

Varvara & Mar

## WE ARE THE CLOUDS



**Soft, fluffy power**  
BY STACEY KOOSSEL

**Biographies**  
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VARVARA & MAR

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*We Are the Clouds*, 2020

Interactive digital installation

Image: SITE Photography

***Soft, fluffy power***  
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Watching the clouds drift by in the sky, waiting for any recognizable form to appear, is almost a kind of divination—like teacup readings or palmistry, it relies on the art of symbolic interpretation. When we cast our gaze on the horizon we can be startled to see a concrete form staring back at us, perhaps half a car, the exaggerated profile of a great uncle, or what could be the backside of a hedgehog. Perplexed but determined we focus our gaze again and start mentally processing what this figure must mean



Installation view of *We Are the Clouds*, 2020. Image by SITE Photography.

symbolically, semiotically, spiritually—while the figure we are trying to grasp morphs into something else, and then back into the ether without a trace, leaving us with the eternal question: what was that and what does it mean?

*We Are the Clouds* (2020), by artist duo Varvara Guljajeva and Mar Canet, is an interactive artwork projected onto the Surrey UrbanScreen. Visitors to the site create shapes and movements with their bodies, which are then captured by a camera and transformed into fluffy, white clouds drifting in a clear blue sky. To observe the clouds formed by previous visitors drift by is both playful and poignant, like reading through an animated guest book and trying to imagine the faces and stories behind the entries. Together, these visitors form a community of the often overlooked and underestimated art-viewing public. The act of deliberately creating clouds, which we would normally observe and interpret passively, is perhaps the most meaningful part of the piece.

When we create figures in the clouds, thanks to artistic intervention and technological wizardry, we are no longer passive viewers—instead, we become the active producers of meaning. This draws parallels to the cultural phenomena of Web 2.0, user-created

Internet content. Web 2.0 ushered in a new era of communication, dissolving previous monopolies on information dissemination and old hierarchies of media hegemony. In its place, a participatory, social web emerged, with blogs and social media platforms giving individuals a voice and a worldwide audience reach that was not possible before. The rise of social media and the participatory web, like every technological advancement, is a double-edged sword. The flipside to users creating content is that they inadvertently become content themselves, not only through data collection and sales, but the problematic psychological and social ramifications of the commodification of the self. Invasions of privacy, information manipulation, and information bubbles caused by closed feedback loops in social media are examples of the dark underbelly of social media infotainment. *We Are the Clouds* speaks to these contemporary concerns, bringing up the abstract notion of individual agency and the body as political battleground. An exertion of freedom and personal choice is visualized in a performative fluffy, white cloud projected triumphantly in a blue sky, which is a reclamation of power, in the form of soft power (i.e., the political strategy of co-option instead of coercion).

The ability to empower individuals, and give an otherwise passive audience the means to creatively express themselves in public, is particularly moving during a global pandemic, when people's lives were flipped upside down. The word 'unprecedented' perhaps best encapsulates what living during the COVID-19 pandemic is like, as we witness a loss of trust in power structures and a rise in cynicism and conspiracy theories. In 2020, feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability surged under a cheerful veneer of banana bread baking, Zoom meetings, sourdough starter and other self-replicating units of culture that momentarily connected us in an attempt to find comfort in the everyday, and a sense of control over the uncontrollable. *We Are the Clouds* presents, if only for a moment, a way of escaping these earthly affairs.

Varvara Guljajeva and Mar Canet are like clouds themselves: true digital nomads. Their artistic practice spans continents and cannot be contained by regional, political, and arbitrary notions of national borders or language barriers. Both artists have known what it means to be from a particular place but not accepted for who you are, perhaps because of nationalist undercurrents that underpin a seemingly globalized art world (Guljajeva is part of the Russian-speaking minority from Estonia and Canet from the struggling Catalan region in Spain). Artists like Varvara & Mar cannot be contained by regional politics and the globe is their playground, from mapping amusing political propaganda in Wi-Fi network names in Seoul, South Korea (*Revealing Digital Landscape*, 2014) to building giant wind-powered kinetic metronome installations in Sancy, France (*The Rhythm of Wind*, 2016). Their mad scientist-like studio, full of 3D printers and robotic knitting machines, is housed in a Soviet era purpose-built artist's union building in Tallinn, Estonia.

Varvara and Mar's *We Are the Clouds* is reminiscent of Nam June Paik's well-known 1974 media installation *TV Buddha*, where a Buddha statue seems to gaze at itself in an infinite loop created by a CCTV camera and television screen. Both works reflect the introspective, meditative, transcendental nature of the screen. They reveal the influential yet overlooked relationships between humans and technology, which has been an endless source of inspiration for media ecologists, artists, academics and philosophers. Media technologies' psychological and cultural effects on our everyday life has been poetically explored by philosophers such as Marshall McLuhan, with his prophecies on the effects of the electronic environment, the global village, and his update of the Narcissus myth to include the hypnotic trance of the mirroring, stage-like phenomena of seeing ourselves on screens. Whereas Paik's *TV Buddha* sits still (as only a statue can) as his static image is fed live to a monitor, Varvara and Mar's *We Are the Clouds* opens up the screen to every visitor who chooses to interact with the piece. This movement marks a shift to pluralistic voices and stories replacing official stances, which are then amplified by digital technology and cultural backlash to decaying power structures and outdated ideologies. This forward push, enabled by playful intervention, is both powerful and soft.

Questions about how digital technology affects our world view, our opinions about others and our self-perception, much like the clouds in sky, are limitless. Every time we momentarily grasp at their meaning, they continuously evade us, morphing back into the unknown.

## About the Artists

Varvara & Mar are an artist duo formed by Varvara Guljajeva and Mar Canet in 2009 and based in Tallinn, Estonia. Their body of work is in dialogue with contemporary culture and cutting-edge technology, while being inspired by the situations and conditions created by living in a digital age. Their artistic practice stages interventions and creates platforms for meaningful discussion and reflection on the social changes and long-term repercussions of our relationships to ideologies and influences deeply embedded in digital technologies. Their works have a strong foundation in participatory art, socially engaged art and interaction with both people and environments, whether it's the wind powering a kinetic sculpture or real time stock-market numbers powering media art installations. They were commissioned to create *Neuronal Landscapes* (2018) for the Estonian History Museum and *Wishing Wall* (2014) for Google and the Barbican in London. Varvara & Mar have exhibited at MAD in New York, FACT in Liverpool, Santa Monica in Barcelona, The Barbican and V&A Museum in London, Onassis Cultural Centre in Athens, Ars Electronica museum in Linz and ZKM in Karlsruhe.

## About the Writer

Dr. Stacey Koosel is a writer, art historian and curator. She was the Chief Editor of *Estonian Art* magazine and has written for *Mousse* magazine, *Art Territory*, *InterArtive*, *Sirp* and *Kunst.ee*. She has worked as a freelance curator and curated exhibitions in Germany, Spain, Estonia and Canada. She was the Curator of the Kelowna Art Gallery, where she curated *Daphne Odjig 100* and *Creative Growth Centre for Spiritual Nourishment*. She currently works as the Curator of UBC Okanagan Art Gallery where she manages the university's Public Art Collection, artist residencies and exhibitions while working towards the development of a new gallery space in downtown Kelowna in 2024. She teaches art history and curatorial studies at UBC Okanagan.



### About UrbanScreen

Imagined by artists and built by the City, Surrey's UrbanScreen is Canada's largest non-commercial outdoor urban screen dedicated to presenting digital and interactive art. UrbanScreen is an offsite venue of the Surrey Art Gallery and is located on the west wall of Chuck Bailey Recreation Centre in City Centre. The venue can be viewed from SkyTrain, between Gateway and Surrey Central stations. Exhibitions begin 30 minutes after sunset and end at midnight.

UrbanScreen was made possible by the City of Surrey Public Art Program, with support from the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Surrey Art Gallery Association, and the BC Arts Council Unique Opportunities Program, and is a legacy of the Vancouver 2010 Cultural Olympiad project CODE. Surrey Art Gallery gratefully acknowledges funding support from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Province of BC through the BC Arts Council for its ongoing programming. UrbanScreen's 2015 equipment renewal was made possible by the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage / Government of Canada and the City of Surrey.

## Surrey Art Gallery Presents a series of publications on exhibitions and projects

ISSN 1918-1302 ISBN 978-1-926573-61-8 Published 2020

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