



Eva Hesse, *Contingent*, 1969. Cheesecloth, latex, fiberglass, 8 units, each 9 ½' x 3-4' (overall 350 h x 630 w x 109 d cm each panel). The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. © 2021 Estate of Eva Hesse. Galerie Hauser & Wirth

## Eva Hesse: Returning to the Source?

Ori Z. Soltes

Eva Hesse (1936–1970) plays an unusual role in the story of shaping and transforming artist identity in the onerous circumstances of the rise of Nazism and the consequent need[ for Jewish artists in particular to leave the Germany that was no longer what it had been and to find a way to resume their lives elsewhere. Hesse most certainly shaped an artistic life for herself in the United States. She came to be associated with the mid-1960s Post-Minimal *anti-form* trend in sculpture, participating in path-breaking New York exhibitions. She is well-known as a pioneer in the use of certain materials, such as fiberglass, plastics, and latex.

Minimalist art and, even more so, Post-Minimalist art, have often been viewed as forms of *anti-art* not only because of the reduced *artistic* content through stripping a work to its barest essentials that they by definition offer, but because they also offer a fundamental coldness, a psychological and emotional distancing from both the artist and the viewer. As anti-art they might be seen as offering a vocabulary to Jews rooted in an anti-iconic tradition—but they have engaged plenty of non-Jewish artists, and only a fraction of Jewish artists. While Hesse is considered important to both Minimalism and Post-Minimalism, she brought into play a distinctive and paradoxical warmth.

She was born into an observant Jewish family in Hamburg, in a Germany being devoured by the Nazis. She and her older sister were sent to the Netherlands in 1938—when she was barely two years old—through the Kindertransport program, but they were able to rejoin their parents several months later; the family moved on to England and was able to immigrate to the United States by 1939, settling in Manhattan’s Washington Heights.<sup>1</sup> This was an area of the city to which many Jewish refugees from Germany arrived during the years that followed, so one might imagine that young Eva’s awareness of the Holocaust and its implications were never very far from her consciousness as she grew up.

Her work has often been discussed in terms of feminism—her responding to the phallic rigidity of sculpture, its *maleness*, by the use not only of softer materials but also by means of works that may be seen as a satire of maleness. Thus, for instance, her *Repetition 19, III* (1968), may be seen as a work of anti-hardness [Fig. 1]: each nineteen-to-twenty-inch-tall fiberglass unit offers an obvious phallic form—translucent and softly slumping over. Her sculptures and drawings have also been said to reflect not only the painful experiences of her life in general but, in particular, her flight from the Nazis.



Fig. 1 Eva Hesse, *Repetition 19, III*, 1968. Fiberglass and polyester resin, nineteen units, each 19 to 20 1/4" (48 to 51 cm) x 11 to 12 3/4" (27.8 to 32.2 cm) in diameter. Museum of Modern Art 1004.1969.a-s. Gift of Charles and Anita Blatt. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY © 2021 Estate of Eva Hesse. Galerie Hauser & Wirth

Although that escape came when she was so young, the temporary separation from her parents must have been traumatic. (How long are a few months to the mind of a two-or-three-year-old?) Arthur Danto referred to her broadly as “cop[ing] with emotional chaos by reinventing sculpture through aesthetic insubordination, playing with worthless material amid the industrial ruins of a defeated nation that, only two decades earlier, would have murdered her without a second thought.”<sup>2</sup>

To whatever extent her sense of loss was born within the Holocaust experience as it directly or indirectly touched her, it would have been reinforced not only by the location of her New York childhood among German Jewish refugees but also by her parents’ divorce in 1944, her father’s remarriage the following year, the suicide of her mother one year later when Eva was ten, and later on, her own failed marriage as well as the death of her father shortly thereafter—in short, a succession of profound emotional traumas. In an ongoing diary begun in her teenage years, she discussed the relationship between her life and her work, so it is reasonable to place her work within the context of these related experiences of desertion.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the writer of a September, 1954, profile for *Seventeen* magazine (that suggested that she was a young artist to watch) comments on her self-described consciousness as a Holocaust survivor and its effect on her work—rendering it emotionally and intellectually deeper than it might have otherwise been: “. . . growing up with people who went through the ordeal of those years makes her look . . . very seriously beneath the surface of things.”<sup>4</sup>

In the context of this volume’s overall focus on Jewish artists who came from Germany and elsewhere in the context of the Holocaust, Hesse stands out on the one hand in having arrived at such a young age that she grew up as an American. Her native language was as much English as German—but German as well as English. One might imagine the formation of her identity taking place simultaneously in two worlds: that of the Upper West Side of Manhattan, with all of its linguistic, cultural, social, and economic aspects; and that of her particular neighborhood with a largely immigrant community, a substantial percentage of which came as exiles from Jewish Germany. Unlike most kids born in and growing up in the United States, her childhood—and thus her identity—were certainly marked, not only by connections to German culture, but by an awareness of the Holocaust and how it led her family to become refugees.

Put another way, psychologically and emotionally, Eva was somewhere between an immigrant and a native, between *first-generation* Holocaust survivors and *second-generation* children of such survivors. An obvious question that one might pose is how the loss of homeland under the exilic conditions imposed on them by the Holocaust influenced the emotional conditions of her parents, whether that might have led to both the divorce and the suicide that must have had such a heavy impact on young Eva. If one adds to this complex matrix of displacement and death the enhanced sensitivities that one can recognize in her as an artist—or simply as Eva Hesse—then one can hardly be shocked at the unique contribution to the American art scene that she already had begun to offer in her twenties.

The precocious Hesse in fact graduated from New York’s School of Industrial Art at age 16, in 1952; she shortly thereafter enrolled at Pratt Institute of Design, but dropped out after a year. She interned the following year at *Seventeen* magazine (which is also when the profile of her appeared) and began taking classes at the Art Students’ League. From 1954 to 1957 she

studied at Cooper Union and at Yale University by 1957, earning a BA degree there in 1959. Aside from the intense intelligence that these learning experiences suggest, there are three aspects of her development as an artist that demand notice. One was the heavy influence on her of Abstract Expressionism, which had emerged by the end of the 1940s as the preeminent new form of painting within Western Art. Its key practitioners were largely located in New York City—hence often loosely referred to as the New York School—and were putting the United States on the world map as an art center.

More precisely, New York was supplanting Paris as hegemonic, particularly after the war, not only because of the new, gargantuan energy that characterized Abstract Expressionism but because of all that had happened to Paris during the war. Its leaders were part of the same generation as artists like Ben Shahn and Raphael Soyer, but by the end of the 1940s had turned away from figurative representation. By the early 1950s the Abstract Expressionists had bifurcated in two stylistic directions—actionist and chromaticist, also called gestural and color field—and most of the latter (most notably: Marc Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Adolph Gottlieb) were secular Jews.

For the most part, in fact, Hesse's early work consisted of abstract drawings and paintings [Fig. 2]. The second point of note, however, is that at Yale, Hesse studied with Joseph Albers—himself a refugee immigrant from Germany. He had arrived after the demise of the



Bauhaus where he had been a key faculty member, together with his wife, Anni Albers, initially teaching at Black Mountain College in North Carolina.<sup>5</sup> Albers, who headed Yale's department of design, was in the process of becoming one of the most influential teachers in the visual arts in the twentieth century. As a painter he had, most specifically in his series *Homage to the Square*, articulated color theory by exploring chromatic interactions with nested square forms, thereby engendering a subtle shift within Chromatic Abstraction toward a more Minimalist sensibility.

Fig. 2 Eva Hesse, *No Title (Self-portrait)*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 16 x 18 in. (40.64 x 45.72 cm) May be in a private collection; it was auctioned on 19 October 2004 by Bonhams in London  
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The third point of note regarding Eva Hesse's emergence as an artist in the late 1950s and early 1960s is that, returning to New York after graduating from Yale, she became friends with a handful of other young artists like herself, all of whom were further carrying visual art toward Minimalism. Donald Judd, Yayoi Kusama, and in particular, Sol LeWitt (1928–2007) would become pioneers not only in Minimalism, but in LeWitt's case, Conceptual Art. As one of the fathers of this art form, LeWitt shaped austere, geometric sculpture (often painted white) and produced drawings and paintings—directly on walls; sometimes an entire room, including its ceiling and doors—comprised of rhythmic repetitions of lines and shapes and patterns. The totality of a given composition was thought out, plotted out, articulated before pigments would be applied to their surfaces—usually by assistants, so that the artist was the creator of the painting without actually being the painter.

Hesse became particularly close to LeWitt; her warm friendship with him continued until the end of her life. They corresponded frequently and he is famously said to have advised her—in 1965, when she was at a point of being filled with doubts—to “stop [thinking] and just *do!*” Their friendship clearly helped stimulate both artists to develop their work—and both went on to become influential figures in the art world by the end of the decade.<sup>6</sup> She became an essential part of the Post-Minimalist urge to question the geometric rigidity of Minimalism as well as the limitations of Pop Art—both of which had themselves displaced the heroic scale and gesture of Abstract Expressionism from its position of hegemony not long before.

In the midst of these various artistic developments, Hesse married sculptor Tom Doyle in November 1961, and the two of them participated in an Alan Kaprow *Happening* in August 1962, in Woodstock, New York.<sup>7</sup> This may be where she made her first three-dimensional work of art: a costume for the *Happening*.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, her primary media at that point were still painting and drawing; she had a one-person exhibition of works on paper at the Allan Stone Gallery on the Upper East Side of Manhattan in 1963.

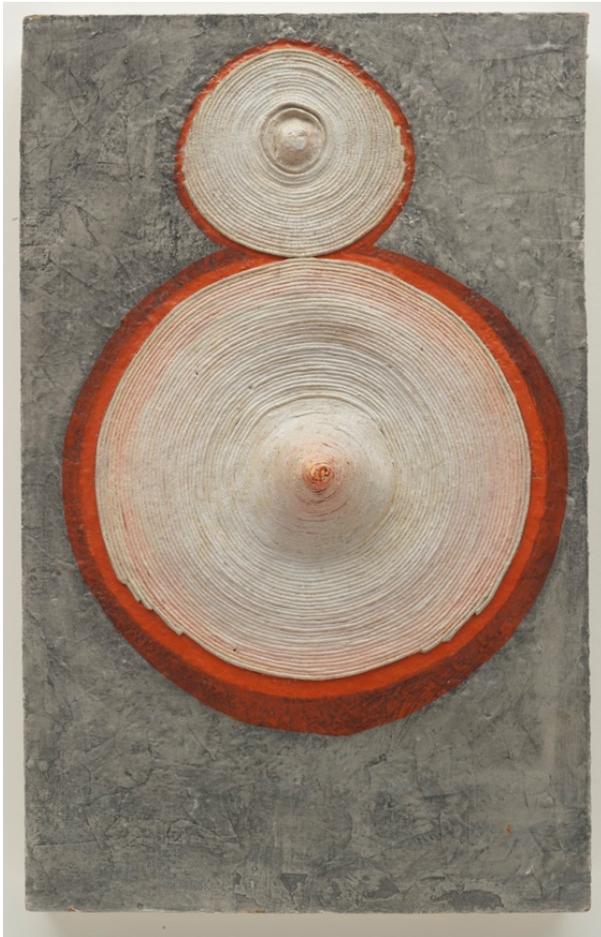
The last several clauses in Danto's comment, quoted above, provoke an observation. He refers to the fact that Hesse and Doyle lived and worked in an abandoned textile mill in Kettwig an der Ruhr, in Germany, for fifteen months (1964–1965). They had moved to Germany to pursue an artist's residency at the invitation of German industrialist and collector, Friedrich Arnhard Scheidt. So at the age of twenty-eight *Hesse went back to the country that had spit her family out*.

Hesse was apparently not happy to be back in Germany.<sup>9</sup> While her memories of it cannot have been extensive, given (again) how young she was when she left, one might suppose that, aside from whatever other psychological and emotional issues the return to the un-homeland provoked, the fact that her marriage was falling apart at that time reinforced a sense of emotional isolation and desolation to which the physical context—the industrial combined with post-industrial abandonment within the land that had rejected her and her family—would have added. Living and working in an abandoned textile mill, under this combination of circumstances, cannot have generated overly cheerful emotions.

On the other hand, however, the largely negative experience offered a positive, transformative side. The building still contained machine parts, tools, and materials from the purposes it had served previously, and the angular forms of these disused machines and tools

served as inspiration for Hesse's complex mechanical drawings and paintings. More than that, within the industrial space of the German site she began sculpting with some of the materials that had been left behind in the abandoned factory.

Her first works at that time were vibrantly colored reliefs made of cloth-covered cord, electrical wire, and Masonite—the first work was entitled *Ringaround Arosie*, which featured these materials—and like this one, subsequent works also offered playful titles like *Fighter from Decatur* and *Oomamaboomba*.



The title of *Ringaround Arosie* (1965) was offered as a tribute to her recently pregnant friend, Rosalyn Goldman. It also plays, tongue-in-cheek, on the children's ditty that accompanies playground games—but which ultimately derives from the grim reality of plague-ridden, medieval Europe. The “ring around the rosie[s]” refers to the red, circular rashes that began on a plague victim's skin; “pocket full of posie[s]” intended to protect one from the Plague; the “ashes, ashes, all fall down” referring to those who nonetheless die from the plague and are burned. That sort of paradox—child-game innocence and death through suffering—seems particularly appropriate to creation inspired in the land of destruction that transforms ugly industrial equipment like covered electrical wire into a work of beauty, and plays between the two dimensions of painting and color and the three dimensions of colorless sculpture [Fig. 3].

Fig. 3 Eva Hesse, *Ringaround Arosie*, 1965. Pencil, acetone, varnish, enamel paint, ink, and cloth covered electrical wire on papier-mâché and masonite, 26 3/8 x 16 1/2 x 4 1/2 in. (67 x 41.9 x 11.4 cm). Museum of Modern Art 240.2005. Fractional and promised gift of Kathy and Richard S. Fuld, Jr. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/ Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. © 2021 Estate of Eva Hesse. Galerie Hauser & Wirth

More precisely: three pigments define this work: against a backdrop of ash gray and black—“ashes, ashes,” whether in the Black Plague or Nazi Germany's crematoria—a small circular form is stacked on a larger one, both dominated by milk-white (the color, in traditional Western symbolism, also, of virgin innocence and purity) and surrounded by lush red (the color of blood, with its traditional implications of life, death, and sacrifice—and in the plague context, of pre-suppurating sores). The building up of the relief's larger circle, with its infinitizing

striations of painted-over, cloth-covered wire and its central, pink-red “peak” suggests a stylized breast. If this lower element assumes, in part, a nurturing quality, the smaller upper element, with its deflated/inflated center, fails at that potential task—resonating, unconsciously perhaps, from the artist’s double experience of early abandonment by her mother and her homeland.

The artist’s *Untitled* of the following year expands her vocabulary of spherical relief sculpture with the same primary material—wound and painted-over cord—while reducing the pigment to gray alone: a mound that, whether or not one asserts a breast-like intention for it, *is* in any case a swollen *mound* [Fig. 4].

Fig. 4 Eva Hesse, *No Title*, 1966.  
Acrylic paint, cord over papier-mache on wood, 7 ½ x 7 ½ x 4 in.  
(19 x 19 cm). The LeWitt Collection, Chester, CT. © 2021 Estate of Eva Hesse. Galerie Hauser & Wirth



On a microcosmic scale, this form echoes the long history of the dome and the cupola—from Michelangelo’s dome of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome back to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the Hagia Sofia in Istanbul, the Pantheon in Rome, and still further back to the Etruscan tombs at Cerveteri and the so-called Tomb of Atreus at Mycenae—with its implication, from without, of the idealized pregnant belly of Mother Earth herself; and from within, the dome of Father Heaven, with its seven planets representing deities on their monthly and seasonal linear routes around the earth.

The time in Germany and its aftermath were both parts of the period of doubts she expressed in letters to Sol LeWitt, to which he ultimately responded with the words quoted above—and also a time of creative burgeoning. Ultimately, if the year in the Ruhrgebiet completed the destruction of her marriage, it also marked a turning point in Hesse’s career. From here on she would continue to make uniquely conceived sculptures, which became the primary direction of her work. Her first solo show of sculpture was presented at the Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf, in 1965.

Returning to New York City at the end of the year, she found herself inspired to experiment further with unconventional materials like latex, fiberglass, and plastic. She regarded her large 1966 sculpture *Hang Up* (72 by 84 by 78 inches), to be her first significant work of art [Fig. 5].<sup>10</sup> She commented on it as offering “the first time my idea of absurdity or extreme feeling came through. . . . The whole thing is absolutely rigid, neat cord around the entire thing. . . . It is extreme and that is why I like it and don’t like it. . . . It is the most ridiculous structure that I ever made and that is why it is really good.”<sup>11</sup>

With tongue buried somewhat in cheek, she highlights a distinct yet marginal feature of a painting—a frame—then not only fills the “framed” space with nothing but the blank white



wall on which the piece hangs, but pulls the work three-dimensionally away from the wall by means of the bendable rod that protrudes into the exhibition space. (The frame is actually a stretcher wrapped with cord and hospital bandage and painted subtly from pale to dark ash gray with acrylic; the wrapping was done for her by Tom Doyle and Sol LeWitt). Moreover, there is a dynamic contrast between the perfectly neat lines of the rectangle and the awkward and irregular shape of that cord. And again, Hesse plays with language as much as with visuals by way of the title of this work: a play on words that refers both to the process of installing a painting on a wall and to an obsessive psychological state.

Fig. 5 Eva Hesse, *Hang Up*, 1966. Acrylic on cloth over wood; acrylic on cord over steel tube, (72 x 84 x 78 in. (182.9 x 213.4 x 198.1 cm). Through prior gifts of Arthur Keating and Mr. and Mrs. Edward Morris, 1988.130. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago Credit: The Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, NY © 2021 Estate of Eva Hesse. Galerie Hauser & Wirth

This work coincided chronologically with her stepping out in the avant-garde scene by being included in Lucy Lippard’s landmark 1966 “Eccentric Abstraction” exhibition at New York’s Fischbach Gallery. In November 1968, she exhibited her large-scale sculptures at Fischbach Gallery in an exhibition entitled *Chain Polymers*—which turned out to be her only solo sculpture exhibition in America during her lifetime, and firmly established her reputation.<sup>12</sup> The following year, her large piece *Expanded Expansion* was shown at the Whitney Museum in the exhibition *Anti-Illusion: Process/Materials*.<sup>13</sup>

This work, a gargantuan fiberglass, polyester resin, latex, and cheesecloth work—10 feet 2 inches high, with a variable width as much as 25 feet—exemplifies Hesse’s push against artistic convention, and specifically against the idea of monumental sculpture as defined by volume, mass, and verticality [Fig. 6]. Her stated purpose was to portray the essential absurdity of life. Not only is it a work of odd form—with enormous height and much greater width, but virtually no depth and no sense of mass; juxtaposing rigid, durable fiberglass poles (that structure its height) and fragile, rubber-covered cheesecloth (that structures its accordion-like variable width)—but its materials decompose over time, and it juxtaposes “order versus chaos, stringy versus mass, huge vs. small.”<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 6 Eva Hesse, *Expanded Expansion*, 1969. Fiberglass, polyester resin, latex, and cheesecloth. 10 feet 2 inches x 25 feet (309.9 x 762 cm) overall. Gift, Family of Eva Hesse, 1975. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY  
Digital image The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation / Art Resource, NY © 2021 Estate of Eva Hesse. Galerie Hauser & Wirth

The regularity of those poles also contrasts visually with the almost arbitrary and irregular parabolas made by the draping of the diverse yet identical cheesecloth panels: all alike and no two the same. Further, while the variable width of repeating units connects *Expanded Expansion* to Minimalism's interest in programmatic serialism, it pushes that idea toward the absurd, for "if something is absurd, it's much more exaggerated, [and] more absurd if repeated"<sup>15</sup>—which idea is underscored by the redundancy of the title.

A second work from the same year, *Contingent* (1969), in a manner somewhat different from *Expanded Expansion*, also uses multiple forms of similar shapes that resonate in their repetitiousness with that element, modularity, favored by Minimalism—albeit not organized, as in so many others of her works, in a grid or cluster—but with her own eccentric touches that carry into Post-Minimalism.<sup>16</sup> *Contingent* consists of eight large, banner-like, irregular, frameless panels, varying from 9 to 12 feet in height and from 3 to 4.5 feet in width. Made of latex-covered cheesecloth, embedded above and below in a translucent field of fiberglass, they hang from the ceiling in a parallel series at right angles to the wall, with some touching or sweeping the floor [Fig. 7].

Rather unusually for Hesse, aside from trying out some small test pieces, she did some drawings of how she wanted the piece to look. Although she had started it in November 1968, "before I got sick," perhaps her committing its form to drawings as the work proceeded reflected her concern that she might not be around to supervise its completion. In any case, because there are a good number of these drawings, many with extensive annotations, it is possible to get a glimpse into the evolution of the work: it changed from an apparent initial idea to have a single piece hung from the wall.



Fig. 7 Eva Hesse, *Contingent*, 1969. Cheesecloth, latex, fiberglass, 8 units, each 9 ½' x 3-4' (overall 350 h x 630 w x 109 d cm each panel). The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. © 2021 Estate of Eva Hesse. Galerie Hauser & Wirth

Hesse collapsed while in the midst of working on *Contingent*, on April 6, 1969, and was taken to New York Hospital, where she was operated on for a brain tumor on April 18. She resumed work after emerging from the hospital, but had to return for a second operation in August. Once again exiting the hospital in mid-October, albeit very weak, she insisted on working to complete the piece for an upcoming exhibition at Finch College Museum of Art (in December). Students from the School of Visual Arts (where she had been teaching part-time), together with friends—Bill Barrette, Jonathan Singer, and Douglas Johns—helped make enough pieces to complete the work, as it were: Barrette later noted that she “had planned to have at least nine irregular sheets of rubberized cheesecloth and fiberglass, but there was only enough latex for eight.”<sup>17</sup>

The fact of Hesse’s evolving oeuvre of sculpture did not mean, however, that her drawings and paintings were either of secondary importance to her or mere preparatory sketches for the sculptures (although there *were* plenty of these as well in the following years) [Fig. 8]. Gioia Timpanelli, in a charming and both joyful and poignant memoir, wrote of how, in

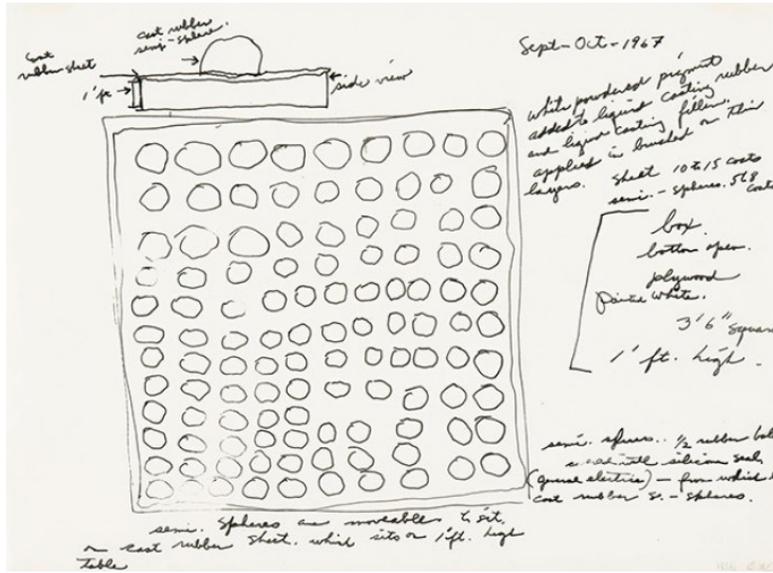


Fig. 8 Eva Hesse, *Study for Schema/Sequel*, 1967. Ink on tracing paper, 22.9 x 30.5 cm. Private collection. © 2021 Estate of Eva Hesse. Galerie Hauser & Wirth

the summer of 1969—in the calm before the storm of Hesse’s second operation, when it seemed that the first had simply been successful and she was passed her cancer—she and Eva shared a cabin in Woodstock, New York, at the Byrdcliffe Arts Colony, where Eva was engaged in a steady stream of paintings:

“Quartet” was a simple cabin that had had artists living in it for six months of the year for sixty-four years, starting with the original members of Byrdcliffe, a utopian Arts and Crafts community for which it was built. It had four small rooms strung out in a row like rectangular beads, with one exterior door facing a dirt clearing that ran the length of the building (*terrace* would be too grand a word) and another exterior door opening onto the steep incline of Mount Guardian, a small mountain of the Eastern Catskills that towered behind us. . . .

For our lives we would live simply and do nothing that would enervate or distract us from our work, and by “our” work we meant art, in all its complexities. “Excellence in art is all I care about,” she said more than once, meaning the excellence gotten after study and knowledge and practice with no preconceived dogma or formula. The operation for a brain tumor that she was told was benign had been successful, and in this “right after” period she felt alive and happy after having “narrowly escaped;” she felt she was being given incredible, beautiful time to continue making her art. Art made from the center of her dramatic life, art worthy of the mysterious inner place that held both object (event) and meaning that could bring you to a new way of being present. So we pledged ourselves to making art from the center of our world and committed life, a center that we both had touched, had experienced. Eva knew exactly what she was going to do: a series of paintings, paintings on paper.



Fig. 9 Materials used by Hesse during the summer of 1969 in Woodstock, New York. Photograph by Jill Sterrett © 2021 Estate of Eva Hesse. Galerie Hauser & Wirth

We learn at least three things from these paragraphs and what is embedded within them. One regards the intensity and seriousness of Eva's artistic intentions, which are directed to her painting [Fig. 9].

Two, that perhaps part of her relaxed intensity at that particular moment is related to the brain tumor that would be her final trauma—it would prove, in the long run (within the following year) not to be so benign so that no less than three operations would in the end fail to save her young life. It would be the horrifying endpoint to complement the horrifying beginning point of her awareness: the separation from her parents as a two-year-old thanks to the shaping of the Nazi regime.

Third: an examination of any number of the works that she produced that summer reveals both a continued interest in abstraction and yet, at the same time, an identifiable visual relationship with her physical surroundings.



Fig 10 Eva Hesse, *No Title (For Gioia)*, 1969. Private Collection © 2021 Estate of Eva Hesse. Galerie Hauser & Wirth

Her *Untitled (For Gioia)* [Fig. 10], for example, with its dramatic color contrast between the angled imagery in the center of the image and its gray outer “frame”: we can recognize in the rectilinear emphases the rectilinear aspects of the cabin—and the specifics of its four rooms and the “dirt clearing that ran the length of the building.” Yet the filling of those four “rooms” with eye-catching pigment in Hesse’s painting suggests not only the fervent act of painting that was going on within them, but the larger reality of those charmed weeks, with their loving conversations between Eva and Gioia over granola and tea and their balances between work and play, solitude and togetherness, hanging out *a deux* and going out to meet up with friends in the evenings.

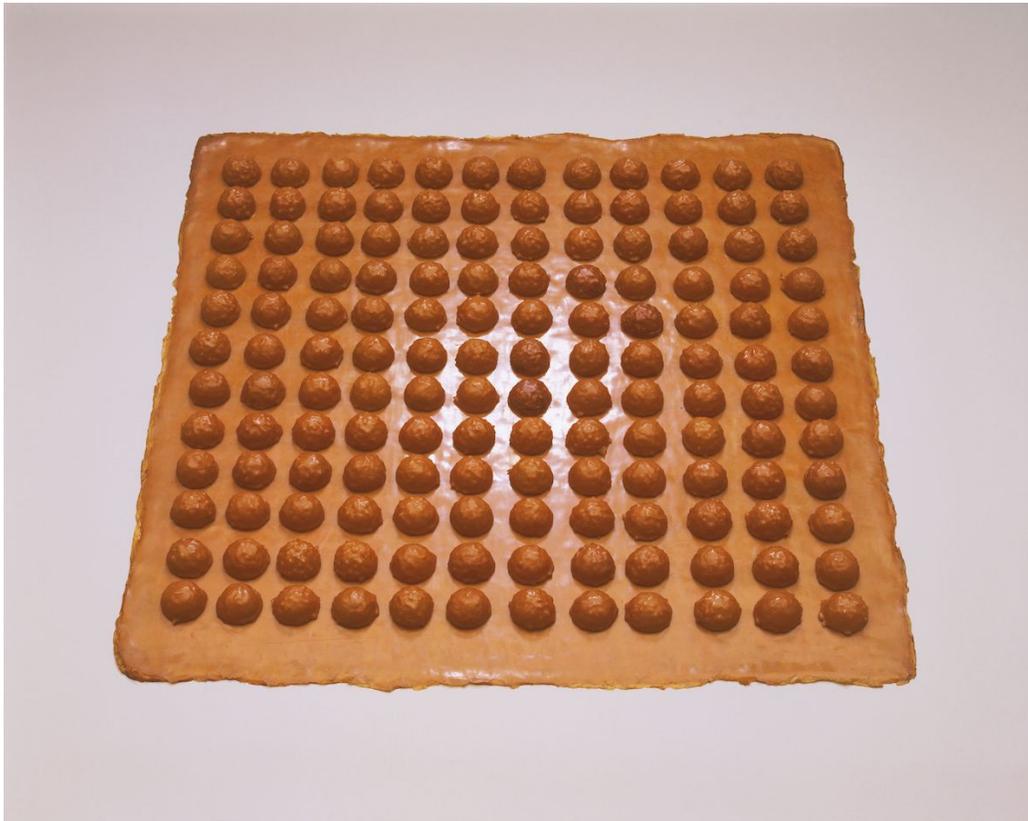


Fig. 11 Eva Hesse, *Schema*, 1967. Latex, 42 x 42 in. (106.7 x 106.7 cm) Each (144 individual pieces): 1 3/8 x 2 1/2 in. (3.5 x 6.4 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art 1979-185-1. Gift of Helen Hesse Charash, 1979. © 2021 Estate of Eva Hesse. Galerie Hauser & Wirth

On the other hand, her equally intense sculptural output of the previous four years or so did become Hesse’s more familiar legacy within the art world. She turned to latex as a medium for sculptural forms because it offered a kind of immediacy.<sup>18</sup> In part, perhaps, this malleable material offered a physical counterpart to the emotional immediacy (perhaps intimacy would be a more accurate term) of which she was repeatedly deprived as a child—from the time of the Kindertransport to that of her parents’ divorce and her mother’s suicide—and that defined her inner life. Her first two works using latex, *Schema* and *Sequel* (1967–68), use the material in a way certainly never imagined by the manufacturer. *Schema*, for instance, takes a bifurcated

Spalding rubber ball and replicates it in a twelve-by-twelve-unit grid (in other words, 144 half-balls) that suggests an endless, infinitizing (42 by 42 inches) pattern; the entire grid of hemispheres and the surface upon which they are placed is lushly lathered with latex [Fig. 11]. Whereas “industrial latex was intended to be cast, Hesse used it like thick paint, building up a kind of low-relief surface both smooth yet irregular, ragged at the edges.”<sup>19</sup> As such she not only obliterated the line between industrial and aesthetic material purposes, but between concepts of two- and three-dimensional visual and sensual perception.



In one of her last works, *Untitled (Rope Piece)* (1969–70), Hesse also employed industrial latex and once it was hardened, hung it on the wall and ceiling using rope, string, and wire [Fig. 12]. The work is like a gigantic spider’s web gone awry—and also like one of Vladimir Tatlin’s Constructivist works, such as his iconic *Counter-Relief* of 1915: vitalizing the corner of the exhibition space with industrial materials, but in a free-flowing highly irregular series of soft curves, rather than with the hard-edged rectilinear forms characteristic of Tatlin constructions.

Fig. 12 Eva Hesse, *No Title*, 1969-70. Latex, rope, string, and wire, dimensions variable. Whitney Museum of American Art 88.17a-b. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Digital Image © Whitney Museum of American Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY © 2021 Estate of Eva Hesse. Galerie Hauser & Wirth

While Hesse's work embodies elements of Minimalism in its simple shapes, delicate lines, and limited color palette, she was also among those artists who pioneered a transition from Minimalism to Post-Minimalism, which latter movement injects the human element into its grids and frequent serial style by shaping works that are typically handmade and exhibit clear evidence of the artist's hand. Danto observes of her mature work that it may be associated with Post-Minimalism by its "mirth and jokiness" and its "unmistakable whiff of eroticism."<sup>20</sup>

A number of feminist art historians have also noted how her work successfully illuminates women's issues while refraining from any obvious political agenda. She observed, in a 1965 letter to Ethelyn Hong, that a woman is "at a [psychological] disadvantage from the beginning. . . . She lacks conviction that she has the 'right' to achievement. She also lacks the belief that her achievements are worthy. [Therefore,] a fantastic strength is necessary and courage. I dwell on this all the time. My determination and will are strong but I am lacking so in self-esteem that I never seem to overcome."<sup>21</sup> She denied a strictly feminist underpinning to her work, asserting it as feminine but without feminist statements in mind. In the extract from her 1970 interview with Cindy Nemser, published in *Woman's Art Journal*, she emphasized that "the way to beat discrimination in art is by art. Excellence has no sex."<sup>22</sup>

Hesse's play with the fluid contours of the organic and irregularly shaped realm of nature, has led some to see proto-feminist references to the female body in her work; others note in her languid forms (to say naught of her titles) expressions of wit, whimsy, and a sense of spontaneous invention particularly appropriate to casually "found" or "everyday" materials.

In short: as some critics see in her work an emphasis on Minimalist features, others see it as Post-Minimalist, and yet others focus on it as feminist. One might also recognize—particularly with her predilection for ash-gray pigments and skin-like translucence—at least some association with the Holocaust that was an important if mostly indirect experience within her early life. It is worthy of note that, at the beginning of the Cindy Nemser *Woman's Art Journal* interview, in referencing her feeling "emotionally connected to [the] work" of Carl Andre, she observes that "it does something to my insides. *His metal plates were the concentration camp for me.*" (Emphasis added.)

A small but steady stream of posthumous exhibitions—from that of her drawings organized in 1982 by Ellen H. Johnson, to work shown in 2019–2020 in Wiesbaden, Vienna, New York, and Oberlin—underscores the recognized importance of Eva Hesse's work and suggests how much more she might have achieved had her life not been cut short at age thirty-four.



Eva Hesse in her studio in the Bowery. 1969.  
 Münchner Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany  
 © Bpk Bildagentur / Münchner Stadtmuseum, Munich  
 M-2012/200.3253/Hermann Landshoff/Art Resource, NY  
 © The Estate of Eva Hesse. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth



Eva Hesse in her studio in the Bowery. 1969.  
 Münchner Stadtmuseum, Munich, Germany  
 © bpk Bildagentur / Münchner Stadtmuseum, Munich  
 FM-2012/200.3248/Hermann Landshoff/Art Resource, NY  
 © The Estate of Eva Hesse. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

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1. The Kindertransport program brought thousands of German and Austrian (mostly Jewish) children to Great Britain, beyond quota numbers, without their parents—most of the latter perished at the hands of the Nazis—and waived all incoming visa requirements. Washington Heights became so popular as a relocation destination for German and Austrian Jews that it was jocularly referred to in the 1950s as “the Fourth Reich.”
  2. Arthur C. Danto, “All About Eva,” *The Nation*, July 17–24, 2006, 30–34.
  3. See the recent edition of her diaries edited by Tamara Bloomberg and Barry Rosen, *Eva Hesse: Diaries* (New York: Hauser and Wirth, 2020).
  4. “It’s All Yours,” *Seventeen*, September, 1954, 140–141 and 161. The unattributed article included a portfolio of her paintings. Elsewhere in the same issue was an illustration of a birthday cake by Sol LeWitt, who was also working at *Seventeen*—although the two artists did not meet at that time.
  5. See Soltes, “From Sea to Shining Sea: Anni Albers in America,” elsewhere in this volume.
  6. The LeWitt quote is one line from a five-page letter to Hesse. See Samantha Dylan Mitchell’s discussion in her review of *Converging Lines: Eva Hesse and Sol LeWitt*, by Veronica Roberts, Lucy Lippard, and Kirsten Swenson, Art Books, *The Brooklyn Rail*, April 2014. Catalogue for the exhibition organized by the Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas, Austin (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

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7. The painter and assemblagist Allan Kaprow (1927–2006) pioneered performance art in the late 1950s and 1960s with some 200 evolving *Happenings*, which began as tightly scripted events in which both performers and audience followed cues to “experience” the art. Unrecorded, they were intended to offer art that dissipates.
  8. Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1992), 21, 218.
  9. Lippard, 219.
  10. It is currently installed at the Art Institute of Chicago.
  11. She is speaking in an interview with Cindy Nemser first published in *ARTFORUM* in 1970. It is quoted in Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era* (New York: HarperCollins, 1966), 29.
  12. See Elisabeth Sussman and Fred Wasserman, *Eva Hesse: Sculpture* (New York: Jewish Museum, 2006), preface. Exhibition catalogue.
  13. The piece is currently in the collection of the Guggenheim Museum, New York.
  14. Hesse, quoted in Nancy Spector’s descriptive essay, “Eva Hesse: *Expanded Expansion*,” online collection catalogue, Guggenheim Museum, <https://guggenheim.org/artwork/1648>.
  15. Hesse, quoted in Spector.
  16. Among her more noteworthy grid-style works are her 1967 drawing, *Untitled*, and two 1968 wall sculptures, *Vinculum I* and particularly *Sans II*.
  17. Bill Barrette, *Eva Hesse Sculpture* (London/New York: Timken Publishers, 1989), 226.
  18. This is most specifically asserted by John Keats in his article “The Afterlife of Eva Hesse,” *Art & Antiques*, March 31, 2011.
  19. Keats, “The Afterlife of Eva Hesse.”
  20. Danto, 33. (See n.2.)
  21. Quoted in Kristine Stiles, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 705.
  22. Hesse, quoted in Cindy Nemser, “My Memories of Eva Hesse,” *Woman’s Art Journal* (Old City Publishing, Inc., 2007): 27.