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Rites of Passage in Hannah Wilke's Life and Art

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Hannah Wilke

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Introduction

Wilke “a sculptor and conceptualist artist who made the body and female sexuality the subject of her work”
(Smith, 1993, p. 52)

died of complications from lymphoma on the 28th January, 1993 aged 52. Wilke’s life was dedicated to expressing her political and theoretical beliefs and concerns about society; especially how patriarchal views of female beauty structured Western representations of women.

Critics often denigrated Wilke’s work for being too narcissistic or exhibitionistic as Wilke often documented her own beauty frequently in its naked form. Some critics felt that

“ in using her own body as the content of her art, in calling her art seduction, she complicates issues and fails to challenge conventional notions of female sexuality”
(Fitterman, 1985, p.315)

Yet Wilke actually used the passing of that beauty when she began to get ill, to support her convictions that beauty and life are not eternal that every person ages and ultimately every person dies.

Her last triumphant series of work *Intra-Venus* (1991-1992) consists of numerous photographs of Wilke’s decaying body during her battle with lymphatic cancer. What separates these photographs from other artists’ portrayals of disease and impending death is the seamlessness with which they fit into the body of Wilke’s artistic production. *Intra-Venus* slotted neatly into the complex discourse which Wilke used; the art refused to deny the pleasure of both narcissism and of being the object of voyeurism while maintaining control of

production and representation . *Intra-Venus* was also photographic evidence of dismantling the image and notions surrounding beauty in western society.¹

The fact that Wilke died so young and of a disease that slowly ate away at her looks signals a rite of passage² more severe than most people would encounter and one that Wilke made use of by using her experience of it in her art.

In seeking to explore the works of Wilke, Rites of Passage can be used as metaphors by which Wilke moved through different artistic movements and experience varying liminal periods³ .

Wilke's work cannot be labelled; she never became stuck into any particular movement in terms of development. Throughout her working life, which spun out over thirty years, from 1961 to 1993, the artworld saw many changes. Wilke's work was not exempt from these changes.

“ In some ways, Wilke was part of the Post-Minimalist soft sculpture aesthetic that emerged in the early 1970's and that included artists liked Eva Hesse and Keith Sonnier”
(Smith, 1993,p.52)

But Wilke brought to this aesthetic a stronger sense of erotic and an often witty political edge. From the conceptualists (Dennis Oppenheim, for example) the Earth Artists (Nancy Holt, Robert Smithson) to the body artists⁴ (Vito Acconi, Chris Burden) and early feminist art practise (Miriam Shapiro, Judy Chicago), Wilke emerged having practised in most of these artistic movements. Society was ever changing and so was Wilke's approaches to her concerns. Social change was an issue of a global scale; the emergence of the so- called Third World and the very survival of the earth were seemingly in question. The period of Wilke's working life spun out over the time of massive social upheaval and change in America.

Wilke had the extraordinary gift to recognise the limitations in her ideas and in her work and at the same time was able to extend and process those ideas, resulting in fully theorised , expressive, powerful works.

Wilke was a Jewish woman born in 1940 in New York, even by this account alone Wilke would have had a multitude of complex concerns and historical issues that would have personally affected her. By being Jewish, knowing friends, family, people of her own nationality that suffered and were tortured because they were Jewish, yet simultaneously knowing that Wilke herself was safe as she was born in the United States. This might have equipped her for issues about identity (of being of mixed nationality), death (her experience and closeness to it) , mutuality (other Jews' experiences in concentration camps), guilt (of being the survivor) and aesthetics.

By 1960 the emergence of Feminist Art was coming into its own; at the same time Wilke was emerging as a young female artist. Wilke had transformed from that of (by Western patriarchal standards) an unattractive girl into that of a beautiful, vivacious young woman. It was with this beauty that Wilke was going to experience criticism later because of the manner in which she used it in her work.

At 20, Wilke's father, a strong protective figure to whom she was very close, died. It was the death of her father that Wilke's sister (Marsie Scharlatt) believed prompted Wilke into voicing a strong sensibility in her work as Scharlatt felt that Wilke was "freed" by her father's death to do so, perhaps because she felt less secure, forced to be stronger in herself. This marked the beginning of Wilke's emergence into and exploration with the essentialistic theories of early feminist art practise.

Wilke's sculptures initially emerged in the form of ceramic gestural sculptures that were representations of the female form, being that as vaginas, wombs and in some cases, wounds. Wilke was experimenting with the idea of the universality of women, creating sculptures that were to become a universal symbol of women. The pieces of celebratory essentialist works were created by Wilke in the 1960's. Images celebrating universality can be seen as problematic because they erased genuine differences between women. The essentialist position presumed that all women's experiences were the same regardless of age, class, ethnic identity and sexual orientation. Judy Chicago is quite a good example with her piece *The Dinner Party*⁵. But because of the fragility of the

feminist movement, there was a need for universality and therefore theories of essentialism in order to bind the feminist artists together.

Wilke began to use her body in works including performance, video and photographic pieces. Wilke by this stage was a fully fledged feminist artist who was faced with a large amount of accusations and critiques about her work as is with any person who dares to break the ranks. Some critics and feminists had a problem with Wilke's work as they felt she was reinforcing what she was intending to subvert about women; femininity and beauty, reinscribing her own oppression. Wilke was well aware of the problematic nature of using her own body as the medium by which to work, but embraced the idea of freedom of expression and did not feel bound by political statements. But perhaps it was the problematic nature of her work that instilled Wilke with the courage to face the criticism and turn the tables to critique the problems? Wilke manipulated her beauty to deconstruct the social decoding of women in Western society; she refused the construction of woman as "pathetic, obscene, victimised object of the patriarchal gaze" but instead offered her body with a fully theorised array of expressions" (Jones, 1995, p. 6). By doing this Wilke had articulated a proactive rather than re-active feminist subject. Wilke left video and performance behind and focused solely on photographic works. By 1986, after her mother had died from breast cancer, Wilke was herself diagnosed as suffering from cancer; but in Wilke's case the cancer was attacking her lymph glands and not her breast. Wilke no longer required props such as chewing gum to mark her body by which to convey her concepts; her body was marking itself. The beginning of the signs of cancer in Wilke's body 'marked' the transition of Wilke's work in *Abject Art*; art of the grotesque. Wilke dumbfounded feminist critics by documenting her physical deterioration as a continuation of her exploration into societies codes of practise with women, sexuality and age. This final piece was named *Intra-Venus*, not only as further evidence of Wilke's characteristic play with words, but also as the original title "*Cured* " was sadly no longer either appropriate nor accurate.

Intra-Venus invites viewers to look at the core of Wilke's art and her beliefs which consisted of an extraordinary degree of self-love; a simple price of

being that is difficult for anyone, but especially women to muster. The cornerstones of these fuelled Wilke's art throughout her life and it flared into a torch with which Wilke illuminated her farewell performance.

The legacy with which Wilke leaves the artworld is the contribution to feminist art practise. If Wilke were still making her artwork in 1997, her work would still reign as powerful and poetic among the post modern artists such as Marina Abramovic⁶, Jana Sterbak⁷ and Janine Antoni⁸. Yet Wilke still had the last word.

“ It was risky for me to act beautiful but the stars representing the highness of society sometimes went unnoticed. People would often give me this bullshit of ‘ what would you do if you weren't so beautiful? ’ What difference does it make? Gorgeous people die as do the stereotypically ugly, everybody dies ”.

(Percettur, 1994,p.2; From Previous Interview)

Chapter One

Unveiling the undesirable: the emergence of vaginal imagery in Wilke's work.

The emergence of a feminist art practise in the 1970's as part of a larger feminist movement created difficulties for artists who wanted to express themselves as both women and as artists. In order to voice themselves and feel strong as political and social individuals feminist practitioners felt they must first unite. By emphasising the similarities between each other, the mutual abused experienced whether verbal, physical or mental because of their sexuality and to share their common experience under patriarchal culture. As an essentialist position this strategy focuses on the "sameness", the common bond between a group of people and in Feminist Art, the binding formula was gender.

The difficulties of speaking as if all women shared the common problems experienced because of their sex, suggested that all women's experiences were the same because of the biological traits and political beliefs⁹ they felt to be common amongst women¹⁰. However for many feminists the problems inherent in universalising female experience had not yet been realised and in speaking and representing "everywoman" aspects of femininity they were celebrating what was essentially female. Later feminists suggested that essentialising women actually reinforced oppressive definitions of women. For example, women as, always in their separate sphere, or women as defining their identities exclusively and narcissistically through their bodies.

Wilke's awareness of the problems of essentialistic theory saved her work from the cul- de-sac of feministic essentialists of the 1970's. Wilke literally used essentialism in order to emphasise deconstruction of this theory that later materialised in her works. This process has been described by Gayatri Spivak, the Indian cultural critic, as "strategic essentialism". By this Spivak was making the same argument as Wilke as in that essentialism is sometimes necessary in "order to create some initial sense of identity amongst a disparate group of people and to mobilise them into political action. Wilke used the initial sense of identity,

by speaking and representing “everywoman”, and then literally reversed the essentialist label by deconstructing it. This action revealed her courage to critique the essentialising tendencies of early feminist theory.

Wilke used the vagina and forms representational of the womb, vulva and wounds to represent the “everywoman”. While the vagina was hidden or tabooed, Wilke used the representation of it as a powerful gesture of liberation and affirmation for women. Wilke deals with politics, the problematic issues within life in society and by questioning them, she was faced with criticism and controversy; not only by critics, but also by other feminists. It was felt that Wilke was too narcissistic and by creating sculptures of vaginal forms she was only serving to continue the long standing sexualisation of women’s bodies and female genitalia in western society. Actually Wilke’s intentions were completely the opposite as she was actually manipulating essentialist discourses on the body. She was clearly aware of the problematic nature of her work, but she converted something that was feared, shamed horrified (the female genitals) into attractive, tactile and desirable forms. The language¹¹ around vaginas was another area of taboo with which Wilke deconstructed. Most language referring to female genitalia was predominately male such as, cunt, box, gash, beaver and muff and the majority of these are considered offensive by women.¹² Wilke confronted the fear of this offensive language by using it openly . By doing this Wilke was also attempting to illuminate the power of naming and to “ wipe out the prejudice, aggression and fear.”¹³ (Wilke, 1989, p.30) associated with women’s sexual parts and the notion that these should be thought of as slightly sinister and repulsive areas of the body. Karen Horney, a contemporary of Freud, discusses these negative feelings as “the dread of the vagina.”(Horney. 1967, p.134) Horney felt that man had a secret dread of women and this was because of their feeling of inadequacy during puberty which carried on later in life and also by the fact it is women who carry the child and give birth. Horney’s beliefs, to a certain extent, support Wilke’s notion of “ Venus Envy ” which will be discussed during this chapter.

A male dominant culture has made the vagina unseen, invisible. The female genitalia are hidden, not only physically but socially also. Even women

themselves are rarely visibly acquainted with their own genitalia, the prime responsible reason being that the female genitalia is internal and the male is external. Freud talked about and referred to this problem, categorising men as “being” (as men possess an external sexual organ) and women as “lacking” (as there is no sexual organ to be seen). This theory of Freud’s was defined as “Penis Envy”. The theory of women being envious of men as they have nothing to see.

Wilke created her own theory about the problems with the comparisons between the male and female sexual organs’ Wilke’s theory was defined as “Venus Envy.” Wilke, not dissimilar to Horney, was suggesting that men were not only scared of women but they were also envious of women, their beauty, genitals, possession of the womb and sensuality.

It was Wilke, not Judy Chicago as some people are led to believe, who pioneered vaginal imagery. Wilke began to use images strategically, her views and highly successful approaches to society’s ideals of female imagery were deconstructive of social coding. She was constantly trying to encourage viewers to step back and re-assess values that have been established in themselves by western culture and tradition over centuries. Wilke was seeking to distance the viewer from and make them sceptical about the dread of the vagina. Wilke’s intentions and concerns originate from her “moments of real life” and are “posited against the context of structures created by art and society.” (Frueh 1989, Retrospective p. 137) One of her original intentions by using female imagery was to create a Universal Reading of the Female Form; not only symbolic of women’s concerns but of men’s also. Wilke was therefore hoping to transform female forms into becoming “sexless” to some degree, attempting to free them from the essentialist stigma that is usually associated to a woman and her genitalia.

Wilke said herself in the 1960’s that she was “scared” to show her work around (Wilke, 1974, p.2), this was when she first began to use sensual imagery such as her vaginal pieces.

Wilke was only twenty years old, just out of college and the women’s movement did not exist as a visible political force. Wilke felt that at the time “

you were put down ” if you were making works to do with female genitalia. Meanwhile artists such as Vito Acconci¹⁴ were masturbating under floorboards in galleries and were accepted under the terminology “conceptual”. Yet when Wilke wanted to perform a “conceptual” piece which was to consist of a massage parlour with Wilke being massaged by men, her dealer smiled and said “ Hannah, why don’t you come up to my room instead ? ” (Picard,1973,p.19)

In 1966 Wilke exhibited a lot of her terracotta boxes (Fig. 3) such as *Early Box, six phallic and excremental sculptures*, (1960 -1963)



Fig. 1 : Early Box, six phallic and excremental sculptures (1960-1963)

The shapes were very sensual and sexy but they went almost unnoticed. This lack of reaction to her pieces led her to believe that if you are a woman and you make little pieces “ you are doomed to craftworld obscurity ” (Wilke, Feb. 1974,p.3) but if women allow their feelings and fantasies about their own life, and bodies to emerge “ it could lead to a new kind of art.” (Wilke,1974,p.3) Wilke obviously followed her own advise and took heed of public reactions, she began to produce larger forms that were very female and with an almost erotic, narcissistic approach, that directly emerged from her personal experience. (That of being a Jewish woman living in America in the 1960’s and 1970’s). By

translating the word into form, as she did, Wilke physically became involved in the materials believing the "movement is the essence of life" (Wilke, 1974, Interview with Nemer) to the extent of feeling " sexual impulses from various colours "hence the varying colours of the vaginal pieces.

Although Wilke's vaginal forms emerged from her immediate sensual responses to life and appreciation of female form, Wilke also benefited from and manipulated the language of contemporary art ¹⁵ , she has used her knowledge of it to express her experience as a female.

"Cunts" are the mark of a woman and they are also Wilke's signature ¹⁶ and as Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro wrote in 1973

" to be a woman is to be an object of contempt and the vagina, stamp of femaleness, is despised. The woman artist, seeing herself as loathed, takes that very mark of her otherness and by asserting it as the hallmark of her iconography, establishes a vehicle by which to state the beauty and truth of her identity."

(Chicago, 1973,p. 143-4)

If people have heard of Wilke's work it is usually in relation to her essentialist pieces taking the forms from vaginas, such as *Teasel Cushion*, (1967) (Fig. 2) , *Generation Process Series*, *Geologic 4-1*, (1980-1982), *Support Foundation*, *Comfort*, 1984 or her final compelling series *Intra-Venus*. (1992-1993)

176 Single- Fold Gestural Sculptures (1973 -1974) (Fig. 3) reveals a fantastic variety of Wilke's concerns. Wilke's sensibility with the use of material have fused to form one strong expressive whole. This piece not only represents her use of vaginal imagery obsessive repetition and erotic gestures it can be seen as a visual metaphor for the individuality of each woman, therefore deconstructing essentialism . Even without any great length of analytical debate of *176 Single-Fold Gestural Sculptures- each to be sold separately* the notion that all women (or vaginas) in this case, are not alike and that if there is going to be a purchase and therefore choice to be made, it will not be an easy one. Wilke has physically created this individuality by rolling clay into flat round discs, then using her hands she folded or twisted the pieces into a shaped that

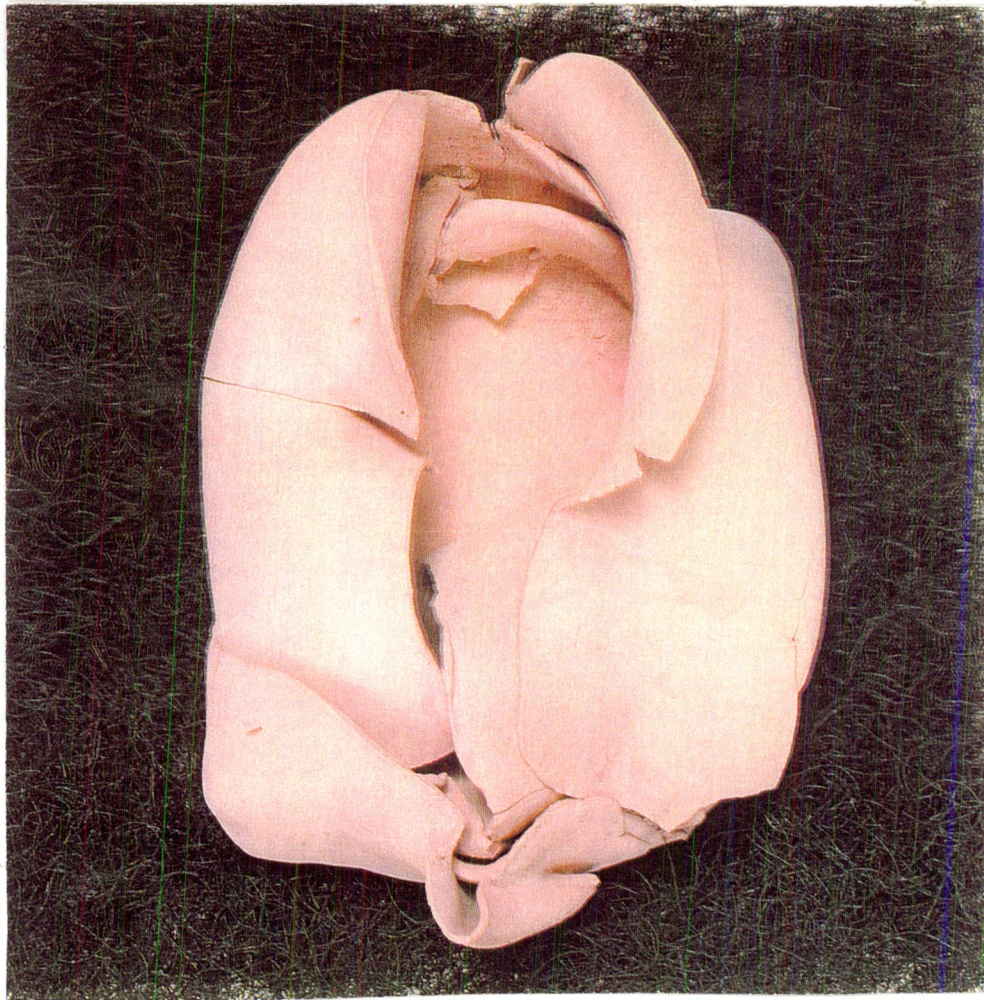


Fig. 2: Teasel Cushion (1967)



Fig. 3: 176 Single Fold Gestural Sculptures (1973-1974)

can be read as a vulva, womb or wound, also evoking Freud's conception of the vagina as a "bleeding wound." Wilke is thus identifying with her own relation to feminine pleasure and pain¹⁷.

In the case of *176 Single- Fold Gestural Sculptures* as with numerous of her other work containing vaginal representation, Wilke is treading on dangerous grounds, her work risks being misinterpreted as reinforcing the sameness of women. Another danger is her use of an image that is often used in pornography also, not only does Wilke isolate it (which in itself could prove problematic) as does pornography but Wilke maintains the vagina's everywoman aspect and expands that into a universal symbol. Wilke however avoids repeating the perhaps problematic side of essentialism, she extracts and recontextualises the vagina from an unknown, undesirable form into a desirable, delicately coloured, tactile one of individuality. Wilke redefines her symbol of the vagina as a positive force capable of making demands to achieve satisfaction, therefore re-representing the vagina as a symbol of strength.

176 Single- Fold Gestural Sculptures is also an example of how Wilke has worked through her transitional periods and concerns by developing her ideas. This piece was incorporated and reviewed in her second solo exhibition shown along with *Laundry Lint* (1973)¹⁸ (see Fig. 4) and *Fortune Cookies* (1974)¹⁹. The difference in response to this exhibition and Wilke's first solo exhibition (both held at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts Inc.) was immense. The reviews ranged from the first exhibition such comments as " the pieces simply did not get beyond their material at this point " (Arts Mag. Nov. 1972) which was latex and described her work in her first exhibition as too " facile" and " too effortless" (Artforum 1972)

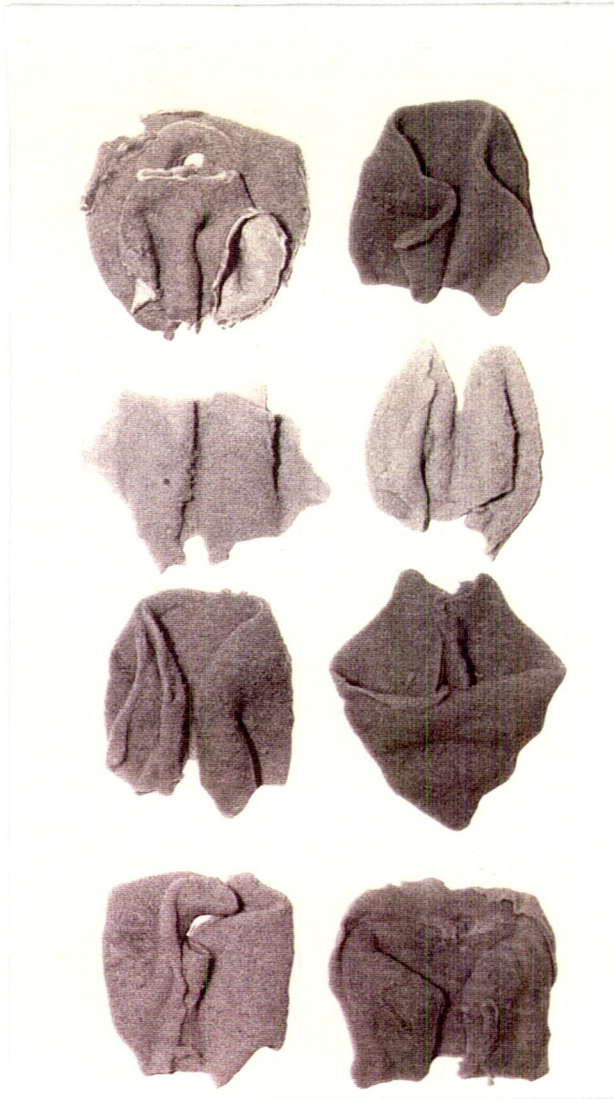


Fig. 4: Laundry Lint (1973)

juxtaposed with such promising reviews from her second exhibition involving *176 Single-Fold Gestural Sculptures*. This exhibition was held only two years later and the substance behind her work was much stronger; her rhetoric and personality are shown to be inseparable from her art and her humour. Wit and courage had begun to work beneficially with her when creating these later works which even by the reviewers opinions had become “enlivening, courageous” and “charming” (Artforum, June, 1974). After all as Wilke described herself she was the “pubic princess” and the more recent of her works showed the progressive, princess qualities. Perhaps also Wilke was the Princess of Deconstruction as she continued to defy patriarchal codes of women. Vaginal forms were to continue on into Wilke’s transitional state of deconstruction of her status of a ‘beautiful’ woman as she began to use her own body by which to express her concerns.

Chapter Two

Deconstructing the Status: The pleasure and pain behind femininity and beauty,

Wilke took apart traditional ways of viewing the female body by using a variety of strategies including celebration through symbol and myth (her ceramic pieces and chewing gum forms), deconstruction of dominant visual codes, parody and role reversal (role playing, posing) to try and find new images and language with which to explore feminine identities. In order to do this Wilke had to deconstruct the old identity of women.

As Rosemary Betterton explained in her book “ Looking On ”;

“ women have specifically used their self images to explore the relationship between personal experience and the social construction of femininity. What distinguishes Feminist Art is the attempt to find new ways of representing women’s experience which challenge or subvert the cultural forms in which women are defined as subordinate.”

(Betterton,1996,p. 205)

Wilke was constantly challenging and subverting these cultural forms, This piece *What does this represent? What do you represent?* (Fig. 7) is a blatant defiance of patriarchal social codes around women and their bodies. It is also one of the pieces that best contains evidence of Wilke’s transformational period revealing the pain and suffering behind beauty and femininity. This piece is also posing questions to the viewer that are in fact crucial in the examination of Wilke’s works and therefore need to be answered by the person viewing them. The problematic nature of Wilke’s work escalated, not only as Wilke was dealing with issues involving the naked female body but it was Wilke’s body itself that was used as the medium. Wilke used her body in performance pieces such as *So help me Hannah Performances* (1985) , *Through the Large Glass* (1976-78) and *Gestures* (1974-76) amongst numerous others. Performance was such a natural medium for Wilke to work in as she was always concerned with the physicality of issues and art; by performing her ideas Wilke could actually realise that.



Fig. 5 : What does this represent, what do you represent (1978-1984)

A great deal of Wilke's work was photographic. This medium was especially appropriate as a strategy for disrupting and transforming visual discourse through parody and reversal and was important for feminist photographers in particular.

The camera lens had and is a central mechanism for controlling feminine appearance and defining women's bodies in terms of the erotic²⁰. Photography's dual status both as commercial product and an individually controlled practice means that it is an area where feminists can challenge dominant stereotyping, which was Wilke's intention while using a familiar visual language.

Cindy Sherman and Jo Spence are other examples of female artists with similar intentions to Wilke. Spence and Sherman reuse and disrupt the meanings of very familiar imagery from High Art, cinema, glamour photography and the family album in order to parody and subvert media stereotypes.

Wilke had already begun to deal with issues of women in society and western culture in her art by the time "Womanhouse"²¹ came along in 1971. The Womanhouse program was headed by Miriam Shapiro and Judy Chicago, both of whom shared the aim of Wilke in exteriorising the female spaces that

were being hidden and repressed. By doing this these artists were hoping to reclaim the rights of their own existence.

They therefore also faced some of the same problems which were with the misinterpretations of their works by critics, theorists and on Wilke's account certain feminists.

The problems arose because until the late 1960's - early 1970's, women artists had been forced to deny the presence of sexual, gendered imagery in their work if they wanted to be taken seriously. Wilke's work challenged these previous denials and where there is a challenge there are always problems, struggles and difficulties arising and Wilke's work was no exception. Unfortunately Chicago remained bound by essentialism but Wilke did not. She was one of the first women artists who endorsed a distinct female voice by which she not only proclaimed a difference from her male counterparts, she made public the display of difference. Wilke's reasoning behind this was that she hoped to create a means of greater understanding with the intention of this leading ultimately to unbiased recognition. (It was Wilke's own body that publicly displayed the difference.)

What does this represent, what do you represent is Wilke's most obvious example of her critique and "public display" of the female nude. (See Fig. 7) Wilke sits in the corner of the room, nude apart from a pair of white high heeled shoes, her legs are bent and apart and her elbows are resting on her knees. There are toy guns and Mickey Mouse replicas scattered around the floor and Wilke's stare is vacant and unfocussed. The focus for the viewer is unavoidably on Wilke's genitals; this photograph is not a glossy pin-up representation of a "model" woman, there are no soft focus effects or beautiful colours. The room is mocking sexiness with its shabby seediness. The photograph is asking for a response. What sort of response does this image provoke? How do patriarchal prejudices of views of the female nude, not only in art but throughout our society contribute to the interpretation of this and many others of Wilke's work ? These are the questions Wilke was yearning the viewer to ask themselves and to re-examine; these questions hold the key to the language by which Wilke developed.

Wilke actually felt that she was a "victim" of her own beauty, feeling "objectified, observed" and "uncomfortable" (Frueh, 1988, p. 116). In order for Wilke to distance the notion of [her] beauty as a desirable object Wilke confronts its wrongness by publicly displaying her body in order to create a positive assertion of her beauty simultaneously revealing the pleasure and pain of womanhood.

Because the demand for beauty divided women and yet also binds them together²²; Wilke's focus on the body is a "significant public discourse" (Jones, 1985, May p.9) that sees everyday matters of life as the important issues that they are. Where Wilke falls into trouble with misunderstanding of her work is that she falls into the apparently "privileged position" (Frueh, 1994, p. 147) of being the traditionally beautiful woman. Lucy Lippard understood this misunderstanding as resulting from the "confusion of her roles as beautiful woman and artist, as flirt and feminist" and how this confusion led to "politically ambiguous manifestations", these being the core of the confusion. (Lippard, 1976, p. 126)

The power in *What does this represent, What do you represent* as with the majority of Wilke's work lies in the irony. This irony is displayed via language, role playing and images; the irony being the extreme juxtaposition between the desire to be beautiful with the pain often experienced with beauty, but is frequently concealed in relation to it. Although female artists were free to proclaim their sexuality through their art they were not free from the practice of critical legitimisation. This legitimisation demanded an interpretation based on the patriarchal concepts of woman as nature, woman as passive and woman as viewed in the times long before them. This is suggesting that perhaps it was the biased nature of the criticism that was also responsible and led to misunderstanding of the work.

Wilke's *SOS Stratification Object Series* (1974-1982) includes many of Wilke's attempts and tactics at conquering these preconceived prejudices. Wilke does this by making the

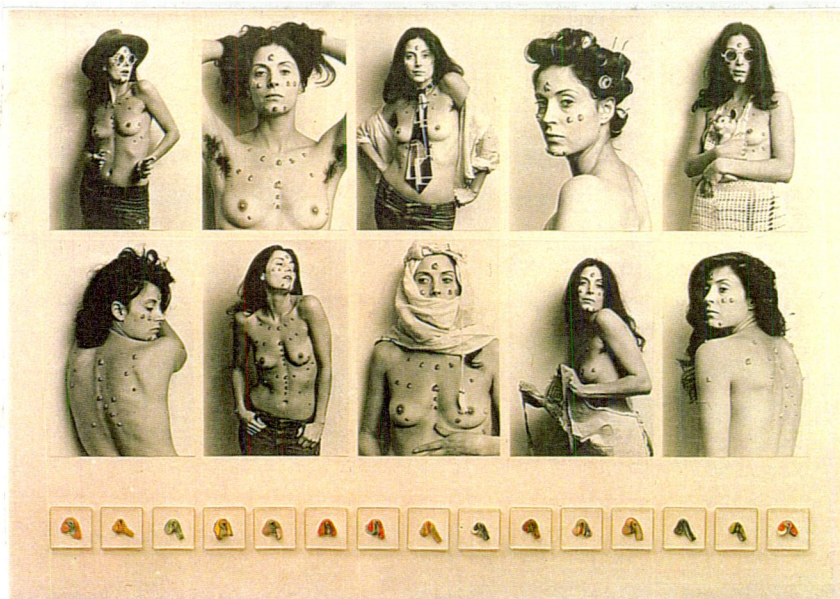


Fig. 6: *SOS Starification Object Series (1974-1982)*

contrast between desire, revulsion, role-playing and the stereotypical images of beauty which is apparent. This piece also exemplifies her radicalised narcissistic approach to problematic femininity, SOS does this by offering Wilke's marked body, in its contingency and woundedness as feminine but also as radically scarred.

SOS Starification Object Series (1974-1982) consists of ten gelatine silver prints with fifteen gum sculptures mounted in Plexiglas cases (see Fig. 6). The gum sculptures originated from a previous performance at the Allbright-Knox gallery in Buffalo on July 4th, 1976. (see fig. 7.) During this piece, *My count-ry 'tis of thee* Wilke invited people outside the gallery to chew gum²³ which she then twisted into these Starification objects²⁴.



Fig. 7: *My count-ry 'tis of thee (1976)*

What is interesting and relevant when dealing with Wilke's ironic contrast between the desirable and the undesirable is her use of material, in this case gum, is that Wilke is embracing and building upon the connotations that are closely associated with chewing gum. Not only is gum culturally seen as a very American activity, it is a sticky, messy, usually unattractive substance especially the action of chewing it and when it is discarded stuck onto furniture etc. to be found by some other person. Yet when displayed on Wilke's torso (Fig. 6) or in the Plexiglas cases the gum adopts a new found beauty and desirability. The gum has reached this new attractiveness by the physical involvement of the viewer incorporating the senses of smell, taste and sound. The vulva shaped gum has become visible²⁵.

The gum in the *SOS Starification* piece is a crucial part of Wilke's artistic, conceptual language. In this piece in particular the folded gum is being used to symbolise a variety of subjects; the first being "cunts" as Wilke's way of valorising female genitalia, the sheer number of the symbolic vaginas make women visible, reinstating women's presence and the notion of individuality, that no two women are the same.

The combination and range of poses that Wilke takes on from the wearing of hair curlers, a cowboy hat, sunglasses, an Arab head-dress to the disguise of an Indian or African woman bearing the 'scars' of her tradition carry various connotations. The predominant concern is of the common bond of the notion that Wilke is trying to put across, that the pursuit of beauty

"has more than any other factor bound together women of different classes, religions and ethnic groups and constituted a key element in women's separate experience of life,"

(Robinson, 1994,p.24)

Wilke is suggesting that both naturally and artificially beautiful women suffer, for to be a star as a woman is to have endured "Starification", therefore revealing internal wounds by making external situations of them. In *SOS Starification Object Series*, Wilke is not just referring to the white western

woman but also the problems with women in other cultures involving less known undesirable social codes and traditions. Wilke wants to cease the constant “labelling of people ” instead of “ listening to them ” or even knowing or understanding them; she also was hoping to put an end to the constant “ judging ” according to “primitive values ” (Wilke,1989,A Retrospective,p.52).

It was obviously some feminist critics who were still “ judging ” by “primitive values ” as they misinterpreted Wilke’s work accusing her of lack of understanding about the “ problematic nature of representation of women in our culture ” (Lippard, May - June 1976,p.75-76) . It was also obvious that these particular critics were failing to see past the female nude body to realise that Wilke was in fact manipulating her beautiful body in order to argue against the “ representations ” Lippard was referring to.

Chapter Three

Flirting with Venous: The tragic but natural progression

All of Wilke's artistic life she was constantly being accused of serving to perpetuate the patriarchal perception of women's beauty and bodies in western society. It was tragic that it took work as severe as *Intra - Venus* (1991-1992) to force her critics into confronting their own expectations and shallowness of the feminine appeal in our western culture which focuses on visual appearance and beauty's guarantee.

In 1987, five years after her mother's death from breast cancer, Wilke herself was diagnosed as having lymphatic cancer. During her mother's illness, Wilke made work literally incorporating her mother and herself, such as *Portrait of the Artist with her Mother Selma Butter* (1978-1981) (Part of the *So help me Hannah Series* (fig. 8)), *In Memoriam, Selma Butler* (1979-1983) and *Support, Foundation, Comfort* (Installation 1-29 Dec. 1984) (Fig. 9)). Wilke did these pieces with her dying mother in order to let her mother's life be captured. Wilke felt that by taking photographs of her mother it would save her life because being photographed "gives you a certain kind of energy" and that process of taking photographs of her ill mother was a way of being intimate with her. Unfortunately the work did not save Selma Butter but it did immortalise her in her daughter's work and acted as a form of release by which Wilke could grieve and "let her mother go".

In 1991 Wilke entered hospital for her own treatment against cancer. This was the starting point for her series of work entitled *Intra-Venus*. Donald Goddard, her partner²⁶ took hundreds of photographs under Wilke's instruction. After narrowing them down to 35, Goddard, Wilke and Fraya Feldman²⁷ looked at them to decide which if not all, would be used and what size for the exhibition Wilke had originally wanted to be "Cured", the series later called *Intra Venus*²⁸. Wilke dealt with Venus as a metaphor for beautiful women, it was works such as *Venus Envy* (fig.12) *Venus Basin*, *Venus Cushion*, *Venus Pareve*, (fig 13) which indicates Wilke's concern with ideal beauty. (Frueh 1989 p.51)



Fig. 8: So Help me Hannah Series: Portrait of the Artist with her Mother Selma Butter (1978-1981)

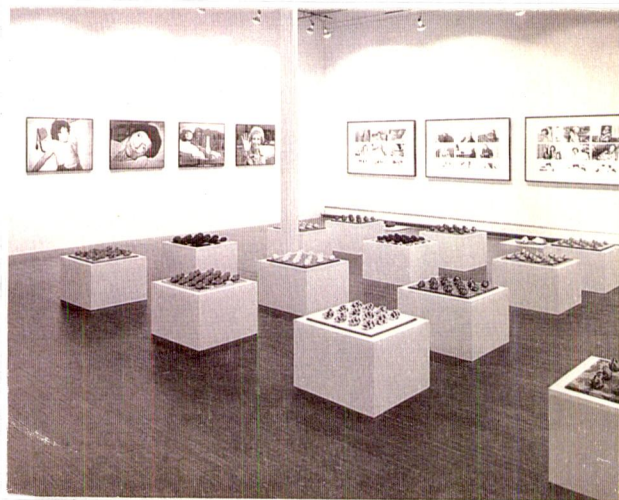


Fig. 9: Support, Foundation, Comfort (1984)



Fig. 10: Venus Envy, with Richard Hamilton (1980)



Fig. 11: Venus Pareve (1982-84)

as conceived from ancient times and this involvement continues into Wilke's use of herself and her own body as the model.

Intra Venus interweaves the medical body of illness with the sexualised body of a woman, thus playing with the notion of intra- venous and Venus. The piece consists of a series of life size colour photographs of Wilke undergoing cancer treatment, self portrait water-colours, one fold gestural vaginal sculptures, brushstroke piece of her own hair (Fig. 12, Fig. 13) and medical objects cum sculptures and artistic images.(See Fig. 14).



Fig 12: Brushstrokes (Jan. 20, 1992)



Fig. 13: Brushstrokes (May 10, 1992)

Wilke used her illness to continue her examination of the long standing constructions of femininity by exploring changes in her body through her life-threatening illness.



Fig. 14: (Top) *Wedges of* (1992), (Bottom) *Why not Sneeze* (1992)

This acerbic and witty yet tragic piece culminates Wilke's radical narcissism yet simultaneously the piece stood as a brilliant riposte to those who condemned her work as traditionally narcissistic and of exploiting her own beauty. *Intra-Venus Series* proves quite the opposite as it shows complete lack of self - consciousness reached not by narcissism but by a person who is in the grips of such an extreme illness. To be self conscious about the body in these circumstances would seem irrelevant and unimportant. Wilke played out her narcissism "to expose the transience and conditionality" of her beauty by turning her focus from inward to outward, from the medical gaze to that of the artworld. Wilke has explored the "convoluted merging/alienation of the self with/from the body that undermines the ancient narcissistic myth"²⁹ (Vine , May 1991, pp 108-109) Wilke does this by facing truth (that of her illness) without blinking, by bearing it.

Wilke's work has often proved controversial, dealing with society's taboos and the series of work in *Intra-Venus* is a continuation of this. Wilke has always said it was her pain and suffering that made her strip herself bare and what better example of pain, being wounded, scarification and defiance of the notions of narcissism is there than the confrontation of death. These "courageous" and "painful" works (Lippard, 1995,p.108) deal openly with death and Wilke seeking " universal healing " and to defy the viewer to " look at me now " because " you looked at me then. " (Dykstra , 1995,p.2)

There are definite, obvious referrals in some of the works from the *Intra-Venus* series to previous works such as: *Intra-Venus Series Number 3* (August 17, 1992, Fig. 15), with *His Farced Epistol* (*Joyce*) (1978-1984 , Fig. 16) and also between *Hannah Wilke super-t-art* (1974) with *Intra Venus Series Number 3* (August 9th, 1992, Fig. 17) and finally between *What does this represent, what do you represent* (Fig. 5) , with *Intra - Venus Series Number 3* (February 15, 1992 , Fig. 18). Yet this is not a



Fig. 15: Intra-Venus Series Number 3
(August 17th. 1992)



Fig. 16: His farce Epistol
(1978-1984)

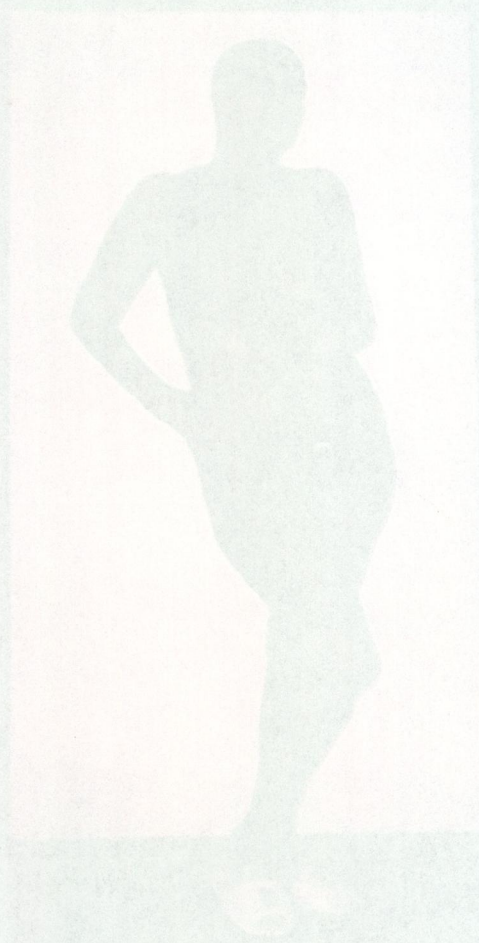
“revision reading” of Wilke’s earlier work; on the contrary it proves that there is a more complex reading than that of just a narcissistic interest in her own body.

Many of the works in the *Intra- Venus* series are similar to previous works but this could also be because a lot of the poses that Wilke assumed are that stereotypical of *Playboy* and glamour models.



Fig. 17: Intra - Venus Number 3 (August 9, 1992) and Hannah Wilke Super - t - art (1974)

Wilke uses these poses to “play” with and manipulate throughout her artistic life.



Wilke's success in combining the inexpressible "ravages of cancer" (Jones, 1995, p. 11) with her unconquerable sense of humour is unavoidably apparent and gloriously successful in the *Intra-Venus Series*. Wilke combines the macabre and the humorous, the terrifying and the sublime to "seduce her audience into terror and pain, the inescapability of death, the suffering behind the mask of lovely flesh." (Frueh, 1989, p. 57)



Fig.18: *Intra-Venus Series Number 3, (February 15th, 1992)*



Fig. 19: Intra - Venus (June 15th, 1992)

On the right side of the panel of *Intravenus* (June 15th, 1992 , Fig. 19), there is an example of how Wilke creates this seduction. Wilke is standing, arms up in the air like that of a statue or posing model, at the same time balancing a pot of hospital flowers on her head. Wilke retains her dignity through physical and emotional boldness, the directness of her gaze challenging, and the front facing pose which obliterates “ all aesthetic defences” (Vine, May 91,p. 108-109) whilst mocking the notion of death of making fun of the notion of flowers on the grave, on that of a dead person, on Wilke herself.

The Intra Venus Series are intricate pieces that interweave these issues and confront than, the fear of the unknown, of change, of the undesirable. Wilke had tried and to many succeeded in transforming the objectifying practice into an opportunity for self expression whilst at the same time making sense of death and the undesirable by severing intricate bonds between her gaze, her body and her sexual identity by using photography to objectify her body for herself, making signs of cancer, its treatment and ultimately Wilke's death legible.

There is plenty that is unbearable about all these images, plenty that makes the viewer want to turn away, yet there is also something about Wilke's aura that is soothing, reassuring and compelling which makes the viewer challenge yet again the way that women are objectified by society and discarded as they become unsightly, old and ill. *Intra-Venus* in the context of Wilke's art as a whole not only becomes more meaningful but it goes towards cancelling out the supposedly negative narcissism of her earlier work imbuing it with more purpose than could be seen at the time. As Jo Anna Isaak described (Isaak, 1996, p. 223) “ it is as if Intra- Venus seems to be a part of a continuum that leads with all the economy and precision of a Greek play (appropriate for a goddess) to this particular climax”.

There is no-one else who could use their deteriorating beauty , the beauty that had condemned them throughout their life in such a triumphant, powerful, compelling manner as Wilke³⁰ . Her sheer love of life and humour overpowered the critics and the agonies of her illness enabling Wilke to smile at her own reflection, find illness “ interesting” and make her life and death into an “

exposition of the truth, here and from the throne of a Goddess (Scharlatt, *Intra - Venus*, p. 30) leaving us with the dreadful yet generous gift of her presence.

“ *Intra - Venus* is the last piece in the puzzle, the one that make Wilke's life and art make perfect sense ”
(Deihl, 1993, p. 164)

Conclusion

The entire 'body' of Wilke's work is a cycle. Wilke worked through her ideas which conglomerated in her final piece *Intra-Venus*; the same 'body' of work is also representational of her life cycle. Wilke's death opened up a whole new scope of opportunities for a certain type of retrospection that is and was not available to 'living' artists ; it is as if Wilke's death purely reinforced the coherence of her concerns and intentions in her life and her art.

This 'certain type' of retrospection is noticeable when comparing the literature previous to Wilke's death and post- Wilke's death. The later literature had the advantage of being able to see Wilke's work as a whole , as complete opposed to earlier literature which could only speculate to a certain degree as to which direction Wilke's work was heading.

Wilke's subject matter was always the female body; from her sculptural forms to the performance, video and photographic pieces of works exploring not only the pleasure, but also the pain behind beauty and femininity. In light of this, Wilke's death, although tragic was very ' fitting' in the context of her work as a whole, it acted as a legible continuation of Wilke's life-long concerns.

Wilke's death also heightened and created a more defined focus on her work and her status; her sheer perseverance; courage, humour and dedication to her work became all the more apparent. Wilke's mortality added " a new dimension to her courage and art " (Smith, 1994, p.37)

This thesis is part of the literary production and industry that has explored Wilke's life and art since her death. From the acknowledgement of her death to the exploration of her rite of passage, this includes Wilke's emergence into a coherent feminist art practice where her work mirrored movements within femininity and worked with the notion of the collective unity of women which resulted in a more fragmented understanding of feminism and its existence. This thesis has followed the process by which Wilke worked through her ideas and concerns throughout her life and death acknowledging both their strengths and weaknesses.

The death of Wilke marked the birth of her legacy. Whilst Wilke was alive her work induced a significant amount of debate, some positive but mostly critical, yet Wilke's work stood and still stands as a huge contribution towards feminist art practice and critical debate. Contemporary feminist writings such as Lucy Lippard's "The Pink Glass Swan", Amelia Jones' "Sexual Politics" and Rosemary Betterton's "Intimate Distance" are just an example of the abundance of literature that is available on Wilke since her death. This only reinstates the fact that Wilke's endeavours to deconstruct attitudes and approaches towards femininity and beauty were not in vain; these later publications are proof of the continuing debate and discussions that her work has induced.

Roberta Smith said in an article on Wilke's final series of pieces *Intra-Venus*

"Wilke's beauty lies in waste but her spirit is strong,
as is her desire to keep on working or living,
whichever comes first"

(Smith, 1994, p. 37)

Smith's comments are a concrete example of the importance of Wilke's work on a number of different levels; including feminist art criticism, art practice and the importance of art to Wilke herself. Wilke's life and her work were intertwined so intricately yet both had the strength to stand alone as separate strands in an exploration of her contribution to debates on art, femininity and beauty.

Endnotes

¹ Although Wilke sometimes included the notions from alternative societies and cultures.

² Rites of Passage, The Dutch anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, in his book in 1908 suggests that rites of passage are rites of dying. He believed that in a rite of passage something is extinguished, something becomes extinct; if not yourself in your bodily being then something you are, e.g. a status or position in which you have been fixed from which you have drawn your identity. (Greenbalt, 1995, p. 28).

³ Liminal Periods. These are as Gennep suggests, the state a person enters when either by choice or by something over which you have no control, the status (in the rite of passage) crumbles, the position disappears.

⁴ Wilke's involvement with the female body became even more personal when her mother contracted cancer and Wilke began to photograph the physical ravages of the disease and treatment.

⁵ Judy Chicago's piece *The Dinner Party* (1979) consisted of a monumental table in the form of an equilateral triangle with thirteen place settings on each side, each representing a woman from western history. The plates on each setting held or had a vaginal image painted on them.

⁶ Marina Abramovic's career has spanned out over 25 years, as an artist Abramovic has made paintings, sound installations, performances, video photography and sculptural objects. Since 1988 she has created 'transitional objects' which demand the participation of the viewer in order for them to be activated. In her earlier works her body was her prime material but now it is designed as a platform for participation of the viewer.

⁷ Jana Sterbak; much of Sterbak's work explores subjects that lie at the interface between our bodies and ourselves. On one side is our demonstrable animality, our corporal being, and on the other are the things that we make and do, that seem to transcend that limitations of our physicality.

⁸ Janine Antoni; Antoni's practice centres around that process and pleasure of her own body. She takes the idea of an experience that she would like to give herself as a starting point. This informs her actions, the material she uses and the form of the drawings, videos, photographs and performance often quoting movements such as minimalism (Gnaw), classism (Lick and Lather) and abstract expressionism (Loving Care).

⁹ The political belief that women were not equal to men but were equal to each other.

¹⁰ The 'sameness' of biological traits came from the notion that all women have the same anatomy, all menstruate and all women can give birth.

¹¹ Wilke plays with language and manipulated it to her advantage. For example "His his forced Epistle"(1978-1984)- a play on Marcel Duchamp's work or Defying the fear of 'cunts' "My count-ry'tis of thee" (1976) , Intra -Venus etc.

¹² This terminology is often considered as verbal harassment.

¹³ For example, Wilke often refers to her 176 Single -Fold Gestural Sculptures as 'cunts'

¹⁴ Vito Acconci piece entitled " Masturbation".

¹⁵ Abstract expressionists gesture, holistic and systematic imagery.

¹⁶ A signature is not solely a style nor just a manner of expression, but it is the manifestations of the poet's intimate presence of self that can project vision and belief.

¹⁷ Wilke believed that to be beautiful one must have endured pain.

¹⁸ A piece consisting of the same methods as 176 Single Fold Gestural Sculptures but this piece is using laundry lint as the medium, which took Wilke two years to collect.

¹⁹ This piece consists of 31 fortune cookies " found objects" which were lined up on a board causing the viewer to see the 'real' world in a new way and simultaneously displaying Wilke's sense of humour.

²⁰ Pornography , advertising, sexual playing cards for example.

²¹ Womanhouse was created by a Feminist art programme at the California Institute of the Arts.

²² This can be said of bodies in general " The body is a highly contested site - it's flesh is both the recipient and source of desire, lust and hatred. As a pawn of technology it is sacred and sacrificial, bearing the politics of society and state. The body is our common bond but it separates us in its public display of identity, race and gender " (Augaitis, 1994, p. 324)

²³ Brightly coloured chiclets, the American brand of gum, Wilke always used in her work.

²⁴ Not only do these objects represent typically female roles of vulva, scars, wombs and wounds, they are androgynous as they also represent the head of a penis.

²⁵ Play of Freud's invisible female sex theory.

²⁶ They married one month before Wilke died.

²⁷ Frayda Feldman was representing the Donald Feldman Fine Arts Gallery in New York. (the gallery represented Wilke on numerous occasions).

²⁸ The title *Intra-Venus* was fitting for Wilke's last piece as it was after all Wilke who coined the term " Venus Envy" believing that any woman who could have an orgasm should have no reason to be envious of the penis and was also a continuation of Wilke's play with words.(Medical "Venous")

²⁹ This *Intra-Venus* is actually a very clear example of Freud's notion of the " triumph of narcissism " where ego refuses to be affected by traumas of the external world.

³⁰ Although others did try using images of the female as grotesque or dying, such as Jo Spence, Kiki Smith etc. ...

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