

“Nova Popularna,” Lucy McKenzie and Paulina Ołowska in *Nova Popularna*, Warsaw: Foksal Gallery Foundation [Reprinted in *Metropolis M*, no. 5.], 2003.

Paulina Ołowska (Poland) and Lucy McKenzie (Scotland) met in 1998 in The Hague while both on academic exchanges, and over the following years formed a friendship and working partnership.

Dream of a Provincial Girl, a series of group shows in an apartment (Sopot, Poland, 2000), was the first instance in which they collaborated in making work and curating. This exhibition paved the way for their subsequent projects, which have included *Heavy Duty* (Inverleith House, Edinburgh, 2001), *Aesthetic Integration* (public mural, Gdansk, 2001), the series of performance / film works *Oblique Composition* (Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, 2002 / Flourish Nights, Glasgow, 2002 / Cabinet Gallery, London, 2003), and *Nova Popularna* (Warsaw, 2003).

Extensions of their individual practices, the point of contact for the relationship is the examination of their experiences of culture, shared and separate, as women, as painters and as friends.

Nova Popularna ran from the 2nd of May to the 29th 2003, in Warsaw. It was facilitated by Foundation Gallery Foksal, and was a working illegal bar with concerts and events every week. It was designed and run by the artists, who worked behind and managed the bar, with the help of friends and locals. The following conversation is an edit of the one to appear in the accompanying catalogue for the project.

Paulina Ołowska and Lucy McKenzie
Royal park in Warsaw and via email, August 2003.

L – Well I thought a good place to begin would be in the concept of the artist salon. What is it exactly about the connotations of a salon that we felt strongly enough about to want to create at this point in time and in this place?

P – The salon is a place with a natural flow of ideas or thoughts, which is easy to romanticize when you see documentation of the Cabaret Voltaire or Cricot in Krakow¹. The idea with Nova Popularna was to create a space designed by artists for artists, friends and passers-by. Feeling unsatisfied with other clubs or bars in Warsaw, it was important to imagine an alternative, that isn't built on generic ideas of how a club should be.

The idea of artists' salons is maybe passé, but when thinking of Montmartre bohemia meetings or creative cabaret or music bands like those at the Bauhaus, it was really tempting to create a contemporary version of it.

L – The places I'd like to socialize in mostly don't exist, so we *had* to make it. Relating to its function as an art project, I think the construct of a salon offers a path between two artistic modalities. On one hand there is involvement in events and creative

¹ Cricot was an avant-garde theater created in 1933 by a group of artists from Krakow.

Some of the artists involved were Tadeusz Kantor and Maria Jarema.

organization, and on the other the gallery exhibition. The Flourish Nights² revealed that there is always a degree of expectation put on live events, pressure for something to be entertaining if it's also going to be sociable, which is limiting. The freedom of a bar is that it's just a place you come to have a drink, there's no real focus.

The salon as an alternative to a hung exhibition especially relates to painting. For the bar we could create paintings and murals, and present them within a *mise en scène* tests the requirements of an exhibition because the installation has to work in the over-determined realm of interior design and functionalism. Their purpose is just to *look good*. The actual meaning has been detached from the images, and located somewhere else in a much more integrated dialogue.

The salon is such a dusty model of counter culture that it is perfect for rehabilitation. We talked about the depiction of women within the milieu of Impressionist and Post Impressionist Paris, specifically paintings such as Manet's '*A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*', and the works of Toulouse-Lautrec. We wanted to make these familiar women more than just sexual objects symbolizing social and artistic progress, we wanted to give them a life away from the male gaze, make an environment for them and also become them. This influenced the kind of roles we took on in the bar, and the discussion with Beca Lipscombe³ for the staff outfits. We wanted to make a place that women like Picasso's absinthe drinker could come and be miserable. Mark Leckey⁴ actually came up with the defining phrase, '*Bachelorette Machine*'. But do you think the female specifics were just an adopted stance, or did it have any practical bearing?

P – Well we wanted quite a structured “feminine atmosphere” with events like ‘Woman Only Wednesdays’ or a ‘No Swearing’ rule in the bar, but these actually existed only for a day or two. It was great to imagine a bar with an archaic kind elegance, but in the end we just went along with the relaxed atmosphere. We served a mixture of students, young artists enjoying the 5 zloty drinks, and friends visiting from abroad. And despite the historical references, it still did not seem like an art only project. People seemed more concerned about the mechanisms of the situation.

L – The clientele seemed generally just happy to ignore the framework and get on with hanging around. Which meant a lot of responsibility for us on purely practical levels because we did not have any suspension of reality. It was a working venue and we had to be courteous, tolerant, reliable and organized!

P - Which was appreciated from others by impulsive ideas of concerts, slides presentations, cooking evenings, and djing. I was scared when hanging up the first posters inviting musicians to play at Np in the music schools and culture clubs that there

² Flourish Nights are an annual series of events organized by the artists working in Flourish Studios, Glasgow. Events include live music, film, performance, poetry and djs.

³ Beca Lipscombe is an Edinburgh based designer and printmaker.

⁴ Mark Leckey is an artist based in London. His soundsystem featured in the bar, and his band Donatella together with Bonnie Camplin and Ed Laliq performed live.

will be hardly any interest. But on the contrary, there were a lot of enthusiasts who wanted to contribute to the idea of the evenings in the temporary bar.

L – The practicalities are what I found the most fascinating I have to say. The way with graffiti scratched into chairs and tables, you have to carefully sand it so that women don't snag their stockings or get splinters. I've never worked in a bar so it was really an eye opener, the way you have to be diplomatic with drunks, bores, neighbours and police. The way you influence a space and the flow around a room by the use of light, temperatures, cause and effect. These concerns are all about the control of people in public places.

It was interesting also how we couldn't embrace dj and club cultures because of their predeterminations – music has to be really loud and go on all night. People drink so much, are on drugs, the egos involved can be volatile. We couldn't cope with that as the central theme of the place so had to shape *Nova Popularna* to the limits of what we could do in the circumstances.

P – The fundamental social and licensing bureaucracy was overcome by renting the gallery of The Society of Friends of Fine Arts for the venue. By softening the interior with curtains, paintings and ornament, a piano in the corner, the café look permitted us to go quite far. We sold illegal homemade alcohol, and when we bothered the neighbours with late sounds, which was most nights, we could announce the evening as yet another vernissage gathering. With the help of Foksal and our friends we manage to keep the place open, but it meant we didn't have any distance from these problems.

L – No, we were committed to an emotional and physical investment with nowhere to hide. Perhaps it relates a little to Mike Kelly's work with knitted toys, where the quantification of art is looked at in relation to this other system involving labour, time and love. At *Nova Popularna* the currency was the energy of everyone involved. But for it to happen smoothly it did make it easier to involve the art world somehow, extending further than just exploiting the general public's insecurity when it comes to art concepts to bend the law. The paintings and furniture in the bar are for sale as remnants of the project, to fund it. It's a nice transaction thinking that a rich aesthete might eventually sit on one of our chairs, and this money funded underagers drinking moonshine vodka and having a good time, or people coming to perform their music in Warsaw. If one of the successes of the project was transgressing value systems, what do you consider the failures of it were?

P – Well failure is a special topic for *Nova Popularna*, because from the beginning we stated that the failure of the project could be a very real actuality, for instance it was unlikely we would have commercial success as a business. We worked out that we were getting paid about 10 Euro cents an hour between us. Failure was written into the brief we set ourselves.

L – So the real failure must be something else. Whether it was busy or empty, whether it served as somewhere people just passed through like a station bar or hung around all day – the praxis was the point, the experiment. The failure for me was perhaps in how much we could actually do physically. Maybe the limitations, and areas of failure come

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into play once it's finished and the question is of how it's documented, how honest we are to the reality of it ... and if it has any kind of resonance in Warsaw.

P- It will be interesting to see if in any way the project served as inspiration other artist initiatives, also if it influences at all in terms of its existence as an approach to exhibition design.

L – This was the initial impetus for the invitation to work with Foksal wasn't it? They saw 'Romancing with Avante Guard', your exhibition in Sopot, which re-presented some of the collection of the institution, and thought that an interesting collaboration could happen between you and Lukasz Gorczyca⁵, because of his interest and practice in collecting Polish design.

P - In the beginning all of us, myself, Lukasz Gorczyca, Foksal were mediators between each other as we all have our own identity, separate 'voices' if you like, in Warsaw. It was clear that you and I, as artists, wanted to create a self-regulated space that would add a voice rather than being part of one existing already in Warsaw

L – It seemed like a special concern for Nova Popularna to have independence and ambiguousness. The art scene here is alive, but quite small. Saying that, though Warsaw feels like a cosmopolitan city, it's not reached the point of cynicism I associate with many large cities. Poland seems to use the term Avant-garde in a broader and more legitimate sense than I know it to have in Scotland. There is still a lot of social upheaval; chaos and illegal gatherings are treated differently. There's the more pressing need of self-sufficiency, for instance making your own alcohol, which is not so widespread in the UK.

P – Do you think in Glasgow somewhere like this could exist? I don't think there is the same culture of artists starting or running bars as a primary form of income, for survival, which happens here.

L – I think it could yes, but not in the same form. We have different problems with property and drinking laws so it's not such an obvious or easy choice. I would be wary because there is a such a violent drinking culture in Scotland, it would have to be more hidden, which could kill what was really good about it on Chmielna street, right in the shopping district in the center of town.

P – How did the bar compare to the Flourish Nights?

L – Well Flourish is more of a free for all, and people come for a good time to see a mix of art forms and drink in a place which is neither a gallery or a pub. Because with the bar the space was so theatricised, people seemed to tolerate more difficult art forms, for instance Marcin Dutka's prepared piano concert⁶.

⁵ Lukasz Gorczyca is a Warsawian entrepreneur, gallerist, critic and founders of *Raster*, Poland's online arts magazine.

⁶ Marcin Dutka is a Warsaw based artist and musician.

P – Yes, relating to the music there was a sense of uncertainty, it’s wasn’t an illegal punk bar only. For the conformist costumers with set expectation there was always a surprise twist so that electronic music fans and stoners would be listening to Streisand covers by Bianca Glazebrook⁷.

L – You could tell people were not totally comfortable with this ambiguity sometimes; they had to be soothed after Bianca with Norwegian Black Metal! People have to be reassured, everyone is so nervous about being in the know. This returns to Bohemia as a thematic subject. As we finished the installation and it took shape, grew from looking like just a gallery with a collection of objects in it into a bar, it hit me that subconsciously what we had been driven by was an effort to not merely depict something, but instead *live* it literally, right down to the aesthetic details of the engraved glasses and Kim cigarettes.

P - Polly Staple described the project as a functioning tableaux vivant, with the atmosphere and symbolism of our paintings. Exploring bohemia hmm...well for me it wasn’t anything to do with Bohemia as such, but I was aware that it referenced a number of different styles. I would say it was nailing a few tastemakers definitely. A place like Warsaw lacks nostalgia and metaphors of the past since it’s in a faze of rapid change, unfortunately tearing down so much of the city design. Stylistically we were close to Warsawian ’50’s cafés like the Alhambra, or the Sculpture Society’s ZRP, which will disappear with the process of change no doubt. Working with Cepelia⁸ furniture is a very plain statement, as is location in The Society of Friends of Fine Arts – kind of dying structures of the past system that were created in the ’60’s to support creative ideas, but now serve a very small public.

L –The bureaucracy we enforced in the bar related to the consumer reality of Poland’s recent past more than anything we could draw or paint though. To actually get a drink, the customer had to purchase with hard cash a small card with a reproduction of the mural on the opposite wall at a separate counter, take it to the bar, and exchange it for alcohol. The homemade alcohol kept branded goods at a minimum also, which meant we had even more control of the environment. It strikes you how unusual it is for any kind of event, exhibition, party or whatever to not have some kind of media or corporate sponsorship actually. Zywiec beer and Kim cigarettes were the only brands in our bar, both chosen for their aesthetic girlishness.

P – Three days after the bar closed, at an opening in the same room totally transformed, painted white again, it was back to its mature artsy audience, as if it was all a dream. I think we predicted there would be more of a sense of loss, but we were too relived to not have to go there again to notice. I thought there would be more melancholy, but people are only nostalgic about the homemade vodka.

⁷ Bianca Glazebrook, originally from London, is a Warsaw based singer.

⁸ Cepelia -Polish Social Union of People’s Crafts and Arts, 1949 – 1990

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