



**New Encounters
with Abakanowicz**



ABAKANOWICZ

Arts and Culture Charitable Foundation

Abakanowicz Today: New Encounters with the Artist and Her Work

This symposium presents new critical perspectives on Magdalena Abakanowicz's art and reevaluates her engagement with crucial artistic, cultural, and ideological debates of her time that remain relevant for us today. An international group of scholars examines diverse topics to deepen our understanding of Abakanowicz's art, her aesthetic choices, and her strategies to address personal, social, and political circumstances of the tumultuous decades after World War II and during the Cold War. The symposium also scrutinizes Abakanowicz's exploration of her own agency as articulated in her art and writings, revealing a complex web of intersubjectivity shaped by historical trauma, geography, ethnicity, class, and gender. Challenging simple binaries and employing many avenues of critical thought, including feminist, psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, and decolonial approaches, the symposium will open a space for new and exciting interdisciplinary and comparative frameworks within which to revisit Abakanowicz's oeuvre.



The Abakanowicz Arts and Culture Charitable Foundation furthers scholarly work on Magdalena Abakanowicz and supports projects internationally which demonstrate her belief in art as a visual language within cultures and dynamic force in contemporary society.

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New Encounters with Abakanowicz

Tate Modern, **May 12 and 13, 2023**

All sessions in Tate Modern, South Room, Blavatnick Building Level 6

Friday, May 12

8:45-9:45	Special-access viewing of Abakanowicz show, Level 2. Use Blavatnik Building Entrance
9:30-10:00	Coffee, South Room, Level 6
10:00-10:05	Welcome Mary Jane Jacob Abakanowicz Arts and Culture Charitable Foundation
10:05-10:25	Joanna Inglot Macalester College, St. Paul, Minnesota <i>The Written and Unwritten World of Magdalena Abakanowicz</i>
Panel 1	Abakans and the Critical History of Craft and Fiber Arts
10:30-10:50	Sarah Wilson The Courtauld, University of London <i>Abakanowicz and the Lausanne Tapestry Biennales, 1965-1971</i>
10:50-11:10	Magali Junet Toms Pauli Fondation, Lausanne, Switzerland <i>Abakanowicz and Lausanne: The Path to Fame</i>
11:10-11:30	Ann Coxon Tate Modern and University College London <i>Bois le Duc—The Forest, The Fortress, and the Nomad's Tent</i>
11:30-11:50	Camilla Larsson Södertörn University, Huddinge <i>Polish "World Art" in Sweden: Magdalena Abakanowicz's Exhibition and Public Commission in the Södertörn Area, circa 1970</i>
11:50-12:10	Ewa Lajer-Burchard Harvard University, Cambridge <i>The Presence of the Past in Abakanowicz's Art</i>
12:10-1:00	Discussion. Moderator David Crowley National College of Art and Design, Dublin
1-2:30 pm	Lunch
Panel 2	The Artist and the Legend: Abakanowicz's Biography and "Portrait x 20"
2:30-2:50	Alina Drapella-Hermansdorfer Wrocław University of Science and Technology <i>Missing Elements in Magdalena Abakanowicz's "Portrait x 20"</i>
2:50-3:10	Joanna Bourke Birkbeck, University of London <i>Vulnerable Materiality and the Sculpture of Magdalena Abakanowicz</i>
3:10-3:30	Anna Markowska University of Wrocław <i>The Colonial Kiss and Some Reparative Stories</i>
3:30-3:50	Angelika Kuźniak Writer, Biographer, and Independent Reporter, Warsaw <i>Following Fingerprints: A Reporter's Take on Abakanowicz's Biography</i>
3:50-4:20	Tea
4:25-5:15	Discussion. Moderator Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius Birkbeck, University of London
6:00	Museum closes

Saturday, May 13

8:45-9:45	Special access viewing of Abakanowicz show, Level 2. Use Blavatnik Building Entrance
9:30-10:00	Coffee, South Room, Level 6
Panel 3	Abakanowicz's Art under State Socialism
10:00-10:20	David Crowley National College of Art and Design, Dublin <i>Abakanowicz and the Alibi of Use</i>
10:20-10:40	Agata Jakubowska University of Warsaw <i>Occupation: Textile Artist. Positioning Magdalena Abakanowicz in the Art Field of 1950s State-Socialist Poland</i>
10:40-11:00	Susanne Altmann Academy of Fine Arts, Dresden <i>Catalysts of Fiber Work: The Impact of Abakanowicz's Art and Projekt Art Magazine on Fiber Art in the GDR</i>
11:10-12:00	Discussion. Moderator Anna Markowska University of Wrocław
12:00-1:00	Lunch
Panel 4	Abakanowicz, Feminism, and the Politics of Gender
1:00-1:20	Katy Deepwell Middlesex University, London <i>What is a Woman to Do?</i>
1:20-1:40	Magdalena Moskalewicz School of the Art Institute of Chicago <i>The Impossible Feminism of Magdalena Abakanowicz</i>
1:40-2:00	Ewa Majewska SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw <i>A Sensual Revolution? The Early Abakans</i>
2:00-2:50	Discussion. Moderator Lina Džuverović Birkbeck, London University
2:50-3:20	Tea
Panel 5	Abakanowicz, Worldmaking, and Decolonial Perspectives
3:20-3:40	Dorota Michalska Oxford University <i>Nomadic Abakans. On Magdalena Abakanowicz's Tatar Identity and Culture</i>
3:40-4:00	Paweł Możdżyński University of Warsaw <i>The Embryos of a Re-Enchanted World: Anthropological and Sociological Perspectives on Magdalena Abakanowicz's Art</i>
4:00-4:20	Monika Bakke Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań <i>The Lithic Ways of Living: The Long Ecology of Magdalena Abakanowicz's Negev and Space of Unknown Growth</i>
4:20-5:10	Discussion. Moderator Marta Zboralska Oxford University
5:15-5:30	Closing Remarks Joanna Inglot
5:30-6:30	Drinks Reception

Speakers' Abstracts and Biographies



Susanne Altmann
Catalysts of Fiber Work: The Impact of Abakanowicz's Art and Projekt Art Magazine on Fiber Art in the GDR

Following Abakanowicz's successes at the Lausanne Biennales, Polish fiber art gained worldwide acclaim for its inventiveness, yet mainly on the Western side of the Iron Curtain. Artists from the other Soviet-bloc countries rarely participated in these exchanges. Many of them gained knowledge about these phenomena from the Polish art magazine *Projekt*, which extensively featured Abakanowicz's achievements, contextualizing them within broader international developments and local traditions. Originally published in Polish, *Projekt* was soon translated into German and English. It was a valuable source of inspiration for East German artists, who were by and large cut off from reviews of contemporary art exhibitions in New York, São Paulo, and Lausanne, and from the analysis of Abakanowicz's groundbreaking approaches. Abakanowicz's insistence on fiber arts as an autonomous field and the promotion undertaken by *Projekt* had a transformative influence on East German artists who sought to move beyond the conventional boundaries of applied arts. Abakanowicz's impact manifested most impressively in the work of Christa Jeitner (b. 1935, Berlin), who felt more at home in Polish art circles than in the GDR.

Susanne Altmann is an independent art historian and lecturer at the Academy of Fine Arts in Dresden, Germany. She studied art history and philosophy in Dresden and at the New School for Social Research in New York. In 1998-99 she assisted in the curatorial department of the Dia Center for the Art in New York; she also received a research grant at the University of Oxford in 2004. Currently, she holds a fellowship "If I Can't Dance" (Amsterdam, 2021-23). Besides various curatorial and publishing activities, Altmann focuses on art produced in the former socialist part of Europe before and after 1989. She examines both the development of a canon and the modes of reception for non-conformist avantgardes,

including the re-contextualization of them within feminist, global, and postcolonial discourses. This resulted in studies of Czech artist Magdalena Jetelová, "socialist" Fiber Art, and the radical East German Erfurt Women Artists' Group. Her most recent projects include a touring exhibition, *The Medea Insurrection. Radical Women Artists Behind the Iron Curtain* [2018-2020, State Art Collection of Art Dresden and Wende Museum/LA, (ed. S. Altmann et al., Köln: Walter König, 2019)]. She also co-curated and co-edited *Pants Wear Skirts: the Erfurt Woman's Artists' Group 1984-1994* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2022).



Monika Bakke
The Lithic Ways of Living: The Long Ecology of Magdalena Abakanowicz's Negev and Space of Unknown Growth

Two works by Abakanowicz—*Negev* (1987) and *Space of Unknown Growth* (1999), created more than a decade apart—converse with each other by evoking complex relations of the lithic and the living. Bakke will consider these artworks from the perspective of Long Ecology, which encourages embracing the processual conviviality of stones and biological entities through their expanded temporalities. *Negev's* limestone mobilizes the Negev desert's deep past, once a thriving marine environment; the synthetic rocks of *Space of Unknown Growth*, made of concrete, point to ubiquitous technofossils of the Anthropocene era and anticipate the deep future. She will discuss Abakanowicz's relocation of the limestone from the desert into the culturally diverse city of Jerusalem and her introduction of anthropogenic stones into the biologically diverse environment of the Lithuanian forest as radical ecological gestures. The latter, in particular, suggests transcorporeality, disrupting human exceptionalism and attenuating human agency vis-à-vis the ongoing coevolution of minerals and life. What remains is an uncanny vivacity of the lithic, constantly haunted by life that is mostly nonhuman, unknown, and uncertain.

Monika Bakke is Associate Professor in the Philosophy Department and Director of the Environmental Humanities Center at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. She writes on contemporary art and aesthetics, particularly posthumanist, transspecies, and gender perspectives. She is the author of *Bio-transfigurations: Art and Aesthetics of Posthumanism* (2010, in Polish) and *Open Body* (2000, in Polish); co-author of *Pleroma: Art in Search of Fullness* (1998); and editor of *Australian Aboriginal Aesthetics* (2004, in Polish), *Going Aerial: Air, Art, Architecture* (2006), *The Life of Air: Dwelling, Communicating, Manipulating* (2011), and *Refugia: The Survival of Urban Transspecies Communities* (2021). Her curatorial work includes the exhibitions: *Bio-Reminiscences* (Poland), *Seeing the Forest Through the Trees* (UK), *Boundless Objects* (Portugal), and *Refugia: Keep (Out of) these Places* (Poland). Currently, her research focuses on nonlife forces and new articulations of mineral becomings in contemporary art.



Joanna Bourke
Vulnerable Materiality and the Sculpture of Magdalena Abakanowicz

Abakanowicz's sculpture is often

viewed through the lens of her own personal and Poland's national historical memory. There is a tension in her art between individual memory and universal precepts. Individual viewers inevitably project their own histories onto these works, but Abakanowicz's art escapes such impositions: when critics asked her whether her work *Backs* was about Holocaust horrors, Peruvian rites, or Ramayana dances, she would respond with a simple "yes." For Abakanowicz, art "speaks about the human condition in general." Central to this understanding is the vulnerable materiality of bodies and environments. What Abakanowicz cannot escape is knowledge of multiple tsunamis of violence that have engulfed modern societies. By undermining the foundations of Enlightenment thought about rationality, moral sentiments, sympathy, and what it means to be human, the intensity of human aggression has demanded artistic responses. Abakanowicz's sculpture is not only a response to the modern era, but also importantly contribute a tactile language for the expression of trauma and modernity.

Bourke will explore what her art can tell us about the politics of trauma, including how ideas about the body, gender, and vulnerability changed between the 1930s and the late 2010s.

Joanna Bourke is Professor of History at Birkbeck, University of London, and a Fellow of the British Academy. She is also the Professor of Rhetoric at Gresham College. She is the prize-winning author of fifteen books, as well as over 120 articles in academic journals. Among others, she is the author of *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War, An Intimate History of Killing* (winner of the Wolfson Prize and the Fraenkel Prize); *Fear: A Cultural History, What it Means To Be Human, The Story of Pain; and Wounding the World: How Military Violence and War-Play are Invading Our Lives*. In 2022, Reaktion Books published *Disgrace: Global Reflections on Sexual Violence* (also published by University of Chicago Press) and Oxford University Press published *Birkbeck: 200 Years of Radical Education for Working People*. Her books have been translated into Chinese, Russian, Spanish, Catalan, Italian, Portuguese, Czech, Turkish, and Greek.



Ann Coxon
Bois le Duc—The Forest, the Fortress, and the Nomad's Tent

In 1971 Abakanowicz completed her largest textile environment:

a woven wall commissioned for the central reception chamber of the newly opened North Brabant government building in s'Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands. *Bois le Duc* stands approximately seven meters high and twenty-two meters wide and was created by the artist with a team of assistants in three months. Set within the heart of Dutch architect H. A. Maaskant's modernist glass and concrete building, Abakanowicz's dark "forest" is the largest work in a collection of tapestries and fiber art that were commissioned and installed within the new building in the 1970s. Recalling her personal experience of seeing *Bois le Duc* in 2021, fifty years after its creation and during a period of strict pandemic-related restrictions, Coxon will raise questions about tapestry's relationship to architecture, structures of power, and forms of shelter.

Ann Coxon is Curator of International Art at Tate Modern and a PhD candidate at the University of College London, focusing her thesis research on New Tapestry in Europe from 1960 to 1979. She has a long-standing interest and specialism in textile-based practices. Coxon is co-curator of the exhibition *Magdalena Abakanowicz: Every Tangle of Thread and Rope* at Tate Modern where she has curated numerous exhibitions and displays, including *Inherited Threads* (2022), *Dorothea Tanning* (2019), *Anni Albers* (2018), *Beyond Craft* (2017), *Alexander Calder: Performing Sculpture* (2015), and *Saloua Raouda Choucair* (2013). Coxon is the author of two books: *Motherhood* (London: Tate Publishing, 2023) and a monograph on the artist Louise Bourgeois (London: Tate Publishing, 2010).



David Crowley
Abakanowicz and the Alibi of Use

Recalling the start of her career in the late 1950s, Abakanowicz once said, “I chose my

place among the Constructivists.” Crowley will explore what this statement might mean. After the de-Stalinising Thaw in the mid-1950s, many of the intellectual and aesthetic concerns of the pre-war avant-garde were revived, sometimes by those who had been key voices in the 1920s, such as the artist Henryk Stażewski and poet Julian Przyboś. After Socialist Realism, abstract art was justified as an experiment with form that might serve the purposeful construction of a modern socialist world. Use was an alibi for experiments in abstraction. The case was also made by a new generation, including Oskar Hansen and Stanisław Zamecznik, for the close alliance of architecture, art, and design as a means of both staving off alienation and for the “restoration” of the body after the violence of the recent past. Was this the place in which Abakanowicz found herself? And, if so, what are we to make of her eschewal of “the alibi of use”?

David Crowley is Head of the School of Visual Culture at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin. Prior, he was a professor in the School of Humanities at the Royal College of Art, London. As an art historian, Crowley is interested in Eastern Europe under communist rule. He has curated various exhibitions, including *Cold War Modern* at

the Victoria and Albert Museum (with Jane Pavitt, 2008-09); *Sounding the Body Electric. Experimental Art and Music in Eastern Europe* at Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź (2012) and at Calvert 22 Foundation, London (2013); and *Notes from the Underground. Music and Alternative Art in Eastern Europe, 1968-1994* at Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź (2017) and Akademie Der Künste, Berlin (2018), both co-curated with Daniel Muzyczuk. His exhibition *Henryk Stażewski: Late Style* will open at the Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, in April 2023.



Katy Deepwell
What Is a Woman to Do?

The publicity leaflet and wall panels for Tate Modern’s current exhibition of

Abakanowicz plainly state that she did not “identify herself as a feminist,” distancing her from ideas of (Western) feminism and assumptions of contemporary audiences. Thus, Deepwell asks what might constitute a feminist reading of her work, even an alternative genealogy, tracing how her art has been repeatedly linked with feminist debates and other women artists in many different ways after 1968. This involves unpacking notions of “gender equality” under Communism/post-Socialist nationalisms; the dominance of US feminisms in art criticism in the 1970s; connotations/associations of Abakanowicz’s work with the feminine or the erotic; how gender appears in her figurative sculpture as statements about the individual/state and nature/culture; and ideas about what it means to be an artist. She will also look at comparisons transnationally across tapestry, fiber arts, site-specific sculptures, and installations, as well as eccentric abstraction, Polish avant-gardism, and notions of invention, attribution, singularity, and universalism.

Katy Deepwell is Professor of Contemporary Art, Theory and Criticism at Middlesex University, London. She is founder and editor of *KT Press*, the *Feminist-Art-Observatory*, and *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal* (1998-2017). Her latest books are: *50 Feminist Art Manifestos* (ed., London: KT Press, 2022); *Feminist Art Activisms and Artivisms* (ed., Amsterdam: Valiz, 2020); and *All Women Spaces in Europe in the Long 1970s* (ed. with Agata Jakubowska, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018).



Alina Drapella-Hermansdorfer
Missing Elements in Magdalena Abakanowicz’s “Portrait x 20”

This presentation will focus on the analysis of the biographical information presented by Abakanowicz in her “Portrait x 20,” first published in the US in 1982. These twenty short, poetic impressions about her early life became a popular point of reference in the analysis of her art. The artist also quoted them frequently throughout her career and included them in the expanded editions of her biography in 1995 and 2008. This study presents little-known, as well as previously unpublished documents and oral historical accounts, that complement Abakanowicz’s own narrative and show how it is embedded in history and concrete realities of her personal life. Drapella-Hermansdorfer argues that many of these unknown or omitted facts contributed to the misinterpretation of some of the artist’s works. The history of towns in which she lived (Falenty, Krępa, and the neighboring Sobolew) were much more complex and dramatic than the artist’s memories of them and which most interpretations of her art and life suggest. The most interesting findings concern the genealogy of Abakanowicz: documents found in her archives which make it possible to reconstruct many missing elements from the history of her family, the manor house in Krępa, and initiatives of private individuals and local organizations who sought to protect memorabilia of Abakanowicz’s family.

Alina Drapella-Hermansdorfer is Professor Emerita of Architecture at the Wrocław University of Science and Technology and a member of the Polish Academy of Science. She is a social activist, co-designer of two parks in Wrocław, and co-founder of the Hermansdorfer Foundation. Along with her late husband, Mariusz Hermansdorfer, who was as the Director of the National Museum in Wrocław (home of the largest collection of Abakanowicz’s art in Poland), she conducted important studies on Abakanowicz’s biography for a catalogue raisonné.



Joanna Inglot
The Written and Unwritten World of Magdalena Abakanowicz

In her introduction to the symposium,

Inglot provides an analytic overview of scholarship on Abakanowicz during recent decades traces key interpretations, both in Poland and abroad, and paradigmatic shifts and interventions into the dominant narratives, while highlighting areas awaiting further investigation. As disciplinary borders have become increasingly permeable, scholars, curators, critics, and writers are acutely attuned to the increasingly globalized and transnational context in which Abakanowicz’s art may be read. This presentation will map methodological perspectives that can open artistic, cultural, and political terrains to test new interpretations and capture Abakanowicz’s positionality within shifting power relations and changing cultural and historical conditions that may reveal both local complexities and larger global visions.

Joanna Inglot is Edith M. Kelso Associate Professor of Art History at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. She specializes in contemporary art, with focus on feminist art and art in former Eastern Europe. Her book *The Figurative Sculpture of Magdalena Abakanowicz: Bodies, Environments, and Myths* (University of California Press, 2004) examines the artist’s work in the context of a dynamic cultural and sociopolitical scene that developed under Communism in Poland and internationally. In *WARM: Feminist Art Movement in Minnesota, 1970s-1990s* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), she analyzes the Women’s Art Registry of Minnesota (WARM) as a leading feminist art collective in the US. Some of her recent publications include book chapters, “Who is Afraid of Natalia LL? The Dangers and Pleasures of Feminist Art in Communist Poland” (Routledge Press, 2021); “The Alchemy of the Word: Harriet Bart’s *Abracadabra Universe* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020); “Cosmopolitan Imagination: Myth, History, and Memory in Vesna Kittelson’s Paintings” (Afton Press, 2020); and “Feminism on Trial: Gender, Art, and Politics in Post-Communist Poland,” (The Commercial Press, 2019).



Agata Jakubowska
 Occupation: Textile
 Artist. Positioning
 Magdalena
 Abakanowicz in the
 Art Field of 1950s
 State-Socialist Poland

This presentation will offer an analysis of the early stage of Abakanowicz's career, from her graduation in 1954 until 1962, when she participated in the First Lausanne International Tapestry Biennale. This period of her artistic activities remains largely neglected as being merely a prelude to the oeuvres that revolutionized textile art, yet studying it can help bring the early works of Abakanowicz [such as *Green Composition* (1956-57) in the Tate Modern exhibition] into the context in which they were produced and originally shown. This talk will address Abakanowicz not so much as an exceptional figure, but as one among many female textile artists who participated in the creation of this significant art field in 1950s state-socialist Poland.

Agata Jakubowska is Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Warsaw. She is an author and the editor of numerous publications on women's art: *Multiple Portrait of Alina Szapocznikow's Oeuvre* (in Polish, Adam Mickiewicz University Press, 2008); *Alina Szapocznikow: Awkward Objects* (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2011); *All-Women Art Spaces in Europe in the Long 1970s* (ed. with Katy Deepwell, Liverpool University Press, 2018); and *Zofia Kulik: Methodology, My Love* (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2019). She recently published a monograph on Maria Pinińska-Bereś titled *Art and the Emancipation of Women in Socialist Poland: The Case of Maria Pinińska-Bereś* (in Polish, Warsaw University Press, 2022). She is presently conducting research into the transnational history of all-women exhibitions financed by the Polish National Science Center. Together with Andrea Giunta (University of Buenos Aires), she runs the project *Narrating Art and Feminism: Eastern Europe and Latin America* within the framework of the Getty Foundation Connecting Art Histories initiative.



Magali Junet
 Abakanowicz and
 Lausanne: The Path
 to Fame

In the spheres of textile arts and fiber art, the name Magdalena

Abakanowicz is invariably associated with the Lausanne Tapestry Biennales, in which the Polish artist officially participated from 1962 to 1979. Her powerfully singular and innovative structures rapidly led to her being considered a major figure in the New Tapestry movement and later lauded as the artist who, at the turn of the 1960s, raised textile art to the rank of sculpture and, thereby, fine art. This presentation will address how Abakanowicz's international career was launched thanks to Lausanne and its Biennales, but also because of important professional encounters and a supportive network there: Pierre and Alice Pauli, André Kuenzi, Pierre and Marguerite Magnenat, and Jean-Luc Daval. These opportunities allowed the artist to become known outside Poland, develop her artistic activities, and establish her works in public and private collections in Switzerland and in Europe.

Magali Junet is curator at Fondation Toms Pauli in Lausanne, a Swiss institution devoted to research and the conservation and promotion of two public collections comprised of ancient tapestries from the 16th to 19th centuries and 20th-century textile works. Junet's research, presentations, and articles contributed to documentation of the history of tapestry as a new form of artistic expression, including *From Tapestry to Fiber Art. The Lausanne Biennials 1962-1995* (ed. with Giselle Eberhard Cotton, Milan: Skira, 2017). She is also the author of several texts and lectures on Abakanowicz, including an essay on her drawings in *Magdalena Abakanowicz* (Tate, 2022). She is co-curator of *Magdalena Abakanowicz. Textile Territories*, which will be shown this summer at the Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne. To mark this occasion, she co-edited with Eberhard Cotton *Magdalena Abakanowicz à Lausanne* (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2023).



Angelika Kuźniak
 Following Fingerprints:
 A Reporter's Take
 on Abakanowicz's
 Biography

The American author Philip Roth used to say

that "details are the fingers of a giant." Minute details are indispensable for writing a good biography; without them, a biographer cannot adequately describe an event or the heroine of a story. Details arrest readers' attention and allow them to get closer to the subject. There are many objects, photographs, letters, documents, and other traces of Abakanowicz's presence in her former house and studio on Bzowa Street in Warsaw. Examining these, Kuźniak reveals the importance of these objects (such as the family signet ring she wore, her shoes ritualistically cleaned and arranged in her closet by her assistants, the wheelchair she used during her last years) in understanding her persona—and her art. Abakanowicz's fingerprints are everywhere on her works of art. It is hard not to notice them on *Heads* or not to see the traces of bark beetles on the trees from which *Ukon*, one of her sculptures from the *War Games* series, was made. As her biographer, Kuźniak follows these traces, while as a reporter she tracks down facts to balance them with her own self-perception. Discovering Abakanowicz and the stories she created about herself for years, she will show how they evolved over decades in response to changes in political climate and her surrounding reality.

Angelika Kuźniak is a writer, biographer, and reporter working for *Gazeta Wyborcza* in Warsaw. She earned her graduate degrees in Cultural History from University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder) and Università degli Studi di Macerata in Italy. She has published numerous articles in Germany, Hungary, Romania, Lithuania, Slovakia, Spain, and Italy. Kuźniak is a recipient of three Grand Press Awards (the most important award for journalism in Poland) for her interviews with Herta Müller, on East German athletes subjected to doping, and an account of Warsaw Uprising as seen by Wehrmacht soldiers. She was also nominated several times for the Polish-German Award for Journalism. She has published several biographies on women artists and writers, including the Roma poet Papusza (2015), and Polish painters Zofia Stryjeńska (2015) and Olga Boznańska (2018), as well as currently Abakanowicz.



Ewa Lajer-Burcharth
 The Presence of the
 Past in Abakanowicz's
 Art

The relation between art and the immediate historical past

became a particularly vexing problem in Poland after the Second World War. The art of Abakanowicz speaks to this issue in eloquent, if most often indirect, ways. Lajer-Burcharth will consider how her work in the 1960s and 1970s (primarily, her *Abakans*) may be understood as having been shaped in its aesthetic specificity by the discourse—and silence—around recent historical experience in postwar Poland, including the artist's own personal experiences. Revisiting previous scholarship, she will reexamine the political and cultural meanings of her art inasmuch as they may be inferred from her idiosyncratic forms. At stake is not so much a contextualization of Abakanowicz's practice, as an interrogation of her work as a complex testimony to its context. By focusing on morphology, materiality, and scale in Abakanowicz's productions, she will address several questions. What motivated the particular abstraction of her forms? How might we think about the effects of opacity and rupture generated by these abstract formations? How does monumentality matter? How can the most recent scholarly reevaluation of the role and place of textiles in early twentieth-century art (e.g., Bauhaus) help us in studying Abakanowicz's engagement with fiber? Finally, how do we situate historically the corporeal and, specifically, feminine dimension of her forms? What are we to make of the ambiguous tension between the sense of obtrusion or obstacle generated by these works, and their effect as shelters or quasi-wombs?

Ewa Lajer-Burcharth is William Dorr Boardman Professor of Fine Arts at Harvard University. She specializes in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French art and has also written extensively on contemporary art. Her books include: *Necklines: The Art of Jacques-Louis David after the Terror* (Yale University Press, 1999; Ebook ed., A&AePortal, 2022); *Chardin Material* (Sternberg Press, 2011); and *The Painter's Touch: Boucher Chardin Fragonard* (Princeton University Press, 2018; paperback ed. PUP, 2023). She also co-authored *Interiors and Interiority*, (De Gruyter, 2015); *Painting Beyond Itself*:

A Medium in the Post-Medium Condition (Sternberg Press, 2016); and *Drawing: The Invention of the Modern Medium* (Harvard Art Museums, 2017).



Camilla Larsson
Polish “World Art” in
Sweden: Magdalena
Abakanowicz’s
Exhibition and Public
Commission in the
Södertörn Area,
circa 1970

Early in her career, Abakanowicz exhibited and made art in Sweden. In its critical reception, one description of her art was as Polish “world art,” representing something significantly Polish while also belonging to a larger international art world (Arbetet, December 12, 1966). Her presence contradicts prevalent ideas of the Cold War divide in which Sweden, regardless of its political neutrality, engaged in substantial cooperation with Western Europe and the US. The mediated history of art in Sweden has been westward oriented, tending to divide Europe and the world in two. Larsson will unpack how Abakanowicz’s presence can be understood in the context of Sweden in the 1970s, and within the developing welfare society where new kunsthalls and public art played crucial roles. She will focus on Abakanowicz’s relationship with curator Eje Höggestätt (1921-86) and the exhibition *Magdalena Abakanowicz. Textil skulptur/ Textile Environments* at Södertälje Konsthall in 1970 (begun by Höggestätt already in 1968), and the public commission of *Black-Brown* (1971) at Huddinge hospital, where Höggestätt was a member of the organizing committee.

Camilla Larsson is a post-doctoral researcher at Södertörn University, studying Polish art from the 1960s until today. She specializes in contemporary art, critical historiography, and transnational exchanges. Her areas of expertise include performance art, theories of performativity, and the history and theories of curating. Her PhD dissertation, *Appearances. Performative Interpretations of the Art of Tadeusz Kantor* (2021), discusses the art of this Polish theatre director, set designer, and visual artist (1915-90). She was also a lecturer in art history at Södertörn University and the Gerlesborg School of Fine Art in Stockholm. From 2006-15, she worked as curator of contemporary art at Bonniers Konsthall in Stockholm and as art consultant

for Public Commissioned Art. Larsson is a board member of the Swedish section of The Nordic Art Association that has a residency program in Stockholm.



Ewa Majewska
A Sensual Revolution?
The Early Abakans

This talk will address the early works of Abakanowicz, the colorful, sensual, and intense *Abakans*. Made of ropes, threads, horsetail hair, and other material, they seduce with their large-scale, enigmatic shape and volatile, hanging installation. In her *Notes toward a Politics of Location*, Adrienne Rich wrote: “A blanketing snow had begun to drift over the radical history of the United States.” A similar statement could be said of the Western perception of the art of women in postwar Central and East Europe. Today, such frontal representations of magnificent, fluorescent vaginal shapes in the early *Abakans*, where one can almost enter “like a cathedral” (Cherríe Moraga), may seem blasphemous. Different from most interpretations and following the curatorial logic of the Tate exhibition, as well as in agreement with the artist’s perspective, Majewska will focus on the ropes rather than textile. In current decolonial times of feminist, queer porno-chic, and post-pornography, the ropes are loaded with meaning as they connect the emancipation from slavery with a rediscovery of female and queer bodies and pleasures, the intensity of BDSM practices, shibari, and other uses of ropes. The early *Abakans* demonstrate an empowerment of the corporeal, feminine, and intimacy, suggesting a sexual, or at least sensual, revolution. Although they were not shown for many years in Poland, and thus remain largely unknown, in these works Abakanowicz certainly performed what Jacques Rancière calls “the new division of the sensible.” As with Catherine Malabou’s *Le plaisir effacé*, we might discover how Abakanowicz not only saved bodies and their parts from patriarchal, racialized, capitalist erasure, but also staged them in ways that announced their autonomy and pleasure, signaling the prospect of a different reading of Central and East Europe and its cultural production.

Ewa Majewska is a feminist theorist of culture and Associate Professor at the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw. She is working on the queer studies/archive theory project “Public against their will. The production of subjects in the archives of ‘Hyacinth Action,’” examining the state action targeting gay men in the 1980s Poland. She taught at the UDK Berlin, University of Warsaw, and was a visiting scholar at UC Berkeley, ICI Berlin, and IWM in Vienna. Majewska has published seven books, including *Feminist Antifascism: Counterpublics of the Common* (London: Verso, 2021), as well as numerous articles and essays in journals, magazines, and anthologies: *e-flux*, *Signs*, *Third Text*, *Journal of Utopian Studies* and others. Her research focuses on archive studies, dialectics of the weak, feminist critical theory, and antifascism. She co-curated the exhibition of Mariola Przyjemaska at Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw (2022-23).



Anna Markowska
The Colonial Kiss
and Some Reparative
Stories

A native Kenyan
kissing Elizabeth II’s
shoes at Sagana Lodge

(in *The Crown*) may recall another reverential kiss expressing the hierarchy of power. As Abakanowicz recalls, her father was the most important person in her family: “He ruled and made all decisions. People listened to him. [...] According to the old custom, they kissed his hand.” Although her harsh and distant father may have been a source of loneliness and sadness for her, the artist recalls her childhood as a magical time, thanks to the country life she explored on her own: “It was best when no one saw me.” The sense of solitude and individualism that emerges from her memoirs is a narrative that can easily lead to the idea of her placing herself in the role of an exceptional artist, a genius in her own right. But beyond the scar of outsider transformed into the virtue of uniqueness, Abakanowicz’s youth is a study in collectivity. Trained as a professional weaver, following in the footsteps of her professor Eleonora Plutyńska at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, she first benefited from the tradition of collective women’s craft. Ultimately, the artist herself suggested the narratives for reading her works. They often point to a loss in which

war, socialist revolution, and modernisation separated her forever from her idealised childhood. The kiss—now a thing of the past and of her own desire—became part of a lost paradise. The rehabilitation of the world of moods and feelings, even against obvious facts and reality, and thanks to the power of the visual imagination, turned out to be the basis of reparative narratives in which anachronism played the leading role. In a rapidly changing world, with human insecurity unable to keep pace, anachronism, the antithesis of the in inventiveness demanded by modernity, returned as a challenge and intervention. Fortunately, the reparative and imaginative potential of Abakanowicz’s art can also be found in opposition to herself and her own ideas.

Anna Markowska is an art historian, curator, critic, and professor at the University of Wrocław. She was elected to the Polish board of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) in 2020. Her publications focus on American art [*Komedia sublimacji* (Comedy of Sublimation), 2009]; Polish art [*Dwa przełomy. Sztuka polska po 1955 i 1989 roku* (Two Turning Points: Polish Art after 1955 and 1989), 2012]; archival research on conceptualism (*Games with places. Wrocław galleries: The Catacombs, Studio on the Moat, The Centre for Artistic Activities*, 2022); and feminism (*Natalia LL*, 2022). Her book *Sztuka podręczna Wrocławia. Od rzeczy do wydarzenia* (Handy Art from Wrocław. From a Thing to an Event, 2018) describes the constant flow between art and non-art, the daily cohabitation and dialogue with things, combined through inventive bricolage. Her most recent book, *Dłaczego Duchamp nie czesał się z przedziałkiem?* (Why Duchamp Didn’t Part His Hair?, 2019), deals with the divisions and taxonomies that lead to unlearning and deskilling strategies in the field of art.



Dorota Michalska
Nomadic Abakans:
On Magdalena
Abakanowicz’s Tatar
Identity and Culture

This presentation will explore the influence of Abakanowicz’s Tatar background on her artistic practice, especially textile works of the 1960s. Although this fact has often been referred to by art critics and scholars, it has never been deeply and thoroughly

analyzed. Michalska claims that attention to this perspective allows for a fundamental reshaping of our understanding of *Abakans* by positioning these works in dialogue with Tatar history and material culture. Can Abakanowicz's textile art be seen as an embodiment of the migratory character of the Mongol empire? Can we see *Abakans* as temporary, ephemeral, and transient objects reflecting the nomadic character of Mongol tribes? Such an interpretation inspires a series of broader methodological concerns about Polish art history, which all too often remains bound to a homogenous understanding of national identities and ethnic backgrounds.

Dorota Michalska is an art researcher, critic, and writer based in Oxford and Warsaw. She is a graduate of the University of Warsaw and The Courtauld Institute of Art in London. She is currently completing her PhD at the University of Oxford, writing a dissertation on experiences of race, coloniality, and subalternity in modern and contemporary art in Poland. Between 2013 and 2015, she was an assistant researcher at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Her writings have appeared in a number of art journals, including *ARTMargins*, *L'Internationale*, *Afterall*, *Notes On Art In A Global Context*, and *Kajet Journal*. She has also written essays for the Venice Biennale (2019), Biennale Matter of Art in Prague (2022), and Zachęta National Gallery in Warsaw (2022, 2023).



Magdalena Moskalewicz
The Impossible Feminism of Magdalena Abakanowicz

This presentation will consider Abakanowicz speculatively in the very implausible, feminist context, positioning her work and her subjectivity in the scopoc regime of socialist patriarchy. Abakanowicz would never call herself a feminist. She did not seem to have much sympathy for the feminist cause (even though she met and exhibited with self-proclaimed feminist artists in the 1970s) and rarely, if ever, demonstrated the kind of female solidarity associated with the movement. Yet it is hard to deny that the soft and fluid bodies of her signature *Abakans* were modeled after, and served as metaphors of, the female body;

and that ultimately she abandoned them to transition in the 1970s and 1980s to more stable and permanent *masculinist* figurative sculpture. Art historians have pointed either to Abakanowicz's careerist motivations in pursuing this switch (Jakubowska) or to the misunderstanding she had received from the Polish scene (Markowska). Moskalewicz attempts to view the artist's reluctance towards feminism and her abandonment of *Abakans* through the lens of what Bojana Pejić called the ideology of socialist patriarchy.

Magdalena Moskalewicz is an art historian, curator, and editor who specializes in Eastern European art of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Currently Full-Time Visiting Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, she has published internationally on Eastern European neo-avantgardes, Socialist Realism, and Cold War exhibition histories, as well as contemporary art practices. As a curator, Moskalewicz collaborates with living artists to examine the postsocialist condition and its parallels with postcoloniality. Among her exhibitions are *Halka/Haiti 18°48'05"N 72°23'01"W* for the Polish Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale, 2015 (Jean Goldman Book Prize awarded to the accompanying book) and *The Travellers: Voyage and Migration in New Art from Central and Eastern Europe* (Warsaw and Tallinn, 2016-18). Recent writing includes contributions to the *Oxford Handbook of Communist Visual Cultures* (OUP, 2020) and *Magdalena Abakanowicz* (Tate, 2022). In 2020, Moskalewicz received Mary Zirin Prize awarded by the Association for Women in Slavic Studies.



Paweł Moźdzysłowski
The Embryos of a Re-Enchanted World: Anthropological and Sociological Perspectives on Magdalena Abakanowicz's Art

This analysis of Abakanowicz's art will stem from two theoretical and research perspectives. The first is devoted to the anthropological (antistructural) interpretation of her art and will explore the archaic symbols and liminal experiences contained in her works with references to Mircea Eliade and Victor Turner. The second, sociological aspect (structural) focuses on

the interpretation of Abakanowicz's work in the context of the dynamics of postmodern society and the re-enchantment of the world in relationship to theories of Zygmunt Bauman, Thomas Luckmann, and Anthony Giddens.

Paweł Moźdzysłowski is Assistant Professor in the Institute of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw, where he teaches courses in sociology and anthropology of art. He studies contemporary arts from a socio-cultural perspective, with focus on both structural and anti-structural aspects of art. In the last two decades, Moźdzysłowski has conducted research projects on the ultra-conservative discourse of Polish art and which he published in numerous sociological and art journals. He is the author of the book *Initiations and Transgressions. Anti-structure of Art of the 20th and 21st Centuries in the Eyes of a Sociologist* (2011).



Sarah Wilson
Abakanowicz and the Lausanne Tapestry Biennales, 1965–1971

Abakanowicz's Polish context is now very well known; less

so is her position within the international scene of the Lausanne Tapestry Biennale, founded in 1962. While the French ateliers of Aubusson and Beauvais had centuries-old traditions, tapestry commissions under the Petainist regime spurred a French postwar renaissance and a return to medievalising roots, spearheaded by Communist and Resistant artist Jean Lurçat. The tapestry revival in France was mirrored in the East, transcending Cold War divisions. Among the fifteen exhibiting countries in the 1962 Biennale were Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Egypt, and Japan, as well as women artists featured from the original Bauhaus. There, the "modern" and the "medieval" and a hybrid "period taste" were rivaled by abstractions. Abakanowicz appears in the second Biennale in 1965 with *Desdemona*; she shows *Black Assemblage 2* in the third in 1967, when Colombia, Israel, Lebanon, Norway, and the US join the list of participating countries. Her alphabetical priority places her in first position among new and old competitors, while some tapestries go "Op." *Abakan Red* (now Tate) appears in the fourth Biennale of 1969, which embraced both "soft sculpture" and "dematerialized techniques." This

Biennale traveled to the traditional Gobelins site in Paris: how were attempts at a pixelated "tapestry hyperrealism" received there? At the fifth Biennale of 1971 (with 491 entries), the asymmetrical and uncompromising *Abakan: Variable Situation* stood out with sprawling ropes on the floor. The Lausanne Biennales were an international testing ground that exemplified changing trends and tastes, showing work by hundreds of professional artists now lost to our histories, while ratifying Abakanowicz's strength, originality, and survival skills.

Sarah Wilson is Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art at The Courtauld, University of London, where she had invited Abakanowicz to lecture. She has published on many female artists—many Polish—and recently on the woven works of Sheila Hicks and the French tapestry artist Aurélie Jaubert. With School of Paris and Cold War interests, she co-curated *Paris, Capital of the Arts* (London and Bilbao, 2002-03) and *Pierre Klossowski* (London, Cologne, and Paris, 2006-07), and published *Picasso, Marx and Socialist Realism in France* (2013) and *The Visual World of French Theory: Figurations* (English 2010; French 2018). A second volume on expanded media practices is in preparation, together with the anthology *SHE+ART*. Appointed Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres by the French government for services to French culture in 1997, she received the international prize for art criticism awarded by the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) in 2015.

Moderator Biographies

Notes

Friday

Panel 1: Abakans and the Critical History of Craft and Fiber Arts

David Crowley, see Speakers' Abstracts and Biographies.

Panel 2: The Artist and the Legend: Abakanowicz's Biography and "Portrait x 20"



Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius was Curator and Deputy Director of The National Museum in Warsaw, and taught art history at Birkbeck College, University of London and Humboldt University Berlin. Her publications include *Borders in Art: Revisiting Kunstgeographie* (Polish Academy 2000); *National Museum in Warsaw Guide: Galleries and Study Collections* (National Museum in Warsaw 2001); *Kantor was Here: Tadeusz Kantor in Great Britain* (with Natalia Zarzecka, Black Dog, 2011); *From Museum Critique to the Critical Museum* (with Piotr Piotrowski,

Ashgate, 2015); and *Imaging and Mapping Eastern Europe: Sarmatia Europea to the Communist Bloc* (Routledge 2021). Her current research is on caricature, its historiography, and agency.

Saturday

Panel 3: Abakanowicz's Art under State Socialism

Anna Markowska, see Speakers' Abstracts and Biographies.

Panel 4: Abakanowicz, Feminism, and the Politics of Gender



Lina Džuverović is a curator and scholar based at Birkbeck College, University of London, where she co-directs BIRMAC-Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Media and Culture and organizes the Decolonial Feminist Forum. Her research focuses on explorations of collectivity, cultural labor, and the sphere of contemporary art as a site of solidarity and community-building. She received Bard College's Center for Arts and Human Rights Faculty Fellowship (2022) for the research project *And Others: The Gendered Politics and Practices of Art*

Collectives. Previously, she was Artistic Director of London's Calvert 22 Foundation; founding Director of Electra, London; Media Arts Curator at ICA, London; co-curator of Momentum Biennial 2009; and taught contemporary art at universities in the UK and Austria. Her writing has appeared in journals, including *Afterall*, *Circuit*, *Women in Music*, *Parse*, *On Curating*, and in numerous edited volumes on topics related to contemporary art, curating, critical art geography, and cultural labor.

Panel 5: Abakanowicz, Worldmaking, and Decolonial Perspectives



Marta Zboralska is Lecturer in the History of Art at the University of Oxford. She was awarded her PhD from University College London in 2020 for a thesis titled *The Art of Being Together: Inside the Studio of Henryk Stażewski and Edward Kłosiński*. Zboralska was the recipient of the Association for Women in Slavic Studies Graduate Essay Prize in 2020, and her *Art Journal* article "Living Color: Henryk Stażewski's Interior Models" was shortlisted for The Royal Historical Society's 2022 Alexander Prize for Early Career Researchers. She is currently

working on a project titled "Art After Witold Gombrowicz," which considers the Polish writer's influence on visual art.

Notes

This symposium is held in conjunction with the exhibition *Magdalena Abakanowicz: Every Tangle of Thread and Rope* on view at Tate Modern November 16, 2022-May 21, 2023.