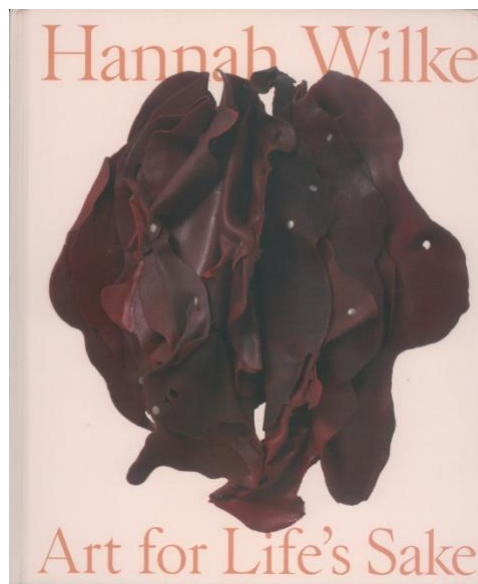


## **A Soupçon of Women Artists: Professional and Intuitive**

**By Jean Bundy**

It's cliché--women have been blamed, actually or metaphorically, since Eve in the Biblical garden. One doesn't have to read Julia Kristeva (b.1941) to realize being female is a hard job. Add children or aging to a woman's palette and the discrimination scenario only worsens. I was in my late forties when I went to grad school; whenever a dignitary came to bestow wealth or a potential teacher arrived to be interviewed, I was whisked away. It was like the scene from the movie 'Auntie Mame' (1958) where the pregnant secretary has to hide in an upstairs bedroom, so the cocktail party guests don't faint at the sight of an unwed mother.



Two books: 'Hannah Wilke: Art for Life's Sake' ed. by Tamara Schenkenberg and Donna Wingate and 'Swimming with Laure Prouvost' by Mathilde Roman, illustrate the glass ceiling is at least bending, if not being punched through by women who combine: raising children, grocery shopping, feeding pets, mediating with partners, and somehow find time to make art or critique the aesthetic world.

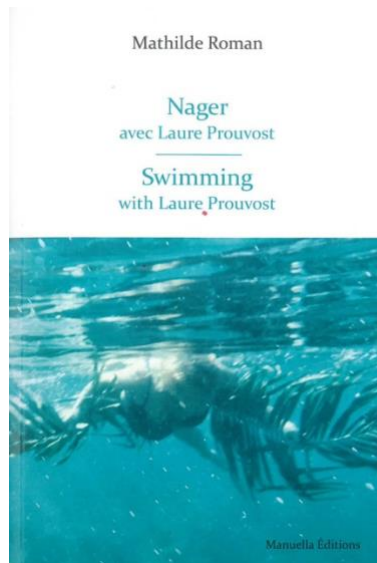
In ‘Hannah Wilke...’ the eponymous artist was a Post-War feminist. Wilke (1940-1993) embedded herself into drawings, sculpture and videos promoting the unabashed woman. Using her body as a canvas, Wilke highlighted female anatomical parts: breasts and vaginal interstices. Art historian Connie Butler writes, “Wilke used her body for evidence: as a tool of critique, as an object of our gaze, and as a spotlight on the problem of the subjugation of women’s bodies throughout the history of art (Wilke 61).”



Wilke fabricated body-parts multiple times, in clay, chewing gum, kneaded-erasers, which she then displayed in rows or on her own body. She emphasized the pliability of inexpensive materials, that could easily replicate the multiple folds of a woman’s vaginal area, or which could pose as metaphorical substitutes for the many layers of a woman’s capabilities-- often overlooked. By mass-producing anatomical parts, using disposable materials, real body parts lose uniqueness—thus voyeurism becomes inconsequential. Wilke writes, “Women aren’t supposed to spit, or be vulgar, or erotic (Wilke 106).”

Wilke’s video ‘*Gestures*’ (1974, YouTube) depicts the artist kneading her face like making bread. Artist Nadia Myre writes, “As a painter might sketch her subject, studying the

composition before applying pigment to canvas, Wilke—an artist who worked with her body as medium—captured her image with a video camera to register and catalogue movements, drawing out a vocabulary of poses and archetypes for a repertoire that she would revisit throughout her career (Wilke 83).” In 1987, Wilke was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, and continued to photograph herself, as a cancer victim, finally succumbing in 1993. Wilke insisted, “Art is for life’s sake (Wilke 40).”



‘Swimming...’ by art critic Mathilde Roman, highlights her special friendship with artist Laure Prouvost, a difficult task in the art world, where egos and jealousy are rampant. Prouvost was a 2013 Turner Prize winner and France’s representing-artist for the Venice Biennale (2019) with her project ‘Deep See Blue Surrounding You’ which had a video component to help the public suspend at least partial reality, before immersing themselves in her installation consisting of a fabricated oceanic floor where sea creatures and vegetation mixed with plastic detritus. The word ‘Sea’ is replaced by ‘See’ suggesting viewers think about what oceans have become—garbage dumps.

Roman, who lives in Nice with her husband and two children, invited Prouvost (pregnant with child number three) and her family to cohabitate during the early days of the Covid-2020 lockdown. Like many in the art world, not being able to interact with their aesthetic worlds except via Zoom, was unsettling.



Roman and Prouvost found comfort by swimming off Nice’s beaches. Roman writes, “We donned masks and snorkels and set our movements and inspirations to a rhythm, letting the waves roll us around, swimming from buoy to buoy, following schools of fish. A plastic hand wedged between two rocks waved at us and made us laugh (Roman 42).” On another aquatic excursion Roman writes, “We’re swimming further out than usual, stretching and pulling our limbs, our bodies and conversations floating. A distance away from the beach, in this blue environment, we experience a reversal of sensations, the loss of direction between sky and earth, top and bottom (Roman 54).”

I watched Prouvost’s videos (You Tube) which contain frenetic imaging, along with the artist pontificating, and text occasionally popping-in. Prouvost is expanding the oeuvre of earlier

artists/writers--imagination mixed with reality. I sensed Laurie Anderson's fast paced self-inflicted videos, Barbara Kruger's wordplay, Jacques Derrida's bursts through picture frames, and Roland Barthes' dissection of signage. Like Prouvost, Roman's verbiage intersects stream-of-consciousness with overlaying aspects of her art, family and play. Both women are boldly 'mixing art with life' while finding 'resources from closeness with others' (Roman 54).

Women artists are finally getting acknowledged, with Post-war female Abstract-Expressionists like Joan Mitchell (1925-1992) posthumously getting bi-coastal exhibitions. A superb Ab-Ex painting at the National Portrait Gallery, DC is Elaine de Kooning (1918-1989) 'John F. Kennedy' (1963). Her loose green brushstrokes penetrate the psyche and narrative of this president's short time in office--the Cape Cod/Camelot glitz overlaid with the Cuban Missile Crisis, and his secret affair with Marilyn Monroe. de Kooning's painting is better than the traditional style of situating celebrities behind a desk, and perhaps better than her husband Willem's raw interpretation of women. There's Artemesia Gentileschi (1593-1653), whose rape trial and thumb screw issues have now elevated her to becoming today's quintessential suffering female artist. Back then, for a woman to paint, a male relative had to be the teacher. With no apprenticeships or guilds 'for you'--it was 'get back to your petit point and embroidery'! Hard to imagine this was an Oscar winner--'Woman of the Year' (1942) Katharine Hepburn decides she must quit being an international reporter, after marrying Spencer Tracy, a mediocre sports writer. Hepburn is also pressured to realize she cannot adopt a Greek refugee boy, in place of having biological children.

Let's hope women continue to be fulfilled and acclaimed for creativity without forfeiting their nurturing components. As Wilke proclaimed, "I become my art; my art becomes me (Wilke 83)."

## BIO and Information:

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‘Hannah Wilke: Art for Life’s Sake’ ed. by Tamara H. Schenkenberg and Donna Wingate is on Amazon. ‘Swimming with Laure Prouvost’ by Mathilde Roman is available thru [manuella@manuella-editions.fr](mailto:manuella@manuella-editions.fr). Thank you, Jodi Price at Princeton University Press.

Mathilde Roman Bio:

After studying philosophy, Mathilde Roman graduated Phd in Arts and Sciences of Art, Univ. Paris 1 Sorbonne. She teaches at the Pavillon Bosio, Art & Scénographie, Monaco. Art critic, she’s treasurer of AICA International. She published two essays : *On Stage, The theatrical Dimension of Video Image*, Intellect, UK, 2016, and *Art vidéo et mise en scène de soi*, L’Harmattan, 2008, and *Corps et images. Oeuvres, dispositifs et écrans contemporains*, Mimésis, 2017. She has conducted several curatorial projects, recently *Danse, Danse, Danse*, Nouveau Musée National de Monaco, 2016, *Full Screen*, La Station, Nice, 2016, MOVIMENTA, first Biennial of Moving Image in Nice, 2017, and in 2018, “Performance TV” at Maison d’Arts Bernard Antonioz, Nogent sur Marne.