

## Belle Lettrists: Nicola Tyson, Maria Lassnig, Amy Sillman

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Meeka Walsh · May 2021

I have two very particular books of letters on my desk. Particular in that neither is the collected correspondence of one writer in touch with a number of recipients over time, nor gathered together to reflect the breadth of the recipients, nor the myriad points of connections the writer made in a lifetime, nor focused on an event of significance—a crisis lived through and reported on, personal or universal. More particular than that.

One is *Nicola Tyson: Dead Letter Men*, a gorgeous book, an artist's book published in an edition of 800 in January 2013 by Sadie Coles HQ, London, and Petzel Gallery, New York, with double covers in a card stock heavy enough to support a banquet, and letterpress printed so that your fingers can't resist the surface. The title sets the letters' teasing tone of wry complaint and deep irony. The men are dead or the letters, improperly addressed, have ended up in that sad place of no return known as "Dead letter mail." But these are dead letter men and there's no further place for the letters to go. No response is expected. British painter and letter writer Nicola Tyson has the last word. That's the thing with writing to painting's patriarchy; while they don't answer back, there is still the hovering risk that they might just utter another, further word, supported as they are by all that history.

The letters are addressed to: The Man in the Street (that ubiquitous nobody with nerve enough to call out or catcall, driving by), to Pablo Picasso, Francis Bacon, Édouard Manet, Thomas Gainsborough, James Ensor and Max Beckmann. Tyson's knowledge of art history is solid; she has looked closely at the work of these artists, from school days on. She's smart, irreverent and very angry. She concedes their reputations and acknowledges that their skill would have warranted the praise they'd received, but she doesn't really like the work of any, with the exception of Thomas Gainsborough and Édouard Manet. The last letter in the book was written to Max Beckmann, the well-dressed man in the dark suit and impeccable tuxedo. Concluding her letter, she wrote, "A fleeting multitude of universes popped into being, while you stubbed out that cigarette...." I figure she hates him.

All the dead men artists, however, have served as foil to her biography, which occasioned her writing the letters in the first place. They are the ground to her figuring herself, going at it by indirection. Each letter opens with a pair of portraits; the man to whom the letter is addressed—a small colophon-sized image on the left page, a mere thumbnail—and a large photograph of Tyson, dressed, made up and with a stance to counter or parallel, mimic or maybe confront the photo of each male painter, on the right. She's taking them on, she's thumbing them off, as the valedictions in most of the letters reflect. No time for Francis Bacon: "Catch up with you later.... Cheers!" Dismissing Picasso: "Anyway, I'm suddenly tired now ... gotta go.... See ya." But the closing to Manet, for whom she had regard: "So gotta get on ... deadlines deadlines.... More power to your elbow, Sir! Regards." Between the opening salutations and the signing off, Tyson is speaking anger at the inequity that privileges male painters. To Bacon, whose work she wrangled with as a student, "Anyway I wanted to top patriarchy and that included homosexuals 'cos they still had it better than women." Feeling the inescapable weight of Picasso's prodigious oeuvre, wishing that "at least a third of your work would just GO AWAY at this point," and discounting his masterpieces as

being “a bit tired and familiar looking and probably a wee bit oxidised, which might account for your dead-seeming colour decisions.” Scoffing at Ensor’s obsession with masks but using it as a confessional opportunity to tell him that she, too, had had a strong desire to dress up, “fictionalize myself to myself and everybody else,” adding her preference for gender-inappropriate characters like cowboys, warriors and Batman. Most often it’s the voice of a young artist articulating her resentment, a student at art school in that impressionable, formative period. Maybe more vulnerable, more resentful because she could have been given other histories as she began to shape her own.

When she writes to Beckmann, she is already an accomplished artist. She speaks with the authority given to her as a participant on a panel about him and she’s not cowed or awed in any way. She’s confident, and tougher now. “Let’s narrow down again here, right down to the self, to self-portraits, ’cos you did a lot and I’ve done a fair amount myself.” She offers that perhaps they share the flaw of narcissism and she’s at his side for a half-second only. “But let’s look at you, look at your witnessing History—sticking your Beckmann jaw right into the foreground of History.” His self-absorption is not going to be forgiven, however well-cut the suit he wears.

The second book is *Maria Lassnig: Letters to Hans Ulrich Obrist*. It is a bit of a heartbreaker and for no good reason except the endless fragility, vulnerability, questing needfulness of every art maker, Lassnig included. Published in 2020 by Walther König in Cologne, Germany, it contains only her letters written from 1993 to 2014, the final letter, just before her death—unmailed. Hers wasn’t a career that went unrecognized—certainly in the last decades when she showed consistently; it wasn’t a short life—she died at 95 and was painting well until the end when the life and the painting met at the finish. In her last letter she wrote, “Dear Hans Ulrich Obrist (she most often addressed him using his full name), “Living with art stops one wilting! Without art one wilts, and me in particular.” When she couldn’t paint anymore, she died; she died when she couldn’t paint anymore.

There is another letter, a love letter, since it is dated February 14, 2017, from Amy Sillman to Maria Lassnig, who had died three years earlier. A letter of love, gratitude and incredulity at the unforgiving intervention of time. Amy Sillman missed finding Maria Lassnig in New York where they could have met, could have hung out, both living in the same neighbourhood for 6 of the 12 years Lassnig lived in the US. Of course they would have met. How not? How not. I know in small measure that feeling of frustrated incredulity, the head-shaking “go back,” my entering that state being less profoundly affecting than an encounter with Lassnig would have been for Amy Sillman.

I was a kid, in New York for the first time, with my parents. Angst-ridden and dramatic as my age required, I was besotted with the poetry of Dylan Thomas. We were visiting family on Jane Street in Greenwich Village. A small cinder blew into my eye. Attentive family hurried me a few streets over to St Vincent’s Hospital on West 12th Street and an able young doctor in the Emergency Department removed the cinder and staunched the tears but not my longing to go back some years, to have been there in that same hospital, there, where Dylan Thomas died of “insult to the brain,” his lyric brain overtaken by alcohol. I could have saved him, I knew. I understand Amy Sillman’s lament about missing Maria Lassnig. Time should have ballooned to include that significant encounter, where Sillman lists the landmark spaces they would both have inhabited. How could time and space and happenstance have been so unaccommodating? Or maybe Fate? Like Sillman said, “I think you mostly hung out socially with women in Women/Artists/ Filmmakers Inc., a group of fierce, pragmatic female filmmakers, working mostly against the grain.”

*Maria Lassnig: Letters to Hans Ulrich Obrist* is a handsome, detailed book. All Lassnig's correspondence—postcards, notes written on exhibition invitations, full letters, are reproduced as facsimiles, with translations on the facing page, an intelligent editorial choice consistent with what she called "body awareness" (*Körperbewusstsein*). In his introduction Obrist explained that in her paintings and drawings Lassnig believed transcendence began with the body and was based on the relationship between the body and the image. If you look at her work, it is easy to imagine—as I expect she did—her mouth, her lips as the writing tool or agent communicating closely and with increasing urgency or maybe just intense persistence, pressed to Obrist's kindly, supportive, generous listening metonymic ear. The book, whose writings span 21 years, draws a good, if not complete, sense of the hand and being from which they issued.

With the sympathy of a sister artist writing to another about finding a receptive place in the world for the work, and dated February 2017, when the history of women making art in the '60s, '70s and on was something with which she was familiar, Amy Sillman wrote to Maria Lassnig: "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." Originally published in a catalogue for the exhibition "Maria Lassnig: The Future Is Invented with Fragments from the Past" at the Municipal Gallery of Athens, 2016, this "letter" was included in *Amy Sillman Faux Pas, Selected Writings and Drawings (After 8 Books, Paris, 2020)*. With present knowledge Sillman speaks to the endless complaints that filled Lassnig's letters to Obrist. Sillman writes, "I know that in the '70s it was hard to be famous if you were a female," and Lassnig's record concurs. "In Germany, even though I've so often had big shows there," Lassnig wrote in the fall of 1998, "I have as good as no theoretical foothold, which means nobody misses me." But by then she was neither overlooked nor outside and misunderstood, as she'd seen herself, and was exhibiting consistently, so often that it appeared almost burdensome. Three significant exhibitions in 2002: Munich, Siegen and Hanover, and she is tired: "I'm not going to become another Louise Bourgeois despite the recent prizes and shows. That's a pity. It's all just too late." Delighted with her exhibition at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, she wrote, "I don't know whether I've written to tell you of my joy at seeing my paintings in Cologne at Kasper König's," undercut for her only by their hanging opposite a wall of paintings by Salvador Dalí. And still in August of 2002, a note of thanks for a book Obrist had sent her, something he did consistently—this one, poems by Eileen Myles, where Lassnig noted "how enviably things flow for her." She is concerned, in her 83rd year, that she is less productive, seeming to lose her vitality. "It really is extraordinary, don't you think," she wrote, "that I think the various prizes might have weakened rather than strengthened me." There is, perhaps, something sustaining in the oppositional stance of the outsider, a tension against which to pull, maybe a taut wariness that works against slackness but in almost every letter: underappreciated, overlooked, forgotten or misunderstood are Lassnig's assessments of how her work is perceived. You might run from this persistent bleak outlook and her resistance to happiness or pleasure or even passing satisfaction at the work's reception but then—there is the work, and it is unique and remarkable and it supersedes the entrenched disappointment. She was right; there had been all those early years, the undermining and diminishing insult of being insufficiently recognized. Attention should have been paid. Photography and the relationship between photography and painting, as Obrist pointed out in the introduction, were a leitmotif throughout her correspondence and in her work. She'd written to him, "The camera often goes farther than the human eye, e.g. on a cable inside the bowels, stomach, etc—but it cannot see into my mind." And she went on, "The Microworld of the millions of neutrons in the brain can, of course, be photographed but not their functions. Painting, however, can." She is a camera,

her mouth a grid of language, her sensing body a neon-coloured host to antennae picking up the world and bringing it in, her face a credible mechanical box camera where the aperture is the nose, the pair of eyes like an attentive lizard at the top of the box—all of it reading as Lassnig's identifiable self-portraits.

Her ability to transmogrify the senses, in this case sight in a work like *Visual/Eye Person*, 1991, into an upright, standing being who is then an eye, or, similarly, *A Kiss for the Whole World/Tathata*, 1990, where two legs support a torso, in turn supporting a giant red mouth large enough to frame a domed blue sky filled with rosy clouds—a world, and all the while the resemblance to Lassnig can be successfully argued. The paintings manifest her embodying the world she perceives in a unity she expressed in all her work. In 2008 Hans Ulrich Obrist, now director of the Serpentine Gallery in London, mounted a solo exhibition of her work, which she referred to as “the most beautiful and most worthy.” Thanking him, and reflecting on the entirely successful works in the show, which were single works, she said, with insight, “I’m a one-off myself; of course the fate of the one-of-a-kind is always drastic to tragic.” In this essay about two artists writing letters to tell the recipient/ readers who they are as women/artists/beings, it seems fitting to conclude with the love letter. Amy Sillman closes her letter to Maria Lassnig—on the occasion of a posthumous exhibition of Lassnig's work, “telling” her, “Your work is a meticulous study of what/how a body thinks and feels, a lived body as a compression machine of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real.... 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.” ■