

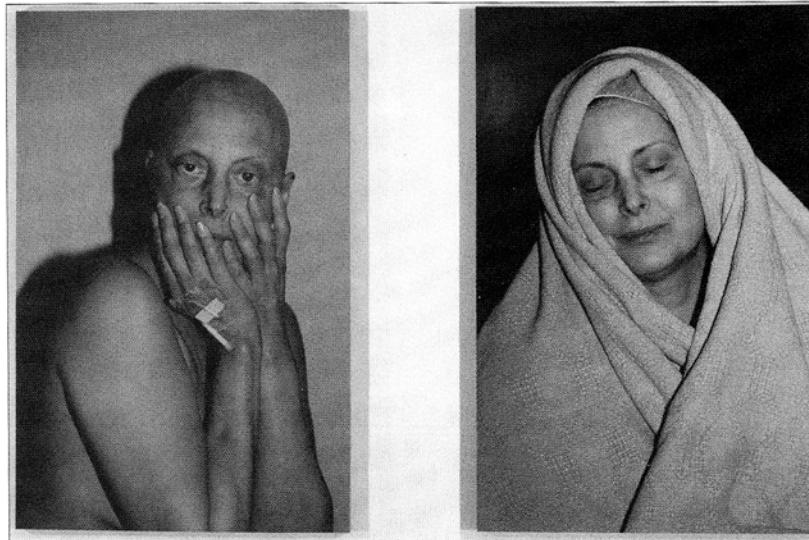
Body of Evidence

Hannah Wilke

By Nancy Princenthal

Prestel, 176 pages, \$49.95

Struggling to establish a career in the male-dominated art world of the 1960s and '70s, Hannah Wilke confronted the obstacles by flamboyantly, literally, shoving her breasts in audience members' faces. Yet because she made her attractive body the focus of so much of her unconventional art, she was not readily embraced by feminists. In



Hannah Wilke's *Intra-Venus #4*, a diptych of six-foot-tall photos, made in 1992 as she underwent treatment for lymphoma.

this thoroughly researched book, Nancy Princenthal does an extremely effective job of placing Wilke's work in the context of her life and times, which is not an easy task when dealing with an artist who is so difficult to categorize.

Princenthal's biography tracks Wilke from her childhood in the '40s on the Lower East Side to her death from cancer at the age of 52 in 1993. She explores the artist's work during the early days of the women's movement in the art world, noting how she was making vulva-like sculptures well before Judy Chicago made *Dinner Party* (1974–79) and creating provocative self-portraits a decade earlier than Cindy Sherman was. Wilke rose to prominence, but never quite achieved the fame she felt was accorded those women as well as her male counterparts. (Later in life, she staged letter campaigns to arts editors to correct this perceived injustice.)

Throughout, Princenthal writes clearly and insightfully, translating much of the heavy theory that surrounds Wilke's diverse body of work—sculpture, performance, video, photography, painting, and drawing—into simple, straightforward language.

Wilke's crowning achievement was her series "Intra-Venus," made in 1992 while she was undergoing chemotherapy. Here, her body, ravaged by disease, is bravely displayed in ways that defy her early detractors' accusations of narcissism. Since her death, many women artists, ranging from Janine Antoni to Vanessa Beecroft, have acknowledged Wilke as an influence. This comprehensive volume should bring Wilke the respect that she felt eluded her during her lifetime. —**Barbara Pollack**