

Feb 14, 2017

Dear Maria Lassnig,

I can't believe I didn't get to hang out with you when you lived in NYC. I was shocked when I found out that you lived here for twelve years. Twelve years??? If we passed on the street, I didn't know it. But for six of your twelve years here, I lived around the corner from you. And I went to the same school (SVA) and wore the same outfit I've seen you wear in pictures, a sweatshirt and sneakers, and like you, I smoked cigarettes while painting. I even know people who live in your old studio building on Avenue B, and went to some crazy parties there after you'd left. Like you, in the 70s I hung out with a lot of women and experimental filmmakers. But I am sorry to say that in the 70s I didn't even know your work, though we were in so many of the same rooms and streets. What boggles my mind is that this is even possible. You lived and worked around the corner from me, and I assume that you therefore ate soup at Odessa, walked by the dog park in Tompkins Square Park, and saw that old Russian man with the giant newspaper hat who lived in a doorway near there on 7th Street? You must have, because we all did. Did you have lovers? Or drink at that old wooden bar on the corner of 7th and B? Though I recognize your *style* in the pictures, I don't recognize you. Would I have even had the nerve to talk to you if I'd met you, or to invite myself to your studio? I doubt it. I would have been intimidated by you; New Yorkers can be surprisingly shy, and though are often smiling in the pictures, you look a little forbidding, with your thin mouth and your rimmed glasses. Once, much later in Vienna, at a fancy dinner to celebrate a Cy Twombly show, I sat on a couch with you. You were very old, and I knew exactly who you were, but I did not say hello. I just stared at your gigantic white sneakers, which looked exactly like the clump-ish forms in your paintings. You were on one side of the couch and Franz West was on the other, so I was on a seesaw of artistic greatness, balanced between you two. I was such an idiot not to address you, but you both looked pretty creaky, and each of you had canes and a helper. Right after that you both died, and I was so frustrated with myself for failing to blurt out, with stupid eagerness, how much I love your work and how it sustains me. But you were absorbed in your own stuff that night, and I knew better than to bother a lady genius with giant white sneakers. So I said nothing, when I could have said, hey, you lived around the corner from me in NYC for six years, how the hell did we not meet!?

But it was completely easy to be private back then in the East Village, unknown and anonymous, walking the streets, which were either very noisy (at night) or very peaceful (during the day). I know that Helio Oiticica was also walking around down there, and I saw Jack Smith at the movies, and gave money to Valerie Solanas who was homeless and lived on my corner then. I knew people who lived in Allen Ginsberg's apartment, and people who knew Richard Hell, and I was friends with Eileen Myles and knew Yvonne Rainer, and went to Ken Jacobs shows and saw Amiri Baraka in Tompkins Square Park, and ate at Gordon Matta-Clark's restaurant. Tommy Lanigan-Schmidt's East Village apartment was filled with gold foil goblets and he called it the Summer Palace of the Czarina Tatlina. These people were all walking around in their own thoughts and in their own scenes, and you were there too, but it's possible that another New Yorker could walk around with them but never meet any of them.

Like you, I was at Millenium Film Workshop a lot of nights, watching weird, beautiful or boring non-narrative films on uncomfortable wooden benches. You must have strolled over from your Ave B studio to East 4th Street, descending the staircase to the funereal light of Millenium, passing by the desk of Howard, who looked like a melancholy version of the devil. There were dirty bins on wheels all around, with strips of film morbidly hanging into them, and a still-palpable odor. I remember that scene intimately, though my crew was a little younger than yours: we were art students, we stayed up late, listened to punk music, danced to hip-hop and went to the Pyramid Club. I guess your age group went to Max's Kansas City, but did *you* go there? Or have the slightest interest in Andy Warhol? I have no idea. You were too young for the Cedar Bar, that I know: it was mostly for old men and their arm candy-- so where *did* you go? Ave B was super druggie: you must have been up all night painting with the sound of sirens and people shouting outside. I know that your loft was spartan, and that your furnishings were simple. Did you have a crush on anyone? Who fueled your images of naked women, animals, and men, entangled? I think you mostly hung out socially with the women in Women/Artist/Filmmakers, Inc., a group of fierce, pragmatic female filmmakers, working mostly against the grain. They were tough poetic ladies like yourself, comrades together in making films that extended the medium of painting into time. I know that working with the figure in an imaginative/expressive way and being female back then made it really hard to get a show at all. I know you showed at Gloria Cortella and Green Mountain galleries, but they don't exist anymore. Where did their archives go? I know that in the 70s it was hard to be famous if you were a female. I know that changed in the 80s— Cindy, Jennie, Barbara, Sherrie, etc—but you were working before that, and you continued working with eccentric figuration and wonky animation, when that was pushed to the side anyway, and *angst* was replaced with something hard-edged. I can just imagine your animation set-up, made on the cheap. We art students loved that kind of stuff: the “Bad Painting” show, artists whose “site” was their apartment, anything *not* found in official “art history,” whatever that is. History is obviously less than it's cracked up to be. You, a serious tough lady thinking about time, no one's arm candy, were exactly what was NOT being shown to me, and I didn't know your work.

I've been thinking lately about the word “undocumented.” (You lived in America during Nixon and Carter, and left right at the moment of Reagan. I wonder what you thought of Guston's bitter cartoons showing Nixon's distorted phlebotic foot and scrotal nose!?) When I spoke to some of your old friends on the phone, it struck me that so much about the female artists before the 80's is simply unknown, left out. All unsung artists are a kind of “undocumented.” There must be a mountain of 35mm slides and reels of movies somewhere, along with the archives of galleries that have closed and the notebooks of their artists, whose work were not sustained financially, and in memory. Or let's say it this way: you were the tip of an iceberg. Even you, who are well-regarded, seem to have passed through NYC like a shadow. But paradoxically your own work is a *scrupulous* documentation-- not of yourself, but of the nature of *thought*. I read your diary, I know you were meticulous in your examination of *knowing*, understanding that “knowledge” cannot be recognized as an image; working on the fugitive moments between thought and image, capturing how they draw together and split up again, making notes in your diary about how the mind flickers from moment to moment. Your work is a study of what how

a body thinks and feels, the lived body as a compression machine of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. In those years in NYC, you and your comrades in W/A/F, Inc lived in your bodies' wits, carrying the wealth of history and the fumes of paint in your glands and your nervous systems. The life of an obscure artist is painful to contemplate: so much energy that remains undocumented. How amazing that you were here, living like that, in your giant sneakers, courageously inventing an iconography of your own and wrestling time with your bare hands.

Love, Amy

From: Maria Lassnig: The Future Is Invented with Fragments from the Past

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Published 2017, Walther König, Cologne