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KwieKulik through the Lens of Feminism

The Acted out Passiveness of Zofia Kulik and Her Maintenance Work

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Introduction

Living and working under the name KwieKulik in the Polish People's Republic from 1971 to 1987, artists Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek developed 'Activities', a dualistic performative art practice, to address the social, economic and political issues of their day. At the same time they constantly commented on their own work and that of their contemporaries through documentary films and photographs, regarding this activity as an equally important form of creative practice. Due to the political and critical nature of their work, KwieKulik soon began to experience problems exhibiting it in public.[1] Their private apartment in Warsaw, which they named the Studio of Activities, Documentation and Propagation (PDDiU), duly became one of the few places where it was possible for them to host exhibitions and presentations both for home audiences and for visitors from abroad. They therefore rendered their private domestic space semi-public, creating a small, alternative world as an antidote to Poland's artistic reality.[2] In due course, the fact that a popular alternative venue such as theirs was tolerated in a communist country has given rise to a major area of critique. While Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski points out that the authorities did not consider Polish Conceptualists' unofficial venues to be a threat to the status quo in the 1970s,[3] it should be noted that the artistic networks they constructed ultimately connected artists like KwieKulik to a larger underground and even to the mainstream art scene on both sides of the Europe's so-called postwar Iron Curtain. In this way KwieKulik successfully defended both their art and that of others against 'historical annihil-

1 In 1976 KwieKulik were banned from representing Poland abroad as a result of the Eagle Affair, when the authorities accused them of disrespecting the State Visual Arts Workshops (Pracownie Sztuk Plastycznych, usually referred to as PSP) by calling them 'barracks' and their director by calling him 'man dick' in their *Commentary Art* series produced for the exhibition '7 Young Poles' at Malmö Konsthall, Sweden. Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2018, p 349; Lukasz Ronduda and Georg Schöllhammer, eds, *KwieKulik: Zofia Kulik and Przemyslaw Kwiek*, JRP/Ringier, Zurich, 2012, pp 220–221.

2 In order for an artist to make a living in socialist Poland, the only legal way was either to make craft-like objects or take on cash jobs commissioned by the authorities. Tomasz Załuski, 'Kwiekulik and the Political Economy of the Potboiler', *Third Text* 153, special issue, 'Actually Existing Artworlds of Socialism', Reuben Fowkes, Guest Editor, vol 32, issue 4, October 2018, pp 371–378.

3 Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*, Reaktion Books, London, 2009, p 317

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KwieKulik, *Activities with Dobromierz*, 1972–1974, photos: courtesy the artists and Kulik-KwieKulik Foundation

ation':[4] their critical art was recorded and recognised by many, whether the authorities liked it or not.

This, however, is not what I want to discuss. In a departure from the standard interpretation, which, although it has been expanded on by scholars over time, continues to minimise the scope of the artists' work; I argue that the ongoing struggle of Kulik for self-definition allows us to revisit KwieKulik's art through the lens of feminism. In comparing KwieKulik with the conceptualist duo Abramović & Ulay, aka Marina Abramović and Ulay (Frank Uwe Laysiepen), who were active in the West in the same period, Katarzyna Michalak claims that while KwieKulik were subject to marginalisation, Abramović & Ulay gained international recognition.[5] This difference in the reception of the two partnerships, according to Michalak, resulted not only from the political and economic isolation of Poland between the 1970s and 1980s but also from the restricted regional and local context of KwieKulik's art: while Abramović & Ulay discussed 'universal issues' such as gender disparity and the political tension between the East and the West, KwieKulik spent most of their time investigating the Polish political status quo.

4 Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc*, op cit, p 5

5 Katarzyna Michalak, 'Performing Life, Living Art: Abramovic/Ulay and KwieKulik', 1999, Zofia Kulik/KwieKulik/Kulik-KwieKulik Foundation, http://kulikzofia.pl/en/archiwum/katarzyna-michalak-performing-life-living-art-abramovic-ulay-and-kwiekulik/ accessed 16 December 2021

KwieKulik, *Activities with Dobromierz*, 1972–1974, photos: courtesy the artists and Kulik-KwieKulik Foundation

Michalak's comparison is useful in that it identifies the problem of the marginalisation of east European art, but my question is this: is it fair to conclude that KwieKulik's art was narrowly defined by its regional context simply because the artists had limited connections with the outside and had few opportunities to explore 'universal issues'?

Considering KwieKulik's art from the perspective of Kulik, writing in 2004 Maud Jacquin suggested that rather than the art itself, it was perhaps the viewers' perception that had been restricted and framed, deliberately or not, by Kulik's so-called regional context.[6] Jacquin identified similarities between American artist Mary Kelly's *Post-partum Document* (1973) and KwieKulik's *Activities with Dobromierz* (1972–1974), claiming that both served as a dispassionate documentation and analysis of the intimate relationship between mother and child. But because the two artists approached the concept from a different perspective, Kulik's work was not associated with maternity in the same way Kelly's was. While the American artist was informed by a feminist critique of the assumed naturalness of motherhood, the Polish artist believed that the issue of gender inequality had been resolved and dismissed feminism

6 Maud Jacquin, 'Motherhood across the Iron Curtain: On Zofia Kulik and Mary Kelly', nd, Zofia Kulik/KwieKulik/Kulik-KwieKulik Foundation, http://kulikzofia.pl/en/archiwum/jacquin-maud-motherhood-across-the-iron-curtain-on-zofia-kulik-and-mary-kelly/ accessed 16 December 2021

as 'a decadent bourgeois ideology'.[7] However, Kulik had subsequently questioned her earlier work, often seeing it as evidence of her oppression, and so Jacquin called for a project of rediscovery of KwieKulik's art. 'The political history of Eastern Europe,' she remarked, 'condemned artists to anonymity, including those who deserved a place in the history of art.'[8]

The key to transcending the standard understanding, as Jacquin implied, can be found in Kulik. In the late 1980s KwieKulik reached a significant turning point as Kulik struggled for independence from her partner. Indeed, up until this point Kulik herself had not commented on their partnership and work, and it was usually Kwiek who represented the duo. Accordingly, their artistic strategy officially switched from his specialty of experimental, improvisational performance art, which characterised the duo's work in the 1970s, to her organised, picture-oriented art. Kulik was subsequently accused by her partner of betraying their original artistic ideals.[9] Art critics in turn accused her of reducing KwieKulik's art to 'aesthetically pleasing visual metaphors that focus the viewer's attention on the aesthetic or personal rather than the political'.[10] In this article, however, I will argue that Kulik's struggle opened up the possibility for reading KwieKulik's art through the lens of feminism, allowing for their art to engage with this so-called universal issue. I want to show that a regional, local context should never be an obstacle to developing new understandings of art. Indeed, even if art is not associated with the 'universal issue' of its time, that fact in itself can be interesting enough for scholars to critically engage. Thus, I will respond to Piotrowski's call for a change in attitude towards conceptual art of the Eastern bloc, which, despite a high level of popularity regionally, is 'generally missing from important catalogues and anthologies on conceptual art produced at the heyday of the movement as well as from subsequent historic studies aspiring to provide a systematic description of conceptualism as an art movement'.[11]

This article seeks to provide a feminist understanding of KwieKulik's art and, to a certain extent, to address the urgent necessity for rewriting art history as a history of labour, as suggested by Marxist feminists in recent years. First, I will identify two key questions in order to briefly address the difficulties involved in analysing central and eastern European art in relation to the issue of gender. Then I will critically review a paradox presented in both Michalak's and Jacquin's articles – they reject a feminist reading of KwieKulik while nonetheless hinting at one – to point out that their understandings are limited by ideological differences between the former Eastern bloc and the West, before analysing the visible and invisible gender roles and identities reflected in two of KwieKulik's most well-known performances, *Monument without a Passport* (1978) and *Activity for the Head: Three Acts* (1978). The visible refers to how, in their open-form performances, Kulik had to work harder – to allow herself to be physically restricted and mentally humiliated – in order to be viewed as an active, labouring subject like her male partner, rather than simply as a posing object. The invisible, meanwhile, refers to the planning and organising work Kulik did for KwieKulik's open form, which was always rendered secondary to Kwiek's ambition of spontaneous appearance. I will associate Kulik's work with Mierle Laderman Ukeles's maintenance art to argue that, by giving *Activity for the Head* a planned and scripted look, Kulik started what remains for her

7 Ibid

8 Ibid

9 Dorota Jarecka, 'Zofia Kulik: I Had to Have a Body', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 19 May 2004, Zofia Kulik/KwieKulik/Kulik-KwieKulik Foundation, http://kulikzofia.pl/en/archiwum/dorota-jarecka-musialam-miec-cialo/ accessed 16 December 2021

10 Lukasz Ronduda, 'Art, Love, Politics, Science: The Life and Art of Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek 1970-87', in Ronduda and Schöllhamme, eds, *KwieKulik*, op cit, p 14

11 Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, op cit, p 315

an ongoing project of self-definition that questions the dissociation between reproduction and creativity. Her project invokes Kathi Weeks's 'utopian demand', which declares a clear rupture with the past and in the interests of progress towards a different future, for better or worse. Kulik's current activities construct a utopia in which the hierarchy that once controlled her can be ridiculed and overthrown, while her research and maintenance of the PDDiU archive offers that utopia a sense of concreteness.

My research largely depended on literature written in or translated into English by researchers from Poland and the former West. I also made direct contact with Zofia Kulik and Wiktoria Szczupacka, the director of the Kulik-KwieKulik Foundation, in order to develop my understanding and to access historic sources. A visit to the PDDiU archive, now located on the outskirts of Warsaw, also played an essential part, bringing me closer, both psychologically and physically, to the space where the artists lived and worked. Here an in-person conversation with Kulik and Szczupacka to some extent further dispelled my stereotypical understandings of KwieKulik, as well as of the Polish art scene of the 1970s and 1980s.

Considering KwieKulik's Art in Relation to Gender: Two Questions

When considering KwieKulik's art in relation to gender – which may be considered a global issue nuanced by regional context – two aspects in particular emerge that are crucial to an understanding of feminist art and feminist theory in central and eastern Europe during and after the Cold War period (1947–1991). The first is how, when analysing art from this region through a feminist lens – a subjectivity that emerged in the former West – one avoids hegemonic understandings. This is closely related to the identities of central and eastern European feminist art and feminist theory, which were recognised and developed some three decades later than their Western counterparts and are thus often problematically referred to as belated developments. Secondly, one has to cope with the fact that many women artists in the region were, and still are, against being identified as feminist artists; indeed, even those who are open to feminist thinking (like Kulik) are not entirely at ease with their art being associated with the issue of gender.

Berlin-based curator Bojana Pejić's introduction to *Gender Check*, a book published in 2010 that gathered together writings on art and gender in eastern Europe, is pertinent for addressing the first issue. Perjić argues that searching for so-called original versions of eastern European feminist art and theory, and treating them as 'belated version [s]' of those of the West, is inherently problematic because it invokes 'an outdated assumption related to the centre and the margins, the original and translation, and implies hierarchies in the production of knowledge'.[12] The difference between the East and the West, according to Pejić, is spatial rather than chronological – chronology conforming to the 'standard version of the story of modernity' – that is, a world history that situates western Europe at the forefront of development and progress.[13]

12 Bojana Pejić, 'Introduction: Eppur si muove!', in Bojana Pejić, ERSTE Foundation and Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna, eds, *Gender Check: A Reader: Art and Theory in Eastern Europe*, Buchhandlung Walther König, Berlin, 2010, p 34

13 Ibid, p 35

Thus, while we can engage (Western) feminist criticism as transferable knowledge and as an analytic tool, the distinct cultural and historical contexts of different geographies should always be the basis of any analysis. Whether they are from the so-called East or the West, as Martina Pachmanová suggests, feminist art critics are faced with the same task: tackling 'the long-demolished, yet mentally still-standing Wall' that generates fragmented and distorted understandings of eastern European women and their art.[14]

In order to unfold the second aspect, it may be helpful to first consider some comments made by Kulik on feminism:

> I once watched a TV programme… on the occasion of the Feminist Conference in Krakow in 1995. I had already been active on my own for a long time. So, American feminists came, I re-wrote their names from the video tape: Elizabeth Kennedy, Claire Kahane, Carolyn Korsmeyer, Isabel Marcus. They answered the question 'My road to feminism'. I listened to them and oops! I could see my former Gehenna [;] I had had to achieve everything of which they were telling now solely by myself. So I listened and every sentence I heard was about me. I thought to myself 'That's the point! It's like that!' Luckily, I started to go back to my own personal experience and recalled various things. Had I not done it, what would have been with me now? I am not a person who will instantly reveal all of her private matters. Speaking about myself in public was a really great trespass for me. Even now, in this interview, I dig out various facts under the influence of your feminist questions… but, come on! Let's not exaggerate. I do not want to be reduced to a single label.[15]

What is clear from this is that on the one hand Kulik is belatedly becoming aware of aspects of her earlier life and work to which a feminist lens can be applied, while on the other hand she rejects being 'reduced to a single label' – a feminist artist. This paradox may lead us to what Angela Dimitrakaki calls 'a politically strategic opening of the definition of feminist practice', that is, it is not the artist but her artworks that generate a feminist political effect.[16] As Griselda Pollock observes, whether or not an artwork is feminist depends on whether it intervenes in and subverts conventional, dominant notions and ideologies of art and femininity within a specific social space, not on the political position of the artist.[17] Indeed, as Dimitrakaki admits, this might be criticised as a hegemonic act of reframing eastern European art within (Western) feminism. However, the affinities between the art by women from the two regions suggest there is at least the need to investigate how works from the East interact with the society in which they were produced, as well as whether they suggest any change to such notions and ideologies in their own social, cultural and historical context.

The Visible Activeness and Acted out Passiveness

Reviewing Katarzyna Michalak's and Maud Jacquin's articles, which I briefly addressed at the start of this article, I find that they have a surprising paradox in common – despite the fact that they both, to different extents, imply a feminist reading of KwieKulik's art, they nonetheless

14 Martina Pachmanová, 'In? Out? In Between? Some Notes on the Invisibility of a Nascent Eastern European Feminist and Gender Discourse in Contemporary Art Theory', in Pejić et al, eds, *Gender Check*, op cit, p 49

15 Joanna Turowicz, '"The Rebellion of a Neo-avant-garde Artist": Conversation between Zofia Kulik and Joanna Turowicz', *ArtMix* 9, March 2005, Zofia Kulik/KwieKulik/Kulik-KwieKulik Foundation, http://kulikzofia.pl/en/archiwum/bunt-neoawangardowej-artystki/ accessed 11 Jan 2022

16 Angela Dimitrakaki, '"Five O'clock on the Sun": Three Questions on Feminism and the Moving Image in the Visual Arts of Non-Western Europe', *Third Text* 74, vol 19, issue 3, May 2005, p 275

17 Dimitrakaki also quoted this in her 2005 article. See more in Griselda Pollock, 'Feminism and Modernism', in Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker, eds, *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970–1985*, Pandora, London, 1987, p 93.

KwieKulik, *Monument without a Passport*, 1978, photos: courtesy the artists and Kulik-KwieKulik Foundation

explicitly reject this idea. Writing in 1999, Michalak carefully, or even bashfully, suggests that there is a scene in *Activity for the Head: Three Acts* that 'could be' addressed in 'a gender context' because of its explicit manifestation of male power. Such an interpretation, however, is quickly denied by the author, who moves on to 'the political context' in which the piece was produced. Similarly, after pointing out that KwieKulik's *Activities with Dobromierz* and Mary Kelly's *Post-partum Document* can both be seen as a dispassionate documentation of childcare, Jacquin emphasises at length that, since at the time the Polish artist was not well versed in Western feminist theory, the politics of KwieKulik's art cannot be treated in the same way as that of Kelly's. For both artistic entities, the personal is political, but, unlike Kelly, who clearly identifies

KwieKulik, *Monument without a Passport*, 1978, photos: courtesy the artists and Kulik-KwieKulik Foundation

herself as a gendered body, KwieKulik's 'personal' refers to a universal, desexualised body shared by Kulik and Kwiek, according to Jacquin.

While approaching KwieKulik's art from two different regions that at one time were separated by the Iron Curtain – Poland and the UK respectively – both Michalak and Jacquin nonetheless fall into 'the ideological conflicts that have characterised Central and Eastern European culture following the collapse of the Soviet Union': in the former West, because of the high marketability of history and identity, art from central and eastern Europe was assumed to be explicitly involved in politics – politics here referring narrowly to the transition from communism to capitalism in 1989 and the reconfigured national identity and concurrent conflict.[18] Artists, critics and curators from previously socialist states – both male

18 Dimitrakaki, '"Five O'clock on the Sun"', op cit, p 276

KwieKulik, *Monument without a Passport*, 1978, photos: courtesy the artists and Kulik-KwieKulik Foundation

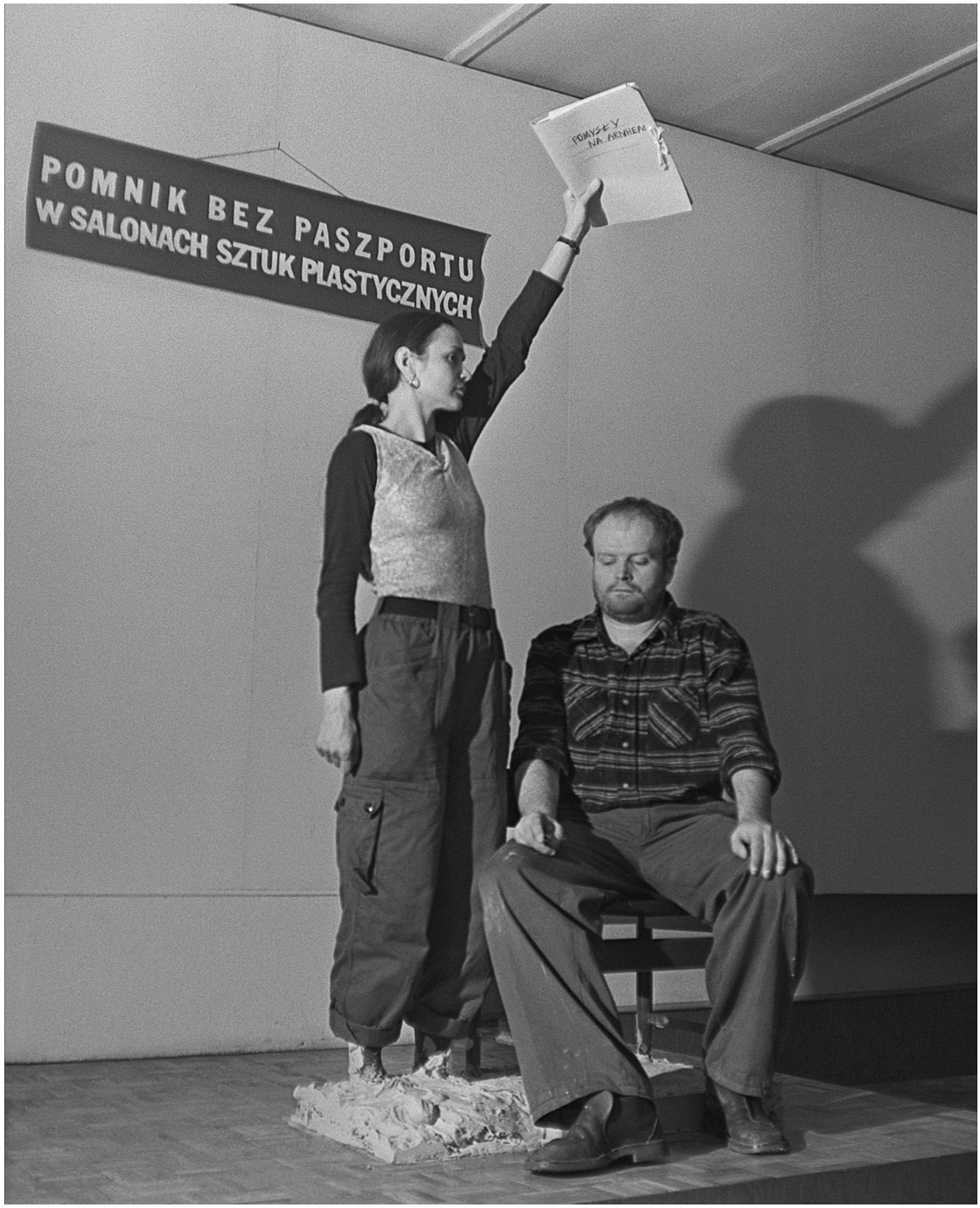
and female – have suffered from this, because they had to figure out how to engage in a global contemporary moment which is still to a large extent defined by the dominant discourses of the West. A desire to catch up with the West urges them (for example Michalak) to filter out feminism – an outdated politics the West dealt with in the 1970s and 1980s. As Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh note in their book *Former West*, 'the Cold War may have been over, but the imaginary of the one – common – world took a course in which the so-called West continued its routine of presuming itself as the "first" among what were supposed to have become its – albeit heterogeneous – equals'.[19]

If we disregard the expectation of the former West that Polish conceptual art was automatically 'political', then the subjugated role that Kulik

19 Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh, eds, *Former West: Art and the Contemporary after 1989*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2017, p 19

KwieKulik, *Monument without a Passport*, 1978, photos: courtesy the artists and Kulik-KwieKulik Foundation

played in KwieKulik's performances demands a feminist reading. In *Monument without a Passport*, for example, it quickly becomes clear that the unequal mobility of the male artist and the female artist corresponds to the active and passive roles traditionally assigned to men and women by the visual culture in a patriarchal context. Throughout the entire performance, Kulik was positioned in an uncomfortable situation – her head was trapped by a table and her feet were fixed in a bowl of plaster, and as a result she could only be moved by her partner with the help of the audience. Kwiek, free from any restraint, was responsible for setting up the entire scene – he made the plaster base, carried Kulik to the right place, unfolded the banner showing the performance title, and finally sat on an 'immobile' chair. Although together they were meant



KwieKulik, *Monument without a Passport*, 1978, photos: courtesy the artists and Kulik-KwieKulik Foundation

to form a living monument that ridiculed the denial of their right to go abroad – monuments cannot travel so do not need a passport – only Kulik was required to create the metaphor with her own body.

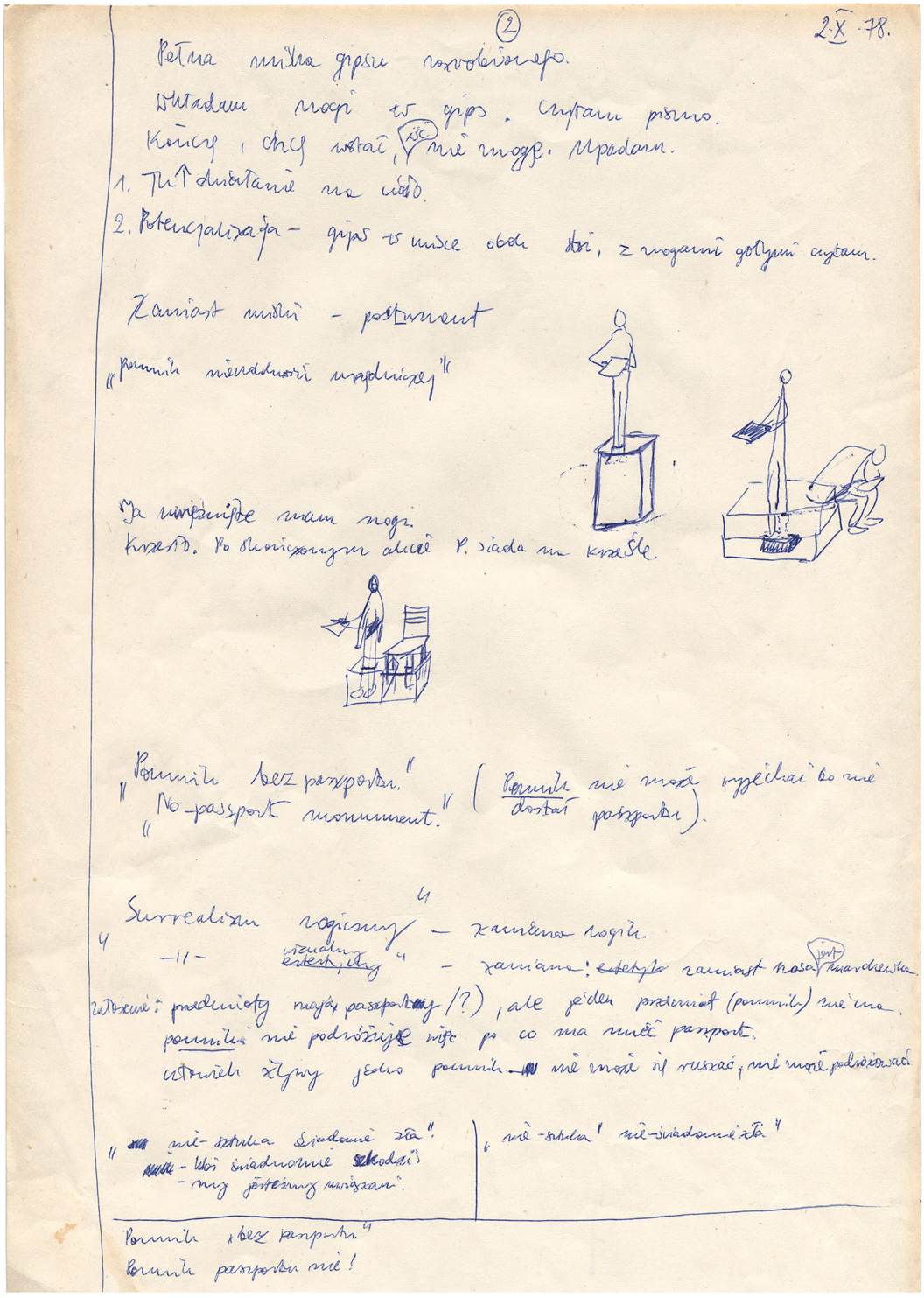
In this way, despite Michalak's denial, *Monument* shared some striking similarities with Abramović/Ulay's *Incision*, performed the same year (1978) in Austria. Dressed in men's clothing, Abramović stood motionless and stared into space while Ulay, naked and standing in front of a wall, repeatedly walked into an elastic band that was attached to the wall, only to be dragged back by it to his starting point. Approaching the end of the performance, as arranged, a man in the audience suddenly rose to his feet and violently attacked Abramović. Afterwards, she simply returned to her previous state. When Ulay finally stopped his action, the performance ended. The distinction between Abramović's passiveness and Ulay's activeness was similar to that between Kulik and Kwiek. The male artists, whose bodies were only symbolically restricted, could still move according to their free will. The female artists, meanwhile, were living sculptures – physically restrained or not, they remained in a non-active position, standing still and staying silent.

It is important, however, to remember that such passiveness was an actively arranged element in the performances. Regardless of their intentions, both Kulik and Abramović adopted a pose of physical suffering – Kulik allowed the restrictions to be imposed on her head and feet and Abramović allowed herself to be kicked to the floor – as a way to fulfil their role in the performance. By contrast, such exertions were not required of Kwiek and Ulay; they seemed to execute their roles effortlessly compared to their female partners. This contrast can be explained using Piotrowski's comparison between male and female body art in the 1980s. Regardless of which side of the Iron Curtain artists were on, Piotrowski argues, male and female body artists based their point of departure on the standard roles of the two sexes in European visual culture in general, where masculinity was associated with action and femininity with the status of being looked at. 'The meaning of the male body was created immediately, in the moment of its action,' he observes, 'while that of the female was deferred and mediated by the images produced by the masculine culture that defined woman's existence in reference to the desire of the "other"'.[20] Working alongside their male partners, Kulik and Abramović therefore felt the need to do more – acting out their passiveness – in order to be considered a subject as opposed to a posing object.

Therefore, Jacquin might be right about how, under the influence of Polish state socialism, Kulik had the impression that she, a female artist, could also represent a universal body, as her partner did. But what she fails to acknowledge, which I wish to highlight here, is the conflict between what the artist was supposed to think in theory and how she acted in reality. In her research on Wojciech Fangor's *Figures*, a Polish socialist-realist painting of 1950, Ewa Franus offers an analysis of the paradox the artist experienced while he was painting: as a male artist he was used to 'the traditional codes of pictorial representation of femininity', but he needed to depict a desexualised (masculinised) female worker to appeal to the socialist imagination.[21] As a result, the artist controversially revealed the idealistic transformation or, in Franus's words, Taylorisation of the female body that was being attempted by the socialist authorities, contrasting the curvy body and powdered face of the 'chick' with the toughened and masculinised 'worker'. To become a labourer, the body of the lady in a white dress needed to be 'effectively Taylorised' – her

20 Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, op cit, p 378

21 Ewa Franus, 'Frankensterin's Bride: The Contradictions of Gender and a Particular Polish Socialist-Realist Painting', in Pejić et al, eds, *Gender Check*, op cit, pp 71–78



KwieKulik, script for *Monument without a Passport*, 1978, scan: courtesy the artists and Kulik-KwieKulik Foundation

skin had to be rendered tanned and rough, her curves flattened, her sunglasses, her handbag, her dress and her jewellery removed. In other words, she needed to shed her vain femininity, and she did this with the help of her male partner. By providing brotherly support, Fangor's male worker grants her the opportunity to become a man so that together they can form 'the ideal gender synthesis of a collective couple'.[22] Although the artist was aiming to parody the 'chick', who represents Western values and aesthetics, he ended up exposing the impossibility of sexual duality and opposition suddenly disappearing, of female bodies suddenly becoming free of the male gaze for the sake of propaganda. Indeed, it is questionable whether we can revealingly compare Kulik with Fangor, a male socialist-realist painter who worked in 1950s Poland. It is interesting, however, to see how the female artist experienced a similar paradox: on the one hand she viewed herself as equal to her male partner and assumed that she would act as a universal body in their art, just as he did, but on the other hand the risk of being viewed as a posing object drove her to work harder – to endure greater restrictions.

The Scripted Improvisation

The gendered roles and identities of Kwiek and Kulik were not simply defined by their public activeness or passiveness. Kulik's planning and organising skills were for a long time regarded as secondary to his ambitious production of open-form performances. Early performance-based pieces, recognised as a characteristic aspect of KwieKulik's practice in the 1970s, were not necessarily as improvised and open as they seemed. Rather, they were often the result of careful discussions and note taking – and it was here that Kulik invested her planning and organising capabilities. The script she created for *Monument without a Passport* serves as a good example. Writing in the first person, she describes each act in detail and carefully illustrates the document with sketches and signs such as '–' and '↑'. While it is difficult to imagine a male artist accepting that a detailed script to which he has devoted time and labour needs to be denied for the sake of spontaneous appearance, Kulik implied that her supporting role fitted her introverted personality well:

> I think that if we lived in the time of revolution, my role would be next to some leader fighting for beautiful ideas. I would organise things, carry pamphlets, bombs or whatever. I dreamt of serving some matter. This remains an unfulfilled desire, unrealised in my life. I was born for ideals [,] not for myself.[23]

Kulik's self-reflection invokes, as Joanna Turowicz observes, the traditional model woman in Polish culture, who 'exists only in relations and the relations are mostly related to sacrifice'.[24] Here it may be helpful to consult Izabela Kowalczyk's 'Visualising the Mythical Polish Mother' and Malgorzata Fidelis's *Women, Communism, and Industrialisation in Postwar Poland*, both of which suggest that the rhetoric surrounding and the image of *Matka Polka* (Polish Mother) dates back to

22 Ibid, pp 73–74

23 Turowicz, 'Conversation between Kulik and Turowicz', op cit

24 Ibid

the nineteenth century when the country experienced partitions by Russian, Prussian and Austrian imperial powers: while men were imprisoned or sent into exile, women fulfilled their duty by giving birth to sons and raising them in a patriotic and Catholic spirit.[25] In the Polish People's Republic, the idea of Matka Polka was contested, especially when women were allowed to enter the traditionally male-dominated industrial workplace in the early 1950s. At this time rearranging gender hierarchies played an essential role in obtaining 'the political and national legitimacy of communist regimes' after Joseph Stalin's death.[26] But Poland had become ethnically homogeneous and predominantly Catholic after World War II and the population movements that followed, and the Catholic Church and the values it promoted would not be easily removed from people's lives, even in socialist Poland. By 1956, women workers were marginalised and assigned to low-paid jobs; skilled and higher-paid jobs were considered to conflict with women's reproductive capacity. It is important, however, to notice that Fidelis restores agency to Polish female workers, who made sense of 'socially and culturally articulated meanings of womanhood' while experiencing those radical shifts in gender hierarchies in the postwar era; she argues that instead of being simply passive objects of the state's policies, female workers cleverly adjusted to political circumstances and formulated their demands within the framework of the dominant political discourse.[27] Similarly, although Kulik claimed that she was happy to stay silent about her uncredited contributions to KwieKulik, she did it in a way that affirmed the value of her hard work. 'I was physically very strong and a good organiser,' said Kulik, 'so I really could be helpful to someone who would really want to do something. But Kwiek didn't.'[28]

Since Kulik's subjugated planning and organising work was invisible to the public – the script resulted from the artists' private discussions and was thus only acknowledged by them – it is subject to the feminist critique of maintenance. In her 1973 performance *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside*, American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles addressed this issue from the perspective of labour, by scrubbing and mopping the staircase of a museum for hours. This simple act, according to Helen Molesworth, reveals that human labour has long been divided into two categories: 'development and maintenance'.[29] The former, under which can be placed art-making, generates novelty, progress and development, and is traditionally a men's field; the latter – usually referring to the drudgery of cleaning, tidying, cooking and childcare – is distinguished by tedious, repetitive tasks that are considered to be the realm of women whose function it is to serve the creativity generators. Maintenance not only takes place in the domestic environment, though; it also exists within public institutions and even applies at a national level. Using her identity as an artist, Ukeles blurs this division in claiming that her scrubbing and mopping is art. 'Hence Ukeles's performance of maintenance activities,' Molesworth points out, 'in full view of the museum and its visitors, opens public space to the pressures of what it traditionally excludes, or renders invisible.'[30] Kulik shares a similar attitude towards work that is behind the scenes. Writing in 2019, Wiktoria Szczupacka remarked that in the same way in which Ukeles centres the invisible maintenance work involved in running art institutions, so Kulik critically analyses not only the professional situation of being an artist but also the back-

25 Izabela Kowalczyk, 'Visualising the Mythical Polish Mother', in Pejić et al, eds, *Gender Check*, p 213; Malgorzata Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialisation in Postwar Poland*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, p 25

26 Fidelis, *Women, Communism*, op cit, p 3

27 Ibid, p 11

28 Turowicz, 'Conversation between Kulik and Turowicz', op cit

29 Helen Molesworth, 'House Work and Art Work', *October*, vol 92, spring 2000, p 78

30 Ibid, p 82

KwieKulik, *Activities with the Head: Three Acts*, 1978, photo: courtesy the artists and Kulik-KwieKulik Foundation

stage of living as an artist. 'This isn't a voice in the debate on women's domestic work,' Szczupacka argues, 'but the frustration of a rational artist functioning in the neo-avant-garde art world, which, according to

her, was governed by absurd laws. Starting a gallery didn't entail maintaining it; an institution idea on a piece of paper didn't have to be cleaned.'[31]

It is therefore reasonable to view Kulik's planning and organisation as one of these excluded and invisible activities and her later action as an exposure of her once uncredited maintenance work. In 1978, just a few days after *Monument without a Passport*, KwieKulik performed *Activity for the Head: Three Acts* at the Galeria Labirynt in Lublin, Poland. The show was divided into three acts. In the first act, Kwiek and Kulik lay on the floor with their heads locked into chairs that were placed among the audience. A curtain made of two large sheets of brown paper was hung across the back wall of the room. As the room filled with spectators and most of the other chairs were taken, the two artists stood up and moved to hide themselves behind the brown curtain. After several minutes Kwiek tore down one of the sheets of paper and presented the second act. Sitting on the floor, Kulik was once again trapped in an uncomfortable situation – this time, her head was locked inside a wash basin. After pouring some water into the basin, Kwiek took off his shirt and shoes and washed his face, armpits and feet with the water in the basin. Then he poured more water; Kulik was able to breath, but she could not speak. With a knife pointing at the back of her neck, he then shouted: 'Come on! Say something, you bitch, speak… You can't… can you?' Leaving Kulik sitting there with her mouth in the water, Kwiek then turned to the audience and explained that, regarding the so-called Eagle Affair, this action was their second protest against the loss of freedom of speech. Then, as the final paper curtain was torn down, the two artists began the third act. This time they were seated side by side, their heads in buckets. Two other artists walked around the artists, filling the buckets with rubbish taken from a bin in the gallery hall.

On the surface, *Activity for the Head* was yet another performance, like *Monument*, where Kwiek practised his activeness and Kulik her passiveness. What made it different was the brown paper sheets. Resonant of curtains in a traditional theatre, the paper clearly divided the performance into three acts, thereby giving it a prearranged, scripted look. In a later interview with Turowicz, Kulik claimed that this was her idea:

> So, in 1978, I had the idea of this performance with a washbasin. We were thinking then what we could do during the 'Body Performance' even[t] at the Labirynt Gallery in Lublin. Later we developed the idea, adding buckets on our heads and the heads on chair seats. Finally our appearance was in three parts… From the moment of that appearance I started to feel better, yet I think Przemek still slighted such pre-arranged appearances. He preferred the things which looked spontaneous.[32]

For the first time, Kulik's planning and organising labour were rendered visible as part of a KwieKulik creation. She thus 'started to feel better', despite the fact that the situation she was put in was even more uncomfortable than the one in *Monument*. Yet where originally she was willing to keep silent, what now drove her to ask for recognition when producing *Activity for the Head*?

31 Wiktoria Szczupacka, 'Responsibility is an Action, Never Simply a Feeling: Zofia Kulik's Alice's Adventures in Fucked Wonderland, or, Cleaning Instead of Talking in the Context of the Polish Neo-avant-garde of the 1970s', in Agata Jakubowska, ed, *Zofia Kulik: Methodology, My Love*, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, 2019, p 108

32 Turowicz, 'Conversation between Kulik and Turowicz', op cit

Potential answers may be drawn from Dimitrakaki's 2019 article on Kulik's transition from a component of KwieKulik to a solo artist. Since the break-up with her partner in the late 1980s, Kulik has continued her career as both an artist and an archivist. However, what she makes today is rather different from the work she co-produced with Kwiek – her solo works are usually complex or, as Dimitrakaki describes them, 'labour-intensive' pieces comprised of black-and-white photographic images.[33] She has also taken on the seemingly tedious and repetitive task of archiving KwieKulik's performances. Many of her recent activities have an apparent 'closed form' character and thus sharply contrast with KwieKulik's intended 'open form'. Dimitrakaki has implied that it is the alienation and humiliation Kulik experienced as a female artist that urged her to make such an overt shift. Thus, although 'maintaining' was her way of producing art, Kulik decided to conceal it in order to be regarded as an artist – an occupation that, from a modernist point of view, was supposed to be associated with development rather than maintenance. From this 'durational process' of concealment, which involved constant marginalisation and silencing in both life and work, was generated the humiliation that pushed Kulik to seek a break, and she saw in maintenance – a methodology that once rendered her anonymous – an energy that would help her to do so. Therefore, by symbolically moving from 'open form' to 'closed form' and by maintaining and archiving KwieKulik's legacy, Kulik began a project that would finally give her some 'control over the forces shaping her life'.[34]

During my in-person conversation with Kulik at PDDiU in Warsaw, I asked her whether she could distinguish her contributions to KwieKulik from those of Kwiek – whether she could tell who did what. She replied that it depended on which period I was talking about: in the 1970s, it would be impossible because that was still a time of 'brainstorming' for the duo; in the 1980s, however, she was more able to distinguish her part in the collaboration. In fact, she even placed her attempt to search for her own identity in front of the public: in 1978, just four months before *Monument without a Passport* and *Activity for the Head: Three Acts*, Kulik performed *Zofia Kulik's Begging for Forgiveness* as a solo artist. This consists of one simple scene: wearing a white satin dress, which she had hired from a shop in Warsaw, Kulik approached the audience several times and each time she bowed to them on her knees. The artist later said that she was inspired by the 1938 Warner Brothers film *Jezebel* (directed by Willima Wyler and starring Bette Davis), in which the heroine is so attached to her lover that she still wants to be with him even after he marries another woman. Wearing a white dress, she kneels before the man and begs for his forgiveness. Kulik felt the woman's pathetic situation resonated with her own. Working and living as part of KwieKulik, she felt restrained and humiliated, both as an artist and as a woman. This was perhaps why, when asked if she had learnt anything from their partnership, Kulik observed: 'What I got out of KwieKulik… was mainly the energy for my own individual rebellion'.[35]

Moreover, in the solo performance it was not Kwiek but the audience Kulik was facing, and so this humiliation and rebellion perhaps did not merely arise out of the duo's relationship. By considering KwieKulik's art only from the perspective of Kwiek, the audience also played a part

33 Angela Dimitrakaki, 'The Struggle for Non-alienation: Zofia Kulik's Work in Terms of Labour', in Jakubowska, ed, *Zofia Kulik*, op cit, p 119

34 Ibid, p 135

35 Tomasz Załuski, 'KwieKulik Anatomy: An Interview with Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek', in Ronduda and Schöllhamme, eds, *KwieKulik*, op cit, p 545

in silencing Kulik. 'Perhaps that I, personally, do not exist,' Kulik said, 'even though it may seem that I do, but only as a part of a two-person hybrid, where nobody knows the role I play, how much space I occupy, and what form I take.'[36] For example, the readings of *Monument without a Passport* barely reflect any connection with *Zofia Kulik's Begging for Forgiveness*, even though the former was performed only four months after the latter. Klara Kemp-Welch interprets Kulik's head being trapped in a table as mimicry of 'primitive methods of public humiliation such as the stocks', but she does not associate this humiliation with that manifested by Kulik in *Forgiveness*; rather, she regards it as a humiliating situation experienced by KwieKulik as an artistic collective – they were denied the right to travel freely and thus forced to perform in a place they detested and had rejected in the first place.[37] Maud Jacquin meanwhile observes that the work is KwieKulik's answer to the denial of their effort to challenge mechanisms of the so-called 'totalitarian regime'. Thus, for many researchers, *Monument* is yet another protest by KwieKulik against the deprivation of their artistic freedom, because this work was closely related to the Eagle Affair. But what I attempt to problematise here is how the meaning of this freedom is rendered completely the same for both Kulik and Kwiek. Despite the fact that in the performance Kulik was restrained to a larger extent than her partner – Kulik's head and feet were trapped while Kwiek was only sitting on a 'fixed' chair – her immobility is still treated as the same as his. *Forgiveness*, then, can be seen as a materialised form of the humiliation she had experienced, both within KwieKulik and beyond it.

Kulik's request for recognition when making *Activity with the Head: Three Acts* in 1978 came at the very beginning of her project of self-definition. By giving this performance an arranged and scripted appearance, KwieKulik began to disassociate maintenance from its implications of drudgery and boredom and to reconnect it with art-making and creativity. Here I turn to Marina Vishmidt's 'Pure Maintenance' for theoretical insight. Vishmidt calls for a redefinition of maintenance as resistance, that is, as an alternative approach to world-making, rather than as a repetitive, tedious practice that promises no creativity.[38] Understanding this logic first requires a sense of 'planetarity', which refers to a sustainable way of thinking that instructs a person to co-operate within the limits of the resource, rather than exploiting it. Secondly, there is a need for 'the idea of technological knowledge as a processual relation to contingency'[39] – that is, unlike the result-oriented activities of development, maintenance as resistance acknowledges the unknowability of the future and focuses on the present accumulation of effects and relations. It is in the process of accumulation that maintenance manifests its creativity.

In this I see a type of utopian thinking in Kulik's practice: she recognises the danger of being nostalgic about the KwieKulik's partnership and bravely declares a rupture with it. However, this is something that cannot be achieved overnight – in Dimitrakaki's words, it is a 'never-settled, life-long process of self-definition'.[40] This processual and long-lasting rupture thus invokes Kathi Weeks's 'utopian demand', namely

> a political demand that takes the form not of a narrowly pragmatic reform but of a more substantial transformation of the present configuration of

36 Turowicz, 'Conversation between Kulik and Turowicz', op cit

37 Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc*, op cit, p 354

38 Marina Vishmidt, 'Pure Maintenance', *South as a State of Mind* 10, summer/fall 2018, pp 80–91

39 Ibid, p 83

40 Dimitrakaki, 'The Struggle for Non-alienation', op cit, p 143

> social relation; it is a demand that raises eyebrows, one for which we could probably not expect immediate success. These are demands that would be difficult – though not impossible – to realise in the present institutional and ideological context; to be considered feasible, a number of shifts in the terrain of political discourse must be effected.[41]

Drawing on Ernst Bloch's ontology of the Not-Yet-Become and the Not-Yet-Conscious, Weeks further explains that such demands are based on an alternative conception of reality. What is real should not only be contingent on what has happened, what has been established or formed in the past; it should also be considered in relation to what will be possible in the future. Reality is the Not-Yet-Become, a process connecting history to the future, which, whether it is desired or dreaded, is open to change and intervention; the Not-Yet-Conscious, meanwhile, provides the mentality encouraging and guiding a person to envision a better future and to progress towards it. Weeks's utopian demand is based firmly on a concrete analysis of what has already happened while orientating towards a possible future and, more importantly, involves the courage and willingness to become different, whether the outcome is good or bad. In this light, Kulik's critical relationship with KwieKulik is political. Her present work explores a different version both of herself and of the world – a utopia in which the hierarchy of the sexes that once controlled her can be ridiculed and overthrown – while her research and maintenance of the KwieKulik archive offers that utopia a sense of concreteness.

Although my intention is to portray the mental humiliation and physical restriction Kulik endured during the performances and her maintenance work as a form of labour, my description of Kulik's 'acting out' and the fact that she was once happy to play the subjugated role in the duo and let her maintenance work remain uncredited may further suggest an engagement with female masochism. Indeed, it is important to discuss why Kulik gained pleasure from her masochistic role in the duo from a psychoanalytic point of view, for she clearly articulated that she 'started to feel better' after performing *Activity with the Head*. Why, then, did she need to 'do that to herself' – echoing Paula Caplan – in order to feel better?[42] If we admit the link between domination and pleasure, as Jessica Benjamin acknowledges, then Kulik's acting out can be attributed to her lack of a coherent identity; she needed to yield to the male artist's power in order to gain a sense of recognition, because 'pain is a route to pleasure only when it involves submission to an idealised figure'.[43] But while such a discussion is important, it might not be wholly relevant to my argument of how her suffering in the performances and the maintenance work should be regarded as labour; how her labour is more intense and demanding compared to that of her partner, and why that is. Besides, let us not forget, as Rita Felski sharply remarks, that masochism is clearly a product of modernity; it requires an assumption that human beings naturally crave happiness and comfort, which renders the concept of masochism almost impossible to comprehend.[44] Interestingly, the painful, strenuous and time-consuming struggles of female (and not necessarily feminist) intellectuals to understand the meanings of female masochism, meanings which changed dramatically over time, may also be read in this light: women always need to work harder – whether to gain an identity that is considered to be men's (for

41 Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2011, p 176

42 Paula J Caplan, *The Myth of Women's Masochism*, iUniverse, Lincoln, Nebraska, 2005

43 Jessica Benjamin, *The Bond of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1988, p 61

44 Rita Felski, 'Re-description of Female Masochism', *Minnesota Review* 63/64, spring 2005, pp 127–253

Kulik, it is as an artist), or to defend themselves against the perplexing and ambiguous images of their psyches.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that Kulik's activities make it possible to read KwieKulik's art through the lens of feminism, thereby (re)building the connection between their art and the so-called international topic. I began by discussing the visible and the invisible gender roles and identities reflected in the duo's art, and concluded the visible to be the male activeness and female passiveness in their performances. What I also emphasised was a conflict Kulik experienced when she was performing: while state socialism allowed her to imagine herself as a universal acting body equal to her male partner, the traditional association of the female body with a posing object urged her to act differently – constantly putting herself in uncomfortable situations. The invisible roles and identities were reflected in the preparation work done by Kulik behind the scenes, which for a long time remained unrecognised for the sake of maintaining an appearance of improvisation and creativity that appealed to Kwiek's ideals. I associated this with women's maintenance activities, and argued that in putting her previous planning and organising work on public display, Kulik has launched a project of self-definition that questions the dissociation between reproduction and creativity. In closing, I also acknowledged the possibility of casting Kulik's supportive role in relation to female masochism while outlining why I chose not to go into detail regarding this aspect. As a contribution to the project of rereading art by KwieKulik and other artists from central and eastern Europe, it serves as a starting point for addressing what Dimitrakaki regards as the necessity and urgency to rewrite art history as a history of labour.

Finally, I want to identify some questions for future research. Since much of the literature I have consulted starts by rejecting anything that took place within the socialist regimes of central and eastern Europe, how should a new art history (as a history of labour) revisit those writings with analytical persistence? Dimitrakaki attempts to provide an answer in her article on Kulik, where she states rather frankly that 'feminist art history has not pursued, through its salient militant category (woman artist), a life–work dialectic with analytical persistence'.[45] She then analyses the gendered experience of Kulik in the art as demonstrated by her yes/no responses to the traditional artist identity, and points out that Kulik's reinvention of herself as a labouring subject offers feminist art historians opportunities for exploring the life–work contradiction. If this is what she means by rewriting art history as a history of labour, what then is 'analytical persistence' and how can we achieve it? What is more, how do we cope with the fact that a desire for a universal reading of art scenes that have felt excluded is not free from the operations of the West's ideological hegemony and the art markets it promotes?

45 Dimitrakaki, 'The Struggle for Non-alienation', op cit, p 120