THE BODY AND THE OBJECT:
Physical Relations of Viewing in the Sculpture of Eva Hesse

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Introduction:

Critics aren’t what they used to be. The “transcendental Enlightenment critic,” who stood at a remove from his text in order to judge it objectively, was ushered out, or at least outdated, by the post-modernist theorist of the 80s, who worked not away from but within his text. (Butt, 3) “There was thus no critical ‘position’ as such to occupy,” Gavin Butt writes of the effect of post-modernism: “no anterior vantage point set apart from criticism’s object…the postmodernist critic found herself always already imbricated in the warp and weft of the cultural text.” (Butt, 3) Though post-modern theory has supposedly made “the traditional authority of the critic” a thing of the past, post-modernism itself has become a new authority on textual readings. (Butt, 3) Thus the authority of the critic still holds, though the hold may manifest itself differently than it did 30 or more years ago.

The conceptual practice of much of art since the 1960s relies on its viewers’ knowledge of art history and philosophy. As such, the art critic becomes a kind of target audience for work whose varieties of meanings cannot be surmised by a look alone. Rather, its value emerges through a conversation with other work, with critical theory, and even with the artist’s personal history. Such art demands that viewers be critics, to be specialists. Viewers without the informational and theoretical tools wielded by the artist himself can be left grasping at the work’s physical and visual reality and finding little to hold on to. For all the supposed subversion of the critic’s authority, postmodern art has often failed to subvert the critic’s most powerful tool: the refusal of the physical body. Instead of addressing Eva Hesse’s art in relation to such a disembodied critic, I will frame it within its interaction with the body of the viewer, that very body that has so often been
locked out of artistic discourse. In doing so, I return to the first frame of reference through which any viewer, including myself, experiences art. That is not to say that there is a first moment of encounter to revisit, one which represents a pure viewing experience. In my analysis of the physical encounter with Hesse’s sculpture, I rely on theory, art history, and even some of Hesse’s personal history. Hence, armed with such analytical tools, I enact not a return, but a reclamation of the physical sight of her sculpture. To echo Hélène Cixous’ claim to write about women for women, I will make this project about the viewing body, for the viewing body, by a viewing body.

An American born in Germany in 1936, Hesse worked primarily in the 1960s and produced a relatively small but unusually impressive body of work before her death in 1970. Although she painted earlier in her career, I will focus exclusively on her sculptural work. That work is most often spoken about within the context of Minimalist sculpture, which dominated mainstream gallery and museum shows in the 60s. While she counted several practicing Minimalist sculptors as her friends, with whom she even shared exhibition space, her own art does not adhere to Minimalist ideology. In fact, her work eludes any easy categorization, as it resists conceptual and visual fixity. Hers are visual objects that continue to pose a challenge to assumptions about art and sight. Her work refuses to be fixed by a gaze, to be held there by viewer or critic. Thus, her warped, chaotic, unfixed sculptures continue to generate conversations about the very categories upon which art depends: eyesight, object, matter, form, even art itself.

Eva Hesse’s sculptures are abstracted forms made of synthetic materials like polyester resin, fiberglass, and latex. The forms are somewhere between the geometric (the preferred form of Minimalist sculptors of her era) and the bodily—fluids, organs, detritus. Although her fiberglass reminds me of disembodied skin, it’s hard to pinpoint
which skin, because it’s not like any skin I’ve ever seen. It is in being both vaguely familiar and completely alien that I am drawn in to look and touch her pieces. I want to touch the fiberglass because I want to know if it would feel human, even as I know that it wouldn’t. The textural intrigue of her work transforms the experience of viewing art from a normatively ocular one to an embodied, physical one, wherein the viewer senses points of comparison between the sculptural body before him and her own (now seemingly more sculptural) body.

In order to embark upon the viewership relations at work in Hesse’s sculptures, I will contend primarily with the physical experience of her art, though it is an experience that is still largely visual. I navigate through two principal frameworks within which to speak of the viewer’s body within and without Hesse’s sculptural text: French Feminism and phenomenology. I recognize in Hesse’s sculptural text a bodily language comparable to the bodily language of two French feminist writers. Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray use the (female) body as vehicle for an anti-logocentric mode of thought. Similarly, the use of the body in Hesse’s sculpture pushes the viewer to engage with the work physically and not merely cerebrally.

The physicality of this bodied relationship ushers in a phenomenological perspective on sculptural viewership. Phenomenology became a popular theoretical framework for Minimalist sculpture in the 1960s. Hesse’s association with Minimalism allows us to use a phenomenological framework to discover how her work belongs to the 60s but also stands apart from other work from that period, principally in its distinctive engagement with the viewer’s body.

In fact, through both a phenomenologically-informed Minimalism and a French feminist treatment of bodied thought, I remain within the historical context of the 1960s.
And while these frameworks allow us to see Hesse’s work from the perspective of that moment, her work’s unusual relationship to practices of subjectivity and objectivity bear a fruitful project to address today. The role of physicality in art continues to be an area of problems, development, and discovery. Art criticism and theory continues to place the intellectual experience of art above what may be a more difficult and nuanced lens: viewership as a physical contact with art objects. The physical experience of being a body in front of Hesse’s sculpture, together with the visceral physicality of the sculpture itself, instigates a more dynamic destabilization of artistic categories than if one were to consider it merely as a visual object of contemplation.

Chapter 1: Embodiment

Accession III [Fig. 1] is an open fiberglass box approximately 31.5 inches cubed. Its inner walls are lined with fine plastic tubes that look like hairs or blades of grass. The fiberglass is translucent but murky, like mucus. Its resemblance to human fluids or skin makes the fiberglass look from afar as though it might have the consistency of soft plastic. But fiberglass is stiff and dense, used to make hefty industrial structures like yachts. Accession’s exterior walls are matte, the fiberglass smooth but unpolished. However, the inner lining of plastic tubes is made of that soft plastic that calls to mind catheters and IVs. The plastic is thin enough that the thousands of small tubes attached to the box bend down with gravity, reminding me of a fur pelt. While it is tempting to jump to a discussion of the relationship between the organic and inorganic in her work, that paradoxical relationship has been given a good deal of attention in critical encounters
with her work Rather, I will consider how the intrigue of that which appears both organic and inorganic draws me to want to touch the sculptures.

For a moment, I forget that touching artwork is forbidden and I am taken by a desire to stroke that interior lining, which looks comfortingly soft even as I know how synthetic it is. On the floor, without the plinth that helps to designate an object as a sculpture, *Accession III* is within close reach both physically and mentally. The desire to touch is not just elicited by the enticing interior, but by the welcoming shape of *Accession III*. The open box is a form that draws the eye inside it. It is like a Pandora’s box: a shape that elicits our curiosity, our desire, our need to know what’s inside. Being 31.5 inches cubed, it is also within the parameter of human dimensions. It is neither small enough to hold, nor large enough to walk around in. It is about the height and width of a human on all fours. There would be just enough room for a small person to sit in it. It is perhaps unsurprising then, that an earlier *Accession* compelled one viewer to climb into the box. (Taylor, 133) He was promptly, however, ordered to get out. Reckoning physically with Accession III, as with all of Hesse’s sculpture, is a temptation that is difficult to refuse. The desire and consequent repression of that desire is a primary experience of her work.

Our desires to touch and to inhabit Hesse’s sculpture indicate that we see her work not merely as an object of our viewership but as another being that invites physical interaction. A parallel physicality between viewer and sculpture gives rise to an inter-subjective viewership. Briony Fer described this physical inter-subjectivity between the viewer’s body and the sculptural body as a “bodily empathy.” (Fer, “Objects” 29) In phenomenology, empathy is the subject’s experience of the other as a subject. (Hermberg, 40) Maurice Merleau-Ponty explained “I know unquestionably that that man over there sees, that my sensible world is also his, because I *am present at his seeing*.”
(qtd. in Hermberg, 40.) Though his emphasis on sight as an inter-subectifying force maintains a certain logocentrism, Merleau-Ponty’s reference to presence acknowledges the corporality of inter-subjectivity, a corporality that Fer then puts at the forefront of her notion of “bodily empathy.”

Sight may be the tool of inter-subjectivity, but the presence of the physical body is a pre-condition for that process. To bring Merleau-Ponty’s invocation of mutual sight to sculpture, we must reassess how sight functions in that art form. A viewer may feel he is present to the sculpture’s aura, but she cannot be “present at [the sculpture’s] seeing.” Lucy Lippard writes that sculpture inspires a viewer to “feel one’s own body assuming those positions or relating to those shapes as to another body.” (qtd. in Berger, 120) To join Merleau-Ponty’s statement to Lippard’s, the phenomenological viewing of sculpture is the knowledge that the sculpture over there physically inhabits the world in much the same way that I, the viewer, do. In other words, what the viewer is presented with in Hesse’s sculpture is the sculpture’s physical being.

As a relation between physical beings, between two bodies, the kind of viewership enacted by Hesse’s sculpture is an embodied one. Embodied for me is a reference to two separate but aligned conceptualizations of experience. The first is Hélène Cixous’ feminist literary manifesto, *The Laugh of the Medusa*,¹ in which she called for (female) writers to bring their body to writing. The second is the increased awareness and use of the body in art and art discourse in the 1960s and 1970s.

*The Laugh of the Medusa* is motivated by the indictment that women have been distanced from their bodies as from writing. For her, to write the feminine body into literary text is a declaration of feminine subjectivity, independence, and power. Though

¹ “Le rire de la méduse”
² The viewer who climbed into Accession III failed to meet this Modernist standard.
her essay is addressed to women, her definition of *écriture féminine* (feminine writing) is not exclusive to women writers. Rather, she uses the ‘feminine’ as a contrast to the dominant and masculine literary tradition: masculine because historically men have determined intellectual culture but also because, she argues, the logocentric tradition is a product of patriarchal and misogynistic cultures. Though Eva Hesse is a woman, the artist’s gender does not determine my argument for why her work might resemble *écriture féminine*. Rather it is through Cixous’ concept of the embodied text that I will call Hesse’s sculpture *féminine*. However, I don’t want to suggest by this that Hesse has brought her body to her sculpture, for Hesse-the-artist does not interest me in this analysis. I am however interested in how the sculpture, through its evocations of the human body, calls forth the viewer’s own embodiment: that is, interpolates the viewer as a body rather than just a mind or a set of eyes.

The embodied viewer has still not been normalized, or even, judging by the social and physical structures of museums, even accepted. The theoretical apparatus that upheld Modernist art at a remove from the body still dominates art viewership practices. The ideal Modernist viewer was neutral and distanced from the artwork in order to best be able to critique it intellectually.² (Jones, 3) (If we consider, as Simone de Beauvoir points out, that “man represents both the positive and the neutral,”³ then we can extrapolate that Modernism’s neutral viewer was also ideally male.) A performative, post-Modern perspective on the other hand argues that such distance and neutrality is not only impossible but also extremely limiting. This performative re-interpretation has nuanced the experience of art as a “profoundly embodied experience” as opposed to a purely

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² The viewer who climbed into Accession III failed to meet this Modernist standard.
³ “[L]’homme représente à la fois la positivité et le neutre” (14)
cerebral activity. (Butt, 9) A viewer is always foremost a social and physical being with, as Gavin Butt puts it in Performing the Body Performing the Text, “social investments, particular identifications, and personal biases.” (Butt 3) The embodiment of the viewer position enacted by this sculpture is thus radical, not only because the viewer has been conceptually disembodied but also it has been historically masculinized. If the viewer is embodied rather than neutralized, the viewer’s social and physical experiences—including her gender—become central to her experience of the art.

Embodiment is not just a theoretical framework but also a formal and conceptual practice in Hesse’s sculpture. In response to a retrospective of Hesse’s work at Yale in 1992, Berger described the viewing of Hesse’s work as “visceral” and “sensory,” descriptors that emphasize that viewing Hesse’s sculpture is a physical and sensual experience. (Berger Objects of Liberation, Yale 119) Repetition Nineteen III, [Fig. 2] Accession III, and Tori [Fig. 3] have in common the formation of open space within the sculpture, features which one critic referred to as “vessels and vacancies.” (Taylor, 131) “Vessel” applies best to Repetition Nineteen III, which looks like a scattering of vases or some other kind of container. While this is the first visual reference that comes to mind, the vacant space sets up a more poignant and lasting metaphorical reference to the empty spaces of the human body. I think of the human body in terms of vessels and vacancies and I picture: digestive organs, sexual organs, and skin. The latter is emphasized by the skin-like appearance of Repetition III’s translucent fiberglass material. The transparent sagging vessels of Repetition Nineteen III feel familiar to my own body. In this way, though her work is not figurative, I identify a representation of the body in these pieces that, in both matter and form, are nonetheless inorganic. In his essay on Hesse’s sculpture the Yale retrospective catalogue, Maurice Berger explained that for him “Hesse’s
forms…are neither a metaphor for the human body nor an abstract reduction from reality.” (Berger, 121)

The non-metaphorical, literalness of the body in Hesse’s work is manifested in a kind of projected imagination of physical contact with the work. I have described how my desire to touch the work is a large part of my experience, and thus the meaning, of the work. My imaginary touching and handling of the work is part and parcel to that desire. Hesse’s beautiful works made from papier maché are subject to such imagination. [Fig. 4] Fer describes the forms well as “more like the shape that you make with your hands as you open them through the air than any recognizable body part.” (Fer, *Studiowork*, 137) I recognize in theses pieces the same shape my hands make when I cup them, an experience I will elaborate on later in this paper. In addition, however, I imagine holding those sculptures in my own cupped hand. The imagined experience of holding these delicate pieces in my own cupped hand becomes the way in which I associate this abstract form to my own physical reality. Cupping one’s hand is a gesture reserved for holding precious things like a found insect, or water. Thus the evocation of this gesture elicits in me the feelings I associate with making it: care, protection, and fascination.

So, to return to Berger’s comment, I would not agree that there are no bodily metaphors in her work. And these metaphors are not all inspiring. Unlike the evocative physical metaphor in the papier maché pieces, the vessels and container shapes in *Repetition Nineteen III* and *Accession III* bring to mind the metaphor of vaginas as receptacles. However, the misogyny-inflected metaphor that receptacles bring to mind is

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4 “Feminine sexuality has always been thought of in terms of masculine parameters…and the vagina draws its value from the gift of a ‘lodging’ for the masculine sex organ.” (La sexualité féminine a toujours été pensée à partir de paramètres masculins…et le vagin tire son prix d’offrir un ‘logis’ au sexe masculin.”) (Irigaray, 23)
a language-based experience. It is a metaphor that pre-exists my sight of Hesse’s sculpture, and not formed through it. While I am disturbed by the metaphor, the non-verbal, physical experience of her work overrides the linguistic associations I bring to it. The physical evocations of her work push beyond language-based representation. Berger went on to say that Hesse’s sculptures are a “dumb” or “absurd” presence inserted directly into the spectator’s sensory field.” (Berger 121) If we take the opposite of “dumb” and “absurd” to be ‘literate’ and ‘logical,’ then we can recognize in Berger’s comment an anti-logocentric interpretation of Hesse’s work. At the risk of perpetuating a dichotomy between linguistic experience and physical experience, this leads me to believe that Hesse’s sculptural appeal to the viewer’s body deflects a linguistic objectification. Mulvey’s allusion to the male “linguistic command” over cinema’s “silent image of woman” is called to mind and I am once again compelled to refer to this deflection of the linguistic as féminine. (Mulvey, 343)

In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous resists the logocentric exclusion of the physical body in not just writing but more generally in social culture and epistemology. In parallel, a performative or post-Modern perspective on art rejects the traditional social practice and conceptualization of viewership as a disembodied and thus purely cerebral activity. Hence, discourse surrounding embodiment in both arenas is rooted in the same recognition of the limitations of valorizing mind over body. Bringing the viewer into art and bringing the body into writing is not a way of including that which had been excluded, so much as acknowledging a pre-existing presence. The body is the utensil of writing, and the viewing body is necessary to the art object. Both perspectives on embodiment are not transformations of a medium but a re-conceptualization of it.
Chapter 2: The Object

A viewer’s physical and social existence as a body informs her experience of Hesse’s sculpture as an object. Just as Hesse’s work nuances viewership as a physical and not a purely cerebral or ocular experience, the work itself is nuanced as being not just an artistic project but also a physical object. The repetition of forms evocative of useful objects in *Repetition Nineteen III* exemplifies this tension and balance between art and object. *Repetition Nineteen III* is, like *Accession III*, made of a container shape. Each fiberglass and polyester resin container is approximately 20 inches tall and 12 inches in diameter. They look like large glasses, vases, or buckets—all banal, quotidian objects. If the piece were constituted by one such form, we might have to contend more metaphorically with the shape in itself, but its multiplication nineteen times over makes the overall collection more important than the individual shape. This repetition suggests that these shapes are the product of an industrial process, much in the same way that house-hold items are most often made in bulk and not as individual pieces. But whereas such household items are constituted by their function—to contain juice, a bouquet, other objects—these containers are distinctly empty. The emptiness of a form designed to be filled makes the objects seem useless or unusable.

The question of an object’s use echoes a broader question of the use, or purpose, of an art object. I am not yet prepared to address this question (I will never answer it), but will turn to Heidegger’s distinctions between these three categories of objects: artwork, equipment, and “mere thing.” (Heidegger 147) He used these categories in order to distinguish an artwork from a “mere thing,” but such a distinction was effectively distorted by Minimalist sculpture. Minimalist sculpture brushes up against and ultimately
past all three categories. It is presented as an aesthetic object in a gallery space that labels it as art and yet it looks like it might be industrial equipment. However, because it has no equipmental use, it is tempting to assign the sculpture a “mere thing,” as skeptics of Minimalism are wont to do. One way Heidegger defines this latter category is through its symbiosis of matter and form. “The thing is formed matter,” he writes, using as an example a block of granite, whose formal elements (say, its fissures) are a result of its material (granite). In literary terms, in the mere thing form and content are inseparable. Thus, a Minimalist sculpture like Donald Judd’s *Untitled (Stack)* [Fig. 5] does not fit this symbiosis: its twelve rectangular boxes are not derivative of their material (green-lacquered iron) but a transformation of it. It may look like either equipment or a mere thing, or both, but most Minimalist sculpture unexpectedly fits within Heidegger’s definition. What is more interesting, then, is the work that truly subverts his categories.

In reaction to a Minimalist, highly regimented control of material, sculpture emerged which strived for the thingly symbiosis between form and content. Robert Morris, who was at the forefront of Minimalist sculpture and theorization, later produced “anti form” work which attempted to make material itself the artwork. In 1967 he piled large sheets of felt into a corner of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. [Fig. 6] There was no pre-determined shape. In subsequent exhibitions, the composition of the pile was left up to the exhibitors. The composition of some of Hesse’s work was similarly left up to the exhibitors, like her *Untitled (Rope Piece)* [Fig. 7] from 1970, which is made of a tangle of hanging latex-coated rope, whose positions and form is slightly altered with every installation. [Fig. 7] Like Morris, Hesse was interested in experimenting with unchartered materials in her art, and letting those materials do what they do naturally. Morris identified a problem in Minimalism’s effort to control the natural properties of the
materials used. It may be that the ‘problem’ was the perpetuation of what Judd called one of “the most objectionable relics of European art”: illusionism. While Judd thought that Minimal sculpture “gets rid of the problem of illusionism,” it would appear that his transformation of one material into a different form is itself a type of illusion. Though Morris never articulated it as such, it’s clear that his work was motivated by the effort to make works that were more honest forms of matter. This may have been the furthest art had gotten from Heidegger’s definition of artwork and the closest to “mere thing.” The extremity of his effort may account for why his Untitled felt piece from 1967 is less interesting to us now, perhaps as later developments in art have made the question of honesty feel antiquated.5

Hesse’s work, I argue, still captures us because it balances between artwork and “mere thing” rather than leaning more toward one side, as some of Morris’ work does. Nevertheless, when looking at some of Hesse’s work, it is sometimes hard to determine its distinction from a scrap piece of material. This ‘problem’ is particularly apparent in what Briony Fer dubs her ‘studiowork’. [Fig. 8] These works, which were the subject of an exhibit Fer curated at the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum in 2011, were pieces left in Hesse’s studio after her death, pieces that were supposedly never intended for exhibition. Fer’s book published on the occasion of the Studiowork exhibition (which travelled to several galleries before landing at Berkeley) includes a transcript of a conversation about Hesse’s studiowork between Sol Lewitt, his wife, and a curator at the museum. In it, Lewitt, who was a good friend of Hesse’s and an artist himself, announces some works to be pieces and others not to be. At the beginning of the

5 Performance art has brought deception and dishonesty into the conversation. Consequently, “truth” has become increasingly irrelevant to an artwork’s value or meaning.
transcript is the note, “I think in the beginning she was just fooling around.” His
subsequent notes like “Yes, this is a piece,” “not a piece,” “This is really stuff from the
studio rather than pieces as such,” seem to hinge on this notion of “fooling around.” (qtd.
in Fer, Studiowork, 5)

His comment suggests that “fooling around” is not the same as making “pieces as
such.” Fooling around, after all, is a process without use or purpose. To return to
Heidegger, fooling around may be the process by which one creates “mere things” as
opposed to art objects or even equipment. And yet, to explain how she came to use latex
in her work, Lewitt’s note reads: “[s]he went down to Canal Street and they were selling
this stuff (latex) all over. She read the directions and started fooling around with it.” (qtd.
in Fer, Studiowork, 5) So we see the same phrase “fooling around” to describe a process
that would prove instrumental in her work. This presents to us, though Lewitt apparently
did not agree, the possibility that all of Hesse’s work is the product of “fooling around,”
and then that this process does not yield a product in quite the way that so-called serious
art-making would. Fer’s Studiowork exhibition and book has brought this unserious,
unfinished work on par with her better-known pieces. This inclusion challenges the
distinction between serious and non-serious throughout her oeuvre. This further
destabilizes Hesse’s artwork, putting their status as art at a fascinating risk. Most
particularly, a risk to our definitions of what is and is not art. As Fer puts it, “This could
be the art historian’s nightmare, to find that the objects that you have taken for art are
really the objects discarded in the trash.” (Fer, Studiowork, 23)

One such discarded-looking work is what can be best described as a chewed-up
piece of plastic, something that one might find on the shore of a polluted ocean. [Fig. 9]
Lucy Lippard described it as “a twisted or chewed-looking shape like a volcanically
melted bottle.” (qtd. in Fer, Studiowork, 23) This object goes even beyond mere thing. It looks like the failure of a thing: a thing that, having once been, is now just the remnants of its former use or intention. Although I have some reservations about talking about her work in terms of an organic-inorganic dichotomy, in this work that very relationship is undoubtedly what paints it as a failed thing. As Lippard suggests, the latex material evokes a synthetically-made tool (like a bottle). It would look useful if it were a uniform shape. After all, as Minimalist boxes remind us, a thing looks particularly useful if it erases the hand of the artist. However, the piece’s chewed appearance looks like the result of an organic process: decay, consumption, or neglect. It thus no longer looks like the artist’s thing, but a thing abandoned: fittingly, it was indeed found abandoned in Hesse’s studio. Whether she had considered it disposable or her best work is impossible to tell.

Chapter 3: From Mere Thing to Nothing

Lewitt also stated that “[s]ometimes she experimented with materials with no end (product) in sight.” (Fer, Studiowork, 5) I suggested earlier that Hesse’s sculpture is a kind of écriteur féminine in that it embodies the viewer. Now I will characterize Hesse’s work as écriteur féminine through the latter’s framing of female sexuality as object-less and thus end-less. Cixous refers to a feminine “body without ending, without an ‘end,’ without principal ‘parts.’ ”6 (Cixous, “Rire” 60) The phrase begins with an abstract metaphor (“body without ending”) whose meaning is then inflected twice over to reveal its significance to female sexuality. In the French, “without an ‘end’ ” is “sans ‘bout’.”

6 “corps sans fin, sans ‘bout,’ sans ‘parties’ principales” (Cixous, “Rire” 60)
“Bout,” as the quotation marks in the text suggest, has multiple meanings, two of which are: an end of some thing or idea (the end of the road, the tip of a pencil) and a small part (a bit of bread, a piece of wood). That small part is the male phallus: the object, the starting end, and the finishing end. This metaphor is furthered by her reference to “principal ‘parts’, ” which in the original (“‘parties’ principales”) as well as in the English refers back to “private parts.” The “principal ‘parts’ ” then might be referring to male genitalia. “[N]o principal ‘parts’ ” then comes to refer to Freud’s notion of lack. Cixous’ correlation of an endless body with the female lack of the phallus inflects my reading of Lewitt’s comment, whose parenthetical “(product)” delineates, like Cixous’ quotation marks, a space for further signification.

“(Product)” suggests a word often associated with it: process. An artwork is the product of the artistic process. This delineation runs alongside Heidegger’s stipulation that the process of manipulating matter into form defines a work as art. Lewitt perpetuates this delineation by designating some works as product and others as mere process (like Heidegger’s “mere things”). His comparison of “end” and “(product)” indicates that for him the art product is the end bit (the “bout”) of the artistic process. That some of Hesse’s has no such end bit indicates that her work’s relationship between process and product is fluid. Our treatment of pieces left in her studio, which could be process pieces, or “just fooling around,” indicates this categorical fluidity. By contrast, Minimalist objects were products that attempted to efface process. Morris’ Anti Form, though the end product looked very different from Minimalist objects, nearly eliminated process by interfering as little as possible with the material. An artistic end product is a visual presence—a something. The process, on the other hand, is that which isn’t yet something but promises something. This is why a work-in-progress, like Hesse’s own
studiowork, is kept in the studio, hidden away from the public eye. Works-in-progress are not ready to be viewed because they haven’t yet reached their end. If they are not yet something, are not-yet-products nothing?

Hesse wrote about her work: “[a]s a thing, an object, it accedes to its non-logical self. It is something, it is nothing.” (qtd. in Fer, “Bordering on Blank” 59) The “non-logical self” seems to be found in the juxtaposition between “thing” and object,” “something” and “nothing.” Such vicissitudes cut through critical attempts to explain her work logically or linearly. Her reference to the “non-logical self” echoes Cixous’ critique of the phallogocentric. It also illuminates how “fooling around” is Hesse’s non-logical and non-linear form of making both things and objects, something and nothing. In another remark though, Hesse said more plainly, “a lot of it could be called nothing.” (qtd. in Fer “Studiowork” 19) Hesse’s statement introduces the possibility that, while her work hinges between object and mere thing, it can also extend past mere thing to nothing.

This reminds me Irigaray’s critique that, while male sexuality is associated with visual presence, women’s genitalia is framed as “the horror of nothing to see.” (Irigaray, 25) The suggestion is that some thing to see is a logical comfort, while the paradoxical sight of nothing is scary and destabilizing. Irigaray argues that feminine sexual identity is constituted by the representation of her sexuality as this horror of nothingness (lack, absence). Earlier, I mentioned how this very horror myth led me to see vaginas in Repetition Nineteen III. In Irigaray’s terms, I saw the sight of nothing in the ‘nothing’ space created by the sculpture’s container shapes. Thematically and formally, a great deal of Hesse’s sculpture creates empty space of ‘nothing’. This prompts us to re-evaluate her

7 “l’horreur du rien à voir”
use of form: Irigaray writes that the sightless vagina doesn’t have a “proper form.”
(Irigaray, 26)

Nothingness constitutes Hesse’s sculpture both physically and conceptually. But
Hesse’s statement that “a lot of it could be called nothing” refers also to the unfinished,
“fooling around,” “mere thing” characteristic of her work. There is a link between those
two linguistic interpretations of nothingness. Both forms of nothing—the inconsequential
thing and the thing made of nothing—refuse to fully present themselves to the viewer.
Fer describes “a dual impulse within the studiowork to rise to the surface of visibility, as
it were, and at the same time to be submerged in a state of sub-objecthood, beneath the
radar of a thing called a sculpture.” (“Studiowork” 150) Neither the chewed-up piece of
plastic, in its unfinished and even unintentional appearance, nor Repetition Nineteen III,
in its minimal physical presence, quite reaches that “surface of visibility.” Such pieces
deflect the gaze rather than submit to it. This deflection destabilizes the viewer’s position
as a viewer, and thus his power to hold the art object in his sight.

This deflection of the viewer’s ocular hold is tied in which the sculpture’s
accession “to its non-logical self.” Hesse’s use of “accession” in the title of one of her
pieces—Accession III—invises an investigation into the apparent paradox of acceding not
to clarity or power but to a diffused logic and dispersed power. Accession refers to
attainment (of a position), accumulation (of things), and ownership (of property). Thus it
is a word tied up with material thingness and objecthood, the very categories that Hesse’s
sculptures play with. As Fer suggested, Hesse’s sculpture accedes not to the status of art
object, but rather, sometimes, to nothingness. And this accession to nothingness puts the
work out of reach of ownership. In a literal sense, this is true of work that does accede to

8 “Ce sexe qui ne donne pas à voir n’a pas non plus de forme propre.”
art objecthood. After all, the mere viewer (as opposed to a collector) cannot own work that has acceded to a certain cultural and commercial value. However, although the viewer cannot own such an object as property, he can still ‘own’ the object by fixing it in his gaze. This visual hold is the viewing practice of the disembodied critic, who holds a work in his gaze in order to hold it in the light of intellectual thought. This holding is also a holding away from the body and a refusal to allow that body to be a part of the conversation. Hesse’s sculpture cannot be thus held because the work’s embodied viewer cannot detach herself from the visual and physical experience of the sculpture. Not quite an object to be held, not quite a sight to be consumed: the wavering status and undefined limits of the sculpture render the work perpetually elusive.

Chapter 4: From Nothing to Every-Thing

To call her work neither object nor thing closes off discussion by condemning her work to bounce back and forth between object and thing into infinity. On the other hand, to call it both thing and nothing further opens the work up to being something more. I noticed a tendency to speak about Hesse’s work in dualistic constructions. Fer calls it the “to and fro.” (Fer “Studiowork” 20) Berger writes that Hesse’s work is constituted by an “oscillation between contradictory possibilities.” (124) While paradoxes and oscillations are undoubtedly in action in her work, we must remember that such dualism (or duelism) is coherent to her project and not a symptom of its weakness. When, earlier in this essay, I hesitated to set up a contrast between the organic and the inorganic in Hesse’s work it was because her oeuvre goes beyond those categories to create, as art can do, a form unique in its valences. If anything, Hesse’s sculpture is supra-organic.
Hence, I find myself noticing the limitations of phenomenological inter-subjectivity and sexual difference. For, in doubling our dominantly singular mode of (phallogocentric) thinking, it is too easy to remain stuck in a conversation of dichotomies. While I have framed viewership as a relationship between a body and an object, it is not merely a dualistic relationship. A viewer shares the physical space of viewership (the museum or gallery) with other viewing bodies and other viewed pieces. Neither the sculpture nor I (nor the other sculptural and human bodies present) are fixed singular entities. Thus, viewing of the sculpture is not a straight line between one thing and another, but the product of an infinite number of other physical, historical, social, and experiential factors. The “to and fro” between a viewer and his experience of the sculpture is merely one dynamic within a web of interaction that continually expands “without ending, without an ‘end’, without principal ‘parts’.” As such, more than anything, the viewership experience is multiplicitous.

The dualism at work in both phenomenology and sexual difference limits their usefulness in understanding the multiplicity of the viewership experience of Hesse’s sculpture. Nonetheless, there are references in both Irigaray and Cixous to a movement beyond dualism. Irigaray writes, about female sexuality: “what they desire is precisely nothing, and at the same time everything.”

(Irigaray 29) Like Hesse’s own juxtaposition between something and nothing, Irigaray frames desire as a non-logical encounter of seeming opposites. In Hesse’s work, ‘nothing’ stands as a further push beyond objecthood, moving past the thing into the not-thing. To frame Hesse’s nothing in terms of Irigarayan desire, her sculpture refuses to fulfill the viewer’s desire for a singular

9 “ce qu’elles désirent n’est précisément rien, et en même temps tout.”
thing, instead giving back the infinity of possibilities of interacting with the work. The “everything” of Hesse’s work lies in this multiplicity of possible viewing experiences.

*Untitled (Rope Piece)* is a visual manifestation of this multiplicitous encounter. [Fig. 7] Sinuous and chaotic, the piece is composed primarily of brown latex-covered ropes that hang by wire from the ceiling. The piece is large in the space that it inhabits, and yet much of that space is taken up by the emptiness created in between, above, and under, the jumble of ropes. The hanging ropes and strings form a jumble that I can imagine pushing or hacking through as though I were in a jungle of swinging vines. It looks like something in the way, like a cobweb. It is both too scattered to form a complete whole and too jumbled for its parts to be distinguishable. There is not enough tangible matter for a viewer to identify a ‘part’ (a *bout*) on which to rest his gaze. Though the piece hangs in mid-air, the latex coating turns the otherwise flexible ropes stiff and still, so while the ropes look as though they should be swinging and loose, they are eerily frozen. And yet, in the absence of compositional movement, our eyes, faced with a kind of static chaos, frantically move through and across the piece in an attempt to understand what we are looking at.

Any possible bits and pieces in *Untitled Rope Piece* are impossible to locate. Because it is tangled and multiple, there is no ‘there’ in the work, because there are no focal points. Irigaray writes: “*woman has sex organs more or less everywhere.* She finds pleasure almost anywhere.” (Irigaray, *Ce Sexe*, 28) Hesse’s rope piece is such a body that has, if not sex organs, then pleasure spots “more or less everywhere.” The physical pleasure Irigaray speaks of is un-fixed, un-locatable, and un-finite. The pleasure is fully embodied, experienced by a whole body rather than a physical region or single sexual organ. This de-regionalized and thus chaotic sexual pleasure is analogous to the pleasure
of viewing *Rope Piece*. The viewer can find “pleasure almost anywhere,” because each spot belongs to the same pleasure.

In this hanging blur, each rope’s singularity and the piece’s cohesive multiplicity coexist. It is not a form or a shape, but an assemblage that cannot be individuated as separate pieces because its beginnings and ends are indistinguishable (there are no discernable “bout[s]”). As the eye begins to follow one line—as it wants to, searching for a linear narrative—the line gets lost and one finds oneself looking at another piece which takes us in a different direction. This is how the piece “accedes to its non-logical self.”

On the one hand, the latex-covered ropes present a uniformly chaotic floating visual entity. On the other hand, however, it is made up of too much air space (nothing space) to be a singular whole. Within that sight of chaos the viewer moves continually over, under, and through the piece(s) to try to make sense of this “non-logical” piece. This movement is at once visual, mental, and finally physical, as the viewer walks towards and around the piece, and then away again. The creation of this phenomenological space constitutes *Untitled (Rope Piece)* as a sculpture with flexible borders.

Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the Dispars, or smooth space, can describe this specific experience of *Untitled (Rope Piece)*:

Smooth space is precisely the space of the smallest deviation: therefore it has no homogeneity, except between infinitely proximate points, and the linking of proximities is effected independently of any determined path. It is a space of contact, of small tactile or manual actions of contact, rather than a visual space like Euclid’s striated space…A field, a heterogeneous smooth space, is wedded to a very particular type of multiplicity: non-metric, acentered, rhizomatic multiplicities which occupy space without “counting” it and [which] can “only be explored by legwork.” (Casey, 275-276)

Hesse’s sinuous rope sculpture is a visual but also a physical field. From a distance, we might see *Untitled Rope Piece* as a continuous blob, but in walking around it we learn to
see both through it—to the wall behind—and into it—and into the empty spaces it creates. The ropes’ resemblance to roots literalizes Casey’s description of “rhizomatic multiplicities.” More importantly than its visual manifestation, however, is the way the viewer experiences the piece rhizomatically. I have argued that Hesse’s work does not follow a linear or logical narrative: there is rarely one part of the sculpture that demands our visual attention first, nor is there a clear visual path or narrative to follow within the piece. This is especially true, for example, in *Repetition Nineteen III*, where, as we look from one element to the next, we see only variations of the same shape. This is a rhizomatic development: as we look, we get deeper into the piece, rather than acceding to a hierarchically assembled peak of visual information. In *Rope Piece* too, we would not gain significant visual information by looking at every detail of the piece. Our experience does not accede to new visual heights. Rather, our physical experience of the piece multiplies horizontally, engendering new meanings as we walk around it.

Casey explains that smooth space is not a “visual space,” as our discussion of the physical encounters with Hesse’s work has helped elucidate. Rather, as he puts it, “[i]t is a space of contact.” It is easier to apply the Deleuzian/Guattarian concept of the rhizomatic smooth space to spaces that humans inhabit daily rather than to spaces that exhibit art that we are forbidden from touching. In spaces like our bedrooms, we have intimate contact, both emotional and physical, with nearly every spot in the room. With people we love and empathize with, physical contact is the experience of intimacy. And yet with Hesse’s work, though we speak of a sensual and physical sculptural relationship, the problem remains that we cannot, or at least have not, come into physical contact with the artworks. Even if the pieces were available to climb inside, touch, hold, the work would fall apart. The visible delicacy and precariousness—one is tempted to call them the
human qualities—of Hesse’s sculptures makes contact with them the most desirable experience and the most impossible.

Conclusion:

Hesse’s sculptures haven’t fared well over time. At 34, she died of a brain tumor likely caused by the toxic chemicals in her unusual materials. Those materials, like latex, rubber, and fiberglass, have since been put in the spotlight. Her death has been romanticized as an artistic sacrifice, while the materials responsible have become vilified. While she was alive, Hesse’s experimental materials were a constant process of discovery. The unexpected variability of the materials Hesse fooled around with is a significant aspect of the pieces and the way we interact with them. That Hesse’s brain tumor can be considered another step in the process of artistic discovery gives the process a destructive underside.

After Hesse’s death, both viewers and conservators have continued to discover the physical properties of Hesse’s materials, much to the distress of the conservators. Many of her materials have undergone a chemical reconstitution that has changed the pieces’ appearance as well as weakened them physically. Physical contact is necessary to the continued exhibition of some of her work: the compositional arrangement of *Repetition Nineteen III* and *Untitled (Rope Piece)* is left up to the exhibitors, who will adjust the pieces as they see fit. Yet such touching has become dangerous to the artwork’s weakening physical state. Giving the work a continued life of exhibition thereby runs the risk of permanently damaging it.

Thus, the material instability of Hesse’s sculpture poses a very real problem for conservators given the task of preserving her work. For the museums that house her
pieces, material deterioration equates to its destruction. A tremendous amount of effort is put into protecting and restoring artworks in order to preserve their so-called original state. The preservation process (itself, like deterioration, a process of altering the work’s physicality) presumes that the artwork reaches its height of integrity at the moment when it is first finished, and that from then on processes of age, neglect, or chemical decomposition will only diminish its artistic value. More than a dozen of Hesse’s pieces have been taken out of exhibition by curators who have considered them too severely altered to be suitable for viewing. To those curators, the effects of time on Hesse’s pieces have whittled away their artistic value to such an extent that the pieces can no longer fulfill their use as objects to be viewed.

This prioritizes an imagined original artistic vision over the physical reality of the pieces. The artist did not, and could not, specifically anticipate the effects of chemical deterioration in her work. The evolution of her work thus puts the work outside the comforting realm of artist intentionality. This brings us back to Heidegger’s notion of “use.” An artwork sits on the side of art as long as its form has been the result of an artist’s process, but a piece that is as much a product of decay as it is of artist intention verges dangerously on the thingly.

On the other hand, as the latex changes colors and the fiberglass changes consistency, it can be said that the materials themselves engage in a continuation of the artist’s process. (Keats) Or, rather, it is the critic’s consideration of the evolving material reality of the sculpture that constitutes a continuation of the creative process. As Butt wrote, “the postmodernist critic found herself always already imbricated in the warp and weft of the cultural text.” This critic’s exploration of the literal warp of Hesse’s text enacts the inextricability of the critical conversation from the tangible sculptural work.
As such, critical writing about Hesse’s text is also a continuation of Hesse’s own ‘writing’ process. The continuation of this sculpturally written process-text provides endless possibilities for re-readings.

Cixous links this ongoing process of reading-writing back to the body. She writes, in *Coming to Writing*:

“I remember, at the age of twelve or thirteen, reading the following sentence. “The flesh is sad, alas, and I have read all the books.”…What a lie! And beyond, what truth: for the flesh is a book. A body “read,” finished? A book—a decaying carcass? Stench and falsity. The flesh is writing, and writing is never read: it always remains to be read, studied, sought, invented.” (Cixous, *Coming to Writing*, 24)

In aligning flesh and text, Cixous reveals the mutual dependence of both entities in the process of living on. “A book,” which for our purposes I will call a text, can never be finished because there are always new ways to investigate and re-constitute its meanings. Cixous balks at the idea of dead and decaying text, because reading, as a never-ending process, extends the life of the text on into infinity. Hesse’s sculptural texts, though they are literally decaying, are as alive now as they were during the artist’s lifetime. Their decay, in providing us with new ways of considering their physicality, is in fact a process through which the texts live on and grow. Cixous asserts that the text, the flesh, and the textual flesh write. A textual flesh cannot decay if it continues to write itself and be written, for writing is an activity of the living. So even as the fiberglass becomes precariously brittle, the “flesh” of *Repetition Nineteen III* is actively “writing.”

If Hesse’s sculptures looked fleshy to begin with, with deterioration they positively reek of fleshiness and the literal body. While the rubber and fiberglass still retain an eerie artificiality, the colors they have turned increasingly resemble our own colors: feces, rot, mucus, skin. If anything, the process of reading her texts becomes more
physical with every viewing. By allowing the physical processes that alter Hesse’s sculptural work—as well, perhaps, as the physical processes that alter our own bodies—to enter into our conversations about it, we acknowledge the effect time has in defining all art. Just as opening up our definitions of object and viewer allows us to consider the physicality of the sculpture, so does the physicality of the sculpture provide a fresh entry point into the way we interact, preserve, and write about artwork. As the physical constitution of Hesse’s sculpture changes over time, the categories by which we define her work, and by which we assess all art, are continually re-defined.
Appendix

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

Fig. 8

Fig. 9

Works Cited


