

**Feel your way:**

**A proposition concerning transitional spaces and the autobiographical<sup>1</sup>**

**Joanne Morra**

**Warsaw talk**

When I was invited to present a talk at this event, I was very excited about the prospect of visiting Warsaw, of being a part of a symposium with artists whose work is dedicated to the explorations of the self and various ways of approaching the autobiographical, of thinking about these questions through the lens of feminism and the politics of representation, and of course, discussing these ideas under the auspices of this excellent exhibition of Maria Lassnig's work.

As I began my research for this presentation, I became somewhat despondent that I had not seen any of Lassnig's works in the flesh, as it were. I felt acutely aware of the fact that this was an artist whose work demanded visual, emotional, and visceral contact. I wondered what I could do about this, and began searching for museums and galleries that I could visit - to experience such an encounter with Lassnig's work - while I was preparing the talk. The more research I did, the more uncanny the experience became. Lassnig's work was incredibly familiar to me. It was increasingly evocative, and stirred something inside me. And yet, this familiarity was not possible, or was it?

I continued to research Lassnig's work, and, I came across her wonderfully quirky, witty and melancholic film *Kantate* (1972) on youtube.



**Kantate, 1972, still**

While watching it, I was startled to realize that I had in fact seen it before. How could this be the case?

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<sup>1</sup> Check out work by Nicola Tyson – 'psycho-figurations'. Early Eva Hesse, Lee Lozano, Dorothy Iannone, Mary Beth Edelson, Yolanda Lopez, Lygia Clark, Louise Bourgeois *Insomnia Drawings*, talk to emma about other possible artists

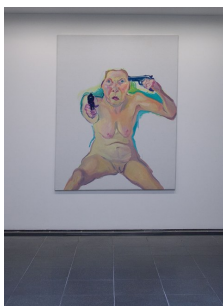
I soon realized to my surprise, that the uncanny feelings I was having were just that, uncanny, because, in fact, I had seen some of Lassnig's paintings. Almost 10 years ago, in 2008, I visited the *Maria Lassnig* show that was held at the Serpentine Gallery in London.



Installation shot of Maria Lassnig at Serpentine Gallery, London, 2008

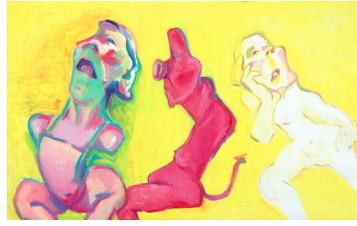
In reflecting back upon that show, I was reminded of Lassnig's deeply engaging and tremendously affective self-portraits, what she calls her 'korpergefühl', or 'bodily-sensation' or 'körperbilder' 'body-awareness painting'. Deeply troubling and yet gripping in their ability to hold my awareness for an extended period of time, Lassnig's self-portraits, and her paintings of more than one figure, have an enormous affective power.

The explosive, *You or Me (Du oder Ich)* 2005 was the first image that I encountered at the Serpentine show.



*You or Me (Du oder Ich)* 2005

This painting was placed at the exhibition's entrance. This is an exemplary instance of the deeply provocative nature of Lassnig's work. With one gun pointed to her head and another at us, we are being dared to enter the show, and to engage with her work. So, I did.



Self-Portrait with Cooking Pot (Selbstporträt mit Kochtopf) 1995

Three Ways of Being (3 Arten zu Sein) 2004

I also remember, *Self-Portrait with Cooking Pot (Selbstporträt mit Kochtopf)* 1995, and *Three Ways of Being (3 Arten zu Sein)* 2004. These two works, like many of Lassnig's paintings and drawings tell us a great deal about the complexity of being a woman, and a female artist in today's world. Cooking pot on head, the expectations of femininity are often related to housework and home-making, and yet, this self-portrait is also staging the difficulties and conflicting response to such positioning. The upturned cooking pot spewing its contents on the figure's head and blinding her, the slackened face, the red shirt almost strangling the figure at the neck, the open mouth – a consequence of Lassnig's working method – may denote the figure's hostility and her desire to be released from these traditional feminine roles.

*Three Ways of Being* acutely demonstrates the multiple roles that women play within our contemporary lives. Each figure a version of Lassnig – denotes the various positions that she – and women – find ourselves in. A strained figure, mouth ajar and hands twisted behind her body stares off into space; she is seated next to a slack red figure, with a large orifice for a nose and a red tail; while the third figure, resting on one hand, looks up and over in the opposite direction to the first figure. All three figures are placed within a bright yellow background, a site that refers us to no particular context, no place, simply a space of existence, or is it a space of consciousness, or is it gesturing towards the no-time of the unconscious, while we drift from one articulation of the feminine to another. It strikes me that this painting presents us with different ways of being that constitute the complexity of feminine subjectivity.

I also distinctly recall several paintings from the Saran wrap series that troubled me: *Lady in Plastic*, 2005; *Couple*, 2005; *Spell*, 2006; *The Illegitimate Bride* 2007.



*Lady in Plastic*, 2005    *Couple*, 2005    *Spell*, 2006    *The Illegitimate Bride*, 2007

Why were these figures covered in transparent sheets of Saran wrap? Or better yet, what is the affect of such a representation. This transparent boundary suggests an in-between state in which the figures are both visible and yet trapped: communicating with us in some oblique way, or with one another, and yet uncommunicative: bound up within their own interiority, and yet making a connection with another and us.

Lassnig's self-portraits, and these multiple figure paintings, function within in a strange liminal space: one that combines and yet separates states of interiority and exteriority: they are inside themselves and yet affecting one another and the viewer. Engaging with such work means that we are caught in a complex paradoxical space of interiority and exteriority, of space and spacelessness, of time and timelessness, of conscious and unconscious realities.

I left the show in 2008 troubled and wanting to know more about the artist, but, like many things, I got caught up with other work, and this was left to drift, until preparing for this symposium.

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Going back to Lassnig's artwork, her diaries, and the various critical writings on her oeuvre, I was struck by the diversity of readings of her work. There is the biographical appraisals which slot her artwork within her various times abroad: her time in Paris in 1951 where she met the surrealists, members of art informel and Gutai, to her move to New York in 1968 where she lived for about a decade and produced 6 films hanging out with the experimental filmmakers working there at that time, and finally her return to Vienna in 1980 as first female professor of painting at a German-speaking university, the Academy of Applied Arts – where she became interested in the work of the Viennese Actionists while carrying on with her own body-awareness-painting. In addition, to these biographical narratives, I found many formalist readings of Lassnig's use of paint, colour and composition; as well as interpretations of her bodily figurations as expressionist paintings of her interior world; interpretations of her work through theories of perception; and contextual art historical placements of her work within various isms that art history often demands – Lassnig and surrealism, Lassnig and expressionism, etc. And then there are the gendered readings of her work: from the deeply problematic interpretations of her practice as the product of a female painter expressing the chaos of femininity; to the richly productive analyses of her painterly practice as a means of representing a feminine ontology and subjectivity through philosophical and psychoanalytic frameworks.<sup>2</sup>

What I came to understand is that this diversity of interpretations speaks to the simple fact that Lassnig's work is extremely difficult to pin down. This is certainly due to the variety of work - from painting, to drawing, to watercolours, to films – but I think that there is also an indeterminacy, or irreducibility about her work that lends itself to such diverse interpretations.

This irreducibility and indeterminacy within Lassnig's work is in sharp contrast to the clarity with which she articulates her practice. An entry from her diary dated 1980, has Lassnig making an important note concerning the psychological and affective aspects of her 'body-sensation' or 'body-awareness' painting. Lassnig notes,

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<sup>2</sup> Bronfen's psychoanalytic reading of Lassnig's work – navel, feminine bodily awareness, kirstevan chora, pp. 34ff Maria Lassnig, in the mirror of possibility Elisabeth Bronfen writing about Lassnig's work puts it well 'Maria Lassnig has adopted the notion of the English philosopher George Berkeley that sensory impressions are ideas that are to be captured in visually experienced images. If every form of self-expression turns out here to be an expression of the body, it will be necessary to find a correspondence for every occurrence of physical sensation demanding expression between that intense feeling and the drawn lines and colours. Lassnig presents these points of concentrated sensations – both within the body and on the paper – quite free of any empirical recollection of what has been seen, which points towards a feminine deconstruction of visual thought. As an artist she has no alternative than to consciously

I confront the canvas as if naked, devoid of intention, devoid of a plan, without a model, without photography and I let things happen. I do work from a starting point, though, rooted in the insight that the only real things are the feelings unfolding within the shell that is my body: psychological sensations, a feeling of pressure when sitting or lying, feelings of tension and special expansion – aspects that are difficult to put on a canvas.

Later in this same diary entry, Lassnig takes care to state that:

Painting, as an elemental activity, is my instrument of meditation; I don't need a shrink or a guru.<sup>3</sup>

These thoughts are worth repeating and pondering over. Lassnig confronts the canvas as if naked, devoid of intention, but, with a starting point. She turns to her feelings, psychological sensations, pressures, tensions, and aspects that are difficult to put on a canvas – but which she continuously attempts to put on canvas. Not only that, but, painting is an elemental activity for Lassnig. It is her instrument of meditation. Because of it, she doesn't need a guru or a shrink.

I was struck by this final pithy statement, and it prompted me to think about just that – why doesn't she need a shrink? What is it about this form of autobiographical practice, this concentration on the body and the internal workings of it – psychologically, emotionally, viscerally – that enables her to reach such an assessment of herself, and her needs? And what is it about the power of these paintings - that form a connection – whether positive or negative – with their viewers that provoke such disparate interpretations?

It is this visceral, emotive and psychological understanding that Lassnig has of her work, and the irreducibility of the artwork itself, that interests me today. In reflecting upon this, her self-portraits, and her practice of body-awareness, I have been prompted to think more generally about the space of autobiography, or self-portraiture, as a space of potentiality. A space of possibility: a practice based on the

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<sup>3</sup> p. 75, ML, pen is sister, Slightly different translation, p. 53, Maria Lassnig, works, diaries, writings. Both republished in the exhibition catalogue of her show in Kunseum Moderner Kunst Vienna from 1985,

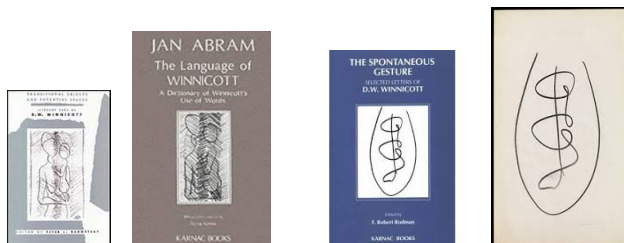
articulation and representation of one's self - in one's irreducibility, in one's specificity, individuality and complexity, and how artists and writers are able to engage a viewer or reader in the more general conditions of living. This liminal condition is the one that I think Lassnig and much autobiographical work works with and through.

I would like to propose – and this is my talk's proposition - that in dealing with the autobiographical, whether through art practice or writing – we are entering and working within a psychoanalytic space, known as a 'transitional space'. What I am proposing today is that the liminal space of autobiographical artistic practice is a transitional space: a space in which our internal and external worlds meet, collide, and are held in a paradoxical relation of separateness and yet inter-relatedness. That autobiographical practices working within transitional spaces are working within a space of creative potential, rest, and play. In this way, autobiographical practices are able to explore one's self and engage one's audience.

Let me explain.

The more I prepared for this symposium and thought about Lassnig's work, the more I realized that there was something important here around the practice of self-representation and a very particular idea within psychoanalysis – the idea of a transitional space. The concept of a 'transitional space' comes from the work of British child psychoanalyst Donald Woods Winnicott. For Winnicott, a transitional space is an 'intermediate area of experiencing to which our inner reality and external life both contribute'. In other words, a transitional space is a liminal or intermediate area of experience, one that brings together our internal and external worlds.

In order to understand Winnicott's theorization of a transitional space, it is worth taking a look at a series of drawings he made, with some variation, of a mother holding a child.



What is so striking about these drawings is that the mother and child are both together – a unit - she holds the baby in her arms – while at the same time, a line, or a bar separates them. They are at once unified and separate. This continuity of being a part of the other, while also separate from the other is integral to Winnicott's understanding of the formation of the human subject, and the life-long struggle to be united and independent, a struggle and paradox that Winnicott understands as a fundamental experience in our lives, one that we continuously negotiate and experience within different transitional spaces – from birth through to death.

Winnicott's essay, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena' in which he originally discusses the idea of transitional space was first published in 1953. Having worked with children in his clinical practice, Winnicott became very curious about the way in which babies and toddlers had special objects – a blanket or stuffed toy - that they clung to and became quite attached to. This object partially replaced the mother or primary caregiver, and aided towards the child's detachment from the mother. From this, Winnicott theorized what he called transitional objects. These objects – a blanket or stuffed toy - are not in and of themselves transitional, it is their function that is transitional – their function within the development of the subject. As Winnicott notes, these objects facilitate the transition from 'a state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate' (pp. 19-20). So, transitional spaces are spaces that enable the paradoxical state of being attached and detached, together and separate.

Winnicott defined the transitional space in this way:

[It is an ] intermediate area of experiencing, to which our inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet inter-related.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, a transitional space incorporates at least 3 separate and yet inter-related experiences. Firstly, our experience of ourselves (the internal world of 'me'). Secondly, our experience of the mother/other (the 'not-me'). And finally, our experience of an object (its nature, its place 'outside, inside, at the border' of our

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<sup>4</sup> Winnicott, p.3



relationships with ourselves and an other). Winnicott was keen to introduce the creative and reparative aspect of transitional spaces, and he talks about our 'capacity to create, think up, devise, originate, produce an object' as activities within transitional spaces. (p. 2)

What Winnicott was able to understand was the way in which human subjectivity is always working with and against our desire to be independent and yet connected to another person, and to our environment. By doing this, he enabled us to 'take account of the role of the environment [in which we live] without at the same time losing the distinctly psychoanalytic awareness of the role of the inner life.'<sup>5</sup> For Winnicott, this was forging an understanding of 'the intermediate area between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived' (p. 4) Transitional spaces are a safe place of resting, of free association. This is the space of 'psychotherapy' (and what takes place within and between the patient and analyst), and importantly, for Winnicott and us today, it is also the space of 'artistic creativity', and of 'play' (p. 7).<sup>6</sup> When a transitional space is shared by more than one person it becomes the basis for a form of communal understanding – the possibility of shared philosophy, or the sharing of artistic endeavours.<sup>7</sup>

I would now like to return to Lassnig's *Three Ways of Being*.

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<sup>5</sup> Preface to playing and reality, p. xii

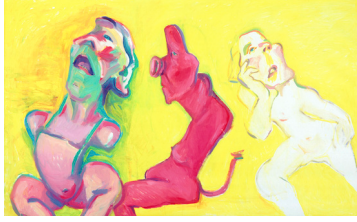
<sup>6</sup> Winnicott repeats this differently on page 19 when he writes, 'This intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality, constitutes the greater part of the infant's experience, and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work.' Also, in his essay on 'Playing and Reality', Winnicott connects transitional phenomena/experience/space to playing, and then playing to psychotherapy. Pp. 54-56  
In a separate text, entitled 'Playing: Creative Activity and the Search for the Self' (1971), Winnicott is firm in his understanding of the importance of play, creativity, and the discovering of the self. Winnicott writes: p. 72 'The general principle seems to me to be valid that *psychotherapy is done in the overlap of the two play areas, that of the patient and that of the therapist*. If the therapist cannot play, then he is not suitable for the work. If the patient cannot play, then something needs to be done to enable the patient to become able to play, after which psychotherapy may begin. The reason why playing is essential is that it is in playing that the patient is being creative.' (italics in Winnicott)  
[...] 'It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self' (p 72-3)  
p. 75

'In developing what I have to say I shall need the sequence:

- a. relaxation in conditions of trust based on experience;
- b. creative, physical, and mental activity manifested in play;
- c. the summation of these experiences forming the basis for a sense of self.

Summation or reverberation depends on there being a certain quantity of reflecting back to the individual on the part of the trusted therapist (or friend) who has taken the (indirect) p. 76 communication. In these highly specialized conditions the individual can come together and exist as a unit, not as a defence against anxiety but as an expression of I AM, I am alive, I am myself (Winnicott, 1962). From this position everything is creative.'

<sup>7</sup> I can't find this reference in Winnicott. It is somewhere in *Playing and Reality*, related to an extended discussion of transitional phenomena or object or playing...



Three Ways of Being (3 Arten zu Sein) 2004

In thinking about this picture once more, in relation to Winnicott's idea of transitional spaces, I would like to turn to two entries in Lassnig's diary.

The first entry is from 1970, after writing about her body-awareness-painting process, she makes this note about memory:

the question now is, whether:

1 realistic associations of memory should be switched off or used [during the process of body-awareness-painting...]

2 I only partially screen myself from the outside world

3 in a picture, I combine memory's realistic associations with freely invented sensations<sup>8</sup>

It strikes me that these associations of memory, these relations with the outside world, with memory's realist associations and freely invented sensations, are the relationships that are being felt, grasped, connected, and embodied in paint in Lassnig's work. Lassnig's considerations of the function of memory within her work is very important in understanding her work, but, also in considering how memory works within transitional spaces and artistic practices dedicated to the autobiographical. That it both present and screened off – separate and inter-related.

This liminality is taken up often in Lassnig's writings and is continuously negotiated in her artistic practice. In a second diary entry, this time from 1978 entitled 'Tests on Investigations into the Genesis of an Image in the Mind'. Next to point number 33, Lassnig writes

[...] you can distinguish two ways of seeing regardless of whether your eyes are open or closed:

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<sup>8</sup> p. 28, the pen is the sister

Genuine seeing as a conscious process and imaginative or unconscious seeing. When seeing unconsciously, you don't really see, i.e. you can't and don't detect anything, but a kind of appearance was there because you know that it was there. Both types of seeing are often present when seeing with eyes closed. You usually notice unconscious seeing only afterwards, and you often don't know whether it was a thought or an image.<sup>9</sup>

If we turn to Lassnig's analysis of different ways of seeing – conscious and unconscious – with memory and memory sensations playing a role, it strikes me that this practice is the basis of a work such as *Three Ways of Being*. Each figure is both a different way of seeing, and thus a different way of being – of being inside one's body, inside one's conscious mind, inside one's unconscious thought or image, while at the same time being able to engage with this internal world externally: by painting it, by giving it a frame, a context (a yellow background is both a no-context and a context). This form of resting, playing and creative working within this type of liminal space is closely related to Winnicott's understanding of transitional space.

As viewers we can enter Lassnig's personal world, and find something in it for ourselves. As Winnicott said, when a transitional space is shared by more than one person, it becomes a communal space. What I find so engaging about Lassnig's works is their ability to tell us something about relationships: about connections that constitute our internal psychic world, and the way in which we bridge the spaces between ourselves and an other person or our environment. And perhaps this is the point of autobiographical practices: a situation in which the personal reaches both the 'me' and 'not-me' of one's self – and the external space of the other/ the viewer.

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In conclusion, I would like to say something more general about the ideas I am presenting today in order to give you a context and perhaps ideas that can be discussed and shared throughout the day in various other manifestations.

I have been interested in the question of autobiography, of life writing and artistic

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<sup>9</sup> pp. 73-4, the pen is the sister

representations of the self, and their relationship to psychoanalysis for quite some time. This interest has grown to include what I call spaces of practice: the artist's studio, the writer's study, the gallery, and the psychoanalytic consulting room. I am keen to consider what and how we articulate what we do in these spaces. I am interested in the possibilities offered to us in analyzing the relationships between the affective psychic processes that take place within the consulting room – ideas related to transitional space and its transformative potential, as well as the process of transference, or working-through, or free association, or dreaming, or failure, or the interminability of endings, or how to begin an analysis – , and those related processes that occur within the artist's studio, writer's study, and art gallery – beginning a work of art, loving and hating it, a failed piece of writing, or an interminable artistic project. Without reducing the singularity (and thus differences) of each of these practices and the spaces in which they take place, I have wondered about the psychoanalytic correlation between them and what each can give the others. Is it possible to think of them as singular yet analogous practices and spaces in articulating the self, in representing one's personal history, in producing transformative practices that change who we are, what we do, and sharing this transformation with others? The question of autobiography, and the representation of the self are key to these concerns. What is the purpose of autobiographical practice? How does it affect us, and our viewers/readers? What political and social work does it achieve? Can sharing mobilize action, change, a better place in which we live and work with one another?

I would like to end with an entry from Maria Lassnig's diary, dated April 11, 1996, where she writes:

the hard work  
of walking, sitting, reclining,  
the harder work  
of seeing, hearing, smelling,  
the still harder work  
of thinking, remembering, supposing,  
the very hardest work  
of feeling, loving, bearing.  
- (doing the dishes, hahaha) -<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Pen is sister, p. 178