



Emily Hesse

Hearing from Artists

Emily Hesse's interdisciplinary, often collaborative practice includes performance, drawing, writing, sculpture, ceramics and installation to question and aggravate social and political power dynamics. She has worked with MIMA on various projects and has work in the Middlesbrough Collection. Emily was born in Middlesbrough and lives in Saltburn-by-the-Sea in the Tees Valley. She is in conversation with Elinor Morgan, Head of Programme, in April 2020.

EM: Why are the land, myths and characters of the area where we live and work so key to what you do?

EH: If I take the place where I stand and I think, what do I know, what do I understand, what is familiar? Then I get a map and I note where I am, then I draw a radius around myself and what I know. It reaches as far south as where the land becomes chalk and as far north to the River Tees. To the east, the North Sea and to the west where coal seams begin. It doesn't end here though, because everything that lies below the land, our ancestors, history and everything up into the ether is also a part of this. I draw my thinking from this bore-hole like sample.

This sample is key as it is the land and its mythologies that have formed me; I am part of them. I cannot shake their importance if I try, but to the rest of the world they are mostly unheard and unknown. I want to reflect them



Courtesy of the artist.

back into the world by telling stories. I tell stories. You are only able to do that if you have an understanding of the language of a place and how to decode it.

EM: Your practice often intervenes in and entangles itself with political systems and infrastructures. How has this manifested in different artworks?

EH: I find this question really interesting because I don't personally view any of my work as political; it just sometimes has a way of being innately so without my trying. I despise injustice. This comes from feeling the effects of marginalisation at different times in my life having come from this region. So a lot of my work addresses this. I am often just trying to subvert or aggravate systems of enforced control and limitation.

In all of my ceramic works and clay practice more generally, from *New Linthorpe* (2015-) to my various brick sculptures such as *Where I Left You* (2016) or *Alcmene and Galanthis* (2015) I am questioning ownership and right to land. All of the clay I use is taken from the streets, wherever I can dig or find it or when it



The Coffee House (2016), made with James Beighton, commissioned by MIMA and Tees Valley Arts. Courtesy of MIMA and the artist.

is given to me. There is no permission sought as it would be impossible to identify who it belonged to. Who owns the earth? Nobody can ever say. It is the same with the bricks, they are just taken from wherever I find them. They are above ownership, or perhaps would not be missed. Their value in monetary terms is nil. I subvert the way we think about value by taking what is written off as worthless and making it covetable. This way of working questions the systems by which we measure worth. I am not suggesting here that because I have touched them, they are suddenly worth something, but altering their aesthetic nature can change how they are viewed.

EM: How do you shift your role and voice to collaborate with others?

EH: By lending my role and voice to others if they require it.

I am interested in what collective voices have to say and how silencing yourself at times is necessary. I don't aim to represent my whole community or its people, but stories that are familiar to many of us because of where we are from, where we exist etc. By creating spaces of experience where we can exist as collectives,

we begin to see our similarities as human beings and less of our differences.

EM: Your work *No Equivalent* (2018) was recently acquired for the Middlesbrough Collection at MIMA. Can you describe this video, and how you arrived at its art historical references?

EH: The scene is a backyard of a terraced streethouse – my home. Nothing is out of the ordinary. On the ground is a red chalk circle, reminiscent of the outlines drawn around a body in old detective films, but circular. From the upstairs window, through net curtains, unfired clay bricks fall into the circle. It is unclear if the bricks are falling or being pushed, as whoever is behind the net curtains is faceless. It is unclear if the circle is to remind us of what we cannot see – histories and ideas that leave no visible trace – or if it is a target. The only sound is that of the clay hitting the ground, thud after thud. And sometimes the chatter of birds.

It was first shown at Workplace, Gateshead, in 2018 on a monitor that leant against a wall, in a manner that mimicked certain Minimalist sculptures.



No Equivalent (2018) Photography: John McKenzie Courtesy of the artist and Workplace Foundation.

This led me to feel increasingly frustrated with the work, as if nothing I could ever make would have any sense of autonomy as it could not be separated from a patriarchal art world or the significant role the male artist still had. Once the work had been de-installed, the final blow came when I was told that the work would never be wanted by a museum as it was too difficult to store and maintain, which I could understand, but that now made it seem futile, pointless and worthless, which is often how I feel as a female artist.

So I got my own back on it and reused the bricks to make *No Equivalent*. For people interested in art history there is not really any way you can look at the work, knowing what it was before, and not draw reference to the death of artist Ana Mendieta**, who was married to Carl Andre. Mendieta was killed by a fall from a first floor window in 1985 following an argument between the couple.

I pushed those bricks out of that window in anger at the lack of equal status for women artists in the art world.

EM: In 2018 you held a solo exhibition at Workplace Gallery, Gateshead. Much of this exhibition was autobiographical and one work in particular alluded to your grandmothers. What does it mean to draw on your own stories and experiences so directly?

No Equivalent (2018), like a lot of my work, was actually born out of another work, *Reclaim the Wilderness* (2017) shown in MIMA the same year. *Reclaim the Wilderness* created a political sloganeering campaign against Margaret Thatcher's declaration of our land as a 'wilderness' (wilderness defined: an unoccupied site where no human previously existed or was able to survive) during the 1980's. The location she labelled was the former site of the heavy industrial firm Head Wrightson, where many generations of our families had laboured for over a hundred years. My work included campaign posters, painted in clay, and seventy-eight hand-made unfired bricks in River Tees clay that formed what appeared to be a pathway or road. It was impossible to lay the bricks out in a way that the work did not resemble Carl Andre's *Equivalent VIII* (1966)*.



Where I Left You (2016) Photography: John McKenzie Courtesy of the artist and Workplace Foundation.



The Old Wife (2019) Courtesy of the artist.

EH: I have often been asked how I have managed to hold on to the ability to make work about my own stories and experiences when so often we are encouraged to lose this during arts education. It's true: I have been encouraged to lose the means to draw on these stories, as if it were childish or bad practice. Yesterday I heard Grayson Perry speaking about how his practice has changed since the lockdown. He described it as becoming freer and more childlike, that perhaps he would make work with what he had lying around the house or found in the street. He was basically describing my practice! I am sure we will see a return to these home truths in art as time goes on now.

In my family there has been historical marginalisation of women's voices. This is true of many families from predominantly working class regions. The stories of women such as my Grandmothers, who both lived through the Second World War and raised their children in Middlesbrough and Thornaby, are important because they have gone unheard. Women's subjugation has often just existed as a family secret and I fear it still does.

Drawing on your own experiences allows you to tell stories which are raw, often dark or muddled, things that you don't really wish to speak of but knowing that doing so will create space for others to share their own. 'Chewy', someone once said to me. I have no right to try to describe other people's experiences, each is entirely individual. Nor do I have any desire to appeal to the art market by altering myself for the sake of value. To draw so directly on experience only means to speak a truth. This is the book I have been given, if I don't read it aloud, who will?

* Carl Andre (b. 1935 USA) is an artist associated with minimalism, a movement focusing on the repetition of forms. His 1966 work *Equivalent VIII*, made from one-hundred-and-twenty fire bricks, bought by Tate Gallery in 1972, became controversial after being defaced in the gallery and featuring in an outraged article in the Sunday Times about the price of the work.

** Ana Mendieta (1948 - 1985) was born in Cuba and lived as an adult in the USA. She is known for her politicised feminist work in performance, sculpture, painting and video. There are two works by Mendieta in the Middlesbrough Collection.