

Feliza Bursztyn: Welding Madness

Curated by
Marta Dziewańska and Abigail Winograd

18 December 2021 — 26 June 2022

**MUZEUM
SŁUSCH**



Feliza Bursztyn in her studio in Bogotá, 1981. Courtesy Estate Feliza Bursztyn. Photo by Rafael Moure.

“En un país de machistas, ¡hágase la loca!”
“In a Sexist Country, pretend to be the Mad One!”
— Feliza Bursztyn, 1979

Feliza Bursztyn: Welding Madness is the first museum retrospective of Colombian artist Feliza Bursztyn (1933 Bogotá, Colombia–1982, Paris, France) to be presented outside her home country. Bringing together approximately 50 sculptures, films, installations, and archival material, most of which are shown for the first time in Europe, this ambitious, career-spanning survey at Muzeum Susch positions Bursztyn as one of Latin America’s most important sculptors of the 20th century.

A pioneer in kinetic sculpture, Feliza Bursztyn created wrecked metal sculptures with ghostlike yet comical humanoid traits that addressed the social effects caused by the aggressive modernization of Colombian society. Composed of industrial junk, often motor-activated, these works perform a theater of dystopian industrial hybrids. Bursztyn’s immersive installations are characterized by their disconcerting mechanical sound produced by the frenetic vibration of the sculptures, as well as by occasional music scores accompanying the pieces. The artist’s works and sculptural mise-en-scènes enact sites of aesthetic resistance and antithetical political investment, creating a unique experience that raises awareness on the situation and the perception of women in a male-dominated society and reveal the troublesome face of modernity.



Feliza Bursztyn in her studio in Bogotá, ca. 1980.
Courtesy Estate of Feliza Bursztyn. Photo by Raphael Moure.

Born Jewish in a Catholic country, the child of Polish immigrants, and a feminist in a country dominated by the conservatism of the church, Bursztyn was an outsider. It was from this position that she witnessed the rapid industrialization occurring throughout Latin America in the postwar era. An ardent supporter of the Cuban Revolution, Bursztyn was skeptical of the pervasive enthusiasm among political and cultural elites for developmentalism which, in her view, exacerbated extant social and economic divisions. Married at nineteen and divorced with three children at the age of twenty-four, Bursztyn rejected the circumscribed nature of women's lives in Colombia and intentionally flouted social mores, embracing the mantle of *La Loca* (the mad one), as she was dubbed by the press. Her political views informed the material and the content of her sculpture driving her to challenge the social and artistic status quo.



Feliza Bursztyn and *Rosemary's Baby*, 1972, double exposure.
Courtesy Estate Feliza Bursztyn. Photo by Pablo Leyva.

Bursztyn's art and life were deeply and constantly intertwined. Her parents, Polish Jews, set out in 1933 for South America. When they reached Columbia, they were greeted with the news of Hitler's victory in Germany's parliamentary elections and decided to stay. Feliza was born the same year. Her father, trained as a rabbi, established himself as a textile manufacturer and became a leader within the city's tiny Jewish community. His rapid success afforded his daughter the opportunity to study art in Bogotá and later at the Art Students League in New York, as well as the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, Paris. This position of relative privilege allowed Bursztyn to travel widely, which she would continue to do throughout her life. Thus, she became familiar with contemporary artistic developments and established relationships across the United States, Europe, and Latin America.

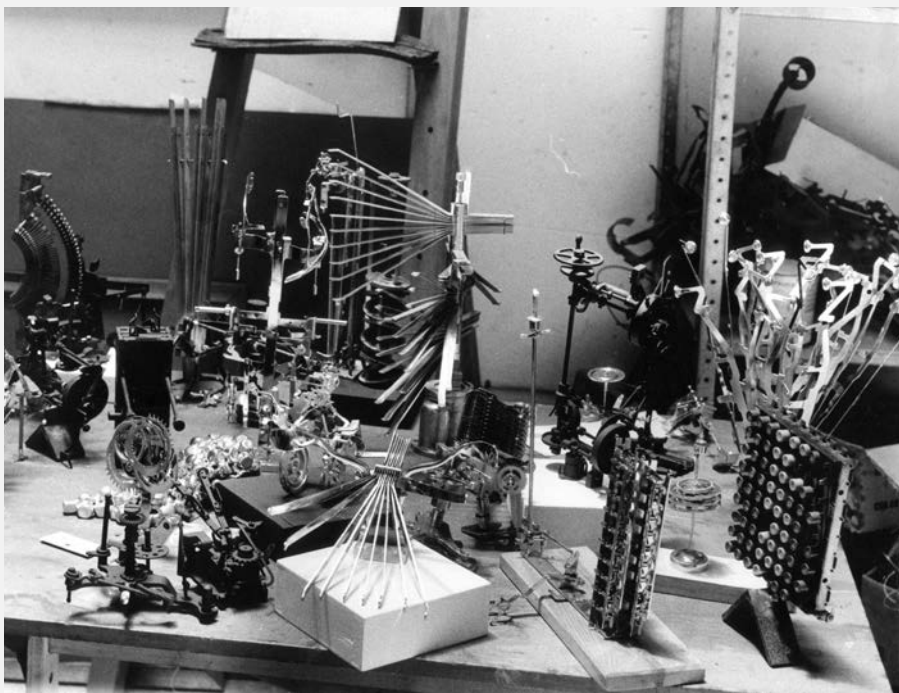


Table with multiple sculptures from the series *Minimáquinas* [Minimachines], ca. 1973. Photo by Pablo Leyva.

Her studio in Bogotá – a converted garage next to her father’s factory – became a meeting point for artists, writers, journalists, musicians, politicians and critics. It was there that she produced her first *Chatarras* (Junk Sculptures) in 1961. Bronze – the material she was trained to work with in Paris –, was scarce in Columbia, leading her to turn to junkyard scraps and work with discarded fragments of machines, tires, cables, bolts and other metal bits. She would use these materials throughout her career adding hand-dyed fabrics, motors, light, and sound to produce increasingly complex, room-sized installations. Eventually, Bursztyn produced immersive, experiential spaces: her sculptures clung to walls, hung from ceilings, perched on stages and carried out choreographed dances set to music in dramatically lit and adorned rooms. In multiple ways, her works were intended to disturb, provoke, push the limits, and reject the status quo. She collaborated with writers, experimental musicians, filmmakers, and theater directors in works that drew inspiration from sources ranging from the natural environment and popular culture to psychoanalysis.

Bursztyn’s political views, extravagant lifestyle and her vociferous support of left-wing thinking and causes resulted in her frequent questioning and occasional detention by the state security forces. Following an arrest and two-day detention in 1981, she fled the country and was granted political asylum in Mexico. She emigrated to Paris the following year where she died suddenly at the age of forty-nine.

CHATARRAS

Inspired by her training in Europe under the influence of her Parisian pedagogue, Ossip Zadkine, and her peers, more specifically the Nouveaux Réalistes, Bursztyn began her *Chatarras* (Junk Sculptures) series in 1961. She welded discarded scrap metal, corroded tires, and rusted cables together into rough, abstract compositions, significantly challenging prevalent ideals of beauty and nobility. The young and relatively unknown artist first unveiled at the highly esteemed Bogotá gallery El Callejón and became the first Colombian artist to use “non-art” materials. She, provocatively, gave each assemblage a romantic, feminine and organic name such as *Una Flor* (Flower) or *Niña alegre* (Happy Girl) which not only contrasted with their rough mechanical appearance but also mocked traditional gender roles and the perceived masculinity of art itself.



Feliza Bursztyn, *Homenaje a César* [Homage to César], 1971.
Courtesy Estate Feliza Bursztyn. Photo by Oscar Monsalve.

LAS HISTÉRICAS

In 1968 Feliza Bursztyn unveiled a new body of work which she titled *Las histéricas* (The Hysterical Ones). The flexible metal strips, which the artist bent into parabolic and circular configurations, were made of stainless steel which Bursztyn acquired at a factory that fabricated radiators, countertops, and kitchen utensils. Combining them with a small electrical motor, which she left visible, she set her work in motion and activated various aspects of the exhibition space. The awkwardness of the movements and their discordant sound resulted in darkly humorous works that could be either suspended from the ceiling or attached to the walls but also reflected light, cast shadows, and made disturbing noise.



Feliza Bursztyn, *Las histéricas* [The Hysterical Ones], 1968.
Private Collection, New York. Photo by Ernesto Monsalve.



Feliza Bursztyn, *Las histéricas* [The Hysterical Ones], 1968. Courtesy Colección de Arte del Banco de la República, Bogotá. Photo by Ernesto Monsalve.

The title of these raving, cacophonous, and ironic sculptures is ambiguous. While intended to be ironical, it seems to reinforce at the same time the patriarchal perspective of Freudian psychoanalysis, which has historically applied the term hysteria primarily to women and their sexuality.

This body of work appears in a short film titled *Hoy Feliza* (Today Feliza, 1968), created by her friend, the experimental filmmaker Luis Ernesto Arocha. The film captures *Las histéricas* in action – vibrating and mad – intertwined with images of the artist herself, but also with dozens of still images of Hollywood divas and sex symbols, including Greta Garbo, Bette Davis and Marlon Brando. The 8mm-film debuted at an exhibition at the Salón Cultural held in the gallery of the Banco de la República, where it was projected on the facade of the building.

LAS CAMAS



Feliza Bursztyn, *Las camas* (1974) installed at the Modern Art Museum Bogotá (MAMBO), 1974. Courtesy Estate Feliza Bursztyn. Photo by Pablo Leyva.

In 1972, Bursztyn began her series *Las Camas* (The Beds). The sculptures consisted of metal bed frames fitted with motors and draped in satin fabric. The exhibition *Las camas* took place in 1974 at Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá (MAMBO). Bursztyn fitted each bed with an electric motor that triggered suggestive vibrations, lending the piece a blatantly erotic charge. The beds with their suggested busy occupants were scattered in a darkened gallery with dim spot lighting. The dimmed atmosphere and the enclosure reinforced the feeling of privacy, a notion at odds with the public nature of the museum.

COLOR SCULPTURES

In 1981 Gabriel Garcia Marquez wrote: “Feliza has never done something more subversive than turning car accidents into artworks”. Indeed, in 1968 Bursztyn had been involved in a dramatic accident that left her face, smile and expression transformed forever.

Bursztyn’s method of turning scraps into sculptures by welding them together brings to mind the strategy of the bricoleur which – as cultural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss argued – either by necessity or by conscious decision, works within “the constraints imposed by the particular civilization” rather than attempt to go beyond them. By using parts of a car as her primary material, Bursztyn not only recalled their former glamorous life, but also complicated the ideas developed by the Nouveaux Réalistes or contemporaneous artists working under the pop art rubric. “Pop art” in Columbia is distinct from its meaning in more industrialized countries and while her use of car scraps can refer to economic development and to a growing consumer culture, it also simultaneously points to scarcity and underdevelopment.



Feliza Bursztyn, *Sin titulo* [Untitled], 1981. Courtesy Estate Feliza Bursztyn. Photo by Ernesto Monsalve.



Feliza Bursztyn, *Sin título* [Untitled], 1980.
Private Collection. Photo by Ernesto Monsalve.

In these works, Bursztyn points to yet another dimension: her colorful assemblages may be read as allusions to proletarian labor. As the gallery owner Alonso Garcés would reflect years later, “Feliza faced an even greater difficulty due to her being a woman in a society in which art made by women was related more to painting on porcelain than to soldering with acetylene torch”. Indeed, her adoption of welding as an artistic technique challenged classical gender stereotypes.

ROSEMARY'S BABY

Bursztyn's work frequently engaged with aspects of popular culture, including music and cinema. *Rosemary's Baby* borrows its title from Roman Polanski's eponymous film, released in Colombia in 1969. Based on Ira Levin's novel, the plot of *Rosemary's Baby* is centered on the pregnancy of Rosemary Woodhouse and her growing suspicion that her elderly neighbors are members of a Satanic cult. Thematically, the film echoed the concerns of Bursztyn's own oeuvre: paranoia, psychoanalysis, gender dynamics, women's liberation, and Christianity.

Bursztyn's *Rosemary's Baby* (1973) is composed of a crib, steel scrap, black satin sheets, and a motor. It is the only work in the *Camas* series to use a crib rather than a bed. The steel frame, originally painted black, was later painted white and the sides removed. The disturbing nature of the work – no doubt part of the artist's intention – was reinforced by an extant double-exposure photograph of the work with a ghostly self-portrait floating above it. Given Bursztyn's predilection for Freudian analysis, it is worth noting the resonance this work must have had for the artist, who, by this time, was separated from her daughters following the dissolution of her abusive first marriage.



Feliza Bursztyn, *El bebé de Rosemary* [Rosemary's Baby], ca. 1972.
Courtesy Estate Feliza Bursztyn. Photo by Oscar Monsalve.

MINIMÁQUINAS / MINIESCULTURAS

Throughout the 1960s, the scale of Bursztyn's work increased exponentially. With the *Minimáquinas* (Minimachines), she reversed course and began producing smaller-scale works. Made from disassembled typewriters and other small manual machines, these small structures are intricate. To compound the preciousness lent to them by their high degree of detail and, often, delicacy, Bursztyn chrome-plated some of them gold and silver. The artist intended these intimately sized constructions to be manipulated by the audience, thereby creating yet another connection between spectator and artwork.



Feliza Bursztyn, *Minimaquina* [Mini Machine], ca. 1969.
Courtesy Estate Feliza Bursztyn. Photo by Pablo Leyva.



Feliza Bursztyn, *Sin título* [Untitled], 1969–1974, from the series *Minimáquinas* [Minimachines]. Courtesy Estate of Feliza Bursztyn. Photo by Oscar Monsalve.

The artist continued to create miniature sculptures at various times throughout the 1970s. In 1971, they inspired the filmmaker Ernesto Arocha to make another short film, titled *Azilef* (“Feliza” spelled backwards). Their machine-like and zoomorphic qualities make them appear as alien creatures, spaceships, or satellites that move through empty space. The film’s soundtrack was composed and performed especially for the project by the Bogotá-based, Beatles-inspired rock band Los Teipus and included a psychedelic folk-rock song, with lyrics in English about magic, dreams, love, the universe, and possibilities. Arocha’s film locates Bursztyn’s work in relation to *hippismo* (hippyism), with its rejection of convention, ideas of sexual freedom, renunciation of materialism, experimentation with drugs, embrace of new popular art forms, and utopian belief in the possibility of a better future.

LA BAILA MECÁNICA



Feliza Bursztyn, *La baila mecánica* [The Mechanical Ballet], 1979.
Courtesy Tate, London © Tate.

La baila mecánica premiered on April 5, 1979 at the Galeria Garcés Velásquez in Bogotá; it represented the pinnacle of Bursztyn's long-standing interest in experimenting with material, light, sound, and movement. Although only five elements were ultimately exhibited, the "ballet" initially consisted of seven large, upright, and mysterious figures dressed in shrouds that the artist humanized and individualized by giving each a name. They "dance", alone or in each other's company, with their own distinct movements, on a music composed by the twelfth-century composer Perotinus Magnus. In 1979 the artist explained, "I am convinced that each sculpture has its own character, its own personality, its own movement, a distinct tone, a world of its own. Exactly like people. So naturally they each have a name [...]."



Feliza Bursztyn, *La baila mecánica* at the artists' studio in Bogotá, ca. 1979.
Courtesy Estate of Feliza Bursztyn. Photo by Pablo Leyva.

There is something anti-monumental and deeply troubling about these motorized, unstable and precarious veiled figures. The visible electrical cords attached to each figure add an ominous quality. At the time, *La baila mecánica* may have evoked images of violent repression, given that, following his election in 1978 president Julio César Turbay Ayala instituted a Security Statute in response to the growth of Marxist guerrilla movements. During his tenure (1978-1982) he facilitated the right for the military to detain, interrogate, and for judges to suspect terrorists, leading to increasing human rights violations, including arbitrary detention and torture. When looked at from this perspective, *La baila mecánica* becomes a tragic foreshadowing of the artist's own future.

The work toured in 1979 and was exhibited at the La Tertulia Museum of Modern Art in Cali, Galeria Rzeźby in Warsaw, as well as in Kraków and La Havana.

Feliza Bursztyn was a pioneering Colombian artist active in the 1960s and 1970s whose kinetic sculptures revolutionized the South-American art field alongside the work of her better known contemporaries Gego and Mira Schendel (all three shared the experience of the Jewish diaspora).

Her art and life were deeply and constantly intertwined. For Bursztyn, art was a language to convey politicized content and a means of actively opposing and commenting on women's rights in a post-colonial society. Her daring, somewhat extravagant lifestyle – unseen in the patriarchal, catholic society of Colombia at that time – and her vociferous support of left-wing thinking made her push material, technical, and aesthetic boundaries in ways that changed Colombian art. What is so striking and so original in our perspective, however, is the way in which she combined and interrogated ideas about art, machines, craft, modernity, and labor through the lens of hysteria – a term which, since the 19th century, has been used to describe female instability, abnormality and emotional excess.

CURATORIAL STATEMENT

This term not only became the topic of her works, e.g. in one of the most stunning series' of sculptures Las históricas (The Hysterical Ones) that she created in 1968, but also a very clear artistic strategy. What is more, it also became a way for Bursztyn to critically thematize the irrational, extremely fragile and ambiguous nature of modernity. There's no doubt that she was both a political activist and a feminist, in ways specific to Colombia but also tied to international conversations about art, politics, and gender. Feliza Bursztyn: Welding Madness happening at Muzeum Susch is an unprecedented occasion to discover an artist whose story and oeuvre challenge and expand existing definitions of Post-War abstraction, "Latin American Art", feminist artistic practice, and politically engaged artwork.

— Marta Dziewańska and Abigail Winograd, 2021

The exhibition *Feliza Bursztyn: Welding Madness* is curated by Marta Dziewańska and Abigail Winograd. It will be accompanied by a fully illustrated book published by Skira.

Marta Dziwiałka is Curator at Kunstmuseum Bern. Between 2007 and the end of 2018 she was head of research at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and, in 2017, a curatorial advisor for documenta 14, Athens and Kassel.

She curated and co-curated several exhibition projects: *Tools for Utopia. Selected Works from the Daros Latinamerica Collection* (Kunstmuseum Bern, 2020), *Things Fall Apart. Swiss Art from Boecklin to Vallotton* (Kunstmuseum Bern, 2019/2020), *MIRIAM CAHN: I AS HUMAN* (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2019), *The Other Trans-Atlantic. Kinetic and Op art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 50s-70s* (MoMA Warsaw and Sesc Sao Paulo, Brazil 2017/2018), *Alina Szapocznikow: Human Landscapes* (The Hepworth Wakefield, UK), *Andrzej Wróblewski: Recto/Verso* (MoMA Warsaw and Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid, 2015/2016), *Maria Bartuszo. Provisional Forms* (MoMA Warsaw, 2015), and others.

She edited and co-edited numerous publications, among which *Tools for Utopia. Selected Works from the Daros Latinamerica Collection* (Hatje Cantz Verlag and Kunstmuseum Bern, 2020), *MIRIAM CAHN: I AS HUMAN* (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and University of Chicago Press, 2019), *Maria Bartuszo. Provisional Forms* (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and University of Chicago Press, 2015), *Alina Szapocznikow: Human Landscapes* (The Hepworth Wakefield, UK) with A. Bonacina and L. Heese, *The Other Trans-Atlantic. Kinetic and Op art in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and University of Chicago Press, 2017) with Dieter Roelstraete and Abigail Winograd, *Points of Convergence: Alternative Views on Performance* (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and University of Chicago Press, 2017) with André Lepecki; *Andrzej Wróblewski. Recto/Verso* (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and University of Chicago Press, 2015) with Éric de Chassey and 1968-1989. *Political Upheaval and Artistic Change* (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and University of Chicago Press, 2009) with Claire Bishop. Her writings have appeared in numerous catalogs as well as art magazines.

Abigail Winograd is the MacArthur Fellows Program 40th Anniversary Exhibition Curator at the Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago. She is the curator of *Toward Common Cause: Art, Social Change, and the MacArthur Fellows Program at 40*, a multi-site exhibition opening at 20 venues across the city of Chicago beginning May of 2021. Her scholarly research has focused on the emergence of aberrant abstractions in post-war South America as well as museological approaches to expanding canonical narratives.

Prior to her appointment at the Smart Museum, she organized *The Other Transatlantic: Kinetic and Op Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America* for the Museum of Modern Art Warsaw (traveled to Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow, and SESC Piñheros, São Paulo, 2017–2018) as well as *Abstract Experiments: Latin American art on paper after 1950* (2017) for the Art Institute of Chicago. In 2016–2017, she was the Transhistorical Curatorial Fellow at the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem, the Netherlands, where she organized *A Global Table: Still Life, Colonialism, and Contemporary Art* (2017).

Abigail Winograd was the Research Associate for *Kerry James Marshall: Mastry* (2016) at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) where she also organized *Unbound: Contemporary Art after Frida Kahlo* (2014) and *Zachary Cahill: Snow* (2014) as the Marjorie Susman Curatorial Fellow. In addition, her writing has appeared in numerous catalogs, books, journals, and art magazines.

**MUZEUM
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Feliza Bursztyn: Welding Madness

A Comprehensive Monograph

Published on the occasion of her long-deserved retrospective organized by Muzeum Susch, *Feliza Bursztyn: Welding Madness* is the first comprehensive monograph dedicated to the work of Feliza Bursztyn (1933-1982) to be published in English. Considered a great artist in Colombia, Bursztyn has remained relatively unknown outside her home country. Edited by Marta Dziawańska and Abigail Winograd, this book testifies to the singularity of her vision, amongst which the dynamic treatment of non-artistic materials. The internationally acclaimed authors of the book investigate into the artist's work in the context of the Colombian art scene, the European Jewish diaspora in Latin American, and her formative time spent in Paris. A particular emphasis is given to the context of the feminist struggles undertaken by women artists in Latin America and beyond.

Bursztyn's life and work is addressed by prominent writers, researchers and curators: Julia Buenaventura (Professor at the

Universidad de Los Andes and Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá), Cecilia Fajardo-Hill (Art Historian, co-curator with Andrea Giunta of the internationally acclaimed exhibition *Radical Women in Latin American Art 1960-1985*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2017 [traveled to Brooklyn Museum, New York and Pinacoteca de São Paulo, 2018]), Camilo Leyva (Artist and Researcher, Curator of a monographic exhibition dedicated to Feliza Bursztyn, Museum of Modern Art in Bogotá, 2009), Daniel Muzyczuk (Researcher, Curator at Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, Poland), Lucas Ospina (Writer), Sylvia Suárez (Independent Curator and Writer specialized in Colombian art), Gina McDaniel Tarver (Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History, with a focus on Latin America, Texas State University), Lynn Zelevansky (Art Historian, former Curator at the painting and sculpture department, MoMA, New York and former director of the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburg, USA).

The publication also features reprints of important source texts and rarely published archive materials. It seeks to reflect new tendencies in scholarly research on Feliza Bursztyn and her vibrant body of work.

Published by Muzeum Susch and Skira Editore, the publication is planned to be released during the run of the exhibition in Spring 2022.

**MUZEUM
SUSCH**

MUZEUM SUSCH



Muzeum Susch © Photo by Andrea Badrutt, Chur.

Being simultaneously a site of contemplation, research and intervention, MUZEUM SUSCH opened in January 2019 as a space for debate and research. Founded and created by Grażyna Kulczyk, the Polish entrepreneur and long-term supporter of contemporary art, it is specifically (but not exclusively) informed by a deep understanding of woman artists and seeks an emotional connection to art as a matrilineage of the sometimes omitted, overlooked or misread. The museum is housed in an extraordinary campus located on the site of a 12th-century former monastery and brewery in Susch, a remote town on the ancient pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostela in the Engadin valley of the Swiss Alps. The multi-faceted project comprises over 1,500 m² of gallery spaces which show site-specific and permanent artworks, and a regular program of curated, temporary exhibitions.

www.muzeumsusch.ch

MUZEUM SUSCH

GRAŻYNA KULCZYK



**MUZEUM
SUSCH**

Grażyna Kulczyk is an entrepreneur and art collector, whose endeavors have made her Poland's most successful businesswoman. In 2004, after many years of running activities in art and philanthropy sectors, Ms. Kulczyk set up her flagship venture: Art Stations Foundation CH, housed in the Stary Browar (Old Brewery) complex in Poznań (Poland), which has received numerous Polish and international awards. In 2017 she started the construction of the Muzeum Susch in Switzerland, which opened its doors in 2019, quickly becoming one of the most important museum institutions in Switzerland dedicated to international modern and contemporary art. Art Stations Foundation CH also houses a Residency Program and the Instituto Susch dedicated to global feminist Research, Conference and Publication programmes.

Ms. Kulczyk's areas of interest and art commissions combine a number of themes as development of new technology and start-ups working to change the world. She is particularly engaged in supporting entrepreneurship among women as well as the equal presence of women in STEM. Since 2012, Ms. Kulczyk supports Tate as a member of the International Council and Russia and the Eastern Europe Acquisitions Committee. She joined the board of the Modern Women's Fund Committee of the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 2015, and has been a board member of Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw for almost 10 years. Ms. Kulczyk has been recognized as one of the 200 Top Collectors in the world by Art News magazine.

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