

HANNAH WILKE, 1940-1993

Fourteen years old and naked, Hannah Wilke smiles over her shoulder, clutches a mink stole to her bosom, and shows a lot of leg. At her ankle, Wilke's 1940 birth name, Arlene H. (Hannah) Butter, is lettered across the print in this, the first of the many Conceptual photographic works in which she used her own body as an evolving subject and consistent female emblem. Wilke also bared herself in sculptures, performances, and films for personal self-documentation and as a feminist art form until shortly before her death in Houston, Texas, on January 28 at age 52.

Wilke was a forerunner for a generation of younger Conceptual and performance artists and one of the most germinal of contemporary practitioners to use her nude beauty to valorize female form and to criticize the cultural devaluation of the feminine. Completely abstract, her ceramics (shown at the Castagno Gallery in New York City as early as 1966) and her latex works of the late '60s and early '70s seemed at the same time to be faithful representations of flowers, fortune cookies, and the folding labia of female genitals. She was thus the first to use the vaginal imagery that—for advocates and detractors alike—became a hallmark for feminist art during the 1970s.

The intelligence in Wilke's work is always visceral and often erotic. Her materials, which range from clay and latex to laundry lint, kneaded erasers to chewing gum and chocolate, are analogies for female physiology—the guts she wanted to show “through” her skin, and her intention to get under yours.

Beautiful by anyone's stan-

dards, Wilke used her shape, her surface, and her stance paradoxically, to express rage, disgust, self-hatred, and defiance. “In the United States,” she said in 1976, “the state of nudity is still a problem.” The complicated and perverse connection of women to the womanish body and its allure can be glimpsed in Wilke's sassy demeanor on an edge between glam-

our and the grotesque. *Venus Parave*, a sculptural self-portrait of the artist's torso in chocolate (that can, according to Jewish dietary laws, be eaten with anything) is a succinct summing-up of Wilke's abilities to embody living the contradictions of woman and artist.

Abstract Expressionism was not only her signature stroke and immediate historical heritage but



HANNAH WILKE: FROM S.O.S. STAFIFICATION OBJECT SERIES, 1974

also emphasized her commitment to process itself. Wilke “soiled” Minimalism, on the other hand, by using its forms for off-color presentations of the foul feminine organism. Her *Needed-Erase-Her* series of 1974 features six squares in two neat rows, each composed of a different size or style of tiny cunt sculpture.

So Help Me Hannah (a 1978 installation from a performance in which the artist was photographed nude at P.S. 1) appropriates texts from critical writers. But Wilke's conversation is with viewers and is always deconstructive in its impassioned analytical posture, while postmodern in its mixing of texts and images, styles and media, representation and formal purity.

Wilke attended the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, where, at the Philadelphia Museum, Duchamp's *The Large Glass* is on permanent display. Her felt connection to Conceptual Art is expressed most specifically in relationship to Duchamp. In the filmed performance *Hannah Wilke through the Large Glass*, she is, she claimed, stripped bare and a bachelor. Her involvement with puns as deconstructive tools and with language in general contributes to the effectiveness of this work as a turnabout tale that both honors and unmask a male myth while proffering a feminist revision.

Hannah in jeans, breasts and belly out there, leans against a wall of delicate latex sculptures in a 1980 photo. These works were larger, more controversial—cunts, pussies, boxes, she insisted—less embraceable despite their formal appeal. The picture, snapshot size, is an installation photo of the

Ponder-r-rosa Series at Ronald Feldman gallery. On the back of the card, an invitation to a party for Hannah's 40th birthday. Above the handwritten information appears the small cunt that is her essential autograph.

Imposing color photographs graphically portray Wilke's mother, Selma Butter, after surgery for breast cancer. Wilke called Butter's baldness from chemotherapy treatments “her Auschwitz.” Yet Wilke, in almost identical poses, complements Butter's portraits with her own: “to wear her wounds,” Wilke said, “to heal my own.”

Wilke believed in art magic. But taking photographs did not save her mother. The scarred, emaciated exposure of Butter served up a view of human suffering, mutilation, and the inevitable deterioration of the physical self that would, moreover, prove prophetic. In June 1987, Wilke was also diagnosed with cancer—lymphoma in her neck, shoulders, and abdomen.

Visiting the Ronald Feldman gallery, where Wilke has shown her work since 1972, I saw the color slides that she had selected to be printed for her next exhibition. Characteristically, she provokes via the confrontational poses of an unruly subject. Hannah without hair, body bloated and bandaged, tubes everywhere, once more puts her self right in my face.

Hannah wrote,

*Remember me
Remember me?
Re-member me*

I will.

—Arlene Raven