

Persons Projects

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Sculpting With Images. On the Early Photomontages of Zofia Kulik

In the early 1990s, at the very beginning of my career as an art writer, I visited Lodz, Poland twice, first in 1992 and then in 1993 for the freewheeling and inspirational *Construction in Process* exhibition. These visits were cathartic and through them I began to learn something about Polish art, making a beeline to Muzeum Sztuki to familiarize myself with the excellent work of Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro (both of whom remain sorely underknown in the U.S.), to read about Polish Constructivism and Strzemiński's theory of Unism, and learn about (somewhat) the modernist artists of the a.r. group. I was also just beginning to learn more about contemporary Polish artists, including Zofia Kulik, who seemed to be on a lot of people's minds, with the striking photomontages that she was developing as a solo artist after the adventurous and conceptual artistic duo KwieKulik (Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek), long mainstays in the Polish alternative art scene, disbanded in 1987.

That's why I was especially primed for Kulik's 1995 exhibition at Lombard-Freid Fine Arts in my home city of New York, a new (at the time) and innovative gallery with a decidedly international focus. For me, this exhibition was stunning, a total revelation. Nothing I was seeing in New York looked remotely like Kulik's black and white photomontages which are simultaneously severe and humorous, somber and enthralling, comprising different photographic images arranged into complex patterns and shapes, sometimes a few images and sometimes many, even hundreds or thousands. *Moon-Skull* (1995) resembles an arch in a Gothic cathedral, except that it is made of bullets. Born in 1947, Kulik grew up in a country still traumatized and scarred by World War II, to which her work, seeded with weapons, memorials, and sometimes skulls, often refers. Instead of a sacred figurative sculpture that one would expect in a cathedral, this work features a columnar stack of disparate images. At the bottom, forming a most peculiar base, are mirror images of the same naked man balancing on one foot, with one leg and arm outstretched, and the other arm reaching straight up. Just above these figures is what looks like a stately and grave architectural memorial, followed by a piece of pleated drapery. Next come two military cannons perched atop buildings (obviously war memorials)

and then a really frightening skull, with an artillery shell on its top, making it resemble a German Pickelhaube (spiked helmet), popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; this artillery shell is also poised to penetrate the anus a naked man spread-eagled just above. At the top, what looks like the moon is actually a skull, and the rockets flying toward it are more bullets. This is a strange, haunting work, conflating human bodies and cosmic ones, religiosity and warfare, vulnerability and force. It looks simply great, and it is also completely unnerving.

Petals (2), 1995, suggests a flower with eight petals but also a military medal. At the center—the pistil of this flower—is an ambiguous white shape with tapering towers which resembles a Catholic cathedral seen from afar but also a clip of bullets (very often in Kulik’s work religious objects like scepters, staffs, spires, arched windows, and parts of cathedrals also resemble weapons of some sort). It is surrounded by eight identical busts of a man with his mouth open in mid-speech; he looks like a sculpture but is a photograph of Polish artist Robert Rumas in the guise of a political leader. He conjures all the voluble, powerful, ideology-spouting men that Kulik (and everyone else in Poland) endured for decades, but he also looks patently ridiculous: half man, half monument, frozen in his silent, repetitive harangue. Kulik frequently mines Poland’s communist past for symbols and images—weapons, flags, insignia, rituals of fealty to the state, monuments, parades, hallowed leaders—which she recasts, subverts, at times mocks, and bestows with new and surprising meaning, while she controls and manipulates that which once sought to control her. Underneath the pedestal supporting each of these busts is a naked man, lying on his back, who looks vulnerable, pinioned, perhaps about to be crushed; this is one of many times in Kulik’s photomontages when people are swept up into an invincible design, a system so elaborate and rigid that it becomes painfully claustrophobic. *Petals* (3), 1995, another captivating flower/medal, looks even more sinister, with images of a crouching (or perhaps hiding in full view) naked man arrayed around a “pistil” featuring eight human skulls, each sporting a clip of bullets like a crown.

I was utterly taken by Kulik’s work in this exhibition, and also disturbed. I was also beginning not really to realize (that would come later) but to intimate that the post-communist label so often applied to Kulik—meaning an artist dealing with and responding to Poland’s communist past—while appropriate, comes nowhere near the full measure of her achievement, and doesn’t adequately address why her breakthrough and courageous works from the late 1980s and

1990s were, and still are, so important. These works are visually riveting, combining and arranging multiple images in a way that thoroughly blurs abstraction and representation. They are meticulous and exacting, yet also elastic and evocative. While referencing post-war communist Poland, they also have an expansive relationship to history and time. A single work can enfold 1970s Poland, medieval architecture, Renaissance paintings, Ottoman carpets, ancient art, and contemporary life.

Human Motif 1 (1989) predates all of the works I've mentioned and was composed just a couple of years into Kulik's new stage as a solo artist. Look at this work from a distance, say from three or four meters away, and it seems to largely be a geometric abstraction. It also seems for all the world like an image of a splendid and elaborate Oriental carpet, say one made many years ago on a loom in Anatolia or Persia. Move closer, however, and you see with surprise that all of these seemingly abstract and geometric forms consist of photographs, some larger, some really small, and some with multiple exposures. In the middle, on opposite sides like mirror images, are identical photos of Warsaw's massive Palace of Culture and Science. This building, completed in 1955, was a gift to Poland from the Soviet Union (it was originally named the Joseph Stalin Palace of Culture and Science) and it comes as a powerful reminder of decades of Soviet domination and repressive communist rule. On all four sides and ringing the work are identical images of the same man, barefoot, with outstretched arms, and wearing a loose, white tunic. He could be a Greek or Roman statue come to life, become flesh and bones, a biblical figure, or maybe a quote from a Renaissance painting. Underneath, and also ringing the work on all four sides, are four rows of an identical (and completely touching) photograph showing three smiling kids outdoors. Elsewhere, forming Kulik's intricate patterns, are hundreds of images of the same mostly naked man in different poses: running, saluting, triumphantly holding a pole over his head, holding another pole like a soldier with a rifle, or kneeling, with his head bowed and his arms behind his back, suggesting both an abject prisoner and the Passion of Jesus. In the late 1980s Kulik took hundreds of photos of the artist Zbigniew Libera in various poses and gestures, often referring to or replicating typical communist ones, the raised arm, for instance, in a statue of Lenin or a heroic worker in a propaganda poster, and also replicating Catholic gestures. In Human Motif I, these many figures seem almost playful, like a kid pretending to be a soldier or trying out the role of a saint, while they also constitute a hilarious one-man public celebration, say a May Day celebration in communist Poland with throngs of people gathered around an architectural symbol of state power.

Composed in the important year of 1989, one gets the feeling that this fantastic work is an exorcism of sorts, Kulik's raid on, and transformation of, all those endless parades and patriotic celebrations that she witnessed for years.

The images in Kulik's photomontages come from her eclectic image archive, which has accompanied her through the years, and grown with her through the years. It includes an amazing array of material, in addition to the copious reminders of communist Poland that I mentioned. All, for whatever overt or mysterious reasons, are fundamental for Kulik: art historical images, stills from Soviet films, close-ups of plants that harken back to circa 1920s German photographer Karl Blossfeldt and the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement, family photos, self-portraits, chance things she happened to notice (a bird killed by her dog, a bit of dried thistle, a cog wheel), television stills, photographs of Libera and other models, and both female and male statues, among many, many others. Through complex procedures, Kulik weaves these images into hyper organized, yet dizzying and mind-bending, photomontages marked by interlacing rhythms and patterns, and often the small images, especially of a naked or partially naked man, function as the letters in an eccentric pictorial alphabet. These works also absorb and combine wide-ranging references and influences. They resemble, as I noted, Oriental carpets but also suggest the layout and look of cathedrals. Catholic iconography abounds in them but so too do military objects, monuments, and emblems of war. The many tiny figures in mock-heroic poses also suggest the small figures in ancient Egyptian art. Sections evoking stained glass are also kaleidoscopic, at times hallucinatory, and connect with Tibetan mandalas and Islamic architectural ornamentation (with hints of architectural blueprints and medical x-rays thrown in for good measure.)

What all of this means is that Kulik, working in communist Poland in the late 1980s and in post-communist Poland in the early 1990s—when there were few, if any, personal computers, when the Internet was still in its infancy, several years before Google was founded in 1998, and long before the flood of images generated by smart phones, Facebook, Flickr and Instagram—was an exceptionally prescient and visionary artist, pioneering a way of adroitly working with a welter of photographic and filmic images years before many artists in the West would do this as a matter of course. This was hardly the first time that an Eastern European artist, specifically a female artist, was significantly ahead of her Western counterparts. Katarzyna Kobro's "Spatial Composition" sculptures anticipate minimalism in the U.S. and Donald Judd's

famous notion of “specific objects” by 30-plus years. In his essay “Specific Objects,” Judd wrote about what he called “the new three-dimensional work,” now commonly called minimalism, although he rejected that term: “In the three-dimensional work the whole thing is made according to complex purposes, and these are not scattered but asserted by one form,” which seems extremely close to what Kobro was up to several decades before with her sculptures. Croatian (and former Yugoslavian) Sanja Iveković’s mid-1970s feminist interventions in mass media advertisements anticipated by several years the work of such acclaimed U.S. artists as Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, and Richard Prince

In this fractious, intensely mediated era, suffused with photographic and video images coming from every which way and chock-full of fiercely competing political and religious ideologies, an age of resurgent, fundamentalist Islam and resurgent Christianity (including Catholicism in Poland), vigorous progressivism and also vigorous right-wing extremism, it is well worth freshly considering Zofia Kulik’s breakthrough photographic collages from the late 1980s and early to mid-1990s: they are that enduringly potent and apt. Even though they were made many years ago, they don’t seem dated at all, but instead like they could have been completed last year or last week. They seem, in fact, far better than any number of works made by younger artists who grew up on the Internet, and who likewise deal in a multiplicity of images, just not with Kulik’s rigor and amplitude. One reason why her works are so very good has to do with their extraordinary formal qualities, their eye-popping, visual brilliance. Another reason is that every image (and there are many), even really small ones, totally matters, to Kulik personally, and by extension to us. Kulik is invested in her images. She lives with them and considers them for a long time. They resonate with her. They constitute her visual lexicon. They are the constituent components of her visual poetry. Little, chance things matter a lot, but so too do weighty things like statues of Lenin. Then there is the scope of Kulik’s inquiry, which mixes the personal and political, often addresses fraught matters pertaining to gender, and which is uncommonly attuned to history on a grand scale. Kulik’s photomontages are born of a profound and sensitive engagement with the world, very often a word in upheaval.

Which brings me to *All the Missiles Are One Missile*, 1993, a masterful work in three integrated sections that was very much of its time and era in post-communist Poland but that now, more than twenty years later, still seems exceptionally relevant and powerful. Again it resembles an ornate Oriental carpet, but with a reeling, kaleidoscopic look. It also connects with images and

designs in illuminated medieval manuscripts and hints at cathedrals. “What you see is what you see,” American artist Frank Stella famously announced in 1964, referring to his paintings but also to the radical advent of minimalism. However, with Kulik, who deals in combinations of visual information, what one initially sees is important, but equally important is what one only gradually discovers, often with wonderment, sometimes with amusement, and sometimes with shock. This is definitely the case with *All the Missiles Are One Missile*, which rewards patient, careful viewing (the title, incidentally, is a paraphrase of T.S. Eliot’s “all the women are one woman” in his commentary on *The Wasteland*).

While the left and right sections at first glance look similar, and maybe even identical, they are markedly different. On the left is Kulik’s version of a woman. A rosette shows a monument symbolizing Mother Russia— a woman solemnly holding a wreath. The monument is in St. Petersburg’s Piskariovskoye Memorial Cemetery, where almost half a million people, who died during the World War II Siege of Leningrad, are buried in 186 mass graves. Encircling the monument in the rosette are identical images that at first look purely abstract but are of a woman, with outstretched arms, holding a piece of sloping drapery, which has several connotations, all evident in Kulik’s image archive: opulent decorations at the 1st Assembly of the Polish United Workers’ Party in Warsaw in 1946, the robe in a 1st century B.C. bronze Roman statue, white fabric held reverentially in a 14-15th century Russian icon by an anonymous artist, the fabric covering Aphrodite as she is born from the sea in a ca. 460 B.C. Greek bas-relief. Nearby, outside the rosette, is a reproduction of Polish Academic painter Pantaleon Józef Szyndler’s soporific *Eve (Temptation)*, 1889, in which a nude, carefully posing Eve looks suspiciously like an eroticized teenage girl concocted as a fantasy for a very male gaze.

The right part is Kulik’s version of a man. Another rosette shows a monument in Magnitogorsk celebrating the Soviet Union’s victory in World War II: two towering workers holding up a massive sword. This city has quite a past. It’s home to the massive Magnitogorsk Mining and Steel Company, which was founded in 1929 as the Magnitogorsk Metallurgical Factory, a big part of Stalin’s five-year plan to develop iron and steel production. Young communist idealists flocked to the remote area to join the effort, but this quickly devolved into brutal forced labor and child labor, and the factory also became a top producer of armaments. In the rosette, this image—so connected to communism and war, Stalin’s dictatorship and heroic masculinity—is encircled by identical

images of a naked Libera holding a piece of drapery over his head (similar to the woman in the first part) and with his phallus replaced by the metal crown of a banner pole. Both left and right parts contain mirror images of Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, which has gone through many identities: a symbol of peace in the time of Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm II; a symbol of military triumph for Napoleon, a party symbol for the Nazis, an emblem of partitioned Germany during the Cold War, and now a symbol of German reunification. The sky above both images of the Brandenburg Gate is cut out so that it suggests arched cathedral windows, but also bullets or missiles in a row. Kulik's versions of "a woman" and "a man" are complex and multifarious. By juxtaposing, combining, and assiduously arranging images dense with references, this work presents femaleness and maleness as intertwined with diverse ideologies and epochs.

As you don't merely look at, but instead give yourself over to this work, opening yourself to its coursing energies and all its rhythmic patterns, you begin to notice its myriad, and sometimes baffling, details. Among these are: a sequence of small film stills from a 1941 Soviet film showing a soldier executing a man by pistol (a woefully casual execution, by the way, which one can still find on the Internet); Chinese television shots of dancing girls celebrating Chairman Mao; more dancing young women in a Miss America pageant; marching armies from different countries; linked chains based on those in a Catholic cemetery in Warsaw; a nude Kulik holding the metal crown of a medieval banner pole in front of her and with one of her white, cathedral-like/bullet-like forms covering her groin; the skulls of captured Polish officers secretly murdered by the Soviet NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) in the 1940 Katyn massacre, and small images of Mickey Mouse, among dozens of others. Somehow, in some exacting, seemingly miraculous way, Kulik teased this raucous assortment of images into an absolutely exquisite, yet hard-hitting, work.

Right here, I think, is a real key to this particular work, and to Kulik's photomontages altogether. She began her career between 1965 and 1971 as an extremely innovative young sculptor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw with works (some utilizing her own body) that were not conceived as fixed entities but that instead were protean and adventurous, going through different stages, incarnations, and even identities, all of which she documented in photographs. There was also a pronounced sculptural aspect in many of KwieKulik's experimental and conceptual works. Then came Kulik's post-1987 career as a solo artist, making these black and white photomontages that seem

so radically different from all her previous work. In fact, in my opinion, Kulik never stopped being a sculptor. Instead she started sculpting with images: sculpture transmuted into photographs and montage. She also, in a manner, started sculpting with the world and with history, in the form of images. All the teeming ideas, historical references, and connections between diverse objects and scenes are important in *All the Missiles Are One Missile*, but so too are really sculptural things like shape, texture, materiality, volume, density, surface and depth. Rigid objects like monuments, artillery shells and wooden poles about soft objects like fabrics. Fabrics, in turn, appear in many different forms: the clothing on statues, drapery, the sash billowing from the loins of a naked man, flags. Passages of total density (a cluster of skulls, soldiers in rows, parading people) about others much more spare and minimal (for instance Kulik or Libera standing alone). Part photo, part sculpture, part carpet, and part church, the medium-scrambling *All the Missiles Are One Missile* is an early 1990s tour de force, a highlight of Zofia Kulik's impressive new body of work.