errors, optical illusions, or willful fabrication to justify expeditions. Isle Phelipeaux, for example, appeared in Lake Superior on maps from 1744 into the 1820s, and is referenced in the 1873 Treaty of Paris that ended the American Revolutionary War. The fictitious island was used as a reference point in describing the international border between the United States and Canada. With mythical histories, sovereign claims, and fictions, these phantom islands, by the mere assertion of their existence, accrue value that has an impact in the social, economic, and political arena.

Cutaways is a logical extension of these Phantom works and of 103.1, in which nonentities are realized as art. The absence made present in these works may be considered “exformation,” a term coined by the Danish science writer Tor Nørretranders to describe explicitly discarded information, or the shared context that makes information intelligible. Nørretranders argues that thought is actually the process of deleting extraneous data that we undertake in order to comprehend the world and communicate with one another. Our subjectivity is formed by exformation, and the information we divest ourselves of influences our behavior in significant ways.

Phantom Estate, 2013, is a new work on view in the current exhibition in which Kurant imagines other possible futures for exformation. In developing the work, she conducted extensive research on unconsummated artworks by early conceptual artists ranging from Marcel Broodthaers to Guy de Cointet. Each of the sculptures in Phantom Estate is based on an idea for a work that the artist perhaps shared with friends, family, or colleagues, but for various reasons never actually made, or, in the case of Broodthaers, made and destroyed without exhibiting. In the latter instance, Kurant found one of Broodthaers’s so-called “sand carpet” pieces in a photograph of another work taken during the installation of his retrospective exhibition Catalogue–Catalogus at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 1974. As a mirror, his Miroir d’époque Regency, 1973, reflects the gallery and its contents, including the sand carpet that was intended for inclusion in the show. According to Yves Gevaert, deputy director of the museum at the time, Broodthaers changed in his mind and had the piece swept up before the opening.

Kurant’s version of the Broodthaers and the other sculptures presented in Phantom Estate are speculative propositions. She is playing with the word “estate,” which is used to refer to the legacy of deceased artists as well as to sectors of society, such as the clergy, the press, or perhaps, in this case, the art market. Kurant points to the questionable practice of artists’ estates completing or executing works based on the late artist’s drawings or sketches, and equally to the galleries, museums, collectors, and dealers who frame aesthetic meaning and generate value to serve their own interests. Phantom Estate is a small fictional museum of irreal works completed on behalf of the artists by Kurant. As exformation, they are essential to the original creators’ bodies of work, but as realized by Kurant, they have a hybrid authorship that complicates their status. They are not forgeries so much as hypothetical fabrications. In an operation similar to that employed in Cutaways, Kurant uses discarded ideas as raw material for new work, playfully and critically subverting the conventional notions of value established by the art world.

Unlike the first generation of conceptual artists, who deemphasized and sometimes eliminated the perceptual experience of a unique object, Kurant gives material form to the very notion of dematerialization, and value to objects simply through the act of valuing them. The junkyard is the perfect setting for Cutaways. The junk dealer recognizes the potential in scrap and can turn it into capital. By reclaiming scraps of film history or realizing unrealized artworks, Kurant makes the ironic comment that late capitalism—in its ability to commodify information and even exformation—has ultimately achieved the dematerialization of the object.
The fabrication of fictions, as Carl Einstein explains in his large culture-critical fragment of the same name, serves the erasure of the real.1 In the early twentieth century, this opposition was still relatively new. It is not the opposition between (inconsequential, playful, and hence frivolous) art and (consequential) seriousness that can be traced from Plato to Friedrich Schiller. Man-made unreality, or fiction, is now no longer associated with art, but with a kind of factory production: fabrication. The word “fabrication” has a double meaning: on the one hand, it denotes industrial production, on the other, forgery or falsification: “This document is a fabrication!”

Fictions forge or falsify reality in an unhealthy or evil sense. They do this regardless of whether or not they are art. This idea, which Einstein was perhaps the first to articulate—followed by Christopher Caudwell, the theorists of the Frankfurt School (above all, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer with their concept of the culture industry), and later, proponents of the populist critique of advertising (Vance Packard) and perhaps most recently, Jean Baudrillard with his influential theory of simulation and simulacrum—is opposed by a handful of counter-positions. One of them can be traced from Dandyism through Friedrich Nietzsche and certain aspects of Georg Simmel to variants of feminism and queer theory. According to this view, the exterior, that which is exhibited or “semblance” (Nietzsche), is more important than (or even identical with) a true inner person or nature substantially conceived. But Schein is not (fabricated) fiction; it is always attached to something that it articulates, illustrates, supplements, or extends. By contrast, the (fabricated) fiction stands on its own. It displaces and replaces what came before it.

Agnieszka Kurant thematizes the relationship of fiction to the real in a different way. Fiction is not a forgery or falsification of reality, an invented reality, an art that is not identified as such, or artificiality without art, like a lie, as suggested by the various ethical and political critiques of fiction. Nor is it a surrogate for or alternative to reality and hence a dead-end road out of it, a drug, an escape, or an error. Rather, it is a second creator of reality, an illegitimate or repudiated sister of the demiurge, not grounded in reality but capable of influencing or altering reality and hence a dead-end road out of it, a drug, an escape, or an error. Rather, it is a second creator of reality, a second demiurge, which can be traced from Plato to Friedrich Schiller. Man-made unreality, or fiction, is now no longer associated with art, but with a kind of factory production: fabrication. The word “fabrication” has a double meaning: on the one hand, it denotes industrial production, on the other, forgery or falsification: “This document is a fabrication!”

Fictions forge or falsify reality in an unhealthy or evil sense. They do this regardless of whether or not they are art. This idea, which Einstein was perhaps the first to articulate—followed by Christopher Caudwell, the theorists of the Frankfurt School (above all, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer with their concept of the culture industry), and later, proponents of the populist critique of advertising (Vance Packard) and perhaps most recently, Jean Baudrillard with his influential theory of simulation and simulacrum—is opposed by a handful of counter-positions. One of them can be traced from Dandyism through Friedrich Nietzsche and certain aspects of Georg Simmel to variants of feminism and queer theory. According to this view, the exterior, that which is exhibited or “semblance” (Nietzsche), is more important than (or even identical with) a true inner person or nature substantially conceived. But Schein is not (fabricated) fiction; it is always attached to something that it articulates, illustrates, supplements, or extends. By contrast, the (fabricated) fiction stands on its own. It displaces and replaces what came before it.

Agnieszka Kurant thematizes the relationship of fiction to the real in a different way. Fiction is not a forgery or falsification of reality, an invented reality, an art that is not identified as such, or artificiality without art, like a lie, as suggested by the various ethical and political critiques of fiction. Nor is it a surrogate for or alternative to reality and hence a dead-end road out of it, a drug, an escape, or an error. Rather, it is a second creator of reality, an illegitimate or repudiated sister of the demiurge, not grounded in reality but capable of influencing or altering reality. For Kurant, fiction always has reality effects.

But it does not have these effects because of its content. Of course, fictions contain, in every description, elements of mythology and ideology, and in this sense they constitute powerful interventions in cultural and psychological realities. But this is not what is at issue here: it is not the content extracted and then reinvested in another type of effect-oriented practice, but the actual fictional status of a thing that makes it a reality of a special kind. Perhaps we can be more specific.

It is no accident that we meet Kurant’s research, her experiments, in the terrain of the visual arts, for the question of the reality effect of the invented, manipulated, or fabricated has for some time been on the agenda there in this special way. Broadly speaking, there are two traditions. One extends from trompe l’oeil through physical optical illusions and Op Art to Tony Conrad’s experimental film The Flicker, 1965, and today’s immersive media art. The other is less concerned with controlling the senses with bogus stimuli that are processed by the body—often unconsciously—as if they were stimuli of the real than it is in the effect on institutions and the reality they define, on political rather than physical reality. This is the line Marcel Duchamp—Hans Haacke—Michael Asher—Adrian Piper—Critical Art Ensemble. There is also a conjunction of the two lines that is often itself an idea of fiction, especially prevalent in Latin American authors of the line Macedonio Fernández—Jorge Luis Borges—Roberto Bolano. Strictly speaking, one would also have to include a Polish Latin American, Witold Gombrowicz. But enough about lines.

Kurant isn’t interested in just one of these lines, or the synthesis of all of them, but in their intersections and intermingling. Another central aspect of her work is that it immediately directs attention to the very first element that differentiates visual art, even in its contemporary manifestations, from the other arts: the question of the material and hence real physical support. Other fictions cannot achieve reality effects as easily because they do not “look like” reality; they require ideology and mythology, by way of belief and internalization, to deploy their effects. Or else, they make use of the performative principle of the role and its extreme, the confusion of person and role, or the latter’s experimental transgression in pop music and performance art. Visual art has no need for any of these maneuvers, because it is already material itself. And therefore real.

And this in turn has two effects: one old and one new, one magic and one, well, also magic. The ancient one is the “Zeuxis effect.” The birds peck at the painted grapes. Innocent animals prove the naturalism of the painting and play the role of reality as embodiments of innocence. The second effect is the incredible prices that artworks are able to command as the result of a bewildering array of complex value creation processes that bear no relation to the labor invested by the artist or to aging, patina, the time of reception and experience, or even rarity. And yet these effects are anything but inexplicable or unreal: today’s most powerful actors, the principal players in society’s economic life, believe in these effects, and some are instrumental in bringing them about. The price of a Pollock, which corresponds to the annual budget of a medium-sized European city, creates a strange connection between the actions of a single man half a century ago and potentially astronomical exchange values. It is no surprise, then, that someone who is active in this field should raise the question of the impact of fictions as levers of reality.

When a copy of the New York Times from the year 2020 is displayed in Kurant’s Future Anterior, 2007–08, the effect is not primarily achieved by its content but by its support, a newspaper printed with “magic” heat-sensitive ink. As the temperature falls and rises, the ink appears and disappears, provoking, on the technical and material level, a vague and bewildering impression with respect to the stability and permanence of print, and hence to the reliability of the everyday testimony “It’s in the paper.” In this case, however, we are not dealing with the virtualization of news or with the shortening of the news cycle from twenty-four hours to just a few minutes, the problems that dominate the debate surrounding electronic journalism. Rather, we are dealing with the peculiar

---


At the Levers of Reality: The Orders of Fiction

Diedrich Diederichson

The Fabrication of Fictions, as Carl Einstein explains in his large culture-critical fragment of the same name, serves the erasure of the real. In the early twentieth century, this opposition was still relatively new. It is not the opposition between (inconsequential, playful, and hence frivolous) art and (consequential) seriousness that can be traced from Plato to Friedrich Schiller. Man-made unreality, or fiction, is now no longer associated with art, but with a kind of factory production: fabrication. The word “fabrication” has a double meaning: on the one hand, it denotes industrial production, on the other, forgery or falsification: “This document is a fabrication!”

Fictions forge or falsify reality in an unhealthy or evil sense. They do this regardless of whether or not they are art. This idea, which Einstein was perhaps the first to articulate—followed by Christopher Caudwell, the theorists of the Frankfurt School (above all, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer with their concept of the culture industry), and later, proponents of the populist critique of advertising (Vance Packard) and perhaps most recently, Jean Baudrillard with his influential theory of simulation and simulacrum—is opposed by a handful of counter-positions. One of them can be traced from Dandyism through Friedrich Nietzsche and certain aspects of Georg Simmel to variants of feminism and queer theory. According to this view, the exterior, that which is exhibited or “semblance” (Nietzsche), is more important than (or even identical with) a true inner person or nature substantially conceived. But Schein is not (fabricated) fiction; it is always attached to something that it articulates, illustrates, supplements, or extends. By contrast, the (fabricated) fiction stands on its own. It displaces and replaces what came before it.

Agnieszka Kurant thematizes the relationship of fiction to the real in a different way. Fiction is not a forgery or falsification of reality, an invented reality, an art that is not identified as such, or artificiality without art, like a lie, as suggested by the various ethical and political critiques of fiction. Nor is it a surrogate for or alternative to reality and hence a dead-end road out of it, a drug, an escape, or an error. Rather, it is a second creator of reality, an illegitimate or repudiated sister of the demiurge, not grounded in reality but capable of influencing or altering reality. For Kurant, fiction always has reality effects.

But it does not have these effects because of its content. Of course, fictions contain, in every description, elements of mythology and ideology, and in this sense they constitute powerful interventions in cultural and
idea that the fading of our real world in old newspapers has its counterpart in a “fading in”—a facticity that gradu-
ally emerges from unreality and enters just as gradually and yet absolutely inexorably into the world—of future
events that will not remain future forever, but will one day be real and factual; yet they are gradually announced
by the fade reversal of future newspapers. The notion that underpins Kurant’s construction is that of a preexisting
newspaper made up of countless unprinted sheets that cease to be entirely blank, entirely white, as their publica-
tion date approaches, gradually filling up with news.

Although Kurant’s work is based in and around the fictional, she has an extremely real and practical flair for
implementation and realization. She always works with surprisingly high-caliber professionals from the worlds
of science and technology, who help her achieve her “magical” effects. She herself did not develop the news
reports from 2020 that vanish from the paper and then come back again so scientifically on the basis of historico-
philosophical or post-conceptual art. It was manufactured as a dummy for a performance. Kurant posits these two preconditions for the reality effect. One

an ISBN number, and thus appear to bookstores and libraries to be practi-

exclusively of the heavy final chords from various live performances by his band Crazy Horse). The high points in

speech, the interval between words is a means of persuasion and suggestion, but she was also interested in it

version, a wide variety of instruments) so that the small noises of the animate and inanimate environment could

commonplace and assured for centuries as a result of their economic obsolescence in digital culture, it was

the reality of radio. The medium popularly known as the “ether,” whose legendary and mythi-

 dificality mingled drugs, spiritualism, and magic and in which radio waves apparently also traveled, was
decidedly ambiguous. On the one hand, it is the focus of scary fantasies having to do with promptings, mad-

ness, paranoia, persecution, the externalization of inner voices, and propaganda. On the other, it carries people
to parts of the world that did not exist for them before. The young Johnny Cash, as he later recounted, had no
“world” when growing up in northern Arkansas. Every morning, his father took him out to a cotton plantation
where he had to toil and slog and saw nothing but labor and a barren, empty landscape. But then a miracle
appeared on the kitchen table. The radio brought the world to Arkansas. Cash became a radio operator in the
army and was even given cryptographic tasks. He succeeded in intercepting and deciphering the signals from the
first Soviet bomber jets.

A decade after World War II, which was waged to a great extent by radio operators, the somewhat moralistic
postwar German writer Heinrich Böll, who was otherwise not particularly interested in media technology, cre-
ated a character who uses radio—its spreading and multiplying empty talk promoted, according to Böll, by the
medium of radio—to suppress his Nazi past. His verbose and fervent speech covers over the untruth, his crimes.
Untruthfulness is directly coextensive with figure and form. Confronting the ex-Nazi Bur-Kalotke in the 1955
short story “Dr. Murkes gesammeltes Schweigen” (“Murke’s Collected Silences”) is the disguised radio engineer
Dr. Murke, who is given the job of editing the German professor’s talks, and as an antidote collects moments of
silence from politicians’ speeches and has his friends make tape recordings of silence. Unlike that of John Cage’s
4’33”; this concrete silence is not dialectical. Cage had repressively silenced a piano and a pianist (and in later
versions, a wide variety of instruments) so that the small noises of the animate and inanimate environment could
be heard. The silence collected by Dr. Murke is the non-speech of lying politicians; in its total lack of figure and
form, it is the truth of non-chatter.

Kurant’s work 103.1 (the title changes depending on the frequency used by the transmitter that appears in
the work), 2011, is a complex variant on Murke’s activity. For this piece, the artist collected moments of silence
from recorded public speeches, of all kinds, in various languages, and from different moments in the history of
radio broadcasting. Whereas Murke used silence to directly expose or, more correctly, counter the untruthful-
ness of politicians’ speech, Kurant uses it for a variety of purposes. Excising the pauses within random speeches
broadcast during peak listening hours, she was aware that, as a rhetorical element of all mass-communicative
speech, the interval between words is a means of persuasion and suggestion, but she was also interested in it
in relation to organization, as it might function in musical syncopation. What she collected, then, is not neces-
sarily the “negative space” of lies but rather the intervals anticipating climaxes and turning points found in any
speech—similar to the practice of music fans, including DJs and collagists, when they edit together a string of
musical high points without including the passages leading up to them (as in Neil Young’s ‘‘Weld, which consists
exclusively of the heavy final chords from various live performances by his band Crazy Horse). The high points in

I cannot be experienced as such without their context: they become a single silent moment of withdrawal,
unlike Kurant’s other backgrounds—the emptied pages of the future New York Times or the place-holding
blank pages of the fictional novels.

What makes 103.1 even more complex is its perfect, sculptural form. Kurant plays the snippets of silence
on a wonderful 1950s tape recorder of the kind that might have been used at Murke’s radio station, which may

display
remind contemporary visitors of the early pioneers of electronic and tape music who are nostalgically revered today, such as master tape splicer Richard Maxfield. However, the tapes are also broadcast by a weak transmitter located somewhere in the museum or gallery, whose signal is received by a radio that, with its antenna, constitutes a flawless 1950s sculpture. Dispersed throughout the exhibition spaces, the work is, then, an installation in the best sense of the term. However, its components being combined into a genuinely functional chain of medial elements, it also points to the muteness and uncoupledness of all other installations, with their exclusively silent objects. And the means by which it does this is, of all things, silence, and yet a silence that is physically real—not the absence of sound, but the presence of silence. A solution to the problem of untruthfulness and fiction?

In *Phantom Estate*, 2013, Kurant investigates the reality status of other artistic practices. Inspired by anecdotes about the families of some conceptual artists completing and selling their unfinished works on the art market after their death, she focuses on comparable works conceived by artists such as Gino de Dominicis, Alighiero e Boetti, Lee Lozano, and Marcel Broodthaers. Kurant continues or completes the unrealized works, but at the same time assigns them such a fleeting and ephemeral status that it is conceivable that someone else, or even some collective, could resume or finish them. Kurant is genuinely concerned with the legacy of the conceptual tradition, which is, after all, her own. At the same time, she takes the dissolution into rumor and anecdote (if not mere oblivion) that awaits every cultural artifact, but that normally occurs over hundreds of years, and hastens the process along in, as it were, the object’s own lifetime.

The works thus initiated parallel *Cutaways*, 2013, for which Kurant collected characters cut from famous movies. The peculiar tension between vanishing and invented realities is again realized with extremely pragmatic strategies. This too is a legacy of classic conceptualism, whose claim that art is reducible to its ideas (and their linguistic expression) frequently coexisted with perfectionism in its physical realization. In this case, Kurant was able to enlist the collaboration of the famous Hollywood editor Walter Murch, who helped her reconstruct from archives and other sources the characters “disappeared” from famous films by cutting and editing.2

These “embryonic” characters, who live their lives locked up in the limbo between fiction and not-even-fiction, mark another boundary of fiction, separating it not from reality but from another realm that might be called that of second-order or virtual fiction. This border—patrolled as well by the artworks known only through anecdote or rumor—is interesting not least because it turns first-order fiction into something like reality, at least when compared to the more tenuous reality of this second-order fiction.

But whether these levels or degrees of reality are related as a stratified series of ascending powers or are instead surrounded by a single homogeneous ocean or interstellar space is a question that pales when they are differentiated in terms of their reality effects. The doubly fictional artworks—imaginary as artworks as well as fictional in their content—are capable of achieving immensely real equivalences vis-à-vis the medium of money, that is, as exchange values. Zombies and ghosts cause greater upheaval in the world of the living than do everyday beings. Art and money, systems that far overshadow physical presence and materiality as criteria of reality, are also constantly ready to incorporate other-order realities. Agnieszka Kurant has investigated this phenomenon in a wide range of extremely rigorous and conceptually scrupulous experiments—while insisting that her investigations take the form of artworks.

Translated from the German by James Gussen

---

2 *Cutaways* narrates the encounter of three characters cut from different major American films, played by their originally assigned actors: Charlotte Rampling as a hitchhiker from Richard C. Sarafian’s *Vanishing Point*, 1971, Abe Vigoda as a lawyer and the best friend of protagonist Harry Caul from Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Conversation*, 1974, and Dick Miller as a junkyard owner named Monster Joe from Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*, 1994.

Agnieszka Kurant, Phantom Estate (detail), 2013. Photo: Jason Mandella.


Checklist of Works in the Exhibition

Agnieszka Kurant
Phantom Library, 2011–2012
Embossed canvas, silkscreen on paper and cardboard, thermochromic pigment on paper, gold leaf, silver leaf, offset print on paper
11.8 x 194.9 x 7.9 in
Courtesy the artist and Galeria Fortes Vilaça and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery

Agnieszka Kurant
Phantom Estate, 2013
Multiple sculptures and sand carpet on motorized platform with artificial intelligence unit
Dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist and Galeria Fortes Vilaça and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery

Agnieszka Kurant
Map of Phantom Islands, 2011
Pigment print on archival paper
27 x 42.8 in
Courtesy the artist and Galeria Fortes Vilaça and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery

Agnieszka Kurant
Political Map of Phantom Islands, 2011
Pigment print on archival paper
29.7 x 44.9 in
Courtesy the artist and Galeria Fortes Vilaça and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery

Agnieszka Kurant
The Archive of Phantom Islands, 2011
30 pigment prints on archival paper
11 x 14 in each
Courtesy the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery

Agnieszka Kurant
103.1 MHz, 2012 (title variable)
Custom-made antenna, 1 WAT broadcaster, sound mixer, loudspeakers, reel to reel player, radio, custom pedestal
Courtesy the artist and Galeria Fortes Vilaça

Agnieszka Kurant
Cutaways, 2013
HD video
Courtesy the artist and Galeria Fortes Vilaça and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery