



1. Gra yna Kulczyk photographed at Muzeum Susch in February 2020, next to *Stairs* (2016–17) by Monika Sosnowska (b. 1972)



# ALPINE RETREAT



Last year, Grażyna Kulczyk opened a contemporary art museum in the Swiss village of Susch. The Polish entrepreneur tells *Apollo* why this remote setting is the perfect backdrop for her collection of conceptual art

By Christopher Turner  
Photography by Franco Borrelli



The Swiss Alpine village of Susch, with its population of just over 200, is so remote that you have to request a stop on the train or wave it down from the platform. Surrounded by high mountains, with a picturesque church rising up over the banks of the river Inn, Susch was once a resting stop on the pilgrimage route from Rome, as travellers crossed the Flüela Pass on their way to Santiago de Compostela. The village is a suitable site for its specialist clinic devoted to burn-out syndrome, but an unlikely one for a new museum of contemporary art. Nevertheless, last year some 25,000 art lovers made the journey to this sleepy spot to visit what is billed by its founder as a 'new kind of laboratory', a 'place of contemplation and challenge to accepted ideas, a museum that is like no other'.

Muzeum Susch, which opened its doors in January 2019, is the brainchild of the 69-year-old Polish billionaire Grażyna Kulczyk, who is slight with a blonde Louise Brooks bob. She is wearing patent boots and leather trousers, seamed like salopettes, and is nursing an injury from a cross-country skiing expedition made a few days earlier. 'I had this sense of excess, of having experienced too much art, almost of being tired, having visited several exhibitions in a day,' she says of her fatigue with the art circuit. 'This is precisely what this place offers: a different kind of experience of engaging and looking at art, at a slower, more contemplative pace.' She was inspired by similarly secluded outposts of contemporary art such as Naoshima, the 'art island' in Japan, and the Kaviar Factory, a gallery in a former industrial building on a Norwegian archipelago high up in the Arctic Circle.

The museum occupies the site of a 12th-century monastery that formerly housed a hospice, vicarage and brewery, and has been sensitively converted by architects Chasper Schmidlin and Lukas Voellmy, both in their thirties at the time; the duo had previously worked on the transformation of a petrol station in Basel into the Von Bartha Gallery. Because of the strict conservation laws in Switzerland, to create 1,500 sq m of exhibition space they expanded into the mountain, excavating 9,000 tons of rock. Layers of history are lovingly exposed and framed with contemporary finishes in local materials, such as a floor composed of polished stones from the river Inn. They enlarged natural grottoes and built a passageway under the road to link the cluster of buildings that form the museum. Everything exudes its patron's perfectionism and the Swiss ideal of 'minimal intervention'.

'It looks modest on the outside,' one Susch resident tells me of this marvel of engineering, 'but when you go in it's like a feat worthy of Fitzcarraldo.' The mountain, which stretches up another 2,000m, sweats and drips throughout the building, a process that is celebrated by the architects who incorporated its boulders into their design, and which lends the museum the air of one of Ken Adam's Bond lairs. One stairway leads down into a chamber of gloopy stalactites, a plaster cave that turns out to be *Inn Reverse* (2018; Fig. 4) by the Swiss artist Sara Masüger. Indeed, the building was reconfigured around 13 permanent site-specific artworks (Fig. 3). In the centre of a mountain grotto once used for storing and cooling beer is Mirosław Bałka's *Narcissussusch* (2018; Fig. 2), a revolving mirrored cylinder that shows nature absorbed in its timeless perfection.

2. Installation view of *Narcissussusch* (2018) by Mirosław Bałka (b. 1958) at Muzeum Susch







3. Installation view of *Flock I* (1990) by Magdalena Abakanowicz (1930–2017) at Muzeum Susch

4. Installation view of *Inn Reverse* (2018) by Sara Masüger (b. 1978) at Muzeum Susch



The 17m-high central cooling tower, into which monks once shovelled snow which would air-condition the building for the rest of the year as it melted, houses an artwork by Polish installation artist Monika Sosnowska. *Stairs* (2016–17; Fig. 1) is a useless, crumpled steel staircase, which now forms the twisted spine of the building; it was one of the first artworks to be installed, lowered into place in one piece before the tower was capped with a glass lantern. A seven-tonne sample of the earth's core by Adrián Villar Rojas occupies the oldest part of the museum complex and depicts layers of rock strata, into which are congealed trainers and other human refuse arranged as if one were looking back at the Anthropocene from 2,000 years hence. Helen Chadwick is the only British artist on permanent display; her *Piss Flowers* (1991–92), white-lacquered bronze casts made from the holes left when she and her partner urinated in the snow, poke out of the drift that has gathered in a walled garden.

Kulczyk's father was a pilot in the Polish Bomber Squadron, and was based in England during the Second World War, where he fought alongside the RAF in the Battle of Britain. He contemplated settling in London after the war, but Kulczyk's mother – a physician and social activist – wanted to return to Poland to help with the reconstruction. 'The war had taken too heavy a toll on my family to be concerned with such things as art,' Kulczyk says, when asked if she inherited her passion. 'They were mostly concerned with securing the daily stability of our lives.' Unsurprisingly, perhaps, many of Muzeum Susch's installations explore themes of war. A bunker-like subterranean space is devoted to Piotr Uklański's *Real Nazis* (2017), a series of 203 photographic prints portraying German soldiers and officials during the Second World War, which was a response to the recent reappearance of far-right movements in Europe; this 'wall of shame' is echoed in the grid of Zofia Kulik's *Ethnic Wars. Large Vanitas Still Life* (1995/2017; Fig. 5), which features a recurring skull superimposed on to a series of patterned headscarves, like those found in mass graves in the Yugoslav Wars. Hanging in another room are works from Joanna Rajkowska's *Painkillers* series (2014–17), including a 1:1 replica of Little Boy (the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima) fashioned out of pulverised analgesic pills.

In the 1970s, Kulczyk studied law in her hometown of Poznań, where she was first exposed to avant-garde art. The crucible was the Galeria Akumulatory 2, founded by Jarosław Kozłowski, who co-authored, alongside Andrzej Kostołowski, the *NET Manifesto* (1972), a copy of which hangs on the wall of Kulczyk's office. Years before the Internet, Kozłowski and Kostołowski mailed this to 300 artists and theorists in America and Western Europe, inviting them to become co-creators of an unofficial, alternative network of artistic exchange that had no borders. 'I was lucky enough to attend some of the presentations by Kozłowski,' Kulczyk says. 'It allowed Polish artists to broaden their circle of contacts and reach out beyond the Iron Curtain.' Many of these artists were anti-government, and the first exhibition of works acquired by NET was broken up by the secret police, and the materials confiscated. Muzeum Susch has a museum within the museum devoted to Kozłowski and NET. It occupies a former stable, and a vitrine elegantly appended to an ancient water trough contains mail art from Richard Long, Douglas Huebler, John Cage, On Kawara and Lawrence Weiner.





5. Installation view of *Ethnic Wars. Large Vanitas Still Life* (1995/2017) by Zofia Kulik (b. 1947) at Muzeum Susch

‘There was the existence of censorship and a lack of free speech, but we were excited, in a weird way, by the fact that we had to fight for those rights,’ Kulczyk recalls of her bohemian years. NET had an impact on how she began to engage with art, and especially on her keen interest in conceptual art, which forms a large part of her collection. ‘Unfortunately, after ‘89,’ she adds, ‘along with freedom of speech and many positive things, there came this odd sense of complacency, of loss.’ At this time, Kulczyk and her late ex-husband, Jan Kulczyk, made a fortune during the sale of state-owned companies, capitalising on the new opportunities presented by the collapse of Communism. After her countercultural youth, Kulczyk retreated into a more stable bourgeois life: ‘I began decorating my house with works of art by people who are now household names in Poland like Jacek Malczewski and Tadeusz Kantor,’ she says. ‘This is not something I am ashamed of, but an important step in my journey as a collector: the retreat to bourgeois art was like going to grammar school and helped me to understand what I had experienced before.’

The Kulczyks were Poland’s sole importers of Volkswagen and Audi cars, and Grażyna transformed their car showroom into a gallery. It was the beginning of what she calls her ‘50:50 philosophy’, in which she mixed commerce and culture. ‘After Communism I felt that many people were mentally blocked,’ she explains. ‘There was something that prevented them from going into such glitzy places which were at odds with the reality of the previous decades, and I wanted to create a reason for them to cross the threshold.’ Many customers who bought cars left with a painting in the boot. In 1998, recognising the ‘incredible aspirational charge’ of contemporary art, Kulczyk bought the Stary Browar (Old Brewery) in Poznań, a 19th-century

post-industrial redbrick ruin that she slowly transformed into a postmodern shopping mall with public spaces full of sculpture. An enclosed ‘Courtyard of Art’ linked the wings of the leisure complex, putting culture front and centre. Kulczyk describes the eight-hectare site, which resembles a set from Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, as her third child. ‘I don’t feel comfortable doing things small-scale or half-baked,’ she says. The complex was soon welcoming one million people every month.

In 2007, following her divorce two years earlier (which left her the richest woman in Poland), Kulczyk showed the entirety of her collection at Stary Browar for the first time. It was later exhibited at the Sala de Arte Santander in Madrid, accompanied by a sumptuous catalogue which recognised her achievements as a collector. She employed a curator to classify it, and learned much from the process, appreciating the various steps she’d taken intuitively along the way. Her collection of contemporary art, which amounts to around 600 works, is often praised as the most valuable in Eastern Europe, and she is on acquisition committees for both MoMA and Tate. Art was a realm that was hers alone: ‘At the initial stage, when I was educating myself about bourgeois art, my husband and I bought pieces with our shared money, but everything that happened afterwards I did independently. I could not imagine myself being a business woman without this art aspect – it really helps me think outside the box.’

Alongside Polish artists, Kulczyk has acquired work by Donald Judd (apparently bought by accident at an auction), Jenny Holzer, Dan Flavin, Eva Hesse, Rosemarie Trockel, Alessandro Mendini and Olafur Eliasson. ‘It’s like playing in a casino,’ Kulczyk explains of buying art. ‘It’s like an addiction.’ There are two main facets to



the collection: conceptual art, rooted in her experience of NET and the 1970s, and work by women artists, which is also reflected in the wider programme of the museum. During our conversation she plays with a necklace by Polish designer Anna Orska, a large circle of amphibolite, the local stone that was extracted during construction of the museum, decorated with a symbol of female empowerment. She swings it like a pendulum as she explains that she wants to address the unequal standing of women in the art market and collections, and that she is also reacting to her own uneasy experience as a female entrepreneur: 'I was the only one in the boy's club. It was not easy.'

In 2008, Kulczyk tried to build a contemporary art museum appended to the Stary Browar complex, and so she visited Tadao Ando's studio in Osaka to invite him to design it. He proposed burrowing under an adjacent park to create a subterranean museum, centred around a James Turrell skyspace. Though she intended to cover the expense of construction, and to provide the art, the city refused to contribute to the future upkeep of the museum, and she withdrew her offer. In 2015, she offered Warsaw a similar deal, in which she hoped Peter Zumthor or Snøhetta might build a contemporary art museum for her collection, and she proposed to transfer the building and all its art to the city after 20 years. 'Yet again, a failure.' That same year, she sold Stary Browar and retreated to Switzerland, where she has had a home for a decade, and acquired another former brewery – what was to become the Muzeum Susch. 'I realised that, by the end of my life, I had to build a museum and create an institution around it,' she says, with determination.

Susch, in the Engadin region between Davos and St Moritz (where Hauser & Wirth recently established a new outpost), seems an odd place from which to try and 'disrupt the status quo', as Kulczyk describes her intent. She is hands-on, at the museum on most days, and talks of 'architecture sparking change' (she describes herself as something of an architect manqué), of wanting to give visitors 'a sense of empowerment', and of 'broadening their horizons'. She is responsible for a dynamic programme of dance performances, concerts, conferences, residencies and exhibitions to which all the local villagers get a formal invitation. Some of her educational initiatives held there have a distinctly academic bent: last year, the annual conference, called 'Disputaziuns Susch', was devoted to revisiting a debate held in Davos between Martin Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer on what it means to be human.

At Stary Browar in 2010, Kulczyk began showing her collection alongside loaned work in exhibitions conceived by guest curators, and this model persists at Susch. Only the site-specific works belong to the museum, and guest curators are invited to borrow works from her private collection, the amount never to exceed 40 per cent of the content of an exhibition. Formal loan agreements are put in place, even though the artworks might just be crossing the road from her house. When I visit Muzeum Susch in February, the exhibition 'Up to and Including Limits: After Carolee Schneemann' is on display (until 28 June; Fig. 6), curated by Sabine Breitwieser, the former director of the Museum der Moderne Salzburg. Works by Schneemann, who died in 2019, are shown alongside those by 13 younger artists or groups whom she influenced.

The exhibition title is inspired by one of Schneemann's seminal works from the 1970s, a piece of 'kinetic



6. Installation view of 'Up to and Including Limits: After Carolee Schneemann' (until 28 June) at Muzeum Susch

theatre' in which she was strapped in a harness and used crayons to mark her movement as she moved about in space. This is shown next to a film of one of Matthew Barney's *Drawing Restraint* series (1987–ongoing), in which he attempts to put pen to paper as he struggles around an assault course in ice skates. Schneemann's orgiastic performance *Meat Joy* (1964) is juxtaposed with Andrea Fraser's *Untitled* (2003), for which the artist had sex with a collector who had agreed to purchase a video recording of the encounter. The exhibition asks, in a world of instant pornography, what it means to work with one's body and identity. Only two pieces, including Schneemann's *Vulva's Morphia* (1995), are from the Grażyna Kulczyk collection.

When asked about her legacy plan for the collection, she pauses. 'I hope my collection will never be dispersed... It upsets me when I look through auction catalogues and see that someone's life's work has been parcelled into small chunks and sold off by the heirs. I hope there are people who will continue this endeavour.' Her long-awaited museum is now being marked on maps and advertised on road signs. 'What gives me most satisfaction is sharing these spaces,' Kulczyk says. She tells me that when she was building the museum, which she sees as the culmination of her life's achievements, she struggled to understand a German-speaking carpenter who was working on the project. Eventually, he scribbled '400' on a bit of scrap wood. She asked someone to translate for her what this meant: 'After 400 years, Susch is coming back to life again,' he said. **A**

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**For more information on Muzeum Susch, visit [www.muzeumsusch.ch](http://www.muzeumsusch.ch).**