

Emily Hesse (b. Middlesbrough, 1980) is an artist who works in a variety of mediums, predominately including the land she is standing upon. Her work aggravates social and political power dynamics through revolutionary thinking, philosophy, regional folk histories, collective action and the use of land and its associated materials as a physical form of protest. Deeply rooted in the social structures of her landscape itself, Hesse utilises aesthetics as a tool for subversion, to reveal the silenced historical narratives of the underground in order to think speculatively toward an inter-matter commons of the future.


Dr Andrea Phillips is BALTIC Professor and Director of BxNU Institute, Northumbria University & BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art. Andrea teaches and writes about the economic and social construction of public value within contemporary art, the manipulation of forms of participation and the potential of forms of political, architectural and social reorganisation within artistic and curatorial culture.

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Exhibition guide

Emily Hesse *The Witches' Institution (W.I.)*

27 May – 18 September 2022

The Witches' Institution (W.I.) is an exhibition by North Yorkshire based artist **Emily Hesse**, imagined and developed in collaboration with organiser and writer **Andrea Phillips**.

Through a series of experimental works, discussions and experiences, the exhibition is envisioned as an exercise in world building, imagining what a cultural institution run by witches could be.

Bringing together Hesse's sculpture, curatorial practice and PhD research at the Belfast School of Art, Ulster University, alongside Phillips' research on institution building, *The Witches' Institution (W.I.)* also includes work by artists **Ana Mendieta** and **The Otolith Group**.

Hesse sees her sculptural practice as an expanded shaping of thoughts, histories and alternative futures. She uses the concept of Magical Materialism to produce objects, installations, diagrams and stories. Clay acts as a key material for the exhibition. Working with clay in its unfired state, Hesse understands the need for us to rethink what we consider dirt as Earth – a political and planetary manifestation.

Hesse's work is deeply rooted in radical narratives of the North Yorkshire landscape and the way it is (and has been) occupied through processes of oppression and enclosure. Her work considers how people, animals and objects stand accused of, and marked by, violence in struggles for freedom – that of our bodies, our intellects, our ways of life, our genders.

The W.I. asks: how can an institution be shaped and reshaped through magical material processes? What freedoms could it constitute and what would be its constituencies? Rather than a hovel full of spiders and broomsticks, *The W.I.* is an interconnected web of feminist ingenuity, a site of shifting possibilities, where social and territorial norms can be refigured.

Exhibition text continues overleaf →

For *The Witches' Institution (W.I.)*, Hesse and Phillips have imagined a set of 'departments' that mimic the organisational structures of institutions – governmental, educational, or cultural, such as galleries or museums. Each department deals with a set of imagined priorities and approaches for an institution of and for witches. But unlike traditional institutional divisions, these crossover and intermingle with each other:

Relationships that Matter

Hesse's research is informed by ecology, archaeology and philosophy. It aims to affirm the way artistic and witching practices have (always had) the ability to think philosophically about difficult questions.

The installation filling the **Atrium** is entitled *CLÆG* (with clay from 319,000,000 years ago), a body of material made in collaboration with Emily Hesse as a new earthly companion, from which relationships are to be developed. *CLÆG* is here as a confidant and friend as well as a site of interaction. The installation is an invitation to reconsider our relationship with the matter of dirt. *CLÆG* reimagines land art as a site of future inquiry.

Magical Materialism

Full of photographs, artefacts and field note documentation, *Ontosis: a methodology* in **Gallery 1** asks: how can we, as witches, develop better methods of care for Earth? To think through this question, Hesse has devised a philosophical method: Magical Materialism, which develops understandings and relationships with non-human matter in the landscape. Instead of ontology (the philosophy of being), Hesse and Phillips propose ontosis: the process or condition which appears as an abnormal transformative state, and which recognises being in all matter.

Three graphs show how the material that makes up planet Earth plays a part in the lives of all species. The graphs demonstrate the way social structures develop around landscapes, suggesting the ways the Earth forms and organises 'society.'

Bringing together earthly and spiritual considerations, throughout the galleries are a set of works made of painted clay and oil paint: the *Portals* (2021). These contain both human and non-human symbols, found by Hesse in her research sites and landscapes. The paintings are escape routes or devices, acting as records of, and portals to, other times and places.

The Call to Re-inhabit

Throughout the exhibition, Hesse offers possibilities for occupying and creating space for lost practices that have been dismissed as witchcraft.

Kissing the Bees (2019) is a film work in **Gallery 2** documenting a series of rituals centring three stone circles on the North York Moors. The 'dressing' of beehives is a commonplace ritual still practised in Yorkshire and many other rural beekeeping communities, particularly at certain life events such as a human death (when hives are cloaked in consideration of the bees' need for mourning). In *Kissing the Bees*, Hesse blesses the stones, bestowing them with gifts and offerings – historic rituals not practised in two centuries. The story that Hesse reads in the film was written by **Bertram Frank** (1919-96), founder of the Ryedale Folk Museum in Hutton le Hole, North Yorkshire. Frank spent his lifetime researching the history, archaeology, folklore and witch lore of the moorland.

Alter-Cosmosis

Gallery 3 features an illustrated lecture, in which **Andrea Phillips** presents *Building a Witches' Institution* (2021-22), a spoken, illustrated essay on property, disenclosure, magic and the contradictions of organisational practice.

The lecture is surrounded by works that consider what forms a witches' institution might take. Many of these reference a lost text, the *Calvert Manuscript* (1823). This manuscript is a key text for Hesse; it documents North Yorkshire witch folklore and recipes for incantations and creations left behind by the previous 'witches.'

The Witches' Manifesto (2022) is a call for radical social change. **Gallery 3** also contains *Elphi* (made from velvet and rag-pickings, 2020), the large scale photographic print *The Old Wife* (2019), works from the *Assembling Peggy* series (inspired by a so-called witch in North Yorkshire, **Peggy Duvell**, whose marks were found in the *Calvert Manuscript*, 2022) and *Sigil House 1 & 2* (found assemblages of architectural photography 2022).

In **Galleries 4, 5** and **7**, Hesse presents *Objects of Incantation*. In **Gallery 4** Hesse imagines a witch's living room. Decorated with a charred mirror (*Recuperation*, 2022), a wall-hanging (*Bitch Faced Witch*, 2021) and one of the *Portal* series, three other works reference the *Calvert Manuscript*: a vitrine of replica ceramic sigils (good luck charms carried in people's pockets), *Watching Candles* (lights for the dead to pass over to the other side, 2022) and a *Witch's Garter* (a marriage spell, 2022). These objects are physical tools of protest and survival.

On the living room TV, Hesse presents **Ana Mendieta's** bodily imprint within *Fundamento Palo Monte: Silueta Series (Gunpowder Works)*, (1980) in which the artist collaborates with earth, fire and air to create artwork that is consumed by combustion, smoke and ashes.

Hesse's *Visioning Balls* (2021-22) also appear in **Galleries 5** and **7**. These unfired clay balls, shaped and polished by hand over hundreds of hours, are a re-imagining of a witch's crystal ball, but replace glass with Earth as their central focus to reflect upon planetary time.

Protest & Survive

Reaching up behind *CLÆG* in the **Atrium** is *Alternative Sky* (2022), a wall painting that reimagines a night sky shaped by earthly communication. *Alternative Sky* suggests a map of the cosmos reimagined through the indigenous intelligences of witchcraft. Each constellation has been run through image captioning software to produce a symbol from within human language, to reclaim the interpretation of constellations, offering an alternate cosmology.

In becoming one with the cosmos, through an alternative physical, spiritual and intellectual union, **The Otolith Group's** *Medium Earth* (2013) in **Gallery 6** envelops us within an audiovisual essay on geology and the unconscious, set within southern California. Focused on the ways tectonic forces express themselves in boulder outcrops and the hairline fractures of cast concrete, and communication with people who are 'earthquake sensitive' and able to predict geological shifts through their bodies and observations of other animals, *Medium Earth* participates in the cultures of prophecy and forecasting that mediate the experience of seismic upheavals, such as earthquakes.

These alternative, earthly ways of relating to the universe also come to the fore in Hesse's retelling of the story of North Yorkshire witch, **Abigail Craster**, in *Keld Hare* (2022), a sound installation and sculptural work in **Gallery 8**.

Abigail was believed to take on the form of a hare (a 'familiar'), and was hunted by foxhunters, who pursued animals they thought to be witches. She jumped from a cliff in her hare form, into the supposedly bottomless Lake Gormire (believed to be Hell's entrance) and arose from a stream over nine miles away. The stream Abigail rises from in this reimagining of the story is filled with white clay. Hesse asks: is the clay before you here a witch, woman, hare or Earth? Or are they all one in the same?

Witches' Gathering

Sat 17 Sep, 10am–5pm

Join us for a day of talks and performances with **Emily Hesse, Andrea Phillips**, as well as **Anjalika Sagar** and **Kodwo Eshun** of **The Otolith Group**.

Hesse will perform *HOWE*, 2022, for the first time, and lead a workshop inviting interaction with the works *CLÆG* and *Alternative Sky*.

Book free tickets on our website: thetetley.org

Artist's edition

Emily Hesse, *Cosmology of a Witches' Institution*, 2022

Drawing in black ink and graphite

Edition of 10

£250

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