

# The Affect of Absence: Rebecca Belmore and the Aesthetico-politics of “Unnameable Affects”

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## Abstract

This essay discusses Rebecca Belmore’s work as a form of protest against violence and a memorial for native cultures and compares her performances and their documentation with later installations in galleries. Her work overcomes the dichotomies of presence and absence, of speaking out and silence, and that of image and language with affect that transgresses genres, media, and material.  
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## Résumé

Cet essai traite de l’œuvre de Rebecca Belmore comme une forme de protestation contre la violence et un mémorial aux cultures indigènes et compare ses performances et leur documentation avec des installations ultérieures dans des galeries. Son œuvre surmonte les dichotomies de la présence et de l’absence, de la parole et du silence, de l’image et du langage et est chargée d’un affect qui transgresse les genres, les médias et le matériel.  
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For almost three decades, Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore has addressed in various media the politics of Indigenous<sup>1</sup> representation, voice, and identity, and advanced the discussion of political identity in Canadian Art. Since 1987 Belmore has shown her installations and performances in numerous group and solo exhibitions all over Canada as well as internationally. She represented Canada at the Havana Biennial, Cuba (1991), at the Sydney Biennale, Australia (1998), and most prominently at the 2005 Venice Biennale (Townsend-Gault 2014; Hill et al. 2013; O’Brian and White 2007; Mars and Householder 2004; Nemiroff et al. 1992). In art historical writing Belmore is foremost known as a performance artist. By discussing her work in the context of a special journal issue on affect and feminism, I do not seek to write her into a feminist art history. Instead, this article looks at how Belmore’s art sheds some light on performances and installations that deal with the violence against and murder of Indigenous women. Belmore would not consider herself a feminist artist, but as she admitted in a talk she gave in 2007 at the symposium in conjunction with the exhibition *Global Feminisms*, she identifies as an artist, as a human being, and as a woman. As a “woman of her people,” the Anishinaabe—her artistic practice is deeply rooted in the Anishinaabe legacy she inherited from her grandmother. Born and raised to speak English, her mother prepared her for a life in modern Canada, where her Anishinaabe language (Anishinaabemowin) and culture would be constantly under threat; the loss of her mother language became the source force of many pieces. Rebecca Belmore’s early work gave visibility to the “destructive forces of colonialism” (Corntassel 2012, 88), and commemorated acts of violence against and resistance of Indigenous people, especially women. Her 2002 performance *Vigil*, for example, commemorates dozens of women who went missing in downtown Vancouver.

This essay compares *Vigil* and its video installation *The Named and the Unnamed* (2002) with the

more recent video piece *Apparition* (2013) and the 2015 re-installation of *Vigil* in the video installation *Somewhere Else* (2015). While *The Named and the Unnamed* gave witness to Belmore's shouting out of the names of disappeared Indigenous women from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, with *Apparition*, she reflects on the loss of language brought by the residential schools played in the silencing of Indigenous languages. By refusing to express that loss in the language of its exterminator, Belmore's video performance becomes a powerful medium for the intergenerational, intercorporeal transmission of "unhappy affects." In the theoretical context of Lisa Blackman's (2011) argument, those "unhappy affects" such as trauma, shame, isolation, and loneliness have been associated with queer lives (185). In "Affect, Performance, and Queer Subjectivities," Blackman contends that "communities of affect" like the queer community could be explored with a practice such as performance, "which can hold the tension between happiness and unhappiness...in close proximity" (196-197) where the transmission of affect is key.

Central to Belmore's practice is the way she uses her body to invoke presence, but also absence.<sup>2</sup> The video installations of the documented performances function here as a form of memorial-turn-protest by forcing the viewer into a conscious act of witnessing. Belmore's speaking out—with or without words—changes from an acclamation of the absent to a provocation of the present by activating the body of the viewer through affect. It is the way affect works that moves the spectator, making the created aesthetic image ethical and her art political. This art, as she shows in the exhibition "Somewhere Else," does not even need the body of the artist anymore. What Florence Belmore (2015) called the "endurance of the image over action" in the essay to the exhibition hints on the videos and other forms of documentation that outlive the actual performances. By the "performative power of materiality" (Bolt 2013, 7), even the documents of a performance can evoke "unnameable affects"—those affects that, according to Julia Kristeva (2002), are too painful to express in words (23). In her reading of Kristeva, Estelle Barrett (2013) claims that only a combination of material processes, affect, and feeling can create embodied knowledge (64-65).<sup>3</sup> Understood as a material process, as I will show, artistic production is able to

turn an aesthetic image not only into an ethics, but into a political entity. By comparing the performance *Vigil* with its documentation and latter video installation, we are able to understand that Belmore's work overcomes the dichotomies of presence and absence, of speaking out and silence, and even that of image and language with affect. And she does that transgressing genres, media, and material—and "does not require a distinctly human body in order to pass and register" (Blackman 2012, 13).

Different authors have already alluded to the metonymic and metaphoric qualities of the different elements of Belmore's performances. In this article, I do not question their symbolic power, but I want to put forward that the aesthetic images created exceed what can be captured by the symbolic because they exist only in and as an interchange with the viewer. By using her body to address the viewer's body, Belmore can affect the recipient in ways that resist interpretation. As soon as the viewer gets engaged in the performance, the conventionalized roles of artist and recipient break up. Performances can create unexpected moments and an intensity that tops mere empathy. Then, I argue, affect mediates not only between mind and body, but also between the aesthetic and the ethical. In this constellation, the aesthetic is neither the visual by-product of an artist's political agenda nor a specific form of representation, but the inherent force that carries the affect.

### **Rebecca Belmore's Performance *Vigil* (2002) and its Installation in *The Named and the Unnamed* (2002)**

In 2013, The Canada Council for the Arts conferred the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts to Rebecca Belmore. On this special occasion, the National Gallery of Canada put Belmore's 2002 installation *The Named and the Unnamed*<sup>4</sup> on display. It was there and then where I was confronted with the work *Vigil* for the first time. The installation consisted of a 50-minute video loop, which was projected on an eight-by-nine foot screen in an otherwise empty room. [Figure 1]



Figure 1: Rebecca Belmore, *The Named and the Unnamed* (2013, video installation). Collection of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, UBC. Purchased with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program and the Morris and Helen Belkin Foundation. Photo: Howard Ursuliak.

Taking a seat in front of the screen, I got mesmerized by the forty-eight light bulbs that pierced the screen and sometimes the projected image of candles glared the screen. But most of the time, my desire to fully immerse in the video got disrupted by the presence of the light bulbs. *The Named and the Unnamed* presents the documentary video of Belmore's performance *Vigil*, held on June 23, 2002 at the corner of Gore Street and Cordova Street, Vancouver, as an installation. The performance was commissioned by the Full Circle Native Performance's Talking Stick Festival and Margo Kane to draw attention to the disappearance of dozens of women from this area (Townsend-Gault and Luna 2003).

Since 1987, Belmore has engaged with the political and social realities of Indigenous communities. The artist, who was born in Ontario, is a member of the Lac Seul First Nation at Frenchman's Head, Ontario, and currently resides in Montréal, Québec. By addressing history, place, and identity, her oeuvre represents and employs the resistance of Indigenous peoples. Belmore's performances, sculptures, videos, photographs, and installations draw upon the connections between bodies, land, and language, and the violence that colonialism enacted upon them. For Belmore (2007), performance is always personal: "It is because it's done by me, my persona, my body, and

I think that with my body I can address history, the immediate and political issues. For me performance is deeply personal, because it's my way of speaking out." Belmore not only addresses the politics of Indigenous representation, voice, and identity in different media, but also gives visibility to physical violence, particularly violence against women, by invoking presence and absence with the body, with hers and others. Belmore's feminist agenda is grounded in her being a cis woman, and that of her people, as she explained in 2007. Even if Belmore's pieces are recognized and discussed by feminist art history, she is not producing feminist art in the art historical sense. Her work, however, joins feminist discourse, since it addresses the discrimination of Indigenous women from the perspective of an Indigenous woman who experienced discrimination and loss of language herself.<sup>5</sup>

### The Performance as *Vigil*

*Vigil* is a performance piece that took place in the same year as rural settler Canadian pig farmer Robert Pickton was charged with the murder of twenty-six women. Since the mid-1980s, over sixty women from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside went missing before the Vancouver Police Department and the city council took action. All of the women were street-level sex-workers—predominantly Indigenous. In 2001, an investigation was launched that led to charges of murder, especially when DNA of twenty-six of the missing women were discovered spread all over Pickton's property. When we speak of DNA traces, we speak of pieces of scalp or bones, single particles of human cells. It is hard to think of a more brutal effacement and disappearance of the women's physical presence; there was literally no-thing left of these women (Lehmann 2012). The absence of any material remnants made it difficult not only to prove their disappearance to the authorities, but also to give their families the chance to grieve the loss of their mothers, sisters, and daughters in any kind of ritual that requires a dead body.

Like the vigils usually held by the relatives of the disappeared or deceased, Belmore's *Vigil* symbolically watches out for the missing women. At a non-descript urban intersection, the performance begins with a ritualistic cleansing of the sidewalk, followed by the lighting of candles, the distribution of red roses, and the calling out of women's names. The names that Belmore



cries out are inscribed on her arms in thick black ink. [Figure 2]



Figure 2: Rebecca Belmore, *The Named and the Unnamed* (2013, video installation). Collection of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, UBC. Purchased with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program and the Morris and Helen Belkin Foundation. Photo: Howard Ursuliak.

After each name is called, she drags a rose across her mouth, stripping of the petals and leaves, and spitting them to the ground. Then she puts on a long red dress and begins nailing the dress to a wood pole nearby. [Figure 3]



Figure 3: Rebecca Belmore, *The Named and the Unnamed* (2013, video installation). Collection of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, UBC. Purchased with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program and the Morris and Helen Belkin Foundation. Photo: Howard Ursuliak.

She then rips the dress from the pole, nailing and ripping it again and again until the dress is nothing but scattered shards of red fabric clinging to the pole and littering the sidewalk. The artist puts on a pair of jeans and a tank top, washes her face and arms, wipes away the women's names, and goes and leans against a parked pickup truck. We can hear music out of the open windows of the car. James Brown is singing, "This is a man's world, this is a man's world, that wouldn't be nothing—not one little thing—without a woman or a girl" (Belmore 2002). Several authors have already alluded to the metonymic and metaphoric qualities of the different elements of the performance: candles are blown out by the wind, red roses are shredded, and a red dress is ripped. These elements were interpreted as the representation of unrepresentable pain and trauma or as the female body constantly in danger (Lauzon 2008, 155-179; Crosby 2008, 77-87). What has been overlooked so far is that these elements (candles, red dress, jeans, and tank top) are symbols of the Western colonial, white, and of course hetero-normative discourse of love, tragedy, and grief. I do not mistrust the symbolic power of these elements nor do I interpret Belmore's use of it as irony or cynicism—every time a woman's name is called out, for instance, the artist shreds a rose with her mouth, as if the life of this woman and her body were violently destroyed. I am convinced that the aesthetic images created through this performance exceed what can be captured by the symbolic by actually employing elements that have already lost their symbolic positive value, like the red colour or the candles in such a minimalist way in her performance. Barrett's (2013) "new materialist" approach proposes to see the aesthetic image as performative and "unlike images that operate via established symbolic codes and that serve to communicate information...it emerges through sensory processes and give rise to multiplicity, ambiguity and indeterminacy" (63). However, as Jessica Jacobson-Konefall (2014) reminds us, there is a specific "Indigenous materialism" that exceeds the new materialism in art history, which is caught in the "gendered dimensions of citizenship" of a settler society like Canada where Indigenous femininity and womanhood are marginalized or obliterated altogether (66-87).

## Affect and the Absent Body

At the beginning there is trauma, bodies in trouble, and a troubled body—that of the artist. Charlotte Townsend-Gault recalls a meeting with Belmore in preparation of the 2002 exhibition of *The Named and the Unnamed*:

Belmore, habitually circumspect, always says that she is in awe of the power of words to shape experience...She wanted to make a work about what was troubling her most, the disappearance of more than fifty (the number remains imprecise) women from the streets of Vancouver's downtown East Side, and the criminally desultory response of the authorities to the horrible plight of the least powerful. She had tried to find a way of "speaking" about the unspeakable, to declaim the secret that had been known but unspoken for an unconscionably long time. (Townsend-Gault and Luna 2003, 18)

It is intriguing to watch how Belmore achieves a "full-on corporeal involvement" by the spectator (13). Belmore's performance, as Townsend-Gault points out in the 2003 exhibition catalogue, threatens to overwhelm the spectator in a "splat of emotion" created by "an almost too familiar overload of culturally conflicting allusions and irresolvable epistemological confusions...Except that Belmore is in control. She is focused on the fine-grain of the physical, of touch and of sound. And then the sensations segue into ethics, clearly" (29). Using her own body to address the viewer's body enables the artist to affect the recipient in ways that resist a mere interpretation of signs. To look at Belmore's face expressing grief, pain, and exhaustion would be just enough to affect the viewer—as it happened to me when looking at *Vigil*. However, contemporary affect theory, as shaped by Patricia Clough, Brian Massumi (2001) and others, separates affect from cognition. In Blackman's (2012) definition, "affect bypasses cognition and is registered prior to its translation into emotion or feeling. The registering of affect is often aligned to the action of the central or autonomic nervous system, such as the mirror neurons, which are seen to grant affect its potential autonomy from meaning and interpretation" (21). I think one has to be very careful not to confuse the affect created by a video installation like *The Named and the Unnamed* with the emotional identification with or sympathy for the victims or a sheer physiological

phenomenon like those of mirror neurons. Rather, I would like to search for what Jill Bennett (2005) calls the "affective dynamic internal to the work" (1-7). The names of the missing women are written on the artist's body, called out loud. Each woman is remembered with a rose that the artist shreds with her mouth and with a dress that is ripped, before the names are washed off again. By the quick change of different kinds of representation of the missing women in language, sound, and image, and their final disappearance, the spectator witnesses how the artist performs their presence and absence with all her senses.

It is important to stress that settler and Indigenous viewers do not engage with Belmore's work in the same way. Lived experiences of the destructive forces of colonialism differ from experiencing embodied knowledge simply through spectatorship. However, Belmore's performance is able to make the absence of the murdered Indigenous women palpable for settler viewers by addressing "the continued colonial mapping and erasing of Indigenous presence within this [colonial] space" (Nanibush 2010, 2). For the activist and curator Wanda Nanibush (2010), performance art is closer to Indigenous ideas of art and resistance "because it is based on process, contradiction, action and connection" (2) and based on collective truths that derive from the experience of individuals, relationships and connection through action, or what Leanne Simpson (2012) calls "presencing" (96).

The question that Western affect theory as well as Indigenous "presencing" shares is, then, how is affect produced and experienced by the audiences? Two examples taken from *The Named and the Unnamed* shall help answer this question.

The uncanniest moment of the performance takes place when Belmore calls out the names of the missing women and there is actually a woman—probably in the neighbourhood close by—who answers her call. For a short moment, the artist and the audience hold their breath. In the video caption, one sees a close up of Belmore's face. For a second, her facial expression is frozen and the only bodily expression is a blink of her eyes before she keeps going. By calling for the dead, she reached the living. Brian Massumi (2001) would prefer the term "unexpected" (27) to describe this moment, rather than "uncanny," just to avoid this highly charged psychoanalytical term. These unexpected

moments create an intensity that exceeds mere empathy by breaking up the conventionalized roles of artist or recipient, of transmitter and receiver. They describe the “critical point,” following Massumi’s vocabulary, when the viewer gets engaged in the performance. In Massumi’s reading of Spinoza’s ethics, affect is the philosophy of the “becoming active” of mind and body alike (32). The witnesses of Belmore’s performance are reminded of the cruelty leading towards the violent destruction of the women’s lives and bodies and the ignorance and oblivion of the public that followed, contrasted with the grief of the women’s families.

By naming the disappeared women during her performance, Belmore creates a gap between the language that signifies the women and the reality of the absent bodies, a process that makes their absence even more present to the spectator. The performance operates here, following Barrett’s (2013) reading of Kristeva’s theory of creative textual practice, as a “new form of language in order to externalize our experience or aesthetic encounters” (68). As Barrett argues, this performativity shall not be confused with J. L. Austin’s speech act theory or other discursive citational practices. Instead,

performativity in creative production involves an interaction between the subject (artist) as material process, as *being and feeling*—and the subject as *signifying process*, as *sense-making*...In the making and viewing of art, experience-in-practice materializes or makes available to consciousness, a new object of knowledge...as an interactive *in situ* encounter. This shifts our understanding of knowledge from a passive to an active ingredient of social life. (68)

Therefore, Belmore’s naming of the women turns from an acclamation of the dead to a provocation of the living. If we understand “provoking” in its etymological Latin origin (*pro-vocare*) as to “call forth,” it becomes clear that Belmore’s work does not work as a static monument, but as a provocation that is only effective if it reaches another being that is listening. In this sense, performance becomes an affective way of acting in the world, mediating not only between mind and body, but also between different bodies. Blackman (2012) deals in her work with phenomena like voice hearing, delusion, or embodied remembering as “modalities of communi-

cation that disclose our fundamental connectedness to each other” (21). In this sense, absence does not function as negativity, a space that separates people and experiences from one another, but as Nanibush (2010) claims, Rebecca Belmore’s performance is able to create a space of “resurgence” with knowledge that is created through “the movement of the body, and sound, testimony and witnessing, remembering, protest and insurrection” (2).

### A Vigil in the Gallery

The second provocation of the spectator—this time in a figurative sense—happens in the gallery space as Charlotte Townsend-Gault introduces the installation in the catalogue: “The continuous projection of the video, its looping repetitive re-enactment, also the re-enactment which characterizes trauma, was to become a kind of shrine or memorial to *The Named and the Unnamed*. The title fixes the secret, because the named were unnamed for so long, and because the unnamed remain unnamed” (Townsend-Gault and Luna 2003, 19). For those who have not witnessed the actual performance in downtown Vancouver, the 50-minute video loop functions as a document. Whereas the immersive quality of the medium of video and film helps to transport messages, to arouse attention, and create feelings, it never comes as close as to the immediate experience of the performance. In order to gain the same troubling effect of the actual performance, the filmic document needs to be troubled too. To project moving images on fixed objects—in this case, light bulbs—produces two contradictory effects. First, the light bulbs become part of the aesthetic image; for example, when they echo the candles lit on the floor or the nails pinned through the dress. As if by accident, the forty-eight light bulbs spread over the screen take up the same rhythm as the visual elements projected upon them. These moments of aesthetic pleasure last only for seconds before a restless camera breaks them. Then, the light bulbs remain alien to the projection. They seem to have nothing to do with the image projected upon them. They make no other sense than to disturb the aesthetic experience of the projected image in order to make it harder to fully immerse in the filmed performance.

In addition, the projected moving image and the static light bulbs on the wall create a strange,



destabilizing effect for the viewer, depending on which element the eye focuses on, the image or one of the light bulbs. Having focused on the latter, the moving image literally moves the spectator. This visually induced self-motion illusion that neuroscience callsvection, and that we all know from our daily lives, would not be expected during a visit to the gallery space. By provoking a visceral response this way, the spectator is reminded of her own physical existence facing the void left by the murdered women of downtown Vancouver. This is as close as it gets to the actual definition of affect as the potential of “a body’s capacity to affect and to be affected” (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 2). *The Named and the Unnamed* is thus no longer a visual art piece, but becomes a corporeal experience for the spectator.

As I argue, it is affect that binds the corporeal experience together with the illusion and that which exceeds the vision/emotion nexus that formerly worked on a semiotic level. Although affect becomes pre-individual in this constellation, this does not mean that affect cannot be mediated. In the case of *The Named and the Unnamed*, the installation becomes the actual permanent vigil filling the exhibition space with viewers who are assured of their bodily existence by acknowledging the absence of the missing bodies. It is important to note that, while the performance commemorates the missing women’s bodies, the corporeal experience in the gallery space is independent of the gender of the spectator and asks Canadian settler society as a whole to take responsibility.

Since Belmore’s 2002 *Vigil* for the disappeared and murdered women of the Vancouver Downtown Eastside, vigils are held every year all over Canada for the missing and murdered Indigenous women. The local case of Robert Pickton became a national inquiry that has received support from various national and international human rights organizations. It is estimated that at least 1,017 Indigenous women went missing under suspicious circumstances between 1980 and 2012 (Huntley 2015). *No More Stolen Sisters* or *Sisters in Spirit* activists have gathered together and marched with those who are engaged in the Indigenous rights movement *Idle No More*, founded in 2012, which denounces ongoing genocidal violence against the Indigenous peoples in Canada.

After Belmore, other artists have focused their work on missing and murdered Indigenous women. For

example, *The REDress Project. An Aesthetic Response to the More than 1000 Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women in Canada*, initiated by Winnipeg-based Métis artist Jamie Black (2015), is particularly interested in feminism and Indigenous social justice, and the possibilities for articulating linkages between and around these movements. The *REDress Project* aims to raise awareness about racial and gender violence and seeks to collect 600 red dresses by community donation to evoke a presence through the marking of absence. Works such as Belmore’s and the *REDress Project* raises questions about the ability of contemporary art to address collective trauma. Literature on art and trauma tends to assume that artists need to either identify with trauma or defuse it. Bennett (2005), who focuses on art and trauma in her book *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, is convinced that art can be a “vehicle for the interpersonal transmission of experience” (7). Bennett argues that, in the case of Belmore, the artist lends her body to create an experience for the spectator and by that helps to address the experience of trauma that “paradigmatically encapsulates both direct, unmediated affective experience and an absence of affect, insofar as it is resistant to cognitive processing and induces ‘psychic numbing’” (5). Thus, the artist’s body functions as a medium upon which affect is carried. This becomes even more crucial when it comes to raising awareness about the fate of marginalized groups, such as Indigenous women in Canada. Artworks such as Belmore’s not only raise awareness about Indigenous women’s struggles, but should also affect the collective consciousness in the direction of justice and equal rights.

### **Witnesses: Art and Canada’s Indian Residential Schools**

In 2013, Belmore participated in an exhibition in the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. The exhibition, “Witnesses: Art and Canada’s Indian Residential Schools,” brought together a group of twenty-two artists to raise awareness about the history and legacy of Canadian residential schools. It was important for the organizers to pair up with Chief Robert Joseph, hereditary chief of the Gwa wa enuk First Nation, the curator Scott Watson, and a group of co-curators to focus on reconciliation (Turner 2013). In the exhibition catalogue, they expressed a desire to honour this request

by showing “works that might point to healing and the future while still telling some of the stories that needed telling about the schools...The story of the schools has few redeeming features and many former students and their children tell of experiences that are difficult to recount and painful to hear. There are too many stories of the abuse of children at the hands of schoolteachers” (Watson 2013: 5). Since the end of the nineteenth century, the United States and Canada established boarding schools to “civilize” Indigenous children. Following the dictum “kill the Indian, save the man,” these efforts resulted in cultural genocide by prohibiting Indigenous traditions and languages in the schools (Smith 2005, 35-37). As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) reported in 2001, 50,000 children were murdered in Canada from 1879 to 1986 through the system of Indian Residential Schools maintained by the Christian churches and the federal government (39-40). The violence of this policy cannot be better illustrated than by the 1920 statement made by Duncan Campbell Scott, Superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs (1913–1932), in reference to Bill 14: “I want to get rid of the Indian problem. I do not think as a matter of fact, that the country ought to continuously protect a class of people who are able to stand alone...Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is the whole object of this Bill” (Watson 2013: 5).<sup>6</sup>

In 2008, the Canadian federal government issued an official apology. The former Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s statement of apology on June 11, 2008 on behalf of Canadians for the residential school system was discussed during the “Dialogue on the History and Legacy of the Indian Residential Schools,” held at UBC First Nations House of Learning on November 1, 2011. As Geoffrey Carr (2013) pointed out in the catalogue to the exhibition, “these apologies avoid difficult questions about racially-based policies of assimilation and segregation, forcible removal of children, and extremely high mortality rates in certain residential schools. Some critics question whether these misdeeds should be considered crimes against humanity, while others raise concerns of genocidal intent” (9). Belmore’s participation in the exhibition *Witnesses: Art and Canada’s Indian Residential Schools* was an indirect reaction to

the Prime Minister’s statement and the first to address this subject.

The artist’s mouth, as illustrated in [Figure 4], is sealed with a duct tape when she appears on screen.



Figure 4: Rebecca Belmore, *Apparition* (2013, video installation). Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Michael R. Barrick, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery.

In her four-minute video installation *Apparition*, Belmore presents herself to the spectator, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, facing the viewer. First on her knees, then moving on to sit cross-legged, she is constantly looking straight into the camera while slowly tearing the duct tape away. The artist remains completely voiceless, even after the tape is fully removed. Belmore keeps sitting in silence, looking towards the audience for a few more minutes, until she slowly fades away only to reappear again as the video is replayed in a loop. In comparison to her performance piece *Vigil*, there is no “speaking out,” no “pro-vocation,” no “talking back” in *Apparition*. There are no signs and signifiers that would allude to the traumatic experiences of former residential school students either. The work consists only of an artist, an Anishinaabe woman who remains silent in front of the spectator. But her silence is a loud one, reminding us of all the children that were silenced, condemning this unspeakable trauma of a whole generation. I am interested in exploring Belmore’s artistic strategy further in relation to the concept of “unnameable affects.”

When Susan Sontag (1983) cites John Cage in her 1967 essay “The Aesthetics of Silence” and claims “there is no such thing as silence,” she in fact introduces



her hypothesis on the aesthetics and politics of silence:

that never ceases to imply its opposite and to demand on its presence...A genuine emptiness, a pure silence, are not feasible—either conceptually or in fact. If only because the art work exists in a world furnished with many other things, the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence. Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech (in many instances, of complaint or indictment) and an element in a dialogue. (186-187)

It is not only the artwork that is silent, but the artist herself, as Belmore's performance illustrates. And by confronting the spectator with her presence, she is in fact addressing said spectator. Or, as Sontag (1983) puts it, "a person who becomes silent becomes opaque for the other; somebody's silence opens up an array of possibilities for interpreting that silence, for imputing speech to it" (191). Deliberate silence is a "means of power" (191). When Sontag argues that "as language always points to its own transcendence in silence, silence points to its own transcendence—to a speech beyond silence" (192), one needs to ask what happens when this silent speech is lost by a violent interdiction of being spoken, as in the case of Belmore. After her two older brothers went to residential schools, where they were forbidden to speak their language, Belmore's mother wanted her to speak English so that she would be integrated into Canadian society (Fischer 2001, 21). Belmore presents her silence as the logical result of Canada's residential school politics. Her silence is the embodied proof of the loss of her mother tongue.

In the Symposium "Traumatic Histories, Artistic Practice, and Working from the Margins," held during the duration of the exhibition, there was a panel that focused on Indigenous contemporary art. In her talk "Vision, Truth, Memory: Art of the Residential School Experience"—available as a webcast on the gallery homepage—Shari Huhndorf asked what art might possibly contribute to our understanding of the experience of trauma that testimonials cannot bring to light. From Huhndorf's perspective, it is with the body that stories of unspeakable trauma can be told, that narratives of, for example, the consequences of residential schools, alone cannot tell. Assimilation

policies defined Indigenous bodies as savage, inferior, and in need of what was termed "reform." Indigenous peoples were consigned to historical pasts that, within the colonial/hegemonic narrative, were destined to disappear in the wake of Western civilization. In a statement about her video installation *Apparition*, Belmore stated the following:

*Apparition* is an artwork that reflects my understanding of the loss of our language. More, it is an illustration of the potential for its disappearance. I do not speak Anishinaabemowin even though I grew up within it and around it. Sadly, I am well aware of the devastating effects of the residential school system, particularly the deliberate role it played in the silencing of our language. For this reason *Apparition* is an image of myself, a silent portrait of this loss. (35)

And Belmore manages to turn her loss into a powerful gesture. Silence is here represented visually. Her video installation works as a self-portrait addressing the absence and silence of language. Unspoken and unnamed history is told with the artist's own body. Belmore's *Apparition* is "embodied knowledge" (Barrett 2013) that gets transmitted through the image of an artist in silence. Belmore makes the spectator feel the loss of the language experienced by thousands of children by demonstrating the absence of her Anishinaabemowin. Silence functions in this case as the most extreme "alteration of language" (Kristeva 1984), an alteration that forges the aesthetic images to the point where also the unspeakable can be shown and made accessible to the ones who did not experience this loss.

### "Somewhere else": The Artist is Absent

In her most recent exhibition "Somewhere Else," displayed at the Montréal gallery OBORO, Belmore again explores the notions of presence and absence, between the lived experience and the documentation of her performances, asking about the role of the artist. In the four channel video installation *Somewhere Else* (2015), Belmore projected the video documentation of four of her past performances on found objects placed in a circle around the projectors. [Figure 5]



Figure 5: *Somewhere Else* (2015, video installation). Rebecca Belmore, 12 September-17 October, 2015. OBORO, Montreal. Photo: Paul Litherland, 2015.

The video documentation of *Vigil* was projected into the center onto a piece of cloth covering the hardware containing the memory of these performances. In an artist statement offered by the OBORO gallery accompanying the exhibition, Belmore (2015) confessed:

I never paid much attention to the documentation of my performances, I was too focussed and concerned about being present and making the work...The documentation of these artworks, captured usually one point of view, one solitary lens had oddly become stronger than my own memory of the lived experience, especially the earlier works. Through the practice of projecting these images and speaking of them over and over again—places me, the artists in the position of the performer once more—somehow present and distant at the same time.

This new installation of *Vigil* shows Blackman's (2012) insights beautifully: "affect does not require a distinctly human body in order to pass and register" (13). In Belmore's pieces *Vigil* and *Apparition*, the question of affect revolves around the status of the artist's body. I propose to look at the installation *Somewhere Else* and think about the artist's body in terms of her *oeuvre*, which could be defined by its "capacity to affect and to be affected" (Blackman 2012, xii) and through the interaction with the spectator. The work of an artist gets activated, I argue, only through the discussion

about the work, as well as the conversations around it. I understand writing and talking about art that address loss, absence, and silence as an "affective transfer" that completes the work of the artist. I wish to understand art as an affective transfer that is always "trans-subjective, shared, collective, mediated and always extending bodies beyond themselves" (Blackman 2012, 23). By remembering the disappeared Indigenous women and the loss of their culture and identity in her numerous performances and installations, Belmore bridges the gap between absence and presence, the dead and the living, between the unspeakable and its remembrance, and the fate of named and the unnamed victims of colonial violence and their re-appearance in a settler-colonial Canadian society that dares to look.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> As a German art historian, my identity perspective is a European post-imperial one. Pursuing my PhD at a Canadian University, I am constantly learning about ongoing colonialism in a settler Canadian society as well as contemporary decolonization movements and Indigenous resurgence. Whenever I am talking about Indigenousness in this article, I follow Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel's (2005) definition of "being Indigenous": "Indigenousness is an identity constructed, shaped and lived in the politicized context of contemporary colonialism. The communities, clans, nations and tribes we call *Indigenous peoples* are just that: Indigenous to the lands they inhabit, in contrast to and in contention with the colonial societies and states that have spread out from Europe and other centres of empire. It is this oppositional, place-based existence, along with the consciousness of being in struggle against the dispossessing and demeaning fact of colonization by foreign peoples, that fundamentally distinguishes Indigenous peoples from other peoples of the world" (597).

<sup>2</sup> In Western critical theory, the framework of absence and presence has been used by Plato, Heidegger, Derrida, and others to define states of being: states of being present as well as states of being absent. The Derridian strain of this approach being the most employed one argues that being present is always defined by a framework like language and mediated with signs, words or writing (Derrida 1976, 5-12). Since presence is always a mediated presence, even represented absence becomes a form of presence. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida (1976) developed this argument with language being the medium of representation *par excellence* (4). Derrida's logocentrism, most prominently summed up in

the enigmatic “there is nothing outside of the text” (158), poses problems when thinking about mediation of presence with and through the body and alternative, non-logocentric intellectual traditions. Confronted with Rebecca Belmore’s performance art, where multiple forms of representation (verbal, non-verbal, corporeal, sign, etc.) are employed, the traditional critical apparatus to engage with absence/presence seems insufficient.

<sup>3</sup> In her book *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, Leanne Simpson (2012) presents alternative, embodied ways of being in the world, which are deeply anchored in Nishnaabeg thought. Unlike Western traditions, “the lines between storyteller and audience become blurred as individuals make non-verbal (and sometimes verbal) contributions to the collective event. The ‘performance,’ whether a song, a dance or a spoken word story, becomes thus an individual and collective experience” (34). In Nishnaabeg culture, teachings are “worn” and knowledge is “embodied” since meaning gets created by “performing the culture” (42-43). Simpson presents Nishnaabeg society as a society of presence where meaning is created through storytelling, ceremony, singing, dancing, and doing (93). For Simpson, Rebecca Belmore engages with her performances with her “full body of knowledge,” infusing Nishnaabeg presence into the colonial space (94-96).

<sup>4</sup> Already in 2009, *The Named and the Unnamed* became part of the National Gallery’s permanent collection.

<sup>5</sup> Gender in Anishinabee communities has been conceptualized differently in the past than the binary between male and female expressed in colonial society. Leanne Simpson (2012) argues that, “for Nishnaabeg people there was fluidity around gender in terms of roles and responsibilities. Often one’s name, clan affiliation, ability and individual self-determination positioned one in society more than gender, or perhaps in addition to gender” (60).

<sup>6</sup> Bill 14 was an amendment to the Indian Act that made the school attendance for First Nations and Inuit children from age seven to fifteen mandatory. See, National Archives of Canada, Record Group 10, vol. 6810, file 470-2-3, vol. 7, pp. 55 (L-3) and 63 (N-3).

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