

Life Doesn't Last; Art Doesn't Last

Eva Hesse created *Sans III* 1969 at a time when she was beginning to win critical acclaim in New York (her home city following her family's escape from Nazi Germany) and internationally. Invited to participate in *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*, a group exhibition that opened in Bern and travelled to Krefeld and London, she made *Sans III* as a variant on the theme of linked box shapes she had explored in two earlier sculptures, *Sans I* 1967–8 and *Sans II* 1968, which were unavailable for the touring show.

Hesse had shown *Sans I* and *Sans II* in her first (and only) solo exhibition during her lifetime. It opened at the Fischbach Gallery, New York, in November 1968 and was called *Chain Polymers*, a punning reference to the molecular construction of latex and fibreglass and to her use of linked and repeated elements or 'chains'. To make *Sans I* Hesse cast forty-eight rectangular units in latex over a simple plaster model, and then glued the boxes together in a double row chain with more latex. The idea of making sculptures from repeated box-like forms referenced the early 1960s minimalist works of such artists as Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Sol Lewitt. But Hesse rejected the emphasis on a grid structure and the impersonal and industrial found in minimalist works. Instead, she explored qualities of flexibility, instability and expressivity, for which latex proved a perfect, if unusual, medium.

To make the much larger *Sans II* Hesse used more durable fibreglass and polyester resin, rather than latex. The process of fabrication, however, was essentially similar: repeated casts were taken of the same module and then linked together in a long chain. Hung horizontally on the wall, the double row piece occupied 35 feet of the 39 feet available in the Fischbach Gallery. A reviewer noted about this work:

Here again Miss Hesse divides, subdivides and aligns as if she is a hard-core serialist, but then the creased and rippling viscous contours, and the light-catching lumpiness of the surfaces or 'structural' walls undermine that ostensible methodology.

With such works she was recognised as one of a new generation of what became known as post-minimalist sculptors, though one who distinctively explored qualities of fragility and the hand-made. The critic concluded:

Incorporating the conceptual with a wryly objective slant on that conceptualness in terms of her materials, and the processes she uses to shape them, Miss Hesse adds a distinct new accent to the current scene in sculpture.

Completed in January 1969, *Sans III* consisted of a chain of forty-nine linked latex boxes that hung vertically and extended onto the floor. Before or during the making of the piece, Hesse made a related drawing showing a single vertical row of boxes. Next to it she wrote, 'rubber skeleton of squares. no inside'. 'Sans' in French means 'without', a word which in English can suggest either a lack or being outside. In the context of the *Sans* sculptures 'without' can be interpreted as referring to the hollowness of the units ('no inside'), or the idea of the work being 'a rubber skeleton' surrounding, or being outside, a vital core. In her titles Hesse was drawn to use words that expressed ambiguous relationships; other titles included *Aught*, *Repetition* and *Contingent*. For the catalogue of her 1968 solo exhibition, Hesse commented that that she sought out words that resisted straightforward interpretation, and that it was the non-logical aspects of her sculptures that interested her:

The formal principles [of my work] are understandable and understood.

It is the unknown quantity from which and where I want to go.

As a thing, an object, it accedes to its non-logical self.

It is something, it is nothing.

In 1968 Harald Szeeman, the director of the Kunsthalle Bern, invited Hesse to show works in what proved to be a ground-breaking exhibition, *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form. Works–Concepts–Processes–Situations–Information*. For this show Szeeman wanted to reflect what he saw as an emerging tendency among contemporary artists to focus on the processes of making art rather than forms. The notion was central to the practice of Hesse who talked about not keeping to preconceived ideas but rather finding out the potential of a piece through developing it. 'As you work, the piece itself can define or redefine the next step, or the next step combined with some vague idea.' The inclusion of *Sans III* in Szeeman's touring show helped establish Hesse's reputation internationally as one of the most interesting and distinctive artists of her generation.

Hesse had begun to use latex (a material generally employed and then discarded by artists in casting works) as a medium for her sculptural work in 1967. At first she simply made latex casts (as with *Sans I*, for example) but soon experimented with its colour and translucency by adding pigments and fillers. Trained as a painter rather than a sculptor, she was attracted to the idea that in its liquid form it could be applied like paint, and she chose to make *Sans III* by brushing coats of latex around plaster moulds. Each coat took at least thirty minutes to dry and so the process of making the forty-nine units was time-consuming. The huge cheesecloth sheets attached to long poles of *Expanded Expansion*, completed in February 1969, also required layers of latex to be painted on the soft material.

Hesse was aware that latex would not last indefinitely. A naturally elastic material tapped from trees, latex is subject to continuous but unpredictable degradation. Change can be initiated by temperature, light, oxygen or ozone, physical stress and contact with metals, but the course and speed of the deterioration are variable.

Eva Hesse 1936–1970

Sans III 1969

Latex and metal grommets

396.2 x 7.6 x 5.1 cm

Depending on whether the molecular bonds making up the polymer chains are broken apart or link together, deteriorated latex can become powdery, brittle, resinous or sticky, or even liquid. Notwithstanding the irresolvable questions surrounding the longevity of individual pieces, Hesse felt her immediate need to use the material was more important than concerns about how her sculptures would change over the years. She was also working in a period in which the idea of the artwork as a precious and permanent object was being challenged by many of her contemporaries. In effect, though she wanted her sculptures to last, she had no deep-seated objection to their deteriorating over time. Confronting her own mortality as a result of her brain tumour, she said resignedly shortly before she died, 'Life doesn't last; art doesn't last. It doesn't matter.'

A year after her death in May 1970, *Sans III*, then part of the artist's estate, was included in a Hesse exhibition at the Visual Arts Gallery in New York. It is thought that the work thereafter remained in storage until 1997 when it was discovered that the chain had broken and the boxes had crumpled. Darkened and brittle, the work was beyond repair (it not only had changed in appearance but it also could no longer hold its own weight when hung from a wall).

In 2002 the future of Hesse's latex works in general was the subject of a symposium involving art historians, conservators and those who knew and worked with Hesse herself. Acknowledging that the translucency and elasticity of the latex had been lost, commentators were divided as to whether deteriorated pieces should continue to be displayed or whether new versions could legitimately be made following Hesse's methods and procedures as study pieces. A complicating factor was ambiguity surrounding Hesse's understanding of her art as process (rather than a final object with a fixed appearance). She accepted change as a factor in her work but would she have wished her works to be seen when severely deteriorated?

Although it is generally felt that Hesse's *Sans III* cannot be exhibited, many of her other latex works remain are still displayed and have been conserved successfully. One such piece is *Test Piece S-93*. Hesse made it to try out an idea in latex for a metal version of *Repetition Nineteen* 1968, a sculpture comprising nineteen bucket-like forms, each one slightly different from the next and placed directly on the floor. By 1997 the test piece had sagged and partially collapsed; its surface was cracked and darkened; and the rubber tubing had broken into several pieces. Conservator Martin Langer, however, was able to fill the cracks, restore surface losses and replace the tubing, making the piece robust enough to be transported. Although far removed from the translucent upright form it once was, the object still conveys much of Hesse's original concept and was included in a recent exhibition of 'studioworks', experimental items left in Hesse's studio or given away to friends (*Eva Hesse: Studioworks*, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh 2009). Critics expressed admiration for the emotional freight still conveyed by these objects, as well as a nostalgia for what has been lost both through Hesse's untimely death and the inherent fragility of many of her major works. It may not have been as Hesse had planned but still offered some sense of what she intended and how she worked, unlike *Sans III*.

Text—

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