

ART TALK

## CARVED IN STONE

Susch, a pint-size municipality in the Swiss Alps, welcomes a modern and contemporary art museum.

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**T**HE MOUNTAIN VILLAGE of Susch is tucked away in the Engadine valley in the eastern Swiss Alps, with an elevation of 4,718 feet and a population of just over 200. Though it is a stop on the historic pilgrimage route to Spain's Santiago de Compostela, Susch has remained relatively obscure—even while neighboring resort towns like St. Moritz and Davos have been swarmed by well-heeled skiers and international politicians. In January, though, the tiny town will become home to Muzeum Susch, an ambitious modern and contemporary art institution that will bring fresh cultural clout to the region and position Susch as one of the most exciting off-piste art destinations in Europe.

Founded and entirely funded by the Polish entrepreneur, arts patron and collector Grażyna Kulczyk—who has lived in the Engadine for a decade—the museum will present both permanent installations and a regular program of exhibitions by visiting curators. More than 16,000 square feet of exhibition space will live inside and underneath the reimagined remnants of a 12th-century monastery, which became a brewery in the 1800s before falling into disuse.

For Kulczyk, 68, the project is the realization of a long-held dream to make her private collection publicly accessible, while creating a remote retreat that offers art in a more contemplative context. Though the project broke ground in Susch in 2015, it has been in the makings for much longer. In 2008, Kulczyk tried to bring an iteration of the museum, designed by Tadao Ando, to her hometown of Poznan, Poland,



### ON THE ROCKS

Outside the Bieraria (brewery), part of Muzeum Susch, an arts institution located in the Swiss Alps.

where she was well-known for successful development projects. A few years later she tried Warsaw, but in both instances the endeavor was dismissed by local politicians who were wary of the private institution model—an example, she says, of the lingering effects of the country's socialist past. Not knowing where to go next, Kulczyk put the museum on hold.

Then, one day, while driving around the Engadine, she stumbled on an unexpected site: “There were these rural, industrial buildings, unlike anything in the region. I very much liked them, and I looked into buying them because in my mind, of course, I still had an ambition to finally build this museum,” says Kulczyk.

Speaking partly through a translator, Kulczyk is perched on a white sofa in a spectacular vaulted

sitting room at her family office in a sprawling London townhouse. She is in town for the Frieze art fair but itching to get back to Switzerland to check up on the museum's progress. By her own admission, she is hardly a passive investor; she is on-site in Susch almost daily and full of strong opinions. “In another life I would have liked to be an architect,” she says.

Kulczyk has commissioned the young Swiss architects Chasper Schmidlin (Schmidlin Architekten) and Lukas Voellmy (Luvo Architekten), who together renovated Kulczyk's private residence—about a 30-minute drive from Susch—nearly 10 years ago. Now the two friends have come together once more to collaborate. A project that started with one pre-existing building soon grew, as Kulczyk purchased >



**INSIDE OUT**  
Clockwise from left:  
Art patron Grażyna  
Kulczyk stands in  
front of Monika  
Sosnowska's *Stairs*,  
2016–2107; inside  
one of the buildings  
at Muzeum Susch;  
Paulina Ołowska's  
*Nova Popularna*,  
2017; the grotto  
inside the museum.



four more properties. The protected status of the structures restricted the possibilities for external alterations. The only way to connect the two main buildings was by burrowing down, and the first stage of construction involved more than a year of excavation, during which 9,000 tons of amphibolite, a metamorphic rock, were relocated. Some rock fragments were also used to create the terrazzo flooring that will feature in several of the gallery spaces.

The buildings have been restored and expanded, largely through a series of subterranean galleries and walkways that unite the museum's two primary structures. After entering the museum, visitors will pass through a natural mountain rock grotto. Raw and exposed, this space—which was once used for beer cooling and storage—will serve as a dramatic backdrop for site-specific installations. The rest of the museum unfolds as a series of harmonious architectural experiences: from a white-walled gallery where a sliver of exposed stonework reveals a swatch of history to ancient rooms made modern through discreet contemporary lighting.

"The museum is like a meteorite that fell from the sky and landed in Susch," says the Swiss artist Not Vital, who is a friend of Kulczyk's. He was born in the Engadine and still owns a home there. "This is a village of just a few people with little sun in

the winter—and that's exactly where she builds her museum. No one else would have had the idea and the strength to build such a fantastic museum in that very spot."

Though Kulczyk is slight in frame and gentle in her manner of speaking, there is indeed something decidedly determined about her gaze. She confirms her own resolve, attributing it to her childhood—her father was a fighter pilot and had wanted boys, so he treated both his daughters as such—as well as to years of working in traditionally male-dominated industries.

Born in 1950, Kulczyk studied law before entering the business world alongside her late ex-husband, Jan, a prolific entrepreneur who invested heavily in the energy, real estate, telecommunications and brewery industries and went on to become Poland's wealthiest man. (The couple had two children together.) Kulczyk's passion for art started during her studies, and she always looked for novel ways to incorporate a social and cultural element into her ventures. In the 1990s, the Kulczyks were general importers for Volkswagen, Audi and Škoda in Poland. In their showroom, Kulczyk created a gallery in hopes of exposing locals to Polish art as the country collectively craved new cultural input. "The philosophy has always been the connection between commerce, culture and art—it was 50 percent business, 50

percent art.... They have always been intertwined," says Kulczyk.

As her career flourished, so too did her collection, which today is one of the largest in Europe and features work by Donald Judd, Jenny Holzer, Dan Flavin, Eva Hesse and Rosemarie Trockel, among others. The focus of Kulczyk's collection is 20th- and 21st-century Eastern European art, especially those artists who were unduly overlooked because of gender, religion or politics. Her collection also emphasizes the work of female artists.

This latter interest in particular will be on full display during Muzeum Susch's inaugural exhibition, *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women*, which opens on January 2 and borrows its title from a 2012 essay by the American writer Siri Hustvedt. Organized by Kasia Redzisz, senior curator at Tate Liverpool, the exhibition will feature 40 artists, most of them women. About one-third of the art—including works by painter Marlene Dumas, multidisciplinary artist Sarah Lucas and Polish sculptor Magdalena Abakanowicz—will come from Kulczyk's own collection.

A priority for Kulczyk—who is a member of the Russia and Eastern Europe Acquisitions Committee at the Tate and sits on the Modern Women's Fund Committee of the Museum of Modern Art in New York—was to ensure a steady stream of year-round visitors to Susch, despite a local tendency to dismiss any seasons other than winter (and its ski tourism) and the short but scenic summer.

Alongside its exhibition program, the museum will host an academic institute focused on gender issues in art and science. Events throughout the year will include an annual symposium on the arts; a residency program for visiting artists, curators, choreographers, writers and researchers; and an ongoing contemporary choreography series. "Muzeum Susch is a slightly mad project, and that is precisely why I admire Grażyna, her spirit and her ambition," says the Swiss-born gallerist Iwan Wirth, of the gallery Hauser & Wirth, in an email. "We all need to recalibrate our concept of cultural destinations to include these highly unusual private museums. Those who make the pilgrimage to these sites are rewarded with a slow, spiritual encounter with the art," he added.

Kulczyk expects the pillars of the program to grow over time; while she was in London, she purchased the museum's sixth building in Susch. Though an air of monastic purity will flow through the museum, Kulczyk is quick to underscore that her institution is not intended as a criticism of or an antidote to the often-frenzied art scene of today—it is just an alternative, "slow-motion option," she says. As a businesswoman, she understands and respects the transactional side of the art world and the important role of galleries and frequent fairs, both for buyers like herself and for artists. "But it's obvious to me that the art world is ready for another movement, towards slow art thinking," she says. "The remote locations are going to be on the map: People need silence, rest, fresh air and healthy food. Coming here, it is an opportunity to be together with nature, but now also culture. Everything is here in Susch." ●