

Renate Wiehager: *Isabelle Waldberg (1911–1990). Giving Form to the Impulses of Life*, in: **text booklet “In Her Hands. Women Sculptors of Surrealism”**, Bucerius Kunst Forum, Hamburg (Feb. 21. to June 1, 2025), with translations of the original texts from the exhibition catalogue “In Her Hands. Bilderhauerinnen des Surrealismus”, ed. by Katharina Neuburger and Renate Wiehager, Hirmer Verlag, München 2025. This exhibition catalogue is published in German. ISBN 978-3-7774-4494-9. Translation from German by Everett Forrest Mason. German p. 118–133. English p. 30–35.

Isabelle Waldberg

Giving Form to the Impulses of Life

Renate Wiehager

“Sculpture has its inner necessity. I want it to be absolutely dense from its core to its surface. [...] People have often asked me why I don’t make something beautiful. First of all, I don’t want to do what they ask me. Secondly, I don’t know what is beautiful. Is it something pleasant, something round, something polished, something that shines? Beautiful perhaps, but for whom?”¹ (Isabelle Waldberg, 1988)

“It is better to take the risk of a whimsical sculpture, to risk failure, than to have things that are too well made, or simply ‘made.’ We are not here to please others.”² (Isabelle Waldberg, 1962)

The sculptor Isabelle Waldberg, whose oeuvre as a whole awaits rediscovery, was closely connected both as an artist and an intellectual with the milieu and leading figures of surrealism in Paris before and after the Second World War and during her years in exile in New York from 1942 to 1945. Her place in this artistic and literary network, along with her initiatives and texts for key publications of the time, testifies to her importance as a theorist, author, and, later in life, professor at the École des Beaux-Arts. Even before the war, she was closely associated with the circle around the philosopher Georges Bataille, which split off from the group around André Breton in the early 1930s. In New York, she was in close contact with Marcel Duchamp, of whom she created some of her most intimate sculptural portraits during the years 1958 until 1978. She was married to Patrick Waldberg until 1959 and was close friends with Robert Lebel for decades—writers who laid the theoretical and art-historical framework for French

¹ Quoted in *Isabelle Waldberg: Sculpteur*, Nicole Vatinel (ed.), exh. cat., Maison de la culture et des loisirs de Gauchy 1988, 5.

² Quoted in Luce Hoctin, “Conversation dans l’atelier Isabelle Waldberg,” in *L’Œil*, 91–92 (July/August 1962), 54–59, 76f, here 58.

surrealism. Immediately after the Second World War, in 1947, she was also one of the authors involved in the *Da Costa encyclopédique*, responsible not only for initiating the project and helping to name it, but also for numerous textual entries therein.³ The elaboration of her sculptural work from 1960 onwards positioned her at the center of French sculpture. Beginning in 1973, she was also a key figure through her teaching at the École des Beaux-Arts where, after at first taking over studio classes, she was appointed to a professorship in 1975.

Literature and Destiny

In order to approach Isabelle Waldberg's vital, allusive, and often physical work, and at the same time form an idea of the artist's intellectual personality, two exemplary works are examined here. They could not be more in contrast. Indeed, it is as though we were encountering two different personalities. Four decades of extensive artistic production lie between the works. The turbulent period of the surrealists' exile in New York from 1942 to 1945 to life in Paris in the 1980s separate the airy, elegant early "Construction" *La prise de la Bastille / The Storming of the Bastille* from the late bronze sculpture *Two in One*. *La prise da la Bastille* is one of around 40 known examples of work group the artist referred to as *Constructions*,⁴ the first of which were first created in New York and then in Paris after 1946. On a delicate wooden base, their curved beech sticks rise upwards, delicately held together by thin cords and glue. What was the artistic and cultural environment of these sculptures, which were highly unusual for the visual language of surrealism? Waldberg, who came to New York in the summer of 1942 with her husband Patrick and their son Michel as part of the exile movement from Europe, soon found herself part of an inspiring circle of leading figures from the worlds of art, literature, sociology, and ethnology. The contacts she initiated and cultivated range from Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Leonora Carrington, Roberto Matta, Robert and Nina Lebel, and David Hare to Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose lectures on ethnology she attended at Columbia University. Many of this network's meetings took place at 18 East 57th Street, in either the Waldberg's or the Lebel's apartments. That Waldberg was able to engage in this exchange so productively from her side is due largely to her early,

³ Tom Lamberty and Ronald Voullié have emphasized Waldberg's involvement in *Le Da Costa Encyclopédique* and discuss her collaboration with Robert Lebel on the project from 1947 to 1949. Cf. *Le Da Costa Encyclopédique/Die Da Costa Enzyklopädie*, Tom Lamberty and Ronald Voullié (eds.), Berlin 2008, 129. Waldberg's contributions to *Da Costa* can be found in *ibid.*, 9 ("Eclat," note on 63), 23 ("Encore"), 77 ("Armure"), 83 ("Isidore"), 86 ("Mettre"), 92f. ("Sinuositis"), and 105–108 ("Flore"). Waldberg, along with Robert Lebel and Patrick Waldberg, was the initiator, editor, and "inventor" of the project's name. Cf. *ibid.*, 133f.

⁴ Under the guidance of Corinne Waldberg, Isabelle Waldberg's daughter-in-law, the Isabelle Waldberg Estate has compiled a digital catalogue raisonnée that provides an overview of surviving works. This is presented with photographs of the works as well as reproductions of historical photographs and publications: <https://oam.io/artistes/isabelle-waldberg/catalogue> (accessed December 14, 2024).

intensive involvement with literature and science. Parallel to her studies in sculpture, which she began in Switzerland in 1933 and continued in Paris in 1936, she read the great works of literature and became a member of the Acéphale artists' circle founded by Georges Bataille, which also included the writer and ethnologist Michel Leiris. Though a larger group around Bataille met for weekly sociology lectures and discussions, only a small circle, to which Waldberg belonged, could join the ritual secret society of Bataille. She attended lectures by Marcel Mauss and Paul Rivet at the University of Paris and read the ethnographic and sociological writings of Émile Durkheim.⁵

This is the background for the joint trips to New England she made with the Lebel in 1943. In museums there, they saw early Navajo and Inuit masks and sculptures and, in the Peabody Museum in Salem, Massachusetts,⁶ nautical charts made from knotted sticks by natives of the Marshall Islands. Waldberg researched the art and culture of the Inuit and Hopi and began to compile her own collection of ritual objects.

The drawings of various ethnological exhibits created by Waldberg together with Robert Lebel are a wonderful testimony to this enthusiasm for objects that could artistically bring together natural magic and spirituality. In the museums they visited together, however, it was above all the nautical charts made of beech sticks bound together with shells and fibers that inspired Waldberg in the conception of her airy sculptures during her New York years. The artifacts are evidence of the expeditions made by the indigenous population of the Marshall Islands, a group of islands in the western Pacific between Hawaii and Australia. The arrangement of the sticks indicates the large currents and wave movements of the sea, while the coconut fibers thread between them represent smaller wave patterns. The charts enabled sailors to identify navigable passages as well as dangerous currents.

For her *Constructions*, Waldberg developed a richly associative vocabulary of linear expressive forms in the space of just ten years: from austere, angular figurations with anthropomorphic resonances and historical references to complexly interwoven, vegetal works whose linear energies seem to strive upward into space. The subtitle of a *Construction* known as *Land's End?*, which Waldberg chose for the background of a

⁵ On Isabelle Waldberg's time in New York, cf. Nicoleta Tsagkari, "Isabelle Waldberg (1911–1990): Une trajectoire émancipée," in *Source(s)* 8/9, 2016, 122–125; Robert Lebel, "Isabelle Waldberg à l'entrée ou à la sortie de son palais de mémoire," in *Le point d'être*, no. 3–4, Paris 1971, 29–52, here 36; Camille Morando, "Isabelle Waldberg et 'l'entretien infini': Sa correspondance avec Patrick Waldberg," in *Les écrits d'artistes depuis 1940*, François Levallant (ed.), Abbaye d'Ardenne 2004, 109–120, here 111–116.

⁶ Cf. Camille Morando, "Isabelle Waldberg: Une liberté intranquille," in *Surréalisme au féminin?*, Alix Agret and Dominique Païni (eds.), Paris, 146–153, here 151; and Cécile Bargues, "Isabelle Waldberg," in "Archipel: Fonds de dotation Jean-Jacques Lebel," Cécile Bargues and Katell Jaffrès (eds.), Milan 2020, 256–269, here 258.

portrait photo from 1944, refers to maritime exploration and stands in the context of her graphic museum studies.

Already in New York, Waldberg's *Constructions* made their initial appearances within the classical exhibition context. In 1944, when her first solo exhibition opened at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery in New York, she was at the same time seeking out and helping to develop cooperative exhibition formats. In April of that year, for example, she worked on the *Lazy Hardware* project initiated by André Breton, for which Marcel Duchamp, with the participation of several exiled surrealists, designed a display window for Breton's text collection *Arcane 17* at Gotham Bookmart on East 57th Street. In November, Waldberg was again involved in a window display project at Brentano's Bookshop on Fifth Avenue. Once again, it is Duchamp who brought together in an artistic arrangement his own objects and works by the surrealist group. Further highlights of such interdisciplinary collaborations included the magazine *VVV*, published in New York over four issues and featured the studio photograph, and especially the *Exposition internationale du surréalisme* at the Galerie Maeght in Paris. In the context of this spectacular show, curated by Duchamp and Breton with an exhibition design by Frederick Kiesler, Waldberg's *Constructions* were shown in a dialogue with works by Maria Martins, Joan Miró, and Roberto Matta.⁷

Inspired by her sculptures, Waldberg's close friend in New York Robert Lebel writes poetic texts under the title *Masque à lame (Mask of Blades)* following the rhythm of seven of her *Constructions*, black and white illustrations of which form a second, independent focus of the book.⁸ Lebel took up the themes of inner turmoil and the fragility of human existence in free verse form in texts that speak of the dualities of security and threat, of erotic attraction and the impossibility of personal commitment, as well as of deception and truth. The horrors of the Second World War, its dream-like scenes and melancholy tonality, also played a poetic role in these linguistic images. Waldberg's *Constructions*, photographed with strong shadows, give a fitting response to Lebel's miniature dramas.⁹

Four decades later, in 1973, with Waldberg an esteemed sculptor in France and the first female professor of sculpture at the École des Beaux-Arts, leading personalities from the worlds of art, culture, and politics, such as Michel Butor, André Chastel, Roselyne

⁷ *La nue / The Nude, Premier du fil / First Thread, and Le grand picucule / The Great Woodpecker*, all ca. 1943/45, were the works exhibited by Waldberg.

⁸ *Masque à lame* was published in 1943 by Liberal Press/Editions Hémisphères, New York, via the poet Yvan Goll, who lived in exile in New York from 1939 to 1947.

⁹ On Isabelle Waldberg's *Constructions* from her New York years, cf. Jean Grapin, "Sous le signe de l'infini," in *Bulletin du comité Isabelle Waldberg 1–4*, Corinne and Céline Waldberg (eds.), Paris 2018–2021, 5–11; Maurice Benhamou, "Construction 1946/48 d'Isabelle Waldberg," in *Bulletin du Comité Isabelle Waldberg*, no. 2 (2019), 5–8.

Granet, Jean-Jacques Lévêque, and others, sought out discussions and exchanges with her. Her work is exhibited in leading galleries in France and her sculptures are featured in major exhibitions in major European museums. Her reputation and the appreciation of her oeuvre culminated in retrospectives at the Kunstmuseum Bern in 1981 and the Galerie Artcurial in Paris in 1984.¹⁰

The bronze *Two in One*, from 1984, is one of Waldberg's important late sculptures that reveal her intimate proximity to literature. The artist transformed into sculptural terms the existential confrontation between two people, creating a binary figure who appears frozen in an impulse to move. It can be read as an imminent fall, or as a shared effort made to pick up its 'dual' self again. The rear figure, wearing a shield-like cloak, embraces the figure in front, who is already sinking to the ground.

Emptiness and Space

In an interview in 1962, Waldberg formulated a central theme of her early New York series of *Constructions*:

"I started making objects. Objects, that was the surrealist term for sculptures. In reality, [my works] were constructions made of pliant beech rods, forms that delimited ideal volumes. The air circulating inside the objects, that was the most important thing for me at the time. I wanted to escape from matter. These objects were an expression of my desire for freedom. [...] It also suited the atmosphere of America for me and, above all, an expression of complete freedom. Nothing had ensured a lifespan back then. It wasn't about making a career out of these things. They were just things that came along."¹¹

Personally, she went through phases of great loneliness during her first two years in New York, as she reported in her letters to her husband, who was working at the time for the U.S. Office of War Information in Algeria, Ireland, and London.¹² On the other hand, her paths through the streets of the metropolis initiated a new perception of dynamics, emptiness and bodies, of lines and space:

"I have always been impressed by anything that involved construction with a lot of empty space. But my change of material after my return to France probably also corresponded to my change of life. The atmosphere was no longer the

¹⁰ Hans Christoph von Tavel, "Isabelle Waldberg," in *Isabelle Waldberg: Skulpturen*, Bern 1981, 9–16; Dominique Le Buhan: "Le geste véridique d'Isabelle Waldberg," in *Isabelle Waldberg*, Paris, 1984.

¹¹ Quoted in Hochtin 1962, 55.

¹² Cf. *Isabelle Waldberg et Patrick Waldberg: Correspondance 1940–1949: Un amour acéphale*, Michel Waldberg (ed.) Paris 1992; and *Waldberg/Waldberg 2018–2021*.

same. Parisian architecture is not as airy as New York architecture, which feels very tenuous, very precarious. European architecture is firmly anchored. When you come back here, the old culture influences you again. There is no past in the USA, not at all. You live in a country where there is only modernity. You live in a country that was created in just 50 years. That is a very moving phenomenon.”¹³

After the extremely delicate and fragile *Constructions* made of beech branches, in Paris Waldberg began experimenting with iron as a material, which enabled more stable connections and forms that could extend more actively into space. This can be seen and, moreover, when one is able to circumambulate the figure in real space, felt very clearly in this *Construction* from 1943–48. Held only by a connecting element in its plinth, a ladder-like structure soars upwards, from which abstract extremities at the base suggest a dancer-like attempt to balance themselves. One could see in this work a gracefully tilted head, a circling arm movement, a spacious gesture. The airy, abstract, energetic lineament, with a little help from the viewer’s imagination, create figures of a moving elegance and serenity.

Viewing the sculpture *Le carcan / The Constraint*, even without knowledge of its title, can induce a quiet fright, a restlessness, a feeling of distress. Although small in size, the compactness of its corpus possesses something monumental. A solid, metal wall is built up around a flat inner body, from which extremities attempt to free themselves. The title *Le carcan* allows us to identify the upper horizontal form as a restraining element attempting to confine something within itself. The spatial compactness and closed nature of the form evokes a vacuum-like, negative emptiness, a sense that is only hinted at when the work is seen only from its front.

Mausolée / Mausoleum, a work Waldberg realized in bronze in 1978, offers an enclosure for the immaterial, for memory and eternity, commemoration, history, a dialectic zone of past and timelessness. As a real, physical place, the mausoleum counters decay in a double sense: the clinging to art and architecture even in death, and the creation of a space set against forgetting. Waldberg undermines the idea of an enduring place for the dead by depicting her *Mausoleum* as a tenuous layering of fragments that are barely supported by an open base that itself contains an abstract body.

Asked by Luce Hoctin in 1962 what she thought of the new movements in cybernetic sculpture, Waldberg replied:

“There is the question of the human, which always comes first: by which I mean the spiritual. Sculpture is not primarily a matter of technique or material, but

¹³ Quoted in Hoctin 1962, 56

above all of spirit and thought. [...] The primordial thing is the human, the spiritual. But one can be restricted or influenced by the material. You are at your freest when there is nothing prefabricated. Then you really do what you want to do.”¹⁴

To begin with nothing, to follow the creative energy back to the first impulses of invention and intimate observation—that, if anything, is Isabelle Waldberg’s credo, as she formulated it in a theoretical text from 1953:

“As far as I am concerned, I want to reduce observation to zero, because otherwise, on the level of sculpture, one will be no better than Frémiet with his gilded *Joan of Arc*. The only sculpture worth attempting would only emerge from invention, discarding all structures, all balances, all proportions, and all harmonies. The production of public monuments would be left to entrepreneurs in whose service the ‘true’ sculptors already find themselves. Sculpture, as I envision it, would be devoted exclusively to the creation of ‘intimate’ (as opposed to public) objects that are ephemeral in duration and manifestly useless. This is probably why [in the eyes of some, author’s note] I am not a ‘serious’ sculptor.”¹⁵

Construction and Architecture

In conversations and interviews, Waldberg repeatedly commented on the significance of architecture and constructed spaces to her work. She was strictly opposed to the forms and traditions of architectural sculpture, from façade decoration to caryatids and portal figures, which for centuries was among the central tasks and possibilities of sculpture. Her stance here is clear:

“I am against sculptures being integrated into architecture. I have a passion for architecture. It is one of the things that most touches me. But the collaboration between architects and sculptors, making a sculpture *expressly* for architecture, that does not interest me. I am against decorative art.”¹⁶

On the other hand, she considers pioneering architecture of the modern era, such as Le Corbusier’s Philips Pavilion for the Exposition universelle de Bruxelles in 1958 or his iconic church Notre-Dame du Haut, often referred to by its location, Ronchamp, in the French Vosges mountains, to be sculptural events in their own right. According to Waldberg, they are “symbols for other things.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Quoted in Hoctin 1962, 58, 77.

¹⁵ Isabelle Waldberg, “En Suisse,” in *Premier bilan de l’art actuel: 1937–1953*, Paris 1953, 344.

¹⁶ Quoted in Hoctin 1962, 58.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 59.

To what extent can her *Constructions* from the New York years be attributed to have architectural qualities? In them, the line plays a fundamentally spatial and form-giving role; they can depict spatial organization as much as architectural volumes. Lines delimit zones and volumes and, thus, define space. Lines guide movement in space. *Constructions* of lines convey a sense of aesthetic levity by reducing the essentials of a space or structure to its minimum without losing the impression of complexity. And lastly, though essentially, as something that was already important to Waldberg in how she arranged the *Constructions* in her New York studio, linear elements in space, through the effects of light and shadow, create an imaginary *spatial* volume. In her work after 1950, Isabelle Waldberg worked in a variety of ways with three-dimensional constructions—dwellings, shelters, cave-like bodies—possessed of spaces of preservation or display. These include a group of fragile, often brittle architectures, whose designation as “*Palais*” stands in clear contrast to their simplicity—miniature buildings, as if made by the hands of children. This theme appeared as early as 1947 with a *Construction* entitled *Palais*, now in the collection of the Centre national des arts plastiques.¹⁸

Le palais rose / The Pink Palace, a sculpture made of pink patinated plaster whose title presumably refers to Guillaume Apollinaire’s poem *Palais*, dates from 1963. The poem combines surrealist imagery with dreamy and decadent motifs: thoughts wandering through an imaginary building, the *palais de Rosemonde*. This palace is decorated with lush roses reminiscent of the patina of human skin.

On his mother’s intimate connection with literature, Michel Waldberg wrote that

“[Her] work defies the alternative ‘figurative/non-figurative,’ it resists any attempt at categorization, it refuses and evades in a certain sense, confronting the lover with a whole system of defence mechanisms, and although in its ambiguity it remains a sculptor’s thing and firmly anchored in reality, the themes that run through it and establish its authenticity are extremely abstract - even literary. That she always preferred the company of writers to that of artists is obvious to anyone who knew her. And although she paid attention to all art without discrimination or prejudice, and her sure eye never tired of seeing the numerous objects of her aesthetic preferences, she often drew from literature the subtle and complex material from which her imagination was nourished.”¹⁹

In her late work, one repeatedly encounters themes, forms, and motifs that evoke associations with the sacred: archetypal, dwelling-like forms or towering, stele-shaped sculptures reminiscent of a tabernacle, or abstract architectures that seem dedicated

¹⁸ On the significance of architecture for Waldberg’s work, cf. Tsagkari 2016, 225f.

¹⁹ Michel Waldberg, *Isabelle Waldberg*, Paris 1992, 35.

to the memory of the deceased or to past moments in history. The sculpture *Glyptothèque*, from 1967, brings these different aspects together. Forms that seemingly burst forth rest on a fragile, roofed pedestal, with one of the elements protruding like a vulnerable body part from the dwelling. A collection of ancient sculptures and sculptures made of stone is known as a *glyptothek*, a German coinage drawing from the Greek term for sculpture, “*glypton*.” Although the title of Waldberg’s sculpture does not seem to have any direct connection to a specific work of French poetry and literature, it is obvious that the artist is using the term metaphorically. We see a fragile collection of frozen memories and emotions, artistic formulations expressing the passage of time.

Small-scale, architectonic forms make up an independent group of works, each with a base, room area, and wall and roof elements, in which strange creatures seem to have found hiding places. A text by the artist corresponds to the open spectrum of interpretation of these works:

“An open, airy architecture in which the sole occupant can look out on three sides. It is protected, but participates in everything that surrounds it, both internally and externally. It is the matrix of the labyrinth - embrasures and walls (the emptiness and the fullness) are created from it - and one of the paths that lead outside (into the foreign). The roof, which despite its apparent gravity represents a danger, must be removable.”²⁰

The title of the 1970 sculpture *Delescluze descend vers le château d’eau / Delescluze Descends to the Château d’Eau*, one of Waldberg’s important late works, refers to a significant moment in French history and at the same time to a poem by André Breton. *Les États généraux*, written in 1943 and published the following year in *VVV*, is a multi-layered text that deals with themes such as the renewal of poetry, political upheaval, and spiritual transformation. The title alludes to the French Estates General, a symbol of political assembly and revolution. Breton uses this metaphor to depict the idea of comprehensive change in art and society.

The title of Waldberg’s sculpture refers to Louis Charles Delescluze, a French journalist and prominent figure of the Paris Commune, the revolutionary movement of the French working class that briefly came to power in the spring of 1871, in the midst of the turmoil of the Franco-Prussian War. Delescluze sacrificed his life on the barricades in the streets of Paris during the Commune’s struggle. This symbolic scene is poetically paraphrased in the title of Waldberg’s sculpture, in reference to the location in Paris where he was shot to death.

²⁰ Quoted in Michel Waldberg 1992, 49.

Antique and Avant-garde

No less significant than the impulses from literature contained in Waldberg's sculptural work—although, here too, not always immediately apparent—are her references to great examples of Western sculpture as well as, albeit more restrainedly, to modernism. As she said,

“There are some sculptors that I really like. There is room for many things at the moment, and very different things. Our time seems to me to be particularly interesting. As soon as Brancusism and the possibilities of pure form are exhausted, you can do anything. And so at the same time you have Étienne Martin, Ipoustéguy, Müller, César, Penalba, Delahaye, Hiquily, Stahly, etc.”²¹

The latter names are contemporaries and, in some cases, friends from Waldberg's Parisian circle. When asked how she felt about new experiments in the field of sculpture, she referred far back to art historical greats: “Personally, I find myself so classical in comparison to it [sculpture made from found materials]. I feel closer to Michelangelo or Rodin.”²²

Elsewhere in the 1962 Hoctin interview, Waldberg says, “I love, for example, the Egyptian sculptures, which were made with so much love, such a love for the thing (the *res*). I love carnal sculpture.” And, asked about Bernini: “I love the delirium of the flesh, the movement.”²³

In his monographic text on his mother's work, Michel Waldberg recalled their frequent visits to the Egyptian section of the Louvre. There, she would admire the hippopotami made of blue ceramic, under whose seemingly unctuous skin the animal's strong bone structure could be read. This expresses a dialectic that runs through Waldberg's entire oeuvre after 1950: the softness of skin against the hardness of a bone structure; a concealed framework against the tactile sensitivity of the surface; a withdrawal from and an opening up to the world.²⁴

Although such deep-rooted references to art history can be recognized in Waldberg's work, there can be no doubt that she also followed contemporary developments in sculpture and object-based art during her training in Switzerland beginning in the late 1920s and then, from 1936 onward, in Paris. While still in Zurich, she became acquainted with the work of important figures of the avant-garde such as László Moholy-Nagy, Max Bill, and Piet Mondrian at the city's Kunsthaus. In 1929, she visited her first survey exhibition of abstract and surrealist painting and sculpture there, where

²¹ Quoted in Hoctin 1962, 56.

²² *Ibid.*, 56.

²³ *Ibid.*, 76f.

²⁴ Michel Waldberg 1992, 13.

she also saw works by Alberto Giacometti, whom she would later meet in person in Paris sometime after 1936. She would go on to repeatedly exhibit the influence of his early work, both on her New York *Constructions*, and in works like her sculpture *Palais*, which references his groundbreaking linear-spatial sculpture *Le palais à quatre heures du matin*.

Waldberg analyzed the history of sculpture—just as she would later analyze major works of painting. Around 1980, she devoted months to the pictorial analysis of one of the French masterpieces of the 19th century and one of the most monumental works of history painting: Théodore Géricault’s painting *Le radeau de la Méduse*. This painting was the work of art “closer than all others” to her, as Hans Christoph von Tavel put it.²⁵ Waldberg analyzes the dramaturgy of the painting’s dynamic triangular composition in numerous drawings and gouaches as well as with a plaster relief and a copper plate, which she summarizes in the limited-edition publication *Le radeau de la Méduse*.²⁶

Géricault’s painting, in the guise of a painterly depiction of a tragic event of his time, was also a thinly veiled call to arms against political despotism and the criminal disregard for human dignity. For Waldberg, this was material that touched her deeply, both as an artist and as a person. The depiction of people “piled up” on a raft, as it were, attempting to rise up with a last, kinetic surge of energy, only to then fall down and ultimately fall into the sea, may also have been the impulse behind her abstract sculpture *La vague / The Wave*. But the expressive, existential imagery of Auguste Rodin may also have played a role here. In any case, Waldberg never holds fast to any single formal or material language—we can see throughout her work repeated echoes of other French modernist sculptors such as Henri Laurens or Jean Arp. The compact figures and free forms of the latter artist can be read in Waldberg’s sculpture *L’oiseau-pilote / The Pilot Bird* from 1973, while Rodin’s legacy is strongly resonant in later works such as *Cavalier zen / Zen Rider* from 1979 or *La draisienne / The Draisienne* from 1980.

Portraits and Self-Portraits

A number of authors since 1960, such as René de Solier, Robert Lebel, and Hans Christoph von Tavel, have emphasized Waldberg’s importance as a portrait artist.²⁷ An overview of the artist’s digital catalogue raisonné or a perusal of Michel Waldberg’s

²⁵ Tavel 1981, 15.

²⁶ Isabelle Waldberg: *Le radeau de la Méduse*, Paris, Edition AREA. Italian quarto, 19 x 28 cm, pages in green publisher’s folder and linen slipcase with an original copperplate engraving on the front cover, 24 pages. The original edition was printed in a run of 100 copies.

²⁷ René de Solier, *Waldberg*, Paris 1960.; Lebel 1971; Hans Christoph von Tavel, “Ein ’intimes Denkmal’ für Marcel Duchamp im Berner Kunstmuseum,” in *Von Angesicht zu Angesicht*, Florens Deuchler, Mechthild Flury-Lemberg and Karel Otavsky (eds.), Bern, 1983, 315–331.

comprehensive monograph²⁸ reveals around 30 works that take up the topos of the portrait in the broadest sense—from realistic head studies and semi-figurative formal complexes to abstract material studies that, in the spirit of Giacometti, seek to give form to the aura of a person, their immaterial presence. The originality of Waldberg’s approach therefore lies not in the quantity of works, but in the rich variety of method.

In addition to the portraits discussed below, it should also be mentioned here that the aspect of the self-portrait is also present in Waldberg’s oeuvre in a variety of ways, be they hidden, coded, or non-representational. There are various self-portraits or the *Portrait intérieur* (1963),²⁹ which exhibits softly modeled, abstract forms. There are small sculptures of erotic themes such as copulating couples, abstracted depictions of a vagina or graphical abstractions of a vulva, life-size molded body parts such as *Les genoux / The Knees* (1983) and *Mes mains ou, Femme aux mains de chair / My Hands or, Woman with Fleshy Hands* (1965) or double figures such as *Suivi de ... / Followed by ...*, which merge two abstracted bodies into a seemingly vegetal figure.³⁰ Authors such as Hans Christoph von Tavel go so far as to interpret Waldberg’s entire oeuvre as the sculptural realization of an “inner image.”³¹

As part of her academic training, however, Waldberg initially concentrated on classical portrait and body studies. But even with her move to New York and the work complex of linear *Constructions*, the theme does not lose its presence, insofar as some of the seemingly abstract line structures are reminiscent of heads or archetypal masks. The artist dedicated a separate group of works to portraying her friend Marcel Duchamp. The digital catalogue raisonné includes two realistic portrait heads, one in black patinated plaster and one in bronze, as well as an abstract portrait in plaster and bronze and finally the assemblage from 1958/78 with a bronze head. This latter work, *Portrait de Marcel Duchamp posé sur un échiquier avec des pions et deux sculptures / Portrait of Marcel Duchamp on a Chessboard with Pawns and Two Sculptures* is an unusual portrait of the man, which brings together several outstanding figures of 20th century art. Waldberg and Duchamp met in New York in 1942 through the circle of exiled artists. Duchamp regularly visited the young artist in her studio, they often went out to eat, and he introduced her to some of the most important figures in the art scene, such as André Breton and Peggy Guggenheim. After the war, many members of the former exile group met up again in Paris. Duchamp, who had decided to live in New York, left his Parisian studio in rue Larrey to his young artist friend, where Waldberg would live until her death in 1990.

²⁸ Michel Waldberg 1992.

²⁹ Cf. Waldberg M. 1992b, pp. 192, 221,

³⁰ For more details on the “autoportraits” of Isabelle Waldberg, cf. Nikoleta Tsagkari: *L'érotisme dans l'œuvre sculptée d'Isabelle Waldberg*, Strasbourg, 2013; Tsagkari 2016, 35.

³¹ Tavel 1981, 10.

In 1958, while visiting Paris, Duchamp came to Waldberg's studio several times to sit for portrait sessions. The resulting drawings would form the basis for the portrait head, an oval-shaped specimen lying on a chessboard that echoes famous early sculptures by Constantin Brâncuși. Duchamp was a passionate chess player, so Waldberg chose a chessboard as the basis, a Chinese lacquer work that she had acquired in a Paris shop. She found the chess pieces in a cupboard in Duchamp's studio in rue Larrey; the black pawn was made by Duchamp himself in 1918/19 during his time in Buenos Aires. The white queen resembles a piece from a chess set owned by Duchamp's close friend, the photography pioneer Man Ray. The small iron frame, which was used to dry negatives in the early days of photography, also comes from him. Around 1960, Waldberg was probably already working on the small bronze elements, which, with a shield in front of their implied body shape, act as guardian figures standing on a small plinth or protected in by a structure reminiscent of a drying rack. It was not until 1978, nearly a decade after Duchamp's death, that all these things would come together in the work—an epitaph that lays her close friend tenderly to rest.³²

Waldberg created both realistic and non-representational portraits of some of her friends, such as Robert Lebel, as well as of Patrick Waldberg and a person (Adrien Liegme) with the initials "A. L." There is also a wonderfully humorous "abstraction" of Duchamp's head, a fleshy, phallic, rising form with a chin that tapers into the shape of a pipe, macabre eye sockets, and a skull in the shape of an acorn. The portrait bust form, handed down from antiquity, which Waldberg used for the portrait of Duchamp, returns in the impressive portraits of her close literary friends Michel Fardoulis-Lagrange and Robert Lebel. While for Lebel the creative focus is on the sensual radiance of the face, with an emphasis on the eyes, nose, and mouth, Fardoulis-Lagrange is depicted more as an enraptured, introverted thinker.

Sculpture pour Michel, from 1965, which again takes up the motif of the guardian figures from the Duchamp assemblage, should be seen in the context of the abstract portraits. The motif of the shield, which protects or conceals the head, as well as serving to demarcate the body of the sculpture as a whole from the outside, is encountered several times in Waldberg's work.

The sculpture *La face visible*, from 1972 is an outstanding realization of the dialectic of outside and inside, the active relationship of the gaze to the refusal of sensual attention by the world. The torn-open eye in Robert Lebel's abstract portrait is both hungrily directed towards the outside world and a gateway to injury. The second eye and the mouth are concealed and blocked by shields.

The helmet-like head of *La Face visible* can be juxtaposed here with another

³² Cf. Tavel 1983.

“irrealistic,” as Waldberg would describe it,³³ portrait bust: *Le casque / The Helmet*, from 1978. The aspects discussed above, of enclosure, protection, but also a forced bounding-in or defense of, appear in a helmet-like form that both shields the head even as it encloses and crushes it with severity.

Finally, the 1959 sculpture of Adrien Liegme, *Portrait de A. L.* is a radical portrait in its constructive strangeness. The plaster version has only survived in the form of a photograph, while the bronze is privately owned. Here, Waldberg is basing her work on portraits and figures from Russian Constructivism, such as Naum Gabo’s *Head No. 2* (1916). Other portrait heads by Gabo, such as *Head of a Woman*, may have influenced Waldberg’s earlier head-like *Constructions*.

Body and Gesture

It has become clear in the preceding analyses that in Isabelle Waldberg’s work of the three decades after 1950 there are repeated links between the early work of the New York years and the later sculptures. For the following considerations, it may at first be surprising to look at a certain surviving major work from the group of *Constructions*, one from 1945 entitled *Le dernier rôdeur / The Last Drifter*.

Two strong beech sticks, rising vertically from the wooden base, form the “backbone” of the construction. Thinner, undulating, ascending beech twigs cling to this backbone. The soft, flowing energy is interrupted and made rhythmic by horizontal, fan-like connections of three to four beech sticks, each pointing out into space. In this way, a figure is built up with three different but interlocking energetic orientations: dominantly supporting, oscillating in space like sine waves, and an expressive, gestural reaching out. Katharina Neuburger points out elsewhere in this catalogue that male and female energies interplay here in a kind of ecstatic upward thrust.³⁴ After Waldberg returned to Paris from exile in New York in 1946, she continued the linear, airy, abstract *Constructions* of the New York period, but now in metal, and also began to work on a group of abstract sculptures with more figurative overtones.

What were earlier thinned-out, seemingly vegetal sculptures now gained in volume and extensive presence over the 1950s. A major work from around 1960 is *Agarien 1er*. One must walk around the sculpture to follow its flowing sequence of non-representational formal elements and aspects seemingly in movement, like a gesture of striding forth or the billowing skirts of a long cloak. The story of the biblical figure Hagar, *Agar* in French,

³³ Michel Waldberg, “Isabelle Waldberg: Avec et sans armure,” in Waldberg 1992, 13–44, here 15.

³⁴ Cf. the text by Katharina Neuburger in this volume.

is told in the Old Testament in the book of Genesis, chapters 16 and 21. She is the handmaid of the patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarah. She gives birth to a child for the couple and is expelled when they have a son of their own, Isaac. With God's help, Hagar survives her seemingly hopeless march through the desert. In French, in poetic contexts, the term "*Agarien*" is therefore used to describe the universal human experience of being lost, of searching for hope where there is none, or of longing for a safe place.

As much of Waldberg's work is inspired by themes, subjects and titles from literature and poetry, Isabelle's son, Michel Waldberg, suggests in his 1992 monograph that Alfred Jarry's poem *Le bain du roi / The King's Bath*, from 1895, which alludes to his famous play *Ubu roi*, first performed in 1896, may have been a further inspiration.³⁵ Jarry's play was immediately perceived as revolutionary in its caricaturing depiction of masculine power and its exaggeration of absurd stupidity and vulgarity, influencing later works of modern and absurdist theater as well as surrealism.

A short poetic text written by Waldberg herself suggests that the sculpture *Agarien 1er* could be read as a male figure:

"He advances in the fullness of his flesh, aggressively, smashing everything in front of him with his blade raised high. He is on the advance, cautious and leading at the same time. In reverse, full of attributes that weigh him down. He clings to his seat, stretches out his back and attacks from the front. Important, the first of his dynasty."³⁶

Another contextual connection to be made with the *Agarien 1er* is obvious if one recalls Waldberg's early, intensive ethnological studies: the cross-cultural figure of the *Glouton*. Waldberg wrote in one of her notes,

"Among the North American tribes, in most of their myths and ritual tales, there is a peculiar figure: '*le glouton*,' the glutton. He is still poorly defined. He appears in the most solemn and serious ceremonies, he behaves contrarily. He is the clown, a comic figure par excellence, [...] intemperance par excellence."³⁷

Michel Waldberg will later write:

"Her sculptures are neither clearly figurative nor clearly abstract; they are, as she herself says, 'irrealistic,' an interplay of observation—the most nuanced observation—and imagination, dedicated to a constant renewal of forms and recreation of the real. Isabelle Waldberg works dialectically, playing with

³⁵ Michel Waldberg 1992, 35. The word "*Agarien*," however, does not appear in the poem.

³⁶ Quoted in Michel Waldberg 1992, 48.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

emptiness and fullness, distance and closeness, lightness and heaviness, combining the unexpected of the never-before-seen with the experience of sensual evidence.”³⁸

Dimensions of Time

The theme of time permeated Isabelle Waldberg’s work for four decades. Of the works discussed so far, this applies in a perceptual-aesthetic sense to the *Constructions* group of works. They reveal themselves in time through the dynamic interaction of the lines within the figuration, the energetic exchange with the surrounding space, and in the multiplicity of views that can be experienced when walking around the structure. In other works, the quality of the temporal is approached through metaphorical condensations or literary, historical, or motivic associations: *La nature morte*, from 1974, is an art historical symbol of time passing, of decay. The sculpture *Suivi de ...* addresses aspects of metamorphosis, in that one of its figures is absorbed into the other and both lose their identity as individuals. Waldberg’s palaces disintegrate and merge into historical upheavals, as in *Mausolée* or *Glyptothèque*. They stand before us as archetypes of the abode, as the quintessence of memory and cult sites of death.³⁹ In 1965 Waldberg dedicated a large plaster sculpture to the phenomenon of time, even in its title: *Le grand temps / Big Time*. She writes:

“The clock has a square dial, viewed from the front. The end of the timepiece rests on the container of time, which has the shape of a shallow bowl. Time flows from bottom to top and solidifies in various forms: accumulations, trenches, and deposits down to the bottom. On the left, a witness to the outflow leans over the bowl. The large surface on the right delimits the space in which the pendulum swings. Behind this surface, in a new and secret space, the grape of past time is distilled without the witness being able to see it, without the pendulum, the bowl and the flow of present time noticing it.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid., 11.

³⁹ Cf. Dominique Le Buhan, “Ainsi d’Isabelle Waldberg,” in *Waldberg: Sculptures*, Paris, 1991, 7–18, here 15f.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Michel Waldberg 1992, 49.