

Trauma and Skin:
Meeting Point, Self-Liberation and Absurdity

Alexandra Lopez-Iglesias
Art 570-01
September 2023

It is a testament to courage, strength and vulnerability to acknowledge and face the physical and mental space that the aftermath of trauma takes up in one's body. To venture into this space introspectively, and then to gracefully and poetically alchemize trauma through a sensuous materiality which is both relatable and recognizable in its skin-like qualities, bearing witness not only to extreme difficulties, but more importantly and impactfully, to women's resilience and fortitude, is something quite extraordinary. The skin-like sculptures and installations of Doris Salcedo, Heidi Bucher, and Eva Hesse do exactly this. These particular works, with their haptic characteristics, illustrate the processing and confrontation with grief, difficulty and desperation, documenting the transposition of evident or hidden trauma. The tactility of the work, both enchanting and grotesque, the strength in its fragility, and the way in which the objects are exposed or concealed, convey a time past, traces of personal history, and those or that which is no longer around. They evoke sorrow and absence as well as exhibit beauty and reverence. And most importantly, they create an opportunity for the spectator to stand still in self-recognition.

Born in different parts of the world during different eras, with different backgrounds and of different socio-economic status, Salcedo, Bucher and Hesse each arrive independently at a materiality resembling human skin. Salcedo came to this conclusion earlier in her career when she used actual animal fibers in her first major work, *Atrabiliarios*, in 1992. However, her use of skin in this project wasn't really a choice, it was dictated by the work itself as she clearly states when interviewed by Carlos

Basualdo: “I do not believe in artistic freedom. I do what I have to do or what I can possibly do.”¹ Bucher and Hesse both embrace the sensuousness of latex as the main material for their sculptures in the later part of their careers, before their deaths, recalling skin in their work. And what could be more personal or political than skin? As intimate and self reflective as their works are, they nonetheless shine a light on what it was like to survive under political injustices and atrocities from a personal narrative. Needless to say that this is the undercurrent in the work, as Carol Hanish once wrote, “personal problems are political problems”.²

What sets Salcedo, Bucher and Hesse apart from other artists that access personal trauma, is that the work doesn’t just express their inner or outer turmoil. There is transference evident in the work, as if some of the difficulty they experienced was somehow transposed and transmuted during the process of making. The resulting skin-like sculptures document a fierce journey inward, to a place that is typically obscured where pain inhabits. Our skin separates our inner self from the outside world, it is a threshold, a portal. Physically traversing this layer, so to speak, to face what lies within, leaves a visible trace of this journey on the surface, a scar, an attestation of healing. Doing so metaphorically, through art, does the same thing. The intention is not to broadcast injustices or point out where the artists have been wronged, or what they find unacceptable about the current state of affairs (which has its own place and power),

¹ Nancy Princenthal, Basualdo, Carlos and Huyssen, Andreas, *Doris Salcedo* (New York, NY: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000), 17.

² Carol Hanisch, ‘The Personal is Political’, *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation*, Feb. 1969.

instead the making of the work becomes a means for sublimation. In doing so, the work contains remnants of the artist's mind and body as they each confront their struggles, suggesting a transformation, not only of materials, but of the one who reconstructs it. Thus, Salcedo, Bucher and Hesse leave us with skin-like sculptures to encounter, that are not only reminiscent of a human body, making them instantly relatable, but in their transformation they contain traces of an inward journey and an intimate embodiment of the artist, creating a meeting point where we can pause, recognize the other, and see our own humanity, fragility and strength reflected back, rendering these works authentic, generative and relevant.

As mentioned above, Salcedo, Bucher and Hesse do not merely divulge injustices, they confront them inwardly before transmuting and rendering them into their work. It is much more sincere and resonant to recount history from a personal level. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Cathy Caruth writes how filmmaker Alain Resnais realized “that direct archival footage alone could not ‘maintain the very specificity of the event’”, thus *Hiroshima mon Amour...* was not about Hiroshima per se, rather it is a fictional story that “takes place at its site”. Historical specificity is conveyed by Resnais and Margu  rite Duras, his collaborator, via the exploration of a faithful history made possible by “the very indirectness of [its]telling.”³ It is precisely in this space, in the “indirectness of its telling”, that Salcedo, Bucher and Hesse’s work lives. Their sculptures inevitably have a more profound and lasting effect than the work of

³ Vanessa Corby, *Eva Hesse: Longing, Belonging and Displacement* (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2010), 66.

Mexican artist, Teresa Margolles for example, had in the 2009 Venice Biennale. Her almost sensationalist use of human remains as her artistic material for the installation, *What else could we talk about?* (2009), in which she hung blood-impregnated sheets and mopped the floor with rehydrated blood collected at the morgue, leaves me wondering, *what do I do with this?* The work is gruesome and uncensored and her anger is palpable, and rightly so, but at the same time she exhibited in Venice, I was living within the violence she was pointing to in Ciudad Juárez, the most violent city during the drug conflict set off in December of 2006 by the incoming Mexican president, Felipe Calderón. The reality of the situation was so much more nuanced, and its materiality was textured and richer and involved the living as much as the dead. Buckets of blood, shot out glass fragments, and blood covered sheets, are gruesome relics of murder, but they do not convey the violent experience, let alone be comprehended on a human level where we all interconnect. As Rebecca Comay notes in *Material Remains: Doris Salcedo*, “We might take the work of Teresa Margolles as an example of everything Salcedo is not doing...”⁴

Doris Salcedo, born in Bogotá, Colombia in 1958, uses narrative and direct transference of others' pain in her work to give voice to victims whose memory would otherwise remain within the privacy of their families. Her approach is to seek out the victims and interview them so extensively and intimately that their suffering becomes hers. Those memories are then catalyzed into physical space and situated in the public sphere where they can become part of a collective dialogue, perhaps even a collective

⁴ Rebecca Comay, “Material Remains: Doris Salcedo”, *Oxford Literary Review*, 2017, vol. 39, No.1, p.44.

mourning. This work consistently takes the form of sculpture. As Salcedo puts it, “My interest in the space of sculpture was in the way it can represent a crossroad, a meeting point”.⁵ It is at this meeting point that the object, which bears testimony of violence and absence, can elicit the spectator to participate in the suffering of the other. Already engulfed in violence, the bloodshed in Colombia markedly increased in the 1970s and 1980s, due in part to the radical rise of international drug distribution, and the internal conflict between guerilla forces and the government, creating an even greater sense of urgency for the artist.

Salcedo is as much a researcher, communicator and translator, as she is an artist. Her work begins with extensive research in order to respond, not react, to the exigency that surrounds her in the most powerful and human-centric way possible. This approach was greatly influenced by Colombian painter Beatriz González, her mentor during the 1970’s. González’s method of working is firmly evident in Salcedo’s practice:

As a painter she did things we hadn’t seen before, such as using photographic documentation and real events as important elements in her work. You could see how she went about developing a piece of work, superimposing layers of information that she would bring in from different fields of knowledge, not only from the pictorial. I feel that this model of working was essential for my development as an artist.⁶

In much the same way, Salcedo’s work is multilayered and dependent on factual information. Her mastery lies in the way she interweaves facts and narratives together,

⁵ Princenthal, Basualdo, and Huyssen, 11.

⁶ Princenthal, Basualdo, and Huyssen, 9.

allowing one to go deeper into her work in a flux of intimate details and gruesome realities.

Salcedo's time in New York further solidified her artistic method, where she obtained an MFA in sculpture from New York University in 1984. More than an education, what really shifted her perspective was the experience of being a foreigner, which granted her the opportunity to embody the role of an objective outsider. She fiercely held on to this new mindset when she returned to Colombia, which she realized would allow her "to be critical of the society to which one belongs."⁷ The second critical encounter was the work of Joseph Beuys, who became "a point of departure" in her work.⁸ Seeking out his work and understanding its importance gave her the confidence to approach her practice in a similar way, "That is why Beuys was so important to me. I found the possibility of integrating my political awareness with sculpture. I discovered how materials have the capacity to convey special meanings".⁹

In 1985, a few months after Salcedo returned to her home country, after having spent three years abroad, the mass casualty at the Palace of Justice in Bogotá took place. Thirty-five guerilla members stormed into the Palace of Justice and held The Supreme Court of Colombia hostage for over 24 hours. The rockets used in the counterattack by the government ignited a fire that would last about two days, leaving a total of 98 people

⁷ Princenthal, Basualdo, and Huyssen, 9.

⁸ Princenthal, Basualdo, and Huyssen, 9.

⁹ Princenthal, Basualdo, and Huyssen, 10.

dead, 11 of which are still considered missing since their bodies were charred beyond recognition. Salcedo recounts the experience during her interview with Carlos Basualdo:

The violence that ensued ended in a horrific tragedy. It was something I witnessed for myself. It is not just a visual memory, but a terrible recollection of the smell of the torched building with human beings inside... it left its mark on me. I began to conceive of works based on nothing, in the sense of having nothing and of there being nothing. But how was I going to make a material object from nothing?¹⁰

It must have been a tremendous undertaking to figure out how to “make a material object from nothing”, but the relentless desire to do so makes sense. When something so tragic as what she witnessed, *and* absorbed, happens, there is a tremendous sense of loss, desperation, grief, and anger. There is an asphyxiating void. Salcedo translates this “nothing” into a perceptible absence within her work, observed in the discarded, unusable and inaccessible commonplace items that we are confronted with at eye level, whose past life we can recognize and relate to. The magnitude, corporeality, and her proximity to this tragedy was to be the most critical moment for the artist, in terms of her work. At that moment, her academic preparation, the desire to make sculpture as social commentary, and a lifetime of civic unrest, came together in the most urgent manner where the only answer was to respond in return. And respond she did.

Salcedo set off to conduct mindful and rigorous field research where she established an intimate dialogue with the victim’s family members. This method allowed her to commune with the mourning so profoundly that she herself felt the absence of their loved ones. She then took her grief and transposed it onto a work of art,

¹⁰ Princenthal, Basualdo, and Huyssen, 14.

Atrabiliarios (1992). Based on human interaction, shared experience, and absence, this work manifests through choice materials and scale in direct correlation to the body. It is a series of wall niches at eye level that contain either a singular or a pair of discarded shoes belonging to missing citizens during the conflict between the guerilla forces and the Colombian government. Many of the deceased were identified in mass graves by their loved ones solely by their shoes. In the same interview with Basualdo she says, “*Atrabiliarios* was based upon the experience of people who went missing. When a beloved person disappears, everything becomes impregnated with that person’s presence. Every single object but also every space is a reminder of his or her absence, as if absence were stronger than presence.”¹¹

By using uninhabited and discarded commonplace objects as a main component, their familiarity and subsequent abandonment guides the viewer to instantly perceive an absence within the work. The niches in which these objects reside are sealed with taut, translucent animal skin, and crudely sewn directly onto the wall with surgical thread. Even without knowing the narrative behind the work, the niches themselves connote violence. They sever the wall through the removal of material, creating a void, perhaps even a structural weakness. The precariousness of the animal skin and surgical thread that half conceal the shoes, add a layer of deterioration, an awareness of imminent loss. Like any organic body, the work itself is in the process of vanishing. We instinctively know that these materials will eventually disintegrate. Lastly, by placing the niches exactly at

¹¹ Princenthal, Basualdo, and Huyssen, 18.

eye level, Salcedo orchestrates a direct encounter between the objects and the spectator, compelling us to relate even deeper on a bodily level, an intimate one. By then, we cannot look away.

The heaviness and pain of the personal narratives that Salcedo absorbs and then transposes onto the work conveys the trauma experienced, shared, processed, and relinquished. Only then, can Salcedo fully withdraw herself from the work:

Once the piece is finished, it becomes completely autonomous from me. It is this autonomous creation that establishes a dialogue with the spectator who is open to it. The viewer may find something in the work that triggers his or her own memories of sorrow, or some personal recollection. It is during this unique moment of beholding that the viewer may enter, as I did, into communion with the victim's experience. The artwork fully manifests itself at that moment.¹²

Heidi Bucher is another artist whose work bears a mark of trauma, or in her case, an overwhelming mark of agonizing desperation cast onto her skin-like sculptures, the *Häutungen*, or “skinnings”. Bucher was born into an upper-middle class family in Winterthur, Switzerland in 1926 (d. 1993), under a patriarchal society (the women's right to vote wasn't recognized until 1971 with the passing of a second referendum; the first one, in 1959, was rejected by a majority of 67%). There is no trauma or difficulty that is overtly perceptible upon a quick overview of Bucher's background. Her socio-economic status, the cultural context, or breathtaking landscape in which she grew up would suggest otherwise. However, the presence of this eventually became clear within her work after 1973, when she returned to Switzerland after having spent four years abroad, three

¹² Princenthal, Basualdo, and Huyssen, 17.

of them living and making art in Los Angeles along with a husband and two young sons. Indisputably, her latex *skinnings* couldn't have happened sooner. The time away proved to be crucial, especially living in Los Angeles at such a momentous time (women's liberation, post-minimalism, her friendship with Ed Kienholz, e.g.). These experiences were vital in shifting her thinking and confidence, propelling her to develop powerful, courageous, and transformational work in her later years.

Bucher's father was a builder, whom she would sometimes accompany to construction sites from a young age. It might have been this circumstance that awakened her attunement to details and tectonics defining the built environment around her, which she directly responded to in her later work. The fact that she was an only child could also have been a contributing factor, although less obviously so. There is a lot of time and silence in which to profoundly contemplate your surroundings when you grow up as an only child. I know this firsthand. I used to stare at dust bunnies dancing in the light coming through the blinds for what seemed like hours, and run my fingers back and forth on the cool coarse brick wall in the shaded path leading to the garden. I wonder if her experience was similar in this regard, and if she too became mesmerized by the materials, light, touch and smells that surrounded her, as a way to perhaps pass the time, or just because they were indeed enchanting, or because this type of "trance" allowed her to enter into a fantastical world, far away from perhaps a not so great reality. Whatever the reason, Bucher had a heightened sensibility to the characteristics of that which enclosed her, apparent in the way she discusses how she initially approaches her *skinnings*: "I look

at the walls, the doors, the windows, the ceilings and the floors/ I touch them. I observe them for a long time/ I must come closer to everything/ I come, we come at the right time, with gauze. We glue it in all the spaces and listen carefully”.¹³ This framework, however, was just the starting point. Having studied fashion and textiles at the Zürich School of Arts and Crafts after World War II, Bucher further cultivated a method of working in which she situated her body as the main frame of reference, which centered her entire art practice. Consistently creating from this viewpoint, in response to the sensibilities of one’s own body within the world, creates work whose scale and familiarity is more accessible. Already working in latex, but before physically heaving herself into the *skinnings*, Bucher had begun to address the pain of her past through her work. During an interview with Ziba Ardalan (founder, director and curator of the Parasol Unit Foundation of Contemporary Art in London) in 2018, Bucher’s eldest son, Indigo, speaks to a hidden pain while addressing *Anna Mannheimer with Target* (1975). He reveals for those who are not aware, that its real title is much longer: *Anna Mannheimer believed in Basil. Around 1950, someone shot at the target and the animal was injured. As a child Anna Mannheimer was lonely* (1975). Indigo goes on to say, “Our mother was a single child and she was a lonely child. She was expected to be somebody she was not, and she struggled her whole life with that.”¹⁴ Bucher also speaks on this work as she is later quoted in the Haus Der Kunst (Berlin 2021) exhibition catalog, “They are the Annas: me,

¹³ Rachel Spence, ‘Heidi Bucher at Parasol Unit – mesmerising chronicles of anonymous lives’, *Financial Times*, Frieze Week 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/1c0b7754-c706-11e8-86e6-19f5b7134d1c>

¹⁴ Parasol Unit, “Mayo + Indigo Bucher in conversation with Ziba Ardalan at Parasol unit, London”, Dec. 8, 2018, 15:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rj9B8b9YyRw>

my mother, my grandmother, all women. And they are called that because they had to survive in the homes of men”.¹⁵

Trauma lives within the mind and body, transferring from generation to generation if not liberated during one's own life, whether one is conscious of it or not. It never stays static and always manifests itself outwardly at some point, one way or another. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel Van der Kolk, M.D. writes:

We have also begun to understand how overwhelming experiences affect our innermost sensations and our relationship to our physical reality – the core of who we are. We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present.¹⁶

Whatever consequences lingered within Bucher, due to her painful past, began to manifest most concretely, or tangibly, within the materiality of her *skinnings*, as well as in the documentation of the physical exertion needed to make them.

The physical process Bucher goes through in order to make the *skinnings* is just as important and impactful as the pieces themselves. She meticulously observes and feels her way through the interior surface of the room she is casting in order to determine where to place the gauze which is structurally necessary. This step doesn't just guide her in determining the means of construction, it becomes a salient step for her to fully commune with the work itself, which then becomes reflected in piece. It is an act of

¹⁵ Jana Baumann, 'Heidi Bucher's Metamorphoses. Emancipation of the Body in Space', *Haus Der Kunst*, Jan. 14, 2022.

¹⁶ Bessel van der Kolk, M.D., *The Body Keeps the Score* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2014), 21.

embodiment. Once the gauze and latex, and mother of pearl (included for its sheer beauty) are applied, Bucher has to wait for the exact moment when the material fusion is hard enough to peel off in one piece, but not rigid enough to where it would break or remain stuck to the wall. The skin-like latex peelings lift grime, dust, paint and residue embedded in the weathering of walls, doors and details, and captures the traces of human touch over time. The latex literally ingests the past which Bucher then confronts with her body by exerting an extraordinary amount of physical force in the process of its removal, leaving this imprint upon it as well.

Whatever pain Bucher experienced and responded to, however, remained deeply personal and is in some sense obscured. She never divulged, at least publicly, any intimate details from her personal life. When prompted in an interview filmed and conducted by her eldest son, Indigo in 1978, during the documentation of her second skinning of *Herrenzimmer* (Gentlemen's Study 1977-79), Bucher shies away from directly answering any "deep questions".¹⁷ Instead, her physically grueling process becomes the channel in which she externalizes any internal turmoil, in the form of a gesture, a transformative one that she recognizes as such.¹⁸ A gesture towards her own liberation, of both mind and body, and of the past that tethered her. It is a work that demands a lot physically, which may have forced Bucher to surrender fully to the process, provoking a true personal transformation. There is a perceptible "lightness" in Bucher's demeanor during the interview. It is conceivable that this is not coincidental, as Van der

¹⁷ Bucher, video.

¹⁸ Bucher, video.

Kolk, M.D. notes, "...we will also see that the imprints from the past can be transformed by having physical experiences that directly contradict the helplessness, rage, and collapse that are part of trauma, and thereby regaining self-mastery".¹⁹ There is a short exchange between Bucher and her son in this film where she acknowledges that the sense of urgency when first creating the work has been lifted. The effect that the space once imposed on her seems to have changed, evidenced in the work, her words and her body language.²⁰

I.B: You still didn't tell me why you do it.

H.B: I don't do it *why*! Because if I would do it and say, I do it for something, then I would be wrong. Because I don't have a reason. I'm not going to do it for a reason. I'm just doing it because I have to do it.

I.B: You have to do it?

H.B: I have to do it.

I.B: You have to?

H.B: I have to.

I.B: You don't have to anymore?

H.B: No. No.

I.B: Why not?

H.B: Because the... the emergency... is over.

I.B: Which emergency?

H.B: I had a very big... I had a very hard time.

Upon closely examining *Herrenzimmer*, 1977-79, the *skinning* of the gentleman's study inside of Bucher's childhood home, where women could not enter, one can perceive an arduous and intimate journey, due in part to its materiality, scale and familiarity. Imprinted onto its skin-like materiality is physical evidence of the past; grime, dirt and paint, as well as the apparent hand in the making. It's as if the past was cast onto a

¹⁹ Van der Kolk, M.D., 4.

²⁰ Bucher, video.

physical ‘body’ of memory quality, in which difficulties were confronted and transformed into something quite beautiful, maybe even a little gross. The *skinning* is translucent and membranous, eliciting a sense of surrealism in its dreamlike quality, amplified by the ever shifting light reflections from the mother of pearl pigment Bucher was so fond of.

Because the work is a casting of something so familiar, but also resemblant of a human body, and existing in an ethereal state, the line between ourselves and what constitutes a closed environment is blurred. We can imagine ourselves inhabiting the work as well as becoming it.

Eva Hesse was an artist who also encountered trauma in her work, although less overtly, and more abstractly, than both Salcedo and Bucher. Hesse was born in Hamburg in 1936, under Nazi Germany. Her father had been making preparations to get the family out since 1933 with the birth of his firstborn, Helen, “but it was very complicated”.²¹ Finally, in December of 1938, Hesse and her sister boarded a *Kindertransport* towards The Hague. By the time they left Germany, children were no longer allowed to live with what relatives they had in Holland, instead they were sent to an internment camp for a couple of months. The sisters might have been too young to retain vivid memories of this experience, but the repercussions remained.

In an interview with Cindy Nemser in 1970 for *Artforum*, Hesse reveals some of the reverberations from her past, “at home terror tremendous fears... I had my father tuck my blanket in tight in my German bed which had bars at the side and he would have to

²¹ Hubertus Gassner, Kölle, Brigitte and Roettig, Petra, *Eva Hesse: One More than One* (Hamburg: Hamburger Kunsthalle, 2013), 89.

hold me and tell me that he would be there in the morning and we wouldn't be robbed and poor and he would take care of me. That was the ritual at night... Then my marriage split up which created another abandonment trauma. And then my father died –".²² In the same interview, Hesse mentions she feels most connected to Carl Andre's work, calling him a romantic, "It does something to my insides". When asked by Nemser what Andre's *floors* represent to her, she answered, "It was the concentration camp. It was those showers where they put on the gas."²³ Hesse lived by the conviction that life and art could not be separated, her entire being was absorbed within the work. Thus, when looking at her art, we cannot separate the person from it either. Vanessa Corby puts it succinctly, "Eva Hesse's Holocaust cannot remain consigned to the footnotes of her histories".²⁴

Hesse was skilled with materials early on, achieving a high level of craftsmanship, but making something beautiful or focusing on form or composition was of little interest to her. She despised anything sweet and gushy. However, in comparison to the renowned male artists working in New York in the 1960's, she could not totally conform to the Minimalist ideas of the time, "Sometimes I feel there is something wrong with me. I don't have that kind of precise mind or I just don't feel that way. I feel very very strongly in the way that I feel, but I don't stand on a kind of system. Maybe mine is another kind of system...[My works are] much closer to soul or introspection, to inner

²² Corby, 103.

²³ Cindy Nemser, Krauss, Rosalind, Bocher, Mel, Fer, Briony, Wagner, Anne M. and Nixon, Mignon, *Eva Hesse:October Files 3* (Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 2002), 24.

²⁴ Corby, 65.

feelings...They are indoor things.”²⁵ This deep seated knowledge caused her to doubt herself many times as she compared herself to her artist friends, mostly male, that were having more “success” in New York. Yet, she always remained true to who she was.

In 1964 Hesse and Tom Doyle, whom she met and married in 1961, were offered the opportunity to live and make art in Kettwig, Germany. They wouldn’t have to worry about money, jobs or the pressures of the art world. Even so, the very idea of returning to the country Hesse had fled from that killed her extended family, filled her with dread, “During the first two weeks in Germany, she had ‘terrible gruesome nightmares’ which gradually lessened and turned into ‘daydreaming, fantasizing...’”²⁶ For a while Hesse was making drawings that were bringing up her ‘weird humor’ more and more, but she felt frustrated with the work and debilitated by her anxiety. She wanted to break away from everything she had learned about art and create ‘nothings’ or make ‘nonsense’, which she wrote about regularly to Sol LeWitt, one of her biggest supporters who wrote back, “Learn to say ‘Fuck You’ to the world once in a while.”²⁷ As challenging as the time in Germany was, it was a huge turning point for Hesse. One day, complaining about not being able to work, Doyle recalls, “I told her why don’t you try some of the shit lying around here. They were tearing up the old weaving things in the factory... We could use anything we wanted.”²⁸ It was then that Hesse picked up a few discarded items, put them together, and leaned into making sculpture, never looking back.

²⁵ Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York, NY: New York University. Press, 1976), 200.

²⁶ Lippard, 25.

²⁷ Lippard, 34-35.

²⁸ Lippard, 28.

Hesse's life had been full of extremes as she shared with Nemser, "Art and work and art and life are very connected and my whole life has been absurd. There isn't a thing in my life that has happened that hasn't been extreme—personal, health, family, economic situations".²⁹ These extremes, her convergence of life and art, and her constant search for answers about life always reflected back the same answer; *absurdity*. The notion of absurdity, or at least some aspect of it, always materialized in her work, even in her simple ink and wash drawings. Her art practice had always involved formal contradictions, "order versus chaos, stringy versus mass, huge versus small", but it wasn't until she got back from Europe that her work fully reflected the absurdity she recognized as life. "When I came back from Europe, about 1965-66, I did a piece called *Hangup*. It was the most important early statement I made. It was the first time my idea of absurdity or extreme feeling came through."³⁰ It is indeed a very absurd piece, and almost too meticulously and well-made, verging on the edge of beautiful, which was very Hesse-like. The piece is a six by seven foot frame that is tightly wound with cord and rope, like a bandaged arm with a very long, thin and flexible metal rod sticking way out into the room from the top of the frame and connecting to the bottom. She sounds almost giddy as she explains it to Nemser, "It is the most ridiculous structure that I ever made and that is why it is really good. It has a kind of depth I don't always achieve and that is the kind of depth or soul or absurdity or life or meaning or feeling or intellect that I want to get."

²⁹ Cindy Nemser, "An interview with Eva Hesse." *Artforum* May 1970, Vol.8, No.9, 60.

³⁰ Nemser, 60.

In 1967 Hesse had another significant breakthrough with the discovery of latex. This material was more sophisticated and sensuous than what she had been using prior. Hesse's work took on an even more apparent interlacing between art and life, which became more relatable to the spectator, in a bodily sense. Lippard writes,

Hesse's existential humor and her eroticism meet and merge not so much in the shapes themselves... but in the combination of shape and highly sensuous textures, the way forms swell or sag, lie or lean, the ways in which one can feel one's own body assuming those positions or relating to those shapes as to another body.³¹

One example of this is *Sans I*, 1967-68, which measures 6'x7"x1" and is made up of repeating shallow trays made of the soft skin-like material. The way the piece is reclining on the wall, capturing the light at infinite angles, and ever so slightly extending onto the floor plain, makes *Sans I* appear anthropomorphic, assuming a slightly restful and casual posture of its own. Another work that is not only reminiscent of a human body but as Lippard puts it, "is as profoundly personal or intimate as a work of art can be," is *Contingent*, 1968-69.³² This work consists of eight panels made out of fiberglass and latex on cheesecloth that each measure 9½ -11' x 3-4' and hang from the ceiling. It is compelling, but not surprising, that Hesse's work concluded with skin-like sculptures that were both beautiful and grotesque, that one could relate to, not only as a body, but a body with a history. Hesse never veered from her purpose in making art, even when she experienced doubt and frustration about not being taken seriously; "Art is an essence, a center. I am interested in solving an unknown factor of art and an unknown factor of life.

³¹ Lippard, 187.

³² Lippard, 164.

My life and art have not been separated. They have been together.”³³ In the end, the answer that Hesse searched for through her work never changed, life always pointed towards the absurd, and art and life remained one and the same.

The concept of trauma is broad, as is its range, and the way everyone responds to it is personal. Trauma can be withheld in the body and/or psyche after experiencing exceptionally distressing events or circumstances that remain disruptive long after said event or circumstance has passed. Van der Kolk, M.D. describes it as such, “... traumatic experiences do leave traces, whether on a large scale (on our histories and cultures) or close to home, on our families, with dark secrets being imperceptibly passed down through generations. They also leave traces on our minds and emotions, on our capacity for joy and intimacy, and even on our biology and immune systems.”³⁴ It is important to emphasize the fact that the biological and psychological aftermath of these traumatic experiences are indeed withheld in the body and psyche, for their effects remain long after the incident, sometimes for an entire lifetime, even lingering across generations. Without exception, these repercussions always manifest one way or another. In the case of Salcedo, Bucher and Hesse, some aspects of their personal trauma manifested and transmuted in their work. They made a conscious choice to not just point out the heartache, fear or atrocities experienced, but to confront the discomfort and intimately commune with the materials at hand, leaving traces of these actions imprinted onto the work. Doris Salcedo succeeded in creating a meeting point where the humanity of the

³³ Lippard, 5.

³⁴ Van der Kolk, M.D., 1.

victims was present and their absence felt, granting them dignity in death. Heidi Bucher made beautiful, almost magical and surreal, lightweight castings of rooms that confined her, absorbing into it vestiges from the past, granting her a sense of freedom. And Eva Hesse's work continues to remind us of the absurdity of it all. In evidencing an intimate embodiment through the materiality, tactility and presentation of their skin-like sculptures, these courageous and resilient women entice us to pause and recognize, not only the presence of others within the work, but ourselves in it as well.

Bibliography

- Baumann, Jana. "Heidi Bucher's Metamorphoses. Emancipation of the Body in Space." In *Haus Der Kunst*. January 14, 2022.
<https://www.hausderkunst.de/en/blog/heidi-buchers-metamorphosen-emanzipation-des-koerpers-im-raum>
- Corby, Vanessa. *Eva Hesse: Longing, Belonging and Displacement*. New York, NY: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2010.
- Gassner, Hubertus, Brigitte Kölle and Petra Roettig. *Eva Hesse: One More than One*. Hamburg: Hamburger Kunsthalle, 2013.
- Hanisch, Carol. "The Personal is Political." In *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation*. February, 1969.
- Lippard, Lucy. *Eva Hesse*. New York, NY: New York University. Press, 1976.
- Nemser, Cindy. "An interview with Eva Hesse." In *Artforum*. May 1970, Vol.8, No.9, 60.
- Nemser, Cindy, Rosalind Krauss, Mel Bocher, Briony Fer, Anne M. Wagner and Mignon Nixon. *Eva Hesse: October Files 3*. Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 2002.
- Parasol Uni. 2022. "Mayo + Indigo Bucher in conversation with Ziba Ardalan at Parasol Unit, London." Uploaded on December 8, 2018. YouTube video, 19:37 min.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rj9B8b9YyRw>
- Princenthal, Nancy, Carlos Basualdo, and Andreas Huyssen. *Doris Salcedo*. New York, NY: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000.
- Spence, Rachel. "Heidi Bucher at Parasol Unit – mesmerising chronicles of anonymous lives." In *Financial Times*. October 5, 2018.
<https://www.ft.com/content/1c0b7754-c706-11e8-86e6-19f5b7134d1c>
- Van der Kolk, M.D., Bessel. *The Body Keeps the Score*. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2014.
- Zevi, Alma. *Heidi Bucher: Sublime Geometry*. Italy: Skira editore S.p.A., 2019.