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Magdalena Abakanowicz

Abstract

Magdalena Abakanowicz, along with Tadeusz Kantor, Roman Opalka and Krzysztof Wodiczko, finds herself among the limited number of Polish artists who have managed to overcome the world's long-lasting political division into the East and the West, winning recognition beyond the former communist bloc. Nevertheless, their art has been deeply influenced by the culture of their home country and its socio-political situation.

The statement repeatedly uttered by German painter Anselm Kiefer: "The biography of my country is my biography; had I not been born in 1945, my work would have been entirely different", might as well be ascribed to any of the aforementioned Polish artists. Yet each of them has created works that address the imagination and sensitivity of any viewer regardless of their personal cultural experience.

This is particularly true for Magdalena Abakanowicz, who in her unique way has managed to reach vastly differing cultural environments. Her early works – large sculpture forms made of natural fibers – have permanently transformed the concept of fiber art worldwide. For years she had remained a role model for its disciples, and her art appeared to speak in an understandable, expressive and universal language.

Later, when Abakanowicz was slowly but consistently evolving from monumental three-dimensional forms of fiber to monumental sculpture, her works gradually started to emanate with an existential message, delivering her reflection on the condition of man in the contemporary world.

"Only speaking about ourselves do we speak about the world at large.
Our confession may become a discovery, provided it is sincere"¹.

On the 40th anniversary of Art Press², Catherine Millet, the magazine's founder and long-standing editor-in-chief, organized a meeting with Robert Storr and Georges Didi-Huberman. The goal was to confront American and European visions of art criticism. The conference, light in form and creating the appearance of an informal social occasion, in fact was highly meaningful. A confrontation of two strong personalities generated the important content.

¹ See M. Abakanowicz, text *Abakans*, in exhibition catalogue, Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw 1995, p. 24.

² Prestigious French art magazine. The first issue was published in December 1972. It presented, among others, a translation of the statement of Josef Albers on the method of teaching painting based on the optical effects of colours that he had developed at the Black Mountain College. Later, he applied this method at Yale University in New Haven, United States. Art Press is a bilingual magazine, in French and English. Website: www.artpress.com [Retrieved December 19, 2012].

While discussing the methodology of art criticism, Didi-Huberman recalled that as a child he would often watch his father, a painter, at work. The artist used to look at freshly painted canvasses from a distance of several meters, and then put them aside and returned to them in several weeks. In this way, the French philosopher and art historian made a suggestion about how diligent critics should work. Just like a painter puts their work aside, and later comes back to finish it, the critic should get some distance from their own words and opinions before they formulate their final statement. Observation and intellectual analysis of a given artist's evolution is important; in order to develop a mature vision of their creative output, but the critic's ability to feel and experience a work of art plays the decisive role.

My encounter with Magdalena Abakanowicz's art began a long time ago, and went through different stages. For the first time I came across her works as a teenager. The secondary school of visual arts that I attended held a screening of films on art. Most of them I cannot remember, but the film on *Abakans* has stuck in my memory for good. The Polish artist had developed sculpted spatial structures made from soft fibres. They were mostly created with the use of weaving looms, but traditional materials – wool and cotton – were replaced by such fibres as sisal and jute, which the artist dyed herself. After taking them off the loom, the artist shaped the tapestry into three-dimensional forms and exposed them in the free space. The first, sporadic attempt of this kind was made in the 1930s by another Polish artist, Katarzyna Kobro, a former student of Kazimierz Malewicz. Nevertheless it was Magdalena Abakanowicz who started a revolution that swept through the world of fibre art in the 1960s and '70s. The spatial structures created by Abakanowicz are named after her last name. She wrote about them in 1970: "My three-dimensional woven forms constitute a protest against systematisation of life and art. My woven forms grew with leisurely rhythm like creations of nature and like them they are organic"³. For years, this exceptional artist seemed an unsurpassable model to me, and her work fascinated me.

Seated Figures exposed in Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw, was my first physical contact with this work, which had touched my imagination as strongly as Alberto Giacometti's sculptures. The Swiss artist's slender works were made of metal, whereas, Abakanowicz created her human half-skeletons, hollowed out in the back, resembling halved cocoons, from jute sackcloth stiffened with resin. The figures, apparently identical, differed in many details. The headless figures carried a strong emotional load and provoked questions about human existence. The forms were hard and coarse, and the artist herself said of them: "The cycles touch upon the questions of empty space which can be filled by means of our imagination and with the sphere of the palpable, the rigid, which is an incomplete trace of our bodies spatial adherence to its material surroundings"⁴. The times were grim. The system that had taken root in postwar Poland was facing a collapse. Hollowed out on one side, the asexual figures seemed to

³ See M. Abakanowicz, exhibition catalogue, p. 28.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 48.

express the feelings of many of the people immersed in the grey Polish reality of the late 1980s.

A few years later while I was in France, I discovered that Magdalena Abakanowicz was among the few Polish artists known in this country. Textile artists associated her mainly with the *Abakans* and her multiple participations at Lausanne Biennales⁵, but the majority would know also her expressionist drawings and sculpture series, namely, *Crowds*, *Embryology*, and *Incarnations*. The Japanese I had met, associated her with a group of bronze *Backs* made for Hiroshima⁶, the Americans – with an exhibition in the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in New York curated by Michael Brenson⁷, French art critics with the Polish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1980 and with an exhibition in Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris⁸. Her works evoked much admiration due to expression achieved by simple means. British art critic Jasia Reichardt wrote in the catalogue of Abakanowicz's exhibition at Yorkshire Sculpture Park⁹, "The entire population of standing figures, the crowds, the flocks and the others, are enough to fill a large public square. (...) No other 20th century artist has realized three-dimensional crowds of grey men that are at the same time passive urgent"¹⁰. The way in which Abakanowicz expressed emotions in her works was completely different from what the Western audiences, raised in the cult of art rooted in the tradition of the first early 20th century avant-gardes, were accustomed to. What the Polish artist was offering was far away from the heritage of Ecole de Paris and it could not be ascribed to subsequent art trends that appeared in the United States and Western Europe in the 1960s and '70s. Even Italy's Arte Povera – perhaps closest in formal terms, due to the employment of simple materials – seemed light-years away.

All the weaving art epigones eagerly ascribed themselves to her oeuvre, completely oblivious of the fact that in the early days of her art career although Abakanowicz indeed used soft and easy to store textile materials, she had never been interested in the decorative art that they were practicing. Her works, made of jute and linen, not only meticulously avoid any kind of prettiness, but in the first place, they possess a power of expression whose form approximates expressionist sculpture initiated by the ingenious French sculptor August Rodin. This was perhaps best noted by Michael Brenson¹¹. When comparing the two artists, the American critic stated that both of them had created works of *powerful inner strength* and *organic vitality*.

Abakanowicz's works are perhaps remotely reminiscent of postminimalist quests of Eva Hesse. The American artist, several years younger, attempted to

⁵ The International Fibre Art Biennale was held in 1960-1992 in Lausanne on Lake Geneva in Rhaeto-Romanic Switzerland.

⁶ In 1991 Magdalena Abakanowicz's solo exhibition visited several Japanese cities. It was displayed, among others, at the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art.

⁷ American critic with a Ph.D. in history of art from Johns Hopkins University; a contributor to *The New York Times* in 1982-1991; in 1993 he curated Abakanowicz's *War Games* exhibition.

⁸ *Abakanowicz. Alterations* exhibition was held in 1982.

⁹ The exhibition was held in 1995.

¹⁰ A fragment of the text's Polish translation was published in Magdalena Abakanowicz's exhibition catalogue, pp. 144-145.

¹¹ In the text referring to Magdalena Abakanowicz's links with modern sculpture. It was published in 1995 in the artist's solo exhibition catalogue.

contain any anxiety she experienced in original installations made primarily from light, easily modulated materials. Both Abakanowicz and Hesse expressed in their works the untold emotions, accumulated over years.

The influential Marlborough Gallery with which the Polish artist collaborated for many years, on numerous occasions juxtaposed her works with the works of Beverly Pepper, an American living in Italy. Both artists belonged to the same generation and had strong personalities, yet this was a strategic move resulting more from the gallery's market policy than from genuine reasons of artistic and critical nature. The two artists, who pursued radically different artistic paths, have never established close contact. Just as Abakanowicz's works are marked by organic form, Beverly Pepper displays a liking for straight lines. She probably developed her use of lapidary forms while studying under Fernand Léger and André Lhote¹² at Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris.

Living in Paris at the end of XX century, I became, altogether unconsciously, increasingly acquainted with Abakanowicz's works. Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris allotted to her a whole room that combines displays of contemporary and modern art. This meant that whenever I visited the museum, I would invariably pass by the twenty five bronze *Crowd* figures from the museum collection. My increasing awareness of art was accompanied by a growing realization of the Polish artist's individualism, of her functioning outside any categories, patterns or divisions. She seemed increasingly comprehensible and close to me, but I had not expected that I would have the opportunity to meet her in person and to win her friendship.

The Polish Institute in Paris organized a meeting with Abakanowicz to accompany her exhibition opening in the now-defunct Marwan Hoss gallery, not far away from the Louvre. At that time I was writing my master's thesis on American minimalist and postminimalist art, with particular emphasis on the works of Eva Hesse; and it took me only one hour to decide on whom I would focus in the next stage of my studies. Abakanowicz allowed me to visit her Warsaw studio and to have a look at her meticulously run archive. In it, I discovered not only valuable documentation materials, but above all, excellent paintings never shown from the artist's student years that signalled the direction of her future quests. Made in the early 1950s, they revealed a liking for monochrome, synthetic forms and a slightly frayed organic line. They evidently augured her first tapestry. These small pictures were like a well-known composer's youth works, ones that reveal the character of symphonies yet to be written.

When I was beginning to work on my postgraduate theoretical thesis, a shift from the analysis of American art of the 1960s to an entirely different cultural area might have seemed a little illogical. To this day I remain convinced that without acquiring a thorough knowledge of Western art from the period of economic prosperity it is impossible to properly understand and describe the specific nature of art created in so-called former Eastern Europe. Incidentally, during the evening at the Polish Institute, Abakanowicz stated that the fact

¹² French Cubist, 1885-1962. His students included William Klein, Tamara de Lempicka, Henri Cartier-Bresson. He wrote several art theory books.

that her works were created in a country suffering from material shortcomings and difficult social relations determined their character in a natural way. This is visible not only in the choice of materials; primarily, these works reflect the tensions existing in the environment in which she lived and worked.

The artist is an organic part of the milieu in which they were born and shaped. They are often perceived as an atypical person, with strong feelings and experiences, one who finds it difficult to fit into norms and patterns. This sometimes leads to marginalization. As a person who escapes norms, and creates in solitude, they spend time seeking their own artistic truth, trying to reach into their inner world. They have their own sense of aesthetics, formed under the influence of the surrounding world and of the experiences strongly imprinted in their mind. The creative act is a moment of liberation, exposing their inner world. All opinions, knowledge, emotions and beliefs are reflected in the finished work like in a mirror. Sometimes this becomes clear only after they reach artistic maturity. In case of Abakanowicz, one of the most meaningful and stirring works is *Katarsis*, a group of thirty-three bronze sculptures installed in 1985 in the open air on the property of Italian collector Giuliano Gori¹³ in Celle in Tuscany. This former industrialist fell in love with artists as a teenager. Initially, he would buy works directly from artists but in 1961, influenced by a trip to Barcelona and meetings with artists such as Osvaldo Licini and Antoni Tàpies, Gori changed his collection concept. He started to invite artists to his property, encouraging them to create artworks on the site. On arriving in Celle, Abakanowicz saw monumental sculptures by Richard Serra, Daniel Buren, Dennis Oppenheim and Sol LeWitt. She had the impression that the park was becoming crowded, so she decided to install her sculptures on a field in the open air. Ten years later she commented: "KATARSIS – the decision came abruptly, in the way that excess must boil over. I seemed to be an onlooker, astonished by what was growing inside me, as though not with me and, removed outside, it swelled and took on force and personality"¹⁴.

In the traditions of Orphism and Pythagoreism, *catharsis* is an attempt to separate body from soul as much as possible. Plato was convinced that music was capable of purifying and liberating an impure soul, and Aristotle applied this theory in theatre. According to him, a tragedy may trigger purification from egoist passions through artistic and emotional experiences (*katharsis ton pathematon*). Freud, on the other hand, believed that reliving a traumatic situation under hypnosis might liberate the patient from unpleasant emotions that had accompanied it. Magdalena Abakanowicz has never confessed what kind of situation resurfaced in her memory when she was staying in Celle. The only hint is in the fact that the thirty-three figures, hollowed out on one side and reaching toward the sky like menhirs¹⁵, were called by her man-coffins...

¹³ Giuliano Gori was born in 1931. In June 1982 he launched a contemporary sculpture park in Villa Celle in Santomato di Pistoia in Tuscany, 26 kilometres away from Florence. More information: www.sculpture.org/documents/parksdir/p&g/gori/gori.shtml [Retrieved January 13, 2013].

¹⁴ See M. Abakanowicz, *Katarsis*, exhibition catalogue, p. 108.

¹⁵ The word *menhir* was adopted from French by 19th century archaeologists. It is a combination of two words found in the Breton language: *men* and *hir*. A *menhir* is a large upright standing stone. Menhirs may be found singly as monoliths, or as part of a group of similar stones. Their size can vary considerably,

Magdalena Abakanowicz was only 14 when she suffered the trauma of watching the glow of fires over the dying Warsaw Uprising. Leonard Sempoliński, who took part in the Warsaw Uprising, is the author of an exceptional album¹⁶ with photographs of the city taken in May 1945. Some of the pictures of buildings turned into ruins include charred bodies of people who were burned alive. Among the gloomy rubble, one can spot black stumps whose shape remarkably resembles *Katarsis* figures standing on the field in Celle. Perhaps this similitude is not just a coincidence? Does the gentle Tuscan sun have the power to liberate one from horrible memories, long carried in the subconscious, a burden that is difficult to shake off?

In the 1960s and early '70s Magdalena Abakanowicz delivered a series of enormous sculptural forms made out of natural fibers. These included *Abakans*, *Environments*, and *Penetrations*. The *Abakans*, the world's first three-dimensional woven structures, won her international fame and contributed to a change in the perception of the art of weaving. They encouraged many artists dealing with the fibre art to experiment with technological possibilities and with atypical materials. The artist herself has stressed on many occasions that the technique is of secondary significance, because it is only the concept and the final visual effect that matter: "Weaving as wall decoration has never interested me. I simply became extremely concerned with all that could be expressed through weaving: how to form the relief of the surface, how the mobile markings of horsehair will react and, finely, how this constructed surface can swell and burst, showing through the cracks its mysterious inside"¹⁷.

In the mid-1970s Abakanowicz made the first version of the *Crowd*. This indicated a radical shift from soft, thick materials to more durable and harder ones. Already in her previous sculpture groups, made from textile materials, it was visible that the artist was concentrating on formal solutions of a certain type. She was primarily interested in the dialogue between the inside and the outside, between the two sides of the artwork – the visible and the hidden one; between the positive and the negative, both in a literal sense and metaphorically. When groups of human and animal figures appeared in her works the empty space between them gained particular significance. According to Abakanowicz, this space is filled by our imagination that complements the world that surrounds us.

The first version of the *Crowd* signalled the artist's turn toward humanity's existential problems. These works owe their impact to their mass and accumulation; they appear to be collections of bizarre creatures. Headless human figures with a rough, unappealing surface, built from heavy, bulky forms, seem to be an incarnation of the carefully hidden human suffering. The bodies, deprived of any sexual connotations, appeal to the viewer in an ambivalent way: dislike for

but their shape is generally uneven and squared, often tapering towards the top. Menhirs are widely distributed across Europe, Africa and Asia, but are most numerous in Western Europe; in particular in Ireland, Great Britain and Brittany. They originate from many different periods across pre-history and they were erected as part of a larger megalithic culture that flourished in Europe and beyond.

¹⁶ E. Borecka, L. Sempoliński, *Warszawa 1945*, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warsaw 1983.

¹⁷ See M. Abakanowicz, in text *Abakans*, exhibition catalogue, p. 22.

apparent ugliness is combined with delight over apt reflection on the condition of man exposed to group pressure. Let the artist speak:

I immerse in the crowd, like a grain of sand in the friable sands. I am fading among the anonymity of glances, movements, smells in the common absorption of air, in the common pulsation of juices under the skin. I become a cell of a boundless organism of the crowd like others already integrated and deprived of expression. Similar in our bone structure, in the construction of our brain, in sensitivity of our skin we are prone to emotions. Through hate and love we stimulate each other. Destroying each other we regenerate¹⁸.

The individual figures in Abakanowicz's anonymous crowds only appear to be identical. They are marked by an internal stiffness typical of people focused on their own problems, who with every move of hands or legs reveal suffering on the one hand and resistance to pain on the other. Just like an Asian yogi immediately notices our deeply coded traumas with his trained eye, the artist externalises our dilemmas and deficits that are invisible to the naked eye.

Abakanowicz prepared her most surprising, visionary project, *Vertical Green, Arboreal Architecture*¹⁹, for a 1991 competition, a development plan for Nanterre, a Paris suburb situated on the extension of the historical axis connecting the Louvre and the district of La Défense. She proposed to build sixty houses-trees, from 60 to 80 metres tall and with a diameter of 7-30 metres. The project was Abakanowicz's reaction to the architecture of La Défense that may delight with geometric excellence on the one hand and terrify with anonymity on the other.

In her bold proposal of *Arboreal Architecture*, Abakanowicz seems to enter dialogue with the concepts of Claude Lévi-Strauss presented in his most famous book *A Word on the Wane*²⁰. According to the French anthropologist, the city combines elements of the natural and the artificial. It is the outcome of biological procreation, organic evolution and aesthetic creation; it constitutes both an object of nature and a subject of culture. The city reflects individual and collective elements, the experienced and the dreamed ones. Unfortunately, according to Abakanowicz, over recent centuries, along with the progress of civilization, people have lost their former balance between instinct and mind. Man is the only living creature that builds artificial surroundings for himself. This increases his distance from nature. His environment is becoming a stone desert, an urban agglomeration located in the proximity of miserable parks. Introduction of art into this environment might provide a bridge between nature and the artificial surroundings built by man.

In order to save the cities, Abakanowicz suggests, urban structures should be reorganized, so that the existing disadvantages of the city could be compensated for. Of course, it is the artists whom she entrusts with the responsibility of seeking new solutions. However, caution is needed to prevent this from turning into the artificial insertion of decorations into a sick organism. Only radical actions can heal the situation. Introduction of greenery, oxygenation of

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 147.

¹⁹ This was one of two projects that won an award of distinction. An exhibition presenting the project was held at Kordegarda Gallery in Warsaw in the winter of 1994.

²⁰ C. Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques*, Plon, Paris 1955. First Polish edition: PIW, Warsaw 1960. Translated in English in 1973 by John Weightman and Doreen Weightman, translated also as *A Word on the Wane*.

urban agglomerations suffering from industrial pollution seems to be a necessity on the way to re-establishing the balance between the rhythm of nature and the rhythm imposed by modern civilization. The unimplemented project of *Arboreal Architecture* seems to be a utopia, but it was a bold attempt to change the patterns of thinking about urban planning and space in the city.

Magdalena Abakanowicz's art attracted the attention of international critics early on, already in the 1960s. Although created in very peculiar political conditions it seems to carry a universal message. It appeals to the sensitivity of Europeans, Asians, and Australians, as well as the people of North America. This is probably due to the fact that anyone can relate to it and interpret the works in their own way. But, as Ryszard Stanisławski, the long-standing and distinguished director of the Museum of Art in Łódź, has stressed on numerous occasions, perhaps what is most important is that Abakanowicz continues to tackle the issues of dignity and courage.

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