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Maria Lassnig: Filmmaker

Maria Lassnig's identity-shifting presence in her autobiographical cinematic "ballad," *Kantate* (1992), suggests the impossibility of a fixed identity for a woman whose fierce individualism was often dissonant with the expectations and narratives others wished to assign her. In the mid 1980s, when accepting a prestigious prize in Austria, Lassnig articulated this struggle:

"Art is also hard labor, you have to be in good shape to do it, it's jealous and will tolerate no rival, which means you often neglect your family, or even do without a family, it means loneliness, wrestling with the existence of this personal art, a battle to the point of destruction – and how many artists have been destroyed! Is there a prize grand enough for that?"

Maria Lassnig's formative years spanned turbulent, revolutionary times, from World War II's outbreak, to the coming of feminism's second wave, to the advent of personal computing, the Internet, and virtual reality. Throughout her career, she used these new pathways to find her way across the European continent, ebbing westward always towards the epicenter of where she felt held opportunity and mobility – artistic, economic, and intellectual – for women: America, or as she called it, "Das Land der starken Frauen." This belief is represented vividly in *Kantate* by Lassnig's gender-fluid metamorphoses from Lady Liberty to a Native American chieftain to a cowboy to a punk rocker to Greek huntress Artemis. After early years studying in Vienna, and a residency in Paris (1961-1968), Lassnig began what she would characterize as one of the most vital chapters in her life and career in New York (1968-1980). One of her greatest ambitions was to have a solo show at a major museum in New York City, and she achieved this lifelong dream spectacularly in the 94th, and last, year of her full and influential life.

Art histories are as complex as human lives themselves, and always necessarily delivered to a future of indeterminate interpretation. While many portray Lassnig as isolated in her time in New York City, it is clear she was a vital force in building and participating in communities, doing the real work of being an artist in an artist-driven network and social milieu - showing up. As fellow collaborator and experimental filmmaker Martha Edelheit said of Lassnig's friendship and spirit, "Filmmaking, unlike painting, is not a solitary process." Another close friend and colleague, Silvianna Goldsmith, recounts how they together "hung out at Millenium Film Workshop, and I think Maria went every night."

Nearly 50, and already a developed artist upon arriving in the socially and politically charged atmosphere of 1968 New York, Lassnig set about immersing herself into the city's art avant-garde, despite resistance on some fronts. She studied animation at the School of Visual Arts (1970-1972), showed at a few smaller galleries, and inhabited a series of studios, most notably her loft at 167 Spring Street in SoHo that hosted collective activities with other artists. Already home to myriad artist groups working specifically across disciplines inclusive of dance, live performance, film, and other time-based media, New York in the 1960s and 1970s was for Lassnig both enlightening and frustrating. She was determined, even though many of her contemporaries were 10 years and more her junior, to find a way to penetrate a formidable and entirely different art world, or what Lassnig wryly terms in *Kantate* "Art Mafia." While the energies of the New York downtown were anti-establishment, especially with the movement towards alternative spaces that were

often artist-run, male artists still received far more attention than their female counterparts.

As a result, Maria was an active participant in a group of feminist filmmakers she helped to create, Women Artist Filmmakers, Inc. WAF germinated first in Lucy Lippard's 1973 show at the New York Cultural Center, Women Choose Women. Several of WAF's members were part of the show, and together they formed a cooperative in 1974 with the aim of collaboratively assisting and empowering each other's filmic productions and general artistic practice. The Women Artist Filmmakers are Susan Brockman, Doris Chase, Martha Edelheit, Silvianna Goldsmith, Nancy Kendall, Maria Lassnig, Carolee Schneeman, Rosalind Schneider, Olga Spiegel and Alida Walsh. Together they achieved the distinction of being the first all-women organization to receive funding from the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council to make art films, and Maria worked tirelessly to make sure their programming had influence beyond the U.S. with programs throughout Western Europe, including in Vienna and Berlin. In Maria Lassnig: Filmmaker, we feel the resonance of these efforts.

Maria Lassnig's filmic oeuvre emerged from the nascent energies of women experimental interdisciplinarians using moving pictures to articulate their visions, many of which featured themes of independence, power struggle, and eroticism in the 1970s New York and European art worlds. Now is a ripe moment to more deeply explore and uncover this moment in cinematic art history, as Lassnig's works in animation and film were coincident with the flourishing American experimental film movement in New York, characterized historically largely through its male heavy-hitters. Lassnig struggled in New York, as many artists do, and tried many new strategies to gain a foothold and make herself known in a new, foreign country and artistic community with different values and ideals. For decades in Europe, she had already influenced not only other women artists, but also several male artists whose success would go on to equal, and even eclipse, Lassnig's own (such as Arnulf Rainer). She was very aware of this injustice, writing in her journal in 1984 that "The basic problem for women is that in all intellectual things, people believe them less than they do men...I'm only secretly imitated." The history of specifically women experimental artists was similarly fraught; women had a nearly impossible time gaining recognition or inclusion. In the words of WAF member Rosalind Schneider, "films by women artists were not seen as part of the art world. Creating the organization allowed us to offer support through production grants from the NEA and NYSCA from 1975-1980, as well as providing a continuing dialogue concerning film as an art form. We shared our work, gaining strength in our creative link to each other. This was the beginning of the Women's Movement and our voices were part of it."

Thinking more closely about Maria Lassnig the filmmaker, it is obvious that a distinct velocity, achieved through time-based strategies, has always been an integral part of her work, and a clear precursor for her treatment of moving images. It's not difficult to imagine that an artist for whom an almost endoscopic view on her own body in relation to her strategies for representation would want to explore her own visual field and mechanisms for feeling, looking, touching, seeing, and mark-making. Transcribing her bodily sensations and movements, Lassnig often made her pictures in different physical positions to better access internal feeling, or in her words "body awareness," that could transmit to her canvas. This is most evident in her "Strich-Bilder" of the 1960s, made in Paris just before coming to New York, by lying or kneeling on a floor-bound canvas, brush pressed up against the surface to most directly record her corporeal perceptions. Her jangling, searching lines are like sensory seismographs indexing Lassnig's efforts to faithfully make visible the internal, collapsing the space between her felt body and the formal representations emanating from it. This approach to painting, necessitating a kind of conscious movement and positioning, functions like a performative feedback loop that leaves a documentary trace, placing Lassnig's paintings in the realm of not just static images, but perceptual performances. She notes "it isn't easy to translate body feelings into sculptural or graphic language; wanting to contain them within certain boundaries and forms is an arbitrary act justified only by its intensity, originality, and selection...you have the freedom of choice to switch from the ground plane to the elevation of a body; you can paint while sitting, standing, lying in an airless void, in prison; you're independent."

This resolute independence bears striking resemblance to other influential constituents of New York's artistic community in the 1960s and 1970s. Most critics and historians prefer to situate Lassnig within the context of other painters, and even explicitly deny a connection between Lassnig's methodology and practice with movements like Surrealism and Fluxus, despite her well-discussed interactions with both André Breton and Paul Celan in Paris and the physical rigor and intrinsic value of feeling bodies in her practice (not to mention her prodigious exertion across several media). One finds extremely productive juxtaposition and dialogue between Lassnig and other visual movers, in every sense of that word. In New York, Lassnig shared a city with a rich and growing community of artists working across and through disciplines, and most particularly in moving images, dance, and performance.

From an exhibition press release in 1960 for Galerie St. Stephan in Vienna, Lassnig wrote down some "painting formulas," one of which urged:

"you have to try to unite the d u r a t i o n and e x t e n s i o n with m o v e m e n t and v e h e m e n c e."

It is not surprising that, in all things Maria Lassnig did, there was insistent dynamism; states were constantly changing. Even her very letters stretch and sprawl to incorporate the dimensions of time and space into the compositionally fixed space of written text, drawing most recognizably from Surrealist poetry. As we have seen, she manages to infuse this also in her "still" images, which throb and writhe with the movement of Lassnig's eye and brush, which itself was never just an instrument, but also a kind of augmenting prosthesis for continued looking, feeling, and moving, much like how her camera would come to function.

The non-expert but self-possessed movement of activities coming out of the Judson Dance Theater is an interesting phenomenon to consider alongside Lassnig's prescription to paint in a number of physical locations and configurations. Trisha Brown's *Walking on the Wall* (1971) and *Roof Piece* (both 1971) both come to mind as acts of spatial (and at times gravitational) defiance. This spirit mimics Maria's own boundlessness when conceiving the approach and site of her work. Additionally, the 'purity' of the untrained that the Judson artists were experimenting with can be read as a kind of analog to the intuitive and spontaneous mode of production exemplified by Art Informel and Tachisme, both of which influenced Maria's painting just before coming to New York.

Other artists like Lynda Benglis were also redefining the spatial parameters of painting and performance, with works like her *Fallen Painting* (1968) that slithered across the floor, prone and supine in a typical "feminine" pose, but radical in the brash displacement of a venerated historical medium to the floor, and the use of vibrant DayGlo colors (not dissimilar to the saturated, acerbic palette Lassnig used in many of her paintings). Like Lassnig, Benglis's painting required movement – dripping, pouring, flinging – and was built on strategies popularized by her male forbears, taking advantage of the entropic properties afforded by agitation and gravitational forces, by moving and taking up space.

Also, as Lassnig does repeatedly in *Kantate* and in many other self representations, Benglis famously disambiguated her own gender presentation for an advertisement in the November 1974 issue of *Artforum*, something Lassnig's transmogrifying *Cowboy/Indian* does throughout *Kantate*. Both took up traditionally male roles – indeed the pioneering Lassnig was the first female painting professor in any German-speaking nation – and insisted on their own agency and choice over the distribution of their body's representations, in effort to break through a male-dominated critical and commercial field. This was not unlike Lassnig's fellow Austrian cohort in the 1980 Venice Biennale, VALIE EXPORT, who enacted her own form of expanded cinema in *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1968) performance, in which she marched, wearing crotchless pants, through rows of seats at a Munich art-house cinema with her exposed genitalia at spectator-eyesight level to challenge the notions of real women versus the projected images of women on screen. This, happening at the same time as Joan Jonas' *Mirror Pieces* (1968-1971), also dealing with the female confrontation with the self, and the public performance and confrontation with female selves.

Indeed another icon, of both feminism and performance art in the 1960s, is WAF member Carolee Schneemann, whose individual artistic activities and ecstatic performances of looking inward into her own body, most notably in collaborations with Judson for her generative *Meat Joy* (1964), and also *Experiments in Art and Technology* (EAT), a group dedicated to new media and interart exploration, would have been contemporaneous and influential to Lassnig, and potentially cross-pollinated into the WAF milieu. It is clear that while Lassnig may not have gotten the critical and commercial response she desired at the time of her residency in New York, she was significantly enmeshed in some of the city's most storied artistic collectives and settings, and a key point of access to this loose constellation of like-minded practitioners was her camera lens.

Much like Maria's own painted self-portraits as prosthesis-laden, hyper-sensing robots, astronauts, or aliens, her camera and consequent films were the terrestrial incarnations of her boundless, cosmic, and powerfully extrasexual identities. Like her paintbrush, the lens represented an additional eye apparatus that could be set into constant and forceful motion to as adequately as possible represent, and even express. Often, the result was wryly humorous. Always, it was sharp and insightful about the people, subjects, and systems that mattered to her. Her filmmaking evidences how Maria, more than anything, wanted in her life and through her work to be present - to herself, to her contemporaries, and to the world at large. She wrote November 16, 1996 in a personal journal entry, "I have always strived, even in my youth, for a sort of presence. In my art, which is an art of immersion all the way to the fevers of the nerve fibers and their vibrations, I have conquered the haze of absence." Even with Maria's physical absence, her presence, and the record (painted, photographic, and filmic) of her body's own potent and vigorous passage, is sustained and amplified through her work and her artistic kinships, as in *Women Artist Filmmakers*, and this presence ensures that the memories, challenges, and victories of critical and influential female histories persist.

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