

Summary

The *Mush Hole Project* is an immersive, site-specific art and performance installation event taking place at the Woodland Cultural Centre (Brantford) September 16, 17 and 18, 2016. This collaborative project aims to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action and to preserve, query, and reveal the complex personal, political, and public narratives around Canada's residential school system, in general, and the Mohawk Institute Indian Residential School (at the Woodland Cultural Centre).

Context

The assumed benevolence of the national policies, which instituted residential schools in Canada, has been revealed, through the work of social activism, political actions, artists, and storytellers, to be anything but benign. Residential schools were government sponsored religious institutions established to assimilate Aboriginal children into Euro-Canadian culture. In 1828, the Mohawk Institute opened its doors. It was one of over a hundred facilities operational across Canada. The survivors and their children, however, continue to call the institute "The Mush Hole" because of the school's poor food quality, which was part of the humiliation, abuse, malnutrition, torture, and medical experiments that were endured by over 150,000 Aboriginal children and youth across Canada. How does this language of malnutrition become a communicative norm that remains unaccounted for? What does it mean to be starved by a sovereign force whose intent was to "kill the Indian in the child?" What does it mean to be starved not only physically, but of one's history, culture, intellect, dignity, ritual, cosmology, emotion, body, land, community, kin, and identity? The consequences of these institutionalized horrors and their ubiquity across this nation are still very much present. In 1970, the Mohawk Institute was closed and in 1972 became the Woodland Cultural Centre. Over the years, the Centre has worked steadfastly to represent Aboriginal artists in its collections, exhibitions, and events. For this project, the site-specific performances will demand a great deal from the spectator. Spectators become witnesses to history in the sense that they are present, not merely as observers, but also as participants who play an active role in understanding the environment, jurisdictions, histories, and present day implications. Working in consultation and collaboration with the Woodland Cultural Centre, Six Nations of the Grand, intergenerational survivors, and the Waterloo Aboriginal Education Centre, among many other individual, institutional, and community partners, the project is process-centred and focused on developing and sustaining fluid practices of relationship building that hinges on critical self-evaluation, understanding of historical contexts, and developing collaborative methods to address contemporary societal issues.

Method and Approach

The *Mush Hole Project* seeks responses from artists that question the following: Apartheid, Assimilation, Decolonization, Education, Genocide, Intergenerational Trauma, Mohawk Institute, Nourishment, Reconciliation, and Truth. Artists may propose interior and/or exterior works or creative interventions and should identify a site on the grounds of the Woodland Cultural Centre for the installation or performance of their work (for example, the driveway, apple orchard, library, kitchen, etc). Artists are encouraged to consider the residential school system through the dichotomy of both historical and contemporary knowledges and creative practices. With this in mind, the site-specific and interactive process of the audience will be as the witness to piece together the found and the fabricated. As each person navigates a route through the site, the participant will embody different meanings of the event based upon how they have "read" the map. This reading is not only seen but felt, as the sensorium includes *proxemic* (spatial) dimensions, an audience's physical proximity to the sweat, the dust and the stains of the performance's elements; it includes a *haptic* (touch) experience in so far as witnesses are welcome to get a feel for where they are in the site through physical contact with the work's elements; finally, it includes the *kinesthetic* (movement) dimension of walking/moving, the act of physically working out the most appropriate route through histories. In the way site-specific performance allows a felt knowledge of the past, it may be seen as a significant reconsideration of the idea of an archive, as well as the state of *being* and *affect* in the present. Rebecca Schneider reminds us that the Greek root of the word "archive" refers to the "house" of Archon; by extension, "the architecture of a social memory which demands visible or materially traceable remains is the architecture of a particular social power over memory" (102). She questions the role of performance in relation to the archive as a "site" of the past, and wonders if the logic of the archive demands that performance disappear in favour of discrete remains. Schneider proposes a performative relationship to the archival "house" and the objects found there in the same way that we are proposing a performative relationship to the Mohawk Institute and what has been found here. Schneider emphasizes the value of re-enactment as a way of keeping memory alive and making sure that this embodied, performative sense of history does not disappear. The space is comprised of three components: the *physical attributes* of the environment, the *activities* that occur or occurred there, and the *sense* that the individual makes of these. Like story, "place" and "space" can be described as a way of understanding the world, containing loose remnants of affect, interpretation, and meaning. The crossroads of place and narrative, the space where stories occur, is powerful. The Mohawk Institute is one such intersection. The Mohawk Institute Indian Residential School building at the Woodland Cultural Centre has been providing in-depth and historically significant insight into the Residential School System for the past 44 years. The Mohawk Institute is one of less than 10 residential schools still standing across Canada. With close to 10,000

visitors every year, tours and programs offer a distinctive look into First Nations and Canadian history. The *Mush Hole Project* aims to raise awareness and encourage support for the *Save the Evidence* campaign, to ensure that the physical evidence of this dark chapter in Canadian history is never forgotten.