

Transcending Hypersensitiveness with Art: The Paintings of Maria Lassnig (*1919)

I would like first to tell you about Maria Lassnig and how she works, before I talk about the Borderland sides of her personality.

Maria Lassnig was born on the 8th of September, 1919. She will be 93 in a few days. She was the only child of a single mother, an illegitimate child as they used to say at that time. She was very close to her mother and obviously loved her dearly. From the little that she says of her childhood, her mother must have been a warm person, supportive of her daughter but not interested in Maria's talent at drawing that showed very early. The girl would draw caricatures of her classmates, or copy Dürer paintings at school when she was bored. Her mother was mostly anxious for Maria to have a normal, unobtrusive life, so as not to suffer, I guess, the public shame that she had had to live with as an unmarried woman with child. It meant that Maria had to get married. The girl Maria was very sensitive and introverted and felt like an outsider from the very beginning. Carinthia where she grew up is a rather backward province of Austria, rural, conservative, very catholic. That is the kind of places where: Woe betide those who are different!! So she was unhappy at school, felt isolated, not accepted and ridiculed by the other children who made her feel like a dumb country bumpkin. This stayed with her. All her life she has felt not accepted, not understood, undervalued, rejected, ignored. She has never had the feeling of belonging, to a partner, or an artistic community, or a neighbourhood etc. To this day she has remained an outsider and a loner. The only person she felt safely bound to was her mother. So when her mother died (1964) Maria, who was a mature woman of 45 by then, was nevertheless devastated. She says: "[My mother] has actually always been my only relative in this world." And at 90, Maria Lassnig still gives the impression of being lost in this world: a "frail lady", writes a female journalist in 2009, "strangely timeless, exposed in a hostile world". [ML in Klagenfurt, 1948 / ML in Vienna, 1952 / ML in Munich, 1970-71 / ML in N.Y., 1972 / ML in N.Y., 1976 / ML in Vienna, 1987 / ML, 2009]

After graduation from high school, Maria tried to go the “normal” way according to her mother’s wish, and to earn her living as a schoolteacher. This she did only one year. Then the shy girl took all her courage and applied for admission at the academy of fine arts in Vienna. From then on, painting was her life. It was 1941, Austria had joined Germany in the war and art had to conform to the criteria of the national socialist party: a patriotic style was asked, naturalistic, moralistic, in earth colours. After 2 years, Maria’s work was found subversive and she was thrown out of the master class. But she managed to complete her training with the help of 2 teachers, and graduated in 1945. She was 30 (1949) when she found to her very personal way of painting. There she decided to stop painting what she saw and to paint instead what she sensed in her body then and there: the pressure on her behind when she was sitting, the stretching in her arm when she painted etc. – to translate the bodily sensations into shapes and colours. She would choose a position in front of the canvas with nothing in mind, no fantasy, no plan - and no mirror. And wait until the “right” stroke came to express the sensation she was concentrating on. From then on, she would only paint self-portraits, 50 years long.

When she got a scholarship to go to Paris 1951-52, she was thrilled to discover the surrealists and their introspective search. But while they wanted to free their minds and expose their inner images and fantasies, she was interested in exploring what she called “the most real reality”, her bodily sensations. In the 1950ies and 60ies she was mostly working in Vienna but would spend time then and again in Paris where she exhibited drawings and paintings, some of them in water colours, but mostly in classical manner, oil on canvas. She would call her pictures alternately bodily feelings, or bodily sensations, or body-awareness pictures.

Let me give you a first insight into her work. The 1st pictures were abstract, the sensations were strictly reduced to strokes, with hardly any colours [**Static Meditation III, 1951/52**]. Then she started to combine the inner sensations with some outside view of herself, or rather, as she puts it, with a “memory” of how she looks. So these figurative components are not an illustration but remain an interpretation, and the face that we come to see is distorted and fragmented, showing solely the parts that she feels. [**Self-portrait, 1955 / Self-portrait, 1955 / S’portrait as a monster, 1964 / Purple monster, 1964 / S’portrait as an animal, 1963 /**

Head, 1965] . But no doubt, it is her. We recognize the high cheek bones, the pointed nose and the groove above the mouth. She begins to use colours. And how!! Her extraordinary sensitiveness to colours produces already the most differentiated, evocative, daring, sensuous shades and combinations of colours that will become her brand and make out a good deal of the fascination of her paintings. Unlike many modern painters but like the surrealists, she remains “classical” in the sense that colours come always second: first come the shapes that are the most appropriate for what she wants to express, then come in addition the colours, always respectful of the structure. But then, as in the works of the expressionists, colours are not applied to describe the outer reality as you and me see it. They are not used as metaphors either, meaning something definite, but they rather transfer on to the viewers a sensation (of pressure, burning, stretching, tearing, tingling) or an atmosphere or a mood depending on the subject and the composition.

She used this combination of inner and outer view to paint how her body felt. She would concentrate on certain sensations and then paint only these parts of her body that she felt. [**Selfportrait as a prophet, 1967]** Here she is sitting with spread legs, and feels her genitals, her buttocks, calves, shoulder blades, a little bit of the arms, and the hands very strongly. There is also an opening, perhaps her mouth. The red colour conveys a feeling of warmth and vibrancy, which the self-confident title “The Prophet” seems to emphasize. “Prophet” in the sense that she was keenly aware of her pioneer posture in art. The following painting [**Whitsun selfportrait, 1969]** depicts both, how it feels to sit in front of the canvas stretching it, and how she sees her body when she looks down. We recognize her right leg bent and her left arm and the hand on the canvas. I could not find out what the purple mass in front of her might mean. Her body is headless. What we see of the head is only the nose and the mouth somehow floating in the air in front of her. If you look down at your body the way you are sitting now, you will really see your body only in parts – and headless. Maria Lassnig wants to get away from the conventional self-portraits representing selves as objects seen in a mirror, from tip to toe. She never uses a mirror. With her radical subjectivity she is exactly in line with the phenomenologists, a philosophical trend that took off in Germany at the end of the 19th century. These philosophers wanted to turn away from the scientific view on the natural world and the living bodies as objects of scrutiny, and to establish the perceiving subject with his culture, his

personal history and his senses as the true criterion for knowledge. They coined the statement: "There is no objective perception". An Austrian physicist and philosopher, Ernst Mach, made 1886 a drawing to illustrate this standpoint. **[Ernst Mach, View from the left eye, 1886]** He looks at the outside world out of his eye sockets and along his moustache, and sees it therefore distorted and partial. Maria eventually heard of Mach. The drawing she made in 1970 is unmistakably inspired by him and a perfect demonstration of the same posture. **[Mooring, 1970]**

Her mother's death (1964) knocks her completely out of balance. The following paintings are a moving testimony to her grief **[The Great Mother, 1964]** This is an archaic picture. The mother's naked body is reduced to the essentials: the pelvis and legs, the womb and part of the face. This archetypal image of the Great Mother, painted in a deep red, red like the life flow, is sturdy and strong, a safe container for the young. **[Lamentation, 1965]** In this picture, painted in finely tuned, greyish blues and greens, we see a wide-eyed child lying close to the dead mother, touching the mother's face as in disbelief. This poignant image conveys Maria's emotional state better than 1'000 words. At 45 she feels like an orphan, hardly able to survive the loss of her caregiver. **[Mother and daughter, 1966]** The mood in this painting is quite different. much brighter and livelier. The bright red of the mother's body lying on her back and the fresh green of the grass on and around her evoke an earth bound mother. The grass growing on her trunk and in the palm of her hand make of her some kind of Mother Nature. The child is coiled around her, snuggling up against her bosom, herself holds the child tight. The two of them stretched on the white sheet form something like an island, surrounded by anonymous people whose hands seem ready to intervene. Maria Lassnig tells us of not just one, but many different feelings, inklings, sensations. We understand that this good feeling of intimacy and protection will not last, and that actions from the outside are about to happen. Will these hands want to separate them? It could well be that the child Maria looks frightened because she apprehends the time when she will have to be a grown up again.

A few years later, Maria is ready for a change in her life. She is 49 (1968) when she settles down in New York, the Mecca of the arts. Only to find out that the Americans do not understand her body-awareness pictures but find them weird and artistically worthless. So she turns to a more naturalistic, more understandable style. During the

10 years she spends in N.Y., her paintings are mostly in muted colours, with a preference for a pale green. [**S'portrait with muzzle, 1973**] This is a picture in the picture, showing her naked down to the waist. The torso is more or less realistic. The shoulders stick out as though the wooden boards screwed to her sides would not only compress the chest but also hold the shoulders up. On her face a device made of two transparent flaps articulated at the chin compress the mouth. Of the face we only see the mouth and the nose, the eyes are closed or covered. If you would press your hands against your ribs, you would see that you can hardly breathe and that your shoulders are tense. And if you press them against your cheeks, it is even worse because you can hardly move your jaws and speak. This is maddening and frightening. Ironically, the background is a mild, greyish blue, as if to deny how she feels and to say "There is nothing to complain about. Everything is fine". This blue adds a sense of powerlessness to the situation. So this is how Maria would feel in N.Y.

Another painting she makes in New York [**Selbstportrait with staff, 1971**] shows her sitting in front of a canvas fastened to the wall. The canvas shows a fading painting or a drawing of her mother's face smiling warmly at us. Maria's body is whole down to the knees. The picture would be "normal" if it were for her mother's hands coming out of nowhere to rest on Maria's shoulders, and also for the staff she is holding that realistically ought to pierce through her chest but is somehow interrupted. Her face doesn't show pain or any emotion. But the postures speak: Maria's upright position, her firm grip on the staff exude steadfastness and determination, and her mother's hands seem to give her support and strength.

The double self-portrait here, also of her time in N.Y. [**Double s'portrait with camera, 1974**] plays with a double ambiguity. We see a self-portrait painted on a canvas, a picture in the picture, and her double sitting in front of the canvas. The picture is a joke, because her normal self, painted realistically with a camera in her hand is represented as a picture on a canvas. The writing on her sweatshirt is reversed as in a mirror, making clear that Maria the filmer who looks so normal and really made films in N.Y., is only a reflection, not the real Her. Her double on the other hand, who is sitting in front of the canvas in a thoughtful posture, has a fragmented face. The eyes are closed, or turned inside. The copies of the red face

that unfold like an accordion, express perhaps doubts and questions in connection with the films she makes, or have to do with the many different faces she shows of her in her films. So we see 2 Marias. The one closer to her feelings is not the purposeful, active filmer, but the introverted, thoughtful brooder.

In 1980 she is nominated professor at the Academy for Applied Arts in Vienna. At 61 she is the 1st female professor ever to teach painting in a German speaking academy. From then on she stays in Austria, living and working alternately in Vienna and in Carinthia. Slowly, the large public begins to take interest in her. In 1988 the Austrian state prize establishes her as a national cultural asset. She is exhibited in Zurich for the 1st time in 1992. Apart from Europe and N.Y., her works are being shown in Australia, Canada, Turkey and China. Numerous prizes follow. A big retrospective in London in 2008 is a triumph. They compare her to Louise Bourgeois and declare her another “warrior queen”. She is now the most expensive Austrian artist alive.

With age Maria Lassnig does not calm down. She still never copies herself. On the contrary, she “gears up” as an art critic puts it. She changes to a high keyed palette and to more emotional, forceful images. She goes on experimenting with new techniques and atmospheres. She makes a film (“Kantate”) about her life. At 80 (2000) she starts to work with models, something she had not done since her days at school.

It is as though age had given her even more freedom. She still pursues her quest around the basic, existential question of how it feels to be alive, in her senses, her guts, her nerves, her heart. She had actually let go of modesty and prudishness long ago. But now!! Now she does not shun an even crude expression of pain and drama. In the last 20 years she has taken to a shrieking combination of suffering and self-derision. More than ever her work shocks, disturbs and confuses. For the art critics she is something like an alien, defying all categories. However, and you will see it from her later works, her purpose is not to oppose any authority or any convention. She is not a rebel like the surrealists or the Dadaists. Although she has been suffering for instance of the discrimination of women artists, or of the superficiality of the art market, she has always wanted to keep away from any other commitment

than to her work. As an authentic introvert, dedicated and talented, she just wants to do her own thing. Without any compromises.

Being as she is, very individual, she sticks out. Not because she wants to be special but because she is different. Just as she used to feel at school. It is not hard to imagine how this position and her lack of social abilities have made her suffer. But she has been able to transcend her emotions in her art - the grief, the wounds, the despair, the anger - and to hold on to the hard work that makes her life worth living. The amazing thing is that despite her lack of self-confidence she has always known that she is a good artist. She has never doubted of the unique quality of her work. This frail lady proves astonishingly strong. Her bond to the earthbound, compact, solid Great Mother – or her positive mother complex if you want - has obviously nurtured her all along.

I want to show you now a few examples of her later work and to explain what I mean by her Borderland sensitiveness. First some body awareness pictures. [**Endangered eye, 1993**] The concentration is on the left eye, the left side of the skull and the jaw. The “face” consists only of the eye and a kind of beak, so that the skull looks like that of a bird. The sharp teeth around the eye socket hold the eye like claws and threaten to tear it. Just to imagine this hurts. Further down a dented panel announces the danger. The burning red ground reinforces the feeling of urgency. Whether these teeth represent a sharp pain or surgical instruments operating on the eye, we don't know. We only know that Maria Lassnig wears glasses, darkened at times, so I imagine that this picture might have to do with a great distress due to a problem with her sight. This other picture has also to do with her sight: [**One-eyed s'portrait, 1998**] Now she paints herself with only one eye, the right eye. She may imagine losing the sight completely on the left side. It could also be that she had to cover up the left eye after a treatment. In the foreground a limb, perhaps her elbow, sticks out as if to protect her against obstacles. The sour yellow colour of the background gives more intensity to the gaze of the eye.

The next pictures are painted in a much more realistic vein. They give some insights into the story of her life. [**Illusion of the missed marriages I, 1997**] She sits naked to the waist, cradling a little man of the size of a baby on her lap. She might well be

about to breastfeed him. Her face shows no emotion. The man/baby in her arms looks like a lifeless puppet. The title alludes to her regrets for having declined several proposals of marriage. It is as though Maria Lassnig were comforting herself, soothing her loneliness by showing how it would have been if she had accepted: she would not have found any support but would have been used by a husband as an “ersatz” mother. Another painting on the same subject is more drastic [**Illusion of the missed marriages II, 1998**]. The contrast between her and the man could not be bigger: the man is barely there, is just the sketch of a person. But she fills the space with her strong colours, her broad posture and her intense gaze. So it is about her, he is only an extra. This image translates visually a German expression describing people in admiration before someone, a man for instance. Of these admirers the Germans would say “these people carry the man on [their] hands”, meaning: they adore him and would do anything for him. So the woman is in the position of an admirer, carrying a phantom of a man – or the idea of a man - on her hands. But she has nothing of an enthusiastic follower. She is old and bends under her burden. Her gaze seems to be directed beyond us towards a higher power. She looks just anxious to be able to hold on. The man doesn’t seem to notice anything, he lies smoking with his legs casually crossed. The truth behind the illusion, this painting says, is that Maria’s role as a woman would have been to use all her strength to sustain the man, while he himself would have been completely oblivious of the burden he means to her. A 3rd picture is also a reflection on regrets: [**Illusion of the missed motherhood, 1998**] The magnificent play of colours is all concentrated on the woman’s body. Nothing else counts, the background in greyish white is completely neutral. She is crouching and holding between her calves a whitish form that must be the baby she has just born. But it does not look like a newborn baby. And the way she holds the baby, touching it lightly with the tips of her fingers, is also not appropriate. The naked woman with the high cheekbones and the pointed nose looks straight at us and seems to ask: “Look at what came out of me, what shall I do with it?” This picture belongs for me to the disturbing ones. Maria Lassnig turns her unblinking inner gaze to the taboo of motherhood and gives her own vision of it in her truthful, unsentimental way. What she is saying, as I understand it, goes against our collective values. She says: Actually, I would not have known how to relate to my child.

Why do I speak of her Borderland sensitiveness? The pictures we have seen until now have nothing to do with “another world” - only with her. They are even very intimate. But then they are sensitive and authentic in such a degree that they touch the deep layers of our unconscious and make us react sometimes very strongly. A critic once said that her paintings are so radically subjective that they become objective. Jung would not have said it differently. Out of the depth of the individual come the contents of the collective unconscious that reach out to us even if we often cannot say how and why. Jerome Bernstein tells us that most Borderlanders do not understand what is happening to them. I don't think that Maria Lassnig would ever think of herself in his terms. Yet she has said enough with her pictures and sometimes even in words to make me sure that she is a Borderlander.

The Borderlanders, Jerome Bernstein explains, have an ongoing feeling connection to nature. They experience the rape of the land in their senses, their muscles, their nerves. What they experience comes from the senses and infuse the body, from bottom up. So the Borderland consciousness is mostly somatic, intuitive and psychic and has a lot to do with the right brain. It is not so much intellectual and verbal. On the contrary: to express what they sense in words is for them almost impossible. This is a good description of how Maria Lassnig understands her art. Her inspiration did not come from an idea, a fantasy or a conviction, but from her body. And the most crucial moment of the creative process is a mystery, she says, something she cannot explain. She just “knows” when the brush comes down and the stroke begins and it is precisely the right thing. The Borderlanders' close connection to nature can be wonderfully comforting and soothing, but also it can also be upsetting and even excruciatingly painful. This is true of her too. Since her young years, nature has been a great source of comfort but with time also of much pain and despair.

Let me show you some paintings which tell of her feeling for animals first, then for nature in general. [**Poor little pigeon, 1981**] She stretches her arms as if to protect the pigeon. At the same time her posture and her extraordinarily eloquent gaze, fearful and tense, speak for the pigeon and tell of its attention to every sound and its freezing fear. [**Self with Guinea pig, 2000/01**] Here again, you see the same gaze in both. It is as if she were looking at the world through the bright eye of the guinea pig, with the same contentment and curiosity as the little being snuggled up in her hand.

[Illusion of the animals' family (with duck), 2000] The atmosphere is quite tense here. The charged strokes, the conflicting colours, her staring eyes, as wide open as the duck's, speak of tension and panic in both. **[S'portrait with monkey, 2001]** Her arm position and her joined hands are in perfect harmony with the monkey's own arm position. He is painted in a strong dark blue and is the main figure here. His bright intelligent eyes watch us. She stands in the back, behind him. Only her arms around his head are in the foreground as if to let us know of her bond to him. Here again, her calm, watchful gaze looks attuned to his.

These pictures speak of her symbiotic relationship to the animals. She wrote in her diary about this kinship with animals and nature: "I am afraid to step on grass, would like to follow every bird to its nest, and think that I understand every motion of the cat." She was 90 when she answered to a journalist asking her whether she ever thought of her death: "I just know: when I lie in a meadow, I would like to resolve into it."

She has also painted the plight of mistreated animals. In these works Maria Lassnig pleads for them. These pictures are objective scenes telling gruesome stories **[Robot and animal, 1997]** Here a weasel is being squeezed by the hands of a machine-man. He has a kind of face with some kind of mouth but no eyes, no arms either, just strong hands. We guess that he won't be moved by the shrieking of the weasel and will keep it in the grip of his metal hands. **[Love of animals, 1998]** We see 2 pairs of legs and 2 arms each holding a stick. In front of them a crouching figure, possibly a child, plays with a rabbit. The adults obviously play a cruel game with the animal, and their sticks leave a trail of blood on the ground. The head of the rabbit is painted in the same dark red as the blood on the ground, meaning perhaps that the animal will not survive the game. About the animals Maria wrote in her diary: "[I am] convinced that animals are far more similar to man than he thinks. Their wailing proves it."

[The world destroyer, 2003] Here, a bulky man holds the earth like a toy in his bare hands and works at kneading it with all his might. His simple-minded face together with his massive strength seem to predict an unavoidable catastrophe. More than her fear for the future of our planet, she is expressing here a murderous anger at the blind forces at work. She said once in an interview how she suffers with nature: "You

don't have to take care of the human beings, but of nature(...) The farmers don't notice how they are ruining nature. But I notice it all."

This painting about sexual abuse [[Don Juan of Austria, 2003](#)] is a testimony to her acute senses. We see a bulky man (the same model as before) holding in his strong hands a young girl as stiff as a board or as lifeless as a puppet against his pelvis. The girl's body is from the waist down transparent, as if her mind were already gone, dissociated from the situation. Although the man's small penis looks harmless, the physical unbalance between the two is such that he can only harm her. The people in Austria shudder when they realize that this painting was describing a reality that came out only 3 and 5 years later in Austria: 2 cases of confinement and sexual abuse of young girls by older men.

A female critic once wrote about Maria Lassnig's work that hers were "the noisiest silent paintings around. It is astonishing that we cannot hear them scream." You may hear this last picture scream: [[You or Me, 2005](#)] To explain this painting she said: "I have often suffered great pains. So I thought once to myself, rather than go on suffering I'll shoot myself."

I'll end with a beautiful statement by a woman Borderlander that Jerome Bernstein quotes in his book. She says: "Those of us who are sick are the first of many to voice earth's pain." This awareness could help Maria Lassnig on her way. I'll try and tell her.