

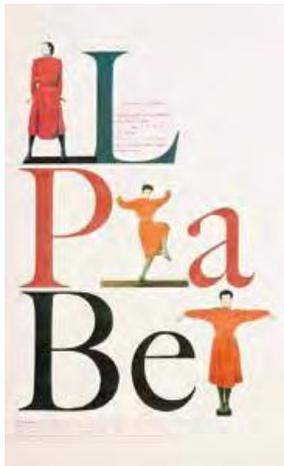
Bishop, Claire, "Reactivating Modernism," *Parkett* (May 2013): 146-153.



*Paulina Ołowska*

## Paulina Ołowska: Reactivating Modernism

CLAIRE BISHOP

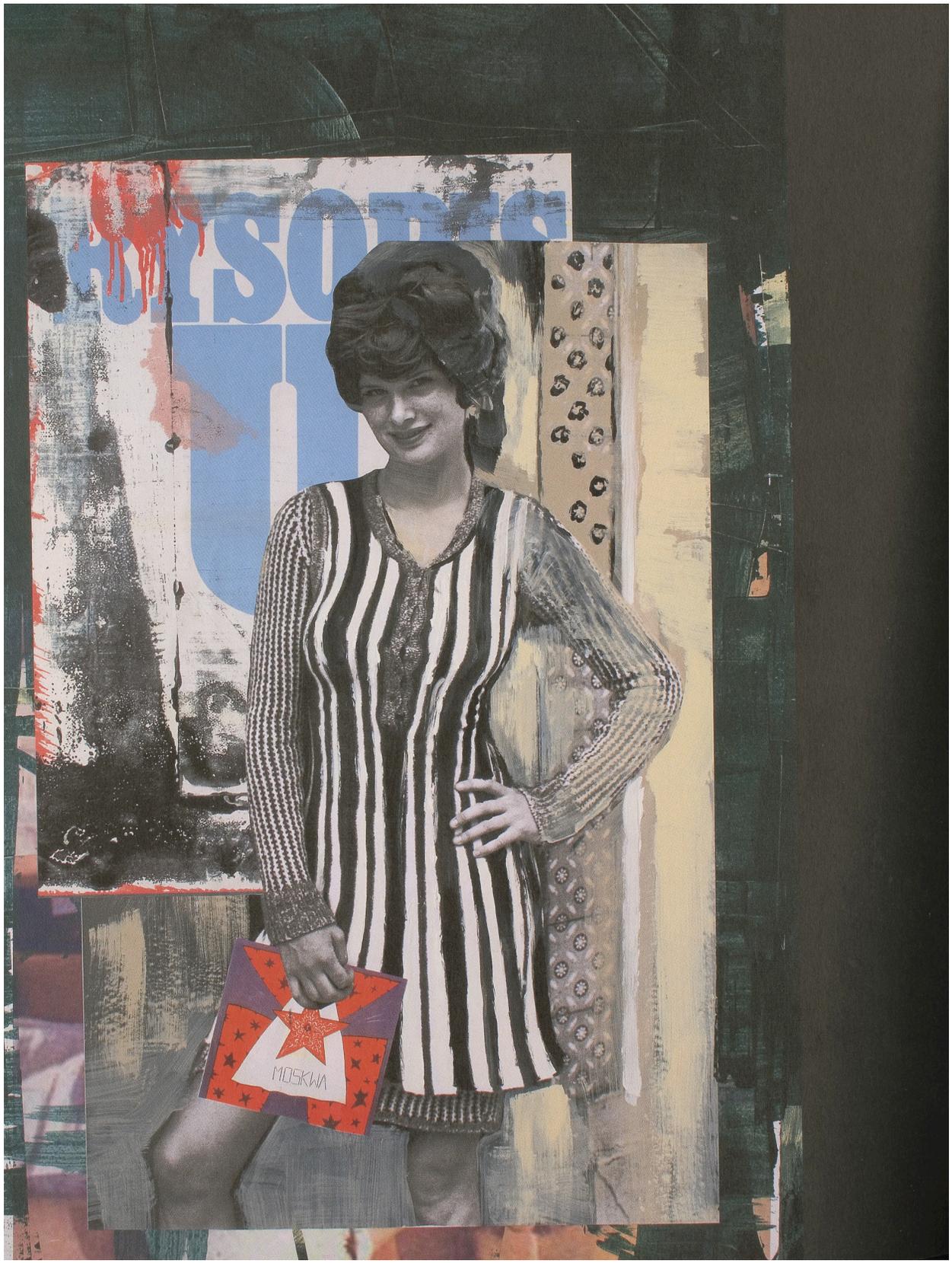


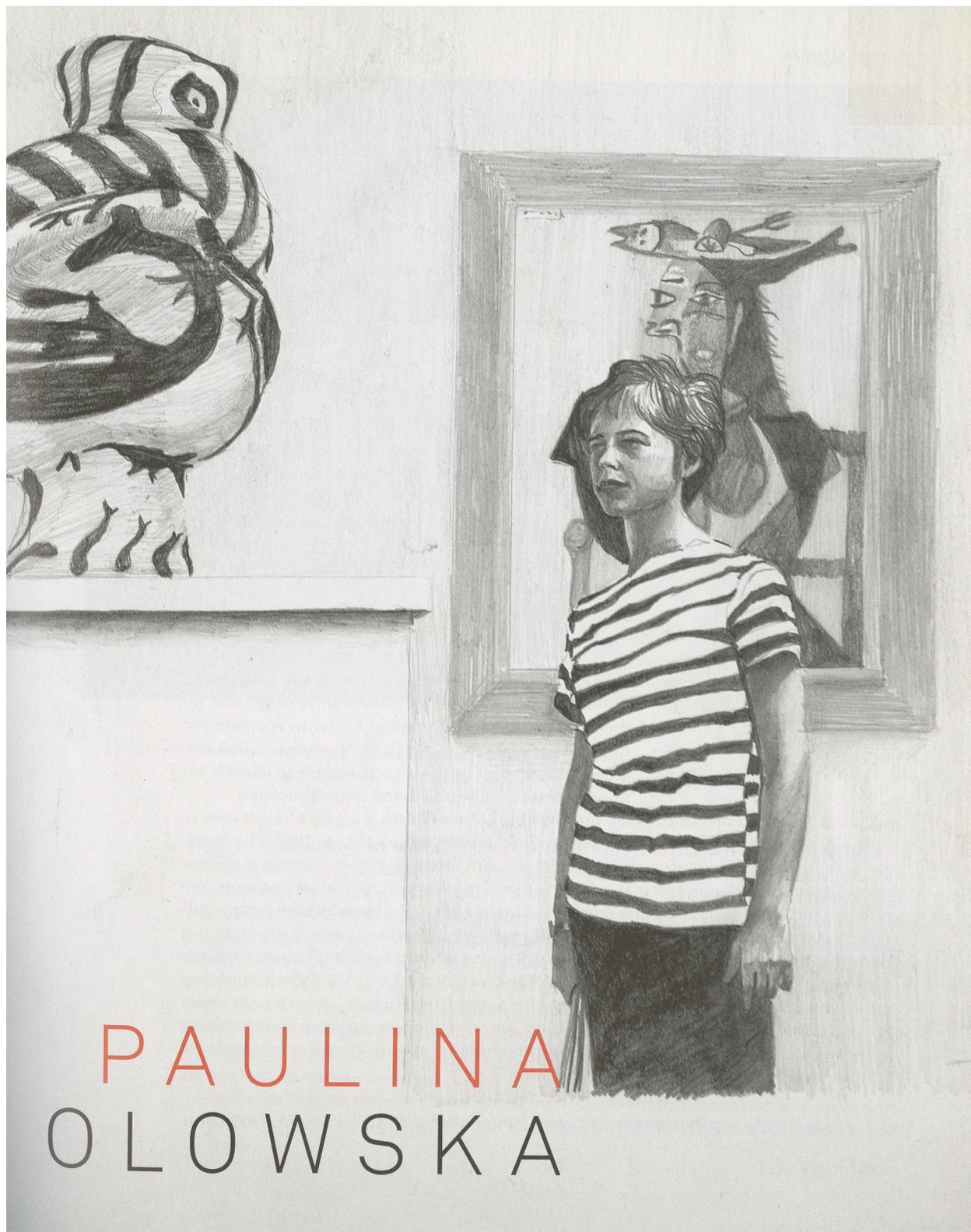
A return to aspects of modernist design and architecture has been a persistent thread in European art since the 1990s. The early practitioners of this work—such as Christian Philipp Müller, Tobias Rehberger, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, or Dorit Margreiter—all revisited classic tropes of modern architecture and design as an object of fascination and criticism. For this generation of artists, modernism is a multiple and inconsistent entity, referring to a wide range of practices globally, from Bauhaus design to postwar architecture to its tropical variants, and across an equally wide-ranging chronology, loosely, from the 1920s to the 1970s. In their work, modernism is addressed for various reasons: formal attraction, homage and representation, nostalgia (for example, for its commitment to social agendas), or as a sign of oppressive, failed ideologies that require fracturing and analysis to uncover repressed histories of sexuality and colonial violence.

In Eastern European art, by contrast, the meaning of modernism is arguably much clearer to identify, since it is synonymous with Soviet internationalism from 1917 to 1989. The “modern” here stands for the project of state socialism, with aesthetic and ideological variations depending on the relationship that existed between Moscow and individual countries. Accordingly, the small handful of contemporary artists in Eastern Europe who have returned to modernist art, architecture, and design have done so with different degrees of affection. It is telling that the two regions to have produced artists most willing to revisit the visual language of socialist modernism are Poland and former Yugoslavia, both of which had significantly less restrictive cultural policies than other parts of the Soviet Bloc. (In both countries, for example, abstract art was tolerated by officials.) To my knowledge, no young artists from Romania or Albania, to name just two countries where state socialism was totalitarian, have any desire to revisit their country’s modernist heritage.

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PAULINA  
OLOWSKA

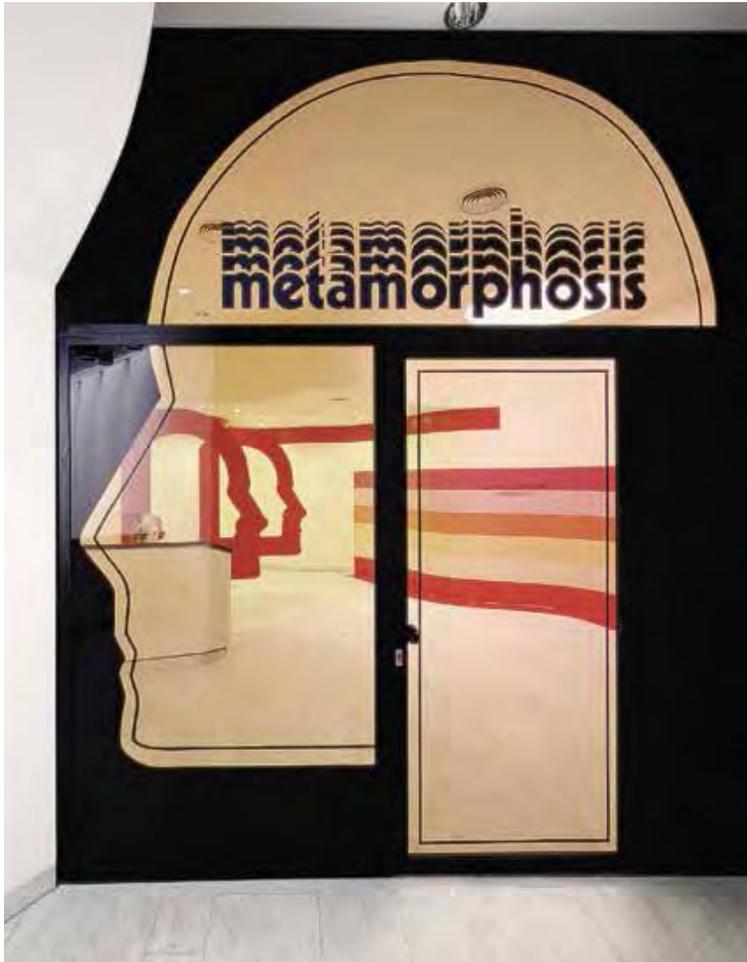


PAULINA OŁOWSKA, ALPHABET, 2012, choreographed performance / Choreographierte Performance, The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden, Museum of Modern Art, New York. (PHOTO: WERNER KALIGOFSKY)

Paulina Ołowska, born in Gdansk, Poland, in 1976, is representative of this second generation of artists, emerging since 2000, who engage with more specific, Eastern European histories of modernist design. Her work is strikingly different from that of the first wave of engagement by the Western European artists mentioned above, as it is not organized around sentimentality, nostalgia, cynicism, or critique but operates from a perspective I am tempted to call *curatorial*: a desire to preserve and keep in circulation an aesthetic and design repertoire that has been too quickly cast aside following the ideological transitions of 1989 to 1991. Moreover, this conservational approach has developed performatively, and over time, as a result of investigating and reenacting numerous local modernisms—from regional Constructivism to magazine design—and in a variety of forms, from painting and collage to neon signs, clothing, and performance.

Ołowska's earliest works feature a Constructivist and Bauhaus aesthetic, as seen in BAUHAUS YOGA. Based on a photograph showing three members of the Bauhaus practicing ac-

Paulina Ołowska



PAULINA OŁOWSKA, METAMORPHOSIS, 2005,  
detail, permanent installation, Museum Abteiberg,  
Mönchengladbach / METAMORPHOSE,  
Detail, Dauerinstallation.  
(PHOTOS: ACHIM KUKULIES)

robotics on the beach, the work exists in multiple forms: as a painting (2001); as a performance—or “life painting,” as Ołowska has called it—at Inverleith House, Edinburgh (2001); and as a photo-and-text piece, published in the magazine *Dot Dot Dot* (2003). When the project began, Ołowska was in residency at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam and making paintings that reference the historic avant-gardes (particularly Rodchenko, Malevich, and Mondrian). Her approach, as summed up in the text for BAUHAUS YOGA, was unabashedly idealist: “Bauhaus Yoga wants to grasp the past and present utopias by re-examining them, romanticizing them, and thereby building a new future based on resemblance and mutual attraction.”<sup>71</sup>

Within a few years, Ołowska’s rationale for looking backward, and the objects of her scrutiny, became much more focused. ALPHABET (2005) takes its lead from a quintessentially modernist composite of poetry, dance, and graphic design, created by the Czech artist collective Devetsil: Vítězslav Nezval’s poem *Abeceda* (1922), twenty-five quatrains based on the



PAULINA OŁOWSKA, *METAMORPHOSIS*, 2005, detail, permanent installation, Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach / *METAMORPHOSE*, Detail, Dauerinstallation.

Latin alphabet, was choreographed by Milca Mayerová, photographs of which were then combined in a typographic montage by Karel Teige. Teige's 1926 book served as the primary source for Ołowska's equally multimedia work: twenty-five photographs (of the artist wearing a voluminous red dress and blue tights in place of Mayerová's sharp Constructivist uniform of monochrome top, shorts, and matching cap), also displayed as a slide show and combined in a poster, and further presented as a live performance. In spring 2012, three dancers performed Mayerová's alphabet in the sculpture garden of New York's Museum of Modern Art—their bright red outfits cutting an

unforgettable contrast with the gray stone—as Kevin Hurley from the Wooster Group theater company read poetry by Josef Strau, Frances Stark, and Paulus Mazur.

ALPHABET seems to be an act of homage to Eastern European modernism, frequently overlooked in favor of its mainstream cousins in France and Germany, but also an act of retrieval and reevaluation. It updates, and brings back into circulation, a multimedia collaboration that places the dynamic image of a woman center stage. In the 1920s, this was an emancipated woman exposing her physicality in severe clean geometric lines; in Ołowska's presentation, this image is shifted toward a more contemporary context. Rather than the streamlined body of modern dance—and in place of the near-naked body of celebrity culture—Ołowska's appearance (and that of her dancers) references Russian Constructivist dress (signifying the redistribution of artistic competences toward mass-produced goods, but also a time when women and men were considered as equally important workers) as if filtered through Kate Bush's 1978 "Wuthering Heights" video. Rather than being nostalgic, the overall impression of Ołowska's photographs is one of reactivation and lived experience, next to which Teige's consummately beautiful black-and-white photographs look static and archival.

This desire to mobilize modernism as a lived practice informs Ołowska's long-term collaboration with the Scottish artist Lucy McKenzie, whose paintings—often rendered in a deliberately flat, faded style—are informed by her own modernist design constellation (Suprematism, East German design, and the Art Nouveau of Scottish architect and designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh). In 2003, Ołowska and McKenzie organized a four-week project in Warsaw called NOVA POPULARNA (New Popular), a café-salon with events, discussions, and performances. The decor quoted Vorticism, Mackintosh, and nineteenth-century French paintings set in bars and cabarets (such as Manet and Toulouse-Lautrec), while the artists wore barmaid outfits evoking 1920s avant-garde productivism. Critic Jan Verwoert has read NOVA POPULARNA as a "speculative scenario" that allowed the artists "to test the potential of the avant-gardist role model of the female Constructivist artist as social engineer proposed by figures such as [Polish artist Katarzyna] Kobro."<sup>22</sup> The project aspired to revive the ambience of the historic avant-garde salon, with its specific forms of community—in this case, providing



PAULINA OŁOWSKA, *SOVIET LIFE*, 2006, acrylic, collage on canvas, 12 x 16" / Acryl, Collage auf Leinwand, 30,5 x 40,6 cm.

a space for performance and the discussion of art that did not exist in Warsaw at that time.<sup>3)</sup> All aspects of the bar's design—from murals and posters to wine-bottle labels and costumes—sought to reposition Polish art history at the intersection of modernism, folk art, and the nineteenth-century French avant-garde. Like *ALPHABET*, *NOVA POPULARNA* was multimedia and feminist, and has multiple forms of existence: the site itself, photographs, screenprints, collages, and a vinyl recording of the performances held there (the album's gatefold sleeve includes a pop-up maquette of the salon).

*NOVA POPULARNA* prompted Ołowska to start addressing Polish modernism more specifically, bringing overlooked instances of postwar socialist art and design to the fore. In 2004, she began a project to refabricate the neon lights that illuminated Warsaw in the 1960s and 1970s, a time of downward economic spiral. Many of the neons were designed by artists for state monopolies rather than private businesses and promoted generic activities such as

hairdressing, sports, milk, and reading books. Ołowska organized an exhibition at Warsaw's Foksal Gallery Foundation, "Neon-Painting-Exchange" (2006), to raise money for the refabrication and reinstallation of one particular neon, the SIATKARKA (Volleyball Player) of 1961, which originally advertised a sporting-goods shop on Plac Konstytucji. It depicts a girl—a simplified outline in white neon, with red swimsuit and outstretched arms and legs—leaping to throw a ball that appears to drop down the side of the facade. Ołowska considers the work to be a "forgotten public sculpture"—an everyday landmark, in this case celebrating exuberant femininity, athleticism, and the city itself; in May 2006, the neon was reinstalled on the roof of the bulky Stalinist-era building where the shop was formerly located. Her project led the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw to acquire the archive of Reklama, the state-owned neon-sign company, and to commission her to create the neon MUZEUM (2010) as signage for the institution. This year, Ołowska reinstalled the fifty-foot-long neon GAZDA (Shepherd or Caretaker), first built in 1962, on the facade of a modernist supermarket in Rabka Zdroj, the town where she lives in Poland.

For Ołowska, the modernism referenced in the neons is one of day-to-day life under socialism; her project is not a nostalgic recuperation of style but a desire to bring back into circulation a playful, non-commercial aesthetic sensibility that has been too rapidly surpassed by the soulless urban environment of free-market neoliberalism. Likewise, her retrieval of more recent forms of socialist design iconography, particularly from the visual culture of magazines and knitting patterns, also works to revalue what many would regard as bygone kitsch. Fashion shoots and advertisements of the early '60s women's magazine *Ty i Ja* (You and Me) became the basis for a series of oil paintings in 1999; in Ołowska's renditions, all text and logos are removed as the idealized world of advertising is reworked into wistful scenes of introspection (as in *COLORADO DREAM*, 2000). She has also drawn from *Ameryka* and *Soviet Life*, two Cold War propaganda vehicles: *Ameryka* was the US Information Agency's premier publication for the Soviet Bloc, while *Soviet Life* was its counterpart, exporting stories and images of socialism to the West. The psychedelic graphics of *Ameryka* became the central focus of Ołowska's 2005 exhibition "Metamorphosis," at the Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach, Germany, for which she re-created a hairdressing salon featured on the front cover of a 1972 issue dedicated to fantastical architecture; both magazines are referenced in Ołowska's collage-like paintings shown under the title of "Nowa Scena" (Metro Pictures, New York, 2007).

Museum exhibitions such as "I Moderni" (Castello di Rivoli, Turin, 2003) and "Modernologies" (Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona and Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, 2009–10) have offered different reasons for why contemporary artists have returned to modernism. According to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, curator of "I Moderni," contemporary artists are fatigued with postmodernism and deconstruction, while there is a renewed enthusiasm for technology and modernity as a result of the Internet, which has prompted a look back to comparable moments of technological upheaval. At the same time, she suggests, these works betray a melancholic belief in modernist ideals that no longer seem possible or viable. By contrast, Sabine Breitwieser, curator of "Modernologies," sees artists critiquing various operations of marginalization within modernism, often because of gender or geography, with the aim of revealing other modernities. As such, Breitwieser argues, our present moment is one of a reflection on times past and an awareness of multiple histories.

Although Ołowska's work was included in "Modernologies," she doesn't fit comfortably into either of these curatorial positions. Rather than critique modernism for its marginaliza-

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*PAULINA OŁOWSKA, GAZDA, 2013, renovated neon sign, Rabka Zdrój / Renovierte Leuchtreklame.  
(PHOTO: MATEUSZ ROMASZKAN)*





GAZDA, department store, postcard of the original neon sign, 1968 /  
Kaufhaus, Postkarte der ursprünglichen Leuchtreklame.  
(PHOTO: JERZY SIEROSLAWSKI)

tion of women, she prefers to celebrate those moments in modernism when women played a central role (arguably, these moments continue to be overlooked in mainstream academia and museum culture). That this role might also fold into questions of fashion and dress, lifestyle and the performance of identity in the cold-war period, and the contradictions of socialist consumerism, is what makes her work so vividly alive compared to the academicism of many of her contemporaries. Modernism is, for Ołowska, not just a question of collecting, preserving, and promoting a socialist visual culture disparaged by older generations but also a question of understanding the present through a reflection on what has been too readily discarded in the race for a new design environment. That these acts of collection and remembrance are refracted not through a roll call of references to familiar heroes—icons of modernism such as Le Corbusier—but through gendered and regionally redolent forms of design ephemera and performance is precisely the strength and significance of her practice.

1) Paulina Ołowska, “Bauhaus Yoga,” *Dot Dot Dot*, no. 6 (October 2003), p. 34.

2) Jan Verwoert, “World in Motion,” *Frieze*, no. 84 (June–August 2004), p. 90.

3) It is only since the opening of Warsaw’s Museum of Modern Art in 2007 that such a forum has existed.