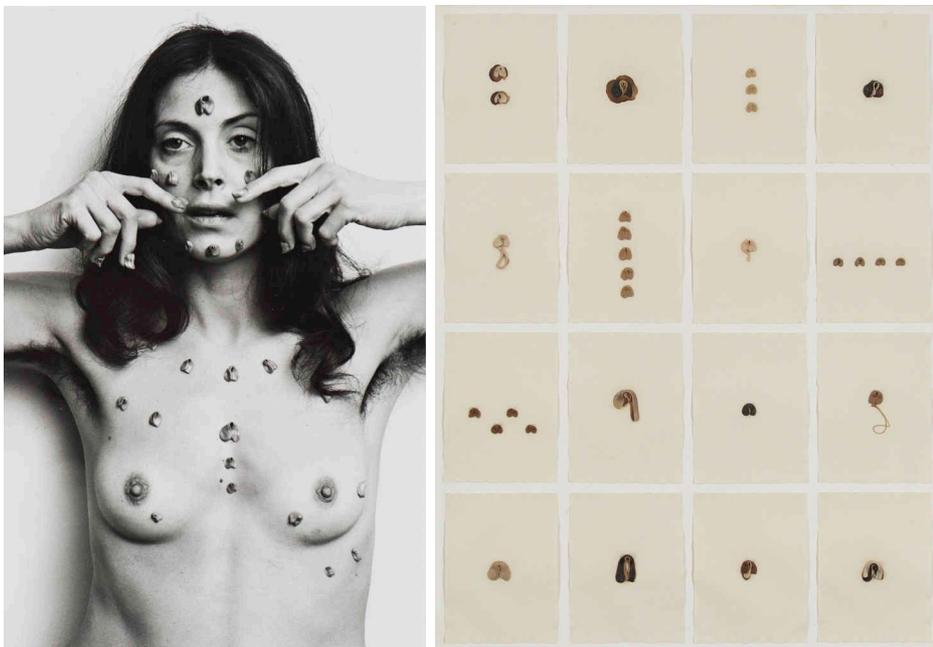


ARTSY

# Hannah Wilke's Naked Crusade to Subvert the Patriarchy

Hannah Williams | 1 January 2019



Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. Starification Object Series*, 1974. © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt, Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles. Licensed by VAGA at Artist's Rights Society (ARS), New York, DACs, London. Courtesy of Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles and Alison Jacques Gallery, London.

Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. Starification Object Series*, 1975. Courtesy Richard Saltoun.

At the far end of Alison Jacques Gallery in London, large and immediate, a sculpture of a vulva appeared leathery, red-raw, hanging from small hooks like drying meat. The sculpture's edges are rippled like petals, shrivelled and calloused, and the folds overlap around a central cavity. Hannah Wilke's *Untitled* (ca. 1970) begs to be touched, as though by doing so one might begin to understand these contradictions: delicate yet hardened, beautiful but off-putting. It has the look

of something blooming and rotting all at once. It made me think of women, of death, of the utter strangeness of the body.

It's easy to label her output "feminist art." Wilke, who was born Arlene Hannah Butter in 1940 in New York and died of cancer in Houston, Texas, in 1993 at age 52, is best known for her performances, photographs, and sculptures, many of which incorporate vulva imagery and her own nude body. When asked why she employed non-traditional materials such as lint, chewing gum, erasers, and vintage postcards, Wilke replied, "I chose gum because it's the perfect metaphor for the American woman—chew her up, get what you want out of her, throw her out and pop in a new piece." Textuality and physicality are inextricable from the politics of her work; their very fabric is imbued with her statement of intent.



Hannah Wilke, *Untitled*, 1970s. © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt, Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles. Licensed by VAGA at Artist's Rights Society (ARS), New York, DACs, London. Courtesy of Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles and Alison Jacques Gallery, London.

Wilke explored this idea of materiality in her well-known "S.O.S. Starification Object Series" (1974–82), a sequence of public performances and documentary photographs. During a performance, Wilke would give out chewing gum to viewers, instructing them to hand it back when it had softened. She'd then fashion the gum into a vulva-like shape—she called it a "cunt" or "box"—and stick it to her body. The effect, captured in the accompanying black-and-white photographs, is unsettling: Wilke vamps like a screen idol even as her face and body are turned grotesque, covered in strange welts that appear almost parasitic.

The violence of mastication—the grinding of teeth, the destruction and transformation of something once whole—is central to the work itself. In this performance, Wilke figuratively reenacted that violence on her own body, symbolizing the real dangers that society imposes upon women. Wilke’s own words emphasize the idea of the chewing gum as an externalized symbol of womanhood that is smoothed out, transformed, then rejected: “As an American girl born with the name Butter in 1940, I was often confused when I heard what it was like to be used, to be spread, to feel soft, to melt in your mouth....Fascistic feelings, internal wounds, made from external situations.”

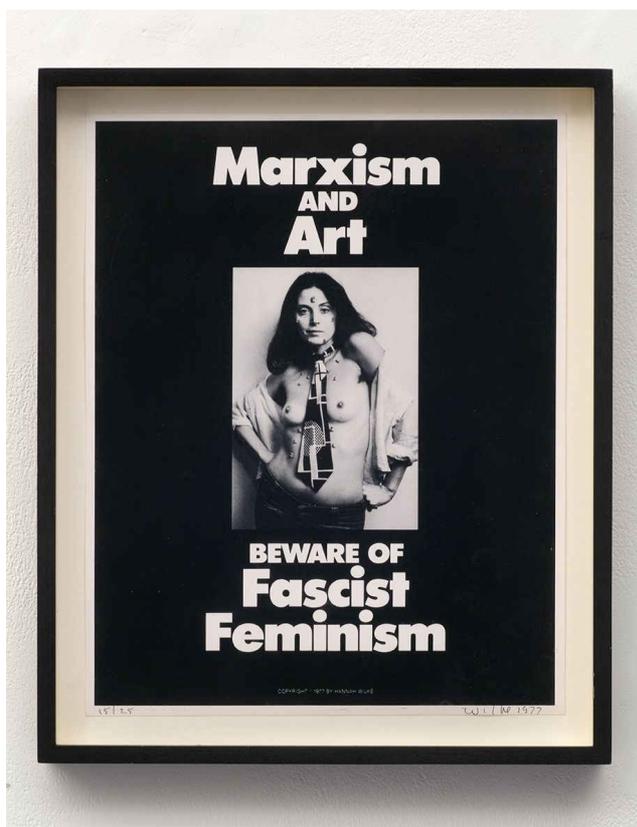


Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. Starification Object Series*, 1974. © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt, Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles. Licensed by VAGA at Artist’s Rights Society (ARS), New York, DACs, London. Courtesy of Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles and Alison Jacques Gallery, London.

Hannah Wilke, *One Car Just Ain’t Enough*. Ronald Feldman Gallery

This emphasis on the body—specifically the female body—was both the reason for Wilke’s success and the critical dissatisfaction with her work. As an attractive, straight, white woman who used her body as a canvas—a site upon which to stage a complex dialogue on beauty and femininity—Wilke was often observed with distaste. She had captured an eternal dilemma: Can femininity or sexuality ever subvert patriarchal ideals?

In her 1987 essay, “The Dynamics of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Pornography and Performance,” Jill Dolan noted that, “Wilke and Carolee Schneemann, who frequently performed nude, had beautiful bodies that implicitly legitimized their exposure in the performance space according to the dominant culture’s standards.” For Dolan, rather than subverting societal norms, Wilke’s nude performances were a tool that upheld them, further adding to the stratification of women’s bodies and the exclusion of those not deemed attractive enough.



Hannah Wilke, Untitled, ca. 1960. Ronald Feldman Gallery

Hannah Wilke, *Marxism & Art*, 1977. © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt, Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles. Licensed by VAGA at Artist’s Rights Society (ARS), New York, DACs, London.

It’s also necessary to examine how Wilke’s representations of vaginas are linked to her ideas around a “natural” womanhood, with her claim that women are “biologically superior. I can have a baby, you can’t.” There’s an uncomfortable strain of essentialism to her statement—one that Wilke has often been criticized for. In this light, her centering of the vagina and use of the idealized feminine body seems lazy, a simplistic byword for femininity that reduces women to their reproductive organs. It’s an objection often raised against female artists from the early 1970s, when many radical, second-wave feminists didn’t consider—or worse, outright rejected—transgender women.

But to definitively categorize Wilke as only interested in a certain kind of biological, essentialist femininity is to disregard the complexity that makes her work so absorbing. The vulva sculptures are not just varied in terms of size or color, but in their very form. Some destabilize the shape of the vulva to such an extent that they function on a purely figurative level. As Rachel Middleman observed in her 2013 essay “Rethinking Vaginal Iconology with Hannah Wilke’s Sculpture,” Wilke’s “ceramic sculptures of the early 1960s (cut, folded, pressed, stretched, and shaped by hand) suggest male, female, and sometimes androgynous sexuality.” Her pastel-hued paintings from this time period reinforce this ambiguity, with phalluses and vulvas that blur into each other until synthesized. Rather than reinforcing a binary, her work alludes to overlap, intermingling.



Hannah Wilke, *Intra-Venus Series No. 11, December 11, 1992*, 1991-1992. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Gallery

It’s also vital to consider the context surrounding the production of Wilke’s work. The pieces were made against the backdrop of *Roe v. Wade* (decided in 1973), a Supreme Court struggle that centered around controlling women’s right to an abortion. To say that Wilke’s beauty meant that she was unable to use her body as a political statement therefore seems reductive. This environment also had a financial and societal toll on women—even beautiful ones—who used their bodies in ways deemed unacceptable. Wilke voiced worries of losing her teaching job at the School of Visual Arts in New York because of her nude performances, demonstrating the conservatism inherent even in artistic circles.

This analysis also glosses over Wilke's desire to use her work to draw out dynamics of race and power, especially in regard to her status as a Jewish American. As Wilke stated in her 1978 video performance *Intercourse with...*, "As a Jew, during the war, I would have been branded and buried had I not been born in America. Starification-scarification....Jew, black, Christian, Muslim ... Labelling people instead of listening to them ... judging according to primitive prejudices... Sticks and stones break our bones, but names more often hurt us." This sentiment is reflected in her poster *Marxism and Art* (1977), in which she uses her naked body—and the slogan "Marxism and Art: Beware of Fascist Feminism"—to directly confront the viewer. It's an arresting image—her chest spangled with her *Starification* gum vulvas, shirt open, tie long—that explicitly acknowledges Wilke's work as political, a call-out to her critics whose reaction to her body reveals their conservatism.

Throughout the 1980s and '90s, Wilke's practice directly investigated the relationship between her success and her looks. The series "Intra-Venus" (1991–93), her final work, documents her body throughout chemotherapy. Running parallel to her earlier nude photographs, which presented the viewer with her naked torso in black and white, all youthful confidence and coy gaze, this bold, heartbreaking series is instead shot in color. Wilke photographed her gauze, her drip, the purple veins that run through her skin. Her shampoo-advertisement quality hair has been reduced to wisps by the chemo; halfway through the sequence, she shaves it off, then photographs a lock of it. Even at the end, Wilke was concerned, still, with all aspects of the naked body: vulnerable, beautiful, strange.

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