

François Curlet
Trois fois par
jour

François Curllet's Commodity Culture

It might be cliché; by now it's probably widely accepted that, when somebody tells you who they are, you're supposed to listen. Imagine my interest, then, when François Curllet said to me, in an email: "Je suis un enfant de l'art conceptuel de base avec reboot poético-naturaliste, anglo-latino je dirais." In English: "At heart, I'm a child of Conceptual art, one with a poético-naturalist, anglo-latino reboot, I'd say." Still, 2005's neon sign *Western* might have already said it all. The English version reads, "spaghetti conceptual art," suggesting a late stage of Conceptual art, where mannerisms have become tropes and character types and plot arcs have become tropes too. Some might refer to this as a loss of idealism or "the look rather than the substance." The question becomes whether or how one might be able to achieve the same objectives as early Conceptual art – shall we call them a critical commentary on communication and cultural production in an era of mass-consumerism? The most recent catalogue of Curllet's work to come out before this one, *François Curllet: Spezialität* (2007), opens with an image of that neon sign. And Vincent Pécoil's enlightening text in the same publication begins by expanding on the art-historical phenomenon distilled by the work. Pécoil quotes Jeff Wall's idea, expressed in *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel*, that Pop and Conceptualism are two guises of the same contemporary reality. For Wall, the former is "the cynical social realism [...] of late capitalism," while the latter is the "melancholic symbolism [...] of the bureaucratic organization governing the consumerist era." Again, I'm repeating what's already known. Let me at least add to it.

Curlet's neon sign appears to be a commonplace in the context of his work. It was also one of two or three of his works that he arranged for me to see in person when I visited him in Paris. Over lunch in the apartment of a friend of his, where the sign hangs, Curlet suggested that "the trademark is a contemporary still life, but aggressive." And we talked about an artwork whose title, in English, means "registered trademark:" John Knight's *Marque déposée* (1989). The work takes the form of a poster and looks like an advertisement produced en masse by the tourist industry. But in actuality, it shows a photo Knight took of the Roger Pailhas Gallery in Marseille. It was Knight's idea to put the name of the city at the top in red, italicized, Helvetica Bold letters. Only one copy of the poster was printed, for an exhibition at the gallery in 1989. As Anne Rorimer explains, the work "functions like an actual, promotional sign but, furthermore, presents an image of its own site of display in the chic shopping district of Marseille."¹ So the work looks closely at the commercial aspect or potential of art, while also casting itself in that image. Believe it or not, Curlet says, he visited the exhibition. An art student in Grenoble at the time, he traveled to Marseille for the opening.

At times, Curlet's artworks take on the guise of advertising, or tourism, or commodities generally speaking. In doing so, they follow in a tradition of trying to understand the mechanisms of commercialism, indicating how they function in our world today, perhaps also re-using those mechanisms – in part in recognition of the fact that art functions under similar conditions. Thus, for 2007's *eBay*, Curlet screenprinted four paint splotches onto white canvas, each splotch the same color as each subsequent letter in eBay's logo. The work speaks to a kind of unconscious of commodity culture. When I mentioned this formulation to Curlet's gallerist Florence Bonnefous, of Air de Paris, she compared Curlet's method to a kind of "Freudian slip" within mass-consumer culture, or to wit. Curlet himself says the logic of his work is more Lacanian, a reverberation of analogies. In the predominantly francophone context in which Curlet's work circulates, others would opt for the term *détournement*. I wanted to make sure I understood what people mean by that word, so I looked up the definition in 1958's *Internationale Situationniste #1*. But it's somewhat confusing. Basically, it describes the use of "preexisting aesthetic elements."² It doesn't talk about specific ways in which they should be used or combined or manipulated, nor what the outcome should be; what that method should reveal. Truth? The universalizing aura surrounding things? Their nature as constructions?

Some more context: Back at the apartment, Curlet showed me a book that his friend owned, Guy-Ernest Debord & Asger Jorn's 1959 collaboration *Mémoires*. As the title page explains, the book "consists entirely of prefabricated elements" – lines of text and some images that Debord had cut out of the newspaper³. Complementing these are "supporting structures" – painted lines and drips and blots that draw connections between the fragments of text, while also constituting figures of their own.

1. Anne Rorimer, "John Knight: Designating the Site" (1989), reprinted in John Knight, ed. André Rottmann (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), p. 16.

2. Online at: <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline///si/definitions.html>.

3. Guy-Ernest Debord and Asger Jorn, *Mémoires* (Paris: L'Internationale Situationniste, 1959), unpaginated.

I can't remember any specific lines from the book, but I photographed a page of Curlet's friend's copy with my phone. You can make out some text, like: *aider à créer une situation* (to aid in creating a situation) and *Dans une aventure d'une telle envergure il serait ridicule de vouloir fixer des priorités ou des suites* (On an adventure of such scope, it would be absurd to want to specify the priorities or the outcome). Clearly, what happens is that, through the combination of elements – when there's a line of text and a picture of a person at a cafe and a big, blue, Rorschach-style blot – *Mémoires* evokes a kind of feeling, a sense, something more than the sum of the parts. There may be no better word for this thing than "meaning." Regardless of whether it's a "hidden" meaning, the fact is it's meaning; more of it, and a specific kind of "contemporary" meaning.



I've come to think of Curlet's method primarily as combination. He'll come across or get stuck on some preexisting thing or idea and then see what happens when it's combined with some other thing or idea. What Curlet "adds" could be a material, a context, a use, some kind of alteration, a degree of abstraction, an image, a word, an organizing principle, etc. Sometimes his method will reveal something; sometimes it will suggest something. Take *Moteur* (1989), for example, whose motor was woven in wicker by artisans who were visually impaired, as a reflection on the skills involved in specific types of work.

Or the black-and-white image of a gear printed on the umbrellas of *Clockwork* (1998), suggesting the interpersonal dynamics of people bustling around on a busy sidewalk in the rain. Or 2008's *Fair Trade*, which consists of an embroidered Fair Trade logo and a net, implying the potential for socially conscious modes of production to act as a selling point for customers. Or 2018's *X-Ray*, in which a suitcase and its contents have been reproduced in translucent glass, as if seen through an X-ray machine, thus referencing the contemporary state of security and surveillance as well as the idea that material possessions might be a corollary for identity, an inner self.

I can't help but think of these combinations in relation to the model of metaphor that Borges traced back to Old English and Old Norse poetry. People love to quote from the beginning of Borges's 1967 lecture *The Metaphor*, in which he cites the ancient Chinese idea that the world consists of 10,000 things – but then Borges describes metaphors as turning their number of potential meanings into a factorial: “10,000 multiplied by 9,999, multiplied by 9,998, and so on.”⁴ Toward the end of the lecture, Borges discusses *kennings*, compound nouns often formed with a hyphen that Old English and Old Norse literature sometimes used in place of a single noun – as a kind of paraphrase, ostensibly for their associative potential. He cites the “very common *kenning* which calls the sea ‘the whale road.’” And he wonders whether the person who came up with it “felt [...] that the hugeness of the whale suggested and emphasized the hugeness of the sea,” which it certainly does. In a similar way, you could think of the abovementioned works by Curlet as “the wicker-motor,” “the gear-umbrellas,” “the Fair Trade-net,” and “the glass-suitcase.” I'm pretty sure Curlet felt that these works suggest and emphasize themes such as work, social interaction, consumption, security, and travel. Other works by Curlet do the same with themes such as advertising, bureaucracy, identity, animals, and the media.

The quick list in the paragraph above of works by Curlet also indicates how they relate to language. Curlet's works almost necessitate brief descriptions of what they represent, how he altered the objects or ideas they represent, or how the works were produced. And yet, it may well be the case that when the works are described, any subsequent analysis is bound to come off as self-evident, even spoilsport. Would it take something away from the works to explain their connection to jokes or one-liners?

Now might be a good time to talk about Robert Filliou. There were a number of books on the artist back at the apartment, but I didn't look at them. Only later did I learn that Curlet owns a complete collection of Filliou's multiples. So I checked out the book *Robert Filliou: éditions & multiples*, published by Les presses du réel in 2003, and on page seven I found a brief text by Curlet: “My interest in this collection of multiples,” he writes, “has to do with its principle of ubiquity. The collection is the reflection of a part of the traces left behind by Robert Filliou, rather than

4. Jorge Luis Borges, “The Metaphor,” in *This Craft of Verse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 21-2; for *kenning*, see page 37. Online in two parts at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBO_rp3k6yk and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vL_86Ckp1E0.



The main work involved was collapsing the space that separated the editions from one another and then organizing them.”⁵ A few pages later, we’re told that in 1962 Filliou created *Galerie Légitime*, an “itinerant” exhibition space in the form of a hat. The artist would fill the hat with artworks, wear it, and offer to show the works to people on the street. Another, later work – *Eins, Un, One* (1984) – consists of 100 examples (and 50 artist’s proofs) of a 3 x 3 x 3 cm yellow, wooden dice, each side of which shows the number one. Is this “one”-sided-dice a riff on Broodthaers’ famous homage (from 1969) to Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* (A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance)?

Speaking of chance versus predetermination: Given late capitalism’s fully developed, globalized networks of production and consumption, experience can seem like it has a universal character. But Curlet’s works can also, at times, be local. In his 2008 exhibition at Air de Paris, *Peptember*, several references were French. And in reproducing old advertisements, some works suggested a degree of nostalgia. *Pschitt 1956* and *Pschitt 1958* (both 2008) consist of silk scarves printed with ads for the eponymous Perrier product from the years referenced in the works’ respective titles. Within that period, the drawing style seen in the ads changed from conservative to modern. Another work also included drawing: *Profiteur!* (2008) reproduced an illustration by French cartoonist Jean-Marc Reiser in his iconic, caricatural style. These works reflect Curlet’s interest in advertising, media, and drawing, but they do so through references to a product I had to look up and a person whose name I – admittedly – didn’t know off the top of my head.

Curlet was born and raised in France, not Belgium, but he has lived most of his adult life in Brussels. In 2010, the artist even made a work about a local serial killer for an exhibition at *Établissement d’en face*, in Brussels. He made a series of birdhouses out of wood that he salvaged from the former house of Father Andrés Pándy. “Like so many altars,” the press release for the exhibition read, morbidly, the sculptures explore the possibility that the material itself could possess or transmit evil. The idea behind the works recalls the stories you hear that such-and-such a mass murderer’s house was demolished and buried in a secret, unmarked location—as if its wickedness might infect others, or people would come to treat it like a shrine. Two years later, in 2012, at the gallery Micheline Szwajcer in Antwerp, Curlet reworked laminated Formica table-tops with a related procedure. He shaped them, among other things, into the logos of various discount supermarkets: Lidl, Aldi, Dia, etc. In so doing, he drew a connection between “vintage” (the furniture) and “discount” (the supermarkets). In these Formica-logos, the afterlife of the materials is framed in terms of the life cycle of second-hand and low-cost commodities.

5. François Curlet, “peopleday®,” in Robert Filliou: éditions & multiples (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2003), p. 7. In 2011, Curlet organized a group show «Bob and Breakfast» at Galerie Nelson-Freeman in Paris featuring Filliou’s multiples alongside the work of contemporary artists.

If you wanted, you could apply the logic of compound metaphors, or *kennings*, to Curlet's exhibition at the Grand-Hornu⁶. You could do so on multiple levels. After all, it's the first exhibition in which Curlet has given equal weight to the three areas of his output: objects-paintings-films. Of course, paintings are objects too, and Curlet's especially so. Each of the Speculoos, Chipster, Waffles, and Cupcake paintings is named after and perhaps even looks a bit like the corresponding snack. He stenciled them using scrap metal--industrially produced plates, each with a pattern of negative spaces. The Waffle paintings have been spray-painted to imply shallow depths within a kind of honeycomb grid structure; the Chipster stencil could be said to resemble a number of potato chips in silhouette. In terms of the commercial aspect of our reality, these works might speak most about the status of painting on the contemporary art market. Curlet describes them as "ectoplasms of industrial production."

Curlet's films aren't objects. But the paintings and the films have something in common. I think of the latter as being kind of like video clips. Each illustrates a single idea. And although it's apparently possible to upload feature-length videos on YouTube (as long as you aren't breaking any copyright laws), most videos on there aren't that long. I feel like most YouTube videos are one-to-seven minutes long--the same length as most of Curlet's films. Whether Curlet's films are like clips or not leads us back to terminology, and by that I mean the subtext of literary devices or concepts running through this essay: clichés, commonplaces, still lifes, signs, "slips," détournements, metaphors, symbols, jokes, etc. What are these things? In a sense, they're ways of classifying or organizing or even eliciting meaning. And the fact that Curlet's objects and paintings and films somehow invite comparisons to these things might suggest that they do something similar--organizing, eliciting.



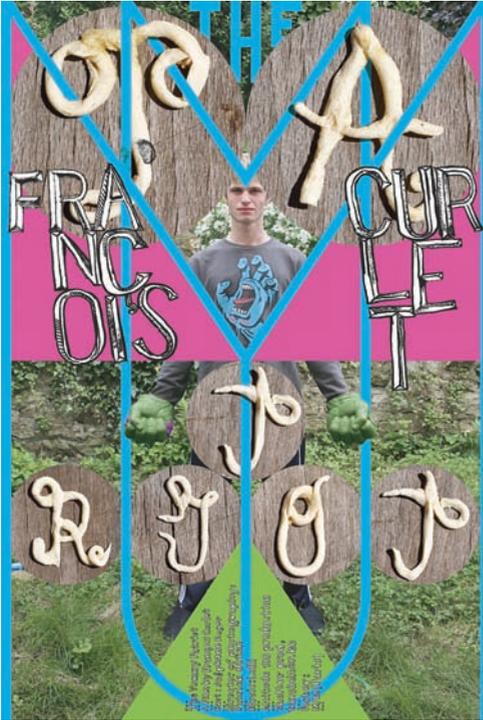
6. Crésus et Crusocé, MAC's, Grand Hornu, November 25, 2018 - March 10, 2019. Catalogue ed. Triangle Books, Brussels, ISBN 978-2-930777-27-6

When it comes to the films, we might think of the compulsion to describe the works as the storyline-problem. At the Grand-Hornu, there's the one with the mimes and the Dan Graham pavilion. They create a new, third pavilion in between the existing two in the sculpture garden of the Kröller-Müller Museum, but then get stuck in their imaginary sculpture (*Air Graham*, 2018). There's also the paté-Hussard, the soldier that the camera finds partially disrobed, hidden among boxes and old furniture, eating a tartine of paté (*Yummy Patriot*, 2018). And there's the businesswoman-Pied Piper, who smokes a cigar and plays Van McCoy's disco hit "The Hustle" on the flute on the way to work in the morning (*The Hustle*, 2018). Given the layout of the museum, viewers encounter objects-paintings-films--in that order. But depending on what consumes your attention or what sticks in your memory, you might think in terms of films-objects, or gear-umbrellas-paintings. Perhaps wicker-motor-businesswoman-Pied-Piper or glass-suit-case-Grand-Hornu-architecture. And who knows what writing about Curlet's work might do to his three decades' worth of reflections, in the form of artworks, on the world of things: I already think of his spaghetti-Conceptual-art in terms of -Vincent-Pécoil-Jeff-Wall-Dan-Graham. Maybe now you'll have to add: -*Mémoires-kennings-Filliou-etc.-etc.*

John Beeson

2018 - 2019

Translation Emiliano Battista



The Yummy Patriot

2018

It is during the March of the King by Jean-Baptiste Lully that a hussar having left his regiment appears to us. The deserter, hidden by the army, seems to take immense pleasure in gluttonously eating a pâté sandwich. Rather than being caught by his hierarchical superiors, he is confronted by the public. Playing with the concept of laziness, François Curlé once again displays his struggle for a space dedicated to laziness within a society of efficiency.

HD film, 1 min 47 sec, looped projection
Poster by M/M (Paris) 175 x 118,5 cm





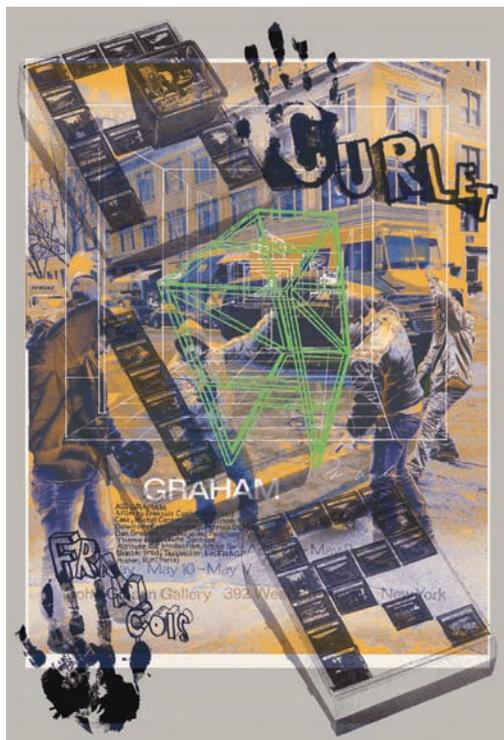
L'Agitée

2015-2018

Dating back to 1284, the Pied Piper of Hamelin tells the story of a musician who, as revenge for the inhabitants of the city not paying their debt to him, led all of Hamelin's children off a precipice to their death with his mesmerizing magic flute. In *L'Agitée*, François Curlet reinterprets the fable in the light of today's consumer society. The flutist is replaced here by a businesswoman playing a disco tune – Van McCoy's *The Hustle* – this scenario however no longer involves leading children to their death, but rather commuters to work.

HD film, 2 min 34 sec, looped projection
Poster by M/M (Paris) 175 x 118,5 cm





Air Graham

2005-2018

The work of the American artist Dan Graham, *Two Adjacent Pavilions*, located in the park of the Kröller-Müller Museum, challenges the Modernist architecture and the curtain walls of glass skyscrapers designed for executives that wish to see without being seen. Made of one-way mirrors, *Two Adjacent Pavilions* invites the public to experience this by placing oneself either on the inside or outside of the glass walls. In *Air Graham* François Curlet stretches the social criticism of his elder by hiring two mimes to enact an imaginary replica / extension of the two pavilions in which they end-up finding themselves locked-up.

HD film, 2 min 6 sec, looped projection
Poster by M/M (Paris) 175 x 118,5 cm



Yummy Patriot with:
Stéphane Roger

L'Agitée with:
Laurence Bibot

Air Graham with:
Bruce Ellison
Michel Carcan

Directed by
François Culet

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