ART PAPERS

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Hannah Wilke
Ronald Feldman Fine Art
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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?

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