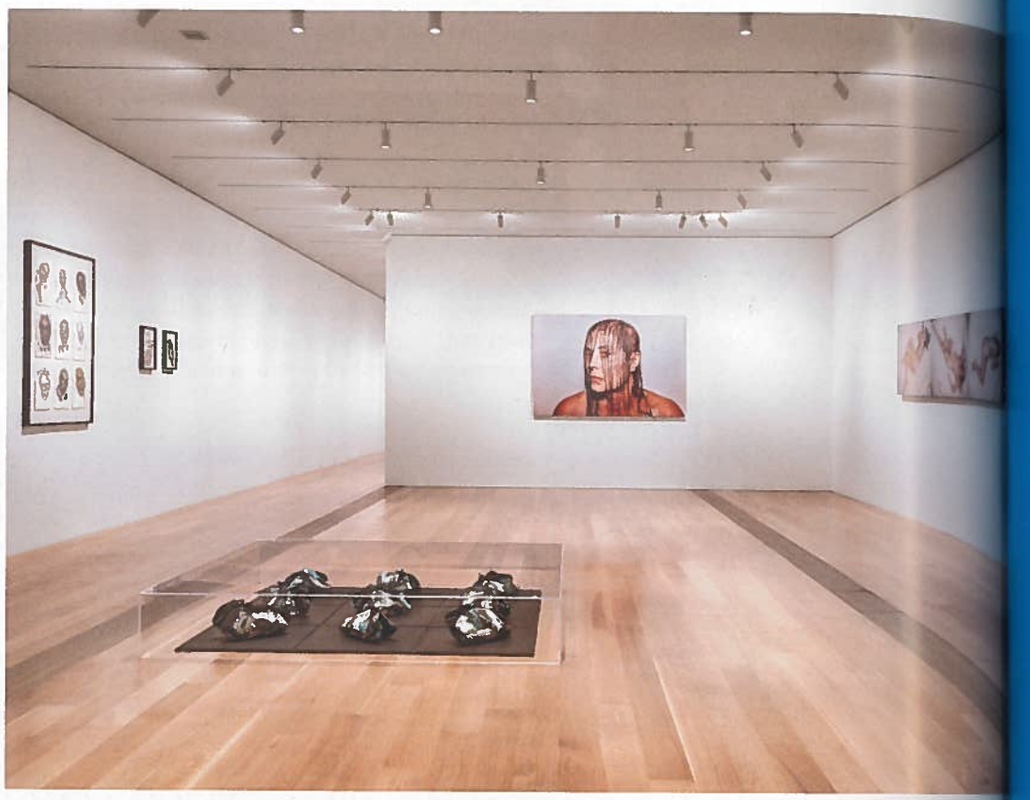
BODY IMAGE

DANIEL MARCUS ON THE ART OF HANNAH WILKE



Above: **View of "Hannah Wilke: Art for Life's Sake," 2021–22**, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, Saint Louis. Floor: *Blue Skies*, 1987–92. Walls, from left: *About Face #4*, 1989; *About Face*, 1991; *Intra-Venus Hand (NYC Hospital), October 18, 1991*; *Intra-Venus Series No. 6, February 19, 1992*; *Intra-Venus Triptych ("Marilyn Monroe")*, 1992–93. Photo: Alise O'Brien.

Opposite page: **Hannah Wilke, *Gestures*, 1974**, video, black-and-white, sound, 35 minutes 30 seconds.

WRITER CHRIS KRAUS devotes a long section of her 1997 book *I Love Dick* to artist Hannah Wilke, who had passed away from lymphoma a few years earlier. Identifying with Wilke's reputation as a "female monster," Kraus glimpsed what few other writers at the time could see. Over a career spanning more than three decades, from the late 1950s until her last days in the cancer ward, where she died at age fifty-two, Wilke treated her art as a vector of her desire, "continuously exposing [herself] to whatever situation occurs," as she put it in a 1976 statement. Rejected as a shameless exhibitionist, she carried on unhindered, refusing to place her sexuality—or her body—under wraps. Her striptease was relentless and ruthless, never more so than in her final body of work, "Intra-Venus," 1992–93, a series of large-scale color photographs and videos in which the artist, sick with cancer, stunts for the camera in the costume of illness, still every bit the goddess in bandages and with an IV drip.

Spellbound by Wilke's shamelessness, Kraus argues, critics failed to grasp the deeper pathos—and underlying contradictions—of her practice. "No one apart from Hannah's closest friends and family recognized the sweetness and idealism at the bottom of her work. Her warmth. The humanness of her female person." Denied its humanity during her lifetime, Wilke's art has since been recoded—and recuperated—by her spectacular death, prompting comparisons to Eva Hesse, another post-Minimalist who died young, the victim of a brain tumor at age thirty-four (the two were paired in the recent exhibition "Eva Hesse/Hannah Wilke: Erotic Abstraction" at New York's Acquavella Galleries). But with Wilke, memento mori only get us so far, and the effort to render her art respectable risks sanitizing a life that was anything but.

With the retrospective "Hannah Wilke: Art for Life's Sake," the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in Saint Louis offers a more complex view of her legacy, rescuing it from the dead, as it were, by restoring its vitality. The exhibition introduces us to Wilke (née Arlene Hannah Butter) as a precocious student of sculpture and ceramics in the early 1960s. Already in her student work, we find her advancing a frank exploration of sexual anatomy—her own, but also imagined, androgynous genitalia—in a group of erotically explicit sculptures and works on paper. As she later remarked to Cindy Nemser (in a previously unpublished 1976 interview featured in the exhibition catalogue), eros lay at the core of her experiments with clay:

> The essence of life and the most viable experience we have is making love.
>
> The most tangible experience you can have is when you really feel good, even though it's intangible and metaphysical. This feeling is so strong that to translate it sculpturally through the softest material that changes, that moves, is always different. Clay is soft, so taking it and moving it around is a fantastic experience. I'm really physically involved with my material.

This involvement centered on the vagina. In her early clay works, Wilke rendered the organ in rustic, hand-formed terra-cotta, creating tabletop sculptures—five of which greet visitors at the exhibition's outset—that resemble artifacts of a bygone matriarchy, to be lovingly handled and used without shame. Simultaneously, she explored the physicality of penetrative sex through drawings and paintings, transposing the veiled subtext of Abstract Expressionism (think of Pollock's ejaculatory spurts or de Kooning's orgiastic *Pink Angels*, 1945) into a tenderly erotic formalism. Mining a territory

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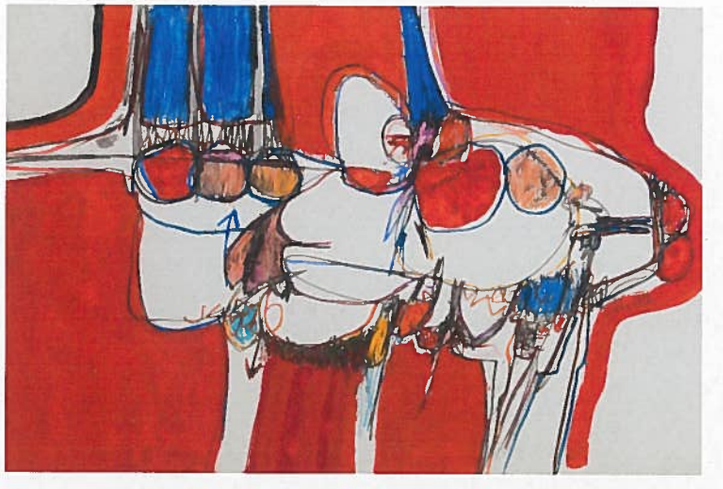
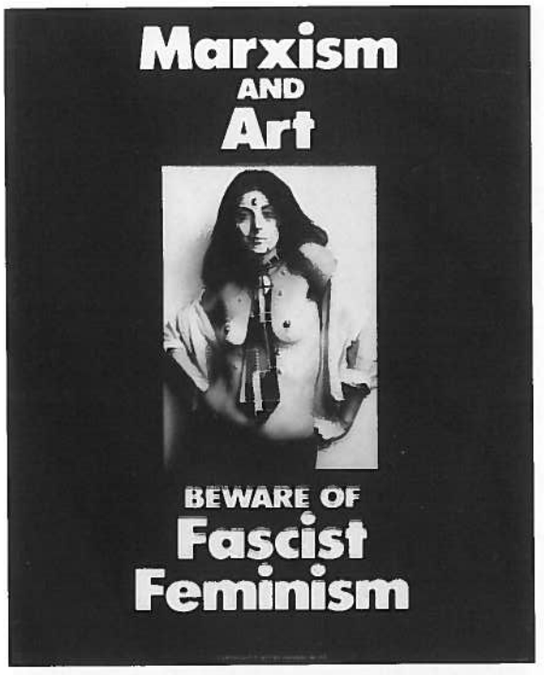


subject to censorship at the time, these convey lovemaking in a push-pull of erogenous marks and signs: shafts, clefts, balls, breasts, and buttocks conjoin and decouple, their action sometimes indicated by directional arrows. Her purpose, she later explained, was to sanction "a specifically female iconography for both sexes . . . in direct conflict with a society that prohibited its citizens from and sometimes arrested them for using the words *fuck*, *cock*, and *prick*"—that is, to rescue sex from patriarchy by claiming the experience as a subject for women's art.

Although clay would remain Wilke's primary medium for this rescue effort, the Pulitzer's retrospective places her ceramics in dialogue with a little-known body of two-dimensional works, including drawing, collage, even painting, through which she explored what curator Tamara H. Schenkenberg aptly calls "the potential of the void." In the rare painting *Untitled*, ca. 1963–65, and several never-before-shown drawings in pencil and pastels, the void takes the appearance of an empty silhouette at the center of the page or canvas—marking figuration as ellipsis, a body secreted beyond vision. This attention to emptiness suffused Wilke's three-dimensional work, too, informing the tabletop sculptures she called "boxes" in reference to the patriarchal slang for vagina. Often cheekily titled (e.g., *North American Candle Snuffer*, ca. 1967; *Teasel Cushion*, 1967; *San Antonio Rose*, 1966), the boxes privilege spontaneity and gestural improvisation over formal coherence, energizing the division between internal and external space, and between inner and outer feeling, through compositions bordering on collapse. Although Wilke would later describe her practice in terms of a "feminine sensibility," in these vaginal abstractions, the link between sex and gender is often tenuous, if not indefinite, as if to imply frameworks of pleasure far beyond the binary.



Opposite page, top left: **Hannah Wilke, *Motion Sensor*, ca. 1966–67,** terra-cotta, 10¼ × 6¾ × 3".

Opposite page, top right: **Hannah Wilke, *Untitled*, ca. 1963–65,** acrylic on canvas, 48 × 60⅛".

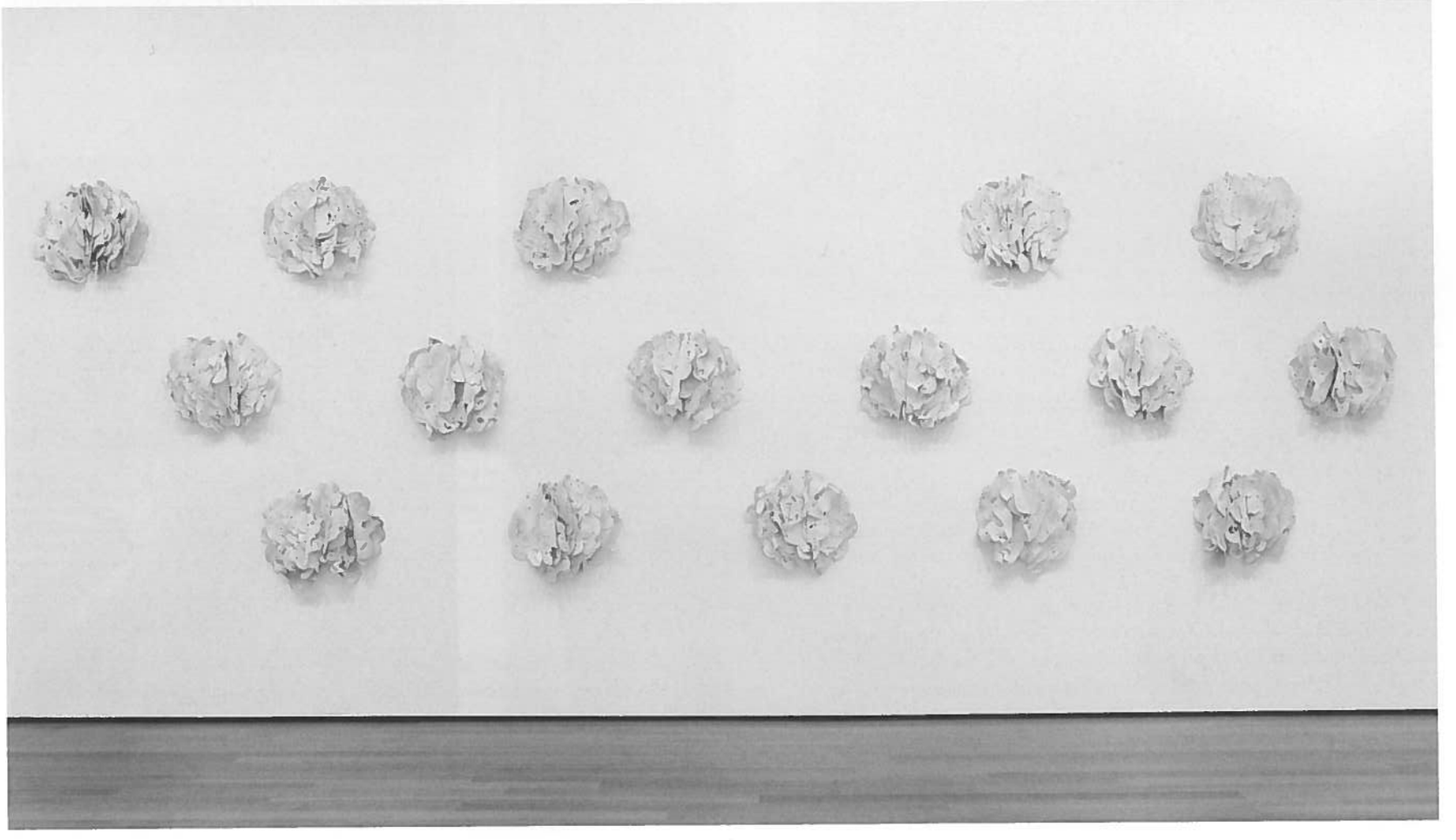
Opposite page, bottom: **Hannah Wilke, *Untitled*, 1960,** pastel, paint, and pencil on board, 20 × 29⅞".

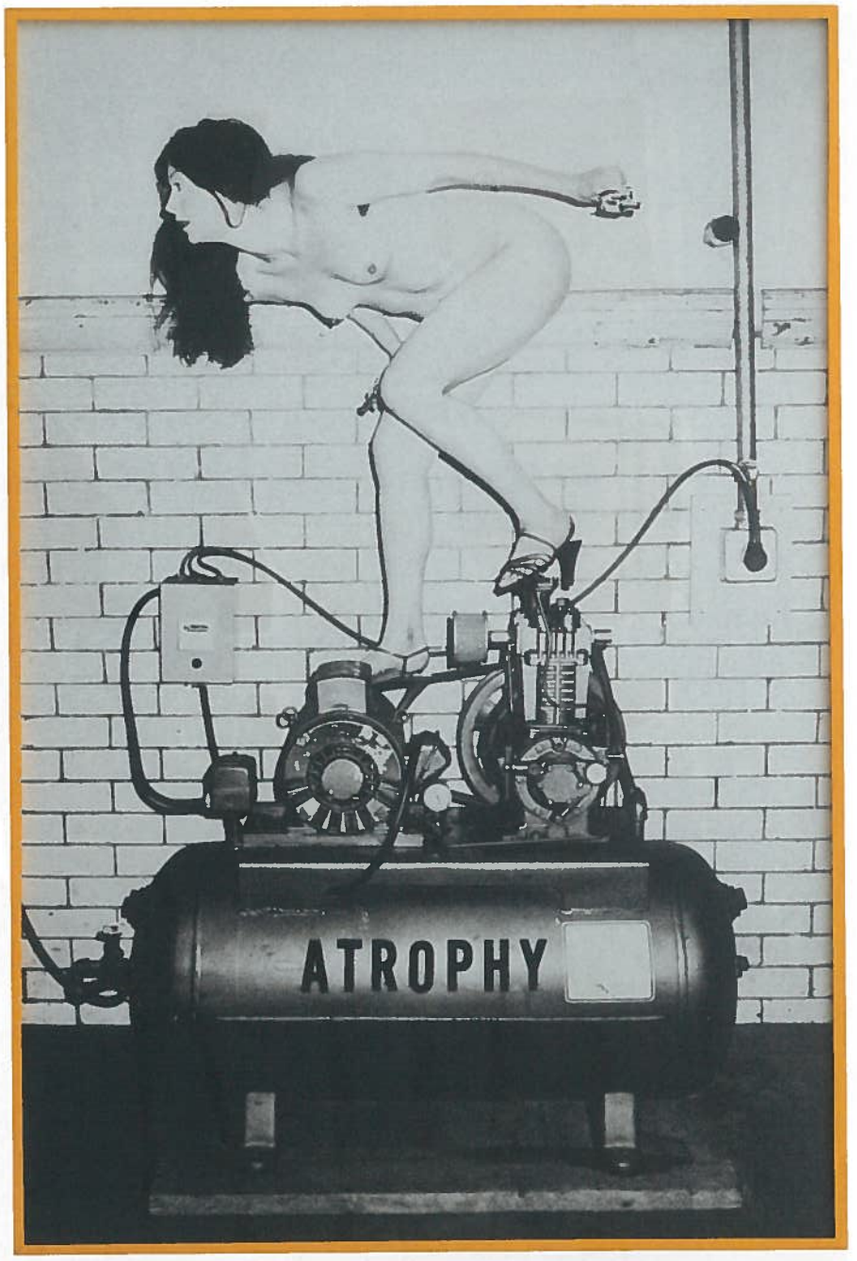
Left: **Hannah Wilke, *Marxism and Art: Beware of Fascist Feminism*, 1977,** silk screen on Plexiglas, approx. 35⅜ × 27⅜".

Below: **Hannah Wilke, *Ponder-r-rosa 4, White Plains, Yellow Rocks*, 1975,** sixteen sculptures in latex, metal snaps, pushpins, each 17 × 26 × 5¾".

WILKE'S EXPERIMENTS with genital form proved fateful in several respects. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they attracted attention from male peers, sparking a dialogue with fellow sculptor Claes Oldenburg that precipitated an eight-year-long romantic partnership. Although Oldenburg later suppressed evidence of their relationship, at the time their coupling satisfied Wilke's desire to be recognized not as his wife, but as an erotic and creative equal, reclaiming heterosexuality as a scene of parallel play—"one artist turned on by another," as she put it to Nemser. In 1970, she began to experiment with pigmented latex, which she poured into epidermal flapjacks, collecting the dried sheets like signatures in a book and pinning the resulting assemblage directly to the wall. The Pulitzer exhibition includes one of her earliest efforts in the medium, *Untitled*, 1970, a ruddy efflorescence suggestive of dried blood; it also features *Ponder-r-rosa 4, White Plains, Yellow Rocks*, 1975, an installation of sixteen sculptures originally commissioned for the corporate collection of Ponderosa Steakhouse (appropriately, its component parts resemble slices of pale mortadella). Although inspired by her earlier boxes, with which they share a topography of layers and folds, Wilke's latex works reasserted the symbolism of the vulva, now enlarged to a monumental scale—a consequence of her move to a larger studio, but also of her increasingly strident feminism.

As the women's liberation movement exploded onto the art world, Wilke entered the fray with gusto, joining Anita Steckel's advocacy group





Opposite page, clockwise from left: **Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. Starification Object Series*, 1974**, gelatin silver print, 7 × 5". **Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. Starification Object Series*, 1974**, gelatin silver print, 7 × 5". **Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. Starification Object Series*, 1974**, gelatin silver print, 7 × 5". All from the "S.O.S.—Starification Object Series," 1974–82.

Above: **Hannah Wilke, *Atrophy*, 1978/1984**, black-and-white photograph in yellow frame, 60 × 40".

Above, right: **Hannah Wilke, *Hannah Wilke Can*, 1978**, offset print on paper mounted on metal coin-collection cans, each 6 × 3 × 3".

Fight Censorship, which defined its remit as defending "women artists who have done, will do, or do some form of sexually explicit art, i.e. political, humorous, erotic, psychological." Claiming the vagina as her personal totem and calling card, she began to issue forth labial surrogates in an array of unorthodox media, fashioning miniature "cunts" (another word she hoped to rescue from misuse) from masticated chewing gum, kneaded pencil erasers, dryer lint, Play-Doh, and bacon. At the same time, she enlarged her practice to incorporate performance and photography, initiating her now-iconic "S.O.S.—Starification Object Series," 1974–82, a project in which she simultaneously courted and deflected heterosexual desire. In this pantomime of femininity, Wilke festoons her body with chewing-gum wads, each one of which resembles a vagina in miniature. Formerly symbols of erotic expansiveness, these "starification" marks here take on a darker meaning, equating to an accumulation of misogynist slurs and also, in the context of her professional risk-taking, a panoply of evil eyes—which is to say, the art world as a panopticon.

Wilke was hardly resolved about her own individuality.

After Wilke's death, her public interventions, which she called "performalist self-portraits," would be canonized through the lens of queer theory as prescient deconstructions of femininity, but in the moment they expressed her earnest desire to reconcile her dual roles as artist and woman, roles she struggled, if not to synthesize, then at least to coordinate. The risks involved were real, and they multiplied as the politics of feminism moved beyond sex positivity to demand the full negation of patriarchy. In 1977, Ruth Iskin, Lucy Lippard, and Arlene Raven posed the question "What Is Feminist Art?" for the Los Angeles–based Center for Feminist Art Historical Studies. In response, Wilke published a broadside featuring a topless self-portrait and the slogans BEWARE OF FASCIST FEMINISM and MARXISM AND ART (the latter not meant as a compliment). As she clarified in 1980, her allegiance was to "the individual"—not the clique—because the individual "remains superior to any system or dogma." Yet she was hardly resolved about her own individuality, having offered herself not in an unblemished state, but as a martyr of desire, embodying patriarchy's contradictions to the point of self-mortification.

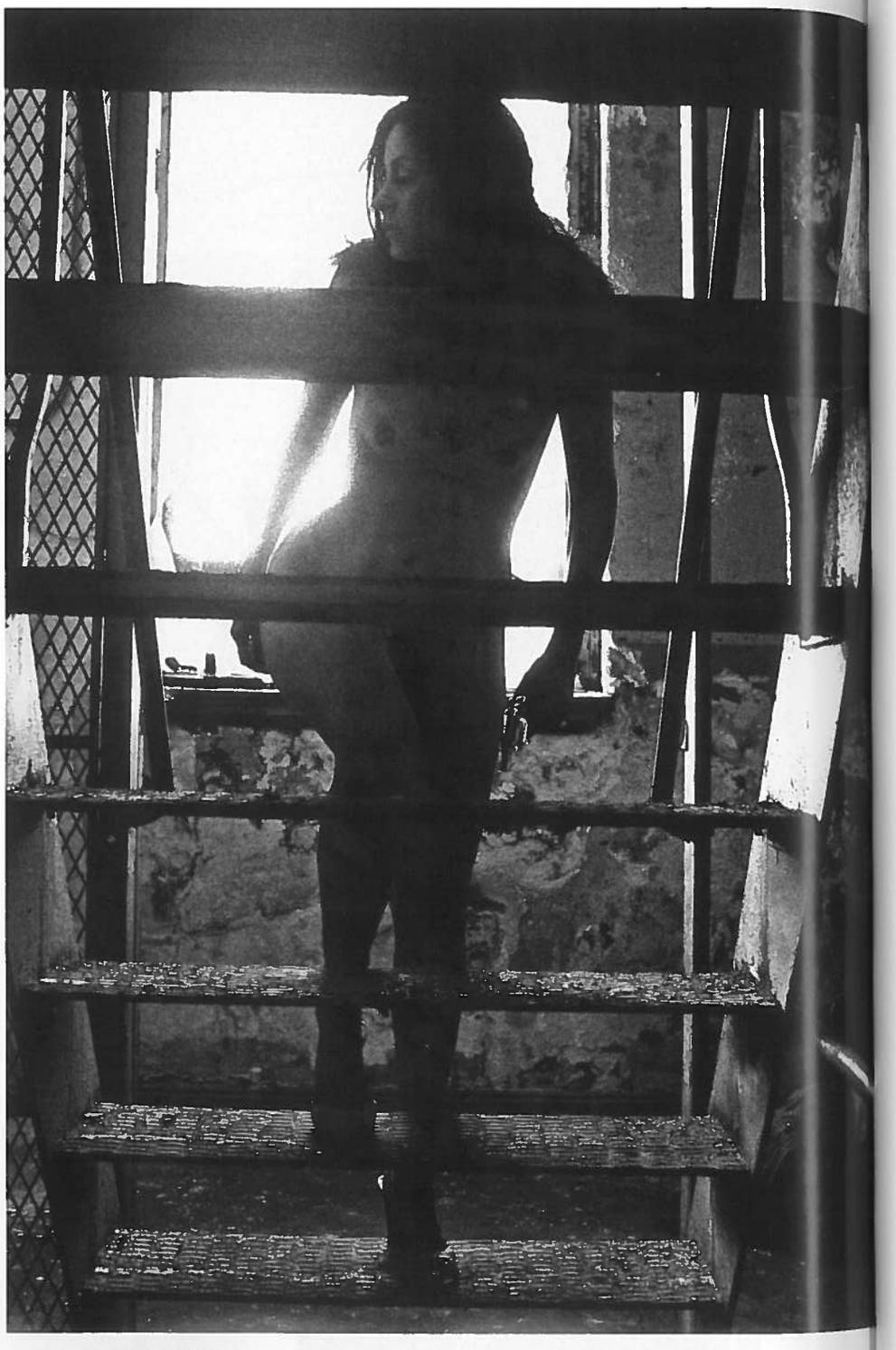
ALTHOUGH WILKE'S RELATIONSHIP with second-wave feminism was famously vexed, her reorientation in the late '70s and '80s toward a poetics of care—and care work—resonated with the concerns of a younger gen-

eration of feminist activists, who adapted the militancy of the Black Panthers to the cause of "wimmin's" (as it was often written) mutual aid. Staged at New York's MOMA PS1 (then the Institute for Art and Urban Resources Inc.) contemporaneously with the first Take Back the Night marches, her performance project *So Help Me Hannah*, 1978, transposed the streetwise pedagogy of self-defense workshops into an endurance test in the course of which the naked artist wandered the institution's then-derelict facilities with just a toy pistol—a prop like those she had previously contributed to Oldenburg's *Mouse Museum/Ray Gun Wing*, 1969–77—as protection. In a related photograph on view at the Pulitzer, the artist pivots atop an air compressor, which bears the word ATROPHY on its side. Wordplay is a constant with Wilke, and here, the entendre is more than double. Created a year after her rupture with Oldenburg, *ATROPHY* portrays the artist in a state of dependency, enduring the hardships of commoditization at multiple levels—as artist and as lover (although it is unclear whose withering-away the title is meant to evoke). She followed up on this "performalist self-portrait" with another admission of precarity, conceiving *Hannah Wilke Can*, 1978, a Fluxus-inspired tithe box bearing a photo of the artist in mid-striptease that enjoined audiences to tip through the can's open slot—a nod to Wilke's self-beatification, but equally to her poverty.

In broad strokes, what Wilke wanted was not so different from what Take Back the Night marchers were demanding at the time: safety in sex and, just as urgently, security in life. This meant freedom in the use of words (*cunt*, *prick*, etc.) and liberty in the exposure of the body's potentials—including its capacity for entropy. Wilke found one such safe space in her role as daughter: Between 1978 and 1982, she put her studio work aside in order to care for her mother, Selma Louise Butter, whose breast cancer had returned after several years' remission. One of the most affecting works in the Pulitzer exhibition derives from this period of familial care work: *In Memoriam: Selma Butter (Mommy)*, 1979–83, consists of three groups of six black-and-white photos depicting Wilke's mother, which are accompanied by a six-part ceramic sculpture ("three-dimensional wombs representing the oneness of our relationship," said Wilke) arrayed on the floor below. Unlike Wilke's own self-portraits, these images are hardly "performalist": When depicted awake and camera-aware, Selma radiates tenderness, and even in moments of rest or duress, her portrayal is a reassurance. A triptych in the most traditional sense, *In Memoriam* honors the artist's mother as both a world giver and a world unto herself—a source of safety from womb unto grave.

Wilke took thousands of photographs of her mother during this period, writing in 1988 that the practice "kept me alive." She was not always the lone cameraperson in the room, however; her romantic partner Donald Goddard, whom she would marry a month before her death, became close with Selma during this period, photographing her and Wilke together on numerous occasions. Joining in the making of *So Help Me Hannah*, for which he served as cameraman, Goddard became a close collaborator with Wilke, his partnership complicating her own staging of selfhood in her late work: He answered her gaze with a look of his own. As Wilke's health took a turn for the worse, Goddard folded the making of "Intra-Venus" into his regimen of support; as he recalls, this project was less a clinical documentation of her cancer than

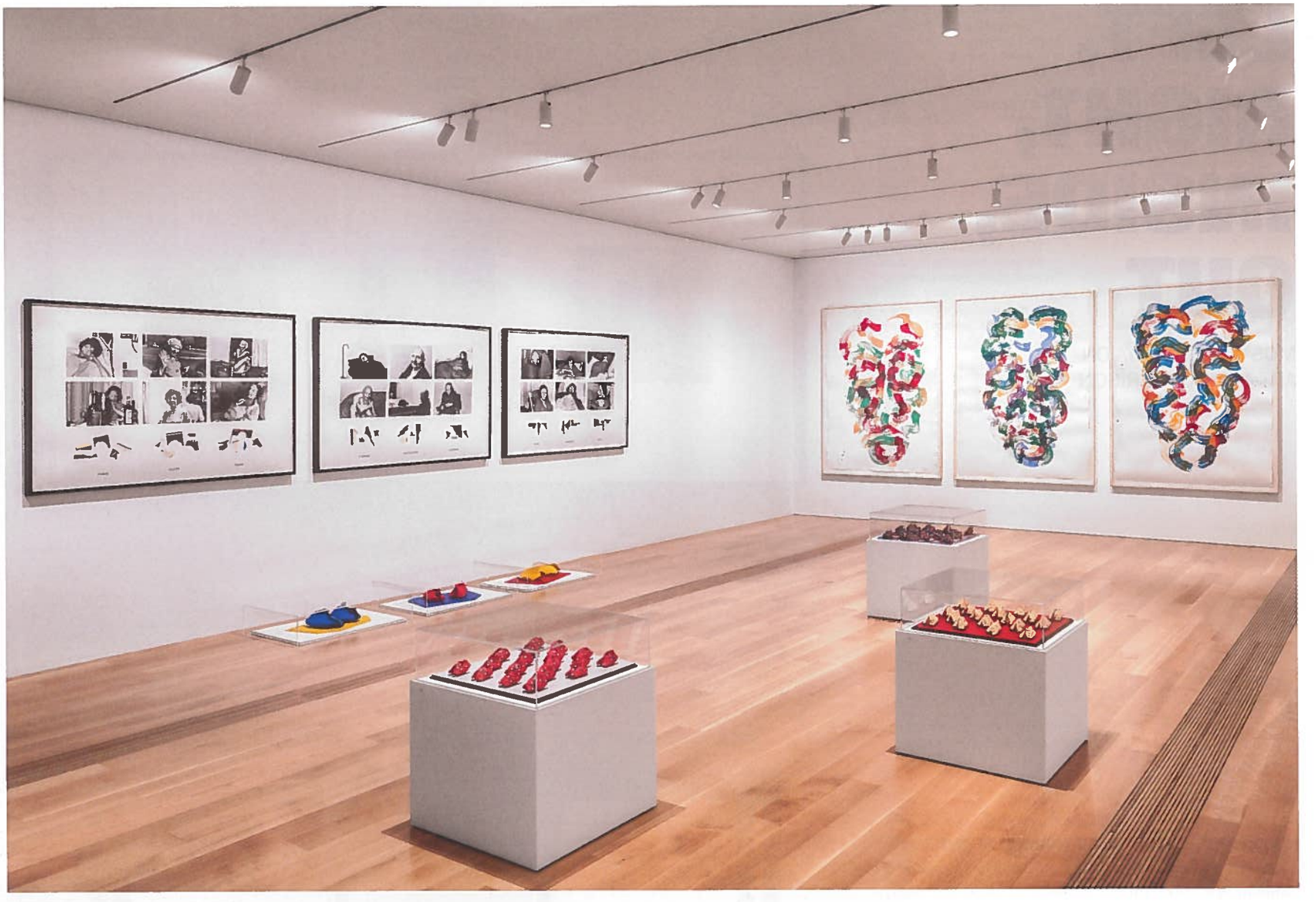
> a way of measuring time. The idea was that Hannah was going to show all this work, and the name of the exhibition was going to be "Cured" . . . . We also looked into therapeutic possibilities: macrobiotic diet, nutritional regimens of various kinds, and alternative doctors and treatments. She read a lot and exercised a lot. Perhaps, all of that is a way of trying to slow down



Above: **Hannah Wilke, *So Help Me Hannah*, 1978,** black-and-white photograph, 14 × 11".

Opposite page, top: **View of "Hannah Wilke: Art for Life's Sake," 2021–22,** Pulitzer Arts Foundation, Saint Louis. Walls, from left: *In Memoriam: Selma Butter (Mommy)*, 1979–83; *B.C. Series, May 13, 1988*; *B.C. Series, May 22, 1988*; *B.C. Series, April 24, 1988*. Photo: Alise O'Brien.

Opposite page, bottom: **Hannah Wilke, *In Memoriam: Selma Butter (Mommy)* (detail), 1979–83,** triptych with floor sculpture, gelatin silver prints and press type on paper mounted on board, acrylic on ceramic mounted on acrylic on Masonite; triptych, overall 3' 5" × 15' 3"; sculpture, overall 13 × 60 × 4".



the inevitable. You are doing things that fill your life. . . . But it was a matter of living rather than dying. Making art was really about living.

Taking this insight to heart, the final gallery of "Hannah Wilke: Art for Life's Sake" surveys what could be called her afterlife, gathering a selection of works from across her career. In various ways, these pieces test the boundary between self and world, seeking, but never securely finding, their homeostatic parity. In the color photographs that make up Wilke's "Gum in Landscape Series," 1976–78, for example, chewing-gum sculptures punctuate the natural tableaux—in one photo, they adorn the stem of an asparagus fern, and in another, a single wad balances atop an acorn—offering intimations of the artist's presence: *Hannah was here.* Art works no miracles, however, and these photographs leave little doubt as to the difference between art and life. The point is to live *with* that difference, Wilke reminds us, and in the face of death, to enjoy what and whom we can. □

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