

## Self-Presentation of the Female Body in the Age of Selfies: Maria Lassnig and her “Body-Awareness” Self-Portraits

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### Abstract

Austrian artist Maria Lassnig (1919-2014) is world-famous for her self-portraits and “body awareness” theory, and became one of the most important artists in the West after the war in 1945. Influenced by the patriarchal social background of that time, Lassnig created numerous self-portraits with creative and feminist political implications in response to the era in which she lived. Her works have made great achievements in the field of artistic creation. In 1988, she became the first female artist to win the Austrian National Award. In 2013, she won the Golden Lion Award for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale. Lassnig presents her self-portrait through “two ways of existence”, as “weird face” and “monster image”, which focuses on the female body and refuses to simply depict the appearance. In the age of selfies, where external beauty is recorded through technology, Lassnig’s paintings present her inner multi-layered true feelings, becoming a more “perfect art”.

**Key words:** Maria Lassnig; Self-portrait; Body awareness; Feminism

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### “GREAT WORKS OF ART ARE RESPONSES TO REALITY”

Traditionally patriarchal society believes that reason can provide a reliable and universal basis for knowledge.

Western philosophy from Plato and Descartes to Kant and Hegel all adhere to the binary opposition hierarchy of gender and use rational male subjects to unfold narratives. Therefore, traditional patriarchal society places human rationality at the highest position. At the same time, rationality is the function of the brain, so whether or not one has a brain has become the criterion for judging a person’s rank. In other words, because men have a brain, they are in a superior position in society.

Compared with the male brain that can think rationally, women were generally considered to be brainless and emotional beings because they were too restricted by natural physiological conditions. Therefore, they could only be in a subordinate position. In traditional societies, women are simply regarded as sexual objects, and their desires, interests, and abilities are often ignored. As Marx once mentioned in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, “The direct, natural, and necessary relation of person to person is the relation of man to woman. In this natural species-relationship man’s relation to nature is immediately his relation to man, just as his relation to man is immediately his relation to nature – his own natural destination.” (Marx, 2014) The reason why women are regarded as nature is about “sex”, that is, women’s reproduction and physiological reactions are exactly the same as those of animals, which are not based on human concepts and consciousness. Therefore, women are merely animals, and the relationship between men and women is the relationship between humans and animals.

Lassnig stands in the traditional male social position, and in many of her works, she paints herself as an ordinary woman with dull eyes and irrationality. Just like the “Self-Portrait Wearing a Frying Pan” created in 1995, on the one hand, her throat is hollow and she cannot speak. The lines on the side are intertwined with each other. Even if she can open her mouth, she does not have the ability to make a sound. On the other hand, her head is brainless and her eyes are covered, depicting the common

view of men in society at that time towards women.

In this discourse context, the evaluation of “a woman with brains” becomes a satire on women. The common view of male chauvinism is that women have no brains. They use weakness, sensibility, delicacy, humbleness and fertility as the standards to measure an excellent woman. “One man, one child” is the destiny of them. This means women are men’s accessories, they only need to obey and do not need to think. Lacan once quoted Hegel’s Master-Slave Dialectic and pointed out that men and women exist in a symbolic order. In this order, men are the “signifiers” of others’ desires in a patriarchal culture. In order to consolidate their own hegemonic position, “others” than him must appear as the one who maintain its position. Therefore, women as the keeper of the men’s position for men’s self-elaboration. (Mitchell & Rose, 1993) If we emphasize that a woman has brains, it contains a special meaning - this woman is morally corrupt and does not conform to the norms of women. Just as Butler mentioned in “Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity”, that the concept of the rebuke has become “something expelled from the body.. and labeled as the ‘other’.” (Butler, 1990) Lassnig once created “The Woman with a Brain” from 1990 to 1999, which satirizes the way of expression that linked “brain” with “woman”.

In the form of paintings, Lassnig revealed the power relations of the masculinist society at that time, as well as the operating structure of the entire society. In her self-portrait, she depicts herself as an ordinary woman, with dull eyes and no brains, one small ear, and a slightly open mouth, but having a hollow throat and bound by countless lines. This expresses the common view in the social background of that time that women do not have brains and cannot think independently. They can only hear instructions with their ears, and therefore lose the ability to express independent language.

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## “THE ONLY THING THAT’S REAL IS HOW I FEEL”

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As a feminist, Lassnig criticizes the actual irrational state of this seemingly rational social reality. People generally believe that the social operating model created through rational thinking is good, and the state of getting along with each other is free, because women lack “brains”. Thus, “lacking” becomes a characteristic of women, and in some unspoken way meaning needs protection. Lassnig expressed this theme in “Self-Portrait with an Umbrella” created in 1971. The woman seemed relaxed and happy under the protection of the umbrella, and was not affected by any rain. However, while being protected by umbrellas, they are also shackled, and the plastic masks on their faces prevent them from breathing smoothly.

In a patriarchal society that advocates rationality,

is it good or bad to force people to think rationally? The ideology of traditional patriarchal society controls people’s thoughts, and women are subordinate to men. Women generally believe that returning to the family, obeying their husbands, and taking care of their children is what they should do. By thinking about this issue, Lassnig abandoned the dualistic opposition between mind and body from the traditional metaphysical perspective of patriarchal society, that is, the view that mind and body can be separated from each other. She proposed the concept of “body awareness” in the form of paintings, believing that “the only thing that is real is one’s own physical feelings”. Physiological feelings and the body are two different categories. The former is a function of the latter, but more importantly, the former can produce feelings. The content of feelings drives the rhythm of people’s life. Therefore, compared with the mind, the physiological feelings of the body are something more important. Shusterman once said in *Body Consciousness*: “The body forms the initial perspective from which we perceive the world.. He often shapes our various needs in an unconscious way.., of course, this also includes Shaping our spiritual lives.” (Shusterman, 2011)

Lassnig believes that “works of art are closest to the truth” (Haldemann, 2007). She only depicts the parts that she can perceive, and highlights the pain, thoughts and breathing during creation, turning these into things that seem to be held in hand and looking at them. Through the language of images, she can express her inner experience. She always believed in her own perception. She once said: “Of course I don’t paint the body as an object. What I paint is the feeling of the body.” (Haldemann, 2007) Her creations are child-like, direct and vivid, but also having a sensitive neurosis. Through her work, she could calmly face different selves in different situations and the true inner self, and show those unsolvable anxieties and desires. Not only that, Lassnig’s self-portrait also attempts to uncover the difference between the external performance and the internal experience she felt at that time. Emotion and language run parallel, and the intersection between the two somehow falls into a state of constant flux. In her self-portraits, the thoughts and emotions, the messy, reluctant and inarticulate inner emotions and the external self that hopes to show a coherent, complete and persuasive self are always separated from each other, expressing the uneasy mood which full of tension and exaggerating. She wanted to state, but she couldn’t express it through appearances that were inconsistent with her heart.

If we only look at the images of ordinary women her depicts, it would be incomplete to resist the oppression of women’s subjectivity in the patriarchal society at that time. Because this image of an ordinary woman actually presupposes the existence of “a woman” in the biological sense, and only appeals for a re-allocation of external

rights or the reshaping of female gender identity. In another type of self-portrait, Lassnig is even more radical. She distinguishes between "social gender" and "biological gender" in an attempt to deconstruct her female identity and depict herself as an alien male or even a monster.

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## **"VISITORS FROM MARS - LASSNIG IS NOT DEFINED"**

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Gender is not a fact, but an act constructed by patriarchal ideology, with only fictitious stability. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler once pointed out: "We are accustomed to imagining power as something that oppresses the subject from the outside, which makes the subject submit, subordinate and degrade to a lower level." (Butler, 1997) Therefore, like most feminists, Lassnig tried to deconstruct the female subject identity as the common foundation and political premise of feminism from a poststructuralist standpoint. In her view, only by dissolving the solidified gender identity, women's status and their environment can be changed. Gender identity is just a theoretical setting under metaphysical discourse. At the practical level, there is no solid gender entity.

Human gender should be a dynamic "becoming" rather than an essential "be". Lassnig refused to depict hair in most of her self-portraits, intending to prevent the viewer from judging the subject's gender through their hair. What she wants to emphasize is that according to personal physical feelings, a person's gender and image are diverse in practice, and they can perceive themselves as different genders or other existences besides the person themselves at different moments. Just as Monique Wittig once put forward the proposition that "one is not born a woman", and "women must distinguish themselves from the definition of 'woman' imposed on them." (Wittig, 2007)

In the left image of "Two Ways of Existence (Self-Portrait)" created in 2000, Lassnig perceives herself through her body as a man and a Martian monster. She believes that red and pink are colors after peeling off the surface skin and are stable. Therefore, her extensive use of such colors in the portrait on the left shows that she has deeply analyzed herself and depicted her true self, not just what looks like on the surface. The reason why Lassnig depicts herself as a man is because in terms of behavior, she deviates from the traditional image of a woman caring for her husband and raising children, and firmly believes that "one man, one child" is not her fate. Besides, she refuses to accept "special protection" in thought, and argues that she likes men can gain self-awareness and think through "body awareness". Thus, obtaining a freer life by her own abilities.

Lassnig's transformation of the self-portrait on the left into an ugly, mysterious, and grotesque image also hints at her criticism of male dictatorship in a patriarchal society. Two eyes can see three-dimensionally, while one eye can

only see flat surfaces. The male image of Lassnig has only one eye, implying that men can only see the weak and submissive side of women. People generally believe that such a state gives women freedom and meticulous care, but they cannot see the actual feelings and needs of women in such a situation, nor can they see the strong and painful heart of a woman.

Lassnig also portrayed herself in the form of a monster. She makes extensive use of contrasting colors such as green, red, and yellow to form flowing color blocks, and the exaggerated body shapes in the paintings make her works full of force. On the one hand, this stems from the similarity between Lassnig and the Martian monster - the tension and uneasiness of coming to a strange world; on the other hand, it also originated from her resistance to the sense of shame given to women by the patriarchal society.

As for the former, the Martian monster fits Lassnig's lonely sensibilities. Her mouth is extremely dark red, forming a strong tension and contrast with other colors. The large blocks of blue and green show her helplessness and melancholy. The combination of colors is a bit harsh and emotionally strong, unable to tell anything, which presents a tense and painful state. Lassnig placed her body in an imaginary outer space, understood neither by men nor by women at the time, which is a kind of isolated, helpless and unrestrained. She often felt alienated from her body and surroundings, leading her to find resonance in the image of the alien. Like the Martians, she is looking at the humans on the earth from the far distant. Put in other words, this Martian is Lassnig.

As for the latter, patriarchal society sets gender norms for subjects, and women who do not conform to gender norms become "monsters" that transcend the two gender categories. Even women at that time internalized the feeling of shame for being a "monster", not only because they were ashamed to express the parts of themselves that were different from the "female standard", but also because the body was regarded as a prison of the soul, a demoralizing thing, and a sin. Most women are ashamed to show their bodies. In contrast, Lassnig not only wants to show that she is the "monster" of the third gender and get rid of the shackles of shame, but also reveals its source - the gender norms set by the male social discourse. Lassnig paid great attention to the awakening of female consciousness and created "Female Power" in 1979. Its purpose was to deliberately present the content that social subjects at that time wanted to hide due to shame, through "body awareness", and use it as a revolutionary expression to counter the dominant power of the male social discourse on female norms.

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## **SUMMARY**

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Lassnig's attempt to express her inner feelings reflects her search for the truth about life. She explores the sensitivity

of her own body in reverse. The painting only conveyed her own physical feelings. If she felt her mind was numb, so she ignored it. Because she could not feel the ears, there were no ears in the painting. Thus, the only real thing is what can be perceived become her principle. Lassnig tried to show all the content her felt in her heart at that moment on the picture, presenting a completely different picture to express the tension and diverse of painting. Rational thinking can only summarize static pictures, but images of fracture and pain can trigger people's constant reverie. This is Lassnig's way of making people pay attention to the truth of life.

In the age of selfies where capitalist commodity culture prevails, what is accepted by the public's aesthetics are exquisite shapes and beautiful faces, rather than the weird looks in Lassnig's paintings. But it is the performative element of her self-portraits that makes us think twice about the difference between how we feel physically (messy, inarticulate, and incomplete) and the results we get through rational thought (logical, persuasive, and complete), and the difference between the original appearance of the world we live in and the appearance of the world presented to us. Just like her work "Double Self-Portrait and Camera" created in 1974, Lassnig realized the gap between the two. As a feminist painter, she is committed to peeling away the surface of the traditional masculinist real world and pursuing the survival of women. The reality is that she dramatizes self-portraits in a way that presents perceptual body awareness. In her art, she always maintains a spirit of freedom, innovation, vision and uncompromising, which not only provides a feast for the senses and comforts the restless soul, but also causing thought-provoking. As Joanne Mora said during a lecture in Warsaw: "In reflecting on her [Lassnig's]

self-portraits and her practice of body awareness, I was prompted to think more generally about the space of autobiography and self-portraiture as a potential space. Specifically, thinking in one's irreducibility, particularity, individuality, and complexity, in where artists and artworks enable viewers to participate in the more general circumstances of life." (Morra, 2017)

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