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The Work of Hannah Wilke

by

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Introduction

> Visual prejudice has caused world wars, mutilation, hostility, and alienation generated by fear of "the other". Self-hatred is an economic necessity, a capitalistic, totalitarian, religious invention used to control the masses through denial of the importance of a body language, which is replaced by a work ethic devised to establish a slavery of the mind burdened by that awful albatross - the body . . . The pride, power and pleasure of one's own sexual being threatens cultural achievement, unless it can be made into a commodity that has economic and social utility(Frueh, 1989, p.141).

This is an extract from Hannah Wilkes's work text in the American Women Artists 1980 exhibition catalogue. It is an apt description of the issues that concerned Wilke. In the 1970s and 1980s Hannah Wilke (1940-1993) became one of the most visible and controversial members of the feminist art movement (Johnson, 1990, p.160).

Always working within a feminist agenda, Wilke's art investigates and explores the embodied female as both subject and object. She enquires into and discloses patriarchal constructions of the female body, female beauty, femininity and female sexuality. She explores and authenticates them from a female and universal perspective. She examines patriarchy's positing of the female body as the object of a male subject's gaze. Jones describes Wilke as a pro-active, rather than a re-active feminist subject. (Jones, 1994, p.6).

Wilke used her own body as a vehicle for her provocative photographic and performance works. Wilke was conventionally beautiful and her appearance fitted traditionally prescribed codes of female beauty and femininity. Her beauty and the obvious narcissism displayed in her work often led to misunderstandings with regard to her intentions. Wilke's purpose was a reversal of the voyeurism inherent in the use of women as objects. In her photographic and performance works Wilke reclaimed production of the female image from male hands. She was director and author of her own image. (Wooster, 1990, p.31.) It is this aspect of Wilke's work that has been her main (most important) contribution to feminist art. This thesis explores this proposal.

Traditionally. women have been equated with the body and men with the mind. It was in the realm of the body that the subjugation of women took place. Definitions of female beauty and perfection, femininity and female sexuality have been constructed and coded from within a patriarchal system that favours an active male subject and a passive female object of his desires. Traditional definitions of beauty and femininity have made bodies of women outside this framework invisible.

Patriarchy's construction of gender difference has been reinforced by society in our cultural representations. In her article '"Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"" (1975), Laura Mulvey considers patriarchy's viewing structures.

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active male and passive female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact, as they can be said to connote to be looked-at-ness. (Heartney, 1988, p.22).

Historically the female nude is portrayed as an icon of Western culture - a symbol of civilisation and accomplishment. Lynda Nead maintains that society's representation of the female nude within the forms and frames of high art is a way of containing femininity and female sexuality. She also states that the definition of a perfect female body as seen in the female nude in art also defines the obscene or uncontained body. (Nead, 1992, pp.22-3)

The emergence of the women's movement in the 1970s led to an increased examination of the female body and its representation. In their challenge to traditional notions of the female nude, women represented themselves as active subject rather than passive object and depicted their own bodies and sexual identity from a female perspective. Images of the female body have since been frequently dismissed as an insufficient essentialist response and a reinforcement of the notion - women as body. (Rando, 1991, p.51).

Post-modern art of the 1980s has been largely based on theory. Generally, anti-essentialist feminists in the 1980s have marginalised the use of the body in art. Artist and post-modernist theorist, Mary Kelly,(b1941-) has said, "To use the body of the woman, her image or person, is not impossible but problematic for feminism". (Nead, 1992, p.76). Some women artists believe the female nude can never be represented in art without diminishing women to mere erotic object. (Heartney, 1988, p.22).

Body artists such as Carolee Schneeman,(b1939-) Joan Semmel. Lynda Benglis(b1941-) and Hannah Wilke use the female body as a declaration of reality. They acknowledge women's presence and creation of meanings. The work of these artists realise that the body is not simply nature. Frueh says "The female body speaks as culture, for its representation realises the interconnections of art, idea, meaning, history and bio-logic." (Frueh, 1996, p.116.)

Feminist artistic practice that engaged in using the female body was essential in giving an authentic position to the female subject and in determining a female sensibility in art. (Klinger, 1991, p.45.) The separation of women from the essential feminine in post-structuralist theory is contracted. (Rando, 1991, p.50.)

Feminist art which uses the female body, however, is in danger of being re-appropriated and interpreted within traditional voyeuristic frameworks. According to Lucy Lippard : "A woman using her own face and body has a right to do what she will with them, but it is a subtle abyss that separates men's use of women for sexual titillation from women's use of women to expose that insult". (Nead, 1992, p.67.) The body based work of Carolee Schneeman, Lynda Benglis, Adrian Piper(b1948-) and Hannah Wilke have been criticised for being self-indulgent, vain, narcissistic and self-exploitive. (Broude, 1994, p.192.) Judith Barry has criticised Wilke for being obsessed with the female body and in objectifying herself. She says about Wilke, "It seems her work ends up reinforcing what it intends to subvert". Wilke herself says, "asking people to take pleasure in their own bodies puts them in fear more than anything else". (Jones, 1998, pp. 171-173.)

Wilke exhibits herself in and as her art. By using her own body she explores the subjectivity and contingency of the female body and at the same time respecting it as an object. Wilke is concerned with creating a positive image of the female body and to destroy the prejudices Western culture has imposed on it.

Wilke not only deconstructs the structures within patriarchy but also, recognises and celebrates aspects of the female body and female sexuality which have traditionally been hidden and suppressed within our culture. Wilke not only makes these claims for the "normal" body but also enforces her claim for bodies outside conventional frameworks - the aged body and the sick body. In a review of her 1989 retrospective, the St. Louis Post-Dispatches review noted "her recurrent need to strip society of its facades and pretences". (Cone, 1989, p.25.)

Chapter 1.

The Female Body

Hannah Wilke was born in America in 1940, into a Jewish family. She began her artistic career in the early 1960's. Primarily a sculptor Hannah Wilke originally worked in ceramics but later her work extended to using a variety of media and materials such as clay, lint, latex, erasers, chewing gum, chocolate and her own body. Her work includes paintings, drawings, videotapes, photographs and films. She has worked within the framework of a number of art movements, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Body Art, Performance Art, Conceptual Art and the Women's Art Movement

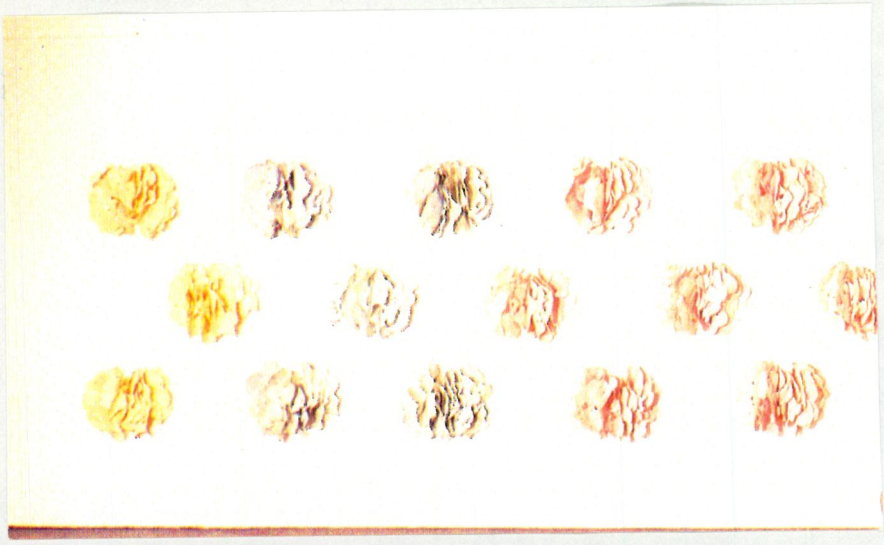
Wilke's art was concerned with valorising the female form and in criticising the cultural devaluation of the feminine (Kantova, 1993, p.104) Her discourse is postmodern. Jane Flax writes that

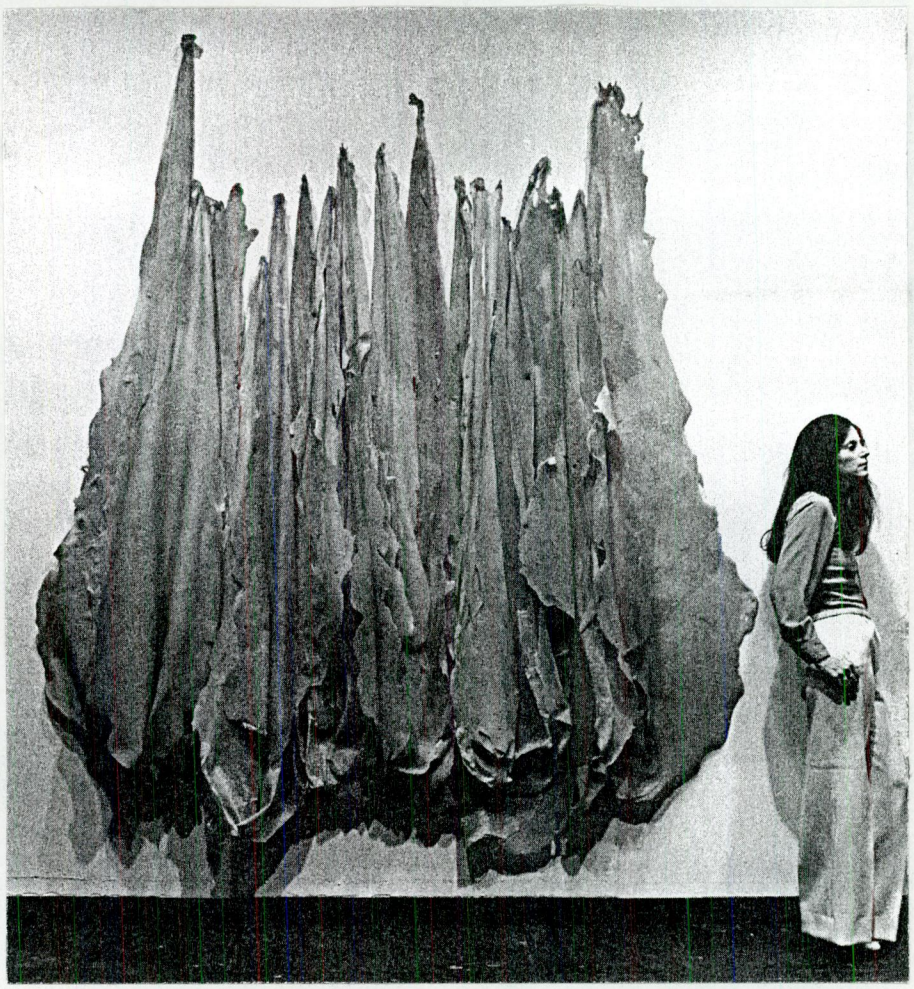
> "postmodern discourses are all 'deconstructive' in that they seek to distance us from and make us sceptical of beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, the self and language that one often takes for granted within and serve as legitimation for contemporary Western culture" (Frueh, 1989, p;23).

Wilke's earlier work was about acknowledging and creating a female form. She wished to make female form universal and symbolic of both women's and humanity's concerns . Historically the white western man has been equated with the human and Wilke wanted women to also mean human (Frueh, 1989, p.23).

Wilke is known for her vaginal iconography which Lowry Sims called "signature cunt/scar forms". It was Hannah Wilke, not Judy Chicago as some believe, who invented vaginal imagery as feminist statement and universal symbol. Originally ceramic, Wilke later sculpted her vulvar forms in lint, clay, kneaded erasers and chewing gum. Taking a single piece of material Wilke folds or twists it into a vulvar shape - a shape that is also womb-like or wound-like. They refer to female pleasures and pain. They are also universal symbols, for sexual pleasure and pain is universal. The folded sculptures identify women with creation, creators of life and also creators of art and ideas. Society has for too long refused women the right to a mind of their own (Frueh, 1989, pp.15-20).

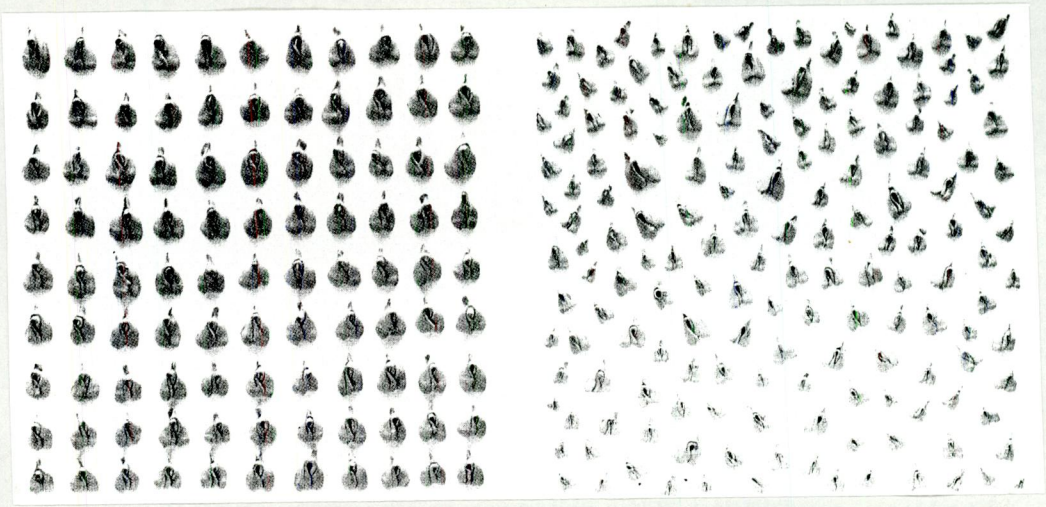
Female form and sexuality are also inherent in Wilke's latex sculptures. Dyed and undyed latex is poured, adjusted and controlled on a white plaster bed. Haphazard occurrences such as bubbles, openings, rips, bulges and irregular edges are used to advantage in the work. The casting side of the work is chalky and rough and the other side is wet, shiny and smooth. According to Frueh the surfaces are like skin, physically and psychologically (Frueh, 1989, p.18). In works like *In Memory of my Feelings*(1972) and the *Ponder-r-rosa Series* (1974-1975) thin layers of latex, each a replica of the other, have been bent, curled or twisted into clusters. The format of each cluster is horizontal, vertical, rounded or drooped. The arrangements are held together with several metal snaps. The latex sculptures are coloured in various flesh-like tones of pink, brown, orange and yellow. The sculptures are very tactile.

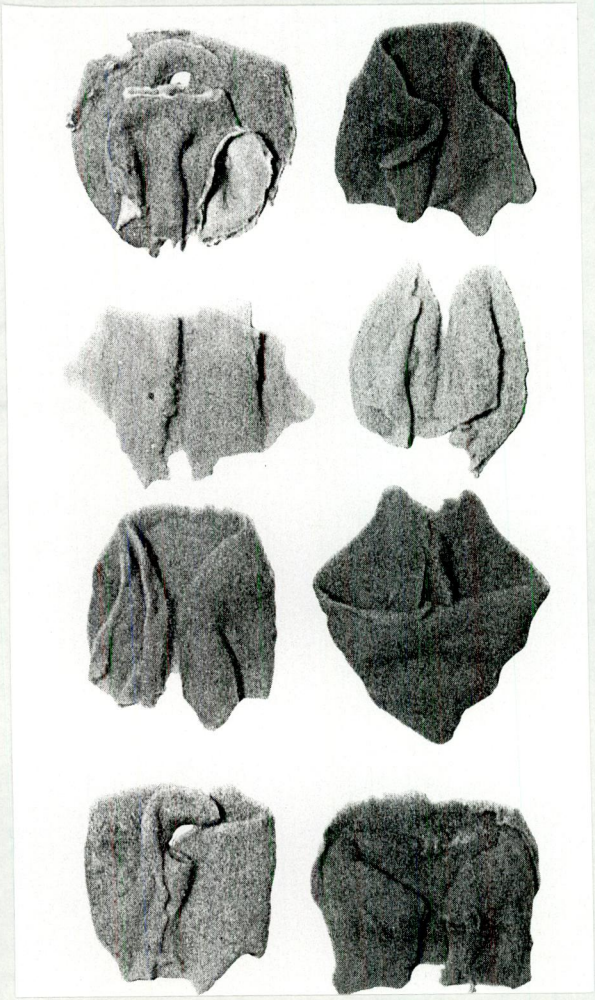




1. Ponder-r-rosa

2. In Memory of my Feelings





3.Needed - Erase - Her

4.Laundry Lint

Wilke's sculptures create a multiplicity of forms which are similar and yet different. They acknowledge the existence of women in all their similarities and differences. The works also address female sexual pleasure. They speak of the general experience of the female body. They refer to the many areas of sensitivity in the internal and external female anatomy and of the plurality of sensation (Frueh, 1989, p.18) According to Wooster, Wilke's celebration of female imagery fulfilled the agenda of the newly emerged feminist art movement of the 1970's (Wooster, 1990, p.31).

A patriarchal culture has made the vagina invisible and unsightly. In Western art the male sexual organs are perfectly apparent, but the female nude has had her genital area hidden or veiled. Wilke says her vaginal imagery and "signature cunt forms" are about creating a positive image to wipe out prejudices, aggression and fear associated with the negative connotations of cunt. Traditionally, cunt has been a pornographic image and word. In pornography women are equated with cunt. In the early 1970's feminism coined the term cunt art in an effort to recover denigrated words used to name parts of the female anatomy. In her "signature cunt forms" Wilke creates a positive image from a pornographic image. She sees cunts as beautiful rather than obscene. Wilke's forms are portrayed as beautiful objects in rich colours, patterns and materials.

Wilke's vaginal forms may be seen to preserve the notion of women's bodies as parts. Vulvar forms are still offensive to some women and are associated with fear, hatred and sexual focus. Some feminists believe that any symbol that

celebrates the fragmented body must disappear. The reality is now that the vagina and female sexuality must be retrieved from this ideology (Frueh, 1989, pp.45-48).

From the mid 1970's Wilke's work moved more from an exploration of universal female imagery to an enquiry into social constructions of beauty and femininity and their reinforcement within our cultural representations. Wilke's work, also, now included the display and use of her own body in the investigation of these issues. From a life long series of self-portraits Wilke organised her artworks. She called the portraits "performalist" works. Wilke took hundreds of photographic, film and video self-portraits.

Several of Wilke's "performalist" works are concerned with confronting the male gaze and uncovering its subtle voyeurism. In works like the *So Help Me Hannah Series* (1978-1984). Wilke solicits the gaze, takes control of it and reflects it back on itself in order to expose and aggravate it (Jones, 1994, p.6). According to Jones feminist body artists subvert the gender differences of traditional viewing structures - the passive female object of a male subject's gaze. The female body artist is both subject and object, both mind and body (Jones, 1998, p.155).

The *So Help Me Hannah* installation is made up of nude self-portraits of Wilke, photographed on site at New York's P.S.I. where the exhibition took place. Wearing high heels only and with a toy gun in her hand, Wilke is photographed crawling across a roof crouched in a skip, on hands and knees on a stairway and standing over a toilet. Six of the photographs are enlarged for the series. Each photograph is inscribed with text such as, "Beyond the Permissibly Given,"

"Opportunity makes Relations as it makes Thieves," and "What does this Represent - What do you Represent." The phrases are quotations by critics and artists, philosophers and political figures such as Edmund Burke, Marx, Nietzche, Daniel Buren and David Smith. In the photographs Wilke recontextualised the quotations from these well known male figures of authority. When set alongside the portraits of her own nude body their meanings are destabilised and altered. Wilke's photographs were taken in a shabby dull space which could be perceived as a sleasy photographic environment. The gun she holds in her hand, traditionally a phallic prop, is a symbol of men's violence against women. (Frueh, 1989, p.30). The images portray the conventional representation of women and they urge the viewer to examine the system in which they circulate (Dykstra, 1995, p.17).

According to Frueh the photograph entitled *What does this represent - What do you Represent* (1978-1984) from the *So Help me Hannah series* is Wilkes's most direct critique of the female nude (Frueh, 1989, p.44). In the work Wilke, sits on the floor in a corner. Her legs are apart and her genital area is exposed. Female genitalia are normally hidden in the representation of the female nude in art history. Wilke's pose is contemplative. Her knees are up and her right elbow resting on her knee with her right hand to her forehead. She is an object "cornered" by the gaze (Jones, 1998, p.159). Toy guns and Mickey Mouse toys are scattered in the foreground of the image. The Mickey mouse toys refer to simplistic notions of the female nude (Frueh, 1989, p.44).

So Help Me Hannah Series, Portrait of the Artist with Her Mother, Selma Butter, and Stand Up, exhibition at The New Museum, 1984.

Plate 5

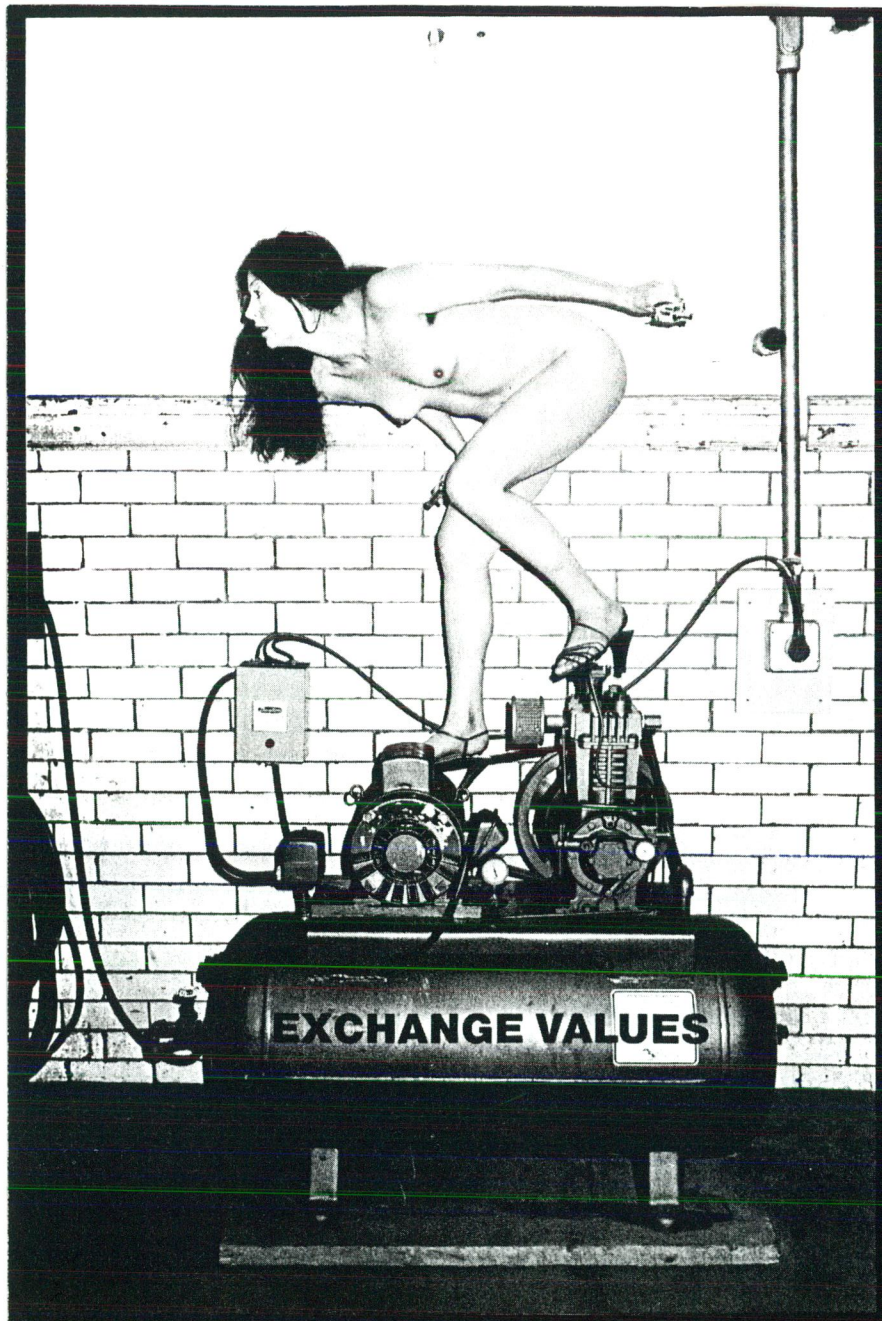
By assuming the immobility imposed by the gaze, Wilke confronts it, directs it back on itself and avoids objectification. Easy objectification of the nude is also prevented by the large black letters of the text across the image. As a feminist critique, the quotation acts as a warning to the "male" viewing subject. It demands that the viewer question the image being looked at. The text is the language of known male authority and Wilke uses this to question the male gaze (Jones, 1998 pp.157-159). "What does this represent - What do you represent" is a quotation from the male modernist painter - Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967). According to Dykstra, the ridiculous array of objects spread on the floor in front of Wilke, refers to the fragile and absurd nature of our cultural icons and the way society represents women (Dykstra, 1995, pp.17-18). The work challenges conventional aesthetic values enforced at the expense of women (Jones, 1998, p.157).

In another photograph from the *So Help Me Hannah Series,* called *Exchange Values* (1978-1984), Wilke is portrayed, in profile, standing on an air compressor machine. Her pose is uneasy and she bends forward with her back parallel to the ground. The words "Exchange Values" are printed across the front of the machine. They are taken from a text by Karl Marx:

> Could commodities themselves speak they would say: Our use-value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects. What, however, does belong to us as objects, is our value. Our natural intercourse as commodities proves it. In the eyes of each other we are nothing but exchange values". (Frueh, 1989, p.30).

What Does This Represent / What Do You Represent (Reinhart), 1978–1984.

His Farced Epistol (Joyce), 1978–1984.



Exchange Values (Marx), 1978–1984.

Beyond the Permissibly Given (Kuspit), 1978–1984.

In the work the word exchange is an adjective and a verb. It describes women as values, objects and commodities, positioned on the machine that is society. Wilke urges the viewer to replace the system (Frueh, 1989, p.30).

Hannah Wilke has said "My work has always been about language" (Frueh, 1989, p.11). This aspect of her art links her to Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968). Their work is similar in their use of language and erotic philosophy. However, Wilke opposes Duchamp and in her own work she has criticised Duchamp's art. Humour is a form of deconstruction and puns act as vehicles of deconstruction. Both Wilke and Duchamp use puns in order to subvert meaning. Film critic B. Ruby Rich says

> In the era of post modernism, it is easy to forget that humour is the oldest form of deconstruction: It breaks down barriers, shatters polarities, and conducts subversive, or even liberatory, attacks upon the reigning order. (Frueh, 1989, p.33).

Venus Envy (1978-1984), the title of a photograph from the *So Help Me Hannah Series* is a good example of Wilke's play with language. The work makes fun of the fascination and belief in the 20th century of Freud's theory of penis envy. Wilke had the photograph made into a poster and T-shirt. Wilke proclaims it is the envy of women, of their beauty and sexuality that is at the centre of our culture (Frueh, 1989, p.34).

In the photograph *His Farcel Epistol* (1978-1984) also from the *So Help Me Hannah Series* Wilke stands ,legs bent, over a public toilet at the New York P.S.I. The text is from James Joyce's novel *Finnegans Wake*. Wilke urinates into the toilet. She has one leg on either side of the toilet and a gun in her left hand. Her pose is

androgenous. Wilke makes fun of Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) was the first of the conceptual works of art. Wilke is her own fountain. In the photograph Wilke is looking upwards and smiling. She mocks the father of the avant guarde. Her expression and humour prevent her objectification.(Frueh, 1989, p.34). In the script Wilke makes reference to the pistol in her left hand, which is pointed downwards. It is symbolic of men's violence towards women. In the feminist critique Wilke attacks patriarchy and the males who dominate society and who also dominate the art world (von Ziegesar, 1989, p.48).

As already noted Wilke's main contribution to improving the status of women was in the arena of the female body. Historically, the female body has been perceived as impure, dangerous and corrupt. On the other hand it has been seen as sacred, nurturing and asexual. Women have been taught to be uncomfortable with their bodies and ashamed of their nudity. Up to recently women artists exposing their own bodies in their work in order to challenge conventional notions of the female nude have been marginilised by the art system. They have also been dismissed by feminist theorists. Many believe that the already sexualised female body is in danger of becoming even more fetishised and objectified. Wilke risks the criticism in her efforts to authenticate and redefine the female body. She says, "Female nudity painted by men gets documented and when women create this ideology as their own it gets obliterated" (Frueh, 1989, p.41).

Wilke is concerned with celebrating the female body and its experiences. In dealing with these concerns, Wilke has included a female erotic discourse in her

work. She acknowledges and celebrates female sexuality and erotica. Wilke says "To be female and sexual is forbidden. If you show your body and are proud of it, it frightens people" (Frueh, 1989, p.41).

Other artists whose work is about the female body and female sexuality, are Carolee Schneeman, Joan Semmel, Lynda Benglis and Yayoi Kusama. Joan Semmel's paintings of female nudes and love-making couples are seen from the subject's perspective (Frueh, 1989, p.41).

Plate 8. Venus Envy 1978-1984

Chapter 2

The Beautiful Body

In her work Hannah Wilke continuously questions the traditional notion of the ideal female body and society's construction of female beauty and femininity. Venus is used as a metaphor for the beautiful woman in several of her works - *Venus Envy*, *Venus Basin*, *Venus Cushion* and *Venus Pareve*. In these works Wilke expresses her concern with ideal beauty and her address extends further to Wilke's use of herself as the "model" woman (Frueh, 1996, p.142). Wilke fits into the traditional category of "ideal" female nude. She is whole limbed, white skinned, slender, well proportioned, with delicate facial features and splendid dark hair. Frueh points out that the ideal woman is oppressive to most women and Susan Brownmiller says the "tyranny of Venus" is what women feel whenever they criticise their appearance for not conforming to prevailing standards of beauty (Frueh 1996, p.142).

For a woman artist to deal with beauty in her work is seen as an acceptance of traditional definitions of female beauty and also as a declaration of beauty for the self. Society still wants women to perform its desires and not her own. It is important not to attack a woman's declaration of her own beauty and pleasure as negative female narcissism (Frueh, 1996, p.142).

Wilke believes beautiful women are victims. They are similar to other groups in society who are feared, envied and hated because of their difference. As a girl, Wilke remembers that she was "made feel like shit for looking at myself in the

mirror" and as a young adult she felt she was observed, objectified by beauty. She believes she is "the victim of my own beauty" and "Beauty does make people mistrust you". Therefore, a women is wrong when she is not beautiful but when she is beautiful she is still wrong. By openly displaying her beauty, Wilke uses her art to create a positive assertion of her beauty and sexuality (Fruch, 1996, pp.143-144).

Wilke's *Stratification Object Series (S.O.S)* (1974-1975) is an important feminist intervention in the practice of self-representation (Paice, 1994, p.24). In the late 1960's, Wilke walked the streets of New York presenting pieces of chewing gum to passers by and getting them to chew out the sugar. Taking back the gum she folded it into tiny vulvar shapes which she then stuck onto her body. (Hixson, 1996 p.30).

In 1975, Wilke exhibited 28 photographs from this performance at the Ronald Feldman Gallery - *Stratification Object Series.* The group of photographs acts as a stage where the artist takes up various female fictional poses of seduction, withdrawal, invitation and self possession (Paice, 1994, p.24). Her chewing gum sculptures, womb-like and vulvar-like, are attached to her back, breasts, arms, fingers and face. Wilke uses herself as subject and support for her sculptures. She uses chewing gum because as she says "it is the perfect metaphor for the American woman - chew her up, get what you want out of her, threw her out and pop in a new piece (Jones, 1998, pp.183-184). The photographs in *S.O.S.* reflect the many ways the female body is culturally coded (Paice, 1994, p.24).

Plate 9. Starification Object Series 1974-1975

In *S.O.S.* Wilke marks her body as female. The chewing gum marks are stars and scars. Wilke is a Jew and the marks are also a reflection of the historical and racial markings of her ethnic background (Frueh, 1989, p.52). Wilke describes the scars as internal wounds that women carry with them as a result of western cultures subjugation of women. Wilke has externalised these wounds (Jones, 1998, pp.183-185).

In *S.O.S.* Wilke "stars" and "scars" her beauty with her chewing gum pieces. The beautiful - the ideal - are also victims. She says that to many people "the traditionally beautiful woman is the stereotype . . . but nobody says there is a prejudice against the beautiful woman." The beautiful woman is a victim as is the "plain" woman. According to Frueh, to be a star as a woman is also to be ill-starred. Beautiful women suffer by continually being observed by others in a process of criticism and misunderstanding (Frueh, 1996, pp.142-146).

The "scars" also relate to African women's citatrization wounds. African women tolerate hundreds of cuts without anaesthetic in order to adorn their bodies with scar designs. Wilke is referring to the suffering Western women endure to reach standards of beauty (Frueh, 1996, p.143).

Historian Lois Banner writes that "the pursuit of beauty has more than any other factor bound together women of different classes, regions and ethnic groups". In *S.O.S.* Wilke reflects this bond by presenting photographs of herself in a variety of feminine attire. Dressing herself in costume, she poses in a range of female

positions and styles - a maid's apron, hair curlers, cowboy hat, sunglasses, Arab head-dress and Indian Caste mask. Beauty separates women but also binds them together (Frueh, 1996, pp. 145-146).

According to Dykstra, Wilke's *S.O.S.* is a criticism of the narrow concept of an identity that relies exclusively on the visual. It also considers the wounds caused by racism and sexism (Dykstra 1995, p.17).

Wilke's conventional beauty often prevented a true understanding of her art. In 1976 Lucy Lippard wrote about Wilke, that "confusion of her roles as beautiful woman and artist, as flirt and feminist, has resulted at times in politically ambiguous manifestations that have exposed her to criticism on a personal as well as on an artistic level". Beautiful women are admired and envied by other women who are caught up in "Venus envy". Beauty has, conventionally been equated with femininity, and femininity has been historically defined within particular frameworks of perfection and self control. Wilke's exposure of her naked body in her art is according to Frueh, offensive to femininity which is patriarchy's containment of female potential (Frueh, 1996, p.152).

Narcissism has traditionally been associated with women and is viewed as a debased and objectified kind of self-love. In her work, Wilke employs narcissism in order to create a positive image of self-love. According to Jones, the female narcissist threatens patriarchy because the desiring male subject is not required to affirm her desirability (Jones, 1998 pp.176-178).

Plate10. I Object: Memoirs of a Sugargiver

Plate11. Etant donnes

Wilke's use of narcissism is exemplified in her double portrait "*I Object: Memoirs of a Sugargiver*" *I Object* (1977-1978) is a critique of Marcel Duchamp's(1887-1968) *Etant donnes (1946-1966).* It takes the format of a fake book cover with the subtitle *Memoirs of a Sugargiver.* In the work Wilke's pose is similar to that of the girl in the *Etant Donnes.* The nude girl in Duchamp's picture is only seen through a crack in a door. Her head is hidden and her legs are spread apart to reveal her genital area. A distorted gash replaces any recognisable vulvar region. The girl lies on a bed of twigs. She appears completely lifeless.

In *I Object* Wilke is photographed nude on rough coastal rocks. [1.] Her pose is similar to Duchamp's figure. However, her head is prominent and the genital area fully identifiable. Her eyes focus directly on the viewer. Wilke reproduces herself in the pose of *Etant donnes* upside down on the front cover. The image is right side up on the backcover. On the front cover Wilke is photographed from above. On the back cover she is photographed from below. The front cover is in fact the back cover and visa versa. Wilke suggests a turning around of meaning in a protest at Duchamp's inert and desexed woman - a passive object of voyeurism. Wilke says "I find *Etant donnes* repulsive which is perhaps its message. She has a distorted vagina. The voyeuristic vulgarity justifies impotence." (Frueh, 1996, p.178). In her own work, *I Object,* Wilke freely exhibits her nudity. Her body is not obstructed or partially hidden. She invites the viewer to explore her image (Jones, 1998, p.176). *I Object* also means *Eye Object* and refers to the artist's willingness to use herself as a sex object and to the voyeuristic aspect of the gaze.

According to Frueh, *I Object* is an affirmation of presence and self knowledge, of pride and delight in being sexually admired and of giving pleasure (Frueh, 1996, p.144). "Why not be an object " Wilke says and points to her objection of society's historical suppression of female sexuality and female pleasure (Frueh 1989, pp.34-35).

The subtitle of *I Object - Memoirs of a Sugargiver* relates to the matter of giving pleasure. Marchand du Sel (salt seller) is the anagram of Marcel Duchamp's name.[2.] Duchamp is a salt seller - he promotes commodities. Wilke is a sugargiver - offering the sweetness of love, eroticism and beauty (Frueh, 1989, p.35).

Up to recently beauty as an issue has hardly featured in the feminist agenda. Contemplating beauty was thought to be vain, self-indulgent and self absorbed. Beauty has been a source of embarrassment to feminism. Lucy Lippard has noted "men can use beautiful sexy women as neutral objects or surfaces, but when women use their own faces and bodies, they are immediately accused of narcissism". Our culture does not promote women to take pleasure in their own beauty and sexuality (Frueh, 1989, pp.61-63).

Women are thought to be negatively narcissistic and to continually engage in "improving" themselves to fulfil society's desires. Then they are told that in doing this, they are vain and indulgent. Frueh insists that women must fall in love with themselves and be positively narcissistic (Frueh, 1989, p.63). In their research, Lakoff

and Scherr found that beauty might be "the last great taboo, the anguish that separates women from themselves, men and each other" (Frueh, 1996, p.145).

Endnotes

1. The photographs for *I Object* have been taken with the artist Richard Hamilton (1922-). They were taken on the coastal rocks at Cadoques, Spain, where Duchamp lived during his later years.

2. Marchand du Sel - the anagram on Marcel Duchamp's name is the subtitle of Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson's "The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp. Salt Seller = Marchand du Sel (Frueh 1989, p.35).

Chapter 3

The Aged Body

Hannah Wilke said "I was my father's daughter". Wilke's father died in 1961, when she was twenty. From 1978 when her mother, Selma Butter, had a stroke and a previous cancer returned, until 1982 when Selma died, Wilke said "I sacrificed my art for my mother". (Frueh, 1979, p.79).

In Memorium: Selma Butler (Mommy) (1979-1983) is a major piece of work that Wilke dedicates to her mother and the concerns and sadness at her illness. Wilke also takes up a broader issue in the work on her mother, that of society's dismissal of the aged and the sick body and their obliteration from cultural representations.

Traditionally the female nude of high art has been revered as the aesthetic ideal of beauty and femininity. In our culture, it has, persistently, been displayed within specifically defined frameworks. These definite structures have resulted in certain bodies becoming invisible within cultural representations. Society sees ageing as the death of "ideal" beauty and femininity (Nead, 1994, p.18).

In Memorium is a triptych made up of three large framed works on the wall and three sculptural floor pieces. Each of the three framed works consists of six black and white photographs of Selma arranged in two rows of three pictures. Within each frame and under the photographs is a set of three collages. The shapes within the

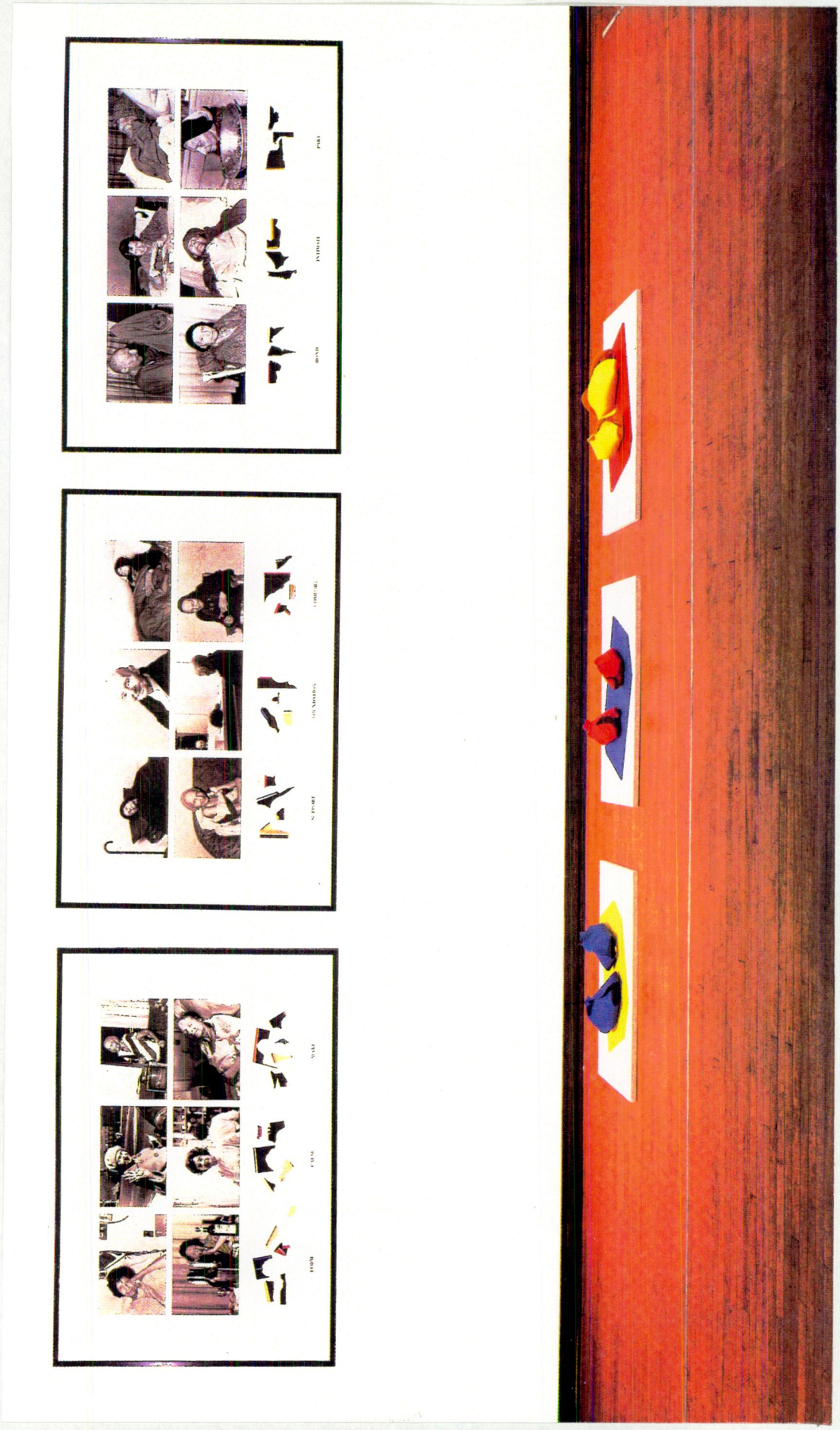


Plate 12. In Memoriam: Selma Butter (Mommy)1979-1983

Plate 13. In Memoriam: Selma Butter (Mommy)1979-1983

collages are taken from the photographs and resemble puzzle pieces. They are coloured blue, red, yellow and black. Beneath the nine collages are nine words. The word Support, Foundation, Comfort, are inscribed on the bottom of the central panel. Form, Cause, Make, are on the left and Bond, Intimate, Part are on the right. On the floor beneath the framed works, are three rectangular white bases. On each is a smaller rectangle, each coloured with one of the primary colours. Placed on each smaller rectangle are two ceramic sculptures - vulvar and womb-like in shape. Each pair is coloured with a different primary colour to the rectangle it sits on. *In Memorium* is organised in the format of an altar piece and refers to the spiritual nature of the work (Frueh 1989, p.79).

In Memorium documents Wilke's relationship with her mother's terminal illness. In the photographs, Wilke's mother reveals her nude body and the effects of her breast cancer on it. The photographs depict the trust and vulnerability on the part of the mother and the care and concern of the daughter. The photographs compare real life as art - the reality of the sick and the aged (Wooster, 199 , p.31).

In the *In Memorium* photographs, Selma Butter is portrayed bravely carrying the effects of her illness . She appears smiling in her hospital bed, bald from chemotherapy , wearing a beret and waving., wearing a wig and laughing as she sits in her hospital chair. Selma is aged and dying but is full of life and energy despite her destiny. Wilke is concerned with capturing her mother's reality . She says

> In 1984, I made a memorial exhibition for my mother . . . to comfort me, to be with her again, to watch her wave, to see her eat, to wear her wounds, to heal my own . . . circles becoming three dimensional wombs

> representing the oneness of our relationships . . . and representing the reproductive process that created me (Frueh 1996, p.151).

Wilke took hundreds of photographs of her mother from 1978 to 1982 and they document what Wilke considers the important aspects of life. She believed that "taking photographs" of her mother "would save her" because being photographed "gives you a certain kind of energy". The photography did not save Selma but it prolonged and preserved the union and intimacy of mother and daughter. Wilke says photographing her mother was "a way of being intimate with her" (Frueh 1989, pp79-82).

The collaged forms are cutouts. They abstract and deconstruct body shapes. The black and white together with the primary colours, from which other colours originate, refer to the basic relationship of mother and child and the importance and closeness of that relationship. The text speaks of intimate bonding, of forming, causing and making and the creation of life and art by mother and daughter. It also speaks of the foundation for support and comfort in both mother and daughter (Frueh, 1989, p.79).

In the work *In Memorium* Wilke explores old age and disease, aspects of living that society fears and ignores. In her photographs Wilke honours "the crone figure" the figure society has denied and neglected in its representations. Wilke recognises the life in her mother despite her imminent death. She places the black and white photographs of her mother next to brightly coloured womb sculptures. The sculptures allude to life and creation (Frueh, 1989, p.82). In terms of loving aura and

constant courage Wilke's mother is heroic. She embodies the reality of life - ageing, illness, love and death (Frueh, 1989, p.86).

Fear of old age in our culture has been worse for women that for men. According to Frueh "sexism and ageism walk hand in hand". Older women rarely appear in cultural representations and have in classical literature and mythology been given the role of the evil witch. Ageing has a negative connotation for women and society encourages women to prevent it (Frueh, 1989, p.86).

In *Portrait of the Artist with her Mother Selma Butter (1978-1981)* from the *So Help Me Hannah Series*, Wilke deals with definitions of beauty and of its perfections. The piece is a diptych and consists of a nude portrait of the artist on the left and of her mother on the right. The photograph of the artist depicts beauty and youth. By conventional standards of beauty Hannah Wilke was beautiful and in the work "improves" her appearance even more with cosmetic make-up. Wilke has placed found metal objects that resemble "raygun" shapes on her upper body. These were objects she had collected as gifts for her partner the artist Claes Oldenburg(1929-) in the early 1970's. They interrupt the perfection of the artist's body. Frueh says the metal guns allude to cover-girl shots of models and continues "the beautiful young (model) woman shot by a camera, murdered into a still, an ideal picture of femininity, the cover-girl who covers up her imperfections with emotional and actual make-up." The objects also refer to the emotional scars of lost love (Wilke is no longer in a relationship with Claes Oldenburg) and the pending loss of her mother through cancer. Wilke says "to wear her wounds, to heal my own . . ." Ironically and

Plate 14. Portrait of the Artist with Her Mother, Selma Butter, 1978-1981.

poignantly Wilke wrote this before she herself was diagnosed with cancer. (Frueh, 1989, p.89). Wilke's facial expression reveals that pain and sadness underlie her perfect appearance (Frueh, 1989, p.57).

The photograph on the right of the diptych shows Wilke's mother nude from the waist up and her face turned from the camera. Selma Butter has had a mastectomy and the photographs show not only the delicate state of the old woman but the damaging effects of her illness. Here the metal scars have become real scars (Frueh, 1989, p.57).

This double portrait of mother and daughter exposes the realities of life-life also means loss, beauty changes and age and illness are part of life. Here the ageing and sick Selma Butter is alive and much loved. The photographs exhibit the close relationship of mother and daughter.

Confrontational and large in size the photographs assess cultural representations of the female nude (Dysktra, 1995, p.18). Ruth Bass believes it is a courageous work by both women that expresses concern over the ideals of beauty and the ways women are valued and devalued in society (Bass, 1985, p.140). The work tells of the high regard and love the artist has for her mother and reflects the esteem and respect society should give to the aged and experienced (Johnson, 1990, p.161)

Susan Sontag says that female ageing in our society is perceived as "a process of becoming obscene . . . that old women are repulsive is one of the most aesthetic and erotic feelings in our culture". Joanna Frueh states it is a "kind of

femicide or sexual violence that, in regard to visual representation absents older women from the erotic arena and kills people's ability to imagine let alone physically imagine older women as erotic". (Frueh, 1994, p.66).

In the 1960's and 70's Carolee Schneeman and Joan Semmel like Wilke explored female pleasure and female sexuality in their work. Today, as older women, these artists continue with this discourse. In 1980 Alice Neel(1900-1984) painted her self portrait at the age of eighty. Since the 1970's, May Stevens(b1924) and Claire Prussian portray the nude images of ageing women in their work. Stevens uses her mother as subject. Lynda Nead has argued that feminist images of the female body has sought to shatter patriarchal definitions of the female and the feminine and she states that the most effective work has been that which successfully interferes in the visual arena and which demands the right to make visible new and diverse kinds of femininity and physical identities (Nead, 1994, p.19).

Chapter 4

The Sick Body

Wilke's work intentions culminated in her final project - *Intra - Venus* (1987-1993). *Intra-Venus* is a documentation of the last years of Wilke's life during which she underwent treatment for cancer. In 1987 Wilke was diagnosed with lymphoma and in the autumn of 1991 she entered hospital for treatment where she died in January 1993. The project was carried out in collaboration with her husband Donald Goddard and is a microcosm of the forms and concerns of Wilke's *oeuvre* (Perchuk, 1994, p.93). The work is made up of a series of larger than life-sized colour photographs of Wilke during her illness and treatment. It also consists of expressionist self-portrait watercolours of her face and hands, images made from her hair which she lost during chemotherapy, sculptures of medical objects used in her therapy and vulvar/womb sculptures which she had executed at an earlier period in the late 1980's.

Previously, Wilke's work involved the re-evaluation of Western culture's definitions of female beauty and female sexuality. She is concerned with confronting traditional representations of the female body, with interrogating the weak associations between external appearance and the subject of that appearance (Jones, 1998, p.187). In *Intra-Venus*, her last work, Wilke takes the ultimate and final step, the last link of a consistent chain, by exploring and exposing the "deterioration" of her own

conventional beauty through illness to death. *Intra-Venus* is a perfect, but sad, retort to those who criticised Wilke for her narcissism and objectification of her beauty.

In *Intra-Venus,* as in *Stratification Object Series,* Wilke is a damaged Venus, this time by cancer and its treatments. Intravenous lines permeate her body, bandages cover the scars of her failed bone marrow transplant, her body is swollen and she has lost her hair. Wilke is no longer the feminine "ideal". "My body has gotten old" she said less than a month before her transplant (Frueh, 1994, p.67).

Wilke called her work "curative" and "medicinal" and said "focusing on the self gives me the fighting spirit that I need" and "my art is about loving myself". Joanne Frueh says that the *Intra-Venus* nude shows Wilke within - intra - the veins of Venus, an inherent lust for living in the blood of the artist. Wilke displays her body as erotic but not the conventional "ideal" female body. In her "abnormal" state she continues to celebrate female desires and desirabilities. She exposes the insecurity of the body's boundaries and declares "I am who I am" (Frueh, 1994, p.67).

The images dominating the *Intra-Venus* project are the thirteen larger than life-sized portraits of Wilke at different stages of her illness and treatment. Wilke is depicted in a variety of situations. Her head is wrapped in a blue hospital blanket in a pose reminiscent of the Virgin Mary. she lifts her hair to reveal a cancerous lump on her neck, exhausted she sits naked on a hospital toilet, wearing only slippers she stands in a pose similar to Ingres' *Venus Anadyomere,* she confronts the viewer her

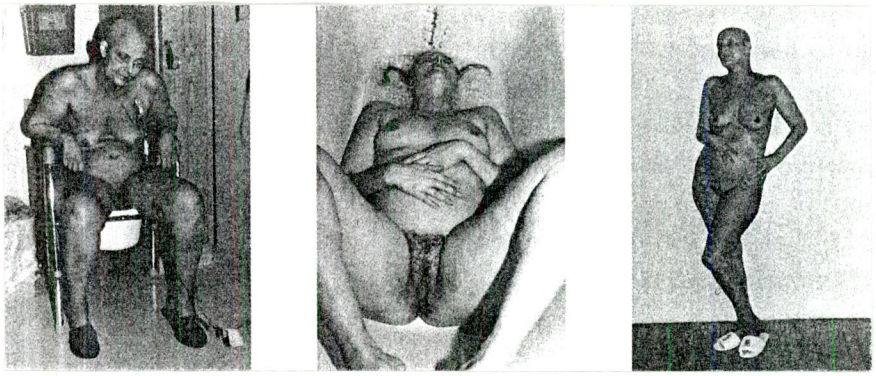


Plate 15. Intra-Venus August 17th 1992/February 15th 1992/August 9th 1992.

Plate 16. Intra-Venus June 10th 1992/May 5th 1992

Plate 17. Intra-Venus July 26th 1992/February 19th 1992.

Plate 18. Intra-Venus June 15th 1992.

Plate 19. Intra- Venus, February 19th 1992

thin wet hair in long strings covering her face and scalp and her body is shown scarred with intravenous lines, gauzes and bandages.

Some of the works are grouped in diptychs and triptychs. One diptych shows Wilke at an early stage in her treatment. A shirt is tied around her head and her bright red tongue is sticking out of equally red lips. In the photograph Wilke appears to be half laughing, half screaming. In the accompanying photograph Wilke's head is tilted back to reveal cotton plugs which completely close and distort her nose. Her tongue is covered in blood and pus.

In a large triptych, on the left panel, Wilke is seated on a hospital toilet. She is naked, has lost her hair and has an intravenous line piercing her chest. In the photograph on the right Wilke takes up a "model" pose - her nude body bruised. In the central portion of the work Wilke lies in a bath, her legs bent and raised and her genital area exposed. Wilke not only displays her wounded body but also her femaleness.

In the *Intra-Venous* project Wilke disrupts conventional aesthetic judgement where the obscene body, the body "other" to the "ideal" female nude must remain outside aesthetic frameworks. Wilke's explicit display of her sick body in exhausted and depleted states, also, interferes with conventional systems of objectification (Jones, 1998, p.190).

The photographs in the series are "chromogenic supergloss prints" and the colour is extremely vivid - the reddest red for blood and the yellowish purple for bruises. Wilke said that being photographed "gives you a certain kind of energy". Hirsch says that the colour in these photographs is a symbol of life and a proof of living (Hirsch, 1994, p.108).

The prints are overwhelming in scale and frankness. They are distressing but sometimes show the artists humour. In one such photograph the artist takes up a model pose, one hand on her hip and the other behind her head. In another she stands balancing a vase of flowers on her head with only bandages adhering to her naked body. She reminds herself and us of her situation in death (Diehl, 1994, p.164).

In the centre of the *Intra-Venus* installation are some of Wilke's charcoal black folded ceramic sculptures (1987-1992). These are arranged, haphazardly, on a black wooden base. They resemble a pile of burnt bones, a reminder of the dead body and also of the holocaust and the mass murder of Jews during World War 11. Wilke was a Jew [1](Jones 1994, p.12). Also, in the installation were two lead alloy neck radiation blocks, a cage like basket of pill cases and syringes and a group of framed bandages from a bone marrow harvest. Hair which she lost during chemotherapy was exhibited on sheets of Arches paper in a series of "drawings" which she called *Brushstrokes*. Expressionist water-colours were also exhibited in which the artist had painted her debilitating face and hands. Wilke planned every detail of her project *Intra-Venus*, including its name, [2], but it was not until January 1994, a year after her death, that it was exhibited.

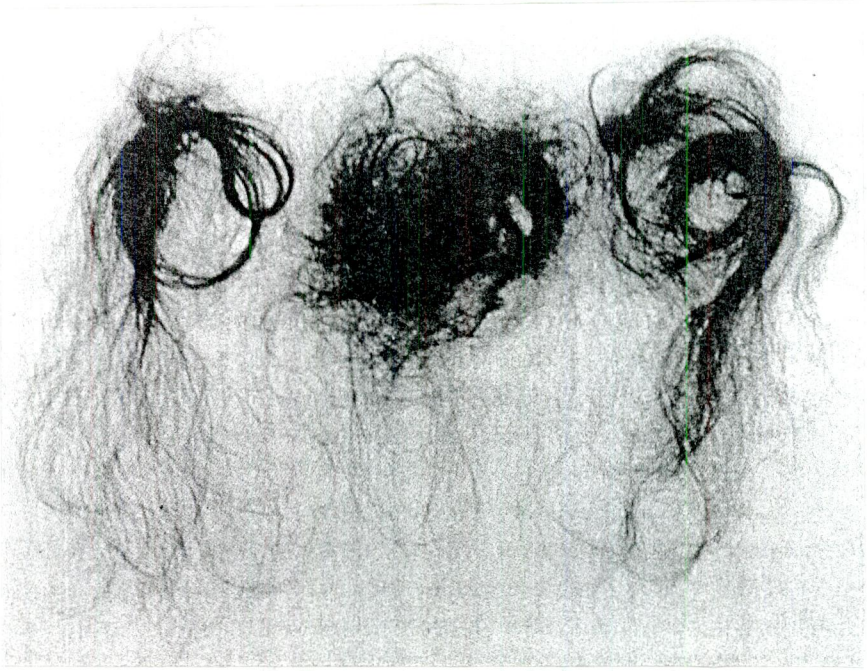


Plate 20. Brushstrokes: January 19th 1992

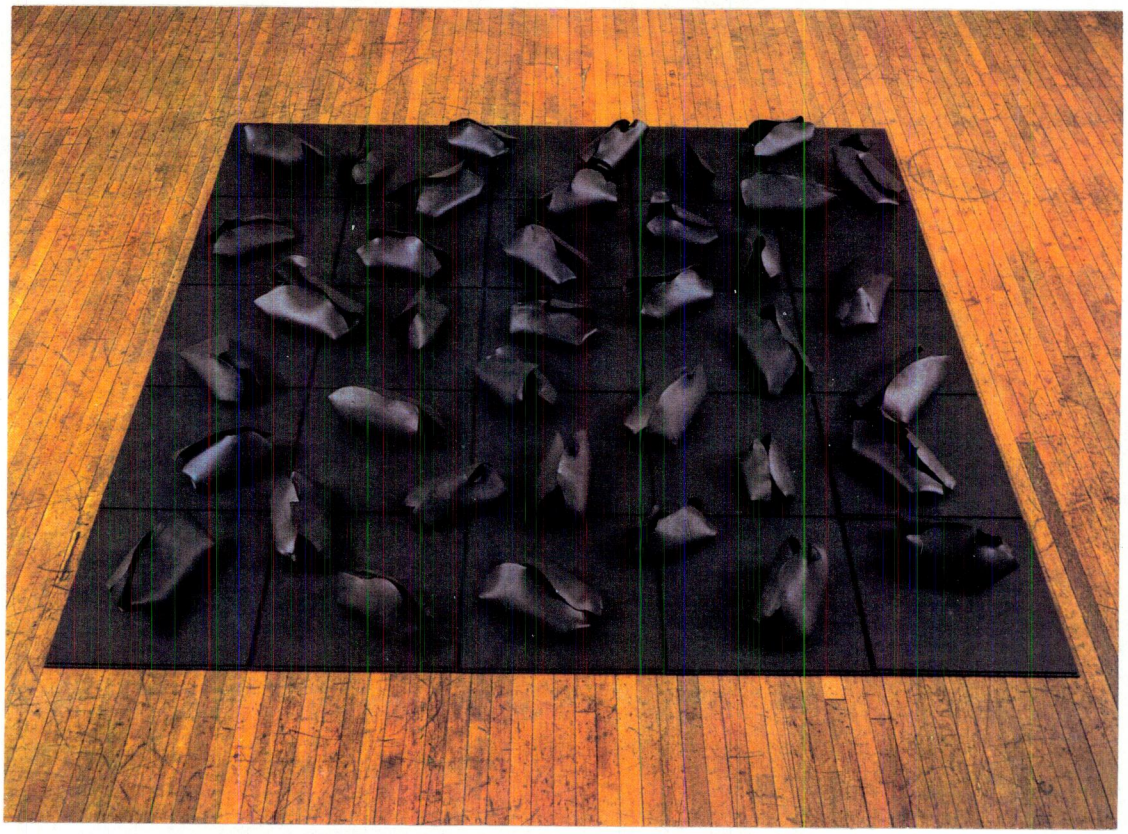


Plate 21, Untitled, 1987-1992 (Part of the Intra-Venus Installation).

The photographs in the *Intra-Venus* series document the progressive deterioration of Hannah Wilke's conventional beauty, through illness and treatment to ultimate death. They are extraordinary in the seamlessness in which they fit into the whole of Wilke's artistic production and intention. *Intra-Venus* was part of the artist's complex discourse that refused to deny the pleasure of narcissism and the pleasures of being the object of voyeurism and at the same time maintaining control of production and representation (Perchuk, 1994, pp.93-94). *Intra-Venus* also exposes the transience and conditionally of "ideal" beauty (Jones, 1998, p.193). According to Hixon *Intra-Venus* is one of the best examples of feminist artmaking (Hixson, 1996, p.30).

The autobiographical works of a number of woman artists have recently focused on the altered state of the body as a result of illness. Nancy Fried's ceramic sculptures are based on her experiences of breast cancer and mastectomy. The photographs of Jo Spence and Miep Ter Hoeven also use their experiences of breast cancer as subject matter for their work. Matuscka, photographer and model, used the images of her body after surgery for breast cancer, as posters for raising funds for breast cancer. The work of these artists challenge cultural definitions of beauty and femininity. According to Dykstra the autobiographical photographs of bodies scarred by disease are a forceful challenge to codes of representation and cultural ideologies about the female body. The refusal to become invisible is part of the importance of these artists works (Dykstra, 1995, pp.16-19).

Endnotes

1. Wilke was a Jew and very much aware she says that "as a Jew, during the war, I would have been branded and buried had I not seen born in America". (Frueh, 1989, p.71).

2. Originally called "Curative", this title unfortunately did not materialise.

Conclusion

Hannah Wilke's contribution to feminist art was her work involving the female body. Wilke was concerned with the embodied female as both subject and object. By using her own body as a vehicle for her art, Wilke reinforced her aims and objectives. She used her body's experiences and feelings in her work to consider the realities of life, particularly the realities of being a woman. Wilke is a pro-active rather than a re-active feminist (Jones, 1994, p.6). She is more concerned with defining the female from a female perspective than deconstructing patriarchal structures of the female body and female sexuality .

From the beginning of her artistic career in the early 1960's, Wilke was concerned with creating a formal imagery that was specifically female, and at the same time universal. Her sculptural forms fulfilled this commitment. In the 1970's her photographic and performance self-portraits extended to a presentation of herself as both subject and object. In her work she exposed the multidimensional nature of the female body and the uncertainty of its definitions. In exhibiting herself as subject and object she was also aware of the interrelationship of these categories. Wilke was also concerned with authenticating the aspects of the female body, ignored, feared and denigrated by patriarchy. She wished to valorise female desires and desirabilities as well as female sexuality from a female perspective. In her work, Wilke aimed at creating a positive narcissism for women in order to disrupt patriarchal demands that women engage in a continual process of improvement to meet a set of standards.

Patriarchy has taught women to dislike themselves, Wilke teaches them to love themselves.

It was in the realm of self-display and narcissism that Wilke's work was heavily criticised. Feminist critics saw her work as self indulgent, narcissistic and self exploitive. They interpreted her work as re-establishing the female body within conventional objectification structures. This criticism was augmented by the fact that Wilke's own beauty adhered to conventional definitions. Wilke's purpose, however, was to reverse the voyeurism which patriarchy has built into its use of women as objects. She took control of the female image from male directorship to become producer and manager of her own image.

Wilke risked the criticism to deal with an area of feminism that has been, up to recently, low on the feminist agenda. The subjects of beauty, self-love and female desires and desirabilities have embarrassed and frightened feminists. These critics had not yet, disengaged themselves from historical associations of narcissism with a devalued femininity. Narcissism has been equated with a pathological obsession of a woman with her appearances, Wilke ignored traditional definitions and created a positive narcissism for women.

In using her own nude body, in her work, Wilke examines its contingency as well as its subjectivity. She reveals the restrictions of a concept of identity based completely on the visual. In *In Memorium*, *Portrait of the Artist with her Mother,*

Selma Butter, and *Intravenus,* Wilke examines this concept of female attraction (Jones, 1994, pp.7-9). Wilke claims and celebrates beauty, not only for the conventional "beauty" but also for those women whose bodies have been marginalised and rendered invisible in our cultural representations - the aged and the sick body.

Intavenus is an excellent retort to those who criticised Wilke for her self indulgence, narcissism and exploitation of her own beauty (Jones, 1995 p.9). In exhibiting the "deteriorating" effects of her cancer and its treatment on her previously "beautiful" body, Wilke exposed the transience and conditionally of her own beauty and forced the viewer to consider the uncertainty of a beauty based on the visual (Jones, 1994, p.13).

The controversial nature of Wilke's work contributed more generally, to an aspect of feminist argument and discussion which demanded a dismissal of inherent patriarchal ideology and that insisted on the reality that women can do what they wish with their bodies.

To her critics, Wilke had and deserves the last word,

> "It was risky for me to act beautiful, but the scars representing the ugliness of society sometimes went unnoticed. People often gave me this bullshit of 'What would you have done if you weren't so gorgeous?' What difference does it make?....Gorgeous people die as do the stereotypical 'ugly'. Everybody dies". (Perchuk, 1994, p.94).

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