

GALERIE FONS WELTERS

Sarah Księżka

Personization

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What it means to be a human being is a question that has vexed thinkers for millennia; of late, though, it's become increasingly urgent. We have, for example, competitors, and learning about them – while we're building them – asks us to reconsider our morphing selves. An artificial intelligence is a mechanism acting on all the information and stimuli that's been fed into it. Humans, meanwhile, remain not only driven to some degree by residual animal instincts but, thanks to networked computing and ubiquitous devices and peripherals, become daily more and more automated and controllable from outside. We check our phones when we don't really want to, we do dumb things online to get attention (or, really, dopamine), we're triggered a lot. Dive, if you dare these days, into a fractious agora like X (formerly Twitter) and you find an infinity of people who are *wound up* – a phrase that of course originates in clockwork mechanisms – and others who know how to wind them up, all of which functions within the mechanism that is the site itself. Currently it's very easy to find yourself involuntarily agitated by something or other while interacting with, or consuming content by, an entity online whose actual humanity is unverifiable. We're converging, us and them. For better or worse – probably it's going to be a bit of both – it's a hinge moment for the species.

How, though, to image this strangeness and not reduce or trivialise it? How to make our era graspable, thinkable? Painting, for all its fundamental analogue-ness, turns out to be appropriate because it places us in the cloud of purposeful unknowing, of duplicity and simultaneity, that is painterly space itself. A figure like the one in Sarah Księżka's *Amygdala* exists in a netherworld of polyvalence: it feels like a range of humanoids, and eras, at once, from steampunk to now. Maybe this thing is a Victorian automaton: it does, after all, have a winding key inserted in its moonbeam-bright head, which nevertheless seems so full of what might be feelings that they're overspilling into the galactic background. But maybe whatever emotions are being alluded to here are just deterministic responses too, like unromantic people or behavioural scientists say that being in love is. Below the head, we see the figure's mechanics, or circuitry, which are either analogues for the cloudiness of feeling or assertions that feeling is just mechanics. Is this you, or a bot, or both? Could you be friends?

Księżka bestows the useful neologism *personization* on this quietly epochal transformation, happening to humans and AIs simultaneously – machining 'us' as it softens and enriches and gives intelligential turbo-boosts to 'them'. The concept skirts evolving empathy for nonhuman actors and for our shoved-around selves. What it does not do is advocate placing one's head in the sand and hoping that technology just, like, goes away. Księżka argues instead for strategic interfacing within her facture: she begins with digital composing, which allows her a great deal of control; then, when she paints, she allows accident and improvisation – something that people are very good at, in terms of deciding when an accident is 'good', computers less so even when they're programmed for algorithmic chaos – in a best-of-both-worlds scenario. (The mechanics

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embedded in her compositions virtually advertise how the works are made.) The person is still running the show, and the person has access to poetics. In *I am not what you think you are*, for example, Księska generates a cartoon haiku of egotistical self-differentiation for our blurry times. Four identical-looking marbles sit on a train seat; one of them, perhaps observing itself reflected, thinks it's something better. Is it? The painting says we can't know; it's in the eye of the beholder, who might be wrong.

In *Untitled*, Księska closes in on the lower part of a face. Her sort-of X-ray technique superimposes onto these very mortal features an inward geometry of nested circles and stars. Around the mouth, things turn chaotic and hard to parse, yet there's a sense that something is either being said and we can't quite hear it or that, in the stilled space of painting, something is perpetually and suspensefully *about* to be said, to be clarified, shaken out. That feels, if anything, like the acutest possible summa of where we're at. The newest media couldn't convey it, and nor could the oldest one alone. In wrangling between the two, Księska pinpoints where we are; as for *what* we are, and what will become of us? We'll find out.

Martin Herbert

Sarah Księska (1992, Germany) lives and works in Vienna. From 2018-2020 she was a participant at De Ateliers, Amsterdam. She has had solo exhibition at among others Ramiken, New York, US; Tobias Naehring, Leipzig, DE and Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam, NL. Her work was part of exhibitions at Fitzpatrick Gallery, Paris, FR; Beacon, Munich, DE; Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, PL; Yaby, Madrid, ES.