

Maria Lassnig Film Works

Edited by Eszter Kondor, Michael Loebenstein, Peter Pakesch, Hans Werner Poschauko

"She said she had handpicked the most beautiful ones."

A Conversation on Maria Lassnig's Filmic Estate

Michael Loebenstein, Mara Mattuschka, Hans Werner Poschauko

Michael Loebenstein (MLoe): When you were sorting out Maria Lassnig's estate, was it a surprise to discover this trove of films that haven't been completed? Or, which were more or less completed but in a state of hibernation? Or did you know about them because you worked so closely with her?

Mara Mattuschka (MM): In the early 2000s, while the *Animation Films* DVD was being produced, we ran into each other at sixpackfilm by chance. She told me about a film, *The Princess and the Shepherd. A Fairytale*, that had not been released yet but which she wanted to re-edit, and wondered if I could help her. However, she couldn't locate the film, it had disappeared...

Hans Werner Poschauko (HWP): This film had been shown—and it was even in the catalog of Austrian Filmcoop. I was at two screenings, one in Vienna—I can't remember where exactly—the second was in the mid-'8os, in Carinthia at the Orsini-Rosenberg schloss, Damtschach, the place where she shot part of it.

Perhaps I ought to say this first: Maria Lassnig lived in New York from 1966 to 1980, and that was where she produced her films. She always said, "The first thing I bought was a fridge, the second thing was a television and the third was a movie camera." So she began in 1969. The first film was *Seasons*, a cut-out animation, and the first drawn film was *Encounter*—at the same time, she took up filming, making also live action films. After a short interlude in Berlin for a DAAD scholarship in 1978, she continued working on her films until 1980.

Then she was offered a tenure position as Professor at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna by the Minister, Hertha Firnberg. She thought about it for a long time, then took a plane back with a reel of her films in her luggage—and an old trunk. She stowed the latter in her attic, and dedicated herself more to her painting again from 1980.

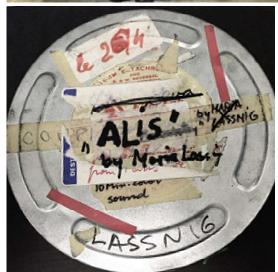
In the mid-1980s she had looked through this trunk with Hubert Sielecki, her assistant at the time. He listed the films individually, they already had titles. Afterwards she said, "So, that stays shut now." And that trunk had not been touched since then. Of course, I often asked her what was in it. Then, eventually she said "my films."—"Super! Let's take them out and publish them."—"No! Definitely not. You ought to do that after I am dead," which shocked me. I said, "Maria, I can't do it on my own." To which she said I ought to do it with Mara. Then I promised her three things: To look after her paintings and drawings, to take care of the films, and to look after the writings. We opened the trunk after she passed away, and a treasure trove came to light.

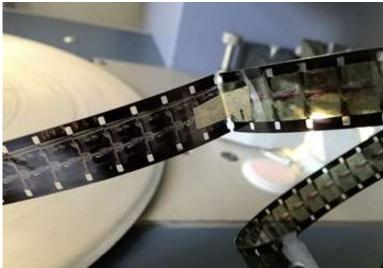
MLoe: Mara, were you surprised when you heard about the undertaking?

MM: Yes, of course. I agreed straight away. It wasn't until after her death that Hans Werner showed me the trunk concerned, in Maria Lassnig's studio. We looked through the contents at ASIFA Austria, the animation studio we had founded in the context of the animation course, and divided it into the 8mm, Super 8 and 16mm films, tapes and other









soundtrack material. And we watched the 8mm and Super 8 films there.

HWP: We gave the 16mm films to Selma Doborac at sixpackfilm, where we also watched the footage together with Jocelyn Miller, a curator at MoMA, for the first time. Selma prepared reports on the condition of these 16mm copies—for example: "Most of the splices were taped sideways, most of these were taped with masking tape; all of these removed and re-spliced." Stone Lifting was among these, Bärbl, Alice—that was what we were working with at the outset. Selma played a key role in this small but essential part of the project.

MLoe: When did you decide to undertake this project in collaboration with the Austrian Film Museum? There hadn't exactly been much of a relationship between Maria Lassnig and the Film Museum.

HWP: The director at the time, Alexander Horwath, was decisive there: I called him, and told him about the new films that had emerged, and he was immediately very enthusiastic. We showed him the first footage soon afterwards, too. Without him this project would never have come to fruition.

We had crazy amounts of film on reels, a number of the films were half-completed. Though we also had many, many short rolls of film stock. Mara had to make new, proper splices for every film at the ASIFA, replacing every tape. Here you can see what was written on the front: *Palmistry, Black Dancer*—or here: *Alis*.

MM: Scenes from different films were often on the same roll, all mixed up together. Often the wrong side up, 16mm film spliced with crepe masking tape.

MLoe: Did you have a system worked out beforehand, or was the documentation compiled, and the system developed with the work?

MM: It can't be done without some kind of strategy. The first step was to remove all of the footage that stemmed from already released films—in part, these were copies of copies, remnants—then what we were interested in was left over.

MLoe: You identified these while viewing?

MM: Yes. And in doing so I realized that much of the new material had already been edited by Maria Lassnig in the sense of "this belongs to the same film." And that at the same time there were out-takes.

HWP: After Mara had prepared it so that it could at least go onto the editing table, the material went to Claudio Santancini and Ivana Miloš and into the Film Museum's care. They digitized everything and sent us the files. After the viewing we were preoccupied for months trying to identify the people who appeared in the films whenever possible: friends, acquaintances, artists, curators, gallery owners etc. This influenced our later work, as well as the final edit. For example, here we have film roll 7.3, black-and-white—this went on to become *Dog Film*: The dogs are in it, the boxer dog, and one person who, after a few misunderstandings, we were able to identify as an old friend she had also painted a few times over the decades.

For *Dog Film*, incidentally, there are very precise notes by Maria Lassnig: first scene, second scene, and so on—right up to the end.

MLoe: Were you able to arrange the material on the basis of the Lassnig-Sielecki list from the 1980s? Or was there also some footage that could not be clearly identified?

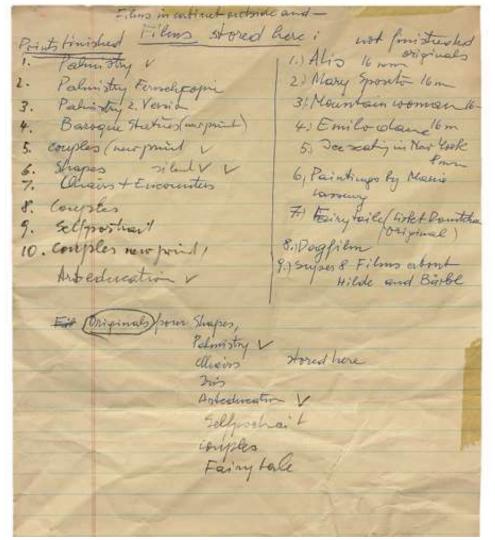
HWP: There are other lists, too, from the 1970s, "prints finished," an inventory of her films. "Films stored here"—in her studio in New York: Palmistry, three versions, Baroque Statues, Couples (three times), Shapes, Chairs and Encounter, Selfportrait, Art Education. Then "not finished originals": Alice, Mary Sposeto, Mountain Woman, Emilio Dance—that became Autumn Thoughts, as it says on the film reel. Ice Skating in New York became Moonlanding/Janus Head, and Paintings by Maria Lassnig became Stone Lifting because that is what it said on the film itself.

MLoe: It's also a far better title.

HWP: Yes, it is! Fairytale (Lisbet Damtschach Original), Dog Film and then Super 8 films about Hilde and Bärbl. That was already like that. She had even labeled the soundtrack recordings. Really, in cases like those our task was only to add them and, of course, provide the interpretation.

1 — See Jocelyn Miller, "Optical Printer," in this volume pp. 58–59.





↑Dog Film

 Film list by Maria Lassnig, late 1970s (excerpt) MM: The good thing about *Bärbl* was that there was already a recording of Maria Lassnig's voice outlining the order of the scenes in the film. Also, for the final cut she had jotted down a number of different versions in her film notebooks. Despite this, for *Bärbl* I still had to advance very carefully and to feel my way along as many editing plans can be made in advance, it's only in the editing process that they prove to be right or wrong. And then it turned out that Lassnig's third editing suggestion was the same as my cut. That was a retrospective confirmation that I'd done the job properly.

HWP: The material was very different. Stone Lifting, for example, has remained chronologically exactly how Maria Lassnig planned it. Only sometimes she left all three takes, which she shot one after the other, in—we then removed two of them and used the best one. That was a film where she had planned everything.

MLoe: You differentiate between several cases: "rough cut by Maria Lassnig"—as with *Stone Lifting*, for instance—also "final cut by Maria Lassnig," and "completed according to her instructions." And in the "rough cuts" the structure was actually clear and plausible. Were there repetitions in the footage which you then cleaned up, or not?

MM: It varied from film to film. *Autumn Thoughts,* for example...

HWP: ... That, for example, was one film where we tried to make it the way she probably intended it to be...

MM: ...We tried to understand whether they belonged together, don't those belong together? There were different titles on the boxes: *Emilio Dance*, *Emiliano*, *Herbstgedanken*, *Autumn Thoughts...* We were primarily led by motifs and thematic links rather than by the labeling. Of course it's obvious which footage belongs to the films with a clear protagonist, like *Hilde*, *Bärbl* or *Alice*.

MLoe: Autumn Thoughts is a good example, too, very enigmatic as it's so plausible in your reconstruction. Apart from that, it reminded me of Maya Deren. You already framed that in the structure: with Lassnig among the trees wearing that sack, then the reflected light on the water, the dancer, the reflection again and then her in a cloister.

MM: It was decisive that we clearly recognized the

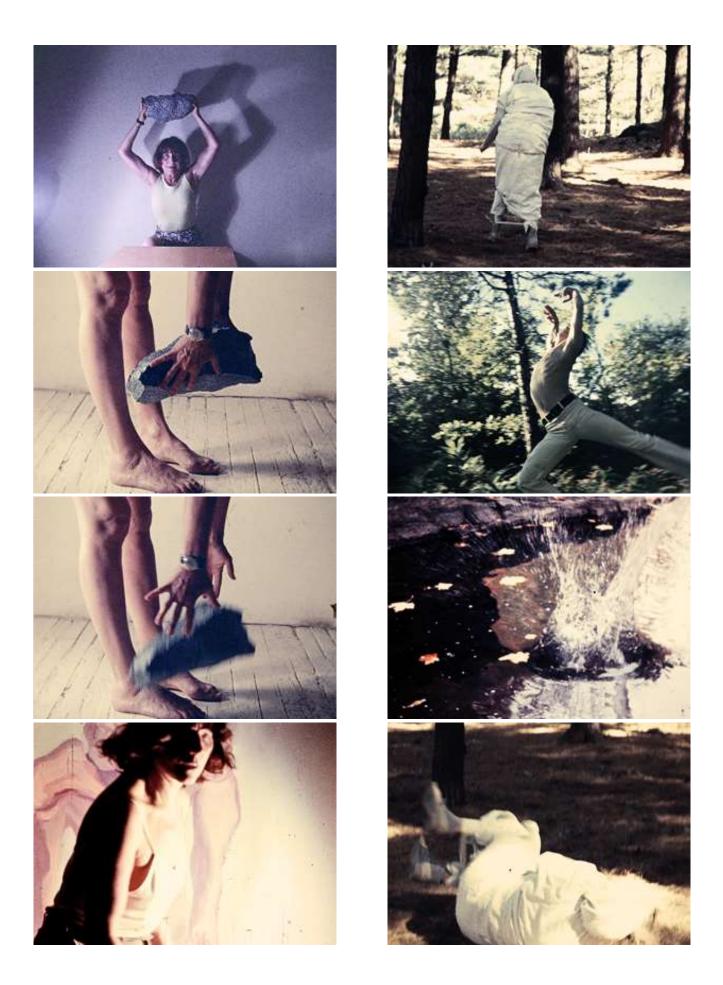
games she alluded to: from the dancer's leap to Lassnig's fall and that of the stone in the water... Fall—fall—fall. It became clear to us that it is aiming for something specific. And it is of course reminiscent—talking about dance and Maya Deren—of Baroque Statues, too.

HWP: Maria Lassnig wrote a manifesto in the 1970s, "Einführung in den Experimentalfilm" (Introduction to Experimental Film) and listed her influences: Jean Cocteau, Hans Richter, Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí and others—and Maya Deren is even emphasized (see facsimile p. 39). Of course she never met her in person as Deren died in 1961. But her influence is clearly ascertainable in the many dance films Lassnig made: Black Dancer, Baroque Statues, Autumn Thoughts.

MM: In *Broadway*, too, the dance sequence on the street...

HWP: First, she attended an animation course at the School of Visual Arts in New York. Then, she went to Bob Parent at the Millennium Film Workshop. Parent was a very important photographer, at the time he took photographs of all the jazz musicians in New York. He taught film at the Millennium. According to her friends Rosalind Schneider and Silvianna Goldsmith, Maria Lassnig was there every evening and saw everything that was shown there. The others couldn't always go, because of their families, but Maria Lassnig was there every day. She also showed her own films there at the weekly "free screenings," for example Godfather, and then she accompanied it with a record she'd brought with her, she had a very open-minded approach. At that time she really wanted to become a filmmaker.

MLoe: The films you found in her estate are also entirely different genres. Categorized roughly, there are animations, Seasons is particularly interesting as a supplement to, or precursor of, Encounter, of Shapes, too. Then those that I would call "experimental narratives," which operate with optical tricks, inter alia, but also have real performers. Then the documentary portraits and essays, and finally what I would almost call "home movies"—direct recordings in everyday situations but conceived in an avant-garde spirit. From this point of view, too, these films are extremely inter-



Stone Lifting. A Self Portrait in Progress
↑Autumn Thoughts







esting as study material, as an extension of this notion of film. They show us an entirely unknown Lassnig—what surprised you most, in film terms, when you were going through the first reels?

MM: Clearly *Nitsch* and *Moonlanding/Janus Head*. Those are films based on double and triple exposures, in black-and-white. They're different from the animations we know of hers, in terms of both theme and of style.

HWP: I spent many years with her, and we discussed some of those films too. But because I never saw the footage, it all remained rather bizarre and abstract. She had forbidden me to use my camera and tape recorder, and I asked her how I was supposed to document all of it. She said: "I'll tell you everything now, and you tell it to others. You sit down in the evening and write everything down." I often only noticed connections in retrospect. For example, we talked about an Emiliano -and I still don't know who that is, and sometimes in her notes but also on the film can she wrote "Emilio." She told me how she had met a dancer in Carinthia, with whom she shot some film. She was in love, somehow—you notice it a bit in the film—, and only during this work with the material in her estate did I realize that she meant him. And it was like that with a number of things. I still remember that she talked about the "great festivals"—and then it turned out that they can be seen in Broadway and that they were early gay parades.

MLoe: Moonlanding also took me completely by surprise, because it's very dense. Its "oeuvre status" can hardly be doubted, I was astonished that it was a rough cut. Could you talk about your approach...

MM: For *Moonlanding* there are the black-and-white double exposures I mentioned, televized images can be identified, Lassnig herself in performance, and the whole thing begins and ends with her friend John Buchanan.

HWP: That's the man from *Couples*, to divulge a secret now.

MM: She also drew and painted him.

MLoe: Ah, it was him in the phone booth!

MM: I presume that this film is based on a dialogue between the two of them, or on their relationship. At least I had the feeling that they were sitting at the kitchen table and actually watching the moon landing on TV—it must've been the 1971 moon landing rather than the one in 1969. In one interview she said, in essence: "Coming to New York was like landing on the moon, because everything was different."3 The scenes with John clearly provide the narrative framework here, they frame the body of the film, whereas that looks like the subject of conversation between John and the filmmaker. I believe she made portraits of her friends in a few of her films—of course mixed with visual associations evoked by the atmosphere somebody exudes. She also painted several portraits on canvas of protagonists of her films.

MLoe: That adds up, completely.

MM: In Moonlanding she contrasts the commotion made about the moon landing with the irreality of television. She plays out the drama—she behaves like an opera singer or a diva in a Hollywood film. Longer passages in the film have remained unaltered. It said "Ice Skating" on the reel, images of ice skaters were edited together with TV footage of a moon crater. A shoal of fish cross the frame at some point.

MLoe: It's really amazing on the big screen because the fish are suddenly so big.

MM: Pictures of the moon, fish, ice skaters—I presume it's about weightlessness, about a kind of floating.

HWP: I also see a very critical take on the media in this film. It anticipates something that came in the 1980s. The impact of television on her, for instance. The second appliance she bought in New York was a television set. And Maria Lassnig always—at least since the 1980s—switched on the TV at 5pm and left it on until she went to bed. Whether she paid attention to it or not—she was always interested in the imagery. There's a drawing where she sits with a television between her legs. She understood that these images penetrated

^{2 —} See also editors' note on p. 152.

^{3 — &}quot;Zur Person. Die Künstlerin Maria Lassnig," in "Diagonal – Radio für Zeitgenossen," Ö1, May 15, 1999. Cited after Lettner, *Maria Lassnig*, p. 196.



Television Sex, 1970

her directly, it was something bodily. Incidentally, I also regard *Nitsch* as a critical, political film...

MLoe: With its reference to the Vietnam War, yes. **HWP:** In *Moonlanding* we also have a large number of fighting scenes, excerpts from *Spartacus*. It's about aggressive manliness... and sex. And then that 1920s diva suddenly appears, wearing heavy makeup, and becomes completely hysterical before all of these images, which flow into her.

MLoe: In what state of completion was *Nitsch* when you first saw it?

MM: It was a "rough cut," partly tagged with sequences from *Moonlanding* on multiple reels. These reels were labeled "Nitsch" or "Januskopf," "Moonlanding" or "Ice-Skating."

MLoe: I would immediately see these two as one work block in this period, despite all the differences.

MM: Yes, *Moonlanding/Janus Head* and *Nitsch* were probably filmed around the same time.

HWP: Nitsch was screened a number of times at the start of the 1970s in New York, including at the Millennium.

MLoe: Some of the film's impact relies on the soundtrack. In the credits, you describe the pieces of music used in extensive detail. How did you choose these pieces?

HWP: She had a small record collection, which she

kept in her flat. On one of these vinyl records, for instance, there is a note stuck on: "Use for this film," i.e. for *Encounter*. So first of all, she had already prepared it that way. Secondly, there were several audio tape recordings in Maria Lassnig's trunk. She was always very frugal, although she did have a tape recorder to use for recording vinyl borrowed from friends. She also had soundtracks for films recorded on tape, for example for *Alice*. These were completed but the soundtrack hadn't been attached to the film yet. The third source was the one she wrote down, she made lists of the film music she wanted used.

It was also a topic of conversation, it's interwoven with her own life, too. She said: "You know, I knew this marvelous composer in the 1940s, then he was shot by the Americans." I only realized much later that she meant Anton Webern. Arnold Schönberg was also very important to her, especially that piece we found on one of the tapes...

MLoe: Musical Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene?

HWP: Exactly. She had recorded the whole piece, and we used an excerpt from that. It was our interpretation. Then, of course, she had made her own recordings, a great many of them—just herself, speaking or singing. For example, a really super song about dogs barking in English, "The Dog















- ⊼ Mountain Woman
- *↑ Hilde*
- ← The Princess and the Shepherd. A Fairytale

Barks." Perhaps for *Dog Film*. We have digitized all of these tapes, too. She really appreciated Vivaldi, Haydn, Mozart, and Schubert. Morton Subotnick, Bruckner—she was a great Bruckner fan, you can hear it in *Baroque Statues*.

MM: Often Ragtime. Live recordings.

HWP: For *Hilde*, she told me, she wanted Webern's *Slow Movement* for String Quartet, one of her favorite pieces of music. In other cases it was our interpretation.

MLoe: Did she also experiment with tape itself as an artistic medium?

MM: It looks that way in *Moonlanding*, yes. There is a soundtrack in the background from another one of her films, but sped up or played backwards. *Black Dancer* also has an experimental sound-track, it's difficult to identify. If you listen very carefully, you can recognize passages from *Palmistry*, also sped up or played backwards, overlaid with other sounds.

HWP: And these were by no means the experiments of a "dilettante," but highly conceptual soundtracks, professionally recorded in a studio. MLoe: Which brings me to the question of the seductive power of today's technical possibilities. Lassnig's work is in the analog realm, clearly also with the available materials. She never completed these works in her lifetime. When you'd inventoried and prepared the films, you digitized them, knowing that ultimately they would be completed with digital media...

HWP: We also decided to work in the digital domain because Claudio told us that some of the original film had already shrunk so much... We'd be able to feed it into the machine one more time to digitize it, but we wouldn't be able to do much else with the original stock.

Other people restore in such a way that they also conserve damage to the material. We didn't do that, otherwise we would have had to leave the edits made with masking tape. She would have wanted it done the way we did it. She told us that we should complete the work.

MLoe: Can you say why she wanted it done posthumously? Why did she stop working on these films after she had made that inventory with Sielecki? **MM:** I think it was about the amount of time it would have required. She needed her time for painting. Painting is very time-consuming.

HWP: For people who knew her, it was obvious she was going to stop working on them. She always looked forward, always to the future, never looking back. Once she'd returned to Vienna she didn't want to hear any more about New York. She broke off all contacts there. Silvianna wrote to her and she never replied. Iris Vaughan thought she'd died a long time ago! She drew a line—"cut." She only made her "canonical" films accessible again as there was a demand for them after she had set up the animation studio. She did not deal with this, nor with the technical condition of the copies. She always said she didn't want her work to be reduced to her films.

MM: Perhaps she was also insecure of herself...

HWP: She always told us not to look back at her old paintings. "Look at what I'm painting now, and show it too." She was not easily satisfied.

MLoe: In terms of her style, it's incredible how often somebody can reinvent themselves in their painting without ever becoming banal. This flows into the film works, too. There are recurring motifs. But at the same time, it's astonishing how she tries out all of the technical possibilities for independent film or experimental filmmaking... condensing them into a couple of years.

MM: And the other way round—referring to themes or ideas: While I was working I often thought "Typical Lassnig!" She had her own, very specific humor. It was usually connected to a misunderstanding in a dialogue: Person A asks a question, Person B replies with a paradox or responds inappropriately. That sort of thing frequently features in her "old" films.

MLoe: True, that's the basic subject of *Couples*.

HWP: A central motif is, of course, the manwoman thematic, relationships in general, but also within the family. That's very important, and the animal-human relationship—and, of course, the criticism of the media mentioned earlier with the images from TV streaming at us.

MM: And the subject of the simple life—for instance, in *Fairytale*: The princess doesn't want the prince, she's in love with the shepherd. Of course,

as an artist she was hard to crack. She often said "I wasn't made to bake cakes" or "men weigh down one's wings." But at the same time, she reveled in the simple, honest, uncompromising life, a life like in *Bärbl*, *Hilde*, *Mountain Woman*. Her mother's life?

HWP: But I do believe that she regarded the whole of life as a tragedy. And she could only cope with that through her self-irony, or by painting, by expressing herself accordingly. Because she was hypersensitive she had problems dealing with other people. At home she could really only receive one person at a time. She became irritable as soon as there were two, she found people difficult to tolerate. Of course, in the end she said: "Hans Werner, you know I'm married to painting." That's a funny quote, everyone laughs, but it's a deeply tragic statement.

MM: Painting means being involved in a dialogue, you're never alone with it!

MLoe: It's fascinating in its complexity of layers. I also think that few artists manage to combine the tragic and pathos alongside the silliness so well, with such elegance. Like with the fine humor of her paintings: You have the powerful work that then has a completely goofy title. And I really do think that's great!

Talking to you, I realized that you also think about which part of yourselves actually brought you to Maria Lassnig. For it always takes two.

MM: She said she had handpicked the most beautiful ones. (Laughs) I once asked her what the criteria were for choosing her students. Hundreds apply for just a couple of places. And she said: "That's simple. I pick out the most beautiful ones!" At the time I wasn't sure whether what I see is what she saw.

MLoe: We definitely need an historical photograph of her class!

MM: Hans Werner, you once asked her how she would define her own work as an artist. She said "drastic."

HWP: She changed herself every couple of decades, and from 2000 she commenced with the drastic paintings—she also wrote "Manifestos" for them: "The New Drastic." She said you have to exaggerate things otherwise people don't under-

stand it. Then I compared her with Thomas Bernhard, and she said: "Yes, but I was frightened of him." (*Laughs*) He really wanted her to paint his portrait. But she never did.

MLoe: "Drastic" is a good term as her art is bold and striking without ever being ostentatious.

HWP: Something else about the '70s: Maria Lassnig had lived in Paris prior to that, but she was isolated from the art scene there, as a female artist in particular. Nancy Spero then suggested that she comes to New York—because of the women's movement. And so that's what Lassnig did.

Silvianna told me she was at every demonstration. They always met up the day before and painted banners, and she was completely into feminism. She also wrote in a letter to her later-assistant and good friend Ruth Labak, that Selfportrait was very clearly produced in the spirit of feminism, which also applied to every film she had ever made. That she had chosen the medium of film at that time should also be regarded as political: to create something for the "broad masses," in a medium that will be seen by a great many etc.

And then she came back in 1980 and didn't want to hear any more about feminism. She said so very clearly in her course. Now she wants to be measured against the men: "If you declare yourself a feminist, you are placed in a pigeonhole and you don't get out of it." She always said that now she compared herself with Baselitz and Gerhard Richter. It was a deliberate decision at the time: Out of the pigeonhole. She said she wasn't a "woman artist," that was discrimination, "I'm an artist."

MM: "I'm a painter!"—always using the male instead of the female form in German...

HWP: She was also a great example to us all. She told us that she could live from painting for the first time on becoming a professor. She still had jobs on the side until she was 60. You mustn't forget that! She worked for a New York animation studio, painting backgrounds. She told her friends to "visit me in the summer, in the winter you see your breath in the studio." She had separated a small part of her loft, where she drew the animations next to a fan heater. In Paris, before that, she'd also been living in the most modest conditions.



Photo of Lassnig's master class, 1984*

She was between 40 and 50 there. She told us about those experiences, too. Wilfried Skreiner had offered me an exhibition at the steirischer herbst festival when I was 24, and she said: "Wait till you're 40, that's still early enough." Then I said, "Frau Lassnig, I'm doing it now, though." (Laughs) She said that art and money do not go together.

MM: According to Lassnig you shouldn't become famous during your lifetime, otherwise you can't concentrate on your art anymore. "They make mincemeat of me, people taking unfinished paintings from my grasp so I never have time to finish a painting."

HWP: She was radical. Not only in her art, but in every aspect of her life.

The interview, here in a shortened and edited version, took place on March 11, 2020 in the offices of the Austrian Film Museum.

^{*} From top left to bottom right: Andreas Karner, Ines Lombardi, Mara Mattuschka, Gudrun Kampl, Hans Werner Poschauko, Roland Schütz, Akin Macaulay, Ives Wendt, Alois Wagner; Christian Macketanz, Therese Derflinger, Stefan Stratil, (unknown), Sabine Groschup, Christian Junger; Gottfried Tauchner, Gerlinde Thuma, Sabine Zelger, Hildegard Rieder, Guido Hoffmann, Rupert Mair, Brigitte Ennemoser, Ursula Hübner; Hubert Sielecki, Maria Lassnig, Ruth Labak; Angela Scheirl