

## **Phantom Capital, Hybrid Authorship, and Collective Intelligence\***

Agnieszka Kurant\*\*

Good morning. Thank you Jane for this introduction. Thank you very much for inviting me to be a part of this Symposium. I won't have much time to talk about my work, but I will try to say a couple words about several projects. Let me start by explaining the main focus of my practice, which relates in particular to this conference. I have to say that the questions of copyright and authorship and hybrid value of objects, among them artworks, are actually at the core of my artistic practice.

I am also very interested in the question of labor, especially in how labor became immaterial since the beginning of cognitive capitalism or late-capitalism. I'm interested in the questions of immaterial and invisible labor as well as hidden exploitation of social energies.

I am going to start with this piece entitled *A.A.I.*, which stands for Artificial Artificial Intelligence. It's a series of works that I outsourced to another species—to the colonies of living termites. I realized that termites are among very few species in nature that, just like humans, in the process of evolution formed very complex worker societies with a very clear division of labor into classes or castes. They form classes of soldiers, farmers, nurses, foragers, and so on. What is even more interesting to me, they produce these monumentally looking forms—the termite mounds. These forms are created as a result of an emergent process, which means that there is no master plan. The structure is emerging through millions of micro-contributions by these insects. Each single termite carries a couple of grains of sand or mud, and it doesn't know what it's building. So there is no way of telling in advance what the final shape will be. Emergent processes are impossible to predict or plan.

In particular, this is interesting to me because these products of the work of termites resemble cathedrals, or pyramids, or some kind of other human monuments that in this case are built by entire societies of termites. I decided to use this labor force that is completely unaware, because termites are almost blind. I decided to outsource my creative work to this another species in a similar manner as factories nowadays very often outsource the labor to countries where the workforce is cheaper like China or Bangladesh or Africa. In a way I was pushing

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some phenomenon to its extreme. I was also inspired by the fact that currently in Africa there are several corporations that are developing new mines, and they are starting to use colonies of termites that go very deep down in the soil and bring up whatever they find there.<sup>1</sup> The corporations that are trying to set up new mines are starting to use colonies of termites to check whether there is gold or uranium or other elements in a given place. In a way, it's like a free organic sweatshop. I thought of applying this idea of an organic, non-harmful sweatshop to the production of my works.

I collaborated with the entomologist from the University of Florida and from Harvard University. We first checked whether it's possible to give termites alternative materials to build with—whether they would notice the difference. It turns out that they wouldn't. We gave them colored sands with particles of gold and crystals, and they started building. Basically this is what they built. These are the termite mounds exhibited at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery and other museums.<sup>2</sup> I am not determining these shapes. I am not controlling them. It's something different each time. It is an example of dispersed authorship, dispersed labor of the multitude of an entire society which is stealthily exploited.

I am, in particular, interested in how in a contemporary economy our social energies are constantly being exploited in a concealed way. I'm talking about the so-called digital labor or invisible labor—namely, pretty much everyone who is using the Internet is participating in this exploitation. While we're using Facebook or Google or Amazon, our personal data is harvested from these platforms and then sold to advertising companies and it brings actual profits to these corporations. For example, it was recently quantified that a single user of Facebook brings this corporation around \$36 per year.<sup>3</sup> Obviously we're not participating in these profits; we are never remunerated for providing our free data labor, sometimes called “playbor” which means “play plus labor.” Theoretically, we are actually enjoying the use of the social media and Google browser, so since we are not suffering then we are not really working and this gray area is being exploited here. So in many ways these termite mounds were a model of critical analysis of our blindness, of our unawareness of how we are constantly being stealthily exploited.

This is just another more recent series of works where I'm actually pouring hot metal—zinc and aluminum, inside of the abandoned termite mounds in Namibia. What is being created are the negatives of these termite mounds as the hot liquid

1. See, e.g., Finmore Mining, News Release (Oct. 28, 2014), <http://finoremining.com/news/press-releases/2014/news-release-2014-10-28.html> [<https://perma.cc/W4A6-PRX6>].

2. Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, Press Release, “Agnieszka Kurant: Variables,” (Sept. 11, 2014), <http://www.tanyabonakdargallery.com/exhibitions/agnieszka-kurant-variables> [<https://perma.cc/G57L-RBTC>].

3. Reports have shown a range of figures associated with Facebook's revenue per user. See Alyssa Newcomb, *Here's How Much Money You Made Facebook Last Quarter*, ABC NEWS (Apr. 22, 2015), <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/heres-money-made-facebook-quarter/story?id=30511094> [[perma.cc/PAB5-LP2D](https://perma.cc/PAB5-LP2D)] (gives a range of \$5.85 and \$9.00); Will Oremus, *Zuckerbergonomics*, SLATE (Apr. 26, 2012), [http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2012/04/facebook\\_ipo\\_how\\_much\\_money\\_does\\_the\\_social\\_network\\_make\\_off\\_each\\_user\\_.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2012/04/facebook_ipo_how_much_money_does_the_social_network_make_off_each_user_.html) [[perma.cc/M9LR-7VR9](https://perma.cc/M9LR-7VR9)] (states that Facebook makes \$100 per user per year).

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metal fills in all the corridors and networks made by the termites inside of the mounds. So here I'm also exploiting the negatives of the labor of these termite societies.

This is a recent commission that I did for the Guggenheim Museum, New York. It's also related to the obfuscation of authorship, that is especially visible in platforms such as Wikipedia and other crowd-sourcing platforms. This is a signature piece that I created by collecting signatures of visitors of the Guggenheim Museum and this is another example of this piece in a different installment in a different place.<sup>4</sup> So people are signing and then depositing their signatures inside of the museum wall, and then the collective signature is morphed with the use of a specially written program. All the signatures of the visitors are morphed into one collective signature that is being signed perpetually by the auto-pen machine that creates replicas of these identical hand written signatures. And a large version of this collective signature is visible on the facade of the building, as you can see here and here. An invisible hand perpetually signs the Guggenheim Museum.

I am quickly going to move to another project, also about copyright. It's a film that I did in collaboration with the American film editor Walter Murch who worked a lot with Francis Ford Coppola and edited films such as *The Godfather* or *Apocalypse Now*. I asked Walter Murch to help me work on this film entitled *Cutaways*.<sup>5</sup> The film is dedicated to characters cut out from feature films. I got interested in the fact that during each film production, there are a number of scenes, sometimes entire subplots, or in some most radical cases entire characters that are being cut out from feature films. And together with Walter Murch we did a one-year-long research and we found about 200 very interesting characters cut out from major feature films.

I've chosen three characters cut out from three films: Charlotte Rampling, who was cut out from the film *Vanishing Point*; Abe Vigoda, cut out from the Francis Ford Coppola film *The Conversation*; and on the right we see Dick Miller cut out from *Pulp Fiction*. So my film was basically an encounter of these three characters in one place and time. I invited these three actors who originally played these completely cut-out characters that were basically erased and were not even featured in the credits of these films, to come to New York and become part of my film. I wrote the script, and the film is a portrait of a parallel universe of phantoms of film production. But also part of this process was the question of these three characters becoming three copyrights. It's a very interesting question that something that is cut out of the film is still copyrighted. What is copyrighted are the character rights for this sort of frozen capital of characters that are in a way up for grabs for another narrative. They are still protected by copyright, so this was one of the things I was investigating here.

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4. Agnieszka Kurant, *The End of Signature*, GUGGENHEIM, <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artwork/33834> [<https://perma.cc/QC3J-CKPE>] (last visited Mar. 8, 2016).

5. See, e.g., David Simpson, "'The Cutaways' Sneak Peak," THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER (Mar. 17, 2014), <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/video/cutaways-sneak-peek-689639> [<https://perma.cc/65RS-CUY8>].

This is another project that was recently exhibited at the Guggenheim. It's called *The Phantom Library*.<sup>6</sup> This piece is based on my research into fictional books that were mentioned by various writers in works of literature. Sometimes a writer such as [Jorge Luis] Borges, Philip K. Dick, or Stanisław Lem would mention briefly a fictional book with a fictional author in their novel. What I did was I produced these books as real objects. I acquired ISBN numbers and barcodes for them, and I entered some of them into circulation. What we can see at the back cover of these books are the barcodes—they are real—and whatever else we know about a given book is also printed on the back cover. I was interested in this idea of patents that are kind of half-baked, ideas that are half-made, frozen. For example, Google has this idea of “phantom-ware”—certain patents that were developed, that were kind of frozen and never put into production. Technically, these books never have to be written, but I actually invited a number of writers to write them. Once they are written I am going to replace the currently blank pages with real content.

This is a project called the *Phantom Estate*, where I was investigating the question of functioning of artists' estates.<sup>7</sup> I realized that a lot of artist's estates, especially in the case of conceptual artists, are very often fabricating non-existing works. There is this very interesting phantom gray area where, for example, I discovered that the family of Marcel Broodthaers, the conceptual Belgian artist, after the artist's death continued putting together notes, photographs, and some kind of ephemera and released them as artworks.<sup>8</sup> And many families do that. This is the kind of grey area where we don't know where to draw the line—where is the authorship when it becomes an intervention or manipulation of the family or the estate?

I decided to push it even further and I made a project based on the idea of a museum of phantom works which are basically works that are even more phantom than the ones that are just fabricated by the families, that are not really works. These are the works that appeared very briefly in informal, private conversations held by a number of conceptual artists such as [Marcel] Broodthaers, Guy de Cointet, Lee Lozano, Allegiero Boetti. These phantom works were only briefly mentioned in informal conversations that these artist would have, such as with their friends or family members. These ideas were just mentioned briefly, in passing. There are no sketches of these ideas nor notes nor ephemera, nothing that could be commodified and sold. For example, the black weather-vane that you can see in the front here is a piece by Aligiero Boetti, the idea of which he briefly mentioned over breakfast to his wife. He said that he would like to make a self-portrait as a weather vane. So I spent one year interviewing families, friends, and collaborators of these artists that were interesting for my own work, and I

6. Agnieszka Kurant, *Phantom Library*, GUGGENHEIM, <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artwork/33708> [<https://perma.cc/53JR-2HG2>] (last visited Mar. 8, 2016).

7. “Agnieszka Kurant: Exformation,” STROOM DEN HAAG, [http://www.stroom.nl/activiteiten/tentoonstelling.php?t\\_id=5430856](http://www.stroom.nl/activiteiten/tentoonstelling.php?t_id=5430856) [<https://perma.cc/RRU3-CPAS>] (last visited Mar. 8, 2016).

8. Matthew Shen Goodman, “Chasing Phantoms: Agnieszka Kurant,” ART IN AMERICA (Nov. 25, 2013), <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/chasing-phantoms-agnieszka-kurant/> [<https://perma.cc/6SS7-JDFS>].

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excavated these completely phantom works where there is no product, no photograph, no documentation—namely nothing to sell. I produced these half-cooked, half-made works. For example, the ladder here is a ladder by the artist Guy de Cointet whose work is currently exhibited by a lot of museums such as the MoMA. There is definitely a scarcity of his works, so a value of something like that is very high. There is no known photograph of this work—there were only several people who saw that he was working and tinkering on this ladder piece in his studio. So I have testimony of many private conversations from several people that describe this work but there is no photo of documentation of it and the work was never finished nor exhibited. There is no object that could represent it or allow to commodify it. So my re-creating of it is just an approximation; all of these works are just approximations. So this as a museum asks a question: how far can the capitalist economy of the art market push this idea of commodifying something phantom?

This piece is called *Mutations and Liquid Assets*.<sup>9</sup> I was interested in the question of destruction of works in fires, floods, including Sandy that happened here New York. Also, I am interested in the idea of mutual influences between artists, circulation and mutations of memes, and ideas and how artists steal from each other. So for this piece, I purchased legally a series of different metal works from different artists: Richard Prince, Carsten Holler, Joseph Beuys, and Carol Bove. Then I melted them into one form so they are half-destroyed, half-visible, and they became this kind of hybrid form. I was interested in whether they are still the objects that they used to be—and what is their current value? What is the status of this hybrid object which is a crossover between these half-melted four artworks?

This piece is called *Ready Unmade*. It was my commission for the Frieze Projects in London, where I hired a professional bird trainer, to teach these macaw birds to bark like dogs to create an illusion of communication.<sup>10</sup> Basically, the birds were separated from their families for three months, and they were only listening to dog barking. If anyone is wondering whether this was violating any animal rights, it wasn't because basically I just used this niche that these birds repeat any kind of sounds and I just narrowed it down. So this piece was a kind of illusion of a fictional language, one species using the language of another species. Then I exhibited this piece at the fair, but the minute the piece was exhibited, this language—this fictional language that wasn't even a language—started falling apart. Because the birds started repeating other sounds, and in front of the viewers, over the course of three days it fell apart. Meanwhile the value of these birds changed since, as it turns out, the value of the completely wild birds is, contrary to what we might think, much higher than the value of the birds that were trained. So the moment these birds got trained their value dropped by half. So in that case acquiring culture meant the drop in value. Thank you.

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9. Agnieszka Kurant, *Mutations and Liquid Assets*, KUNSTHALLE MAINZ, [http://www.kunsthalle-mainz.de/files/3414/5553/5002/AK00095\\_Mutations\\_and\\_Liquid\\_Assets\\_DDH\\_1klein.jpg](http://www.kunsthalle-mainz.de/files/3414/5553/5002/AK00095_Mutations_and_Liquid_Assets_DDH_1klein.jpg) [<https://perma.cc/TAJ6-GN9Y>] (last visited Mar. 8, 2016).

10. Frieze Projects 2008, "Agnieszka Kurant," FRIEZE PROJECTS, [http://www.friezeprojects.org/commissions/detail/agnieszka\\_kurant/](http://www.friezeprojects.org/commissions/detail/agnieszka_kurant/) [<https://perma.cc/HL94-96WX>] (last visited Mar. 8, 2016).