun against her knee. The image is emblazoned with these words from Joyce: "His Farced Epistol."

Wilke is perhaps better known for her earlier "cunt art" works—pieces in which she has folded kneaded erasers, clay or chewing gum into labia-like shapes which she grouped together in repetitious, almost obsessive collections. The works in this show include a group of kneaded-eraser pieces on hand-tinted old postcards, as well as a series of more formal exercises in which colored "trays" hold groups of ceramic shapes.

Animal endurance. *Hannah Wilke's "Seura Chaya #1.' Photo: Lisa Kahana*

Also included in this show are photographs documenting Wilke's "Jesus Christ Super-t-Art" performance at the Kitchen, as well as the parts of her "Starification Object Series (SOS)" (1974), a sort of rent-able Happening in which Wilke would invite the audience to chew pieces of gum, which she then folded into her trademark labia forms and fastened her body with. In this piece, she refers to herself as "The S. O. (Starification Object)," a reference to both the cultural "bubblegum" fascination with celebrities as well as the view of women as objects to be adored as stars, yet chewed up and spit out like pieces of gum. The similarity between "scarification" and "Starification" of the title refers to the gum-objects' resemblance to scars when placed on her body—in what now seems an eerie premonition of her later works. ▼

The Genovese Gallery, at 535 Albany St., 4th fl., opposite the Flower Exchange, in Boston, is open, Tues.-Sat., 10 am-5:30

Expressing the Inexpressible

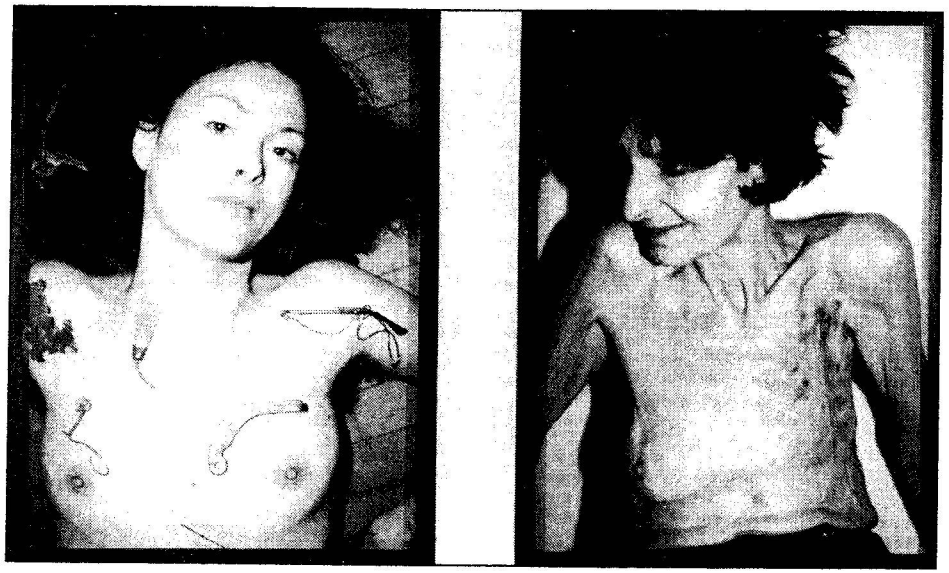
Love and Death: Growing Old in America (is a sin) at Ghia Gallery

BY EDIE MEIDAV

What shall I do with this absurdity—
O heart, O troubled heart—this
caricature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail?
—W. B. Yeats, "The Tower"

In *Le Bavarde*, Robbe-Grillet's *nouveau roman*, the loquacious narrator runs on at the mouth because to cease talking would mean death. In the show *Love and Death*, spirit continues unabated as one male and eleven female artists, without wasting a word, address aging, death and the healthy sexuality of the elderly. Half the work in the show—well-curated by Katherine Cook—comes from a show on aging at the Forum Gallery in Jamestown, New York, in 1990. These are not isolated phenomena, but why is there a growing number of exhibitions about the process of aging? Possible responses: a cultural awareness of living a button away from collective doom and a decade away from environmental catastrophe; science's parallel advances and failures have greater entrance into the public domain; the graying of the baby boomers; continued threats to the rights to euthanasia and abortion, as well as modernism's legacy of the quest of societal taboos, such as the topic of aging, in order to dispense with them.

Or does the act of creation, carrying within it the seed of its apparent opposite, force the artist to confront aspects of elegy and the funerary at an earlier age, and so now we begin to see shows collected around this theme? Like Robbe-Grillet's narrator, do artists create in an attempt to ensure their own immortality, papering over what may appear as a painful distinction between life and death? And in regard to shows at Ghia and elsewhere, is there a reason why more female than male artists appear to be unblinkingly confronting the fact of age?



Hannah Wilke, *So Help Me Hannah Series: Portrait of the Artist with Her Mother, Selma Butter*, 1978-1981, Cibachrome diptych, 40" x 30" each, at Ghia Gallery, San Francisco. (Photo: courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.)

Whatever answers you may form, great maturity is shown by the panoply of artists in this courageous exhibit at Ghia. A particular standout is Hannah Wilke, who has taken Carolee Schneemann and Cindy Sherman one step further with her excruciating honesty. A large color nude photographic diptych of a healthy Wilke and her post-mastectomy mother from the *So Help Me Hannah* series (1978-1981) follows us with an unwavering gaze as we move about the gallery. Further power is given to the photograph, making it a relic of sorts, by the knowledge that Wilke herself now confronts a form of cancer. Much of Wilke's other work in this show deals more explicitly with formal concerns, which meld an expressionistic reduction of form into gesture with the disintegration of the youthful face. Self-portraits also seem a precocious will-making, an insurance that one's face lives on after death; the expressionistic self-portrait, like much of Wilke's work over the years, forces us to look at our preconceptions about narcissism and subjectivity.

Courage, not false sentiment, underlies the work of the Bay Area artist Eleanore Dickinson, who presents us with seven lovely ink-on-paper works (1975-1991) in which older nude couples entwine, sleep, or stare at each other (or at us) with a restive passion. In Dickinson's profoundly understated draftsmanship and formatting, unmarked swatches of paper come to denote physical form and connote a great whiteness that approaches the richly tale-telling bodies of her well-respected subjects. Liz Cane's educational video, *Libido*, continues the thesis that the elderly can maintain an active sexuality, while Barbara Hammer's videos, *Optic Nerve* and *Vital Signs*, are fixed in the nexus between women's film theory and expressionism and provoke a claustrophobic, fragmented sense of aging.

In a different vein, Deidre Scherer's ten quilted portraits of elderly women invoke both a good-humored wit and solemnity. That she uses quilting, traditionally a woman's art, to sculpt space around these figures, to show them as they eye us skeptically, or sleep with IV tubes against their noses, seemingly awaiting an end—or even using threads to suspend a picture to show us, literally, the threads we are made of and to which we will eventually unravel—these things tie form to subject in an admirably innovative manner. That she does so with compassion raises her art to a high level while it educates us in ways of seeing others'—and our own—aging.

Because these and other artists—such as Minette Lehmann, Mary Lou Uttermohlen and Joyce Tenneson—show us vivid strength, we feel that whatever reasons lie behind the increased prominence of age as a topic of art, the attention of these artists has served to awaken us, to inspire us away from phobia and toward the understanding with which thoughts of mortality may let an artist say, as Yeats did, that "Never had I more/ Excited, passionate, fantastical/ Imagination, nor an ear and eye/ That more expected the impossible." ■

Love and Death: Growing Old in America (is a sin) through February 23 at Ghia Gallery, 2648 Third St., San Francisco.

Hannah Wilke

Interview

BONNIE FINNBERG

Hannah Wilke has developed a personal mythology through her sculpture, performance, video and photography. From 1969-79 when she lived with Claes Oldenburg, her work derived from her experiences as a young female artist coming of age in an older male-dominated art scene. Language predominates, not only in the titles of her work, which exploit puns and malapropisms, but in her imagery as well, where life and feminism are more important than art.

This engenders a body of work which is self-revelatory and self-exploitive, creating resonance with the implicit exploitation and objectification of the female stereotype within our culture, particularly a male-dominated art subculture which exalts the female body, claiming its imagery for itself. Whereas women artists using such self-proclamation and celebration on their own subjective terms are accused of "narcissism," male artists' depiction, or in a sense misappropriation of stereotypes and cultural biases, are acclaimed as "inspired."

The difference here is between the direct expression of the female artist's self-exploitation of a personal iconography rooted in the conscious and unconscious experiences of one's body, as opposed to the male artist's personal vision shaped by, and sometimes shaping, the cultural ethos.

Like Frida Kahlo, Wilke's depiction of female beauty ventures beyond the slick surface of an ideal to underlying emotional and psychic experience. Sometimes using materials in a Minimalist format, Wilke crosses the line between Minimalism and Conceptualism by indicating with sensuously embellished forms the social and political implications of woman as "cunt," "whore," "angel," "mother," "receptacle," "object," "life-giver," "lover." She reflects the image back to the culture, transforming stereotype to universal icon, as well as autobiography.

Wilke encapsulates pivotal life experiences of loving and dying, placing these processes in contexts which alternately illuminate passive victimization and aggressive self-assertion. Language and physicality are constantly in interplay. The physicality of her work is primary, both in the use of her own body, as well as the importance of process in her approach to materials.

Presently, Hannah is showing at Ronald Feldman Gallery; there is a retrospective of her work at the University of Missouri in St. Louis; and a book of the exhibit is coming out this month published by the University of Missouri Press.

COVER: How has your work evolved over the last 30 years?

HW: Well, from about 1959 or '60 I did what could be considered erotic landscapes and fountains. Then from about '60 to '63 I worked in ceramics, creating layered vaginal forms in natural browns and terra cotta. I added color in around '63, pink ceramics, and that's when the vulvic forms evolved. Around 1969 I started working in latex, pouring it on the floor, making veils of color, trying to make vaginal forms using staples. These collapsed. I hung them on the wall, dyed latex, using snaps, making 6' blossoms. The snaps related to the scarifications on my body with chewing gum, which I did later in '74.

I realized when people started to see me it was like, "Ah, there's the rub." I was out there, with Claes, looking 19 at 28. I looked too young for the artworld in the 1960's; I didn't fit in. I looked very glamorous and pretty, and the social irritant of it made me create for my first piece, *Hannah Wilke Super T-Art*, which was a female crucifixion. 'Cause I was being, I probably didn't realize it, being crucified for my looks. So I created a performance where I was first dressed as Mary Magdalene, changing to the Christ, and all of this gesture was like my latex, as I unfolded my toga and it became the same layered latex of the Christ figure. Because I really feel the crucifixion is a female fertility figure in disguise.

COVER: How do you see that?

HW: Well, because Christ's most famous words are, "I am the body, I am the blood, eat of my body," like "eat of my blood." And it's woman's blood that creates life, not Jesus. So it's really our bleeding that they appropriated.

COVER: You've been accused of narcissism and exploiting personal relationships in your work. How do you see this in terms of current concerns with appropriation?

HW: In terms of appropriation, I was appropriating, in a manner, about things that occurred in my life. My art is autobiographical, and because it's autobiographical I've reappropriated that which belonged to me, as well as belonged to women in general. So, I represent all women in my art. Since art is passed on to all generations; it doesn't belong to me. So using myself is never narcissistic to begin with, because I'm gonna die and then the work will live on. So that I just become a figure of a woman, and I think women are the controllers of the universe. So I should control the images that I created, or collaborated on.

One of the earliest collaborations was the "So Help Me Hannah" series in '78, in which I reappropriated back "ray-guns" that were gifts to Oldenburg from 1969-78. And since he had called them "Group H" in his book, I felt I had to take back that which was a collaboration, but I extended it to my own image of fifty nude photographs that were women in all positions of glory of death, of desecration, and of denial, of joy, of humor, and created an image of ...like a motion picture moving through my life, in time, in different physical motions that were like a living dance, all the human gestures that one sees on television, of women being raped, or men being raped, or Kojak running through the streets with his gun. But by stripping oneself bare, one formally sees it like one sees a Noh play, a dance of all the human gestures in society. The ray-guns were really symbols of all the refuse in society, the gum wrappers that became L-shaped that would then become guns, the little broken toothbrushes that would become gun-shaped, anything found on the street that took this shape. So it became a collage of what goes on in the life of any individual, especially in New York, where there's so much garbage.

COVER: A lot of your work makes references to Duchamp. How do you see his work in relation to your own?

HW: Duchamp, by posing as a woman was honoring women. Duchamp de LLOHQ, where he put a moustache on the Mona Lisa, was being disrespectful to art. He slightly altered someone else's photograph, he touched it, to show maybe a human being is more important. To live one's life...we keep talking about living, we sometimes sacrifice life for art, that art is more important than human existence. I go back on that. Maybe that's why I devalued my own art and put it on the floor as graven images, or gravestones. In the photographs of my mother dying of cancer she was the graven image. I honored her because I wouldn't have made my art without her. So my little vaginal wombs became tombs, became organic gestural symbols that were circular and folded. The circle is the most minimal organic geometric form we can find. The basis of the circle is also the basis of cell division, which is what creates life, as well as what creates cancer.

COVER: You seem to be iconoclastic, both in your deconstruction and reconstruction of female beauty per se. However, certain elements of traditional feminine beauty remain. How do you see yourself utilizing accepted standards of beauty in your work?

HW: That's what the traditional deconstructivists in feminism have done. But to the extent that at times we've denigrated the "other" as well in this respect, by subjugating traditional beauty to a negative attitude. So in saying that beauty, which is a given, is a negative, and we have to put it down, we're very unfair to those women that happen to be born traditionally beautiful. It's like racism. People tend to look at people first and not hear them. †

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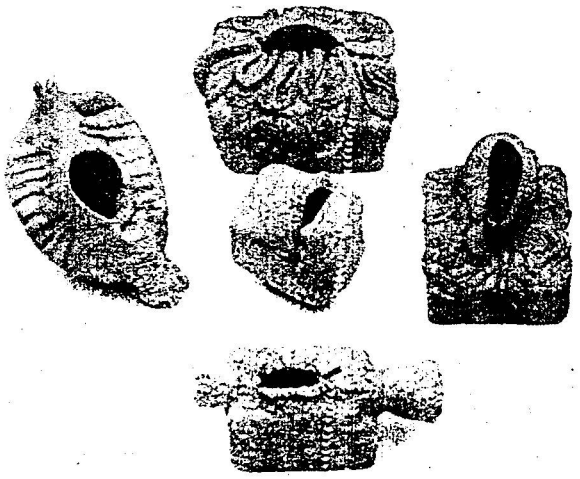
ART PICK OF THE WEEK

HANNAH WILKE



Untitled (Five Androgynous and Vaginal Sculptures), 1960-61

In an art world that has mainstreamed iconoclasm, Hannah Wilke stayed in our faces not by flouting convention, but flaunting it — and not by smashing idols, but inventing them. She was conventionally gorgeous, and rather than hide it in an era of stringy-hair misandry and old-boy defensiveness, she presented herself as a conceptualist centerfold. And even before that, from the beginnings of her career in the late '50s, the abiding leitmotif in Wilke's sculptural output was that quintessentially feminist sign, the vagina. The abiding tone of her art was ludic rather than dramatic, however. By piling pun on pun in her titles, by fashioning eentsy cuntlets out of everything from fired clay to chewing gum, and by posing topless but not propless (studding her body with her family jewelry and not infrequently wielding, er, complementary devices such as toy guns), Wilke inflected her sense of the outrageous with her even keener sense of the absurd. Anger was definitely in her vocabulary, but fun came first. Ironic distance came last, but self-reflection was right up there, and served Wilke well when her body failed her big-time. In this too-brief but still-telling nanospective, Wilke's Starification photos, all bedroom eyes and sleek torso and little chicle coochies, come to a screeching halt when she pairs her yummy self with the ravaged body of her mother, who died in 1982 of breast cancer. The defective gene ambushed Wilke half a decade later, and the works of her too-early twilight document her decline with the same ferocious, knowing narcissism — cut with a newfound tenderness and introspection — that animates her earlier self-portrayals. This show includes almost none of Wilke's wrenching sickbed photos, letting her mother's condition rage alone against the dying of the light. As for surprises, the survey offers several from Wilke's salad days — an abstract drawing (well, almost — notice the phallus aforethought) from the mid-'60s, for instance, and a group of labial terra cotta vessels from 1960-61. Hannah, we hardly knew ye. At SolwayJones, 5377 Wilshire Blvd.; thru Feb. 21. (323) 937-7354.

—Peter Frank

remarkable homage to the Cage-Cunningham partnership in which we witness footage of the late Merce Cunningham, projected onto six large screens, as he shifts his facial and bodily movements just slightly over the course of 4'33", the length of John Cage's infamous 1953 composition. The work's placement near the apex of the Guggenheim enables a more reflective spot to consider one highly evocative (albeit silent) dialogue created between past and present avant-gardes.

In contrast, Douglas Gordon's *Bootleg (Empire)*, 1998, a handheld video taken of Warhol's *Empire*, situated in the museum's foyer, reads as a slightly redundant work. Although Gordon is probably as 'haunted' by Warhol's legacy as anyone, why not screen Warhol's still-relevant film itself, especially as only paces away one finds an 'electric chair' painting (*Orange Disaster #5*, 1963)? And if the exhibition concerns itself with the current profusion of video and film works, why include so little politicised work or work addressing questions relating to the nearly simultaneous 'deaths' of both cinema and still photography, in their classic forms? Ultimately the slackness of definition in 'Haunted' permitted the curators to make capricious leaps between eras, artists, media and practices without aligning these aspects with a particularly productive argument. ∎

Haunted will be on view at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao from November 2010 through March 2011.

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Hannah Wilke: Elective Affinities

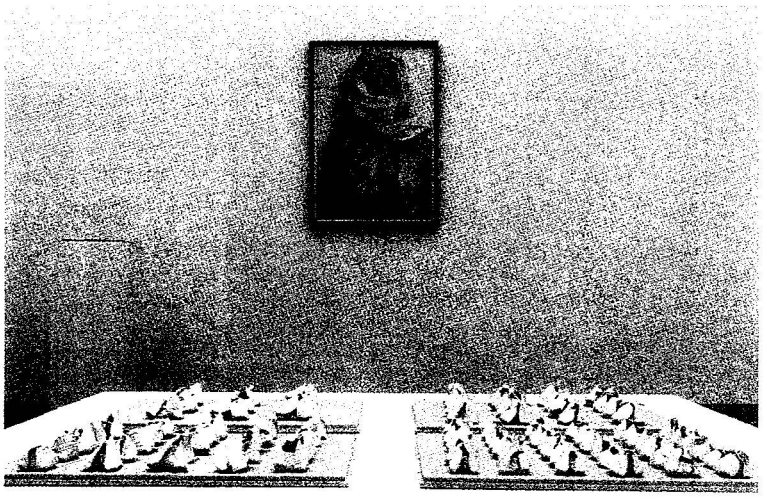
Alison Jacques Gallery London 4 June to 14 August

Imagine waiting until 2010 for the first monograph on Claes Oldenburg or Robert Morris. Yet that is the situation with their contemporary Hannah Wilke (1940-93), who only now has received the benefit of a full-length study of the range and complexity of her work. Preceded by Joanna Frueh's insightful essay in the Wilke retrospective catalogue of 1989 and Tracy Fitzpatrick's equally illuminating essay for *Gestures*, the catalogue for a show at the Neuberger Museum in 2008-09, Nancy Princethal's new and magnificent monograph (Prestel, 2010) complements the exquisitely selected exhibition of works at the Alison Jacques Gallery this summer drawn from the vast treasury of the Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles. Made notorious by the moment of feminism, Wilke has also been poorly served by feminist art historians – I include myself – for too narrow an understanding or even knowledge of her extensive oeuvre. She has often been misrepresented as feminism's earliest and loudest bad girl through selective focus on her use of her nude body; what has been missed is the patient and intense sculptural exploration of matter, form and what we might in a Freudian sense call the life drive: *libido* is not just conventional sexuality; rather sexuality was for Freud but one form of the drive that generates curiosity, creativity and connectivity with the world and ourselves in and through embodiment. Wilke chose, however, to add to the rich vein of 20th-century artistic engagements with the life-drive by inflecting shared formal, material and iconological experiments with a self-consciously female perspective that predated, but was consolidated by, the collective interest in gender typical of the feminist perspective around 1970. In daring to explore the morphology of the female body through sculptural forms, Wilke was also the initiator, even in feminist organic abstraction.

Wilke wrote that she was both inspired and challenged by Marcel Duchamp. Wilke's work is as conceptual and language-based as his. We can link Wilke's wry sense of the humour of sexuality as well as her profound respect for the body and for cultural gestures to Duchamp (from the *Female Fig Leaf* to *Etant Données* and the playful cross-dressing of his alter-ego Rrose Sélavy, whose name translates as *Eros – that's life*), especially in her typically 1960s sculptural work in clay, that most earthy and mouldable of materials, or – innovatively – in a fragile but intimate substance, laundry lint from a tumble dryer: both materials were formed in a single movement of the hand into an infinitely differentiated yet serially repeatable shape that while not specifically an image of female sex cannot but make any viewer think vaginal associations of folds, interiorities, touchings, dualities. On the other hand, Wilke also took on painters like de Kooning – with a wonderfully gestural and frank drawing in the exhibition *Untitled*, 1962-66 – and Pollock, whose choreographed movements she transformed in her early use of poured latex. Spilling liquid latex onto specially prepared plaster floors, she then peeled off the pooled shapes to create layered, viscerally evocative and sexually suggestive tinted abstract sculptures that were hung on the wall vertically or horizontally, as in *Pink Champagne*, 1976.

Wilke's moment of emergence was also shared with an extraordinarily rich range of women artists daring to remake the bodily by means of, rather than against, the burden of Modernism's twin insistence on materialised gesture and abstract formalism. Wilke's performative work invites relations with dancers Simone Forti, Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer, who moved from dance to film, while her exploration of novel materials (lint and gum) and bodily suggestiveness invites conversations with Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Alina Szapocznikow and Niki de St Phalle. The resonances between these artists in this vital period of the 1960s countered the rationalist seriality and disciplined abstraction of some minimalist boys without disowning the idea of art shaped through formal and procedural protocol. But Wilke's work, as this show reveals with its finely judged selections and juxtapositions, goes beyond any of these others because it extends beyond the moment of sculpture-led rupture and embraces the performative and the photographic. In 1976, exploring the emergence of women's body art, feminist critic Lucy Lippard wondered how, and if, Wilke could manage the tension between a feminist critique of patriarchal images of woman as body and her own confident playfulness in restaging in live performances, thus shifting, those conventions with the 'seductive' use of her own (almost) naked body in series such as 'Super-T-Art', 1974, 'S.O.S. Starification Object Series', 1974-75, or 'So Help Me Hannah', 1978-84. Lippard's judicious and self-admitted anxiety about the subtle abyss between critique and self-exposure underestimated Wilke's extensive knowledge of art history and its iconographies. Her performance work parodically brought dead statuary to life to explode the authority of classically imprisoned femininities through the challenge of live performance in th presence of the animated, thinking and personalised body of on actual woman. Wilke also clearly used photography and liv performance as extensions of her sculptural imaginatior challenging the fixity of photographic vision and the gaze by he own activated body and her returned gaze.

The exhibition layout sets up a beautiful juxtaposition of photograph of the artist, head wrapped in a keffiyeh, her tors nude but studded with her suggestively shaped vaginal form made from masticated chewing gum from the 'S.O.S Starification Object Series' (*Veil*, 1974) with *Elective Affinitie* 1978: low grey plinths displaying four grids of white glaze porcelain folded sculptures. The placement challenges us discover the links between work in sculpture, video, photograph performance and installation that takes on and transform Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, Minimalism and expande sculpture, staged photography and searing self-portraitur Working between hard and soft, conceptuality and sensuo materiality, play and pain, in her final works – represented he by two small 'Intra-Venus Face' drawings, 1992, and sculptu on paper made of her hair shed during chemotherapy – Wil faced up to mortal illness. In the gallery, *Brushstrokes (No.6)*, January 1992, looks back at the more youthful Wilke in V across the quadrangulated field of *Elective Affinities*, the residue which, as in Goethe's 1809 book of the same name, h been described as 'a deep, passionate wound which shrinks frc being closed by healing'. The hang forges a conceptual li between the lively, the creative and the failing embodiment sexed human subjectivity that is at the core of Wilke's profou and expanded artistic project.



Hannah Wilke
'S.O.S. Starification Object Series' (Veil) 1974-75
foreground
'Elective Affinities' 1978

In a review in 1974, Edit de Ack wrote: 'I cherish Wilke's expressive potential. I hope she can hold onto it by being hysterical, loud, cheap, silly, funny, formalistic, sarcastic, full of sorrow. I hope she can remain a woman artist and hold onto her sense of humour.' She did. Her final series, 'Intra-Venus', 1992, shows her doing so in the face of dying. The time has come for a major museum to stage a full-scale retrospective of Wilke's extraordinary intelligence, range and deep consistency that justly places her alongside the other artists of her generation who by virtue of their sex won their just recognition some 30 years earlier.

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