Eva Hesse Oh, More Absurdity

This episode focuses on Eva Hesse (1936–1970). Joining host Helen Molesworth are artist Mary Weatherford and art historian Darby English. Hesse is one of the most influential artists of her generation, despite having a career that lasted only ten years. In a rare 1970 recording, made only a few months before her death, Hesse discusses the trajectory of her practice, her distinctive materials, and the meaning of art and life.

Additional Resources

- Estate of Eva Hesse, Hauser & Wirth (https://www.hauserwirth.com/artists /2810-eva-hesse)
- Cindy Nemser Papers Finding Aid (http://archives2.getty.edu:8082/xtf/view ?docId=ead/2013.M.21/2013.M.21.xml)

Transcript

Episode transcripts are provided to make this podcast accessible to a wider audience. Please note that interviews featured in this episode have been edited for concision and clarity.

Original interview: Cindy Nemser interview with Eva Hesse, January 20, 1970, D96, Cindy Nemser papers, 2013.M.21, Getty Research Institute.

EVA HESSE: All I wanted was to find my own scene, my own world, my own inner peace or inner turmoil; but I wanted it to be mine.

HELEN MOLESWORTH: This is Recording Artists, a podcast from the Getty dedicated to exploring art and artists through the archives of the Getty Research Institute. I'm your host Helen Molesworth.

In this season we focus on audio interviews with six women artists whose lives span the twentieth century. These recordings were made by the New York-based art critic Cindy Nemser and art historian Barbara Rose. Most of these interviews come from the 1960s and '70s, in the midst of the civil rights movement and the feminist revolution. Hearing these artists in their own words talk about their work and about their experiences as women making art is a revelation.

This episode focuses on Eva Hesse. Cindy Nemser interviewed her in January, 1970. Hesse was 34 years old.

I asked artist Mary Weatherford and University of Chicago-based art historian Darby English to listen to these tapes with me. Mary's mixture of painting and sculpture stems directly from Hesse's work. And Darby is an art historian who pays close attention to language and description, especially when things are hard to describe.

Eva Hesse was one of the most innovative and beguiling artists of the twentieth century. She is the kind of artist other artists swoon over, the kind they steal from, copy from, and learn from. Her ambitious body of sculpture has given several generations of artists the permission to experiment. During her lifetime she shared close friendships with her artist peers in 1960s New York—namely Sol LeWitt, Bob and Sylvia Mangold, and Mel Bochner. Hesse was also married to a fellow artist, the sculptor Tom Doyle. Given this I suspect she may have always been the kind of artist other artists admire.

Hesse's life story was marbled by tragedy. Born in 1936 in Hamburg, Germany, Eva and her older sister Helen were put on a children's train in 1938 in order to escape Nazi aggression after Kristallnacht. Luckily, the children were reunited with their parents in Holland and the family was able to secure passage on a boat to America in 1939. Once in the United States, they became New Yorkers. The rest of her family—her grandparents on both sides, as well as aunts, uncles, and cousins—did not survive the Holocaust. When Eva's mother learned of the death of her parents in a concentration camp, she committed suicide. Eva was 10 years old.

By the age of 16, Hesse was attending Pratt, already committed to being an artist. She didn't like the instruction and dropped out of school. But two years later she found herself enrolled at Cooper Union, where she thrived, as she did a few years later at Yale's legendary art school under the tutelage of Joseph Albers. By 1960 she was an active member of the downtown New York art scene. And she was married to a prominent member of that circle. Although Hesse is now the bigger name, at the time of their marriage, Tom Doyle was the star in their artistic union. His reputation far outshone hers, a story typical for women artists of the period.

Her career would only last ten years. In 1969, she was diagnosed with a brain tumor which took her life one year later. Cindy Nemser interviewed Hesse in January 1970, a few months after Hesse's operation and just a few months before she would die. Nemser's tape is a rare recording of Hesse's voice, quite possibly the only one. It's unclear how much each of them understood about Hesse's prognosis. It's notable that this interview is one of Nemser's longest and even Hesse notices that Nemser is uncharacteristically ill at ease.

HESSE: Even you're nervous, your hand is shaking.

CINDY NEMSER: I am. I am. I'm very nervous. [she laughs] I really am.

MOLESWORTH: Was Nemser nervous because of Hesse's growing reputation? Or because she knew unconsciously (or not) that she needed to get as much down on tape as possible, that this interview needed to be good, because she might not get a second crack at it?

Hesse says she feels tired several times during the interview, but Nemser doesn't

stop until Hesse's third entreaty. I can't say I blame her. I've been in a similar situation. It's a very ambivalent moment. You know the person is ill and you both know and don't know that they might die. You want to release them from the interview out of human compassion and you want to keep going, because there is something gnawing at you to do so.

To my ear, Nemser sounds different in this interview than she does in the others. I got the sense that she is really trying to keep Hesse on the line so to speak, to keep her talking despite her forgetfulness, her fatigue, and her somewhat circular approach to questions. And Hesse herself seems infused with a kind of pathos. When Nemser encourages Hesse to talk about the fugitive life span of some of her materials—she had been working in rubber and latex—Hesse seems aware of her mortality.

HESSE: I have this partial thought about— It's not very clarified in my own mind, maybe. And also interesting how life and art merges. Because I've been so sick, where I could've, you know, died all the time, that whole idea of art, making something last, is put in another position. And I'm not sure what I feel about it, if it matters. It probably shouldn't matter. But I'd like to try rubber that will last. I think I'm getting confused because it's two very, very different but big issues.

MOLESWORTH: Even though Hesse had a truncated career, her work nevertheless had distinct periods, during which she worked through similar problems in different materials. Her first show in New York was of exuberantly colored drawings of arrows and geometrical shapes that skitter and dance around the page. Relatively soon after this exhibition, Hesse returned to Germany for the first time since leaving as a child. Her then-husband Tom Doyle had been invited by a German industrialist to come and set up a studio in a derelict textile factory. From start to finish the trip filled Hesse with great apprehension. Nevertheless, while in Germany, she developed a set of relief sculptures that used the detritus laying around the abandoned factory, namely left-over bits of hardware, and ropes and cords which she painted in meticulous color gradations. These works moved some of her ideas from the realm of drawing into the space of sculpture.

HESSE: I started working in sculpture when we lived for a year and a half on an unusual kind of Renaissance patronage in Europe. I had a great deal of difficulty with painting, and never with drawing. So I started working in relief. And the line, the ropes that now are so commonly used started by— The drawings became so linear. And I would vary the cords. And I would start with three-dimensional boards, and I would build them out with papier-mâché or some kinds of soft materials. When I came back to America, I varied the materials further. And then it just grew. And they came from the floor, the ceiling, or the walls. The— Then it just became whatever it became.

MOLESWORTH: Even though her use of cord was an extension of her linear drawings, the way she coiled and wrapped these cords led to biomorphic shapes that were highly suggestive of body parts: breasts, eyes, and knees. All of a sudden, her work was neither drawing nor sculpture, but some sexy tactile situation in between the two. This is why Mary Weatherford opted out of defining Hesse as a sculptor.

MARY WEATHERFORD: I think of her more as a maker. I mean, she's always called a sculptor. She did plenty of things that hang on the wall...

MOLESWORTH: And so when you call Hesse a maker, what does that mean to you? What does the word maker do that gets you out of this conundrum of "is she a

sculptor or is she a drawer or is she a painter?"

WEATHERFORD: I think Hesse is creating a situation in which I can feel. So the work is *there*. I could touch it with my hands. She's making a situation in which I can feel something. Sometimes it's a box with tubes in it that looks like an inside-out sea anemone, sort of. Sometimes it's some fiberglass things that hang on the wall in a serial manner, that are each slightly different.

I find myself in a situation where I come to something that Eva Hesse made, and it fires certain things in my brain that to me, are interesting and pleasurable.

MOLESWORTH: When Hesse returned to New York from Germany, minimalism was in full fever. Hesse, ever responsive to her environment, bled the color out of her work and made a set of graphite drawings of circles on graph paper. Highly repetitive and obsessive, they were her response to minimalism's elimination of color and reduction of form. Soon, however, she had a major breakthrough in both scale and material. She seemed to seize on the pleasure noted by Weatherford and, in a manner that might be seen as antagonistic to the high seriousness of minimalism, she deployed her deeply humorous and material-based sensibility to make one of the most beguiling objects of the twentieth century, *Hang Up*.

Hang Up, is widely considered one of Hesse's most important works, and is almost always on view at the Art Institute of Chicago. When I am in Chicago, I always go visit it, and it has never failed to surprise me with its exuberant sense of joy. I asked Mary what she thinks of Hang Up:

WEATHERFORD: It's shocking.

MOLESWORTH: Why?

WEATHERFORD: In its ridiculousness. It's something that is as if in a dream. It's something that's impossibly exaggerated.

And for people who haven't seen it, it's a large frame with an animated line that comes out into the space of the viewer, blowing out into the space, and goes back into the frame. And so it has a kind of— the impossible animation that occurs in dreams, where you go, "Oh, my God, I dreamed I could fly." So you come around the corner and you see it—ah!—and there's a sort of surprise that happens.

MOLESWORTH: I asked art historian Darby English if he could describe *Hang Up* from memory:

DARBY ENGLISH: *Hang Up* is a roughly five-and-a-half-foot square construction, open construction. Some armature—I forget the material—has been wrapped by Hesse in canvas. Padded first, to a depth of, I would say, three and a half inches; wrapped in canvas; and painted in grayscale all the way around. At roughly ten-thirty and five p.m. are two holes, into which a large wire, most of a loop, have been inserted. It, too, is painted a gray or several grays from the same gradient that wraps what is basically an open stretcher bar. And the wall is visible through the open form. And so you're looking at a sculptural painting and a painted sculpture and a wall, and a very peculiar and delicate moment of contact between what hangs on the wall and the floor on which you stand.

MOLESWORTH: What Darby is describing is a large frame that encloses an empty patch of wall, and a large loop that interrupts the space of the viewer, both wrapped and bound, painted in grey. The piece is both conceptually serious and spatially

hilarious. I asked Darby what kind of story he thought Hesse was trying to tell.

ENGLISH: It is a color story; it is a shape story; it is a format story; it is a medium story; it is a wall story; thereby, it is an institution story; it is a phenomenological story, because we share the floor with *Hang Up*. And the work, thereby, takes part in the space that we claim. And it is utterly formless.

MOLESWORTH: What do you mean?

ENGLISH: Actually, I mean that it's imageless. I mean that it's an incredibly precise system of art gestures, which present no image at all. And the absence of image is every bit as palpable a presence as all the material factors that I just described as comprehensively as I could.

MOLESWORTH: And now, let's listen to Hesse describe it, although the audio is a little hard to hear:

HESSE: This really is an idea piece, I think. It's very strong, and it's absurd when you see it. It's almost primitive in its construction. It's very naïve, in the way it's constructed, because I really did it[?]. But these words are wrong, I know, but I mean, half the time, I have a kind of depth in me. And I don't always achieve. And that's the kind of depth or soul or absurdity or life or meaning, really, or intellect that I want to keep. And I think it's a very honest piece.

It's also the extreme— That's also why I like it and don't like it. It's so absurd to have out of that structure, this little thing come out here and there. And it comes out a lot. It's like ten feet out or eleven feet out. It's ridiculous. And it's the most ridiculous structure I think I've ever made, and that's why it's really good. I mean, it's this ridiculous form coming out of nothing. And what's it coming out of? It is coming out of something. And yet nothing. And there's this whole— this framing of it. And then the whole thing's gradated. Oh, more absurdity.

MOLESWORTH: Hesse uses the word absurd twenty-eight times in the course of this interview, and six times in describing *Hang Up* alone.

I asked Darby English what he heard in Hesse's account of Hang Up:

ENGLISH: So much of what she is saying is tentative and unsure tonally. But the words are very precise. The words are the words of someone who clearly has been speaking English in a very educated context for her entire life and knows that she's speaking as an artist who made something, about the thing that she made. For all of the saying that she's doing, and for all the precision and the weight of the words that she's using, we don't really get much from her in the way of description. We get a lot of evocative language about how the attempt to make *Hang Up* looks in retrospect, and how you might feel when you look at it. Absurd is a word that's chosen willfully and used repeatedly.

MOLESWORTH: What's fascinating about Hesse and the word absurd is that she also uses it to describe her life. The tentativeness that Darby hears in Hesse's account of *Hang Up* is not the same as when she talks about the absurdity of her life, where her tone becomes more emphatic.

HESSE: My whole life has been absurd. Nothing ever was normal. [she chuckles] The extreme traumas—personal, health, family, war, economy, health, sickness, to my art and my working there, school, my personal, friends—

That's just in life. Then in art, it can't be separated for me, because my life was so extreme. Art being the most important thing for me, rather than like existence, staying alive. And I could never really separate them. And they became close, enmeshed. And absurdity is the key word.

MOLESWORTH: Throughout our conversation, Darby often wanted to protect our interpretations of Hesse's work from the tragedy of her life. Basically, he didn't want her life to pathologize her art, a fate particularly available to women artists. And yet I still wanted to know what he heard when Hesse described her life as absurd.

ENGLISH: Absurd. Valences of uncontrolled actions and their consequences, which is, of course, a precipitant of hysteria, which is a quintessentially female domain in twentieth-century society.

Hesse both knows this and is smart about it, and is also someone who is honest about the fact that she has a life full of symptoms. And I think it must've been very difficult to be smart and modern about this and actually have a life full of symptoms.

It's like, you don't just stop making things because there are too many symptoms happening in your life. And you know, that's a— that's an absurdity, you know? Having to live both. Having to live under a kind of symptomatic regime and having to keep making your art no matter what, for as long as you had.

MOLESWORTH: Part of what makes Hesse so extraordinary is that the art she produced in the face of the absurdity of her tragic life was never sentimental or hysterical. In other words, her work never seemed like a symptom of her tragedy.

The other thing Hesse's work shied away from was any participation in specific art movements. She wasn't concerned with the new pictorial language of abstract expressionism or the sculptural grammar of minimalism. Instead, she was struggling to make a new form and as such the critics were stumped for language. One effect of Hesse's innovations was that she made abstract work that seemed to teeter on the edge of having explicit content, without ever quite going there.

Listen as Nemser struggles to define what's happening.

NEMSER: How do the soft materials relate to the content of your work? Well, supposing we talk about the content before we get into the—

HESSE: Supposing you clarify what you mean by content.

MOLESWORTH: Hesse's challenge to Nemser to define what she means by content is typical of artists who work abstractly. They tend to be skeptical about the category. Here's artist Mary Weatherford:

WEATHERFORD: Content, content. I really don't like talking about content. I don't care about content.

MOLESWORTH: Why not?

WEATHERFORD: I mean, I might regret saying this. I don't even know what content is in a painting. My God! Are you crazy? Like, what is the content of a Eva Hesse? Like, the content is infinite. That's why it's a piece of art. And that content changes over time, depending on the person who is experiencing it.

MOLESWORTH: In her interview with Hesse, Nemser pushes on and tries to clarify what she means about the content in Hesse's work, even though you can feel her

discomfort.

NEMSER: I notice that your work, it has to do with sexual impulses or organic feeling. I feel it's sort of anthropomophical. And I don't know if I said that right. But anyway, [she laughs] in any sense, I mean, do you— Can you talk about that?

HESSE: I'll try. It's not a simple question for me. First, when I work, it's only the abstract qualities that I'm really working with. Which is then, say, the material form it's going to take and the size and the scale and positioning, where it comes from, the ceiling or if it lies on the floor. However, I don't value the totality of the image on these abstract or aesthetic points. For me, it's a total image that has to do with me and life. It can't be divorced, because as an idea or composition or form, I don't believe art can be based on that. So that it is inevitable that it is my life, my feeling, my thoughts. And they are very complex. I'm not a simple person. [Nemser: Of course.] And if I can name content then, on that level, maybe it's the total absurdity of life.

MOLESWORTH: When I played this clip for Mary Weatherford, a native southern Californian, she started to chuckle, and I assumed it was about Hesse's use of the word "absurd." It turns out I was wrong.

Why are you laughing?

WEATHERFORD: The accent. Her accent is so great. Yeah.

MOLESWORTH: That's so funny. I don't even think it's that pronounced. Do you think I have a New York accent?

WEATHERFORD: Uh-huh.

MOLESWORTH: Regional differences aside, the question remains, how do we talk about the complexity of Hesse's work? Nemser clearly feels a sexual pull, but Hesse won't acknowledge it head on. Instead she insists upon the work's complexity and in doing so falls back on her word of choice, stating that the content of her work is quote "the total absurdity of life." This passage made me wonder if, for Hesse, the body itself, with its needs for food, tenderness, and sex, is also complex and absurd. Certainly, in the days of minimalism's austere surfaces and cool affect, there wasn't a lot of room to talk about the body and all of its vicissitudes. But that didn't mean that the young artists looking at Hesse's work couldn't feel it.

Mary Weatherford:

WEATHERFORD: As a young woman, as a nineteen-year-old, I could understand how the work was made, and it was incredibly sexual. I understood that. So my body became more important. If I see some breasts on a wall with strings hanging out of them and I know a lot of money's been paid for it and people are writing about it, people are thinking about it, my breasts are more important than they were five minutes ago. The sexuality of her work was incredibly important to me. And it was the thing that wasn't spoken about. It was there, in your face; but it was talked about as if it were Sol LeWitt. And I loved that.

MOLESWORTH: Weatherford registers the importance of Hesse's introduction of the specifically female body—"some breasts on a wall"—and how that opens out onto the possibility of sexuality. When Mary says it was both in your face *and* something you didn't talk about, that struck me as analogous to the "problem" of being a woman artist—it both doesn't matter and it means everything at the same time. It's

both in your face *and* you can't talk about it. One of the things I hear in this back and forth over the problem of "content" is how difficult it is to balance the abstract qualities of Hesse's work with how the work makes people feel, both in their bodies and in their minds. Hesse's work *is* often really sexy and really funny, but when you try to explain why the effect starts to disappear. It's similar to how when you begin to recount a dream the images evaporate before you get the words out. I asked Darby English how he navigates this quality of Hesse's work.

I mean, how do you square the abstraction and the profound formal inventiveness of Hesse with this other kind of almost bawdy sexuality that runs through her body of work?

ENGLISH: Yeah. I think I don't square it. I think not squaring them is the strategy I go to for dealing with the, well, what do you call this? Dealing with the conflict. It is a conflict, it's a paradox, it's all of the things that we say to signify hard to figure out.

MOLESWORTH: This quality of the paradoxical or the conflictual seems completely germane to Hesse's approach. And it seems related to the problem of being a woman and an artist. Hesse's desire to keep things abstract and have them be sexy and bodily feels like one of the ways she is managing the tension inherent in the phrase "woman artist," where woman implies a gendered world and artist implies a world free of gender's restrictions. Even in her most "abstract" works, like her circle drawings, Hesse is playing with these fundamental contradictions.

Listen as she struggles to talk about what her work is doing or what it might mean—if it's abstract or not, if it relates to gender or not, if it's about art or life or both.

HESSE: I think the circle was really very abstract. I could make up stories of what the circle means to [inaudible] to man, but I don't know if it was that conscious. I think it was a form, a vehicle. I don't think I had a sexual, I mean, or anthropomorphic or geometric or, you know— It wasn't a breast and it wasn't a circle representing life and eternity. Maybe on an unconscious level, but that's so opposed to say it was an abstract, you know, life symbol or it was a geometric— There you have the two opposite— an opposition.

I was always aware that I would take order versus chaos, stringy versus mass, huge versus small, and I would try to find the most absurd opposites or extreme opposites. And I was always aware of their absurdity, and also their contradiction formally. And it was always more interesting than making something average, normal, right-sized, right proportion.

MOLESWORTH: Hesse's description of her own work hums with the force of opposition. And part of how Hesse's work embodied this sense of opposition was through how handmade it was. At a time when much art had a sleek, hard-edged surface that masked the labor that made it, Hesse offered intensely handmade things. Mary Weatherford talked about how important this was for her as a young art student.

WEATHERFORD: I copied her work or made my version of her work for four years at school. Not exactly copying it, but wrapping things, dipping things, constructing things, sawing things, drilling things, hammering things, collecting things. Collecting twigs, cutting them into the same length, putting them in boxes. That, this was all I did for four years.

I think the reason it's so compelling, was so compelling to young artists, is the way

it's made is so obvious. There's no mystery to it. If you looked at a Pollock—and I'm trying to pick something that you would think there's no mystery to it—but you go, "You try and make a Jackson Pollock." But do you know what? You could probably make yourself an Eva Hesse. You could copy one. Pretty close.

MOLESWORTH: It strikes me that this too is absurd in a way, that the artist so revered by other artists is an artist who ensures that her process is available for everyone to see. That the artist so revered is the artist most easy to copy. There's a vulnerability and a generosity in this. It's as if Hesse's commitment to showing you her cards up front is a form of radical honesty—honesty about how difficult and joyful life is, how abstract and tangible the world is, honesty about the ultimate fate of all things.

Throughout the interview, we've heard Hesse blur art and life. When pressed again for how her materials might hold up over time she ultimately waxes existential.

HESSE: Because I'm conflicted, because part of me feels it's superfluous. If I need a rubber to use, that's more important. And life doesn't last, art doesn't last; it doesn't matter.

MOLESWORTH: "Life doesn't last, art doesn't last: it doesn't matter." This feels like it could be cynical, but in this idea, Hesse seems to find freedom. And the freedom she finds is the permission to use the materials she needs to use, to figure out whatever problem she has to solve. I started to get the sense in listening to Hesse that the studio was a place where *because* life doesn't last and art doesn't last, she could do whatever she wanted, no matter what the outcome was.

Curious about Hesse's sense of freedom, I asked Mary Weatherford what it is about art that feels so necessary for artists.

WEATHERFORD: It is something that has to be done. I've thought about this a lot. It's what I've found that—I don't want to say makes me happy, but it's what I need to do to live. My time in the studio, my time with my paintings, it's a place where I can fail. It's a place where I can succeed. I can set limits for myself, I can take away those limits, I can raise the bar, I can demand things of myself, I can let myself off the hook. So the process of making the work it's like life, but contained.

MOLESWORTH: This sense of permission to fail, permission to explore, permission to follow one's own questions is central to Hesse's project. In the wake of great personal and historical tragedy she was brave enough to become an artist. She was brave enough to strike out on her own to try and find a way to make objects that muddled the categories of painting, sculpture, and drawing in a way that conveyed the equally blurred categories of art and life. And she was brave enough to make work that didn't look like anyone else's.

HESSE: I know art history. I know what I believe in, I know where I come from or I'm related to or the work that I've looked at that I'm really personally convinced by and feel close to or connected with or attached to. But I feel so strongly that the only art is the art of the artist personally. It's truly, as much as possible, for themselves, by themselves. It's impossible to be isolated completely. But my interest is in finding solely my own way.

MOLESWORTH: What does it mean to be an artist and to want to go "solely your own way"? What does it mean to not be part of the movement of your peers? I find this particularly poignant given how many of her works are not in fact solitary, but are

made out of the repetition of tens, if not hundreds of parts. She tended to make things that didn't stand on their own—they often had to be suspended from the ceiling or propped up on a wall or hung from a hook. Was her desire to stand apart, to be alone, also part of what was absurd for Hesse about life and art?

These questions reminded me of something else Darby English said about Hesse's use of the word absurd.

ENGLISH: No one feels absurd about the same things. The same thing never strikes everyone as absurd the same way. And that keeps the artist's discourse about the thing as open as the thing itself. I think that's incredibly brilliant.

MOLESWORTH: I think both Darby and Mary share this sense of Hesse's work being open and multivalent, and it's a huge part of her importance for them. Her work is trying really hard to be as open a field as possible. Hesse's playing with materials and forms as well as the space of the studio and the museum. She's courting the ridiculous and the sexy as well as the fragile and the bound. She was trying to make work that communicated her incredibly complex history and her everyday reality. She was trying to be one of the hardest things it is to be, an individual.

HESSE: All I wanted was to find my own scene, my own world, my own inner peace or inner turmoil; but I wanted it to be mine.

MOLESWORTH: In keeping with Hesse's fierce desire for independence I'd like to close with her response to Cindy Nemser's questionnaire about the role of gender in art:

Thursday January 27

Dear Cindy,

The way to beat discrimination in art is by art. Excellence has no sex.

Eva

For episode transcripts, images, and additional resources, visit our website at getty.edu/recordingartists.

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