

Tapta: Flexible Forms

Muzeum Susch

20 July – 3 November 2024



Tapta during the installation of *Forms for a Flexible Space* (1974) at Palais des Beaux-Arts (now Bozar) in Brussels, 1975, black-and-white photo (Tapta Archive, Maurice Verbaet, Berchem, BE)

From 20 July to 3 November 2024, Muzeum Susch presents *Tapta: Flexible Forms*, an exhibition curated by Liesbeth Decan. This will be the first large-scale retrospective dedicated to the Polish-Belgian artist Tapta (1926-1997) outside of Belgium, the country to which she fled in 1945 and where she developed her artistic career from the 1960s onwards. The title of the exhibition, *Flexible forms*, refers to the central concept of her oeuvre: the creation of sculptures which interact with the exhibition space and the viewer, through their flexible forms. The exhibition's ambition reflects Muzeum Susch's founding mission to promote the work of international Avant-garde women artists who have been overlooked or misread and therefore not been positioned on equal footing with their male counterparts across art institutions all over the world.

“My older sister told me that once, as a little girl, I arranged all my toys in a beautiful circle and started to dance between them and sing: ‘I’m Tapta, Tapta, Tapta.’ The family liked it, and I became Tapta. Forever.” (Tapta, 1997)

Tapta (the pseudonym of Maria Wierusz-Kowalska, born Maria Irena Boyé) was born in Poland in 1926 and came to Belgium as a political refugee with her husband, Krzysztof, after taking part in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. She studied weaving at the La Cambre National School of Visual Arts, Brussels, from where she graduated in 1949. Shortly afterwards, the couple moved to the Belgian Congo (now Democratic Republic of the Congo), where they lived from 1950 to 1960. Upon their return to Belgium in 1960, until her sudden death in 1997, she worked in Brussels as an artist and – from 1976 until 1990 – as a professor at La Cambre.

Installed in a loosely chronological order, the exhibition will give an overview of Tapta's oeuvre, which is mainly divided into two periods: the textile works made in the 1960s until the early 1980s and the works in neoprene from the 1980s-1990s.

The exhibition first focuses on Tapta's textile works, in which she steadily distanced herself from traditional weaving by applying experimental techniques such as twisting her woven pieces and, in particular, through the use of ropes, which she knotted and joined together into organic volumes. Her work protruded outwards from the wall, became more three-dimensional and increasingly

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interacted with the space and the viewer, who was invited to experience the works not only visually but also in a tactile and physical manner, stepping around and even inside them.

“What’s my dream? To create softly formed places that envelop you and protect you from the outside world. They become zones of peace and friendship.

What’s my dream? To feel enveloped not only by these textile forms, but also by their extensions: large shadows on the walls. That’s when real and imaginary, past and future merge and you feel reconciled with everything.” (Tapta, 1974)

In addition to about twenty original textile works, a key highlight of the exhibition is the unveiling of *Forms for a Flexible Space* (1974), a reconstructed version of Tapta's installation, in which she invites visitors to immerse themselves. This installation represents one of the few surviving *environments* that Tapta created in the early 1970s. Due to the original's delicate condition, a replica was crafted last year for Tapta's exhibition at WIELS in Brussels and will now be displayed in its entirety for the first time at Muzeum Susch.

Tapta’s activation of the viewer, as seen in the textile sculptures, also manifests itself in the black neoprene works that she began making in the late 1980s and which – following an intermediate phase of experimenting with rubber and stretching ropes across the vaults of the exhibition spaces – marked a radical turn in her use of materials. Handcrafted rope sculptures now gave way to sculptures and installations from the industrially manufactured material, neoprene—further developing her idea of “flexible sculpture”. Large black surfaces connected by metal bars and bolts form open structures, which the viewer can walk through. Sometimes, the different elements of the sculpture are connected by hinges, allowing their shape to be changed – according to the size of the space or the will of the visitor.

Next to a selection of works, two exhibition rooms will be dedicated to the scale models, by means of which Tapta invented both her textile and her neoprene sculptures. These models, which are miniature versions of the final monumental works or trial versions of sculptures that were never executed, reflect Tapta’s way of working: totally lead by the material – its texture, weight, flexibility, and touch – she sculpted the pieces of textile or neoprene into shapes that foreshadow how, in the eventual installations, she would lead, or weave, the visitors through the space, in and around her works, making them experience the environment differently.

Some of the archival documents that will be shown next to the scale models feature Tapta as a professor at the La Cambre National School of Visual Arts in Brussels. From 1976 to 1990 she led the textile workshop there, renaming it ‘Flexible Sculpture’. This commitment as a teacher was as important to her as her artistic practice. Rather than instructing her students in a particular technique, she prioritized the development of an open and critical mind. Her students included Ann Veronica Janssens, Monica Droste and Marie-Jo Lafontaine.

The exhibition is curated by Liesbeth Decan, who is a lecturer at LUCA School of Arts Brussels. Her research is focused on the work of Belgian avant-garde artists from the 1960s till the 1990s. In 2023, she organized the exhibition *Tapta: Espaces souples. With Greet Billet, Hana Miletić and Richard Venlet* at WIELS, Brussels, where Tapta’s sculptures were in dialogue with works from three contemporary artists specifically made for the exhibition.

Notes to editors

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Listing details:

Exhibition dates: xxx

Vernissage: xxxx 2024

Address: Muzeum Susch, Surpunt 78, CH-7542 Susch, Switzerland

Tickets: Regular 25 CHF/ reduced 20 CHF *

Website: www.muzeumsusch.ch

Instagram: @muzeumsusch

About Tapta

Tapta (pseudonym of Maria Wierusz-Kowalska, born Maria Irena Boyé) was born in Poland in 1926 and came to Belgium as a political refugee with her husband, Krzysztof Wierusz-Kowalski, after taking part in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. She studied weaving at the La Cambre National School of Visual Arts, Brussels, from where she graduated in 1949. Shortly afterwards, the couple moved to the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), where they lived from 1950 to 1960. After returning to Belgium, Tapta swiftly established herself as an important member of a new generation of artists, who sought to redefine sculpture by using textiles and other flexible materials as sculptural elements. In doing so, she simultaneously took textile art beyond the categories of the decorative arts and crafts. She had her first solo exhibition in 1966 at the Galerie Les Métiers in Brussels, after which her work was shown in major exhibitions in Belgium and abroad, including at the 4th International Biennale of Tapestry in 1969 in Lausanne. This exhibition, in which her work was displayed alongside those of Magdalena Abakanowicz, Jagoda Buić, Elsi Giaouque and Sheila Hicks, encouraged her to continue along the path of unconventional experimentation with textiles. In the 1980s she quite radically changed her materials from woven textiles and cords to neoprene. With this industrially produced rubber she created large black installations that, however, still represent her idea of “flexible sculpture”. Tapta died unexpectedly in 1997, just as her native Poland was discovering her work at a major solo exhibition at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, and her monumental sculpture *Esprit Ouvert* near Brussels North Station had just been inaugurated.

About Liesbeth Decan

Liesbeth Decan teaches history of photography and art at LUCA School of Arts Brussels. She holds a PhD in Art History (KU Leuven). Her research concentrates on the work of Belgian avant-garde artists from the 1960s to the 1990s, with a special focus on their photographic work. Her most comprehensive publication on that topic is the book *Conceptual, Surrealist, Pictorial: Photo-based Art in Belgium (1960s-early 1990s)*, which was published within the Lieven Gevaert Series of Leuven University Press (2016). On the same topic she curated the exhibition *From Broodthaers to Braeckman. Photography in the Visual Arts in Belgium* at M HKA, Antwerp (2017). With Mieke Bleyen she co-edited the book *Photography Performing Humor* (Leuven University Press, 2019). In 2023 she was the curator of the exhibition *Tapta: Espaces Souples, With Greet Billet, Hana Miletić and Richard Venlet* at WIELS, Brussels, and editor of the book with the same title (Mousse Publishing, 2024). She is a senior staff member of the Lieven Gevaert Research Centre for Photography, Art and Visual Culture (KU Leuven/UCLouvain) and a member of the Committee of AICA Belgium.

About Muzeum Susch

Being simultaneously a site of contemplation, research and intervention, MUZEUM SUSCH opened in January 2019 as a space for debate and research. Founded and created by Grażyna Kulczyk, the Polish entrepreneur and long-term supporter of contemporary art, it is specifically (but not exclusively) informed by a deep understanding of woman artists and seeks an emotional connection

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to art as a matrilineage of the sometimes omitted, overlooked or misread. The museum is housed in an extraordinary campus located on the site of a 12th-century former monastery and brewery in Susch, a remote town on the ancient pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostela in the Engadin valley of the Swiss Alps. The multi-faceted project comprises over 1,500 m² of gallery spaces which show site-specific and permanent artworks, and a regular program of curated, temporary exhibitions. Due to its unique architecture, the MUZEUM SUSCH has become a “must see” in Switzerland in recent years.

About Grażyna Kulczyk

Grażyna Kulczyk is an entrepreneur and art collector, whose endeavours have made her Poland's most successful businesswoman. In 2004, after many years of running activities in art and philanthropy sectors, Ms. Kulczyk set up her cultural flagship venture: Art Stations Foundation CH, housed across the carefully restored and extended 8-hectare, former industrial complex, Stary Browar (Old Brewery) in Poznań (Poland), which has received numerous Polish and international awards. In 2015 she started the construction of the Muzeum Susch in Switzerland, which opened its doors in 2019. It has quickly become one of the most important museum institutions in Switzerland and is largely recognized across Europe for its dedication to international modern and contemporary art. Art Stations Foundation CH also houses a Residency Program and the Instituto Susch dedicated to global feminist Research, Conference and Publication programmes.

Ms. Kulczyk's areas of interest and art commissions combine a number of themes as development of new technology and start-ups working to change the world. She is particularly engaged in supporting entrepreneurship among women as well as the equal presence of women in STEM. From 2012 to 2018, Kulczyk supported Tate as a member of the International Council and REEAC. She was a member of the board of the Modern Women's Fund Committee of the Museum of Modern Art, New York and a board member of Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw for almost 10 years. Ms. Kulczyk has been recognized as one of the 200 Top Collectors in the world by Art News magazine.

About Maurice Verbaet

Maurice Verbaet, born on January 22, 1951, in Antwerp, displayed an early interest in the arts, a passion that was fuelled by travels to cultural hubs in Italy and Spain. While pursuing humanities studies in university, Verbaet started his art collection, initially purchasing graphic works. This early phase laid the foundation for what would become an important art collection, primarily focused on Belgian art of the late 19th and 20th centuries.

Verbaet's professional career took a notable turn when he became Belgium's youngest stockbroker at twenty-five, inheriting his grandfather's business. His innovative and non-traditional approach to business not only led to its growth but also enabled him to expand his art collection.

Shifting his focus entirely to his art collection, Verbaet founded a private museum in Antwerp until its closure in 2018. In the same year, he opened an art gallery on the Belgian coast and participated in various prestigious art fairs, promoting post-war Belgian art in particular. Today, his collection is considered one of the important of twentieth-century Belgian art.

Verbaet is also committed to the revival and defense of underrepresented or forgotten artists in art history. This includes championing artists such as Tapta (Maria Wierusk Kowalski), whose rights he acquired. His dedication to preserving and highlighting these important cultural works remains a key aspect of his legacy.