



Agnieszka Polska: The New Sun

27 February to 20 June 2021







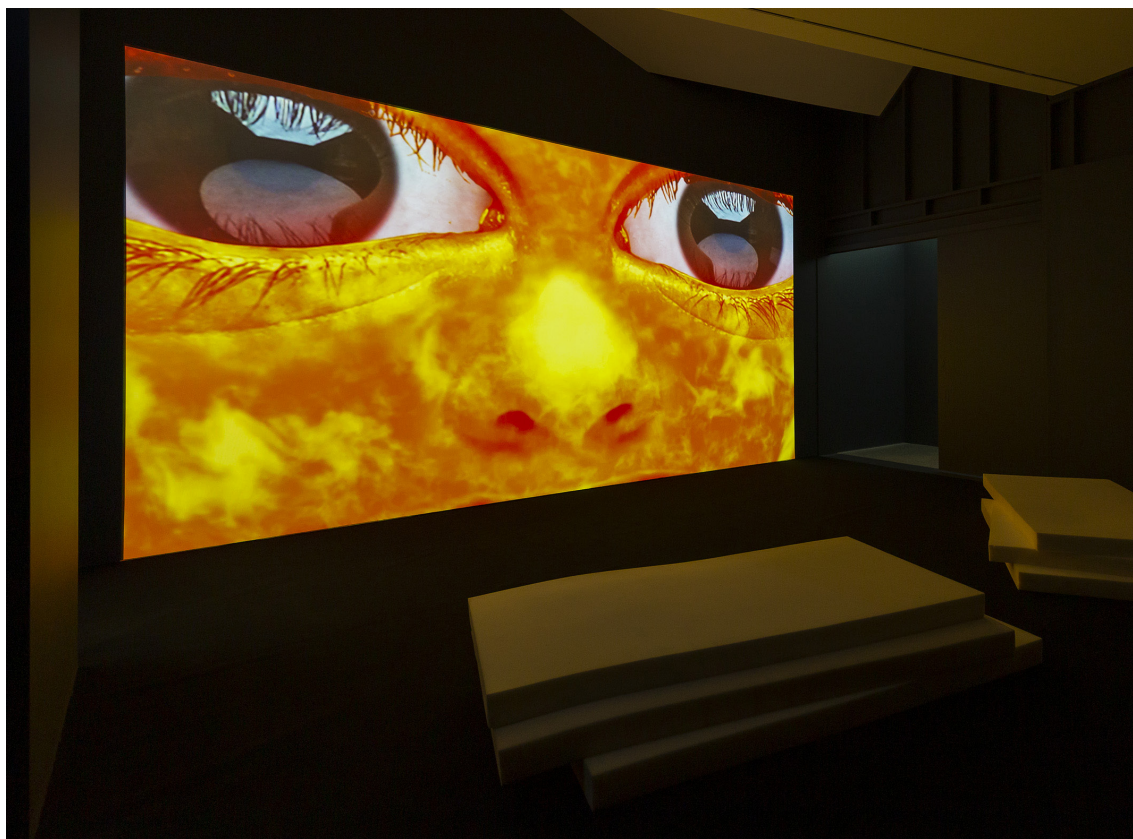
Part of the tremendous appeal of Berlin-based Polish artist Agnieszka Polska's digital animation *The New Sun* 2017 lies in the claim it stakes in the popular imagination. The work features an immersive projection of the sun personified as an animated character addressing the audience—planet Earth—with scientific theory, poetry, hackneyed jokes and crooning love songs. Projected at an imposing scale, it is arresting and visually rich, and its graphics are alluring. There is obvious relish to be had in its droll humour, but it nevertheless strikes an intimate chord as the sun casts an affectionate gaze over the Earth from afar. In short: it is highly relatable.

In content, the work's relevance is similarly immediate. Polska's benevolent sun bears witness to the increasing global threats of environmental and humanitarian calamity the Earth faces. Imagining a scenario in which something catastrophic happens, the sun speculates that whatever might follow would be built on the words it speaks. Later, the protagonist deliberates on the forces that 'dissolve [our] little body'—our warm evenings becoming cold, the air turning to poison, our economies melting, and crops rotting—all as it looks on. In reality, these are ideas that are becoming less speculative and gaining in urgency over time. The work reads grimly differently, for instance, from its first presentation in 2017, as the winning entry to that year's prestigious Hamburger Bahnhof Prize for artists under 40, to its post-COVID premiere in Australia at Heide Museum of Modern Art. But while the themes remain both germane and sophisticated, the work's reference point is a children's poem

from 1889, 'What the Sun has Seen', by Polish poet Maria Konopnicka, that describes the daily goings-on of a peasant family from the aerial viewpoint of the sun. This lightness in tone keeps the 'message' somehow unexpectedly buoyant.

The New Sun premieres at Heide as part of PHOTO2021 International Festival of Photography. While not strictly photography in the traditional sense, the work is derived from Polska's decade-long experimentation with the limits of photo media, although she now works predominantly with digital imagery. An image surplus in the twenty-first century has seen contemporary artists increasingly use photography as found material rather than technique and evolve the practice of digitally manipulating pre-existing sources. Likewise, Polska's process starts with images in the public domain. Here, a photograph found online of a child's face formed the basis for *The New Sun*'s central motif. Using a method of animation she has derived from the cut-up technique—and that she still calls photo-collage, only now effected in the digital—Polska employs facial recognition software, CGI, photographic textures and effects to manipulate and animate her sources.

Polska also produces digital prints that more closely resemble what we comfortably call photography, but they are two-dimensional images distilled from this process and not created 'in camera' in the traditional sense. Where software now has the ability to mimic the functions of a camera and post-production effects of a darkroom, these stills and animations represent a newer kind of technologically mediated vision that reflects our increasing entanglement with the digital.





In the context of a festival about photography, this kind of work inevitably raises questions about how computer-based techniques like digital animation relate to more traditional categories of photography and video (what defines a photograph, for example, now that cameras can be computers and computers can be cameras?). It nevertheless comfortably falls into a class of works engaging with photo-based media in newer ways arising out of recent developments in technology and online communication. Polska's visual language, too, derives in part from lives lived online, referencing a culture of emoji, GIFs and memes that have become the symbolic currency of our new modes of communication.

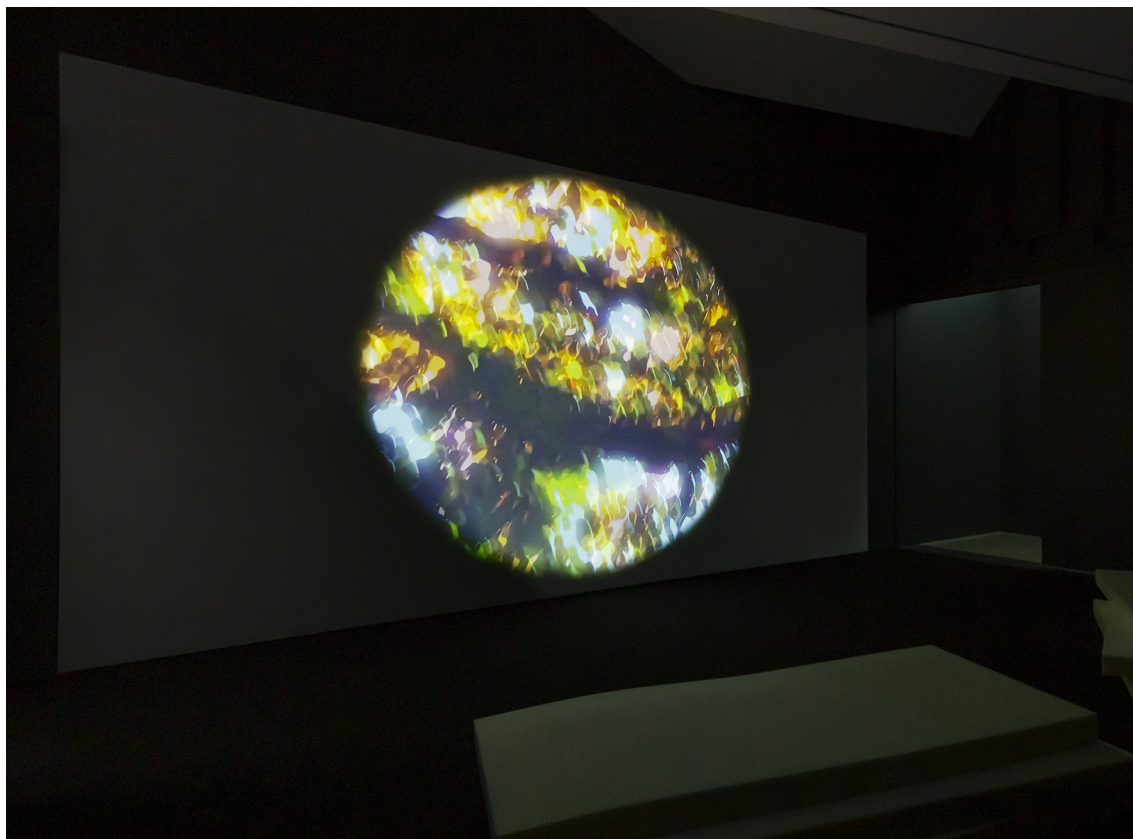
Simulation, augmentation and the virtual are terms we increasingly associate with contemporary image-making technologies. Equally, new technologies influence the way we understand today's images and their complex relationship with our realities. Effecting a poetically approximate artificial intelligence, the sun in Polska's animation generates a compassionate connection with the audience via simulated human emotions, pledging from the outset that 'This film is about love'. The immense gleaming eyes and baby-faced features of the sun enhance the effect—exploiting a psychological bias in humans toward childlike looks, which we subconsciously associate with qualities of honesty, naivety and trustworthiness.

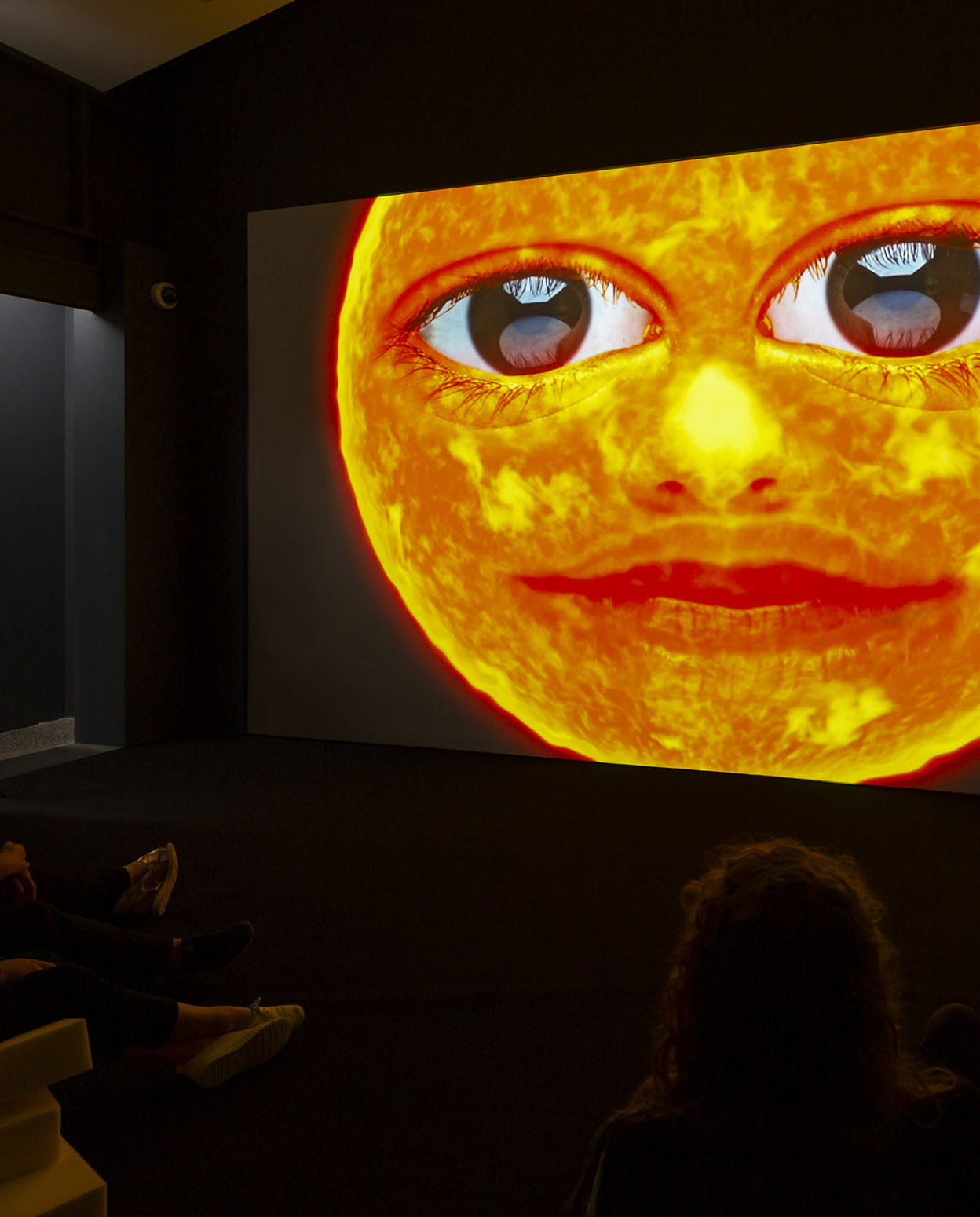
This *influence* over the viewer is augmented by the inclusion of ASMR-like auditory prompts and seductive, surrealistic visual stimuli (rhythm, repetition) projected at a physically overwhelming scale. In keeping with several other works by Polska for which language is key, *The New*

Sun's poetic narrative plays an important role in enhancing the somnolent–sensual mood. Together, these elements are intended to entice the audience toward a mesmeric or meditative state of immersion that harbours an almost subconscious emotional appeal. Polska understands this as having a real-world physical impact on the viewer. It is perhaps significant to note that these are techniques wielded with increasing sophistication by groups that trade in persuasion, such as advertising, organised religion and increasingly, politics.

PHOTO2021's festival theme of truth is a notion Polska has long toyed with in different guises, teasing out the kinds of trust we place in what we see—often despite deliberate layers of artifice or use of fictionalising narrative devices such as myth, rumour and confabulation. So too, the nature of truth and reality are complex ideas in *The New Sun*. Bearing witness to the Earth's devastation and the collapse of our human systems, Polska's sun tunes in to the kinds of generalised popular anxieties that are being hotly debated in our era of 'post-truth' politics.

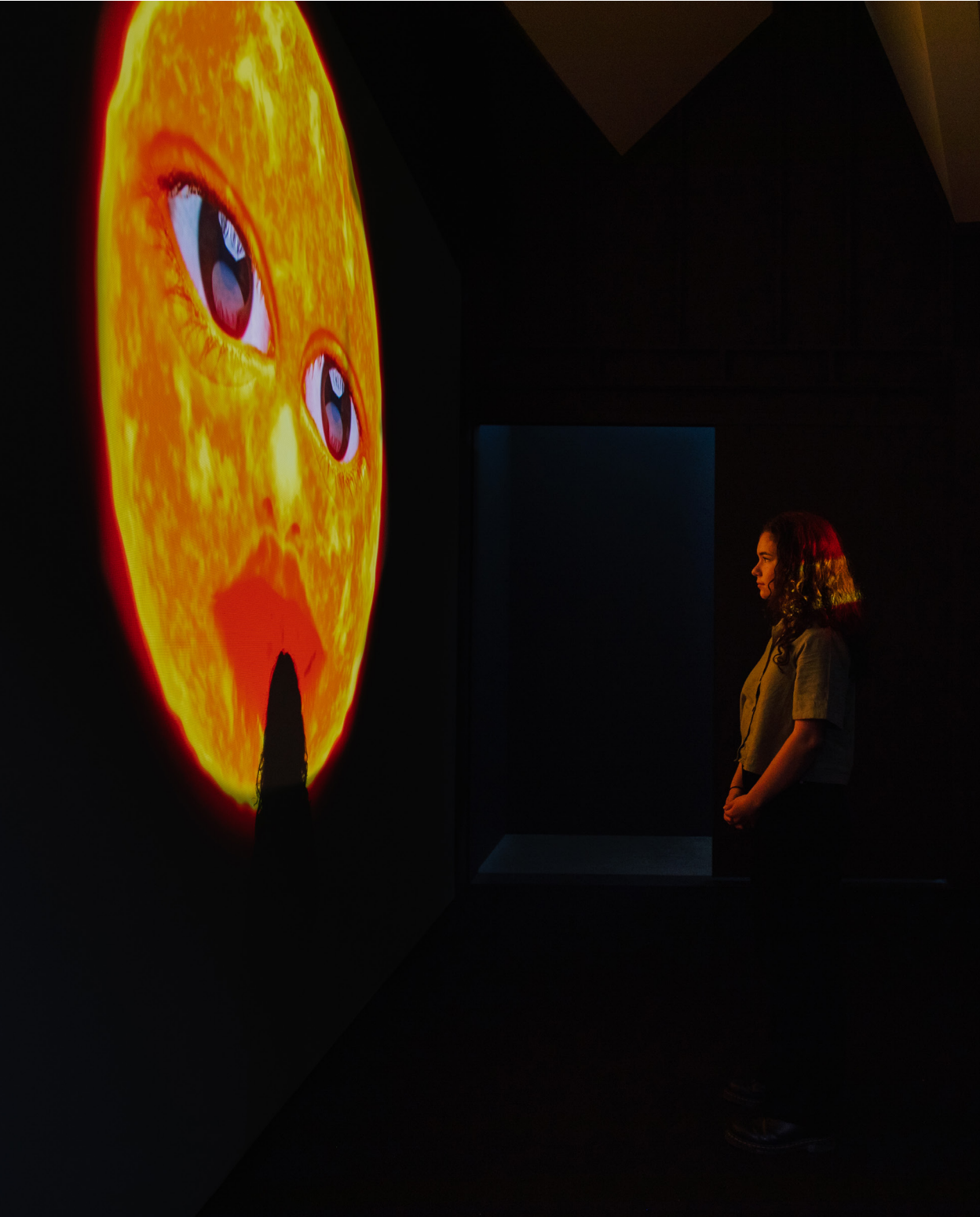
The narrative of *The New Sun* juxtaposes the languages of lyric poetry and popular comedy routines with ideas from quantum theory: specifically, the seemingly unreal—seemingly *poetic*—premise that through the very act of observation, a witness can affect observed reality. Chronological time in *The New Sun* takes on an elastic quality as the narrative moves seamlessly between cosmic, historical and subjective scales. The sun renders this explicit: 'We don't share the same temporality baby'.





The suggestion appears that for Polska, reality is a multiple and complex mechanism that can be understood from various perspectives or several at once. Though far from prescriptive, *The New Sun* carries a sense of this that undercuts the more levelled, politically leveraged idea of truth as a simple dichotomy of 'real' or 'fake'; of facts as deniable for political gains in the current climate. It reveals a complexity that is reduced in political debates around the very issues *The New Sun* tackles, namely increasing states of climate emergency, the rise of nationalistic sentiment, inequality, and humanitarian crises.





List of Works

Agnieszka Polska

The New Sun 2017

HD video, 12:19 min

Courtesy Zak Branicka, Berlin
and Overduin & Co., Los Angeles.

© the artist

Biography

Agnieszka Polska (b. 1985, Lublin, Poland) lives and works in Berlin. She has held solo exhibitions at the New Museum in New York, the National Gallery in Prague, Nottingham Contemporary in the UK, and the Salzburger Kunstverein in Austria. Polska's work has been included in exhibitions and screenings at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington DC, the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow, the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, the 19th Biennale of Sydney, the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, the 13th Istanbul Biennial, the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, and the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin. In 2016, Polska's work was featured in the 11th Gwangju Biennale in Korea and in 2017 at the 57th Venice Biennale.

Heide Museum of Modern Art

7 Templestowe Road, Bulleen Victoria 3105, Australia

T + 61 3 9850 1500

heide.com.au

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Curated by Brooke Babington

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Design: Jessica Pitcher

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Agnieszka Polska, *The New Sun*, 2017, c-type print, 90 x 70 cm.
Image courtesy of Zak Branicka, Berlin and Overduin & Co., Los Angeles

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Agnieszka Polska: The New Sun (installation view), Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, 2021. Photograph: Clytie Meredith.
Image courtesy of Heide Museum of Modern Art

All other images:

Agnieszka Polska: The New Sun (installation view), Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, 2021. Photograph: Christian Capurro.
Image courtesy of Heide Museum of Modern Art

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