

# VARIA

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## FEMINISM IN THE TIME OF TRANSFORMATION. PIOTR PIOTROWSKI, ZOFIA KULIK AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINIST ART HISTORY IN POLAND

In 2015, a few months after the passing of Piotr Piotrowski, an exhibition in his memory was organized at the Profile Foundation gallery in Warsaw, in which four artists – Jarosław Kozłowski, Zofia Kulik, Zbigniew Libera, and Krzysztof Wodiczko – took part.<sup>1</sup> The information prepared by the gallery read: “The exhibition features works that were the subject of Piotr Piotrowski’s essays as well as a reference for his art historical research, his vision of art history, of artistic topography and its significance for Poland’s and Eastern Europe’s cultural experience.”<sup>2</sup>

Zofia Kulik, the only woman in the group, showed a miniature of her work titled *From Siberia to Cyberia* (1998–2004). The original version of the work comprises a rectangle 21 metres in length and 2.4 metres in height, made up of eighteen thousand small photographs – TV screenshots of shows and films watched by the artist, or rather photographed by her. The fact that Kulik chose this particular work for the exhibition in tribute to Piotrowski comes as no surprise. The first version of the work was presented in 1999 at the artist’s monographic exhibition curated by Piotrowski at the National Museum in Poznań. The presentation was actually under the title *From Siberia to Cyberia*, and a fragment of the work was reproduced on the cover of the exhibition catalogue.<sup>3</sup> This exhibition was in a way the climax of a Piotrowski’s interest in Kulik’s art that had developed in this very particular period – the first dec-

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<sup>1</sup> Its title repeated that of one of his books – *Sztuka według polityki. Od Melancholii do Pasji* [Art According to Politics. From Melancholy to Passion], Cracow 2007.

<sup>2</sup> See <<http://www.fundacijaprofile.pl/wystawy.php?act=more&a=330>> [accessed: November 28, 2021].

<sup>3</sup> A miniature of the piece, still smaller than the one exhibited at the Profile Foundation, and made specially by the artist for this occasion, was a gift for Piotrowski on his 60th

ade of post-communist Poland – and was strongly influenced by the specificity of this time.

The significance of Piotr Piotrowski's writings in the 1990s has already been recognised by many authors. Magdalena Ujma, for example, wrote that in this decade in Poland "there was no widely recognised authority of art criticism. With one exception. One waited for texts and books by Piotr Piotrowski, which were situated between art history and criticism and caused waves of reviews, polemics, and commentaries."<sup>4</sup> According to her, his success resulted from the fact that he accurately described this time. A similar opinion was expressed by Karol Sienkiewicz, who wrote that "Although Piotrowski showed a slippage typical for art historians towards what artists or curators did, as a theoretician, he was able to define the ideological framework of their activities, describe the processes taking place, and name the sides of a broader dispute about Polish modernization in which artists took an active part."<sup>5</sup> In this text, I concentrate on one fragment of his activities from the first decade of post-communist Poland – his writings on Zofia Kulik's art and, more precisely, on their feminist dimension. I argue that Piotrowski not only, as the quoted authors claimed, presented accurately her art and its relationship to the political situation of that time, but he also practised a form of feminist reflection that was new in Polish art history and criticism, intensively engaged in criticism of the recent communist past and current politics. He catalysed, through his activities in many roles, including being a teacher at the Institute of Art History at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, the development of this specific feminist discourse.

Today, in Poland and more generally in Eastern Europe, an effort is being made to rethink the recent past of feminist scholarship, especially its development in the period of transformation from state socialism to democracy.<sup>6</sup> It is commonly observed that the 1990s were the time when Polish feminist activists and intellectuals established close ties with Western critical thought associated with democracy distancing themselves from socialist ideas of the

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birthday from the staff of the Institute of Art History of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, with the support of the artist.

<sup>4</sup> M. Ujma, "Krytyczki w Polsce po 1989 roku" [Female critics in Poland after 1989], in: *Polki, Patriotki, Rebeliantki* [Polish Women, Patriots, Rebels], ed. I. Kowalczyk, Poznań 2018, p. 178.

<sup>5</sup> K. Sienkiewicz, *Zatańczą ci, co drżeli. Polska sztuka krytyczna* [Those who Trembled will Dance. Polish Critical Art], Kraków-Warszawa 2014, p. 435.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, one of the most recent publications on the subject *Gender, Generations, and Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond*, ed. A. Artwińska, A. Mroziak, London 2021.

emancipation of women. As Magdalena Grabowska put it, “state socialism was taken for granted as a detrimental gap in the development of a Western-style liberal identity for Poland and Polish feminism”.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, they mobilized criticism of the conservative, patriarchal character of the democratic transformation taking place in Poland that manifested itself in the increased influence of the Catholic Church and the 1993 restriction of the anti-abortion law. The analysis that I propose in this text offers a close reading of this process in the domain of art history in Poland, using as an example one milieu in which a crucial role was played by, paradoxically, a male art historian not particularly interested in women artists, Piotr Piotrowski.

## ZOFIA KULIK

Three separate periods can be distinguished in Zofia Kulik’s artistic career.<sup>8</sup> The first and shortest of these was at the turn of the 1970s, when the artist studied sculpture under Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts. During the second, from 1971 to 1987, she shared her life and artistic practice with Przemysław Kwiek in a duo known as KwieKulik. The form of their activities stemmed from a non-traditional treatment of sculpture that they acquired when still at the art school, i.e., sculpture is seen not as a closed form but as being under constant transformation – a process whose stages are documented and shown. By the end of the 1980s, the KwieKulik duo broke up, parting in both their personal and professional life. At the turn of the 1990s, Zofia Kulik began making very different artworks. Initially, these were simple hand-made collages, later replaced by photomontages made using multiple exposures. The common element in all the works was a human figure inserted in decorative patterned structures, treated as an ornament, and juxtaposed with details referring to the communist system in different ways. The nude male body in all the pieces was that of a young artist, Zbigniew Libera, who posed for her assuming various postures and performing various gestures that Kulik took from art and visual culture.

Zofia Kulik’s individual practice quickly attracted attention of both critics and curators. From 1989 onwards, her works were exhibited at numerous

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<sup>7</sup> M. Grabowska, “Bringing the Second World In: Conservative Revolution(s), Socialist Legacies, and Transnational Silences in the Trajectories of Polish Feminism”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2012, 37(2), p. 396.

<sup>8</sup> More in T. Załuski, “How to Live and Work with Two Artistic Biographies: Zofia Kulik’s Archival Drive”, in: *Zofia Kulik. Methodology, My Love*, ed. A. Jakubowska, Warsaw 2019, pp. 54–77.

solo shows, both in Poland and abroad, the first being *Visual Idioms of Soc-Age*, organised in 1989 at the ZPAF Small Gallery in Warsaw, followed by a show at the Postmasters Gallery in NYC a year later,<sup>9</sup> and at many important group presentations of current Polish art.<sup>10</sup> In 1993, a photo of the artist posing before one of her works was put on the front cover of the first issue of "Magazyn Sztuki" (Art Magazine), a magazine that in the 1990s played a huge role in developing the critical discourse on art.<sup>11</sup> A conversation with Zofia Kulik, titled *Being nothing but an obedient psycho-physical instrument*, was the opening text.<sup>12</sup>

### PIOTR PIOTROWSKI ON ZOFIA KULIK

At the turn of the 1990s, Piotrowski remained inattentive to Zofia Kulik's artistic practice, at least he did not write about her. This could in part have been due to his longer stays abroad, in the US, where he was on fellowships.<sup>13</sup> He was also engaged in writing a book on the Russian avant-garde. The work came out in 1993 under the title *The Artist Between Revolution and Reaction. A Study in the Ethical History of Art*.<sup>14</sup> It seems that at the beginning of the decade, he did not closely follow the development of the Polish art scene. If he published texts on Polish art at that time, he would go back to the 1970s, including the actions that Kulik had undertaken together with Przemysław Kwiek as the KwieKulik duo. In a book published in 1991 as *The Decade. On the Syndrome of the 1970s, Artistic Culture, Criticism, Art*, he wrote about

<sup>9</sup> See <<http://kulikzofia.pl/en/cv-zofii-kulik/>> [accessed: November 28, 2021].

<sup>10</sup> Such as *Bakunin in Dresden. Polnische Kunst Heute* (1990, Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf; Kampagelfabrik, Hamburg; 1991 Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw).

<sup>11</sup> More on this see, e.g., in the already mentioned texts: Ujma, "Krytyczki...", p. 179; Sienkiewicz, *Zatańczą...*, p. 115.

<sup>12</sup> „Bądź tylko posłusznym, psychofizycznym instrumentem... Wywiad z Zofią Kulik. Rozmawiał – Ryszard Ziarkiewicz” [Being nothing but an obedient psycho-physical instrument. Ryszard Ziarkiewicz talks to Zofia Kulik], *Magazyn sztuki*, 1993, 1, pp. 12–21.

<sup>13</sup> The Kościuszko Foundation Research Grant for a study visit in New York (1989), Ailsa Mellon Bruce Senior Fellow at The Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at The National Gallery of Art Washington D.C. (1989/90), J.P. Getty Fellow at Columbia University in New York (1994).

<sup>14</sup> P. Piotrowski, *Artysta między rewolucją i reakcją. Studium z zakresu etycznej historii sztuki awangardy rosyjskiej* [The Artist Between Revolution and Reaction. A Study in the Ethical History of Art], Poznań 1993.

their *Activities for the Head* (1978).<sup>15</sup> His approach was critical, as he saw these actions as “extremely poor” and as “having virtually nothing to propose, [being] boring and pretentious”.<sup>16</sup> Piotrowski repeated and developed his criticism in a paper *Postmodernism and Post-totalitarianism* delivered in 1993 in Bratislava, at a conference “Totalitarianisms and Traditions”, which was later published first in the Slovak art magazine “ARS” and in the already mentioned “Magazyn Sztuki”.<sup>17</sup>

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when Piotrowski became interested in Kulik’s solo artistic activities. The artist herself gives 1994 as the year when the two actually met.<sup>18</sup> Kulik had a solo show in Poznań, at Galeria U Jezuitów, titled *Symbolic Weapon III*, prepared by Janusz Marciniak, a Poznań-based artist and critic. Piotrowski most probably saw the exhibition;<sup>19</sup> what Zofia Kulik remembers, however, is that they met not at the gallery but at the international congress *Contemporary Art, Contemporary Challenges in a Period of Transformation*, organised in Poznań at the same time. Piotrowski was responsible for the part of the conference dedicated to visual arts<sup>20</sup> and Kulik was mentioned there by one of the speakers, the American art historian Steven Mansbach, who said that in characterising the modern movement we need “sensitivity to specific local conditions, despite the claims to universality”. He gave an example of Kulik’s works when he claimed that “What was as meaningful in New York, London, and Paris, given the quite specific historical, political, and cultural contexts of the post-War epoch, may have little relevance to the contemporary climate of Bucharest, Sofia, Moscow, or even Poznań – as we can see with the recent work of the Polish artist, Zofia Kulik.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> P. Piotrowski, *Dekada. O syndromie lat siedemdziesiątych, kulturze artystycznej, krytyce i sztuce – wybiórczo i subiektywnie* [The Decade. On the Syndrome of the 1970s, Artistic Culture, Criticism, Art], Poznań 1991.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 56.

<sup>17</sup> It was published at around the same time as the Polish version. “Post-modernism and Post-totalitarianism. The Poland Case of the 1970s”, *ARS* 1993, 2–3, pp. 231–242. “Postmodernizm i posttotalitaryzm” (Postmodernism and Post-totalitarianism), *Magazyn Sztuki* 1994, 4, pp. 56–73.

<sup>18</sup> E-mail from the artist, 24 April 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Information from Piotr Piotrowski’s wife, Maria Żuk-Piotrowska.

<sup>20</sup> Two editions of the international congress *Culture of the Time of Transformation* were organised in Poznań in the 1990s, dedicated to the culture of Central and Eastern Europe. The first one took place on 2–5 February 1994, the second on 11–14 March 1998. Both were organised by the Poznań Society of Friends of the Sciences.

<sup>21</sup> S. Mansbach, “Contemporary Art, Contemporary Challenges in a Period of Transformation”, in: *Culture of the Time of Transformation International Congress. Materials*.

Izabela Kowalczyk – Piotrowski's student at that time, who wrote under her maiden name Pikosz – noticed the coincidence between the dates of the Kulik exhibition and the congress in her review of the show, "It is telling", she wrote "that the exhibition was opened a day before the *Contemporary Art, Contemporary Challenges in a Period of Transformation* congress began". Zofia Kulik's works were thus introduced into the discussion about the process of political and artistic changes after the fall of communism.<sup>22</sup> Kowalczyk's (Pikosz) text was polemical to the interpretation of Kulik's works as proposed by the curator of the presentation, Janusz Marciniak.<sup>23</sup> She found this interpretation to be too narrow. Like many other interpreters of Kulik's art, he too admired her for "being able to grapple with the experience of totalitarianism and find a form for expressing the weight of the external and internal desolation it had caused."<sup>24</sup> Kowalczyk (Pikosz) believed that the works did indeed deal with enslavement and submission but in a broader sense, not only caused by the communist state but also by "other tropes in human existence". The author pointed mainly to the photographs of the nude man so extensively used by Kulik. His poses often repeated those taken by people of power, while how he was presented "made him look ridiculous". According to Kowalczyk (Pikosz), "the artist thus ridicules the patriarchal culture, mocks the systems of enslavement that it has created."<sup>25</sup>

Piotrowski's first opinion on Kulik came in a text *The Old Attitude and the New Faith*, published a year after the above polemics, in 1995, in a catalogue of an exhibition *Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East-Central Europe* organised at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and reprinted in an extended version in the already-mentioned "Magazyn Sztuki".<sup>26</sup> His text concentrated on artistic projects that were heavily immersed in the

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*Poznań, 2–5 February 1994*, ed. J. Brendel, S. Jakóbczyk, Poznań 1998, p. 293. Any analysis of Kulik's works was not offered by Mansbach, he just presented two reproductions of her works.

<sup>22</sup> I. Pikosz, "Chwytając za każdą broń" [Grabbing at Every Weapon], *Czas Kultury* 1994, 1, p. 72.

<sup>23</sup> Kowalczyk also wrote about Kulik in a similar spirit in her 1995 M.A. thesis at the Institute of Art History, on the feminist motifs in Polish art (synopsis published in *Artium Quaestiones* in 1997 as "Wątki feministyczne w polskiej sztuce" [Feminist Tropes in Polish Art], pp. 135–152).

<sup>24</sup> J. Marciniak, "Sztuka jest bronią bezbronnych. O wystawie »Broń symboliczna« Zofii Kulik" [Art is the Weapon of the Defenceless], in: *Broń symboliczna III* [Symbolic Weapon III], ex. cat., U Jezuitów Gallery, Poznań 1994.

<sup>25</sup> Pikosz, "Chwytając...", p. 73.

<sup>26</sup> P. Piotrowski, "The Old Attitude and the New Faith" in: *Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe*, ed. L.J. Hoptman, ex. cat., Museum of Contemporary

political situation of Poland.<sup>27</sup> Kulik interested him, as her “art combines political criticism with a feminist perspective. This combination seems very significant from the standpoint of the broader problem of the position of women in Polish society.”<sup>28</sup>

Piotrowski’s writings about Zofia Kulik seem to merge the above-mentioned proposals made by Marciniak and Kowalczyk (Pikosz), as he presented her art as combining political criticism with a feminist perspective. Whilst Marciniak failed to address the gender issue,<sup>29</sup> Kowalczyk (Pikosz) focused on it, although from a universal perspective and not in any specific political reality. It was in the connection of these two aspects that Piotrowski saw the specificity of Kulik’s art.<sup>30</sup> To him, she was an artist who touched both on the power relations between a woman and the patriarchal system and someone who related to the current political situation, actually to the position of women in the Polish communist and post-communist society. When describing this, he stressed “the negative attitude of Polish culture towards women, a culture moulded by Catholic views and institutions, regardless of whether the communists, liberals, peasants, or ex-communists again”. He pointed to the important role of the Church in Poland which, among other things, resulted from the fact that Polish history “has made Catholicism an integral part of the national tradition”, and observed that whilst the communist authorities masked their anti-woman politics, “after the ‘break’, at a time of heightened Catholic reaction, the situation changed to the extent that the authorities stopped trying to conceal their repressive attitudes towards women.”<sup>31</sup>

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Art, Chicago 1995, pp. 34–45; P. Piotrowski, “Beyond the Old and New Belief”, *Magazyn Sztuki* 1996, 10(2), pp. 161–176.

<sup>27</sup> The other artists who he discussed in this context were collectives Pomarańczowa Alternatywa, Gruppy, Luxus, Koło Klipsa, Łódź Kaliska, and Robert Rumas, Zbigniew Libera, Józef Robakowski, Grzegorz Klaman.

<sup>28</sup> Piotrowski, “The Old Attitude...”, p. 41.

<sup>29</sup> He only wrote: “it is symptomatic that it was a woman who managed to cope with the experience of totalitarianism [...] and oppose the stigma of the epoch of the enslaved mind, the stigma of its not-enslaved intelligence and salvaged sensitivity”. Marciniak, “Sztuka jest bronią bezbronych”.

<sup>30</sup> Piotrowski made a reference to Kowalczyk’s interpretation in a text published in the Kulik monograph exhibition in the National Museum in Poznań in 1999. P. Piotrowski, “Between Siberia and Cyberia. On the Art of Zofia Kulik and on Museums”, in: *Zofia Kulik. From Siberia to Cyberia*, ex. cat., National Museum, Poznań, 1999, p. 15

<sup>31</sup> Piotrowski, “Beyond...”, p. 173, 172. Law of 7 January 1993 on Family Planning, Human Embryo Protection and Conditions of Permissibility of Abortion made the latter more stringent, by permitting abortion only in three cases: a threat to the life or health of

In the second half of the 1990s, Zofia Kulik began to play an ever-greater role in Piotrowski's writing, being, as he put it, "one of the most interesting artists in the domain of visual arts who touches on the issues of the visual structure of the language of power."<sup>32</sup> By accentuating this aspect of her art, he consistently pointed to its feminist dimension. In a text to the catalogue of her solo exhibition in 1999, which, as I have already mentioned, he organised at the National Museum in Poznań, Piotrowski presented Kulik as a person who emancipated herself by breaking the binding rules in culture governing gender relations.<sup>33</sup> Piotrowski referred to her works that used photos of Libera, the expansive set of these photographs exhibited for the first time as *The Archive of Gestures*, writing that "the one who rules here is a woman, not a man."<sup>34</sup> Piotrowski explained that it was she who noticed the entire organisation of the world, while the man was just a supine element, unaware of broader meanings.

The exhibition at the National Museum in Poznań could be perceived as strengthening Kulik's position in the art world. At the time, the artist enjoyed both Polish and foreign critical acclaim, which manifested itself in the form of numerous exhibitions, texts, and an invitation to represent Poland at the Venice Biennale in 1997. However, the monographic exposition prepared by Piotrowski was the first to be held in an institution of a rank as high as the National Museum.<sup>35</sup> This show was also the second to introduce a feminist perspective into this kind of institution in Poland, the first being *Polish Women Artists* in the National Museum in Warsaw in 1991, which was of a completely different character that will be discussed later in this text. In the case of the Poznań exhibition, the introduction of a feminist perspective turned out to be only partially successful, as the act of censorship that was performed at the beginning of the exhibition revealed the enormous resistance to changes in gender relations in the art world or, more broadly, in society. The director of the museum did not agree to exhibit fragments of male nudes, photographs

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the pregnant woman, severe and irreversible fetal defect, the pregnancy is a result of an unlawful act.

<sup>32</sup> P. Piotrowski, "Sztuka krytyczna" [Critical art], *Pokaz* 1999, 3, p. 41.

<sup>33</sup> Piotrowski invited English feminist art historian Sarah Wilson to also contribute to the catalogue.

<sup>34</sup> Piotrowski, "Between...", pp. 13–14.

<sup>35</sup> In the years 1992–1997, he was Head of the Contemporary Art Department/Curator of the Contemporary Art Gallery at the National Museum in Poznań. On Piotrowski's curatorial activities see K. Murawska-Muthesius, "The Critical Museum Debate Continues", in: *Horizontal Art History and Beyond, Revising Peripheral Critical Practices*, eds. A. Jakubowska, M. Radomska, Routledge 2022, pp. 15–25.



of sculptures from the Hermitage collection in St Petersburg, which were part of an installation titled *A Home and A Museum*, in the Museum hall, a space that could not be bypassed by viewers who came to see the collection and not the temporary exhibition. He proposed to move the work to a side room, but the artist did not agree. Instead, she proposed to attach fig leaves onto the photographs, which the director opposed, saying that it would look like censorship. Finally, the installation was taken down.<sup>36</sup>

## PIOTROWSKI AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINIST ART HISTORY IN POLAND

It should be noted that in the earlier period, Piotrowski had not participated in any discussions or activities related to feminism, feminist art, or women's art. Most probably, this was not due to a lack of knowledge of the above but rather that while socialist ideas of emancipation of women were unacceptable for Piotrowski, who was a member of the anti-communist opposition, Western ideas of second-wave feminism, which appeared in Poland in the 1970s,<sup>37</sup> functioned in this country as apolitical in the sense that they were not related to activist and political actions and manifests, and as such were uninteresting to Piotrowski.

In socialist Poland, two more extensive texts on feminism in art (not so much in art history) were published, both written by male critics. The first was an article by Stefan Morawski, that appeared in 1977 under the title *Neo-feminism in Art*.<sup>38</sup> It presented feminist art as a revolt by women against society but described it as a foreign phenomenon. The text ended with the author's reassurance that it was written as an "invitation to reflect on the same problems in our own country."<sup>39</sup> The second elaboration on feminism in art was a text by Grzegorz Działowski published in 1988.<sup>40</sup> He finished his long overview of the most important characteristics of feminist art with a fragment on Polish women artists, as if demonstrating that the invitation formulated by Morawski

<sup>36</sup> More on this: Piotrowski, *Sztuka według polityki*, pp. 205–207.

<sup>37</sup> See more in: A. Jakubowska, "Circulation of Feminist Ideas in Communist Poland", in: *Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present*, ed. B. Hock, A. Allas, Routledge 2018, pp. 135–148.

<sup>38</sup> S. Morawski, "Neofeminizm w sztuce" [Neo-feminism in Art], *Sztuka* 1977, 4, pp. 57–63.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 63.

<sup>40</sup> G. Działowski, "Sztuka feministyczna" [Feminist Art], *Miesięcznik Literacki* 1988, 2–3, pp. 104–116 (part I) and 1988, 4, pp. 81–90 (part II).

was undertaken by them. Yet feminist art is presented by him as a radical artistic practice that developed in the West and influenced some Polish artists, and not as resulting from the critical analysis of the local society and the position of women within it. What is worth noting is that Dziamski functioned in the Poznań scholarly and artistic *milieu*, just like Piotrowski. What's more, it was in Poznań, in the ON Gallery, that Izabella Gustowska and Krystyna Piotrowska conducted their artistic and curatorial activities concentrated on women artists, including the organisation of all-women exhibitions.<sup>41</sup> The text by Dziamski and the activities of both artists revealed a certain ambivalence towards feminism, manifested by a favourable attitude towards the feminist concentration on women and their experiences but also by a strong objection to entangling art with politics. Although they recognised the significance of promoting women artists, and the validity of the question about whether there was any community among women (a similar sensitivity being the common basis), they would still be reluctant to connect art with social or political issues.

The same attitude was apparent after 1989, both in the activities of Gustowska<sup>42</sup> or Dziamski, as well as in other initiatives undertaken by female critics or historians, for example, the all-women exhibitions with the participation of Zofia Kulik. What they had in common was that they did not problematize nor politicise the question of gender.<sup>43</sup> The profile of these exhibitions had an obvious impact on the way that Kulik's art was presented there; paradoxically, the issue of gender was left unnoticed. In a short note in the catalogue of *Polish Women Artists*, Agnieszka Morawińska, curator of the exhibition, did not mention the issue at all.<sup>44</sup> This is important for a comparison between this show, which I have already mentioned in the text as the first one introducing the feminist perspective into any Polish national museum, and the Poznań monographic exhibition of Kulik. *Polish Women Artists* referred to earlier international shows presenting women artists that aimed at challenging the male-dominated art canon.<sup>45</sup> It did not, however, offer any

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<sup>41</sup> See more in: A. Jakubowska, "Meetings: Exhibitions of Women's Art Curated by Izabella Gustowska", *Ikonotheka* 2016, 26, pp. 291–311.

<sup>42</sup> Krystyna Piotrowska emigrated to Sweden in the 1980s.

<sup>43</sup> I. Kowalczyk, "Wystawy sztuki kobiet 1991–2001: od esencjalizmu do konstruktywizmu" [All-Women Exhibitions 1991–2001: From Essentialism to Constructivism], *Sztuka i Dokumentacja* 2016, 15, pp. 97–105.

<sup>44</sup> A. Morawińska, "Zofia Kulik", in: *Artystki polskie* [Polish Women Artists], ex. cat., National Museum, Warsaw 1991, p. 216.

<sup>45</sup> See texts by the curator of *Artystki polskie* (Polish Women Artists) and by Maria Poprzęcka, "Inne? Kobiety i historia sztuki" [Different? Women and Art History], in: *Artystki polskie* [Polish Women Artists], ex. cat., National Museum, Warsaw 1991, pp. 9–16, 17–20.

feminist interpretation of art created by women. A similar scenario was the case with the catalogue to the exposition *Presence III*, organised in Poznań in 1992, in which Kulik's art was discussed in a text by Alicja Kępińska.<sup>46</sup> Noticeably, both texts (by Morawińska and Kępińska) mentioned the nude model, but neither of them discussed the gender relations present in her art. No different was the situation with the catalogue to the exhibition *Woman About Woman* organised in Bielsko-Biała in 1996 in the article by Adam Sobota titled *The Art of Zofia Kulik*. The only difference from the two texts mentioned above is that the phrase "nude model" was replaced by "nude man", thus the author at least noticed the model's gender.<sup>47</sup>

This short overview of comments on the oeuvre of Zofia Kulik formulated on the occasions of all-women exhibitions organised in Poland in the 1990s, demonstrates one type of the discourse on women artists that was popular during that period. It concentrated on promoting women and their intimate experiences but ignored gender power relations and the situation of women in society.<sup>48</sup> Another type of discourse, one that put exactly these issues at its centre, had started to develop, and it was Piotr Piotrowski who played a crucial role in this process.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> A. Kępińska, "Bliskość bytu" [The Proximity of Existence], in: *Obecność III* [Presence III], ex. cat., BWA, Poznań 1992, n.p.

<sup>47</sup> A. Sobota, "Sztuka Zofii Kulik" [The Art of Zofia Kulik], in: *Kobieta o kobiecie* [Woman about Woman], ex. cat., „Galeria Bielska” BWA, Bielsko-Biała 1996, pp. 32–35.

<sup>48</sup> It is symptomatic that the feminist campaign against restriction of the anti-abortion law used an artwork not by a Polish but by an American artist – Barbara Kruger, her poster *Your Body is a Battleground* – who appeared in Poland on the invitation of the curator Milada Ślizińska.

<sup>49</sup> In this case study, I concentrate on Piotrowski's and his milieu's activities that I perceive to be the most influential, yet some female art historians and artists that promoted a feminist perspective at that time, at least sporadically, should be mentioned: Ewa Franus, who at that time lived in Holland; Barbara Limanowska, an art historian engaged in feminist activism, the leader of a feminist organization, OŚKA, who in 1999 published a special issue of its bulletin devoted to the feminist perspective in women's literary and visual production (*OŚKA. Pismo Ośrodka Informacji Środowisk Kobiety* 1999, 3(8)); Ewa Toniak, who criticized one of the exhibitions mentioned in the text for lack of connections with a feminist agenda (E. Toniak, "Ogród Zosi" [Zosia's Garden], *Obieg* 1993, 7–8 (51–52), p. 65); or Katarzyna Kozyra, who introduced feminist materials to a zin/magazine published by students from Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts (*Czereja* 1995, 5). The above-mentioned Milada Ślizińska, who invited feminist artists to exhibit in Warsaw, diminished the feminist agenda of their work as, when exposed, it resulted in diminished interest by the media and public, see "Gender artyści mnie nie dotyczy. Wywiad z Miladą Ślizińską" [I'm not concerned by the gender of an artist. An interview with Milada Ślizińska], *OŚKA. Pismo Ośrodka Informacji Środowisk Kobiety* 1999, 3(8), pp. 19–23.

As already mentioned, Piotr Piotrowski did not participate in these pro-women apolitical activities. He was not interested in women's art as such. What interested him was critical art, also that created by women. Feminism appeared in the scope of his interests as a result of the influence of the very engaged, both in feminism and politically, American art history and criticism. This is very apparent, for example, in his book *In the Shadow of Duchamp. The New York Notes*, which was published after his return from research stays in the States.<sup>50</sup> The fact that Piotrowski became involved in feminist art history and criticism did not stem from his interest in art made by women but rather from his identification with the critical stance presented by feminism and some women artists. Nor was it based on in-depth studies of the feminist reflection on art. While his female student – Izabela Kowalczyk (Pikosz) – referred to Griselda Pollock in her above-mentioned text from 1994, Piotrowski in his article from 1996, in which he presented a feminist interpretation of Zofia Kulik's work for the first time, did not mention a single feminist art historian, but instead resorted to John Berger and his comments from the *Ways of Seeing*. He wrote: "in examining visual culture from a sexual standpoint, we can follow John Berger in saying that a characteristic feature of Western (masculinist) art is the principle that "men act and women appear". [...] Zofia Kulik has turned the principle described by Berger upside down: women act, and men appear."<sup>51</sup>

The references to John Berger's book, originally published in 1972, in interpretations that were feminist by assumption and written in the last years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, can be somewhat surprising. Interestingly, it was largely owing to Piotrowski that this particular fragment from Berger's book became one of the most frequently cited points of reference used in feminist interpretations in Poland.<sup>52</sup> It was, first of all, because Piotrowski, an already highly valued and often quoted art historian in the country, cited Berger.<sup>53</sup> Secondly, he was instrumental in the publication of the *Ways of Seeing* in Polish, which came out in 1997, translated by Mariusz Bryl, a colleague of Piotrowski from the Institute of Art History of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, and published by REBIS, which was also Piotrowski's publisher.

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<sup>50</sup> P. Piotrowski, *W cieniu Duchampa. Notatki nowojorskie* [In the Shadow of Duchamp: New York Notes], Poznań 1996.

<sup>51</sup> Piotrowski, "Beyond...", p. 173.

<sup>52</sup> Other tropes from Berger's book did not find much popularity.

<sup>53</sup> Also in his analyses of the works by Natalia LL, Piotrowski, "Postmodernizm i post-totalitaryzm...", p. 65.

Although Piotrowski did not resort to reading feminist research too often and actually did not devote much attention to women artists, he contributed to the development of feminist art history in Poland in several different ways. Some of them, when he acted as an influential critic, or as a curator, have already been pointed out. Yet it is also worth mentioning his role as a teacher who supported the feminist interests of his students. I have already discussed Izabela Kowalczyk's writing on Zofia Kulik. She included her observations in a master thesis written in 1995 and devoted to "feminist tropes" or "feminist interventions", as she called them, in the works of Polish women artists.<sup>54</sup> Another feminist master's thesis written at that time under Piotrowski's supervision was my work on Natalia LL.<sup>55</sup> Supported by our teacher, we organised the Poznań Feminist Seminar in 1995, which consisted of artists' presentations and an academic conference. In a short text that accompanied the event, we underlined that we were specifically interested in feminist issues, both in art and art history, not just in women's art. As another student of Piotrowski at that time, Paweł Leszkowicz, noted, we were all inspired by Michel Foucault. Leszkowicz observed that "Foucault's books on power, sexuality, and exclusion had a significant impact on Polish new art history and art at the time of the political transformation in the 1990s, unsurprisingly, as the Polish systemic transition involved so many conflicts over discriminatory sexual and gender politics."<sup>56</sup> The conviction that reflections on women's art need to confront these conflicts, not avoid them, was one of the characteristics of feminist art history that flourished in this milieu.

Moreover, Piotrowski's role as an editor of the annual "Artium Quaestiones" (since 1996<sup>57</sup>) and an initiator of other publications should be mentioned here. Already in 1993, Ewa Franus, a graduate of the Institute of Art

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<sup>54</sup> Fragments published in *Artium Quaestiones* in 1997 as I. Kowalczyk, "Wątki feministyczne w polskiej sztuce" [Feminist Tropes in Polish Art], pp. 135–152.

<sup>55</sup> Fragments published in *Artium Quaestiones* in 1997 as A. Jakubowska, "Kobieta wobec seksualności – podporządkowana, uwikłana czy wyzwolona" [Woman and sexuality – submissive, entangled, or liberated?], pp. 113–134.

<sup>56</sup> P. Leszkowicz, "Gender and Art History in Poland: A Constant Story of Subversion", in: *Making art history in Europe after 1945*, ed. N. de Haro Garcíá, P. Mayayo, J. Carrillo, Routledge 2020, p. 234. A more general formulation about the significance of Foucault's thought in Poland at that time was formulated by Ewa Domańska in E. Domańska, "Co zrobił z nami Foucault?" [What Has Foucault Done to Us?], in: *French Theory w Polsce* [French Theory in Poland], ed. E. Domańska, M. Loba, Poznań 2010, pp. 61–79.

<sup>57</sup> Piotrowski became a deputy director of the Institute of Art. History in 1996, which automatically, in accordance with an unwritten rule, made him a member of the editorial team.

History at Adam Mickiewicz University, published an article, *The Seeing, the Seen*, which was the first presentation of the main tendencies of feminist art history published in a Polish academic journal.<sup>58</sup> The first issue of the magazine that appeared after Piotrowski joined its editorial team included articles based on the above-mentioned master's theses by his students (already doctoral students at that time), and a text by Griselda Pollock, a translation of an introduction to her book that appeared that year – *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*.<sup>59</sup> The next issue included a translation of a text written by Sarah Wilson and published in the catalogue of the exhibition *Femininmasculin*, organised in the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1995. Moreover, Piotrowski contributed to the publication of the Polish translation of Lynda Nead's book *The Female Nude. Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality*, for many years one of the main points of reference for Polish art writers proposing a feminist reading of the female nude.<sup>60</sup>

## CONCLUSION

From today's perspective, we notice the distinctive character of feminist reflections on women's art developed by Piotrowski and his milieu in the 1990s, and in this conclusion, I will point out its two interrelated aspects. First, his feminist reflections were indebted to Western notions, although he was soon to become the author of the concept of horizontal art history, which undermined the significance of the narrations produced in the centres.<sup>61</sup> At that time, horizontalization of art historical discourse meant, for him, that the art of particular artists should be considered in relation to local problems and not universal art language, in the case of Zofia Kulik, in relation to the patriarchal character of the political transformation in Poland. It did not mean turning to the local emancipatory tradition, including socialist concepts and practices. Like other feminists at that time, he rejected

<sup>58</sup> E. Franus, "Widziane, widzące" [The Seeing, The Seen], *Artium Quaestiones* 1993, 6, pp. 101–114.

<sup>59</sup> G. Pollock, "Polityka teorii: pokolenia i geografie. Teoria feministyczna i historie historii sztuki" [The politics of theory: generations and geographies. Feminist theory and histories of art history], trans. M. Bryl, *Artium Quaestiones* 1997, 7, pp. 153–186.

<sup>60</sup> L. Nead, *Akty kobiety. Sztuka, obscena i seksualność*, trans. E. Franus, Poznań 1998.

<sup>61</sup> P. Piotrowski, "Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde", in: *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent*, eds. S. Bru et al., Berlin 2009, pp. 49–58.

them because they were perceived as an element of the communist regime's policy.

Secondly, for him, feminism was inseparable from the defence of democracy and criticism of any form of totalitarianism. It was part of a struggle for freedom and against any forms of subservience of an individual to political or religious systems. For him, there was no *raison d'être* for feminism without any form of critical engagement. This is visible in his attitude to Zofia Kulik's art. As I wrote at the beginning of this text, her monographic exhibition, organised by Piotrowski at the National Museum in Poznań in 1999 was, in a way, the culmination of his interest in her art. Later, he did not devote much attention to it.<sup>62</sup> This could have been caused by the fact that Kulik's art changed, which can be seen, for example, in her series *Patterns*, exhibited for the first time in 2007. On the one hand, *Patterns*, being ornamental structures, filled with a combination of human, floral, and other motifs, inscribe themselves well into Kulik's oeuvre, while on the other, they are significantly different. They mark some kind of release from the "necessity" to visualize the post-communist condition and offer the possibility of elaborating other aspects of her life and work.<sup>63</sup> When asked why the earlier, political content is missing here, Kulik answered "I did critical work, but at the moment I don't do it. In a way, I betray myself."<sup>64</sup> This is how Piotrowski could have seen it, as he was the one who never betrayed himself in this regard.

In subsequent decades, Piotrowski's writings gradually stopped resonating with the development of feminist scholarship and art, and they stopped playing that important role of the catalyst. I can only imagine that he would get back together with the feminist art and activism developing intensively in Poland in recent years.

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<sup>62</sup> He wrote about the act of censorship that took place during this exposition. For Piotrowski, who criticised the strength of anti-democratic, conservatist forces in post-communist Poland, the censoring of Kulik's work was of utmost importance and he wrote about it in several texts, also in his book *Art and Democracy in post-Communist Europe*, trans. A. Brzyski, London 2012, pp. 278–281.

<sup>63</sup> A. Jakubowska, "Patterns: 'In a way, I betray myself'", in: *Zofia Kulik. Methodology...*, p. 321.

<sup>64</sup> "W pewnym sensie zdradzam samą siebie: Z Zofią Kulik rozmawia Kamila Wielebska" [In a way, I betray myself. Kamila Wielebska talks to Zofia Kuik], unpublished, sent to me by the artist.

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#### FEMINISM IN THE TIME OF TRANSFORMATION. PIOTR PIOTROWSKI, ZOFIA KULIK AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINIST ART HISTORY IN POLAND

##### Summary

This article is an analysis of one area of Piotr Piotrowski’s (1952–2015) activity in the 1990s – his writings on the art of Zofia Kulik and, more specifically, on its feminist dimension. I argue that although Piotrowski was never interested in women’s art in particular, not only did he practise feminist criticism during this period, but he was also a catalyst for the development of a specific form of feminist reflection that was then new in Polish art history. It focused on power relations and did not accept distancing oneself from social and political problems. I analyse it from the perspective of contemporary revisions of the development of feminist discourse after 1989 in Eastern Europe, which critically examines its embeddedness in Western ideas.

##### Keywords:

Piotr Piotrowski, Zofia Kulik, feminism, post-communism, feminist art history, women’s art