

G A L E R I A
Arsenal

Agnieszka Polska

DEMON'S BRAIN

11.09–15.11.2026

Arsenal Gallery in Białystok
2 Adam Mickiewicz Street

My kingdom for narratives! [Przemysław Czapliński, speaking at the Congress of Culture in 2016]

Those who have seen the two-headed horse ought to tell the story of what they saw to those who averted their eyes or kept looking, mesmerised by the unfolding view. [quote from a song from Agnieszka Polska & Sam Samiee's video *Two-Headed Horse*, 2021]

In the face of (...) civilisational transformation, one of the greatest political challenges involves an effort to combine two facets – the environmental and the technological – all too often approached as two separate realms; and pursue political ecology hand in hand with politics of technology in consequence. [Michał Krzykowski, afterword, in: Yuk Hui, *Rekursywność i przygodność* (Polish edition of *Recursivity and Contingency*), transl. by Michał Krzykowski, Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2022, p. 307]

Visual artist, director, scriptwriter and storyteller, Agnieszka Polska explores interrelations present in ecological and technological transformation, and human relations with technology. While willingly setting all motifs to historical context, the artist blends archival sources with fiction. Her interests include the social responsibility of individuals, artists in particular, and their influence on developing historically significant narratives

– especially in the context of dynamic changes to the environment as a result of technological era-related processes. Polska is tireless in asking questions regarding the justifiability of making art in polycrisis times – yet ultimately identifying art as a source of hope for humanity in the face of blatant disintegration of identity and agency, and the ever-increasing dominance of machine-based thinking and creation. Key to her practice, the storytelling category is highlighted by the artist as impacting the process of forming social imagination and the course of history alike.

The narrative is a medium and spore of information in equal measure, the artist seeing it as a primary component, exemplar of the most pivotal man-made technologies. Easily and weightlessly, Agnieszka Polska reaches into contemporaneous philosophy, social and economic theories, psychoanalysis and history, and cybernetic vocabulary. She explores them all in terms of her narrative and artistic expression choices alike. Her practice observably owes much to i.a. Sara Ahmed's thought¹, politics of emotions and affects in particular. Reflections regarding measures used to define and validate the essence of artistic practice in this day and age are of equal importance, as are deliberations of art generating greater societal reverberation, not least in referencing Yuk Hui's concept of recursivity which he developed within contemporary critical philosophy of technology².

The artist has developed her own artistic language, at once hypnotising and aesthetically and ethically consistent. Motifs and implements present throughout her oeuvre include speculation, and the power of imagination and abstract thinking – in visions of the future and everyday strategies alike. Polska's art is seductive in its multi-layered structure, profundity and complexity – in the narrative, visual and audio strata, and technique. The artist applies new imaging technologies critically and ethically, using them in cryptic combination with more traditional means and media. Extending beyond traditional cinematography, her video works are enhanced with Artificial Intelligence capacities. She fills her film sets with actors and digital animation components, boundaries between the real and the virtual blurred. Using archives and open licence-sourced content in parallel, the artist blends popular culture texts with history of art symbolism.

In the narration stratum, Agnieszka Polska explores deeply contemporaneous themes of technological and ecological transformation and ways in which they intermingle, as well as human relations with technologies – never forgetting that all are well-grounded in history. Combined with the ambiguousness of pondering the future

1 See: S. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

2 According to Polska, "Recursivity is a term sourced in cybernetics, standing for a system's capacity for self-regulation. This system operates in a loop. Information and obstacles transmitted from the environment it encounters are forcing it to self-redefine every once in a while. I have recently been pondering that very subject: can the narrative we develop as people of film, art, or culture in general, be recursive in nature? – can it redefine the system and us as well?", 'Rekursywność działa w pętli. O tym, czy narracje tworzone przez sztukę mogą redefiniować rzeczywistość – z Agnieszką Polską rozmawia Joanna Glinkowska (Recursivity is Looped. Joanna Glinkowska in conversation with Agnieszka Polska on whether narratives developed by art can redefine reality)', NN6T, October 20th 2023, online: <https://nn6t.pl/2023/10/20/rekursywnosc-dziala-w-petli/>

and the healing potential of art, power over narration and imagination, such exact topics are palpable in works shown at the exhibition: *Demon's Brain*, *The Book of Flowers*, *Birds Fly Into Space* and *Two-Headed Horse*. All are magnetic and meditative, wondrous and dark, exaggerated and modest in equal measure. Far from direct in content, they invite critical perception, thought and dreams. They are a total, fully-fledged experience. Their power lies in the viewer's inability to respond with indifference.

Referencing one of the pieces on display, a large-scale four-channel video installation, the titular *Demon* might well evoke immediate associations with the devil, or an evil spirit. As it is, the phonetically similar *daemon* extends the work's interpretation considerably. In the English language, meanings of the word *daemon* (from the Greek: *daimon*) include "a supernatural being whose nature is intermediate between that of a god and that of a human being". In Latin of mediaeval Poland, *daemon* could mean an "evil spirit, devil", a "spirit, intangible being, superior to man", or a "pagan deity". One of the characters in the film says, "They call me a demon, because I am the process that runs in the background, eluding user control. I influence the natural course of things, showing distinct support for neither good nor evil" – this a reference to the word *demon* as employed in cybernetics and IT. The title of the work as well as the exhibition both draw on the many meanings of the key term.

The film *Demon's Brain* was inspired by 15th-century letters exchanged by Mikołaj Serafin, lessee of the Wieliczka and Bochnia salt mines, and his debtors and workers – in a suggestion that the way of operating that particular salt mine was a seedling of capitalism, appearing within the dominant feudal system. In aforesaid context, the titular demon universally references the "background" industrialisation and technological development processes, as well as all their negative outcomes (the ecological disaster included), yet with no specific historical connotations. The fictitious Messenger (artist figure?) may be the one to alter the course of history, against all odds.

In addition to the video projections, the installation also features texts displayed on the wall. These are compilations of quotes from Serafin's letters combined with excerpts from contemporary critical essays in the humanities and social sciences that address topics such as new technologies and ecological transformation.

"I will speak of the past, both yours and mine, the past of every human being and each of the 370,000 species of flowers in bloom every year. I will speak of the past we share with flowers, as the past and future are the same for us all. I will speak of need, misfortune, terror, desire and dreams – and of how they have been replaced with more need, misfortune, terror, desire and dreams" – thus reads the opening quote from the next work shown at the exhibition: *The Book of Flowers*. The first impression we may have is that of an educational film. Be that as it may, this – as the artist tells us – is actually a science-fiction narrative: a speculative story of plants and their interactions

3 'Daemon'. Merriam-Webster online dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/daemon>.

4 'Daemon'. Elektroniczny Słownik Łaciny Średniowiecznej w Polsce (E-Dictionary of Mediaeval Latin in Poland), <https://elexicon.scriptor.es.pl/pl/lemma/DAEMON>.

5 'Demon (IT)'. Wikipedia (translated from the Polish version), [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demon_\(informatyka\)](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demon_(informatyka)).

with mankind. In formal terms, the film combines new imaging technologies (including Artificial Intelligence tools, such as Stable Diffusion) with conventional cinematography (time-lapse animation) inspirations.

It goes without saying that the two most poetic works shown at the exhibition allow assorted contextual interpretation; consider philosophy, the Platonian allegory of the soul as a chariot pulled by a pair of winged horses, and the *Two-Headed Horse*; or scientific ponderings, the two *Birds Fly Into Space* prints, and the accompanying text by the artist: “For a bird to fly in outer space, it would have to hold its breath. It would have to fight Earth’s gravity. It would have to endure a temperature of -270°C . It would have to bathe in radiation, unprotected by Earth’s magnetic field (...)”. That said, I prefer to perceive both as praise of art, poetry, imagination and abstract thinking – and of openness to contingency, which may bring change in perspective.

Eliza Urwanowicz-Rojecka

WORKS ON DISPLAY

Agnieszka Polska

works 3. and 7. from ***Birds Fly Into Space*** series, 2024

ink print on archival paper, 115 × 115 cm, edycja / edition 1/5 + I AP

the author of the poetic text accompanying the works is Agnieszka Polska

Courtesy of the artist and Consonni Radziszewski gallery

Agnieszka Polska

The Book of Flowers, 2023

video, 9'30"

versions with Polish and English subtitles are shown in a loop (alternating)

Agnieszka Polska & Sam Samiee

Two-Headed Horse, 2021

video, 7'

the lyrics to the song featured in the video were written by Agnieszka Polska

versions with Polish and English subtitles are shown in a loop (alternating)

Agnieszka Polska

Demon's Brain, 2018

four-channel video installation, 7'24"

film by Agnieszka Polska, produced by Freunde der Nationalgalerie

versions with Polish and English subtitles are shown in a loop (alternating)

The video projection *Demon's Brain* is accompanied by excerpts from texts published in the exhibition catalogue *Agnieszka Polska. The Demon's Brain*, ed. Udo Kittelmann, Sven Beckstette, Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2018. The exhibition took place at the Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart in Berlin, September 27, 2018 – March 3, 2019

Contemporary sources:

Beate Xix, *Adventures of a Trans-Historical Guillotine*

Federica Bueti, *Touching Across Time*

Jan Sowa, *In the Grain of Salt*

Margarida Mendes, *Tactical Energetics*

Matteo Pasquinelli, *Artificial Intelligence, or the Demonization of Mental Labor*

Nora N. Khan, *Spiritual Debts*

Sven Beckstette, *If Not Us, Who? If Not Now, When?*

Tiziana Terranova, *Data Mining the Body of the Socius*

Archival sources:

Korespondencja żupnika krakowskiego Mikołaja Serafina z lat 1437–1459, red. Waldemar Bukowski, Tomasz Płóciennik, Anna Skolimowska, Kraków: Towarzystwo Naukowe „Societas Vistulana”, 2006. Mikołaj Serafin's correspondence is held in the collections of the National Library in Wrocław

ACCOMPANYING EVENTS

venue: Arsenal Gallery in Białystok, 2 Adam Mickiewicz Street

Friday, September 11th, 6 p.m.

Opening Night

Saturday, September 12th, 12 p.m.

Artist-curator guided tour of the exhibition

Tuesday until Saturday weekly, September 22nd – November 15th, 10 a.m. – 5 p.m.

“Man-U-facturers”. Do-it-yourself basket sets of creative projects for family and friends, designed to enhance the exhibition’s reception. Booking ahead not required. Included in the general admission ticket price

Wednesday, October 7th, 6 p.m.

“Long Live the APOCALYPSE”. A meeting with Jan Sowa, as part of the “New Eco-Philosophies of Art” programme. Moderated by Bartosz Kuźniarz

Sunday, November 15th, 12 p.m. and 4:30 p.m.

Closing curator guided tours

COLOPHON

curator: Eliza Urwanowicz-Rojecka

production and coordination: Ewa Chacianowska, Urszula Dąbrowska, Yulia Kostereva

exhibition visual identity: Tomasz Pawluczuk

exhibition installation: Maciej Zaniewski, Kacper Gorysz, Krzysztof Kazimierski, Kyle MacKenzie, Michał Małeczek, Mateusz Smorczewski

conservation supervision of the works on display at the exhibition: Martyna Dąbrowska-Wojteczek

communication and promotion: Gabriela Owdziej, Piotr Trypus

Polish to English and English to Polish translation: Anna Bergiel, Aleksandra Sobczak-Kövesi

editing and proofreading: Ewa Borowska, Agnieszka Lenkiewicz-Ołdytowska

photo documentation of the exhibition: Jan Szewczyk

education: Katarzyna Kida, Justyna Kołodko-Bietkał, Ksymena Wojtkowska

legal advice: Urszula Dubieniecka-Kiszło

administrative support for production: Aneta Szekalska

audience service and audience development coordinator: Maja MacKenzie

exhibition supervisors: Maja MacKenzie, Krzysztof Kazimierski, Małgorzata Kopciewska, Tomasz Lelo, Mateusz Smorczewski, Piotr Trypus, Ksymena Wojtkowska

multimedia solutions: Eidotech Polska

EIDOTECH • Polska

MEDIA PARTNERS

S Z U M



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MUNICIPAL CULTURAL INSTITUTION

G A L E R I A
Arsenal



Venue

Galeria Arsenał w Białymstoku

ul. Adama Mickiewicza 2

Exhibition open

Tue–Sun: 10 am–6 pm, last admission to exhibition is at 5.30 pm

entrance fee: 8 PLN, reduced 4 PLN, free admission on Thursdays

a detailed price list with a list of discounts is available at: galeriaarsenal.pl/zaplanuj-wizyte/

The Gallery accepts the Large Family Card, the Białystok Large Family Card and the Active Senior 60+ Card

Arsenal Gallery in Białystok offers free entry to exhibitions and events to all refugee persons

Галерея Арсенал у Білостоці пропонує всім біженцям безкоштовний вхід на виставки та заходи

Галерэя Арсенал у Беластоку прапануе ўсім бежанцам бясплатны ўваход на выставы і мерапрыемствы