I like Ideas: Lucy Lippard in Conversation

From I/Q Volume 6. Issue 3 Eva Hesse Studiowork 1969, courtesy of the Estate of Eva Hess, photograph by Abby Robinson, New York* On a blustery, wet September day, 6 hours before she was scheduled to speak at the Art Gallery of Ontario on the work and short life of American abstract artist Eva Hesse, I had the opportunity to sit down with the legendary feminist thinker/writer and curator Lucy Lippard. In the seclusion and quiet of the AGO's members lounge, between the hiss of the cappuccino machine and clatter of crockery and flatware, we chatted about Hesse and her exhibitions from the early part of her career. It was more of an organic exchange than Q & A, and for me a gleeful experience. In preparation I had read Curating by Numbers, (1a.) 2008, and re-read her catalogue essay (2a) on Joyce Wieland (1987). In both of these works she speaks of looking back and re-evaluating ideas and art from the past. That evening she would be doing just that, looking at the Eva Hesse of 40 years ago with today's eyes.

The exchange that took place that afternoon, while recorded, seems more like eavesdropping - randomly heard snippets of conversation - than an actual interview. It drifts through time, bounces back and forth from specifics to general concepts, while all the time sounding like gossip about common friends; the friends being exhibitions that she orchestrated and that I have only read about. In interviewing her I tried to follow a textile thread and imagining a pile of ravelled yarn drop-kicked across the floor, something to look at rather then picked up and rolled into a ball. As a reader of this discursive fabric (i.e.-my interview with Lucy Lippard) think of this as both performance and installation - you as reader are both performer and audience Eva Hesse Studiowork, 1968, courtesy of University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, gift of Helen Hesse Charash, 1979. Photograph by Abby Robinson, New York*

Cultural amnesia &ndash; imposed less by memory loss than by deliberate political strategy &ndash; has drawn a curtain over much important curatorial work done in the past four decades. As this amnesia has been particularly prevalent in the fields of feminism and oppositional art, it is heartening to see young scholars addressing the history of exhibitions and hopefully resurrecting some of its more marginalised events. (1b.) Joe Lewis: &hellip; In the 1966 Eccentric Abstraction (3.) exhibition at the Marilyn Fischbach Gallery, New York, you presented the work of eight abstract artist; Alice Adams, Louise Bourgeois, and Eva Hesse, along with five men. Hesse has somehow become adopted into the fibre and textile arts community, and held up as a ground breaking artist. Adams was trained as a weaver. Lucy Lippard: Frank Lincoln Viner, who was in the show, was a man who did his own sewing, which was/s something unmentioned &hellip; Claus Oldenburg was famous for his soft sculptures, but his wife did the sewing. In that show, all the work had some flexible material in it. Looking back on it now, what was the attraction of bringing these artists together? LL . . . I was finding a kind of subversion of minimalism, of its hard, shiny materials and angles and grids, through materials that were much more sensual, and more exotic, and more body connected; soft stuff obviously did that. In 1971, in another show of mine, Howardena Pindell contributed a hanging grid made of stuffed canvas. . . . I had also curated a show for a MoMA travelling exhibition called Soft Sculpture. JL Over the next several years academically trained female artist in reaction against the ivory tower of the mainstream art world began reclaiming decorative arts (i.e. needle work, textile/ fibre arts, ceramic painting) that become relegated to the status of hobbies, and no longer part of the burgeoning studio crafts movement because it was considered domestic and therefore women's work. Do you think the work that came from investigations into these techniques and materials suffered because they didn't have the skills of a crafts person who had been trained to work with textiles? LL No, I don't think they would have wanted to [be identified with crafts]. As you know &hellip; there was a strict line between Craft and High Art. Years later, in Heresies, I wrote a defence of women's hobby art dealing with those issues, called (2a) Making Something Out of Nothing. Did you ever see that one? JL no I have been trying it out down. LL I liked the ways women were being told they could be as creative with a couple of rolls of wallpaper or tin cans as you could with oil paints and marble, depending on the context and depending on how you looked at it &hellip; I don't think Eva [Hesse], quite frankly, would have ever said she was interested in fibre arts as such, and I think Elissa Author in String Felt Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art, 5] quotes Claire Zeisler saying that she did want to be a fibre artist, and she was staying there, while Eva was just looking for odd materials, latex, rope, string, whatever came to hand -- things that were unexpected and would surprise people. Within the high art context those materials were surprising, and within the craft context they wouldn't have been, and that just another symptom of the split between craft and high art. Like the tangle strings Hesse sometimes used; I think craft people would have rejected the tangle. They were better at it, technically, as you said, and that would have just looked screwed up. A few years ago I wrote something for a metalwork magazine and looked at back issues. I was very struck by the different ways craft people talk about their work. They spoke about how it was made, and technique was so much more important than in so called high art, where the role of accident is so much greater, and also the role of meaning, or content. [a lot of chattering and banging here as we begin to discuss the Eva Hesse: Studio work exhibition] JL Actually, the thing that fascinates me with the show is that it is the studio works, unintended for general consumption, where I see maquettes for larger pieces, and the deflated paper pieces are just beautiful. LL She saw a certain humour in these sketches, saw them as absurd, her favourite word for that work. JL You quoted Harold Rosenberg as saying if art went backwards it became handicrafts, and if it went forward it would become media (2b) LL He was right, wasn't he? [said laughingly] JL In this time period, in an almost total reverse. Of the seventies when textiles in particular, and crafts in general, was insisting it be considered part of High Art, the new Craft History movement is rearing its head and claiming its own space, wanting to take craft out of high art jurisdiction. LL, Oh, I didn't know about that. Is it related to the cross-disciplinary Do It Yourself or DIY movement that is being rediscovered today in very different contexts by a much younger global generation? (3a) For me the point of conceptual art was precisely the notion of doing it ourselves &ndash; bypassing mainstream institutions and the
oppressive notion of climbing the art-world ladder by having an idea and directly, independently, acting upon it.’

(1c.) JL In Curating by Numbers you talk about the DIY moment of the time, and the makeshift exhibition spaces, and working with what was at hand. With DIY coming to the fore with a new generation - as if for the first time - with no sense of history, I see you as a bridge, and wonder what you think of that. LL I don’t know. I’ve always been interested in working beyond the art world, in the blurring of borders between art and life. I’ve always said I’m looking for social energies that haven’t yet been recognized as art, or can’t be recognized as art, or are beyond art; the woman’s hobby art article was part of that. JL When writing about Process Art you said, ‘with its perverse denial of materiality in favour of an obsession with materials.’

(1d) This is very much a craft thing. LL But what was done with it was so different. Process art was about tossing things on the floor, scattering, seeing what accidents would bring. It seems to me craft people need to have more control. But I hate the divisions; there really is no difference - high, low, minor, major - whatever. But there it is, people do learn different things in schools, and they learn different things in the art world, and so forth. JL Well, that is it. I think of you as a witness to an era that was extremely interesting, and the end result is this craft revolution today, in which people are trying to pull out of what has been established, and trying to pull back into traditional practices, while at the same time wanting to have the freedom to exhibit in galleries as installation or performance, and not in stores or craft fairs as products. It is a very confused period and also very exciting. LL And that confusion is what makes it interesting.

(1b, 1c, 1d) Lucy Lippard Landmark Exhibitions: Contemporary Art Shows Since 1968. This paper is a version of a talk given at the conference a collaboration between Tate Modern and Jan van Eyck Academie with the Royal College of Art and The London Consortium, in October 2008. Other papers relating to the conference can be found in issue 12 of Tate Papers. Accessed Sept 29 2010-09-29