



ZOFIA KULIK

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## *Myself*

In 2007 the curators of Documenta 12 (Roger M. Buergel and Ruth Noack) presented Zofia Kulik's self-portrait alongside Rembrandt's at Wilhelmschloe Castle in Kassel. This bold arrangement was indeed a sort of face-off—a battle between the female artist and the male, between new media and painting, between the art of Eastern Europe and the hierarchies of Western art, between an artist hailing from a neo-avant-garde movement that negated art tradition and history. Zofia Kulik's work bore the brunt of this confrontation. In the self-portrait entitled *The Splendour of Myself* that hung in the Wilhelmschloe Castle,

this artist from the geographical and institutional periphery of the art world said "I am"—in spite of the mechanisms excluding her existence in the context of the art tradition, the male dominance in art, and the international circulation of ideas.

Zofia Kulik is an icon of the Polish neo-avant-garde, an artist who wrote a heroic episode in its history. In the 1970s she and her partner in art and life, Przemysław Kwiek, created the KwiekKulik duo, who came forward with a radical proposition for the development of the language of art toward direct action, an active inscription of the artistic gesture into the social and political reality, an ongoing experiment and polemic relationship with reality. Cut off from access to the official mechanisms of art distribution, the artists were not formally recognized by the art system, and were, in reality, discriminated against and repressed, functioning in an institutional vacuum. Their work, inextricably tied to everyday life, seemed an utopia of crossing the border between art and existence—an utopia that was fulfilled beyond the parentheses of art in its traditional conception. From a long-term perspective, their uncompromising approach found its place in the arts discourse; KwiekKulik's work from the 1970s is one of the most important points of reference for contemporary Polish art, and is increasingly recognized internationally.

In the KwiekKulik period, Zofia Kulik was practically non-existent as an individual in the field of art. When the duo went their separate ways in 1989, the artist had a triple challenge to deal with. The first was the collapse of the communist system, the subject of a series of works coming to terms with the iconography of power, techniques of visual persuasion, and symbolic domination. A second challenge was a dialogue with the history and tradition of art; Zofia Kulik entered this discussion from the specific position of the neo-avant-garde artist with experience in negating the past in the name of developing a new, contemporary language

of communication. Having discarded artifacts and representation in favor of action in the 1970s, Kulik now began a probing investigation into the potential of the image, ornament, allegory, and iconographic codes deeply rooted in history. The third issue she approached was that of her own identity and subjectivity—as a woman, an artist, and an individual caught in a web of political and ideological contexts. Her response to the third challenge were



Exhibition view at Documenta 12, Kassel, 2007

her self-portraits. The first such picture came about directly after the collapse of KwiekKulik, as a symbolic image of the emancipation of an artist who went on to stress her individual existence in art; subsequent self-portraits have been systematically created to this day. At the same time, Kulik began developing the language of photographic collage, which allowed her to clash and confront different images, and to organize them into extraordinarily complex statements based on a precise visual grammar.

Kulik's large-format collage photographs consist of multiple exposures, containing dozens or even hundreds of depictions, arranged in ornamental structures. The discursive dimension of the montage interweaves with the artist's archival instinct; for her the idea of the archive was always a key artistic notion.

Zofia Kulik implemented about 700 photographs of a naked male model, 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.

Kulik gathers and classifies depictions, later weaving them into her work, which take the character of meta-images. This is also the technique used for the artist's self-portraits: Kulik surrounds them with images, symbols, icons of ideologies, and photographic records of gestures. She tests her identity in various contexts; she installs her own image in mandalas, frames it in mandorlas, or, as in *The Splendour of Myself* self-portrait which was shown alongside the Rembrandt in Wilhelmschloe Castle, she depicts herself in the splendor of the iconography of a self-declared ruler. *The Splendour of Myself* ties in with an official portrait of Elizabeth I, a queen in a man's world, who forwent marriage to avoid dissolving in its shadow. The monarch is presented in her parade gown. Zofia Kulik's garb is no less impressive—it is stitched from hundreds of photographs. "I collect images," the artist says. "One might say I have a wealth of images. I dress myself in them." The rule which Zofia Kulik establishes in her self-portraits is over her own identity in a world of images and imaginings.

*Stach Szablowski*



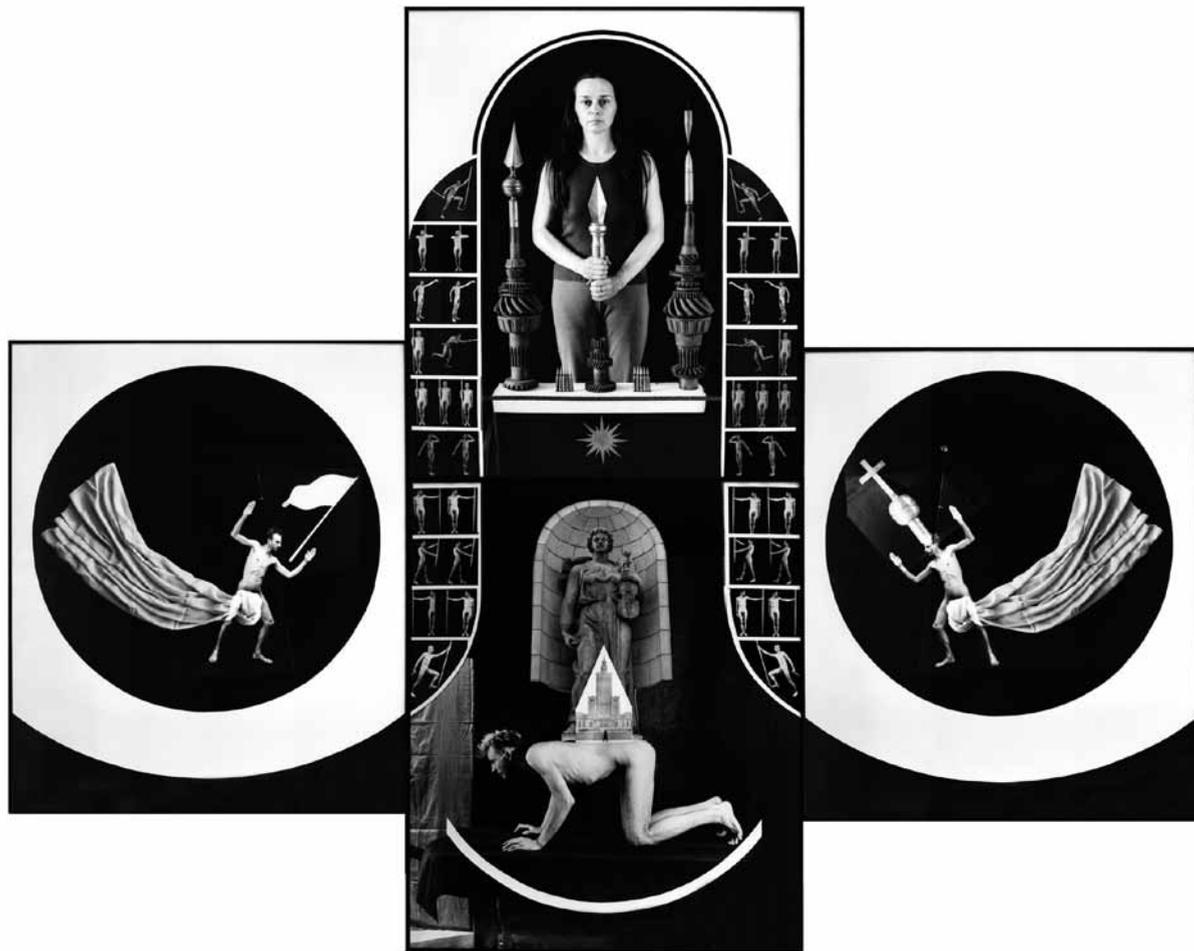
*Black Square and Mandorla*, 1987/89, silver gelatine print, 60 × 50 cm (above)

*The Splendour of Myself IV*, 2007, silver gelatine print, 200 × 180 cm (left)

*Land-Escape*, 2001, silver gelatine print, 180 × 150 cm (next page, left)

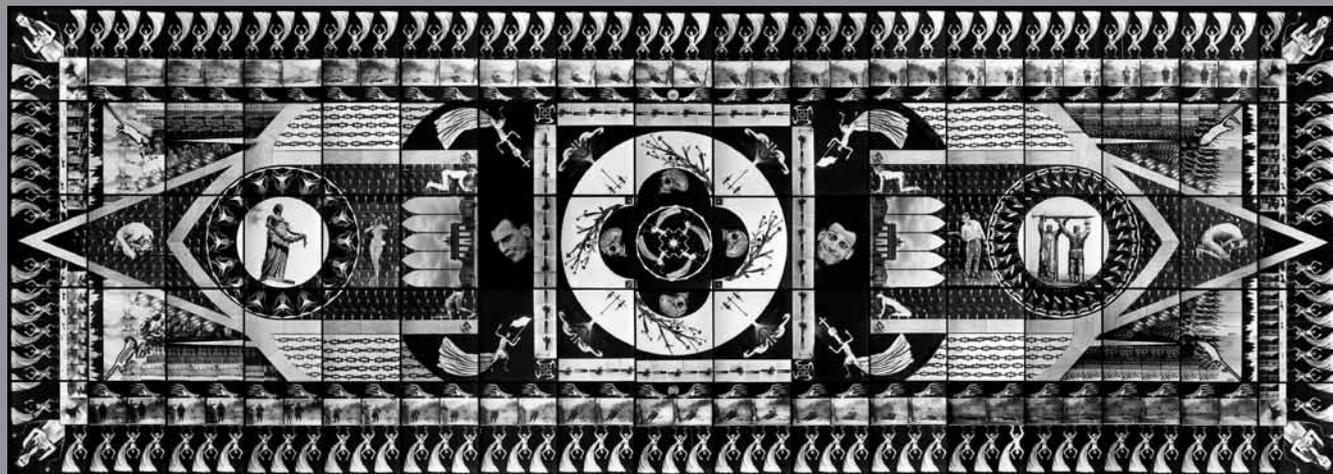
*Introduction*, 2013, silver gelatine print, 180 × 150 cm (next page, right)





*Self-portrait with a Palace*, 1990, silver gelatine print, 60 × 50 cm (above)

*All Things Converge in Time and Space; To Disperse, To Converge, To Disperse, and So On II*, 1992  
silver gelatine print, 120 × 150 cm (left)



*All the Missiles Are One Missile*, 1993, silver gelatine print, 300 × 950 cm (above)

## ZOFIA KULIK

Born 1947 in Wrocław, Poland. Lives and works in Warsaw (Łomianki). From 1971 to 1987, Kulik worked together with Przemysław Kwiek as the artist duo KwieKulik. They ran an independent Studio for Art Activities, Documentation and Propagation in their private apartment in Warsaw. Their archive contains slides and negatives of ephemeral Polish art from the 1970s and 1980s, as well as prints and artists' books. Within the frame of this project, they carried through actions and interventions, constructed installations and objects, worked with texts, films, slides and mail-art. Since 1987, Kulik has been working individually creating black-and-white multiple exposure photographs, objects, installations and films.

Since 1968, she presented her work internationally including: Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin; Polish Pavillion, Biennale di Venezia (1997); Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana; Documenta 12, Kassel (2007); Kunstmuseum Bochum; Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw; MUMOK, Vienna; Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; MACBA, Barcelona; Tate Modern, London; Sculpture Center, New York.

Her works are included in several international collections including: Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Bochum Museum; DG Bank, Frankfurt; ING Nederlanden; Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana; Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

Cover illustrations:

*Still Life 01*, 1994, c-print, 40 × 40 cm (front cover)

*Still Life 05*, 1994, c-print, 40 × 40 cm (back cover)

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