

## Beyond a close friendship, Eva Hesse and Sol LeWitt had a profound influence on each other's work, a subject explored at the Addison Gallery of American Art

### Art Review

by Sebastian Smee

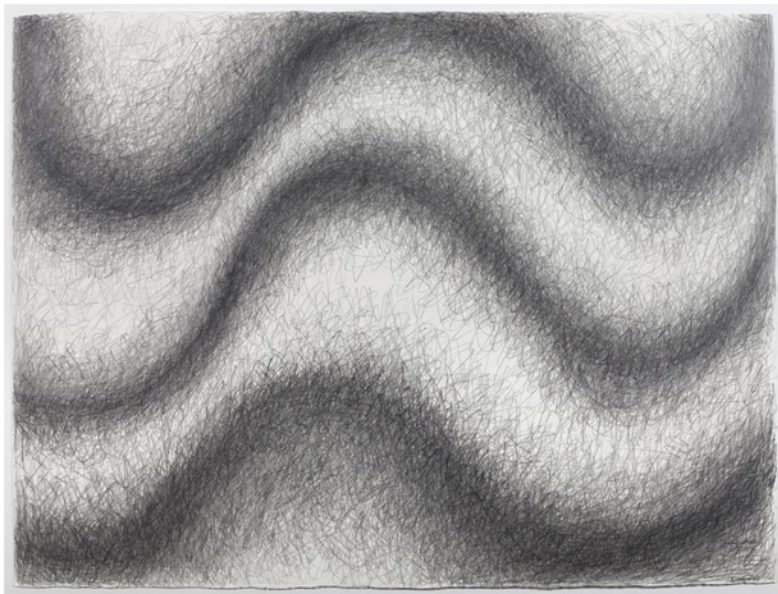
ANDOVER — There is an intimacy in art history that the textbooks ignore. Partly, I suspect, that's because intimate relationships and creativity obey different time signatures. When Sol LeWitt, the great late conceptualist and minimalist, was asked how long it took him to think up an idea for a work of art, he said "about a millionth of a second." LeWitt's relationship with fellow artist Eva Hesse, by contrast, took place over 11 or 12 years.

In that same span of time — the 1960s — Hesse and LeWitt both found their voices after periods of creative confusion and spiritual struggle. Hesse went from being an unknown art school graduate to one of the standout talents of her generation. She died in 1970, the year after she was diagnosed with a brain tumor.

LeWitt meanwhile alighted on an approach to art that was rational and efficient and rooted in ideas. He relished the way, as he famously put it, "the idea becomes the machine that makes the work." His disinterested and surprisingly fecund approach was perceived as an antidote to the histrionics and subjectivity of earlier art — and perhaps to the tumult of the times.

"Converging Lines: Eva Hesse and Sol LeWitt" at the Addison Gallery of American Art addresses the fascinating relationship between these two artists. It comprises minimal, low-key works in neutral colors. But behind its crisp, 4:4, almost stately pacing pulses a heartbreaking, hiccupping narrative.

The show has come to Andover from the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas, where I saw it last year. The Austin show, which grew out of a 2011 show at the Craig F. Starr Gallery in New York, was organized by Veronica Roberts, and comes with a catalog of lasting value.



A detail of Sol LeWitt's "Scribbles (Waves)" THE LEWITT ESTATE/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY

We all know that artists look keenly at the work of their peers and often are influenced by it. If they are ambitious, the resulting relationship will inevitably have an aspect of rivalry to it. But perhaps because our culture is so besotted with models of behavior imported from sport, we cling to an idea of rivalry that completely misses the reality of artistic relationships. Instead of revolving around ruthless competition, enmity, and domination, the great relationships between artist-contemporaries are more often about yielding, seduction, and dialogue. At their most meaningful, they are about mutual admiration and, sometimes, love.

Of course, they are also inherently volatile, fraught with slippery psychodynamics. That's what makes these important relationships hard to describe with any kind of historical certitude.

What makes "Converging Lines" so compelling is that the conjecture is not really conjecture at all. It is all there, backed up by the artists' statements, and by unambiguous developments — things you can point to — in the work.

Among other things, the show serves as a corrective. As Roberts notes in the catalog, almost every study of Hesse's work stresses the importance of LeWitt's influence on her development; but very few studies of LeWitt acknowledge the strong pull of her influence on him — even though LeWitt himself repeatedly stressed it.

Hesse made her reputation in the 1960s by lending organic twists to minimalist reductions. She used lumpy, bending forms, wavy lines, and soft or stretchy materials. When she died, at 34, LeWitt created a wall drawing in her honor. Up until this point, as Roberts points out, all his wall drawings had featured “systematic combinations of parallel, straight lines of fixed lengths in four directions — vertical, horizontal, right, and left diagonal — constituting what LeWitt called his ‘coat of arms.’”

But in his tribute to Hesse after her death, he broke away from this formula. “Wall Drawing #46,” executed in pencil and remade at the Addison for this show, consists of “vertical lines, not straight, not touching, uniformly dispersed with maximum density covering the entire surface of the wall.”

It was the “not straight” part of LeWitt’s instructions that was key. The meandering lines cascade down the wall like rain down a window pane — or like tears down a face.

Of course, that last simile feels inappropriate — even if the work was a posthumous tribute to a dear friend. The defiantly objective work of the artists who came to be labeled minimalists (against their will) was all about rejecting overwrought emotion, along with illusionism, allegory, metaphor, and most other forms of poetic association.



THE EVA HESSE ESTATE/HAUSER & WIRTH

But there was a secret core of ardent romanticism in many a minimalist’s heart. And Hesse, although she was clearly influenced by minimalism’s aloofness, was responsible for reinserting poetic, bodily, and psychological associations into minimalist aesthetics.

If some of her mature work resembles the Surrealist-derived sculptures of Louise Bourgeois, it’s also true that subsequent artists as diverse as Tara Donovan and Mona Hatoum can seem unimaginable without the language of charged forms Hesse invented.

LeWitt was never exactly diverted from his own project by Hesse. But the wall drawing with the “not straight lines” was just the beginning of an expansion of his repertoire that showed how indebted he was to her. He used “not straight” lines in more than 90 subsequent wall drawings, and went on to develop several series that depended on curving, wavy, or scribbled lines — many of which are on display in a LeWitt wall-drawings retrospective at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams.

It seems clear that an underground channel of hot and heartfelt feeling ran between LeWitt and Hesse. LeWitt was the only son of Russian-Jewish immigrants who settled in Hartford. Hesse had arrived in the United States as a toddler, after her Jewish family fled Nazi Germany. Her parents separated before the end of the war, and her mother committed suicide soon after her father remarried in 1945.

Hesse studied at the Pratt Institute of Design and Cooper Union, before enrolling at the Yale School of Art and Architecture in New Haven, where she was a favored student of the legendary former Bauhaus and Black Mountain teacher Josef Albers.

LeWitt himself was struggling through this period. He worked in the graphics department at the fledgling architectural firm of I. M. Pei, and in 1960 got a job at the Museum of Modern Art, working first at the information desk and then as a night watchman. It was at MoMA that he met Dan Flavin, Robert Mangold, and the critic Lucy Lippard, among others — all people who played significant roles in LeWitt’s and Hesse’s lives.

After Hesse’s death, LeWitt wanted the world to know not only that he rated her as one of the key artists of her generation — one who had had a massive influence on his own work — but also that she was his best friend.

An astounding document that makes clear the depth of the connection is included in the show in a display case. It is a letter LeWitt wrote to Hesse while she was living in Germany in the early 1960s. The 18-month overseas interlude had prompted a crisis for Hesse, which LeWitt, who knew about such things, addressed head-on in his letter:

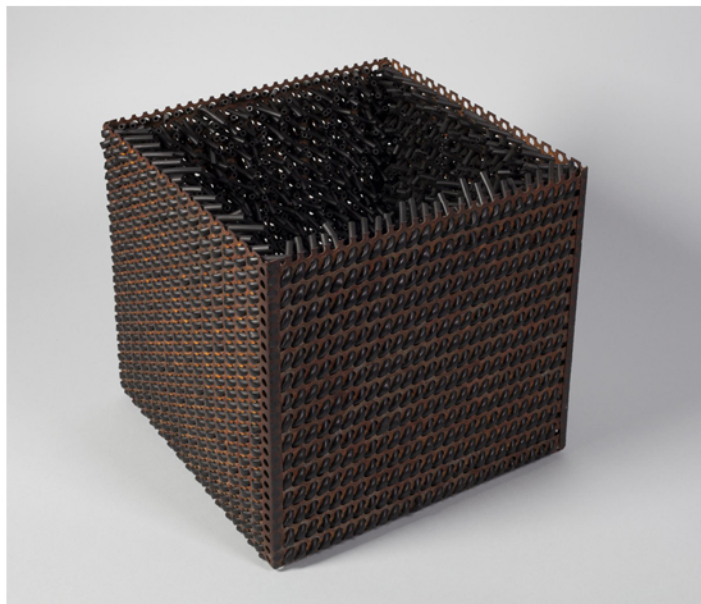


“Learn to say ‘[expletive] you’ to the world once in a while,” he wrote. “You have every right to. Just stop thinking, worrying, looking over your shoulder, wondering, doubting, fearing, hurting, hoping for some easy way out, struggling, grasping, confusing, itching, scratching, mumbling, bumbling, grumbling, humbling, stumbling, rumbling, rambling, mumbering, gambling, tumbling, scumbling, scrambling, hitching, hatching, bitching, moaning, groaning, honing, boning, horse-[expletive], hair-splitting, nit-picking, [expletive]-trickling, nose-sticking, [expletive]-gouging, eyeball-poking, finger pointing, alleyway-sneaking, long waiting, small stepping, evil-eyeing, back scratching, searching, perching, besmirching, grinding, grinding away at yourself. Stop it and just DO.”

The letter goes on sagely for a few pages, and concludes: “[R]elax and let everything go to hell. You are not responsible for the world — you are only responsible for your work — so DO it.”

It’s a great letter. Briefer, but just as poignant are the upbeat, encouraging postcards LeWitt sent to Hesse just a few short years later, when Hesse was struggling with her brain tumor.

The works of art in between are not many, but they have been brilliantly chosen to illustrate the different sensibilities of Hesse and LeWitt and the ways in which their thinking often overlapped, sending up sparks.



THE EVA HESSE ESTATE/HAUSER & WIRTH

The influence of LeWitt on Hesse peaked in 1968 with a series of perforated 10-inch cubes threaded with floppy rubber tubes pointing inward. Hesse gave one of them, “Accession V,” to LeWitt.

Two years earlier she had made a work called “Metronomic Irregularity,” which consisted of several wooden squares mounted on a wall and joined by long, horizontal wavy lines of wire covered in cotton. The work was subsequently lost, but it is represented

here by a magnified photograph. LeWitt, whose help Hesse enlisted to install it, called it “a magnificent piece and a way of liberation for me in my own work.”

Art history is littered with similar pronouncements by great artists acknowledging debts to their peers. Willem de Kooning talked openly about being liberated not only by Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings but by his unbridled personality. Degas felt similarly rescued from his own creative block by Manet, and Lucian Freud was profoundly liberated by his friendship with Francis Bacon.

There was a lot of competition in all these relationships. But also a lot of complicated love. It’s a basic response, is it not? You love the one who sets you free.

At: Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, through Jan. 10. 978-749-4015, [www.andover.edu/Museums/Addison](http://www.andover.edu/Museums/Addison)