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Polish Cold War Neon

Artist Ilona Karwińska Illuminates the Past with Captivating Neon Signs

“Ilona Karwińska’s images of communist-era neon preserve a unique and significant moment in Poland’s history.”
—David Crowley, Royal College of Art, London

In 1929, the first neon sign in Poland went up in Warsaw. Popular from the start, the earliest neon signs were made to order—free in design, shape, and color, and significantly influencing other forms of advertising like poster design and typography. *Polish Cold War Neon* tells the fascinating story of neon in Poland by preserving and celebrating the remnants of this rich and influential history.

Designed and built by prominent architects, graphic designers, and artists, and overseen by a chief graphic designer in the state-run company Reklama, Polish neon signage was renowned for its outstanding technical and artistic qualities. During its peak, Reklama maintained over 1,000 neon signs, whose playfulness and folly stood out in dark and oppressed Poland, ornamenting otherwise drab cities and towns.

As David Crowley says in the foreword, “in the very best designs produced in Poland in the 1960s, rippling animation and fluid threads of light brought a kind of nocturnal magic to the city.” Today, most of the neon signs are gone, too expensive and fragile to maintain; belonging to no one, all that remains of them are their ghostly weathered “shadows.” In *Polish Cold War Neon*, Ilona Karwińska collects her own stunning photographs, archival images, original neon designs, and interviews with their designers to reveal the untold story of Polish neon.

British photographer **Ilona Karwińska** specializes in portraiture and world cultures. Based in London, she is a graduate of Goldsmiths College and the London College of Printing. She has been exploring the disappearing world of Cold War Era neon and graphics for more than five years, and has been credited with starting a new “school of neon,” as well as helping to found the Neon Muzeum. Her work has been featured in *Creative Review*, *A4*, *Icon*, *The Telegraph*, *Newsweek*, and *Time Out*. Karwińska regularly exhibits in international galleries.

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