

THEME

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Welcome to LBI Presents—a new podcast from the Leo Baeck Institute, New York. I'm Mark Oppenheimer. I'm the director of open learning at American Jewish University, and I've spent my career writing about Jewish history. On this series, we dive into LBI's archive, with key experts as our guides, to learn about the lives of German Jews throughout history, beyond the stories you already know. Today, LBI Presents...life doesn't last, art doesn't last.

THEME OUT

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): For sculptor and painter Eva Hesse, art wasn't a desire, but a compulsion. In 1960, she wrote, "It is totally interdependent with my entire being." Maybe that's why Eva Hesse's been called one of the most powerful artists to come out of the famous 1960s New York art scene. But getting that acclaim wasn't easy. She had a lot of competition. Back then, New York was basically the world headquarters of avant garde and contemporary art. Not to mention, it was a very male-dominated space and a world far removed from her upbringing. Eva Hesse was born in Hamburg, Germany in 1936. She was a toddler when both she and her older sister, Helen, left for the Netherlands on a Kindertransport. Her family eventually reunited in England and made their way to New York. They were safe there. But more trauma followed. Eva's parents separated and when Eva was just 10 years old, her mom died by suicide. For much of her life, Eva grappled with anxiety. And her own end came too soon. In 1970, at the age of 34, she died of a brain tumor.

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ELISABETH SUSSMAN: She's been a heroine to artists since her death. The work is so strong, and yet, so delicate. So it's almost mythic in its proportions.

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Elisabeth Sussman is a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. She edited a book on Eva Hesse's work and has curated several exhibitions on the artist. She sees Eva's art as both colored by her painful history, but also as an emotional release and a joyful pursuit.

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: She had a very kind of utopian view of art. That somehow art could be...Not a message, but an expression of your feelings at the moment.

MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): Our conversation about Eva Hesse starts at the very beginning—with baby books, or Tagebuchs, that recount the childhood of Eva and her sister, Helen, and which are held in the LBI archive.

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MARK OPPENHEIMER: Elisabeth, LBI has a collection of materials from Eva Hesse's family and it includes books written by her father about Eva and Helen's early years. What are these books, and what do we learn about Eva from these materials?

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: I have to say, I feel very close to those materials. And I was always interested in the fact that in the great biography of Eva Hesse that was written in the '70s by Lucy Lippard, there's like one line that says, "the family left Germany." There's maybe another line that says, "her father kept scrapbooks." And that there's a whole life of the Hesse family that's told through these scrapbooks, which ostensibly tell the lives of the two daughters. When they were born, their baby pictures. The Tagebuchs are also profusely illustrated by Helen and Eva's father, Wilhelm, with his own photographs that he took of them. So they are incredible visual and historical records. And they remained intact in Helen's collection until she gave them to Leo Baeck. But I used them quite a bit when I was doing my work.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: And what do we see about her life as a child from these materials?

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: What you see is a very treasured child, a family of two daughters adored by their parents, grandparents, whole community that had gathered in Hamburg. Very much treasured, I would say, as children. Which is not to say that everything is rosy. They are growing up immediately, from the time they're born, in a time of trouble. Family trouble and political trouble.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Do you see Eva, the future artist, in these books? Is there something in the diaries that helps predict or foreshadow the creative person she'll become?

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: Well, since they start literally the day she's born, it takes a while. But these diaries extend over the trip to America, and they stop when Eva is something like six or nine years old, maybe eight, something like that. So you begin to see Eva emerge as this person who's playful and I think even you may see some drawings by her in the Tagebuch.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So aside from professional responsibility, because you have to pay attention to Eva Hesse, what draws you personally to Eva's work, as a curator?

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: Well, that's a great question. I, of course, have known about her ever since the biography came out in the '70s. And I then had this job at the Whitney Museum. And I thought to myself, at a certain point, I really want to do exhibitions of women. And I had seen the great Eva Hesse retrospective at Yale, which was in the very early '90s and had read the catalog. And I said to myself, "well, you know, you have this position of authority and power now, and Eva Hesse has not had a show in her hometown. Go for it!" So I did. But I was, obviously then, that's the kind of superficial message. If you sort of dive down into my psyche, the fact is that the difference between her age and mine is not that great. I can remember World War II. I am a Jewish woman. All but for the grace of God, there go I. You know, with her experience of having to leave Europe. As I got deeper and deeper into it, what did it mean, really, to be this creative and very much a Jewish woman at this moment in time? Something I could identify with a lot.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: And then she had the incredible good fortune to be coming of age in America and becoming an artist in 1960s New York, which was one of the great art scenes, I think it's safe to say, ever. For people who don't know, what was New York art in the '60s? Can you describe the scene and what made it so fruitful for artists?

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: Well, I guess the most amazing thing was that New York was really the center of the art world. And it had been becoming so in the '50s with abstract expressionism and the importance worldwide of abstract expressionism. But by the '60s it was definitely the pilgrimage place, not Paris. And that was because there was this

concentration of galleries. There were really great collectors. There was a good market. You almost have to say that from JFK down, there was a recognition, even in the White House, of the importance of the arts. So it became a kind of, for the first time, really, a combination of a very public social scene. You know, think of Warhol and disco, you know, early club music, and the art world, they were connected. So you have like the growth of the art world and the importance of America and this kind of social acceptance of art.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Right. There was a time when you wouldn't want artists at your parties if you were high society, because they were countercultural and, you know, unwashed. And in 1960s New York, you really wanted the artists at your parties.

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: I think gradually. By the mid-'60s, when it was clear that there was a lot of money being exchanged between collectors and great collections being built, that you might want artists at your parties. I mean, you know, towards the end of the '60s, it was cool. Yeah.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Now, you talked about abstract expressionism flourishing in the '50s. That's people like Jackson Pollock and de Kooning. You talked about Andy Warhol in the '60s with his pop art. Eva Hesse is most associated with a movement called post-minimalism. What is that? Talk to me like I don't know what that is because I mostly don't know what that is.

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: Okay, so minimalism, very simply, is geometric, not colorful. So black and white usually. And very conceptually not emotionally produced. Think of Josef Albers, who was one of Eva Hesse's teachers, "Homage to the Square." And that was a very important minimal gesture, just a painting of squares and the relationship of one square to another. That would be minimalism. And it was very distinguished. There were a group of five or six artists who had that title, all men. And they flourished in the '60s and sold and were very important. And they were also theoretically justifying this kind of very reduced art. So Eva Hesse knew those people. One of the leaders of that group, minimalism, was a man, an artist called Sol Lewitt, who you've probably heard of. And he was her very close and dear friend throughout her whole life. And so she knew those people and they accepted her. She was taught by Josef Albers. She stopped using color at a certain point in her art career, and she became a minimalist. But there was this breakthrough with Hesse. And the breakthrough goes back to the earliest part of her

career as an artist, when art is really an expression of feeling for her. Feelings about her life, her dreams, her unconscious, her body. But she never wants to be literal about it to that extent. She buys into the minimalist non-expressivity, but it just kept breaking through. There was nothing she could do except find an equivalent for her feeling somehow within this very reduced vocabulary. So Eva Hesse becomes a leader of what is known, almost after she dies, of post-minimalism, of what came after minimalism. What did they do with the minimalist vocabulary to turn it expressive? She was a leader.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: What did she do with the minimalist vocabulary to turn it expressive?

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: Well, I guess what I feel after looking at her work is that...you know, with artists, it's all about what's in your head and what's in your hands. And so she was very much interested in her hands, you know, making things. And she learned...She was taught at Yale to become a painter. So she knew how to paint. She knew how to draw. But she did not know how to make sculpture. And that was a very important move for her as she became the person that we think of as the great Eva Hesse. And for sculpture, for her, it had to be a material that she could feel that it wasn't necessarily industrial. It wasn't metal. It was something that was more fluid, more tactile, closer to painting. So that's what she did. She created, self-taught, a kind of sculpture that was very materialist-based. And these feelings that she had about the materials became equivalence for various bodily feelings and also abstractions where the two come together.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: You used the words fluid and material. And I can't think of two better words to describe "the rope," which is in the collection of the Whitney. If people haven't seen it, can you tell people what "the rope" is? Can you describe that sculpture?

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: Sure. This is one of Eva Hesse's last sculptures. It was done '69, '70. She died then. And what she did was to buy rope at the hardware stores on Canal Street, where she bought a lot of her materials. And she had this idea to use it as spontaneously as she could to make a hanging sculpture that would last. But really, if you look at it, it's a tangle of ropes that hangs from the ceiling from 13 points where the ropes are kind of wired together and where they are attached to the ceilings and the walls. So what you're looking at is like, imagine a ball of wool. Before you wind them into a ball,

they're all messed up. You don't know the beginning, you don't know the end. You don't know how one end intersects with another. That's what this is. It's a tangle like that.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: I have to say, people should go to Whitney.org and take a look at it. You won't find it under "the rope." It's actually an untitled sculpture from 1970. But you'll know when you're looking at it. What does this piece tell us about her interests as an artist? What are the themes or the ideas embodied in this piece as far as you can tell?

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: I think she had this sense that ideally, the work of art should be as close to the maker as possible, that it would almost not be the kind of piece that could be in a gallery or a museum. But it was thrilling to make. That she was making decisions every moment that she was making that piece and having this kind of vision in her mind of what the beauty of such a piece could be. And that it was kind of a utopian piece, an ideal piece, because it really was not the kind of piece that could hang easily, that she kind of knew would always present these problems, and that it was very close to not being art. It's very, on some levels, ugly. And that's her ideal.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: So, I mean, would she have used that word? Would she have said "ugliness is one of my ideals?"

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: She would say that she did not like something that was too pretty. That she made a version of this piece out of fiberglass, strands of fiberglass, which is also hung from the ceiling and which looks like some sort of a cloudlike apparition. It's now at the Milwaukee Art Museum. I've seen it. And she made that before she made "rope piece." And she felt that this cloudlike piece was too pretty. It was not where she wanted this piece to go. No. So she definitely knew that.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: That's so funny because I've seen pictures of her and she seems, not just pretty, which of course is out of her control, but to want to be pretty, she seems well turned out. Unlike many artists who are kind of deliberately slovenly or indifferent or have a cultivated messiness about them. Am I onto something there? Is that right?

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: I think you are. I mean, first of all, she was pretty. And I think, not having known her, she was also dynamic. You know, she would be the kind of person who

would not sit around like a bump on a log. You know, she would be very vivacious, let's say. And she was a person who, when she came to the U.S., had no means to be, you know, sort of well-dressed in a '60s kind of way. She really was poor. So there's very much a sense of, how am I going to get by? How am I going to be somewhat glamorous in my impoverished artist state? There's that about her. There's the sense that she wants to please, that she wants to be appreciated physically. And there are many photographs of her that indicate that. That she's asked someone over for a photo shoot and been very kind of coy and aware of her image.

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MARK OPPENHEIMER: These unconventional materials that she used in her art. We've talked about rope, but there was chicken wire and there was felt and there was pulp. These are not particularly stable materials, right? She's not carving from marble. She's not Michaelangelo. Did she like the ephemerality of that? Was that intentional? Was that one of the attributes of these materials that she valued?

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: Yeah. I mean, if you had to say, what did she like to work with? Papier maché. She liked to work with string and rope all the time. She liked to work with this latex that is very fluid rubber that you can paint on something. But she had to invent how she was going to have a mold for that fluid latex. And she was aware, for instance, with latex, that there were intrinsic problems to its lasting. That it would go on, when she used it, in this very fluid watercolor like way, but that over time it would change colors, it would harden, it would get sticky. And in the end of her life, when she was very ill and knew it, she said that what was important to her was making this work the way she wanted it to look at that time and she was aware it wouldn't last. And that was the way life was.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Elisabeth, that brings us to one of Eva Hesse's famous quotations. She was supposed to have said, "life doesn't last, art doesn't last." And given that she was a refugee and that she absolutely knew how quickly life can be snuffed out, I'm curious. Was this obsession with temporality, with working with materials that didn't necessarily last forever. This preference for making the art she wanted over making something that might be more stable. Do you think this had to do with her own biography? The death of her mother, the fact that she was a refugee. Or do you think it was more just a purely aesthetic choice?

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: I've been working on Eva Hesse for quite a long time and when I first encountered her and the career and the Tagebuch and took the whole life into the view of the art and read those last statements, I absolutely began to connect the whole story with the story of her being a refugee and her family being driven out of Germany and her mother dying and so on. I think all that is true. But at the same time, I like to hold in my mind this thought. And that is that she was... had a very kind of utopian view of art. That somehow art could be an expression of however you felt. Not a message, but an expression of your feelings at the moment. And that she really was intrinsically looking for as much sort of freedom that she could find in making art so that it wouldn't look like a product, but it would look like something that really meant something to her. So I think, at the same time, ephemerality is always in her mind. It's like a given. And at this point in her life, when she makes that statement, especially so, because she's so ill. But I also think that she just wanted to test the limits, which is a very joyful idea.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: It makes me wonder how much we should think of her as a political artist. What was her relationship to feminism? And to ideas? Because some people would put that appreciation for joyfulness and utopianism, sometimes in opposition to the temporal concerns of politics or movement politics. Did she have a relationship to movement feminism that was around her at the time?

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: Her feminist ideas are certainly there. She read Simone de Beauvoir when she was a very young woman. And she struggled, very much struggled with the definition of being a woman throughout her life. She was proto-feminist, in that she preceded the real, you know, movement into feminism that her good friend Lucy Lippard almost led in the early '70s. She was not part of that. She was too ill and also just kind of interested in making art. In becoming everything she knew she could be. And so movement politics, anti-Vietnam marches, all of them, she was involved with, her friends were involved with them. But she wasn't. Her core wasn't with them. No.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: What about the fact that the art world was just quite male-dominated at the time? Was it hard for her to break through and get noticed?

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: I think so. I think that she was a person of great talent, which was recognized from the time she went to high school. Then she went to Cooper Union,

which you had to get into based on merit. So she was at art school. And then from Cooper Union, she was accepted into Yale. So her talents were recognized. And she was in the Yale School of Art at a time when women were beginning to make a difference. Beginning. So, to your question, her barriers were that she faced the traditional definition within her family and within her culture of what a woman should be. So a woman should be the sort of household angel, you know, taking care of all the things that are necessary for the man to get on with his life and have a great career. And she had a marriage with somebody who was kind of on the brink of having a great career. And she was very secondary to do that. And eventually that marriage dissolved. And I think it was because she felt the kind of de facto assumption that he was a better artist than she was. She felt this great strength in her own ideas. She was encouraged. So she very much was aware of the fact that she was going to have to fight every inch of the way.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: What about her fellow artists outside of her marriage? Was she getting respect? We know who she is now, but what was her level of notoriety or respect in the art world at the time?

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: So when we talk about notoriety, you know, we could talk about, was she getting shows, critical notice, and so on? Not until the end of the decade did she do that. However, notoriety in the sense, did she hang out with people of significance who were thinking deeply about what American art could be in the mid-'60s in New York, the capital of the art world? Yes. She was. I mentioned Sol Lewitt before. I would not call him a mentor, I'd call him a friend, almost a romantic friend and supporter of her and her talent from the moment he knew her. And so she was getting support from some pretty heavy lifters in the New York art world, who were all men. I mean, they were artists. They were fellow artists.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: You talked a little bit about the traditional expectations put on her as a woman, maybe from her parents' European culture, within her marriage. What about her religion? Did her Judaism matter to her or to her art?

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: Traditional Judaism, I don't think mattered. However, cultural Judaism, she had no question about the fact that she had been born Jewish, that her family were members of a Jewish community that had to move from Europe to America. Washington Heights Synagogue was part of their lives. But that was the extent of it. She

wasn't really someone who had religion on their mind all the time. It was just part of her identity.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: As was being a refugee, I assume. Did she think about that?

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: I think she did. I think that there was no escaping that. That there was hardship in the home. That her mother, as you mentioned before, had died tragically as a result of a deep depression that probably came out of the move from Europe to America and losing all her family in the concentration camps. So, yes, she very much thought of that community that she lived in, that she was brought up in, as an emigre culture.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: I want to talk about Eva's death. She died very young at 34. There has been speculation that some of the materials she used, the rubber, the latex, the industrial plastics, with their toxicity, might have contributed to her early death. Is that just idle chatter? Has anyone really investigated that deeply? Is there a consensus on that?

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: No, there really isn't. There is speculation that's gone on ever since her death. But, I mean, it was certainly not a healthy situation. She lived in very cramped quarters on the Bowery and she worked and slept and cooked all in the same environment that she made a lot of the latex that she. Not all of it. The fiberglass was made at a separate studio. However, the person who worked most closely with her, whose name was Doug Johns, to kind of help her realize technically some of the things she wanted to do, was alive and kicking 40 years later, and he was exposed to the same material. So, don't know.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: What's her legacy today? Among artists, among collectors, and among the general art loving public.

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: Well, she's been a heroine to artists since her death. The work is so strong and yet so delicate. So it's almost mythic in its proportions. It's so rarely seen. And people write about it because they are incredibly moved by just seeing the pictures of the work on the page. It's really so beautiful. So her reputation has been absolutely, I would say, secure since her death so long ago. The proof that she's a great artist is that she's taken up by so many different people in so many different ways. People are attracted

to the imagery. They're attracted to her life story, her beauty, her effervescence that comes through as a creature, sort of like Edie Sedgwick or something, a real icon of the '60s. And yet, people who are feminists born yesterday are attracted to things like the rope piece. I just started to read some book where somebody is taking up Virginia Woolf and Eva Hesse and it's Eva Hesse's rope piece. So it's a great career.

MARK OPPENHEIMER: Elisabeth Sussman of the Whitney Museum, thank you so much.

ELISABETH SUSSMAN: Thank you.

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MARK OPPENHEIMER (VO): That was Elisabeth Sussman. I'm Mark Oppenheimer. And this is LBI Presents. 'Til next time.

PRODUCER: For more information and to visit LBI's digitized archive, go to lbi.org.

On the next episode of LBI Presents... The Nazi propaganda machine was huge and powerful. News stories developed inside the Third Reich made their way into the media all around the world—including in America.

HEIDI TWOREK: If you look at stories of D-Day landings, you see they're coming from the Associated Press. But actually the Associated Press is getting some of that from Transocean. So this is what makes this landscape so incredibly powerful for the Nazi propaganda machine is that people do not realize that that's where it's coming from.

PRODUCER: Propaganda for breakfast. Coming up on LBI Presents.

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