

Tatiana Wolska: the London Modules

If you wander through London this autumn, you may be stopped in your tracks by one of several expansive translucent red sculptures around town: floating high in the air amid the Victorian splendour of Leadenhall Market, oozing from the façade of a modern office building in the heart of the City of London, or hovering underneath the branches of a tree in the elegant English Garden of Regent's Park. These works belong to what their creator, the Polish artist Tatiana Wolska refers to as 'a giant organism whose parts surge forth from different places'. Spanning two of London's annual public art events, Sculpture in the City and Frieze Sculpture, Wolska's *Untitled, Modules 1 & 2* (2019) and *Modules 3 & 4* (2021), share a common genesis in 2015, when the artist embarked on an intensive 3-month-long production period with the help of two assistants. After cutting up some 5,000 discarded plastic water bottles into small pieces, Wolska and her team used soldering irons that heat to around 500C° to melt the edges of each fragment and join it to the next by pressing together the molten seam, building up a patchwork that eventually grew to 25-metre long and a sculptural installation first exhibited at the Palais de Tokyo art centre in Paris. That monumental work has now been reconfigured into the smaller components installed around London, which continue to produce in the viewer a distinctive complex of sensations both ethereal and visceral.

If, in classical times, the sculptor sought to liberate pure form from an undifferentiated block of stone, Wolska performs a contrary manoeuvre: she manifests shapes into thin air using the slightest of means. With their blood-red hue, these organic jewel-like bubbles seem to pulse with life, like the sutured skin of an invisible creature. Guided by the physical properties of her materials — in this case morsels of plastic that retain a residual curve from their former life as bottles, in others discarded bits of wood with unique textures and histories — Wolska builds up her sculptures gradually and intuitively. In the London Modules, the repetition of fragments of red bottles is evidence the endless supply of waste products, while the compulsively additive production process promises the potential for infinite self-reproduction. Thanks to their countless perforations these porous membranes constitute a family of respiratory systems that invite air and the eye to flow across, around and *through* them to reach the world beyond.

L'étrangère

While Wolska's reuse of waste plastic and reclaimed wood is often assumed to be motivated by ecological concerns – an interpretation she appreciates but says is not quite accurate – it really stems from a habit of creative recuperation based on economic need, which she learned as a child. Wolska, who grew up under communist rule in Poland in the 1980s, describes how life then was guided by 'an economy of means that involved storing everything, and transforming it'. She vividly remembers her first swimming suit, fashioned from an old skirt of her sister's, and says it was a time when, according to necessity 'a chair could be made into a table, and later back into a chair'. Wolska cherishes this highly imaginative system and has made it the basis for her creative practice, handling materials in such a way that improvisation, imagination and coping with scarcity might yield by-products of joy, self-sufficiency and curiosity.

Beyond their innovative and thought-provoking handling of materials, Wolska's amorphous sculptures illuminate our relationship with the world around us in an existential way. With their continuous membranes and sanguine complexions they call to mind nascent creatures, in a state of continual emergence. They are like bodies in which the delineation of organs or parts is yet to occur. In this respect, they resemble the 'body without organs', a concept put forward by the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. It's a compelling notion, which allows recognition of the unfettered potential in organisms, before they are sectioned into meaningful components or slotted into specific politics, beliefs and modes of behaviour.

Deleuze and Guattari compare the body-without-organs to an egg, in which potential is limitless. Just as an egg might develop into a chick with any number of possible characteristics, Wolska's Modules, which are evocative of chrysalides, also hold infinite possibilities. They may grow or shrink, be severed or reshaped; installed outdoors they could change colour or texture because of sunlight, water, wind or force. Indeed, it is also possible to trace the arc of potential back to the original water bottles, a collection of smaller bodies-without-organs that fulfilled an unusual potential as component parts of these vast public sculptures. The Modules are entities onto which a range of different codes may be imposed: conceptual or aesthetic, related to economic, cultural or personal value. The sculptures, like us all, are situated in a stream of continuous change and potential, profoundly interconnected with the world. To appreciate their status as bodies-without-organs allows us to envision the many different sculptures they may eventually become.

This openness to potential also extends to Wolska's daily drawing practice. 'Every morning', she says, 'I get up at 6am and it's coffee and drawing for an hour and a half before my kids get up.' This allows her to 'warm up the hands', both right and left, and to draw curved forms, which, if not perfect circles are nearly always shapes that cycle back into themselves: another expression of Wolska's impetus to revisit materials and forms to create them anew. Drawing, for Wolska, is an absorbing practice that leaves no space for thinking: 'my need is to draw, not to think about drawing.' The fluid nets, grids and sheaths she generates are reminiscent of skin, intestines, ligaments and muscles, yet they are not representations of anatomical elements or organs. This freedom from specific referents allows Wolska to follow her intuition until she reaches the point of 'appetising surprise', in which potential teeters on the edge of definition.

Wolska's drawings are made for their own sake, and she never creates preparatory sketches for her sculptures, preferring to begin with materials and space. She uses leftovers and scraps, adapting herself and her work to what is available. Wolska's structures are often rough-hewn but they can also be elaborate: one particularly labyrinthine installation comprised spaces for living, working and resting, and served as a dwelling for the artist for three weeks. Elsewhere, these constructions recall dens and tree houses, responding to a childhood desire for a place of escape for the body and mind. Like the spectral red volumes appearing around London this autumn, they invite us to project our deepest wishes and desires, and facilitate an engagement with the infinite potential of our imagination.

—Ellen Mara De Wachter, September 2021

Ellen Mara De Wachter is a writer based in London. Her work has featured in a range of publications, including Frieze, Art Quarterly, Art Monthly, The World of Interiors and The White Review. Her book 'Co-Art: Artists on Creative Collaboration' (Phaidon) explores the phenomenon of collaboration in the visual arts and its potential in society at large. She is a co-author of 'Great Women Artists' (2019) and has contributed to several medium-specific anthologies published by Phaidon. De Wachter has taught widely, including at Central Saint Martins, Royal College of Art, London College of Communication, Royal Academy Schools and Goldsmiths College. She mentors artists and writers through various publicly funded creative development schemes.