THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

An Artist Who Disavows the Possibility of Individual Agency

According to Agnieszka Kurant, everything we make — from the systems that oppress us to the inventions that transform us — is the result of a collective.

by Zoë Lescaze (November 12, 2021)

Agnieszka Kurant, photographed in her Brooklyn home. The artist makes conceptually adventurous work that sits at the intersection of art and science. Portrait by Donavon Smallwood. Architectural design by Studio Christian Wassmann

THE FIRST BRISK day in September found the conceptual artist Agnieszka Kurant perusing Thomas Edison's lesser-known inventions in West Orange, N.J. Waffle irons, mimeographs, movie cameras and batteries lined a long, creaking hall of the laboratory turned museum, but it was a blond doll in a blue dress that drew Kurant's gaze. The doll reached forward, porcelain lips parted, as if to touch the artist on the other side of the glass. Equipped with a miniature phonograph in place of a heart, the antique toy once emitted nursery rhymes. "Back then, to see and experience a talking doll must have been just completely uncanny and frightening," says Kurant. It's impossible, she says, for us to grasp how shocking the spectacle would have been for 19th-century consumers, now that the breakneck pace of technological discovery has numbed us to even the most startling innovations. But that is what Kurant seeks to conjure in her work: the eerie, uneasy wonder we used to feel toward progress that augured new ways of life.

Over the course of her career, Kurant, 43, has used electromagnetic fields to make stones float above their plinths and trained parrots to bark like dogs. She has released fake currency into circulation and printed heat-sensitive newspaper with disappearing stories based on a clairvoyant's predictions. She has created maps of nonexistent islands, periodic tables of collective delusions and ersatz fossils using sped-up geological processes as a form of "fiction writing." Works like these are calibrated to reset viewers' perceptions of reality, to conjure experiences that, if only for a minute, make the rest of the world look suddenly suspect.

Kurant is fascinated by moments in which new developments — the agricultural revolution, the invention of writing, the advent of electricity — transform humanity, rewiring both individual brains and the collective unconscious. We are, she believes, living in such a moment, and her works give expression to the heady, ominous potential of our current evolution. “She’s actually interested in how technology becomes magical to most of us,” says Mary Ceruti, the executive director of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, who organized Kurant’s breakout exhibition. “She’s interrogating both how seductive the magical part of it is and how potentially sinister the invisible parts are.” In an era when our digital selves are bought and sold, data mining has extended to our dreams, cellphones have practically become prostheses and algorithms determine whom we date, Kurant probes the uncertainties of the volatile present and unknowable future through projects that verge on scientific experiments. If technology is remaking individuals and society in ways we can barely articulate and certainly cannot predict, her projects examine the mechanisms driving these changes and where they may take us.

A piece from the 2015 installation of “A.A.I.,” featuring sculptures built by termite colonies.
Courtesy of Fortes D’Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo & Rio de Janeiro. Photo: Sebastiano Pellion di Persano

To create one of her best-known works, Kurant supplied termite colonies with unusual building materials: crystals, gold and neon sand. Over the course of several months, the insects produced a glittering suite of knobby spires in electric shades of blue, violet, yellow, orange and green. Kurant titled the 2014 piece “A.A.I. (Artificial Artificial Intelligence),” borrowing Jeff Bezos’ dubious term for the humans who perform microtasks, often for pennies and given little context regarding the projects they are helping to realize, on his online labor platform, Amazon Mechanical Turk. At its most basic level, the piece spotlighted the condition of workers more alienated from their product than Marx could have imagined, but it also spoke to the extent to which we have all become workers in a global digital factory, inadvertently generating profit for private corporations. The termites had no idea they were producing art for Kurant — they were just doing what termites do. Humans may be slightly less oblivious, but we continue cranking out intangible capital simply by logging on and going about our everyday lives.

What distinguishes the piece, and the Polish-born artist’s practice in general, is the lack of dystopian hand-wringing in the face of technological change. Although she is disturbed by digital surveillance, dehumanizing forms of labor, environmental ruin and what she calls the assorted “horrors of late capitalism,” Kurant is equally excited by some of the developments she senses are underway — along with an indictment of free enterprise, “A.A.I.” was also something of a celebration of collective creativity, a model of how the art of the future might be created by entire societies, not individuals.

KURANT'S DRIVING PASSION is collective intelligence: phenomena in which vast numbers of independent agents cooperate to produce unpredictable, novel and complex behaviors. Collective intelligence is present in bacterial colonies, slime molds, human cities, online communities and artificial intelligence systems — picture flocks of starlings wheeling through the air, thousands of male fireflies flashing in perfect unison to attract mates or social movements that coalesce on Twitter and erupt onto the streets. But could collective intelligence also become a form of artistic production? Culture, Kurant points out, was created collectively for thousands of years in the form of authorless myths and epics. The concept of the lone creative genius is a comparatively recent development — and a tenuous one at that.

"The End of Signature" (2021) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. C
ollaboration with Katie Lewis, Divya Shanmugam, Jose Javier Gonzalez Ortiz and John Guttag. Photo courtesy of the artist

"The End of Signature" (2015) on the facade of the Guggenheim Museum. Kristopher McKay

"I'm trying in my work, in various ways, to talk about the fact that there's no such thing as individual intelligence, just as there's no such a thing as an individual self," says Kurant. Billions of gut bacteria producing dopamine and other neurotransmitters impact our moods and thoughts and ultimately our behavior; computer algorithms shape our decision making, spending, research and love lives. "So we're hacked from the inside and from the outside," she continues. "And basically, what is a human? It's a multitude of agencies. It's a polyphony. It's an assemblage of all these various types of agencies — human, nonhuman, mineral, viral, bacterial and A.I."

Last spring, Kurant unveiled the first part of "The End of Signature" (2021-22), a colossal installation at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. Looping black lines composed of high-tech

lights were designed to simulate the flow of ink scrawl across the facades of two new buildings, as though an invisible hand were repeatedly signing the walls. Kurant worked with computer scientists to create two collective signatures — one for the scientific and academic community at M.I.T. and another for Cambridge residents — by aggregating those of hundreds of individuals using artificial intelligence.

The work is a reminder that although we tend to credit individuals with key discoveries, scientific triumphs typically involve broad communities of collaborators, unseen technicians, rivals, peers, partners and patrons. Edison, for instance, may have patented the light bulb, but he was hardly the only person experimenting with electricity, as Kurant emphasized during our visit to his former laboratory. She is encouraged by the fact that Nobel Prizes are increasingly being awarded to teams, or even to multiple teams, instead of to single recipients. Textbooks, she believes, should be revised so students understand that discovery doesn't happen in a vacuum. "I think that basically not only the history of culture but the history of humanity should be rewritten from this perspective," she says.

A work from the 2011 piece "Maps of Phantom Islands," which depicts nonexistent territories. C ourtesy of Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles and Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo & Rio de Janeiro. Photo courtesy of the artist

Fittingly, most of the projects Kurant undertakes are collaborations. She has worked with linguists, sociologists, neuroscientists, epigeneticists, economists, anthropologists and philosophers. This fall, Kurant won a grant from the Artists and Machine Intelligence department of Google to work with its computer scientists on a new project. She plans to produce a film, in which every detail will be determined by different forms of collective intelligence — among them artificial society simulations used by sociologists to predict riots, ethnic conflicts, the growth of cults and new religions, as well as the spread of memes and viruses. Although Kurant signs her works as an individual, she sees her role as that of an impresario. "I more or less just create a system that can produce something, or a program," she says. "I create conditions for things to emerge."

Kurant possesses an encyclopedic mind and a laser focus. When she's really on a roll, she rarely pauses for breath. Ideas gallop forth as her small, expressive fingers pinch, squeeze and pull the air as though it were taffy. The average sentence unpacks itself like a set of Russian dolls, revealing others nested inside. During another recent excursion with the artist to see the collection of vintage automatons (the ancestors of modern robots) at New Jersey's Morris Museum, our driver missed the exit and made the bold, if questionable, decision to reverse 150 feet on I-78 instead of getting off at the next one. Tractor-trailers veered around us, honking wildly. Cars went careening past as we crawled backward against traffic. Eventually, deep in her discussion of the theories of the French philosopher Catherine Malabou, Kurant asked what was going on. I explained, clenching the leather seat. She cast a glance out the window at the would-be exit and murmured something about this all being "a little dangerous." And then she picked up right where she had left off.

Kurant's rhetorical style is arguably an extension of her views on authorship. The verbal deluge of interdisciplinary references, research and ideas serves to disintegrate her own identity within a sea of information and other thinkers. "She wants to say that there is no she," says the curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "but to say that, she has to become a ghost." The irony, of course, is that the constellation of wide-ranging figures Kurant brings together could never exist without her.

"Chemical Garden" (2021), made of sodium silicate, copper, nickel, cobalt, chromium, manganese, iron and zinc salts, in collaboration with Magdalena Osial. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles. Photo: Anna Zagrodzka. Image courtesy of Muzeum Sztuki, Lodz

KURANT'S INTERESTS IN science and technology were hard-wired at an early age. Her parents were both electrical engineers, and together they founded a company producing a line of heat-resistant markers to label panels of electric, telecommunication, pneumatic and hydraulic cables. An only child, Kurant grew up playing with crayon-colored bits of plastic in their at-home workshop in Lodz, a former manufacturing city in central Poland. Real toys were scarce. "Poland in the '80s was an extremely gray country," says Kurant. Communism was breaking down, and even basic goods were in short supply. "But this was really good for imagination because we would just develop ideas and invent language games," she says. When Western merchandise trickled in through back channels, children would trade the vibrant candy wrappers and barter the broken nibs of colored pencils. "Kids would turn anything into a currency because there was a shortage of everything," she says. These ad hoc systems of value and collective fictions have remained for her a constant muse.

When Kurant was a teenager, relatives visiting from Brazil took her to the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw. It was only there, surrounded by broken headstones defaced with swastikas, that she learned her mother's family was Jewish. Her grandparents survived the Holocaust hidden as workers in a pots and pans factory. Kurant, who was raised Catholic, discovered that she only knew them by the pseudonyms they had adopted during the war. Her dual heritage has fueled her attraction to hybrid objects and sharpened her radar for the missing parts of history.

Kurant studied philosophy and art history at the University of Lodz and, at the urging of her more practical parents, also studied photography at the Lodz Film School. She had no ambitions to become an artist — she thought she might write essays or criticism; her interest in bringing together multidisciplinary ideas prompted her to apply to the creative curating program at Goldsmiths College in London, where she moved in 2002. There, she had the opportunity to meet with a number of curators, including perhaps the world's only celebrity curator, Hans Ulrich Obrist. The artistic director of London's

Serpentine Galleries, he is known for the broad range of people — from Rem Koolhaas to Yoko Ono — who populate his professional and personal lives, and included Kurant's work in his latest book. "The thing I remember most from that meeting is that incredible connection to knowledge," says Obrist, who locates Kurant in an artistic lineage descended from Nam June Paik, a new-media pioneer who believed that art can liberate or activate the poetic dimensions of technology.

An image from "Emergency Exit" (2010), Kurant's installation, made with Aleksandra Wasilkowska, for the Polish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Courtesy of Zacheta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw. Photo: Maciej Landsberg

As a young curator, Kurant dreamed up experimental projects: an exhibition inside a film, an exhibition as parasite that would take over its host museum. Her ideas prompted some discerning onlookers to suggest she might be an artist herself, but Kurant demurred. "I didn't think I had anything in me original to say that other people would like to see," she says. That changed in 2004 when Kurant came to New York for the International Studio & Curatorial Program, a Brooklyn-based residency for artists and curators. One day, when the artists opened their studios to the public, Kurant did the same. Inside, she had created a mercurial exhibition of artworks reproduced in special pigment that would only appear in UV light. The art dealer Yvon Lambert invited her to restage the exhibition in his New York gallery — not as a curatorial gesture but as an artwork in its own right. The installation went up in 2005, melting away and reappearing with the sun.

Eventually, no longer able to support herself, Kurant moved back to Poland. She stayed there for the next five years, trying to figure out who she was as an artist. She had few studio visits and made a living teaching French and English. By the time her mother was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer, the future seemed inexorably bleak. Then, Kurant's friend the architect Aleksandra Wasilkowska suggested that they submit a proposal for the Polish Pavilion of the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale. Together, they won the competition and transformed the pavilion into a charged space for physical daring and psychological release. A scaffold composed of bird cages loomed above a sea of fog; visitors were invited to jump off, into the void. There was a mattress just below the swirling mist and the drop was only a few feet down, but it was impossible to know that from above.

The piece offered what Kurant calls a "cathartic, purifying" leap into the unknown — people left the pavilion laughing and crying, sometimes at the same time — but it also testified to a collective need for risk. "Where does elimination of risk lead us? Nowhere good," says Kurant, who continues to produce

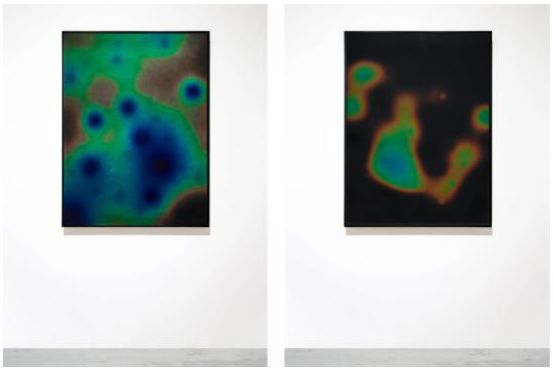
wry critiques of risk management in her work. To err is not only human but essential to innovation, she argues, pointing out that we owe aspirin, X-rays and Viagra to accidents. Without the aberrations of mutant genes, evolution could not occur and our species would not even exist.

Charlotte Rampling in Kurant's 2013 film, "Cutaways," in which the actress appears as her character that was cut from the theatrical version of Richard C. Sarafian's 1971 film "Vanishing Point." Courtesy of Anna Lena Films, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles and Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo & Rio de Janeiro

A 2011 residency at Location One, a now-defunct New York arts nonprofit, brought Kurant back to the United States and into contact with some of her first major supporters: the arts patron Thea Westreich Wagner, Guggenheim curators who eventually invited Kurant to install an early version of "The End of Signature" on the white spiral facade of the museum and, later, Ceruti, who curated her first solo show at the SculptureCenter in Long Island City, Queens, in 2013. For that show's focal point, the film "Cutaways," Kurant imagined encounters between characters who had been cut from the final versions of famous films, persuading Charlotte Rampling, Abe Vigoda and Dick Miller to reprise characters that were cut from "Vanishing Point" (1971), "The Conversation" (1974) and "Pulp Fiction" (1994), respectively. The short script, which Kurant co-wrote with her husband, the artist and writer John Menick, has the three meet through a series of coincidences and converse in an auto parts junkyard. (Walter Murch, the film editor for "The Conversation," was a close collaborator on the project.) Ceruti remembers being stunned by the intellect, charisma and "outright determination" with which Kurant persuaded these cinema heavyweights to participate in the film (which was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art earlier this year), as well as by the artist's grander objectives. "She has ambitions to make major contributions to the way we understand ourselves, and to how we categorize and organize knowledge," says Ceruti.

KURANT'S PRACTICE IS an ode to instability. Materials shift; categories bleed together; hybrid objects metamorphose in alchemical limbo. The artist's medium changes with nearly every project, but the one constant uniting her most recent creations is their fugitive nature.

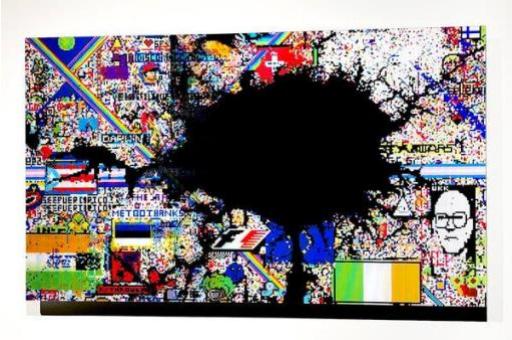
"Crowd Crystal," the artist's current solo exhibition at the Italian museum Castello di Rivoli in Turin, includes new examples of Kurant's "Conversions" paintings, begun in 2019, which have no fixed state or appearance. Clouds of blue pulse within seas of acid green, only to be cannibalized by swells of burnt orange. To create the paintings, the artist worked with various scientists to develop pigment made of liquid crystals — substances that morph and realign themselves in response to thermal and electrical signals — and to design an algorithm that mines emotional data from members of protest movements on Twitter. The program translates expressions of rage, joy, sadness and grief into heat signals, and the paintings transform in direct response to the ebbs and tides of social movements. The works are therefore effectively authorless, and their hallucinatory swirls of color impossible to predict.



"Conversions #2" (2020). Engineering: Nick Wallace. Programming: Agnes Cameron.
Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles.
Photo: Randy Dodson, courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Although the "Conversions" sometimes resemble holograms or digital screens in reproduction, their physical reality is far more complex — they have granular, textured surfaces and seem to defy everything one knows about how matter behaves. What's it like to stand in front of one? In a word, "weird," says Christov-Bakargiev, who compared the experience to being in a dream rife with contradictions. The indeterminacy of the paintings extends to Kurant's practice as a whole. "I think the essence of her work is that there is no essence," says Christov-Bakargiev, who notes that Kurant's solo exhibitions often resemble group shows with multiple artists. "There's no stability in her oeuvre so that you can say, 'This is what she does, this is who she is.'" Some artists define their legacies through sustained inquiry into a single medium or subject, but the strength of Kurant's practice may be her lack of focus.

Another new piece in the exhibition, "Adjacent Possible," consists of pseudoprehistoric rock paintings inspired by two recent paleontological revelations. Scientists studying extraordinarily vivid examples of ancient cave art in Australia discovered that the original pigments used by early humans contained bacteria and fungi that have been preserving them ever since, keeping the paintings fresh for thousands of years by consuming the pigments and replacing them. "I really love this idea of pigments that are perpetually evolving and [that] we kind of needed these nonhumans, the bacteria and the fungi, to understand something about humanity," says Kurant. The project also takes the geometric symbols found on cavern walls across Europe — painted zigzags, spirals and clusters of dots — as a point of departure. For decades, paleontologists have examined the images of wild beasts, such as the bulls that parade across the famous Chauvet Cave in France, ignoring the abstract markings that often outnumber the animals. Working with Genevieve von Petzinger, the first paleontologist to focus on these symbols, which also include ladders, hatches and curves, and the computational social scientists F. LeRon Shults and Justin E. Lane, Kurant has used A.I. to create a suite of similar symbols and painted them on stone using bacterial prehistoric pigment. Kurant is fascinated by the way in which these geometric elements have been overlooked, their dismissal a case study encapsulating the biases of all sorts of scientific disciplines. It's important, she says, to remember how much evidence is "just ignored."



"Collective Rorschach Test" (2019). Courtesy of Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles and Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo & Rio de Janeiro

"Placebo" (2018). Collaboration with Krzysztof Pyda. Courtesy of Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York/Los Angeles

History, Kurant often observes in her work, is as mutable as the pictures created by liquid crystals and fraught with blind spots. To write is to edit, and any account represents a slender facet of the staggering, unwieldy whole. Writing about anyone else, I might not have mentioned the following for the sake of a tidy narrative, but I make this confession in light of Kurant's love of cutaway pieces: Our successful visit to Edison's former laboratory in West Orange was a second attempt. The first time we tried to go, Kurant and I punched Edison's name into a smartphone and allowed ourselves to be squired to the first appropriate-sounding place the ride-hailing app suggested. We ended up at the Thomas Edison Center in Menlo Park. Edison did once have a laboratory there, but it had burned down over 100 years ago. And so we found ourselves stranded at a bizarre memorial on a sweltering summer day, staring up at an absurdly tall, inescapably phallic tower capped with a giant light bulb.

"Well, we can look at the plaques," Kurant said brightly. We read a few brass panels extolling Edison's singular genius in purple prose. Edison, though, described himself and his work in terms that may sound familiar: "I am not an individual — I am an aggregate of cells, as, for instance, New York City is an aggregate of individuals," he once said. Kurant is not a fan of Edison; she stresses that her interest in him has more to do with the social transformation he helped bring about than the man himself. Still, I can't help but think they would have gotten along.