

# THE

# Manuel Oliveira

# HESSIE

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**Junta de  
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Consejería de Cultura y Turismo



CASTILLA Y LEÓN

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## **NOT TAKING UP SPACE. A POLICY OF ANOTHER KIND FOR GENDER, SPACE, THE ECONOMY AND THE MEDIA**

Hessie's work comes to light today after many years, no doubt too many years, immersed in darkness and silence deriving just as much from the artist's shyness as from her resistance to the art system; and above all, from her political stance and her deeply radical way of challenging and questioning many of the conventions in the system, which at the end of the day condemned her to oblivion and alienation. The exhibition entitled *Survival Art*<sup>1</sup>, presented at les Abattoirs, Musée - Frac Occitanie Toulouse in 2017 and in MUSAC, the Contemporary Art Museum of Castile and León, in 2018, curated by Annabelle Ténèze and Sonia Recasens,

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1 The exhibition held at the Museum of Art in Paris in 1975 went under the same name, where Hessie clearly showed the foundations of her work.

rescued from oblivion the body of work that Hessie put together from the late 1960s, when she moved to the mill at Hérouval with her family, together with a series of nonconformist and transforming matters which underlie the production of an artist who in humbleness and silence took up a divergent position against the *status quo*, to such an extent that she did not take up any space therein.

Hessie's work, forgotten and silenced for such a long time, presents characteristics which distance it from the bombastic spectacularism and discursive sensationalism of the majority of contemporary art. The piece entitled *Silence* (1972) is a good example of this, not just because of its name, which is self-evident, but also because of its formal discretion and visual resistance, which endows it with a dull and almost invisible monochrome.

In a cultural context which favours efficacy, effectiveness, visibility and success, in which the market rules and every kind of production, programming and collection can be standardized<sup>2</sup>, her work has gradually found its place although it does not fit in any of the spaces or the preassigned forms in the art system. She built up her space while she gave form to a language, a personality and a positioning based on a conscious resistance to the productivity, competitiveness and hypervisibility decreed by the system. She also generated her space

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<sup>2</sup> It is highly illustrative that Hessie's invisibility started in the 1980s, when the mercantilization, institutionalization and spectacularization of art burst forth.

by refusing to take it up and shunning conventional places, to such an extent that she created her own “place of another kind”<sup>3</sup>.

We could say that HESSIE’s work neither complies, nor spends nor takes up. Her work—which can be analysed from many different perspectives, given its complexity, personality and subtleness—enables an approach, in relation precisely to the media, the economy and space; or to be more specific, to the radical political position of not endorsing them, not promoting it and not taking it up, respectively. The exhibition came into being from this perspective, and also with the purpose of highlighting the special and powerful way in which her work puts many of the conventions of contemporary art in a predicament from the radical, libertarian and feminist perspective we find in her work (it is also as subtle as it is delicate).

The work of Carmen Lydia Đurić, HESSIE’s official name, seems to viewers to be brutally simple, as it is often almost invisible or camouflaged (especially in the MUSAC’s concrete rooms) on the walls. This simplicity, nevertheless, means she can create a series of pieces which behave as radical othernesses in the current art system. Her work, simple and modest, just like the artist herself was, is an accusation and a sharp and incisive vindication. Maybe it doesn’t mean to, but it could also

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3 Michel Tapié introduced the concept of art of another kind (*art autre*) in a book of the same name in 1952, to specifically refer to non-geometric abstract art (also known as Informalism) and in general, to show that another, different category was needed for a new artistic manifestation.



be an extremely useful lesson of exemplarity in these times when it becomes necessary to claim “a place of another kind” to think of art beyond standardization.

There is something modest in this vindication; a modesty far removed from the affected tones, props and pretensions artists and academics sometimes employ (car boot academics, as Walter Benjamin would say). It is the Spartan modesty of someone who has spent her whole life producing art, both in success and visibility and staying at home and in her studio for many years of scarce or almost no outside presence. This is why we can say that her work is related to employment, activity, her precarious survival and her intimate and daily place in the world. Hessie’s work is not just a canvas, a *collage* or a piece of paper with holes in it: it is an activity or a space in which her daily life and her political position facing up to it reverberate. It is, above all else, a space for living and ontological speculation; because to her mind everything (even waste from food packaging) comes from art or becomes art.

Artistic vindication, and so Hessie’s politics, might seem modest and even extemporaneous, but actually it isn’t. It is anything but modest, even though the truth is that it is modest. Hessie never claimed to be a professional who fitted in and worked in the world of art. She actually said that art was an activity through which life gained meaning as it mediates between the self and the world, a world governed by too many conventionalisms, which she decidedly and modestly opposed. Her work is not made to fit in or operate in the worldly art system, but rather to challenge it and at

the same time to bring to light numerous aspects which have been falsely standardized.

The system has classified certain artistic manifestations with labels such as underground, outsider, *art brut* and *amateur*, and has relegated them to the margins, as in general they do not endorse the desired conventional standards and professionalism. Foreign to fashion and the teachings of art, often outside the circuit, almost always beyond standardization, most of these manifestations share the fact that they arose from a need to express, the conflict deriving from the collision of the inside and the outside, and the primary functions which either give meaning to the world or are held up by it. Hence all of them are configured as practices and spaces of resistance, as they challenge the *status quo*.

These challenges and this resistance work in many different ways and affect many different matters, among which we should highlight feminism, which questions the whole patriarchal system, refutes the extractivist logic of capitalism and challenges the neoliberal mercantilization of all aspects and spaces in life.

Feminism<sup>4</sup> attempts to generate new paradigms of thought and critique to evidence the systematic violence against women. This is why the gender perspective criticizes some of the foundational methodologies and conventional political and moral theories, evidencing

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4 Hessie knew many artists who were related to feminism. She played an active role in the Women's Liberation Movement (Mouvement de libération des femmes, MLF) and in groups such as Femmes en lutte.

the partial, contingent and historically located nature of what was said to be a universal and ahistorical “truth”. This is why feminism also redefines the relationship between the centre and the margins, and propagates a general revision of the whole system, in particular a revision which takes the politics of gender, space, the economy and the means into account.

## **Gender policies or *femme***

A large part of Hessie’s work presents imaginaries which are related to basic questions (the meaning of life and what happens to us after death) and to basic needs (food, fertility and emotional well-being), which she formulates with a diffuse feminist and essentialist perspective. We are face to face with a series of works of art which refer us to an ideal of pristine and original femininity, related to nature and life, contrasting with the supposedly warlike and depraved instincts found in men. From this position, certain artists of her generation tried to look deeper into the essential experience of the female body and its privileged relationship to life and nature.

Many contemporary authors, following the postulates of Walter Benjamin, accept the idea that once art lost its auratic dimension to the growing capacity of technical reproducibility, the only front left open is social condemnation and political struggle; but in the case of Hessie and other artists, their position lies in precisely the opposite direction to this trend, in order to evidence the otherness of the world as seen

by women. This is her first political vindication, and many others proceed from it.

In the 1960s a multitude of othernesses and challenges to the system in general (pacifist, antiracist and feminist movements and those in favour of social rights of all kinds) and the art system in particular (antiobjectualism, antiform, dematerialization, performance, site-specific installations and contextual art, etc.) were developed. One of the global focal points of these non-conformist practices was New York, where Hessie lived from 1960 to 1962; this is where she met the artist Dado, with whom she later moved to France. This independent, rebellious attitude, resistant to the *status quo*, took root in her just as it did in many other artists of the time, especially in those with an interest in the feminist theories and practices that emerged at this foundational time.

Beyond the ethnic, religious, cultural or geographical distance that separates artists, those who identify with this political stance connect their work to elements, materials and practices related to femininity and refer to the myth of the matriarchate which yearns to build a “world of another kind” that is much fairer. It is therefore a paradigm that tunes in to numerous regenerationist positions which today seem more relevant than ever.

In this line, many of Hessie’s works of art seem to invoke the secrets of daily routine, nature and life, its rhythms and what is required to hold it up (hence the title, *Survival Art*, chosen for the exhibition in 1975 and also for the one in 2017-2018). In relation thereto, we should not forget how Hessie answered Sonia Recasens

in an interview, when she asked her about the simple materials she used: “They are fundamental elements, even elements that enable us to survive, more or less”<sup>5</sup>.

The fact that Hessie used sewing thread in much of her work on fabric points in the same direction, as it gave rise to very characteristic pieces in technique and topic, such as *Végétations* (ca. 1969-1985). In the above-mentioned interview, when asked why she used fabric so frequently, she said “fabric is a staple material for mankind. Getting dressed and being warm is one of our basic needs, as vital as eating”.

It is no trivial matter, then, that Hessie chooses materials (thread, fabric, buttons, diverse trimming elements, food packaging and all kinds of remains from daily life), manual activities (spinning, sewing and sticking) and subjects (decorative, vegetable, primary animals) that are prototypically associated to the feminine and grouped together around what some art critics call *femmage*<sup>6</sup>. The term was coined by Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer in the winter of 1977—they included it in the feminist magazine *Heresies*; the concept of *femmage* alludes to any work of art created by women and in which objects are assembled or *collages* are produced. The term is intimately linked to feminist claims, because it refers to a whole series of activities, often homemade

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5 This interview was conducted on 6 December 2014 and published in the catalogue *Cosmogonies: Hessie, Kapwani Kiwanga, Myriam Mihindou* by Galerie Arnaud Lefebvre in 2015 (pp. 6-8).

6 SCHAPIRO, Miriam, MEYER, Melissa, 1978. Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into what Women Saved and Assembled – FEMMAGE. *Heresies: Women's Traditional Arts – The Poetics of Aesthetics*. New York: Heresies Collective, vol. 1, no. 4, pp. 66-69.

and anonymous, which women regularly carried out in relation to sewing in many cultures, such as joining pieces of leftover cloth together by patchwork or needlework, cutting, patterning, etc., and which highlight their skill and talent in introducing *collage* into their daily lives.

Women's work has traditionally been confined to the economy of care, among which are textile work and the domestic economy and tasks. Recycling all kinds of household objects, handiwork, the small size and delicate details, attention to daily objects, decoration, patterns and sewing all form part of women's skills in all cultures. They have developed great innovation and creativity in these skills, as can be seen in the collective exhibition *Monochrome Neutral Gender*, consisting of work by female artists and creators, and curated by Juan Guardiola in 2019-2020 for MUSAC in León<sup>7</sup>.

This is how, from a feminist perspective, an alternative genealogy is claimed for *collage*. While the history of western art places its origin at the beginning of the twentieth century and highlights its rise with cubism, the alternative narratives and revisions with a feminist perspective have claimed it as a practice and aesthetic established within the cultural traditions of women long before Picasso or Braque created their first *papier collé* (pasted paper).

Following this female tradition in the arts, Hessie assembles objects and decorative patterns from diverse

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<sup>7</sup> Monochrome Neutral Gender [Accessed 2 March 2020]. At: *musac* [Available from: <https://musac.es/#exposiciones/expo/monocromo-genero-neutro>]

places to create a very personal body of work that is further amplified by the titles of the pieces or series as a call to attention to topics related to essentialist feminism, so prevalent in her work: *Boutons – Points – Trous* (Buttons – Stitches – Perforations), *Bactéries et Dessins microscopiques* (Microscopic Bacteria and Drawings), *Végétations* (Vegetations), *Écritures – Bâtons pédagogiques* (Writings – Educational Canes), *Grillages* (Grids), and *Déchets collages* (Collages of Waste).

Consistent with the logic of collage, the materials that make up Hessie's work have a diverse origin, and if they are analysed consciously, they are seen to clash with each other because they depend on divergent and even contradictory environments. The activity of the subconscious, on the other hand, can operate within contradiction because it is capable of transforming something into its opposite, and make both present at the same time. This opens up a space created through operations of displacement and condensation that aim to intensify the experience from the manipulation of the elements.

This contradictory intensification, which can be brought about by the simple sequence of elements or through more complex mechanisms, influences the meaning of the object by re-situating it in a different conceptual or material context; it alters the laws of its constitution by identifying idea and matter until they merge; or it problematizes the object with iconographic manipulations capable of reactivating the complex and difficult question of ornamentation. The opposition of the conscious/subconscious is typical of a drive related

to writing and memory, which are also at the root of Hessie's work.

Often deprived, in almost all cultures, of a voice—and therefore of writing and memory—many women have managed to leave the imprint of their voices. A brief investigation into cultures, rites, customs and traditions around the world of women shows that through their songs, poems and secret languages, things are handed down from one generation to another. Such is the case with Nüshu, the secret language created and used for four centuries by the peasant women of Hunan (China) to write the “third-day missives”, books that mothers gave to their daughters when they got married, in the hope that they would find happiness. The Nüshu texts, embroidered on cloth, contained the feelings and emotions they wanted to hide from men and were burned along with the women when they died.

References of this kind help us understand the strategies generated by women to produce a type of memory and writing of their own that focuses on the elements they have around them and on the very personal use they make of them. This is why Hessie resorts to typewriters, as in the work *Machine à écrire* (1978), but also to fabrics and thread, as in the series *Bâtons pédagogiques* (1972-1973), or domestic waste, as in *Déchets collages grillage* (1978-1979), among others.

## **Economic and media policies**

Seen from afar, Hessie's work seems monochord, but it clearly shows the economy of means from which it



arises. Seen up close, it reveals many nuances and the overwhelming humility that breathes life into it becomes even more evident. It is not only that many of the different materials that come together in her work are everyday objects, and *a priori*, hardly artistic: what is important is that they are often remnants of the domestic. The economy, understood according to the dictionary as the “containment or appropriate distribution of resources” or the “saving of labour, time and other goods or services”, especially in the hands of a woman caring for a large family, is a crucial issue in understanding her work. The ascetic economy of means sustains her entire artistic attitude, which, in the end, is her most decisive contribution.

With the remains of food packaging, clothes and other household items, Hessie made a series of pieces (among which are the aforementioned *Déchets collages*) with what she had at hand, since she had no money to buy professional artistic materials. Economic necessity led her to find a way of working that suited her interests and satisfied her need to make art.

Not only does her work look poor (emphasized by the abandonment and scratches of life exemplified in the wrinkles, tears and stains of moisture or rust that can be seen on her canvases), but it works by resisting visuality. Often, there is either minimal elaboration (*Temps perdu*, 1972) or it is almost monochrome (*Grillage blanc*, 1975-1980), or the least attractive part is shown (*Lignes nouées*, 1978); if a piece is coloured, it is covered with fabric (*Autoportrait*, 1975-2015, and *Déchets collages*, 1976-2015). Her work clearly does not satisfy the desire

for scopie consumption and goes against the spectacular logic of the art system<sup>8</sup>.

There is something revealing in Hessie's lack of "production" or "effectiveness": the libido of capitalism is productivity, while the libido of creation is gratuity and resistance. The tremendous investment of time in "unprofitable" and seemingly gratuitous activities is understandable because it achieves a healing and refreshing benefit. In the aforementioned interview with Sonia Recasens, when asked about the importance of temporality in her work, Hessie answered, "It's true, time allows you to travel with your mind. What's more, if speed were what interests me, I would use a sewing machine".

The artist frees herself from these external production demands and focuses on the internal logic of her work, which values humility, everyday life, the nomad who produces with simple, common, cheap, transportable and easily foldable materials. The lightness of her work speaks of the freedom achieved by not asking for or expecting anything and thanks to a concept of economy which operates according to economizing rules that are alien to impatient capitalism, which in turn considers the economy as expenditure and exploitation, while she understands it as investment and containment.

Hessie's work neither satisfies, nor spends, nor endorses nor complies with capitalist patterns. Quite

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<sup>8</sup> The maximum expression of this productive indifference are the apparently undocumented performances in her study.

the contrary: she acts compulsively against the grain. According to Freud in *Der Dichter und das Phantasieren* (*Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*), obsession is the compulsive repetition of a ritual that does not reach its goal. Hessie's work neither satisfies consumption nor endorses efficacy, neither does it underline productivity, but rather subverts or jumbles them up. "Science manipulates things and gives up living in them"<sup>9</sup> says Merleau-Ponty right at the start of *The Eye and the Spirit*, published in 1964, and continues: "Only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees"<sup>10</sup>. According to this point of view, the artist's activity is an enormous "waste" of time and energy that serves to build something poetic and refreshing, but not practical. Thus, words of the order of knowledge and action lose their capacity to value or witness and leave a record of other possible perspectives.

Just as with marginal or outsider art that is developed without specific standardized instructions and is born of an intrinsic motivation and a vital need, the origins of Hessie's work lie in the primary and the experiential. Even though her work is not testimonial or anecdotal, because it lacks details and biographical details, it is the product of direct experience.

Hessie records experiences and leaves a record of her memory. She is explicit, but eludes literalism. She is almost like a secondary witness. Her work is related

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9 MERLEAU-PONTY, Maurice, 1977. *El ojo y el espíritu*. Buenos Aires: Paidós, p. 9.

10 *Op. cit.* p. 12.

to writing and memory, although not only to this, as the artist reminds us. This should be understood in the plural; that is, it would be more correct to speak of “memories”, because she establishes a very productive dialectic between private memory (traumatic, suffering, biographical, experiential and intimate) and plural memory (open and in solidarity with certain historical events) that concerns and challenges all of us.

Hence her work not only refers to an intrahistory or an intra-time, but to something broader. Indeed, as Jean-Luc Nancy said in relation to memory and writing, “your gaze touches upon the same character tracings that mine are touching now, and you are reading me, and I am writing you”<sup>11</sup>. Hessie “writes” for herself, but with a sense of life, and also of social responsibility, in a work that is elliptical, poetic, and at the same time related to the most primary aspects of life that recall the words of the poet Saint-John Perse, born in the Caribbean like Hessie, in “Oiseaux”: “[...] a stain stamped like a seal, but which is neither a seal nor a cipher, neither is it a seal or a symbol, but the thing itself in its meaning and fatality—something alive, in any case, captured in the most vivid part of its fabric”<sup>12</sup>.

## **Policies of space and horizontality**

With all these materials and procedures a “reality of another kind” is created, depictions and stagings

11 NANCY, Jean-Luc, 2003. *Corpus*. Madrid: Arena Libros. p. 39.

12 PERSE, Saint-John, 1976. Oiseaux. In: *Pájaros y otros poemas*. Madrid: Visor, p. 165.

charged with ambiguity and suggestion, with interwoven images that go from the domains of the anthropological, the individual and the private to the “micro-policies” of the most radical agency. Hessie customizes the world, appropriates it and builds up her own place with the humble remains of existence, like in the *Déchets collages* (1976-2015) or *Boîtes* (1970-2000), in which she uses a wide variety of “residues” from her life.

In her work, the challenge of glimpsing what constitutes the artist unfolds, her poetic or creative identity, understood as a gaseous process rather than a stable state, as a phenomenon that is subject to a constant and very personal fluidity, a fleeting nature, mutation and contamination with the environment. If we add to this the experiential references (Hessie is experimental because she is experiential), this explains the significant production of images of domestic activities, daily dramas and identity games that make up this “reality of another kind” mentioned above. Art is, in short, a personal liturgy that allows her to construct her place in a world that is felt and superimposed onto a given world, or in a mythical world that is superimposed onto the real one.

This mythical feeling world connects her with the essentialist feminism she shared with the Nouvelles Pénélopes<sup>13</sup>, a group of artists with whom she was in

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13 The term was coined in 1976 by the French critic Aline Dallier-Popper, the author of the introductory text of the collective exhibition catalogue *Combative Acts, Profiles and Voices* at the A.I.R. Gallery in New York, including work by Hessie, Francoise Janicot, Milvia Maglione and Nil Yalter, among other artists.

contact in Paris and who worked with domestic elements, daily activities and feminine values. These ideas of femininity tend to blend the biological and experiential field with certain psychological characteristics, which in the end link the feminine to care, nourishment, empathy, support and affection, non-competitiveness and also with a way of being in space without taking it up, and if you do, taking horizontality rather than verticality as a reference.

In the traditional pictorial or scenic space, the centre—or any other place where attention is fixed—is usually the most important point. In Hessie's work there is no hierarchy: in general, the whole space functions differently, its meaning is different, and all the points have the same importance; this is why the layout is uniform and isotropic, as in the *Végétations* series. Perhaps it is because Hessie does not work as someone who paints (vertically), but rather as someone who writes or sews (horizontally). In fact, we have already seen that her work is related to a certain idea of writing that takes up space in a uniform way.

In all of Hessie's production we witness, among other things, an arduous critical re-evaluation of the complex relationship between the visual arts and horizontality. In her canvases and *collages*, the artist approaches the relationship with the space of the piece and with the horizontal plane from a gender perspective that problematizes the usual conventions in contemporary art.

Writing, embroidering, drawing and making collages all have in common a use of space and a relationship with

the body that is very different from that of sculpture or painting. They are activities that demand an intimacy and a close body position, and, in addition, a relationship with the horizontal plane to carry them out. To explain this issue in relation to Hessie, we will use the essay in which Rosalind Krauss and Ive-Alan Bois describe the ideology and politics of the use of space, both vertically and horizontally.

No space is neutral. Neither is the museum, as Brian O'Doherty reminded us in *Inside the White Cube*<sup>14</sup>, nor the space of the work of art itself. Its size, the surface it covers, the mode of production and many other aspects involve questions of all kinds, especially aesthetic and political questions. Of all these aspects, some are not very evident, such as the importance of the vertical or horizontal plane, but they are no less decisive from a conceptual point of view.

The use of horizontality in the visual arts in the second half of the twentieth century has a milestone and a hero: 1947 and Jackson Pollock. It was at this time that Pollock (immortalized in Hans Namuth's photographs in 1950 while he was producing his well-known drippings) lowered the painting from the vertical to the horizontal plane to work on it by letting the paint spurt and drip as a ritual act, pissing or ejaculating. In this way, Pollock not only developed his technique of dripping, but, in the words of Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss in the catalogue of the exhibition *L'Informe: mode d'emploi*

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14 O'DOHERTY, Brian, 1999. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Berkeley, University of California Press, (originally published as a series of articles in Artforum magazine in 1976).

held at the Pompidou Centre in 1996<sup>15</sup>, he opened up the possibility for future subversions of the erect plane, of verticality and of “phallic erectibility”.

This concept that revises conventional practice in the West in relation to verticality was proposed, along with others, by Krauss and Bois in the above-mentioned catalogue. Even though it had been mentioned and used previously by Georges Bataille, it was they who updated it and used the idea of the “formless” in the theorization and reconfiguration of the field of art today. In art there is always a dialectical tension between form and content, and the concept of “formless” constitutes a third term that lies outside this binary opposition and can evaluate the conceptual and practical incidence of the “informal” within current artistic production.

Bataille came up with the concept of the “formless” in the magazine *Documents*<sup>16</sup> in December 1929. In collaboration with several different ethnographers, he produced a kind of dictionary, which rather than providing the conventional definition of words, related them to specific activities. The work or activity he associates with the word “formless” is to rethink all the other words and categories used. Bataille said: “Philosophy as a whole has no other goal: it is a matter of

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15 The catalogue was published in English: BOIS, Yve-Alain, E. KRAUSS, Rosalind, 1997. *Formless: A User's Guide*. New York, MIT Press.

16 A surrealist magazine directed by Georges Bataille in Paris in 1929 and 1930. Conceived as a “war machine against received ideas”, as Bataille himself wrote, the magazine challenged the majority conception of Surrealism as represented by Breton and advocated greater openness to the hierarchies of form.



putting reality into a straitjacket, putting a mathematical frock coat on it. On the contrary, affirming that the universe is like nothing else and that it is only formless, is to say that the universe is something like a spider (crushed underfoot) or a gob of spit".<sup>17</sup>

This quotation is extremely important, because it determines the suppression of all the conventions that define and determine reality, and that pigeonhole it into units of meaning, thus opening it up to other possibilities. The plasticity of Hessie's work (and the opposite, represented by the cells of the expanding *grillages*) is reminiscent, in part, of the amorphous concept of the formless that is also very much present in all her work, especially in the *collages*. The task of the formless is to question the inherited way of organizing and understanding the world, in such a way that, for Krauss and Bois, a liberating disintegration takes place that challenges the world in all its dimensions.

Among the concepts that are exposed and that need this liberating disarrangement is the conception of space defined by the vertical and the horizontal. In their essay, Krauss and Bois say that laying the canvas flat on the ground affects its "phallic erectibility", which, according to Henri Lefebvre, "confers a special status on the perpendicular, proclaiming phallocracy as the orientation of space"<sup>18</sup>.

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17 BATAILLE, Georges, 1929 (December). Informe. *Documents*, n.º 7, p. 382.

18 LEFEBVRE, Henri, 1991. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, p. 287 (originally published in 1974 as *La Production de l'espace*. Paris, Anthropos).

A spatial conception of a feminist nature should necessarily unfold in a different way. The political, poetic and ideological implications of space determine that the position, size, conformation and above all, the use of space, should be different. Such is the case with Hessie, who seems to find writing and memory deeply important; they require a certain use of the plane and space.

Another referent for Krauss and Bois when it comes to understanding the ideology and politics that govern space, verticality and horizontality, is Walter Benjamin. In an early text<sup>19</sup>, the thinker proposes distinguishing the implications of the vertical and the horizontal plane in relation to painting, drawing and writing. To his mind, the vertical plane corresponds to painting and the representation of objects, while the horizontal plane is more linked to the graphic and writing, since it does not contain depictions but rather signs.

Taking Benjamin's theory as a reference, they argue that Pollock's act of painting horizontally instead of vertically subverts the conventional privilege of masculine verticality as the plane of pictorial depiction<sup>20</sup>. Actually, it is a halfway subversion. Lowering the painting onto the ground was not an end, but a necessary means to produce the painting, since

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19 BENJAMIN, Walter, 2004. Painting and the Graphic Arts. In: Bullock, MARCUS, W. Jennings, MICHAEL (eds.). *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, 1: 1913-1926. Cambridge and London: Belknap Press, p. 82.

20 It could also be understood as an act that turns the surface of the canvas into a floor, an empty territory or a *mawat* that authorizes Pollock to possess it, because the painting appears on the ground as virgin space that can be colonized.

once it was finished it would return to the art world's conventional verticality and recover its erectibility.

Even so, even if it was only at the time of production, the painting had been placed on the ground and had adopted a horizontal position, and this had a clearly transgressive meaning that other artists took advantage of in the late 1950s and early 1960s in order to broaden the practices of art. It is sufficient to say that Allan Kaprow<sup>21</sup> in *The Legacy of Jackson Pollock* claimed that Pollock's well-known images on the canvas on the floor inspired his early actions and happenings, so characteristic of the non-objectual art resulting from the immaterial and conceptual practices of experimentation at the time.

This same reference was also evident in the famous feminist performance *Vagina Painting* that Shigeko Kubota produced in 1965 at the Perpetual Flux Festival in New York. Kubota squatted over the blank paper and painted it with a brush attached to her vagina. In an act that is as evocative as it is critical of action painting, Kubota attached a brush to the back of her short skirt to paint on a large piece of paper on the floor. In this way the artist challenged the assumptions and conventions that still prevailed, and still do, in the art world, connecting masculinity with creative genius. This work interprets abstract expressionism from a feminist perspective, a genre characterized by male practitioners presented almost as heroes.

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21 KAPROW, Allan, 1993. *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Berkeley, University of California Press, pp. 1-9.

In the face of this productive and significant heroism, Hessie went in the opposite direction. We should not forget that she was active from the 1960s, a time when anti-object artistic manifestations proliferated. Hessie's work, without being conceptual, processual or performative, participates in all of this in her own way. There is something in it, above all in the attitude that emerges from her work, which always alludes to indifference or resistance to the effectiveness of the object. It is as if she expressly makes it clear that she prefers creative action to the product of creation. It is, we could say, an objective attitude in the adjectival sense of the term: it has a purpose, but not a goal.

The experimental, the immaterial, processes and interactions are common characteristics in the advanced practices of art from the 1960s and 1970s. Another, no less characteristic or common, is resistance to the reification and alienation of capitalist production and consumption that was bursting forth at the time. Bringing the state of things into the light and into crisis was the obvious consequence, even if it meant paying the price of being relegated to the margins.

Hessie was excluded from the hegemonic historiographic accounts dominated by men and by the figures of the artist-hero or the romantic artist because she did not fit into any of these models (not even that of the exotic artist); she was also relegated

from the new narratives that try to correct the history of art from a feminist<sup>22</sup> perspective because her artistic production is not based on “the body, the construction of difference in visual depiction or racial or sexual identity”<sup>23</sup>. Hessie’s work was ignored. The result was a double invisibility that led to her marginalization.

Marginalization was the fate of a woman like Hessie, who was neither white, European nor bourgeois, but she knew how to find her place on the margins. Despite the narrowness, she was able to build up a body of work that expands and empowers these margins through the ability to endow writing with a voice, and the most humble and intimate with memory<sup>24</sup>.

This capacity places her beyond the “professional” conventions of art, to the extent that the attitude emanating from her work is perhaps her greatest achievement: her resistance to the standardization of the system, her unproductiveness and her refusal to take up space. Hessie seems to have gone through art without having taken up any space (not taking up space is a radical way of understanding the

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22 Something that a new generation of artists and exhibition curators, such as Sonia Recasens, Annabelle Ténèze and Perrine Lacroix, are trying to correct.

23 This is the theme of the above-mentioned exhibition *Monochrome Neutral Gender*, curated by Juan Guardiola for MUSAC in 2019.

24 In relation to this, we should mention Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s essay: *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (2003) in which she sets out the ways in which those who are denied as subjects of enunciation find to speak, forms that include both what is said and what is silenced. In: *Revista Colombiana de Antropología*, vol. 39, pp. 297-364.

economy of means; and therefore, in her case, not taking up space involves “political implications of another kind”), although she certainly contributed to producing it in her own way.

This is the artist’s mission: to produce space, but her own space, not a space indebted to the system. Hessie did not access the space managed by the art gatekeepers, nor did she want to pay the price of the ticket. She was not interested. She knew that this was not the way or her mission, which was rather to create her own space, a space that was just hers and that nobody could take away from her, and which she offers to others to expand the physical and symbolic world through perception.

In Hessie’s imposed or self-imposed limitations lies her capacity to produce her place, and with it, her libertarian potential. Also, paradoxically, her freedom. She was “imprisoned” by the responsibilities of a large family and a lack of acknowledgement and visibility<sup>25</sup> by the art system, despite the fact that it was very close; she freed her work from the “use” of art and left it transparent, experiential and fulfilled as an artistic and vital action.

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25 A lack that continues today. Proof of this is the problem and the delay derived from the catalogue of the *Survival Art* exhibition that this humble publication tries to amend.



# **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**





## **SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF THE ARTIST**

Hessie's life is enshrouded in little mysteries that have not been entirely solved. We know the basics about her, but numerous biographical details are often missing. We know that Carmen Lydia Đurić was born in the Caribbean, almost certainly in Cuba, on 17 April 1936 and that she died in Pontoise, France, on 9 October 2017 at the age of 81. Between these two dates, we can reconstruct a life as nomadic as it was discreet, but it no easy task to find the precise details.

We know that she left her native Caribbean and that she travelled in the late 1950s through Europe (Spain, England, France, Switzerland and Germany) and North America (Canada and the USA). In 1960 and 1961 she lived in New York, where she worked as a model and copyist of works of art. There she met the Montenegrin painter Miodrag Đurić (Cetinje, Yugoslavia, 1933 - Pontoise, France, 2010), known under his artistic name of Dado. He was based in France and Hessie moved in

with him at Hérouval, an old mill that had belonged to the collector and art dealer Daniel Cordier, where he lived with his children. These little details allow us to briefly discover Hessie's life, but many aspects that could illuminate a secluded, austere and introspective life remain in the shadows.

Hessie exhibited regularly in the 1970s at galleries such as Yvon Lambert, Iris Clert and Beaudoin Lebon. In 1975, Suzanne Pagé organized her first solo exhibition at the A.R.C. under the title *Survival Art*, the homonymous title of the exhibitions held forty years later at les Abattoirs, Musée - Frac Occitanie Toulouse from 29 September 2017 to 4 March 2018 and at MUSAC, León, from 9 June to 14 October 2018. In 1976, Hessie participated in the collective exhibition *Combative Acts, Profiles and Voices* organized by Aline Dallier and the A.I.R. Gallery in New York, together with Françoise Janicot, Milvia Maglione and Nil Yalter, among other artists. Her work has also been exhibited at the Lund Konsthall, Sweden, which held an individual exhibition in 1978.

At the same time as exhibiting, the 1970s also meant for Hessie the construction of her commitment to feminist movements, in which she played an active role, especially in the meetings of the Women's Liberation Movement. This effervescent period slowed down in the 1980s and Hessie gradually became less and less active, and enjoyed less and less public impact; she became somewhat isolated in the mill at Hérouval.

Thanks to Daniel Cordier's donation, two of Hessie's

works of art were included in the collection of the Centre Pompidou and are now on deposit at les Abattoirs. These pieces were included in the exhibition *Elles@centrepompidou* in 2009, initiating a new period of attention to Hessie's work, especially since she was represented by the Galerie Arnaud Lefebvre in Paris, which is growing due to the quality and uniqueness of her work.

In 2016 her work was presented at La Verrière, Fondation Hermès in Brussels, curated by Guillaume Désanges. This exhibition was followed by another, curated by Annabelle Ténèze and Sonia Recasens and presented at les Abattoirs and at MUSAC in León in 2017 and 2018. This book was first conceived to accompany the mentioned exhibition. After many problems and delays, only this text could have been published by MUSAC without the images and some other texts that would have constituted the catalogue initially conceived.

**Hessie**

*Déchets collages grillage* (No.Inv.144), 1978-79

Collage, mixed media. 115 x 62 cm

MUSAC Collection

