

Article

Eva Hesse: Emergent Self-Portrait

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Abstract: The artist Eva Hesse (1936–1970) and her work, ranging from traditional painting and drawing to highly inventive bas-relief and sculptural form, are frequently interpreted through the lenses of biography, psychology, and gender, contributing to a prevailing narrative of a troubled and tragic artist figure. This dominant understanding of Hesse’s oeuvre has largely emerged from the interpretation of the artist’s own words, in the form of diary entries and interviews, and the published interpretations of these texts by scholars, peers, and critics, who frequently dwell on the narrative of Hesse’s short and challenging life. However, a closer look at the documentation of the artist’s own process of making, one that combined a near-daily writing practice, close annotations of choices made and executed in her work, and her emphasis on material experimentation, reveals an alternative reading of her writing and work. This paper will first explore the origins of the existing scholarship dedicated to Hesse’s writing that has contributed to the gendered and tragic mythos surrounding the artist and her work. This paper will then provide a re-reading of Hesse’s practice through the example of the work *Repetition Nineteen*, demonstrating her textual and material process as a deeply entangled set of relations between artist, process, and material contributing to a still-emerging portrait of the artist and her contributions.

Keywords: Eva Hesse; identity formation; process-oriented practice; emergence



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1. Introduction

In surveying the existing scholarship dedicated to the artist Eva Hesse (1936–1970), her short but highly productive career is often framed within distinct biographical brackets of life-threatening or traumatic events, and the resulting psychologically influenced analysis serves as an explanation for her complex and deeply affecting work. Much of this bodily and identity-focused sentiment can be traced to several texts published shortly after Hesse’s untimely death from brain cancer in 1970, setting the tone for the subsequent art historical discourse on the artist. The first section of this paper will trace the lineage of the existing scholarship that has contributed to the prevailing narrative around Eva Hesse which has greatly influenced the interpretation of her work. This historiography will focus on the treatment of the artist’s own words in the form of diary entries and interviews, the original catalogue raisonné published six years after the artist’s death, and the writings of critics and artist peers produced during and after Hesse’s lifetime.

The second half of this paper will offer a counternarrative for the interpretation of Hesse’s work in relation to her biography. This approach, relating the artist, her writing, and her artistic work, will be understood through the lens of entanglement, reinterpreting Hesse’s words, material processes of making, and artistic production as deeply interrelated and still unfolding. This argument for a new reading of Hesse’s oeuvre, and particularly a consideration of her highly iterative process involving both writing and material experimentation, will be discussed through the production of *Repetition Nineteen*. Revisiting this well-documented sculptural work, which marked the starting point of Hesse’s use of latex, suggests how the vital materiality that still makes up Hesse’s archive of papers, process materials, and completed works has extended the vitality of Hesse herself, contributing

to the ongoing emergence of her identity as a far more complex and nuanced figure of 20th-century art history.

2. Defining the Artist

2.1. Personal Writings

Much has been made of Hesse's diaries, kept as a series of notebooks and datebooks between 1955 and the time of her death in 1970 at age 34. Hesse's journals chronicle her personal musings, obsessive list-making, and ultimately her focus and self-awareness as an artist emerging in the Bowery art scene of New York City in the 1960s. As a first-hand account, these writings not only provide a window into Hesse's practice but also an intimate portrayal of the struggles Hesse faced in her foreshortened life. Escaping Nazi Germany with her Jewish family as a young child, surviving the suicide of her mother as a teenager, struggling to establish herself as an artist, and grappling with her own diagnosis of brain cancer, the drama of Hesse's life was something she often reflected on in her writing as she actively participated in psychotherapy throughout her adult life (Lippard 1976, p. 5).¹ This personal reflection and documentation were and continue to be frequently referenced in understanding Hesse's life as tragic and troubled and formed the basis of the prevailing psychological framework through which her work has been viewed since the 1970s.

In addition to the reflective journaling in her datebooks, writing was deeply entangled with Hesse's artistic practice. She kept copious notes on the development of her art, which frequently blended as simultaneous musings on the artist's perception of herself along with her work. Difficult to extract from one another, many of the papers held in the Eva Hesse Archive at Oberlin College, donated by the artist's family following her death, include the mundane recording of everyday occurrences, ideas for art works, and notes-to-self encouraging and coaching the artist to pursue her craft. An example of a typical collection of Hesse's notes can be found in an undated diary entry from 1966 that was published in *Eva Hesse: Diaries* in 2016. The text included the following:

Thurs. 4:00 p.m. almost finished piece. beautiful. Crash. fell off the wall. Now midnight again. 'I can't believe it.' For I am drunk on librium and stuck.

I must pull through.

Fri 1:30 a.m. I am tired. scared. It's up but might not be long. I am running bad luck streak-way-all Where it is my own fate, my making it this way—I must learn + change. i.e.,

1. Tom.

2. the working falling down.

3. friends

my handling things wrong. Consistently so.

That I let Sol + Mel help me when neither are technicians is wrong.

That I can only count on friends and fear asking advice outside my circle is wrong. even like not being able to call WBAI for bulletin.

Sat. frame drawing (get staple gun)

1. balsa wood?

2. Press

3. address Elias

4. dress shortened.

(Hesse 2016, pp. 710–11)

The combination of reported updates on work, personal reflections, practical tasks, a crossed-off to-do list, and self-motivating language are typical throughout the archive of her datebooks, diaries, and loose notes collected from her studio following her death.

Hesse's estate, in conjunction with Oberlin College and Yale University, Hesse's alma mater, published a transcribed and abridged version of Hesse's extensive collection of notebooks (Hesse 2016). The editors' notes provided in the closing pages of the text state that the dates associated with the diaries are difficult to attribute, the artist's handwriting is often difficult to decipher, and "material has only been included when it seemed relevant or compelling" (Hesse 2016, p. 897). This raises questions about the completeness of the text and the editorial liberties taken in their transcription. In addition, it is also stated that all sketches included in the body of the various journal texts have been redacted rather than reproduced (Hesse 2016, p. 897). This disassociation of text from image within the context of the diaries, which are themselves far from complete in terms of dates covered, leaves significant gaps in understanding Hesse's diaries and notebooks as an entangled component of her process-oriented production, leaving the reader to wonder about lost connections in tracing the conceptualization and development of her work.

2.2. Interpretations of Hesse's Words and Works

The reaction to Hesse's death and the scholarship produced shortly thereafter to memorialize and extend her legacy established a prevailing interpretation of her work through the lenses of trauma and gender, largely drawn from the artist's own words recorded in her writings and in interviews.

Feminist art historian Cindy Nemser's 1970 interview with Hesse is a frequently referenced text. The interview, published as "A Conversation with Eva Hesse", was conducted during the last stages of Hesse's illness and rushed to publication in *Artforum* in the weeks leading up to her death (Nemser 1970). The timing and nature of Nemser's questioning have added to the mythos of the tragic artist figure as she opens the interview with questions regarding Hesse's childhood and family dynamics. A tone of personalized tragedy pervades the questioning despite Hesse's own responses, which suggest a positive, even absurdist, acceptance of her life circumstances and the reflection of an artist looking forward to a recovery from her illness and returning to work. Published so close to the time of the artist's death, the interview is practically a conversation from beyond the grave, and Hesse's responses to Nemser's questions have been interpreted and reinterpreted by many scholars for their own ends since 1970, including by Robert Pincus-Witten in the first retrospective exhibition of Hesse's work and Lucy Lippard in the compilation of Hesse's first catalogue raisonné (Lippard 1976; Pincus-Witten 1971).

The timing and tone of Nemser's interview are also revealing of the interviewer's own motivations as an early and vocal advocate for feminist art practices, placing Hesse soundly within the context of the growing women's movement of the early 1970s. Hesse's words and works were being recorded and widely published during a period of increasing feminist discourse on art and culture, an association that has influenced the reading of Hesse's works (Bochner [1992] 2002). Despite Hesse's own statements in her interview with Nemser rejecting the preoccupation of her status as a woman and her clear intentions to recover from her illness and continue working, these associations have persisted as the dominant characteristics defining Hesse as an artist.

The first comprehensive accounting of Eva Hesse's work was published in 1976 by art historian and critic Lucy Lippard. Among the earliest scholars given access to Eva Hesse's diaries by her family, Lippard's catalogue raisonné was informed not only by documentation from Hesse's personal papers supporting the accounting of her work but also by Lippard's personal friendship with the artist. The resulting catalogue is both a complete record of Hesse's works and a biography of the artist supported by the professional and personal insight of Lippard. This text and the authorial influence of Lippard in constructing a personal, though thorough, narrative of the artist's life and work have not escaped scrutiny (Bochner [1992] 2002). The writing accompanying the catalogue entries often combines the personal experiences of the author with an objective presentation of the artist's perceived intent or process, conflating the subjective nature of the author's relationship with Hesse with the scholarly tenor of a catalogue raisonné. The narrative constructed by Lippard,

which references Hesse's personal writing but does not provide traceable citations, straddles a line between personal and critical distance and ultimately established a trajectory for future scholarship on Hesse defined by the themes of psychoanalysis, gender, and biography, which had already begun to emerge during the artist's lifetime.

A passage of note is included early in Lippard's accounting of Hesse's development as an artist. Lippard makes much of Hesse's journal entries regarding the writings of French feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir. Hesse's notes on de Beauvoir's book *Second Sex*, specifically those passages relating women to objects (as opposed to subjects) and the suggestion that this is a role that women have been made explicitly aware of and embodied through time, have been widely cited in subsequent scholarship focused on the bodily reading of Hesse's work (Lippard 1976, p. 26). The inclusion of this excerpted diary passage in the first major publication dedicated to Hesse opened the door for a later generation of art historians, including Briony Fer, Mignon Nixon, and Anna Chave, to use Hesse's writings as evidence supporting the formal interpretation of her sculptural work as sexualized part-objects (Fer 2007; Fer 1994; Nixon 2007; Chave 2002). Much has been made of this iconographic reading of Hesse's work, producing wide ranging scholarly interpretations of Hesse's engagement with the feminist zeitgeist of the late 1960s and Hesse's softer (and floppier) contribution to the highly rational Minimalism of her male peers. Griselda Pollock has written an extensive historiography of this line of inquiry, recounting how each of these scholars, including Fer, Nixon, and Chave, has taken up their own interpretation of Hesse's gender and perceptions of her own femininity in addressing her body of work (Pollock 2006). These texts, which often toe a fine line between embracing and rejecting the psychoanalytic theories on which they appear to be based, often remain within the veins of inquiry established by early scholarship on Hesse's work and avoid outright questioning the interpretation of Hesse's writing by Lippard or the original intent of the artist's own note-taking.

Hesse's work was also included in gallery shows and widely commented on by critics and peers alike during her lifetime. Although written from the perspective of fellow artists and critics who perceived Hesse as a peer rather than a subject of study, these writings tend to suffer less from an overly personal bent than much of the scholarship published immediately after Hesse's death. Many of the artists Hesse associated with in her Bowery neighborhood were also transitional figures benefitting from the Minimalist movement, exploring new forms of abstraction and representation during the 1960s, and influencing one another's practices. While Hesse was perceived as a private person, she writes extensively in her notebooks about the artistic cohort she belonged to, many members of whom went on to contribute to the scholarly discourse on the artist herself. Despite Hesse's writing on her daily life and practice, retrospective views on the artist often draw on the insights of her peers, such as Sol LeWitt and Mel Bochner, who seem to stand in for Hesse herself. Because she did not live long enough to write with the critical distance of time about her own work, the musings and explications of LeWitt and Bochner are received as a type of composite understanding of Hesse and her work through proxy artist figures, as if to say, "If Eva could write this herself, she would say . . ." Often, these artists are called upon to contribute to the conversation as major exhibitions on Hesse have been staged in the last thirty years interrogating Hesse's works through their individual lenses and brands of conceptual art making to varying degrees of criticality (Roberts et al. 2014; Sussman 2002).

Correspondence with Sol LeWitt, a close companion of Hesse, has been preserved and published in several venues and demonstrates their personal connection and parallel development of their artistic voices (Swenson 2015, p. 68). Many scholars read into Hesse's turn toward the grid and repetition of similar yet varied forms in series during the mid-1960s as part of the same line of inquiry as LeWitt's works, producing linguistic structures for the creation of similar yet varied drawings and forms. LeWitt, who directly participated in Hesse's work and helped fabricate components for several of her pieces, has contributed to an understanding of Hesse's studio practice from a first-hand perspective

(LeWitt and Kazanjian [1991] 2014, pp. 66–67). Mel Bochner, another of Hesse's artist contemporaries and close companions, respected and commented on Hesse's work both during her lifetime and following her death. Bochner's own compositions, based on ordered structures punctuated by elements of disorder, share characteristics with Hesse's regularized and geometricized armatures that are augmented with disorderly components. In more recent writings on Hesse, Bochner has advocated for a contemporary, critical reading of Hesse's works that elevates the understanding of her practice beyond that of the tragic to that of a significant artistic figure contributing to the evolution of 20th-century sculpture, as he considers her work foundational to what developed into the performative focus of art in the 1970s (Bochner [1992] 2002).

Although the first half of this paper has explored the problematic tropes recurring within the existing scholarship on Hesse, more recently published scholarship has questioned the essentializing nature of much of the standing commentary on Hesse, returning to her diaries and interviews for evidence. Of note are the essays of Ann Wagner and James Meyer, published in 1994 and 2008, respectively (Meyer 2008; Wagner 1994). Each resists the pitfalls of reducing Hesse to her biography of trauma and rejects her journal writing as indicative of her anxiety as a female in a male-dominated field, but even these attempts at questioning the origins and arcs of the biographically driven, psychoanalytically informed, and bodily derived narrative developed around Hesse's life and work fail to completely break out of the mold. Anne Wagner's 1994 essay, "Another Hesse", attempts to trace the origins of the early readings of Hesse's diaries and interviews by critics and scholars closest to Hesse immediately following her death. Challenging the authority of the tragic narratives that have been reinforced throughout both the academic and popular discourse on Hesse, Wagner asserts that the interpretation of Hesse's highly edited journals and the potential for perpetuated errors and omissions not only guided a specific interpretation of Hesse's work but, to a large extent, determined it (Wagner 1994). Wagner provides examples of diary passages that have been taken out of context to play up the reading of Hesse's demeanor as anxious, insecure, and terrorized by her most challenging life experiences, and by extension, her work is understood and read as a product of these same emotions.²

James Meyer's assessment of the existing scholarship on Hesse similarly rejects the feminist reading of Hesse's work in favor of contextualizing her practice among Minimalist contemporaries, albeit without fully questioning the parameters of Minimalism in the first place and ignoring Hesse's own rejections of this categorization for her work (Meyer 2008). While these more contemporary re-readings of Hesse's life through her writing and the analysis of her work may fall short of pushing the discourse into new territory, their willingness to question the standing interpretations of this evidence allows space for additional opportunities for reinterpretation of Hesse's practice, presented later in this paper.

3. The Emergent Self-Portrait

3.1. Re-Reading Hesse

Rather than reject the writings of, by, and about Eva Hesse problematized in the first half of this paper, the following interpretation understands Hesse's personal writing and note-taking practice as integral to her processes of making through experimentation, as demonstrated in the context of the work *Repetition Nineteen*. Hesse's own words have taken on an outsized importance in the construction of the personal narrative of the artists, often interpreted as describing Hesse as a tragic female figure, which has, in turn, influenced the interpretation of her work from a gendered perspective. However, by reframing the relationship between Hesse the artist, her words, her practice, and her resulting art works, this evidence can be understood as a deeply entangled set of relations, providing a new understanding of Hesse's practice and her still-emerging identity through her work.

The reciprocal relationship between the artist, her process, and her work speaks directly to the material entanglement theories of Ian Hodder (Hodder 2014). According to

Hodder, entanglement emerges from the relations between humans and things in which “subject and object, mind and matter, human and thing co-constitute each other” (Hodder 2014, p. 19). In the case of Hesse, this complex set of relations plays out between the artist and her work and in the continued emergence of her identity through the process of making.

Beginning with an alternative reading of several of Hesse’s diary excerpts particularly concerned with the self-conception of the artist maturing into an adult, there is evidence that her work can inform her biography as much as her biography has informed an understanding of her work to date. Hesse’s objects are the result of a highly personal and materially engaged process of making, which came into full fruition with the creation of her *Repetition Nineteen* series between 1967 and 1968. Reflecting the artist’s awareness of her self-emergence, her note-taking documents the simultaneous processes of material innovation and personal self-awareness developed in tandem through her work. The objects that Hesse made through close documentation and a rigorous process of material exploration act as a simulacrum of self, not in a bodily sense, but as representative of her own process of becoming that continues in the ongoing material change in the work well after her death.

The nature of Hesse’s writings is evidence of many years of psychotherapy, referring to personal growth and her emergence as an “adult” directly in dialogue with the development of her practice and her emergence as an artist. In a journal entry from 1963, Hesse states, “I still want to be a little girl, and yet I resent when then I do not feel I get respect as an adult” (Lippard 1976, p. 23). Later, Hesse follows her commentary on Simone de Beauvoir’s musings on the modern woman with the rhetorical question to herself, “What does being adult entail?” (Lippard 1976, p. 26). While building an interpretative argument from these excerpted writings may resemble trading one psychologically informed reading of Hesse’s life and work for another, it is the language of self-questioning and exploration captured in these diary entries and many others that lends a new understanding of the artist in relation to her process-oriented practice.

3.2. Processes of Making

Hesse’s works are not merely symbolic references to her life trauma or perceptions of a disordered and deteriorating world. Instead, her works are the material result of a self-reflective exercise to fashion herself. As Hesse became dependent on the material engagement of her work as a means of parsing out her own perceptions of self, her work also became dependent on her exploration and inventiveness of method in relation to her emerging concept of self-identity. The suggestion that Hesse’s non-representational work serves as a form of self-portraiture, a long-standing artistic tradition, is not a stretch when considered in the larger context of Hesse’s oeuvre. Her earliest surviving paintings are self-portraits, rendered in the expressive though very traditional use of oil paint in the style of Abstract Expressionism. Though her methodology of making evolved drastically as she abandoned painting for object making, the resulting process-oriented work can still be read as an extension of a practice of self-representation, with her work reflecting her testing out of various media in conjunction with an evolving perception and fashioning of her own persona. Hesse conscientiously rejected composition, or “formal esthetics”, as the root problem considered in her work, as she felt she had already mastered an understanding of them (Lippard 1976, p. 5). She felt that “everything is process” (Nemser [1970] 2002, p. 8). This included spending her time and energy on the exhaustive exploration of materials at her disposal from local hardware stores in her Bowery neighborhood, as well as on her own introspective process of grappling with her suppressed emotional state. While she personally struggled with defining herself as simultaneously carrying the labels of “Woman, beautiful, artist, wife, housekeeper, cook, saleslady, all these things”, she explored a material-oriented means of art making as a way of seeking stability in her life, a process reflected in the production of *Repetition Nineteen*.

Similarly to Hesse, Hodder prominently references stability in the discussion of relations between humans and things, acknowledging that stability is a desirable state that also frequently requires an intensive investment of effort by humans or others to be maintained (Hodder 2014, p. 21). The answer to Hesse's call for something stable can be found in her adoption of a process-oriented and material-specific experimentation introduced to her during her time at Yale. Josef Albers was known for his methodical and systematic studies of color, which underscored his belief in the contingent role of color as a mutable material in and of itself, impacting the perception of art and the world (Swenson 2015, pp. 30–32). His pedagogical stance, originating in his experiences at the Bauhaus, structured his teaching and, in turn, structured Hesse's experiences at Yale, stressing "process and experimentation" with all materials in the production of art (Singerman 1999, p. 81). Despite Hesse's diary entries, which suggest she struggled with Albers' aesthetic proclivities and his insistence toward "rule making", Albers' emphasis on "heuristics and problem solving" can be seen as the legacy of his teaching in her resulting development as an artist (Swenson 2015). Lippard provides commentary on Hesse's relationship to materials later in her career, suggesting that "she felt it dishonest to use materials in a way that hadn't been personally arrived at, usually through long and/or difficult processes" (Lippard 1976, p. 110). This can be interpreted as the conflation of the material with the personal self-reflection of the artist.

The artistic process outlined by Albers and imparted on Hesse while at Yale resulted in a rigorous, almost scientific, experimentation with materiality that Hesse later engaged in while creating *Repetition Nineteen*. The title of the work itself, featuring the term "repetition", suggests the emphasis on iterative practice. In her process, Hesse's materials and their inherent characteristics were given agency in the production of the work and resulted in three major iterations of material experimentation with lasting repercussions on Hesse's ongoing practice until her death.

Although Hesse did not maintain a daily diary during this time, she included copious notes-to-self as part of her documentation of her process of developing *Repetition Nineteen* through several rounds of making. The earliest drawings studying this serial piece were made in 1967. Hesse's process included sketching, note-taking, and small mockups of her concepts particularly focused on the material qualities of the resulting work, the structural integrity of the forms she created, and the perception of the spaces these objects made. The ink, gouache, and watercolor study *Repetition Nineteen I* conceptualized the work as a collection of vessels with various postures and effects in relation to light, shade, and shadow, and was annotated with Hesse's impressions and intentions for next steps in fabricating the sculptural form (Hesse 1967c). The first test of fabricating the nineteen forms, though initially planned to be executed in thin sheet metal, was later realized in wire mesh, papier-mâché, and white paint as *Repetition Nineteen I* (Hesse 1967b). In reflecting on this first stage of work, Hesse noted she was "conscious of her use of papier-mâché in *Repetition Nineteen I* as 'kid's stuff' in contrast to the use of 'real' materials which she admired in the work of others" (Lippard 1976, p. 110). Hesse associated negative connotations with the perceived character of papier-mâché, assessing the work as much from the perspective of a formal object as a personified self-reflective vision of self. She strove to be an adult, and so the work called for "adult" materials.

Hesse repeated the process of drawing and note-taking in developing further iterations of *Repetition Nineteen*. Her sketches closely studied the volume and dimensions of the nineteen hollow forms and emphasized her desire for each of the objects to be placed at random in relation to one another, forming a sense of individual elements making up a larger whole (Hesse 1967c). The layer of white paint in conjunction with the papier-mâché used in *Repetition Nineteen I* had also lent the forms a solidity or heaviness that detracted from the lightness and a more subtle interplay of shade and shadow that Hesse felt was important to the overall composition. This led her to experiment with a new material, cast latex, in the second test of the piece. Briony Fer has discussed the material significance of Hesse's choice of latex and the process of building up its mass through layering as a critical turn in Hesse's practice (Fer 2009, p. 97). In addition to achieving a complex and variable

effect of light passing through the surface of the latex vessels she experimented with, the process of material layering was analogous to parsing the multi-layered and complex perception of self that Hesse was grappling with at that moment of her artistic emergence.

Though Hesse noted her positive reaction to the material qualities discovered during this phase of work, *Repetition Nineteen II*, produced in cotton cloth, latex, and rubber tubing, was never fully completed. She felt the vessels seemed *too* solid, detracting from the interaction of the hollow forms in relation to one another (Lippard 1976, p. 110). The first latex experiments lacked the complexity and perceived vitality she hoped the forms would convey as a larger collection of different yet related elements, again a potential link to her own perception of self, made up of a multitude of alter egos, related but different. The process yielded results that Hesse internalized and recorded in sketches as part of her notes as the basis for further “hard work” propelling her practice forward and refining *Repetition Nineteen* by using new-to-her materials (Hesse 1967a). Few tests from this iteration survived, as portions of *Repetition Nineteen II* were incorporated into other studies and finished pieces rather than retained and documented as a completed version, reflecting Hesse’s inventive reuse and repurposing of materials within her studio.

The final version, *Repetition Nineteen III*, was the first work that Hesse commissioned to be fabricated outside of her studio. The artist contracted Aegis Plastics of New York City to produce the collection of vessels in fiberglass and polyester resin, materials that Hesse had not worked with before but hoped would capture the quality of lightness she wanted the piece to convey. As seen in “Studies for Repetition” from 1968, Hesse provided dimensional and material specifications for the piece, rendered as nineteen similar yet different vessels (Hesse 1968). This process extended the network of relations involved with her work beyond her individual practice through the process of commissioning fabricators. The first version produced by Aegis was rejected by the artist because the vessels’ forms were too refined, a reaction suggesting the artist felt that the personal, physical connection of her hand had been lost in translation during the fabrication by others (Lippard 1976, p. 110). The final version was created and approved by the artist in July of 1968. The completed fiberglass forms were larger than the original papier-mâché version, though their quality of translucency balanced the perception of the objects in space. The composition was prominently featured in the only one-woman show staged during her lifetime, *Eva Hesse: Chain Polymers*, at the Fischbach Gallery in New York City in 1968 (Barger and Sterrett 2002).

3.3. *Repetition Nineteen, Entanglement, and Artist Identity*

Through the production of *Repetition Nineteen*, Hesse developed a process of art making inextricable from her process of self-making, similar to what Hodder has described as a “double bind” of “depending on things that depend on humans” (Hodder 2014, pp. 19–20). This concept of the double bind is also present in Rosalind Krauss’ “Notes on the Index Part I”, in which she employs Lacan’s linguistic mirror stage to interpret the doubled relation of self-identity of the artist “[as] primarily fused with identification (a felt connection to someone else)” evidenced in the works of artists such as Vito Acconci and Marcel Duchamp (Krauss 1977, p. 197). In the case of Hesse and *Repetition Nineteen*, Krauss’ doubled relations are also those of Hodder, enacted between the artist, written documentation, material processes, and the completed work of art. Hesse used the documentation of her writing, material evidence of her experimentation, and creation of her work as a way of creating herself. Hesse’s notes on material experimentation were not only “technical instructions” but also a record of her interest in a material’s “Intrinsic” characteristics and their “extrinsic connections and interactions” (Fer 2009, p. 106). This interpretation of her notes suggests the importance of the relationality of the base materials and final objects produced throughout Hesse’s process. The exhibition of Hesse’s work situated her within a larger milieu and community of artist peers that contextualized her practice, i.e., a cultural network of people and things. The systematic and iterative exploration practiced by Hesse was also a tether to her earlier study and work with Josef Albers. The involvement of text as integral to the

realization of the work, in Hesse's case, her notes and instructions for fabrication, not only implicated others in the making of the work but related her practice to the contemporary works of her close friends Sol LeWitt and Mel Bochner.

The nineteen separate vessels that make up the completed *Repetition Nineteen* can be understood as proxy physical representations of the many personas Hesse felt compelled to identify with as a woman and artist establishing her practice, each unique, similar yet different. Hesse placed significance on the distinctly "aimless yet congenial" ordering of the vessels on the floor when arranging and presenting the work (Lippard 1976, p. 108). She struggled to reconcile the existence of her multiple selves, and the multiple vessel forms of *Repetition Nineteen* were a way of externalizing those entities so she could directly grapple with the process of making a whole out of many distinct parts. The arrangement of the objects in the room created a space, an interiority and exteriority, contributing to both the viewer's experiential and visual encounter with the work and, in turn, perhaps also with the artist. The collection of vessels with gaps in between as well as the objects being hollow containers introduce aspects of light vs. shadow, edge vs. field, and inside vs. outside, all potential personal reflections of Hesse's own multiple personas and pluralistic understanding of self within the work as well as the variability of the viewer's individual perception of the piece.

Hesse used a photograph of one of the earlier iterations of the work as the postcard for the gallery announcement for her first solo show, signaling that she recognized the importance of *Repetition Nineteen* as a work that closely aligned with her self-perception and projection as an artist. But this choice was not necessarily made due to the outward aesthetics of the sculpture. Given that she used an image of the papier-mâché iteration of the installation, the image represented the process of *Repetition Nineteen* rather than a final product. As Wagner has also noted in her historiography dedicated to Hesse, Rosalind Krauss attributed Hesse's significance not to her contribution to or creation of a discourse, but to "her engagement with contemporary practice" (Wagner 1994, p. 67). Hesse's practice relied on the integration of writing and making together, suggesting that the evidence of Hesse's working process held significant agency in the artist's systematic experimentation with materials. Hesse's writing, which blends self-talk and notes on the production of *Repetition Nineteen*, ultimately constitutes the body of work and the artist herself.

All materials, including discarded tests from her various iterations of *Repetition Nineteen*, were valid for exploration and reuse, a cyclical process mirroring Hesse's ongoing search for the form she would ultimately take as an artist. In her 2009 essay, Briony Fer raised questions regarding the role of Hesse's material test pieces and their eventual display in a series of glass cases included in the installation in the Fischbach Gallery show where *Repetition Nineteen* was debuted. According to Fer, the juxtaposition of the tests with the final sculptural work contextualized the "radical and experimental nature" of Hesse's practice, elevating the importance of the process by displaying the "residue of the work involved in making" (Fer 2009, p. 86). Despite this assertion of their importance, Fer also uses the word "failure" to refer to the multiple, earlier iterations of *Repetition Nineteen* put on display, but the categorization of these fragments as "failures" associates negative connotations with what can otherwise be understood as productive material outputs of Hesse's process-oriented practice (Fer 2009, p. 102).

The *Repetition Nineteen* series was a breakthrough moment for Hesse in her discovery of liquid latex, its properties, and its resulting aesthetics, marking a transition from what Hesse considered more juvenile, conventional materials to the "adult" medium of plastics. Hesse noted latex's flexibility, malleability, and inherent color properties as particularly appealing to her, and she used these characteristics to her advantage in much of the work she produced between the completion of *Repetition Nineteen* and her death in 1970. The significance of Hesse's association with and affinity for a material built up through layering that could transform into so many different things cannot be understated, as latex came to be seen as her signature material in a period of her artistic production rife with transformation.

4. Continued Emergence

Despite the development of a wide field of scholarship dedicated to Eva Hesse throughout the last 40 years, a re-reading of the artist's writing, along with a closer analysis of the material processes of her works, reveals an understanding of Hesse constituted by her works (rather than an overreliance on interpretation through her biography) that continues to emerge.

The process of preparing instructions, testing, evaluating, dismantling, and repurposing her material experiments is strikingly similar to the process of self-evaluation Hesse recorded in her diaries. As Hesse established and grew her artistic practice, her internalized perception of self became entangled with her process and materials of artistic production. Hesse also understood that her works produced in unstable materials such as latex would continue to morph in form and quality over time, even commenting that she felt bad that patrons would pay so much for pieces that would become brittle and fall apart (Nemser [1970] 2002, p. 18). *Repetition Nineteen III*, now a part of the permanent collection at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is a composite of its previous iterations as much as Hesse is a composite of the many personas she describes as aspiring to embody in her diaries. The once clear and luminous fiberglass vessels have become cloudy and yellowed, continuing a process of transformation started by the artist. Her awareness of the expected decay of her work can be understood as a material presence extending the vitality of the artist long after her death. Hesse's writing and works have an agency of their own, outlasting the artist as they continue to transform, allowing for new interpretations of her intent and practice. The vitality of the materials that Hesse chose to work with represents the vitality that she wished to capture and harness within her own persona, creating a still-emerging assemblage of the artist and her work through the objects of her creation.

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Notes

- ¹ While Lippard's account of Hesse's biography cited here is the first and most comprehensive version of the artist's personal story to be published following her death, it serves as a stand-in for the extensive list of subsequent scholarly works on Hesse prefaced to some extent by a recounting of the tragic circumstances of the artist's life and death. A complete recounting of Hesse's life is far too long to recreate in this paper. Therefore, for brevity, further discussion of the details of Hesse's life will be forgone in favor of a deeper analysis of the existing scholarship and will only be provided when directly applicable to the discussion at hand.
- ² Wagner provides a specific example of textual analysis. A paragraph of journal text, first published by Helen A. Cooper in the catalogue associated with the 1992 exhibition *Eva Hesse: A Retrospective* regarding Hesse's experiences at Yale, is compared to the original text from the artist's journal, unedited. The omission of 24 words from the original to the republished text paints an entirely different picture about Hesse's outlook on life and her work, one in which the artist finds painting uncomfortable and emotionally taxing. The implication is that the edited text presented by Cooper as "the artist's own words" privileges a reading that reinforces the image of emotional distress that much of the narrative around Hesse thrives upon.

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