

*To the Editors:*

Anne Wagner did not need to create a straw man in order to make her case about Eva Hesse ["Another Hesse," *October* 69], but since she has pressed me into service, I must point out that she fictionalized my views in the process. When I stated that "we cannot deny our lasting interest in . . . ghoulish tales of the spirited, gifted, young woman who struggles to find her voice only to have it choked off by disease," Wagner suggests that I really meant *I* not *we*, and she chides me for cloaking a personal preoccupation in larger terms. But the phenomenon I referred to—a practically cult-like veneration of figures like Hesse, Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, Diane Arbus, and Frida Kahlo—is a conspicuous fact of the sociocultural milieu to which I *and* Wagner belong; hence the pronoun "we." As it happens, I have never particularly shared this fascination, let alone "endorsed" it, as Wagner claims. Wagner goes on to state that I take issue with the views of Mary Ann Doane and Mary Kelly that such ghoulish enthusiasms are unwholesome and troubling. In fact, I do *not* say that I disagree with these views, and I do *not* disagree.

My brief from Helen Cooper, the Hesse exhibition's organizer, was to examine Eva Hesse through 1990s feminist lenses, and in the paragraph in question I began to delineate the conflicted character of current feminist views on the subject of women and illness. However Wagner might question it, bringing a present-day feminist perspective to bear on a 1960s topic is no less

justifiable than, say, bringing a Marxist perspective to bear on an eighteenth-century subject; such treatment need not lack a historical consciousness. Wagner patronizingly advises that "some conception of history" is what "feminism needs to keep hold of," however, the conception she vaunts being a kind of bell jar-like view of a fixed historical instant. But my scholarship (and that of innumerable other feminists) is no less historically grounded than Wagner's; it is, with reason, *differently* historically grounded, in this case taking into account, alongside primary sources, a multiplicity of critical perspectives on Hesse's art available during *and* since her lifetime.

Wagner argues that in isolating pain, especially women's pain, as the central theme of Hesse's art I (like others before me) am guilty of reading back in, retrospectively and ahistorically, from my knowledge of the sculptor's final ordeal with brain cancer. My essay establishes, however, that Hesse's identity as a sick woman, and her experience especially with illnesses that exclusively or predominantly afflict women, had dogged her since childhood. Wagner complains that we would do better to look at Hesse's work less in gendered terms than as evidencing some "common human quality or experience." This appealingly inclusive, neutral category has for too long served to cloak patriarchal interests and agendas, however. Only through the protracted efforts of many stubborn feminists and some congresswomen has the N.I.H., for instance, been forced to acknowledge

that illness does discriminate by gender, and that programs targeting “human” disease have in fact long been biased in favor of male patient populations. Wagner may call it “radical pessimism,” but I call it common knowledge: at that time of life when people generally expect to enjoy sound health, women are impelled to seek help for a greatly disproportionate share of physical, mental, and emotional illnesses. I did not and would not propose the sick woman as a feminist ideal, but this figure warrants feminist interest and concern; and I believe it provided a logical subject—among other subjects—for Eva Hesse. This is not the same as having a “notion of Hesse as wound,” as Wagner puts it in a reductive Freudian formulation that travesties my position.

Turning to a specific sculpture, discussed at length by Wagner: Eva Hesse produced *Contingent* from her sickbed, through the agency of assistants, in a time when she was intermittently swathed in bandages from her surgeries. The work is formed of mottled, yellowish-white, translucent latex over loosely rectangular sheets of cheesecloth, a fabric akin to gauze. That I should have evoked the image of “soiled bandages” and flayed skin in relation to *Contingent* strikes Wagner as exaggerated. I will have to leave it to others to decide whether this image is any more extreme than Wagner’s evoking the window Hesse’s mother jumped through in relation to the cloth-wrapped picture stretcher that forms the basis for *Hang Up*.

Notwithstanding her own reading of *Hang Up*, Wagner complains of schol-

arly approaches that would tie Hesse’s accomplishment too tightly to the specifics of her biography; I understand these qualms. What persuaded me to write the essay I wrote was the compelling fact of Hesse’s diaries, the accessibility of which Wagner seems to lament. What might well impress anyone who examines these documents is that during a period when Hesse actively combed her sculptural production, having work destroyed in anticipation of her death and the judgments of posterity, she made no similar effort to edit, much less to destroy, that exceedingly intimate body of writings, which dates to her adolescence. Instead, it seems that in her last years (though conceivably it was earlier) she went back through the diary pages, carefully numbering many of them and occasionally inserting (remembered) dates, as if to ready them for scholars’ eyes.

We are not bound to see Hesse as we think Hesse wished to be seen, of course; we are not bound to stress a biographically based reading of her work; other approaches may yet bear greater fruit. To Wagner’s persistent suggestion that we might somehow cleanly separate Hesse’s art from her life, I would reply, however, that all (modern, Western) works of art are inextricably tied to an artist, no less than scholarship is to a scholar. In ways opaque or transparent we all write our lives in our work. Insofar as we find the ability to see our personal vicissitudes in terms that exceed the personal, they may serve to deepen our work. Eva Hesse possessed that ability, such that her art is, ulti-

mately and unmistakably, far larger in its meanings than the story of her life. That (in brief) is Wagner's conclusion—one that I and others had already arrived at, as it happens.

Feminist art history is as yet a young branch of the discipline—so very young that, just over the past four years, I have found myself the first to publish sustained feminist readings of such central subjects as Minimalism, Pollock, Agnes Martin, Brancusi, and the *Demaiselles d'Avignon*. I have regarded these writings necessarily as beginnings, as experimental, subject to critique and revision. I ask only that I be criticized for my actual positions and not for reinventions of them. Feminist art history always stands to benefit from careful criticism; smug admonitions to get history right—as if that meant one thing—do not advance the cause.

Eva Hesse liked to think that “excellence [in art] has no sex,” and it seems that Wagner has a similar ideal for scholarship, as a sexually indifferent field. Yet scholarship, like scholars, is sexed. For female professionals to identify with the opposite and dominant sex generally makes sound career sense, no doubt. One can only admire Eva Hesse for having had, in practice, the courage some thirty years ago not to divest herself of her sex.

—ANNA C. CHAVE

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