

TRANSCRIPT

Hear, Now
Episode 16

The Travel
Bureau

A Podcast from Whitechapel Gallery

RL: Hello and welcome to Hear, Now a Whitechapel Gallery podcast that delves into the stories behind the exhibitions on view at the gallery here in the heart of East London.

Each episode offers an insight into the works and themes explored in the displays, giving you special access to the ideas that shaped the artworks through live recordings from some of our events, archive footage and conversations with Curators, artists and collaborators.

My name is Ruth Lie, Curator of Public Programmes introducing you to today's episode, as we get to delve into the work of the artist, Paulina Olowaska and her selection from the Christen Sveaas Art Foundation, The Travel Bureau. Inspired by Orbis, the largest and longest running travel agency in Poland. The exhibition is open and free to view in Gallery Seven until 8th of May 2022.

But first, let's rewind a little and listen to Paulina, live in conversation with Iwona Blazwick, the Director of Whitechapel Gallery, as they reflected upon Paulina's inspirations and pivotal moments in her career during an evening event at the gallery last month.

[Applause].

IB: Here at the Whitechapel, we like to take curatorial risks. We invited four painters to each take a turn as guest Curators. The Curator of our second display from this collection is Paulina. And one of the reasons we invited her is that she's not only a great painter, but also creates mis-en-scène. So, we wanted to start by talking about an artists' café that she created in Warsaw in 2004 called The Nova Popularna. Over to you.

PO: Thanks to you all for coming and thank you for the invitation. It's a very layered invitation to be an artist to be working with the collection, to be choosing the collection and to be making, from the beginning, a kind of environment. So, in this talk I wanted to show and share with you all a bit of my, going back in time, installation art works that are not just depicted by works, but they are depicted by the whole of, method of seeing and being in a specific place.

So, going back to it in 2004 this was one of the projects that kind of brought me to understanding what environment and what being in time and space and contextualising it can mean. By creating, with Lucy McKenzie, a fellow artist, a bar, a salon, a place of meetings in Warsaw in 2004.

So, maybe some of you have been at it. I see a couple of you in the audience, but we thought of it as an exhibition. We looked at other exhibitions of artists like Kippenberger who created bars. But how do you create this space for art, but also for accidents to happen? Yes.

So, the first days when the bar opened, I said to Lucy... Because we didn't want to advertise as well. We just wanted it to be a place that is spoken by word of mouth. And in the year 2000, you know, the idea of advertising was staking to take place. So cool magazines like The Activist, the Avant-Garde were, you know, happening, but they were not so interesting. So, I remember asking Lucy and I said, what if nobody will come to our bar? And she said, don't worry, it's an artistic experiment.

Basically, what we did, we created the furniture. It was a combination of a beautiful collaboration. So, Lucy, coming from Glasgow, she brought Mackintosh curtains. I bought Supellia, so Polish folk 1960s design chairs. We did paintings that had a function.

We couldn't sell alcohol because it was an illegal bar, so we decided to create tickets. So, if Iwona would come to the bar, she would say, could I have a little Vodka? And we had organic Vodka before Vodka was organic, from my uncle, who is going to show you in a second. So, I would say, Mrs Iwona, please go to Lucy to acquire a ticket and for the five zloty which is like one pound, you can receive a free drink. Because we are an illegal bar so we wanted to deal with this levels of, what can be legal, what can be illegal? We survived a month, but by the end the Police started to come in.

But our programme of events was rather extravagant. So, we, had Donatello, so Mark Leckey, Steve Claydon, Bonnie Camplin come in with their huge sound system for an evening. And then we had Nightshift, which is a Berlin based band with Marcus and his companion. But we had evenings of classical music.

In the back there was a wall painting that we made together. So, we were looking into avant-garde. We are looking for a place, how we can have art and have friends and comrades to come and join and appreciate the kind of, I guess, the artist club.

IB: I mean, if we think right back to Paris in the 1900s, you know, going to La Palette or Berlin, Weimar Republic, it's all about alcohol and, or the Cedar Bar in the 1950s, but it's that kind of informal place of relaxation where it's kind of outside of a working environment, it's outside of the framework of just the everyday. And it seems to kind of, to me, evoke the ghosts of all those previous bohemian meeting places.

PO: Yeah, I would say, exactly. And, I guess, by the year 2004, this definition of performativity was not there. So the sense of, you know, fantastic artists coming all the way from London to, coming to visit it, to entering like Poland for the first time, because there was not a lot of artistic, you know, as it is now, galleries and situations that they weren't happening. It was special enough.

IB: Could you say something about your interest in fashion? Because traditionally there's been a kind of separation? I mean, in the 20th century, of course, a great many of artists worked with great fashion designers, Balenciaga and Salvador Dali, for example. But I sort of feel we've moved into a great separation, almost a hierarchy between applied art, so called, and fine art. And you bring that right back together again. So, why is that important for you?

PO: Just recently, with Julie Verhoeven where we're leading a workshop in Zurich University, we are speaking how from fashion, it's the first instinct for a freedom of an expression. So even with Nova Popularna, like I remember discussing with Beca Lipscombe who was a part of Whitechapel Projects as well, when we were discussing the outfits, like there's always a tension, how do you create the outfits? So, for example, in Nova Popularna we felt that the outfits should be really old fashioned, conservative, long, hiding, almost nun like. So, to go over the trend of 1999 is like slinky fashion and, you know, short skirts and so on.

IB: Yeah.

PO: So, us being the waitresses that we will be austere. So, even in painting, you know, like fashion just occupies so much of the canvass side, hairstyle, pose, becomes so much emblematic to the meaning. So, I started to reflect on it with my work because I felt that something, that this is, you know, that's something that needs to be shaken.

IB: Could I just ask, you've also published a magazine and one of the kind of themes that runs through your work is an interest in theatre, puppetry, in those kinds of formative spaces where there is a stage set, where we're asked to enter a different kind of reality. Could you say something about that, in regard to this café bar?

PO: I think, because I was brought up with my education and there's like a strong urge on the conceptual and the very heavy lift of what a painting is, I thought, I can let it go a little bit, or play with this idea of the painting as a more functional, the painting as a stage set.

So, this is maybe my appeal to applied arts, and Sveaas Collection had invited me, that it gives me this moment of playfulness or, you know, bringing it back maybe to even to like Dadaist and surrealism of questioning.

So, when it comes to puppetry, or when it comes to theatre, puppetry I have this relationship that it's just like modernism. It's a form that, I don't know where it's going to go and I'm very close, the village that I live off of Krakow with the puppet theatre that I make portraits of the performance, you know. They're like my buddies and girlfriends and, where they work, and I'm just amazed, I guess, of the object being the animated object and the animation of the object. So, how do we allure to the object? Because

objects are amazing by self-paintings. But what if you give another level to it?

IB: One of the interesting things about this is that I believe one of your tutors was Marina Abramovic.

PO: Oh yes, yes.

IB: And if we think about two different strands of the history of performance, what Marina really pioneered was this kind of jarring of standing naked with Ulay, for example, at opening view and asking everybody to squeeze through the two of them. So, it was this intervention in the kind of conventions of our normal social interactions, with a raw encounter with naked bodies. I mean, it was very much a kind of reality shock.

Whereas I think in your work there is this interest in the artifice of theatre that we kind of join you in a more theatrical concept of performance. You know, that there are costumes, there's a set, it's very different, I think, from that other kind of performance which is like *épater la bourgeoisie*, you know, it's like, woah this is the shock of the real, as it were. Whereas this seems more perhaps literally aesthetic and playful.

PO: Yes, we did have this argument about the straightforwardness with Marina, but I was lucky enough to have two amazing performance teachers which was Marina at the same time as Joanne Jonas.

IB: Mm-hmm.

PO: So, from Marina I must say, I, you know, she was the first one that permitted to cross certain boundaries, for example. With the class, we had to join her in her house and she, I think I learned about the idea of rituals and the spiritual, which is now closer to my work. Where Joanna Jonas she was talking about the narrative and about the different episodes and dividing it.

And, you know, as a young artist, I started to study in Art Institute with like Charles Ray, Paula Rego, but then I moved back to Poland for economical reasons, it was easier to study painting there, and then I understood this idea of the lack of theatrical, this division that had started to clash with the contemporary performance. And stubbornly enough, I wanted to bring it back to theatrical. There was, at the time that I was growing up, especially, you know, in Poland with Katarzyna Kozyra, Zmijewski, and the artist from '99 [inaudible 0:12:31], there was this strong cross about, you know, entering your space, you know. Like crossing the political and being shocking.

So, by that time when I came to Poland I felt, I just want to paint, you know. I just want to paint from 960s fashion magazines. And this is when I met Lucy as well and we just started to discuss, and I was really back

then looking to painting. But I think looking back now, I'm looking more into this place of theatricality, of bringing other people's work that I learned also from Camille of, how do you collaborate and how do you bring your friends and the ones that you think are forgotten, or can be included in your work together?

IB: We should probably kind of move to our project upstairs.

PO: Yeah, well when I got the invitation from Whitechapel, I had one project that I really wanted to conceive which was The Travel Agency. Because this Travel Agency, I think it's symbolic to a lot of places that... I really like the one-to-one relationship. And I was very saddened by the loss of Polish travel agents, which was for 20 years the major travel agent called Orbis, and Orbis had spots everywhere. And when I started to show internationally, and I had no family in Warsaw, this is the place that I would go to, you know, discuss my new travel. And, but also reflect on my others.

And it just felt really, you know, properly made for what it is was meant for. So, the women were wearing like stewardess like scarves. You could see posters of travel, so we're in a way travelling. And, yeah, it was much better than what is called Expedia.

So, talking to Iwona, we, and Grace, we decided to, you know, like to depict the idea. And I hope you will feel it upstairs that actually a painting is a travel by itself. So looking at Sveaas' collection I just saw how many landscapes actually we, there are in the collection. And since I'm a figurative painter, but I think of landscape often, I got fascinated by it.

So, I put a lot of images on my walls in my studio and I felt, you know, I'm not going to, you know, choose paintings from the computer. It's too obvious. So, I'm going to meditate on those images and, yeah, the landscape was coming through it. And different kind of, you know, from post-impressionist little painting of a landscape. But then, you know, painting on landscape, that would be banal, so I started to move to this relationship of, what do we actually sew? And this is what, I'm really happy about this reintroduction of arts and crafts and the applied arts. Because I think we're living now a little bit in this, you know, still fixation of the, you know, the concept art and the post object art. But I think the applied arts are going through anyway.

So, there is some works that kind of related to the idea of obstruction, but have a sense of travel that you will see. And I just felt, what a great, you know, set up to have a show. And I even used the Orbis logo. Yeah, I had, three years ago I had made frequent travels to Belarus where I became friends with some of the local artists from Minsk. I was not going to Minsk, you know, I was feeling what's going to happen in Minsk, but the relationship with the landscape and the stillness of time, of still reminding me of my youth days in Poland.

So, the empty street, the one and only store called GUM, the Univermag, I started to make secret films with my phone and just picture how is the, you know, the relationship of women in the shops in the GUM, how do they relate with their bodies, their time, how is it different? And it seemed really extreme. So, I made a series of four films and I'm showing one upstairs which is called GUM Airport, which is the Minsk Airport that I picked four years ago.

And then, you know, I started to be in conversation with the Curators from Norway and we started to look at different posters. So upstairs, you're going to see a film which comes from the archives of tourism promotion of Norway, which I collaged together with music of Cuban/Greek artist Delia Gonzalez.

IB: That leads us now to opening up to questions from the floor. Would anyone like to ask anything, or make an observation or comment?

F1: Collaboration and conversations with fellow artists are very central to what you do, and this exhibition in some ways seems to me to be a collaboration or conversation with the work of Ida Ekblad who just did the previous display. You kept the tripartite structure of the walls. You've put a train back in the room in your film. I wonder if you can say anything about your thinking and the planning process and how what Ida previously did maybe informed your thinking?

PO: Yeah, so I think it was kind of natural that it's nice, the system of collaborations. Ida had shown the painting *À La Galcante* (2015). I'm showing one of her paintings. And yeah, it's not like dealing under the table. I just think the work kind of suits the whole atmospheric sense. I mean, there is... You know, I want you to judge it as well. But there is this kind of sense-ness of opening up certain connections to work and how we can create works and connection and maybe you will feel this.

But also, it's a continuation of exhibitions which I think is really interesting as a whole topic, for example, the curation of... Of course, I had to react with Ida somehow. I was thinking of Ida's, looking in her arrangement, her works and so on. So, but Iwona it's like this for you because this presentations of artists curating different exhibitions from different collections has been going on for a couple of years, right?

IB: Ten years.

PO: Ten years.

IB: And what's been fantastic is the collectors have given carte blanche to artists. So, we had Fiona Banner, for example, who her whole exhibition changed colour. It was yellow then it was blue then it was magenta and then it was in pitch darkness. And that collector said, okay. And one artist

called Mike Nelson, we sent him to Moscow to look at the VAC collection, 700 works and he came back with one. And I said, really? And he said, yes, but Iwona, it's a hefty work and it was indeed. A Francis Bacon, and he created an entire environment. So, I have to say, you know, artists do make the best curators.

PO: Mm-hmm.

F1: You know, I'm sorry, but I have to kind of admit that because they take risks and are allowed to take risks that we wouldn't naturally do, or wouldn't be allowed to do. So, it's really been an incredible journey seeing how artists see art.

One of the things that Paulina said in one of our conversations, she drew my attention to the great Marc Auge book about the Non-Place and actually for the first time, I really understood that she'd revealed the true nature of a gallery, which is Marc Auge, the French anthropologist had this idea that airports and station concourses and shopping malls are no places. And, you know, all of our sense of identity based on where we live, what we do, we lose that in those places because they're all about becoming someone else by what you buy, perhaps, or going somewhere else, which isn't here.

And that sense of imminence, that sense of entering a space where there are all these portals to other destinations presented by artists is, I think it's a fantastic idea, you know, that this is a Travel Bureau, and we'd love all of you to come and join us upstairs and to have your very own VIP preview of Paulina's installation.

Please join me in thanking Paulina for a wonderful survey. Thank you.

[Applause].

RL: Paulina and Iwona's conversation held in the Zilkha Auditorium in the gallery on a cold Thursday evening in mid-January felt intimate and warm. A lively gathering of friends and visitors. What a fascinating insight into Paulina's multi-faceted practice as she touched upon her inspirations, her loves and her experiences. Everything from performance and activism to painting and fashion, and weaving through all of this, a dialogue with the past and a dream of modernist eutopias. If only we could have been sat in Paulina's Nova Popularna bar with a cocktail in hand.

As the conversation that evening ended, the audience were invited up to gallery seven where The Travel Bureau had just opened.

Let's hear from Grace Storey now, Whitechapel Gallery's Assistant Curator who worked closely with Paulina on the making of the show.

GS: My name is Grace Storey. I'm an Assistant Curator here at Whitechapel Gallery and I've been working with artist, Paulina Olowka on her display of works from the Christen Sveaas Art Foundation.

This is the second of four displays from the renowned collection of the Christen Sveaas Art Foundation from August 2021 to January 2023. The Whitechapel is presenting a series of exhibition, each conceived by an artist whose work is held in the collection. The first, called This is the Night Mail was curated by Ida Ekblad and the third and fourth will be created by Hurvin Anderson and Donna Huanca.

Christen Sveaas is a Norwegian businessman, collector and philanthropist who has collected art and antique silver for more than 40 years. He began his art collection with late 19th century and early 20th century Norwegian artists including Edvard Munch and Harald Sohlberg. The collections focus is primarily painting, with some sculpture and photography and is made up of more than two thousand works by over three hundred artists.

In her display which is called The Travel Bureau, Paulina Olowka who was born in Gdansk, Poland in 1976, reveals the true nature of the gallery as a Travel Bureau while works of art are portals into destinations imagined by artists. Her installation of works from the Christen Sveaas Art Foundation is inspired by Orbis, the largest and longest running travel agency in Poland. Founded in 1920, its offices, staff and posters offered prospective travellers a dream of escape. Olowka recounts regular teenage visits to Orbis, and she says, the idea of entering such an office was already a travel.

Olowka has said that she thinks of painting as a beautiful metaphor for travel itself, a longing for a place. In her own work, she embraces painting, graphics, stage design, performance and activism and her practice itself expresses a yearning for the lost eutopias of modernism.

In thinking about her display, she references what French anthropologist Marc Auge termed the non-place, a space such as an airport or shopping mall. Unlike a home or a workplace, such spaces do not define identity but offer the possibility of leaving it behind. They are stage sets for anonymous interactions, the promise of new destinations and new tomorrows stewarded by helpful, professionals.

Olowka accounts how the futures that the Orbis Bureau once promised were also encapsulated in poster designs featuring the graphic style that made poster art famous in the 1960s and 1970s. She says, they had very strong visual content like a cute spaniel puppy in a bag, or a sparrow dressed in a suit with a suitcase. You really felt like you could just travel by looking at the posters. This made me realise that using sets and theatrical devices in my shows is a way to present works, especially

painting. Like the theatrical set, it makes you look from another angle and two of these iconic posters are included in her display.

So, each of the four artists who have been invited to curate displays of work from the Christen Sveaas Art Foundation have been given carte blanche in terms of how they work with the collection. So, Paulina Olowaska describes how she looked at Ida Ekblad's display, This is the Night Mail and was looking for a way to proceed or find a methodology of how to work with such a large and varied selection of works. She said she decided to print images of the works that she had pre-selected which dated from 1913 to 2019, pin them to her studio wall and then take a couple of days to contemplate them. She said, it became apparent that throughout the images, there were sets and scenes of different forms of landscape. In my works, I usually like to find the special unseen and unusual, but this time I was drawn to classical landscapes.

RL: I hope this inspires you to come and visit and to dream of escape by immersing yourself in another world. In Paulina's words, she thinks of painting as a beautiful metaphor for travel itself, a longing for a place.

Thanks for listening to this episode of Hear, Now. If you've enjoyed this, why not have a listen to our other recent podcast, This is the Night Mail, which focuses on last season's Christen Sveaas collection that was selected by artist, Ida Ekblad which exposes us to the eeriness of night scenes from moonlit landscapes to dreams and nightmares, including a reading by poet, Mark Ford.

You can find all of our other episodes online at www.whitechapelgallery.org as well as iTeams, Spotify, Stitcher and Sound Cloud. Keep an eye out for upcoming episodes as we explore Whitechapel's Exhibition, A Century of the Artist's Studio as well as Galleries in the Grove, our current archive exhibition which spotlights pivotal galleries during the '60s to '80s who took great risks in order to offer opportunities to unsupported artists and open up their networks.

Also, don't forget to come and visit the exhibition, The Travel Bureau, work selected by Paulina Olowaska from the Christen Sveaas Art Foundation which will be open from 14th of January to 8th May 2022. Bye for now.

Transcribed by 1 st Class Secretarial Services.