

"I think art is a total thing. A total person giving a contribution. It is an essence, a soul.. In my inner soul art and life are inseparable"

eva hesse

SYNOPSIS

Eva Hesse is one of the most renowned American artists to come of age in the immediate aftermath of **The Abstract Expressionists**. Having fled her native Germany during the rise of Nazism, Hesse was originally schooled in American abstract painting and commercial design practices. She originally pursued a career in commercial textile design in New York City, but Hesse's practice as an expressionist painter led her to increasingly experiment with industrial and every-day, or "found" materials, such as rope, string, wire, rubber, and fiberglass. Reducing her means in the spirit of **Minimalism**, Hesse explored by way of the simplest materials how to suggest a wide range of organic associations, psychological moods, and what might be called proto-feminist, sexual innuendo. She also experimented with expressing semi-whimsical states of mind rarely explored in the modern era until

her all-too-brief debut. Thus Hesse arrived quickly at a new kind of abstract painting, as well as a kind of so-called "eccentric," freestanding sculpture.

KEY IDEAS

- Professionally trained as an abstract painter and commercial designer, Hesse is a paradigmatic postwar American artist, much like Ellsworth Kelly, who regarded painting not as a two-dimensional surface, but as an object on the wall to be extended into the space of the viewer before it. Mimicking the organic vulnerability of the human body itself, work by Hesse seems to take on a tentative or even ephemeral life of its own, its material density apparently enlivened by some invisible, psychological momentum.
- Much of Hesse's work might be thought of as a form of poetic, three-dimensional montage, a conjoining of disparate parts culled from diverse sources and combined, or arranged in ways that suggest moments of quiet reflection on the world around us.
- Hesse's life was plagued by various kinds of physical and emotional hardship, ranging from political persecution to familial illness and depression, not least of all her eventual suffering and demise from cancer. Nevertheless, Hesse boldly forged ahead and made the most of her professional circumstances, ultimately to create abstract and endlessly evocative works free of any socio-political agenda.
- Hesse was among the first artists of the 1960s to experiment with the fluid contours of the organic world of nature, as well as the simplest of artistic gestures. Some observers see in these qualities latent, proto-feminist references to the female body; others find in Hesse's languid forms expressions of wit, whimsy, and a sense of spontaneous invention with casually found, or "everyday" materials.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Childhood

Eva Hesse was born into a German-Jewish family during the social and political turmoil brought about by the rise of the Nazi regime in Hamburg. Family life under the Nazis was difficult for the Hesses; Eva's father, Wilhelm, was barred from his law practice, and mother, Ruth, frequently suffered bouts of depression. Intent on keeping their children safe after the November pogrom of 1938 ("Kristallnacht"), Eva and her sister Helen were sent to a Dutch children's home. The family was later reunited in England, from where they made their way to the United States. Arriving in New York, the Hesses initially found support in the German-Jewish community of Washington Heights. Ruth's depression worsened, however, leading to her separation from the family in 1944. Ruth subsequently committed suicide shortly after Wilhelm remarried; Eva was then 10 years old.

A sensitive child with a strong attachment to her parents, Eva was deeply affected by the tragic loss of her mother. Nonetheless, she performed well in her classes and was a popular student at New York's School of Industrial Art (today the High School of Art and Design). Although she was characterized as "insecure" by family and friends (Helen has also publicly claimed that her sister suffered "separation anxiety"), Eva firmly believed in her own artistic potential. While interning at *Seventeen* as an 18-year-old, Eva was chosen as the subject of a feature article in which she described her artistic calling in no uncertain terms, stating, "For me, being an artist means to see, to observe, to investigate. It means trying to understand and portray people, their emotions, their strengths and faults. I paint what I see and feel to express life in all its reality and movement."

Early training

While at *Seventeen*, Hesse took classes at the Art Students League. After brief studies at Pratt Institute, she gained a certificate in design from Cooper Union, and then went on to attend the School of Architecture at Yale University, where she was a student of Josef Albers. After graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1959, Hesse took a job selling jewelry to supplement part-time employment

as a textile designer. Following the example of her childhood idol, **Willem de Kooning**, Hesse strove to paint in an **Abstract Expressionist** style. Academically executed landscapes gradually gave way to figure sketches and self-portraits of intense color and heavy strokes of the palette knife. Her experimentations in painting and drawing produced some of the first of what was to be many compartmented images, a schematic compositional format that may have derived from her extensive design training. The widely influential *Sixteen Americans* show by curator Dorothy Miller at MoMA in 1959, which included the work of **Louise Nevelson**, **Jasper Johns**, and **Ellsworth Kelly**, may have further encouraged this aspect of Hesse's work, although she was already independently maturing as an artist by the end of the decade. A thick impasto method, coupled with the depiction of glowing, object-like shapes floating above a dark ground in *Untitled* (1960), demonstrate Hesse's growing interest in referring to three-dimensional space at that juncture.



In 1961, Hesse exhibited drawings and watercolors for her first shows at John Heller Gallery, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Wadsworth Atheneum. In April of the same year, she met the sculptor Tom Doyle, whom she married six months later. As was common of female artists of the day, Hesse's artistic output lessened in the years immediately following her marriage, but her professional development nonetheless continued to progress. Some of the most important drawings and paintings from this period feature her signature box works, but their systemization shows the beginnings of a subsequent preoccupation with the grid. The use of repeated units suggests the work of friend and informal mentor, **Sol LeWitt**, whose studio was within walking

distance of Hesse and Doyle's apartment in downtown Manhattan.

Mature period

Hesse and Doyle left New York to work in Dusseldorf in 1965, after Doyle received an offer from the Kunstverein, one of the oldest and most prestigious art associations devoted to contemporary art. Hesse immersed herself in the German art scene, which was dominated by abstract sculpture. Turning that winter to found materials in a converted studio-factory, she began to explore working with plaster and string, while continuing to produce variations of the grid in her paintings and drawings. A playful eroticism emerges in Hesse's work at this time, one possibly inspired by the examples of French artists **Marcel Duchamp** and **Jean Tinguely**. Hesse's experimentation led to *Ringaround Arosie* (1965), which she described as the representation of a breast and a penis. A selection of Hesse's reliefs and paintings were exhibited at the Kunsthalle Dusseldorf during the last month of 1965, the conclusion of the couple's year-long German sojourn.



Hesse and Doyle divorced after returning to New York in 1966. Maintaining her studio on the Bowery, Hesse resumed her friendship with LeWitt, and grew close to **Robert Smithson** and **Mel Bochner**. These relationships resulted in a mutually productive exchange of ideas that would bear a strong influence on Hesse's subsequent work. It was also in 1966 that Hesse made a decisive transition from painting to sculpting, specifically with *Hang Up* (1966), a blank canvas consisting of a cloth-wrapped frame and a steel rod extending from its surface.

Related to **Minimalism**, the exceedingly extended metal rod gives *Hang Up* a certain "absurd" distinction, as Hesse herself has remarked. Her inclusion in the watershed exhibition *Eccentric Abstraction*, of 1966, organized by **Lucy Lippard** for Fischbach Gallery, argued for a common ground between the leading artistic movements of the 1960s. In hindsight, Hesse's inclusion suggests how her work was exercising an ambivalent impression on critics and the public at that moment. In any event, Lippard's influential show led to Hesse's official representation by Fischbach starting in 1967.

Since the late 1960s, much has been made by critics of a so-called contradictory or "dual" nature in Hesse's work. *Hang Up*, for example, partakes of the spatial realms of both painting and sculpture. The pieces from Hesse's *Metronomic Irregularity* series, one of which was shown in *Eccentric Abstraction*, combine elements of **Abstract Expressionism** with formal qualities of Minimalism. In *Metronomic Irregularity II* (1966), one of her most renowned works, a Jackson Pollock-like composition of tangled wires floats above a Donald Judd-esque arrangement of boxes formed by pieces of slate and a blank wall. The visual impact of the sculpture exceeds its parts, however, taking on a life of its own. This equivocal phenomenon is in keeping with Hesse's desire, in her words, "to get to non-art, non-connotive, non-geometric, non-nothing, everything, but of another kind, vision, sort, from a total other reference point."

Late Period and Death

Once Hesse fully concentrated on sculpture, her work evolved rapidly. The *Accession* series of the late 1960s features her first forays into working with metal. *Accession II* (1967-68), a steel box lined with nearly countless multiple protrusions of plastic tubing features hard and soft textures to create an object that is both menacing and inviting. Meanwhile, Hesse started her first pieces in latex, a material that attracted Hesse due to its flexibility and its lending an organic quality to objects. The latex spheres of *Schema* (1968) soften the rigidity of the 12 x 12 matrix, thus subverting its harsher Minimalist overtones. In 1968, Hesse was introduced to fiberglass, which was the material of choice for the period's *Repetition Nineteen* series. Unlike *Schema*, which is a serial work in the strictest sense, the *Repetition* pieces seem

to take place in random arrangement. Instead of relying on the tactility of latex, the *Repetition* series utilizes a more literal tube-like shape to convey an ambiguous organic nature.



In late 1968, Fischbach Gallery showed both Hesse's latex and fiberglass works in an exhibition titled *Chain Polymers*, named after Hesse's own scribbled description of this latest series. It was to be her first and only solo exhibition of sculpture. Well-received by the critics, the watershed exhibition was followed up by Hesse's inclusion in a group show organized by Robert Morris for Leo Castelli, the prestigious *Annual Exhibition* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the widely influential exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* (1969), organized by Harald Szeemann for the Kunsthalle Bern. Important articles appeared in *Life* and *Artforum* magazines, and MoMA acquired two works from the *Repetition* series, all attesting to Hesse's evolving acclaim. Such professional successes were soon coupled by personal tragedy, however, as Hesse would undergo surgery for a brain tumor three times from 1969 to 1970. Hesse died in May 1970, at the age of 34, arguably at the very height of her career.

LEGACY

Though Hesse's career spanned little more than a decade, her work has remained popular and highly influential. On the one hand, the enduring fascination with Hesse derives from her remarkable "life of extremes." But Hesse's work, itself, was very much part of an equivocal and unique era in history, when artists were seeking new modes of

expression in the aftermath of Abstract Expressionism. Her answer to that problem continues to defy easy categorization. Hesse's oblique references to the human body succeeded in breathing new life into a former Surrealist current in Europe and the United States in the pre-World War II period; thus Hesse's work demonstrated to a new, postwar generation how to distill feelings and conceptual references down to a set of essential forms and contours. These forms' abstract, yet subtly organic qualities suggest that Hesse's work has left a distinct legacy for her contemporaries and subsequent followers. Indeed, the languid lines of her signature shapes, at once playful and full of gravitas, are apparent in a wide range of work by late 20th century American painters and sculptors, among them Brice Marden, Anish Kapoor, Louise Bourgeois, Martin Puryear, and Bill Jensen.

*Original content written by **The Art Story Contributors***

ARTIST QUOTES

"I am interested in solving an unknown factor of art and an unknown factor of life. In fact, my idea is to counteract everything I've ever learned or been taught about those things - to find something that is inevitable that is my life, my feeling, my thoughts."

"In the forms I use in my work the contradictions are certainly there. I was always aware that I should take order versus chaos, stringy versus mass, huge versus small, and I would try to find the most absurd opposites or extreme opposites. I was always aware of their absurdity and also their formal contradictions and it was always more interesting than making something average, normal"

Major Works:



Title: Untitled (1960)

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Private collection, Zurich

Description: At 24, Eva Hesse was well informed on matters of recent art history, such as the Abstract Expressionist ethos of the New York School and its "second generation" response in the form of Color Field painting. In 1960 she set out as an independent artist, producing a series of what have since come to be referred to as "spectre pictures," according to curator E. Luanne McKinnon. What unites these expressionistic abstractions is their flirtation with imagery of the human body and self-portraiture, while they nonetheless seek to express something comparatively intangible, a recurring psychological motif such as a state of mind, a mood or a memory. In this piece, Hesse hints at the common format of a studio-based self-portrait by the painter standing at her easel, although one would not see this at the outset, which is precisely Hesse's intention. As in many of the works from this series, *Untitled* presents a largely monochromatic palette of green pigment accentuated, or visually compartmentalized, by sharply contrasting tonalities articulating the two-dimensional space of the canvas. The compartmental imagery of *Untitled* will be repeated in Hesse's sculpture, such as in the *Repetition Nineteen* pieces, and may have been influenced by Hesse's exposure to the work of Louise Nevelson in MoMA's contemporaneous *Sixteen Americans* show. The gestural brushwork here derives from Hesse's training in the Abstract Expressionist style, while her restricted color scheme and compartmental leanings might be attributed to her study under Albers. All speaks to her desire to simplify, reduce and visually pare the subject down to its most essential qualities.



Title: Ringaround Arosie (1965)

Materials: Pencil, acetone, varnish, enamel, paint, ink, and cloth-covered electrical wire on paper-mache and masonite

Collection: The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Description: A German exhibition by Jean Tinguely may have triggered the kitschy, playful vein of *Ringaround Arosie*, although Hesse was already familiar with the erotic surrealism of Marcel Duchamp. We might also see in this work the playful, absurd qualities of Dada, as well as the more fantastic, futuristic elements of late Bauhaus as

manifested in the abstract theatrical costumes of Oskar Schlemmer and others of pre-war German design culture. Hesse has identified the two central objects as a breast and a penis, which lends the work a humorous quality; at the same time, the relief exudes a stereotypically feminine persona with its pink tonality and craft-like texture. The title, which recalls a well-known childhood game with a haunting subtext referring to "falling down" or similarly suffering a calamity, has been interpreted as a statement of Hesse's own desire at that time to become a mother. As if giving birth to another dimension in her own work, this first relief by Hesse is an important landmark in her evolving path from painting to so-called "eccentric" sculpture.

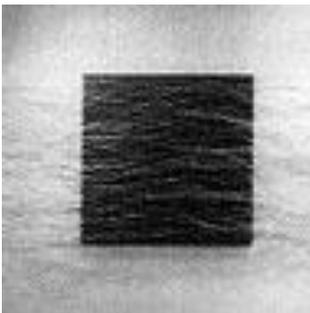


Title: Hang Up (1966)

Materials: Acrylic paint on cloth over wood; acrylic paint on cord over steel tube

Collection: Art Institute of Chicago

Description: The seemingly simple addition of the long metal rod to a canvas in *Hang Up* dramatically transformed a painting into a sculpture, symbolizing the artist's own transition from working in two to three dimensions. Hesse called *Hang Up* her earliest important artistic "statement", due to its successful manifestation of her fascination with "absurdity." The wire juts out seemingly too far into the space before the "picture", and the cloth-wrapped frame of the canvas contrasts strongly with the metal loop. The soft and hard textures are subtle testaments to the self-contradictory nature of much of Hesse's sculpture, keeping any given work's meaning shrouded in mystery. The rod protruding from the canvas might even be said to evoke the erotic, as did the orbs in *Ringaround Arosie*.



Title: Metronomic Irregularity II (1966)

Materials: Paint and Sculp-Metal on wood with cotton-covered wire

Collection: This work is no longer extant

Description: Lucy Lippard, who organized the seminal show *Eccentric Abstraction*, was originally disappointed with Hesse's selection of *Metronomic Irregularity II* for the exhibition, due primarily to the work's apparent lack of sexual or organic qualities. Here, we see Hesse interested in something relatively free of erotic overtones, but just as extraordinary, by marrying Minimalist forms with Expressionist gesture. Indeed, the

square pieces of slate with equal spaces of blank wall between them utilize the formal, highly reductive vocabulary of Minimalism. This visually muted impression is overcome, however, by the twisted fibers that approximate the effects of early 1950s "Action Painting". The push and pull between these different sources of inspiration and such starkly contrasting textures create a dissonance that gives *Metronomic Irregularity* a unique intensity, evoking at once the beat of a clock and the disarray of an all-enveloping windstorm.



Title: Accession II (1967-68)

Materials: Steel with plastic tubing

Collection: Detroit Institute of Arts

Description: *Accession II* seems a logical, structural outcome of the compartmental images characterizing Hesse's early paintings. Once again, the metal cube seems to have dropped straight out of a two-dimensional, Minimalist work of art, all the while the interior rows of tubing complicate its clean, exterior sensibility. Bristling along the inner walls of the cube like the quills of a porcupine, the protrusions give the cube an ominous aura that belies their soft plasticity. Is this a cloister of cushioning, or a torture chamber? The dual qualities of the box aptly characterize Hesse's own "life of extremes", the unknowing girl of a forced and tragic diaspora, and the accomplished university design student. Alluding to unexpected dangers and the need for a safe, protective space, *Accession II* embodies the artist's own fears and desires just as effectively, perhaps, as any more representational self-portrait.



Title: Repetition Nineteen III (1968)

Materials: Polyester and fiberglass resin

Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York

Description: The cylindrical structures of *Repetition Nineteen III* are of fiberglass, one of the many industrial materials that Hesse experimented with in her later work. The process of repetition and subtle variation speak to a recent heritage of Minimalism, but Hesse imbues each form with a hand-sculpted individuality. Visually simple in its design, *Repetition* is actually complex for its many associations, both to Hesse's work to that date, as well as to the world around her. The tube-like objects are in keeping with

Hesse's compartmental preoccupations, but they are also ambiguously sexual. Even so, the translucent fiberglass allows light to pass through the containers glowingly, lending the composite artwork a calming pastoral or even quasi-spiritual quality.