



Paulina Ołowska

Design for Living

Since facts always occur in a context, a particular lie—that is, a falsehood that makes no attempt to change the whole context—tears, as it were, a hole in the fabric of factuality. As every historian knows, one can spot a lie by noticing incongruities, holes, or the junctures of patched-up places. As long as the texture as a whole is kept intact, the lie will eventually show up as if of its own accord.

—Hannah Arendt, *Truth and Politics*

CATHERINE WOOD

If modernism's critical exposure of the elements of pigment, canvas, and supporting frame that constitute Painting was preoccupied with an attitude of medium-specific "truth" to materials, Paulina Ołowska's approach might be said to cast painting, extravagantly, as a lie. For her, the fictive space of the painted canvas—its plasticity as a handmade representational space, its nuance of surface and touch, and its capacity as a window onto an alternate, aesthetic reality—has a place among the facts of the world and offers transformative, and performative, potential. The way that this potential is elaborated and enacted in her work opens up the effect of painting beyond the canvas, destabilizing perception of the world more broadly. In a sense, painting's insertion into reality, and the way that paintedness as style or masquerade is then carried through Ołowska's work, creates a

new aesthetic regime of permission. She paints the world as she would like it to be, perhaps, and steps into its conjuring as a reality.

There are, to begin with, degrees of deliberate anachronism to the way in which Ołowska paints pictures. Styles are tried on and cast aside: Sometimes she employs sweeping flourishes of gestural brushwork; sometimes she works in a painstaking photorealistic style; and at other times, she appropriates the formal ritual of the process of abstraction, making paintings that resemble Constructivist works from the early twentieth century. Her sources for images are drawn from life as well as from a range of photographic, media, political, and art-historical material. But although the ecology of her practice is anchored by the making of painted pictures on canvas—variously portraits, paintings of clothing, pattern, or composite collages—she also manifests a strong fascination with painting in its applied form as mural, decoration, theater set, or fashion design. She ties

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LUCY MCKENZIE, PAULINA OŁOWSKA, HEAVY DUTY, 2000, color photograph, 10 x 7 7/8" / HOCHLEISTUNG, Farbphotographie, 25,5 x 20 cm.
(PHOTO: ZUZA KRAJEWSKA)





LUCY MCKENZIE, PAULINA OŁOWSKA,
HEAVY DUTY, 2011, installation view, Inverleith House, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh / HOCHLEISTUNG, Installationsansicht.
(PHOTO: ALLAN DIMMICK)

the capacity of the canvas to conjure untruth to these insertions of paintedness that already exist, embedded within the everyday, so as to extend its reach.

If her paintings exaggerate their painterliness, the manner in which Ołowska chooses to perform the role of “the painter” as a bohemian figure offers a lived equivalent. In a beautiful portrait photograph taken for an invitation card—for the exhibition “Heavy Duty,” in 2001, at Inverleith House, Edinburgh—she is pictured with Scottish artist Lucy McKenzie. Ołowska stands as though painting at an easel, poised with brush in hand, while her collaborator lounges on the floor wearing a leotard (a nod to a series of paintings of Olympic gymnasts made by McKenzie). They pose as artists, but also deliberately as women whose mode is, according to Ołowska, *feminine as much as feminist*. This photograph is typical of Ołowska’s frequent dramatization of the act of painting itself, which she relates to her own body in sensual and physical terms:

In painting, I jump from large-scale to small, just because it takes you away from stretching your body into a hunched-back position with a tiny brush. I love using my body in painting and physicality in painting—treating the canvas like it is made of clay or almost as in cooking, smearing, spraying, washing the paint.¹¹

In terms of both content and strategy, Ołowska’s approach draws heavily on feminist historical per-

spectives. She has focused on the lives and work of women such as Elsa Schiaparelli; Virginia Woolf and her lesser-known sister, painter Vanessa Bell; and Polish artist, designer, and illustrator Zofia Stryjeńska, whose paintings she re-created in grayscale for the 5th Berlin Biennale in 2008. “Mother 200” was the title of a 2012 show of Ołowska’s work at Simon Lee Gallery, London, and indeed a number of works by feminist artists of her mother’s generation gesture toward the ways in which she inhabits the space of painting both imaginatively and performatively. For her 2011 exhibition “The Revenge of the Wise-Woman,” at Foksal Gallery Foundation in Warsaw, Ołowska placed Suzy Lake’s *A NATURAL WAY TO DRAW* (1975) alongside her own paintings. The video shows a woman’s face in close-up, covered in white makeup. As a male narrator reads aloud from a drawing manual by Nicolaidis, the woman first draws black lines onto her face, then proceeds to shade and texture it with black pencil. She subsequently applies mascara to her eyelashes, focusing the viewer’s attention on the parallel between the making of a drawing and the social implication of makeup. The work, demonstrates—like key works by peers, including Eleanor Antin’s *REPRESENTATIONAL PAINTING* (1971) and Sanja Iveković’s *MAKE-UP – MAKE-DOWN* (1976)—an important transposition of the idea of painting into new media via performance. Such experiments, by

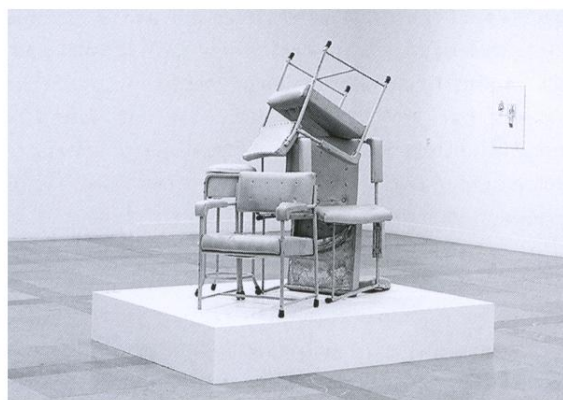
women artists who had learned conventional painting skills at art school, erased the medium's associations with an essentially masculine, heroic tradition and shifted it toward a reinvention of an age-old feminine practice. By invoking the idea of makeup, and specifically the construction of femininity that Ołowska frequently parades, these works simultaneously connect painting and paintedness with the history of *maquillage*: a practice imbued by Charles Baudelaire, for example, in "The Painting of Modern Life," with magical properties, and moreover one that has been "owned" by women for a long time. Art (as painted decoration) is integrated with a particular live agency within collective social life.

Helena Almeida's series of painted photographs from the 1970s, each titled PINTURA HABITADA (Inhabited Paintings), offers a complementary historical precedent for Ołowska's negotiation of the depth-space of the canvas and her physical relationship to it. Almeida's experiments with literally wearing the canvas as a dress in certain of these works and staging her own portrait—which she appears to paint from within the depicted space onto the surface of the photograph, which in turn appears to imprison her within it—relate, for example, to Ołowska's two-part exhibition at Galerie Buchholz, Cologne, in 2008. "Attention à la Peinture" included in one space a series of photorealistic renderings of extraordinary dress designs by Schiaparelli and others in exuberant shapes and colors; the other room featured a series of large-scale canvases painted with dress patterns in black lines and blocks of color. From these latter canvases, the delineated material shapes had been cut and placed in proximity as freestanding "dress-sculptures" that showed off the drips and fields of painterly abstraction. The gestural traces of the artist's body and the masquerading surfaces of the tightly painted simulations of fashion images mark the outer parentheses of Ołowska's world as a painter: at one extreme, drag-like pictorial illusion, and at the other, a tangible, primary space to be lived in.

In these works, Ołowska's own bodily presence is alluded to and enunciated in a sort of latent performativity rather than being literally activated. The absent bodies in both the cut-out sculptures and the depicted dresses make the clothing somewhat ghost-

like. However, the role of actual performance—of live acting and initiating action—has been an important central thread in her practice over the last decade. Significant in this regard have been her collaborations with McKenzie. In the photograph described above as well as in a number of other works, the artists perform with exquisite attention paid to costume, makeup, and pose. For OBLIQUE COMPOSITION III (2005), a joint performance staged at Cabinet Gallery in London, the two artists appeared in front of a backdrop they had painted abstractly. A live greyhound prowled the gallery, and snippets of conversation and a telephone call between the artists were played over their stylized movements. At one point, McKenzie took a brush and painted a loose portrait of Ołowska onto a large sheet of paper set up at the side of the stage. The articulation of the act of painting lent every detail that unfolded a quality of formal arrangement, giving the apparently domestic tableau a rarified aesthetic and an atmosphere of life lived under glass.

Two years earlier, Ołowska and McKenzie—wearing gray cloth dresses designed by Beca Lipscombe—ran a temporary bar called NOVA POPULARNA (New Popular) in Warsaw. Modeled on artists' bars and social clubs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the project was a drawn and painted space with handwritten notes graffitied onto its walls, along with two beautiful painted panels depicting nightlife



PAULINA OŁOWSKA, CAFÉ BAR, 2011, installation view /
Installationsansicht, National Museum Krakow.
(PHOTO: JUSTYNA GRYGLEWICZ)

Paulina Olowka

scenes (not unlike the positioning of Kippenberger's Paris Bar paintings within the legendary Berlin bar itself). It also served as a space for performances by other artists, such as the band donAteller (Bonnie Camplin, Ed Laliq, and Mark Leckey) and Mathilde Rosier. NOVA POPULARNA resonates with Olowka's more recent CAFÉ BAR, 2011, a site-specific installation at the National Museum in Krakow that was inspired by the institution's workers' cafeteria, designed in the 1960s but no longer in existence. In addition to curating a selection of furniture from the café, works from the museum's collection, and her own related drawings, the artist created a fourteen-foot-long painting in the style of early twentieth-century painters such as Natalia Goncharova and Varvara Stepanova, framing the activity of people seated eating and drinking as a kind of day-to-day stage set.

If stylization, illusion, and masquerade are at the heart of Olowka's painting-derived practice, how might we understand the element of "truth" in what she does? "Painting for me is a manifesto," the artist explains. "I would like it to be read like a manifesto: both a manifesto of women's independence but also a manifesto of fashion and 'utopian optimism,' as a way of surviving the mediocrity of things."²⁾ Olowka consistently attempts to reenact certain notions, or utopias, even if these efforts sometimes reflect—like her decision to retain the accidental typo on her poster RECONSTRUCTING MODERNISM (2000)—that straightforward revival isn't possible today. As her many collaborations attest, painting opens up a sociable space, a collective situation that proposes certain modes of aesthetic living that bring aspects of the past back to life within the present. Painting's ceremonial quality lends the possibility of a special order of experience, one that is otherwise logically dismissed. Its persistence, as a lie stitched into the fabric of reality's coordinates, does not show itself up in its falsity via incongruity. Rather, it is a form of falsehood that manages to change its context to suit itself: an inverse chameleon. In Olowka's hands, painting is explored not only as a craft but as a productive and extendable mode of living.



1) Olowka, e-mail to the author, December 2012.

2) Olowka, conversation with the author, December 2012.



*PAULINA OLOWSKA, "Attention à la Peinture," 2008, installation view / Installationsansicht, Galerie Buchholz, Cologne.
(PHOTO: LOTHAR SCHNEPF)*