

NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

**FINE ART** 

# **BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES**

## (AN EXPLORATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PAINTING/SCULPTURE THE FORMAL/PERSONAL IN EVA HESSE)

ΒY

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### INTRODUCTION

"It just seems to me that the personal in Art if really pushed is the most valued quality and I want so much to find it in and for myself"

(Hesse Retrospective, 1992, p. 25)

The Sculptor Eva Hesse's sudden death at the age of thirty four brought to a premature close the career of an artist who was on the brink of major success. Within five years prior to her death in 1970, Hesse had amassed a body of work, important not only in itself, but also for the influence it had on future art practise. Emerging as an artist from the "waning shadows" of abstract expressionism, Hesse's most productive years 1965 - 1968 coincided with the rise of Minimalism as the predominant art style in New York, where she lived and worked. Her remarkable achievement as an artist was also one of the central paradoxes in her art: her ability to focus primarily on the personal and private areas of feeling, while conveying these experiences through literal, reductive and rational minimalist forms. How these apparently conflicting concerns co-exist in contradictory yet complementary ways is one of the main issues which I intend to explore in this paper.

Although she achieved recognition as a sculptor any assessment of Hesse's work, must take into consideration the fact that she trained as a painter initially and painterly concerns continue to play an integral part in her artistic development. In its concerns with surface and luminosity, construction through layering, frontality and use of translucent materials - fibre glass and latex especially - Hesse's sculpture is of a particularly painterly kind. She blurred the boundaries between painting and sculpture. Boundaries were fluid and not fixed in Hesse's mind and this influenced her approach to life and art. She insisted that one of her most important sculptures "Contingent" (See Fig. 1.) which she completed in 1969 was really hung paintings:

"Hung against the ceiling and hung against the wall more than it is sculpture."

(Hesse Retrospective, 1992, p. 9)

She also saw her drawings as:

"Really paintings on paper but I call them drawings"

(Hesse Retrospective, 1992, p. 9)

Hesse's resistance to classification and categorisation contributed towards the great sense of risk which permeates her art, as Helen Cooper remarks:

"As in her testing of the limits set by abstract expressionists and the minimalists she approached all boundaries obliquely even playfully".

(Hesse Retrospective, 1992, p. 9)

The transition from painting to sculpture and the interaction between drawing, painting and sculpture which is contained in Hesse's "**Oeuvre**" is the second key issue which I will be addressing in this thesis, focusing especially on the ways and means by which she broadened the scope of these traditionally separate activities.

Lucy Lippard, the art critic, who was a friend of Hesse's and one of her staunchest supporters warns that no discussion of Hesse's work can be severed from her personal life, as the two were so completely intertwined. The only way to write about Hesse, she recommends, is the approach that Hesse herself undertook which was to walk the 'edge' between Art and Life. Therefore, those aspects of Hesse's personal life which help to clarify the motives behind her artistic choices or which help to explain the unusual physical characteristics of her sculpture will be discussed throughout this paper. However, the posthumous exploitation of the tragic circumstances in her life have in the past threatened to engulf Hesse's work and I have consciously tried not to add to that exploitation.

Chapter One will recapitulate Hesse's early biography, and discuss her attraction to abstract expressionist goals and practises. It will also trace the transition she made from painting to sculpture, focusing in particular on the reasons for this change of direction. Chapter Two will outline key aspects of the intellectual battle which took place in the sixties between subjecthood and objecthood in Art. It will discuss also, the ways in which Hesse benefited from the art practices which emerged from those debates without relinquishing her expressionist sensitivity, and the dark, romantic thrust of her artistic preoccupations.

Chapter Three will concentrate on the emergence of anti-forms challenge to minimalist rigidity, Hesse's positions art historically as a precursor of this movement, and the way in which her late art 'unravels' to become an allusive, unformed and informal antithesis to 'minimalism'. Its successful attainment of 'another vision'.

## CHAPTER ONE

#### 1936-1965

Eva Hesse was born to Jewish parents in Hamburg, Germany on January 11<sup>th</sup>. 1936. In 1939 she moved with her parents and sister Helen to New York to escape Nazi persecution. Most of her relatives did not survive the war and her mother, already deeply disturbed by these events and her subsequent divorce from Hesse's father committed suicide when Hesse was only ten years old. The insecurity which resulted from these events, and a fear that she had inherited her mother's instability ,haunted Hesse for the rest of her life. She was often sick and suffered from extreme anxiety. The events in her past contributed to her near obsession with autobiography which is revealed in her diaries and notebooks. Hesse was of a melancholic predisposition, a personality trait which was amplified by her tragic personal circumstances. In contrast to this however, she also had a playful sense of humour and a wry wit which is evident in many of the photographs which exist of her (See Fig. 2) and in some of her most successful pieces of sculpture: "Repetition 19" and "Untitled" 1970 (See Figs. 3 and 4) for example. Lucy Lippard once described her sculpture as both 'tentative and strong' a description which Hesse stepmother said sounded like 'Eva' herself. In contrast to the photographs, which seem to exude self confidence a rare self portrait, painted in 1961 presents us with the fragile aspects of Hesse character (See Fig 5). She looks sad pale and "Munch" like. Presented from the torso up, her shoulders are bare, her long dark hair falls behind her and one of her eyes is blackened. Her image dominates the right hand side of the composition. It is shadowed by a pale apparition looming over its left shoulder. The ghost like shadow may represent the dark forces which seemed to threaten to engulf Hesse throughout her life.

The contradictory impulses within Hesse herself were to become a powerful means of expression in her mature sculpture, contributing to its essential

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absurdity, a characteristic which Hesse regarded as they key to both her art and herself. An avid reader, Hesse strongly identified with Samuel Becketts writings and saw herself as a Vladamir or Estragon, the two main characters in "Waiting for Godot".

"They go on waiting and pushing and they keep saying it and doing nothing. And it really is a key - the key to understanding me and only a few understand and could see that my humour comes from there. My whole approach to living and the sand things come from there"

(Hesse Retrospective, 1992, p.64)

Eva Hesse's life and art were so deeply intertwined that she rarely worked with a specific content in mind, insisting instead on "the integrity of the piece". She wanted to discover through her work some of the 'potential and not the preconceived'. using materials in the least pretentious and most direct manner.

In this sense Hesse was and remained rooted in the abstract expressionist belief on the primacy of the artist in the content of his/her art, particularly as it is embodied in Jackson Pollock whom Hesse in later life was to cite as 'before anyone', the greatest influence on her art. As Pollock described:

"When I am in my painting I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of getting acquainted period that I see what I have been about. I have no fear of making changes destroying the image etc. because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through" (4)

(Rose : 1986 p. 85)

Hesse interest in probing beneath the surface of life in her art especially her own life, was already in place when she was still in her teens. The struggles she experienced throughout her career with her intuitive affinities with abstract expressionism as a mode of art making, and the figuring of herself in her art, are already evident in the following extracts from her diary in 1955:

"For me being an artist means to see, to observe, to investigate... I paint what I see and feel to express life in all its reality and movements... the more I see of life day to day experiences the more dissatisfied I am with conditions and with myself. I know so little how can I really paint or just paint? What do I have to say that is worthwhile and if I spend all my time saying and feeling when will I learn more which in turn will be told? Its like writing memoirs without a previous life."

(Lippard, 1976 p. 8)

Hesse's intuitive approach to making art caused her problems in Yale School of Art and Architecture which she attended between 1957 - 1959. Amongst her teachers was the painter and theoretician Joseph Albers. Distrustful of the improvisational aspects of abstract expressionism, Albers taught painting techniques on a strict theoretical basis. Although Hesse enjoyed Albers colour exercises she found his cerebral attitude to art incompatible with her expressionistic affinities. She was frequently frustrated in her struggle between the formal language of painting and her need to express herself spontaneously in her art. Her anxieties were recorded in her diary:

"To hell with them all paint yourself, out though and through it will come by you alone. You must come to terms with your own work not with any other being".

(Hesse Retrospective, 1992, p.)

From the beginning, drawing was close to the centre of Eva Hesse's creativity and it constantly sustained her. Shortly after she left Art College in 1969 she made a series of drawings using string like meandering looping lines which anticipated her mature sculpture especially "**Right After**" and "**Untitled**" (See Figs 5a, 6 and 7).

A series of Gouaches made during 1960 and 1961 also contain the seeds of many of her sculptural pieces. Small in scale and executed in inks mainly, Hesse manages in this series to create a vocabulary of forms which ' long to be independent of the page'. Some of the drawings contain oval shapes centred and contained in nest like forms while others beg to break free of their surroundings. (See Fig. 8) One drawing (See Fig. 9) can perhaps be seen as an homage to the sculptor Lee Bonteceau, whose sculptural reliefs were greatly admired by Hesse for their content, which was an exploration of

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'openings and orifaces'. as well as the technical skill which went into their making. Bonteceau used canvas and welded steel in a very innovative manner (See Fig. 10). The series includes a drawing that is strikingly prophetic of Hesse's latex and fibreglass sculptures 'Contingent' in particular (See Fig 1)A The colours Hesse used in this series, browns, blacks and greys are traditionally the tones used in old master drawings and sketches, signifiers of structure. Elizabeth Frank in an essay on Hesse confirms the origins of Hesse's mature sculpture which exists in these early drawings and goauches, even though at this stage Hesse saw herself essentially as a painter:

"When you consider what Hesse later did simply with cord and wire and tubing - hanging it, looping it, dangling it, meshing it and tangling it, or with nets which became among other things a three dimensional equivalent of cross hatching it becomes clear that, for Hesse, line in and of itself, had a more than two dimensional reality, and that it had freighted imagistic possibilities for her from the beginning. It seems impossible looking backwards from the mid sixties sculpture to these early drawings that she could ever have 'just painted', every mark she makes has an almost solid presence"

(Eva Hesse Gouaches Catalogue: 1993 p. 5)

It was to be a further four years before the sculptural 'promises' which are contained in these drawings would begin to be realised.

In 1961 Hesse met and married Tom Doyle, 'a lively and charming Pennsylvanian and Ohio Irishman' several years her senior and already an accomplished and sought after sculptor. The marriage which should have furnished Hesse with the emotional security and professional support she so clearly craved was not to succeed. The fault lay on both sides. Hesse felt undermined by Doyle's successes in the art world and lack of co-operation in domestic matters, and he found her emotional make up impossible to live with. The marriage which began to show signs of strain as early as 1963 finally dissolved in late 1965. Ironically, it was her marriage which provided Hesse with the conditions which would allow her to make rapid progress in her art and which provided the catalyst which resulted in her move into sculpture. It came in the form of an offer of free studio space, materials and technical support which was made to Doyle by the German Industrialist and collector Arnold Scheidt in exchange for some of his work. The location of the studio was a partially abandoned textile factory in Keltwig, Germany. Hesse naturally had very mixed feelings about returning to a country which had been the site of so much tragedy in her family, but recognised that this ' unusual kind of Renaissance patronage' was an offer neither Doyle nor she could refuse. They arrived in Germany in June, 1964 and although Hesse had terrible nightmares initially, she gradually began to settle down to work and wrote on July 1<sup>st</sup>.

"... I still agonise about my painting but at least now the agony is in and around the work, and if I work that will probably change into another kind of feeling, and if it remains there it is better placed there than 'back in myself ' "

(Hesse Retrospective, 1992, p.77)

The paintings that Hesse was producing at this stage of her career bordered on fussiness (See Fig 11). Her compositions were chaotic and she seemed to be looking at Arshile Gorky, whom she had greatly admired as a student, abstract expressionism in general and the brashness of pop art for inspiration, while appearing to be decidedly uneasy with what they had to offer. Max Korloff in his essay on Hesse's paintings made the following remarks:

"These are exasperated irrational searching pictures which almost desperately want to turn away from what had been achieved in recent history but are not yet realised from its gravitational field".

(Eva Hesse Paintings Catalogue, 1993, p.3)

Hesse at this point seemed to be journeying along the via negativa in her paintings. She includes everything in order to cancel everything out. She was also deeply unhappy with her colour sense and wrote about this in her diary, after she had visited Dolumenta Three in Kassel Germany, where she particularly admired the Picasso's, Leger, Alchensky and Jorn:

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"I can't stand the colour I use and yet I mostly develop in the same way. This I should change since I decided I like it not. It is amazing how this happens again and again. The Picasso's at Documenta had an interesting use of colour. I end up with red. yellow, blue, green and I hate it. It is dumb and uninteresting and I know better. I guess I am so involved in creating my own forms that I cant be at the same time involved that much in colour. But ironically they scream in colour and then I am defeated by my own lack of concern"

(Lippard: 1076 p.25)

This quotation reveals quite clearly that form is of greater interest to Hesse .

Shortly after this entry to her diary Hesse began to find the focus in her work which would lead her towards the transition from painting into sculpture which had been taking place unconsciously for some time previously. The reasons why it took her so long to recognise the fact that painting in the traditional sense of the word was not suitable for her particular needs, is explained in a remark that Elizabeth Frank made in her essay on Hesse.

"It sometimes takes years for an artist to catch up in herself. Hesse had to arrive, almost accidentally to a point where her thinking about materials required a move into sculpture. When she did, the shapes the relationships, the vocabulary were there, ripened and available for use. They had been there all along as the 1960 - 1961 drawings attest, but it is sometimes the case with large talents (Pollacks for instance, with whose work Hesse's suggests more than one instructive analogy), that the work that comes out of the deepest recesses of the self must first be resisted until that and no other will do".

(Eva Hesse Gouaches Catalogue : 1993 p.6)

The focus which quickly emerged in Hesse's work from this point on was initially most apparent in her drawings. She began to simplify them and increasingly eliminated their earlier clutter. Spatially the work became flatter in imagery, and she frequently employed a compartmental device to organise her compositions. Gradually, one kind of image began to dominate, a flat but fundamentally organic machine element which was abstracted from drawings, She made of bits of machinery that were lying around the studio, leftovers from pieces of machinery Tom Doyle had gathered to make sculptures. (See Fig 12). Encouraged by Doyle, Hesse began to become interested in releasing some of the forms she had created in her drawings. This initially took the form of a series of reliefs which was a step towards sculpture which she pursed with enormous enthusiasm for the rest of her stay in Germany. By the following June she had completed fourteen reliefs.

An examination of a watercolour (See Fig. 13) from which Hesse got the idea for her first relief illustrates this crucial step in her transition from painting to sculpture. The watercolour made just at the time Hesse learned of her friend Rosie Goldman's first pregnancy contains imagery of birth, ovulation, gestation and fertility executed in a part organic part mechanical manner. Hesse used the central image of the watercolour and translated it into a relief containing two conical shapes suggestive of both breast and penis. (See Fig. 14). The relief is executed in a variety of mixed media: pencil, acetone, varnish, enamel inks, glued cloth covered electrical wire, papier mache and masonite. She would continue to use these materials in many of her subsequent sculptures. The composition of the piece with the smaller and larger circles suggests pregnancy and motherhood. The relief also establishes many of the techniques that Hesse would use in future pieces over the next two years: building up surfaces with papier mache, binding forms with cord, activating the surface with torn pieces of paper. Hesse exhibited her reliefs in a joint show in Dusseldorf with her husband just prior to their departure from Germany in August, 1965.(See Fg. 15 & 16).

In early September she returned to New York with Doyle full of a new found confidence and a respectable body of work. She knew by now that sculpture was the correct route to follow and would enable her to realise her full potential as an artist . She had made that discovery in Germany away from the pressures of the New York art world. When they came back to New York Hesse was immediately confronted with an art movement which was to have major repercussions for the shape her artistic development would take from then on. As Tom Doyle was to recall later:

"Minimalism was everywhere"

(Lippard, 1976, p. 49)

## CHAPTER TWO

#### 1966-1968

From early 1966 onwards Eva Hesse worked exclusively in sculpture. An appreciation of the developments which unfolded in her work between 1966 and 1970 must take into consideration the major shifts which occurred in aesthetic theory and practise during the 1960's upon which it depends, to an extreme degree.

As we have seen in Chapter One, Eva Hesse absorbed the abstract expressionist aesthetics and philosophy which dominated the art world in the 1950's. Harold Rosenberg, the most influential art critic of this period wrote a seminal article on abstract expressionism called 'The American Action Painters' which became its definitive manifesto. He claimed that:

"At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act... what was to go on the canvas was not a picture, but an event....

A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist. The painting itself is a moment in the adulterated mixture of his life.... The act painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life".

(Geldzahler, 1969, p. 342)

What Rosenberg was suggesting was that in the case of abstract expressionist paintings every mark in the canvas was the trace of an intense emotional experience on the part of the artist. The outer surface of the work functioned as a 'map' of the artist's inner feelings and sense of self. The most successful practitioner of 'action' painting was considered to be William de Kooning, whose improvisational painterly canvas's were seen as an embodiment of the artists creative struggle. De Kooning was greatly admired by Hesse when she was an art student.

By the beginning of the 1960's however, abstract expressionism was almost exhausted as a style. The loose painterliness, brushed record of gesture, spontaneous drips and splashes, which were hallmarks of the style were beginning to be seen as the excesses of 'unbridled subjectivity' by painters such Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg in "**Factum One**" and "**Factum Two**", two identical action paintings highlighted one of the inherent dangers in abstract expressionism which was the degree to which it could be simulated or staged. Amy Goldin an art critic, identified the fundamental flaws in the style:

".... As the story goes abstract expressionist content, formal devices as well as subject matter are read as the natural results of direct emotional impulse. The question of individual quality is seldom raised. Expressionist techniques are not treated as components of a style but as quasi involuntary traces of emotion.

As pure argument this formulation is silly"

(Sandler, American Art, p.9)

In 1959, Frank Stella exhibited a painting in New York called "The Marriage of Reason and Squalor" (See Fig. 17) which provided a radical departure from abstract expressionism. Stella's painting was inspired by Jasper Johns, whose series of flag paintings (See Fig. 18) rejected the internality of the abstract expressionist picture, its dependence on a 'psychological space'. Based on a single motif, the American flag, these paintings were executed in thick encaustic paint which drew the viewers attention to the surface of the picture, denying any access to an illusionistic space.

"The Marriage of Reason and Squalor" consists of black bands of paint inspired by the stripes in John's flag series. Stella arranges his stripes in a simple geometric formal which purges the picture of any subjective associations. His painting signals the shift which took place in aesthetic thinking and art practises of the 60's towards an espousal of the 'thingness' of the art object in contrast to the enormous weight which subjectivity held in the 1950's, for artists and critics alike. Stella's aesthetics were influenced by the writings of Ad Reinhardt, a painter and writer who had championed an art-for-arts sake as opposed to a life-as-art approach as early as 1948 when he began to ridicule the abstract expressionist idea of the transcendant through the artists subjective 'actions'. Proclaiming himself 'The great demurrer in a time of great enthusiasms, he advocated an aesthetics of negation:

"The one objective of fifty years of abstract art is to present art-as-art and as nothing else, to make it into the one thing it is only, separating and defining it more and more, making it purer and emptier, more absolute and more exclusive, non-objective, non-representational, non figurative, nonimagist, non-expressionist, non-subjective. The only and one way to what abstract art is, is to say what it is not! "

(Johnson, 1982, p.31)

Artists like Frank Stella who was only 23 when he painted "The Marriage of Reason and Squalor" were beginning to emerge in the early 60's. Young and well educated, confident and not content to wait in the wings while their older predecessors held centre stage, these artists were a new breed, part of the youth culture which was the driving force behind the tumultuous changes which took place in that notorious decade.

The outburst of artistic energy which erupted in the 60's was bolstered by an economic boom that took place in America at this time, transforming New York in particular from being a provincial Bohemia into a leading centre of aesthetic activity. With this package came money, glamour, and attention.

New ideas on art were given a forum in art magazines and periodicals, in articles written either by artists themselves or academic collaborators. In Stella's case the academic sanctifier of his artistic output was Michael Fried, a powerful and highly respected art historian. A disciple of Clement Greenberg, 'The Dean of post war art criticism', Fried shared the former's belief in the fundamental 'objecthood' of paintings. He claimed that Frank Stella's paintings achieved that objecthood though their rigorous denial of any meaning beyond themselves. Stella had<sub>j</sub>according to Fried, solved the fundamental preoccupation of Modernist painting which was a quest for its essential attributes.

In response to Frieds claim many artists felt that painting as an art form had been brought to its natural conclusion and that the only way forward was through sculpture. Painters such as Sol le Witt, Robert Morris, Donald Judd, Carle Andre, and Robert Smithson felt compelled to abandon painting in favour of sculpture from then on.

Stella's paintings were influential in offering clues as to how the fundamental objecthood of sculpture could be reached. His choice of simple geometric formats, use of industrial paint and rejection of traditional relational composition in favour of repetition as a structuring device were all explored. The new sculptural style which emerged became known as minimalism because of the spareness of its look. All the artists mentioned above became leading practitioners of this movement, bound together in their pursuit of a sculptural language which declared the 'extremality of meaning', an art which operated within the boundaries of a 'public' rather than a 'private' space. To this end, art strategies emerged which caused a stripping away of traditional antromorphic associations from the sculpture object so that its externality could be highlighted: Simple geometry and conventional systems of ordering replaced relational composition. The use of non-traditional sculptural materials such as chrome, plexiglass and fibreglass and industrial manufacturing and fabrication techniques, eliminated the artists presence from the completed object. Furthermore, the base on which traditional sculpture was placed in order to relate it to the viewers body and viewpoint was considered unnecessary and new ways of displaying the art object were explored.

An example of a piece of sculpture which employed all the above strategies in its making was Donal Judd's "Untitled 1965" (See Fig. 19) It consisted of

seven galvanised iron boxes which measured 9" x 40" x 3". These were attached to the wall in a vertical line from ceiling to floor with an interval of 9" between each box.

As I have already mentioned in Chapter One minimalism was rapidly flourishing all over New York when Eva Hesse returned from Germany. It posed enormous challenges to an artist as deeply committed to a personal quest in her art as she was. Sol le Witt was a very close friend of Hesse's and as her marriage crumbled shortly after she came home, she relied on le Witt more and more for personal and professional support. He introduced her to his circle of minimalist artist friends which included Robert Morris, Carl Andre and Mel Bochner.

The pieces of sculpture which Hesse made at this time originated more from her German reliefs than her exposure to minimalist practises, but she did however eliminate colour entirely from her work and was encouraged to continue to work exclusively in sculpture by the example of the ex-painters with whom she mixed.

A body of work not only dark in colour but also in mood began to emerge (See Fig. 20) Explicitly sexual in reference, the mummified phallic objects which were displayed in the walls of Hesse's studio looked like 'vulgar hunting trophies'. The sausage like forms of 'several' for example, or the dismembered testicular shapes of 'not yet' which consisted of nine dyed bags filled with weights wrapped in clear polythene (See Fig. 21 and 22). These objects reflected Hesse's despair at the collapse of her marriage. Their conception taking its spur as always in her case, from closely lived and sometimes painful experience.

Hesse's art lived in such extreme proximity to her life that it ran enormous risks of remaining at the level of the cathartic or therapeutic. It is to her great credit as an artist that she recognised this inherent danger. Although she was for too much of an individualist to succumb to any art style for its own sake she would benefit enormously from 1966 onwards from her exposure to minimalism. It provided her with formal means which she could use to counter her innate expressionistic tendencies. From 1966 onwards she included minimalist strategies as part of her art practise without participating in the movements denial of selfhood in art. Her first major artistic statement was completed early in 1966. It was called "**Hang Up**" (See Fig. 23)

"The most important early statement made. It was the first time my idea of absurdity and extreme feeling came through. It was a huge piece, sixty seven feet.... The construction is really naive. If I were to make it now I'd construct it differently. It is a frame ostensibly and sit on a wall with a very thin but easily bent rod that comes out of it. The frame is all cord and rope. It's all tied up like a hospital bandage as if someone had broken an arm. 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's so absurd to have that long thin metal rod coming out of the structure and it comes out a lot, about eleven feet out.

(Hesse Retrospective, 1972, p. 24)

**'Hang Up'** deals with the tensions between order and chaos in the tightly bound empty stretcher and the released metal rod which is attached to it, it also deals with the tensions between the hang-ups which Hesse herself had experienced when faced with that choice of broadening her artistic enquiry. The oscillation between contradictory possibilities that is contained in **'Hang Up'**, the arbitrary versus the motivated, the disciplined versus the spontaneous, the familiar versus the mysterious, were to preoccupy Hesse for the remainder of her life. Three further sculptural pieces made also in 1966 explored this process again. They were **"Lacöon", "Ennead"** and **"Metronic Irregularity"** of which three versions exist. (See Fig. 24, 25 and 26).

**"Lacöon"** is one of Hesse's few free standing sculptures. It consists of a ladder like ascending structure 10' high which is counterpoised with 'earthbound' snake like cords. The ladder like structure is influenced by Sol le Witts plastic grid structures. Hesse's structure however is mummified, frozen in time and space. The title **"Lacöon"** refers to a sculture depicting the Greek

Myth about the punishment of the Trojan priest "Lacöon" and his two sons by avenging serpents for warning against the wooden horses of the Greeks. Hesse saw a reproduction of this sculpture when she was in Germany.

Ennead which means a set of nine, signals the imposition of a system of repetition in Hesse's work a development which she would explore again and again as another way of emphasising the absurd nature of her art. Measuring 36" x 33" x 1.5" **'Ennead'** consists of a board which contains fifteen rows of nine small hemispheres made from papier mache and painted grey. Each hemisphere has a cord dangling from its centre. The cords are of different lengths and fall like a mass of 'tangled' hair onto the ground. Bill Barrette suggests that the way the hair like strings in **"Ennead"** fall, 'evokes a state of mourning and implies a sense of resignation also.' This would be an accurate reflection of Hesse's emotional state at the time of **"Ennead"**'s making. Still trying to accept the fact that her marriage was irreparable, Hesse had to face a further loss when her father with whom she had a very close and loving relationship died suddenly in 1966.

Lucy Lippard included Hesse in an important group show which she curated in 1966 called "eccentric abstraction". Lippard wanted to demonstrate in this show that there were artists who were exploring 'eccentric' or 'erotic' alternatives to the solemnity and non referential aspects of minimalism, which still retained the clarity of that notion. She recognised the fact that a series of charged oppositions created an erotic effect as embodied in Hesse's art. The erotic projection into space that "Hang-Up" contained for example. In the text that accompanied the show Lippard wrote.

"These artists are eccentric because they refuse to forego imagination and the expansion of sensuous experience while they also refuse to sacrifice the solid formal basis demanded of the best in current non objective art.... eccentric abstraction thrives on contrast, but contrast handled uniquely, so that opposites become complementary instead of contradictions."

(Lippard, 1976, p.83)

Artists included in the "eccentric abstraction" show were Louise Bourgeois, Keith Sonnier, Alice Adams, Bruce Naumann and Claus Oldenberg. Eva Hesse was represented by **'Metronemic Irregularity'**, a piece which she made especially for the show and it was one of the largest pieces in it. Spanning twenty feet horizontally, it consisted of three grey plaques into which a grid was drawn with a hole inserted at each intersection, a copper wire which is cloth covered runs from one plaque to the next.

'Metronemic Irregularity' was the most cerebral of Hesse's art to date which ironically made it perhaps less suitable for the thematic concerns of Lippard's show in comparison to some of her earlier pieces, "Hang-Up" for example. She was also represented in Eccentric Abstraction by some of her overtly sexual pieces 'Several' and "Ingeminate" but it was "Metronomic Irregularity" which attracted critical praise.

"Eva Hesse's work was the best in the exhibition. It has become more involuted since her last showing and like all good work is not eccentric at all or any other epithet... the result of 'Metronemic Irregularity' is not chaos, but a structure ordered in itself, yet unavailable to comprehension. The totality is mind boggling. It is a fabrication of entanglement, a logical fiction... Hesse's work has an awkwardness similar to that of reality which is equally empty of inherent meaning or simplistic contrasts".

(Lippard, 1976, p.83)

The suppression of the emotional content in Hesse's art which began with "**Metronomic Irregularity**" was to continue in the work that was produced in 1967. The pieces that she made that year show a stronger orientation towards minimalism then had been present previously. Lucy Lippard feels in retrospect that Hesse benefited from this period in her artistic development.

"It is unfortunate that this suppression seems to have been the right prescription. When she later moved back in a more expressionist direction she was able to take or leave what she had learned from rigorous structuring during 1967".

(Lippard, 1976, p.85)

Key works from that year were "Constant", "Washertable", "Addendum" "Accession" (1) and (11). (See Figs. 27, 28 and 29).

"Constant", and "Washertable", still bear a close relationship to painting in their use of a rectangular grid format. The masonite board which was used in "Constant" was painted over in elmers glue, liquitex and varnish which gave it a mute continuous, rough surface and painterly look. The surface rills on the board seem to extend naturally into the rubbery extrusions which protrude from the surface at intersection points of the grid. Connected visually to the earlier "Ennead", "Constant" removes the emotional effect which the long rubber extensions in "Ennead" created by cropping the extensions in "Constant" to only 3" in length and knotting their ends. This created a sculptural presence which was much more controlled. This could be seen as a reflection on Hesse's life at this point just as "Ennead" had been earlier. For example, at the time of making "Constant" Hesse was beginning to regain control over her own life, symbolised by her decision to crop her much admired long hair. A new look for a new outlook on life. Hesse by now was also being taken more seriously as an artist as Mel Bochners earlier response to "Metronomic Irregularity" implies.

**"Washertable"** which is the largest of a series of washer covered surfaces that Hesse made in 1967 bears a strong resemblance to a series of drawing of circles on graph paper which she made in 1966 (See Fig. 29).

Together they demonstrate the continuing interest in the circle as a motif which permeates Hesse's entire "**Oeuvre**" and also the close relationship that existed between drawing and sculpture in her art practice.

"Addendum" is the most important piece of sculpture that Hesse made in 1967. Based on minimalist concepts of serial systems as a method of composition, it consists of a long line of semispherical forms which are attached to a support at increasing intervals that are measured mathematically, i.e. 1/8", 3/8", 5/8", 11/8", 13/8" and so on. "Addendum" signals the re emergence of an expressive element in Hesse's art in the rope which emerges from the centre point of each semisphere and drops to the ground. A tension of opposites is thus produced which looks back to her earlier work such as "Ennead" and "Hang-Up" and repeats their absurd thrust. Hesse made the following comments about "Addendum":

"The cord is flexible. It is ten feet long, hanging loosely but in parallel lines. The cord opposes the regularity. When it reaches the floor it curls and sits irregularly. The juxtaposition and actual connecting cord realises the contradiction of the rational series of semispheres and irrational flow of lines on the floor. Serial, Serial, Serial, art is another way of repeating absurdity"

Eva Hesse Sculpture "Absurdity"

(Notebook, 1970, no page number)

Towards the end of 1967 latex rubber was discovered. Its flexibility and sensitivity to touch was of little interest to hard edged minimalists, for Eva Hesse latex was to provide the means for another breakthrough in her work. Long conscious of the children's material associations of papièr machè, latex provided Hesse with a 'real' material which suited her needs. She produced a whole new body of work. Latex magnified the sensual characteristics of her art because of its ability to retain marks and its tremendous flexibility and rubbery texture. Applied like paint and built up in layers, its softness and pliability moved Hesse further away from a minimalist orientation in her work and greatly increasing its expressivity. Her work did however retain the simplicity of structure that she had gleaned from her experimentation with minimalist compositional devices but the reintroduction of the expressivity which she had suppressed in 1967 resulted in pieces of art which had minimalist affinities but were strikingly her own. "Schema" (1967), "Stratum" (1967 - 1968), "Sans 1" (1967 - 1968) and "Area" (1968) are some examples.

"Schema's" composition (See Fig. 30) bears a strong resemblance to earlier work but has a much stronger organic visceral character. Also the semispheres which had appeared in earlier pieces, are not fixed here. They are placed on the mat, thus imparting a greater sense of fragility and risk to the piece. The innate coloration of the honey coloured latex suited Hesse's desire to impart an organic feel to the finished piece. From this time on Hesse abandoned adding colour to her sculpture, allowing the natural colour of her materials to dominate. "Schema" in its orderly structuring device, yet vulnerability to change in the unfixed placement of its semispheres, challenges minimalisms rigidity and belief in 'order as meaning'. This was a challenge which she had posed in many of her previous pieces including "Addendum" about which John Perrault wrote the following remark:

"Only Hesse sees questions and in a way relishes the absurd implications of the new minimalist cliché"

(Lippard, 1976, p.96)

In 1968 the questioning of minimalism as a style moved into the public arena.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### 1968-1970

"While her mature work remained deeply personal, its aesthetic and ideological sensibility was to some extent however commensurate with a significant manifestation of the process orientated out of the period: Anti-Form"

(Hesse Retrospective, 1992, p.125)

The term Anti-form was coined by the editors of 'Art Forum' magazine as a title for a controversial article by Robert Morris in which he called for alternatives to the repressiveness of the hard edged forms of minimalist sculpture. In his article, Morris advocated a replacement of minimalist geometric rigidity with fluidity and indeterminacy. This could be achieved by reducing objects to their base material state and scattering them around on the floor. The resulting objects would no longer aspire to anything but their materiality in recognisable, unprecious, ordinary states. Morris put forward Jackson Pollock as the precursor of Anti-form in his ability to recover process and hold onto it as part of the end form of the work. He also claimed that he himself had been experimenting with this process orientated approach to sculpture as early as 1961 in his piece **"A box with the sound of its making"** (See Fig. 31)

He named Claus Oldenberg, Richard Serra, Alan Saret, Bill Bollinger, David Paul, as artists who were working in an Anti-form direction and included these artists in an exhibition which he arranged called **"9 at Castelli"** in 1969. Held in a warehouse belonging to Leo Castelli, a major dealer in New York in the 60's, The exhibition was formed around a refusal of the limitations of closed forms in favour of an exploration of sensuality and chance using non traditional materials. The show consisted of piles of felt; sheets of rubber, latex and plastic; rivers of spattered lead; all casually placed around the ground. All the work had an abstract disorderly dimension, in its randomness and basic qualities. This challenged the formal aloofness of minimalist sculpture.

Although she was eventually included in the show, Eva Hesse was not mentioned in Morris's provocative article on Anti-form despite the fact that she had obvious connections with the movement. Even though Hesse's work was focused primarily on the tensions between order and chaos, its embrace of a disorderly dimension in an abstract manner suggested strong ties to the Antiform. The arbitrariness of the tangled cords in "Ennead" for example and the erratic projection into space of the bound metal rod of "Hang-Up" prove this point When she was eventually invited to participate in "9 at Castelli" the two pieces which were selected "Aught" and "Augment" both made in 1968 (See Illustration) were not as descriptive as Morris's understanding of Antiform, as some of Hesse earlier pieces, as Lucy Lippard remarked:

"While Hesse's pieces looked beautiful in the vast dim concrete floored space which dwarfed some of the larger works, their completion and assurance seen among the most casual manifestations of Anti-form made them look almost conservative"

(Lippard, 1976, p.137)

Her first major brush with the marginalisation of women artists left Hesse deeply hurt. Although she was always acutely aware of the difficulties women artists faced in their struggle for recognition she believed that it could be achieved through a striving for excellence in the work. Hesse always resisted a gender based interpretation of her art. She once remarked:

"The best way to beat discrimination in art is by art Excellence has no sex"

(Lippard, 1976, p. 205)

Her relegation to a minor precursory role in the emergence of alternatives to minimalist aesthetics in her lifetime, contradict this statement. The lack of recognition of her important contribution to Anti-form by the time of the Castelli show clearly demonstrates that the ongoing discrimination against women in the art world is a far more complicated issue, than merely a question of quality. Two other important connections with Anti-form which were also linked with Hesse were omitted from Morris's Anti-form article. They were the emotive, eccentric and erotic alternatives to minimalism which had been proposed three years previously in "The Eccentric Abstraction" show which included Hesse and was discussed earlier in this paper. The second omission, was the developments which were taking place in European art in the 60's particularly in the work of Joseph Beuys. Beuys use of non traditional sculptural materials such as fat and felt although chosen in his case for their metaphorical rather than formal value share similarities with Anti-form. When Hesse lived in Germany, she was very near Dusseldorf where Beuys was a leading artist and would have seen his work. They both shared a belief in the inseparability of life and art. Beuys was deeply rooted in the German Romantic notion that everything is complimented by its opposite, a philosophy to which Hesse was also deeply attached. The similarities between Hesse and Beuys can also be seen in their preoccupation with the wounded self and deep belief in the redemptive power of art. Their compatibility is confirmed by Maria Kreulzer:

"Ultimately Hesse's preoccupations with polarities of self as well as materials - hard and soft, technological and natural, organic and inorganic - comes closest to the principles guiding Joseph Beuys"

(Hesse Retrospective, 1992, P,80)

Industrial fabrication was a central strategy in minimalist art but until 1968 Hesse was reluctant to have some of her pieces fabricated as she was afraid that the process would diminish the tactile qualities of her work. Encouraged however, by the prospect of increasing her work rate and discovering new materials she succumbed to the process. It was quickly confirmed that her decision was the appropriate one through her discovery of fibreglass. It was a more permanent material than latex because of its strength, and as malleable as

latex in its liquid form. It also had the added advantage of tranluscence. These qualities were of great interest to Hesse because of the duality of concerns, painterly and sculptural, within her work. She began to experiment with fibreglass, working at the Aegis factory in New York which specialised in sculpture commissions. Hesse exhibited the fruits of her labour in her first one woman show in the Fishbach Gallery in New York in 1968. "Repetition 19", "Accession" "Accretion" "San 11" all made that year were included in the show and demonstrated how successfully Hesse was able to exploit the inherent properties of fibreglass. Called "Chain Polymers" to reflect her interest in the mysteries of chemicals, materials and advanced fabrication, the show was a great success. Based on simple minimalist geometrical forms such as the cube, square and cylinder, the versatility of fibreglass enabled Hesse to combine formal, minimalist, and Anti-formal concerns in the same object. Reducing the arbitrary motivated polarities of "Ennead" for example to the contained-chaotic cubeof "Accession II" 1968 a waist high, grid perforated box (See Fig. 33) through which Hesse herself hand wove 30,000 plastic tubes. "Accession III" was a fibreglass version of "Accession I" which was made of steel and rubber hosing. Made earlier in 1967, "Accession I" suggested a stylistic collision in its calculated exterior and erotic bristling interior, between Donald Judd's minimalist aluminium boxes and Meret Oppenheimers famous surrealist covered teacup of 1936. She had an uncanny ability to suggest softness and fragility in heretofore repressive industrial materials, such as fibreglass.

Hesse's transformatory attitude towards materials is fully explored in **"Repetition 19".** 19 Fibreglass cylinders are distorted to suggest states of potential collapse. These pieces which are placed on the floor in 'aimless but congenial order' have a visceral affect on the viewer and confirm Hesse's re-introduction of emotive, allusive, and expressive aspects in her work in 1968. Her ability to inject these qualities into simple minimalist structures justify further her right to be seen as one of the leading artists in the quest for

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alternatives to minimalist rigidity, without the total loss of order which Morris's understanding for Anti-form suggested. The use of repetition in most of the pieces in the **"Chain Polymer"** Show also illustrate just how salient a feature repetition was in Hesse's work. It was a device which she returned to again and again and her reasons for doing so were deeply connected to the absurdist nature of her attitude towards life and art. She once said in relation to repetition:

"It is not just an aesthetic choice if something is absurd, its much more greatly exaggerated if its repeated. Repetition does enlarge, increase or exaggerate an idea or purpose"

(Eva Hesse sculpture CAT, 1970 Notebooks, No Page number)

In April, 1969 Hesse collapsed as the onset of the illness which would cause her death 11 months later began. Determined to continue working she employed assistants to help her with what were to become her final pieces. In **"Tory"** 1969, (See Fig. 34) the split cylindrical latex discards scattered in a heap on the floor seem to embody the final destination of the cylindrical buckets of **"Repetition 19"** Reminiscent of wizened empty pods **"Tori"** moved Lucy Lippard to write:

"It is impossible not to read into these broken and barren forms - like seed pods past their prime, the downward plunge of Hesse's life at this time"

(Lippard, 1976, p. 136)

The pathos of "Tori" was relieved in "Right After" which Hesse completed with the help of assistants in 1969 (See Fig. 6). "Right After" consisted of fibreglass weighted strings which were hung and looped from hooks attached to the ceiling in Hesse's studio. Hesse draws with the string in a manner which brings us right back to her early drawings. She releases lines which she had originally incorporated into drawings into real space in a completely spontaneous manner. The overall effect of "Right After" was gossamer like. It had a grace and beauty which Hesse was unhappy with. It was too 'right'. She made a further version of "Right After" in 1970 which remains untitled (See Fig.7). The second version consists of latex covered ropes of different widths which hang in a massive tangle from ceiling hooks. Although chaotic in appearance, "Untitled" has an underlying order which is imposed by the latex that glues the ropes together, and the points by which the ropes are attached to the ceiling. This untitled piece confirms the close relationship that exists between Pollack and Hesse. They both sought the underlying structure in chaos. Hesse was well aware of this:

"This piece is very ordered, maybe I'll make it changeable when it's completed. It's order could be chaos. Chaos can be structured as non-chaos that we know from Jackson Pollack".

(Nemser 21 Years Art Form p.91 - Cindy Nemser Interview) Hesse drew compulsively throughout her life. It was her way of uncovering her deepest pre-occupations which existed beyond the realm of language. As she became progressively weaker with her illness, she concentrated on drawing more. In the summer of 1969 she made a series of gouaches where she used a rectangular shape like 'windows' instead of the circular motif which her earlier drawings contained. They show a deep concern with light (See Fig. 34A). She used gouache and coloured inks to build up the surfaces in fragile layers, sometimes using pencil to mark out the rectangles and sometimes allowing layers of gouache to make the window shapes. "Untitled" 1969 - 1970 (See Fig. 35) is realised in actual space in "Contingent" one of Hesse's final and most important pieces (See Fig. 1). Like her drawings, it parallels the layering effect of the gouache with the layering of latex and fibreglass and shares the drawing series preoccupation with light. It consists of eight glowing composites of rubberised cheesecloth and fibreglass run through various proportional and textural changes with light catching each translucent sheet. "Really a painting" as Hesse describes it, "Contingent" functions sculpturally in the way it is displayed in perpendicular fashion to the wall behind it.

More than any of Hesse's other sculptures, "Contingent" successfully synthesises the qualities of painting and sculpture. Light, colour and frailty are merged and activated in its hybrid form. Bill Barrette who worked with Hesse as an assistant on the piece describes it thus:

"The eight bannerlike units appear as skins lifted off the surface of a painting and allowed to hang magically suspended in mid-air. At the same time the eight absorbing qualities of the latex are played off against the eight transmitting qualities of the fibre glass. The fragile latex midsections are pulled taut by the heavier fibreglass attachments imparting a palpable tension to the piece and this tension is exaggerated by the poignant contrast of the ephemeral and enduring qualities of the two materials".

(Barett, 1991, p.226)

"Contingent" is at once more attached and less associable than most of Hesse's work; transcending the whimsical to make a statement that is 'grand simply in its existence', at once fragile and yet very firmly conceived it is deeply romantic in mood and confirms Hesse's expressionistic concerns in her art.

Although frequently poignant, and inclusive of the suffering aspect of the human condition that "Ennead" and "Tori", "Lacoon" and her hanging pieces from 1966 imply, Hesse was also capable of a whacky humour in her art. "My weird humour" as she describes it. Nowhere is this more evident than in her last piece that she completed before her death which remains untitled. It consists of seven big bound disembodied legs made from wire and polythene armatures which are covered with fibreglass (See Fig. 4). The seven 'legs' resemble "Repetition 19" in their aimless grouping. They immediately bring Hesse's love of Samuel Becketts absurdist existentialism to mind and look as if they are straight out of "Waiting for Godot" in their futile quest. Lucy Lippard made the following remarks about this piece.

"There is a fatalistic calm about them and a humble look of waiting without anticipation"

(Lippard, 1976, p.179)

In their absurdity they are a fitting final statement from Eva Hesse in the nature of life and art.

### CONCLUSION

"The World of the Flesh and the World of the Spirit are indivisible. They co-exist painfully in the same frame. The poet has a foot in the mud, an eye on the stars and a dagger in his hand.

The contradictions of any living process cannot be denied. There is an omnipresent paradox that cannot be argued but must be lived. Poetry is a rough magic that fuses opposites"

(Peter Brook The Shifting Point, 1987, p. 55)

Although the above extract was written by the theatrical director, Peter Brook, in an account of the discoveries that he made after forty years of theatrical experimentation, it could just as easily have been written by Eva Hesse. The 'painful' co-existence of opposites 'in the same frame' is an extremely accurate description of the ultimate effect of her major sculptural statements such as "Hang-Up" and "Contingent" and the paradoxical nature of her own personality. Through her fusion of opposites between painting and sculpture, order and chaos, formal and personal, forbidden and permissible, Hesse showed that the way out of minimalism could lead not only to further reductions, to conceptual and process, art and theory, but also into unexplored private areas of feeling. As we have seen, Hesse pieced together a new kind of expressionism, abstract and minimalist in form, but her main concern was not about formal questions. She used her formal discoveries to accentuate through opposition the battle between the impulse to form and formlessness. This was not in an attempt to discover meaning but as a way of finding a visceral response to meaninglessness.

More aware of a need to include sculpture as part of her artistic enquiry than any ideological abandonment of painting as an activity, the interaction between painting and sculpture that permeates Hesse's work contributed to its distinctiveness in relation to mainstream minimalist art practises. Its ability to sustain its own emotional demands and the mark of the marker provided an alternative approach in a period in art history when 'cleanliness and straight edges were close to the Godliness of success'.












figure 5 A. 'UNTITLED' 1960










































































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