

The Fantasy of Paulina Olowska

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Part 1: In the Land of Nova Polska

If you landed in Poland today, dear reader, the most common adjective you would see on tourist adverts, in state slogans and just about anywhere that Polska is invoked would be Nova or new. Post-wall Poland seems like a born-again state, relishing in the youthfulness of the capitalist republic, following the triumphant overthrow of the communist PRL (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa or Polish People's Republic, 1952-1989). Official 'solidarity' now rests with the Bush administration. The issue of European integration has been bungled of late, but an official cultural exchange has been mobilized to reclaim novelty from the neo-con sympathizers. The slogan *Nova Polska* overlooks that 'nova' is spelled 'nowa' in polish because it was invented for the West, or more precisely for the Polish Season in France currently under way. Novelty, having been virtually discarded as a possibility since the post-modern turn, returns by popular demand from the east (its naïvete perhaps all the more forgivable when it is not home grown). It is beyond the scope of this text to elaborate on the fascinating social ramifications of Poland's nova-lust; suffice it to say that these few lines are an invitation to do just that in other place and at another time. For now, it will be important to consider the impact of the aforementioned need of the new on art since, after all, the subject in question here is Paulina Olowska, an artist whose work confronts the dream of novelty without losing sight of its long history. The modern avant-garde drive for social change that provoked numerous attempts to reorganize art's relation to life is continually invoked in contemporary art, but for a long time the all-knowing wink of irony has been summoned to disassociate projects from the destiny of failure that radical thought and revolution are known to suffer. Olowska's approach, however, relies on a selective memory tuned to ideals rather than outcomes – a sentiment that may seem naïve but is in fact born of a particular necessity. When I met her recently to discuss quite generally

where she was coming from and compare notes on our perspectives of Poland, she ventured that what her country needs now more than ever is a good dose of nostalgia.

Svetlana Boym has gathered an impressive volume of essays on this subject entitled *The Future of Nostalgia*. In it she discusses how nostalgia, which she sees as a specialty of Eastern European emigrants who fostered an idealized version of the Europe they were forced to abandon, has become a necessary sentiment for all – an antidote to the bureaucratized ethos cultivated in Brussels which puts debates about the price of feta ahead of discussions about cultural values. Boym celebrates intellectuals like Milosz, Kundera and Havel, who stubbornly cultivate a ‘third meaning’ for Europe, not as the site of fierce wars, ethnic tensions and barbaric colonial expansion, but as the cradle of “common cultural values” of critical reflection on history, of the twilight time of the mind, of public culture that ensures the values of “free citizens as a source of power”. Here, “Twilight is not the time of the end but that of reflective, nonlinear time, time out of time, pregnant with possibilities.”¹ “The Europeans without euros” Boym ventures, “made one thing clear: the end of history is nowhere near.” These Europeans are able to fixate on *eros*, not euros, cultivating a “joyfully naïve image of the European romance.” Ironically, with the logic of *Nova Polska* in full force, many Poles are demonstrating the opposite tendency; their drive to emulate the perceived plenty of €-pa and the US tends to obscure this optimistic historical reflection.

Perhaps because of its perceived naivete, Olowska’s call for nostalgia has not been shared by many Polish artists. Consider two prominent strains of Polish contemporary art: the first, developed in the early nineties, on the heels of communist collapse, made a point of confronting the latent trauma and psychological unease that pervaded a generation that had fought for change. Some of the main protagonists of this approach are Artur Zmijewski, Zbigniew Libera and Katarzyna Kozyra.² All the artists used performance mediated with

video, photography and other surveillance technologies. The scenarios they conjure have brought out the phantoms of the holocaust, the psychology of incarceration and surveillance and the social discomfort with sickness and incapacity – the dominant affect here is psychological unease. This is not to say that these artists are without humor, but this humor is often black as coal. Last year's Polish Pavillion at the Venice Biennale foregrounded the behaviorist model of art making with Zmijewski's *Repetition*, a 'documentary' restaging of the Stanford Prison Experiment that the artist organized in Warsaw.³ Zmijewski's exhibition and the broader success of his peers at international biennales has given voice to many an unspeakable sentiment. While the historical anxieties foregrounded by these artists cut against the grain of Nova Polska boosterism, they may run the risk of presenting an all too bleak and burdened picture of the human psyche. The body, which remains the focal point, is most often presented as debilitated or a product of state, family and religious institutions, leaving little room for eros.

The second strain of Polish art, which gained momentum towards the late nineties and continues to enjoy critical as well as unprecedented commercial support, operates in a diametrically opposite fashion to the first. In 1995, five artists asserted themselves in confident and blasé fashion as Grupa Ladnie (The "Pretty Group" or The "Group Pretty")⁴. They included students or recent graduates of Krakow's Fine Art Academy: Rafal Bujnowski, Marek Firek, Józef Tomczyk-Kurosawa, Marcin Maciejowski and Wilhelm Sasnal. The group was most active as such until 2000, whereupon the artists began to focus on their individual practices. As their title may suggest Grupa Ladnie was interested in cultivating an aesthetic filter of everyday life rather than questions of trauma or other psychological and moral 'discomforts.' Nor were they particularly interested in the technological novelty and surveillance ethos of digital means. Instead, they went about reanimating the age-old practice of painting (with occasional forays into the suddenly sensual analog media of animation and film). Making these old media fresh again signaled a broader sense of renewal.⁵ In the west, however,

Sasnal's work in particular has been read as a variant of the ambivalent figuration of Luc Tuymans. Such comparisons are not often favorable, determining Sasnal's graphic style as light, fluffy stuff that does not match the difficult political content which Tuymans brings to painting.⁶ Somehow, this line of criticism reinforces an overzealous expectation of angst from Eastern European art. Yet it is precisely the automation of angst, or its transformation into a national pathology, that Grupa Ladnie has aimed to avoid. The Pretty is not the easiest term to engage critically. But seen in a dialectical tangle with this notion of requisite angst, it gains a strategic force. Grupa Ladnie's unapologetic approach to painting asserts 'everything' as a viable subject: diaristic scenes of family, friends, the neighbourhood and personal travels are rendered alongside cultural or political figures, riffs on music or film graphics and other forays into popular media. Especially in Sasnal's case, where the pleasing compositional or material play with paint often outweighs the clarity or gravity of the specific subjects, the cultivation of an aesthetic filter takes on great weight. The contemporary world is continually transformed into pretty pictures, perhaps so that it may become all the *more* pliable in our eyes. While this may present a world that seems ripe with possibility – especially in comparison to the just discussed body and video works – these possibilities remain in what may be described as an 'absolute present.' It's as if history had in fact ended.

Paulina Olowska's approach is thus rather unique among Polish artists, in that she continually delves into the modern past in a way that makes it seem fresh and full of possibility in the present. *Romancing the Avant Garde*, the title of an exhibition she curated at the State Gallery in Sopot which combined her own collages with selections from the soon to be closed museum's collection, betrays her willingness to fall in love with minor histories and to engage them with enthusiasm. This is not to say that she is alone in a kind of sincere reconsideration of vanguard strategies—every second artist I meet is busy remaking versions of constructivist paintings and spatial constructions, restaging Dadaist theatrics or refreshing the possibilities of the *informe*. But Olowska has

pursued avant-garde tactics with a performative and immersive sensibility that animates what she makes, drawing deep connections between modern art and a willful subjectivity. Also, her program has been fostered within one of the cradles of the socialist experiment that went awry (not looking on through 007 binoculars). There is, almost by necessity, a strong theatrical element to her optimistic approach – historical ideals and social experiments are not so much analyzed as replayed or revived, without a sense of institutional doom. Her figure, often clad in a fitting costume, replaces irony and angst with the otherworldly glamour of the “new woman” of old.

Part 2: Her Story of History, but not Herstory

Now, if this is starting to sound like a feminist manifesto, bear in mind, dear reader, that this is another fantasy of Paulina Olowka – not mine. The common fixation on Olowka’s work as a reconstruction of women’s history is warranted, of course, as she has continually drawn attention to neglected female protagonists in her paintings, collages, performances, installations and the full gamut of her mercurial enterprise, proving once again that questions of female subjectivity are far from exhausted. What is less noted, however, is that her attention to the fantasy of the modern woman *reworks* as many tenets of feminist critique as it upholds. Her examples are most often artists and fashion icons chosen as much for their seductive poses and hip haircuts as for their consciously sexual politics: the girl in the jumpsuit in her painting *America*, the anonymous nymph silhouetted against all-over splashes in *Pollock*. The type of pose a woman strikes, the kind of picture she presents to the world has been of great interest to Olowka – an attitude that does not easily fit with the anti-spectacular thrust of feminist politics. In Fashion, Olowka finds an outlet for the imaginary, rather than an “industry” that will determine her. Her will is her own and she reclaims this much-maligned field as an arena of social experiment.

Consider the performance of ALPHABET, where the artist curves and stretches her figure into twenty-six letters from A to Z. During a live version of the performance on the rooftop of the Galerie Meerrettich in Berlin, Olowska (with Joanna Zielinska, Daniel Yamada and Josef Strau) performed the individual letters of the alphabet, followed by the enactment of short poems by Strau, Frances Stark and Paulus Mazur. The performers, clad in eighties-style exercise gear complete with florescent highlights to stand out in the night, become somewhat abstract as genders. What came through was the physical energy of letter/word forms—a kind of zero-degree of performance where elementary bodies constitute the building blocs of language. And they could say anything. In the photographed version of the performance, Olowska, presents the letters sporting a red dress, a blue scarf and blue stockings – *sporting* is really the term here as the artist's signature short hair gives the dress a sense of the gamine proletarian allure of Liubov Popova. Seen in still photographs, the embodied letters look more like fashion poses for the *thinking woman*. They put me in mind of the seventeenth-century “blue-stockings” (as women philosophers were referred to in the days of Descartes). We get a kind of fantasy chapter of their history as Olowska enacts a stylish antithesis to the Cartesian mind-body split.

Many of Olowska's early paintings of gals striding optimistically in modern clothes (with modern art as scenery in ample supply) were based on the idiosyncratic spreads of *Ty i Ja (You and I)* a Polish women's magazine which temporarily thrived in the late fifties and early sixties as a forum for free thought and fashion fantasy. [It may be noted here that Olowska's very choice *to paint*, and to paint without end games in mind, signals an attitude unencumbered by the feminist distrust of the medium as a vehicle for male mastery.] “Paint” becomes a means of historical contemplation and, given the sure but imperfect gestures in most of the pictures, it serves as a kind of energy transfer from past to present. David Crowley's brilliant historical review of *Ty i Ja* points out how the early designer Roman Cieslewicz freely used images of coveted prêt-a-porter fashions gleaned from French and English magazines, but reformatted them inside the magazine

using antiquated printer's devices that lent an absurd, heterodox quality to the layout.⁷ Even more incongruously, the designer used his eccentric graphic style to create many advertisements, which had no function within Poland's central economy. However fraught with ideological contradiction, the magazine cultivated a willful defiance of the grim and gray communist status quo:

“The magazine ignored the divisions of Europe drawn by the Cold War, frequently featuring the work of Paris fashion designers, West German novelists and British photographers. When the Soviet Union was discussed, it was not in terms of fawning testimony characteristic of the rest of the Polish press: the magazine's editors were far more interested in the image of revolution offered by figures like Majakovsky and Rodchenko, the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s, than in Dmitrii Nalbandian or any other ‘official’ Soviet artist of the Khrushchev era.”

This was one arena where the nostalgic ideals of Europe that Boym speaks of may be seen to have gained ground. Here too, Crowley recognizes – what the Polish novelist Leopold Tyrmand referred to as, the “applied fantastic” – a dedicated enactment of a liberal fantasy despite modest means. The phrase came to Tyrmand's mind observing the stylish improvisations of women from behind the iron curtain, and it came to me through Olowska, a keen historian of Poland's cleverly fashioned freedoms who recommended Crowley's article to me.

The stylized wit of the ‘applied fantastic’ has been reactivated in two of Olowska's most ambitious projects to date: her solo exhibition at the Kunstverein Braunschweig entitled *Sie musste die Idee eines Hauses als Metapher verwerfen* [She had to reject the house as a metaphor] and the earlier bar/salon, *Nova Popularna* which she staged in an temporarily unoccupied Warsaw gallery with her longtime collaborator Lucy McKenzie. Despite what its name might suggest, *Nova Popularna* was no celebration of the forgetful fantasies of *Nova Polska*. The space positively clamored with historical reference: from Cepelia furniture

(imports of Poland's seventies craft revival), through wall paintings where fin-de-siècle flair gave way to constructivism and merged with squatter chic. Nova Populana had, not one, but *two* logos: one inspired by Glasgow's Arts and Crafts graphics and the other emblematic of Warsaw's bohemian grit. An eclectic menu of classical, experimental, avant-jazz and arriviste punk performance with a constant flow of moon-shine sustained the guests, each day for a month well into the night. Recalling the evening of a certain slide presentation hosted by Maurycy Gomulicki, an artist and eccentric connoisseur of all things graphic and gaulish, Michal Wolinski details NP's prevailing atmosphere: "It wasn't enough that the place, founded with full and premeditated knowledge of its premature death, was visited exclusively by corpses and all classes of carrion, and that this nightly assembly was constantly preyed upon by insatiable leeches and vampiric trash, there were also the slides of graves, wreaths and dead serious aesthetics of the most exotic and exhalted variety..."⁸ In short, a Twilight Zone – or should I say a persistent twilight hour which marks "reflective, nonlinear time, time out of time, pregnant with possibilities."

At Braunschweig, Olowska also lived among friendly ghosts – energetically painted portraits of Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Charlotte Perriand and Nina Hamnett were displayed in animated fashion on easels with wheels – effecting a kind of "salon des femmes." Olowska has a particular affinity and nostalgia for the public/private space of the salon where disparate voices can harmonize in debate and 'genius' is never solitary. The entire Kunstverein was filled with more paintings, collages, murals, architectural models and other remnants of an all-encompassing female creativity. The eclectic scenography gained narrative depth as a kind of dimensional portrait through the ambient presence of a radio play entitled *Desky Maiden*, written especially for Olowska's exhibition by Lucy McKenzie – a walkman was handed to each visitor to accompany them on the visit so that they too were never alone. The maidens – Rowan Morrison and Mattie Urquart as retro-futurist doppelgängers for Olowska and McKenzie – they drink in bars, ride in the women-only-compartments and are visited by ghosts,

one of whom tells Rowan she is an architectural genius, which leads her to an obsessive devotion to her practice that ends in death and an absurd floorplan for the Zentrum Kultury in a fictive Slavic-sounding Republic. The Kunstverein Braunschweig became an immersive space permeated by the half-fantasy/half-history of its own making and by the generative force of creative women. It constituted a historical chimera that cannot be said to right or even write a history (or should I say “herstory”?), but to make the course of people and events plastic, pliable even.

Part 3: The End (every children’s story has one)

Olowka’s entire practice has this pliable quality, where priorities seem to be reorganized and obsessions shift. This is especially true of her last work. The exhibition *Rainbow Brite*, which opened at the Ujazdowski Castle Center for Contemporary Art in August, seemed out of character. The reference to the unicorn-striding Rainbow Brite naturally asserts a girlie imaginary, but this turned out to be a bit of a red herring. The actual exhibition focused on Wolfgang Petersen’s 1984 film *The Neverending Story* within a minimalist, paired down installation. Five different language versions of the film were continuously projected onto flowing white curtains in two adjacent rooms which led to a smaller, dimly lit space with a presentation of five framed posters for the film. Only the entrance to the exhibition was brightly lit – a cube with five luminescent white-on-matte white silk screens bearing the fluffy face of Falkor, the good luck dragon from *The Neverending Story* (looking more like a dog actually). Falkor had become an unlikely Warholian icon through the mechanical print process, a departure from Olowka’s characteristically loose painterly techniques. Olowka wanted to entertain the prospect of making a stark show without recourse to the warm patina of *avant* gestures. It was a kind of business proposition with real legal repercussions in the realm of copyright law.⁹ Unable to fit the work into previous readings of her art, this exhibition felt like a signal of change, a willful

inconsistency with past practices and a challenge to any complacent critic. The same could be said about her project for *A Prior*— absent-minded doodles gleaned from a Taschen book on Polanski; here, the filmic fantasies of Poland's enfant terrible seem like a perfect subject for Olowska's own Kippenbergerian gestures. They trace yet another path for Olowska's inconsistent fantasies.¹⁰ And speaking of bad children, the expression of cozy innocence on the face of the satanic toddler from *Rosemary's Baby* ("Dziecko"), soaring like an angel to the top of the page, is wicked in every sense of the term.

When we met in Sopot, Paulina's hometown by the Baltic (and birthplace of Klaus Kinski, whom I could not dismiss as yet another enfant terrible in our midst), the imagination of children came up. The Ujazdowski castle exhibition made me think of my childhood in Poland, and I remember watching *The Neverending Story* with rapture at the age of eight when I could most easily identify with the protagonists. I didn't choose to be Bastian, the boy who reads and keeps alive the fantasy, Atreyu the girlie-looking young warrior, or The Childlike Empress. I simply thought I was all three combined – and maybe even Falkor too. Seeing it again in this exhibition as a cultural icon re-presented for critical consumption made me curious about the contemporary resonance of this meta-fantasy. Olowska saw the terrifying Nothing which Bastian learns to battle as an apt allegory for the void of imagination in the current government (with Lech and Jaroslaw Kaczynski, Poland's twin towers of populism, most to blame).

In the shadow of the Kaczynski twins, Poland seems sadly off course.¹¹ Their arrogant euro-bashing, coupled with an unwavering support for Bush's Iraqi quagmire, is matched at home with a moralistic agenda that fosters a culture of cleansing (corruption, energy dependency, but also of human rights). The celebrated Solidarity roots of the President are betrayed by his social policies. I was just recently informed that the "milk bars" or workers' canteens which are the locus of so much of my own nostalgia but also of cheap good food, will likely be shut down under this government. Many historic parts of the PRL are being

dismissed – any inspiring babies that may have been spawned in the four decades prior to 1989 are summarily dumped with the communist bathwater. Paulina Olowska has fought for three years to secure the life/light of a neon sign which shows a girl scoring a hoop at the top of a building in Warsaw's Constitution Square.¹² The design is a classic of socialist modernism – a springy elemental line of a girl jumps up to a basketball that multiplies as so many perfect circles that run down the side of the MDM hotel. Olowska's attempt to lend nostalgia to what would moralistically be read as a throw-away PRL icon displays her willingness to re-invent Poland's just-passed material history in an optimistic way.

Part 4: Neverending (briefly)

Strains of optimism, fed by nostalgia and focusing attention on the social possibilities of art, may be seen to persist in Olowska's practice. Particularly when her projects based in Poland are considered, there emerges a succession of interventions in the social fabric of the country. At stake here is the realization of an imaginary space where friendly ghosts thrive, friends and strangers have a place to gather and history lives in the streets. The whole thing may sound somewhat naïve, but in the way that your wise grandmother can be naïve, when she wields the renegade historical authority of nostalgia. Nostalgia is a special province of fantasy that unhinges our sense of time and melds reality and fiction, lending life a pliable quality. Discussing Olowska's practice is a matter of learning to elaborate on a deep sense of Fantasy that is aimed both at the future and the past. This text is hopefully just the beginning – though of course the question will arise: Why persist with this talk of a 'sense of fantasy', is this not in fact *non-sense*?

"Fantasy" may be the only real thing and it still has too few dimensions in our mindless times.

¹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books, 2001, p. 223. On this issue of Twilight Boym quotes Vaclav Havel's "Hope for Europe."

² Marta Deskur and Alicja Zebrowska may also be mentioned as artists of this generation who use photography, video and performance to interrogate notions of cultural and gendered identity, though their work is not perhaps as traumatic as that of Libera, Kozyra and Zmijewski tend to be.

³ The Stanford Prison Experiment is an infamous 1971 study of human behavior in prison conditions, conducted by professor Philip Zimbardo at the US Stanford University, where one half of the volunteers were given the roles of guards and the others of inmates. The experiment was prematurely terminated because each side began to display sadistic tendencies. The swift assumption of abusive power relations by people in full cognition of the artificial nature of their situation presented some disquieting facts about human behavior. By restaging the experiment, with the same effect of power abuse, Zmijewski makes a depressingly poignant case for the power of the institution and the inhuman seductions of power. Zmijewski is famous for staging such disturbing scenarios; examples include *The Game of Tag*, where naked adults played tag inside gas chambers in a Nazi death camp, and *Singing Lesson* which assembled deaf children to sing a Bach cantata.

⁴ The name may be a partial reference to the Grupa Wprost (The Straightforward Group) which was founded in 1966 in Krakow and persisted into the eighties. It included painters interested in returning to the figure including Maciej Bieniasz, Zbylut Grzywacz, Leszek Sobocki and Jacek Waltos.

⁵ Here I should mention Raster – a commercial gallery/den of radical repose/all around organizer in Warsaw led by Lukasz Gorczyca – that was been a source of support for the Grupa Ladnie and injected social energy into its ethos.

⁶ See Jordan Kantor, "The Tuymans Effect: Wilhelm Sasnal, Eberhard Havenkost , Magnus von Plessen" in *Artforum*, November 2004: 164-171

⁷ See David Crowley, "Applied Fantastic" in *Dot Dot Dot*, Issue 9.

⁸ Translated from a Polish text by Wolinski in Lucy McKenzie & Paulina Olowska, *Nova Popularna*, Warsaw: Foksal Gallery Foundation, 2003, p. 17.

⁹ The exhibition was also accompanied by a legal treatise, "The Installation as a Work Within the Meaning of Copyright Law on the Example of the Practice of Paulina Olowska" drafted specifically on this occasion by the legal expert Joanna Holda. It argued for an interpretation of copyright law that would allow Olowska to screen the entire film twenty-four hours a day, seven-days a week – a neverending story indeed. With the text, the exhibition partly merged the realm of fantasy with the world of law.

¹⁰ Here, I say inconsistent in keeping with Lucy Lippard's defense of inconsistency in art making and thought. See especially Lucy Lippard, "Change and Criticism: Consistency and Small Minds" in *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*, New York, Dutton & Co. Inc., 1971, p. 23-34.

¹¹ Speaking of fairytales gone bad, I should mention that the Kaczynski brothers are famous in Poland for having once starred in the film version of a popular fairytale entitled *O Dwóch takich co ukradli księżyc* (“About the two who stole the moon”).

¹² The proceeds of her summer exhibition at Foksal Gallery Foundation in Warsaw went towards the preservation of this urban icon. Other neons and black were displayed in the windows of the modernist cube as well as two monochrome paintings and a text work that listed all of Warsaw’s neons; they are being rapidly destroyed to prepare the capital’s nova face of gentrification.