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Erring on the Mount

Public Energy, Peterborough, Ontario

May 30 – June 1, 2014
by Caroline Langill

On May 30, 2014, Peterborough's Public Energy, an animator of contemporary dance, performance, theatre and interdisciplinary work, launched *Erring on the Mount* which played host to 53 projects in the de-consecrated convent, St. Joseph's on the Mount. This project references the original *Erring* event from 1996 when artists responded to the loss of their artistic home, the Union Theatre, with a series of performances in rooms above The Only Café, on Hunter Street.

In many ways the arts community in Peterborough is made up of various allied factions. However, curator Liz Fennell's call to all artists for site-specific work came with the intention of bringing those with a high degree of professional experience into proximity with emerging and amateur artists. This move could be read as an attempt to create some porosity between different degrees of artist recognition in order to demonstrate the full breadth of the community's practices. The City of Peterborough's future intent for St. Joseph's is for it to transition into affordable housing, gallery and performance spaces, community gardens and perhaps food programs. Site-specificity and interactivity were therefore integral to the Public Energy project as ways to facilitate public engagement with the site and draw support for its future use. *Sculpture Projects Münster* (1997) achieved a similar result for the small German town, and there are other

examples in Canada: Shorefast President Zita Cobb's rejuvenation of Fogo Island, Newfoundland, is a case in point, albeit on a different scale. Cobb's decision to leave her work in technology and finance, move back to Fogo, and establish the Fogo Island Arts residencies program is an example of the way local identity pulls one back to home. Artists in Peterborough are similarly resilient, and they remain rooted regardless of the day-to-day stresses of living in an under-resourced municipality. For the past 20 years, Peterborough has witnessed the decline of the small manufacturing industries upon which the local economy relied. The resulting increase in unemployment is acutely noticeable when one walks Peterborough's main streets, where at least a third of storefronts lie empty and for lease. While Peterborough residents experience nowhere near the level of economic hardship that those living on Fogo Island do, *Erring on the Mount* is a preliminary nod in the same direction and demonstrates the potential to rethink the messaging of the city. Public Energy Artistic producer Bill Kimball knows this, hence his 20+ years of efforts to bring cutting edge contemporary dance to a small university town. In a sense, the artists curated into the present-day *Erring* project performed the space in order to unlock its potential and reclaim the site for the arts community and the public alike.

At the event itself, people were met just outside the doors of the convent, on the front lawn, by Paul Cade's *The Garden of Infinite Possibilities*, and invited to reconfigure precarious sculptures built from painted steel and wooden abstracted elements. This invitation to interact with the art prior to entry served to demystify the anticipated experience of *Erring on the Mount* for the public, marking the event as one where agency was communal. John Marris's *Re-Haunting* continued to set this precedent using motion-sensitive surveillance



John Marris with Phillip Chee, *Re-Haunting*, 2014, installation view at the decommissioned St. Joseph's Convent, Peterborough Ontario.
IMAGE COURTESY OF ELIZABETH FENNEL

cameras to capture spectral images of visitors at various locations throughout the site. Wafting to the ground from a printer installed at ceiling height, facsimiles accumulated over the weekend in a sedimentation of visitor presence. The linen sheet of *Uplift*, a collaborative installation by electronic media artist Douglas Back and structural engineer Sara Bradley, rose like a ghost up the historical stairwell, in response to the vibrations of people walking up the stairs. The machinist aesthetic of the work, with its visible wiring woven along the banisters, re-awakened and elevated the relentless domestic labour that comes with communal living.

The convent's chapel acted as a pivot around which *Erring* revolved, providing a number of architectural sites with which artists rarely have an opportunity to work. At the front of the sanctuary stood Robert Edmundson's *Exploring the Boundary between Art & Corn*, a whimsical, scaled-up kinetic folk art sculpture of a nun, a dove flying above her head. This work acted as an uncanny counterpoint to *Rupto Silentio*, a sonic installation in the ambulatory. With numerous metal pipes hanging from the ceiling and running the length of the curving aisle, Jan-Paul Campeau, Roz Hemant and Victoria Wallace created a cacophony of sound contradicting what one might imagine within a monastic setting.

An embedded exhibition, *No Man's Land*, curated by Judith A. Mason for a quiet secluded wing of the convent, consisted of eight installations occupying the nuns' former cells, which remain eerily intact. Sally Thurlow's installation *What the Nun Told Me* (2014) was a particularly strong contribution as her inferred narrative, regarding a pubescent girl's modesty and guilt, was skillfully rendered. Mason's show was not the only direct reference to the evacuated community. Quilt Arts Peterborough offered up var-

ious detailed narratives regarding the history of the religious order's activities through a series of quilted textile banners. Kate Story's *A Place you'd go to find something, something you'd left there*, performed in the 'trunk room' in the depths of the site, enacted the mystery and power of the nuns' narratives as they departed for and returned from their global missionary work.

The Public Energy initiative might be considered an antidote to the bitterness and inertia one might assume would result from such conditions. *Erring on the Mount* supposes that participatory strategies can forge collectivity between cultural workers and the public who will potentially advocate for future occupants and users of the renovated facility. One might assume this to be a process of gentrification, but if the site moves forward as a mixed-use facility it will actually serve the demographic that has been disenfranchised by the economic downturn. This would be the best possible outcome for the site, but in the meantime Public Energy has been able to achieve something quite extraordinary and when the question comes to city council, as it inevitably will prior to the release of funds, about whether or not people will even go to the Mount, the answer will be a resounding yes.

Caroline Langill is a curator and arts educator who splits her time between Peterborough and Toronto.



Robert Edmundson, *Exploring the Boundary between Art & Corn*, 2014, installation view at the decommissioned St. Joseph's Convent, Peterborough Ontario

IMAGE COURTESY OF CAROLINE LANGILL