

SCULPTURE FROM POLAND

THE PLASTIC BODY



Magdalena
Abakanowicz

Barbara
Falender

Teresa
Murak

Ewa
Partum

Alina
Szapocznikow

Wanda
Czełkowska

Zofia
Kulik

Ewa
Pachucka

Maria
Pinińska-Bereś

Teresa
Tyszkiewicz

1960 — 1989

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THE PLASTIC BODY
SCULPTURE FROM POLAND
1960-1989

Introduction
by the Curators

The exhibition *The Plastic Body* grew out of a shared interest in the artistic legacies of Eastern Europe. On view at Stavanger Art Museum from 26 September 2024 to 28 January 2025, the exhibition presented the work of ten Polish artists who, in the 1960s and 1970s, challenged traditional understandings of sculpture. It included works by Magdalena Abakanowicz (1930-2017), Wanda Czełkowska (1930-2021), Barbara Falender (b. 1947), Zofia Kulik (b. 1947), Teresa Murak (b. 1949), Ewa Pachucka (1936-2020), Ewa Partum (b. 1945), Maria Pinińska-Bereś (1931-1999), Alina Szapocznikow (1926-1973), and Teresa Tyszkiewicz (1950-2020).

The artists did not belong to a single group or movement, although some knew each other as colleagues or friends. The works were lent from Polish institutions, private collections, and foundations. The exhibition also included a performance by Maria Pinińska-Bereś, *Living Pink* (1981), reenacted by her daughter, the artist Bettina Bereś.

The word 'plastic' means malleable, elastic or flexible. The exhibition title refers both to sculpture as a *plastic art* and to the ways in which the featured works expand the definition of the body by representing it in new and unconventional forms. The title also alludes to the use of new plastic materials by several of the artists. While our relationship with such materials has changed over time, in the 1960s plastic was perceived as a 'material of possibilities'. The use of new materials was partly

motivated by economic concerns: textiles, seeds, and plastic materials such as polyester and resin offered inexpensive alternatives to stone and bronze. They were easy to handle and could be processed more quickly than traditional materials. These materials also enabled new artistic approaches to conveying personal experience and articulating artistic visions that were radical at the time.

The fragmented body appears in many of the works in the exhibition. These bodies bear witness to violence and the misuse of power. Five of the artists lived through World War II, and two experienced internment and concentration camps. The remaining artists were born in the immediate postwar years and grew up in a war-torn Poland. All of them lived under a Soviet-aligned communist regime, with the attendant restrictions on individual and artistic freedom. Yet, despite these conditions, they produced remarkably radical works. Abandoning conventional representations of the human body, they explored the body as a site of resistance, transformation, and freedom. Vulnerability and transience emerge alongside sensuality and desire. As expressions of body art, the works transcend their historical context and remain highly relevant to contemporary artistic investigations of the politics of the human body.

Although artists faced travel restrictions under the communist regime, several of the artists in the exhibition visited and exhibited in Scandinavia. In Norway, there was considerable interest in Poland during this period, particularly within the field of textile art. Both formal and informal artistic exchanges took place between Norway and Poland in the 1970s and 1980s. Wanda Czełkowska participated in a group exhibition in Norway in 1958. Magdalena Abakanowicz held her first solo exhibition outside Poland in Norway in 1967; the exhibition toured several Norwegian cities, including Stavanger. Teresa Murak took part in the land art project *Art - Nature* in Lillehammer in 1987. Despite these connections, many of the artists included in the exhibition remain little known to the general public outside Poland. One of the exhibition's primary aims was therefore to highlight their innovative contributions to postwar art history. Through their work, a broader understanding of movements such as Pop art, Nouveau Réalisme, and Land art emerges. The works presented reflect an expanded notion of sculpture, often emphasizing temporality and process. Consequently, the exhibition also included photography, film, and performance. In this way, the artists extended the concept of sculpture by foregrounding the human body as both motif and theme.

In connection with the exhibition, we organised a seminar with Polish and Norwegian researchers to address recent art historical perspectives on the artists included in the exhibition – and beyond – and to discuss their contributions to the field of sculpture and to contemporary art practices dealing with the politics of the human body. Teresa Murak was invited to participate and responded by creating a new artwork: a 'peregrinating object' sent to the museum by post. Entitled *Peregrinating Object 2024/2025 Warsaw-Stavanger (OBIEKT PEREGRYNUJĄCY 2024/2025*

Warszawa-Stavanger), the work consisted of a worker's overall sprouted with cress seeds. This poetic gesture closely aligns with Murak's practice, which is characterized by ritualistic and process-based actions involving garments with sprouting seeds. In this work, the body is absent – a feature shared by several works in the exhibition. The pockets of the overall were filled with seeds, functioning as containers in a manner reminiscent of the concept described by Ursula K. Le Guin in her essay *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1986).

This perspective is further explored in a commissioned text by the writer Sofie Bakke Ringstad, included in this publication. Ringstad investigates physical and conceptual spaces, reflecting on the artists' use of hollows and cavities. She examines how these practices enter into dialogue with contemporary understandings of identity, feminism, and historical context. From Magdalena Abakanowicz's bent figures to the silhouettes of Ana Mendieta, the text explores how negative space functions as a container of meaning and how we, as viewers, create connections across time, space, and ideas.

Art historian Klara Kemp-Welch also engages with Teresa Murak's work in her contribution, which addresses themes of mobility, resistance, and freedom. Kemp-Welch examines how the artists in the exhibition used sculptural practices to confront psychological and political constraints and to challenge the limitations imposed on their creative expression. Rather than being deterred by the forces working against them, these women pushed through both internal and external barriers, using their practices to explore the dynamic and malleable nature of freedom. Their art embodies vitality, resilience, and movement in defiance of stagnation and decline—a message that continues to resonate today.

Helga Nyman and Vibece Salthe

FROM RESILIENT OBJECTS
TO PERFORMATIVE BOUNDARIES

Traditional assumptions about sculpture were being subjected to the most radical of overhauls by artists around the world in the long 1960s. Alina Szapocznikow's remarkable use of new materials brought a particular literalness to the idea of "plastic art". Melting, pouring, and casting industrial plastics such as latex, polyester, and polyurethane – materials that were subject to the process of entropy in ways that more traditionally noble materials were not – the artist built temporality into the fabric of her sculptures, which resonate with the precarity, pain, and possibility of pleasure in bodily experience. Szapocznikow wrote in 1972 that her work was concerned with sensations and that she sought to capture "the fleeting moments of life, its paradoxes and absurdity". She saw the body as being "the most vulnerable" of ephemeral phenomena, "the source of all joy, all suffering and all truth", as something that was "as inevitable as it is inadmissible on any conscious level".¹ My paper takes some of the questions raised by one of Szapocznikow's provocative resin sculptures as a starting point for thinking about how women artists worked in the expanded field to materialise and to challenge the boundaries they faced in their working lives.

Szapocznikow's academic training had been at the Academy of Applied (rather than Fine) Arts, in Prague, where she enrolled after being liberated from Terezin, 30 miles north of the city, in 1945, and her lamp-sculpture blurs the boundaries between fine and applied art. If it is a functional object, it also sheds light on how Szapocznikow's resilient challenge to the male-dominated history of sculpture. Her sensual lamp sculpture is composed of two, equally, although differently, excessive

elements. The lower of these is a rugged grey clay-like erect phallus, positioned as though protruding from a prone body, gently curved, emerging from what may be a public mound, or the suggestion of an abdomen. The textured stand appears to merge with the earth, receding in death, rising in a final gesture to try to give new life. It's like an oversized stem or trunk. But for all its solidity there is also something precarious and unsettlingly vulnerable in the imperfection of the form, which renders it human rather than superhuman, despite its scale. It is one of Szapocznikow's *objets maladroits*, awkward objects, fragile, exquisite, and a little clumsy. The upper part of the sculpture seems too fragile to touch: the only way to move the lamp is to grasp the phallus firmly, if not to caress it in an erotic movement. To touch it is inevitably to become implicated, a co-producer of its libidinal charge, but it is also, presumably, a calculated shock, for it is cold and rigid, dead. Its length begins to recall that of a bone, its curve suggests that of a rib. We think of the biblical story of the creation of Eve from the rib of Adam so that the two might be companions in the garden of Eden. These intimate companions are conjoined.

The cast of a female face (the artist's?) – she had begun casting plastic body parts, increasingly deployed like death-masks, in 1965 – is also a fragment, for it reveals only the area below the nose: elegant cheeks, a perfectly formed mouth with red, red, lips, slightly pursed, and a shapely chin, resting – not on a hand, as in Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker*, but in the same attitude, equally pensively – on the tip of the eager phallus below. This morbid stem, stiving upwards out of the ground, encouraged by the lips, eventually bursts



Alina Szapocznikow
Sculpture-lamp X, c. 1970
 Coloured polyester resin, light bulb,
 electrical wiring and metal
 The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow /
 Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris /
 Hauser & Wirth

Teresa Murak
Bra, Object, 1975/76
 Cress seeds, epoxy resin
 Private Collection





Ewa Pachucka
The Open Man, 1969
Sisal, crochet
Fortress House, Gibraltar

into flower. It is topped by a glass-candy rendering of four deliciously bright balls of delicately-flavoured sorbet. This final flourish is what first draws the eye to the piece, illuminated by a discretely concealed light-bulb. The versatile polyester resin takes the form of a precious set of rose and yellow-tinted petal forms. These are angelic in their choreography, evoking both a halo and a set of wings in motion, or a fan of colour filters for a camera lens, giving the work a cinematic quality. By contrast with the delights above, the phallus appears no more than a remnant. Its drab form cannot compete with the excess of radiance it supports, and neither does it try to. The coloured elements grow like a delightful fungus from a tree-stump, nourished by its support. The enticing sugary shards almost ridicule the support, so clearly outshining the supporting phallus. The sculpture teases rather than avenges. True, the shard-like petals might threaten to drop and to slice, like small guillotines, through both the pretty lips and the fleshy phallus, but they do not: they seem instead to float protectively above, like exotic birds, giving their blessing to the delicate play of the chin and the glans of the phallus below. Szapocznikow acknowledges the power of the phallus, but takes advantage of its support, using it as a base from which to flourish in new and spectacular ways, just as her sculptural experimentation with synthetic plastics built on her artistic training with traditional materials, referenced here by the clay-like form below. The male and female elements seem to operate in harmony, the phallus supporting and raising up the shattered female element, which rests there with confidence, and, in return, delivers the gentlest of erotic pleasures to the awkward object straining below, providing it with a physical extension and more than a touch of style. Szapocznikow's lamp sculpture materialises the idea of an art object as something that sheds light on a situation, that helps us to better see and, by extension, to understand, what might go unseen, without the light it shines on the situation.

Male and female combine to make their case together in my next case study too: KwieKulik's *Monument without a Passport*. Performed at the "All Polish Biennale of

Youth Art "in Sopot in October 1978, it was a response to the state's refusal, a month earlier, to issue them with passports to participate in an international artists' meeting in Arnhem in the Netherlands. The couple had spent many months preparing for the so-called "Behaviour Workshop" in Arnhem, an experimental interdisciplinary event modelled on workshops at Joseph Beuys's "Free International University" at the 1977 Documenta 6, only to be informed, not long before the opening, that their passport applications had been refused. In a letter of appeal to the passport office, KwieKulik explained that the prestigious invitation was the cumulative result of many years' concerted effort to build up their reputation, and ought to be considered a success for Polish art. They wrote that non-attendance would be financially catastrophic for them personally as they badly needed the money they would receive for the trip to purchase equipment for future work, concluding by remarking that they intended to give the Arnhem organisers an honest account of the reasons for their non-attendance, thereby implying that the state's violation of their post-1975, post-Helsinki right to travel would arouse international condemnation. To no avail.

The blacklisted sculptors had to content themselves with attending a youth festival in Sopot. It was an invitation they had initially marked "for the trash". Early notes refer to the piece as a "monument to bureaucratic hatred",² explaining that "a monument cannot travel because it does not have a passport". While other "objects have passports", they said, "one object (the monument) does not. Monuments do not travel so why should they have passports (...) a "living person as a monument – can't move, can't travel".³ The circular logic of their stream-of-consciousness musings tried and failed to make sense of the mechanics of socialist bureaucracy. A photograph shows the culmination of an elaborate performance carried out by the artists, which entailed recounting how they had been blacklisted by the authorities following the publication of a work by Kwiek entitled *Dick Man*, alongside the Polish emblem of the eagle in their studio, one of the commissions they were working on as part of their day-to-day "hackwork", published in a Swedish

catalogue and considered offensive by the authorities. This side of the story was only revealed to one half of the audience, though, while the other half were treated to a slide show of an official summer meeting for Young Sculptors at Legnica in 1971, combined with audio playing English language lessons for beginners. The official images of collaboration between industry, art and socialist youth, paired with the English lessons, were an awkward coupling, potentially ridiculing the provincialism of the Polish People's Republic's cultural scene. Kwiek then made a rectangular mould around Kulik's feet and poured in plaster, placing her in the situation of a "double bind", with her head in a table, mimicking primitive methods of public humiliation such as the stocks, and her feet rooted to the ground. Once everyone had waited for the plaster to dry, Kwiek revealed Kulik's feet encased in plaster, and her conversion into a monument with the prerequisite solid base. Kulik was then carried onto a podium and her base joined to another base housing the legs of a chair. She held aloft a folder marked "Ideas for Arnhem". Kwiek unveiled a sign reading "Monument without a passport in the Salons of Visual Art". The artists remained immobile in front of their sign for ten to fifteen minutes.⁴ As in other works by the artists from the series "Activities for the Head", here too, it is Kwiek who plays the sadistic role of the oppressor, performing the repressive element, while Kulik plays the part of the repressed. Though the work ostensibly addressed the restrictions placed on both artists by the state, the internal dynamic of the duo did little to challenge patriarchally ingrained tropes of male as active, female as passive, and so on. KwieKulik's performative emphasis was on challenging state power, not patriarchy.

In a short text entitled "On Feminism in Art?", in the mid 1990s, Maria Pinińska-Bereś observed that because she was a woman, "the baggage of experience" that she carried with her would "today [...] be classified as feminist," but she confessed: "I deeply hid my experiences, perceptions and resentment." She said that the process of committing to exploring her experience as a woman produced conflicting emotions: "Once I decided to speak with my own voice,

when I had unblocked that female reservoir, there flowed out a river which led me myself at times into confusion."⁵ She was concerned with "the liberation of the author's personality" but she said that she needed to create the conditions for doing so within a safe space.⁶ Many of her performances relied on first staking out a territory.

In 1979, in Świeszyno near Miastko, Pinińska-Bereś made an installation she called *The Place: A Portable Monument*. It consisted of four pink poles arranged around a linen cloth and topped by a canopy bearing the inscription "There is such a place on earth," fluttering in the wind, like a sail. She called it an "homage to nature. Portable so that it doesn't cause ecological damage, erected as an act of affirmation."⁷ It is powerful but humble; simply serving as a framework for marking what is already there, and drawing visual attention to it. Janina Ładnowska has argued that if Pinińska-Bereś had "an extremely ambivalent attitude towards monuments," this may well have been because she had studied under one of Poland's foremost sculptors, Xavery Dunikowski, at a time when "an awful lot [of monuments] were created in Poland - devoted chiefly to the martyrdom of the occupation."⁸ These could not be more different in tone to Pinińska-Bereś's low-key portable monument, characterised by its fragile and understated elegance.

Agata Jakubowska has discussed extensively how the artist's particular "style... distinguished her from the rest of Polish art," and pointed out the role played in her work by fenced-off areas, which she refers to as "a field for action for a woman."⁹ Pinińska-Bereś insisted that women's work - in many undervalued forms - be taken seriously. In two performances devoted to *Laundry I* ¹⁰, in 1980 and 81, she marked out a space with white posts and a washing line, inside which there were tubs with water and a washboard, once used by the artist to wash her daughter's nappies. She put on a pink apron and worked carefully away at doing the laundry. After washing, rinsing and wringing out a series of cloths she hung these out to dry. Each was marked with a letter in pink; together, these read: fem-



Barbara Falender
Full Moon, 1976
 Marble «bianco di Carrara»
 and «rosa di Portogallo»
 Jacek Malczewski Museum, Radom

Drawings for
 «*Erotic Pillows*» series, 1973
 Private Collection

Alina Szapocznikow
Tumours Accumulated, 1969-70
 Polyester, dressing gauze,
 newspaper, photography
 National Museum in Wrocław





The Plastic Body: Sculpture
from Poland 1960-1989
(installation view),
Stavanger Art Museum
28.09.24-26.01.25

❶ Maria Pinińska-Bereś
Laundry II, 1981
Performance, Photo documentation
The Maria Pinińska-Bereś and
Jerzy Bereś Foundation



Barbara Falender
Erotic Pillows I-VI (detail), 1973 (2006)
Porcelain
Private Collection



2 Magdalena Abakanowicz
Cage and Back, 1981
 Wood, metal, jute, glue
 Museum Sztuki, Łódź



Maria Pinińska-Bereś
With a Rose in Teeth, 1970
 Mixed media
 Private Collection

Sco-Re with a Drop VI, 1995
 Canvas, sponge, music stand,
 Plywood, paint
 Museum Sztuki, Łódź

Window with Collection, 1997
 Mixed Media
 The Maria Pinińska-Bereś
 and Jerzy Bereś Foundation

inism. The actions ended when the artist turned her pink apron into a flag and secured it upright.

That regressive attitudes towards women's work and women's art persisted in experimental circles, just as they did elsewhere in society, was illustrated during the second iteration of the performance in the summer of 1981, in Osieki near Koszalin. The artist recorded in her summary of the event how "the performance was [...] disturbed by an intervention of the Łódź Kaliska members who threw their dirty linen into the tub. Still, I proceed as planned and the letters arrange themselves into the word 'feminism.'"¹⁰ She continued washing and hanging out to dry the parts that came together to take the form of a public feminism, displayed for all to see in the afternoon sunshine, and ignored the dirty vests of her younger male colleagues. Over the course of her career, the artist suffered a range of forms of aggression from viewers and colleagues: her work was despoiled, her intentions and working methods were criticized, false accusations were made about her by older male colleagues, and her actions were sabotaged by younger male colleagues. Pinińska-Bereś recalled: "I was greatly affected at that time by the opening of exhibitions and comments, often aggressive or ironic. Over a series of years my work was damaged at exhibitions by some anonymous person."¹¹ Her recollections speak volumes about the conditions within which she and other women artists were working. Small wonder, perhaps, that she made the decision to put up barriers around her work. These marked her right to her own safe space to carry out her activities in a context where this was far from guaranteed. She insisted that "art has to act upon the viewer, must not leave them indifferent. An indifferent viewer is the artist's failure. They may not understand it fully, but it has to act upon them."¹² I want to propose that the viewers she may have been most interested in targeting were neither members of the official socialist art establishment nor members of the general public. I think many of her actions were designed to speak to her immediate circle of alternative artist colleagues, in the first instance. Edit András has also noted that "the counterculture

mirrored the way official power worked."¹³ Bojana Pejić, likewise, explains that men continued to dominate in alternative circles, in an entirely conventional manner. Pejić has argued that a "non-romanticised view of dissident circles" has to acknowledge the degree to which "in resisting the oppressive state, they nevertheless carried on time-honored gender relations."¹⁴

Magdalena Abakanowicz's work of the Martial Law period, *Cage and Back* ②, skirted this issue, including an androgenous everyman figure, a body reduced to bare life, with no arms or legs or head, trapped in a gulag-evoking cage. We sense the figure's entrapment viscerally. Abakanowicz described her own experiences of travelling abroad as a struggle:

Every trip to the so-called capitalistic world could involve a nervous breakdown, a catastrophe or an adventure. The permission to go could be suddenly refused. Sometimes even if I applied several months in advance, I would only receive my passport two hours before my flight. Standing with my suitcase in the police passport office, my hands were shaking, my brain seemed to stop. There was no thinking; instead, a kind of pain like a toothache, like a gastric ulcer, like a muscle cramp. Finally, sitting in the airplane, I was again a victor in this competition. A victor and a victim. The price I paid for winning was high. The competition was based on what I had to defend: my existence as an artist, my desperate need to communicate with people through my art, my identity as a citizen of the world, and the identity of my country belonging to the world of culture. This may sound banal but at that time it was true. There was only one existence.¹⁵

She was all too aware of the fragility of her right to travel, and her testimony hints at the neurological, bodily experience of her uncertainty and the potential curtailment of her mobility, like a dull pain.

Now artists can travel more easily, but it is still often objects that make the pilgrimages instead. Teresa Murak was to be present

at the seminar and to show a performance but instead she made a new work specifically for the museum entitled *OBIEKT PEREGRYNUJĄCY 2024/2025 Warszawa-Stavanger*. Curator Helga Nyman explained: "It is a wandering or pilgrimaging object that consists of a blouse sprouted with cress seeds and a photograph. The sprouts will wither during transport and will arrive dry at the museum. We ... hope it will arrive in time for the seminar. It would of course be wonderful to have Teresa present, but we appreciate this poetic gesture which is very much in line with her practice. The simplicity of cress. A living shroud".¹⁶ Nyman's idea of a shroud is thought provoking, as is the idea that the object will already likely be dead when it arrives. So many lives are now lost on migrant journeys, over before they reach their destination, so many bodies never identified or recovered. Migration and mobility, or "peregrination", as Murak poetically puts it, is curtailed more aggressively than ever before by a necropolitical political order that privileges the movement of goods, capital and weapons over human rights and dignity.

The museum serves as a resting place where objects such as Murak's may act as prompts to continue the dialogue about how sculpture in the expanded field relates to the culture wars today, focused as they are on gender, environmental and border politics today. We have only to remind ourselves which executive orders Donald Trump has prioritised since his re-election, to remember how important it is to continue to resist sexual, environmental and geopolitical necropolitics today. The artists in the exhibition used their sculptural practice to challenge the psychological and political obstacles they were faced with and to call into question all restrictions. Rather than being deterred by everything that conspired to stand in their way, these were women who chipped away at the barriers they faced, both internally and externally, experimenting with the plastic experience of freedom. Their work champions resilience, movement, and life against the forces of entropy and stasis.

¹ Alina Szapocznikow, cited in Elena Filipovic & Joanna Mytkowska, *Alina Szapocznikow. Sculpture Undone 1955-1972*, exh. cat. (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 2013), 28.

² KwieKulik, sketch dated 2.10.1978. PDDiU "Warsztat zachowan" folder 133.

³ KwieKulik, sketch dated 2.10.1978. PDDiU "Warsztat zachowan" folder 133.

⁴ KwieKulik, "Pomnik bez paszportu - opis" type script. PDDiU "Pomnik bez paszportu" folder 134.

⁵ Maria Pinińska-Bereś, "On Feminism in Art?", in *Maria Pinińska-Bereś 1931-1999*, ed. B. Gajewska, J. Hanusek (Kraków: Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej Bunkier Sztuki, 1999), 162.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Maria Pinińska-Bereś, 'The Place: A Portable Monument' in *Maria Pinińska-Bereś. Ephemeral Works, 1967-1996*, ed. Jerzy Hanusek (Warszawa: Galeria Monopol, 2017), 76.

⁸ Janina Ładnowska, "A Puff and the Edge of the Sky (Maria Pinińska-Bereś's Sculpture)," in *Maria Pinińska-Bereś 1931-1999*, 157.

⁹ Agata Jakubowska, "The Pink Flag," in *Maria Pinińska-Bereś. Ephemeral Works*, 33; 39.

¹⁰ Maria Pinińska-Bereś, "Laundry II," in *Maria Pinińska-Bereś. Ephemeral Works*, 96.

¹¹ Maria Pinińska-Bereś, "On Feminism in Art?", 162.

¹² Maria Pinińska-Bereś cited in J. Hanusek, "Unrealised Performances," in *Maria Pinińska-Bereś. Ephemeral Works, 1967-1996*, 151.

¹³ Edit András, "Gender Minefield: The Heritage of the Past", *n.paradoxa*, 11 (1999), 4-5.

¹⁴ Bojana Pejić, "Proletarians of All Countries, Who Washes Your Socks? Equality, Dominance, and Difference in Eastern European Art," in *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* (Cologne: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 2009), 24.

¹⁵ Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Fate and Art*, 2nd Edition (Milan: 2020, 287) cited in Mary Jane Jacob, "The Artist. The Person", in Ann Coxon and Mary Jane Jacob (eds), *Magdalena Abakanowicz* (London: Tate, 2023), 12.

¹⁶ Helga Nyman, email to the author, 9 Jan 2025.



Barbara Falender
Erotic Pillows I-VI, 1973 (2006)
 Porcelain
 Private Collection

Maria Pinińska-Bereś
Stream, 1979
 Plywood, canvas stuffed with
 cotton wool, stones, acrylic
 The Maria Pinińska-Bereś and
 Jerzy Bereś Foundation

Alina Szapocznikow
Consonant, 1962
Sandstone, lost wax bronze
The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow
/ Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris /
Hauser & Wirth



Wanda Czełkowska
Head, 1968/2018
Plaster cast, metal frame
Wanda Czełkowska Estate /
Galeria Monopol, Warsaw





Teresa Murak

Third Crop, 1973/2014

Gauze, cress, drawing and photographs

MOCAK Museum of Contemporary Art in Kraków



Maria Pinińska-Bereś
Living Pink, 1981/2024
Performance, Kraków 1981
Reenactment, Bettina Bereś, Stavanger 2024

The Plastic Body
(installation view)
Alina Szapocznikow
Sculpture-lamp X, c. 1970
Coloured polyester resin, light
bulb, electrical wiring and metal
The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow
/ Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris /
Hauser & Wirth

Maria Pinińska-Bereś
Table II - Feast (1968)
Papier mâché, wood, canvas,
pencil, crayon
Jacek Malczewski Museum, Radom



Alina Szapocznikow
Photosculptures, 1971/2007
Gelatin silver prints and
a collage with text on paper
The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow
/ Piotr Stanislawski / Galerie
Loevenbruck, Paris



→ A CRACK IN MY VENN DIAGRAM ←

HOLLOWS ARE HEROES

The ten artists presented in *The Plastic Body* – which mainly exhibited sculpture – were all women, and their works serve as witnesses to a period in Polish art that many west of the Iron Curtain knew (and know) little about. Their works are voluminous, bending and buckling. And as an unpremeditated thematic twist that appears in hindsight, most of these works embody a form of hollow: a dip, a fold, a dent, a crack. A negative space.

This text is about the hollows. Those found in ourselves, in works of art, in concepts and in Venn diagrams (you know, the ones made up of two or more circles, more or less overlapping with each other).

In the science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin's essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" from 1988 she suggests that (pre) history isn't really about spears and mammoths, but about containers to keep things in. The reason why we remember the spears

is that a mammoth hunt makes a better story and is easier to paint on the cave wall. As Le Guin puts it, who wants to hear about how "I wrestled a wild-oat seed from its husk"¹. But apart from the things that enthralled our forefathers and foremothers round the fire, the real hero of history is "a thing that can contain something other than itself"²: a container, a bottle, a box, basket, a purse. A hollow.

The hollows are the heroes of the essay you are now reading. They are transformative spaces that create the ground for imagination and ideas. In *The Plastic Body* these hollows are full of metamorphic potential – at times hopeful, often ill-aboding. We shall start with the latter.



9 Magdalena Abakanowicz
Cage and Back, 1981
Wood, metal, jute, glue
Museum Sztuki, Łódź

In Magdalena Abakanowicz' (1930–2017) sculpture *Cage and Back* ❸ from 1981 there sits a body, bent double, with legs stretched out in front. Or rather, the body is no longer there, but we see its outline. A thin hard shell has caught the person's posture, eternally bent with an unnaturally large back. The shell's legs stop above the knee, there is neither neck nor head. The colours are earthy and dark. Who has forced the body into this position? What has this person borne on its shoulders that can have pressed it down into this state?

The material used for this hollowed-out human form is jute, as is used in coarse sacks. The membrane-like result reminds one of gauze bandages, used for healing. Something has been severely damaged – a whole person broken – and all that is left is the eternally bowed hollowed dressing. Yet the imprint of the body is not alone. The jute outline is sitting on a narrow wooden plank which again rests in a primitive cage made of wooden poles. The work is uncanny, raising urgent questions about the missing body.

In Abakanowicz' hollowed form we do not see the contours of a person; we see the person itself. She invites each of us to project our version of a body into the empty space. We call this *Negative space*: what one does not see has the same effect as the physical expression. As in Le Guin's essay the hollow room becomes the transformative factor, a container with room for our own images and experiences. We attribute elements of our own world view to the "negative" area, and this is why it resonates so profoundly in each of us.



❶ Alina Szapocznikow
Herbarium (Piotr's Head),
 1972
 Polyester resin
 The Estate of Alina
 Szapocznikow / Galerie
 Loevenbruck, Paris /
 Hauser & Wirth

The hollow theme can be seen in many of the works shown in *The Plastic Body*, in particular the sculptures of Alina Szapocznikow (1926–1973). I see from the exhibition text that her work took an entirely new course with the growth of a tumour in one of her breasts. It seems as if the formation of a new shape in her body forced her to break with concrete volume in her art. In her work *Large Tumour I* (1969) ❷ photographs (cast into and under a layer of) polyester are twisted and warped. Another work *Piotr's Head* ❸ (from the series *Herbarium*) – which she made only months before her death from breast cancer at 47 – evokes associations of a death mask. We see a face cast in polyester resin. The mask billows behind sterile museum glass as if it has lain too long in the sun. It bulges, contracts, lacks volume. As in the work of Abakanowicz the actual person is no longer there, the imprint alone survives.



Wanda Czełkowska (1930–2021) is another artist intent on hollows, dents and bulges in her sculptures. Her works undulate as if there were bubbles heaving under the surface leaving dents as they swelled. The human head is the theme of many of her works, though we are never given a clear figurative representation of anything like that. The result is grotesque asymmetrical creatures in plaster, often with exposed metal framework ❹. It is almost as if we are looking into a human blueprint, as if Czełkowska is leading us into the early phases of Creation, or perhaps more drastically into decomposition.

A third artist working with *negative space* is Ewa Pachucka (1936–2020), represented in the exhibition with her textile sculpture *The Open Man* (1969) ❺. This is her only contribution to *The Plastic Body*, yet her hanging figure clearly forms one of its central works. Pachucka's man is knitted and crocheted from the natural material sisal. A hole penetrates his stomach, like a peephole on one side and wide open on the other. The man's penis weighs heavily on the floor, but his legs are missing, and his arms have grown into the body's thighs. The work evokes many associations and as in the other works and figures in the exhibition it is up to the beholder to provide the body with a story.



● Wanda Czelkowska
Head, 1968/2018
Plaster cast, metal frame
Wanda Czelkowska Estate /
Galeria Monopol, Warsaw

● Ewa Pachucka
The Open Man, 1969
Sisal, crochet
Fortress House, Gibraltar

Magdalena Abakanowicz
Androgyn (A Tribute to Witkacy),
1984/1985
Wood, resin, jute
Galeria Studio in Warsaw

Maria Pinińska-Bereś
Table II - Feast (1968)
 Papier mâché, wood,
 canvas, pencil, crayon
 Jacek Malczewski Museum,
 Radom

● Ewa Partum
*Change. My Problem Is a
 Problem of a Woman*, 1979
 16 mm film, silent, 7:16 min
 Ewa Partum, VG-Bild Kunst

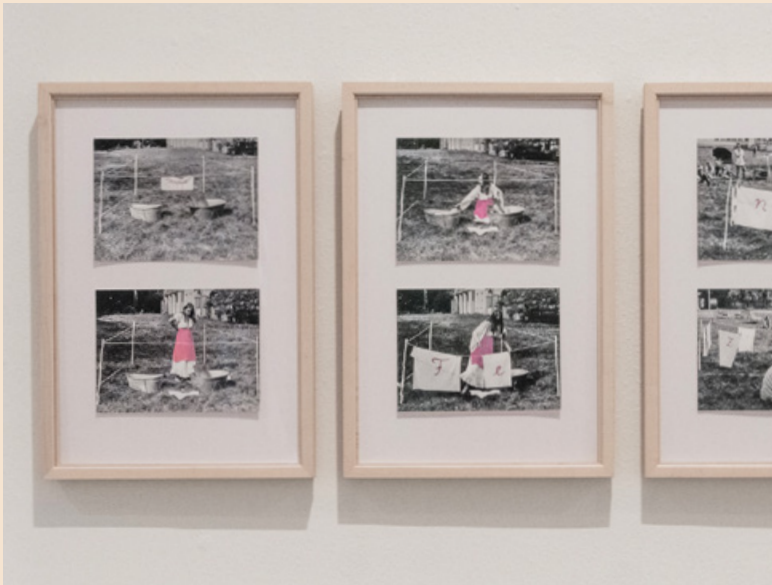
I was born three years after the collapse of the Soviet Union (and therein, the Eastern bloc) and for a long time simplified propaganda posters were the only visual expression I knew of art history in the Eastern bloc. When you reflect on the fact that the art in *The Plastic Body* was created parallel to such insistent social realism you realise how radical the ten artists were. They all lived in totalitarian conditions; two of them had been in concentration camps and internments camps during the Second World War.

As so often happens when one learns something new, the exhibition fills in a blank space in my knowledge of the world – leaving new impressions in my mental map of geography and history of art. *The Plastic Body* awakens immediate associations to similar works and expressions I have seen, and as the human brain tends to do, my thoughts zoom into high gear to connect these two impulses with one another. Small craters in the lunar landscape of my mind fumble towards each other in the dark, like a Venn diagram where the circles try to overlap. I am trying to make sense of the world.

In this mental Venn diagram one circle consists of *The Plastic Body*, encompassing the artists and works that I have recently got to know. In the next circle is the name of the Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta (1948–1985). On the other side of the Atlantic at the very same time as the Polish artists were creating their sculptures Mendieta was working with identical themes. Like Magdalena Abakanowicz she made a series of works where only the outline of a body remained, and like Teresa Murak she let plants



grow out of her works. Like Maria Pinińska-Bereś she worked with the female body as artistic material, often outside the context of an institution or gallery. But *in contrast* to many of her Polish colleagues, Mendiata was an out and out feminist, and would presumably have been happy with having her work called exactly that – “feminist art”.



For in the exhibition text it is stated that «a western notion of feminism is hardly productive in an analysis of the former Eastern bloc»³. In other words, my hasty assumptions and connections are at best simplistic, and the visual and discursive codes that make me read the Polish works as feminist, did not apply to the

③ Maria Pinińska-Bereś
Laundry II, 1981
Performance,
Photo documentation
The Maria Pinińska-Bereś
and Jerzy Bereś
Foundation

artists shown in *The Plastic Body*. On the contrary they had their own intellectual points of departure which still made them create art which I today would automatically categorize as feminist.

There are of course exceptions. The 7:16 minute long video *Change. My problem is a Problem of a Woman* (1979) ④ by Ewa Partum is deeply feminist; and in the performance *Laundry II* ⑤ from 1981 by Maria Pinińska-Bereś (1931–1999), reproduced in *The Plastic Body* as photo documentation, the artist hangs cloths on a line, each cloth carrying a letter which together formed the word “Feminism”. Yet what this term entailed for them cannot be directly transferred to the interpretation I have or the one Ana Mendieta might have had.

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The part of the Venn diagram where Mendieta and the Polish artists overlap (the section where there occurs a joint colour, or which could be stripy) can therefore not be crudely labelled “Feminism”. The diagram resists my elementary logic, and the circles become two magnets repulsing each another. I need another term to understand the encounter between my earlier knowledge and the works in *The Plastic Body*.

THE SHORTCOMINGS OF CONCEPTS / SAME, SAME BUT DIFFERENT

In Mendieta’s most well-known series *Silüeta* she worked repetitively with the imprint of a woman’s body, the hints, the remnants. In some places there is a paint stain, a body that has left its trace on the canvas; in other places there are deep abstract indentations in the ground. In other places the imprint has caught fire and the woman’s body is burning. In one of the works Mendieta



is herself lying in a hole in the ground, as in a grave between stones. Over her body there are flowers growing, forcing themselves up between her legs and arms. Just like the cress in Teresa Murak's work *Object, Bra* (1975/6) ¹⁰ from *The Plastic Body* where the female attributes, bra and panties, have been taken over by nature.

¹⁰ Teresa Murak
Object, Bra, 1975/76
Cress seeds, epoxy resin
Private Collection

The artists are working with the same themes, similar experiences of being a woman. And in the light of Ursula K. Le Guin's essay, I shall insist that they share yet another quality: Both Mendieta's work and several of the Polish artists' sculptures are "a thing that contains something other than itself".⁴ This means that even I from my present-day Norwegian point of departure immediately see the dents in their stories, immediately recognise their experience. Their women's bodies and objects sprout and sink back into nature simultaneously. On their different sides of the world the artists have used the same tools to talk about the times they live in. So, in what common linguistic denominator can I fuse these impressions?

We are living in a world obsessed by terms and concepts. This is clear even in this text; all I want to do is to sort the artists and their works into boxes, to categorise and describe them - I am even writing an essay about it! Why should this be so? To quote the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951): "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." If I cannot manage to find words for the associations that crop up, I cannot then understand my world. I need a language in order to digest the impressions made by the exhibition.

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TERMS FULL OF HOLES

Why is it so tempting to call the Polish artists feminists? Does it really matter what we call them when we are all fighting the same battle? Why do we so crave a term to stand behind, as if it were a banner? The text for the exhibition *The Plastic Body* says that "The word 'plastic' means malleable, elastic or flexible. The title refers both to sculpture as a 'plastic art' and to the way the works extend the definition of body by representing the body in new ways".⁵ Like the title of the exhibition terms and labels are themselves elastic and relative.

In *The Argonauts* Maggie Nelson provides a good example of how the term feminism and the perception of gender change with time. In her autobiographical book Nelson describes her college professor in feminist theory who had "[...] used her whole life on problematising and deconstructing identity".⁶ At some point a group of students rebelled against her feminist, indeed, but traditional way of teaching and they invited her in return to a private lecture.

There – contrary to every tenet of the teacher’s lifelong work – each visitor was asked to pin a label on their chest, stating what they identified themselves as.

Horror! A physical label actually defining who one is. What happened to those deconstructed identities? The professor must have wondered: how did we go from gender being a construction to everyone knowing and publicly proclaiming which identity is theirs? From this we can imagine a Venn diagram where the overlapping common denominator is “feminism”, but where the components in their respective circles do not recognise themselves in the others. Terms are complex, full of holes, dents and contradictions.

00 Maria Pinińska-Bereś
Table II – Feast, 1968
Papier mâché, wood,
canvas, pencil, crayon
Jacek Malczewski Museum,
Radom



MEANS AND ENDS

A Venn diagram can contain several circles, and we need to go back to the exhibition’s framework to include more. One of the artworks – Maria Pinińska-Bereś’ (1931–1999) *Table II – Feast* from 1968 00 – consists of a low table. In the middle of the table there is a mat, a knife and fork and in addition two uninviting pear-shaped female breasts. They have been parted from their body and now function perversely as salt and pepper shakers. To the right of the cloth a female thigh sticks out of the tabletop, and I follow the leg right down to the foot that is resting on the edge of the table. A shadow of the leg is drawn up on the tabletop. On the left Pinińska-Bereś has also drawn the face of a woman; she is laughing, but has a wild stare, with her hair dancing round her head like Medusa’s snakes. The female body is literally served up. Pinińska-Bereś has used

the properties of the home – or rather the kitchen – to say something about a woman’s place in society.

A decade after this work was created the resistance movement *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* (The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo) was formed in Argentina. Like the Polish artists in *The Plastic Body* these women also lived in a totalitarian regime, the Argentine military dictatorship (1976–1983). The group was formed by mothers searching for their missing children⁷, and they started gathering on the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires to protest against the regime that had abducted them. Most of them were housewives with no activist experience, and their signature was traditional white headcloths; the garment of domesticity became their battle helmet. On it they embroidered the names of their lost children: the personal became political.⁸

To begin with they were on their own but from 1980 feminist groups began joining the protests of the mothers. This proved difficult for *Las Madres*: their activism was anchored in the home and their narrative about themselves did not correspond with the feminist movement that was engulfing the western world. As a member of the group put it: “It was difficult for us to share our resistance with the feminists [...] They confused *Las Madres*; we were scared by these new ideas about what it was to be a woman [...] It was hard for us to observe that motherhood could be seen as patriarchal notion.”⁹

The same struggle, different narratives. A resistance group that uses feminist strategies yet is scared stiff by feminism. I look at my Venn diagram and draw a new circle. This is for *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*. Just like the Polish artists in *The Plastic Body* they used feminist tools without knowing or identifying with the way the term “Feminism” is understood today. So, what do we find in the overlapping sphere between the circles in my Venn diagram?

THE INVISIBLE BETWEEN THE STARS

The apparently empty is never without meaning or content, even though it may seem like it to the naked eye. While writing this text I take a break to leaf through the inventory of procrastinations: Instagram. NASA has posted images of shimmering nebulae with the text: “The space between the stars is not empty but rather filled with filaments of dust and gas (known as the interstellar medium), which is often invisible until something illuminates it”¹¹. Art mirrors the world and vice versa.

Like Le Guin, I believe that hollows are really transformative places. While working on this text, it has become clear to me that it is the hollows that make the works in *The Plastic Body* resonate so powerfully with those who see it today; that we can provide our own meaning, fill the works and sites with our own domains and experiences, making them relevant in another time than the one they were created in. This makes it so intriguing to

10 Magdalena Abakanowicz
Orchidee Violet, 1973
Textile relief, sisal
Nordenfjeldske
Kunstindustrimuseum,
Trondheim

categorise them: like all great art, they are recognised through time and space because they speak of universal themes. They look like something already familiar to us.

Maybe the place where the circles in my Venn diagram meet is no neutral, simple and definable area, but a crack. The sort of crack where water trickles between two rocks, where a small tree against all odds has decided to grow. A crack that becomes filled with meaning the moment it becomes illuminated. This crack may remind us of Magdalena Abakanowicz' clitoris-like wall hanging in *The Plastic Body* 10. Rough, purplish, red lips bulge out from the walls, open up to me and let me peer into the hollow within. Maybe I need to sink into this crack to find the term I am looking for.

«I said it was hard to make a gripping tale of how we wrestled the wild oats from their husks, but I didn't say it was impossible»¹¹.



¹ Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (London: Ignota Books, 2019), 27.
² Le Guin, 28.
³ Helga Nyman and Vibece Salthe, *The Plastic Body: Sculpture from Poland 1960-1989* [Exhibition text], Stavanger Art Museum, 2024.
⁴ Le Guin, 28.
⁵ Nyman and Salthe, 2024.
⁶ Maggie Nelson, *Argonauts* (Stavanger: Pelikanen Forlag, 2017), 79.
⁷ Often young adults who protested against the dictatorship.

⁸ An allusion to the feminist motto "The Personal is Political", which became generally known through an essay by the activist Carol Hanisch in 1969.
⁹ Mabel Bellucci, 'Childless Motherhood: Interview with Nina Contrías, a Mother of the Plaza de Mayo, Argentina,' *Reproductive Health Matters* 7, no. 13 (May 1999): 83-88, 86 (accessed 15 Jan 2024 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3775707>).
¹⁰ NASA, Official Instagram Profile, 14 Jan 2024 (accessed 15 Jan 2024 www.instagram.com/p/DEOXdLKp7ho).
¹¹ Le Guin, 36.



The Plastic Body:
Sculpture
from Poland 1960-1989
(installation view),
Stavanger Art Museum
28.09.24-26.01.25

© Wanda Czeikowska
Head, 1968/2018
Plaster cast, metal frame
Wanda Czeikowska Estate /
Galeria Monopol, Warsaw



Teresa Murak
Sowing, 1975-76
 Cress seeds, epoxy resin
 Museum Sztuki, Łódź

Teresa Murak
Object, Hand, 1975-76
 Cress seeds, epoxy resin
 Private Collection

Magdalena Abakanowicz
Orchidee Violet, 1973
 Textile relief, sisal
 Nordenfjeldske
 Kunstindustrimuseum,
 Trondheim

Teresa Tyszkiewicz
Grain, 1980
 16 mm film, sound
 Museum Sztuki, Łódź



STAVANGER KUNSTMUSEUM

28. 09. 2024

BODY
PLASTIC
THE
DEN
PLASTISKE
KROPPEN



Magdalena
Abakanowicz

Barbara
Falender

Teresa
Murak

Ewa
Partum

Alina
Szapocznikow

Wanda
Czelkowska

Zofia
Kulik

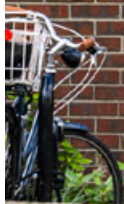
Ewa
Pachucka

Maria
Pinińska-Boreś

Teresa
Tyszkiewicz

26. 01. 2025

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