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## The Geometry of Power in the Zofia Kulik's Art

**Izabela Kowalczyk**

‘Whenever I recall how they tried to "bring me up" - at home, at school, in institutions - for a positive, polite and joyful citizen, I feel deeply distressed. I was never hungry, never cold, I did not suffer any physical discomforts. So when I feel distressed it occurs to me that it is my own mental weakness, my own fault in a way.

Why am I not a joyful citizen?

I have been hammered, we all have been hammered. Hammering implies a repetitive driving of a nail into something. And now it seems that I am struggling with some invisible blade which I try hard to turn away from me and point it outwards - at others? It is not gentleness that fills me in but suppressed desire to attack. The only problem is the one of direction: to myself or from myself.

I wrote once: "Order and self-subordinations account for a powerful inner urge that makes me behave and act in a given way: both in so-called life and so-called art". By visualizing the "subordinations" do I appreciate and praise it, or do I mock it and abolish it? Accepting the "subordination" as my problem and theme, full of fear and hatred toward the situation in which "the urge of subordination" occurs I take an artist revenge with every weapon (symbolic and formal) that has been against me. (...)’ (Zofia Kulik. Artist's Statement from *Darc Decor* Independent Curators Incorporated (ICI), USA)

From the end of 1980s the Zofia Kulik's art has been organised by such problems as power and subordination. Since this date her art has turned outwards in a wider sense. 1989 was the year of change in the geopolitical life in Poland, and even in the whole of Eastern Europe. It was the date of the communist systems' collapse and we

should add that this system had persisted in so-called Eastern Block for over 40 years. The date mentioned above was also an important moment for the appearance of a new political system. In Zofia Kulik's private life many changes also took place in this period. In her art the private is always connected with the public, so these changes also became very important. In 1987 she broke her connection with her partner of life and art, Przemyslaw Kwiek. From 1970 to 1987 she had managed with him the Private Studio of Art Activities, Documentation and Wide-Spreading. In place of the ephemeral events and actions that were created together with Kwiek, she started to create concrete, material works of art. The fundamental artistic form of these material artworks became photography and it is only in this period and manner that Zofia Kulik appeared at the woman's and feminist art exhibitions. Zofia Kulik's art has many threads (layers) but its unique combination of these threads is unrepeatable and one can not fully interpret the political, private and artistic threads separately. Such a situation creates one problem for the writer on Kulik's work: how to bind together the very different questions and issues that appear in her art and how to avoid emphasising some of them while omitting others. The key to interpretation ultimately are such notions as power and subordination.

Zofia Kulik's works during this time, such as *Medals* (1987-89), *The Inter-National Gothic* (1990), *Square of Palace* (1990), *March, March, March* (1990), *Guards of the Spire* (1990), *Favourite Balance* (1991), *All Things Converge in Time and Space; to Disperse, to Converge, to Disperse, and so on* (1992), *Columns* (1992), *Petals* (1995) are big hieratic tabloids composed like mosaics, with Gothic windows and altars, columns, Persian carpets and mandals. These forms present a world defined like a system and organised around some form of representation always with a centre, an order given from above. Kulik's work is described by Alicja Kepinska as including: such co-ordinates as "static" symmetry, role of centring point, precision of place, formal rigour of shapes. With the help of these visual matrixes the artist pays attention to understanding the world as ordered structure, system of power and subordination, domination and dependence. Geometric forms are the framework of composition, they are filled with photographs of different motifs and themes. The main decorative motif is a body, most often it is the male nude situated between different signs and symbols which are connected with different systems of power. So there are: flags, banners, arrow - heads, cambrels, ropes and monuments from different periods of totalitarianism. In this representation the naked man is treated as the "transmitter" of meanings of all domination systems and orders. His role is dual, on the one hand: he is a ruler, master, leader, from the other hand: on the other he is a slave, subject, when he is showed with loop on the neck in *The Inter-National Gothic*. The majority of Kulik's works are placed in context of communism. We can find the references with communistic celebrations and the 1st of May marches (for example, in the work *March, March, March*). In Kulik's works the body is represented as that which was at authorities' service. We can talk about something like collective body.

The body here serves the government as a representation of its power and splendour, I mean here the actions of the collective body during celebrations, marches, national holidays, festivals and so on. In her works Zofia Kulik shows not only the body's obedience to and constraint by the communist system but we can also find signs and elements connected with other powers that are important in Polish political and social life. She shows the power of catholic church so one notices forms such as crucifixions, altars and the human body that is shaped as Christ's body. She also shows the main opposition to communism in Poland, emphasising its by presenting typical symbols of the Solidarity opposition: for example, its Victoria/Victory sign. Kulik analyses contemporary Polish culture and shows how the communist system and its opposition, mainly catholic church, influenced our minds. Her analysis is not limited only to the Polish context. She also reveals the impact of power and subordination in other political and social systems. In the work entitled *Idioms of the Soc-Ages*, for example, one of the representations of the male body is photographed as if it were a swastika and this image is additionally repeated in ornamental forms. In *Inter-National Gothic* there is also shown a fascist salutation. In other representations there are different emblems of international communism, for example, the red banner, medals, sickle and hammer, typical soc-ages (socialist realist) architecture, Warsaw's famous socialist-built The Palace of Culture and Science (for example in *Guards of Spire*). A man and his body is participant of both the construction of power and its constraint. He is depicted as one of the official order's elements, Communist, Catholic or Fascist.

Let's return for a while to the work *The Inter-National Gothic*. It depicts the male body with loop on the neck, as I said earlier. The ambiguity of these works moves away from references to only communism or totalitarianism. The photography of her male nudes reminds us of numerous academic catalogues of poses and gestures, some of them intentionally invoke academic stylization of the perfect body. After thinking through what this art is about one might conclude that the impression left is not optimistic. The artist reveals that human being (man or woman) assumes a required pose according to situation. He or she adapts himself, herself to the particular situation and falls into next set of subordinations. Mechanisms of power and subordination direct him, her and control his or her behaviour and activity.

It is worth noticing here the effect of the museum glass-cases which appear during Zofia Kulik's exhibitions. Into these kind of cases she puts different souvenirs, gadgets, photos, postcards that refer to the totalitarian systems. By this method, she creates a sort of depressing museum dedicated to various power types. Enclosed in the museum's glass-cases these emblems, which refer to totalitarian systems as communism and fascism, seem to be harmless but to every viewer, they bring back immanent need for freedom in the face of human being's

submission. Using this method, the artist appears to warn against systems in which there is no privacy (private sphere) given to citizens and constraints placed upon their consciousness as well as their body.

In every society, power operates through sexuality and attempts to master or make obedient the bodies which it controls, as Foucault claims. The most extreme examples of total human body appropriation are totalitarian systems. In these systems the male body is treated with affirmation, it becomes a symbol of power and domination. This often occurs through the hero-worship of the body of a concrete man - usually the nation leader, usurper or the only ruler. But very often it is also the anonymous body, for instance: a warrior or a sportsman. Occurring as male nude shown in action, it becomes a timeless example of power, strength and perfection. Such a male nude serves as the support to the social hierarchy of the power and as the factor which strengthens patriarchal models within a society. This role is never played by female nude which, if it appears in totalitarian art, generally refers to notions connected with everlasting femininity, powers of nature and woman's role as a mother. The art of totalitarianism is based on strong and binary oppositions and it precisely this which characterises the different roles of woman and man; soldier and mother. One can treat Zofia Kulik's art as an accusation against a world that functions on the base of hierarchy and domination. One can also interpret her art as an attack against the universality of culture. In such structured world, the artist sees and analyses the danger of constraint and domination over the groups and individuals that are situated at the lower grades of social hierarchy or are beyond its precisely marked cultural frames. These problems we can also find analysed on a feminist level. Feminism has analysed the relations between genders in the patriarchal system which exists under the influence of all hierarchies and drawn attention to the men in power in this kind of system. In Zofia Kulik's works her analysis of patriarchy seems to be the clue that can join such systems as nazism, communism, and such institutions as army or other systems. The artist aims her "symbolic weapon" exactly against patriarchal system. The title of one Zofia Kulik's work: *All bullets are like one Bullet* is the paraphrase of T. S. Eliot's expression: 'All women are like one woman'. The phallic shape of a bullet that appears in her works may relate to a male genital organ and it can be treated as the symbol of his power. Translocating and reversing the meanings in this way the artist manipulates, as she says: the weapon that is usually used against her. It is worth paying attention to this in how she chooses to depict men as she breaks with the tradition of individualised portraits and instead depicts the precise character of the male model. In Kulik's works the men is objectified as 'man', he is shown by the same means the women have become "Woman in Art" through the last six centuries. The passive and anti-individualised female nudes that turned images of women into men's objects of visual consumption indirectly expressed the power and rule of men, their control of the language about and images of women. In spite of the power attributes that go

together with typical representations of men, Kulik often shows a man, as defenceless, powerless and passive. Her use of conventionalised poses unmasks his nakedness and the man is covered with ridicule. The fact of stripping a man of his clothes disarms him, and at the same time renders him harmless, takes the possibility of activity and enforces the possibility of obeying orders away from him. Zofia Kulik reveals the activity of power that was presented by the act of representing men herself.

Let's try to interpret the representation of naked model in which he assumes a pose similar to monument to Lenin. Undoubtedly creators of this monument wanted the body of socialist leader to represent Lenin's authority and power. Showing the man in the same pose but stripped of clothes changes the connotation and he becomes a seemingly empty sign that means nothing. In this way, the artist shows the illusory character of symbols and signs connected with power. She notices the insecure and weak principles of all systems, among which the patriarchal system is obviously included. Since the artist strips a man of the power granted him by patriarchy, it is worth thinking over how she also depicts women. Kulik also breaks with passive representations of woman in the art. Showing herself in her own works she predominantly appears with attributes of power and domination. Passing censure on patriarchal system, she creates her own system and order in which we can find references to the matriarchal one. But the artist does not think about reversal of systems but about showing the mechanisms through which they operate. She wants to analyse the relationships between the power which remains at the centre and how it dominates and produces its subjects. It is worth to notice that in Poland only Zofia Kulik has made work in which the sphere of relations between a woman and a man has been addressed and tried to describe the total subordination and influence of power in the patriarchal system. Although it is difficult to univocally qualify her works as feminist, one can state that she took up the problems of feminism most comprehensively in Polish art and she has achieved very interesting results.

The artist shows that power in an invisible way can rule our attitudes and activity. She reveals something of which we are not often conscious, the means of power itself and our place in different forms of system and power, literally, our entanglement in power mechanisms. Defining the world in this way, we become attached to different systems since the moment of our birth, we are taught to be obedient to such sorts of power as State, church, parental and patriarchal powers. The thing in which Zofia Kulik is interested in great measure is the problem of how this power influences our consciousness and how conflicts arise that are rooted in very deep layers of the human consciousness. She presents both the internal structures of power and how they function in our consciousness. Both oppressor (here: woman) and victim (man) tend to be viewed as two aspects of the same game. The name of the game is power and subordination. The artist shows the geometry of this game. The power is situated in the centre (although the centre is often empty)

while other parts of the system are subordinated and situated in relation to it. The artist presents the ambiguity of the situation in terms of the mutual dependence of victim and oppressor. The first person in "the drama" is the victim who adores the power that remains in the centre and is happy to play the role imposed upon him (her) from above. The place that is occupied by 'victim' is very comfortable for him (her) because it gives a kind of satisfaction to him. The victim's satisfaction is the result of allocating him (her) a fixed place in the game / world and of giving him (her) the possibility of defining himself (herself) with reference to something: the power in the centre. The power plays a protective role in relation to individual, it protects him (her) from that which is situated outside the whole system. It protects him/her also from being thrown out of the well-ordered structure but the price that the individual must pay is a loss of freedom and individuality. One can think through the problem in this question: does real freedom exist at all? The truth is that the individual who resists one system falls into other and frees himself (herself) from one pose by assuming only other poses. So perhaps the individual is doomed to function and be in a constant state of mutual dependency and maybe there are always some powers in reference to which the individual has to define himself (herself). This improbability of tearing himself (or herself) free from the particular system, Kulik shows through her intensively repeating these representations in different combinations revealing the operation of power itself.

The question about the limits of our subordination is the most important point of Zofia Kulik's art. Can the individual be free in the world shown in this way? The artist draws our attention to the most important and serious danger which exists in totalitarian systems, namely the total human being's incapacity to act autonomously. Totalitarian systems seek to possess the whole human - his (her) body and consciousness in a manner subordinate to the system. The method of taking such possession is very intelligent because a man (woman) does not notice his (her) own subjection. But this form of power is not only exercised in a dangerous manner by totalitarian systems. The danger is also carried by patriarchy and each form of power that seeks to treat the world hierarchically. In her most recent work *From Siberia to Cyberia*, the artist points out the power of media culture and power which we internalise from this culture. Zofia Kulik, in the words mentioned at the beginning of this article, expresses her passive acceptance with reference to this kind of power and how she falls under its control. She also expresses this most clearly when she refers to "hammering" of her consciousness. I suppose that the presentation of this situation, the disclosure of its power mechanisms and the excavation of power from its invisibility are the best solutions of the problem. This deconstruction of power can reduce and weaken its control and allow the individual to free himself (herself) from its influence. Zofia Kulik makes such a presentation in her art and in this way her art becomes one of the possibilities of regaining freedom for the constrained mind.

For more information about the artist Zofia Kulik, see Sarah Wilson's essay 'Discovering the Psyche: Zofia Kulik' in *n.paradoxa* Volume 4, July 1999 and her catalogue of Zofia Kulik's one person show in Posnan Piotr Piotrowski (ed) *Od Syberia/Do Cyberii; From Siberia to Cyberia* Museum Narodwe w Poznaniu. Poland, May-June 1999. ISBN 83-85296-82-4. Her work *Siberia to Cyberia* is included in the exhibition *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 16 Oct-16 Jan 1999.

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