

Mary Ann Samyn

“So you saw and now you know what you want”: In the Presence and Prescience of Eva Hesse

—At the Eva Hesse archives, The Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio, c. 2000: “\$ makes a difference” (dollar sign abbreviation mine b/c I was working quickly and in white gloves. *These are the archives, dear—*)

Hesse touched this stuff, so I’m not allowed. If my oils mixed with hers... there’s no telling.

“Art is controlled and disciplined...”

I like her hooded coat.

~

To be in the presence of a work by Eva Hesse is to understand one’s limits. Though not, perhaps, hers. The work seems to reach beyond what can be said.

As a poet, words are my business, supposedly. Also, silence. Without one, you cannot really have the other. This is what lyric poetry reminds us. This is why the space of the page is active, an equal partner in the making of meaning.

But Hesse’s work says *not so fast—*. Says, *this is language too*. Says, *can you speak it? I didn’t think so—*

—*but you feel it, don’t you?*

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—Also, that the white space is not only of the page or canvas, but off the wall, too, and into *your* space. Think *Hang Up*, one of her most famous pieces: a large frame with a looping metal rod coming out of it and touching the floor, carving the space, almost like a string tied around the finger of space, a reminder. She called it “absurd.” But now, the feeling I feel is more *oh!*, meaning *that nearly touches me, doesn’t it—*

Hang Up is in Chicago, at the Art Institute. Parquet floor. Or, I just wanted to say “parquet” since it’s such a good word and intricate in a way that, at first glance anyway, *Hang Up* is not, its gesture merely a gesture of *see—*

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Once upon a time I wrote a series of poems about and inspired by Hesse. The best of these did not mention her and only occasionally borrowed her titles. Many of the poems appear in my books, but the whole chapbook, *Dream Eva*, has never been published, thank goodness. As I wrote in the preface to that

manuscript:

These poems were mentored by the sculpture of Eva Hesse. Hesse's work is stunningly spare and extremely non-narrative, non-referential. And yet it haunts, it has enormous resonance. It is visceral, alternately shouted and whispered. Why is this? Though it does not tell a story—just as poetry at the far edges of the lyric does not tell a story—it does, somehow, echo story. Or, if not story precisely or not the distilled retelling of story, not even the gestures that accompany story, then perhaps the way the gestures swirl and burrow into your throat, closing it, or sit on your chest, or curl in the pit of your stomach. Hesse used rope and latex and fiberglass and papier-mache. She made forms that were vulnerable in the sense of risky and in the sense that they would decay over time and she knew this and was mostly OK with it. The risk of her work—the very idea of risk, of what is at the edges and how we might express that—has been the model for these poems.

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I'm saving this document as "HesseEssay1.doc" with the "1" meaning I know I'll have to begin again. It's so hard to be clear. She was clear. Anyone might say, looking at one of her pieces, *what does that mean?* —to which I'd reply: *but how do you feel?* That kind of clarity. The mysterious clarity of the lyric poem.

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Fast forward to September 9, 2006. The Jewish Museum. New York.

"On the Spontaneity of Her Working Process (58 sec.)"

"On Trying to Categorize Her Work (41 sec.)"

"Comparing Her Work to Other Systems-based Artists (36 sec.)"

"On Titles (50 sec.)"

"On Materials (29 sec.)"

"On Abstract Expressionist Painters (25 sec.)"

"On Her Life and Her Art (54 sec.)"

The information was delivered thus. Audio Tour. Topic sentence and here's some proof and here's some more and now we wrap it up. *Keep moving.*

By this point, I had seen Hesse's work many times in person and, of course, in books. *Rope Piece*, my old

friend, etc.

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To be in the presence of a work by Eva Hesse is to remember the body. Not just the obvious, like breasts, which figure, or seem to figure (pun intended *and* not intended), in her work, but also the nervous system, little hairs on arms and legs, something like *oh yes*— traveling up the spine. All the uncalled-for and sometimes awkward reactions.

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Think “Eighter from Decauter”: breast-like knob, with spokes protruding. Is this whimsy? Or power? A wind might come along.

Or “Ringaround Rosie”: two breasts? One smaller than the other. Papier-mache and—I love this— electrical wire. Can’t argue with that.

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“Suspended, left to right” is the kind of language that turns up in catalogues of Hesse’s work and is, I think, a perfect definition of lyricism: *I strung it up for you to see*:

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When I visited the archives, a graduate student in art history was also there. Hesse was, the grad student assured me, “an art star now.” Dissertations and everything. The student knew a constellation when she saw one.

I heard it as *ArtStar*, all one word and a little odd. As though Hesse was being handled by professionals. Sort of like when the police arrive and we’re assured that there’s no need to gawk.

I tried to be good and folded my gloves as neatly as possible.

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I had been worried, or at least reluctant, about this essay. “Essay.” What’s that, anyway? And the work— hers, hers, hers—is stunning. What more is there to say?

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About the body, breast and penis particularly, Hesse said, “I cancel that.” Meaning, ham and eggs; order up. *Cancel that*, too. Like a postage stamp or ticket: you can’t use it anymore, it’s neutral now, so many hands have been that corner down. *Keep moving; there’s nothing here to see*.

~

About being a woman and artist, about potential bias, she said, basically: make art.

~

Repetition. Chaos and non-chaos. Absurdity. Not that and not that either. These are things you'll read when you read about Hesse.

But what I felt was *so sad* or *thank goodness!* or *finally, elation* or *tell me, again*.

~

December 2002, my husband and I are in London to see a major Hesse show at the Tate Modern. They're all there—*An Ear in a Pond*, *Eighter from Decatur*, *Up the Down Road*, *C-Clamp Blues*, *Constant*, *Metronomic Irregularity*, *Addendum*, *Accession*, *Repetition Nineteen*, and so many others.

And later, in my living room: a large framed poster of *No Title or Not Yet*, 1956. "Net bags, polyethylene sheeting, paper, metal weights, and string." It looks as though it's been hauled up. I'm pretty sure this is my worst fear. If you saw it, you'd be pretty sure it was yours.

Like most worst fears, I keep it close.

~

Among her things: a Sears catalogue order form. What could she have wanted? Answer: many things, just like anyone. It's the ordinariness that's compelling.

Also, it reinforces what the work suggests: she understood. She *got* the absurdity and seriousness of need.

~

About her work I once wrote:

The lyric is the vertical, this moment opened up, a rabbit hole and down you go and further and look around, why don't you? Lyric poetry does this. So does lyric sculpture, which is what Hesse's work is. An interior landscape. Call this piece "aught" or "accession" or "accretion" but ask yourself how you feel. Her art is not a story.

Or, rather, it's the story no one told you. The ridiculous, private, oh-so-common, dizzying story you're frightened *and* desperate to hear, or tell.

~

The trip to the archives was years ago, but what remains is the memory of how I longed to leave, a strange *now what?* feeling, having seen her, especially, according to my notes, box 77.52.76.36 and box 77.57.76.35 a-b.

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Even the "Please no food or drink" sign started to get to me. *Okay, already*.

~

With Hesse, words can turn into “mere words” pretty quickly. If she could have “said” it otherwise—via poetry or photography or gardening or any other medium of expression—she would have.

True for anyone.

What isn't always true though is this: she discovered a means by which to express that which is so difficult—the interior life—and then, equally remarkable, she did it.

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I keep coming back to what she seems to have known about me, my moods. Is this self-centered? Or the highest compliment? *She knew beforehand...*

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Hesse's work is so startling and startlingly familiar to me now that I cannot remember not knowing about her. Or, perhaps more accurately, for the longest time I'd had the sense that she knew something about me long before I did.

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In an early photo, Hesse's hair is in a beehive. It's easy to make metaphors from that. Which means we shouldn't? It was, after all, of its time. Common. But so too are her materials. You might have cheesecloth at home right now, somewhere. Surely you've made papier-mache. A mask maybe? And you wore it out?

~

In June 1968, Hesse wrote, “It is my main concern to go beyond what I know and what I can know.”

Out of the archive and back to the gallery: “Her structures are welcoming,” I wrote then, “but the emotions (hers slash mine) remain both palpable and elusive—”

Eva Hesse. Untitled or Not Yet, 1966. Net bags, polyethylene sheeting, paper, metal weights, and string. 71" by 15 1/2". San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Purchased through a gift of Phyllis Wattis. Copyright The Estate of Eva Hesse.



Works Consulted

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