

Teacher and  
Group Leaders' Kit

# Eva Hesse

13 NOVEMBER 02 – 9 MARCH 03

MODERN

**TATE**

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The exhibition is co-curated by Elisabeth Sussman for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Dr Renate Petzinger for Museum Wiesbaden. The Tate Modern installation is curated by Sheena Wagstaff and co-ordinated by Helen Sainsbury.

# Introduction to the Eva Hesse exhibition

Welcome to Tate Modern and to the Eva Hesse exhibition.

The work of Eva Hesse refuses to be completely known and understood. She said that she aimed to create both 'something' and 'nothing', and the work embodies contradictions, denying one simple reading. However there are many fascinating discussions that arise from looking at the artworks. Should we consider the pieces she produced in isolation from her biography, for instance, in particular her confessional style diaries, her tragic early death and her subsequent mythologisation? Did she intend her artworks to have a finite life span and was that the reason she used experimental materials that would decompose over the years?

These questions and others are raised in this kit. We hope you will find plenty of fruit for discussion in the exhibition and for continued work back in the classroom or centre. Deterioration of the work means that this could be the last time that we have the opportunity to see a retrospective of this scope, so we hope you enjoy the occasion.

## Visiting the Exhibition

Tickets are available in advance from Tate Ticketing, tel 020 7887 3959, school and group bookings line. Price: £3 per head.

Please ask Tate Ticketing if you would like to book locker and lunch space for your group (there is a limited amount available).

In special exhibitions you are not allowed to lecture to groups of more than six people. We suggest instead that you divide your class into small groups and follow the suggestions in this kit.

## Tate Modern's approach to learning

Tate Modern's approach to learning encourages students to think not of one correct reading or interpretation of an artwork, but of plural readings. These will depend on who the viewer is, and when, where and how he or she encounters a work of art. To construct meanings, therefore, the viewer needs to be aware of the experiences they bring to looking, as well as the information an artwork holds. The questions and activity ideas in this kit, particularly in the 'A Work in Focus' sheet, stem from this approach to thinking about art.

## How to structure your visit

We suggest you introduce the exhibition to your group in one of the concourse spaces, the Turbine Hall or the Clore Education Centre. Work in small groups when you are in the exhibition. Use the ideas and information in this kit to prepare task and discussion sheets for students, or hand out the information sheets as they are to older students. You can later get back together as a whole class and let each group share their ideas.

Please remind your group not to touch the works on display. Make sure that everyone understands the issues about the fragility of Eva Hesse's materials and knows that even clean hands can damage the surfaces of the works.

## Handling objects

In the interpretation area outside the exhibition entrance you will find books on Hesse, an interactive CD-rom and handling objects made from materials similar to those she used to make her artworks. We also have a box of these objects which groups can borrow for use in the gallery. Materials in the box include fibreglass, rubber tubing on a metal grid, net bags filled with plastic, rope dipped in latex, and cord wrapped objects.

Call 020 7401 5064 to book the materials. Please note that it is not possible to borrow the box for use in the classroom.

## Bibliography and web links

*Eva Hesse*, exhibition catalogue, edited by Elisabeth Sussman, 2002

*Eva Hesse*, by Lucy Lippard, 1972, reprinted 1992

*Minimalism*, Themes and Movements series, Phaidon

*Feminism and Art*, Themes and Movements series, Phaidon

*Minimalism*, David Batchelor, Movements in modern Art Series, Tate Publishing

*Eva Hesse – An interactive programme*

[http://www.sfmoma.org/education/edu\\_online\\_hesse.html](http://www.sfmoma.org/education/edu_online_hesse.html)

# Links with Other Artists and Displays

## **Tate Modern Collection displays**

Below are some suggested works by other artists which you could discuss while considering various themes in Hesse's work.

### **Landscape/Matter/Environment**

Jackson Pollock *Summertime: Number 9A* 1948

The contradiction between order and chaos in this work relates to Hesse's rope pieces which she arranges in three-dimensional space rather than on a flat canvas.

### **Nude/Action/Body**

Robert Morris *Untitled* (mirror cubes) 1965/71

In his work Robert Morris explored the idea of 'anti-form' which gave a high level of importance to the materials and processes of making art. Materials could inform the finished shape, size and look of an artwork. (For example Richard Serra threw lead against a gallery wall and wouldn't have known what form the finished piece would take.) In this work the reflection in the mirror cubes changes according to who is looking at it. How do materials in Hesse's work change or adapt according to for example where the artwork is installed?

Donald Judd *Untitled* (stack piece) 1990

Compare this hard-edged industrially fabricated example of Minimalist art with Hesse's softer and more fluid pieces.

It is also interesting to compare the way that Judd repeats the elements in his work with Hesse's forms of repetition. In which ways are they similar and different?

Donald Judd *Untitled* (box piece)

Compare Hesse's boxes (*Accession*) with this work and discuss how the exterior and interiors of her boxes compare with this box-shaped work by Judd.

### **History/Memory/Society**

Sol LeWitt *Wall drawing* 1970

LeWitt's wall drawings are executed by an assistant or other person according to his detailed instructions. They usually conform to a tight grid-like shape. Consider how Hesse introduces more individually crafted and organic forms into the structure of the grid and compare this with Sol LeWitt's wall drawing.

## **Still Life/Object/Real Life**

Marcel Duchamp *Fountain* 1917

Hesse enjoyed the fact that people sometimes found her work amusing or absurd. Several works in the exhibition could be linked with Duchamp's *Fountain* for their absurdity, audacity and ability to push the barriers of what might be considered to be art.

### Gallery or classroom activity

Ask students to choose one work by Eva Hesse. If they were taking on the role of curator at Tate Modern, in which display suite would they hang this work: History, Landscape, Still Life, or the Body suites? Their answer has to be backed up by at least two reasons, which they could write in the form of a caption to hang next to the work to be displayed.

# Classroom Suggestions and Curriculum Links

## English writing

### a) Writing to imagine, explore, entertain

Eva Hesse's work often explores the idea of the absurd and of contradictions. For instance, order versus chaos, soft versus hard. The ideas of contradiction and absurdity are also key to one of Hesse's favourite authors, Samuel Beckett. In his famous play 'Waiting for Godot' the two principal characters contradict each other to such an extent that they never get anything done.

Choose some opposing characteristics or qualities that you have found in Hesse's artworks. Use these words to create a written piece (poetry or prose) that is about contradiction and nonsense.

### b) Writing to inform, explain, describe

A wall text is the introduction to the theme of a room or display. Invite students to look at the works in one of the rooms, noting down any links between the works (for example, size, colour, date), and to write a wall text indicating what they consider to be the most significant aspects of the work in the room.

### c) Writing to analyse, review, comment

Invite students to write a review of the Hesse exhibition. They could imagine they are journalists writing for a newspaper or presenter of a television arts programme. What do they think of the selection of works shown in the exhibition, the way the works have been installed, the amount of supporting information available etc?

## Science / English

If possible you could collect samples of materials used by Hesse such as latex, fibreglass, rope and plaster. Investigate the properties of the materials, for example relative mass and density.

Choose an artwork by Eva Hesse that is made from one of the materials you have researched and write a conservation report on it, advising curators about the quality of the material, what it consists of, how it should be stored and displayed (lighting, humidity etc), and how the material might be likely to degrade over future years.

## Maths

Much of Hesse's work is concerned with geometry, repetition and series. However she moves away from the rigid structures around which other Minimalist artists often base their work.

Choose a work, or series of works in the exhibition and work out which rules Hesse has followed to make it. For example has she left gaps of the same size between the various elements of the work? Is each part of the work the same size? Can you create a mathematical formula which explains the rules by which she made the work?

## Art and Design

### *Transitory materials*

Eva Hesse made artworks from materials which will not last forever and have already changed so much from when she first used them that several of her works can no longer be displayed. What materials do students think should be used to create an artwork? Should there be any limit as to what you can use? What materials might be thought of as unsuitable, and why?

Make a classroom display of a range of different materials which show different properties, for example, materials which are very stable such as stone, and materials which will decompose. Ask students to make an artwork from materials with opposing qualities, such as plastic and flowers. They should keep a notebook of how their artwork changes over time, recording the decay that might occur and how this changes the look or feel of the piece.

### *Bodily connections*

A lot of Hesse's work has a skin-like quality. For example *Connection* uses wire as an armature on which to build the fibreglass shapes that act like a skin over the top. The wire is hidden within (like the bones in our body), apart from the areas where it comes close to the surface (similar to our knees and elbows).

Create an object using wire (or chicken-wire) as its 'skeleton' (it can be figurative or abstract) and then use another material over the top to create a skin. You could try using cling-film, or material soaked in PVA glue.

# A Work in Focus

## **Addendum 1967**

You can adapt this sequence of activities and questions to most other works in the exhibition.

You don't need a great deal of knowledge about the works because the questions will help students to work with you to create their own responses and to decide what aspects they need to research further. Prompts or suggested answers are in brackets.

### **A personal approach - what do I bring?**

- What are your first reactions to the work? Why do you think it makes you feel or think like that?
- What does the work remind you of? Why does it remind you of that?
- What can you connect the work to?

### **Looking at the object - what do I see?**

- What is the work's scale? In what way would a smaller or larger scale affect the work's impact?
- What materials is the work made from? (Printed papier-mâché, wood and cord.) Are these traditional art materials? How would your response to the work change if the artist used different materials? What associations or connotations do the materials carry?
- How has the work been made? Has the artist made it or has it been fabricated? Will it look the same every time it is displayed or may some elements be placed in a different way?
- Look at the different elements of the work. Are they placed an equal distance apart? (The spheres are placed at increasing intervals apart.) What effect does this have on the whole piece?
- How does the work relate to the others in the room? Does it dominate the space, is it part of a series of works, are there other works of the same material or structure?
- In what ways does it relate to reality and in what ways is it not realistic?

### **Looking at the subject - what is it about?**

- What do you think this work is about? Does it in fact have a subject matter at all, or are its materials and

making the subject?

- What do the forms remind you of? Think of some words to describe them, in particular the way the hanging elements fall onto the floor.
- What is the title of the work? ('Addendum', which means 'a thing added or to be added'.) Does this change your interpretation of the work? (The work is made up of repeated hanging cords, the gap between which increases as you look from left to right. It gives the impression that it could be added to ad infinitum.)

### **Looking at the context - relating the work in the gallery to the outside world**

Researching the context within which a work was produced (for example the political climate, social history and culture of the time) will tell us more. It is also interesting to compare the work to others created throughout the artist's career, or to works by her contemporaries (some suggestions for other works you could look at are included under 'Links with other artists and displays').

- What do we know about the artist who made the work, and how does this affect our interpretation of the piece? (Eva Hesse was a woman artist, working in the 1960s – a time when most of her fellow artists were male. Her work has been seen as feminising and softening the hard-edged, industrial looking artworks made by male Minimalist artists.)
- When was the work made? How do people view the work today? Is it the same or different from how it might have originally been seen?
- Look at other works in the exhibition. How does this work compare to the earlier works? And later works? To which is it more similar?

# An Art Historical Context

*The fact remains that Hesse was a pivotal figure and a synthesizer... she took exactly what she needed from the art around her, transformed it, and gave it back to the art world.*

Lucy Lippard, art critic

*I don't know if you can be completely outside tradition ... I know where I come from and the work I have looked at and that I am really personally convinced by...*

Eva Hesse

One of the fascinations of Hesse's work is how it problematises key characteristics of several art historical movements. Among the art historical contexts her work responds to are the following schools: Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism, Conceptual art, Pop art and most importantly, Minimalism.

In the mid-1960s Hesse was at the heart of the New York contemporary art scene, and as such could not help but be aware of the predominant trends in art making. Broadly speaking, it was a decade of Pop and Minimalism, both in their own ways reacting to Abstract Expressionism, with its claims on the significance of the artist's hand in creating a work and the metaphysical nature of painting in particular.

In each artwork we look at in this section what becomes clear is the way that Hesse's work retains its own aesthetic, borrowing from, but never subscribing itself to the art-making strategies of the moment.

## Minimalism

Minimalism is noted for using modular units in a rectangular or gridded arrangement, with an absence of ornamentation. The artist's gesture (brush or chisel marks) is replaced by industrial manufacturing processes. Hesse's works are bursting with contradiction. Although her sculptures often suggest geometry, repetition and industrial production, they are also invested with a sense of the hand-made and the irregular. Even when her works were fabricated outside the studio, Hesse typically modified the industrially manufactured components with handwork.

*The work of Don Judd and Sol LeWitt was always completely without a hand. And Eva's work always had a hand. If you look at the boxes, nothing is the same... the hand is there.*

Tom Doyle, Hesse's husband

- Find a work in the show that carries the trace of the artists' hand. What is the effect?

Hesse talked about wanting to achieve a kind of 'non-art' in her work.

*Absurdity is the key word. It has to do with contradictions and oppositions. 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.*  
Hesse

This quote expresses some of the inherent contradictions in her work. She wanted to make something which was nothing, which pushed the boundaries of possibility and logic as far as they could go.

One way in which Hesse's work employed Minimalism's idea of seriality is that she would make multiple versions of many pieces, but would change each of them in some way (scale, material etc). She would also use pre-determined mathematical sequences in her work (see 'Addendum Work in focus' sheet).

- Find two works in the exhibition which could be part of a series. Make a list of similarities and differences between the two works and consider how Hesse has kept to a particular theme but also expanded on it.

*Accession II* (first version 1968, five versions made in total)

This work juxtaposes a regular, geometric exterior with a more organic and enclosed interior. The hard-edged, machine-made quality of the steel case shows how Hesse adopted the industrial fabrication techniques common among mid-60s Minimalists. However this is set against a mass of over 30,000 plastic cords inside the box, which Hesse threaded by hand and which give the interior a natural quality, as if coated in a layer of

fur. There is a potential for chaos within the logical, ordered art-making process of industrial fabrication. Unlike most Minimalist artists she didn't want her work to be highly finished or perfect.

#### *Addendum 1967*

This work displaces the forms and language of Minimalism. Compare it to one of Judd's *Untitled* stack pieces in 'The Perceiving Body' room (Nude/Action/Body). See how *Addendum* displaces the literal meaning of repetition, through its combination of spheres and cords that fall arbitrarily to the floor, and its obvious handmade quality.

*The cord opposes the regularity. When it reaches the floor it curls and sits irregularly. The juxtaposition and actual connecting cord realizes the contradiction of the rational series of semi-spheres and irrational flow of lines on the floor.*

Hesse

The form is both contained and disordered. This work softens minimalism and undoes its rigorous geometry.

In 1967 Sol LeWitt's essay 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art' was published in the journal *Art Forum*. This set out what he considered to be the main characteristics of Conceptual art, namely that 'to work with a plan that is pre-set is one way of avoiding subjectivity'. Yet Hesse's subtle interventions could be said to violate a sense of conceptual order, the 'cool and crystalline ideas for art making' that LeWitt advocates.

Towards the end of her life Hesse made increasing use of assistants to help create her finished works. It is interesting to consider whether, if she had lived, she would have moved closer to LeWitt's conceptual method of leaving detailed instructions for others to make additional or replacement versions of work. In the light of the transitory nature of many of Hesse's materials (which has led to several of her works being unexhibitable in their present state) there is an argument that her work be remade according to her original conception of them.

- Get your group create a debate around this problem. Who would be for and who would be against creating new versions of Hesse's work? Use examples of other artists' work to back up or refute your point of view.

#### **Abstraction**

Although often appearing to be abstract, some critics attribute expressive qualities to Hesse's work, referring to it as 'expressive Minimalism'. Though it does not lend itself to symbolic decoding, her work is certainly evocative and allusive. In particular it is often discussed in relation to the human body (Hesse, for instance, compared one of her early reliefs *Ringaround Arosie* to a breast).

- How does Hesse's work relate to the idea of abstraction, in which an artwork bears no relation to the real world, but is about itself only? Can you find a work that at first glance looks entirely abstract, but on reflection raises associations with things in the real world?

#### **Pop Art**

Hesse enjoyed yet was dissatisfied with Pop art, finding that it lacked subtlety. Meaning was too apparent, too much on the surface and as such it left little to the imagination. The implication was that an artwork should attain a level of sophistication through a lack of specificity. However some of Hesse's ideas derive from Pop art, for example her use of cloth and latex relate to soft sculptures made by Claes Oldenburg some years earlier.

*Hesse's compulsion to wrap, to cover up, to entwine subverts Pop blatancy. She buries the referent in so much cloth, in so many casts and combinations...*  
James Myer, art critic

- It is not difficult to see how Hesse's work distances itself from Pop recognisability. Can you make any links between Pop Art's sensibility and that of Hesse's work?



## **Surrealism**

On returning to New York in 1965 from her year-long stay in Germany, Hesse befriended so-called 'Neo-Surrealist' artists such as Paul Thek, who shared the Surrealists' fascination with psychology and sexuality. Her work of this period has a quirky, almost fetishistic quality.

*Ingeminate* 1965 consists of two over twenty-inch-long, sausage-shaped pieces, which are attached together with surgical tubing. The sausage shapes are bound in string, a practice that Hesse began while making reliefs in Germany. She had started to include in her work items picked up from the floor of her factory studio and this is what took her painting forward towards reliefs. Binding alludes to ideas of protection or mummification, but also to the Surrealist idea of concealed desires. Hesse's continued use of the technique articulates an almost fetishistic, repetitive process. The work clearly relates to the body with its phallic shaped forms and notion of coupling, evoking the work of Surrealists such as Hans Bellmer or Man Ray with their images of sexually-charged or bound figures.

*Untitled or Not Yet* 1966 shows Hesse experimenting with new materials, gravity and concealment, binding the sexually suggestive shapes with cord. The bags have been variously seen as testicular or breast-like, or perhaps evoking placentas or microscopic parts such as lipids and tissues. Hesse was interested in the Surrealist or Dadaist notion of the absurd and of incongruous objects placed next to each to create strange new meanings.

- What words could students use to describe this piece? Funny? Erotic? Disturbing? A mixture of all three? What does the work remind them of?

# Materials, Processes and Meanings

By 1968 a shift was underway in the art world; artists were becoming increasingly interested in the inherent qualities of the materials they used. Indeed, a work's own materiality – its innate physical properties – became the primary subject for many artists. From the outset Hesse's work was imbued with a sense of materiality. She had an intimate relationship to matter, exclaiming of her first sculptural experiments with plaster:

*Plaster! I have always loved the material. It is flexible, pliable, easy to handle in that it is light, fast working. Its whiteness is right.*

Hesse

Hesse's early drawings often developed into collage, while the paint and colour of early figurative paintings are physically confrontational as substances, be they luminous, dense, thick or thin. The surfaces of her relief works – textured with papier-mâché, or plaster-soaked cloth – are palpable in an organic sense. Sculptural works manifest her sensitivity to diverse and non-traditional materials, for example rope, latex and fibreglass. Her art practice was extremely experimental and throughout her artistic career Hesse developed innovative working methods. She would push a particular medium to its limits by repeating a process almost obsessively. Alternatively, she would produce several versions of the same work, but with different materials (for example, *Sans* and *Accession*). Total control through manipulation was not her ultimate aim. Many of her works demonstrate that she was also capable of a sense of abandonment, of allowing works to change according to their material properties. and this sense of chance.

- To what extent are a work's ephemeral qualities or processes of degradation intrinsic to its meaning?
- Some of Hesse's works have changed greatly in appearance since they were made. Choose one such work and research the kinds of processes that have acted on the material over time. Contextualise this with other contemporary artists such as Anya Gallaccio whose work is characterised in large part by the changeable nature of the materials she uses.

## Latex

Latex has huge potential as an artist's material. It can conform to a shape, remain flexible, register an imprint, be translucent or opaque, hard or soft. It can be cast, poured, or painted (liquid latex performs as paint, solidifying into malleable shapes). But ultimately it has a life of its own that surpasses the artist's intentions. For Hesse this took her practice into a state of unknowing, in creative conflict with a priori decisions. She began making latex sculptures in the autumn of 1967, working intermittently with fibreglass. Unusually, Hesse did not use latex as a casting material, but rather worked with it directly, eliminating the need for making moulds. She experimented with a range of different effects achieved by painting latex onto a range of surfaces, from cheesecloth to wire mesh.

Over the last thirty years, the flexibility of the material has diminished, surfaces have become discoloured and stretched by the pull of gravity. When read against the context of Minimalism, with its dominant aesthetic of hard, industrial surfaces, the quality of disintegration inherent in Hesse's latex works can be understood as a radical artistic strategy. Tate Modern's exhibition only includes a small number of latex works as other key pieces have been judged too fragile to travel.

- Latex works are not designed for longevity as eventually they will completely deteriorate. Beautiful surfaces will become repellent. In 1970 Hesse remarked, in relation to the purchase of latex works:

*At this point I feel a little guilty when people want to buy [latex works]. I think they know but I want to write them a letter and say it is not going to last ... life doesn't last, art doesn't last, it doesn't matter.*

- How important do students consider permanence as a material quality of a work?

## Fibreglass

Fibreglass, pliable until it has fully hardened, served as an extension of Hesse's experiments with latex.

*Sans II* consists of sixty fibreglass and polyester resin boxes in two parallel rows. Hesse made this piece in five sections, which are together displayed as one imposing, continuous frieze. However the five pieces were sold individually so are also displayed in their home galleries as smaller units. In this installation the edges where these boxes meet are intriguing, in that they resist aligning as perfectly as the overall grid motif might suggest. The walls of adjacent boxes seem to alternately fuse together or swell apart. Such physical deformations represent Hesse's continued exploration of distorted geometries.

- Notice how the different sections of *Sans II* have slightly different tones of colour. Discuss why this could be, bearing in mind the changeable nature of the materials Hesse often used. (Each of the five pieces was sold to different galleries and must have been stored in different conditions which has affected the nature of the fibreglass material in various ways.)

Hesse made two similar sculptures, *Sans I* and *Sans III*, but rather than using fibreglass her medium was latex. These works have deteriorated so much that they are no longer displayed. Some commentators argue that they could be displayed if it was stated that the intention was to demonstrate Hesse's working process rather than her aesthetic.

## Rope

*Untitled* 1970

Hesse made several hanging works from materials such as rope dipped in latex or fibreglass covered wire. The rope in *Untitled* 1970 was knotted, dipped in latex then allowed to dry hanging. The work can be installed in different ways such as in the corner or the middle of a room, bunched together or spread out depending on the space available. It evokes painterly gestures such as Jackson Pollock's drips on the canvas and refers back to Hesse's earlier repetitive wrapping and binding.

*It is composed of three units, and there's a certain degree of flexibility in how the piece is configured. You can stretch it out, or you can orient the three sections differently, but the possibilities are not endless. ... Now the work is becoming quite brittle and losing flexibility, the range of possibility has become even more restricted.*

Bill Barrette, Hesse's assistant

- Compare this piece to another work by Hesse that uses rope or twine to wrap and bind an object. Discuss both the formal differences between the works and the feeling evoked by the expanded and random arrangement of the rope in *Untitled*.

## Sketches

Although Hesse made preparatory drawings for her sculptural works she did not set out a pre-determined plan of exactly how the work would look as some of her contemporaries did. Her sketches expressed instead the ideas she had in her mind about a work, which would be adapted when the actual making of the piece took place.

## Conservation Issues

It cannot be denied that many of Hesse's work are extremely fragile and are sometimes in such a state of degradation that they are no longer whole objects. Such artworks are not put on public display and the question arises about how to conserve Hesse's work in order to make her legacy known to future generations. A vital element in this discussion is the question of the artist's intentions when she made the works and to what extent she knew they would deteriorate over time. Did she see deterioration as part of the life story of an object, or would she rather we were still able to view her artworks in a similar condition to when they were made?

A symposium was held at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art to explore this debate and the following quotes describe some of the differing points of view. There was no resolution about how, or if, we should conserve Hesse's works for the future, and the discussion continues.

*I believe that Hesse tried to make the latex last longer.*

Martin Langer, conservator

*If you want to show what Hesse intended for this piece, (Sans III), or to show the way it once looked, I think you would be forced to remake it.*

Bill Barrette, artist and Hesse's assistant

*If Hesse were alive, I just cannot imagine that she would accept the degradation as part of the natural life of the piece.*

Bill Barrette

*Everyone told her that the latex wouldn't last. She knew it wouldn't last. She wanted to use it because of its aesthetic properties. Eventually she abandoned the latex in favour of fibreglass, because she was convinced that the fibreglass would last. ... But she couldn't stop using the latex because it was the only material that she knew of that could act in a particular way.*

Sol LeWitt, artist

*Life doesn't last; art doesn't last. It doesn't matter... I think it is both an artistic and life conflict.*

Eva Hesse

*(This interview) was done a short period of time before she died. So we have to frame her comments in the interview as coming from somebody who is really ill, and is aware that death is not far away.*

Bill Barrette (on Hesse's comment above)

*Sans III is so degraded that I personally could never imagine showing it. Hesse was not an artist about degradation. ... Sans III, to me, is not alive. It is not a work of art any longer, and I don't think it would be right to show it.*

Gioia Tempanelli, fiction writer and friend of Hesse

*I actually think that the erosion of the works, while not authentic to what they originally looked like, must be taken into account when considering their contemporary resonance. It is the contemporary appearance of these works, degraded or not, that has been important and influential for younger artists. This is Hesse's legacy; this is what she means now.*

Briony Fer, art historian

# A Feminist Reading

Feminist art criticism did not fully develop until after Eva Hesse's death in 1970. However some art historians have applied a feminist critique to her work retrospectively. During the 1970s women artists often made work which explored issues such as childbirth, women's bodies or housework, whereas others felt that a more abstract art could be interpreted as relating to a female sensibility. Many feminist critics and artists felt there was something uniquely feminine about art works that were created by women. Every woman lives in a body which is coded as female and a female artist cannot deny that their work articulates this experience to a certain degree. It is possible to view Eva Hesse's work in such a light, particularly when considering her soft, anthropomorphic imagery. Critics such as Lucy Lippard have also observed that Hesse's works evoke elements of the female body.

After Hesse's untimely death, reception of her work grew to mythic proportions amongst many women artists. Artists such as Lynda Bengalis were inspired by Hesse to make works where they poured latex directly onto the gallery floor, an action which critics perceived as declaring a strong female presence. While a similar interpretation was not upheld about Hesse's work during her lifetime, in the context of the women's movement of the 1970s this reading can be more easily understood. Latex is a particularly expressive, flexible and sensuous material, which takes on colour well and allows for a hand-made quality that was shunned by Minimalist artists of the time.

Other techniques Hesse used relate to traditional notions of woman's work. Processes such as threading, weaving and bandaging evoke the craft activities of women over a period of centuries. Hesse did not commit herself to the rigid structures of Minimalist art but instead can be seen to soften or perhaps feminise its hard edges.

*Early drawings evoke notions of the body. The self portraits suggest a deep thinking .... Insecurity about herself comes through in her often confessional in style diaries.*

Lucy Lippard, art critic

After the publication of Hesse's diaries in the 1970s much writing on Hesse focused on her self-doubt and psychological fragility. Extracts from her diaries have been used to present Hesse as a woman who suffered from the injustices of a male-oriented society and whose work often referred to this theme. It is understandable that this view of Hesse should come about in the context of the rise of Feminism in the 1970s, but it is also problematic. Some art historians and artists have countered such readings by pointing out that Hesse was never marginalised in the New York art scene of her day, and was at the centre of artistic debate and innovation. The premise of this exhibition is to focus on Hesse as someone whose practice engages with the materiality of the art object rather than expressing personal or subconscious insecurities.

*Untitled 1965 (drawing)*

Hesse's early drawings returned again and again to sexual or fetishistic imagery. She was inspired by the legacy of Surrealism and by a circle of artist friends whose work explored similar ideas. Such drawings allude to a concern with ideas from the subconscious. Hesse did have an interest in psychoanalysis and her diaries are witness to her thoughtful self-analysis but it is debatable how much we should take her private thoughts into account when looking at her work.

*Ringaround Arosie 1965*

This work was amongst the first reliefs Hesse made. It was during a trip to Europe in 1965 that she first began to move her work away from the strictly two-dimensional and on her return to America she declared herself a sculptor. Hesse's life impacts on *Ringaround Arosie* as the title refers to a friend, Rosie, who was expecting a child at the time the work was produced. An iconographical interpretation of the imagery could view the round forms as breasts,

particularly the lower circle with its raised nipple-like peak. Hesse herself has questioned whether the forms are breasts, or penises, but in the end a closed or 'correct' reading was not important to her.

*Accession III*

This work is one of a series of five open boxes. Hesse used milky white fibreglass for the structure of the work, which was drilled with twenty-eight thousand holes and threaded with clear vinyl tubing. This labour-intensive process required many months to complete. It is possible to see the threading technique as relating to traditional women's work and as such to create a feminist interpretation of the work. The interior of the work has also repeatedly been likened to female genitalia and a mass of other associations which relate to the body.

*I cannot be so many things. I cannot be something for everyone ... Woman, beautiful, artist, wife, housekeeper, cook, saleslady all these things. I cannot even be myself, nor know what I am.'*  
Hesse, diary entry on January 4, 1964