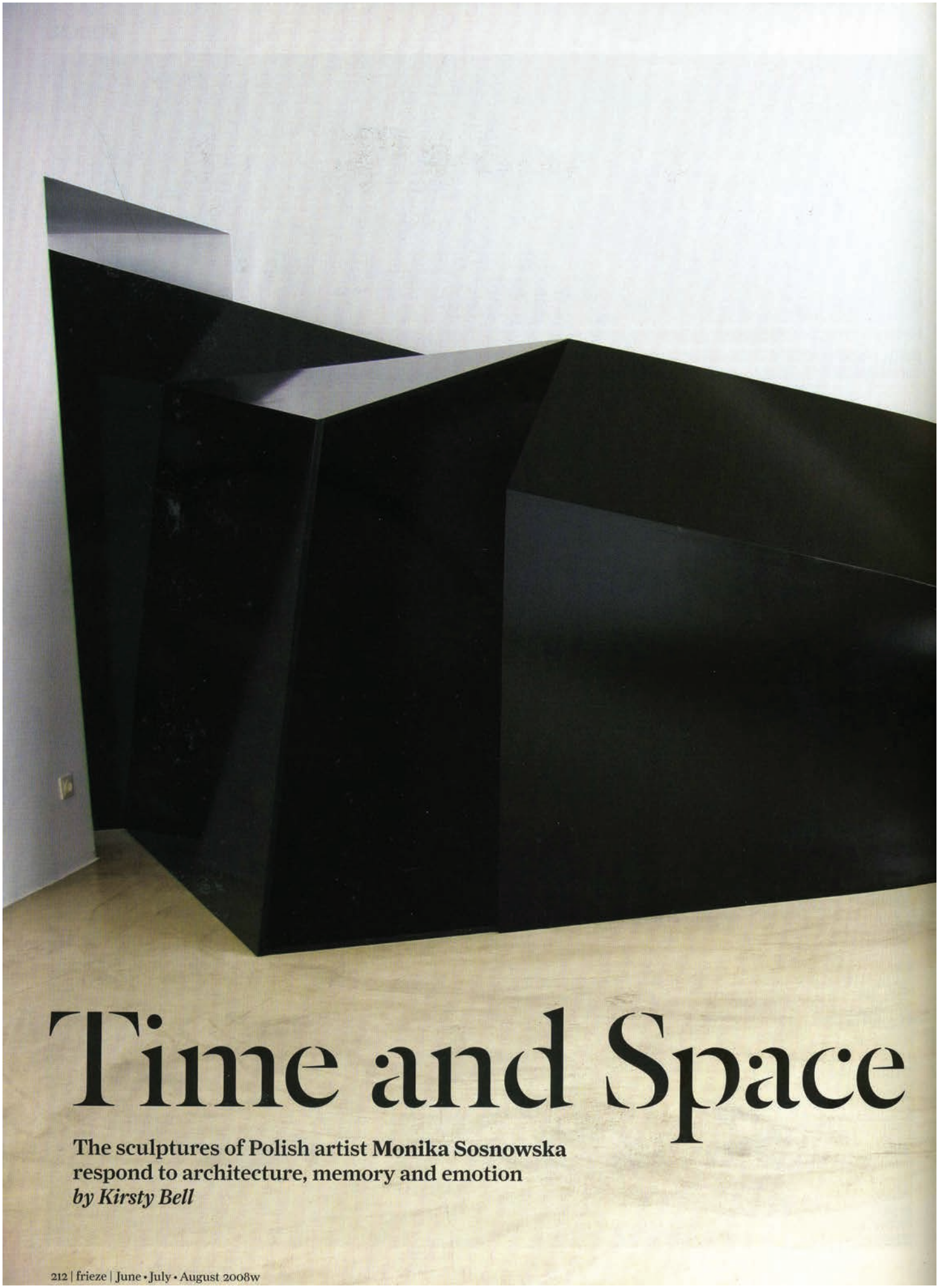


Time and Space

The sculptures of Polish artist Monika Sosnowska respond to architecture, memory and emotion
by Kirsty Bell

This page and inset:
Untitled
2005
Wood, lacquer
Installation views at
Galerie Gisela Capitain,
Cologne

A steel skeleton of a housing block – the type that, concrete-clad, took over the Polish landscape in fleets during the 1960s under communism – is crushed and squeezed into another symbolic Polish building: the country's pavilion in the Giardini at the Venice Biennale, a 1930s' symbol of national prestige. The violent force involved in twisting and crushing these huge beams of steel to fit inside the considerably lower structure of the pavilion, is strangely unapparent in the work, however, which seems instead to serenely inhabit its new home, a three-dimensional line drawing in space. Like a tree impeded from growing naturally and forced to adapt and twist its branches, it moulds itself within the confines of its habitat. The forcing together of these two obsolete forms of architecture becomes, then, an exercise in adaptability and conformity; a metaphor for the many lives forced to adjust to the social requirements of an antisocial architecture.

'Display'
2005
Mixed media
Installation view
at Foksal Gallery
Foundation, Warsaw

Corridor
2003
Mixed media
Installation view at
Schaulager, Basel, 2008

Though it is the skeleton of a life-sized building, it looks like a model, albeit a very large one, as its title, *1:1* (2007), corroborates. The piece raises an ambiguity central to many of Monika Sosnowka's works: to what extent should they be considered in architectural terms, and to what extent as sculpture? Is there a line that separates the functionality of one from the formalism of the other? Can the characteristics of one infect those of the other? Sosnowska has described her works as having a parasitical relationship to the architecture they inhabit. Usually determinedly site-specific, they borrow some of their site's characteristics (the doorway, the room, the walls of a corridor) but then abandon them to indulge their own perversely formal nature. Like Bruce Nauman's corridor works, they become what Paul Schimmel termed 'environments of controlled response';[1] works in which, as Nauman put it, 'somebody else would have the same experience instead of just having to watch me have that experience'.[2] In Nauman's case, the corridors evolved from props in his studios (the first one was built for the video *Walk with Contrapposto*, 1968) and relate to performance and the study of movement and perception in different types of space. For Sosnowka, however, these works engage the associative emotional triggers of architecture and a subjective psychological involvement with space. Her architectonic environments employ the decorative vocabulary of various institutions, from the dull green paint halfway up the walls in *Corridor* (2003) to the hospital-bright white walls and strip lighting of the looping labyrinthine corridor that invaded the whole of Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein (*Loop*, 2007). Though her works often draw on the communist brand of institutionalism she experienced growing up in 1970s' Poland, its vocabulary is generic enough to have a wide appeal. She engages not just a perceptual here-and-now, but an individual response to interior space based on memory and emotion.

However, Sosnowska's careful staging of illusion and disillusionment prevents her installations from simply being theatrical set pieces. While the clinical corridors of *Loop* insert an abstract space into a museum through which the audience can take an otherworldly tour, the illusion is fractured at the point where the outside of the corridor construction is suddenly visible, cutting through a gallery room at the end of the loop. From the reverse, the structure is all provisional plasterboard and metal framing, completely without psychological content or allusion. It appears in a gallery together with a small group of figurative paintings, chosen by Sosnowska from the museum collection. So we

To what extent should these structures be considered in architectural terms, and to what extent as sculpture?

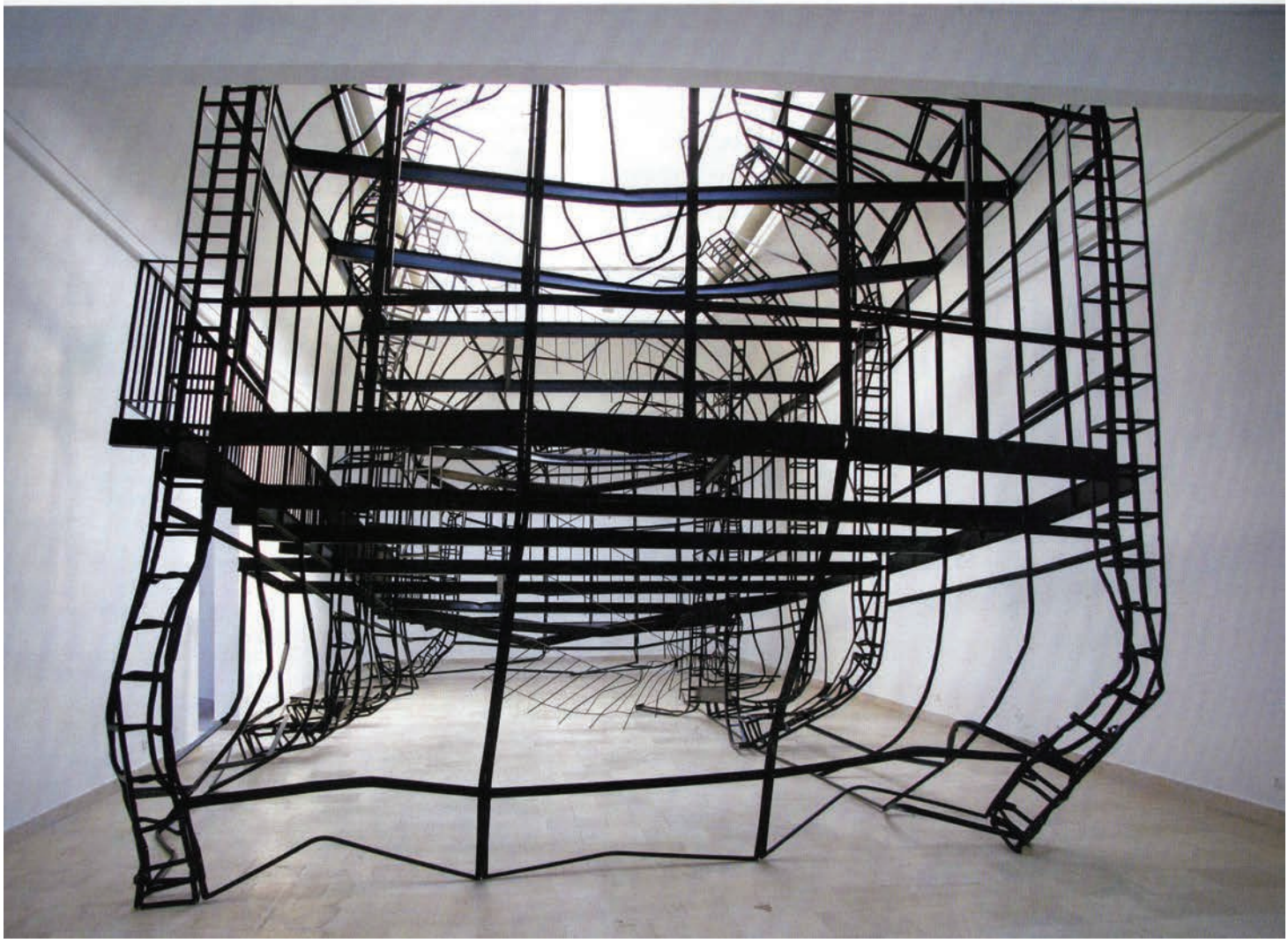
Above:
Untitled
2008
Metal
c. 15×5×2 cm

Below:
1:1
2007
Steel
Installation view at the Polish Pavilion, 52nd Venice Biennale

are encouraged here to read the structure in purely sculptural terms, as an object whose dimensionality contrasts with the paintings' flatness and the illusional depth they propose. The use-function and emotional engagement involved in an interior appreciation of the installation contrasts with this newly distanced exterior view. The interiority of architecture and exteriority of sculpture are revealed to be back to back, but separated by a gulf of alienation.

In his well-known study *The Poetics of Space* (1958), Gaston Bachelard observes that: 'Outside and inside form a dialectic of division, the obvious geometry of which blinds us as soon as we bring it into play in metaphorical dimensions. It has the sharpness of the dialectics of yes and no, which decides everything.'[3] Bachelard goes on to explain how this duality becomes inflicted with the notion of alienation, so that 'simple geometrical opposition becomes tinged with aggressivity. Formal opposition is incapable of remaining calm.' The intensity of Sosnowska's works is built on exactly this notion of an aggressive intervention into cool formal dialetics.

The emotional complexity of such an apparently simple dualism as inside/outside, extends to scale with the problematic notion: big or small. Robert Morris describes scale as the crucial element that affects the apprehension of sculptural objects: 'The size range of useless three-dimensional things is a continuum between the monument and the ornament.'[4] Scale is always related to the constant of the body, and an increase in scale brings with it a change in perception from a private, intimate appreciation 'essentially closed, spaceless, compressed and exclusive'[5], to a more public and physical appreciation: 'Things on a monumental scale [...] include more terms necessary for their apprehension than objects smaller than the body, namely, the literal space in which they exist and the kinaesthetic demands placed upon the body.' Sosnowska engages both these aspects of scale explicitly in a work such as *Untitled* (2005). Installed in Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne, a door-like aperture invited viewers to enter a black room-like structure that gradually diminished in size until they could no longer pass through, and were obliged to crouch, squat, kneel. The wide-open room morphed into the narrow tail of a shiny black beast: spaceless, compressed and exclusive. Scale is impressed on the participator in bluntly physical and experiential, as well as psychological, terms.



Above:
Untitled
2006
Steel and enamel paint
Installation view at
Schaulager, Basel, 2008

For Sosnowska, illusion is a quality of space, shown in all its variety in 'Display', an exhibition at the Foksal Gallery Foundation in Warsaw in 2005, where she showed a collection of models of previously completed projects. While models are always the starting point for her large-scale projects, here they formed a virtual city of absurd architectural possibilities. With the large-scale installations reduced to Lilliputian size, visitors were able to observe them from a great height, as mathematical conundrums, spatial impossibilities, variations on the idea of space and architecture in a playful, material sense. As Robert Smithson noted: 'It is well to remember that the seemingly topsy-turvy world revealed by Lewis Carroll did spring from a well ordered mathematical mind.'[6] Sosnowska's models suggest the Utopian brainstorming that led to the disasters of social housing projects, as much as Vladimir Tatlin-esque constructivist sculptures. These works engage the 'privateness' of appreciation their small scale allows, while also asserting an idea of the 'publicness' that their large-scale realization calls for.

For her current exhibition at the Schaulager in Basel, Sosnowska looks again at the question of scale, but does so through a change in the scale of her works' architectural surroundings, rather than of the works themselves. This is the first time she has shown existing pieces together outside of the original sites that determined their formal specifics, but she addresses this problem by relating them all to their new site, explicitly in terms of scale. In the vast lower gallery of this Herzog & de Meuron-built exhibition and art storage space, from which all the dividing walls have been removed, Sosnowska's works appear like blown-up versions of the models in 'Display'. They are no longer site-specific installations, however, but objects that have shrunk relative to the size of the room in which they now find themselves: they are full-size models, all replicated on a scale of 1:1 – a fact recalled by the title of the show. Extracted from the confines of their original sites, these convoluted structures can now be seen from without in all their dimensionality. Their experiential element is sidelined as the illusions they conjure are revealed from the

As Robert Smithson noted: 'It is well to remember that the seemingly topsy-turvy world revealed by Lewis Carroll did spring from a well ordered mathematical mind.'

Right:
Corridor
2006/8
MDF, carpet, fluorescent lights
Installation view at
Schaulager, Basel, 2008

Left:
Concrete Ball
2008
Concrete and steel
Installation view at
Schaulager, Basel, 2008

start. Rather, we look at them as sculptures: their tendency towards the architectural is overshadowed by their arrangement as separate objects in a larger space – from the hulking but modest steel skeleton of *1:1*, squeezed in to fit under the ceiling here, to the landscape of tiny Tom Thumb houses lodged inside a paper bag (*Untitled*, 2003). Bachelard, again, puts it succinctly when he writes: 'Everything, even size, is a human value [...the] miniature can accumulate size. It is vast in its own way.'[7]

This curtain-lifting on the illusionistic nature of many of Sosnowska's works coincides with a shift in focus in her art from spatial illusion – which is narrative, time-based and experiential – to material illusionism, a confounding of expectations to do with the nature of materials. This is the case with the housing block skeleton of *1:1*, where its heavy steel frame assumed a lightness and flexibility completely at odds with the physical facts of its material. Or with the white cubic room that, door ajar and jammed between two exterior walls of the Sprengel Museum in Hanover, looked as if it had just dropped from the sky and got stuck there (*Untitled*, 2006); its crumpled walls seemingly formed from paper, but in fact made out of steel.

These transubstantiations have the effect of transforming the way we view Sosnowska's work, from a psycho-spatial experience to an anthropo-architectural one, in which solid matter can behave in an emotional, uncontrollable fashion. Such is the case with the banisters she made for the Foksal Gallery Foundation, as one stray railing defies the expectations of strict uniformity by running willy-nilly down the stairwell (*Hand Rail*, 2006). The Minimalist insistence on a physical appreciation of objects with regard to their materials is flipped by Sosnowska's suggestion of a psychological component to materials or their use-forms. The associations implied by earlier installations have, in recent works, transferred to the materials themselves, which seem to have taken on the memories of the institutional architecture they manifest. They run wild; they bend under the strain of expectations to conform; they are tired and floppy or crushed by the demands of the institution. In a tiny work in the Schaulager, a door handle is imprinted with the indentations of the hand that has squeezed it open and closed countless times (*Untitled*, 2008). At the other end of the scale is a huge concrete ball embedded with steel frames and trusses, with one stray rod flailing out of it like an expressive arm (*Concrete Ball*, 2008). It appears like a wrecking ball that has absorbed the remnants of the building it was knocking down; the act of destruction has turned into a creative moment, and documents its own production. Architecture intertwines with individual psyche, and seems to imply that we leave an imprint on buildings as much as architecture imprints on us.

In the catalogue for Sosnowska's exhibition at the Polish Pavilion in Venice, Tomasz Fudala wrote: 'One can read into the architecture of the period all of the ailments of communist reality.'[8] Likewise, the current architectural landscape in Poland can be read as the culmination of attempts by the post-communist population to adjust to its current reality. While some of the antisocial housing structures have been knocked down, many more have been modified with cosmetic measures: a bright new cladding, a fresh coat of paint on a dull grey façade. These obsolescent architectural styles are still a reality for many, and Sosnowska addresses the catalogue of ailments they bring with them in her sculptures, as materials that either conform against their nature or resist their expected functions. A concrete public fountain bubbles up filthy water as if from the ailing bowels of the national bedrock (*Dirty Fountain*, 2006), while the ceiling in a corridor drips steadily into a puddle on the floor (*The Fountain*, 2006). Decay, decline and ruin become as omnipresent as skirting boards or stairwells. They are inevitable. In Smithsonesque terms, the ruin becomes the monument itself, but Sosnowska builds her ruins from scratch, hybrid Modernist-futuro follies for a post-Utopian era.

Kirsty Bell is a writer living in Berlin.

Find out more at frieze.com

1 Paul Schimmel, *Bruce Nauman*, ed. Joan Simon, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and Wiese Verlag, Basel, 1994, p. 77
2 op. cit. p. 78
3 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1969, p. 211
4 Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture, Part 2' *Artforum*, vol. 5, no. 2, October 1966
5 ibid.
6 Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996, p. 21
7 op. cit. p. 215
8 Tomasz Fudala, 'A Dream of Prefabricated Houses' in *Monika Sosnowska*, Polish Pavilion, 52nd International Art Exhibition, Venice, Zacheta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 2007, p. 32

Loop
2007
Mixed media
Installation view
at Kunstmuseum
Liechtenstein, Vaduz

Bell, Kirsty, *Time and Space*, Frieze, Issue 116, June-August 2008, pp. 213-217