Magdalena Abakanowicz
Crowd and Individual

Catalogue of Exhibitions and Permanent Installations

Illustrations p. 4–13:
Views of the installation *Crowd and Individual* by Magdalena Abakanowicz in the Carnelutti Hall of Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Island of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice, 2015. Photos by Alessandra Chemollo.

Preface

Ute Eggeling and Michael Beck

Magdalena Abakanowicz, without a doubt, is among the most significant sculptors of our time. She developed a universal sculptural language that is unique and unmistakable. Her works are understood in all countries and by all peoples, and her exhibitions – mounted worldwide from Asia and Australia to America and Europe – have garnered attention and admiration. More than forty-five monumental permanent installations bear witness to Magdalena Abakanowicz's notions of human and animal existence. To experience her works is to understand her message: Everything is loud and clear and involves all our senses.

We have been greatly honoured and enriched by working with Magdalena for eighteen years and by the opportunities we have had to show her work not only in Düsseldorf but also now in Venice with *Crowd and Individual*, an exhibition running parallel to the Biennale. We are especially delighted to honour her in the year of her 85th birthday, to thank her in this way for the many years of working together. Her aura and her oeuvre are overwhelming!

We would like to thank Sigifredo di Canossa for his great support of this important exhibition project. Our thanks go to Professor Luca Massimo Barbero, whom we were able to win as the curator for *Crowd and Individual*. And we would also like to thank the many hard-working members of Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice, as well as Jil Campisi for managing the exhibition project.

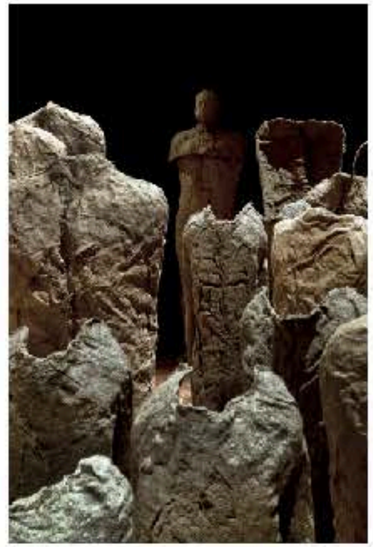
The present publication serves to illustrate the multilayered and rich work of Magdalena Abakanowicz with an overview of her exhibitions and permanent installations. Our warm thanks go to Dr. Andrea Knop and Martina Löhle who have brought the publication to fruition. We would like to express our sincere thanks to Dr. Jola Gola, who prepared Magdalena Abakanowicz's catalogue raisonné and, with her extensive knowledge of the artist's life and work, made an essential contribution to this book. Finally, our thanks go to Magdalena Grabowska, the artist's long-time confidante, and to Tomasz Piatkowski for their unreserved collaboration and support.

To judge from its primitive sound, just as from the lack of any aperture in its head, *Mutant* seems to be the natural evolution of a creature both Jurassic and imagined; and if its body really is, as it seems, in the process of *mutating*, it is also true that its forms can be compared to those of the large domestic animals which have accompanied man in his own "evolution". The artist herself reminds us – and as is her habit, her words unite both autobiography and history – that these animals exist both in a natural dimension, as regards their origins, and in an imaginary dimension, and all sparked off by the possibility of hypothetical trans-human genetics. "When I learned to use my pocket-knife, I carved imaginary animals out of tree bark. Sometime later, I painted fish, birds and butterflies. And after a several years, I cast in bronze metaphoric animal heads of huge 'dragons' and small 'hoofed mammal heads'… *Mutants* are the first complete animals after many years."[3] But it is the mystery, the wish for that inevitable destiny united to nature and to man that seems yet again to give birth to these creatures. "Allied by their texture to tree bark, broken stone or soil, they do not imitate any definite animal or species. Their forms are invented. *Mutants* are the result of exploring the intellectual and intuitive exploration of the mystery of shape and tissue. They constitute something significant which is between me, the fragments of the known and the unknown."[4]

The unfathomable seems to be behind the meaning of her work, from the individual sculptures to the multitude indicated by the title *Crowds*. The unfounded sense of the *unknowable*, the mystery that accompanies man's existence and has been the basis of his beliefs, led to conquests and constructed religions in an absolute way. The sightless mutant that blocks the exit of the invading crowd, or the crowd that is "restricted" by the space of the Carnelutti room in the Fondazione Cini, seems almost oedipal. This is a room in which there are hosted various sounds, a place that contains in itself, like forgotten traces, its history, the sound of others' footsteps through the ages. If we shift our eyes from the animal on the room's horizon, we are greeted by the crowd, and it is this quantity of people scattered around the room that is alienating, incomprehensible, and equivocal. Quantity is another inescapable element of this artist's

3) Magdalena Abakanowicz 1997, About *Mutants*, in Abakanowicz, *Mutants*, see note 2, p. 14.

4) Ibid.



work. She seems to find in quantity one of the aspects of nature's behaviour. The activity of a swarm, of a multiple and composite mass with a single sound and sharing the same fear: the sound of a crowd of humans, desperately alone and together. In fact, she reminds us that the sense of quantity and the movement of crowds are a basic fact of great natural communities and, by reflex, almost dramatically so in those human communities that are inseparable from, and belong to, others. "I once observed mosquitoes swarming. In grey masses. Host upon host. Little creatures in a slew of other little creatures. In incessant motion. Each preoccupied with its own spoor. Each different, distinct in details of shape. A horde emitting a common sound. Were they mosquitoes or people?"[5]

A widespread tension that in just a few seconds could degenerate into uncontrolled movement, is the distinctive element of crowds. This is the almost exorcist-like undertaking that the artist enacts in the face of multiplicity, of the infinite fears that can lead to conflicts and deflagrations, of that "loss of control" that supersedes human conscience. In *Crowds and Individual* are groups of small-scale human beings who seem to engage with *Mutant*. They are simulacrums of *Bambini*, children, which, together with *Ragazzi*, *Infantes*, and *Puellae*, are the artist's tribute to childhood,[6] to infancy and the complexity of adolescence. These children, reminders of the dramas that are often associated with the artist's historic memory,[7] engage with the space that distances them from the Beast. Shadows seem to protect them and, with their small stature and headless body, they wait; they are isolated in small groups, some placed quite distant from the others, together with taller individuals: possible adults. Everything seems to begin from infancy, that intense and fragile period in which everything is imprinted on the sensitive paper of memory and character. *Bambino* is both the possible beginning of life and, at the same time, a mystery which few can understand. The artist reminds us that "imagination is stronger than reality or, rather, it replaces it."[8]

By following the traces that Magdalena Abakanowicz has left through her quotations, memories and texts linked to her individual series of works, critics have often reconstructed the *Crowds* by justly placing them in a wide area that ranges from the artist's personal feelings to the universal value of drama and to what I would call the great leitmotiv of these works and of all her art: the human condition and its mystery. The body as a mass and as a refuge, as an emblem and metaphor for reality. Through the fabric it is made of, through its liberation from and, at the same time, definition through its anatomy, the body is both dressed and "flayed", both tactile and alienated from everything that might be corporeal. The fabric distances itself from softness and becomes "laborious", memory, an ill-treated natural material.[9] On the other hand it would be interesting, though this is not the time or place to do so, to discuss Abakanowicz's place among the great innovators of contemporary art who have confronted the production of the twentieth century. She herself says that the choice of a mass consisting of various and variable elements which can be considered together or separately, both distinct yet united, was fundamental to the sculpture of the last century. Abakanowicz eliminates the single-focus centrality of an individual element and goes beyond what only a few great artists have attempted: to consider elements and persons in their individuality and, at the same time, in their multiplicity to form, not a simple sculptural group, but a crowd: a mass of humanity and forms which, as the artist reminds us, cannot be quantified and where counting "has no sense". But then, as Aleksander Wojciechowski

5) Magdalena Abakanowicz 1985, as quoted in Magdalena Abakanowicz 2008, see note 5, p. 73. The quotation continues: "I feel overawed by quantity where counting no longer makes sense. By unrepeatability within such a quantity. By creatures of nature gathered in herds, droves, species, in which each individual, while subservient to the mass, retains some distinguishing features."

6) For a deeper investigation of the series and themes of the artist's work, see Magdalena Abakanowicz 2008, note 5; Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Working process e non solo*, Collezione Gori, Fattoria di Celle, 2002; and *Magdalena Abakanowicz. Space to Experience*, ed. Horst Albach and Peter Busmann, exh. cat. Düsseldorf, 2008.

7) Of the drama of children in wartime, the artist has written, "I remember the severe winter of 1942. The Germans occupied Poland. The war of Hitler with Russia continued. A transport of children from Poland to Germany, where they would be turned into Germans, was stopped by accident for a day and a night. The train was not heated. Hundreds of blond, blue-eyed children in the unheated cattle carriages froze to death. When finally soldiers opened the doors, the bodies fell out, stiff and hard like sculptures. I wasn't there. The person telling me about this built images in my young memory – clear, strong and lasting", Abakanowicz 2008, see note 5, p. 73.

8) Ibid.

9) For a partial analysis of the artist's use of textiles see, apart from the monographs, the particular and subjective investigation by Leslie Milofsky 1987, M. Abakanowicz, in Feminist Studies, vol.13, no. 2, pp. 363–378 and, above all, Michael Brenson 1995, M. Abakanowicz "Abakans" in Art Journal, vol. 54, no. 1, pp. 56–61.

2001

Magdalena Abakanowicz
Kunst-Station Sankt Peter, Cologne, Germany
08/30 – 10/21/01

Abakanowicz is also well-informed about the art of her time. Since she began exhibiting outside Poland in the 1960s, she has travelled widely (including Mexico and New Guinea) and participated in numerous international group shows, such as the São Paulo Biennale and the Venice Biennale.
The modern sculptors with whom Abakanowicz's work maintains the most instructive dialogue are Auguste Rodin, Constantin Brancusi and Joseph Beuys. Rodin is the fountainhead of modern sculpture, a source that continues to nourish so many sculptors whose approach to materials, like Abakanomicz's, is hands-on.
Abakanowicz has known about Beuys, who studied Rodin, at least since she saw him at Documenta III and felt his importance "immediately".
Like Abakanowicz, Brancusi is an Eastern European who grew up with a knowledge of the vitality of folk and peasant culture. In his reverence for materials and indeed for all of life, he may be Abakanowicz's most important predecessor. He is also as close to her as any other modern sculptor in his gift for the epiphanic image.

Michael Brenson, 1995■

Caminando (Walking Figures), 1999, bronze, 20 figures, ca. 172 x 50 x 65 and *Crowd*, 2001, bronze, ca. 268 x 90 x 120 cm, Kunst-Station Sankt Peter, Cologne, 2001. Photo © Magdalena Abakanowicz.

6th Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie (International Tapestry Biennale)
Lausanne, Switzerland
07/16 – 09/30/73

Installation at the 6th Biennale in Lausanne, 1973, and the artist with wheel and rope. Photos by M.R. Nicod.

Rope Environments. Magdalena Abakanowicz discusses her work with Judith Bumpus[8]

Bumpus: What is it about weaving that attracts you?

Abakanowicz: I'm not interested in the technique – the result is the important thing. By result I don't mean the final form of the work, but the woven material with which I start to create something – a situation. I want to create situations and introduce the viewer into these situations. In a series of exhibitions I had in the last four years I used the woven material just like fabric. I also used a run of rope which for me has been one of the most meaningful and flexible materials.

With the woven material and the rope I create different shows in different places depending on the space. I use the gallery space and also the landscape: the sand beaches in Poland and even cities, as in Edinburgh. So you see external objects sometimes as enhancing, sometimes extending your work?

Yes . . . and no. I mean every situation inspires me as a result of working in that situation. I couldn't repeat exactly in another place what I did at Edinburgh. I was inspired by the city and its landmarks and by the opportunity offered me by the gallery. I wanted to establish a definite link with the outside by means of this run of rope.

What situations do you create with your work?

I'm not interested so much in the individual exhibits as in the ensemble, the total effect made when I hang certain works together in one place. There is something which could be called a music of space. It's a relation between the objects and the whole environment and it's not until you find the proper relations that the music begins to work. The same objects in another situation can take on an absolutely different meaning. The meaning depends entirely on the relationships in a particular space.

Do you make any preliminary models or sketches?

No, none at all. It's impossible to make something from a drawing, because drawing is another technique. It's another medium. First of all you must imagine the form, feel it – you must know everything about it. The medium I work in would change a drawing completely.

So you don't even draw a line or a shape; it's all in your mind?

Rope installation at the 6th Biennale in Lausanne.
Photo © Magdalena Abakanowicz.

Sometimes I do, just to remind myself of a form I was thinking about. But in reality everything happens when I am sewing the material together and making the form. But as I said, the final form is not as important as giving the material a shape which can live in any situation in a different way.

So there are really two creative stages to your work, the first when you are actually making the piece in your studio, and the second when you are creating a situation somewhere else – setting up an exhibition.

Yes. The studio is my laboratory. I am only thinking there of what I want to express. What I am doing is preparing material to do something outside it.