

SculptureCenter

Agnieszka Kurant: exformation

Agnieszka Kurant, Junk Dealer

Mary Ceruti

Three characters populate Agnieszka Kurant's *Cutaways*, 2013, a short film premiering as part of *exformation*, the artist's first exhibition in a United States museum. Played by Dick Miller, Charlotte Rampling, and Abe Vigoda, these characters were found, or more precisely reclaimed, from the cutting room, having been edited out of the final cuts of the feature films for which they were created: *Pulp Fiction*, *Vanishing Point*, and *The Conversation*, respectively. Kurant revives these figures not only by writing a brilliant new script for them but also by casting the original actors: twenty to forty years later, the roles are the same and different.

Kurant's use of the same actors shifts the emphasis from the original narratives to the process by which those narratives were created, namely editing. By deleting and reorganizing raw material, the editor is constantly moving between presence and absence, making decisions about what to present and what to omit. One can see this as a sculptural process. Kurant first explored the artistic and political implications of editing in 2011 in her piece titled *103.1* in the current exhibition (originally *88.7*, the title changes according to the frequency on which the work's radio content is broadcast). The silences that comprise the audio component, taken from recorded political speeches, do not represent the absence of noise, but rather convey room tone—the recorded sound whose characteristics derive from the location of the microphone within a space. Another term for room tone is “presence.” We hear presence when speech or music is absent. Presence is given specific form by the shape, proportion, and material of the room in which the recording is made. Absence becomes presence.

This paradox is metaphorically fertile for Kurant, who has been working with what she has termed “phantom capital” for some time. In projects such as *Phantom Library*, begun in 2011, and her maps of phantom islands, the artist has explored the ways fictions, hypotheses, rumors, and memes gain currency in the real world. For the first manifestation of *Phantom Library*, 2011–12, Kurant produced 114 books that are described within works of fiction, bringing them into the world as sculptural objects. Obtaining ISBN numbers for the invented publications, she has given them an identity within the commercial book trade. For the next phase of the project, Kurant is commissioning authors to actually write these books. Similarly, *Political Map of Phantom Islands*, 2011, shows nonexistent islands that appeared on geographic, political, and economic maps beginning in the fifteenth century, with some appearing as recently as the 1940s. These phantom islands may be the products of navigational

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 unreal 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.

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.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 counterpositions. 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 artificially produced, *Schein* or “semblance” (Nietzsche), is more important than (or even identical with) a true inner person or nature substantialistically 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 Bolaño. 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

¹ Carl Einstein, *Die Fabrikation der Fiktionen. Gesammelte Werke in Einzelausgaben*, ed. Sibylle Penkert (Reinbek, Germany: Rowohlt, 1973).

idea that the fading of our real world in old newspapers has its counterpart in a “fading in”—a facticity that gradually 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 publication 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 historicophilosophical or politicological theses. Instead, she relied on the knowledge of a psychic. Following a practice that is a constant in her work, she selected a practitioner who is highly respected in his field; in this case, the field apparently extends to intelligence services and international police organizations.

Kurant’s work rests on the combination of a type of text that has an almost performative power to project reality (say, stories in the *New York Times*) and magical materials that fall under the general heading of the poetic. Fading and fade reversal, the pastel quality, that which is uncertain or yet to come—these are all categories of poetic experience, in which the magical and the mundane are already comingled. I would argue that Kurant’s synthesis of sensational magic and a deconstructive, critical perspective on the institutions and conventions that enable us, however skeptically, to believe in a reliable and solidly organized social reality requires a specific, in this case literary, starting point.

Phantom Library, 2011–12, deals with authors who came up with such projects in the realm of literature but were unable to fully realize their propositions because, for purely temporal reasons, they were unfamiliar with post-conceptual art. Kurant provides material supports for made-up books these authors cite within theirs, often alongside other publications that really exist. The projects come out of works like Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962) which has always interested visual artists (Geoffrey Farmer, for example), Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* (released posthumously in 2004), which refers to novels by his character Arcimboldo (who actually sports a range of first names, nationalities, biographies, and bibliographies), or books by Stanislaw Lem and Philip K. Dick. Or by Jorge Luis Borges. The most famous of all fictional books, the legendary *Necronomicon* from the short stories of H. P. Lovecraft, is also present and accounted for. We have differing amounts of information about these fictional books, and “realizing” them would mean relying on sources that are not themselves equally plentiful. But as I see the thrust of this work, the central reality aspect of these books is not their text. The reality of a materially existing book has two dimensions: it must have an ISBN number, and thus appear to bookstores and libraries to be practically available, and it must be manufactured in a manner that is suited for mass production. It is not a book if it was manufactured as a dummy for a performance. Kurant posits these two preconditions for the reality effect. One of them is actually magic, in that it concerns the book’s ontology, its status between unique and mass-produced item. The book is really there, not as a one-off but as a single specimen of a widespread commodity (albeit the sole existing iteration). The other condition is more conceptual: as a book with an ISBN number, it exists from the perspective of the book trade, that is, of the relevant social sphere that guarantees the existence of books.

The third cultural sphere (after journalism and literature) in which production like this is meaningful is radio. Long before society became uncertain about the reality and future of cultural practices that have been

commonplace and assured for centuries as a result of their economic obsolescence in digital culture, it was uncertain about the reality of radio. The medium popularly known as the “ether,” whose legendary and mythical ontology 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, madness, 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, created a character who uses chatter—a 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-Kalottke in the 1955 short story “Dr. Murkes gesammeltes Schweigen” (“Murke’s Collected Silences”) is the disgusted 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 untruthfulness 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 necessarily 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 *103.1* cannot be experienced as such without their context: they become a single silent moment of withdrawal, not 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



Installation view, Agnieszka Kurant: *exformation*, 2013. Photo: Jason Mandella.



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



Agnieszka Kurant, *Phantom Estate*, 2013. Photo: Jason Mandella.



Agnieszka Kurant, *Endless Second*, 2008. Photo: Jason Mandella.

Agnieszka Kurant, *Phantom Library*, 2011–2012. Photo: Jason Mandella.Installation view, Agnieszka Kurant: *exformation*, 2013. Photo: Jason Mandella.



Installation view, Agnieszka Kurant, *Cutaways*, 2013. Photo: Jason Mandella.



Agnieszka Kurant, *Cutaways*, 2013. HD film still.
Agnieszka Kurant, *Cutaways*, 2013. HD film still.

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

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

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

Endless Second, 2008
Foam, wood, electromagnets,
custom shelf
Approximately 5" in diameter
Courtesy the artist and Galeria Fortes
Vilaça and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery