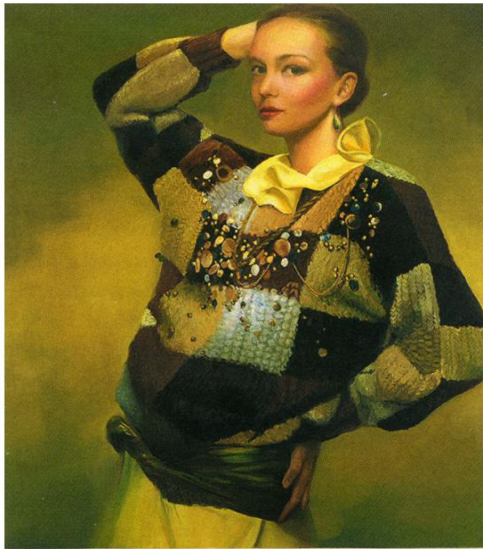




Paulina Olowska

Storytelling:

Paulina Olowska and History in Motion



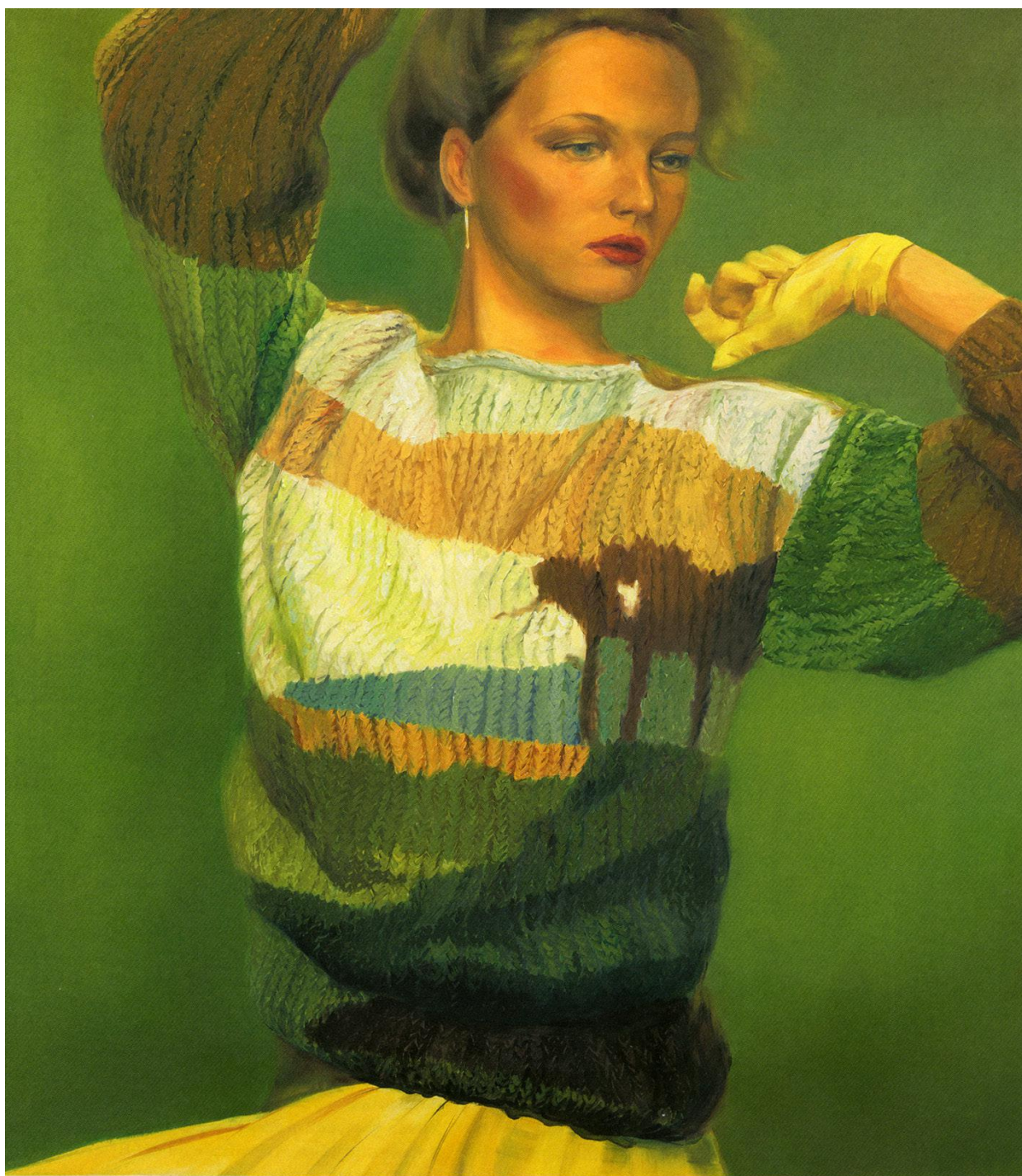
„Szachista I”

MARTA DZIEWAŃSKA

“Storytelling,” writes Hannah Arendt, “reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.”¹⁾ In her essay devoted to the writer Isak Dinesen, storytelling is opposed to conceptual thought. According to Arendt, storytelling “recollects and ponders” instead of putting forth a notion of truth as revelation. A storyteller, by repeating the past (a “story” is by no means pure fantasy), not only unveils the past’s unknown, marginalized, or simply unnoted aspects, but transforms them: from “grief into lamentations” and from “jubilation into praise.”²⁾ Thus, the imagination is not necessarily linked to the creation of something new, an expression of personal invention; it is rather the capacity to observe the world from different perspectives and to represent the real or potential viewpoints of others.³⁾ “All she needed to begin with,” Arendt says of Dinesen, “was life and the world, almost any kind of world or milieu, for the world is full of stories . . . which wait only to be told.”⁴⁾

A return to the past is an essential element in Paulina Olowska’s installations, paintings, and performances. NOVA POPULARNA (2003, with Lucy McKenzie) was an oblique reconstruction of an artists’

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„Pejzaž“



PAULINA OŁOWSKA, ZOFIA STRYJEŃSKA, 2008, installation view / Installationsansicht, Schinkel Pavilion, 5th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art. (PHOTO: JENS ZIEHE)

salon or bohemian café, in which myths and clichés were revived with the introduction of contemporary elements such as feminist and antiglobalist slogans scratched into the tabletops. In 2006, inspired by an abandoned modernism, Ołowska reactivated a historical neon sign representing a volleyball player, the wholesomeness of sport, health, and movement, once again occupying the space reserved today for brands and logos. In collages from the same year, she blends style and aesthetics from American and Soviet propaganda magazines of the 1960s with imagery from the Polish punk movement of the '80s. Her canvases from 2010 celebrate the colorful sweaters and knitting patterns that appeared (accompanied by instructions) in Polish advertisements and postcards in the '80s, at a time when there was hardly anything in the stores to buy. Amplified in size, they recount history from a different vantage point. All of these

works set in motion a certain, constant sequence of recollection (memory), release (imagination), and an accompanying reinvention (storytelling).

If this thread can be found throughout Ołowska's multidisciplinary practice, it is of particular import to the multiple paintings in which she revisits past women artists. For her, these works are not merely nostalgic, nor only utopian (although she is not ashamed to use such terms). Instead, by recalling individual histories (with a small "h"), Ołowska discloses the renunciations and omissions in the rapid currents of History (with a capital "H"); and by imagining an alternative, she transgresses chronology, perturbing the image of the past as an immobile monolith. Such work on what has passed is for the

artist a way to excavate forgotten layers and, prospectively, a way to work *through* the experience of prior events; in the telling, she makes these events come to be again.

In the five large-format paintings that make up *ZOFIA STRYJEŃSKA* (2008), Ołowska invokes one of Poland's most acclaimed—and clichéd—painters of the interwar period. Stryjeńska's expressive, colorful works from the 1920s stretch across media and genres, blurring religious iconography with archaic myths in a folkloric style. Her personal story was that of a woman living on the cusp of two worlds: the nineteenth century and modernity. In her twenties, dressed as a man, she was admitted to the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. As she wrote in her diary, "The masquerade was quite necessary, for neither in the Munich academy, nor in any other institution of higher learning, were women accepted."⁵ Stryjeńska refused to be constrained by any social roles or rules. After World War II, she declined to join the Union of Visual Artists in Communist Poland and emigrated to Switzerland. Her work was assimilated into Polish popular culture, but she herself was forgotten.

Ołowska cites Stryjeńska, creating a series of replicas based on the earlier artist's paintings and gouaches. Her citing reflects a slight shift, though. The copies differ from the originals in two respects: Color is omitted, and the size is enlarged. Stryjeńska is not only a historical personage pulled from the past to whom Ołowska turns and returns; with her name set in quotation marks, she becomes the title of the story. This transference of a historical fragment to a completely different context is, from the point of view of chronology and linearity, a kind of intrusion and anachronism; it is a gesture not so much of conserving but of disturbing and tearing the past from the safe and secure continuum of history. In her quoting, Ołowska is not concerned merely with pointing out the omissions of History, thus indicating its porous structure, nor only with creating a montage of various temporalities for a shocking visual or theoretical effect. Her citation is a mix of old-fashioned melancholy, the romantic desire to avenge artists who were marginalized, as well as a pragmatic wish to recuperate the potential lying unused but still

active in those histories, which she seeks to endow with a new future.

The latter is possible only through the deployment of difference. For Ołowska not so much quotes Stryjeńska's history but consciously misquotes it. She manipulates the citation, pulling it out of the past and recounting it in her own way.⁶ Depriving the original images of their color rearranges their accents and demonstrates what in these pictures interests her: the representation of nature, social stereotypes, and dress codes. At the same time, she personalizes Stryjeńska's work, presenting it in the grayscale in which she first encountered the paintings: as black-and-white reproductions in books. The change in format of the works, their amplification, even monumentalization, is just one more reinterpretation: A tale forgotten and missing from history is extracted by Ołowska and recollected, but not in order to weep over it. By putting it on a pedestal, she invests it with a *then* impossible future.⁷



PAULINA OŁOWSKA, *ZOFIA STRYJEŃSKA*, 2008,
gouache on canvas, 90 1/2 x 94 1/2" /
Gouache auf Leinwand, 230 x 240 cm.

Paulina Ołowska

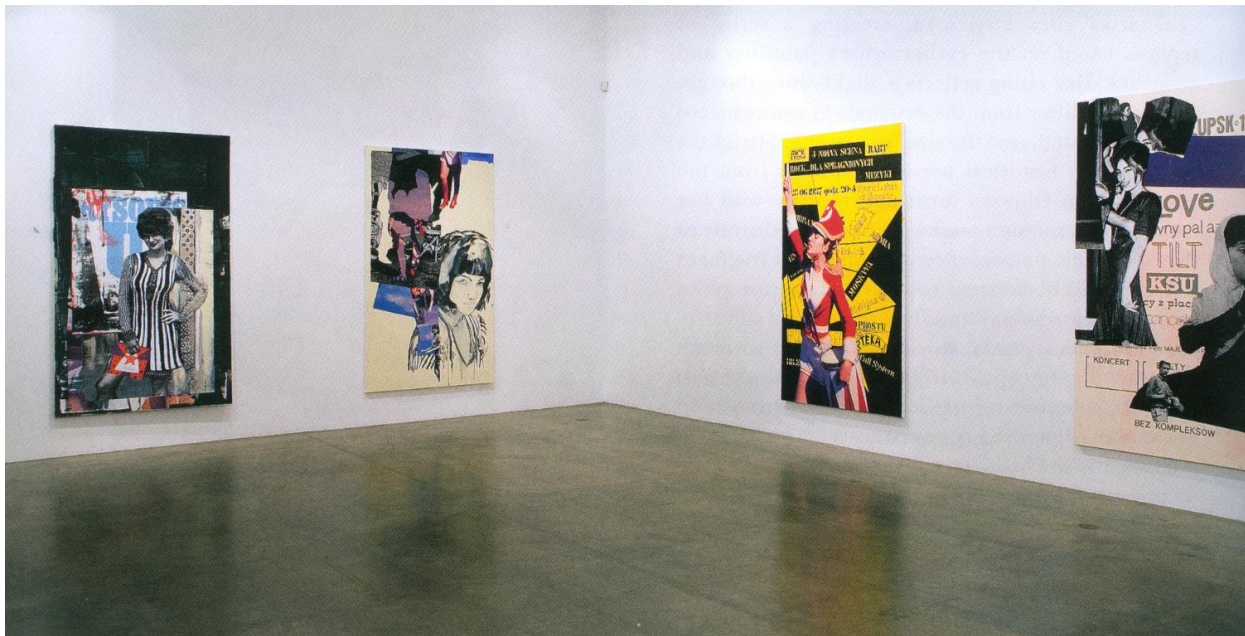
Similar gestures, identifications, and positionings occur in Ołowska's earlier paintings *ALINA SZAPOCZNIKOW IN HER STUDIO* (2001) and *PAULINE BOTY ACTS OUT ONE OF HER PAINTINGS FOR A POPULAR NEWSPAPER* (2006), both of which picture their subjects. In the former, Ołowska copies a photo of the Polish artistic pioneer who, in her brief career, experimented with materials and form, often casting parts of her own body. Szapocznikow is seen alone and at work, in a moment when she has nothing but her own presentiments to confirm her groundbreaking innovations.

In the 2006 painting, Ołowska recalls the British Pop artist who presented a highly sensual and playful self-image as a means of challenging her invisibility as an artist in the male mainstream of her times. Ołowska "quotes" a '60s British tabloid photo of Boty

taking off her top—a pose that itself "acts out" one of the artist's own canvases. But in Ołowska's painting, Boty stands beside the figure of an artist painting in her studio (an image borrowed from an '80s magazine), and they both loom large over views of the Manhattan skyline. All this is arranged into a tale: Pauline Boty coexists in the same canvas as a woman who, twenty years later, has more freedom to pursue an artistic career.

In these and other paintings, Ołowska harks back to creative women who have served as inspirations for her, but this gesture is never a one-way relationship where she simply draws on and recalls female icons from the past. On the contrary, the gesture always takes the form of a dialogue that, despite the fact that it is objectively uneven, is uncommonly vibrant. Her works feed on histories as on outmoded

PAULINA OŁOWSKA, "Nowa Scena," 2007, installation view / Installationsansicht, Metro Pictures, New York.





PAULINA OŁOWSKA, *ROCK AND ROLLA*, 2006,
acrylic and collage on canvas, 98 x 55" /
Acryl und Collage auf Leinwand, 248,9 x 139,7 cm.

even downright anachronism, create a “conversation” between artists that is enlivened and dynamized. The past is no longer merely referred to but interrogated. Access to it is possible only through a montage of observations and projections, imaginings and recalled dreams, and, hanging in the air, unfulfilled ambitions. These artists—who could not know their role in changing the position of women—are brought back by Ołowska and, through her recounting, they can continue where they were halted, speak where they were made silent, and become active players in the history of feminism. In this way, Ołowska’s works are stories, which, like those of Isak Dinesen, tell that the past is never truly passed but is always in motion.

(Translated from Polish by Warren Niesluchowski)

fashions, recalling and rescuing them from oblivion; at the same time, these histories are the very essence and *élan vital* of her entire oeuvre. Thus both sides seem to be fighting the same fight for existence, and their dialogue is not so much depicted as waged right before our eyes.

These multiple, zigzagging vectors lead to a configuration where reality—both past and present—is mixed with fiction. History recalled flows into the present moment, and Ołowska imagines her protagonists’ histories within her own. Such personalized relations and openness to temporal disturbances,

1) Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), p. 105.

2) Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 260–61.

3) Cf. Wolfgang Heuer, “Imagination is the prerequisite of understanding’ (Arendt): The bridge between thinking and judging,” paper presented at the symposium “Hannah Arendt: Filosofia e Totalitarismo,” Università degli Studi di Bari, Italy, 2005, p. 7; online at http://wolfgang-heuer.com/online-publicationen/heuer_wolfgang_imagination_bari.pdf (accessed February 19, 2013).

4) Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, p. 97.

5) See D. Jarecka, “Twarze” (Faces), *Gazeta Wyborcza, Wysokie Obcasy* (High Heels) supplement, November 23, 2008, p. 14.

6) It is worth noting that when Arendt writes on Dinesen, she not only cites and discusses her but also incorporates elements of the writings into her own text.

7) In this context, see Isla Leaver-Yap’s inspirational essay, “Paulina Ołowska: And It Is Time” in *Map*, Summer 2008, pp. 36–41.