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BOOKS | "Hannah Wilke" by Nancy Princenthal: And You Thought There Was Nothing Left to Expose



By [Jay Gabler](#), [TC Daily Planet](#)
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"Singly or severally," writes Nancy Princenthal, "chewed sticks of gum were shaped...into little, surprisingly delicate and subtly colored cunts." Such was the work and life of Hannah Wilke, a multimedia artist (in those days, weren't they all?) active from the 1960s to her death—at only 52—in 1993. New this month from Prestel is *Hannah Wilke*, Princenthal's important overview of the artist's life and work.

Wilke's *Intra-Venus Tapes*, frank documents of her struggle with lymphoma, were recently on display at the Walker Art Center as part of [The Talent Show](#). What may make Wilke of greater local interest, however, is her eight-year personal and professional relationship with artist Claes Oldenburg. Their relationship dissolved—ultimately into great acrimony—in 1977, the same year Oldenburg married Coosje van Bruggen, with whom he created *Spoonbridge and Cherry*, a sculpture that's become one of the Twin Cities' signature visual icons.

As a sculptor, performance artist, photographer, painter, and all-around provocateur, Wilke was among the most important artists working to challenge ideas of art and gender in the 60s and 70s. She used her shapely body fearlessly—once, when a photographer arrived to document her with an installation of her work, she pulled off her shirt for the photos—to force the issues of identity and desire in an art world that had grown sterile in the abstract-expressionist race to ultraflatness. The fact that this sometimes made it hard for Wilke to be taken seriously was part of her point. "Sure, her work looked terrific," a 1970s male dealer confided to Lucy Lippard in a telling comment about an unnamed artist, "but she's such a good-looking chick, if I went to her studio I wouldn't know if I liked the work or her. So I never went."

Princenthal has the rare talent of being able to write about conceptually challenging art in a manner that's substantive but accessible, which makes her new book a fine introduction for readers unfamiliar with Wilke's work and legacy. Those who think they know Wilke will be surprised by little-known corners of the artist's output highlighted by the author—for example, her paintings and drawings. The straightforward title *Hannah Wilke* is apt for this direct, concise (168 pages, which is not so concise as to forgive the book's lack of an index), and insightful volume.

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