



The contributions of Eva Hesse and Lynda Benglis on contemporary sculpture and how they have influenced my work  
by Roberta Joy Holloway

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sculpture  
Montana State University  
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## PREFACE

The intent of this professional paper is to honor and credit Eva Hesse and Lynda Benglis of the Post-Minimal movement. In order to accomplish this I decided to compare and contrast their ideology and methodology with the Minimal Movement. In doing so, I found within the Minimal Movement, as with any particular stylistic methodology, a lot of contradictions. I would like to state that in its most basic conception, the Minimal artists concentrated on formal fundamentals of design. They created large geometric shapes that not only dominated a space but also proposed a nonrelational and nonhierachcal arrangement of forms. What I find extremely interesting is that Minimal art and Minimalistic art can mean two different aesthetics. When I talk about the Minimal art object I am referring to the object that reflects the intrinsic characteristics of the Minimal Movement. When I discuss my own work I am talking about the Minimalistic tendencies that pertain to the unaltered state of materials and the hand manipulation of materials that produces a pure and clear relation between the artist response to materials and the ability to transform media into aesthetic form. I have found that color, texture and scale as well as angularity can have a Minimalistic stance with out having the conceptual ideology of the Minimal art movement. In fact it may have been Hesse's work that has allowed Contemporary artists to speak of their work in these terms. It has been my experience that the term Minimalistic is a catch phrase to describe anything that lacks decoration or ornamentation within the abstracted object. I would like to make it clear that an object can be Minimalistic but have the expressive and emotive qualities that a Minimal object denies.

**“ . . . a shift from man-made form to the  
unshaped raw material of experience  
constitutes a return to concrete reality,  
from which alone new thought can arise.”<sup>1</sup>  
Rudolph Arnheim**

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<sup>1</sup>Marcia Tucker, “Anti-form,” Robert Morris, (Whitney Museum of American Art, Praeger Publishers, New York, 1970), p. 38.

What I find influential as an artist is work that communicates originality, experimentation and innovation. Eva Hesse and Lynda Benglis of the Post-Minimal movement in particular exemplify these characteristics. The Post-Minimalists of the mid sixties created abstract objects using unique materials and processes. In doing so, they successfully introduced new methodologies that freed artists from the restrictions of creating art confined by a particular ideology. This movement was multi-faceted. Each artist exhibited forms that ranged from the biomorphic to the geometric. They also confronted and addressed issues through contradiction and paradox, such as male/female, hard/soft, clarity /chaos and naturalistic/ industrial. They deliberately incorporated contradictions to give the objects ambiguity, to raise questions rather than dictate answers. The common denominator among the Post-Minimalists was their determination to redefine sculpture in ways that had never been thought of before, unlike the Minimal artist, who made sculpture based on traditional, elemental properties. In doing so, the Minimal artist dictated that sculpture be made large in scale, angular, and with commercial constructive materials.

The Minimal artists, active around 1965, transformed two-dimensional properties into three-dimensional properties. They took painting techniques and the sensibilities of the rectangle, cube and the grid and turned them into sculpture. Sculptors Robert Morris, Donald Judd, Robert Bladen, Robert Grosvener, Tony Smith, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, as well as Sol Lewitt made large scale geometric

objects that confronted the viewer's spatial boundaries and dominated the space in which the objects were placed. The forms were all hard edged and emphasized that content was primarily based on the formal fundamentals of art: line, space, and color. In doing so, the Minimal artists proposed the authority of good design and the well built aesthetic. A cube, rectangle and square must be perfectly constructed to sustain its integrity. This integrity combined with the elemental philosophies of painting, such as the grid, the rectilinear and cubist form, inspires good design and is formally based.

The Minimal movement was comprised strictly of men. Even Anne Truitt, who was creating large scale geometric shapes in 1963, is not considered a Minimal artist. Her forms are closely related to the minimal object but differ in that she incorporated bands of color around the objects. What I find discouraging about this movement is that these men were dictating that art should be constructed, have hard edges and follow the traditions of art. They were so busy trying to uphold the traditions of art that they lost sight of free expression and the power that expression can have in a piece of work. This male dominated movement may have perpetuated traditional art, but in doing so did not offer anything unique or inspiring for the artistic community. There is a reason that this movement ended as quickly as it appeared: lack of interest. In my opinion, the only contributing factor that came from the Minimal movement was that it sparked a change in thought processes and procedures of creating art.

The metamorphosis of dynamic, ambiguous, and thought provoking art can

be contributed to Eva Hesse and Lynda Benglis of the Post-Minimal movement. Hesse set out to make “nothing”<sup>2</sup> so that something, anything, could replace the formalistic approach of the Minimalists, while Benglis exemplified the properties of process art<sup>3</sup> and its infinite possibilities. By approaching art with these diverse components, the Post-Minimalists made a long lasting impact on contemporary art.

Hesse and Benglis in particular were pivotal figures in making the transition from the preconceived, prefabricated geometric object, to the spontaneous, intuitively worked, repetitive aesthetic of process art. My thesis proposes that Eva Hesse and Lynda Benglis, by employing unique and original approaches to materials and processes, redefined sculpture and established infinite possibilities to creating three-dimensional objects. I will juxtapose the Minimal and Post-Minimal movement, and will illustrate the impact that Hesse and Benglis had on American art. These artists depended on process and innovative materials as intrinsic components in their work and thus introduced new approaches to creating abstract art. My work will also be discussed as it is inspired by the work of Eva Hesse.

To begin, the innovative materials that Hesse and Benglis used inspired experimentation with and investigation of new substances. Commodities of string, latex balloons, plaster, liquid latex, and polyurethane foam not only denounced traditional materials of wood, steel, and bronzes, but introduced a commitment to

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<sup>2</sup>The concept of nothing will be discussed later when I introduce Eva Hesse and her philosophies to creating art.

<sup>3</sup>Process art will be defined in detail on pages 13.

working media that in the past were suspect and considered invalid as sculptural elements. According to the Post-Minimalist, the more eccentric and original the material, the closer the artist was to achieving a new sensibility that questioned and rejected the principles of the Minimalists.

Most Minimal artists chose to work in plywood and steel. These constructive commercial materials combined with the restrictions of making geometric objects communicated a detached and less involved participation of the artist with the work. The difference between the Minimalists and the Post-Minimalists is that the Post-Minimalists intentionally ceased to make art, metaphorically, and the Minimalists physically made nothing and let the labor force of the factories create the components of their objects. Most Minimalists ordered their materials and shapes over the phone.<sup>4</sup> I find this method of working completely irresponsible and pompous. I also believe that these materials perpetuated a very controlled and limited range of aesthetic possibilities. The fact that a factory worker can execute a Minimal object reiterates the simplicity and meaninglessness of this movement. In my opinion, these geometric shapes mirror the shallow and detached methodology of the Minimalists.

By employing innovative materials, Hesse and Benglis produced a wide range of aesthetics. Although these two artists worked independently of each other, they shared a quest to create something totally expressive and original, which in part

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<sup>4</sup>referring to "Minimalists sculptors had their work factory-made(as soon as they could afford to),Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," Art forum, (1990), p. 51.

is defined by their choice of non-traditional media. Robert Pincus-Witten, a critic of the sixties, has coined "Signature Substance" as the material that identified a particular artist and set her/him apart from other Post-Minimalists.<sup>5</sup> Lynda Benglis used liquid latex and polyurethane foam.

Eva Hesse, contrary to Pincus-Witten's theory, used a variety of materials and cannot be identified by one particular substance. Hesse set the experimental and innovative forum in which all Post-Minimalists worked. She began her sculpture career by using various found materials in an old weaving factory in 1964. Hesse used string, screens, and plaster. The grid like structure of the screen called for something to be poked into it. She first used wire, but, when she ran out of that material she turned to cloth and plaster. She dipped the cloth into the plaster to give it the ridged quality of the wire; then she poked the strips into the screen. The process of poking combined with knotting later became the working style of her mature pieces.

Lucy Lippard called the movement that Hesse was working in during the 1960's "The New Material Syndrome."<sup>6</sup> She meant that the more innovative the material, the better it was for the artist's credibility. By 1965, Hesse used malleable materials such as surgical tubing, inflatable beach balls, latex balloons, polyethylene sheeting, inner tubes and nets. Each material demanded a different approach to forming. Hesse was quoted in her retrospective, ". . . materials are lifeless til given

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<sup>5</sup>Robert Pincus-Witten, Post-Minimalism (Out of London Press, Inc., N.Y., 1977), p. 15-16.

<sup>6</sup>Lucy Lippard, Eva Hesse, (First Da Capo Press edition, 1992) p. 136.

shape by the creator. . . materials by their own create the end.”<sup>7</sup>

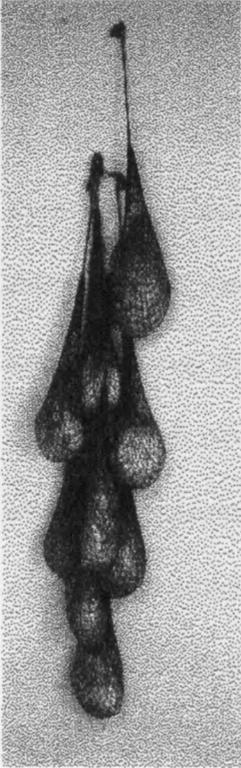


Figure 1

For Hesse, the material was the form. Hesse loved the hands on manipulation of malleable materials. In *Not Yet*, 1966,(Fig. 1) and *Vertiginous Detour*, 1966,(Fig. 2) Hesse had discovered the powerful expressiveness of working netting, plaster, polyethylene and inflatable beach balls. One can see the spontaneous work habits that developed as a result of reaction to a material. The properties of the nets, plaster and polyethylene have an ugly yet soft and supple seductive quality that is contrasted by the weightiness and confinement of these multiple bulbous forms by a net. In this respect, Hesse

uses non-traditional materials that communicate an expressive and emotive aesthetic with ambiguous overtones. These materials reject the restrictive attitude of the Minimalists which made art in the media that would best illustrate a purity of design.

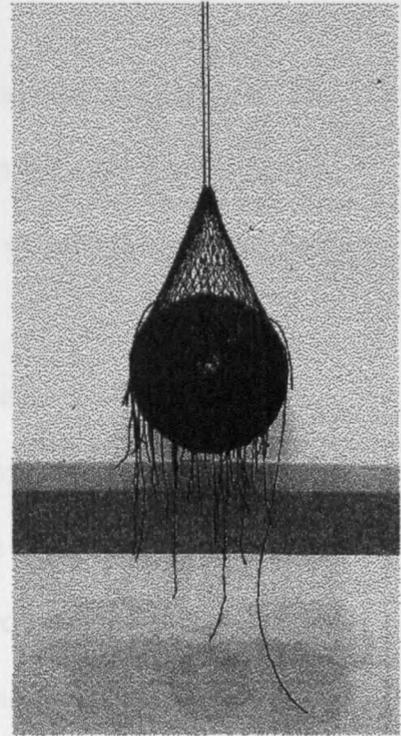


Figure 2

One can see a stark difference between a Judd object and Hesse object. Donald Judd's, *Untitled*, 1966,(fig. 3) made of painted cold-rolled steel communicates nothing

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<sup>7</sup>Helen A. Cooper, "Eva Hesse: Diaries and Notebooks," *Eva Hesse: A Retrospective*, (Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, 1992), p.23.

more than the repetition of rectilinear order of shapes. I feel that this piece falls short. This minimal object reiterated a non emotive and non expressive stance so that the clarity within the object would be revealed. It is static, symmetrical and ordered. Its scale dominates a limited spacial surrounding, and confronts the viewer with nothing more than an

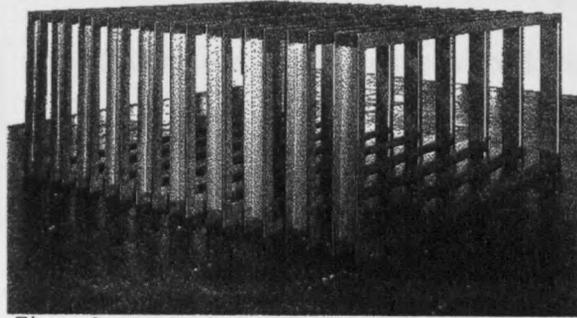


Figure 3

answered quotation about rectangles, "A rectangle will always be a rectangle" The eccentric materials that Hesse and Benglis used however, produced aesthetics of ambiguities and dynamics. They also increased the realm of possible solutions in creating art.

I remember the first time I saw Eva Hesse's Retrospective show at the Hirshorn Art Gallery in D. C. I was so inspired by her use of cord dipped in paper mache, and then wrapped over balloons, that I went home and created a cocoon series. The first cocoon's internal structure was made of card board rings that had



Figure 4

paper mache' wrapped around each ring. I then pulled jute twine through the rings and created a warp so that more twine could be woven and wrapped around the rings. I repeated the weave until the skeleton of the form was totally concealed.

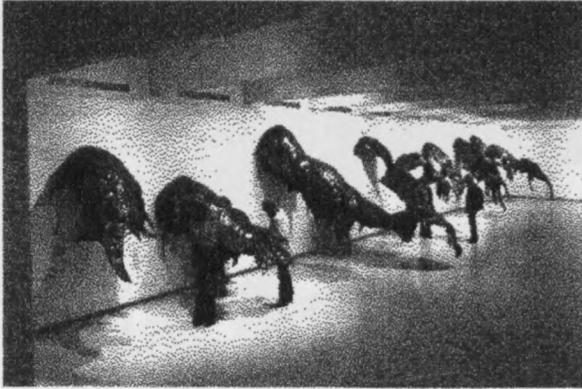


Figure 5

best feeling in the world is discovering something that has never been thought of before.

Benglis contributed to the redefinition of sculpture by creating incredible biomorphic shapes with polyurethane foam. These behemoths are comprised of foam alone. Benglis

installed six environmental pieces around the country, (Fig. 4-9). During the early sixties and seventies, Benglis's signature substance was liquid latex and



Figure 6

polyurethane foam. Both materials have an inherent quality of paint when wet and a sculptural quality when congealed.

Although it looks soft in her finished pieces, it is actually very hard like plastic.

Benglis used the transformative properties



Figure 7

























































































