

**Exhibition Related to Ephemeral Art Practices:  
Philosophical and Practical Issues Presented by Organic-Based Works of Art**

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## ABSTRACT

Exhibition Related to Ephemeral Art Practices: Philosophical and Practical Issues  
Presented by Organic-Based Works of Art

Sara Serban

Postwar artists have been using ephemeral materials such as food, bodily fluids, and contemporary, yet constantly changing technological devices previously not intended for artistic use. What are curators and conservators to do when faced with a work that is meant to decay and deteriorate, or that has been destined to be consumed and constantly remade? At the time of her death in 1970, many of Eva Hesse's latex sculptures had already started to deteriorate, and at present many cannot be exhibited. While aware that the latex was not a stable material, she continued to incorporate it into many of her works. Questions remain as to her intent for these sculptures. Zoe Leonard's installation piece *Strange Fruit (for David)* (1992-97) did not begin as a deteriorating piece, but upon its completion, the artist decided that she did not wish to have it preserved, and the slow decay of the organic elements are central to the idea of the work. Situated within the artistic practices current at the time that Hesse and Leonard created these works, this thesis will present a discussion on works of art that represent both planned and unplanned impermanence, and the options available to curators and conservators when making decisions about preservation and exhibition.

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## Introduction

“The creation of an artwork is only the beginning of its life.”<sup>1</sup> With these words, Barry Munitz, president of the J. Paul Getty Trust, began his discussion on the provenance of a work of art. Once the artist has finished the piece, it will pass through one of a series of channels, most likely involving a dealer, a collector, a curator and a conservator.<sup>2</sup> The use of the word ‘life’ also refers to the actual physical changes that will inevitably take place, and the effect these will have on the aesthetic of and meaning behind the work. In reference to contemporary art, this process is further complicated by the range of materials artists are now using in their artworks - materials that were not originally meant for use in the production of art. Many contemporary artists are incorporating hitherto untested permutations and combinations of organic and industrial materials, and in some cases the instability resulting in the breakdown or deterioration of the work is intentional. Though a relatively new problem facing curators and conservators, the rapid deterioration of some contemporary artworks has necessitated a new direction in scholarship and discussion regarding not only the physical manifestations of such problems and their material solutions but the ethical guidelines that allow for certain interventions to take place.

Due to the current nature of many of these works, artists have also become involved in the debate. Artists are being asked to discuss their thoughts on the preservation (if

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Munitz, “Preface,” in Ed. Corzo, Miguel Angel, *Mortality immortality?: The legacy of 20th-century art*, (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1999), vii.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

applicable) and lifespan of their work. Questions as to what defines the original, what constitutes a copy, how substitutions can or may be made in the future if an element of the work becomes damaged or obsolete (especially in the case of installation art) are expected. Borrowing from the idea of the certificates used by minimalist and conceptual artists, a piece is often accompanied by documentation containing installation and storage specifications, in addition to archival copies of some aspects of the work (especially in those pieces using newer technology, as with video or sound installations). The incorporation of certificates and other written documentation as a way of defining the work has resulted in the “establishment of a market for potentially ephemeral works and in giving artists a certain freedom from the idea of art-making as the production of lasting objects.”<sup>3</sup> As such, a body of law, referred to as moral rights has also helped to move the view of the artwork beyond that of simply a commodity and posits that the integrity of the artwork is based on the idea of authorship.<sup>4</sup> Collaboration between curators and conservators is becoming standard practice in many major institutions and respect for artistic intent is, more than ever, the point at which the discourse begins.<sup>5</sup>

As art historian Martha Buskirk has written,

Over a work’s history, decisions about how it will be presented necessarily determine the spectator’s experiential understanding of it. In the case of work made from unfixed or changeable elements, interpretation is not simply a matter of a possibly varied response to an essentially stable physical object; instead, a prior stage of interpretation can have dramatic implications for the configuration of the object to be perceived. Furthermore, the process of interpretation that shapes decisions about display as well as long-term care and preservation is frequently presented as a reading of artistic intent – a reading based on assumptions about the artist’s common practice as well as written statements and

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<sup>3</sup> Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

documentation. Over the life of a work, questions about display and preservation require interpretation of exactly what constitutes the work and who is authorized to make decisions that will shape how it is received.<sup>6</sup>

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This type of scrutiny is not limited to contemporary art. Traditional works also demand similar consideration. How is one to approach the discolouration of the pigments Joshua Reynolds used for representing the flesh tones in his portraits? In his attempt to imitate the surface effects of old master paintings, he experimented with various media, including balsams, resins, drying oils, egg, volatile plant oils and wax; the resulting flesh tones have since turned a deathly grey-blue. While it is most likely that he would not have wanted to leave such a dramatic change in tone, this does not necessarily authorize the overpainting or retouch of his paintings. Another attempt at imitating techniques found in old master paintings is found in works by Albert Pinkham Ryder. Ryder's use of fast-drying paint over slower-drying paint, or the addition of a paint layer on top of a wet varnish layer – combined with a working timeline of up to ten years per painting - has resulted in the darkening and cracking of his works. The subsequent fragility of their surfaces has resulted in the fact that many of his works are not shown. As with Reynolds' paintings, the early deterioration of Ryder's works resulted in retouching almost from the moment that the works were finished. More recently, the black and white paintings of Paul-Émile Borduas now have large cracks in the black paint as a result of the different drying times of the white and black paints. Surface texture is often discussed in relation to the paintings by Vincent van Gogh. Van Gogh's intentions for the impasto of his paint were well documented in letters to his brother Theo, in which he wrote that he painted thickly in order to obtain what he referred to as a "solidity of

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<sup>6</sup> Buskirk, 14.

colour”.<sup>7</sup> Once the painted surface had dried sufficiently, he recommended passing a razor blade over the surface of the paint, thereby shaving off some of the paint and producing a greater intensity of colour. He was also not careful when transporting his paintings – in some instances the painted surface bears the imprint from another painting that was placed against it while in transit. Van Gogh also consulted with Paul Gauguin, who recommended covering the paint surface with newspaper and heating it with a hot iron. Once the surface had cooled again, the paper was wetted and removed, resulting in a smooth paint surface. Gauguin also recommended this treatment as a way of consolidating any loose paint flakes. In many of these cases, one can assume that the artists did not anticipate the resulting effects of their experiments with media; however, while it was not likely that the creation of a lasting artwork was secondary to the actual act of producing the artwork, there is no way of knowing for certain that they may have changed the ways in which they made their paintings if they had foreseen the results. Those entrusted with the care and preservation of traditional artworks have had to establish certain parameters within which to define the intrinsic nature of the work.

Similarly, when confronted with an artwork made from ephemeral materials, several questions present themselves. (1) What does it mean to accept a work of art on its own terms? (2) If an artist makes his/her intentions known, are these to be viewed as inarguable facts or merely suggested guidelines to be used when assessing all the factors involved? (3) Should a work of art be left alone and preserved, or should it be restored to

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<sup>7</sup> M. Kirby Talley, Jr., “The Original Intent of the Artist,” in Price, Nicholas Stanley, M. Kirby Talley Jr., and Alessandra Mellucco Vaccaro, eds. *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1996), 171.

its original state? (4) Is one to preserve the "essence" of the work or the exact object, and are these two concepts inseparable? (5) When, if ever, should one intervene in the normal aging process? (6) Is a work an historical artifact, reminiscent of a particular time, or is it dynamic in its existence? (7) How does one view an artwork meant to decay over time, in regard to museum or gallery acquisition?

As a way of situating these questions, one must first understand the artistic intent behind the incorporation of certain media and the meaning these materials impart to the piece. As such, the idea of a core meaning for an artwork is a difficult and elusive concept open to conflicting interpretations. For example, psychoanalytic art theory has questioned the notion of the artist as that source best equipped to provide a unified, coherent reading of the work through a conscious attempt to convey his/her specific intent and that that message is the only true meaning behind the work. Instead, as Griselda Pollock in particular has demonstrated, psychoanalytic theory questions the contradictions presented by the subconscious, and about how the subconscious can direct the artist in directions not originally planned.<sup>8</sup> Sigmund Freud wrote two vastly different interpretations of Michelangelo's *Moses*. In the first interpretation, Moses, on coming down from Mount Sinai, encounters the Hebrews worshipping a golden calf. Their worship of a pagan idol arouses his anger, and the moment depicted in the sculpture occurs when Moses is about to rise up and smash the Tablets. The second interpretation is that Moses is not about to rise up. Instead, "to preserve a higher purpose, he has overcome his rage, which is both expressed and suppressed through muscle tension. Intellect and civilization thus triumph

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<sup>8</sup> See Griselda Pollock's essay "The Image in Psychoanalysis," in Griselda Pollock, ed., *Psychoanalysis and the Image*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 25.

over primitive impulse.”<sup>9</sup> Other perspectives, such as feminist, gay and ethnic art history, have also held up as examples certain masterpieces that are then reinterpreted according to the specific methodology employed, and thus demonstrate how such works were used to represent the status quo, thereby continuing to marginalize alternatives to these ideologies. Peter Paul Rubens’s painting *Susanna and the Elders* is an example of changing interpretations of meaning. As it is impossible to know whether or not Rubens’s was saying intentional things about women in his art, it is certain that the painting has acquired new meanings compared with those that it may have had in the seventeenth century. Regardless, the feminist interpretation introduced in the second half of the twentieth century is more important to art historians today than what may have been the original idea behind the work. The question of meaning is further complicated by Roland Barthes in his famously phrased literary theory regarding the death of the author and the birth of the reader, in which the responsibility of interpretation of the written work is passed from the author to the person reading the text, and that there are therefore as many interpretations as there are readers.

While one may disagree with a given interpretation of a specific artwork, when attempting to conserve the work, those responsible must still assess a work of art based on its own merit as a physical entity. Interpretations of meaning often change as a result of the methodology applied, yet the material aspect of the piece remains the same. Paul Schimmel, the chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, has discussed the term “material culture” and its relevance to the importance we place upon

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<sup>9</sup> Laurie Schneider Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 157.

man-made objects. In his words, “We are compelled primarily by a love of the object itself and its power to express the emotion and thinking of its maker – whether the object is only a trace of the action that produced it, a remnant of the work it once was, or a kind of cultural relic.”<sup>10</sup>

While one of the traditional concerns of artists was that their artworks not change, they still accepted the inevitability of aging and its effects on said works. Contemporary artists’ engagement with and exploration of unorthodox materials in the pursuit of an artistic end has become a common theme. Conservator Carol Mancusi-Ungaro has stated that “experimentation for visual effect is a primary aspect of creativity and, as such, it is not only an artist’s prerogative but his/her prescript. In part for this reason, the tone and concerns of modern-day artists often reflect those of their forebears.”<sup>11</sup> Further to this sentiment, Mancusi-Ungaro has added that one may accept that the practical manifestation of the creative endeavour and those engaged in such work have not changed; rather, it is their cultural context that has.<sup>12</sup>

For the introduction to the 1999 symposium *Modern Art: Who Cares?* in Amsterdam, project manager at the Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art, Dionne Sillé, has

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Schimmel, “Intentionality and Performance-Based Art,” in Ed. Miguel Angel Corzo, *Mortality Immortality? The Legacy of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Art*, (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1999), 136.

<sup>11</sup> Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, “Original Intent: The Artist’s Voice,” in Eds., Hummelen, IJsbrand and Dionne Sillé, *Modern Art: Who Cares?: An Interdisciplinary Research Project and International Symposium on the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art*. (Amsterdam: Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art: Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, 1999), 393.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

stated that “along with the implementation of unorthodox materials and combinations thereof, the materials themselves may have a diversity of meaning.”<sup>13</sup> Conservator Christian Scheidemann has further elaborated on this theme by saying that the materials themselves create a type of language and are often central to the meaning implicit in the piece.<sup>14</sup> Museums are paying heed to artistic intent in an ever-increasing fashion, though in some instances this may seem counterintuitive. Anselm Kiefer’s works – both the large-scale lead pieces and the large paintings – are often cited as examples of unstable artworks. Kiefer studied with Joseph Beuys and inherited from him “a profound sense of the inherent quality of materials and the possibilities they possess as raw, malleable substances for his use.”<sup>15</sup> Kiefer sees his works as constantly changing, and welcomes such changes to his works. In his own words, he “choose[s] materials which contain and will give off energy when they are used.”<sup>16</sup> With this in mind, it is still difficult when one sees the numerous morsels of paint that fall from his paintings throughout the duration of an exhibition. Kiefer, however, is not distressed by this. It is his opinion that if the loss is significant enough, it should just be re-adhered to the canvas. His use of lead is also problematic because the material is not protected by any type of coating, and is prone to

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<sup>13</sup> Dionne Sillé, “Introduction,” in Eds., Hummelen, IJsbrand and Dionne Sillé, *Modern Art: Who Cares?: An Interdisciplinary Research Project and International Symposium on the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art*. (Amsterdam: Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art: Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, 1999), 14.

<sup>14</sup> Christian Scheidemann, “Material as Language in Contemporary Art”, in Ed. Stephen Melville, *The Lure of the Object*, (Williamstown, Massachusetts, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute: Yale University Press, 2005), 76.

<sup>15</sup> Albert Albano, “Art in Transition,” in Eds. Price, Nicholas Stanley, M. Kirby Talley Jr., and Alessandra Mellucco Vaccaro, eds. *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1996), 182.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

lead corrosion. For Kiefer, the lead possesses the concept of an alchemical change and he uses it partially for this abstract reference.

Piero Manzoni's white canvases from his *Achromes* series, dating from 1957-1958, are yet another example of artistic intent moving away from what an owner may choose. Manzoni has required that the pieces be either cleaned or re-painted as they age. For him, the works should retain their pristine white surfaces. Unfortunately, many collectors balk at this notion; for them, the whole concept of the artist's autograph is found in the original, unadulterated object. Guggenheim Museum conservator Carol Stringari has referred to this as the "fetishization... [of artworks] based on an inherent nature to memorialize and sanctify" such objects.<sup>17</sup>

In structuring my thesis, I will be framing the aforementioned questions using as case studies the works of two very different artists. Chapter One examines the latex sculptures Eva Hesse created in the period from 1967 to 1970. Hesse's death from a brain tumour in 1970 at the age of thirty-four has left a litany of questions regarding her intent for her pieces. Her use of latex, against recommendations from her contemporaries, was a result of her desire to see the visual effects created by these materials. The natural latex pieces have deteriorated to the point that the museums and galleries which have these works in their collections have been forced to stop exhibiting them, instead opting for cold, dark

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<sup>17</sup> Carol Stringari, "Installations and Problems of Preservation," in Eds., Hummelen, IJsbrand and Dionne Sillé, *Modern Art: Who Cares?: An Interdisciplinary Research Project and International Symposium on the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art*. (Amsterdam: Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art: Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, 1999), 278.

storage areas with carefully controlled temperature, humidity and light levels. Hesse was aware of the problems with her choice of various media, though unfortunately she never clearly addressed the issue and has gone on record with conflicting opinions about these problems. In preparation for a retrospective of Hesse's works at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2002, some of the artist's friends, one of her former assistants, as well as various curators and conservators, gathered to discuss her intent and what, if anything, could be done to try to arrest the continuing deterioration of the latex. The discussion of her works is situated in the minimalist and conceptual ideologies that were prevalent while Hesse was creating the sculptures. The concept of the anti-form in her works, both physically and conceptually, has contributed to the debate on possible solutions.

Countering this approach to the ephemeral, Chapter Two focuses on Zoe Leonard's 1992-1997 installation *Strange Fruit (for David)*. Composed of over three hundred sewn fruit peels, the installation is still a work in progress, as Leonard's wish for the piece is that it be left to decay completely. On the occasion of the piece's acquisition by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1998, the artist's dealer, Paula Cooper, suggested to Leonard that she meet with a conservator in order to try to arrest the decay of the fruit peels. While originally in agreement with this plan, Leonard eventually changed her mind, and decided that the concept of permanence did not fit with the work and its meaning as a memorial to her friend, artist David Wojnarowicz. In spite of this decision, the Philadelphia Museum continued in its bid to acquire the work, thus calling into question the role of the museum regarding the preservation and exhibition of its works.

The changing definition of the museum will be further examined through a brief inventory of other contemporary artworks composed of organic materials whose very inclusion was to convey a sense of the impermanent. Leonard's photographic oeuvre from 1991 to 2007 will be briefly discussed as a way of situating *Strange Fruit*. In her collaboration with a conservator and his proposal for *Strange Fruit*, Leonard eventually authorized the preservation of twenty-five of the dried peels to be used as a record of the original state of the piece. She has compared these preserved fruit peels with the concept of the archival photograph, in some sense assigning a similar function to their placement within the work. In order to contextualize Leonard's incorporation of organic materials into her artwork, this chapter will also include a brief survey of other artists using similar materials and the relevance of these decisions to the meaning of the works.

The decision to use Hesse and Leonard as case studies for the purpose of this thesis was based on a number of factors. Both artists chose to incorporate organic materials into their artistic production, though the associations with the term organic are different for each artist. The latex that Hesse used falls under the chemical definition of organic in that it is a carbon-based substance. In order to obtain the material, it must be extracted from the rubber plant in the form of sap. The fruit peels that Leonard used evoke references to the term organic as it is often used today when describing food that falls under strict regulations regarding production and harvest. Hesse's organic material is often used for industrial purposes, whereas Leonard's is meant for consumption as food. In addition to these two differences, I found that the case studies allowed for interesting contrasts into the intended life of the various artworks discussed. Hesse's intended

lifespan for her pieces is still not entirely understood, and this has provided the forum for considerable debate every time a museum or gallery wishes to exhibit some of her latex sculptures. Because Hesse is no longer able to contribute to a discussion on her oeuvre, I felt that this provided an interesting example of how a museum or gallery confronts such issues when clear answers are no longer available. Conversely, Leonard originally started to investigate a way to preserve her fruit piece, yet changed her mind when she realized that its eventual decay was central to its meaning. In contrast to Hesse, Leonard continues to provide input as to the installation and documentation of *Strange Fruit* throughout its deterioration. Initially, Hesse and Leonard were chosen as two discrete cases, however further research revealed that Leonard had been inspired by Hesse's methods and aesthetics. I also felt that the two examples complemented each other by approaching the questions investigated in this thesis from opposing directions. Compared with the continued interest in Hesse's latex pieces from a curatorial and conservation perspective, Leonard's work *Strange Fruit* has in some ways been considered an oxymoron to the whole concept of art conservation. It is the opinion of some that a work that is meant to decay precludes the notion of conservation, and for this reason I feel that a discussion of exactly how and why a conservator would be interested in such a work is important. In part, this thesis attempts to explain how such a shift in scholarship and attitude has changed the discipline of art conservation and its relation to exhibition practices as they exist today.

For both of these chapters, I will be examining the cited artworks through an incorporation of Nelson Goodman's ideas on the visual art forms of sculpture and

painting which are – according to Goodman - autographic. In *The Languages of Art*, he has divided the arts into two categories – autographic and allographic. Painting and sculpture are considered autographic in that no replica, no matter how accurate, can count as a genuine instance of the original. In contrast to this idea, allographic art forms, such as literature, can be reproduced, providing that the words or spelling of the original manuscript are maintained, thereby resulting in a genuine embodiment of that artwork.<sup>18</sup> Though not mutually exclusive, these two categories differ in their approach to the position of the artist, and one wonders if they can be reconciled in the case of ephemeral art, thus raising the question as to how much of the artist’s original signature remains. One is confronted with the idea of the “aura” of the original, as put forth by Walter Benjamin.<sup>19</sup>

In researching my thesis, I found that the body of work written on Eva Hesse’s oeuvre is nothing short of staggering. There have been countless methodological approaches to her work. For this thesis, I focused on Hesse’s use of materials, and her intent behind such decisions. I found the two catalogues written by Elizabeth Sussman for the 2002 and 2006 exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art<sup>20</sup> and The Jewish Museum in New York<sup>21</sup>, respectively, to be invaluable sources for insightful discussion on such artistic decisions and their subsequent consequences. The 2002 catalogue is replete with

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<sup>18</sup> Nelson Goodman, *The Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 113.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 221.

<sup>20</sup> Elisabeth Sussman, ed. *Eva Hesse*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> Elisabeth Sussman and Fred Wasserman, eds. *Eva Hesse Sculpture*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006).

input from not only curators and conservators, but also from other artists and friends who knew the artist intimately, and continue to be involved in making the best decisions possible when caring for Hesse's legacy. The catalogue from the 2006 exhibition offers important information on the continuing debate over the appropriateness of exhibiting some of the fragile latex works. Lucy Lippard's 1976 monograph on Hesse<sup>22</sup>, which Lippard viewed as a memorial to the artist, has also proven to be a particularly important source of information stemming from a period immediately after Hesse's death. Lippard curated one of the first major shows that Hesse participated in, and it was through this that Lippard came to know the artist as a friend. Lippard was also friends with other artists, such as Robert Smithson and Sol LeWitt, who worked with Hesse and understood what she was doing with her art. Bill Barrette, Hesse's former assistant, published a catalogue raisonné in 1989.<sup>23</sup> Prompted by the recent death, in 1987, of Victor Ganz, one of the largest private collectors of Hesse's work, and the passing in 1985 of Donald Droll, Hesse's dealer from the Fischbach Gallery in New York, Barrette felt that the catalogue was dedicated as much to them as to Hesse. The catalogue was to fill the void of information that had been lost when Ganz and Droll died. Barrette had worked closely with Hesse in the last year of her life, and continued to install her work after her death. His insight into the fabrication and installation of her works is extremely important. Rosalind Krauss - first with her 1979 essay<sup>24</sup> on Hesse's *Contingent* (1969), and later, in

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<sup>22</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, (New York: New York University Press, 1976).

<sup>23</sup> Bill Barrette, *Eva Hesse Sculpture: catalogue raisonné*, (New York: Timkin Press, 1989).

<sup>24</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, "Eva Hesse: Contingent," in Rosalind E. Krauss, *Bachelors*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 91-100.

1993, in her own book *The Optical Unconscious*<sup>25</sup> - discusses Hesse's shift from painting to sculpture as a sideways move, or what she terms the "anamorphous". Briony Fer, in her 1994 article for *Art History*<sup>26</sup> and her essay for Sussman's 2002 catalogue<sup>27</sup> has written extensively on what has been termed the "part-object" and how the changing nature of Hesse's chosen materials were important to her for just that reason: they conveyed a sense of temporality and with it a shift from beauty to ugliness.

The research for the chapter on Zoe Leonard followed a completely different trajectory. Due in part to the fact that Leonard's work is considerably more recent than Hesse's, the accrued body of research is much smaller. Anna Blume's 1997 interview with Leonard for the catalogue for the *Vienna Secession* in Vienna in 1997<sup>28</sup>, provides a considerable amount of important information pertaining to Leonard's activist pursuits, and therefore about the impetus behind her works. This is complemented by an article published in 2002 in *October* magazine entitled "Artists' Questionnaire" and involves the participation of twenty-one artists, discussing their work, inspiration and working methods.<sup>29</sup> Leonard gives considerable insight into her work as a photographer, equating the archival nature of her photographs with a modern version of the still life. Much of Leonard's work

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<sup>25</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).

<sup>26</sup> Briony Fer, "Bordering on blank: Eva Hesse and Minimalism," *Art History* 17 (September 1994), 424-49.

<sup>27</sup> Briony Fer, "The Work of Salvage: Eva Hesse's Latex Works," in Ed. Elisabeth Sussman, *Eva Hesse*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 78-95.

<sup>28</sup> Anna Blume, *Secession: Zoe Leonard*, (Vienna: Wiener Secession, 1997).

<sup>29</sup> Baker, George; Rosler, Martha; Serra, Richard; Kentridge, William; Byrne, Gerard; Dean, Tacita; Burr, Tom; Huyghe, Pierre; Kolbowski, Silvia; Barry, Judith; Gordon, Douglas; Roberts, Liisa; Buckingham, Matthew; Koester, Joachim; Davenport, Nancy; Norman, Nils; Muller, Christian Philipp; Green, Renee; Durham, Jimmie; Camnitzer, Luis; Burch, Noel; Sekula, Allan; Leonard, Zoe, eds., "Artist questionnaire: 21 responses" *October* 100, (Spring 2002), 6-97.

consists of photographs of people or places the artist has compiled as a way of commenting on both the human subjects portrayed in the photographs and the changing urban landscape in which they are situated. The concept of memory is important to Leonard, and she refers to the tradition of still life as a theme central to her work. In yet another interview by Beth Dungan in *Discourse* magazine in 2002, Leonard again discusses her photographic work and her incorporation of natural, organic materials into her installation pieces.<sup>30</sup> There are also various other interviews with Leonard that are similar in scope and material.<sup>31</sup> Lastly, Ann Temkin, the Muriel and Philip Berman Curator of Twentieth-Century Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, has written an essay discussing the process by which the museum acquired Leonard's ephemeral installation *Strange Fruit (for David)*.<sup>32</sup> She discusses the changing role of the museum, as well as that of both curators and conservators when confronted with such decisions.

For the purposes of this thesis, I did not address two methodological approaches often associated with Eva Hesse and her works. While the application of a feminist discourse to Hesse's oeuvre is certainly a logical and fruitful way of looking at her works, there has already been a significant contribution to this effect. One can certainly look at Hesse in relation to her male colleagues from the period of 1967 to 1970 and see how the fact that

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<sup>30</sup>Beth Dungan, "An Interview with Zoe Leonard," *Discourse* 24.2 (Spring 2002), 70-85.

<sup>31</sup> See also Laura Cottingham, "Interview with Zoe Leonard," *Online Journal of Contemporary Art*, <http://www.jca-online.com/leonard.html> and Zoe Leonard, "A Thousand Words: Zoe Leonard Talks about her Recent Work." *Artforum* (January 1999), 101.

<sup>32</sup> Ann Temkin, "Strange Fruit," in Miguel Angel Corzo, ed., *Mortality Immortality? The Legacy of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Art*, Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1999, 45-50.

she was a woman may have influenced her artmaking; much has already been said in relation to Hesse's art production compared with her male colleagues. Within the minimalist movement, Hesse's works do stand out as something other than the industrial, anonymous works of artists such as Donald Judd. Her use of repetition still conveyed a sense of the personal, and many have attributed this to the fact that she was a woman. That said, in formulating the discussion on Hesse, I was looking at her works as objects, because for the theme of the chapter, this was the most important point. I believe that situating her works in the feminist context would have created too much of a diversion from the main point the chapter on her work is trying to convey.

The other methodology, that of the "mythology" of Eva Hesse, which is based upon certain readings of her biography, is often used as an introduction into the discussion from a feminist context. Access to the many journals and diaries that Hesse kept has produced a perception of Hesse that references her sickness, her psychological extremes, and the responses to her tragic life story. In some instances, her writings have been edited to the point of losing their original meaning, thereby assigning certain emotional responses that were not in the original material. One has a difficult time imagining the introduction to a catalogue on the works of artists such as Carl Andre or Robert Morris conveying the same sense of intimacy as some of those written on Hesse. For example, the 1972 memorial exhibition of her work at the Guggenheim in New York, Linda Shearer wrote, "I only regret that I did not know Eva personally, even though I feel I know her through her work. The exhibition and accompanying catalogue will, I hope,

stand as a fitting tribute to her memory.”<sup>33</sup> For the introduction to the catalogue for the Yale University retrospective in 1992, Helen Cooper wrote, “My only regret is that I never knew Eva Hesse personally. I can only hope that this catalogue and exhibition honor her memory as well as do justice to her art.”<sup>34</sup> Some of Hesse’s earlier works have been said to viscerally convey a sense of the body, though some of these readings posit that she represented the body as feminine and sick, while it is my belief that her suggestion of the human entity could be seen to be male or female, yet not so literally.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, I did not include a feminist reading of Leonard’s work, even though she was very involved in 1990s feminist activism in New York. For the chapter on Leonard I was focusing on her version of the still life in *Strange Fruit* and her use of this to convey the concept of memory and the passage of time, and just as with the chapter on Eva Hesse, a discussion on her work from a feminist perspective would have been too involved for the length of this thesis. For both artists, a discussion of their works through a feminist viewpoint may also have contributed to a further complication of the discussion of artistic intent as posited by both artists toward their individual works. By assigning a feminist reading to the meanings behind the case studies used in this thesis, the focus would have shifted dramatically from the desired questions of intention as they

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<sup>33</sup> Linda Shearer, *Eva Hesse*. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1972), 5.

<sup>34</sup> Helen Cooper, ed. *Eva Hesse: A Retrospective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 13.

<sup>35</sup> For further reading on the use of biography and feminism to describe Eva Hesse’s oeuvre, see Anna C. Chave, “A Girl Being a Sculpture,” in Cooper, Helen, ed. *Eva Hesse: A Retrospective*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 99-118, and Griselda Pollock and Vanessa Corby, eds., *Encountering Eva Hesse*, (Munich: Prestel, 2006).

intersect with the physical preservation and/or restoration of the artworks and the discussion of the artworks as objects in relation to their materiality.

General research pertaining to not only both Hesse and Leonard but also to the question of ephemeral art practice started with the ever-increasing body of publications resulting from symposiums dedicated specifically to these problems. *Shared Responsibility* is a collection of the proceedings from a conference held jointly by the National Gallery of Canada and the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) in 1989.<sup>36</sup> The conference was for curators and conservators and covered a wide range of problems found in the contemporary art collections of museums around the world. *Saving the Twentieth-Century: The Conservation of Modern Materials* was another conference sponsored by the CCI in 1991, and addressed the specifics of such materials as latex and plastics.<sup>37</sup> The year 1999 saw the publication of two pivotal collections of essays by conservators, curators and artists. The first, *Modern Art: Who Cares? An Interdisciplinary Research Project and an International Symposium on the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art*, was a landmark publication based on the symposium held in Amsterdam in 1999.<sup>38</sup> Through this, a dialogue was established between curators, conservators and artists on a scale previously unseen, and a decision-making model for

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<sup>36</sup> Barbara A. Ramsay-Jolicoeur and Ian N.M. Wainwright, Eds. *Shared Responsibility: Proceedings of a Seminar for Curators and Conservators*, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1990).

<sup>37</sup> David Grattan, ed. *Saving the Twentieth Century: The Conservation of Modern Materials*, (Ottawa: Canadian Conservation Institute, 1993).

<sup>38</sup> IJsbrand Hummelen and Dionne Sillé, Eds. *Modern Art: Who Cares?: An Interdisciplinary Research Project and International Symposium on the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art*. Amsterdam: Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art: Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, 1999.

the care of contemporary art was created. The material presented in this collection offers solutions to myriad problems, and serves as a starting point for any investigation into the exhibition and the conservation of modern and contemporary art. That same year, The Getty Conservation Institute hosted the conference *Mortality Immortality? The Legacy of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Art*<sup>39</sup> which was similar in content, if not in scope, to *Modern Art: Who Cares?*. Once again, curators, conservators and artists gathered to discuss the changing relationship between the museum and its collection. Artists such as Bill Viola contributed essays discussing the ways in which they viewed impermanence and their approach to accepting it, or to deterring it.<sup>40</sup> Viola's essay was especially pertinent in that he discussed his approach to updating the technology for his video-based installation pieces from the early 1980s. *From Marble to Chocolate: The Conservation of Modern Sculpture* is a publication from a conference at the Tate London in 1995.<sup>41</sup> The focus of this was scientific research projects concerned with modern materials, and the use of modern materials by twentieth-century sculptors, both living and dead. *Modern Art, New Museums*<sup>42</sup> is a collection of papers from the Bilbao congress in 2004 and has a similar focus to that of *Modern Art: Who Cares?*. In addition to the above-mentioned conference

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<sup>39</sup>Miguel Angel Corzo, Ed. *Mortality Immortality?: The Legacy of 20th-Century Art*, (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1999).

<sup>40</sup> Bill Viola, "Permanent Impermanence," in Ed., Miguel Angel Corzo, *Mortality Immortality: The Legacy of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Art*, (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1999), pp. 85-94.

<sup>41</sup> Jackie Heuman. *From Marble to Chocolate: The Conservation of Modern Sculpture: Tate Gallery Conference, 18-20 September 1995*, (London: Archetype Publications, c1995).

<sup>42</sup> Ashok Roy and P. Smith, Eds. *Modern Art, New Museums* Contributions to the Bilbao Congress 13-17 Sept 2004, (London: International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, 2004).

publications, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* by Martha Buskirk<sup>43</sup>, is an extremely important resource for her discussion of the temporary, and of the many ways in which this manifests itself in the contemporary art world. Finally, no discussion of the issues surrounding the impermanence of contemporary art would be complete without a mention of the *Variable Media Initiative*, the result of collaboration between the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Daniel Langlois Foundation Centre for Research and Documentation. The Initiative devised an artist's questionnaire to be used when compiling a database of works in the Guggenheim's collection.<sup>44</sup>

My interest in this topic stems from my practical work as an art conservator at both the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal and the National Gallery in Ottawa. To date, I have worked on various contemporary sculptures and installations, and in many cases, the issues discussed in this thesis are those frequently encountered while assessing an artwork and the possible ways of treating it. As previously stated, the discipline of art conservation is changing as a result of demands introduced through contemporary art practices. Conservators are questioning the validity of traditional approaches, and the extent to whether or not any intervention is both conceivable and necessary. Having seen the latest exhibition of Hesse's sculptures at the Jewish Museum in New York in 2006, I was struck by the poignancy of such a body of work, and the unanswered questions that ensued. Having previously only been familiar with her sculptures through illustrations in

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<sup>43</sup> Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito, and Caitlin Jones, eds., *Permanence Through Change: The Variable Media Approach*, (Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, and The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology, Montreal, 2003).

catalogues, comparisons between the original state of the latex pieces and their current condition elicited a sense of heaviness in the viewer when considering the futility of the sculptures' continued existence.

## Chapter One Eva Hesse's Latex Sculptures: Materiality and Meaning

One of the artists whose works have become highly synonymous with ephemerality through deterioration is Eva Hesse (1936-1970). Hesse was born to Jewish parents in Hamburg. To avoid Nazi persecution, she and her sister were put on a children's train to Amsterdam two years later. The sisters were eventually joined by their parents, and the family then moved to New York City, settling in Washington Heights in 1939; most of the rest of her family did not survive the war. Hesse's father, formerly a criminal lawyer in Hamburg, worked as an insurance broker. Her mother suffered from severe bouts of depression, and after her divorce from Hesse's father, took her own life when Hesse was ten years old. Throughout her life Hesse was often sick and suffered from severe anxiety. This anxiety was to stay with her until she gained critical success as an artist. Much has been written about Hesse's personal life and its subsequent effect on her work. While this thesis does not focus primarily on her personal life, one cannot completely ignore an artist's biography when discussing artistic intent. As she remarked near the end of her life, "Art and life are very connected and my whole life has been absurd. There isn't one thing in my life that hasn't been extreme."<sup>1</sup>

Hesse's early artworks consisted primarily of drawings and paintings, and it was based upon a portfolio containing some of this work that she was granted admittance to the Cooper Union Art School, which she attended from 1955 to 1957, earning a certificate in

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk Conversations with Twelve Women Artists* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 218.

design. In the fall of 1957 she enrolled in the Yale School of Art and Architecture, studying with Joseph Albers, Rico Lebrun and Bernard Chaet; upon graduating she moved back to New York, where she taught at Cooper Union. A trip to Europe with her husband, sculptor Tom Doyle, gave Hesse the time and studio space to continue to work, and it was at this point that she began to experiment with the elements that moved her work from the two-dimensional to the sculptural realm. Doyle and Hesse were the guests of textile manufacturer and collector F. Arnhard Scheidt in Kettwig, Germany. While in Kettwig, Doyle was given a vacant floor of Scheidt's textile factory, for the purpose of producing a number of sculptures for him.<sup>2</sup> Hesse was allowed to use some of this studio space and she began working on a series of drawings, with unsatisfying results. Her next step was to combine elements of painting, collage and projecting elements onto panels. This experimentation led to a series of reliefs on masonite and wood. For the reliefs, Hesse incorporated cord, plaster and found machinery parts, and it was with these pieces that one can see the foreshadowing of such works as *Ringaround Arosie* (1966), presently in the collection of the Suzanne Hilberry Gallery in Ferndale, Michigan.<sup>3</sup> Hesse and Doyle moved back to New York in 1965 and set up a studio on the upper floor of their Bowery Street loft. She quickly established herself within the New York art scene, making the acquaintance of such artists as Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt and Robert Smithson. As her career progressed, she continued to devote more of her artmaking to the three-dimensional realm and it was in 1966, with the work *Hang-Up* (Figure 1) - now part of the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago and credited as being the work that

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Barrette, *Eva Hesse Sculpture: catalogue raisonné* (New York: Timkin Press, 1989), 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

definitively took her work from drawing through to sculpture and installation - that she first received critical praise.

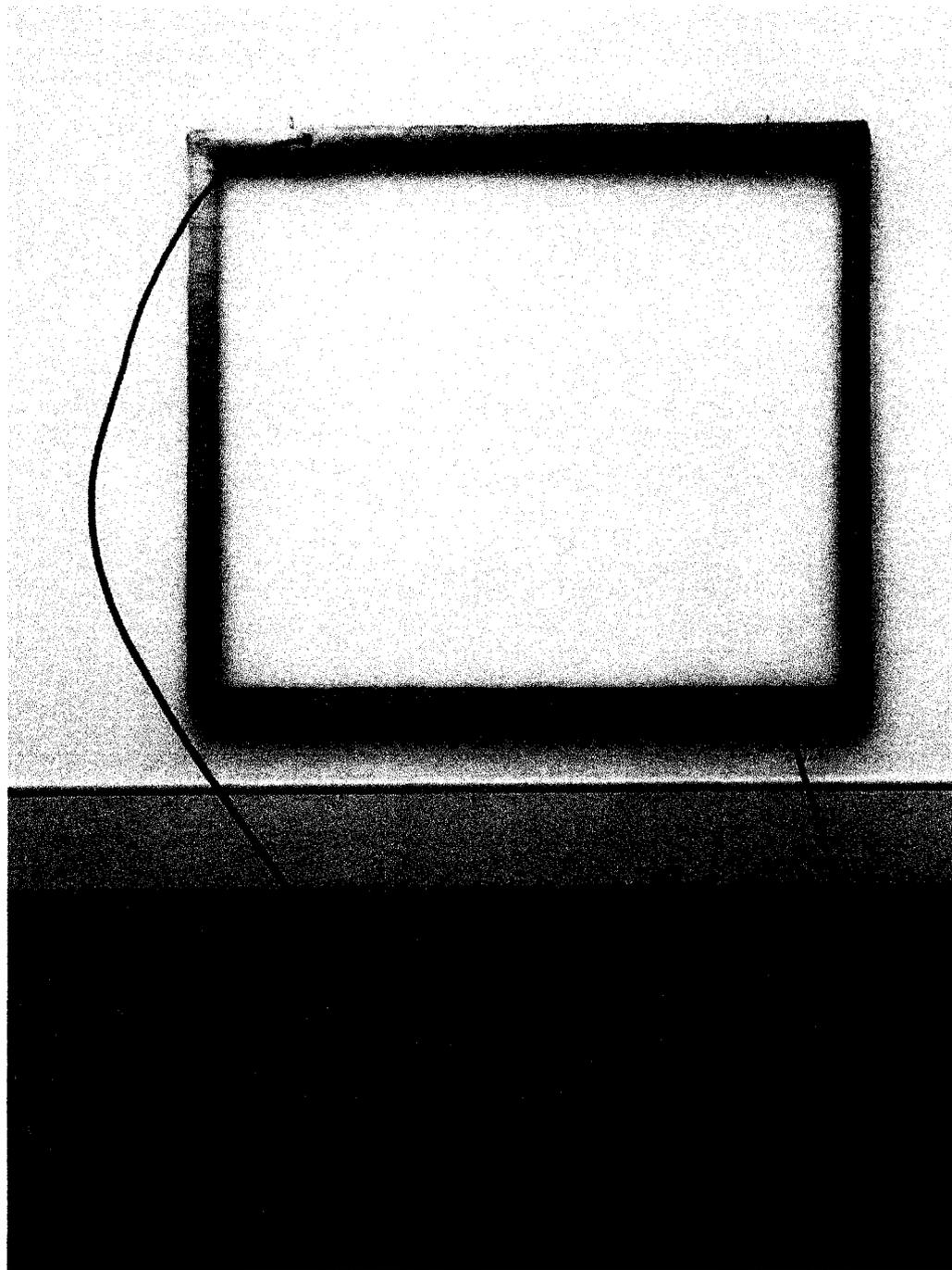


Figure 1. Eva Hesse, *Hang-Up*, 1966.

*Hang-Up* has been described by Bill Barrette, one of her assistants, as “one of her most arresting sculptures.”<sup>4</sup> Hesse herself claimed that it was one of the most important early statements that she made. In her words, “It was the first time my idea of absurdity of extreme feeling came through. It was a huge piece, six feet by seven feet. The construction is really very naïve. It is a frame, ostensibly, and it sits on the wall with a very thin, strong, but easily bent rod that comes out of it.”<sup>5</sup> Barrette was responsible for numerous installations of her works, and in his experience, “whenever it is installed, it invariably creates a surprising impression that is hard to explain and almost impossible to sense from a photograph. Perhaps it is the integrity of the numerous contradictions that are held in taut suspension that accounts for the powerful presence, a presence made all the more remarkable because the piece is made up of negative spaces.”<sup>6</sup>

The actual construction of the piece was carried out by Sol LeWitt and Doyle, to Hesse’s specifications. Bed sheets were wrapped around a stretcher, and a half-inch steel tube wrapped with cord was set to project from this, curving from the upper right corner of the frame out into the room and then back into the lower right corner. The wrappings on the frame and tubing were painted to achieve the effect of light-grading – transitioning from light to dark grey, and thus creating the illusion that the frame was “strangely insubstantial”.<sup>7</sup> The wrapped tubing was also coloured following a similar strategy, but in this case, the light gradation resulted in the darkest section of the tubing being on that

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Lucy R. Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 56.

<sup>6</sup> Barrette, 66.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

section closest to the floor, giving the effect that the tubing is dragged down by its own weight.<sup>8</sup> Lucy Lippard has likened this piece to the reliefs Hesse worked on while in Germany, and feels that it “deals with the tension between two-and three-dimensional spaces.”<sup>9</sup> It also seems to concern itself with seeming opposites – painting and sculpture, real and depicted space, darkness and light, and expansiveness and limitation.<sup>10</sup>

Hesse’s approach to the various properties of specific materials was important to her from the early years of her art practice – “even in her student work [her] impulse to manipulate a material [yet] let it act according to its own dynamic is clear.”<sup>11</sup> While still a student at Yale in 1957-58, she created a set of works she described as “collages of leaves pasted onto brown paper.”<sup>12</sup> She was attracted to the ‘readymade’ concept of the leaf, which “yields its own inherent shapes and patterns and possesses its own processes (it will dry, it will disintegrate).”<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Sussman describes this as “engag[ing] in a sort of partnership in which she did not control everything. This collaboration with the texture and outline of a leaf, and its potential to dematerialize, presage[d] what she would do later in her latex sculpture. Photograms of leaves and other objects made at the same time, fragile surfaces exposed to light to create their own traces, also foreshadow[ed] things to come.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 56.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Barrette, 66.

<sup>11</sup> Elisabeth Sussman, ed., *Eva Hesse* [catalogue] (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Sussman, 19.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

During a relatively short though incredibly productive period from 1967 to 1970, Hesse created a series of sculptural works incorporating natural latex rubber and fibreglass - both relatively new and unexplored materials at the time. To this point, there had not been a great deal of research into the various properties inherent in these two materials, especially their application as art media. For example, their longevity was not yet completely understood when Hesse was working. Her first foray into the use of latex as an art medium was in 1967 and it is unclear whether in this particular case Hesse herself mixed the rubber with its various plasticizing and drying chemicals in her Bowery Street studio, or whether she bought the liquid form of casting latex.<sup>15</sup> In interviews she stated that she both mixed her own latex and bought liquid casting latex from Cementex, a New York-based company which dealt with moulding and casting materials.<sup>16</sup> Her requirement for the material was that she be able to use it directly, thereby eliminating its association with mould casting.<sup>17</sup>

Hesse was attracted by latex's flexibility, translucency and mutability. While not attracted to it as a casting material, she first used it in this capacity, pouring the liquid rubber into forms which she then heated, or cured, in her oven. In an often-cited

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<sup>15</sup> Briony Fer, "The Work of Salvage: Eva Hesse's Latex Works," in *Eva Hesse* [catalogue], ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 81.

<sup>16</sup> Natural latex is a milky white suspension of a hydrocarbon polymer that is found in the sap of the rubber tree. Hesse used the formulation L-200 casting latex that is sold for the purpose of producing moulds for casting. The Cementex catalogue describes this particular product as containing sixty-one percent solids. Used alone or mixed with filler, it is normally used in a plaster mould that draws off some of the water during the curing process. As cited in Bill Barrette, *Eva Hesse Sculpture*, (New York: New York University Press, 1989), n. 10, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> Cindy Nemser, "An Interview with Eva Hesse," *Artforum* 7 no.9 (1970): 61.

interview with art historian and feminist critic Cindy Nemser she stated that she did not want to use latex as a casting material. Once she had attained a sense of the latex as a material, she used it more like paint, applying it by brush to lightweight supports (such as cheesecloth or wire mesh) or building up successive layers on a plastic sheet which was later pulled away. Between 1967 and 1970, Hesse made sixteen major works incorporating latex. Other artists had used latex before. Claes Oldenburg, for example, had painted it on canvas in his giant *Floor Burger* of 1962. Hesse, however, explored its possibilities more than anyone else. Her manipulation of latex is perhaps closest to that of Louise Bourgeois, who had painted and poured latex in a particularly visceral group of works from the early sixties. A few of Bourgeois' latex pieces were included in the Fischbach Gallery's *Eccentric Abstraction* show (New York), organized by Lucy Lippard in 1966. Hesse's piece *Metronomic Irregularity II* was included in this, as were Bruce Nauman's rubber streamers and Richard Serra's rubber belts. Nauman's rubber streamers were made from a single piece of latex-covered burlap cut into strips. Whereas Nauman and Serra used pre-formed rubber strips and manipulated them, alluding to the idea of the readymade, Hesse and Bourgeois used liquid latex and painted with it, creating malleable forms.<sup>18</sup>

In conversation with Lucy Lippard for Lippard's monograph of Hesse's oeuvre, curator Marcia Tucker further articulated Hesse's process by stating that "because she [was] concerned with creating personal forms, she must use only materials that she [could] make herself. The plastic, fiberglass, rubberized cheesecloth and gauze from which her

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<sup>18</sup> Fer, 81.

pieces are modeled are neither cast nor moulded. They are made by putting the raw material on the floor and shaping it, adding layers until the proper substance is attained.”<sup>19</sup> Latex, fiberglass and other flexible or translucent synthetic materials were of interest to Hesse due to their “malleability, their near-ugly delicacy, and ambiguous textures.”<sup>20</sup> When incorporating such materials into her pieces, she was not concerned with a “truth to materials”. Citing her work *Contingent* (1969) as an example, she stated to Cindy Nemser:

I rubberized the cheesecloth in *Contingent* because the rubber needs more strength for permanency. To keep it very thin and airy I use a very fine plastic, a very cheap plastic which is so thin, and clings together so when the rubber dries you have all this clingy linear kind of thing. If a material is liquid... I can control it but I don't really want to change it. I don't want to add colour or make it thicker or thinner... I don't want to keep any rules; I want to sometimes change the rules. But in that sense, process, the materials, become important and I do so little with them which is I guess the absurdity. Sometimes the materials look like they are so important to the process because I do so little else with the form. I keep it very simple.<sup>21</sup>

While still discovering the many properties of some of her preferred materials, Hesse made numerous small test pieces. Helen Hesse Charash, the artist's sister, gave a collection of these test pieces to the Berkeley Art Museum. Within this group of thirty-one objects one can see the range of Hesse's engagement with latex and its potential combinations with other materials. The various permutations included latex that had been molded, stapled, applied to cheesecloth and wire screen, mixed with pigmented paint, and cast to form boxes. Some of these pieces also incorporated such materials as molded wax discs, fibreglass with plastic tubing, and plaster tiles. In a few of these tests can be located the beginnings of such major sculptures as the *Accession* series, 1967-68;

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Lippard, 155.

<sup>20</sup> Lippard, 133.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Lippard, 133.

*Area*, 1968; *Schema*, 1967-68; *Sequel*, 1967-68; and the *Repetition Nineteen* series, 1967-68.<sup>22</sup> The impetus behind these experiments was partly design and aesthetics, and partly to examine these unusual materials in order to determine solutions for the immediate problems that they represented.<sup>23</sup> From 1968, Hesse worked with Frank Nishio, founder of Cementex, from whom she originally bought the liquid latex.

It was while Hesse was working on the fibreglass piece *Accretion* in 1968 that she first approached the art factory Aegis Reinforced Plastics, on Staten Island, on the recommendation of the artist Robert Morris. She was introduced to Doug Johns, one of the partners in the business, who was in charge of the artistic side of the factory. This was the first time that she contemplated working outside of her own studio space. Eventually, she consulted with sculptor Richard Serra. Together, they worked at Aegis, where Serra gave her advice regarding sources of materials and technical problems. At this point, Hesse had already started to carry out “determined testing and experimentation with materials.”<sup>24</sup>

While not entirely certain that this was how she wanted to work, Hesse felt that it was necessary in order to lend a more “professional craftsmanship” to her works, which would, she hoped, result in keeping her pieces from disintegrating.<sup>25</sup> Doug Johns became a close friend as well as technical advisor and worked very closely with her on

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<sup>22</sup> Robin Clark, “Glass Case and Test Pieces,” in *Eva Hesse* [catalogue] ed. Elisabeth Sussman, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 225.

<sup>23</sup> Elisabeth Sussman and Fred Wasserman, *Eva Hesse Sculpture* [catalogue] (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 18

<sup>24</sup> Lippard, 115.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

every piece she made from 1968 until her death two years later. His devotion was such that he left Aegis in the fall of 1969 and, charging a minimal fee, lived in Hesse's studio, working solely on her projects.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps one of the most monumental pieces to come out of Hesse's studio was *Expanded Expansion* (Figure 2), completed on February 28, 1969 and exhibited in the group show *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* at the Whitney Museum of American Art later that year. Working with Doug Johns and another assistant, Martha Schieve, Hesse made the piece by laying thirteen sheets of cheesecloth on plastic, mixing the liquid latex, applying it to the cloth with a brush so that it was spread as one continuous layer, letting it dry, and then unpeeling the plastic layer from the rest, allowing chance to determine the irregular edges. Ten-foot fibreglass poles were made and, once dry, these were laid down on the cheesecloth. Fibreglass was then laid over each pole (overlapping the latex) and the resin was spread on both sides.<sup>27</sup>



Figure 2. Eva Hesse, *Expanded Expansion*, 1969.

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<sup>26</sup> Lippard, 127.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

For practical reasons, *Expanded Expansion* was assembled in three large units that were then joined to form a seamless length within the exhibition space. The cheesecloth draped between the poles could be extended to encompass a much larger area and was exhibited with the poles closer or further apart to a maximum extended length of thirty feet, depending upon the space in which the work was exhibited. Hesse's notes for the piece requested that the drapes not be taut, but fall loosely. Installed as such, the piece created what Hesse referred to as an "environment"<sup>28</sup> and when Nemser asked Hesse about this quality, she replied,

I guess this is the closest thing I've done to an environment. It is leaning against the wall like a curtain and the scale might make it superficially environmental but that's not enough...I thought I would make more of it, but sickness prevented that – then it would actually be extended to a length one would really feel would be environmental. This piece does have an option... I think that what confuses people in a piece like this is that it's so silly yet it is made fairly well. Its ridiculous quality is contradicted by its definite concern about its presentation.<sup>29</sup>

The latex-coated cheesecloth originally had a supple, creamy, almost diaphanous quality to it. Its abstractly epidermal quality was remarked by many, including James Monte, co-curator of the *Anti-Illusion* show. In his essay for the catalogue, Monte wrote that Hesse's sculpture "alludes to human characteristics such as the softness of skin, the swell of a muscle, or the indeterminate colour of flesh fading under clothing after exposure to the summer sun."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Robin Clark, "Accretion and Expanded Expansion," in *Eva Hesse* [catalogue] ed. Elisabeth Sussman, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 248

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Cindy Nemser, "An Interview with Eva Hesse," *Artforum* 8 (May 1970): 63.

<sup>30</sup> Clark, 248.

Another piece, entitled *Contingent* (1969), now in the collection of the Australian National Gallery in Canberra, consisted of eight glowing composites of rubberized cheesecloth and fibreglass run through various proportional and textural changes, the light catching each translucent sheet in a different way, thus producing different colours. In the finished work, one piece is much longer than the others. Hesse had originally wanted to add another unit, but her assistant, Doug Johns, advised her that it was too late, for they had run out of latex and with a new batch, the colour in the new unit would not be uniform with the already existing units.<sup>31</sup>

Many of Hesse's late sculptures have been removed from view because of their fragility or their deteriorated condition, often the result of the instability of the latex and fibreglass that were so important to her.<sup>32</sup> At present, many of Hesse's works cannot be exhibited, and exist in the public consciousness solely as photographs. The discoloration and fragility of their materials have changed the aesthetic originally sought by the artist in her use of these materials. As documentation has shown, Hesse's latex works started to deteriorate almost from the moment that they were first presented. Her 1968 piece *Augment*, comprised of multiple layers of latex placed in a pile on the gallery floor, suffered damage while being returned from a European tour. Interestingly enough, facts such as this did not deter some museums or collectors from expressing interest in acquiring these pieces. In 1970, Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld, West Germany acquired the latex works *Augment* and *Seam* (1968), the latter an installation consisting of

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<sup>31</sup> Lippard, 164.

<sup>32</sup> Elisabeth Sussman, ed., *Eva Hesse* [catalogue] (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 18.

two sheets of latex and filler-coated wire mesh sewn together and allowed to hang down the wall, eventually extending out along the floor. Both works remain in the museum's collection, unexhibited between 1970 and 2006. Their present condition can best be described as dirty, discoloured and brittle, and from 1970 to their 2006 exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York, they had been best known through photographs.

*Expanded Expansion* is presently stored in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's reserves in New York in a cold storage facility. The work has come to signify myriad problems associated with exhibiting Hesse's objects. For the 2002 retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, curator Elizabeth Sussman stated that "its title, originally a reference to the sculpture's elasticity, now seems an ironic rebuke."<sup>33</sup> As with so many of the latex works, the obvious deterioration of the latex, with its resultant appearance, has compromised the original concept.<sup>34</sup> *Expanded Expansion* has suffered what has been described as "the degeneration visited upon all organic materials, and particularly... human skin. [The rubberized cheesecloth] has wrinkled, weakened, darkened and shriveled."<sup>35</sup> The once flexible and creamy latex skin has now darkened to a yellow, desiccated and rigid shell (Figure 3). Further exacerbating the problem of exhibiting and conserving this piece is the fact that its three primary materials – latex, cheesecloth and fibreglass – all age differently. The inherent vice of the piece is complicated by its structural weaknesses – the cheesecloth and latex drapes are too heavy and place too much stress on their own joins to the fibreglass poles, the brittle fibreglass

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<sup>33</sup> Ann Temkin, "Uncertain Mandate: A Roundtable Discussion on Conservation Issues," in *Eva Hesse*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 292.

<sup>34</sup> Elisabeth Sussman and Fred Wasserman, eds., *Eva Hesse Sculpture*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 14.

<sup>35</sup> Robin Clark, 248.

strains under the weight of these drapes and the latex has started to powder and fall from the cheesecloth. *Expanded Expansion* was last placed in its intended upright configuration in 1988 and, due to its fragility, will never be positioned in this way again.<sup>36</sup>

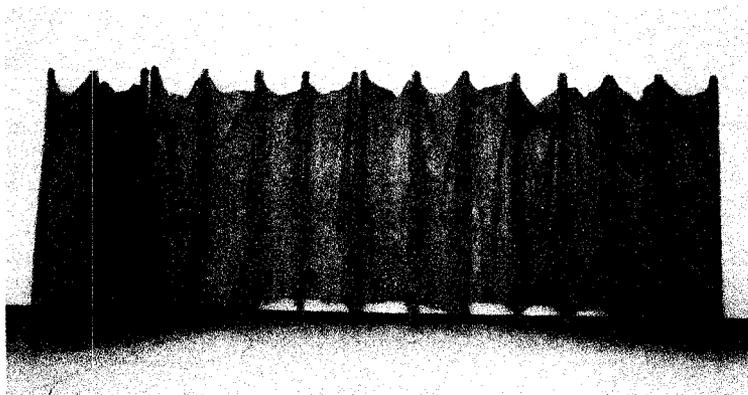


Figure 3. Condition of *Expanded Expansion* in 1988.

Perhaps one of the most important questions one must ask when discussing the possible exhibition of individual works is the artist's intention behind each piece. With this in mind, a conservator must carefully weigh the positive and negative aspects that a possible treatment or preventive conservation plan may have on the work –with the exception of works intended to mimic anonymous, industrial production methods as closely as possible – and, it is of utmost importance that the work retain its autographic quality. Hesse's work could often be quite delicate, with the translucency and light-play inherent in the material contributing a major part in the finished piece. Due to the difficulty or impossibility of maintaining the original aesthetic of her latex and fibreglass works, the decision is often made to leave the piece as it is without any outside interference. Safe storage is the preferred method of mitigating the rapid deterioration that results from the

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<sup>36</sup> Phone conversation with Eleanora Nagy, former sculpture conservator at the Guggenheim, New York, October 18, 2006.

materials being exposed to light and air. *Expanded Expansion* thus serves as a moral compass for the debate over exhibition and conservation issues surrounding Hesse's works. One wonders if it should be left to "quietly decompose" out of view of the public eye, or whether it is more important to take what remains, and expose it to the radical approach of reinforcing the supporting materials, thereby reducing its translucency and setting it into one rigid position.<sup>37</sup> What of the option of creating an exhibition copy, which would approximate the original appearance of the work? It has been suggested that Hesse's studio assistant refabricate the piece for exhibition purposes, though this raises the complicated question as to whether or not the essence of the piece lies solely in the concept, or whether Hesse's approval of the finished piece is also necessary.<sup>38</sup>

The period from 1967 to 1970 has become known as Hesse's mature period, in which her work has been described as having moved beyond what was viewed as sculpture, or 'objects' (as sculpture came to be referred to in the 1960s). As Hesse described her artistic goals, "I remember I wanted to get to non art, non connotative, non anthropomorphic, non geometric, non nothing, everything, but of another kind, vision, sort. From a total other reference point. Is it possible?"<sup>39</sup> Simply put, she was trying to create work that went beyond the conventional definitions and was instead "non-art".

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<sup>37</sup> Art conservator Martin Langer has suggested that the existing work be coated in further layers of liquid latex as a way of consolidating the already-existing piece, and therefore allowing for it to be exhibited. This would, however, create further stress due to the excess weight from the extra layers of latex.

<sup>38</sup> Clark, 248.

<sup>39</sup> This is an extract from Hesse's statement about her work in the catalogue for *Art in Process IV* at the Finch College Museum of Art, New York (opened 11 December 1969), as reprinted in Robert Pincus-Witten, "Eva Hesse: Post-Minimalism into Sublime," *Artforum* 10 (November, 1971): 43.

These later works seem to represent this desire to produce something that, in her words, “[comes] from a total other reference point.” Elizabeth Sussman has described work from this period as “amorphous and strangely beautiful[;] it hovers between something and nothing, on the borderline of not coming together. Her work looks uncomfortable in the institutional setting where it was first shown, and even now, where it resides.”<sup>40</sup>

One of the primary avenues through which Hesse attained her goal of “non-art” was through the use of a wide range of often untraditional materials, including papier-mâché, latex and fiberglass. It has been said that her control of a specific 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.”<sup>41</sup> While she tended to focus on a specific materials and processes, she still maintained the ability to move away from the planned outcome and let some element of abandon control the result. Thus, “her work emerged from a liminal space between control and freedom, between what she knew and what she couldn’t have known in advance, between coherence and fragmentation.”<sup>42</sup> As Rosalind Krauss has described the impact of Hesse’s sculptures, “They were delivering to the world... a declaration about the expressive power of matter itself, of matter held down to a level of the subarticulate.”<sup>43</sup> She further elaborates:

Although Hesse’s work takes the form of large expanses of dense coagulations and snarls of matter – of latex, of fiberglass, of cord, of plastic – the impression that forms through that matter is one of an extraordinary originality, as though this matter, in its preformed

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<sup>40</sup> Elisabeth Sussman, *Eva Hesse* [catalogue] (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 17.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Bachelors*, (Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2000), 92.

condition, were a reflection of the self as unmediated, preformalized origin, as the purest and most authentic source of feeling.<sup>44</sup>

When attempting to describe and contextualize the anti-form tendencies inherent in the body of work Hesse completed in the three years beginning 1967, it is necessary to view such works as *Augment* (Figures 4 and 5) and *Seam*, and the way in which they contribute to a “nuanced appraisal of Hesse’s oeuvre”.<sup>45</sup> This is, however, a difficult task; due to their fragile condition, these works are rarely seen. They reside in different institutions, further complicating the attempt to view them in comparison with one another. As noted earlier, Helen Hesse Charash, the artist’s sister, gave the work entitled *Aught* (1968) (Figure 6) – consisting of four panels of double sheets of latex stuffed with rope and polyethylene dropcloths - to the museum of the University of California, Berkeley (now called the Berkeley Art Museum) in 1979. It has been made available to scholars for study, but has not been approved for long-term exhibition since 1982. A brief appearance in 1995 was cut short when it was observed that portions of the surface had begun to liquefy and drip. *Seam* and *Augment* are at present both on extended loan to the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum, Krefeld, which, in 2001, pronounced the two works to be unexhibitable.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Krauss, 94.

<sup>45</sup> Robin Clark, “Anti-forms: Augment, Aught and Seam,” in ed., Elisabeth Sussman, *Eva Hesse*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 254.

<sup>46</sup> These works were examined in March 2001 by curators Renate Petzinger, Elisabeth Sussman, Barry Rosen and conservator Martin Langer together with Sabine Roder, curator at the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum. There are no current plans to treat them. See Robin Clark, “Accretion and Expanded Expansion,” in *Eva Hesse*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), note 12, 254.

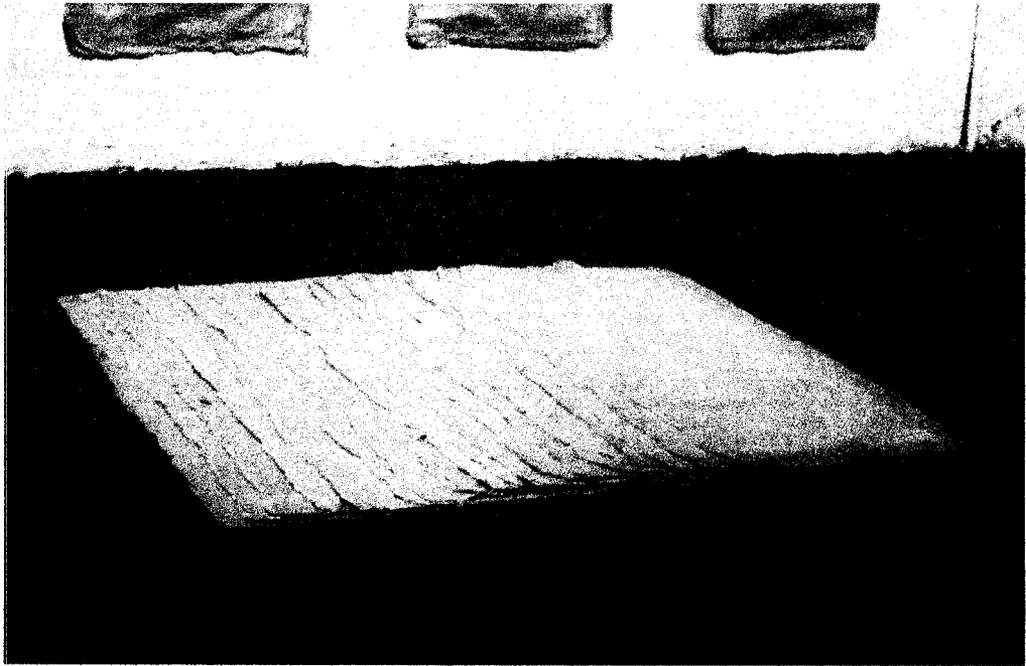


Figure 4. Eva Hesse, *Augment*, 1967.



Figure 5. *Augment*, showing present condition.

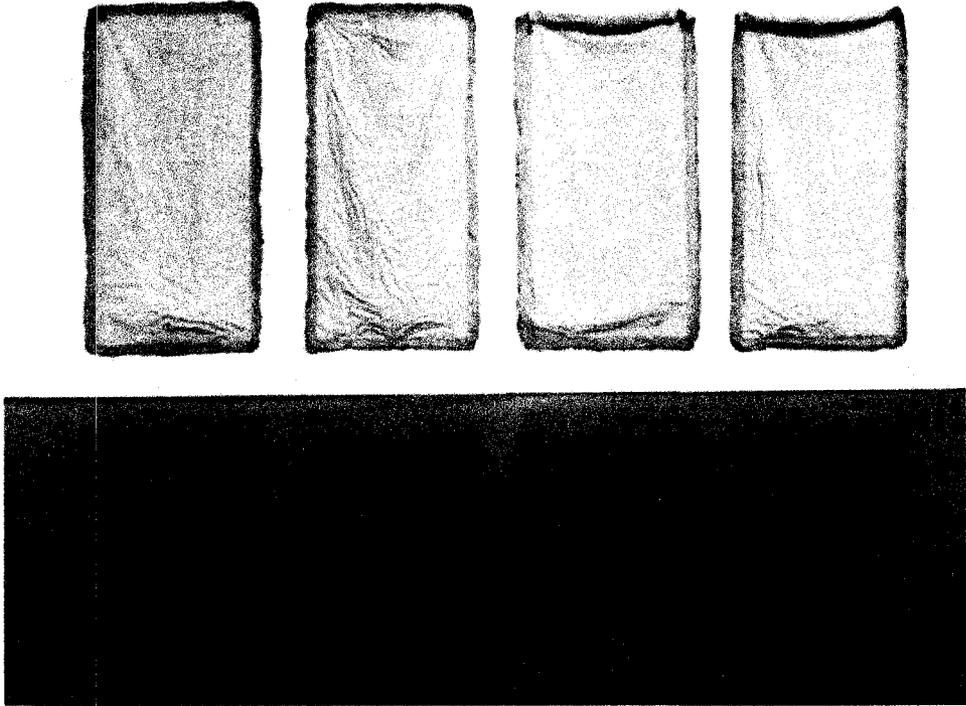


Figure 6. Eva Hesse, *Aught*, 1968.

In any case, an anti-form approach is relevant to *Seam* and *Augment* because in them, and in other works, Hesse used unstable materials even though she knew that deterioration was not just a possibility but was to be expected. One would not describe her as indifferent to the problem; for her the importance of the materials' formal and aesthetic possibilities were simply more desirable than the alternatives available at the time. As she stated,

At this point I feel a little guilty about 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'm not sure what my stand on lasting really is. Part of me feels that it's superfluous and if I need to use rubber that is more important. Life doesn't last; art doesn't last. It doesn't matter.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Anne Temkin, "Uncertain Mandate: A Roundtable Discussion on Conservation Issues," in *Eva Hesse*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 292.

It is, however, interesting that when Hesse did address this problem, she also seemed to be most concerned in addressing the question of the value of her works to her collectors. She was very clear as to the fragility and instability of these works and yet people continued to acquire her works. As curator Ann Temkin has commented on the statement quoted above, “the flavour of this remark is highly ambivalent, as was typical of Hesse’s few recorded comments on the subject.”<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately for those who are left with the burden of decision-making in regard to Hesse’s intentions for her works, the abundance of material left behind in her diaries and recorded conversations seems to encompass more the mood and circumstance of a specific moment than point to a generally-held opinion on the subject. An adherence to such excerpts may lead one to make an incorrect judgment with permanent consequences based upon what may have been a casual remark. One must bear in mind that Hesse was working in a period in which the concept of impermanence was very important, as a means of questioning authority both through the permanence of the institution and the stamp of the individual artist. Lucy Lippard has referred to this rethinking of the sculptural genre as the “dematerialization of the art object”<sup>49</sup> and this was very much a product of the political and cultural atmosphere of the time, as reflected in sculptural genre.<sup>50</sup>

Bill Barrette, one of Hesse’s assistants, has a different interpretation of the statement Hesse made regarding the impermanence of her art. As he has stated, “Hesse made those comments shortly before her death, and so we have to frame her comments... as coming

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<sup>48</sup> Temkin, 292.

<sup>49</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 5.

<sup>50</sup> Temkin, 292.

from somebody who is really quite ill, and is aware that death is not far away.”<sup>51</sup> Hesse had, though, voiced the same opinion on earlier occasions, but Barrette still believes that “in a sense, she has passed on these complex issues to the people that survived her – her dealer, her friends, her executors. She never had to deal with the consequences.”<sup>52</sup>

However, even with Barrette’s intimate knowledge of Hesse’s thoughts on the subject, it is difficult for those left with the responsibility of storing and exhibiting her works to make the decisions necessary for each individual piece and situation. Barrette feels that “you just make the decision. And you don’t worry too much about it, I think, in the end. You can fuss about it, but basically, I think that’s part of what she had set up. These structures are temporary, they’re unstable, and you do the best you can.”<sup>53</sup>

It is Barrette’s opinion that there is not any clear evidence one way or the other as to how Hesse really felt about degradation – that she was often ambiguous in her interviews – and for him, it is not central to her work. He also feels that Hesse was not completely informed as to the consequences of her use of unstable materials. She may have said, “Yes, I don’t care,” but this may have been in response to what she was facing regarding her own mortality. Barrette holds that Hesse knew that her time was limited and she felt under pressure to produce as much work as possible. Most likely she was no longer concerning herself with whether or not her works would shortly start to deteriorate.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Bill Barrette quoted in “Roundtable Discussion Edited by Chad Coerver,” in *Eva Hesse*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New York and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 295.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

A related view on Hesse's motivation to use unstable materials is voiced by Lucy Lippard in her monograph on Hesse. Writing in reference to Hesse's works and her mortality, Lippard suggests that the use of latex allowed for an element of chance in the finished pieces. To that point, no other artist had created such a large body of work in a medium known for its impermanence. In 1976, when Lippard's book was published, the search for chance effect was already having a negative impact. At least three of Hesse's pieces had already disintegrated, giving some perspective as to how quickly the latex was deteriorating. Lippard's comments seem to agree with Barrette's interpretation of Hesse's motives:

What is surprising is that she did not separate her sculpture from her life with more clarity, did not seem at that point to think of her work as her memorial, did not attach her great drive and ambition to its permanent place in the world after she had left it. It is as though she had finally made her art for herself as a part of her life, that she had no picture of it after she was gone, that it made no difference whether or not it remained intact forever, if she herself could not survive to enjoy its triumphs; as though this were an acknowledgment of the ultimate tie between art and life.<sup>55</sup>

Close friends and colleagues in the art community in the late 1960s – among them Sol LeWitt, Richard Serra, Mel Bochner and Robert Smithson – were very involved in the production of ephemeral works, some of them so fleeting, they were intended to last only through the photographic documentation of their creation. Serra's *Splash* pieces, some of them executed before Hesse died, involved pouring molten lead along the join between floor and wall. There was no material acting as a barrier between the lead and the surfaces, and in order for a piece to be moved it had to be destroyed, thus seemingly “deprecating permanent installation.”<sup>56</sup> In addition to theorizing about artistic practice within such a milieu, Hesse also socialized and collaborated with dancers, filmmakers

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<sup>55</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 210.

<sup>56</sup> Scott Burton, “Time on Their Hands,” *ARTnews* 68 (Summer 1969): 41.

and musicians, which led to a further breakdown of the boundaries between various artistic disciplines and to the creation of performance-based, time-sensitive works.<sup>57</sup>

Artist Scott Burton described sculpture in 1969 as “the ultimate... in the idea of art as an ‘imitation of life’; not to aspire to an impossible permanence is at once audacious and humble.”<sup>58</sup>

According to Ann Temkin, Scott Burton’s statement is one with which Hesse most likely would have agreed. However, her pieces can still in some ways be seen as traditional sculpture, especially when compared with the conceptual art being created by her contemporaries. The emphasis on the idea rather than on the physical embodiment of that idea differed from Hesse’s approach to the finished work. In addition, her working method, including the fact that she created her pieces in her own studio, was different in approach to those of her friends, such as Serra, who often worked with a fabricator in a large industrial space instead of his own studio space. This commitment to the studio and her works placed Hesse in a position that was much more conservative than was the norm in her particular milieu during this period. Temkin has described Hesse’s process and resulting artworks as outposts of her personal expression, and likens them to art production in the 1950s instead of the 1960s, further commenting that “the use of the system as an escape route from artistic subjectivity held no appeal for her.”<sup>59</sup> When she did work with assistants, especially closer to the end when her health was fast deteriorating (and she was physically unable to work on the pieces herself), the

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<sup>57</sup> Ann Temkin, 293.

<sup>58</sup> Burton, 43.

<sup>59</sup> Temkin, 293.

importance of her own intuition was too important to allow for any real responsibility being bestowed upon her assistants or fabricators. She still exercised her approval over the finished product, vetoing anything with which she did not agree. She also did not view process as more important than the final resulting object: as she discussed with Cindy Nemser, “I never thought of it as ‘now I am rolling, now I am scraping, now I am putting on the rubber.’”<sup>60</sup> What was implicit was that the materials she used and the methods she employed were always a means to an end.<sup>61</sup>

On the occasion of a retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2002, a panel consisting of various curators, conservators, friends and colleagues of Hesse’s were invited to participate in an all-day roundtable discussion.<sup>62</sup> Present were such well-known conservators as Martin Langer, Sharon Blank and Carol Stringari, as well as curators Ann Temkin and Elisabeth Sussman, Hesse’s assistant Bill Barrette, and Sol LeWitt, artist and contemporary of Eva Hesse, who also gave input into the many issues facing the future exhibition of her works. There were also important insights from other people who had been close to the artist during her last creative period from 1967 to 1970.

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<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Cindy Nemser, “Interview with Eva Hesse” in *Art Talk: Conversations with Fifteen Women Artists*, rev. and enl. ed., (New York: Icon editions, 1995), 192.

<sup>61</sup> Temkin, 293.

<sup>62</sup> Among those present at the round table were Bill Barrette, Michelle Barger, Associate Conservator of Objects, SFMOMA, Sharon Blank, Objects conservator, private practice, Los Angeles; Helen Hesse Charash, sister of Eva Hesse; Robin Clark, assistant curator, Eva Hesse exhibition; Briony Fer, Reader in History of Art, University College, London; Jay Krueger, Head of Modern and Contemporary Painting Conservation, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Martin Langer, conservator, private practice, Idstein, Germany; Sol LeWitt, artist and friend of Hesse; Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Director, Centre for the Technical Study of modern art, Harvard University Art Museum; Naomi Spector, New York-based art writer, worked with Hesse while at Fischbach Gallery; Jill Sterrett, Head of conservation, SFMOMA; Elisabeth Sussman, curator of Hesse exhibition; and Ann Temkin, curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Bill Barrette stated that it was his wish that the discourse might create “a kind of consensus among the people she trusted with her legacy to make the kinds of decisions that she couldn’t make. It’s an imperfect process, but I think there’s no other way. What other possibilities are there? It’s a very rare opportunity.”<sup>63</sup> He was concerned with who was to be responsible for making such decisions, how they would be made and who would support them. Suggestions as to the potential refabrication of some of Hesse’s works as well as the idea of preventive storage conditions were debated, without a clear conclusion.<sup>64</sup>

Conservator Martin Langer holds the view that Hesse did not want the latex to deteriorate. In his words, “I believe that Hesse tried to make the latex last longer. In the beginning, as far as I can see, she tried very hard. It was only later that she had to let it go and admit that the material behaves a certain way.”<sup>65</sup> To further support this idea, Doug Johns has commented on how Hesse consulted with him regarding the amount of ultraviolet inhibitor that should be mixed into the latex in order to slow the deterioration as much as possible.<sup>66</sup> Hesse herself remarked in the Nemser interview that she “would like to try [using] the rubber that will last.”<sup>67</sup> While these statements definitely point to

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<sup>63</sup> Bill Barrette quoted in “Roundtable Discussion Edited by Chad Coerver,” in *Eva Hesse*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New York and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 297.

<sup>64</sup> Temkin, 290.

<sup>65</sup> Martin Langer, quoted in “Roundtable Discussion Edited by Chad Coerver,” in *Eva Hesse*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New York and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 295.

<sup>66</sup> As cited in Lucy R. Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 164.

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Cindy Nemser, “Interview with Eva Hesse” in *Art Talk: Conversations with Fifteen Women Artists*, rev. and enl. ed., (New York: Icon editions, 1995), 191.

the fact that Hesse was trying to stabilize the latex, she continued to state conflicting ideas on this subject. In a telephone conversation with Chad Coerver on October 15, 1988, Johns stated that he had “repeatedly warned Hesse that the latex would deteriorate, and that he urged her to use more durable forms of rubber.”<sup>68</sup> Hesse responded by lecturing Johns on how important the instability of materials was to her process. Barrette, in discussing this exchange between Johns and Hesse, summed up Hesse’s rebuke: “She was very aware that it was temporary. She was not defensive about it; she was offensive about it. She would say that it was an attribute. Everything was for the process – a moment in time, not meant to last.”<sup>69</sup> To further confuse matters, according to Barrette, Hesse later questioned Johns about the permanence of the reinforced fiberglass, saying that it was a concern of hers.<sup>70</sup>

Yet another interpretation of Hesse’s intent has been made by Briony Fer in her article for the catalogue for the artist’s 2002 retrospective in San Francisco. In describing the latex and the visual changes that occurred with time, Fer wrote that “its effects could be beautiful, but, especially as they have aged, they could also be almost repellent, a paradox that in principle obviously attracted Hesse.”<sup>71</sup> Fer continues by suggesting, however, that even with the understanding that the material was perishable, it is difficult to know if the physical decay of the work was something that was planned for. Instead, the “logic of temporal change, from the hardening of the liquid latex as it dried to the change of colour that it underwent when exposed to light, was certainly unavoidable and in some respects

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<sup>68</sup> Barrette, 205.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Fer, 80.

desirable.”<sup>72</sup> The discussion is taken further by a reference to disintegration not as the physical act of decay, but as a new way of viewing an object, and the viewer’s involvement in this. As previously stated, Hesse had already started to question the distinction between painting and sculpture, and the role of the viewer within this space with her piece *Hang-Up*. “Particularly in her work from the mid-sixties on, Hesse’s practice set in train an undoing of the very terms by which a pictorial surface was to figure in the spectator’s experience. The changing nature of the material itself, especially in the case of the aging of the latex as a material, may dramatize this undoing – but the logic of disintegration is absolutely not synonymous with it.”<sup>73</sup>

At the 2002 roundtable discussion, Sol LeWitt proposed the idea of having one of Hesse’s assistants remake some elements of deteriorated pieces. In effect, he was suggesting that a portion of the original be exhibited with the newer version, serving as archival documentation of the original. The pieces for which he suggested such a solution were those that consisted of repetitions of a specific element, thereby allowing for the refabricated portion to stand in for the deteriorated portions of the original. For the last year of her life, Hesse was not able to do her own hands-on work and she relied upon her assistants to bring her ideas to fruition. As has already been stated, she gave the final approval if the piece was ready. With this in mind, LeWitt felt that as part of the process of art fabrication in the 1960s, having a fabricator redo a piece by closely following the

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<sup>72</sup> Fer, 81.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 82.

process made it possible to represent the artist's ideas in a fresh light. For him, Hesse's work was very much about process and how this contributed to the finished piece.<sup>74</sup>

A further discussion of LeWitt's approach to refabrication may be seen in the words of conservator Albert Philippot, whose philosophical approach to the definition of the object and suitable approaches to replace damaged areas reads:

A work of art as such is not composed of individual parts but constitutes, as an image, a whole endowed with its own unity, realized in the continuity of the form – a unity therefore essentially different from that of the things represented... While impossible to resume the original creative process, reconstitution remains conceivable, even fully justified, if we understand it as an act of critical interpretation intended to reestablish a broken formal continuity, to the extent that this continuity remains latent in the damaged work and reconstruction brings to the aesthetic structure the clarity of reading that it has lost.<sup>75</sup>

This type of approach has been suggested for the piece *Sans III* (1969), which is composed of small latex boxes that have been attached together to form a line that is fixed to the wall with metal grommets and is left to fall to the floor, with part of the sculpture then extending out from the wall along the floor. The deterioration of the boxes is quite severe – many have collapsed in on themselves and are not capable of sustaining the stress placed upon them from the original configuration of the piece. LeWitt had proposed that the piece be remade, with some of the less damaged boxes on display

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<sup>74</sup> Sol LeWitt in "Roundtable Discussion Edited by Chad Coerver," in *Eva Hesse*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New York and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 300.

<sup>75</sup> Albert Philippot and Paul Philippot, "The problem of the integration of lacunae in the restoration of paintings," in *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, eds., Nicholas Stanley Price, M. Kirby Talley Jr., and Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro, Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1996), 335.

beside the newer version.<sup>76</sup> With this approach, it is important to bear in mind that the exhibition of pieces of the deteriorated original alongside the re-fabricated work would be the decision of the curator and would not have been the preferred direction of Hesse herself. Before such decisions were made, the curator would need to determine whether or not the piece lends itself to the fabrication of a copy that would, in effect, stand in for the original work, and if so, would also have to accept responsibility for having commissioned an unauthorized copy for an absent work of art.<sup>77</sup>

In 2006, the Jewish Museum in New York held an exhibition that was to encompass all of Hesse's surviving sculpture from her solo show, *Eva Hesse: Chain Polymers*, at the Fischbach Gallery in 1968 and the group exhibitions of 1968. As was to be expected, it was the works of latex and fiberglass that presented serious problems. When organizing and designing the exhibition, curator Elisabeth Sussman questioned whether the few surviving fragile works would best be left in storage in order to protect them from the effects of air and light. By being exhibited, the pieces would be further exposed to the natural process of aging. Was this legitimate in this instance? Consideration was given to the condition of the latex pieces, and the fact that it may have been prudent to exhibit only the fibreglass pieces from this period, as they are more stable. There was also much to contemplate in the risk involved in shipping the works from their various collections and thereby potentially exposing them to further harm. In the end, it was decided that

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<sup>76</sup> Sol LeWitt in "Roundtable Discussion Edited by Chad Coerver," in *Eva Hesse*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New York and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 297.

<sup>77</sup> Roundtable Discussion Edited by Chad Coerver," in *Eva Hesse*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New York and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 296.

both the latex and the fiberglass works would be exhibited together, as this gave the most cohesive view of what Hesse was doing during this period of production.<sup>78</sup> For this exhibition, Sussman succeeded in securing the test piece for *Contingent* from the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. When she had requested this for the 2002 retrospective in San Francisco, the gallery refused, stating that the piece was one of the few latex pieces in very good condition. Jay Krueger, head of modern and contemporary painting conservation at the National Gallery, explained that the gallery was hesitant to send the work for fear that it may be damaged in transport.<sup>79</sup>

As previously stated, even though museums and collectors were aware of the pitfalls of collecting Hesse's works, many still continued to include some of her pieces on their acquisition lists, and it is worth reiterating some of this collecting activity here. At the time of Hesse's death, many of her major works were still in her possession. The estate was left in the care of her sister, Helen Hesse Charash, and it was intended that Charash be assisted by Sol LeWitt and by Donald Droll, Hesse's dealer at the Fischbach Gallery. The ability of Hesse's various collectors to look past the inherent instability of many of her works while continuing to treat them with the respect that they deserved illustrates a change that was beginning to take place in the art world. Artistic intent was something that received more attention than before and the concept or idea behind a specific artwork became central to its meaning. Donald Droll was in charge of selling Hesse's drawings and sculptures from the estate, and he, more than anyone else, was instrumental in

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<sup>78</sup> Elisabeth Sussman, "Sculpture 1968," in *Eva Hesse Sculpture*, eds. Elisabeth Sussman and Fred Wasserman, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 15.

<sup>79</sup> Jay Krueger, in Roundtable Discussion Edited by Chad Coerver," in *Eva Hesse*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (New York and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 309.

maintaining her legacy, up until his death in 1985. In his catalogue raisonné of Hesse's works, Bill Barrette has clarified the complicated path her estate followed: "the estate moved from the Fischbach Gallery to the Knoedler Gallery, to Fourcade Droll, to the Droll/Kolbert Gallery, and then to Metro Pictures, following Droll's own trajectory through the art world. In 1984, the estate moved back to the Fourcade Gallery, and then in 1986, following Xavier Fourcade's death, it moved to the Robert Miller Gallery."<sup>80</sup> It is an unfortunate consequence of such moving around of the estate that a significant amount of the documentation of Hesse's work was lost or left in disarray. Droll's memory served as the best source of information, and with his death, a great deal of information has been lost,<sup>81</sup> for when a work has deteriorated to the point where it lives only in its documentation, this becomes paramount to its survival or to its preservation.

In some instances, the size of a piece or the relatively unknown status of Hesse at the time led to a work being sold in pieces. *Sans II* was eventually acquired by four different collectors - one unit is in the Daros Collection, Zurich, one is in Museum Wiesbaden, Germany and one in the Museum of Modern Art, and two units are owned by the Whitney Museum of American Art. When the five units were reunited for the 2006 exhibition, the resulting work was disconcerting as a whole due to the varying rates of discolouration of the fibreglass resulting from different exhibition and storage conditions.

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<sup>80</sup> Barrette, 7.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

In its present state it has lost some of the uniformity that was part of the original presentation and concept.<sup>82</sup>

A large portion of Hesse's major work was bought by private collectors Victor and Sally Ganz, and, second only to Droll, they were important in promoting Hesse's career. They started collecting her work in 1968 after having seen the show *Chain Polymers* at the Fischbach Gallery, subsequently acquiring five items from that show. They came to know Hesse quite well, and after her death started to enlarge their collection of her works. They bought ten major pieces of sculpture and several drawings. Victor Ganz died in October 1987.

Droll had reserved *Contingent* for the Art Institute of Chicago in 1972, but it was purchased by the National Gallery of Australia in 1973. *Expanded Expansion* was originally reserved by Droll for *Documenta*, but was donated by the Hesse Estate to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1975.<sup>83</sup> The Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld, West Germany, acquired the latex works *Augment* and *Seam* in 1970, even though the works were already severely deteriorated and could not be exhibited. *Aught*, one of the latex pieces included in the *Nine at Leo Castelli* exhibition in 1968, stayed with the Hesse Estate until 1979, when it was given to the art museum at the University of California, Berkeley. Included in this gift were thirty of Hesse's small test pieces made from 1967 to 1969 while she was experimenting with new materials. In museum director James

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<sup>82</sup> Elisabeth Sussman, "1968 Sculpture," in *Eva Hesse Sculpture* eds. Elisabeth Sussman and Fred Wasserman, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006),14.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*,13.

Elliot's letter of acceptance of the gift, he recognized the conservation issues that related to *Aught*, writing that, "students and those doing our conservation work will also be interested in studying and researching the questions of fabrication and preservation inherent in such a work."<sup>84</sup>

As the two most recent retrospectives of Hesse's works in 2002 and 2006 have shown, the debate continues as to what her intentions were for the latex sculptures. The attempt by Hesse's former friends, colleagues and critics to determine a suitable approach to the exhibition of these works is further complicated by the conflicting statements Hesse made during the last three years of her life. Yet, for all of the issues of stability surrounding some of Hesse's works, the surviving latex pieces have still found their way into the collections of various prestigious institutions, such as the Guggenheim Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as well as into various private collections.<sup>85</sup>

Though some of these works no longer appear as they did when new, the essence of these pieces is still there. Whether or not Hesse would have been happy with their current appearance is a question that one cannot answer.

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<sup>84</sup> James Elliot to Helen Charash, Nov. 15, 1979, quoted in Elisabeth Sussman, "1968 Sculpture," in *Eva Hesse Sculpture* eds. Elisabeth Sussman and Fred Wasserman, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 14.

<sup>85</sup> Elisabeth Sussman, *Eva Hesse*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 248.

## Chapter Two Zoe Leonard *Strange Fruit (for David)*: When Time is of the Essence

Whereas one is not able to discuss the issues surrounding the preservation and exhibition of some of Eva Hesse's works without coming to terms with the fact that she cannot answer the many questions raised by these problems, many contemporary artists have been very forthcoming in regard to the possible deterioration of their works, and the ways in which they wish to mitigate such deterioration or leave the work to its natural decay. Zoe Leonard is one such artist. Leonard follows in the footsteps of many twentieth-century and twenty-first-century artists who have been willing to consult with curators, and more recently, conservators, when questions arise as to artistic intent and the subsequent care of their pieces.

Leonard grew up in New York, on the east end of Harlem, and moved to the Lower East Side in 1977, when she was sixteen.<sup>1</sup> She has been a member of various activist groups, starting from the early 1980s. She was a member of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), and worked with WAC (Women's Action Coalition) and WHAM (Women's Health Action and Mobilization). She has also been a member of the collectives Gang and Fierce Pussy, which she co-founded with her friends Suzanne Wright and Nancy Brody. Fierce Pussy was a lesbian collective active from 1991 to 1995, whose membership included Joy Episalla, Carrie Yamaoka, Pam Brandt and Alison

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<sup>1</sup> Baker, George; Rosler, Martha; Serra, Richard; Kentridge, William; Byrne, Gerard; Dean, Tacita; Burr, Tom; Huyghe, Pierre; Kolbowski, Silvia; Barry, Judith; Gordon, Douglas; Roberts, Liisa; Buckingham, Matthew; Koester, Joachim; Davenport, Nancy; Norman, Nils; Muller, Christian Philipp; Green, Renee; Durham, Jimmie; Camnitzer, Luis; Burch, Noel; Sekula, Allan; Leonard, Zoe, eds., "Artist's Questionnaire: 21 Responses" *October* 100, (Spring 2002), 82.

Frolic. Working during a decade “steeped in the AIDS crisis, activism, and queer identity politics, Fierce Pussy brought lesbian identity directly out into the streets in a manner characterized by the urgency of those years.”<sup>2</sup> The work they produced was low-tech, fast, and low-budget, relying on modest resources such as old typewriters, found photographs, and any material donated to their cause. The first project consisted of lists of typed words - dyke, muffdiver, bulldagger, etc.- which were xeroxed and then wheatpasted to various locations on the street. Another project was about childhood and consisted of members’ childhood photos with captions such as “Find the dyke in this picture” and “Are you a boy or a girl?” One part of this installation took the format of a billboard and used Leonard’s second-grade class picture with the words “How many dykes in the picture?” therefore implicating not only the students but the teachers as well. Another shows two girls in tube tops playing in their suburban back yard. The caption reads, “She had recurring dreams about the girl next door”. Through such works, Fierce Pussy was questioning the notion that homosexuals are dangerous influences on children, and was asserting that “homosexuality can be in the child as play or a dream or fantasy, not something ominous or outside.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1992, while still a member of Gang, Leonard and her colleagues produced a poster using the image of a woman’s vagina with the caption, “Read my lips before they are sealed.” The phrasing was a parody of George Bush Sr.’s promise, “Read my lips. No new taxes,” which he used as a slogan when he was running for president in 1988. The

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<sup>2</sup> Newsgrist website, accessed April 21, 2008.

<http://newsgrist.typepad.com/underbelly/2008/04/fierce-pussy-ex.html>

<sup>3</sup> Anne Blume, *Secession: Zoe Leonard*, (Vienna: Wiener Secession, 1997), 31.

impetus behind this poster was a shift in the political climate to the right, resulting in a 'gag order' that forbade federally-funded clinicians and groups like Planned Parenthood from mentioning abortion as an option. With this, Gang was commenting on the fact that women were losing control of their bodies and their freedom of speech. In addition to the poster's use to draw attention to the criminalization of abortion, it was soon used to champion such issues as AIDS, gay rights and feminist activism, as they, too, were at the heart of the battle for the right to self-determination and personal choice. Activist groups at the time felt that government was exerting its power inside people's homes; and with the debate and controversy over abortion, it was, in a sense, entering into women's bodies as well. Many of the posters were immediately torn down, while those that remained were vandalized, often with the image of the vagina scratched out.<sup>4</sup> The poster obtained such notoriety that Senator Jessie Helms, the well-known opponent of abortion, strongly protested against both the poster and the message it was conveying.<sup>5</sup>

It was not long after the 'Read my lips' campaign that Leonard first came to prominence as a solo artist with her installation in the Neue Galerie for *Documenta IX* in Kassel in 1992. The piece was a site-specific installation in which she responded to works of art in the museum. As part of the mandate for that year's *Documenta*, she was allowed to choose the room in which she was going to place her installation. While it was not a

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<sup>4</sup> To situate Gang's use of the poster, it was common practice during the culture wars of the time for artists to convey their message through this medium. Artists such as Jenny Holzer ("Men are not monogamous by nature"), Barbara Kruger ("Your body is a small battleground") and the collective known as the Gorilla Girls ("Bus companies are more enlightened than NYC Galleries") covered surfaces throughout New York City with their various feminist political messages.

<sup>5</sup> Blume, 30.

requirement to work with those works from the permanent collection that were currently on exhibition, she eventually decided to include them in the piece. As she has said, “The paintings [and the wallpaper] were what made me want to work in those rooms. I didn’t know why, but I knew that there was something in those rooms for me.”<sup>6</sup> Her description of the works already displayed in the space was that most were “trashy, regional, second-rate paintings – very bourgeois work.”<sup>7</sup> Many contained images of nude women and nude women with men. “Diana the Huntress” seemed to be a dominant theme. The few portraits of men, landscapes and war scenes that were also on exhibit were removed for her installation. For the finished piece, Leonard juxtaposed nineteen images of six different women’s vaginas that she had photographed in New York, with the already existing paintings.<sup>8</sup>

Another important piece, *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman* (1991), is a series of five black and white photographs Leonard took of a woman’s head that had been preserved and mounted in a bell jar. The eyes of the woman’s head regard the viewer through the domed glass jar, following you as you walk past the photos.<sup>9</sup> Through chance, the jar had caught Leonard’s eye while she was on a private tour of the Musée d’Anatomie Delmas-Orfila-Rouvière, the museum of anatomy associated with the Université de Paris; it was located on a shelf on top of a filing cabinet. The jar contains the actual head, neck and shoulders of a bearded woman, though the scientists who made her into a specimen failed

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<sup>6</sup> Blume, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Naisbitt, John, “Death, Sex and the Body: the new specimen art movement”, in John Naisbitt, *High Tech High Touch: Technology and Our Accelerated Search for Meaning*. (Naperville, Illinois: Nicholas Brealey Publishers, 2001), 211.

to include the identifying feature of her breasts; and the only information that Leonard was able to obtain from the museum was that she had lived at the end of the nineteenth century and had been a circus performer. The fact that no one could tell Leonard what the woman's name had been, where the rest of her body was or any other information regarding how she happened to have been decapitated after her death and kept as a bizarre science specimen, upset her and she wanted to honour the woman's memory. In Leonard's words, "This series of photographs... is less about a woman with a beard, than it is about us, a society torn up over difference."<sup>10</sup> As a follow-up to her *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman*, Leonard created another series of photographs that centres on another woman with a beard. In this instance, the woman, Jennifer Miller, happens to be a friend of Leonard's, and is also a performer in her own circus. Her beard is natural and much of her performance work centres around ideas of gender and how she represents herself. Leonard's project with Miller was inspired by a series of photographs in which a nude Miller imitated poses found in Marilyn Monroe pin-up pictures. In response to questions about whether or not Miller has also been exploited in much the same way that the woman in the bell jar had been, Leonard has said that Miller was not an anonymous figure, and that she had the power to control how she was portrayed, through her collaboration in the piece.

Anna Blume has pointed out that Leonard's work is often about "people or things that are missing or silent"<sup>11</sup> and, along with *Preserved Head of a Bearded Woman*, one of the most poignant examples of this is her 1992-1997 installation piece, *Strange Fruit (For*

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Naisbitt, 212.

<sup>11</sup> Blume, 24.

*David*) (Figures 7 and 8).<sup>12</sup> The work consists of the peels from almost three hundred bananas, oranges, lemons, avocados and grapefruits that, once the flesh of the fruit had been eaten, have been sewn back together, forming empty-shelled relics of the originals. The stitching together of the individual elements incorporated thread, wire, buttons and zippers. For the installation of the work, the fruit skins are scattered across the gallery floor, invoking for some the random nature of the works of Eva Hesse and other artists of her generation. The use of perishable material also evokes a comparison to Hesse.<sup>13</sup>

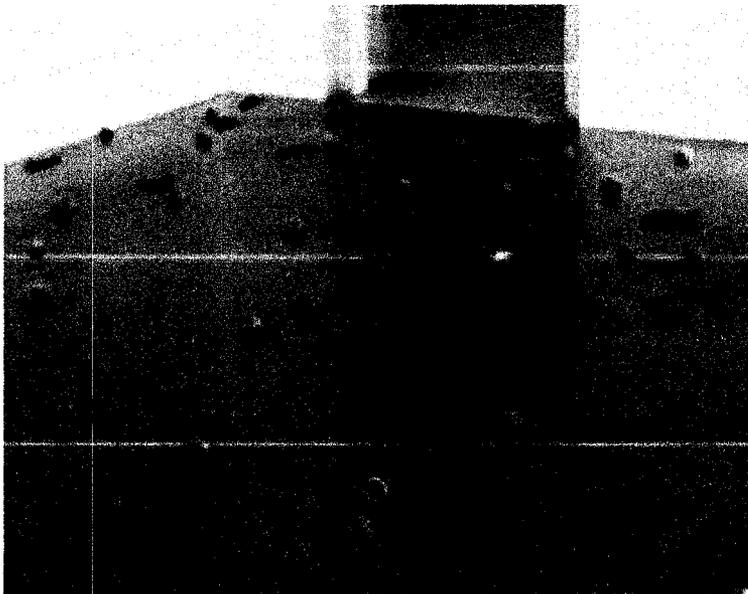


Figure 7. Zoe Leonard, *Strange Fruit (for David)*, 1992-97.

The piece was started in 1992 while Leonard was spending a winter in Provincetown, Massachusetts, which she then followed by two years in Alaska. She had previously returned from a trip to India, where she had become impressed with the way in which people there did not waste things as they do in North America. Every scrap of paper, bit

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<sup>12</sup> The exact dates of this piece are not entirely clear. Leonard began to sew the peels in 1992 and continued to accumulate the various elements until 1997. In some listings, the piece is cited as a work from 1998, however a more appropriate way of referring to it may be to clarify that it is technically a work in progress, since the change brought about by the decay of the fruit is integral to the meaning of the work.

<sup>13</sup> Martha Buskirk, *The Continent Object of Contemporary Art*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 145.

of string or wire was reused to its fullest.<sup>14</sup> Life in Alaska quickly reiterated this approach to consumption and recycling. In Leonard's words, "You live within the seasons. You eat what's available at different times of the year. You do what's appropriate. The sun becomes your clock. You still have a will within that, desires, a style of your own, but you take your cue from the darkness and light, the temperature, the available game and plants."<sup>15</sup>

The concept of recycling took on an entirely new meaning while Leonard was in India and Alaska. As a native New Yorker, she felt that she had been conscious of environmental issues, yet at the time, this meant making the token gesture of using recycled paper towels. In Alaska, she began to understand the necessities basic to survival, and the labour necessary to supply these. She learned how much water she would need to haul every day, how to hunt an animal in order to provide food, and how much wood was required to create the desired amount of heat.<sup>16</sup>

One morning in Provincetown, after having eaten two oranges, Leonard realized that she did not want to just throw away the peels, and she began "absentmindedly sew[ing] them back up."<sup>17</sup> She has referenced a work by her friend (the David in the title of *Strange Fruit*), 1980s artist and performer David Wojnarowicz, in which he broke a loaf of bread

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<sup>14</sup> Blume, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 17.

in two and sewed it back together with thick red embroidery thread.<sup>18</sup> The impetus behind the piece, as she explains, was that:

at first, it was a way to think about David [who had died of AIDS in 1992]. I'd think about the things I'd like to repair and all the things I'd like to put back together, not only losing him in his death, but losing him in our friendship while he was still alive. After a while I began thinking about loss itself, the actual act of repairing. All the friends I'd lost, all the mistakes I've made. The inevitability of a scarred life. The attempt to sew it back together.<sup>19</sup>

Later, after Leonard left Provincetown for Alaska, friends sent her fruit through the mail. Thus began a slow, meditative process in which she continued to 'repair' the peels of any of the fruit she consumed while living in her Alaska cabin.

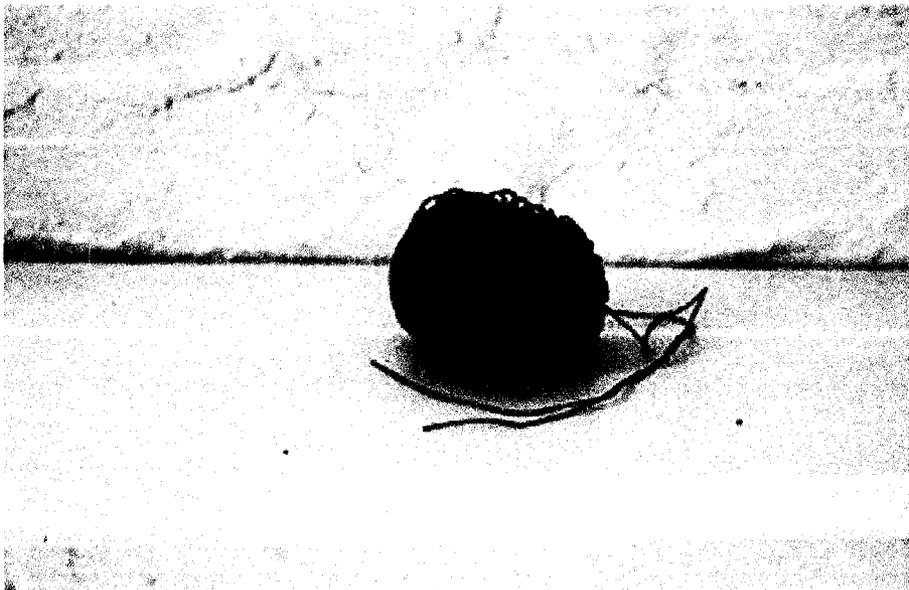


Figure 8. Detail of orange peel from *Strange Fruit*

The title of *Strange Fruit (for David)* is multifaceted. The first, most obvious reference is to the song, "Strange Fruit", written by Lewis Allen and famously performed by Billie

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<sup>18</sup> Buskirk, 145.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Blume, 20.

Holliday in 1939, which is about racism and lynching.<sup>20</sup> In the lyrics, the strange fruit is the lynched body hanging from a tree and this makes one think of loss and violence.

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit...  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees...  
Pastoral scene of the gallant South...  
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,  
For the sun to rot, for trees to drop,  
Here is a strange and bitter crop.*<sup>21</sup>

The title is also a pun on the word fruit, which is a pejorative term for a gay man.<sup>22</sup> With this title, Leonard has commented on not only the loss of her friend to AIDS, but also to the larger issue of the gay community and effect that AIDS had upon it.

Leonard often sees objects in her pieces as standing in for something else or symbolizing something:

I'm interested in the power objects hold for us. We rely on them to represent our ideas, philosophies, beliefs, and memories. You see this is our relationship to religious objects relics or souvenirs and snapshots, or even physical evidence presented at trial. They are not the idea, place, person, or action itself, but a representative of it. Proof of it. Art objects tap into this essential relationship. We have an innate need and ability to look at, and look for, symbols. They give us a way to focus. I think this is why I work with both photography and sculpture. In both mediums, my practice is remarkably similar. In both cases I work with found objects and found images, things I notice. Either I take a picture or I collect the objects and arrange them: re-present them, re-frame them.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: Billie Holliday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights*, (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> First published by Abel Meeropol as a poem, *Strange Fruit*, in 1937.

<sup>22</sup> Buskirk, 145.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Beth Dungan, "An Interview with Zoe Leonard," *Discourse* 24.2 (Spring 2002): 79.

Leonard attempts, through her work to reconcile loss and replacement.<sup>24</sup> As a lesbian involved in activist endeavours throughout the 1980s and 1990s, she put much of the focus of her earlier works upon gender and sexual identity, the politicization of a woman's body and the initial systemic refusal to deal with AIDS. As a result of widespread indifference toward the disease – it was viewed initially as a 'homosexual problem' – many people succumbed to the disease before it was better understood and people were properly educated on how to prevent it.<sup>25</sup> Anna Blume has described the dried fruit pieces as "the debris and residue of that sense of loss."<sup>26</sup> For art historian Martha Buskirk, "their presentation, dispersed across the floor of the gallery, serves to emphasize the isolation of each of these paradoxical objects."<sup>27</sup>

Some have suggested that the piece is a continuation of her activist works, yet Leonard, when prompted with the idea, claims that she does not, in fact, view it that way. For her, "activism, by its nature was always very loud and very verbal. It was sincere, but it was very external and exterior... finding the sound bite, getting arrested, working with other people. The fruit is very, very silent. The fruit came from a deeply private, nonverbal, even nonvisual place. It is me alone in a room with my thoughts and thread."<sup>28</sup>

Leonard worked on the *Strange Fruit* from 1993 to 1997. In April of 1995, before it had reached its final configuration, she decided to exhibit it, sending invitations for people to

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<sup>24</sup> Dungan, 82.

<sup>25</sup> Blume, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Buskirk, 145.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Blume, 18.

come to her apartment to view the piece. During the spring of 1997 it was shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami and again later that year at the Kunsthalle in Basel.<sup>29</sup> When Leonard began to discuss the work with her dealer, Paula Cooper, Cooper suggested that she contact an art conservator in order to see if there was a way to treat the piece so that it would last longer. At the time, both Leonard and Cooper felt that for *Strange Fruit* to be exhibited and possibly sold, some form of preservation was necessary. In 1997, Leonard was introduced to Christian Scheidemann, a conservator of contemporary art, who proceeded to work with Leonard for a few years in order to come up with a suitable solution. Leonard initially wanted to see if it would be possible to arrest the decay of the fruit without altering its appearance. Scheidemann eventually decided on what Leonard at first described as “a perfect method of preservation”<sup>30</sup> whereby he shock-froze the peels and then soaked them with the consolidant Paraloid B-72 in vacuum conditions.<sup>31</sup> By doing so, he arrested the decay of the peels while maintaining the appearance of the not only the peels but of the zippers, buttons, wire and thread as well. Once Leonard had seen a few of the test pieces, however, she decided that this was not the right course of action for *Strange Fruit*. Of Scheidemann’s work, Leonard says that “he came up with a successful solution, but when I saw it, I knew it was wrong. The very essence of the installation is to decompose. The absurdity, irony, pain and humor of it is that we attempt to hang on to memory, but we forget. All

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<sup>29</sup> Ann Temkin, "Strange Fruit," in Miguel Angel Corzo, ed., *Mortality Immortality? The Legacy of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Art*, (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1999), 46.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Sylvia Hochfield, “Sticks and Stones and Lemon Cough Drops,” *ARTnews* (September 2002): 120.

<sup>31</sup> Temkin, 46.

elements wear down in time, change form.”<sup>32</sup> In the end, her decision was to keep the sewn fruits together as a unit and allow them to decay on their own. She did, however, ask Scheidemann to preserve twenty-five pieces of fruit.<sup>33</sup>

Leonard likes to archive things through photographs and sees this as an important endeavour. For her contribution to an artist’s questionnaire in *October* magazine, she stated her interest in the archiving traditions of Eugène Atget and Walker Evans. For her, “both had such a keen eye for signs of the human hand, a love and respect for the distinct voices of anonymous individuals. Each had a specific view of the time in which they lived, and a clear understanding of the value of their work in history.”<sup>34</sup> Along with Atget’s photographic documentation of Paris, his work also provides a record of the shift from the era when photographs were handmade objects created with the use of an enlarger projecting images from the film negative onto light-sensitive gel-emulsion papers which were then soaked in developing and fixing solutions in one’s darkroom, to that of the newer mechanically produced variety. In Leonard’s opinion, his photographs provide an archive of a world that has been completely altered. Leonard feels that recently we have witnessed another shift – from the era of mechanical production to the digital age - and that with this shift is a unique opportunity to archive the change to such a drastically different technology. Perhaps in response to this shift, she still uses an old

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Blume, 20.

<sup>33</sup> Blume, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in “Artist’s Questionnaire: 21 Responses” *October* 100, (Spring 2002): 95.

Rolleiflex camera, adding that she “like[s] using this tool, looking at a new world through an old lens.”<sup>35</sup>

Leonard further defends her choice of the photographic process:

It occurs to me that obsolescence is less about time and more about context. About what makes sense in a given circumstance. Our ways of doing things, or making things, reflect the larger direction our society is taking. New technology is usually pitched to us as an improvement. And attachment to old things is seen as regressive: nostalgic or sentimental. But progress is always an exchange. We gain something, we give something else up. I’m interested in looking at some of what we are losing.<sup>36</sup>

Leonard has since finished another project entitled *Analogue* (1999-2007), which consists of three hundred and sixty-eight photos she took of neighbourhoods in New York City and other urban centres. The work was exhibited at the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University from May 12 to August 12, 2007.<sup>37</sup> The project began when Leonard started to take photos of storefronts in her neighbourhood. She found a kind of beauty in the handwritten signs, the creaking metal signs, the dried fruit stores, the pillow makers, and the different languages represented by the various small businesses. With the spread of gentrification, places such as the butcher’s shop, the linoleum store, the quilt maker’s store, and the bodegas were being replaced by upscale bars, restaurants, and clothing stores:

It was only as these shops began disappearing that I realized how much I counted on them – that this layered, frayed, and quirky beauty underlined my own life. I felt at home in it... I liked the way my neighbourhood [with its typewriter repair store and Chinese laundry downstairs] grounded me in the world– with physical evidence of the past – of who and when and how. With language. Spanish overlaying Hebrew, Chinatown inching over... And with other kinds of language, an urban vernacular: signs in store windows. “We accept food stamps,” “Immigration, divorcios, traducciones.”

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>37</sup> Exhibition announcement from the Wexner Center for the Arts, URL <http://www.wexarts.org/ex/?eventid=1948>, accessed on August 12, 2008.

I felt centered in a migratory pattern of generations of immigrants, centered somehow in history.<sup>38</sup>

Leonard has implied the concept of photography when discussing *Strange Fruit*. The fruits that served as test pieces for Scheidemann's consolidation now act as a type of photograph of the piece when it was first installed. They are to be kept as a reference, and in some instances, exhibited as part of the installation, and therefore continue to serve in this capacity as the fruit further decays and becomes less recognizable for what it once was. As Anna Blume pointed out, "[the] sewn fruit skins, they're like photographs of fruit." In Leonard's words, "the way that a picture of someone is not the person. It looks kind of like them, but it's not them. And these are like photographs, because it looks kind of like a grapefruit, but it's not a grapefruit anymore."<sup>39</sup> The piece stands in for memory, and for Leonard's wish that she could have fixed things in her relationship with David Wojnarowicz before he passed away. "One of the themes I work with over and over again is the idea of reconstructed experience: memory, our desire to remember, and the changeable quality of our memories. We constantly reconstruct images of the past in order to create our present... I'm interested in the fissures in this reconstruction... the clumsiness, the seams and breaks."<sup>40</sup>

As with photography, the tradition of still life also takes objects and places, using them to archive stories of their owners and inhabitants. Much of Leonard's work involves collections of older, used objects.<sup>41</sup> Leonard refers to this as a "constant thread" in her

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted in "Artist's Questionnaire: 21 responses," *October* 100 (Spring 2002): 91.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Blume, 18.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Dungan, 79.

<sup>41</sup> Dungan, 83.

work, and as a kind of “archaeology”. She wants to see what people make and leave behind, “the clues and signs, the flaws and beauty. I know the world will never look quite this way again, and I feel that I want to look closely, to hold it near.”<sup>42</sup>

Leonard is enamoured with still life, which is where *Strange Fruit* comes in – a still life that was allowed to continue on its inferred trajectory. In this case, the impermanence is important for the sense of mourning that the piece is supposed to convey. In her words, “I’m equally interested in the traditions of Flemish and Dutch still life painting – in the idea that a grouping of objects can be a portrait, or an allegory, that the owner can be described through his objects, that the assembling of these possessions reveals his or her class, profession, interests, religious beliefs, his or her status and place in the world. And that objects can be arranged, symbolically, to relate a story of the fragility of life, the temporal qualities of life.”<sup>43</sup>

If one looks at *Strange Fruit* as a contemporary version of the still life, one can see that Leonard has taken the associations not only with the philosophical meaning behind a *vanitas*, but also the materials traditionally involved, and has then updated them. Mortality versus immortality, as traditionally portrayed by fruit about to decay, candles close to burning down, the everpresent ticking clock and flowers beginning to fade create a dialogue on death and decay, while the objects as they are portrayed on canvas were durable.<sup>44</sup> The two-dimensional representation of these assorted objects on canvas has

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted in “Artist’s Questionnaire: 21 responses,” *October* 100 (Spring 2002): 97.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>44</sup> Temkin, 45.

thus been replaced in Leonard's work by their real, three-dimensional counterparts. Today, materials are often used in order to physically and literally represent the breakdown resulting from deterioration. Stability is often passed over in favour of materials chosen for their ephemeral qualities. As Ann Temkin has stated, "Vulnerability and evanescence have determined the form, not only the content, of much of the most important art to have been created in the last twenty years."<sup>45</sup>

It is important to situate the creation of *Strange Fruit* in a period that was making activist-based art that was not meant to last. Leonard's work with Fierce Pussy and their reliance upon found or donated objects harkens back to work that was being done in the 1960s in the Arte Povera movement. Including such artists as Piero Manzoni and Mario Merz, the group worked under an egalitarian, aesthetic ideology that was directed against "the inhuman aspects of industry and consumer capitalism."<sup>46</sup> To realize their projects, they opted to use cheap materials like wood, wax, sand and stone and created objects or projects that were not meant to last.<sup>47</sup> The comparison has also been made between the deterioration of *Strange Fruit* and Eva Hesse's latex pieces, not only due to the deterioration visited upon the latex but also due to Hesse's aesthetic of the anti-form. In addition, Hesse used natural latex, which is a plant-based, organic material. The

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Jan Heim Sassen, "Mario Merz and the Archetypes of Our Culture," in Eds., Hummelen, IJsbrand and Dionne Sillé, *Modern Art: Who Cares?: An Interdisciplinary Research Project and International Symposium on the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art*, (Amsterdam : Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art : Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, 1999), 76.

<sup>47</sup> Kees Herman Aben, "Conservation of Modern Sculpture at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam," in Ed. Jackie Heuman, *From Marble to Chocolate: The Conservation of Modern Sculpture*, (London: Tate Gallery Publisher, 1999), 107.

difference between the two types of organic media – Hesse’s latex and Leonard’s fruit – is that Hesse’s material is an organic substance that was usually used for industrial purposes, whereas Leonard’s material is usually meant to be consumed.

Even though Leonard had made the decision to let the piece decay, the Philadelphia Museum of Art was interested in acquiring *Strange Fruit*. While initially happy that the museum had decided to commit to such a work, Leonard soon began to worry about the terms under which it would agree to buy the piece. For her, it was important that the museum put the piece on continuous display, that it devote a specific space for the work, and, perhaps most important of all, that it show the piece when it was obviously a ruin. The museum’s curator of contemporary art, Ann Temkin, was working with Leonard and Paula Cooper in order to realize this decision. The museum agreed to try to follow Leonard’s requests, but no formal commitment was made. Their solution to the question of deterioration was that the piece would be shown for certain periods of time on a yearly, or bi-yearly basis, which in the museum’s opinion seemed to respect the piece’s temporality. The museum took archival photographs and also granted Leonard permission to photograph each installation, all in the interest of a potential publication. In addition to this, the museum also agreed to an ongoing collaboration with Leonard as the piece deteriorated further, thus allowing her to communicate her wishes when the piece was no longer exhibitable.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Temkin, 48.

At the time that the Philadelphia Museum of Art acquired this piece, such continuing dialogue with an artist was unusual. This has changed considerably. It is now a standard procedure, for larger institutions at least, to have both the curator and the conservator interview the artist if the artist is still living and is willing to discuss his/her work.<sup>49</sup> These interviews can take the form of a written questionnaire or a videotaped meeting between the artist and the person responsible for the work, in which a series of questions probe for information about the artist's wishes regarding exhibition space and conditions, storage conditions, and whether or not it would be acceptable to replace a damaged element of the piece (especially in the case of artworks with elements of newer technology that may themselves break, or become obsolete). An artist may agree to go through the process of walking a curator and conservator through an installation in order to highlight specific problems and technical requirements that need to be understood for the museum to correctly exhibit the piece. A partnership between the Guggenheim curators and conservators and the Daniel Langlois Foundation's Centre for Research and Documentation, entitled *Variable Media Initiative*, asks artists directly how their ephemeral artworks should be preserved and how they can be transferred to new media when original media have worn out, been used up or become obsolete. While disciplines such as performance art present problems in regard to documentation, technologically based art, such as website art, present other problems as technological advances make it difficult to maintain equipment in its proper working order as mechanical hardware

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<sup>49</sup> Conversation with Marie-Noël Challan-Belval, restauratrice, Musée d'art contemporain de Montreal, May 22, 2006.

becomes obsolete.<sup>50</sup> Artist Bill Viola, who began working with video in 1970, has been very proactive in transferring and updating his works as a way of keeping up with changing technologies.<sup>51</sup> Many artists are now adopting this same course of action. Often when a new media-based work of art arrives for exhibition, a back-up or archival copy of the specific technology involved in the piece is sent along. If the artists are still living, a museum will often ask permission to update a problematic situation, such as converting analog cassette tapes to digital CD. This is not, however, a valid approach for every situation. Grahame Weinbren and Roberta Friedman's 1982-1985 installation piece, *The Erl King*, used software based on the PASCAL computer language, which was in use when the piece was created. When trying to conserve the problematic technology, staff at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, in whose permanent collection the piece resides, decided to update the computer components, while at the same time emulating the aesthetic and pacing of the old computer system (the processor speed was much slower than what we have become accustomed to today). The Guggenheim consulted with the artists and a suitable solution was found.<sup>52</sup>

While curator Ann Temkin was convinced of the merits of *Strange Fruit* as an addition to her museum's permanent collection, many of her colleagues, while interested in the piece

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<sup>50</sup> Sylvia Hochfield, "Sticks and Stones and Lemon Cough Drops," *ARTnews* (Summer 2002): 117.

<sup>51</sup> Bill Viola, "Planned Impermanence," in Ed., Miguel Angel Corzo, *Mortality Immortality: The Legacy of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Art*, Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1999, 87.

Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito, and Caitlin Jones, eds., *Permanence Through Change: The Variable Media Approach*, (The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, and The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology, Montreal, 2003), 102.

as part of a temporary exhibition, were not convinced that acquiring the piece was in the museum's best interest. Understandably, their concerns were mostly with the issues raised by *Strange Fruit*'s storage and conservation requirements. Some of Temkin's colleagues did not feel comfortable assigning an acquisition number to the piece, since the piece would eventually cease to exist. Temkin's response to this was that even those items deemed permanent may become lost, or broken, or be sold; the fact that an object has a number does not mean that it will always exist in the museum's collection.<sup>53</sup>

The conservators, while initially hesitant about the piece, approached the situation with an open-minded perspective and designed a simple manner of storage and documentation. In regard to their conundrum, Temkin comments, "I believe that *Strange Fruit* is very much a work of our time. The heroics of the conservation lab are as much in question as those of the hospital. As medical and conservation technology develop and the number of potentially treatable patients grows, the questions raised by *Strange Fruit* become social questions – for example: Is it more graceful and humane to let a person die than to preserve him or her bizarrely and at great expense?"<sup>54</sup> The solution that Temkin and the conservators agreed upon was that the conservators would not document the condition of each fruit peel with the same minute detail with which they would normally approach a new acquisition. Instead, they concentrated their efforts on devising a suitable storage plan "so that its periods of dormancy [would] impinge as little as possible on its life span."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Temkin, 49.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Temkin, 49.

Leonard is pleased with the way that the conservators have approached the piece and has said that “they were freaked out at first, but now they love the piece and understand it.”<sup>56</sup> Two years after the museum’s acquisition of *Strange Fruit*, Leonard went there to install the work and found that some of the fruit had been stepped on and crushed, while other pieces showed signs of insect infestation.<sup>57</sup> The conservators had carefully removed these pieces and placed them in acid-free envelopes. The damage is not important to Leonard; for her it is part of the process of decay. In her opinion, “as long as you can pour it out of the envelopes onto the floor, I would like to keep installing it.”<sup>58</sup> The only intervention at this point was the treatment of the insect infestation; other than this, the piece has remained physically and conceptually intact.

Leonard continues to collaborate with the Philadelphia Museum of Art and will do so for as long as that institution maintains *Strange Fruit* in its collection. If she were to have her way, the piece would remain permanently installed, left to decay until finally all that would remain would be little piles of dust on the floor, punctuated by buttons and zippers. As to whether or not the piece will ever be deemed unexhibitable, Temkin has said that museum and artist have agreed to discuss this if and when the situation arises, and will make the decision together. “For the most part,” Temkin says, “it’s lasting really

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<sup>56</sup> Hochfield, 120.

<sup>57</sup> Unlike many installations of the piece in North America, when *Strange Fruit* was exhibited in Israel, the fruit was placed behind a barrier, so that the public did not have access to it. In most North American installations, it has been without such a protective device. Conversation with Richard Gagnier, Chief conservator, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, May 22, 2005.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Hochfield, 120.

beautifully. Leonard has installed it herself in the past. After she's gone, we'll use our own discretion."<sup>59</sup>

As someone who has been given the responsibility of watching over the piece while it is in the possession of the museum, Temkin has commented on the fact that even with the certainty that *Strange Fruit* will continue to disintegrate, and the fact that the piece also represents death, it is her belief that it is in some ways more alive for the public than many of the pieces in the museum's collection that appear to be fixed and never-changing. In her words, "Sometimes it's great to get caught up in the fiction of forever and the fiction of certainty. Sometimes it's great to enjoy a pretty Impressionist landscape. But sometimes we are ready to know that there can be beauty in cracks and in loss. Sometimes it is much more of a help to know that everything is changing, is in some way dying, that we do what we can, and that we go on creating."<sup>60</sup>

*Strange Fruit* does not stand as the sole example of an artwork composed of organic materials finding its way into a museum's permanent collection. To the great consternation of a percentage of the Canadian tax-paying public, the National Gallery of Canada acquired Jana Sterbak's 1987 piece *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, made from raw flank steak sewn together into a dress, and which is salted and then left to dry throughout the length of its exhibition. The piece is remade for each subsequent installation and when in storage, consists of photodocumentation and written

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Temkin, 50.

archival information providing instructions on how to assemble the meat.<sup>61</sup> Janine Antoni is another artist who has worked with food in her art; she has created numerous works using large blocks of lard and chocolate. Unlike the situation with the Sterbak piece, for the installation *Gnaw* (1992) (Figure 9) Antoni did not treat the lard or chocolate in order to preserve it (whereas Sterbak salted the meat in her work). Instead, the pieces are left to deteriorate at their own pace. They are also remade for each subsequent exhibition: a trait shared with *Flesh Dress*.<sup>62</sup> The piece was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In another example, Matthew Barney used large-pearl tapioca and a giant pound cake as part of his piece *OTTOshaft*, (1992), now in the permanent collection of the Tate Gallery, London. The piece had been installed at *Documenta IX*, and while in situ had been eaten by rats. Scheidemann was consulted about redoing the food-based element of the piece and, after much experimentation, found a bakery willing to bake such a large pound cake. With such a large-scale cake, however, it was impossible to bake it so that the inside was cooked, without burning the exterior. The eventual solution was to make a wire-mesh frame with a void inside it. Once baked, the grease had to be extracted with chemicals and replaced with synthetics.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps one of those artists most associated with the planned deterioration of their works is Joseph Beuys, whose use of lard has often caused headaches for conservators, and even created great controversy when one of his pieces, *Fettecke in Kartonschachtel* (1963), was remade in 1977 while in the permanent collection of the Stedelijk Museum. Even

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<sup>61</sup> Conversation with Richard Gagnier, Chief conservator, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, May 22, 2007.

<sup>62</sup> S. Taylor, "Janine Antoni at Sandra Gering," *Art in America* 80 (October 1992): 149.

<sup>63</sup> Gregory Williams, "Conserving Latex and Liverwurst: An interview with Christian Scheidemann," *Cabinet* 2 (Spring 2001).

though Beuys had been explicit in public statements that his works should be allowed to decay, the museum went against his wishes and replaced the rancid lard with a new lump. Even more shocking, perhaps, was the fact that though Beuys was still alive, the museum did not first consult with him before undertaking such an endeavour.<sup>64</sup> Similar approaches to organic-based works of art are, thankfully, less prevalent today.

Just as curators are now instigating a relationship with the artists whose works they are exhibiting, so the interaction between the conservators at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Leonard represents a new direction in the discipline. Scheidemann has worked with a number of contemporary artists aside from Leonard, among them Dieter Roth (1930-1998) and Robert Gober (b. 1954). While one may view the slow deterioration process for *Strange Fruit* as meditative, not so the decay visited upon some of Dieter Roth's sculptures. Leonard's use of fruit in some way lends a certain grace to her work, whereas Roth's organic works from 1965 to 1970, which have employed such unorthodox materials as salami, cheese, mutton cubes and rabbit excrement, when viewed strictly as materials, convey a sense of aggression that is not present in Leonard's fruit. His self-portrait busts made from chocolate are often used as examples of his approach to the longevity of some of his artworks. Through his works, Roth intended to make time visible through the decay of the organic materials from which his works were composed; in order to assure this, no conservation or intervention was to be attempted.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Aben, 108.

<sup>65</sup> Hans-Joachim Müller, "Interview with Dieter Roth," in *Dieter Roth: Bilder, Zeichnungen, Objekte* (Basel: Galerie Littmann, 1989), 13.

Another important element in Roth's works is chance – he often subjected the work to a specific set of conditions as a means of influencing the rate and type of change the piece would undergo. Factors such as temperature, humidity, light, and the presence of insects and bacteria were used to alter pieces once the artist had finished his part of the creative process.<sup>66</sup> Scheidemann has recounted a conversation with Roth about his chocolate bust *Portrait of the Artist as Birdfeed* (1970) (Figure 10) in which Roth stated that "the worms and bugs in my pieces are my employees. You must not disturb them; they have to do their job like any one of us."<sup>67</sup> As with *Strange Fruit*, the museum or institution left to care for one of these sculptures is primarily responsible for maintaining certain environmental conditions, for assuring that the insects do not infest other artworks, and for keeping an updated archive of photographs as the piece continues to deteriorate.

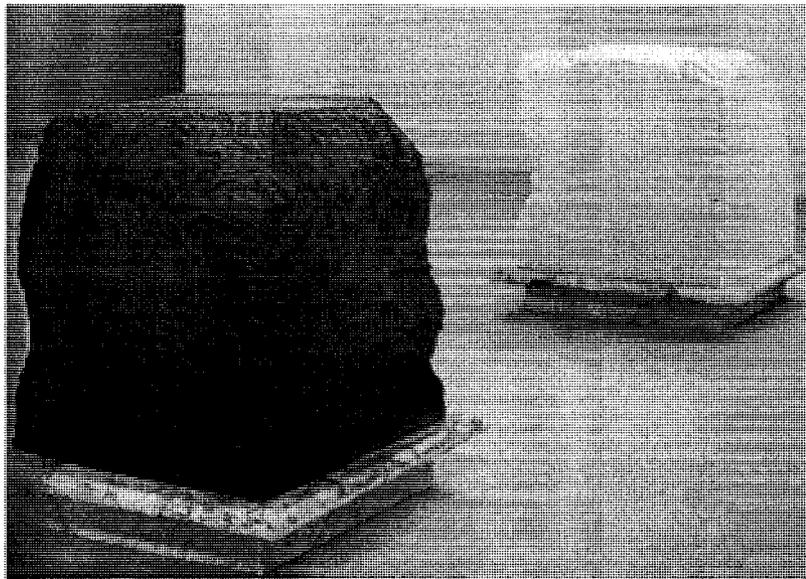


Figure 9. Janine Antoni, *Gnaw*, 1992.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Gregory Williams, "Conserving Latex and Liverwurst: An interview with Christian Scheidemann," *Cabinet* 2 (Spring 2001).



Figure 10. Dieter Roth, *Portrait of the Artist as Birdfeed*, 1970.

Heinz Althöfer, conservator of modern art at the Restoration Center in Düsseldorf, had at one time discussed the idea of injecting a pesticide into *Portrait of the Artist as Birdfeed*, though his reason for rejecting this proposal was that once the toxin had been added to the chocolate it would alter the material from edible to inedible, and the chocolate would therefore not be the same substance.<sup>68</sup> One may question if this is really the bigger problem, or whether by killing the worms and beetles, one removes the element of chance in which Roth was so interested. Roth was using food more as an ephemeral substance, not as an edible substance. Leonard had actually consumed the flesh of the fruits she used. Further to this idea is Roth's use of organic materials as a way of defying or questioning the authority of the museum and its predetermined categories. He referred to museums as “‘funeral homes’, implying that once art was in a museum, it was on its way to burial in the archives of history.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> John Dornberg, “Intensive Care,” *ARTnews* (January 1991), 130.

<sup>69</sup> Müller, 15.

Artist Robert Gober presents yet another intended outcome for his sculpture made from organic materials. *Bag of Donuts* (1989), recently purchased at Christie's auction for a private collection, is a life-size sculpture of one dozen doughnuts in a specially made paper bag. Gober mixed the dough himself and fried it in the traditional fashion.<sup>70</sup> His intent differs from Leonard's in that he wanted to preserve the work. As he told interviewers, "I want those donuts to exist forever."<sup>71</sup> Once he had completed the piece, Gober shipped it to Scheidemann in Germany so that Scheidemann could perform an extensive treatment to prolong the doughnuts' shelf life. The doughnuts were summarily subjected to a degreasing process in several acetone baths, followed by a coating of clear synthetic resin. The resin was used to preserve the doughnuts. Finally, a coating of cinnamon was added to authenticate the appearance and aroma of the doughnuts. As for the paper bag in which the doughnuts are placed, Gober has indicated that it may potentially be replaced as necessary.<sup>72</sup> Scheidemann's success in preserving the doughnuts nearly resulted in the piece's destruction when an uninformed member of the public tried to eat one of the doughnuts.<sup>73</sup>

Gober's decision to preserve the objects had resulted in their transformation into something new. One might compare the doughnuts in their transformed state to the unpreserved fruit in *Strange Fruit*. While the fruit has not had the organic chemical treatment that Gober's doughnuts have had, they, too, have in a way become

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<sup>70</sup> Buskirk, 145.

<sup>71</sup> Stephan Götz, *American Artists in Their New York Studios: Conversations about the Creation of Contemporary Art*. (Cambridge and Stuttgart: Center for Conservation and Technical Studies, Harvard Art Museums, and Daco-Verlag Gunter Blasé, 1992), 65.

<sup>72</sup> Buskirk, 149.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

representations of the fruit that they once were. The sewn-up orange is no longer a real orange, but rather an altered representation of one. Gober's decision regarding the preservation of the doughnuts moves in a different direction from that taken by Antoni and Sterbak, for example; many artists will often accept changes in appearance instead of completely transforming the material. For Gober, the appearance was the most important aspect of this process, thereby prompting Martha Buskirk to comment on whether or not he has in fact "transformed [the doughnuts] into bizarre representations, raising the question of why not simply simulate the actual object in the first place."<sup>74</sup> To answer Buskirk's question, Gober often creates a replica of a simple object, thus creating a tension between what the object appears to be and what it really is. In this instance, the doughnuts are real doughnuts, though they have been transformed by their preservation, and this opposition between the two sides pits the familiar against the irrational.<sup>75</sup>

In a gesture completely different from that of Gober's doughnuts, Felix Gonzalez-Torres' (1957-1996) works evoke, in the words of Ann Temkin, a sense of the antiheroic and the antimemorial, much as *Strange Fruit* does.<sup>76</sup> As with *Strange Fruit*, "disappearance, absence and the trace of the relic" are prevalent concepts in Gonzalez-Torres' installations.<sup>77</sup> These works represent poignant metaphors of human experience and exchange. Gonzalez-Torres' created a number of works consisting of piles or beds of candy. Central to these works is the fact that Gonzalez-Torres invites the viewer to take one of the candies, thereby making the viewer complicit in the consumption of the work.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>75</sup> Götz, 69.

<sup>76</sup> Temkin, 47.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

As Gonzalez-Torres himself has stated, “without a public, these works are nothing... I need the public to complete the work.”<sup>78</sup> This relationship between the piece and the viewer results in a continuing cycle of disappearance and replenishment that forms an active relationship between the artwork and its viewer.<sup>79</sup> Each time one of these works is exhibited, it has to be refabricated. Andrea Rosen, Gonzalez-Torres’ dealer, friend, and executor of his estate has stated that this was the artist’s intent. In some instances, the pieces are a commentary on mortality and physically represent the bodies of various lovers, friends and family members of Gonzalez-Torres, in essence serving as portraits of each of these people.<sup>80</sup> Their dimensions are variable – they can be placed in a pile in the corner, or in a mound or in a carpet - though each has a “specific starting volume based on the body weight of a specific individual”<sup>81</sup> which references the person the piece is about. Many are untitled, with a descriptive name, word or phrase placed in parenthesis, which is used to identify the person for whom the piece is a portrait.

For such a piece to work, the collaboration does not end with the viewer. A museum or gallery that acquires the piece has to agree to the terms as Gonzalez-Torres described. Temkin explains that the role of the museum has shifted in that “[the museum] has become his collaborator, asking that we fill a much greater role than that of providing security or cleaning a grimy surface.”<sup>82</sup> The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum owns *Untitled (Throat)*(1991), a portrait of Gonzalez-Torres’ father which was originally made

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<sup>78</sup> Robert Nickas, “Felix-Gonzalez-Torres: All the Time in the World” (interview), *Flash Art* 161 (November-December 1991),86.

<sup>79</sup> Temkin, 48.

<sup>80</sup> Hochfield, 118.

<sup>81</sup> Buskirk, 155.

<sup>82</sup> Temkin, 48.

from Luden's Honey Lemon Cough Drops, which at the time of the piece's creation were wrapped in opaque yellow and blue wrappers. Gonzalez-Torres' father died from throat cancer, and these specific cough drops were the only thing that helped to make his throat feel better.<sup>83</sup> Since the Guggenheim acquired the piece, Luden has changed the packaging and the opaque wrappers have been replaced by clear cellophane wrappers with yellow lettering, and this returns us to the issue of how a museum presents and/or preserves a work of art that is by nature degradable. For a piece such as this, there were a number of options that the museum could take in order to continue to remake and show the piece. According to John Ippolito, the museum's associate curator of media arts, and one of the curators involved in the Variable Media Initiative, the first option is that of storage. If the museum chose to do so, it could store an extra supply of the candies, making sure that it always had a large supply on hand. Unfortunately, this was not desirable because candy attracts insects that in turn threaten other objects in the museum's collection. The second option would be emulation, which was chosen by the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art when it borrowed the piece for a retrospective of the artist's work. Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art's exhibition of the piece combined yellow-wrapped candies with blue-wrapped candies in an attempt at simulating the overall aesthetic created by the original wrappers. The third option proposed by Ippolito was that of migration to a different medium, and therefore bringing the work up to date. This was chosen by the Guggenheim when the piece once again traveled abroad for another retrospective. The museum purchased the Luden cough drops with their new packaging as Ippolito had "posited some potential allegiance to the brand

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<sup>83</sup> Hochfield, 119.

of Ludens honey lemons that went beyond the physical look of the piece.”<sup>84</sup> The fourth option, was reinterpretation, whereby the museum or owner would recreate the piece, taking certain liberties in regard to what the piece could possibly mean.<sup>85</sup>

At present, the Guggenheim has made the decision that for this piece, the candies are not to be taken by the public, despite Gonzalez-Torres’ conviction that the work “is nothing” without such participation. For the curators, the importance of the specific candies to *Untitled (Throat)* is central to the meaning of the work, and they have therefore stopped the consumption of the work. The Guggenheim took a different approach to Gonzalez-Torres’ sculpture *Untitled (Public Opinion)* (1991) (Figure 11), for which the museum acquired the rights to remake the piece, but not the piece in its physical form. The piece was made during the first Gulf War and the licorice candies originally used for the piece were shaped like small torpedoes. When it became a concern for public relations that the original candies turned peoples’ mouths black, the museum decided to substitute a similarly shaped brown candy that produced the same visual effect. While he was still alive, Gonzalez-Torres did in some instances allow for his pieces to not be consumed. This usually occurred when museums had similar concerns regarding the long-term availability of the materials for his pieces, or were concerned that most of the piece would be eliminated at the opening of the exhibition. While he was strict about his intent for the pieces, Gonzalez-Torres would occasionally give in. When questioned about this,

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Jon Ippolito, *Permanence Through Change: The Variable Media Approach*, (The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, and The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology, Montreal, 2003), 97.

his response was, “Oh, it’s OK, people have rules, and you have to have rules.”<sup>86</sup> Gonzalez-Torres’ dealer has also offered the explanation that his flexibility may also have been due to the pain he felt when witnessing his works being physically diminished.<sup>87</sup> As a way of consolidating the needs of the museum and the intent of the artist, certificates accompany these replenishable works. Their purpose is to try to encompass the various scenarios surrounding the refabrication of the works, “ensuring [that] the artist’s desire to convey that meaning is never secured in any one way and that the owner has the responsibility to reinterpret the work each time it is fabricated.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito and Caitlin Jones, eds., *Permanence Through Change: The Variable Media Approach*, (The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, and The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology, Montreal, 2003), 96.

<sup>87</sup> Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito and Caitlin Jones, eds., *Permanence Through Change: The Variable Media Approach*, (The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, and The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology, Montreal, 2003), 96.

<sup>88</sup> Nancy Spector, in Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito and Caitlin Jones, eds., *Permanence Through Change: The Variable Media Approach*, (The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, and The Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology, Montreal, 2003), 94.

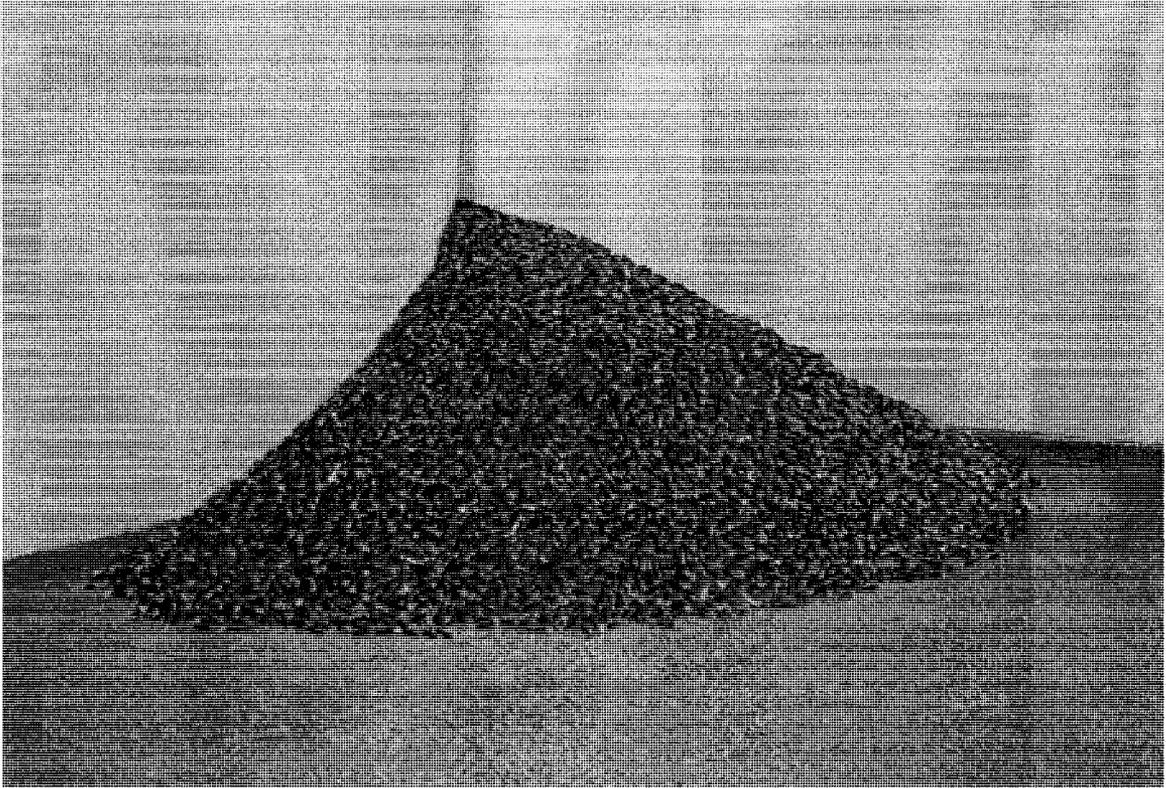


Figure 11. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Public Opinion)*, 1991.

Even when the artist is still alive and willing to provide input into the future of a specific artwork, there are often many decisions to be made. The path *Strange Fruit (for David)* followed to eventually become part of the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art was certainly filled with its share of compromise. In situations where the artist has clearly stated his or her wishes for a given piece, the physical reality of the work may dictate a change in direction. It is through an ever-growing recognition of such problems that museums are starting to come to terms with works already in their collections, and artists, curators and conservators are now engaging in a dialogue as to how to properly represent the work in question.

## Conclusion

The use of ephemeral materials in the production of artworks creates a series of challenges for both curators and conservators. Further complicating this is the fact that some of the artists whose works continue to be in various museum collections are no longer alive, and are therefore unable to provide guidance when decisions as to the preservation of these works is to be undertaken. Problems arising from pieces such as Eva Hesse's latex sculptures have led to the investigation into new ways of understanding and documenting contemporary works as they are acquired by museum collections. In an attempt to prevent questions pertaining to the use of materials (and the intent behind such choices) of the individual artists when exhibiting their works of art, communication and collaboration with artists has become standard practice. Zoe Leonard's continuing dialogue with Philadelphia Museum of Art curator Ann Temkin is one such example. In taking on the responsibility of acquiring ephemeral artworks, museums are cooperating with artists on an unprecedented scale. At the core of this communication is the desire to preserve not only the artist's intent but also the aura of the artist's signature in the sense that the artwork is an original creation with historical significance. Curators and conservators are establishing new parameters within which to respect the delicate balance between the reality the requirements of exhibition place on a particular work, and the desire of the artist to leave the work to its own devices.

For reasons of brevity, this thesis dealt specifically with ephemeral artworks made from organic materials. The range of unorthodox materials used by artists is ever-increasing,

with the rapid changes found in technology. Planned obsolescence has created myriad problems for museums when trying to maintain works that incorporate electronic elements. Nam June Paik worked extensively with televisions and video cameras, creating what is perhaps the first video installation dating from 1965. The televisions in some of his older installations used cathode ray tubes (CRT, the glass picture tube present in older monitors and TV sets), and with the advent of flat panel displays into the affordable public realm, the older versions will soon no longer be available. Artists such as Bill Viola have addressed this. Viola constantly works at updating his pieces, migrating to newer technologies. Updating his first video installations from their original analog format in circa 1970 to present-day digital formatting, Viola wanted the lifespan of the works to be prolonged. While this is an important step on the part of the artist, copying material in a video installation piece, for example, and migrating to new technologies, begets a newer concept of originality. Some artists, however, do not agree with this approach, and their works require significant research and creativity on the part of those left with the responsibility for their care. For pieces that incorporate computers, both software and hardware are constantly going through such rapid changes, it is a daunting task to maintain functionality. Computer languages in use twenty years ago are no longer viable. Further confounding this are works that are both installation and performance, with elements that remain long after the initial event. Often viewed as temporary pieces, installation and performance works may include ephemeral elements or may be site specific, and the decision to reinstall such pieces often follows considerable debate.

Thus, the proliferation of unorthodox materials found in contemporary artworks has resulted in a curatorial and art conservation community that has had to reconsider the approach to each work based on its own merits. While it may be a difficult decision to let a work deteriorate - as per the wishes of the artist – such resolve toward the integrity of the piece results in a better understanding of what the artwork is about.

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