

2015

# Challenges Surrounding the Conservation and Replication of Eva Hesse's Sculpture

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## Recommended Citation

Nurmi, Kaela L., "Challenges Surrounding the Conservation and Replication of Eva Hesse's Sculpture" (2015). *Scripps Senior Theses*. Paper 709.  
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**CHALLENGES SURROUNDING THE CONSERVATION  
AND REPLICATION OF EVA HESSE'S SCULPTURE**

by  
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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL  
FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF  
ARTS**

**PROFESSOR MARY MACNAUGHTON  
PROFESSOR FRANCES POHL**

**APRIL 24, 2015**

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I would like to thank Professor Mary MacNaughton, my first reader and academic advisor. Professor MacNaughton initially inspired me to pursue the art conservation major as a first-year student; and since then she has been a priceless source of knowledge, advice, and encouragement. At every step of the thesis writing process, Professor MacNaughton was there to help me communicate my ideas thoughtfully and succinctly. I appreciate Professor MacNaughton's constant support in both my academic and career endeavors.

I would like to thank my second reader, Professor Frances Pohl. After only meeting me once, Professor Pohl graciously agreed to be my second reader. Her constant wealth of knowledge and motivation helped me throughout the writing process. I was so lucky to have had such an involved second reader.

I extend an additional thanks to Professor Bill Anthes and the other art history faculty across the Claremont Colleges. Without your passion for art history and your continuing guidance over the past four years I would not be where I am today.

I would also like to thank my friends at Scripps College and across the Claremont Colleges for an amazing four years. From study sessions to late night conversations, my time at Scripps has been an unforgettable journey filled with lasting memories.

Lastly, and most importantly, I would like to thank my family for their unwavering love and support. Thank you for always believing in me and encouraging me to pursue my dreams. This would not be possible without your help. Thank you.

“The way to beat discrimination in art is by art.  
Excellence has no sex.”  
-Eva Hesse

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## Introduction

Opaque, crumpled, and cracked: *Sans III*, 1969 (Figure 1-2) by Eva Hesse, is now a milky, yellow-brown, and brittle remnant of the once translucent, white, and elastic sculpture. *Sans III* is an example of the serious challenges faced by conservators of contemporary art.

One of the most critical issues in the field of art conservation today is how to treat contemporary art objects made with ephemeral materials. Whether the object was intended to fall apart or not, much of contemporary art is proving to be impermanent. As Italian art critic and curator Francesco Poli says, “Like all object and products of our time, contemporary artworks often wear out, suffer damage, or break and are subjected to the frenetic pace of the consumer society of which they are the expression. But works of art are special productions whose function is an eminently aesthetic one: to represent, at the highest level, contemporary cultural heritage. Therefore, they must be preserved, defended, and appreciated like any other form—musical, literary, cinematic, or architectural—of artistic production.”<sup>1</sup>

The sculpture of mid-twentieth century German-born American artist, Eva Hesse, presents many conservation challenges, but these challenges also highlight what makes her artwork so important to preserve. Her sculptural innovations and experimentation with industrial materials position her as a key figure in the international postwar art world. Hesse’s latex and fiberglass sculptures embody her painterly, process-oriented,

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<sup>1</sup> Francesco Poli, “Preface,” in *Conserving Contemporary Art: Issues, Methods, Materials, and Research*, ed. Oscar Chiantore and Antonio Rava (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2012), 8.

and intimate relationship with art making. Through her innovative approach to material, form, composition, and structure, Hesse blurred the lines between painting and sculpture. Her specific manipulation and experimentation with latex and fiberglass elevated industrial products to that of fine art. Unfortunately, today, Hesse's remarkable sculptures are in various states of disrepair. Her artwork is an extreme example of the conservation challenges surrounding contemporary art. If Hesse's works are inexorably deteriorating, should they be allowed to die or should they be replicated? How did Hesse's sculptures arrive at this dilemma?

During the 1960s, artists expanded the range of artistic mediums from oil paint, bronze, and marble to *words, steel, and rubber*. Conceptual art critiqued the commodification of art by bringing the concept to the forefront; often creating a set of written instructions that could be manifested in a multitude of ways. Minimalism highlighted repetition of simple, geometric shapes made from industrial materials in order to break away from self-expression filled abstract-expressionist pieces. Process-art combined both conceptualism's focus on the *concept* and minimalism's experimentation with industrial materials, while emphasizing the organic process of art making. While not self-defined as such, Hesse's approach to her artwork most closely aligns her with the process art movement.

Today Hesse is recognized as one of the leading American artists of the 1960s, despite having European roots and only a brief career in the United States. In 1936, Eva Hesse was born to Jewish parents in Hamburg, Germany. In order to flee the Nazi regime, the Hesses moved to New York City in 1939. Several years later, Hesse's parents separated and shortly after that her mother committed suicide. Hesse's tumultuous early

life did not stop her from pursuing her dreams of being an artist. Before receiving her BFA from the Yale School of Art and Architecture, Hesse took classes at a variety of prestigious New York institutions, including the School of Industrial Art, the Pratt Institute, and Cooper Union. While at Yale, Hesse studied abstract expressionist painting under the tutelage of former Bauhaus professor Josef Albers. After graduating, she opened a small studio in New York City and married fellow artist Tom Doyle. The couple moved to Germany for a residency program in the early 1960s, which is where Hesse first started to experiment with industrial materials. The couples' return to the United States in 1965 marked Hesse's shift almost exclusively to the latex and fiberglass sculptures she is so famous for today.

Hesse died from complications due to a brain tumor at 34 years old, leaving behind a small, but influential body of sculptural work. Her experimentations with latex and fiberglass created stunningly innovative works of art in the late 1960s bringing these unorthodox materials into the world of fine art; but now these materials are creating major conservation problems. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's (SFMOMA) 2002 retrospective exhibition *Eva Hesse* prompted the start of a major discussion concerning the care, preservation, and conservation of Hesse's sculptural works. Many of Hesse's sculptures have deteriorated to the point where they are no longer recognizable and in a few cases cannot be installed or displayed. Because of this, the organizers of the exhibition were faced with difficult decisions and forced to ask complicated questions such as those of the former Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Philadelphia



Museum of Art Ann Temkin<sup>2</sup>: “Is the condition of the piece so far from the artist’s intention that it is better to leave it unseen and make do with photographs of it in good condition? Does one attempt to remake the objects or portions of them, sacrificing literalness to present something true to the spirit of the original? Or does one accept the aging of the sculpture as part of its meaning and present it as it now exists...?”<sup>3</sup> Hoping to answer these questions, SFMOMA assembled a roundtable of conservators, curators, and friends and colleagues of Hesse. The discussion was held in New York City in November 2000 and covered issues from the state of specific sculptures to bigger overarching questions. The roundtable was the point of departure for many more scholarly articles and discussions surrounding Hesse’s sculptures that contributed to the research of this thesis and the exploration of topics covered.

This thesis examines the challenges surrounding the conservation and replication of Eva Hesse’s large-scale latex and fiberglass sculptures. In particular, this thesis engages with the questions and opinions raised by both Elizabeth Sussman, the curator of the retrospective exhibition and editor of the exhibition catalog *Eva Hesse*, and Michelle Barger, associate conservator of objects at the SFMOMA, at the roundtable discussion. The first chapter introduces Hesse as a contemporary American artist whose artworks are severely deteriorating despite the fact that the sculptures are less than fifty years old. Therefore, Hesse serves as a good example of contemporary art conservation. This

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<sup>2</sup> Ann Temkin held the position as the Muriel and Phillip Berman Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Philadelphia Museum from 1990 until 2003. Since 2008 Temkin has served as the Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

<sup>3</sup> Ann Temkin, “Introduction to *Uncertain Mandate: A Roundtable Discussion on Conservation Issues*”, in *Eva Hesse*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (San Francisco : New Haven: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art ; Yale University Press, 2002), 291.

chapter also discusses how Hesse's works pose many new questions and challenges that cause conservators to push their personal ethics to new lengths. In addition to expanding the boundaries of art making and broadening the range of materials, Hesse's art forces conservators to establish conservation practices specific to modern and contemporary art.

The second chapter presents Hesse as an extreme example of the challenges concerning contemporary conservation by delving deeper into the materials she used and how they have contributed to her sculpture's demise. The chapter explores her process and materials through a close examination of several of her sculptures. Unfortunately, the latex and fiberglass materials that captivated Hesse are compromising the structural integrity of her large-scale sculptures today. In two separate cases, institutions created exhibition copies to better understand the process and materials of Hesse's sculptures. This exercise revealed the fact that Hesse's sculptures today are drastically different than what they originally were. The chapter looks at how the innate properties of the materials themselves impacted the long-term stability of Hesse's sculptures and what conservators have done to address these issues.

The final chapter expands upon the concept of sculptural replication discussed in the previous chapter. Hesse left no clear statement of intent for the continued preservation of her sculptures making it difficult for conservators to know how to best care for her work. Although she was conscious of her materials' ephemeral qualities, Hesse wanted her artwork to last. Because of the complicated nature of Hesse's body of work, conservators are left asking how to best preserve her sculptures. Conservation tries not only to stabilize the materials, but also in trying to uphold Hesse's artistic vision. Although replication pushes conservators to re-examine their usual practices and violates

the standard notion of minimal intervention, replication is sometimes the best option for contemporary art that is falling apart. The chapter addresses replication of Hesse's sculptural works as a means to better represent her artistic vision and not as replacements of the original works. The conservation challenges of contemporary art and ideas surrounding replication discussed throughout this chapter have implications far beyond the reaches of Hesse's latex and fiberglass sculptures.

## Chapter I: Eva Hesse and Contemporary Art Conservation

The boundaries pushed by artists in the 20th-century have led to the drastic altering and deterioration of contemporary art. Through the long-established workshops and schools of the past, artists had centuries to master techniques and develop an exhaustive knowledge of their materials. With the rapid introduction of innovations and the vast production of new materials during the 20th-century, the intimate understanding of the past was no longer achievable. Exploration with modern materials and industrial products drove artists farther and farther away from the traditional techniques of centuries past. In her essay, professor of conservation at the Academy of Fine Art in Warsaw Iwona Szmelter suggests that this departure results in a greater risk to the long-term survival of the work of art.<sup>4</sup> Artists were drawn to the newly produced materials due to the wide range of artistic possibilities available to them, but the same possibilities that excited artists *then* terrifies conservators *now*. As materials were being produced, artists were snatching them up before substantial research could be done on the physical and chemical properties. This lack of understanding in the materials gave artists untethered freedom to do with them what they pleased. Unfortunately, this carefree approach resulted in the mixing of materials with incompatible properties, erroneous manipulation, and complex applications that have contributed to the early demise of entire artworks. On the other hand, some postwar materials were just not meant to last; the innate properties of the materials are not suitable for long-lasting results.

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<sup>4</sup> Iwona Szmelter, "An Innovation and Complex Approach to Visual Art Preservation," in *Innovative Approaches to the Complex Care of Contemporary Art*, eds. Iwona Szmelter, (The Knowledge Tree. Warsaw : London: Academy of Fine Arts ; Archetype, 2012), 12.

Hesse and her process sculpture contemporaries were interested in experimenting with nontraditional products. For Hesse and her colleagues the medium was not just a means to an end, but intrinsic to the overall piece. When Hesse turned to industrial supply stores for her materials, she chose both latex and fiberglass to create her major artworks of the late 1960s. The particular materials she selected and her individual making processes were deeply linked both to her artistic idea and to the finished product.

Like other 20<sup>th</sup>-century artists, Hesse placed little attention on long-term preservation. Her focus was on the concept and the process of the art—how the materials would achieve her intent— not on how her art would last over centuries. Consequently, her sculptures have deteriorated. But whatever the reason behind the deterioration, her artworks must still be preserved.

Contemporary art needs to be conserved, but how? The care and preservation of artworks have long been necessary, but in the last few decades, conservation has received special attention. With the growing number of art institutions, museums, galleries, and private collections, the need for conservators and best practices increased. Key conservation standards were created by Cesare Brandi (1906-1988), founding director of the Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione e il Restauro (High Institute for Conservation and Restoration, ISCR) in Rome and the author of the 1963 landmark theoretical essay on restoration, *Teoria del Restauro* (The Theory of Restoration). In this text, Brandi articulated the standards that conservators have been using for centuries. The basic principles of artwork care are as follows: first do no harm; uphold maximum respect for the original artwork and all its values; conduct minimum necessary intervention; aim for legibility and distinctiveness of intervention; strive for reversibility

of methods and materials; and execute all work to the best of your knowledge and to the highest attainable standard.<sup>5</sup>

With contemporary art, it becomes a challenge for conservators to follow Brandi's standards. Knowledge of contemporary artwork is crucial for the proper conservation of the piece. Conservators must educate themselves on every aspect of the artwork, from the original materials, the techniques used in creation, and to the thinking behind specific methods. Now conservators believe that the relationship between materials, technique, and the work's intended meaning go hand-in-hand. Hesse was drawn to latex and fiberglass because they allowed for a unique manipulation that culminated in organic bodily sculptures. Her finished products cannot be separated from Hesse's fabrication process, which in turn cannot be separated from the materials. The understanding that all three work together is essential for a conservator working on one of her pieces.

Contemporary artwork broadens the role of the conservator. With traditional fine art, the materials were not definitively linked to the essence of an artwork. While the medium governed to what extent the composition could be completed, it was not necessarily tied to the overall meaning of the work. But with art of the 20th-century the material significance is often paramount to the overall artwork. For Hesse, not only does the physical piece have to be conserved, but the essence of the work as well.

While all materials change over time, there is very limited knowledge of how non-traditional materials change. In contrast to traditional fine art, this finite knowledge creates challenges in conserving contemporary art; thus, the philosophies of early

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<sup>5</sup> Iwona Szmelter, "An Innovation and Complex Approach to Visual Art Preservation," 22.

restorers and conservators, such as Brandi, are difficult to apply to contemporary art like Hesse's sculptures. There is a lot known about the behavior, changes, and deterioration of traditional materials, but with the plethora of new materials available to artists now, there is no way for a single conservator to understand everything about each material.

Conservators then have the difficult task of figuring out how to stop rapid deterioration of artworks without understanding the materials completely themselves. Hesse's latex and fiberglass materials started to drastically deteriorate just in the last 15 years, when the sculptures themselves are only around 50 years old. While more is known about latex and fiberglass now than half a century ago, conservators still must educate themselves about Hesse's particular material composition and making process in order to best approach the conservation of her pieces.

In addition to the fast deterioration of contemporary art pieces, the conservation task is increased in difficulty due to the complexity of structure, function, idea, and the mixtures of materials. Contemporary art is often classified by blurred differentials between genres; a painting is no longer just a two-dimensional wall hanging and a sculpture is no longer assumed to be a freestanding three-dimensional piece. This conflation of genres makes it nearly impossible to follow traditional conservation methods. As German conservator Heinz Althöfer points out, "there is no single solution applicable to all cases... each and every case must be studied in terms of its uniqueness."<sup>6</sup>

The authentic object is key to determining the conservation of artworks, but what is an *authentic object*? In 1983, the United Kingdom Institute for Conservation (UKIC)

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<sup>6</sup> Oscar Chiantore and Antonio Rava, "Methodological Problems," in *Conserving Contemporary Art: Issues, Methods, Materials, and Research*, (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2012), 45.

defined conservation as the “means by which the true nature of an object is preserved. The true nature of an object includes evidence of its origins, its original construction, the materials of which it is composed and information as to the technology used in its manufacture.”<sup>7</sup> The artist’s intent and the true, or authentic, appearance of an artwork is the most important information when conserving a piece of art. But how does one define the authentic object in contemporary art? In traditional fine art, the authentic object was often simply defined as the original object and visual message that the artist created. Pride in the original artwork was upheld at all costs. Historically, curators and conservators emphasized the past over the present in the preservation of an artwork, but with modern and contemporary artworks those simple guidelines do not work anymore. Authenticity of contemporary artworks may come from different sources, and the conservator has the troublesome task of identifying where to find it. The multiplicity of values assigned by the artist to each part of the artwork—materials, idea, process, finished product—must be understood completely by the conservator.

Compromise is often necessary in order to properly attend to both the physical and conceptual properties of a work of art. Conservation professor at the Institute of Conservation Polytechnic University of Valencia, Spain Salvador Muñoz Viñas argues that authenticity in contemporary art, “...may be an oxymoron; it is not about truth, but rather about values and meanings.”<sup>8</sup> In some cases, conservation of the authentic object

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<sup>7</sup> Glenn Wharton, “The Challenges of Conserving Contemporary Art.” (Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art, 2005), 164.

<sup>8</sup> Salvador Muñoz Viñas, “The artwork that became a symbol of itself: reflections on the conservation of modern art,” in *Theory and Practice in the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art: Reflections on the Roots and the Perspectives*, eds. Ursula Schädler-Saub and Angela Weyer. (London: Archetype, 2010), 18.



may be completely nonsensical if the conservation dramatically alters the artwork as conceived by the artist. For instance, Zoe Leonard's sculpture *Strange Fruit (for David)*, 1992-1997 (Figure 3), consists of orange, banana, grapefruit, lemon, and avocado peels sewn closed with thread, zippers, buttons, sinew, needles, plastic, wire, stickers, fabric, and trim wax. In collaboration with Leonard, German conservator Christian Scheidemann developed a procedure to "arrest the decay of the fruit surfaces [in *Strange Fruit*]." <sup>9</sup> The pieces were individually shock-frozen and meticulously injected with Paraloid B-72, a stable acrylic resin adhesive frequently used in objects conservation. Although the procedure was successful, Leonard rejected the newly preserved pieces because "the appearance of decay was not enough for her; the *metaphor* of disappearance was insufficient." <sup>10</sup> In this case, the subjective was preferred over the objective. Leonard chose instead to have the objects continue to decay in the gallery in order to best represent her artistic vision. The authentic object can change classification from the authenticity of form, of substance, of material, of the artist, or to a combination of a few or of all.

Attitudes towards authenticity have changed over time. In the 20th-century, the preservation of a work of art was equated with the original substance, but today it is about the preservation of the entire identity of an artwork. As conservator Monika Jadzińska points out, the identity of contemporary art is connected with its intermediality,

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<sup>9</sup> Ann Temkin, "Strange Fruit," in *Conservation Perspectives, The GCI Newsletter* 13.2 (The Getty Conservation Institute: Summer 1998), <[http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications\\_resources/newsletters/13\\_2/news1\\_1.html](http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/newsletters/13_2/news1_1.html)>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

processuality, contextualism and relativity.<sup>11</sup> All components must be considered in the conservation of artwork today. Unlike with traditional art of the past, now the definition of authentic object is ambiguous.

The theories and philosophies of past conservators and restorers may no longer be relevant for contemporary art. The standardization of conservation practices was only recently instituted in much of the world through the establishment of formal graduate school programs in the United States and Europe, organizations like United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Centre, and professional membership organizations like the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC). These institutions helped regulate and promote the conservation of art objects, but now the practices and principles must reflect the constantly changing and altering art world.

Amongst conservation professionals around the world there are differing ideas regarding standard guidelines. Glenn Wharton, founding director of the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art – North America (INCCA-NA) and current professor in the New York University Museum Studies department, claims that contemporary art demands for standard conservation precepts and principles to be rethought. Conservation is no longer motivated by preserving the authentic object, but rather a discussion of two types of discrepancy: whether the current condition of a work conflicts with its intended meaning and whether conservation intervention helps unite the

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<sup>11</sup> Monika Jadzińska, “Back to the Future: Authenticity and its Influence on the Conservation of Modern Art,” in *Innovative Approaches to the Complex Care of Contemporary Art*, ed. Iwona Szmelter (The Knowledge Tree. Warsaw : London: Academy of Fine Arts ; Archetype, 2012), 92.

object with its intended meaning.<sup>12</sup> Does the aging, damage, and/or decay warrant conservation intervention? Both the passive and active options must be considered in the conservation of contemporary works. The old straightforward procedure approach to conservation is outdated. Contemporary art, like Hesse's sculptures, show that every work of art requires a different solution. While theorists around the world have come up with different solutions for a modern approach to conservation, they all share three common themes. First, the materials must be identified and understood; second, the context and history of the art must be gathered; and lastly, the relationship between the materials, technique, and the artist's intentions must be determined.

Hesse's large-scale latex and fiberglass sculptures highlight the need to restructure the precepts and principles of conservation. The specific chemical composition and mixture of her materials in combination with her ambiguous intent behind the work make the conservation of her sculptures particularly complicated. Conservators not only have to stabilize the physical deterioration of the materials, but also preserve the specific identity of every piece. Each sculpture is in a different condition and each requires an individual intervention method. Hesse's latex and fiberglass works confirm the desperate need to approach the conservation of contemporary art differently than in the past.

Artist Eva Hesse's latex and fiberglass sculptures exemplify the dilemma surrounding the conservation of contemporary artworks. Hesse's work suggests that a new standardization of conservation practices and principles are necessary for the proper conservation of contemporary artworks. Conservators have the difficult task of uniting

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<sup>12</sup> Wharton, "The Challenges of Conserving Contemporary Art," 173-174.

the overall identity of Hesse's work while also treating the degrading materials themselves. The following chapter investigates the specific materials and composition of Hesse's latex and fiberglass sculptures that are falling apart at what appears to be an irreparable rate

## Chapter II: The Untimely Demise of Eva Hesse's Sculptural Materials

Towards the end of her career, Hesse, participated in the trend away from traditional to industrial materials for art production. Although industrial materials are often associated with minimalism, Hesse's emphasis on their organic aspect aligns her with the process-art movement. As a formally trained abstract expressionist painter, Hesse began her career in two-dimensional media. After discovering latex and fiberglass in the late 1960s, she transitioned almost exclusively to sculptural art forms. Hesse extended the boundaries of two-dimensional painting into the three-dimensional world through her unconventional use of non-traditional materials. The turning point for Hesse's career was her breakthrough exhibition, *Eva Hesse: Chain Polymers*, held at the Fischbach Gallery, New York in 1968.<sup>13</sup> The palpable rawness of Hesse's latex and fiberglass sculptures of her first solo exhibition contrasted drastically with the preconceived ideas of industrial materials. Unfortunately, today Hesse's awe-inspiring sculptures are cloudy, opaque, and lifeless remnants of those that debuted nearly 50 years ago.

On May 29, 1970, at 34 years old, Hesse died from complications due to a brain tumor leaving behind a body of work that had just begun to be recognized and celebrated by scholars, critics, and the public. Hesse positioned herself as a pivotal figure for the 1960s art movements through her originality in sculptural materials. While much has been written about the uncanny connection between Hesse's untimely death and her

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<sup>13</sup> "Eva Hesse: Sculpture," The Jewish Museum, accessed March 26, 2015, <http://thejewishmuseum.org/exhibitions/eva-hesse-sculpture>.

rapidly degrading artwork, there is more to be found in a close study of her chosen materials in relation to the degradation of her major sculptural works. Hesse's innovations in sculptural materials contributed to the early demise of her artworks.

In the last 15 years, museums around the world have begun to confront the imminent conservation challenges of Hesse's works. From curators to conservators, museum professionals have collaborated with outside experts in an attempt to come up with the ideal strategy to care for Hesse's deteriorating sculptures. The pivotal moment in the discussion on the conservation of Hesse's sculptures was the 2000 roundtable discussion held in New York in preparation for the 2002 SFMOMA retrospective *Eva Hesse*.<sup>14</sup> Friends of Hesse, artist peers, art historians, and conservators united together in the pursuit of solutions to the many conservation problems intrinsic to Hesse's latex and fiberglass pieces.

Hesse's discovery of latex and fiberglass paved the way for new and unique sculptural works. In the mid-sixties, Hesse started to shop at the industrial supply stores, near her Bowery studio in Manhattan. Using materials such as rope, fish net, polyethylene sheeting, and nails, Hesse fused her interest in painting and sculpture to create works that hung from the walls like paintings.<sup>15</sup> In 1967, while wandering along Canal Street, Hesse stumbled upon a new working material in a Cementex shop: latex.<sup>16</sup> Latex is a natural rubber that organically is a colorless, fluid liquid. Originally used for

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<sup>14</sup> Chad Coerver, "Uncertain Mandate: A Roundtable Discussion on Conservation Issues," In *Eva Hesse*, edited by Elisabeth Sussman (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 291-311.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathon Keats, "The Afterlife of Eva Hesse," *Art & Antiques Magazine*, Vol. 34, Issue 3 (January 1998), 51.

<sup>16</sup> Renate Petzinger, "Life and Work", in *Eva Hesse: One More than One*, ed. Hubertus Gaßner, (Hamburg : Ostfildern: Hamburger Kunsthalle ; Hatje Cantz, 2013), 195.

casting, Hesse re-appropriated latex for her artwork treating it almost like paint. She applied it in layers with a paintbrush, building layer upon layer until she had a smooth yet irregular surface.<sup>17</sup> Latex sets after 24 hours, but remains soft and flexible, leaving it to be shaped and formed as desired.<sup>18</sup> The new material allowed Hesse to venture into the world of sculpture while still utilizing her painterly skills. Dissatisfied with her earlier structural materials, Hesse sought out a material to support her newfound soft medium. Fiberglass, as a form of light, yet durable glass primarily used in insulation and as a reinforcing agent in plastics, seemed to be another promising medium for Hesse's projects. In 1968 Hesse was introduced to the fiberglass technician at Aegis Reinforced Plastics, Doug Johns. From then on Hesse relied heavily upon Johns' expertise and the two collaborated on almost all of her later works.<sup>19</sup>

Hesse's deliberate decision to use non-traditional materials demonstrates how critical the characteristics of latex and fiberglass were to her sculptures. She intentionally selected industrial materials because of their properties and the creative potential they contained for her. The fluidity of latex combined with the malleable but strong fiberglass opened up endless possibilities of creation. Reflecting on her methods, Hesse said, "... in the process, I'd like to be —it sounds corny—true to whatever I use and use it in the least pretentious and most direct way"... "In that sense, processing the materials becomes important because I do so little to them. I do so little else with the form, which I guess is

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<sup>17</sup> Keats, "The Afterlife of Eva Hesse", 51.

<sup>18</sup> Elisabeth Sussman, "Letting it Go as it Will: The Art of Eva Hesse", in *Eva Hesse*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (San Francisco : New Haven: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art ; Yale University Press, 2002), 28.

<sup>19</sup> Petzinger, "Life and Work", 195-197.

the absurdity. I keep it very, very simple, so then it's like a hanging material.”<sup>20</sup> The soft, flexible materials had the ability to physically capture her hand and reveal her making process to others. Latex also made it possible to convey the sense of forms that yielded to gravity instead of resisting it like Minimal sculpture. Process sculptors rejected the aesthetic values of Minimalism by working with materials that appeared soft but were in fact rigid enough to stand.

The process behind the making of Hesse's sculptures was crucial to the overall outcome of her latex and fiberglass objects. Both latex and fiberglass demand a physical engagement incomparable to other mediums. Hesse worked closely with her materials to achieve the result that she wanted. In the 2002 *Eva Hesse* retrospective exhibition catalog from SFMOMA, Sussman explains that, “[Hesse's] control of material could be supreme; she often pushed a given medium to its limits by repeating a process so often that her actions would border on obsessive. Yet, at the same time, Hesse had the ability to step back from a preconceived plan and allow abandon to overtake it.”<sup>21</sup> As she grew more familiar and confident with her materials, Hesse embraced their intrinsic imperfections. She sought out the defects, such as the bubbling caused by poor mixing or sagging due to gravity<sup>22</sup>, and in doing so created her distinctive and recognizable aesthetic. Thus, Hesse's intimate relationship with the materials and her acute involvement with the making of her sculptural works are closely linked to the resulting finished pieces. Hesse was forced to delegate more work to Johns and her assistants after she was diagnosed with a brain tumor in 1969. True to her unique vision, Hesse never relinquished control

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<sup>20</sup> Nemser, *A Conversation with Eva Hesse*, 20.

<sup>21</sup> Sussman, “Letting it Go as it Will: The Art of Eva Hesse,” 17.

<sup>22</sup> Keats, “The Afterlife of Eva Hesse,” 52.



over her projects. Although her personal touch may not be concretely visible, Hesse's guidance and influence is evident in each of her sculptures.

Hesse's unmistakable attention to both the materials and the making process raises the important question: for Hesse, is the process more important than the aesthetic? In "Uncertain Mandate: A Roundtable Discussion on Conservation Issues", from the discussion held in New York in November 2000, private practice conservator Martin Langer posits that, "...the process of making *Sans III* [Figures 1-2] may have been more important to the artist than the aesthetic of the resulting work. And I feel that showing process-oriented pieces such as this should be an option."<sup>23</sup> *Sans III*, 1969, like many of Hesse's pieces, is considered unexhibitable by the institution today, but Langer suggests it should still be exhibited. Langer's position suggests that as a process-artist, Hesse upheld the making process of her sculpture above all else and therefore the current aesthetic state of *Sans III* is unimportant. The deterioration of today is just a continuation of the process Hesse started in 1969. Following this reasoning, Hesse's latex and fiberglass sculptures should continue to be exhibited in their current states of deterioration in order to uphold Hesse's process-oriented intention.

In *Sans III*, 1969, Hesse created a rectangular plaster mold, from which she cast forty-nine individual boxes in countless layers of latex. She then joined the boxes in a singular chain that was mounted in an elongated L-shape on the ground and the wall.<sup>24</sup> As Langer suggests, the resulting composition probably took days, even weeks to finish.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Coerver "Uncertain Mandate: A Roundtable Discussion on Conservation Issues," 295.

<sup>24</sup> Scott Rothkopf, "Sans", in *Eva Hesse*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (San Francisco : New Haven: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art ; Yale University Press, 2002), 238-39.

<sup>25</sup> Coerver, "Uncertain Mandate: A Roundtable Discussion on Conservation Issues," 295.

The time and dedication Hesse gave to the materials in order to achieve her outcomes suggest that the process was of great importance to her. She could have easily returned to more traditional materials that would have been less physically demanding and less time consuming, but she stayed with latex. Her initial fascination with latex remained with her until her death; all of her late sculptural works were created with some combination of latex and fiberglass.

Unfortunately, Hesse's fixation with these materials is proving to be problematic for the survival of her pieces. Fifty years after their creation, nearly all of Hesse's sculptural works are showing extreme signs of deterioration. Private conservator, Sharon Blank, another participant in the roundtable discussion, claimed that during an interview with Doug Johns she gathered, "[Johns'] basic feeling...is that the work was about process. And the aging is part of the process."<sup>26</sup> The materiality and the process were critical to Hesse's sculptures at the time of their creation, but now what Hesse held so dear is causing serious complications. Is there anything that can be done to preserve what is left of her objects? Should intervention methods be taken with Hesse's works? Or should her works be left to fall apart?

When considering the conservation of works that are proving to be ephemeral, the phrase *inherent vice* often enters the discourse. In terms of art, an inherent vice is "an internal flaw that will damage the value of the piece."<sup>27</sup> Is such a flaw embedded in Hesses' materials? Hesse pushed art to new limits through the expansion of artist materials. By using industrial products and other unconventional materials Hesse created

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>27</sup> Julian Stallabrass, "Inherent Vice." *The Tate Papers* Issue 8 (2007), accessed October 26, 2014. <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/inherent-vice>.

engaging and fascinating objects, but at what cost? From minimal visual changes to detrimental structural failures, Hesse's works have dramatically altered from the originals.

Hesse's treasured sculpture materials would be unrecognizable to her today. The chemical composition of both latex and fiberglass is critical to the stability of Hesse's works. Natural rubbers, like latex, consist of a chain of polymers. Rubber, an elastomer type polymer, has the ability to return to its original shape after being stretched or deformed. Due to the presence of the double bond in each unit of the chain, latex is highly susceptible to chemical decomposition.<sup>28</sup> The wrong chemical combination leads to rigidity, cracks, and discoloring.

Hesse's works have two problems: they contain fillers and combine latex and fiberglass. If any fillers are included in the latex composition, as Hesse did on occasion, the latex, according to Wharton, will "yellow, craze, and become brittle as additives migrate within their structure and their long molecular chains break down and cross-link."<sup>29</sup> The specific conditions which must be adhered to and the inevitable lack of

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<sup>28</sup> Rubber polymers are coiled when in the resting state. The elastic properties allow the chains to stretch apart, but when tension is released the chains spring back to the original coiled position. Rubber gets its elasticity when the formed double bond takes the Z configuration, also known as the *cis* configuration. In natural rubber, most of the double bonds in the chain have the Z configuration that gives the rubber its elastic characteristics. Although stable in the Z configuration, the double bond is susceptible to outside reactions from ozone and other reactants in the air that force the double bonds to the opposite configuration (Y). When some bonds are in the Z configuration and others are in the Y, the chain no longer fits together and as a result it begins to break down, causing deterioration in the overall latex composition.

"Rubber Polymers," Chemwiki.ucdavis.edu, accessed November 15, 2014.  
[http://chemwiki.ucdavis.edu/Organic\\_Chemistry/Polymers/Rubber\\_Polymers](http://chemwiki.ucdavis.edu/Organic_Chemistry/Polymers/Rubber_Polymers).

<sup>29</sup> Wharton, "The Challenges of Conserving Contemporary Art," 166 (see ch. 1, n. 7).

control over chemical reactions, make latex a risky material to work with, especially if the object is meant to last for a long time.

Hesse's bold choice to work almost exclusively with latex makes one wonder whether or not she was aware of the substance's faults. Although considerably more stable than latex, fiberglass can suffer deterioration from moisture exposure. On a molecular level, the repeated introduction of water molecules to the original polyester fiberglass molecule (known as hydrolysis) accumulates and builds up pressure. This phenomenon can result in bubbling, cracking, and structural failure on a grander scale.<sup>30</sup> While science does not suggest that the combination of latex and fiberglass together would accelerate or exacerbate deterioration, the inherent vice of both materials together does not bode well for the survival of Hesse's sculpture.

Was Hesse aware that latex was such a problematic material? During the 2000 roundtable discussion, artist and friend of Hesse, Sol LeWitt claimed that, "She knew [latex] wouldn't last. She wanted to use it because of its aesthetic properties...She wanted her work to last, but she couldn't stop using the latex because it was the only material that she knew of that could act in that particular way."<sup>31</sup> Hesse was drawn to the unique properties of latex and fiberglass because through her manipulation of both materials she could express her artistic aesthetic. Although Hesse's colleagues warned her that the

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<sup>30</sup> "After having set, the original polyester molecules are immobile. After hydrolysis, the new molecules have some mobility and also occupy a greater volume than the polyester molecules from which they came. The result is internal pressure. The pressure, along with the natural mobility of the molecules, causes them to fill any voids in the fiberglass, including the pinhole porosity that is always present. If they can't escape to the surface fast enough, and if there are any deficiencies in the composite, then blistering and delamination are common results." Fred Hochgraf, "Hydrolysis of Fiberglass," *Nuts & Bolts*, no. 23 (May 2006).

<sup>31</sup> Coerver, "Uncertain Mandate: A Roundtable Discussion on Conservation Issues," 297.

materials would not last, Hesse never ventured away from latex and fiberglass. She was transfixed by the materiality of the products and their unparalleled ability to convey her ideas.

The materials Hesse cherished appear to be the inherent vice of her sculptures. Museum goers today know Hesse's work as brittle, opaque, mustard-yellow fragments, but looking at vintage photographs from the 1960s (see Figure 10), one can see that these same works were once pristine, luminous, white entities. In his article, "The Afterlife of Eva Hesse: The Mutable Materials of the Artist's Sculptures are Continuing the Creative Process that she Began", conceptual artist and experimental philosopher Jonathon Keats points out that, "over the past 40 years, the sculptures have chemically restructured themselves... Were she alive today to see masterpieces such as *Sans I* (1967-68) and *Repetition Nineteen III* (1968) she'd probably find them unrecognizable."<sup>32</sup> As if the indistinguishable, cloudy appearance was not enough, Hesse's sculptures are disintegrating so rapidly many cannot be exhibited anymore, lest they fall into lifeless heaps on the ground.

Is there nothing that can be done to stop the deteriorating process and to preserve Hesse's sculptures? Keats points out that the materials Hesse favored are "notoriously archivally unstable."<sup>33</sup> Museums strive to keep art objects and related documents in chemically stable archival storage containers. The archival stability of a storage medium ensures that the object within will not be compromised whatsoever by the container itself. In Hesse's case, the inherent qualities of both latex and fiberglass to deteriorate on their

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<sup>32</sup> Keats, "The Afterlife of Eva Hesse," 50.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

own accord make them archivally unstable no matter what storage container they are housed in.

The stability problem with Hesse's works stems from the inherent vice of the materials she used in each piece. This is most clearly evident in what is known as Hesse's *Sans* series: *Sans I*, 1967-68 (Figure 4); *Sans II*, 1968 (Figure 5); and *Sans III*, 1969 (Figure 1). The series stemmed from developments in minimalist sculpture, particularly the tendency to create sculptures of repeating, modular shallow rectangular boxes. Although the *Sans* series has a unified underlying concept, the precise size, number, and arrangement varies amongst the three versions. *Sans I* and *Sans III* both originally took on an L-shaped form, lying on the wall and the floor, while *Sans II* was hung horizontally on the wall. Of the three versions, only *Sans II* is currently exhibitable.<sup>34</sup> This predicament is due to the difference in Hesse's materials across the three *Sans* pieces. In both *Sans I* and *III*, Hesse built up layer upon layer of latex onto fiberglass box frames, but in *Sans II* she cast fiberglass onto rectangular forms in the same shape as the latex boxes.<sup>35</sup> Fiberglass on its own is innately more stable than latex, therefore contributing to *Sans II*'s better lasting condition. *Sans III*, in the collection of the Estate of Eva Hesse<sup>36</sup>, is so severely deteriorated and compromised structurally that it can no longer be exhibited (Figure 2). The chemical composition of the latex altered so considerably that the material lost its soft, pliable properties. The brittle structure is so fragile that it cannot be moved, let alone shown in the intended L-shaped position. *Sans III* now exists in several crumpled, cracked, and yellowed pieces.

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<sup>34</sup> Rothkopf, "Sans," 239.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 238-239.

<sup>36</sup> Eva Hesse's estate is controlled by *Glare Hauser & Wirth*, Zurich.

The current state of *Sans III* was the topic of much contention at the 2000 roundtable discussion. Gioai Timpanelli, fiction writer and friend of Hesse, voiced her opinion that, “*Sans III* is so degraded that I personally could never imagine showing it. Hesse was not an artist about degradation...but *Sans III*, to me, is not alive. It is not a work of art any longer, and I don’t think it would be right to show it.”<sup>37</sup> Timpanelli, as a personal friend of Hesse, felt strongly about what Hesse would have wanted. She claimed, Hesse never explicitly said that she was an artist interested in creating ephemeral works, but, as mentioned earlier, LeWitt claimed Hesse knew the limitations of latex and chose to use it anyways.

The conflicting interpretations and memories of those close to Hesse make the discussion of her works particularly interesting. In direct refutation of Timpanelli’s protestations, Keats states, “Hesse’s work concerned her materials, her interactions with them, and theirs with her. Those interactions are still reverberating physically and chemically. The materials with which she collaborated have become her executors. They deserve our respect.”<sup>38</sup> Keats asserts that the materiality of latex and fiberglass that Hesse held so dear should not be forgotten. The specific characteristics of the mediums were what made her work stand out and even though the materials look drastically different today, the inherent qualities of the materials need to be accepted. Keats goes so far as to claim that *Sans III* is truer to Hesse’s achievement today than it was at its first showing in 1968.

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<sup>37</sup> Coerver, “Uncertain Mandate: A Roundtable Discussion on Conservation Issues,” 295.

<sup>38</sup> Keats, “The Afterlife of Eva Hesse,” 54.

In contrast to *Sans III*, 1969, the test piece for *Contingent*, 1969 (Figure 7) is in pristine condition. Although Hesse created both of the latex and fiberglass works within the same year, the two hold hardly any resemblance to each other today. Hesse made only sixteen major works containing latex, but in the process she created a multitude of small test pieces, like the test piece for *Contingent*.<sup>39</sup> These test pieces, ranging in size, material, and various states of preservation, make up a significant portion of Hesse's body of work.

The test piece for *Contingent* at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., is generally considered to be the best preserved latex work by Hesse. For *Contingent* (Figure 8), Hesse and her assistants coated large sheets of cheesecloth in latex and then attached irregular rectangles of fiberglass to either end of each sheet. Originally, *Contingent* was comprised of eight pieces that hung at different heights from the ceiling in a row.<sup>40</sup> Now, the individual banners of *Contingent* in the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra are in various states of degradation. Fortunately, the singular, rectangular sheet of latex covered cheesecloth and fiberglass known as the test piece for *Contingent* still hangs relatively freely, as is intended. New York based art writer and acquaintance of Hesse, Naomi Spector, commented that, "when you walk by the work, it feels very alive visually and kinetically, and it occupies the same space as the viewer, which is one of the most important aspects of Eva's work."<sup>41</sup> The test piece still contains

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<sup>39</sup> Robin Clark, "Glass Cases and Test Pieces", in *Eva Hesse*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (San Francisco: New Haven: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art ; Yale University Press, 2002), 225.

<sup>40</sup> Scott Rothkopf, "*Contingent*", in *Eva Hesse*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (San Francisco : New Haven: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art ; Yale University Press, 2002), 279.

<sup>41</sup> Coerver, "Uncertain Mandate: A Roundtable Discussion on Conservation Issues," 308.



many of the original qualities that Hesse's other works have lost over the years. Perhaps one of the best examples of her painterly qualities, the brushed-on layers of latex, still hold Hesse's idiosyncratic touch without sign of decay. When displayed, the test piece for *Contingent* hangs from the ceiling like a canvas with the light shining through. Fortunately, the luminosity that is lost in most of Hesse's other works is still present in this piece.

The test piece is in exceptional condition due to the fact that it has spent almost all of its life in storage. Since its arrival in the National Gallery's collection in 1996, the test piece has only been on exhibition twice, and otherwise remains in storage rolled up in polyurethane and suspended within its crate.<sup>42</sup> Jay Krueger, the head of modern and contemporary painting conservation at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., recalled that, "when the test piece for *Contingent* first entered the collection of the National Gallery, we decided to treat it as we would any light-sensitive object, such as a photograph, textile, or work on paper."<sup>43</sup> Light sensitive materials must be exhibited on a rotating schedule, spending a short period on view, then returned to storage for a longer duration. Even though gallery lighting is highly regulated, light sensitive materials deteriorate rapidly under any light and benefit greatly from limited exposure. In the case of Hesse's test piece, the National Gallery exhibited it for two months the first time then six or seven months the second time. According to Krueger, the test piece for *Contingent*

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<sup>42</sup> Sylvia Hochfield. "Sticks and Stones and Lemon Cough Drops." *ARTnews* (U.S.A.) 101, no. 8 (September 2002): 117.

<sup>43</sup> Coerver, "Uncertain Mandate: A Roundtable Discussion on Conservation Issues," 308.

was out too long for the second exhibition. The test piece is sticky in places making it very vulnerable to airborne fibers settling on and imbibed by the soft latex.<sup>44</sup>

The extremely delicate state of the test piece for *Contingent* has kept it in storage for most of its life, which consequently contributed to the piece's status as the best-preserved latex work by Hesse. As a moderator of the 2000 roundtable discussion, Temkin, raised the important point, "...because it is the best-preserved latex piece in Hesse's oeuvre, one could make the argument that it's worth keeping off-view. On the other hand, what good does that do?"<sup>45</sup> The piece holds an extremely valuable position showing the world what Hesse's latex pieces are supposed to look like. Aside from the uncontrollable yellowing and clouding of the latex (Figure 6), the test piece for *Contingent* is in good condition. Therefore, the work has the potential to serve as a great educational tool for museum professionals and the public alike. However, since the test piece's pristine condition is due to the museum keeping it in storage at all times, most people have never actually had the opportunity to see it. The quandary over the test piece for *Contingent* raises many important questions for Hesse's major latex works as a whole. How does one best preserve her works? Should the materials be left to degrade naturally or should conservators intervene? If the sculpture is completely unexhibitable, should the object be replicated?

With the majority of Hesse's large latex and fiberglass sculptures in various states of deterioration, museums are presented with a problem. In two separate cases, museum professionals made the decision to replicate Hesse's sculpture: The Guggenheim Museum

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 309.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 308.

in New York and SFMOMA. Carol Stringari, the chief conservator at the Guggenheim Museum, teamed up with technician Doug Johns to create a “material mock-up” of two sections of *Expanded Expansion* (Figures 9-10).<sup>46</sup> When first exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1969, *Expanded Expansion*’s latex coated sheets of cheesecloth supported by fiberglass poles leaned against a wall. Now, *Expanded Expansion* is far too fragile to stand on its own. The once flexible and luminescent sculpture is now desiccated and dark. Like many of Hesse’s sculptures, *Expanded Expansion* is composed of three different materials—latex, cheesecloth, and fiberglass—that all age differently. The powdery latex falls off the cheesecloth, the stiff cheesecloth tears away from the fiberglass, and the brittle fiberglass strains under the weight of the fabric.<sup>47</sup> Each material’s different aging process impacts the relative stability of the surrounding materials. The deterioration of the latex, cheesecloth, and fiberglass resulted in the undeniable conservation and exhibition dilemma of *Expanded Expansion*.

In order to better understand the materials and help with conservation, Stringari chose to create a replica of *Expanded Expansion*. The mock-up was authorized by Hesse’s estate and was displayed alongside the original piece.<sup>48</sup> The difference between the now opaque, hard, and disintegrated original *Expanded Expansion* and the

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<sup>46</sup> “Eva Hesse at Getty Conservation Conference,” The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, accessed November 18, 2014, <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/press-room/news/1797-eva-hesse-at-getty-conservation-conference>.

<sup>47</sup> Robin Clark, “*Accretion and Expanded Expansion*”, in *Eva Hesse*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (San Francisco: New Haven: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art ; Yale University Press, 2002), 248.

<sup>48</sup> “The Object in Transition: A Cross-Disciplinary Conference on the Preservation and Study of Modern and Contemporary Art”, a conference that was held at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles in January 2008.

translucently bright and ethereal mock-up, created quite an impact on the public.<sup>49</sup> The mock-up not only enabled visitors to see how *Expanded Expansion* would have looked in 1969, but also the remaking provided crucial information on the materials for future conservation and preservation work.

In conjunction with the 2002 SFMOMA *Eva Hesse* retrospective, the museum created an exhibition copy<sup>50</sup> of *Sans II*, 1968. Associate Conservator of Objects, Michelle Barger headed the project with the help of Johns. Johns supplied the original polyurethane molds and latex recipe to create a four-box mock-up.<sup>51</sup> They followed Hesse's original procedure by draping the latex-coated fiberglass over the mold and then roughly joined the individual boxes together to create the final copy.<sup>52</sup> The lengthy exercise deepened the understanding of the material properties and reiterated just how important the process was to Hesse's creations. The finished exhibition copy was so striking in its appearance, that the conservation and curatorial teams chose to install it next to the original work at the close of the exhibition (Figure 6). The difference between the yellow, opaque, and brittle *Sans II* and the white, translucent, and pliant mock-up was shocking.<sup>53</sup> What started as purely an educational project for the conservators and curators of the SFMOMA turned into a public spectacle. Both the Guggenheim's mock-

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<sup>49</sup> Graham Larkin, "Things Fall Apart: On 'The Object in Transition'," *Artforum* 46, no. 8 (April 2008): 154.

<sup>50</sup> The terms *exhibition copy* and *mock-up* can be used interchangeably. Both refer to the replication of a specific artwork as a supplement, not as a replacement.

<sup>51</sup> Michelle Barger, "Thoughts on Replication and the Work of Eva Hesse." *The Tate Papers* Issue 8 (2007): accessed October 26, 2014. <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/thoughts-on-replication-and-work-eva-hesse>

<sup>52</sup> San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Studio Assistant Doug Johns on Eva Hesse's *Sans II*, 2002. Video. <http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/112>.

<sup>53</sup> Barger, "Thoughts on Replication and the Work of Eva Hesse."

up of *Expanded Expansion* and SFMOMA's exhibition copy of *Sans II* provided insight into Hesse's materials and her artistic process while also uncovering the appearance of the original sculptures.

Hesse's deteriorating latex and fiberglass sculptures illuminate the problem of inherent vice in artistic materials. Unfortunately, her passion and dedication to latex and fiberglass resulted in the premature demise of her sculpture. Nearly all of her major latex works are in such a state of degradation that they cannot be safely exhibited. The radical deterioration of Hesse's body of work led institutions to create exhibition copies as educational tools to learn about Hesse's materials and processes while also providing a rare look at what her sculptures originally looked like. The striking difference between the luminous and flexible exhibition copies and the murky, yellow, and brittle original sculptures created such an impact, it raises questions in regard to replication. Should Hesse's works be replicated in order to best represent her intentions? These are among the questions that are explored in the following chapter.

### Chapter III: The Continued Preservation of Eva Hesse's Sculptures

It was only in the last two years of her life that Hesse created the visceral sculptures she is so celebrated for today. Hesse's short career contributed to the drastic and inevitable decline of her sculptures. She passed away before she had the opportunity to establish guidelines for the long-term preservation of her artwork. Even as Hesse's health deteriorated, she refused to relinquish control over her work. In an interview from 1969 with Cindy Nemser, Hesse explained, "I can't work at all now, and when I can it's going to be limited. My physical capacities are going to be limited for some time and it's unreal to think I can handle it all. So I'll have really to give more and more for other people to do, and there's such a personal idiom for me, such a personal involvement, that it's not going to be easy for me to conceive of other people handling..."<sup>54</sup> Illness aside, Hesse finished nine large-scale sculptures in the last year of her life and had the greatest exhibition success of her career. She left behind an impressive body of work that continues to inspire and influence people around the world. Unfortunately, her sculptures are degrading at such a rate that soon, nothing will be left of the originals. Complicating preservation and conservation matters more is the fact that Hesse left no clear indication of her intent or what should be done with her sculptures.

Hesse had no time to look at her earlier work and make adjustments accordingly. The brief amount of time Hesse had to experiment with the latex and the fiberglass used in her famous sculptures limited her understanding of how the materials would react and

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<sup>54</sup> Cindy Nemser, "A Conversation with Eva Hesse" in *Eva Hesse*, ed. Mignon Nixon (Cambridge Mass.: MIT, 2002.), 13.

withstand time. Hesse first began to show signs of her illness in September 1968. In the beginning Hesse paid little attention to her symptoms, but by March 1969 she was unable to work on her projects without assistance. Less than a month later, Hesse had an operation to remove a tumor from her brain. Over the course of the next year she had two additional operations to treat her brain tumor. On May 22, 1970, Hesse fell into a coma and tragically died 7 days later. Although seriously ill for much of the last three years of her life, Hesse completed 16 large-scale sculptural works during this time.

These sculptures elevated Hesse as a major figure in the post-war art world while also forcing her into the art conservation discussion. Hesse recognized that the long-term viability of latex and fiberglass were unknown. When questioned by Nemser if she was concerned with the idea of her works lasting, Hesse responded “well, I am as confused about that as I am about life....At this point I feel guilty when people want to buy it. I think they know but I want to write them a letter and say it’s not going to last. I am not sure what my stand on lasting really is.”<sup>55</sup>

Thus, although it is clear that Hesse was aware of the precarious state of her pieces’ future, she never attended to this crucial flaw, as her position on the question was ambiguous. During the 2000 roundtable, LeWitt, reflected on Hesse’s sculptures, “... she certainly didn’t have the attitude that she would mutely sit by and watch it disintegrate before her eyes.”<sup>56</sup> Hesse was not concerned with creating ephemeral works of art even though she used materials that proved to be ephemeral. Her contradictory approach to her work—using non-lasting materials for a work of art that is meant to last—creates major

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<sup>55</sup> Nemser, “A Conversation with Eva Hesse,” 18.

<sup>56</sup> Coerver, “Uncertain Mandate: A Roundtable Discussion on Conservation Issues,” 297 (see ch. 2, n. 14).

problems. Considering the various states of disrepair amongst her sculptures, would she even recognize her own artwork now? Would her sculptures hold the same meaning for her that they did when she created them?

Hesse claimed that, “Life doesn’t last; art doesn’t last. It doesn’t matter,”<sup>57</sup> but it most certainly does matter to some. Once accessioned by an institution or owned by a private collector, artworks accrue a particular value. Aside from monetary value, art objects encapsulate everything from sentimental to historical worth. Following her death, Hesse’s artwork entered museums and private collections around the world. Each of these institutions has an obligation to protect and preserve Hesse’s artworks. But how do these collections tackle the problem of Hesse’s short-lived sculptural works?

The few references and statements Hesse made about her sculpture’s lasting nature are in opposition with each other. She both understood that her materials would fall apart *and* wanted them to last. What did she realistically intend for her pieces? Hesse’s message is confusing to say the least. The confusion behind Hesse and her intentions has prompted passionate conversations amongst art historians, conservators, and artists. Stringari remarks, “Some people, especially those who knew and worked with the artist, feel that even in its state of deterioration, it still has tremendous impact and that the artist would embrace the changes. A small group of people thinks it should be remade as an exhibition copy... Then there are people who think it needs to be retired and we have to accept that.”<sup>58</sup> Everyone invested in Hesse’s legacy has a different view on the

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<sup>57</sup> Nemser, “A Conversation with Eva Hesse,” 18.

<sup>58</sup> Hochfield, “Sticks and Stones and Lemon Cough Drops,” 115 (see ch. 2, n. 42).



preservation of her artworks. Similar to Hesse's own thoughts on her sculpture, those engaged in the conservation discussion of her work have complicated and opposing ideas.

Regardless of how Hesse's sculptures have been interpreted in the past, the conservator must respect the original artistic intentions. The distinction between what an artwork *means* and what an artwork *is*, may seem trivial, but is crucial for intervention. Personal responses and individual interactions to a piece must be separated from what a work of art is intended to be. Over the past 50 years, Hesse's sculptures have been analyzed, reviewed, and experienced by hundreds of people. Her artwork engenders unique emotions for everyone and has been interpreted in a multitude of ways: from visceral, to vulnerable, to sensual, to sexual, to strong, to haunting, to erotic.<sup>59</sup> In the case of Hesse's latex and fiberglass sculptures, the interpretations and understandings have shifted as the disintegration and discoloration of her sculptures intensified. The changing interpretations of Hesse's art only contribute to the confusing, problematic, and daunting conservation of her body of work.

But where does the conservator look for the statement of intent when the artist does not explicitly define it? Generally, when artists sell a piece of art they give up certain rights while retaining others that are dictated by copyright legislation or written contracts from the sale.<sup>60</sup> Under these regulations, institutions and collectors owning an authentic piece must uphold the artistic integrity of the piece as outlined in the official documents. In Hesse's case there are no legitimate records of her artistic intention for the

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<sup>59</sup> Michael Blackwood, *4 Artists: Robert Ryman, Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman, Susan Rothenberg*. (Michael Blackwood Productions, Inc., 1988), MP4 Video, 47:00. <http://evahesseestate.com>.

<sup>60</sup> Wharton, "The Challenges of Conserving Contemporary Art," 165.

lasting legacy of her artwork. How does a conservator honor the artist's intent if there is no obvious clue as to what it is? Interviews, quotes and comments made by Hesse, her personal writings, and conversations with those that knew her well are helpful tools, but should not be used as the singular guiding hand. Although helpful, these out of context thoughts and comments should not and *cannot* be considered Hesse's intentions.

Artists change their minds constantly. Although seemingly unrelated, Hesse and contemporary American artist Dan Flavin (1933–1996) propose similar conservation intervention themes. Initially, Flavin stated he wanted his iconic fluorescent lamps, such as "*monument*" *I for V. Tatlin*, 1964 (Figure 11), to burn out. As he matured as an artist, Flavin also altered his thinking.<sup>61</sup> His final declaration—and what owners and institutions must uphold—is for his fluorescent light sculptures to burn forever.<sup>62</sup> What an artist says one day can easily be rescinded or contradicted the next. Over the course of the single interview with Nemser, Hesse changed her mind multiple times regarding the lasting life of her artwork.<sup>63</sup> Unfortunately, unlike Flavin, Hesse never came to any formal conclusion relating to her intent. Without an official written statement, conservators cannot assume any singular declaration as fact. This lack of intent from Hesse makes the treatment of her artworks particularly difficult. Due to all the

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<sup>61</sup> Morgan Falconer, "In a Pickle," *Art Review*, no. 3 (September 2006), 68.

<sup>62</sup> With or without an official statement of intent, conservation of postwar artwork is a challenge. Glenn Wharton frankly says, "Problems arise when artists change their mind or express interests that are either unachievable or undesirable by current owners." Wharton, "The Challenges of Conserving Contemporary Art, 165.

Despite the fact that Flavin made an official statement of intent, there are still major conservation issues concerning his artwork. The fluorescent bulbs he used are no longer manufactured and are actually quite toxic to reproduce. Essentially, Flavin's pieces are technologically obsolete. How does one deal with this preservation issue? What happens when the specific intent of an artist cannot be maintained?

<sup>63</sup> Nemser, *A Conversation with Eva Hesse*, 1-24.

contradictions and conflicting viewpoints involved, there is no definitive or unanimous decision in regards to the treatment of Hesse's sculpture.

Without specified and clear artistic intent, the future of Hesse's sculptures is uncertain. The current state of the large latex and fiberglass sculptures leave conservators with two options: leave them as they are or create copies. Wharton explains that, "aside from mending breaks and filling losses, conservators have few options for dealing with structurally deteriorating plastics"<sup>64</sup> In the absence of preventive measures, many pieces are declared 'dead'. This art is not exhibited and is left by the institution to be archived in museum graveyards solely for research purposes.<sup>65</sup> Ideally preemptive intervention should have been performed on Hesse's sculptures to intercept the drastic deterioration of today. But unfortunately, this is not the case and Hesse's artwork must be addressed in the current condition.

Letting Hesse's pieces remain as they are will result in their inevitable death. Due to the inherent vice of her materials and the current state of degradation, her latex and fiberglass sculptures will fall apart completely. Nevertheless, the pieces left to age might actually be representing her artistic intent. While Hesse never made a formal statement, many interested parties formulated their own ideas as to what she would have intended. *Sans III* was declared unexhibitable due to the sculpture no longer resembling the product of Hesse's studio (Figure 2). In response, Keats claims, "This is a mistake, for *Sans III* is

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<sup>64</sup> Wharton, "The Challenges of Conserving Contemporary Art," 167.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 167.

truer to Hesse's achievement today than it was when she first showed it in 1968.”<sup>66</sup>

Would Hesse agree with Keats? Would she welcome the aging of her sculptures?

Ephemerality and deterioration may not have been Hesse's intent, but it is definitely not unreasonable. Some of Hesse's comments and practices even seem to support this intention; and yet, Hesse never explicitly says she wants the sculptures themselves to be ephemeral. The incongruent nature of Hesse's position on ephemerality makes it difficult for conservators to justify letting her sculptures fall apart. If allowing her latex and fiberglass sculptures to die is not an option, then Hesse's large-scale sculptures beg to be replicated.

Replicating Hesse's sculptures would allow for her artwork to be seen. Alex Potts explains, “For an artwork to endure, some aspect or trace of it has to survive in a reasonably permanent material form.”<sup>67</sup> Ideally, some original form should exist in the deteriorating sculptures for them to be considered as Hesse's work. But, when the original materials are so compromised that they cannot be salvaged, replication may be the best solution. When the decision was made to create exhibition copies at both the Guggenheim and SFMOMA, the conservators were mainly concerned with educating themselves about the material qualities and Hesse's process. That being said, both museums chose to publicly display the exhibition copies alongside the originals in the end.

Unfortunately, creating exhibition copies and replicating Hesse's sculptures raises many complicated ethical questions. As Wharton explains, “unstable works can lead to

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<sup>66</sup> Keats, “The Afterlife of Eva Hesse,” 52-54 (see ch. 2, n. 15).

<sup>67</sup> Alex Potts, “The Enduringly Ephemeral.” *The Tate Papers* Issue 8 (2007), <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/enduringly-ephemeral>.

conservation interventions that challenge ethical practice but are sometimes justifiable.”<sup>68</sup>

The current irrevocable state of the latex and fiberglass in Hesse’s sculptures puts conservators in an uncomfortable position. While replicas and exhibition copies allow for visitors to see what Hesse’s sculptures originally looked like, they also push the boundaries of Hesse’s artistic intent. Wharton explains, “Conflicts arise when the artist’s intent is contrary to the preservation doctrine. This tension makes conserving contemporary art a particularly lively terrain. Debate over meaning turns to action when conservators make decisions and intervene in the physical lives of artworks...”<sup>69</sup> When conservators perform any sort of intervention they are adhering to a particular meaning or intent. If that intent is not explicitly obvious, like in Hesse’s case, conservators then must follow their best professional opinion and interpretation of the intent. Although there is no conclusive agreement on the matter, it can be argued that the current deteriorated state of Hesse’s sculptures does not represent her original artistic idea. In this situation Wharton expounds that, “substitutions may be made for original materials that have degenerated and no longer represent the artist’s intent. However, materials replacement is in direct conflict with the conservation ethic of respecting the integrity of the authentic object.”<sup>70</sup> Hesse’s sculptures are so far gone from what they were originally that it is hard to imagine she would appreciate them as they are today. The materials have decayed and discolored in ways that are undeniably divergent from the initial conception of her art.

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<sup>68</sup> Wharton, “The Challenges of Conserving Contemporary Art,” 167.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 167.

The current state of Hesse's sculpture has led to the skewed way art historians interpret her artistic work in regards to her untimely death. While her artwork may be unexpectedly falling apart today, Hesse's early death is completely unrelated to this. Hesse's poor personal health and her artistic process were separate during her life, and should continue to be kept so in scholarly discussions. While the replication of her artwork may push conservators' personal ethics to the limit, the outcome will better represent Hesse's artistic intentions. With copies and replicas, people will have access to what Hesse's sculptures looked like originally, giving people the opportunity to understand and interpret her art as designed.

Replications cannot be created with the intention to substitute Hesse's own artwork. The handmade irregularities that she emphasized are integral to each piece's integrity. Potts claims that the material processes that took place at the moment of realization were a part of its very substance; and therefore a replica, in the substantive sense, would be impossible to produce—any attempt is at best a re-enactment or experiment.<sup>71</sup> The replication process and presentation of a Hesse sculpture is similar to a re-enactment of a historical event. While the participants may be doing everything exactly as it occurred in the past, the resulting performance will never be the same as the original. The participants are different, the current world events are different, and most importantly the attitudes towards the re-enactment are wholly different than when the real event took place. Therefore, a replica of a Hesse sculpture cannot stand in as her original work. The conservator should not take credit as the artist or for the artistic vision in the replications.

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<sup>71</sup> Alex Potts, "The Enduringly Ephemeral."

Hesse and her artwork cannot—and should not— be separated. In the interview with Nemser, Hesse divulges, “Andy Warhol...He is the most artist that you can be. His art and his statement and his person are so equivalent. He and his work are the same person. It is what I want to be, the most Eva can be as an artist and as a person.”<sup>72</sup> Interestingly enough, Warhol often was not the actual executor of his own artwork, while Hesse stressed her personal interaction with her artwork above all else. Regardless, Hesse saw Warhol as a true embodiment of his work and she sought to have *herself* and *her work* indistinguishably united. Because of this, it is impossible to separate Hesse’s work from Hesse the person. Replications or exhibition copies must be differentiated from the original works, as they cannot hold the same effect or meaning as Hesse’s own art.

Without Hesse’s personal touch, her process, and her idea the pieces cannot be assigned as “Hesses.” With that understood, when copies are presented to the public, they must be unmistakably labeled as such. To further underscore the distinction, photographs of the original should be displayed alongside the copy. This arrangement would allow for the public to have an accurate view Hesse’s work.

Replicating Hesse’s sculptures is the best solution considering the current declining condition of her artworks. With attention to certain stipulations, everyone can enjoy the copies of Hesse’s artwork for years to come. The sculptures that are in such a degraded condition and are no longer able to be exhibited properly should be the first to be replicated. The replicas should be approved by Hesse’s estate, created following her original procedures, documented as copies, given a date based on the replication completion, and accessioned by the institution as an official replica or copy.

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<sup>72</sup> Nemser, *A Conversation with Eva Hesse*, 20.

The replicated object will then enter Hesse's body of work as a replication and not as her own art. As curator Sebastiano Barassi, proposes in his article "Modern Cult of Replicas: A Rieglian Analysis of Values in Replication," a replica enters the world and with it a discussion around its own meaning and interpretation emerges.<sup>73</sup> The replicas will acquire their own historical and age related value. When creating a replica or an exhibition copy, the conservator must understand that the resulting object will enter into a unique part of Hesse's art historical canon. The replica cannot replace the original artwork, but it will have its own value as a representation of the original. The complicated nature of replicas means that this is not a perfect solution to every conservation problem. In Hesse's case, replicas will serve as a close visual likeness of her original works. The replicas have value in the fact that they will give the public the rare opportunity to experience Hesse's large latex and fiberglass sculptures as they once appeared.

Hesse's large-scale latex and fiberglass sculptures present an extreme case for the conservation and preservation of contemporary art. At her death, Hesse left a body of work made from unstable materials without any guidelines as to how to preserve them. Her latex and fiberglass sculptures are proving to be ephemeral even though she did not specifically want them to be so. In an ideal situation, the artist would leave an official statement addressing the long-term preservation of their works. In reality, very few artists actually do this. Due to Hesse's untimely death, she Hesse did not have the opportunity to

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<sup>73</sup> Sebastiano Barassi, "The Modern Cult of Replicas: A Rieglian Analysis of Values in Replication." *The Tate Papers* Issue 8 (2007): Accessed October 26, 2014. <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/modern-cult-replicas-rieglian-analysis-values-replication>.



give any declaration of intent for her sculptures. The inherent vice of her materials severely limit the conservation intervention possibilities. The lack of undisputed artistic intent and the current state of Hesse's sculptures, provide conservators two plausible options: leave her works as they are or create exhibition copies. What is known about Hesse and her artistic intent suggests that creating exhibition copies to present to the public would best preserve her sculptural works.

## Conclusion

The deteriorated condition of Eva Hesse's sculptures presents a myriad of problems. Hesse cherished both latex and fiberglass for their specific qualities, but these same characteristics became the inherent vice of her sculpture's structural stability. So although she wanted her artworks to last, they are not able to. Hesse's sculptures are prime examples of how contemporary art forces conservators to rethink the methods and practices of conservation intervention. When the original materials are compromised beyond repair, alternative conservation methods must be considered. Although in traditional conservation the goal is to maintain the original authentic object, in cases like Hesse's latex and fiberglass sculptures, replication becomes a viable option.

While creating replicas of Hesse's most drastically deteriorated sculptures may seem like an inappropriate decision, the current state of her artworks is so far removed from the originals that in actuality the replicas better represent her vision. Replication is not always the best option, but in cases like Hesse's, where the original materials are no longer able to support the object and convey the artists' intent, then copies become a necessary alternative. By displaying the replicas alongside images of the original and current sculptures, exhibition patrons are able to get a holistic view of Hesse's work.

The conservation challenges of contemporary art and ideas surrounding replication discussed throughout this thesis have implications far beyond the reaches of Hesse's latex and fiberglass sculptures. Hesse's large-scale sculptures represent an extreme in contemporary art conservation, highlighting problems and solutions that can be related to other artworks. From unclear intentions to unstable materials, Hesse's latex and

fiberglass sculptures are a conservation nightmare. But, the questions raised, the methods revisited, and the conclusions drawn about Hesse's sculptures can be applied to many other types of artwork, contemporary or not.

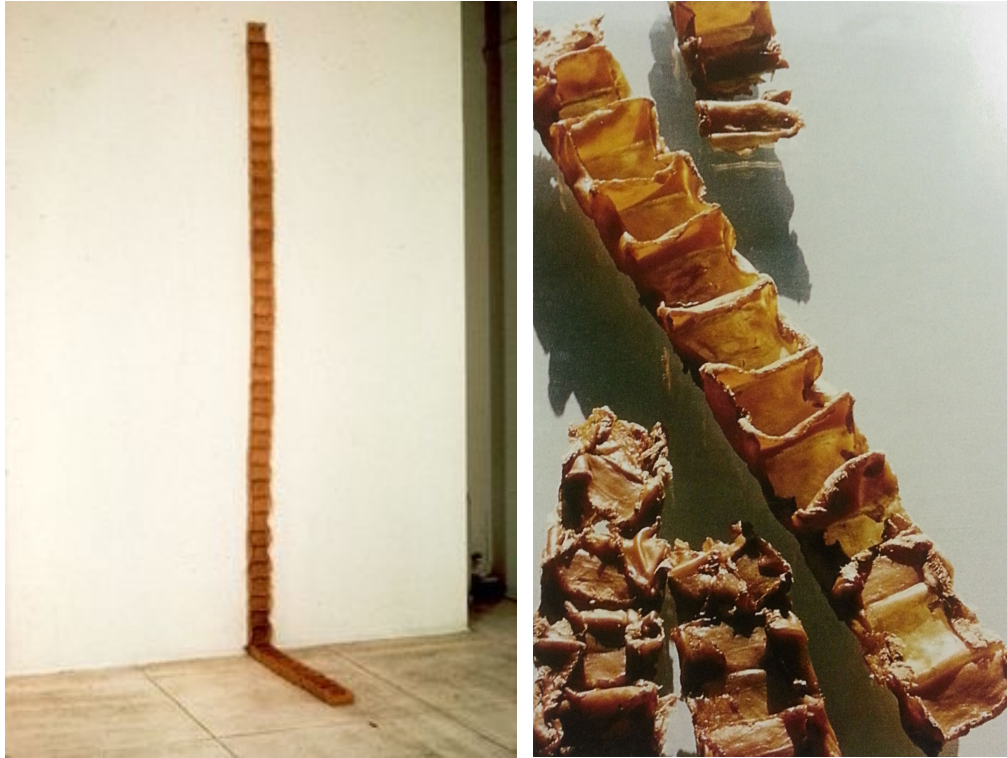
Artists are going to continue to make artwork and it is going to continue to fall apart. Materials are invented every day, and each day artists will continue to experiment with these products in order to express themselves. The fast production rate of materials and the quick responses by artists make it nearly impossible for conservators to keep up. One conservator simply cannot be an expert on every material, but unfortunately the field today demands it. Professional art conservation lends itself to a life of learning, of research, and of understanding new techniques, materials, processes, and approaches to art objects. Not only is the field of conservation constantly having to adapt and adjust in response to the changing art world, but conservators have to change their perspectives and methods as well.

The best way for conservators to get ahead of deterioration is through preventative conservation. Whenever an institution acquires a new piece of artwork, the conservators must administer a condition report. During this initial observation, the conservator should research the composition and properties of the materials, especially with modern and contemporary artworks. If there is little known about the materials or they are unidentifiable, the conservator should consult with a conservation scientist to run tests on the materials. Once the conservation team members more deeply understand the materials, they can store and care for the object to the best of their institution's ability. Institutions that acquire an object by a living artist have the fortunate opportunity to interview the artist personally. The conservation and curatorial departments should

discuss and record the continued care and preservation guidelines of the object directly with the artist. This document should be placed in the object file for future generations to reference.

The realm of contemporary art is an exciting and confusing field for conservators. Contemporary art poses many questions, creates new challenges, and requires difficult decisions to be made by conservators. Each object demands a different conservation intervention. Conservation is no longer a straightforward formulaic procedure, but an opportunity for conservators to embark on an ever changing adventure.

## Appendix of Figures

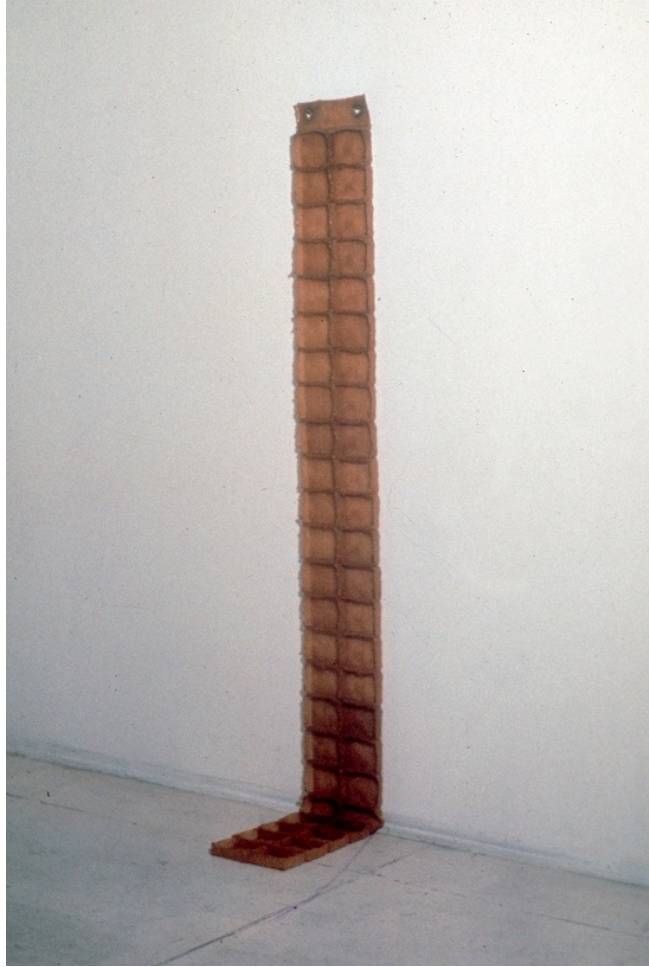


**Figure 1-2.** Eva Hesse, *Sans III*, 1969. Latex and metal grommets. 156 x 3 x 2 in. The Estate of Eva Hesse. Courtesy Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zurich. (Left: work newly completed; right: detail in current condition). From: Sussman, Elisabeth, ed. *Eva Hesse*. San Francisco: New Haven: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: Yale University Press, 2002. Figure 122-23.

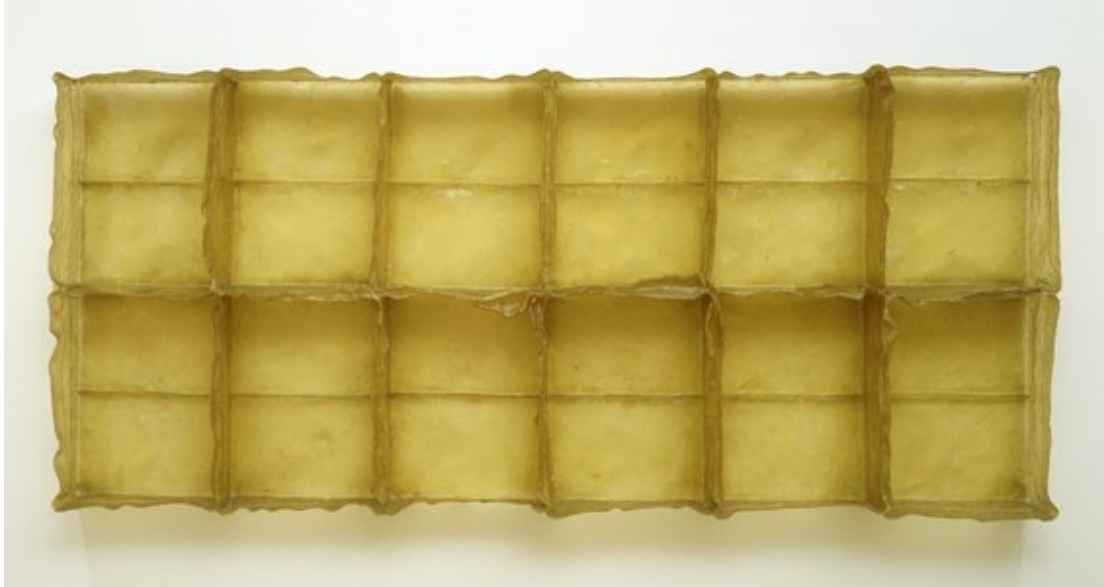


**Figure 3.** Zoe Leonard, *Strange Fruit (for David)*, 1992-1997. Orange, banana, grapefruit, lemon, and avocado peels with thread, zippers, buttons, sinew, needles, plastic, wire, stickers, fabric, and trim wax. Dimensions vary by installation.

Philadelphia Museum of Art. From: Philadelphia Museum of Art, <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/92277.html> (accessed April 15, 2015).



**Figure 4.** Eva Hesse, *Sans I*, 1967-68. Latex with metal grommets. 72 x 7 x 1 in.  
Washington State University Museum of Art, Pullman.  
From: Hauser & Wirth, <http://www.hauserwirth.com/artists/34/eva-hesse/images-clips/56/> (accessed April 15, 2015).



**Figure 5.** Eva Hesse, *Sans II*, 1968. Fiberglass and polyester resin. 5 units, each 38 x 86 x 6 1/8 in. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. From: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, <http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artwork/30187> (accessed April 15, 2015)



**Figure 6.** Eva Hesse, exhibition copy of *Sans II*, 2002 displayed next to original *Sans II*, 1968. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. From: Barger, Michelle. "Thoughts on Replication and the Work of Eva Hesse." *The Tate Papers*, Issue 8 (2007). Accessed October 26, 2014. <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/thoughts-on-replication-and-work-eva-hesse>





**Figure 7.** Eva Hesse, Test piece for *Contingent*, 1969. Fiberglass and polyester resin; latex over cheesecloth. 144 x 44 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gift of the Collectors Committee. From: National Gallery of Art, <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/art-object-page.97499.html> (accessed April 15, 2015)



**Figure 8.** Eva Hesse, *Contingent*, 1969. Fiberglass and polyester resin; latex over cheesecloth. 8 units, each 114 to 168 x 36 to 48 in. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. From: National Gallery of Australia, <http://nga.gov.au/international/catalogue/Detail.cfm?IRN=49353> (accessed April 15, 2015)



**Figure 9-10.** Eva Hesse, *Expanded Expansion*, 1969. Reinforced fiberglass poles and rubberized cheesecloth. 3 units, overall: 122 x 360 in. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, Family of Eva Hesse.

(Top: On view at the Guggenheim; below: Hesse with *Expanded Expansion* at the 1969 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York)

Figure 9 from: The Guggenheim Museum, <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artwork/1648> (accessed April 15, 2015).

Figure 10 from: Sussman, Elisabeth, ed. *Eva Hesse*. San Francisco: New Haven: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: Yale University Press, 2002. Figure 119.



**Figure 11.** Dan Flavin, *"monument" I for V. Tatlin*, 1964. Fluorescent lights and metal fixtures. 8 x 23 1/8 x 4 1/2 in. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of UBS. Courtesy of the Estate of Dan Flavin / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. From: Museum of Modern Art, [http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object\\_id=81337](http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=81337) (accessed April 15, 2015)

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