

All about Eve. Eva Hesse and the Post-Minimalist Romantic Irony

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Polish version available at / Wersja polska dostępna pod adresem:

(RIHA Journal 0081)

Abstract

The article employs the category of Romantic irony for an interpretation of Eva Hesse's work. It takes as its starting point one of Arthur Danto's texts, where the American philosopher makes a positive re-evaluation of the artist's work, and reads it as a largely humorous combination of two – seemingly incongruent – traditions of American art of the 20th century: Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. Features that Danto finds humorous, the author of the present article considers exemplary of Romantic irony, an approach that he finds in Eva Hesse's *oeuvre*. In the second part of the article, two competing interpretations of Eva Hesse's work are presented: Robert Pincus-Witten's and Lucy R. Lippard's. However, with the use of the notion of Romantic irony their standpoints can be reconciled, with a simultaneous indication of a previously dismissed, yet crucial, ironic aspect of the work of the American artist.

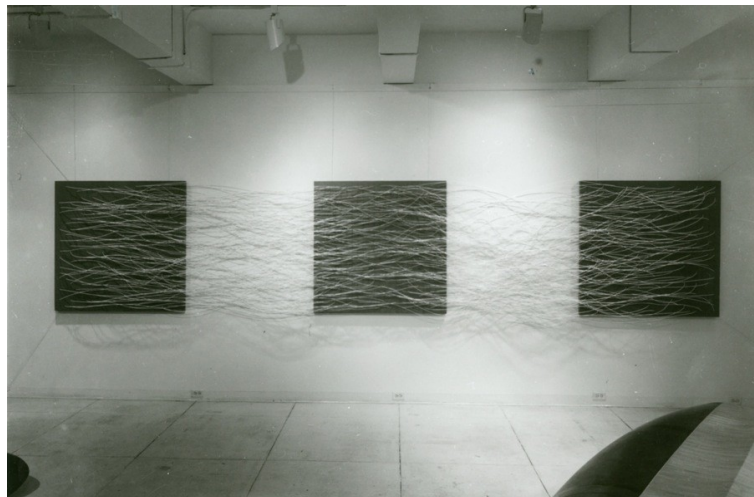
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Romantic Minimalism



1 Eva Hesse, *Metronomic Irregularity II*, 1966, graphite, paint, papier-caché (?), masonite, wood, cotton-covered wire, 48 x 240 inches / 122 x 610 cm, 3 panels. The Estate of Eva Hesse, whereabouts unknown after 1971, installation view Fischbach Gallery, New York 1966 (Photo: Rudolph Burckhardt, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2014)

- [1] In *All About Eve*, a 1950 film directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, a young girl, Miss Eve Harrington, a devoted theatre aficionado, accidentally encounters her biggest idol, the great Broadway star, Margo Channing. Having gained her trust, she is first her secretary and confidante, later – thanks to her knowledge of the roles of the great actress whom she had seen in the theatre numerous times – her double. Finally, by means of a stratagem plotted by a theatre critic, Eve scoops a role meant for Margo, is highly acclaimed by the critics, and becomes a brand new star transcending all the theatrical hitherto. If I were to describe the main theme of *All About Eve* in one word, I would say it is a film about mimicry. For it is mimicry that allows Eve to become Margo's double playing in her costume, as well as it allows her to become a naïve and helpful student, which she only plays, in order to be Margo's double in real life. Therefore, *All About Eve* is a film that serves as an illustration of Denis Diderot's paradoxical statement on acting, according to which "an actor should not experience his or her role, but pretend to become a different person"¹. Thus construed mimicry may be used as a context for a reading of Eva Hesse's work – an American sculptor of German-Jewish descent, who died prematurely in 1970; an artist who was most crucial for the notion of Post-Minimalism coined by Robert Pincus-Witten, and for Lucy R. Lippard's concept of eccentric abstraction² – as well as her exceptional position that she gained by playing two roles at the same time: that of an Abstract Expressionist and a Minimalist. All of it for one purpose only, which she explained somewhat enigmatically, referring to acting terminology. As Lippard reported: "Asked if she was <satirizing Minimalism> she replied that she was only <punning her own vision, if anything>."³

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Abstract Minimalism

- [2] This role-playing, borrowed from strategies employed by the theatre – as well as by camp – was constructed on a repetition of certain gestures and forms, typical both for painting, as well as for Minimalism. The strange, eccentric combination of the two traditions has been noticed by commentators of Eva Hesse's art from the very beginning, as reported by Arthur C. Danto, the author of a text on her art entitled – of all things! – *All About Eve*. In a different essay – with an equally apt subtitle: *Comedies of Similarity* –

¹ Andrzej Tadeusz Kijowski, *Teoria teatru. Rekonesans*, Gdańsk 2001, 13.

² Pincus-Witten coined the term "Post-Minimalism" in 1971 and used it in a text on the late Eva Hesse (died in May 1970) published in *Artforum* under the title "Eva Hesse: Post-Minimalism into Sublime". The notion of "eccentric abstraction", on the other hand, comes from Lucy Lippard, who coined it in 1966 and used it in her lectures at the University of California, Berkeley and at Los Angeles County Museum in the summer of the same year. She also used it as a title for an exhibition she opened in September 1996 at the New York Fischbach Gallery. Under a different title the text was published in *Art International* in November 1966 to be later reprinted in a slightly modified version in a 1971 collection of Lippard's critical texts. Cf. Lucy R. Lippard, "Eccentric Abstraction," in: Lucy R. Lippard, *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*, New York 1971, 98.

³ Lucy R. Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, New York 1976, 188.

the American philosopher describes the artist's work that he saw in 1996 at Lippard's exhibition at the Fischbach Gallery, reconstructing the disbelief and the reactions of the viewers provoked by Hesse's *Metronomic Irregularity II* (1966, fig. 1):

Consider *Metronomic Irregularity II* by Eva Hesse, perhaps as great a sculptural influence as there is today but who was so unfamiliar when this work was first shown in 1966 that even a seasoned art worlder would encounter it as almost radically alien. The work is quite wide, consisting of three painted wood panels, each 48 inches square, separated by spaces of about the same dimension. The panels have been drilled at regular half-inch intervals, so they look like industrial pegboards, though <made by hand>. And they are connected by coated wire drawn loosely in and out of the holes, so that it looks like a tangle. [...] Nothing quite like it had been seen in 1966, not unless one frequented Hesse's studio, and even then it was somewhat novel⁴.

- [3] The attempt to rationalise the disbelief described above by Danto was based on a search for some similarities, references, and allusions that Hesse made in her work. And these clearly were: Abstract Expressionism and – in the second reading – Minimalism. Danto quotes a review by the always-reliable Hilton Kramer published in *The New York Times*. This crushingly wrong and unjust – as Danto saw it – review deemed Hesse's work "secondhand" for it "simply adapts the imagery of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings to a third-dimensional medium"⁵. Although Arthur Danto did not like the review, he had to admit that the author's remark on tangled wires as a transposition of Pollock's painting could be acclaimed as an art critical discovery. After all, it is possible to read Hesse's gesture, a repetition of Pollock's gesture in a different medium, at least in two ways: in a negative way – as Kramer did – or in a positive way – as Danto did, appreciating this eccentricity. If we stayed in the realm of analogies with the theatre and refer to Diderot, the negative reading would see Hesse's gesture as a gesture of a poor actress who wants to be like Jackson Pollock and tries to repeat his gesture believing that one can and should play it out, rather than pretend to be doing it. In the latter case, writes Danto, it "would in fact be pathetic, secondhand, but also second-rate. The marvellous tensions of Pollock's paint simply are not to be found in the slack and almost inert wiring"⁶. On the other hand, Hesse's gesture can be read in a different way and seen as invested with positive value. However, in order to do it, one cannot, as Kramer did, stop at reading it as a naïve and failed attempt to "be-like-Jackson-Pollock". On the contrary, Hesse's gesture should be seen first, through its references to Minimalism, and second, through her ironic approach consisting not in a simple repetition, but in pretending to be making a repetition. Danto explains that Kramer, who stopped at an initial reference to Pollock, made a mistake because he did not take into consideration three boards with holes that

⁴ Arthur C. Danto, "The Art World Revisited: Comedies of Similarity," in: Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box. The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 1992, 43-44.

⁵ Danto, "The Art World Revisited," 44.

⁶ Danto, "The Art World Revisited," 44.

have nothing to do with Pollock; they are much more than just a frame for a three-dimensional transposition of Pollock, a definition that we would have to accept if we limited them only to the "painterly" reading of the work. Just like the wires hanging on them, the three boards with holes constitute a meaningful element and:

belong to a different order of impulse, not possible in the world of Abstract Expressionism, but quite possible in the world of Minimalism, to which Hesse belonged, with its deliberate use of industrial materials like pegboard⁷.

[4] It is only in this optic that Hesse's work ceases to be "second-rate and secondhand" and allows the interpretation to focus on the fact that the work combines two contradictory kinds of materials and elements, one of which is mechanical and ordered, and the other unordered and irregular, handmade. One of them belongs to the Classical order, the other to the Romantic order; one is masculine, the other feminine, and the entire work was constructed on the material and symbolic tension between the two⁸. Danto, who noticed that one of the two elements that form Eva Hesse's work – the one Kramer described as a clumsy imitation of Pollock – can be seen as belonging to the Romantic order, while its inadequacy to the classical boards makes the work seem "funny, perhaps [...] very funny"⁹. To emphasise the comic accent of his interpretation, Danto refers to Hesse's statement, where she mentioned the comic qualities of her work, objective sense of absurdity, and stupidities that it included¹⁰. However, Danto's understanding of the Romantic aspect could be extended to Hesse's entire *oeuvre*. The thus expanded idea of the Romantic could be found, then, not in a single element of the artist's work, as Danto saw it, but in what Danto considered a humorous combination of opposites, which indeed permeates her entire creative output. For humour – as Friedrich Schlegel, the father of Romantic irony explained – is an ability to bring together the opposites¹¹.

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⁷ Danto, "The Art World Revisited," 44.

⁸ Danto, "The Art World Revisited," 44-45.

⁹ Danto, "The Art World Revisited," 45.

¹⁰ Danto, "The Art World Revisited," 45. Arthur Danto means here an interview with Eva Hesse conducted by Cindy Nemser for *Artforum* and published in the magazine in May 1970.

¹¹ Cf. Michał Paweł Markowski, "Poiesis. Friedrich Schlegel i egzystencja romantyczna," in: Friedrich Schlegel, *Fragmenty*, transl. Carmen Bartl, Kraków 2009, XXI. Juxtaposition of opposites used by Eva Hesse in her work is a well-analysed phenomenon, and has been discussed numerous times. For example, Maurice Berger, discussing *Not Yet* (1966) and *Ringaround Arosie* (1965), remarks that their meaning oscillates around two opposite poles: masculine/feminine, soft/hard, commonplace/strange, or attractive/repulsive. Cf. Maurice Berger, "Objects of Liberation: The Sculpture of Eva Hesse," in: Helen A. Cooper, ed., *Eva Hesse: A Retrospective*, ex. cat., New Haven 1992, 123. Anne Middleton Wagner, on the other hand, listed oppositions such as: fragility/power, meat/latex, absence/presence. Cf. Anne Middleton Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keefe*, Berkeley 1996, 268. *Contingent* (1969) was discussed by Susan Best, who addressed internal tensions produced by oppositions: skin/non-skin, dead/alive, disintegration/preservation, beautiful/ugly, painting/sculpture. Cf. Susan Best, *Visualizing Feeling. Affect and the Feminine Avant-Garde*, London – New York 2012, 86.

Romantic irony in the puppet theatre. Ironic Minimalism

[5] Romantic irony conceived in the circle of the Jena Romantics was based on a humorous and "fragmentary genius" which, putting aside the differences between fantasy and reason, neither dismissed them nor supported them, and its essence "consisted in showing that in the world of incessant change no form of expression can be considered to have a stable position or value"¹². This epistemological rule – the German word *Witz* meaning wit is derived from the verb *wissen*, to know – suggests that "one needs to become aware of this infinite inhomogeneity, which means that one needs to become aware also of the fact that being yourself is also being someone else"¹³; and that "one should drill the hole where the board is thickest"¹⁴. Thus construed irony problematises, of course, the metaphor of life as theatre where – just like in Mankiewicz's film – some truly understand that when repeating, they pretend (Eve), while others – much less prepared for self-irony – think that those who repeat are very serious about their role. For although they know well what theatre is about, they do not take into consideration the theatrical dimension of reality (Margo); as if they did not take seriously, or were incapable of finding a broader application for, Diderot's paradox of acting, built upon the differentiation between imitation (*mimesis*) and experience (*catharsis*). It is not surprising, as irony – which they lack – is also a form of paradox. Imitation, which is also linked with comic effects, and ironic detachment, consisting in certain self-awareness of imitation, is problematised in the context of the theatre by Heinrich von Kleist in his masterly text entitled *The Puppet Theatre*. He describes in it a boy – unskilled in Romantic irony – who thinks he is like *Spinario* when:

[a] glance in a large mirror recalled it to him at a moment when, in drying himself, he happened to raise his foot to a stool – he smiled and mentioned the discovery he had made. I indeed had noticed it too in the very same instant, but either to test the self-assurance of the grace with which he was endowed, or to challenge his vanity in a salutary way, I laughed and said he was seeing phantoms. He blushed and raised his foot a second time to prove it to me, but the attempt, as might easily have been foreseen, did not succeed. Confused, he raised his foot a third and fourth time; he must have raised it ten times more: in vain! He was unable to produce the same movement again. And the movements that he did make had so comical an effect that I could hardly suppress my laughter¹⁵.

[6] On the basis of the above quoted fragment we can see clearly that comic effect springs from the lack of differentiation between *mimesis* ("a glance in a large mirror") and *catharsis* ("to challenge his vanity"), a differentiation that irony makes possible ("suppress my laughter"). Eva Hesse's genius – as a sculptor who in this optic is also an

¹² Cf. Markowski, "Poiesis," XXI.

¹³ Markowski, "Poiesis," XXVI.

¹⁴ Friedrich Schlegel, "Critical Fragments," in: Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, transl. Peter Firchow, Minneapolis 1971, 144.

¹⁵ Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Puppet Theatre," in: Heinrich von Kleist, *Selected Writings*, ed. and transl. David Constantine, Indianapolis 1997, 415.

actress on the stage of the great theatre of the world – does not consist in a non-reflective repetition of Pollock's gesture, as Kramer claimed – who certainly did not see her as a genius – nor, as Danto claimed, on a humorous dialectic of difference construed as an essence of her work. Eva Hesse's genius consists in taking in brackets the seemingly irreconcilable differences and in a self-ironic – and hence Romantic – detachment from the role that she was playing, the role of "pretending to be repeating"¹⁶. Therefore, it is not surprising that in her text on eccentric abstraction, of which Hesse is the most distinct – both most ambiguous and unambiguous – representative¹⁷, Lucy Lippard several times referred to the notion of camp, popularised by Susan Sontag in 1964. Camp, which can be considered a contemporary version of Romantic irony, and camp, which also uses the metaphor of life as theatre¹⁸. At the end of his story on the artist, Danto also employed a theatrical comparison:

If there was to be a connection between Hesse's and Pollock's tangles, it would be referential and satirical. Hesse had in fact participated in an exhibition whose very title was a put-down of Abstract Expressionism: "Abstract Inflationism and Stuffed Expressionism". [...] Kramer's was a very different discourse and one, moreover, which led him into the inadvertent comedy of similarities which disfigures so much of the art world's way of talking about art: if it looks the same (or even similar), it is the same¹⁹.

[7] Nevertheless, we should consider: what was the actual purpose of Eva Hesse's ironic gesture? We can try to answer this question in at least several ways. And so, using psychoanalysis, Susan Best writes about Eva Hesse's work from the point of view of corporal feminism, seeing it as an affective work. This interpretation, according to which Hesse's work, built upon contradictions, expresses affective emotions and the artist's desire, is of course very promising. However, firstly, as it seems, it is not necessary to reach for the authority of the Chilean psychoanalyst Ignacio Matte-Blanco to notice in

¹⁶ In the catalogue of the exhibition "Tony Delap/Frank Gallo/Eva Hesse" from 1970 Lawrence Alloway wrote on the artist in a similar way, although he did not recognise her approach as ironic, nor did he call it such: "one of our ingrained habits of thought is to arrange the world dualistically, in such pairs as right and wrong, us and them, North and South. In art, Classical and Romantic is one such pair; geometric and organic form is another. It is a sign of Hesse's originality, and to some people a cause of difficulty, that her sculptures do not conform to the latter pair. For example, the sculptures have a curious way of consisting of modular units, which, even as we recognize their repetition, become knotted and collapsed." Cited in: Robert Pincus-Witten, "Eva Hesse: More Light on the Transition from Post-Minimalism to the Sublime," in: Robert Pincus-Witten, *Postminimalism*, New York 1977, 53.

¹⁷ When I call Hesse's work ambiguous, I mean her ambiguous, ironic working method. When I call it unambiguous, I mean that her work, if we compared it to other artists whom Lippard labels eccentric abstract artists, and Pincus-Witten Post-Minimalists, presents itself as exceptionally unified, which, of course, stems from the fact that she died young and that her work developed in the course of one decade. This unambiguity is noticed by Pincus-Witten, who refers to its causes. Cf. Pincus-Witten, "Eva Hesse," 45.

¹⁸ Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'," in: Sally Everett, ed., *Art Theory and Criticism. An Anthology of Formalist, Avant-Garde, Contextualist and Post-Modernist Thought*, Jefferson 1991, 100.

¹⁹ Danto, "The Art World Revisited," 46.

Hesse's work corporality and affectivity²⁰. Second, Best's interpretation is not, so to speak, the best, because assuming an ahistorical, that is unchanging, model of the mind, we universalise individual experience, while it is dependent on historical circumstances. Moreover, this narrative written from High C, does not take into consideration the artist's subversive irony – an aspect crucial in the reading I have proposed, as well in readings suggested by Lippard and Pincus-Witten.

[8] One could answer the initial question in a more historical manner, taking into consideration the individual's historical entanglement, a task undertaken by Anna Chave. According to the art historian, Hesse's works and their inherent contradictions may be read as external expression of the traumatic experience of the artist – a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany. She writes about *Contingent* from 1969 that it was: "Looking like a ghastly array of giant, soiled bandages or, worse yet, like so many flayed, human skins"²¹. Anna Chave's very pictorial language, bringing to mind American class B horror movies, rather than the intended description of Nazi homicide, a context that she wanted to use for her reading of Hesse's work, might be repelling for some. Yet, we have to admit that presenting Hesse's work that makes use of new, corporal material (like leather) in this context is interesting and most useful²².

[9] I am not dismissing here all kinds of reading based on the psychoanalytic paradigm, which is deeply set in American visual studies and art history and has brought very valuable inspiration for reading Eva Hesse's work. What is more, one might risk a statement that psychoanalysis is one of the leading discourses for the interpretation of this work, as exemplified by texts of the above mentioned authors, as well as analyses and interpretations by Griselda Pollock²³. Yet, a very popular, not to say fashionable, affective reading of the work of the American artist, which is proposed by Best, is heavy with a burden of not so much a mistake, but a serious methodological problem that I mentioned above. This problem is typical of any kind of ahistorical and hence universalist models of translating and interpreting historic forms (including art), that is accidental and understood in an appropriate context. Including – of course – Silvan Tomkin's theory of affects, referred to by Best, as well as a competing theory by Ignacio Matte-Blanco that she actually bases her interpretation on. Regardless of which of them we favour – the

²⁰ Cf. Best, *Visualizing Feeling*, 87-91.

²¹ Anna C. Chave, "Eva Hesse: A Girl Being a Sculpture," in: Helen A. Cooper, ed., *Eva Hesse: A Retrospective*, ex. cat., New Haven 1992, 101.

²² If one compared, for example, Hesse's works to those by Alina Szapocznikow – a comparison attempted to some extent in contemporary curatorial practice, for example at Agata Jakubowska and Joanna Mytkowska's 2009 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw entitled "Awkward Objects", where Eva Hesse's drawings were displayed next to Szapocznikow's pieces – one would be encouraged to draw interesting parallels between the work of the two artists. New materials that both of them used more or less at the same time could be read as an attempt to express the experience of a long illness, woman's point of view, or Jewish fate after the Shoah.

²³ Cf. Griselda Pollock and Vanessa Corby, eds., *Encountering Eva Hesse*, New York 2006.

theory of the conscious (Tomkins) or of the unconscious (Matte-Blanco) – there is not and cannot be a simple translation of affects into artworks. In other words, even if we take the most copious set of affects divided into nine – according to Tomkins – or into more categories/subsets – according to Matte-Blanco –, we will never be able to explain potentially infinite forms of artistic expression with a finite set of affects. It seems that Best is aware of it, as she ends her story about the American artist's work with a reference to Sigmund Freud's 1905 text *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Bringing up Freud's text in this context, a text where it is said that "a joke is [...] a double-dealing rascal who serves two masters at once"²⁴, is meant to explain the ambivalent and elusive, even infinite interpretative potential characterising Eva Hesse's art that is impossible to label with particular affects.

[10] At the point when Best refers to Freud and his essay on jokes she brings to the surface – perhaps without being aware of it, as the term never appears in her text explicitly – the previously unmentioned irony. With a reference to Freud jokes come back with all their ambiguity of the Janus face of the god with a viper's tongue. Their work consists most of all in the production of comic effect by a reference to the unconscious and by revealing the unconscious – *ob-scene* – and laugh provoking content. On the other hand, the nature of the joke is always *scenic* – as it needs to be adjusted to the perceptive expectations of listeners/recipients in order to be understood by them. In other words, only the understanding of this paradoxical – both *ob-scene* and *scenic* – nature of the joke can make the joke work with all its liberating, delightful power.

[11] This kind of reading features, first, irony, which I identify with Romantic irony, and second, reveals the sense and meaning of Eva Hesse's work by means of which it is now seen not as a conscious or unconscious exercise in affects taking form of artworks, but as a subversive play with the conventional understanding of affects, as well as with "affective" art. Moreover, this kind of reading, which liberates the artist from reflections on affects, requires a correction that would enable us to situate her over or beyond affects. In this optic, Hesse's work is not so much a kind of work that can be read through variously formulated theories of affects, but appears as the artist's casual game with these theories. Therefore, if one wishes to make use of Tomkin's authority, they should not refer to his theory of affects but to its derivative – the very theatrical script theory. This theory avoids the problem of explaining historical forms through ahistorical psychological models by assuming a *scenic* and conscious nature of human-actor's use of certain gestures and expressions as an answer-reaction to a given affect. And if so, these expressions are not biologically determined, but they are of conventional nature, and just as any convention, it is possible to apply them according to one's wishes, achieving both

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious," in: James Strachey, ed., *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. VIII, London 1960, 1741.

an effect of situational humour, as well as distancing oneself from them and their allegedly cathartic power.

- [12] It is also possible – to come back to the initial question on the purpose of Eva Hesse's ironic gesture, which I now intend to do – to look for an answer on thus posed question in the already mentioned texts by Lippard and Pincus-Witten. The images of Eva Hesse's art, as well as the image of a broader phenomenon (Post-Minimalism), offered by these two texts, though similar in some respects, are fundamentally different.

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Two classic readings

- [13] Applying his program of a post-minimalist writing on Post-Minimalism, Robert Pincus-Witten situates Eva Hesse's art in a strictly biographical context, and sees her ironic work through what he considers her trademark: a worldview based on a sense of absurdity. Hence, he often refers to Hesse's comments and notes, quoting and explaining them. Referring to a series of three works – all of which were made in 1966 – that included *Metronomic Irregularities*, an object analysed by Danto, Pincus-Witten writes:

This decision [to link boards with wires] combines the firmness of Minimalist ontology with the erratic inconsistency of eccentric [!] interconnection, an impression facilitated by the cotton-covered wires which act as the threading agent²⁵.

- [14] According to the critic, the destabilisation of the Minimalist-made ontology of the artwork that takes place in Hesse's work by means of the introduction of "biomorphic relief elements"²⁶ is related both to the artist's sense of absurdity of the world, as well as to a self-ironic detachment towards this absurdity, which characterises her artistic approach, as well as the approach of other Post-Minimalist artists:

A disparate range of work came into being, resistant to the architectural and sculptural ambitions of Minimalism. These artists, in order to cut through Minimalism's solemn atmosphere, adopted a self-mocking stance. The general levity was viewed as "doing an Oldenburg number". The shifting sensibility was expressed in the growing use of highly colored, emotionally associative materials²⁷.

- [15] And even though, as Pincus-Witten's logic suggests, the thus characterised self-ironic Post-Minimalist approach was shared by an entire group or generation of artists, Hesse's

²⁵ Pincus-Witten, "Eva Hesse," 54.

²⁶ Pincus-Witten, "Eva Hesse," 45.

²⁷ Pincus-Witten, "Eva Hesse," 46. Irony and Romantic irony are characterised by a distanced approach to the world and one's activity in it, by looking at oneself from aside. Thus understood irony can also be found in Eva Hesse's writing, as she – as Pincus-Witten emphasises – often talked about herself using the third person. For example, in a fragment of her notes entitled "Underlying Theme of the conflicting forces inside Eva", Hesse referred to herself as Eva, inside whom there are: "1. Mother force: unstable, creative, sexual, threatening my stability, sadistic-aggressive. 2. Father, Stepmother force: good little girl, obedient, neat, clean, organized-masochistic". Pincus-Witten, "Eva Hesse," 48.

particular use of eccentric forms, shapes, and colours is explained by Witten in reference to her private, singular, and unique experience. Writing about *Long Life* (1965), presented at the already mentioned exhibition *Abstract Inflationism and Stuffed Expressionism*, he states that its sexual connotations, just like sexual metaphors introduced by Hesse in *Total Zero* (1966) "are not introduced into Eva Hesse's work because of an active literary fantasy, but because they take their spur from closely lived experience"²⁸. In a similar manner he comments on, for example, a controlled gradation of greyness appearing in Hesse's work with increasing intensity, matching the increased sense of absurdity of the world caused by events in her private life: the death of her father and the awareness of her own illness²⁹. There is no doubt that Pincus-Witten characterised Eva Hesse's Post-Minimalism with words similar to those of Lippard, paying attention, just like she did, to explicit eroticism, self-irony, shifts of sensibility, softness, marginality in respect to the mainstream of Minimalism; sometimes these words are identical – eccentricity – and reveal his debt for Lippard, whose name features in his text. Therefore, it is perhaps puzzling that in a 1976 monographic book on Eva Hesse Lucy Lippard distances herself from Pincus-Witten so powerfully that his name is mentioned in the main text only three times, one of which is a very critical remark on the term coined by Witten for the description of Eva Hesse's work, a term that Lippard neither applies, nor even attempts to discuss at all. The reason for this probably unjust treatment of the person who, after all, took part in the work on Hesse's first big solo exhibition³⁰ and who for purpose of this exhibition and the accompanying catalogue was presented by Helen Charash, Eva Hesse's sister, the artist's archive with her notes and journals, can be found, I suggest, in Lippard's radically different reading of Hesse's work³¹. In other words, although Pincus-Witten's terminology used for his description of Post-Minimalism seems similar to this used by Lippard to account for eccentric abstraction, their goals are significantly different. I will try to show it by comparing the two critics' respective interpretations of eroticism in art. In the already mentioned fragment on Pincus-Witten, Lippard criticises his text on Eva Hesse in the following way:

Unfortunately, by the time the Guggenheim Museum's exhibition of Hesse's work opened in December 1972, she had become a stereotype, or myth, the art world's answer to Sylvia Plath and Diane Arbus. That she did *not* commit suicide and had, on the contrary, an immensely strong will to live and to work, was ignored. The

²⁸ Pincus-Witten, "Eva Hesse," 47.

²⁹ Pincus-Witten, "Eva Hesse," 44, 48, 54-55, 59, 61.

³⁰ I mean here an exhibition titled *Eva Hesse: A Memorial Exhibition*, which took place at the turn of 1972 and 1973 at the New York Guggenheim Museum.

³¹ Perhaps it is worthwhile to note that another person whom Hesse's sister granted access to her archive was ... Lucy Lippard, who simultaneously with Pincus-Witten began to work on her own vision of Hesse's work. I do not intend to accuse this way the great curator and critic of petty jealousy of the competing critic who worked on the same subject, yet – as we all know – the world would be different if Cleopatra's nose had been shorter. Cf. Anne M. Wagner, "Another Hesses," in: *October* 69 (1994), 55-56.

tragic facts of her life, which she herself admittedly had emphasized, came to submerge her work. The damage was reinforced by the substitution in *Artforum* (November 1972), at the time of the Guggenheim show, of Hesse's pathetic last diaries for a serious critical examination of the work; Robert Pincus-Witten's essay in the Guggenheim catalogue also contained inaccuracies about the work and overemphasized the life, ending in a flourish: "The voice no longer speaks to us, but beyond us. In her last year Eva Hesse discovered the sublime, another place and time at which the critic only guesses and the historian maps only these superficial pathos. She had left her Post-Minimalist colleagues and friends, and joined Newman, Still, Pollock, and Reinhardt". (She would have found the company irresistible, but not the context.)³²

[16] In the above quoted text Lippard accuses Pincus-Witten of at least two things. First, quite explicitly, of exaggerating the influence of Hesse's personal life on her work, a focus that was a result of Witten's program of a biographical model of writing. Second, in an implicit manner, yet clear for those who know the criticised text for the catalogue, she is disdainful of putting the artist in line with the two "great madwomen" of American culture, who – as Jean Améry would put it – have decided upon "voluntary death", that is with Diane Arbus and Sylvia Plath³³. Although Lippard herself does not avoid completely elements of biography in her book on Hesse, and her account of the artist's life and work is marked by a personal tone, a kind of elegiac mode at times, the critic emphasises at the very beginning of her text, once again detaching herself in her allusions from Pincus-Witten, that:

To make this book personal at all was a difficult decision; since her death Hesse's memory has been exploited even by those writers who purported to be seriously discussing her art. In view of this, I began with a hyper-awareness that the only way to write about Hesse was to tread a fine and dangerous line between the art and the life– to emulate, in other words, the "edge" she spoke of walking herself³⁴.

[17] Indeed, Lippard's use of elements of biography is completely different from that of Pincus-Witten, leading her as well to a very different reading of eroticism in art, which suggests a fundamental difference between the two readings of Eva Hesse's art, as well as of the eccentric or Post-Minimalist tendency in the mid-60s. Pincus-Witten, to bring back his position, claimed that the openly erotic and sexual form of Hesse's work is a result, or a kind of transposition, of a particular life experience (such as her split with her husband, which he mentioned, or the death of her father, recalled in this context). In this – affective, or even behavioural – interpretive model Hesse's work becomes an objective transposition of an experience, based on a strikingly simple and vulgarised psychoanalysis, only waiting for an interpreter. Perhaps this kind of expressionist method, as Pincus-Witten called it, leads him to an involuntary comparison of Hesse and Plath, something that he was accused of by Lippard, which also means making Hesse's work

³² Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, 180. In any case, it is fortunate that Pincus-Witten lists the still alive Clyfford Still with the three artists deceased before 1971. Otherwise, one could think that Hesse passed away to indulge herself in a posthumous communion with saints.

³³ Pincus-Witten compared the artist to Sylvia Plath. Cf. Pincus-Witten, "Eva Hesse," 44.

³⁴ Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, 6.

susceptible to "affective" interpretations that treat art as an external expression of female hysteria, while a sensuous and erotic form as an expression of "something different" that can be defined in numerous ways, yet always through an essentialist and ahistorical assumption of women's typical, "hysterical" nature³⁵. Eroticism in Hesse's art is understood in a completely different way by Lippard, who also draws different conclusions. Behind the "rhythm of postorgasmic calm instead of ecstasy, action perfected, completed, and not yet reinstated"³⁶, typical of eccentric abstraction, there is "the sensibility that gives rise to an eroticism of near inertia"³⁷. Thus defined passive eroticism, devoid of machismo, aggression, impulsiveness and suddenness – features that characterised Abstract Expressionism, as Arthur Danto suggested³⁸ – yet nevertheless provoking emotions and constituting eccentricity speaking against the dead seriousness of Minimalism³⁹, is hardly an expression of "something different", as Pincus-Witten would see it, something hidden behind the sensual forms, because:

In eccentric abstraction, evocative qualities or specific organic associations are kept at a subliminal level, without the benefit of Freudian clergy. [...] Ideally a bag remains a bag and does not become a uterus, a tube is a tube and not a phallic symbol⁴⁰.

[18] It seems to be a completely different approach to art, suspiciously opposing psychoanalysis as a philosophy of suspicion and, what is equally important, rejecting the kind of thinking about art represented by Pincus-Witten, namely an approach that is based on the idea of referential representation (of experience, thought, will, etc.)⁴¹. While the expressionist-affective reading suggested by Pincus-Witten got dangerously close to the discourse of the essentialist notion of female hysteria, a symptom-ignoring, so to speak, reading suggested by Lippard manages to stay at a safe distance from this threat, without ascribing eccentricity to any kind of discourse and thus being faithful to her notion of ex-centricity. In this sense, Lippard is also in agreement with Sontag's postulate

³⁵ It is perhaps the weakest point of Pincus-Witten's Post-Minimalism since it seems to have been constructed upon a vicious circle. The critic considers every creative expression understandable in reference to singular and unrepeatable experiences of particular artists, and on the basis of this tenet he suggests that there has been a general shift of sensibility, which he calls Post-Minimalism, possible to explain only in reference to particular manifestations. In other words, the general is inferred from the singular, which in turn is based on the general.

³⁶ Lippard, "Eccentric Abstraction," 111.

³⁷ Lippard, "Eccentric Abstraction," 111.

³⁸ Danto, "The Art World Revisited," 46.

³⁹ Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, 83.

⁴⁰ Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, 83. However, in spite of her dismissal of "Freudian clergy", she admitted that Hesse's art can be read in this fashion. In her discussion, Lippard referred to Norman O. Brown's claim that art is made by desire, need, and pre-puberty sexuality and hence is fundamentally autoerotic. Cf. Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, 188.

⁴¹ It brings Lippard close to Post-Modernist critics from the *October* magazine circle and to Postmodern discussions on referentiality and representation, its crisis and its (im)possibility. Nevertheless, it seems that Lippard at that time did not draw from her approach any further conclusions that would be more fundamental for understanding art.

that "in place of a hermeneutics, we need an erotics of art"⁴². To conclude, although similar at first sight, Lippard's and Pincus-Witten's interpretations of Eva Hesse's work are fundamentally different in terms of rules they apply in their respective analyses of art. A comparison of their critical statements, constructed around different understanding of eroticism – a key aspect of Hesse's art – proves that in spite of fundamental differences, these readings are not mutually exclusive and can constitute complementary statements, both about the artist herself, as well as about the broader phenomenon within which these critics sought to situate her. What seems crucial, apart from the emphasised eroticism, is: detachment, sense of humour and self-irony, which I recognised as an approach close to Romantic irony, its variation, and Lippard as something related to the notion of camp⁴³, borrowed from Susan Sontag, a 20th-century version of this form of irony.

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Romantic Minimalism

[19] A formally eroticised irony displayed in a detached approach to the tradition of Abstract Expressionism, as well as of Minimalism is also read – which is perhaps clearer in case of Lippard's and less in Pincus-Witten's writing on Hesse – as a form of linguistic subversion. Writing about erotic, corporal, sensuous and organic materials and forms used by Hesse, Pincus-Witten refers to the artist's biography, emphasises the atmosphere of her family home (her parent's divorce, her relations with her stepmother, the death of her father, and her own terminal illness), as well as the fact that in a broad sense Hesse was a Holocaust survivor, and tries to use these "facts of life" to find an answer to the question about a strange combination of painterly expression with a disciplined, Minimalism-inspired sculptural form. Lippard, on the other hand, unwilling to interpret art as a direct response to life, views Hesse more like a representative of a feminine, more sensuous and emotion-oriented language, and thus revealing her feminist sensibility that dismissed essentialism that marked the 60s⁴⁴. Although they have different starting points, and Pincus-Witten's interpretation leans towards the artist's multipolar – German-Jewish-American – Other cultural background, while Lippard, expressing her increasing interest in feminism in the 70s, focuses on the artist's feminine – hence Other – nature, both

⁴² Cf. Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," in: Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York 1961, 14.

⁴³ Lippard described Eva Hesse's sense of humour and her repetition of gestures in a language very similar to the one used in the analysis of irony I presented in this text on the basis of Kleist's essay. In her book on Hesse, Lippard remarks that "Hesse admitted that <repetition feels obsessive>, but it was so natural to her that she did not explore its ramifications. Repetition equals humour, much in the way that children can extract endless delight from the repetition of a phrase or joke". Cf. Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, 188.

⁴⁴ Lippard refers here to Hesse's description of her works as "delicate feminine" in contrast to the "heavy masculine" works by Tom Clancy; her remark on the "heavy masculine" nature can be extended to include the majority of classic Minimalism. Cf. Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, 161.

critics share the conviction that Hesse's work should be read as a subversive attempt: an attempt to both formulate her individual artistic statement, as well as destabilise a stable ontology and aesthetics of Minimalism⁴⁵. In this reading, Hesse would be the Other – strange and eccentric, feminine, diseased, fragile and multicultural – stranger of Minimalism. This otherness is based on the combination of words from different registers and traditions – all in one statement. Furthermore, it was an attempt to construct her own language and locate her in the tradition of American art by a reading of this tradition through Romantic irony. By bringing together contradictions (Romantic) irony was not – as Kramer claimed – a clumsy and naïve repetition of strange words from the dictionary of Abstract Expressionism, nor – as Danto thought – a funny combination of two words from two different dictionaries. Irony used by Eva Hesse in her work was a Romantic irony *par excellence*. An approach that can also be characterised – to quote an expert – as one that:

is able to confront the most relevant problem of modern consciousness, namely the alienation from a radically disenchanted reality. There is, however, no chance for a trusting belief in the power of one's own mind, typical of naïve Romantics. On the contrary, Romantic irony is a natural tool of consciousness in the state of war, facing a flood of dehumanised languages, reifying natural facts, and objectifying social situations. Therefore, the basic context of irony is a situation of subjective-objective split⁴⁶.

[20] This split, featured in Kleist's short story, emerges between the *Self* and the objective; that is, both the outside world, to which – I suddenly feel – I am not adjusted, as well as my own art, to which I no longer belong and which is not, and cannot be, fully mine – like a mirror image, where the boy does not recognise either himself or a successful artistic act. For irony, as Agata Bielik-Robson writes, is:

a trope of a disturbed identity: it emerges where A stops being A; where the relation of identity is suddenly haunted by a margin of freedom promising the possibility of individual variations⁴⁷.

[21] The more so:

What is at stake in the game of Romantic irony is the problem of freedom from influence constituting the *sine qua non* of the future individuation⁴⁸.

[22] The artist's Romantic and Post-Minimalist irony understood as an artistic approach is, then, both a trope and a method. "The trope of disturbed identity" of the Other of Minimalism, whose "split" was recognised by both Pincus-Witten, as well as Lippard and Danto, who tried to read Hesse's work in various contexts, yet always emphasising her

⁴⁵ Pincus-Witten defines the poetics of her work as childlike and girly, and sees them as a challenge to a faultless – masculine and learned, we may add – Minimalism. Cf. Pincus-Witten, "Eva Hesse," 58.

⁴⁶ Agata Bielik-Robson, *Duch powierzchni. Rewizja romantyczna i filozofia*, Kraków 2010, 197.

⁴⁷ Bielik-Robson, *Duch powierzchni*, 198.

⁴⁸ Bielik-Robson, *Duch powierzchni*, 200.

non-normative nature in respect to the exigencies of the period and the established canons. The ex-centric or Post-Minimalist art of Eva Hesse was not just a satire on Minimalism and/or Abstract Expressionism, but a play with the conventional dialectic of creative practice based in the 60s on the idea of originality of creation and originality of artistic gestures in general, constructed upon inappropriate repetitions. Hesse's irony was a conscious misspelling of the words from the dictionary of artistic forms; a kind of pleonasm that was to become an idiom in the following decades. And idiom which – based on the appropriation of somebody else's gesture and motif – will come back together with the "trope of disturbed identity" in the work of artists referring to other artists – like Hesse and also to Hesse – in the final decades on the 20th century. These will be, among others: Janine Antoni, Felix Gonzales-Torres and Roni Horn.

This text was written as a result of "Post-Minimalism in visual arts 1985-2000. Artists and the heritage of Minimalism. Felix Gonzales-Torres, Roni Horn, Derek Jarman", a grant awarded by the Polish National Science Centre.

Translation by Karolina Kolenda

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