



agnieszka polska | cuckoo

Cuckoo

**Agnieszka Polska** (b. 1985, Lublin) lives and works in Warsaw and Athens. In her multimedia practice encompassing video, animation and photo-based works, she employs found materials and historical imagery which she adapts and recontextualizes to create subtle, slow-paced narratives. Most recently, she has had solo exhibitions at the New Museum, New York (2016) and Nottingham Contemporary (2014), and her videos have been included in screenings and group exhibitions at the 11th Gwangju Biennale (2016), the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC (2016); the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow (2015); the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2015); as well as the 19th Biennial of Sydney (2014) and the 13th Istanbul Biennial (2013).

Agnieszka Polska  
Ayn (LP), 2017  
ink print on archival paper glued on dibond  
31,5 x 31,5 cm  
Ed. 1 of 5



Federica Bueti

## **Cuckoo Calling**

And she said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. She separated light from darkness. She gave a name to each little thing: she called “building” a building; “cigarette” a cigarette; “market” a market. She left nothing to chance. She created man and woman. She gave them intelligence, ambition, and power. Yet, she soon had to realise that human beings are not born equal, thus she grouped them into winners and losers. She separated the good from the evil, the weak from the strong, the selfish from the selfless, the world from the underworld. She gave humans religion and astronomy. She gave them the Law. She taught them how to value their existence, and to keep themselves occupied with timeless, universal problems, rather than with the random trivia of the day. Then, the day came when this perfectly built system collapsed. The imminent disaster was announced by the call of a cuckoo.

Was it something she said that caused the alarm to set off? Or rather something she did not say? Some words give the writer the power of legitimacy. Words are powerful triggers. They can shift mountains, move people and planets. They are spellbinding, although they are meant to break the spell of magical thought. Some voices speak with the power of facts and figures. They tell how things are and how they ought to be looked at. They seem to describe objective realities, or so we believe. The good writer—whether a fiction writer, a law-maker, a politician or an art critic—knows what the power of words is: to bring something into existence by naming it, to shape opinions, or to manipulate others by creating powerful systems of beliefs. Words do create realities. They mould illusions. A skillful writer, or an expert politician, might make those illusions become real. Don’t you agree?

In 1968, on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary release of *The Fountainhead*, the novelist Ayn Rand writes in the preface, “I want to see, real, living, and in the hours of my own days, that glory I create as an illusion. I want it real. I want to know that there is someone, somewhere, who wants it, too. Or else what is the use of seeing it, and working, and burning oneself for an impossible vision?” Indeed, why would one want to write a book or make art if not to turn an intuition, an illusion or dream into reality? In the preface to her book, Rand explains that she had felt so much contempt for the state of “things as they are” that she desired nothing more than to “move a step farther towards things as they ought to be.” Thus, she used fiction to create the prototype of the perfect human being.

How did the world according to Ayn Rand look like? Set in New York of the late 1920s, *The Fountainhead* revolves around the story of an ambitious architect, Howard Roark, and his battle to affirm his personal vision of a modern world in which individual happiness and technological progress dominate. The novel’s title refers to Roark’s idea that individual creators are “fountainheads” of civilisation. He is one of such individuals, fighting against the status quo. Unlike the corrupt businessmen and the sneaky, manipulative media tycoons he is surrounded by, he is the embodiment

of what Rand believed to be the ideal man: hard-working, rational, unemotional, profoundly individualist, independent, and career-driven. Contrary to his colleagues, Roark doesn't accept to follow popular ideas to become a successful architect, nor does he use his influence to promote his personal agenda. Roark's only belief is individual happiness achieved by means of rational calculation. His anti-establishment sentiments and charisma are the ingredients of his success. Doesn't this sound familiar? Today, Rand's fantasies have become real.

In a prophetic manner, *The Fountainhead* announced the birth of a hero mirroring Ayn Rand's own life and value system. It helped her promote her beliefs in the primacy of the individual and the importance of reason: anything worth thinking of is the product of reason and logic, she once said. Despite her use of factual language and the teacherly tone of her writing, Rand's works resemble a spiritual parable rather than, as one would expect, a scientific treatise. Ironically, despite her belief in the individual and her aversion for any form of collectivism, Rand's ambitions essentially boiled down to creating a community of followers, a "superhuman" society whose religion was logic and rationality. While she wrote ambitious philosophical texts, her ideas became popular through her fiction. It is not by chance then that the protagonists of her books as well as the ideas that her fiction promoted, influenced millions of North Americans, and, as Adam Curtis shows in his BBC documentary series, *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* (2011), became especially widespread in Silicon Valley. What must have been particularly appealing about Rand's writing is her authoritative voice, "the voice of reason." She speaks like a prophet delivering a scientific utopia grounded on something "real" rather than on outdated "ideals."

The immense popularity of *The Fountainhead* makes Rand a key figure in understanding the power of myth-making in shaping the modern self and its relation to others. The figure of Rand appears in Agnieszka Polska's new body of works. The artist has made a series of prints entitled *Bitter Tears of Ayn Rand* (2017), and a video animation, *My Little Planet* (2016), which, although not directly connected to the Russian-American novelist, seem to have been inspired by Rand's prophetic voice. Made using images found online and digitally manipulated by the artist, the video-animation presents a dystopic scenario. The opening scene shows an ashtray full of half-smoked cigarettes against a cosmic backdrop. It's a starry night, and the rhythmic call of a cuckoo is heard in the distance. This must be the planet. An inscription appears in the middle of the image. We are told that on the little planet, time is measured by the passage of "astronomical objects" across the sky: a minute is measured by following the elliptical path of a cigarette's butt; the concentric orbit of a used sticking plaster gives us the year, whereas the discovery of a bottle-cap has made possible to measure the hour. We also learn that despite society's effort to bring order to the planet, things do not seem to work how they ought to: total eclipses of the sun happen every half-minute creating confusion among birds; the orbit of the bottle's cap is decaying and the cap is moving away from the planet. In the face of the many attempts at creating a fully functional system governed by accepted norms, the planet is in fact entirely dysfunctional.

The surreal story is told in a dry, factual tone. The language employed reminds of a popular science documentary, but with a surreal spin. As we read the text, the ashtray littered with cigarette

butts, perhaps a metaphor for the disastrous conditions of our own planet Earth, morphs into a judge's hammer, and then into a dumb face of a wannabe businessman. The young man smiles, and the more he smiles the more his smile becomes grotesque. The cuckoo keeps calling, the almost imperceptible movement of the morphing images contrasts with the accelerated reality that the text describes. Day changes to night every half-hour but nothing substantial seems to change. Is this how the world would look like were the dreams of unconstrained capitalism to be realised?

Polska's animation envisions a post-apocalyptic scenario in which something new, something spooky and potentially more diabolic than capitalism itself has begun. It's the beginning of time. Everything starts all over again, but not necessarily for the better. When God created the world and the Law, he brought order to infernal chaos in less than seven days. In seven minutes and fifty-six seconds, *My Little Planet* plunges the world back into a permanent state of emergency. In this state, surprisingly, it is not hysteria that prevails, but a sense of general dumbness.

Polska plays with a pseudo-scientific version of the myth of creation, adopting its form and language. Yet, unlike Rand's, the tone of her story quickly goes from prophetic to pathetic with the effect of undermining the myth's authority. The artist exposes the denial of one reality in favour of a more convenient version of it, suiting the political agenda of its maker— no matter how factual the claim may be. Mythologies are powerful political tools. Heroes inspire dreams of betterment, revenge, ideals of national unity or personal success. These dreams might become lived realities and inspire real actions. The little planet might be the place in which the protagonist of *The Fountainhead* lives, and from which he so desperately wants to emancipate. Yet, it might as well be the reality he himself created; the disastrous outcome of his rational calculations and radical individualism.

The story that Agnieszka Polska tells is as absurd as Rand's pretences to objectivity and rationality in the face of her delirious visions. Yet, the scenario that the artist portrays is as real as the character of Roark, created by the ambitious and diabolic fantasies of the writer. Rand's superhuman man is the kind of individual we are all familiar with: it is the Trump, the Berlusconi, the wannabe businessman, the Google manager or the white, middle-class, disenfranchised hipster who lives on his/her little planet and works twenty-four seven on his new start-up. There is a little bit of Roark in each of us. So, what?

What's great about Agnieszka Polska's work is that, unlike the prophetic tone of Rand's writing, she takes a stance without teaching anyone a lesson. It is precisely the claim to authority and the attitude of the person who tells what's right and what's wrong that Polska's video-animation so rigorously mocks.

The series of prints entitled *Bitter Tears of Ayn Rand* (2017) is also a mockery of sort. What if Rand had regretted her beliefs and theories? What if she had renounced to portray herself as an unemotional woman? She would become very emotional, and shed bitter tears, as the title of the series ironically suggests. Drops of sweat moist Rand's large forehead in *Ayn (LP)* (2017), a portrait of the novelist resembling a record cover made in a futuristic and proto-fascist style reminiscent of Lange's *Metropolis*. In Polska's prints, Rand looks sad, hallucinated. The *Leisure Time of Firearm* (2016) shows a woman looking down the barrel of a gun. Is it Rand's eye? Does she feel under pressure to prove herself wrong? Does she feel an oppressive sense of failure now that her fantasies have

become reality? What has happened to her dreams of reason and individual happiness? Alas, Rand seems to have lost her own reason. In another print, *Bitter Tears of Ayn Rand 1* (2017), Polska imagines that coloured teardrops have fallen onto a page where a quotation from Rand reads: “I am not primarily an advocate of capitalism, but of egoism; and I am not primarily an advocate of egoism, but of reason. If one recognizes the supremacy of reason and applies it consistently, all the rest follows.” Tears fall on the paper blurring Rand’s writing. The prophet’s tears momentarily suspend the claim to power inherent to the prophecy. Rand suddenly appears more human. Yet her humanity doesn’t make her visions look any less diabolic. Rand can cry, but she cannot change things. She is stuck in the role she had created for herself, and there is nothing she can do about it.

Agnieszka Polska’s humour is dark. She presents scary situations from which there is no escape other than silent laughter. Her stories neither propose a happy ending, nor do they lead to a tragic finale. Bizarre as it is, life goes on, days are followed by nights, and the cigarette butts keep revolving in the sky.

**Federica Buetti** is an art critic and editor based in Berlin. She is editor of *...ment*, a journal for contemporary culture, art and politics ([www.journalment.org](http://www.journalment.org)), and member of the curatorial team at *SAVVY Contemporary*, Berlin. Her writing has appeared in several journals, critical anthologies and monographs. She was educated at the University of Milan, and is currently a PhD candidate in the Critical Writing Programme at the Royal College of Art, London.





Agnieszka Polska  
Bitter Tears of Ayn Rand 2, 2016  
ink print on archival paper glued on dibond  
60 x 80 cm  
Ed. 1 of 5





Agnieszka Polska  
Bitter Tears of Ayn Rand 1, 2016  
ink print on archival paper glued on dibond  
60 x 80 cm  
Ed. 1 of 5





Crystal ashtray with cigarettes




Agnieszka Polska  
My little Planet (Film), 2016  
HD video  
7' 57"  
Ed. 1 of 5












ANOTHER UNIT  
OF TIME IS  
A YEAR.



AND AS ONE YEAR IS  
THE AVERAGE LIFESPAN  
OF A HUMAN,



HOURS  
DIDN'T HAVE  
A FIXED LENGTH







THE BOTTLE CAP'S  
ORBIT IS DECAYING,



IN THIS CASE  
THE HOUR  
WILL NOT MATCH



THE NORMS  
WITHIN OUR SOCIETY,



AT THE MOMENT THERE  
IS NO LEGITIMATE WAY OF MEASURING  
SECONDS. SOME PEOPLE JUST REPEAT:  
"DISCOMPOSE, DISCOMPOSE, DISCOMPOSE",  
AS PRONUNCIATION OF THIS WORD  
TAKES EXACTLY ONE SECOND.

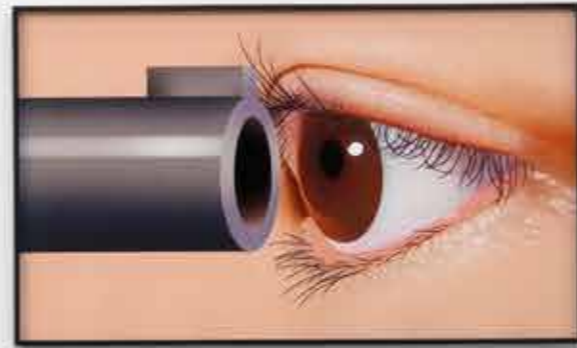


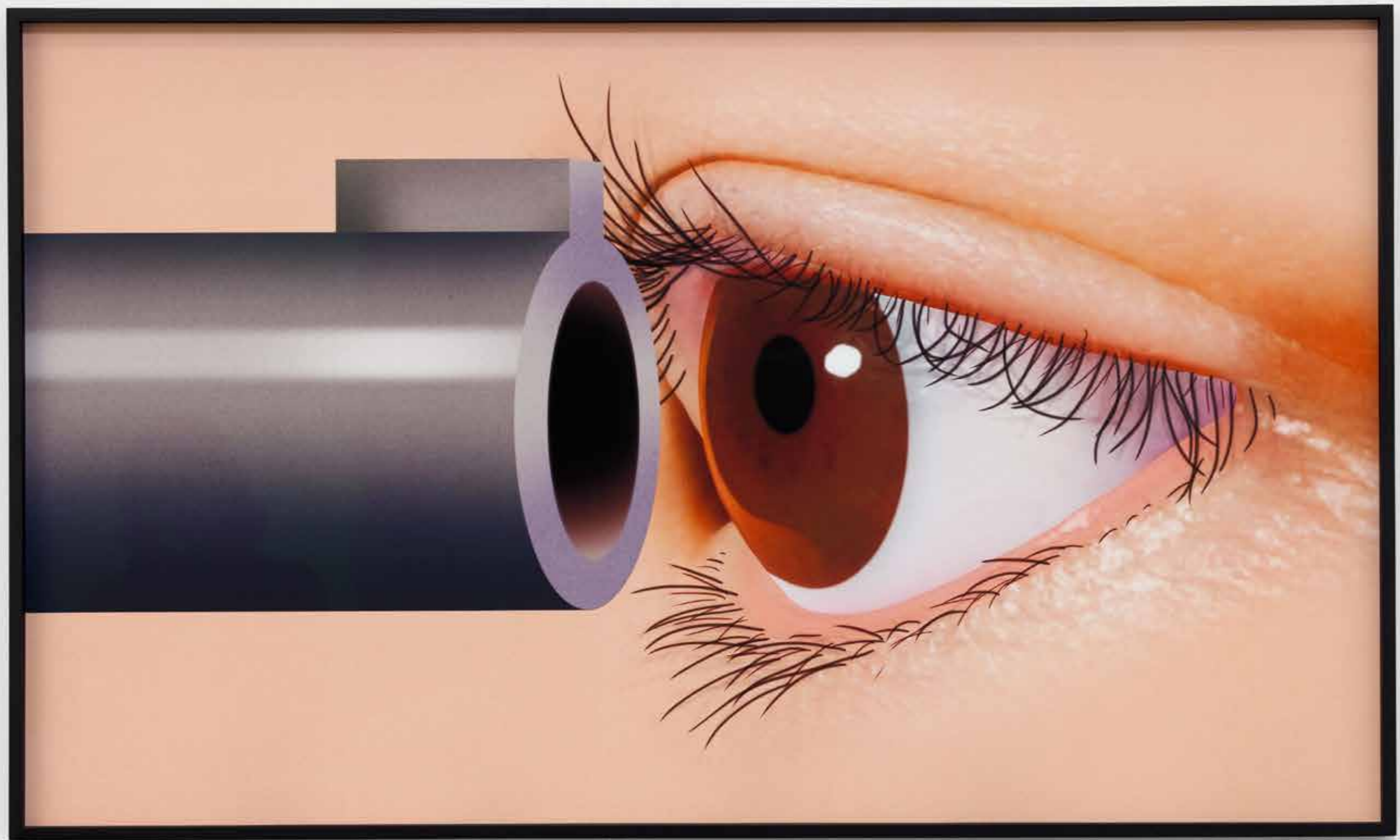
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PATRZY-  
LO









Agnieszka Polska  
Leisure Time of Firearm, 2016  
ink print on archival paper glued on dibond  
60 x 100 cm  
Ed. 1 of 5

KASIA  
MICHALSKI

G a l l e r y

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