

## MUTABLE FORM AND MATERIALITY TOWARD A CRITICAL HISTORY OF NEW TAPESTRY NETWORKS

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The recent curatorial resurgence of modern textile art—evidenced through such exhibitions as *Fiber: Sculpture 1960–Present*, Nelson Rockefeller’s *Picassos: Tapestries Commissioned for Kykuit*, and *Decorum: Carpets and Tapestries by Artists*—suggests an urgent need for a critical history of fiber art in the 20th century.<sup>1</sup> This article highlights two interrelated concerns in moving toward this objective. The first is the necessity of foregrounding overlooked artistic, ideological, and political milieus that drew together textile artists from localities formerly treated as peripheral in art history. Because much fiber art production emerged from countries with authoritarian regimes and state-run cultural institutions, a critical history should examine the mutability of the medium as fundamental to articulations of modernism in these particular contexts. Here, a comparison of three artists,

1 This article represents an early step toward my book project on mapping transnational tapestry networks. I thank the *ARTMargins* editorial team, their anonymous peer reviewer, and Delinda Collier for their invaluable feedback on numerous drafts, as well as Giselle Eberhard Cotton, Xavier Hermel, and Aïcha Filali for their generous assistance with my research in Lausanne, Paris, and Tunis. Details of the mentioned exhibitions are—*Fiber: Sculpture 1960–Present* (exhibition presented by the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, October 1, 2014–January 4, 2015); Nelson Rockefeller’s *Picassos: Tapestries Commissioned for Kykuit* (exhibition presented by the San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio, December 20, 2014–March 8, 2015); and *Decorum: Carpets and Tapestries by Artists* (exhibition presented by the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, October 11, 2013–February 9, 2014).

Magdalena Abakanowicz (Poland), Jagoda Buić (Yugoslavia), and Safia Farhat (Tunisia) demonstrates their engagement not only with the formalist aesthetics of Western modernism, but also with the very praxis of a medium that allowed for political ambiguity due to a perceived proximity to state-supported craft and folk art. The second line of argument holds to account Euro-American institutions and related historiographies for their curatorial exclusion of Arab and African fiber artists, such as Farhat. Due to the institutionalization of primitivist tropes in Western Europe, artists from formerly colonized territories struggled to achieve coevalness when they were exhibited at the scale of la Biennale internationale de tapisserie à Lausanne (Lausanne International Tapestry Biennial, hereafter referred to as the Lausanne Biennial), the preeminent forum for modern tapestry during the 1960s and 1970s and sponsored by the International Centre of Ancient and Modern Tapestry (CITAM). Farhat's cool reception in Lausanne differentiates her career trajectory from that of Abakanowicz and Buić, as the lack of exposure restricted her capacity to reach international audiences for New Tapestry. While Biennial juries claimed for themselves the scientific neutrality of a "seismograph," they rejected artists from the African continent and the Arab Middle East until 1992.<sup>2</sup> Their inclusion, I argue, would have conjured tapestry's deeper incongruities, which emanated from unresolved questions at the core of modernism: the assigning and appropriating of artistic identities, the evaded issue of state patronage, and the persistent ideological and aesthetic problem of craft and its framing within economies.<sup>3</sup> We can begin to address these problems through a reassessment of New Tapestry networks, their myths, and their underlying systems of institutional support.

In doing so, this article moves beyond the aesthetic formalism promoted by the Lausanne Biennial to propose an expanded approach

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2 Jean Lurçat, co-founder of the Lausanne Biennial, stated "CITAM is a seismograph," a phrase circulated by CITAM officials after his death. See, for example, the catalog for the Third Biennial, *3ème Biennale internationale de la tapisserie* (Lausanne: Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts; Centre internationale de la Tapisserie Ancienne et Moderne, 1967) and "Bientôt la 6e Biennale internationale de la tapisserie à Lausanne," in Archives générales sur les Biennales, Côte G2 Carton 50, Archives de la Ville de Lausanne.

3 Not until 1992 did a Tunisian artist, Fatma Charfi M'Seddi, and an Austrian-Iranian artist, Mehrdad Sadri, participate in the Fifteenth Biennial. An exception is expatriate artists. Odette Blanc-Falaize, a French-born colonial artist, and Roger Caron, a Canadian-born artist, represented Lebanon at the Third Biennial. While Egyptian artist Hamdi el Attar was rejected from the Fifth, Sixth, and Eighth Biennials, his German wife and collaborator Brunhild el Attar participated in the Fifth and Sixth Biennials in 1971 and 1973.

to New Tapestry, which carries broader methodological implications for revisiting the larger corpus of fiber art in the 20th century. Here, weaving as a medium is shown to encapsulate the most troubled sides of modernism. The relationship of Abakanowicz, Buić, and Farhat to systems of state support, their momentary convergences around sites that perpetuated institutional racism based on the origins of the artist, and their manipulation of an art/craft medium illuminate larger questions in the history of modern art. Furthermore, the artists' identities as gendered subjects and international artists shifted and clashed through various situations and relationships that are frequently overlooked or undervalued. Yet the circulation of these three artists across commingling dimensions signals a new pathway for recovering and writing a history of fiber art, and perhaps a reflection on modernism at large.

#### NEW TAPESTRY AND THE LAUSANNE BIENNIALS: DISENTANGLING NETWORKS AND MYTHOLOGIES

New Tapestry, or *la nouvelle tapisserie*, is a term coined by Swiss critic André Kuenzi in 1973 to describe a body of artwork that arose as artists explored fiber's unique materials, spatial dimensions, and conceptual possibilities.<sup>4</sup> In the early 1960s, a subset of artists began to shift their orientation from the design of flat, pictorial compositions toward fibrous constructions exhibiting three-dimensionality. They experimented with the techniques and aesthetic possibilities of weaving, macramé, and crocheting, as well as the textures of "unconventional" materials such as raffia, cord, and rope. Approaching textile forms as autonomous sculpture or site-specific art, artists claimed to liberate tapestry from its hybrid artisanal status, to set free an art form hindered by its historic workshop processes and functionality as wall decoration.<sup>5</sup> This exploration of the medium occurred in localities across the globe, in places where artists had already engaged with French modernist approaches to tapestry through previous artistic exchanges, and thus it invigorated a vast network of practitioners and interlocutors. Despite its widespread appeal in a variety of geopolitical contexts, from

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4 André Kuenzi, *La nouvelle tapisserie* (Geneva: Les Editions de Bonvent, 1973). Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen dubbed this the "Art Fabric" movement in *Beyond Craft: The Art Fabric* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1972). The artists featured in these volumes constitute the established "canon" of New Tapestry artists.

5 See T'ai Smith, "Tapestries in Space: An Alternative History of Site-Specificity," in *Fiber Sculpture: 1960–Present*, ed. Jenelle Porter (Munich: Prestel, 2014), 152–164.

Communist Eastern Europe to postcolonial authoritarianism in North Africa, a small group of European and North American artists, notably Abakanowicz, Buić, Sheila Hicks, Claire Zeisler, and Lenore Tawney, gained the most recognition for their artwork, which Euro-American institutions homogeneously interpreted through the lens of Western High Modernism.

Supporters of New Tapestry effectively canonized these “stars” as part of a formalist narrative of the movement, ironing over the possibility that underlying ideological motivations might also be in play, especially due to these artists’ negotiations with accepting state and institutional support. In particular, the Lausanne Biennial proffered the largest, most dynamic “rallying point” for New Tapestry and, crucially, delimited its historiography.<sup>6</sup> Sponsored by CITAM, a Swiss cantonal institution inaugurated by Jean Lurçat and Pierre Pauli in 1961, the Lausanne Biennial was initially intended to transform the city into the “Mecca” of two-dimensional tapestry and strengthen transnational ties.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps unforeseen was its consequent position at the center of Western European debates about tapestry, induced by an influx of artists for whom the medium served to veil experimentations with abstraction and politically subversive content.

French artist Jean Lurçat, the co-founder of the Lausanne Biennial, represented one side of these polarized debates. A powerful proponent of modernist tapestry, Lurçat reformed its materials, tools, and techniques following Marie Cuttoli, the first to commission paintings from the Parisian avant-garde for translation into tapestry, and François Tabard, director of a centuries-old tapestry workshop in Aubusson, France. Particularly contentious in Lausanne was Lurçat’s advocacy of *cartons* (cartoons) and specialized assistants to produce mural tapestries. A *carton* is a full-scale plan made by a *peintre-cartonnier* (painter) or *cartonnier* (specialist), numbered by color for use by weavers to execute a tapestry. This method precipitated a hierarchical division of labor in which the painter was the sole artist despite minimal contact

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6 Constantine and Larsen called Lausanne the “rallying point” for “Art Fabric” in *Beyond Craft*, 55. For a contextualization of the Lausanne Biennial in a wider exhibition history see Jenelle Porter’s essay “About 10 Years: From the New Tapestry to Fiber Art” in *Fiber Sculpture*, 166–178.

7 The catalog for the final Lausanne Biennial in 1995 historicizes its foundation: 16e *Biennale internationale de Lausanne: Chassés-croisés: 17 juin au 3 septembre 1995*, ed. Philippe Jeanloz (Lausanne: Centre international de la Tapisserie Ancienne et Moderne, 1995), exhibition catalog.

with fiber. From 1945 onward, Lurçat, as president of the Association des Peintres-Cartonniers, increasingly promoted exhibitions and the techniques of French tapestry in the Eastern Bloc and former colonial territories. Concurrent with the founding of CITAM and the Lausanne Biennial around 1960, he undertook consultations for reviving tapestry in the Soviet Union, the Caucasus, Egypt, and francophone Africa. Although it continued to display tapestries that conformed to Lurçat's prescriptions, the Biennial swiftly became the preeminent platform for opposition to his methods, particularly after his death in 1966, thus pitting New Tapestry against Lurçat's genre of "conventional" tapestry in the same forum.

In augmenting its support for New Tapestry under the direction of Pierre Pauli after 1966, the Lausanne Biennial validated Eastern European nodes in the vast network of fiber artists, while CITAM's endorsement of primitivism and rupture from pictorial tapestry marginalized others. This story of inclusion/exclusion may be recovered by reading tapestries in relation to artistic networks and systems of state and institutional support, as well as by critiquing formalist narratives with their implicit hierarchies positioning artist above craftsperson. The absence of Arab and African artists from the Lausanne Biennials, notably Safia Farhat of the École de Tunis and Papa Ibra Tall of the École de Dakar, signals their continued invisibility in Western scholarship on modern tapestry. This is not surprising, given that in the 1960s and 1970s, Euro-American institutions, whose curators and directors served on CITAM's juries and committees, largely categorized Arab and African artists as premodern and intuitive craftspeople, and treated their articulations of modernism as derivative. Exemplifying this proclivity, the French director of Dakar's École des Arts asked in his 1974 interpretation of Senegalese tapestry and painting, "Is it not true that the feeling of collective artistic expression which has remained deep in the African psyche inevitably makes any individualized artistic practice seem alien?"<sup>8</sup> In circumscribing intellectuality to Euro-America, such assumptions undermined the intentions and theoretical capabilities of individual Arab and African textile artists. Moreover, in a venue that classified artists by country, the touchstone

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8 Bernard Pataux, "Senegalese Art Today," *African Arts* 8, no. 1 (Autumn 1974): 26–31, 56, 59, and 87. See Prita Meier's critique of art historical paradigms in "Authenticity and Its Modernist Discontents: The Colonial Encounter and African and Middle Eastern Art History," *Arab Studies Journal* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 12–45.

of the primitive weaver, as is apparent in Jagoda Buić's remark, "I wish we were the primitives of a new sensibility, the sensibility of 'textile artists'" (Je voudrais que nous fussions les primitifs d'une nouvelle sensibilité, la sensibilité des "tissagistes"), necessitated CITAM's omission of artists whose national identities could have invalidated this paradigm.<sup>9</sup>

In Lausanne, this exclusionary discourse framed the heroism of New Tapestry artists in wresting fiber from the category of "craft," while at the same time reinscribing the term's conceptually fraught suggestions of ethnographic populism and aesthetic inferiority. Critics reinforced the metanarrative that its artists took command of weaving's primordial processes and sculptural possibilities, resurrecting fiber art from utilitarian traditions and the attendant processes of rote labor.<sup>10</sup> In evoking fiber's ancient, primal, and "native" origins through formal explorations of process, artists purportedly elevated New Tapestry beyond the needs of mundane design, as well as differentiating themselves from a racialized craft tradition. Writing in 1967, Swiss curator Erika Billeter proclaimed, "Anything smacking of 'applied art' has been kept out of the exhibition, thanks to the praiseworthy efforts of the selection jury."<sup>11</sup> In 1973, critic Jean-Luc Duval conjured racial undertones as he hailed Abakanowicz and Buić for their break with "the 'ghetto' of tapestry."<sup>12</sup> Uncritical adherence to these claims overlooks the fact that many New Tapestry artists designed installations for the bureaus of industry and commerce, indicating the unsettled tension between artist and designer within modernism. Above all, the privileging of a formalist, Eurocentric lens obscures the messy geopolitical contexts in which New Tapestry emerged, and evades the racism at play in art-world institutions.

In laying out the need for new methodologies in tapestry scholarship, I compare the historical conditions, political concerns, and philos-

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9 Kuenzi, *La nouvelle tapisserie*, 144.

10 For discussions of tapestry's hybridity and fluctuating status as art/craft in Western Europe and North America, see Glenn Adamson, "The Fiber Game," *Textile* 5, no. 2 (2007): 154–77; Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Romy Golan, "L'Éternel Décoratif: French Art in the 1950s," in "The French Fifties," ed. Susan Weiner, special issue, *Yale French Studies*, no. 98 (2000): 98–118; Virginia Gardener Troy, *The Modernist Textile: Europe and America 1890–1940* (Burlington: Lund Humphries, 2006).

11 Erika Billeter, "3rd International Tapestry Biennale: Work by 86 Craftsmen from 25 Countries Is Displayed in Lausanne," *Craft Horizons* 27, no. 4 (July/August 1967): 9.

12 Jean-Luc Duval, "De la tapisserie au 'textil-relief': A propos de Magda Abakanowicz et de Jagoda Buić," *Art International* 18, no. 6 (Summer 1973): 96.

ophies of weaving that undergirded the textile production of Safia Farhat, Magdalena Abakanowicz, and Jagoda Buić, each entwined in the New Tapestry network. Due to the brokerage of CITAM's founders in Africa and Eastern Europe, these artists' engagement with the Lausanne Biennial drew them together literally and conceptually. Each artist used the high-warp loom to construct three-dimensional textiles and manipulate perceptions that weaving was an authentic art of the people. In Tunisia, Poland, and Yugoslavia, three countries that implicated craft in communist and socialist reforms, fiber arts carried romanticized associations of patrimony, rural life, and female labor. Textiles likewise served as nationalist symbols of political and cultural autonomy in the wake of geopolitical tensions over resistance to Soviet dominance in the Eastern Bloc, decolonization and authoritarianism in North Africa, and the pursuit of nonalignment by Yugoslavia and Tunisia. Tapestry's ambiguous status as art/craft was vital for artists who worked in contexts in which government scrutiny and patronage intervened with local iterations of modernism by setting official parameters for publicity and access to international circuits. In the hands of Abakanowicz, Buić, and Farhat, the mutable forms of fiber art presented multiple meanings that both satisfied and eluded authorities and, in the case of the Eastern European artists, circumvented restrictions shaping transnational artistic exchanges.

#### THE "SLAVONIC VOGUE":

##### MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ AND JAGODA BUIĆ

Abakanowicz and Buić garnered attention from critics in Lausanne as the "Slavonic Vogue."<sup>13</sup> While both artists engaged with modernist formalism, they simultaneously conceptualized their artistic experimentations within a broader framework of negotiating Soviet and Communist ideology. In Poland, professors at the art academies attempted to reconcile local traditions of abstraction with official stipulations that conceded a certain amount of nationalist spirit to the applied arts. Abakanowicz's artistic training came at a time when authorities conferred great value to the potential of textiles in recon-

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13 This racially tinged term signals a level of Western European exoticism toward female modernists from Eastern Europe. See, for example, *Abakanowicz-Jagoda Buić* (Lausanne: Galerie Alice Pauli, 7 September–11 October, 1969), exhibition catalog; *Magdalena Abakanowicz, Jagoda Buić: Textilreliefs* (Lausanne: Galerie Alice Pauli, 1973), exhibition catalog.

struction and industrialization.<sup>14</sup> In Yugoslavia, weaving's association with a primordial "Slavic" identity intersected with discourses on national sovereignty. The political currency of weaving in both contexts facilitated Buić and Abakanowicz in gaining access to the networks of the Lausanne Biennial.

In 1969 Abakanowicz achieved critical acclaim at the Fourth Biennial for a series of artworks she called *Abakans*, fiber sculptures that came to epitomize New Tapestry to the West. In title, these weavings evoked Abakanowicz's claim to an aristocratic lineage traceable to the Mongolian conquests of the 13th century. After years of concealing her identity for fear of being declared a "class enemy," the artist's allusion to ancestral wealth ended her early practice of self-censorship.<sup>15</sup> Abakanowicz posed a further challenge to government censors for her rejection of tapestry as wall décor, instead suspending organic forms from the ceiling. In contrast to Lurçat's method of using wool spun for loom production, Abakanowicz executed this series using brittle sisal threads dyed crimson, teal, and black. Each *Abakan* possessed a floating shape and silhouette that emulated biomorphic forms. Western critics cast the works as "prehistoric," "like camel skin coats worn by nomadic tribes wandering the steppes of Asia," and "dark visions of primal myth."<sup>16</sup> Curators Barbara Rose, Mildred Constantine, and Jack Lenor Larsen praised the artist's "savage aggression" and "direct and primitive involvement with materials."<sup>17</sup> One Danish critic went so far as to equate the primordial environment of the *Abakan* with the raw force of Africa: "Her carpets have an inner power that make you think of Africa's jungles and black magic."<sup>18</sup> The primitivist undertone in New Tapestry discourses reflected, and helped to resuscitate, the desire for an intuitive, racialized Other—a desire long entrenched in the

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14 Joanna Inglot provides an excellent analysis of Abakanowicz's artistic training and art work in *The Figurative Sculpture of Magdalena Abakanowicz: Bodies, Environments, and Myths* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). In her account, Inglot dislodges modernist myths surrounding Abakanowicz's sculpture and recovers the artist's wider network of influences.

15 Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Fate and Art: Monologue* (Milan: Skira, 2008), 23.

16 Michael Brenson, "Magdalena Abakanowicz's 'Abakans,'" *Art Journal* 54, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 56–61; Robert Hughes, "Dark Visions of Primal Myth," *Time*, June 7, 1993.

17 Barbara Rose, *Magdalena Abakanowicz* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 20; Constantine and Larsen, *Beyond Craft*, 83.

18 The critic was Kirsten Dehlholm writing for *Dansk Kunsthåndværk* in 1967. Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Magdalena Abakanowicz: Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1982), 64.



Magdalena Abakanowicz. *Red Abakan III*, 1970-1971. Sisal, 300 x 300 x 45 cm. Fondation Toms Pauli, Switzerland. Donation from Pierre et Marguerite Magnenat. Photo by Arnaud Conne.



Euro-American psyche and periodically invoked in various forms of Western art and art criticism.<sup>19</sup>

As the Lausanne Biennial's second female star from Eastern Europe, Yugoslavian artist Jagoda Buić achieved recognition for her textile structures, objects, and "situations" alongside Abakanowicz at the Biennials and other prominent dual Abakanowicz-Buić exhibitions.<sup>20</sup> She first exhibited *Triptyque structural*, produced in 1964, at the Second Lausanne Biennial of 1965. Envisioning "a pliable world" (un monde pliable), Buić explored the innumerable mathematical possibilities for different weave structures, which she termed "interweaving," as well as the warmth of richly textured weaves and felted surfaces and the supple qualities of fiber.<sup>21</sup> In *Triptyque structural II*,

19 Virginia Gardener Troy's study of Anni Albers traces primitivism in modernist textiles but does not extend to Albers's students who participated in the New Tapestry movement. See *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles: From Bauhaus to Black Mountain* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002).

20 *Jagoda Buić: Gewebe Formen 1968-1977*, ed. Karl-Heinz Hering (Kunstverein für die Rheinlande and Westfalen Düsseldorf Grabbeplatz Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf, 29 April-3 July 1977), exhibition catalog; *Jagoda Buić: Textilní objekty/Textile objekte/Textile Objects* (Museum Kampa Praha, Prague, 16 September-28 October, 2001, and Egon Schiele Art Centrum, Český Krumlov, Czech Republic, 4 November, 2001-6 January, 2002), exhibition catalog; Vlado Bužančić's biography of her in *Jagoda Buić*, ed. Vasja Kraševac (Ljubljana: Mladinska Kniga, 1988), 210-27.

21 For Buić's discussion of "interweaving" (l'entrelacement), see Kuenzi, *La nouvelle tapisserie*, 140-47.

shown at the Third Biennial of 1967, Buić combined “interweaving,” the joining of various weave structures, with empty space to create a collage of surface structures, textures, and voids. Executed in shades of brown, the work exhibited a voluminous organic presence that Buić believed stood in contrast to mural tapestries, which she condemned as “decoration,” the continual copying of painting, and the failure to intellectualize material form.<sup>22</sup> Buić defended the autonomy of woven objects, claiming to formulate a new aesthetic approach drawn from the symbolism of Ariadne, in which threads of fiber signified conduits for thought.<sup>23</sup> This allegorical language reverberated not only among officials in the Yugoslavian art establishment, but also, albeit due to different motivations, among Western European artists and critics seeking to disavow the historic stronghold of French artist-designers.

Archival records in Lausanne and Aubusson reveal the disagreement in Western Europe over the naming and gendering of tapestry. P. M. Grand wrote that whether or not *Triptyque structural* was a tapestry, no one could accuse Buić of producing an “*ouvrage de dame*.”<sup>24</sup> According to some critics, works such as the *Abakan* and *Triptyque structural* series shocked the conservative weaving establishment upheld by Lurçat and his French colleagues.<sup>25</sup> Others, such as Michel Tourlière, then-director of the École nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Aubusson, refuted their “newness,” insisting that students had long experimented with unusual materials and forms, but that such works were subject to instability and degeneration.<sup>26</sup> Even though Abakanowicz was one of numerous Polish artists experimenting with unusual fibers and three-dimensional abstraction, critics of the Lausanne Biennial imparted her with the title of persona of brilliance.<sup>27</sup> As André Kuenzi wrote, her studio space consisted of a

22 Irene Waller, *Textile Sculptures* (New York: Taplinger Publishing, 1977). For an analysis of weaving and intellectual theory, see T'ai Smith, *Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

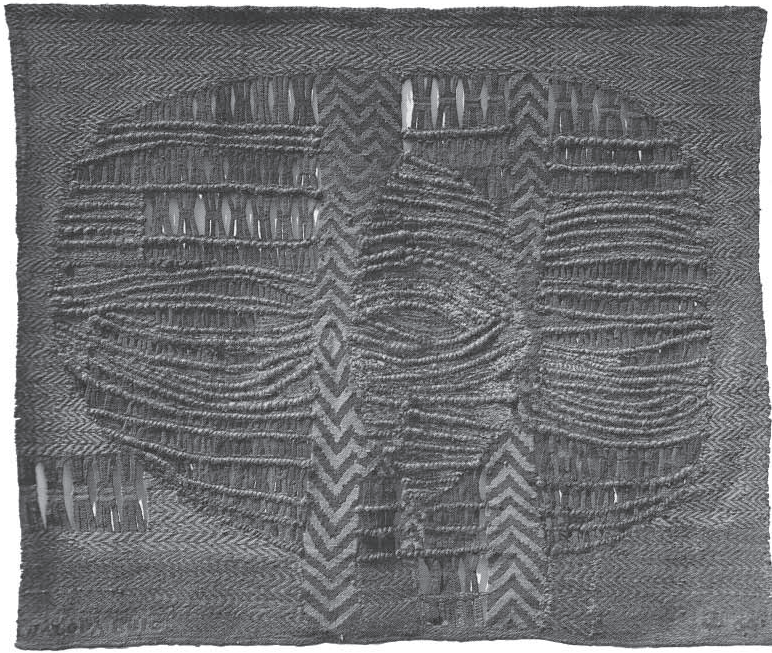
23 Waller, *Textile Sculptures*, 34, 146.

24 Translated “needlework” or “embroidery,” but literally “wife’s work.” P. M. Grand, “Confrontation international à la Biennale de la Tapisserie,” *Le Monde*, July 2, 1965.

25 “Résumé du discours prononcé par M. Michel Thévoz à l’occasion de l’inauguration de la 6e Biennale internationale de la Tapisserie,” Archives générales sur les Biennales, Côte G2 Carton 50, Archives de la Ville de Lausanne.

26 Michel Tourlière, letter to CITAM, May 21, 1965, Tome 30J 136, Archives départementales de la Creuse, Guéret.

27 Erika Billeter, “Textile Art and the Avant-garde,” in *Art textile contemporain: Collection de l’Association Pierre Pauli* (Berne: Benteli, 2000), 52–65; Rich Mathews, “A Lausanne Notebook: Abakanowicz,” *Fiberarts* (September/October 1977): 39–42.



Jagoda Buić. *Triptyque structural II*, 1966. Tapestry, 2.5 x 3 m. Location unknown.

rudimentary loom and a bottle of vodka: “The creative genius asks nothing more!” (*Le génie créateur n’en demande pas davantage!*)<sup>28</sup>

While the debates proffered by the French and Swiss art establishments elucidate the mixed reception of New Tapestries in Western Europe, in postwar Poland and Yugoslavia, the association of tapestry with working class and peasant roots was ideologically valuable. In Poland, the nationalist revival of weaving in the 1950s awakened new political and aesthetic tonalities afforded by the medium.<sup>29</sup> Officials framed rural women’s artistic production as elevating an authentic vernacular culture lodged in the past but in a perpetual state of progress. While the Ministry of Culture and Art enforced Socialist Realism among painters between 1949 and 1956, its favorable position on craft left room for possibility.<sup>30</sup> During his visit to Warsaw in 1953, Lurçat’s collaborator François Tabard observed that officials were more lenient

28 André Kuenzi, “La tapisserie de demain est née en Pologne,” *Gazette de Lausanne*, 20/21 April, 1963.

29 A.K., “Bientôt la troisième Biennale de la Tapisserie,” Tome 30J 136, Archives départementales de la Creuse, Guéret.

30 For a discussion of the political anonymity of crafts in Stalinist Poland, see David Crowley, “Stalinism and Modernist Craft in Poland,” in “Craft, Modernism and Modernity,” ed. Tanya Harrod, special issue, *Journal of Design History* 11, no. 1 (1998): 71–83, doi:10.1093/jdh/11.1.71.

toward the use of abstraction in textiles.<sup>31</sup> An opening for aesthetic experimentation is discernable in documents concerning the 1953 exhibition of French tapestry in the Warsaw Museum, an exhibition that has yet to be connected with the surge of Polish tapestry in Western Europe a decade later.<sup>32</sup> Staged by the Polish Committee for Cultural Cooperation, the display of 35 works designed by French painters was intended to encourage peaceful exchange. In his account of the inauguration, Tabard affirmed that elite critics were reconsidering the official position on Socialist Realism and the place of abstraction in the applied arts. While some abstract tapestries were met with hesitation, ambivalence, and disapproval, Tabard suggested that works by artists like Lurçat and Fernand Léger offered potential solutions to aesthetic constraints faced by Polish artists.<sup>33</sup> At stake, too, was the translation of abstract forms found in Polish folk traditions into objects permissible for mass production. Tellingly, the tapestries were mounted alongside an exhibition of ethnographic art devoted to the “Polish Renaissance,” endorsed as authentic source material.

When Abakanowicz entered the Warsaw Academy in 1950, she witnessed the severe Stalinist imposition of Socialist Realism on Polish art. Joanna Inglot describes this period as “the worst possible time in Polish postwar history” for painters.<sup>34</sup> Artists who adopted textiles and ceramics, however, were subject to fewer restrictions, due to the favorable perception of craft.<sup>35</sup> Authorities allocated resources to artisanal cooperatives for the mass production of objects, as well as to initiatives that paired academic artist-professors with rural craftspeople and children. Art schools in Warsaw and Kraków turned to folk art traditions in their pedagogies.<sup>36</sup> As P. M. Grande remarked, “In the domain of decoration a fertile liaison is provided by popular

31 François Tabard, “A propos de l’Exposition de Tapisseries d’Aubusson en Pologne,” Tome 30J 310, Archives départementales de la Creuse, Guéret.

32 See the papers in Tome 30J 310, Archives départementales de la Creuse, Guéret.

33 Ibid. Valentine Fougère and Michel Tourlière mention a similar official openness to tapestry in Moscow in *Tapisserie de notre temps* (Paris: Les Éditions du Temps, 1969), 8.

34 Inglot, *Figurative Sculpture*, 26. In 1950 the Ministry of Culture and Art merged the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts with the Institute of Applied Arts.

35 Louise Llewellyn Jarecka, “Contemporary Polish Weaving,” *Handweaver and Craftsman* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1950): 15–18, 59.

36 See Inglot, *Figurative Sculpture*. P. M. Grande wrote two articles for *Le Monde*, “Dix jours en Pologne: Sciences et pratiques socialistes de l’art” and “Dix jours en Pologne: Art et tradition nationale dans une République populaire,” which examined tapestry in the wake of official policies on abstraction. These articles appeared February 9–10, 1954. Tome 30J 132, Archives départementales de la Creuse, Guéret.

tradition.”<sup>37</sup> Abakanowicz studied with professors such as Eleonora Plutyńska, who taught traditional weaving techniques and worked with female weavers on the revival of hand-woven bedspreads in northeastern Poland. In congruence with shifts in artistic practice with the cultural “thaw” of 1956, Abakanowicz increasingly used abstraction in painted textile patterns on paper and cloth.<sup>38</sup> She joined the state-supported cooperative Ład, which produced *kilims*, wall hangings, and furniture upholstery.<sup>39</sup> Despite fewer restrictions on artists in the late 1950s, Abakanowicz’s first solo exhibition, at the Kordegarda Gallery in Warsaw in 1960, was temporarily censored until the local authorities interpreted the content of her work as being intended for interior design. This instance exemplifies Catherine S. Amidon’s argument that in Poland, “fiber art was modernism protected by its process,” relatable to a presumably national, feminized craft rather than a potentially dissident, masculine art history.<sup>40</sup>

Abakanowicz’s censored exhibition of “interior décor” was the fortuitous setting for her encounter with Maria Łaskiewicz, who added her name to a list generated for Pierre Pauli, the Swiss co-founder of CITAM. Pauli made multiple trips to Poland in search of artistic developments within a framework of heavily regulated cultural exchange, and solicited Łaskiewicz to help identify participants for the First Lausanne Biennial.<sup>41</sup> Abakanowicz soon wove under her mentorship alongside a group of women artists sharing the large loom in Łaskiewicz’s basement. Together, Łaskiewicz, Abakanowicz, Ada

37 Grande describes how in one studio Wanda Telakowska oversaw the fashioning of industrial prototypes in cut paper, painted eggs, pottery, glass painting, embroidery, clothing, and marriage blankets. P. M. Grande, “Dix jours en Pologne: Sciences.”

38 The cultural “thaw” refers to the shift in political climate following Krushev’s policy of “peaceful coexistence,” announced at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 as part of post-Stalinist ideology. The Thaw relaxed Stalinist-era censorship in the arts and fostered the renewal of culturally specific, nationalist art programs. For an overview of the Thaw’s effect on Polish and Yugoslav art, see chapter six in Nancy Jachec, *Politics and Painting at the Venice Biennale 1948–64: Italy and the Idea of Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

39 For a critical discussion of Abakanowicz’s artistic training, see chapter two in Ingot, *Figurative Sculpture*.

40 Catherine S. Amidon, “Different Voices with Common Threads: Polish Fiber Art Today,” *Polish Review* 43, no. 2 (1998): 196–206. For further discussion of Abakanowicz’s “symbolic” relationship to Polish authorities, see Aneta Biesiadek, “Magdalena Abakanowicz and the Development of the Figure in Postwar Polish Sculpture,” *Women’s Art Journal* 32, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2011): 30–38; Leslie Milofsky, “Magdalena Abakanowicz,” *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 363–78.

41 Interview with Giselle Eberhard Cotton (director of the Fondation Toms Pauli) by the author, May 5, 2011.

Kierzkowska, and Anna Sledziewska launched a subgroup within the Union of Polish Visual Artists called the Experimental Workshop of the Polish Artists' Union. The union authorization was significant: as Abakanowicz remarked, "non-members did not exist as artists. Membership allowed one to practice the arts as a profession: tax deductions, exhibition possibilities, access to art supplies, help in getting studio space were otherwise impossible."<sup>42</sup>

The warm reception of Abakanowicz's two-dimensional tapestry *La composition des formes blanches* at the First Lausanne Biennial in 1962 facilitated the artist's entry into an established network of French tapestry experts. Abakanowicz received invitations to Paris and Aubusson, where she sent two designs to be woven at the Ateliers Tabard. Corresponding with Tabard in 1963, Abakanowicz expressed her gratitude for her brief visit to view the weaving of her tapestry *Les carrés*, as well as her frustration with the Atelier Tabard's use of cartoon.<sup>43</sup> She acknowledged the impact a "foreign technique" had on her conceptual process, and reported to be authoring a series of articles comparing French and Polish approaches. In the following Lausanne Biennials, Abakanowicz explored the spatial dimensions of unusual fibers and introduced rope.<sup>44</sup> She exhibited the *Abakans* in other venues as well, notably the Wall Hangings exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in 1969, curated by Constantine and Larsen. She simultaneously participated in official exhibitions, such as Contemporary Polish Artistic Textiles, inaugurated in Lausanne in conjunction with the Second Biennial in 1965 to signify (to the West) the Polish government's "generosity" toward its artists and the revitalization of national traditions.<sup>45</sup> Abakanowicz thus adopted an acceptable art form to balance what the previously Stalinist-oriented Ministry of Culture and Art had termed "decadent individualism," or the expression of the artist's personal vision, with ideologically correct themes in order to access art world networks beyond Poland.<sup>46</sup>

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42 Abakanowicz, *Fate and Art*, 24.

43 Abakanowicz lamented the weavers' inability to execute the cartoon as she desired. Letters from Magdalena Abakanowicz to François Tabard, March 1, June 26, and September 2, 1963, Tome 30J 276, Archives départementales de la Creuse, Guéret.

44 Judith Bumps, "Rope Environments," *Art and Artists* 9, no. 7 (October 1974): 36–41.

45 *Les tissus polonais artistiques contemporains/Informateur édité par le Musée de l'histoire des textiles à Łódź à l'occasion de l'exposition internationale de la tapisserie moderne, Lausanne juin–septembre 1965* (Łódź, Poland: Muzeum Historii Włókiennictwa), exhibition catalog.

46 Crowley, "Stalinism and Modernist Craft in Poland," 73.



In the Yugoslav political climate, which similarly elevated weaving as being vital to national folk identity, tapestry afforded Jagoda Buić considerable flexibility in straddling nationalist discourses at home and formalist concerns in Lausanne. Buić entered the Academy of Applied Arts in Zagreb in 1949 during postwar reconstruction, a period that museum director Zoran Kržišnik nostalgically described as “a poetic reordering of the world.”<sup>47</sup> As Buić speculated on “how to work out a new design in the universe,” she created costumes for the Croatian National Theater in Split.<sup>48</sup> She gained recognition in industrial and home design by the early 1960s, representing Yugoslavia in government-sponsored exhibitions touring Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.<sup>49</sup> She first approached a “tapestry situation” around 1960, when commissioned to produce a monumental work for the Federal Executive Council in Belgrade. The tapestry’s inauguration was staged on Josip Broz Tito’s birthday and the Day of Youth festival in 1961. In the days leading up to the event, she timed its weaving to match the daily distances run by a youth marathon team. The artist produced her second tapestry, entitled *From Sunshine, From Stones, From Dreams*, for the presidential residence in 1963. From the outset, Buić’s weavings were imbued with allegorical significance that advanced a return to native roots and cultural self-determination.<sup>50</sup> Tapestry provided an apt medium for the official representation of Yugoslav autonomy in the early 1960s, just as Buić’s personal philosophy of weaving, borrowing from ancient Greek mythology, conceived of individual fibers as distinct channels of thought. “Thread symbolizes thought; it involves direction and an application of intelligence. However, thread is never an end in itself. It remains the vehicle of thought, and thought organizes it into a system—a structure.”<sup>51</sup>

In a period of heightened nationalism, high-ranking members of Yugoslavia’s art establishment commended Buić for her ingenuity in efforts to revive the origins of weaving, her use of handspun wool obtained from the rustic interior, and her collaboration with peasant weavers. With female assistants from the regions of Dalmatia, Sandžak, and Herzegovina, Buić constructed woven environments

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47 Zoran Kržišnik, essay in Kraševac, *Jagoda Buić*, 20.

48 Ibid.

49 *Wall Hangings*, ed. Mildred Constantine and Jack Lenor Larsen (New York: Museum of Modern Art, February 25–May 4, 1969), exhibition catalog.

50 See Vjenceslav Richter’s 1967 essay in Kraševac, *Jagoda Buić*, 39.

51 Kuenzi, *La nouvelle tapisserie*, 146–47. Author’s translation.

for biennial exhibitions, theater sets, hotels, and airport lounges. These woven objects were said to engender a return to the “Slavic soul,” a collective primordial consciousness when woolen objects were not conceived of as pictorial wall tapestries, but as portable items of clothing, tents, blankets, and shepherds’ sacks. As the Croatian critic Josip Depolo wrote in 1976,

While for Europe and the world Jagoda’s anti-tapestries were bizarre and extravagant, we saw our own face, *the aesthetic simile of a whole nation*. The surprised world discovered in this woolen architecture “mystic temples” and “settings from classical antiquity,” while our infallible nose registers the smell of onions, cheese, and cornbread spreading from these outsized bags, and we hear the sound of a shepherd’s pipe, monotonous, atonal, not in the least faunal or romantic. In this crudely woven wool, stained with colors of soot and blood (even the coloring is typically our own!), we find ourselves revealed.<sup>52</sup>

Exhibition catalogs reinforced this myth of nationalist primitivism; photographs depicted the artist working with rural weavers and dyers, hiking through the meadow with sheep, and riding on horseback through textile environments positioned outdoors.<sup>53</sup> Buić was seemingly ambivalent with this reading of her work, stating in 1966,

I cannot stress too strongly that every human being, every artist, is marked by tradition. I have been told that my tapestries resemble the mourning dress worn by widows in the stony hinterland of Dalmatia. I have also been told that others display the colors of the sashes once worn by Montenegrin warriors. Perhaps. Yet without neglecting the links to our tradition, I feel committed to the artistic expression of our time.<sup>54</sup>

Buić’s artistic philosophy and public persona simultaneously exemplified the orientation favored by Pierre Pauli and CITAM after Lurçat’s death. Lausanne’s juries deployed Buić’s concept of artistic autonomy to bolster New Tapestry in the post-Lurçat era, promoting

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52 Josip Depolo, essay in Kraševac, *Jagoda Buić*, 72–73, emphasis mine.

53 See *Jagoda Buić: Woven Forms* (Yugoslavia: VIII Bienal de São Paulo, October–December 1975), exhibition catalog; Jacques Lassaigue, “Yugoslavie: Jagoda Buić,” *L’œil* 240/241 (1975): 37–39; Kraševac, *Jagoda Buić*.

54 Jagoda Buić, “On Tapestry,” in Kraševac, *Jagoda Buić*, 9.



artists' direct engagement with materials and terminology that encapsulated fiber's independence in space.<sup>55</sup> Buić's installation of six tapestries, *Hommage à Pierre Pauli*, demarcated such a contemplative textile environment for the Fifth Lausanne Biennial of 1971. Executed in dark wools, the work's title honored the legacy of the Biennial's co-creator who had, in Buić's mind, elicited new ways of thinking.<sup>56</sup> Here, Buić intended for her concept of "interweaving" not only to apply to the physical structure of weaving, but also to conjure the pliability of the mind, the creative ability to structure and restructure one's thought processes, imagination, and meditation, in contrast to the perceived formulaic approach of executing cartoons. In asserting the autonomy of the medium in accordance with the discursive framework of the Lausanne Biennial, Buić was praised for transcending utilitarian design and ancestral tradition. Yet, it is precisely her manipulation of fiber within the politically charged arenas of decoration, theater, and ideological spectacle that lent opportunities for representing Yugoslavia abroad.

#### SAFIA FARHAT'S NEW TAPESTRY

Tunisian artist Safia Farhat also situated herself within the transnational network of the Lausanne Biennials. Her experience of rejection from this forum, however, stands in contrast to that of Buić and Abakanowicz, for whom the Biennials opened new possibilities for direct artistic exchange, international travel, and global recognition. Farhat's turn to New Tapestry came during a peak in her career in the early 1970s. As the sole woman in the group *École de Tunis* and the first Tunisian to direct the postcolonial *École des Beaux-Arts*, Farhat publicly signified the modern, professional woman in support of the state-enforced vision of modernity. Conceived by former President Habib Bourguiba, this vision encompassed the socioeconomic ideology and development model of the administrative elite, known as Bourguibism, which featured the "emancipation" of women as its cornerstone. In forging Tunisian socialism in the 1960s, Bourguibist narratives deployed the figure of the rural woman weaver as the prototypical Tunisian citizen in need of intellectual elevation, and they conscripted art institutions to effect the desired socio-psychological

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55 René Berger, "La tapisserie en question," Archives générales sur les Biennales, Côte G2 Carton 47, Archives de la Ville de Lausanne.

56 See the homage to Pauli in the catalog for the Fifth Biennial: *5ème Biennale internationale de la tapisserie* (Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Palais de Rumine, Lausanne, 18 June–3 October, 1971), exhibition catalog.



Safa Farhat. *Le couple*, 1972. Wool tapestry, 1.6 x 1.20 m. Location unknown. Slide courtesy of the Fondation Toms Pauli, Switzerland. CTIAM Archives. Photograph by Abdelhemid Kahia.

transformation. As director of the École des Beaux-Arts, Farhat aligned artistic practice and pedagogy with social engineering by instituting a partnership between artists and artisans from the National Office of Handicraft.<sup>57</sup> This relationship, in which art school students designed tapestries for execution by weavers, was in part her reinterpretation of Lurçat's advice on the division of labor, which was solicited by the Tunisian government in 1960 and reported in her journal *Faïza*.<sup>58</sup>

In 1972 Farhat produced a woven object titled *Le couple* in her private atelier in Radès, Tunisia. While the tapestry itself has been lost, Farhat's slide was archived by the Lausanne Biennial. In contrast to the flat surfaces of her previous mural tapestries, which decorated state-

57 Jessica Gerschultz, "The Interwoven Ideologies of Art and Artisanal Education in Postcolonial Tunis," *Critical Interventions: Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture* 8, no. 1 (2014): 31–51.

58 Paul Sebag, "Les tapis Tunisiens et leur rénovation," *Faïza* 7 (June 1960): 22–23. See also Lurçat's papers held in the collection of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, Paris. (These were in the process of archival classification at the time of writing.)

owned hotels, banks, factories, tourist bureaus, and government offices, the woven areas of *Le couple* are bedecked with loose, hanging, knotted cords. Rather than consisting of a singular plane, this tapestry comprises several autonomous pieces. The base is a rectangular woven structure with colorful geometric motifs, modeled on those historically produced by women weavers from the Gafsa region of southern Tunisia. A woven protrusion with a zigzag edge, made possible by the use of a discontinuous warp, is attached to the top of the base. The central point of the tapestry, void of any woven form, permits the viewer to see the wall behind a tangle of multicolored cords with tassels. These cords are threaded through the comb-like protrusion above and pulled through the empty space to drape alongside colorful representations of ropes woven into the flat base. Although intended for display against a wall, *Le couple* demonstrates Farhat's engagement with debates emanating from the Lausanne Biennial concerning the direction of fiber art.<sup>59</sup> Shortly after the work's production, Farhat submitted it for review for the Sixth Lausanne Biennial, held in 1973.<sup>60</sup>



Safia Farhat. *Le cyclope*, 1972. Wool tapestry, 2.5 x 1.2 m. Collection of Aïcha Filali. Slide courtesy of the Fondation Toms Pauli, Switzerland. CITAM Archives. Photograph by Abdelhemid Kahia.

In addition to *Le couple*, Farhat submitted three other tapestries. *Le fétiche* and *Le cyclope* are large structures composed of tall, rectangular woven forms from which long cords and braided tassels dangle. In executing these works, Farhat's weavers employed plain tapestry and cut pile weave, allotting unwoven warp threads to create a curtain of

59 According to Farhat's niece and biographer Aïcha Filali, Farhat attended several biennials in the early 1970s. Filali, in discussion with the author, 2010–15. See also Aïcha Filali, *Safia Farhat: Une biographie* (Tunis: MIM Editions, 2005), 206–7.

60 Safia Farhat's dossier is housed at the Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne.

cascading braids. *Le cyclope* conveys the contour of a body over which a striped shawl in white, blue, yellow, and black is draped. This hint at figuration bears strong resemblance to Maria Łaszkiewicz's woven figure, *La solitude*, exhibited in Lausanne and Warsaw in 1971. Composed of coarse blue and gray panels stitched together, the form of a shrouded female figure holds her wooden flesh-colored hands to the woven rectangle of her anonymous face. Unwoven cords and tassels hang from the figure's wrist, waistline, and belt, and conjure wisps of gray hair around the face. Łaszkiewicz was instrumental in joining Polish tapestry with Western art institutions, which Farhat closely followed through her contacts with Lurçat and Tourlière, an engagement that illustrates the extent to which the tapestry network had expanded.<sup>61</sup>

Among the voluminous works that Farhat produced in Radès in the early 1970s, nowhere is her experimentation with spatiality and material more explicit than in her grand work *Fécondité*. This artwork is a self-supporting structure of plush fibers. Photographed in the courtyard of Farhat's estate, *Fécondité* stands over six and a half feet tall. Twisted strands of sprouting wool create a cushioned base with a central concentric diamond shape, towered over by rows of cut pile weave. A backing of woven pillars supports the soft sculpture and plays with gravity. The zigzag shapes adorning this column attest to Farhat's practice of appropriating recognizable motifs that were ubiquitous in women's weavings from Gafsa and its environs.

Throughout the 1960s, *Gafsien* motifs were in a perpetual state of reinvention by the newly reorganized National Office of Handicraft.<sup>62</sup> As the component of Tunisian socialism directed toward uneducated, unmarried women, the craft industry employed thousands of wage-earning weavers who fabricated textiles for local and export markets. Similar to what was the case in Poland, the office preserved a repertoire of popular symbols and techniques through ethnographic indices, which comprised authentic source material for artist-designers. Farhat sent students from the École des Beaux-Arts to Gafsa's artisanal workshops to study rural women's weaving, congruent with the practice at

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61 My conversations with Filali and Farhat's former student Mohamed Njeh confirm Farhat's professional relationships with French tapestry experts. Filali and Nieh, in discussion with the author, 2010. See also Filali, *Safra Farhat*.

62 Sophie Ferchiou, "Façon de dire, façon de tisser ou l'art figuratif dans la tapisserie de Gafsa," *Les cahiers de l'IREMAM* 7–8 (1996): 79–90; Marthe Sakka, "Gafsa: Haut-lieu des tissus de décoration," *Carthage: Revue Trimestrielle Tunisienne* 1 (January–March 1965): 52–56.



Maria Laszkiewicz. *La solitude*, 1970. Sisal, wool, linen, and wood, 3,5 x 1,5 m. Collection of the Fondation Toms Pauli, Switzerland. Donation from Pierre et Marguerite Magninat. Photograph by Jacques Bétant





Safia Farhat, *Fécondité*, 1972. Wool tapestry, 0.8 x 0.6 x 1.5 m.  
Image courtesy of the Fondation Toms Pauli, Switzerland.  
CITAM Archives. Photograph by Abdelhermid Kahia.

the Warsaw Academy.<sup>63</sup> She simultaneously drew from her own observations of *Gafsiën* weavers whose work was characterized by bold geometric and figurative motifs and coarse, handspun wools.<sup>64</sup> Farhat's integration of these designs and materials into fiber sculpture not only demonstrates her command of the visual grammar of the New Tapestry movement, but also verifies the intellectual networks she intersected.

The framing of women in Tunisia's political economy, coupled with the very materiality of Farhat's tapestries—each woven by female artisans with hand-spun, local wool—imbued her tapestries with ideological significance. These works were constructed during a period in which the artist enjoyed financial support for her tapestry workshop. As the co-founder of the design company the Société Zin, Farhat received numerous orders for tapestries due to the favorable cultural policies of the Bourguibist regime, particularly its reinstatement of the so-called one-percent law in 1962. This decree mandated that one percent of the construction budget for a public building must be designated for its dec-

63 Ismaïl Ben Frej, in discussion with the author, August 5, 2010; Mohamed Njeh, in discussion with the author, August 30, 2010.

64 Farhat's dossier, Archives du CITAM, Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne.

oration with art.<sup>65</sup> At the same time, administrative elites championed women's weaving and wool production as the entry point for women's participation in the formal economy. In the bureaucratic echelons of the *Parti socialiste dusturien* (PSD), a shared aesthetic and political philosophy toward female creativity underpinned women's textile production.<sup>66</sup> By equating women's modern industrial labor with their traditional artistry in the home, the administrative elite of the PSD sought to validate female employment in terms that were compatible with accepted social customs. Whether *atelier* or factory, the site of textile production constituted a social space in which women's ingenuity and labor could be harnessed and controlled via Bourguiba's state feminism.

While Farhat's administrative and journalistic work was Bourguibist in orientation, tapestry served as an expressive means for materializing potential critique due to its ambiguity of form. The medium's strong association with women's traditions and progress could mediate metaphors of political turmoil and deception, such as those implied in Farhat's portrayals of *Ulysses and Penelope*. Although the series's title evokes the epic weaver and her estranged yet heroic husband—folk heroes of Tunisian popular myth resuscitated in nationalist discourses—Farhat's figures are ambiguously self-referential. In eliciting scenes of anxiety and doubt, Farhat at once invoked the characters' cunning feats, as well as their ploys of treachery and loyalty.<sup>67</sup> Fiber's multivalence is also useful in explaining such paradoxes as the looming presence of "feminine" imagery in Tunis's Banque centrale de Tunisie, the financial hub of the administrative elite. Towering installations of voluminous female figures quietly bespeak larger power differentials, contradicting the Bourguibist myth of gender equality.<sup>68</sup>

Given Farhat's grasp on contemporary design issues and her weavers' creative capacity to execute sculptural forms, CITAM's rejection of

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65 Decree 62-295, August 27, 1962. Document from the Imprimerie officielle de la République Tunisienne, Tunis.

66 The Tunisian feminist publications *Faïza* and *Femme* were replete with articles on women artisans throughout the 1960s. An excellent example is Safia Farhat's 1961 interview with then Minister of Planning, Ahmed Ben Salah: "Entretien avec M. Ahmed Ben Salah," *Faïza* 15 (May 1961): 20–23.

67 In 2010 and 2013, I located some of these tapestries in the collection of the Tunisian Ministry of Culture. They were dispersed between the National Tourism Office and the Musée Ksar Saïd in Bardo.

68 See Sophie Ferchiou's critique, "'Invisible' Work, Work at Home: The Condition of Tunisian Women," in *Middle Eastern Women and the Invisible Economy*, ed. Richard A. Lobban (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 187–97.



Safia Farhat. *Untitled*, 1978. Wool tapestry, 5.25 × 2.62 m. Collection of the Banque centrale de Tunisie. Image courtesy of Aïcha Filali. Photograph by the author.



her submissions to the Biennials of 1973 and 1975 is at first puzzling. Farhat adopted the very approaches of New Tapestry artists: an interrogation of three-dimensionality, the use of dangling ropes and cords, and the blending of formalist abstraction with research on local histories of weaving.<sup>69</sup> In her correspondence with CITAM's executive commissioner, Farhat explained that she had been invited to participate.<sup>70</sup> As her application to the Sixth Biennial was disqualified because of its late arrival, she requested consideration for the Seventh Biennial. CITAM's secretary informed the artist that she had, unfortunately, again missed the deadline, but noted that she might reapply.<sup>71</sup> Although Farhat never did, she maintained a professional presence in the New Tapestry network from Tunis, notably hosting Sheila Hicks at the *École des Beaux-Arts* around 1974. Farhat's rejection nonetheless curtailed her international recognition, while the lack of access effectively eliminated her from New Tapestry scholarship. The admission of New Tapestry produced by an artist who was African, Arab, and Muslim would have unsettled white appropriations of "indigenous" textiles. The primitive, as an appropriable and assigned category, attachable to person or medium, ultimately hinged upon the identity of the artist. As Farhat's biographer Aïcha Filali has reflected, "Knowing that these international events are rarely open to countries of the South, it is acceptable to question the reason for this refusal." (*Sachant que ces manifestations internationales sont rarement ouvertes aux pays du Sud, il est permis de douter de la cause de ce refus.*)<sup>72</sup>

It is imperative to reassess the dilemma of (in)visibility and access if we are to conceive of fiber art's political dimensions. The prominence of the Lausanne Biennial, fostered in part by the "Slavonic Wave," prompted innumerable iterations of New Tapestry. Artists from Europe, North and South America, Israel, Japan, and Korea participated in its exhibitions. However, the institutional reliance on assigning primitivity required the repression of modernist sensibilities in those whose work was appropriable. Despite CITAM's claim to scien-

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69 Farhat's dossier, Archives du CITAM, Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne.

70 Farhat did not specify who invited her. Letter from Safia Farhat to Claude Ritschard, June 2, 1975, Archives générales sur les Biennales, Côte G2 Carton 56, Archives de la Ville de Lausanne.

71 Letter from Valerie Jost to Safia Farhat, April 7, 1975, Archives générales sur les Biennales, Côte G2 Carton 56, Archives de la Ville de Lausanne.

72 Filali, *Safia Farhat*, 207.

tific neutrality, this made it easier to reject submissions from Africa and the Middle East. Documents housed in the Fondation Toms Pauli and the city archives of Lausanne reveal that artists from Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Senegal, Zaire, KwaZulu Natal (a homeland in apartheid South Africa), Lesotho (in collaboration with Alexander Calder), Turkey, and Pakistan submitted dossiers throughout the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>73</sup> These artists faced the added obstacle of individual and structural racism, indicted for engaging with modernism during a period in which their articulations were regarded as naïve derivatives of European models.<sup>74</sup>

This “transgression” was particularly incisive because the fiber medium typified a series of hierarchies whose origins in early 20th century art history could be mapped onto geopolitical motivations underlying imperial enterprises. Weavings from Africa and the Islamic world, ascribed an ethnographic, utilitarian, and decorative status in Euro-American taxonomies, were presumed to be the products of intuition and ritual, reducible to antiquated sources of “discovery” for avant-garde painters and, later, New Tapestry artists: as MoMA curators Constantine and Larsen summarized, “In the cultures of the past, basketry, body coverings, masks of ritual and dance were woven in Africa. . . . Today, some of our artists are producing conventional objects for unconventional purposes . . . *purposefully abstract*.”<sup>75</sup> CITAM perpetuated this trope in the first years of the Lausanne Biennial through its endorsement of the primitivist mythologies of its Euro-American stars. Lurçat’s death in 1966 meant that his brokering efforts in Senegal, Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt went largely unobserved in Lausanne.<sup>76</sup>

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73 Among these notable records is a file submitted to the Seventh Biennial of 1975 by weavers Josephine Memela and Mary Shabalala. Sent from KwaZulu Natal, this dossier included as a cartoon an original linocut print by John Muafangejo, a black artist engaged in social and political commentary. This satirical cartoon was made under the auspices of “acceptable” manual labor for black craftsmen associated with Rorke’s Drift Art and Craft Centre, a Swedish-sponsored Evangelical Lutheran training center. It remained folded into the rejected dossier until I recovered it in 2011.

74 I am indebted to Giselle Eberhard Cotton for helping me locate these dossiers at the Fondation Toms Pauli. To her knowledge, applications were submitted to the jury with no indication of the artist’s name or country of origin (personal communication, November 11, 2011). Yet the paperwork, slides, and photographs submitted for consideration were labeled with this information.

75 Constantine and Larsen, *Beyond Craft*, 11, emphasis added.

76 Lurçat’s widow Simone Lurçat kept records of the artist’s travels in Africa by country: Collection of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, Paris. The National Archives of Senegal hold records of Lurçat’s assistance in launching the Manufacture nationale de Tapisserie in Thiès in conjunction with the Festival mondial des Arts Nègres in 1966.

## TOWARD A CRITICAL HISTORY OF NEW TAPESTRY NETWORKS

Farhat, Buić, and Abakanowicz are linked in their contouring of New Tapestry within systems of national patronage that promoted textiles as folkloric emblems with design potential. Yet, the discursive lens engendered by the Lausanne Biennial centered on the heroic individuality of artists as distinct from the rote mechanics of artisans. Due to the persistence of pejorative views of tapestry despite the Biennial's laudatory writing, Abakanowicz in the 1970s distanced herself from her textile background and emphasized her work as pure sculpture.<sup>77</sup> However, as archival records confirm, the political concerns shaping Polish artistic production in the 1950s created the impetus for textile research and transnational exchanges with tapestry specialists. The resulting intellectual and artistic milieu eventually mobilized a New Tapestry network and spurred Abakanowicz's innovations in Lausanne.

An analytic framework that probes how meaning is construed through and embedded in fiber arts is germane to the treatment of New Tapestry. In examining the political facets of materiality within specific contexts, it becomes possible to link artists' strategic engagement with the medium. Contrary to biennial rhetoric, the New Tapestries under discussion were very likely interlaced with responses to ideologies that affected the terms of their production. The perceived viability of modern textile design in postwar, post-thaw, and postcolonial economies enacted a more fluid set of conditions for fiber artists, while the official endorsement of tapestry created space for abstract and ambivalent content in a feminized medium deemed relatively innocuous.<sup>78</sup> The canon of New Tapestry as enshrined by the Lausanne Biennials did not register the emergent artistic developments in Africa and the Middle East, nor did it disclose the political tonalities that could be activated through the medium of fiber due to its uneasy relation to notions of premodern, nonintellectual craft and emergent design economies. The networks around New Tapestry artists, however, are more vast than current tapestry scholarship suggests, and require revisiting issues that have eluded scholarship on modernism.

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77 Ingot, *Figurative Sculpture*, 66–70; Bumps, "Rope Environments," 37.

78 Mark Allen Svede and Viktoras Liutkus suggest the flexibility afforded by the medium in Latvia and Lithuania in chapters two and four of *Art of the Baltics: The Struggle for Freedom of Expression under the Soviets, 1945–1991*, ed. Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press and the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 2002).