

**MARIA LASSNIG**  
WAYS OF BEING

# Maria Lassnig

## Ways of Being

6 September – 1 December 2019

This comprehensive presentation of Maria Lassnig's work marks what would have been the 100th birthday of the artist, who died in 2014. Lassnig is considered one of the most important women artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. She is primarily known for her body-awareness paintings, in which the perception of her own body becomes the starting point for her exploration of the world. This is where the exhibition sets in: at the very moment in which Maria Lassnig was no longer in search of her language of expression in an artistic dialogue with the movements of modernism and contemporary art, but had developed an innovative pictorial language of her own which she knew how to unfold autonomously for the themes with which she was concerned.

Lassnig's idiosyncratic use of color is an equally essential aspect of her intriguing art, as is the virtually inexhaustible diversity of the subject matter and content of her imagery.

Her painting carries inner bodily sensations and emotions to the outside, analyzing the relationship between body and environment. The artist began discovering this path for herself as early as 1948, which makes her one of the first pioneers of the body art of the 1970s.

Starting out from the conviction that our perception of reality is purely subjective, Lassnig resorted to her own bodily sensations to deal with such primal themes as love and death, art and technology, violence, and the endangerment of nature while playing with the contradictions between her own self-image and how others saw her—as a woman, artist, and human being.

The exhibition brings together more than 80 works tracing Maria Lassnig's self-empowered career as an artist. "Ways of Being" thus offers an unprecedented, nuanced, and all-encompassing overview of the artist's oeuvre.

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## EARLY YEARS

Maria Lassnig's earliest works from her youth follow entirely in the tradition of academic realism. Yet before long the artist began to distance herself from the required tone-in-tone solutions, instead relying on experimentally developed, subjectively felt colors. She responded to the radical confrontation with international contemporary movements that followed the artistic isolation of Austria during her time as a student in the Second World War by enthusiastically exploring the ideas that were new to her: Carinthian colorism as well as Cubism, Surrealism, and, from 1951 on, French Tachism and Abstract Expressionism have left clear marks in her work.

In 1948, Lassnig produced her first works that, initially called "dumpling pictures," were already owed to the idea of the introspective self-portrait. Soon Lassnig transferred the lines of her body sensations to the canvas. One title refers to an inner state, the other to the form of a pram we are all familiar with. Ultimately, however, both works depict body fragments and their pressure and tension networks.

## PARIS

"Then I knew one thing: my situation could only improve if I left, no matter where I went." Toward the end of the year 1960, Maria Lassnig moved to Paris, which in her eyes was the most important art metropolis at the time. She soon found an apartment in which she combined two rooms to create a studio. In this way she had enough space for larger formats.

Here she was able to begin working truly independently. She did her "stick pictures," which she sometimes also affectionately referred to as "stickmen." Her work revolved around profound physical sensations. If her first introspective works had already been created in the 1940s, she now finally broke entirely free from currents prevalent on the art scene, arriving at her very autonomous means of expression. "After all, these are my most beautiful paintings," she is said to have remarked once. The "stick pictures" oscillate between painting and drawing. Lassnig questioned the meaningfulness of discriminating between the two disciplines, as was usual at the time, "because my oil paintings appear to be graphic (sometimes at least), while my graphic work appears to be painterly."

During her time in Paris, Lassnig exhibited in various galleries together with numerous French and American artists, including Joan Mitchell and Jean-Paul Riopelle. Yves Klein seemed impressed by her paintings when visiting one of these galleries. She deepened her friendship with the poet Paul Celan and frequented literary circles.

## NEW YORK

Paris had ceased to be the center of the art world by 1968. Lassnig went to New York, as she had heard that women artists had better opportunities there. But people did not understand her body-awareness work. It was the time of Minimal Art, Land Art, performance and video art, and especially Pop Art, a rediscovery of the realist approach in painting. Faced with the reproach of lacking talent, she responded—deeply hurt—by adopting what she herself referred to as “American” realism: She sought to prove her skills by realistically rendering her own body surrounded by objects of American everyday life and consumerism. Following Andy Warhol’s example, Lassnig familiarized herself with screen printing and attended an animation film course at the School of Visual Arts. Animation films based on her body-awareness drawings immediately earned her fame and recognition. For her film *Self-Portrait*, in which she plays with various aspects of her personality and art, she won an award of the New York State Council.

Lassnig arrived in New York at a time when the feminist movement had reached its climax. She listened to a speech by Kate Millett, whose book *Sexual Politics* was considered a classic of feminism. She regularly attended meetings of the women’s liberation movement and took part in demonstrations, among others against such museums as the MoMA and the Whitney Museum of American Art, which presented almost exclusively works by men. In this environment Lassnig also met the artist Louise Bourgeois, whose basement became a meeting point of the feminist scene.

Later on, Lassnig distanced herself from feminism, as she was afraid that her work would be pigeonholed.

## BACK IN VIENNA

When she was offered a chair for Theory of Design—Experimental Design with a focus on painting and animation film at the Academy of Applied Arts, Maria Lassnig returned to Vienna in 1980. That same year, she and VALIE EXPORT represented Austria at the Biennale di Venezia. The financial security attained with the professorship allowed her to travel more often. Thematically, she increasingly centered on nature and animals; stylistically, she gradually turned her back on a “realistic” approach to representation. Featuring backgrounds framed in color, her drawings came to show a more painterly quality.

## SELF-PORTRAITS

The subject that dominates Maria Lassnig's work is the self-portrait. Her knowledge of the traditions of visual art and her extraordinary talent allowed her to transgress the narrow boundaries of the genre from the very beginnings of her career. Her attentiveness to her own body and the concentration on it and on her own feelings ensured a hitherto undreamt-of range of innovative possibilities of representation. The visualization of the inner world of experience turned out to be a feasible approach even when combining the realistically viewed and the introspectively felt body. The focus on self-portraits testifies to an obsessive involvement with her own person and pitiless self-observation but is always also to be read as a form of role-play: Lassnig relied on portraying herself to define her attitude to – and her understanding of – herself and her environs. She could thus express her love of nature and animals as well as her unease about a technologized world, traditional role concepts, and relationships between the sexes and her powerlessness in the face of them.

## LATE WORKS

Maria Lassnig's oeuvre encompasses approximately eighty years. Just this enormous span of time suggests different stylistic phases and periods of development. The artist consistently and uncompromisingly explored her very own subject of body awareness to the end, unwaveringly focusing on her feelings and the perception of her sensations even in her last years. Her late work is marked by the continuing exploration of her key field of subjects and its completion. The resulting wealth of pictorial and formal solutions reveals a partly humorous, partly oppressed and oppressive involvement in human existence and testifies to a merciless alertness. Maria Lassnig produced an important late work. In the history of art, only a circle of great masters had been able to boast a late work of substance until then: Maria Lassnig was one of the first women that succeeded in joining their ranks.

## BIOGRAPHY

- 1919 Maria Lassnig is born on September 8 in Garzern near Kappel am Krappfeld in Carinthia.
- 1925 Moves to Klagenfurt after her mother's marriage to Jakob Lassnig, a baker. After graduation from secondary school in 1937 trains to become an elementary school teacher; works as a teacher at elementary schools in the Metnitz Valley in Carinthia.
- 1940–1945 Studies painting at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts (Wilhelm Dachauer, Ferdinand Andri, Herbert Boeckl).
- Having received her diploma, she returns to Klagenfurt in 1945. Devotes herself to such artistic movements as Expressionism and Surrealism.
- 1951 Moves to Vienna and joins the *Art Club* and the artists' group *Hundsgruppe* ["Dog Group"].
- Short stays in Paris in 1951/52 together with Arnulf Rainer, where they discover Art Informel.
- Close contacts to writers from the circle of the *Vienna Group* and to artists associated with Galerie St. Stephan.
- 1960 Moves to Paris.
- 1964 Her mother's death leads to a severe psychological crisis.
- 1968 Moves to New York.
- 1971 Attends an animation film course at the School of Visual Arts in New York.
- 1974 Co-founder of *Women/Artist/Filmmakers, Inc.* in New York.
- 1977 First presentation of her drawings in a museum environment at the Albertina.
- 1978 One-year stay in Berlin.
- 1979 Returns to New York.
- 1980 Upon her return to Austria, Lassnig and VALIE EXPORT jointly exhibit at the Austrian pavilion at the Venice Biennial.
- 1980–1989 Appointed head of the Creative Theory and Experimental Art master class at the Vienna Academy of Applied Arts, with a focus on painting and animation film.
- 1982 Participates in documenta 7.

## ALBERTINA

- 1985 First comprehensive museum retrospective at Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien.
- 1988 She is the first woman to receive the Grand Austrian State Prize for the Visual Arts.
- 1997 Participates in documenta X.
- From 1999 Receives international attention. Solo exhibitions in important museums and galleries, such as Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien and Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes (1999), Serpentine Galleries, London (2008), Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien/Museum Ludwig Köln (2009), Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich (2010), Neue Galerie Graz (2012), Deichtorhallen Hamburg (2013), and MoMA PS1 (2014).
- 2005 Awarded the Austrian Decoration for Science and Art.
- 2013 Receives the Golden Lion Lifetime Achievement Award at the Venice Biennial.
- 2014 Maria Lassnig dies in Vienna on May 6 at the age of 94 years.