



EN

# Tapta

## Espaces souples

With

**Greet Billet**

**Hana Miletić**

**Richard Venlet**

18 05 13 08 2023

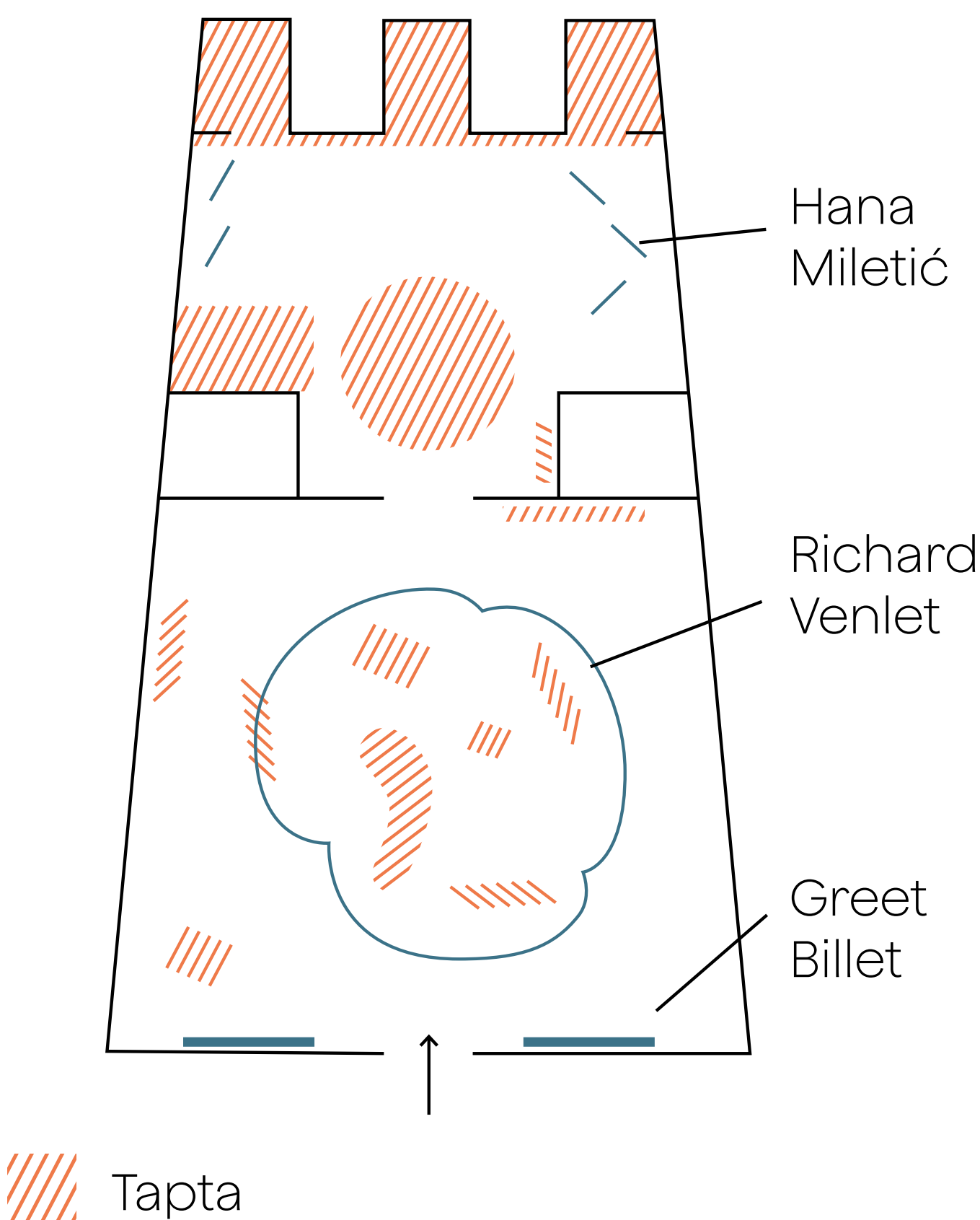
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# Introduction

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The Polish-Belgian artist Tapta (1926–1997) set out in the 1960s to radically redefine sculpture by using textiles and other flexible materials as sculptural elements. This exhibition centres on Tapta's attention to the tactility of materials, the suppleness of structures, individual and collective practice, and the interaction between artwork, space and viewer. New work by Greet Billet, Hana Miletić and Richard Venlet is also presented in relation to Tapta's historical pieces.

**Curator:** Liesbeth Decan



# Tapta

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Tapta (pseudonym of Maria Wierusz-Kowalski, born Maria Irena Boyé) was born in Poland in 1926 and came to Belgium as a political refugee with her husband, after taking part in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. She studied fine art and weaving at the National School for Advanced Visual Arts La Cambre, Brussels, graduating in 1949. Shortly afterwards, the couple moved to the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), where they lived from 1950 to 1960. After returning to Belgium, Tapta swiftly established herself as one of the most important members of a new generation of artists, who sought to rethink sculpture by introducing textiles and other flexible materials as sculptural elements. In doing so, she simultaneously took textile art beyond the categories of ornament and craft. She had her first solo exhibition in 1966 at the Galerie Les Métiers in Brussels, after which her work was shown in major exhibitions in Belgium and abroad, including the 4<sup>th</sup> International Biennale of Tapestry in 1969 in Lausanne. This exhibition, where her work was displayed alongside those of Magdalena Abakanowicz, Jagoda Buić, Elsi Giauque and Sheila Hicks, encouraged her to continue along the path of unconventional experimentation with textiles.

## **Flexible sculptures**

The exhibition focuses on Tapta's signature works from the 1970s, in which she steadily distanced herself from traditional weaving through experimental techniques such as twisting her woven pieces and particularly the use of ropes, which she knotted and joined together.

Her works were becoming increasingly three-dimensional, more 'sculptural'. ***La Chute de noeuds (1970)***, for example, can be hung on a wall but functions equally well when placed freely in space. The knots create a relief and the gaps between the ropes create an interweaving between the artwork and the space around it. This is even more visible in the ***mobile (1972)***, which Tapta created as a gift for friends who had just had a child. Here, as in the ***hanging untitled work*** from the same period, the use of sisal stands out, for which Tapta possibly drew inspiration from work by colleagues like Abakanowicz that she saw in Lausanne, but also from her stay in Africa in the 1950s.

Fully three-dimensional are the two ***Cocons (n°1 and n°2, both from 1973)***, which are shown together possibly for the first time in this exhibition. The spiral carpet under the sculptures replaces the classical plinth and invites the viewer to walk around the artwork and look at it from all sides. The gigantic, enlarged cocoons testify to an organic, at once soft and powerful, feminine visual language, which we can experience not only visually but also tactually and physically.

The interaction that Tapta pursued between artwork, space and viewer is also found in ***Horizon flexible (1977)***. These columns wound with coloured wool and attached to each other by the woolen threads, function both as autonomous sculptures and as room dividers, which can change shape depending on the use and space.

In the 1960s-70s, Tapta also created garments, such as ***scarves***, and in the late 1970s she covered two ***Bertoia chairs*** with cords at the request of Brussels architect Simone Guillissen-Hoa. This 'applied art' is,



in a way, the ultimate realisation of the tactile, bodily experience of art she was aiming for.

### **Scale models**

Her involvement of the viewer is also seen in her neoprene works, which she began to make in the late 1980s and which marked a radical turn in her use of materials. Large black surfaces connected by metal bars and bolts form open structures, which the viewer has to walk through or past. Elsewhere, the elements of the sculpture are connected by hinges, allowing their shape to be changed. The exhibition features several dozen small models in neoprene, which the artist used to prepare her monumental works. Also on display are two neoprene sculptures, **Untitled (1994)** and *Impatiente (1995)*, whose parts are attached to each other with hinges that allow them to change shape.

### **Reconstruction project**

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

The reconstruction studio also refers to Tapta's teaching. Tapta's appointment as a teacher at the National Higher Institute for Visual Arts of La Cambre was just as important as her artistic practice. She headed the textile workshop there from 1976 to 1990, renaming it 'Flexible Sculpture'. Rather than instructing her students in a particular technique, she prioritized the development of an open and critical mind. Her students included Ann Veronica Janssens, Monica Droste and Marie-Jo Lafontaine.



Tapta during the installation of *Formes pour un espace souple* (1974) at Palais des Beaux-Arts (now Bozar) in Brussels, 1975, black-and-white photo (Tapta Archive, Maurice Verbaet, Antwerp)



Tapta died unexpectedly in 1997, just as her native Poland was discovering her work at a major solo exhibition at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, and her monumental sculpture *Esprit Ouvert* (1997) near Brussels North Station had just been inaugurated. Introduction \_\_\_\_\_



Shezad Dawood, *Night in the Garden of Love*, 2023. Performance rehearsal, Choreographer and Dancer: Wan-Lun Yu. Costume: Ahluwalia. Image: Miranda Sharp. Courtesy UBIK Productions

# Greet Billet

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Greet Billet (b. 1973, Leuven, Belgium) focuses her practice on the representation of light through temporary in situ installations, in which rule-based systems play a crucial role. The translation of light into an analogue or a digital context is also an important aspect within her oeuvre. By combining different media (mirrors, projections, Plexiglas, transparent film and others), Billet explores the representation and registration of light in its essence.

Inspired by some of the parallels she discovered between her and Tapta's practice – such as working in situ, the use of mirrors, an interest in light and soft, flexible materials – Greet Billet has created a new work for this exhibition using as its original starting point an installation Tapta made in 1996 at Galerie Etienne Tilman in Brussels. This consisted of two neoprene sculptures, leaning against the wall; a projected triangle; a wall-mounted black square formed by two rectangular wooden panels; and a water basin, in which the entire installation was mirrored. With two large mirror works, on either side of the entrance to the expo, titled *Réfléchir (à) Tapta (2023)*, Billet refers on the one hand to the figure of the triangle, which Tapta integrated into many neoprene installations of the 1990s, and on the other to Tapta's use of mirrors and especially mirrored water surfaces as in the installation at Galerie Tilman or the public sculpture *Esprit Ouvert* in Brussels. Like Tapta's water surfaces, Billet's triangles also reflect the exhibition installation, merging artwork and surroundings.



# Richard Venlet \_\_\_\_\_

In his artistic practice, Richard Venlet (b. 1964, Hamilton, Australia) combines sculpture, art historical research, exhibition design and architecture. He turns spaces – usually exhibition spaces – into specific ‘environments’ that make us look at the space, and the objects in it, in a different way, by adding walls or floors in precisely chosen materials (opaque, transparent or reflective) often with gaps and see-throughs.

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

The involvement of the viewer forms the connection between Venlet and Tapta, whose early textile works as well as later monumental rubber and metal sculptures focused on the bodily experience of the viewer. For this exhibition, Venlet designs a transparent, flexible structure, titled ***Salon II (2023)***, that subtly guides visitors through the space and around Tapta’s works, intensifying their perception of the artist’s forms and materials.

# Hana Miletić

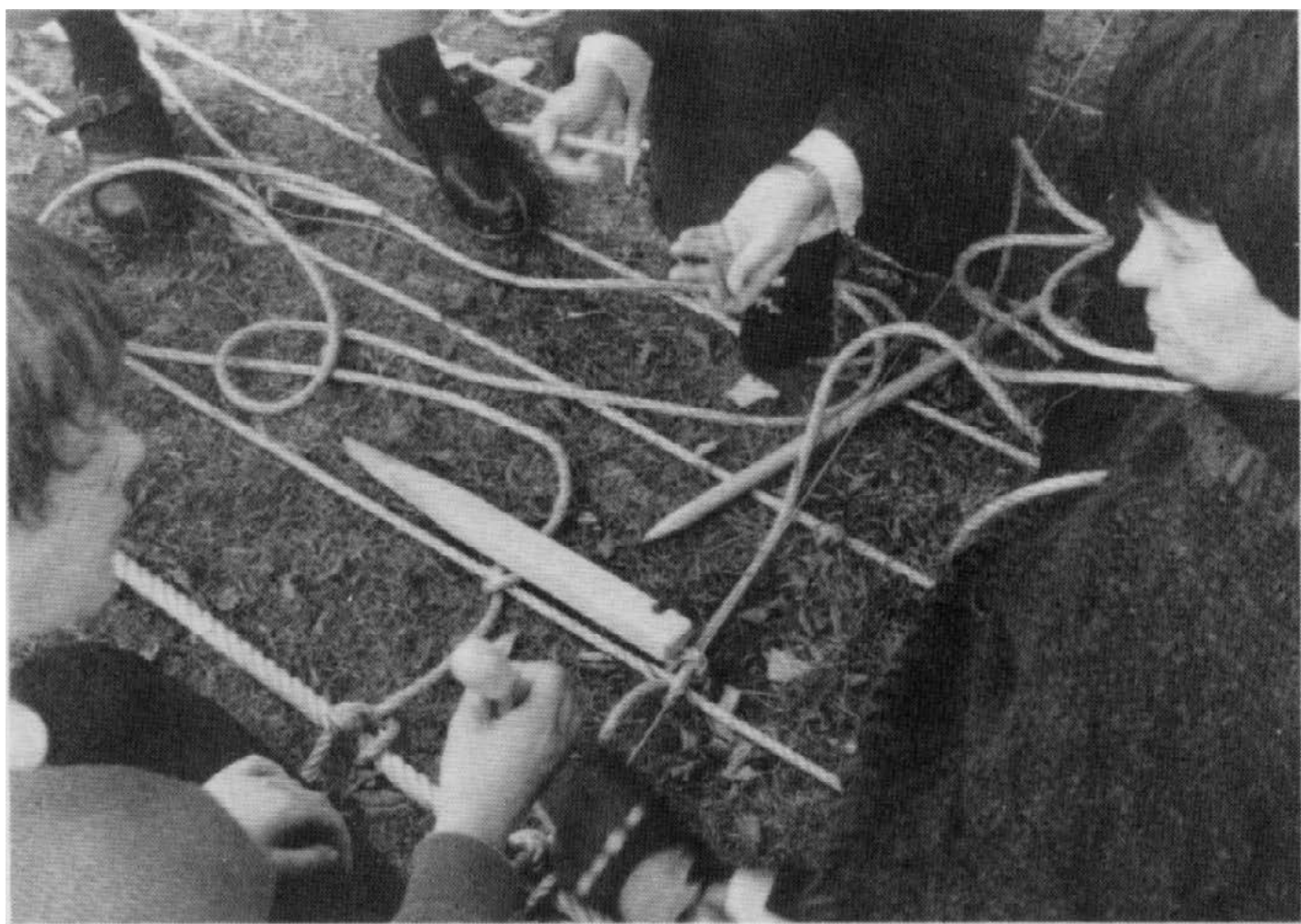
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In her practice, Hana Miletić (b. 1982, Zagreb, Croatia) complicates the relationship between representation and reproduction by making connections between photography and weaving. The artist models her woven textiles on photographs that document acts of 'care and repair' in public spaces. She uses the weaving process – which requires a lot of time and dedication – to counter certain economic and social conditions, such as acceleration, standardization and transparency. In addition, the slow and caring labour of weaving allows her to create new connections between working, thinking and feeling. In doing so, she clearly connects with the methodology of Tapta, who arrived at 'supple sculptures' through the manipulation of materials, which, could not only be looked at but also touched and experienced more physically.

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

Referencing this, Miletić organizes, together with some members of Espace Fxmme, a group of women and non-binary people from

the socio-artistic organization Globe Aroma, felt workshops for and with exhibition staff and visitors. The felt workshops are hands-on, guiding audience participants in wet felting, a craft technique that revalues gendered cultural practices. They are the continuation of *txt, Is Not Written Plain* (2017), the first felt work Miletić created with a group of female members of Globe Aroma, which was shown to the public during Miletić's solo exhibition at WIELS in 2018. The fact that the *Felt workshops* will continue as part of this exhibition underlines the ongoing focus at WIELS on collective authorship and emancipatory co-creation.







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

## **PARTNERS**

**This exhibition is realised in collaboration with the Intermedia Research Unit of LUCA School of Arts, Brussels**

**Generously sponsored by Maurice Verbaet**

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# EVENTS

## *Felt workshops*

Accompanied by Hafiza Azimi en Shilemeza Prins (Espace Fxmme, Globe Aroma) and Hana Miletić  
Sat. 20.05 & 01.07, 14:00-16:30

## Look Who's Talking: Virginie Mamet (FR)

Sun. 04.06, 15:00 & 09.07, 16:00

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

Sat. 24.06, 14:00

## Lecture by Liesbeth Decan (EN)

Thu. 29.06, 19:00

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

Fri. 02.06, 19:00

More events & registrations:

[WIELS.ORG](https://www.wiels.org)

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Image credit: Tapta, Untitled (mobile) (detail), 1973, wool, sisal, mixed fibres, ø 62 cm (Private Collection) © photo: Rein De Wilde.

