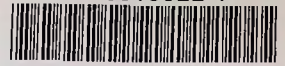


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I N T R O D U C T I O N

This essay is an attempt to trace the development of Magdalena Abakanowicz as a major contemporary sculptor, an innovator, and artistic revolutionary who refused to allow her creativeness be moulded by existing norms in the art world. It places special emphasis on her fibre works and shows how her innovativeness has transformed our expectations of woven objects from being craft to being fine art. Although Abakanowicz expresses herself in a variety of mediums including bronze, stone, fabric and wood sculpture, as well as drawing, painting, film and poetry, she is still best known for her fibre works.

I decided to write about this Polish artist not only because of her ability and determination but because I can identify with her work, and use of material.

Because Abakanowicz is from an Eastern-bloc country, I found great difficulty in acquiring information. Most of the published works about her are in Polish, German or French. As a result my research was limited to extracting information from catalogues and periodicals. I contacted several galleries around the world who have represented her, requesting information, and all were unco-operative with the exception of the Turske and Turske Gallery in Zurich, Switzerland. They informed me about her major retrospective exhibition in Budapest, Hungary, from January 29th - April 3rd of this year (1988), and they sent me the catalogue. This publication has been of enormous benefit to me particularly in relation to her works over the past five years.

Inspite of intensive research, I found great difficulty in obtaining serious, objective critical reviews of Abakanowicz's sculptures. The art critic James Beck writes in his article "Magdalena Abakanowicz in the Apennines" :

"Lamenting that although there had been any number of prestigious and inevitably favourable publications about her in the art press, Magdalena Abakanowicz recently asked me to write some words about her art because writers seemed unwilling to confront the critical issues raised by her sculpture. Much less did they broach the edgy task of a serious evaluation of its merits. She explained with a slightly exasperated air that the commentators more often than not had summarized her career, described her personality and even her appearance".

As a result of this difficulty, the critical comments contained in this essay are limited.

In chapter one I have dealt with her achievement as a major sculptor and traced the development of her works from working with fibre to eventually working with the harder traditional materials of bronze and stone.

Chapter two deals with her development through her childhood, the war years, her student days and her initial introduction to weaving and sculpture.

In this chapter I have highlighted in particular how her childhood, her close connection with the landscape, and the social and political realities of the time have played an important role in the development and content of Abakanowicz's art.

In the third chapter I begin by highlighting that when Abakanowicz began to work with fibre there was already a movement in the art world for the inclusion of all kinds of materials in works of art. As Allan Kaprow wrote in his seminal article, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" :

"Objects of every sort are materials for the new art:
paint, chairs, food, electric and neon light, smoke,
water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things
will be discovered by the present generation of artists".²

I do not wish to get involved to any great extent in the debate regarding the validity of craft as art. I do however, investigate the position of tapestry and weaving in the 1960's when Abakanowicz began to work with weavings, and to trace her pioneering role in the development of fibre as a medium for sculpture.

My fourth and final chapter looks closely at her works and the bold statements she made as to her reasons for using soft materials:

"If my thoughts and imaginings -
just as I will turn to earth, so will the forms that
I create... and this is good.
There is so little room".³

At that time, Abakanowicz felt that to make something more durable than herself would add to the imperishable rubble heaps, crowding our environment.

At the end of this chapter I have highlighted how over the past four years Abakanowicz has made a dramatic change in her range of mediums which now includes bronze and stone. After decades of intensive work with installations made from soft materials she has now turned to using these harder traditional materials. Her two major works in bronze and stone are outdoor pieces related to the landscape, and mark a watershed in the development of Abakanowicz's career.

FOOTNOTES

1. James Beck, "Magdalena Abakanowicz in the Apennines".
Arts Vol. 61, No. 4 December, 1986 p.30.
2. Allan Kaprow, "The legacy of Jackson Pollock".
Arts News, (October 1985), p.56.
3. "Contemporary Artists", London, 1983 p.7.

CHAPTER I

ABAKANOWICZ'S DEVELOPMENT

Magdalena Abakanowicz is considered by many artists and critics to be the foremost artist working with fibre in the world to-day. The fact that she is now regarded as a leading sculptor as well, indicates how far she has come since her innovative, imposing woven Abakans of the early 1960's. Her woven forms led the way for experimentation by many artists with fibre as a medium for expression or as a medium for the making of art. Abakanowicz's work has had the strength to break with the tradition of tapestry going back to the Middle Ages. She was among the first to bring the wall hanging down from its time honoured place right into the middle of the room. In doing so she wished to abolish the barrier separating Man from the work of art, to physically reach the onlooker, to win him over and to envelope him on all sides.

Abakanowicz had critical recognition and encouragement for her achievements since almost the beginning of her career. As early as 1968 in the catalogue for her exhibition at the Helmpaus, Zurich, organizer Erika Billeter states :

"...the name of Magdalena Abakanowicz has become a symbol of the contemporary art of weaving. She had most determinedly contributed to the liberation of weaving from its role of decoration and wall ornament and to freeing it from its long lasting dependence on painting. What Abakanowicz has begun is not a revival in tapestry making, but a revolution".

It has been a constant struggle for her, in her life and art. Living as she did in a poor and bureaucratic country, and having to work in restricted spaces. It has also been extremely difficult for her to break with the limitations of her material and the tapestry tradition itself. Over twenty five years ago, Abakanowicz initiated a totally new approach to the use of fibre. Her ambition was to expose the integrity of this material as a vehicle of serious artistic expression with no utilitarian function attached to it. She used sisal and other fibres in completely new ways technically and formally. Using weaving materials and techniques associated for past centuries with crafts she made an extraordinary bold statement that is very different from anything produced by weavers in the past. Abakanowicz's approach to fibre has served as an inspiration for the international development of art in fibre.

In relation to her use of fibre as a medium for sculpture Abakanowicz states :

"I am interested in weaving technique only to the extent that I require it as a technical means. In weaving I have simply found a material that exactly fits my needs and imagination. After all, wood is used to make not only chairs".²

The Abakans were her first important works in the 1960's. These were huge, coarsely woven forms that are usually tubular or circular abstract shapes. They incorporate folds, open slits, and wrapped protruding elements.

These pieces were conceived three dimensionally, first projecting from the walls and then fully sculptural, hanging free in space. Other pieces within the group of Abakans are known as Black Garments. They are rectangular forms extending from floor to ceiling, rounded at the top and are suggestive of giant headless figures. Their dark colour and large scale give them the presence of judges hovering over us.

Early in 1970, Abakanowicz expanded upon the figurative idea, taking the actual human form as the basis for several cycles of works known as the Alterations. In a series of headless Seated Figures and torsos called Backs, she used the material burlap, string and other fibres, and cast these forms by pressing these materials into a plaster mould. She did this to create multiple works that, like human beings themselves, retain their unique individuality. Abakanowicz also dealt solely with the abstracted forms of the head. In a series of Heads which stood 42 inches high, she traced the effect on human beings of to-day's artificial environment and unlimited stress. The heads are shown at first calmly contained within the skins wrapping, later the seams open and spill out their insides.

The Heads were very important as they led to Embryology. The ovoid forms, previously upright and all the same size are now multiplied into hundreds of pieces of different sizes. Here the use of semi-transparent gauze and nylon in addition to the coarser burlap made it possible for Abakanowicz to reveal sections of their tangled insides.

Embryology marked a culmination point in her use of soft materials. Later she began to use another fibrous natural material: wood. She bound together small birch branches with wire, and formed a series of ovoid forms entitled pregnant.

The Abakans seem to represent an abstract phase of Abakanowicz's work, with the Garments as transitional and the Alterations more figurative, this distinction is not quite as rigid as it may at first seem. She has always made reference to the human body in her art, and fibre is well suited to the organic concepts evident in both directions of her art: the Abakans and the Alterations. The Abakans have a fleshy look about them. Huge openings and thick folded areas appear like vaginal forms and in their female associates these Abakans can be seen as aggressive, sexual shapes. Her use of the figure in the early 1970's shifts the focus of her work from the internal to the external. While some of the series deal literally with the human form, the figure as an abstract shape was employed to create the Heads Embryology, and Pregnant - all titles which reinforce the figuration reference. A lot of the energy in her art can be attributed to this constant dialogue between representational and abstract concerns.

Her approach to media was also different, as she wove all the Abakans, while she wrapped, stitched, or moulded already existing materials for the Alterations. Here again the Garments mark the transition since the most important works in this group incorporate mantles of black-dyed burlap sacking laid over black woven structures.

This sacking has gone on to become the primary substance for all her later works in fibre. She used industrial tarpaulins, in an untitled installation at the Malmo Konsthall. Thus Abakanowicz steadily moved away from weaving towards the use of pre-existent material, for example. burlap, gauze and the rope. She used the rope as a means of defining and manipulating space. Abakanowicz began using the rope in her work around 1970, which parallels the use of this medium in the work of Jackie Winsor, Robert Morris, Eva Hesse and other contemporaries.

Abakanowicz's work is most of all an expression of the most intense of human emotions. The Abakans of her earlier career possess a youthful aggressive energy and a larger than life scale. They take on a mysterious quality when combined in installations, and appear to challenge the notion that they were made by human hands alone. The Seated Figures, Backs and Heads have a very different tenor, and as such also have autobiographical implications. They appear to mark a more mature period and a growing consciousness and concern for man. They speak not only about economic plight and physical poverty, but also more importantly about the poverty of the mind, and the breaking down of man's spirit. Embryology is about the process of birth and growth in human beings and in nature and the changes that bodies or earth undergo when cut or altered.

In 1973, Abakanowicz moved to using ready-made cloth. This move helped to encourage more widespread interest and knowledge of her work, as the distinction between hand-made and ready-made materials had very often been used as criteria to distinguish craft from art. Abakanowicz regards her earlier woven works as ultimate failures, not on aesthetic grounds, but in terms of critical response and appreciation. Despite the great acclaim they have aroused over the years, the Abakans are to-day talked about as tapestry or weaving. It is their woven quality that seemingly locks them into this field.

Abakanowicz's move around 1984 to include the harder traditional mediums of bronze and stone opened up a whole new dimension to her art. She no longer confines them in Gallery installations, but arranges these harder medium in permanent arrangements in the landscape.

One of the Abakanowicz's major works in bronze is the multi-figural composition Katarsis. It was executed in 1985, and belongs to the same sphere of subjects as the Alterations. Consisting of thirty-three monumental figures cast in bronze, it stands in the open space of the "Spazi d'Arte", a collection of contemporary art near Pistoia, Italy. Until then, she had declared a close link with her works. The material she used was as frail as the human body if not frailer.

In 1987, she executed a composition in stone for the Billy Rose Sculpture Garden of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

This thirty seven metre long sculpture called Negev consists of seven monumental wheels hewn from rough rocks found by Abakanowicz in the Negev Desert. The spectator is invited to walk among these unevenly spaced round white stones, three metres in diameter and observe the rough surfaces built of layers of fossils.

Abakanowicz's next composition in the open air will be in Seoul later on this year (1988). The design comprises a group of scattered, loosely arranged figures, however, she will decide on the materials on site, once she has seen the qualities of the local landscape.

In expanding her mediums, Abakanowicz has never broken away from her former works and problems. In a strange way she recurs to certain constant truths. She has created a type of ambiguous forms with complex structure and, of these a certain type of space.

Abakanowicz continues to broaden her experience. She makes drawings, oil paintings, short films, and writes poetry. She writes metaphoric texts referring to her childhood, human condition, brain structure, mythology and religion. At the same time she makes series of charcoal drawings called Faces and Bodies as well as the cycle Incarnations a series of 60 cast bronze faces.

The one person exhibitions are very important in her creative activity. She arranges each as separate works of art, as spaces for contemplation. Abakanowicz has installed over 60 of them in museums of Europe, both Americas, Australia and Japan, considering them as her intimate contact with people. However, her recent works placed permanently in outdoor spaces, has made her aware that constant immobility is stronger than changing situations.

Since 1965 she has been teaching at the Academy of Fine Arts in Pognan, and lives and works in Warsaw.

FOOTNOTES

1. Cited by John Hallmark Neff, Abakanowicz (Chicago) 1982, p.8.
2. Danuta Wroblewska, "Magdalena Abakanowicz: She confronts the viewer with textile as object and environment".
Crafts Horizons, October, 1970, p.23.

"In my childhood, when I began to see the world, I
 felt a desire. There was the bridge between me and
 the world. I was frightened by the world."

CHAPTER II

ABAKANOWICZ'S BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCES

The early ideas are apparent in her work and are highlighted
 in her poem titled Life, written by Abakanowicz in 1976.

This philosophical writing reflects her efforts to find meaning
 and was viewed as an introduction to the collection "Life",
 which she organized for the Museum of Modern Art in the late
 1970's. The show included Surrealism, Symbolism and Primitive
 Art, as well as work by Alfred Hirschfeld, Joseph Beuys, the
 French, Dutch, German and American figures.

"In my childhood, when I began to use my hands, I built objects. They were the bridge between me and the reality. I was frightened by the reality".¹

It is difficult to imagine Magdalena Abakanowicz frightened of anything but she insists that this was the genesis of her artistic career. The adult versions of Abakanowicz's childhood objects have brought her international acclaim with more than 100 groups and 60 solo exhibitions in the past 28 years. She was the only Polish artist selected for "An International Survey of Recent Paintings and Sculpture", at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1984. From 1982 - 1985 a touring retrospective exhibition of Abakanowicz's work from the 1970's and 80's was organized by Mary Jane Jacob, chief curator of Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, it was presented at the institution and in Montreal, Portland (Oregon), Boston, Dallas, Anchorage and Los Angeles.

The early links are apparant in her work and are highlighted in her poems titled Soft, written by Abakanowicz in 1979. (This metaphorical writing explains her affinity for soft materials and was printed as an introduction to the exhibition "Soft", which she organized for the Kunstmuseum in Zurich, in the late 1970's. The show included Surrealist, Dadaist and Primitive Art, as well as works by Claes Oldenburg, Joseph Beuys, Eva Hesse, Lucia Fontana and Antonio Tapies.)

Abakanowicz describes her experience as a small child :

"...crouching over a swampy pond, watching tadpoles...

Through the thin membrane covering their distended bodies, the tangle of intestine was clearly visible.

Heavy with the process of transformation sluggish, they provoked one to reach for them. Pulled out onto the shore with a stick, touched carelessly, the swollen bellies burst. The contents leaked out in a confusion of knots.

...The never fully explained mystery of the interior, soft and perishable".²

Abakanowicz's poems are metaphorical but are based on her observations as a child growing up on a 5,000 acre estate ten miles outside Warsaw. Her family was descended from Polish nobility. (Her surname derives from Abaka-Khan, a 13th Century Mongolian ancestor who controlled what is now Iran). Abakanowicz led a cosseted existence in the 32 room 17th Century Mansion. But by her own account she had a lonely childhood, with no friends her own age. She was cared for by nurses.

"Mother appeared rarely ... She brought unease to my entire world: the women grew silent, I became timid, almost frightened. I wanted to please her, to deserve her attention. Some years later, I learned and came to understand: She had passionately wanted a son. My birth was a terrible disappointment to her".³

Abakanowicz's father was always a distant head figure of whom she saw very little. One day she became really ill.

"When father came, I understood the uncommonness of this sickness, and of my importance because of it. For once at least. As never before. I now existed. I was me. An important reason for concern of all... Time passed. I felt better and regretted it. When it was all over responsibility for myself returned. And the fears. And like a treasure I carried the meaning of that helplessness which had been accepted".⁴

At six when teachers were introduced, Abakanowicz was too shy to answer questions. She escaped to the river, where she would push a canoe through the tall reeds. As a self described loner she says she preferred solitary walks, where she felt closest to nature. She hoarded twigs, stones and shards - the stuff that would later inspire her art. These experiences are described in her autobiographical prose poem Portrait X 20.

"There I belonged. With concentration for hours, I looked at the grass and the water, I wanted to subordinate myself to them. So that I might understand the mysteries which separated me from them".⁵

The sculptures that eventually resulted embody that sense of wonder and ephemerality. The direction of Abakanowicz's art was influenced not only by the Polish landscape but also by the social and political realities of the time.

After Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, she and her family lived in fear. In 1943 she saw Nazi Soldiers break into her home and shoot her mother. Bullets severed her Mother's arm from her right shoulder and wounded her left hand.

"The capable, wise hand suddenly became a piece of meat, separate. I looked at it with amazement. I had seen dead bodies, but they somehow had always preserved their completeness in front of others".⁶

Fragments of the human body, including a single hand in The Hand, 1976, recur throughout her work, (See ill. 18).

After the Soviet "liberation" of Poland in 1945, Abakanowicz and her family moved to Warsaw.

"As our home and the countryside receded, I felt increasingly hollow. As if my insides had been removed and the extension, unsupported by anything, shrank losing its form".⁷

In Warsaw her parents had to sell many of their possessions in order to survive. Later they made a living by running a newspaper kiosk.

These wartime experiences have certainly coloured Abakanowicz's art, but she refutes the suggestion that any specific political comment is intended. Her 1976-82 works, Back for example, (See ill. 14 and 15) consists of 80 separate forms, hollow men made from moulded burlap, without heads or limbs, that sit in rows facing a blank wall.

One figure sits in a log cage. The huge Heads from the early 1970's, (See ill.11) with their split expressionless faces, look similarly tortured. Since the disbanding of the free trade union solidarity in 1981 and the imposition of martial law in Poland, critics have tended to apply contemporary political readings to her sculpture. But Abakanowicz insists :

"All experiences of war are important to every human being. But I'm not illustrating. I speak only in a metaphoric way. It's larger about men in general. In every country something is happening - here, in Italy, in South America. Everywhere there is a conflict between man, society and government. If I talk about problems, its global. Everything I do is about the human condition. I'm interested in the different beliefs of man, his mythology, the science man makes as well as his rituals and his religions".⁸

For example, when she showed Backs in 1980, she was asked, 'Is this a concentration camp in Auschwitz ? Or is it the dance of Ramayana in Bali ? Or is it the ritual ceremony in Peru ? and Abakanowicz answered yes to all of these questions, because it is all of these.

Abakanowicz's aversion to narrow political messages in art may be traced in part to her experiences as a student at the Academy of Fine Art in Warsaw, where she enrolled in 1950, after one year of study in Sopot. Because she was very poor she lived with 15 other students in one room.

At the same time she was forced to hide her privileged background, as children of pre-war aristocracy were denied higher education.

During the 1950's Stalinist doctrine and Socialist Realism prevailed in Poland. Abakanowicz could not produce the desired illustrational effects, however, -"just large smudgy things". Abakanowicz resisted instruction liking neither rules nor prescriptions, "these enemies of the imagination".

In the essay by Jasia Reichardt for the Catalogue accompanying Abakanowicz's touring retrospective exhibition in America from 1982-85, the artist recalled the frustration of her academy days. The Sopat art School was liberal at the time and the academy in Warsaw was not. Abakanowicz liked to draw. The professor would come with an eraser and rub out every unnecessary line on her drawing, leaving a thin, dry contour. She hated him for it. She liked the transparency of oil paint laid on a white primed canvas. The professor did not allow her to paint in this way. He said that they were accidental affects. Abakanowicz got bad grades and hated the academy.

"Artistic studies were a terrible disappointment to me. My imagination refused to yield to the binding rules and canons, and my flesh crept in contact with accepted aesthetics; fashionable philosophies were unreconcilable with mine I wanted to graduate as soon as possible and run away from all the established trends, from people who made up recipes, knew beforehand what art should be like, and had no doubts about what was good and what was bad".⁹

Even to-day, though Abalanowicz gives classes at the University of Poznan, she maintains that "art cannot be taught", and insists :

"You can only develop what the person has inside or help a person find his or her own way".¹⁰

Despite her poor grades, Abakanowicz graduated in 1954. She realised how much she was against all that was accepted and how her imagination did not fit into any existing movements. She had to find her own way. So in her spare time at home she painted enormous gouaches of imaginery plants.

Her small apartment could't accomodate such large-scale work and she persuaded a professor at the Academy to let her use one of the Studios at night. Impressed by her work, he encouraged her to enter her paintings at the 1955 competition sponsored by the Co-operative for the promotion of the Popular Arts in Poland.

Abakanowicz won the competition and part of her prize was to have her paintings used for fabric design. She was annoyed because her plants painted on paper had nothing to do with designs for tapestry. They simply were paintings in their own right and were not intended to be repeats or for decoration. They were paintings not cartoons, to be reproduced. Because they found their way into this competition and won, suddenly they became something that should be practical and utilitarian.

She was invited to collaborate on other fabric design projects.

These efforts proved frustrating and influenced by the criticism of several people that her painting "lacked solidity" she decided to try weaving. Returning to the Academy to learn weaving, she realized that she did not want to be taught the conventional methods as she could not stand the restrictions and principles and left the Academy.

So she constructed her own frame loom and taught herself. The first three competitions done on this loom, made her realize that there was something mysterious about the uneven surface that gradually became a composition in its own right. She later states that she started weaving because,

"I wanted to get as far as possible from all the established forms. It is easy to follow, but it is uninteresting to do easy things. We find out about ourselves only when we take risks. For me there is nothing to follow in art, because art that follows is not art".¹¹

Abakanowicz wanted to question all the rules and habits connected with this material. Soft is comfortable and useful. It is obedient, wrapping our bodies. It deadens the sound of footsteps. It covers walls decoratively and warmly. It is practical and easy on the eye. Accompanying our civilization from its very beginning its role has been defined and governed by our needs and habits.

That is why Abakanowicz found the struggle with these acquired habits so fascinating. She wanted to show qualities overlooked through the blindness of habit, the autonomous qualities, to show all that this material could be as a liberated carrier of its own organic nature.

And so Abakanowicz discovered this soft and powerful medium. Yet she made a few other experiments with other mediums in the late 1950's and early 60's. She made small sculptures and reliefs from wood and cork. In 1965 one of these sculptures was used as a model for a huge seven metre high steel sculpture which still stands on location in Elblonk in Poland. In the interview with Judith Bumpas in 1974, Abakanowicz discussed why she abandoned using steel,

"I felt my metal sculptures were too rigid and when I had finished them nothing could be changed. But woven material can move. It can react to people and react when they touch it. It can move too in the wind when I put it outside. It has a life which no other material has".¹²

In 1960 Abakanowicz had her first solo exhibition at a hall belonging to the Ministry of Culture in Warsaw. Her work caught the eye of Maria Lasgkiewicz, a professional weaver, and a year later she added Abakanowicz's name to a list of names being compiled of the best known weavers to represent Poland in the 1st. International Biennial of Tapestry, in Lausanne.

The weaving metamorphosed into the Abakans named by the Polish art critic Anka Ptazkowska, who declared that they were neither Gobelins or traditional weavings and should therefore take their name from that of the Artist. When Abakanowicz won the gold medal at Sao Paulo in 1965, not as a weaver but as an artist, this was tremendous breakthrough for her and for fibre art. In the light of this it was not surprising that estimable American galleries added weavers to their list of artists - Jagoda Buie, Lenore Tawney and Claire Zeisler.

Abakanowicz gained rapid approved popularity in Europe and America, and became a symbol representing new perspectives for the art of weaving and for the avant-garde as a whole. Her artistic development was stimulated largely by her contacts with avant-garde artists grouped around the Constructivist Painter Henryk Stozewski, who was a special friend, and who inspired her work for many years through his attitude towards life, inner discipline, and wisdom. Abakanowicz met the painter Maria Eva Lunkiewicz (Mewa) and Roman Owidzki, on her first visit abroad in 1957 when she joined a tour in Italy, organised by the Polish Artists' Union. These people gave her support, encouragement, an introduction to the world of ideas, and standards vital to a young beginner. Her friendship with Mewa lasted until the latter's death in 1967, after which, Abakanowicz wrote, she felt much alone.

Her work is in many private and public collections, for example, The Art Institute of Chicago, U.S.A.; The Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth; The Museum of Modern Art in Lodz, Poland;

Centre Georges Pompidou, Musee National d'Art Moderne, Paris;
 The Kyoto National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, Japan; Denver
 Art Museum, Colorado, U.S.A.; Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem, The
 Netherlands; Kulturhistoriska Museet, Lund, Sweden; and The
 Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

FOOTNOTES

1. Cited by Hunter Drohojowska, "Magical Mystery Tours",
Arts News - September 1985, p.108.
2. Ibid. p.111.
3. Magdalena Abakanowicz, Abakanowicz (Chicago), 1982, p.19.
4. Ibid. p.23.
5. Cited by Hunter Drohojowska, "Magical Mystery Tours",
Art News - September 1985, p.111.
6. Magdalena Abakanowicz, Abakanowicz (Chicago), 1982, p.27.
7. Ibid.
8. Cited by Hunter Drohojowska, "Magical Mystery Tours",
Art News - September 1985, p.112.
9. Magdalena Abakanowicz, Abakanowicz (Budapest), 1988, p.15.
10. Magdalena Abakanowicz, Abakanowicz (Chicago), 1982, p.37.

11. Cited by Hunter Drohojowska, "Magical Mystery Tours",
Art News - September 1985, p.p.112.113.
12. Cited by Judith Bumpus, "Rope Environments",
Art and Artists - October 1974, p.37.

CHAPTER III

TAPESTRY REVIVAL

The metamorphosis of the Art Fabric in recent years is parallel with that of other visual arts. They share the same artistic currents and enjoy experimentation and manipulation of materials. Painting is no longer limited to the application of pigment to canvas or wood; sculpture is no longer limited to stone or wood carving, modelling or casting. In the "Bauhaus Manifesto", Walter Gropius states :

"Architects, sculptors and painters we must all return to the crafts..... There is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman".¹

The eminent art critic Barbara Rose states :

"Such distinctions separating the 'minor' arts of photography, film, graphics and the various crafts from the 'major' arts of architecture, painting and sculpture are status distinctions imposed at the end of the Middle Ages when the guilds disappeared to be replaced by the Renaissance".²

What was needed was to dispense with the distinction between the major and the minor arts and think in terms of quality alone.

"The quality of art lies in concept and quality insight, not in materials or tools".³

Because the art world had grown larger than ever before, scholars, critics and institutions had to re-assess what range of materials could be considered in a work of art.

"Objects of every sort are materials for the new art".⁴

So the art world began to discard the historical hierarchies of genres, materials and techniques. Yet for a long time the crafts, even when clearly outside the category of utility were generally assigned a lower status than the fine arts.

It was at the turn of the 20th century, that the scope of the crafts changed in Europe, while painting was being enriched by new concepts, weaving, although connected with painting by the practice of cartoons prepared by eminent painters, made changes concerned only with the external composition. The decorative quality of the tapestry was for long years valued above any other feature.

Creative independence was attained in the 1960's, by the generation of artists educated in the post war world, whose intention was the integration of the arts. Innovation started not in France, which might be expected, as it still remained formally the European homeland of artistic weaving, but it started in Poland, Yugoslavia and in the Netherlands.

It is believed that the international success of the Polish artist/weavers is associated with the impact of the 1st. International Biennial of Tapestry in Lausanne in 1962. The Biennial was started by Jean Lurcat and has since become an important and vital institution.

Early in the 1960's, Lurcat explained to them the definition of an Artistic fabric :

"What is an artistic fabric ? It is a cartoon woven on loom by a specially trained craftsman".⁵

He spoke out against the making of a cartoon by copying an existing work of art and then rendering this image as a tapestry. His aim was to involve artists in creating new designs for tapestries by making cartoons specifically for that purpose. This was regarded as being the first step in liberating weaving from its role of being subservient to works in other mediums. Abakanowicz visited weaving workshops in Franc in 1962 and found that these specially made cartoons still had very basic limitations. The artist and the weaver worked independently, never meeting one another, the scale of the cartoon was always one to one, and it was divided into numbered areas to indicate colour of limited choice. Most of the new French tapestries were designed by painters of the School of Paris and executed by Professional weavers in Aubusson, Beauvais or Paris.

At the 1st. Biennial all but two exhibitions gave the name of weaving workshop responsible for the actual production of their work. Abakanowicz who exhibited Composition of White Forms, and other Polish participants who also did their own weaving, nevertheless gave as their workshop, "Atelier Experimental de l'Union des Artistes Polonais" - a heroic name for Maria Laszkiewicz's basement in which they all worked.

However, three years later at the next Biennial, Abakanowicz was among 19 exhibitions out of eighty-five, who said they did their own weaving. Attitudes changed rapidly; by 1979, in the catalogue of the 9th. Biennial, thirty-five out of forty two artists said that the execution of the exhibits was their own.

From its initiation the fundamental aim of the Centre International de la Tapisserie Ancienne et Moderne - CITAM, has been to promote the development of tapestry as a 'living art', and it is for this reason that the scope of the exhibition has been continually widened so as to be able to cover new concepts and functions in textile art. Movement has been towards inclusion of sculptural and experimental work.

So over the years the idea of what was meant by a tapestry has changed dramatically from that of the formal Larousse dictionary definition.

"Work for decorating a wall or furniture, made on a loom, or by needle by crossing parallel coloured threads".⁶

Now the tapestry artist would seem to aim at taking over the function of sculpture, of a semi-architectural spatial design in the form of 'environmental tapestry'.

When in 1965 and 1967 Eastern bloc countries sent hangings to compete with paintings and sculpture at the Sao Paulo Biennale, the works found acceptance as well as critical and editorial acclaim. After Abakanowicz subsequently won the gold medal there as an artist, the word weaver no longer seemed adequate to describe them and a new term had to be found.

Flat tapestries and wall hangings gave way to works hanging in space and to objects made of materials that had little to do with those of the traditional weaver.

A good example of this development can be seen in Abakanowicz's Abakan's (See ill.1-7).

The beginning of 1969 was a breakthrough for weavers and craftsmen in general. Three major exhibitions took place. The first at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum from January to March. The second was at New York's Museum of Modern Art from February to May with an exhibition called 'Wall Hangings', while the third was at London's Victoria and Albert where a rare one man show for weaver Peter Collingwood was launched from January/March. These exhibitions were indeed good news. The struggle for status was not over, but at least major progress had been made for the validity of craft media as art.

In the three exhibitions only half of the pieces were woven; knotting, knitting, wrapping, crocheting, and unnamed techniques edged towards dominance. Thus the title for two of the exhibitions proved inadequate. The Stedelijk used the title "Textiel", which correctly applied to woven fabrics only, while the Museum of Modern Arts title 'Wall Hangings' was correct except that some pieces were neither wall hung or hanging at all. In the catalogue that accompanied this exhibition 'Wall Hangings', it states:

"The development of the last ten years have caused us to revise our concepts of this craft and to view the work within the context of the twentieth-century Art".⁷

The editors of Craft Horizons asked internationally - known

sculptor Louise Bourgeois, whose background in weaving gave her special interest in the show, to comment on the 'Wall Hanging' exhibition. Bourgeois stated:

"These are all non-functional weavings, many of them constructed off the loom ... They have been called woven forms or objects because although they must use traditional methods or materials, they are not made for traditional purposes".⁸

When Bourgeois was asked if she felt in these works any reaching towards the space of sculpture ? her response was very negative, in that she states :

"I have found the medium of weaving incompatible with sculpture".⁹

She felt that the emptiness and the fullness which was essential to the space and volume of sculpture was absent, because there was a background that was never really pierced except with some of the pieces, by vertical slits. However, these slits were not holes, just warps separated and pulled apart. As an example, she refers to Abakanowicz's work, and states she would like to have seen her weaving with real openings, these openings are necessary to bring in three-dimensionality which is a prerequisite of sculpture. Bourgeois felt that these weavings, delightful as they were, must be classified somewhere between fine and applied art. She also felt that the exhibition could have been a little wilder and that the show only began to explore the possibilities of textiles.

However, a very different reaction to Abakanowicz's work is expressed by Jack Lenor Larsen, who was asked also by the editors of Craft Horizon to report on the Stedelijk textile show, which as I have already pointed out took place almost simultaneously with 'Wall Hangings' in New York. This can somewhat be attributed perhaps to the fact that all the Stedelijk pieces are major; most are monumental and all are recent. Larsen states :

"Magdalena Abakanowicz's pieces fill space and conquer it".¹⁰

"Her work tends to dominate through her usual elements of scale and monolithic vigor. The two black pieces are all black-sharp shiny black. Their black stallion forms slash the surrounding space with the brute vigor of the late Franz Kline. Size is important.... but not because of bigness, rather they are heroic".¹¹

"Of all living artists she is to me the most like Picasso, since she shares his fierce strength, his innate creativity, his prolific and changing output".¹²

Larsen refers to Abakanowicz's Ronde Abakan (See ill.5) as a cylindrical, complex black sculpture of great height. Her second piece Zwart Kleed is also conceived in the round. It is meant to be walked around and through, with an inner cavity large enough for three people. I wonder how Louise Bourgeois would have felt about these pieces, would she have approved of Larsen's reference to them as sculpture ?

Abakanowicz exhibited more and more out of Poland. She encountered varied reactions to her work and critics found it increasingly difficult to find a suitable way of discussing it. Critics and journalists became apologetic for introducing into the context of fine art works which had been made with materials and techniques of a traditional craft. Two characteristics however, were repeatedly mentioned in reviews; the loss of utilitarian function; and second the departure from the traditional form of the wall hanging.

Abakanowicz continued to introduce new ideas into the realm of weaving. She was well aware that would be initially outside any accepted canon, but that from this uncomfortable position she would bring about changes. In relation to her revolutionary

Abakans Abakanowicz states :

"Among the complex reasons for my making them was that I was anxious to prove to myself and to others that in spite of the entire tradition and limitations of weaving as a craft, I would be able to transform it into a pure art, I would make my own objects, useless in practical terms but conveying their unique philosophy, like painting and sculpture.... which would free me from the binding categories.... and allow me to do things my way".¹³

This is just what happened, and since the 6th Biennial in 1972, when she showed a vast wooden wheel and a rope (See ill.9) the exhibition has since included many extraordinary objects totally

innocent of the loom. In 1977, Cis Amaral reviewing the 8th Biennial writes :

"Tapestry used as a medium for sculpture was to be found in its most dramatic and emotive form in Magdalena Abakanowicz's group of twenty headless, crouching forms in muted grey fabric".¹⁴

So the Artists of the fibre medium have found new freedom - freedom from the loom, and perhaps more importantly or at least more universal, a transformation of purpose - the freedom to choose an aesthetic over a utilitarian need.

Abakanowicz uses weaving not because of the presence of materials and techniques, but because of the presence of rich ideas.

The difference between the weavings of Abakanowicz and craftsmen consists in the different localization of the idea of weaving in each of the two concepts. In handicrafts, weaving is the inevitable result of the use of hands, tools and materials. But for Abakanowicz the hands, tools and material are subjected to her will, a concept which acts as a dynamic force completing the action of the hands. Abakanowicz stands beyond the old classifications of Art as 'pure' or 'useful' to her only the material and imagination exist.

FOOTNOTES

1. Cited by Peter Selz, "Knots and Bolts"
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2. Mildred Constantine and J. Lenor Larsen,
Beyond Craft The Art Fabric p.7.
3. Ibid p.8.
4. Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock",
Art News (October 1985) p.56.
5. Danuta Wroblewska, "Magdalena Abakanowicz :
She confronts the viewer with Textile as Object and
Environment", Craft Horizons, 30.5 (October 1970) p.19.
6. Cis Amaral, "What is Tapestry",
Art and Artists, August 1977. p.5.
7. Louise Bourgeois, "The Fabric of Construction at Museum
of Modern Art", Craft Horizons, 29.2 (March-April 1969) p.31.
8. Ibid
9. Ibid

10. Jack Lenor Larsen, "The New Weaving"
Craft Horizons, March / April 1969. p.50.
11. Ibid. p.27.
12. Ibid.
13. Magdalena Abakanowicz, Abakanowicz (Budapest 1988),
p.15.
14. Cis Amaral, "What is Tapestry", Art and Artists,
August 1977. p.5.

CHAPTER IV

HER WORKS

Abakanowicz started her career as an artist with bold, colourful paintings on pieces of cloth and from these she turned to weaving. Out of weaving she made three-dimensional forms and spatial arrangements. She then abandoned weaving and started to use ready-made cloth. In 1977, she started to write, 'Portrait X 20' belongs to that period. Since then she has made short films. In 1984, she started to use bronze, in 1987 stone, and places these works out in the landscape. She now continues to make three-dimensional forms from a variety of mediums and to organize space.

The contact between Abakanowicz and her materials is of great importance. In her earlier works she uses horsehair, flax, wool and sisal - all of these not only have the sensitivity that all organic things possess, but they are also traditional materials with a past.

"I needed a material which embodied age, which contained the whole of our history".¹

So Abakanowicz using only fingers and hands started to weave fibre constructions.

"Between myself and the material with which I create, no tool intervenes. I select it with my hands. My hands transmit my energy to it. In translating idea into form, they always pass on to it something that eludes conceptualization. They reveal the unconscious".²

Abakanowicz worked with fibre in order to stress, as Constantine and Larsen point out.

"...Our affinity to fibre as related to the fibrous world we live in - the grasses and trees, food-stuffs and flowers. She senses the fibre of our hair, skin and tissue. And she forcibly projects these insights into both individual statements".³

She rarely used colour in her forms, because she felt that colour would impose itself too much. She liked natural colours.

Abakan is the name given to the majority of her woven sculptures (See ill. 107). These forms were independent of the walls and existed in space. In creating them Abakanowicz did not want to relate to either tapestry or sculpture. Her aim was to create possibilities for complete communion with an object whose structure is complex and soft. Through cracks and openings she tried to get the viewer to penetrate into the deepest reaches of the composition.

The Abakans have three basic shapes for example, rectangular, round or oval. The third shape belongs to those Abakans which Abakanowicz has called Garments (See ill. 7). These Garments suggest mantles or jackets over long skirts or trousers, and are reminiscent of giant headless peasants, ghosts, or trees. They are monumental some standing over 16 feet tall. Critic John Russell described them as :

"Barbaric, bizarre and distinctly unlike anything else".⁴

One of the main points of Abakan wrote Paul Overy is :

"... the fact that it hangs and therefore functions quite differently from something that goes on a wall".⁵

Many of the works have individual titles. Some of them are called by the name of the month or by their shape. However, Abakanowicz does not always use titles believing them to be a purely administrative necessity.

Abakanowicz's most ambitious work in the Abakan cycle is called Bois-le Duc (See ill.4) and is installed in the reception hall of North Brabant government building in Hertogenbosch the Netherlands. It is the largest of all Abakanowicz's works, measuring eight-by-twenty-by two metres. It's an enormous, hairy, heavy black composition like most of her work of the early 1970's.

Those in charge of the Commission did not know what to make of this strange tapestry. They hovered around as it was being assembled complaining and giving increasing signs of their disquiet. It took over six months to complete. Visitors liked it, and in the end, much to their own amazement so did those in charge.

Abakanowicz's rope has travelled to many parts of the world playing different roles in every place.

In 1970 in Sodertalje it hung in an enormous tangle from the ceiling, terminating in a three pronged green carrot. In 1971 in Pasadena, after traversing the space between ceiling and floor it came to rest coiled on a large brass bed (See ill.8). In 1980 it was in the Polish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale where it curved around a huge wooden wheel (See ill.9). In a sense her use of the rope is free because she can create something different with it at each exhibition. Perhaps her most avant-garde use of it and one which aroused most public interest was at Edinburgh Festival in 1972. In a discussion with the art critic Judith Bumpus, Abakanowicz tells us how it came about.

When Abakanowicz arrived in Edinburgh she realized that the gallery space wasn't large enough to show all the works she had brought over. So sitting there and thinking for over a week, it came to her. She saw Edinburgh as a monumental city. Looking at the facade of the Demarco Gallery she thought of bringing the rope through it into the Gallery and out again of the windows where her exhibition was. It disappeared on the top of the building. Then it re-appeared on Edinburgh Cathedral which you could see from the exhibition room, and from the top of the Cathedral it went to the Chapter House, from the Chapter House in a straight line to the garden and then it disappeared. The rope could be seen from many angles from a long way off and so the environment created by the rope seemed to get larger and larger (See ill.10).

This was only possible in Edinburgh and could never be repeated anywhere else, as it was inspired by that particular city. The people liked it and I think they understood what Abakanowicz meant. Her work is connected with thread and sewing, and this was a sort of sewing through one building and then through another.

Cordelia Oliver, reviewing the exhibition (for the Guardian) writes :

"Magdalena Abakanowicz would need a small barn to do justice to her twisted and woven sisal hangings... She bursts the gallery's bounds with massic black and orange ropes that smack across the roof and down the stone facade pushing in and out of windows on their way".⁶

Abakanowicz has compared the rope to a meandering river, a pathway which changes direction because once there was a good reason for it. But perhaps her affinity to the rope is best illustrated by the following poem which she wrote :

"The rope is to me like a pertified organism, like a muscle devoid of activity. Moving it, changing its position and arrangement, touching it, I can learn its secrets and the multitude of its meanings.

I create forms out of it. I divide space with it.

Rope is to me the condensation of the problem of thread, the thread composed of many fibres whose number nobody tries to establish.

Transported from one place to another it grows old.

It carries its own story within itself, it
contributes this to its surroundings.

I used it in urban landscapes where it became
an echo of the banished organic world. It enables
one to see architecture with all its artificiofality
of hard decorative shell.

I sense its strength which is carried by all
intertwined elements, such as those in a tree,
human hand, or a bird's wing - all built of count-
less co-operating parts".⁷

M.A. 1975.

In 1972 Abakanowicz wanted to reduce the scale of her work
to approximately life size. Her first step was to use
shop mannequins, which she covered in hessian dyed black.
She showed five of them with black balloons in an exhibition
in Dusseldorf, and never again. She realized two things after
this experiment: One that the dummies were far too elegant,
and two that the human body is too complicated. Alterations
followed.

Alterations originally consisted of four groups of works but
is still expanding. One group is called Heads (1973-75)
(See ill. 11).

Jasia Reichard reviewing her Seated Figures refers to them as :

"Ecological Sculpture....

.... The figures are headless, they are identical except for the texture of fibre which forms a root-like surface on the body. They have been interpreted as the judges or the judged, as witnesses, as effigies from the theatre of cruelty".⁹

The third group of works in the Alterations is the series of Backs (1976-82) (See ill.14 and 15). In this series Abakanowicz eliminates legs as well. The Backs are rear views of a man from neck to knees, seated on the ground and leaning forward with curved shoulders. Nancy Stapen reviewing her Backs in Boston in 1984 writes :

"Fifty-four of these figures slumped forward and truncated at the head and knees, were installed in four rows facing a blank gallery wall. Wrenchingly affective, suggesting myriad, sometimes contradictory interpretations of fascist submission, of Jim Jones - style collective suicide, of a prayer group, or of an unknown ritual of infinite waiting".¹⁰

However, Seated Figures and the Backs are often interpreted as political commentaries in light of Abakanowicz's childhood experiences during World War II and the recent declaration of martial law in Poland.

Constructed on metal frames, these bulky objects are stuffed like mattresses and covered in roughly sewn hessian split in places, with hemp occasionally spilling out. These works have been described as creating 'an unforgettable and dramatic experience'. They seem to be stripped of all grandeur, and are made of what is usually contained inside: tow, string, sack-cloth- like skinned human beings. These Heads stand firmly on the ground and they are large, round and without front or back. In referring to them Abakanowicz writes :

".... Heads relate to my fear that to exceed the rate of ones biological rhythms leads to a loss of ability to meditate. I am apprehensive about the consequences suffered through the effect of artificial environment and unlimited stress".⁸

Curiously this is not perceived as a catastrophic vision but rather as a confession and a disclosure.

Then came the Seated Figures (1975-79) (See ill.12 and 13) Abakanowicz found it very important to minimize the many intricate body components demanding attention, so heads and necks were dispensed with. The figures have no hands and no sex. In their final form the bodies are seated on high metal frames. They give the impression that they should be seen from the front because the backs are hollow, but Abakanowicz feels that they are equally important from the rear and really should be seen in the round.

But Abakanowicz does not want to delimit the meaning of her art,

"Politics is coming and going, changing every year
and the work comes from much deeper sources".¹¹
and admits that her work is about existence in general.

With these two series of works, work extended beyond weaving to using whatever materials and techniques were required. Abakanowicz made a plaster cast in two parts of a tall man. Using these moulds she pressed sacking dipped in glue to form positive shapes, and cast the Seated Figures and Backs.

A major and extensive part of Alterations is the Embryology series (1978-81), (See ill.16) which consists of approximately 800 burlap and sisal ovoid forms, some intact, some ruptured, ranging in size from tiny, potato-like forms to huge, boulder-sized forms. Displayed scattered on the floor at Los Angeles' Frederick S. Wright Gallery in 1984 where 6,000 visitors went to see them. Art Critic Hunder Drohojowska states how the viewers gaped fascinated by the 'dun-coloured pods'. They were as long as six feet, as small as six inches, and every size in between, each made of burlap crudely stitched or transparent gauge to reveal the tuberous, raggy filling. Here viewers stopped and stared.

"The pods were as familiar and as cosy as potatoes yet as repellent as a clump of rodents, designed to confound easy interpretation".¹².

Confronted with this observation Abakanowicz responded with a 'slight smile' of agreement.

"Nothing in my work is pretty, because I'm not trying to be pleasant for the viewer. ... I bring him a message".¹³

The use of semi-transparent gauze fabric allows the viewer to see inside, revealing an intravenous interior of tangled threads, while the stitched burlap recalls scars. Nancy Stapen in relation to Embryology writes :

"Round and phallic shapes were massed in profusion to form dark, recessionary spaces alluding to the birth canal. Surrounded by this anomalous multitude of sensual cocoons, one felt the enigma of waiting, the cyclical silent process of birth and morality".¹⁴

Abakanowicz states that the point of the image is to show all that which escapes conceptualization. Her work is full of recognition - people are confronted by forms they know very well from the surrounding world - like stones, seeds or brains. The work is metaphoric. People who look at it see different things because they are rich in meaning.

Here I feel it is apt to include passages from her poem in relation to the Embryology series.

"Carried for a long time in the imagination, shapes ripen ... I become one with the object created. My body grows ugly, exhausted by bringing forth ...

My body gets rid of something ... The effort

of discharge makes it hideous.

In my belly life was never conceived. My hands

shape forms, seeking confirmation of each

individual specimen ... as in leaves produced by

a tree".¹⁵

One of Abakanowicz's more recent cycles of works, started in 1981, and consists of bunches of birch twigs of different sizes bound together with wire and presented as a group. Some are bullous and some spindly. This cycle is called Pregnant (See ill.17) and looks hard to the touch unlike Embryology which appears soft to the touch. These cycles are like the cycles of life, moving from growth to decay.

Abakanowicz's forms appear tragically affected not just by time, but also by the stripping away of their outer cover, the skin. It is the revelation of inner turmoil that characterises the husks of the Backs and even the most delicate of her works, small object or The Hand (See ill.18) Self Portrait (See ill. 19) and The Face sometimes called the Centre made in 1976.

In 1985, Abakanowicz made a series of 6 faces, casts of cotton resin and sand each titled Anonymous Portrait (See ill.20). These faces which could be either male or female rests its chin somewhat uncomfortably on a simple piece of one-by-two piece of wood.

This juxtaposition could serve as a metaphor for all of her work, in which the timeless inevitably collides with modern life.

Female Figures (1985) (See ill.21) is a series of back views of the female in a standing position. These headless, armless figures are shown standing in a line facing the gallery wall in her biggest ever retrospective exhibition in Mucsarnok, Budapest from January 29th - April 3rd of this year (1988).

Also included in this exhibition is her new series the Crowd (See ill.22). These figures were completed in 1987, and like the Female Figures are made of soft materials.

However, a dramatic change in her use of mediums occurred around 1985 when Abakanowicz started to work with bronze. Despite all her earlier statements about not wanting to use hard mediums which 'would add to the imperishable rubble heaps - crowding the environment' she started working with this harder traditional medium. Her most ambitious and major work to date in this new medium is the multi-figural composition Kataris executed in 1985 (See ill.23 and 24). It belongs to the same sphere of subjects as the Alterations. This project was one of enormous physical commitment, intellectual challenge and one that, besides, expands the artistic boundaries of her previous undertakings.

It is located at the base of the Apennines, in the open space of the 'Spazi d'Arte', a collection of contemporary art, commissioned by Giuliano Gori, an entrepreneur. He has put together a formidable collection of contemporary art in the living spaces of his villa, and the restored farm buildings have become a private gallery. In addition, Gori has arranged for sculptors to design works specifically for the vast woodlands that surround the villa not far from the medieval city of Ristioia. Each artist was allowed to select a site and to construct a work to suit the landscape, the nature, the light and their independent styles. Among those represented already are: Richard Serra, Dennis Oppenham, Ann and Patrick Serra, Dennis Karavan, Richard Morris, Alice Aycock, and recently Alberto Burri.

Gori approached Abakanowicz and she selected a field connected with the farm at the outer limits of the property. After several months of frantic activity, thirty three-life sized cast bronze 'statues' have been installed in a grassy field defined by a high ancient stone wall. In this field punctuated by uneven rows of olive trees of differing sizes Abakanowicz planted her 33 inventions. Like the trunks of the ageless trees in adjoining fields, against which they stand to attention her forms have rugged and irregular surfaces. From the back, it is as if 'one is witnessing a naked regiment standing at eternal parade'. The upper portion of the body is cut off, not mutilated or severed, but rather rounded organically.

They are buried in the earth above the ankles; yet despite this their appearance is neither grotesque nor disruptive.

The placement of the symbolically potent number, 33, the age of artist can hardly be considered casual.

They appear to be set in orderly rows from controlled points of observation, but haphazard or at least informal from others. From robust swelling, three-dimensional forms on one side they transform themselves into hollow receptacles, like caskets on their other side.

On the casket side one is tempted, to walk inside to seek protection, but from what ? perhaps the sun or the fall-out from Chernobyl!

Here, the sculptures are permanently fused to their place, unlike her other installations which were light, portable, easily moved transient objects. Birds and insects will make their visits to them, and perhaps children will stumble upon them and play hide and seek in the field. The seasons of the year should also change their appearance. I wonder how they would look, partially covered in snow.

Abakanowicz although she calls his composition Katarsis refers to the figures as 'man-coffins' and 'man-trees', and explains why she chose bronze as their medium.

" 'Katarsis' is of material more lasting than life.

Perhaps because I hoped that the signs left behind would be for others a lasting anxiety. Perhaps it was a defiance of my own views, an urge to question my own accomplishments. Perhaps an awareness that constant immobility is stronger than changing situations".¹⁶

Last year (1987) Abakanowicz executed another major project this time using stone. This composition was for the Billy Rose Sculpture Garden of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. This is a thirty-seven metre long sculpture called Negev. (see ill.25). It consists of seven monumental wheels hewn from rough rocks found by Abakanowicz in the Negev Desert. The spectator is here again invited to walk among the unevenly spaced round white stones, three metres in diameter. What greatly enhances these wheels is the way Abakanowicz has treated or should I say untreated their surfaces - surfaces appear naturally irregular. The piece missing from the 4th wheel somehow strengthens her whole composition.

The catalogue for the retrospective in Budapest (1988) shows Abakanowicz selecting and working on the stones for Negev. They are quite stimulating as it is such a dramatic change from seeing her working with fibre and indoors.

Abakanowicz hopes to continue working in the open and her next composition will be in Seoul, later on this year (1988). The design comprises 'a group of scattered, loosely arranged figures'. However, she will not decide on the medium, until she has seen the qualities of the local landscape.

Though Abakanowicz is continually engaged in creating her own reality, in demarcating spaces for mysteries, that everyone discovers for themselves, she has never broken away from her former works and problems. In a strange way she returns to certain constant truths. She has created a type of ambiguous forms with complex structure, and of these, a certain type of space.

"The world of dreams, of interrupted unfulfilled childhood, complemented with keen observation of contemporary life, and subjected to the scrutiny of both intellect and intuition, has been embodied in different but in some way related forms which have changed consistence and place from enclosed areas to the open".¹⁷

Abakanowicz continues to broaden her experience. She believes 'materials and disciplines to be merely tools'. She has come a long way since her innovative Abakans. She now makes short films, writes poetry, and investigates into her surroundings in all possible ways.

FOOTNOTES

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2. Cited - Contemporary Artists p.7.
3. Mildred Constantine and J. Lenor Larsen.
The Art Fabric Mainstream p.p. 231 - 232
4. Cited by Jasia Reichardt,
Abakanowicz (Chicago) 1982, p.50.
5. Paul Overy, 'The Art of Detachment',
The Listner, September 29th 1966, p.459.
6. Cordelia Oliver,
'Polish Contemporary Artists in Edinburgh Festival',
August 21st. 1972, p.8.
7. Magdalena Abakanowicz.
Abakanowicz (Chicago) 1982, p.17.
8. Ibid. p.85.
9. Jasia Reichardt, ('Individuality and Imagination',
Architectural Designs, 45, 8(August)1975, p.507.

10. Nancy Stapen, 'Magdalena Abakanowicz, De-Cordova and Dana Museum', Art Forum, January 1984, p.81.
11. Cited by Hunter Drohoyowska, 'Magical Mystery Tours', Art News, September, 1985 p.112.
12. Ibid. p.110.
13. Ibid.
14. Nancy Stapen, 'Magdalena Abakanowicz, De-Cordova and Dana Museum', Art Forum, January, 1984. p.81.
15. Magdalena Abakanowicz, Abakanowicz (Chicago) 1982, p.p. 102 - 103.
16. Magdalena Abakanowicz, Abakanowicz Budapest 1988, p.154.
17. Mariusz Hermansdorfer, Abakanowicz Budapest 1988, p.15.

C O N C L U S I O N

In the course of this essay I have attempted to trace the development of Abakanowicz as an innovator and an artistic revolutionary who refused to allow herself be moulded by the existing norms. Initially making use of the techniques of weaving by adapting them to her own ideas. Her art has always been a protest against what she met with in weaving. She used rope, horsehair and fur because she needed these materials to give her vision expression and did not care that they were not part of the tradition in this field. Moreover, tapestry with its decorative function has never interested her. Abakanowicz simply became extremely concerned with all that could be done through weaving. This decision to use weaving required exceptional courage, confidence and determination. Her woven Abakans of the early 1960's, caused general shock and put the tradition of many centuries into question. Her innovative-ness has helped revolutionize our contemporary conceptions of fibre art.

Abakanowicz in 1973, abandoned weaving and started to use readymade cloth for her forms. This greatly helped create more widespread interest in her art, and insured that her works would be viewed more for their inherent artistic qualities rather than for her ability in weaving.

The cultural implications of Abakanowicz's work have become more explicit since the early 1970's. Burlap sacking, impregnated with glue and moulded into plaster casts to form Seated Figures and Backs, became shell-like fragments, as if these were the broken emptied husks of human bodies. Installed in mute throngs or lined up in poignant queues, they appear to silently protest all authoritarian and suppressive regimes. It is hard not to see the metaphorical significance in her art. Like Goya, she lives in a time and place where artistic freedom cannot be taken for granted and yet, like him she has found a way to express her feelings in an art that is deep and elicits a very emotional response. Her rows of headless, armless figures can be seen as 'hollow men', victims of imposed conformity. Her caged figures as mankind imprisoned; her embryonic forms as illusions to rebirth. But one can't help wonder that if we were aware of her background would they still carry the same power.

Abakanowicz continued working with soft materials for over 25 years. This, one feels, was an unnecessary self imposed restriction. While her series of Heads, Seated figures, Backs and Embrvology addressed issues which evoked emotional response, some of her later works like Pregnant, Female Figures, Anonymous Portraits and Crowd, lacked this same power being less specific in their references. She continued to show her major works in different combinations in various locations around the world. Each installation representing for her a new art problem.

Thus her move in 1985 to including the harder materials one feels was a necessary one. It once again demonstrated the courage and conviction that she has. For a quarter of a century she eschewed the use of such materials and claimed that they 'would add to the imperishable rubble heaps of human ambitions crowding the environment'.¹

Her major work in bronze, one feels, is very aptly titled Katarsis (presumably 'Catharsis') coming at a time it did. Abakanowicz was re-examining her views and questioning her own accomplishments. This cathartic introspection was the beginning of the breaking away from the confinements of soft materials. A whole new horizon has now opened up for her. She now has a more open approach to media and this has given her a new freedom. It has enabled her to leave the confines of indoor spaces and place her work in permanent situations in the landscape. An example of her new openness to media is seen by her commission in Seoul later this year (1988). Although she has decided on the composition of the work she will not select the medium until she has visited the area and examined the qualities of the landscape.

However, one of the main reasons one feels that her work has always been so successful is that she abolishes the barriers separating man from the work of art, physically reaching him and inviting him to participate. All of her installations indoor and outdoor are environments for contemplation.

Abakanowicz who survived Nazi occupation, and the take over of her family's estate is an extraordinary woman: a survivor and a heroine. From tragedy she has created an art of beauty and significance that does not despair of humanity's evil but instead inspires hope for human redemption. She has achieved in the West what is conceived as a virtually impossible cultural situation, a position that few artists from behind the Curtain have managed - namely, an international reputation. That coupled with what must be recognised as a handicap, being a woman, her attainments must be described as remarkable.

FOOTNOTES

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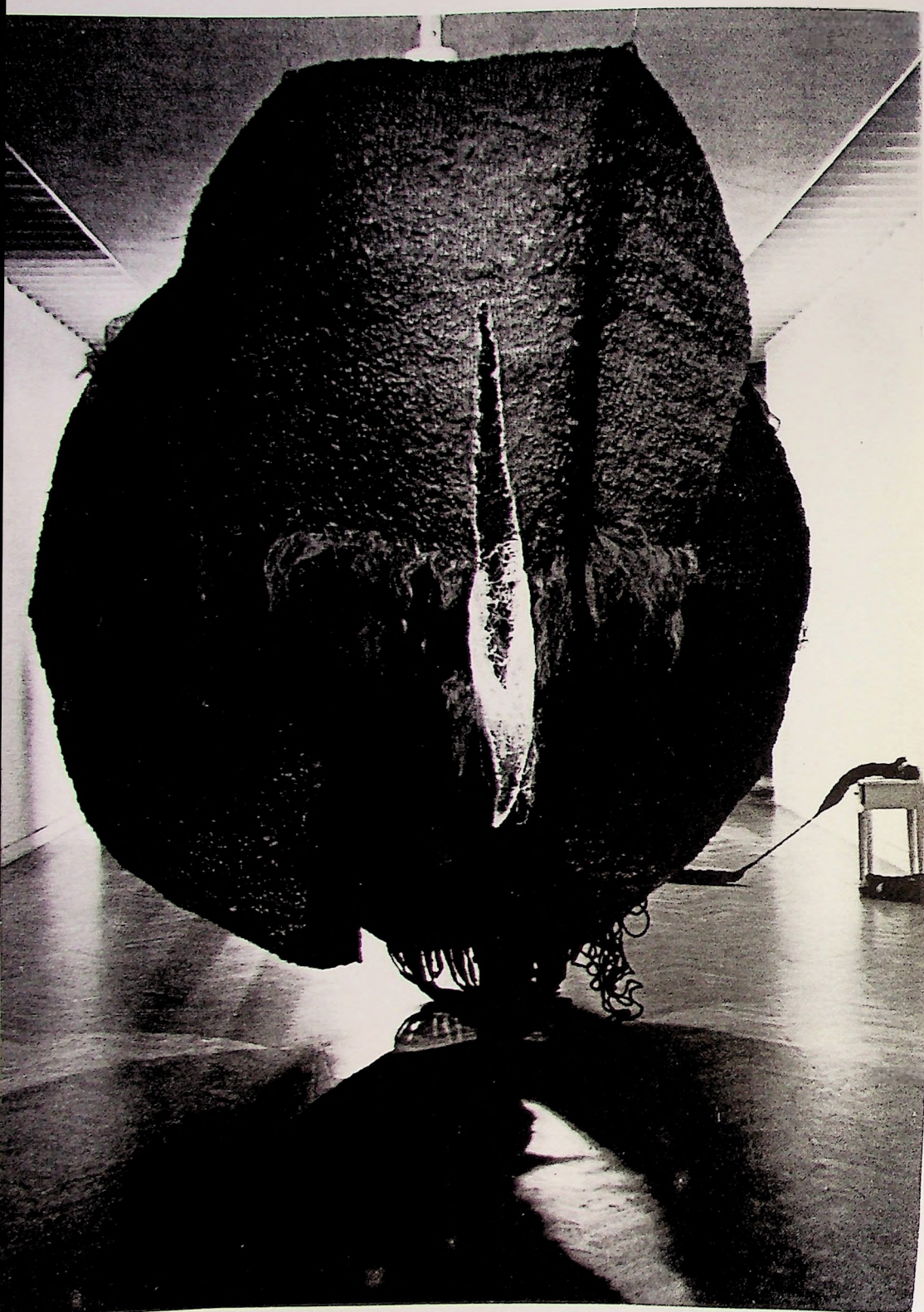
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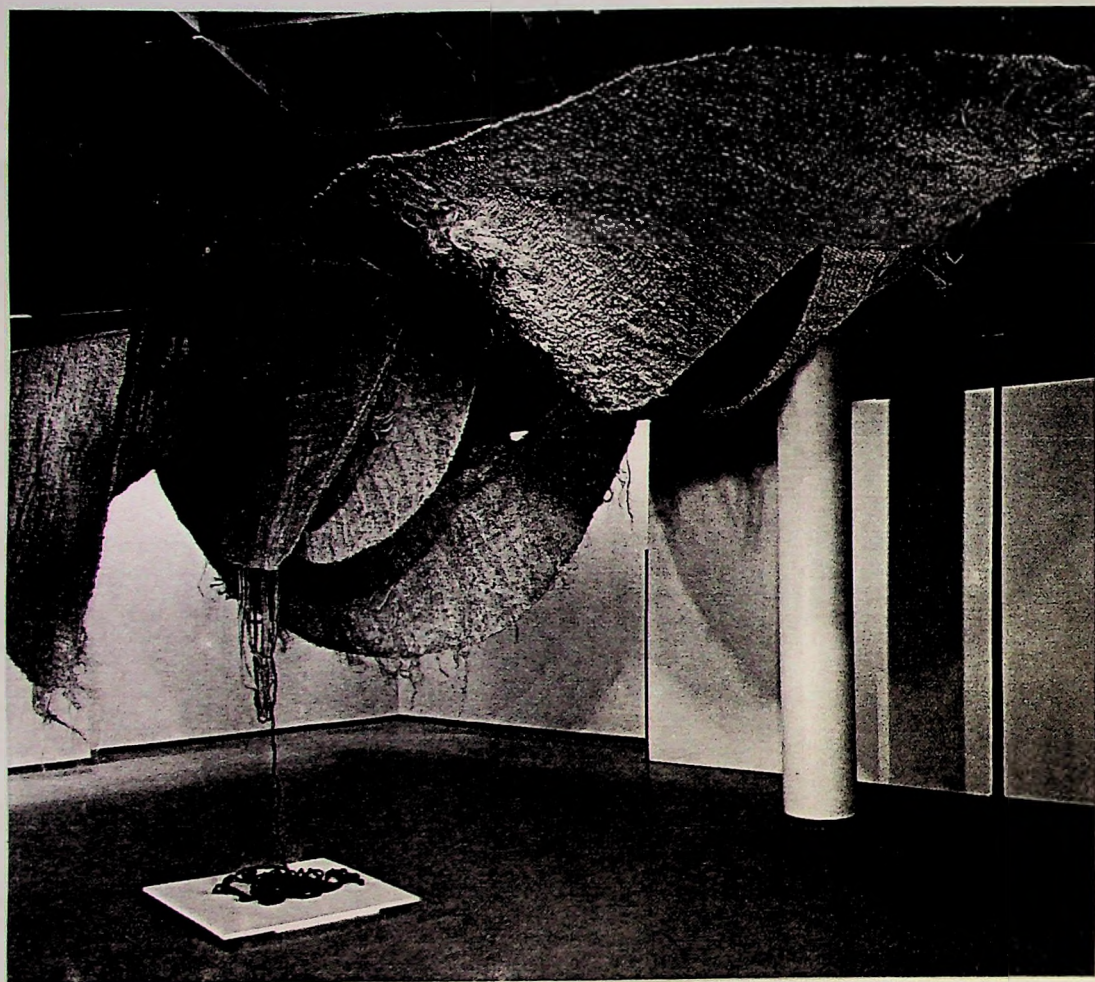
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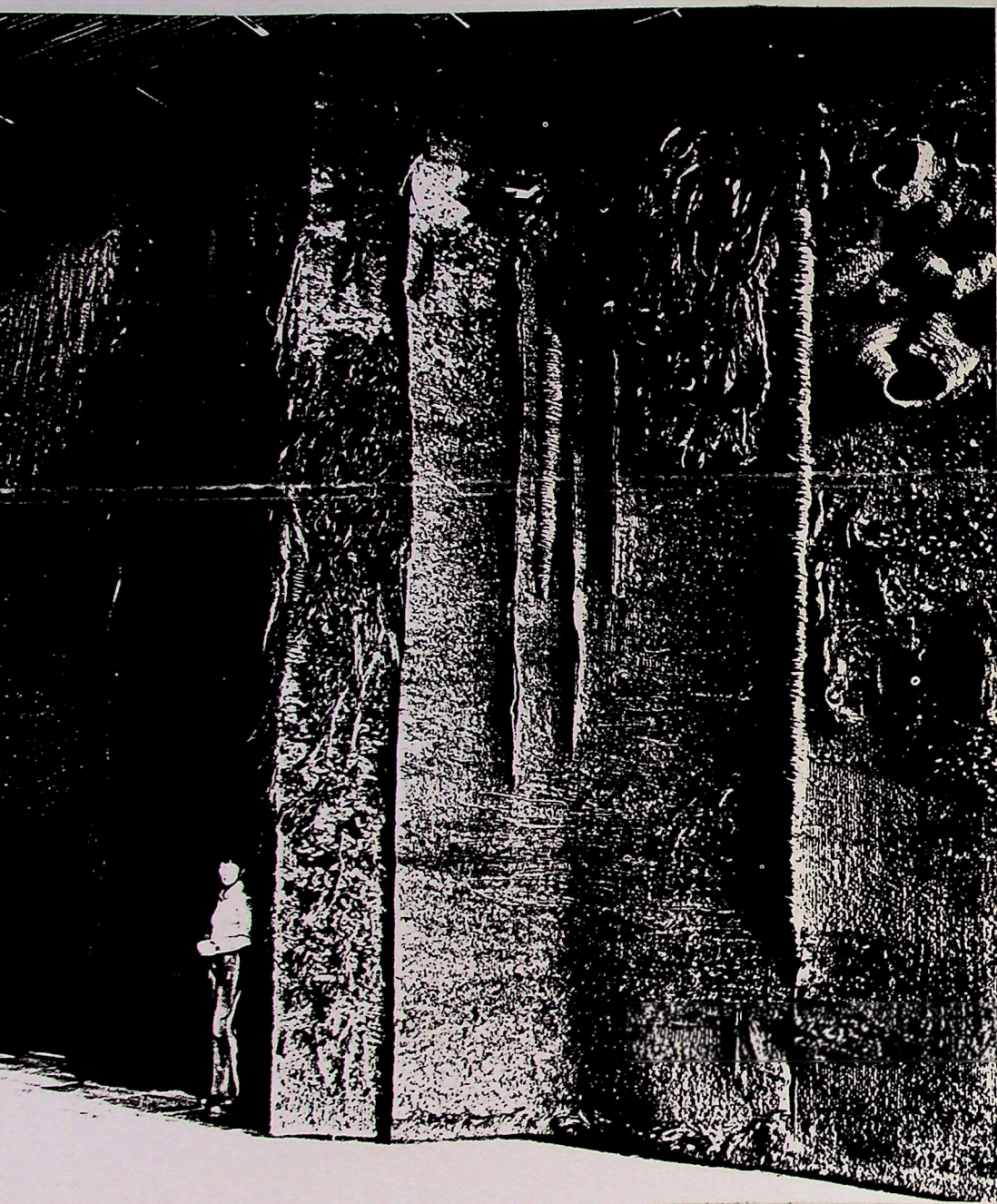
ABAKAN RED (ill. 1.)



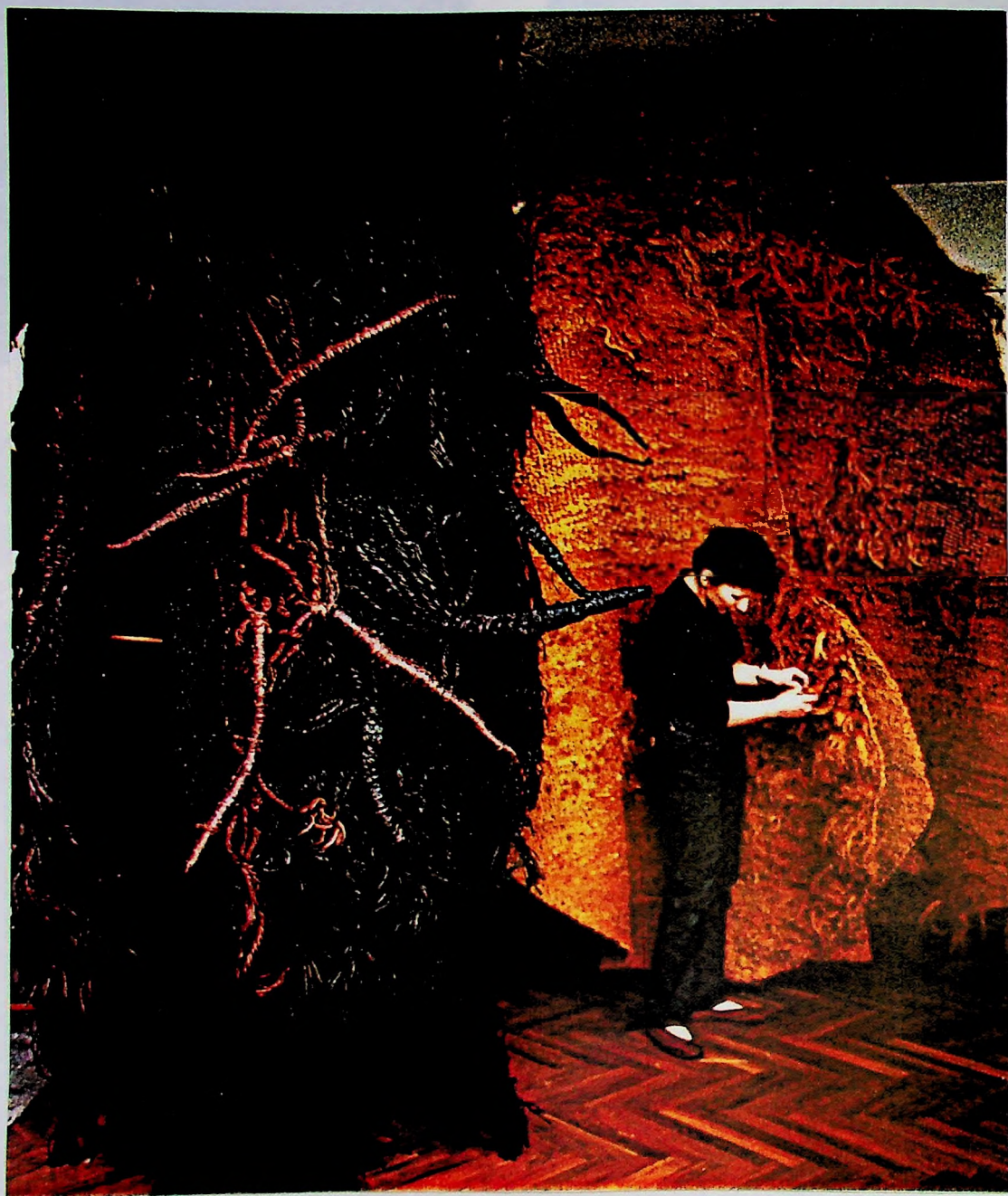
ABAKAN BAROCK GARMENT (ill. 2.)



TEXTILE SCULPTURES (ill. 3.)



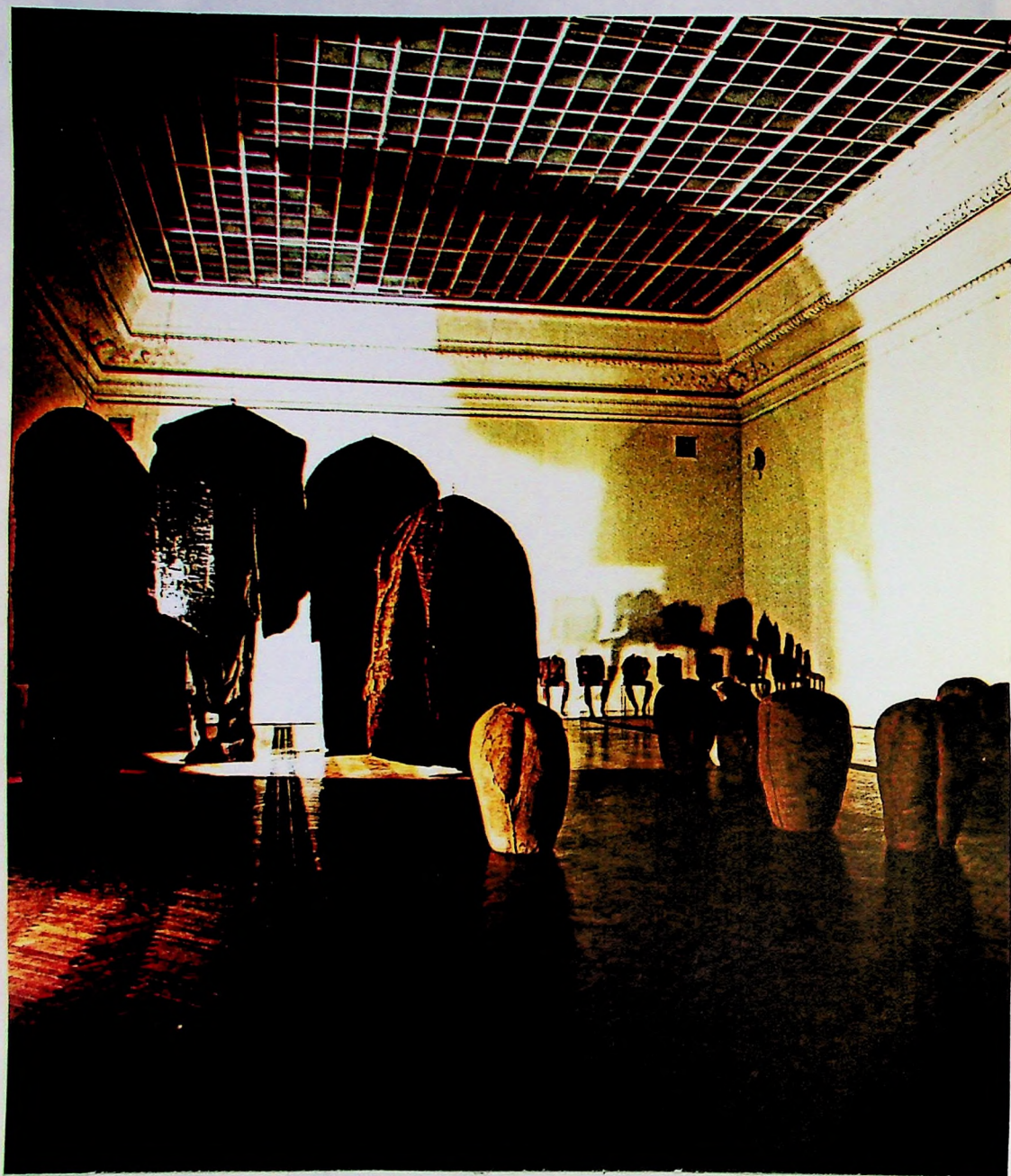
BOIS-LE-DUC (ill. 4.)



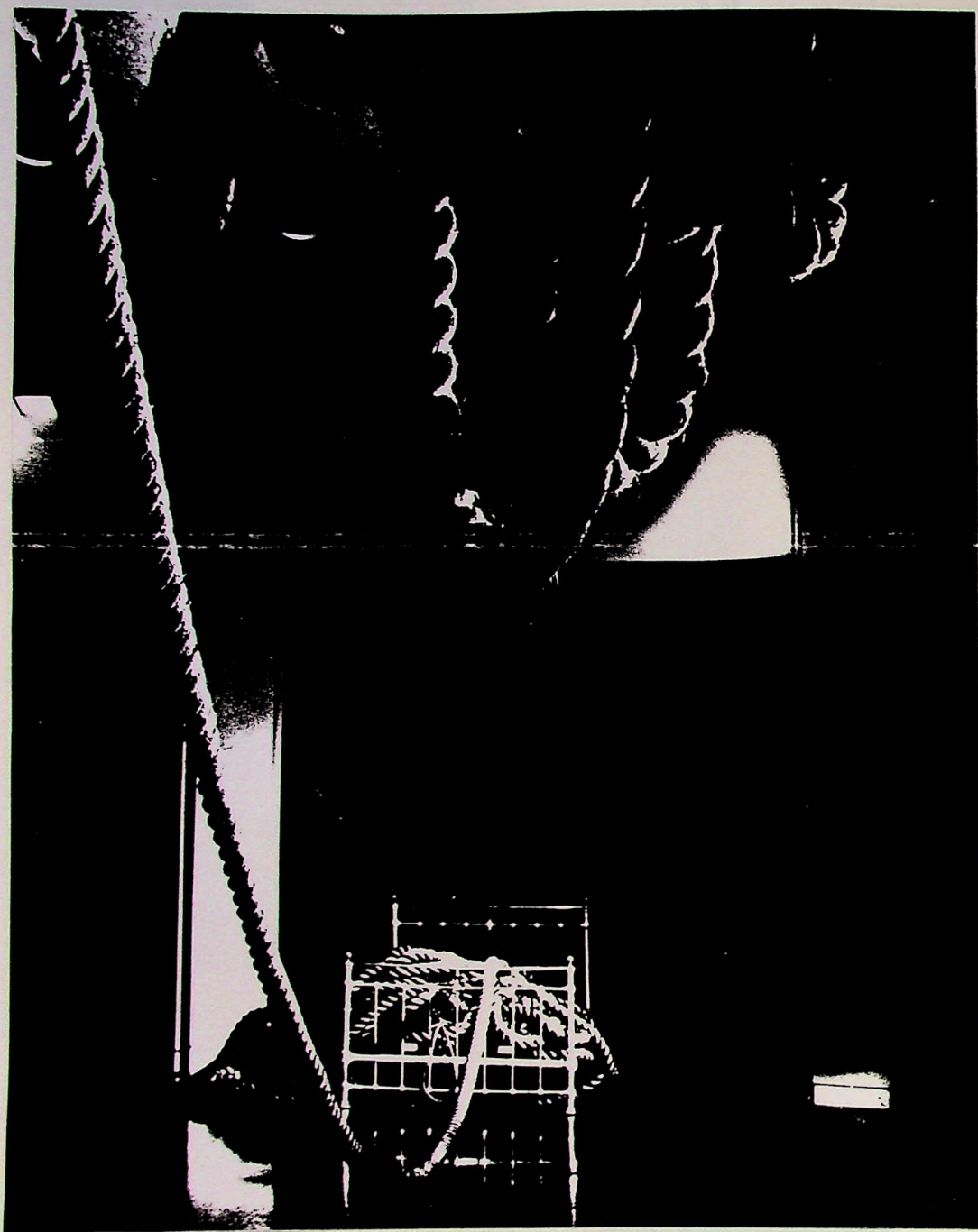
ABAKAN ROUND AND YELLOW ABAKAN (ill. 5.)



BLACK ENVIRONMENT AND ORGANE ABAKAN (ill. 6.)



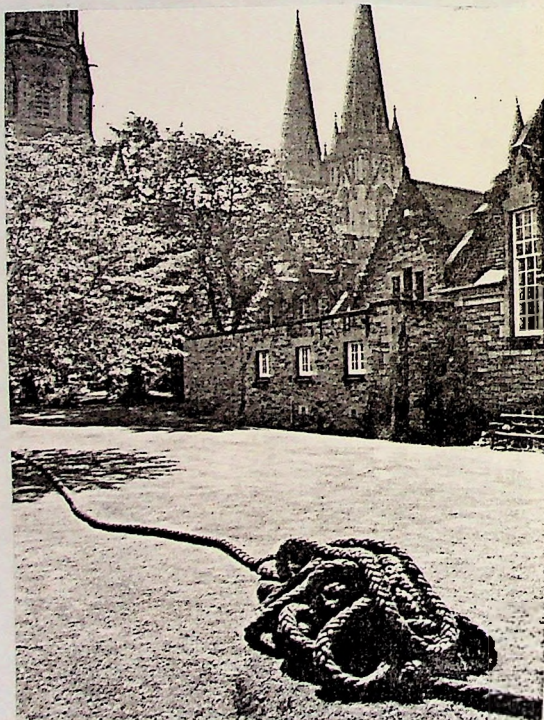
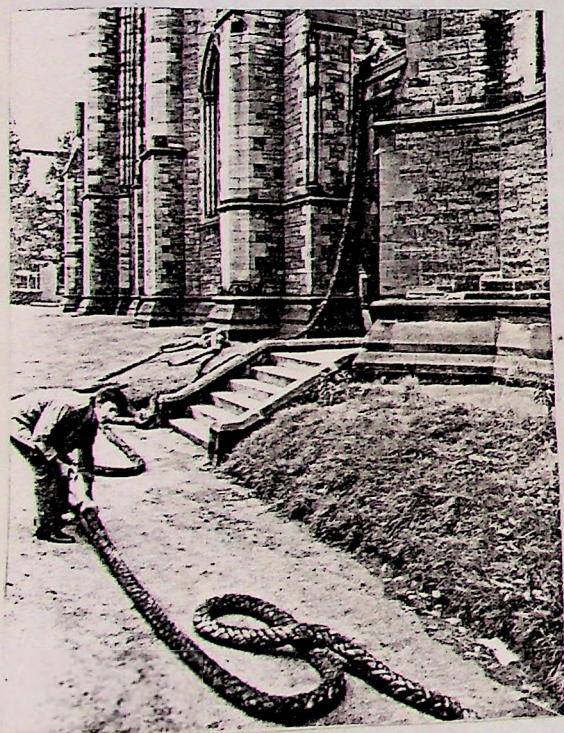
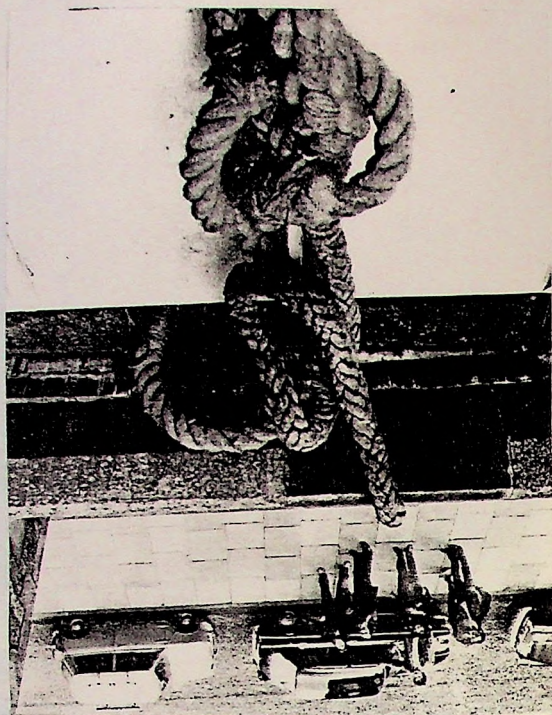
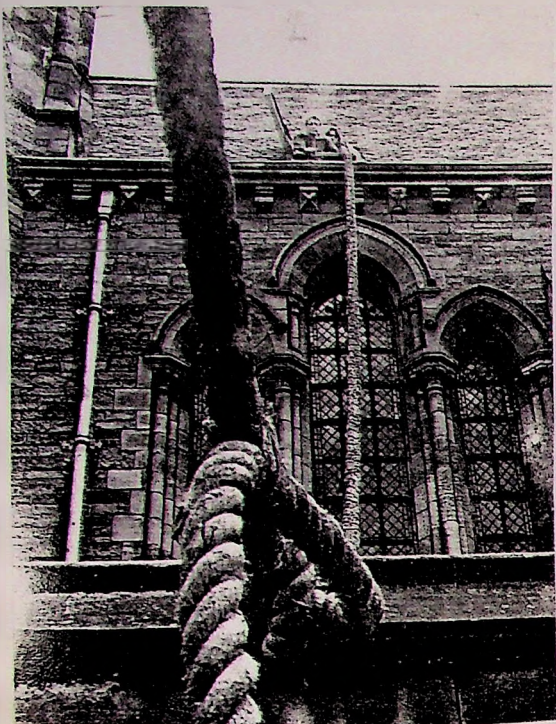
INSTALLATION AT ZACHETA (ill. 7.)



INSTALLATION AT PASADENA ART MUSEUM - CALIFORNIA 1971 (ill. 8.)



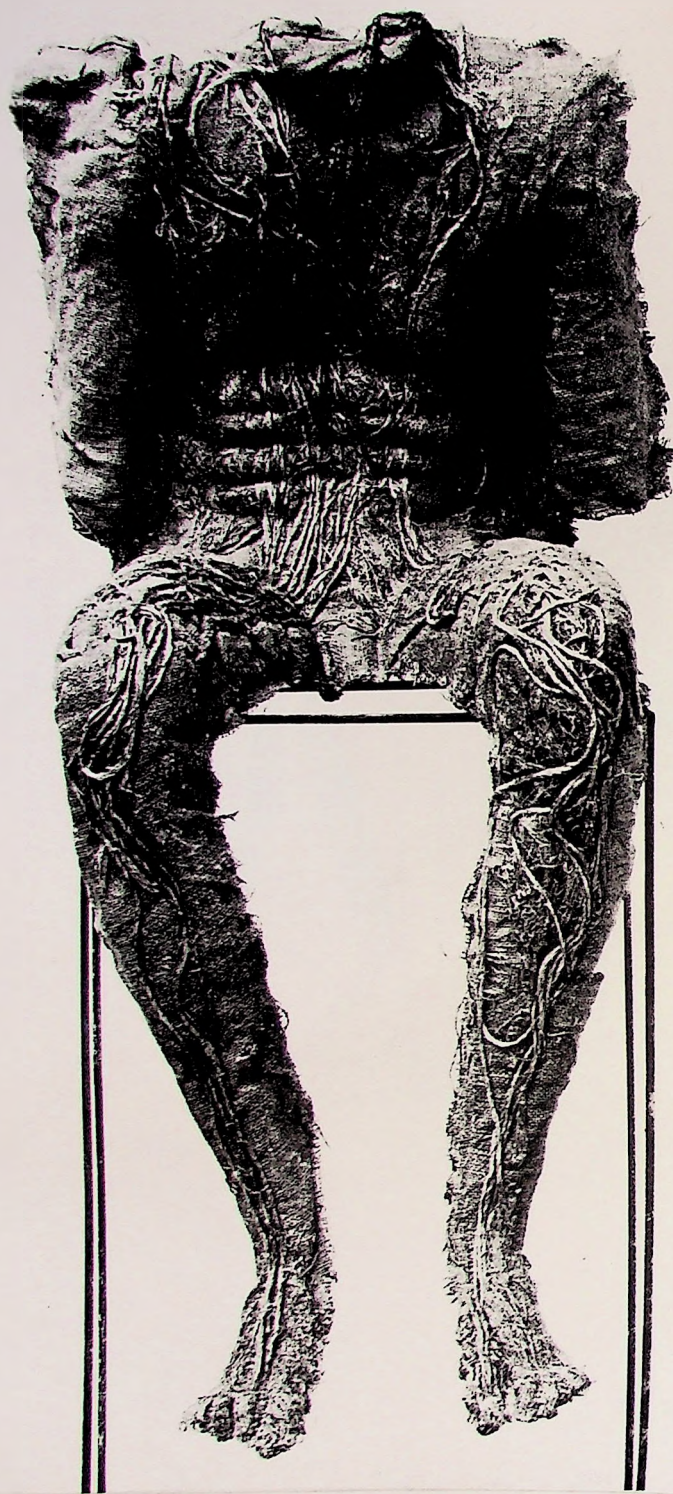
DIVISION OF SPACE (111. 9.)



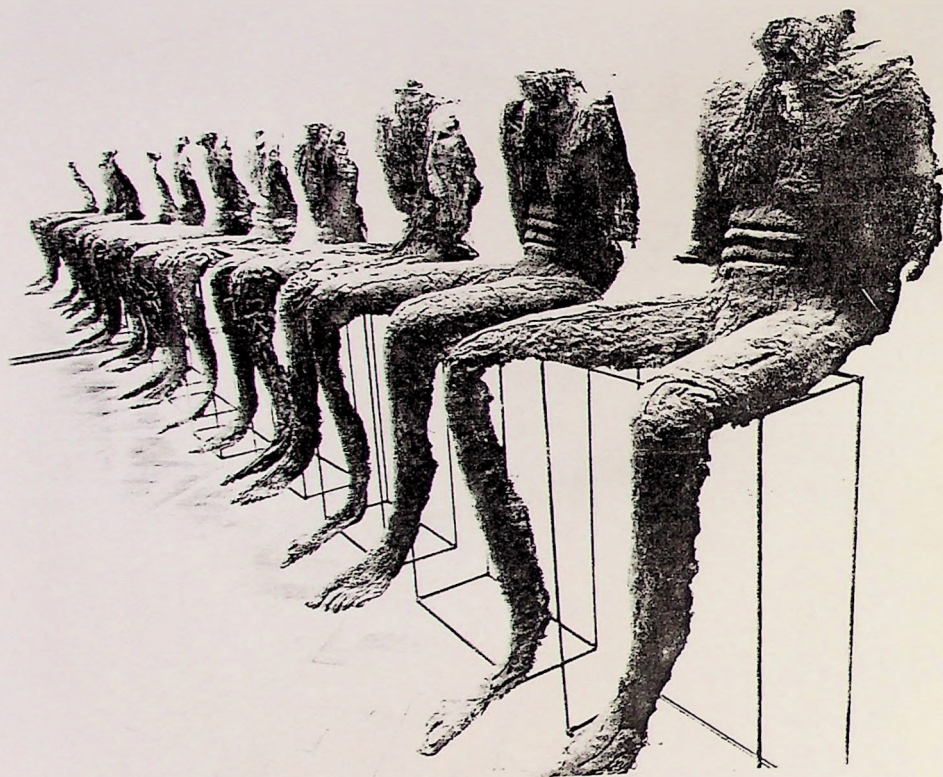
ROPES AT EDINBURGH FESTIVAL 1972 (ill. 10.)



THE HEADS (ill. 11.)



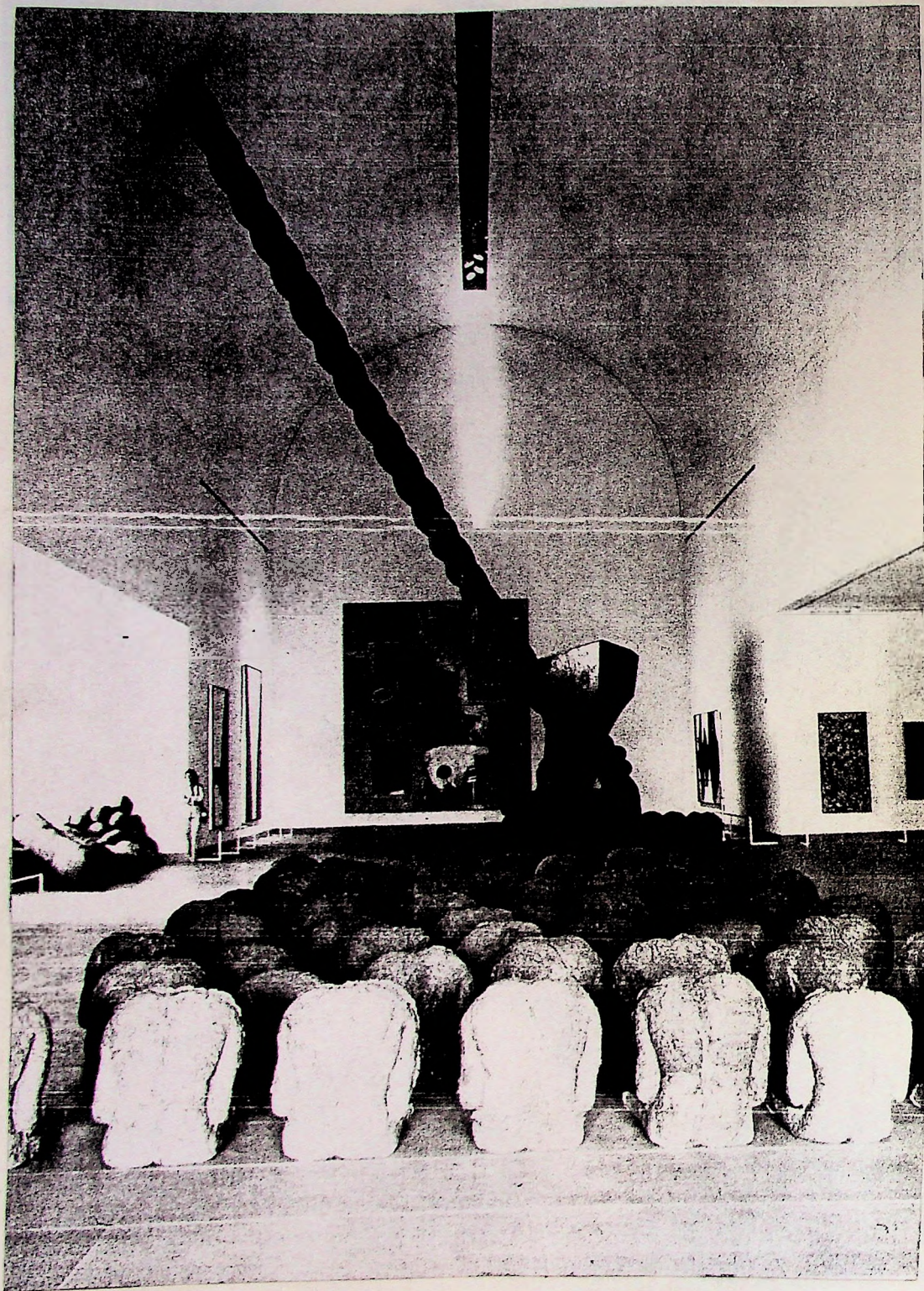
SEATED FIGURE (i11. 12.)



SEATED FIGURES (ill. 13.)



BACK (i11.14.)



BACKS (ill. 15.)



EMBRYOLOGY (ill. 16)



PREGNANT (ill. 17)



THE HAND (111.18)



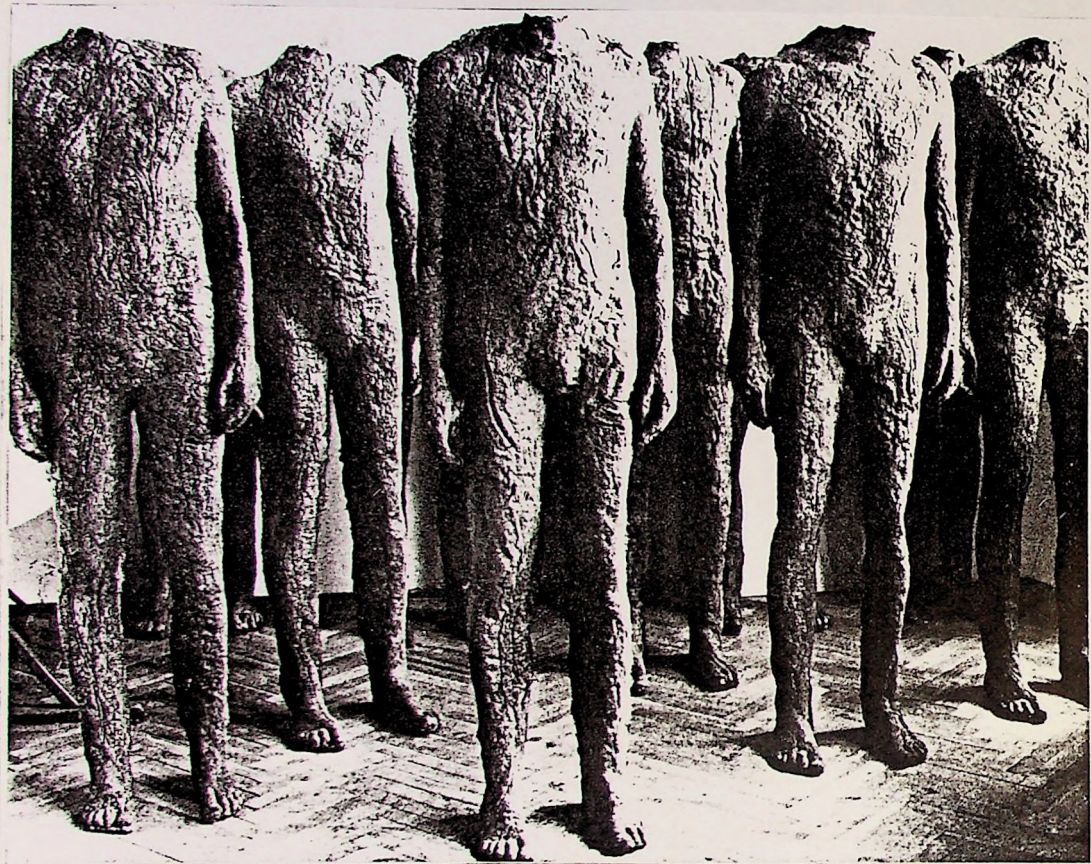
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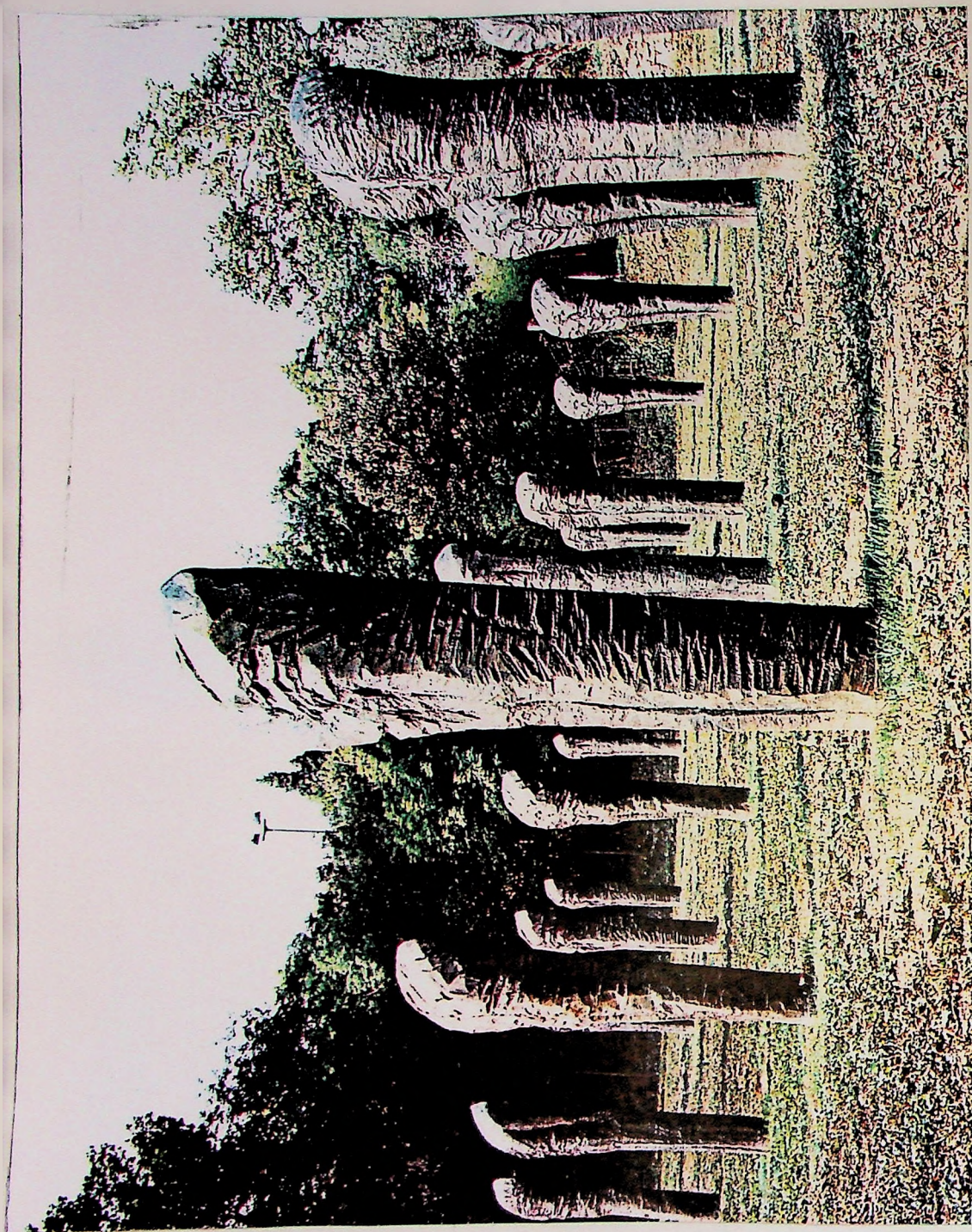
ANONYMOUS PORTRAIT (ill. 20)



FEMALE FIGURES (111.21)



CROWD (i11.22)



KATARSIS (i11.23)



KATARSIS (ill. 24)



NEGEV (ill.25)