

Michał Murawski is an anthropologist of architecture and art, based at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, where he is lecturer in Critical Area Studies. His book *The Palace Complex: A Stalinist Skyscraper, Capitalist Warsaw, and a City Transfixed* was published by Indiana University Press in 2019, and, in Polish, by the Museum of Warsaw in 2015. He is currently conducting research for a new book project on architectural aesthetics and politics in Putin-era Moscow. Along with Jane Rendell, he co-edited *The Social Condenser: A Century of Revolution through Architecture, 1917–2017*, a special issue of *The Journal of Architecture* (2017), and he has published in scholarly and media outlets, including *Third Text*, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *Anthropology Today*, *Social Text*, *Laboratorium*, *Focaal*, *The Calvert Journal*, *Strelka Magazine*, *Forbes*, and *The Architectural Review*. In 2018, at the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture in Moscow, he co-curated the exhibition *Portal Zaryadye*, featuring eighteen new works by Russian artists exploring the relationship between architecture, politics, and ecology in contemporary Russia.

ZOFIA KULIK'S PALACE COMPLEX: REVEALING THE COMPLEXITY OF CLOSED FORM (FILLING IT WITH HER OWN MADNESS)

I am fascinated by Closed Forms.

Centricity, symmetry, multiplication, order, figural ornament, imposing upon myself certain preexisting patterns of structures (monuments, medals, mandalas, carpets and gates) that I try to fill with my own madness—these constitute my formal and constructive rules of composition.¹ —Zofia Kulik

The Palace of Culture and Science—a Stalinist skyscraper gifted to Warsaw by the Soviet Union in 1955—features prominently in at least eighteen of Zofia Kulik's works: eight executed together with her former partner Przemysław Kwiek as part of the KwiekKulik duo between 1970 and 1987, and ten of Kulik's own. These Palace-focused works—the majority of them executed at the time of or in the decade following the fall of the Polish People's Republic in 1989—will be the focus of my attention in this essay.

Warsaw's "Palace Complex"—the dominance of the Stalinist Palace over the post-socialist city, and the corresponding "fixation" of the city's social life on this building—functions to a large extent by means of the building's symmetrical layout, its monumental appearance, and its uncontested location at the city's absolute center. These attributes—centrality, monumentality, and symmetry—are also key ingredients of what Zofia Kulik—after her teacher and mentor Oskar Hansen—calls "Closed Form." I argue in this text that, following the collapse of state socialism in Poland in 1989, Kulik developed a sophisticated and radical understanding of and interaction with Closed Form, which went beyond Hansen's own binary distinction between Closed and Open Form (a binary to which Kulik herself subscribed, to an extent, in her earlier works).² Instead, in her 1990s works, Kulik "queered" the Palace, by questioning the commonsensical understandings of the relationship between aesthetics, form, geometry, politics, gender, and sexuality, which were typical not only of her time (the late-socialist and post-socialist periods) but also of her intellectual and artistic milieu. In doing so, Kulik's 1990s works attested to the latent subversive and critical potential within the Closed Form of Warsaw's Stalinist Palace, as well as anticipating (and perhaps actualizing) the current role of the Palace as an object of hatred for Poland's reigning nationalist government and their far-right allies—and a possible tool and symbol of resistance against the pervading ideological climate.

Crucially, I emphasize that the category of the Palace Complex is neither a "pathological" nor a "normal" phenomenon. The Palace Complex is not an ailment, which afflicts only some Varsovians—it is a political-aesthetic, ideological, and economic con-

2 It is instructive to note, given my concern in this text with Kulik's kinship with Russian conceptual art of the late-socialist and post-socialist period, that Hansen's binary is redolent of architectural historian Vladimir Paperny's high-structuralist division of Soviet architectural culture into a horizontal, dynamic, open "Culture One" (epitomized by the avant-garde of the 1920s), and the vertical, static, closed-off Culture Two (epitomized by the Stalinist period). Paperny's analysis of *Culture Two* (published in English in 2006) was first written as a PhD thesis in Moscow in 1972, but not published in full in Russian until 1996. Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

junction, whose contours were influenced by the historical context from which the Palace arose, its aesthetic and spatial characteristics, and today by the political-aesthetic realities of Poland's post-socialist condition. Kulik's Palace Complex, however, is not focused on erasure, mutilation, containment, and subordination, or on the "undermining" or "overcoming" of the Palace's "domination" over the city; instead, it explores and attempts to make sense of—to "reveal"—the Palace's social and aesthetic complexity. In their 1970s actions, Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek already sought to adapt a studio exercise of Oskar Hansen's, "Revealing Complex Form," into an artistic and activist method, which they called "The Art of Revealing Complex Form." Kwiek and Kulik "tried to strip the exercise of its purely formal dimension and relate it to the complex socioeconomic situation."³ Kulik's work with the Palace—both before and after 1989—continued in this vein, in an effort to disclose the "complexities of reality and the relationships constituting it, to knock the recipients out of their normal routine 'rhythms' or 'patterns' of behaviour, and to reveal the multidimensionality of seemingly defined relationships."⁴ And today, the output of Kulik's Palace Complex—the archive of her revealings of Complex Form—can still work to defamiliarize our political-aesthetic commonplaces, among other things by highlighting some of the ways in which aspects of Poland's socialist legacy—including its Closed Forms—can function as vectors of commonality, publicness, and collectivity in the privationary and stratified climate of the late-capitalist city.

The Palace, as I show in detail elsewhere, was built as an inherently and powerfully *public* building—the largest "House of Culture" ever constructed in the socialist world, existing as it did not only on the level of a city district or work unit, but also on the scale of a large city and national capital. Moreover, unlike much of the rest of Warsaw, which has been—and continues to be—mercilessly resti-

3 Łukasz Ronduda and Georg Schöllhammer, eds., *KwieKulik: Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek* (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art and KwieKulik Archive; Wrocław: BWA Wrocław Galleries of Contemporary Art, Awangarda Gallery; Vienna: Kontakt: The Art Collection of Erste Group and ERSTE Foundation, 2012), 466.

4 Ronduda and Schöllhammer, *KwieKulik: Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek*, 466.

tuted and reprivatized since 1989, the Palace has, *somehow*, been able to maintain the myriad public functions condensed within it: concert and congress halls, four theaters, a gigantic “Palace of Youth” featuring elaborate sports and arts facilities (including a monumental, marble-decked swimming pool⁵), municipal offices, the headquarters of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and a viewing terrace, among many others.⁶ The Palace is able to remain socialist in part because of the spectacular and far-reaching manner in which numerous elements of a Socialist-Realist “economic aesthetic” were built into it: gigantic size, bombastic style, symmetrical layout, and nodal positioning at the heart of the city’s transport network and layout of communicational axes. Together, these aesthetic features—mapping precisely onto Hansen’s understanding of Closed Form—ensure that there is enough room within the building for the Palace’s myriad public functions to be gathered together under one roof. They secure for the building a prominent place in the city’s symbolic universe, and also inspire a mixture of awe and fascination among the city’s inhabitants. However, none of this multifunctionality or collective use-value would have come into being had the land on which the Palace sits not been expropriated from its private owners by the Warsaw Decree on land use of 1945, and had the construction of the Palace itself not been motivated by its designers’ and patrons’ mission to “revolutionarily transform the city.”⁷ The complex of the Palace’s spatial and aesthetic characteristics—the Closed Form that came to fascinate Kulik—works to consolidate the social and affective effects of this transformation, even long after the collapse of the political system that brought these morphologies into being.

5 Zofia Kulik points out that she would regularly attend diving training at the Palace of Youth’s swimming pool between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. Kulik, personal communication with author, 2018.

6 These functions are elaborated on in detail in Murawski, *Palace Complex: A Stalinist Skyscraper, Capitalist Warsaw, and a City Transfixed* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019); the idea that the Palace functions as a fusion of the Soviet House of Culture and a “Social Condenser” is theorized in Murawski, “A Stalinist ‘Social Condenser’ in a Capitalist City,” *The Journal of Architecture* 22, no. 3 (2017): 458–77.

7 Edmund Coldzamt, *Architektura zespołów śródmiejskich i problemy dziedzictwa* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1956), 21.

The Palace Complex

The idea that Warsaw suffers from a “Palace Complex”—a pathological fixation on or obsession with a single building that represents the traumatic memory of Poland’s communist past and Russian/Soviet domination—is regularly invoked in conversations about the Palace.⁸ Though this term has a complex usage, it is especially frequently encountered in conversations about the Palace’s perceived architectural “domination” over Warsaw. Since the fall of the communist regime in 1989, countless attempts have been made to try and “overcome” the Palace’s dominating presence in Warsaw; most of these conversations and proposed solutions focus their attention on the problem of the Palace’s apparently overbearing symmetry and centrality.

One frequently encountered suggestion is to overcome the Palace Complex by demolishing the Palace or physically modifying it. For example, by chopping off its side wings, which reach like talons into the surrounding city; by removing some of its extravagant exterior decorations, thereby turning it into something more like a “normal” skyscraper; or by removing the spire, as in the suggestion of Warsaw architect Jerzy Skrzypczak, thereby making the Palace the same height as the later glass-and-steel towers built during the 1980s–2010s, the tallest of which are between 140 and 180 meters high.⁹

Another set of ideas aspires to keep the Palace’s physical body as it is, but to “contain” its pathological presence by changing the nature of its surroundings. Professional and amateur architects (in most cases middle-aged men) have frequently suggested covering the Palace with glass pyramids or Buckminster Fuller-esque geodesic domes. Official proposals for the Palace—those formally promoted by the municipality, whether as a result of international architecture competitions (1992) or the adoption of binding zoning ordinances (2010)—first entailed surrounding the Palace with a circle (or “crown,” or *corsa*) of even taller skyscrapers; this was the offi-

8

Murawski, *Palace Complex*.

9

See Murawski, *Palace Complex* for a detailed description and analysis of these and other “ideas” for the Palace.

cial plan for the empty space around the Palace during 1992–2006 and 2008–2010. Subsequently, the debate was won by those who suggested that crowning the Palace with a ring of towers would only underline its symmetry and dominance rather than undermine it, and thus the proper response was to diffuse the Palace's overbearing symmetry within an irregular jumble of high-, low-, and mid-rise structures.

As transcripts of the Warsaw mayor's advisory councils have shown, these discussions usually feature long back-and-forths between architects, accusing each other's ideas of *undermining* as opposed to *underlining* the Palace (and vice-versa). A few choice quotations from the period between 1992 and 2010 provide a vivid insight into the see-saw between undermining and underlining that characterizes Warsaw discussions about architectural responses to the Palace:

If you stick a compass in the Palace and make a circle, then this magnifies the Palace, it doesn't diminish it. (actor and satirist Stanisław Tym, 1992)

... the *corso* is ... utopian ... an architectural megasculpture ... which raises the value of the Palace instead of depreciating it. (architect Czesław Bielecki, 2007)

We must depart from the symbolism of crowning the Palace. (architect Andrzej Chylak, 2008)

... the attempt to form a symmetrical "wall" or "curtain" of tall buildings on the Palace's western side ... would strengthen its domination, and not weaken it. ... Symmetry is the aesthetic of fools. (planner Crzregorz Buczek, 2008)

The elimination of the symmetry in the Palace's surroundings would be desirable. Ultimately, however [in all the variants presented so far for the council's eval-

uation], The Palace is underlined, and it has not been possible to avoid this. (architect Tomasz Sławiński, 2008)

Our conscious strategy ... was the avoidance of the simple symmetry that is imposed by the Palace itself. (Deputy Mayor Jacek Wojciechowski, 2010)

... we really try to honor the axiality of the Palace and its ensemble. ... we have tried to reflect the Palace's symmetry in the panorama of the city. (municipal planner Małgorzata Sprawka, 2010)

Abhorring/Adoring/Erasing: Closed Form Before 1989

Zofia Kulik's teacher and mentor, Oskar Hansen—the creator of the theory and practice of "Open" vs. "Closed" form that informed much of Kulik's work in its formative phase, during her time as a student at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts in the late 1960s and early 1970s—had his own ideas about how to deal with the Palace, which was, for him, the paradigmatic example of Closed Form.

Hansen formulated his clearest thoughts on the Palace itself while working on his final exhibition project—devoted to the Palace's relationship to Warsaw's cityscape—in 2005. "The Palace—uncontested in its enormity and aggressive in its form, subordinates to itself all the remaining elements of Warsaw's landscape by means of the contrast of form and scale."¹⁰ He also saw the problem with the Palace as being related to its oneness: "The cityscape of Warsaw educates us. Now we live in a world dominated by a single element."¹¹ But the skyscrapers that have sprouted up in central Warsaw since the 1980s are of little help: "instead of weakening the effect of the Palace, they strengthen it. It looks a bit like the King sur-

10

Oskar Hansen, "Kościelnia, 'Kościelnia' XX wieku - PKiN im. Józefa Stalina w Warszawie," ex. cat. (Warsaw: Fundacja Galerii Foksal, 2005).

11

Hansen, quoted in Artur Żmijewski, *Sen Warszawy / A Dream of Warsaw* (2005), accessed September 15, 2018, <https://artmuseum.pl/en/filmoteka/praca/zmijewski-artur-sen-warszawy>.

rounded by his servants.”¹² Hansen’s remedy was not to “destroy, conceal, or screen” the Palace, but to “polemicize” with it, to enter into a “conversation with it.” His solution, the model of a proposed building—a high concrete shaft topped by a wide elliptical crown—took the form of a tall sculpture affixed to the branches of a tree providentially positioned just outside the Palace-facing windows of the Foksal Gallery Foundation [FIG. 1]. For Hansen, this constituted a “civilized,” dialogic negation of the Palace: “The Palace of Culture grows wider at the base, and this grows wider all the way up. It’s a sort of reversed pyramid.”¹³

The ideas of Oskar Hansen—a generation older than Zofia Kulik—came out of a mid-century fascination with cybernetics and binary structural oppositions. Kulik shares many aspects of this fascination, but her relationship to it—both as part of KwieKulik and as a solo artist—is more ambivalent. Whereas Hansen, in his binary purism, seeks—however dialogically—to reject or “overcome” the Palace Complex, Kulik seeks to bury herself within the Palace Complex, to make sense—in a quasi-ethnographic manner—of the structures (in particular, the symmetries) constituting it. Furthermore, Kulik’s approach seeks to harness the Palace Complex, to appropriate it, to “fill it with her own madness,” and ultimately to deploy this mutated Palace Complex—this “activated” Closed Form—as an aesthetic and political weapon.

The manner of the Palace’s appearance in Kulik’s work is, on the one hand, quite steady, running through some of the ruptures or phases that art historians tend to demarcate her oeuvre into. Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans writes of Kulik’s photo-collages (those from 1989 onwards) that “many of these compositions are symmetrical, centralized, and geometrically organized, imitating the previously abhorred ‘closed form’ theorized by Oskar Hansen.”¹⁴ Yet they are foreseen in (and make explicit reference to) earlier works. Thus, perhaps Kulik’s most explicitly Palace-centric work, *Guardians*

¹² Hansen in Żmijewski, *Sen Warszawy*, 2005.

¹³ Hansen in Żmijewski, *Sen Warszawy*, 2005.

¹⁴ Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans, *Images Performing History: Photography and Representations of the Past in European Art after 1989* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2015), 127.

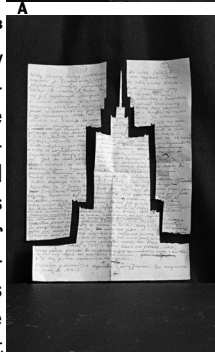


FIG. 1
OSKAR HANSEN, *A DREAM OF WARSAW*, 2005

of the Spire foregrounds a photograph of a crowd outside the Palace of Culture, taken during KwieKulik's documentations of the 1972 **MAY DAY PARADE** ^A (1972).

Zofia Kulik's work **LETTER FROM MILAN** ^B (1972), an elaboration on her correspondence from Italy with Przemysław Kwiek, comprises a remarkably complex early series of activities on the figure of the Palace and its symmetries. The centerpiece of the work is a handwritten letter from Kwiek, onto which Kulik has sketched the silhouette of the Palace. The work consists of a series of photographs documenting successive stages or scenes, all taking place against the background of a navy-blue curtain (onto which several light-blue paper clouds have been attached), with the stage itself laid out on the surface of a brown imitation-leather suitcase. In the first act, the Palace—now cut from Kwiek's letter—has had a red heart attached to it, and appears to grow out of a little grass lawn that has been cut out of paper and stuck to its bottom reaches. The brown suitcase, standing in for Warsaw's Parade Square, is the scene for a sort of May Day parade composed of amorphous clay figures carrying one-word love slogans, as if cut out of Kwiek's letter ("Dear," "Dream," "To You," "Was," "Think," "I Miss," "Yes," "For.") The slogan-bearing figurines are interspersed with extravagant decorations "made from colored paper used by children for cut-outs" and resembling—according to the catalog of KwieKulik's works¹⁵—"infantile decorations from state ceremonies in Communist Poland."

In the next scene, the Palace appears to grow wings, made from the two fragments of Kwiek's letter, which Kulik had excised in order to obtain the figure of the Palace itself. The Palace flies off into the sky, lifted by the flapping of its side wings. As the Palace flies further and further away, the cute little clay figurines grow and mutate into enormous, grotesque, golem-like vertical formations, while the May Day decorations and love/agitational slogans are scattered over the surface of the suitcase (or Parade Square). As the



B / P. XX

Palace retreats towards the horizon, the golems are flattened, and the suitcase-Square is turned into a wasteland of parched clay. Finally, a silhouetted photograph of a woman—stretching out her arms in mimicry of the symmetry of the flying Palace—is placed on the clay, accompanied in the concluding scene by a series of several smaller photographs of human silhouettes, as the Palace (and the sun under which it had been flying) disappears. (The motif of the disappearing Palace also appears in Kulik's diploma project, *Instead of Sculpture* [1968–1971].)

In Luiza Nader's analysis, the first act "introduces the two subjects and their amorous, affective relationship."¹⁶ The first subject is constituted by the inchoate multitude gathered at the foot of the Palace (clay figurines, paper slogans, and cut-outs). In Nader's words, "this is a subject that expresses itself in fragments. She is dispersed, incoherent, surrendered, naive, childish, enthusiastic, disciplined, but first of all—in love." The second subject is the "phantasmatic, phallic structure of the Palace of Culture and Science." This subject is "powerful, institutional, political, it receives tributes, it deploys the expert language of art, and first of all—it is the object of love." We can identify this second Palace-subject, Nader says, "as a human subject and an ideological non-human one: as a partner as well as a post-totalitarian political system."¹⁷ As Nader points out, it is never clear whether the object of love (or obsession, or fixation—"affect" is Nader's chosen word for the sum of these feelings and drives) is a person or a political system—"the ambivalence is maintained" throughout the piece.¹⁸

Kulik's apparently conscious conflation of her lover/the father of her child/the Palace/the totalitarian system is remarkably redolent of the phenomenon of the "untypical" correspondence sent to the Palace, kept for decades in a special folder by the build-

16

Luiza Nader, "Materializing Conceptual Affects: The Love Discourse of Zofia Kulik's *Letter from Milan* (1972)" in *Conceptualism and Materiality: Matters of Art and Politics*, ed. Christian Berger (Brill; forthcoming 2019). First published as "Konceptualne efekty: Dyskurs miłosny Listu z Mediolanu (1972) Zofii Kulik," *Miejsce: Studia nad sztuką i architekturą polską XX i XXI wieku* no. 3 (Warsaw: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych, 2017).

17

Nader, "Materializing Conceptual Affects."

18

Nader, "Materializing Conceptual Affects."

ing's chronicler Hanna Szczubefek. The first letters in Szczubefek's folder date from 1972—remarkably enough, the same year as Kulik's Milan letter. The letters from the 1970s and 1980s connect the Palace to sacred, eschatological, and legal realms, as well as to love, dispute resolution, demonic and healing power, public and intimate abuses, and grievances. Many of the letters also contain references to the architectural or spatial (such as suggestions for alterations to the body of the Palace) and ideological realms (attacks against or defenses of the Palace on historical-political grounds). Notably, both the pre- and post-1989 letters frequently contain a strikingly gendered dimension.¹⁹

Kulik's "disappearance" of the Palace in the *Letter from Milan* is also redolent of the manner in which the Palace's eradication (or at least its deformation) was treated, during the late-socialist 1970s and 1980s, as a prerequisite of any sort of substantive reconfiguration of Warsaw's (and Poland's) social, political, and ideological landscape. During this time, artists, writers, musicians, filmmakers, and satirists produced visions depicting the Palace as codependent on the system that erected it. One of the opening lines of Tadeusz Konwicki's novel *A Minor Apocalypse*, for example, describes the Palace, once a "monument to arrogance, a statue to slavery, a stone layer cake of abomination," transformed into merely "a large, upended barracks, corroded by fungus and mildew, an old toilet forgotten at some central European crossroad."²⁰ Meanwhile, the closing scene of Sylwester Chęciński's 1991 film *Calls Controlled*, set during the martial law winter of 1981, features the main protagonist, an accidental anti-regime conspirator, fleeing from pursuit by the Citizens' Militia into the Palace of Culture where, at the same time, a New Year's Eve banquet for the communist top brass is being held. Hiding in a toilet cubicle, the escapee pulls the flush to escape the suspicions of prying toilet users.

19 The "untypical" correspondence is elaborated on in Murawski, "Big Affects: Size, Sex and Stalinist 'Architectural Power' in Post-Socialist Warsaw," in *Elements of Architecture: Assembling Archaeology, Atmosphere and the Performance of Building Spaces*, eds. Mikkel Bille and Tim Flohr Sorensen (London: Routledge, 2016).

20 Tadeusz Konwicki, *A Minor Apocalypse* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 4.

Immediately the entire Palace crumbles and topples over, an unambiguous allegory for the fragility of the repressive, conflicted, and unsustainable system that the building represented. The culprit crawls out of the rubble, hopelessly muttering, "We'll rebuild it..."

Moreover, the scenography of Kulik's *Letter from Milan* provides an anticipatory staging of the many planned—but failed—architectural reconfigurations of the Palace's surroundings during the post-socialist period. The clay figures, which "grow larger and turn monstrous as they try to reach the building as it moves away [...] turn[ing] into a tyrant"²¹ are suggestive of the multiple attempts to build a high-rise city center (whether symmetrical or consciously anti-symmetrical) in the vicinity of the Palace from the 1980s onwards—successful on the outer peripheries of the Palace's surroundings, beyond the perimeter of Parade Square (beyond the suitcase, as it were), but unsuccessful, so far, on the Square itself. The affect—the "madness" with which Kulik fills this scenography—is mirrored by the affection, fixation and obsession, anger and love that Warsaw and Varsovians attach to the Palace (and its surroundings). All of this, as Nader observes, "manifests itself as a force with both a positive as well as a negative influence on the world."²²

After 1989: To Disperse, to Converge

Kulik's treatment of the Palace in her 1970s works was already characterized by an extremely high level of complexity and dialectical probing of the contradictions invested in the Palace's Closed (and Complex) Form—encompassing, to paraphrase Nader's analysis, both the positive and negative consequences of the Palace Complex. Nevertheless, it appears, on the strength of *Letter from Milan* and *Instead of Sculpture*, that Kulik, at this point, still considered the disappearance of the Palace to be a prerequisite for an "opening" of the form of the city. However, despite the collapse of the Polish People's Republic in 1989, the Palace not only failed to disappear from Kulik's works—as her 1970s creations seemed to suggest that it might—but its presence actually increased, in terms of both frequency and intensity.

21
22

Nader, "Materializing Conceptual Affects."
Nader, "Materializing Conceptual Affects."

A preoccupation with centrality, symmetry, and their opposites—with the “geometry of power,” in Izabela Kowalczyk’s term,²³ and with the Palace’s role as a pivot of this geometry—comes to the very foreground of Kulik’s oeuvre in 1989—at the very moment, in fact, that the Polish People’s Republic collapsed. In *Human Motif* (1989), the Palace’s mirror-image appears on either edge of the foreground as a focal point for an ultra-symmetrical mass spectacle. In *Monument I* (1989), however, the Palace’s presence is already more ambiguous—it is a burden borne on the back of a naked, dog-like male figure (the artist Zbigniew Libera, Kulik’s model in most of her photomontages) crouched on all fours—a pathetic, canine caricature of the stele-bearing turtles from Chinese mythology. Moreover, the spire of the Palace on Libera’s back is transformed into a spear—pointed, with castrating, emasculating intent, directly between the legs of the druid-like male figure (also Libera), whose body and cape hover over the Palace-stele. This positioning seems especially subversive in light of the highly gendered and sexualized images of the Palace that began to appear in the 1990s, depicting the Palace as a phallus poised to penetrate female flesh.

1990’s *Self-Portrait with the Palace I* shows an upside-down Palace dangling precariously over Kulik’s head; it is unclear whether the robed male druid-clones whose arms reach towards the building on either side are dropping the Palace onto Kulik, with the aim of killing her (“hammering” her, in her own phrase²⁴); are protecting her against it (by holding it up); or have mounted the Palace on her head as a crown. If it is not an admission of naivety, then Kulik’s con-

23 Izabela Kowalczyk, “The Geometry of Power in Zofia Kulik’s Work,” *n.paradoxa* no. 11 (October 1999): 19–25, <https://www.ktpress.co.uk/pdf/nparadoxaissue11.pdf>.

24 Zofia Kulik, “Autokomentarz,” *Magazyn Sztuki* no. 15/16 (1997): 214. Ewa Lajer-Burchardth, Piotr Piotrowski, and Izabela Kowalczyk have written about Kulik’s understanding of “hammering,” and of Kulik’s own working-through (and “subordination” to) the mechanisms of “hammering” to which communist, totalitarian, patriarchal, and capitalist regimes submit artists and women. See Lajer-Burchardth’s text, “Old Histories: Zofia Kulik’s Ironic Recollections,” reprinted in this volume, XX; Piotrowski, “Between Siberia and Cyberia: On the Art of Zofia Kulik and on Museums,” in *Zofia Kulik: From Siberia to Cyberia*, eds. Zofia Kulik and Piotr Piotrowski, ex. cat. (Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe, 1999); and Kowalczyk, “The Geometry of Power.”

fidant gaze, and the spear she holds in her own hands, appears to suggest that the latter interpretation is the most accurate.

In *Guardians of the Spire* from 1990, the guardians appear neither to be the May Day crowd gathered beneath the building, nor the communist apparatchiks greeting them from its honor tribune, but the twin, naked Liberas perched calmly on either side of the metallic structure—redolent of a window-frame in a Gothic church—which Kulik erects around the Palace. Perhaps this frame is a cocoon to protect the now-vulnerable Palace (vulnerable like Libera’s spindly male body) from the baying post-socialist throng; a frame to preserve its symmetry in the face of the chaos-causing centrifugal uncertainties of the incoming epoch; or a pyramid-like encasing, intended to contain the Palace’s dangerous radiation within its immediate vicinity. The whirling kaleidoscope of (partially dismembered) male bodies at the center of the image, however, suggests that the task of the guardians is not as easy as the calmness exuded by the duplicate Libera figures makes it seem.

May Day Mass (also from 1990), makes clear, however, that the artist does not necessarily see the symbolism, rites, and symmetries of the two epochs (pre- and post-1989) as being at odds with each other. Here, the May Day crowds are replaced with the faithful, gathered at Pope John Paul II’s open-air Mass on Parade Square during his historic 1987 pilgrimage to Poland (actually held on June 14 of that year). This Mass/spectacle was notable less for the words spoken by the pontiff than for the experiments with Palatial symmetry, which the temporary altar—erected specially for the occasion—was itself deployed to carry out. Plans were initially made to hang a 70-meter crystalline crucifix from the Palace’s main facade in the spot ordinarily occupied by Lenin, crownless eagles, or other elements of the socialist state’s symbology during May Day parades, but these came to nothing, apparently in the face of objections from the Soviet embassy, who did not want “any holy trinkets hung from our present.”²⁵ The Palace’s facade remained bare, but an enormous altar, styled after organ pipes and centered on a crucifix wrapped in

25

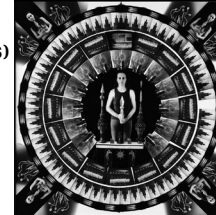
Irena Świerdzewska, “Krzyż Na Pałacu Kultury,” *Idziemy*, May 30, 2012, <http://www.idziemy.com.pl/polityka/krzyz-na-palacu-kultury/2/>.

aluminum foil, was erected on top of the tribune, directly in front of the Palace's main entrance. As several hundred thousand people crowded into the Square and surrounding streets, all eyes were focused on the altar. Although its pyramidal symmetry directly corresponded with (and was therefore subordinate to) the form of the Palace, the weight of the occasion was such that the hierarchy was reversed: the Palace either seemed to become "part of" the altar or to be displaced by it—even cosmically banished, as in Julian Bohdanowicz's 1987 cartoon—in an act redolent of the Palace's disappearance in the 1972 *Letter from Milan*. There is no suggestion of banishment, movement, or flight on the Palace's part in Kulik's image, but the Libera-males seem to float into the ether—either in a dream-state (dreaming of the Palace, no less, as the central image of Palaces circulating around Libera's sleeping head suggests), or ascending into heaven.

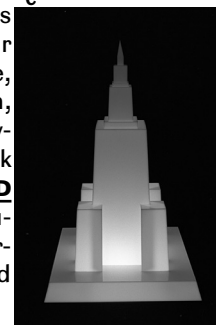
The Palace appears again in 1991's *Favorite Balance*—a monumental image of daunting intricacy and complexity; and in 1992's *All Things Converge in Time and Space; To Disperse, To Converge, To Disperse, and So On*—an explicit exploration of the relationship between center and periphery, symmetry and asymmetry, fission and fusion—the "ceaseless battle between centrifugal forces that seek to keep things apart, and centripetal forces that strive to make things cohere"—the former of which were in the ascendancy during the 1990s, years of center-irrupting, disorienting "wild capitalism."²⁶ Here, the Palace-bearing male dog/turtle reappears, and the spire of the Palace once again doubles-up as a spear, pointing with violent intent—this time towards a woman's loins. Not a living person, however, but a monumental sculpture (an allegory of music, holding a violin), whose exaggerated musculature is contrasted with the lanky frame of the young Libera—one of the dozens of sculptural figures positioned in niches around the ground-floor facade of the Palace of Culture. Above looms the figure of warrior-craftswoman Kulik, clutching another spire as if it was a spear (repeating the pose from

26

As Michael Holquist puts it, with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophy of language. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).



1990's *Guardians of the Spire*), flanked by two enormous assemblages of drill bits fashioned into spires (or spears). The usual collection of cloned Liberas dance, in Chaplinesque fashion, around the composition, endowing the whole with movement, comedy, and gravitas. The same image of the spear-brandishing Kulik constitutes the centerpiece of **MYSELF, POPPIES, AND THE JOKE**^{C (1992)}, in which dozens of dark Palace silhouettes, projecting from the edge of a circular halo surrounding Kulik, perform the functional, tireless, and un-singular role of a cog in a greater structure.



In Kulik's "geometry of power," then, the Palace's role is hardly unambivalent or unidirectional. It performs a number of seemingly contradictory functions and adopts an array of different directionalities, both centripetal and centrifugal: it is a heavy burden, borne by an emasculated male (a gift that demands reciprocity); a stele (a bearer of signs and symbolic meaning); a weapon (a "spire" or a "hammer") of both symbolic and sexual violence; and a spatial, structural, or symbolic center, holding the whole together and providing it with meaning; as well as a periphery, a cog doing the bidding of a system or cosmos, whose real core is located elsewhere.

Beyond the photomontages, the Palace plays an important role in Kulik's sculptural/archival installation **KURGANS OF FAME AND INFAMY**^{D (1993)}, exhibited at Warsaw's Zachęta National Gallery of Art; here, a Palace-like shape is one of a series of illuminated Plexiglas maquettes, accompanied by figures resembling Alexander Shchusev's Lenin's Mausoleum on Red Square, a Mesoamerican pyramid, and a series of other obelisks, ziggurats, and plinths. The reference to kurgans in the title of the work—ancient burial mounds found throughout Central Asia and Eastern Europe, which were appropriated into Polish national memorial culture in the 19th century—appears to suggest a sort of Eurasianist dimension to Kulik's work here, further hinted at in her invocations of the symmetry of oriental carpets, mandalas, and Chinese mythology. The *Kurgans* series brings home the aesthetic and morphological kinship of

Kulik's art with the late-Soviet and post-Soviet Russian artistic avant-gardes, as well as with the decorative and applied art of the Soviet 1920s–40s—the agit-carpets and agit-fabrics that Kulik may have come across during her 1971 student trip to Moscow.²⁷ The Moscow Conceptualists (Andrei Monastyrski, Vitaly Komar, Alexander Melamid, and others)—famously analyzed by Boris Groys²⁸—devoted their practice during this time to a fixation on and (ironic) exploration of the symmetries and monumentalities of high-Soviet civilization and its material and mnemonic legacies, such as Lenin's Mausoleum or the Exhibition of Achievements of the People's Economy (VDNKh) in the northern suburbs of Moscow. Similarly but distinctly, the New Academists (Timur Novikov, Alexey Belyaev-Gintovt, Georgy Curyanov, and others) explored the aesthetics of Stalinism, fascism, and—most markedly in the case of Belyaev-Gintovt, a self-avowed Russian nationalist and Eurasian Romanticist—Russo-centric Eurasianism. The New Academists' aesthetic is, like that of Laibach and the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), much more openly queer and camp than that of the Moscow Conceptualists, but unlike the NSK, who are unmistakably ironic, and unlike the Moscow Conceptualists, who are quite safely left-liberal and postmodern, the New Academists flirt on a meta-ironic level not only with Stalinist, far-right, conservative, and fascist aesthetics, but also with the corollary political ideologies and movements.

Zofia Kulik is a strange bedfellow to Moscow Conceptualism, New Academism, and the NSK, but she is probably the only major Polish artist of the late- and post-socialist period whose oeuvre is fixated—like them—on the symmetries and centripetal-centrifugal geometries at the core of state socialism's aesthetic makeup, legacy, and unravelling. She is also, unlike the (largely but not exclu-

27 See also Sarah Wilson's reflections on the relationship between Kulik's work and the broader genre of East European "Soc-art" postmodernism, with which the works of the Moscow Conceptualists and New Academists are sometimes associated. Sarah C. Wilson, "Zofia Kulik: From Warsaw to Cyberia," *Centropa* 1/3 (September 2001): 233. Reprinted in this volume, XX.

28 Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

sively) male and woman-blind Moscow Conceptualists and New Academists (for all their exploration of male sexuality, Novikov and Belyaev-Gintovt were not particularly concerned with gender), consistently concerned with exploring the intersection between gender, aesthetics, and politics: Kulik's art, in Sarah Wilson's phrase, has been "from the outset [...] resolutely antipatriarchal."²⁹

In her analysis of the work of Curyanov, Novikov, Belyaev-Gintovt, and the New Academists after 1990, Maria Engström argues that these artists carried out a "queering" of Socialist Realism in the political-aesthetic context of late-Soviet and post-Soviet Russia.³⁰ Following David J. Getsy,³¹ Engström uses the phrase "queer" to refer to a "strategic undercutting of the stability of identity and the dispensation of power that shadows the assignment of categories and taxonomies." The New Academists, says Engström, queered the aesthetics of Stalinist Socialist Realism by exploring its sublimated sexual and homoerotic content, but also by retaining its heroism and monumentality, in a "metamodernist" move, which differs in its sincerity from the irony-laden postmodernism of the Moscow Conceptualists. In a not-unrelated gesture, I would argue, Kulik queers Closed Form—and especially its epitome, the Palace of Culture—by undermining the stability of the binary taxonomies (aesthetic, political, sexual, geometric) through which Closed Form/the Palace are habitually made sense of by the Polish intellectuals of the late-socialist period (whether Konwicki, Chęciński, Hansen, or even—to some extent—the Kulik of *Letter from Milan*).

Queering the Palace Complex: Towards a New Red Palace

Kulik's exploration of the Palace's multiple symmetries, centricities, aesthetics—and sexualities—runs alongside, I would like to suggest, the "queering" of the Palace, which has intensified during the past several years in Warsaw, especially in the context of the

29 Wilson, "Zofia Kulik: From Warsaw to Cyberia," 235.

30 Maria Engström, "Queering Socialist Realism: Timur Novikov's New Academy," conference paper presented at "1917–2017: Russian Revolution in Arts and Aesthetics," Stockholm, October 19–21, 2017.

31 David J. Getsy, ed., *Queer (Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art)* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

ultra-Catholic, homophobic, misogynistic, and xenophobic ideological climate created in Poland since 2015 under the rule of the Law and Justice party. In the context of Law and Justice's combined assault on women's rights and contraception, and on what it perceives to be Poland's "post-communist" condition, could it be that the seemingly ultra-phallic, domineering Palace could even be made to take on some symbolic feminist attributes?

Among the relatively few people I met in Warsaw who virulently disliked the Palace or who wanted to see it knocked down, I mostly remembered encounters with young or youngish boys and men—patriotically minded, politically conservative activists in their teens or twenties handing out flyers on the street or attending public discussions about the history of Warsaw, fueled by varying degrees of anger and nationalistic zeal; indeed, the data I collected in my Palaceological survey (conducted in October 2010) backs up this impression. Among the most striking figures revealed in the respondents' answers was the disparity between male and female attitudes towards the Palace of Culture. 73% of women, but only 57% of men, described themselves as "positively disposed" toward the Palace (64% overall). More strikingly, just 21% of female, but over half (51%) of male respondents thought that "Warsaw needs to have a skyscraper taller than the Palace of Culture," and almost three times more men (23%) than women (8%) expressed their desire for the Palace to be demolished.

During a public meeting at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw in the autumn of 2010 at which I presented my survey results, audience members were unanimous in their psychosexual etiology of these figures: Warsaw's men are more aggressively disposed toward the Palace than its women are, because its vast dimensions—and perhaps its architectural power—leave them feeling belittled and intimidated. In other words, Warsaw's men are uniquely afflicted by the Palace Complex. A Facebook discussion that emerged following my presentation of these statistics during a lecture at Warsaw's Academy of Fine Arts in March 2017 also gave rise to a conversation about the relation between gender and the Palace Complex, and about belligerent versus nonbelligerent attitudes towards the

Palace itself and Poland's communist past in general. The conversation started lightheartedly: feminist philosopher and artist Ewa Majewska posted a photograph of my slide presenting the survey figures, accompanied by the comment, "It would seem that men are dangerous." "Rather, it seems that they have complexes," responded sociologist Kasia Kasiówna. Soon, however, the conversation was joined by a male Facebook friend of one of the participants (who hadn't been present at the lecture). He expressed outrage at the idea that the Palace was being considered in a positive light at all: it was a terrible imposition on Warsaw; it ripped apart the whole prewar layout of the city, separating the western Wola district from the center! And he expressed even more consternation at the idea that gender was a relevant factor in attitudes towards the Palace, towards Poland's history, or towards everyday life in general.

The paradoxically belligerent manner in which this protest against the belligerent nature of the Palace—and of the political system that stood behind it—was delivered also reminded me of the competitive, macho turn taken by a discussion about the Palace that I organized in the context of my fieldwork in July 2010: several male members of the panel and audience began accusing each other of "impotence" or "dwarfishness" for their perceived inability to deal with the Palace Complex. Right-wing architect and Law and Justice mayoral candidate Czesław Bielecki even went so far as to claim that he is in possession of the "legislative Viagra" (a phrase that Bielecki, as he emphasized, actually trademarked) to break through the so-called "administrative impotence" hampering the city's plans to overcome the Palace's domination over the city.³²

The character of Warsaw's Palace Complex—although ultimately rooted in the political-economic parameters underlying the building's ability to continue to function publicly—affects, afflicts, and enriches the life of Warsaw on numerous uneven, contradictory, and complementary levels. Various working generalizations can be made in order to try to make sense of—to "reveal" rather than to obscure—some of this complexity and contradiction. On a compar-

32

This interaction is described in more detail in Murawski, "Big Affects" (2016).

ative, global scale, the Palace Complex does appear to be highly unusual in terms of the extent to which the attention of an entire city is concentrated—to Oskar Hansen’s dismay—on one architectural object. However, even if the Palace Complex is not exactly “normal,” it is not pathological either; rather than being an affliction that only “the other Varsovian” has, the Palace Complex permeates pervasively, if asymmetrically, throughout the whole social existence of 21st-century Warsaw.

To dwell a little more on belligerent versus nonbelligerent attitudes towards the Palace, it is also clear that—contrary to an opinion I often heard expressed while in Warsaw—these are not distributed linearly according to age: older people are no more likely to dislike the Palace than younger ones. Apart from gender, few demographic categories underlie substantial divergences in disposition towards the Palace, with political opinions and attitudes towards Poland’s communist past being among the few exceptions: unsurprisingly enough, 79% of self-described left-wingers were positively disposed towards the Palace (only 5% negatively), while the corresponding figures for right-wingers were 45% versus 34% (57% versus 17% for political centrists). 100% of respondents who evaluated the communist past in positive terms were fond of the Palace, while less than half of those whose attitude towards the socialist period was negative thought likewise. Even among this anti-communist demographic, however, it is interesting to note that the Palace had more admirers (47%) than detractors (30%).

For all its phallicness, then, the Palace—in its awesome capacity to provoke male belligerence—may, perhaps, be able to play an anti-patriarchal role in Warsaw’s symbolic-political landscape. For all its morphological centrality and symmetry, it veers distinctly closer towards Warsaw’s political left side than to its right. As the meeting place for Warsaw’s annual feminist Manifa marches, and a focal point for the city’s LGBT Pride parades; as an object of hatred and symbolic censorship for Poland’s currently reigning nationalist right; as a powerful container and radiator of public spirit in a city of wild restitution and resurgent privation; as a vivid reminder of the extent to which Poland’s socialist regime was as invested in the pro-

vision of new kinds of public culture and opportunity to previously dispossessed classes as it was in the withdrawal of old kinds of privilege from the feudal and bourgeois elites; and as a near-universal object of affection and fascination—even for the greater share of Warsaw’s belligerent males, right-wingers, and anti-communists—the still-socialist Palace may, so long as its publicness remains intact, serve as a powerful agent and device for the reconfiguration of the left-less, patriarchal, and privationary economic, aesthetic, social, and ideological landscape of 21st-century Warsaw.

The Palace, then, has queered itself, but it has also been queered by circumstance. Zofia Kulik—who sought to “fill the Palace with her own madness”—is a witness, an archivist, and an activator of this process of queering the Palace and of switching on its radical potential—of reactivating the Palace’s public spirit, and thereby of building a New Red Palace. This is especially true in the context of the recent right-wing upsurge in Polish politics, and of reactionary politicians’ calls to demolish the Palace in time for the celebration of the centenary of Polish independence in November 2018.