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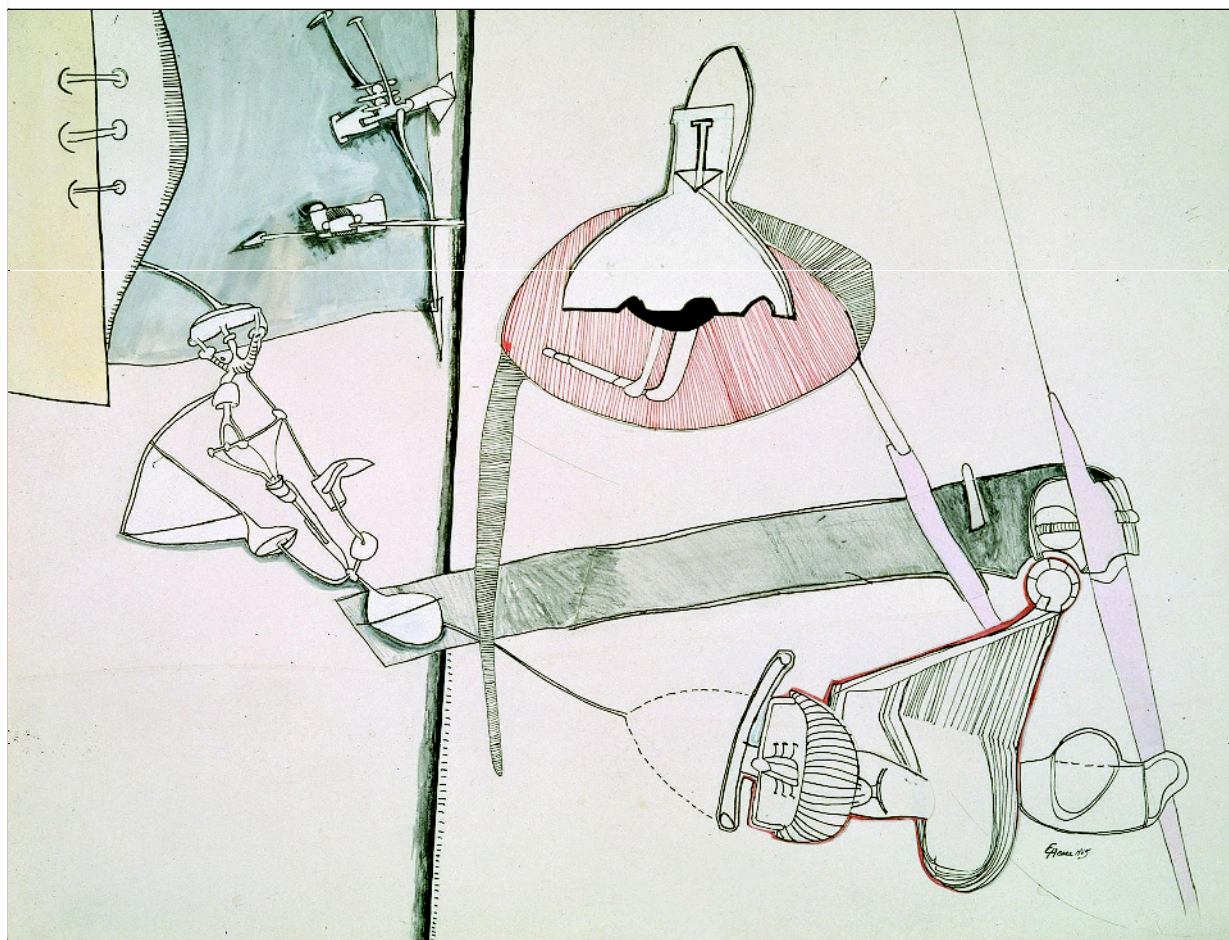
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Exhibition Review

Eva Hesse



Exhibition Review

Eva Hesse. Tate Modern, London November 13 2002 – March 9 2003

“not painting, not sculpture”

In November 2002 I chaired a panel of artist speakers in a session called “The Studio Encounter” at the conference *Encountering Eva Hesse* at Tate Modern. Initiated by Dr Vanessa Corby and organized in collaboration with the AHRB (Arts and Humanities Research Board) Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory and History at the University of Leeds, it provided a forum for discussion of the work of Eva Hesse in the context of a new exhibition originated by Elizabeth Sussman and Renate Petzinger which was shown in San Francisco and Wiesbaden, and installed at Tate Modern by Sheena Wagstaff and Nicholas Serota from November 2002 through March 2003. In our session Joanna Greenhill spoke of her first encounter with Eva Hesse’s work in an exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1979 while she was a student making sculpture at art school in London. “Everything in Eva Hesse’s work was different from what I had experienced

before,” she told us. “It revealed a new space in sculpture . . . they made some kind of relation to my body, some kind of understanding that was imagined as well as physical. The works in this exhibition were made of materials and involved processes which were not previously part of the language of sculpture.” Yet, as Phyllida Barlow so neatly phrased it in her presentation, Hesse’s “near-copyright” on materials such as liquid latex and resin posed a dilemma for young artists encouraged to experiment with their properties as part of their training. “Once these processes have been discovered,” she explained, “what next? To make a series of near-miss Eva Hesses . . .”¹

Together these remarks represent a concise history of the effects, both enabling and limiting, of exposure to the work of Eva Hesse most familiar to me before I visited the exhibition at Tate Modern. Incredible as it now seems, I did not see *Eva Hesse: Sculpture* at

the Whitechapel Art Gallery in the spring of 1979. It was not surprising at the time though: I was a painter and sculpture did not interest me. In her influential biographical study of the work of Hesse published in 1976, Lucy Lippard closes the chapter covering the artist's completed "apprenticeship" at the end of a year working in Kettwig-am-Ruhr in Germany with the statement that Hesse returned to New York in 1965 full of new confidence and with "an image of herself as a sculptor" (Lippard 1976: 47). The line thus drawn in Lippard's narrative of Hesse's development, between her immature activity in painting and her coming of age as an artist in sculpture, has characterized curatorial decision making, and most of the critical writing about the artist's practice ever since. In the galleries of the exhibition at Tate Modern, however, in what counts as my first encounter with the work of Eva Hesse twenty-three years on from *Eva Hesse: Sculpture* at the Whitechapel Gallery, that division looked decidedly less distinct.

This is not to say that the curatorial logic of the exhibition broke with the established narrative; the two rooms of paintings and colored drawings Hesse made between 1962 and 1965 were located according to its developmental chronology, but the force of their impact in the specific context of this exhibition unexpectedly loosened its authority. "Chewing up the patriarchs" was how Max Kozloff described what he saw in Hesse's paintings when he wrote about them in his introduction to an exhibition at the Robert Miller Gallery in New York in 1992. For Kozloff the source of their

energy was competition, generated in Hesse's acts of rejecting "prestigious forefathers in her pictorial culture." On the other hand he detected a tension in the work that he speculated was the result of "a female artist who is male identified at the expense of instincts in her own sexual being" (Kozloff 1992: unpaginated). Feminist scholars have analyzed this dilemma: artists who were women had to negotiate the terms of their own interventions in the Oedipal structure that determined the mode of avant-garde practice as one of "reference, deference, and difference."² At the same time they struggled to represent aspects of their subjectivity not recognized by a phallogocentric culture.

The information panel in the exhibition cited the work of Matta and Gorky as resources for the colored drawings and paintings Hesse made between 1962 and 1964. The impressive blue box painting (*Untitled*, oil on canvas, 72 × 60 inches, 1964), and an associated smaller 3D piece, also from 1964, undoubtedly drew on the work of Sol Lewitt. Hesse plays fast and loose with Lewitt's 3D wall pieces in oil on canvas and painted wood of 1962, unceremoniously tugging at the corners of his regular cubes to shape them according to an altogether different spatial logic. We know that Hesse visited *Documenta 3* in Kassel in June 1964 and was interested in paintings by Asger Jorn, Pierre Alechinsky and Scottish painter Alan Davie. Davie's vocabulary lingers in the series of five remarkable paintings made in Germany in 1964/5 that for me was the surprise and pleasure of the whole exhibition. Medium sized,

flatly painted, none larger than 35 × 43 inches, these works may have originated in drawings based on letters and numbers Hesse made for children who visited her studio in Kettwig. They were important enough for her to note their qualities in her journal as “clear, direct, powerful” (Lippard 1976: 27). A letter to Sol Lewitt contains what sounds like a description of how the playful drawings developed . . . “contained forms somewhat harder often in boxes and forms become machine like, real like, and as if to

tell a story in that they are contained. Paintings follow similarly” (Lippard 1976: 34). Rumbustious, comic strip kind of paintings these, and if they tell a story what is it? “A dirty one,” in the opinion of one of my viewing companions at the Tate. Sol Lewitt replied to Hesse’s letter quoted above with the injunction “Do more. More nonsensical more crazy, more machines, more breasts, penises, cunts, whatever . . .” (Lippard 1976: 35). In *Untitled*, 32 × 40¼ inches (1964), and *Untitled*, 31 × 39¾

inches (1964), hair, fingernails, toes nails, teeth, anus, or is it a plughole? Sink, cistern, towel rack/ chair back, crude forms outlined in black that leaves a tide mark in the body color, anticipate Philip Guston’s late comic book style. Machines? I am reminded of Stuart Davis’s flat, squared up *Egg Beater* and *Percolator* paintings of the late 1920s. Workmen were dismantling weaving machines in the factory Hesse and Doyle were using as a studio in Germany, while not far away, in Paris, Marcel Duchamp was

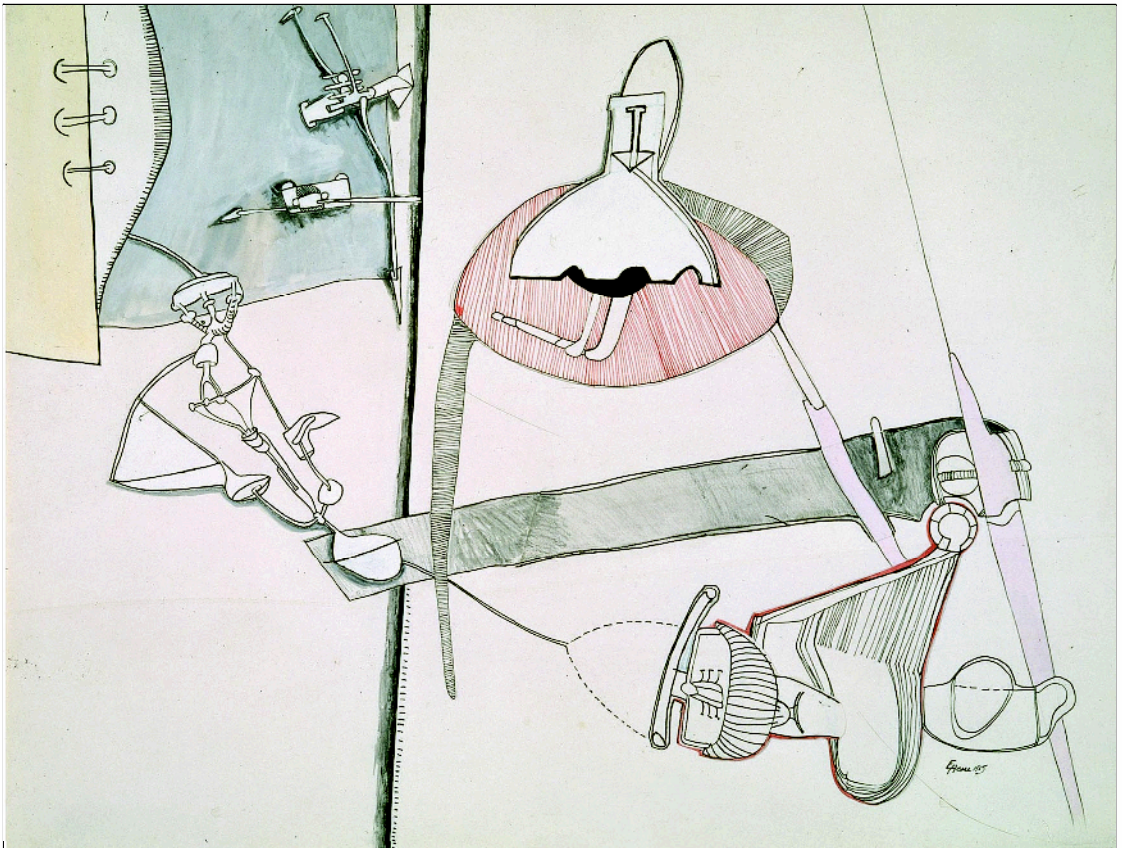


Figure 1

Eva Hesse (1936–1970). *Untitled* 1965. Drawing and gouache on paper. Unique 496 × 647 mm. Courtesy of the Tate. Purchased 1986. © Estate of Eva Hesse.

etching his *Bride* as a spindly machine. Sex machine-machinic sex, what's the story? Precisely, I suggest, the one Max Kozloff offers about chewing up the patriarchs.

Hesse remarked on the Picassos she saw at *Documenta* for their interesting use of color. Her own she considered unimaginative and put it down to the fact that she was too involved in finding her own forms to manage color at the same time. The boldest pair of the 64/65 series, *Untitled*, 32 × 40¾ inches (1964), and *Untitled*, 31 × 39¾ inches (1964) bear out this assessment; they are monochrome in tones of

flesh or yellow, but they demonstrate Hesse's comment about Picasso exactly in reverse. The paintings say: what I find interesting in Picasso is his use of form. A study in gouache and a similar painting from 1964/5 have at their center a bulbous hooped element reminiscent of the equestrian penis figure in Picasso's etching *Dream and Lie of Franco 1* (1937) which is, of course, a comic strip narrative. The story which provides the pretext for the painting that must have been the centerpiece of Picasso's 12 canvas contribution to *Documenta* is the rape of the



Figure 2

Eva Hesse (1936–1970). *Tomorrow's Apples (5 in White)* 1965. Enamel, gouache and mixed media on board 654 × 556 × 159 mm. Courtesy of the Tate. Purchased 1979. © Estate of Eva Hesse.

Sabine women, a not insignificant fact, it seems to me, if we read this astonishing group of paintings by Hesse in the light of Kozloff's astute comments about sex and competition. The theme of *The Rape of the Sabines* was mobilized for the virtuoso performances of the generations of painter fathers against whom Picasso was driven to compete, and he takes them on. I am not suggesting that *Untitled*, 32 × 40¹/₄ inches (1964), and *Untitled*, 31 × 39³/₄ inches (1964) are a direct reworking of the narrative pretext of Picasso's *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (1962). It seems to me, however, that they are evidence of Hesse's highly ambitious engagement with the vocabulary by means of which Picasso translated sexual energy into visual form. She utilizes the crude and quirky, rather than cruel, conventions of the comic book illustrator's art to perform an audacious deflation of Picasso's virile forms. In the process she achieves a sense of exhilaration that belies Kozloff's doubts about her ability to articulate the mode of her own sexuality under the terms of such an engagement.

Much has been written on questions raised by the issue of the impermanence of the materials Hesse employed to make sculpture, particularly in the last works: resin discolors and latex perishes. Should degradation be accepted as part of the work's natural life? What is the status of the object exhibited now? Before my first visit to the exhibition I attended a workshop conducted in the Fine Art studios at the University of Leeds by sculptor Doug Johns who assisted Hesse with the fabrication of her later work, including *Sans II* (1968), *Contingent*

(1969), *Right After* (1969) and the hanging rope piece *Untitled* (1970). We saw the qualities of the fresh materials and experienced their technical potentials and limitations: the frustrations and excitements of drying and hardening times, the unpredictability of chemical reactions. It became apparent from the demonstration that managing these "liquid to solid"³ processes on the scale of *Right After* and *Untitled* involved an ambitious choreography, at once technically exacting and thrilling in its potential to materialize a proposition. About what I was not sure until confronted in the galleries of Tate Modern by the "blasphemy" of *Untitled*, 32 × 40¹/₄ inches (1964), and *Untitled*, 31 × 39³/₄ (1964) and then eagerly anticipated the apotheosis of their promise in the furthest rooms of the exhibition.⁴ *Untitled* (1970) indeed was the last work in the show, but the translucent drool of fresh latex over rope, at once fascinating and repellent in the workshop demonstration and unimaginable spanning meters, had turned opaque with age, darkened, hardened and begun to crack. *Contingent*, tantalizing in reproduction as the exquisite mature resolution of the proposal illustratively prefigured in *Hang Up* (1966), "not painting: not sculpture," is too fragile to travel, even to hang and languishes in boxes in the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra.⁵ Paradoxically, the vitality missing from the sculpture of the late 1960s, its origin and loss both an effect of ephemeral processes, resided now, as if it had migrated between rooms, in the relative stability of the earlier paintings. To put this another

way: in a phenomenological encounter with a chronological installation of what of Hesse's practice can be brought together for exhibition today, an unexpected temporal reversal occurred. At the point of the exhibition's representation of the very period of Hesse's practice we have come to accept from art historical, critical and pedagogical discourses as the pinnacle of her achievements as a sculptor, an intense moment of her pre-sculptural production returned to re-animate it in the present. This raises interesting questions not so much about what, as *how* the work of Eva Hesse means today. What determines the sense it makes now? How do we go about writing and curating new meanings for it?

An old meaning, new meanings, the curatorial coherence of the exhibition was everywhere evident in enlightening and provoking transitions from room to room. Nowhere more so than in the decision to represent quite literally the passage of Hesse's ideas through drawing in corridors linking the predominantly painting and predominantly sculpture sides of the exhibition. Coming after the room of wonderful colored reliefs, and in the company of *Hang up*, the pictorial framing of *Ingeminate* (1965), *Untitled* (1965) and *Ennead* (1966), installed close to the walls and lit for shadows, made sense in terms of narrating a transition from painting to sculpture. There was, however, one glaring miscalculation. For conservation reasons dangling and hanging strings and cords were not allowed to touch the floor. To get around the problem such pieces were installed on white platforms raised above the

wooden floor of the gallery. But did they need to be quite so high? The resulting bulk proved disastrous in the long stretch of *Addendum* where it read as an added element of the work and wrecked the stunning material economy of Hesse's condensation of many contradictions that makes it such an astonishing work of art. This mistake apart, the work was thoughtfully installed, and we must

thank all the people who collaborated to bring the exhibition to London. It offered those for whom the example of Eva Hesse's practice has been central to their own for many years as artists, art historians, cultural analysts, together with those of us who have engaged with it more recently, the opportunity to study its full range at first hand. We are left to discuss and debate what to make of it today.



Figure 3

Eva Hesse (1936–1970). *Ingeminate* 1965. Enamel paint, cord, and papier-mâché over two balloons connected with surgical hose. Each balloon: 55.9 × 11.4 cm Hose: 365.8 cm. Courtesy of Daros Collection, Switzerland. © Estate of Eva Hesse. Photocredit: Courtesy The Estate of Eva Hesse. Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zurich.

Notes

1. Publication of the papers presented by Joanna Greenhill and Phyllida Barlow is forthcoming.
2. See Griselda Pollock's important study of this situation in "Killing Men and Dying Women: A Woman's Touch in the Cold Zone of American Painting in the 1950s" in Orton, Fred and Pollock, Griselda (eds). 1996. *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 221–294.
3. The description is Phyllida Barlow's.
4. Donna Haraway's concept of blasphemy offers a helpful way of reading these works. See Haraway, Donna. 1991. "A Cyborg Manifesto" in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women – The Reinvention of Nature*. New York : Routledge.
5. The phrase "not painting, not sculpture" comes from Hesse's catalogue statement accompanying *Contingent* when it was shown at Finch College's *Art in Process IV*, Fall 1969.

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