

***Interview with Anne White of Company Town
July 2020***

Victoria Mohr-Blakeney: Covid-19 struck in the middle of your residency and artistic research work for Company Town. How has your work and artistic process shifted due to the pandemic?

Anne White: Just about everything has had to adapt. Normally, I make live performance, but this was simply not a possibility under COVID-19. So my collaborators and I went from envisioning this project as a week of live events and site-specific installations in public places to developing it as a controlled installation environment at Artspace and an online installation in the form of a website.

Each collaborator has developed their work with these new constraints in mind. For my own part, I have completely changed my medium for this project. I was envisioning developing performance and workshop pieces for *Company Town* but now I'm making a book! I'm still trying to think about this work as a performative medium in various ways, particularly in terms of how I centre embodiment and site in the work and process. But all of that said, it's a huge change and a challenge I was not expecting.

On a week-to-week basis, COVID-19 has forced us to collaborate over Zoom, which has presented its challenges, especially because my performance-based practice usually relies on everyone being in the same physical rehearsal and creation space. So adjusting to consistently co-create with a group online has been different, but I've found that everyone has risen to the challenge with patience and resourcefulness. I actually now feel very comfortable and efficient on Zoom in a way that seemed difficult to imagine in the beginning.

VMB: What inspired you to delve into the General Electric factory's legacy in Peterborough/Nogojiwanong?

Anne White: As an artist, I am drawn to contested histories and contested sites. I am interested in the friction and connections between officially sanctioned histories and memory held in communities. In residency, I have been thinking about how a site like GE is sitting in this temporary and fragile moment. On the one hand, it is becoming a historical object, an institution no longer part of the day-to-day life of the city. On the other hand, the way that the factory has impacted and continues to impact the people, lands and waters in this city makes it a reference point for a living urgency. While the effects from GE have been felt most directly by many of its former employees, I am also interested in how the

larger city is or is not absorbing what I consider to be traumatic information about its historically most significant employer.

I'd like to contextualize my encounter with this topic by saying that I was not raised in the Peterborough/Nogojwanong area. I moved to the city about 4 years ago. When I first arrived, I remember immediately hearing about GE and about how Peterborough was going through the death of its industrial economy. Yet, it wasn't until I started researching the topic on my own for a different project in 2017 that I stumbled on some interviews on Youtube with widows of workers who had died due to toxic working conditions at GE. I remember their descriptions of asbestos falling like snow. This was when I first became aware of the recently released documentary, *Town of Widows*.

At that time, I remember feeling a sense of disorientation around GE. Workers were coming forward to describe horrific working conditions and experiences of cancer while most of the sources I could find about General Electric locally were very pro-industry or simply GE propaganda. It felt like this major disconnect, like the romantic, historical image of GE hadn't caught up to the reality for workers.

The disorientation that started 3 years ago and has only deepened more over the past year. I'm trying to hold various images and experiences of GE up side by side not for academic argument but for processing pain and understanding how to support ongoing political action. I can only speak for my own experience in this work, but I hope in this process to engage others in the conversation.

VMB: Can you describe what the research process was like for you during Company Town?

Anne White: My process in residency has been a chance to explore two related but distinct research approaches: research as a historian and research as an artist. I was interested in how these approaches might feed one another. Because I was centering my research around General Electric, an actual site with ongoing significance, I knew that the work would need to be rooted in documents, interviews, objects, geographical reference points - in short, the *evidence* of this factory and its effects on the city.

So, I sought a wide range of sources and forms of information. I read a report written by an Advisory Committee of former workers and occupational health and safety researchers. I read a lot of copies of the Works News, a weekly newsletter published by General Electric. I read a lot of local media, particularly from the past decade. I examined various maps at the Peterborough archives. I visited the Peterborough Museum and held their artifacts, some motors made at the local

GE factory, in my hands. I conducted a number of interviews with Sue James, Chair of the Advisory Committee that is advocating for workers pursuing claims with the WSIB. I visited the GE sites in the south end of the city, tracing their fenced perimeters on foot, listening, taking photographs, occasionally chatting with residents living across the street.

I brought back much of this material and organized it in some back offices that Artspace generously lent to me for creation work. As a performer, I initially developed the space as a place to embody and perform the sources I was gathering, which were mostly documents. I explored gesture-based sequences, pieces of scripted text, structures for collaborative approaches with audience members, and ways of displaying vast amounts of complex information (ex. mapping). Ann Jaeger collaborated with me on some early experiments and contributed her visual arts practice to developing this space.

Since the more collaborative phase of the project (and COVID-19) began, I have shifted my personal attention to making a book instead of a performance, so some of this process has changed. I have also attempted to share material and research with collaborators who joined the process in April. In this position, my process has also involved developing a common body of research and finding creative ways of sharing this with other collaborators.

VMB: You have created an artistic publication to be distributed during Company Town- what does the publication consist of and how do you hope people engage with it?

Anne White: The book I'm creating is mostly image-based but it also features direct quotes from a report written by an Advisory Committee of former GE workers documenting the dangerous and in many cases lethal working conditions that they faced at the factory. It's a reflection on what I consider to be a key part of rewriting and reconceiving of General Electric, the unpaid labour of former workers. In doing this work, these former employees pursued a qualitative research method which rigorously centres the memories and expertise of workers themselves in reframing the factory environment.

I have been thinking about the embodied and intimate nature of the evidence workers collected in order to construct a new narrative and set of facts. This memory work is ingenious, in my view, and I wanted to express my immense respect for workers' process as researchers and the impact of this work on the city.

The work for me is also a way to think about my artistic relationship to real documents that are created for non-artistic purposes in other disciplines. The process of researching General Electric has been a new challenge since I have never worked this closely with non-fictional sources that have ongoing political significance. In the book, I wanted to explore how art could respond to this kind of source, remaining in intimate relationship to the original document. These are ethical and aesthetic questions for me, and I invite readers to consider them as well when they encounter the work.

In addressing this topic in an artistic publication, I am thinking about its form, including its durability and vulnerability. I will be printing a limited number of copies which will be distributed in various ways around the city. I am interested in exploring to what extent residents come across this document by chance versus seeking it out because they have heard of it. I am also thinking about how many of the printed copies will survive. Some, by virtue of where I leave them, might for example perish in adverse weather conditions. Others I intend to leave in spaces that I specifically entrust to protect this work. There will also be a digital copy available on the website we are developing, companytown.ca.

The way this publication lives on or disappears is, for me, part of its artistic life and impact.

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

Anne White: GE, as I mentioned above, is a local force that means many things to many different people. I see *Company Town* as one entry point for reflection, engagement and processing. I see it as an attempt to *keep working on GE* which still imposes a monolithic presence on the city. There are a variety of ongoing justice, human health and environmental struggles linked to GE and industry in this town. How we as residents continue to engage with this history and legacy will, I believe, inform how we want to create and inhabit Peterborough/Nogojwanong as a post-industrial city.