An Unexpected Guest in the Studio

Regarding the debate between Ronan Barrot and Robbie Barrat organized by Étienne Gatti at Schoolab on February 5, 2019

Memento mori

For Ronan Barrot, because he is human and therefore connected to the world through millennia of memories and sensory apprenticeship, a skull is a meaningful object. Such obviousness is anthropological: a skull is an anatomic part of his and each of his kin's bodies. It is what literally holds his mind together. Homo sapiens knew as much—in the bony carcasses of preys he hunted, under the skin of every relative he interred, that skeletal structure displayed the clearly recognizable features of his own face.

Because Ronan Barrot is a painter and because he has probed the Flemish masters, Caravaggio, Georges de La Tour, because he has read *Hamlet* and paid attention to Delacroix, the skull for him falls within the familiar purview of the pictorial "vanity" and, as such, precipitates in its cavernous gaze a reminder of his mortality and temporality. His relation to the world and his memory have shaped the sense-producing network that links him to that object, the serial declensions of which he is and has been presenting for decades.

For Barrot, his skulls operate as notes in a sketchbook, as painterly mementoes. They are the conclusive, intimate ritual signing a painting off. He preserves some of his palettes of paints and combined mediums in their instant-bound thickness as exploitable memory banks from which an ulterior resurrection may spring up. Should their impasto take years to dry out, there's nothing to worry about: pictorial memorizing takes its own good time and sediments according to the pigments' rhythms. Thus the viscous, half random matter left at the exhausted end of the palette is laid to rest, layer upon layer into skull after skull, as a subjective database that Ronan Barrot later queries in order to generate new canvasses, new combinations that, keeping track of his choices, preserve the memory of what has been found for him to continue doing.

LOCUS SOLUS

The GANs Robbie Barrat devises have no clue as to what a skull is. Their memory banks, self-enclosed the way tableaux vivants are in Raymond Roussel's *Locus Solus* novel, are not connected to the world. Quite the contrary: their very performance requires they be kept in vitro, shut out from any external reference. Starting from random noise, they operate a-historically through self-winnowing until they reach iteratively a granularity discreet enough to fit the model they're bonded to (the images of Ronan Barrot's skulls). They neither learn how to paint nor what is a skull. Queried to paint some other thing, they'd draw a digital out-of-whack blank (*doesn't compute*). They strive toward a pre-established shape, ever unconcerned with what said shape stands for, even less with what it conjures up and what echoes in it. Their sole criterion of success lies within their uncontested equivalence to their bond.

Out of the endless flow the brutal force of computing generates, Robbie Barrat, because he is a human being and an artist, culls out images his gaze deems meaningful. As a programmer, he fed at a later stage "anomalies" (which are such for him only) into his algorithm. As he himself explains by means of a vocabulary quite explicitly anthropomorphic, the proposals then indiscriminately spewed forth by the machine catch his interest when he makes it sick, when he "messes the software up" and brings it

to "hallucinate." Which it to say, not when the machine errs—since it merely knows code-driven notions of convergence and divergence—but rather when it baffles the purely human gaze of the viewer, of the one who selects pictures out of the flow. Because of their surprising, unforeseeable aspect, their drifting off from the model, the monsters, the freaks, the modern Prometheus which Barrat gives rise to when he adjusts his algorithm's "weights" (the convergence rules) steer his choices and serve as criteria to his esthetic memory, allowing him to pick up images from the uninterrupted flow the digital network produces. It is his gaze that instills anxiety: the algorithm, self-unknowing as it is, does not know angst. On a scale made infinitely larger by randomness that nonetheless rests on the same sensory basis, Barrat selects his material of interest in the flow of his images just as Barrot chooses his in the movable material of his exhausted palette. In both cases, the *resurrectine*, that which gives life to the inert, is the choice-driven gaze.

Labsynth