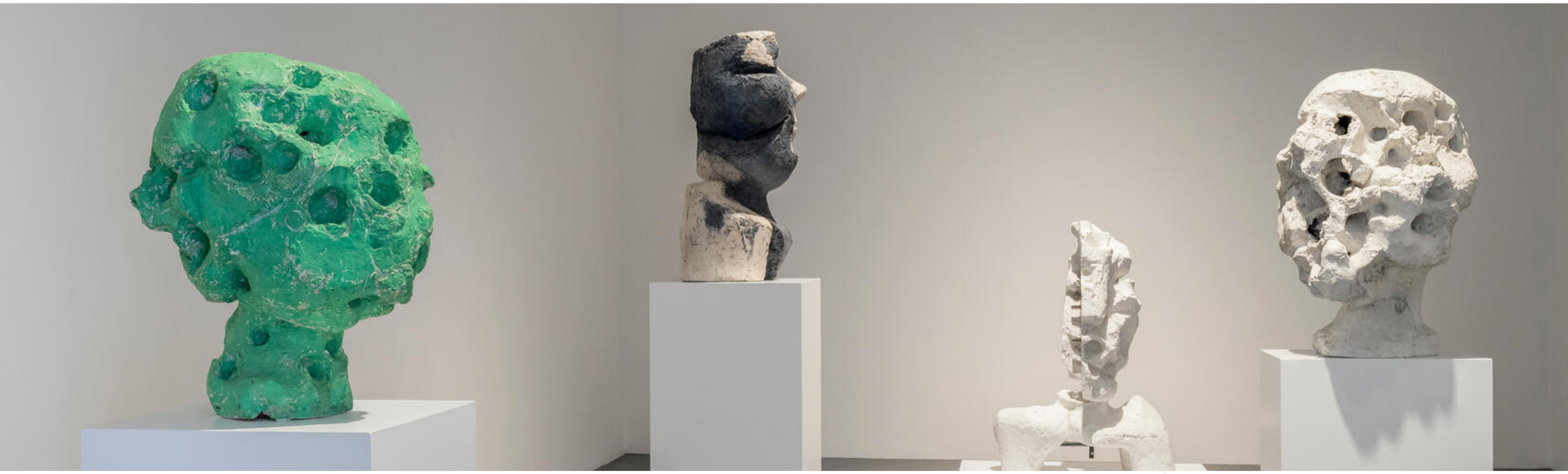


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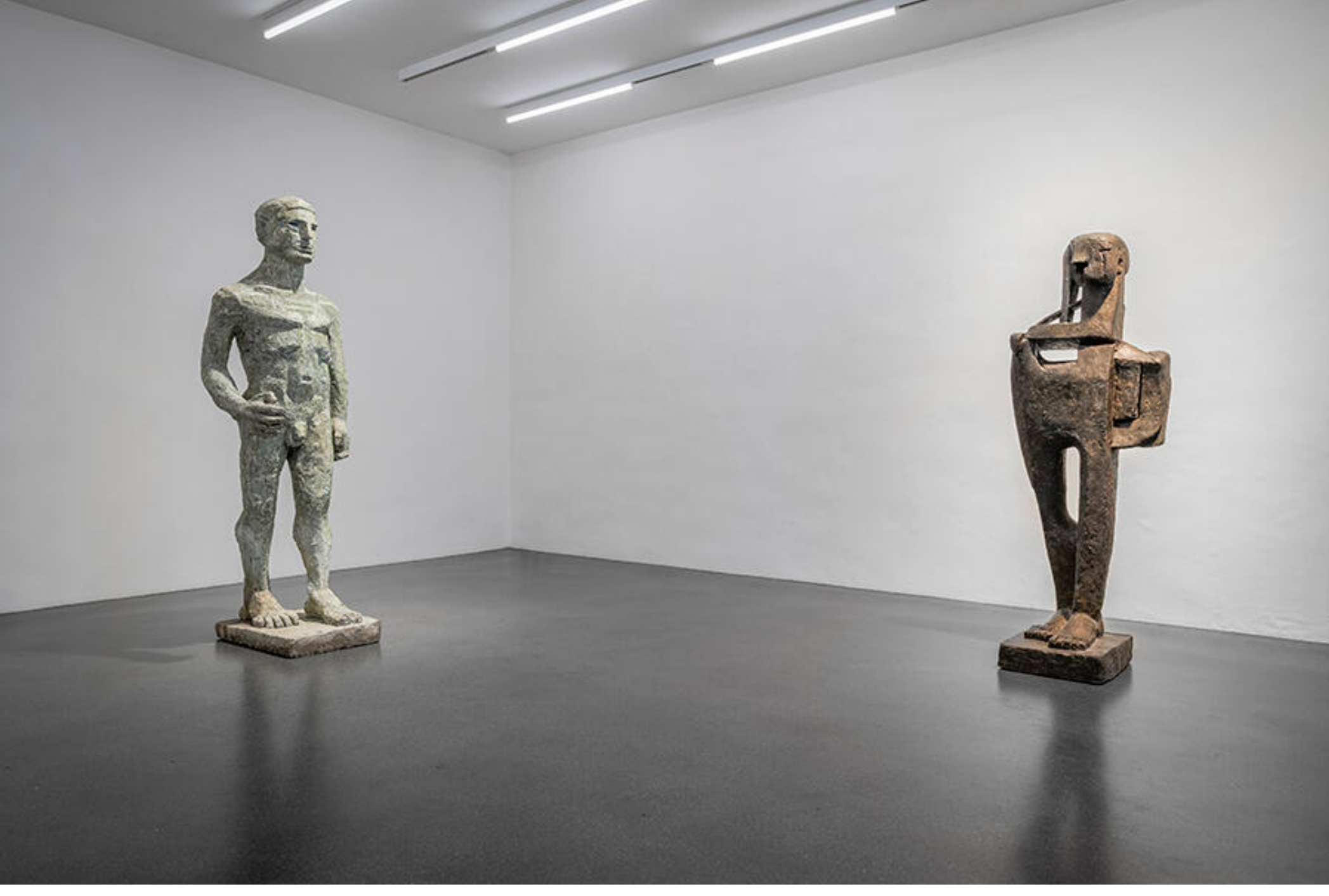
The Monumental Humanism of Wanda Czelkowska

At Muzeum Susch, 'Art Is Not Rest' celebrates a singular artist who refused to be categorized

1 BY AGATA PYZIK IN EU REVIEWS, EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 17 AUG 23



'I am a sculptor, not a sculptress,' artist Wanda Czelkowska told gallerist Ewa Opalka in an unpublished interview conducted between 2014–19. 'I am beyond male and female. [Being a sculptor is] a form of existence.' Working largely during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in an era dominated by monumental public sculpture designed by men – whether in socialist Poland, where she was based, or in the West – defining herself as an artist living outside of the patriarchy might seem like wishful thinking. Yet, this show, deftly curated by Matylda Taszycka at Muzeum Susch, reveals Czelkowska to be a larger-than-life character who consistently punctured expectations.



Wanda Czelkowska, *The Man*, 1956, cast, painted plaster, 176 × 55 × 57 cm (left) and *Study X* 1957, painted plaster, 159 × 58 × 45 cm (right). Courtesy: © Muzeum Susch / Art Stations Foundation; photograph: Federico Sette

As the exhibition title, 'Art Is Not Rest', suggests, there was a political dimension to Czelkowska's practice. Born in 1930, the artist avoided being forced to embrace socialist realism, which was compulsory in Poland from 1949–56, but still needed to meet the requirements of 'socially engaged' art. Early works such as *The Man* (1956) and *Study X* (1957), for instance, are clever takes on the monumental humanism of this period. They reference Etruscan bronzes in colour and expression while remaining crude and bulky, creating a nonconformist take on classic forms. In 'Heads', a series of works started in the late 1960s, Czelkowska's interest in the human psyche became even more pronounced. Made mostly with painted plaster, these bomb-blasted, bullet-ridden sculptures, including *The Table* (1968–71) and *The Green Head* (1973), evoke the destruction wrought by World War II that she witnessed as a child.



Wanda Czelkowska, *The Table*, 1968–71, plaster, metal, wood, 8 × 4 m. Courtesy: © Muzeum Susch / Art Stations Foundation; photograph: Federico Sette

While the head, as the site of human intelligence and destructive inner forces, recurs throughout Czelkowska's practice, it soon became clear that busts were too limiting a form for the avant-garde artist. In 1972, she designed the first iteration of *Absolute Elimination of Sculpture as a Notion of Shape* – a monumental 'floor' consisting of 66 concrete plates in two different colours illuminated by 66 lightbulbs on the ceiling above – which she wouldn't fully realize until 1995. Forming the centrepiece of the Susch exhibition, this installation can be read in relation to the dematerialization of art championed in the 1960s by American minimalists, such as Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt, but feels emotionally closer to the playful performances of Yves Klein, such as his *Anthropometry* series from 1960. The 'floor' was not intended to be walked on, but to act as an arena for dancing and other social interactions. For Czelkowska, this was a way to rid sculpture of the insufferable pathos of Polish art at the time, which still beat to the nationalistic drum of the communist party.



Wanda Czelkowska, *Absolute Elimination of Sculpture as a Notion of Shape*, 1972/1995/2023, 66 concrete panels, 66 canvases, 66 light bulbs, dimensions variable. Courtesy: © Muzeum Susch / Art Stations Foundation; photograph: Federico Sette

Czelkowska returned to the human figure in abstract installations such as *Wall* (1975–76), *Head – The Kinetic Sequence* (1981) and *Elegy* (1990), which showcase her fascination with maths, cybernetics and computers. In a series of untitled abstract paintings from the 1980s, which take up a whole room at Muzeum Susch, the artist dissolves the human head into uncanny molecular forms that resemble both an image of cells under a microscope and Gustav Klimt-like patterning. As an artist creating work under the conditions of state socialism, Czelkowska's focus on developments in science, such as cybernetics, was unusual for the time, making her an outlier among her peers.



Wanda Czelkowska, 'Art Is Not Rest', 2023, exhibition view. Courtesy: © Muzeum Susch / Art Stations Foundation; photograph: Federico Sette

As the feminist revaluation of the art-historical canon continues – it's worth noting that this is the first exhibition dedicated to Czelkowska's work outside of Poland – the question arises as to how to frame the work of 'woman artists' who rejected this category, often to avoid limiting their options. Czelkowska's fear of being marginalized was not without reason: she repeatedly had to answer questions about whether the themes and materiality of her work were suitable choices for a woman. Thankfully, 'Art Is Not Rest' avoids viewing Czelkowska's many accomplishments through the lens of her gender alone, respecting her belief that she was, first and foremost, a sculptor.

Wanda Czelkowska's **'Art Is Not Rest'** is on view at Muzeum Susch, Zerne, until 26 November.

Main image: Wanda Czelkowska, 'Art Is Not Rest', 2023, exhibition view. Courtesy: © Muzeum Susch / Art Stations Foundation; photograph: Federico Sette



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