Introduction : On Recognition

The *Unknown Artist* (UA) is the title and driving concept of a programming cycle presented at Skol from January to June 2011. The UA program consisted of exhibitions and interventions that were to deepen curator Bernard Schütze's own enquiry into the figure of the artist – a constant theme since Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* – a figure whose representation has spanned extremes such as those embodied in Vincent Van Gogh's abject failure, and that of Damien Hirst with his extraordinary business success. When Skol circulated the call for the *Unknown Artist*, it was certainly not with the expectation of receiving proposals from 'unknown artists' hoping to promote their work through our program (even though, Skol's reputation has been built on its ability to identify promising artists and support their first solo exhibitions). Indeed, no one knew what would happen, and that was precisely the crux of the enquiry. As it turned out, the topic of the figure of the artist provided the ingredients necessary to grasp how the artistic character can be both radically individual and profoundly universal and inform what is commonly refered to as 'programming' in the context of artistic experimentation.

Through a series of postures designed to undermine their own status as artists – identity and authorship, self-proclaimed and highly self-aware artists were invited to represent and perform a fiction that would make the corpus of the *Unknown Artist* known, emerging only at the end of the season, in June. As each artist strived to constitute the UA through their respective actions, it was precisely this failure to capture this figure that made the experiment meaningful and success-

ful. Because the programming was mostly presented publicly, and the works themselves were attributed to artists, some well known locally, the experiment appeared to remain rooted in the established methods of the local and familiar not-for-profit art world: thematic call out, committee decision making, rotating exhibition slots with scheduled public viewing hours, including openings, artist talks and one-off events. In that sense, the topic, for the curator, focused on examining the figure of the artist, while for Skol, it consisted of making known and embracing indeterminacy as an organisational method, as per the methods and processes employed in the production of the artworks that would make up the corpus of the UA.

The UA programming struck a chord with Skol's expressed project to test the claims of its mission to support experimental and emergent art practices, spurred on by the over-determined character of exhibited contemporary art, in which experimentation often appears as just another style. The programming was supported as part of a concerted and shared vision to affirm the centre as a creative space and not merely a place that hosts creativity. Within this framework, art professionals are expected to test and practice concepts more extensively than the usual exhibition slot typically allows, and risk meaningful failure. In this case, failure is understood as a possible, welcome outcome of risk, and risk as a necessary device to ensure the movement inherent to artistic process and agency. Suffice to say that artistic process periodically redefines its contours with just enough ironic distance to reaffirm artists' inalienable need for self-identification within the traditions of art history and its institutions, and also, extending beyond the art world. Using the artist figure as a form personifies humanity's potential as a possibility in process, itself ongoing and open-ended.

The gallery and off-site programming was therefore grouped and planned according to a plausible narrative where the figure could evolve conceptually across place and time, and move through identities, even as the exhibitions and interventions did not appear overtly related. The following descriptions were written in 2011 by Schütze (with the exception of *Brouillon Général!* written by the artist) to introduce each module in the programming. I am reproducing them here as part of my introduction to Schütze's essay:

Unit 1 – Territories: The notion of territories set the stage for the UA's multiple embodiments and trajectories. Unit 1 consisted of the presentation of *Monologue* (January 14 – February 12, 2011) Patrick Ward's video installation which featured a video in which a seemingly continuous shot travels through a series of abandoned rooms and corridors to form an improbable architectural entity with no outside.

Comprised of a montage of footage selected from various video-sharing websites the work weaves multiple subject positions into a fictional point of view belonging to no one in particular. In playing on the narrative conventions of the subjective shot and the trickery of montage, *Monologue* revealed a paradoxical territory born of the encounter between an unknown subject and an unknowable object.

Unit 2 – Named Absence/ Anonymous Presence: An intervention in which the artist painted *"Nathalie Quagliotto was here"* (February 25–April 2, 2011) using safety yellow paint on one of the gallery foyer walls. With this terse statement, the artist revealed herself as the essence of her practice, which often involves leaving marks of a cautionary nature and pointed to a defining characteristic of many artists, to be an absent presence indicated by a temporary inscription in social space. Artistic identity is here boiled down to a named absence that disrupts our ordinary understanding of what it means to be someone, somewhere.

Multiple voices speak in the first person singular in Sophie Castonguay's interventions *Ce n'est rien* (February. 25–April 2, 2011), presented for the duration of the exhibition period and *Château fort*, which was presented on the closing night (April 1, 2011). In these interventions, the *Unknown Artist* is convened to express him or herself freely without betraying his or her anonymity. In order to do this, the artist used a method that required interpreters to engage with visitors by reciting a pre-recorded script written for the occasion by the *Unknown Artist*. This way, everyone could dialogue with this elusive being, and reflect on the significance of art and artistic identity. It turns out that the UA resides somewhere between the one who writes and the one who recites. In *Château fort*, the UA appeared to a collective audience as its own fiction narrated by different voices relating each individual's experience with the UA's exhibition.

An anonymous entity known only as *S/he embodies the unknown artist* (February 25–April 2, 2011) engaged in undisclosed artistic actions. Working from a position of anonymity, the 'embodier' made the *Unknown Artist*'s presence palpable through various interventions, performances and multidisciplinary works that s/he created while the gallery was closed. Fuzzy and imprecise photographic, videographic and textual traces and other existential clues left behind by this unpredictable displayer-who-was-not-to-be-displayed echoed the tension between the gradually emerging installation corpus and the embodied person behind it all. In this unit, the UA's profile was gradually traced through the exploration of possible identities. The guiding questions for this exploratory and open-ended process were: Who goes there? When? How and to what ends?

Unit 3 – Futures: The vast reservoir of future unknowns, examined from a triad of vantage points including Dustin Wilson imagined configurations of our living environment in his *Reversion to the Original Point* (April 15–May 21, 2011). In this gallery installation comprised of looped animations and a drawing series, Wilson offered a glimpse into an unknown future anchored in the artist's observation of his home province of New Brunswick, Canada. Drawing on the visual idioms of scientific and educational illustrations (diagrams, visual aids) as well as popular culture (comics, animation) this multifarious project explored the contested terrain of possible futures by weaving a narrative in which the personal and situated intertwined with the technical and scientific method.

François Deck's *Brouillon Général! Montréal* (17 May–9 June 2011) proposed the emergence of renewed value in a time to come. In this four-week residency project, the artist-consultant used a methodology referred to as the *Erratic School* that brought together three groups of five people from different backgrounds to produce a collective intelligence. The *Erratic School* is a transitional space created to bridge the divide that invariably exists between individuals and problems at the global scale. Getting to know one another by exploring problems as a group is to acknowledge that new possibilities can be found in the gaps and differences that exist between our perceptions of any given problem. The program underlying these gatherings therefore consisted in adding value to problems by introducing a concerted delay of their solutions, and subjectifying them in an unpredictable way. The *Erratic School* was organized in two half-day meetings per group over the course of two consecutive weeks, followed by three day-long group-wide workshops held on the 3rd week, concluding on the last week of the residency with a public gathering held at the gallery on June 9th, 2011. Though the group was unable to agree on a subject or form for the public presentation, it was not deterred and opened the project to an audience, "invited to an event that had yet to be determined?" on the evening of June 9. The only documentation of the public event consisted of spoken and written testimonials such as the one published herein by art historian Patrice Loubier who had come to listen to a presentation of the Erratic School and who instead found himself immersed in the experience.

DATA, a documentary film on the Au-travail / At-work collective (61 min) proposes a model for better work and creation modes down the road (May 25, 2011 at 7:00 PM). The screening combined the original French and English sub-titled versions of the film, followed by a conversation with the filmmaker. Manifesto, documentary, pamphlet, call-out for disobediance or fable, *DATA* attacks institutions without ever wishing for their abolition, discusses freedom rather than liberation, proposes autonomy but without separation.

It refers to a collective that never meets, a group that works under the cover of anonymity but that enjoys great visibility. These artworks, documents and dialogic interventions situate the UA figure in the midst of an unmapped territory.

Venturing into the unknown demonstrated the capacity of artists to act and take risks in the face of ambiguity and, for Skol, the organisation, the capacity to perceive and address the dissonance that exists between stated mission of experimentation and operating by rote. For Skol, taking risks from within the established modes of artistic inquiry was an attempt at revitalization by reconnecting who we were as an organisation with what we do. Mobilizing the artist as a metaphor allowed to expand our understanding of the artist as a figure who both resists naming as a condition onto itself while also seeking recognition as a fatality of that same inescapable condition.

By accepting to venture into the unknown, one also risks the shaming of not having clearly defined objectives. The *Unknown Artist* becomes both the subject and the object of what is possible in the present moment, working with what is there, toward some yet to be determined future. In retrospect, focusing less on the results—a symptom grounded in fear of failure—and expecting less definite answers from the ongoing enquiry, would have likely produced the same results. Despite the supportive context of Skol's mandate and shared desire to work differently, the undetermined character of the process felt risky, like going against the norms and agendas of the wider art milieu as expressed in the management requirements of funders and implicit standards of what is understood to be artistic merit. This may have produced as much excitement as anxiety at any given moment—an anxiety that can be attributed to the tension that exists between the need to express authentic self and vision as a dynamic part of creative life and our milieu's tendency for stability and conformity. An unconditional confidence in artists and their process, rather than concern with accepted forms of success, are required in order for ongoing and open-ended potentiality to fully form into a 'corpus'.

Setting out on this experimental journey served many ends both futile and utilitarian, or, *futilitarian*, to use an expression coined by Schütze in reference to art's political role. Punning in this instance serves to underscore the paradox that resides at the core of, and defines artistic activity. To quote another text by Schütze on the subject of what happens to privileged literacy when operating outside of accepted modes of recognition required to 'get it': "...contemporary art is more vigorous, surprising, and vital when it provokes an encounter, an opening to the not-yet-known that allows us to become literate in other ways."[1] Responding to a very basic human yearning to become whole, this

publication re-unites, while firmly establishing into the realm of art, the radically singular voices that redefine the present—such as in Patrick Ward's *Monologue*—and recreate the future before its time, such as François Deck's *Brouillon Général*—whereby each individual action, combined and accrued, is to create a future that is yet to be determined and recognizeable because perpetually unknown.

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[1] Schütze, Bernard, "*Seizing a Transformative Wind,*" in *As if All Were Well, Livraison No. 9*, co-curated by Anne Bertrand, Hervé Roelants, Stephen Wright, eds Rhinoceros, Strasbourg, France & SKOL, Montréal, Canada, 2008. (unpaginated).

CONFIGURATIONS VARIABLES DE L'ARTISTE INCONNU

L'artiste inconnu (AI) sous ses différents couverts
« Ceci [...] pourrait bien être ce que plusieurs d'entre eux font sans se rendre vraiment compte qu'ils participent peut-être à un projet collectif qui englobe toutes leurs interventions et expérimentations individuelles. »
– Proverbe Çabôcounien

Le monument, qui incarne une mémoire collective et des valeurs communes, est généralement un ouvrage d'un seul tenant, immuable et grandiose. La programmation de l'Artiste inconnu est au contraire éclatée, en mouvement, et n'existe actuellement que dans une forme en devenir. En effet, ce n'est qu'au terme d'une exploration à la fois individuelle et collective, hors des sentiers battus, que se précisera le sens de la proposition. Les artistes ont été choisis à la suite d'un appel à enrichir un corpus qui décrit l'Artiste inconnu comme une figure qui occupe des espaces mouvants, fait naufrage sur des îles flottantes, décompose en formes multiples une topographie en voie de cristallisation.

Les expositions présentent un Artiste inconnu protéiforme : un vaste espace architectural sans sujet, une signature sans présence, une présence sans signature, une voix unique portée par d'autres, un futurologue, un collectif anonyme, un mineur qui invente une méthode pour extraire des connaissances du gisement de l'inconnu. Portant principalement sur la figure de l'artiste et la possibilité de brouiller ou d'étendre les limites de son corpus descriptif, les œuvres et les