

Agnieszka Polska
Love Bite

February 15–April 19, 2020

FRYE
ART MUSEUM



Agnieszka Polska's computer-generated media works draw on language, history, and scientific theory to illuminate issues of individual and social responsibility. Combining original poetic texts with digitally manipulated imagery, her hallucinatory videos attempt to describe the overwhelming ethical ambiguities of our time. In this exhibition, the artist presents two immersive, deeply affecting audiovisual essays that address the urgent global issue of climate change and the specter of mass extinction.

The first installation pairs two videos, *The New Sun* and *What the Sun Has Seen* (both 2017), depicting a sentient sun that is witness to environmental and ethical collapse on Earth. The sun speaks directly to the audience in half-sung monologues, moving through a range of emotional states and modes of address, from professing love and telling silly jokes, to pondering the power of language to construct a new world order. Passages of the text refer to the effect in quantum mechanics in which the observer influences the event observed through the act of interpreting it. From this point of view, the sun character is seen to be both helpless witness to and cause of the transformation it beholds.

Extending from Einstein's notion that space-time is dynamic and relative to the perspective of the observer, the second installation, *The Happiest Thought* (2019), takes us back to a prehistoric environment that might pre-figure our own: Earth's biosphere before the Permian-Triassic extinction, which occurred more than 250 million years ago and annihilated as much as 90 percent of life on the planet. The piece offers a hypnotic exploration of this lush and alluring ancient environment while contemplating humanity's potential to overcome enormous threats like the current climate crisis.

Incorporating online-video tactics such as emotional mimicry and ASMR triggers (heightened sounds and whispers that stimulate pleasant tingling sensations), Polska crafts a mesmerizing atmosphere to compete with what she calls the "environment of seduction" surrounding consumer marketing and organized religion. Through her work, the artist aims to create "a common territory of exchange, a territory for involvement in ritual," in which we can confront our collective calamity.



Agnieszka Polska. *The Happiest Thought* (still), 2019. HD video, adaptation from a full-dome video (color, sound); 21:02 min. Courtesy of the artist and Overduin & Co., Los Angeles. Based on a work commissioned by the Berliner Festspiele / Immersion / The New Infinity in coproduction with the Planetarium Hamburg. Funded by Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media of Germany.

Agnieszka Polska (Polish, b. 1985, Lublin, Poland) lives and works in Kraków and Berlin. She has presented her works at international venues, among them, the New Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Centre Pompidou and Palais de Tokyo in Paris, Tate Modern in London, Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC, and Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin. Polska also participated in the 57th Venice Biennale, 11th Gwangju Biennale, 19th Biennale of Sydney, and 13th Istanbul Biennial. In 2018 she was awarded Germany's Preis der Nationalgalerie.

Fathomless Depths: Empathy and Extinction in the Works of Agnieszka Polska

Amanda Donnan, Chief Curator, Frye Art Museum

Despite the outrageous fact that I'll soon be dead forever, I live in the present, not the future. Given a choice between an alarming abstraction (death) and the reassuring evidence of my senses (breakfast!), my mind prefers to focus on the latter. – Jonathan Franzen¹

There is the scientific and ideological language for what is happening to the weather, but there are hardly any intimate words. Is that surprising? People in mourning tend to use euphemism; likewise the guilty and ashamed. – Zadie Smith²

Climate change is a problem so large, so devastating in its implications, that our minds tend to shut it out—we cannot truly fathom it. *Fathom* means “to penetrate and come to understand,” but it also describes a measurement of liquid depth—specifically, six feet, the approximate length of a man’s outstretched arms, fingertip to fingertip. In its earliest usage, the word was synonymous with “embrace,” that is, “to encircle something with the arms as if for measuring.”³ These layered significations are evocative in the context of global warming—of deep water, of “six feet under”—and of what, as Zadie Smith identified, has been lacking in our descriptions of it: an intimate understanding in relation, a sensory or bodily index. Rising sea levels, climbing average temperatures—so far, these are abstract data, statistics, incremental changes occurring in such a diffuse way that they don’t really *touch* us.

Accessing the alarming abstraction of mass extinction via the immediacy of the senses, Agnieszka Polska’s recent video works *The New Sun/What the Sun Has Seen* (2017) and *The Happiest Thought* (2019) attend both to the issue of impending environmental collapse and to the problem of its unfathomability. Through a confluence of digital animation, poetic narrative, theoretical physics, and immersive technological mesmerism, these “melancholy journeys,” as the artist calls them, slip the bounds of entrenched everyday perspectives to envision humanity’s fate on the scale of the cosmos. In the process, they bring home the wonder and horror of our shared circumstances, addressing the viewer directly, *intimately*, while simultaneously arousing a sense of uncanny strangeness and humbling insignificance. In other words, they bring the sublime—that expansive experience of concurrent terror and fascination—uncomfortably *close*.

Invested in art’s capacity to widen experience and expand the moral imagination, Polska seeks to inspire behavioral transformation on a societal scale by leveraging the ethically persuasive power of affect. Affects are more elusive, untranslated versions of emotions that, according to the artist, “constitute a dimension of bodily experience and encounters, a dimension that remains, significantly, pre-discursive and non-representational.”⁴ Polska cites the influence of Sara Ahmed’s work on affective economies, in which “emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments.”⁵ Hate and fear are powerful motivators in this regard, opposed on the other side by empathy: a receptive, accommodating affective disposition that refuses to distinguish between those who are like us and those who are not.

Polska's videos stimulate viewers' capacity for empathy, using neurologically based audiovisual cues like emotional mimicry or mirroring as well as techniques linked to tactile sensation like ASMR and body awareness meditation. These are layered with emotionally dynamic music and sound effects that promote a heightened, responsive state, along with lyrical texts that suspend normative rational frameworks like linear time and individual will. Many of the affective techniques Polska employs were developed or popularized in online environments like YouTube, where entire subcultures have grown up around therapeutic audiovisual phenomena like ASMR, hypnotic or meditative visualization, and binaural beats. Her music tracks and imagery are also often sourced from the internet and maintain the generic familiarity of stock media even as they are altered and layered to accompany complex narrative monologues. In this way, Polska uses the lingua franca aesthetic vocabularies of our time to plug into the contemporary sensorium and overcome psychological resistance to the existential threat presented by climate change.

This link to everyday online experiences is readily apparent in *The New Sun* and *What the Sun Has Seen*, which operate as a looping diptych and center on the figure of a childlike sun who is a helpless witness to the environmental and ethical collapse unfolding on Earth. Voiced by American actor Aaron Ronelle Harrell, the Little Sun, as the character is called, is depicted as a glowing orange orb floating in the infinite black expanse of outer space; his enormous, lifelike brown eyes, however, reflect an indistinct white glow reminiscent of the screen or lighting ring sometimes visible in the eyes of vloggers. Trained on the viewer, the gaze of these oversize eyes grabs us at the deep psychological level associated with bonding and established in infancy in relation to our parents' faces. The round, cartoony appearance of the Little Sun and the proportions of its facial features also make it "cute," which is one of the most prevalent and potent "minor affects" of the postmodern age.⁶ Cuteness is appealing because it aestheticizes powerlessness; it is, of course, often deployed by toy manufacturers, but it is also present in media products popular with adults, like cat memes (see Lil Bub).

Fittingly, the *Sun* diptych was inspired by a children's story: the poem *Co słońko widziało* (What the sun has seen), by the Polish writer and activist Maria Konopnicka (1842–1910). As Polska says, the poem "describes the harmonious daily routines of modest [nineteenth-century European] rural life as if seen from above by the sun."⁷ The artist's contemporary take on the poem, encapsulated in the video of the same title, begins with an updated (and unsettling, though cheerfully delivered) recounting of everyday family life as it might appear to the sun, but told by planet Earth, who also has exaggerated facial features. With the viewer's perspective thus joined to that of the sun, we penetrate the cloudy layers of Earth's atmosphere to zoom in on a man standing on an isolated outcropping high in the mountains. This is unmistakably a reference to Caspar David Friedrich's 1818 painting *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*, a work of German Romanticism so iconic that it functions almost as shorthand for the experience of the sublime. The sun expresses alarm at finding the man "still here," and a nonsensical, yet affectively charged montage of cultural dross ensues: a kitten's paw stroking a giant thumb, a joint being rolled in a bloody Band-Aid, a crow slowly inserting its beak into a man's mouth. This suggests, perhaps, that the horizon of sublimity now lies in the incomprehensibly vast quantity of "information waste," or unnecessary and useless data, that clutters the internet and our minds.

Extending the affective purchase of its counterpart, *The New Sun* focuses almost exclusively on the Little Sun, who delivers a moody, half-sung monologue that might be seen as a lyrical and darkly absurd amplification of the remote and public yet personal mode of address commonly used in the vlog format. The script presents a vision of a world dissolving under the sun's gaze, in which the only immutable elements are words and language. The addressee, affectionately called "baby," may be the man on the cliff but is, in effect, everyone watching. At the beginning of the video, a disembodied animated mouth speaks in a woman's voice (presumably the artist's) to inform the viewer that "this a film about an observer who influences events through the act of observing"; the Little Sun seemingly contradicts her when he then says, "This is a film about love." This coupling of the rational to the emotional persists throughout *The New Sun*, as the video's tone reels between contemplative, woeful, buoyant, humiliating, terrifying, and amorous, hooking into the viewer affectively through their established identification with the Little Sun. Sound effects like sibilant whispering—commonly used in ASMR videos to approximate physical closeness and generate pleasurable tingling sensations—and dynamic music intensify the gripping variability of mood.

The artist's prologue to *The New Sun* refers to the "observer effect" in quantum mechanics, in which a system remains in superposition (i.e., multiple states corresponding to different possible outcomes) until it is observed or measured. Light, for example, is both a particle and a wave, depending on how one evaluates it; a cat in a box is both alive and dead until it is observed to be one or the other. The problem remains profoundly distressing, as it seems to undermine the possibility of objectivity—the very foundation of science. Essentially, it presents the question: "If the way the world behaves depends on how—or if—we look at it, what can 'reality' really mean?"⁸

The Happiest Thought picks up on these threads, taking its title from the realization that led Albert Einstein (1879–1955) to formulate his theory of general relativity, published in 1915. Einstein was reportedly sitting in his study watching workers on the roof of a nearby building when it occurred to him that if one of them fell, he would plummet to the ground at the same speed as his tools, pocket change, and other loose belongings.⁹ From the worker's local perspective, these items would appear to float around him, in defiance of gravity. Ergo (to summarize), space-time is unified and relative to the observer.

Originally commissioned for a planetarium, *The Happiest Thought* is an immersive audiovisual essay that extends Einstein's thought experiment into an elegiac rumination on our existential-environmental dilemma, centering on simple animated imagery with a hypnotic voice-over by the American performance artist Geo Wyeth. The video begins with the viewer in the position of the falling worker, with a bucket of paint, coins, and nails floating before their eyes against the dark backdrop of outer space. An omnipresent voice—which sounds similar to that of the Little Sun but which here emanates from a source outside the *mise-en-scène*—guides the viewer through a detailed visualization of Einstein's scenario, directing their awareness to the weight of their own body within a space on a planet accelerating through the cosmos. A gentle melody with a warm tone of discovery and amazement plays in the background, bringing an emotional tinge to the viewer's embodied mindfulness.

Thus sensitized to their physical being-in-place on scales of astonishing magnitude, the observer plunges toward Earth—with the demarcations of modern nation-states laid over Pangaea—and enters the planet's biosphere prior to the Permian-Triassic extinction, which will soon kill over 90 percent of life on the planet. The largest extinction "ever before, ever before," this irksome (and familiar) premonition hangs over the dreamy sequences that follow, all of which are affectively pitched toward a discordant, sublime experience of distress, wonder, and acceptance. To wit: in the sequence in which prehistoric sea creatures swim in the periphery, the viewer's perspective remains stationary, looking up from under the water at the sparkling refractions of sunlight. "Husk vertebrates" sing a beautiful, beckoning hymn, and we are both transported and drowning, bubbles of oxygen escaping all around. Similarly, the transfixing dance of dragonflies is offset by the voice's agitated description of colossal insects in our vicinity, including a tragic overturned millipede that the viewer is compelled to turn upright. The graphic foci in both passages move rhythmically, in symmetrical geometric or tunneling patterns that are neurologically linked to trance induction, and similar to those generated in the visual cortex during psychedelic, sensory deprivation, and near-death experiences.¹⁰

In the end, as the viewer crawls deep into a burrow at the base of a tree, the source of the voice materializes as a pair of eyes and a mouth that are really just openings in the black surround. This segment echoes Franz Kafka's 1923 short story "Der Bau" (The burrow), a parody of human reason in which a solipsistic and volatile subterranean creature struggles constantly to fortify his labyrinthine den, harassed by a persistent yet unidentifiable noise (i.e., that which exceeds rational thought) outside its walls. Polska's being invades our consciousness like Kafka's perturbing sound, undermining the impersonal futurity of extinction that serves to distance it from ourselves: "Mass extinction, what's that? Everyone has to die. What's your point of reference? Are you great or small, old or new, floating or falling? And how alive are you anyway?" Closer than you'd like to believe, death is the great leveler and the ultimate foundation for empathy. Vulgar and corporeal, the love bite on your arm is a reminder of this.

Rather than tell us what ought to be done, Polska's works help us fathom environmental collapse, shaping an affective disposition toward the problem for at least as long as we are under their spell. This can be seen as a type of action, inasmuch as it prepares "people for some field of possible future actions, in producing a mood or structure of feeling that makes possible certain kinds of actions, thought, [or] speech . . . that might not have seemed possible before."¹¹ Opening and exercising our capacity for empathy, the artist gives us something to carry forward, a lingering feeling that might soften the barriers between us, and between humans and other living beings.

Endnotes: **1.** Jonathan Franzen, "What If We Stopped Pretending?," *New Yorker*, September 8, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/what-if-we-stopped-pretending>. **2.** Zadie Smith, "Elegy for a Country's Seasons," *New York Review of Books*, April 3, 2014, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/04/03/elegy-countrys-seasons/>. **3.** Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "fathom," accessed January 3, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fathom>. **4.** Agnieszka Polska, presentation at the New Centre for Research and Practice, March 9, 2018. **5.** Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 119. **6.** See Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). **7.** "Agnieszka Polska on the Amorous Ideas behind Her Award-Winning 'Baby-Faced' Star," interview by Kate Brown, *artnet*, November 27, 2017, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/origin-story-agnieszka-polska-1159565>. **8.** Philip Ball, "The Strange Link between the Human Mind and Quantum Physics," BBC.com, February 16, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20170215-the-strange-link-between-the-human-mind-and-quantum-physics>. **9.** William D. Heacox, *The Expanding Universe: A Primer on Relativistic Cosmology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). **10.** Marianne Freiberger, "Uncoiling the Spiral: Maths and Hallucinations," *Plus*, December 1, 2009, <https://plus.maths.org/content/os/issue53/features/hallucinations/index>. **11.** Richard Grusin, "Premediation and the Virtual Occupation of Wall Street," *Theory & Event* vol. 14, no. 4, 2011, cited by Polska in presentation at the New Centre for Research and Practice.



Images: Cover: Agnieszka Polska. *The New Sun*, 2017. Ink print on archival paper. Courtesy of the artist and Overduin & Co., Los Angeles. **Poster:** Agnieszka Polska. *Ring of Fire*, 2019. Digital print. Courtesy of the artist and Overduin & Co., Los Angeles. **Back cover:** Agnieszka Polska. *The Happiest Thought* (still), 2019. HD video, adaptation from a full-dome video (color, sound); 21:02 min. Courtesy of the artist and Overduin & Co., Los Angeles. Based on a work commissioned by the Berliner Festspiele / Immersion / The New Infinity in coproduction with the Planetarium Hamburg. Funded by Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media of Germany.

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