Hannah Wilke
Exhibition Catalogue
Early box and Six Phallic and Excremental Sculptures, 1960-63
Terracotta, plaster of Paris and glazed terracotta.
7 sculptures in 8 parts.
Throughout her undergraduate career at Tyler School of Art at Temple University in Philadelphia, Hannah Wilke experimented with materials like plaster of Paris and Fiberglass but ultimately determined these materials were too limiting for her work. She turned to clay to find the malleability she had been searching for. The result being her early ceramic works which she called “blooms” or “boxes”, a pun, which was slang for vagina. While much of her work at the time were abstractions of the human body, these boxes were some of her earliest work that depicted abstractions of the vagina. In fact, she was one of the first artists ever to use vaginal imagery in her work.\(^1\) Wilke was reserved when it came to showing and revealing the content of her boxes because it was looked down upon to create artwork about female genitalia. The 60’s art world was still permeated with Clement Greenberg’s negativity towards and exclusion of craft material, female artists and feminine content in high art. Wilke was concerned about herself and her work being doomed to craft world obscurity.

Laundry Lint (C.O.’s), 1971-73
Lint
12 sculptures: dimensions vary
After her series of boxes, Wilke began to use simple gestures and extremely vulnerable materials to create her work. Her piece Laundry Lint (C.O.’s), 1971-73 is a series of simple folds made out of the compressed lint from her own and Claus Oldenburg’s laundry. Displayed on the floor, this series investigates vulnerability and potential violation of the vaginal forms. The lint varies in supple shade of pinks, oranges, purples and blues, loosely mingling with thread, clothing labels, hair and other remnants of everyday life.\(^2\) Wilke utilized the waste of “women’s work” to address her distinctly feminine concerns and express a range of emotions related to the feminist issues. A factor that begins to come into play with these works is the passage of time and the deterioration of the delicate materials. This deterioration is dilemma that curators often experience while moving, storing, and displaying Wilke’s work.

\(^2\) Fitzpatrick, Tracy, and Saundra Goldman. *Hannah Wilke: gestures*. (23)
Throughout the early 1970’s Wilke completed a series of latex wall hangings that referenced flowers and vaginal forms. She created these works by pouring liquid latex out in large flat sheets on the floor, which she then folded and hung in gathered compositions. Willem de Kooning considered these latex folds to be the first abstract expressionist sculptures. She compared her process of pouring out the latex with the gestural painting style of Jackson Pollock, stating that human gesture becoming form was at the heart of her final products. Wilke intended her malleable sculptures to be pleasurable objects; she experimented with soft forms and colors to create abstractions of female genitalia. In an interview with Andy Warhol she described the vagina as being an internal object, something no one has a real or direct picture of, which lends the vagina to being abstracted and made into art. The latex forms were originally sensual and fleshy but the passage of time has made the latex brittle and prone to cracking. This materiality lends itself to further interpretations about the mortality of the body or a fragility of the vagina itself. A few of these forms like Pink Champagne, 1975 were held together with small snaps, which could easily be undone. This vulnerability of form was confirmed by the fact that if the sculptures were to be undone they would never be able to be restored to their original position. These aspects opened the work up to further metaphors about feminine issues of violation and rape.

Hannah Wilke continued her search for malleability through her series of kneaded eraser compositions. The kneaded erasers were pliable like clay and instead of utilizing them as a tool for subtraction she used them to construct small one-fold sculptures. The erasers are unique in that they absorb the color of what has been erased with them, and while they stiffen and change color over time they never completely deteriorate. Wilke often employed wordplay in the titles of her pieces, the title Needed-Erase-Her was a commentary on the idea of women being needed while at the same time being erased, particularly as it concerns the inclusion of women in the written history of fine art.
Wilke utilized her own body as a subject of her artwork just as she used other malleable materials like clay, latex and kneaded erasers. In her 30-minute long, wordless film, *Gestures*, Wilke uses her fingers to knead the skin around her face, slap her face, and tug on her tongue, lips, and eyes. She pulls her face into expressions that should come naturally to humans but do not for her in this context. Her relationship with the camera in this video is so unselfconscious that it gives the viewer the impression she is examining herself in the mirror. Which opens the door for viewers to ponder why such examination of her body is necessary in the first place, and in what feminine context this examination of the female body is commonplace.

Chewing gum as a sculpting material became as prominent in Wilke’s work as ceramic. She used pre-chewed gum, either from herself or another person and folded them into minimalist erotic forms. With one simple gesture she was able to blend the seduction of eating, sex, and sugar. With these gum sculptures her visual language expanded to include oral eroticism as well as genital. She utilized the gum sculptures in various projects the most notably of which is; *S.O.S. Starification Object Series, An Adult Game of Mastication, 1974-75*.

which viewers were encouraged to chew sticks of gum, which she would then use to create the gum folds and pin them to the wall or stick them onto her own body. There was significance in the interaction between viewers, their saliva, the gum; the gesture of folding the gum into sexual objects, and her own body that was unprecedented in art at the time. Along with the other materials Wilke used, the chewing gum was prone to drying out, changing color and cracking over time. The particular intimate experience that happened between viewer and artist through the creation of these objects was put at risk by the passage of time. This interaction between viewer, artist, object and the passage of time extends to metaphors about what is at stake in relationships physically and psychologically.

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8 Princenthal, Nancy. *Hannah Wilke*. (47)
Wilke watched the decline of her mother’s health and disintegration of her mother’s body due to breast cancer. It is not surprising then that human mortality became a looming presence in Wilke’s mind and in her work. So much of her early work was so ephemeral that much of it deteriorated within years of making it. She stated, “I’m not denying the fact that I’m going to go, yet it still hurts to see some of my early work go before I do.” In a search for sustainability in her work Wilke explored bronze as a material. While her bronzes would last a great deal longer than much of her other work she began to realize that “permanence and sustainability have a great deal to do with someone recognizing the significance of an object or a space and choosing to care for it.” With the ephemeral nature removed from these folds, the content shifts slightly; the folds become eternally vulnerable to penetration or violation. While at the same time they become strengthened against time and deterioration, armorized to protect what may reside inside.

Wilke was diagnosed with lymphoma in 1987 and underwent extensive treatment including a bone marrow transplant and chemotherapy. In the years between her diagnosis and her death she made several different series of work that both documented the deterioration of her body and commented on the overall mortality of living beings. In 1992 she produced an extensive series of watercolors, as well as a series of eighteen Brushstrokes, which were made from her own hair as it fell out from chemotherapy. Brushstrokes made reference to the tradition of preserving locks of loved ones hair, while resonating with unsettling intimacy of loss.

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10 Fitzpatrick, Tracy, and Saundra Goldman. *Hannah Wilke: gestures*. (61)
11 Princenthal, Nancy. *Hannah Wilke*. (116-17)
12 Princenthal, Nancy. *Hannah Wilke*. (116-17)
Thirty-seven black painted ceramic sculptures on twenty-five painted wood bases, 7 x 98 x 98 in. Near the end of her life Wilke made a final series of one-fold ceramic sculptures. The thirty-seven folds were a burned blacked color, seemingly hollow and sparse compared to her lush and fleshy folds with which she started her career. They look as if they may have been left on the floor to be forgotten or abandoned. As if life could never prosper in the folds again. This piece in particular demonstrates the passing of time. Transitioning in life from young, malleable and carefree to a state of rigidity, void of color and movement as if these are the images we are left with, as we progress through life, it’s not really a choice.

Wilke made several series of drawings that ranged from images of the pet birds she let fly around her apartment to flowers drawn with complete confidence. Lilies shows a range of blooming flowers that includes daises, daylilies, Queen Anne’s lace and roses. The flowers seem to exude health and lusciousness; she viewed lilies as being distinctly feminine and masculine in nature, indicating a harmonious and thriving existence of both females and males. The lack of decay in these drawings is a striking contrast with most of Wilke’s other work especially with the works she made between her diagnosis and death.

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13 Princenthal, Nancy. *Hannah Wilke.* (118)