

UNION PACIFIC
17 Goulston Street
London E1 7TP (UK)
+44 (0) **207 247 61 61**

AGNEISZKA POLSKA

Perfect Lives

11 November – 12 December 2020

Preview: 11 November

In a dark side street off Whitechapel Road, birds are singing and waves are crashing, misplaced sounds for a crisp and foggy November evening in London. Apace with these natural harmonies, follows a melody of three digital piano keys, on a loop. Similar to a waiting song for the menu of a computer game. All together they appear to suspend time.

There, in time out, is Agnieszka Polska's Perfect Lives projected onto Union Pacific's window. It unravels a slow-motion collage of videos in soft textures and hues of colour. Like a portal to another world, we watch images of people fading into each other. Whilst we are standing there in pause, arrested by the film – arrested by the lockdown – we witness them socializing in groups, studying in schools, playing games in parks, going to the doctor, playing with their children, looking at the time, looking at the sea, making pottery, hanging out with the cat, writing on the computer, and so on. But there is something about them that is quite different from us.

The video tells the story from the perspective of Galileo, an American automatic space probe that studied the planet Jupiter and its moons in the 1990s. It starts with white text on a black background:

"In 1990, the Galileo spacecraft was passing Earth on her way to Jupiter.

Scientists asked: can you detect if there is life on Earth?

She said:"

As the depiction of human life unfolds, there is nothing from the 90s in those images, yet they don't seem to be from our present reality either. They are performative, like an advertisement for western life.

It seems odd that the Galileo spacecraft could not detect exploitation, poverty, war... as well as other aspects of human existence that give a bad name to our species. It makes up a biased archive of human existence, where many things seem to have been lost in time.

Something about the detachment between the film and the viewer keeps challenging the idea of chronologic time. Perhaps the 1990s from the video are not set in the past but the future. Because spaceships are futuristic, scientists are futuristic, and Perfect Lives is there archiving life on Earth as something that has been and gone. Perfect Lives could be a PowerPoint presentation made by an alien-human-cyborg at Galileo, giving a brief about the old Earth-human's way of living. Similar to showing a live motion presentation on the now extinct Dinosaurs. The video is somewhat speculative and romanticised – it imagines human life from an alien perspective, as if life on Earth had been extinct, but looked upon dearly.

Back in the 1990s, those were the perfect days, at the peak of economic growth, consumerism was exhilarating, people believed in great futures to come. They were still unconcerned by the potential exhaustion of Earth's resources. They were naive and oblivious, but guilt-free. This is what makes Polska's people so different from us.

It is inevitable to compare Perfect Lives to our contemporary reality. Living through a global pandemic is not as exciting as in sci-fi films. For some, there is a lot of waiting around, isolation, and boredom, for others there is pain, loss and mourning. When living under restrictive lockdown rules and paranoid sanitization, every move is hyperconscious, it is hard to be carefree. The undertone of the film is eerie because of the haunting awareness of the fragility of humankind and our Planet.

Nevertheless, Perfect Lives is also magical: it pauses time, time-travels, takes us up to Space, and back onto the pavement of Goulston Street, where this portal is situated. The suspense interrupting such perfect lives, theirs and ours, offers a canny standpoint from which to consider our strange times.

- By Mariana Lemos

Agnieszka Polska (b. 1985, Lublin, Poland) lives and works in Berlin, she studied Graphics at the Academy of Fine Arts, Krakow, PL, 2010 and at the University of the Arts (Class of Hito Steyerl), Berlin, DE, 2008.

She has had solo exhibitions at FRYE, Seattle (2020); Mobile Dome by Berliner Festspiele, Berlin (2019); Hamburger Bahnhof Museum, Berlin (2018); New Museum, New York (Screen Series, 2016); Nottingham Contemporary, UK (2014); Salzburger Kunstverein, Austria (2013); and the Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw (2012), among others. Her videos have also been included in screenings and group exhibitions at the Centre Pompidou (2018), 57th Venice Biennale (2017), the 11th Gwangju Biennale (2016), Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC (2016); Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow (2015); the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2015); the 19th Biennial of Sydney (2014); Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2014); the 13th Istanbul Biennial (2013); Tate Modern, London (2012); Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw (2012); the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (2012); and KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2011).

Exhibition Hours
Wednesday–Saturday
12pm–6pm

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further information.

