

Eva Hesse

"I think art is a total thing. A total person giving a contribution. It is an essence, a soul.... In my inner soul, art and life are inseparable."

Born in Hamburg, Germany on January 11, 1936, Eva and her sister Helen escaped the Nazi program via train to Amsterdam in 1938. Rejoined with her parents they travelled to England and then to the United States, arriving in New York City in 1939. Hesse's creativity became apparent in her early childhood. At 16 she graduated from the New York School of Industrial Arts. In the fall of 1952 she began studies at the Pratt Institute of Design, but dropped out in December 1953. She then studied figure drawing at the Art Student's League while she worked as a layout artist for Seventeen magazine. In 1957 she graduated from Cooper Union in New York and attended Yale University where she studied color theory with Joseph Albers, receiving her B.A. in 1959.

After graduation she worked as a painter. Strongly influenced by Abstract Expressionism, her work from 1960 to 1965 was small and deeply personal. Mirroring a concern for chaos and order, her drawings developed from early 1960s gestural and pictographic symbols often defined by flowing contours in non-atmospheric spaces. Hesse's interests in spatiality became evident in collages she completed in ink, watercolor, and gouache. In 1962 Hesse married the sculptor Tom Doyle and two years later they moved to Ketturg-Am-Ruhr, Germany. They worked as guest artists for a year with textile manufacturer and collector F. Amhard Scherdt. During that time Hesse executed a large portfolio of drawings and began her first sculptures. Hesse and Doyle separated in 1966.

Hesse's personal development was strongly affected by her early childhood experience fleeing Germany, her parents' divorce and her mother's suicide. The personal nature of her work stemmed from her ability to keep a diary, of which she made continued reference from along with her father's records of childhood events and activities he kept when she was a child. Hesse began psychiatric therapy in 1954 which continued for the rest of her life. Therapy and self-analysis offered the encouragement to expand from both her personal fears and artistic limitations. From this Hesse produced work that led the way in the usage of nontraditional material-based sculpture such as plastic. This offered visualization to her trademark concern: the absurdity of relationships within contradictory systems.

Although Hesse worked professionally as a sculptor for only five years, Her work made significant contributions to contemporary art and aesthetics. Consistently experimenting with new processes and materials, Hesse began to use latex and fiberglass to build up layered forms to cover found objects in 1967. These translucent plastic forms captured light and color and enhanced the language of her work. Hesse died prior to the feminist movement in the 1970s, but her work often addressed concerns of the female experience. Eva Hesse died of brain cancer on May 29, 1970 in New York. She was 34 years old.

- Thomas Watkiss