Sickness, Sexuality, Secrets: the Erotic Anatomies of Hannah Wilke and Annie Sprinkle

Through a comparative, historically-contextualized reading of select early works and later cancer-themed pieces by photographer Hannah Wilke and porn star/visual artist Annie Sprinkle, this paper seeks to further investigate how these artists engage with the legacy of eroticized anatomies while staging their own feminist interventions that visually externalize the internal, pathological/sexual female body. Wilke and Sprinkle mobilize images of the sick body refracted and re-presented through the familiar language of erotic representation and pornographic visuality to stage a conversation between sickness and sexuality, the pathological and pornographic. In doing so, they question notions of corporeal interiority/exteriority; the secrets of women; correlations between femininity/pathology/sexuality; and women’s corporeally/visually based identities – questions exasperated by the externalizing interventions of pornographic and medical display. By exploring these notions through representations of dually erotic and pathological anatomies, these artists force a reconsideration of historical and biological characterizations of femininity and femaleness, and enter into the prevailing debate over how the internal female body is rendered inside-out within visual culture. Their works stage a provoking intervention that harkens back to historic traditions of representing eroticized anatomies while ultimately leveling their own feminist critique on how the female body comes to be visualized as an externalized sight of erotic interiority.

Biography

Meghan Chandler is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Visual Studies at the University of California, Irvine. She holds a Bachelor’s Degree, summa cum laude, in Cinema & Cultural Studies (with Honors) and Psychology from the State University of New York, Stony Brook. Her research focuses on gender/sexuality, fragmentation, and mediations of body with visual culture.