Anna C. Chave

Sculpture, Gender, and the Value of Labor

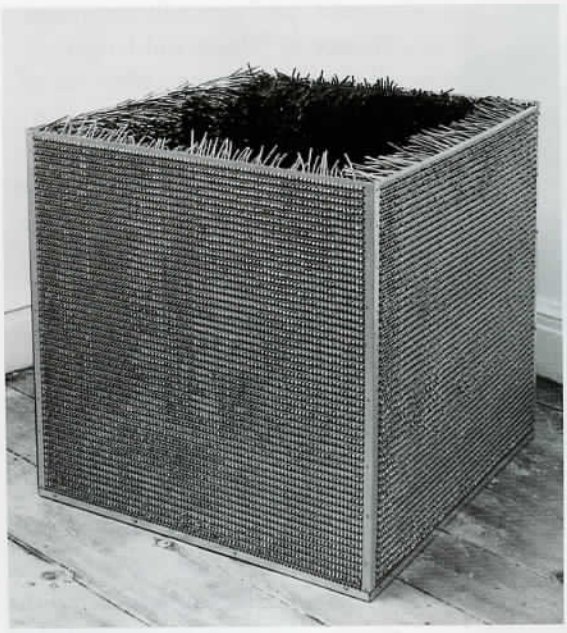
> Interviewer: "I was going to ask you if your mother worked at any point?"
> Jackie Winsor: "Mostly she didn't. No."

So endemic is the bias that unremunerated labor is not legitimate labor that, when an art historian posed the above question to sculptor Jackie Winsor, she discerned at once his intended query: Did your mother work outside the home for wages? After politely answering the unspoken question, Winsor proceeded to set the record straight. Raising three daughters in rural Newfoundland without modern amenities, her mother did, it turns out, work: she grew, canned, cooked, and baked the family's food; spun the wool for, knitted, and sewed the family's clothes; pumped the household's water and kept its fires going year-round. By contrast with her father's paid daytime employment, her mother's

Production shot of Jackie Winsor, *30 to 1 Bound Trees*, 1971–72. Wood and hemp © Jackie Winsor, Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

unpaid "job" generally impressed Winsor as "bigger and longer"—all the more so since, after one of many household relocations, her mother constructed the family's new home. "Literally?" the doubtful interviewer pressed. "Literally," replied the sculptor. "[Your father] supervised her?" he inquired. "No," she answered.[1] The fact that Winsor's mother built a house (designed by her father) is in a way at odds with the larger story the sculptor has to tell, that of a practically nineteenth-century upbringing in a community where labor was highly sex-segregated. Winsor herself mostly acquired the myriad competencies demanded of women in that society, but, as the tomboy daughter of a man who lacked sons, she (like her mother) managed to attain a range of male-coded skills besides.

If the primitive setting of Winsor's youth makes her story distinctive, the gendering of labor that she describes was not confined to remote regions. In the otherwise coeducational United States public school systems, girls were typically trained in the domestic arts—that is, prepared for largely unpaid forms of labor—whereas boys studied industrial arts, mastering the usage of hand and power tools that could lead to gainful employment. Further, in an era antedating Home Depot, females who strayed into spaces devoted or ancillary to the use of such tools—such as hardware stores or lumberyards, basement or garage workshops, not to mention sculpture ateliers—were generally vulnerable to hazing, at best. Any young woman who eyed a profession requiring workshop know-how, as sculpture (more than other media) generally does, stood to be thwarted, then. The rare exceptions included those tomboys blessed with obliging fathers, such as Winsor, or Lee Bontecou, daughter of the inventor of the aluminum canoe, whose girlhood pastimes included building model airplanes and who was renowned in the late 1950s and early '60s for complex, welded, and sewn (with wire) relief works.[2] The technical proficiency represented by that work awed novice Eva Hesse, for one: "I am so amazed at what that woman can do," Hesse gasped, after an evening spent with Bontecou in 1965; "technically I have everything to learn."[3] Trained as a painter, Hesse (like Bontecou) investigated the realms between painting and sculpture before venturing fully into sculpture, but, as a girlish girl (and an urban one at that), she found herself chronically frustrated by her work's "falling down . . . my handling things is wrong. Consistently so." She berated herself for depending on male friends for assistance: "That I let Sol [LeWitt] and Mel [Bochner] help me when neither are technicians is wrong."[4] Over time, Hesse coped with her technical shortcomings in part by hiring male assistants, in part by embracing states of material collapse as endued with their own aesthetic interest, and in part by deploying nontraditional materials that required less workshop savvy—especially cord or cordlike materials



Eva Hesse, *Accession II*, 1968. Galvanized steel and vinyl, 30 x 30 x 30 in. Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, Friends of Modern Art Fund, and Miscellaneous Gifts Fund © The Estate of Eva Hesse. Photo, John A. Ferrari, New York, courtesy Hauser & Wirth

Jackie Winsor, *Four Corners*, 1972. Wood and hemp, 27 x 48 x 48 in. Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio, Gift of Donald Droll in Memory of Eva Hesse © Jackie Winsor, Permission of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

akin in a way to the yarn with which she knit as a pastime. Recalled her former husband, sculptor Tom Doyle, "string," salvaged from the floor of a disused factory, "was really what got her going."[5]

It bears underscoring that Hesse did not resolve her technical difficulties by following her friend LeWitt's example—that is, by devising objects that appeared untouched by human hands and letting others overtake their production. Sculpture came newly to the fore in the United States during the sixties in significant part through the emergence of the minimalists who, with LeWitt, tacitly elevated the role of the concept in their artistic process by removing themselves completely from the labor entailed in executing their intently impersonal-looking works. Before market success rendered the use of commercial fabricators feasible, however, that strategy sometimes entailed shunting labor to handy family members, such as Dan Flavin's wife (skilled, unaccountably, in basic electrical engineering) or Donald Judd's father, both of whom remained uncredited. Though Hesse admired Judd's achievement, she would distinguish her own efforts by keeping the effect of her hand visible and, often, by evincing a kind of labor-intensiveness in her practice. After having an open-topped galvanized metal cube fabricated for *Accession II*, for instance, Hesse took months to cut tens of thousands of lengths of vinyl extrusion and thread them through the box's perforations to produce its densely bristling interior—discharging a rote task cumulatively so time-consuming that, for the first time, she was impelled to go "outside her circle of friends for help."[6]

Like Hesse, Jackie Winsor did (and does) not require that all the labor in her artwork be her own. But her sense of her sculpture's value remains closely tied to the countless hours of effort she invests in it—effort that, she believes, "attracts energy to it" from the viewer in turn. "[P]ut[ting] energy into the piece" amounts to a "caring process," to "affection" and "commitment"; "It's simply having put in the time, like a life," observed the sculptor (who is known, accordingly, for her scant production). In *Four Corners* of 1972, for example, Winsor submitted some humble materials to a humble process purposely performed with an excess of diligence: using hemp that she harvested by patiently unraveling old ropes, she joined four logs to make a square by wrapping the corners so assiduously that the hemp formed four outsize balls, reminiscent of twine or yarn, that

together fill up the empty space at the center of the square—a work that, in toto, weighs fifteen hundred pounds. "It took me six months to build that piece," she recalled, "And I had somebody helping me, full time. . . . And by the time it got near the sixth month, I had a third person help me." In its disdain for conventional sculptural procedures, its proclivity for geometry, and its importing of industrial materials, Winsor's work—like Hesse's before it—seemed to mouth the name minimalism. But because these women aggressively emphasized their labor, their sculpture emerged, pointedly, as a form of counterstatement. Minimalism tends to have a "head on, hand[s] off" quality, as Winsor saw it, "And I . . . if anything, might have [had] a heart on and hands on kind of quality."[7]

Whereas Hesse's and Winsor's transition to a mature vision devolved from their ingenious reuse of fiber extracted from an industrial context, some women active in the 1960s and '70s risked bringing to the rapidly expanding sculptural field fibers (and processes) that were coded as domestic, ergo indelibly feminine. Thus, for instance, Faith Wilding crocheted the oversize web of her idiosyncratic *Womb Room* in the watershed 1971 *Womanhouse* project organized by members of the California Institute of the Arts' Feminist Art Program.[8] In New York in the early 1960s, the pioneering Yayoi Kusama (who had been conscripted to do needlework in her youth for the Japanese war effort) sewed thousands of stuffed, phallic protruberances that she attached in eerie profusion to the surfaces of commonplace objects, such as an upholstered chair, in her fabulous *Accumulation* sculptures. Those works evidently helped give Claes Oldenburg the idea for his soft sculptures, sewn initially by his wife.[9] But where a man's employment of needlework could be vaunted as transgressive and catapult him to fame, so entrenched is the social habit of regarding women's work as negligible that a woman's use of the same medium could help consign her to obscurity—as generally proved the case (excepting early and late bursts of publicity) with Kusama and, more so, Wilding.

At a juncture when many male sculptors were undercutting received templates for artistic authorship by detaching themselves from the facture of their work—availing

Faith Wilding, *Crocheted Environment (Womb Room), Womanhouse* project, 1971, Feminist Art Program, California Institute of the Arts, Los Angeles. Photo, courtesy of the artist

Yayoi Kusama with *Accumulation #1*, 1962, and *No. B. 3*, 1962, ca. 1963–64 © Yayoi Kusama. Photo, Hal Reiff

themselves of industrial processes while abjuring their direct use, in an "executive" model of production[10]—a pathbreaking generation of female sculptors found their way instead by conspicuously deploying tools (such as crochet hooks) they had been socially assigned mainly for private use or by seizing and wielding the workshop tools that society had conspired to keep from them. Not all of these women would or, realistically, could frame their initiatives in explicitly feminist terms. Yet the fact that so many women saw a potential for inventive sculptural practices in the conscientious, dignified, patently visible completion of low-grade, repetitive tasks could signal in part their resistance to the invisibility and thanklessness of their mothers' tireless labors.[11]

Notes

1 Jackie Winsor, interview by Lewis Kachur, April 25, 1990, typescript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 13–14.

2 Elizabeth A.T. Smith et al., *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2008), 174, 171. Bontecou also spent part of her upbringing in rural Canada, summering in Nova Scotia.

3 Loose pages dated December 12, 1965, stapled into Eva Hesse, diary, dated on cover March 26, 1965, Eva Hesse Archives, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio.

4 Eva Hesse diaries, September 1966, Eva Hesse Archives.

5 Quoted in Lucy R. Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1976), 28.

6 Bill Barrette, *Eva Hesse: Sculpture* (New York: Timken, 1989), 140.

7 Winsor, interview by Kachur, 86–89.

8 Before doing their installations in the decrepit building that housed *Womanhouse*, the Feminist Art Program's members had to repair the structure itself. "One of the goals of the Program [was] to teach women to use power equipment, tools, and building techniques. . . . When we found that we had to replace twenty-five broken windows, five women went to Redondo Beach, where the father of one of them owned a hardware store," and he gave them the necessary instruction, as well as selling them the materials. The students "had to do hard physical labor, use tools they knew nothing about, . . . work in a scale larger than most of them had ever tackled." See Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, "Womanhouse," in Lydia Yee, *Division of Labor: "Women's Work" in Contemporary Art* (Bronx, N.Y.: Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1995), 67–68.

9 See Midori Yamamura, "Re-Viewing Kusama, 1950–1975: Biography of Things," in Frank Gautherot et al., *Yayoi Kusama: Mirrored Years* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2009), 82–88. Doyle has said that Hesse was deeply impressed by the obsessive aspect of Kusama's work, which they saw on a studio visit; see ibid.

10 See Caroline A. Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996). It bears noting that Judd's recourse to an "executive" model of labor did not prevent him from valuing the work of Hesse or, above all, Kusama, a close neighbor whom he assisted early in his career (for instance, by scavenging the chair used in *Accumulation No. 1*) and whom he championed in his critical writing.

11 Though it counts more as performance art than sculpture, Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Maintenance Art* project also deserves mention in this context. For example, a proposed exhibition of 1969, subtitled "Care," involved Ukeles "flush[ing] . . . up to consciousness" the "maintenance" activities that normally absorbed so much of her time as a woman, wife, and mother (e.g., "a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking . . .") by performing them within an exhibition space as "public Art activities," such that "MY WORKING WILL BE THE WORK." See excerpt of statement in Helena Reckitt and Peggy Phelan, *Art and Feminism* (New York: Phaidon, 2001), 93.