

Interview with Ann Jaeger of *Company Town* July 2020

Victoria Mohr-Blakeney: Can you describe the work, which will be installed in the Artspace front window- what are visitors likely to encounter?

For *Company Town*, I created three textile based and two sculptural works. Although photos of these pieces will be available on the website they are better viewed in person. *Factory Tour* is hand stitching on muslin, based on the floorplan of the GE building, which was used in the worker-commissioned *Report of the Advisory Committee on Retrospective Exposure Profiling* detailing the areas where different hazardous chemicals were encountered by workers.

Motor is stitched felt based on an internet-sourced schemata of one of thousands of motors produced by GE. *Ghost*, embroidery on screening material, is based on a "map" of a human body indicating incidences of disease attributed to exposure to toxic substances by workers at GE. The dots on the diagram correspond to diseases but at first glance are almost decorative. Two black sculptures in paper mache are crude depictions of a heart and a classic motor. Both icons represent engines: one, the engine of human life and the other an engine of industry. Through scale, texture and colour, I want to reflect on the false equivalency of human life and industrial production.

VMB: Can you tell me about the relationship between your sculptural and textile work and mapping and researching the legacy of General Electric?

Ann Jaeger: Anne White brought a tremendous amount of research to the project through her residency with Public Energy. One of the themes that kept resonating with us was the idea of mapping - mapping the actual site of the factory in relationship to Peterborough, as well as the floorplan of the factory itself as described by the people who worked there, mapping the idea of product as a stand in for labour and of the romantic aspirations of technological advances versus their actual impact on quality of life.

Maps were a valuable and surprisingly subjective vehicle for framing and depicting relational ideas in this work. For me, the repetitive actions of textile work and the use of industrial felt and plastic screening recall factory labour.

Our visit to the Peterborough Museum & Archives to research their GE memorabilia revealed a common motor as one of only a handful objects in the museum's collection representing GE's 126 year history in Peterborough. The artifact was catalogued and handled with the same care that a settler artifact would be handled, but if one considers GE's lengthy presence and influence here, it came as a shock that so little is left behind to tell the story. I also reflected on the museum's photographic collection which documented early days of the factory - handsome black and white photographs whose long exposures revealed ghostly impressions of human presence among the giant equipment. I came away with the sense that GE had literally "ghosted" its workers and the city.

VMB: What has the experience of collaborating with artists across so many disciplines been like for Company Town? Have there been any new opportunities or unforeseen challenges?

Ann Jaeger: It was a privilege to work with Anne White, Eryn Lidster, Miranda Jones and Lily Ross-Millard, whose work I have admired for many years. Though working in different media, I had faith that the whole piece would come together, by the magic of art. When Covid19 arrived, we had to pivot to a web-based presentation and Zoom collaborations. Some early material and performative explorations were no longer viable, but the ideas we were generating as a group brought poetic new dimensions to the work.

VMB: Is there anything else you'd like to share with future visitors about Company Town?

Ann Jaeger: Sadly, the story of GE is the story of corporate factories across North America since the mid-20th century. In Peterborough, the benefits of a stable, equitable economy also left a trail of occupational disease and 50 acres of prime land too toxic to use. GE currently outsources manufacturing to 130 countries around the world, some presumably with lower worker protections than we enjoy in Canada. We should not forget the legacy of GE or absolve it of its responsibility.