

The Museum of Modern Art
Projects 83: Monika Sosnowska

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Interview between curator Ann Temkin and Monika Sosnowska

AT: You've mentioned that there are two aspects to the beginning of a project for you: the idea, and the maquette. We have a photograph of the maquette for *The Hole*, made earlier this summer. Can you put into words, briefly, the "idea?"

MS: I had an idea of making a sculpture in the shape of a hole in the ceiling and rubble lying underneath. I wanted to do that in a very simple way, so that at the end there would just be simple forms roughly recalling real things. I made a very basic model at a small scale and I thought that it seemed interesting. I couldn't really put my idea into words at that time, but I just felt that it worked. Looking at that small model I figured out that the most interesting thing was the atmosphere of curiosity and potential, but in the end, impossible damage. I imagined the real situation, when somebody looks up through the hole and cannot see the space on the other side, except a small piece of well-illuminated ceiling. Then the rubble, which in reality, if there were a real damage, would never look the way I designed it. The particular pieces are supposed to be made with great care, intentionally sculpted, assuming the shapes of prisms, rhombuses, or other geometrical figures. I wanted to create an illusion of something that from a distance looks like a recognizable thing, but on looking closer, becomes something else.

AT: I wonder whether the setting of MoMA had any influence on this work. Or could you have arrived at this idea for anywhere that provided you with a space of this size?

MS: When I came to MoMA for the first site visit, I figured out that the place is particular. First of all, the distinguished neighborhood of the historical art, and second, a great number of visitors coming to the Museum every day. I couldn't ignore that while preparing my work. I wanted to prepare a particular piece, something that would be significant for me, having my first presentation at a museum in New York. But soon I noticed that I cannot work that way. I couldn't make a particular masterpiece all of a sudden. I could just do what I felt at that moment.

Being a bit stressed by the rush and the amount of information at the Museum, I decided to do something opposite. Something that was subtle and required attention. I wanted to create a work that was a bit poetical, and stimulated certain interaction with the visitor. The room was large and the sculpture was supposed to be relatively

small, so that I could create an atmosphere of emptiness in the space, where the sculpture seems a bit shy. I liked that.

AT: While you provide precise instructions for the fabrication of your installations, you personally do not execute the work, entrusting that to carpenters and other technicians. Is there a philosophical reason for this, or is it simply practical?

MS: Both. First of all, most of my installations function similarly to architecture or design. I make a project, provide drawings and models, and the specialized people can execute them better and faster than I could. Of course I supervise them and make precise decisions during the production, but generally I keep away from them. My works have to look as if somebody else did them. The walls have to be done by a builder, wooden objects by a carpenter, etc. I would like to keep a distance from the work itself. I don't want to express myself too much. The works are not about my temperament and me. I would like to be a bit invisible. For me the concept is the most important.

There is also another aspect of my works: they are very physical. One can enter them, touch them, but after the exhibition has ended most of them are destroyed. In a way they seem very ephemeral. I also have a feeling that I can better control the concept when I am not personally producing the work and don't have a chance to get used to it. I like it if it seems that the work just happened.

AT: As I look at the trajectory of your work over the last six years, it seems that the installations have become more abstract. At the beginning, the imagery or colors made specific reference to the environmental context (for example, often alluding to the atmosphere of Communist-era Eastern Europe). Now this seems less true. Would you agree, and if so, would you be able to explain why?

MS: Indeed, at the beginning my works were more realistic. I thought that way I could make people think that nothing is as obvious as it seems. For me those works functioned kind of as traps. Some people didn't even notice that they were "entering" the artwork, at least at the beginning. But I was never interested in creating stories. I preferred to build a kind of stage for individual projections and experiences. Even if I copied some actual spaces, they were still very universal. I created certain types of spaces or situations.

Later I realized that the aesthetics, which I had thought were universal, are recognized by some people as aesthetics representing particular times and regions. At a certain

moment I just started to give less information. When I prepare a project I always ask myself how much I have to say to be understandable, but not to create any narratives. I have been testing the communication between myself and others. My works became more minimal, at least in my consciousness. I thought that less information leaves more place for the imagination.

AT: Even if this work is seemingly abstract, it is very much rooted in your reality in Warsaw. You showed me a photograph you had taken of a smashed window in an abandoned building not far from you. You used its contours as the model for your “hole” here. And this is true for so much art throughout the twentieth century that is thought to be “abstract”—it has a very concrete foundation if you dig deeply enough. Warsaw is in such an extraordinary state of physical flux these days, with so much demolition and new construction. From your apartment you look out onto a massive building in the course of demolition; it could almost be one of your installations. Is it possible for you to articulate how this environment affects your work?

MS: I think that the place where an artist lives is influential. The confrontation with reality creates opinions. I wonder if I lived somewhere else, would I create works similar to what I do now? I chose to live in Warsaw because it seemed inspiring to me. There were many reasons why I made that decision, but one of them was Warsaw itself, a very chaotic city growing up very fast on the ruins of modernism, or rather, coexisting in a symbiosis with them. There are a lot of new buildings, but the past is very present as well.

I often doubt whether everything is going in the right direction. Sometimes I have the impression that some good things are being destroyed and that the real damages are growing. I am thinking, for example, of new architecture. I am shocked by how many amazing modern buildings were destroyed, and wonder who agreed to the many horrible new buildings. So sometimes I think that everything is going backwards...

AT: And then there are also the influences that are less everyday. For example, last year you did an installation at the Villa Manin in northern Italy, which has an amazing eighteenth-century ceiling painting entitled *The Fall of the Giants*. You sent me a photograph of this. Do you think that *The Hole* was somehow triggered by that painted ceiling?



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MS: At the beginning, when I prepared *The Hole*, I wanted to explain my idea to you and I had a problem translating it into verbal language. I found the photos that I took a few years ago at the Villa Manin. They were photographs of a baroque painting on the ceiling of villa. The painting showed a fragment of sky (or paradise) with a tangle of baroque bodies framed within an illusionistically painted fragment of architecture. Two of the figures were about to fall down. One arm of one person, and almost the whole second body, were painted over the architectural motif, so it looks as if they are really falling down into the interior. I don't know why, but I had the feeling that I could explain my idea just by showing you another artwork.



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AT: I see in the work of you and your peers in Warsaw that the avant-garde history in the city is something that you value highly. Unlike the West, it is a bit of a rescue operation, for there has not been an academic or market structure in place to preserve and communicate this history. The first such moment was during a brief period of Polish independence between the two World Wars. At that time, artists such as Katarzyna Kobro (1898–1951) and Wladyslaw Strzeminski (1893–1952) produced geometric painting and sculpture as part of an international vanguard. The second moment was during the nineteen-sixties, with a group of artists centered around the Foksal Gallery, founded in 1966 in Warsaw. This was an underground movement, as the official art of the state was social realism. It was very Conceptual in nature, dedicated to finding alternatives to the glorification of the work of art, whether through unconventional materials, impermanence, or the rejection of personal expression. You had a direct connection to that moment through your instructor in art school in Poznan, Jaroslaw Kozlowski, one of Poland's most important conceptual artists.

MS: Kozlowski was indeed very influential for me during my studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Poland. The academy was very conservative and the only alternative program was Kozlowski's. I was seduced by Conceptual art. I felt that it's very close to what I wanted to do. At that time I wasn't aware of many things.

AT: Can you describe your feeling of connection with these forerunners today?

MS: When I studied in Poland, I did not really concentrate on the early Polish avant-garde. First, because I had another interest at that time. It seemed to me that I had to focus on foreign art. I had those extroverted feelings of exploring the world. Maybe it

was because I thought that in Poland, such a provincial country, which was isolated for such a long time, I couldn't find anything interesting—that everything was happening somewhere else. Second, because there was not a common consciousness of the Polish avant-garde. There were not many publications of that period of Polish art. After my studies in Poland I left for Amsterdam for two years of study and I started to travel more. I discovered many things for myself, but I also figured out that that is not enough for my personal adventure with art. After that experience I came to Warsaw and I have changed my interests a bit. My researches have become more introverted. With distance, I started to rediscover my own country for myself. I became more interested in my relations to Polish history. I noticed that there were a lot of facts that I didn't know. At that time I also started to work with the Foksal Gallery Foundation, which was a great source of information about the Polish avant-garde. I feel that there is a link between what I am doing and what was happening in the past. I also think that it is a great basis for further development for many artists.

AT: It is fascinating to me that in Kobro you have the example of a prominent modern artist who was a woman—something that is rare anywhere. Does that have meaning for you, or not really?

MS: I was never interested in dividing art between male and female. I never wanted to express my sex through my works and I think that by looking at my art it's hard to say which sex I am. But it is true that women's artistic practice was rare in modernism. So I really admire Kobro's determination. She had to struggle with art, but also with a very difficult reality. She had a very complicated personal life and she still managed to make such great work. She is a great example for me. Kobro is the artist who fascinated me the most in the Polish avant-garde. First because I really like her works, and second, because of my interest in space.

When I was creating my first “spaces” I didn't think about Kobro at all. Her works did not inspire me. Later I visited the Museum of Modern Art in Lodz, which was established by the Polish avant-garde artists, among them Kobro. It has the biggest collection of her works, and I got really fascinated. I just figured out that I had a similar interest in space as she had. It was for me almost like initiating a dialogue with the past.

AT: In certain ways, therefore, you are working within what might be considered a Polish avant-garde tradition, one that approaches space conceptually. Obviously there are differences. The artists of the 1920s, for example, were utopians, using geometry to find an ideal. While your vocabulary is seemingly close, your viewpoint is quite the opposite: you seem to show

disruptions, breakdowns, misreadings. In the twenty-first century, do you believe that art is not capable of providing solutions for social life? If not, could you say what your goal is in making your art?

MS: I don't know, I think I have more egoistic goals. I would like to be drawing out something from my brain. I don't want to make a revolution. I just would like to express what I cannot any other way. I don't think that I can find a solution for social life. I can only express my subjective reflections and propose an alternative, more individual style of perceiving the world.