

Ghost stories...

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Ghost stories...

Denis LONGCHAMPS

The question “is there a life after death?” has fascinated people for ages. As far back as the eighteenth century, novels such as *Frankenstein* and *The Cavern of Death*¹ captured the imagination of the public. Even today, just a quick look at the line up of films and television programs confirms that zombies, vampires, spirits and ghosts are in vogue. Many people do wonder if there is some sort of life after death... some even push the issue by searching for ways to defy, circumvent or even cheat death.

Consequently, the living-dead (as in zombies and vampires) or other forms of afterlife existence (as in ghosts and spirits) hold, not only entertainment value but also bring to the fore the “what if” possibility. In popular culture, fiction and legend seem to blend with reality as in the television program *Ghost Hunters*,² which examines such phenomenon in assumed haunted places with all the seriousness and high tech equipment required. Such popular enthusiasm witnessed in this subject matter is parallel in contemporary artistic practice where the explorations take on multiple levels and touch many interrelated issues from the global environment to international politics to private concerns. While some question the public’s fascination with the undead, others delved into this form of (un)bodily representation to highlight contemporary issues far beyond that of just mere entertainment. The works examined within this context include the *Apport* series started in 2010 and *Psychic Cabinet* of John Latour (Montreal, Quebec) and Will Gill’s (St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador) installation titled *High Water* presented during Toronto’s *Nuit Blanche* in September 2012, and an earlier presentation and subsequent video produced in 2011.

On July 7 2011, during the *ArtEx 2011*,³ on the Bishops Falls Train Trestle, artist Will Gill and his assistant, Michael Pittman, scrutinized the water of the Exploits River. It was past 10PM, the village’s lights dimly shone on the river, as did the half-moon;

still darkness prevailed. It was a cool summer night, like so many others in this region. Gill’s and Pittman’s search lights danced on the water... from left to right then back to the left... further down the river... then closer to the bridge. A reflection. Another. Here. There. Floating lifeless white objects; ghostly illusions slowly appeared under the projecting lights, only to disappear again, carried by the current of the river towards the train trestle and beyond. As they drifted closer, their silhouettes became clearer, a child’s boot, a chair, a crutch, a baseball bat, pieces of clothing from a baby’s pyjama to an adult’s pair of pants, a teddy bear, even a bicycle. Somewhere nearby, Geoff Panting played a sad lament on his accordion. A sense of eeriness filled the night as people watched and tried to understand, chills running down their spine. The pieces appeared, silent witnesses of a tragedy, ghosts of what was once filled with life, and then disappeared again.

Gill’s *High Water* performance was then turned into a video (2011); and an installation (2012) for *Nuit Blanche* in Toronto. The work, more so the performance of 2011, is not without recalling known disasters that happened at sea near the coast of Newfoundland such as the sinking of the Titanic (1912), a hundred years ago, or the sealing disasters two years later (1914).⁴ Its presentation in Toronto highlights other more contemporary tragic realities and the universality of a sense of loss and emptiness. The whiteness of the objects, while adding to the haunting effect of ghostly apparitions, is not without spiritual connotations.

Recent tsunamis, such as the December 26, 2004 occurrence in the Indian Ocean or the March 11, 2011 disaster in Tohoku, Japan, come to mind. More so for the latter, since it was reported that 1.5 million tons of debris is currently floating towards the west coast of North America—motorcycles, small boats, personal items and clothing of all kinds and architectural remnants of buildings.



John LATOUR, *Psychic Cabinet*, 2010. Found objects (wooden cabinet and foot rest), copper pipes and wire, plastic shower curtains, acrylic paint. Variable dimensions. Collection of the artist and courtesy of Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain.

The floating detritus acts as memento of many passed lives, men, women and children who have disappeared, swallowed up by the waves, never to be found again. As this material of living is washed ashore on the beaches of British Columbia, concerns about the ecosystem grow exponentially.⁵ The floating debris thus highlights more than one disaster, one with environmental consequences, the destructive power of nature and the loss of so many lives.

On a smaller scale, the floating objects of Gill’s performance and installation also make reference to the refuse people leave behind on beaches or throw in the water for fun and games without consideration for the environment. Water bottles, coffee cups, beer and wine bottles are a few examples of such garbage carelessly abandoned that have a significant impact on the wildlife and the ecosystem.⁶

John Latour’s new series of sculptures, *Apport*, were first presented in Montreal in a solo exhibition⁷ with other works that touched upon the idea of communicating with the entities of another world. Each sculpture of the series includes a wooden block from which stems a steel rod supporting an object from the past. The assemblage is then partially covered with paraffin that gives the sculptures a very sensuous finish. Sometimes the paraffin is applied in one place in a substantial accumulation, like a glob; in other cases the application seems more refined, as an even coat. Many of the found objects are or suggest modes of communication.

Four new works, intended to be presented together as *Apport 11-14* (2012) of this continuing series, include a horseshoe, a pipe, a compass and a 1946 pocket diary. Curiously, when arranged side by side in a certain order, they spell COLD.

John LATOUR, *Apport 7*, 2010. Found object (metal toy telephone), wood, metal, paraffin wax, acrylic paint. 64 x 12 x 9 cm. Private collection.



John LATOUR, *Apports 11-14*, 2012. Found objects, wood, metal, paraffin wax, acrylic paint. Variable dimensions. Collection of the artist and courtesy of Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain.

Will GILL, *High Water*—ArtEx 2011. Performance. Exploits River, Grand Falls Windsor, Newfoundland. Spotlight from train trestle. Photo: Mark BENNETT.



Each object of course acts as a memento of a passed life, era, or activity, each one alluding to someone or something else. As Latour writes on his website, the series “is related to the phenomenon of Apportation—ordinary or transformed objects that materialize out of thin air during the course of *séances*.” The *séances* were held starting in the late 18th century after the publication of George First Baron Lyttelton’s book *Communication With the Other Side* in 1760. These *séances* consisted in a gathering of people who wished to communicate with dear ones in the after life. Apports were left behind by the spirits as a sign of their presence; on other occasions their manifestation was marked by a wax mould that “[re]produced the ectoplasmic forms or entities.”⁸ While the apports of another era was a demonstration of the existence of an afterlife, Latour’s *Apports* suggest a passed life that highlights new ways to communicate.

Will GILL, *High Water*
 –ArtEx 2011.
 Performance.
 Exploits River,
 Grand Falls Windsor,
 Newfoundland.
 Reflective objects
 floating downriver.
 Photo: Eric WALSH.



Will GILL, *High Water* –
 ArtEx 2011. Performance.
 Exploits River, Grand Falls
 Windsor, Newfoundland.
 Reflective objects floating
 downriver (Chair, Crutch).
 Photo: Mark BENNETT.



use to get the proper atmosphere to establish communication with the *au-dela*. In the past, the mediums would enter the cabinet, and within its confine space they would be able to focus on their communicating powers. Similarly, Latour's cabinet provides a quiet and secluded place to focus and concentrate. However, during its public exhibition, no such communications with spirits were reported.

The concept of the afterlife has always been fascinating to human beings. The Egyptians left traces of such beliefs in their pharaoh's tombs in the pyramids. And to this day, human beings look for a continuation of their life after death, perhaps always in hope for a better one. Both artists, Gill and Latour, invite us to consider the haunting presence of loss and absence but with very different outcomes. Environmental issues overlap with personal ones; objects become story tellers, witnesses of other times and cultures. They highlight changes in our habits, personal and universal, in our communion with nature and our communication with each other.⁹ ←

Denis LONGCHAMPS was recently appointed Director of Programs at the Burlington Art Centre, Ontario. Previously, he was Manager of Exhibitions and Publications at The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery, St. John's, Newfoundland. He received his PhD in art history in 2009 from Concordia University where he was the administrator of the Gail and Stephen A. Jarislowsky Institute for Studies in Canadian Art from 2006 to 2011.

NOTES

1. Written by Mary Shelly (1797-1851), it was first published anonymously in 1818 under the title *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* by Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor & Jones, London, UK. *The Cavern of Death* was first published anonymously as a series in the *True Britton* newspaper and then as a book in 1794 (J. Bell, London). It is

still published anonymously today. The author is Mary Ann Burges (1763-1813).

2. *Ghost Hunters* (OLN, Fridays, 9PM ET), follows a group of real-paranormal specialists in their investigation of haunted sites in the United States. For more on this show, visit the OLN website: www.olin.ca
3. *ArtEX* is a biennial held in Grand-Falls-Winsor, Newfoundland and Labrador. For more information on *ArtEX* visit artexploits.com
4. The sinking of the Titanic has been the subject of many documentaries, books, and movies. It occurred during the night of April 15, 1912. The Sealing Disaster occurred two years later on March 31, 1914 when the *SS Newfoundland* left 132 seal hunters stranded on the ice. A few hours later a storm broke and the men were abandoned, in part due to the lack of communication with another ship, the *SS Stephano*. On April 2, rescuers found the men, 78 had died of cold or drowned, falling into the icy waters. Cassie Brown wrote *Death in the Ice* in 1976, telling the story of the *SS Newfoundland* crew, and the following inquiry.
5. CBC News, "Tsunami Debris Turning B.C. Beaches into Landfills," June 22, 2012 [online] www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/story/2012/06/21/bc-tsunami-debris-haida-gwaii.html
6. What is known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is composed of a multitude of debris, coming from many natural disasters, tropical storms and the likes, as well as from careless people. For more on the subject, [on line] education.nationalgeographic.com/education/encyclopedia/great-pacific-garbage-patch/?ar_a=1
7. *Spirit Communications* was presented at Pierre-François Ouellette Art Contemporain in October 2010.
8. One famous wax mould is known as the *Kluski Hands Moulds* [on line] January 30 2013, www.metapsychique.org/The-Kluski-Hands-Moulds.html
9. The author wishes to thank Mary Reid who read previous drafts of this essay and the artists John Latour and Will Gill.

←
 Will GILL, *High Water* –
 Scotiabank Nuit Blanche
 2012. Installation. Roy
 Thomson Hall Reflecting
 Pool, Toronto, Ontario.
 Installation of 100 Objects.
 Photo: W. GILL.

While the artist investigates the history of paranormal experiences and research, some of his sculptures also tap into other issues. The old landline telephone that allowed for endearing human interaction has been replaced by smart phones and computers where human emotions can be easily erased from the equation. Through texting and emailing a

level of emotion is removed (such as voice trembling, silence or hesitation) and replaced by cutesy emoticons and short texts that allow one to hide and conceal.

Apport is not the artist's first series of work that touches upon ghost life and the spirit world. In 2010, he presented *Psychic Cabinet* reminiscent of a similar one that mediums