

SYBIL

Charlotte vander Borgh and Tapta *The Unknown*

Curated by Laurence Dujardyn

SYBIL is pleased to present, in collaboration with Maurice Verbaet, a duo presentation of works by Tapta (1926 - 1997) and Charlotte vander Borgh (b.1988). *The Unknown* offers an opportunity to shed new light on the late works of Tapta, a major yet internationally underexposed artist, while opening a dialogue with vander Borgh's contemporary practice through material and thematic affinities.

Having fled Poland after participating in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, Tapta (b. Maria Wierusz-Kowalska) arrived in Belgium as a political refugee. She studied weaving at La Cambre National School of Visual Arts, where she returned to teach from 1976 until 1990, leaving a lasting impression both on her students (Ann Veronica Janssens, Monica Droste and Marie-Jo Lafontaine, amongst others) and on the Belgian and Brussels art scenes at large[1]. A key figure in the New Tapestry movement of the late sixties and early seventies, Tapta experimented widely with off-loom techniques and spatial interaction, coining the concept of Sculpture Souple (flexible sculpture). In the 1980s, Tapta shifted her focus to black industrial neoprene rubber, used with steel rods, nuts, and bolts to create imposing geometric sculptures until her untimely death in 1997.

The four works shown here belong to this late period. Her leap from braided and woven sculptures in jute and wool to these minimalistic interventions in synthetic rubber may appear radical. Yet a clear intention to engage viewers and sculptures in space persisted throughout Tapta's oeuvre. Just as the artist's previous textile pieces solicited touch and invited visitors to enter the sculptures, here one can also walk through and around them, their titles also recalling her engagement with movement and encounter: *Tailler-Ouvrir* (Cut-Open), *Jouer* (Play), *Point de Rencontre* (Meeting Point). It is essential to note that the works from this period were created in relation to the artist's height, their scale hinting at human presence and providing embodied points of view to observe both the architecture they inhabit and, in this instance, sculptures and photographs by Charlotte vander Borgh.

Set side by side in the space, vander Borgh's and Tapta's works share clear substantial and conceptual correspondences. Tapta's imposing black sculptures evoke the mechanical workings of cityscapes that shift humans and goods from here to there, her forms reminiscent of iron bridges, boat hulls, train tracks, and girders. Beyond a common use of industrial materials (resins, rubber, steel, aluminium), Tapta's motifs also find resonance in vander Borgh's ongoing interest in infrastructures, commercial transit modes, and patterns of flux within the city.

In 2019, vander Borgh began moulding and casting seating elements from the New York subway system, revealing their paradoxical existence between total anonymity and a potential for capturing and channelling an everyday, lived human experience of the city. The concave resin works – one of which is featured here (*Metamorphosis* (shedding), 2026) – suggest presence through absence: the seats are ergonomically adjusted to the contours of a "typical" yet nonexistent body, all the while bearing the trace of countless commuters, their surfaces shaped and scratched by contact with real people in transit.

Here, the two bodies of work find a key hinge point. While Tapta rarely expressed herself on the interpretation of her works, she rejected the assimilation of her neoprene sculptures into the self-referential frigidity of the Minimal Art canon: "*Minimal artists reject all feelings, and I mostly sculpt in feelings.*"[2] Tapta understood them instead as pieces creating flux, to be encountered through their manipulation and potential for variation (sometimes incorporating wheels and hinges to allow repositioning). The metallic connectors cause the rubber to buckle and pucker slightly; the tension across the neoprene remains visible, and its malleability slowly appears.

To fully appreciate these sculptures is to experience them bodily, and even to smell their rubbery odour. This sensibility, verging on sensuality, is echoed in vander Borgh's practice.

Recently, the artist has begun dismantling, exploding, and expanding her reproducible forms, pushing her towards a new consideration of the body (be it human, partially human, or nonhuman). For *The Unknown*, four new works hand-carved in stone-like, porous resin manifest lifeforms as something now more present yet still unseen: wrapped, concealed, regenerating. Like sarcophagi, chrysalides, a convolute leaf, or even a sleeping bag, these painted sculptures are the result of vander Borgh's approach itself in metamorphosis; an organic, coloured counterpart to the alienating forms present in the constructed world. Their meeting with Tapta's arches and doorways creates a dialogue between the built and the natural, recalling the surreal landscapes of Giorgio de Chirico, where rigid, perspectivist architecture hosted soft and disarticulated mannequins.

Ideas of movement and metamorphosis course through the exhibition, whether in the way visitors are invited to circulate through it, or in the themes of the pieces themselves. Vander Borgh's two photographs bridge the two bodies of work in this sense. *Untitled* (Building), 2025 captures a contemporary high-rise in Mexico City, its curves and arches constituting a call-and-response to those in Tapta's nearby *Tailler-Ouvrir*, 1990/2024. A security guard stands shrouded in mystery at the entrance while each white-curtained window becomes a chrysalis for an anonymous entity, positing the hotel as the quintessential interchangeable space. Finally, a large-scale photographic print of rubber tyres outwardly echoes the neoprene of Tapta's sculptures and continues vander Borgh's parallel interest in transient spaces, where the leftovers of unbridled industriousness accumulate. These objects of speed and transport are blocked and piled up, announcing the end of the road for a material once natural, now almost impossible to break down and recycle. In turn, the image provides a pendant to the other works on show, which point towards movement, mutation, and transcendence.

Across *The Unknown*, the form and formlessness meet in warp and weft. While in her later career, Tapta gravitated towards the defined and architectural, vander Borgh moves towards the shapeless and the organic, their works weaving in and out of one another against the backdrop of a megalopolis whose pipes, roads, tracks, vents, and conduits interlace to keep bodies and desires in constant motion.

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[1] A testimony to this critical legacy is the 2023 exhibition which took place at Wiels, Brussels, entitled "Tapta: Espaces Souples. With Greet Billet, Hana Miletić and Richard Venlet", coordinated by the artists and researcher Liesbeth Decan.

[2] In *Tapta: Flexible Forms*, Liesbeth Decan, Agnieszka Sosnowska, Sarah Van Beurden, Camiel van Winkel, Anda Rottenberg, Ann Coxon, Greet Billet, Marta Kowalewska, Marika Kuzmicz, Virginie Mamet, Sergio Martins, Muzeum Susch & Hatje Cantz, 2024, p.[a]

This exhibition was realized in close collaboration with Maurice Verbaet, who manages the estate of Tapta. We would like to warmly thank Maurice Verbaet, François Deconinck and the entire team at MV for their collaboration and support in bringing this project to life.

Guided tour with artist Charlotte Vander Borgh & art historian Liesbeth Decan
Friday, September 11, 5:30–7pm

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SYBIL is a curatorial platform founded in 2024 by Laurence Dujardyn in Brussels. It explores the intersection of contemporary art, historical perspectives, and disciplines such as architecture and design. Operating across various locations, SYBIL engages in collaborations with artists, other curators, galleries, and institutions to develop its projects.

September 11 - October 24 - 2026 Maurice Verbaet Exhibition Space
Avenue Van Volxem 260B, 1190, Bruxelles
Open Thursday to Saturday 11am - 6pm