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"Architectures of Gender: Contemporary Women's Art in Poland"
Installation view of the main space



Zofia Kulick
The World As War and Adornment
2003



Katarzyna Kozyra
Still from *Men's Bathhouse*
1999



Body Building "Architectures of Gender: Contemporary Woman's Art in Poland"

April 11 - June 8, 2003

by Carolee Thea

"Architectures of Gender: Contemporary Woman's Art in Poland," Apr. 11-June 8, 2003, at the SculptureCenter, Long Island City, New York.

In "Architectures of Gender," curator Aneta Szylak has combined a survey of contemporary art by 16 Polish women artists with a thoroughgoing exploration of the muscularly raw space of the new Sculpture Center facility in Long Island City, across the East River from Manhattan. The works involve ideas and metaphors of space, place and the body. The site itself is contradictory: outside and on the ground floor, its scale and height diminish the viewer, while inside, beneath ground, the body seems to grow, not quite fitting the narrow corridors. Placed in the main arena, Zofia Kulick's *The World as War and Adornment* is a pair of full-sized replicas of Michelangelo's *Moses* -- except that one is attired in camouflage, the other in flowery patterns. The work refers not only to gender, but also to cross-dressing and family roles, as well as obligatory art-school studies of art by Old Masters.

Also in the center of the gallery, installed in an octagonal viewing arena, is Katarzyna Kozyra's video, *Men's Bathhouse*. Originally shown in the Polish pavilion at the 1999 Venice Biennial, the multichannel projection work follows the artist, who is disguised as a man, wandering through a male bathhouse. To the side is an adjacent single-channel video showing Kozyra being prostheticized with chest hair and penis. Quite compelling!

For *Passions and Other Cases*, Izabella Gustowska's work placed translucent shell-like shapes on spindly iron legs, like three giant insects. Radiating with a green light and operating on heat sensors, the shells slowly open and close when approached. Three projections onto the mollusks reveal kissing couples -- a pair of men, a pair of women and heterosexual couple. The work purports to conjure your attitudes towards gender. . . but the discussion is modified by the technical drama.

During the opening celebration, the performance artist Elzbieta Jablonska prepared a feast. And another performance artist is also in the show, less visible but still quite significant -- namely, Charlotte Perriand, the wife of Le Corbusier. Perriand contributed to the design of the famous deck chair attributed to her husband, and is in the show via a constructed room built in homage to her by artist Paulina Olowaska. Decorated with beautiful modernist furniture and hung with posters from Olowaska's performances, the work encourages lounging and conversation, both.

Another work in the pebbled courtyard is Jadwiga Sawicka's *Numbers*. Set along the exterior 25-meter gray concrete wall, a four-centimeter-wide strip of pink paper printed with front-page headlines from all parts of the world to recall a geography of violence.

Izabella Gustowska
Passions and Other Cases
 2000



Elzbieta Jablonska
Through the Stomach to the Heart
 2003



Paulina Olowska
Perriand
 2003



Jadwiga Sawicka
Numbers
 2003

Monika Sosnowska's white cube is like a house within a house within a house, a Kafkaesque place of exclusion. Anna Potnicka's wall installation at the front desk contains notes of sentences extracted from women's narratives, forming "gathered" stories. Julita Wojcik's public work is a small private garden in Courthouse Square.

I descended the stairs into the once damp and odiferous cellar, a catacomb-like maze of alleys, niches, arches -- a multitude of birth canals, I thought. Dominika Skutnik turned what is usually hidden in buildings into a large minimalist presence -- a beehive of balled cable, called *The Field*, whose energy could be literal as well as apparent. Nixed within a long passageway, the work referred to the narrow hallway and seemed to contain the metaphoric energy of a cooking womb.

Katarzyna Jozefowicz constructed *Habitat*, a corner space of miniature dressers, drawers like hiding places that reek of thousands of secrets. Another installation is *Omnipotence, Gender Male* by Dorota Nieznalska. Set in a room lit by red fluorescent lamps, the piece has sounds made by men lifting weights that can be confused with moans of sexual climax. And in its suggestion of a fitness club interior, the work sits between cultural patterns of masculinity, sexuality and violence, and can be read as the new pop culture of consumer values.

Natalia LL, the first Polish artist to join the international feminist art movement, installed her work in one of the basement's blind alleys. Transforming this narrow space, her long, scroll-like wallpaper makes the hallway impassable, and its pattern references a contemporary Vanitas.

Hanna Nowicka-Grochal's *The Pleasure Out of Reach*, also sited in a blind alley, fills the space with several human-sized rubber hammocks stretched from wall to wall. Filled loosely with air, as forms they seem both body and object. The hammock is a suspension we associate with intimacy, relaxation, sleep and dreaming, and in their repetition and materiality they refer to the works of Eva Hesse.

Agnieszka Kalinowska's work, *Just a Little Bit More*, is a dense installation of woven paper streamers filling a narrow corridor and taking the shape of a fallen figure. With the streamers, the reference is to the human body as "tired of enjoyment and consumption, becoming impotent and weak."

Karolina Wysocka creates a long aisle roped off by two long parallel rows of velvet ropes on stanchions -- but all made of glass. What's more, the poles are topped with glass vulvas on one side and penises on the other. (Wysocka did her own research for the male member, and her [male] glass fabricator informed the shapes of the vulvas.) Recalling the sacred or secular separation of men and women (in religion, folk dancing, etc.), *Cautiously*, 2002 is well made, poignant, funny and one of the best works in the show.

In communist Poland in the 1960s and '70s, women's experiences understandably differed from those of American women during the same period. Where Westerners struggled with exclusivity quotas for women, in communist countries, women were simply educated. While trained as doctors, lawyers or engineers, their entry into politics was limited.

After the fall of the communist regime, the Catholic Church regained power, with its restraints on women. Today, women in Poland maintain a limited access to the power structure, and the result is the interesting gender investigations of these artists.



Monika Sosnowska
The Entrance
 2003

In the best of worlds, the exhibition itself should be a place for discussion, as is the case with "Architectures of Gender: Contemporary Women's Art in Poland." Twentieth-century structures that have become obsolete are transformed to house contemporary and experimental art, as with the former trolley repair shops that is now the SculptureCenter.

While expanding the Museum's space, the practice also refers to the elitism of the museum and to the metaphoric clash or embrace of modernity. Typically employed simply as envelope, it is rare, as it is here, to see architecture so successfully involved as foil and partner for the artistic concept.

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Anna Plotnicka
Live Stories
 2003



Dorota Nieznalska
Omnipotence. Gender: Male
 2001

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