

Magdalena Abakanowicz: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. New York: Abbeville Press. 1982.

THE WORKS

Magda started with bold, colorful paintings on pieces of cloth and from these she turned to weaving.

Out of weaving she made three-dimensional forms and spatial arrangements.

She abandoned color.

She abandoned weaving.

She started to write.

She continues to make three-dimensional forms and to organize spaces.

Thus goes a brief outline of 30 years.

Magda's painted textiles of the early 1950s were done on linen sheets with elements similar to those that eventually left the flat background and emerged into space—round shapes with attenuated tails that almost break, then acquire more substance and recommence their dance on the canvas. All have a sense of movement. From the mid-1950s the color gradually became more and more limited, but the forms of plants continued to appear. In the late 1950s, they were mostly in black and white with a strong vertical emphasis, and the black was actually composed of shades of brown.

Magda's first woven works were improvised on a frame. Later, when she started weaving huge compositions on a loom, with only a small fraction of the piece visible as she was working, she used small sketches for guidance. These indicated spatial divisions on a scale of one-to-twenty-five.

Her first one-person exhibition at the Kordegarda gallery in Warsaw in 1960 included small weavings as well as gouache and oil sketches. Another critic immediately recognized Magda's desire to consider a woven object as an element in its own right, rather than something to be applied to a chair, a sofa, or a window, and thought that such an approach could help develop an art instinct in people and lead them to contemplate things they might not have considered before.¹⁰

Sculpture

I have wondered from time to time why Magda did not turn to sculpture in conventional media. She explained:

When I was quite small I did not draw, but collected and made three-dimensional objects. At school I sculpted wooden dragons as presents for my friends. Having decided to go to the art school in Sopot, I was sure that they would accept me for the sculpture course. After the entrance exam they threw me out. The professor said: "She has no feeling for form." So I started to paint. This judgment had been so unequivocal that only after finishing my studies at the Academy in the late 1950s, did I make a few wooden reliefs.

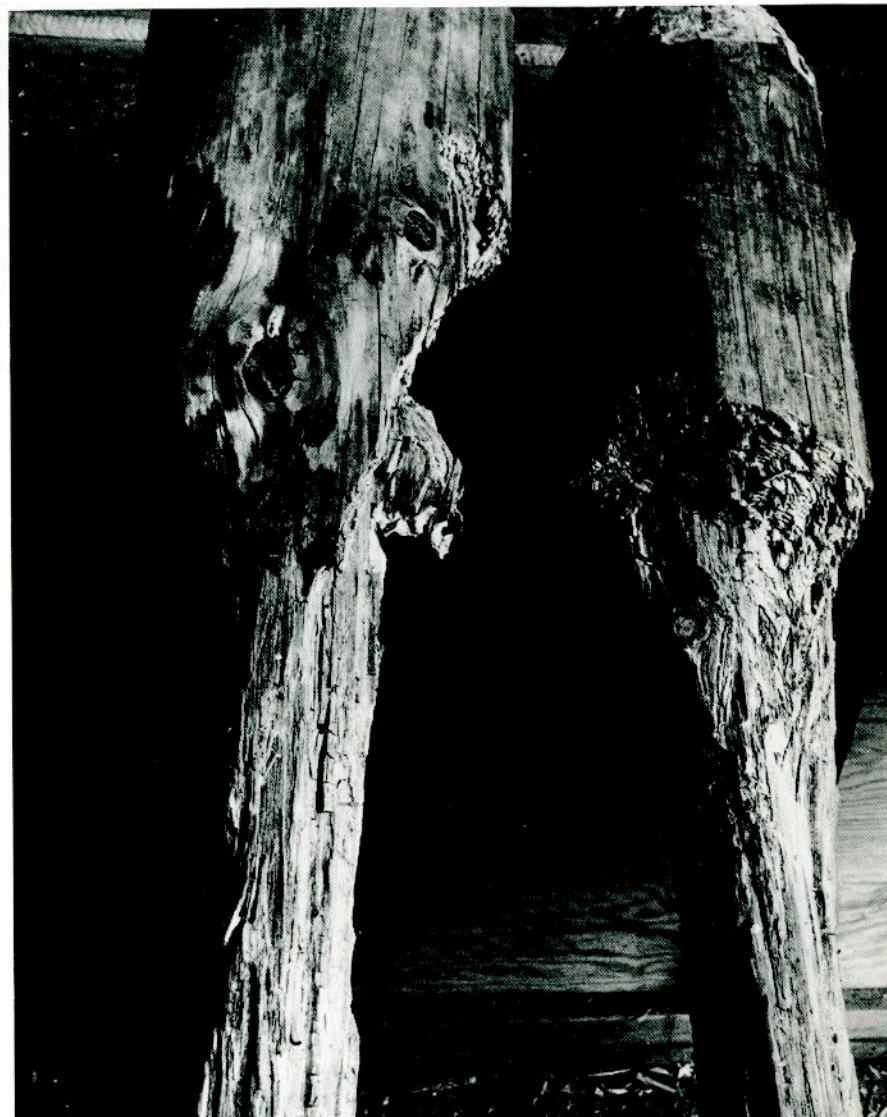
One of them [fig. 4] served as a point of departure for a huge seven-meter-high steel sculpture which I made in 1965, when I participated in the first Biennial of Three-Dimensional Form in Elbląg. This was organized by sculptors for sculptors and a few specially invited painters. One of the organizers drank a lot. He invited me while he was drunk and everybody was very surprised when I actually arrived. Their surprise was so ungracious that I was asked straight out: "What are you trying to do?" Despite this, I constructed a sculpture. I made friends with a few workers from a factory making ships' engines, and they helped me to weld and to erect this form. I later continued to think about this piece while making Abakans. This sculpture is still there [fig. 19]. I am pleased with it. Why didn't I take up sculpture? Perhaps it would have been too easy and lacking in conflict.

In the summer of 1981 Magda started carving again. She took a series of wooden cylindrical fenceposts and made incisions in them, creating a narrower neck at one end. She calls them *Trunks* (see fig. 20).

Fig. 19 *Untitled* 1965 (cat. no. 13)



Fig. 20 *Trunks* (detail) 1981 (cat. no. 80)



Weaving

At the beginning Magda did all the weaving herself, but gradually, on very large compositions, Stefa Zgudka would do some weaving as well, and then they would change places because Magda had always found it impossible to explain to anyone else what is required. Stefa also helped with the preparatory work, washing of materials, dyeing, winding the thread, and with countless other tasks that must be done before one can start weaving. She recalls that the first works she helped on were comparatively flat and were intended for hanging on a wall; reds, browns, and blacks were the usual colors. The relief element became increasingly pronounced after the mid-1960s.

Materials have always come from various sources, but most of them are cast-offs from different factories. Hemp, flax, and sisal come from factories that make rope; warp (the discarded thread used for stitching boots) comes from shoe factories; but even the rejects are increasingly difficult to come by, since industries have become unwilling to sell to private people. Other materials such as horsehair which comes from the country and wool from sheep belonging to the peasants of the Tatra mountains are acquired with considerable difficulty.

Magda does not like artificial fibers, only natural ones. The contact between Magda and her materials is of great importance. Materials which suit her imagination are those which always conserve their natural properties: hemp, horsehair, flax, wool, sisal—all of these not only have the sensitivity that all organic things possess, they are also traditional materials with a past. Magda's is the contact of the fingers, hands, and muscles: manipulating both nature and history. Once when asked about the fact that her work is antitechnological, she did not deny it, but remarked that, after all, she works with her hands and thinks of her work as a protest against the misuses of the environment.¹¹

Abakans

Abakan is the name given to the majority of Magda's woven sculptures, to her work in space, to that "new genre she has invented somewhere between the wall and the floor."¹² In 1964 a critic, Hanna Ptaszkowska, coined the work *Abakan* when talking to friends at the Club of the Architects' Association, at the time of Magda's exhibition at Zachęta, the main exhibition hall in Warsaw. The term was used in 1965 to describe these same pieces when they traveled to the São Paulo Bienal (see fig. 21). Since then, *Abakan*, designating a woven relief or a free-hanging three-dimensional work, has become a useful means of identifying both the artist and the art.¹³ Magda was ambivalent about



I like neither rules nor prescriptions, these enemies of imagination. I make use of the technique of weaving by adapting it to my own ideas. My art has always been a protest against what I have met with in weaving. I started to use rope, horsehair, metal, and fur because I needed these materials to give my vision expression and I did not care that they were not part of the tradition in this field. Moreover, tapestry, with its decorative function, has never interested me. I simply became extremely concerned with all that could be done through weaving. How one forms the surface reliefs, how the mobile markings of the horsehair will be put into place and, finally, how this constructed surface can swell and burst, showing a glimpse of mysterious depths through the cracks.

In 1966 I completed my first woven forms that are independent of the walls and exist in space. In

creating them I did not want to relate to either tapestry or sculpture. Ultimately it is the total obliteration of the utilitarian function of tapestry that fascinates me. My particular aim is to create possibilities for complete communion with an object whose structure is complex and soft. Through cracks and openings I try to get the viewer to penetrate into the deepest reaches of the composition. I am interested in the scale of tensions that intervene between the woven form, rich and fleshy, and the surroundings.

I feel successful each time I reject my own experience. There are all too many fascinating problems to confine oneself to a single one. Repetition is contrary to the laws of the intellect in its progress onward, contrary to imagination.

Magdalena Abakanowicz 1969

Various forms woven on the loom were sewn together into three-dimensional entities. Their initial form already had the desired overall shape or contour, for example, rectangular, round, or oval. Three meters high (the height of Magda's studio), they were woven to incorporate holes and apertures, and smooth or hairy surfaces. Onto these fundamental forms, other, smaller elements were added. *Abakans* have three basic shapes. One is a rectangular form that became a tube sewn around a metal ring at the top which gave it the required shape and provided a structure for hanging it in space (figs. 31-34). Second, there is a round or oval woven form, usually three-by-three meters, with a metal tube sewn in at the top which is invisible and allows the *Abakan* to hang partly open, with the sides left loose (figs. 34-41). The third shape belongs to those *Abakans* which Magda has called *Garments*. These are the largest of all *Abakans* and consist of three woven parts: one constitutes the back of the jacket, and two become the two sides of the front. Everything is fixed on a metal construction resembling a huge coat hanger (figs. 42-44).

These *Garments*, suggesting mantles or jackets over long skirts or trousers, are reminiscent of a cross between giant headless peasants and petrified trees, bulky and overwhelming. They are monumental. All *Abakans* were showing this tendency and gradually they were becoming more and more enormous. They are made up of contrasts of dense, nearly monochromatic textures and surfaces. Critic John Russell described the final effect of this shaggy amalgam of materials as "barbaric, bizarre and distinctly unlike anything else."¹⁵ One of the main points of the *Abakan*, wrote Paul Overy, is "the fact that it hangs and therefore functions quite differently from something that goes on a flat surface."¹⁶

Fig. 26 Violet *Abakan* (*Stadium Faktur*)
(detail) 1964 (cat. no. 11)



Fig. 27 Black *Assemblage II* 1967 (cat. no. 24)

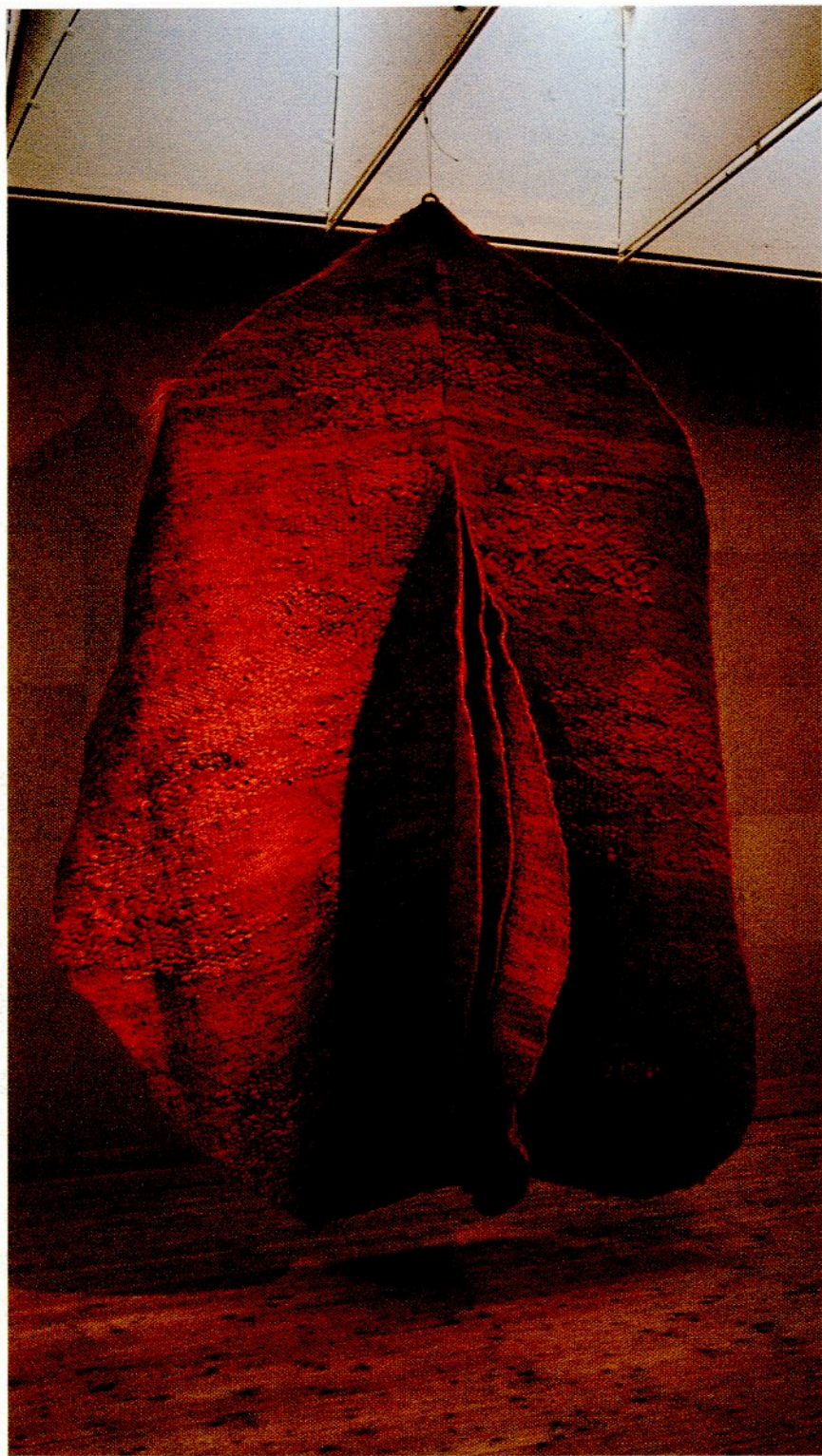


Fig. 37 *Yellow Abakan* 1970–75 (cat. no. 42)



Fig. 38 Abakanowicz at work on *Baroque Dress* (detail) 1969 (cat. no. 31)

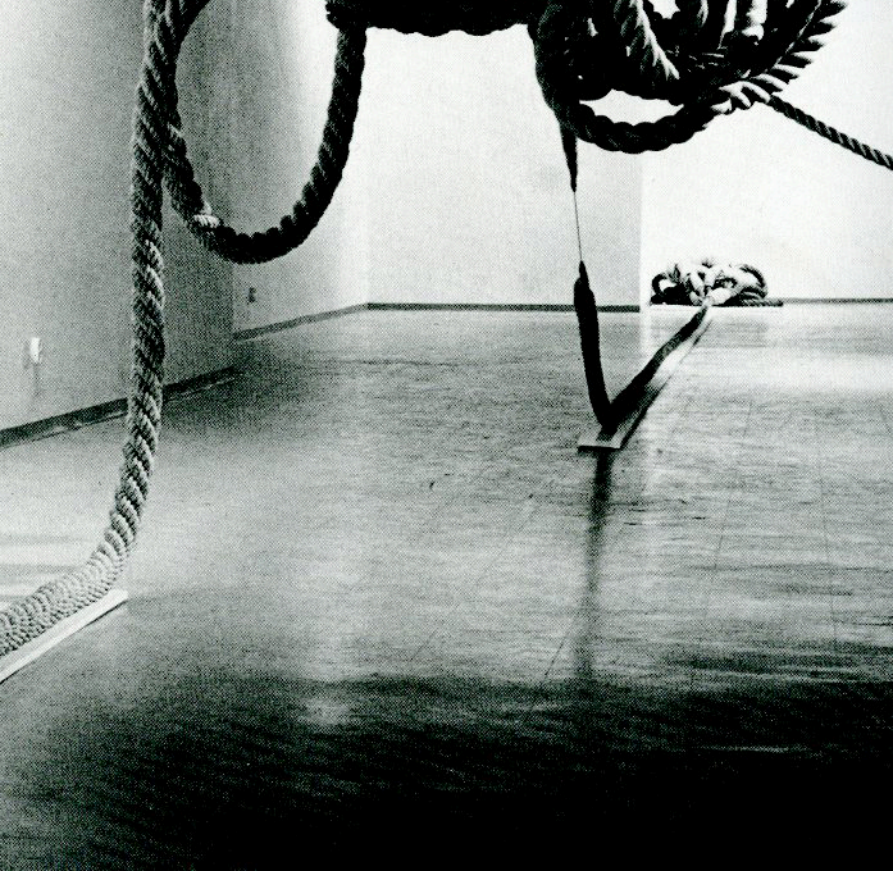
Fig. 39 *Baroque Dress* 1969 (cat. no. 31)

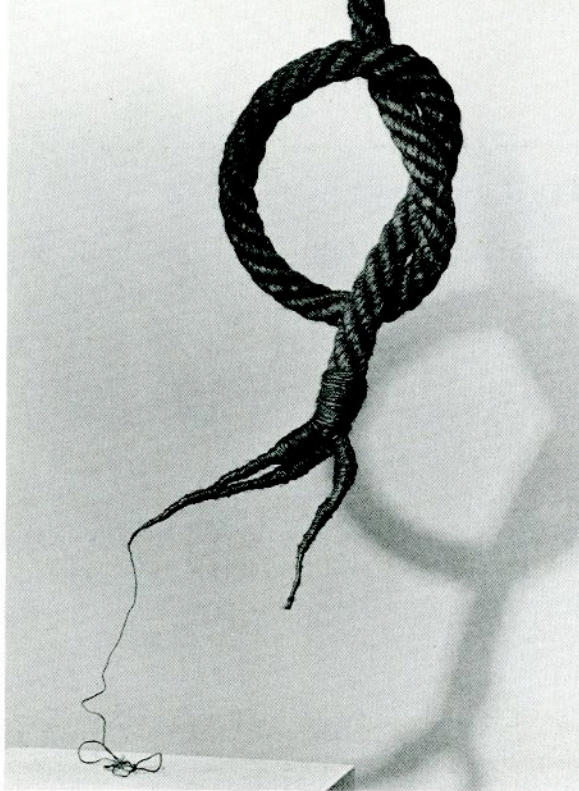
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Fig. 40 *Red Abakan* 1969 (cat. no. 34) at Zachęta, Warsaw, 1975 (cat. no. 65)

Fig. 41 *Red Abakan* 1969 (cat. no. 34) at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia (cat. no. 69)

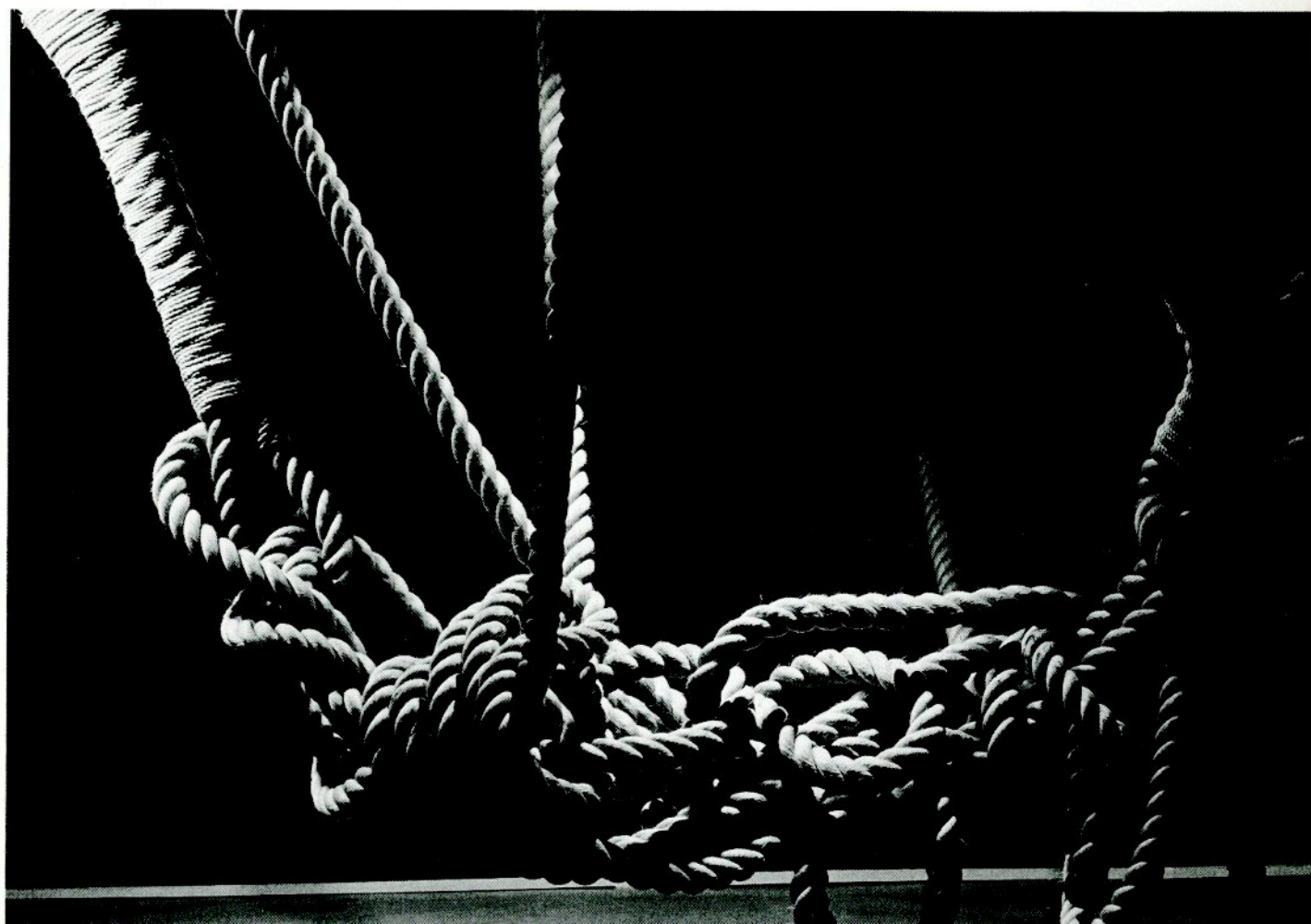






Magda herself has written about the rope and has discussed it in an interview, comparing it to a meandering river, a pathway which changes direction because once there was a good reason for it. It is not the shortest or the quickest possible way, it is rather like a country path that built up over years because people stopped at a shrine, rested under a tree, or climbed a hill to see the view.²⁰

The relationship between the rope and the woven form is not only associated with the pathway between one object and the next. Weaving involves the use of a thread that moves in one direction and then returns, sometimes covering longer distances, sometimes shorter. This, Magda said, started her interest in working with thread.²¹



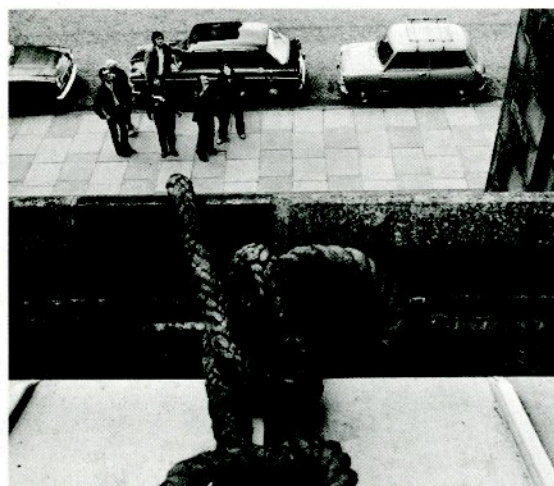


Magda described how she came to use the rope at the Edinburgh Festival in 1972 (figs. 62-64):

I sat for one week doing nothing, because I had no idea what I should do there. The gallery space was not large enough to show all the works I had brought over. So sitting there and thinking, suddenly I saw Edinburgh as a monumental city. I looked at the façade of the Demarco Gallery and I thought I would bring the rope through it into the gallery and out again through the window. It disappeared on top of the building. Then it reappeared on Edinburgh Cathedral which you could see from the gallery; 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. But this was possible only in Edinburgh and could never be repeated anywhere else. It was inspired by this particular city. I liked it and I think people understood what I meant. My work is always connected with thread and sewing. And this was a sort of sewing through one building and then through another.²²



Figs. 60, 61 Installation of ropes at Bordeaux, France, 1973 (cat. no. 53)



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Figs. 62-64 Installation of ropes at the Edinburgh International Festival, 1972 (cat. no. 52)

The rope is to me like a petrified 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 fibers 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 enabled one to see architecture with all its artificiality 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 countless cooperating parts.

Magdalena Abakanowicz 1975



The *Seated Figures*—shell-like negatives of the bulk of the human body—deal with the problem of containing and enclosing. 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 body's spatial adherence to its material surroundings.

Magdalena Abakanowicz 1975

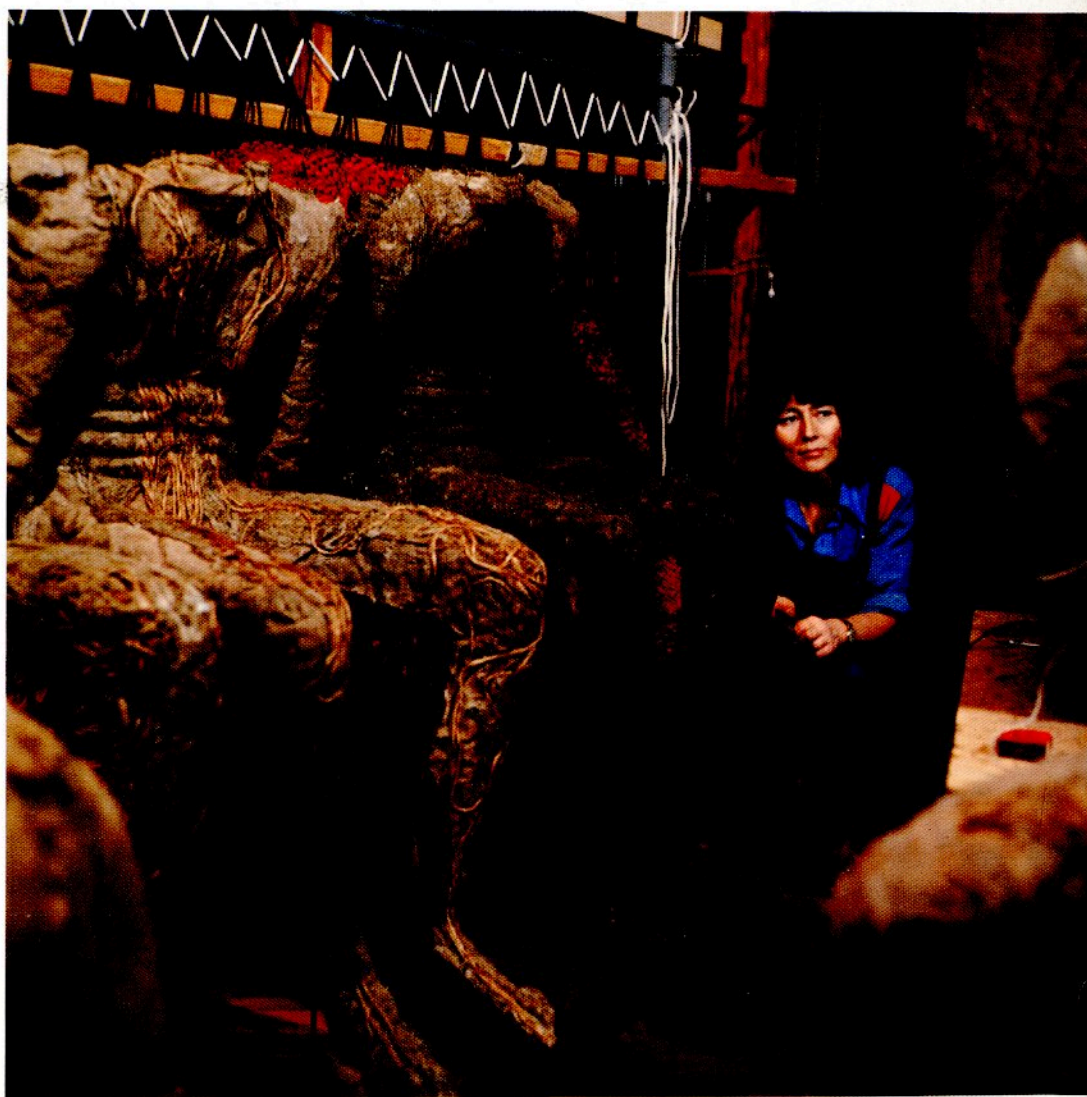


Fig. 76 *Head* 1973/75 (cat. no. 57), and *Seated Figures* 1974–75 (cat. no. 64) at Zachęta, Warsaw, 1975 (cat. no. 65)

Fig. 77 Magdalena Abakanowicz in her studio with *Seated Figures* (cat. no. 64), 1974



Fig. 79 *Seated Figure* 1974/77
(cat. no. 64)

Figs. 80, 81 *Seated Figures* 1974–75 (cat. no. 64)
at Zachęta, Warsaw, 1975 (cat. no. 65)

