

RE- ENCHANT- ING THE INSTITU- TION

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Promiscuous Infrastructures is a research-driven project by the Artivistic collective. It took place (mainly) at Montreal’s Centre des arts actuels Skol from June 2010 until December 2012, starting with a summer research residency (Phase I) geared toward the development of a book based on previous Artivistic activities. Phase II of *Promiscuous Infrastructures (PI2)* occupied Skol’s gallery space for five weeks in the spring of 2012. And more than two years after the project began, it has led to the production of this issue of *FUSE* as its third phase – an outcome that extends and embodies the notion of promiscuity by providing pragmatic and temporary production and distribution infrastructures.

During the first two phases of the project, Skol (with its steady operational funding) was the more stable of the two partners, awakening in Skol feelings of patronizing benevolence toward Artivistic – perhaps much like those typically assigned to funders. Due to the current hostile trend

in arts funding (and as private sources continue to be unreliable, subject to the whims of the market and rich patrons), Skol felt a growing need to join forces with others out of resistance, rather than to reconfirm an entrenched, implicit hierarchy based in material and financial assets. At that particular point in their respective lifespans, both organizations were open to the reciprocal infiltration of their structures across generations, cultures and histories, in order to explore alternative economies and deepen the experience of art by becoming more creative, rather than merely be institutions that host creativity. [1] Seduced by the idea of promiscuity (especially in this hostile period of economic austerity), Artivistic and Skol were ripe for an open examination and renewal of their approaches to “organizing” and “programming.”

For the *PI2* public exhibition, Artivistic extended the promiscuity to others involved in similar interdisciplinary social justice missions, revealing an important network of independent organizations in search of autonomy and alternative organizational modes. By inviting and calling on collaborators to contribute, Artivistic members Sophie Le-Phat Ho, Kevin Yuen Kit Lo and Faiz Abhuani became a singular yet collective – and continually shifting – figure of the artist. And the gallery was set up correspondingly: “The space consisted of a hybrid between a creative lab, a radical documentation centre and an experimental exhibition.” [2] An intimate library of some 200 zines surveying past and current anti-capitalist struggles was made available for visitors to borrow, photocopy and even assemble into their own booklets. Meanwhile, a neon sign stating cryptically that “consensus did not form” invited a critical reflection on the depleted decision-making practices associated with contemporary democracy.

Did performing an “alternative” production environment challenge the visitors’ own participation in an exchange economy? Or did it reconfirm how alternative culture, whether or not promoted through art or activism, is just another style to be consumed? As the collective’s members are also involved in many different social justice initiatives, often as volunteers, we also began to understand that their respective paid work is a necessity that diverts energies away from their mission to work hard together – toward never working again. In other words, the Artivistic collective came to Skol with an already highly developed stance that “something was already being done” [3] toward re-enchanting the world.

Active since 2004, Artivistic is competent in emulating the operations and standard tasks that make up the institutional workaday. Unlike Skol, which is narrowly associated with the visual arts tradition, Artivistic’s *Promiscuous Infrastructures* draws from a variety of cultures and traditions, including art theory. Considering that Skol has gained much of its notoriety from “*Les Commensaux*”: *When Art Becomes Circumstance*, a seminal 2001 publication on relational aesthetics edited by curators Anne-Marie Ninacs and Patrice Loubier, it is not entirely coincidental that, despite their many differences, Artivistic and Skol appeared to be a good fit for this “relational” experiment. The three phases of *Promiscuous Infrastructures* produced an expanded form of the relational by revealing and aestheticizing the “organizational.” Even though the phrase “organizational



↑
Artivistic
*Promiscuous Infrastructures/
Infrastructures entrelacées (Phase II)*
Skol, Montreal, 2012
Images courtesy of the artists

[4] The inaugural issue of *Organizational Aesthetics* was launched earlier this year.

[5] François Deck, “Reciprocal Expertise,” *Third Text* 18.6 (2004): 617-632.

aesthetics” has been claimed by a journal whose editorial mission is “to explore how the five senses and artistry inform business, non-profit and government organizations,” [4] it can still be understood in terms of the broad categories and processes of relational art – infiltration, circulation, encounters, resistance. But instead of operating in the public sphere, as a means to “go outside,” *PI* operated from within the institution, in order to re-enchant and repurpose it, rekindle belief in structured, yet undetermined, collective organizational processes and time frames, and explore beauty beyond representation, in the realm of decision-making. [5]

By definition, individuals within the collective did not claim authorship. In fact, the collective made no effort to sign, nor claim, the brilliant campaign titled *Le 22, on ferme* (“On the 22nd, we’re closing”), which led to many Montreal-based artist-run centres closing their doors to join striking students in the streets on 22 March. This was followed by Artivistic inviting Montreal-based activist Stefan Christof to present his research on artist-driven social movements in Quebec, potentially initiating Skol’s audience to this legacy. For Skol, engaging with Artivistic as a peer made rallying behind the political sentiments exposed in *PI2* possible. Visitors to the gallery will remember the huge *Fuck Harper* sign printed on the entrance wall in 1200 pt. Franklin Gothic bold vinyl letters. This shared, unequivocal and highly contentious political sentiment, at first directed toward our Prime Minister, was soon after redirected toward Quebec’s then-Premier, Jean Charest, who was defeated at the polls in September, after many months of student protest.

Unlike relational aesthetics, which gives form to a desire to “go outside” the art world, *Promiscuous Infrastructures* keeps us inside and prevents us from dropping out. Engaging in organizational experimentation with other structures allows us to test the limits of each other’s desire and need to rethink respective missions, methods, assumptions, fixations and agendas. Promiscuity offers the means to redefine institutional culture without throwing the baby out with the bath water. Rallying behind a common mission that involves “exposing” the hand that feeds us allows us to become collectively more confident and pool available resources in the spirit of resistance. Keeping within the structural boundaries offered by the two groups also allowed not only for the building of trust but also the establishment of a base for experimentation. *Promiscuous Infrastructures* created a unique environment for a time-based political experiment of cooperation. Making something happen collectively means everyone becomes responsible for ensuring synchronicity and affect. Embracing indeterminacy as an institutional operating principle is a means to reclaim the present and re-enchant our institutions.

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[1] François Deck et al., “Banque de problèmes et de questions avec hypothèses,” Skol(Online, skol.ca; 6 June 2009).

[2] Skol, “Artivistic: Promiscuous Infrastructures, Phase II,” Centre des arts actuels Skol (Online, skol.ca; accessed 10 November 2010).

[3] Artivistic, “Promiscuous Infrastructures (Phase 2): Last Week!” (Online, artivistic.org; accessed 10 November 2012).