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An interview with Agnieszka Kurant

by Jason Farago (Fall 2015)

Agnieszka Kurant. *Air Rights*. 2014. Electromagnets, wood, foam, powdered stone, pigments. Photo: Jean Vong.
All images courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.

All that is solid melts into the cloud. The art of Agnieszka Kurant maps a world tipping from the real to the virtual — a place of offshore bank accounts, leveraged air rights, digital microfactories, social media specters. But her art declines to represent the hurly-burly of contemporary economics, or to illustrate the contradictions of digital life. It embodies those contradictions instead, in strange and unlikely forms: the labor of Wikipedia writers, for example, might take the shape of a glistening termite mound.

Kurant was born in 1978, in the Polish city of Łódź, and she studied at the city's renowned film academy before moving to London, where she became a curator. Making art came later, and you quickly sense Kurant finds even the no-limits terrain of contemporary art a little too small for her roving intellect. We meet in her studio on the far west side of Manhattan, a few flights up from a cavernous garage, where her table is covered with faded newsprint: a newspaper from 2020, whose stories were communicated to her with the help of a psychic. And they say print media has no future!

Very little of your work as an artist is image-based, but you initially trained at one of the world's great cinema academies, the National Film School in Łódź.

I studied photography and film there. But I was simultaneously studying philosophy and art history. I don't have an art degree, and I was never interested in obtaining one; I was never interested in being an artist. It was very surprising that I eventually became one.

When you enrolled, did you think of it as just the local school? Or did you already have a sense of what Łódź film school meant: the alma mater of Roman Polanski, Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Kieślowski?

It's a phenomenal school, and there were a lot of interesting filmmakers there during my time. My favorite professor at the Film School was Józef Robakowski, who was the founder of the Film Form Workshop, a structural film group. One of the reasons I was so interested in his practice was because he started a complex hybrid structure: a gallery/collection/museum at his own apartment. It was called Exchange Gallery. He exchanged artworks with his artist friends, or accepted gifts from artists like Nam June Paik or Joseph Beuys. He was curating and building a collection, but without the pompousness of the institution. He was just doing it sort of illegally, outside of the market or the official art institutions — a museum created collectively, with many co-conspirators, as some sort of hybrid artwork. This was before the fall of Communism, it started in the 1970s.

And in this way Robakowski was continuing the tradition of the Łódź Museum of Art and these artists Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemi´nski: these two modernists, contemporaries of Malevich. They also exchanged works with their artist friends, Theo van Doesburg and Hans Arp and Vantongerloo. They accepted gifts from Schwitters and Max Ernst. They created a modern art museum in 1930 — the second earliest museum of modern art in the world, after MoMA.

I was really interested in all these hybrid structures which were sort of *Gesamtkunstwerke* with multiple authors, growing like living organisms. An idea of an institution or an infrastructure as an artwork. It all resonates in my works, which often have a hybrid status and value, with multiple authors, changing over time. It sometimes becomes a nightmare for the art market. Which I secretly enjoy.

Your time at the National Film School must have informed *Cutaways* (2013), a short film whose characters were all cut from Hollywood productions.

Cutaways all began when I reached out to Walter Murch, a great film editor. He collaborated a lot with Francis Ford Coppola; he worked on *The Conversation, The Godfather, Apocalypse Now*. I asked Walter to help me work on a pretty crazy idea I had — I wanted to look at a bunch of characters cut from important feature films, and make them meet in one space and time. I wanted to do a film which would be a portrait of this invisible universe of phantom characters that have been completely cut out, without a trace. Murch helped me research the history of cinema to find these characters which were completely deleted from the final cut versions of feature films by various editors, directors or producers.

It's a ghostly video. Like a graveyard of Hollywood cinema. Or maybe it's more like the afterlife…

There is this entire parallel universe of cut-outs. A sort of no-man's-land or junkyard of surplus characters and narratives. It's a bit like this notion of "phantom ware" in technology — the half-baked ideas that were abandoned by corporations, but still patented. Google has a lot of those. It is some sort of cemetery of frozen phantom capital. The question of phantom capital is very important for my work, and it takes different forms. In *Cutaways* it is about the phantoms of invisible labor and these half-baked, half-made characters and narratives.

So that is how *Cutaways* came about. It's an encounter of three cut-out characters from different major American films. I asked the original cut-out actors to be in my film and to continue to impersonate their characters. So Charlotte Rampling continued to play the hitchhiker cut from *Vanishing Point* in 1971, and Abe Vigoda continued to play the best friend from *The Conversation*, and Dick Miller who was cut from *Pulp Fiction* continued playing his deleted character, the junkyard owner Monster Joe.

What editing out a character means economically is that these cut-out actors are never credited in the final film. Often they are not even remunerated. So this is an example of invisible labor, where some people who contributed to a film are removed from its history and economy. So I decided to explore this universe of phantoms.

In some ways *Cutaways* reminds me of the Pierre Huyghe work *L'Ellipse* (1998), in which he cast Bruno Ganz to reprise his role in an old Wim Wenders film, years after the initial shoot. In the film Ganz's character is in one location, and then after a jump cut he arrives at another. Huyghe had Ganz walk across Hamburg between those two locations, filling in the jump cut decades later. The artist reconstitutes what got left on the cutting room floor, or what was never filmed in the first place.

Pierre was one of the first very big supporters of my work, and I really owe him a lot. I co-wrote a book on Anna Sanders Films *[a production company founded by Huyghe and other French artists in 1997]* with my ex-partner, and I became a curator of Anna Sanders Films. I love people asking me about certain convergence points between some aspects of my work and Pierre's work, although there are big divergences as well. We definitely share an interest in systems and hybrid phenomena, hovering between nature and culture. But I think in the case of *L'Ellipse* he was more interested in the economy of cinema, whereas when I was doing *Cutaways*, I think I was more interested in the economic system as such, in shadow economies in particular, and in editing as a very political tool.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but even if you cut a character from a film, you retain the copyright.

Yes, as I discovered in the course of the research. Trash is also copyrighted.

Did you acquire the copyrights?

No, I didn't have the copyrights for any of these characters, and actually, Twentieth Century Fox threatened me with a cease-and-desist. I consulted with a number of lawyers, among them probably the best lawyer in Europe for Hollywood cinema. He told me this would be a case of fair use, and that they would be really crazy to go after me. So at some point *Cutaways* has also become a tale about the meeting and adventures of these three copyrights as protagonists.

There's this whole universe of people that are basically cut out from history or from the economy. Science is another world where people get simply cut out: not only the different scientists who discovered a given thing simultaneously, but also the interns, nameless assistants, and postdocs working at different labs contributing in various ways into an important research. But then only one person or a very small team gets the Nobel prize. Art too has always been a harvesting of labor from different entities, of different agents. Co-conspirators, friends of the artist, partners of the artist disappear.

***The End of Signature* (2014–15), your project for the façade of the Guggenheim, is also one in which the agents that produced the final work are elided.**

It's about this plurality of authorships, this slippage and obfuscation of authorship. It's about the end of handwriting, and how that expired at the same time as the idea of a singular author. I ask people to sign blank sheets of paper, and then the signatures are scanned. They're morphed through an algorithm into one averaged, collective signature.

The final product is an illegible, meaningless scribble.

It is literally an abstraction. Signed by an invisible hand on the Guggenheim's façade.

Agnieszka Kurant. *The End of Signature*. 2015. Site-specific projection.
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Photo: Kristopher McKay.

So the signature of signatures reflects a collective signature — if the general intellect had a signature, this is what it would look like. But it really is no signature at all.

This work existed in different instantiations before. I did *The End of Signature* first in Utrecht, where I collected signatures from one community of three different generations of people who all lived in a postwar housing project. Here in New York the context is quite different. One of the things that inspired me to make this work, which becomes more interesting when the piece was adapted to the façade of the Guggenheim, was a note that Duchamp left for himself in 1916 — it's just a phrase in one of his notebooks — where he says he wanted to sign the Woolworth building. It's not an artwork in itself; it's a phantom readymade. Duchamp has been an important reference for all of the artists of the second half of 20th century, but as much as he undermined every single parameter of art, I think he didn't entirely question authorship as a paradigm. He used pseudonyms, he duplicated and multiplied works, he even used silence… but it's still *his* silence; it's still *his* pseudonym. The modernist fetishization of authorship is still in place. But I am sure if Duchamp were living nowadays, he would question this paradigm too.

After he dies in 1968, something begins to change, fundamentally, in both the way we value things in our economy and the way artistic careers are made.

He died before the end of Bretton Woods — the end of the gold standard. Already this makes a huge difference. He was still operating under a different paradigm of value. One of the things that's always fascinated me is that the underpinnings of conceptual art emerge at the same time as the beginnings of dematerialization in the economy. The virtualization of money, the dematerialization of labor. Speculation around real estate. The concept of air rights starts to be explored. And obviously the beginning of immaterial labor, even though it wasn't called that at that point. What we now call cognitive capitalism.

Your work *Air Rights* (2014), in which a meteorite hovers magically over a white plinth, goes a long way to embodying the absurdities and the precariousness of speculative value. Once Duchamp put Paris air in an ampoule as a kind of joke; now air in Manhattan costs more than $300 per square foot.

It's both a horror and a beautiful idea: we have a materialization of Duchamp in our economy. Speculating on air rights is a particularly New York phenomenon, though it now exists in Paris, in Berlin and even Warsaw. In my work *Air Rights*, there's an electromagnetic field created between the plinth and the object. In this one particular spot, the meteorite magically levitates and seems frozen in mid-air, just before hitting the ground, permanently suspended. But if you actually touch it, it's going to fall. It is already moving slightly if you talk next to it because this causes the movements of air. So it's very fragile and precarious, as a lot of things in the economy are, like prices of property or stocks. It's the idea of a bubble: up to a point, it's all perfect, and then it can just collapse.

That's the old joke: capitalism has succeeded where conceptual art has failed. But then people say that the artist is the paradigmatic economic actor of our time. You work for yourself, you labor with your mind and with your ideas, and you have to take your individual ideas into the marketplace with relatively few protections.

And that's just the artists who make it. Only a few succeed, and often it is a question of accident or luck, and not necessarily merit. Then you have all the allegedly "failed" artists, scientists who never happened to make an important discovery, or failed novelists with unpublished novels, people who never succeeded. The popular opinion is that these people who failed are to some degree redundant, but no, it's actually worse. They are absolutely necessary, because without them the system, the industry, doesn't exist. In complexity science these people are called "silent heroes" — all the people that are absolutely necessary for a given field to exist. Not only to create competition, which makes just one person out of thousands get lucky. They are also economically relevant. They are buying magazines, they are buying museum tickets and memberships, they are the crowd. So they're not only necessary in a symbolic way, but in an economic way. They passively contribute to the surplus value of artworks of other people.

Or consider how artists participate in the process of gentrification, which is quite crazy when you think about it. An artist's work might never be seen, but his symbolic capital transforms the fortunes of a neighborhood, or even a whole city. We think that artists who are not successful are irrelevant, but they're the ones who actually transformed Chelsea, and then Williamsburg, and then Red Hook. Through the surplus value of the social capital that they bring, they are transforming these areas into attractive real estate for developers. They're very important actors. And it's impossible not to participate. It's this harnessing of social energies of different kinds which interests me. Who is becoming an author? And who is becoming the benefactor?

It gets to an interesting point that I think is implicit in your work: that these collective energies could be harnessed in a democratic way, or they could be much closer to exploited labor. Collective knowledge, in your work, can feel wondrous and terrifying at the same time.

Sure. I'm starting to use Amazon's Mechanical Turk, in which humans receive micropayments for doing simple tasks that computers can't do. What's called "artificial artificial intelligence," or A.A.I. It is based on outsourcing some microtasks to thousands of people who become sort of software components, working all over the world, online.

"Artificial artificial" intelligence, otherwise known as real.

It's counterintuitive: the most difficult tasks for a computer are the simplest ones for humans, for example choosing which photo is blurry and which one is sharp. A.A.I. can solve some problems that

benefit the public. And there might be some positive prospects for that. Maybe we will be able to create new forms of collective authorship, based on the model of Wikipedia. But for the moment the use of Mechanical Turk is mostly corporate and very exploitative.

It's sobering, really — for so long we were told that the cost of A.I., of robotics, of information technology would eventually drop so low that we would all be freed from work. And instead what dropped was the cost of labor. Millions of workers, signing up for Amazon's digital sweatshop, upvoting blogposts for a penny.

The so-called Turkers are a new working class with no protections, and no way to unionize. The system has found a perfect worker. Though I actually think older media, or non-digital media, can say more about new media than new media themselves. My work A.A.I., for example, is made by termites. Factories outsource their production to countries with cheap labor, such as China or Bangladesh. So I outsourced my work to another species. I had entire colonies of termites creating a sort of harmless, organic sweatshop.

The final product is quite alluring: these squat, somewhat phallic sand mounds, in electric red or green. I'd have believed you if you said you made them by hand; they don't look like they're the product of thousands of insects.

I was inspired by the fact that termites belong to just a handful of species in nature that, in the process of evolution, formed complex worker societies with clear class divisions, just like humans. They have soldiers, farmers, foragers, nurses…. But, unlike ants for example, they build these sustainable monumental structures — the mounds, which resemble cathedrals or pyramids. Each mound is a product of a collective intelligence of often over a million specimens. So it is very similar to a human society, collectively creating or erecting monuments, or landmarks of culture.

So we get back to something rather a lot like the signature project. There is a collective will, or a collective action, whose individual producers can only be anonymous. They have no ability even to see the entirety of what is constructed.

Yes, most people are completely unaware when they are being exploited. I was really interested to technically demonstrate how the labor can be harnessed unbeknownst to the worker. I'm like an evil investor.

I wonder, though: we speak about these works as having no author, or being collectively authored. But they are all works signed Agnieszka Kurant. How do we unpack this phenomenon? Things that have no author ultimately have an author? An artist who doesn't have a signature style, nevertheless has a signature?

I am interested in general in the erosion of authorship. Obviously: Wikipedia. But it is not so simple. Even Wikipedia has hierarchies of experts. Theoretically anyone can amend a post, but in fact, there are experts controlling this; there are hierarchies in every system. I am interested in the phenomenon of this dispersed authorship because it's happening, but at this point, there is no such thing as total erosion. It is a slow process. I am just observing a certain tendency.

I'm also interested in the fact that the figure of the author was invented to capitalize on all these social energies, and we cannot escape from this. There exist very important works of human culture which do

not have an identified single author — the Bible, for example. They have many anonymous authors. So what I am observing is a partial return to the times when entire societies collectively created these works. In a certain way memes also become these authorless structures. They grow exponentially. Especially internet memes.

But the figure of the author is just useful, economically and socially. Imagine if someone online just anonymously exhibited this project of morphing thousands of signatures. Maybe it would become a meme. Maybe it would have the comparable value of a cat GIF. So it would have the power of attracting crowds, but its cultural value could be questionable — until it got validated by institutions. And this only happens because somebody signs it. It's sad, in many ways, and I would like to change that, but through my work I'm hopefully drawing attention to this phenomenon.

There's a huge naïveté prevailing in the cultural field. The whole idea that somebody declares that they "do not participate in the art market system" and that they can "refuse" is a fiction. Because artists are always creating social capital around their work, and different artists do it in very different ways. The monetary value of these works is always being calculated as they get shown in museums, which are also a really crucial part of the art market system. If we actually wanted to be really radical, artists should stop doing this, stop participating in any museum exhibitions and biennials.

In which case, why be an artist at all?

It's very easy for artists to jump to conclusions, but I think there are smarter ways of doing something to effectively make people aware of problems than just withdrawing. I take the criticism. But I think I am more effective by working with these problems and using my privileged position, in this most recent case, as an artist invited by the Guggenheim to talk about the exploitations present in the socioeconomic status quo of the world we live in.

But again, as an artist, you can roam across so many disciplines — liberty would be the word, I guess. To draw the links you want to draw, perhaps you have to be an artist.

This is why I got so fascinated by complexity science. Scholars and scientists got siloed into different realms. People got so specialized that they have absolutely no idea about what's happening in another discipline, and no time to develop an interest. And so it is very fascinating that complexity science creates important dialogues between, I don't know, psychologists and physicists, which allowed them to realize that the social phenomena such as revolutionary movements or a dispersion of a meme can possibly be described via the same algorithms as the movements of particles in a heated gas or the behavior of a slime mold. My work is somewhere at the convergence of all of this research, anthropology to artificial life.

But to what end, ultimately? Your work doesn't accuse, but it isn't utopian either. It diagnoses the world we already live in. It makes visible things that are invisible, but pointing to some new world doesn't seem to be your thing.

I'm not a radical, and I think we should be really very aware of our own naïveté. I'm really interested in revealing all of these blind spots of our analysis of culture, science, and economy. To become aware how we are all participating passively in gentrification, in speculation, in exploitation of our data. Eventually people will realize, after the whole wave of alienation from politics, that one thing social media has

partially made us aware of is that there are ways of participating in the debate, in society. The idea that we could just check out was far too easy.

Freud called it abreaction: you can change things just by talking about them.

My role is to make people think. I'm a very big enemy of art as applied social activism, but I do think art should make people ask important questions about the world and socioeconomic order they participate in. And about themselves. Before we blindly criticize or subscribe to yet another ideology, we should understand how we are operating, and how things work.