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## Soft Sculpture: Textiles in Architectural Space

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# Soft Sculpture: Textiles in Architectural Space

Tapta

**Abstract**—The author discusses the various phases of her art, including early, spontaneous textiles, textile environments and monumental-scale projects. Her primary interest is introducing a flexible and personal element into architectural space. An educator since 1976, she also comments on art instruction and on her dedication to young creators.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Textile art today is undergoing a deep change. During the sixties, particularly due to the influence of the Tapestry Biennale in Lausanne, the research of pioneers like Leonor Tawney, Magdalena Abakanowicz and Sheila Hicks reached a large audience. This generation of textile artists, to which I belong, started to employ textile fibers in a free, personal and individual way and brought textiles out to the public sphere.

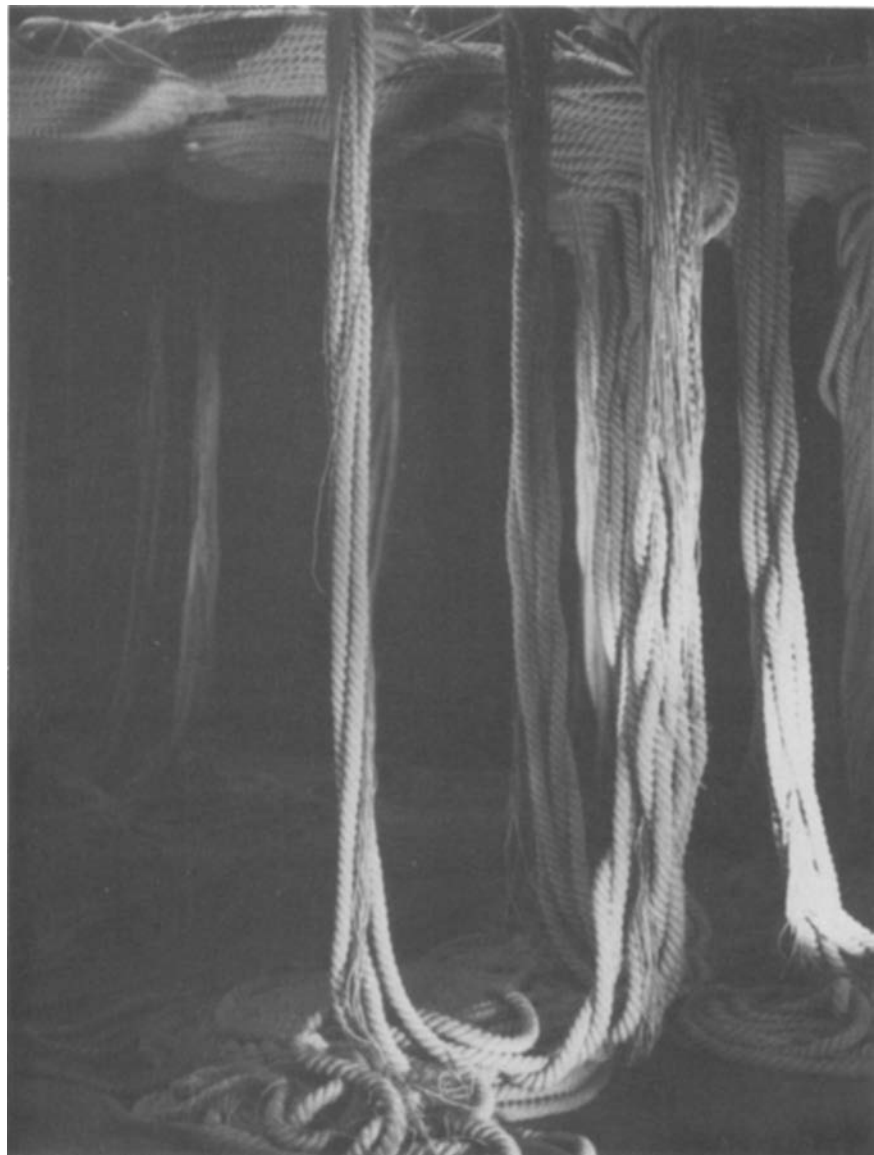
I am particularly interested in modifying space by introducing a supple, flexible element. I seek to create a new dynamism in space using form, color or undulatory movements in my textiles. In the late sixties this dynamism was rather fluid, as reflected in works that fell from the ceiling in free, but organized, pleats. At present I am introducing a stretched element into my work to bring tension to the space. Changes in my textiles have come gradually. In the beginning I worked more spontaneously using swift propelling moves. The process has become slower and more carefully planned. As a result, my work is more naked—by reconsidering every move, I rid my work of all ornamental or seductive elements. I wish to keep only the essential. My attitude towards my work is passionate, alternately inspired by enthusiasm and low spirits.

## II. EVOLUTION OF TECHNIQUES

I first began to work in a spontaneous manner on my handloom. But I soon decided that this machine influenced my work too much. I now resort to my own simple techniques, which could be termed ancestral. Sometimes nothing but a needle moves between myself and the

material. I submit the technique to my work; the technique follows my idea, not the reverse. Most of the time I use heavy woolen or acrylic ropes that are specially manufactured for me. I design my works using models. This allows me more

control over the work; I can check its progress, proportions, colors and relationships. The small scale gives me a better command of all the elements and allows me to imagine my structures at full scale.



**Fig. 1.** *Shapes for a Flexible Space (Formes pour un espace souple)*, woolen ropes, 2.5 × 2.5 × 2.5 m, 1974. (Photo: Christophe Wierusz-Kowalski.)

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### III. ENVIRONMENTS

My sculptures question traditional ways of using textiles. In the 1970s I created a number of large 'environments', such as *Chatting Tent*, *Shapes For a Flexible Space* (Fig. 1) and *Flexible Space* [1-3]. These environments facilitate dialogue and conversation. They create a favorable climate for exchanges between persons and for intimacy—a quality I have observed on many occasions during exhibitions.

While I was working with environments, I also created structures on which one could sit in a relaxed manner (Fig. 2). I do not believe a work of art should only be viewed. My work calls for touching and daily use. In addition to the construction of large 'environments', I became interested in the relationships

children can have with flexible objects: knots on which they can climb, creepers from which they can swing. In 1973 I carried out two experiments in this area, and later when I started teaching I developed a number of related projects with my students.

### IV. TEACHING

Since 1976 I have devoted much time and energy to teaching. I conduct a workshop on 'flexible sculpture', which is primarily centered on personality development and imagination [4]. My La Cambre workshop involves going outside the classroom. I stimulate my students' curiosity by taking them to exhibitions, theater performances and to see works of art integrated into architecture. By

opening their horizons as widely as possible I try to help young creators find their personal language. Teaching art should not consist of teaching traditional techniques that are often no longer applicable to the present time or to today's sensibility. Technique is but the medium of the message, and the message depends on the richness of the individual artist. My essential purpose as a teacher is to prompt students to create, to use their imagination, and to develop their judgement and sense of observation.

### V. RECENT WORKS

I often integrate my work into private and public places. The execution of my projects is usually carried out by teams of my former students. Sometimes I work for galleries and sometimes for architects. One such architectural project was for a navigation center [5]. My textile structures for the center, entitled *Chromatic Tension*, consist of textile environments for two restaurants. The works remind one of the rigging of a sailing boat and create a relaxed atmosphere. The two environments differ in shapes and in colors, but were created in the same spirit and integrated into the architecture. Each work is made of a harness of ropes stretched on the back wall and tied, stretched and crossed in the space between the beams of the building. The ropes are led through pulleys or through metallic rings where they return or change direction. Each harness is 50 meters long, is made of 44 pure woolen ropes of 20-mm diameter and consists of eight colors.

I wanted my project to be closely related to the purposes of the premises, rather than strictly decorative. I used simple materials related to navigation and transformed them into another reality. This new reality was intended to create a new space dynamic—the folksy concept of a festivity hall. I wanted the informal side of my textile structure to become a part of the whole structure of the building. My ropes, which cross and uncross each other and go up and down, were designed to be dynamic, due not only to their tension but also to their colors.

In 1982 I created a new *Tension* [6] (Fig. 3) and integrated it into the exhibition hall, a neoclassical chapel. Ropes rose from the ground, were coiled around the columns, and reached the ground again in the other side of the chapel—tied, linear, dynamic, provocative.

In 1981 I began to use industrial rubber leaves as a medium. This raw, black, smooth material allowed me to build a

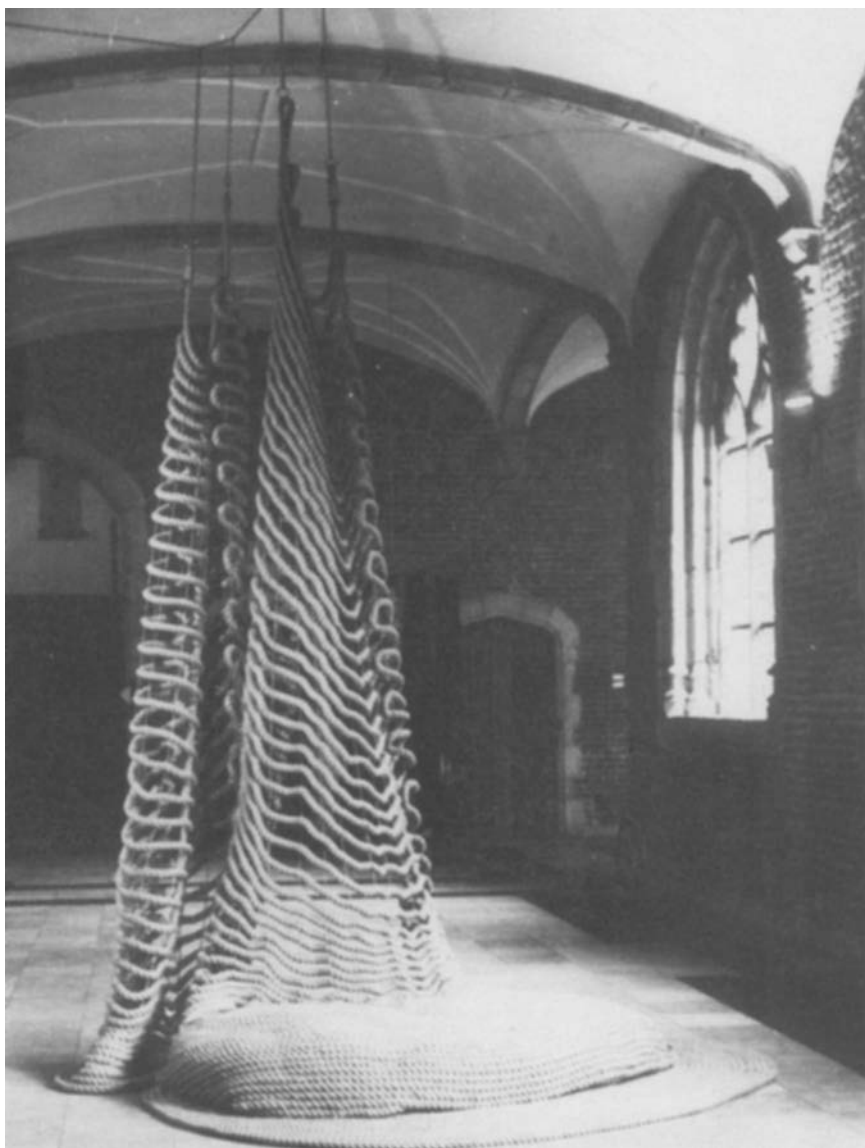
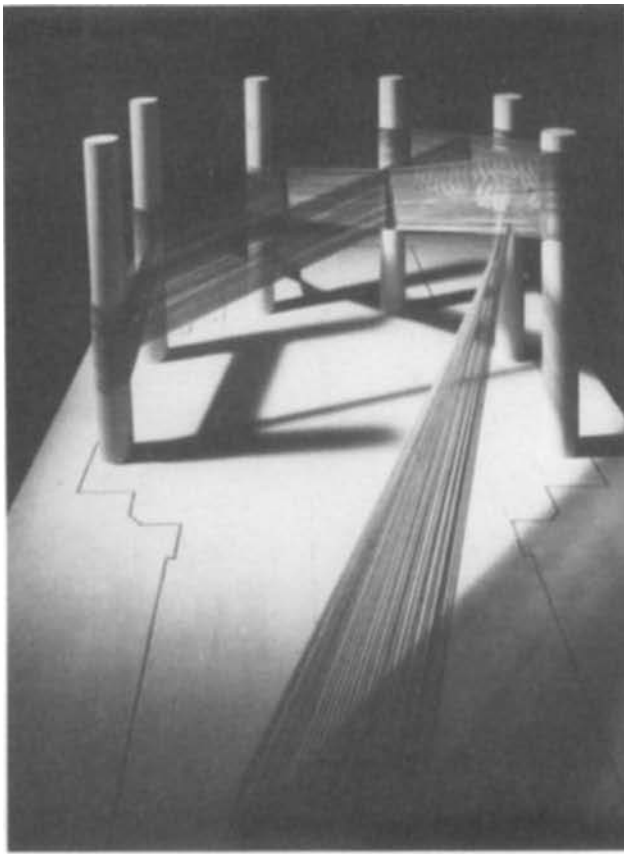
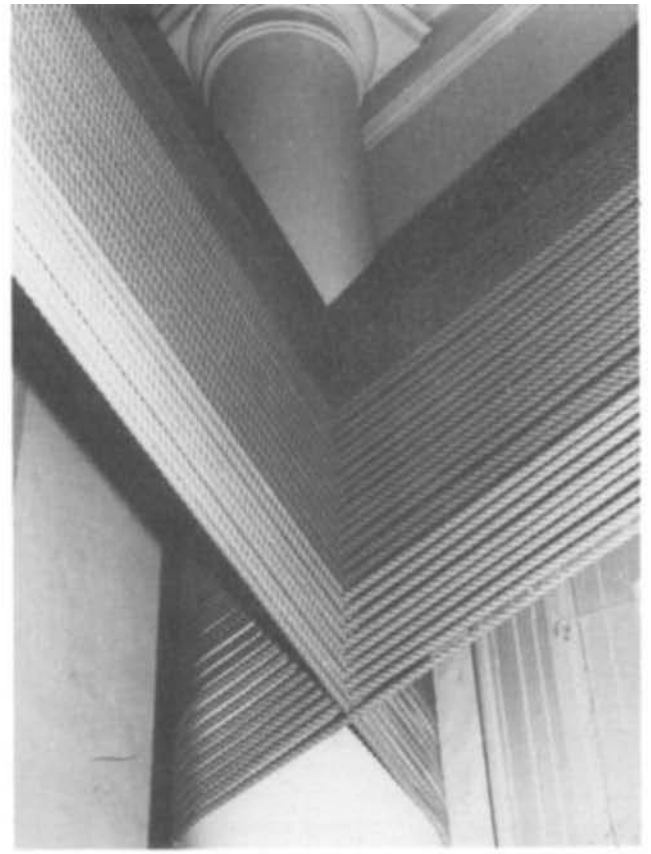


Fig. 2. *Suspended Seat (Siège suspendu)*, woolen ropes,  $4.5 \times 4.5 \times 2$  m, 1973. (Photo: Christophe Wierusz-Kowalski.)

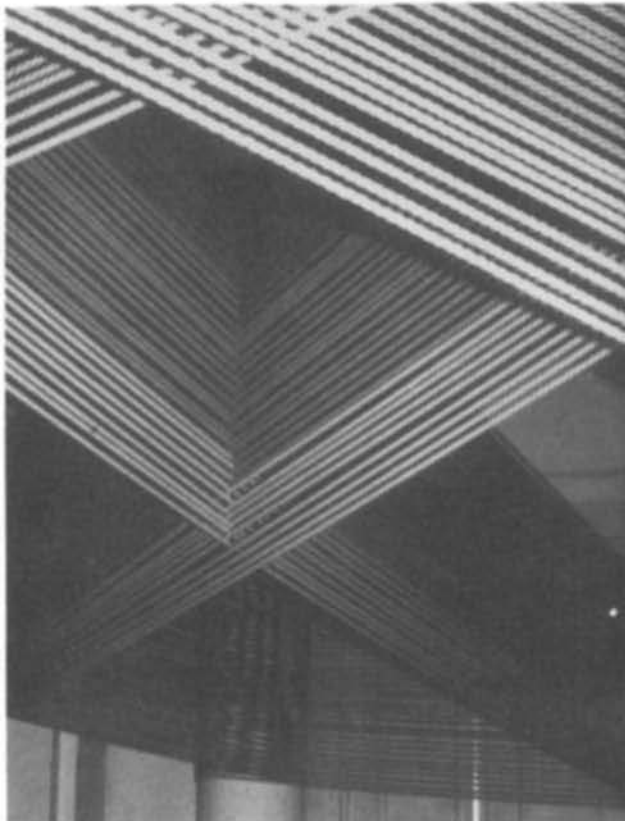


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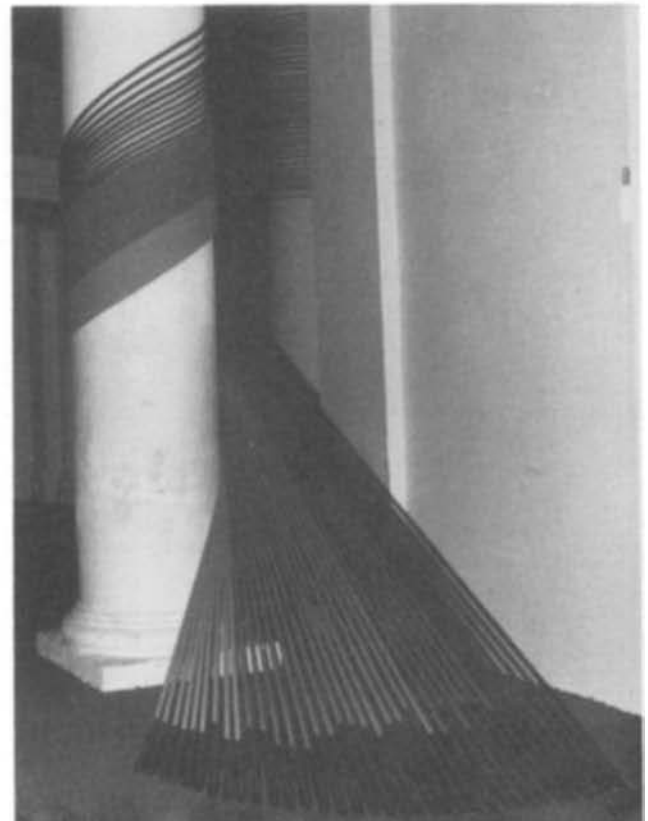


Fig. 3. *Tension*, textile installation,  $4.5 \times 15 \times 6.4$  m, 1982. Museum of Aix-en-Provence. (a) Model, 1982. (Photo: Speldoorn) (b) Photo of installation. (c) and (d) Detail. (Photos: Christophe Wierusz-Kowalski.)

large pleated wallhanging of cut rubber leaves linked to each other by rusted steel bolts. This *Elastic Structure* (Fig. 4) was preceded by another structure of rubber leaves called *Elastic Horizon*. It was designed to be placed outdoors and incorporated into the landscape.

The last work, carried out in 1985, uses a thick synthetic rubber. It is a self standing sculpture of sinuous, black curves (Fig. 5).

For several years Brussels has been slowly building its subway, station by station. Each station is entrusted to an artist who is asked to integrate monumental-scale work into the proposed space. In 1983 I designed a project for one of the subway stations then under construction. It will be completed in 1985. The work consists of four flexible structures, facing each other to form two hyperbolic vaults ( $16 \times 8 \times 8\text{m}$ ). My objectives were to integrate the forms carefully into the architectural space without destroying its innate qualities, while at the same time modifying the space, modulating it and giving viewers a new perception of it. Each structure is made of stretched stainless steel cables forming curved and transparent surfaces. Light falling on those surfaces creates alternating shadows and light. The lines of the cables meet each other and influence each other like a communication network. This type of project fascinates me more than any other: it enables me to influence an architectural space, leaving the museum and integrating myself into the daily life of the city.

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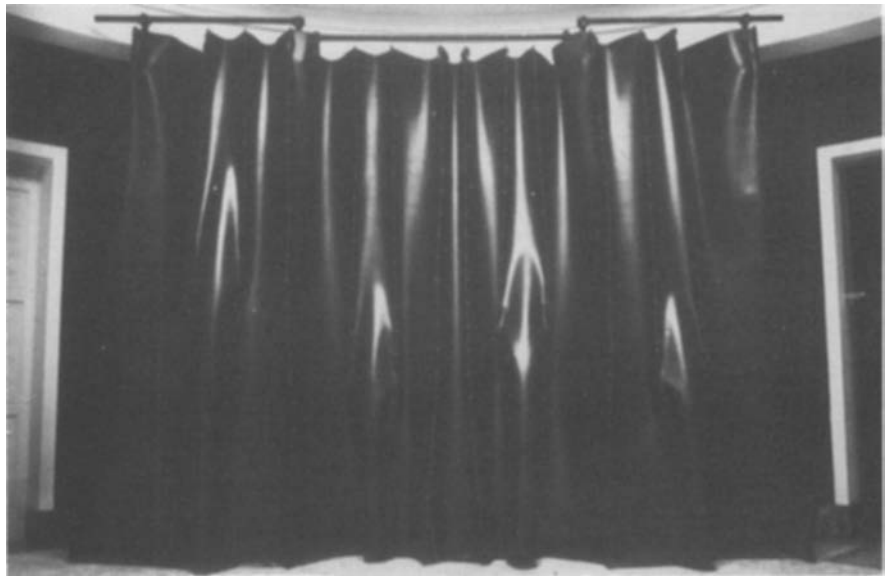


Fig. 4. *Elastic Structure (Structure élastique)*,  $4.5 \times 5.5 \times 0.8\text{ m}$ , 1981.

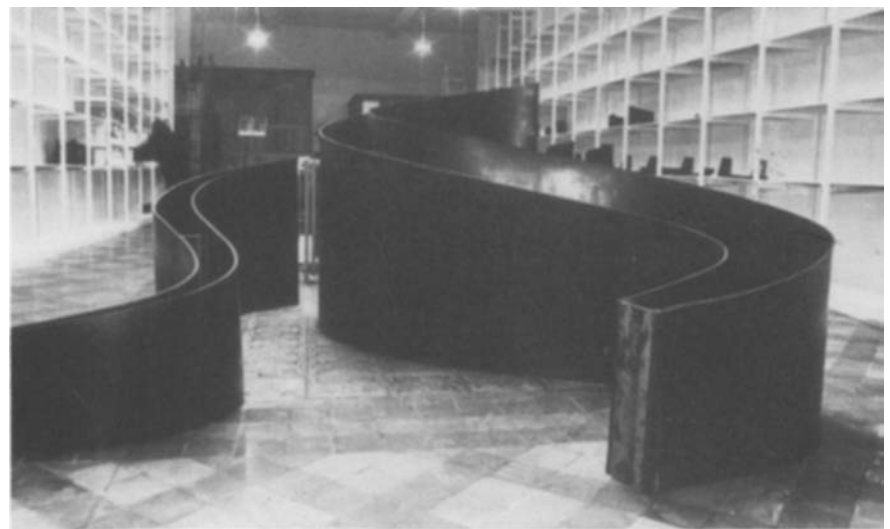


Fig. 5. *Neoflexible*, synthetic rubber,  $1.4 \times 4 \times 2.5\text{ m}$ , 1985. (Photo: Christophe Wierusz-Kowalski.)

4. My workshop is held at the National School for Advanced Visual Arts La Cambre in Brussels. The school was set up in 1926, modeled after architect Henri Van de Velde's Bauhaus.
5. The Butgenbach Navigation Center (Belgium).
6. Catalogue of Exhibition "Tension", Musée des Tapisseries, Aix-en-Provence (France), 1982.