

The Human Touch In Contemporary Sculpture: The Continuing Vision of Eva Hesse

by David S. Rubin

In 1970, a promising career was tragically cut short. On May 29 of that year, Eva Hesse, who was beginning to achieve national recognition as a daring and innovative sculptor, succumbed from a brain tumor at the age of 34. Only two years prior to her passing, Hesse had presented her first solo sculpture exhibition in New York.¹ During the last six months of her life, the Museum of Modern Art acquired two of her sculptures,² and critics were already assessing her historical importance. In January, 1970, Robert Pincus-Witten wrote, "Anyone who has watched the evolution of new American sculpture is aware of Eva Hesse's central contribution to this development."³

Pincus-Witten's comments were in response to the exhibition "A Plastic Presence," held at the Milwaukee Art Center and intended to demonstrate the diverse uses of a relatively new material for making sculpture—plastic. For the most part, although he singled out Hesse as the most impressive exhibitor, Pincus-Witten had his doubts about the potential of plastic, noting that its use "...as a medium tends to transform persons into the ungrateful roles of craftsmen (in the sense of arts and crafts) as distinguished from artists. One is tempted, therefore, to conclude that a reliance on plastic as a medium tends to lead young artists into imitative rather than innovative modes."⁴ Hesse, on the other hand, was Pincus-Witten's exception, as he considered the forms in her work to be "...strong, suggestive and intellectually focused...."⁵ And in the more than 25 years that have passed since the "Plastic Presence" exhibition, Pincus-Witten's reservations about hand-made objects have been proven unfounded, as evidenced by the creative triumphs of multitudes of artists who were subsequently influenced by Hesse.

Indeed, Eva Hesse's place in history is firmly cemented. It is generally acknowledged that she set a significant precedent for sculptors, liberating them to work not only with plastic, but with a host of

pliable materials. For Hesse, these included fiberglass, latex, cheesecloth, rope, electrical tubing and the like. In manipulating these materials by hand, she opened doors for viable alternatives to the intellectual rigor of geometric Minimalism, the dominant sculptural mode of the mid-1960s. Although not herself a Feminist, Hesse is often claimed as a precursor of Feminist art, in which the role of craftsmanship, viewed pejoratively by Pincus-Witten, was embraced as central to an artwork's process or style. Additionally, Hesse is credited with reinstating emotional content in sculpture.

Characteristically, Minimal Art of the 1960s consisted of solid, fabricated geometric sculptures like those of Donald Judd. Reacting in part against the self-absorbed Abstract Expressionist painters of the 1950s, Judd and his compatriots (among them Frank Stella, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre) believed that art should be about nothing other than art itself. They felt that the Abstract Expressionists had gone too far towards the opposite extreme—by viewing the canvas as the arena for self-projection and reflection, exposed in the form of giant brush gestures interpreted as heroic Rorschachs. Consequently, those artists were seen as no longer dealing with "art," but with "life." In contrast, Judd eradicated the "human" presence in his sculptures by having them industrially manufactured according to his specifications. His wall-mounted sculptures of the mid-1960s, for example, were horizontal structures made of galvanized metal, with equally spaced grooves along the surface. Interested only in the

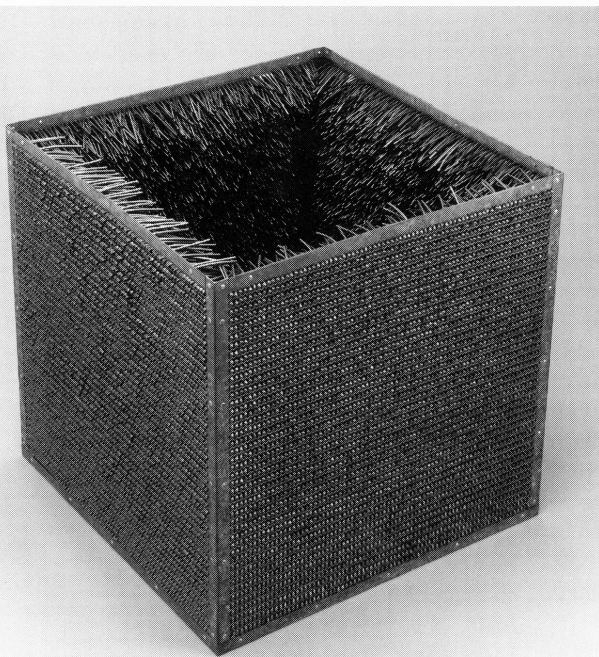
integrity of the object itself, Judd set out to solve purely formal problems, such as maintaining a work's sense of "wholeness." In a 1964 interview he explained, "...the big problem is that anything that is not absolutely plain begins to have parts in some way. The thing is to be able to work and do different things and yet not break up the wholeness of the piece. To me the piece with the brass and the five verticals is above all *that shape*."⁶

By the 1960s, Hesse was herself well acquainted with both Abstract Expressionist and formalist thinking. Studying under Josef Albers at the Yale School of Art and Architecture in the late 1950s, she felt conflicted between the two approaches.⁷ Although she respected Albers, who is best known for his *Homage to the Square* paintings, where color varies from work to work while a compositional system of concentric squares remains constant, she had mixed feelings about his serial approach. Hesse wrote in her journal, "If every new work is based on this conception it is not new but variations on a theme. He (Albers) is terribly limited but really maintains one point of view throughout. This is a paradoxically strong and weak attribute and shortcoming."⁸

In Hesse's own work, which at the time consisted mostly of ink wash drawings, she rejected the idea of rigorous control, preferring instead the spontaneous working method of the Abstract Expressionists. In reference to her gestural drawings she wrote, "...I have and still continue with a series of drawings in ink with my main tool a crudely shaped wrong side of the brush. The drawings can at best be described as imagined organic and natural forms of 'growth.' They are essentially quite free in feeling and handling of medium. 'Ultra alive!'"⁹

The seeds of Hesse's "break-through" with materials began to sprout in the early 1960s. In the summer of 1962, Hesse experimented freely with chicken wire, using it as the armature of a costume for a series of Happenings by performance art pioneer Allan Kaprow. Two years later, she addressed her frustrations with painting and drawing by shifting her attention to sculpture. While working with cord and plaster in late 1964 she wrote, "Plaster! I have always loved the material. It is flexible, pliable, easy to handle in that it is light, fast working. Its whiteness is right. I will take those screens. Finish one I began in lead. Then get cloth cut in strips and dip in plaster and bring through screen."¹⁰

From 1965 onward, Hesse was working regularly with materials



Eva Hesse, *Accession II*, 1967, vinyl, steel, plastic extension, 30 3/4 x 30 3/4 x 30 3/4". Courtesy The Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society.



Carol Hepper, *Lariat*, 1991, wood, steel, 26 x 70 x 73". Courtesy Phoenix Art Museum.

that could be found on the shelves of hardware stores. In Hesse's hands, materials like electrical wire, rubber cord, metal rings, washers, twine, industrial tape and latex balloons were transformed into evocative sculptures via processes such as coiling, wrapping, lacing, stringing, glueing, or stapling. The *Accession* series (1967-69), for example, was made by joining together steel screens and puncturing their holes with individually cut strips of rubber or plastic tubing. As variations on the cube, these boxes may be considered humorously subversive attacks on Minimalism. Grand parodies of formalist values, they are serial geometric shapes (not unlike Albers's *Homage to the Square* paintings) infused with "human touch," a Minimalist taboo. Human time, human labor and human obsession are visibly evident in each hand-cut, hand-woven piece of tubing, while metaphoric associations with the body and human sexuality are suggested by both the hole-puncturing process of making each work, as well as by the vaginal shape of their interiors. As Mark Rosenthal has explained, "By exploiting...visual-tactile qualities, Hesse found ways to evoke the stimuli of erotic sensations through abstract forms, thereby conveying the pure emotion that other abstractionists had described as their subject matter."¹¹

As a result of the sexual connotations of many of her sculptures, Hesse has been a primary role model for artists dealing with Feminist concerns, from the 1970s through the present day. Although Hesse wrote in 1969 that "The way to beat discrimination in art is by art. Excellence has no sex,"¹² most agree that she would likely have joined ranks with the Women's Movement had she lived to see its rise in the 1970s and 1980s. According to Lucy Lippard, "Hesse died just before the Women's Movement gained a broad impact on the art world and she considered herself one of the unique ones,

almost a freak, since there were so few women artists at all visible at that time. She was very aware, however, of the injustices she herself had suffered and she expressed often to both male and female friends her conviction that she was not being taken as seriously as her male colleagues because she was a woman."¹³

Today, Hesse's influence is observable in a wide variety of contemporary sculpture, some of which is tied to Feminist issues, but

much of which lies outside that domain. Exemplifying the former are the recent sculptures of Petah Coyne, who acknowledges that Hesse inspired her to hang sculptures from the ceiling.¹⁴ In the art of Carol Hepper and Christian Marclay, whose concerns respectively involve such disparate topics as the environment and music, strong affinities with Hesse are also apparent. To some extent unifying the art of Coyne, Hepper, Marclay, and, indeed, of many of their contemporaries, are sculptural attributes that are commonplace today, but were novel when introduced by Hesse. Specifically, Hesse validated the employment of hand-craftsmanship and expressive, metaphoric content as viable options for future generations of sculptors.

Since the late 1980s, Coyne has been fabricating hanging sculptures, monumental personages that the artist often refers to as her "girls."¹⁵ Beginning with an armature of chicken wire—the same material Hesse used for performance costumes in 1962—Coyne constructs the personages using several layers of material. *Untitled #789* (1995), for example, was formed using hundreds of hand-tied black-and-white ribbons, which were then saturated in dripped candle wax and coated with chemicals for protection. Intended to evoke associations about the complexity and will of the female spirit, the sculpture was inspired by the Charles Dickens character Miss Havisham from the novel *Great Expectations*. After being left at the altar, Miss Havisham never took off her wedding dress, choosing instead to live

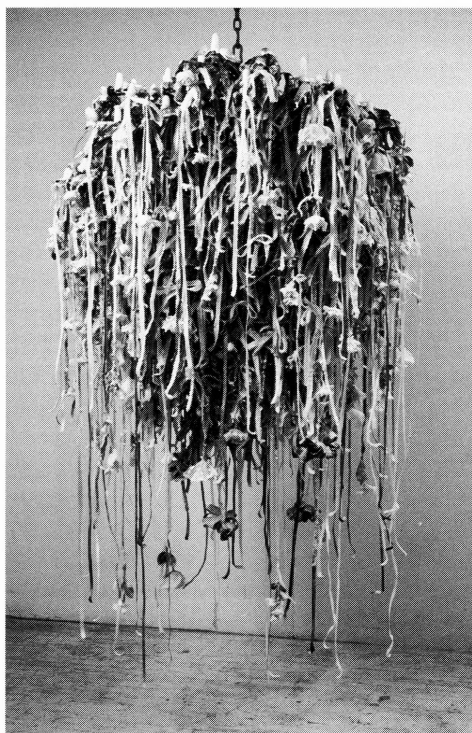
in dreams, lost in her past. On another level, *Untitled #789* presents a positive statement about female identity. While the ribbons in the sculpture are suggestive of frequent stereotyping of women as soft and frilly, the solid wire structure underneath is a reminder of their enduring inner strength.

Like Coyne, Hepper also lists Hesse among major influences, particularly in liberating her to experiment with unconventional materials.¹⁶ In the mid-1980s, an interest in organic form and the natural environment inspired Hepper to make sculpture by stretching fish skin or animal hides over armatures made from willow branches. In recent works, the branches have become a primary medium. In order to construct *Lariat* (1991), the artist bundled and manipulated the branches to form a series of spirals, and held them together with steel plumbing joints. Metaphorically, the reshaped and constricted branches allude to the industrialization of the West, which has entailed an ongoing restructuring of nature.

The intricacy of craftsmanship and the power of metaphoric content also provide the punch in the art of Marclay, who employed a traditionally "female" process to make a clever and whimsical sculpture entitled *The Beatles* (1989). Crocheted by hand from audiotape containing every Beatles song available at the time, the pillow-shaped object alludes to the dreamy comforts that almost everyone derives from the music of Lennon, McCartney, Harrison and Starr. Since the early 1980s, Marclay has been extremely inventive in making art by recycling materials of rock-and-roll culture. Other examples include collages made by breaking apart and reassembling vinyl records or by joining together the parts of different record albums (in the tradition of the Surrealist "Exquisite Corpse" drawings) and installations in which the floor of an entire gallery is tiled with compact discs (parodying the Minimalist floor sculptures of Carl Andre).



Christian Marclay, *The Beatles*, 1989, Beatles music on audiotape. Private collection.



Petah Coyne, *Untitled #789*, 1995, mixed media, 86 x 52 x 38". Courtesy Phoenix Art Museum.

Were Eva Hesse alive today, she would undoubtedly welcome the art of Marclay, Hepper, Coyne, and their peers. Yet, as one who rarely acknowledged her own remarkable achievements, she would likely be surprised by the degree to which her personal vision has become the prototype for a fruitful, continuing legacy.

NOTES:

1. The exhibition, entitled *Chain Polymers*, was held at the Fishbach Gallery, November 16-December 5, 1968.
2. In November, 1969, the Museum of Modern Art purchased *Repetition Nineteen I* and *III*. See Eva Hesse: *A Retrospective*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992, 46.
3. Robert Pincus-Witten, "New York," *Artforum*, VIII/5, January, 1970, 69.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Donald Judd, quoted in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968, 155. The quotation is from a broadcast on WBAI-FM, New York, by Bruce Glaser, entitled "New Nihilism or New Art?" The transcript was edited by Lucy Lippard and published in *Art News*, September, 1966.
7. Eva Hesse: *A Retrospective*, op. cit., 21.
8. Eva Hesse, quoted *ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 22.
10. *Ibid.*, 30.
11. Mark Rosenthal, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline*, New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1996, 205.
12. Eva Hesse, letter to Cindy Nesmer, quoted in Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, New York: New York University Press, 1976, 205.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Carrie Przbilla, "Petah Coyne: Interview," in Terrie Sultan, *Petah Coyne: Black/White/Black*, Washington, D.C.: The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1996, 33.
15. Sultan, *ibid.*, 12.
16. Sue Scott, *Carol Hepper: Skin/Deep*, Orlando, Florida: Orlando Museum of Art, 1995, unpaginated.

Afterschool Lessons From A Hitman

What I do is
our secret.
Sh-h-h-h.
You gotta tell
I gotta
bury it deep
bury it deeper
than that.
Everything is fine.
Everything is copacetic
as long as you keep
it all to yourself.
Don't let it —
Open your mouth.
Open it wider.

If you're gonna cry —

Your mother can't help.
Your father can't either.

A man is a man.
Sometimes he is neither.

You'll learn as you go.
You'll learn just like I did.

You know what you know.
You know kid?

That time at the restaurant
in New Jersey
I put away my piece calmly
and eased past the customers,
looked straight ahead
out on the sidewalk
and into the car
I left running.

You with me
so far?

U-m-m.
Now pull up your pants
and get outa my sight.

If I gotta dance,
I gotta dance solo
all night.

One more thing.

There's always a chance,
a chance that the hit might —
No, don't think about it.
Just go.

Wait. Take this calzone
my mother made
to your mother.

Hey, how's your brother?
Bring him next time.

You're never too young to
learn things.

I promise.
You'll know what I know.

I always say
it ain't a shame:
it's crime
and thank God somebody else
is paying
this time.

— Ai

Ai's first book of poetry "Cruelty" was published in 1973. She is a native of the Southwest and has since published four additional volumes of verse with W. W. Norton & Co. She is teaching at the University of Colorado and is at work on her first novel.