

Agnieszka Kurant

The End of Signature

A Percent-for-Art Commission
MIT Kendall Square Initiative



Agnieszka Kurant's *The End of Signature*

Christy Lange

Agnieszka Kurant believes that, in the future, art will be made collectively. "As our civilization develops," she proposes, "could we imagine the end of singular authorship in a few thousand years?"¹

This radical idea underpins all of Kurant's artistic practice, including her commission for MIT, the two monumental outdoor works that make up *The End of Signature* (2021–22).

Kurant's sculptures unfold like looping, meandering trails of light hovering overhead. On the rear facade of the 238 Main Street building, an abstract signature appears and disappears in animated LED, perpetually signing and erasing. Mounted on the underside of Building E37's cantilever, another signature glows and occasionally flickers like a vintage neon sign. These massive, illuminated gestures may resemble signage on commercial buildings, but they're actually closer in spirit to other kinds of signs: daring graffiti tags that say "this person was here" or abstract, minimal sculptures. The signatures don't say anything about an individual who owns the buildings or the artist who created the works, but they do suggest a collective portrait of their occupants and their surroundings.

What is a signature today, when we are using handwriting less and less, and when there are so many digital ways to identify ourselves? Rarely, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic, do we sign a check, a contract, or a petition by hand. We're more likely to e-sign a document or use a digital log-in and password to verify ourselves. "[*The End of Signature*] is about the end of handwriting," Kurant explains, "and how that expired at the same time as the idea of a singular author."² Even as there are ever more sophisticated biometric or digital means of identification—from facial recognition technology to iris scans to voice prints—there are as many, or more, ways that an individual can be imitated by artificial intelligence. As Kurant sees it, "the idea of individual self is collapsing."³

But even with technological advances that make signatures increasingly obsolete in our daily lives, the act of signing remains deeply attached to the artistic act and our ideas of authorship. In our narratives and myths about artistic creation, we still imagine an individual completing a singular process. Perhaps the artist signs her work with a flourish or as a kind of punctuation mark, at once

verifying it as her own and bestowing value on it. It is the signature, after all, that can turn a readymade like Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) into a work of art or give an artwork at auction its value. Despite the fact that artists in the sixties and seventies sought to dematerialize the art object itself, and many artists make their work with the help of producers, assistants, and others, we still cling to the nostalgic notion of the singular creator. Even the newest artistic medium, the NFT—although it exists only digitally and is endlessly replicable—still relies on a "digital signature" to lend it its worth. In many ways, it is still the signature that confers the authenticity, uniqueness, and rarity of the artwork.

In *The End of Signature*, the signature is the artwork—but it does not belong to the artist or any other individual. These signatures are generated by a computer program that Kurant developed with graduate students and their advisor in MIT's Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory. The program is a neural network that constantly learns how to create new and more optimized outputs. It was trained on a dataset of real signatures, which Kurant collected from scientists and other academics working in the building, as well as residents of the area. These individual signatures were then scanned and transformed by the algorithm into an "averaged" signature, which looks less like something signed by a human hand and more like an abstract, illegible scrawl trying to make sense of signatures that often lack clear alphabetical characters to begin with. Unlike the usual outcomes of artificial intelligence, the end products are not "optimized" for anything and have no explicit use. And unlike the usual handwritten signature, they have no unique owner and no ability to verify or authenticate anything.

Kurant considers individual verification and creation as antiquated. In their place, she imagines something closer to hybrid forms of authorship found in science, nature, and, increasingly, online.



The End of Signature, 2021–22. Site-specific installation in two parts: 18mm coated cobalt blue neon tubing, magnetic neon transformers, and custom-programmed controller, 193 × 580 in. (490.2 × 1473.2 cm) and LED lights, acrylic lens, steel, paint, and custom-programmed controller, 234 × 697 × 16 in. (594.4 × 1770.4 × 40.6 cm). Collaboration with Katie Lewis, Divya Shanmugam, Jose Javier Gonzalez Ortiz, and Professor John Guttag. MIT Collection commissioned with MIT Percent-for-Art funds. Photo: Charles Mayer Photography



Above and cover: *The End of Signature*, 2021–22 (detail of LED component). MIT Collection commissioned with MIT Percent-for-Art funds. Photo: Charles Mayer Photography

As Kurant points out, in the scientific community, most discoveries are done by teams: “The idea of individual ‘genius’ in science as in culture is nonsensical.”⁴⁴ What’s more, “People get written out of discourses of science.”⁴⁵ If the individual author is becoming outmoded, the new paradigm will be the kinds of collective intelligence our networked culture fosters. *The End of Signature* signals this new paradigm: it is not only a work of co-creation; it also portrays two distinct but collective portraits of the site’s denizens.

The animated sculpture at 238 Main Street—which amalgamates signatures of current scientists, students, interns, and academics at the Institute, as well as past ones—points toward correcting that history. The neon sculpture is based on signatures of people who live in the Kendall Square and East Cambridge area. This act of amassing individual signatures to represent a community of signees is part of the origin of *The End of Signature*, which Kurant first realized in 2013 by collecting the signatures of different generations living in a postwar housing project in Utrecht. For other instances of the piece, she collected signatures of members of social movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Indivisible, visitors to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, and all the employees of Cleveland Museum of Art to represent the “phantom, dormant capital that can be aggregated when people get together for a social movement or a common cause.”⁴⁶

Kurant’s commitment to collective intelligence and hybrid authorship also reflects broader developments in our culture. With the rise of digital technologies, production is increasingly crowd-sourced: artistic creations are realized through crowdfunding on platforms like GoFundMe, while Wikipedia gives us a corpus of knowledge aggregated and edited by communities of editors. Many of the staples of our popular culture are impossible to trace back to a single author—memes and conspiracy theories gain life, mutate, and go viral anonymously.

“Complex, hybrid authorship,” as Kurant sees it, “could change the existing paradigm in art and culture.”⁴⁷ This is the central tenet of Kurant’s work, from collaborating with scientists and engineers to outsourcing the making of *A.A.I. (Artificial Artificial Intelligence)* (2014) to termite colonies. *Collective Rorschach Test*—part of her 2021 exhibition *Errorism*, which addresses the potential risks and systemic errors of digital communities—tracks the progression of one recent experiment in collective artistic creation. Called *r/Place*, the study began on April Fools’ Day 2017 on Reddit. The social-networking platform invited Redditors to contribute one pixel each to a blank digital canvas. Over seventy-two hours, online communities and subreddits banded together or worked alone to colonize parts of the image by marking it with collectively made national flags, Pokémon characters, and odes to their favorite sports teams. Slowly, something that became known as the “black void” began erasing an image of the US flag, spreading like a mold and blacking out previous contributions. Depending on how you look at it, this experiment could be a successful example of crowd creativity or a darker manifestation of the way collective decision-making can behave or mutate unpredictably. As Kurant points out, “all systems are vulnerable.”⁴⁸

Kurant has worked collectively before to create literal and figurative portraits of invisible online communities. In *Assembly Line* (2017) and *Aggregated Ghost* (2021), she asked Amazon Mechanical Turkers to submit their self-portraits, creating a single, amalgamated image of this largely invisible working class. These remote gig workers are paid small fees to perform micro-tasks online, completing the so-called “last mile” that automation cannot achieve. They are named after the original “Mechanical Turk,” a chess-playing automaton created in the late eighteenth century that amazed viewers with demonstrations of its seemingly magical abilities. The proto-robot was later revealed to have



The End of Signature, 2015. Site-specific light projection, dimensions variable. Collection of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Photo: Kristopher McKay



The End of Signature, 2021–22 (detail of neon component).
MIT Collection commissioned with MIT Percent-for-Art
funds. Photo: Charles Mayer Photography

been operated by a human hiding in the background. Similarly, in collaboration with the artist and writer John Menick, she created a series of drawings made by Turkers in which each worker contributed one line remotely, without knowing they were co-creating an artwork. With both pieces, Kurant shared her profits from the sale of the two series with the contributors. The final products are portraits of a new, underpaid, unrecognized labor force that creates today's digital assets beyond our vision. They pose the question: What if this invisible labor could be used for less straightforwardly instrumental purposes?

"Contemporary economy and politics are based to a high degree on immaterial, virtual and phantom products such as patents, copyrights, strategies, debts, air rights, etcetera," says Kurant.⁹ "Money and labor are becoming increasingly immaterial and invisible."¹⁰ In her 2014 work *Air Rights*, a meteorite levitates above a plinth, seemingly by magic. The immaterial gap between object and pedestal represents the concept of "air rights" in the real estate market—the value of the unbuilt air above a property. The hovering signatures in *The End of Signature*, similarly, make a kind of immaterial value visible—not only that of the artwork but also of the cognitive labor at the Institute and the collective

contributions of the wider community that supports it. *The End of Signature* attempts to represent the aggregated social capital of the institution and the surrounding community, and more broadly, it suggests the ineffable value of scientific achievement and discovery. Such virtual or "phantom" capital can be hard to see, yet it increasingly defines today's economies.

The End of Signature captures the current condition in which the harvesting and analysis of personal data on a mass scale allow governments and corporations to "slice and dice" audiences and group them into any number of categories or demographics, which may or may not accurately represent their identities. Things unique to us—our behaviors, faces, browsing histories—are used in the service of making assumptions about groups of people. Algorithms are trained on this data to create "imagined communities" of like users in order to optimize everything from attention to policing. At the same time, we are seeing how the collection and analysis of that data are deeply flawed and biased. Kurant's illegible, "optimized," collective signatures are both a reflection and a critique of these imagined communities and what algorithms based on data can ever truly tell us about the humans behind them.

1 Agnieszka Kurant, interview by Sabine Russ, *BOMB*, no. 131 (Spring 2015), <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/agnieszka-kurant/>.

2 Agnieszka Kurant, interview by Jason Farago, *Even*, no. 2 (Fall 2015), <http://evenmagazine.com/agnieszka-kurant/>.

3 Agnieszka Kurant, conversation with the author, Berlin, June 18, 2021.

4 Kurant, conversation.

5 Kurant, conversation.

6 Agnieszka Kurant, "Cambridge Analytica and The End of Signature," interview by Jan Garden Castro, International Sculpture Center blog, June 6, 2018, <https://sculpture.org/blogpost/1810776/348716/Part-2-of-Interview-with-Agnieszka-Kurant-Cambridge-Analytica-and-The-End-of-Signature>.

7 Kurant, interview, *BOMB*.

8 Kurant, conversation.

9 Kurant, interview, *BOMB*.

10 Kurant, interview, *BOMB*.

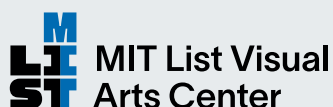
The List Visual Arts Center,
MIT's contemporary art museum,
collects, commissions, and
presents rigorous, provocative,
and artist-centric projects that
engage MIT and the global art
community.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Agnieszka Kurant (b. 1978) was born in Łódź, Poland, and lives and works in New York City. Kurant's work in systems, sculpture, and film has been exhibited widely in the US and Europe at institutions such as SculptureCenter, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; de Young Museum, San Francisco; Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto; Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; and many others. She co-represented Poland at the 12th Venice Architecture Biennale (2010, with Aleksandra Wasilkowska). Her recent fellowships and residencies include the Berggruen Institute's Transformations of the Human program (2020–21) and the Ida Ely Rubin Artist in Residence at MIT's Center for Art, Science, and Technology (2016–18). She is also the recipient of the 2020 LACMA Art + Technology Lab Grant, the 2019 Frontier Art Prize by VIA Art Fund and the World Frontiers Forum, and the Google Artists and Machine Intelligence Grant.

ABOUT THE COMMISSION

Agnieszka Kurant was selected for the commission by Percent-for-Art committee members, including: Azra Akšamija, Associate Professor, MIT Program for Art, Culture, and Technology; Jon Alvarez, Director, MIT Office of Campus Planning; Richard Amster, Director, MIT Campus Construction; Robert Brown, Director of Perkins & Will Architects, Executive Architects of Kendall Square Initiative; John Durant, Director, MIT Museum; Paul C. Ha, Director, MIT List Visual Arts Center; Michael Owu, Director, Real Estate at MITIMCo; Stuart Schmill, MIT Admissions; and Emily Watlington, MIT Graduate Student in History, Theory, and Criticism of Architecture and Art.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christy Lange is a writer, editor, and Program Director at Tactical Tech (tacticaltech.org), a Berlin-based nonprofit organization that designs creative interventions that seek to demystify technology. She is a former editor at *Frieze* magazine, and her writing has appeared in publications worldwide.

ABOUT PUBLIC ART AT MIT

MIT's world-renowned Public Art Collection reaches across the Institute and is enjoyed by students and visitors alike. New works are added through the Percent-for-Art program on the occasion of new campus construction. Formally instituted in 1968, the program continues to expand MIT's Public Art Collection through artworks by important and critically acclaimed contemporary artists, including Olafur Eliasson, Jeffrey Gibson, Sol LeWitt, Sarah Sze, and Ursula von Rydingsvard, among others. The List Visual Arts Center oversees MIT's art collections across campus and presents contemporary art exhibitions at the museum located in I. M. Pei's Wiesner Building (E15). The Public Art Collection and museum are free and open to all.

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