

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 Sandra 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 Staatliche 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 Wilke¹

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.: Stratification*

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 perfor-

malist 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, *Teard 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 Sandra 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 fascist 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."