

EXHIBITION

Between the walls

ANDREAS OLDÖRP

Le Nénuphar

Darling Foundry

Montreal, Canada

Until 26 October

Reviewed by Talia Dorsey

In today's age where new media seems to dominate the artistic palette of those works coming out of, and participating within contemporary cultural discourse, it is a rather rare and shocking experience to encounter works that manage to shed new light by using materials and methods that date back centuries. Such is the case of Andreas Oldörp's latest site-specific sound installation *Le Nénuphar*, now showing at Quartier Éphémère's Darling Foundry.

□□ Upon entering the Darling Foundry, the most immediately striking experience is of the building itself. The Foundry is one of the few buildings in the once-industrial-come-'media-city' neighborhood of Montreal that, in spite of its new use as the contemporary arts organization Quartier Éphémère's primary gallery space, has been left in its abandoned state.

□□ The vast interior space is impressive, with its bare brick walls, exposed pipes, silent machinery, and leaded windows whose ambience taps directly into the jugular of today's post-post-industrial nostalgia for the days when form following function seemed a simple proposition. The

building is a relic of a bygone era – still echoing, in its silence, the industrial boom out of which it was born.

□□ However, beyond the metaphoric silence of the space, one is immediately met with the actual eerie and undefinable sounds that beg further exploration. The space at first read seems empty, with no sign of an installation. Moving into the space, with each searching step, the sounds begin to intensify. With still no visual material, other than the stained concrete floor and lofty roof, with which to decipher the experience, one is pulled further into the space. And then all of a sudden through one's movement itself, the installation reveals itself as clearly as the architecture in which it is enclosed – as immaterial as the walls material, but as physical as the building itself. Oldörp's installation is a structure of sound – or "acoustic architecture", as Oldörp has termed it – within and through which one moves. The structure's 'rooms' are defined by the specific combination of pitches, qualities, and intensities of the sounds by which they are created.

□ Through the exploratory movement within the space, one inevitably arrives at the sound source, and it is as stunningly simple as the experience effective. The sound is generated by a phenomenon discovered in the late 18th century by a British natural scientist, Dr. B. Higgins. Higgins accidentally discovered that the controlled process of burning hydrogen to create condensation within glass tubes produced the uncanny phenomenon of 'singing flames'. *Le Nénuphar* was created using materials differing little from those of the original experiment. Upon the far brick wall of the space, are mounted seven glass tubes of varying diameter and length. Running up the wall to the

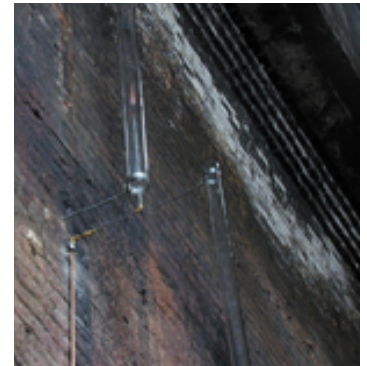


mouth of these tubes are seven copper pipes fed with hydrogen gas. At the tip of these copper tubes is a small flame that causes the air within the glass tubes to pulse with varying pressure, which in turn causes the tubes to resonate, and thus produce their haunting sounds. The varying diameters and lengths of the glass tubes determine the sounds' pitch and quality.

□ While these 18th century devices in their 19th century setting are quite stunning unto themselves, the relationship that exists between them lies far deeper than simply their aesthetic juxtaposition.

□ Oldörp essentially tunes his pipes to the space itself in order to create the acoustic architecture that exists between them. The behavior of the sound waves within the space, i.e. the manner in which they reflect off the surfaces of the interior as well as in the way they interact with each other – sometimes reinforcing, sometimes diminishing – create the distinct acoustic areas within the otherwise continuous space.

□ In this way, the building and the sound are implicit and essential components, or 'materials', of the acoustic structure, as much as the structure is inextricably embedded within both the sound and the building. Much like the moiré patterns which emerge from the superimposition of a perforated surface upon a perforated surface, the acoustic structure emerges as the resultant immaterial phenomenon of the specific interface of physical elements (the



Top, view of installation; above, detail of glass and copper pipes; below left, Andreas Oldörp installing and 'tuning' pipes

sound and the building), and only because of the inherent physical properties of each.

□ It is this aspect of *Le Nénuphar* that begs its consideration in reference to contemporary cultural, and specifically architectural, discourse. For, the nature of the acoustic structure as an emergent phenomenon, suggests itself as a manifestation of architecture's inherent and embedded 'virtual' component – as seen through the lens of post-structuralist thought. In the words of Gilles Deleuze 'the virtual' is that which is "real without being actual" and "ideal without being abstract." (1) And such is the elegantly simple and experientially extraordinary reality of *Le Nénuphar*.

(1) Deleuze, Gilles : *Bergsonism*. New York, NY: Zone Books, 1990, p. 96

