

In Conversation with
Mark Curran

on Multivocality as a Representational Strategy

Iris Sikking Your project *THE MARKET* (ongoing since 2010) deals with the functioning of our financial market.¹ Your PhD was supervised by a visual and media anthropologist, and you used photography as a central research method. This has shaped your practice as a photographer—or rather, you might say, as a researcher using photography. An important part of the installation is the full transcripts of conversations you had with stakeholders in the financial sphere, which were also on display in your exhibition at Krakow Photomonth 2018.²

¹
For more detailed information about this project, see, [themarket.blog](#), Mark Curran's research blog.

²
THE MARKET was installed during Krakow Photomonth 2018 at the Szara Kamienica Gallery.

Mark Curran

Photography is central to my practice. By way of context, I was a social worker and then, over twenty years ago now, wanting a career change, I bought a camera. Subsequently, through my postgraduate education, I was introduced to ethnography and visual and media anthropology. Since the late 1990s, I have completed what I describe as a cycle of long-term research projects focused on the predatory context resulting from migrations of global capital. While I would consider myself a researcher, much of what I do is centered on thinking about photography and the role of ethics and representation and the politics of representation. In response to these concerns, I have adopted the approach of “multivocality/montage,” taken from visual ethnography, as a research and representational strategy. The full installation of *THE MARKET*, my ongoing, multi-sited, transnational project on the functioning and condition of global markets and the role of financial capital, incorporates photographs, film, soundscape, artificial material, 3D data visualization, and verbal testimony. So the transcripts you mention of those conversations with bankers, traders, brokers, and financial analysts, along with the other components completed in Dublin, Frankfurt, London, Amsterdam, and Addis Ababa, are a central element in that approach.

IS You found that audiences in the exhibition space are very open to engaging with these transcripts. You also aim to reach out and present your work in other contexts beyond “the art world.” How do you involve the audiences in these various contexts?

MC

I'd absolutely advocate for the potential of practice-led research to reach multiple audiences beyond academia. This has been critical for my earlier projects and continues to be so with *THE MARKET*. A key theme has been the study of power. In 1972, Laura Nader, an anthropologist at the University of California, Berkeley, wrote about “studying up,” and proposed that instead of studying the powerless, we should study the powerful; that instead of asking why some people are poor, we should ask why other people are more affluent.³ However, gaining access to those structures is incredibly difficult, which is intentional—it's constructed that way—so I spent one and a half to two years negotiating access to specific sites and/or individuals working in this sphere, building relationships enabling people to tell their stories: the person as witness, regardless of ideological position. And that's where ethnography comes in, in terms of a long-term engagement, in terms of immersiveness, and as a critical commitment. So you can see the transcripts as objects lying there on a table, but in some cases it took two years for that object to come into existence.

Some of the transcripts are blank, where individuals collaborated but then directed me to redact the complete text for various reasons—including fear, a functioning attribute of this sphere. It was also very important to maintain the anecdotal quality of the conversations; people who have read them say it's like they can hear the voices. As an installation in the context of practice-led research, it's about appropriating strategies, so in one way it may look like art, but it's not necessarily art. And this can be so powerful: Allan Sekula, whose work is a major reference, said that the economy was never a sexy subject for art. So, in a time of continuing crisis, what's the role of art, and, indeed, its relation to activism?

³

See, Mark Curran, “Studying Up,” *THE MARKET* blog (January 20, 2015), [themarket.blog/2015/01/20/studying-up-from-capital-at-work-methodology-in-the-market](#) [accessed September 22, 2018].



Mark Curran, *THE MARKET*, 2010–ongoing, desk with documents in folders; and *The Economy of Appearances*, 2015, single-channel projection, HD digital video animation, sound, 4'51". Installed in the Szara Kamienica Gallery, as part of Krakow Photomonth 2018 (photo: Studio Luma)

I have to say, particularly with this project, in the encounters I have had and invitations I have received—for example, to present at international conferences on global finance—when I address the functioning and condition of the global markets and talk about the “normalization of deviance” as an appropriate cultural description for this sphere, people central to its operation listen and agree. That’s been invigorating and affirming. It evidences a consensus regarding the unsustainability of this system.

And during the installation of the project at the Centre Culturel Irlandais in Paris, in 2014, we had a panel discussion with two economists; the Irish ambassador to France was also present. I always insist on a program of events because the idea is that the installation becomes a site of discourse, a space to open up and provoke discussion. There were 150 people in the room, and another 150 on the waiting list. In the context of people working in this sphere who were also present, it was no news to them: they were kind of like, “We know this.” But in terms of the general public, there seemed to be a real desire to understand these systems and the reasons behind them. Also, the people who run La Défense, the financial district in Paris, requested all the transcripts. These experiences and outcomes have been a consistent response to the installation—overwhelmingly positive regardless of location. I should also add that I use social media, my research blog, and my role as an educator as means to further share the outcomes to encourage involvement, awareness, and critical debate.

- 15 In 2015, you traveled to the Zuidas in Amsterdam. I live near the area, and saw this financial district grow rapidly over the past two decades. Could you elaborate on the research process and your visual approach to constructing the video work *Algorithmic Surrealism*, which was part of the installation in Krakow as well?

The work in the Zuidas district was an opportunity to expand the scope of the project. It was commissioned by the Noorderlicht Photo Festival, in Groningen, and the NEPN Research Centre at the University of Sunderland, in the UK. I had been curious about Amsterdam as the location of the oldest exchange in the world. However, I started to do a lot of research around the role of “shadow banking”—the Netherlands, Ireland, and Luxembourg are central to the functioning of that global system—and that of “high-frequency trading” (HFT), which I’d already been researching in London. A British government report states there will be no human traders within a decade. This led me to this new financial district in Amsterdam where, in response, I made photographic work, recorded sound, and created 3D data visualizations and a short film.

What the site brings to the project is what I describe as “financial surrealism”: the notion that we’ve entered a period where the market has no relationship to the economy or even social reality—which is perhaps the end phase of late capital. We’ve entered—because I would argue that financial capital seeks for everything to be recreated in its image—what the anthropologists Karen Ho and Anna Tsing call “the economy of appearances.” What I experienced in Zuidas embodied that.

While working in Amsterdam, I was also invited to contribute to an event about representing financial capital, at the Royal Anthropological Institute in London, along with other artists, anthropologists, bankers, professors of accountancy, and traders. One of the organizers was Brett Scott, a former trader who used to work in global finance and is now a financial activist. Brett wrote an essay titled “Algorithmic Surrealism” to describe how HFT operates. It’s 6,000 words long and all in the first person, which I also felt maintained the ethnographic voice present throughout the rest of *THE MARKET*. So, with Brett’s permission, I adapted the essay into a short script for the voice-over of the film.

The film, also titled *Algorithmic Surrealism*, was recorded in the landscaped park in front of one of the global investment banks in the Zuidas. I was struck by

this evidently manmade landscape, botanic-like and completely artificial in its construction. So the female voice in the film, for example, describes dredging up oil from the Niger Delta, because with things like HFT and cryptocurrencies, we’re using large amounts of energy, which is unsustainable—destroying the environment to produce something that doesn’t even exist, on which we then speculate. This is where the world of finance finds itself. As the voice states, we’re creating meaninglessness.

IS It’s a project you could continue for years, I suppose. You are now working on a publication of all the material from *THE MARKET*. Would that be the conclusion of this project, or is there a logical next step?

MC

The idea would be to produce a substantial publication—a material artifact documenting a sphere which may become abstracted by the very algorithmic machinery it has innovated. This is the challenge, because I know it’ll be expensive. Alongside the publication would be a web-based version to be made freely available.

And for the future, well, I see it as a cycle of projects. There are four projects to date, including *THE MARKET*.⁴ At the moment, I am trying to access people who code within financial capital. At the heart is storytelling, because obviously anthropology studies human culture, and giving cultural description to this sphere is central for me.

A lot of contemporary work focuses on “re-presenting” what these systems do. While I think that’s important, I also believe we need to go beyond that. Human beings designed these systems, so if we are to imagine a post- or beyond-capital future, we need this cultural description.

A key concern of *THE MARKET* project has been algorithmic machinery as a key innovator of financial capital. So I’ve begun conversations with coders in various global locations, mostly anonymous, who code specifically for financial capital, and centered their stories on questions about ethics. At the moment, they’re

⁴
The other three Curran projects are *Southern Cross* (1999–2001; Gallery of Photography/Cornerhouse, 2002); *The Breathing Factory* (2003–2005; Edition Braus/Belfast Exposed, 2006), the outcome of his doctoral research; and *Ausschnitte aus EDEN/Extracts from EDEN* (2003–2008; Arts Council of Ireland, 2011).

all male. One is a father with children, working within this system while also knowing its implications. And this had already come up speaking to traders. I remember a woman who attended the event I mentioned at CCI in Paris, who worked on the dealing floor of a global investment bank in Paris. She came up to me after the event and told me about the debate she was having with her partner about whether or not to bring a child into the world—because, she said, “I know what the future might bring.”

This conversation took place via Skype, on June 27, 2018.

How to Frame?

Why Exhibit?
Positions on Exhibiting Photographies

Ahmed Alalouisi was born in Mosul, Iraq, in 1992. He is a self-taught photographer and videographer currently living and working in Ekenäs, Finland. His interest in photography began, in 2012, when he enrolled at the University of Mosul. The creative atmosphere within the university's department of media stimulated him to explore the art of photography further, also outside of university, and he quickly developed his skills, achieving success in various regional and national competitions.

Gigi Argyropoulou is a researcher, curator, dramatist, and theorist working in the fields of performance and cultural practice. Based in Athens and London, she has initiated and organized public programs, festivals, conferences, performances, actions, interventions, and cultural projects both inside and outside of institutions. She holds a PhD from the University of Roehampton. She received the Routledge Prize, in 2012, and the Dwight Conquergood Award, in 2017. She publishes regularly in journals, books, and magazines, and was co-editor of the *On Institutions* special issue of the *Performance Research Journal*. She also co-initiated the DIY Performance Biennial and co-curated its first edition.

Taco Hidde Bakker is a writer and researcher. He completed an MA in Photographic Studies at Leiden University with a thesis on the crossroads of photo theory and visual anthropology. He worked as a researcher on the documentary project *The Last Days of Shishmaref* with Paradox and Dana Lixenberg. His writings have been published in catalogues, artist's books, and in periodicals such as *Camera Austria*, *Foam Magazine*, *EXTRA*, *British Journal of Photography*, and *The PhotoBook Review*. *The Photograph That Took the Place of a Mountain*, his first collection of essays, was published by Fw:Books, in 2018.

Lisa Barnard's photographic practice discusses real events, embracing complex and innovative visual strategies that utilize both traditional documentary techniques and more contemporary and conceptually rigorous forms of representation. She connects her interests in aesthetics, current photographic debates on materiality, and the existing political climate. Barnard is a Reader in Photography and Programme Leader on the MA in Documentary Photography at the University of South Wales. She has two publications, both with GOST: *Chateau Despair* and *Hyenas of the Battlefield, Machines in the Garden*. Her new project, *The Canary and the Hammer*, will be published by MACK, in early 2019.

Natasha Caruana is a London-based artist working across photography, moving image, and installation. She has an MA in Photography from the Royal College of Art, London. Her work begins autobiographically, exploring narratives of love, betrayal, and fantasy, underpinned by a performative and playful documentary approach. Significant to all of Caruana's work is the questioning of how today's technology impacts relationships. The series *Married Man* breaks with traditional portrayals of infidelity, whilst later works grapple with the institution of marriage—its promise and defeat. Her work is created by drawing from archives, the Internet, and personal accounts. Caruana recently produced the moving image and installation piece *Timely Tale*, using 360-degree technology to reposition the viewer, subject, and maker. The work develops photography as an expanded form and continues to push the specific boundaries of documentary photography.

Mark Curran is an artist-researcher living and working in Berlin and Dublin. Holding a practice-led PhD, he is Lecturer and Programme Chair, BA (Hons) Photography, Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT), Dublin; and Visiting Professor, MA in Visual and Media Anthropology, Freie Universität Berlin. Incorporating multimedia installation informed by ethnography, since the late 1990s, he has undertaken a cycle of four long-term research projects, critically addressing the predatory context resulting from flows of global capital. These have been extensively published and exhibited. His most recent installations include at the Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris, France (2014); Noorderlicht | House of Photography, Groningen, The Netherlands (2015); Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto, Canada (2016); Museum of Capitalism, Oakland, USA (2017); Turchin Center for the Visual Arts, North Carolina, USA (2017); Le Bleu du Ciel, Lyon, France (2017); and Krakow Photomonth, Poland (2018).

Nicoló Degiorgis is academically trained in Sinology and professionally in photography. He is an author and publisher currently on residency at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. He runs the publishing house Rorhof and occasionally curates exhibitions.

Doris Gassert is Research Curator at Fotomuseum Winterthur, Switzerland, where she co-curates SITUATIONS at situations.fotomuseum.ch, runs the blog *Still Searching...*, and is responsible for Fotomuseum's publications. With SITUATIONS, a research lab and exhibition format that investigates current changes in photographic media and culture, she helps develop Fotomuseum's program and understanding of post-photography. She holds a PhD in Media Studies from the University of Basel, Switzerland, where she teaches media aesthetics, with a focus on the intermediality and epistemology of photography and the politics of representation.

Marko Karo is a Helsinki-based visual artist. He is a lecturer in the MA program ViCCA (Visual Cultures, Curating, and Contemporary Art) at the Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Helsinki, Finland. From museum collections to vernacular imagery and prison histories, Karo's work engages with archives as sites of rethinking and reanimating histories. He forms one third of the artist collective Gruppo 111 (with Mika Elo and Harri Laakso), which curated the Finnish ensemble of exhibitions entitled *Falling Trees* at the Venice Biennale, in 2013. Karo was also a co-curator of the Helsinki Photography Biennial, in 2012.

Kim Knoppers is an art historian at the University of Amsterdam and a curator at Foam. Since 2011, she has worked on solo exhibitions, including those by Melanie Bonajo, Broomberg & Chanarin, JH Engström, Anne de Vries, and Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs, and group exhibitions such as, most recently, *Collectivism: Collectives and Their Quest for Value* (2016) and *Back to the Future: The 19th Century in the 21st Century* (2018). She has contributed to various magazines including *Foam Magazine*, *Unseen*, and *Aperture*, and has written catalogue texts on Jaya Pelupessy and Sylvain Couzinet-Jacques, amongst others. She is also a lecturer in the MA Photography program at École cantonale d'art de Lausanne (ECAL) in Lausanne, Switzerland, where she initiated and developed the course Do Not Disturb – Curating in Progress.

Robert Knoth and Antoinette de Jong's work is characterized by an autonomous, modern approach with a focus on long-term documentaries that attempt to uncover the complexity of various socio-economic or political topics and their impact on the lives of "ordinary" individuals. In the resulting work, Knoth and De Jong seek ways to merge the hyperrealism of documentary with the abstract qualities of art and literature. For two decades, Knoth and De Jong have covered numerous conflicts through background stories and reportages for various international media outlets. Their projects have been exhibited worldwide; they have published a number of books; and they have received awards from World Press Photo and the Deutscher Fotobuchpreis.

Why Exhibit? Positions on Exhibiting Photographies

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Why Exhibit? offers a spectrum of views on how the myriad forms of exhibiting photographs can increase our understanding of how images operate today, as well as what they do to us when we interact with them. In the digital age, “photography” is best described with adjectives connoting a medium in constant flux: liquid, fluid, flexible, unstable. As such, there is no primary format for displaying photographs. However, with all of the medium’s formats, modes, and approaches, it is important to question how we see photographic images—and to ask why, by whom, and for what purposes the images were produced in the first place.

By drawing upon the perspectives of a diverse group of curators, scholars, photographers, and artists based in the field of contemporary photography, this volume aims to provide a foundation for a wider discourse about exhibiting photographs in the twenty-first century.