

Prodigious Protocols

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Le Bureau des Miracles (2020) is part of an ongoing artistic project entitled *L'Inexpliqué* (2015-now), in which the French artist *Stéphanie Solinas* brings together questions of spirituality, corporeality, and gestures of the sacred. As the name indicates, *Le Bureau de Miracles* is occupied with miracles—unexplained events, prodigious coincidences—and its primary offer includes the collection, storage, and distribution of these miracles. To participate, a simple procedure should be followed: you send a story of a miraculous event anonymously by SMS to the Bureau which becomes part of the collection, and then in turn you receive, without particular regularity, another story. On the website, the Bureau and its interests, intentions, and participative protocol are described unceremoniously:

SEND A STORY OF A MIRACLE

BY SMS TO +33 6 68 67 70 20

A MIRACLE YOU HEARD OF,

A MIRACLE THAT HAPPENED TO YOU,

AN UNEXPLAINED EVENT THAT SEEMS MIRACULOUS TO YOU,

A PRODIGIOUS COINCIDENCE, ETC.

1. YOUR MIRACLE WILL ANONYMOUSLY BE PART OF

LE BUREAU DES MIRACLES COLLECTION

2. YOU WILL OCCASIONALLY RECEIVE BY SMS

A STORY OF A MIRACLE FROM THE COLLECTION. (Solinas)

Appropriating its mode of operation from chain letters, tear-off flyers, and similar despised products, Solinas' Bureau establishes a subtle alliance between mystery–miraculous, unexplained events—and everyday life with its inflexible institutions and predictable, technical arrangements. As with several of her other projects, e.g., the vast exploration of *Dominique Lambert* (2004-2016) which occupied the artist for more than a decade (Herrie), a strict methodological setup is in place: to participate, you need to follow a set of rigidly defined principles. Employing the form of the protocol as well as the limited options offered by the SMS technology, the project operates on (mimics, parodies) an orderly logic of bureaucracy. To participate, fill in the form: in this case, the 160 characters that constitute an SMS.

In this essay, I take my point of view in precisely this form, asking what it means to “speculate” along the lines of the protocol: what ways of seeing, operating, and knowing does the protocol offer? How does such a “protocological” mode of thinking influence the conceptual work provided by Le Bureau de Miracles (Galloway 176), and how is it challenged? To contextualize this kind of art-based research, I draw on Claire Bishop's idea of aggregative knowledge production (Bishop). I discuss how the assembling of already existing materials—in Solinas' case miraculous stories from (potentially) all over the world—and the artistic reconfiguration of them into the “mold” of the bureaucratic institution can be understood as a research strategy. Rather than being occupied with, e.g., content creation, Le Bureau des Miracles, and many other, contemporary art-based research projects,¹ seem instead to annex

¹ Bishop's examples include Akram Zaatari's re-presentation of the preexisting archives (*Objects of Study/Studio Practices*, 2007), Taryn Simon's photographs of folders from the New York Public Library (“The Color of a Flea's Eye: The Picture Collection,” 2013), Zoe Leonard's collection of postcards of Niagara Falls (*You see I am here after*

already existing systems of configuration (Joselit “On Aggregators”), creating what David Joselit has termed an “epistemology of search,” (Joselit “The Epistemology of Search”) or what Bishop critically has described as “a desultory updating of appropriation and the readymade” (Bishop). I explore this trend of employing pre-existing formats to conceptualize from. Yet, while Bishop remains unconvinced about the idea of artistic appropriation, I aim to show its potential as a strategy to “think” with (or against) concrete logics underpinning contemporary knowledge production. As such, this essay is both a reading of Solinas’ artistic project and a critical discussion of its intervention in a broader cultural field, where art-based research has shown that art practice and research can indeed complement each other and both be considered essential and valuable for contributing to knowledge production.

Orderly Transmissions

A protocol, in its simplest definition, is a preexisting agreement as to how information will be structured and how each side of a communicational exchange will send and receive it. Such an agreement may contain a set of procedures for the transmission of information and a set of rules for correct behavior. Before its usage in information theory, “protocol” thus referred to any type of proper behavior within a specific system of convention (e.g., concerning social etiquette, diplomacy, and international relations). With the advent of digital computing, the term however took on a slightly different meaning. Now, protocols also refer specifically to standards governing the implementation of particular technologies (Galloway 6). Like their diplomatic predecessors, computer protocols establish the essential points necessary to enact an agreed-upon

all, 2008), Maryam Jafri’s compilation of photographs of postcolonial celebration (*Independence Day 1934–1975, 2009–*), Henrik Olesen’s *Some Gay-Lesbian Artists and/or Artists Relevant to Homo-Social Culture Born between c. 1300–1870* from 2007, and Wolfgang Tillmans’s “Truth Study Center” (2005–). While she is mostly critical towards this third phase of the art-based research project, Bishop at the same time praises some of its exponents, in particular Henrik Olesen. Bishop, Claire. “Information Overload.” *Artforum*, vol. 61, no. 8, 2023, artforum.com/print/202304/claire-bishop-on-the-superabundance-of-research-based-art-90274.

standard of action, and, so, they are vetted out between negotiating parties and then materialized in the real world by its participants.

Le Bureau des Miracles operates in much the same way: just as a computer protocol it determines the shape and structure that the data must conform to exist in the network. To experience the artwork—by adding to the collection and receiving miracle stories from others—spectators must conform to the bureaucracy of the project. Your personal miracle is condensed into the short format of an SMS, which is then anonymized and transformed into a node in a decentralized network based on one-to-one interactions. You have no control over its distribution or its reception in other parts of the network. As such, the Bureau, rather than being a guarantor of stability and predictability, ironically becomes a generator of sudden, unexpected events. Whether you are riding the metro, eating your lunch, or in the middle of a meeting, a miracle can potentially “occur” (Limongi). What are the affordances of such an SMS-driven Bureau, of its protocological way of operating?

Setting up her project, Solinas does not just use the format of bureaucratic protocols she *installs* a working protocol that operates autonomously beyond her will. Collecting, storing, and spreading miracles (whatever they are), the Bureau is a leaky archive that systematically “connects what cannot be connected,” distractedly making connections among disparate points (Foster), “one miracle per SMS” (Solinas). It employs old-school text messaging, which, with its character limits and lack of embeddable media and other more advanced messaging services such as photos, videos, and emojis, is almost provocatively mundane and “boring”—at least in contrast to the fantastical nature of miracles. To think as a protocol, the project seems to claim, is to think *bureaucratically*. Because while it is inherently rigid and regulatory in its operationality, the protocol is indifferent to the content inside it. It is pre-meditated, yet operates spontaneously

on whatever input it is fed, and, as such it marks a radically open starting point for Solinas' experimental setup.

Aggregative Knowledge Production

In her recent essay "Information Overload," Claire Bishop critically examines what she calls a superabundance of research-based art. Identifying four phases, she describes how each of them presents a different understanding of what constitutes knowledge (Bishop): while artists during the first phase in the early 90s would invite viewers to themselves piece together parts of provided materials to form their own historical narratives and bodily experiences, second phase artists would rather craft the narrative as part of their work. And while the third phase, fully post-internet artists will return the viewer to sifting through information, albeit now in a formal, less interactive mode, the fourth phase artists will focus their projects on strong arguments that seem to refute neutrality. Bishop identifies both pros and cons in all four phases yet tends to prefer the interpretative syntheses of phase four over, e.g., the "inchoate curiosity" of phase three (Bishop).

Relating Solinas' Bureau to Bishop's taxonomy, it seems to be a clear-cut third-phase phenomenon. Operating on what David Joselit has described as a logic of "aggregation," that is, configuring, searching for, and making meaning from already existing content, *Le Bureau des Miracles* is precisely *appropriating*. Like other "third phasers," Solinas invites meta-reflection on the production of knowledge as truth, and she is reluctant to draw conclusions. Her material is radically unexplainable, as most of her projects are built on the stuff of myths, miracles, and other supernatural phenomena. Bishop is critical of such aggregative ways of producing knowledge, claiming that artistic projects from this phase no longer undertake their own research, but just sample what is already there (Bishop). "Yearning for selection and synthesis," Bishop lacks "original proposition[s] founded on a clear research question" (Bishop).

While it is true that Solinas with her Bureau borrows, recontextualizes, and samples already existing materials and principles instead of creating her own content, it is interesting to ask *how* she uses these things, and to what extent her artistic research “thinks” with or along them. Working as an artist in today’s media culture, the Internet with its vast possibilities and seemingly all-encompassing search engines at your fingertips. A fact that, according to Bishop—and David Joselit whose term of aggregation is central in her critique—has transformed the ways in which artists think and work. “*Search becomes research,*” Bishop writes, and whereas “[s]earching is the preliminary stage of looking for something via a search engine,” proper research “involves analysis, evaluation, and a new way of approaching a problem.” Search implicates “the adaptation of one’s ideas to the language of ‘search terms’—preexisting concepts most likely to throw up results—whereas research (both online and offline) involves asking fresh questions and elaborating new terminologies yet to be recognized by the algorithm” (Bishop). Artists who simply search for already existing content and reconfigure it in order to find what they need and make meaning from it are not proper *re*-searchers.

Whereas Bishop’s essay provides a useful taxonomy for approaching the rich and varied field of contemporary research-based art, I see a central issue regarding its narrow focus on the art-researcher subject. Inspired by the protocological thinking of Le Bureau des Miracles, I suggest taking a closer look at the very gesture of appropriation. Instead of centering the argument around an individual art researcher, I would rather ask what it means to “think” with (or against) the algorithmic logics underpinning contemporary knowledge production. Immediately diagnosing this idea of appropriation as just a shallow gesture of “pointing,” (of “cut and pasted” information or data “dropped in a vitrine” to use Bishop’s formulations) you risk missing the potential of criticizing from the very viewpoint of the algorithmic condition

(Colman et al.). Bishop's focus on the art-researcher subject entails an accidental blind spot in terms of understanding the critical potentials of appropriation, not just of a set of already existing materials or collections, but also of thought systems, bureaucratic infrastructures, or concrete techniques.

“The richest possibilities for research-based installation emerge when preexisting information is [...] *metabolized* by an idiosyncratic thinker who feels their way through the world,” Bishop writes paraphrasing Mark Leckey. I could not agree more. But does this idiosyncratic “thinker” have to be the *mind* of an artistic subject, or could it also be a theoretical principle, a program, or a concrete technique executing its power beyond our human-to-human everyday life? Le Bureau des Miracles is a wonderfully weird example of a critical research project operating precisely at the limits of our expectations, both in terms of how questions of spirituality can be addressed and interpreted via something as *in-appropriate* as a bureaucratic protocol, and in terms of how an artist-spectator ratio can look like. Solinas' miracles are precisely *metabolized*, yet crucial parts of the body undertaking this process of digesting are conceptual and collective: the “thinking” of the work is done by many actors, some of them technical and theoretical.

In this essay, I have discussed the potential of artistic appropriation as a critical tool to “think” with (or against) concrete logics underpinning contemporary knowledge production. I have asked what it means to see, operate, and know along the lines of the protocol, and in doing so, I have tried to broaden the notion of artistic thinking to also encompass collective, conceptual, and technical contributors, challenging conventional boundaries in the realm of art and research.

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