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Life text: interpreting the *ethereal* images of Hannah Wilke

Abstract:

A life narrative is something more than circumstantial. It is a work; an embodiment of a subject moulded through time and shaped by experience, tugged back from the eclipse of night by memory to be cast out into the present as the autobiographical act. This is not a tawdry encounter, but a literary dance involving a plethora of identities, partnered with regimes of truth, its authority(ies), and the narrative itself; the embodiment of the text. There are several ways that could be used to elucidate what an author/ artist creates, and how it is read. In this respect, however, one form of criticism will be used to articulate and discuss the nature of such a life narrative: interpretation. Unlike written modes, which are confined to their boundaries, the image offers multi-parameters. Thus, this paper attempts to interpret three images by American photographer/ performance artist Hannah Wilke that illustrate her life narrative. While Wilke, who died in 1993, these photo texts, though separate in their enunciation, are connected and entwined through a thematic narrative that takes the viewer through an exploratory and voyeuristic experience of life, sex and death: Wilke's autobiographical act.

Photographic Work, The Art of Hannah Wilke, Hannah Wilke Collection and Archive, Los Angeles <http://www.hannahwilke.com/id5.html>, Visual Artists and Galleries Association (VAGA), New York (viewed April 10, 2015)

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Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerabilities of lives heading toward their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people – Susan Sontag (2005: 55).

What constitutes a life narrative lies beyond the physical and sanguine pulse. It offers a sacrament, an embodiment of a temporal subject moulded by time, space, and experience to become an autobiographical act. This is not a tawdry encounter, but a literary dance involving a plethora of identities, partnered with regimes of truth, its authority(ies), and the narrative itself; the embodiment of the text. Arguably, several ways could be used to elucidate what an author/ artist creates, and how it is read. In this respect, however, one form of criticism will be used to articulate and discuss the nature of such a life narrative: interpretation.

This text is not confined to the boundaries of poetry or novel: the page, but the image through its multi-parameters of time and space. Thus, this paper attempts to interpret and articulate images by American photographer/ performance artist Hannah Wilke from her website that illustrate a life narrative: a taxonomy of self. Here, three images, a triptych of photographs, will be interpreted that, though separate in their enunciation, are connected and entwined through a thematic narrative that takes the viewer through an exploratory and voyeuristic experience of life, sex and death: Wilke's autobiographical act.

Before one begins a hermeneutic reading of Wilke's three life images, it is imperative to examine how the photograph, as a work of art, provides a form of aesthetic expression. In *Camera Lucida* (1980), Roland Barthes writes 'more than other arts, Photography offers an immediate presence to the world-a co-presence; but this presence is not only of a political order ('to participate by the image in contemporary events'), it is also of a metaphysical order' (Barthes 1980: 84). While Stephen Greenblatt posits the photograph, as other forms of art work is 'itself the product of a set of manipulations, some of them our own ... many others undertaken in the construction of the original work' (Greenblatt 1989: 12). In this respect, the image is produced through a negotiation between its creator – supplied with an ornate, communally shared set of tropes, and the social and cultural milieus.

In examining forms of expression and representation, however, a photograph interacts with/ to something, and in that affiliation, its essential value or meaning depends on that correspondence. Virgil C. Aldrich contends that while the photograph is in effect a part of a set of instructions or directives as to what to do to the original, it 'is a descriptive portrayal – it refers to something beyond it, where the description includes what is to be done about the referent' (Aldrich 1963: 49). Thus, the image may be viewed reminiscently. Indeed, as Susan Sontag observes that even 'after the event had ended, the picture will still exist, conferring on the even a kind of immortality (an importance) it would never otherwise have enjoyed' (Sontag 2005: 8). Thus, the photographic image serves as both an artificial and evidentiary locator of an experience or of a temporal situation, even without having engaged in the exquisite moment, or who is evoked or invoked of similar situations that may have existed.

In further examining the dichotomy between representation and expression, Aldrich (1963) notes that while no work of art as an aesthetic object functions as a descriptive

portrayal, and so non-descriptive; it therefore must be an expressive form of representation. In this respect, in non-aesthetic modes, the image portrayal is both descriptive and formal. Within the aesthetic mode, however, image portrayal is both expressive and formal. According to Aldrich, the expressive mode ‘in general, exhibits what the portrayal means in the medium of expression; it breaks down into the representational and the nonrepresentational modes’ (Aldrich 1963: 52). Therefore, an art work is provides a form of representation through its expression of the subject, and its perceived similarity between its design and the essence of its subject matter.

In returning to Wilke, the first image one seeks to examine is: “Advertisements for Living, 1966-84” (Wilke). Installation. 9 cibachrome diptychs with text, 28 x 81 inches



This work, a montage, cues aspects of her life, as a thematic point, taken over 18 years. Thus, within the frame of shots, it could be argued is a narrative of the *self* and the agencies (landscapes, objects, family, *et cetera*) through which the *self* is explored, bound and subject. Laura Mulvey asserts that it is the image ‘that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence of the first articulation of the I, of subjectivity’ (Mulvey 1975: 18). Here, the narrative imagery is captured through the narrating ‘I’ of the photographer. Arguably, for the auteur as well as author, this narrative provides both a first and third-person person perspective – the narrating ‘I’, as well as that omniscient narration of the subject. In his essay, *Distance and Point of View* (1961), Wayne Booth articulates this sense of narration through a distinction between the implied author (auteur) and narrator – a narrator who is dramatised or undramatised and reliable or unreliable (Booth 1961: 60-79). In this sense, Wilke’s narrative, a

nonverbal representation, thus provides an iconographic document through which the narrator converts representation into a narrative by describing herself. In doing so, the viewer is positioned to acknowledge that Wilke's memorial experiences are authentic.

Due to the discursive nature of the self-identified photographic author, Wilke is able to self-represent herself within and outside of the photograph. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note that such '[p]hotograph(s) may accompany an autobiographical narrative, be alluded to but absent, or stand in the place of an absent but suggested narrative' (Smith & Watson 2001: 76). In this respect, Wilke provides a narrative discourse through which imagery and its expressive representation is produced. This narrative discourse, as Gérard Genette submits, 'constantly implies a study of relationships: on the one hand the relationship between a discourse and the events that it recounts, on the other hand the relationship between the same discourse and the act that it produces, actually or fictively' (Genette 1980: 27).

Here, I suggest, Wilke's *self* is deposited within the image, yet also positioned and to be maintained at length from the photographer so that the narrating 'I' is distanced from the narrative. In pursuing this motif, Sontag suggests that:

[p]hotography is seen as an acute manifestation of the individualised 'I', the homeless private self astray in an overwhelming world – mastering reality by a fast visual anthologising of it. Or[,] photography is seen as a means of finding a place in the world (still experienced as overwhelming, alien) by being able to relate to it with detachment – bypassing the interfering, insolent claims of the self (Sontag 1973: 92).

In "Advertisements for Living, 1966-84" (Wilke), the work of the text as a life narrative circulates around the *self*; that is, it is not confined by the frame, but is part of a matrix of each 'self' within the text. In this regard, the *self* is homogeneous to the text (the website from the image is sourced), yet the *self* is heterogeneous to the photograph within the text. To extrapolate, Sidonie and Smith note that:

[e]ach photo tells a separate story and, taken together, they form a separate system of meaning. And the stories in photographs may support, or be in tension with, or contradict the claims of the verbal text. To read these multimedia texts we need to develop familiarity with the narrative and generic conventions of visual compositions (Smith & Watson 2001: 76).

In this sense, each 'self' of the text would harness the images together such that they would constitute a life narrative; a text of the 'portrayed' *self*. Indeed, through photographs, as Sontag affirms 'each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself – a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness' (Sontag 2005: 5). Sontag continues, 'those ghostly traces, photographs, supply the token presence of the dispersed relatives' (6).

Despite the multiple generic conventions the text is whole; it is a narrative. This assertion may conflict with Jacques Derrida's *La loi du genre*. As Derrida contends, '[a]s soon as the word *genre* is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. Or, more rigorously, genres should not intermix' (Derrida 1992: 224-225). Thus, according to Derrida, Wilke's

autobiographic act would be set, defined and bound by one generic convention - autobiography. If this was the case, which, I contend it is not, it would leave it stale to our witness. Therefore, it could be interpreted that the generic conventions of the visual compositions denote an autotopography – a term initially coined by Jennifer A. Gonzáles (1995). In this respect, Wilke’s photographs of herself *et cetera*, may be metaphysical. As Gonzáles notes, ‘[t]hese personal objects can be seen to form a syntagmatic array of physical signs in a spatial representation of identity’ (Gonzáles 1995: 133). However, despite one’s interpretive response that the text may denote an autotopography, each photograph within the text displays a different generic convention. Indeed, each work in this reading has a different generic convention to the next. The first image – “Advertisements for Living, 1966-84” (Wilke) – may be explained as an autofiction, with its textual markers (the montage) signalling a manoeuvre between the modes of *real* and *fiction*. In this sense, the work, as like others in this reading, provide a postmodern aesthetic; in that such forms of representation and reality overlap. Due to the nature of the image and its representations, Umberto Eco observes that:

the form of the work of art gains its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood. These give it a wealth of different resonances and echoes without impairing its original essence (Eco 1989: 3).

Thus, such informal or open works of art, as Eco again asserts, ‘provides a wider range of interpretive possibilities, a configuration of stimuli whose substantial indeterminacy allows for a number of possible readings, a ‘constellation’ of elements that lend themselves to all sorts of reciprocal relationships’ (Eco 1989: 84). However, due to the technical nature of photography and the camera as an implement of art, do these factors contribute to its limitations? Barthes contends that:

What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially... it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the *This* (this photograph, and not Photography), in short, what Lacan calls the *Tuché*, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real, in its indefatigable expression (Barthes 1980: 4).

In this respect, the photograph, that writing with light, provides an artefact of legitimacy; but, also a torrent of encounters that are impermeable and fixed, yet temporally transient.

As an art form, Aldrich states that photography is far more restrictive and less expressive than other art forms; ‘[t]his is because it puts a machine between the artist and his(/her) finished work, (and) that tends to do too much picturing on its own’ (Aldrich 1963: 62). However, Sontag argues that for the practice to be a legitimate art, ‘photography must cultivate the notion of the photographer as *auteur* and of all photographs taken by the same photographer as constituting a body of work’ (107). Indeed, she continues, in that ‘[p]hotography, though not an art form in itself, has the peculiar capacity to turn all its subjects into works of art’ (116). With Wilke, as both the performance artist and photographer, *she* is herself the art as well as the muse for her camera: the eye, through which, only *she* sees.

The second image I look to discuss is: “Portrait of the Artist with her Mother, Selma Butter (1978-81)” (Wilke).



This image, I suggest, offers what G. Thomas Couser in *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing* (1997) terms as an autopathography, which characterises a personal narrative about illness that contests cultural discourses that stigmatise the subject. Thus, in Wilke’s work, I suggest the autopathography is represented as a narrative that is primarily rendered outside of the framed shot. Thus, while the photograph is flat, the narrative lies outside of the frame; it stands before the image to be recounted, told. The camera deconstructs the subject to the object. In this sense, Sontag notes that ‘[t]o photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed’ (Sontag 2005: 10). In doing so, Wilke, as the body, is the subjective object. This also relates to the ‘I’ constituted in the *eye* of the beholder, be it the viewer/ voyeur; but also in Wilke as the photographer/ auteur. Thus, the ‘I’ of these self-portraits is not in the image. What is in the image is the *negative* of what the ‘I’ (eye) perceives the ‘self’; that is, what Wilke’s *self* to be and what ‘Others’ – the viewer or voyeur within the same socio-cultural position, perceives her ‘self’ to be. In this sense, voyeurism, as Julia Kristeva writes ‘is a structural necessity in the constitution of object relation, showing up every time the object shifts towards the subject; it becomes true perversion only if there is a failure to symbolize the subject/object instability’ (46). In this respect, such voyeurism accompanies Wilke’s narrative of abjection; in that, once the narrative ends voyeurism becomes perverse.

As the viewer or reader we have access to the narrating 'I'; this is implied by the life narrative that exists outside of the image (like cancer) inasmuch as we know they are *self* portraits. As Smith and Watson observe, 'the photograph presents the 'I' in the photograph as at once a flesh-and-blood subject and a dematerialized phantom of an invisible photographer' (Smith & Watson 2001: 76). In this case, as like the previous image, the 'I' is the invisible or ethereal entity of the image. Therefore we see an interrogation of self-identity; of who Wilke's 'self' is, what her-'selves' relationship is to others.

The image also reflects the thematic aesthetic of gender and sex. Here, I suggest, the voyeur views the antithesis of the other; a sex, or sexual, versus a sexless. This notion in Western culture, as Bob Connell observes, is how the physical aesthetics of what is male and female is critical to the cultural hermeneutics of gender. In both feminine and masculine gender 'is (among other things) a certain feel to the skin, certain muscular shapes and tensions, certain postures and ways of moving, certain possibilities in sex' (Connell 2005: 53). Thus, the viewer/ voyeur may interpret Wilke: desirable; *un femme*, while parallel, her mother is viewed as undesirable, *the Other*. That is, Wilke as the subject *is* the object, while her mother remains *the* subject; she *is* subject to her daughter's image, as well as *subject* to her cancer. In pursuing this course of viewing, Mulvey observes that:

(i)n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/ male and passive /female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is stylised accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness* (1975: 19).

While this may be true, particularly concerning film and the cinematic experience, Wilke subverts this position for she is the active (in taking the picture) as well as the passive (the muse) the subject of the camera lens. Similarly, in *Le Rire de la Méduse* (1986) Helen Cixous articulates the need and want for women to speak through writing and speech. As Cixous asserts:

Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body. In a certain way she inscribes what she's saying, because she doesn't deny her drives the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking. Her speech, even when theoretical or political, is never simple or linear or objectified, generalised: she draws her story into history (Cixous 1986: 251).

Thus, I suggest that this notion also resonates through visual expression; in that, within the image, Wilkie's speech is evoked and pronounced through her body as the body text: the image narrative. To further this point, it is conceivable to question how the role and function of the artist – the authorial producer of a text, and its characters, who are *real*, as well as textual bodies, allow for a deconstruction of the physical and emotional sense. In pursuing a post-structuralist approach, Jean- François Roussel and Christian Downs note that this 'allows for a theoretical examination of body and emotions that views theme as the locus and effect of theoretical and political

intervention. As socially constructed, the body may be deconstructed and reconstructed, in postpatriarchal ways' (Roussel & Downs 2007: 183). Therefore, it could be conceived that Wilke deconstructs the body text (her self, and the Other) for it to become a surfaces from which to be articulated and interpreted. In this sense, Sontag observes that the descriptive/ expressive image, as captured by the camera lens, teaches us 'a new visual code(:) photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, and ethics of seeing' (Sontag 2005: 1).

The final work one seeks to examine is: "Intra Venus No.4, 1992-93" (Wilke). Diptych 2 cibachrome photographs; Intra-Venus photographs Copyright Donald Goddard



The image "Intra Venus No.4, 1992-93" may be read through a term initially used Nancy K. Miller: autothanatography (1996). In this sense, Miller suggests that 'autobiography – identity through alterity' is also writing against death twice: the other's and one's own' (Miller 1996: 12). In this respect, the artist, Wilke herself, confronts illness and death simultaneously as both the performer and auteur. Here, I suggest she recognises a life at a limit of its own; inasmuch as the image responds to the death that awaits her; death is a *fait accompli*. These images of the 'self' are Wilke's naked *self*. As discussed, the narrating 'I' for each of the previous images is outside of the photograph, the frame. Here, however (in the left-hand image), the 'I' is beside the *self*; it is the *shadow* of her *self*, the spectre that haunts image and the photographer. As Wilke, ill with cancer, the 'I' is visible; it is no longer hidden within the *self* but exposed, naked, like Wilke. As Sontag affirms, 'photography

provides a unique system of disclosures: that it shows us reality as had *not* seen (...) before' (Sontag 1973: 92). Indeed, the work is a praxis of sentiment; a vestige of a life lived, a portrait of her 'self' true worth. In exploring this point further, Niall Lucy notes that like literature, the 'true worth of a work (of art), then, seems not to be a matter that remains to be decided or judged (but) its status being always already given' (Lucy 2001: 81). The position of Wilke's 'self' can be taken further in terms of its relation to power; the author/ auteur's discursive identity to her 'self' and the text. In his analysis of *Technologies of Self* (1982), Michel Foucault examines imperatives for constituting the 'disciplined' self as a subject via multiple confessional practices established a vocabulary for specifying subject positions. Therefore, in Wilke's work, she is the subject to and for her own *self* scrutiny via the lens, which also directs the reader to a 'private' versus 'public' dichotomy of her *self*. As Sontag attests, '(a) photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture' (Sontag 2005: 3). In this sense, for Wilke as a subject text, the aesthetic image is private, but it is also public, through its exhibition and in others' private ownership of her as a photographic image. This dichotomy has cultural implications. As Greenblatt notes, '[f]or *The Political Unconscious* any demarcation of the aesthetic must be aligned with the private which is in turn aligned with the psychological, the poetic, and the individual, as distinct from the public, the social and the political' (Greenblatt 1989: 3). In this respect, Wilke's images, though private, become commodified; in that, the image text no longer belongs to her but to private publics.

Through her work Wilke is positioned to express something of herself within the aesthetic; an impression of her expression, *herself* elicited through the use of the camera and its agencies. In doing so, as Sontag notes, '[a]ll photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability' (Sontag 2005: 11). Thus, in examining just some of the photographs, we see the autobiographic act on display – moments of truth dispersed within the performance: the act. Though, this performance is not exhibited as one text, but as several simultaneously, a multiplicity of the autobiographic act, indeed an ethereal life narrative portrait of Hannah Wilke.

After the event has ended, the picture will still exist, conferring on the event a kind of immortality (and importance) it would never otherwise have enjoyed (Susan Sontag 2005: 8).

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