

THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE

The physically emotive works of the late German process artist Eva Hesse have inspired a generation of young American sculptors.

By Elizabeth Hayt-Atkins

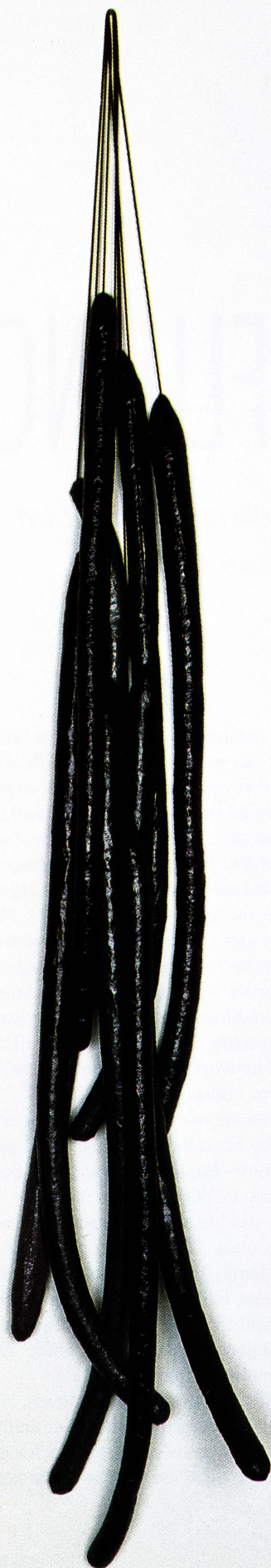
It has been twenty years since sculptor Eva Hesse died, but the spirit of her art has never been more alive. Artists as varied as Petah Coyne, Heide Fasnacht, Sydney Blum, Kim Jones, Tom Butter, Rona Pondick, and Carol Hepper are building on her legacy by working in personally expressive modes and emphasizing the individuality of their vision through the palpability of their touch.¹ This younger generation of sculptors, who reject sociopolitical critique and theoretical discourse in favor of expressionism and self-reference, "objectify the subjective," as art critic Peter Schjeldahl once said of the postminimalists. It is no coincidence that all of these artists cite Hesse as a significant influence on their work. The strong undercurrent of emotionalism and personal experience running through her art draws an empathetic response. "The most important thing I got from Hesse," says Hepper, "is that you can bring your own experience to your work, and that can only empower it."

Like her contemporaries Richard Serra, Robert Morris, and Alan Saret, Hesse created an anti-formal, process-oriented sculpture in order to break with the formalism and ascetism of minimalism. As a result of the Whitney Museum's recent show, *The New Sculpture 1965-75: Between Geometry and Gesture*, Hesse now appears as one of the "strongest talents"² of her generation. In fact, art historian Robert Pincus-Witten describes her work as "the essential condition of post-minimalism, which is really an extrapolation of everything she achieved."³

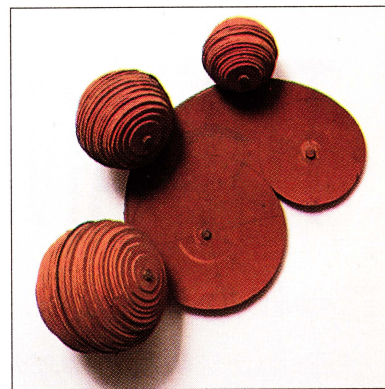
Many of today's sculptors single out Hesse because they recognize that her work is "fundamentally different in spirit" from that of her contemporaries, explains Bill Barette, her former studio assistant and author of her catalogue raisonné. "Her work at the center remained expressionist: based on strong feelings and doubts, the inner forces of creation and destruction became annealed in the formation of her art."⁴ Heide Fasnacht says that she admires both the emotional intensity and the idiosyncrasy of Hesse's sculpture: "Her truth to materials was limited. She deviated in order to make a metaphorical statement. Her way of depicting emotional states and her use of materials are one and the same. Her work is very eccentric. She's not a 'movement' person. I relate to that."

Hesse's predisposition toward expressionistic sculpture was presaged by her self-obsessiveness and preoccupation with her now-legendary tragic past. Born a Jew in Nazi Germany in 1936, she was not quite three years old when she and her sister were sent to Amsterdam on a children's train. The girls rejoined their parents there, and the family immigrated to New York in 1939. A few years later, Hesse's mother became mentally ill and was hospitalized. Hesse's parents then divorced and her father remarried soon after. When Hesse was ten, her mother committed suicide.

Plagued by a sense of loss and abandonment, Hesse also feared that she was doomed to inherit her mother's instability. In her early teens, she began a life-long series of diaries that provided her with an outlet for her



Eva Hesse, *Several*, 1965. Acrylic, papier mâché, balloons, rubber cords, 84 x 11 x 17 inches. Saatchi Collection, London; courtesy the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



anxieties, dreams, and nightmares. In them, she often refers to herself in the third person, like a subject for her own clinical examination. Her unrelenting self-scrutiny grew more intense during her adult years, when she underwent psychoanalysis. In fact, her art served as a psychoanalytical, rather than autobiographical, medium through which she rendered her conflicting personae. In April 1966, one of the entries in her diary was entitled, "Underlying Themes Conflicting Forces Inside Eva." It described her character in terms of: 1) Mother force: unstable, creative, threatening my stability, sadistic, aggressive. 2) Father, Stepmother force: good little girl, obedient, neat, clean, organized-masochistic."⁵ Many of these adjectives could be used to describe Hesse's sculpture, and as she grew more secure in her work, her art replaced her diaries as the vehicle for her emotional and personal insights.

Hesse's incessant search for self-understanding may have been based on her belief in solipsistic philosophy. Between 1968 and 1969, she wrote a definition of solipsism on a loose sheet of paper and slipped it into her diary: "the theory of belief that only knowledge of the self is possible and for each individual that self itself is the only thing really existent and that therefore reality is subjective."⁶ This idea was more than just a casual diary entry to Hesse—it was the creed by which she lived and worked. Hesse "had no notion of the world outside her,"⁷ observed her friend Robert Smithson. "I saw her as an interior person making psychic models."

Despite her allegiance to minimalist principles of spare rigor and serial presentation, Hesse described her work in subjective terms. In a 1970 interview with Cindy Nemser, she defined her work as a gestalt:



far left: Heide Fasnacht,
Maledicta Balloon, 1990.
Rubber gasket, 15.5 x 16 x
6.5 inches. Courtesy
Germans Van Eck Gallery,
New York.

left: Petah Coyne,
Untitled, 1989. Mixed
media, approximately
111 x 60 x 63 inches (each
piece). Installation at the
Brooklyn Museum, 22
September through 4
December 1989. Courtesy
Jack Shainman Gallery,
New York; photograph by
Kathleen McCarthy.

**right: Kim Jones, Stars
on Newspaper, 1990. Mixed
media. Courtesy Lorence-
Monk Gallery, New York.**



I think art is a total thing. A total person giving a contribution. It is an essence, a soul and that's what it's about. ... In my inner soul, art and life are inseparable. It becomes more absurd and less absurd to isolate a basically intuitive idea and then work up some calculated system and follow it through—that supposedly being the more intellectual approach—than giving precedence to soul or whatever you want to call it.⁸

Hesse's art, its eccentric forms and unconventional materials, communicates this "soul" or self which so appeals to artists today.

"Hesse's work is extremely intuitive," says Petah Coyne. "I feel I know her. The rawness of emotion in her work disarms you, makes you drop your defenses, so that you feel its humanness. That's what I strive for." By responding to the expressionism of Hesse's sculpture, Coyne highlights the salient feature of her own work. Despite their bulk and blackened exteriors, Coyne's gangliated sculptures reek of vulnerability and fragility kindred to Hesse's latex and rope pieces. And like Hesse's late works, Coyne's sculptures hang from the ceiling. Their precarious positions threaten a thunderous collapse. The instability of Coyne's works is countered by the aggressiveness of the barbed wire and steel skeletons dripping with tumescences made of clay and cloth, coated in black sand, all of which are redolent of Hesse's 1966 sac pieces. These works embody—at least in part—the rage and anxiety Hesse felt after she and her husband separated.

As a vehicle for her emotional turmoil, Hesse's art provided therapy and catharsis. Likewise, Sydney Blum's sculptures function to assuage her unease and apprehension. Hanging from large iron hooks, Blum's


pieces are formed out of canvases sewn together, then coated in acrylic gels, polymers, dirt, and pigments. They give the unsettling and powerful impression of body bags lifted out of sludge. They signify death: not dying, not resurrection, but a state of eternal waiting. Blum describes her work as "capturing a time of nothingness, of being nowhere. For me, this is comforting and safe. I see my sculptures as cocoons or nests, and imagine myself in them. Because, as a little girl, I remember myself lying awake in a pool of sweat, always afraid that 'they' would get me. If I moved, 'they' could find me. My parents couldn't protect me. So I just had to pull so far into myself, I couldn't exist, and then no one could find me. Art is my well-being. It is my control over myself."

Blum's recount of her childhood insecurity and the relief she now finds in her art eerily echoes Hesse's own description of her early anxiety and how she translated it into her work:

I had trouble—tremendous fear, incredible fear. I had my father tuck my blankets into my German bed, which had bars on the bottom which I would hold at night, and he would tell me that we wouldn't be poor, and we wouldn't be robbed, and he'd be there to take care of me in the morning. [For me], as a child, it was a ritual every night. There wasn't one day of security and then it never really got any better. So that gave me whatever strength I have. I have been a giant in my strength and my work has been strong and my whole character is inside it.⁹

The frailty and resiliency of Hesse's complex psyche is dramatized in countless works. *Contingent*, for instance, is a hanging piece constructed out of fragile

“The rawness of emotion in Hesse’s work disarms you, makes you drop your defenses, so that you feel its humanness.” —Petah Coyne



and perishable latex mid-sections stretched by rigid, permanent fiberglass attachments.

“Hesse allows you to reexperience an emotional state without relying on modeling, gestural, or histrionics,” says Fasnacht. “Her use of materials induces a response that bypasses your brain and goes right into your body. So when you look at *Contingent*, you feel flayed and hung; with *Repetition Nineteen III*, you get the impression of being scattered and weighted.” Her response to the visceral immediacy of Hesse’s sculpture or “body ego,” as Lucy Lippard deemed it in 1968, echoes the compelling feature of Fasnacht’s own sculptures. Made of black rubber conveyor belting, sliced and bolted and either hung from the wall or placed on the floor, her works leave the viewer feeling stretched, skinned, collapsed, and perforated. Though abstract, they bear covert anatomical references that make the forms disturbing. *Terra Lingua* insinuates a tongue being ripped out, while *Witness* suggests eyelids being pulled off. “People don’t understand with their minds the way they do with their bodies,” says Fasnacht.

A similar sense of darkness and pain informs Kim Jones’ art, in which he grapples with the emotional legacy of being a Vietnam veteran. He constructs burrlike forms out of twigs and large wall sculptures out of natural, industrial and found materials. The gritty and menacing impression of the pieces—their charred-looking surfaces and bulbous shapes, impaled by spikes and thorns—belies the sense of solace the artist gains from them. His excessive taping and binding of the forms fulfills a psychological need “to make something secure, make it tight,” he says. Contradictory forces of compression and explosion in Jones’ work magnify a similar

duality in Hesse’s sculptures, which appear both “tentative and expansive,” according to Lippard.¹⁰

Hesse achieves this oxymoronic condition by compulsively wrapping cord (*Long Life*), weaving wire (*Metronomic Irregularity I, II, III*), inserting tubes (*Accession I, II, III, IV*), and knotting rope (*Constant*). She creates a superstructure of order over the irrational underpinnings of her art. This conflicting methodism and impulsiveness determine both the “formal and personal quality of her work, which is extreme but equal,” says Tom Butter. “That’s why I like it. Hesse’s sculpture offers the viewer a lot of freedom because it isn’t didactic, it is open. You can see it any way you want.”

Not coincidentally, Butter’s art offers an analogous ambiguity of emotionalism tempered by rationality. He deforms geometric configurations to correspond to his contradictory man- and machine-made materials. He often constructs pared-down, unstable, rough-edged shapes with amber-toned fiberglass, a rigid, permanent substance that allows light to filter through it. An unexpected transcendental effect takes place. The work evokes the artist’s restrained temperament, his quiet emotionalism and spiritual need “to connect to the world through a physical object.”

The extreme contrasts within Hesse’s art border on senselessness or the absurd, which in turn mirrors the irrational forces of life. Rona Pondick exhibits a parallel sense of absurdity in her scatological mounds of wax, individual turds placed on stacks of pillows, and oversized multi-nippled breasts, all of which elevate taboo subjects like excrement and sex. “They have an absurd quality, a ridiculousness,” says Pondick. “But life has no logic either. It has no rationale.”



top: Sydney Blum,
Reclining Bag, 1988.
Mixed media. Courtesy
the Sculpture Center,
New York.

above: Carol Hepper,
Three Corners, 1989.
Wood, steel.
42 x 42 x 12 inches.
Courtesy Rosa Esman
Gallery, New York.

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the passion
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Ultimately, it
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—Carol Hepper

Hesse’s reliance on serial repetition was a means for exacerbating the absurdity of her art because, as she explained, “if something is absurd, it’s much more exaggerated; more absurd, it’s repeated.”¹¹ But seriality also enabled Hesse to impose order on her otherwise unstructured art. Pondick points out, however, that “by placing her works on a grid and making them inert, Hesse’s pieces are still highly charged—not cold. They have something human to them.” Pondick elaborates on the incipient expressionism of Hesse’s serialization by hurling fecallike wax units across her studio. The shapes accumulate to form a cluster that is the antithesis of a grid. In an inversion of Hesse’s technique, Pondick’s serial repetition represents the “act of letting go. My work is like having a tantrum. So it immediately illicit an emotional response.”

“But what is the passion behind the making?,” asks Carol Hepper. “Ultimately, it is knowledge of the self.” Hepper grew up in South Dakota, a background that bred in her an inner stoicism and an affinity for nature. Today, these qualities reverberate through her sculpture. Her tense, gestural forms, created by bending thick bundles of willow branches into loops and arches, exude both organic vitality and austerity. They are primal forms symbolizing Hepper’s internal experiences. Just as Hesse used her sculpture to explore how her past congealed in her psyche, Hepper distills from her heritage the qualities that define her own temperament.

Hepper, Coyne, Fasnacht, Jones, Blum, Butter, and Pondick all objectify immaterial inner states to create psychologically and emotionally self-referential art. In a culture dominated by the media, where simulacra are more real than reality itself, their work represents a way

Tom Butter,
Shift, 1988. Wire
 mesh, fiberglass,
 aluminum wire,
 63 x 32 x 32
 inches. Courtesy
 Curt Marcus
 Gallery, New York.

to recover one's selfhood and celebrates creative inspiration. It represents an act of self-legitimization. Expressing their subjective idealism, these artists share a time-honored faith in the idea that all that is knowable lies within. This kind of art, like Hesse's, disproves the pronouncements of postmodern theorists like Frederic Jameson who declare that the concept of the self is bankrupt, that "individualism and personal identity ... [are] a thing of the past; [and] the old individual or individualist subject is 'dead.'"¹² In light of Hesse's living legacy, this obituary of the self is evidently premature.

Notes

1. The limited scope of this article prevents discussion of the work of several other sculptors who might be considered relevant to this theme, such as Ellen Driscoll, Maureen Connor, Alex Pearlstein, Mia Westerland, and Scott Richter.
2. Roberta Smith, *New York Times*, 9 March 1990, p. 1.
3. Robert Pincus-Witten, conversation, 3 May 1990.
4. Bill Barette, *Eva Hesse: Sculpture*, Timken Publishers, Inc., New York, 1989, p. 14.
5. Robert Pincus-Witten, *Postminimalism into Maximalism: American Art 1966-86*, UMI Research Press, Michigan, 1987, p. 49.
6. Ellen Johnson, "Order and Chaos: From the Diaries of Eva Hesse," *Art in America*, Summer 1983, p. 117.
7. Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, NYU Press, New York, 1976, p. 6.
8. Cindy Nemser, "An Interview with Eva Hesse," *Artforum*, vol. 7, no. 9, May 1970, p. 59.
9. Barette, *ibid.*, p. 9.
10. Lippard, *idem*.
11. Nemser, *ibid.*, p. 64.
12. Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. by Hal Foster, Bay Press, Washington, 1983, p. 115.

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