

#44

Zeszyty Artystyczne

TKANINA ARTYSTYCZNA
Wobec współczesności

TEXTILE ART
In the face of contemporary times



Uniwersytet Artystyczny
im. Magdaleny Abakanowicz
w Poznaniu

2(44)/2023

Janis Jefferies

Emeritus professor of Visual Arts, Goldsmiths London. With a long-standing engagement in how fibre intersects with feminist practice and art-based textiles. Jefferies's work considers issues of gender and identity subjectivity. Her later research and practice have expanded to encompass sonic art, digital art, and haptic technology, considering access and impact for different audiences. Exhibiting in 'Women in Revolt! Art! Activism and Politics,' TATE Britain, UK (November 2023 and touring). She is co-chief editor of the 10 volume Bloomsbury Encyclopaedia of World Textiles with Dr Vivienne Richmond, due 2025.
https://research.gold.ac.uk/view/goldsmiths/Jefferies=3AJanis_K=2E=3A=3A.html

An introduction to: Magdalena Abakanowicz, Zeszyty Artystyczne

Introduction

In 1980, a couple of years after I arrived back from my studies at the Academy of Fine Art in Poznan (1976–1978), an exhibition of Contemporary Polish Tapestry was shown at the Roundhouse Gallery in London (5th September to 5th October). Three-dimensional tapestries and wall hangings were exhibited by established Polish artists, including Wojciech Sadley, Hanna Jung, and Barbara Levittoux-Świdowska, but it was Magdalena Abakanowicz who was recognised for her monumental woven sculptural forms. Now, some 42 years later and 5 years after her death in 2017, Tate Modern in London, UK has mounted Magdalena Abakanowicz's *Every Tangle of Thread and Rope*¹. This provided an opportunity to re-evaluate the extensive body of her early material-based work, which challenged the conventions of weaving as understood in other parts of Europe and the USA.

I had chosen to overcome the utility function of weaving, and especially to create potential contact with the fleshy and the flexible structures on all sides. Creation of the potential for penetration, through slips and openings, up to the innermost recesses of the interior.²

» 1 The exhibition, *Magdalena Abakanowicz: Every Tangle of Thread and Rope*, was held at Tate Modern, London, UK, from 17th November 2022 to 21st May 2023; at Musée cantonal des Beaux Arts, Plateforme 10, from 13rd June to 24th September 2023, and at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Hovikodden, Baerum, Norway, from October 27 2023 to February 25, 2024. Lausanne is the site of Abakanowicz's international career breakthrough: she participated in the 2nd International Tapestry Biennial in Lausanne in 1965. See, Janis Jefferies (2023): *Magdalena Abakanowicz: Every Tangle of Thread and Rope*, London, UK: Tate Modern, 17 November 2022 to 21 May 2023, TEXTILE, DOI: 10.1080/14759756.2023.2191385. To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2023.2191385>

» 2 Jan Berdyszak, *Two Notions: mission and infinite*, Academy of Fine Arts, Poland, a publication issued to celebrate the Honorary Doctoral Degree awarded to the artist

Such reflections have made Abakanowicz something of a mystical, highly complex figure within Western discourses around feminism and the idea of the ‘feminine’, as explored through the writings of Luce Irigaray in the 1970s.³ In the 21st Century, ideas around ‘feminine’, androgyny are being reframed. At the same time, Abakanowicz is becoming increasingly known as a storyteller – a disciplined and detached onlooker – expressing her contradictory artistic statements through interviews, diaries, and memoirs, assembled in *Fate and Art* and in a recent anthology: *Magdalena Abakanowicz: Writing and Conversations*.⁴

Magdalena Kleszyńska’s call for papers, *TEXTILE ART*. In the face of contemporary times, has come at exactly the right time as the TATE exhibition and its related texts are entering the public domain. The selected papers form the basis of a special issue of “*Zeszyty Artystyczne*” / “*Art Notebook*”, a journal published by the renamed Magdalena Abakanowicz University of the Arts in Poznań, Poland. For the first time since its inception in 1983, the journal’s theme relates to textile/fiber art.

My introduction to “*Zeszyty Artystyczne*” / “*Art Notebook*”, recalls some of the key questions outlined in Kleszyńska’s call. However, throughout this text, I draw on *Abakanowicz Today: New Encounters with Abakanowicz, the Artist and Her Work*, a 2-day professional seminar series at TATE Modern on 12 and 13th May 2023. I was one of the few invited English artist-academics. Organized by curator and chair of the Abakanowicz Charitable Foundation (USA), Mary Jane Jacob, sessions were constructed around themes in order to consider Abakanowicz’s engagement with the critical, artistic, cultural, and ideological debates of the period in which she worked and lived: Poland during the first cold war. The symposium reflected upon Abakanowicz’s exploration of her own agency, art and writing, and her legacy or relevance for artists and scholars in the field of contemporary art, globally. As Joanna Inglot said in her opening and closing remarks to Magdalena Abakanowicz’s “*The Written and Unwritten World*” symposium at the TATE modern, the complexity of Abakanowicz’s agency should not be underestimated. This complexity can be seen in her writing (often fictional), her life (autoethnographical), how she traveled – from the former East to Italy, France America, Brazil, and

(Magdalena Abakanowicz) by the Strzemiński Academy of Fine Arts and Design Łódź in April 1998. The publication was given to me by Professor Anna Goebel (we were co-students in Poznań in 1977–1978) in May 2008. Once a student of Abakanowicz, Professor Anna Goebel is a consultant to the textile studio of Abakanowicz, Magdalena Abakanowicz University of the Arts in Poznań.

- » 3 Luce Irigaray, *The Sex which is not One*, translated by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke, Cornell University Press, 1985, pp 148-149.
- » 4 *Magdalena Abakanowicz: Fate and Art. Monologue*, SKIRA Edition, November 2008. *Magdalena Abakanowicz: Writing and Conversations*, eds. Mary Jane Jacob and Jenny Dally. SIRKA publishers and the Abakanowicz, Arts and Culture Charitable Foundation. 2022.

Australia (amongst other countries) – to install her ‘environments’ whilst remaining rooted in one place, shaped by the traumas of history, geography, class, and gender. As Michael Jachula has argued in his extended, unpublished essay, Magdalena Abakanowicz, ‘In Front and Behind the Iron Curtain’, the whole of her work is perceived differently in Poland than on the international stage⁵. Whilst interdisciplinary art, modernist abstraction and feminist art were commonly practiced within the Western canon of art history, there were challenges in defining Abakanowicz’s works. At various points in her career, the artist herself further ‘complicated’ the question of defining what her art was before it became recognised as sculpture in the late 1970s.

New Encounters with Abakanowicz

While Abakanowicz frequently presented herself as an artist inspired by nature and her childhood experiences in the forest, Inglot contends that artists cannot remain detached from their cultural-political realities and must function within and respond to them. Abakanowicz’s artistic formation is unquestionably connected with World War II and populist socialist realism. The emerging abstract forms can be seen as a response to historical circumstance, produced at a particular time and place with ‘poor materials’ (Warsaw was always her home, with a studio on Bzowa Street), but as pliable forms they are always transportable to other places and time frames. A complex artistic identity was being formed that is only now being unraveled.

Abakanowicz’s autobiographical narrative “Portrait X 20” (1978–80) was written at a turning point in her career. First published in the USA in 1982, these twenty short, poetic impressions about her early life became an enduring aspect of her career, from which she frequently quoted in exhibition publications. The fact that she was self-consciously aware of how media worked is exemplified by the classic black-and-white photographs of Mark Holzman and Artur Starewicz, in which Abakanowicz is presented as isolated individual, aiming to position herself as a sculptor negotiating art worlds, rewriting her artistic biography to reduce the association with fiber art. Nonetheless, Abakanowicz’s work, notably the Abakans of the 1960s and 1970s can also be viewed as a shift from metaphors of a specifically female body to more androgynous, mostly figurative sculptural cycles in the 1990s. Magdalena Moskalewicz⁶ suggests that it is possible to dis-

» 5 Michal Jachula’s *Crafting an Art Practice: The PostWar Polish Art Scene* in the TATE Modern catalog that accompanies *Magdalena Abakanowicz: Every Tangle of Thread and Rope* (pp 148-151) is recommended although it is an abbreviated version of the longer text, which I was fortunate to receive from the author by email attachment on January 2nd, 2023.

» 6 In her *The Impossible Feminism of Magdalena Abakanowicz* presentation at New

cuss Abakanowicz's reluctance towards feminism and her abandonment of her Abakans through the lens of what Bojana Pejic has called 'socialist patriarchy'⁷. Pejic has forcefully proposed that 'nobody wants to live in a ghetto' – be it created by others or by one's chosen nomenclature, such as 'feminist', 'post-communist', 'genderless' (Katy Deepwell, a speaker at the New Encounters symposium, would contest this position in so far as it is possible for artists to deliberately construct ambiguity, which Abakanowicz was certainly capable of in her earliest writings). Pejic's words also suggest that every artist wants his/her work to acquire significance, 'portability', and wide appeal to many audiences in different cultures and contexts. Anglo-American accounts of feminism and feminist art practices as a Western art movement originating in the 1970s have set certain terms for an account of what feminism is or may be. As a result, many women artists from many parts of the world have been marginalized from this history, which speaks only in terms of Western precedents.

Ambivalence and What is a Woman to do?

Consequently, the Abakans themselves took on an ambivalent character, so by the late 1980s Abakanowicz announced:

The Abakans brought me fame around the world, but they weigh on me like a sin I can't admit to. Practicing weaving closes doors to the world of art. The world of art suddenly discovered me in 1980 when I showed ALTERATIONS at the Venice Biennale. [...] My new life is unfolding now; it justifies and interprets the ABAKANS – these soft sculptures, giving them the context of stone and bronze⁸.

However, as Katy Deepwell succinctly argued in her presentation *What is a Woman to Do?*, entering the Western, modernist, male-dominated museum world – gaining international recognition and reputation – was a monumental task for an ambitious and self-aware woman artist

Encounters with Abakanowicz, Magdalena Moskalewicz centered her discussion around the period when the Abakans artworks were interpreted as female bodies.

» 7 See Bojana Pejić, chief curator of *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*, shown at MUMOK and Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw. In 2010, she edited *Gender Check: A Reader – Art and Theory in Eastern Europe*, in which these ideas are expressed.

» 8 Quoted from Agata Jakubowska's, "The "Abakans and the Feminist Revolution". *Regarding the Popular: Modernism, the Avant-Garde and High and Low Culture*, edited by Sascha Bru, Laurence Nuijs, Benedikt Hjartarson, Peter Nicholls, Tania Ørum and Hubert Berg, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2012, pp. 253–265. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110274691.253> Based at the University of Warsaw, Jakubowska contributed to New Encounters with Abakanowicz at TATE Modern 2023 with her unpublished paper *Occupation: Textile Artists: Positioning Magdalena Abakanowicz in the Art Field of 1950s State-Socialist Poland*.

that required strategy and implicitly non-gendered bodies. The claims of universality and the 'human condition' excluded gender, except for references to ideas of the feminine and the erotic, which were readings of Abakanowicz's work in the 1970s by American and UK theorists. Referring to Abakanowicz's "Portrait X 20" and other writings, she notes how gender appears in her figurative sculpture about the individual/state and nature/culture and what it means to be an artist. In other words, What is a Woman to Do?

It was not until the WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution exhibition of 2007 that Abakanowicz arguably considered it possible to be associated with other women artists and Western feminist debates⁹. After 1989, political and historical conditions were spoken and written about from both inside and outside of personal histories with what might be termed 'absent content', thus releasing the marked Polish psyche of the past but also excavating the resilience of artists, writers and workers who silently performed constellations of resistance.

Interpretations from contemporary Polish artists and art historians

As contemporary Polish artists and art historians, Ewa Majewska and Anna Markowska respectively noted while speaking at Encounters that Abakanowicz's work can now be rethought and reread through decolonisation (as in former East European societies), feminist and queer theory, and the reparative potential that can be found in Abakanowicz's work, almost in opposition to her own self-fashioning and invention¹⁰. Nonetheless, Majewska made a significant point that whilst early Abakans were not shown in Poland for many years and are largely unknown to the younger generation, they demonstrate an empowerment of the corporeal, suggesting a sexual and sensual revolution. Majewska and Markowska believe that Abakanowicz 'saved' bodies from patriarchal erasure, staging their autonomy with pleasure and intimacy.

» 9 *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* was an exhibition of international women's art in Los Angeles, USA, from March 4 to July 16, 2007. WACK! documents and illustrates the impact of the feminist revolution on art made between 1965 and 1980, featuring pioneering and influential works by, amongst others, Sanja Iveković, Ana Mendieta, Annette Messager, Louise Bourgeois, Judy Chicago, Alice Neel, and Yoko Ono. The fact that Abakanowicz was included alongside Judy Chicago would have been impossible 20 years ago. If you look at the list of international feminist art exhibitions, there have been many precedents of feminist international exchanges since the mid-1970s, with different frameworks, explanations, and artists, including those who worked with fiber and soft materials.

» 10 Ewa Majewska, *A Sensual Revolution* and Anna Markowska, *The Colonial Kiss and Some Reparative Stories*. These papers were presented at *New Encounters with Abakanowicz* under the themes of "Abakanowicz Feminism and the Politics of Gender" and "The Artist and Legend: Abakanowicz's Biography and 'Portrait x20'", respectively.

Arguably, burlap – the ‘poor materials’ of Abakanowicz’s early work – signaled the fragile world under Soviet domination: people now became headless, shell-like, and cast in burlap – a shift that Abakanowicz wanted to clarify (2006)¹¹. With anti-government protests and women’s protests demanding abortion rights in 2023, Abakanowicz thoughts again bear witness to trauma and the question of repression. Readers will also want to consult 100 Flags for the Centenary of Polish Women’s Suffrage, Marta Kowalewska’s curatorial project at The Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź, (with the 100 FLAG collective) in 2019, as a recent and powerful example of textile, art, and activism.

Space of Unknown Growth, long ecology, and worlding

Within this interdisciplinary framework, Monike Bakke explored a very distinctive approach to Abakanowicz’s later work, such as Negev (1987) and Space of Unknown Growth (1998–999), which were made not from soft material but limestone/stone¹²s (12). In thinking through these artworks from the perspective of Long Ecology, Bakke examined the processual conviviality of stones and biological entities through expanded temporalities that opened new interpretations of Abakanowicz’s often-quoted feelings about nature. Drawing on Jeffrey J Cohen’s ideas¹³ on long ecology and post-humanity, Bakke delved deep into geological time, where only the ghostly presence of humans could be recalled.

In 1987, Abakanowicz decided to work in stone for the first time in her career. Moved by the power of limestone, this decision was quite radical. Seven monumental ten-ton limestone wheels, each 280 cm in diameter and 60 cm thick, were installed in The Israel Museum, Jerusalem;

- » 11 Abakanowicz, 2006, *Cogitations in Konteksty, Polska, Sztuka Ludowa*, no 03-04, p.132. As Gabi Scardi points out in her contribution to the TATE exhibition catalog *Art as Spatial Dramaturgy: Polish Theatre and Italian Povera*, (TATE, 2022. pp 79-85), poverty and ‘poor materials’ became a central theme for Kantor, Szajna, and Jerzy Grotowski. For example, Grotowski (1933–1999) introduced the name *teatr ubogi* (poor theater) when he was director of productions of the Polish Theatre Laboratory in Wrocław in the 1960s. “Grotowski proposed stripping everything down to a bare minimum to focus on the actor-spectator relationship. A leading exponent of audience involvement, he set up emotional confrontations between a limited group of spectators and actors’ contortions. In terms of Abakanowicz’s practice, substitute ‘actor-spectator’ for ‘artist-viewer’ and examine the connections between the fragility of human beings, their bodies, and the primordial forces of nature. Kantor also exposed the concept of the ‘poor object’ – a degraded object that ends up showing its true value at the threshold of the dustbin: rags, scraps, papers, and moldy books”. (TATE, 2022.p.81).
- » 12 Monika Bakke, *The Little Ways of Living: The Long Ecology of Magdalena Abakanowicz’s Nagrev and Space of Unknown Growth* presentation at New Encounters.
- » 13 See Jeffrey J. Cohen’s *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*, which received the 2017 René Wellek Prize in comparative literature from the American Comparative Literature Association. His research examines strange and beautiful things that challenge the imagination – phenomena that are alien and intimate at once – which seems fitting to contemporary readings of *Abakany* (1969 film) and Abakanowicz’s feelings about forests, Polish ghosts and spirits.

the surface of the disks, enriched by fossils, was left untouched. The entanglement of biology and sea creatures completes a different cycle than *Alterations*¹⁴. Being attentive to care, being vulnerable and resilient at the same time – the traditional dissociation between ecology, paleoecology and archaeology – are registered as artificial, as in the example of *Space of Unknown Growth*

Somewhere deep in a wet Lithuanian forest in *Europos Parkas Open-Air Museum of the Centre of Europe*, Vilnius, 22 giant concrete eggs are placed. As synthetic forms made to resemble limestone, they seem abandoned; they are part of slow time, slow decay, a sign of what was once a human era incapable of protecting the earth against its ongoing destruction.

In a modern world increasingly affected by the consequences of overproduction, overconsumption, waste, pollution, biodiversity loss and climate change, there is a growing urgency to be able to produce biodegradable materials. These should be free of toxic chemicals and allergens, made from renewable sources, but at the same time reducing the levels of energy, water, and wastage in the textile production process. Many research efforts in making biodegradability a part of a biomimetic textile economy draw inspiration from nature's sustainability and integrated circular economy. I am not suggesting that *Space of Unknown Growth* is part of this research, rather that slime, bacteria, and fibrous networks combine to become overgrown but renewable green environments to which, arguably, Abakanowicz has borne witness.

Worlding, as Palmer and Hunter (2018)¹⁵ further elaborate, is “a particular blending of material that removes the boundaries between subject and environment, in this case artist (subject) and object (artwork)”. This definition of worlding is anchored in the humanities and can be expanded to an ensemble of processes whereby living and non-living entities and meaning-making processes emerge and come together, not as a perfect machine but as a system of productive echoes, resonances and dissonances, transformation and hybridization. Worlding is a political project in the sense that it radically calls into question general Western assumptions around linear progress as the technical and scientific subsumption of the environment to human will, in turn fundamentally decentering the place of the human as the controller, ‘master’ and ultimately the destroyer of environments. On the other hand, humans can be part of complex processes of worlding, as in the *Space of Unknown Growth*, and Bakke's remarkable presentation made me rethink what the deep future might look like in the

» 14 In 1974–1975, Abakanowicz produced sculptures called *Alterations*, which were twelve hollowed-out headless human figures sitting in a row.

» 15 Palmer, Helen, Hunter, Vicky. 2018. “Worlding”. *New Materialism* (blog). March 16, 2018. <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/w/worlding.html>. (accessed 11th August 2022).

Lithuanian forest – bringing together the ongoing coevolution of minerals and life that is mostly unknown and uncertain but transforms into a new shape with new environments.

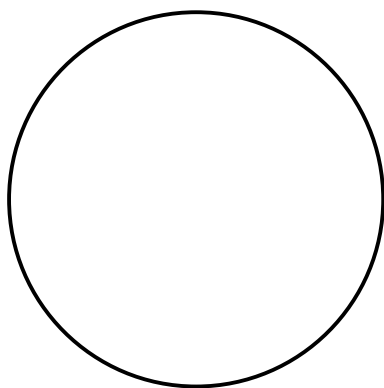
Our threads of fragile life become part of another cycle.

Forms result from everything ... like a diary. They are prophets and records of my time ... which is emotion, disappointment, longing, and care. My forms change as time goes by ... they were a cry of despair in the irony of civilization.¹⁶

The challenge for contemporary textile art, if this term is preferred, is to be watchful and consider which form captures the times we are living in.

Janis Jefferies,
Emeritus Professor of Visual Arts,
Goldsmiths, University of London,
UK, 6th June 2023

» 16 Magdalena Abakanowicz – Introduction to the catalog for *Organic Structures*, Malmö Kunst exhibition, Sweden, 1977.





Zeszyty Artystyczne

#44 / 2023 / rok XXXII

Rada programowa „Zeszytów Artystycznych”

Izabella Gustowska
Marek Krajewski
Mária Orišková
Jörg Scheller
Miško Šuvaković

Redaktorka prowadząca Magdalena Kleszyńska

Redaktorka naczelna Justyna Ryzek

Zastępczyni redaktorki naczelnej Ewa Wójtowicz

Redaktorka tematyczna Izabela Kowalczyk

Sekretarzynie redakcji Magdalena Kleszyńska

Redaktor graficzny Bartosz Mamak

Korekta Joanna Fifielska, Filologos

Tłumaczenia

Marcin Turski
Józef Jaskulski

Korekta anglojęzyczna Michael Timberlake

Kontakt

zeszyty.artystyczne@uap.edu.pl

ISSN 1232-6682

© Copyright by Uniwersytet Artystyczny
im. Magdaleny Abakanowicz
w Poznaniu 2023

Wersją pierwotną czasopisma
jest wersja drukowana.

Wydawca

Uniwersytet Artystyczny
im. Magdaleny Abakanowicz w Poznaniu
Wydział Edukacji Artystycznej i Kuratorstwa
Aleje Marcinkowskiego 29
60-967 Poznań 9

tel. +48 61 855 25 21
e-mail: office@uap.edu.pl
www.uap.edu.pl

Druk

MJP Drukarnia Poterscy Sp. j.
ul. Romana Maya 30
61-371 Poznań

MEiN

UAP | POZNAŃ



WYDZIAŁ EDUKACJI
ARTYSTYCZNEJ I KURATORSTWA

Stworzenie anglojęzycznej wersji publikacji –
płatne ze środków Ministerstwa Edukacji i Nauki
na podstawie umowy nr RCN/SP/0363/2021/1
stanowiących pomoc przyznaną w ramach programu
„Rozwój czasopism naukowych”.

nakład 100 egz.

ISSN 1232-6682

