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Hannah Wilke and Reading Narcissism in Images

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Hannah Wilke and Reading Narcissism in Images

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Arts
of Bard College

By

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Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter I	
Hannah Wilke and the 1970s: Body, Image, Feminism & Criticism.....	4
Chapter II	
Opening the Narcissism of Wilke's Reception History.....	22
Chapter III	
Reading Narcissism: Psychoanalysis, the Female Body, and Self-Centering.....	53
Conclusion.....	74
Figures.....	77
Bibliography.....	93

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For Wilke, who always got hers.

Introduction

This project intends to expose underlying misogyny and reinforcements of patriarchy in the way assertive women are viewed. More specifically, this project focuses on one artist, Hannah Wilke, who during her lifetime (1940-1993) had been caught in a storm of passive and overt aggression towards not only her work, but her character. I became interested in how the critical reception of art bleeds into life, and how from that we learn more than just about the artist, but the attitudes and perspectives of the people that surrounded, tormented, and fed the artwork.

In this project I emphasize subtle, yet toxic ways viewership can facilitate the suppression of female subjects/artists—it has often does this by censoring the female body, constricting female agency, a destroying the female sense of self. I questioned the voice of this project, because it prioritised showing the nuances of the vernacular used to criticize female subjects for narcissism—that insinuates the female subject over-values herself. However, in light of the 2016 of the 2016 US Presidential Election a lot of sexist/misogynist vernacular has prevailed, and it is not nuanced at all! The country has elected a man who brags about sexually assaulting women over the first woman president in US history. I have always said that it easier rebuff outright discrimination than it is the seedy, shady, (or worse) incognizant aggressions towards women. But I am aware now that there is less inclination be subtle.

After a year of studying Wilke's experience as a a New York artist, and the criticism of her work/character that continues even her death, it has become evident that narcissism multi-faceted concept and and invocation of it, is perhaps, one of the best ways to gage the sensibilities of an audience. Wilke is known for her 'feminist-narcissism' which was coined by

art historian, Amelia Jones. But before narcissism was interpreted in a positive way by Jones, Wilke encountered decades of stigmatisation for the way she displayed herself in her photographic/film/performance work. Looking more into the criticism used against her, and the history of narcissism I saw specific connections made between narcissism, the female sense of self and morality. For this, Wilke was considered by many a regressive feminist.

Her dismissal for narcissism is further complicated by the fact that (actual) narcissism is an ego-defense mechanism, and if the term is being used loosely, but still discredit in its own right, then what is the charge of narcissism but an attack on the ego, and more often than not, a degradation the female ego. Beginning with Wilke and the early 1970s feminist, I question why feminism still perpetuate such a patriarchal attitude towards even the slightest inclination of narcissistic display.

The charge of narcissism revealed itself as eerily tied to patriarchal structure which insists on the passivity of the female role, punishes (always with moral rationalization) women who act outside of the passive role, and squashes efforts to become non-reliant on the validation of the others.

Though this analysis will convince explicit misogynists to reconsider their position, but it is my hope that by complicating narcissism, removing its moral and sexist implications, and showing how it facilitated autonomy for Wilke, I have disempowered the attitude towards narcissism that cause her alienation. In addition, I have analysed the anatomy of narcissism, as we know it in its psychoanalytic roots, in order to construct the idea that narcissism can be enabling. For people whose experiences are not centered in this society, narcissism be a self-preservative expression, wherein the individual center-themselves in spite of their social

disadvantages. All in all, my findings should inspire a viewership that is open to self-centeredness, especially in artwork, and can interpret the ways in which 'narcissism' functions in non-reductive ways.

CHAPTER I

Hannah Wilke and the 1970s: Body, Image, Feminism & Criticism

Gestures, 1974: a video of two hands, stark white, against a black background, that enter from converse sides of the frame and meet at the center on the face of a woman. (Fig. 1) The woman, whose face is also stark, with hair so dark it appears to melt into the abyss behind her, is that of the artist, Hannah Wilke. With fingertips all aligned the hands pressure her face, idle in the foreground, and work the flesh outward in several swipes. They trace her bone structure, toggle her cheeks, stretch and squeeze her malleable flesh; and like clay, like object, her face submits to their bidding. The hands mold expressions and at times they pause and exhibit its insincerity until they wipe it away. Wilke does not attempt to deceive the viewers because it is easy to deduce that the hands are her own, however, it is the crafted performance of *Gestures* that reads as if the hands are separate entities with shifted roles. For one, the close cropping of the frame disconnects them physically which adds to the sense of the hands as active *others*. More than that, the body parts take on qualities which they are not conventionally assigned. Wilke's face, the most recognizable feature of a human, is astoundingly de-personified by its malleability. Seldom does her face act on its own. The hands take the aggressive role, as the high-contrast black and white aesthetic dramatises the effect of the hands and face as two wholly separate players in the frame. At one point the hands tug her lips incrementally outward until an inscrutable full-toothed grimace is formed, and meanwhile Wilke's eyes stare straight ahead. Her inanimateness is unhindered by the emotive disfiguration.

While *Gestures* is a thirty-four minute portrait of the artist, it extends beyond its historical connotations of gender-performance or female narcissism. It inverts, tilts, and reassigns roles of viewer and performer, subject and object, active and passive. The hand kneads a smile. The hands are ‘other’. The flesh is a material and the body is art. Wilke’s *Gestures* provokes questions about the body and its representation, which was a heavily investigated subject during the Women's Movement. The video inflames many of the points of contention that arose within the Movement as well, such as: objectification of the female body, the ethics of body-centered art, regressive and progressive feminism, sexuality and beauty conventions, and gender roles.

Although Wilke had always been concerned with representation of the body, *Gestures* was the first project in which she ushered in imagery of her own body as having artistic value. In the video, Wilke asserts her face as sculptural material for which her hands procure various expressions. The expressions are done and undone in a manner akin a sculptor examining clay and testing the strength of the grout to gain a sense of its ability before beginning to build. In a way *Gestures* is the document of her early curiosity with her own image that foreshadows a succession of projects in which she would articulate her full body before the camera. Her early *Gestures*, though it points to sculpture, does not relate her body to a sculpture as much as it does her performance to sculpture practice. While conventionally sculpture involves the reconstitution of materials (but not always), the performance in *Gestures* does not read as transformative or even recontextualising of its content. Her face is a material from beginning to end, and at no point is there a shift where one could devise that something is ‘made’. Instead, the shift is all in the naming; Wilke, through *Gestures*, is announcing her body *is* material and always has been. Although the antics of her hands on her face does not amount to a sculpture per se, through

performing her own materiality with her hands she signals a broadening of possibilities to what her sculptural practice can apply.

The change was first evident when *Gestures* premiered at the *Floor Show* in 1974 at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. (Fig. 2) Wilke was mildly established in the New York art scene, at the time *Gestures*' conception, as a sculptor of unconventional materials. The *Floor Show*, Wilke's second solo exhibition, is where she installed clusters of ceramic, laundry-lint, and found fortune-cookie sculptures, respectively, on the gallery floor. Her years of practice with clay, translated into her treatment of the laundry lint which she had collected for two or three years from her partner, Claes Oldenburg's, dryer. She systematically folded and compressed the material into small forms. The found fortune-cookies, arranged in a long line, mirrored the vulval appearance the other tenderly hand-formed sculptures. Apart from the consistent visual theme of female genitalia, the strongest commonality between all of the objects installed at the *Floor Show* was the evidence of Wilke's touch that is both systematic and immediate. The petite, one-fold, vulval folds recur all along the plane of the floor in varying materials, but never relinquish the evidence of Wilke's touch.

Despite *Gestures* having been the only video installed at the *Floor Show*, amid analogous hand-made objects, Wilke's sculptural sensibility transfers from physical object to the screen. The minimalist aesthetic of *Gestures* along with Wilke's sculpturally evocative performance permits the video to transmit 'tactility' on par with that of the vulval objects. The video is, however, distinguished not for visual incongruity, but for what it means for representation of the body and for Wilke's career in the context of the *Floor Show*.

The complexity *Gestures* presents of the body as art object realised in the *Floor Show* by its deviation from the other art objects in the exhibition. While all of the works at the Floor Show are evident of Wilke's systematic hand-molding methods, *Gestures* especially brings Wilke's sentimental treatment of materials to the fore. Many of Wilke's early sculptures have a short lifetime and are fragile if not already destroyed, but *Gestures* evades 'lifetime' in a way the objects in the Floor Show cannot. This has less to do with *Gestures*' status as a video and more to do with its evocation of process over product. In the video Wilke churns expressions on her face and settles on a pose only for a moment before wiping it away or altering its configuration. Meanwhile the temporariness of the formations Wilke creates on her face refines *Gestures* to its process. The video elucidates Wilke's sentimentality towards the treatment of her materials that drives the exhibition. More than instant, the sculptural process of *Gestures* is unstable; the instability goes to comment on the inherent complexity of the body as art-object.

Wilke adjoins the mediums of video and sculpture with a permeating sense of touch. But the leveling of materials also revealed the inherent differences between a body's representation in image as opposed to laundry lint, for example. The video presents Wilke's body as just another material to mold and to stage and to be consumed by the viewer. Undoubtedly the automation of Wilke's expressions are flavored by her notorious sense of humour, but even in their quirkiness there is an eerie, underlying discomfort--and awareness of the jarring effect that self-objectification gives.

Wilke chose to display *Gestures* on a monitor alongside her vulval sculptures, or "boxes", to let the works inform each other about inextricability of body with sculpture, creation and life. Though she could tentatively situate her work in the conversation of her choosing, her

statements about the body as art-object have triggered discussions that transcend the simplicity of her first video. For representing her own body, in performative photographic or video works until her death, she was regularly confronted by the various and powerful meanings in which viewers assign the female body. Her unapologetic diligence matched by her contentious reception history is part of a larger discussion, that goes unresolved, about the position of the female body in art.

Body, Image, Feminism

After the first half century of war and horror phenomenology theories became more of interest. Phenomenology can function as an alleviating response to mortality because it gives heed the meaning of a specific body in its relation to space. It understands that the way in which the body effects and is affected by exterior events or objects is subjective to the identity of the viewer. Theorist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, states that the identity of an interpreter is always implicated in the interpretation, therefore the relation of object and subject is fluid, simultaneously both, and “never either fully”.¹ Not only does this idea reject total objectivity, but it understands the body as interrelated and integral to space. The experiences of the body are not separate and impeding, but intact shaped by the viewing subject and the bias and predilections. In a period of history where people feel the world, and horror especially, around them is out of their control phenomenology gives value to their individual experiences.

¹Amelia Jones, "Meaning, Identity, Embodiment: The Uses of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology in Art History," *Art and Thought*, 2003, , doi:10.1002/9780470774199.ch4.

Consequently, phenomenology, by insisting on the interconnectedness of the subject and object, encourages the viewing subject to explore their own subjectivity.

Performance, in a way, necessitates phenomenological reading because it imbues the circuit of subject/object where the event remains in flux or in relation to the surroundings. The phenomenon of the 1950s and 60s Happenings which entailed performing everyday occurrences, were centered on the very idea of interrelatedness and relied solely on the engagement of the body in its space. Undulating the conventional roles of subject and object of viewing, knowing that an individual is *never either fully*, artists use that fluidity to indulge in their own subjective experience and incite the unknown experience of the viewing others. *Gestures* has been critically acclaimed as a phenomenological video. It embodies the fluidity of subject/object by actively reforming her ‘sculpted’ face; it juxtaposes the animate with inanimate and exemplifies the idea of Wilke inability to be object ‘fully’.² Although she may present herself like clay Wilke can never embody the ‘objectless’ of her vulval sculptures, because she too is a viewer. The identity of the viewer is implicated in their response to her self-engagement.³

Wilke was like her contemporaries in that she continued a post-war body interest well into the notable years of video performance of the 1970s. Women artists did not annex early

² Lowery Sims, B. H. D. Buchloh, *Art & Ideology* (New York, NY: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 46.

³ That the identity of the viewer is implicated their viewing response of her self-engagement, or her experience of flux (being both object and subject) is the dominating interest of the following chapters, where I explore the critical response to Wilke and the anatomy of narcissism by which it is influenced. Amelia Jones in “Hannah Wilke: Intra-Venus,” (6) discusses the woman living in patriarchy existing in a state of (narcissistic) flux is empowering because it “confuses the conventional separation between woman as subject and object of making that values women by consigning them to remain in the former role.” She argues that Wilke exacerbates the state of flux.

performance in the way they did early video art, which predominantly incorporated performance. Artist, and Wilke's contemporary, Carolee Schneemann comments, "By the mid 1960s, performance played a major role in the New York art world, yet women were a conspicuous minority on the scene."⁴ A number of female names to the performance art scene after 1968, in the beginning of the Women's Movement. Schneemann calls the efforts of the first wave of women performers "a shift in collective thinking about art". In performance the body became the woman's best asset for articulating her suppression and not just the site of experiencing suppression.

Wilke continued her practice in performance and imaging her body which included camera documentation. She performed live for the first time a piece titled, "Super-T-art", at the Kitchen in 1974—the same year she began in video with *Gestures*. As a pioneering space for artists experimenting video and performance, The Kitchen, was founded in New York City just three years prior to both of Wilke's debuts. Performance and video formed a natural synthesis.

Artist, Dara Birnbaum, has offered a lot of incite on the rise of video and its induction to performance art. She remarks that the video works of the late 1960s and early 1970s "largely functioned as an extension of the more traditional vocabulary of painting, sculpture and performance."⁵ Wilke's *Gestures* is an example of that direct translation of

⁴ Carolee Schneemann, *Up to and including Her Limits* (New York, NY: C. Schneemann, 1978), 5.

⁵ Dara Birnbaum and B. H. D. Buchloh, *Rough Edits: Popular Image Video Works 1977-1980* (Halifax, N.S.: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1987), (introduction).

sculpture/performance to video.⁶ Birnbaum cites that by the late 1970s video had become a medium of its own. Birnbaum's original interest in video began with television, which she calls "common visual experience" that artists ignored.⁷ Wilke's interest was not in television, but she was very rooted in common visual experiences. Her identity as an artist nurtured interjection of traditional mediums into video/photography, but the way she represented herself played on the common visual experience of an artist that is the male-gaze. By aligning herself with the vocabulary of the male-gaze, posing as the female nude and her own muse, she complicated her traditional sculpture/performance presence before the camera. She pulled on another common visual experience tied to her female identity, by creating a theatre out of the glamour girl and artist celebrity.

Although the era of the 1970s yielded notable video works of both women and men, many of which utilized the artists' body, it can be argued that video as medium rising was especially significant to women artists. For the first time, women had the opportunity to operate the camera and oversee the editing process which resulted in an unprecedented opportunity for complete control over their own representation. By functioning outside of the commercial realm female artists could produce without pandering to the phallogocentric order.⁸ Birnbaum, recalls the early days of video as a "guerrilla experience, taking video equipment and technology into one's

⁶ Another example of a direct translation from more traditional artistic mediums to video is Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1965), which has been critically acclaimed for its collage and painterly nature. Schneemann is mentioned throughout this chapter.

⁷ Dara Birnbaum and B. H. D. Buchloh, *Rough Edits: Popular Image Video Works 1977-1980*, 68.

⁸ Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism : Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 804. Mulvey in her essay, "Visual Pleasure" dubs the term phallogocentric order in considering the frustration of feminists working within the patriarchal structures of society.

own hands and thus becoming more forceful than commercial television.”⁹ In considering why so many women took to video, Birnbaum states that she is not convinced that new medium new influx of women artist is concrete logic, however she admits that her “role identification with women” was immediately important in her expressing her concerns.¹⁰ Birnbaum brings forward a very important aspect of video that would be attractive to female artists, like Wilke: the experience of taking the equipment ‘into one’s own hands’ means taking their own representation and their own perspective—from being exclusively in the hands of men and into the hands of the women themselves. Wilke used photography in much of the same way she used video, create something outside of herself that was completely made of herself. Through her performances for the camera she has created works that one critical called “disturbingly because they “[insist] on a ‘one-to-one’ relationship.”¹¹ He explains that, “the ability to engage us viscerally in her life and work is experienced most directly in Wilke’s videos and performances.¹² Understandably, video has nurtured political expression equally as much as feminist ambitions have been drawn to the medium of video; “since the 1970s, feminist alternative media has been a most significant site of personal, social, and political action for American women.”¹³

Wilke first asserts her body, as a medium of protest, in the midst of the Women’s Movement, a cultural machine intended achieve equal liberties for the women by giving them a

⁹ Dara Birnbaum and B. H. D. Buchloh, *Rough Edits: Popular Image Video Works 1977-1980*, 68.

¹⁰ Dara Birnbaum, Barbara Schröder and Karen Kelley, "Dara Birnbaum," *BOMB - Artists in Conversation*, Summer 2008.: .

¹¹Lowery Sims, B. H. D. Buchloh, *Art & Ideology*, 47.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³Stella Rollig, *<Hers> - Video as a Female Terrain: = Video Als Weibliches Terrain* (Wien: Springer, 2000), 8.

vocabulary to articulate their suppression and the opportunity for their voice to be affect change. When Wilke began self-imaging there was a growing faction of society that unprecedentedly supported women in articulating their experiences of otherness, which became the Women's Movement. Schneemann, names *The Second Sex* as the first permission she received to "introduce [her] body into a literal space".¹⁴ She recalls: In 1959, I found Simone de Beauvoir. I felt all alone while my sense of gender politics was revealed by *The Second Sex*. Later I found out that there thousands of other women all alone with de Beauvoir."¹⁵ Schneemann is an early video artist who began performing before there was a sense of 'the Movement', but by the late 1960s women in numbers were picking-up super 8 video cameras, "something that looks like a cigar box"¹⁶ With camera in hand women artists took the opportunity to stake out space in the visual culture, and in effect challenge their own representation while negotiating what was emerging as the feminist consciousness.

After *Gestures* there was a natural progression from impersonal sculptural iconography to creating self-centered imagery about her social position. *Gestures* signified the transition between her relinquishment of anonymity (in her sculptures) to a full embrace of uninhibited, confrontational body language. to a fwas a natural progression for Wilke. Despite her work landing in the direction of popular tendencies in art in the 1970s, for a woman to produce such

¹⁴ Alexandra Juhasz, *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video*, 67.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, 71. Carolee Schneemann recalls a man offering her a free camera after being impressed by one of her films. She goes to his hotel to meet him, expecting a nicer Super 8 camera, like a Beaulieu, "the camera [she] really deserved", and received instead "something that looks like a cigar box", a Bell & Howell. Taking what she can, she later shoots her three year-long film, *Kitch's Last Meal*, with this free camera.

unobscured self-representation it was high-stakes. Video, photography presented new frontiers for Wilke to manifest her individualism and unique feminist perspective.

Criticism

Lowery Sims, art critic, notes that she was associated with the movement early on, due to the sexual content of her work.¹⁷ Lucy Lippard is famously included with the critics who expressed reproach for Wilke's work (which she recanted), but actually she is one of the first to articulate a grievance for how narcissism is ascribed to women.

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!!! Because women are considered sex objects, it is taken for granted that any woman who presents her nude body in public is doing so because she thinks she is beautiful. She is a narcissist, and Vito Acconci with his romantic image and pimply back is an artist.¹⁸

That Lippard gives, possibly, the powerfully concise argument for tolerance of Wilke's self-display is shocking because she also gives Wilke some of harshest criticism. "A glamour girl in her own right who sees her art as 'seduction.'"¹⁹ Lippard chastises Wilke for confusing her roles, trying to be both "flirt and feminist," essentially presenting Wilke with an ultimatum of self-display or feminism because her conventional beauty will not let her be taken seriously for both.²⁰ Lippard adds, that because she tries to be both "beautiful woman and artist" with

¹⁷ Lowery Sims, B. H. D. Buchloh, *Art & Ideology* (New York, NY: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 45.

¹⁸ Lippard quoted in Lowery Sims, B. H. D. Buchloh, *Art & Ideology* (New York, NY: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 47. Also quoted in also quoted in Amelia Jones, *Intra-Venus: Hannah Wilke*, 4-5.

¹⁹ Amelia Jones, *Intra-Venus: Hannah Wilke* (New York: Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, 1995), 4.

²⁰ Nancy Princenthal and Hannah Wilke, *Hannah Wilke* (Munich: Prestel, 2010), 67.

“politically ambiguous manifestations” she opened herself to being criticised on a personal level in addition to her as an artist.²¹ Elizabeth Hess condemns her for ““innumerable narcissistic poses [that enable her] to wallow in cultural obsessions with the female body,”²² Wilke was even criticised for “assuming the conventions associated with a stripper,” because her actions were not clearly subversive of conventions. And the criticism that does not attack her feminism, goes in the opposite direction, and focuses on her actual appearance calling her the “the most gorgeous face and body in town”.²³ Wilke exclaimed, “People often give me this bullshit of, ‘What would you have done if you weren’t so gorgeous?’” expressing the extent to which her appearance affected the reception of her work.²⁴

Although the Women’s Movement began with the same objective of empowering women, it was revealed that second-wave feminists had different and contradictory ideas about how to proceed. How to combat objectification by the male gaze was just one of the issues which feminists artists were exposed to. Feminists had to pioneer decisions on which actions were progressive and which were regressive to the Movement. Already cleft from the concerns of mass culture, feminists were often divided further on the ethics female representation. Wilke was accustomed to the ferocity of disagreement on representation, invoked by anti-essentialist critics. Her formalist self-portraits essentialist were deemed regressive to ‘the cause’, despite her own concerns with a society obsessed with controlling the female body. The orthodoxy of anti-essentialism rejected all representation of the female body because of the long and

²¹ Ibid.

²² Amelia Jones, *Intra-Venus: Hannah Wilke*, 4.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Nancy Princenthal and Hannah Wilke, *Hannah Wilke*, 67.

complicated history imbued which lent the female body to objectification by men. This came in response to essentialism, which is found in a lot of early feminist art, argues for inherent differences between female and male subjects, or does so by spectacularization sexual anatomy/differences and in turn reinforcing the gender binary. Essentialism has problematic roots in using sexual difference to assign females as the lesser sex, and thereafter it has been used disseminate transphobia. Anti-essentialism became a popular deconstruction by feminists to dislodge arguments about sexual difference, so that a stronger argument for gender equality could be made. However, anti-essentialism feminism in the 1970s reestablished constrictions on the female body, and thereby reinforced patriarchal tendencies to disallow women their subjectivity. Anti-Essentialism promotes the idea of the female body as “[inexorable] from the patriarchal gaze.”²⁵ The movement towards anti-essentialism dogmatically criticised female self-display despite its feminist intentions. Wilke, Schneemann, and Benglis are the three artists most commonly grouped for being disavowed by the 1970s feminist art movement, which was suspicious of their ostentatious self-display and regressive by ostentatiously exhibiting their bodies as art, without masquerade or subversion.²⁶

²⁵ Amelia Jones, *Intra-Venus: Hannah Wilke* (New York: Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, 1995), 6.

²⁶ Lynda Benglis’ early video work is done without explicit critique of female conventions. Her most well-know video is, possibly, *Female Sensibility* (1973) in which she proceeds lick and kiss Marilyn Lenkowsky in a close-up shot . However, Lynda Benglis is also very well know for her *ArtForum* ad (which is mentioned in chapter II of this project) and does take a more explicit critique to female conventions. The ad shows Benglis nude, holding a dildo as if it were protruding from her, and sporting a ‘macho-esque’ haircut and sunglass combination. The ad would have been rejected by the anti-essentialist all the same, and was very infamous for its audacity, but is disavowed for the same reasons of self/beauty display that affected Wilke and Schneemann.

Schneemann was condemned to essentialism in feminist history for her hetero-erotic video works and performances in which she indulges in her sexual or otherwise bodily related desires. Schneemann has regularly discussed in her interviews, the heated political climate in which she had to navigate during the Women's Movement, which led to her, one time, having to crawl out of her own showing in the late 1970s, at a film festival. The audience was largely woman-identified, and she recalls the "lesbian women" of the audience shouting "We don't need him!" in fierce reaction to the image of a man in her *Plumb Line* video. (Fig. 3) She recalls escaping the building on her hands and knees, "not because of the police or the men going crazy—but because of women going nuts."²⁷ As a self-proclaimed proto-feminist Schneemann's aesthetic concerns were not always aligned with popular feminist modes. She describes developing her fierce autonomy as an artist in the margins with the other female artists in the early 1960s.

Hannah Wilke too, expresses her qualms about making work that is both demeaned by the general public and unsupported by feminist groups. Wilke points to the "unbelievable risk" of being an artist and making a sexual statement as a female, which she became aware of when first exhibiting her genitalia-esque terra cotta 'boxes' in 1966. She complains, "Guys looking at it think you're a lesbian or an easy lay."²⁸ At the center of Wilke's agitation here is not the accusation of being gay or promiscuous, but with society's tendency to treat expression of female sexuality reductively. She was not accruing feminist support from the other side, either.

²⁷Alexandra Juhasz, *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video*, vol. 9 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 58.

²⁸Tracy Fitzpatrick et al., *Hannah Wilke: Gestures* (Purchase, NY: Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York, 2009), 15.

Schneemann remarks in an interview that the movement was sort-of sprawling at this time. She recalls: “Well, there was no women's movement in the '60s, of course. In the '60s we began to be consumed with women being able to work together as artists, but we had no sense yet of it as a movement. We were all like wild cats.”²⁹ Both artists engaged with taboo material which had not yet been claimed by any side, and which pre-dated the marginalisation of essentialist imagery, due to the works being some of the first explicit engagements with female sexual imagery, of this kind.

By the time of Schneemann's return to the United States in 1976, at the end of a self-proclaimed “four-year exile”, she observed the established feminist theory at work.³⁰ Despite these seemingly consolidated efforts among feminist artists, women such as Wilke, Schneemann, and Benglis remained beyond the reach of feminist support. Sims, in his review of Wilke, agrees with Gloria Steinem, that “It was difficult to be a good looking feminist back in those days.”³¹ Wilke complains in *Forum*, 1989, that “keeping one’s clothes on, we call Post-modernism,” but certainly she was not the only artist exhibiting nudity.³² Sims’ resolve is that Wilke walked a fine line between “unfettering the body” and “flaunting it in public,” which is why she may have experienced so much exclusion. The feminism stemming from 1970s would be accepting of the unfettered body, but ultimately it would reject Wilke for suspicion of her ‘flaunting’.³³ However, because she was put in that very position, always asked to choose between flirt and feminist, unfettering her body *meant* being able to flaunt it. Still, Wilke felt that the many of her

²⁹Alexandra Juhasz, *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video*, 69.

³⁰Ibid, 68.

³¹Lowery Sims, B. H. D. Buchloh, *Art & Ideology*, 47.

³²Nancy Princenthal and Hannah Wilke, *Hannah Wilke*, 150-151.

³³Lowery Sims, B. H. D. Buchloh, *Art & Ideology*, 48.

post-modernist peers, including but not limited to Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, Jenny Holzer, Dara Birnbaum (interestingly enough), Laurie Simmons and Barbara Ess, with whom she had exhibited were turning their backs on her.³⁴ She suggested that she was among many other women artists at the time, including Benglis and Schneemann, to create significant ‘personas’, but that she suffered from institutional censorship regardless. Sims writes that Wilke’s work is as narcissistic as, for example, the “impersonal impersonations” of Eleanor Antin or Cindy Sherman, but because she does not “disguise the self and parody the suffering, pain, and pleasure” her work is not as easy to digest. Wilke was unforgetting of the lack of support she received along with the dismissals for narcissism she endured during her career; in fact, in the last years of her life, while she being treated for the lymphoma that eventually took her life in 1993, she confronted her a cutting response to her critics in a show-all multimedia project entitled *Intra-Venus*. The tapes and flash-lit photos show up-close, (still) nude portraits of the cancer that brutalised Wilke’s body, from chemotherapy to her last fatal days. (Fig. 3-4) Jones calls the project “Wilke’s brilliant riposte to those who condemned her work as narcissistic and Wilke herself as exploiting her own beauty.”³⁵ Andrew Perchuk wrote, “Wilke had and deserves the last word,” in *Artforum* 1994.³⁶ Tragically and poetically, *Intra-venus*, culminates and

³⁴ Nancy Princenthal and Hannah Wilke, *Hannah Wilke*, 148. Wilke was included in an exhibition curated by Barbara Kruger in 1981, called “Pictures & Promises”. In addition to Kruger, Wilke, Levine, Sherman, Holzer, Simmons, and Ess there were works of Richard Prince, Hans Haacke, Joseph Kosuth. Princenthal notes that the artists included in the exhibition were “precisely those postmodernists who, Wilke believed, and not without justification, were turning their backs on her.” One should note that Sherman and Levine among the artists, including Barbara Bloom, who Princenthal names as Wilke’s heirs. The connection between Sherman and Wilke has been referenced in much of the scholarship on Wilke, including the *Art & Ideology* exhibition essay by Sims (see note above).

³⁵ Amelia Jones, *Intra-Venus: Hannah Wilke* (New York: Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, 1995), 9.

³⁶ Nancy Princenthal and Hannah Wilke, *Hannah Wilke*, 122.

concludes the work that was begun by *Gestures*. Wilke continues until her death to revel in the beauty of her life while exposing her immense loss. She shows the betrayal of her body but also her acceptance of the vulnerable, transient, and complex condition in which her body has always existed; and for those reasons it has always been the center of her work. She once said in 1985, after explaining that her appearance makes not difference in her work because her work alludes to the “suffering of humanity,” that “gorgeous people die as do the stereotypical ‘ugly’.”³⁷

Intra-Venus is a last testament, in which Wilke turns to the viewer, addressing those new and old (and those who have spurned her) and concretizes her life’s work, which, can be summarised by a quote in one of the tapes, in which Wilke says “The ordinary things sometimes are the most extraordinary. There’s honesty in them.”³⁸

The feminist art movement prompted a collaborative effort to make representation of women more honest, which of course, is a response to the much longer tradition of women being the subject of work rendered exclusively by the male gaze, and only to be penetrated by few individuals. In the tradition of the male-gaze, the ‘flaunting’ female subject has not been a point of contention; only until women began representing themselves has overt narcissism become a popular dismissal. Wilke’s career was very much shaped by that dismissal, as it aggravated those who were sensitive to female representation her work became reactive to that, and with stronger attitude. Readings in her personal life that crossed the boundary of art criticism fueled her to be more blatant and combative. Looking at *Gestures*, when she began centering herself in work, I do not believe her intentions were to be combative. Body based performance, performing for the

³⁷ Ibid, 67.

³⁸ Ibid, 122. Wilke is quoted in the *Intra-venus* tapes, talking about her mother’s voice in “Intercourse With,” an earlier video work. Princenthal notes that the quote could be her epitaph.

camera, and explorations of self and female identity and representation were points of interest that intersected in the 1970s. She stood at the crux of those modes of expression yet she was alienated by the reception of her work, perplexed by how it valued her appearance more than it valued the art it self. The attitude towards ‘narcissistic’ or self-centered work forged the power of her work, but in effect, her suppressive viewership stayed with her until her death. Larger discussions about the role of narcissism and the female sense of self are now integrated into the fabric of Wilke’s work.

CHAPTER II

Opening the Narcissism of Wilke's Reception History

The work of Hannah Wilke is often preceded by her reception history, which contain much contentious and unresolved discourse on her narcissism. In a way, narcissism has claimed her, and it would difficult to discuss her works without mentioning it. Because there has been a proclivity amongst Wilke's peers and critics to immediately reduce and discredit her on the grounds that her work is narcissistic, it is understandable why her advocates, such as Amelia Jones and Alfred Fischer, have had to work at length to counter or account for the charge of narcissism in her work. The current tendency of scholars who write on Wilke, is to reframe her obsessive use of the body by deprioritizing her condition of beauty. This project, as well, strategically explores the significance of her appearance and body-representation in her work rather than perpetuating moralistic comments about her as a person based on her appearance. While the aim of current scholarship is to either distance Wilke from insinuation of narcissism, reject her narcissism, or re-define it in other terms—the aim here is not to deny or redefine, but to challenge the moralistic implications of 'narcissism' by discussing a nuanced perspective of its function and significance in her work. Because her work has a reciprocal relationship with her reception, in order to flesh out the role of narcissism in Wilke's work one must flesh out role of narcissism in the critical discourse.

Though recent scholarship, since her death, is well-intended, aiming to undo the charge of narcissism in her early reception, it has abandoned the idea of narcissism as a whole or translated it into terms with better connotations, such as 'self-love'. The division of Wilke from her appearance is not completely gainful, because even though the value of her work should not

rely on her appearance it is evident that her appearance informed and shaped her experience as an artist and her conviction of liberating her body from censorship. Making those distinctions is a delicate task, because when Wilke poses nude and claims she is a sculpture, to be consumed and analyzed, the ethical divisions of judgment are always likely to meld. Wilke also indulged in ambiguity and flux, which makes it difficult, as in works like *Through the Large Glass*, where she performs a strip tease behind Duchamp's *Large Glass*, to discern where subversive theatre ends and indulgent, self-exploitation begins. But that is the power of work; she has fought to remain in a position of flux! Fischer identifies an acute quality in her work when he says, "Wilke has an unfailing knack for making the two sides of a coin visible at the same time".³⁹

Fischer, however, does not realise that Wilke's best coin is one-side subversion and one-side self-exploitation. He is part of the camp that rejects narcissism and re-defines it as a less controversial 'self-love', which essentially reads the same as narcissism, just without its moral implications. Thus, his efforts may save Wilke specifically, from moral judgment he perpetuates the moralistic insinuations that dismissed her in the first place. Even if the easiest way to revise Wilke's reception is to debunk the narcissism of which she was accused, it would not do her or her work justice. To pigeonhole Wilke with labels, rather than complicate the labels themselves, is to undo her best efforts to liberate herself from dogmatic and moralistic insinuations—and, also to be the subject of her joke in the work, "What does this represent, what do I represent." (Fig. 5)

While Fischer, in his article on Wilke, is attuned to the humor and double-sidedness of Wilke's work he seems to embody the blind-eye advocate when it comes to confronting Wilke's

³⁹Alfred M. Fischer, "Becoming Form, Remaining Human.," in Hannah Wilke et al., *Hannah Wilke, a Retrospective*, (1998), 50.

consciousness over her own appearance. Fischer opines that Wilke's work does not have to do with narcissism, "It does, however, have a lot to do with love".⁴⁰ He then ensures that it "became poignantly clear in the last artistic testaments of her own body fighting for the life she loved".⁴¹ The last testaments which he refers to are self-portraits she posed for, taken by her husband Donald Goddard, during her last years in cancer treatment. Fischer's argument here, though it is brief and vague, insinuates that the images of her dying from cancer were not narcissistic because they did not possess the beauty of her earlier images. He makes narcissism contingent of a specific state of beauty that is affirmed by society, which was lost to Wilke during cancer. Even if she thought that image could save her life, what is narcissism if not a desire to secure one's own ego? Fischer supports the notion that narcissism can only be found in conventionally 'beautiful' women, thus reducing female ego to her physical appearance. To further the damage, his definition of narcissism as an affirmation of what society already affirms. Tinted by his distaste for term—he propagates the suspicious attitude society has towards women's relationships with their own appearance. The idea that women should be admired for their beauty, such as the female subject of a painting, but they should not admire themselves as much (as the male gaze), is a reinforcement of the patriarchal-structured subject-object viewership; the same structure Wilke was adamantly opposing in her self-representations.

Fischer emphasized a major component of her work as her incessant nudity. He relates her nudity to the photographic work of Joseph Beuys, which does not contain nudity, to explain it as a forcing a state of vulnerability This substantiation of Wilke through Beuys is Fischer's attempt to offset the assumption that her nudity was a showcase of her attractive body, thus a

⁴⁰ Ibid, 45.

⁴¹ Ibid.

practice of narcissism and therefore not an expression devalued by Fischer. However, his desexualized and fettered analysis of her nudity, comparing it to Beuys' state of vulnerability, is not a fitting concept for Wilke. After all, her beauty and sexuality inform the reciprocal relationship between her position and reception that is the force behind her work. In order for her to contest the discrimination she received—to make space where any expression of her body is possible—she had to aggressively forefront her sex and beauty. Nudity facilitated her inherent protest.

Wilke's vulnerability was her most impenetrable characteristic. She performed *Intercourse With...*, a piece in which she plays her answering machine messages from a period of five years and removes the letters from her chest which spell the names of the callers, at the London Art Gallery in Ontario. (Fig. 6) The curator, Robert McKaskell, and friend to Wilke, notes two “particularly moving” aspects of her piece. The first was her “vulnerability” in front of new and foreign audiences, in which he was most likely struck by her nudity as well as her desire to make personal content extremely public.⁴² Her bravery was her vulnerability; the incessant nudity is iconography for her impenetrable honesty.

McKaskell names her “particular relationship to feminism,” the other moving aspect of the piece, to which her vulnerability, signified by nudity, was a precursor.⁴³ Wilke's relentless exhibitionism had always put tension on her relationship with feminism at the time. McKaskell differs from Fischer in that he acknowledges the sexual nature of her nudity, which had always gotten her into trouble. Surely it was not Wilke's “vulnerability,” simply implied by Fischer, that

⁴² Robert McKaskell, “Exposing Taboos,” in Amelia Jones, *Intra-Venus: Hannah Wilke* (New York: Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, 1995), 14..

⁴³ *Ibid.*

put her at odds with popular feminist modes, but the way her nudity “placed her beauty and sex up front.”⁴⁴ Laura Cottingham describes Wilke’s trope, naked except for a pair of white high-heels, as a performative costume.⁴⁵ (Fig. 7) While the shoes signal her status as a sculpture, they also bring attention that her nudity is a conscious effort. Not only was nudity an iconographical sign of her willingness to be vulnerable, but it was a costume of willful and autonomous sexuality.

While Fischer genuinely champions Wilke in his revocation of the narcissism charge, he is unable to remove the moral implications of the charge of narcissism that is the root of her suppression. He misses the key elements in her self-representations that are more nuanced than just self-love, but actually enact superficiality to play on the double-bind of beauty, that is the desire to be beautiful despite the suppressiveness of beauty standards. Through that process she finds a place to dissent in her own unique position, and accomplish liberation without forfeiting any part of herself to look the part.

The *double-bind* is omnipresent in Wilke’s artwork; whether she indulges in glamour poses marked by clay cunt-shaped scars for *S.O.S. Starification*, she stands contraposto in only a hospital cap and slippers after cancer treatment in *Intra-Venus*. (Fig. 8-9) The problematic status of beauty in 1970s feminism informs nearly every aspect of her approach to self-imaging. While she began using her body as sculptural material in *Gestures*, surely it was soon after, if not immediately, that she started considering politics of self-objectification. To treat the female body as art-object at the beginning of an all-inclusive motion to question its significance, entails

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Laura Cottingham, “Some Naked Truths and Her Legacy in the 1990s,” in Hannah Wilke et al., *Hannah Wilke, a Retrospective*, (1998), 50.

controversy that is incomparable to that caused by her lint or cookie-dough vaginas. There is always a risk for Wilke when she represents her body and desires, and being one of the earliest artists to embark on that kind of sensitive material in an explicit manner, she carried the responsibility of setting a precedent for other women. Wilke embodies the difficulties of fighting for autonomy and then becoming a symbol for others who seek it; if anything is evident from the criticism Wilke received, it is that feminists are very wary of symbols and highly critical of their representation (not without merit).

Despite Wilke's iconic assertiveness, she has admitted that not every action is a pointed maneuver and she did not always pre-meditate her performances. One instance was when Wilke, among the crowd at the opening reception of Benglis' *Artforum* ad, proceeded to take off her top, a performance she called *Invasion Performance*, and later said, "It didn't really have anything to do with real feminism; and, I really don't know even if it had anything to do with her art, per se. But it was 'au courant'."⁴⁶ (Fig. 10) Wilke was not exactly making a stance against Benglis' ad, and though it may have been a spontaneous she was doing as she always did—exercising her autonomy.⁴⁷ The performance reads as a sort of publicity stunt, though some have interpreted it as a protest to Benglis' infamous ad despite Wilke's comment, but I interpret it as a very of-the-moment, styled, protest. That is part of her continuous protest against the second-wave feminist dogma she found so problematic. Wilke, who was constantly throwing her body into a flux of subject-object with her provocative and punning titles, was always ready to admit that she was not a perfect feminist symbol. It was not for lack of commitment to women's rights, but to

⁴⁶ Nancy Princenthal and Hannah Wilke. *Hannah Wilke*. (Munich: Prestel, 2010), 61

⁴⁷ McKaskell references Benglis' *Artforum*, with her humongous dildo and macho stance, as one example of 1970s feminist rejection of normative gender expression.

decline the very second-wave idea that a feminist could be defined and identified in very superficial ways, that said for example, that one had to choose “feminist or flirt”.

Her autonomy in *Invasion Performance* confronted dogmatic feminism, but it also challenged, like so many of her works do, the morality expectation. Women are often held to a higher standard of ‘morality’ than men. Women are constantly assessed and criticised for their morality while the mishaps of men are accepted as normative; if not evident before, it had been exhaustingly made evident by the 2016 US Presidential election. The morality expectation can also appear on a micro scale, where a woman is praised for passiveness, naturalness, and/or overall agreeableness by translating it to morality. Then, when the woman acts outside of that role the moral implications are used to criticise and dismiss her. Hence, narcissism has deep moral implications. Wilke laughs, she knew she was being ‘bad’, knowing that confrontations will always reflect back on moral character from the view of others.

Feminists encounter their own kind of double-bind in that they are constantly criticized for unraveling the fabric of feminine morality by non-feminists; and, on the reverse, they are criticised by their own community if they do not always uphold the current perception of feminist-morality. Either way, the expectation for women to maintain perfection creates many unproductive situations in which women must fall from grace. I locate one aspect of Fischer’s article where he brings feminist-morality into his analysis. In his description of a two-portrait diptych of Wilke and her mother, Selma Butter, Fischer highlights the contrast of Wilke’s appearance as “doll-like” and “unreal”, against her normal natural look.⁴⁸ (Fig. 11) Wilke does not usually wear noticeable make-up, but Fischer in a way apologized for unusual done-up

⁴⁸ Alfred M. Fischer, "Becoming Form, Remaining Human.," in *Hannah Wilke, a Retrospective*, 54.

appearance. He follows with a rhetorical praise of Wilke's usual natural beauty: "Wilke doesn't make herself up for the camera, doesn't polish her fingernails or toenails doesn't adorn her body with jewelry, and she leaves her hair under her arms and her pudenda the way nature provided."⁴⁹ Through this description he leaves Wilke ingratiated to her natural beauty, the very natural state he repeatedly argues has no influence on her work: "...the very question whether she would have worked so much in the nude if she were not so beautiful is so utterly inappropriate and irrelevant. All more so in light of her late work." Again, he cites *Intra-venus* as evidence as to why her beauty was a non-factor, because "her[self] succumbing to the lymphoma and the treatment for it give the lie to such superficial observation."⁵⁰ Because he his argument for her non-narcissism on her unconcern for superficial adjustments in her images, thus praising Wilke for maintaining a moral beauty through her naturalness, he reinforces expectations for feminists not to be aware of their own appearance.

Fischer applies a line of thinking to his reading of Wilke that is a culturally problematic perspective, where self-consciousness is vanity: is narcissism: is 'trying'. On the opposite end, confidence and naturalness are equated with morality: self-love: 'not trying'. This is problematic, first and foremost, because the argument endeavors define what feminism looks like. Jones warns against the labeling of 'feminist' and 'not feminist' because it is "antithetical to the best impulses of what [she takes] to be feminism, which in some forms at least argues against attributing inherent meaning or value to people, texts, or objects in the world."⁵¹ Feminism, in all of its trajectories, cannot survive if defined by its appearance.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Amelia Jones, *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*(London: Routledge, 2010), 2.

Secondly, Fischer's approach, which echoes a larger cultural perspective, is problematic because it privileges naturalness in women's appearance over cosmetic changes, thus making beauty a moral issue and a feminist double-bind. Whereas the subject desires autonomy, but by appearing natural or non-natural she is pandering to some and disappointing others. Either way, the woman is in a position where her autonomy is threatened by the implications of her appearance.

The final problematic aspect of Fischer's perspective, which is shared by others certainly, is that it tries to create a feminist paragon. Therefore, Fischer must ignore her humanly desires or inevitable faults of Wilke in order to maintain her symbolic status. The issue being that her desires and faults, *her honesty*, and her fight to allow them *are* the bones of her work; and to sweep them into a vague self-love practice is to erase the most powerful aspects of her feminism. For example, the desire to be appear beautiful—has no value in Fischer's idea of a feminist paragon, yet, it is the one aspect that makes Wilke a more relatable, contemporary feminist pioneer. She is always those two-sides of a coin, occupying and representing the difficulties of the double-bind of being a woman in Western society⁵². One detail Fischer would not chose to reveal that Wilke did in fact care about her appearance, evident in an excerpt from a phone conversation between McKaskell and Wilke, when he had asked her to perform *Intercourse with...* and she responded with "No! I've gained weight and couldn't possibly do a piece."⁵³ She performed regardless, but her initial concern with her appearance is an authentic detail that no scholar or critic should have to disclude in order to prove her feminism. Not only is the idea that

⁵² Hannah Wilke et al., *Hannah Wilke, a Retrospective*, (1998), 27.

⁵³ Robert McKaskell, "Exposing Taboos," in Amelia Jones, *Intra-Venus: Hannah Wilke*, 14.

Wilke's beauty was invariable to her projects too quixotic, but it should be acknowledged that the possibility of her to have indulged in her own appearance to some extent, does not discredit her work but actually coexists with her intentions.

One cannot deny that Wilke was conscious of her own beauty, but there is a fine line when giving her a fair assessment, between discussing her beauty and making it central to her work. Jones notes that in articles on Wilke and her work this problem arises frequently. Although there is now an effort to highlight more underrated aspects of Wilke, such as her legacy as a sculptor or her connections to the abstract expressionist movement, this occurs most often in revisionist retrospectives after her death. Jones comments that articles on Wilke usually began with comments on her beauty; and that critical reception of Wilke, before Jones published "Intra-Venus and Hannah Wilke's Feminist Narcissism" in 1995, "often pivot[s] around her supposed narcissism, self-display, and too-beautiful body and face". Thus, the danger of debating Wilke's beauty is reducing her to it, which is why her positive reception has avoided the subject. However, her beauty, as I have already stated, is integral to the position (i.e. choosing flirt or feminist) to which she is contesting in her artwork. The beauty is not the value of her work, it is a factor. The value is in her engagement with her position!

To Wilke—her American-standard beauty was a weapon and every pose was a dare. Naked and splayed across an earthy terrain, Wilke lays lifeless for the faux book cover that reads "I Object: Memoirs of a Sugargiver". (Fig. 12) Displayed as a photographic diptych, Wilke's pose references the subject (female body) encased in Duchamp's assemblage *Étant Données* (1946-66) installed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. (Fig. 13) Wilke was well acquainted with that location of the museum, having performed a strip-tease behind the neighboring work,

Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped bare by her Bachelors Even*, or commonly known as *The Large Glass* (hence the title of Wilke's performance, *Through the Large Glass*). (Fig. 14) For this performance, Wilke engages with the dark, sexually exploitive, subject matter of *The Large Glass* not by juxtaposing its qualities but by absorbing them. The narrative that Duchamp displays on the glass is ambiguous despite his detailed notes and instructions. The female subject, the bride, nonetheless is shown isolated in a sort of cage, suspended and interjected by mechanical elements, which are shown in the diagram as related the mechanism (and bachelors) in the lower pane. An interpretation of this sexually complicated and utterly dark piece, and its equally ambiguous neighbor, *Étant Données*, is not so relevant to the project as is Wilke's interactions with Duchamp's work. More specifically relevant is her interjection of self in his representations of female subjects.

Wilke, who "opposed" Duchamp many times throughout her career, discusses the "dialectical" process of history, but *Hannah Wilke Through the Large Glass* does not instantly register as acting through opposing forces.⁵⁴ She stands behind the transparent "The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even" stripping herself bare, and giving a second example of the female subject displayed nude for viewing pleasure. (Fig. 15) Wilke's performance is a layer that does not critique the original in a conventional way. Offering her body to the audience and the camera, behind an image that diagrams a female body being systematically exploited, is perhaps, at surface level, the typification of why the anti-essentialists argued against all representation of the female body. However, Wilke explains in *I OBJECT* that to reconcile the separation of the bachelors from their feminine parts "is not to co-opt the feminine, but to

⁵⁴ "Hannah Wilke: Writing Excerpts, HWCALA," Hannah Wilke: Writing Excerpts, HWCALA, , <http://www.hannahwilke.com/id15.html>.

be...feminine.”⁵⁵ The best way to oppose the conditions of Duchamp’s image, which represents the female role as a passive, exploitable sex-object, is to undermine it in the very same conditions. In other words, a co-opting of the feminine would be Wilke contrasting the exploitation, but instead she self-inflicts it. Her active exploitation undermines Duchamp’s gaze, and gives her representation power. Instead of perpetuating the idea of being ‘stripped’, or being ‘the bride’ as a passive role Wilke strips herself and reverts the power back to herself. While Duchamp creates conditions within an image that leave the female subject without agency, Wilke reestablishes agency over her body, as a role model, under those very conditions. She dissolves the stigma through absorption and re-rendering.

Similarly, in the photographic diptych of *I Object: Memoirs of a Sugargiver*, Wilke assumes the pose of one of Duchamp’s female subjects, this time from the assemblage *Étant Données*. Cottingham describes Wilke’s *I Object* as “a simulated color book jacket rendered as a photographic diptych that profoundly critiques, absorbs, and advances Duchamp’s *Étant Données*”, echoing the process I described for Hannah Wilke *Through the Large Glass*. The idea of advancement through absorption is understood as Wilke’s notorious self-objectification and is most commonly exemplified by the *I-Object* project.

Unlike *Through the Large Glass* where Wilke absorbed an action, in *I Object* Wilke absorbs a physical pose; however, both are evocative gestures. However, *I Object* is visually more difficult because of its closeness to the original subject of *Étant Données*. Despite Duchamp modeling the nude subject of his assemblage after his girlfriend, Maria Martins, the body’s given no form of identity is obscured. Her face is hidden by hair and some of her limbs

⁵⁵ Ibid.

appear beyond the scope of the peepholes on the heavy wooden doors that Duchamp allows you to look through. This leaves her genitals, which are oddly misshapen, as the focal point and one of the only telling elements of the body's identity. The other telling element is her unconscious, (either careless or helpless) sprawl across a patch of brush. It is an image of woman/body with extreme passivity and isolation. The dark room set before Duchamp's doors function to transition the viewer from the bustling galleries of the museum into a voyeuristic event, and otherworldly space of voyeurism. Besides the work being well-known after its debut, there is no element of *Étant Données* that forewarns the viewer of the contents inside the assemblage or the nature of the gaze to which they will be party. The assemblage is wholly unconcerned with the idea of consent in both its representation or viewership.

The *I Object* project is in many ways the reverse of Duchamp's work. Wilke fully consents to present her body, even if she inherits the passivity and exploitative optics of Duchamp's subject. Even more, the project is designed as a book cover—a material which is inherently exposed. Wilke's book cover is a stark contrast to the dark room, heavy wooden doors, and single set of peepholes; while Duchamp's subject is encased in solitude, Wilke's body is willingly exposed, both by nudity and function as an exterior jacket.

Despite certain strategic differences, Wilke maintains visual similarities with Duchamp's subject. The left image, when displayed as a diptych, features Wilke in an upside-down perspective slide, bringing all of her flesh to the foreground. Her body dangles in front of the viewer with words "I Object", another great Wilkean pun. She presents herself as Duchamp's subject/object, both describing herself as "I" an "Object" and voices her objection to Duchamp, while actively objectifying herself through Duchamp. Wilke is objecting through object-ifyng

herself; advancing through absorption. The image on the right similarly uses foreshortened perspective, to emphasize the midsection of her body as did Duchamp. Wilke's head is minimized in the background, obscuring her identity and lessening the ability for the viewer to humanize her. Her genital area replaces the face as a dominant point of focus, in order to exaggerate the origin of her objectification by society.

Wilke effectively objectifies herself in a very conventional manner, which was inflammatory to the sensitivities of the feminist movement, but also risky in that it could be misunderstood by history. Cottingham discusses the risk of such close mimicry, stating that Wilke's self-objectification can fail when the irony is lost on audiences over time. Ironic works can "become nothing more than mimetic repetition."⁵⁶ Although, Cottingham warns against being reductive when Wilke's irony fails to resonate with the audience, but I do not agree that such an excuse needs to be made in the first place. What she identifies as irony lost, I identify as Wilke's peculiar absorptive critique. She is not just performing poses ironically to ridicule them, but she is trying them on for herself with the consciousness that she is profoundly affected by them. Nancy Princenthal identifies an observation made by Craig Owens, that women "are not primarily interested in what representations say about women; rather, they investigate what representation does to women," as being historically relevant to Wilke. An interest in the effect of representation, as opposed to its contents, is where I locate Wilke's reason behind her use of conventional media motifs.

Another example of Wilke interacting with popular feminine representation is the *S.O.S. Starification Object Series*, including a series of photos strategically shot by a commercial

⁵⁶ Laura Cottingham, "Some Naked Truths and Her Legacy in the 1990s," in *Hannah Wilke, a Retrospective*, 57.

photographer. That decision prefaced the project with a level of visual conventionality that was continued by her strategic posing and partial nudity.⁵⁷ The series includes several images of Wilke performing glamorously, in black-and-white, with her classic kneaded cunts fixed to her face, chest, and back. (Fig. 16) When the photos are displayed together there is an obvious commercial consistency, which Sandra Goldman describes as a “fashion shoot format.”⁵⁸ Although, I have already discussed Wilke’s general method of absorption, Goldman notes that “Wilke absorbed the codes convention and codes of the media and repeated them back to the camera with an uncanny precision” in the S.O.S series.⁵⁹ Although the images assimilate conventional glamour, the tiny scar-like sculptures distract from the normalcy with their scar-like appearance. Despite her investment in the normative showcasing of beauty, her pain under the double-bind subsists. But the images obtain a hilarious quality to them, perhaps because of the juncture of tiny cunts and a serious and flamboyant facial expression; or because of the heightened viewership they receive as art objects, which draws more awareness to the inorganic and strange protocol of the everyday beauty image.

Returning to Cottingham’s concern for Wilke’s irony becoming “mimetic repetition” over time: Wilke uses irony at times, and it may appear so because she unearths the representation in its original, but her intention is not to have an opposite meaning or create a new meaning at all. She does not just invert the representation to reject its meaning, rather, undoes the power the representation takes over its subject. When she said the only way to reconcile Duchamp’s representation was not to co-opt but to be, she was making the point that avoiding

⁵⁷ Sandra Goldman, “I Object: Gestural Punning and Wilke’s ethics of ambiguity,” in Hannah Wilke et al., *Hannah Wilke, a Retrospective*, (1998), 28.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

the representation does not disempower its claim. Banning representation of the female body does not obscure the tendencies of the male gaze, just as avoiding the word narcissism does not uproot the derogatory use of it that is predominantly against women. Instead of creating yet another representation for viewers to internalize, she works, as she did in *Gestures*, with the material that she is given. By re-entering pop culture poses Wilke can disempower their claim to simplify women by inserting her conflict of being both afflicted and intrigued by her own representation. She identifies such conflicts of “[wanting] to be beautiful” and taken seriously. Susan Douglas explains that “[Wilke] demonstrated that for her conflict was a way of life, as it is for most women in western society.”⁶⁰ Despite a heightened feminist consciousness, women continue to be concerned with their appearance and their desirability to men.⁶¹”

Wilke’s self-inflicted objectification mirrors a process that the artist Wilke identifies as unavoidable and occurring regardless of her consent. By valorizing herself and her agency in classically objectified images of women, she mocks not what the image represents but the stigma it carries and validity it claims. She humorously validates nudes, glamor poses, and strip-teases to liberate the female subject from having to define what woman, artist, or feminism looks like. By actively committing her body to the forces that try to determine its significance, she delivers herself from their suppressive reign that thrives—not on the beauty, sex, or pose of the body—but on the imposition of passivity.

When Wilke exploits her her own image image, giving it over to analysis, scrutiny and condemnation, she does so to expose objectification, marginalization, and contradictions. On that

⁶⁰ Saundra Goldman, “I Object: Gestural Punning and Wilke’s ethics of ambiguity,” in Hannah Wilke et al., *Hannah Wilke, a Retrospective*, (1998), 26.

⁶¹ Ibid.

notion, of flipping a position of disempowerment into empowerment, Amelia Jones coins 'feminist narcissism' in her essay, "Intra-Venus: Hannah Wilke's and Feminist Narcissism".⁶² The term is meant to positively defend motif of narcissism in Wilke's performalist self-imagery that indisputably became a part of Wilke's reception. Although Jones' feminist narcissism explains Wilke's indulgent self-display as a reaction to the "conventional or passively feminine" relationship women are expected to have with their own body. Although Jones only invokes narcissism to show how Wilke is "turning the regressive connection of women with a non-worldly (non-transcendent) narcissistic immanence inside out" — and that Wilke is finding empowerment in a historically disempowered position, the term 'feminist narcissism' is not accepted by all Wilke advocates.⁶³ The idea of a feminist narcissism is nearly as contentious in Wilke's reception as her work was itself.

Fischer is an example of a Wilke advocate who avidly objects to the inclusion of feminist narcissism in writings on Wilke. In fact, he founds his entire analysis of Wilke on his disapproval of Jones' theory, directly combatting Jones' attempt to "psychologize" Wilke. That the mere mention of 'narcissism' fosters such a harsh reaction, despite the subversive nature of 'feminist narcissism', speaks to the nature of its connotations. And even though Fischer shares this historical attitude of contempt for narcissism, he fails to acknowledge that the word means anything more than its mythological root. What he identifies in Jones' writing as 'psychologizing' may actually be just an awareness of a shared experience, that he lacks. In other words, his rejection of a 'feminist narcissism' demonstrates ignorance of a gender-bias—and

⁶² Amelia Jones, *Intra-Venus: Hannah Wilke* (New York: Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, 1995), 4.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Jones identifies that specific bias as the essence of what Wilke was trying to combat. Though Fischer does not present an argument strong enough to rival Jones', his writing demonstrates the necessity for the kind of awareness Jones tries to bring.

Fischer begins his argument to debunk the presence of narcissism in Wilke's work by highlighting its inconsistency with the original myth of Narcissus and Echo.⁶⁴ Fischer on Jones, opines that "in effect she is pandering to a vocabulary and to the ideas behind it Wilke was ultimately combatting in her art."⁶⁵ What he believes Jones to be pandering to is not exactly clear, but he takes issue especially with her appropriation of the word from the original myth. He contends that Jones and Joanna Frueh, two scholars who have discussed the value of narcissism in Wilke's work, "are not only ruining a beautiful metaphor" about Narcissus and Echo, but "they are essentially barking up the wrong freudian tree."⁶⁶ His reverence for the original myth is dismissive of alternative significance the word may have, in experiences outside of his own. Though he discusses narcissism pejoratively, he remains oblivious to it in his line of argument that emphasizes the mythical sense of the narcissism over the psychoanalytic. If Wilke was intentionally engaging with narcissism, it was not the myth to which she was reacting, but the way it was used pejoratively in her reception. Jones, in contrast to Fischer, brings immediate attention to the lineage the of term that makes it much more complex than the myth. She traces her feminist narcissism first to the derogatory charge, which came from the psycho-analytic and clinical diagnoses, which took its name from the original story of Narcissus. It is important to

⁶⁴ Alfred M. Fischer, "Becoming Form, Remaining Human.," in Hannah Wilke et al., *Hannah Wilke, a Retrospective*, (1998), 45.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

acknowledge these subtle socializations of the term to understand its complex power—and the array of attitudes it can evoke.

Jones presents two very crucial, and acute observations on the current standing of the term. First, she identifies that Wilke has endured critical dismissals “which tend vastly to oversimplify” her work, and rest on “conventional, derogatory conception of narcissism drawn from psychoanalytic models.”⁶⁷ It is also important to recognize that the negative reception *dismisses* Wilke to narcissism, but Jones inverts that criticism to show that narcissism is something Wilke *enacts*. What the critical dismissals seem to miss is that they are reinforcing the very expectation of passivity Wilke is aiming to combat. The charge of narcissism is meant to reduce Wilke’s process of self-representation to helpless disordered behavior, leaving her in a passive role, but actually Wilke’s use of her own body is exactly a resistance against that role. Fischer does not condemn Wilke to narcissism, but his fierce rejection of the word reinforces the its ability to disable the subject. This is dangerous because it encourages psychologizing the subject, which questions their agency and credibility. It opens every artist/subject engaged in self-representation to personal judgment, and even worse, Jones argues, female subjects are more likely to be dismissed by the charge of narcissism.

Accordingly, Jones’ second observation, shared by feminist critic/scholars Lucy Lippard and Simone de Beauvoir, states that “narcissism is a particularly charged label in relation to women”, and its deployment to condemn a body of work is linked to a “specifically feminine degradation of the self.”⁶⁸ Fischer, interestingly enough, notices the inequality with which narcissism is applied too, in his comparison of Wilke to Joseph Beuys. He observes that Beuys’

⁶⁷ Amelia Jones, *Intra-Venus: Hannah Wilke*, 4.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

self-representations do not elicit the same notions of narcissism in his reception that Wilke experienced. Fischer: “[...] the question arises as to why it doesn’t occur to anybody to speak about “narcissism” with Beuys.”⁶⁹ Fischer and Jones ask the same question, the question that every person should ask about vernacular that is disproportionately employed to analyze subjugated groups. Both Fischer and Jones found their arguments on this question, of why ‘narcissism’ is so often used to dismiss women over men, but the two scholars come up with drastically different answers. Jones is attentive to the nuances of the term that is an attack on the ego and credibility of a female subject’s sense of self. Fischer, on the other hand, sees the bias, but unfortunately fails to identify Beuys’ male privilege. His answer is: if Beuys is not called narcissistic then Wilke should not be called narcissistic either. Fischer, though he is only an example, exhibits a problematic line of thinking that centers the male-subject and accesses the experiences other subjects against the male-normative. If the intentions or reception history of the female subject/artist, such as Wilke, can be disregarded simply because of its dissimilarity with the intentions/reception of her male contemporaries, then she is truly being denied her subjectivity, not assessed in her own right. By legitimizing Wilke through the perspective of Beuys, Fischer awards Wilke a pass for her obsessive self-display, but he continues to marginalize other female subjects suspected of narcissism. The precedent is set so that female subjects must portray a sense of self-love over a sense of conflated self in order to be legitimate. With the male experience as the authority on the validity of the female experience, patriarchal structure is reinforced.

⁶⁹ Alfred M. Fischer, "Becoming Form, Remaining Human.," in Hannah Wilke et al., *Hannah Wilke, a Retrospective*, (1998), 44.

The point that Fischer tries, unsuccessfully, to obscure is that narcissism is undeniably relevant to Wilke's experience and the history of her work, despite anyone's wishes. Jones eludes to this issue when she explains, "The simplistic dismissal of Wilke as narcissistic veils a resistance within art critical systems towards acknowledging the often confusing and highly-charged ways in which the artist's body has meaning within the circuits of art production and reception."⁷⁰ To continue that observation, I would suggest that the resistance that exists within art critical systems to acknowledge confusion and highly-charged (and sometimes contradictory) meanings of the body often ends with dismissal, which not exclusive to narcissism. While Jones was referring to the initial dismissive responses from critics on Wilke's self-display and beauty, the confusion that caused such responses, I argue, continues throughout her reception.

Fischer, as the archetype of the kind of criticism that affirms Wilke's actions but rejects narcissism, experiences confusion when trying to reconcile Wilke's self-love with the early reception's pejorative use of narcissism. Then, he experiences confusion again reconciling Jones' affirmative feminist narcissism with his rejection of the pejorative use of narcissism.

Finally, he complicates all reception that gives heed to narcissism with Wilke's own protest of the relevance of narcissism to her work. Fischer includes a piece of dialogue from Wilke's interview with Max Ernst in which, "She stated it herself clearly enough: 'It doesn't have to do with narcissism.'"⁷¹ This objection by Wilke has been used as the grounds for major criticism of Jones' feminist narcissism and involves larger questions about the priority of an

⁷⁰ Amelia Jones, *Intra-Venus: Hannah Wilke*, 5.

⁷¹ Alfred M. Fischer, "Becoming Form, Remaining Human.," in Hannah Wilke et al., *Hannah Wilke, a Retrospective*, (1998), 44.

artist's intentions in the receptions of the work. How much influence should intentions have over actual reception? In order to resist a feminist-heroization of Wilke by dismissing her words for the sake of a linear argument about subversive and tactical narcissism, I will leave her objection open to interpretation. However, it is very likely that her fierce rejection her works connection to 'narcissism' is a reaction to the pejorative use of the term that characterized her early reception. The interview from which the quote was taken occurred in 1978, in the beginning of her performalist endeavors, just four years her debut in *Gestures*. In the late seventies Wilke was still in the midst of a critical reception that was centered on her beauty, self-display, and narcissism with an implied derogatory nature. The term was only beginning to be investigated for its history of being used to discredit and suppress the female sense of self—and around the time of the interview the word was still predominantly used in that sense. It was not until nearly two decades later that Jones reclaimed narcissism, and even still narcissism is rarely applied without the intention of discrediting the subject. I suggest that Wilke's explicit repudiation of 'narcissism' was not from a theoretical standpoint, like the one Jones suggests, but most likely a heated reaction to the employment of the term to discredit her.

Regardless of projections about Wilke's approval or disapproval of a 'feminist narcissism' or an oblique 'self-love', Fischer's juxtaposition of Wilke's intentions with her critical reception exasperates a point of confusion within art critical systems. The significance implied by the artist versus the varied significances understood by the public is a contentious obstacle in accessing a work of art. However, I am of the camp, especially with Wilke's ambiguity, that the possibilities presented within art-critical systems are more valuable than the conclusions drawn. Subjecting Wilke to labels is not the concern; understanding Wilke, or

any artist/subject in relation to their own image is more valuable. In Wilke's case, the relationship of the viewer to the artist/subject's relationship with self has led to many suppressive conclusions. Mythic, psychoanalytic, and vernacular uses of the term 'narcissism' only examine the relationship between subject and self.

The myth describes the tragic Narcissus who falls so deeply in love with his own image, reflected in the pond, that he can neither escape nor fulfill his one desire. His impossible self-love sends him spiraling in a paradox, which Jones describes as: "He is both profoundly unified (as he who both "has" and "is" his desired object) and radically alienated (split into self and other, unable to attain that which he is).⁷² Narcissus faces the challenge of having to objectify the image of his own reflection, because until it is completely there it will never be attainable. The contradiction is that seeing himself as other would fracture his image from his being and because Narcissus is cursed to love only himself that fracture could never sustain his love. He must separate himself from his image in order to attain it and at the same time, his image must be completely his own to obtain his love. Because he can never truly divorce his image from his being he lives a fractured existence of unending and incomplete self-objectification. He is tortured by the contradiction that he is: self and object, longing for what is and never can be.

The narcissism of Narcissus is direct, local, confined to his gaze. His desire exists between the brackets of his eyes and his reflection and because he can never desire outside of himself every action he performs is for his own pleasure. In that way Wilke and Narcissus are similar. Wilke is determined to represent herself in a manner that pleases her, whether she is crouching nude in platform heels or in bed with her lover, but her gaze is never completely

⁷² Amelia Jones, *Intra-Venus: Hannah Wilke*, 5.

locked on her self-image. (Fig 8-9) The outside world informs her, enrages her, and enlightens her. Narcissus, on the other hand, is so imprisoned by his self-image that he is oblivious to the admiration or disappointment from outside world. His self-display is influenced only by the desire of what he wishes to see/love and never for the admiration or provocation of others. Though, arguably, his self-image represents the ‘other’ he wants to impress, the same could be said for any subject—self-image relationship. From reflection to photograph, to the role one plays in their everyday life, one’s appearance fed back to oneself is always to a degree ‘other’.

Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Narcissism

Wilke’s process was never truly exclusive of the influence of others, despite her imperative to prioritize her own pleasure above all. Meanwhile, Narcissus grapples with the confines of his gaze, his oblivion to the outside world saves him from having to manage his obsessive self-love with actual ‘others’. Princenthal reminds us, “[Wilke] was dedicated to unburdening women, herself first and foremost, of the cultural constraints that had inhibited their pursuit of pleasure and power.”⁷³ Wilke was not consumed with herself, she was consumed with her position—one that she believed was shared by most women. Although, to fight for the rights to her own subjectivity she could not insist on speaking for the experiences of others. Her main critique of the Women’s Movement in the 1970s was the scramble to define boundaries and label *feminist* or *not feminist*. When Wilke created the poster that read “Marxism and Art: Beware of Fascist Feminism,” in 1977 she was warning that liberation movement could at times be antithetical to itself. (Fig. Though she stood for the progress of women, she refused to stand for notions that a

⁷³ Nancy Princenthal and Hannah Wilke. *Hannah Wilke*, 7.

feminist could be identified by physical appearance or single actions. Wilke's warning is echoed in Jones' writing, mentioned earlier in this project, about the importance of resisting to "patrol [feminism's] border."⁷⁴ Wilke realized that "unburdening herself, first and foremost" was the only way to advocate her purpose without contradiction—to liberate without confining others.⁷⁵

Contemporary scholarship on Wilke's particular feminism has circumambulated the idea of her as a role model. Princenthal opines, "She was not much of a team player (though she could be an inspiring leader). But she was an unremitting supporter of women's liberation."⁷⁶ Her assessment is a fair. Wilke's ethics of ambiguity did not correspond with the often polarized attitude of the movement, *with us or against us*. When Wilke said, "If I scarred myself and ripped my face up, or put lice on me then it would be clear," she was responding to the exclamation of feminist art-critics to use visible signs, such as protest, subversion, aggression, to make her position clear.⁷⁷ Wilke recognized there was resistance to her work; perhaps because her performalist imagery did not have the urgency and fire that other au courant feminist art did. Feminist artists/critics were cautious to support work that could be misconstrued—meaning any feminist portrayal that did not explicitly subvert the conventional feminine roles (ie. domestic, sexual, moral, modest, selfless, passive beings. Although Wilke was very candid and witty, she was not deconstructing roles that were as recognizable as, for instance, *woman in the kitchen*, like Martha Rosler did in the 1975 video, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*.⁷⁸ The video, which depicts

⁷⁴ Amelia Jones, *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2010), 2.

⁷⁵ Nancy Princenthal and Hannah Wilke. *Hannah Wilke*, 7.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Sandra Goldman, "I Object: Gestural Punning and Wilke's ethics of ambiguity," in Hannah Wilke et al., *Hannah Wilke, a Retrospective*, (1998), 28.

⁷⁸ Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. Film. 1974.
<http://www.eai.org/title.htm?id=1545>.
 6:33 minutes. Black and white, with sound.

Rosler in the kitchen, putting on an apron, staring into the camera, and picking up various kitchen utensils, naming them (one for each letter of the alphabet), and giving a hostile demonstration for each. For the letter “K” she jabs a knife into the air towards the camera three times. Like Wilke, Rosler stars her own video, using her body to perform the everyday role, but she makes obvious her dissent with deadpan humor and reckless treatment of kitchen utensils. She draws attention to the banal role which society seeks to place her in. To those who insist that domesticity is feminine terrain, she bluntly aims her disgruntlement. Her visible displeasure juxtaposes the quaint conventionality of the setting, as the viewer comes to understand Rosler is not Woman in Kitchen but Domestic Insurgent.

Rosler stated, “Semiotics of the kitchen is about the television image of the kitchen and it's not really about experiencing life.”⁷⁹ But Wilke was about life as much as she was images, or rather, she was about life in negotiation with its images. Rosler’s *Semiotics* does not critique a unique experience of woman, or even an experience per say, what she intends to dismantle is a portrayal of women, on the screen, that perpetuates unachievable expectation and isolation of the woman in the home. Although the domestic expectation and isolation is certainly an experience lived by many women, she critiques the propaganda that fuels it; she incorporates the television format and bringing attention to the fabricated image. *Semiotics of the Kitchen* is a legible critique of the fictionalized and sweeping representations of female subjects, which inspire dismissive attitudes in everyday life towards female subjects, and deny female subjects their *subjectivity*. Rosler meets an immediate need of the feminist movement, that is to rejoin the

⁷⁹ Electronic Arts Intermix : Semiotics of the Kitchen, Martha Rosler : January 19, 2011. <http://www.eai.org/titleVideoIntro.htm?id=1545>.

female subject with her image from which she had been alienated thus far. Understandably, Rosler would have been considered more of a team-player for feminism in her time than was Wilke. McKaskell said pointedly, “When the common stance was for women to challenge or question their sex, [...] Hannah placed her beauty and sex up front.”⁸⁰ Although the aim of this approach was to dismantle conventions, such an attitude of fierce rejection became a convention of its own. Rosler’s *Semiotics* approaches a wide audience when she confronts the television representation of a woman, but Wilke did not perform the ‘impersonal’; her critiques are niche, but also authentic and complex.

Rosler was insurgent to the domestic cliché and television woman, but Wilke was insurgent to the glamorous, the sexed up, and the nude. Like Rosler, she intended to dismantle the roles in which society tried to place her, using her femininity: body-expressions-actions. Wilke did not just tackle traditional roles of women in society, but the role of women within art critical systems and feminists conventions, as well.

The ambiguity many have identified in Wilke’s work is evidence of her hesitancy to align herself with feminist dogma, though she and all feminists were working towards the same goal. Because she had the experience of being objectified, alienated, and/or stigmatized by non-feminist and feminist audiences, the only allegiance she pledged was to herself. As a result, her work features her body-desires-experience, solely. She was not oblivious to her surroundings, with gaze locked on her own reflection like Narcissus; rather, she was completely aware, of the vast and varied experiences of women, of the need for liberation, and of the tension

⁸⁰ Robert McKaskell, “Exposing Taboos,” in Amelia Jones, *Intra-Venus: Hannah Wilke*, 14. McKaskell references Benglis’ ad in *Artforum* as an example of the feminist artist questioning gender roles.

and contradictions that befall the making of progress. She was sensitive to the consequences of 'patrolling feminism's borders' and "what it would be to be annihilated just for a word", so as to perpetuate that experience on others she looked inward, mined her-*self* for material, and spoke on her experience alone.⁸¹ Though her output was quite literally self-centered (a word that, like narcissism, carries negative/demeaning connotations), a more appropriate and constructive adjective to use is *self-reliant*.

But there is no need to argue a case of another word, to add to the lexicon of ego-based synonyms attached to Wilke's name. Though *self-reliant* captures the essence of Wilke's autonomy without framing her ego as disordered or threatening, I am more concerned with understanding the description that *has* endured in her critical reception—that is, *narcissism*.

Because Wilke was so aware of stigmatization, and the exclusive tendencies of feminist dogma, she is not the oblivious self-seeker that Narcissus represents. She portrayed herself *in spite* of cultural standards and not regardless of them. Narcissism, which is conventionally understood as an **intrapersonal** matter, if applied to Wilke, must be dually analysed as an **interpersonal** matter because use of self is deeply connected to the communication she has with others. Her self-based practice is not rooted in an obsession or perverse love for the self, but a desire to enact her own body in face of the world that seeks to govern her being.

Imprisonment / Liberation

The reflection in the pond is a punishment for Narcissus, causing him agony and isolation, while the 'narcissism' of Wilke's process gives her liberation, autonomy, and pleasure. Her self-image

⁸¹ Nancy Princenthal and Hannah Wilke. *Hannah Wilke*, 7.

is an implement of freedom; Narcissus' reflection is an implement of torture. So it is difficult to think of her in terms of the mythological root of the word, which is the very same beginning of the pejorative use that is cast against her and many female subjects. It is through her self-representation that she could deliver her affectedness, her suppression, and her alienation, in truth.

In her representation she could reassert herself as a unified, self-governing figure despite all fracturing effects of the patriarchal gaze. Jones posits that Wilke is in direct confrontation with the anti-essentialist feminists who implied that the female body to be an “object inexorable of the patriarchal gaze.”⁸² Wilke rejected any notion that her body could disable her agency. Through absorption, which is described by Jones as the gaze “[grafted] onto and into her body/self,” Wilke is able to play within the state of flux between object subject, making it so that assigning her body as object is not a simple task.⁸³

Jones discusses the state of flux as the site of Wilke's feminism, because she can exacerbate the reciprocity of the gaze, which is a befitting theoretical resolve. However, it also befitting to say that Wilke's spirit of self-affirmation is her answer to the chaotic state of flux. In that vein, Wilke is not just exposing her self/object status to the gaze, burning it with a mirror, but excluding herself from the flux by leaving the gaze nothing left to determine.

Self-fulfilment / Self-Affirmation

⁸² Amelia Jones, *Intra-Venus: Hannah Wilke*, 6.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

Similar to the way in which Narcissus' quest for self-fulfillment excludes the necessity of others, because he literally was on a quest to obtain himself, Wilke's self-affirmative imagery excludes the necessity of validation from others. The self-affirmative woman is extremely threatening to the patriarchy. It is an attribute of which Wilke was in possession. Self-affirmation is not dependent on appearance or conventionality, though it may be nurtured by these conditions. For example, Wilke may have been reared to self-affirm because she met normative beauty standards; but, it is just as possible for an individual with nonconformist appearance to self-affirm, as is an individual with conformist appearance to be completely dependent on the validation of others! The "recognition and assertion of the existence and value of one's individual self" is an intrapersonal occurrence, however, cultural conditions have and always will hinder or help the individual's faith in their subjectivity.

In addition, the way in which cultural conditions hoist certain qualities above the others or condemn unfavorable attributes—shuffling hierarchies based on appearance, race, gender, orientation, class, ethnicity, or religion affects the self-affirming individual, **affects everyone**. Because the individual recognizes and asserts the existence and value of their self it does not preclude them from the injury inflicted by others who do not. The self-affirmed continue to recognize in spite of the others who exclude them.

Wilke is not the first artist, woman, or person to confront subjugation with a spirit of self-affirmation. Her privilege as a white woman, of considerable economic comfort, living in New York city and running art-celebrity circles, gave her the exposure and safety to express her affirmation of self despite criticism. She was not the most suppressed artist, or woman artist, because if she were—there would not be a critical reception on which to create this project now.

Having said that, suppression and self-affirmation were part of her lived experience. The spectacle of Wilke's work is not that her experience is unique, but that her self-affirmative approach to her own alienation is unique, both within early feminist art and among the examples available to us.

CHAPTER III

Reading Narcissism: Psychoanalysis, the Female Body, and Self-Centering

The historical understanding of narcissism, from clinical diagnoses to psychoanalytic to derogatory usage, has made it the over-inclusive, slighted charge that is today. However, it is the same history that has led to Jones' feminist narcissism and has prompted the reassessment of self-centered art practice, such as that of Hannah Wilke. In order to construct a reading of narcissism that is no longer reliant of psychoanalytic or pejorative assumptions, one must first study the anatomy of how narcissism is identified. Beginning from the beginning, Freud's groundbreaking contribution, singled out women as being especially narcissistic, and it is a criticism that is applied to female subjects with bias still in the twenty-first century. Through an analysis of narcissism identification this project aims to expose the aspects of identification that functions to denigrate the female sense of self, thus inverting those aspects of identification to reveal that ego-mechanisms can be a source self-empowerment and self-preservation.

Freud's *On Narcissism*, published in 1914, propels the term narcissism from a clinical condition, coined by Paul Nacke in 1899, of a person "who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated", to a personality disorder resulting from underdevelopment.⁸⁴ Freud adds that attributes of the narcissistic attitude may be found in "every living creature" since it is not a perversion as previously understood, but an instinctual act of self-preservation, with regard to the ego. Thus, with Freud's widening of the definition of

⁸⁴ 77. Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism," in *The International Psychoanalytical Association: Contemporary Freud: Turning Points and Critical Issues Series*, eds. Fonagy, etc. (London: Karnac Books, 2012), 7.

perversive sexual attraction to the self to an ego-maintaining behavior, the term ‘narcissism’ began its evolution. After Freud’s contribution, the literature on Narcissism became extensive, and sought to resolve the issues raised by his original definitions. Though he made great strides in identifying the attributes of the narcissistic personality, there are “contradictions, inconsistencies and gaps”⁸⁵ that are still being disputed. Freud makes very specific conclusions about the differences of narcissism between female and male subjects. His claims predisposition the female subject to narcissism which explains the term’s history as a gendered charge. To this disadvantaging treatment of females, Jones writes her feminist narcissism. Upon examination of the actual terms Freud writes, which are without question fallible, but not unfounded, it is immediately evident how so much of the personality he describes is aligned with a confident, feminist women—or any self-affirming individual living in a society in which they are devalued. Apart from Freud, Andrew D. Brown delineates a concise summarization the characteristics of the narcissistic personality, which is the decided result of decades of theoretical quarrel (1997). With a feminist reading of Freud’s *On Narcissism* and Brown’s summaries of the six-ego defense mechanisms, this chapter will locate the gendering aspects of the psychological perspective of narcissism and explain how narcissism, or self-centeredness, may function to reconcile the condition of the non-centered subject, such as the woman in relation to patriarchy.

We learn from Freud that the diagnosis of narcissism begins with a clinical description of self-orientated ‘perversion’. Before Freud discovered that all living things go through a period of narcissism in their childhood, which he called ‘original narcissism’, narcissism was considered to be a sexual inclination, a clinical disorder that occurs in only some individuals.

⁸⁵ Andrew D. Brown, "Narcissism, Identity, and Legitimacy," *The Academy of Management Review* 22, no. 3 (July 1997): , <http://www.jstor.org/stable/259409>, 645.

However, the stigma attached to ‘sexual perversion’ seems to continue despite Freud’s observation that all humans are narcissistic for a part of their life, at least. This stigma is best illustrated by the scene in the film, *American Psycho* (2000), where Patrick Bateman, played by actor Christian Bale, gazes into the full-length mirror flexing his muscles, slicking back his hair, pointing and winking at his own reflection while performing intercourse with another woman. The idea that the narcissistic individual is not only self-absorbed but sexually aroused by their own image (auto-erotic) and unsympathetic to the point of sociopathy (Patrick Bateman is a murderer). Freud describes clinical narcissism as “the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated—who looks at it, that is to say, strokes it and fondles it till he obtains complete satisfaction through these activities”.⁸⁶ Such a definition is extreme and it would be far fetched to apply it to Wilke who was not nearly as erotic as, for example, Carolee Schneemann’s *Fuses*, or Andy Warhol erotic films and “porno-chic”. There is not a work of Wilke that can be singled out as explicitly auto-erotic or “perverse” self-fulfilled, but attributes are not far from “autonomous” or “self-fulfilling”, which are two words I have used in my discussion of Wilke. Though the term is understood to be broader than just a sexual proclivity and is no longer considered a perversion, the essence of the stigma remains relevant. The charge of narcissism is meant to other the individual, to out them as an anomaly by referring to the archaic clinical ‘perversion’, despite narcissism being an ego-preserving stage of development necessary for all human beings. Drawing on the essence of a perversion/anomaly, the charge of narcissism can dismiss or

⁸⁶ Freud, “On Narcissism,” 73; 3.

discredit on its own, like when Schneeman was simply called “narcissistic and lewd”⁸⁷.

Additionally, the *auto-* aspect of narcissism in the clinical and psychoanalytic are important for understanding the fear that narcissistic attitude elicits in others and which fuels the stigma.

The attitude of narcissism, described in the literature, is extremely excluding. The clinical definition, especially, heightens the excluding aspect to a sexual level (Patrick Bateman having sex with his reflection). I have been trying to understand why such fierce rejection of the narcissistic attitude exists if it is, in fact, an ego-preserving device gone awry; why has it become a popular weapon to use against women taking photos of themselves? The exclusiveness, with added notions of auto-eroticism, is one strong possibility. Freud explains the process as, “The libido that has been withdrawn from the external world has been directed to the ego and thus gives rise to an attitude which may be called narcissism.”⁸⁸ Just like Echo was spurned by Narcissus, withering away beside him, who could only love himself, so too does external world feel spurned by the definition narcissist. Though, the ability rests inside all human beings to revisit narcissism, the thought of being self-sustained is threatening to individuals who, for the most part, want to be needed (want to be loved, or love someone).

There are interesting ties here between fear of being unnecessary and conventional gender roles. First, it important to note, that Freud admits to being highly hypothetical in his findings because of “the total absence of any theory of instincts which would help us find our bearings.”⁸⁹ Also, it becomes very apparent that he publishes *On Narcissism* in 1912. Freud observes that women are more narcissistic than men. He writes, “A comparison of the male and

⁸⁷ Shana MacDonald, “Carolee Schneemann's Fuses as Erotic Self Portraiture,” CineAction: 2007.

⁸⁸ Freud, “On Narcissism,” 75; 5.

⁸⁹ Freud, “On Narcissism,” 78; 8.

female sexes then shows that there are fundamental differences between them in respect of their type of object-choice,” an object-choice being the focus of one’s sexual desire external to the ego. But, he continues, “these differences are of course not universal”.⁹⁰ One should consider the hypothetical nature of his findings with the perspective from which he observes his subjects, as a male in a patriarchal society reliant on sexual difference. Regardless, he reaches the conclusion that “complete object-love of the attachment type” is a masculine characteristic. Object-love is the overvaluation of a sexual object and it means that the male is able to diminish his original narcissism and love another object completely. The woman, however, Freud says is not likely to do so. Puberty intensifies the original narcissism in the woman, which is “unfavorable to the development of true object-choice.”⁹¹ I take issue here first with his perception that narcissism is intensified during puberty due to the female’s biological make-up; while certain sexual elements of the body are intensified during puberty, so too does the societal pressures put on women’s appearance. It would be difficult to extricate internal interest of vanity and status, within in the pubescent female, from her internalizing of the superficial imperatives set by a society who whispers, *beauty is success*. While all sexual beings (not all human being are sexual) may experience a heightened sense of self and desire to please others and amend their appearance to please others, I do not have to argue that conventions ask a lot more of the female-identified individual than the male. Perhaps the increase that Freud observed in females was them surmounting the societal expectations the sexualized female body. Freud’s theory, of biologically increased narcissism in pubescent females, is too blindly aligned with the expected

⁹⁰ Ibid., 88; 18.

⁹¹ Ibid.

self-consciousness of pubescent females and their intense engagement with their appearance, as coaxed by external forces.

Because Freud points to the female body as the site of narcissism, the female subject is always a suspect of narcissism and therefore, must regulate herself more than the female subject to avoid dismissal. Remembering Fischer's astonishment that narcissism took a major role in the reception history of Wilke while it was never discussed with Beuys: one can recognize the disparity.

Freud insists that women are not able to achieve the level of object-love that men can, which is a theory that must inspire insecurity in the male-female relationship. He defines the state of being in love as the "highest phase of development of which object-libido is capable." So to love one must be able to allocate their sexual desires outside of themselves, and according to him, this highest phase is characteristic of the male. In addition to desire, in order to complete object-libido, "the subject seems to give up his own personality in favor of an object-cathexis," with object-cathexis meaning mental energy concentrated on an external entity. When an individual completes object-love, hence depleting their love for themselves and must compensate with sexual over-evaluation (idealization) of the external object.⁹² In the reverse, Freud proposes that it is not characteristic for women to complete object-libido because they have underdeveloped object-choice, therefore, he observes, women cannot focus desires outside of their ego. They obtain that original ego-maintaining narcissism and only seek to be loved completely, and not to give love completely. He even goes as far to say, "Strictly speaking it is only themselves that such women love with an intensity comparable to that of the man's love for

⁹² Ibid., 76; 6.

them.”⁹³ Though he reiterates that this observation of sexual difference is not universal, and some women possess the masculine type and are able to sexually over-evaluate like men, and vice versa, the distinction of ‘masculine type’ versus ‘feminine type’ promotes assumptions and concretizes the idea that narcissism equals feminine inability to love others more than self or the feminine necessity for the complete love of the male.

The inequality Freud sets up is interesting, and probably resonates with some subjects; if you are a woman who feels she is self-centered it may even seem accurate, but the distinctions he makes are too reliant on sexual difference to be considered accurate, because if Freud admitted to inconsistencies in 1912, we can be sure that his distinctions do not hold in today’s gender spectrum. My concern here is not to do with the accuracy or inaccuracy of his findings in sexual difference, but to explore the correlation of his findings with circumstantial differences that have persisted between the conventional male/female roles—or gender difference. I find it interesting that he proposes that it is a feminine characteristic to love the self more than others (a man, in his example) because the woman is so often represented, on screen or in literature, as the co-dependent lusting for the love of their absentee, straying husband. In such cliché, outmoded representations one would not consider the self-love of the woman to outbalance her love for the man. Freud’s distinction at first seems to juxtapose the conventional, disparaging representation of women, however, with what Freud proposes the woman is not the classic hero of self-love as one might perceive because she is virtually enslaved by her need for the affection from others. I assume that self-love is conceived more as a selfish need for love from “man” who gives complete love than it is a kind self-affirmation. Wilke, who I have labeled as a self-affirmative

⁹³ Ibid., 89; 19.

queen, is in direct conflict with this theory. It can be argued that her Wilke, did, in fact, love herself the most, as she reiterated so often her love of “life”, which I assume to be her own, but it was not necessarily due to her inadequacy to love others. Rather, she invited others to love her and experience her life through images but if she were in desperate need of her audience’s affection she would have done more to pacify them.

Freud emphasizes the need for to be loved in the feminine type, going as far to say that women of this type do not need to “to lie in the direction of loving, but of being loved; and the man who fulfills this condition is the one who finds favor with them.”⁹⁴ The object-choice of the woman is diminished to the point of her not actively choosing her lover, but accepting the first lover (man = capable of complete object-love) to pursue them. The perspective Freud presents is of the woman as biologically inadequate of object-choice, but he does not consider social restrictions at any length that may have created conditions where women have limited choice / or are coerced to choose a lover and settle quickly (perhaps with someone whom they do not love). He does the social aspect once, stating that, “Women, especially if they grow up with good looks, develop a certain self-contentment which compensates them for the social restrictions that are imposed upon them in their choice of object.” Basically, Freud believes that narcissistic women, especially those who are conventionally beautiful, focus on themselves in order to compensate for the limitations they experience in patriarchy. Despite his recognition of the way societal limitations affect his findings, he does not consider societal limitation liable for his perception of sexual difference.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

Freud even notes that the narcissistic type of woman “is to be rated very high” for the “erotic life of mankind.”⁹⁵ He reasons that the narcissistic woman is attractive because of her high interest in men (for aesthetic and psychological reasons), her enigmatic nature, her self-contentment and her inaccessibility. He compares the benefits to those of animals, and great criminals or humorists represented in literature—whom fascinate men for the way they distance anything that may harm their ego. Because Freud begins with the advantages of narcissistic women, one might assume that narcissism would not have the reputation that it does. He focuses the positives around the great charm of the narcissistic woman, who he describes as cool and having a blissful state of mind. The bliss is envied by the men who, as he explains, have abandoned” the “unassailable libidinal position” that narcissistic women (and animals, criminals, and humorists maintain).⁹⁶ I wonder if that envy is exclusively taken as charm—if the envy that narcissism inspires is not always taken lightly, but if the witnessing of the “unassailable libidinal position” instills resentment in the non-narcissistic individual. This occurrence would have less to do with sexual difference, as Freud insists, but between any subject who displays narcissism and a subject who does not. I make the amendment to ‘narcissistic subject’ here to ‘person who displays narcissism’ because envy is relevant to any encounter, and is not exclusive to subjects who are consistently narcissistic or non-narcissistic. An action, a conversation, or a display (images and performance) can be read as narcissistic if it seems to inflate the ego, and may not be representative of the individual as a whole.

Freud ventures into the perceived negative side of the narcissistic woman, as well, which undoubtedly contribute to the derogatory power of the charge of narcissism. His negative aspects

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

focus on doubt rather than envy, which I take to factor more into the negative than he lets on. Freud asserts, “A large part of the lover’s dissatisfaction, of his doubts of the woman’s love, of his complaints of her enigmatic nature, has its root in this incongruity between the types of object-choice,” which centers the problematic nature of the narcissistic woman around the insecurity of the male.⁹⁷ The complaints about enigmatic nature are related to the cool, inaccessibility that also was positive Freud. Wilke’s willingness to self-objectify, mixed with her “cross gender-codings” and symbols give her an enigma that is both attractive and confusing at times and especially in the highly-charged feminist setting of the 1970s.⁹⁸ Viewers may have struggled to access her intentions more than usual, which is reminiscent of when she was criticised for not “[making] her own position clear”.⁹⁹

The two elements combined, doubt of the narcissist’s love and envy of narcissist’s unassailable ego, equal the insecurity narcissistic action elicits in those who are external to it. Returning to the idea of excluding nature of narcissus, that it not only encourages the other/external object to perceive the narcissist as a perversion, but it threatens the other/external object because it renders them unnecessary (for sex, and otherwise). Since Freud sets his distinctions so that the male is necessary to the female because she represents a negative value, or a void (needing love), and male represents the positive (needing to give love) then, in this Freudian equation, the female narcissist threatens the significance of the male when she does not require his love / validation. Though Wilke requires an audience as an artist, and she certainly wanted all to bear witness to her life, she did not have the relationship to her audience as

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Amelia Jones, *Intra-Venus: Hannah Wilke* (New York: Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, 1995), 6.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 4.

presented in Freud's characteristic female. She does not subsist on the audience (Freudian Male type) any more than her career requires, and she did fall for the first "suitor" to show her love, as in she did not adapt her convictions to appease audiences, who criticized her so harshly in the beginning. Thus, the independence of the self-affirming female, like Wilke, is physically and visually menacing to the patriarchy.

Freud allocates this condition of insecurity to men, it can apply just as well to the feminists who rejected Wilke for being enigmatic—as if they were insecure about her dedication to their motives. The male and female type distinctions that Freud made are based on observations that affirm his belief in sexual difference, however, they are made tentatively, knowing that many individuals do not love according to their supposed type. If one is to disregard the biological aspects of the types, his distinctions can still inform more current situations. For example, an interaction between two individuals where one is displaying narcissistic action and the other is reacting dismissive of that action, one can deduce that the latter individual is dismayed by the former's object-choice. The doubt and envy that is incited by the narcissistic object-choice, or being enigmatic and unassailable, can happen on a person-to-person basis of course. But, the distinctions can also correlate to the conventional gender roles in a patriarchal society, when a woman (subjugated subject) enacts narcissism, thus displaying their self-contentment, she incites insecurity—doubt and envy—in the patriarchal rule (which requires the dependency of subjugated subject). Freud's male type, which I exchange for an individual expressing complete object-love *or* patriarchy, only function if their love is needed and accepted by others. The male type and the individual expressing object-love have supposedly diminished part of their self-esteem in order to achieve their cathexis, and when that love is

unrequited they feel incomplete. For patriarchy, in this scenario, love is adjacent to general idealization and not so much libido; but the power of patriarchy is threatened all the same by the “narcissistic woman” who does not require its “love”.

Overall, the female body as the site of narcissism, emphasized by Freud, explains why the term is used so frequently against women. The historical understanding of the narcissism is suspicious of the female body and has resulted in the unequal application of the term to female subjects. In addition it has disadvantaged the female subject, especially one who is engaged in self-representation, to a state where she is constantly accessed for her narcissism. On the converse side, Freud’s attachment of the female body to narcissism can also have contributed to the distaste of its connotations, wherein feminine characteristics that are not passive are unfavorable to patriarchy. Both of these conditions have contributed to the pejorative application of the term and its power to dismiss that to which it is applied, even in its own right. An individual, experiencing doubt and envy or overall rejection, in face of a person who displays a seemingly invincible ego may want to compensate for their own hurt ego by causing damage the ‘narcissistic’ display. Naturally, it is difficult to pierce an invisible ego, so a complete undermining of the ego is in order. The individual looking to do the undermining can utilize the charge of narcissism to discredit the display/invincible ego as a whole, to invalidate that which the ego has already affirmed—or to say *you are not as valuable as you believe yourself to be*. The charge of narcissism inflicts the subject’s ego-ideal against itself; it undercuts (what is perceived as) the invincible ego by implicating fallacy in the subject’s conception of self (ego-ideal). The pejorative charge of narcissism widens the parameters of the term from a

diagnosis to part of the vernacular that is used to exaggerate criticism of another's self-esteem or overvalued self.

What happens then, when the subject of criticism holds a position in society that is historically devalued by the perspective of that society? What is implied in the charge of narcissism when it involves an individual who is denied the liberties in which they are promised, and are vocal about their rights to equality? Do the vernacular of self-advocation and the efforts of self-preservation not border the vernacular ego-preservation that is identified as narcissism? Finally, is the excess of which one advocates oneself not more of a matter of opinion (and the perspective that informs the opinion), and could excessive self-advocation not be the direct response to prolonged subjugation despite decades of progressive efforts and protections ensured by the government?

At the base of the criticism of narcissism, I find the capability for the attack on an individual ego-ideal to be an attack on the individual's self-worth with a clinical guise to appear legitimate. The ego-ideal is the image of what the individual would like to be, but because identifiable displays narcissism are so deeply entrenched in cultural values and audience engagement, it is difficult to differentiate between one's ego-ideal and, what I would call, one's social-ideal. That is to say that one's perceived potential-self / ideal-self may be inextricable from their aspirations for certain liberties within their society. Thus, the gap between their actual self and ideal self may not be disillusioned aggrandizement but a sense of entitlement to the self they have been detained from enacting.

The six characteristics of narcissism on which Brown's arguments rely—such as, denial, rationalizations, attributional egotism, self-aggrandizement, and sense of entitlement—are

“broad behavioral/psychological predispositions,” which he has summarized from an array of post-Freudian scholarship.¹⁰⁰ His aim is to apply what is known of the narcissistic personality to the “dynamics of group and organizational behavior.”¹⁰¹ Most important here, are his characteristic summaries, but his articles shows that narcissism can be applied to more than just an individual’s internal process. He shows that the narcissistic mindset can be enacted by several people at once with similar aims, or a company can even function narcissistically for its own aims. He recognizes the “terminological slippage and overinclusiveness” that the concept of narcissism has endured since Freud’s *On Narcissism*, which is at the center of interest in this project, but he too expands the ways in which narcissism is thought to function and can be analyzed.¹⁰²

Brown explains that narcissism exists on a continuum, where “the dividing point between what constitutes healthy and what is pathological at either end of the spectrum requires a subjective evaluation”.¹⁰³ What I wish to exploit is *who* decides where that dividing point lies in its current state of over-inclusiveness, and especially in regard to those outside of psychology realms. In its current vernacular, which is so often used to describe self-representation, who sets the pathological baseline? Freud set the groundwork for women to be easily designated to the pathological margin of narcissism with his sexual difference based observations. I don’t believe American psychology to insist on such difference any longer, after studying Brown, where no gender observations are included. However, criticism and overall attitude towards self-display do not depend on the same integrity as a psychological diagnosis. However, non-professional use

¹⁰⁰ Brown, Andrew D. *Narcissism, Identity, and Legitimacy*, 646.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 643.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 646.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 638.

undoubtedly defaults to baselines set dominating power systems more often than not. In this case, patriarchy has had a heavy hand in deciding what response of women is pathological; and, because patriarchy decides women to be of lesser value than men, and likely far less than the woman values herself, the baseline for pathological narcissism is set very low. Subsequently, the margin for “healthy” narcissism is virtually nonexistent for women, from a patriarchal standpoint.

Knowing this, I would like to make it possible to read the characteristics or *ego-defense mechanisms* from the patriarchal view: where the “healthy” margin, or normative attitude, equals the passive/conventional role of women in patriarchy. Subsequently, any action that infringes on the non-passive/non-conventional role, wherein the woman contends she is of equal value and ability to men, thus threatening the patriarchy, would fall into the margin of “pathological” narcissism. Feminism, in these terms, would always be considered excessive from the patriarchal baseline. The goal is to bring awareness to the points in which high-subjectivity intervene objective judgment of the ego-defense mechanisms; and, to posit how ego-defense mechanisms may be inverted and exploited for the advancement and self-preservation of socially-subjugated, non-centered, subjects.¹⁰⁴

The first attribute of narcissism Brown names is *denial*. He explains it as a primal coping response to “otherwise intolerable conflict, anxiety, and emotional distress or pain” which results in confident or seemingly invulnerable behavior.¹⁰⁵ It is implied that subjects of social

¹⁰⁴ Non-centered subjects are non-white-cisgendered-males, but this project in particular discusses individuals in relation to male-centricity. Because this project focuses on feminism as a broad advocacy of equal rights for those disadvantaged by patriarchy, the analysis of ego-defense mechanisms will be geared towards gender inequality, though it is not exclusively relevant to this one aspect of inequality.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 646.

subjugation would experience conflict, anxiety, and emotional distress or pain in response to their disadvantages. He locates the denial in the subject's not being able to tell the difference between the ideal self and the actual self. From a patriarchal perspective, the actual self of a woman, her abilities/worth, would not equal the abilities/worth she sees in herself. Denial can be used to explain the disparity between the two perspectives, where the patriarchy designates the woman's sense self as her self-ideal, and she is in denial of the difference because she does not adopt the self that the patriarchy has assigned her.

Rationalization, the second attribute, is how Brown describes the narcissistic individual justifies their actions or feelings that are "unacceptable", and how they "make what is consciously repugnant appear more credible."¹⁰⁶ Judging which actions are deemed unacceptable or repugnant is also a highly subjective task. Obviously many feminist actions and actions for de-tabooing the female body has and continues to be viewed as repugnant from by patriarchal standard. Wilke had incident at the London Art Gallery when she performed *Intercourse with...* being conflated with behavior that is widely viewed as unacceptable. Robert McKaskell, curator, tells the story:

A current controversial matter in Windsor was the licensing of strippers in bars. On the news the next day were excerpts of Hannah's nude piece intercut with images of table dancers. The story was reported nationally and created havoc for the gallery. A year and a half later a stripper was charged, she used the tape as evidence for her defense. What's amazing is that Hannah took the whole incident in stride. Another kind of taboo had been exposed.¹⁰⁷

Wilke used the intrinsic vocabulary of her body with the gallery context to visually rationalize the enactment of the erotic female body. Her positive reaction to the public conflation of her with

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 647.

¹⁰⁷ Robert Mckaskell, "Exposing Taboos," in *Intra-Venus: Hannah Wilke*, Amelia Jones, 14.

an erotic dancer/ecdyasiast/stripper only strengthens her feminist rationalization of taboo behavior.¹⁰⁸

Brown adds that narcissistic rationalization involves the alteration of “meanings, people, and events” but meanings require subjectivity and often implicate the identity of the meaning-maker. When Jones said that feminism must refrain from attributing inherent meaning or value to people, texts, or objects it was because the patriarchy benefits from the practice. Reinstating conventions, defining significance, making vast generalizations are methods of asserting control. Progressive measures depend on deconstructing and reassigning meanings, which require rationalization and normalization in order to make the new meanings legitimate. From a patriarchal perspective, progressive action and the justification it involves would be viewed as a conscious effort to make what is unacceptable appear more credible.

The third attribute is most easily understood in relation to self-based work.

Self-Aggrandizement Brown defines as the “general tendency of an individual to overestimate his or her abilities and accomplishments” which is “accompanied by extreme self-absorption, a tendency towards exhibitionism, claims to uniqueness, and a sense of invulnerability”.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ While Wilke supports this humorous this connection between her and a ‘stripper’, this is not the first time the comparison was made. “In objectifying herself as she does, in assuming the conventions associated with a stripper,... Wilke... does not make her own position clear... It seems her work ends up reinforcing what it intends to subvert...” This criticism reinforces the patriarchal standard for acceptable action. The comparison parallels Wilke’s rejection of narcissism when it was used critically to dismiss her. Her distancing of herself from flitter man’s conception of stripper was resolved by her embrace by an actual erotic dancer, who obviously were not trying to discredit her, but add more credibility to her own position. It is useful to see that her embrace or rejection of an association changes with the cultural attitude, or rather, the attitude of the individual making the association. It is possible that if she had experienced a similar support for the narcissistic aspect of her work from an affirmative perspective she may have embraced the conflation with narcissism.

¹⁰⁹ Brown, Andrew D. *Narcissism, Identity, and Legitimacy*, 646.

Self-aggrandizement is the pinnacle of criticism of narcissistic display, especially in regard to Wilke. (A) Exhibitionism is inherent to art practice, but it is extended by Wilke's physical presence in her work and even more by the showcase of beauty and sexuality. (B) Claims to uniqueness can be paralleled to her unique feminist position, which was critical of feminist exclusivity and did not dispose of conventional feminine tropes. (C) a sense of invulnerability came through with self-affirmation and is read as invincible-ego. All three of these tendencies can be found in Wilke's work, though, arguably they are the tendencies that produce the most liberating aspects of her work. These tendencies are only negative if taken in that way, but they accumulate in what can be perceived as an overestimate of an individual's "abilities and accomplishments". It is true that Wilke's conception of her own abilities, to self-represent without impediment, and accomplishments, to free her body of censorship by feminist and non-feminist parties, were overestimated—not because she was not entitled to those things, but because those were not realities during her most active years. From the patriarchal perspective by unapologetically exhibiting herself, she was assuming the value that could only exist in her fantasies, which Brown adds is the "unconscious wishes for fulfillment or gratification". The feminist perspective would argue that because the image of women, their bodies, their personalities, have been historically claimed by men and manifested in clichés and generalizations, there is a considerable amount of room for self-absorption, self-advancement, and all upwardly-mobile activity for women before it becomes excessive in comparison to what they have been denied.

Attributional Egotism, which is "the tendency of an individual offer explanations or events that are 'self serving' or 'hedonic'" to reach favorable outcomes for the self, is the fourth

characteristic Brown names.¹¹⁰ The last paragraph highlights the necessary and feminist encouragement of upwardly-mobile activity and attributional egotism parallels the enactment and justification of such activity. The patriarchal perspective would designate self-serving outcomes for women as excessive, or pathologically hedonic. While women are denied more opportunities (women of color especially, [continued in the following paragraph]) than men and so women seeking favorable outcomes for themselves is a necessary action for self-preservation. Patriarchy has always tended to “offer explanations or events” that involve “favorable outcomes” to patriarchy. Brown states that attributional egotism is used in order to “protect vulnerable self-esteem”, but the feminist perspective would show that efforts to protect the self-esteem are complicated when the individual endure perpetual, socially-induced depletion of self-esteem.

Characteristic five, the narcissist’s *sense of entitlement*, is fairly basic. Entitlement is a pivotal aspect of the relationship between dominating groups and subjugated groups. Feminism concentrates on exposing male privilege, while patriarchy tends to deny or disclaim its privilege to reinforce a masquerade of equality and its accompanying tranquility. The denial of male privilege functions to denigrate the belief that there should be mandated for the advancement of women to neutralize the opportunities from which they have been excluded. This argument has parallels to racism, wherein male privilege is interchanged with white privilege, but the two are not divorced. Male privilege does not affect all women to the same extent. White women are given more privilege than women of color, who face male privilege and white privilege in tandem. In the general landscape of feminism (because this is a broad feminist reading of broad characteristics) the identification of entitlement in an individual who is socially disadvantaged,

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

and is an artist who is publicly engaging with her social position, is ill-considered. Patriarchal perspective, because it both denies and subsists on male-privilege, would diminish any feminine sense of entitlement—which is to say, feminism’s belief of entitlement to equality.

Brown associates the narcissist’s sense of entitlement with “a strong believe in his/her right to exploit others and an inability to empathize with the feelings of others”.¹¹¹ Feminist criticism can be aligned with what the patriarchal perspective sees as exploitation. Meanwhile, feminism’s fierce rejection of pandering to the male-gaze, which has manifested in many progressive and (as we have seen in the anti-essentialists) regressive ways, can be aligned with what the patriarchal perspective sees as a lack of empathy for “others”.

When identifying a *denial* of actual self, *rationalization* for unacceptable behavior, *self-aggrandizing* overestimate of abilities or accomplishments, *attributional egotism* for self-serving actions, and/or *sense of entitlement* in an individual one must give heed to the subjectivity that is indelible to making such judgments. These are only five characteristics, but Brown offers the last one—anxiety—not as an ego-defense mechanism per se, but as an integral part of the narcissistic personality. *Anxiety*, Brown explains, is “what the ego-defense mechanisms are designed to ameliorate”. The narcissist experiences feelings of dejection, worthlessness”; the narcissist is “despairing, empty, and fragile”. The parallel here, between the symptoms of a narcissist and the anxiety that is systemic to those whom are socially-disadvantaged, is too easily made. Feelings of dejection, of being undervalued, of being abandoned or excluded, of being in despair about unchanging social-conditions are hardly distinguishable from that which is non-systemic, intrapersonal ego over-compensation, from

¹¹¹ Ibid., 647.

outside judgment. Narcissism is not indistinguishable from self-advocacy, because the two certainly can exist as separate entities, but it is to say that what may be perceived as narcissism can have roots in warranted and necessary self-advocation.

Conclusion

The historical examination of narcissistic personality has disadvantaged the female body, and because of that association, there is an aversive and suspicious attitude surrounding women, especially, who participate in self-imaging or self-centered visual practices and otherwise. Narcissism has evolved, many times, and now exists both as a pathological personality disorder and an over-inclusive pejorative term. Narcissism has gained the status of a critical weapon to devalue expressions of the self, and suppress the ego/confidence, autonomy, and/or self-affirmation (all of which are essential to individuals whose experiences are not centered in their society)—that is to say the viewer has a more accurate perception of the subject's worth than the subject themselves.

Women who are active in their career or are a public figure often encounter criticism for narcissism (i.e. for selfishness, self-promotion). Wilke, like many other women artists, experienced criticism for narcissism because of her practice of self-display or self-centeredness. For the reason that narcissism is often a criticism of women seeking advancement or self-exploration, actions taken to explore themselves outside of patriarchy, more heed should be given to the role of subjectivity in making judgment about other's ego-defense mechanisms. It is assumed that the dividing point between healthy and pathological narcissism is objective, but in fact it is result of the pejorative power of the term welcomed by psychoanalytic studies, and it does not consider that a higher amount of narcissism may be required by individuals who live in ego-depleting social environments. As a result, viewership of artistic expression, as well, needs to consider the way in which narcissism can function as public expression of empowerment for non-centered individuals. While the dividing point has been exploited by patriarchal devices to

deem actions which would otherwise be feminist, pathologically narcissistic just by implicating that the charge of narcissism should discredit the actions of the individual to whom it is applied. Feminism, too, can exploit the dividing point by allowing more enactment of narcissism, inverting the ego-defense mechanisms named by Brown, to reconcile the lack of centeredness women experience in society.

Finally, when assessing self-centeredness, including self-based artwork, one should consider the individuals the lack of centeredness the individual/artist experiences in their social climate and how that reads into their actions/project. There needs to be an awareness, as well, to ways in which criticism of narcissism (i.e vanity, self-centeredness, self-promotion, self-valorisation, self-love, egotism, confidence) is tinted by gender-discrimination, misogynist aggression, and reinforcements of patriarchy and its conventions. Everything considered, charge of narcissism itself should implicate the identity of viewer as much as it implicates the identity of the subject/artist.

Self-imaging practice are twenty-first century mainstream expression. Artists are not the only individuals to receive aggressive criticism that seeks to censure their body and diminish their sense of self-. Social media facilitates mass narcissistic display, which causes much controversy, but one should be attuned to the tropes discussed in this project that persist in conversations about au courant self-imaging practices. The way in which female subjects receive an unequal amount criticism for narcissism than men, especially when engaging with their on appearance in images, reminiscent of the patriarchal insinuations about their morality and depth of person. The aggression that exists in that critique is rooted in this historical aversion to

narcissism which functions to deplete the female ego and force women into conventional passivity.

Egotism, a secure sense of self, and unforgiving expression of one's liberation from patriarchy is necessary for feminist to achieve their aims in a society, which, still uses implications of morality to keep women from opportunities of advancement and continues to prioritise misogyny over capable, confident, self-reliant women.

Figures



Figure 1: Hannah Wilke, *Gestures*, 1974. Stills from videotaped performance; black and white, sound, 30 min. Scanned from Nancy Princenthal and Hannah Wilke. *Hannah Wilke*. (Munich: Prestel, 2010).

Figure 2: Hannah Wilke, Installation view; foreground: 176 One-Fold Gestural Sculptures, 1973-74. Painted Ceramics, 72 x 96 in. Background, left: Laundry Lint [C.O.'s] 1973. Twelve sculptures, double-fold lint, dimensions variable, overall installation 11 x 96 in. Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles. Background, right: Fortunate Cookies, 1974. Fortune cookies, dimensions variable; no longer extant. Scanned from Nancy Princenthal and Hannah Wilke. *Hannah Wilke*. (Munich: Prestel, 2010).



Figure 3: Hannah Wilke, above: Intra-Venus #1, June 15, 1992/ January 30, 1992. Two chromogenic supergloss prints, 71½ x 47½ in. each. Scanned from Nancy Princenthal and Hannah Wilke. *Hannah Wilke*. (Munich: Prestel, 2010).



Figure 4: Intra-Venus Triptych [“Marilyn Monroe”], 1992-93. Two of three chromogenic supergloss prints, 26 ¼ x 39 ½ in. each. Scanned from Nancy Princenthal and Hannah Wilke. *Hannah Wilke*. (Munich: Prestel, 2010).



Figure 5: Hannah Wilke, *What Does This Represent? What Do You Represent (Reinhart)*, 1976. Black and white photograph, one of six, 60 x 40 in. *From So Help Me Hannah* series. Photographer: Larry Qualls. Retrieved from Artstor.

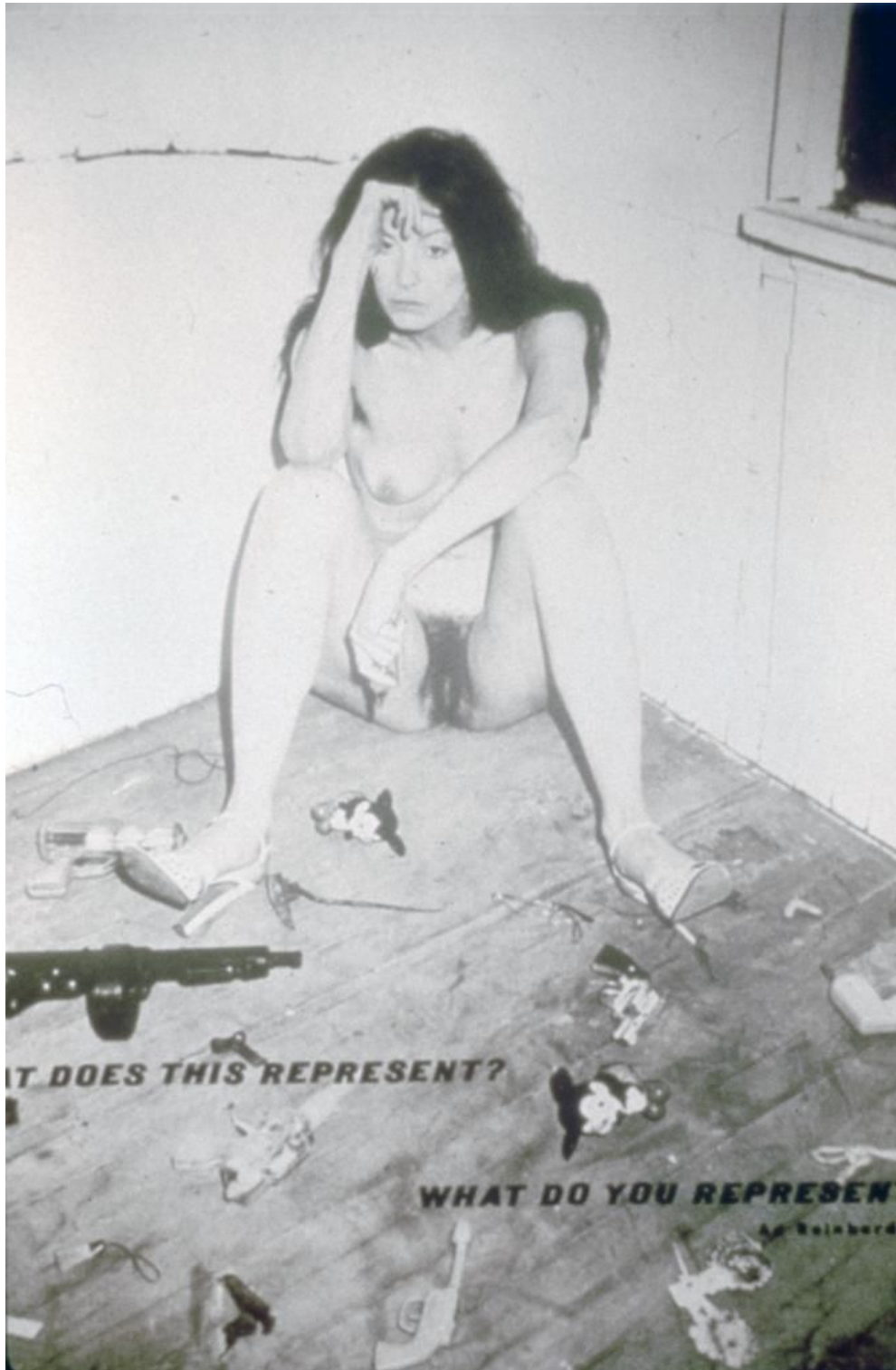


Figure 6: Hannah Wilke, *Intercourse With...*, 1977. Still of videotaped performance/lecture given at the London Regional Art Gallery, London, Ontario. Photographer: Larry Qualls. Black and white. Retrieved from Artstor.



Figure 7: Hannah Wilke, *Exchange Values (Marx)*, 1974-1984. Photograph from *So Help Me Hannah* series. Photographer: Larry Qualls. Retrieved from Artstor.



Figure 8: Hannah Wilke, from *S.O.S. Starification Object Series*, 1974-82. Black and white photo. Scanned from Nancy Princenthal and Hannah Wilke. *Hannah Wilke*. (Munich: Prestel, 2010).



Figure 9: Hannah Wilke, one of three in triptych: *Intra-Venus #3, August 9, 1992*. Chromogenic supergloss print, 71 ½ x 47 ½ in. University of California, San Diego. Retrieved from Artstor.



Figure 10: Lynda Benglis, Untitled (paid advertisement in *Artforum Ad*, November 1974), color photography, 9.84 x 10.43 in. Bard Visual Resources Collection. Retrieved from Artstor.



Figure 11: Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S Starification: Self Portrait w/ Her Mother Selma Butter*, 1978-81. Photography. University of California, San Diego. Retrieved from Artstor.



Figure 12: Hannah Wilke, *I Object: Memoirs of a Sugargiver*, Chromogenic print diptych. 1977-78. Scanned from Nancy Princenthal and Hannah Wilke. *Hannah Wilke*. (Munich: Prestel, 2010).



Figure 13. Marcel Duchamp, *Étant donnés*: 1. La chute d'eau, 2. Le gaz d'éclairage (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas) 1946-66. Mixed media Assemblage. Permanently installed in the Philadelphia Museum



Figure 14: Hannah Wilke, *Through the Large Glass*, 1972. Still from videotaped performance at Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photographer: Larry Qualls. Retrieved from Artstor.



Figure 15: Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (or, The Large Glass)* 1915-23. Oil, lead wire, glass. Philadelphia Art Museum. Retrieved from Artstor.

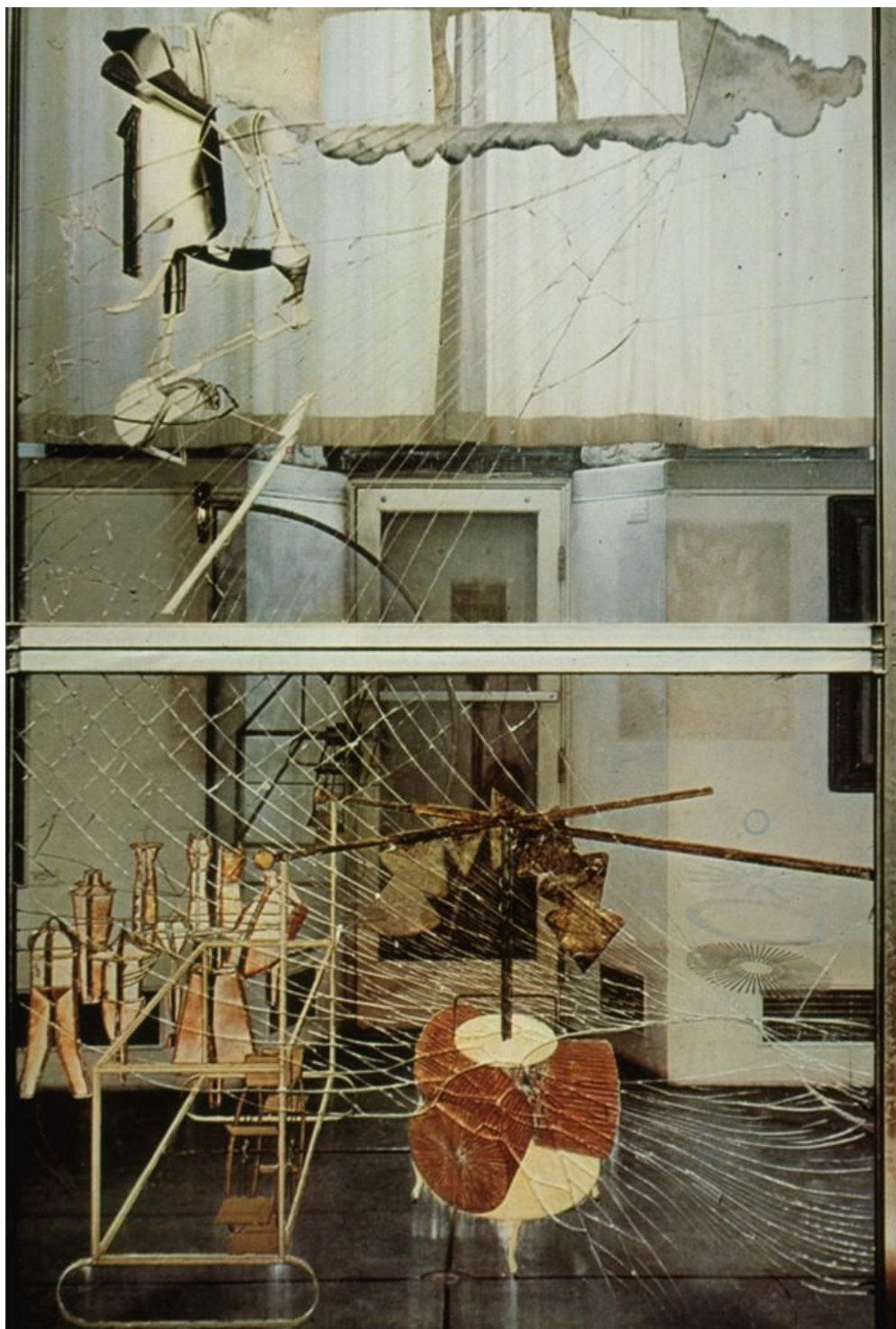


Figure 16: Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. Starification Object Series*, 1974. Photographic series, black and white prints. Scanned from Nancy Princenthal and Hannah Wilke. *Hannah Wilke*. (Munich: Prestel, 2010).



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