

Persons
Projects

Zofia Kulik



Zofia Kulik was born 1947 in Wrocław, Poland. Lives and works in Warsaw (Łomianki).

From 1965 to 1971, Zofia Kulik studied at the Sculpture Department of the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts. After her graduation, Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek formed the artistic duo KwieKulik, a project which lasted until 1987. They carried through countless performances, interventions and artistic demonstrations, as well as creating objects, films and photographs. In their private apartment in Warsaw, the duo set up an independent gallery called the Studio of Activities, Documentation and Propagation (PDDiU), in the frame of which an archive of Polish art from the 70s and 80s was created.

Since 1987, Zofia Kulik has been working individually, creating black-and-white multiple exposure photographs, objects, installations and films. Thematically, she focuses on the relationship of man and woman, the individual and the mass, as well as on symbols of power and totalitarianism. A further pivotal part of her work is the phenomenon of mass-media, and its influence on consumers.

Her works have been introduced to a wider audience at the documenta 12 in Kassel (2007) and at the 47th Venice Biennale (1997). Being part of renowned international collections such as Tate Modern, MoMA NY, Centre Pompidou and Moderna Museet, her work became part of the reopened permanent exhibition at the MoMA NY.

The Splendour of Myself

In this self-portrait, Zofia Kulik presents herself as a queen, evoking historical associations to the official portrait of Queen Elisabeth I and thus establishing a sense of female power. The sumptuous, ornamented robe she dresses herself in consists of many black-and-white and multiple exposure photographs of her male model and artist friend Zbigniew Libera. By turning the images of the naked model into her garment and arranging them in such a miniature, geometrical and abstract way, Kulik subordinates the male, which even increases the notion of female authority. As splendid as her dress appears to be, the crown and royal attributes Kulik decorates herself with are made of lettuce leaves, a cucumber and a dandelion – objects of a rural, daily life. The artist thus creates a clash between rich and poor, the home and the state.



Zofia Kulik, *The Splendor of Myself II*, 1997, silver gelatine print, 150 x 108 cm.

Stach Szablowski

The Splendour of Myself

Within the realm of the self-portrait *Splendour of Myself*, Zofia Kulik presents herself as a queen. Where is her kingdom? It lies in the private empire of a photographic archive, a collection made up of preserved or frozen gestures and motifs, a kingdom of ornaments in which forms are constantly repeated and pictures are rhythmically unravelled in time.

Zofia Kulik started to produce self-portraits after 1987, which brought an end to her collaboration with Przemysław Kwiek. In a sense, Kulik's self-portraits were not possible prior to that date. Between 1971 – 1987 the artist did not act autonomously, never exhibiting under her own name, only as a half of the artist team KwieKulik. The self-portrait came, therefore, as a manifestation of an awakening of identity in the artist. Along with this self-justification came the ornament. Though looked down upon at the dawn of modernism as blasphemy, the ornament served as a way for Zofia Kulik to unravel a vision of history, politics and art, as a continuum of recurring signs and gestures, organised by the artist's individual experience and materialised in her private archive of images. In the 70ties, within the frame work of KwieKulik, the artist was concerned with the most radical sub-genre of process art, that excludes the picture or work of art as a complete, finite form: "We were never finishing anything", – Kulik has said in one interview; the art of KwieKulik was unfolding as an on-going artistic, sociological and political experiment, with its authors playing the roles of guinea-pigs and taking all the risks related to those roles.



Zofia Kulik, *The Splendor of Myself II*, 1997, silver gelatine print, 150 x 108 cm.



After 1987, Kulik decided to create compound photographic compositions. The contradiction between the “open form”¹ of earlier actions and the “complete form” of the later works from the end of the 80ties was overcome by the use of ornamentation. Isn't the ornament the most open of forms, a potential unfinished image?

Between 1987-91, Zofia Kulik implemented about 700 photographs of a naked male model², presented on a black background, striking poses and performing symbolic gestures quoted from ancient Greek vases, catholic iconography, and modern painting as well as Stalinists memorials. This collection of photographs, entitled by the artist Archive of gestures had been incorporated into a larger, extensive archive, created by the artist from the very beginning of her artistic practice. This archive of photographic images, the visual equivalent of life experiences up to the present, constitutes the material of Zofia Kulik's art. The images of Zofia Kulik are produced as fotomontages, using multiple exposures placed on a photo paper, through precisely cut masks. In this way one work can consist of hundreds or - in the case of more elaborate pieces - even thousands of single images. The represented elements are reduced to the status of a sign; the structure is ruled by the grammar of ornament; based on rhythms, repetitions and symmetries. These photographic ornaments are woven into robes, which the artist uses to clothe herself in her self-portraits - similar to polish devotional traditions, where one “clothes” the painted representations of Holy Mary in so called camisoles, made of precious metals and valuable stones. History is ornamentalised as well.

In the works such as Idioms of the soc-ages Zofia Kulik reckons with the visual experience of totalitarianism, by weaving presentations from the political gestures and symbols she collects. Her practice, the weaving of images, reminds one of oriental carpets, a reference to which the artist consciously refers in many of her works. The signs that make up these photographic carpets, evoke oriental calligraphy, where the difference between the text and ornament is abolished - just like in the art of Zofia Kulik the borders between discursiveness and decorativeness, tradition and modernity, rhythm and narration, abstraction and allegory are blurred. „In a sense it is easy, banal and kitschy”, said Kulik in 1998 “The subtlety of this work relies on its complexity. I feel that a great value of my work is the fact that I'm a talented organizer of compound visual structures. In turn all of the details are simple, like in a common song about love, death etc. My whole work is based on the fact that I permanently collect and archive the images of this world. The complexity of this work comes from the richness of the archive that I possess.”

1) Zofia Kulik I Przemyslaw Kwiek were students of Oskar Hansen, the architect, artist, art theoretician and professor at the Warsaw Art Academy, the author of the “Open form” theory.

2) The performing model was Zbigniew Libera, self-taught artist, punk, dissident, in the 90ties he had become one of the most important polish artists.

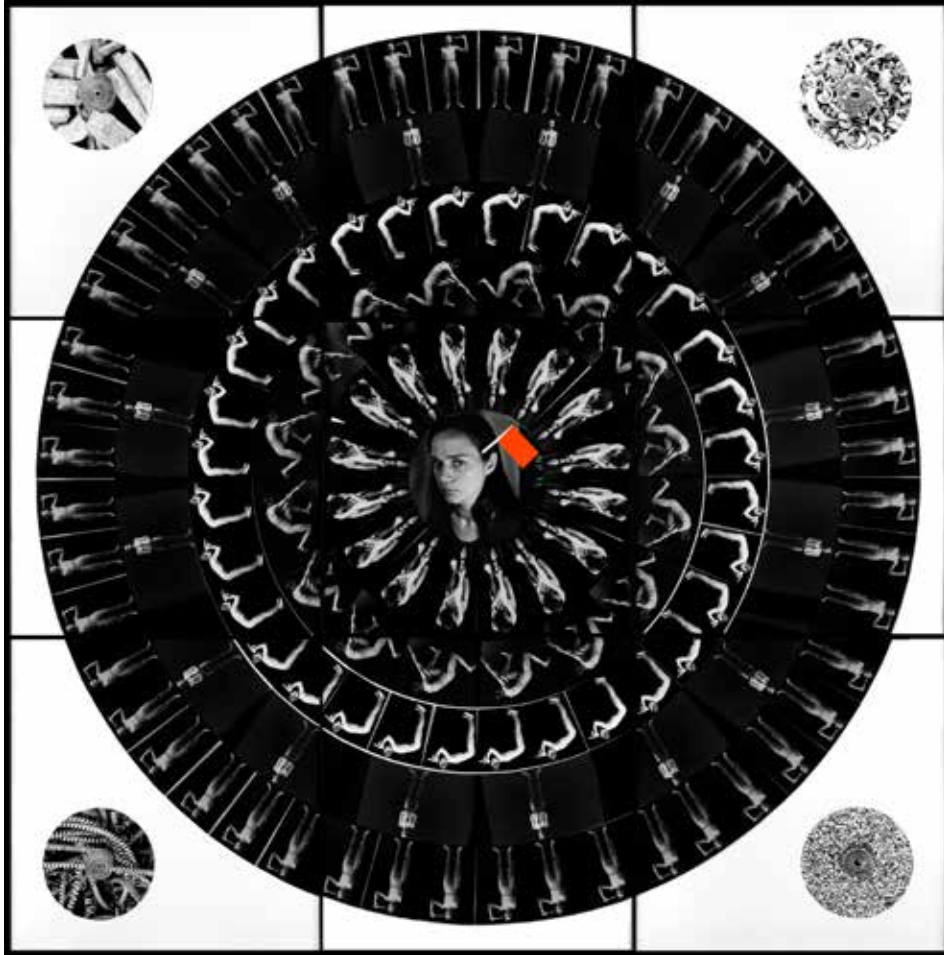


Zofia Kulik, *The Splendor of Myself II*, 1997, exhibition view at documenta 12,

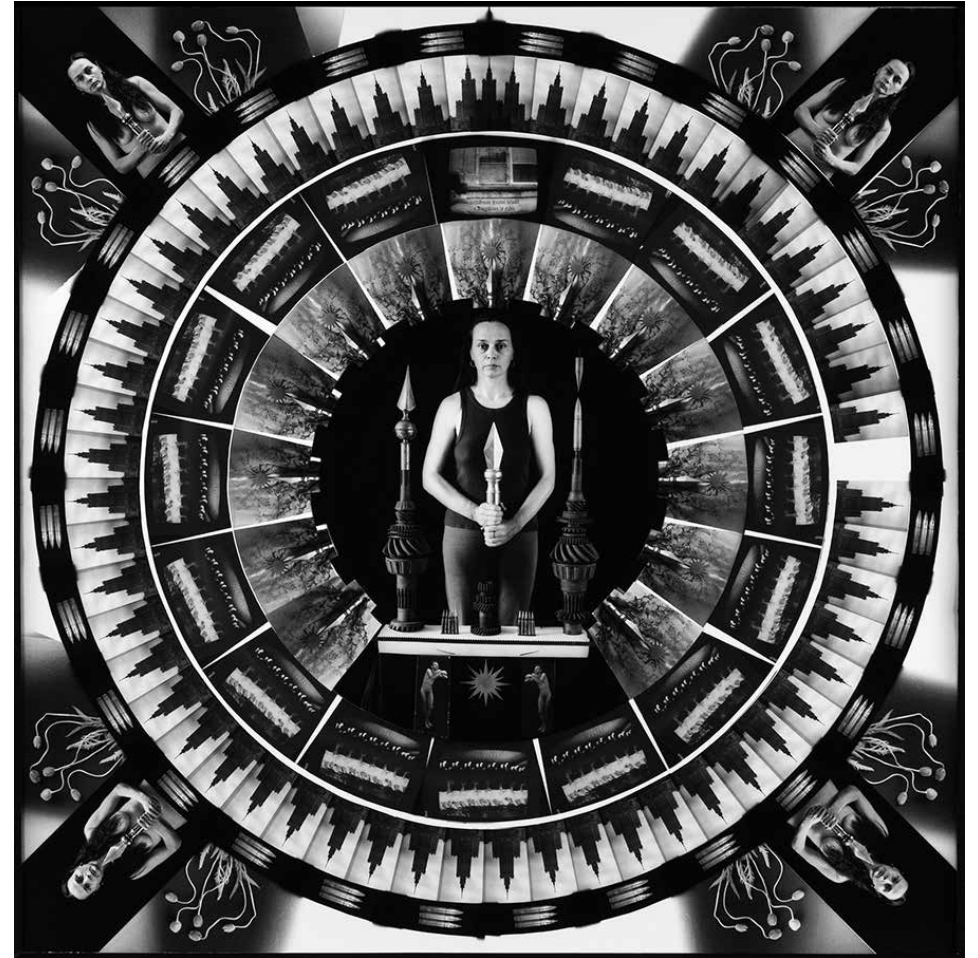
Mandalas

Zofia Kulik's tableaux of photographic compositions amount to an ongoing series of symmetric, allegoric and ornamental works. The basis for all of these pieces is the artist's extensive collection of black-and-white photographs. The most important part of this vast amount of images is her so-called Archive of Gestures, which comprises around 700 black-and-white photographs of a nude male model (the artist Zbigniew Libera) in various poses. These gestures stem from poses found in paintings throughout art history, as well as associations of body gestures imprinted on collective memory. The fact that the model executes gestures implying power and pride whilst being naked and thus appearing vulnerable turns them into a farce and the arrangement of these photographs in a small, multiplied format increases this effect of inferiority. In many of these compositions, these images are also arranged around a self-portrait of the artist. In this way, the traditional hierarchy of the male artist subordinating a female model is reversed.

Other elements that regularly occur in these works are the communist symbols, appearing in the form of objects photographed and inserted by the artist. Be it soviet monuments, hammer and sickle, a star, military objects or the color red here and there, a reference to the system in which Kulik spent such a great part of her life can be found in almost every work. Adding to this the fact that all pieces follow an almost rigid symmetry and organisation, it seems that the artist, despite her critical attitude towards the regime, is nevertheless somehow influenced by the symbolism and visual setup promoted by the communist government.



Self-portrait with a Flag II, 1998, silver gelatine print, 150 x 150 cm.



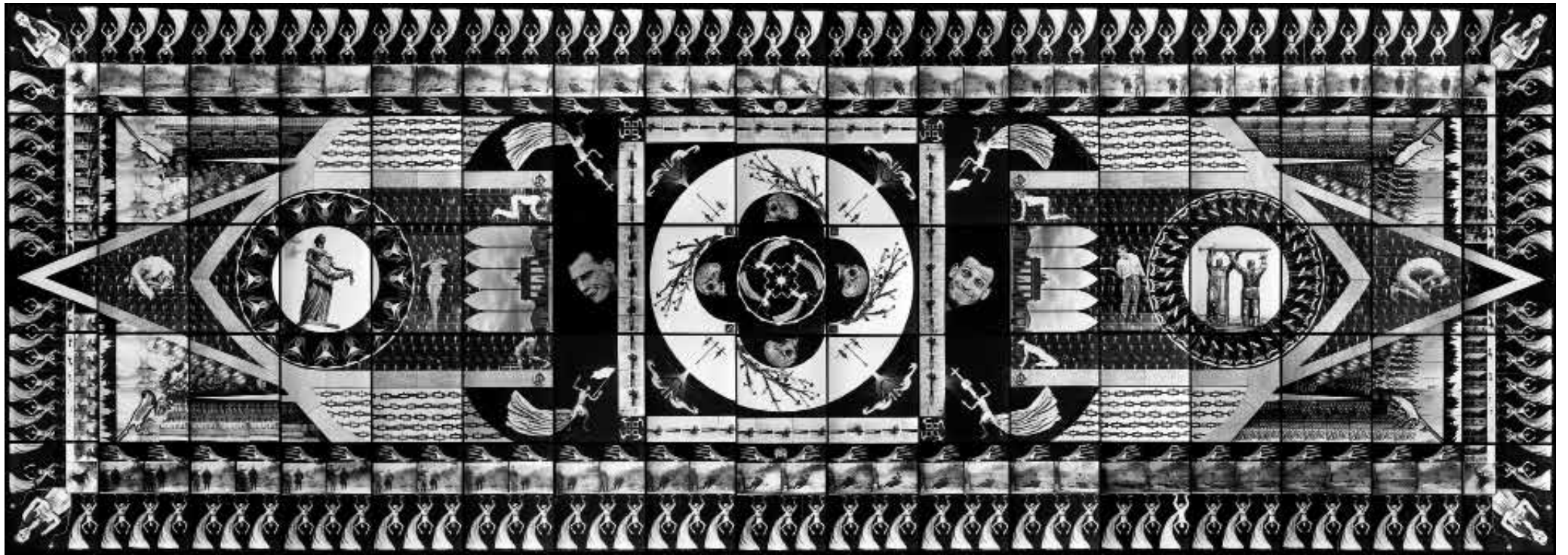
Myself, Poppies and the Joke I, 1992, silver gelatine print, 50 x 50 cm.



Zofia Kulik & KwieKulik, *Quotes from the Archive*, 2019, exhibition view at Żak I Branicka, Berlin.

All the Missiles Are One Missile

The work is divided into two apparently symmetrical parts resembling church elevations, yet the contents of the left and the right side are not entirely identical. The left wing is devoted to a woman. It shows a monument called The Country Our Mother from Petersburg in the middle of the rosette, a reproduction of Szyndler's painting „Eve” from 1902 featuring a timid-looking girl, as well as TV screen frames showing rows of women, such as dancing girls, girls in the Miss America Competition or Chinese girls singing in the name of Mao. The right wing is devoted to a man. It shows a monument called Back and Front from Magnitogorsk (symbol city of industrial power of the USSR), the multiplied nude figure of a man holding a drapery triumphantly over his head, as well as rows of TV screen frames showing soldiers from all over the world. More TV frames can be seen at the top and the bottom of the work, where grey stripes depict executions in 1941 from a documentary called The Russia we lost shown by Moscow's television in 1993. The title is a paraphrase of T.S. Elliot's words "...all the women are one woman". This sentence comes from his commentary to "The Waste Land", part III "The Fire Sermon".



Zofia Kulik, *All the Missiles Are One Missile*, 1993, photography, silver gelatine print, 300 x 850 cm.



Zofia Kulik, *All the Missiles Are One Missile*, 1993, exhibition view at 47. Venice Biennale, Venice 1997.

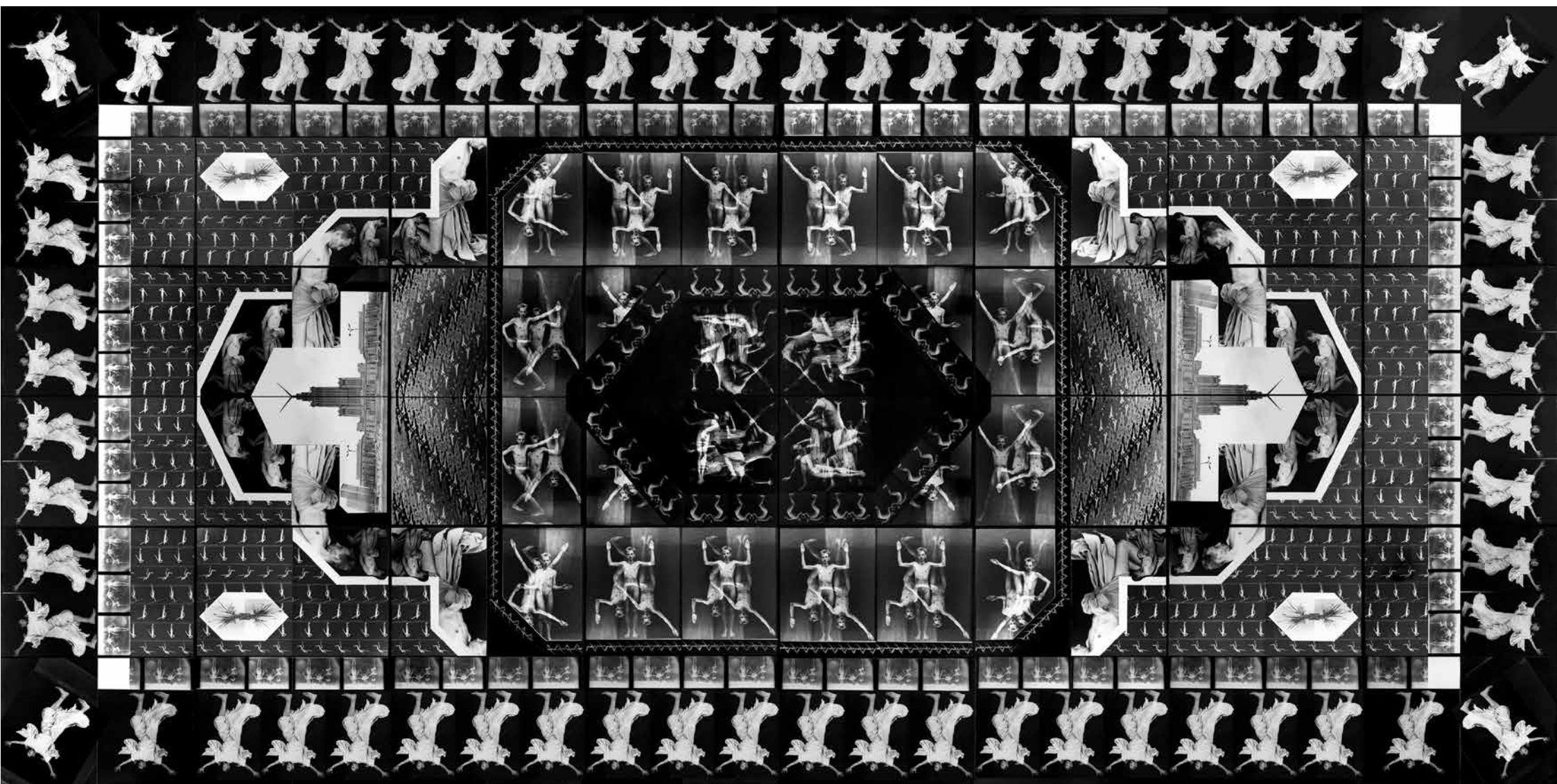


Zofia Kulik, *Favourite Balance*, 1991, installation view at the Stedelijk Museum, Group Show *Wandererlieder* Amsterdam 1991.





Zoha Kulik, exhibition view at the Museum of Architecture, Breslau, 1991.



Zofia Kulik, *The Human Motif I*, 1989, 240x480 cm, silver gelatin print.

Gregory Vogl

Excerpts of "Sculpting With Imags: On the Early Photomontages of Zofia Kulik.

Human Motif 1 (1989)... 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 (Kulik with a bow knot in her hair, her older brother, and a kindergarten friend, from around 1950).

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, 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.



Zofia Kulik, *The Human Motif I*, 1989, exhibition view at documenta 12, Kassel.

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.



Zofia Kulik, *Ethnic Wars*, 1995-1997/2019, site-specific permanent installation at Mueum Susch, Susch, Switzerland.

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