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COMMUNAL LUXURY

Paulina Ołowska examines the contested legacy of socialism in Eastern Europe by reanimating its visual culture.

by Rachel Wetzler

Paulina Ołowska:
Vitebsk Station,
2018, oil and acrylic
on canvas, 78¼ by
55¼ inches.

All images, unless
otherwise noted,
courtesy Metro
Pictures, New York.

VOGUE POLSKA debuted in February 2018 and was instantly embroiled—perhaps by design—in heated debates around Polish national identity and self-image. When Condé Nast announced the magazine's forthcoming launch in 2017, the news was received by many in Poland as confirmation that they had truly arrived as equals in the eyes of the West; a *Vogue* of their own meant that Poles were now recognized as worthy targets of the magazine's aspirational glamour, taken seriously as luxury consumers. They were, in other words, finally out from under the shadow of post-socialism.

But when the inaugural issue appeared, the cover told another story. Photographed by Juergen Teller, with his characteristic disregard for conventional compositional symmetry, the models Małgosia Bela and Anja Rubik—two of Poland's most successful fashion-industry exports—pose in severe black couture against a vintage black Volga, the car of the Soviet elite. Looming over them in the background, shrouded in Warsaw's notorious smog, is the Palace of Culture and Science, a domineering Stalinist wedding cake constructed in the city center shortly after the official establishment of the People's Republic of Poland in 1952 as a "gift" from the Soviet people. As critic Agata Pyzik wrote, summarizing the controversy, "the reaction was a combination of hurt aesthetic feelings and wounded national pride": the public wanted a glossy trophy celebrating their progress and were offered black comedy instead.¹

The issue's centerpiece was a portfolio of photographs by Teller depicting an array of Polish cultural luminaries. It's fitting that the artist Paulina Ołowska was among them, as her work of

the past two decades has often taken up the abandoned relics of socialist modernism, swiftly condemned to the dustbin of history by the architects of the nation's post-Communist transition: Warsaw's neon signs, the graphic design of '60s magazines like *Ty i Ja*, the interiors of workers' cafés. Ołowska's projects have taken strikingly diverse forms—painting and sculpture, collage, installation, urban intervention, theater, and performance—but they have typically adopted what art historian Claire Bishop has described as a "curatorial" perspective.² Highlighting so-called minor figures and genres, in particular the applied arts and the work of neglected women artists, Ołowska both constructs a counter-history of modernism and argues for the ongoing relevance of the modernist project in the present. "I don't believe in the artist-genius figure," Ołowska said in a 2014 interview. "I see myself more like a medium, processing things that I find interesting or that have been omitted in the official discourse because they're classified as unimportant."³

Born in Gdańsk in 1976, Ołowska belongs to a generation of Eastern European artists who came of age as the world around them transformed beyond recognition, a social upheaval accompanied by a physical one that was especially acute in Poland: monuments were torn down and old buildings razed to make room for new skyscrapers bearing advertisements for global conglomerates. Unlike many of her peers who have approached the material traces of state socialism's failed utopias with barbed irony, on the one hand, or through the rose-colored lenses of *Ostalgie*, on the other, Ołowska's attempts to preserve and recuperate these discarded forms are animated by both

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Ołowska (left) and Lucy McKenzie in their installation *Nova Popularna*, 2003. Courtesy Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw.



a genuine aesthetic appreciation and a belief that they might contain some kernel of a usable past. She doesn't romanticize real socialism, but neither does she concede that the idea of utopia is permanently dead.

IN THE EARLY 2000s, as Poland prepared to enter the EU and Warsaw's transformation accelerated, Ołowska embarked on a number of projects devoted to preserving facets of the city's social and material fabric from the pressures of globalization. *Nova Popularna* (2003), one of several collaborations between Ołowska and the Scottish artist Lucy McKenzie, took the form of an underground bar operated out of a disused space in Warsaw during the month of May 2003, its decor a mélange of historical styles: Constructivism, Vorticism, and the vernacular modernisms of Scottish Arts and Crafts and Poland's fin-de-siècle Zakopane Style, among others. Rather than create a faithful replica of any one avant-garde café-salon, Ołowska and McKenzie mined them all, as if their space might channel the lively energy of these sites in the present by placing their aesthetics into conversation, too. The artists hosted a series of performances, readings, and concerts, but *Nova Popularna* was, above all, a place to drink and talk and dance, intended to serve as an open-ended meeting place that might fill a void in Warsaw's cultural life, if only temporarily.

The most ambitious of Ołowska's urban projects is the restoration of "Siatkarka" (Volleyball Player), a neon sign on the exterior of a building in Warsaw's Constitution Square in the form of the abstracted outline of a young athlete diving for a ball, which progressively cascades down the facade. Conceived in 1961 by the eminent graphic designer Jan Mucharski, "Siatkarka" had, like many of the neon signs that once dotted the city's skyline, long since fallen into disrepair when Ołowska began planning its restoration in 2006. Warsaw's postwar neons, unlike those of the capitalist West—or the glaring LED billboards that increasingly came to dominate Warsaw's streets after 1989—rarely advertised anything in particular. Instead, they functioned primarily as urban ornament, manufactured by the state-run firm Reklama and installed throughout the city center from the late '50s on by Communist authorities in order to project an image of vibrant abundance. Ołowska staged an exhibition titled "Obraz-wymiana-neon" (Painting-Exchange-Neon) at Warsaw's Foksal Gallery Foundation in 2006, featuring a sculptural collage of neon signs as well as related paintings, and she used the proceeds from the works' sales to fund the meticulous restoration of "Siatkarka."

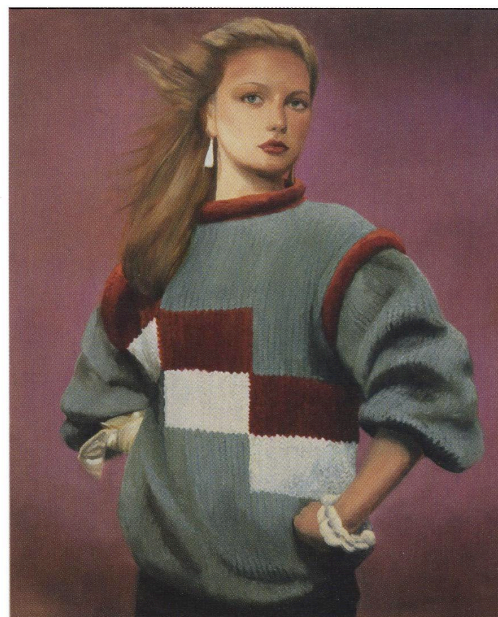
Ołowska has frequently returned to the dynamics of consumption and desire under socialism, probing the workings of the commodity system outside capitalism. For her 2010

Ołowska doesn't romanticize real socialism, but neither does she concede that the idea of utopia is permanently dead.

exhibition “Applied Fantastic” at Metro Pictures in New York, the body of work for which she is arguably still best known, she created a series of paintings based on postcards featuring DIY knitting patterns published in the 1980s by the state-owned Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza (National Publishing Agency). Intended to help Polish women create versions of the unavailable Western fashions they saw in magazines and movies at home, the cards were illustrated with photographs of young women modeling the results, their poses similarly emulating the language of fashion advertisements. Ołowska took the title from a 1954 essay in which Polish writer Leopold Tyrmand describes the inventive makeshift elegance of Polish women he encountered during the height of postwar poverty and deprivation: though they ostensibly mimed Western styles, Tyrmand’s phrase conveys a fundamental admiration, perhaps even a preference, for these ersatz versions, “deepened by a sense of improvised necessity.”⁴ While Ołowska’s paintings express a similar sentiment—alongside the canvases, she exhibited knitwear created from the depicted patterns—she is equally interested in the period aesthetics of the pattern cards themselves: the paintings highlight the garments as artifacts of socialist modernism, as do the models’ poses, the brightly colored gradient backdrops, and the typefaces conveying the name of each style.

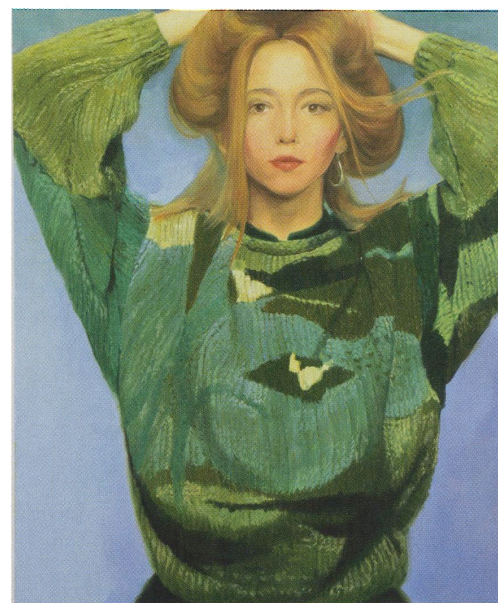
Ołowska’s exhibition “Belavia,” on view last December at Metro Pictures, turned to the fate of the commodity in Poland’s neighbor, Belarus, a country whose transition to capitalism has been far less smooth than Poland’s. The exhibition (all works 2018) revolved around a four-part film, *Univermag*, displayed on double-sided monitors on either side of the gallery. Described as a documentary, the film is a montage of footage shot mostly—according to the press release—at the Minsk location of GUM, a type of Soviet department store that functioned, much like Warsaw’s neons, as an aesthetic symbol of abundance that was largely absent in practice. But if the stores served, in socialist times, as an emblem of modernity, the Minsk GUM today, as the press release notes, is “a Cold War time capsule.” In the film, Ołowska’s camera lingers on the busts of Soviet leaders, the red stars, and hammer-and-sickles still extant throughout the store, whose merchandise, evidently untouched by globalization, comprises almost exclusively local brands.

The film was accompanied by three new paintings depicting, according to the gallery, “modern Belarussian women juxtaposed against the cityscapes of Minsk,” each rendered in an exquisite Socialist Realist pastiche. In *Vitebsk Station*, a woman with a chic bob, a touch too much makeup, and a voluminous fur coat slumps in the chair of a sparsely populated train station waiting area, her glamorous image contrasting with the shabbiness of her surroundings and the sleeping bum visible over her shoulder. In *Independence Avenue*, a woman dressed in a shock of red seems to glare at the viewer, the only human presence against a frieze of Brutalist towers. *Prospekt Niezależności* adopts a compositional



Ela, 2010, oil on canvas, 69 by 49¼ inches.

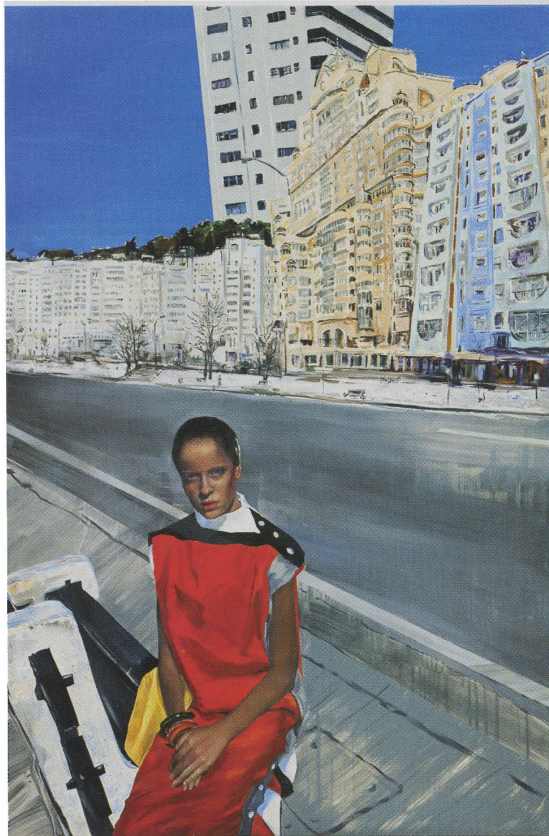
„Ela”



Hunting, 2010, oil on canvas, 69 by 49½ inches.

„Polowanie”

The stakes of Ołowska’s project seem higher now, since the far-right nationalist Law and Justice Party has made the politics of memory central to its repressive agenda.



Independence Avenue, 2018, oil and acrylic on canvas, 82¾ by 55½ inches.

trope common in Socialist Realist paintings, with a woman and child, dressed in matching tailored navy, gazing into the distance: pressed up against the picture plane, they almost hover over an empty, silver-flecked ground, with a meticulously detailed building in the distant background, its distinctive Soviet-era ornament marking it as an architectural fossil.

When I saw these works in the gallery, I had an uncanny sense of recognition, as if I’d somehow seen them before. It turned out that in some sense I had: though the gallery materials indicate that the paintings show contemporary women in Belarus, what goes conspicuously unmentioned is that the figures are copied directly from other sources. I recognized the woman in *Prospekt Niezależności* because it was Amber Valletta wearing Yves Saint Laurent, exactly as she had appeared in the March 2011 issue of American *Vogue*. Exactly, that is, except for the setting. I later learned that portions of Ołowska’s film featuring a fashion show at a GUM-like department store, which I mistook for recent footage, were excerpted from the 2015 Russian TV

miniseries “Krasnaya Koroleva” (The Red Queen), loosely based on the life of the ’60s Soviet supermodel Regina Zbarskaya.

On the one hand, with these works, Ołowska seems to lay a trap for the viewer, who sees the outmoded painterly style and the looming tower blocks in the background and perhaps assumes that the outfits are sad, Second World copies in the vein of the “Applied Fantastic” paintings. But the works in “Belavia” do more than just use Socialist Realism as a style: they play in a similar, if inverted way, with the condensation of time. Socialist Realism projects the image of the future onto the present and insists that it has already arrived; here, it’s the present that seems to time travel, as contemporary fashions find themselves absorbed into the aesthetics of the past. Ołowska imagines a world in which these things might coexist. Collectivism in YSL: is this utopia? It might be. However frivolous it may seem when put so bluntly, Ołowska reminds us that the real dream of communism wasn’t despotism and deprivation, but communal luxury.

LAST NOVEMBER, Ołowska appeared once again in the pages of *Vogue Polska*, this time as the guest editor of the magazine’s first annual art issue. She transformed its pages into an eclectic celebration of avant-garde women past and present, from Zofia Stryjeńska to Alina Szapocznikow to Michèle Lamy. In this sense, the issue was an extension of another set of recent collaborative projects directed by Ołowska, namely a suite of performances inspired by Stryjeńska’s 1918 lithographic series *Bożki słowiańskie* (Slavic Goddesses), modernist inter-



Cover of the February 2018 issue of *Vogue Polska*.



View of Ołowska's performance *Slavic Goddesses: A Wreath of Ceremonies*, 2017, at the Kitchen, New York. Photo Paula Court.

pretations of figures from Slavic folklore and myth. In 2017 Ołowska staged a performance, *Slavic Goddesses—A Wreath of Ceremonies*, at the Kitchen in New York in collaboration with the dance company Ballez to bring Stryjeńska's figures to life. (A second version, *Slavic Goddesses and the Ushers*, was presented by Fondazione Furla in Milan in 2018.)

Part collaborative artwork, part media intervention, her version of *Vogue Polska* attempts to imagine the fashion spread as something more celebratory than consumerist. But perhaps most striking about her dalliance with *Vogue* was a profile in the magazine's digital edition in which the writer, Marcin Różyc, describes her as a "patriotic artist,"⁵ devoted to the preservation of those aspects of Polish culture that might otherwise have been left behind. The word "patriotic" strikes an odd chord from the vantage of New York: it's hard to imagine it being used here as a compliment. But the stakes of Ołowska's project seem higher now, since the rise of the far-right nationalist Law and Justice Party (PiS), which has controlled the Polish government since 2015 and has made the politics of memory central to its repressive agenda. In 2016 the Polish parliament passed new decommunization legislation banning "the propagation of communism or any other totalitarian system," and ordered the removal of remaining Communist-era monuments, replacing them with memorials to Poland's "cursed soldiers," martyrs of the

anti-Soviet resistance.⁶ Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, a PiS politician, recently lent public support to the idea of demolishing the Palace of Culture and Science, a "vestige of communist domination [in] the center of Warsaw," stating that it had been his dream for the past forty years.⁷ Perhaps most troubling was the passage, in 2018, of a "National Remembrance Law," making it illegal to publicly implicate the Polish nation as being in any way culpable for Nazi crimes during the German occupation of Poland. Instead, Ołowska's work offers a model of a celebratory approach to national history and identity without chauvinism: to preserve the past as a living thing, constantly open to reinvention. ○

1. Agata Pyzik, "Vogue Poland: Why the iconic magazine's first Polish cover has proven so controversial," *Calvert Journal*, February 15, 2018, calvertjournal.com.
2. Claire Bishop, "Paulina Ołowska: Reactivating Modernism," *Parkett*, May 2013, p. 147.
3. Karolina Plinta, "Nocą Warszawa należy do burżuazji. Wywiad z Pauliną Ołowską [At night Warsaw belongs to the bourgeoisie. A conversation with Paulina Ołowska]," *Magazyn Szum*, June 8, 2014.
4. Leopold Tyrmand, "Dziennik" [Diary] (1954), quoted in David Crowley, "Applied Fantastic (on the Polish Women's League Magazine *Ty i Ja*)," *dot dot dot*, issue 9, 2004, pp. 42–43.
5. Marcin Różyc, "Paulina Ołowska: A Slavic Goddess," *Vogue Polska*, Oct. 10, 2018.
6. Matthew Luxmoore, "Poles Apart: The Bitter Conflict Over a Nation's Communist History," *Guardian*, July 13, 2018.
7. Mateusz Morawiecki quoted in "Top Polish Politicos 'Dream' of Demolishing Stalainist Palace," AFP News, November 15, 2017, news.yahoo.com.