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Katarzyna Bojarska

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The author analyses Maria Lassnig's visual autobiography, her creation of painterly temporalities and her record of bodily experiences. The article concentrates on Lassnig's experiencing her historicity and her distinctive way of feminizing the process of its construction. Her historicity is seen here as framed by the ways she measures the distance between her experience as a woman and the medium of painting, herself and other women artists, her forms of visual resistance and struggles vis-à-vis theirs. Lassnig performs her historicity in painting (and on the canvas) in the timespan of decades and in relation to other forms of female autobiographical performances in the sphere of the visual, social and political. This relational perspective remains crucial for positioning of Lassnig on the map of the feminist critique of both image and history. The author looks at some of the artist's self-portraits as stages in a lifelong work of self-reflection and self-inscription into the world and painting, as well as conversely, of the inscription of the world and painting onto woman's history and her body.

Katarzyna Bojarska - Assistant professor in the Department of Cultural Studies of the SWPS University. From 2008 to 2019, she worked in the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Co-founder of Widok. Since 2024 head of Center for Comparative Research on Memory Cultures (CCRM). Author of articles and translations interested in the relations of art, literature, history and psychoanalysis. She translated among others Michael Rothberg's "Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization" (Warsaw 2016). Author of a book "Wydarzenia po Wydarzeniu: Białoszewski – Richter – Spiegelman" [Events after the Event: Białoszewski – Richter – Spiegelman] (Warsaw 2012). Editor and one of translators of Ernst van Alphen's book "Criticism as Intervention: Art, Memory, Affect" (Krakow 2019). Receipient of numerous research grants and awards,

including Fulbright, National Centre for Science, Horizon2020.

Maria Lassnig: Becoming Female in History

> it is from women that we must "buy time,"
> *and it is with women that we must, today, create time*[1]
>
> THE FUTURE OF WOMEN WILL BE THE HISTORY OF WOMAN[2]

This essay begins with four images. Their coming together made them speak about the female body, female portraiture, the female sex, the address of the image, and control and violence both in and of the image – conventions that are being disrupted and expectations that are being questioned. The very fact that when they entered the public sphere – in 1968 (VALIE EXPORT), 1992 (Zoe Leonard), and 2000/2005 (Maria Lassnig) respectively – they shook and disrupted it, proves that woman's image of herself is still to be reclaimed, that the re-vision of female portraiture in the realm of the visual arts as much as in the realm of visual culture is still necessary, and that female sexuality and desire, as well as her being a body that becomes an image, continues to be the battlefield where multiple powers collide and where victory is hardly achieved once and for all. It actually never is *for all women*, hence the urgency of addressing as many female bodies, colors, desires, experiences, and memories as imaginable, or even going beyond what one imagines here and now. There is always more to be gained. What do these historical gestures of women



Du oder Ich (You or Me), 2005 © Maria Lassnig Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna 2019 Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zurich

artists mean for us, and how do they write female autobiography in the visual sphere? How do they reshape historical time and thinking about historicity and femininity?

In her *Action Pants: Genital Panic* VALIE EXPORT (photographed here by Peter Hassmann) sits with her legs spread wide (and with bare feet), her naked hairy vagina clearly visible through a hole in her jeans. The artist's long hair is messy; her face seems intent, if not tense. She looks us straight in the eye and holds a machine gun ready, pointing towards the spectator. In her painting of nearly half a century later, *You or Me*, Maria Lassnig seems to be making a connection with EXPORT, depicting her own naked body (with hairless vagina) seated in a similar position – the painted pink-peach-colored body protrudes from the "unpainted" white background – and aiming two guns: one at the side of her head, the other at us. What are we to make of this correspondence, who is the *You* and who the *Me*, is the *Me* terrified or determined, and who is to make this choice? In 1992 at *documenta IX* (curated by Jan Hoet) in the Neue Galerie in Kassel, Zoe Leonard exhibited her *Untitled*, a series of nineteen unframed black-and-white photographs depicting naked vaginas, or, better said, portraits of vaginas affixed to gallery walls amid the museum's collection (early modern nude and portraiture paintings).[3] The gesture was read as "the familiar critique of painting in terms of the 'male gaze,' inserting sex, and the reproductive power of women, into a traditional, restrained, bourgeois narrative."[4] Thus Leonard (and Hoet) pointed to the



Valie EXPORT, *Aktionhose:Genitalpanik*, (*Action Pants: Genital Panic*) 1969, courtesy of the artist.

entrapment in and by images (painting) and to liberation from it (photography). Lassnig has made the power of self-inspection and critique of the medium visible and shared. In her *Two Ways of Being (Double Self-portrait)* (2000) the artist provides a corresponding site for an encounter between traditional portraiture (her face, painted on the right) and a subversive gesture of revealing another mode of being (herself-as-vagina [the size of the head] on the other). In both cases the tension between the women's existence in image and as image is countered by their power to act, and decide on their self-image – their right to be (what and how they want to be, also in the sphere of images).

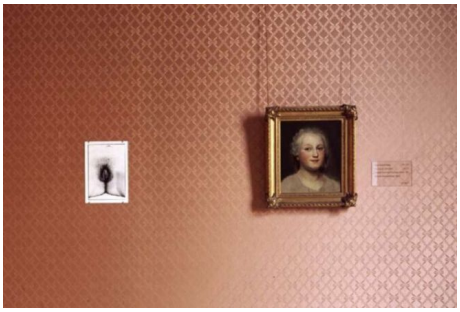
This essay is devoted to Maria Lassnig's visual autobiography, a her-story in painting, to her creation of temporalities and her record of bodily experiences. It concentrates on Lassnig's experiencing her historicity and her distinctive way of feminizing the process of its construction. Her historicity is framed here by the ways she measures the distance between her experience and the medium, herself and other women artists, her and their forms of visual resistance, and her and their struggles (especially as someone at least two decades older than the 1960s and 70s generation of female artists). Lassnig performs her historicity in painting (and on the canvas) in the timespan of decades and in relation to other forms of female autobiographical performance in the spheres of the visual, social, and political. This relational perspective remains crucial for my positioning of her on the map of the feminist critiques of both image and history. I will look at some of her self-portraits as stages in a lifelong work of self-reflection and self-inscription into the world and painting, as well



Zwei Arten zu sein (Doppelselbstporträt) (Two Ways of Being (Double Self-Portrait)), 2000 © Maria Lassnig Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna 2019

as, conversely, inscription of the world and painting onto woman's history and her body (or a history of her body).

For me, Lassnig's painting is all about position (according to the dictionary: "a place where someone or something is located; a particular way in which someone or something is placed or arranged") and not pose ("a particular way of standing or sitting, usually adopted for effect or in order to be photographed, painted, or drawn; a particular way of behaving adopted in order to give others a false impression or to impress others"). This, as Silvia Eiblmayr put it, is the "gender specificity" of her art: "artistic critical contemplation of her positioning as woman."[5] Lassnig's painting is of woman born – to use the title of Adrienne Rich's renowned book. This positioning also concerns practicing the "politics of location." Like many other Austrian women artists and writers of the 20th century, including Christine Lavant, Elfriede Jelinek, Ingeborg Bachmann, Elke Krystufek, and VALIE EXPORT, among many others, Lassnig has proven that "a place on the map is also a place in history."[6]



Zoe Leonard, *Untitled*, 1992, Installation in the Neue Galerie, Documenta IX, Kassel, Germany. Photo Markus Tolhopf, Kassel.

In her book devoted to the possibilities of the resistant reading of and the writing of women's autobiographies, American literary critic Shoshana Felman argues, after Adrienne Rich – in favor of re-reading and re-vision – that "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an older text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival."[7] I am reading this "old text" here as a narrative of emancipation, the struggle for women's right to have equal access to their history and story: their production, possession, and transmission. And I am interpreting survival in

this context as something more than life itself – it seems to be both about wanting more life (more than is offered by the available norms and forms of sociality) and being pushed to live more than one life (in roles one hardly finds fit for herself), as well as more than one's life (under the expectations imposed by the above norms). Along with Felman and others who have followed, I would like to unsettle the concept of autobiography, female autobiography in particular, something the author of *What Does a Woman Want?* asserts that "we have *settled* into [...] a little too impatiently and self-complacently, as though we could be sure that we already have – in culture or in life – a room of our own."[8] And with the unsettling of autobiography might come the unsettling of other forms of recording life, such as history, memory, or testimony, and possibly also the image. In "This Is Not My Body" *Élisabeth* Lebovici claims that: "Women artists have been undoing the autonomy and the universality of the aesthetic image, by developing their art, not only for the production of effects in signification or communication, but as a form of agency."[9] And this agency seems to be nothing less than resistance and survival.

Intimacy of inspection

In the introduction to *Interfaces* Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson stress the fact that the materialization of autobiographical female subjectivity in the visual and performative arts has been enacted outside the tradition of self-portraiture and quite often against it. Likeness was therefore not the most important factor, replaced by what Smith and Watson call the "proliferation of the sites of the autobiographical."[10] What is meant by this is that the history of women being in time and in/as image has not so much been written but enacted in numerous genres, styles, and modes of self-presentation and representation. It has also been, they claim, the outcome of complex procedures of negotiating and playing with – as well as

against – appropriation and adaptation. Thus, according to this framework, the "I" conceived by such an autobiographical gesture seems fragmented, provisional, and multiple – and it is precisely its porosity which opens up space for and invites others: not only by means of relating to others and their stories, but also by allowing others to relate to and resist our stories (the stories of ourselves). The inclusion of these many sites (and also the many politics of self-representation) seems a necessary step towards an expansion of visual autobiography that, rather than on faces (mere portraiture) begins to concentrate on inter-faces (more-than-portraiture). "The autobiographical is a performative site of self-referentiality where the psychic formations of subjectivity and culturally coded identities intersect and interface one another."[11] In such a conceptual scheme of intersecting and interfacing, painting as a genre should be thought of precisely as a site of various encounters, rather than a mirror or screen.

The autobiographical, as the authors of *Interfaces* write, cannot be equated with "transparent rendering of the real life." Quite the contrary, it is never a transparent practice, as it includes negotiating one's past, reflecting on one's identity (rather than reflecting this identity), and also actively producing a framework for containing one's life experience in its ever-changing forms. Such a life-story has to be not only claimed and owned but also shared – thus it is a collective practice and effort, a shareable and shared act of confronting the "constitutive masculinity"[12] of a life worthy of its narrative. Writing of the many women artists and performers of the second half of the 20th century, Smith and Watson stress that what interests them in particular is finding and celebrating the strategies that follow the autobiographic gestures: how feelings become embodied; bodies re-emerge on their own and in new constellations of relations; sexuality and sensuality are liberated from oppressive codes of objectification; independent actions are recorded and

remembered; and various modes of self-presentation are invented for the sake of the ever-expanding repository. In mining the many archives of visual autobiography, the authors offer a set of possibilities which in turn can be appropriated and further adapted for future use and struggle.

The autobiographic subjects mentioned here, whose practices provide important points of reference for my reflections on Maria Lassnig, reorganize the available archive of visual stereotypes, looking for difference and resistance, erasure and lacunae, objects of mourning and objects of desire. They expose the rhythms and interruptions of the "codes of cultural intelligibility"[13]: when, how, and why women's visual stories of their lives are welcome, understood, allowed, and appreciated as such. They also look for the unthinkable, the unimaginable, and the scandalous, which can allow for the expression of the hitherto silenced and can be transformed into the potentialities of another kind of presence in the field of the visual. Lassnig's painterly autobiography is a testimony of – as Lauren Berlant compellingly wrote – "[forcing] into being new recognitions of what a life is and ought to be."[14]

Maria Lassnig debuted in Austria in the 1950s, the time of post-war rupture and turbulence caused by necessary normalization and equally indispensable repression. It took her another 30 years to become the first female professor of painting in a German-speaking country, at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, where she taught for nearly 20 years.[15] Lassnig accepted the position having made sure her earnings would equal those of Josef Beuys. It was back in 1910, however, that the Austrian Association of Women Artists (VBKÖ), which demanded space for women in art schools and art exhibitions, organized a show entitled *Die Kunst der Frau* at the Viennese Secession. This legacy was soon to be erased by the Nazis, cutting women off from their history as artists and from creative heritage.[16]

That history regained its momentum in the 1960s and 70s

when VALIE EXPORT practiced her "body cinema." In *Tapp- und Tastkino* (Munich 1967, Vienna 1968) she paraded the city streets wearing a cardboard "movie theater" around her naked upper body. The public could not see her breasts, but they could feel them, invited as they were to put their hands through the holes in the "theater." The artist looked in the eyes of those who touched her, closely observing their reactions, their facial responses to the touch of her body on their hands. EXPORT was not only in charge of how she presented herself (and what of herself she presented), but was also managing a social, public situation where access to the female body and the right to someone else's body as a visual object were at stake, and where it was exposed and explored, as well as open for criticism – an act that might follow a spontaneous encounter on the street with a woman-cinema. Social critique merged with critique of the cinematic medium, whose visual control over the female body was sickening. Thus, in another of her awareness-awakening performances, the aforementioned *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, EXPORT walked around the audience in one of Munich's art cinemas wearing pants with the crotch cut out and no underwear, her private parts exposed at the face height of the spectators.

In 1970 EXPORT and others proclaimed themselves Feminist Actionists (*Aktionistinnen*), in response and opposition to the male-dominated Viennese Actionism described by critic Brigitte Borchhardt-Birbaumer as "masochistic fixation on the country's postwar situation."[17] Women artists such as EXPORT, Kiki Kogelnik, Margot Pilz, Renate Bertlmann, Linda Christanell, Rita Furrer, Ingrid Opitz, Birgit Jürgenssen, and Frederike Pezold did not ignore the traumatic past, but rejected secondary traumatization as their strategy, concentrating instead on fierce protest against women's inferiority in Austrian society, and employing "forward looking conceptions that tied environments, politics, and aesthetic innovation together with roleplaying

explorations of identity and creativity, and radical reduction and political resistance."[18] Their practices were based on humor and irony, experiment and collaboration, subversively applied kitsch and hybridized genres. Trying to liberate femininity from "the shackles of reification," dismantling oppression by exposure and ridicule, these artists, Borchhardt-Birbaumer writes, "had important and powerful supporters such as Johanna Dohnal, minister of women's affairs (she is said to have realized all the women's goals including repeal of the abortion ban), theorist Silvia Eiblmayr, journalists Heidi Grundmann and Jana Wisniewski, and numerous female gallery owners."[19] In 1975 EXPORT organized the exhibition *MAGNA. Feminismus: Kunst und Kreativitaet* (with works by Jürgenssen, Bertlmann, Lassnig, Pezold, and others); conversely, there was not a single female jury member to decide on the participants of the *Austrian Contemporary Women Artists* exhibition, which sparked street protests and was followed in turn by the establishment of the association *Internationale Aktionsgemeinschaft Bildender Kuenstlerinnern IntAkt*.[20] Borchhardt-Birbaumer strongly criticizes the neglect of these women artists and their milieu by art history, which has privileged just one way of art working through historical and contemporary trauma.[21]

However, when these developments took place in Austria, Lassnig, seemingly impatient with the Austrian art world, dissatisfied with what it offered her, or simply looking for different stimuli – both artistic and political – left in 1968 for New York City, where at the age of 49 she began studying animation at the School of Visual Arts and joined an artistic collective, Women Artist Filmmakers (which included Susan Brockman, Doris Totten Chase, Martha Edelheit, Silvianna Goldsmith, Nancy Kendall, Carolee Schneemann, Rosalind Schneider, Olga Spiegel, and Alida Walsh, and remained active from 1974–1981).[22] Lassnig was at least a decade older than her colleagues, and yet it was here that she found creative

collaboration and an environment to thrive in. However, one should bear in mind that, as Kasia Redzisz and Lauren Barnes, authors of "The Body Decides," the introductory essay to the artist's recent Tate Liverpool exhibition catalog point out, Lassnig's painterly style was found to be rather awkward, and her body awareness translated onto canvas did not correspond well with the then-popular forms of painterly expression.[23] In addition, women artists at the time – both in the US and Austria – were finding other forms of expression that worked better in the service of their struggle: photo-collages and photographic series, performance, and video, among others. And yet they surely shared experiences and concerns, courage and determination, in their projects of scrutinizing themselves and the inhospitable worlds they inhabited, examining and enjoying their sexuality and desire, bodily presence, and exploring bodily cultural oppression.

Sensation over appearance

As critics and curators have repeatedly stressed, Maria Lassnig's "overriding concern, in a career that spanned over seventy years, was the challenge of transforming her own bodily experience into painting."[24] Often, her "commitment to self-portraiture" was labelled "obsessive."[25] And yet "obsessive" suggests some kind of abnormality or disorder, as if devotion to one's autobiography as a woman would be a *faux-pas*, scandal, or excess. To me, however, rather than excessive, Lassnig seems stubborn, devoted, and curious; a curiosity that does not decrease with time but rather grows. What else is there, one could and should ask, besides the bodily experience and self-portraiture? What is this immense autobiographical exercise in painting? What life does it tell the story of (the life of self-exploration and fantasy, the life lived in a body and as a body) in the wide array of self-portraits, ever expanding, never fully satisfied? It seems to correspond with an insatiable desire to become, and to capture that becoming and make it meaningful and shared; such, in my opinion, is the essence of her autobiographical project. By meaningful I literally mean *full of meaning*, the meaning that comes from inside the body and from one's experience of being the body; the meaning that can be ascribed to the outside world insofar as that world has come through the body and left its imprint, as Lassnig explains in her manifestos and diary entries. The abundance of meaning can be



Selbstporträt als Ungeheuer (Self-Portrait as Monster), 1964 © Maria Lassnig Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna 2019

treated as a result of the many lives one lives, with acute attention to every detail of the disintegration of one's body, of collaboration with other bodies, of resistance to other bodies and of self-resistance, and of measuring one's materiality against the materiality of the world (and vice versa). Lassnig recorded her participation in the struggle with and for the authentic form of female being in history, and remained faithful to the only realism she was convinced she could produce: the realism of painting. She was determined to work with painting and in painting; she was determined to make painting work for her.

While EXPORT was making her groundbreaking performances, Maria Lassnig was painting her monstrous self-portrait – with its skinless, meaty pink face and shoulders, swollen and closed eyes, and a mouth and nose hard to distinguish – thus exercising another kind of criticism of and control over one's image. A female face hardly recognizable as a face, hardly readable as a metaphor, and yet painfully troubling as an invitation to feel and think with. What does this deformation stand for, communicate, and call for? This, to me, is how Lassnig's devotion to remaining a realist and a painter began.[26] And this is where the impression of the immensity and seriousness of her devotion to the work of visual autobiography imposed itself forcefully.



Alina Szapocznikow, *Cendrier de celibateur I*, 1972, photo Wojciech Holnicki © Piotr Stanisławski and Alina Szapocznikow Estate

Self-Portrait as Monster can be seen as the opening of a series of Kafkaesque metamorphoses – grotesque, and at times kitschy instances of the self on canvas: as a lemon, a chair, a grater, an alien, a baby, a camera, a weapon, or an animal. This is her life as it makes itself felt to her at various stages, in different geographical or emotional climates. Lassnig worked with and reworked the same figure – herself – in tragicomic, camp, joyful, or violent ways. So did Louise Bourgeois in her sculptures from the 1960s onwards, materializing her body as an egg, as a cylinder, fragmenting it into breasts, anuses, mouths, penises, or feces.[27] So did Alina Szapocznikow, contemporaneously creating "awkward objects" of her body and illness.[28] Yvonne Rainer in her *The Mind is a Muscle* (1968) and Carolee Schneemann in her *Eye Body* (1963) and *Meat Joy* (1964) not only reworked the imagery of the female body in acts of revolt, but also introduced new forms of its presence in space and of its temporality. They were, as *Élisabeth* Lebovici rightly points out, "celebrating flesh" as material for and in art. The "new field of visibility" opened and new possibilities of meanings and understandings, new ways of approaching sense and sensuality emerged; body became not the other but one, the one that acts, feels, understands and produces senses and sensibilities."[29] Nudity, gesture, and mimicry were reclaimed, and new codes for the expression of ambivalent feelings towards social roles were invented.

In an analogous manner Maria Lassnig struggled with her body, sensing and scrutinizing it, fragmenting and deforming it, responding to and resisting it – at once a painful and pleasurable

experience. Hers is a porous body, a body that leaks and absorbs, that does not need to be admired or desired. Oftentimes it is impossible to determine: is the monster a depressive figure or is it a revolutionary one, is she giving in or is she acting up, does the color signify bruises or "meat joy"?

As Silvia Eiblmayr rightly observed: "In Lassnig's work body experiences are not only related in the image but she also shows us in a drastic way that the reality of the image always interferes with the so-called 'reality' of the body so that both levels of reality become inseparable."[30] Thus Lassnig's body emerges from the sphere of mere representation – "passivity" or "facticity" – into the sphere of potent agency, becoming "the apparatus proper, the recorder and the transmitter of experience."[31] What Lebovici calls "the short-cut of the body" taken by women artists at the time "is used to activate and reactivate forces, to display what a body can do or where it can go, as well as its alienation, its obstacles."[32] In 1977 Lassnig noted her reflections on this "short-cut":



Maria Lassnig painting in her studio in Vienna, 1983. Photo: © Kurt-Michael Westermann / Maria Lassnig Foundation.

> Self-representation, a wide sweeping movement in contemporary art, isn't narcissism or being in love with oneself, but rather the loneliness of the critical and the inability to exploit another. It is meditation and the application of a scientific scalpel on a willing object, oneself. Women have been especially prone to recede into the solitude of themselves and they continued to do so until it became a strength.[33]

It was more than a decade after painting *Self-Portrait as Monster* that Lassnig would feel and see that strength as the potentially collective power of the "critical," and an opening

for the love of oneself.

She painted what she felt of herself, so if there were parts of her body she was not feeling while painting – because of the position her body took in the act of painting34 – they remained out of the picture, unfelt for her, invisible to the beholder. Body awareness (in each of its elements) allows for an image to come to life, for it to be born; however, it could only be born insofar as she was aware of the present moment of herself, in time and space. In the Inside and Outside the Canvas series from the 1980s painting provides an interface for scenes of multidirectional pressing: of the outside world onto the body, the body onto the canvas, and the canvas back onto the body and the world. Lassnig measures her body against the canvas, portrays her-self as trapped in it, lying side by side with it, and emerging from or disappearing in it. It is the pressing of sensations and the pressing of the flat surface, the flatness which rarely does justice to the life of the body and the life in a body, which demands more than the image and yet returns to the image to testify of itself. Lassnig keeps reminding herself and her audience that, with equal intensity and devotion, she is performing both the act of painting and the act of living.



Innerhalb und außerhalb der Leinwand IV (Inside and Outside the Canvas IV), 1984-5
© Maria Lassnig Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna 2019



Die Küchenschürze / Frau in der Klemme / Küchenschürze oder die Eingezwängte (The Kitchen Apron / Trapped Woman), 1992 © Maria Lassnig Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna 2019

The scenes Lassnig recorded are reminiscent of 1970s avant-garde feminist works such as Ana Mendieta's *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)* (1972/1997) or Katalin Ladik's *Poemi [Series A]* (1978), where the artist's female bodies are squeezed and pressed against glass. Critics have pointed out that these gestures are suggestive of "the barriers society imposes and injuries it inflicts."[35]

As much as this is true, the works also seem to be a playful – even if at times dramatic or drastic – conversation with the expectations of what the female body should look like, how its image should be framed and presented. Because they are reminiscent of children's play, these deliberate disfigurations partly undermine the very logic of self-portraiture, the outrageous idea of the possibility of fitting into any frame or corresponding to any flat surface. I read Lassnig's *insides* and *outsides* vis-à-vis the canvas as a response to these concerns, a response loyal to the medium yet making powerful claims on its limitations.



Illusion von der versäumten Mutterschaft (Illusion of the Missed Motherhood), 1998 © Maria Lassnig Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna 2019 Photo: Roland Krauss

In a few paintings from the 1990s Lassnig seems to revisit some of the classic themes of feminist art and female biography: scenes of entrapment and potential regret for scenarios unrealized and forever lost. She paints the *Illusion of the Missed Marriages* (1998) and the *Illusion of the Lost Motherhood* (1998), along with *Kitchen Apron or Trapped Woman* (1992). The latter especially – beside other self-portraits as kitchen utensils – seems to correspond with such 1970s classics as Martha Rosler's parody of television kitchen demonstrations in her *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), Helen Chadwick's performance *In the Kitchen* (1977), during which she transformed herself into kitchen objects, Birgit Jürgenssen's *Hausfrauen-Kuechenschuerze* (1975), or Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1976). Obligations imposed by culture, forced social roles and life-scenarios, uncanny domesticity, the killing boredom of repetitive gestures, the poses one assumes in order to enjoy daily familial obligations – domesticity claiming the body of the woman, transforming it, reifying it – all of it filled the life of the housewife. And thus the housewife was a woman married to her house, to her kitchen, a woman who with time becomes yet another object to be had by a man. An atrocious symbiosis between a woman and an object, her merging with the surroundings, monotonous activities, and repetitions turning her into body-machine – all these and more are staged and resisted, ridiculed and rejected. In Lassnig's paintings the retrospective look seems to have replaced the urgency of battle. The protagonist revisits the obligations,

pressures, and oppressive expectations with distanced irony, mockery, and even amused surprise. Her victory is a fact; the paintings' victory is a fact. She is a woman over 70 and a painter; she has not lost what she did not have and did not want to have, and thus the painted loss is an illusion, an expectation she does not feel obliged to meet.

At the age of 94 Lassnig painted her *Self-Portrait with Brush* (2010–2013), the last episode of her visual autobiography, a completed-incomplete painting depicting the artist proudly holding her head up. The color covers only the face and the upper part of the figure's torso; the contour fades, disappearing. Yet the artist is still in action, staging the body in an act of self-portraiture, staging it in a victorious gesture: holding an invisible brush or a weapon, ready to paint or to deal a blow. As usual with Lassnig it is scarcely possible to determine which the more accurate interpretation is, or whether we should just agree to continue playing. So if it is a brush, does this mean it has been a life of fighting by means of painting, and if it is a sword is it the *pathos formula* of feminist art, the woman artist, the woman as an artist, the portrait of the artist as an old woman, a warrior?



Illusion von den versäumten Heiraten II (Illusion of the Missed Marriages II), 1998 © Maria Lassnig Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna 2019 Photo: Roland Krauss

A possible closure

> With whom do you believe your lot is cast?
> From where does your strength come?[36]

French philosopher Catherine Malabou opens her book *Changing Difference*, devoted to reflection on the possibility of liberating and acceptable feminine essentialism, with the following address: "I write for the women I know, the ones who in their very way of being, carry with them something like an unlived memory of the others, a fragility that does not try to hide. I write for these women, who, for this reason, are my friends."[37] Going beyond (if not against) the phantasy of the either ambiguous or sentimental "solidarity of women," the author addresses the friends whose "way of being" allows room for others and their memories, allows for porosity, honesty, and the display of fragility.

Malabou analyses the position of the "woman" in the post-feminist age. In speaking against the violence – both theoretical and social – done to women, the author speaks against the anti-essentialist proposition that, according to her, reduced the female ontological position to "being nothing," never being something (a supposedly liberating and protective gesture), and in favor of the "resistant essence" that refuses to disappear or subjugate, that returns to claim its rights in the world (both theoretical and social). Malabou offers femininity the concept of fluid being, of plasticity – the transformation of form that allows for avoiding oppressive fixation from within as well as from without. Constant fluidity, as she conceives it, would enable women to "become passing, metabolic points of identity,"[38] subjects in a process of change, whose power to form and mold would also pertain to other beings. The supposed "impossibility of being" a woman thus becomes "a specific power"[39] of a woman

– untamable, willful, and independent.

I find in Malabou as much as I find in Lassnig a truly feminist project that attempts to undermine the foundations of traditional thought and imagery. It is partly the structure of address, "inclusive of its otherness," as Felman would put it – the need (if not necessity) to speak to women, with women, and address the community of women: "An address is not merely an act of intellectual and emotional appeal. It is an *act of empowerment*. And such empowerment becomes possible only when women can transmit and grasp – their own *metaphoricity* to one another, only when each woman can become (however different) the metaphor for another woman."[40] The empowerment Lassnig enacts by and in her painting is neither *about* her biography, nor about her career or the outcome of her struggle, whether in life or in art. But it is not that she has set an example; rather, it is the "metaphoricity" of the porous and deformed, imperfect and transformed personae, in the "obsessive" talking about herself, looking for what makes her be her, that she talks to other women, referencing the many shared feelings and ambivalences of self-experience (in and out of the image) at the same time as and in relation to other women artists and other women.



Selbstporträt mit Pinsel (Self-Portrait with Brush), 2010–13 © Maria Lassnig Foundation / Bildrecht, Vienna 2019 Photo: Roland Krauss

In her reading of Adrienne Rich's poem Shoshana Felman enacts the displacement and deconstruction of Freud's question (*what does a woman want?*) into "with whom does a woman want?"[41] where the desire becomes that of address and of power. In my reading of Lassnig's painterly autobiography I looked for the "with whom" as much as I looked for the how she experienced her historicity, how she testified to it with the imagery she created, and how she implicated other women and bodies. Lassnig seems to have unlearnt how to speak the old language of essence and the equally old language of difference. When pointing a gun to her head, and in the "you" of her address, she provides no simple solutions to whom this "you or me" actually refers to. And why is her pussy exposed? I would want to follow Felman yet again and say that, in her lifetime of painting, Lassnig worked "not only against, but outside of the specular phallocentric structure, to establish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the phallacy of masculine meaning."[42] The outside of this phallacy is the vaginal I (eye) looking at us from EXPORT, Lassnig, and Leonard alike, encouraging us to join in.

I owe my gratitude to all participants of the symposium *Becoming Female in History: Maria Lassnig and the Artists*, **as well as to the Zachęta Art Gallery for the invitation to curate this symposium, and to the curators of Maria Lassnig's show at Zachęta.**

1 Shoshana Felman, *What Does a Woman Want?: Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 127.

2 VALIE EXPORT, "Women's Art: A Manifesto," in: *Art in Theory 1900 - 2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul J. Wood (New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 870. Originally published in March 1972 on the occasion of the exhibition *MAGNA. Feminism: Art and Creativity* (Vienna).

3 The same year Leonard – as a member of the GANG collective – made a poster depicting a vagina with the inscription: "Read my lips before they are sealed," which was a response to the "gag order" forbidding clinicians in the USA to even say the word "abortion." Therefore, it was about the loss of control not just over one's body and reproductive rights, but even over speech. The title was also a pun on George H. W. Bush's promise not to raise taxes: "Read my lips: no new taxes," he said during his presidential campaign. See: "Zoe Leonard interviewed by Anna Blume," http://www.anthonymeierfinearts.com.

4 Angela M. Bartholomew, "Installations Everywhere: Disorientation and Displacement in Jan Hoet's *documenta IX* (1992)," http://www.on-curating.org/issue-33-reader/installations-everywhere-disorientation-and-displacement-in-jan-hoets-documenta-ix-1992.html#_edn15.

5 Silvia Eiblmayr, "A Picture Atlas of Turmoil," in: *Maria Lassnig: Works, Diaries & Writings*, ed. Laurence Rassel (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2015), 218.

6 Adrienne Rich, "Notes Towards the Politics of Location," in: *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), 212.

7 Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," in: *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), 35. Quoted in: Felman, *What Does a Woman Want?*, 13.

8 Felman, *What Does a Woman Want?*, 14-15.

9 *Élisabeth* Lebovici, "This Is Not My Body," in: *Spheres of Action: Art and Politics*, eds. Éric Alliez and Peter Osborne (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), 35. Lebovici points to women artists who in her opinion have "opened a field of visibilities": Carolee Schneemann, Yoko Ono, Ann Halprin, Yvonne Rainer, Meredith Monk, Atsuko Tanaka, Yaoi Kusama, Esther Ferrer, Jackie Raynal, Gina Pane, and VALIE EXPORT. See also: https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/this-is-not-my-body.

10 *Interfaces: Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance,* eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2002), 11.

11 Ibid., 5–6, 11.

12 Ibid., 8, 15.

13 Ibid., 35.

14 See: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/03/25/affect-theory-and-the-new-age-of-anxiety. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

15 It was in the same year, 1980, that Lassnig, together with VALIE EXPORT, represented Austria at the Venice Biennale; two years later, in 1982, she participated in *documenta 7*, and in 1997 in *documenta 10*. At the Venice Biennale in 2013 she received, together with another female artist, Marisa Merz, the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement.

16 Gabriele Schor, "The Feminist Avant-Garde. A Radical Revaluation of Values," in: *Feminist Avant-Garde: Art of the 1970s: The Sammlung Verbund Collection, Vienna*, ed. Schor (Munich–London–New York: Prestel Verlag, 2016), 26.

17 Brigitte Borchhardt-Birbaumer, "Vienna's Female Actionists: Feminist Positions in Austria," in: *Feminist Avant-Garde*, op. cit., 85.

18 Ibid., 85.

19 Ibid., 86.

20 Schor, "The Feminist Avant-Garde," 28.

21 Borchhardt-Birbaumer, "Vienna's Female Actionists," 86.

22 See: Joyce Kozloff, "Maria Lassnig in New York, 1968–1980," *HYPERALLERGIC*, November 8, 2014, https://hyperallergic.com/159289/maria-lassnig-in-new-york-1968-1980/.

23 Kasia Redzisz and Lauren Barnes, "Introduction: The Body Decides," in: *Maria Lassnig*, eds. Redzisz and Barnes, ex. cat. (Liverpool: Tate Liverpool, 2017), 15. It was in the US that Lassnig developed the style named by critics "American realism," which, as Redzisz and Barnes rightly point out, was still consistent with questioning the rules of self-representation, estranging the self-image by all kinds of painterly means (multiplication, deformation, the use of the nude, etc.).

24 Ibid., 11.

25 Ibid.

26 See: ibid., 11-45. Before this self-portrait Lassnig had already created numerous paintings depicting herself.

27 See: Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008).

28 See, among others: *Alina Szapocznikow: Awkward Objects*, ed. Agata Jakubowska (Warsaw: Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej, 2011).

29 Lebovici, "This Is Not My Body."

30 Eiblmayr, "A Picture Atlas of Turmoil," 217.

31 Lebovici, "This Is Not My Body."

32 Ibid.

33 *Maria Lassnig: Works, Diaries & Writings*, 207.

34 The few known photographs of Lassnig in the act of painting – depicting her lying on her side, on the canvas or right next to it, reaching her arm out to touch the brush onto the surface – have been interestingly juxtaposed with photographs of Jackson Pollock "dancing" over his canvases, dripping paint in frantic bursts, dominating the surface. Lassnig is shown and seen as calm and concentrated, caring and tender; rather than above, she is right next to her paintings, accompanying or even protecting them.

35 Schor, "The Feminist Avant-Garde," 32.

36 Adrienne Rich, "Your Native Land, Your Life." Quoted in: Felman, *What Does a Woman Want?*, 127-128.

37 Catherine Malabou, *Changing Difference* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 4.

38 Ibid., 135.

39 Ibid., 111.

40 Felman, *What Does a Woman Want?*, 127.

41 Ibid., 128.

42 Ibid., 40.

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