



Monika Sosnowska, *Market*, 2013, painted steel, exhibition view, Zachęta — National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2020, photo: Piotr Bekas/Zachęta archive

MONIKA SOSNOWSKA

exhibition is open until 25 October 2020



Zachęta — National Gallery of Art
zacheta.art.pl

Monika Sosnowska

24.07–25.10.2020



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The exhibition has been produced in cooperation with Hauser & Wirth, Foksal Gallery Foundation, The Modern Institut, Glasgow, Galerie Gisela Capitain, kurimanzutto.

Prepared specially for the Zachęta, Monika Sosnowska's exhibition is the first such large monographic presentation of the artist's oeuvre in Poland. It features the older works selected from her comprehensive output as well as more recent works focusing around new themes and inspirations. The exhibition fills the space of Zachęta's seven main rooms in such a way as to facilitate tracing the conceptualisation and changes in the artist's works created across a broad sculptural, architectural and technological context. Sosnowska's art stems from the tradition of modernism which is reviewed and processed in a consistent manner.

Monika Sosnowska has become famous for her works inspired by early and post-war architectural modernism, in which she sometimes refers to iconic projects, such as Lake Shore Drive Apartments by Mies van der Rohe (1948–1951), in *Tower* (2014), but first of all explores the architecture of socmodernism — the construction projects created in Poland in the 1960s and 1970s. The topography of modernism that she examines is expanding: her recent works are an expression of her fascination with Russian engineering architecture by Vladimir Shukhov and her interest in post-war modernism in Asia.

The starting point for her artistic strategy has been the architecture of post-war urban modernisation — look-alike concrete housing estates, shops, urban infrastructure (market stalls, barriers, gates, etc.) characterised by austerity, often shoddy construction. An important reference point is constituted here by façades, walls, and spatial modules: rooms and corridors with their typical interior design (wainscoting, wallpapers) and so-called small architecture: handrails, stairs, doors, door handles, and lamps mass-produced in line with the principles of technology and materials available in the communist period. Architectonisation of sculptures consists in using the language of architecture and construction in an unprecedented way: these include appropriations of solid elements reproduced precisely one-to-one, deformed, and stripped of their original function. It involves questioning the rational foundations of architecture — structural elements change into abstraction, conciseness and logic get disrupted, which brings in uncertainty and chaos. The force exerted on the construction materials (steel, concrete) is used to test and sap their strength. Such action creates an impression of plasticity of matter and illusion of lightness. In a way, it shows the forces that are invisible when one experiences architecture directly.

The narrative of Monika Sosnowska's exhibition at the Zachęta begins with the steel top rail coated in red PVC, in a manner typical of socmodernism (*Handrail*, 2016–2020); it runs first entwined

with the existing handrail of the gallery building, but it continues to climb up the wall turning at various levels and going into one of the exhibition rooms. It provokes the direction of sightseeing, although it is not obligatory. This is one of the works that perversely interprets the design of communist Poland and exemplifies the recycling of modernist ideas present in each piece made by the artist. The majestic curtain (*Façade*, 2016), an appropriation from a typical building, is a steel skeleton, deformed under the pressure of powerful forces. *Market* (2013) recreates the makeshift amateur structures of market stalls from the Europa Fair at the 10th Anniversary Stadium in Warsaw, stored as scrap metal when the bazaar was closed in 2008; suspended under the ceiling, the bundle of the stall skeletons turns into an anonymous abstract tangle. Experiments with steel bending — 'construction exercises' — are conducted in many works, like in *T* (2017) — a T-bar bent to form the right angle and in *Pipe*, (2020) — a massive drainpipe cut in half with a burner and rolled up like a shred of paper. Looking for new inspirations, the artist reached the engineering architecture of the eminent creator of industrial structures, Vladimir Shukhov. The series *Cross Brace* (2019) refers to Shukhov's projects made at the end of the 19th century in Russia, and next in the Soviet Union. The steel sculptures look stretched almost to the limit, using stresses that have never been tested before. Several of the latest works made of a mix of reinforcing bars and concrete refer to the architecture of Bangladesh, where next to the local version of modernism one can come across chaotic architectural reality, and where — despite the disruption of the principles of rational construction engineering — everything works.

According to architect Tom Emerson, Monika Sosnowska's art presents intriguing architectural references from psychologising interiors, through utopian and political ideas of socmodernism, to purely structural and basic construction elements. On yet another level, it also reveals a potential 'architectural failure' by exposing things that architects unconsciously fear as they design structures that are supposed to outlive us all.

ROOM 1

Handrail, 2016/2020, painted steel, PVC

The exhibition begins with a steel handrail covered with red PVC, intertwined with the existing railing in the hall of Zachęta and penetrating into the Matejko Room. It evokes the model applied in modernist buildings from the 1960s and 70s, constructed en masse throughout Poland. The handrails covered with a colourful material are often the only colour accent in the monochrome interiors.

Stairs, 2016, painted steel, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth Los Angeles

Stairs and stairwells are among the basic elements of functional architecture built since the beginning of the modernist breakthrough. The artist frequently uses these forms, constructing and then transforming them into sculptures and installations on the borderline of abstraction and figuration, from spiral emergency stairwells to narrow, single stairs in cramped blocks of flats from the time of communist Poland. In these works, the original shapes are deformed and the construction material is seemingly relaxed.

Façade, 2016, painted steel, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth Los Angeles

The starting point for the work was a small paper model, which became the basis for a large-format sculpture inspired by the façades of modernist buildings from the 1960s and the formal solutions of the so-called international style. The monumental curtain *Façade*, once innovative thanks to the development of production technology and engineering, has been distorted by the use of powerful forces and stresses.

Handle, 2020, aluminium

The reconstructed standard door handle is a typical element of construction in communist Poland, frequently present in Sosnowska's earlier installations that multiplied the interiors of Polish blocks of flats. The mass-produced object, which in this case bears an imprint of the artist's hand (her fingerprints), has taken on individual traits.

ROOM 2

Market, 2013, painted steel, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth New York

The installation uses the makeshift constructions of the former stalls from the Europa Fair at the 10th Anniversary Stadium in Warsaw, left after the closing of the bazaar in 2008 in connection with the construction of the National Stadium. Built in 1955, it served as a sports facility, but also as a propaganda tool. From the 1980s on, it fell into disrepair, until it transformed into the largest market of Central and Eastern Europe, becoming a symbol of the chaotic transformation of the subsequent decade. It is difficult to recognise the initial function of the stalls in the bent and twisted elements of the installation, although the artist kept their original scale.

ROOM 3

Cross Brace, 2019, painted steel, courtesy of the artist and The Modern Institute, Glasgow

The *Cross Brace* series is the result of the artist's fascination with the engineering architecture, characterised by great durability, of prominent Russian creator of industrial structures, Vladimir Shukhov (1853–1939). The 'stretched' steel sculptures were created using stresses they had never been tested with. As a result, the cross braces (diagonal elements connecting trusses) undermine the durability of modern materials and the internal logic of construction, which was replaced by extreme dysfunctionality.

ROOM 4

T, 2017/2020, painted steel

Pipe, 2017/2020, painted steel

Lamp, 2020, glass, ceramics

The process of subjecting seemingly durable materials to mechanical testing is also visible on a smaller scale in *T* and *Pipe*. In these 'structural exercises', Monika Sosnowska questions the functionality of the elements of modernist architecture, the strength of the skeleton structure or the geometry of the right angle as the basis of architectural composition.

ROOMS 5 AND 6

Antechamber, 2011/2020, plasterboard, aluminum profiles, wallpaper

The antechamber made of MDF boards on an irregular star plan, fitted in the space of two Zachęta rooms, is one of many reconstructions of communism-era interiors undertaken by the artist in a series of architectural installations created since 2007. The impression of a surrealist interior, as well as the increasing sensation of spatial disorientation is created by the cramped space, the use of sharp angles and the wallpaper typical of flats in blockhouses.

ROOM 7

Rebar 20, 2017/2020, painted steel

Rebar 20, 2020, painted steel

Rebar 16, Concrete, 2020, painted steel, concrete

Rebar 20, Concretes, 2020, painted steel, concrete

In the collection of several works made of deformed bars, sometimes in combination with cocoons made of untreated concrete, we can find references to structural failure and ripping architecture apart along with its steel and concrete roots, but we can also perceive them as the usually invisible construction innards of a structure. These works undermine the functionality and durability of reinforced concrete, the basic building block of modernist architecture. The dismantling of elements, as if revealing the foundations, is a reference to the architecture in Bangladesh, where the local version of modernism functions in a chaotic building reality.

Monika Sosnowska — born in 1972 in Ryki, lives and works in Warsaw. She studied at Schola Posnaniensis — University of Applied Arts (1992–1993), at the Faculty of Painting of the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznań (1993–1998), and at the Rijksakademie van beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam (post-graduate studies, 1999–2000). In 2003, she received the prestigious Balaise Art Prize and the Polityka Passport award in the field of visual arts. She is a laureate of the Schering Foundation scholarship (2004) at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin. In 2007, she represented Poland at the 52nd Venice Biennale of Art.

Selected individual exhibitions:

Monika Sosnowska. Exercises in Construction. Bending, Garage Contemporary Art Center, Moscow, 2020; *Aird's Lane*, The Modern Institute, Glasgow, 2019; *Urban Flowers*, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne, 2018; *Structural Exercises*, Hauser & Wirth, London, 2017; *Models 2007–2017*, Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw, 2017; *Monographic Intervention by Monika Sosnowska*, Museum Susch, 2017; *Habitat*, The Contemporary Austin, 2016; Indianapolis Museum of Art, 2016; *Architectonisation*, Serralves Foundation, Porto, 2015; *Monika Sosnowska. Regional Modernities*, Australian Center for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2013; *Monika Sosnowska*, Perez Art Museum Miami, Project Gallery; Aspen Art Museum, 2013; *Fire Escape*, Museo Tamayo, Mexico City, 2011; *The Staircase*, K21 Ständehaus, Düsseldorf (2010); *1 : 1*, Polish Pavilion, 52nd Biennale of Art, Venice, 2007; Kunstmuseum Lichtenstein, Vaduz, 2007; Serpentine Gallery, London, 2004; *Projects 83: Monika Sosnowska*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2006.

Selected group exhibitions:

Space Shifters, Hayward Gallery, London, 2018; *Honey, I Rearranged the Collection*, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, 2018; *Sharjah Biennial 13: Tamawuj*, Sharjah International Art Biennial, Sharjah, 2017; *Primary Structures and Speculative Forms*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2017; *Sculpture on the Move 1946–2016*, Kunstmuseum Basel, 2016; *Architectural Allusions*, deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, Lincoln, 2015; *Skyscraper: Art and Architecture Against Gravity*, MCA, Chicago, 2012; *New Sculpture?*, Zachęta — National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2012; *ILLUMInations*, Arsenale, 54th Biennale of Art, Venice, 2011; Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2010; Hayward Gallery, London, 2009; *Monika Sosnowska/Andrea Zittel*, Schaulager, Münchenstein/Basel.

Maria Brewińska

Years ago, in a building in the Ochota district of Warsaw, a residential community celebrated the installation of a railing by the stairs leading to the cellar. Although it was not a great event, the media noted it, writing about the railing that brought the residents together. The simple, welded metal rod anchored in the wall gained importance as an essential element of the building, integrating the community. In terms of design, no railing is like another; those in modernist buildings from the interwar period, as well as those from the 1950s, are wooden, and thus pleasant to the touch thanks to the properties of the material used. They seem to be a trivial detail until we feel their absence or until they fall prey to kitschy renovation. In the spaces of stairwells, they complement the function of the stairs. The rising and falling movement of the rail follows the rhythm of the stair, it seemingly alleviates the height of the storeys. In the geometric grid of divisions of modernist architecture, it fits into the dynamic composition of verticals, diagonals and horizontals — the play between the line and the plane. It is a fluid minimalist ornament that enhances the visual qualities of the designed interior.

Memory evokes here a model of the railings installed in modernist buildings from the 1960s and 70s, constructed *en masse* throughout Poland, which we still deal with on a daily basis. Their stairwells are equipped with standard oil-painted metal railings, their handrails covered with a colourful material, which is often the only colour accent in the monochrome interiors. In her series of works, Monika Sosnowska refers directly to this architectural detail, a relic of construction from the Polish People's Republic. The artist became famous for her works inspired by early and post-war modernism in architecture, in which she sometimes refers to iconic designs of the international style, but largely explores the aesthetics and specificity of local architecture. She draws inspiration from the times in which she grew up, and since around 2000, she has been observing and documenting both well-preserved late-modernist buildings and the remnants of architecture built from sub-standard prefabs, which is already falling into disrepair today. This private, but also collective experience of Warsaw in the times of transformation, the chaotic city growing on the ruins of the previous epoch, is enclosed by the artist in her works, which remain in a dynamic dialogue with this past. However, she does so without nostalgia, purifying the process of creation of any affectation. These works, however, activate the memory of unfulfilled utopias of modernity, and the violence of communist power, manifested in architecture and urban planning by the unification of urban tissue and identity.

Monika Sosnowska's oeuvre develops in a series of works drawing on the repertoire of forms and elements of architecture: stairs, façades, balustrades, walls, rooms, construction materials repurposed and then transformed into sculptures, as well as installations bordering on abstraction and figuration. Many of them use the motif of handrails: fragments of black railings hanging on walls, covered with shiny red PVC, free-standing railings with bent balusters or single handrails formed into abstract shapes — precisely made aesthetic objects. The permanent installation at the Foksal Gallery Foundation building is unique here. The artist used an original balustrade with a blue handrail and added a steel rod to

one of the balusters, bent with finesse and stretched in the original space of the staircase from the communist era (*Handrail*, 2006). As a result, the rigid and concrete materials seem easy to form (twisting, bending, rolling, crushing), which makes some critics write about the organic nature of her works. In fact, the experience of Sosnowska's works is rather physical, haptic. The works are perceived as objects strongly present in the space thanks to their materiality and subjectivity. In an interview, the artist emphasised the physical nature of the raw materials she uses: 'When choosing the material, I follow a simple rule: if I make a railing, it is made of what railings are usually made of, that is steel and PVC. I call this "material realism".' She operates in the language of architecture, although she is far from making detailed plans. She begins with simple, handmade models and mock-ups, sometimes drawings, then works with contractors in workshops.

The scale of the works is also important here: the original elements are reproduced in their actual size, which means they may seem too monumental and overwhelming in the exhibition spaces. The theme of the majestic spiral staircase is present in *Stairs* (2010), presented at K21 Ständehaus in Düsseldorf (2010–2012), a giant structure inspired by a fire escape unique in socialist modernism, an external stairwell in a building on the Zatrásie housing estate in Warsaw's Żoliborz district. In a smaller version of this sculpture — *Stairs* (2010) shown at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv, as well as at the *New Sculpture?* exhibition at Zachęta (2012) — the experience of materiality and scale is overshadowed by a sense of irrationality, caused by deformations that disturb functionality. The staircase has sunk under its own weight, as though the steel used to make it began to melt, and this deformation has been underlined by the graceful line of the red railing.

The narrative of the exhibition at Zachęta begins in the representative stairwell of the building — with a steel handrail made of red PVC (*Handrail*, 2016–2020) intertwined with the existing railing. It runs along the wall, penetrates into the Matejko Room, where it is coiled up on one of the walls at different heights. This is an example of the appropriation, but also the recycling of modernist elements, activities present in many works of the artist. The exhibition takes place in the old part of Zachęta, built in an eclectic style with neo-classical décor. All the works enter into a specific dialogue with the exhibition space but are not stylistically connected with it. The common element may be the understanding of matter as a carrier of historicity; as a result of mutual confrontation, the historicising forms establish a discreet dialogue with the modernist ones.

The exhibition of Sosnowska's works in the rooms of Zachęta emphasises the clash of two opposing attitudes in architecture: the academic art of the Zachęta building meets minimalist modernity. If, according to architect Tom Emerson, Sosnowska's works reflect a potential failure of architecture and the subconscious fears of the architect, then on the level of concrete realisation in the exhibition space they pose a threat to the space that accepts them. Francesco Bonami made a similar remark about the expansive, appropriating works: 'Sosnowska creates a sculpture

with the rapacity to pierce the ceiling and the museum's boundaries, imposing its presence beyond its natural limitations. But, as in most of her work, it also contains the antidote to avarice, which is failure and collapse'. Zachęta's edifice came out unscathed from the clash with Sosnowska's works and measured up to their imposing presence. The expansive, monumental curtain-like *Façade* (2016), borrowed from a typical frame-construction building, occupies the Matejko Room. This gigantic steel skeleton is distorted by the use of powerful forces and stresses to which other works of the artist are also subjected, using materials and technologies typical of the former modernist breakthrough in architecture. The impression of gigantomania accompanying some of Sosnowska's works comes from testing the material in a series of many brutal, controlled trials. *Tower* (2014), inspired by the modernist Lake Shore Drive Apartments designed by Mies van der Rohe (1948–1951), *Exercises in Construction. Bending* (2020) in the Garage, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow, referring to one of Vladimir Shukhov's towers, and *1 : 1* in the Polish Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale of Art (2007) exceed the size of objects usually presented in exhibition spaces, but are placed there as defeated constructions using materials and technologies developed by engineers to achieve durability. Fall, ruin, degradation, error — these words describe Sosnowska's objects and at the same time the state of preservation of many modernist realisations from the previous epoch. *Market* (2013), suspended in the Narutowicz Room at Zachęta, expands the typologies of the space the artist is interested in: the work recreates makeshift constructions of the former stalls from the Europa Fair at the 10th Anniversary Stadium in Warsaw — suspended from the ceiling, the conglomerate of their skeletons turns into an anonymous abstract tangle illustrating social transformation resulting from political conditions.

In many of her works, the artist explores the durability of the original raw materials of contemporary architecture and construction. In these explorations, she does not reference the history of architecture or sculpture, although the overall work fits into various traditions: constructivism, minimalism, conceptualism or radical transformations in sculpture made by such artists as Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Gordon Matta-Clark and Charlotte Posenske, and constitutes new artistic values in the field of architecturisation of sculpture. Sosnowska's actions on architecture and its materials are interesting for architects themselves. In 2007, she collaborated with Christian Kerez on the *Loop* installation at the Kunstmuseum Lichtenstein in Vaduz; her exhibition *Structural Exercises* at Hauser & Wirth London and the one present at the Garage in Moscow were critically interpreted by the already mentioned Tom Emerson. Experiments with steel bending — 'structural exercises' — in *T* (2017–2020), a T-profile bent into a right angle, or in *Pipe* (2020), which weighed more than a tonne, cut open with a blowtorch and rolled up like a piece of paper — are the result of the study of basic, structural steel architectural elements undergoing transformation and destruction. In a way, they show the forces invisible in the direct experience of architecture. Similar issues are present in the *Cross Brace* series (2019), which arose from a fascination with the engineering architecture of the eminent creator of industrial struc-

tures, Vladimir Shukhov, who worked on designs since the end of the 19th century in Russia and later in the Soviet Union. The steel sculptures look almost stretched to the limit, subjected to stresses and forces they were never tested with. As a result, the cross-braces (elements connecting the trusses), in which the internal logic of construction was replaced by extreme dysfunctionality, look like stretched rubber. The collection in one space of several works made of deformed bars or bars in combination with cocoons made of untreated concrete can be referred to a structural failure, a cataclysm that rips architecture apart along with its steel and concrete roots, but also to the construction innards, usually invisible. The dismantling and combination of elements in the latest works, as if revealing the foundations, is a reference to the architecture in Bangladesh, where, apart from modernism in its local version, a chaotic building reality functions, and where — despite the loosening of rational construction principles — everything somehow works. These sculptures introduce a fascinating material context of another world, a pandemonium of unexpected shapes, but also references to social and political values contained in urban tissue.

In fact, all of Sosnowska's works are based on the visual archive created by the artist over the last two decades. The monumental, brutalistic, painted metal sculptures, reproducing façades, stairs, railings with handrails, lamps, door handles and structural elements, refer to the rationalism of architecture, whose logic is questioned and transformed. The result is functionless objects, unrestrained by the resistance of the raw material used, but also evoking the fiction and utopia of the avant-garde. The consequence of such actions is the impression of plasticity of matter and the illusion of its lightness.

Among Sosnowska's works referring to post-war standardised concrete blocks of flats we find references to spatial modules: rooms, hallways with their typical appearance (oil-painted bottom halves of walls, wallpapers). The works depicting interiors (multiplied rooms or even their labyrinths) with a designated functional minimum (as in the blocks of flats) have undergone a metamorphosis, starting with *Little Alice* (Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, 2001), *Hallway* (Venice Biennale of Art, 2003), *Tired Room* (Sigmund Freud Museum, Vienna, 2005), characterised by fairy-tale illusory traits, optical manipulations or transposition of the idea of unconsciousness into constructed space. The series of interiors entitled *Antechamber* (2011–2020) is more austere, but it still evokes slightly psychedelic feelings, introducing chaos and uncertainty. *Antechamber* at Zachęta annexes two rooms, it is squeezed into them; constructed of tall, wallpapered walls on the plan of a star with irregular arms with sharp angles, it disturbs reality. In this abstract space, the wallpaper with a dense floral pattern is a familiar element. The work bears psychological traces of enclosure, an imposed order of limited space, a certain alienation. Two entrances to the installation assume increased performativity of the viewer, while the unbuilt fragments of external walls show the construction: profiles, plasterboards. Here, the spell is broken, we come back to reality. Everything is designed, slightly hyper-realistic, but it does not pretend to be a real object. Most of Sosnowska's works are, in a sense, unmarked by emotions, except

for one — a typical aluminium handle for a door in a block of flats (*Handle*, 2020). It is distinguished by the imprint of Sosnowska's hand and fingerprints, like an attempt to transform a mass-produced object into a unique, to give it individual features.

The architecture of Monika Sosnowska's sculptures is based on elements borrowed from the language of architecture and construction, processed in an unprecedented way. Her works suggest a potential 'failure of the architecture', they refer to reality with errors, bringing out things that the architects who in principle design permanent objects to outlive us all, are subconsciously afraid of.

- 1 See *Monika Sosnowska*, exh. cat., Aspen Art Museum, Aspen Art Press, 2013.
- 2 'Przestrzeń wyrzeźbiona w skali 1 : 1', Jakub Banasiak talks with Monika Sosnowska, 10.09.2008, http://krytykant.com/archiwum/przestrzen_wyrzezbiona_w_skali_11__rozmowa_z_monika_sosnowska/ (accessed 20.07.2020).
- 3 Tom Emerson and Mark Rappolt about Monika Sosnowska at the *Monika Sosnowska. Structural Exercises* exhibition, Hauser & Wirth, London, 23.01.2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mElzpczXoeU> (accessed 20.07.2020).
- 4 Francesco Bonami, 'The Cabinet of Dr. Sosnowska', *Parkett*, no. 91, 2012, p. 34.

Bending the Structure. Notes on Monika Sosnowska's Exhibition at Zachęta

Gabriela Świtek

'It didn't so much as budge for a few days. Even when it was hit with an excavator that weighed 20 tonnes and jumped on each impact'¹ — this is how Monika Sosnowska recalls her work on *Exercises in Construction. Bending* — a twenty-metre, seven-tonne structure, which she showed at the Garage, Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow (31 January–30 July 2020).² Work on bending the steel structure took place on the site of a former Soviet kolkhoz where milk was once produced and which today houses an architectural studio and a locksmith's workshop. Sosnowska's structure is a 1 : 1 scale copy of the top of the hyperboloid radio tower designed for Moscow's Shabolovka Street by engineer Vladimir Grigoryevich Shukhov (1853–1939). As a result of many days' work with heavy construction equipment, the tower fragment was finally bent in half. The material surrendered to fatigue. The seemingly insurmountable structure finally capitulated. In January 2020, it was transported to Moscow and squeezed into the Garage atrium.

Resembling steel cobwebs, and at the same time characterised by great strength, Shukhov's towers are the object of the latest and deep fascination of the Polish artist, who gained fame for transforming elements of Polish and international architectural modernism into sculptures perversely questioning rationalism, functionalism, architectural tectonics — transparency and logic of the composition of buildings — and the nature of modern materials, such as concrete or steel. After being inspired by Polish socialist modernism and its ruins, blocks of flats, house factories and stalls left over from Warsaw's 10th Anniversary Stadium, as well as the international style of Bauhaus, De Stijl and Chicago's Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Sosnowska turned to the Eastern European and South Asian version of modernism. Recent artistic journeys to Moscow enabled her to refresh her view of Konstantin Melnikov's and El Lissitzky's constructivism and Le Corbusier's architectural affair with the Soviet Union in 1928–1932, but also provided an opportunity to learn about the achievements of one of the most prominent representatives of world engineering architecture, Vladimir Shukhov.

The renaissance of Shukhov's engineering — he was a pioneer of industrial constructions (including steel towers in the shape of a rotating hyperboloid or long-span steel lattice shells) — can be observed in the contemporary 'Western' history of architecture since the 1990s.³ In the popular history of architecture of the 20th century, published in 2001, we can find a photograph of a lighthouse in Ukraine (1911),⁴ one of many examples of the application of Shukhov's universal openwork, steel hyperboloid structure in engineering architecture — as lighthouses, radio towers, water towers or transmission towers erected in the era of belief in revolutionary technological progress and building a new world for a new society. Let us add that in a 2001 study, Shukhov's Ukrainian tower was inscribed in the Western European history of engineering architecture, alongside such 19th-century projects as Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace (1851), Victor Baltard's and Félix Callet's Les Halles market in Paris (1854–1857, 1860–1866) and the Eiffel Tower (1889).⁵

In 2005, an international group of engineers and architecture historians initiated research into Shukhov's legacy in the Nizhny Novgorod region. It was there, at an exhibition in 1896, that the architect first presented a prototype of a lightweight, robust and easy to assemble hyperboloid-shaped tower. The method of tower assembly is today referred to as 'telescopic'; Sosnowska compares it to building without cranes, using the 'matryoshka' principle.⁶ This method involves lifting and welding round segments of structures with an ever smaller diameter.⁷ In 2007, a team from Germany, Austria, Russia and Switzerland carried out research in the territory of the former USSR in order to inventory and develop principles of conservation of the preserved monuments of Shukhov's engineering architecture.⁸ As a result, a 2019 publication presents a list of 34 surviving hyperboloid towers designed by the architect — in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, as well as in Uzbekistan, Armenia and Turkmenistan.⁹ Based on archival research, it was also confirmed that 104 towers of various purposes were built in Russia before the 1940s according to the system he had proposed.

The breakthrough moment for international research on Shukhov's engineering innovations came in 2014, when controversial decisions were made in the Russian Federation to demolish a 1000-foot Moscow radio tower on Shabolovka Street (1919–1922), often compared by architecture historians to Vladimir Tatlin's design of the monument to the Third International (1919).¹⁰ In February 2019, after the official announcement of the decision to demolish the tower, the international community of architects and architectural historians (including Norman Foster, Rem Koolhaas, Jean-Louis Cohen)¹¹ protested in defence of the world heritage of engineering architecture.

The exhibition dedicated to Shukhov, organised at Moscow's Shchusev State Museum of Architecture (2019/2020), is a part of this international response. It presented both the vastness of the output of an outstanding constructor — not only the author of a prototype hyperboloid tower from 1896, but also a designer of bridges, industrial constructions, ironworks furnaces, elevators, factory chimneys, railway stations, shopping centres, or an innovator in the field of the oil industry — and the voices of the most important researchers of his engineering work collected in the exhibition catalogue.

Monika Sosnowska had previously shown several works inspired by the architect's constructions at an exhibition at the Modern Institute in Glasgow (25 May–7 September 2019).¹² It contained the *Cross Brace* series (2019) — moulds suspended on walls, stretched to the limits of material strength. They were made of steel (weighing from 100 to 150 kilograms each) and looked like they were made of black rubber. Their excessive stretching was contrary to both the nature of the material and the properties of the structure — these are quotations from Shukhov, truss elements (cross-braces), whose proper task is to stiffen and strengthen the structure. In Glasgow, the artist also presented an openwork steel pylon. Its upper part was bent and broken, which made the whole structure

resemble a tired, wilted stem. Another work, a fragment of the final of one of Shukhov's hyperboloid towers, looked like a schematic drawing of a multi-petal flower. Organic comparisons are not accidental here; the artist herself does not avoid them, and *Still Life* was the title of one of her exhibitions at the Foksal Gallery Foundation (27 November 2015–30 January 2016), referring to her fascination with the ruins of modernism and their organic character.

The Moscow *Exercises in Construction. Bending* and Monika Sosnowska's realisations shown in Glasgow — her latest fascination with Shukhov's engineering projects — should be seen as a continuation of her sculptural struggle with the matter and construction of modern architecture. After all, the common denominator for her many years of artistic activity remains the particular challenge that is subjecting to mechanical torture seemingly durable materials and stable structures designed by architects and engineers in the spirit of modern functionalism and architectural tectonics in such a way that they do not suffer fatigue, bend, or submit to unexpected pressures and tensions. Similar bending of the structure can be found in small sculptures, such as *I-Beam* or *Angle Profile* (2008), but also in monumental works, such as *The Tower* (2014), inspired by Lake Shore Drive Apartments, a Chicago project by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

Striking Vladimir Shukhov's stable tower — a lacy, steel spider web weighing many tons — or stretching the truss elements of his design are not the only current aspects of Sosnowska's work. Equally intriguing are her recent references to the (apparent) chaos of construction in South Asia. In February 2020, Monika Sosnowska presented her work as part of the Dhaka Art Summit, an art biennial in Bangladesh,¹³ in a section referring to the work of Muzharul Islam (1923–2012), architect, urban planner, politician and social activist. Islam studied architecture at the University of Oregon, the Architectural Association in London and the Yale School of Architecture, where he met, among others, Louis Kahn and Paul Rudolph, whom he invited to create projects in Bangladesh.¹⁴ It was thanks to Islam's determination and political influence Kahn received one of his most important Asian commissions — the construction of the Bangladeshi Parliament in Dhaka. Construction began in 1964 as an assembly building for the capital of then-Eastern Pakistan; it was finally completed in 1982 after the establishment of Bangladesh (1971) and the death of Kahn (1974). Sosnowska's sculpture *Stairs* (2020) refers to the building of the school of fine arts in Dhaka designed by Islam — an architect who introduced modernism to Bangladesh while at the same time giving it a local character. Sosnowska's work presented in this city is a chaotic, non-functional form, a tangled rebar, on which, as if by chance, hang several steps of terrazzo stairs.

In the exhibition at Zachęta, the artist shows several new sculptures inspired by her artistic journeys to Bangladesh, during which she discovered not only modernism in its colonial and post-colonial versions, but also local construction practices. One of the images Sosnowska photographed are the banks of rivers flowing into the Bay of Bengal, from which workers manually recover the stones carried by the water, which are then processed into gravel and concrete. Others — buildings that look unfinished or already ruined; rebar protrudes from them, sometimes surrounded by bamboo scaffolding. The employment of many unskilled workers (at the insistence of local authorities) and wobbly bamboo scaffolding were

also characteristic of the way the Dhaka parliament building was constructed in the 1960s and 1970s. Kahn designed it as a complex of simple blocks, cubes and cylinders, built partly of reinforced concrete (an expensive building material in Eastern Pakistan at the time) and partly of brick.¹⁵ The clash of our European visions of modernism in architecture with the reality of South Asian construction is a theme that Monika Sosnowska marks in one of the rooms at the Zachęta exhibition as 'madness' seen during her trip to Bangladesh. The result of this 'madness' are four heavy rebar sculptures (*Rebar 20; Rebar 16, Concrete; Rebar 20, Concretes; Rebar 20, 2020*), some with pieces of concrete (like the sculpture shown as part of the Dhaka Art Summit), intended to look as if they had been torn out of the building and at the same time started to live their own lives — outside any structure. The tangle of rebar — one protruding from and entering the gallery walls, the others freely dancing in the middle of the exhibition room — no longer resembles any 'logical', geometric form of modernism. Rather, it reflects the vitality and organic nature of construction, falling into ruin and returning to life at the same time.

- 1 Interview with Monika Sosnowska conducted on 9 January 2020 in Warsaw.
- 2 On the subject of Monika Sosnowska's exhibition in the Garage in 2020, see <https://gagemca.org/en/exhibition/monika-sosnowska-i-exercises-in-construction-bending-i> (accessed 11.04.2020).
- 3 See Ekaterina Nozhova, *Networks of Construction*, Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2016, p. 5. I would like to thank Monika Sosnowska for sharing her collection of latest publications about Shukhov.
- 4 Peter Gössel, Gabriele Leuthäuser, *Architecture in the Twentieth Century*, Köln, London, Los Angeles, Madrid, Paris and Tokyo: Taschen, 2001, p. 31.
- 5 Ibid., pp. 17–25.
- 6 Interview with Monika Sosnowska.
- 7 Rainer Graefe, 'Shukhov's Constructions: State of Research and Preservation', in *Shukhov: Formula of Architecture*, ed. Mark Akopian, Elena Vlasova, book accompanying the exhibition at the Shchusev State Museum of Architecture (22.10.2019–19.01.2020), Moscow, 2019, p. 53.
- 8 Ibid., p. 50.
- 9 'Current State', in *ibid.*, p. 373.
- 10 Mark Akopian, Elena Vlasova, 'Shukhov's Method: Formula — Structure — Architecture', in *ibid.*, pp. 10, 15.
- 11 'Wieża Szukowa pójdzie na zyletki?', 1.03.2019, <https://architectu.pl/artykuly/wieza-szukowa-pojdzie-na-zyletki> (accessed 8.04.2020).
- 12 <https://www.themoderninstitute.com/artists/monika-sosnowska/exhibitions/3-the-modern-institute-3-airds-lane2019-05-25/6754> (accessed 17.04.2020).
- 13 <https://www.dhakaartsummit.org/> (accessed 11.04.2020).
- 14 Carter Wiseman, *Louis I. Kahn: Beyond Time and Style*, New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007, p. 152.
- 15 Ibid., pp. 157–159. See also: Kathleen James-Chakraborty, 'Reinforced Concrete in Louis Kahn's National Assembly, Dhaka: Modernity and Modernism in Bangladeshi Architecture', *Frontiers of Architectural Research*, no. 3, 2014, pp. 81–88.

Press images



Monika Sosnowska, *Market*, 2013, painted steel, exhibition at Perez Art Museum, Miami, 2013, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth New York, photo: Daniel Azoulay



Monika Sosnowska, *T*, 2017, painted steel, *Structural Exercises* exhibition, Hauser & Wirth, London, 2017, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth London, photo: Alex Delfanne



Monika Sosnowska, *Rebar 20*, 2017, painted steel, *Structural Exercises* exhibition, Hauser & Wirth London, 2017, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth London, photo: Alex Delfanne



Monika Sosnowska, *Façade*, 2016, painted steel, exhibition at The Contemporary Austin, Texas, 2016, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth Los Angeles, photo: Colin Doyle



Monika Sosnowska, exhibition at Hauser & Wirth, Los Angeles, 2017, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth Los Angeles, photo: Mario de Lopez



Monika Sosnowska, *Rebar 16*, 2017, painted steel, *Structural Exercises* exhibition, Hauser & Wirth, London, 2017, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth London, photo: Alex Delfanne



Monika Sosnowska, *Structural Exercises* exhibition, Hauser & Wirth, London, 2017, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth London, photo: Alex Delfanne



Monika Sosnowska, *Cross Brace*, 2019, painted steel, courtesy of the artist and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow, photo: Patrick Jameson



Monika Sosnowska, *Cross Brace*, 2019, painted steel, courtesy of the artist and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow, photo: Patrick Jameson



Monika Sosnowska, *Handrail*, 2006, *The Exotic Journey Ends* exhibition, Foksal Gallery Foundation, courtesy of the artist, Foksal Gallery Foundation, photo: Aneta Grzeszykowska, Jan Smaga



Monika Sosnowska, *T*, 2017, painted steel, *Structural Exercises* exhibition, Hauser & Wirth, London, 2017, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth London, photo: Alex Delfanne



Monika Sosnowska, *Market*, 2013, painted steel, exhibition view, Zachęta — National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2020, photo: Piotr Bekas/Zachęta archive



Monika Sosnowska, *Regional Modernities* exhibition, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2013, courtesy the artist and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, photo: Andrew Curtis



Monika Sosnowska, *1 : 1*, exhibition in the Polish Pavilion at the International Art Exhibition — La Biennale di Venezia, 2007, photo: Marta Leśniakowska/Zachęta archive



Monika Sosnowska, *Stairs*, 2010, *New Sculpture?* exhibition, Zachęta — National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2012, photo: Marek Krzyżanek/Zachęta archive



Monika Sosnowska, *Tired Room*, 2005, exhibition at Sigmund Freud Museum, Vienna, courtesy of the artist, Foksal Gallery Foundation and Galerie Gisela Capitain, photo: Gerald Zugmann



Monika Sosnowska, *Untitled*, 2006, exhibition at the Sprengel Museum, Hannover, courtesy of the artist and Galerie Gisela Capitain



Monika Sosnowska, *Exercises in Construction. Bending*, 2020, exhibition at Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow, photo: Ivan Erofeev, © Garage Museum of Contemporary Art

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