

Laure Prouvost

Ohmmmm age
Oma je ohomma mama

11/5 — 1/10 2023



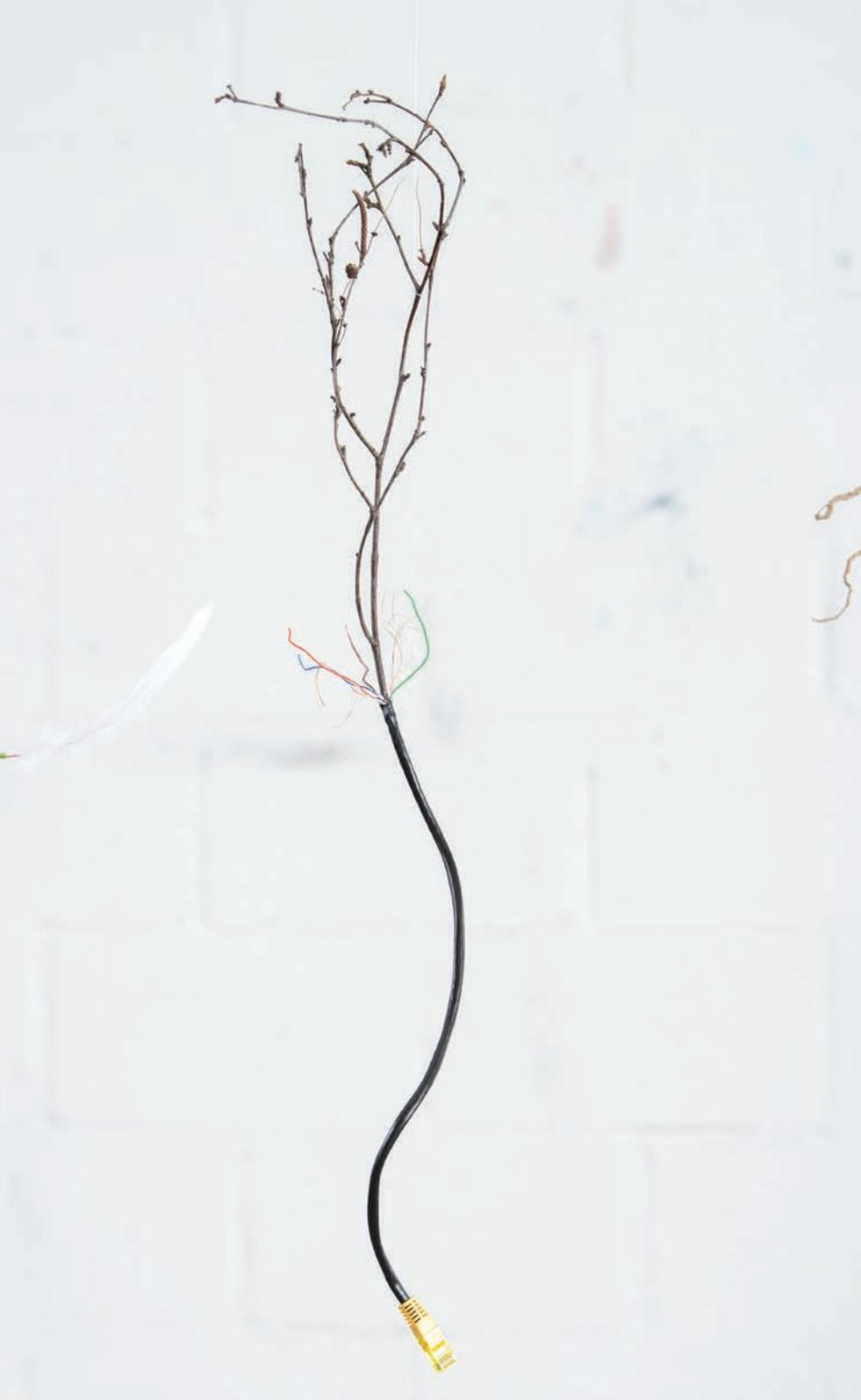
Laure Prouvost, Moving Her, 2023 (detail), photo: Dániel Mátyás Fülöp

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Laure Prouvost, *Moving Her*, 2023 (detail), photo: Dániel Mátyás Fülöp



Laure Prouvost, *Moving Her*, 2023 (detail), photo: Dániel Mátyás Fülöp

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Preface

What, How & for Whom / WHW
Artistic Directors of Kunsthalle Wien

Christophe Slagmuylder
Artistic Director of Wiener Festwochen

The exhibition by artist Laure Prouvost entitled *Ohmmm age Oma je ohomma mama* is the second cooperation between **kunsthalle wien** and **Wiener Festwochen** under our artistic direction. Next to winning the Turner Prize, Prouvost's intervention for the French Pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale drew tremendous attention and acclaim. After many other international exhibitions, *Ohmmm age Oma je ohomma mama* is her first solo exhibition in Austria. Carolina Nöbauer, program dramaturg of **Wiener Festwochen**, curated the exhibition in a close exchange with the artist.

As the title suggests when spoken aloud, it's about the fine gesture of homage—to the oma, the nana, the grandmother. Prouvost asks: how are stories passed on, from mouth to ear, from pocket to pocket, across generations of women? How does knowledge travel, via material culture or through language? And what detours, lapses, or unforeseen encounters can occur along the way?

The topic of intergenerational connectedness, especially among women, was pivotal most recently in Sanja Iveković's exhibition *Works of Heart (1974-2022)* at **kunsthalle wien**. Iveković links past and present forms of resistance. She counters a national historiography dominated by male figures with personal, biographical, and often forgotten stories. In many works presented in the 2023 Wiener Festwochen program, the course of a life and the social upheavals that manifest within it form a key



Laure Prouvost, *Here Her Heart Hovers*, 2023 (video still)

narrative. Sarah Vanhee, for instance, explores matriarchal lineages in her solo performance *Mémé*—she too commemorates her grandmothers in an ode to all invisible women.

Together with Laure Prouvost, we can reimagine the figure of the grandmother beyond a biologicistic point of view, which binds her to the female gender. Inspired by Black feminist Alexis Pauline Gumbs, we embrace the idea of *mothering* as a *practice* of caring—a care that can be performed and shared by all. This is more fertile than the *mother*, an almost impossible figure who suffocates under the many idealizations and ambivalent projections and is structurally disadvantaged. Grandmothers can be anyone who identifies as such, regardless of whether they are younger or do not have children. You, me, us.

Therefore, Prouvost and Nöbauer place special emphasis on elective kinships outside biological family constellations: the diverse personalities referred to

in the exhibited works and collaborators such as the Austrian composer Elisabeth Schimana form a “chosen family”.

Laure Prouvost’s artistic practice started out with filmmaking. In the installation specially created for *Ohmmm age Oma je ohomma mama*, objects from the film journey to the darkened ground floor of **kunsthalle wien**. The video imagery unfolds in the space and visitors themselves can now walk around in the chimeric scenography. When light falls upon certain objects, they begin to speak their part. They share stories, whispering testimonies of what they have seen and heard, and then we do the same as we spin the tales further outside of the exhibition space.

We look forward very much to this inviting, humorous new production, which we hope will bring much joy and inspiration to our audience in Vienna. We would like to voice our appreciation and sincere thanks to Laure Prouvost and her artistic studio, to curator Carolina Nöbauer, and to our colleagues at **kunsthalle wien** and **Wiener Festwochen**.

Introduction

Carolina Nöbauer

STORY/HISTORY, *feminine*.
Is a complex gathering of subjective facts.
Everything before you
and the moment just lived.
Reading these words
is now history.
It is often his story
more than her story,
or their story.
Huge what makes us, made us.

— Laure Prouvost, *Legsicon*, 2019

Laure Prouvost’s works stimulate the senses and imagination of those who see them. The great concerns of the present-day world are set to simmer in her humorous cosmos. By means of playful storytelling, she seeks paths forward. Over the last two decades, the artist (born 1978 in Croix, Northern France) has developed an inventive audio-visual vocabulary characterized by wit, a singular sensory quality, and joyful play with misunderstanding and linguistic ambiguity. Thus, she has come to occupy a very special place in contemporary visual art. In 2013, she won the Turner Prize, one of the most important art prizes in the world. In 2019, she was the French pavilion exhibitor at the 58th Venice Biennale. *Ohmmm age Oma je ohomma mama* is Laure Prouvost’s first solo exhibition in Austria. A series of works created especially for the exhibition—including a new film—form an expansive multi-media installation.

Prouvost's multi-dimensional art practice moves easily between various media and techniques, characterized throughout by the singular performative and narrative aspects of her gesture. The artist works in film, painting, sound, and sculpture, using glass, textiles, ceramics, and found-object assemblages, among other materials. All these elements converge in imaginative worlds and interwoven storylines.

Prouvost's works dissolve reality and fiction into unusual stories. Inspired by the strategies and poetics of Surrealism, she gracefully yet purposefully subverts linear narrative and socially normative articulations of word, image, and material. The works resist any obvious reading, instead inviting an intuitive and affective mode of examination. They present gaps to be filled by the personal realities, emotional worlds, and imagination of the viewers, in the process opening a broad spectrum of new meaning.

While Prouvost's works originate in reflection on serious social matters of emancipation, globalization, and

Studio view, 2023,
photo: Dániel
Mátyás Fülöp



climate change, their response to the contradictions of a complex world is playful or even bewildered. The artist pushes subtly through the personal into the global, investigating collective “worldmaking” with empathy and imagination.

The cryptically spelled title *Ohmmm age Oma je ohomma mama* is a perfect example of Prouvost's witty use of language. In its play on spelling and pronunciation it leaves meanings to shimmer, working through multilingual consonances. A spirited “Ohmmm” sound is followed on exhalation by what could be the monosyllabic English “age” or the more dilated French “age”. The German “Oma” (grandmother) is entwined with the French “je” (I). Behind this combination lies a phonetic “hommage” (French) or “homage” (English), which frays into an almost childlike mantra, inviting us to join in.

In her exploration of the figure of the grandmother, Prouvost engages with the concept of origin and its possible interpretations, and in a broader sense with the construction of history in its transmission through generations. Prouvost's works generally emphasize the importance of interpersonal relations and family units in their various forms. Thus, the protagonists of her films tend to be close-knit groups held together by a form of elective affinity or seeing themselves as “chosen family” by virtue of their allegiance and intimacy.

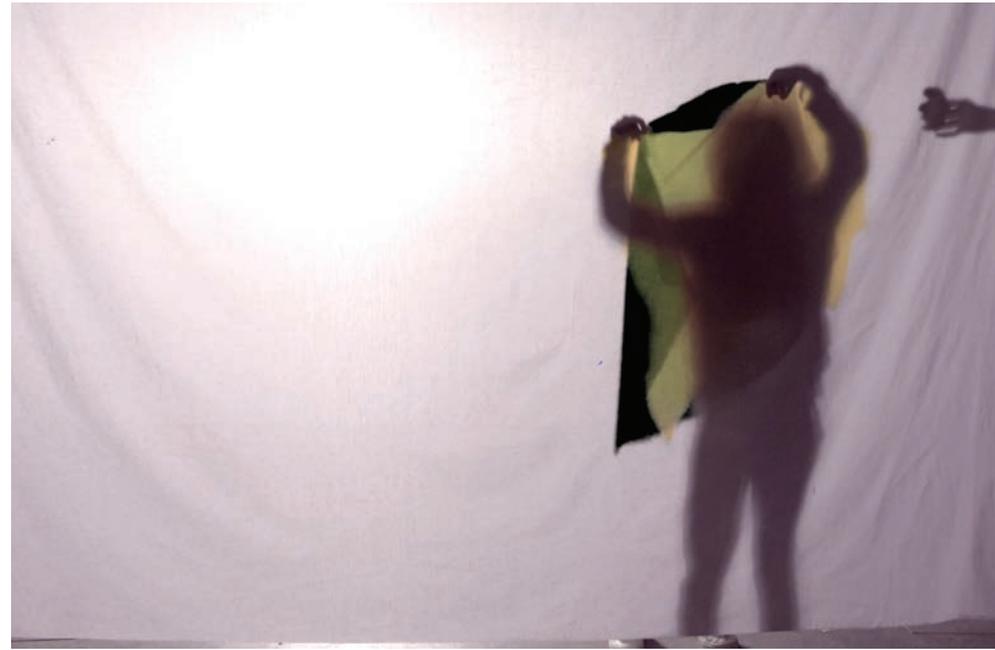
The Vienna exhibition begins in search of those who made us what we are able to be today—the capabilities they passed on to us and our means of transmitting this knowledge onward. We encounter an audaciously invented genealogy of “grandmothers” (a list which of course can never be considered complete), ranging from the prehistoric figurine known as “Venus of Willendorf”, the baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi, the civil rights campaigner Rosa Parks, to the mountaineer Junko Tabei, theorist Donna Haraway, the filmmaker Agnès Varda, and the electronic music pioneer Éliane Radigue, to the grandmothers of the curator, a neighbour, a friend, and the studio manager.

Prouvost uses stories of intellectual role models and inspiring historical characters interchangeably with people personally known to her or important in her immediate world. These 130 names and the artist's subjective reflections on their importance underpin the script of Prouvost's new film, feeding into the narrative of the entire exhibition, in which the film stands as centerpiece.

Prouvost leads us into a sensual, cavernous darkness where shadows flicker, evoking an originary place from which everything seems to have emerged. *Ohmmm age Oma je ohomma mama* works like a tangled surreal dream where past, present, and future dissolve into indistinction. Stories, encounters, and fleeting memories proliferate here, materializing in multiple bodies, voices, and objects.

As in many of Prouvost's works, at the centre of this immersive installation is a new film. *Here Her Heart Hovers* (2023) follows a sisterly group of women who embark on a journey over land and through time to pass on the valuables they carry. But the story doesn't end on the screen. By means of an intricately synchronized score of lighting effects, sounds, and video projections, the women's echo and shadow flies around an exhibition space populated with objects. In the kinetic mobile work *Moving Her* (2023), fragile objects move over the heads of the viewers: twigs, walking sticks, cigarette packs, plastic bottles, and strange hybrids, like roadside relics on a long journey. On the way they have stories of their own, throwing shapes onto the wall. And mixed through the whispered poems, the voices of children singing, and the heavy electronic sounds by Austrian composer Elisabeth Schimana, there are the voices of talkative glass objects. When the spotlight finds the objects titled *Ada Programmed Our Future* (2023), *Bzzz* (2023), *We Were 130 Sisters* (2023) und *Gathering Ho Ma, The Glaneuse* (2023), they come to life, addressing the audience in short monologues containing startling anecdotes.

In this exhibition, Laure Prouvost lays out a closely woven genealogy whose branches might well spread



Laure Prouvost,
*Here Her Heart
Hovers*, 2023
(video still)

widely. One in which kinship relations and the writing of history are not set in stone but persist as fluid and malleable things. The exhibition is dedicated to ancestors and forerunners: those who preceded us but also the ancestors and forerunners still to come. Prouvost invites us to see ourselves bound together in an interconnected world of a collective *We*. One that protects what the predecessors left, and with passing generations will watch over the forays of those who follow.

The Film

Here Her Heart Hovers, 2023

Laure Prouvost's artistic beginnings are in experimental cinema, and videos are often in the center of her exhibitions and installations. Her unique approach to filmmaking employs layered storytelling, quick cuts, montage, and wordplay and is composed of a rich, almost tactile assortment of pictures, sounds, spoken and written phrases. The fictional film *Here Her Heart Hovers* was made especially for *Ohmmm age Oma je ohomma mama* and is split between two screens in the immersive installation.

Shot near Marseille in a grotto overlooking the Mediterranean, *Here Her Heart Hovers* depicts a journey through space and time in search of our grandmothers and connections to our past, towards the history of the future. The world Prouvost invents here might perhaps originate with the 11 cm figurine known as the "Venus of Willendorf" as *great-grandmother* of us all. The artist borrows the story of this stone-age sculpture, reinterpreting and interweaving contextual motifs. Among the many interpretations that fascinate

Prouvost is one whereby the figurine, named "Venus" by her finder, might not be a fertility symbol but rather a representation of a wise grandmother. Scientific testing has established that the figurine (or the material she was sculpted from) travelled a long way to the place where she was found. This is important, as is the discovery of more than 130 similar figures across Europe. A display panel in the Naturhistorisches Museum affectionately refers to these as "sisters". Inspired by these ideas, Prouvost imagines an expansive genealogy of ancestors: who might the "130 sisters" be for us today?

A sisterly group of women moves across the screen to pass on their stories and those of their ancestors, and to immortalize them. "30,000 years ago, Grandma had walked far to arrive in Willendorf / We were 130 sisters / There she handed to Francine the needle to make her dreams / Cäcilia warned us and got us full," reads the poetic script. It continues: "Rosetta dances our lunches with a welcome smile connecting us all /



Laure Prouvost, *Here Her Heart Hovers*, 2023 (video still)

Joan reflected in us and swam swam swam in the images / Laurie is our Superman / Odette asked us the right questions and cracked good jokes". The lines continue, becoming a long list that juxtaposes various personalities in an abstracted way. Together with cross-generational, interdisciplinary intellectual, political, and artistic role models or "grandmothers" like here Joan Jonas and Laurie Anderson, the artist invokes informally—by first name—personal relatives of the performers and women from within her own milieu: Rosetta Nuotatore, Francine Pans, Odette Prouvost Leclercq, Cäcilia Schmidtbauer.

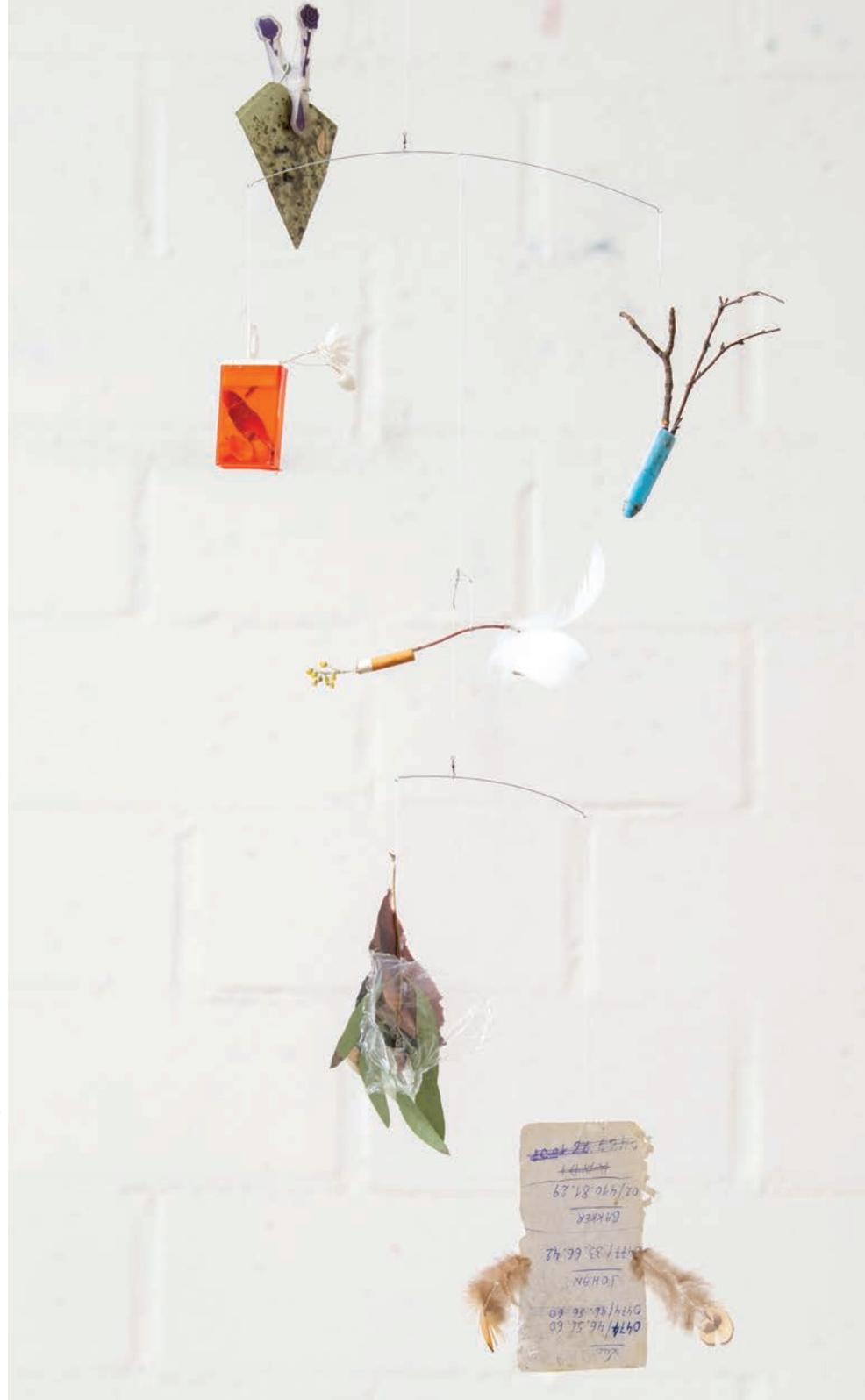
Here Her Heart Hovers was commissioned by **kunsthalle wien** and **Wiener Festwochen**, and **Remai Modern**.

The Mobile

Moving Her, 2023

Laure Prouvost's new film *Here Her Heart Hovers* is the centerpiece of a large-scale installation work that takes up its interwoven plotlines, references, and images, translates them into other artistic media, and spins them further. In *Moving Her*, a system of finely detailed kinetic mobiles flies over the head of the viewers: among the fragile objects incorporated are twigs, dried leaves, walking sticks, bird feathers, plastic bottles, packaging materials, broken cables, and discarded electrical appliances. The works of Laure Prouvost breathe new life into found and collected materials, bringing apparently insignificant, forgotten things to light. Strange hybrids emerge and almost accidentally become creatures with a will of their own as nature collides with the detritus of consumer society, basic cultural goods, and new technologies. The objects in *Moving Her* seem like remnants of the film, roadside relics on its protagonists' long journey. On the way they hover above the action, carrying their own stories and throwing their shapes onto the wall.

Laure Prouvost, *Moving Her*, 2023 (detail), photo: Dániel Mátyás Fülöp



The Glass Objects

Ada Programmed Our Future, 2023

Bzzz, 2023

Gathering Ho Ma, The Glaneuse, 2023

We Were 130 Sisters, 2023

Talkative glass objects gather in the exhibition: when the spotlight finds them, the figures wake and address each other in short dialogues or make the audience listen to anecdotes. A synchronized system of sound and light underpins the dramaturgy. Prouvost's sculptures often have anthropomorphic characteristics, becoming figures with personality and expression, seeming almost to return the viewer's gaze. When they stage their little theatrical performance, they invite us into a direct experience and strengthen their bond with the viewers. Prouvost often works with glass, a material whose optical qualities evoke the preciousness of the moment. She describes it as a material that appears almost as fluid, pausing only briefly before continuing to flow from any point.

Each of the objects—the entanglement of cables, the potato, the fish, the slippers—refers to an important

“grandmother” in the genealogy of Prouvost's exhibition. Together with the corresponding audio track they invoke a defining attribute of the person concerned—a detail of a portrait photo, a key moment in a story, or an aspect of their achievement—which Prouvost interprets idiosyncratically through her own visual vocabulary. The cables, bearing the title *Ada Programmed Our Future* (2023), for example, refer to the mathematician Ada Lovelace, who was hundred years ahead of her time with her vision of informatics. In *Gathering Ho Ma, The Glaneuse* (2023), several glass objects are grouped into a scene of a gathering around a campfire. The glass potato and the overarching title of the installation refer to the French filmmaker Agnès Varda, her obsession with potatoes, and her documentary film *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* [The Gleaners and I] (2000). The fish symbolizes feminist Body Art pioneer Carolee Schneemann and her groundbreaking performance *Meat Joy* (1964), in which participants interacted with color, raw fish, and meat in a kind of ecstatic ritual. The slippers refer to a photograph that shows the grandma of the artist's friend barbecuing in the garden.

Middle women
in peach
with the original
venus

g objects
- berries
- candies

Bear

Natural
be nest

Real Nest

wet towels

Tiger

small
drips
on a Branche

Red glass and
to be done for



-black
berries

Sound

Sound occupies the role of the subconscious in Laure Prouvost's works. In the form of intimate whispering (often the artist's voice itself), children's singing, or ASMR-like sounds, sensual audio tracks accompany the flow of visual impressions in her films and installations. These work as emotional stimulus on various levels, deepening viewers' involvement in the setting. The echo of *Ohmmm age Oma je ohomma mama's* voices and sounds greets visitors at the cash desk, and *Hi Her Garden* (2023), a trellis of six modified cymbals, registers their arrival in the gallery with a brassy clang. Along with the various audio tracks of Prouvost's works, Elisabeth Schimana's sound-composition *Zwiebelfäden* [Onion threads] booms across the space. In the spirit of new artistic and intergenerational elective affinity, Laure Prouvost invited the Austrian composer and media artist Elisabeth Schimana to contribute to the installation.

Elisabeth Schimana, born in 1958, is regarded as a female pioneer of electronic music in Austria.

Beginning her career in electroacoustics, Schimana started experimenting early on with the technological possibilities of new software and later the internet. Her works, live appearances, and projects deal with radical approaches and aesthetics in the relationship between space, body, and electronics. When Schimana began studying in the male-dominated domain of computer music in the early 1980s, she was confronted with a canon and teaching methods implying a complete absence of female artists from electronic music. So she started looking independently for traces of their presence. Her years of research on women musicians and promotion of their visibility resulted in exhibitions (e.g. *HIDDEN ALLIANCES*, Ars Electronica Festival, Linz, 2018) and the foundation of the IMA Institut für Medienarchäologie [Institute for Media Archaeology], a permanent institution with a research focus on women, art, and technology.

Zwiebelfäden [Onion threads] is a 6-channel fixed-media



Laure Prouvost,
She is an onion,
2023

composition in which Schimana interprets and expands the concept of the exhibition with a homage to her own musical role models and companions. She draws threads between herself and composers Éliane Radigue, Pauline Oliveros, Beatriz Ferreyra, and Maryanne Amacher, *Ö1 Kunstradio* founder Heidi Grundmann, and musicologist Helga de la Motte-Haber, and integrates audio recordings from

her archive into the piece. The principle of the score is based on the rhythmic structure of spoken words and six motifs of virtual heartbeats. The basses pulse asynchronously through the space, one speech fragment is peeled from another, passes through various stages of modification, disappears, and reappears.

Language

LANGUAGE, *feminine*.
Hard to use well.
Simplifying but also communicative.
Spreading.
Hard to catch but once there,
dominating.
Spoken and written.
Structured.
Helps communication between
humans
but also
misunderstanding.

– Laure Prouvost, *Legsicon*, 2019

Language is of great conceptual significance in Laure Prouvost's work. Her experience as non-native speaker of the omnipresent, universalized English language feeds into a game, where mistakes in translation, typing mistakes, accent and pronunciation create a new poetry. Semantic displacements open new levels of meaning, the creative potential of misunderstandings clears the way for the imagination. Prouvost exposes the process of communication as a slippery and precarious undertaking. Her inventive, unorthodox juggling with language challenges the constant flow of information, linear modes of reading, and the social obsession with interpretive authority.

Prouvost's attention to language and its representation is evident within her work in text images on signs and flags, in publications, and in the spoken dialogues and other audio tracks in her audio-visual installations. Especially in the titles in this exhibition one encounters onomatopoeic language, puns, and rich metaphors. The film title *Here Her Heart Hovers*, for

example, is a sonorous alliteration with sensory-affective properties when spoken aloud, and serves as a powerful visual commentary that puts an additional layer of association over the film's scenes. The exhibition title *Ohmmm age Oma je ohomma mama* works through multilingual consonance. An "Ohmmm"

sound, the English and French pronunciations of "age", the "Oma" (grandma) and the French "je" (I), together form a phonetic "homage, hommage" (homage, tribute). Meanwhile, "homme" (man), which might easily have shown up here, disappears in the alternative spelling.



Studio view, 2023,
photo: Dániel
Mátyás Fülöp



Laure Prouvost, *Moving Her*, 2023 (detail), photo: Dániel Mátyás Fülöp

Grandma

GRANDMA, *soft feminine*.
Hidden but with strong vision,
carries with her the past of the
past of her past,
made of so many experiences
crossing through a century,
almost.

Likes making teapots and tapestry
to tell stories and her point of view
on things,
loved by many.

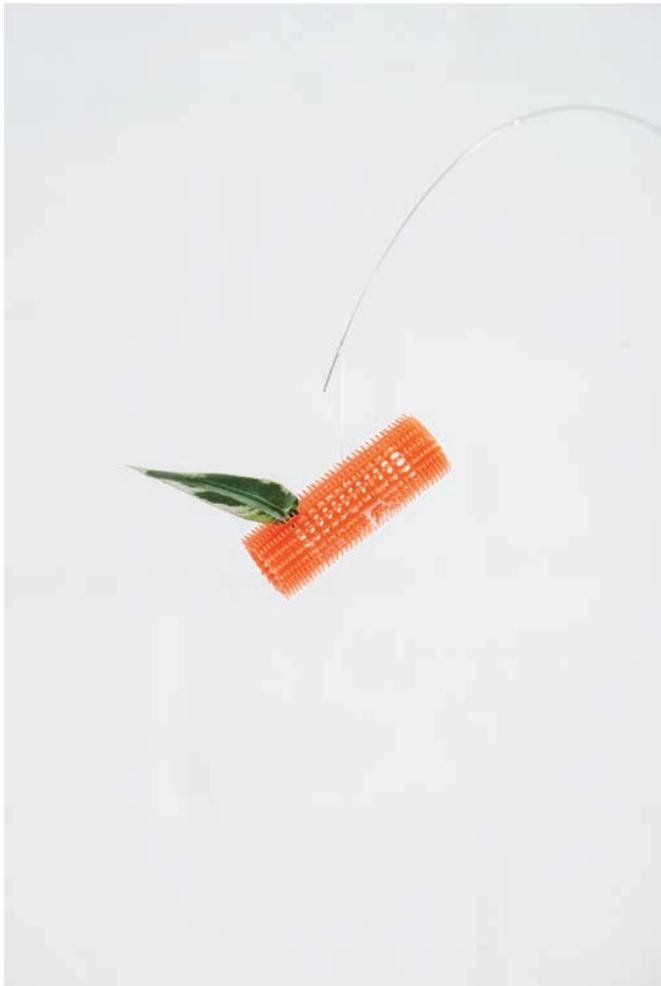
— Laure Prouvost, *Legsicon*, 2019

*Ohmmm age Oma je ohomma
mama* is an organic and sprawling
net, gathering together “grand-
mothers” of all kinds and inter-
preting their stories. As homage
to various ancestors—among
them real characters who inspired
Prouvost—the exhibition introduc-
es an almost documentary under-
current into the artist’s practice.
Prouvost has already produced a
lot of imaginative work about the
figure of the grandmother. Over the
last ten years, she has established
the figure of her own “grandma”
as a permanent companion in her
work. This character often ap-
pears as a central protagonist, and
sometimes also a kind of alter ego
of the artist. In cheerfully playing
with the question of how biogra-
phies and stories are constructed,
Laure Prouvost has developed a
mythology around her own family
history. With the grandparents at
the center of these emancipatory
narratives, there is license for am-
biguities, diversions, and clichés.

Prouvost first introduced an auto-
biographical fiction centered on
her grandparents into her work in

2010. In this story, “Granddad” is a famous conceptual artist who disappeared without trace while trying to dig a tunnel to Africa from his studio in England. Grandma is the wife left behind. Prouvost’s video work *Wantee* (2013) leads us through the grandfather’s abandoned studio. In the absence of the famous artist, the ceramic teapots

made by the creative grandma take center stage, together with her fascinating yet pragmatic personality, busy looking after her house guests (“Want tea?”) and at the same time taking care of her husband’s estate and art. Believing that conceptual art should be much more useful than it usually is, she has converted some of his



Laure Prouvost,
Moving Her,
2023 (detail),
photo: Dániel
Mátyás Fülöp

sculptures into practical everyday items. Soon after this work, the video *Grandma’s Dream* (2013) established the figure of Prouvost’s grandma as leitmotif. This film is an affectionate tribute to the complexity of the grandmother’s opinions, desires, worries, and visions: “In Grandma’s dream we wouldn’t talk about art but just go dancing all the time”.

In interviews, Prouvost maintains the deliberate ambiguity around the degree to which these biographies of her family members are real. Authorship of some of her works is assigned to the grandparents. Prouvost conceived the exhibition *GDM - Grand Dad’s Visitor Center* (Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milano, 2016) as a bizarre museum, supposedly initiated by “grandma” to preserve and present her husband’s art. Along with the works of granddad, Prouvost often stages grandma as an artist. In contrast to the husband’s elite conceptual art, techniques connoted as “feminine” or usually seen as “craft”—e.g. ceramics, textiles—are used here to articulate the grandmother’s worldview. Prouvost shows grandma’s inventive teapots from *Wantee* in exhibitions and ascribes numerous tapestries to her. An ongoing series of large-format oil paintings is attributed to grandma’s hands (*The Hidden Paintings Grandma Improved*, 2017–present). In the figure of grandma and her story, Prouvost speaks of the circumstances and struggles of a time when everything revolved

around the “master”. She strikes a playful blow against existing artistic practice (in which she herself participates) and pulls apart the cult of genius and authorship. In doing so she formulates a witty feminist critique of the way male careers are canonized at women’s expense¹ and of the lack of attention directed to female artists compared with their male colleagues.

1 Cf. Eva Klerck Gange: “TO A WEIGHTLESS SHADOW BEHIND YOUR FOOT!”, in: Eva Klerck Gange, Marianne Yvenes, Maud Gyssels: *In Your Hands We Levitate. Laure Prouvost*, Oslo: Nasjonalmuseet, 2023, p. 14.

Excavated, aquatic, and galactic grandmothers

Laure Prouvost's *Ohmmm age*
as a strategy of string figuring

Julia Grillmayr

"Who are your grandmothers?," asks Laure Prouvost in her exhibition *Ohmmm age Oma je ohomma mama*. What a wonderful question about string figures. It can't be brushed aside with "paternal" or "maternal", its tentacles extend indefinitely. It doesn't simply follow biological relations in a "direct, straight line," it connects the convoluted lines of elective affinities, of pioneers and inspirations, all intersecting with and amplifying the others. Inspired by Prouvost's method in *Ohmmm age*, I would also like to knot together a few of these meandering and mutable strings. For example, what if we were to address one of the most famous of all archeological finds as grandmother?

My grandmother, the Venus of Willendorf

One of the many grandmothers inspiring Prouvost is the Venus of Willendorf, now residing in the Vienna Naturhistorische Museum (NHM). This limestone figurine is 11 centimeters tall and approximately 29,500 years old. She has heavy breasts that lie over a large belly, and an even larger behind. Because of this voluptuousness, the Venus was presumed to be a symbol of sexuality and fertility. However, according to Caroline Posch, a scholar of the ice age at NHM, we

can't be sure about how fertile people really wanted to be at that time. The late ice age period precedes sedentism. As the archaeologist explains, women in nomadic societies of this time would not bear a child every year, because children must be carried when on the move. The Willendorf Venus, then, remains an enigma, while theories and hypotheses regarding her meaning proliferate.

The Venus and her many sisters offer us insight into the movement of ideas across the Eurasian continent, since the figure is not an individual depiction but a standardized form found in several regions and time periods. Perhaps she really does represent the age's ideal of youthful female beauty, as the name "Venus" implies. But this use of the familiar name, of course, is itself interpretive, and dates from 1908, the year of the figure's rediscovery. As Caroline Posch remarks, the name is taken from a classical Greco-Roman aesthetic vocabulary cultivated since the 19th century. Apart from such sexualized interpretations of the figure—always formulated by men—another idea has been

Laure Prouvost,
Here Her Heart
Hovers, 2023
(video still)



around for quite a while, according to which the Venus is a grandmotherly figure. “We don’t know. It could also have been a favourite grandmother.”¹

Heroic grandmas

Caroline Posch walks with me through the museum, leading me around a corner to the gold-lit Venus in her small black berth. She is often called the most important piece in the collection, and is certainly one of the most expensively insured. But museum visitors’ most frequent immediate response on seeing the Venus is to express surprise at how small the figurine is. A figure so culturally and historically important is only 11 centimetres tall? And it may just be a grandma? Grandmothers are often underestimated. The roles assigned to them in stories are rarely heroic. In her famous work *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1986), the late SF/Fantasy writer Ursula K. Le Guin criticizes the tedious, one-dimensional fictional stereotype of the hero as solitary, white, macho man carrying some sort of lethal instrument used for piercing bodies.

The supposed non-heroism of grandmothers, she observes here, is bound up with cultural conventions of storytelling. It’s easy to tell an exciting story about killing, but incredibly difficult to “tell a really gripping tale of how I wrested one wild oat seed from its husk, and then another, and then another, and then another, and then another, and then I scratched my gnat bites, and Ool said something funny [...]”²

Ool? Yes, Le Guin’s essay contains real-world arguments *and* fictional characters together. Ool for example, but also Oom, Oob, and Oo Oo. As in

1 New research, notably by NHM researcher Walpurga Anti-Weiser, suggests this interpretation of the Venus and was published in mainstream media. See Caroline Haidacher: “Großmutter statt Sexsymbol,” *Universum History*, 19/4 2022, <https://science.orf.at/stories/3212596/>. [12/3 2023]

2 Ursula K. Le Guin: *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1986), Ignota Books, 2019, p. 27.

contemplating the Venus, fact and fiction interweave. “It is a strange realism, but it is a strange reality,” says Le Guin of the Science Fiction genre. (This is also very fitting for Laure Prouvost’s *Ohmmm age*.) SF, Le Guin demands, should tell us less about the piercing objects of the solitary heroes and more about old women who use the old technology of the carrier bag. Pouches for collecting and sharing food; pouches to put small people into and tie onto your back when you are on the move; pouches to keep tiny things that mean something to you—such as an 11 centimetre figure of your most beloved grandma.

Whether as grandma, heroine or both, it is not unlikely that the Venus of Willendorf was once carried in the pouch of someone like Ool, Oob, or Oo Oo. Recent analysis of the limestone—a stone called Oolite, by the way—have shown that it is not from Willendorf but from somewhere to the south. The stone was either brought along on a journey, or the figurine was a traveller herself.

Traveling grandmothers

Willendorf, the last station of the Venus before excavation, is located in the part of Lower Austria now known as Wachau. The site of the discovery (known to archaeologists as “Willendorf II”) is interesting because it tells us where travellers at that time would interrupt their journeys to rest and meet up. Once again, an unhurried grandmother who can’t climb hills quite as fast as she used to and likes to take a break sometimes turns out to be a better source of information than a solitary hero racing through the area in a feverish lust for fame. Caroline Posch told me a wonderful detail: when out exploring, in search of what once were former campsites, the archaeologist asks herself: “where would we like to stop to eat our packed lunch?” You have a good chance of finding something in a place that invites you to rest. It is best to ask post-ice age grandmas.

But what about the grandmothers of the future? Why are they so rarely asked? Do you know any SF novels



in which post-menopausal women appear, let alone in leading roles? Sylvia Spruck Wrigley calls this deplorable situation “the lack of galactic grandmothers in visions of the future.” The lack of “badass older women” in science-fiction, she concludes, is a product of sexism and ageism in the here and now.³ “As women get old,” Spruck-Wrigley continues, “they gain a superpower: invisibility.”⁴ Another woman writer also repudiates the invisibility of “old” women: once again, Ursula K. Le Guin. In the essay “The Space Crone” (1976), she proposes the grandmother as the candidate best

Laure Prouvost,
Here Her Heart Hovers, 2023
(video still)

3 Sylvia Spruck Wrigley: “Space ageing: why sci-fi novels shun the badass older woman”, in: *Nature*, 25/11 2019, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03618-w> [12/3 2023].

4 Ibid.

suiting to a long and adventurous journey: “Into the spaceship, Granny!”⁵

If a spaceship full of the human-friendly beings from the planet Altair landed on earth today and could take with it only one single person from whom to learn about humankind, many brave young people would surely be willing, but Le Guin would nonetheless advise taking any old grandmother.⁶ After all, the old woman has gone through many changes from puberty to menopause. The transformation into a “crone” (a derogatory term for an old woman, which Le Guin proudly appropriates) however is by no means automatic. “The woman who is willing to make that change must become pregnant with herself, at last. She must bear herself, her third self, her old age, with travail and alone.”⁷

My Homère

At this point we need to tie a string to another traveling woman, the mother of the philosopher and author Hélène Cixous. “In these scenes, the daughter is the mother, we are the wrong way round, the mother was, is child, the daughter is mother and still daughter, the mother is the daughter [...]” writes Cixous about the last year of life of her mother Eve, who died at the age of 103 years.⁸ In the mother’s last waking moments, the roles and generations are blurred.

H. – *What’s your mother’s name?* E. – *Hélène. Isn’t it?* H. – *If you would like it to be. But your mother back then?* E. – *Grandma!*⁹

5 Cf. Ursula K. Le Guin: “The Space Crone (1976)”, in: *Dancing at the Edge of the World. Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*, New York: Grove Press, 1989, quoted from the non-paginated ebook.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Hélène Cixous: *Meine Homère ist tot ...*, translated into German by Claudia Simma, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2014, p. 45. (English translation translator’s own)

9 Ibid., p. 36.

In the book with the beautiful and untranslatable title *Homère est morte* (2014), Cixous describes how she accompanies her mother on her journey to death—sometimes an Odyssey, hence the feminized “Homer” in the title. But *Homère* is more than an allusion to an arduous journey: it also bears witness to the way Cixous’ mother was always a source of language and poetry for her. This is brought to light in the last year of Eve Cixous’ life, when she suddenly starts speaking English: “It could have been German, her mother and sister tongue. But Eve was always a born traveller.”¹⁰ (*Ohmmm age Oma je ohomma mama—how many languages are mixed together here, associated and brought into play?*) And how close are the bonds between Hélène Cixous’ homage to her mother and Le Guin’s “Crones” as heroines ...!

*[...] old Eve is certainly proud of her heroic deeds, and the heroic deed is not some outstanding feat from her wars, but rather the way she vaulted over the constraints of old age by leaning on the stick of her umbrella, and then in celebration of her victory joined me and my Kleber bookstore friends at the Strasbourg Kamerzell to polish off, devour, wolf down a world-beating quantity of Sauerkraut, bacon and sausages [...].*¹¹

Eve Cixous also seems to have been an expert at finding the sort of comforting, welcoming spaces that future archaeologists will look for. Hélène Cixous even imagines how archaeological research would start from her mother’s many shopping lists, notes, and exact lists of purchases: “In 1,000 years they will be able to reconstruct the life of a woman living in Europe 400 years after Shakespeare, around the same time as Kafka and the mobile phone.”¹²

Aquatic grandmothers

In order for this to happen, the Venus, the shopping lists of Eve Cixous, the works of Kafka, and the mobile phones would need to end up together in a “stable

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 79–80.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 108.

¹² Ibid., p. 54.



stratigraphy”, on an elevated plane. The location of Willendorf at 200 meters above sea level is one of the reasons the oolitic limestone figurine was preserved. Not far away, a massive body of water flows and has burrowed into the land for thousands of years, carrying solid matter away to build it up elsewhere: the Danube. “Water has certainly always been an intense site and agent of planetary terraforming,” writes the hydrofeminist Astrida Neimanis.¹³ Water is another means of access to grandmothership in a broader sense. Surely not by chance, it is prominent in Laure Prouvost’s art. As I learned from my friend Christina Gruber, an artist and aquatic ecologist, the rivers and seas we live close to are significantly constitutive of us: of our cultures, histories, and bodies.¹⁴ For the Venus, for Christina, and for me, this means the Danube. Our bodies and cultures are *archaeologies* in themselves: layers of many elements, sometimes ordered, often mixed up, never just one.

And here if not sooner, the question must arise: why center a human succession of generations at all—and why allocate a gender?

The hydrofeminism of Astrida Neimanis seeks to focus on specific differences between people where causal factors—e.g. gender, class, race, inclusion in particular human or non-human communities—may be multilayered. “The fluid body is not specific to woman, but watery embodiment is still a feminist question; thinking as a watery body has the potential to bathe new feminist concepts and practices into existence.”¹⁵

13 Astrida Neimanis: *Bodies of Water. Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2017.

14 Christina Gruber’s research and art often address the “Ecoton” or the “Interstitial”, ecological concepts that describe changeable and hybrid transitional spaces—which can stimulate substantial philosophical debate. Cf. <https://christinagruber.net> [12/3 2023].

15 Cf. Astrida Neimanis, “Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water”, in: Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni and Fanny Söderbäck: *Undutiful Daughters: Mobilizing Future Concepts, Bodies and Subjectivities in Feminist Thought and Practice*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 89.

Notably in returning to H el ene Cixous’ concept of * criture feminine*¹⁶, Neimanis outlines a feminist utopia

16 “It is vital for woman to write herself: that a woman writes taking woman as her starting point and pushes women to write, to writing, which they have been kept away from by use of force, just as they were kept away from their bodies: for the same reasons, by force of the same law, according to the same deathly principle”, writes Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa” in: Esther Hutfless, Getrude Postl, Elisabeth Sch afer (eds.): *Das Lachen der Medusa zusammen mit aktuellen Beitr agen*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2017, p. 39 (English translation translator’s own). This touches on what the philosopher has explained over and over again: that femininity here is not biologically defined but stands for a place in the social order, which is to do with attributions in relation to gender. Cixous speaks of ‘male’ and ‘female economies’ for example, in order to express these power structures. Still, * criture feminine* continues to be contested because biological terms are applied and it is necessary to prevent a biologist interpretation by means of additional debates. The question whether these debates are valuable continues to be unresolved.

Laure Prouvost,
Sketch for the
exhibition, 2023





where unity and difference converge in a continuously moving stream. “To say that we harbor waters, that our bodies’ gestation, sustenance, and interpermeation with other bodies are facilitated by our bodily waters, and that these waters are *both* singular and shared, is far more literal than we might at first think.”¹⁷ According to Neimanis, watery feminism is always critical-materialist.

Laure Prouvost,
Here Her Heart Hovers, 2023
(video still)

“[...] and we ourselves are sea, sand, corals, algae, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves.”¹⁸

Neimanis focuses on mothers in her research on Inuit mothers’ milk, which contains excessive amounts of poisons and heavy metals because the mothers eat mostly from the sea and are therefore closely bound to a water cycle: “from watery body to watery body”; “to waterway, to ocean and atmospheric current, to plankton, to whale, to breastfeeding body.”¹⁹

17 Neimanis, 2012, p. 90.

18 Cixous, 2017, p. 55.

19 Cf. Neimanis, 2017, p. 164.

Grandmothers appear when she writes about the Anishinabe community and the “First Nations grandmothers” who lead Water Walks around the Great Lakes, raising awareness of human responsibility for river and lake ecologies.²⁰ In both instances, the concept of the anthropocene—often discussed in terms of “mankind”—is liquified. It is always a matter of specific people in specific places, specific causes and specific responsibilities. Likewise, Neimanis wishes to liquify the concept of “woman”. Considered as watery, the woman is anything but “essentialist” in a static or immutable sense. She herself is also the “matter of transmutation.”²¹

Grandmothers in the sea

It’s important then, to remain wary of essentialist arguments that enshrine female and male “biological” roles, making the multitude outside that binary unthinkable. A glance at the field of evolutionary biology will not make this any easier, but the evolutionary-biological question of the “invention of the grandmother” is pretty exciting—most of all because it shows that what seems self-evident to us is actually something very special.²² Very few animal species live beyond reproductive age. Grandmothers—what a gift! Unsurprisingly, it has also been shown that grandmothers play an important part in biological development. Researchers speak of a “Grandmother effect”: studies of non-industrial human societies and of orca

20 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 173. Neimasis makes concrete reference to Josephine Mandami and the Water Walkers. Cf. <https://www.artandeducation.net/classroom/video/288709/josephine-mandamin-sacred-water-walkers> [12/3 2023]. She starts her discussion of the Anishinabe on the basis of the writings of Deborah B. McGregor and the works of the artist Rebecca Belmore.

21 Neimanis, 2012, p. 89.

22 Cf. Henning Engeln: „Evolution: Die Erfindung der Großmutter“, *RiffReporter*, 3/3 2023, www.riffreporter.de/de/artikel/grossmuetter-hypothese-enkel-kinder-evolution-helfen-gene-mensch-lebensdauer [12/3 2023].

concur that the presence of an active grandma lowers infant mortality rates.²³ The four known non-human species whose females go through menopause are all mammals living in the sea: orca, pilot whales, narwhal, and beluga whales.²⁴

This brings us back to Hydrofeminism, which like all good feminisms demands emphasis on the specific. Not as invocation of ‘otherness,’ but—especially in opening concepts like ‘grandmotherhood’ as widely as possible—in order to celebrate what is particular, to specify and commemorate the singularity of those struggles. The work of Black feminists in particular has shown convincingly and poetically how this can be accomplished. Writer and activist Alexis Pauline Gumbs describes standing beside the Combahee River in South Carolina and remembering Harriet Tubman, the abolitionist freedom fighter who helped so many enslaved people to escape by this route. Suddenly she sees a bottlenose dolphin in the water, causing her to wonder: what does it mean to a marine dolphin to swim upstream in a river?

Gumbs pays tribute to the bottlenose dolphin, to the water and its inhabitants, to her “undrowned”²⁵ ancestors and allies, and to her grandmother. This will be the last nodal point so far in this string figure.²⁶

The message for me today is about specificity. About choosing a lane with all my infinite potential. About how my world-traveling

23 Cf. Ibid.

24 Cf. Ibid.

25 Gumbs uses the term *Undrowned* to describe how the *middle passage* continues to reverberate in current politics and society; the brutal history of the enslavement of numerous Black people and their abduction over the ocean where thousands of people were killed, often by drowning.

26 Donna Haraway wrote an especially beautiful instruction to science-fiction string figuring: “An ubiquitous figure in this book is SF: Science-Fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far.” In: *Staying with the Trouble*. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016., p. 2.



grandmother made a commitment to a small island.²⁷ About how strong we grow sometimes, swimming upstream. About what the world can learn from the visibility of our message in a context that is specific enough to ring clear. And to trust that all water touches all water everywhere.²⁸

Laure Prouvost,
Moving Her,
2023 (detail),
photo: Dániel
Mátyás Fülöp

27 Alexis Pauline Gumbs explains in the book that her grandmother Lydia Gumbs had designed the emblem of Anguilla. It shows three dolphins in a circle. Her grandparents were both committed to Anguilla’s independence. The caribic island range is British Overseas Territory.

28 Alexis Pauline Gumbs: *Undrowned. Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, Emergent Strategies, Chico: AK Press, 2020, p. 39–40.

List of Works

Ada Programmed Our Future,
2023
glass cables and cables,
dimensions variable

Bzzz, 2023
glass bees, bee nest, sound,
dimensions variable

Gathering Ho Ma, The Glaneuse,
2023
glass objects, sound, dimensions
variable

Here Her Heart Hovers, 2023
HD-video: color, sound

Film production
Dóra Benyó, Martha Kirszenbaum

Performers
Leslie Auguste, Laure Bruno,
Won Jin Choi, Martha Kirszenbaum,
Sophie Lvoff, Celeste Prouvkens,
Isidor Prouvkens, Mathilde Roman,
Océane Valence

Voices
Theodor Eldridge, Tania Golden,
Bertie Gronlund Le Miere,
Laure Prouvost, Raihana Saeed,
Wim Samek

Sound Mastering
Senjan Jansen

Hi Her Garden, 2023
6 hi-hats, 6 motors, sensors,
dimensions variable

Moving Her, 2023
hanging elements, pulleys, DMX
motors, rope, dimensions variable

We Were 130 Sisters, 2023
glass boob, sound, dimensions
variable

Elisabeth Schimana
Zwiebelfäden
[Onion threads], 2023
6-channel fixed media
composition: 13'

Here Her Heart Hovers was commissioned
by **kunsthalle wien** and **Wiener
Festwochen**, and **Remai Modern**.



Biography

Laure Prouvost (b. 1978 in Croix, France) is currently based in Brussels.

She graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Central Saint Martins and a Master of Fine Arts from Goldsmiths College in London and took part in the LUX Associate Artists Programme. She received the Max Mara Art Prize for Women in 2011, the prestigious Turner Prize in 2013 and represented France 2019 at the 58th Biennale Arte in Venice.

Her most recent solo projects include: A Flying Grandma in Oslo, Esmé Blue in Busan, Helsinki, and Madrid, An Elastic Arm Hold in Tight in Copenhagen, A Swallowing and Breathing in Eindhoven, A Smoking Mother in Copenhagen, A Melting Into Another in Lisbon and Sonsbeek, An Occupied Paradise in Aalst, Deep See Blue Surrounding You in Venice, Toulouse, and Lille, A Waiting Room with Objects in Minneapolis, A New Museum for Granddad in Milano, a Tearoom for Grandma in Derry, A Karaoke Room in Brussels, A New Octopus Ink Vodka Bar for Gregor in Rotterdam, A Travel Agency for an Uncle in Frankfurt, A Lobby for Love Among the Artists in the Hague and Luzern ... tea bags, and wet floors and tentacles.



Public Program

Opening

**Laure Prouvost. Ohmmm age
Oma je ohomma mama**

Thu 11/5 2023, 7 PM,

Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier

Performance

**The Long, very long Journey
by Laure Prouvost**

& Sam Belinfante

Sat 13/5 2023, 4 PM,

Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier
with: Patricia Auchterlonie,
Construction Choir Collective,
Susanna Gartmayer, Ingrid
Oberkanins, OMAS GEGEN
RECHTS and others

On the opening weekend of the exhibition, Laure Prouvost and Sam Belinfante gather amateur and professional musicians from different generations for a unique choral performance. Inspired by the search for traces of our grandmothers, *The Long, very long Journey* is a musical expedition through the spaces of Kunsthalle Wien. Processional songs, playful scenes and experimental sounds echo the memories of familiar connections and great heroines.

**Coffee Klatsch
with Laure Prouvost**

Sat 13/5 2023, 5:30 PM,

Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier

TOURS

All tours are free with an admission ticket.

**Curator's Tour
with Carolina Nöbauer**

Tue 16/5 & Thu 15/9 2023, 6 PM,

Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier

Sunday Tours

21/5, 4/6, 18/6, 2/7 16/7, 6/8, 20/8,
3/8, 17/9, 1/10 2023, 4 PM

Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier
with: Carola Fuchs, Andrea Hubin,
Michaela Schmidlechner,
Michael Simku

Every first and third Sunday of the month at 4 PM you can explore the exhibition *Laure Prouvost. Ohmmm age Oma je ohomma mama* together with our art educators and discuss the context and background of the exhibited works.

The Sunday tours are free with an exhibition ticket and will be held in German.

My View Tours

My View is a program series in which experts, non-experts, and interesting people are invited to present their personal view on the exhibition.

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Please see our website for regular updates and further details on the program around the exhibition *Laure Prouvost. Ohmmm age Oma je ohomma mama*:
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Laure Prouvost

Ohmmm age Oma je ohomma mama
11/5 – 1/10 2023

A joint exhibition of
kunsthalle wien
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THANK YOU

The artist would like to thank Nick Aikens, Céleste, Isidor, Esmé Blue, family, and friends. Our thanks go to Julia Grillmayr, Georg Petermichl, Dr. Carolina Posch, Monika Salzer, Elisabeth Schimana, and Dr. Walpurga Antl-Weiser.

PUBLISHER

**kunsthalle wien / Stadt Wien Kunst
GmbH**

TEXTS

What, How & for Whom / WHW
and Christophe Slagmuylder (preface)
Carolina Nöbauer
(introduction, short texts)
Julia Grillmayr (essay)

EDITORIAL MANAGEMENT

Ramona Heinlein
Nicole Suzuki

COPYEDITING

Ramona Heinlein
Lara Mejač
Katharina Schniebs
Nicole Suzuki

TRANSLATION

Christine Schöffler & Peter Blakeney
(preface, biography, *Legsicon* texts)
Anja Büchele & Matthew Hyland
(introduction, short texts, essay)

DESIGN

Dejan Kršić & Lana Grahek

TYPEFACE

Mackay [René Bieder]
La Nord [Raoul Gottschling]
khw Ping [typotheque]

PRINT

Gerin GmbH, Wolkersdorf, Austria

ISBN 978-3-903412-09-5

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kunsthalle wien is the city of Vienna's
institution for international art and
discourse.

All works and photos are courtesy of the
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Laure Prouvost, *Moving Her*, 2023 (detail), photo: Dániel Mátyás Fülöp

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www.kunsthallewien.at
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ISBN 978-3-903412-09-5

kunsthalle wien
museumsquartier
museumsplatz 1
1070 vienna

+43 1 521 89 0