

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.



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

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Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

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 photographic 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.

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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 groundbreaking 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 soliciting 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
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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 Wilke 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; 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.



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

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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.



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 Owens 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 Sandra 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.