

WARSAW

Agnieszka Kurant, Nonconformist

INTERVIEW AND PHOTOGRAPH BY LISA ROVNER

Constantly experimenting and endlessly working towards breaking free from tradition, Agnieszka Kurant wants to take you for a walk on the moon, for a dance in the dark. A free spirit refusing to be categorized as artist or curator, she

manifests herself through invisible shows, mental cartoons and most recently, subliminal messages broadcasted on the Panasonic screen on Times Square. While waiting in line for the bathroom at a party, Lisa Rovner switches on her recorder.

Lisa: *What stage name would you choose for yourself?* Agnieszka: I like your friend's name, Start. *You know her real name is Junesa.* I know a girl whose name is November Painter. *My ex ex ex boyfriend's friends named their baby Audio Science.* [Someone else in the queue:] *I knew a girl whose real name was Easy Summerville.* [Someone else in the queue:] *This guy who came to my high school in Canada on an exchange program got to rename himself and so he named himself Eric Shin.* [Someone else in the queue:] *Erection?* You know in Eastern European countries when I was growing up, people would give their children foreign names, and sometimes they did not know what they meant, sometimes they were just foreign words. And so, when I was a kid in Poland, there was a baby girl who was born in the block of flats where I was living and they called her Badminton. *Badminton?* Yeah. [Someone asks her:] *Where do you live?* In my suitcase. Actually, AirFrance.com. *Agnieszka is smiling when she asks me, "Are you recording?"* She steps into the bathroom. I am still recording. *My friend Ashleigh is talking to my friend JT.* She says to him, "They show pandas porn to get them to mate in captivity." *Agnieszka steps out of the bathroom and says to me:* Once, together with a wonderful Japanese artist Shinabuku, we coined this theory about panda bears. In fact, I'm still thinking of turning it into an artwork. Since pandas bears are very rare creatures, all zoos dream of having one, but they are very expensive to buy. And even once a zoo gets a panda, the animal so rarely leaves its little house that most of the time all we see is an empty cage and a little house with "panda" written on it. So our theory is that perhaps some zoos don't even bother to buy the panda, they just display empty cages with panda houses. ... *After the party, where the conversations I recorded while dancing with her are completely unrecognizable and now forgotten, we are outside waiting for the next big thing.* We are talking about Poland, where Agnieszka grew up during communist times. "Dick Black?" Yeah! In the 80s that was a brand of soft drinks because Coca Cola was banned because it was a capitalist drink. There was one company and they called themselves Dick Black without thinking what it meant. There was also a company, I think it was an insurance company, called "Fart." Seriously though, "fart" in Polish means "luck" in English. When communism collapsed and this company started working outside of Poland someone had to explain to them that they had to change their name. *Can you imagine the person that actually did that? You talk a lot about Poland, how has your upbringing there affected your way of thinking and working?* I was 11 years old when communism fell in Poland. I was just about to understand what politics meant but I was a kid. I was careless, you know, I didn't care about the real world yet. In my eyes now, the most important legacy of communism in terms of influencing culture and people's mentality on a creative level – not to mention the obvious impacts a totalitarian system has on a nation and its individuals separately – is that it created this unique relationship to

absurdity. This relationship strongly dictates my work. I like to call it the "aesthetics of the absurd." It's visible in our deadpan sense of humor and in our understanding of reality. Nowadays there is this whole discussion about the de-realization of reality, you know, the idea that we can't distinguish the real from the unreal, for example that we don't believe what we see on tv. In Poland we've had this feeling for the past fifty years. We watched manipulated tv with fake newsreels and artificial images of the world both inside and outside the Iron Curtain. We never believed the images we were watching, so for us, the preoccupation that current intellectuals have, this idea that we are losing the feeling that reality is real – like when Stockhausen says that 9.1 was the greatest performance in the world's history – is sort of passé. We already felt like we were living in the scary sci-fi world of Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* or Godard's *Alphaville* long ago. And it's this feeling of living in science fiction, that made, at least some of us, have this absurdist disposition. When I worked with my ex-boyfriend Mathieu Copeland on a magazine he ignited – *Perfect Magazine*, a magazine and an art exhibition in one with all the parameters of a magazine from bar code to ISSN number to adverts; with artworks submitted by 43 artists; printed white on white, white ink on white paper – what was important and inspiring to me was the idea of making something opposite to what art usually does. Instead of making things appear visually, why not make things disappear. Coming from a country that for a long time, and even now, still cannot afford expensive art exhibitions, if any at all, I thought of curating a totally democratic show which could go anywhere: a show with no production, insurance or transport costs. I thought of an invisible show, that is to say, an exhibition consisting exclusively of invisible artworks. That's how my exhibition *Snow Black*, which started out at Yvon Lambert Gallery in New York last year, came about. *Snow Black* is a mental cartoon. No preconceptions, no images. An exhibition without dimensions, existing only in time. It is also never-ending, as artists continue to add new pieces to it. Artworks by artists such as Art & Language, David Medalla, Cerith Wyn Evans, Ben Kimmott, Cedric Price, Liam Gillick, Simon Moretti, Vedova Mazzei, Maurizio Cattelan, Pierre Huyghe, Joe Scanlan, Carey Young, Olivier Mosset, Gino de Dominicis, Jay Chung and many others were commissioned, borrowed or sometimes stolen. Each piece is invisible for a different reason: because it doesn't exist yet or any more, because it's a computer virus, a dream, a smell, a mental image. In New York the show was visible only at night, in the windows of the gallery when it was closed. Now it travels to all the places that can only afford invisible art. It could even be sent to the moon! It was recently shown in Skopje, Macedonia. Now it's going to Berlin, to COAMA – Center for Opinions in Music and Art. This time the show appears in the form of a poster, printed black on black.

The descriptions of the artworks are printed with invisible paint used for printing money, only visible with special strong uv or infra red light. *We are walking to the next party and the sound of ice in a scotch glass fills the air. A friend is talking about how in Canada they discovered that a polar bear and a grizzly bear had mated because a hunter killed the offspring.* I ask Agnieszka, "What would you kill to know?" I know I'd like to kill time. I'd like to exceed the logic of this reality for one day and see what happens. My upcoming project, which started with a poster-piece I contributed to Pierre Huyghe's Tate Modern show, is called *Day Out of Time* and is devoted to this absurd dream I have. *You seem to always be going against logic.* I have always wondered why people think that discourses exist in a void, that nothing influences them. I don't believe that. *L'espion qui n'existe pas*, featuring the work of Stefan Bruggemann, Pierre Huyghe, Gabriel Lester, Gianni Moti and others, does not exist separately in an empty gallery or museum. Instead, it infiltrates, inhabits and explores other existing exhibitions. This exhibition constantly changes its identity from a ghost, tourist, and passenger to a spy, parasite, subliminal message or image depending on the exhibition and context it enters. It's an attempt to dissolve the fixed, temporal nature of exhibitions. It's like a discussion between discourses, a crossover of different shows meeting in space and time. What this project articulates is the need to conceive of an exhibition not as an end or as a result but as a point of departure to ensure constant negotiation and exchange of meaning. I treat exhibitions as an art form, experimenting with different exhibition formats. I have been dreaming for a long time of making an exhibition inside a movie. I'm interested in the existence of subliminal messages and images, things that millions of people see, but somehow go unnoticed. *Thaler part 1*, my collaboration with Charles de Meaux, director of Anna Sanders Films, is the starting point of a feature film to come. Charles de Meaux's one minute long trailers will be shown once per hour during a period of two months, between the commercials on the Panasonic screen in the middle of Times Square. I'd like to commission more of these large-scale interventions inside the reality of contemporary cities. These works will first function separately, as subliminal messages or images inside the urban fabric and surrounding reality. They will subsequently become part of the larger film's reality. The film will refer to the mythology of the future created within our world. As described by Jorge Louis Borges in a tale of the country of Tlon, we can perfectly imagine the very existence of another, alternative logic but we cannot have any idea what exactly this logic would represent. *We're home, lying on my bed and my dear friend Agnieszka says to me:* "I am going to play a dead person right now. It's really late and now I am going to play a dead person, okay?" Okay, but one more thing, *do you think there is going to be a moment when everything is going to be okay?* No, because our desires will never sleep.