

Eva Hesse and Magdalena Abakanowicz:  
Their Relationships to Paradox  
and Soft Materials

by  
Amy McMurtry

Pat Coronel  
Graduate Research Seminar  
AR 693

In the late 1970's, a show opened in Zurich Switzerland entitled "Soft". The show represented a handful of noteworthy and innovative artists. Among them were Joseph Beuys, Anton Tapies, Claus Oldenburg, Luciano Fontana, Eva Hesse and Magdalena Abakanowicz. It's within this well respected group of artists that the last two in particular stand out and seem to share something unique. Eva Hesse and Magdalena Abakanowicz may not at first glance appear to have anything noteworthy in common, but upon closer examination, subtle but strong connections come into focus. It becomes evident that their inspiration and drive comes from a similar source. That source being paradox.

Historically, paradox has had many definitions. It is the cornerstone of philosophy and it's premiss has been fretted over and debated since the days of Aristotle and Plato. None the less, "the heart of all paradox lies in contradiction (Poundstone, 1988). And it's this element of paradoxical contradiction which is the focal tie between Hesse and Abakanowicz.

The purpose of this paper is to examine this tie by exploring each artist's relationship to her chosen material. It is hoped that through a closer look at the ties to material it will be made clear that the underlying paradoxical current lies in how each artist relates their

materials to the idea of "Soft". In order to better understand all of this, this researcher feels that a background understanding of each artist is important.

### Background

Eva Hesse was born in West Germany during the period of Nazi occupation. At age two, Eva and her sister were placed on a train bound for Amsterdam in order to escape Hitler's persecution. Later the two children were joined by their parents and the family eventually settled in New York City. Hesse recalls her early childhood as being full of insecurity, fear and anxiety. She was often sick and even as an adult admitted that through illness, she was able to gain comfort and attention from others. During her adulthood, it was widely accepted that Eva suffered from bouts of extreme anxiety, which seemed to be alleviated only when she was gaining success in the art world.

Eva described her life as always having been made up of opposites and extremes with nothing ever resting in the middle. It's this idea of extremes which will show up later as the contradictory element in her mature works. A wonderful example of this can be found in a piece entitled Hang Up. (Plate 1) In this piece, a large metallic extrusion juts out from a carefully bandaged and gradated empty frame. About this piece Lucy Lippard (1976) writes, "It Balances its' great clearness with its' pathos of disproportion. While its' two negative spaces, frame and

loop also propose paradoxical elements of the fastened and the discontinuous." It attempts to suggest order and an organized geometry, at the same time denying itself this satisfaction by using the "most pulverized and perishable of materials." (Lippard 1976)

Hesse knew early on that she wanted to be an artist. She studied first at the High School of Industrial Design. From there went on to Pratt Institute for Industrial Design and then to Cooper Union. In 1959, she graduated with a degree in painting from Yale School of Art and Architecture where she had met and studied with Joseph Albers. At this time, Hesse was influenced primarily by the Expressionists but was adept enough to realize that the style her generation was inheriting had little left to be discovered.

In 1961, she met and married sculptor Thomas Doyle. Three years later they moved to Kettwig, West Germany for a fifteen month stay. It was during this time that Hesse began to explore her sculptural sensibilities and realize that for her sculpture was the bridge between the exhausted movement of the expressionists painters and her own personal needs of expression. What she gained from her stay in Germany was the formation of basic questions and the realization of certain sensibilities which she would continue to explore the rest of her life.

The life of Magdalena Abakanowicz began also during a period of war. She was born in Falenty Poland to parents of

nobility. Her early childhood as she describes it was filled with contradicting messages. Her mother had apparently wanted a son and not a daughter. The daughter, Magda, consequently carried much guilt, little acceptance, and no understanding of what she had done wrong. These feelings were reconciled with age, but it's the researchers' opinion that these early experiences set the stage for the paradox which would appear in her later works.

As a child, Magda preferred to spend much of her time alone with nature for it was here that she felt understood and accepted. Living on an estate in the country left Magda isolated. She had no friends and didn't attend a public school. Her only confidants and playmates were the woods, ponds, and fields that surrounded her home. Consequently it was nature that communicated with her in a way that no one else could or would. They shared many secrets, and through hours of observation and silence, nature revealed itself to her. This early bond with the organic world, its fibrous qualities, mysteries and gentle complexities, would form the foundation through which her expressions as an adult would manifest themselves.

Unlike Hesse, Abakanowicz wasn't able to escape the war which besieged her country. In her autobiography, *Portrait x 20*, Magda recounts some of the horrors of war which altered her life and her perceptions of the world. She speaks of being forced to leave the country and move with

her family to Warsaw. At one point in time her mother is shot by soldiers and thus loses one of her arms. It's through events such as these coupled with the experiences of isolation as a child, that works as Heads, (Plates 2, 3, & 4) give form to feelings. About the works, and their relation to mankind, Abakanowicz (1985) states, "I am apprehensive about the effects of an artificial environment and unlimited stress." It's through these anonymous, silent, sometimes painful forms that Magda's apprehension about her own life and the condition of the surrounding world can be seen. What she speaks of in this piece are not only her own apprehensions, but also the relationship of man to the world which he has created. A world of paradox created by and for living organisms which sometimes denies its' inhabitants life.

After the war, Magda enrolled in school. Her scholastic experiences were difficult and sometimes disastrous. Being a daughter of pre-war aristocracy meant that she was not eligible for any sort of higher education. She was able to skirt this law by not revealing her true identity or background to anyone. Her parents no longer had any money and weren't able to help her financially. Consequently, her life as a student was the life of a transient. After one successful year of schooling in Sopot, Magda decided to move back to Warsaw and entered the Academy of Fine Arts. This change of schools happened during the period of Socialists

Realism, and as hard as she tried, Magda couldn't seem to produce what the professors at the Academy wanted to see. Instead, all she could make were what she called; large, Smudgy things. (Reichardt, 1985). Time after time her drawing professors would come around and erase all of the lines that they felt were extraneous and unnecessary, explaining to her that if she insisted on continuing in this way, her works would be ruined. These were the lines that gave her drawings personal meaning, through them she felt connected to her organic past and it's within this build up of lines and marks that her later works in fiber were foreshadowed.

Magda eventually received her degree and left the Academy. Once out, she began to weave again. She had used soft materials before as a means of expression because they could be folded and easily hidden under a bed. Now she returned to weaving because of its organic, soft, flexible qualities. It's associations fit her sensibilities and also fit her sense of paradox and contradiction.

In summary, both artists had rather difficult beginnings. But it's through these beginnings that certain cynical attitudes and perceptions of the world were formed. These attitudes and perceptions for each artist would later manifest themselves as elements of paradox in their mature works.

In the next section of this paper, the relationship

between artist and materials will be explored. It is the author's belief that the heart of paradox lies in each artists relation to their materials and ultimately in the inherent qualities of the materials themselves.

#### Materials

Abakanowicz and Hesse both express a strong affinity for the materials they chose to work with. It appears evident that they each have some intrinsic need to be in contact with them physically. Each have indicated that the it is through the actual process of doing that they gain artistic satisfaction.

In Hesse's case, she was actually influenced by the anti-form and process movements. This may be one of the reasons she chose to stay away from traditional sculptural materials such as bronze, clay and marble. The Untitled Piece (Model for an Unrealized Sculpture; Plate 5) is an example of one of the very few times she used clay to give form to an expression. However, she chose to use the clay in an unfired, greenware state, thereby exploiting the fragility and fugitiveness of the materials. This need to use alternative materials, or materials in non traditional ways became very important to both Hesse and Abakanowicz. For Hesse it was an extension of her need to stay away from materials\* which carried with them a predetermined history or pre-subscribed aesthetic connotations. She chose instead to work with substances which, unlike the materials



used by Abakanowicz, were inorganic and industrial in nature. In her earlier works, Hesse found that styrofoam, paper mâché, and even street detritus fit her expressive needs. Later these materials seemed immature and unsatisfactory. It wasn't until she discovered latex, poly-resins and reinforced fiberglass that her personal connections to her materials began to take form. Eventually these associated expressions\* became an integral part of her aesthetic dialogue.

Abakanowicz was also intent on removing herself from the traditional, decorative and utilitarian aspects of her materials. For her, it was important that she shake up any preconceived ideas regarding woven materials which might be held by her audience. Magda's desire was to produce questioning on the part of the viewer and hopefully provoke new ways of thinking. Of her work Abakanowicz (1985) says, "I am interested in the feeling of man confronted by the woven object." and " I am not interested in the practical usefulness of my work."

Magda's work is not inspired by the actual act of weaving, but instead inspiration comes through contact with the fabrics she creates. For her, fabric is something to be made, then cut apart and reassembled into something else. This method of working seems to embody the paradoxical concept of simultaneously existing forces of creation and destruction. On a basal level, Abakanowicz is deeply

connected to the individual fibers she works with.

(Reichardt 1985). In her own words, she describes her feelings about fiber:

..."I see fiber as the basic element constructing the organic world on our planet, as the greatest mystery of our environment.

It is from fiber that all living organisms are built - the tissues of plants and ourselves.

Our nerves, our genetic code, the canals of our veins, our muscles.

We are fibrous structures.

Our heart is surrounded by the coronary plexus, the plexus of most vital threads.

Handling fiber, we handle mystery.

A dry leaf has a network reminiscent of a dry mummy.

What can become of the fiber guided by the artists hand and by his intuition?" (pp. 127)

For Hesse, the process of polymerization was the deeply embedded link between her and the synthetic substances she was using. According to Bill Barnette (1989), co-worker and author of the book, *Eva Hesse*, polymerization "is a chemical reaction usually carried out with a catalyst in which a large number of relatively simple molecules (monomers) are combined to form a chainlike macromolecule." When looking at works such as *Sans I & II*, *Accretion*, *Veniculum II*, and *Ice Piece*, (Plates 6 - 10), it's clearly evident that Hesse was interested in the basic structure of her materials and in the process of polymerization. In these works, repetition of simple forms and the joining or linking of elements becomes important. This repetition and joining of forms is much like what actually happens when simple

elements lock and form new structures during polymerization.<sup>1</sup>

Her work Entitled Ice Piece, exists not only as an example of Hesse's use of polymerization, but also as an example of her use of paradox. Often, Hesse's definition of paradox included aspects of absurdity which related back to the extremes and opposites in her life. About her tie to absurdity, Hesse says, "Absurdity has to do with contradictions and opposition. In the forms I use for my works the contradictions are certainly there... order versus chaos, stringy versus mass, huge versus small, and I try to find the most absurd or extreme opposites. I was always aware of their formal contradictions and it was always more interesting than making something normal, right size, right proportions." (Danto, 1989). Ice Piece embodies these feelings and is an excellent example of the absurd and the paradoxical. It is constructed of fiberglass and resin laid over twenty-two wire armature pieces, each piece with a loop on the end in order to connect them. Fully extended, the work measures sixty two feet, but is intended to be shown as in plate 10. Here it's seen that its vertical segments are capable of expanding to the full height of the exhibition space while the rest of it coils itself stiffly around its'

<sup>1</sup> This connection to the structural aspects of her materials is also evident in the title she chose for her show at the Fishbach Gallery sometime between the years 1967 and 1969, the actual date could not be found. the title for the show was "Chain Polymers".

base. The paradox lies in its' movement, fragility and transparency of form. For it seems to almost "dissolve in space as it ascends towards the ceiling" (Barnette, 1989).

In the previous sections of this paper, the topics of materials, background and to an extent, paradox were covered. In the last section, It is this writers intent to name, define and convey the importance of the soft materials chosen by Hesse and Abakanowicz and their connections to paradox within each artists expressions.

Formerly, reference was made of the artists' need to move away from traditionally used sculptural materials. This shift was necessary for each artist in order avoid any of the predetermined aesthetic vocabulary which might have been associated with such materials. To use items such as bronze or marble meant using all that they imply; strength, stability and permanence. They generally discourage a tactile, personal type of interaction. One might wish to touch, but one knows that one shouldn't.

Contrary to bronze and marble, materials such as fiber, clay, wood, and even latex molds are thought of as utilitarian in nature. Their associations are softer and more personal. It's a prescribed part of their aesthetics that they should exist in a temporal way, functioning for man, and to be used by him. Obviously, these materials are not free from the preconceptions developed through time, but fortunately the feelings and affects that are associated

with them are the same ones associated with things "soft".

The word "soft" suggests many things. It suggests perishability, instability and above all, impermanence. It alludes to the organic and the temporal, things which are subject to growth, transformation, change and decay. It denies and contradicts all that's implied in traditional sculptural material, and is capable of eliciting direct human empathy and of encouraging more active forms of viewer participation. This fugitiveness of materials used within the sculptural realm of the permanent to create an expression of a transitory thought is essentially the paradoxical tie that binds the two artists.

For Hesse, "soft" represents contradictions, opposites and extremes. It allows her in her work to deny or humiliate any "expectations of a geometrical satisfaction" (Shapiro, 1973). This denial is exemplified in Laocoon (Plate 11). In this piece, the rigid grid work is stifled by the snake-like cords which strangle the piece and deny it its structural integrity. It seems to speak of lofty aspirations entangled, abandoned and in a state of decay.

This process of deterioration is also evident in her piece entitled Tori (Plate 12). Tori is an example of Hesse "soft" sensibilities applied to rigid materials. Here, the forms appear randomly scattered and thrown away. As if the contents of the once perfect forms has been used up and the split, empty husks were tossed aside, left to brittle and

ultimately disintegrate. Both works, Laocoon and Tori embody feelings of perishability and impermanence. They speak of something, perhaps a thought or an idea that's past its prime, considered no longer of any use and destined to disintegrate.

Paradox between materials and expression exists also in Abakanowicz's work. She explains it quite eloquently in a poem entitled "Soft" (Abakanowicz, 1979) which is partially reprinted here:

"Impermanence is a necessity of all that lives. It is a truth contained in a soft organism. How to give vent to this innate defeat of life other than turning a lasting thought into a perishable material?"

The next stanza contains the key to the paradox/material connection:

Thought- a monument. Thought, a defense against disappearance. Timeless thought. A perverse product of the soft tissue which will one day cease to connect. Expressed in materials whose durability is related to the matter from which it came". (pp. 102-103)

Two works in particular by Abakanowicz, *Embryology* and *Seated Figure*, (Plates 13, 14, & 15) seem to be manifestations of the idea of paradox. Both of these seem to be contradictory concepts of lasting expressions created by temporal organisms. Both works speak of impermanence, fragility and the paradoxical idea of life and death existing within the same form. With *Embryology*, it's difficult to decide whether the "embryos" are in the process of growth as the name implies, or have reached maturation

and are now in the act of splitting open, rotting and returning to the materials from which they came.

(Abakanowicz, 1979)

Likewise, Seated Figure (Plate 15) also makes this distinction unclear, using the human form to make this piece even more unsettling. The gesture of the figure suggests the presence of life, but the disintegration of the fabric and the way in which the materials were used point instead to a vacant shell of a human being, forgotten and left to decompose.

In conclusion, Magdalena Abakanowicz and Eve Hesse share something quite similar and profound in their work. They come from different countries but have experienced some of the same events. They both know first hand about war, man's inhumanity to man, and the byproducts of insecurity and isolation. We have seen how these early experiences have influenced each artist in a variety of ways. Most notably within their own personal interpretation and use of the elements of paradox and contradiction. We have also examined the ways in which this paradox and contradiction manifests its expression through the "soft" associations of the materials chosen by each artist. For it is within the materials that the true paradoxical connection between these two artists can be made. That paradox, which is the heart of the connection, deals with the feelings and all that's associated with the word "soft". It is ultimately the

concept of a fugitive organism's attempt to express a lasting thought through perishable materials.



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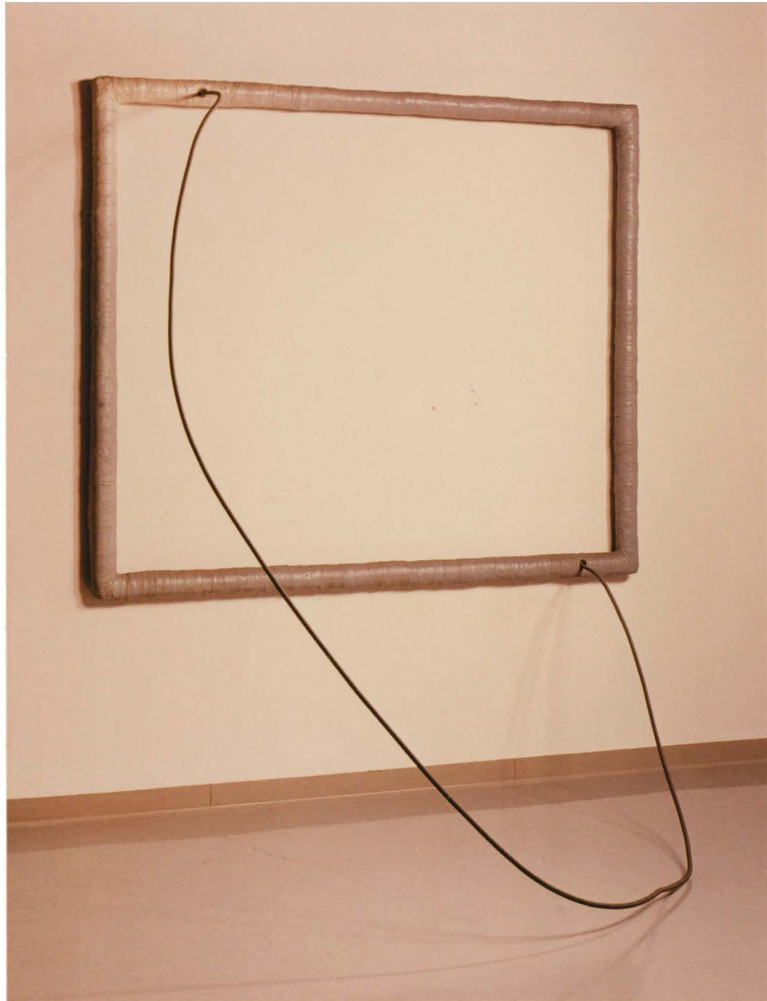
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4	Heads, installation by M. Abakanowicz
5	Untitled Piece, (model for an unrealized sculpture) by Eva Hesse
6	Sans I by Eva Hesse
7	Sans III by Eva Hesse
8	Accretion by Eva Hesse
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16	Heads, Seated Figure, Garments (installation) by M. Abakanowicz



Hang Up  
Plate 1



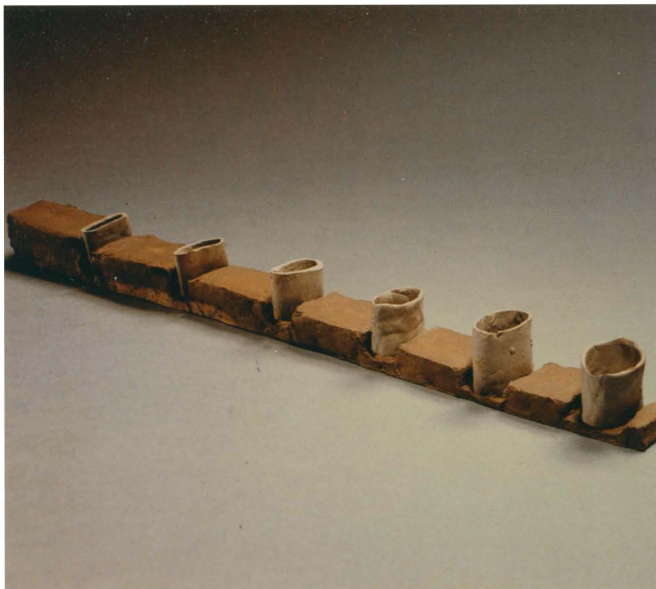
Heads, (two views).  
Plate 2



Heads  
Plate 3

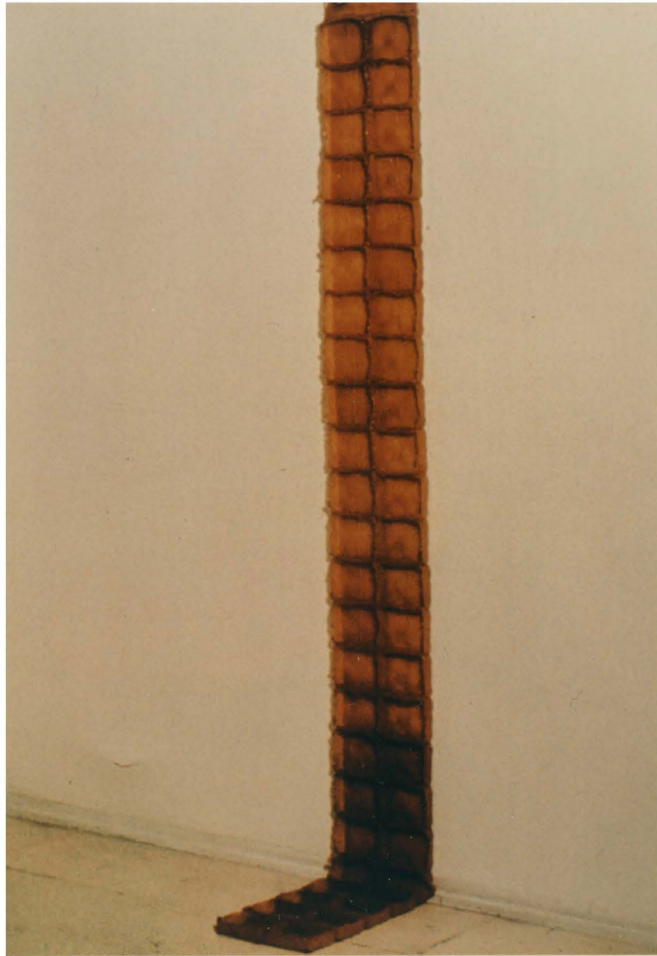


Heads. (installation).  
Plate 4

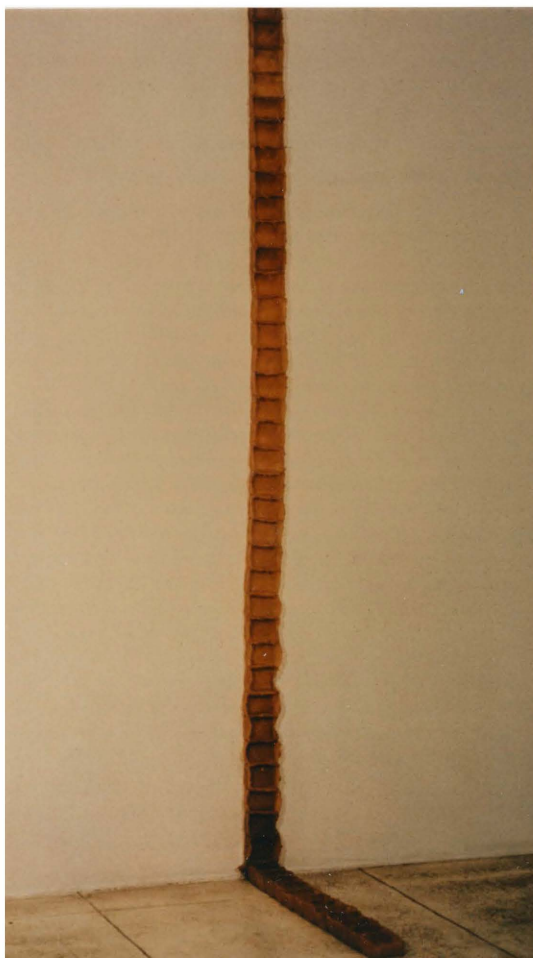


Untitled Piece. (Model for an Unrealized Sculpture).  
Plate 5

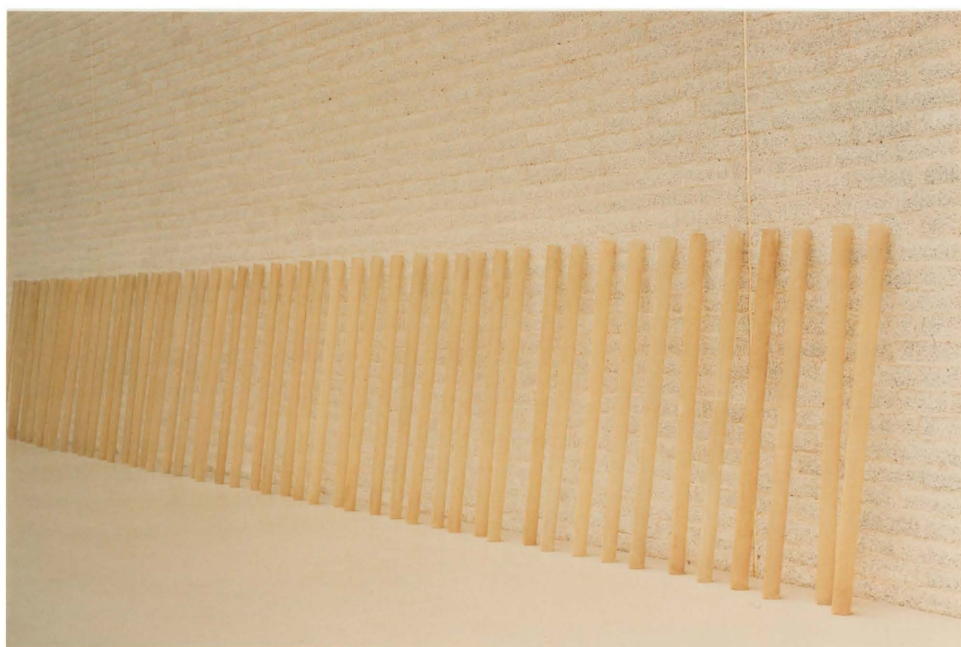




Sans I  
Plate 6



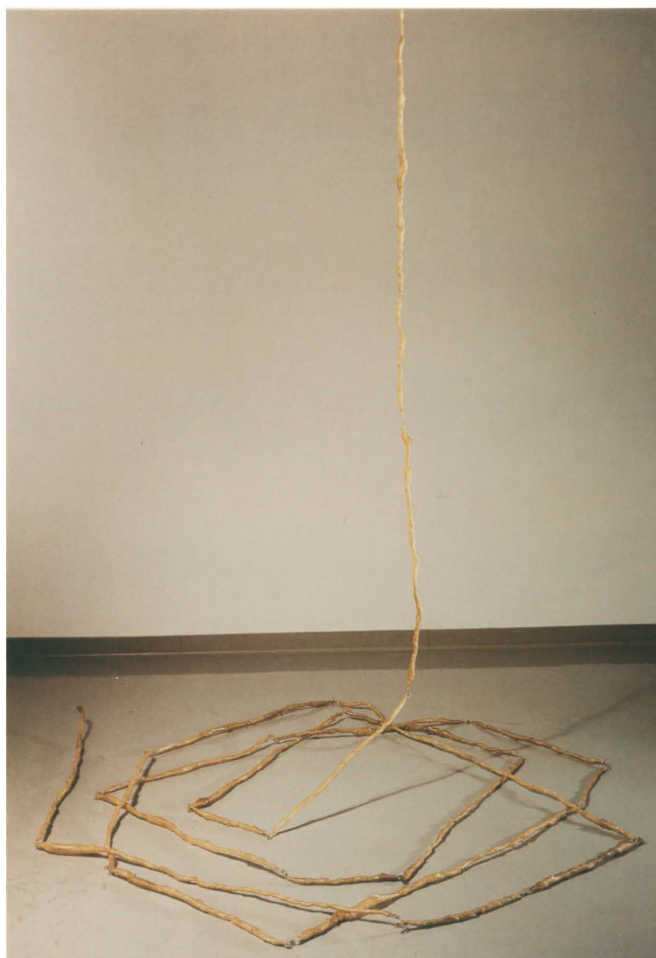
Sans III  
Plate 7



Accretion  
Plate 8



Veniculum II  
Plate 9



Ice Piece  
Plate 10



Laocoon  
Plate 11



Tori  
Plate 12



Embrvology  
Plate 13





Embryology. (detail)  
Plate 14



Seated Figure  
Plate 15



Installation with Heads, Seated Figures, Garments  
Plate 16