

Agnieszka Polska, *The Demon's Brain*, Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin

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Agnieszka Polska

← *The Demon's Brain*, 2018.

Photo : Agnieszka Polska, courtesy of ŻAK |
BRANICKA, Berlin & Overduin & Co., LA

↑ *The Demon's Brain*, video still, 2018.

Photo : Agnieszka Polska, courtesy of ŻAK |
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Agnieszka Polska

The Demon's Brain

The Polish artist Agnieszka Polska, a recipient of the prestigious Preis der Nationalgalerie (2017), has been commissioned by the Hamburger Bahnhof to produce a multi-channel video installation. Taking on the entire main Historical Hall of the former train station, converted into Berlin's museum for contemporary art in the 1980s, *The Demon's Brain* is a *tour de force*. Based on fifteenth-century letters addressed to Mikołaj Serafin, the custodian of Poland's prized salt mines, Polska tells the fictitious story of the messenger entrusted with the task of delivering the letters. On his way, the young man gets separated from his horse and encounters a demon with whom he has a life-changing conversation that climaxes with the burning of the letters. While the story is set in the fifteenth century, the demon's monologue pertains to our current moment, addressing contemporary economic, social, ecological, and technological issues. The demon explains to the messenger that he has the power to change the course of history; that "it's not too late." These last words resonate in the space of the gallery like a critical alarm.

The narrative is divided across four large screens that loop the same scenes but each is synchronized in order to harmoniously narrate the story. In this way *The Demon's Brain* is simultaneously musical, theatrical, and performative. The screens are installed in such a way that prompts the viewer to move around, watching one screen while listening to another, or resolutely chasing the narrator from one screen to the next. On the fourth screen, the camera steadily moves into the interior of a salt mine, drawing the visitor incessantly deeper in the earth. On an adjacent wall, excerpts of the original letters to Serafin are mixed with commentaries on the various issues raised in the work, taken from essays by Sven Beckstette, Federica Buetti, Nora N. Khan, Margarida Mendes, Matteo Pasquinelli, Jan Sowa, and Tiziana Terranova. Each of these

authors were commissioned to write for the catalogue of the exhibition, a document that functions as an extension of the video installation, more than a complement to the exhibition.

Polska relies on storytelling as a methodology to address the difficult questions of individual responsibility and the feeling of powerlessness in the face of overwhelming crises. The work asks whether or not one has the power to affect change and influence the complex processes that operate around us. By its very structure, her work promotes plural perspectives—both via the splitting of the narrative into multiple screens and via the collaborative effort of the catalogue, which she has synthesized into her own perspective for the wall text. Polska's work also calls for the reclaiming of folklore in this moment. The work highlights how folklore is being reengineered by digital technologies, re-activating collectivism in the face of an economic system that has made us profoundly self-centred. *The Demon's Brain* argues for new models of storytelling, ones that consider more than a single perspective, ones that require us to be active listeners. Because it is not too late for messengers.

Anaïs Castro

Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin

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