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Between Beauty and Pain: Hannah Wilke's Intra-Venus Series

Hannah Wilke was an artist best known for her performalist photographs that imaged her own body. When she states that her work is concerned with “the creation of a formal imagery that is specifically female,” Wilke places herself within a wave of feminist artists who turned to working with their own bodies as a way to critique dominant beauty standards and to claim the right of self-representation. Wilke's physical beauty, however, served to undermine her attempts, as her work was often labeled narcissistic. It was not until the end of her career in her posthumous exhibition, *Intra-Venus*, which depicted her battle with cancer, that Wilke's critique of beauty was taken seriously. By investigating the interaction between beauty and pain as the space between life and death, this paper will argue that Wilke utilized beauty's power to inflict pain, by way of the grotesque, as a revisionist tool in her attempts to rewrite visual codes of femininity and sexuality. In revealing that her strategies of subversion are dependent upon the metaphor of Venus rather than Narcissus, this reading of her work will move beyond the limiting and sexist category of narcissism. In support of this thesis, I analyze how Wilke challenged the concept of ideal beauty codified during the eighteenth century as an intellectualizing practice of evaluation as well as nineteenth-century medical discourses, which by means of photography, aimed to visually inspect a person for signs of illness as a means of controlling the body.