

In Search of Her Own Language
Eva Hesse Show
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This article discusses the work of Eva Hesse, a young German minimalist artist who died in 1970 at the age of 34. Hesse left behind a complex assembly of art works known for their fragile and disintegrating beauty. Hesse's work resists to be understood in relationship to other works of art; instead her sculptures and paintings are viewed as attempts to find her own language through which she creates a pathway to her inner turmoil. Her work is understood not as a representation of her inner world but as a language through which she gains access to a previously foreclosed, somber world. Struggling at the edge of inside–outside and chaos–order, Hesse succeeds at drawing the spectator into questioning the most fundamental, pregiven realities of life.

I.

“Artist’s fragile works deteriorating” read the headline in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, announcing the first major retrospective

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of Eva Hesse's work in the United States in February 2002. While Hesse was an icon for many feminist artists in the early 70s, she has remained largely an enigma since her death in 1970. Who was this young woman, born in Germany in 1936, who emigrated to the United States in 1938, whose mother committed suicide in 1945, who pursued an art education at Yale University under the auspices of Josef Albers, who created an astonishing body of art in a matter of 10 years, and then died of a brain tumor at the age of 34? Who was this forever young woman, and what was her art all about? Why were her pieces of art and her sculptures disintegrating? What was she trying to tell us about her own sense of time and timing, her time and our time now?

My first visit to the show left me speechless and disoriented. Nothing seemed familiar. The first room of the exhibition was filled with early drawings by Hesse, each carrying the name "Untitled," which set the stage for my first impressions of the whole show: that there were no suitable titles to describe these paintings and strangely magical sculptures. I could not draw connections to any art I was familiar with, nor could I situate Hesse's pieces in any customary contexts. There was no language into which I could place her work, nor find maps with which I could follow her paths. As I stand in front of one of her early mechanical drawings, *Untitled, 1964–1965*, my mind works hard to form links to earlier abstract drawings, like those by Kandinsky or Kasimir Malevich; yet those amoebalike forms, while evoking memories through their color compositions, could otherwise not find a host in the forefathers of abstract art. In a letter to Sol Lewitt, a close friend, Hesse (Catalogue, 2002) describes this piece in a curious telegraphic style:

I have done drawings. Some like hundreds although much less in numbers.

There have been a few stages. First kind of like what was in past, free crazy forms—well done and so on. They have a wild space, not constant, fluctuating and variety of forms etc. Paintings were enlarged versions, attempts at similar space—etc.

2nd stage. Contained forms somewhat harder often in boxes
and forms become
machine like, real like, as if to tell a story that they are
contained. Paintings
follow similarly.

3rd stage. Drawings—clean, clear-but crazy like machines,
forms larger
and bolder, articulately described. So it is weird. They
become real
nonsense. [p. 149]

Finally I gave up. I realized that I could not understand nor get close to Eva Hesse's work if I kept trying to squeeze it into my preexisting orders of thinking and into my usual ways of relating to art. In contrast to other artists to whom I am usually drawn because of the ways that they incorporate history in intriguing and complex fashions, in Hesse I encountered an artist who was very much on her own and who did not want to be understood in relation to others. Here was a woman artist who was establishing her very own language and grammar, one that she instituted by taking apart and questioning all the elements that constitute a work of art. My initial sense of Hesse's strong desire to undo and dissolve previously existing forms of painterly and sculptural thinking, and to establish her very own genre, was corroborated when I later read that Hesse: "wanted an art that was 'hers' certainly, and she stood alone in the minimalist field in her expressive ambition" (Meyer, 2002, p. 61). Hesse herself expressed the wish "to find my own scene . . . inner peace or inner turmoil, but I wanted it to be mine" (p. 67). As I walked through this stunning exhibition, on multiple visits, I gradually began to catch the sense that this "forever under 35"-year-old woman (Wagner, 1996, p. 197) was allowing access into her internal world in a unique way. Deeply antibiographical, refusing any imagery that would remind the viewer of her early escape from Nazi Germany and immigrant experience in the United States, Hesse takes the viewer on a profoundly different kind of journey, one that leads the viewer to inhabit the deepest caverns of Hesse's mind and ultimately the viewer's own mind as well. While blocking possibly

sentimental associations to her troubled life, Hesse forces an intensely private encounter of another kind, one which exhibits the internal grid of her mental and emotional functioning.

As I became more and more familiar with Hesse's work, Wilfred Bion's (1967) dictum that one approach each clinical session without memory and desire acquired a new meaning. I could feel my own mind being rebuffed by Hesse's works. Neither my memory of other abstract painters nor my desire for more coherence served me in any useful way. I had to drop all my preconceptions and meet Hesse where she needed to be met. Once I allowed myself to be pulled into this enigmatic engagement, I could begin to feel myself in the body of her language, made up of absurd, sometimes tightly woven, sometimes disintegrating, sculptural elements.

The exhibition begins with what most critics assume to be one of Hesse's early self-portraits. *Untitled, 1960* (Figure 1) shows



Figure 1. *Untitled 1960*. Oil on canvas. Robert Miller Gallery, New York. The Estate of Eva Hesse, Courtesy Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zürich.



Figure 2. Eva Hesse with her 1965 reliefs. *An Ear in a Pond* (1965) and *2 in 1* (1965), Photo: Manfred Tischer, Düsseldorf.

the head of a young girl, painted with thick grey strokes and with yellow paint thickly dripping down as hair. The head is slightly bent to the right, the eyes appear like holes piercing through grey matter, and an orange brushstroke serves as a mouth. The child's oversized face sits heavily on a pair of small shoulders, evoking an impression that this young girl, with her disheveled blonde hair, is burdened by the weight she has to carry in the world and absorb in her mind. The pronounced asymmetry of the girl's eyes resembles Eva Hesse's own forelorn look in the photograph in which she holds up her later works, *An Ear in a Pond* and *2 in 1* (Figure 2). There are a few other oil

paintings portraying this young, melancholic girl, but one has the impression that these early childlike drawings became too personal and too revelatory for Hesse's artistic purposes and gradually had to be abandoned. As Anne Wagner (1996) writes, "Hesse's statement seems less a move towards self-revelation than a professional self-identification" (p. 201). In her conscious wish to become a more analytical artist, more interested in seeing how things worked rather than what they represented, Hesse seemed to have taken from these early oil paintings a focus on the eye, the gaze, and the look. In a multitude of black and greyish ink drawings, Hesse plays with wishes to be looking out at the world and to look into the depths of her own troubled psyche and soul. "Figure 69" seems to capture the simultaneous function of the eye as an organ that is looking out into the world, taking in and absorbing visual elements and sensations, while at the same time transmitting, through the lightness or heaviness of the gaze, the internal state of one's being. From interviews with Hesse, we know that she was conflicted about the separation between her life and art. At one moment, she felt that "in my inner soul, art and life are inseparable," but at another moment she pronounces the idea that "you can't combine art and life" (pp. 200-201).

II.

The delicacy that speaks through these warm, soft-edged, somewhat childlike ink drawings comes to a sudden halt as Hesse seems to have sought out an utterly new way of expressing herself in starkly vibrant colors and geometric, mechanical forms. The visitor to the show is invited to imitate this abrupt internal shift in Hesse's art by being obliged to traverse an entire hallway to reach the next room of the exhibition. There the viewer is greeted by a wide selection of brightly colored drawings of uniquely formed shapes and squiggles. The starkness of the contrast is baffling, as the viewer is expelled from the realm of dark, intuitive, sensuous, and melancholic ink drawings to a sphere of bright, scribbled drawings that allude to an inner world that is scratched in disarray. *Untitled 1962* (Figure 3) and *Untitled 1962* suggest that the formerly somber world has



Figure 3. *Untitled (1962)*. Felt-tip pen, pencil and oil crayon on paper. Sarah-Ann and Werner H. Kramarsky, NY.

exploded into pieces and fragments that are accidentally held in check by the frame of the papers' edges. At the same time, these 1962 hurly-burly drawings suggest a freedom and intensity that insinuate a breakthrough in Hesse's own relationship to her art work. *ArtNews*, at the initial exhibition of these works in 1963, captured the vivacity of these works:

She smashes down on little cut-out shapes, half-erased ideas,
Repetitive linear strikings, and sets up new relationships.
She invents
dimension and position with changes of kinds of stroke,
levels of intensity,
starting and breaking momentum, and by redefining a sense
of place from
forces which are visible coefficients of energy.¹

¹Hesse's paintings evoke strong echoes of the works of Twombly, Winters, and Mitchell.

Thinking of Bion (1965) again, I was struck that in these frenetic drawings Hesse expresses a readiness to explore and confront her own internal chaos, the truth that Bion called O. Influenced by the Surrealists' automatic writing, Hesse appears ready to give herself over to an automatic process, through which she does not have to muster any concerns for aesthetic beauty, coherence, or illusion, but instead can give free flow to the disorder she experiences inside and outside herself. *Untitled 1962* (Figure 3) and *Untitled 1962* can then be thought of as depictions of raw energy, of undigested irregular forms and wiggles, starkly reminiscent of Bion's (1965) concept of beta-elements. Grotstein (2000) describes beta-elements as "the whirling swarm of infinities and fearful symmetries and asymmetries coursing across the inner, boundless landscape... equivalent to, noumena, things-in-themselves" (p. 294). These intensely energetic drawings depict a fractured world in which each shape is questioned, disassembled, and then stuck back together in its idiosyncratic forms. Some drawings look like pieces of shattered glass. Some form their own mosaic landscapes; others look like fragments left over from an explosion, splattered all over the ground. Yet, gradually, the chaos of the 1964 drawings becomes ordered into recognizable containers and repetitive patterns that lend an aura of childish innocence to her drawings. The shapes become more geometrical and mechanical, and different body parts can eventually be made out. As though in a picture puzzle, penises, breasts, legs, and fingers can be detected, yet without exuding any sexual charge. Rather, they strike one as Hesse's own primordial version of penises and breasts reconstructed from her fragmented and frenetic shapes and pieces. It is as if Hesse were rediscovering the world of male and female organs at her own pace, like a little child who is about to uncover the world of sexual differences.

In 1965 Hesse turned to large-scale sculptures, with *Ringaround Arosie* (Figure 4) being the first prominent one. The combination of materials involved in this sculptural painting foreshadows the passion with which Hesse would devote herself to the exploration of individual materials and textures. Pencil,



Figure 4. Ringaround Arosie, 1965. Pencil, acetone, varnish, enamel paint, ink, and cloth-covered electrical wire on paper-mache and Masonite. Gallery Ferndale, MI. The Estate of Eva Hesse, Courtesy Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zürich.

acetone, varnish, enamel paint, ink, and cloth-covered electrical wire on paper-mache and masonite are all tightly woven into the depiction of a large protruding breast with a smaller breast or simple toy sitting on top of or rolling around the larger breast. Hesse described *Ringaround Arosie* as “a breast and penis” (see Catalogue, 2002, p. 165) but left unclear whether she intended the bigger circle as the breast and the smaller one as penis. We are uncertain whether Hesse thought of both shapes as combinations of breast and penis, with the penis protruding out of the breast. Wagner (1996) writes that Hesse was known

to want “to control the play of reference and gender when her own work is concerned” (p. 200), and I think *Ringaround Arosie*, illustrates the complexity of that control. Breasts, or, better, “breastly forms” and penises, or “penisly forms,” were to become areas of intense focus for Hesse’s imagery, and she is said to have become upset at one point when her fellow minimalist painters recommended that she make her art more sexual. I do not think that Hesse exerted such a tight command over her imagery of the female and male sexual organs, not because she did not want other references to exist, but because she was compelled to bring to paper and later into a three-dimensional space the combined sexual figures as she saw them in her internal mind. Hesse’s earlier organic, fluctuating drawings, in conjunction with the later sculptural paintings, recall the Kleinian (1929) concept of a combined parent figure, an idea that was later elaborated upon by Donald Meltzer (1973). Hinshelwood (1991) writes, “The phantasy of the combined parent figure is that the parents, or rather their sexual organs, are locked together in permanent intercourse. . . . The combined parent figure is expressed as mother with the father inside her. . . . the idea of the maternal penis, and indeed of one concealed inside the vagina” (p. 242). Klein, and later Meltzer, wrote about the intense terror and fright that resides in the child’s mind with the persecutory power associated with this combined figure. They also spoke of the envy that the child experiences at being excluded from the parental sexual union and the child’s finding it intolerable to be barred from this powerful bond.

Meltzer (1973) expresses the view that the persecutory nature of the combined vagina/penis object has to be worked through for a person to become sexually and aesthetically creative. If this internal combined parental object is too powerful and is clamoring for too much attention, the person will feel overwhelmed and disorganized and helplessly subjugated to these mighty, intrusive figures. Hesse’s preoccupation with breast, penises, and testicles suggests such a complex relationship to her own internal sexual configurations and allows one to speculate that she was using her artwork to free herself from these powerful internal demons. Devoid of any eroticism, her

depictions of the combined breast/penis organs as in *Ringaround Arosie*, *An Ear in a Pond*, or *2 in 1* (see Figure 2) suggest a view of these sexual organs as hard and unyielding, stark and void, menacing and vulnerable all at the same time. In *Ringaround Arosie*, the breasts are invaded by piercing penises; in *An Ear in a Pond* they are leaking; and in *2 in 1* they are ashen, hollow, and threatening. Only the rosy colors and playful titles detract from the potential fears Hesse is portraying. Even though Hesse was consciously determined not to expose her personal history in her art, her history nonetheless speaks through them. I am very careful not to get lost in psychobiographical speculations when the artist has not provided the necessary details. In the case of Hesse, however, we are in possession of diaries that chronicle her artwork, and so we have some sense of her thinking.

In addition, the sheer repetition of the theme of sexual organs, combined with the difficult and remote access allowed the viewer, strongly suggests that Hesse was working through her tremendous yearnings for and fright of an accessible parental figure in these sculptural paintings. In other words, I am proposing that the relationship Hesse constructs between her viewers and her art mirrors the relationship she found to exist between her parents, and between her mother and herself. The solid distance that is established in a work like *Ringaround Arosie* alludes to the remote relationship she endured with her mother. Breasts are portrayed as flattened and controlled, penises are fierce and powerful, and the combined objects of breast and penis are darkly menacing. Although *Ring Around Arosie*, *An Ear in a Pond*, and *2 in 1* are better known as examples of her feminist works, her political alliance conceals far more infantile desires and fears, which are then repetitively wrapped up in tight bindings of ropes and electrical wires. Hesse's diary uncovers the tremendous depression she was experiencing at the time, and probably for much of her life. On December 12, 1965, she wrote, "My yearly fall into the pit of darkness is upon me . . . and as I am working constantly with a great intensity, it is mounting inside. The intensity with which I work is translated then into the gloom of despair. All my stakes are in my work."

I have given up all else. . . . I do feel I am an artist—and one of the best” (quoted in Lippard, 1992, p. 56).

Instead of sinking into a sea of “Untitled” objects, Hesse provides names for the first time for these three-dimensional paintings and with them invites the viewer into a play on words and meanings. The tight control she exercises in her imagery is curiously matched by her childlike play on words. Take “*Ring Around Arosie*, a play on the nursery rhyme “Ring around the rosie, Pocket full of posies, Ashes, ashes, All fall down.” Using the first line of the nursery rhyme, Hesse alludes to the whole song, the content and meaning of which have been fiercely debated by folklorists. The song refers either to the plague, around which one had to form a circle, or to a dance song in which children form a circle. Hence, Rosie could either mean the first symptoms of the bubonic plague, ashes being the metaphor for the cremated plague victims; or Rosie may be a name for a girl or a flower around which little girls form a ring and fall down on their knees as the rhyme comes to an end. Analogously, I suggest that Hesse’s *Ring Around Arosie* plays between shades of meanings that suggest lightness and playfulness, on one hand, somberness and fright, on the other. A ring can signify either a border against the outside world or a circle that contains the inside world. In many of her later works, Hesse continues to struggle at the edge of inside–outside, chaos–order, entanglement and control. Lippard (1992), a close friend of Hesse’s writes, “Hesse was panic-stricken at the prospect of abandonment, and at the same time buoyed up to face it by her increased confidence in her work, a confidence still and always importantly rooted in the mutual respect of several close friends” (p. 56). Although Hesse formed many intimate friendships with her fellow minimalist artists, her working methods reveal a woman who was fiercely independent, who created her own imagery as well as her own vocabulary. I believe that the early loss of her mother gave her the sense that she had to fend for herself. Since her mother failed so profoundly to help her make the transition to the larger social world, Hesse had to search and find her own way, her own language, and imagery to define and shape her identity.

III.

Hang-Up (Figure 5) begins the next phase of Hesse's work. Like her earlier art, for which she took commonly available cloth, wood, and steel and then used them for very uncommon purposes, the frame for *Hang-Up* is made of cord and rope and is bandaged up as one would bandage up a broken arm. A metal rod emerges out of the frame and forms a big loop, the other end of which is anchored in the bottom of the frame. Rather than hanging up, this metal rope is hanging down, looking more like a jump rope through which the viewer would be tempted to jump were it not for the watchful eyes of the museum guard



Figure 5. *Hang-Up*, 1966. Acrylic paint on cloth over wood, acrylic paint on cord over steel tube. The Art Institute of Chicago. The Estate of Eva Hesse, Courtesy Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zürich.

who makes sure that such playful activity does not occur. Hesse describes her own structure as totally absurd, “It is the most ridiculous structure that I ever made and that is why it is really good. It has a kind of depth I don’t always achieve and that is the kind of depth or soul or absurdity or lie or meaning or feeling or intellect that I want to get (quoted in Lippard, 1992, p. 56). Hesse loved to explore the realm of absurdity, of contradictions, oppositions, and incomprehensions and was fascinated by producing little and big “nothings,” works that evoked pure nonsense. *Hang-Up* subverts all different genres and puts them upside down. Up is down, down is up; the frame contains a piece of any wall that it is attached to. The center is off center, and, once again, it is Hesse’s particular view of the world that she invites us to look at. It is as if she were saying to the viewer, “Come in and jump into my crazy, absurd world. Leave all your ordinary perceptions behind and take for granted nothing that you once thought you knew. A frame is never necessarily there to surround a piece of art; it may have a life of its own and refuse to be constrained to encircling the piece of art. So give up what you know, hang up what you have grown up to believe, and jump into my world, which I am redefining and recreating for myself and for you if you are willing to come along with me.”

To call the piece *Hang-Up* points also to the fragility and the strength of language. We know from de Saussure (1966) how capricious the connection is between the signifier and the signified. We randomly match the sound of “hang-up” with the signifier of an upward motion and hence are startled when we see a downward motion. By poking fun at the conventionality of language, Hesse subtly unsettles us and shows us how arbitrary our social conventions are. Although we collectively agree to these conventions most of the time in order to be able to communicate and interact with one another, this tight conventionality can be readily disturbed by a simple shift in the connection between signifier and signified and thereby reveal the utter randomness of our existence. Of course, in the arbitrary connection between signifier and signified, words gain their own prominence, form their own associations, and

craft their own expressions. So what is Hesse hung up on? A desire to explore absurdity? A desire to use materials in a novel way? A desire to reappropriate for herself a world that seemed so alienating to her? Describing *Hang-Up*, James Meyer (2002) writes, “She [Hesse] wanted an art that verged on the ‘ugly,’ a form that appeared odd and unresolved, although she did not seek to ‘destroy’ form outright. . . . It is awkward and incommensurate, difficult to hold in one’s mind. . . . The absurd, in Hesse’s sense, is an effect of exaggeration or in-betweenness. It is not a ‘thing’ but ‘the sensation of the thing’” (p. 60).

It is important to note that Hesse gave a great deal of thought to how her objects were to be hung. In a home movie, filmed by Dorothy Levitt Beskind, and shown at the exhibition, viewers had the rare opportunity to see young Eva Hesse in action. In this short black-and-white movie, Hesse is shown in her work studio, which is furnished with European Baroque furniture, but cluttered with her art pieces. Surprisingly, Hesse is dressed conservatively in a short skirt and sweater yet is seen moving around her fishnet balls and other penis-shaped sculptures; she is seriously concentrating on the way these “balls” are hung. In this movie, Hesse plays with the order and repetition of how her objects are hung and tries out various configurations and interconnections between them. There is an oddly domestic flavor to the setting, which creates a homey relationship to her idiosyncratic pieces. The movie reveals a woman who seems shy yet strongly determined in her vision, one who consistently lives at the edge of contradictions. Hesse is seen washing ropes in her bathtub, as if she were scrubbing ordinary clothes. In another scene, she gently strokes her piece *AccessionII*, a galvanized, steel box filled with plastic tubing. She caresses this metal box as if it were a cradle holding a baby who has to be treated with great care. The absurdity and wildness of Hesse’s pieces is so thoroughly unmatched by the girlish and conservative presentation of the artist herself that the viewer is curiously caught between the paradoxes among which Hesse appears to move effortlessly.

IV.

In 1966, the year her father died, and she divorces her husband, the focus of her works shifts away from concentrating on sexual fetishes, such as her tightly wrapped phallic objects and fishnet testicles, to an elaboration of the very materials with which she created and bound up her whimsical breasts and phalluses. One of her fishnet constructions is titled "*Untitled or Not Yet*" (1966), and as one observes her subsequent rope/string configurations, one gains the sense that the fishnet balls were not yet ready to drop but were about to come apart. Looking at *Ennead* (1966) (Figure 6), which incorporates the same downward movement

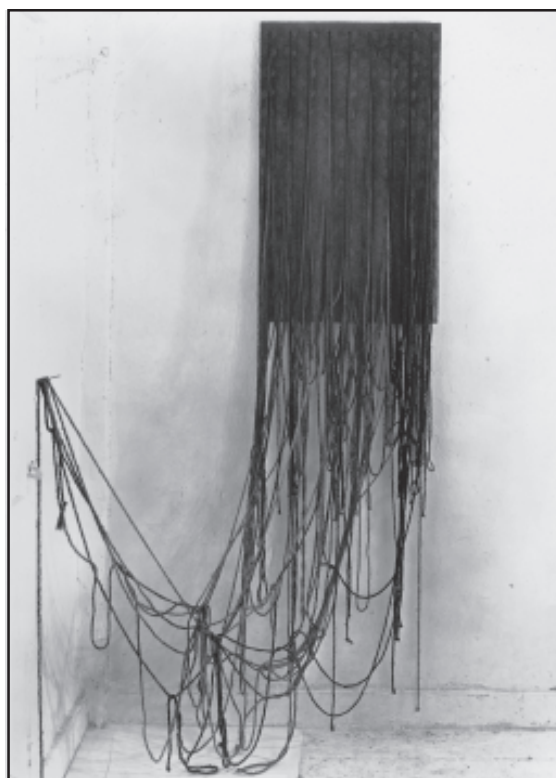


Figure 6. *Ennead* 1966. Paint and papier-mache on plywood with dyed string. Barbara Fish Lee. The Estate of Eva Hesse, Courtesy Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zürich.

as *Not Yet*, the viewer is left with the impression that the fishnet balls have finally dropped and that the liquid held in the plastic bags has leaked out, leaving behind merely the strings with which the nets were knotted. I do not know if the presence of her father inspired Hesse to keep her phallic objects tightly wrapped, yet it is remarkable how her constraints disappear as she is dealing with her father's death and the divorce from her husband. In one swoop, her works become softer and more fragile, depicting disintegration rather than a wrapped-up hard object. In her pieces, titled *Metronymic Irregularity I* (1966) (Figure 7), Hesse depicts threads running across three wooden panels in delicate, chaotic ways. Even though the initial impression is one of complete disorder, a hidden structure seems to exist behind the apparent confusion. In her portrayals of chaos, Hesse seems to have discovered on her own the essential rule of chaos theory, which holds that "the degree of irregularity remains constant over different scales. . . . Over and over again

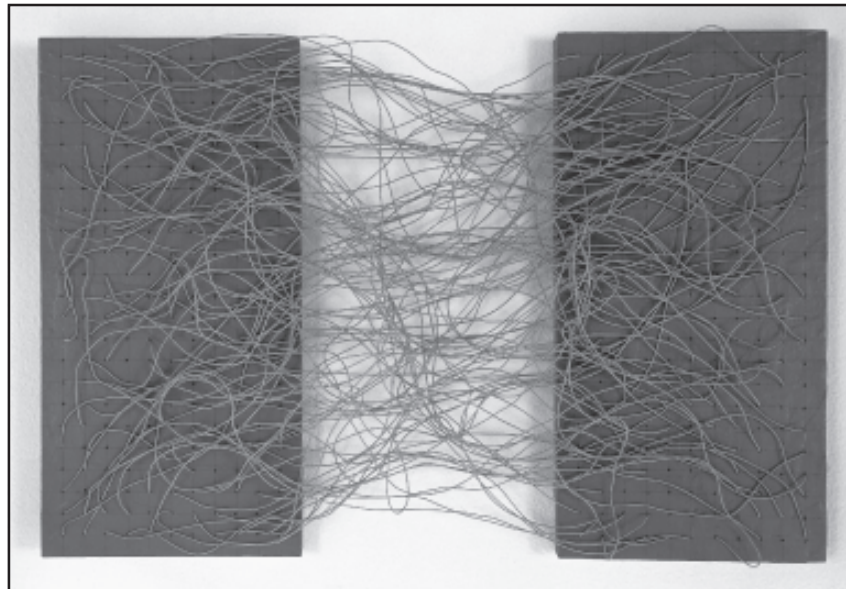


Figure 7. *Metronymic Irregularity I*, 1966. Paint and Sculp-Metal on wood with cotton-covered wire, Museum Wiesbaden, Germany. The Estate of Eva Hesse, Courtesy Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zürich.

the world displays a regular irregularity” (Gleick, 1987, p. 98). The structure Hesse discovers comes close to what chaos theorists call the phenomenon of “Strange Attractors,” which are a family of shapes, jagged, tangled, and fractured, that conceal an organizing principle measuring turbulence in fluids. Indeed, when one compares depictions of sound waves or weather patterns, Hesse’s metronomic irregularities evoke strong resemblances, as if she has succeeded in depicting the flow of raw energy or waves floating against a wall.

I agree with Lippard’s observation that “*Metronymic Irregularity* should be seen less as a rupture than as a bridge, drawing on her previous works as much as they prefigure that which would follow” (quoted in Catalogue, 2002, p. 185). Through *Metronymic Irregularity*, Hesse revisits, with a calmer, more distant point of view, the utter chaos she depicted in her earlier, brightly colored ink drawings. Now, instead of working from the disorder she experienced inside, she has evolved to become a spectator of it, or an “experimenter” who, according to chaos theory, “develops an intimacy with matter as a sculptor does with clay, battling it, shaping it, and engaging it” (Gleick, 1987, p. 125). Instead of feeling disturbed by her inner turbulence, Hesse no longer needs to control the disorder outside of her but expresses it within the patterns and rhythms as she senses them. For the last three years of her life, Hesse primarily explores the raw ingredients and textures that have constituted her artwork. Although Hesse was not interested in symbolic representations, the works of her last years take her even further away from making allegorical statements. In her continuous attempt to downgrade the art object as object, Hesse sinks her body and mind into the very materiality of the objects that she now lets speak for themselves.

V.

Strings, fiberglass, and latex became the primary elements to which Hesse was to devote herself for the rest of her brief art career. Her frequent use of ropes and strings recalls Winnicott’s (1958) ideas about string functioning as a denial of separation, as an extension of communication, and as a symbol of union. He wrote,

String can be looked upon as an extension of all other techniques of communication. String joins just as it also helps in the wrapping up of objects and in the holding of unintegrated material. In this respect, string has a symbolic meaning for everyone; an exaggeration of the use of string can easily belong to the beginnings of a sense of insecurity or the idea of a lack of communication. . . . As a denial of separation, string becomes a thing in itself, something that has dangerous properties and needs to be mastered [p. 19].

Strings and ropes were powerful tools for Hesse to express and contain her internal confusion and despair. Frightened by her insecurities and her deep sense of abandonment, Hesse initially defended against her internal demons by roping in her anxieties, which were most likely related to the sudden loss of her mother. Just at a time when mothers usually help their daughters transition from being girls to becoming young women, her mother could no longer bear to live. Left to her own devices, Hesse had to find out on her own what it meant to be a woman and what it meant to be left by the woman who bore her. Through the relationships that Hesse evokes with her viewers in her early works, it is evident that she used her ropes and strings as a way to defend against the loss of her mother and to hold in, as Winnicott wrote, the unintegrated material. String in pieces like *Ring Around Arosie* becomes armor to keep the world outside and to keep her troubled self inside. The works from 1966 constitute a kind of manifesto announcing rigorous statements about male and female sexuality. I suspect that Hesse was determined to turn her painful loss into a virtue so that the art works could function as a shield rather than as an expression of her pain. However, with the death of her father in 1966, which Lippard (1992) describes as a time that “all the terrors of her first parental abandonment surfaced again” (p. 78), Hesse allows herself to become vulnerable again. Now the strings become untied and begin to communicate rather than defend against her utter helplessness and confusion. As she is admitting more to her internal despair, she is beginning to experience herself as a stronger artist.

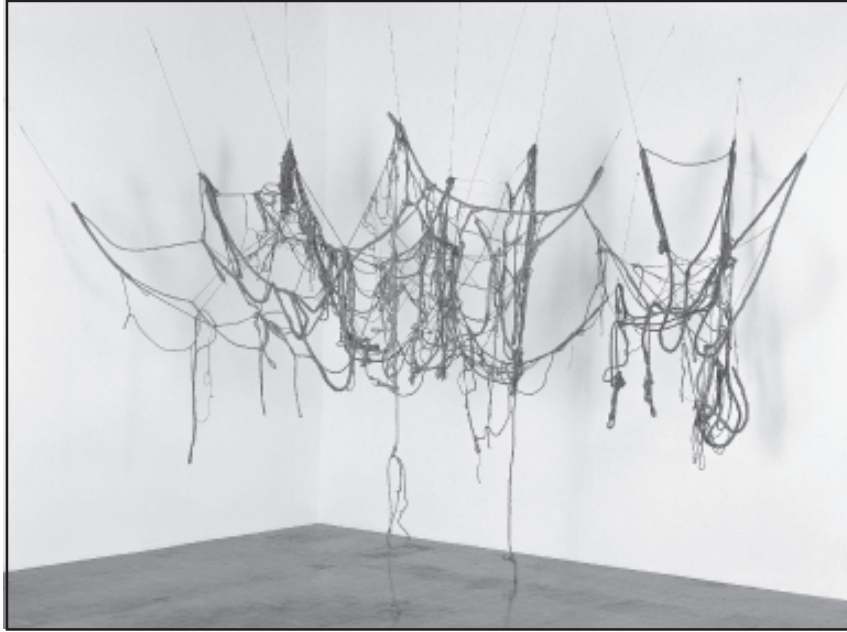


Figure 8. *Untitled 1970*. Latex and filler over rope and string with metal hooks, Whitney Museum of Modern Art, NY. The Estate of Eva Hesse, Courtesy Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zürich.

I do not know how Hesse's mother killed herself, but I wonder if she might have hung herself with a rope. Certainly the expression that "one's life is hanging from a thin thread" speaks to the fragility that characterizes some of Hesse's last works, such as *Right After* (1969) and *Untitled 1970* (Figure 8). Even before Hesse was forced to deal with the terrors of her own impending death, she had become acutely aware of the temporality of her artworks. Unlike most artists, who create to preserve and to extend history beyond their own mortal lives, Hesse was becoming acutely interested in the short-livedness of her sculptures. As she turned her interest to liquid rubber and explored its internal mechanics, she found a medium that galvanized her mind. The fragility, quick hardening, and semitransparent texture more closely mirrored Hesse's own internal state than did any of the other materials she had

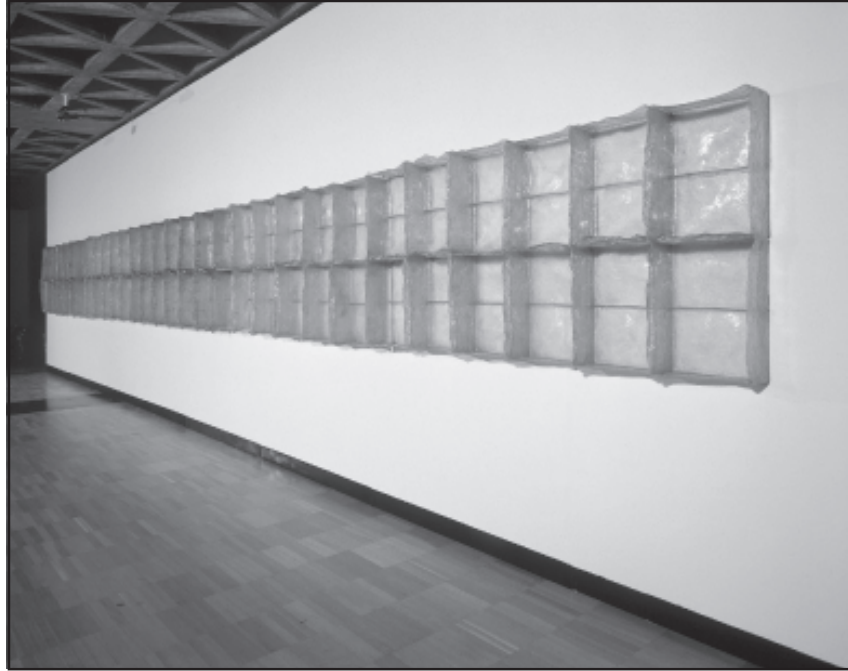


Figure 9. Fiberglass and polyester resin. Five Units. One unit each collection of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Museum Wiesbaden, Germany; Daros Collection, Switzerland; two units collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, NY. The Estate of Eva Hesse, Courtesy Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zürich.

employed thus far. Hesse produced some of the most aesthetically pleasing and peaceful sculptures by pouring liquid rubber and combining it with fiberglass. The transparency and repetition of a work like *Sans II*, 1968 (Figure 9) situates the viewer in a meditative state that allows for an inward look.² *Sans II* offers viewers an uncluttered space within which to follow their own reveries and freely project their fantasies into the empty, richly textured square cubicles. Its title suggests that Hesse was well aware of having finally reached a point where

² The inwardness that Hesse's later works evoke in the spectator is quite analogous to the meditative stance Andre and his collective of minimalists, as well as Judd, produce through their pieces of art.

she could be “*without*” a message or a defensive statement and give viewers the freedom to find their own meanings. By offering *without*s or little *nothings*, Hesse was able to create a magical aura that made time almost stand still, as she was beginning to run out of time herself.

Time, in its evanescence and in its permeability, became the theme of some of Hesse’s last works. *Aught* (1968)

is four units joined of latex and canvas sheets, stuffed with polyethylene drop cloths and rope. These four elements hang from grommets in their upper corners, and they are evenly spaced about as far apart from one another as they are from the floor. Over time, the units of *Aught* have puckered in the centers and darkened at the edges; in some cases the top borders have folded over and fused with the underlying latex. Once almost identical, they still bear a family resemblance, but each seemed to have aged differently [Catalogue, 2002, p. 253].

Like *Sans II* (Figure 9), *Aught* appears to offer nothing but the very materiality of canvas that has aged over time and produces pieces, each of which takes on a life of its own. The interplay between the canvas and the polyethylene produces an absorptive state reminiscent of Mark Rothko’s famous paintings.

Aught is one of Hesse’s works that is profoundly fragile and is literally disappearing because portions of the surface can liquefy and drip. For Hesse, art was not to be permanent but to vanish. Toward the end of her life, Hesse knew that many of her artworks, like her, had an abbreviated life. She said, “At this point I feel a little guilty about when people want to buy [it]. I think they know but I want to write them a letter and say it is not going to last. I’m conflicted. . . . Life doesn’t last, art doesn’t last, it doesn’t matter” (Catalogue, 2002, p. 254). Hesse’s last delicate artworks bring to mind one of the vanishing monuments against fascism that was erected by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz in 1986 in Hamburg-Harburg, Germany. They built a 12-meter aluminum pillar designed to sink gradually into the ground. Visitors are invited to leave their names on the monument; and, the more people cover it with their names, the

faster it will disappear in to the ground. After several lowerings over the years, nothing will be left of the pillar. James Young (1993) describes this monument as a countermonument: “its aim is not to console but to provoke, not to remain fixed but to change, not to be everlasting but to disappear, not to be ignored by passerby but to demand interaction. . . . In this way, it functions as a valuable “counterindex” to the ways time, memory, and current history intersect at any memorial site (p. 30). Hesse’s artwork demands active interactions in similar ways and in so doing remains vividly present for and in our time. Hesse’s installations literally need the presence of someone who knew her and who knows the ways her works were to be hung. In her last meditative works Hesse strikes her viewers in the most immediate ways. Through her fading works Hesse seems to reach out from her own absence, inviting her viewers to look inward for their own memories, their own fading and their own passing presence in the world.

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