"I OBJECT" HANNAH WILKE'S FEMINISM

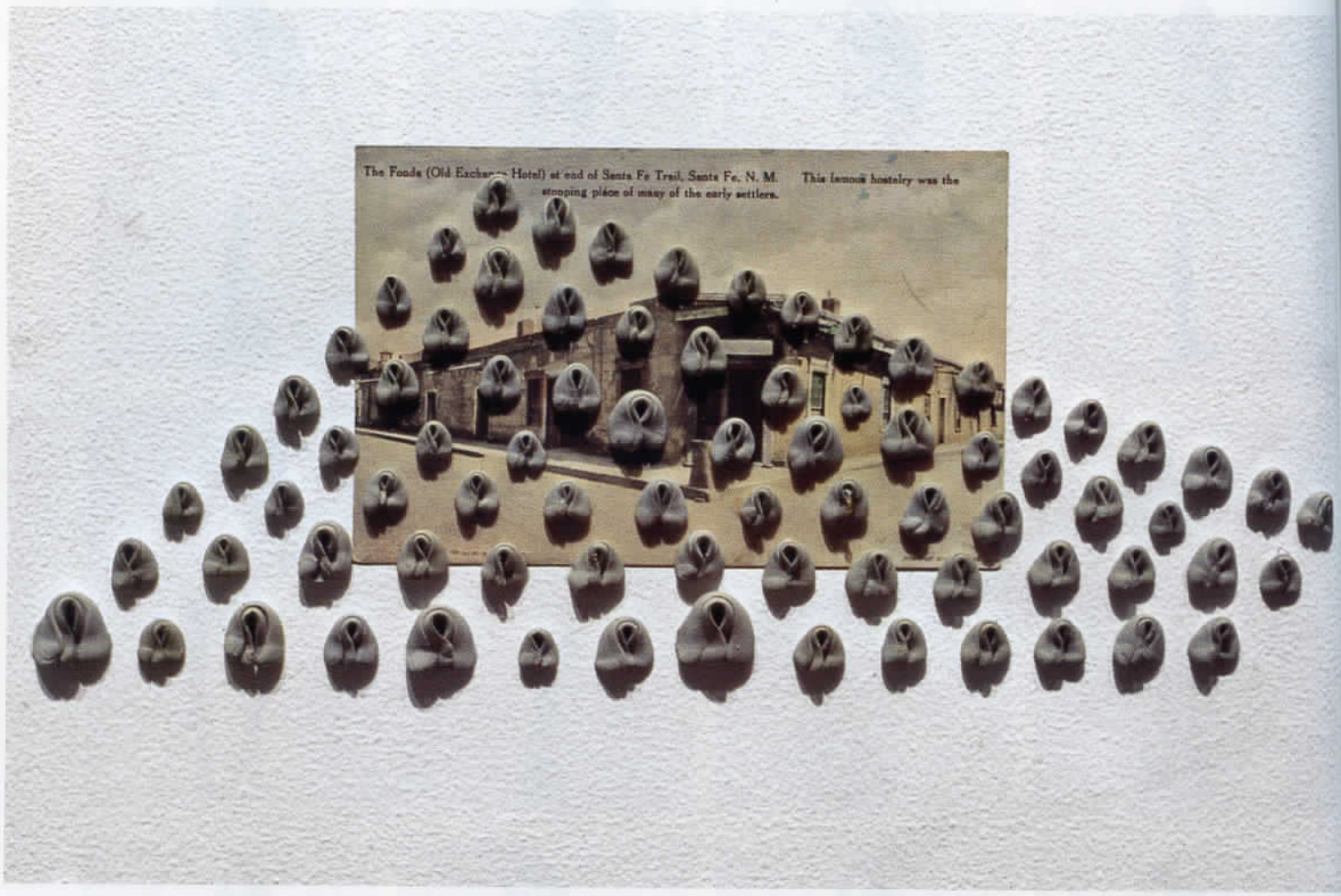
In her groundbreaking sculpture as well as in her better known photo-based work, Wilke developed a body-centered expressive language that gleefully violated protocols of social, visual and ideological etiquette.

BY ANNA C. CHAVE

FOR MOST WOMEN MAKING ART in the 1960s and '70s, the prospect of being no longer implicitly diminished as "women artists," but acknowledged simply as artists—as male professionals always had been—remained an overriding goal. But there were countervailing ambitions. Some feminists dreamed that the epochal emergence of a full generation of women recognized as artists might spell not merely an expansion of art-world business as usual, but a duly epochal shift in art practice worthy of the radicalism of the times. These feminists envisioned the advent of an authentically different art, marked by women's experience. In 1969, Lee Lozano argued that there could be no "art revolution that is separate from . . . a political revolution . . . [or] a sex revolution."[1] For her part, Lozano deferred her painting practice in favor of conceptual, life-into-art exercises such as her

Above, *Early Box and Six Phallic and Excremental Sculptures*, 1960-63, terra-cotta and plaster of Paris, 7 sculptures in 8 parts, between 7 and 1¾ inches high. Courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard, and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

Opposite, Hannah Wilke: *Super-T-Art*, 1974, 20 silver gelatin prints, each 6½ by 4½ inches. Photo courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt/Licensed by VAGA, New York.



WILKE ANTICIPATED A SUCCEEDING GENERATION'S DECONSTRUCTION OF THE MANNERED ROLES MARKED OUT FOR THE SEXUALIZED FEMALE BODY.

Masturbation Investigation of 1969, with its graphic (textual) account of the sight of her own genitals in the throes of orgasm—a project foreshadowing the notorious "cunt art" subgenre of '70s feminist art.[2]

The both vaunted and reviled *Dinner Party* that Judy Chicago and her retinue realized in ceramics and textiles in the mid-1970s is the project most widely identified with "cunt art." But some say the genre originated with the sexually suggestive, small ceramic "boxes" (some with abstractly penile as well as vaginal flourishes) done by Hannah Wilke in 1960-65, works lately shown in "Hannah Wilke: Gestures" at the Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase. Whereas female genitalia figured only sporadically (if importantly) in work from the '70s forward by such artists as Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta and Nancy Spero, vulval or labial forms became a leitmotif for Wilke. Tacitly at issue for all these women was a drive to redress the fact that, as Lynne Segal put it, "The vagina has served as a condensed symbol of all that is secret, shameful and unspeakable in our culture."[3] The aim, too, was to displace the enduring paradigm of the "bachelor machine" with a new model of creative production: that of a female creator whose bona fides are somehow attested to by her reproductive capacity.[4]

Although female artists increasingly strategized among themselves during the 1970s, opportunity remained unequally distributed. Writing in 1977, Harmony Hammond observed, "For women, the economic class system is largely determined by their relationship to men. The higher up the man she relates to, the more she benefits from the system."[5] As a minor case in point: Wilke successfully parlayed her relationship with Claes Oldenburg (with whom she had a liaison between 1969 and '77) into a berth at the newly established Ronald Feldman gallery; she even advertised the tactic, in a way, by crediting Oldenburg for a revealing photo of her, wearing sheer pantyhose, no underwear and high-heeled boots, which she used to publicize her premiere show there in 1972. Her abstract vulvae, by then contrived out of latex and snaps on a scale up to 6 feet tall, reportedly attracted de Kooning as a buyer,[6] while a young Douglas Crimp proved an enthusiastic reviewer, greeting the work as "unsettling" and "'feminine' with a vengeance." "[O]ne wants to unsnap—to violate," Crimp added; "This metaphor of sensuality mixed with vulnerability is frank and touching."[7]

Two snapped latex pieces from 1975 were included in the Neuberger exhibition; however, a wall text explained that some of the latex work has not survived. Wilke's performative/photographic works have tended to overshadow her legacy as an object maker, in any case, and the exhibition, curated by Tracy Fitzpat-

rick, was accordingly conceived to advocate for her strength as a sculptor. This aim was somewhat undercut, it must be said, by the decidedly uneven quality of the works on view, which included dozens of examples of ceramic and terra-cotta vulvae, along with a few photographic works, a single video, and assorted pieces made from chewing gum, kneaded erasers and laundry lint. In certain instances, as with the important "Starification Object Series (S.O.S.)," 1974-75, Wilke's labia-shaped, chewing-gum sculptures were actually embedded within her performance works, as well as within the quasi-documentary artifacts that followed. Such projects, which generally entailed skewed enactments of erotic stereotypes, showcased Wilke's mischievous efforts to extrapolate a model of released sexuality for women. Unlike her peers who advanced earth-goddess visions, Wilke mostly crafted her vulval objects from contemporary materials—ostensibly worthless, vulgar stuff transformed by her ingenuity. Affected by Oldenburg's "Mouse Museum" project (1965-77), whose Ray Gun wing incorporated found, phallic objects—found in part by Wilke, she claimed—she also began to use or to counterfeit objects within the general culture that had vulval shapes, such as fortune cookies and tortellini.

Wilke's tie to Oldenburg would fairly obsess her after their relationship ended, as attested by some highly Oldenburgian works at the Neuberger, including proposals for colossal vulval forms installed in public settings. During her romance with Pop's sculptor-in-chief, however, Wilke made no secret of her sexual availability. Hence the often charged tone of the messages from a queue of art-world men (interspersed with endearments from her mother, among others) animating the cache of answering machine tapes that she spliced together in her riveting *Intercourse with . . .* of 1975. This seldom-exhibited work (which was not included in the Neuberger show) proved one of the great finds of the huge 2007 exhibition, "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution," where there was also a notebook listing the callers. Insofar as *Intercourse with . . .* afforded a glimpse into the mundane operations of the

Opposite, *The Fonda*, 1975, kneaded erasers on postcard on painted wood, 16 by 18 inches. Courtesy Donald and Helen Goddard, and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

Above, *Through the Large Glass*, 1976, film still from performance at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Also in the film *C'est la vie, Rrose*, 1977, directed by Hans-Christof Stenzel for German TV. Photo courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt/VAGA.

Left, *The Red One*, 1980s, 34 painted ceramic elements on painted wood base, 5 feet square. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

intertwined social and professional networks of a noted female artist of her day, it incisively demystified the art world's back channels. Though the initial project relied mainly on aural suggestion, a 1977 version featured one of Wilke's offbeat stripteases, in which she methodically peeled off the names of callers that had been spelled out across her body in letters applied to her skin.

Prior stripteases had included a 1976 gambol behind *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (a.k.a. *The Large Glass*) at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, affirming the artist's intensive engagement with Duchamp's legacy,[8] and *Super-T-Art* of 1974, wherein Wilke arranged a tablecloth around her bare body into getups ranging from goddesslike drapery to a Christ-like loincloth. A photo made of the performance *Super-T-Art*, showing the high-heeled artist tickling a bare nipple, later figured in *Give: Hannah Wilke Can*, subtitled *A Living Sculpture Needs to Make a Living* (1978), in which the artist poses as a seductive mendicant whose coin-collection canisters announce that she "can"; the kittenish image reinforced the invitation to give it to Hannah in her "can," or through her slot. At the Neuberger, eight of the cans were shown, along with a conceptual piece incorporating the photograph that appears on the cans.

Throughout her performance work, Wilke's intent was at once serious and humorous, coyly and slyly feminist. But few other feminists laughed along. At a time when foiling the indiscriminately objectifying male gaze seemed an overriding goal—and when feminists were widely policing one another over the cosmetic use of razors, tweezers and the like—Wilke's efforts to mime, and send up, the role of the sex object tended to be viewed as complicit (a view likely cemented by the fact that *Oui*, *Penthouse* and *Playboy* all ran stories about her during the '70s). Criticizing Wilke for trying to have it both ways, "flaunt[ing] her body in parody of the role she actually plays in real life . . . as beautiful woman and artist, as flirt and feminist," Lucy Lippard sagely commented in 1976, "it is a subtle abyss that separates men's use of women for sexual titillation from women's use of women to expose that insult."[9] Though Wilke's art had drawn some respectful attention from critics outside the feminist fold, Lippard's critique came from an ambit that ideally would have yielded its most engaged supporters. And whereas Wilke's punning claim "I Object," on the cover of a fake book jacket, resonated loudly in that circle, her simultaneous plaint, "I Ob*ject*," fell on deaf ears there. Instead of spurring a lively, wide-ranging discourse on Wilke's art, Lippard's critique of her performative work, and a correlative complaint about the artist's narcissism, have ever since dominated—and so, arguably, short-circuited—the (rather sparse) Wilke literature.[10]

"[I]n spite of the excellence of [Wilke's] work," writer Edit deAk warned as early as 1974, "people talk about *her*."[11] "[T]he basic problem that most women have had making things," Wilke herself once complained, is that "people would rather look at women than . . . look at art."[12] Of course, Wilke explicitly chose to force this issue; as soon as she lost her clothes, her audience lost its cool, even though public displays of nudity (outside the sex industry) were by then established as markers of antibourgeois, ergo radical, behavior in both the art world and the culture at large. In 1989, Wilke defiantly though ambivalently claimed, "Harold Rosenberg in one of the quotes I dance nude to said something like, 'As soon as one sees a portrait of a nude woman, one never thinks of art, one thinks of woman.'" Added Wilke, "[O]ur seductiveness . . . [is] our power. [But] our power prevents people from listening to us."[13]

The troubling equation between women's seductiveness and their power lingers still, of course, but for those who came of age in a time when few other avenues to power were on offer, that equation was quite commonplace. For young women in the 1950s, Yvonne Rainer noted recently, "It cannot be said often enough that . . . everything in the culture militated toward pleasing men." Citing Shulamith Firestone's 1970 assertion that "[a woman's] whole identity hangs in the balance of her love life. She is allowed to love herself only if a man finds her worthy of love," Rainer reminisced that, in her own case, "it was the light from *his* eyes as I described the making of *Trio A*—the dance that was to become my signature piece—that first illuminated my achievement . . . I was saved."[14] Wilke's persistent demonstrations of her status as a man-magnet might well be viewed in this light.

By contrast with Rainer's typically more matter-of-fact displays of nudity, however, Wilke anticipated a succeeding generation's deconstruction of the mannered roles marked out for the sexualized female body within the commercial culture. In the "Starification Object Series," for instance, she blankly struck a number of stock feminine poses, anticipating the masquerade soon to emerge in Cindy Sherman's celebrated "film stills." But unlike Sherman, whose enactments of feminine roles mostly deviated rather subtly from their models in the commercial realm, Wilke explicitly disrupted those models by marring her own flesh with labia-shaped chewing gum "scars." She thus alluded to the tribal practice of scarification, which is designed to beautify yet bound to be painful, and hence is resonant of Western imperatives that women suffer to achieve beauty. While Wilke referred to her use of gum as a signal of the disposability often associated with women, her gummy labia were not, in fact, negligible wads, but—as could be seen in the gum-on-rice-paper examples at the Neuberger—colorful, exquisite little sculptures meant for sale. By marking virtual polymorphously perverse entryways all over Wilke's body, moreover, they represented a super-added orgasmic potential unique to women—represented women's *jouissance*—and so further fulfilled her stated aim, to revalue the denigrated cunt.

Lippard was completely justified, of course, in charging that Wilke wanted to have it both ways: she did want to be both agent and object. What often got lost in the ensuing conversation is that, broadly speaking, so do we all want that basic possibility, women and men alike. In psychoanalytic terms, all integrated individuals typically want and need to be objects, at least to someone—if not objects alone. Besides positioning herself as sexual prey, for that matter, Wilke also disported herself as a sexual huntress. (In art world conversation, she was often termed a slut—a slur without masculine equivalent since libidinousness tends to be valorized in men.) In playing both sexual subject and object, however, Wilke violated feminist edicts against soliciting the male gaze; by the same stroke, she challenged an abiding fiction that the contemporary art market (especially as reborn in the then retail-free SoHo district) disdained to deal in objects or commodities. Regardless that her work proved too extreme to garner much commercial success,[15] Wilke perversely played the part of a

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Right, Untitled, from the "Sotheby's" series, 1991, ink on magazine page, 16½ by 10¾ inches. Photo Jim Frank, courtesy Solway Jones, Los Angeles. © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt/VAGA.

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whore to the marketplace. And whereas, say, Andy Warhol could openly call art a business, and thereby draw (in time) the approbation of leftist critics for illuminating the art world's capitalist core, Wilke would be denied a comparable reading. In a problem that also plagued Yayoi Kusama and Lynda Benglis, who likewise (if more briefly) undertook some provocative vamping, revisiting the age-old trope of the artist as prostitute to the marketplace proved particularly taboo if the artist was female—an insight lately acquired anew by Andrea Fraser (who controversially sold her sexual services to a client-collector for an untitled 2003 artwork, documented on videotape).

"The society we know . . . is based upon the exchange of women," observed Luce Irigaray in 1978, citing Lévi-Strauss's explanation that the "most desirable women" are "scarce [commodities] . . . essential to the life of the group." "Marx's analysis of commodities as the elementary form of capitalist wealth can thus be understood as an interpretation of the status of woman in so-called patriarchal societies," Irigaray argued. Further, "Participation in society requires that the body submit itself to a specularization, a speculation, that transforms it into a value-bearing object" or commodity.[16] Inasmuch as the prostitute collapses the distinction between the sold and the seller, she represents the apotheosis of the commodity; as such, she has served as an avatar of urban modernity in the Euro-American world.[17] "Could commodities themselves speak," Marx wrote, in a passage that Wilke incorporated in a performance titled *So Help Me Hannah* (presented several times between the late 1970s and the mid-'80s), "they would say: Our use-value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects. What, however, does belong to us as objects, is our value. Our natural intercourse as commodities proves it. In the eyes of each other we are nothing but exchange values."[18]

In the 1980s, New Museum founder and director Marcia Tucker listed a range of initiatives that female artists had been credited with advancing in the prior decade, such as "the use of a subjective, personal voice; overtly political content; . . . performance as autobiography," and so forth. "Certainly it seemed as though women had defied the canon," she declared; but, "Unfortunately, it was the men who became famous and reaped the economic rewards."[19] By now, many women have achieved substantial rewards of their own, if not full parity—but not Wilke (or her heirs). And it is especially younger women who have mined her pioneering work, often while holding it at arm's length. In a 1998 exhibition catalogue essay, Laura Cottingham cites Sarah Lucas, Janine Antoni, Vanessa Beecroft and Renee Cox, among others, as Wilke's present-day artistic heirs.[20] Wilke and her cohort, long scorned for harboring naively essentialist convictions said to be discredited by a theory-wise generation to follow, in fact produced work that was throughout "intensively mediated"; so Abigail Solomon-Godeau recently adjudged, while further lauding Wilke's generation for having "intuitively grasped the difficulty of extricating the woman who speaks from the discourses that speak her."[21]

Though feminist discourse could not easily assimilate Wilke's practice in her day (a failure that caused the disappointment she betrayed in a poster of 1977 that read, in part, "Beware of Fascist Feminism"), today her feminist thinking appears not only vexing, but also, by turns, premonitory, ingenious and compelling, arguably delivering on the poignant feminist dream that an art made by women might look genuinely different, unexpected, and so might open fissures in the sociocultural field. Such was the suggestion, in a way, inscribed in Wilke's witty "Kneaded-erase-her" works of 1975-76, several of them shown at the Neuberger, in which vintage postcards of landmarks ranging from the New York Public Library to the Atlantic City boardwalk bear ranks of tiny labia modeled from bits of gray erasers: if the promise of the available, nubile woman is everywhere, the reality of her being, emblematized by her genitals, remained broadly suppressed—an erasure that Wilke's assisted readymades fantastically redress. ○

1 In "Open Hearing," *Art Workers Coalition Handbook*, New York, 1969, as cited in Helen Molesworth, "Tune In, Turn On, Drop Out: The Rejection of Lee Lozano," *Art Journal* 61, winter 2002, p. 68. **2** Lozano finally declined to join the women's movement, even ceasing to speak to women as a conceptual piece begun in 1971; see ibid., pp. 70-71. **3** Lynne Segal, "Body Matters: Cultural Inscriptions," in *Feminist Theory and the Body*, edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 109. **4** "'[T]he asexual reproduction of fathers on their own' is part of the European literary tradition from Genesis and *Paradise Lost* to . . . James Watson's *Double Helix*," observed Elaine Showalter in *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, New York, Viking, 1990, p. 78. **5** Harmony Hammond, "Class Notes," *Heresies* 1, no. 3, 1977, p. 35. **6** See Lil Picard, "Hannah Wilke: Sexy Objects," *Andy Warhol's Interview*, January 1973, p. 18. **7** Douglas Crimp, "Hannah Wilke," *Artnews*, October 1972, pp. 77, 83. **8** Evident also, for instance, in her references to his alter ego Rrose Sélavy, as in her series of latex works "Ponder-r-rosa (White Plains, Yellow Rocks)," 1974-75. **9** Lucy R. Lippard, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art," 1976, reprinted in *Art and Feminism*, edited by Helena Reckitt, New York, Phaidon, 2001, p. 214. **10** Wilke's principal champions have been Joanna Frueh, who wrote the exhibition catalogue *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective*, edited by Thomas H. Kochheiser, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1989, and Amelia Jones; see Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998. **11** Edit deAk, "Hannah Wilke at Feldman," *Art in America*, May-June 1974, pp. 110-11. **12** Cited in Leslie Dick, "Hannah Wilke," in *X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly* 6, no. 4, summer 2004 (accessed in August 2008 at www.x-traonline.org/past-articles.php?articleID=161). **13** Garry Noland, "'I could be representative of every woman': An Interview with Hannah Wilke," in *Forum* 14, no. 5, November-December 1989, p. 11. **14** Yvonne Rainer, "Skirting and Aging: An Aging Artist's Memoir," in *Yvonne Rainer: Radical Juxtapositions 1961-2002*, Philadelphia, University of the Arts, 2002, p. 89. **15** On the occasion of her sole (noncommercial) U.S. retrospective, at a St. Louis university gallery in 1989, Wilke noted that "you could buy the entire show for the price of one Frank Stella," in Noland, "'I could be representative...'," p. 11. **16** Luce Irigaray, "Women on the Market," in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985, pp. 170 (ellipsis and brackets as in original), 172, 179-80. **17** See Hollis Clayson's discussion of Benjamin, Baudelaire and Simmel on the topic of prostitution, in Clayson, *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1991, pp. 7-9. **18** Cited in Frueh, p. 30. **19** Marcia Tucker, "Women Artists Today: Revolution or Regression?" in Randy Rosen, et al., *Making Their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream, 1970-85*, New York, Abbeville, 1989, p. 199. **20** See Laura Cottingham, "Some Naked Truths and Her Legacy in the 1990s," in Elisabeth Delin Hansen, et al., *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective*, Nikolaj (Denmark), Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, 1998, pp. 57-58. **21** Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Woman Who Never Was: Self-Representation, Photography, and First-Wave Feminist Art," in Lisa Gabrielle Mark, ed., *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2007, p. 339.

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