

WIELS

Press release

Tapta: *Espaces souples*

With Greet Billet, Hana Miletić and Richard Venlet

18 May – 13 August 2023

WIELS, Brussels

The Polish-Belgian artist Tapta set out in the 1960s to radically redefine sculpture by using textiles and other flexible materials as sculptural elements. This exhibition centres on Tapta's attention to the tactility of her materials, the suppleness of structures, individual and collective practice, and the interaction between artwork, space and viewer. New work by Greet Billet, Hana Miletić and Richard Venlet is also presented in relation to Tapta's historical pieces.

Tapta (pseudonym of Maria Wierusz-Kowalski, born Maria Irena Boyé) was born in Poland in 1926 and came to Belgium as a political refugee with her husband, Christoph, after taking part in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. She studied fine art and weaving at the National School for Advanced Visual Arts La Cambre, 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 one of the most important members 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 ornament and craft. 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 the 4th International Biennale of Tapestry in 1969 in Lausanne. This exhibition, where her work was displayed alongside those of Magdalena Abakanowicz, Jagoda Buić, Elsi Giauque and Sheila Hicks, encouraged her to continue along the path of unconventional experimentation with textiles.

Flexible sculptures

The exhibition focuses on Tapta's signature works from the 1970s, in which she steadily distanced herself from traditional weaving through experimental techniques such as twisting her woven pieces and particularly the use of ropes, which she knotted and joined together. Her work became more three-dimensional and increasingly 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 (in *Triennale 3*, exhib. cat., Bruges Beurshalle, 1974, n.p.)

Her activation of the viewer is likewise manifested in her neoprene works, which she began to make in the late 1980s and which marked a radical turn in her use of materials. Large black surfaces connected by metal bars and bolts form open structures, which the viewer has to walk through or past. Elsewhere, the elements of the sculpture are connected by hinges, allowing their shape to be changed. The exhibition features several dozen small models in neoprene, which the artist used to prepare her monumental works. Also on display are two neoprene sculptures whose parts are attached to each other with hinges that allow them to change shape.

Reconstruction project

Perhaps the most innovative part of Tapta's oeuvre is her environments from the early 1970s. As far as we know, of these impressive installations, made of ropes strung together in which the viewer can take a seat, only one survives: *Formes pour un espace souple* (1974), now in M HKA's collection. However, due to careless preservation in the past, the work is in poor condition. In order to be able to publicly display the work again in the future, a reconstruction of the installation will be worked on as part of the exhibition. Using the same materials and following the same techniques, textile designers and students from La Cambre and LUCA School of Arts, will make the process-related and collective experience that Tapta pursued tangible again.



Tapta, *Formes pour un espace souple*, 1974, ca. 300 x 400 x 400 cm (collection M HKA). Photo taken by Philippe De Gobert in Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 1975.

The reconstruction studio also refers to Tapta's **teaching**. Tapta's appointment as a teacher at the National School for Advanced Visual Arts La Cambre was just as important as her artistic practice. She headed the textile workshop there from 1976 to 1990, renaming it 'Flexible Sculpture'. 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. Ann Veronica Janssens and Monica Droste were also her assistants from around 1979 to around 1987, helping to create the textile sculptures based on Tapta's models. Besides teaching at La Cambre, from 1980, Tapta also coordinated the "Structure" studio of the Fondation de la Tapisserie in Tournai, which later became TAMAT (Musée de la Tapisserie et des Arts Textiles de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles). All these engagements show her deep commitment to mentoring and encouraging young creators in particular.

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.



Tapta, *Esprit ouvert*, 1997, steel & stainless steel, 1700 x 1200 x 500 cm, near Brussels North Station. © Commissioned by Proximus (formerly Belgacom) and WTC nv; managed by the Brussels-Capital Region. Photo Liesbeth Decan

In addition to historical works by Tapta, the present exhibition includes new pieces by three contemporary artist-teachers, **Greet Billet**, **Hana Miletic** and **Richard Venlet**, who respond from within their own practice to specific aspects of Tapta's oeuvre, such as the interaction between artwork, space and public.

Greet Billet, who, like Tapta, often creates in situ installations, also continues Tapta's use of mirrors, (reflective) water surfaces or light projections in geometric shapes with two triangular mirror works where she blends the artwork and the surrounding space.

Richard Venlet creates a transparent, flexible wall structure that guides visitors to the exhibition past Tapta's works and through the space. His work creates a fluid spatial experience that reveals itself as both framing an exhibition and an autonomous form.

In collaboration with Espace Fxomme-Globe Aroma and the public, **Hana Miletic** creates new works within their series of Felt workshops (2018-), inspired by the tactile and playful installations Tapta created in the late 1970s and early 1980s in co-creation with her students and groups of young children.

HANA MILETIĆ

In her practice, Hana Miletic complicates the relationship between representation and reproduction by making connections between photography and weaving. The artist models her woven textiles after photographs that document acts of 'care and repair' in public spaces. She uses the weaving process - which requires a lot of time and dedication - to counter certain economic and social conditions, such as acceleration, standardization and transparency. In addition, the slow and caring labour of weaving allows her to create new connections between working, thinking and feeling. In doing so, she clearly connects with the methodology of Tapta, who arrived at 'supple sculptures' through the manipulation of her materials, which, could not only be looked at but also touched and experienced more physically.

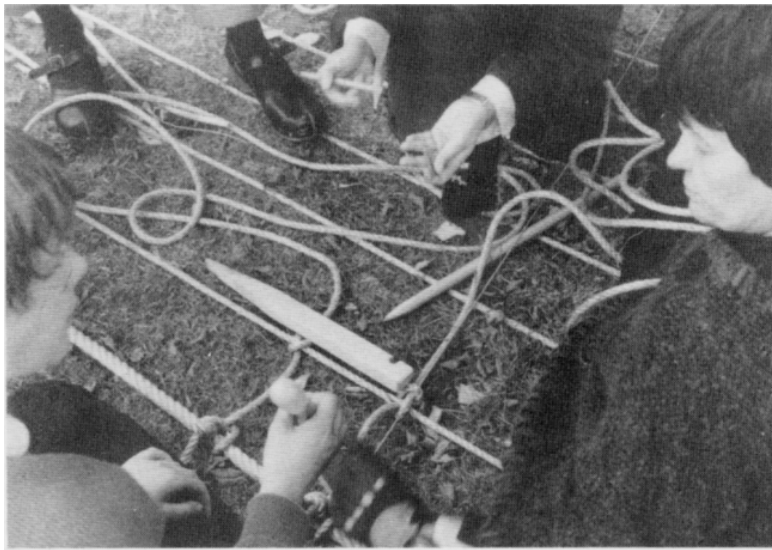
Miletic's contributions to this exhibition are mainly inspired by Tapta's collaborative projects. One of these is *Structure spontanée*, a work that Tapta created in 1978 with her La Cambre students and young children from a local school for the exhibition *Tapisseries d'aujourd'hui* at Malou Castle in Sint-Lambrechts-Woluwe: a spontaneous structure that was not executed according to her design but entirely created by the participants' free gestures.

Referencing this, Miletic organizes, together with some members of Espace Fxomme, a group of women and non-binary people from the socio-artistic organization Globe Aroma, three felt workshops for and with exhibition staff and visitors. The felt workshops are hands-on, guiding audience participants in wet felting, a craft technique that revalues gendered cultural practices. They are the continuation of *txt, Is Not Written Plain* (2017), the first felt work Miletic created with a group of female members of Globe Aroma, which was shown to the public during Miletic's solo exhibition at WIELS in 2018. The fact that the felt workshops will continue as part of this exhibition shows WIELS' commitment to forms of collective co-creation.

BIOGRAPHY

Hana Miletic (b. 1982, Zagreb, Croatia) lives and works in Brussels. In recent years, her work has been shown in several solo and group exhibitions at home and abroad. In Belgium, she had solo exhibitions at WIELS (2018) and La Loge Brussels (2021) and participated in the Sharjah Biennale 13 (2017),

Manifesta 14 in Pristina (2022) and the Dhaka Art Summit (2023). In 2015, she was the laureate of the BOZAR Prize, nominated for the Belgian Art Prize, and in 2021 she received the prestigious Baloise Art Prize. Her work is part of several public art collections, including KANAL Pompidou, M Leuven, MUDAM, MuHKA, Mu.ZEE and Stedelijk Museum. She teaches at LUCA School of Arts Brussels.



Installation made by Tapta in collaboration with her students from La Cambre and a group of elementary school children, 1978, Manila hemp. Part of the exhibition *Tapisseries d'aujourd'hui*, Woluwe-Saint-Lambert: Château Malou. Photographs from Françoise Galle & Marie-Paule Ripoche, « Tapta » in *Dri a di*, 9, April 1979, p.18.

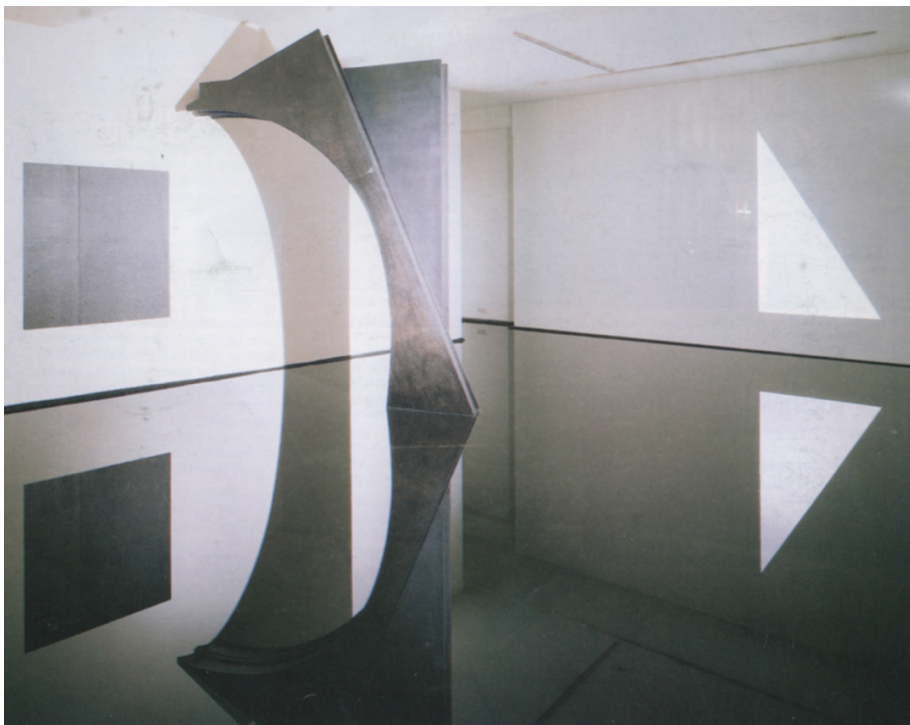
GREET BILLET

In her artistic practice, Greet Billet focuses on the representation of light through temporary in situ installations, in which control-related systems play a crucial role. The translation of light into an analogue and digital context is also an important aspect within her oeuvre. By combining different media and representations, Billet investigates the representation and registration of light in its essence.

Stimulated by some of the parallels she discovered between her and Tapta's practice - such as working in situ, the use of mirrors, an interest in light and soft, flexible materials - Greet Billet creates a new work for this exhibition using as its original starting point an installation Tapta made in 1996 at Galerie Etienne Tilman in Brussels. This consisted of two neoprene sculptures, leaning against the wall; a projected triangle; a wall-mounted black square formed by two rectangular wooden panels; and a water basin, in which the entire installation was mirrored. With two large mirror works on either side of the entrance to the expo, Billet refers on the one hand to the figure of the triangle, which Tapta integrated into as many neoprene installations of the 1990s, and on the other to Tapta's use of mirrors and especially mirrored water surfaces as in the installation at Galerie Tilman or the public sculpture *Esprit Ouvert* in Brussels. Like Tapta's water surfaces, Billet's triangles also reflect the exhibition installation, merging artwork and surroundings.

BIOGRAPHY

Greet Billet (b. 1973) lives and works in Brussels. She teaches at LUCA School of Arts Brussels, where she is also a researcher at the Intermedia research unit. Since the late 1990s, her work has been shown in various galleries and museums in Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Germany, the UK, Italy, Japan, Australia, Brazil, the US and Canada.



Tapta, *Installation*, 1996, neoprene, light projection, wooden panels painted in black, water basin (Galerie Etienne Tilman, Brussel)

RICHARD VENLET

In his artistic practice, Richard Venlet combines sculpture, art historical research, exhibition design and architecture. He turns spaces - usually exhibition spaces - into specific 'environments' that make us look at the space, and the objects in it, in a different way. He adds walls, flexible structures, floors or reflective surfaces - often with gaps through which artworks (by other artists) become fully or partially visible.

The viewer's experience plays a crucial role in his designs. Through Venlet's interventions, you are guided - sometimes misled - into the space and thus made aware of your viewing experience and position. The walls and floors that carry, support, tolerate or protect the artworks in Venlet's interventions function as spatial experiential contexts where the viewer and what is on display enter into an equal and mutual relationship.

The activation of the viewer forms the connection between Venlet and Tapta, whose early textile works as well as later monumental rubber and metal sculptures focused on the visual and tactile experience of the viewer. For this exhibition, Venlet designs a transparent, flexible structure that subtly guides visitors through the space and around Tapta's works, intensifying their perception of the artist's forms and materials.

BIOGRAPHY

Richard Venlet, born in Australia in 1964, lives and works in Brussels. His work has been shown in many national and international museums and galleries, including WIELS and BOZAR in Brussels, Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf, S.M.A.K. in Ghent, Macba in Barcelona and FRAC in Paris. As an artist who consciously intervenes in the architecture of an exhibition space, Venlet regularly collaborates with architectural firms, curators and art institutions. Richard Venlet is a lecturer at LUCA School of Arts Brussels.



Tapta, *Transit*, 1992, neopreen en staal, 40/200 x 1000 x 1000 cm. (Luik, Université de Liège, Musée en Plein Air du Sart Tilman)

A publication with installation views will be issued after the exhibition. In the booklet (of about 80 pages), designed by Sophie Keij, photographs of the exhibition (by Lola Pertsowsky) will be accompanied by text contributions (in NL/EN) from Liesbeth Decan i.c.w. Greet Billet, Hana Miletić and Richard Venlet. They outline the current state of research around Tapta, as well as the connection to contemporary art practices and touch upon the relevance of Tapta's oeuvre.

Curator: Liesbeth Decan

PARTNERS

In collaboration with the Intermedia Research Unit of LUCA School of Arts, Brussels

With the special support of Maurice Verbaet

Thanks to the Flemish Government, LUCA School of Arts, M HKA, Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens and Atelier Wauters

Reconstruction process of the work *Formes pour un espace souple* led by Chevalier Masson studio, in collaboration with Estelle Chatelin and Antonella Valerio, with the participation of students from ENSAV La Cambre and LUCA School of Arts: Harriet Benard, Amaryllis Bouyer, Annelies Clerix, Sulenur Eryuruk, Anouk Ostin, Marie Rasper, Martha Verleyen, Liane Vitte.

EVENTS

Felt workshops

Accompanied by Hafiza Azimi en Shilemeza Prins (Espace Fxmme, Globe Aroma) and Hana Miletić

Sat. 20.05, 14:00-16:30

Sat. 01.07, 14:00-16:30

Conversation between Ann Veronica Janssens, Michel Baudson, i.a. (FR)

Fri. 02.06, 19:00

Look Who's Talking: Virginie Mamet (FR)

Sun. 04.06, 15:00

Sun. 09.07, 16:00

Look Who's Talking: Greet Billet, Liesbeth Decan & Richard Venlet (NL)

Sat. 24.06, 14:00

Lecture by Liesbeth Decan (EN)

Thu. 29.06, 19:00

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Press conference and visit: Wednesday 17 May 2023 at 11:00

Opening to the public: Wednesday 17 May 2023 at 18:00

Press contact

Fran Bombeke

Fran@wiels.org

0494907166

WIELS

Avenue Van Volxemlaan 354

B-1190 Brussel

www.wiels.org

As one of the leading institutions for contemporary art in Europe WIELS presents temporary exhibitions by national and international artists, both emerging and more established. WIELS is a site of creation and dialogue, in which art and architecture form the basis for a discussion about current events and issues, not only through the exhibition programme, but also through hosting complementary activities.

Opening hours:

Open Tuesday to Sunday, 11:00-18:00

Every 1st Wednesday of the month until 21:00

8