

Eva Hesse: Sculpture 1936–1970
Nicholas Serota

Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, May 4–June 17, 1979

Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, Netherlands,
July 1–August 6, 1979

Kestner-Gesellschaft, Hannover, Germany,
August 17–September 23, 1979











Poster for *Eva Hesse: Sculpture 1936-1970* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1979

Pages 33-39: Installation views, *Eva Hesse: Sculpture 1936-1970*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1979. The woman at the far right on page 35 is educator Pat van Pelt; standing at the back on pages 36-37 is Jenni Lomax, who oversaw the community education and public programs at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in the 1980s before becoming director of Camden Art Centre, London, from 1990 to 2017.

Eva Hesse at the Whitechapel Art Gallery

In 1970, barely a month after the death of Eva Hesse in New York, the British sculptor Barry Flanagan wrote an “obituary note” for the July–August edition of *Studio International*, an unusual gesture for the magazine. The issue was guest edited by Seth Siegelau, at the time the curator of several influential exhibitions of Conceptual art and later a scholar and collector of textiles. Flanagan wrote, “It was my fortune to meet her and see some early pieces last year, also new pieces more recently. Her maturity and courage are reflected completely in the strength of her work; the loss of such an artist is acute,”¹ and he followed this by publishing one of Hesse’s statements, dated October 15, 1969, which begins, “out of hospital, short stay this time, third time.”²

I had been a student subscriber to the magazine for some years, and it was the source for most of my knowledge about what was progressive in international contemporary art. I also knew and admired Flanagan’s work. Like most outside a very small circle of artists in New York, I knew nothing about Hesse’s work, but I clipped the obituary and the statement from the magazine. In the years that followed, and especially after the publication of the catalogue for Hesse’s first retrospective exhibition (*Eva Hesse: A Memorial Exhibition* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York), with perceptive essays by Robert Pincus-Witten and Linda Shearer, and Lucy Lippard’s exemplary monograph, largely written in the early 1970s but published only in 1976,³ I sought out Hesse’s work in group exhibitions on the continent and in a small show presented by James Mayor at his gallery in London in 1974. By then I had resolved to present an exhibition of her work if the opportunity appeared.

In 1976 I became director of the Whitechapel Art Gallery with an ambition to renew the gallery’s commitment to showing contemporary art from abroad. Bryan Robertson, the legendary director from 1952 to 1968, had presented a breathtaking series of shows of work by American artists from the late 1950s, but the series had lapsed, and for different reasons neither Tate nor the Hayward had filled the gap. Money was very tight, but I began to make plans with the idea of sharing costs through collaborations with

1 Barry Flanagan, “Eva Hesse: An Obituary Note,” *Studio International* 180, no. 924 (July–August 1970): v.

2 Eva Hesse, quoted in Flanagan, “An Obituary Note,” v.

3 Robert Pincus-Witten, “Eva Hesse: More Light on the Transition from Post-Minimalism to the Sublime,” in *Eva Hesse: A Memorial Exhibition* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1972); Linda Shearer, “Eva Hesse: Last Works,” in *Eva Hesse: A Memorial Exhibition*; and Lucy R. Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York: New York University Press, 1976).

European institutions. A program started to take shape, by design and opportunity. The next two years saw, for the first time in London, large-scale exhibitions of work by Europeans like Stanley Brouwn, Walter Pichler, and Carel Visser, and Americans such as Robert Smithson, Robert Ryman, and Carl Andre. But Hesse remained an ambition.

I was aware that no museum exhibition of Hesse's work had yet taken place in Europe, despite the growing interest in it. In February 1978, I wrote to Rudi Oxenaar, the director of the Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller in Otterlo, Netherlands, to ask whether he might be interested in partnering on an exhibition.⁴ He responded positively, but raised concerns about whether such a project would be viable, given the fragility of the work and the likely costs. In July 1978, I therefore wrote to Victor and Sally Ganz (the renowned New York collectors of work by Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns), who had become patrons of Hesse and the owners of many of her most important sculptures.⁵ Their support, together with that of Helen Hesse Charash, sister of Eva, and Donald Droll, who represented the Estate of Eva Hesse, was essential. Victor Ganz replied almost by return, urging me to secure museums in Germany and France and to "assure [me] of [his] complete support."⁶

Preparations began, and with benefit of wise counsel from Droll, we arrived at a selection of forty works, including some "test pieces" and a strong representation of work from the artist's final year. With regret, we had to recognize that we could not afford to ship *Contingent* (1969) from Australia and that US museums would be reluctant to lend fragile works to a European tour. Early paintings and drawings made in Germany before Hesse returned to New York were excluded, partly because I wanted to show how she had redefined the territory and materials of sculpture. I also did not fully recognize then the beauty and significance of Hesse's expressive paintings from the early '60s, and to exhibit the drawings would have been too expensive. James Mayor generously stepped in to organize a show of drawings at his gallery, and this show then traveled in slightly larger form to join the sculpture in the tour of the Whitechapel exhibition to Otterlo and Hannover, Germany.

One of the attractions of the Whitechapel as an exhibition space, in a period before we all became so conscious of the risks attached to showing works of art in natural light, was the abundance of daylight. So much of the writing about Hesse had been influenced by the trauma of her cancer and her death that I wanted to emphasize, as had Lucy Lippard in her book, that it was the development of a personal vocabulary that was paramount and that Hesse's contribution to the language of sculpture was defined by the intensity and the presence of her works, both large and small. In planning the installation, I decided to place *Vinculum I* (1969), *Addendum* (1967), *Hang Up* (1966), and the large later pieces in fiberglass and latex in the gallery's daylight "side aisles." The more intimate works and test pieces were shown on plinths or hung on temporary walls in the

4 Letter from the author to Rudi Oxenaar, February 14, 1978, *Eva Hesse: Sculpture 1936–1970* exhibition file, Whitechapel Art Gallery archive, London. I am grateful to Whitechapel archivist Andrey Lazarev and Whitechapel director Gilane Tawadros for giving me access to the Hesse exhibition files held at the gallery.

5 Letter from the author to Victor and Sally Ganz, July 12, 1978, in *Eva Hesse: Sculpture 1936–1970* exhibition file, Whitechapel Art Gallery archive, London.

6 Letter from Victor Ganz to the author, July 24, 1978, *Eva Hesse: Sculpture 1936–1970* exhibition file, Whitechapel Art Gallery archive, London.



Installation views, *Eva Hesse: Sculpture 1936–1970*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (top), and Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo, Netherlands (bottom), 1979

darker central space and arranged much as they had been in the studio. As photographs show, the exhibition was sparsely hung, with works such as *Accretion* (1968) and the untitled hanging sculpture from 1969–70 composed of latex-coated rope, wire, and string, looking particularly authoritative. This was thanks in part to the care of Bill Barrette, Hesse's studio assistant, who worked with us on the installation.

The catalogue was planned with an ambition to assess Hesse's achievement as a sculptor and to give the reader an insight into her approach and process. Rosalind Krauss was widely regarded as the foremost writer on modern and contemporary sculpture of her generation and had recently published *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. She had only touched briefly on Hesse's work in that book, citing her as an example of an artist interested in the transformation of materials and in process.⁷ I was keen to hear more. Her short essay, produced on a tight deadline that she understandably regretted, refers to the tradition of anamorphosis as exemplified in Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* (1533). She expands our reading of *Contingent* and other late works, such as the hanging sculpture described above, with its allusions to Jackson Pollock, by observing that Hesse's sculptures often occupy territory between the wall and the floor, causing us to reflect on the conventions of painting and sculpture and on the boundaries between.⁸ As Hesse herself had written in a statement for the 1969–70 *Art in Process* exhibition at Finch College Museum of Art, New York, "not painting, not sculpture."⁹

Naomi Spector, writer and friend of Hesse, kindly agreed to make a selection from Hesse's notebooks in the collection of the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College in Ohio. As Spector wrote to me in March 1979, "Some are short and some quite extensive. The sequence and the placement are very important. I have followed the composition of her handwritten pages as much as I could with a typewriter. That is one reason why the pages look a bit eccentric. But I think that is good. There are many spelling errors which I let stand, as I feel that they are not finished compositions, but attempts to get ideas down."¹⁰ Translating these notes onto the pages of a catalogue and finding appropriate drawings or images to reinforce the reading was a task that preoccupied me and the designer, Richard Hollis. His sensitive approach is apparent in the layout and was also reflected in his imaginative suggestion that we might use a very cheap board for the cover and wrap a silhouette image of the aforementioned untitled work, with its distinctive latex-covered rope, wire, and string, across the front and back and onto the flaps.

I remember the opening of the exhibition as being filled with artists who had known the work through reproduction and discussion but not through experience. There was a sense of anticipation and a slight anxiety as to whether the work would fulfill expectation. Critics were respectful but more tentative, some perhaps reacting against what one described as "the cult" of Eva Hesse,¹¹ in a reference to the consistent praise for her

7 Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking, 1977), 272.

8 Rosalind Krauss, "Eva Hesse," in *Eva Hesse: Sculpture 1936–1970* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1979), n.p.

9 Eva Hesse, artist statement, in Naomi Spector, "A Selection from the Notebooks of Eva Hesse," in *Eva Hesse: Sculpture 1936–1970*.

10 Letter from Naomi Spector to the author, March 20, 1979, *Eva Hesse: Sculpture 1936–1970* exhibition file, Whitechapel Art Gallery archive, London.

11 William Feaver, "Welsh Visionary," *Observer*, May 13, 1979.



Invitation for the preview of *Eva Hesse: Sculptures and Drawings* (as the Otterlo presentation of *Eva Hesse: Sculpture 1936–1970* was titled) at the Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, 1979

Information about the educational programs held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery for *Eva Hesse: Sculpture 1936–1970*, 1979

work by fellow artists. In the *Guardian*, Waldemar Januszczak responded to what he saw as the "sexual imagery" and "relentless intensity,"¹² while, with an interesting perception, Paul Overy in the *Listener* saw her "sensitivity as being Central European . . . closer to German and Polish artists like Joseph Beuys, Tadeusz Kantor, and Magdalena Abakanowicz than . . . to any other American artist."¹³ In the *Financial Times*, Ian Bennett wrote that she was "an artist of peculiar power and imaginative brilliance" but concluded that whether "she was an artist of major significance is a judgement that only history can endorse."¹⁴

Nearly forty-five years and many exhibitions have passed since he wrote those words, and we can perhaps agree that history has indeed judged Hesse to be an artist of "major significance." As I wrote in the foreword to the catalogue, "In this exhibition and publication we have tried to concentrate on her sculpture and on her ideas about art, not through disregard for the circumstances and emotions that surround the work, but because it is through the sculpture that a rare and fine sensibility continues to communicate with us."¹⁵

—NS

12 Waldemar Januszczak, "The Mysteries of the Organism," *Guardian*, May 17, 1979.

13 Paul Overy, "Masculine and Feminine," *Listener*, May 31, 1979.

14 Ian Bennett, "Meet the Visiting Americans," *Financial Times*, May 26, 1979.

15 Nicholas Serota, foreword to *Eva Hesse: Sculpture 1936–1970*.