Hans Ulrich Obrist Archives Chapter 5: Maria Lassnig ‘Living with art stops one wilting!’ opens in Arles

Publication	Artdaily
Published	13 July 2025
Exhibition	Maria Lassnig: Living with art stops one wilting! – Hans Ulrich Obrist Archives, Chapter 5, LUMA Arles (co-curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Arthur Fouray)
Online	artdaily.com/news/183667/Hans-Ulrich-Obrist-Archives-Chapter-5--Maria-Lassnig--Living-with-art-stops-one-wilting---opens-in-Arles
Retrieved	23 September 2026

ARLES.- For the fifth chapter of the Hans Ulrich Obrist Archives, LUMA Arles presents the first major exhibition in over twenty-five years in France devoted to Maria Lassnig (1919-2014). Born in rural Southern Austria in 1919, Lassnig pursued a 70-year career in the fields of painting, drawing and (animated) film. Building on the profound connection shared by Lassnig and curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, this presentation renews French audiences’ engagement with the artist’s groundbreaking oeuvre, which has shaped the history of modern and contemporary art through the concept of ‘Body Awareness’ and its feminist engagement. Her last solo exhibition in France was in 1999 in Nantes, held at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes and the Fonds Régional d’Art Contemporain des Pays de la Loire.

In Lassnig’s earlier work, expressionist and Surrealist influences were strongest, followed by Art Informel and Nouvelle Figuration, developments that shaped Lassnig’s approach rooted in drawings and paintings driven by sensations from inside the body rather than outward appearance. Her colours vibrate, and figures seem to spring from an understanding of ‘the micro-world of the millions of neurons,’ where no camera can penetrate. Celebrated as one of Austria’s most significant painters since Egon Schiele and Oskar Kokoschka, Lassnig has been the subject of over one hundred books, and, among others, she inspired a critically acclaimed biographical film, Sleeping with a Tiger, premiered at the Berlinale in 2024, and a theatre play, Alte Meisterin. Lassnig/Beresin/Bitzan (2024).

A towering figure of post-war art, she remains a vital reference for the evolution of European painting. Obrist discovered Lassnig’s work as a child, when he acquired a postcard of one of her paintings and tucked it into his home-made ‘shoebox museum.’ In 1986, at seventeen, he boarded a night train to Austria, where he first encountered Lassnig at her Maxingstrasse studio in Vienna. At the time, she taught painting and animated film at the University of Applied Arts. Lassnig introduced Obrist to the work of Austrian poet Friederike Mayröcker, prompting his exploration of Mayröcker’s writing.

Years later, concerned that Obrist might be left adrift whenever he returned to Vienna in her absence, Lassnig connected him directly with Mayröcker, who became a close friend until her passing in 2021.

From 1993 until 2014, Lassnig and Obrist maintained a steady exchange of letters and frequently met in her Vienna studio. In 1993, when Kasper König invited Obrist to co-organise The Broken Mirror exhibition for the Wiener Festwochen [Vienna Festival], Lassnig’s paintings and the film The Ballad of Maria Lassnig (1992), at the opening, emerged as a central element of that landmark painting survey. In 2000, Obrist helped Lassnig publish diaries spanning from the 1940s to 1997, revealing the depths of her artistic doubts and the evolution of her distinct Body Awareness practice. Although Lassnig was famously reluctant about formal interviews, she granted Obrist permission to film her in 1999, initiating numerous recorded conversations until 2012. Subsequently, in 2005, he collaborated with Daniel Birnbaum and Akiko Miyake on selecting Lassnig for the Safety Curtain project by museum in progress at the Vienna State Opera, a reproduction of her oil painting Frühstück mit Ohr, 1967.

When Obrist joined the Serpentine in London, he mounted with Julia-Peyton-Jones an ambitious show of Lassnig in 2008 at the Serpentine Gallery, supported by Maja Hoffmann. A decade later, in 2017, Obrist finalised in Athens a posthumous exhibition conceived with Maria Lassnig, centred on her passion for Greek mythology and guided by a

poetic title from Friederike Mayröcker: The Future Is Invented with Fragments from the Past.

Since her death, Obrist has remained close to the Maria Lassnig Foundation, serving on its advisory board (since 2016) and participating in the jury of the Maria Lassnig Prize, envisioned by Lassnig before her passing to encourage artists not yet familiar to the public.

For the first time in one setting, this exhibition at LUMA Arles brings together the complete video interviews between Lassnig and Obrist, accompanied by their extensive correspondence in chronological order. Among the featured works are selected paintings from The Broken Mirror and the Serpentine Gallery shows, the Vienna State Opera project, as well as paintings and watercolours presented in Athens. Alongside the biographical Ballad of Maria Lassnig, the film Selfportrait (1971) reveals her pioneering experiments in animation in the 1970s New York feminist art scene.

Notably, two paintings by Lassnig were last shown in France in the 2023 exhibition Action, Gesture, Paint: Women Artists and Global Abstraction 1940–1970 at Fondation Vincent van Gogh Arles, a nod to her own admiration for Van Gogh, whom she once described as an ‘expressionist god’ in a 2008 interview with Obrist. Echoing ‘Living with art stops one wilting!,’ a sentence she wrote to Hans Ulrich Obrist in her last and unfinished letter on 11 January 2014, this show honours the vibrant legacy of a painter whose interior visions continue to reverberate across our bodies and souls.

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