

MARIA WALSH

writer Maria Walsh responds with a text and an image of a work by Hannah Wilke



A question or a series of questions can provoke musings and reflections rather than answers:

Performativity allows for the recontextualisation of feminist-informed artists from the 1970s such as Hannah Wilke, accused then of essentialism and narcissism. Read through the lens of performativity where saying is doing and subject to a ritual repetition that generates the possibility of resignification, Wilke's poses pose an essential question for feminist-informed and/or inspired art practices today. Not only about how to challenge orthodox hierarchies between bodies and language but how to re-imagine the interrelation between them.

Bodies are always already inscribed by a number of codes: personal, social, and ideological. When I look at 'What Does This Represent? What Do You Represent?' (Reinhardt), 1978-84', what I see is a question, a challenge: how could these codes signify something other than what we know them to mean in Western patriarchal culture? It is not nostalgia to hold this image up as a foil to the literalist representations of bodies and language in contemporary art practices - Tracey Emin, Cathy Wilkes, to name a few high profile ones. It is rather to hold a virtual mirror to future possibilities of producing new expressive relations between bodies and language.

Paradoxically, these relations may depend on the artwork's creation of a universal space. While the 'universal' was taboo in past feminist discourse as it was deemed to be synonymous with 'the male subject', it also has another meaning as a potential space in which anybody might find themselves addressed (and here I'm loosely paraphrasing Barbara Kruger). This is the universal as a virtual concept rather than a stable category. Wilke's image takes me to a place where categories are dismantled and the universal, as I mean it here, is probed...

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Left: Hannah Wilke, 'What Does This Represent / What Do You Represent (Reinhart)', 1978-84, from "So Help Me Hannah series", black and white photograph

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