

The Afterlife of Eva Hesse's *Expanded Expansion*

Video Transcript

RICHARD ARMSTRONG: "Expanded Expansion" is one of the great monuments of postwar American art.

LENA (CAROL) STRINGARI: It's been shown several times, in the memorial exhibition, which was right after the death of the artist. It comes into the collection in 1975, and since 1988 it has been in storage. It has been the subject of a tremendous amount of debate about what we often call the artist's intention. I like to think of objects having an afterlife, that they live outside of the artist's studio. You have no more control. The materials change, fade, turn dark, turn yellow. All of those things are part of the post-studio life. Now, with "Expanded Expansion," you can get twenty people in the room and everyone feels differently. What is the work? What were you trying to say? When is a work no longer indicative of an artist's intent? It's always important for us to have that conversation.

ARMSTRONG: The late '60s was a real infusion of creativity. There were artists all over the city, in SoHo and below SoHo. Canal Street was a wild zone, many artists incorporated materials after finding them in places like that.

STRINGARI: Hesse was quite embedded in the art world. She started out as a painter. She moved to Germany and had a studio in this ex-textile factory. Being around all these fabrics and textiles and textures, it really inspired her and she started to think about three-dimensionality.

ARMSTRONG: And, really, her work exploded from that moment on.

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: Touching is so important to her sculptural breakthrough.

MAREN HASSINGER: I was attracted to her and her work because she investigated materials and life. She was being an artist.

STRINGARI: She was really interested in taking materials and pushing them to their limits or taking a found material and figuring out how she could use it.

LINDA SHEARER: The idea of repetition— she got bolder and bolder. On the one hand extremely serious and committed to being an artist. And then this wonderfully absurdist, goofy side that took her into another realm.

SUSSMAN: She just personifies what it was to be vibrant and alive and this incredible icon of the '60s.

STRINGARI: It was a time when very few women were showing in these galleries, and she ended up being one of the most important artists of that period. Hesse really took a lot of the tropes of Minimalism, and she takes it to another level that's purely Eva.

ARMSTRONG: She had a very short life. She died at age thirty-four. Her work really augured a new future for sculpture, both in materials and also in imagery.

STRINGARI: Linda Shearer did the memorial exhibition here at the Guggenheim.

SHEARER: It introduced her work to people who didn't know it. It had a powerful impact on a lot of artists, particularly women artists. She ran in a crowd; it was mostly men!

STRINGARI: "Expanded Expansion" was fabricated with rubberized cheesecloth or latex, which is painted onto cheesecloth that forms these draping soft panels, and it's juxtaposed next to these fiberglass polyester resin poles, which are very rigid.

In modern and contemporary conservation we're often working very closely with the artists. In the case of "Expanded Expansion" we didn't have that, although we do have a tremendous amount of information from Hesse's writings. After years of discussion and analysis, we came to the conclusion that this is a really important work by Eva Hesse. Let's try to get it out there because people should see it. It's languishing in storage and let's see what we can do.

Whenever we're working on any artwork in the Conservation Lab, the first thing we need to do is understand what it is, from the material perspective, but also from the conceptual perspective.

ESTHER CHAO: My name is Esther Chao. I am an objects conservator at the Guggenheim Museum. My responsibility as a conservator includes the long-term preservation and care of artwork in the Guggenheim's collection.

Responsible stewardship means honoring the vision and the concept that the artist intended for their work. In the case with "Expanded Expansion" the conservators were hesitant to do anything very intrusive. We do a lot of research, testing, analysis.

STRINGARI: Science is a very important aspect of what conservators do.

The latex had a pretty accelerated aging. And so, between 1977 and '88 it changed pretty drastically.

CHAO: Natural latex rubber is a polymer, which ages over time through chemical processes. Exposure to light, heat, and oxygen the material oxidizes and can become very sticky, and then slowly turn hard and brittle. This happens as the chemical bonds begin to crosslink. The color darkens from a light yellow to an orange or a brown color.

Since the last exhibition of “Expanded Expansion,” the work has been stored in its crate for over thirty years. Given the inherent aging process of latex rubber, we were very concerned about its fragile state. Before the work could be lifted and installed, we had to make sure the rubber panels were structurally strong enough. Our conservation treatment goal was to stabilize and provide support to the brittle rubber panels. To do this, we applied small backing strips to the tears in the panels.

STRINGARI: “Expanded Expansion” has just raised all kinds of wonderful questions. Because it has unstable materials, the artist was kind of ambivalent about that deterioration. She knew it was going to happen but she needed to use these materials because they were the materials that did what she needed them to do. So, all of her writings and interest in these things gives us an idea of what we’re trying to conserve.

We found a way to address the treatment in a way that I would like to call minimal intervention. Derek came up with an engineering solution to lift the piece, being able to move it around. Because that’s the first thing that we needed to do in order to treat it.

DEREK DELUCO: I’m Derek Deluco. My official title is Lead Conservation Technician. So, my job was how can we handle it without touching it? How can we get it off of these forms and ultimately get it to the wall?

CHAO: Eva Hesse passed away in 1970, and in 1969 she was already quite sick. Even though she physically may not have put the piece together, her hand is there because a lot of it is her decision-making.

STRINGARI: We contacted Doug Johns, he became Hesse’s studio assistant in the ‘60s. When she was working with the fiberglass, Doug was working hand in hand with her and was with her until the end of her life.

We asked Doug if we could make a section of “Expanded Expansion,” so we could understand what it might have looked like at the outset. We often make mock-ups of things in order to test materials. But this was really to understand the process.

MICHELLE BARGER: What we’re doing here today is a mock-up of “Expanded Expansion,” which is in the collection of the Guggenheim.

STRINGARI: Did you ever talk about the fragility of latex? And what might happen to it...

DOUG JOHNS: Oh, all the time. All the time. You know, I made her very aware that this stuff was not going to last. And she says: “fine.”

And she would say: “Well, I want to do this, I want to try this.”
And I would say: “Well, this is the way we can accomplish this.”

She would tell me what she wanted, and I would tell her structurally how it would have to be built. And then she would either accept that and we'd go with that, or she'd say: "Well, no, we want to do it this way anyway and don't care."

STRINGARI: I feel like we've come pretty close to making something that resembles the original.

JOHNS: Real close. You're not taking into account her feeling that these things are going to be destroyed. She and I discussed it.

STRINGARI: Right.

JOHNS: So, in my mind, I'm totally positive.

BARGER: But have you changed your mind in your entire life, through the course of your life, your opinions about things?

JOHNS: Oh, never. [Laughs.]

BARGER [Laughs.] Yeah. See? And that's why it's important. I think artists might say something like that at the point of creation.

JOHNS: Right.

BARGER: And this is where we're stuck in this discussion. Just because she may have felt that way at a point in time. And one thing that we know from the work we do and working with artists and revisiting each time, maybe we install a complex piece.

JOHNS: Right.

BARGER: Bringing the artist back to install it... Things change...

JOHNS: In hindsight, right...

BARGER: Things change over time.

STRINGARI: I really don't think that we had a definitive answer from her whether she would be comfortable with this. The further we get from the creation of a piece, the more tolerant we are of it changing.

CHAO: This is a reunion of the three pieces. For the past two years that we've been working on the project, we've been working on each section one by one. We weren't able to bring all these pieces together until now.

STRINGARI: So, here it is...

HASSINGER: Hmm.

SHEARER: Oh, wow. Oh, my goodness. Good heavens. Oh, wow.

SUSSMAN: So, that's the sample piece.

STRINGARI: That's the sample piece.

SUSSMAN: And this is the whole thing.

STRINGARI: This is the whole thing.

SUSSMAN: Fantastic.

SHEARER: Wow. What struck me the most about seeing the piece was the color.

STRINGARI: I think this is a little washed out.

SHEARER: I think so, too.

STRINGARI: Do you feel that way?

SHEARER: I do.

SUSSMAN: Well, you would know. It was more orange?

SHEARER: Yellowy. Orangey.

STRINGARI: Probably more in that vein. I don't think it was ever like that white.

SHEARER: I agree, completely.

HASSINGER: Maybe it's from the pictures. I didn't realize it was this color.

STRINGARI: We've been trying to bring back a little bit of the drape. Heating areas that are really stiff, it softens. It starts to have a feeling of drape.

HASSINGER: An artist makes what they want to make while they can make it. And then they die, and that's it. What's so ironic is that something that was so malleable and responding to gravity is now locked in place forever. Now she's made a monument.

STRINGARI: Do you see it as a relic?

HASSINGER: Yes.

SUSSMAN: I do not believe it's a relic. I think it's got tremendous force. It's better to have an argument in front of an artwork that's intelligently presented than, you know, to keep it in the pages of some scholarly journal.

HASSINGER: So much of what I always liked about her work was reading what she said about it.

STRINGARI: Yeah, yeah.

HASSINGER: And certainly, this continues that.

SUSSMAN: It was very impressive that they've done so much work on trying to figure out what's best, in terms of this work of art. This has been reenergized, and not remade.

ARMSTRONG: The Guggenheim has a very sterling reputation as a steward, but also, as a conservator of materials. This piece in particular re-demonstrates the skill and tenacity of our conservators.

STRINGARI: Maybe today we're willing to tolerate this. Maybe in ten years there will be a different perspective on this. We have to always be aware what we're doing is at this moment in time.

ARMSTRONG: I feel confident in that we can justify what we've done to revive this piece, honoring the artist's intentions, her hand, so that into the future we can share it with a wide public again.

[credits]